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THE MAN  
Who Would Be  
KING



Rudyard Kipling

# The Man Who Would Be King

By Rudyard Kipling

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Plan

India was a wild, strange, and dangerous place when I worked there as a journalist many years ago. It was even wilder, stranger, and more dangerous than it is today. It was the kind of place where you never knew what was going to happen next. It was a place where people lived by laws that nobody could understand, and where you could be suddenly rich or suddenly poor and then suddenly rich again. You could be a beggar one day, a prince the next, and then a beggar again. All sorts of strange people came from England to try and make money there, and they found very unusual ways to make it. There was enormous wealth in India, and if you could find a way to get some of it you could live very well. If you couldn't find a way, you would live very badly indeed; begging is not fun.

At the time that my story begins, I wasn't a beggar, but I was certainly not a prince. I was traveling to Mhow from Ajmir on the train, and because of lack of funds, I had to travel in third class, which is not very nice. There are no cushions on the seats, and the passengers carry their food in bundles and pots and drink water from the roadside. In summer, when it is really hot, third-class passengers are sometimes carried out of the carriages dead. I was the only person in the carriage until we reached Nasirabad, when a huge Englishman in shirt sleeves came in and began to talk to me.

He was also a traveller, and we shared stories of our past adventures. He then wondered how he could send a telegram to his friend, who was in Ajmir, because he only had enough money for his dinner. I had no money at all, and although I would be paid when I reached Mhow there was no telegraph office there, so I was not able to help him.

"Did you say that you would be traveling back along this line soon?" asked my big friend.

"In about ten days," I replied.

"Can't you make it eight? My business is urgent."

"I can send your telegram for you in ten days' time if that will help you," I said.

My fellow-passenger thought about it for a moment. "My friend is traveling from Delhi to Bombay on the twenty-third, so I don't think the telegram will reach him in time, but perhaps there is another way. He will pass through Marwar Junction early in the morning of the twenty-fourth, and you might be returning through there at about that time. Do you think you could be there to give him a message? If I don't tell him where I am, he won't know where to go." I thought that this might just be possible.

"All you have to say to him is, 'He has gone south for the week.' He'll know what that means. He's a big man with a red beard, and he'll be asleep in a second-class carriage. Just wake him up and tell him the message."

I said that I would do it if I could, and then he told me that he was on his way to Degumber because he had heard that the Raja had done something bad. His plan was to blackmail the Raja by pretending to be a journalist and threatening to publish the story in his newspaper. People like him generally lived a hard life and died suddenly.

I kept my promise and was at Marwar Junction on the twenty-fourth. I found the red-bearded man in a second-class carriage, woke him up, and told him the message. "I am to tell you that he has gone south for the week."

The red-bearded man rubbed his eyes. "That's just like him. Did he say I was to give you anything? I won't."

I told him that he did not have to give me anything, and I watched the train pull away from the station. I didn't want the two men to get into trouble in Degumber, so I described them to the authorities. This prevented them from entering Degumber at all.

I got a job at the newspaper office, where we reported all the important events from Europe as well as India. Kings died, wars began and ended, politicians made speeches, and ladies had afternoon teas. During the hot summer, the only things that happen in India happen in the hill towns, where it is cooler, and nobody comes into the office where I work. One hot summer Saturday night, I was in the office alone, waiting for a telegram about a sick king so that the paper could be up-to-date with the news before it was printed.

It was a very black night with a westerly wind blowing in hot air from the desert. I was surprised to see two men wearing white clothes come into the office, and when they saw me, they laughed. One was the man I had met on

the train, and the other was the red-bearded man to whom I had given a message. I asked them what they wanted.

"We'd like to talk to you for half an hour," said the red-bearded man, "and ask you for some advice. We think you owe it to us because you stopped us from going to Degumber."

I invited them to sit down, and they introduced themselves. "This is Peachey Carnehan," said the red-bearded man, pointing to the other, "and I am Daniel Dravot, and we have been most things in our lives, including soldiers, sailors, proof-readers, photographers, street preachers, journalists, engine drivers, and so on, but we think India is not big enough for us." They were certainly too big for the office. Dravot's red beard filled half of it, and Carnehan's shoulders filled the other half.

"We don't like all the laws that the government makes," said Carnehan, "so we are going away to be kings, and we have signed a contract that we will not drink alcohol or go near any women until we are kings. It is alcohol and women that give us most trouble and stop us from getting ahead."

I thought they had been out in the heat and were affected by the sun, but they were serious, and Carnehan continued to tell me their plan. "There's a place to the north of India called Kafiristan, where no Englishman has ever been and where the people are always fighting each other. We will teach one of the tribes to have a proper army and then overthrow the king and take his place and establish a dynasty."

"You'll never get there," I said. "No Englishman has ever crossed Afghanistan because of its wild mountains and even wilder people."

Despite my warning, they wanted to look at maps, so I gave them some, as well as an encyclopaedia and some other books so that they could read about Kafiristan. I sat and smoked and watched them for a while and then went home, leaving them with the books.

"Come to the market tomorrow," they said as I left, "and we will say goodbye to you then."

"You will never get past the border," I repeated. "Stay here, and I will try to find you some work."

"No, we are going," said Carnehan, and he showed me the contract they had made as proof that they were serious.

## CHAPTER TWO

### To Kafiristan and Back

I went to the market the next day. It was a place where all the nationalities of Central Asia come, as well as people from all over India, and where you could buy ponies, precious stones, cats, sheep, and hundreds of other things, many of which don't even have names in English. A priest approached me, carrying a child's toy, and his servant walked behind him, carrying a heavy basket full of children's toys. Everybody laughed at them, and a horse trader told me they were mad.

"He is going to Kabul to sell the toys to the Amir, but I think that he will have his head cut off."

"God protects the mad," said an Uzbek, "and they always bring good luck."

The Uzbek shouted to the mad priest, "Where do you come from?"

"I come from Roum, blown by the breath of a hundred devils across the sea! Listen all you liars and thieves. Who will take me north to help me sell these magic toys to the Amir? God will protect you if you protect me."

A trader from Eusufzai told him there was a caravan leaving from Peshawar in twenty days and that he was welcome to join it. The priest and his servant leapt onto their camels.

As they left, the priest turned to me and invited me to come a little way along the road with him, promising to give me a ring that would make me the King of Kafiristan. Suddenly, I understood, and I followed the priest and his servant out of the market. When we reached the open road, the priest spoke to me in English. It was Dravot. Carnehan was his servant, and they had twenty of the best rifles that money could buy, with ammunition for them, hidden under their basket of toys. They both shook hands with me and said goodbye, and I watched the camels go down the road. I was certain that I would never see them again because their plan was insane and full of danger.

Two years passed. Lots of things happened in those two years, and all of the important ones were recorded in our newspaper. Kings died, but the daily work in our office remained the same. On another one of those hot dark nights, I was again sitting alone in the office, waiting for some news to come by telegram when a strange creature crept into my room. It was a man, but his head was sunk between his shoulders, and he shuffled along like a bear. He

was dressed in rags, but he called out my name and told me that he had returned.

"Give me a drink!" he croaked. "Don't you know me? I am Peachey Carnehan, and I was the King of Kafiristan, together with Daniel Dravot, and you have been sitting here all that time!" I was more than astonished and said so.

"We were real kings, with crowns on our heads! Poor Daniel, he would not take advice, though I begged him."

I gave him a whiskey and told him to stay calm and tell me his story slowly.

"I'm not mad," he said, "but you need to look into my eyes, or I will forget." I saw his hands and they were like bird claws, with a strange scar on the back of each. Then I looked into his eyes.

"You left the market on your camels, with Dravot dressed as a mad priest, and you were his servant. Can you remember that?" I asked.

"Yes, and we joined a caravan, but we left it before Jagdallak, because we heard that the roads to Kafiristan were good from there. We dressed in all sorts of strange clothes. Dravot burned off half his beard and shaved his head into strange patterns. We went into the mountains, which were tall and black and they always fought each other."

I looked at him strangely and said to him slowly, "Here, have another glass of whiskey."

He continued, "After a while, our camels could go no further. We killed the camels, but first we unloaded the guns and ammunition, and when two men came along with four mules, we killed one of the men. The other one ran away, leaving us the four mules, so we put the rifles on the mules and went further into the mountains. Dravot sang as he went along, but I was afraid and begged him to stop. Dravot wouldn't stop, saying that if a king could not sing, it was not worth being a king.

"We marched through the mountains with our mules and our guns for ten cold days, and then we came to a wide valley. The mules were almost dead, so we killed them and sat on the boxes of guns. Ten men came running into the valley, carrying bows and arrows and chasing twenty men with bows and arrows. We could see that this was an opportunity to start the business of becoming kings. We took out our rifles and began to shoot at the twenty men and killed most of them. Then the ten men fired an arrow at us, but Dravot

fired a bullet over their heads, and they all fell down. Dravot walked over to them and began to kick them, and then he shook hands with them in a friendly way. He made them carry the boxes of guns across the valley and up a hill to their village, as if he were already their king.

"In the village, there were some very large carved rocks, and Dravot stood in front of the biggest one, opened his mouth, and pointed down it. One of the men offered him some food, but he refused. Another man offered him food, but he refused again. Then the oldest and most important looking man in the village offered him some food, and he accepted it.

"That's how we came to our first village, as if we had tumbled out of the sky, but later we tumbled from one of those rope bridges, and you can't laugh much after that."

"Have some more whiskey," I said to him, "and tell me how you became kings."



## CHAPTER THREE

### Carnehan Tells How He Became a King

"Dravot sat by the large rock every day, and the people in the village came to worship him. Then some other people came into the valley. Dravot and I shot them before they knew what was happening. We ran down into the valley and up the other side and found another village, and all the people there were afraid of us. Dravot made the two villages work together in the valley digging up the land, and we began to learn some of their language. We chose twenty good men and showed them how to use a rifle and make a military formation. They were our army.

"Then we went into the next valley and found another village, which was very poor because the land was too rocky, so we took the people from there and gave them some land in the good valley. We found another valley, but the army was afraid to go there, so Dravot shot one of them, and the others were suddenly more courageous. We made friends with the people, and Dravot left me there while he searched for more villages.

"A big chief came across the mountains to us because he had heard that there was a new chief in the area. I shot one of his men as they were approaching and told the big chief to come forward alone and shake hands, or they would all die. The big chief obeyed. I asked him if he had an enemy, and when he said that he did we trained some of his men, and together we marched to a plain on top of a hill where the enemy was, and we shot some people there and made the others our friends. I sent a message to Dravot because I was worried that our kingdom was becoming too big to look after by myself, but it was two months before he returned. When he did, he had an army of hundreds of men with him and was wearing a golden crown.

"He was very excited because the people all thought that he was a god, descended from Alexander the Great and Queen Semiramis, and they thought I was his younger brother and also a god. He opened a bag and gave me a golden crown as well. It was very heavy, but I wore it for a while because it made me look so grand. He brought one of the chiefs to me and asked me to shake hands with him. Dravot had given him the name of Billy Fish. I shook hands with him and nearly fell over; he had given me the secret Freemason's handshake!

"Does he know the secret words, too?" I asked. Dravot assured me that he did, that all the priests and chiefs knew them, and that they had made Freemason marks in the rocks, but that they did not know the Third Degree. Dravot could hardly believe it himself, but he declared that he would make himself Grand Master, as well as king and a god, because it would help him to run the country more easily. I agreed, and we ordered the women to make lots of Freemason aprons for the men to wear.

"Then we held a meeting, where we told all the people that we were gods and descendents of Alexander, as well as Grand Masters, and that we had come to make Kafiristan a place where everyone could live happily and in peace. One of the old priests saw the Freemason marks on our aprons, which made him shout and try to push over one of the large rocks. It was very frightening because I thought he was going to reveal that we were frauds. But when he and his friends pushed over the stone and cleaned the bottom of it, we could see the ancient Freemason mark on the stone. It was exactly like the one on our aprons. The old priest fell to the ground and kissed Dravot's feet. It was a miracle, or, as Dravot said, luck.

"After that day, we had no trouble convincing the villages to stop fighting each other and to form an army to protect themselves against people from places further away. We worked very hard for the next six months, teaching the people about farming and helping them to build rope bridges across the deep ravines. We trained the army, which became quite large, and settled complaints and disputes with the help of Billy Fish and some other chiefs.

"Then we took some of the gold and valuable gems that were in the country, and I took them to the Ghorband country, where we bought a hundred more rifles and ammunition and gave them to the army. I was very busy training the army, and Dravot did most of the other work of kingship. He was becoming so excited that he started talking about establishing an empire rather than just a kingdom. He reckoned that there were about two million people in his kingdom, and he could have an army of two hundred and fifty thousand fighting men, who would help England protect India if the Russians ever decided to attack.

"He was sure that Queen Victoria would be grateful. His plans became grander and grander, and he decided that he needed more men to help him run the country, insisting that they had to be clever and wise and have skills that I did not possess. I was angry when he said this because I knew he thought I was not

wise or clever enough to help him. However, he told me that I was still a king and that half the kingdom was mine, and that the men he needed had to be cleverer than either of us because the kingdom was now so large. Then he told me something else that he wanted to do, but this time I could not agree with him at all."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Kings, Gods, and Men

"'Winter is coming,' said Dravot, 'and nothing much will happen then because it is too cold, so I am going to get a wife, and I think you should, too.'

"'I don't think it is a good idea,' I replied. 'We still have a lot to do. Remember all the trouble that women have brought us in the past. We made a contract!'

"'But the contract was only until we became kings, and we have been kings for many months now. We should both have nice, young, healthy girls to keep us warm in winter, and we can take any one of them that we choose, perhaps even more than one, because we are kings.'

"'I'm staying away from women until we are a lot more settled than we are now! I haven't forgotten the trouble they made for me when we were living in Mogul Street in Bengal.'

"'But this will not be a Bengali woman. This will be a queen.'

"'I warned him that it could only lead to trouble. 'Don't do it, Daniel.'

"'I will do it,' he said, and walked away from me. The sun shone on his red beard and on his crown, and he looked as if he was on fire.

"Getting a wife was not as easy as Dravot thought. He asked the chiefs about it, but they did not give any advice, until Billy Fish said he had better ask the girls which of them wanted to be the queen, but this made Dravot angry. He thought that a king should not ask a girl to be queen but that the chiefs should find one for him. He shouted at the chiefs about all the things he had done for them and walked away.

"I asked Billy Fish what the problem was, and he told me that no girl would marry a god or a devil because they thought they would die if they did. I tried to explain this to Dravot, but he would not listen and ordered the chiefs to give him a wife the next day. I was awake very early the next morning, and when I went out I saw the chiefs and priests standing around whispering to each other, and they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes.

"'What's the matter?' I asked Billy Fish.

"'I can't really say, but if the king would give up this idea of marriage it would be better for him and also for us.'

"I knew that Dravot would not change his mind. I told Billy Fish that we were not gods but only men. He said that it would be better to let the people believe that we were gods. Nevertheless, he told me that he had twenty men who would be loyal to the two kings no matter what happened.

"Winter was already beginning, and there was a little snow on the ground when Dravot arrived for the wedding. I urged him once more to drop the plan and warned him that there would be trouble, but he would not take any notice.

"'There will be no trouble, Peachey,' he said, 'for they are my people, and they love me more than they love their fathers. Where's the girl? Let the emperor see if his wife suits him!' All the chiefs and priests were there, and a group of priests brought a girl to Dravot.

"She was beautifully dressed and wore a large number of jewels. The priests blew the trumpets loudly enough to wake the dead. The girl looked back at the priests as she came toward Dravot, her face as white as death.

"'She'll do,' said Dravot. 'Come and kiss me, girl. You don't need to be afraid.' He put his arms around her, and she closed her eyes and put her face into his red beard. 'She's bitten me!' exclaimed Dravot, putting his hand on his neck where her teeth had broken the skin. His hand had blood on it, and the priests began to howl. 'Not a god, not a devil, but just a man!'

"Billy Fish pushed us both to where his loyal twenty soldiers were, just as the army attacked. The loyal twenty tried to protect us, but the army had too many people in it now, and we had to run. Dravot blamed me for not keeping the army under control and called me every bad name under the sun.

"'We cannot escape,' said Billy Fish, 'because the priests will be telling everybody in the valley that you are not gods or devils but just men. I am a dead man.'

"He fell to the ground and began to pray. We got away from the village, but only six of the twenty men were still alive. It was very steep country, and when we came to a village, the people there began to shoot at us because they had already received the priests' message. A bullet hit Dravot in the leg, and this woke him up.

"'It is my fault, Billy Fish. You get away from here and save yourself! And you go, too, Carnehan. They may not kill you.'

"But Billy Fish would not leave us, and I would not leave Dravot, either. We told the last six men that they could run, and they did. Then Dravot, Billy Fish, and I walked to the village, where trumpets, drums, and horns were making a lot of noise. It was very cold up there, and I have a lump of that cold in the back of my head right now."

I realized that Carnehan's story was almost at an end. "What happened after that?" I asked him.

"They took the three of us without making a sound. I shot a few of them, but they did not care. The others closed in around us, and I could smell them. They cut Billy Fish's throat as if he were a pig. Then they took the king and made him walk to the middle of one of his rope bridges. They cut the ropes of the bridge, and the king fell into the ravine, and I saw his body on the rocks below, with the golden crown next to it.

"They took me to some trees and nailed me to the trees with wooden nails through my hands and feet, but I didn't die. They took me down the next day and let me go. Sir, you knew Daniel Dravot," he cried out. "Would you like to see him now?"

He reached into his loose clothes and brought out a bag, from which he pulled a red-bearded head and a golden crown which he placed gently on the head. I shuddered, for it was strange to see the head of a man you had once spoken to when he was alive. "I must go now," Carnehan said quietly.

I gave him a bottle of whiskey and a little money, put him in my carriage, and drove him to a hospital. The next day, he died, and nobody ever saw the head of the king or his crown again.

- THE END -

