

The Mad King

By

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CHARACTERS

King 45 +

FRANCIS 21+

FIGURE Male or Female 30+

The place is a home for retired actors although there is nothing to reveal it as such. The stage is empty apart from a throne on a dais. There is a window/exit /door centre upstage and an entrance downstage left. It is dawn. As the light increases, the sleeping figure of the King curled up awkwardly on the throne is revealed. The characters are all dressed in black.

KING

(Waking abruptly he looks around with a look of terror on his face.)

FRANCIS! FRANCIS! WHERE ARE YOU? Where...?...

(Enter FRANCIS)

FRANCIS

Anon Sir .

KING

Late.

FRANCIS

Your majesty, I came as quickly as I could.

THE KING

When the King calls, the servant obeys.

FRANCIS

(He kneels)

Your will is my command.

KING

These are hard times. We are under attack.

The enemy is almost at our gates, seeks

To destroy us, to plunder our wealth, to
Murder our children, rape our women and
Now we must fight or die.

FRANCIS

My Lord. I and my father
Before me have served you loyally these last twenty years.

KING

Now, tell me is the guard posted? Are the men ready?

FRANCIS

There is no guard Sire.

KING

No guard?

FRANCIS

No guard.

KING

Not possible. They were here yesterday. Where are they?

FRANCIS

They left sire. In the dead of night.

KING

All of them?

FRANCIS

There's no one left apart from your Queen and her handmaiden.

THE KING

Every, disloyal miserable cowardly one of them left ?
Left me? Their king, whom they had sworn
To defend with their lives?

FRANCIS

I do not know their motives.
There was little talking. I was asleep. I...

KING

Enough. Let them rot. Is my army ready? Rouse them.
Sound reveille. Let them sharpen their swords, cast off
Drowsy sleep. Let the trumpets of war sound.

FRANCIS

Sire, there is no army .

THE KING

Of course there is an army.
We have always had an army. A King has to have armies.
That is how they rule, you fool.

FRANCIS

The army left, Sire.
They did not want to fight.

KING

Left?

FRANCIS

Yesterday sire. You told them
To leave, to go home.

KING

I did? I don't remember.
You're sure?

FRANCIS

Yesterday you said resistance was futile,
The enemy was too strong and there was no point
In dying for a lost cause.

KING

The enemy is far from home.
Hunger and disease gnaw at his entrails.
We wait. We watch. When the moment comes
We strike. A few good men are all I need.

FRANCIS

The people have left too your majesty.

KING

My people?
My subjects? My loyal subjects? They too have left?

FRANCIS

Yes your majesty. Some time ago.

KING

The castle is empty?

FRANCIS

Yes your majesty. There is only the Queen and her handmaiden.

KING

What have we come to as a nation, a people? Where are the bonds
Of kith and kin. Can we not stand like men, proud of our nation?
To defend our homes, our way of life. To stand as our fathers
And forefathers have stood, resolute, proud, willing to give our lives
For the sake of our country? Remember the great battles
Of the past, remember Truwallon where we stood in a thin line
Our backs to the sea, my father's sword glinting in the sun
As he rallied the brave few and we struck and we struck
And the enemy fell around us like the leaves of autumn
Their blood drenching the sand....

FRANCIS

That was before my time.

KING

Of course it was. Even I was just a boy,
Frightened, but the shadows were long and we buried
Our dead, washed and bound our wounds and briefly
Knew peace.

FRANCIS

It was a long time ago, Sire.

KING

It was indeed. They were good days, well earned.
Men paid the price so that we might live.

FRANCIS

Can I get your breakfast?

THE KING

Breakfast?

FRANCIS

There is still food in the kitchens. They didn't take it all.

KING

Yes, breakfast would be good.
It is hardly the right day for dying on an empty
Stomach.

FRANCIS

Yes my Lord.

KING

For the Queen too...

(FRANCIS exits)

I worry about her. She's not been well.
When the body's sick, the mind follows suit.
I must think clearly. There must be a solution.
There always is. What are my choices?
My brothers are too far away to help me.
My guards, army, people have abandoned me.
The castle though is strong. And we have food.
We could withstand a siege for many months
And even if we died our fall would be
A symbol, a light in the darkness. The people
Would mourn our death, nurture their anger against
The conqueror, tell stories to their children
Of a King who would not, despite all odds,
Leave his post but stood his ground ...Oh that's good.
But maybe, this might not be the right time.
Perhaps a tactical retreat would be the better way.
Leave the enemy with no true sign of victory,
No corpse to gloat over, no crown to pick up
From the battlefield and then.... Yes... then to wait
Till sickness and boredom and the weather
Take their toll, while we nurture our people's venom
At the atrocities the enemy will commit
And we shall wear their patience to the bone.
Then they will sue for peace on any terms
So that they too may return to kith and kin.
It is a possibility.

(Re-enter FRANCIS)

FRANCIS

Your breakfast sir.

KING

Good. I am feeling hopeful.

FRANCIS

I found some eggs.

KING

Eggs. Delightful.

FRANCIS

And some bread. There's plenty of flour in the bins. We can make more.

KING

Your loyalty will not go without reward.
A king's gratitude is worth more than gold.
Have you taken food to the Queen?

FRANCIS

No your majesty. I will do so now.
(Exit)

KING

Then of course, I could just fall on my sword.
The heroic gesture of an abandoned king.
Yes .. A lesson to all those cowards, those traitors
Who when their country called turned a blind eye,
Would not face the enemy... a messy business though,
Painful. But courageous. Kings must face death
As other men. Sooner or later it will come
And it matters not the coming but the way
That it is faced. After that it is a matter of history.
Let me be judged on my record. I have protected the realm.
I released wheat from the granaries in times of famine.
I built hospitals for the sick, homes for the aged
And the orphans. I flayed alive judges found
To be corrupt and made their skins into cushions
For the others as a reminder. I built dykes to drain
The land and instituted laws to protect the weak.
I have been a good king, better than my father.
I do not deserve this. What should I do?
Maybe I should not ask ,what I already know.
The hardest way is the only way to go.

(Enter FRANCIS)

Fetch me my sword.

FRANCIS

Your sword sire?

KING

Ay, my sword.

FRANCIS

Yes your majesty.

(Exit FRANCIS)

KING

I suspected that one day I would be called upon to do

Just this. Sometimes when I looked out

Over the battlements watching the sun rise

And fall, I knew that this moment would come.

I wondered, would I be able, would I have...?

(Re-enter FRANCIS with sword)

KING (CONT'D)

Good. Now. This is to be your last act of devotion

To your king. You hear me?

FRANCIS

Your majesty?

KING

You must hold the sword. When the enemy comes

You must tell the truth. You are the witness.

On your shoulders rests my reputation.

Tell the people all they need to know.

Stand here. Grip it hard with both hands. Like this.

Good.

(He removes his shirt)

Kneel. Brace yourself. The pommel against

Your hip. That's it. Close your eyes. I will grab your

Shoulders. Stand your ground. Be brave. Bid my wife

Farewell. Are you ready?

FRANCIS

(He cries)

But my Lord.

KING

Hold fast.

(He puts the point of the “sword” to just under his ribs, takes hold of FRANCIS’s shoulders and pulls himself onto the “sword”. There is an exhalation of breath as the sword appears to enter. He collapses unable to breath.)

FRANCIS

Your majesty.

(A FIGURE DRESSED IN BLACK APPEARS IN THE DOORWAY CENTER. HE SMILES AT FRANCIS WHO SMILES BACK.)

LIGHTS DOWN