

DO YOU KNOW WHY --- There is So Much Pleasure Entertaining A Guy Like This?

Drawn for this paper By Fisher



KING--of THE KHYBER RIFLES A Romance of Adventure by TALBOT MUNDY

Chapter I.—At the beginning of the world war Capt. Athelstan King of the British Indian army and of its secret service, is ordered to Delhi to meet Yasmini, a dancer, and go with her to Khinjan to quiet the outlaws there who are said by spies to be preparing for a jihad or holy war.

Chapter II.—On his way to Delhi King quietly foils a plan to assassinate him and gets evidence that Yasmini is after him.

Chapter III.—In Delhi he is met by Rewa Gunga, Yasmini's man, who tells him that she has already gone North and that he, the Rangar, has been left to escort King.

Chapter IV.—In Yasmini's house the Rangar attempts to outwit King, but fails. Ismail, an Afriid belonging to Yasmini, is given to King for a servant.

Chapter V.—King rescues some of Yasmini's men and takes them North with him, tricking the Rangar into going ahead of him.

Chapter VI.—Rejoined by the Rangar at the mouth of the Khyber pass, King and party start through the pass for Khinjan.

Chapter VII.—The Rangar deserts, King and Ismail, with three others, in the pass.

Chapter VIII.—King sends to his brother at All Masjid fort, meets him alone in the pass, and with his aid transforms himself into a native hakim, or man of medicine.

Chapter IX.—Calling Ismail and the men back he at first puzzles and then astonishes and delights them by his transformation. Ismail grows friendly and seems appalled at the thought that Yasmini may love King.

Chapter X.—In Khinjan King is taken into the mosque and Ismail and another falsely witnessing for him that he has slain an Englishman, he is admitted thru the mosque wall into the celebrated caves.

Chapter XI.—He holds a clinic for the cave's inhabitants, and bears of a lashkar by Bull-With-a-Bear's men.

Chapter XII.—Next night Ismail takes him to a vast cave through which an underground river pours—"Earth's Drink"—and finds gathered there thousands of men, among whom he has pointed out to his mullah Muhammad Anim, or Bull-i-ai Muhammad Anim, or Bull-With-a-Bear.

Chapter XIII.—After a wild dance begins the trial of three of the mullah's men who have gained admission by claiming to have killed an Englishman, but cannot produce the victim's head as proof. Yasmini appears, a lovely vision on a rock bridge above the crowd and orders the men thrown into Earth's Drink.

Chapter XIV.—King, in his disguise as Kurram Khan, is placed on trial, and at the critical moment has a human head thrust into his hands from behind. As he holds it up he sees that it is the head of his own brother. He throws it in Earth's Drink to keep it from the savage mob. Yasmini dances and the mob goes crazy under her spell.

Chapter XV.—Ismail leads King away, thru dark passages to a rock door guarded by ancient curtains with red shining lamps before them. He pushes thru the curtains. Before him on an ancient bed lie the bodies of a Roman warrior and a Grecian woman, dead 2,000 years, yet perfectly preserved. The woman is the perfect double of Yasmini. Yasmini herself appears and shows King that he is like the dead warrior in every feature.

Chapter XVI.—She tells King how she found the Sleepers and used the mystery to control the lawless men of the Hills. There is gold, there are arms and munitions in the caves. She and King are to take up the Sleepers' fight, and together conquer India and perhaps the world.

Chapter XVII.—She uses every effort to bend King to her will and at last writes and shows him a letter to his general, telling that King has turned traitor. They go back again to the Sleepers and at last she mesmerizes and leaves King asleep.

Chapter XVIII.—"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.

Chapter XIX.—"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!"

Chapter XX.—She nodded and tucked the scroll 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!"

Chapter XXI.—He followed her through leather curtains again and down the dark pass for Khinjan.

Chapter XXII.—The Rangar deserts, King and Ismail, with three others, in the pass.

Chapter XXIII.—King sends to his brother at All Masjid fort, meets him alone in the pass, and with his aid transforms himself into a native hakim, or man of medicine.

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 fall, yet knew that she must, and pitied her.

"Have you seen that breast under the armor?" she asked suddenly. "Come nearer! Come and look! 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. I think that scent is the preservative. Athelstan—listen! I think he would have failed her! I think she stabbed him rather than see him fall, and then swallowed poison! Afterward their servants hid 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 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 on it softened nothing of its lines. His Roman nose and stony, 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 that if she cradled 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 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 dual eyes of hers were indifferent to dark or daylight, she picked her way among bowlders 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 peaks 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!" Her hands slipped into his, soft and warm; her eyes fastened on his and held them. And as they did so King sank, like a sack half-empty and toppled over sideways on the floor asleep. He neither dreamed nor was conscious of anything, but slept like a dead man, having fought against her mesmerism harder than he knew.

Statesmen, generals, outlaws, all make their big mistakes and manage to recover. Very nearly always it is an apparently little mistake that does most damage in the end, something unnoticeable at the time, that grows in geometrical proportion, minus instead of plus.

Yasmini made her little mistake that minute in believing King was utterly mesmerized at last and utterly in her power. Whereas in truth he was only weary. It may be that she gave him orders in his sleep, after the accepted manner of mesmerists; but if she did, they never reached him; he was far too fast asleep. He slept so deep and long that he was not conscious of men's voices, nor of being carried, nor of time, nor of anxiety, nor of anything.

CHAPTER XVIII. When King awoke he lay on a comfortable bed in a cave he had never yet seen, but there was no trace of Yasmini, nor of the men who must have carried him to it. He had no idea how long he had slept. It did not matter. He had probed Khinjan caves, and knew the whole purpose for which the lawless thousands had been gathering and were gathering still. Remained, to thwart that purpose. He began at the beginning, where he stood.

Behind him in a corner at the back of the cave was a narrow fissure, hung with a leather curtain, that was doubtless the door into Khinjan's heart; but the only way to the outer air was along a ledge above a dizzy precipice, so high that the huge waterfall looked like a little stream below. He was in a very eagle's aeris; the upper rim of Khinjan's gorge seemed not more than a quarter of a mile above him.

Round the corner, ten feet from the entrance, stood a guard, armed to the teeth, with a rifle, a sword, two pistols and a long curved Khyber-knife stuck handy in his girdle. As he looked, a little procession of women, led by a man, came up the ledge. The man was armed, but the women were burdened with his own belongings—the medicine chest—his saddle and bridle—his untried mule-pack. They came past the dumb man on guard and laid them all at King's feet just inside the cave.

He smiled, with that genial, face-transforming smile of his that has so often melted a road for him through sullen crowds. But the man in charge of the women did not grin. He was suffering. He groveled at the women, and they went away like obedient animals, to sit half-way down the ledge and await further orders. He himself made as if to follow them, and the dumb man on guard did not pay much attention; he let women and man pass behind him, stepping one pace forward toward the edge to make more room. That was his last entirely voluntary act in this world.

With a suddenness that disarmed all opposition the other humped himself against the wall and bucked into the dumb man's back, sending him, weapons and all, hurtling over the precipice to the caverns into which the water tumbled thousands of feet away. The other ruffian spat after him, and then walked back to where King stood.

"Now hear me my boys!" he said, grinning at last, doubtless from pleasure at the prospect. He was the same man who had stood on guard at the "guest-cave" when Ismail led King out to see the Cavern of Earth's Drink.

The temptation was to fling the brute after his victim. The temptation always is to do the wrong thing—to cap wrath with wrath, injustice with vengeance. That way began and are never ended. King beckoned him into the cave, and bent over the chest of medical supplies. Then, finding the light better for his purpose at the entrance, he called the man back and made him sit down on the box.

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