

"Hush!" said a voice that seemed familiar.

He turned swiftly and looked straight into the eyes of the Rangar Rewa Gunga!

"How did you get here?" he asked, in English.

"Any fool could learn the password into this camp! Come over here, sahib. I bring word from her."

The ground was criss-crossed like a man's palm by the shadows of tent-ropes. The Rangar led him to where the tents were forty feet apart and none was likely to overhear them. There he turned like a flash.

"She sends you this!" he hissed.

In the same instant King was fighting for his life. In another second they were down together among the tent-pegs, King holding the Rangar's wrist with both hands and struggling to break it, and the Rangar striving for another stroke. The dagger he held had missed King's ribs by so little that his skin yet tingled from its touch. It was a dagger with bronze blade and a gold hilt—her dagger. It was her perfume in the air.

They rolled over and over, breathing hard. King wanted to think before he gave an alarm, and he could not think with that scent in his nostrils and creeping into his lungs. Even in the stress of fighting he wondered how the Rangar's clothes and turban had come to be drenched in it. He admitted to himself afterward that it was nothing else than jealousy that suggested to him to make the Rangar prisoner and hand him over to the mullah.

That would have been a ridiculous thing to do, for it would have forced his own betrayal to the mullah. But as if the Rangar had read his mind, he suddenly redoubled his efforts and King, weary to the point of sickness, had to redouble his own or die. Perhaps the jealousy helped put venom in his effort, for his strength came back to him as a madman's does. The Rangar gave a moan and let the knife fall.

And because jealousy is poison King did the wrong thing then. He pounced on the knife instead of on the Rangar. He could have questioned him—kneelt on him and perhaps forced explanations from him. But with a sudden swift effort like a snake's the Rangar freed himself and was up and gone before King could struggle to his feet—gone like a shadow among shadows.

King got up and felt himself all over, for they had fought on stony ground and he was bruised. But bruises faded into nothing, and weariness as well, as his mind began to dwell on the new complication to his problem.

It was plain that the moment he had returned from his message to the Khyber the Rangar had been sent on this new murderous mission. If Yasmini had told the truth a letter had gone into India describing him, King, as a traitor, and from her point of view that might be supposed to cut the very ground away from under his feet.

**T**HEN why so much trouble to have him killed? Either Rewa Gunga had never taken the first letter, or—and this seemed more probable—Yasmini had never believed the letter would be treated seriously by the authorities, and had only sent it in the hope of fooling him and undermining his determination. In that case, especially supposing her to have received his ultimatum on the mullah's behalf before sending Rewa Gunga with the dagger, she must consider him at least dangerous. Could she be afraid? If so her game was lost already!

Perhaps she saw her own peril. Perhaps she contemplated—gosh! what a contingency!—perhaps she contemplated bolting into India with

a story of her own, and leaving the mullah to his own devices! In such a case, before going she would very likely try to have the one man stabbed who could give her away most completely. In fact, would she dare escape into India and leave himself alive behind her?

He rather thought she would dare do anything. And that thought brought reassurance. She would dare, and being what she was she almost surely would seek vengeance on the mullah before doing anything else.

Then why the dagger for himself? She must believe him in league with the mullah against her. She might believe that with him out of the way the mullah would prove an easier prey for her. And that belief might be justifiable, but as an explanation it failed to satisfy.

There was an alternative, the very thought of which made him fearfully uneasy, and yet brought a thrill with it. In all eastern lands, love scorned takes to the dagger. He had half-believed her when she swore she loved him! The man who could imagine himself loved by Yasmini and not be thrilled to his core would be inhuman, whatever reason and caution and caste and creed might whisper in imagination's wake.

**R**EELING from fatigue (he felt like a man who had been racked, for the Rangar's strength was nearly unbelievable), he started toward where the mullah sat glowering in the cave mouth. He found the man who had carried his bag asleep at the foot of the ramp, and taking the bag away from him, let him lie there. And it took him five minutes to drag his hurt weary bones up the ramp, for the fight had taken more out of him than he had guessed at first.

The mullah glared at him but let him by without a word. It was by the fire at the back of the cave, where he stopped to dip water from the mullah's enormous crock that the next disturbing factor came to light. He kicked a brand into the fire and the flame leaped. Its light shone on a yard and a half of exquisitely fine hair, like spun gold, that caressed his shoulder and descended down one arm. One thread of hair that conjured up a million thoughts, and in a second upset every argument!

If Rewa Gunga had been near enough to her and intimate enough with her not only to become scented with her unmistakable perfume but even to get her hair on his person, then gone was all imagination of her love for himself! Then she had lied from first to last! Then she had tried to make him love her that she might use him, and finding she had failed, she had sent her true love with the dagger to make an end!

In a moment he imagined a whole picture, as it might have been in a crystal, of himself trapped and made to don the Roman's armour and forced to pose to the savage "Hills"—or fooled into posing to them—as her lover, while Rewa Gunga lurked behind the scenes and waited for the harvest in the end. And what kind of harvest?

And what kind of man must Rewa Gunga be who could lightly let go all the prejudices of the East and submit to what only the West has endured hitherto with any complacency—a "tertium quid"?

Yet what a fool he, King, had been not to appreciate at once that Rewa Gunga must be her lover. Why should he not be? Were they not alike as cousins? And the East does not love its contrary, but its complement, being older in love than he West, and wiser in its ways in all but the material. He had been blind. He



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had overlooked the obvious—that from first to last her plan had been to set herself and this Rewa Gunga on the throne of India!

He washed and went through the mummery of muslim prayers for the watchful mullah's sake, and climbed on to his bed. But sleep seemed out of the question. He lay and tossed for an hour, his mind as busy as a terrier in hay. And when he did fall asleep at last it was so to dream and mutter that the mullah came and shook him and preached him a half-hour sermon against the mortal sins that rob men of peaceful slumber.

All that seemed kinder and more refreshing than King's own thoughts had been, for when the mullah had done at last and had gone striding back to the cave mouth, he really did fall sound asleep, and it was after

dawn when he awoke. The mullah's voice, not untuneful was rousing all the valley echoes in the call to prayer.


Allah is Almighty! Allah is Almighty!

I declare there is no God but Allah! I declare Muhammad is his prophet!

And while King knelt behind the mullah and the whole camp faced Mecca in forehead-in-the-dust abasement there came a strange procession down the midst—not strange to the "Hills," where such sights are common, but strange to that camp and hour. Somebody rose and struck them, and they knelt like the rest; but when prayer was over and cooking had begun and the camp became a place of savory smell, they came on again—seven blind men.

(To be Continued.)

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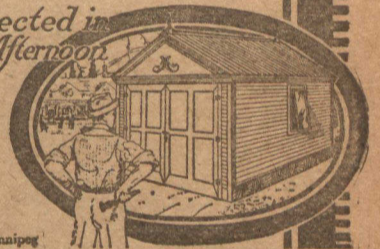
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