

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

By TALBOT MUNDY

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CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

"I THINK you are very beautiful, Princess!"

"Beautiful? I know I am beautiful. But is that all?"

"Clever!" he added.

She began to drum with the golden dagger hilt on the table, and to look dangerous, which is not to infer by any means that she looked less lovely.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Forgive me, Princess, but you forget. I was born east of Mecca, but my folk were from the West. We are slower to love than some other nations. With us love is more often growth, less often surrender at first sight. I think you are wonderful."

She nodded and tucked the sealed letter in her bosom.

"It shall go," she said darkly, "and another letter with it. They looted your brother's body. In his pocket they found the note you wrote him, and that you asked him to destroy! That will be evidence. That will convince! Come!"

He followed her through leather curtains again and down the dark passage into the outer chamber; and the illusion was of walking behind a golden-haired Madonna to some shrine of Innocence. Her perfume was like incense; her manner perfect reverence. She passed into the cave where the two dead bodies lay like a high priestess performing a rite.

Walking to the bed, she stood for minutes, gazing at the Sleeper and his queen. And from the new angle from which King saw him the Sleeper's likeness to himself was actually startling. Startling— weird—like an incantation were Yasmini's words when at last she spoke.

"Muhammad lied! He lied in his teeth! His sons have multiplied his lie! Siddhattha, whom men have called Gotama, the Buddha, was before Muhammad and he knew more! He told of the wheel of things, and there is a wheel! Yet, what knew the Buddha of the wheel? He who spoke of Dharma (the customs of the law) not knowing Dharma! This is true—Of old there was a wish of the gods—of the old gods. And so these two were. There is a wish again now of the old gods. So, are we two not as they two were? It is the same wish, and lo! We are ready, this man and I. We will obey, ye gods—ye old gods!"

She raised her arms and, going closer to the bed, stood there in an attitude of mystic reverence, giving and receiving blessings.

"Dear gods!" she prayed. "Dear old gods—older than these 'Hills'—show me in a vision what their fault was—why these two were ended before the end!"

"I know all the other things ye have shown me. I know the world's silly creeds have made it mad, and it must rend itself, and this man and I shall reap where the nations sowed—if only we obey! Wherein, ye old dear gods, who love me, did these two disobey? I pray you, tell me in a vision!"

She shook her head and sighed. Sadness seemed to have crept over her, like a cold mist from the night. It was as if she could dimly see her plans foredoomed, and yet hoped on in spite of it. The fatalism that she scorned as Muhammad's lie held her in its grip, and her natural courage fought with it. Womanlike, she turned to King in that minute and confided to him her very inmost thoughts. And he, without an inkling as to how she must fail, yet knew

that she must, and pitied her.

"Have you seen that breast under the armour?" she asked suddenly. "Come nearer! Come and look! Why did his breast decay and his body stay whole like hers? Did she kill him? Was that a dagger-stab in his breast? I found perfume in these caves—great jars of it, and I use it always. It is better than temple incense and all the breath of gardens in the spring! I have put it on slaughtered animals. Where the knife has touched them, they decay—as that man's breast did—but the rest of them remains undecaying year after year. It was a knife, I think, that pierced his breast. I think that scent is the preservative. Did she kill him? Was she jealous of him? How did she die? There is no mark on her! Athelstan—listen! I think he would have failed her! I think she stabbed him rather than see him fail, and then swallowed poison! Afterward their servants laid them there. She smiles in death because she knew the wheel will turn and that death dies too! He looks grim because he knew less than she. It is always woman who understands and man who fails! I think she stabbed him. She should have loved him better, and then there would have been no need. I will love you better than she loved him!"

SHE turned and devoured him with her eyes, so that it needed all his manhood to hold him back from being her slave that minute. For in that minute she left no charm unexercised—sex—mesmerism—beauty—flattery (her eyes could flatter as a dumb dog's flatter a huntsman!)—grace unutterable—mystery—she used every art on him she knew. Yet he stood the test.

"Even if you fail me, Well-beloved, I will love you! The gods who gave you to me will know how to make you love; and lessons are to learn. If you fail me I will forgive, knowing that in the end the gods will never let you fail me! You are mine, and Earth is ours, for the old gods intend it so!"

She seemed to expect him to take her in his arms again; but he stood respectfully and made no answer, nor any move. Grim and strong his jaw was, like the Sleeper's, and the dark hair three days old or its softened nothing of its lines. His Roman nose and steady, dark, full eyes suggested no compromise. Yet he was good to look at. She had not lied when she said she loved him, and he understood her and was sorry. But he did not look sorry, nor did he offer any argument to quench her love. He was a servant of the raj; his life and his love had been India's since the day he first buckled on his spurs, and Yasmini would not have understood that.

Nor did she understand that, even supposing he had loved her with all his heart, not on any conditions would he have admitted it until absolutely free, any more than if she crucified him he would love her the same, supposing that he loved her at all. Nor did she trust the "old gods" too well, or let them work unaided.

"Come with me, Athelstan!" she said. She took his arm—found little jeweled slippers in a closet hewn in the wall—put them on and led him to the curtains he had entered by. She led him through them, and, red as cardinals in lamplight on the other side, they stood hand-in-hand, back to the leather, facing the unfathomable

dark. Her fingers were so strong that he could not have wrenched his own away without using the other hand to help.

"Where are your shoes?" she asked him.

"At the foot of these steps, Princess."

"Can you see them yonder in the dark?"

"No."

He shuddered and she chuckled.

"Could you return alone by the way Ismail-brought you?"

"I think not."

"Will you try?"

"If I must. I am not afraid."

"You have heard the echo? Yes, I know you heard the echo. Hear it again!"

She raised her head and howled like a wolf—like a lone wolf that has found no quarry—melancholy, mean, grown reckless with his hunger. There was a pause of nearly a minute. Then in the hideous darkness a phantom wolf-pack took up the howl in chorus, and for three long minutes there was din beside which the voice of living wolves at war would be a slumber song. Ten times ghastlier than if it had been real, the chorus wailed and ululated back and forth along immeasurable distances—became one yell again—and went howling down into earth's bowels as if the last of a phantom pack were left behind and yelling to be waited for.

When it ceased at last King was sweating.

"Nor am I afraid," she laughed, squeezing his hand yet tighter.

She led him down the steps, and at the foot told him to put on his slippers, as if he were a child. Then, hurrying as if those opal eyes of hers were indifferent to dark or daylight, she picked her way among boulders that he could feel but not see, along a floor that was only smooth in places, for a distance that was long enough by two or three times to lose him altogether. When he looked back there was no sign of red lights behind him. And when he looked forward, there was a dim outer light in front and a whiff of the cool fresh air that presages the dawn!

She led him through a gap on to a ledge of rock that hung thousands of feet above the home of thunder, a ledge less than six feet wide, less than twenty long, tilted back toward the cliff. There they sat, watching the stars. And there they saw the dawn come.

Morning looks down into Khinjan hours after the sun has risen, because the precipices shut it out. But the peaks on every side are very beacons of the range at the earliest peep of dawn. In silence they watched day's herald touch the peak with rosy jeweled fingers—she waiting as if she expected the marvel of it all to make King speak.

IT was cold. She came and snuggled close to him, and it was so they watched the sparkle of dawn's jewels die and the peaks grow gray again, she with an arm on his shoulder and strands of her golden hair blown past his face.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked him at last.

"Of India, Princess."

"What of India?"

"She lies helpless."

"Ah! You love India?"

"Yes."

"You shall love me better! You shall love me better than your life!"

Then for love of me you shall own the India you think you love! This letter shall go." She tapped her bosom. "It is best to cut you off from India first. You shall lose that you may win!"

She got up and stood in the gap, smiling mockingly, framed in the darkness of the cave behind.

"I understand!" she said. "You think you are my enemy. Love and hate never lived side by side. You shall see!"

Then in an instant she was gone, backward into the dark. He sat and waited for her, cross-legged on the ledge. As daylight began to filter downward he could dimly make out the waterfall, thundering like the whelming of a world; he sat staring at it, trying to formulate a plan, until it dawned on him that he was nearly chilled to the bone. Then he got up and stepped through the gap, too.

"Princess!" he called. Then louder, "Princess!"

When the echo of his own voice died, it was as if the ghouls who made the echoes had taken shape. A beard—red eye-rims—and a hook nose came out of the dark, and Ismail bared yellow teeth.

"Come!" he said. "Come, little hakim!"

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT Yasmini had been doing in the minutes while King stared from the ledge in the dawn was unguessable. Perhaps she had been praying to her old gods. At least she had given Ismail strict orders, for he said nothing, but seized King's hand and led him through the dark as a rat leads a blind one—swiftly, surely, unhesitating. King had no means whatever of guessing their direction. They did not pass the two lights again with the curtain and the steps all glowing red.

They came instead to other steps, narrow and steep, that led upward in a semicircle to a rough hole in a rock wall. At the top there was a little yellow light, so dim and small that its rays scarcely sufficed to show the opening.

"Go up!" said Ismail, giving King a shove and disappearing at once. One side-step into blackness and he might have been a mile away.

So King went up, stooping to feel each next footing with a cautious hand. He was beginning to be sleepy, and to suspect that Yasmini had taken him to view the dawn with just that end in view. Nothing can make tired eyes so long for sleep as a glimpse of waking day. Sleepy eyes are easiest to trick.

It was not many minutes before he was sure his guess was right.

The opening at the head of the stairs led into a tunnel. He followed it with a hand on either wall and reached another of Khinjan's strange leather curtains. His face struck the leather unexpectedly, and at that instant, as if his touch were electric, the curtain sprang aside, and his eyes were dazzled by the light of diamonds.

It was Aladdin's Cave, with her acting spirit of the lamp! It needed effort of self-control to know that the huge, white, cut crystals that sparkled all about the hewn cell could not be diamonds. They were as big as his head, and bigger—at least a hundred of them, and they multiplied the light of half a dozen little oil lamps until the cave seemed the home of light.

Yasmini had not a jewel on her. She was in a new mood and new garments to suit it. Her feet were still bare, but she was robed from head to heel in pure white linen, on which her long hair shone as if it were truly strands of gold. She received him with an air of mystic calm, gracious and dignified as the high-priestess of