

now should gallop round that rock would be obliged to cross the line of fire. Such are the vagaries of the Khyber's night echoes that it was a long five minutes yet before a man appeared at last, riding like the night wind, on a horse that seemed to be very nearly on his last legs. The beast was going wildly, sobbing, with straggled ears.

Instead of speaking, King spurred out of the shadow and blocked the oncoming horseman's way, making his own horse meet the other shoulder to breast, knocking most of the remaining wind out of him. At risk of his own life, Ismail seized the man's reins. The sparks flew, and there was a growled oath; but the long and the short of it was that the rider squinted uncomfortably down the barrel of King's repeating pistol.

"Give an account of yourself!" commanded King.

THE man did not answer. He was a jezailchi of the Khyber Rifles—hook-nosed as an osprey—black-bearded—with white teeth glistening out of a gap in the darkness of his lower face. And he was armed with a British Government rifle, although that is no criterion in that borderland of professional thieves, where many a man has offered himself for enlistment with a stolen Government rifle in his grasp.

The waler he rode was an officer's charger. The poor brute sobbed and heaved and sweated in his tracks as his rightful owner surely had never made him do.

"Whither?" King demanded.

"Jamrud!" The jezailchi growled the one-word answer with one eye on King, but the other eye still squinted down the pistol barrel warily.

"Have you a letter?"

The man did not answer.

"You may speak to me. I am of your regiment. I am Captain King."

"That is a lie, and a poor one!" the fellow answered. "But a very little while ago I spoke with King sahib in Ali Masjid Fort; and he is no captain, he is lieutenant. Therefore thou art a liar twice over—nay, three times! Thou art no arrficer of Khyber Rifles! I am a jezailchi, and I know them all!"

"None the less," said King, "I am an officer of the Khyber Rifles, newly appointed. I asked you, have you a letter?"

"Aye!"

"Let me see it."

"Nay!"

"I order you!"

"Nay! I am a true man! I will eat the letter rather!"

"Tell me who wrote it, then."

But the fellow shook his head, still eyeing the pistol as if it were a snake about to strike.

"I have eaten the salt!" he said. "May dogs eat me if I break faith! Who art thou, to ask me to break faith? An arrficer? That must be a lie! The letter is from him who wrote it, to whom I bear it—and that is my answer if I die this minute!"

King let his reins fall and raised his left wrist until the moonlight glinted on the gold of his bracelet under the jezailchi's very eyes.

"May God be with thee!" said the man at once.

"From whom is your letter, and to whom?" asked King, wondering what the men in the clubs at home would say if they knew that a woman's bracelet could outweigh authority on British soil; for the Khyber Pass is as much British as the air is an eagle's or Korea Japanese, or Panama United States America, and the Khyber jezailchis are paid to help keep it so.

"From the karnal sahib (colonel) at Landi Kotal, whose horse I ride," said the jezailchi slowly, "to the arrficer at Jamrud. To King sahib, the arrficer at Ali Masjid I bore a letter also, and left it as I passed."

"Had they no spare horse at Ali Masjid? That beast is foudered!"

"There are two horses there, and both lame. The man who thou sayest is thy brother is heavy on horses."

King nodded. "What is in the letter?" he asked.

"Nay! Have I eyes that can see through paper?"

"Thou hast ears that can listen!" answered King.

"In the letter that I left at Ali Masjid there is news of the lashkar that is gathering in the 'Hills,' above Ali Masjid and beyond Khinjan. King sahib is ordered to be awake and wary."

"And to lame no more horses jumping them over rocks!"

"Nay, the karnal sahib said he is to ride after no more jackals with a spear!"

"Same old game!" said King to himself. "What knowest thou of the lashkar that is gathering?"

"I? Oh, a little. An uncle of mine, and three half-brothers, and a brother are of its number! One came at night to tempt me to join—but I have eaten the salt. It was I who first warned our karnal sahib. Now, let me by!"

"Nay, wait!" ordered King. But he lowered his pistol point.

To hold up a despatch rider was about as irregular as any proceeding could be; but it was within his province to find out how far the Khyber jezailchis could be trusted and within his power more than to make up the lost time. So that the irregularity did not trouble him much.

"Does this other letter tell of the lashkar, too?"

"Am I God, that I should know? But of what else should the karnal sahib write?"

"What is the object of the rising?" King asked him next; and the man threw his head back to laugh like a wolf. Laughter, at night in the Khyber, is an insult. Ismail chattered into his beard; but King sat still.

"Object? What but to force the Khyber and burst through into India and loot? What but to plunder, now that English backs are turned the other way?"

"Who said their backs are turned?" demanded King.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ho! Hear him!" The Khyber echoed the mockery away into the distance.

"THEIR backs are this way and their faces that! The kites know it! The vultures know it! The little jackals know it! The little butchas in the valley villages all know it! Ask the rocks, and the grass—the very water running from the 'Hills!' They all know that the English fight for life!"

"And the Khyber jezailchis? What of them?" King asked.

"They know it better than any!"

"And?"

"They make ready, even as I."

"For what?"

"For what Allah shall decide! We ate the salt, we jezailchis. We chose, and we ate of our own free will. We have been paid the price we named, in silver and rifles and clothing. The arrficers the sarkar sent us are men of faith who have made no trouble with our women. What, then, should the Khyber jezailchis do? For a little while there will be fighting—or, if we be very brave and our arrficers skilful, and Allah would fain see sport, then for a longer while. Then we shall be overridden. Then the Khyber will be a roaring river of men pouring into India, as my father's father told me it has often been! India shall bleed in these days—but there will be fighting in the Khyber first!"

"And what of her? Of Yasmini?" King asked.

"Thou wearest that—and askest what of her? Nay—tell!"

"Should she order the jezailchis to be false to the salt—?"

"Such a question!"

The man clucked into his beard and began to fidget in the saddle. King gave him another view of the bracelet, and again he found a civil answer.

"We of the Rifles have her leave to be loyal to the salt, for, said she, otherwise how could we be true men; and she loves no liars. From the first, when she first won our hearts in the 'Hills,' she gave us of the Rifles leave to be true men first and her servants afterward! We may love her—as we do!—and yet fight against her, if so Allah wills—and she will yet love us!"

"Where is she?" King asked him suddenly and the man began to laugh again.

"Let me by!" he shouted truculently. "Who am I to sit a horse and gossip in the Khyber? Let me by, I say!"

"I will let you by when you have told me where she is!"

"Then I die here, and very likely thou, too!" the man answered, bringing his rifle to the port in front of him so quickly that he almost had King at a disadvantage. As it was, King was quick enough to balance matters by covering him with his pistol again. The horses sensed excitement and began to stir. With a laugh the jezailchi let the rifle fall across his lap, and at that King put the pistol out of sight.

"Fool!" hissed Ismail in his ear; but King knows the "Hills" better in some ways than the savages who live in them; they, for instance, never seem able to judge whether there will be a fight presently or not.

"Why won't you tell me where she is?" he asked in his friendliest voice, and that would wheedle secrets from the Sphinx.

"Her secrets are her own, and may Allah help her guard them! I will tear my tongue out first!"

"Enviably woman!" murmured King. "Pass, friend!" he ordered, reining aside. "Take my spare horse and leave me that weary one, so you will recover the lost time and more into the bargain."

THE man changed horses gladly, saying nothing. When he had shifted the saddle and mounted, he began to ride off with a great air, not so much as deigning to scowl at Ismail. But he had not ridden a dozen paces when he sat round in the saddle and drew rein.

"Sahib!" he called. "Sahib!"

King waited. He had waited for this very thing and could afford to wait a minute longer.

"Hast thou—is there—does the sahib—I have not tasted—"

He made a sign with his hand that men recognize in pretty nearly every land under the sun.

"So-ho!" laughed King, patting his hip pocket, from which the cap of a silver-topped flask had been protruding ever since he put the pistol out of sight. "So our copper's hot, eh?"

"May Allah do more to me if my throat is not lined with the fires of Eblis!"

"But the Kalamullah!" King objected. "What saith the Prophet?"

"The Prophet forbade the faithful to drink wine," said the jezailchi. "He said nothing about whisky, that I ever heard!"

"Mine is brandy," said King.

"May Allah bless the sahib's sons and grandsons to the seventh generation! May Allah—"

"Tell me about Yasmini first?"

"Nay!"

King tapped the flask in his pocket. "Nay! My throat is dry, but it shall parch! I know not! As to where she is, I know not!"

"Remember, and I will give you the whole of it!"

He drew the flask out of his pocket and rode a little way toward the man.

"None can overhear. Tell me now."

"Nay, sahib! I am silent!"

"Have you passed her on your way?"

The man shook his head—shook it until the whites of his eyes were a streak in the middle of his dark face; and when a Hillman is as vehement as that he is surely lying.

King set the flask to his own lips. "Salaam, sahib!" said the jezailchi, wheeling his horse to ride away.

King let him ride twenty paces before calling to him to halt.

"Come back!" he ordered, and rode part of the way to meet him.

"I but tried thee, friend!" he said, holding out the flask.

"Allah then preserve me from a second test!"

(To be continued.)

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