

mullah and had received no answer. At the end of ten minutes he handed up what he had written, and Muhammad Anim made as if to read it, trying to seem deliberate, and contriving to look irresolute. It was a fair guess that he hated to admit ignorance of the scholar's language.

"Are there any alterations you suggest?" King asked him.

"Nay, what care I what the words are? If she be not persuaded, the worse for thee!"

HE held it out, and as he took it King contrived to tear it; he also contrived to seem ashamed of his own clumsiness.

"I will copy it out again," he said.

The mullah swore at him, and conceiving that some extra show of authority was needful, growled out:

"Remember all I said. Set down she must surrender Khinjan Caves or I swear by Allah I will have thee tortured with fire and thorns—and her, too, when the time comes!"

Now he had said that, or something very like it, in the first letter. There was no doubt left that the mullah was trying to hide ignorance, as men of that fanatic ambitious mold so often will at the expense of better judgment. If fanatics were all-wise, it would be a poor world for the rest.

"Very well," King said, quietly. And with great pretense of copying the other letter out on fresh paper he now wrote what he wished to say, taking so long about it (for he had to weigh each word), that the mullah strode up and down the cave swearing and kicking things over.

"Greetings," he wrote, "to the most beautiful and very wise Princess Yasmini, in her palace in the Caves in Khinjan, from her servant Kurram Khan the hakim, in the camp of the mullah Muhammad Anim, a night's march distant in the hills."

"The mullah Muhammad Anim makes his stand and demands now surrender to himself of Khinjan Caves and all his ammunition. Further, he demands full control of you and of me and of all your men. He is ready to fight for his demands and already—as you must well know—he has considerable following in Khinjan Caves. He has at least as many men as you have, and he has four thousand more here."

"He threatens as a preliminary to blockade Khinjan Caves, unless the answer to this prove favourable, letting none enter, but calling his own men out to join him. This would suit the Indian government, because while the 'Hills' fight among themselves they can not raid India, and while he blockades Khinjan Caves there will be time to move against him."

"Knowing that he dares begin and can accomplish what he threatens, I am sorry; because I know it is said how many services you have rendered of old to the government I serve. We who serve one raj are one—one to remember—one to forget—one to help each other in good time."

"I have not been idle. Some of Muhammad Anim's men are already mine. With them I can return to India, taking information with me that will serve my government. My men are eager to be off."

"It may be that vengeance against me would seem sweeter to you than return to your former allegiance. In that case, Princess, you only need betray me to the mullah, and be sure my death would leave nothing to be desired by the spectators. At present he does not suspect me."

"Be assured, however, that not to betray me to him is to leave me free to serve my government and well able to do so."

"I invite you to return to India with me, bearing news that the mullah Muhammad Anim and his men are bottled in Khinjan Caves, and to plan with me to that end."

"If you will, then write an answer to Muhammad Anim, not in Urdu, but in a language he can understand; seem to surrender to him. But to me send a verbal message, either by the bearer of this or by some trustier messenger."

"India can profit yet by your service if you will. And in that case I pledge my word to direct the government's attention only to your good service in the matter. It is not yet too late to choose. It is not impertinent in me to urge you."

"Nor can I say how gladly I would subscribe myself your grateful and loyal servant."

The mullah pounced on the finished letter, pretended to read it, and watched him seal it up, smudging the hot wax with his own great gnarled thumb. Then he shouted for the Orakzai Pathan, who came striding in, all grins and swagger.

"There—take it! Make speed!" he ordered, and with his rifle at the "ready" and the letter tucked inside his shirt, the Pathan favoured King with a farewell grin and obeyed.

"Get out!" the mullah snarled then immediately. "See to the sick. Tell them I sent thee. Bid them be grateful!"

King went. He recognized the almost madness that constituted the mullah's driving power. It is contagious, that madness, until it destroys itself. It had made several thousand men follow him and believe in him,

but it had once given Yasmini a chance to fool him and defeat him, and now it gave King his chance. He let the mullah think himself obeyed implicitly.

He became the busiest man in all the "Hills." While the mullah glowered over the Camp from the cave mouth or fulminated from the Quran or fought with other mullahs with words for weapons and abuse for argument, he bandaged and lanced and poulticed and physicked until his head swam with weariness.

The sick swarmed so around him that he had to have a body-guard to keep them at bay; so he chose twenty of the least sick from among those who had talked with him after sunrise.

And because each of those men had friends, and it is only human to wish one's friend in the same boat, especially when the sea, so to speak, is rough, the progress through the camp became a current of missionary zeal and the virtues of the Anglo-Indian raj were better spoken of than the "Hills" had heard for years.

NOT that there was any effort made to convert the camp en masse. Far from it. But the likely few were pounced on and were told of a chance to enlist for a bounty in India. And what with winter not so far ahead, and what with experience of former fighting against the British army, the choosing was none so difficult. From the day when the lad first feels soft down upon his face until the old man's beard turns white and his teeth shake out, the Hillman would rather fight than eat; but he prefers to fight on the winning side if he may, and he likes good treatment.

Before it was dark that night there were thirty men sworn to hold their tongues and to wait for the word to hurry down the Khyber for the purpose of enlisting in some British-Indian regiment. Some even began to urge the hakim not to wait for the Orakzai Pathan, but to start with what he had.

"Shall I leave my brother in the lurch?" the hakim asked them; and though they murmured, they thought better of him for it.

Well for him that he had plenty of Epsom salts in his kit, for in the "Hills" physic should taste evil and show very quick results to be believed in. He found a dozen diseases of which he did not so much as know the name, but half of the sufferers swore they were cured after the first dose. They would have dubbed him fakir and have hoisted him to a pillar of holiness had he cared to let them.

Muhammad Anim slept most of the day, like a great animal that

scorns to live by rule. But at evening he came to the cave mouth and fulminated such a sermon as set the whole camp to roaring. He showed his power then. The jihad he preached would have tempted dead men from their graves to come and share the plunder, and the curses he called down on cowards and laggards and unbelievers were enough to have frightened the dead away again.

In twenty minutes he had undone all King's missionary work. And then in ten more, feeling his power and their response, and being at heart a fool, as all rogues are, he built it up again.

He began to make promises too definite. He wanted Khinjan Caves. More, he needed them. So he promised them they should all be free of Khinjan Caves within a day or two, to come and go and live there at their pleasure. He promised them they should leave their wives and children and belongings safe in the Caves while they themselves went down to plunder India. He overlooked the fact that Khinjan Caves for centuries had been a secret to be spoken of in whispers, and that prospect of its violation came to them as a shock.

Half of them did not believe him. Such a thing was impossible, and if he were lying as to one point, why not as to all the others, too?

And the army veterans, who had been converted by King's talk of pardons, and almost reconverted by the sermon, shook their heads at the talk of taking Khinjan. Why waste time trying to do what never had been done, with her to reckon against, when a place in the sun was waiting for them down in India, to say nothing of the hope of pardons and clean living for a while? They shook their heads and combed their beards and eyed one another sidewise in a way the "Hills" understand.

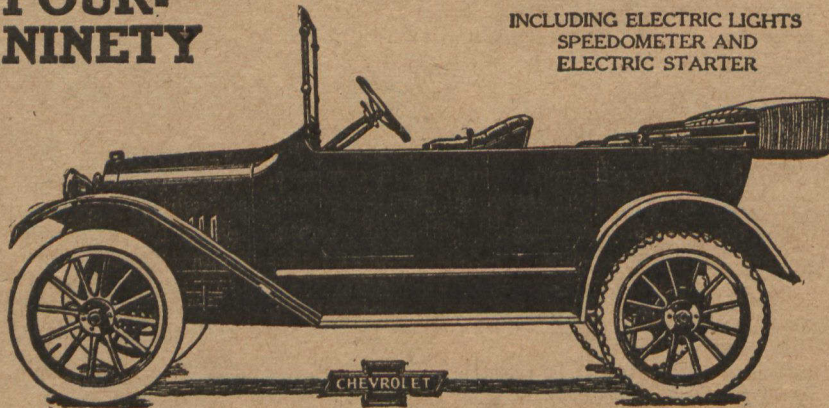
That night, while the mullah glowered over the camp like a great old owl, with leaping firelight reflected in his eyes, the thousands under the skin tents argued, so that the night was all noise. But King slept.

All of another day and part of another night he toiled among the sick, wondering when a message would come back. It was nearly midnight when he bandaged his last patient and came out into the star light to bend his back straight and yawn and pick his way reeling with weariness back to the mullah's cave. He had given his bag of medicines and implements to a man to carry ahead of him and had gone perhaps ten paces into the dark when a strong hand gripped him by the wrist.

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