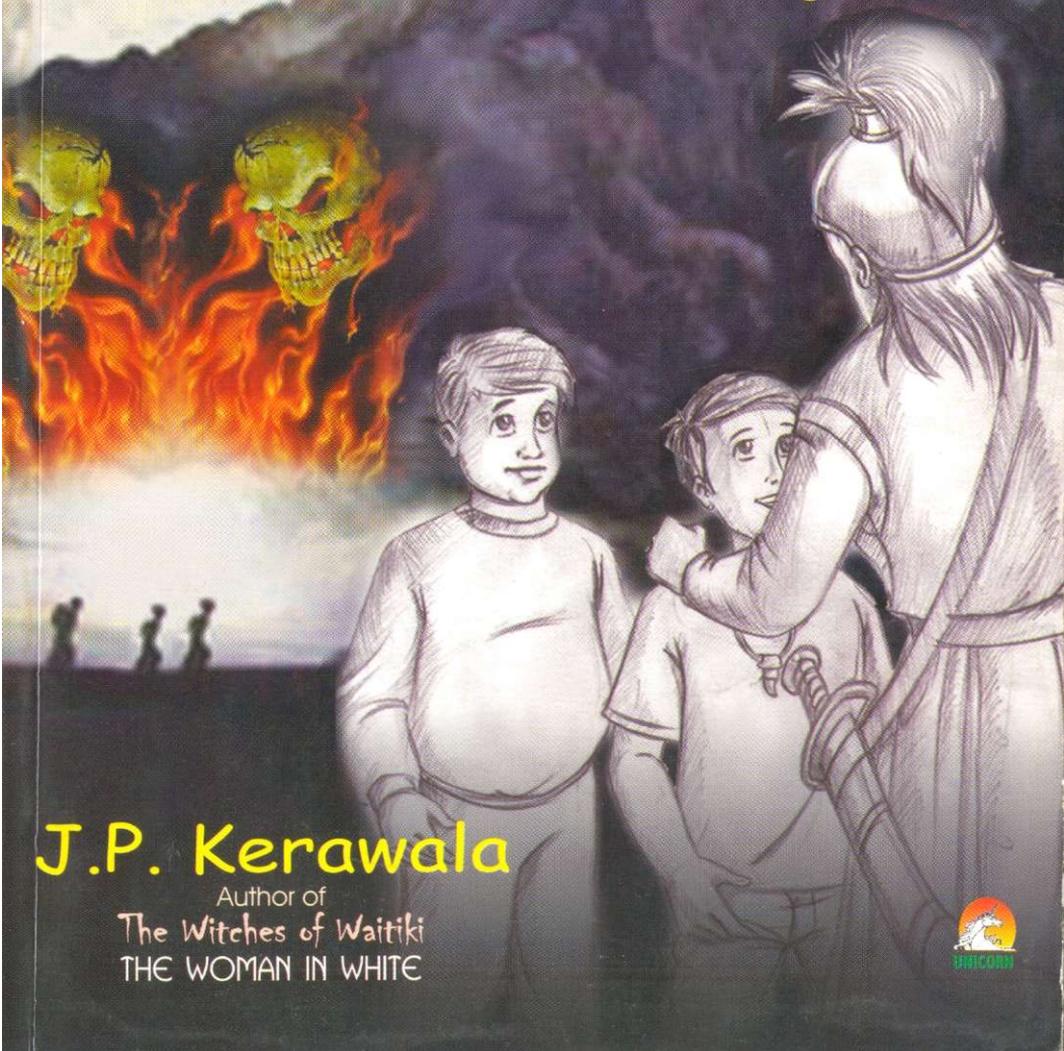


Guldasta
Engrossing tales for the young

The Khan's Talisman

*...and other stories of
mystery, adventure
and imagination*



J.P. Kerawala

Author of
The Witches of Waitiki
THE WOMAN IN WHITE



THE KHAN'S TALISMAN

...& Other Stories of Adventure,
Mystery and Humour

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The Khan s Talisman

It was late March in Kolkata and the last few days had been very hot and humid. But on this day a severe Nor'wester threatened to tear the city apart. Nor'westers, are seasonal storms that are generally welcomed as they cool down the city after the oppressive summer heat of Gangetic Bengal.

"Whew! How dark it's become, and it's not yet 3 PM," observed Shiv's cousin, Vicky. He had come down for a weeklong visit from Lucknow, but in two days, Shiv had had enough of him. He dreaded the remaining days he would have to tolerate Vicky. Shiv found him boisterous, and a big bully. But being five years younger, a foot shorter and some twenty-five kilos lighter, there was little he could do but to endure it.

Just then there was a loud clap of thunder and everything broke loose. A furious wind blew in from the Northwest, pelting the city with lashing rains.

"That's it," said a relieved Shiv, "no more football this afternoon." He hated the rough tackles Vicky always employed, often injuring him.

"No problem. Let's play wrestling." Shiv groaned knowing he had just thrown himself from the frying pan into the fire.

In the next hour, Shiv learnt that there were twenty-four different ways of being thrown harshly onto the mat; that when caught by an arm in a vice-like grip round the neck there was little he could do and that the bones in his body were there just to experience pain in different degrees.

"Look!" He cried eagerly, pushing Vicky off his back for the umpteenth time. "It's stopped raining. We can go out now."

"Great! Let's play football."

"But the grounds will be too slushy."

"No problem. What do you say to rugby?"

Dear God, Shiv thought, if playing chess with this maniac had proved too rough, two minutes of rugby and he'd surely be decapitated.

"No, no, no...I have a better idea. Remember you wanted to buy something from New Market? Let's go there."

"Good idea. I wanted to buy a knuckle-duster and a ...^{7>}

Knuckle-duster? For a fifteen year old kid? Shiv sighed remorsefully, praying he would not end up being its first

target. To further divide Vicky's prospective victims, Shiv informed his mother that they would spend the night at his friend Bablu's place.

Vicky got his knuckle-duster, a brass one, and immediately he went back his old self.. a bully. In the crowded New Market, he purposely banged into smaller boys and instantly whirled round for a fight. It was only the timely intervention of Shiv that three innocent boys escaped a bashing

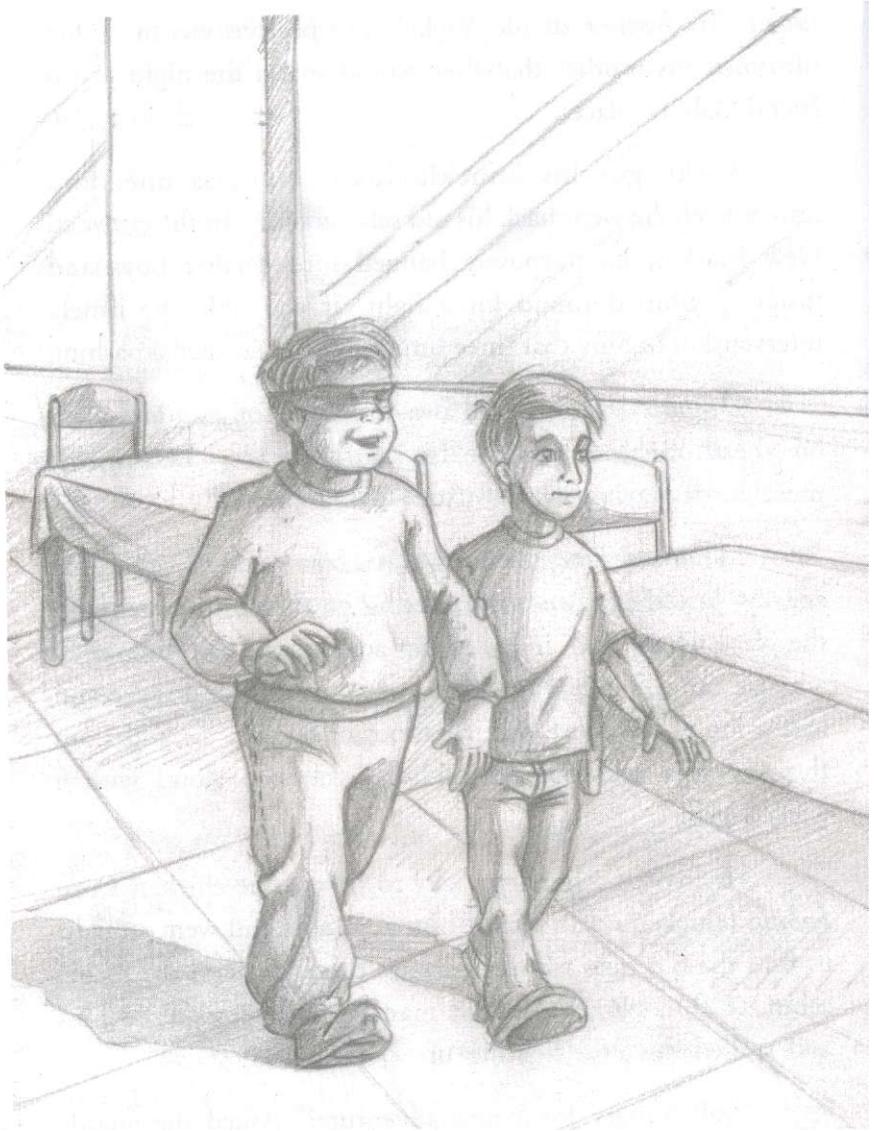
Disgusted, Shiv moved away from his cousin and walked on ahead. Behind him the leering Vicky kept flexing his muscles, displaying his new 'toy' to one and all.

"This boy needs to be taught a lesson..." thought Shiv angrily. Just then they were walking past Nizam Restaurant, the place where Shiv, in his earlier adventures, had discovered a magic cabin. He had used it to travel in time and space and had some of the most exciting times of his life, "...and I am the one who will do the teaching," he said aloud with a wicked grin.

He invited a hungry Vicky to have some chicken *kathi kababs* (chicken rolls), settled him at a table and went straight to find the old man who was always there to guard the magic cabin...Cabin No. 8. The old man instantly recognized him and smiled, his eyes lighting up.

"Still hungry for a new adventure?" Asked the guard.

"Not me," said Shiv hurriedly, remembering the narrow escape he recently had from the Chinese regime of the 35th century. "It's for my cousin." He saw the old man raise his eyebrows, obviously not liking the idea of an unknown



member. "I'll keep the cabin and the system a secret from him, and...it's very important to me," pleaded Shiv.

The old man kept quiet.

"Er...what place and year is it right now?"

"Mongolia... 1183," replied the old man gravely.

Wow! Just what Vicky needed...a place and time just right for his cousin!

"...And is there any way you can ensure that he will be at the right place for the return trip?" Nothing would have suited Shiv more than marooning Vicky in Mongolia, but as they claim, blood is thicker than water.

"It can be arranged." Clearly the old man did not look happy.

"And... er... how long before he can return?"

"Minimum six hours. Thereafter the 'connector' will remain open till he returns."

Before the old man could change his mind, Shiv hurried back to Vicky and sweet-talked him into being blindfolded. Soon Shiv guided a blindfolded Vicky towards the magic cabin.

"Where are you taking me? I don't like this game..."

"Believe me, you are going to love this," said Shiv, positioning Vicky at the entrance of the cabin, ready to push him through. He looked towards the old man for the signal and seeing a grave nod, he pushed Vicky. But at the same instant, Vicky blindly grabbed Shiv's hand and both of them plunged into the cabin.

WHAM!! A blinding light, a floating feeling and they crashed onto the floor.

"*Why in God's name did you grab me?*" Shiv was seething with anger at finding himself next to Vicky...in a felt tent. He stepped outside and saw they were in the middle of nowhere.. .and by that I mean absolutely nowhere. There were huge stretches of plains surrounding them, and not a human soul in sight.

Vicky stumbled out, wrenching away the blindfold. He looked around him disbelievingly, blinked his eyes several times and slapped himself, looking blankly towards Shiv.

"Wha...Whe...How?" His eyes were bulging out of their sockets and his wide-open mouth had dropped to a level lower than a politician's morals.

"Nothing to worry about," Shiv reassured him quickly. "We've just travelled through time...and gone places. We're in Mongolia in 1183."

"Oh." Either it sounded absolutely logical to Vicky, or its meaning was totally lost within the maze of cells and tissues he dared to call 'his brain'.

Shiv cursed his luck at being thrown into another adventure; one he was not happy going through so soon after the last one. He looked about him as Vicky continued his display of a mortified boy. The 'connector' to this part of the world was obviously the rugged tent. But where was its keeper?

Shiv found him asleep on the other side of the tent. He was a very old man, bald with a long, drooping moustache

adorning his face. He wore a coarse robe and a battered sword lay next to him. When Shiv woke him, he showed no interest. He mumbled something in a strange language, turned his back and promptly went off to sleep again.

Shiv turned back to Vicky who now sported one of the silliest grins he had seen. He was still circling round and round the tent, disbelievingly. "Wha... wher... how..."

"Its okay, you will get over it. Ah look, smoke! It's far away, but at least we will be amongst some civilization."

They walked for an hour across the wide plains towards the smoke.

"These must be the Steppes of Mongolia that we learnt about in our geography books," observed Shiv, gazing at the barren plains stretching endlessly in front of them.

"Uh, huh." It seemed that a cut-out of an open-mouthed grin was pasted over Vicky's face. For an hour, he had not spoken with the exception of some unintelligible grunts and exclamations, and was happy to follow Shiv wherever he went.

Suddenly, they heard the thunder of hooves, and an instant later saw four horsemen charging towards them. The horsemen, who seemed to have come out of nowhere, pulled up in front of them amidst a spray of sand and pebbles and hoarse cries of aggression. A spear came hurtling through the clear and crisp air and landed two inches away from Vicky's legs. The four men were extremely rugged-looking with slanted eyes and deeply tanned skin and were clothed in robes of fur. They rode the horses without any saddle or bridle.

The horsemen saw no retaliation from the boys who stood rooted to the ground unmoving, as though a game of 'I spy' was on. One of the men, the wildest looking one, jumped off his horse, swished out his long-bladed sword and ran towards the boys. He raised the sword with both hands and was about to bring it down on Vicky's head when Shiv finally found his voice.

"WAIT!!!" He shouted. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, and signaled that they were unarmed. "We ... we... are...fr...friends," he stammered, frightened out of his wits. The wild man seemed to have leapt straight out of the pages of a book on barbarians.

The man halted in his attack, midair, and hesitatingly looked towards his mates for advice. There was some discussion and apparently it was decided that the boys should be taken prisoners. They searched them for hidden weapons, tied their hands behind their back and escorted them towards the direction of the smoke.

As they were marched off Shiv noticed a wet patch where Vicky had stood and hoped it was not what he thought it could be. Of course, by now Vicky's face had changed from the perpetual expression it earlier sported. Gone was the silly grin, gone was the blank look! Reigning supreme now, was the total expression of naked fear.

Soon they came upon the source of the smoke. It was a native settlement. There were about twenty tents made of either canvas, felt or fur. Horses were tethered at various posts. The tribe of natives looked dirty and rough. Strangely, most of them were outside their tents. They were all armed

to the teeth, but somehow, instead of appearing threatening, they looked frightened. There were mild looks of inquisitiveness as the two boys were escorted in. But no one really bothered to make anything more out of it. Shiv was surprised at this luke-warm reception, as he was sure their different clothes and appearance would arouse much curiosity.

They were guided to a well-guarded tent and were pushed into it after their bonds were removed. A lone prisoner, a white man, already occupied the tent.

"Who are you?" The white man asked gently.

As Vicky was still speechless, Shiv replied, "We are from India. And you?"

"India? Never heard of it. Where is that?"

"Beyond the Indus river..." Suddenly Shiv remembered, "Our country is also called Hindustan."

"Ah, Hind!! I have heard of this great land, but it is the first time I've met someone from there. I am Father Joseph, a missionary from England." He got up and inspected them both. "But you are just boys. How did you travel so far?"

"Long story." Shiv worriedly turned his attention towards Vicky and tried forcing him to return to normalcy. "Don't worry Vicky, another few hours and we'll be out of here."

"I don't think so," intervened the Father. "I've tried to escape from here for the past two months, but these guards are very alert.. .and very cruel." He bared his back and showed dozens of slashes crisscrossing each other. "Ten lashes of the whip for each attempt at escape. And I've tried many times," he added with a sad smile.

Seeing the numerous scars, some fresh, dripping with blood made Vicky sit down on the ground, pale with nausea and eyes out of focus again.

"Why are these Mongols so heavily armed?" Asked Shiv.

"They are not Mongols", explained Father Joseph, painfully leaning back on the central post of the tent, "They are Tartars and they control the eastern parts of Mongolia. They are well armed as they are expecting trouble from the Mongols."

"War?"

"Yes, the Mongols are at war with the Tartars. These settlements will simply be demolished in minutes by the Mongol army lead by their great warrior.. Temujin. The Tartars poisoned his father and he has sworn revenge. Rumour has it he has already plundered half of the Tartar's territory and is now heading this way. They say he is the greatest Mongol leader ever, and he is only twenty one."

Temujin? Shiv failed to recall the name from his history books.

"They now call him," continued Father Joseph, "Genghis Khan!"

The sky, like a chameleon, was changing its colour as dusk ushered itself in. Without the warmth of the sun it started getting cold. Along with the dark and gloomy atmosphere, the mood of the tribe changed too as everyone huddled together, fearfully gazing far out into the darkness, almost as though waiting for the inevitable.

"It's very cold." Finally Vicky found his voice. "And I am hungry too. Shiv, why did you bring me to this place? Where is the restaurant and where are my chicken rolls? I feel like giving you a wallop right now."

The harsh hours till now seemed to have been overcome by Vicky, thought Shiv, as he noticed his cousin return to his normal self. A hard nut like him probably needed a much tougher lesson to reform and learn compassion.

"There are some furs in that corner," pointed Father Joseph. "Help yourself to them before you freeze. It gets much colder as the night progresses."

Soon it was totally dark, yet the lanterns were not lit. In wide-open areas like these steppes, a spark could be spotted a mile away. Even the fires were extinguished as it was better to be cold, than dead.

"Y...yo...you know, he is right," stammered Vicky, now looking bulky with three huge furs over him, "It is ge...ge...getting very co...cold here. Ca...can't we go home now?"

Shiv calculated that the minimum six hours they had to spend in this time zone were almost over by now. If they did manage to escape, they could return home to warmth and safety.

"We will have to wait for our chance."

An hour later, they heard the dull rhythmic sounds of hooves on hard ground. The sound was low, but ominous. It must have been some distance away, but the alarm had gone

up. The whole camp was on its feet running blindly from one end to the other, looking for a way out, but banging into invisible walls. Running away from the camp would also mean sure death by starvation and cold as the steppes, like a desert, is a never-ending stretch of land.

And then with a piercing scream, the marauding hoard of Mongols rode through the camp, their spears and arrows streaking through the dark night on their murderous paths, their swords and axes swishing angrily at anything that moved and their burning torches lighting every tent standing. The attack lasted just a few minutes and at the end of it an eerie silence reigned. Not a Tartar was left alive to tell the tale of the massacre. The three prisoners were now in the hands of the Mongols.

"Bring them to me!" A deep voice shouted in the dark. The three were once again bound and escorted out of the tent. Out in the open they expected fresh air with the cold weather, but it was the stench of death that hit their nose. It was so revolting it made them sick. They could see nothing save for the glare of burning tents.

"Ouch!" cried out Vicky as he stepped onto something round and toppled over. Though the guards shouted at him to get up he groped in the dark to feel the object he had stumbled upon. It was wet and sticky as he held it in his hands. A guard brought his torch closer and Vicky identified it.

"AAAAHHHHH!" he screamed, again and again, finally dropping the object where he stood.

"What is it Vicky?" Shiv forced his way towards his cousin to calm him down.

"Its...its...a man's head!" Vicky answered and collapsed on the ground, oblivious to the world.

A few sharp slaps and Vicky was lifted off the ground by the two guards, and then half-carried and half-dragged to a circle of flames. Father Joseph and Shiv were already there.

Sitting in the center was the most striking man Shiv had ever seen, or even imagined. He stood barely 5'9" tall, which is taller than an average Mongol, and commanded immediate respect and fear. He looked very young and very agile. His black hair fell to his shoulders with the same defiance and royalty that his intense eyes displayed. His entire presence projected untamed arrogance and royalty.

Shiv's knees were knocking uncontrollably as he stood before this man, eyeing his unsheathed sword that was still dripping blood. The man studied them for a moment, and then abruptly walked up to Vicky. With a savage jerk, he pulled up Vicky's drooping head by his hair and shouted something. The sagging boy, his eyes almost bulging out of the sockets paralyzed by fear, wept in despair. In disgust the man pushed Vicky's head backwards, spat out a command, and strode away from them.

Even as the guards held them and started taking them away, Shiv saw a movement in the darkness. Somebody out of the glare of the flaming torches was crouching and creeping towards them. Shiv saw it was one of the Tartars taken for dead. He was walking in a staggering manner, and he held

