

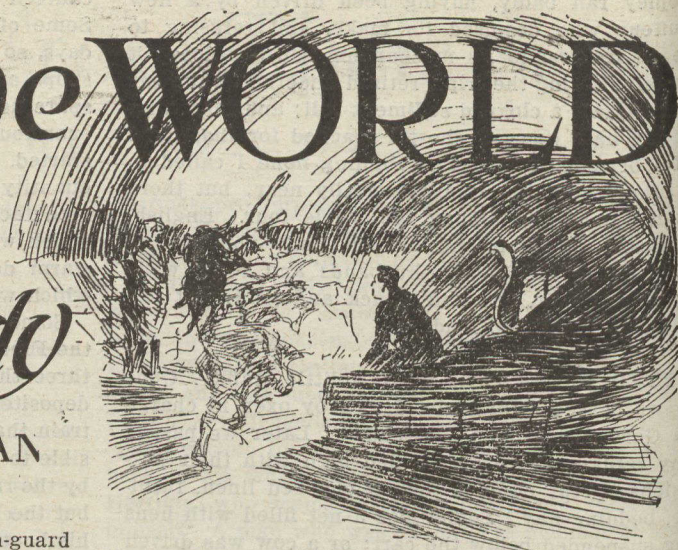
The WINDS of the WORLD

PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

RANJOOR SINGH, major of a Sikh squadron, goes to visit Yasmini, the extraordinary woman who learned all the secrets of India from the winds of the world. There he meets three Germans one of whom offer him, in the name of Germany, the freedom of the earth if only the Sikhs would fail England when the time came. Ranjoor Singh refuses his answer until that time should come. Colonel Kirby, of the Sikh squadron is told that his best native officer has called on Yasmini; but refuses to believe that he is anything but a loyal officer. As an act of revenge for the contempt shown him in Yasmini's house, an Afridi murders one of the troopers in Ranjoor Singh's squadron. He is taken up as a witness, and Ranjoor Singh tries to bribe the truth from him. He escapes, and is followed into a house by Ranjoor Singh. When Colonel Kirby and one of his officers find that he has disappeared, and trace him here they find to their horror that the house has been burned to the ground, leaving only the walls standing. The Colonel continues his search by going to Yasmini's house. Here the two British officers are forced by the mischievous Yasmini to beg on their knees for the missing man, before she will give them any information. On returning to his quarters, the Colonel finds orders to parade at dawn in two days. He learns also that the still missing officer, Ranjoor Singh has sent a message to his squadron guaranteeing "to be with them before the blood ran." With this information the squadron had to be content.

by
Talbot Mundy

Illustrated by T. W. McLEAN



CHAPTER IX.

NOW, India is unlike every other country in the world in all particulars, and Delhi is in some respects the very heart through which India's unusualness flows. Delhi has five railway stations with which to cope with latter-day floods of paradoxical necessity; and nobody knew from which railway station troops might be expected to entrain or whither, although Delhi knew that there was war.

There did not seem to be anything very much out of the ordinary at any of the stations. In India one or two sidings are nearly always full of empty trains; there did not seem to be more of them than usual.

At the British barracks there was more or less commotion, because Thomas Atkins likes to voice his joy when the long peace breaks at last and he may justify himself; but in the native lines, where dignity is differently understood, the only men who really seemed unusually busy were the farriers, and the armorers who sharpened swords.

The government offices appeared to be undisturbed, and certainly no more messengers ran about than usual, the only difference was that one or two of them were open at a very early hour. But even in them—and Englishmen were busy in them—there seemed no excitement. Delhi had found time in a night to catch her breath and continue listening; for, unlike most big cities that brag with or without good reason, Delhi is listening nearly all the time.

A man was listening in the dingiest of all the offices on the ground floor of a big building on the side away from the street—a man in a drab silk suit, who twisted a leather watch-guard around his thumb and untwisted it incessantly. There was a telephone beside him, and a fair-sized pile of telegraph forms, but beyond that not much to show what this particular business might be. He did not look aggressive, but he seemed nervous, for he jumped perceptibly when the telephone-bell rang; and being a government telephone, with no commercial aims, it did not ring loud.

"Yes," he said, with a receiver at his ear. "Yes, yes. Who else? Oh, I forgot for the moment. Four, three, two, nine, two. Give yours! Very well, I'm listening."

Whoever was speaking at the other end had a lot to say, and none of it can have been expected, for the man in the drab silk suit twisted his wrinkled face and worked his eyes in a hundred expressions that began with displeasure and passed through different stages of surprise to acquiescence.

"I want you to know," he said, "that I got my information at first hand. I got it from Yasmini herself, from three of the hillmen who were present, and from the Afridi who was kicked and beaten. All except the Afridi, who wasn't there by that time, agreed that Ranjoor Singh had words with the German afterward. Eh? What's that?"

He listened again for about five minutes, and then hung up the receiver with an expression of mixed irritation and amusement.

"Caught me hopping on the wrong leg this time!"

he muttered, beginning to twist at his watch-guard again.

Presently he sat up and looked bored, for he heard the fast trot of a big, long-striding horse. A minute later a high dog-cart drew up in the street, and he heard a man's long-striding footsteps coming round the corner.

"Like horse, like man, like regiment!" he muttered. "Pick his stride or his horse's out of a hundred, and"—he pulled out his nickel watch—"he's ten minutes earlier than I expected him! Morning, Colonel Kirby!" he said pleasantly, as Kirby strode in, helmet in hand. "Take a seat."

He noticed Kirby's scalp was red and that he smelt more than faintly of carbolic.

"Morning!" said Kirby.

"I'm wondering what's brought you," said the man in drab.

"I've come about Ranjoor Singh," said Kirby; and the man in drab tried to look surprised.

"What about him? Reconsidered yesterday's decision?"

"No," said Kirby. "I've come to ask what news you have of him." And Kirby's eye, that some men seemed to think so like a bird's, transfixed the man in drab, so that he squirmed as if he had been impaled.

"You must understand, Colonel Kirby—in fact, I'm sure you do understand—that my business doesn't admit of confidences. Even if I wanted to divulge information, I'm not allowed to. I stretched a point yesterday when I confided in you my suspicions regarding Ranjoor Singh, but that doesn't imply that I'm going to tell you all I know. I asked you what you knew, you may remember."

"I told you!" snapped Kirby. "Is Ranjoor Singh still under suspicion?"

THAT was a straight question of the true Kirby type that admitted of no evasion, and the man in drab pulled his watch out, knocking it on the desk absent-mindedly, as if it were an egg that he wished to crack. He must either answer or not, it seemed, so he did neither.

"Why do you ask?" he parried.

"I've a right to know! Ranjoor Singh's my wing commander, and a better officer or a more loyal gentleman doesn't exist. I want him! I want to know where he is! And if he's under a cloud, I want to know why! Where is he?"

"I don't know where he is," said the man in drab. "Is he—ah—absent without leave?"

"Certainly not!" said Kirby. "I've seen to that?"

"Then you've communicated with him?"

"No."

"Then if his regiment were to march without him—"

"It won't if I can help it!" said Kirby.

"And if you can't help it, Colonel Kirby?"

"In that case he has got what he asked for, and there can be no charge against him until he shows up."

"I understand you have your marching orders?"

"I have sealed orders!" snapped Kirby.

"To be opened at sea?"

"To be opened when I see fit!"

"Oh!"

"Yes," said Kirby. "I asked you is Ranjoor Singh still under suspicion?"

"My good sir, I am not the arbiter of Ranjoor Singh's destiny! How should I know?"

"I intend to know!" vowed Kirby, rising.

"I'm prepared to state that Ranjoor Singh is not

in danger of arrest. I don't see that you have a right to ask more than that, Colonel Kirby. Martial law has been declared this morning, and things don't take their ordinary course any longer, you know."

Kirby paced once across the office floor, and once back again. Then he faced the man in drab as a duelist faces his antagonist.

"I don't like to go over men's heads," he said, "as you threatened to do to me, for instance, yesterday. If you will give me satisfactory assurance that Ranjoor Singh is being treated as a loyal officer should be, I will ask no more. If not, I shall go now to the general commanding. As you say, there's martial law now, he's the man to see."

"Colonel Kirby," said the man in drab, twisting at his watch-guard furiously, "if you'll tell me what's in your sealed orders—open them and see—I'll tell you what I know about Ranjoor Singh, and we'll call it a bargain!"

"I wasn't joking," said Kirby, turning red as his scalp from the roots of his hair to his collar.

"I'm in deadly earnest!" said the man in drab.

So, without a word more, Colonel Kirby hurried out again, carrying his saber in his left hand at an angle that was peculiar to him, and that illustrated determination better than words could have done.

His huge horse plunged away almost before he had gained the seat, and, saber and all, he gained the seat at a step-and-a-jump. But the sais was not up behind, and Kirby had scarcely settled down to drive before the man in drab had the telephone mouthpiece to his lips and had given his mysterious number again—4-3-2-9-2.

"He's coming, sir!" he said curtly.

Somebody at the other end apparently asked, "Who is coming?" for the man in drab answered:

"Kirby."

Five minutes later Kirby caught a general at breakfast, and was received with courtesy and feigned surprise.

"D'you happen to know anything about my risaldar-major, Ranjoor Singh?" asked Kirby, after a hasty apology for bursting in.

"Why?"

"HE was under suspicion yesterday—I was told so. Next he disappeared. Then I received a message from him asking me to assign him to special duty; that was after I'd more than half believed him burned to death in a place called the 'House-of-the-Eight-Half-Brothers.' He has sent some most extraordinary messages to his squadron by the hand of a mysterious babu, but not a word of explanation of any kind. Can you tell me anything about him, sir?"

"Wasn't a trooper of yours murdered yesterday?" the general asked.

"Yes," said Kirby.

"And another missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Ranjoor Singh go off to search for the missing man?"

"I was told so."

"H-rrrr-ump! Well, I'm glad you came; you've saved me trouble! Did you put Ranjoor Singh in Orders as assigned to special duty?"

"Yes."

"What is the missing trooper's name?"

"Jagut Singh."

"Well, please enter him in Orders, too."