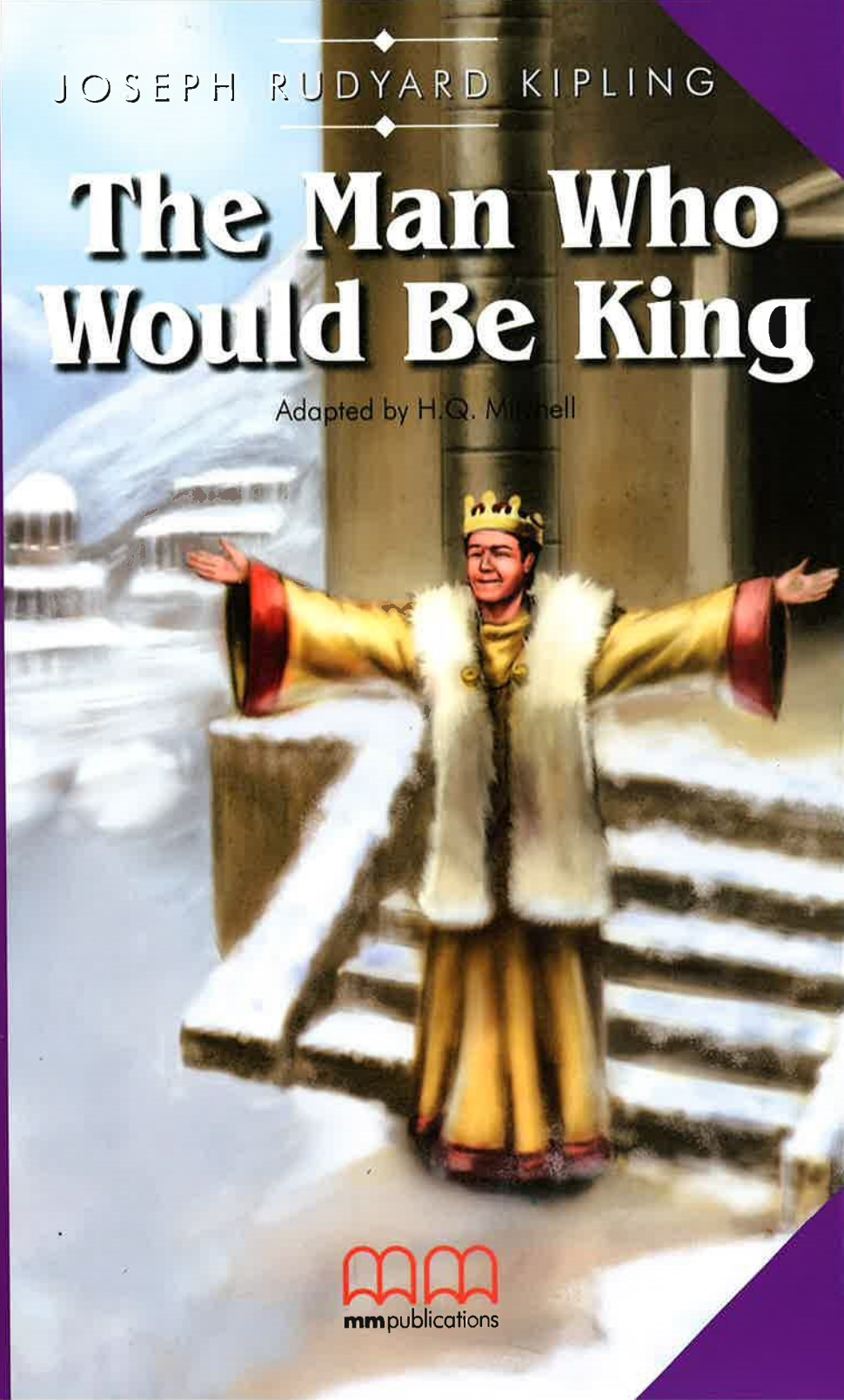
TOP READERS

JOSEPH RUDYARD KIPLING

The Man Who Would Be King

Adapted by H.Q. Mitchell



level 4

mm publications

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CHAPTER 1

MY NAME IS WALTER SMYTHE AND I AM A RETIRED NEWSPAPER editor. Though I now live in England, I spent many years working at a newspaper in a town in India called Mhow. At that time, India was under British rule. The story I am about to tell you is one that I have told many times at many dinner parties. I never get tired of telling it, and though some people refuse to believe it is true, I swear that it is.

During my time at the newspaper, I was fortunate enough to meet a number of interesting people. I interviewed princes, but also became friends with beggars and even met two former British soldiers who wanted to become kings. My story is about those soldiers – two very brave men whose unbelievable adventure ended tragically.

It all started on a train from Mhow to Ajmir. I had decided to travel to Ajmir to interview the British Chief Commissioner, and various other officials, for an article I was writing about the political situation in India. Unfortunately, the newspaper I worked for, The Northern Star, had very little money, and I could only afford a third-class ticket in the most uncomfortable section of the train.

There are no seats in third-class, and in summer it is unbearably hot. The travellers in this part of the train are usually either very poor or very old – they carry their food with them in small bags and drink the dirty roadside water. Sometimes the heat is too much for these unfortunate souls, and many of them are taken out of the carriages, dead.

My particular carriage was empty, until I reached the town of Nasirabad. There, a tall man with dark hair and thick black eyebrows sat down next to me and introduced himself.

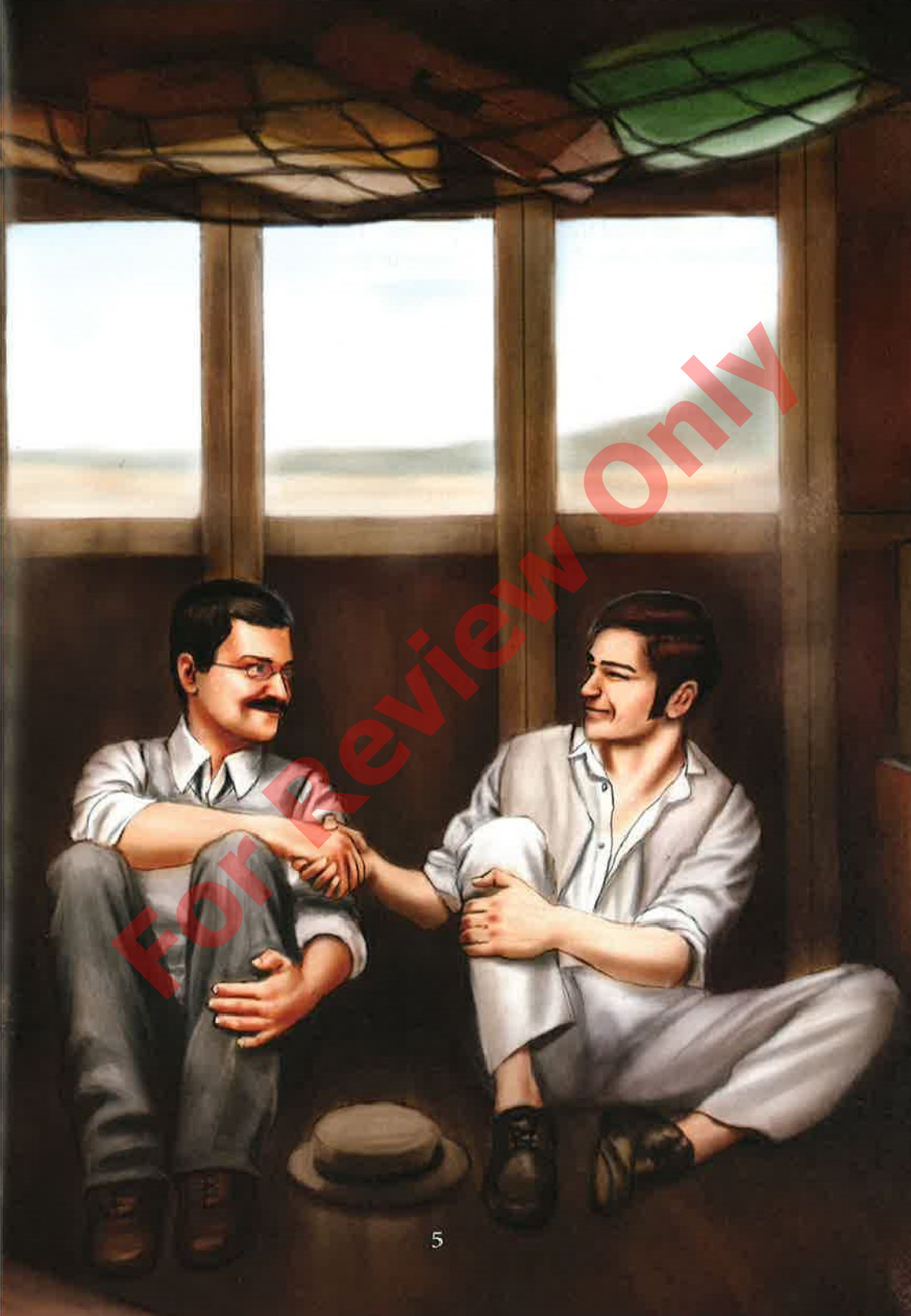
"Peachey Carnehan," said the man as he shook my hand.

"Walter Smythe," I said.

Carnehan grinned. "It's good to meet a fellow Englishman!"

He asked me what I did for a living and where I was going, and I explained that I worked for a newspaper and that I was on my way to Ajmir for some interviews. He told me that he was a former soldier, and that he'd been in India for about twenty years. He didn't have a job, but had worked as a carpenter, street preacher and photographer.

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We discussed just about everything from politics to the unreliable Indian postal service. Carnehan mentioned that he wanted to send an urgent telegram to a friend of his, but telegrams were expensive and he didn't have enough money.

"I could send the telegram for you," I said. "Though I will only be able to do it when I return to Mhow in about ten days or so. I haven't got enough money at the moment, you understand."

Carnehan frowned. "That may be too late," he said. "You say you'll be returning to Mhow in about ten days?"

I nodded.

"Perhaps you could do me a favour then," said Carnehan. "My friend will be on the train from New Delhi to Bombay on the 23rd. He'll be at Marwar Junction on the morning of the 24th. You will also pass through Marwar Junction on the way back to Mhow. Do you think you could manage to be at Marwar on the morning of the 24th?"

"Yes," I said. "I suppose I could."

Carnehan smiled broadly. "Excellent!" he said. "You'll find my friend in the second-class compartment of a train called the Bombay Mail. Just push down the window and give him this message: 'He has gone south for the week.' He'll know what that means."

I removed a pencil and a notebook from my pocket and wrote down the message and the name of the train. "How will I recognise your friend?" I asked.

"He's a big man with red hair and a red beard," said Carnehan. "You can't miss him."

"Consider it done," I said as I put the pencil and notebook back in my pocket.

"Thank you, sir!" said Carnehan. "Now, I'm going to get off at the next stop; I have some important business in Degumber state."

"What sort of business?" I asked.

Carnehan grinned. "Someone I know told me that the Prince of Degumber poisoned his wife and that he's blaming one of his servants for the murder. I'm going tell the Prince that I'm a newspaper journalist and that I'm going to publish the story in my newspaper unless he pays me to keep quiet…"

"What?" I gasped. "You're going to blackmail the Prince of Degumber? He'll have you killed!"

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Carnehan shrugged. "A man must eat, Mr Smythe," he said.

There was a loud noise as the train came to a stop at a small station. "You'll give my friend the message, won't you, sir?" said Carnehan, jumping out of the carriage.

"Yes!" I shouted after him. I really had no idea why I had decided to help this man; it simply seemed like the right thing to do.

Three hours later, I'd reached my destination. I spent the next few days doing interviews and researching my article. I left Ajmir on the 23rd and arrived at Marwar Junction early on the morning of the 24th.

The Bombay Mail makes only a short stop at Marwar and I had just a few minutes to run across the busy platform to deliver the message. Luckily, I found the train easily; I quickly pushed down the window and looked inside.

"Excuse me!" I said to the man with the red beard who was asleep under a blanket.



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The man was annoyed. "Tickets again?" he said.

"No," I said. "I've come to deliver a message. Peachey Carnehan said to tell you that he's gone south for the week!"

The man sat up and rubbed his eyes. "South for the week, you say? Was that all?"

The train whistle sounded and I took a step back. "Yes!" I shouted. "That's all!"

Slowly, the Bombay Mail began to move out of the station. I watched its red lights disappearing into the distance; then I returned to my train.

On my way home, I thought about Carnehan's plan to blackmail the Prince of Degumber. I was convinced that it would probably get him and his friend killed. When I arrived in Mhow, I decided to report the two men to the authorities. One week later, I heard that Carnehan and his friend had been thrown out of Degumber. They probably weren't happy about it, but I'm sure my action saved their lives.



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