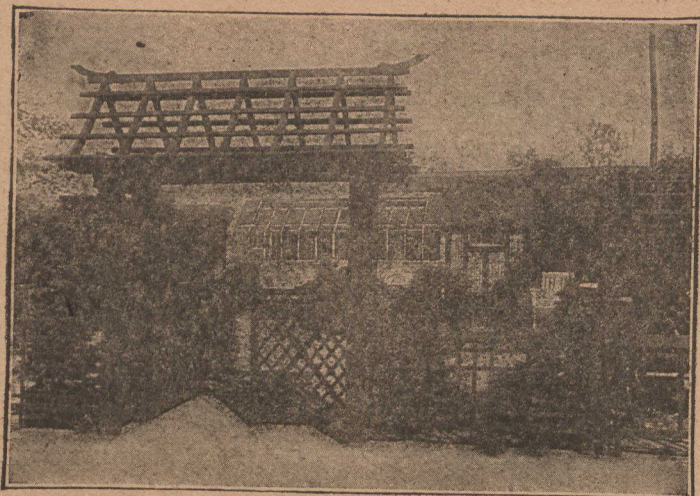




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KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES —By TALBOT MUNDY

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

THE echo of the waterfall within the cave was like the roaring in a shell held to the ear, but each time he came near the entrance the new guard could catch a few bars of the tune. After a little while the hook-nosed ruffian began to sing the words to it, in a voice like a forgotten dog's.

So he stopped at the entrance and changed the tune. And the guard sang the words of the new tune, too. After that he came out into the light of day (direct sunlight was cut off by the huge height of the cliffs all around) and leaned in the entrance, smiling.

"Allah preserve thee, brother!" he remarked. "Thine is a voice like a warrior's—bold and big! Thou art a true son of the Prophet!"

"Aye!" said the fellow, "that I am! Allah preserve thee, for thou hast more need of it than I, although I guard thee just at present. Whistle me another one!"

So King whistled the refrain of a song that boasts of an Afghan invasion of India, and of the loot that came of it, and the prisoners, and the women—particularly the women, mentioning more than a few of them by name, and their charms in detail. It was a song to warm the very cockles of a Hillman's heart. Nothing could have been better chosen for that setting, of a cave mouth half-way down the side of a gash in earth's wildest mountains, with the blue sky resting on a jagged rim a mile above.

"Good!" said the bearded jailer. "Now begin again and I will sing!"

He threw his head back and howled until the mountain walls rang with the song, and other men in far-off caves took it up and howled it back at him. When he left off singing at last, to drink from a water-bottle, that surely had been looted from a British soldier, King decided to be done with overtures and make the next move in the game.

"Didst thou ever sing for her?" he asked, and the man turned round to stare at him as if he were mad. King saw then a blood-soaked bandage on the right of his neck, not very far from the jugular.

"When she sings we are silent! When she is silent it is good to wait a while and see!" he answered.

"Hah!" said King. "Was that wound got in the Khyber the other day?"

"Nay. Here in Khinjan. I had my thumb in a man's eye, and the bastard bit me! May devils do worse to him where he has gone! I threw him into Earth's Drink!"

"A good place for one's enemies!" laughed King.

"Aye!"

"A man told me last night," said King, drawing on imagination without any compunction at all, "that the fight in the Khyber was because a jihad is launched already."

"That man lied!" said the guard, shifting position uneasily, as if afraid to talk too much.

"So I told him!" answered King. "I told him there never will be another jihad."

"Then art thou a greater liar than he!" the guard answered hotly. "There will be a jihad when she is ready, such an one as never yet was! India shall bleed for all the fat years she has lain unplundered! Not a throat of an unbeliever in the world shall be left unslit! No jihad? Thou liar! Get in out of my sight!"

So King retired into the cave, with something new to think about. Was

she planning the jihad! Or pretending to plan one? Every once in a while the guard leaned far into the cave mouth and hurled adjectives at him, the mildest of which was a well of information. If his temper was the temper of the "Hills," it was easy to read disappointment for a jihad that should have been already but had been postponed.

When they changed the guard again the new man proved surly. There was no getting a word out of him. He showed dirty yellow teeth in a wolfish snarl, and his only answer was a lifted rifle and a crooked forefinger. King let him alone and paced the cave for hours.

He was squatting on his bed-end in the dark, like a spectacled image of Buddha, when the first of the three men came on guard again and at last Ismail came for him holding a pitchy torch that filled the dim passage full of acrid smoke and made both of them cough. Ismail was red-eyed with it.

"Come!" he growled. "Come, little hakim!" Then he turned on his heel at once, as if afraid of being twitted with desertion. He seemed to want to get outside, where he could keep out of range of words, yet not to wish to seem unfriendly.

But King made no effort to speak to him, following in silence out on the dark ledge above the waterfall and noticing that the guard with the boils was back again on duty. He grinned evilly out of a shadow as King passed.

"Make an end!" he advised, spitting over the cliff into thunderous darkness to illustrate the suggestion. "Jump, hakim, before a worse thing happens!"

To add further point he kicked a loose stone over the edge, and the movement caused him to bend his neck and so inadvertently to hurt his boils. He cursed, and there was pity in King's voice when he spoke next.

"Do they hurt thee?"

"Aye, like the devil! Khinjan is a place of plagues!"

"I could heal them," King said, passing on, and the man stared hard.

"Come!" boomed Ismail through the darkness, shaking the torch to make it burn better and beckoning impatiently, and King hurried after him, leaving behind a savage at the cave mouth who fingered his sores and wondered, muttering, leaning on a rifle, muttering and muttering again as if he had seen a new light.

Instead of waiting for King to catch up, Ismail began to lead the way at great speed along a path that descended gradually until it curved round the end of the chasm and plunged into a tunnel where the darkness grew opaque. In the tunnel the torch's smoke cast weird shadows on walls and roof, and the fitful light only confused, so that Ismail slowed down and let him come up close.

THEN for thirty minutes he led swiftly down a crazy devil's stairway of uneven boulders, stopping to lend a hand at the worst places, but everlastingly urging him to hurry. They were both breathless, and King was bruised in a dozen places when they reached level going at least six or seven hundred feet below the cave from which they started.

Then the hell-mouth gloom began to grow faintly luminous, and the waterfall's thunder burst on their ears from close at hand. They emerged into fresh wet air and a sea of sound, on a rock ledge like the one above. Ismail raised the torch and waved it. The

(Continued on page 28.)