

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

(Continued from page 18.)

King nodded good-by to him, his dark eyes in the shadow of the khaki helmet seeming scarcely interested any longer.

"Couldn't you find another berth?" Hyde asked him angrily when he stepped back into the compartment. "What were you out there looking for?"

King smiled back at him blandly.

"I think there are railway thieves on the train," he announced without any effort at relevance. He might not have heard the question.

"What makes you think so?"

"Observation, sir."

"Oh! Then if you've seen thieves, why didn't you have 'em arrested? You were precious free with that authority of yours on Peshawur platform!"

"Perhaps you'd care to take the responsibility, sir? Let me point out one of them."

FULL of grudging curiosity Hyde came to stand by him, and King stepped back just as the train began to move.

"That man, sir—over there—no, beyond him—there!"

Hyde thrust head and shoulders through the window, and a well-dressed native with one foot on the running-board at the back end of the train took a long steady stare at him before jumping in and slamming the door of a third-class carriage.

"Which one?" demanded Hyde impatiently.

"I don't see him now, sir!"

Hyde snorted and returned to his seat in the silence of unspeakable scorn. But presently he opened a suit-case and drew out a repeating pistol which he cocked carefully and stowed beneath his pillow; not at all a contemptible move, because the Indian railway thief is the most resourceful specialist in the world. But King took no overt precautions of any kind.

After more interminable hours night shut down on them, red-hot, black-dark, mesmerically subdivided into seconds by the thump of carriage wheels and lit at intervals by showers of sparks from the gasping engine. The din of Babel rode behind the first-class carriages, for all the natives in the packed third-class talked all together. (In India, when one has spent a fortune on a third-class ticket, one proceeds to enjoy the ride.) The train was a Beast out of Revelation, wallowing in noise.

But after other, hotter hours the talking ceased. Then King, strangely without kicking off his shoes, drew a sheet up over his shoulders. On the opposite berth Hyde covered his head, to keep dust out of his hair, and presently King heard him begin to snore gently. Then, very carefully he adjusted his own position so that his profile lay outlined in the dim light from the gas lamp in the roof. He might almost have been waiting to be shaved.

The stuffiness increased to a degree that is sometimes preached in Christian churches as belonging to a sulphurous sphere beyond the grave. Yet he did not move a muscle. It was long after midnight when his vigil was rewarded by a slight sound at the door. From that instant his eyes were on the watch, under dark closed lashes; but his even breathing was that of the seventh stage of sleep that knows no dreams.

A click of the door-latch heralded the appearance of a hand. With skill, of the sort that only special training can develop, a man in native dress insinuated himself into the carriage without making another sound of any kind. King's ears are part of the equipment for his exacting business, but he could not hear the door click shut again.

For about five minutes, while the train swayed headlong into Indian darkness, the man stood listening and watching King's face. He stood so near that King recognized him for the one who had accosted him on Rawalpindi platform. And he could see the

outline of the knife-hilt that the man's fingers clutched underneath his shirt.

"He'll either strike first, so as to kill us both and do the looting afterward—and in that case I think it will be easier to break his neck than his arm—yes, decidedly his neck; it's long and thin;—or—"

His eyes feigned sleep so successfully that the native turned away at last.

"Thought so!" He dared open his eyes a mite wider. "He's pukka—true to type! Rob first and then kill! Rule number one with his sort, run when you've stabbed! Not a bad rule either, from their point of view!"

As he watched, the thief drew the sheet back from Hyde's face, with trained fingers that could have taken spectacles from the victim's nose without his knowledge. Then as fish glide in and out among the reeds without touching them, swift and soft and unseen, his fingers searched Hyde's body. They found nothing. So they dived under the pillow and brought out the pistol and a gold watch.

After that he began to search the clothes that hung on a hook beside Hyde's berth. He brought forth papers and a pocketbook—then money. Money went into one bag—papers and pocketbook into another. And that was evidence enough as well as risk enough. The knife would be due in a minute.

KING moved in his sleep, rather noisily, and the movement knocked a book on the floor from the foot of his berth. The noise of that awoke Hyde, and King pretended to begin to wake, yawning and rolling on his back (that being much the safest position an unarmed man can take and much the most awkward for his enemy).

"Thieves!" Hyde yelled at the top of his lungs, groping wildly for his pistol and not finding it.

King sat up and rubbed his eyes. The native drew the knife, and—believing himself in command of the situation—hesitated for one priceless second. He saw his error and darted for the door too late. With a movement unbelievably swift King was there ahead of him; and with another movement not so swift, but much more disconcerting, he threw his sheet as the retiarius used to throw a net in ancient Rome. It wrapped round the native's head and arms, and the two went together to the floor in a twisted stranglehold.

In another half-minute the native was groaning, for King had his knife-wrist in two hands and was bending it backward while he pressed the man's stomach with his knees.

"Get his loot!" he panted between efforts.

The knife fell to the floor, and the thief made a gallant effort to recover it, but King was too strong for him. He seized the knife himself, slipped it in his own bosom and resumed his hold before the native guessed what he was after. Then he kept a tight grip while Hyde knelt to grope for his missing property. The major found both the thief's bags, and held them up.

"I expect that's all," said King, loosening his grip very gradually. The native noticed—as Hyde did not—that King had begun to seem almost absent-minded; the thief lay quite still, looking up, trying to divine his next intention. Suddenly the brakes went on, but King's grip did not tighten. The train began to scream itself to a standstill at a wayside station, and King (the absent-minded) very nearly grinned.

"If I weren't in such an infernal hurry to reach Bombay—" Hyde grumbled; and King nearly laughed aloud then, for the thief knew English and was listening with all his ears, "—may I be damned if I wouldn't get off at this station and wait to see that scoundrel brought to justice!"

The train jerked itself to a standstill, and a man with a lantern began to chant the station's name.

"Damn it!—I'm going to Bombay to act censor. I can't wait—they want me there."

The instant the train's motion altogether ceased the heat shut in on them as if the lid of Tophet had been slammed. The prickly heat burst out all over Hyde's skin and King's too.

"Almighty God!" gasped Hyde, beginning to fan himself.

There was plenty of excuse for relaxing hold still further, and King made full use of it. A second later he gave a very good pretence of pain in his finger-ends as the thief burst free. The native made a drive at his bosom for the knife, but he frustrated that. Then he made a prodigious effort, just too late, to clutch the man again, and he did succeed in tearing loose a piece of shirt; but the fleeing robber must have wondered, as he bolted into the blacker shadows of the station building, why such an iron-fingered, wide-awake sahib should have made such a truly feeble showing at the end.

"Damn it!—couldn't you hold him? Were you afraid of him, or what?" demanded Hyde, beginning to dress himself. Instead of answering, King leaned out into the lamp-lit gloom, and in a minute he caught sight of a sergeant of native infantry passing down the train. He made a sign that brought the man to him on the run.

"Did you see that runaway?" he asked.

"Ha, sahib. I saw one running. Shall I follow?"

"No. This piece of his shirt will identify him. Take it. Hide it! When a man with a torn shirt, into which that piece fits, makes for the telegraph office after this train has gone on, see that he is allowed to send any telegrams he wants to! Only, have copies of every one of them wired to Captain King, care of the station-master, Delhi. Have you understood?"

"Ha, sahib."

"Grab him, and lock him up tight afterward—but not until he has sent his telegrams!"

"Atcha, sahib."

"Make yourself scarce, then!"

Major Hyde was dressed, having performed that military evolution in something less than record time.

"Who was that you were talking to?" he demanded. But King continued to look out the door.

Hyde came and tapped on his shoulder impatiently, but King did not seem to understand until the native sergeant had quite vanished into the shadows.

"Let me pass, will you?" Hyde demanded. "I'll have that thief caught if the train has to wait a week while they do it!"

HE pushed past, but he was scarcely on the step when the station-master blew his whistle, and his coloured minion waved a lantern back and forth. The engine shrieked forth with of death and torment; carriage doors slammed shut in staccato series; the heat relaxed as the engine moved—loosened—let go—lifted at last, and a trainload of hot passengers sighed thanks to an unresponsive sky as the train gained speed and wind crept in through the thermantidotes.

Only through the broken thermantidote in King's compartment no wet air came. Hyde knelt on King's berth and wrestled with it like a caged animal, but with no result except that the sweat poured out all over him and he was more uncomfortable than before.

"What are you looking at?" he demanded at last, sitting on King's berth. His head swam. He had to wait a few seconds before he could step across to his own side.

"Only a knife," said King. He was standing under the dim gas lamp that helped make the darkness more unbearable.

"Not that robber's knife? Did he drop it?"

"It's my knife," said King.

"Strange time to stand staring at it, if it's yours! Didn't you ever see it before?"

King stowed the knife away in his bosom, and the major crossed to his own side.

"I'm thinking I'll know it again, at

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The Transfer Books will be closed from the 20th to the 30th December, both days inclusive.

By order of the Board.

W. E. RUNDLE,
General Manager.

Toronto, December 6th, 1916.