

"What's the exact meaning of all this?" I inquired, as we threaded our course out to the cab stand and went dodging westward along Forty-third Street in a taxi. The rain, I noticed through the fogged window, was still falling.

"I want you to show me exactly where that man sat in that box," was his answer. "And two minutes in the theatre will do it."

"And what good," I inquired, "is that going to do me?"

"It may do you a lot of good," he retorted, as he flung open the cab door.

"I feel rather sorry for you if it doesn't," was my answer as I followed him out. We had drawn up before a desolate-looking stage door over which burned an even more desolate-looking electric bulb. The man turned and looked at me with a short ghost of a grunt, more of disgust than contempt.

"You're pretty nifty, aren't you, for a New York edition of Jesse James?"

And without waiting for my answer he began kicking on the shabby-looking stage door with his foot. He was still kicking when the door itself was opened by a man in a grey uniform, obviously the night watchman.

"Hello, Tim!" said the one.

"Hello, Bud!" said the other.

"Doorman gone?"

"'Bout an hour ago!"

Then ensued a moment of silence.

"Burnside say anything was turned in?"

"Didn't hear of it!" was the watchman's answer.

"My friend here thinks he's left something in a box. Could you let us through?"

"Sure," was the easy response. "I'll throw on the house-lights for youse. Watch your way!"

He escorted us through a maze of what looked like the backs of gigantic picture frames. He stepped aside for a moment to turn on a switch. Then he opened a narrow door covered with sheet iron, and we found ourselves facing the box entrances.

My companion motioned me into the second box while he stepped briskly into that nearer the footlights.

"Now, the young lady sat there," he said, placing the gilt chair back against the brass railing. Then he sat down in it, facing the stage.

Having done so, he took off his hat and placed it on the box floor. "Now you show me where that man sat."

I placed the chair against the plush-covered parapet and dropped into it.

"Here," I explained, "within two feet of where you are."

"All right!" was his sudden and quite unexpected rejoinder. "That's enough! That'll do!"

He reached down and groped about for his hat before rising from the chair. He brushed it with the sleeve of his coat absently, and then stepped out of the box.

"We'd better be getting back," he called to me from the sheet-iron covered doorway.

"Back to what?" I demanded, as I followed him out through the maze again, feeling that he was in some way tricking me, resenting the foolish mystery which he was flinging about the whole foolish manoeuvre.

"Back to those guests of yours and some good old-fashioned common sense," was his retort.

But during the ride back to Sherry's he had nothing further to say to me. His answers to the questions I put to him were either evasive or monosyllabic. He even yawned, yawned openly and audibly, as we drew up at the carriage entrance of that munificent lighted hostelry. He now seemed nothing more than a commonplace man tired out at the completion of a commonplace task. He even seemed a trifle impatient at my delay

as I waited to check my hat and coat—a formality in which he did not join me.

"Now, I can give you people just two minutes," he said, as the five of us were once more seated at the same table and he once more consulted his turnip of a watch. "And I guess that's more'n we'll need."

He turned to the wan and tired-eyed girl, who, only too plainly, had not altogether enjoyed her wait.

"You've got the necklace?" he asked.

She held up a hand from which the string of graduated pearls dangled. The man then turned to me.

"You took this string of pearls away from this man?" he asked, with a quick nod toward the jewel thief.

"I assuredly did," was my answer.

"Knowing he had taken them from this young lady earlier in the evening?"

"Your assumption bears every mark of genius!" I assured him.

He turned back to the girl.

"Is that your necklace?" he curtly demanded.

The girl looked at me with clouded and troubled eyes. We all felt, in some foolish way, that the moment was a climatic one.

"No!" she answered, in little more than a whisper.

"You're positive?"

She nodded her head without speaking. The man turned to me.

"Yet you followed this man, assaulted him and forcibly took that necklace away from him?"

"Hold on!" I cried, angered by that calmly pedagogic manner of his. "I want you to un—"

He stopped me with a sharp move of the hand.

"Don't go over all that!" he said.

"It's a waste of time. The point is, that necklace is not your friend's. But

I'm going to tell you what it is. It's a duplicate of it, stone for stone. The lady, I think, will agree with me on that. Am I right?"

The girl nodded.

"Then what the devil's this man doing with it?" demanded Benny Churchill, before any of us could speak.

"S'pose you wait and find out who this man is!"

"Well, who is he?" I inquired, resolved that no hand, however artful, was going to pull the wool over my eyes.

"This man," said my imperturbed and big-shouldered friend, "is the pearl-matcher for Cohen and Greenhut, the Maiden Lane importers. Wait, don't interrupt me. Miss Churchill's necklace, I understand, was one of the finest in this town. His house had an order to duplicate it. He took the first chance, when the pearls had been matched and strung, to see that he'd done his job right."

"And you mean to tell me," I cried, "that he hung over a box rail and lifted a string of pearls from a lady's neck just to—"

"Hold on there, my friend," cut in the big-limbed man. "He found this lady was going to be in that box and wearin' that necklace."

"And having reviewed its chaste beauty, he sneaked out of his own box and ran like a chased cur!"

"Hold your horses now! Can't you see that he thought you were the crook? If you had a bunch of stones like that on you and a stranger butted in and started trailin' you, wouldn't you do your best to melt away when you had the chance?" demanded the officer. Then he looked at me again with his wearily uplifted eyebrows. "Oh, I guess you were all right as far as you went, but, like most amateurs, you didn't go quite far enough!"

It was Benny Churchill who spoke up before I could answer. His voice, as he spoke, was oddly thin and child-like.

"But why in heaven's name should he want to duplicate my sister's jewelry?"

"For another woman, with more money than brains or the know-how or whatever you want to call it," was the impassive response.

I saw the girl across the table from me push the necklace away from her, and leave it lying there in a glimmering heap on the white table. I promptly and quietly reached out and took possession of it, for I still had my own ideas of the situation.

"That's all very well," I cried, "and very interesting. But what I want to know is: who got the first necklace?"

The big-framed man looked once more at his watch. Then he looked a little wearily at me.

"I got 'em!" he said.

"You've got them?" echoed both the girl and her brother. It was plain that the inconsequentialities of the last hour had been a little too much for them.

The man thrust a huge hand down in the pocket of his damp and somewhat unshapely overcoat.

"Yes, I got 'em here," he explained as he drew his hand away and held the glimmering string up to the light. "I picked 'em up from the corner of that box where they slipped off the lady's neck."

He rose placidly and ponderously to his feet.

"And I guess that's about all," he added as he squinted through an uncurtained strip of plate glass and slowly turned up his coat collar, "except that some of us out-door guys'll sure get webfooted if this rain keeps up!"

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

By TALBOT MUNDY

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

"SHE will use thee for a reward," he said. "He who shall win and keep her favour may have his hurts dressed and his belly dosed. Her enemies may rot."

"Who is fool enough to be her enemy?" asked King, the altogether mild and guileless.

The Pathan stuck out his tongue and squeezed his nose with one finger until it nearly disappeared into his face.

"If she calls a man enemy, how shall he prove otherwise?" he answered. Then he rolled off center, to pull out his great snuff-box from the leather bag at his waist.

"Does she call the mullah Muhammad Anim enemy?" King asked him.

"Nay, she never mentions him by name."

"Art thou a man of thy word?" King asked.

"When it suits me."

"There was a promise regarding my reward."

"Name it, hakim! We will see."

"Go tell the mullah Muhammad Anim where I sit!"

The fellow laughed. He considered himself tricked; one could read that plainly enough; for taking polite messages does not come within the Hills' elastic code of izzat, although carrying a challenge is another matter. Yet he felt grateful for the hakim's service and was ready to seize the first cheap means of squaring the indebtedness.

"Keep my place!" he ordered, getting up. He growled it, as the men

speak to dogs, because growling soothed his ruffled vanity.

He helped himself noisily to snuff then and began to clear a passage, kicking out to right and left and laughing when his victims protested. Before he had traversed fifty yards he had made himself more enemies than most men dare aspire to in a lifetime, and he seemed well pleased with the fruit of his effort.

The dance went on for fifteen minutes yet, but then—quite unexpectedly—all the arena guards together fired a volley at the roof, and the dance stopped as if every dancer had been hit. The spectators were set surging by the showers of stone splinters, that hurt whom they struck, and their snarl was like a wolf-pack's when a tiger interferes. But the guards thought it all a prodigious joke and the more the crowd swore the more they laughed.

Panting—foaming at the mouth, some of them—the dancers ran to their seats and set the crowd surging again, leaving the arena empty of all but the guards. The man whose seat Ismail had taken came staggering, slippery with sweat, and squeezed himself where he belonged, forcing King into the Pathan's empty place. Ismail threw his arms round the man and patted him, calling him "mighty dancer," "son of the wind," "prince of prancers," "prince of swords-men," "warhorse," and a dozen more endearing epithets. The fellow lay back across Ismail's knees, breathless but well enough contented.

And after a few more minutes the Orakzai Pathan came back, and King

tried to make room for him to sit.

"I bade thee keep my place!" he growled, towering over King and plucking at his knife-belt irresolutely. He made it clear without troubling to use words that any other man would have had to fight, and the hakim might think himself lucky.

"Take my seat," said King, struggling to get up.

"Nay, nay—sit still, thou. I can kick room for myself. So! So! So!"

There was an answering snarl of hate that seemed like a song to him, amid which he sat down.

"The mullah Muhammad Anim answered he knows nothing of thee and cares less! He said—and he said it with vehemence—it is no more to him where a hakim sits than where the rats hide!"

He watched King's face and seeing that, King allowed his facial muscles to express chagrin.

"Between us, it is a poor time for messages to him. He is too full of pride that his lashkar should have beaten the British."

"Did they beat the British greatly?" King asked him, with only vague interest on his face and a prayer inside him that his heart might flutter less violently against his ribs. His voice was non-committal as the mullah's message.

"Who knows, when so many men would rather lie than kill? Each one who returned swears he slew a hundred. But some did not return. Wa' and watch, say I!"

Now a man stood up near of the crowd whom King recognized and recognition brought n

