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KING OF KINGS

Wilbur Smith

[Copyright]

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
ZAFFRE
80-81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78576-846-0
9781785768460
Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

<FSC logo>

Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

[Dedication]

[RECTO]

[PT A] Part I

[PT B] January 1887

Amber Benbrook was dazzled for a moment as she stepped out from the shadowy cool of the Gheziera Club into the Cairo sun. She lost her footing on the shallow steps that led down to the gravelled driveway, and instinctively clutched the arm of her fiancé, Major Penrod Ballantyne. He steadied her and looked down fondly into her lovely eyes. She smiled back up at him.

‘I don’t think I’m quite used to these new boots yet, Penny. The shop-girl said they are quite the latest thing and they were terribly expensive, but it seems they aren’t really made to be walking about in.’ She sighed and poked one foot out from under the long folds of her striped skirt, turning her ankle a little to examine her neat suede boots with their delicate low heel and elaborate fastenings of hooks, eyes and ribbons. ‘In the harem I used to go about barefoot most days.’

Penrod clenched his jaw. Captain Burnett and Lieutenant Butcher of Her Majesty’s Coldstream Guards were standing behind them in the shade of the portico. They would have certainly heard Amber’s little speech, and her remark about the harem would be spread around the club before dinner.

Penrod admired Amber, loved her, even, but he would have to explain to her again that the fiancée of a senior officer should not speak of certain things in public, and her time living in the harem of Osman Atalan, numbered among the greatest enemies of the British Empire, was most certainly one of them.

In the fortnight since their engagement, Penrod had discovered that being linked to such a famous young lady had its disadvantages as well as its pleasures. Amber was in many ways a gemstone of the first water. She was beautiful, stunningly so. Her old nurse in the Sudan had called her al-Zahra, the Flower, and the name suited her. At sixteen, her figure was youthfully slim yet womanly, and although she had lived most of her life in Africa, her skin was the colour of

cream and she had the blonde hair and blue eyes of an angel on a Christmas postcard. She also had an innocent charm, was clever without being opinionated and friendly without being forward. Thus far, she was an ideal choice for a man such as Penrod. He was an ambitious officer already decorated for his bravery, but he had a tendency to clash with his superiors from time to time and had a temper he could not always control. Such a charming and lovely wife should have been a perfect political asset, smoothing his ascent through the ranks to high command.

However it was not just Amber's beauty that made her famous: her history also made her an object of fascination. She was one of the few survivors of the siege of Khartoum, that terrible stain on British imperial pride. For ten months General Gordon, hero of British campaigns in China, had defended the city from the rebel warriors of Sudan and their spiritual leader, hailed as the Prophet reborn by his followers but called the 'Mad Mahdi' by the horrified reporters of the British newspapers. As Members of Parliament in Westminster and the leader writers of the London press demanded Gordon be saved, the Ministers of State hesitated and the city was left to starve. Penrod had been the only intelligence officer able to slip across enemy lines and bring the messages and orders of their government to Gordon, and the British consul in the city, David Benbrook. Then Penrod had met the beautiful Benbrook girls, the eldest, Rebecca, acting as hostess over her father's table of scraps, and the twin sisters, Amber and Saffron, who spent most of their days grinding riverweed to feed the people. Penrod had fought on the walls of the city to fend off the repeated assaults of the Mahdi's warriors, and then led the government's troops through the treacherous desert to lift the siege, but relief came too late. Before the British forces could reach Khartoum, the dervishes launched one final attack across the river. Through a daze of hunger and fever, Amber Benbrook saw Gordon killed and her own father beheaded in the street as he tried to lead his family to safety.

Amber's twin, Saffron, had escaped with a trader who had also been caught up in the siege, a man called Ryder Courtney, whom she had since married, but Amber and her elder sister Rachel were taken as spoils of war and held first by the Mahdi himself, then by his most powerful

warlord, Osman Atalan. Penrod refused to desert the sisters but was betrayed as he infiltrated Osman's camp, then held as Osman's slave and tortured for many months.

Rebecca chose to make herself Osman's favourite concubine, convincing him Amber was still too young for his bed and instead making herself mistress of his appetites. For a time it seemed they had been forgotten, but Saffron, Ryder Courtney and Penrod's friends among the Arabs staged a daring rescue by river just as Amber's maturing beauty was provoking Osman's attentions. Rebecca, however, refused to leave. She was already pregnant with Osman's child. Certain it would be a son, she chose to raise him under his Islamic father's protection rather than to expose him to the scorn of her own people as a half breed.

Amber spent the weeks after her rescue writing down everything she could remember about what had happened, and discovered in herself a talent for storytelling. The resulting book, *Slaves of the Mahdi*, became an international sensation. Everyone had read it, from the Prime Minister of Britain to the lowest paid, most ink-stained and incompetent clerk in government service in Cairo. Amber had been in England for the publication, but she could not leave Africa for long. She returned to Cairo and to Penrod in time for her sixteenth birthday, celebrated in Shepherd's Hotel with her twin. Amber and Penrod's engagement seemed a fitting end to the fairy tale.

At first Cairo society had welcomed Amber, but Penrod was increasingly aware that his fiancée did not act as a young English woman should, and her failure to do so was drawing comment. She did not tremble or faint at any mention of Khartoum, she described shooting a crocodile or a kudu with relish, and rather than refusing to speak of the terrible fate of her elder sister, Amber said openly that she was very sorry not to know her nephew, and she hoped that her elder sister Rebecca was happy with their friends in the harem. She had added that the baby would probably be much prettier than most, as Rebecca was beautiful and Osman Atalan very handsome. Every white mother in Cairo was deeply insulted by her remarks. The whispered commentary on her behaviour distressed and embarrassed Penrod. Unless Amber learned to follow the unwritten codes of the club and the army, she might not be such an asset to him in his career as he had

expected. Then he considered her unfortunate association with Ryder Courtney. Penrod was the younger son of a baronet, and had a large private income from the family trust as well as his army pay. He had been educated at Harrow and discovered his talent for languages travelling through Europe before joining the army. He was an officer and a gentleman, born to command and loyal to Queen and Empire. Courtney was a trader, a self-made man who had fought for every penny he owned, and who was openly contemptuous of all forms of soldiering. It was true he had fought the dervish with great personal bravery, and played a key role in their escape from Osman Atalan, but Penrod would rather that his fiancée's sister had married a gamekeeper.

As Amber examined her boot, Penrod glanced upwards and noticed Lady Agatha Woodforde watching them from the balcony above, a slight smile on her lips. He felt a tug in his loins. She caught his eye and made a small moue of disdain. At once Penrod found himself recalling her naked body in a tangle of fine cotton sheets in his bedroom at Shephard's Hotel. However he dismissed the image from his mind. For now, at least, he would be faithful to his rather difficult young bride-to-be.

'Ballantyne! Watch your pockets!'

It was a shout from one of the officers still smirking at Amber's remark about the harem. Penrod twisted around and stared into the face of a dark-skinned boy of perhaps ten years old. The boy already had his slim hand in Penrod's coat pocket. He danced away a few steps as Penrod made a grab for him and opened his fist to show Penrod's 18-carat half-hunter pocket watch in his palm, then he turned and ran. The drivers and servants who were crowded in front of the club lunged after him, but he ducked and twisted and slipped through their fingers like an eel. Penrod glanced at Amber.

'Don't worry about me, Penny,' Amber said, slipping her arm from his. 'But do get your watch back.'

Penrod winked at her, then set off at a sprint in pursuit of the young pickpocket.

Amber watched him go and felt her skin flush. He was so handsome; watching him made her mouth go dry and her heart flutter in a way that was both delicious and frightening. Though her sister's subtle subterfuge meant Amber had left the harem untouched, she had heard enough while living there to know what she might expect on her wedding night. The idea of it, of doing such things with her beloved Penrod, made her both afraid and desperate to be married as soon as possible.

'Miss Benbrook?' Captain Burnett approached her from the shade of the verandah. 'Perhaps I can be of assistance. Do you require a carriage back to your hotel?'

She blinked at him. 'Why would I require your assistance for that? My Arabic is much better than yours.' Behind her, in the shadows of the entrance hall, Amber heard a rich female laugh. She turned to see a rather beautiful blonde woman walking towards them across the chequerboard floor of the lobby with the light, animal grace of a cat. Amber thought she recognised her, but knew they had never been introduced.

'That's you put in your place, Burnett!' the woman said, holding out her hand to Amber. 'My dear, I am Lady Agatha Woodforde and I am *so* delighted to meet you. I am a very old friend of Major Ballantyne's, you know. Do let me treat you to some tea while he is out chasing criminals.'

Amber thought rather longingly of her suite of rooms at Shepherd's Hotel. She wanted to change out of these horrible boots.

'I want to hear everything about your romance, my dear,' Lady Agatha continued smoothly, 'and I shall tell you all the dramatic details of Major Ballantyne's former service.'

Amber remembered when she had seen her before. On occasion, when Amber had walked by a group of ladies and gentlemen on the club grounds, she had felt their gaze on her, then heard a burst of laughter just after she had passed. It had made her uncomfortable, exposed. More than once she had turned back and seen Lady Agatha at the centre of the group, watching her. Though now she seemed friendly enough.

‘Do join me! Though it is too bad of Penrod to dash off and leave you like that for the sake of a pocket watch.’

‘I gave him that watch,’ Amber said simply. ‘It’s engraved.’

Lady Agatha laughed again, showing her even white teeth. ‘That explains it! He had to go, of course, if it was a present from *you*.’

She smiled and touched Amber’s sleeve. It was too tempting. Amber could never tire of talking about Penrod, and even Saffron, who was an indulgent sister most of the time, had started rolling her eyes when Amber talked about him and their wedding plans. A suspicion flitted across Amber’s mind and she looked at Agatha narrowly. She was beautiful, but she was quite old, Amber decided. She must be at least twenty-five. Comforted, she gave Lady Agatha her hand and allowed herself to be led away.

[NEW SCENE]

The boy had a good start on him, but Penrod felt the boy was not really putting his full effort into his escape. Penrod was almost insulted. As they raced across the bridge and into the city, dodging between the water-sellers in their sky-blue *galabiyyas* with swollen waterskins over their shoulders, and the carriages of the Europeans going from club to office to home, the boy paused and looked back, and when he saw that Penrod was still pursuing him at speed, he grinned before running on again. As soon as they were off the bridge, Penrod expected the boy to turn into the maze of twisting narrow lanes that formed the Arab quarter, but instead he continued down the main open boulevard, past the handsome frontage of the Opera House and the Esbekeeyah Gardens. The boy danced through the crowds of Abyssinians and Turks, European tourists balanced awkwardly on patient donkeys, Albanians with their multi-coloured sashes, and the proud, aloof-looking Bedouins.

‘What are you playing at, my boy?’ Penrod wondered aloud and increased his speed. The boy was cursed in a dozen languages as, with a graceful bound, he leaped a low ornamental box

hedge like a champion hurdler and tore across the grass, then sprang back onto the roadway, ducked under the nose of an affronted camel, and headed into the narrow shadows of the buildings opposite. Penrod drew the hot, spiced air of the city deeper into his lungs and felt the prick of sweat under his collar. The pleasure of the chase fired his blood and he lengthened his stride.

The boy looked back over his shoulder. His small face showed shock and concern as he realised Penrod was gaining on him. He dropped his head and lifted his knees, quickening his pace, then swung suddenly right into the silk bazaar. Penrod swore and forced himself to go faster, knowing the twisting labyrinth of alleyways would make a perfect hiding place for the thief. He must not let him out of his sight even for a moment; the watch had special value to him. As the road narrowed, two men carrying a large wicker cage full of live turkeys and slung on a pole between them started to cross in front of the speeding boy. He dropped into a crouch and skidded below the swinging cage on the heels of his leather sandals. Bemused, the two men set down their load to stare after him. Penrod shouted a warning as he leaped over the cage, touching his hand to the dusty pavement as he landed, then springing up and after the boy again.

They raced down the long line of shallow shop fronts hung with woven silks in golds and purples, the shopkeepers quickly sweeping their goods out of the way of the charging pair. Penrod was gaining on the boy as he turned sharply right into a narrow courtyard and a sudden shaft of light struck Penrod like a blow after the deep shade of the main bazaar. The boy grabbed hold of the central fountain and used his momentum to swing around and hard left. The change in direction almost worked, but Penrod let his instincts, honed by years of triumph on the polo ground and battlefield, guide him and he pushed off from the fountain base with his left foot, throwing himself sideways and after the child. The boy was nervous now, looking back to check the progress of his pursuer too often. Old Arab men in white and green turbans raised their delicate coffee cups, shielded them with long fingers and began placing bets on the outcome of the race. The boy looked back again and stumbled into the wares of a tinsmith, scattering his goods to the ground with a crash, but before the stallholder could get his fingers on the boy's trailing rags

he was up and off again. Penrod hung to the right wall, climbing a precarious pile of thin tea chests to avoid the scattered metalwork, then hurled himself towards the boy like an eagle stooping on a rabbit. His quarry turned once more and it seemed that at last the boy's luck had run out. This was a dead end, a gap between houses filled with rubbish and burst barrels. The boy darted left through a wooden gateway left half ajar under a sandstone arch. Penrod followed just in time to see the boy race up the stone stairs from the courtyard to a studded cedar door that led to the interior of the house. He plunged after him into the sudden darkness of the old house and followed the sound of the boy's feet upwards. A woman stepped out onto a landing and screamed, covering her face as Penrod dashed by. The stairs became more rough and unfinished as they climbed, small children and curious cats watched them from narrow doorways, then suddenly Penrod was out into the light and heat of the afternoon sun once more, on a flat rooftop dotted with storage bins and washing lines. He caught sight of the boy through the shifting cotton sheets and ran once more over the twisted and irregular jigsaw of the roof. The boy came to a sudden stop in front of him, his arms windmilling. He was at the edge of the roof, staring over the low parapet at the fatal drop back into one of the twisting alleyways. He had nowhere left to run. Between the boy and the next rooftop was a chasm some eight feet across. Penrod felt a moment of satisfaction, then he saw the boy take a step back and crouch down.

'Don't do it, boy!' Penrod shouted, but the boy had already launched himself forward and into the air, his limbs flailing.

Penrod skidded to a halt at the edge of the roof, prepared for the sickening sight of the boy's small body broken below him. But no, the boy had almost made it across the gap. He was hanging by one hand from a slight overhang of the opposite roof. But there was no balcony or awning beneath him to break his fall, no place for his thrashing feet to find a grip. A man shouted from below and suddenly the pit of the alley was full of faces looking upwards. None of them were laughing now; they were mesmerised by the imminence of death. For a moment Penrod was tempted to leave the boy, let him fall and collect his watch from the corpse. The child obviously

did not have the strength to pull himself up again; it would be only a matter of seconds until he lost his grip and fell. Plaster crumbled under the boy's hand and he slipped an inch with a small frightened yelp. Penrod thought of Amber. How would he tell her he'd done nothing to try and save this child? He could lie, of course, but he was keeping enough secrets as it was. He sighed, turned and retreated a dozen strides from the edge of the roof, then lowered his shoulders and sprinted back. At the edge of the roof he pushed off with all his strength and speed. He heard a scream, a gabbled prayer below him, then he landed hard but cleanly on the opposite roof. The boy cried out again; the jolt of Penrod's landing had jarred him and he lost his last desperate fingerhold. He began to fall, then a strong hand gripped his wrist and Penrod hauled him up onto the rooftop. The boy would have tried to run even then, but Penrod kept a firm hold of him, lifting him up by his thin shoulders.

The boy recovered quickly. As Penrod held him suspended in mid-air, he let out a stream of insults and complaints in Arabic. He could talk as well as he could run. But he wasted no words thanking Penrod for his rescue; instead he called on Allah to witness the cruelty of the *ferengi*, and then he begged every *djinn* now resident in Cairo to pity him and come to his aid, and defend him against the monstrous accusation of thievery that was such an insult to his honour, the honour of his forefathers and the honour of the city itself. Penrod grinned as he listened, setting the boy down halfway through this tirade and, while keeping him from escaping with a firm grip, brushing the dust from his trousers and smoothing his hair with his spare hand. Then when it seemed the boy would never run out of breath, he said, in the same language: 'Empty your pockets, honoured son of Cairo, or I swear by the Prophet, peace be upon him, I shall put you back where I found you, hanging off the end of the roof gables.'

The boy was suddenly silent. He looked into Penrod's eyes and whatever he saw in them convinced him it would be better to obey rather than argue any longer. He dug his hand into his robe, retrieved the watch and presented it to Penrod on his open palm.

Penrod took it and restored it to his own pocket, but did not let the boy go.

‘And the rest.’

This brought another wail of protest, but Penrod lifted the boy onto his toes so his robe pressed against his throat and began dragging him back towards the edge of the roof. The boy squealed, dug into the folds again and produced a handful of silver coins, which he flung at Penrod’s feet. Then he began to weep.

The tears of women or children did not have much effect on Penrod, but he was surprised. He would have expected a thief like this one to have a collection of small items: purses, jewellery, not a handful of freshly minted English shillings such as these. He frowned at them as they glinted in the dust among the flickering shadows of the drying cottons hanging on the wash lines above them.

The boy saw his tears were having no effect. He sniffed then began to talk again. This time he spoke of his poverty, his mother’s sickness, of how he was trying to take care of her guiding an honoured *effendi* like himself around Cairo. Of course, he could see that Penrod was no ordinary tourist, but he, Adnan, son of Mohammed, knew all the secret places in Cairo where a rich man might be entertained: gambling, women, drink and opium-soaked scenes of delight straight from the pages of *The Arabian Nights*.

Penrod shook him until he was quiet again. He thought of the way the boy showed him the watch just after he had stolen it, how at first he had run more slowly and down the wide boulevards where Penrod could follow him easily, the expression on his face early in the race as he looked back to check if Penrod was still following him.

Penrod spun around and used two hands to lift Adnan off the ground and brought his face close to the boy’s. ‘Who paid you to steal from me, Adnan?’

[NEW SCENE]

The Ladies’ Veranda of the Gheziera Club was a triumph of elegant design, bringing the best of European and Egyptian architecture together to create a cool and tranquil Eden in the heat of the

afternoon. Servants in pristine white kaftans, sewn with gold thread at the throat and wrists, each wearing a dull scarlet fez, moved between the low tables carrying trays of bitter black coffee, silver tea pots and mounds of delicate patisserie that would be the envy of the best Parisian hotels. For the officers and men they carried mixed drinks, beaded with moisture and crackling with ice. For the ladies, lemonade that tasted both sweet and sour and was as refreshing as bathing in pure spring water.

Lady Agatha led Amber to a pair of low sofas in a corner, shielded by the delicate fronds of growing palms. At the far end of the room a string quartet was playing something soothing and gentle, and under the hum of general conversation Amber could hear the trickling music of the central fountain, where a stone goddess poured the water of the Nile eternally into a shallow pool lined in sparkling turquoise mosaic.

As Lady Agatha ordered for them, Amber held her little reticule on her knee and observed her. Amber did not know a great deal about clothes other than she liked them, and though she had learned to dress hair in the most elaborate styles in the harem, they were not the styles approved of in Cairo. She knew enough though to tell that Lady Agatha was marvellously well dressed. The cut of her tight satin jacket suggested both sophistication and modesty while emphasising the curves and swells of her body. Her skirts were full and long and a startling white, but their scarlet satin stripe and lace fringing gave them an original dash. What was most remarkable about her clothes, however, was the way Lady Agatha seemed to take no notice of them. Amber could not stop herself fidgeting and itching. Her corset pinched her, the lace around her neck scratched. She was forever trying to loosen one thing or tighten something else but whatever she did, she could never get comfortable. Her twin, Saffron, was of little or no help. She wore breeches and long shirts she borrowed from her husband when they were on the trail in the wilds of East Africa, and for formal occasions would produce from her trunk some elaborate evening dress of her own design. These dresses drew gasps of wonder and envy from every woman in the room, but Saffron seemed as easy in them as she did in her travelling gear. The style, however, did not suit Amber at

all. She had once tried one on, but when she'd emerged from the dressing room in the hotel, Saffron had laughed so hard at her she had given herself hiccups. So Amber was condemned to the dressmakers of Bond Street and Parisian-trained guardians of couture plying their needles in the European quarter of Cairo.

'Now we may have our talk,' Lady Agatha said as the waiter brought them their lemonade, cakes and tea, served in the English manner.

For a while Amber listened happily. Lady Agatha knew all sorts of interesting details from Penrod's early career and Amber was fascinated by her account of his fighting retreat from the disaster at El Obeid, and of the reception he'd received when he returned to Cairo. Amber forgot about her awkward clothes, and the suspicious laughter of Lady Agatha's friends, and told her stories about Khartoum, Penrod's time as a captive of Osman Atalan and the humiliating privations he endured.

'And now we are to be married. I don't think anyone has ever been happier than I am.'

Lady Agatha put her head on one side. 'My dear girl! How romantic!' She seemed to hesitate. 'Should I say nothing? Oh, I wish I could stay silent and let you enjoy this happiness.'

Amber thought suddenly of the cobra she had once stumbled upon in the scrub just outside Khartoum, how it raised itself and stared at her, swaying its beautiful head from side to side. She felt the same instinctive, sickly fear she had felt then, the same sense of being frozen and helpless.

'Amber – I do hope I may call you Amber, my dear – I must ask you: are you sure you know Major Ballantyne *quite* as well as you think you do?'

'Of c-course I am,' Amber replied faintly.

Lady Agatha's voice became a soft purr. 'I *am* glad. Then you will not be surprised by anything he has said and done. You must know it all already! You see, he told me everything in confidence while you were in England seeing to the publication of your *thrilling* little book. *Of course* nothing I could say about Penrod would surprise you, dear, but for the sake of my

conscience I must make sure you are aware of what he said to me about your family, and about your beautiful, tragic older sister in particular. Rebecca is her name, is it not?’

For the next twenty minutes Agatha talked in her lovely, lilting voice while Amber’s world collapsed around her. Each word she spoke pierced Amber’s naive heart like a dagger forged of the finest Damascene steel. When Agatha finally stopped speaking and let go of her hands, Amber stood up at once. Agatha looked like a pretty cat on the sofa with her cakes and cream, her ease and elegance.

‘I . . . I must go,’ Amber said.

‘I think that’s best,’ Lady Agatha replied without even bothering to look up, instead admiring her manicured fingernails. Her voice was cold.

Amber turned and hurried blindly towards the door, unable to comprehend what she had just heard, but at the same time believing every word. She had to get away before she burst into tears in front of all these people. She almost succeeded, but her fashionable little boots betrayed her again and she slipped on the marble tiles near the threshold of the lobby. One of the waiters reached out an arm for her, but he was late and clumsy and they fell together, the tray of empty glasses he was carrying in his other hand crashing to the floor. Even the string quartet stopped playing to turn and look at them as Amber struggled to her feet.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry . . . ’ She pushed away the hands that reached out to help her, then ran down the steps, out into the bright sunlight and into the first waiting carriage. She managed to ask for Shephard’s Hotel, then fell back against the upholstery.

From the veranda of the Gheziera Club the cream of Anglo-Egyptian society watched her go, followed by the low, musical laughter of Lady Agatha.