



Captain King and the Afghans

after the novel by Talbot Mundy

by Christian Lanciai (2005)

Dramatis personae:

The General
Captain King
Charles, his brother
Carmichael
Carpenter
Carter
Courtenay
a commandant
a guard
Gunga Din
Darya Khan
Ali
a spy
Yasmini
Muhammed Anim, "Bearded Bull"
an Afghan guard
an Afghan mullah
and all sorts of Afghans

The action takes place 1916 in former British India and Afghanistan.

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Captain King and the Afghans

Act I scene 1. In a tent.

(The General is sitting by a tent table as captain King reports.)

General Captain Athelstan King, I presume?
King At your service, Sir.
General Sit down, please.
King (sits down) You look worried, Sir.
General I am very worried.
King Is it the war in Europe or the war going on here?
General Both, captain King, both are extremely worrying. We have war enough in Europe not to need any war here.
King Is there any risk?
General That's why I called on you. I want you to eliminate the risk.
King In that case I would need to know something more about it.
General Of course, King. You shall know everything.
King Just don't tell me it's about the Afghans again.
General However could you guess?
King (dismayed) Oh no!
General (earnestly) This is serious, King. We can't handle one front too much. If the muslims start a holy war up in the mountains we are done for! It must be avoided, at any cost!
King What can we do about it?

General (somewhat calmer) Fortunately we have an ally on the enemy side, an agent on the spot who seems to have a clear view of the situation. The problem is we don't know how reliable she is.

King She?

General Yes, King. It's Yasmini. You must have heard of her.

King That notorious Russian?

General She is only three quarters a Russian. She speaks English as well as anyone of us and twenty other languages besides. But most interesting of all is, that she can move freely in the mountains and have even been inside the caves of Khinjan.

King The notorious Khinjan caves!

General Yes, from which none of our men have returned alive. With some help from her you could be the first one.

King Wasn't my brother sent up there?

General I hoped you would mention him. At the moment we don't know where he is. You will accept this mission as an excuse for finding him.

King Obviously I am not supposed to decline.

General Could you decline?

King No.

General That pleases me. You will go directly to Rawalpindi where you will have further instructions and where they will know more about the situation beyond the Khyber pass.

King Exactly what do you want me to do?

General You will find out what's behind the rumour of a new holy war from that area, and if there is any substance to that rumour you are to stop it at any price. At best you will find Yasmini by your side as your right hand. She can be both your interpreter and guide.

King And at worst?

General Be careful with her, since she could be a double agent.

King Have you no picture of her, so that I could recognize her if she turns up?

General Of course. Here is our latest picture. *(hands over a picture)*

King (inspecting the picture) But this is a belly dancer.

General No, a temple dancer. It's one of her disguises.

King It's not, hem, just a little provoking.

General She uses many disguises but is easily recognized in all of them since she has her very own style.

King Is she really blonde like this?

General Yes, isn't it an interesting contrast to her dark skin? That's how she is always recognized.

King I understand. I can't miss her.

General (rising, like also King) Good luck, captain King. You will have further orders in Rawalpindi. There they will know much more than I. *(shakes his hand)*

King I certainly hope so.

General We depend on you.

King Thanks for your trust, Sir. I will do my best. *(salutes)*

General I don't doubt that for one moment, but the important thing is that you must succeed, We don't want the muslim world against us in this moment when the Gallipoli failure is a fact and lieutenant Lawrence is ready in Arabia to cut the balls off the Turks.

King Yes, Sir.

General Good luck!

King Thank you, Sir. I will need it. *(salutes and leaves)*

General (sitting down again) An impossible mission. But there is a slight chance that only he can make it. *(returns to his matters.)*

Scene 2. The bazar at Rawalpindi.

Carmichael Welcome, captain King! New secret missions beyond the border line?
King I am afraid so.
Carpenter Is it the Russians again?
King No, I am afraid we might have problems with the Afghans again.
Carter Is the Turkish sultan cooking up something behind them?
King At worst.
Carmichael You will make it, King! You always do.
King So far.
Carter You are not afraid, are you?
King Only of women.
Carter Women don't make war.
King Their cunning is worse than any war.
Carpenter They are only jealous. Keep out of their reach, and you will be safe.
King With any woman near by that will be difficult.
Carmichael Good luck, King, whatever havoc you create!
King Alas, for the Afghans, the time to create havoc is always imminent.
Gunga Have I the honour to find captain King of the Khyber Rifles?
King Who are you, my friend?
Gunga (in deep humility) Gunga Din, at your service.
King What do you want?
Gunga Talk alone with you, if possible.
King Why?
Gunga (lower) I have a message for you from *her*.
King Yasmini?
Gunga (still low) Yes.
King Come here, my friend. (*takes him aside*) I had hoped to see her in person.
Gunga When the time comes. First you must pass all dangers. I have a letter to you from her.
King Who is she really? What do you know about her?
Gunga She is my mistress, and I serve her with all my heart. She has numberless servants like me, and we belong to her, soul and body. She commands all the mountain country in the east, and all will obey her like devoted slaves.
King What is her interest?
Gunga The same as all English.
King Which is?
Gunga Power. What else?
King (more serious) My friend, you had a letter from her. Do you have it?
Gunga Of course. (*takes it out immediately and hands it over.*)
King (opens it and reads) "My master and brother, I send to you my servant Gunga Din, who in all will serve you as he serves me. He will bring you through all the dangers up to the caves of Khinjan, where I will wait for you and welcome you. As a token I send with my servant a talisman for you which will protect you against all dangers if you just will show it when needed. It is on my responsibility that no one shall touch a hair on your head as long as you are on your journey to my realm. Take good care of my servant, for he is of the royal blood of the Ketchawas and will never fail you. – Your servant, *Yasmini.*"

A remarkable letter of a woman, which indicates an unlimited confidence and almost unquestionable power, that could allow herself anything. She speaks like a queen and calls you the descendant of a king. Is she a queen?

Gunga (enigmatically) Not yet, but she could be.

King What does that mean?

Gunga You shall see.

King I honestly hope so. Well, *Gunga*, what is the token you have brought with you?

Gunga This. (*takes out a bracelet, an old and considerable piece of jewellery of olden times.*)

King (inspecting it) A nice piece of work. It almost seems antique.

Gunga It will make all mountain people obey you.

King Why?

Gunga That's for *Yasmini* to tell you.

King (eying the bracelet more closely) I think I recognize the woman on the bracelet. (*takes out a richly ornamented dagger with its sheath*) Isn't it the same person as on this dagger?

Gunga (is shown the dagger, states casually) Yes, it is.

King Is it *Yasmini* herself?

Gunga Yes, captain, it could be *Yasmini* herself.

King There is much here that I don't understand. How could an old piece of jewellery like this, which must be from the 17th century at least, show a *Yasmini* who is alive today?

Gunga Leave your questions to *Yasmini*, captain. She has all the answers.

King I sincerely hope so. (*falls into thoughts*)

Gunga Can we start moving, captain?

King Yes, of course, *Gunga*. What are we waiting for? I am left at your guidance and have no reason to question it. Lead me where you will, and I hope you will lead me directly to *Yasmini*.

Gunga That will be my pleasure, captain. But we have a long and difficult journey ahead of us into the mountains. We must be well prepared.

King You seem to know what it is all about. I must rely on you.

(They leave together.)

(Another part of the bazar. Ali and the spy appear.)

Ali How is the holy war proceeding up there?

Spy It is hard to get started, and *Berlin* is getting impatient.

Ali Did you see that English captain who was here with a much too affectionate servant?

Spy Yes. Who is he?

Ali It's he who was commissioned by the British to go up to *Khyber* and the caves of *Khinjan* to settle the situation.

Spy Could he be an impediment to our plans?

Ali No, for he knows nothing. The problem is that the beautiful *Yasmini* supports him, and as long as he enjoys her support he is untouchable.

Spy Why is she supporting him? Doesn't she share the same interest of us all to create another front against the British?

Ali That's what nobody knows. No one knows where she really stands. Don't forget that she is actually Russian and that the Russians are on the side of the British in the war, even if they stand against the British in India.

Spy Can't we get her over on our side?

Ali Everyone wants her on his side, and all are working on her to get her over, but no one knows where she stands. She is a joker, she only plays tricks with us all, and no one can manage without her or influence her.

Spy So we must trust her good will and grace.

Ali We must be patient. Sooner or later she must take sides.

Spy Everyone will be happy if we only get the war started.

Ali Except the British, and that's our very purpose. The question is why she stands by this captain.

Spy Does she know him?

Ali No, they never met. Still she has given him a talisman which will give him free access to all Afghanistan.

Spy A mystery. What do you think her plans and intentions are?

Ali The true face of a woman you can never find out until it is too late.

(They retire back into the throng of the bazar.)

Scene 3. The prison.

Commandant We just got them in. Are we then to immediately release them?

Guard Don't ask me. We have no right to question orders of our superiors.

Commandant But what's the meaning? What do they want?

Guard We had better not ask any questions, especially not when there is reason to.

Commandant But it doesn't make sense! What the hell should we put them in jail for if only to let them out?

Guard At best it's some kind of misunderstanding. At worst it's no misunderstanding.

Commandant Yes, that's how it usually is.

Guard Here is the captain responsible. Maybe he knows something.

Commandant But it's captain King! I know him. *(He enters.)* Captain, do you know anything about this?

King Yes. I need these men for my expedition to the mountains.

Commandant Is that why they have been locked up here?

King No. It's why I must ask you to release them.

Commandant Do you know them?

King Not yet.

Commandant They are a grim lot all of them. They look like assassins every one of them.

King So do all Afghans just because of our bad experience of them and their bad experience of us. But all these served Yasmini.

Commandant And who the devil is Yasmini?

An afghan (behind bars) Our ruler!

Another Don't you dare use such a holy woman's name in connection with the devil! It's blasphemy!

King May I ask why you put them in jail?

Commandant It was not on my orders. They were just brought here.

King On whose order?

Commandant Well, not on mine!

Guard Perhaps they were brought here not to be dispersed before your expedition.

King Do you mean to say they were brought here for my sake?

Guard It's not impossible. You are the only one who needs them.

King Release them at once.

Commandant Be careful, Sir. They are angry and difficult to handle.

King Leave it to me.

(The guard and commandant lock up the prison doors, and the Afghans come pouring out.)

My friends, I don't know why you were arrested, but you are supposed to show me the way up the Khyber pass to the caves of Khinjan.

Afghan 1 (the first, on his knees) Our saviour, we have orders to obey you in everything.

2 We were arrested without reason only because we were at Yasmini's house.

King Yes, you were gathered there because I needed you.

1 Just show us the token, captain, so that we may believe in you.
King The token?
Gunga (behind him) Show them the bracelet.
King Ah! (*pulls up his sleeve immediately and shows the spectacular glimmering bracelet. The Afghans almost turn ecstatic.*)
2 It's him! It's true!
3 He is really under her protection!
4 We will follow you to the end of the world, captain!
1 Down here in the plains we are just languishing. We belong in the mountains and wish for nothing more than to return there with you, so that we can bring you to our lady. We are all at your humblest service, captain.
King This formidable submission almost scares me. What do they make of me? A divinity? A saviour?
Gunga You actually released them from prison, Sir.
King They shouldn't have landed here in the first place. I was to collect them at Yasmini's house.
Gunga But your general collected them all here for security reasons, to have them all in one place,
King That was unnecessary.
Gunga But it made you their saviour.
King (to the submissive and grateful Afghans) My friends, I regret the humiliating treatment that you were subject to. It was completely unnecessary and was not included in the program. I hope you can forbear what happened and accept my apology.
1 You don't have to make any excuse, captain. We are all your slaves.
2 All you have to do to convince us is to show her bracelet.
3 Captain King, lead us back to the mountains and to her!
4 You will never regret it. You will be the one to open your own paradise.
5 With her help we will all overcome.
King (to Gunga) The devil himself might understand their real meaning, but it certainly is far beyond my own understanding completely.
Gunga We shall probably know more when we arrive.
King What's the real purpose of my mission? I am filled with misgivings.
Gunga Her bracelet seems to be a more secure protection though than any guns or armour.
King Yes, so far, but how long can such a fantastic state be sustained?
Commandant Will you take them all with you?
King Yes, my friend, that's the intention.
Commandant Then I must ask you to sign here. (*gives him paper and pen*)
King (signs) There. Then there is only one more thing to do before we can go.
Gunga Well?
King I would like to see Yasmini's house before I go.
Gunga A simple matter. I know exactly where it is.
(*Exit Gunga and King, followed by all the grateful Afghans, who are in a very vivid debate about their situation.*)

Scene 4. Yasmini's house.
A splendid garden dominates the scene.

King (enters) So this is the home of the remarkable woman, indeed a place for dreams and enchantment. At least she has good taste and good order. Nothing is missing here for an ideal home in the orient. She could have waited for me here, though. Why does she avoid and escape me?

Gunga You will have to ask her when you meet her.
King But she never wants to see me. She keeps constantly one step ahead of me.
Gunga She knows what she is doing. She shows the way. One day she will open the door to you.
King The only thing for me to do is to obey orders. If she opens a door I can't enter unless I be given the order.
Gunga That will come later.
King You know more than you want to tell.
Gunga Even I have my orders, captain.
King What kind of orders?
Gunga To obey you and obey her.
King So far these orders don't conflict with each other. Let's hope it remains that way.
Gunga Yes, Sir.
King Come, my good servant. Let's at last have some rest for the night. (*lays his arm around him, and they go out.*)

Scene 5. By the Khyber pass.

General What the deuce have you done with her, King? Have you managed to seduce her?
King Who?
General That Russian spy, who must work for us and who will fix that rebellion in Khinjan.
King Yasmini?
General Yes. Who else?
King I have never seen her.
General How then can she show such confidence in you?
King Don't ask me. Ask her.
General We don't know where she is.
King She is as usual somewhere ahead of us.
General She can't be. Then she would be up at the Khyber pass. No one has passed that way before us.
King Are you sure?
General That road is under constant hard surveillance.
King What's that, then? (*points at some distance*)
General What? (*tries to look for something*)
King Let one of our men fetch it. It looks like a marker of the road.
General You mean that thing fluttering?
King Yes.
General Carpenter, send some one to have a look at that white object over there and to get it here if it's something of interest.
Carpenter It will be Courtenay in that case. (*gets away*)
General How the devil could that dame have such confidence in you if you never saw her?
King That's exactly what I wonder myself.
General She called me on the telephone and told me straight that you were the only Brit in the whole army to have anything like a head on his body. She doesn't think highly of men in general.
King Obviously she trusts me.
General Obviously we selected the right man for the right mission. Well, Courtenay?
Courtenay A message, Sir, stuck on a spearhead. (*hands over a message*)

General Let's see. (*studies the message*) It's for you, King. (*hands over the message, confused*)

King (*reads*) "I shall be expecting you at Khinjan. Don't be late on your arrival. They are preparing a raid from the caves. Trust my servants as your own. They are as faithful to you as they would give their lives for me – and not just because you let them out of prison. Come soon. Yasmini."

General What is the meaning? Did you let all her wildest creatures out of prison?

King I needed them for my escort, Sir.

General We had intended to interrogate every one of them.

King I think they will be of greater use to us in freedom. They know the mountains and her.

General All seem to be on intimate footing with her except we who employ her. There is something odd about this.

King Sir, she seems to know what she is doing, and so far she has been on the line and kept up her style. Let's not let her down but follow her directions as long as they move forward.

General Yes, so far nothing has gone wrong, so you just carry on as you started, and we might even succeed with our mission. But what the devil did you do to earn her confidence so unreservedly?

King Nothing, Sir.

General Carry on with it then, and keep following her course, and you will end up with the whole world at your feet. Make haste to get your wild Afghans up the pass. I just hope you will return as well. Few Englishmen did ever get back alive from Afghanistan. Your brother should be up there somewhere.

King That's my chief concern about going there. I would like to see where he ended up.

General I hope he will also make it back alive. You will be almost the first ones in that case. Good luck, captain King.

King Thank you, Sir. I will be off at once. (*leaves*)

General You could think they both had seduced each other, and still they never met. There is something very odd about this. Hem! (*falls into thoughts*)

Courtenay Captain, can you understand how that creature could bypass us up the pass without our observing her?

King You must have winked.

Courtenay No one of us slept on his watch. Who is she really?

King No one really knows.

Courtenay Are you sure that she exists?

King My dear Courtenay, one thing is certain, and that is the fact that she exists, even if only in the realm of fantasy.

Courtenay That is what I mean, Sir.

King What do you mean?

Courtenay That she could be a faked character fashioned to lure us all into a trap of destruction. Many of us were lost in Afghanistan. Didn't your brother disappear there as well?

King He is not yet reported missing.

Courtenay People who are lost in Afghanistan vanish without a trace.

King You are not very encouraging, Courtenay.

Courtenay I try to stick to facts.

King No matter what the facts are, Courtenay, our orders are to follow her up into the mountains. We have no choice. Hopefully she does exist in reality, and hopefully we shall learn more about that reality up there.

Courtenay Yes, Sir.

King Make ready, Courtenay. (*leaves*)

Courtenay Invest a woman with power, and she will make everyone who follows lose his way, since no woman ever acquired any power over any man without making him lose his way.

Act II scene 1. By the Khyber pass.
Night, moonlight, sharp rock contours.

King (alone) Thou moon, why is your light so extraordinary, like as if your light was so much more than only light? Just because your light is insufficient it is the more shining in its dimness, as if it vibrated of so much more than only music, and as if its unbridgeable distance implied so much more than just a mystery. People can get mad of watching this bewitching moonlight and not only dogs. Women can turn into vampires, and men of some extreme susceptibility can suddenly turn into senseless sexual murderers and maniacs, so affected by the radiation of the night that they forget completely who they are and what they did, as if they turned into completely different characters. What is it with you, fatal moon of destiny and spooky light, as if you filled the night with ghosts but only of a kind that we can never see but only feel with horror as the more irrevocably fatal? No, it's better not to think of it. I suppress your mental moonlight, so that I will spare myself the risk of finding myself hanging in thin air of total disorientation. It is best and safest to just stick to the deep darkness of the night, for full moon magic could seduce you to just anything, and its temptations are notoriously impossible not to give in to.

But there's someone moving in the shadows. Is it you, old friend?

Charles Yes, Athelstan, it's me.

King Come out there from the shadows, so that I can see you.

(Charles comes out of the shadows.)

Charles So you chanced to get here anyway, Athelstan.

King I was obliged to. I had no choice. We must make the best of it.

Charles No one knows what's awaiting us over there.

King At least you seem to be alive.

Charles I know how to make it even in a land like Afghanistan, which once and for all has sworn to murder all intruding Englishmen and strangers..

King Still you have been long away here. So you got my message.

Charles Your letters always reached me. And this time you had an extra faithful messenger,

King He was entrusted me by Yasmini, our strange ally, whom no one knows anything about and who continuously stays out of touch and reach without letting us know anything of what she knows or does while we all depend on her.

Charles I never saw her either.

King To the point! What do you know of the holy war?

Charles It's coming, that's for sure, but it hasn't started yet.

King Who is leading it? When will it break loose? Are Turks or Germans behind it?

Charles There are no Turks or Germans here, while the sultan is interested indeed to get it started, but he seems to have no influence over it, the Germans even less, but Berlin is carefully following the development of its possibilities.

King Who then is the instigator and why?

Charles That is what no one knows.

King Except perhaps Yasmini.

Charles She refuses to play any card that she might have in hand.

King So we are faltering in blindness.

Charles Where are you going?

King My mission is to reach the Khinjan caves and there settle the situation if there is any situation to settle.

Charles There always is. But you can't move behind those lines in your present character. You would be shot at once. We must disguise you.

King I was hoping you might help me with that. I have all the necessary means. (*picks out cans for colouring and disguise materials from his saddle bag.*)

Charles As usual you are well prepared for your job. Nothing is missing here. Let me see. (*starts carefully making him up*)

King Make me a real Hindu, or even better, a true Afghan. Let me never more be recognizable as an Englishman. Let no one be able to suspect that I know English. I must be absolutely convincing as a native of the wildest mountain people.

Charles We certainly shall be able to accomplish that. But I am afraid we have to shave off that elegant moustache. Or else we can never make the skin under it dark enough. (*takes forth some shaving gear and shaves off his moustache.*)

King What do I look like most? Hindu or Afghan?

Charles Nepali. Gurkha soldier. You are too slim to be Afghan and too robust for a Hindu. There. The moustache is gone. Your metamorphosis is complete. No one can believe you are white any more. Now to the dress.

King Here. (*takes forth a long silk scarf*) Make it a real taliban turban.

Charles (*ties the turban*) Now no one can guess that you haven't been born and lived all your life in the mountains.

King Thanks, Charles. I trust your expertise.

Charles You don't even have to be afraid of washing yourself. These stripes will now never leave you until you change skin.

King When do we see each other again?

Charles Unfortunately I must remain English, but I will also be diverted on different spying errands. We will probably meet somewhere on the way, hopefully when you have completed your mission and are safely on your way back to civilisation.

King Without a war.

Charles Yes, or else it's not possible. No war is more dangerous than a holy war, for no one can stop such a war. It's a madness spreading about like a plague contamination until all are dead. There is only one way to make peace with muslims waging a holy war, and that is to give them a shot for eternity.

King We must stop it before it breaks out.

Charles You must do it. I have other orders and am only here to cover you and keep your way open.

King (*embracing him*) Thanks for coming, Charles. And thanks for being alive.

Charles That's the least you can do as long as you can.

King Take good care.

Charles You had better. You take greater risks. You must be visible, while I can sneak.

King With your disguise I can never more be seen as myself.

Charles That ought to save you. I must leave. Someone is coming.

King Farewell, brother!

Charles Good luck! (*leaves*)

Gunga I thought I heard voices.

Darya Khan But captain King was here alone.

Gunga But now he is gone.

Darya There is no one here but this native.

Gunga Have you seen our captain King, stranger?

King Why should I?

Gunga They have taken him away!

Darya Or made him vanish!

Gunga I smell some mischief going on!

Darya (to King) You are a weird one, slyboots! Who are you? Answer, or we must kill you.

King I am Hakim, a doctor. I can cure anything.

Gunga You must have seen our captain. He can't just vanish without a trace.

King I was here alone with the moon all the time.

Darya He is lying. He looks suspicious. We must take him prisoner and have him interrogated.

Gunga Wait! If he is lying he must have some reason for it.

Darya Why are you lying, you bastard of a native arse, when you must know what happened to our captain?

King No captain here. No one here but me. See for yourselves.

Gunga I think he is pulling our legs.

Darya Are you pulling our legs, you miserable dotard?

King No, I mean bloody serious when I mean no one here but me.

Darya We mean you must know more than we know!

King All know something others don't know.

Gunga He is just pulling our legs. Come! Let's torture him to death, so that he confesses to what he knows!

Darya If you don't confess the truth we will torture you until you confess the truth!

King I already confessed the whole truth. You don't see fact that no one is here but me.

Gunga How did you come here then, you frustrating imbecile!

King From your camp.

Darya You are lying!

King Prove it!

Gunga You are finishing our patience!

King No, you finished it yourselves.

Gunga No, you make us run out of patience!

King It never was there. It was finished from the beginning.

Darya Aren't you afraid of us, you vicious blackguard of a bandit!

King My friends, is it so impossible for you to recognize me? (*removes his turban and shows his hair, which hasn't been tampered with.*)

Gunga (*terrified, down on his knees*) Captain!

Darya (*terrified, down on his knees*) Captain, you really fooled us! No one can recognize you in your new outfit!

King That's all right, boys. Then it works. That's all I wanted to know. Let us now get back. (*claps them and raises them up*)

Gunga Can you forgive us, captain?

Darya We were almost going to massacre you!

King My own fault. It was my experiment. At ease now. We need a drink.
(*They leave, him in the middle with his arms about them.*)

Scene 2. The entrance to a great cave, a big black hole.
King and his friends completely exhausted.

Darya (*arriving first*) We have reached the entrance of hell, captain. This is our last chance to return.

King Don't forget, Darya Khan, that I am Hakim the doctor, and that my name is Kummar Khan.

Darya As you wish, Hakim, but that does not change anything. We are still at the gate of hell.

Gunga Wasn't it one of your poets that wrote something like, "You who enter here, leave all hope behind"?

King Are you trying to scare me?

Darya No, only issue a warning about reality.

Gunga Only because we know it won't work anyway.

King And that saves you. Or else I would have chastised you. Come now. I am a doctor, and there is an entire underworld waiting for me full of patients.

Darya Forward, to all the demons and hells of the underworld, towards the endlessness of the countless tribulations, to the most secret and innermost homestead of terrorism, towards the heart and core of evil, towards the very heart of darkness in the caves of Khinjan!

King Lucky we that you have been here before, Darya Khan, so that you know what you are talking about.

Darya That's why I am talking about it.

Gunga Forward!

(They light their torches and enter the darkness which they are swallowed by.)

(After some time they come out again to what is supposed to be the end and opening of the cave.)

King *(astonished, coming up to the ramp)* Have we come out again?

Darya No, that's only how it seems. This is the secret of Khinjan and the heart of the mountains, the great hall cave in the centre of the underworld, which all the caves of Khinjan lead in to and which is so large that you can neither see its roof or its end.

King But what made this marvel of nature?

Darya All this enormous space has been a softer kind of rock, I think you call it sandstone, which during the millennia have dissolved and flowed down the depths. A subterranean river from the glaciers of Himalaya have gradually undermined and eroded all the mountain while the harder rocks have remained.

King And no European has been here before me.

Darya Not without losing his life. It's lucky for you that you are now Hakim. But you will get plenty to do here. This world is swarming with patients.

(These start appearing on crutches with bloody damages, all wild Afghans warriors.)

afghan 1 We heard a Hakim was on his way here.

Gunga He is here! He is here to save you all! He can operate anything, apply proper bandages, heal all wounds and pull out all sore teeth!

2 That's exactly what I need. I have had tooth-ache for three days and haven't been able to eat anything.

Gunga Bravo! Our first patient! Lay him down, Darya, and press the knife blade between his teeth, so that his jaws are kept open! Hurry here with your tongs, Hakim!

2 If I only get rid of the tooth-ache you can do anything to me. I am a scarred veteran but am rather mortally wounded than walking around with a constant tooth-ache.

King *(comes along with some tongs)* Which tooth is aching?

2 All of them!

King Where in the mouth?

2 In the far back!

King On which side?

2 Here! *(points with his finger)*

King *(examining)* Here all the teeth look black and rotten. I don't think it will do to pull just one out.

2 Pull out as many as you wish, as long as I get rid of the ache!

Darya It takes a real Afghan warrior to freely dare give himself up to a dentist!

King Open it up more!

2 (*opens up*) Aaaah!

King (*applies a tong, struggles and operates, the patient is roaring gutturally while Gunga and Darya keep him steady on the ground and King extracts a big bloody tooth.*)

2 It still hurts!

King Let's take the next one then. (*continues operating*)

Darya All Afghanistan will honour him as their saviour.

Gunga He will become indispensable at once.

Darya We always had a disproportionate lot of wounded warriors to our few vanishing doctors.

Gunga In here he will find work for a lifetime.

Darya And longer. An eternity would not be enough.

King There! Three teeth! Is it enough? Do you want more?

2 (*finished*) Thanks, that's enough. I think the worst is over now.

King Take a break. Feel how it feels, and come back if you want more extractions.

2 Thank you, Hakim. I am quite satisfied. (*leaves*)

King Next!

3 I have gangrene in my leg.

4 I was shot through the lungs.

5 One of my eyes was shot away. Can you give me a new one?

King Have you then all been in battle quite recently?

1 Yes, we made a raid down the Khyber pass. The English just hid behind their walls and shot us down with machine guns.

3 It was just a small raid. Only some hundred dead and some thousand wounded.

4 It was only a skirmish as an experiment.

King So the holy war hasn't started yet?

5 No. The Bearded Bull holds us back.

King Who is the Bearded Bull?

1 Don't you know him, Hakim? Then you will come to know him.

King (*to Darya and Gunga*) Do you know the Bearded Bull?

Gunga Not directly.

Darya Not closely.

King I think it's enough for today. We have had a long day of ordeals, we are tired out and need some rest and to retire for some recuperation and conference. Come back tomorrow, my patients. Tomorrow I will gladly operate you all.

Afghans (*various*) As you wish, Hakim. We can wait. We won't get better anyway. Come, fellows! Let's lick our wounds! (*The Afghans retire.*)

King (*settles down, exhausted*) Phew! It's harder to be a doctor than to be a soldier.

Darya Lucky for our captain to be both. Then he will never be out of work.

Gunga What do you mean?

Darya He can always do the one thing, if he needs more to do with the other.

King That's why wars always pay. The destruction always necessitates more work.

Gunga Go to sleep now, Hakim. Here is your evening toddy. I made it extra strong and nourishing tonight.

King Yes, I can feel it by the scent. Here is not just whisky.

Darya Drink deep, and you will sleep well.

King A better advice was never given a thirsty soldier and sober doctor. (*drinks*)

Gunga (*meaningly to Darya*) He will soon be asleep.

Darya And he will have the loveliest dreams in the world.

King It never tasted this good before. What did you actually... (*falls asleep*)

Gunga (*rising and setting him right, making him comfortable*) Now she may come.

Darya We have done our duty. Now she may do the rest. (*whispers with some Afghans. They nod and set off.*)

Gunga Do you think we shall see her?

Darya Sooner or later.

Gunga Now or later?

Darya She always appears as a surprise.

Yasmini (*has entered*) Well done, my servants. You are not needed any more.

Gunga Our lady!

Yasmini I'll take care of him now.

Darya What will you do with him?

Yasmini Nothing. Is he drugged enough?

Gunga Not even a stamping elephant could wake him up.

Yasmini (*comes up to him*) It's well that he is asleep. He can't imagine what's waiting for him. He shall never even suspect it before he wakes up in the strangest of dreams of reality. (*takes his arm carefully and removes the magic bracelet*) He won't need this any more.

Gunga Is he what you expected, my lady?

Yasmini It's better than I thought. Providence sent him here personally.

Darya He will miss your bracelet.

Yasmini That's why I removed it, silly. You may leave. Await my further instructions among the others. He must wake up alone and feel completely deserted.

Gunga I trust no Afghan will harm him?

Yasmini No Afghan can afford harming a doctor. We leave all his medical gear with him. He will manage on that for some time. Not a rat will touch him.

Darya I guess we are finished then.

Yasmini Yes, you are finished. You may go.

Gunga Come, Darya Khan. Our lady has given us leave.

Darya Yes. (*leaves with Gunga Din*)

Yasmini You fill me with wonder as to our destiny, which so mysteriously has been presented to us by the most unfathomable mystery, as if it was a cosmic natural law which brought an ancient historical chapter two thousand years ahead in time to actualize and finalize an unfinished story. It couldn't be better. Sleep soundly, my future partner, for that future will to begin with give us a number of sleepless nights. (*retires*)

King (*is still lying still, begins gradually to move and then awakes suddenly*) What was that? Someone was here and touched me! I know it! That scent! (*sniffs*) It's the same scent I felt in the house of Yasmine. Could she have been here? I thought I heard her velvet voice saying, "*It's well that he is asleep.*" Was it a dream, or was it just my imagination? My head feels like a planet of weight and size. Have they drugged me then? Why? And where are they? Gunga Din! Darya Khan! They are gone! No one here! I am abandoned! (*feels in panic for his bracelet*) They have taken my bracelet! What's the meaning of this? I am completely lost in darkness! But they have left me my medical kit. They are no bandits plundering me, but someone has bereft me of only items of importance with some distinction. A new mystery! But I still have my knife, (*pulls his dagger, and views it*) and she is still there on it. Well, I trust I'll just have to try to survive and make the best of it. At least something seems to be happening all the time! (*sits up and takes his head in his hands in a terrible headache*)

I can't just sit here and enjoy a splitting headache! (*rising*) Anything is better than just to sit and wait for nothing! (*goes towards the exit, but is immediately pushed back by an entering guard, an uncouth Afghan warrior*)

Guard You stay here!

King Why?

Guard Her orders!

King So she was here?
Guard I didn't say so.
King But she gave the order and knows that I am here. By what right does she keep a Hakim in custody? Doesn't she realize that my patients and her wounded warriors need me? And where are my servants? Have they been taken away from me, or have they escaped?
Guard Are you a Hakim?
King Yes.
Guard Then do something about this. (*shows a terrible wound*)
King That doesn't look very nice. How did you get such a bayonet thrust to the very bone?
Guard The English.
King (*starts working with cleaning and bandages*) The holy war?
Guard Not yet. But it is coming.
King Her war?
Guard We are only waiting for her signal.
King Does she want war?
Guard No, it comes by itself. We Afghans only live by making war.
King Yes, that's about the only thing you know.
Guard You are no Afghan. Are you from Nepal?
King You could say something like that.
Guard Yes, for you are too robust to be a Hindu.
King But who started these war preparations? Is it the Bearded Bull?
Guard Among others.
King Who is he?
Guard Just an ordinary sect leader. There are many around.
King There. Your wound shouldn't hurt any more now, and at least there is no infection and shouldn't be one either, unless you tear it open. Don't go to war with the English for some time now.
Guard I will try not to.
King Take a good piece of advice. Postpone the holy war as long as possible.
Guard You can't postpone it. If it starts, everybody must fight it.
King Keep away from it. That's the only sensible thing to do in any war.
Guard Impossible for an Afghan.
King Don't tell me that I didn't warn you when you come next time to be put together again.
Guard We'll see when that day comes. If I am lucky I will be dead.
King Do you consider it lucky to be dead?
Guard If you die in a holy war you get straight to paradise.
King So that's why it's worth while to die?
Guard Yes, if it is for a good cause.
King No war is for any good cause.
Guard A holy war can only be for the best of causes, namely the holiness of the war itself.
King Your Afghan logics are not entirely logic.
Guard It's better not to think about it. (*Gunga appears.*)
King Gunga!
Gunga Hakim, follow me! Things are getting started.
King Where?
Gunga There is a great gathering coming together in the big central cave.
Guard It could be the holy war at last being proclaimed for all believers. Then I must be present.
King Then you don't need to guard me any more.

A veteran (on crutches with bloody bandages) We have made several raids against the English at mullah Muhammed Anim's command and openly been butchered by the English machine guns. They don't attack us. Why should we be butchered for nothing by attacking their forts? For every Englishman we succeed in killing they gun down thousands of us. It was different when the English invaded our country and we had reason to slaughter them to their last man, which we did successfully. Then it was a defensive war. But I can see no meaning in a war of attack with inestimable constant losses.

Anim (rising again) The war hasn't started yet! We have only tested their vulnerability! Not once have they counter attacked! They only dig themselves down in their pot holes and barracks and fire at random from there without exposing themselves. That means they are afraid and dare not attack and hit back! That means they are weak! That's why we have the chance now or maybe never. A major attack against Peshawar cannot fail, and we would have all the north west territories of India with us including all Kashmir and maybe all Punjab, the richest province of India!

King (to the guard) He doesn't speak like a mullah. He speaks like a strategist.

Guard He is no mullah. He is a Turk.

King From Constantinople?

Guard Yes. And he has lots of money.

King Is he then paid by the Turks to start a war against the British from Afghanistan?

Guard No. He gets his money from Berlin.

The veteran (rising again) Can a holy mullah talk in this manner? Can a holy mullah be such a war-monger and preach the sacrifice of lives without considering the victims and casualties and the war consequences? I doubt the honest intentions of this mullah. I think he is paid by pagan powers to urge us to war to further the interests of pagan powers. He has a lot of money and has promised a lot of money to everyone who goes to war at his command. But have we seen any money or from whence they come?

The mullah Which brings us to next question.

(Several experienced warriors have risen and want to have a word)

1 No, there is no issue more important than our honour as warriors! We are warriors first of all and fight first of all for our honour as warriors! We need not be paid to fight. We fight for our own honour and for the honour of the war we are waging, if there is any honour in it, that is, any just cause, that is, fighting some intolerable tyranny! We don't need your Turkish or German money in Afghanistan. We were born poor as warriors of honour and would rather remain as such.

2 Abdul is right! We all agree with his argument!

3 Hear! Hear!

The mullah Still we have only one arch enemy in Asia, and that is the British. If we now have a chance to cleanse them all out of Asia, would it not be worth taking that chance, especially if there is every possibility of success?

Anim We have everything to win and nothing to lose. We can't lose. At length it's the British or us. If they are allowed to remain they will spread their influence and money and the decadence of their perverted culture like poison in our veins and in the blood of our wives and children, which we then never will be able to get rid of, until all muslim fundamentalism is uprooted and extirpated and watered out in the British putrefaction. The westerners have no morals. We have something to live for and a code of law and morals to stick to in the Quran, which all the world that lives without this holy book is dead and doomed and condemned without!

Several voices Hear! Hear!

The mullah Which brings us to next question.

A voice Well, let's finally get to that damned next question then!

The mullah All of us who are here have made the test. No one is allowed among us here who hasn't made the test. We have all murdered an unbeliever or enemy to become one of us here. That's the test. If anyone who hasn't murdered someone says he has and enters here with a lie, he may be at rest until he is accused of lying. Then he must prove his murder or produce witnesses. If he can't, our law says he must be sacrificed. Now we have three guests here who all affirm that they have killed to gain entrance here but who are accused of lying. Bring forth the three prisoners!

(Three prisoners are brought up pinioned.

They are terrified and look very guilty.)

Anim (rising, furious) Those are my men! They are innocent!

The mullah Does mullah Anim suggest that they are innocent of murder to have gained access here?

Anim No, I mean the opposite, of course! They are innocent of not having committed any murder!

The mullah Then it remains to prove their guilt. What is your evidence?

Anim The evidence was stolen from them!

The mullah And what is your evidence of that? What was the evidence that was stolen from them?

Anim What can you say, my boys, to your defence? It's a matter of life and death for you! How could you lose your evidence?

The mullah One claimed that he had murdered an unbeliever, and the other two were witnesses. Therefore they were all three admitted. Not until in here there have been complaints about that they were lying. In that case his two witnesses have lied as well. In that case all three must die. That's our law, where we only stick to the basics of our fundamentalism.

Many They can't prove their case. They must die.

Others No one can escape the law.

Anim (wild) I forbid it! They are innocent!

The mullah If they are innocent of murder they must die.

Anim No, they are guilty, and therefore they are innocent!

The mullah Have you yourself, mullah Anim, seen your servant kill an unbeliever?

The veteran Hardly, for I have never seen him before. He gives orders and commands many men but never had anything to do with them, since he gives them licence to kill in such a manner that those orders never can be traced back to him.

Anim (desperate) You have no right to kill my servants! The Sultan forbids it!

The mullah (politely) What sultan? We have no sultan over us.

Veteran Drive him out of the country! He has no business here! He only wants to sacrifice honourable Afghan fighters for nothing, which he is paid for by unbelievers in Berlin!

Anim You forget that I have many men under my command! *(a group of professional warriors appear threateningly armed, triggering their guns)*

The mullah No fighting in here! You may kill as much as you want out there, but this is a sacred lodge for all believers!

(There is a murmur among all as Yasmini is seen to have entered, and all fall quiet.)

King (to himself – no one else hears his comments) So at last I may see her. But what a surprise! It can't be true! She cannot be that beautiful! I am benumbed and paralysed. Is this a secret agent? And in that case for whom? And what is she doing in this sea of wild bearded barbarians who know nothing else than to fight? She is more than an oasis in the desert. She is a daybreak in the middle of the darkest night in hell.

Yasmini You are playing with false cards, Muhammed Anim, who try to threaten free men with guns in their own holiest sanctuary. If your men are guilty of

not having murdered to get access here they must prove it. If they are cheating they must be punished according to the law like all deceivers.

King How can she be so beautiful? And appear in front of so many men with such wonderful long blonde hair and bare feet? She could sit on that hair. I thought all tales about her must be exaggerated, but I am more entranced by her reality than I was by her myths.

Yasmini We who belong to the free people of the Khinjan caves don't send out men to recruit people, and we are not stupid enough to ask our men to lie to be let in. All lies must be exposed sooner or later. Neither do we send out men to hunt for heads to thereby make the lies of deceivers legitimate. In spite of your power and your command of your own hooligan companies, Muhammed Anim, you can't transform any lie to truth. Here you do what is expected of you as a member, or you stay outside.

King The old bearded bull can't answer. He is as powerless as everybody else against the absolute power of her spellbinding beauty.

Yasmini And, mullah Muhammed Anim, you wandering man of God, when you have sent forth a gang of murderers on a raid and they return from a total defeat, how can we then believe that they carried a head with them, when they didn't, and that it was stolen on the way? By whom? What Afghan needs stealing other's heads? He has his own, or he gets his own.

Veteran Our lady Yasmini is right. Mullah Muhammed Anim is a cheat. He has no business among honest warriors, who never make war in vain and never do it for the money of others.

Yasmini Guards! Take out the prisoners! Execute the command of the law! *(She points at the three prisoners and thereby displays her glimmering golden bracelet.)*

King She has my bracelet! She has taken it back!
(Twelve guards take care of the three pinioned victims, who are brought up on the bridge and pushed down from there into what can only be a bottomless crevice down to some current. You hear their last horrendous screams of death fade out down into the abyss.)

The mullah There are more among us here who have found their way into the caves of Khinjan without accounting for their murders. I call Hakim Kurram Khan!

King (rises)

The mullah You are a doctor and have cured and dressed a number of wounded warriors, but did you really also commit murder to be allowed in here?

King I can't deny that I killed many men before coming here.

Mullah And where are your witnesses?

Several voices Witnesses! Witnesses!

Anim We have never had a doctor in here before and least of all a doctor that could kill, since his art is to save lives.

Gunga (rising) I can testify for him.

Darya Khan (rising) And I!

Yasmini Hakim, if you really killed an Englishman to get in here, you should be able to tell us who it was.

King I can tell you who it was.

Yasmini Who was it then?

King Athelstan King, captain of the Khyber Rifles.

Yasmini And he is dead?

King As dead as I am alive.

Anim Proof! We must have proof! Only witnesses is not enough! We have the right to demand proof!

Gunga (while Darya Khan slips a larger round object into King's hands behind his back) We have evidence! We have evidence!

Yasmini Then produce it!

Darya (secretly to King) Don't hold it up in its hairs but with both hands by the ears, so that you don't risk dropping it.

Several The evidence! Let us see the evidence! Hold up the severed head! We want to see it!

King (raises and holds up the head in sight if all)

All (rejoicing by satisfied bloodthirst)

Mullah It's enough! Are you satisfied? Can you all see that this is the head of a non-believer?

Many It's enough! He may go!

Mullah Then you only have to throw it to them.

King (doubtful) Throw the head to the audience?

Mullah Yes, that's our normal procedure.

Yasmini Throw the head to them, Hakim!

Many The head! The head!

King (catches sight of the looks of the head and suddenly recognizes it as his brother)

But it is...

Darya (secretly to King) Quiet, for the sake of Allah, Hakim! I stole it from the Bearded Bull! It was our only chance!

King (hardly audible) My brother! (*advances but at the same time towards the abyss like in order to throw it to the crowd but throws it instead into the abyss.*)

Most (roaring) Wrong! He has fooled us!

Many That head was for us!

Others Penalty! Penalty!

Anim We demand the doctor's head on a plate! He has cheated us of a head! Then we must have his instead!

Yasmini Stop! Why didn't you throw the head to the people, you fool, according to our habit?

King (has succeeded in regaining his composure somewhat) I am a doctor, not a murderer. I killed only when necessary when I didn't have any choice, but not even a non-believer deserves to be violated after his death. What would all these have done with the head? What would mullah Muhammed Anim have done with it if he got hold of it? Taken care of it, so that another could have used it for cheating his way into the caves? Even if I as a doctor couldn't do anything about my victim's life, I had the right as a doctor to decide his fate after his death.

Yasmini It's reasonable, but you provoked and angered the Afghans.

Gunga Come, Hakim, let's retire before it's too late.

Darya You have done enough good deeds for today.

(Some of Yasmini's followers enter conveniently and lay down a shield for her, which she climbs to be lifted on, which is carried around for the crowd.)

Yasmini (singing to dumbstruck assembly) Would we not be free, we who live for life? There is no people freer than the mountain people, for no people are more impossible to subjugate, for every day we live in the humility of the mountain shadow to the greatness of nature well aware that we never can overcome the mountain supremacy. The mountains protect us, and by their torrents of trickling water they bring life to our deserts and dried up fields, so that we can live in the shadow of the mountains by their grace as the freest people on earth on the roof of the world. Let us never forget our freedom, and may the mountains forever testify to it and preserve it!

Gunga She sings a song of the freedom of the mountain people.

King And her voice is the loveliest imaginable. But all her being and appearance is Greek. Where did she get it all, her style, her jewellery, her art? It's all Greek. It's neither Russian nor Indian.

Darya All we need now is her dancing to top it all.

(As if that was the signal, her fighters lower her shield so that she steps down and starts dancing in the middle of the arena in front of all, demonstrating a most fascinating art.)

As I said, that's all we needed.

King Even her dancing is more Greek than oriental.

Gunga But the music couldn't be more local. *(Some blowers and percussionists have started at once.)*

King Where did she get everything from?

Gunga Come, Hakim, before the murderers wake up and wish to reward you for your doctoring in their own incomparable way.

Darya The Bearded Bull will never forget that you tricked them. He will never stop demanding your head as a compensation for his own lost one.

(King disappears with Darya Khan and Gunga Din, while Yasmini continues her intensive exotic dancing, which the wild Afghan audience can't tear their eyes from. All are entranced and exstatic, until she dances out and disappears.)

Scene 2. Darkness.

King Left alone in the darkness. Where is everyone? They brought me out here away from the muddle and abandoned me here, to wait – for what? For some miracle? I can't see anything except darkness, so I had better not move at all.

(enter Gunga bringing some faint light)

Saved! Where are we, Gunga? I can't see in the dark, and I see only darkness!

Gunga Just a little further on, Hakim, and I have fulfilled all my duties.

King These mine tunnels only lead to nowhere or to hell!

Gunga Just go on ahead! The most dangerous of all in life is to make a halt! That false mullah's killers could be on our tracks, and they will never abandon the scent once they felt the smell of blood!

King Do they know who I am?

Gunga We don't know how much they know, and that's the most dangerous of all, for they know that we don't know how much they know. They can know all or nothing, but they know that they can know more about us than what's good for us. They know that we don't want anyone to know what we know, and therefore they can kill us presently, especially if they know that we stand between them and their holy war.

King Then they know too much.

Gunga That's what I mean.

King But what is this? *(They reach some kind of an entrance hidden by a curtain, which is lighted on both sides by two ancient oil lamps.)* These lamps are more than antique. On top of that they seem to be genuine. Where on earth have you brought me, Gunga Din?

Gunga No further than this. Here I leave you to your destiny, captain Hakim. Your life starts or ends here. On this side you still have some hold of your life and of who you are, you could be Hakim or Athelstan King or whoever, but on the other side you have no life of your own any more. You will be completely hers if you enter here and lose yourself forever. I must warn you. And I must advise you to turn around here and go back, if you want to keep your old life.

King Why then did you bring me here?

Gunga On her orders. I belong to her myself more than than I belong to you. But I like the British insistence on fair play. That's why I want to warn you before you enter.

King Didn't you say yourself just now that the most dangerous in life is to make a halt, and that the only thing that counts is to continue forward?

Gunga You decide the matter, captain King. Your life is in your hands on this side of the curtain, but on the other side no one is responsible any more for what will happen.

King You only sustain my curiosity. I have to go on. Did I reach this far through so many dangers, and would I then turn back now? You only make the challenge more irresistible, *Gunga Din*.

Gunga Suit yourself. I run away. (*runs away*)

King Some remarkable servant. And here I stand facing a remarkable riddle. Of course I must investigate it. What else are riddles for? I have had enough of all the mystifications down here.

(*enters*)

(*The scene opens to a chamber like a chapel in very ancient style.*

In the end is a large enough bed with two characters apparently sleeping on their backs beside each other, a young woman like almost a copy of Yasmini, and a Roman officer of a striking likeness with captain King.) .

King What place is this? Have I unnoticeably glided into the world of dreams? This looks like no reality. Rather it is like if I had been removed back in time two thousand years. Is it a Roman warrior I see, with an eagle nose and the furrows of severity on his brow, who seems to be deep down into his eternal sleep? Yes, they are both dead but improbably well preserved to be corpses. No smell, no putrefaction. His armour is real, but her clothes are new. And if she wasn't without breath and life I would assert that she was Yasmini herself, equally beautiful, equally inexpressibly magnetically magic, equally classical in her blonde beauty and equally exotic in her statuesque and bronzelike appearance. They must have been lying here like this for two thousand years, harmoniously asleep together like lovers, united by joining hands. But what is it I see on her arm? It's my bracelet! (*touches it to feel it*) And it's still warm although the arm is cold. Yasmini has been here right recently!

Yasmini (*appears from behind a curtain, chuckling with laughter*) Aren't they an adorable couple?

King I have never seen anything like it. What's their secret? What's their story?

Yasmini Observe them carefully, my Hakim. (*sneaks up to him, stealing one hand and arm into his*) What do you notice?

King I thought at first it was you lying here. She is almost an exact copy, equally young, equally beautiful, equally blonde and equally transporting.

Yasmini What more do you notice?

King She has your jewellery.

Yasmini It was her jewellery. I borrowed it from her. What else?

King What do you know about them? Who are they? Who is he?

Yasmini A Roman warrior of about 40 years. What do you notice about him?

King He must have loved her. But what is he doing here?

Yasmini Don't you notice anything?

King What more should I notice except that everything is an impenetrable mystery?

Yasmini Are you then blind? (*takes out a mirror*) Look at yourself and look at him. What do you see?

King (*looks into the mirror, regards the warrior, is struck with surprise.*) He is like me.

Yasmini He is your double, Hakim! He is your twin soul from two thousand years ago! And she is mine! What do you make out of that?

King (*at a loss*) I can't make out anything.

Yasmini No, you are at a loss and even more so than when you found yourself with your brother's head in your hands without first recognizing it. You took a great risk by not throwing it to the mob.

King How could I do that with my own brother's head!

Yasmini I understand you, and you managed to get out of the situation alive, but it was hanging by the hair. It could have ended very badly, and the false mullah probably recognized his stolen head which he himself had cut off and given to his accomplices for an entrance pass. There you got yourself a dangerous and implacable death enemy for life.

King So you mean it was that Turk who murdered my brother.

Yasmini He and his hired killers and war mongers. They are the only ones who want war to help Turkey and Germany against our allies. But by some incredible fortune by providence we have acquired means available to effect the contrary. What you see here in front of you is eternal love which never died. No one knows their story, it could be the great legendary Gesar himself who lies here with his beloved, but no one can doubt that they were a loving couple, and their legend has prevailed through the millennia. This is the secret of Khinjan, its holiest heart, which only the lucky few initiated know about and have access to but which secret through all centuries has been preserved and maintained unto incorruptibility and imperishableness. I found them here sleeping side by side ten years ago and was immediately struck by her likeness with me. I borrowed her jewellery and found myself discovered and recognized as herself in resurrected form, and since then I have indefatigably searched for his duplicate in our time. I found him in Delhi when I first discovered you. To protect you and lead you on the right way here to the heart of these caves I gave you her bracelet which would open all doors and roads for you and the right servants to guide you. And all the cards I have been giving you you have managed and played out excellently. It almost went awry when the complication with your brother's head caused some disturbance, but your getting through that test proves you can manage any trial and test. The world is ours, captain King. We can have all Khinjan to our feet, yes, all Afghans who know the secret of these mountains already adore us and would follow us to the end of the world, and they are such warriors that against our power neither Turkey or Great Britain with all their empires could do nothing. I offer you an eternal partnership in an eternal war of love against the wars and politics of the world. We have the power to overcome all the world's power. Let's take that chance and make a difference. The world has never been in more dire need of love and peace than now.

King I stand faltering by an abyss. The ground is wobbling like an earthquake under me, and you ask me to throw away all I lived for to follow your fantastic inducement.

Yasmini Not my inducement, King, but the induction and offering of providence in its irrefutable indication. Perhaps we were these two lovers in an earlier life and now found each other again to be able to fulfill an incomplete affair.

King Yasmini, you are irresistible. (*embraces her warmly*)

Yasmini I know. But my education was long and hazardous. You have seen all these pictures of her art as dancer. They were part of my school, and I learned to copy and master her art. She must have been a legendary temple dancer in her time, and by transcending her art I can resume with dignity where she was interrupted.

King She was not old, thirty, at most.

Yasmini That's exactly my age today, but I intend to become older – with you.

King Your offer is too enchanting and fantastic to be resisted. You are right. Such an opportunity must be given a chance.

Yasmini It's all about reaching out to grasp an offered hand by destiny, to catch the moment and not miss the train, or else you never know if there ever will be another train.

King There is nothing wrong with your argument. You reason wisely and irrefutably. Let's see where this could lead us. What is our next step?

Yasmini The only natural one. What we now need is a proper dinner. Come!

(She pulls a curtain aside exposing another much greater and more sumptuously furnished room dominated by two elevated thrones among other furniture like divans, and tables for work and for a banquet.)

Make yourself comfortable in the divan! We shall immediately have a sumptuous dinner! *(She claps her hands. At once there are servants bringing in a dinner.)*

King (to the first servant) Don't I know you?

The afghan Don't I recognize my lord from the prison in Rawalpindi?

Yasmini You liberated them from there so that they could help you across the mountains to me.

King I recognize them all. We have all met before.

Yasmini Yes, they are a number about thirty, and they all know you. They followed you all the way.

King You certainly organized my journey with some precision.

Yasmini That was intentional. Enjoy your food. You have to eat something.

King And you? What about you?

Yasmini I am just keeping you company. I don't need so much. I live more on talking. We have plenty to discuss and plan.

King Do we need to fear anything from that Turkish bully?

Yasmini The Bearded Bull is an idiot. I fooled him all the way. He thought he could gain power over all Afghanistan with my help, and he succeeded in convincing Berlin of that possibility, so Berlin decided to send him weapons and supplies and dynamite to blow up the entire country. All has been stored here in the mountains in expectation of the outbreak of the holy war, but he doesn't know that I have taken it all into my own custody. If he wants a holy war he has to make it on his own responsibility, he will then immediately be revealed as an impostor by all the Afghans and exposed as a worthless fool who has nothing to deliver, and then we take over. We have resources, captain King, to take over this entire part of Asia.

King So your ambition is power, love and peace.

Yasmini We have the key to all three of them. We can get both Turkey and British India trembling before us.

King And what about Russia?

Yasmini What is it with Russia?

King Yasmini, I know that you are three quarters Russian and one quarter Indian. Whose interests do you really serve? Isn't it the Russians, who always vied with England about the influence of these parts of the world?

Yasmini What are you really thinking of me?

King That you want to use me for your purposes.

Yasmini I have no political purposes. If I have any purposes they are rather religious.

King Explain what you mean.

Yasmini The western civilisation is facing a downfall with their christianity. That religion doesn't hold tight any more, and monotheism did never cause anything but wars and conflicts. What the world needs is a new religion of love which can't be turned into dogma, and then it must renounce all ideas about God. It must not have any taint of superstition. It must detach itself completely both from muslim intolerance and fundamentalism and from hindu superstitious beliefs and its detestable caste system. It must rather be buddhist

King You mean reincarnation and all that.

Yasmini (indicating the couple) You can see for yourself. This is us in a previous life. This has been revealed to us today to enable us to manifest their universal mission of love.

King Yasmini, you are seducing my soul rather than my body.

Yasmini One does not exclude the other. Why not both?

King Yasmini...

(Yasmini goes up to him, sits in his lap and then rises to lead him towards the end of the chamber where there is another richly decorated but empty and more spacious bed.)

Yasmini Do what you want with me, on condition that I may do whatever I want with you. *(They retire to the bed.)*

(Here there is free space for improvisations.)

King I am still uncertain of who you really are.

Yasmini Do you need to know?

King Do you really mean, that if the Bearded Bull starts the holy war, you intend to take it over and lead it?

Yasmini Of course. And you will help me.

King A war against whom?

Yasmini Against the whole world. The Turk naturally first of all wants to direct it against the English. He already established a slogan: "The only good Brits are dead Brits." To the Afghans it doesn't matter if they are British or French or Germans or Turks. They will kill them all with the same enthusiasm whatever nationality and whatever religion or race they are of.

King So you want to make yourself a leader of chaos?

Yasmini Didn't your servant tell you, that if you entered here, you would be obliged to forget all about your nationality, identity and past?

King I can't turn against my own country and my own people.

Yasmini You already did.

King Not by force.

Yasmini No, but in spirit, and that's what counts. I already wrote to your superiors, which Darya Khan already took with him down to the plains.

King What have you written?

Yasmini That captain King caused us much trouble, that he stole from the Germans, dressed up as an Afghan and called himself Kurram Khan and killed his own brother at night by the Khyber pass, that the carriers of this letter can testify that he used his own brother's head for an entrance pass to the caves of Khinjan and there showed it to five thousand armed Afghans ready to start a holy war, to which he encouraged them, which I myself, Yasmini, was the witness of. He advocated an invasion of India, and next time you hear about him he will probably lead that invasion. You should have trusted me instead. That's about what I wrote.

King You couldn't have ruined my position more thoroughly.

Yasmini That was the intention.

King Did you so fanatically want me all for yourself, that you at any price had to make myself impossible to the whole British world?

Yasmini I love you, King. Yes, I wanted you all to myself and to my crusade for love and peace to thereby subdue the world to our cause. I want you for my personal love demonstration, which will show and prove that the power of love is the only one that works at length. I want the sleeping couple in there to prevail after two thousand years. And I don't want them to fail another time. That's why I will love you whatever you do. You may kill me if you want.

King Do you think these our predecessors failed?

Yasmini I have investigated the matter. He has a wound in his breast. It's the only place where his body has shown any decay at all. Everything else has been kept intact by that special ointment applied on them which I myself use for a perfume.

King That's why I felt the scent of you so strongly when I entered the chamber.

Yasmini But her body has no sign of any damage at all. Therefore she must have killed him by some sharp knife in his breast and then taken poison herself. She was Greek. He must have brought her from Hellas, and they must have created some realm up here, the traditions and legends of which have survived to this day. Maybe

he wanted to break up and return home and that she then killed him. But I will never do something like that to you whatever you do. If you don't want to support my holy war I must ask you to leave me now and return to your own. You will have the bracelet back, which will open all roads for you out of the caves. (*removes her bracelet and gives it to him.*)

King You make it sound almost like a command.

Yasmini It is a command. I command you to return. Let me pacify the Turk and the German spies. We can manage them without you.

King We had a lovely night of love. Was it only temporary?

Yasmini No, our union is eternal. We have reunited once and for all, and we shall never again lose each other in our thoughts. Therefore I can let you go with no hard feelings.

King You really ask me to leave.

Yasmini Yes.

King And if they shoot me for the letter you wrote?

Yasmini You managed the Afghans when you refused them your brother's head. Then you can also manage your own Brits. Go, Athelstan King, and keep me and bring me along in your soul for ever. We shall constantly meet again and reunite.

King I honestly think that's the best thing for me to do. I can then inform the British about the German-Turkish manoeuvre up here and that you don't need anyone's help in quenching it.

Yasmini In that way you can also exonerate yourself.

King You really do trust me.

Yasmini I know that you can't do anything foolish.

King Good-bye then, Yasmini, for the time being. (*kisses her*)

Yasmini Thank you for forgiving me and not killing me.

King I only kill men and only if I must. Women I could never but love.

Yasmini Thank you, my Athelstan. I knew I chose the right lover the first time I saw you.

Gunga (showing up) Come along, my captain. You don't have to grope your way out of the caves alone.

King Gunga Din! Have you been here all the time?

Gunga No, only when you needed me.

Yasmini Go, my captain, with your and my servant back to civilisation and tell them all about what a barbaric world you encountered here.

King Yes, I rediscovered all the high culture and beauty of the ancient world. But I could never make a superficial civilisation understand that.

Yasmini I will wait for you until you return next time.

King In another two thousand years?

Yasmini At latest.

King Farewell, my princess. (*kisses her again and leaves with Gunga*)

Yasmini He will be back. I know it. I found him again after two thousand years, and I will always find him again.

Act IV scene 1.

Anim Everything is working out well, and victory is within reach. There remains only a few pieces to complete the strategy, and the campaign will be a triumph all the way. Everything has worked so far. Nothing can go wrong. All we need is that capricious Russian spy's cooperation, but if we can't get it by persuasion we will have to force her.

A warrior Your holiness, we have taken a prisoner.

Anim What have we to do with prisoners? They will only be a burden. Wreak him down into the abyss.

Warrior I think this prisoner could be of some interest.

Anim What prisoner could possibly be of interest? A prisoner is always utterly worthless unless you can ransom him, and we can only do that with Englishmen or with Yasmini's closest men.

Warrior This figure was last seen together with Yasmini.

(King is brought in a prisoner pinioned by rough guards.)

Anim (positively surprised) But isn't it our friend Hakim, the doctor? This is the best thing that has happened for a long time. Welcome, Hakim! What did you do with the head you stole from us?

King I did not steal it. It was brought to me by my friends without my knowing whose head it was or how they came by it.

Anim I know all that. It was that Russian who stole it to help you along. Does she love you very much?

King Not more than that she doesn't hold me prisoner.

Anim (to the warriors) Where did you take him? Where was he going?

Warrior He was on his way out of Khinjan.

Anim Where were you heading, Hakim?

King Out of Khinjan. There were too many patients here, and they pay better on the outside.

Anim Thanks for reminding me. I have many patients for you, wounded veterans, knifed hooligans, old men with rotting teeth and wounds, blisters and swellings, that you should be able to cut out. You are longed for, Hakim.

King I can't work with my hands pinioned.

Anim Of course not. Cut him loose! Make yourself at home, Hakim! You have come to the right place. You shall have the great pleasure of witnessing how we start the last great holy war against all the unbelievers of India, first of all the decadent British. We will come down like a storm wind upon them and give them hell by a new front in Asia, so that Turkey then can blot them out from all the Orient.

King War only offers overwork to doctors and mourning veils to fresh widows and fatherless daughters. There is only one madness worse than war, and that is to start it without armies or weapons.

Anim Do you seriously think we are without means? I have five thousand men, all invincible professional warriors of the wildest mountains of Afghanistan! Last time we poured down over India we created the Mogul empire, which lasted for five hundred years and united all India and gave it the first order of society it had seen for ten thousand years! The muslims cannot fail! We are efficient and always victorious!

King What is five thousand men against the hundred millions of India, and with the greatest empire and war power in the world in the world to support them? And what are your weapons? Blunderbusses and fowling-pieces? Your delusion, mullah Muhammed Anim, is suitable indeed for a pig-headed bully.

Anim Your skepticism is fitting for a doctor. We have during the last years obtained weapons enough to arm an army of Napoleonic dimensions from the best arms factories of Germany!

King I can only see your ancient stone age shotguns. Where is the rest?

Anim The depot is not far from here. *(enter Warrior 2, upset)*

Warrior 2 I come from there, great mullah. Everything is gone.

Anim What are you saying, you infernal miserable thief?

Warrior 2 There is nothing left. Everything has been taken away.

Anim What do you mean? It's impossible! All the gunpowder? All the army stores? The machine guns? The ten thousand rifles?

Warrior 2 All gone. You can come and look for yourself.

Anim (darkening) It's her work. She has circumvented and confounded us – again! Of course she has taken care of it all and brought it to her caves which we cannot reach. Does she then want a civil war here in the caves? What does she mean? (*regards King*) But we have a trump card. We have him here. We can demand everything back against his life – or else he will be grilled alive with his testicles removed with his eyes and tongue! We shall cut out one limb at a time! What say you to that, Hakim?

Hakim Then all your patients will be without a doctor.

Anim You will cure them first, and as long as you have patients to cure in my camp, you may keep your life and freedom, but under close guard! For we need you against that Russian, who pleases to play games with us. What does she really want? I was the one who discovered her and brought her to the holiest heart of these mountains and showed her the grave chapel and suggested that she would take on the role as that legendary dancer in a modern form! I was the one who made her! – And now you, Hakim, actually show some likeness to that Roman commander. Is that why she is interested in you? Does she want you to make a career together as resurrected ghosts? Of course, that's how she reasons in her wild romantic imagination! But nothing will come of that, unless she gives us our weapons back.

King You have no chance against her. All are following her. You are only regarded as a foreign deceiver and bully.

Anim I am a mullah! I am holy! I am infallible! It is I who starts the holy war and who organizes everything and not she! She can't take the holy war away from me! I have five thousand men to invade her caves with and drag her out from there alive, so that I then may torture her bit by bit to death in front of your very eyes, Hakim! What do you think about that? First I will make her one-eyed and then you, and then you can try to make that career together as much as you want! You will be laughed out of the country!

Hakim Have you already forgotten, o holy mullah, that all your weapons have been taken away from you?

Anim That damned Russian bitch! I created her! I gave her this whole world! And then she just spits me in the face! The devil take all women! All they do is to ruin everything by their intrigues! There will never be any order in the world unless the men alone may stand for it! Women only sabotage everything that we try to create. How the devil shall we try to manage this situation?

Hakim I am the only one who can negotiate between you.

Anim And what do you think you can accomplish? Do you think she will return our weapons because we ask her kindly? No, our only weapon is you in our captivity. But she probably cares nothing about you like all men. She would rather let you be flayed alive by us than she would return a single pistol. You are right. You are our only possible diplomat. Try to talk some sense to her, Hakim. We can't wage a holy war without her help and all her men, for she actually commands all the best and most of them. All listen to her and obey her, while I only succeed in scaring them with my hard aggression. I need her, Hakim, and I need you. I need you both for my purposes. Please be so kind as to cooperate, for the sake of the holy war.

King I'll see what I can do.

Anim With you as symbolic prototypes for our holy war we can only be victorious. Everyone here knows the legend of the Roman conqueror and his Greek princess and love it, and they would do anything to make it come real after two thousand years of its beauty sleep. People here are like that. They live on legends. They need dreams and fantasies as ideals to live for. Or else life would be too mortally boring. Get going, Hakim, and try to make her cooperate. Without her we can all go home and to bed.

King May I leave?

Anim Yes, leave at once, the sooner the better. Your patients will still be here when you come back.

King I don't doubt it.

Anim Good luck with your diplomatic mission. If you fail I will go home to Turkey.

King I can't promise anything. We know how unreliable women's hearts can be.

Anim Indeed, and don't remind me of it! One woman in politics is enough to make the whole world run out of order. Get away now, so that I need not be reminded of her any more! (*King leaves.*)

Everything seemed to work out so well, and then she acquired some power and influence and started using it to boost her whims. No matter how powerful women may become, all they really are interested in is the satisfaction of their personal caprices of vanity. (*Enter a messenger.*)

What's this? A messenger? I recognize you as one of her men. What do you want? What does she want? (*accepts a letter*) A short note. (*reads it quickly, then rises with joy*) She is with us! Hakim! Where is he? Come back! Your mission isn't needed any more! She welcomes us back to the depths of the holiest caves of Khinjan! We shall go into the holy war together! You don't have to argue with that woman, Hakim.

King (returning) So she suddenly wants to go to war with you?

Anim Yes! Look for yourself! (*shows the letter*)

King (reads) Incredible. So the woman is volatility itself.

Warrior 2 (curious) What does she write?

King (reads) "Come with all your men, and we shall open all doors for you to the deepest vaults of Khinjan, where we shall reach an agreement." That's what she writes.

Warrior 2 I wouldn't trust her.

Anim She is serious! She means business! I know for sure that she is serious! I can feel it! We don't have to torture you, Hakim, to make her reasonable. We don't have to force her to agree on our conditions! We don't have to starve her out of her worm's nest. She has foreseen all that we could do to her to force her with us and arrived at the sane conclusion that she must cooperate. Thanks for your mission, Hakim, although it wasn't needed!

King It was nothing.

Anim So let's be on our way! What are we waiting for?

(*Seven blind men appear leading each other with their arms around one another.*)

blind 1 Have mercy on us, Hakim!

King What's this?

Anim Poor blind hopeless cases. Leave them be. Let them wander across the brim and disappear. We don't need them.

Blind 2 You can cure us, Hakim! We heard there was a doctor from outside come down to us!

King I am afraid that blindness is beyond my capacity. I need glasses myself.

3rd blind man Spare us, Hakim, and give us light in our darkness!

Anim Go to blazes, you miserable parasites! We have a war to consider, and blind men will only be in our way!

4th blind man Hakim, only you can give us back our sight!

King In the darkness of these caves you need no light. Use your sixth sense.

5th blind man At least try your art on us, blessed Hakim!

Anim Go back to hell where you came from, you crippled failures! (*kicks them and tries to shove them off.*)

6th blind man Don't kick us! Allah forbids it!

King Give them a break, your holiness. They are still human.

Anim Not according to my criteria.

7th blind man At least put your hand on my eyes, Hakim, and see if you can't wash away their darkness.

King (*lays his hands on his eyes. Something is released from them. King, to the blind man, surprised and carefully*) Gunga Din! It's you! What does this mean?

Gunga Be careful. Just follow. Leave the direction to her.

Anim Enough! Away with you, infernal blind buffers! You have no business here, and least of all you will have your eyes back! Surely you must know, that once you've lost your sight you are unfit for warriors and can only throw yourselves down the drain to the abyss! (*tries to drive them off. They scatter, and only Gunga Din stays close.*)

Gunga (*to King*) Just follow along. All will be arranged. She knows what she is doing.

King I sincerely hope so.

Anim (*to King*) You will come to enjoy the most splendid holy war that ever extirpated the population of an entire country! We will take the world by storm, Hakim, together with you and that Russian blonde, as the whole world will follow your seduction! It has no chance against us! Now life begins! (*starts to lead to the transition with joy. All appear enthusiastic for the enterprise.*)

King What does this mean, Gunga Din?

Gunga She sent you a message as well. It's equally short. Here it is. (*shows a note*)

King (*reads*) "Today you shall learn how much I loved you, Englishman. Even you will be convinced by my evidence." She almost seems desperate. Surely, she won't blow up the entire army for the Turk?

Gunga What man can ever understand how women think?

King I only know, that where there are women there are intrigues, and where you engage in women you get lost in their intrigues. I hear an alarm clock calling and telling me it's time to get out of here. Whatever happens down there in the depths of Khinjan it's better not to be there when it happens.

Gunga Are you escaping?

King I think it's time to leave the war before it has started, for holy wars can be more explosive than what's good for anyone.

Gunga I will follow you.

King Collect all faithful men who rather join the English than follow these fanatical fanatics on their holy war. They may come with us at their own risk, but the British redeem all deserters who return by their own free will.

Gunga I will gather them. There will certainly be some hundred qualified fighters.

King That's enough. It's time to leave the battlefield of these caves and their lawless secrets. Whoever could here be inspired to any lawlessness. Let's pull out. (*Gunga is gone.*) Where did he go? He has always come from nowhere and disappeared again without a sound or trace. Well, he will probably catch us up. But my instinct tells me, that Yasmini sent her last warning and that all that counts now is to get out.

Act V scene 1. In the British camp.

General Tell me what you think about it, Courtenay.

Courtenay Whatever are we supposed to think, Sir? He came down from the mountains as the leader of the roughest gang of Afghan veteran warriors the world ever saw, who all claimed to have deserted from the British army and had an affluence of British medals to prove it, which they very well might have taken from slaughtered British soldiers...

General Never mind the Afghans, Courtenay. It's the King case that is of interest.

Courtenay He came disguised and dressed as one of them, as if he had lived with them all his life. If we didn't know him we would never have taken him for an Englishman.

General That's just the bother of the matter, that his disguise fitted exactly with the spy Yasmini's report from Khinjan.

Courtenay So we can't doubt her report.

General No, not directly. I wish we could. I would rather believe King than a woman's partial report.

Courtenay Is that how you interpret the report, Sir?

General It is written as if she hated him enough to want to see him dead. The report is indirectly an effort to make us have him shot.

Courtenay What is his own comment on the report?

General I wanted to hear your opinion before I question him.

Courtenay I am afraid that I can't have any direct opinion.

General That's exactly my opinion. We have to make the best of it. Well, bring in the lost son. *(King is brought in.)*

King Am I under arrest, Sir?

General Yes, you are under arrest, captain King, until you can make us understand what really happened up there and what you really were up to.

King Haven't you read my report, Sir?

General Unfortunately your report is not the only one. Here is another. *(Shows him Yasmini's report.)*

King (reads) "Captain King caused us much trouble. He has stolen from the Germans, dressed up as an Afghan and called himself Kurram Khan and killed his own brother at night by the Khyber pass, and the carriers of this letter can testify that he used his own brother's head for an entrance pass to the caves of Khinjan and there showed it to five thousand armed Afghans ready to start a holy war, to which he encouraged them, which I myself, Yasmini, was the witness of. He advocated an invasion of India, and next time you hear about him he will probably lead that invasion. You should have trusted me instead. I would have been able to prevent the holy war if he hadn't come here."

Sir, the holy war has been averted, and it is completely thanks to her.

General Yes, you present utterly fantastic and unbelievable information which no one in the world can confirm. Answer instead the extremely grave accusations of the letter. How was it with your brother? Is it true that you killed him to use his head to be able to enter Khinjan?

King Sir, you must yourself see through the fantastic twist of this formulation. No Englishman could ever kill his own brother even under the most extreme circumstances.

General Is then this story about his head pure fabrication?

King It's true that the head was given me to protect me – if I didn't carry any proof of having killed somebody, I would have been killed myself. But I didn't know then that it was the head of my brother.

General And all this talk about your exciting the Afghans against India and encouraging a holy war, as if she wanted to turn you into a traitor... How she must have hated you.

King No, she loved me.

General Why then this massive poisonous hatred?

King Women are like that. They love and they hate. She gave me my liberty but could not forgive me that I left her, but she didn't want to murder me to stick to me by force against my will. But she saved the situation. Sir, she blew up all the Turks.

General How?

King The holy war and rebellion would have been led by a mullah who was under Turkish influence and manipulation and received money and resources from Berlin. He gathered an army of five thousand men and was allured with all these by her down into the depths of the Khinjan caves, where she had collected all the dynamite store which she had stolen from him, and where she blew them all up including herself.

General So she is dead?

King No one could have survived that explosion, Sir. The whole mountain went up in the air. Where the large central cave had been with its remarkable valley, everything collapsed, and instead the river broke forth and buried and carried with it everything in the torrents that could have remained.

General She must have loved you if she did all this for you.

King I can't exclude that possibility, Sir.

General Can anyone at all confirm your story?

King No one except those brave warriors that followed me down.

General Hardy ruffians all of them of which no one speaks English, although they claim to have been in British military service.

King My only possible surviving witness that spoke English would have been my servant Gunga Din, but he disappeared before I left Khinjan.

General A smart and slim agile figure moving around a lot in a turban covering almost everything?

King Yes, very alert and nimble.

General I think we have him here.

King I thought he left me to return to his mistress before she blew up the whole mountain. If he has survived he might even tell anything about her last moments.

General I suggest that you talk with him alone to start with. He is sitting here in the next room. He knew that you would come and wanted to see you.

King That gives me pleasure.

General Fetch him, Courtenay. We go out in the meantime, awaiting the sum of this experience. (*Courtenay shows in Gunga Din.*) Come, Courtenay. (*leaves with Courtenay.*)

King It gives me pleasure to see you alive, my faithful Gunga Din. What do you know that I don't know?

Gunga Very much, captain King.

King What can you tell me? But please sit down.

Gunga I came to you with my mistress' last assertion that she remained faithful to you and intended to prove it. I was with her in her last moments before the explosion came. She had planned it all. Not one of the mullah and his followers escaped. You were spared the holy war. She gave you India and the future according to her intention.

King I would be grateful if you could testify about this to the general.

Gunga She saved your life many times and opened your career for you.

King Yes, obviously she did, and you must have been very close to her. Sometimes I got the suspicion that even you might have been her lover.

Gunga However could you suspect such a thing?

King You fitted her better than I. You were of the same size and mentality, same type and character, as if you could be a brother of hers.

Gunga And if I was her brother?

King It wouldn't surprise me.

Gunga And if I was more than her brother?

King Then my jealousy would have been justified.

Gunga (shakes his head) She really managed to turn your head off.

King How?

Gunga Did you love her?
King Yes, I loved her honestly enough.
Gunga Are you still in love with her?
King I shall never forget her.
Gunga That's no answer. The question is whether you fell in love with her for real or not.
King My friend, if I tell you that I can never forget her and always will miss her and hardly ever will be able to find another, shouldn't that be enough for an answer?
Gunga In that case, captain, I think I have the power to reunite you.
King Is she then not dead?
Gunga Didn't you realize in that cave that she cannot die?
King What do you mean, Gunga Din?
Gunga Captain King, can't you see anything? (*tears off his turban and lets his long blonde hair down almost to his knees, flowing down her back.*)
King (*aghast*) Yasmini!
Gunga Yes, who did you think I was?
King (*embracing her*) You are alive!
Yasmini It doesn't look any better, does it? Imagine that you were so easily fooled all the way!
King You are then a master of all kinds of arts!
Yasmini That's a woman's way of protecting herself. Here in these wild parts of the world torn asunder by war, it's her surest protection, if there is no other way for an escape, to disguise herself as a man.
King And your voice! Everything was convincing! You could change both your voice and your ways, your attitude and your mentality!
Yasmini I had to practice all my life.
King So you never left me! You just sent me away to be able to reunite with me later on and settle with the warmongers in peace!
Yasmini Wasn't it well planned?
King We must never be separated again.
Yasmini Tell that to your superiors, so that they don't send you away on impossible missions again.
King Thanks, Yasmini, for deceiving me!
Yasmini It was a pleasure to fool you since you were so easily fooled.
King But you didn't always play the Gunga Din part. He did exist in reality.
Yasmini Yes, he was my most faithful servant and enjoyed a special confidence just because I so easily could dress up like him,
King Where is he now?
Yasmini He is always ready round the corner when we need him and keeps away when he is not needed.
King That's what I call an ideal servant. And I was jealous of him!
General (*enters with Courtenay*) I see that the situation has taken a most unexpected turn. So your report was still completely faked, captain King, since she is here alive.
King Yes, she is indeed.
General If she then also retracts her report we can forget about the whole thing and immediately send you on to important business in Kashmir and Tibet.
King Do I have to go at once?
General I don't think Yasmini will fail you even if she has to wait for you sometimes.
Yasmini Don't take him at once, general. We have some private business to settle first.
General Well, he is yours for the moment, Yasmini, but only at night. We have much to do in the daytime with or without new holy wars lying in ambush for us.

King No more holy wars for my part, general. I am already through with the holiest of them.

General And you seem to have won it. Just never let your victory out of sight. You need nothing better in life than a woman.

King I will never let her go off any more.

Yasmini Come, my Athelstan. We have much to talk about. I owe you some explanations.

King Yes, you do indeed. (*leaves with Yasmini*)

General What a relief to be able to cancel that report as irrelevant.

Courtenay Yes, general, but still it was true.

General In what way?

Courtenay It was truly written with love.

General You can never trust a woman's love, no matter how falsely it is expressed.

Courtenay That was very truthfully said, general.
(*They settle down to their business.*)

The End.

The extremely romantic and irresistibly fascinating novel by Talbot Mundy "*King of the Khyber Rifles*" is far above this dramatization in its intriguing richness of details and fantastic environmental envisionings, let alone the mastership of its ingenious intrigue, and was the author's greatest success, although he wrote some 20 novels of at least equally exotic contents. In the novel there is a third important servant (apart from ranger Rewa Gunga and Darya Khan), namely Ismael, who maybe is the most important one. Instead we have allowed Gunga Din to take over both these parts, so that according to your own pleasure you can let him contribute to the double role play of this part by letting him be played by the real female protagonist of the book whenever suitable. That's the purpose of the whole play, that (like in the novel) the audience will have no chance to guess the female protagonist's double play.

Gothenburg, March 12th 2005,
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