

‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (1888): Rudyard Kipling’s Last Imperial Story

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Abstract

With its complex, metafictional narrative-frame structure and ironic, detached treatment of imperial history and mythology, Rudyard Kipling’s 14,000-word short story ‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (1888), is a privileged site in the study of the ‘imperial short story’—a cultural phenomenon which, when viewed in its historical and geopolitical context, can be defined as ‘*imperial short story*’ and, in the history of colonial and colonialist fiction, as a specific literary subgenre: the ‘*imperial short story*’. Returning to ‘The Man’ through the literary-historical perspective opened up by the subgenre of the imperial short story casts new light on the mechanisms that regulate the text’s several transitions: from the section narrated by a journalist-narrator (who shares many traits with the author himself), to the tragicomic adventure story which the ‘man who would be king’ has previously related to the journalist. This new light offers a way to understand both how Kipling’s text represents and comments upon a shift in geographical perspective on British India and the implications of the latter for his art.

With its complex, metafictional narrative-frame structure and ironic, detached treatment of imperial history and mythology, Rudyard Kipling’s 14,000-word short story ‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (1888),¹ is a privileged site in the study of the ‘imperial short story’—a cultural phenomenon which, when viewed in its historical and geopolitical context, can be defined as ‘*imperial short story*’ and, in the history of colonial and colonialist fiction, as a specific literary subgenre: the ‘*imperial short story*’. If the story, as David Gilmour notes, ‘resists classification’ (Gilmour 2002: 37), it is also because Kipling wrote it at a moment when his writing was about to change forever. In March 1889, four months after the story first appeared, he left his native India, his Anglo-Indian readership, and his lowly social status as a young journalist who also happened to write short stories, to move to London, where he overnight became a celebrity. (The ‘Kipling boom’ was a nearly unprecedented phenomenon in English letters, and the young writer responded by publishing or republishing, in 1890 alone, seventy-eight

¹ See <https://archive.org/details/phantomrickshawo00kiplrich>.

stories, eighty-six poems, twelve essays and periodical contributions, as well as a novel, *The Light that Failed* [Arata 1996: 152].)

Several studies of ‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (henceforth ‘The Man’) have contributed to elucidating its narrative structure.² Each starts, of course, from the short story’s famous narrative frame, a narrative device constructed around an external narrator who writes down a story he or she has heard from (as in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* or Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*) or read in a document written by (as in Henry James’s ‘The Turn of the Screw’) an inner narrator—and, in so doing, acts as a cultural mediator between the audience and his source. The individuation of this ancient technique in Kipling’s story is less important than the peculiar way he bent it and twisted it to create a narrative structure and an editorial project without equal in half a century of short-story writing. Returning to ‘The Man’ through the literary-historical perspective opened up by the subgenre of the imperial short story casts new light on the mechanisms that regulate the text’s several transitions: from the section narrated by a journalist-narrator (who shares many traits with the author himself), to the tragicomic adventure story which the ‘man who would be king’ has previously related to the journalist. This new light offers a way to understand both how Kipling’s text represents and comments upon a shift in geographical perspective on British India and the implications of the latter for his art.

The analysis of such a complex text requires interpretive tools capable of analyzing in detail the narratological choices Kipling made. In particular, in the reading that follow two sets of technical terms will be employed. The first is a set of connected critical concepts—‘implied author,’ ‘implied reader,’ ‘unreliable narrator’—that allow us to describe the game that Kipling in this short story is playing with his Anglo-Indian readers and the public persona created by his earlier stories.³ The second

² For example, see Shippey and Short 1972, Drandt 1984, Bascom 1988, and Ambrosini 2008.

³ The three terms were coined in 1961 by Wayne Booth (Booth 1961: 151, 428, 158-9) and were then further refined and elucidated by generations of narratologists. The ‘implied author,’ explains Wolf Schmid, ‘has become a widespread term for a concept referring to the author evoked by, but not represented in a work.’ This implied presence in text does not signal an intention on the concrete author’s part ‘of creating an image of themselves in their works. Instead, the image is understood as one of the by-products that [...] necessarily

is the theoretical vocabulary—in particular, ‘narratee,’⁴ ‘paratext,’ and ‘peritext’—introduced in the early 1970s and late 1980s by the French structuralist theorist Gérard Genette and without which it would be impossible to understand the connection between the publishing history and narrative structure of Kipling’s story. Most importantly, the distinction Genette made between ‘three aspects of narrative reality’—‘narrative,’ ‘story’ and ‘narrating’—allows us to bring into focus the peculiar function of Kipling’s narrative frame.⁵ As the present essay will

accompanies each and every symbolic representation.’ Schmid then lists some of the acts that produce a work capable of functioning as an indexical sign bearing this indirect form of self-expression: ‘the fabrication of a represented world; the invention of a story with situations, characters, and actions; the selection of a particular action logic with a more or less pronounced world-view; the deployment of a narrator and his or her perspective; the transformation of the story into a narrative with the aid of techniques such as flattening simultaneous events into a linear progression and rearranging the order of episodes; and finally, the presentation of the narrative in particular linguistic (or visual) forms’ (Schmid 2011-13). Instead, Schmid defines the implied reader as ‘the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author’s image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs’ (Schmid 2013). As far as the ‘unreliable narrator’ is concerned, Booth’s definition is still the most useful. ‘I have called a narrator reliable,’ he writes, ‘when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not. [...] It is often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him’ (Booth 1961: 158-9). For practical criticism, Booth adds, of crucial importance is the kind of distance between the unreliable narrator and ‘the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator’ (158). In her entry on ‘Unreliability,’ Dan Shen acutely explores the idea of a relationship between unreliability and distance, one that has particularly importance for ‘The Man’: ‘If the reader discovers unreliability as encoded by the implied author for the purpose of generating irony, she/he experiences a narrative distance between the narrator and the implied author, and a secret communion occurs between the latter and the reader behind the narrator’s back’ (Shen 2011).

⁴ ‘The receiver of the narrative’ inside the text, who ‘does not merge a priori with the reader (even an implied reader) any more than the narrator necessarily merges with the author’ (Genette 1980: 215, 259).

⁵ In his Introduction to *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Genette advances a terminological proposal based upon a distinction between the

suggest, the adventurous core of the narrative is contained within a double frame: an inner-textual one and a second, external-paratextual frame⁶. When its function is revealed, the interplay between text and biographical-historical context in the story acquires its full meaning.

From journalist to artist (1882-1889)

To understand why Kipling felt the need at this point in his career to come up with this particular kind of narrative structure—one he never again attempted—one has to bear in mind the importance hitherto of his relationship with his Anglo-Indian readers. Kipling had learned his craft in India as a teenager journalist, and in the process introjected an ideal model of writer-audience relationship based on a commonality of beliefs which he shared with a politically and culturally homogeneous community of Anglo-Indians. This had required some adjusting on his part, since, as Andrew Lycett remarks, ‘there was little inherently imperialistic’ about him by the end of his school years, when he planned to go live in Germany (Lycett 2000: 107, 109). (A family questionnaire listed as his favourite politicians as Gladstone and Bismark.) The only

narrative—an ‘oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events’ (in the case of ‘The Man,’ the journalist’s written account including the frame and the inner oral narration)—from *story*—a ‘succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse [...] a totality of actions and situations [...] through which knowledge of that totality comes to us’ (the adventurous content set in Kafiristan)—and, thirdly, the *narrating*—an event other from the event that is recounted but ‘that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself’ (Genette 1983: 25-26).

⁶ In *Paratexts* Genette explains the difference between the two categories that together form the ‘paratext’ as follows: ‘A paratextual element [...] necessarily has a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. Within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the texts [...] I will give the name peritext to this first spatial category—certainly the most typical one. [...] The distanced elements are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others. his second category is what, for lack of a better word, I call epitext’ (Genette 1997: 4-5).

explanation Kipling's father gave for bringing his son back to India was to protect the boy's virginity but, whatever the case, once he had Rudyard safely in Lahore he put him to work on *The Civil and Military Gazette*, the sister paper of the Allahabad *Pioneer* to which he himself was a contributor. The sixteen-year-old cub journalist was soon busy rehashing his pater's ultraconservative political and racial theories; a couple of seasons reporting from Simla, the summer capital of British India, was enough to convince him that he had constructed a public persona which was well integrated into this community of soldiers and administrators, as evidenced by the title of his first poetry collection, *Departmental Ditties*.

This same public persona appears in Kipling's short stories. Here, however, the voice of his projected self is but one of several facets that make more credible his narrator's status as a young man uniquely positioned to reveal the hidden machinery of the Indian government, and to cross the racial and social lines which separate British 'sahibs' from Indian life. And what these narrators find there is, of course, a succession of outsiders—the author's shadows. Each of the strategies that went into creating the narrative voices of these tales was modulated according to the literary or journalistic form of writing which Kipling he was employing; each represented, indeed, an act of mediation with an audience whose every reaction Kipling evidently felt he could anticipate. Perhaps he was not destined forever to remain an outsider, after all, now that he has become the 'singer to my [Anglo-Indian] clan' (Kipling 1989: 341).

The stories collected in *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) were, according to Kipling, vignettes and anecdotes designed for Anglo-Indian readers who 'wanted accuracy and interest, but first of all accuracy' (Kipling 1937: 205). But Kipling's readership changed once he began writing longer stories for *Weekly News*, 'a weekly edition of the *Pioneer* for Home consumption' (Kipling 1937: 70-1). These tales were intended to be reprinted in Britain after being published, together with earlier stories, in six issues of the Indian Railway Library. Kipling's narrative style evolved as he started addressing a more sophisticated readership, becoming more experimental and literary. As he recalled in his autobiography,

Henceforth no mere twelve-hundred Plain Tales jammed into rigid frames, but three- or five-thousand-word cartoons once a week. So did young Lippo Lippi, whose child

I was, look on the blank walls of his monastery when he was bidden decorate them
 “’Twas ask and have; Choose, for more’s ready,” with a vengeance. (Kipling 1937:
 71)

The quotation is drawn from a scene in Robert Browning’s poem ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ (lines 163-5) in which the late-medieval Florentine painter, having completed his first fresco, realizes that he is, not a talented young craftsman, but an artist. The same revelation was granted to Kipling. After being commissioned to write longer stories for the *Weekly News*, he no longer saw himself as merely a journalist with a knack for writing stories and began instead to entertain artistic ambitions.

The paratextual frame

The sole short story to be written expressly for the *Weekly News*’s December 1888 issue was ‘The Man Who Would Be King’. The first two tales, ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’ and ‘The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes’, had appeared in the 1885 Christmas Annual of the *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore) as Anglo-Indian versions of a ghost story, a staple of the Victorian magazine’s Christmas issue. The third, ‘My Own True Ghost Story,’ had been published in the 25 February 1888 issue of the *Week’s News*; meant as an anti-ghost story, it ends with a rational explanation for what at first seems to be the presence of a ghost in an old bungalow. The most important thing about this collection is Kipling, that having experimented with the frame-narrative structure in ‘The Man’, modified the structures of his stories from 1885. These had originally been what Hugh Haughton has called ‘straightforward first-person narratives in the manner of Poe’ (Haughton 1989: 31), but for their reissue Kipling chose to expand upon the versions published in the *Phantom Rickshaw* collection. For the short story ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’, he added seven paragraphs to the opening section, supposedly written by an anonymous figure who claims to have found the protagonist’s manuscript; in ‘The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes’, he added a long introductory paragraph. Neither of these other narrative frames bears comparison to that of ‘The Man.’

Kipling must have found that his changes to the two earlier tales gave the fifth issue of the Indian Railway Library an internal coherence, one that made it, in contrast to the previous four issues, a ‘collection’ of short stories and of ‘facts’. This result must have been momentous

enough for him to require an ad hoc intermediary between the stories' frame narrators and the author, in the guise of a 'collector,' who addresses the readers from within:

PREFACE

This is not exactly a book of real ghost-stories, as the cover makes believe, but rather a collection of facts that never quite explained themselves. All that the collector can be certain of is that one man [the protagonist and first-person narrator of 'The Phantom Rickshaw'] insisted upon dying because he believed himself to be haunted; another man [Morrowbie Jukes, the protagonist and first-person narrator of the eponymous tale] either made up a wonderful fiction or visited a very strange place; while the third man [Peachey Carnehan, the internal narrator of 'The Man Who Would Be King'] was indubitably crucified by some person or persons unknown, and gave an extraordinary account of himself.

Ghost-stories are very seldom told at first-hand. I have managed with infinite trouble, to secure one exception to this rule. It is not a very good specimen, but you can credit it from beginning to end. The other three stories you must take on trust; as I did. (Haughton 1989: 403)

With 'The Man' in place, the 'eerie tales' became something quite different from a ghost story, whatever the cover could make believe—which sounds a bit disingenuous, given that he had his father draw it, presumably following his own indications. 'Rudyard Kipling' is prepared to vouch only for a straightforward, unmediated tale told in the first person, 'My Own True Ghost Story.' In the three cases in which the first-person narrator's account is vouchsafed by a frame narrator the reader 'must take [the facts] on trust.'

To further complicate the entry into the text, after the cover, the title of the collection, the three other stories and the 'Preface' he personally signs, the author inserts another element of the peritext, an epigraph: 'Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy.' The identity of the speaker of this line—which Kipling was to adapt in 1926 as 'Brother to Beggars and Fellow to Kings' for his Masonic poem 'Banquet Night' (Kipling 1989: 775)⁷—is revealed on the same page of the paragraph, not in the *paratext* but in the *text*. 'The Law, as quoted,' the first-person narrator declares, 'lays down a fair conduct of life, and

⁷ Kipling became a Freemason in Lahore in 1885 but soon lost enthusiasm and after leaving India did not enter a Lodge for thirty years (Lycett 2000: 641)

one not easy to follow.⁸ This echo-effect makes explicit how the narrator is in the story but not exclusively of the story. There is nothing post-modern in this: simply, the readers of the ‘Indian Railway Library’ would have easily recognized how in the first quarter of the narrative many of the narrator-journalist’s experiences in the ‘dark places of the earth’ (212) coincided with those related in nineteen articles titled ‘Letters of Marque’⁹ which had appeared from December 1887 to February 1888 in the *Pioneer*, the newspaper which Kipling had joined in November 1887 (Condé 2004: 230). The letters were unsigned, but everyone would have recognized the distinctive style and tone of a Kipling posing as ‘a kind of journalistic privateer, licensed to raid foreign land for newspaper booty’ (Ricketts 1999: 104). In reading the journalist-narrator—whose self-importance the author on the eve of his departure for the imperial metropolis undermines by changing his newspaper title into *Backwoodsman*—it is impossible to miss an author’s irony aimed at his earlier self-presentation as a would-be corsair adventurer.

The narrator continues to elaborate on the epigraph in the second sentence of the first paragraph, ‘I have been fellow to a beggar again and again under circumstances which prevented either of us finding out whether the other was worthy’. In so doing, he confirms the impression that the abstract reflections in the opening lines of the narrative undermine any possible application of the epigraph to the narrator’s own ‘conduct of life.’ This holds especially true when he proceeds to emphasize his unresolved relationship with the people he met in an undefined past and future: ‘I have still to be brother to a Prince, though I once came near to kinship with what might have been a veritable King, and was promised the reversion of a Kingdom—army, law-courts, revenue, and policy all complete.’ He then concludes on an ambiguous note: ‘But, today, I greatly fear that my King is dead, and if I want a crown I must go hunt it for myself’ (209). In this unspecified present time of ‘today,’ he does not know what has happened to ‘his’ King and suspects he must become one himself. The narrative has not yet begun

⁸ Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Man Who Would Be King,’ in Hugh Haughton (ed.), *Wee Willie Winkie*, Penguin: London, 1989. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ ‘A licence to fit out an armed vessel or privateer and employ it in the capture of the merchant shipping of the enemy’s subject’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

but all the signs are there that this narrator will turn out to be wholly unreliable.

This first paragraph is the last in a succession of Chinese boxes of a paratextual overflow produced by the concrete author's playing on erasing the boundaries between narrator and implied author. The implied author will later reestablish the distance between himself and the frame narrator by proving his unreliability, invoking the claims to brotherly laws and promises of kingship made in the opening paragraph; and he will also reduce his status from frame narrator to narratee once the 'beggar' is given the role of chronicler of another beggar's conquest of a kingdom. That same implied author, however, will also, on the last page of the story, give the final word to the journalist-narrator, in an ending in which he is shown to recover his initial status as 'king' of the narrative.

The frame narrative

The implied author gives the impression of further insulating the first paragraph from the narrative proper by opening the second paragraph with the hackneyed formula, 'The beginning of everything...' As significant is the way he here moves from a series of abstractions to concrete topographical details that make explicit who are the 'implied readers' addressed by his narrator: 'The beginning of everything was in a railway train upon the road to Mhow from Ajmir....' (209). Supplying those two place names in the first sentence is an act of complicity with Anglo-Indian readers on Kipling's part: readers in Britain, the United States, and the Dominions would have to reach for their atlases.

Anglo-Indian readers would be equally familiar with how colonial class distinctions operated along racial lines in order to exclude white outcasts such as the 'Loafers,' the Anglo-Indian term for white trash, who had to share Intermediate class railway carriages with Eurasians, persons of mixed Asian and European ancestry. The narrator's presence in such a carriage requires some explanation on his part:

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. Intermediates do not buy from refreshment-rooms. They carry their food in bundles and pots, and buy sweets from the native sweetmeat-sellers, and drink the roadside water. That is why in the

hot weather Intermediates are taken out of the carriages dead, and in all weathers are most properly looked down upon. (209)

One particular Loafer he meets in the Intermediate turns out to be the ‘beggar’ of the epigraph and of the first paragraph:

a big black-browed gentleman in shirt-sleeves entered, and, following the custom of Intermediates, passed the time of day. He was a wanderer and a vagabond like myself, but with an educated taste for whisky. He told tales of things he had seen and done, of out-of-the-way corners of the Empire into which he had penetrated, and of adventures in which he risked his life for a few days’ food. (209-10)

In having his journalist-narrator share with his readers a fantasy of being ‘a wanderer and a vagabond’ Kipling is recreating (with a healthy dose of self-irony) the excitement he himself had felt while crossing the Indian desert for *The Pioneer*. As he wrote on 25 January 1888 in a diary letter to his cousin, Margaret Burne-Jones: ‘I slept with natives upon the cotton bales and clean forgot that there was a newspaperly telegraphic world without. Oh it was a good and clean life and I saw and heard all sorts and conditions of men and they told me the stories of their lives, black and white and brown alike.’ In his fictional recreation of those adventures, Kipling chose to assign a central role to an episode in his 1887-88 travels which he had not included in his ‘Letters of Marque’: an encounter with a fellow Freemason on whose behalf he had delivered a cryptic message to a friend, also part of the brotherhood. That experience, he commented, had made him feel like ‘all sorts of veiled and mysterious things for at least five minutes’ (Pinney 200: 149-56). As ‘The Man’ makes clear, the implied author chose to set in the foreground not so much those ‘mysterious things’. Far more interesting to him was the narrator’s feeling that, as a journalist, he is on the threshold between the ‘newspaperly telegraphic world’ and the one inhabited by the Loafer.

The narrator hides from his travel companion his identity as a roving correspondent for the *Backwoodsman*, while his disguise as a ‘vagabond’ allows him to share with the other his impolitic opinions on the administration of the Raj: ‘We talked politics—the politics of Loaferdom, that see things from the underside where the lath and plaster is not smoothed off’ (210). But there is another topic they discuss: ‘we talked postal arrangements because my friend wanted to send a telegram back from the next station to Ajmir’ (210). By linking together the Loafer’s criticism of the government and his seeking information about

the postal service while aboard a train the implied author is sending out a message to his implied, Anglo-Indian readers: an Intermediate train carriage is the right place in which to dramatize the fracture line within the Anglo-Indian community between those working for the Crown government—like the journalist—and the remnants of the old, pre-1857 British India. Those readers would have either lived through or heard from their parents of the 1857 ‘Great Mutiny,’ when the East India Company’s native Army revolted against the white officers, almost bringing to an end British rule in India; and they would have been familiar with the customary explanation of its cause—the country’s rapid modernization by the Marquess of Dalhousie, Governor-General between 1848 and 1856, who identified in ‘Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph’ the three ‘great engines of social improvement’ (Brendon 2008: 128) capable of strengthening, through their material benefits, his Westernizing project. As the journalist lives out his thrill of communing with a fellow adventurer (a former soldier in the East India Company’s army), the implicit author is carefully invokes a historical precedent for mistakes that will be repeated by these Loafers turned kings.

When the Loafer tells the journalist that he is about to go into the remote area of the Central Indian States, where he intends to ‘pretend to be correspondent of the *Backwoodsman*,’ he obviously cannot imagine that he is talking to the correspondent himself. But what can he fear from a Brother to whom he is ready to entrust a delicate mission, the conveying of a message to a friend? The expression he uses is ‘I *must* give him a word o’ mouth’ (211). This is all the means of communication to which Loafers have access, living as they do outside the ‘newspapery telegraphic world.’

The narrator reiterates these temporal and spatial coordinates in order to underscore that his foray into the world of adventure is both remote from and connected to his identity as an English reporter working in the Raj:

The Native States have a wholesome horror of English newspapers which may throw light on their peculiar methods of government [. . .] 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. When I left the train I did business with divers Kings, and in eight days passed through many changes of life. Sometimes I wore dress-clothes and consorted with Princes and Politicals, drinking from crystal and eating from silver. Sometimes I lay out upon the ground

and devoured what I could get, from a plate made of leaves, and drank the running water, and slept under the same rug as my servant. It was all in the day's work. (212)

Perhaps it was this servant in mind when he boasted in the opening paragraph, 'I have been fellow to a beggar,' since the moment he returns from the world of the *Thousand and One Nights* to that of the railway (where 'The beginning of everything was') he breaks Masonic law by having the forces of law and order arrest his 'Brothers'. Admittedly, the Loafer had made a mistake in confiding to the *Backwoodsman* correspondent that he planned to impersonate a *Backwoodsman* correspondent so as to blackmail a native prince. Being a journalist, the narrator feels he only has the power to move in and out of whatever role he may choose to impersonate, and in so doing to decide what is an adventure and what is a criminal attempt against the social order. The journalist's roving spirit is clearly on the wane:

two gentlemen like my friends could not do any good if they forgathered and personated correspondents of newspapers, and might, if they black-mailed one of the little rat-trap states of Central India or Southern Rajputana, get themselves into serious difficulties. I therefore took some trouble to describe them as accurately as I could remember to people who would be interested in deporting them; and succeeded, so I was later informed, in having them headed back from the Degumber borders. (213)

What is important here is that the implied author is contradicting the narrator's self-presentation in the first paragraph of the story. Clearly, he does not really believe in the brotherly principles which he had affirmed just a few pages previously.

'Then I became respectable,' the narrator continues, 'and returned to an Office where there were no Kings and no incidents outside the daily manufacture of a newspaper.' He is back in the world of the 'Railway and the Telegraph,' leaving behind that in which adventurers communicate by 'word o' mouth' at railway junctions. This is the opening of a long paragraph in which he re-establishes himself as a 'respectable' member of Anglo-Indian society, giving the readers a long, humorous account of the variety of petty provincial (i.e. imperial) issues and personalities: 'Zenana-mission ladies [. . .] Colonels who have been overpassed for command [. . .] stranded theatrical companies [. . .] every dissolute ruffian that ever tramped the Grand Trunk Road [and] makes it his business to ask for employment as a proof-reader' [214]. These latter

absorb his entire time in the office in between telegrams or phone calls announcing Historical events (with a capital 'H') from Europe, where the only real kings live and, occasionally, die, thereby becoming news for newspapers across the world.

One sultry summer night, the journalist is forced to stay up waiting for news about a European king whose death is imminent; 'I drowsed,' he recalls, 'and wondered whether the telegraph was a blessing' (216), but at three o'clock he finally gives the word: the machines start printing the paper and he leaves to go home where he can catch some sleep. Or does he? He remembers that the moment 'I rose to go away [...] two men in white clothes stood in front of me' These are the 'Brothers' whom he had had deported for endangering the 'respectable' persona he was about to resume: the Loafer he had met on the train, Peachey Carnehan, and his friend Daniel Dravot. They have come not to seek revenge but because they have a plan: they intend to establish themselves as kings of Kafiristan, a remote region in north-eastern Afghanistan. As adventurers who still send and receive messages through 'word o' mouth' they are unaware that in imperial India news about Kings that make it into the political discussion can arrive only by telegraph or telephone. And yet, precisely because they are marginal to contemporary politics, they have a literal faith in the mythology of empire, and believe that, even despite the journalist's declaration that 'Mister Gladstone is calling down brimstone upon the British Dominions' (214), the great days of empire-building are not yet over for two former soldiers of the East Indian Company's army

The Loafers count on finding in the newspaper office the maps and history books needed for their empire-building adventure. In other regards, history is for them less important than imperial lore, an inexhaustible source of precedents for what they have in mind. If they chose Kafiristan, Dan explains, it is because it is the 'only one place now in the world that two strong men can Sar-a-whack' (217), a punning reference to James Brooke, the India Company officer who in 1841 had been appointed Rajah of Sarawak, in northern Borneo, by the Sultan of Brunei, whom he had restored to the throne. The Loafers display their own regal generosity by extending to the journalist an invitation: 'When we've got our Kingdom in going order we'll let you know, and you can come up and help us to govern it' (219). Is this what the journalist had in mind in the opening paragraph when he claimed he had been 'promised the reversion of a Kingdom' (209)? If so, then it is, after his betrayal, the

second time that the implied author has poked fun at how his protagonist represents himself. Once Dan becomes king and needs ‘twelve picked English’ to ‘help us govern a bit’, his first choices will be, not a journalist, but a Sergeant-pensioner at Segowli (‘many’s the good dinner he’s given me, and his wife a pair of trousers’) and ‘Donkin, the Warder of Tounghoo Jail.’ And in any case, ‘there’s hundreds that I could lay my hands on if I was in India’ (235).

While sliding into Loaferdom, the ex-soldiers have tried to adapt to the changed environment that followed on the Company’s dissolution by working on railways (as ‘boiler-fitters’ and ‘engine-drivers’) and in newspapers (Dan has been ‘compositor, photographer, proof-reader’ [217])). There they had been among those who benefitted from the ‘great engines of social improvement,’ the telegraph and the railway; but in the newspaper office, the journalist explains, such jobs are done by ‘little black copy-boys’ and ‘all but naked compositors’ (214, 215-6). Their military skills are required only for conquering and dominating another people, in which their ignorance ceases to be a handicap. As to the Kafiri’s religion, all that counts is that ‘They have two-and-thirty heathen idols there, and we’ll be the thirty-third and thirty-fourth’ (218), while as to their social and ethnic composition, the men care only that ‘They’re a mixed lot [...] and it won’t help us to know the names of their tribes. The more tribes the more they’ll fight, and the better for us’ (219). The golden rule of all empires: *divide et impera*.

The two Loafers leave the next day, attired as a mad priest and his servant. Yet this is no comedy. ‘The beginning of everything’ may have been in a railway train but the end of—not everything, only but the first section of the narrative—is two camels heading toward Afghanistan loaded with the ‘great engines of social improvement’ which Western technology has made available to people in search of an empire: the Martini rifle, used by the British army in India from 1871 to 1892. The journalist would have prayed for them, he recalls, but ‘that night, a real King died in Europe, and demanded an obituary notice’ (223).

The narrating scene

The journalist returns to his daily life, which is so respectable that its routine is in harmony with the universe. ‘The wheel of the world,’ he writes, ‘swings through the same phases again and again. Summer passed

and winter thereafter, and came and passed again. The daily paper continued and I with it.' Then, 'upon the third summer there fell a hot night, a night-issue, and a strained waiting for something to be telegraphed from the other side of the world, exactly as had happened before.' The author is creating an exact replica of the scene when the Loafers materialized at the newspaper office: 'At three o'clock I cried, 'Print off,' and turned to go.' This time, however, instead of two larger-than-life Loafers, 'there crept to my chair what was left of a man':

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—this rag-wrapped, whining cripple who addressed me by name, crying that he was come back. 'Can you give me a drink?' he whimpered. 'For the Lord's sake give me a drink!' ... 'Don't you know me?' he gasped, dropping into a chair. (223)

The journalist recognizes the human wreck only when he repeats 'I've come back,' and cries: 'I was the King of Kafiristan—me and Dravot—crowned Kings we was! In this office we settled it—you setting there and giving us the books. I am Peachey—Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan, and you've been setting here ever since—O Lord!' (224).

'O Lord!': the would-be adventurer has been 'setting' in his office all the time, while the two Loafers strove to win a crown for themselves and thereby earning their right to tell a story. It is at this point that the implied author forces the journalist to relinquish his sceptre and content himself with the diminished role of a narratee, recording Peachey's story and commenting in particular on the first-person's gestures and voices in ways that contribute to create what Genette defines as the 'narrating,' 'the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself' (Genette 1983: 26).

Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* opens with the famous line: 'Hegel says somewhere that great historic facts and personages recur twice. He forgot to add: "Once as tragedy, and again as farce"' (Marx 2008: 1). Marx's axiom has an obvious relevance to the two Loafers, whose empire-building farcically replays the catastrophic outcome of the East India Company's attempts in the 1850s to remodel India as a tropical Britain. Whether or not Anglo-Indian readers could 'take on trust'—as the Preface's 'collector' put it—Peachey's story, they could not miss the 'collection of [historical] facts' introduced by Kipling in the journalist's narrative and here reiterated in parodic form.

After consolidating their rule over the natives, the two instinctively replicate that same order which in India had marginalized them as ‘Loafers’. Thus their versions of those ‘great engines of social improvement’—‘Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph’—are the ‘rope-bridges across the ravines which cut up the country horrid’ (233) which Peachey has the villagers build, and the ‘string-talk letter, that we’d learned the way of it from a blind beggar in the Punjab’ (229) which he and Dravot use to communicate. Other modernizing measures *à la* Dalhousie include a ‘census’ which the King plans to take ‘in the spring if the priests don’t get frightened’ (234) and insatiable land grabs that resemble Dalhousie’s own ruthless annexations of native states, which had served to alienate the Indian elites (Ambrosini 2008: 103).

Lest readers younger than Kipling (born in Bombay eight years after the Mutiny) should miss the historical parallel, the implied author has Dan blame Peachey for contenting himself with leading the Army, acting as judge, and introducing Western agricultural practices, and drilling the Army at the same time as acting out his regal fantasies: ‘It’s your fault [...] 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!’ (This last epithet is a reference to how Dalhousie had given the Evangelicals a free hand to Christianize India.) All Peachey can do is reply: ‘I’m sorry, Dan, [...] but there’s no accounting for natives. This business is our Fifty-Seven’ (241).

Kipling intended the historical frame behind Peachey’s story to recall even the earliest phases of the Indian sub-continent’s conquest and, indeed, all colonial enterprises in history. Upon arriving in Kafiristan, Carnehan and Dravot see some locals, armed with bows and arrows, chasing other locals. Instinctively, they know what to do, pulling out their rifles and killing at random a few men of the winning side. In this way, they forge a series of alliances, arming with rifles one tribe at a time and drilling the men loyal to them as part of a Regular Army. They succeed in settling disputes between villages and generally pacifying the country by inventing the parodic trappings of a civilizing mission. Luckily for them, this mission did not require converting natives to Anglicanism since, as they discover, the Kafiri religion derived its symbols from those of Freemasonry. Dan is free to act out his megalomania and pose as a superhuman being. When he appears in front

of the supreme priests of the land in a ceremonial dress decorated with the symbols of the third Masonic level, they all fall on their knees because the symbols are the same as those engraved upon the stone idol of their supreme god, Imbra.

Disaster strikes when Dan, deciding to take a wife in order to found a dynasty, contravenes the cultural norms meant to inhibit interbreeding between different races in British colonies, *miscegenation*. A Kafiri girl is forced to accept, but when he leans over during the wedding to kiss the terrified bride she bites him until he bleeds. Shouting 'Neither God nor Devil but a man!' (240) the Kafiri people, led by the priests, turn against the two and capture them. Dravot is forced onto one of those rope bridges built by Peachey and, when they cut the ropes, crashes into the river below. Carnehan is crucified with wood splinters. He survives the torture and is sent back to India. After wandering for an entire year carrying Dan's crowned head in a bag he makes it back to the journalist's office, where he ends his story with the words: 'Look at him now!' The narratee recovers his role as a narrator and recalls how Peachey

fumbled in the mass of rags round his bent waist; brought out a black horsehair bag embroidered with silver thread, and shook therefrom onto 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!' (244)

The crowned head ought to be the 'fact' that will conquer the frame narrator's trust. The newly reinstated first-person narrator lets the deranged Peachey leave, with the head in the bag, a bottle of whiskey and some money, in search of the Deputy Commissioner, who, hopefully, will open for him the doors of the poorhouse. Later in the day the journalist sees this wretched specimen crawling under the sun, picks him up, and takes him 'to the nearest missionary for eventual transfer to the Asylum' (245). Two days later, he comes to visit the Loafer only to learn from the Superintendent that he is dead. The story concludes with the following exchange:

'[D]o you happen to know if he had anything upon him by any chance when he died?'

‘Not to my knowledge,’ said the Superintendent.
And there the matter rests.¹⁰ (245)

From a narratological point of view, however, the ‘matter’ cannot rest. When the implied narrator so pointedly makes the inner narrator’s evidence disappear, he is casting the frame narrator as sole witness to the story’s veracity. The final line in the frame narrative, rather than sealing off the chain of events initiated in the second paragraph (‘The beginning of everything’), invites the reader to return to the most ambiguous sentence in the first paragraph: ‘today, I greatly fear that my King is dead, and if I want a crown I must go hunt it for myself’ (209). And this is exactly what the ‘Arranger’¹¹—no other term will do—of the paratextual elements has done by breaking all narrative conventions and projecting the self of the epigraph into the first paragraph. In effect, he has launched the frame narrator (whom the implied readers would recognize as the fictional counterpart of the journalist-writer Kipling) on a fantastic search for one of those crowns that formerly graced the brow of every successful empire-builder.

The transitions from the journalist’s *narrative* to Peachey’s *story* and then back to the journalist’s *narrative*, take place in two twilight zones, between waking and sleeping—or, in Martin Green’s celebrated formulation, between dreams of adventure and deeds of empire (Green 1979). Thus the two Loafers show up ‘as the clock-hands crept up to three o’clock’ (216) and Peachey returns while the journalist is going through ‘just such a scene as I have already described. The nervous tension was stronger than it had been two years before, and I felt the heat more acutely. At three o’clock I cried, ‘Print off,’ and turned to go’

¹⁰ Angelia Poon notes that the last line of the story ‘appears to sum up the suspended state of things and the uneasy momentary equilibrium between the worlds of fantasy and reality. It is a moment of balance rendered especially ironic given the disequilibrium and disorientation the narrative deliberately seeks to create in the reader’ (2008: 134).

¹¹ In an appendix to the revised edition of his 1970 book on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, David Hayman further clarifies the term he had coined at the time: ‘the arranger,’ he writes, ‘should be seen as something between a persona and a function, somewhere between the narrator and the implied author. [...] Perhaps it would be best to see the arranger as a significant, felt absence in the text, as unstated but inescapable source of control’ (1982: 122-3).

(223). Inscribed in 'The Man Who Would Be King,' then, is the suggestion that we have been reading the transcription of a dream story in which 'the man who would be king' is actually the journalist himself. And that ambiguous 'today' upon which the text-paratext dynamic hinges, delimits the moment in which the author chooses to review ironically his own traipsing around the 'dark places of the earth' as that living oxymoron, a licensed adventurer.

Kipling intended that complex and unique dynamic to create a distance between the two Loafers' Kafiristan adventure and the particular kind of imperial short story that he felt he was being called to create at that point ('today') in his career. This distance is an intellectual space Kipling was able to conceptualize in the months running up to his departure for London. This space is given representation in the text through one of the themes implicit in the journalist's characterization: the technology associated with the 'great engines of social improvement' is also changing the way stories about India are being told. The press, the telegraph, and the telephone ringing in the middle of the night to announcing the death of a European king—all are reducing the distance between modern Europe and the India of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The liminal journalistic persona who travels in 'Intermediate' is an agent of that evolution, a lynchpin of the growing integration of the British Raj into the rest of the world, or what Niall Ferguson has termed 'Anglobalization' (Ferguson 2003: xxiv-xxviii). The application of these new technologies to story-writing changed forever the role of colonial writers and, in the process, made possible the cultural phenomenon defined in this special issue as the 'imperial short story.'

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