

"Glad to see you, old man," said Athelstan.

"Sure, old chap!" said Charles; and they shook hands.

"What's the desperate proposal?" asked the younger.

"I'll tell you when we are alone."

His brother nodded and stood a step aside. The three who had taken the note to the fort came closer—partly to call attention to themselves, partly to claim credit, partly because the outer silence frightened them. They elbowed Ismail and Darya Khan, and one of them received a savage blow in the stomach by way of retort from Ismail. Before that spark could start an explosion Athelstan interfered.

"Ismail! Take two men. Go down the Pass out of ear-shot, and keep watch! Come back when I whistle thus—but no sooner!"

HE put fingers between his teeth and blew until the night shrilled back at him. Ismail seized the leather bag and started to obey.

"Leave that bag. Leave it, I say!"

"But some man may steal it, sahib. How shall a thief know there is no money in it?"

"Leave it and go!"

Ismail departed, grumbling, and King turned on Darya Khan.

"Take the remaining man, and go up the Pass!" he ordered. "Stand out of ear-shot and keep watch. Come when I whistle!"

"But this one has a belly ache where Ismail smote him! Can a man with a belly ache stand guard? His moaning will betray both him and me!" objected "Lord of the Rivers."

"Take him and go!" commanded King.

"But——"

King was careful now not to show his bracelet. But there was something in his eye and in his attitude—a subtle suggestive something—other about him—that was rather more convincing than a pistol or a stick. Darya Khan thrust his rifle-end into the hurt man's stomach for encouragement and started off into the mist.

"Come and ache out of the sahibs' sight!" he snarled.

In a minute King and his brother stood unseen, unheard in the shadow by a patch of silver moonlight. Athelstan sat down on the mule's pack.

"Well?" said the younger. "Tell me. I shall have to hurry. You see I'm in charge back there. They saw me come out, but I hope to teach 'em a lesson going back."

Athelstan nodded. "Good!" he said. "I've a roving commission. I'm ordered to enter Khinjan Caves."

His brother whistled. "Tall order! What's your plan?"

"Haven't one—yet. Know more when I'm nearer Khinjan. You can help no end."

"How? Name it!"

"I shall go up in disguise. Nobody can put the stain on as well as you. But tell me something first. Any news of a holy war yet?"

His brother nodded. "Plenty of talk about one to come," he said. "We keep hearing of that lashkar that we can't locate, under a mullah whose name seems to change with the day of the week. And there are everlasting tales about the 'Heart of the Hills.'"

"No explanation of 'em?" Athelstan asked him.

"None! Not a thing!"

"D'you know of Yasmini?"

"Heard of her of course," said his brother.

"Has she come up the Pass?"

His brother laughed. "No, neither she nor a coach and four."

"I have heard the contrary," said Athelstan.

"Heard what, exactly?"

"She's up the Pass ahead of me."

"She hasn't passed Ali Masjid!" said his brother, and Athelstan nodded.

"Are the Turks in the show yet?" asked Charles.

"Not yet. But I know they're expected in."

"You bet they're expected in!" The younger man grinned from ear to ear.

"They're working both tides under to prepare the tribes for it. They flatter themselves they can set alight a holy war that will put Timour Ilang to

shame. You should hear my jezailchies talk at night when they think I'm not listening!"

"The jezailchies'll stand though," said Athelstan.

"Stake my life on it!" said his brother. "They'll stick to the last man!"

"I can't tell you," said Athelstan, "why we're not attacking brother Turk before he's ready. I imagine Whitehall has its hands full. But it's likely enough that the Turk will throw in his lot with the Prussians the minute he's ready to begin. Meanwhile my job is to help make the holy war seem unprofitable to the tribes, so that they'll let the Turk down hard when he calls on 'em. Every day that I can point to forts held strongly in the Khyber is a day in my favour. There are sure to be raids. In fact, the more the merrier, provided they're spasmodic. We must keep 'em separated—keep 'em from swarming too fast—while I sow other seeds among 'em."

His brother nodded. Sowing seeds was almost that family's hereditary job. Athelstan continued:

"Hang on to Ali Masjid like a leech, old man! The day one raiding lashkar gets command of the Khyber's throat, the others'll all believe they've won the game. Nothing'll stop 'em then! Look out for traps. Smash 'em on sight. But don't follow up too far!"

"Sure," said Charles.

"Help me with the stain now, will you?"

With his flash-light burning as if its battery provided current by the week instead of by the minute, Athelstan dragged open the mule's pack and produced a host of things. He propped a mirror against the pack and squatted in front of it. Then he passed a little bottle to his brother, and Charles attended to the chin-strap mark that would have betrayed him a British officer in any light brighter than dusk. In a few minutes his whole face was darkened to one hue, and Charles stepped back to look at it.

"Won't need to wash yourself for a month!" he said. "The dirt won't show!" He sniffed at the bottle. "But that stain won't come off if you do wash—never worry! You'll do finely."

"Not yet, I won't!" said Athelstan, picking up a little safety razor and beginning on his mustache. In a minute he had his upper lip bare. Then his brother bent over him and rubbed in stain where the scrubby mustache had been.

After that Athelstan unlocked the leather bag that had caused Ismail so much concern and shook out from it a pile of odds and ends at which his brother nodded with perfect understanding. The principal item was a piece of silk—forty or fifty yards of it—that he proceeded to bind into a turban on his head, his brother lending him a guiding, understanding finger at every other turn. When that was done, the man who had said he looked in the least like a British officer would have lied.

ONE by one he drew on native garments, picking them from the pile beside him. So, by rapid stages he developed into a native hakim—by creed a converted Hindu, like Rewa Gunga—one of the men who practise yunani, or modern medicine, without a license and with a very great deal of added superstition, trickery and guesswork.

"I wouldn't trust you with a ha-penny!" announced his brother when he had done.

"Really? As good as all that?"

"The part to a T."

"Well—take these into the fort for me, will you?" His brother caught the bundle of discarded European clothes and tucked them under his arm. "Now, remember, old man! This is the biggest show there has ever been! We've got to hold the Khyber, and we can't do it by riding pell-mell into the first trap set for us! We must smash when the fighting starts—but we mayn't miss! We mayn't run past the mark! Be a coward, if that's the name you care to give it. You needn't tell me you've got orders to hunt skirmishers to a standstill, because I know better. I

know you've just had your wig pulled for laming two horses!"

"How d'you know that?"

"Never mind! I've been seconded to your crowd. I'm your senior, and I'm giving you orders. This show isn't sport, but the real red thing, and I want to count on you to fight like a trained man, not like a natural-born fool. I want to know you're holding Ali Masjid like Fabius held Rome, by being slow and wily, just for the sake of the comfortable feeling it will give me when I'm alone among the 'Hills.' His hard when you have to, but for God's sake, old man, ware traps!"

"All right," said his brother.

"Then good-by, old man!"

"Good-by, Athelstan!"

They stood facing and shook hands. Where had been a man and his reflection in the mist, there now seemed to be the same man and a native. Athelstan King had changed his very nature with his clothes. He stood like a native—moved like one; even his voice was changed, as if—like the actor who dyed himself all over to act Othello—he could do nothing by halves.

"I'm going to try to get in without my men seeing me!" said the younger.

"If they do see you, they'll shoot!"

"Yes, and miss! Trust a Khyber jezailchi not to hit much in the dark! It'll do 'em good either way. I'll have time to give 'em the password before they fire a second volley. They're not really dangerous till the third one. Good-by!"

"By, Charles!"

Officers in that force are not chosen for their clumsiness, or inability to move silently by night. His footsteps died in the mist almost as quickly as his shadow. Before he had been gone a minute the Pass was silent as death again, and though Athelstan listened with trained ears, the only sound he could detect was of a jackal cracking a bone fifty or sixty yards away.

He repacked the loads, putting everything back carefully into the big leather envelopes and locking the empty hand-bag, after throwing in a few stones for Ismail's benefit. Then he went to sit in the moonlight, with his back to a great rock and waited there cross-legged to give his brother time to make good a retreat through the mist. When there was no more doubt that his own men, at all events,

had failed to detect the lieutenant, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Almost at once he heard sandals come pattering from both directions. As they emerged out of the mist he sat silent and still. It was Darya Khan who came first and stood gaping at him, but Ismail was a very close second, and the other three were only a little behind. For full two minutes after the man with the sore stomach had come they all stood holding one another's arms, astonished. Then—

"Where is he?" asked Ismail.

"Who?" said King, the hakim.

"Our sahib—King sahib—where is he?"

"Gone!"

Even his voice was so completely changed that men who had been reared amid mutual suspicion could not recognize it.

"But there are his loads! There is his mule!"

"HERE is his bag!" said Ismail, pouncing on it, picking it up and shaking it. "It rattles not as formerly! There is more in it than there was!"

"His two horses and the mule are here," said Darya Khan.

"Did I say he took them with him?" asked the hakim, who sat still with his back to a rock. "He went because I came! He left me here in charge! Should he not leave the wherewithal to make me comfortable, since I must do his work? Hah! What do I see? A man bent nearly double? That means a belly ache! Who should have a belly ache when I have potions, lotions, balms to heal all ills, magic charms and talismans, big and little pills—and at such a little price! So small a price! Show me the belly and pay your money! Forget not the money, for nothing is free except air, water and the Word of God! I have paid money for water before now, and where is the mullah who will not take a fee? Nay, only air costs nothing! For a rupee, then—for one rupee I will heal the sore belly and forget to be ashamed for taking such a little fee!"

"Whither went the sahib? Nay—show us proof!" objected Darya Khan; and Ismail stood back a pace



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