

KING-of the KHYBER RIFLES

A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY

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King whistled softly.

"There's no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and find out. Go and work with Yasmini. I shall have enough men here to attack instantly and smash any small force as soon as it begins to gather anywhere near the border. But Khinjan is another story. We can't prove anything, but the spies keep bringing in rumors of ten thousand men in Khinjan Caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khinjan. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenseless! We can tackle sporadic raids. We can even handle an ordinary raid in force. But this story

about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unity of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the fact." King granted. To stop a holy war single-handed would be rather like stopping the wind—possibly easy enough, if one knows the way. Yet he knew no general would throw away a man like himself on a useless venture. He began to look happy.

The general clucked to the mare and the big beast sank an inch between the shafts. The sals behind set his feet against the drop-board and clung with both hands to the seat.

One wheel ceased to touch the gravel as they whirled along a semicircular drive. Suddenly the mare drew up on her haunches, under the porch of a pretentious residence. Sentries saluted. The sals swung down. In less than sixty seconds King was following the general through a wide entrance into a crowded hall. The instant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight between them on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!" The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face-upwards on the top.

"That's the woman! How d'you like the look of her?" King took the package and for a

minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb, yet very few dancing women could afford to be dressed as she was.

King's service uses whom it may, and he had met and talked with many dancing women in the course of duty; but as he stared at Yasmini's likeness he did not think he had ever met one who so measured up to rumor. The nautch he knew for a delusion. Yet! The general watched his face with eyes that missed nothing.

"Remember—I said work with her!" King looked up and nodded.

"They say she's three parts Russian," said the general. "To my own knowledge she speaks Russian like a native, and about twenty other tongues as well, including English. She speaks English as well as you or I. She was the girl-wife of a rascally Hill-rajah. There's a story I've heard, to the effect that Russia arranged her marriage in the days when India was Russia's objective—and that's how long ago?—seems like weeks, not years! I've heard she

loved the rajah. And I've heard she didn't! There's another story that she poisoned him. I know she got away with his money—and that's proof enough of brains! Some say she's a she-devil. I think that's an exaggeration, but bear in mind she's dangerous!"

King grinned. A man who trusts Eastern women over readily does not rise far in the Secret Service.

"If you've got 'nous' enough to keep on her soft side and use her—not let her use you—you can keep the 'Hills' quiet and the Khyber safe! If you can contrive that—now—in this pinch—there's no limit for you! Commander-in-chief shall be your job before you're sixty."

King pocketed the photograph and papers. "I'm well enough content, sir, as things are," he said quietly. "Well, remember, she's ambitious, even if you're not! I'm warning you! Ambition's bad! Study those papers on your way down to Delhi and see that I get them back."

The general paced once across the room and once back again, with hands

behind him. Then he stopped in front of King.

"No man in India has a stiffer task than you have now! It may encourage you to know that I realize that! She's the key to the puzzle, and she happens to be in Delhi. Go to Delhi, then. A jihad launched from the 'Hills' would mean anarchy in the plains. That would entail sending back from France an army that can't be spared. There must be no jihad, King! There must—not—be—one! Keep that in your head!"

"What arrangements have been made with her, sir?"

"Practically none! She's watching

the spies in Delhi, but they're likely to break for the 'Hills' any minute. Then they'll be arrested. When that happens the fate of India may be in your hands and here! Get out of my way now, until tiffin-time!"

[To be continued]

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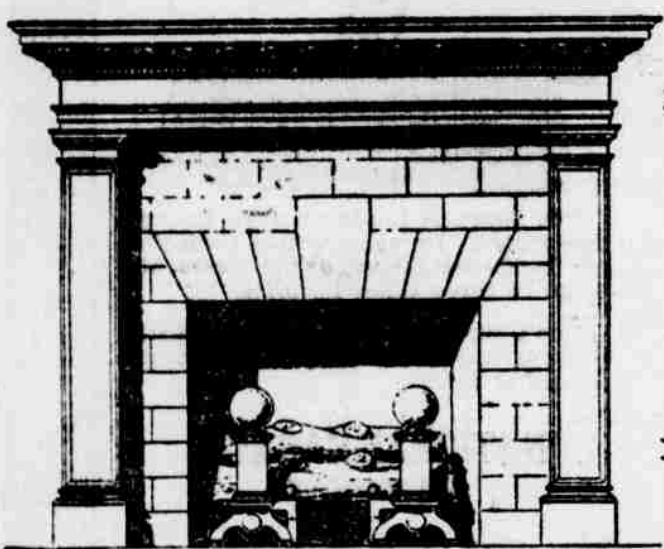
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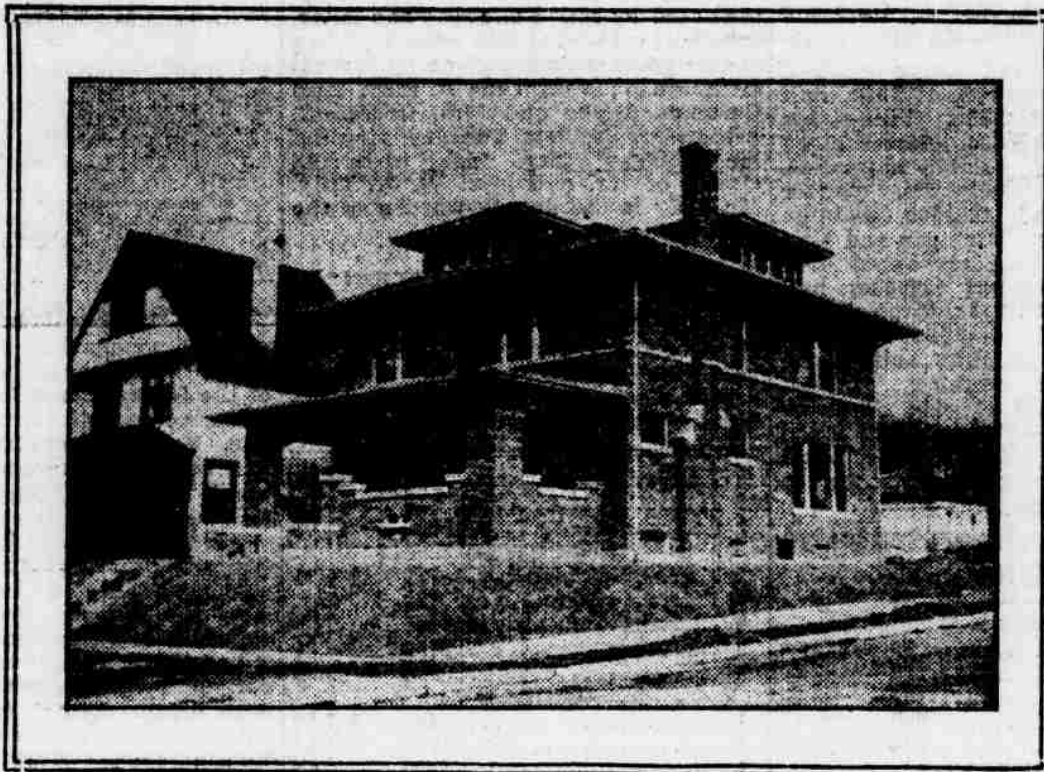
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