“Without Benefit of the Clergy” by Rudyard Kipling

Summary: Without Benefit of Clergy is a short story written by Rudyard Kipling. The story takes place in India during its time as a British Colony and is centered around an English man working for the government, John Holden. While in India Holden falls in love with a young Indian girl, named Ameera, and he purchases her from her mother. The audience is introduced to these characters while Ameera is pregnant with John's child. Throughout the story the reader is presented to themes and motifs concerning love and mortality. During this time in India sickness was rampant throughout the country and is an aspect of life that is of major concern to these characters.

Themes and Motifs:

Impermanence:
This is a dominant theme throughout Without Benefit of Clergy. Both Holden and Ameera are well aware that their domestic happiness can be destroyed at any time. Holden fears that he will be transferred from his posting in India and have to leave Ameera behind. He is also constantly worrying for the safety of his wife and child while he is away at his government post. A concrete reason is never given, but given the ambivalent reception news of the plague receives from officials it likely has to do with the common outbreaks of disease and/or political and social instability. Ameera, for her part, seems convinced that Holden will one day leave her for an Englishwoman, and has resigned herself to this regardless of the fact that Holden has never shown any signs of being anything less than pleased with their relationship.

Social Hierarchy: This is expressed in two ways: 1) English/Indian and 2) Male/Female.

English/Indian
- All John’s peers in the government appear to be other Englishman
- The house employs an Indian servant
- When the plague hits English wives are sent away for safety while Ameera is not (though this was her choice, Holden offers to send her away, presumably it is his position that allows for the privilege to be extended to her at all)
- Ameera observes that the “white mem-logs” marry later in life and seem young for their years in both appearance (because they do not have to work as hard and have better nutrition) and behavior. She also believes that most of them will outlive her.

Male/Female
- Ameera constantly speaks in a subservient manner, referring to herself as her husband’s slave
- Ameera desperately wants to give birth to a male child for Holden’s sake to carry on his line. She also believes that if she gives him a son he will be less likely to cast her aside for an Englishwoman.

Travel: Kipling provides plenty of descriptions of local customs, rituals, dress and terms which to spark the interest of the readers and give the story a touch of the romantic.

An interesting note as to the title:
In English law, the benefit of clergy (Law Latin Privilegium clericale) was originally a provision by which clergymen could claim that they were outside the jurisdiction of the secular courts and be tried instead in an ecclesiastical court under canon law. Eventually, the course of history transformed it into a mechanism by which first-time offenders could receive a more lenient sentence for some lesser crimes (the so-called "clergyable" ones).

The use of this in the title likely refers to the fact that John Holden and Ameera were not and could not be married. For them to do so would have met professional ruin for Holden. They do however live as man and wife unofficially, without the blessing of his church or hers.