

Enter JOHN, dressed in rags.  
He crosses to a candle, stops and  
looks up.

JOHN

Strange light from unseen windows. A message,  
perhaps, some kind of message.

(He searches for matches among his  
rags)

Can't see a thing in this light.

(He dumps odds and ends from his  
rags - an empty cigarette pack, a  
tape measure, a knife, fork and  
spoon, a woman's nylon stocking -  
finally, a box of matches. He  
strikes a match)

I want to see their faces; look them in the eye.

(He lights a candle)

Keeping secrets...

(He lights another candle)

I've got my eye on you!

(Pause, he lights another candle)

Mustn't shout. No need... to shout.

(He lights the final candle)

I hope it isn't too late.

(He gestures to an imaginary court  
and sits on the throne. Pause)

We are pleased to learn that the revolutionary  
forces - lawless enemies of Crown, Culture and  
the Fatherland - Motherland? -

(Pause, he is confused)

Well, whatever, they've been destroyed, finished,  
done for. The revolution is no more.

(He smiles as though receiving  
applause)

We share your happiness a thousand-fold. We share  
your joy at this momentous moment. And so I dress  
in rags! In rags! Isn't it fitting? To dress in  
rags, to have bartered my rings and jewels - my  
trappings and all signs and figures of royalty -  
all for the -- Whateverland! That's the sort of  
king I am, and don't you forget it! Never once  
did I think of myself -

(Pause)

JOHN (Cont.)

Never mind: forgive and forget. We share your joy, and we bless you. In spite of your being in league with them from the start - you think I didn't know about that? I knew all about it - inciting the people to riot and acts of civil disobedience - never mind! We bless you and ask only that you resume your place as loyal subjects of the Crown.

(Pause)

Yes, We are magnanimous. We can afford to be. In spite of Our rags, Our seeming poverty, We remain sovereign, and We forgive this Court all crimes against Us.

(Pause)

Frankly, I don't need you. I've got my army. I've got Steiner, and Steiner has the army, so... That is the situation. And don't forget the people. They love me. The common folk - life-blood of the - the country! They adore me! They worship me!

(Pause)

The people have the greatest respect for their king. It is only fitting.

(Pause)

We recognize the debt We owe General Steiner, and We pay. How dearly We pay.

(Rising from the throne)

Steiner, in the presence of the Court I greet you with a new and finer title: Marshal of the Army. Arise, return to your troops. Give them this message: their King knows of their loyalty and devotion. And so, a general promotion of rank, as well as the Cross of Honor, First Class - with Oak Leaf clusters! The Crown is most loyal to those most loyal to the Crown.

(He draws "Steiner" aside)

Remember the University? The student corps? We dueled, we sang, we studied philosophy. We were happy. You were a great lover in those days. The women went wild over you. They couldn't get enough of you. You shared the extras with me. The leftovers. I didn't care. What did I care?

(Pause)

You brought out the whore in a woman. You had a great talent for that. You still have- a great talent for that. I owe a lot to you, and you to me, Steiner. Don't forget.

(Pause)

JOHN (Cont.)

You won't forget?

(Long pause)

Mother! Mother! Idiot, what do you want to call her for? The old hag! All she ever-- Mother! Mother!

(Enter BEATRICE, in rags)

BEATRICE

John! Will please stop shouting! I can't bear it anymore!

JOHN

Mother!

BEATRICE

(Shaking him)

John! Stop it!

JOHN

(Startled, then embracing her)

Beatrice. My dear Queen. Don't be afraid.

BEATRICE

You were shouting.

JOHN

It's all right now. I'm all right.

BEATRICE

(Pulling away from him)

You were shouting.

JOHN

Was I?

BEATRICE

Again, yes. It's becoming a habit with you-

JOHN

I didn't realize-

BEATRICE

-almost a chronic condition.

JOHN

Truly, Beatrice, I have a great deal on my mind these days. Steiner, the army, matters of state and destiny--

BEATRICE

Which concern me as well. Should you die--

JOHN

Ridiculous! What an idea. Unless, of course, you've made plans. Have you, Beatrice - dearest wife, loving Queen - have you made plans?

BEATRICE

You are talking like a fool.

JOHN

Good. Fools are often spared, often revered as holy men.

BEATRICE

Don't start raving again!

JOHN

I am not raving! I am merely thinking out loud.

BEATRICE

You are going mad. Yesterday you tried to walk on water.

JOHN

I did not!

BEATRICE

You tried; you looked ridiculous.

JOHN

I'm a sleepwalker! It's a well-known fact.

(Pause)

BEATRICE

There is a limit to the sacrifices I can make.  
Draughty chambers, no rugs, no tapestries,  
nothing to soften the cold. And these rags!

JOHN

Well, these are desperate times.

BEATRICE

Yes, thanks to you. No respectable queen ever  
had to live like this.

JOHN

Respectable! Bite your tongue. Steiner told me  
everything. In great detail. It was very amusing.

(Pause)

You don't even change color; you don't blush. You  
know what that means? You're getting old.

BEATRICE

He told you everything? Even-

JOHN

In great detail.

BEATRICE

(After a pause)

It's just as well. In fact, I'm glad you know.  
We were quite open about it. Quite brazen,  
actually. The best way to keep a secret is to  
publish it before the rumors start.

(She sits on the floor)

JOHN

I do wish you wouldn't sit on the floor.

BEATRICE

Where should I sit? You occupy the throne, for  
the time being.

JOHN

For all time. Steiner will see to that. After  
all, You did your job. You made him happy. Isn't  
that why you offered yourself to him, to make him  
happy, for my sake?

BEATRICE

Actually, it was for my sake. I took great pleasure in making him happy, as you say. And he made me happy, so very happy.

JOHN

Stop using that word.

BEATRICE

You started it.

JOHN

Disgusting euphemism: happy.

(Pause)

Are you jealous of my mistress?

BEATRICE

No.

JOHN

You must be. Just a little? Admit you're jealous.

BEATRICE

I am not jealous.

JOHN

I am. Of you and Steiner.

BEATRICE

It was my pleasure to please him as a gesture of good will.

JOHN

What I want to know is how many such gestures must be made, eh? How many? The man is insatiable. Too many gestures of good will are being made, and still no peace. I have given Steiner everything, and what have I got to show for it?

BEATRICE

You haven't given him everything. Not that he wants her; it's the gesture that matters.

JOHN

You really hate me, don't you?

BEATRICE

Would you care to know how much?

JOHN

Hate is not quantitative, my dear, it's qualitative. It's like any other venereal disease, you've either got it or you don't.

(BEATRICE turns away)

No one listens to me.

BEATRICE

You should listen to your mother.

JOHN

Hah!

BEATRICE

She's trying to save your skin.

JOHN

My ass she is. That stupid hag, I should have had her killed years ago.

(BEATRICE laughs)

JOHN

You laugh now, but wait, you'll see. I am not an ignoramus, you know. I happen to be a man of the world. A king, too, of course, but a man of the world: I've studied history; I've studied philosophy.

BEATRICE

You've dabbled in the arts.

JOHN

Yes, I am a rational man.

BEATRICE

In rags, holding court in the Temple of Reason.

JOHN

Shhh! They'll hear you.

BEATRICE

The clergy? They have abandoned you. After all, you gave the order.

JOHN

To put down the revolt! Only to put down the revolt, that was all.

BEATRICE

If it hadn't been for Steiner -

JOHN

Oh yes, his hands are clean! Damn politicians had a field day. The entire world knows my hands stink to heaven.

(Pause)

I'm not afraid.

BEATRICE

The dark corners? The black robes?

JOHN

I don't want to confess my sins. I just want to get out of here.

BEATRICE

Then talk to your mother. Listen to her. She can help you, John. The people respect her; Steiner respects her. She has your best interests at heart.

JOHN

Her interests, you mean. And what of your interests? Let's not leave you out of this.

BEATRICE

I want to help you.

JOHN

How?

BEATRICE

By convincing you that your mother is right.

JOHN

Oh, you are very good: that throb of sincerity in your voice.

BEATRICE

At least talk to her, will you? There's no harm in talking. You cried out for her a while ago.

John

She didn't hear me, did she? She never hears me; she never listens to me. You came to me. You, not her.

BEATRICE

I was concerned. I thought you might be ill. Your mind wanders; you can't deny that.

JOHN

I imagine things. I remember so many things I would rather not remember -

BEATRICE

Let me send for your mother. Listen to her, John. Respect her years. She knows what is best.

JOHN

Yes. I've been meaning to have a chat with Mommy.

BEATRICE

Good.

JOHN

You give her a call. I'll just wait here; I'll wait for her. Change your clothes while you're at it. I can't bear to see you in rags.

BEATRICE

What have we left but rags? We have only rags!

JOHN

I will not argue!

BEATRICE

Neither will I! If you listen to your mother, perhaps we can exchange our rags - and this cathedral - for finer things: a place and decent clothes and food and a proper life!

JOHN

Don't lecture me! As for my mother, I promise nothing.

BEATRICE

That is all you can promise: nothing!

(Exit BEATRICE)

JOHN

You people can't manipulate me! I'm warning you!

(Pause)

Keep your rags. You deserve them.

(Pause)

Stupid woman. I am surrounded by stupid women. All of them in rags. When this business is finished heads will roll, believe me. Coffers and treasuries will open wide, and I shall dress in gold. Let Beatrice keep her rags. Keep your filthy rags!

(Pause)

I'll make her come bagging before the entire court, her rags rotting on her back. Then, when she is groveling at my feet - no, kissing them. When she is kissing my feet, I'll present her with a splendid gown, trimmed with gold, studded with... No, I'll give her a gown of finest velvet, but no gold trim. In times like these mustn't flaunt our wealth. A bit of silver, perhaps, here and there...

(Pause, smiling)

You see, Steiner, I know how to handle women. I know how to make them beg, how to make them grovel at my feet. Just between us, Steiner, I know how to bring out the whore in a woman. Clothe yourself, my dear Beatrice. You're half naked. The court is all agape. Steiner is admiring you all over again. Sheer poetry, eh Steiner.

(Pause)

Remember that day, many years ago, we both wanted the same woman? I said, "By all means, take her. I won't stand in your way." I could afford to be magnanimous. We were such good friends, such brothers. She was a gem; she gave herself with such abandon - so enthusiastic! I couldn't resist sharing my good fortune.

(Pause)

So you kept her for a year, and then discarded her. She came running back to me.

JOHN (cont.)

(Pause)

I am surrounded by stupid women. They rag me so that I'm a tattered king.

(Enter QUEEN MOTHER with an armload of maps)

QUEEN MOTHER

All right, John, Beatrice said you want to talk business. Well, I'm ready for that. I've been ready for a long time. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever ask for my advice. For your sake I hope it isn't too late. You've made a fine mess of things. Ahhh! Don't make excuses. You're full of excuses - always have been, always will be - but it's too late for that now. Excuses won't buy you shit.

(QUEEN MOTHER drops the maps at his feet, except for one, which she holds before him.)

JOHN

Bless you, Mother, for coming in my hour of need.

Queen Mother

Never mind that stuff, look at this.

JOHN

What is it?

QUEEN MOTHER

A battle map, you fool. I've brought you all my battle maps. I've been pouring over them for weeks, trying to grasp the situation. I've been doing your job!

JOHN

All right, mother.

QUEEN MOTHER

All right, he says! Take a look at the map! See if it's all right! Here: Steiner's army, and there: the filthy rabble.