

THE KING WHO COULDN'T DIE

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Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved...

Osho

THE KING WHO COULDN'T DIE

is a four act play
for young and old.

It's a modern day fairy tale
of humour and sincerity,
mystery and intrigue,
youth and old age,
life and death,
ignorance and love.

The action takes place
in the Kingdom of Yore
in Hither Village
and Yonder Castle.

The characters are:

Ada, a girl of 15, who comes from the town of Mullein in a neighbouring land;

Tim, a youth of twenty, who owns a farm near Hither;

King (also Hubert), 129-year-old King of Yore;

Court Jester (also "Fool"), 101 years old;

Maid (also Hildegard), 99 years old;

Regent (later simply called by his first name, Carl), 40 years old;

Baron (also John Paul or "Baron Lazybones"), assistant waiter at "The Pig and Whistle" inn;

George, innkeeper of "The Pig and Whistle";

Henry, Ada's father;

Bertram, a tramp.

INTRODUCTION

Long ago...

in the prime of his life, King Hubert of Yore, set out on a holy war, leaving his childless young wife, Adelaide, behind.

Two years later, Queen Adelaide bore a daughter but died in childbirth. The daughter, called Maggie, was brought up by Hilda, a young woman from the village who also frequently served the castle as maid. The story went that Maggie had been a foundling left at the castle. No one knew that she was the daughter of the dead Queen Adelaide, except for the Maid, the Court Jester and the Regent. Neither did anyone except for these three know that the Court Jester was Maggie's father. After her death, Adelaide's diary disappeared for safekeeping into the Regent's desk drawer.

Another year passed. King Hubert returned home from his journey and learned of his wife's death. He was told that Adelaide had fallen from her horse and broken her neck. The story of Maggie's birth was kept secret. In his sorrow the King had the entire war booty removed to the attic. He decided never to have anything to do with war again.

At the age of 16, Maggie left for another country, and was never heard of again.

Hubert's kingdom gradually dwindled, nibbled away by the neighbouring princes whom Hubert offered no resistance to. For he had sent his soldiers home long ago and given over complete rule of the land and all political matters to his Regent.

As our play takes place, many years have passed. Peace and happiness reign in the Kingdom of Yore. The King has become terribly old, 129 to be exact, but he is still in good health and - when he's in good company - in high spirits. His Court Jester is 101 years old meanwhile and the Maid, who has long since moved into the palace, is 99. And then there is the Regent, the grandson of the earlier Regent. He is only 40 years old and very ambitious.

Now, as none of the castle dwellers (to anyone's knowledge) ever appears in the village - except for the Regent now and again - rumours about Yonder

Castle have started running rampant. The fact is that once a year on "King's Day", the old King, the Court Jester, the Maid and the Regent appear out on their high balcony to wave to the people, including a lot of tourists, who have flocked there for a glimpse.

Rumour has it that the King's old age might be the workings of unnatural or even supernatural forces. And gossip of ghosts and fraud (maybe those three people waving from the balcony up there next to the Minister aren't "real") have enticed growing numbers of sightseers to Hither Village, not to the displeasure of George, the innkeeper of "The Pig and Whistle".

Every morning, except on Sundays, there is a cabinet meeting at the breakfast table in the throne room of the castle, at which time the Regent goes through the mail with the King and signs important decrees. For the rest, the King occupies himself with reverie and all sorts of games with the Court Jester, whose former sharpness has waned considerably. The aging Maid carries out only the most unavoidable duties but is still a great cook. The castle is in a deplorable state. Only a few rooms are still in use. The Regent is against repairs, maintaining that a decaying castle is more in keeping with the expectations of a sightseeing public. Although the King doesn't mind the state of disrepair so much, he does feel annoyed by the gaping tourists. And he finds it quite amazing that his great age gives him so little trouble. He grumbles regularly that he really ought to be dying one of these days.

Once a week on Thursdays, there is a disco evening at the village inn. John Paul (or Baron Lazybones), the assistant waiter, is disk-jockey for these occasions. A regular Thursday night visitor is an old tramp called Bertram. Where he comes from, nobody knows. Bertram doesn't talk much; but he does keep his ears and eyes peeled. Now and then he even dares to come out onto the dance floor with the teenagers.

Thursday evenings are also the Regent's nights off. The King then goes to bed at half past eight. He hears the Minister ride off in the old Royce to visit his aging mother, so he says, in the big city of the bordering land of Sombury.

But... even in the peaceful land of Yore, intrigues and malicious plans have taken root in the minds of dissatisfied and ambitious citizens. There is a secret conspiracy in the making among the Regent, Baron Lazybones and his friends from Sombury. The aim is a coup d'état and the conversion of

Yonder Castle into a casino. Every Sunday morning at exactly eleven o'clock, Baron Lazybones finds his way into the Regent's room by way of a secret passage. The old folks in the castle know nothing about this...

Our story begins the evening Ada, a young girl of 15, appears in Hither Village.

ACT I

Prologue: Dark outside. Part of the outside of an old mansion can be seen. A dishevelled looking old man climbs out of a high window, descends down a rope ladder and creeps away in the dark.

ACT I SCENE I

Thursday night around ten o'clock inside "The Pig and Whistle" inn. It is the weekly disco night. The event is quite popular with the young people. For one thing, "The Pig and Whistle" isn't a real discotheque, (quite clearly retaining the character of a country inn which has been fixed up with simple means for the occasion). And then, too, Hither Village does have that special power of attraction, located as it is near the mysterious castle, Yonder.

The interior is basically that of an average inn, with bar and tables, but dance space has been made in the middle and there are some more or less permanent light and sound fixtures, which can be "dampened" on other evenings.

George, the innkeeper of about 55, is standing behind the bar counter. The assistant waiter, John Paul, is serving as DJ. He is, as we are to learn later, actually of nobility; thus the nickname Baron Lazybones. He puts on a jovial act announcing the numbers and especially spurring the young girls on to dance. There are quite a few young guests, but sitting at a table, somewhat to the side while still keeping a good eye on everything that goes on, is Bertram, the old tramp. Everyone is used to the fact that Bertram virtually never says a word. There is also a young man of 20 among the guests. Tim, a farmer's son, owns his own farm close to Hither Village. There is lots of light and lots of noise.

Ada comes in with a pack on her back. She is clearly a newcomer to the area. She takes off her pack and goes to sit down somewhere. No one pays any particular attention to her. She goes over to the bar to get a drink. A bit later, meeting by chance on the dance floor, she and Tim strike up a conversation.

Tim: You want another drink?

Ada: Yes, a coke for me, please.

(Tim walks towards the bar counter. As he takes the coke...)

George: Cute girl, Tim...(Tim doesn't respond.)

Ada (as Tim returns): It's quite nice here.

Tim: Yes, it is. Are you here on holiday?

Ada: Yes. I'm going to the castle tomorrow.

Tim: Oh. What are you going to do there?

Ada: Look around.

Tim: Nobody gets in there.

Ada: So I've heard. I'm going to give it a try anyway.

Tim: What for?

Ada: Because of my grandmother.

Tim: Oh, she lives there?

Ada: No. But maybe she used to.

Tim: How do you know?

Ada: Her name was Maggie and she used to talk about a castle. She died when I was six. And there once was a foundling who did live there in Yonder Castle, so they say. Her name was Maggie, too.

Tim: So I've heard. (Pause.) Are you staying here somewhere?

Ada: Mmmm. Well, at least, I hope so.

Tim: You don't have a place to stay yet?

Ada: No.

Tim: I have a place where you can stay, if you need to.

Ada: Do you live here?

Tim: Not far from here. I've got a farm.

Ada: Oh, great. (Pause.) I'm going to go for another dance.

(Ada goes out onto the dance floor again. Bertram, the tramp, does the same. That doesn't seem to surprise anyone. Bertram keeps a good eye on Ada).

End of scene I

ACT I - SCENE 2

Friday morning in the throne room in Yonder Castle. There are two high windows in the middle back and six doors: front left (to the outside door and kitchen) middle left (is hardly ever used, but Ada does appear through it in a suit of armour in Act II - scene 6), front right (King's bedroom), middle right (private abode of the Regent) and right back (Court Jester's bedroom). The sixth door is located to the left of the windows, a sort of extension to the stage setting. This door leads to the bathroom and adjoining toilet, which the three men use. There is a large hearth between the front and middle doors on the left. All the woodwork is brown and classic in style and could be carved. Long velvet curtains hang from wooden curtain rods in front of both windows.

We see two large thrones positioned next to each other rather far back in the room but which are not totally symmetrical in their relationship to the windows. A cloth covers the left throne. The right throne is red, purple and gold and has carved armrests. Embroidered in the backrest is Hubert's coat of arms which reads: *Vivo Quod Vivo* (I live for I live).

There is a very large rectangular table, somewhat towards the front, perhaps parallel to the footlights. It could easily seat twelve people but now we see only five old, tasteful chairs grouped around it. The King prefers the chair farthest to the right, the one which is closest to his bedroom door. Half covering the view of the draped throne is a huge hobbyhorse in perfect condition, beautifully painted with its head beautifully carved. The floor is wide planked with a gigantic carpet brought back from a distant country. Once exquisite, the carpet is now threadbare from the passage of time. There is a large candle holder on the table with one or two sturdy candles in it. A sign hangs on the door to the Regent's room with a message on both sides. When the Regent is going to be in his room, he turns the sign to: "Do not disturb". When he leaves for the throne room or elsewhere, he turns it to "Entry Forbidden". This he has been doing consistently for years.

As the curtain goes up, the throne room appears, dimly lighted. Thin rays of sunlight stream through a chink in the closed curtains. No one is there. The room is clean and tidy. The silence of centuries hangs in the air.

After a few moments, a cock crows loudly. Three times. Immediately following the third crow, the Regent appears from his room in a

distinguished looking classical night robe. He has a night cap on and a large towel over his arm. He turns the sign to "entry forbidden" and hurries off in his slippers towards the door diagonally opposite: the bathroom. He disappears and we hear the door lock shut.

A little later, the Maid enters from the left. She is already dressed, be it rather simply. She might be wearing a sort of indoor shawl over her other clothes, as protection from the morning chill. She hasn't fixed her hair yet. She has a table cloth with her, which she spreads over the right half of the table. She takes the candle holder and sets it on the fireplace. Then she walks over to the curtains and opens them carefully. A pleasant light fills the room. She walks towards the front right door, listens for any activity behind it, decides not to go in. She crosses the room again, disappearing through the door she entered from.

The stage is empty for a moment. Then the Court Jester appears through the back right door, still in some sort of pyjamas, but already wearing his fool's cap. He totters towards a window, opens it and gives out a loud cock crow. The rooster outside gives an immediate response, whereupon the Court Jester closes the window and exclaims:

Jester: Right. Time to get up!

(He walks towards the bathroom door and finding it locked, lumbers on towards the front left door. He disappears, calling:) Hildegard!

(The bathroom door opens. The Regent appears spic and span with his hair combed. He is more dressed than he was at his previous appearance. He walks towards his door, reconsiders, walks forward a few steps towards the King's door and listens. Refraining from knocking, he calls out instead, not all too loudly:)

Regent: Your Majesty!

(There is no reaction. The Regent disappears into his own room, not without first turning the sign to: "Do not disturb.")

Now the Maid enters again with a pot of tea under a large tea cap in the form of a little doll woman with a wide skirt. The Court Jester totters in right behind her, balancing a large tray with the breakfast paraphernalia on it. He sets the tray down onto the "bare" part of the table on the left.....)

Jester: Twenty-seven!

Maid (preoccupied): Twenty-seven what?

Jester: Steps. From the kitchen to here. Twenty-seven steps. How many times a day? Let's say twenty-seven times as well. That makes twenty-seven times twenty-seven steps a day...which comes to seven-hundred-and-twenty-nine steps a day. In one year, that's 365 times 729, or 266,084 steps. We're talking some 20 million steps since I started work here. You a few less, me a few more. Or should I say (singing):

A few more for you,
A few less for me, '
For she walks to the kitchen,
More often than he!

(Starting to pour himself a cup of tea, the Court Jester is interrupted by the Maid who calls out as she exits through the door on the left:)

Maid: It hasn't steeped yet!

Jester (singing):

So what does it hurt,
If the tea hasn't steeped
Under mother's skirt?

(He puts the tea cap back on the pot. The Regent now re-enters, this time fully dressed and with an important looking file under his arm. He goes straight to the left side of the table and installs himself there.)

Regent: Has his Majesty not yet awoke?

Jester:

I hate to say
This time of the day,
That he doesn't stir
...As it were.

Regent: It's high time! Are you sure?

Jester: Aha! His Excellency rhymed! What's going to come of us!

Regent: Go call him.

Jester: That's not my job, Your Excellency.

Regent: Where is the Maid?

Jester (Looks under the tea cap and sighs): If I only knew!

Regent: Go call her and have her wake the King. It's late. Too late. The affairs of state can wait no longer.

Jester: Certainly, Your Excellency. The cock has already crowed four times and the King of Sombury will be descending upon our land within half an hour. Hard or soft, Your Excellency?

Regent: What do you mean?

Jester: That's no answer... Hard or soft? Your egg... HARD or soft?

Regent: Medium... and call the Maid!

Jester (half acting despair and disgust): Medium...! (He goes to the window, and opening it, calls out:) Maid! (He quickly closes the window again and on his way to the front left door, he passes the Regent.) She doesn't answer. The tart!... It hasn't steeped yet! (This is meant for the Regent who is about to pour himself a cup of tea. The Court Jester disappears through the front left door.)

Regent (alone): Impudent fool. (He doesn't pour himself tea, however. The King enters from his door. He is still in his night clothes and very sleepy. He stumbles towards the bathroom door.)

King: What a lot of commotion... You'd think the world were going under. Ah, Reg...

Regent (who has risen): Good morning, Your Majesty. Did Your Majesty sleep well?