

The Man Who Would Be King



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RUDYARD KIPLING

Rudyard Kipling was born December 30, 1865, in Mumbai, India, to English parents. During his early childhood, Kipling explored Mumbai's streets and markets with his Indian nanny, which had an effect on him for the rest of his life. At the age of six, he was sent to England for a British education, and he stayed there until 1882, when he returned to India and spent several years working for local newspapers. It was during this time that he began to write novels and short stories, which quickly became popular in England. After seven years in India, he returned to England, where he got married. He and his wife lived in Brattleboro, Vermont, for several years before finally returning to England in 1896. Kipling's work continued to grow in popularity, and he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907. At the beginning of World War I, Kipling was an outspoken supporter of the British cause. However, he was also critical of the way the British Army conducted the war, especially following the death of his son John at the Battle of Loos in 1915. Kipling's modern legacy is complicated. He is beloved for his short stories for children, and some of his writing demonstrates a deep love for India and its people. At the same time, he has been widely criticized for his support of British imperialism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in 1617, the British East India Company began to trade with India. Gradually, the company gained more power, and by the nineteenth century, it ruled much of the subcontinent. In 1857, the soldiers enlisted by the East India Company rebelled. The British suppressed the rebellion, committing horrific atrocities in the process. As a result of the revolt, the British Crown assumed direct control of India. The rebellion was still very much part of the public consciousness when Kipling wrote "The Man Who Would Be King" two decades later. This was the height of the British Empire, and much of Kipling's work explores—and sometimes questions—the moral justifications for colonialism and imperialism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kipling's best-known novel is probably *Kim*, which describes the adventures of a young man who grows up on the streets of Lahore before becoming a British intelligence agent. He also is known for his children's stories, including those collected in *The Jungle Books* (later adapted into film by Disney). In 1899, Kipling published the poem "The White Man's Burden," which puts

forth the idea that industrialized Western nations have a moral obligation to bring "civilization" to the rest of the world. Kipling's work influenced postcolonial Indian writers, especially those writing in English, such as Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai. Rushdie's novels include *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, while Desai is perhaps best known for *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting*. Many Indian postcolonial writers express a complicated relationship to Kipling, rejecting his racism and imperialism but also celebrating his use of language and his descriptions of Indian people, places, and cultures.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Man Who Would Be King
- **When Written:** 1888
- **Where Written:** Lahore, India
- **When Published:** 1888
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Short Fiction
- **Setting:** India, Kafiristan
- **Climax:** The people of Kafiristan realize that Daniel Dravot is not a god after all but merely a man, and they launch a rebellion against him.
- **Antagonist:** Greed
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Young Nobel Laureate. Rudyard Kipling was the first English-language writer to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, and he remains the youngest person ever to receive the award (he was 42).

Polyglot. As a young child, Kipling spoke Hindustani with his *ayah*, or nanny, and the household's other servants. He even had to be reminded to speak English to his parents.



PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, a newspaper correspondent, is traveling across India by second-class train when he meets Peachey Carnehan, a white man planning to extort money from a local prince. Carnehan asks the narrator to deliver a message to his friend, Daniel Dravot. The narrator agrees to do so because he and Carnehan are both Masons.

A few days later, Carnehan and Dravot turn up at the narrator's office. They are planning an expedition to conquer Kafiristan, and they would like the narrator to provide them with books

and maps to plan their journey. The narrator says that Carnehan and Dravot are fools and will likely die before they reach their goal. However, Carnehan and Dravot explain that they have signed a **contract**: neither of them will have anything to do with women or alcohol until they have become kings of Kafiristan. This contract, they believe, demonstrates that they are in earnest. Reluctantly, the narrator agrees to help them.

Dravot and Carnehan, disguised as a mad priest and his servant, depart for Kafiristan, secretly carrying with them twenty British **Martini rifles**. The narrator receives news that they have made it across the border but hears nothing more for some time.

Three years later, the narrator is again in his office when he receives a visitor. It's Peachey Carnehan, but he is so haggard and scarred that at first the narrator doesn't recognize him. Carnehan, rambling and apparently slightly mad, tells the tale of his adventures with Dravot in Kafiristan.

In Carnehan's version of events, he and Dravot arrive in Kafiristan and immediately take sides in a local dispute. The locals have only bows and arrows, so Carnehan and Dravot easily take control. Carnehan stresses to the narrator that the people of Kafiristan are white ("fairer than you or me"). Carnehan and Dravot introduce new agricultural practices to the region, set up a new legal system, train the men as soldiers, and extend their power over the surrounding villages. Dravot commands their newly colonized subjects to make **golden crowns** for the two of them, and they declare themselves kings. It turns out that the people of Kafiristan have some familiarity with Masonic symbols and rituals, and Carnehan and Dravot exploit their superior knowledge of these rites to claim that they are gods, further cementing their control. As far as Dravot is concerned, this is "a master-stroke o' policy."

However, Dravot is not content with being king. Based on the idea that the Kafirs are white—and therefore, in his mind, potentially the equal of the English—he believes that he can use them to build a great empire. As he outlines his ambitions to Carnehan, he paces back and forth, chewing his beard, showing the first signs that he is becoming unhinged.

In addition, Dravot demands that the Kafirs provide him with a wife, abandoning the **contract** he made with Carnehan. Carnehan warns him that this is a bad idea, especially after the people object, stating their belief that any woman who marries a god will die. Dravot insists, and the Kafirs do provide a bride for him. However, she is so terrified that she bites Dravot, drawing blood.

Seeing this, the Kafirs realize that Dravot is not a god after all but only a man, and they immediately rebel. Together with a few loyal soldiers, Dravot and Carnehan flee. At this point Dravot has lost his mind, raving about being an emperor even as Carnehan tries to lead him away from danger. The rebels catch up to them and cut away the rope bridge that Dravot is

standing on, causing him to plummet to his death. Carnehan is crucified between two pine trees, but when he survives the night, the Kafirs declare it a miracle and release him.

As he finishes telling his story to the narrator, Carnehan opens the bag he is carrying, revealing the severed head of Dravot, still wearing a golden **crown**.

Later that day, the narrator comes across Carnehan crawling in the dust by the side of the road, singing to himself, apparently having lost his mind. The narrator takes Carnehan to an asylum. A few days later, he learns from the asylum superintendent that Carnehan has died of heatstroke. The bag carrying the **crowned** head of Dravot is nowhere to be found.



CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The story's narrator is a correspondent for the *Backwoodsman*, an English-language newspaper. As part of his job, he travels by train to various parts of India, interacting with everyone from the kings of minor states to the "loafers" who travel second-class. On one of his journeys, he meets Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, who ask for his help in planning their conquest of Kafiristan. The narrator thinks Carnehan and Dravot's plan is foolish, but when they assure him they are serious, he provides them with books and maps of the region. Two years later, Carnehan returns, injured and haggard, and tells the narrator about his adventures in Kafiristan. The bulk of "The Man Who Would Be King" is a story within a story: in the framing narrative, the narrator talks of his interactions with Carnehan and Dravot, and it is within this context that Carnehan tells the story of what happened in Kafiristan. The narrator thus serves as an intermediary between the "respectable" world familiar to Kipling's Victorian British readers and the exotic setting of Carnehan and Dravot's adventure. Kipling was working as a newspaper correspondent in Lahore when he wrote "The Man Who Would Be King," so it seems likely that the narrator is a stand-in for Kipling himself.

Peachey Carnehan – Peachey Carnehan, one of the story's two protagonists, is a "loafer"—an Englishman in India who lacks the funds to travel first-class. He makes just enough to live on through a combination of odd jobs and extortion. Carnehan and Daniel Dravot hatch a plan to conquer Kafiristan, and they sign a contract stating that neither of them will have anything to do with women or alcohol until they have achieved their goal. Unlike Dravot, though, Carnehan seems content to control Kafiristan; he does not develop delusions of grandeur and instead focuses on training soldiers and improving agricultural practices. He keeps to the terms of the contract and earns the trust of Billy Fish, one of the local chiefs. Carnehan thus represents the kind of "benevolent" colonialism that Kipling supported—he brings "civilization" to a supposedly inferior people. However, when the people of Kafiristan revolt, they

turn on Carnehan as well as Dravot. Carnehan is crucified between two pine trees, but when he survives the night, his captors let him go. He returns from Kafiristan a changed man—broken and mentally unstable, carrying the severed head of Dravot, which is still wearing its **crowns**. It is in this state that he tells the story of his adventures to the narrator. The next day, the narrator finds Carnehan crawling through the street, apparently quite mad, and arranges for him to be taken to an asylum. Despite the narrator's intervention, however, Carnehan dies of sunstroke.

Daniel Dravot – Daniel Dravot is the story's other protagonist who, along with Peachey Carnehan, sets out to conquer the land of Kafiristan. Once they have conquered a few villages, however, Dravot immediately develops grander ambitions. He claims to be a god and a "son of Alexander"—that is, a descendant of Alexander the Great—and orders his subjects to make him a golden **crowns**. Not content merely to rule Kafiristan, Dravot wants to create an empire. Spurred on by greed and hubris, he demands that the people of Kafiristan provide him with a wife. This is both against local custom and a violation of Dravot's contract with Carnehan. Dravot's bride, meanwhile, is terrified, as she believes that she will die if she marries a god; as soon as she is close enough, she bites him. Seeing Dravot's blood, the people realize that he is not a god but a man, sparking a revolt against Dravot and Carnehan's rule. The insurgents cut away the rope bridge on which Dravot is standing, and he plummets to his death. It is thus Dravot's greed combined with his abandonment of his moral code—his contract with Carnehan—that leads to his downfall. Dravot's rise and fall serve as a cautionary tale, suggesting that there could be catastrophic consequences if the British Empire loses its moral authority.

Billy Fish – Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot make up names for the chiefs of Kafiristan, presumably because they can't pronounce their real names. One of these is Billy Fish. Billy Fish warns against Dravot's plan to marry, and he remains loyal to Carnehan even after it is revealed that Carnehan and Dravot aren't gods. Because of his loyalty to Carnehan, the insurgents slit his throat. Billy Fish's experience mirrors that of Indians who remained loyal to the British during the Rebellion of 1857, many of whom were killed.

TERMS

Loafer A white British person living in India without personal wealth or stable employment—a former soldier or servant, for example. In British colonial India, the word was roughly equivalent to "white trash." At the beginning of the story, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot describe themselves as loafers.

Masons Members of a secret fraternal society who use secret

symbols and signs to communicate with one another, agree to provide one another with assistance, and participate in certain rituals and initiations. Masons (also called Freemasons) are organized into local groups called Lodges, and a Grand Lodge governs the individual Lodges under its jurisdiction. Masons can also earn "degrees." With each degree, a Mason is initiated into new knowledge regarding the symbols of Freemasonry. At the beginning of the story, the narrator agrees to deliver Peachey Carnehan's message because both men are Masons. In Kafiristan, Carnehan and Daniel Dravot exploit their knowledge of Masonry to establish a Lodge and install themselves as Grand Masters, cementing their authority over the colonized Kafirs.

Kafiristan A region in northeastern Afghanistan. The inhabitants practiced Hinduism, so the Muslim residents of the surrounding areas referred to them as Kafir, which means "infidel" in Persian. Kafiristan appears on some British maps from the Victorian period, but the British knew very little about the place, so Kipling felt free to invent the details of the setting and its inhabitants.



THEMES

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MORALITY AND COLONIALISM

Written during Britain's imperial rule of India, Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" is essentially a parable about the moral authority of the British Empire. Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan, two British men living in India, have signed a **contract** stating that they will abide by a strict moral code: they will not touch women or alcohol until they have become kings of the land of Kafiristan. Yet soon after becoming a king, Dravot decides that the terms of the contract have been met and commands his subjects to bring him a wife. As a direct result of abandoning his moral code, Dravot loses all of his power and meets a violent end. A framing narrative, in which the narrator describes his experiences as a newspaper correspondent in India, brackets the story of Carnehan and Dravot's adventures in Kafiristan and situates the story firmly within the context of British colonial rule. Like Daniel and Peachey, Kipling suggests, the empire cannot maintain control of its colonies if it loses its moral authority.

Near the beginning of the story, Carnehan shows the narrator the "Contract" he has signed with Dravot as evidence that their desire to become kings of Kafiristan is serious. The contract

describes a morality in keeping with Victorian ideals: neither man will “look at any Liquor, nor any Woman black, white, or brown” until they have become kings. The narrator thinks Carnehan and Dravot are fools, but Carnehan uses the contract to establish his credibility, asking the narrator rhetorically, “Would two lunatics make a Contract like that?” As far as Carnehan and Dravot are concerned, this contract demonstrates that their ambition to rule is valid. In this scene, Kipling directly ties Carnehan and Dravot’s moral code to the perceived legitimacy of their colonial aspirations.

Once Carnehan and Dravot have conquered Kafiristan, they further seek to justify their colonization by claiming to have improved the lives of its people. Dravot tells the Kafirs to “dig the land, and be fruitful and multiply,” and he installs the village priest as the judge in a rudimentary legal system. Carnehan notes that he has provided military training and has “shown the people how to stack their oats better,” demonstrating that he believes he has improved the lives of the people he has subjugated. Carnehan also states that the people don’t understand Dravot’s commands but benefit from them anyway.

Dravot and Carnehan obviously would like to think of their paternalism as benevolent; they believe they are helping the people of Kafiristan become “civilized.” Carnehan even suggests that governing is an obligation that weighs more heavily on the colonizer than the colonized, noting that “Kings always feel oppressed that way.” Kipling does not challenge Carnehan and Dravot’s perception that they have brought “civilization” to Kafiristan, which suggests that the author is not opposed to colonialism in principle, however ambivalent he may be about some elements of its implementation.

Dravot’s moral failure is what eventually causes his political (and literal) downfall. Dravot explicitly states that personal power is more important to him than improving Kafiristan. He pretends to be a god, has a **crown** made for him, and says that his goal is “to make Kafiristan a country where every man should eat in peace and drink in quiet, and specially obey us.” Just before the story’s climax, Dravot abandons the moral code of his contract with Carnehan by deciding to get married. He abuses his power by commanding the community to give him a wife against their—and her—will. Dravot’s unwilling bride bites him, and when the people see his blood, they conclude that he is not a god after all but an imposter. They rebel, and Dravot falls to his death when his former subjects cut away a rope bridge on which he is standing. Dravot’s death is therefore a direct consequence of his corrupt motivations and the abandonment of his moral code.

By embedding the main story within an account of the narrator’s experiences in colonial India, Kipling emphasizes a historical precedent for the events of “The Man Who Would Be King.” Carnehan tells the narrator, “The country isn’t half worked out because they that governs it won’t let you touch it. They spend all their blessed time in governing it, and you can’t

lift a spade, nor chip a rock, nor look for oil, nor anything like that without all the Government saying—‘Leave it alone, and let us govern.’” Kipling’s original audience would have understood that Carnehan was complaining about the fact that the British Crown now ruled India directly, whereas previously it had ruled indirectly through the East India Company. As a result of this change in government, Indians had gained at least some nominal legal rights, so Carnehan essentially is complaining that he no longer can exploit Indians and steal their natural resources to the extent that he would like. Furthermore, this change in government was a consequence of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (also known as the Sepoy Mutiny or India’s First War of Independence), in which Indians staged a violent uprising against the oppressive rule of the East India Company. The fictional rebellion of the natives in Kafiristan thus parallels the real Rebellion of 1857.

As a matter of principle, Kipling appears to accept the imperialist idea that colonialism can have a positive impact on the colonized. However, he does criticize the motives of the colonizers and suggests that a loss of moral credibility has been—and could continue to be—disastrous for the British Empire.



AMBITION AND HUBRIS

Throughout “The Man Who Would Be King,” Daniel Dravot’s ambition is boundless. As soon as he achieves his lofty goal of becoming king of Kafiristan, he decides it’s not enough: he must build an empire as well, and ultimately pronounces himself both an emperor and a god. Ambition and hubris are what drive Dravot to break his **contract** with Carnehan (the two men had agreed to abstain from women and alcohol until they were king), leading to his dethroning as king and his violent death at the hands of the local people. That Dravot literally plunges to his death after declaring himself a god makes clear that, in the world of Kipling’s story, pride comes before the fall.

After conquering Kafiristan, Dravot immediately moves on to grander plans: “I won’t make a Nation,” he declares, “I’ll make an Empire!” His erratic behavior further suggests that his ambition has become a dangerous obsession, as he speaks in long monologues full of asides and exclamations, chews his beard, and paces back and forth. As the story unfolds, Dravot’s ambition-turned-obsession bleeds into insanity when his aims are finally thwarted. As they are fleeing from the rebellious natives, Carnehan says, “My own notion is that Dan began to go mad in his head from that hour.”

Dravot also demonstrates his hubris by repeatedly overstating his own political and religious power. On the journey to Kafiristan, for instance, Carnehan implores Dravot “not to sing and whistle so loud for fear of bringing down the tremenjus avalanches. But Dravot says that if a King couldn’t sing it wasn’t worth being King.” Dravot, who is not even a king yet at this

point in the story, is pompously saying here that his mere desire to be king should make him immune to the forces of nature—a patently ridiculous claim.

Dravot's hubris also leads him to claim a religious authority that he does not in fact have. He exploits the local devotion to freemasonry by pretending to be a Grand Master, even though Carnehan points out that this is illegal as neither of them "ever held office in any Lodge." Dravot doesn't listen and instead uses his knowledge of Masonic ritual to convince the natives that he is a god.

Dravot's lust for power and excessive pride ultimately lead him to abandon his moral code (symbolized by his contract with Carnehan) and demand a wife, which sets the stage for his fall. Dravot's desire for a wife not only goes against the grain of his moral code, but is itself based partly on ambition. He says he wants "a queen to breed a King's son for the King." In other words, he wants to establish a dynasty. It's clear that Dravot's inflated sense of his own power interferes with his judgment. When the council and Carnehan question his demand for a wife, he flies into "a white-hot rage," and Carnehan says that he is "going against his better mind." Finally, it is Dravot's hubris in claiming to be a god that sparks the rebellion against him. When his terrified wife bites him, the people discover that he bleeds and is therefore a man rather than a deity. If he had never claimed to be a god in the first place, he presumably could have avoided the situation that leads to his downfall.

By highlighting the consequences of Dravot's arrogance and insatiable ambition, Kipling warns against what he sees as corrupt motivations for colonialism. The morally appropriate motivation, he believes, is the (ethnocentric) desire to bring the benefits of civilization to supposedly inferior people, not the hubristic desire for power and glory.



CIVILIZATION AND THE COLONIZED

In an attempt to justify colonialism, European colonial powers routinely portrayed the people they subjugated as "uncivilized" and, it would

follow, deserving of (and even benefiting from) their colonization. A large part of this stereotype involved seeing colonized people as primitive, superstitious, and cruel. Despite Kipling's critique of the British Empire's moral failings, "The Man Who Would Be King"—written during the Empire's rule of India—largely embraces this portrayal and so upholds the fundamentally flawed ideology behind colonialism.

For one thing, the story depicts the colonized as technologically backward. When Carnehan and Dravot set out for Kafiristan, they carry with them a supply of "Martinis." These rifles, which were standard issue for British soldiers at the time, were products of British technological and industrial power. In contrast, the inhabitants of Kafiristan have bows, of which Carnehan is quite dismissive: he refers to one of their

projectiles as "a footy little arrow."

Carnehan and Dravot introduce new agricultural techniques to Kafiristan as well, further demonstrating their technological superiority. The narrator also describes the Native States—the vassal states allied with the British Empire but governed by Indian rulers—as "touching the Railway and the Telegraph on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun-al-Raschid." Harun-al-Raschid was a historical ruler, but he is better known as a character in *One Thousand and One Nights*; to Kipling's European readers, his name would have evoked the stereotypically violent and exotic world of Arabian folktales. To the narrator, meanwhile, the railway and telegraph—both European technological innovations—are signs of civilization; the Native States, who have limited access to these technologies, are thus depicted as being on the margins of the civilized world.

Furthermore, the natives of Kafiristan are portrayed as superstitious heathens who are less religiously sophisticated than Carnehan and Dravot. Dravot notes that the people of Kafiristan have "two-and-thirty heathen idols," and Carnehan refers to them as "a stinkin' lot of heathens." When Dravot and Carnehan arrive at a village in Kafiristan, Dravot establishes his position by pretending to be a friend of the local gods. His act is farcical and condescending—he refers to the deities as "these old jim-jams"—and yet it works, indicating that the religion of Kafiristan is primitive. And though the priests of Kafiristan are familiar with Masonic symbols and rituals, Carnehan and Dravot's understanding of these rites is far greater—a fact that allows them to turn the situation to their advantage.

The story also shows that the colonized—both in India and in Kafiristan—are uncivilized by depicting them as irrationally violent. Carnehan, when the narrator first meets him, is on his way to blackmail a local king, Degumber Rajah. The king has killed his father's widow by stuffing her full of red pepper, hanging her from a beam, and having her beaten to death with slippers, a clear demonstration of Degumber's cruelty. The narrator then refers to the people of Afghanistan as "utter brutes," and he says they will cut Carnehan and Dravot to pieces, further emphasizing the supposed savagery of the region's inhabitants. Carnehan and Dravot's plan further relies on the expectation that the people of Kafiristan are constantly fighting one another. This turns out to be the case—the first people they encounter upon arrival are in the middle of a battle.

In contrast to the inhabitants of India and Kafiristan, whose violence seems gratuitous and irrational, Carnehan and Dravot deploy violence purposefully as a tool for imposing order and spreading civilization. For example, when Dravot sets up a new legal system in the area they have conquered, he says that if anything goes wrong, the local priest "is to be shot." This threat of violence turns out to be both effective and beneficial to the colonized: "Next week they was all turning up the land in the valley as quiet as bees and much prettier." By attributing

different motivations to each, Kipling attempts to justify the violence of the colonizer even as he condemns the violence of the colonized.

Although Kipling criticizes the behavior of the British Empire in India, “The Man Who Would Be King” also portrays the colonized as fundamentally uncivilized—a portrayal that seeks to justify colonialism as one superior group “helping” their inferiors. In the decades after Kipling’s writing, of course, such a viewpoint would be challenged and debunked as Indians threw off the yoke of British rule.



RACE AND RACISM

At the beginning of the story, the narrator’s description of an intermediate-class train journey provides a succinct account of India’s racially stratified society under British governance. The British of Kipling’s world believe themselves to be racially superior to the people they have colonized, and they use this prejudiced ideology to justify their rule. Initially, Carnehan and Dravot’s insistence on the whiteness of the Kafirs appears to complicate this notion of the colonizer’s racial superiority. However, there are some hints that Carnehan and Dravot’s claims about the whiteness of those they have colonized may not be reliable. Their rejection of the racial distinction between colonizer and colonized ultimately leads to their downfall, and the story thus reinforces the racist underpinnings of colonialism.

Due to a budget shortfall, the narrator, despite being white, is forced to travel in the train’s intermediate class, which he describes as “very awful indeed.” The narrator divides the other passengers in intermediate class into three racial categories, which provides insight into the racial hierarchy in India under the British Crown. The first category is Eurasian—that is, people of mixed European and South Asian descent. The narrator seems to believe these are the people who naturally belong in intermediate class. The second category is “native, which for a long night journey is nasty.” The narrator does not feel any need to explain what he means by this; to him, the nastiness of native Indians is self-evident. The third category is “Loafer, which is amusing though intoxicated.” These are white passengers who lack the financial means to travel in first or second class. “Loafer” is thus more or less the British colonial equivalent of “white trash.”

Carnehan and Dravot repeatedly emphasize that the colonized inhabitants of Kafiristan, in contrast to those of India, are white. When Carnehan first describes the Kafirs, he says, “They was fair men—fairer than you or me—with yellow hair and remarkable well built.” The source of the conflict between two villages in Kafiristan turns out to be a woman “that was carried off.” Carnehan again insists to the narrator that the woman was “as fair as you or me.” After Carnehan and Dravot have exploited their knowledge of Masonic rituals to cement their control of Kafiristan, Carnehan once again notes how racism

shapes his attitude toward the local people: “Then the Chiefs come round to shake hands, and they were so hairy and white and fair it was just shaking hands with old friends.”

Carnehan and Dravot seem to conflate whiteness and morality. Dravot tells the Kafirs, “I know that you won’t cheat me, because you’re white people—sons of Alexander—and not like common, black Mohammedans.” And when, in an effort to convince Dravot not to take a wife, Carnehan reminds him of a Bengali woman who cheated on Carnehan and stole his money, Dravot claims that this situation will be different, because “these women are whiter than you or me.”

There are, however, some hints that Carnehan and Dravot’s claims about the whiteness of those they have colonized are either mistaken or misleading. For example, Dravot, speaking of the women of Kafiristan, says, “Boil ’em once or twice in hot water, and they’ll come out like chicken and ham.” This (appallingly misogynist) simile suggests that the natives’ complexion may not be as pale as Dravot claims; if it were, boiling would not be required to make them “like chicken and ham” (that is, white). In addition, Dravot has a strong motive to simply *believe* that the Kafirs are white. In his view, this would justify both his desire to make them into a great empire and his desire to marry one of them. On account of this bias, his assertions about their whiteness may not be entirely reliable.

Dravot makes two important decisions based on the dubious claim that the natives of Kafiristan are white (and therefore, in his view, morally upright): he trusts them not to rebel, and he marries one of them. Both of these decisions backfire horribly, resulting in the loss not only of Dravot’s power but also of his life.

Kipling, like other Victorian advocates for colonialism, believed in the racial superiority of white Europeans. By insisting on the whiteness of the Kafirs, Carnehan and Dravot erase the racial distinction between colonizer and colonized, which leads to their demise. Kipling seems to be suggesting that if the British abandon their commitment to the idea of white superiority, then, the results will be equally disastrous.



WOMEN AND MISOGYNY

Carnehan and Dravot’s “Contract” (**contract**) prohibits either man from interacting with women, which implies that women are inherently immoral.

Furthermore, they believe relationships with women could distract them from achieving their goal of becoming kings of Kafiristan. Similarly, the narrator complains that the women who visit the newspaper office distract him with frivolous concerns and prevent him from doing his duty. It is also Dravot’s desire for a wife that leads to his undoing, which seems to confirm the characters’ sexist beliefs. Throughout the story, then, Kipling’s portrayal of women is fundamentally misogynist: he presents them as an immoral distraction from

the (manly) work of colonization.

To the story's male characters, the well-being of women is of very little concern. The narrator complains about "Zenana-mission ladies" who ask him to write newspaper stories about their work. The primary goal of the zenana missions was to convert Indian women to Christianity; however, they also trained women to provide medical care to Indian women who could not interact with male doctors because of the purdah system. The narrator has no interest in any of this and merely considers the zenana missionaries a nuisance. Later, Dravot doesn't care at all that his bride is afraid to marry him as long as she submits to his authority. When the priest explains that they are "a-heartening of her up down in the temple"—that is, helping her to gather her courage—Dravot simply says, "Hearten her very tender, then [...] or I'll hearten you with the butt of a gun so you'll never want to be heartened again."

Women are portrayed as frivolous and inherently immoral, and colonized (nonwhite) women in particular are portrayed as dishonest and sexually promiscuous. The women who interrupt the narrator's newspaper work ask him to write stories about dances and print calling cards, tasks that he considers unimportant. Furthermore, Dravot and Carnehan's contract, in stipulating that neither man should interact with any woman, suggests that women are somehow impure or morally suspect simply by virtue of their gender. Carnehan reinforces this idea when, as a cautionary tale, he tells Dravot about a past relationship with a Bengali woman: "She ran away with the Station Master's servant and half my month's pay. Then she turned up at Dadur Junction in tow of a half-caste, and had the impudence to say I was her husband—all among the drivers in the running-shed too!"

In the world of the story, women are not only inherently morally suspect but also a distraction from duty and a source of weakness for men. The narrator says that paying attention to the "Zenana-mission ladies" would require him to "abandon all his duties" as a newspaper editor. Carnehan and Dravot's "Contract" shows that they believe interacting with women has the potential to distract them from their goal of becoming kings. Carnehan says to Dravot, "The Bible says that Kings ain't to waste their strength on women, 'specially when they've got a new raw Kingdom to work over." This is an allusion to biblical figures like Samson, who loses his strength because of Delilah, and David, who acts unjustly because of his lust for Bathsheba.

To the male protagonists of "The Man Who Would Be King," then, women's concerns and suffering are largely unimportant. Kipling describes a world in which men do the work of conquering and governing while women exist primarily as a temptation for men to avoid.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CONTRACT

The "contract" between Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot represents the strict moral code that Kipling believes is necessary to justify colonialism and imperialism. The contract requires both men abstain from alcohol and sex with women until they have become kings of Kafiristan. Both of these prohibitions carry significant weight according to a Victorian British understanding of morality. Carnehan and Dravot thus use their contract as evidence to convince the narrator that they are serious about their plans, explicitly connecting their morality to the legitimacy of their colonial aspirations. The contract also plays an important role in the story's climax. Dravot decides to abandon the contract by taking a wife, but she is so afraid of her new husband that she bites him. When the people of Kafiristan see Dravot's blood, they realize that he is a man rather than a god, which sparks a revolution that leads to Dravot's death. Kipling thus ties Dravot's failure to follow his moral code (as symbolized by the contract) to his downfall. The implication is that if the British Empire—which held control of India during Kipling's writing—loses its moral authority, the consequences could be similarly disastrous.



MARTINI-HENRY RIFLES

When Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan set out to conquer Kafiristan, they carry with them twenty Martinis along with ammunition. These Martini-Henry rifles, which were standard issue for the British army at the time, symbolize the technological sophistication of "civilized" Europeans. In the first encounter with the inhabitants of Kafiristan, Dravot uses one of the rifles to pick them off "at all ranges," whereas the locals fire "a footy little arrow" in return, emphasizing the technological disparity between colonizer and colonized. In addition, Dravot and Carnehan use their technological advantage to divide and conquer, offering the rifles to local leaders as a way to destroy their enemies. As Dravot's ambitions grow, he says that the people of Kafiristan "only want the rifles and a little drilling" to become a force capable of building an empire; in other words, he believes that technological advancement is the only thing that separates the people of Kafiristan from the supposedly superior Europeans. Ironically, it is the introduction of "civilization" in the form of the Martini-Henry rifles that gives the locals the power to rebel, as they ultimately turn the guns on their colonizers. Kipling may be suggesting that in order to maintain order, it is necessary to insist on a greater distinction than mere technological

advancement between the “civilized” colonizers and the “uncivilized” colonized.



GOLDEN CROWN

Daniel Dravot orders the people of Kafirstan to make golden crown, and he also has one made for Peachey Carnehan. These crowns represent Dravot and Carnehan’s dominion over the people of Kafirstan. When Dravot first presents the crowns to Carnehan, he waxes poetic about the natural resources of Kafirstan: “I’ve got a crown for you! I told ‘em to make two of ‘em at a place called Shu, where the gold lies in the rock like suet in mutton. Gold I’ve seen, and turquoise I’ve kicked out of the cliffs, and there’s garnets in the sands of the river.” His desire for a crown—that is, his desire to rule—is based on his lust for glory and riches. Kipling also mentions the crown at the moment of Dravot’s death. It is “caught on a rock” beside his broken body, emphasizing the loss of his right to rule. Finally, Carnehan carries Dravot’s crown (reattached to his severed head) all the way back from Kafirstan. After Carnehan’s death, the narrator asks whether anything was found on his body, but he is told that there was nothing. Carnehan’s adventure thus ends with the loss of his crown, the symbol of his power and glory, as well as his life.



what this entails, he offers a succinct account of the racial hierarchy in colonial British India.

Wealthy, white British people, who are at the top of the hierarchy, generally travel by first and second class. The narrator views Eurasians—that is, people of mixed European and Asian descent and Indians who have adopted British customs—as the natural passengers in intermediate class. Native Indians, on the other hand, he considers “nasty.” Finally, there are loafers. These are white British people, many of them former servants or soldiers, who lack the means to travel by a higher class. In colonial British parlance, then, “loafer” means something like “white trash.”

The narrator does not question this racial discrimination; rather, he seems to view it as the natural order of things. Kipling likely would have expected his readers to share this racist assumption. In Victorian Britain, racism served as a justification for colonialism: the idea was that white Europeans, because of their supposed racial superiority, had a right—and perhaps even a moral obligation—to colonize supposedly inferior nonwhite people.

They do not understand that nobody cares a straw for the internal administration of Native States so long as oppression and crime are kept within decent limits, and the ruler is not drugged, drunk, or diseased from one end of the year to the other. They are the dark places of the earth, full of unimaginable cruelty, touching the Railway and the Telegraph on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun-al-Raschid.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Peachey Carnehan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

On the train, the narrator meets Peachey Carnehan, a loafer who has a scheme to blackmail the king of a nearby native state (that is, a vassal state allied with the British Empire but not under the empire’s direct control). Carnehan plans to pose as a newspaper correspondent and threaten to publish information about the king’s cruelty. This plan is plausible, the narrator explains, because the kings of native states are under the mistaken impression that the rest of the world cares about how they run their internal affairs.

The narrator describes the native states as brutal, uncivilized, and technologically backward. On one border,





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Knopf edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1994.

The Man Who Would Be King Quotes

There had been a Deficit in the Budget, which necessitated travelling, not Second-class, which is only half as dear as First-class, but by Intermediate, which is very awful indeed. There are no cushions in the Intermediate class, and the population are either Intermediate, which is Eurasian, or native, which for a long night journey is nasty, or Loafer, which is amusing though intoxicated.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The story begins with the narrator, a newspaper correspondent for a paper called the *Backwoodsman*, traveling across India by train as part of his work. He is forced to travel by intermediate class, and in explaining

he says, they touch “the Railway and the Telegraph,” the civilized world of advanced British technology. Beyond the range of these technological advances, the native states touch “the days of Harun-al-Raschid.” Harun al-Rashid was a real historical ruler of Baghdad, but most Victorian British readers would have recognized him as a character from *One Thousand and One Nights*. With this allusion, Kipling evokes the often cruel and (to British readers) exotic world of Arabian folktales.

Kipling’s portrayal of Indians as cruel and technologically backward serves as yet another justification for colonialism. The British Empire, he suggests, has a moral obligation to intervene to prevent Indian cruelty and to spread the benefits of modern technology.

●● A newspaper office seems to attract every conceivable sort of person, to the prejudice of discipline. Zenana-mission ladies arrive, and beg that the Editor will instantly abandon all his duties to describe a Christian prize-giving in a back slum of a perfectly inaccessible village; Colonels who have been overpassed for command sit down and sketch the outline of a series of ten, twelve, or twenty-four leading articles on Seniority versus Selection; missionaries wish to know why they have not been permitted to escape from their regular vehicles of abuse and swear at a brother-missionary under special patronage of the editorial We; stranded theatrical companies troop up to explain that they cannot pay for their advertisements, but on their return from New Zealand or Tahiti will do so with interest; inventors of patent punkah-pulling machines, carriage couplings and unbreakable swords and axle-trees call with specifications in their pockets and hours at their disposal; tea-companies enter and elaborate their prospectuses with the office pens; secretaries of ball-committees clamour to have the glories of their last dance more fully described; strange ladies rustle in and say: “I want a hundred lady’s cards printed at once, please,” which is manifestly part of an Editor’s duty.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator’s journey on the train, he returns to “civilization” (that is, a part of India that is under direct British rule). Here, he provides a long catalogue of the various people who interfere with his work as a journalist.

This catalogue paints a vivid picture of the various kinds of people populating British India—primarily missionaries, soldiers, and merchants.

Of particular interest in this passage is the narrator’s portrayal of women. The zenana missions, originally created to promote Christianity, quickly became one of the only organizations offering medical care to Indian women living in *purdah* (seclusion from the world outside their homes). To the narrator, this is unimportant; the “mission ladies” and their work are merely distractions from his duty. In addition, he believes that traditionally female concerns, such as social events, are frivolous and unworthy of his attention.

The narrator seems to take this sexist perspective for granted, and the behavior of the rest of the male characters in the story indicates that they share his unexamined sexism. It seems likely that Kipling shares this sexism, as he does not criticize or question it at any point in the story.

●● “Would two lunatics make a Contract like that?” said Carnehan, with subdued pride, showing me a greasy half-sheet of notepaper on which was written the following. I copied it, then and there, as a curiosity—



This Contract between me and you persuing witnesseth in the name of God—Amen and so forth.

(One) That me and you will settle this matter together; i.e., to be Kings of Kafiristan.

(Two) That you and me will not, while this matter is being settled, look at any Liquor, nor any Woman black, white, or brown, so as to get mixed up with one or the other harmful.

(Three) That we conduct ourselves with Dignity and Discretion, and, if one of us gets into trouble the other will stay by him.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Peachey Carnehan (speaker), Daniel Dravot

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot show up late one night and ask the narrator to provide them with books and maps so that they can plan their takeover of Kafiristan. Initially, the narrator he thinks the two men are mad. In response, Carnehan produces the contract as a sign of both


their sanity and their sincerity.

The contract consists of a moral code—albeit one that reflects a Victorian British understanding of morality according to which alcohol and sex are morally suspect. Again, the idea that women are somehow inherently sinful or harmful demonstrates the sexist assumptions of the male characters.

Importantly, Carnehan clearly believes that the existence of this contract—this moral code—proves that his colonial ambitions are legitimate. The narrator is skeptical, but Carnehan and Dravot do eventually carry out their plan, which implies that perhaps the contract really does confer a certain moral authority. Kipling thus explicitly ties morality to the legitimacy of colonial rule. If they wish to maintain the right to colonize others, he suggests, the British must not abandon their moral principles.

They went up and up, and down and down, and that other party, Carnehan, was imploring of Dravot not to sing and whistle so loud, for fear of bringing down the tremenjus avalanches. But Dravot says that if a King couldn't sing it wasn't worth being King, and whacked the mules over the rump, and never took no heed for ten cold days.

Related Characters: Peachey Carnehan (speaker), Daniel Dravot

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

During their journey to Kafirstan, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot pass through a barren, mountainous region. Dravot sings and whistles as they travel, and Carnehan is afraid that the noise will trigger an avalanche. However, Dravot doesn't share Carnehan's fear and seems to believe that his kingship—even though he is not even a king yet at this point—renders him immune to the danger.


Dravot's carelessness is one of the first signs of the hubris that will eventually lead to his downfall. Although he is not yet a king, he has no doubt that he will become one, and he further believes that his right to rule extends to control over the natural world, a belief that is ridiculous on its face. Kipling draws attention to Dravot's hubris here to foreshadow the events that will unfold later in the story. Just as he overestimates his power over the mountains, Dravot will overestimate his power over the people of

Kafirstan, and his hubris will blind him to the danger of rebellion.

Then ten men with bows and arrows ran down that valley, chasing twenty men with bows and arrows, and the row was tremenjus. They was fair men—fairer than you or me—with yellow hair and remarkable well built. Says Dravot, unpacking the guns—"This is the beginning of the business. We'll fight for the ten men," and with that he fires two rifles at the twenty men, and drops one of them at two hundred yards from the rock where he was sitting. The other men began to run, but Carnehan and Dravot sits on the boxes picking them off at all ranges, up and down the valley. Then we goes up to the ten men that had run across the snow too, and they fires a footy little arrow at us. Dravot he shoots above their heads, and they all falls down flat. Then he walks over them and kicks them, and then he lifts them up and shakes hands all round to make them friendly like.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 235–236

Explanation and Analysis

Upon arriving in Kafirstan, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot find the Kafirs fighting among themselves. Their powerful weaponry allows them to exploit this situation to begin their conquest of the region.

Kipling contrasts Carnehan and Dravot's rifles, which make use of the most advanced European technology, to the ineffective "footy little arrow" of the Kafirs. Again, the technological sophistication of the colonizers is meant to indicate that they are superior to the people they have colonized.

It is also worth noting that, unlike the colonized, whose violence is portrayed as arbitrary and cruel, Carnehan and Dravot use violence for a purpose. As soon as they have subdued the ten men in the valley, Carnehan and Dravot shake hands with them and claim to be friends. Carnehan and Dravot believe their intentions are benevolent despite their violent methods. Thus, by attributing different motivations to colonizer and colonized, Kipling makes a distinction between "civilized" and "uncivilized" uses of



violence.

At the same time, Carnehan's claim that the Kafirs are white introduces a complication. If the Kafirs are white, then the racist rationalization for colonialism does not apply. Later in the story, Carnehan and Dravot's failure to insist on a racial difference between themselves and the colonized Kafirs will contribute to their fall.

☞ Then all the people comes down and shouts like the devil and all, and Dravot says—"Go and dig the land, and be fruitful and multiply," which they did, though they didn't understand. Then we asks the names of things in their lingo—bread and water and fire and idols and such, and Dravot leads the priest of each village up to the idol, and says he must sit there and judge the people, and if anything goes wrong he is to be shot.

Next week they was all turning up the land in the valley as quiet as bees and much prettier, and the priests heard all the complaints and told Dravot in dumb show what it was about.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

As soon as Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot have conquered their first two villages, they begin to show the villagers how to improve their agricultural production. They also institute a rudimentary legal system. Carnehan's statement that within the week the Kafirs are "as quiet as bees and much prettier" indicates that these efforts are effective.

Kipling once again portrays the colonized Kafirs as less civilized than the colonizing British. Prior to Carnehan and Dravot's arrival, he suggests, the Kafirs' agricultural methods were ineffective, and they did not have a peaceful way to resolve conflict. In addition, the colonizers' use of violence again appears to be justified, as threatening to shoot anyone who disobeys allows Carnehan and Dravot to impose peace.

By introducing new technologies and social systems, Carnehan and Dravot believe they have improved the lives of the Kafirs. This serves as yet another moral justification for colonialism: in Kipling's view, bringing "civilization" to supposedly inferior people really can work to their benefit.

This is a reminder that although Kipling criticizes the British Empire for its immoral treatment of its colonies, he does not object to colonialism as a general principle.

☞ One morning I heard the devil's own noise of drums and horns, and Dan Dravot marches down the hill with his Army and a tail of hundreds of men, and, which was the most amazing, a great gold crown on his head. "My Gord, Carnehan," says Daniel, "this is a tremenjus business, and we've got the whole country as far as it's worth having. I am the son of Alexander by Queen Semiramis, and you're my younger brother and a God too! It's the biggest thing we've ever seen. I've been marching and fighting for six weeks with the Army, and every footy little village for fifty miles has come in rejoiceful; and more than that, I've got the key of the whole show, as you'll see, and I've got a crown for you! I told 'em to make two of 'em at a place called Shu, where the gold lies in the rock like suet in mutton. Gold I've seen, and turquoise I've kicked out of the cliffs, and there's garnets in the sands of the river, and here's a chunk of amber that a man brought me. Call up all the priests and, here, take your crown."

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Daniel Dravot marches away to continue the conquest of Kafirstan, while Peachey Carnehan stays behind to oversee the villages they have already conquered. When Dravot returns, it is with great fanfare at the head of an army, and he is wearing a crown.

Dravot's crown signifies that he has completed his conquest and now has dominion over Kafirstan. It is also at this point that he first claims to be a god, and he has invented an imaginary lineage for himself stretching back to Alexander the Great. This claim is a clear sign of his ambition and hubris: he is not content merely to colonize Kafirstan but also wishes to be revered and worshiped.

It is also clear from Dravot's words that his motivation for colonizing Kafirstan is selfish. He says in passing that the Kafirs are happy to be part of his kingdom, but he waxes poetic about the country's natural resources. Clearly, he is



more interested in obtaining gold and gems than in bringing the benefits of “civilization” to the Kafirs. By emphasizing Dravot’s greed, Kipling questions the morality of Dravot and Carnehan’s colonization of Kafiristan.

“Shake hands with him,” says Dravot, and I shook hands and nearly dropped, for Billy Fish gave me the Grip. I said nothing, but tried him with the Fellow Craft Grip. He answers all right, and I tried the Master’s Grip, but that was a slip. “A Fellow Craft he is!” I says to Dan. “Does he know the word?”—“He does,” says Dan, “and all the priests know. It’s a miracle! The Chiefs and the priests can work a Fellow Craft Lodge in a way that’s very like ours, and they’ve cut the marks on the rocks, but they don’t know the Third Degree, and they’ve come to find out. It’s Gord’s Truth. I’ve known these long years that the Afghans knew up to the Fellow Craft Degree, but this is a miracle. A God and a Grand-Master of the Craft am I, and a Lodge in the Third Degree I will open, and we’ll raise the head priests and the Chiefs of the villages.”

“It’s against all the law,” I says, “holding a Lodge without warrant from any one; and you know we never held office in any Lodge.”

“It’s a master-stroke o’ policy,” says Dravot.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker), Billy Fish

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

After conquering Kafiristan, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot discover, to their great surprise, that the priests and chiefs of the Kafirs are Masons (as indicated by Billy Fish knowing the secret handshake). However, the Kafirs don’t know the symbols and rituals of third degree, the highest of the three degrees of Freemasonry.

Again, Kipling portrays the colonized Kafirs as less “civilized” than their colonizers. Carnehan and Dravot’s superior grasp of Masonry shows that they have more knowledge and greater spiritual sophistication than the Kafirs.

However, Dravot’s decision to impersonate a Grand Master and hold a lodge without a warrant is another example of his hubris. He does not feel it is enough simply to share his knowledge with the Kafirs. Instead, he exploits his knowledge to gain power by claiming an authority he does not legitimately possess. In the end, this overreach will be his undoing, as the discovery of his lies triggers the Kafirs’


rebellion.

Dravot talked big about powder-shops and factories, walking up and down in the pine wood when the winter was coming on.

“I won’t make a Nation,” says he; “I’ll make an Empire! These men aren’t niggers; they’re English! Look at their eyes—look at their mouths. Look at the way they stand up. They sit on chairs in their own houses. They’re the Lost Tribes, or something like it, and they’ve grown to be English. I’ll take a census in the spring if the priests don’t get frightened. There must be a fair two million of ’em in these hills. The villages are full o’ little children. Two million people—two hundred and fifty thousand fighting men—and all English! They only want the rifles and a little drilling. Two hundred and fifty thousand men ready to cut in on Russia’s right flank when she tries for India! Peachey, man,” he says, chewing his beard in great hunks, “we shall be Emperors—Emperors of the Earth!”

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 243–244

Explanation and Analysis

Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, using military force and their knowledge of Masonry, have managed to become kings of Kafiristan. However, Dravot’s ambition and hubris continue to drive him. He no longer wants to be just a king—he wants to be an emperor. His pacing and tearing out his beard suggest that his ambition has become an obsession and may be driving him mad.

This passage also emphasizes once more the technological differences between the colonizer and the colonized. The “civilized” colonizer Dravot plans to build factories in the unindustrialized villages of Kafiristan, and he states that the Kafirs need only rifles (that is, superior technology) to become like the English. The role of the colonizer here is to bring “civilization,” in the form of technological advancement, to the colonized.

Throughout his speech, Dravot operates from the racist assumption that only white people have the ability to forge an empire. The Kafirs do not conform to the Victorian stereotype of the nonwhite “savage,” and for this reason

Dravot believes that he can turn them into a great civilization.

However, there are some reasons to doubt Dravot's claim that the Kafirs are white. First, he is losing his mind, so his judgment is not entirely reliable. Second, he has a strong motive to believe that the Kafirs are white: he believes that if they are not, he will not be able to achieve his ambitions. By casting doubt on Carnehan and Dravot's version of events, Kipling leaves the racial characteristics of the Kafirs ambiguous. From a racist colonial British perspective, this is significant, as blurring the distinction between whites and nonwhites would undermine the racist rationalization of colonialism.


☞ “There’s another thing too,” says Dravot, walking up and down. “The winter’s coming, and these people won’t be giving much trouble, and if they do we can’t move about. I want a wife.”

“For Gord’s sake leave the women alone!” I says. “We’ve both got all the work we can, though I am a fool. Remember the Contrack, and keep clear o’ women.”

“The Contrack only lasted till such time as we was Kings; and Kings we have been these months past,” says Dravot, weighing his crown in his hand. “You go get a wife too, Peachey—a nice, strappin’, plump girl that’ll keep you warm in the winter. They’re prettier than English girls, and we can take the pick of ‘em. Boil ‘em once or twice in hot water, and they’ll come out like chicken and ham.”

Related Characters: Peachey Carnehan, Daniel Dravot (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Daniel Dravot's rant in the pine grove about forging an empire, he reveals that he wants a wife, which will mean abandoning the contract he made with Peachey Carnehan. As Dravot points out, the contract originally was to end when they became kings, which they have now accomplished. Dravot's willingness to abandon the contract suggests that to him, the contract was no more than a way to legitimize his desire for power. Now that he has the kingship he desired, he no longer feels an obligation to

follow his moral code. Of course, Carnehan and Dravot's adventure in Kafirstan parallels the British colonization of India. Kipling is suggesting that the British Empire, like Dravot, has entered into the project of colonialism with ostensibly noble intentions only to abandon its moral principles after gaining power.



Dravot says that boiling will be needed to make the women “like chicken and ham”—that is, to make them truly white. If they were already white, no boiling would be necessary. Kipling again seems to be hinting that the Kafirs are not as white as Carnehan and Dravot claim. According to racist colonial ideology, it is the natural order of things for white people to rule over nonwhite people. As far as Kipling is concerned, by failing to observe this racial distinction, Carnehan and Dravot are undermining their own authority.


Dravot's comparison is also fundamentally sexist, as it suggests that women are merely objects for men to consume.

☞ “The girl’s a little bit afraid,” says the priest. “She thinks she’s going to die, and they are a-heartening of her up down in the temple.”

“Hearten her very tender, then,” says Dravot, “or I’ll hearten you with the butt of a gun so you’ll never want to be heartened again.” He licked his lips, did Dan, and stayed up walking about more than half the night, thinking of the wife that he was going to get in the morning. I wasn’t any means comfortable, for I knew that dealings with a woman in foreign parts, though you was a crowned King twenty times over, could not but be risky.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

In response to Daniel Dravot's demand for a wife, the Kafirs are reluctant. Because Dravot is a god, they explain, any woman who marries him is sure to die. Dravot is indifferent to this claim, and the Kafirs finally agree to his demand. The chosen young woman is, of course, afraid, and when Dravot asks why she is crying out, the priests explain that they are “a-heartening of her up”—that is, helping her to gather her courage.

Dravot seems entirely unconcerned about his prospective bride's distress. Furthermore, he threatens the Kafirs with violence if they don't do what he wants. In this case, Dravot's threat of violence no longer serves a legitimate purpose: he is not imposing peace but enforcing an unreasonable demand. This abuse of power is yet another act of hubris, as Dravot's delusions of invincibility blind him to the danger that the Kafirs might rebel against him.

Peachey Carnehan demonstrates his sexism by commenting that "dealing with a woman in foreign parts" is always risky. For him, women are a source of weakness; he does not consider the possibility that women might have independent worth beyond what he sees as their effect on men.

●● Up comes the girl, and a strapping wench she was, covered with silver and turquoises, but white as death, and looking back every minute at the priests. "She'll do," said Dan, looking her over. "What's to be afraid of, lass? Come and kiss me." He puts his arm round her. She shuts her eyes, gives a bit of a squeak, and down goes her face in the side of Dan's flaming red beard. "The slut's bitten me!" says he, clapping his hand to his neck, and, sure enough, his hand was red with blood. Billy Fish and two of his matchlock-men catches hold of Dan by the shoulders and drags him into the Bashkai lot, while the priests howls in their lingo,—"Neither God nor Devil, but a man!" I was all taken aback, for a priest cut at me in front, and the Army behind began firing into the Bashkai men.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker), Billy Fish

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

Just as it seems Daniel Dravot is about to fulfill his desire for a wife, she bites him, and the fact that he bleeds immediately reveals to the Kafirs that he is not a god after all but merely a man. Immediately, they rebel against his rule.

This is the climax of the story—the moment at which the consequences of Dravot's actions finally appear. Dravot has abandoned his moral code by taking a wife, and he has demonstrated his hubris by impersonating a god. These two failings lead directly to his downfall: if he had not taken a bride, he would not have been bitten; and if he had not

claimed to be a god, the fact that he bleeds would not have been a revelation. By analogy, Kipling is identifying hubris and a lack of moral rectitude as the twin failures of British colonialism.

The sexist and misogynist language of this passage ("strapping wench" and "slut") are a reminder of the sexist assumptions of all of the male characters in the story. This kind of sexism was thoroughly embedded in Victorian society, and Kipling seems to take it for granted.

●● "My own notion is that Dan began to go mad in his head from that hour. He stared up and down like a stuck pig. Then he was all for walking back alone and killing the priests with his bare hands; which he could have done. "An Emperor am I," says Daniel, "and next year I shall be a Knight of the Queen." "All right, Dan," says I; "but come along now while there's time." "It's your fault," says he, "for not looking after your Army better. There was mutiny in the midst, and you didn't know—you damned engine-driving, plate-laying, missionary's-pass-hunting hound!" He sat upon a rock and called me every foul name he could lay tongue to. I was too heart-sick to care, though it was all his foolishness that brought the smash. "I'm sorry, Dan," says I, "but there's no accounting for natives. This business is our Fifty-Seven. Maybe we'll make something out of it yet, when we've got to Bashkai."

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately following the beginning of the Kafirs' rebellion, Daniel Dravot's hubris and ambition seem finally to have driven him mad. He cannot accept that he has lost his kingdom, and he claims to be an emperor even though he clearly never will achieve his ambition of forging an empire. He also lashes out at Carnehan, refusing to accept responsibility for the situation.



Carnehan knows that he is not primarily responsible for the rebellion, but he doesn't bother trying to correct his friend. Instead, he blames the colonized Kafirs, stating that "there's no accounting for natives." In the wake of the rebellion, he no longer claims that the Kafirs are English. Instead, he now insists on the differences between the colonizers and the colonized, as claiming that the Kafirs are inherently violent


and uncivilized provides a convenient explanation for the rebellion without having to acknowledge his and Dravot's culpability.

The reference to the Rebellion of 1857 makes it explicit that Carnehan and Dravot's colonization of Kafiristan is an allegory for the British colonization of India. While Kipling does appear to believe that white Europeans are inherently superior to the nonwhite people they have colonized, he believes that this superiority confers not only a right to rule but also a moral responsibility. Here he is criticizing the British refusal to accept this responsibility following the rebellion.

●● They marched him a mile across that snow to a rope-bridge over a ravine with a river at the bottom. You may have seen such. They prodded him behind like an ox. "Damn your eyes!" says the King. "D'you suppose I can't die like a gentleman?" He turns to Peachey—Peachey that was crying like a child. "I've brought you to this, Peachey," says he. "Brought you out of your happy life to be killed in Kafiristan, where you was late Commander-in-Chief of the Emperor's forces. Say you forgive me, Peachey."—"I do," says Peachey. "Fully and freely do I forgive you, Dan."—"Shake hands, Peachey," says he. "I'm going now." Out he goes, looking neither right nor left, and when he was plumb in the middle of those dizzy dancing ropes, "Cut, you beggars," he shouts; and they cut, and old Dan fell, turning round and round and round, twenty thousand miles, for he took half an hour to fall till he struck the water, and I could see his body caught on a rock with the gold crown close beside.

Related Characters: Daniel Dravot, Peachey Carnehan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 252–253

Explanation and Analysis

Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot manage to escape from the rebelling Kafirs, but only temporarily. When Carnehan and Dravot are captured, the Kafirs march them to a bridge in order to execute them.


Ironically, Carnehan and Dravot were the ones who brought the innovation of rope bridges to Kafiristan in the first place. The Kafirs are thus using the colonizers' infrastructure as a weapon in their rebellion. In doing so, they also are


depriving themselves of that infrastructure. Dravot's hubris and moral failing thus have consequences not only for himself but also for the Kafirs, undoing whatever benefits of "civilization" colonization might have provided in the first place.

It also is significant that Kipling mentions the crown on the rocks next to Dravot's body. The crown symbolizes Dravot's dominion over Kafiristan, so the fact that his crown too falls into the abyss suggests that he has lost not only his life but also his moral authority and his right to rule.

●● He fumbled in the mass of rags round his bent waist; brought out a black horsehair bag embroidered with silver thread; and shook therefrom on to my table—the dried, withered head of Daniel Dravot! The morning sun that had long been paling the lamps struck the red beard and blind, sunken eyes; struck, too, a heavy circlet of gold studded with raw turquoises, that Carnehan placed tenderly on the battered temples. "You be'old now," said Carnehan, "the Emperor in his 'abit as he lived—the King of Kafiristan with his crown upon his head. Poor old Daniel that was a monarch once!"

Related Characters: Peachey Carnehan, The Narrator (speaker), Daniel Dravot

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 253–254

Explanation and Analysis

After Daniel Dravot's death, the Kafirs crucify Peachey Carnehan. However, when he survives the night, they decide it's a miracle and let him go. They send with him the severed head of Dravot, still wearing the crown. Carnehan carries the head and the crown all the way back to British India, refusing to sell the crown even when he is near starving.

By keeping the crown, Carnehan is clinging loyally to the idea of Dravot's right to rule despite the disaster in Kafiristan. However, based on Carnehan's rambling story and his devotion to Dravot's decaying head, it is clear that Carnehan's experiences have driven him mad. The consequences of Dravot's hubris and moral failing thus extend far beyond his own death. By drawing attention to Carnehan's suffering, Kipling may be referencing the many British civilians and soldiers who, because of their loyalty to the British Crown, died violently in the Rebellion of 1857.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

The narrator, a newspaper correspondent, is traveling by train from Mhow to Ajmir. He is in intermediate class, which is “very awful indeed”—the passengers are “either Intermediate, which is Eurasian, or native, which for a long night journey is nasty, or Loafer, which is amusing though intoxicated.” One of these loafers strikes up a conversation with the narrator. When the loafer (later revealed to be Peachey Carnehan) learns that the narrator’s journey will take him to Marwar Junction, he asks the narrator to deliver a message to a friend for him. He asks the narrator to do this “for the sake of my Mother as well as yours”—a code indicating that both men are Masons. The narrator agrees.

Carnehan also explains that he is about to embark on a scheme to extort money from the king of nearby Degumber State. His idea is to pretend to be a correspondent for the *Backwoodsman* and threaten to expose the prince’s murder of his own step-mother. The prince, he says, “Filled her up with red pepper and slipped her to death as she hung from a beam.”

The narrator does not reveal that he actually does work for the *Backwoodsman*. Carnehan leaves the train, and the narrator explains that the Native States are afraid of this kind of exposure because they don’t understand that no one in the wider world “cares a straw” what goes on there “so long as oppression and crime are kept within decent limits, and the ruler is not drugged, drunk, or diseased from one end of the year to the other.” He describes the Native States as “the dark places of the earth, full of unimaginable cruelty, touching the Railway and the Telegraph on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun-al-Raschid.”

When the narrator arrives at Marwar Junction, he finds the train car of Carnehan’s friend, Daniel Dravot, another British loafer, and delivers the message. However, the narrator becomes concerned that his two new friends will get themselves into trouble if they go through with their plan to blackmail a local state, and he sends a message to have them stopped when they arrive at the border of Degumber State.

It is reasonable to assume that the narrator is a stand-in for Kipling himself, as he worked for several years as a newspaper correspondent in British India. His description of the various classes of train car provides a succinct explanation of the racial hierarchy in British colonial India. At the top are wealthy white Europeans; then are Eurasians (people of mixed European and Asian descent) and loafers (white Europeans who lack the funds to travel in a better class); and then there are natives, whom the narrator considers inherently disgusting.



Carnehan’s scheme relies on the cruelty of the king of Degumber State, which he describes in gruesome detail. This cruelty emphasizes that the Native States are “uncivilized,” which serves as a justification for the colonialism of the supposedly more civilized Europeans.



*The narrator again focuses on the brutality of the Native States. He also credits European colonizers for keeping this cruelty “within decent limits,” suggesting a moral basis for colonialism. In addition, the narrator here equates civilization and technological advancement. Because the Native States are just beyond the reach of the European technology of the railway and the telegraph, they might as well exist in the mythical and cruel world of *A Thousand and One Nights*, in which Harun-al-Rashid is an important character.*



The British government of India, tipped off by the narrator, interferes with Carnehan and Dravot’s plan to extort money from the king of Degumber State. This introduces the idea that the British Crown places at least some limits on the exploitation of colonized Indians.



Back at his office, the narrator gets on with his work, though he is often interrupted: “Zenana-mission ladies” ask him to “abandon all his duties” to report on their work in remote villages, “secretaries of ball-committees” ask him to describe their dances, and “strange ladies rustle in and say: ‘I want a hundred lady’s cards printed at once, please.’”

One night, the narrator is working late when two men arrive at the newspaper office. He recognizes them as the two men from his journey on the train, Carnehan and Dravot. They feel the narrator owes them a favor in return for the “bad turn” he did them by preventing them from reaching Degumber State. They are fed up with India because, as Carnehan explains, “they that governs it won’t let you touch it. They spend all their blessed time in governing it, and you can’t lift a spade, nor chip a rock, nor look for oil, nor anything like that.”

Carnehan and Dravot want to stop scraping together a living from odd jobs and extortion. Instead, they will travel to Kafiristan, a country “at the top right-hand corner of Afghanistan,” and set up a kingdom there. They want the narrator to provide books and maps so they can plan their journey. Reading from one of the narrator’s books, Carnehan notes that the Kafirs have “two-and-thirty heathen idols.” He also says that the Kafirs fight one another, “and in any place where they fight a man who knows how to drill men can always be a King.”

The narrator believes Carnehan and Dravot’s plan is foolish and says they will be “cut to pieces” before they reach the border of Kafiristan. To show him that they are serious, they explain that they have signed a **contract**: until they are kings, neither man will “look at any Liquor, nor any Woman black, white, or brown.” Before the narrator leaves to go to bed, Carnehan and Dravot tell him to make sure he goes down to the market the next day.

The narrator here dismisses the work of the zenana missions, who provided medical care to Indian women living in purdah (seclusion from the world outside the home). He considers both this missionary work and the ladies’ interest in social occasions to be nothing more than distractions from his duty, betraying deep-seated sexist assumptions.



Some historical context: For many years, Britain ruled India indirectly through the British East India Company, but Queen Victoria assumed direct control following the violent Rebellion of 1857, in which Indians rose up against their oppression by the Company. The fact that Indians are now at least nominally British subjects places some limits on Carnehan and Dravot’s ability to exploit the country. Their desire to find a new country to pilfer indicates that they are driven by greed. In addition, this reference to the Rebellion of 1857 provides context for Carnehan and Dravot’s adventure, suggesting that their experiences will parallel those of the British Empire.



By noting the Kafirs’ “heathen idols,” Carnehan and Dravot demonstrate their belief in their cultural and spiritual superiority to the people they wish to rule. In addition, their plan relies on the assumption that the Kafirs are constantly fighting among themselves, which reinforces the idea that the people of Kafiristan are violent and uncivilized.



The narrator’s assumption that Carnehan and Dravot will die in Afghanistan further underscores that the world beyond British control is violent and uncivilized. Carnehan and Dravot’s contract consists of a moral code. Their idea of morality is fundamentally sexist, as it assumes that women are somehow inherently immoral. However, they seem to believe that their contract legitimizes their colonization of Kafiristan. Kipling thus suggests that moral uprightness is necessary if colonialism is to be justified.



At the market, it takes the narrator some time to recognize Dravot and Carnehan, as they have disguised themselves as a mad priest and his servant. They are loading up a caravan of camels with toys, which, they say, they intend to sell in Kabul. The narrator, tipped off by a pointed comment from Dravot about becoming a king, finally sees through the disguise, and he goes with them a little way from the market. Before they part ways, Dravot tells the narrator to feel under the camel bags. He feels the butt of a **Martini rifle**, and Dravot says they have twenty of them with ammunition. The narrator says farewell. Ten days later, he hears from a native correspondent that the two men have made it past the border of British India. However, he doesn't expect ever to see them again.

Three years pass, and then, one night, Carnehan shows up at the newspaper office once more. He has changed so much that the narrator doesn't recognize him at first: "He was bent into a circle, his head was sunk between his shoulders, and he moved his feet one over the other like a bear. I could hardly see whether he walked or crawled." Carnehan asks for whisky and gulps it down. He says, "I was the King of Kafiristan—me and Dravot—crowned Kings we was!" After assuring the narrator that he is not mad, though he thinks he will be soon, Carnehan begins the tale of his adventure with Dravot in Kafiristan.

Carnehan and Dravot (in Carnehan's story) make their way into the mountains. When the terrain becomes too mountainous for their camels, they kill and eat them. Two men come along on mules and try to rob Carnehan and Dravot, but Dravot breaks one man's neck, and the other runs away. Carnehan and Dravot continue through the mountains on the mules. Carnehan implores Dravot "not to sing and whistle so loud, for fear of bringing down the tremenjus avalanches. But Dravot says that if a King couldn't sing it wasn't worth being King."

Just after Carnehan and Dravot run out of food and have to slaughter the mules, they see twenty men chasing ten others down a slope. Carnehan notes that these Kafirs are "fair men—fairer than you or me—with yellow hair and remarkable well built." Carnehan and Dravot fire their rifles at the larger group. Dravot kills one at two hundred yards, and the rest flee. Carnehan and Dravot approach the ten men, one of whom fires "a footy little arrow" at them. Dravot fires over their heads, and the men surrender at once.

The success of Dravot and Carnehan's disguise suggests that their plan may be more plausible than the narrator first believed. The presence of the Martini rifles confirms this idea: Carnehan and Dravot will be bringing with them the best of British military technology. Kipling again is emphasizing the superiority of European technology, which may be enough to give Carnehan and Dravot an edge over the "uncivilized" Kafirs.



Carnehan's pitiful condition makes it clear that something has gone horribly wrong, and he immediately asks for whisky, indicating that he no longer is bound by his contract with Dravot. Kipling thus ties together Carnehan and Dravot's downfall and their abandonment of their moral code.



The two strangers' immediate decision to rob Carnehan and Dravot once again portrays the people who live outside of European rule as violent and uncivilized. Dravot's violence, on the other hand, is justified—this time as self-defense. Dravot's absurd claim to be immune to the forces of nature demonstrates his hubris.



Noting that the Martini rifles can kill at two hundred yards emphasizes the sophistication of British technology. By comparison, the Kafirs' ineffective weapons show that they are technologically less advanced and thus less "civilized" than the British. Carnehan's insistence that the Kafirs are "fair" introduces a complication: if the Kafirs are white, the racist argument for colonialism does not apply here.



The men lead Carnehan and Dravot back to their village, where there is a group of stone idols. Dravot pretends to show respect to the idols, saying, “all these old jim-jams are my friends.” Neither Carnehan nor Dravot knows the Kafir language, so Dravot gestures to show that he is hungry but then refuses any food until the “boss of the village” brings it to him, which is enough to establish Dravot’s authority. Every morning, Dravot sits by the idols, and the people from the village come to worship him.

One day, men from a nearby village attack. Again using their **Martini rifles**, Carnehan and Dravot defeat the attackers. They ask the villagers what has caused the conflict between the two villages, and it turns out to be a woman, whom Carnehan describes as “as fair or you or me,” who has been kidnapped. Dravot returns the woman to her original village and brokers a peace between the combatants, bringing both villages under Dravot and Carnehan’s control.

Dravot tells the Kafirs in the village they have conquered, “Go and dig the land, and be fruitful and multiply.” He also sets up a rudimentary legal system: “he leads the priest of each village up to the idol, and says he must sit there and judge the people, and if anything goes wrong he is to be shot.” The next week, Carnehan says, “they was all turning up the land in the valley as quiet as bees and much prettier.”

Carnehan and Dravot train twenty men to use the **Martini rifles**, and they conquer another village. As they press onward Dravot’s men become afraid, but when Dravot shoots one of them, the army marches on. They take control of yet another village, and Carnehan stays there with two men while Dravot marches away with the rest of the army. Carnehan makes friends with the local chief—whom they later decide to call Billy Fish—and helps him to conquer one more village nearby. Then, as he is running out of ammunition, Carnehan sends a message to Dravot, saying that he should come back because their kingdom is getting too big for Carnehan to manage on his own. For two or three months, Carnehan waits for Dravot, during which time, he says, “I kept my people quiet.”

When Dravot finally returns, he is leading an army of hundreds and wearing a golden **crown**. He tells Carnehan, “I am the son of Alexander by Queen Semiramis, and you’re my younger brother and a God too!” He has a **crown** for Carnehan as well, which, he says, he had made “at a place called Shu, where the gold lies in the rock like suet in mutton.” He goes on: “Gold I’ve seen, and turquoise I’ve kicked out of the cliffs, and there’s garnets in the sands of the river.”

Dravot’s attitude toward the gods of the Kafirs is dismissive and contemptuous. The fact that his act works suggests that the Kafirs’ religious beliefs are not very sophisticated, a further demonstration that Kipling regards them as less “civilized” than the British.



Carnehan and Dravot’s technologically superior rifles again allow them to assert their control over the Kafirs. Their violence, unlike the violence of the Kafirs, serves a greater good, allowing them to impose peace. Meanwhile, Carnehan repeats his claim that the Kafirs are white, blurring the racist distinction between colonizer and colonized. The cause of the Kafirs’ conflict is a woman, which once again demonstrates sexist Victorian assumptions.



Dravot and Carnehan’s ability to create peace and improve agricultural productivity—their ability to bring “civilization” to the Kafirs—suggests that Kipling views their colonization of the Kafirs as justified, even if it requires the threat of violence.



The Martini rifles, symbols of British technological sophistication, continue to allow Carnehan and Dravot to subjugate the less “civilized” Kafirs. Furthermore, Carnehan and Dravot’s use of violence again appears justified, as it allows them to impose discipline.



Dravot’s crown symbolizes that he now has dominion over Kafiristan. His claim to be a god is an act of hubris and the first sign that his ambitions extend beyond merely becoming king. His loving description of the country’s wealth shows that he is motivated primarily by greed rather than a desire to “civilize” the Kafirs, which undermines his moral credibility.



After Carnehan puts on his **crown**, Dravot says, “we don’t want to fight no more. The Craft’s the trick.” The Craft here refers to Freemasonry; it turns out that the Kafirs are familiar with some Masonic symbols and practice some Masonic rites. Dravot knows enough to impersonate a grand master, and he intends to open a Masonic lodge so that, by convincing the Kafirs of his superior knowledge of Masonic mysteries, he can further cement his authority. Carnehan warns against this, as neither man has ever held an office in a lodge before, and it’s against the law to hold a lodge without a warrant. However, Dravot insists it’s “a master-stroke o’ policy.” The two men instruct the Kafirs to make Masonic aprons and make plans to hold a lodge.

At the lodge meeting, Dravot says he and Carnehan are “Gods and sons of Alexander, and Past Grand-Masters in the Craft, and was come to make Kafirstan a country where every man should eat in peace and drink in quiet, and specially obey us.” They shake hands with all of the chiefs of Kafirstan, and Carnehan notes that they are “so hairy and white and fair it was just shaking hands with old friends.” Then an old priest reveals that the symbol on Dravot’s apron, the “Master’s Mark,” is carved in a hidden place in the temple, and the Kafirs take this as proof that Dravot and Carnehan are what they claim.

After the meeting, Dravot makes plans to continue strengthening the army. He also states that he trusts the Kafirs, saying, “I know that you won’t cheat me, because you’re white people—sons of Alexander—and not like common, black Mohammedans.”

For the next several months, Carnehan’s work is “to help the people plough, and now and again go out with some of the Army and see what the other villages were doing, and make ’em throw rope-bridges across the ravines which cut up the country horrid.”

Meanwhile, Dravot begins to make grander plans. He holds councils of war with the local chiefs (including Billy Fish), and he sends Carnehan to Ghorband to acquire more rifles, handmade knock-offs of the **Martinis**. When they return, Carnehan trains more soldiers, noting that “Even those corkscrewed, hand-made guns was a miracle to them.”

Carnehan and Dravot’s superior knowledge of Masonry once again demonstrates that they are more “civilized” than the Kafirs, who are portrayed as comparatively ignorant and superstitious. Dravot shows his hubris by claiming an authority he does not legitimately possess, as he is not in fact a grand master.



Dravot’s hubris continues to lead him to claim to be a god. He also reveals once again that his motivations are immoral—he is acting based on lust for power rather than a desire to “civilize” the Kafirs. Carnehan again emphasizes his claim that the Kafirs are white, failing to make a racial distinction between colonizer and colonized. The Kafirs’ again are portrayed as less sophisticated than the British, as their failure to see through Dravot’s lies suggests that they are gullible and superstitious.



Dravot’s racism is obvious here. He equates whiteness with honesty, and his belief that the Kafirs are white therefore allows him to trust them.



Carnehan introduces new agricultural techniques and builds infrastructure, which simultaneously demonstrates the superiority of British technology and suggests that colonization can work to the benefit of the colonized.



The fact that even substandard versions of British rifles are “a miracle” to the Kafirs shows that they are technologically less advanced than Europeans.



After Carnehan's return, Dravot takes him aside to speak privately in a grove of pine trees. "I won't make a Nation!" Dravot says, "I'll make an empire!" The soldiers aren't black, he insists, but English, and "They only want **rifles** and a little drilling." He continues, "we shall be Emperors—Emperors of the Earth!" While he speaks, he paces back and forth, "chewing his beard in great hunks." Furthermore, because the kingdom is becoming so large, Dravot says, he needs more help to govern it than Carnehan can provide.

Carnehan is distressed by this and tells Dravot he's done all he could: "I've drilled the men and shown the people how to stack their oats better; and I've brought in those tinware **rifles** from Ghorband—but I know what you're driving at. I take it Kings always feel oppressed that way."

Dravot tells Carnehan that he wants a wife. Carnehan objects and reminds Dravot of their **contract**, but Dravot says the contract no longer applies, as they are now kings. He says that the two of them can have their pick of the local girls, adding, "Boil 'em once or twice in hot water, and they'll come out like chicken and ham." Carnehan again urges Dravot to have nothing to do with women, but Dravot says he's not speaking of women in general but of a wife, "a Queen to breed a King's son for the King." Carnehan reminds Dravot of a Bengali woman he once lived with who ran off with a servant and half a month's pay. Dravot insists that this will be different, as his wife will be white. Carnehan tries one more time, noting that "The Bible says that Kings ain't to waste their strength on women." Dravot doesn't listen but walks "away through the pine-trees looking like a big red devil, the sun being on his **crown** and beard and all."

However, when Dravot tells the council that he wants a wife, Billy Fish tells him he'll have to ask the girls. Dravot flies into a rage, claiming that his marriage is a matter of state, and Carnehan says he can tell Dravot is "going against his better mind." Billy Fish explains that the Kafirs believe that any woman who marries a god will die, and he tells Carnehan privately that he believes there will be trouble if Dravot goes through with his plan.

The priests finally comply with Dravot's demand, choosing a girl for him to marry. She is terrified, but Dravot doesn't seem to care. When he tries to embrace her, she bites him so hard he bleeds. The priests, seeing his blood, howl that he is not a god after all but only a man. This revelation immediately sparks a rebellion: the priest tries to cut Carnehan, and the army begins to fire.

Dravot's ambition continues to grow—now he wants to be an emperor. Operating under the racist assumption that only white people are capable of building an empire, he claims that the Kafirs are white, in which case the only thing that distinguishes them from their colonizers is the lack of advanced technology.



Carnehan again attempts to justify his colonial project by claiming to have brought "civilization" to the Kafirs. He even goes so far as to suggest that colonialism, as a moral duty, weighs more heavily on the colonizers than on the colonized.



Dravot announces his intention to abandon the contract, which symbolizes his moral code. Carnehan's objections are both sexist and racist: he views women, and especially non-European women, as distracting and untrustworthy. Dravot's joke about boiling the Kafir women to make them "come out like women and ham" (i.e., white) suggests that his claims about the whiteness of the Kafirs may not be entirely reliable: if they were already white, there would be no need for boiling. By noting Dravot's desire to establish a dynasty and drawing attention to his symbolic crown, Kipling makes a connection between Dravot's lust for power and his decision to abandon his moral code.



Dravot's hubris causes him to abuse his power by demanding a wife against her will and the will of the community. Carnehan's statement that Dravot is acting "against his better mind" suggests that Dravot's ambition is clouding his judgment.



Dravot's sexism is evident in his callous indifference to his bride's fear. Kipling also clearly identifies two causes of the rebellion: 1) Dravot's abandonment of the contract, which gives a woman a chance to bite him, and 2) Dravot's hubris, which led him to impersonate a god.



Billy Fish and his men, who remain loyal to Carnehan and Dravot, help them to flee the village, though many of Billy Fish's men are killed in the process. Dravot, even as Carnehan drags him away, continues to rant about being an emperor. Carnehan says he believes Dravot "began to go mad in his head at that hour." Billy Fish, Carnehan, and Dravot manage to escape for a few days, but the rebels finally catch up with them.

The rebels slit Billy Fish's throat, and they march Dravot and Carnehan to a rope bridge. They prod Dravot toward the bridge, and, after saying farewell to Carnehan, he walks out onto it. They cut the ropes, and Dravot falls to his death in the ravine. Carnehan says, "I could see his body caught on a rock with the gold **crown** close beside."

The rebels crucify Carnehan between two trees, but when he survives the night, they decide it's a miracle and cut him down. They give him Dravot's head and **crown** as a gift and tell him to go home. Carnehan says that he never thought of selling the crown during his journey home, even though he was starving.

In the newspaper office, as Carnehan brings his story to an end, he opens a bag and shakes Dravot's head onto the narrator's desk. The **crown** also falls from the bag, and Carnehan places it on the dead man's head.

Later in the day, the narrator finds Carnehan crawling through the street, singing to himself, "The Son of Man goes forth to war, / A golden **crown** to gain." The narrator takes him to an asylum. However, when the narrator asks later what has become of him, the asylum superintendent informs him that Carnehan has died of heatstroke due to being "bareheaded" under the midday sun. The narrator asks whether Carnehan had any possessions when he died, but the superintendent says he did not.

At this point, the consequences of Dravot's ambition and hubris have driven him mad.



Billy Fish's death echoes the fate of Indians who remained loyal to the British during the Rebellion of 1857, many of whom died in the fighting. Kipling thus emphasizes that a loss of moral authority harms not only the colonizer but also the colonized, who no longer have the opportunity to experience what Kipling sees as the benefits of European civilization. Kipling also notes that Dravot's immoral actions have lost him not only his life but also his crown—that is, his right to rule.



Kipling again portrays the Kafirs as superstitious, as there is no real reason to assume that Carnehan's survival is a miracle. Carnehan continues to cling to the idea of his moral right to rule (as symbolized by Dravot's crown) even though it has cost him everything.



Carnehan, by placing the crown on Dravot's severed head, shows his refusal to admit that he and Dravot have failed. He does not recognize his responsibility or learn a moral lesson from his experiences. By analogy, Kipling is suggesting that the British have not learned from the Rebellion of 1857.



Carnehan's song emphasizes the symbolism of the crown. It is the fact that Carnehan is bareheaded that leads to his demise, and after his death, his crown is nowhere to be found. As the final consequence of Dravot's moral failure, then, Carnehan has lost his glory and right to rule as well as his life.





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