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Sinopsis

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The story of the man who would be king describes the journey of two half-mad yet determined Englishmen from obscurity in India to divine rule in far-off Kafiristan. The two men smuggle themselves into Afghanistan posing as a mad priest and his servant, steal some mules when their camels can go no further, trek over the vast mountains, and set themselves up as kings by demonstrating the power of the rifle to spear-brandishing natives (in the most murderous way, one might add). They later establish their status as gods by introducing Masonic mystery and orders to the mountain villages. Eventually, however, their humanity is exposed, thus wrecking the dream of empire.

The story itself is witty and exciting, driven by the raw prose and longing for exotic adventure characteristic of Kipling. At the same time, this short tale is remarkable as a summary of imperialism and its problems. The questionable motives and courses of actions of the imperialists are exposed, yet at the same time they are shown to reflect human nature more than ideology or political purpose. The ease with which a small number of people with superior technology can subjugate much larger numbers is also demonstrated in a non-sentimental fashion (it is certainly not a politically correct story by present standards). Finally, the ending emphasizes the impossibility of maintaining authority in the long run under such circumstances - technological knowledge must be revealed to maintain order, responsibility must be shared with intermediaries, and propaganda will eventually be appropriated for subversive purposes. If only historians could be as brief and straightforward as Kipling in recognizing these simple facts about how imperialism came about and how it was doomed to failure.