

# Masonic imagery in the man who would be king



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Rudyard Kipling begins *The Man Who Would Be King* by quoting a phrase commonly associated with the Masonic Order; the story itself contains many Masonic references including the degrees, the forms of recognition, the overall Lodge hierarchy, and certain aspects of the initiatory process. But Freemasonry, which is sometimes known as the Craft, consists of not just the formal elements but also the shared knowledge, culture, and traditions observed by all Masons. These aspects of Masonic subculture, and the fact that the narrator and the two main characters are Freemasons, are vital to the plot of the story. This essay will provide background information for the Masonic terminology and imagery used in *The Man Who Would Be King* so as to provide sufficient context to allow a reader of the novella to understand the subtext. Yet the essay does not purport to probe any of the deeper meanings of Masonic symbols, to endorse or condemn Freemasonry, or to reveal information restricted to initiates. Nor does it provide any information about the Craft beyond what is necessary to understand Kipling's story.

In *The Man Who Would Be King*, the two main characters Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnahan travel to Kafiristan, a fictionalized version of a part of northeastern Afghanistan once known by that name, and presently called Nuristan. Their goal is to make themselves kings of that territory. One of the ways they do that is by passing themselves off as having mystical powers in addition to their firearms. They find evidence that Freemasonry has been introduced to the local men in the distant past, but only up to the Second Degree. It has since fallen out of regular use and mutated into an almost cult-like practice. Dan and Peachey impress the local men with their knowledge of Masonry by displaying knowledge that, in Kafiristan, is

considered to be not just specific to a higher degree, but proof that they are actual gods. Instead of correcting the misunderstanding, Dan and Peachey willingly use the Craft to consolidate their power, until one day Dan takes his arrogance too far and is revealed to be just a mortal man. The Kafirs immediately rebel, and only Peachey returns alive to tell the tale. To a person not familiar with Masonic culture or traditions, Kipling's story is a swashbuckling adventure novel. However, from a Masonic perspective, it is a morality tale with a very predictable denouement.

The Masonic Order is an all-male fraternal organization established in the early 18th century but based on traditions from even older secret societies that may possibly include medieval trade guilds and the Knights Templar. In its present form, Masonry has a tiered initiation system wherein men pass through three degrees one at a time, with each degree of conferring additional knowledge and responsibility. A man may request admission, but he must be sponsored by a reputable Mason of the Lodge to which he seeks admission, so that the members of the Lodge may vote on whether to accept him. If he is accepted, his sponsor is held partially accountable for his future conduct, and he is initiated into the First Degree by means of a special ritual. The First Degree is followed by the Second or Fellow Craft Degree ritual, at which point he may be "raised" to the Third or Master Mason Degree, which is also a separate ritual.

There are a few ways by which one Mason can recognize another of his own degree or lower. These forms of recognition are secret, and one of the oaths a Freemason takes during each degree ceremony is to never reveal them to outsiders. They are given out during the degree ceremony and must be

memorized, and before any Mason is allowed to see or hear any activity related to a specific degree he must prove himself by using these means of recognition. Kipling's story mentions two forms of recognition: the degree grips, and the degree words.

Grips can be considered as secret handshakes. They are discreet enough to be done in public between two Masons who will appear to simply be shaking hands. But they are unique enough to not occur by accident, and each grip also has a response so that the man giving the Grip can determine whether the other is responding correctly. Each degree has a unique grip. When Peachey shakes hands with Billy Fish and receives the Grip, he recognizes Billy as a Mason of at least the First Degree. Peachey tries the Fellow Craft grip and Billy responds correctly, proving himself to be a Mason of at least the Second Degree. But when Peachey tries the Master Grip of the Third Degree, he gets no response. Accordingly, Peachey identifies Billy as potentially being a Fellow Craft Mason. So he asks of Dan: " does he know the Word?"

The Word Peachey is asking about is another form of recognition. Each degree has a unique word that, like the Grip, is secret. These words are not language specific, but common throughout the world to all Masons of that degree. Dan asserts that Billy knows the Words of the First and Second Degrees, as do all the priests. Dan has seen " marks" or symbols carved on the some rocks that correspond to some symbols associated with First and Second Degree Masons, and tells Peachey that the local chiefs and priests can conduct a Fellow Craft Lodge ceremony " in a way that's very like ours."

The phrase “in a way that’s very like ours” is a sign that Dan and Peachey are in trouble. They have stumbled upon people who appear to be Freemasons and who have some of the forms of recognition, but who are not actually part of a regular or recognized Lodge. Although they know and observe the superficial parts of Masonry, they are not necessarily aware of the significance of the words, symbols, and rituals they use. Nor are they necessarily bound by the same oaths or obligations as Peachey and Dan. Indeed, Masonry the way it is practiced in Kafiristan operates more like a religious cult. To the local “Masons”, the fact Dan and Peachey possess knowledge of the Third Degree is not evidence that they have advanced farther in the Craft (as it would be in any regular lodge), but that they are gods. Since Dan has been trying to pass himself and Peachey off as gods since they entered Kafiristan in order to get the local people to submit to his rulership, the coincidence appears to be a lucky break. In reality it is a pitfall.

The Masonic Order is a global body with members all over the world, but it has a somewhat hierarchical structure. The core unit of organization is the “Lodge”: a collection of Masons who meet in a specific location, frequently a hall or building dedicated to the purpose. Lodges are run by men known as “officers” who perform specific administrative tasks that correspond roughly to those performed by the officers of a business corporation. Lodges in turn are governed by administrative organizations that Peachey Carnahan and Dan Dravot refer to as “Grand Lodge”. A Grand Lodge is an administrative body that enforces uniform standards among the various lodges throughout the region and grants or denies applications to open or close a Lodge. There is also a Mother Grand Lodge in England that regulates the Grand Lodges in

each part of the world. This interconnection and correspondence between Lodges is very important, because recognition by a Grand Lodge confers legitimacy. There are groups of people who form “irregular” lodges that purport to be Masonic but that are not acknowledged or recognized by the other Lodges due to serious departure from the traditions and principles of Freemasonry. A “lodge” that is not recognized by a Grand Lodge or particularly the Mother Grand Lodge is very likely to have something seriously wrong with it. For this reason, Masons are required to not participate in Masonic activities with outsiders or with “irregular” Masons from a lodge that is not recognized. Yet this is exactly what Dan and Peachey do.

In Kipling’s fictionalized Kafiristan, Dan and Peachey find a collection of polytheistic men who have radically different beliefs and priorities than their apron-wearing English visitors. Their version of Freemasonry has mutated over the years into something more like a religious cult. They were not given their degrees by any regular, recognized lodge, and are therefore irregular Masons at best and outsiders at worst. Accordingly, when Dan and Peachey participate in Masonic rituals with them, they are engaging in a forbidden form of Masonic activity.

Dan identifies himself as a Grand-Master of the Craft and asserts that he will open a Lodge in the Third Degree, to raise the local chiefs and priests to the Third Degree in order to appropriate their authority and cement his own. Although a casual reader might suspect that Dan might have some authority beyond the Third Degree, the text shows he does not. Peachey asserts that neither he nor Dan has ever actually held office in a Lodge. This means that

Dan's claims of being a "Grand-Master", or his introduction of himself and Peachey as "Past Grand-Masters" cannot possibly be true.

An "officer" is a man who has specific responsibilities within a Lodge, sometimes having been elected by the other members of the Lodge. He is given enough authority to fulfil those responsibilities. The most senior officer in a Lodge is the "Worshipful Master", who is elected by the men in the Lodge. After his term of office expires, he becomes a "Past Master" and in some cases may join the regional Grand Lodge. The head of the Grand Lodge is the Grand-Master. The title "Past Grand-Master" exists in the York Rite, but is not relevant to ordinary Freemasonry. During Dan's first Lodge ceremony Peachey takes the office of the "Senior Warden", who is the Worshipful Master's second-in-command. There are several other offices through in which a Mason is expected to serve before he is considered eligible to be a Senior Warden or Worshipful Master, and there are always more opportunities for service than there are men willing to serve. Since both Dan and Peachey can read but neither has ever held office in a lodge before, for the two of them to take the most senior possible roles is quite arrogant.

Peachey is aware of the extent to which he and Dan are overreaching. He asserts that opening a Lodge is "against all the law," because he and Dan lack the necessary experience and do not have an appropriate "warrant" from any Grand Lodge. Dan, however, will not be denied. He commandeers the temple of Imbra, sets Peachey to work making it look like a Masonic ritual space. Black and white checkerboard tiles are a customary decoration, as are seats for particular officers and specially decorated aprons. The

Master Mason symbol on Dan's apron matches a hidden symbol under a large stone in the Temple of Imbra. The fact Dan knows and possesses the secret symbol causes the Kafir men to believe that he and Peachey are not men who have reached a higher level of advancement in the Craft, but gods. Since Daniel Dravot has been trying to pass himself off as a god since he entered Kafiristan, he takes advantage of their credulity to seize temporal power and expand his authority throughout the region.

The English adventurers give each of the Chiefs and priests English names, and do not bother to learn their real ones. Billy Fish, for example, is a big chief in the first valley Dan and Peachey conquer. But the fact Dan and Peachey are willing to raise Billy and the other chiefs and priests to the Third Degree without knowing their real names is ridiculous: almost as ridiculous as trying to lead a Lodge without being able to speak the local language. Masonic rituals are always conducted in the language of the members of the Lodge. After a couple months in the country, Dan understands some of the language but does not speak fluently. Peachey never learns to speak to the Kafirs at all. He does not have the communication skills to convey anything really important, such as the obligations of the Master Mason.

Masonic Lodge ceremonies, including Degree rituals, have a large number of words in them. There is a great deal of information that must be transferred to the man being initiated to the First Degree, passed to the Second Degree, or raised to the Third Degree. His obligations must be explained to him in the clearest possible terms. To conduct a plausible Degree ritual takes a lot of memorization and practice. Although Dan and Peachey have passed through the Third Degree and knows its symbols and forms of recognition, they are



also out of practice. Peachey admits that he has to “fudge” the Ritual and make it up as he goes along despite the fact he is serving as Senior Warden (a name for a role within a Masonic ceremony). He and Dan get away with it chiefly because the local priests are even more badly out of practice than they are. But the overreach is almost ludicrous, especially when they fabricate a Third Degree ceremony which Peachey admits is “not in any way according to Ritual” simply to raise ten of the most important local chiefs and priests to the degree in order to consolidate their power base.

The Masonic Order is what is known as a fraternal order. Part of the obligations associated with Masonry include the duty to treat all other Masons as though they are one’s brothers, and to render reasonable help in time of need, should the recipient deserve it. This is one of the reasons Peachey, at the outset of the story, asks the narrator for a favor “for the sake of your mother as well as mine”. Peachey suspects that the narrator is a Mason, and that he therefore has a brotherly responsibility to him to at least pass on his message to Dan at the railway station. This the narrator does, however his brotherly responsibilities to Dan and Peachey do not extend to helping them blackmail the head of a neighboring state. Just as biological brothers do not necessarily help each other break the law or avoid consequences for bad behavior, a Freemason’s bonds of fraternity do not override his religious, civic, or military responsibilities. Masonic brothers are not obligated to aid each other in illegal activity: indeed, the very first line of the story contains the phrase “if he deserve it”. The narrator understands the principle: once he has performed the favor requested of him by delivering Peachey’s message to Dan, his responsibility to the travelers ends.

At no point does he believe that two vagabond con artists (who happen to be Masons) deserve his cooperation or protection in the form of silence while they embark upon their extortion scheme. Indeed, his responsibilities of citizenship and basic decency compel him to send an advance warning so that Dan and Peachey are intercepted at the border. In doing this, the narrator is acting on one of the core Masonic principles, which is a respect for the law and authority in one's own nation. Although Dan and Peachey expect the narrator to help with, or at least overlook their illegal shakedown scheme, the narrator feels no such obligation as a Mason.

Freemasons are not required to agree with each other or support one another blindly. Within the Lodge, the custom of *pax templi*, or “peace of the temple” is observed: all disputes, including legal battles and political differences, are left outside. Discussion of controversial issues, particularly religion and politics, is forbidden. Because Masons can be found throughout the world, including in countries where Lodges cannot formally exist due to government suppression, it is not unusual for them to be on opposite sides in a war. Outside the Lodge, Masons are expected to uphold the laws and military responsibilities of their country, which may include knowingly fighting or killing another Mason in battle should he be on the enemy side. Although Masonic culture includes a sense of obligation to help people who are in need of aid including other Masons, should they deserve it, the duty to render aid is always superseded by a man's greater duties such as the ones to his family, his nation, or his God. This is another area in which Dan and Peachey blunder: their contract that they make with each other requires that each stand by the other if he is in trouble. When Dan's megalomania sets off

a riot and outright rebellion once the villagers realize Dan is not in fact a god, and when Dan walks around talking to himself instead of running for safety to Billy's village, Peachey and Billy then make a critical mistake by electing to stay with him. For this, the rioting tribesmen kill Billy and crucify Peachey.

One of Daniel Dravot's most fatal errors is to suppose that he has a bond of brotherhood with the Kafir men that will protect him should they ever discover his deception. Although the Kafir men observe some of the superficial behaviors associated with Masonry, they do so as part of a ritualistic cult behavior, having blended Masonry with their polytheistic religion. When Dan is revealed as having lied to them about being a god, in Dan's mind his lie is separate from his status as a Mason. The Kafirs make no such distinction. Even if they have sworn the same oaths as Dan and Peachey, and taken on the same obligations (which is not at all clear), once the Kafirs recognize Dan as an impostor god they take him as an impostor through and through: if Dan was ever a brother to them in the first place, he no longer is. This different style of reasoning is not at all what Dan and Peachey expect. They expect the Kafirs to reason as Europeans might, simply because they look European in their outward appearance, as opposed to having an African, Asian, or Arab features. Yet the resemblance is entirely superficial.

One might be brother to a King, but can a human being ever be a brother to a god? With the privileges of godhead, of course, come responsibilities and expectations that no human being can meet. One of the things expected of Peachey and Dan is that they know things only a god could know, including

what gods should and shouldn't be able to do. Yet two men lack even normal Kafir knowledge about how their gods are supposed to behave. They are unaware, for example, that there is a taboo against intermarriage with humans and that they are supposed to be invulnerable to injury. Peachey in particular feels his limitations, and is reminded of some "lost" knowledge of the Master Mason: facts or mysteries related to the Third Degree that have either been genuinely forgotten over the centuries or that never existed in the first place and that are spoken of merely to illustrate the limits of human knowledge. But if Peachey tells the truth—that the knowledge has been lost through no fault of his own—there is a very good chance that their carefully constructed illusion of godhead will collapse.

At this point, it should be obvious that Dan and Peachey are violating Masonic rules and traditions in many ways. They are also participating in Masonic rituals with irregular "Masons". They have founded a Lodge without a charter or authorization, and have taken it upon themselves to raise men to the Third Degree without even knowing their real names. Had they done these things simply to promote Freemasonry or to help the Kafir men better themselves, their offenses might be excused. But they are not. They are using the Craft to commit large-scale blasphemy for material gain. Since all Masons by definition are theists and generally monotheists, and since one of a Freemason's first duties is to his own God and religion, what Dan and Peachey are doing is inexcusable. Thus, while *The Man Who Would Be King* is a rollicking adventure tale for many, it is also a morality tale.

#### Sources

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