

The King of Kafiristan



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after Rudyard Kipling

by Christian Lanciai

Dramatis personae:

Rudyard Kipling, journalist
Peachey Tagliaferro Carnehan
Daniel Dravot
Peachey as young and healthy
Billy Fisk, Gurkha soldier
A high priest
Shangrilailah

Four merchants and caravan leaders
Priests and guards and people of Kafiristan

The action is in Lahore and Afghanistan towards the end of the 19th century.

Act I scene 1. A newspaper office late at night.

Kipling The silence of the night is seething with a wonderful unrest, as everything exciting usually is planned and happens at night. The veil of silence is just a curtain to a challenging and tensely waiting drama, that at any moment suddenly could burst out into play. I am only waiting for the signal. A telegram? Some news? A visitor? A sudden urgent message? I hold my breath. New political murders in Europe? Some royalty assassinated? New rebellions in Bengal? The journalist clings to his vibrant pen only waiting to get started, but the silence won't give in. The lid will not open. Well, I might as well start printing the new issue, then.

(A soft knock at the door.)

Kipling (by reflex) Come in!

(The door opens slowly and carefully by someone hesitating)

Peachey Mr Kipling?

Kipling You are lucky, whoever you are. He is here and alone. Come in! What can I do for you?

(The man enters almost falteringly, evidently a type who has been through the worst, mauled by torture and physical ordeals, but dressed in Indian rags with a turban, that partly hides the terribly harrowed face.)

Peachey (entering gradually) I remember the room. Nothing has changed.

Kipling Have you been here before?

Peachey Yes, this is where it all started. Don't you remember Peachey, Mr Kipling? Peachey and Daniel Dravot, who were going to be kings?

Kipling (struck by astonishment) My goodness! Peachey! You are still alive! I thought I would never see you again! But come in! You look like needing a whisky.

Peachey Or two.

Kipling Are you alone?

Peachey Yes, I am all alone.

Kipling And Dravot?

Peachey Dravot is with me, but he was left.

Kipling Obviously you have a story to tell.

Peachey It turned out rather long, both longer and worse than we thought.

Kipling Sit down! I am all on edge!

Peachey (sits finally down and takes care of his glass of whisky) I shouldn't have come back, but what could I do? Here I am. Even less could I have returned to Kafiristan.

Kipling So you reached Kafiristan?

Peachey Yes, why shouldn't we? That was what we had decided. A British soldier does what he has intended if he once decided to do it, doesn't he, Kipling?

Kipling Of course.

Peachey So we reached Kafiristan.

Kipling But start from the beginning, my dear Peachey. It was long since you disappeared, and I have forgotten most of it. You must remember it all better than I.

Peachey But even my memory fails me sometimes. Sometimes I don't know where I am or who I am. The sun is hard on you here in India, brother, especially if you are subjected to harsher treatment than you had expected and prepared for. Are you ready to hear about it?

Kipling I will die if I am not given it all, Peachey. Take it all from the beginning. Don't worry about the whisky. There is always some more.

Peachey (drains his whisky) I needed that. Let's go then, Mr Kipling. We met on the train, where I gave you the noble task to contact brother Dravot in Marwar...

Kipling Yes, I remember that. I took you for two downright rogues.

Peachey But we were serious, brother, and you completely changed attitude when we turned out to be freemasons all three of us.

Kipling How was it with that contract?

Peachey You witnessed it. Didn't you even have it copied?

Kipling I actually think you are right, brother. *(starts searching the shelves)*

Peachey It was simply drafted in three paragraphs.

Kipling What luck! Here it is!

(reads) "We hereby confirm signing this contract, Daniel Dravot and me, Peachey Tagliaferro Carnehan, that its purpose may be safely concluded.

1. That I and Daniel Dravot are seeing this through together, that is, that we will make ourselves kings of Kafiristan.

2. That we will neither look at liquor or women of any kind until we are established as kings.

3. That if one gets into trouble the other will stay with him, whatever happens, unto death if necessary,

signed Daniel Dravot and Peachey Tagliaferro Carnehan and
witnessed by Rudyard Kipling."

(lays the document aside to Peachey) A historical document. Everything is there.

Peachey And we stuck to it, by golly, all the way until Dravot had to go blundering as if just to ruin it all for himself, that outrageously stupid fool!

Kipling What happened?

Peachey Yes, it's time that we at last get down to it, isn't it?

Kipling I remember you as two exalted and incorrigible optimists, who waged everything on their good luck and trusted implicitly your total and certain success just by your winning attitudes. But honestly speaking, I never thought I would see anyone of you again. I thought you would meet with the most atrocious imaginable adversities by the cruel Afghans.

Peachey We did, but not like we had expected. We were so successful to start with that we saw it as a practical impossibility that anything could turn us down...

Kipling That's when accidents happen.

Peachey Yes, we noticed that.

Kipling All too well I now remember that moment when you came wreaking yourselves in here as if the whole office was yours...

(enter Dravot)

Dravot So here's that bloody scoundrel who put us in at Degumbar! What luck that you discovered he was a freemason, Peachey, or else I would have pressed him into a concertina!

(Peachey enters after him, another actor, young and fresh and as overwhelming as Dravot)

Kipling You actually asked for it, gentlemen, who tried to pull my legs without my even knowing you.

Peachey It's true, brother Kipling. We pulled each other's legs, and that's how we became brothers. Let's make the best of it.

Dravot Yes, that's the least we can do, isn't it, brother Kipling?

Kipling What can I do for you, gentlemen?

Peachey You are sitting here with all the maps and charts and secrets of the land beyond the Kybher pass...

Kipling Afghanistan! You are not thinking of going to Afghanistan?

Dravot India is too small for us, brother Kipling. We need some greater space. Here there are British authorities itching us in the back who try to control us. It's difficult to start any enterprise of your own here.

Kipling Do you really think then that Afghanistan will be any easier just because it is dominated by lawlessness and peopled by bandits and murderers?

Dravot Really, Kipling, what do you think of us?

Kipling I think you are not too sober. Come back tomorrow when you have woken up from your hazy dreams.

Peachey We are dead sober, captain. Not one drop. Give us each a cigar, and you'll see if we are shaky enough even to lose the ashes from the tip.

(Kipling immediately offers them each a cigar. They light each other's cigars in exact precision of simultaneity.)

Kipling I believe you. You deserve a drink. *(pours out some whisky for them both.)*

Peachey Cheers to that.

Dravot I knew we had found our man, brother Kipling. *(They drink.)*

Kipling Let's get down to business. How can I help you in Afghanistan?

Dravot Maps, brother Kipling. We need to get oriented, find the way, check the passes and arrive safely immediately.

Kipling What is your destination exactly? Afghanistan is vast.

Dravot Kafiristan.

Peachey We intend to become kings of Kafiristan.

Kipling That's the very farthest. No one has come back alive from there. Already Alexander the Great met with his severest difficulties there.

Dravot But he made it! He was the only one who made it! And we shall make it too!

Peachey If he could, we can as well.

Kipling An expedition there would take months of preparation.

Dravot We know how to do it.

Peachey We will dress out like Hindus.

Dravot No, Muslims.

Peachey We have tested all and know all. We have been tinkers, engine-drivers, pettifoggers...

Dravot And now we want to try something else.

Kipling How do you think you'll get away without anyone seeing you through and cutting your heads off? You don't trifle with Afghans. The slightest offense, and you are finished.

Dravot We have a plan.

Peachey In Afghanistan they respect madmen. They are believed to bring good fortune. So Dan here will be a mad sorcerer whose caretaker and disciple I will be, so we can follow just any caravan.

Kipling Not to Kafiristan.

Dravot No, we have to find our way there ourselves.

Kipling There are some high passes with snow storms and glaciers on the way.

Peachey We can make them. Don't you think we have been through all Kashmir?

Kipling Well, brothers, you shall have my maps and all information I can give you, but don't even think afterwards that I didn't warn you, for I shall never expect to see you alive again.

Dravot Of course not. Since we stay there and will be kings.

Peachey You will probably have some sign of life communicated to you when we are well established.

Kipling At least there is nothing wrong with your optimism.

Dravot Of course not.

Kipling Well, brothers. (*takes out a big map*) Here is the pass. Here is the road to Kabul, where lord Louis Cavagnari's entire British force was annihilated only ten years ago. From there the road proceeds to unknown parts in the north that no European visitor ever came back alive from...

Dravot We will find out why and send you information about it.

Kipling If you ever come that far. Turn back for God's sake if ever you meet with any intolerable absurdity.

Dravot No risk. We are British.

Kipling Enough said, brothers. Bring your freemason sign just for security.

Peachey Could there be freemasons up there?

Dravot You never know when you'll stumble into them. After all, we found *Kipling* here.

Peachey You are right, brother *Kipling*. The sign will protect us if nothing else does.

Kipling I hope so, for you will hardly have any other protection at all.

Dravot Don't worry. We can always manage everything.

Kipling Good luck, gentlemen.

Dravot You don't seem very convinced, brother *Kipling*.

Peachey Come to the seraglio tomorrow, and you will see our preparations.

Kipling So you are already ready to leave?

Dravot Definitely! Only your maps were missing!

(*Peachey and Dravot have emptied their drinks and smoked their cigars and now exit in triumph.*)

Kipling (alone) So all enterprises are launched in jubilant supremacy and youthful invincibility, in order to lay the whole world to their feet to start with, until they start tiring, wobbling and stumbling to a fall. Then starts the scorn. And then follows martyrdom, which no one survives, least of all in Afghanistan. My poor brothers, what a pity and waste of your wonderful good spirits.

Scene 2. The seraglio in Kumharen.

(Merchants are discussing the demeanour of *Dravot*.)

1 He is a fool.

2 No, he is a magician.

1 That's the same thing.

3 No, he is a priest.
4 If he is a fool he is as holy as a priest.
2 If he is a priest he is also a magician and holy as such.
1 If he is a magician and priest he is also a fool.
3 At least he behaves like a fool although he is a priest.
2 A magician is wiser than any fool.
1 But a fool can be more clever than a priest.
4 Maybe he is fooling us all.
3 Why would he do that?
1 Because he is a fool.
3 A fool would never claim to be a priest.
1 A magician would never claim to be a fool.
3 So he is neither a fool nor a magician but a priest.
4 Which is hereby evident. He is thereby holy.

Peachey (dressed up as the priest's servant) Who is willing to let us come along to Kabul? His caravan shall surely be blessed by my holy master's grace.

1 A fool always brings luck on a journey.
2 But a magician always brings bad luck.
3 Not this one. As a priest he is innocent.

Dravot (fantastically dressed up as a guru-priest with hair down to his waist and a turban, makes great show of his exhibition) Who is willing to support our holy mission to the emir of Kabul? We have vital messages and errands to convey to the emir of Afghanistan which the destiny and welfare of the whole world could depend on!

1 We will take you on, holy fool, if you tell us what you have to offer the emir.
2 Where do you come from, holy magician?

Dravot I come with my disciple from Room, and our holy mission is to lay all Roos to his feet!

3 By order of the sultan, o holy mullah?

Dravot I am an ayatollah, you poor ignoramus! Don't you feel and recognize my illimitable holiness?

4 Is it the emir you are going to honour with your childish presents?

Dravot My mission is for his ears only. My presents are for all the people on the way and especially for pleasing the children.

1 There is no harm in that.
2 Let's take him along.
3 And his servant as well.

(The caravan leaders are agreed and leave with Dravot.)

Kipling (showing up) Psst, Carnehan! I hardly recognized you!

Peachey So you approve of our disguise?

Kipling It's almost too good. You are almost overdoing it.

Peachey That's the point. A holy man, priest and fool must overdo it to be taken seriously. But we don't bring just trinkets along.

Kipling What else?

Peachey Twenty Martini rifles.

Kipling Then you are mad! Will you sell them or use them?

Peachey They will come in handy in one way or another, if we are to get through.

Kipling You seem to have thought of everything indeed. I must confess, that I see no flaw in your disguises. You also seem comfortable enough with the language.

Peachey Or else we would never have thought about the project.

Kipling I can just once more wish you the best of luck, then.

Dravot (enters) There you are, you loitering sloth! They are taking us on! What are you waiting for?

Peachey (with a curtsey, like a humble servant) Only for your holiness' blessings.

Dravot So here you are, brother Kipling, to say good-bye. Well, can you still doubt our inevitable success?

Kipling Impossible – for a start.

Dravot Just you wait! The Empire was beaten by the Afghans, but we will manage them!

Peachey Let us not keep the merchants waiting, holy master.

Dravot So come on then, you dawdling dullard!

(Dravot walks solemnly out with Peachey.)

Kipling (alone) The question is not *if* they will make it but *how long* they will make it. They may know the language, but they know nothing about the Afghans' cruelty.

Act II scene 1. The office.

(like act I scene 1. The old Peachey is still there sitting in the same place.)

Peachey We easily made it to Kabul, and from there we had no problems getting on towards the north. Dravot played his part excellently, and all respected or enjoyed him thoroughly. He knew his role well and kept it up with consistent bravura, until we had to continue on our own up in the mountains.

We had all kinds of adventures. We had an avalanche, and I was snowblind. We were attacked by bandits and robbed of everything, especially our vital mules. We had to carry on by foot. But finally we reached Kafiristan. Down by the river some women were washing their clothes when they suddenly were attacked by bandits. We still had some rifles, so we interfered and chased off the bandits, so we were immediately made the heroes of the day. Our reputation spread immediately everywhere, and we were soon brought to their local capital to their chief, who was very grateful that we so bravely had thwarted the vicious attack by the neighbouring tribe. We were asked to join them in their warfare against that tribe and subject them once and for all. Our military discipline came in handy and proved very useful, so we had soon put together a small but excellent army. We successfully carried out the campaign, and the neighbouring tribe was subjugated indeed, but Dravot got an arrow into his breast, which he pulled out without bleeding. This was remarked as a

miracle. The reason was actually that he carried a coat of mail, but he didn't reveal his trick. But among the kaffirs there was a Nepali Gurkha soldier who knew English. He alone saw us through but saw the advantage of loyally helping us, which we all three had much to gain by. And he had very remarkable things to tell us about the local people's view and notion of us...

Scene 2.

Billy Fisk They consider you gods.

Peachey Gods? How on earth did we manage to become gods?

Billy This is not just any place. They have deep traditions here. Haven't you noticed that people are blond and have blue eyes? They never forgot Alexander the Great and still honour him.

Dravot But that's more than two thousand years ago!

Billy But since then nothing has really happened.

Peachey Explain what you mean.

Billy Alexander was considered a god and has been venerated as such ever since.

Peachey In lack of other gods?

Dravot Don't they have Allah here?

Billy No, islam never came through here and was never a success in this country. They thought their old demons were better, they claim to be the oldest believers in the world, but their belief is like some kind of demonolatry worshipping the peacock and other symbols of what they call the original deity, which probably was imported from India. They claim to be related with the descendants of Noah and the Yezidis, another remote mountain people, and Alexander above all came here like an incarnation of all their divine ideals both for looks and superiority. And you carry his symbol around your neck.

Dravot (takes out his masonic identification) Do you mean this?

Billy Yes. It's an old Egyptian sun symbol of Alexander the Great. People here are of the opinion, that by you the descendants and heirs of Alexander have at last returned.

Dravot But that's wonderful, isn't it, Peachey?

Peachey Do you see our possibilities, Dravot? We can make a difference. We can build something here, organize the country, build bridges, make roads, construct dams...

Dravot Peachey, we are at large!

Peachey This is better than India.

Dravot At last! We have come to our own!

Peachey It's only the royal crown that's missing.

Dravot But we'll have it, if we are the heirs of Alexander.

Billy You must first convince the priests.

Dravot Are there any other priests here than me?

Billy Yes, an entire priesthood, and you had better not offend them.

(opens a door, and the priests make their entry, bowing to the English but with skeptical detachment.)

High priest We have followed your careers here in our country with astonishment, gentlemen, and you never cease to surprise us. You rescue our ladies, whom you do not even know, save their honour, volunteer in our wars and help us win although you don't know us, you carry symbols that are direct copies of the most sacred signs of our holiest traditions, and you speak a language between yourselves that no one can understand a word of. What are really your intentions?

(Peachey and Dravot look at each other somewhat at a loss)

Billy (tries, stealthily) You must answer the High Priest.

Dravot (finding his role, simply) Your holiness, all we know is that it was probably intended for us to become kings here.

High priest We can only have one king here.

Peachey (finding his role, simply) Exactly, and I am his servant.

Billy Excellent, boys.

High priest Are you really our much longed for successor to our incomparable heroic king Alexander the Great?

Dravot (simply) Of course.

Peachey What else would we be doing here?

High priest You are indeed convincing. You have manifested many signs, and the most manifest of them all is the sign around your neck. *(indicates Dravot's masonic token)* How did you get it?

Dravot We always had it.

High priest I believe you. *(bows with some veneration)* You are welcome as our king and his servant. I just hope that you will stay and not like the great Alexander just leave us.

Another priest We have been waiting for you for two thousand years.

Dravot You haven't waited in vain.

High priest I really hope so.

Peachey We will do our best, your holiness. We have only started helping you along.

High priest What more can you do for us? You have saved our ladies and vanquished our enemies. What more can you do? Conquer the world like Alexander?

Peachey Why not?

Dravot Shut up, Peachey. – What we can do, your holiness, is to better organize the country. We can fix your irrigation system and improve your roads. We can build bridges across your gaps. We are trained engineers.

Peachey Don't overdo your smartness now. They don't know what an engineer is.

Dravot In brief, we can restore the glory of Alexander the Great.

High priest That's well enough. We can hardly expect anything better.

Peachey We seem to agree well on everything then. You seem to be king then, Dan.

Dravot Direct successor to Alexander the Great after two thousand years. Not bad. It's even better than I expected.

High priest Which also gives you access to the treasury of Alexander the Great, which we have safeguarded ever since he left us.

Peachey Many thanks for that.

Dravot When may we see it?

High priest After the coronation. (*bows and leaves with the other priests.*)

Dravot (when they have left) How about that? We made it!

Billy You managed that well, boys.

Peachey You shall be our secretary of defense, of course, Billy Fisk.

Billy Many thanks for that. Always ready!

Dravot You are the only one we know that we can trust around here, Billy, for you are the only one who speaks English.

Billy I don't think you have anything to fear of anyone.

Peachey I almost believe you are right. It's almost too good to be true.

Dravot Don't paint the devil on the wall, Peachey. We don't need him.

Billy It will all work out well, I am sure, boys, since you are English gentlemen! (*Peachey and Dravot look at each other.*)

Dravot Maybe that's the secret.

Peachey And we have a contract, which we must stick to. Nothing has been broken in it so far.

Dravot You said it, Peachey, and we'll hardly get any chance to break it either, since there's not any liquor here.

Billy Gentlemen, allow me now to prepare you for the solemn coronation ceremony, so that you can go on keeping up appearances.

Dravot Thanks, Billy. Your help is invaluable.

Scene 3. Back to the office.

Peachey We were incredibly graced by fortune and had succeeded better than we ever could have imagined or even dared to dream about. The whole country was in our control within a circumference of 50 miles. Dravot could go out on long military expeditions for several months while I managed the administration, and Billy Fisk stood by me while Dravot handled the wars alone. He soon had a very well drilled and efficient army of 500 men, and we estimated that we were lords of a population of two million. And everyone was happy with us. We built new roads for them, we constructed rope bridges across their gorges, everything was improved, and there never was any complaint against us. You never thought we would succeed so well, did you, brother Kipling?

Kipling But only you returned, Peachey. What happened to Dravot?

Peachey He constantly went from triumph to glory. He was solemnly ordained king and gained access to the treasury of Alexander, which jealously had been guarded for two thousand years, and we could take from there whatever we fancied. It was all ours, since Dravot actually was crowned as the successor of Alexander. But

time passed, our life was becoming comfortable and a bit too good for us, so Dravot started to get bored...

Act III scene 1.

Dravot as king with diadem and mantle in sumptuous circumstances.

Dravot Well, what do you say, Peachey? I am a crowned king and not just any king, but a direct successor to Alexander the Great! We made it, Peachey! We are untouchable, and now it's just for us to relax.

Billy You had better not relax, for now you are accountable for the whole people and country.

Dravot That's what I mean, Billy Fisk! With your help we two English gentlemen loners have succeeded in mastering the most impossible country in the world, which the British Empire was thrown out from and which no one managed to subjugate after Alexander the Great! We made the impossible! What on earth could we then have to fear?

Peachey Nothing.

Dravot Exactly.'

Billy Except yourselves. Alexander died at only 33.

Dravot We crossed that marker long ago. We are by far on the safe side.

Peachey Billy is probably right though that we should be careful.

Dravot And make ourselves comfortable and get bored for the rest of our lives? Not without a woman.

Billy A woman?

Dravot Yes. Didn't Alexander marry several? You should do that as well, Peachey.

Peachey But the contract, Dravot.

Dravot It was only valid up till we became kings. Now we are kings, so we could leave the contract behind.

Peachey You are challenging destiny, Dravot. You don't break your word just like that.

Dravot Have I then no right to be natural? Have a no right to be human?

Billy Is there a particular woman you are thinking of?

Dravot Billy, you know me. You know that I wouldn't bring up the matter if I didn't have someone in mind. (*makes a sign to a servant who opens the door to a heavenly beautiful local virgin.*)

Billy (aghast) The lovely Shangrilailah!

Dravot Yes, who else! Come, my darling! Make yourself at home! Don't be afraid! Nothing can harm you. (*Shangrilailah appears. Dravot puts his arm gently around her.*)

Peachey I wouldn't do that if I were you.

Dravot What could happen?

Peachey Anything.

Billy What does she say herself? Is she willing?

Dravot Of course she is willing! Aren't you, sweetheart?
Shangrilailah I am afraid to die.
Dravot And why would you die?
Shangrilailah Whom the gods love die young.
Peachey You hear, Dravot. Leave her in peace.
Billy What do the priests say?
Dravot They advise against it.
Billy Why?
Dravot For no reason.
Peachey Let the bride decide, Dravot. She is obviously reluctant.
Dravot She will be willing soon enough as soon as she get used.
Peachey You don't know what you are doing. (*leaves annoyed*)
Billy You really should take it carefully, Dravot. In this country the notions and superstitions of people are unpredictable factors and forces.
Dravot I know what I am doing. I love her.
Billy I wash my hands. (*leaves like Peachey but without wrath.*)
Dravot So we are alone at last, little titbit. Surely you can't have anything against love?
Shangrilailah Love is mortal.
Dravot Of course. So what?
Shangrilailah If we love each other either you or I must die.
Dravot Why? Who says so? And why not both?
Shangrilailah It's dangerous to mix love with divinity. You are divine, and we want you divine. If they are mixed up, either love or divinity must lose and get lost. Don't risk your divinity by risking your love.
Dravot I would risk anything for you, my flower, and gladly.
Shangrilailah That doesn't help. All can get lost and not just love itself.
Dravot What are you actually warning me against? Can anyone become jealous or envious? Look at me, honey! I am the king here! No one has been more powerful here since Alexander the Great! I command and control the entire country! I have organized it, built bridges and roads and channelled the waterways and irrigations, I have only done a lot of good and defeated and subjugated all your enemies, so how could anything at all threaten me by normal human love?
Shangrilailah I just feel it.
Dravot You are incorrigible. In woman the soul has no body and the body has no soul. But I love you anyway. I already prepared our wedding.
Shangrilailah I must die if I am loved by a god.
Dravot But you will only become more alive if you are loved by a man.
Shangrilailah Then you will lose your divinity.
Dravot That's another issue. Let's deal with that problem later, if necessary.
Shangrilailah But it could mean disaster!
Dravot How? What could possibly happen?
Shangrilailah (*shyly*) I don't know.

Dravot Neither do I. So let it be, eh? Our wedding is more important than all the world's superstition. The country needs a queen.

Shangrilailah You are the king and god. You decide. We only have to obey. But you must also take the consequences.

Dravot Of course. I will take full responsibility for all your children. They will have the best possible English education.

Shangrilailah My lord, Afghanistan is dangerous, Kafiristan is even more dangerous, but nothing is more dangerous than love.

Dravot I take your word for it. *(kisses her and escorts her out.)*

Scene 2.

High priest Are you sure you know what you are doing?

Dravot I know that I love her. Isn't that enough?

High priest Alexander married and got lost. We have heard that he might have died young. We wouldn't like to repeat it.

Dravot How on earth could you attribute Alexander's fall and death to his marriage?

High priest He was established as an immortal god. By his marriage he turned mortal.

Dravot I don't care about your metaphysical notions and complex of scruples! I don't want to live without a woman, and that's that!

High priest We are not accountable for the consequences.

Dravot Neither am I if you fool around.

Peachey For the last time, Dravot, heed the warnings.

Dravot When you go to bed with your wife you don't hesitate. You just do it.

Peachey You can still avoid all possible matrimonial crises in advance.

Dravot Come on!

Billy Don't do it, Dravot!

Dravot Why not? Why on earth shouldn't I do what I must do? Can you find any possible rational reason why I shouldn't go through with an ordinary human mortal marriage?

Billy We have warned you.

Dravot Against what? You never could tell. So there is nothing to warn me against. Has she maybe some poisonous scorpion's sting in her rear?

(The procession is commenced. Lovely maids throw flowers to the slowly advancing and even lovelier princess.)

Dravot Come then, my lovely, and become at last a worthy queen! You can't imagine how much I missed a playmate. Who can sleep alone at length? Only insomnia itself. If I can't have anyone to share all my good things with I must get smothered by in it. So come then, my little darling, come to daddy, come to your

longing lover and to your invaluable function and position as the first lady of Kafiristan! Come into my arms, my girl!

(She comes up to him to be united in marriage, whereby he gives her a slight embrace, but then something happens.)

Dravot Ouch! *(bleeds)* She bit me!

High priest He bleeds!

The priests He bleeds! He is mortal! He is like anyone of us!

Peachey Now we are done for, Dravot. You have done away with your immortality.

Dravot Why the hell would she bite me? Doesn't she love me?

Peachey Obviously not.

Priests Away with him! He is mortal!

More and more Out with him! Away with him!

Billy She doesn't want you, Dravot. She has made that clear. You had better come with me.

Dravot Who the hell could guess she would turn violent?

Billy All Afghans are violent, Dravot. You should have asked her first.

Dravot I did! She didn't say no!

Billy She could not deny your divinity as long as you remained divine. Now you are bleeding and proved not divine any more. Come with me inside. Perhaps they will calm down.

Dravot I'll be damned for this foul play of unfair capriciousness! *(Peachey and Billy carry him away. The priests are raving outside, and the people are agitated.)*

High priest We have seen it with our own eyes! He bleeds! He is not divine! He is just an ordinary mortal human being! What shall we do with him?

Priest 1 Throw him out of the country!

2 Cut his head!

3 Crucify him!

4 Crucify both of them!

Several Let them die!

1 They are intruders! They are bluffing fakes! They have nothing in common with us! They only fooled us all the time!

4 We must get rid of them. They should never have come here.

High priest What says the virgin Shangrilailah?

1 She has fainted.

2 She awakes.

Shangrilailah (awakening) They are no gods. They are adventurers and robbers. They only want to take away Alexander's treasure from us. That's all they came for, and they fooled us all the time. They are simple common deceivers.

High priest So what shall we do with them?

Shangrilailah Hang them!

High priest Both?

Shangrilailah Castrate the deceiver who wanted to marry! *(rushes out)*

(The people get more stirred up.)

High priest So what shall we do with them? Is it the opinion of all that they should die?

Billy They helped us with many things. Don't forget that. Let at least the innocent get away with his life.

High priest The virgin Shangrilailah demands only her bridegroom's death. Is that enough?

Almost all Yes!

High priest So be it! The people and justice has spoken! Deception must be punished! *(beats his staff in the ground. General dispersal, but in order.)*

(to Billy) Our army commander, you are hereby tasked with bringing our false king to justice for a legal trial and judgement. Or else, you will be prosecuted yourself.

Billy (has to accept, bows and retires.)

High priest Go home! The royal wedding has been cancelled!

(exeunt all.)

Scene 3

Peachey What the devil shall we do? We can't escape. I told you not to break the contract, Dan! Breach of contract is not done by English gentlemen!

Dravot But all I wanted was just a woman!

Peachey But it was a breach of contract!

Dravot I never thought I had to worry about being prosecuted.

Peachey You thought wrong, you bombastic fool!

Billy We had better cooperate with the priests. That's the only chance for anyone to get out of this alive.

Dravot Have I any chance?

Billy It looks worst for you, Dan.

Dravot And the girl? What does she say?

Billy She publicly denounced you as a deceiver.

Dravot What I cannot understand is why she wouldn't have me. Am I so revolting? Is there something wrong about me? Did I do something wrong?

Peachey Everyone liked you as a divinity, Dan. That's why they can't forgive you that you let it go.

Billy Yes, that's how it might be.

Dravot But aren't we all only human? Why can't you then be both human and divine?

Peachey You staged yourself as their leader, Dan. They liked your role. You became their superstar. And then suddenly you assume a totally different role in the opposite direction. No audience, who liked you first, can accept your turning the opposite.

Dravot May an actor then not play different parts?

Peachey Not at the same time.

Dravot (resigns) What do you think, Billy, about your and Peachey's chances?

Billy Minimal if at all existent.

Peachey We fall with you, Dan. I am not breaking the contract. Do you remember the last paragraph: if anyone of us gets into trouble, the other will stay with him.

Dravot Thanks, Peachey. But you must get away. I'll do anything I can to make you get away.

Billy There is nothing you can do for us any more, Dan. All your power and glory is lost.

Dravot I can't say how sorry I am, boys. I must have lost my head.

Peachey Not yet, Dan. Not yet.

Act IV scene 1.

Shangrilailah Holy father, it was my fault. I should never have accepted his proposal.

High priest The sentence can not be appealed, virgin Shangrilailah. You testified against him yourself and denounced him as a deceiver. The sentence has been given and must be carried out. That is the law.

Shangrilailah And what is his sentence?

High priest Death by decapitation. It's the only right thing. A divinity must not lose his head.

Shangrilailah It was I who lost it.

High Priest You were no divinity. Women always lose their heads. It's in their nature, and it's always forgivable.

Shangrilailah I feel guilty of his death.

High priest He has only himself to blame. We all warned him against you.

Shangrilailah And the others? His servant and commander-in-chief?

High priest People demand their sacrifice as well.

Shangrilailah Can't you save them? For my sake?

High priest I'll see what I can do, but it will be difficult.

Shangrilailah They are after all of the same kind as Alexander the Great.

High priest Even if they were, my daughter, nothing could have saved them from their stupidity.

Shangrilailah Is stupidity then a crime?

High priest The greatest of crimes. You must not make a fool of yourself.

Shangrilailah Not even of love?

High priest No matter how much love may be blinding, it can never excuse what isn't love. Stupidity isn't love.

Shangrilailah You are inhuman.

High priest No, my daughter, only consistent according to our great king Alexander's divinity, the most inveterate and uncompromising of all, the memory of whose divinity it is our holy pledge to take care of. Our English benefactors could

have lived up to that divinity and got the chance, but unfortunately they did not make the test. I am sorry, but it's their own fault.

Shangrilailah And mine.

High priest You are a woman. Women always make it. No one has ever been able to prosecute her womanhood, for in it there are all human weaknesses gathered together, and no one can throw any stone at them.

Shangrilailah (rising) One last prayer. Let the punishment of the servant be to take along with him the head of my bridegroom away from here.

High priest That's fair, my daughter. You have found out the perfect punishment for the second deceiver.

Scene 2.

Peachey badly manhandled and tortured, crucified between two trees.

High priest (coming up to him with a few other priests and guards) That wretch is still alive to his own misfortune. Well, you miserable impostor, are you cured now from your hubris? Do you still want to govern the world, you miserable failure? Are you still born to rule and make yourself master of all others with no other right than the supremacy of your race? Bullying attitudes will never profit anyone, my friend. Just because you are English you have no right to automatically command the whole world. We have had visitors before. Not one escaped alive. You will be the first one. But if you come back alive to your own country. it will be as the warning example of a human wreck. Release him!

(The guards release Peachey who immediately falls down whining.)

It is only by the supplications of the virgin Shangrilailah that anyone of you will come out alive. Your friend who was king is lost, but by his love for one of us he has through Shangrilailah managed to save your life. But it is a unique special occasion for one time only. It will never happen again. Bring up the other one.

(Billy Fisk is brought in, badly manhandled.)

Billy (seeing Peachey's state) Brother Peachey! *(falling down by him, embracing him and crying)*

Peachey We seem to have come wrong after all, Billy Fisk.

Billy But we are still alive! There is still hope.

High priest Yes, if you can make the mountains and the glaciers. But you have a long way to walk. And you will get nothing to bring with you except a present for your own people.

Billy A present?

High priest A message. I hope you will get it through and that they will get the message not to try colonizing us any more. *(some priests bring forth a round bundle to Peachey.)*

Peachey What is it?

Billy Don't open it, Peachey!

Peachey Your holiness, I will bring your message to my brothers in India unopened whatever it might be just to challenge your cruelty.

High priest We are finished here. Let them go.

(The priests and guards leave Billy and Peachey alone.)

Peachey What did we do wrong, Billy? Didn't we help them? Didn't we build roads and bridges for them? Didn't we defeat their enemies? Didn't we protect their ladies? Were we not just? What did we do wrong?

Billy Like all English, Peachey, you were too good and noble. You were too unilaterally constructive. You were too righteous. You were too clever and decent. You did it all too well. The only salary and reward by the world ever for good deeds was ingratitude.

Peachey Is it that simple? Was it that stupid? Is humanity so hopeless?

Billy Yes, Peachey, and the few exceptions are too naïve to ever realize that doing good will never do any good.

Peachey So the whole British Empire with its superhuman burden of good will and effort that the white man took on himself was just a boast of vanity?

Billy A concretized idealism without comparison but on the loose ground of the ignorance and stupidity of the entire humanity. If an illiterate wants to remain illiterate, there's nothing in the world that can help him, Peachey.

Peachey We have a long way to walk, Billy Fisk. Can you make it?

Billy A Gurkha in the British service can make anything and never fails. Always ready!

Peachey Good old Billy! We'll make it all right. I'll show that bloke of a high priest. And we shall bring the present safely the whole way just to spite him.

Billy Just don't open it, Peachey, for anything in the world!

Peachey Just take it easy, Billy Fisk. We'll break no contracts here. The unforgivability of one broken word is hereby proved by what we three have gone through, and he who broke it had to pay for it with his life. The good faith of holding on to a given word endures forever, Billy Fisk, and we have at least survived.

Billy But our crucible isn't over yet.

Peachey No, it has only just begun, and we have a long way ahead of it.

(helps Billy to his feet. They struggle out together, stumbling and supporting each other.)

Act V scene 1. The newspaper office.

Kipling How did Dravot die? Was it as simple as just a decapitation?

Peachey Our last days were an interminable running the gauntlet. We were mishandled and scorned, abused and tortured without cease, and finally they separated us when we so consistently stuck together and refused to break down. That was when I was crucified like Saint Andrew between two trees. Billy told me what they did to Dravot. They dared not touch him. Somehow he kept his royal untouchability and his maintenance of Alexander the Great's secret, which inevitably

had to make everyone respect him. Maybe it was the freemason token around his neck which he refused to remove, which always reminded them of his unique and sacred status. It was probably only because of that they allowed us to live at all from the start. All other visitors they had disposed of at once.

Finally they let him go. They let him keep his crown and mantle and just sent him away. When he thus all alone crossed one of those hanging bridges he had constructed across the deepest gorge at Ghorband, they cut the ropes of the bridge behind him. He fell a few hundred meters, they went down and fetched his corpse and brought it up, and not until then could they face up to decapitating him.

Kipling And Billy?

Peachey Poor Billy. He went mad. His spirit could not take the inhuman ordeals. He remained behind in the mountains snow blind and hopelessly mad. I tried to retain him and restrain his ravings, but one night he was just gone. In those mountains and glaciers, 90 percent are lost in avalanches or fall down into gorges and glacier cracks all the way down to hell. It's very difficult to do anything less.

Kipling And the bundle? Is that what you bring with you?

Peachey I never opened it. I submit it to you, brother Kipling, with its seal unbroken. Interpret its message however you like. But I swear, brother, that we did nothing wrong. We only did our best, and we were paid with the worst. Judge me for it if you can. Billy and Dravot are already punished enough, if they did anything to deserve it. I will just disappear. Don't try to ask for me or trace me. I will anyway remain unrecognizable for good. (*empties his last whisky*) Thanks for the whisky. Thanks to that I could last through the last.

(staggers out limping, a hopelessly aged and dying invalid.)

Kipling My goodness. It's midnight, and he leaves me alone with Dravot's head. No, I refuse the message. I will not open it. I protest. I can't return it to sender, but I can appeal the case, not legally but to the better judgement of timelessness. May the future hear me: Peachey and Dravot and Billy Fisk were innocent except of good faith.

The End.

(Constantinople-Athens, 27-31.3.2004,
translated last week of November 2017.)