

YASMINI OF INDIA by Rick Lai

In the pages of *Adventure*, Talbot Mundy created several memorable characters who interacted with one another in the shadowy corners of India and the Middle East. This stellar cast included such luminaries as Athelstan King of the Khyber Rifles, James Schuyler Grim ("Jimgrim") and Cotswold Ommony. The most prominent female member in this recurring group of characters was Yasmini of India. Yasmini appeared in two novelettes, "A Soldier and a Gentleman" (*Adventure*, January 1914) and "Gulbaz and the Game" (July 1914), and four novels, *The Wind of the World* (serialized in *Adventure* starting in July 1915), *King of the Khyber Rifles* (serialized in *Everybody's* beginning in May 1916), *Guns of the Gods* (serialized in *Adventure* beginning in March 1, 1921), and *The Gray Mahatma* (*Adventure*, November 10, 1922). All the novels were published in hardcover under the same titles with the exception of *The Gray Mahatma* which was re-christened *The Caves of Terror*. *The Gray Mahatma* was also reprinted in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* (December 1951).

Athelstan King appeared in both *King of the Khyber Rifles* and *The Gray Mahatma*. He also appeared in one novelette and two other novels which did not involve Yasmini. These were "Benefit Of Doubt" (*Adventure*, December 10, 1922), *The Nine Unknown* (serialized in *Adventure* starting March 20, 1923) and *Mohammad's Tooth* (*Adventure*, December 10, 1923). I hope to examine Athelstan's career sometime later in a future article, but these separate appearances by him are important because they allow us to chronologically date the events of *The Gray Mahatma*. "Benefit of Doubt" was published in book form with two other novelettes, "Treason" (*Adventure*, January 10, 1923) and "Diana against Ephesians" (*Adventure*, August 10, 1923), as *Jungle Jest*. Although King was present in only one novelette, all three of them featured Cotswold Ommony. *The Nine Unknown* has been published in both hardcover and paperback. *Mohammad's Tooth* was published in hardcover as *The Hundred Days*.

Guns of the Gods is chronologically Yasmini's first adventure. The story is set at the turn of the century when Yasmini was a teenager. References to "His Majesty's Government" give us the vital information to assign a proper year to the events of the novel. In January 1901, Queen Victoria died and was succeeded by her son, Edward VII. Since the British government is described as belonging to "His Majesty," then Edward VII was monarch of the British Empire. Because of chronological references in later stories, 1901 would seem the likely year in which *Guns of the Gods* transpired.

Yasmini's age was given as "perhaps seventeen." She must have been either sixteen or seventeen in *Guns of the Gods*. It would probably be advisable to make Yasmini as young as possible in 1901 since her exploits extend into 1921. Most likely, she was then sixteen in this novel.

Therefore, Yasmini was born in 1885. Details about her parents are given in *Guns of the Gods*. Her father was Indian and her mother was Russian. Yasmini was born with blonde hair and blue eyes. At least, her eyes were identified as blue in *Guns of the Gods*. In "A Soldier and a Gentleman," they were hazel. *The Winds of the World* described them as brown. Probably aware of these discrepancies, Mundy in *Guns of the Gods* mentioned the rumor that Yasmini possessed some secret means of changing the color of her eyes.

Yasmini's mother was Princess Sonia Omanoff. In Moscow, Sonia had murdered her first husband, a Russian Prince, because he had enraged her by certain indiscretions. In Russia, a Prince was not a member of the royal family, but a member of the nobility. Sonia was tried in secret and sentenced to death. Her sentence was then commuted to life imprisonment in the Siberian mines. At this point, she was given

the choice of becoming a Russian spy or serving out her sentence. Her choice was obvious.

Less than a month after her arrest, she was in Paris. Amply equipped with money by the Russian secret police, Sonia was ordered to romance the Maharajah of Silapore, Bubru Singh, who was then visiting France. At this time in history, Tsarist Russia had hopes of driving the British out of India. Sonia was being used as a pawn to get a Maharajah on Russia's side. Bubru already had a middle-aged wife in India, but she had failed to provide him with an heir. Apparently The Maharajah could have more than one wife under the laws of his religion. Bubru married Sonia in front of seven witnesses in the Russian Embassy in Paris. The couple then went to the groom's kingdom in Silapore. Shortly after Yasmini was born, Bubru died as a result of injuries received in an accident. Since it is mentioned that Yasmini was walking during her father's lifetime, he must have died about a year after her birth.

Prior to Bubru's death, there had been eighteen Maharajahs of Silapore in direct succession from father to son. From the time of the founder of the dynasty, the Maharajahs had been accumulating a secret treasure. Each Maharajah had confided the secret of the treasure to his son. Because Yasmini was a girl, Bubru let the secret die with him. He did tell Sonia on his deathbed that if their daughter had any brains, then she would find the treasure on her own.

Bubru also added that Yasmini would also have to win the throne on her own. The throne of Silapore had been inherited by Bubru's nephew, Gungadhura. The new Maharajah was a vicious man who delighted in torturing women. He would have made life difficult for Sonia and her daughter if the British authorities had not intervened. Hoping to win the female Russian spy to their cause, the British prevailed on Gungadhura to assign Sonia a palace as a place of residence.

Yasmini was taught by Father Bernard, a Jesuit who presided over a chapel in Silapore. He taught the young girl English. One year before the events of *Guns of the Gods* unfolded, Sonia died and her body was cremated according to Indian tradition. Yasmini then severed her ties to Father Bernard.

The brutal Gungadhura wanted to arrange a marriage for Yasmini. He wanted her to wed a sixty-year old reprobate to whom was owed a gambling debt. Yasmini refused to adhere to her cousin's wishes because she was in love with Utirupa Singh, a young prince with a claim to the throne of Silapore.

Yasmini had pondered for years over the riddle of the Silapore treasure. Her father had mentioned to her mother that "a hundred guard the treasure." Yasmini suspected that the hundred were snakes and consequently learned to handle cobras. She then decided that the hundred were priests, but she soon realized that the priests of Silapore were ignorant of the treasure's location. She eventually realized that the clue meant a hundred trees surrounding the location of the treasure.

Guns of the Gods is story of how Yasmini found the treasure of Silapore. Due to a murder charge, Gungadhura was deposed by the British and replaced with Utirpua, who then married Yasmini. Gungadhura was then conveniently slain by a British guard dog. Not wishing to share the treasure with the British authorities, Utirpua and Yasmini kept their discovery of it a secret.

In *Guns of the Gods*, two faithful servants of Yasmini made their first chronological appearance. Sita Ram was the secretary of the British Commissioner of Silapore, but he was actually a spy for Yasmini. When his treachery was discovered, he was dismissed from his post. He then became Yasmini's secretary. Ismail was a giant Afridi warrior from Afghanistan. He was a gatekeeper in Silapore in *Guns of the Gods*. He aided Utirpua and Yasmini in their plot to seize control of Silapore. Years later, Ismail would function as Yasmini's bodyguard.

Yasmini's marital bliss did not last long. Her husband was murdered by a one-eyed bandit named Gopi Lall. The murderer made suspicion for Utirpua's death fall on Yasmini, and she lost all claim to the throne of Silapore. She went to Delhi with an entourage of maids. Sita Ram followed her to Delhi, but it would seem that Ismail left her service for several years. She stayed in Delhi until word reached her that Gopi Lall was terrorizing the Indian territory of Bengal. Moving to Bengal, she and her maids took up residence inside an abandoned palace in the jungle.

At this point, the events of "A Soldier and a Gentleman" unfolded. It was Yasmini's plan to lure Gopi Lall to her palace with the promise of becoming her lover, and then slowly torture him to death for a period of three days. Unfortunately for Yasmini's scheme, a British soldier slew Gopi Lall as he was about to fall into her trap. Deprived of her revenge, Yasmini had to content herself with spiriting away Gopi Lall's large hoard of ill-gotten gains under the noses of the British authorities.

Returning to Delhi, Yasmini became involved in the intrigue described in "Gulbaz and the Game." She became a pawn in a stratagem hatched by Gulbaz, a native Indian serving in the British Secret Service. A Russian Grand Duke named Peter was visiting India in order to stir up trouble. The Grand Duke visited Yasmini in order to see her dance. At Yasmini's house, Gulbaz arranged for the Grand Duke to be caught conspiring with various leaders of India's northern tribes. Gulbaz gained enough evidence to blackmail the Grand Duke and the chieftains. As a result, India experienced five years of peace.

Grand Duke Peter never really existed, but various references in Mundy's story allow us to determine the year in which it probably took place. Since India experienced five years of peace and this novelette was published in 1914, then its events could not have transpired any later than 1909. During 1909-14, there was a flood of terrorist activity inside India. The five years of peace must have transpired before 1909. Russia and Great Britain were rivals in the story. In 1907, Russia became Great Britain's ally against Germany and promised not to interfere in India. During 1904-5, the Russo-Japanese War and internal unrest prevented Russia from interfering in India. The period from 1903 thru 1908 was a relatively peaceful period in India. 1903 would seem to be the year of "Gulbaz and the Game." Since the events of "A Soldier and a Gentleman" were mentioned as being very recent, then the events of the earlier novelette probably transpired in 1903 as well.

As a result of her participation in Gulbaz's ploy, Yasmini became an informal member of the British Secret Service in India. In 1904, ten years before the events of *King of the Khyber Rifles*, the British government asked Yasmini to journey to Afghanistan to investigate rumors about the "Heart of the Hills," a unknown focal point for bandit activity inside that country. There Yasmini discovered an underground city in the Caves of Khinjan. She learned that the "Heart of the Hills" was a mummified corpse of a Grecian woman. Next to the Grecian maid was the preserved body of a Roman soldier. Together these two corpses were known as the Sleepers. Legend had it that the Roman soldier had carved out an empire in Afghanistan centuries ago. The Grecian maid had been his consort. Because he the soldier had failed her in some manner, the Grecian lady had slain her lover with a knife and then took her own life. Their empire collapsed, but loyal followers preserved their bodies. The Khinjan Caves then became the headquarters of various bandit tribes. Emir Abdurrahman Khan, Afghanistan's ruler from 1880 to 1901, had sought to learn the secret location of the Khinjan Caves. Twenty men of Khinjan were captured by Abdurrahman, but they all died under torture without revealing anything.

Yasmini bore an amazing physical resemblance to the "Heart of the Hills." Hailed as the modern incarnation of the mummified maid by the inhabitants of the

Khinjan Caves, Yasmini now possessed a fortified base to pursue her personal ambitions. She did not report back her true discoveries to the British government. She pretended to be a loyal agent of the British while plotting to drive them from India. Viewing herself as the future Empress of India, she hoped to find a consort who would be the modern incarnation of the male Sleeper. After fruitlessly searching for an exact physical counterpart of the male Sleeper, she relinquished the precondition that her future Emperor must resemble the Roman soldier. Yasmini now looked for a man who possessed the proper characteristics of a true leader. She once nearly chose an unnamed Frenchman (1). She even sought to enlist an unnamed American to her cause. He "used the strangest words" to her and laughed at her dreams of Empire (2). For a brief time, Yasmini considered Muhammad Anim, an Afghan mullah who had been instrumental in proclaiming her as the "Heart of the Hills" inside the Khinjan Caves, but she judged him to be an inadequate candidate.

Over the next few years, Yasmini shuttled back and forth between Delhi and the Khinjan Caves. In 1911, she regained the loyalty of Ismail, the gigantic gatekeeper who had served her in Silapore. In Delhi, Ismail had found himself indebted for a large sum to Ali, the proprietor of a house of prostitution and a German spy. After Yasmini had given Ismail the money to pay off Ali, the Afridi became her loyal bodyguard. In 1914, a month or two before the events of *King of the Khyber Rifles*, Ismail broke the leg and ribs of a rajah who was overly attentive to Yasmini.

In 1911, Yasmini also met Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Germany, who was then visiting India. His trip is a matter of historical record. He supposedly just visited India in order to hunt, but it had been rumored that he engaged in espionage and subversion as well. When the Prince left India apparently due to an outbreak of cholera, it was whispered that the British government had actually ejected him. Yasmini thought that the German Crown Prince may be the incarnation of the male Sleeper, but he deemed her dreams of Empire to be falsehoods. He offered her money to go to Germany in order to dance for the Kaiser. The Prince also made "other offers" which were hinted to be of a sexual nature. An insulted Yasmini spat in his face and threw food at him. The Prince supposedly swore to have Yasmini whipped someday. Yasmini told the British government what she knew of the Prince's activities, and this information allegedly caused the local authorities to force the royal visitor's departure.

The Crown Prince of Germany was not the only member of European royalty with whom Yasmini had contact. During December 1911 to January 1912, King George V of Great Britain visited India. Sometime during this visit, Yasmini danced for him. She had also danced for a British Viceroy on another occasion. The Viceroy was either Lord Cruzon (1899-1905), Lord Minto (1905-10) or Lord Hardinge (1910-16).

Despite her feud with the Crown Prince, her contact with him had allowed her to establish firm ties with German agents inside India. She began to receive supplies of weapons from them for a future insurrection inside India. She stored these weapons in the Khinjan Caves. Yasmini was now playing a double game with both the British and the Germans. She would receive German supplies to further her own future scheme to expel the British, but simultaneously supply the British with news about other German espionage activities in order to remain unsuspected in India.

She helped British secret agents penetrate Afghanistan on at least two occasions before the events of *King of the Khyber Rifles*. She gave these agents a bracelet from the "Heart of the Hills" to act as a sort of passport inside Afghanistan. The first man to receive this bracelet was Jack Allison, who crossed Afghanistan in order to reach the city of Bukhara inside the boundaries of the Russian Empire. This incident probably transpired before Britain and Russia concluded an alliance in 1907. The other man was Collins of the Gurkhas. He apparently was a British Officer in charge of Gurkha

(Nepalese) soldiers. After completing his mission, Collins refused to return the bracelet to Yasmini. He was conveniently slain by a cobra, and one of Yasmini's agents retrieved the bracelet. The agent had probably arranged for the cobra to kill Collins.

Collins learned the hard way that it was unwise to cross Yasmini. Another person who discovered this fact was a Hillman seeking to investigate a secret room in the basement of Yasmini's Delhi residence. The room was guarded by a steel door. It was rumored that Yasmini possessed a secret radio there. This man searched around Yasmini's house for secret radio wires but never found any. However, he was later found one night with a knife between his shoulder blades.

During July-August 1914, the event of *The Winds of the World* unfolded. As World War I was about to break out, Yasmini uncovered a German plot to cause insurrection in India with an arsenal of a million bombs hidden inside a temple. In order to continue to mislead the British to her true loyalty, Yasmini arranged for a Sikh soldier, Ranjoor Singh, to discover the weapons. As for the German spy entrusted with the explosives, Yasmini slew him with a cobra.

After his adventure with Yasmini, Ranjoor Singh left India to fight with a Sikh regiment in Europe. The exploits of Ranjoor and his fellow soldiers during World War I are told in *Hira Singh's Tale* (serialized in *Adventure*, beginning in Mid-October 1917). In The United States, this novel was published in hardcover as *Hira Singh*.

Having convinced the British of her trustworthiness, Yasmini offered to go to the Khinjan Caves in order to keep peace in India while troops were being moved to Europe. From her German suppliers, Yasmini had amassed an arsenal in the Khinjan Caves. This stockpile of weapons overshadowed the bombs confiscated by the British in *The Winds of the World*. Her plan was very simple. Once the British had weakened their troop strength inside India, she would lead an army of conquest out of the Khinjan Caves.

She still needed to find the modern incarnation of the male Sleeper. To her surprise, she found a British captain in the Khyber Rifles, Athelstan King, who bore an incredible physical resemblance to the Sleeper. Manipulating the British government into assigning King to help her in her alleged mission, Yasmini arranged for him to wear the bracelet of the female Sleeper and be transported to the Khinjan Caves.

There she confronted King with the remains of the Sleepers and offered him the throne of India. Despite Yasmini's temptations, King was still loyal to British rule. Unable to persuade King to follow her ambitions, Yasmini discovered that she had fallen in love with him. Abandoning her grand plan of conquest, she fled the Khinjan Caves with King and Ismail after planting a bomb which ignited the arsenal stored there.

For his role in the destruction of the Khinjan Caves, King was promoted to a major. As for Yasmini, she promised the British government never to interfere in Indian politics in exchange for her freedom. She was permitted the title of Princess and given as her residence a palace in the Punjab. *King of the Khyber Rifles* concluded with the impression that Yasmini and King would marry when the war ended. Nothing remotely like that happened.

After the war ended in 1918, King stayed with the British army until he resigned his commission in August 1921. Despite his resignation, King became drawn into fighting a rebellion by the Moplahs of Malabar, an Arab tribe in India. King's participation in the quelling of this actual insurrection was told in "Benefit of Doubt."

After distancing himself from the Moplah rebellion, King found himself again involved with Yasmini in *The Gray Mahatma*. King had resigned his commission in order to work for Meldrum Strange, an American millionaire. Talbot Mundy contradicted himself over the rank that King held when he resigned. It was stated that King was still

a major at the time of his resignation in both "Benefit of Doubt" and *The Gray Mahatma*, but his rank was given as colonel in *Mohammad's Tooth* and *The Nine Unknown*.

King's new employer, Meldrum Strange, had been featured in other stories. In a series of stories about the Middle East, Mundy had fashioned the character of James Schuyler Grim, also known as "Jimgrim." He originally was an American serving with the British army in Palestine. Joining in his adventures was an American named Jeff Ramsden, a Sikh named Narayan Singh and an Australian named Jeremy Ross. In "A Secret Society" (*Adventure*, August 10, 1922), Grim resigned from the British military to become with his other friends the private troubleshooters of Meldrum Strange during 1920. Grim and his fellow adventurers were employed by Strange to combat criminals who threatened world peace. King had now joined this private club of crimefighters.

In *The Gray Mahatma*, King's first mission for Strange, the former British officer joined forces with Jeff Ramsden to investigate Yasmini's recent activities inside India. Yasmini had broken her pledge of non-interference in Indian politics. She had learned of the existence of the Nine Unknown, a secret society which possessed ancient scientific secrets such as telepathy and the transmutation of metals. One member of the Nine Unknown was a holy man known as the Gray Mahatma. Yasmini invited the Mahatma to hold a meeting in her palace with other members of his organization. When the meeting was held, she secretly listened in with some of her female attendants. She then blackmailed the Mahatma with the threat to reveal publicly what she had overheard. Her price for silence was to be taught the secrets of the Nine Unknown. Her plan was to use the vast knowledge to conquer India and then the world. The Mahatma agreed to Yasmini's terms, but he tricked her by teaching the knowledge in an incomprehensible manner.

She then used the Mahatma to lure King to her palace. King had been seeking to gain information about the Nine Unknown since at least 1918. As agents of Meldrum Strange, King and Ramsden were investigating rumors that Yasmini and the Gray Mahatma were planning a violent revolution in India. Actually, the Mahatma wanted to bring about Indian independence in a peaceful way and hoped to enlist King as an intermediary for this purpose. King turned down the Mahatma's offer to become an agent of the Nine Unknown, but the former British officer and Ramsden were able to escort the Gray Mahatma out of Yasmini's palace. The Mahatma then surrendered himself to the Nine Unknown to be punished for compromising their secrets. He became the subject of an experiment involving the destructive effects of vibrations. The Mahatma perished when he was turned into a skeleton by these experiments.

With the Mahatma no longer in her clutches, Yasmini was no longer capable of fomenting turmoil in India. She did not appear in any later novels.

Athelstan King appeared in two further novels. Chronologically, the first of these was *Mohammad's Tooth*. With James Schuyler Grim, Jeff Ramsden and Narayan Singh, King foiled a bandit's plan to kidnap the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, during his November 1921 visit to India. In *The Nine Unknown*, King, Grim, Ramsden, Narayan and Jeremy Ross prevented a Thuggee cult from plundering the secrets of the Gray Mahatma's organization. *The Nine Unknown* would seem to be set in May-June 1922.

Talbot Mundy would extend the further exploits of Grim and Ramsden into 1930, but King would be absent from their company. What happened to him? Perhaps the answer lies with the Sleepers of the Khinjan Caves. The "Heart of the Hills" supposedly murdered her Roman lover because he failed her, and then took her own life. In a sense, King had failed Yasmini by refusing to adhere to her schemes. If Yasmini and King were indeed the reincarnations of the Sleepers, then their tragic

history may have been repeated. Perhaps Yasmini tracked down King, slew him and then committed suicide.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1884 Bubru Singh marries Sonia Omanoff.
- 1885 Birth of Yasmini.
- 1886 Death of Bubru Singh.
- 1900 Death of Sonia.
- 1901 Yasmini marries Utirpua Singh (*Guns of the Gods*)
- 1902 Utirpua Singh is murdered by Gopi Lall. Ismail leaves Yasmini's service.
- 1903 Yasmini seeks revenge on Gopi Lall ("A Soldier and a Gentleman"). She helps the British Secret Service foil a Russian Grand Duke ("Gulbaz and the Game").
- 1904 Yasmini discovers the Khinjan Caves.
- 1911 Yasmini regains the loyalty of Ismail and meets the Crown Prince of Germany.
- 1911-12 King George V of Britain visits India during the winter, and Yasmini dances for him.
- 1914 Ismail punishes a rajah who offended Yasmini. Yasmini uses Ranjoor Singh to foil a German spy (*The Winds of the World*). Britain enters World War I. Out of love for Athelstan King, Yasmini destroys the Khinjan Caves (*King of the Khyber Rifles*).
- 1914-15 The adventures of Ranjoor Singh and his fellow Sikhs (*Hira Singh*).
- 1918 End of World War I. King seeks information about the Nine Unknown.
- 1920 Meldrum Strange recruits James Schuyler Grim, Jeff Ramsden, Narayan Singh and Jeremy Ross to be his agents ("A Secret Society").
- 1921 King resigns from the British military to work for Meldrum Strange. King becomes entangled in the Moplah rebellion ("Benefit of Doubt"). On his first assignment for Strange, King works with Ramsden in order to investigate Yasmini's involvement with the Nine Unknown (*The Gray Mahatma*, also known as *The Caves of Terror*). With Grim, Ramsden and Narayan Singh, King neutralizes the threat of a bandit chief during

the visit of the Prince of Wales to India (*Mohammad's Tooth*, also known as *The Hundred Days*).

1922 King, Grim, Ramsden, Ross and Narayan Singh battle a Thuggee cult which threatens to steal the secrets of the Nine Unknown (*The Nine Unknown*).

NOTES

1. The Frenchman could have been Arsene Lupin, the French adventurer and thief created by Maurice Leblanc. He had visited India earlier in 1903 during Leblanc's *Le Retour d'Arsene Lupin* (according to Francis Lacassin's "La Vie Criminelle d'Arsene Lupin de 1864 a 19.." published in volume III of *Arsene Lupin* (Editions Robert Laffont, 1986)). It is possible that Lupin took a later trip to India sometime during August 1907 to February 1908 (a gap in Lacassin's chronology).
2. The American could have been Robert E. Howard's Francis X. Gordon, who was wandering around India and Afghanistan during 1900-14. See my article, "The Legend of EL Borak" in *The Pulp Vault #5* (1989), for the chronology of Gordon's activities. The "strangest words" could have been profanities.