

The King's Accounts | A Stage Play in Three Acts
a parody of errors

by Peter Cowlam

The King's Accounts

A note on staging

The action of the play is located in and around the court of a future King of England, King Chads I, which has moved to its country retreat for a joust re-enactment. Although all characters and events are approximated to an era of late capitalism, the court is shown as more akin to a Camelot-Tudor amalgam. Accepting that this makes the King and his court a fantasy of sorts, there is nevertheless symbolic meaning in it. King Chads's is a life circumscribed by precedent and tradition, and the ancient backdrop he is etched against is a concrete representation of the ancient system of power a country like England is rooted in. In varying degrees all the courtly characters, and some of the other characters too, reflect these two worlds – the modern, late capitalistic one, and a feudal world of deference and pageant. The premise is that the accidents of history ensure that in some measure this is the duality the English have long inhabited. Paradoxically, it is King Chads only who over the course of the play is able to shed most of his courtly encumbrances. From their very first scenes he, the Defence Secretary, the Chancellor, the King's Musician – in fact all associated with court life – are dressed partly in Arthurian or Tudor garb, partly as moderns – ermine, boots, hauberks, swords, hose, codpieces all in combination with business suits, neckties and an assortment of other articles, bill-folds, cigarette lighters, etc. Palmers and Star begin the action dressed entirely as moderns. All peripheral characters, such as in street and pub scenes, are largely modern, though each of these with a sole concession to Camelot or Gloriana (for example a boot, or a sword, or a hat etc.). Madame Zemlinsky, who is a professional astrologer, is complete in the representation of her trade (dotted bandeau, hooped earrings, Tarot cards, a crystal ball, etc.). It is by the fifth scene of Act III that transformations have largely taken place. The King has faced up fully to the crisis of his reign, and has formed a plan to steer himself and his future successors through the mires of a changing political landscape. At this moment most of his retrospective garb has gone (by the end of this scene all of it has gone), so that now he looks more thoroughly the post-industrial man. Conversely, his chancellor and Defence and Foreign Secretaries have slid at the same rate in the opposite direction, as *they* take on the exteriors of a Cecil or a Walsingham or a Lancelot (for example). This is intended to reflect their own solution to the time's most urgent question as a drastic one, borne of their inability to see the people who elect them into office as anything other than statistical units. Politics is a trade in human flesh, amorphous populations bound to the dictates of a new English feudalism, held together by the workaday demands arising from low wages, debt, a half-hearted education and severe limits on social opportunity. Fully blinkered at the close of the third and final act, the scheme they concoct is no more imaginative than the many like it our history is littered with.

Players

King Chads I, a future King of England
Sir Purse, King's Chancellor
Lady Mort, King's Defence Secretary
Sir Gawain, King's Foreign Secretary
King's Musician

Palmers Ltd, an entrepreneur
Madame Zemlinsky, a fortune-teller
Star, a singer / songwriter

King's courtiers
King's servants
King's vassal

Pincher, a merchant

Erato Electric
Chorus (heard only)

A pub landlady
Two tabloid journalists
Revellers

A lutenist

Entertainers, and others

(‘O Fortuna, in excelsis...’)

Act I

I.1 Busy highway pub, interior, not far from King Chads's country estate. It is late, and some are already leaving. Palmers is talking with two locals he's befriended. Star is in a corner sitting sullenly on his amplifier, nursing his guitar. The two tabloid journalists are together, talking. Madame Zemlinsky is with two companions, who look a little shifty. The pub landlady is collecting empty glasses, at intervals stopping to chat with her regulars. Finally she stops to talk with Palmers and the two Palmers has struck up a conversation with. Palmers is dressed in a long coat that reaches to his ankles. Under his coat there appears to be a very fat man. In reality, this outer garment is lined with the purses bulging with the money he has earned from exploiting Star.

1 REVELLER To be honest, I'm getting fed up with all this talk of the Republic.

2 REVELLER Surprising to hear you say that, you always prattling some opinion or other. There's a rumour going round that a blueprint for the 'glorious' Republic has already been drawn up.

1 REVELLER What, you mean Chads has sold his shares in Royal Household Plc, and retired to one of his windfarms....

2 REVELLER Nothing so dramatic.

1 REVELLER Pity. Now Chads and his private correspondence – that *is* a juicy read. Don't think you'll ever top that.

2 REVELLER I'm not so sure. There is speculation in the *Daily Screech* that hints he's reached an accommodation with our friends across the *Manche*.

1 REVELLER That rag!

2 REVELLER Rag or not, the whole reason Chads is slimming down his Royal Court is that Glitterati Brussels won't be out-glittered by Glitterati House of Chads. In return he gets safe haven in Paris and the promise that the EU won't abolish the remaining European monarchies.

1 REVELLER I can't see HM Government handing the whole lot over – the Crown Jewels – to the bureaucrats in Brussels. Or Chads abandoning his limos and riding round on a pushbike.

2 REVELLER That would be a motorised pushbike. Powered by electricity he sells to the rest of us generated by his windfarms.

1 REVELLER Bah! Don't buy it! It's only ever *The Guardian* agitating for a republic, and half of their readers have lost interest.

2 REVELLER Don't be so sure. I have heard it suggested King Chads is sympathetic to the idea of a second referendum, re-entry into Europe.

LANDLADY What's your opinion, Mr—

PALMERS Palmers. The name's Palmers. Here's my card [*hands her business card*]. Personally I don't see the King, what with all his generous initiatives, ever retreating from public life. Even if forced to abdicate, heaven forbid.

1 REVELLER I don't call unveiling a few plaques here and there on a hydroelectric dam, or a field blooming with organic courgettes, or stocking his bathroom cabinet with herbal remedies, 'generous' exactly, *or* much of an 'initiative'.

2 REVELLER That's just not fair. You can't deny: the 'alternative' Chads has left his mark on government policy, not to mention the Green Brigade. And aren't you overlooking all those trusts of his?

LANDLADY That's a good point.

1 REVELLER ‘Good point’! He’s never lived down his mistress the Princess Moon – so much more popular than he ever was, even after he got rid of her! All these schemes are just a diversion.

LANDLADY *Former* mistress.

1 REVELLER All right, *former* mistress.

PALMERS Might be something in that, yet to me Chads *is* a man of conscience, whatever you think of his windfarms. I speak from personal experience. Take my business partner over there, whose name isn’t Simon Star for nothing.... [*All briefly look over to him*] Now his is a tragic lot if ever there was one. A boy who’s never wittingly met his father, has spent his whole life with inner-city crime, who doesn’t have the rudiments of education. I was duty bound to take him off the streets.

2 REVELLER What’s that got to do with the King and his conscience?

PALMERS The King knows our Star here by the hundreds of thousands like him. Absolutely no use to the grinding wheels of commerce. Chads asks himself, what’s in it for people like them?

LANDLORD Well – what?

1 REVELLER Nothing but problems.

PALMERS Haven’t you heard? Chads’s latest scheme for the young unemployed?

1 REVELLER I did read something – to do with song and dance and chord books.

PALMERS Spot on! That instrument he’s got is all down to Chads’s largesse. In return, all he’s got to do is learn how to play it.

2 REVELLER Don’t see how handing out chord books and guitars – even *if* by royal decree – makes the life of our youth any better. And what good’s that to the rest of us?

PALMERS You’ve had an evening’s entertainment, haven’t you?

2 REVELLER If you can call it that. Anyway, that’s typical Chads: aren’t singer-songwriters passé? It’s all crooners, Botox and hairdos nowadays. Your Star there looks like something left over from the ’70s.

1 REVELLER What’s he trying to prove?

PALMERS That’s exactly where I come in. It’s one thing for a boy like Simon Star to learn a few chords and sing a bit. What’s vital is management. From that he learns a level of trust in the mature, common-sense kind of person who’ll ensure his talents aren’t exploited in all the wrong ways, so think what can flow from that.

2 REVELLER It’s a cruel joke if you ask me. Everyone knows: for every success there’s a thousand unsung flops. That’s imaging.

2 REVELLER And imaging works only for the most determined narcissists.

LANDLADY How do you answer that, Mr Palmers?

PALMERS Well, success in the entertainment biz isn’t – if I read it right – the *only* aim.

1 REVELLER In that biz what other aims are there?

PALMERS You hand the social outcast an opportunity, and that gives him motivation. Once motivated, integration follows. Before you know it, all sorts of opportunities open up.

1 REVELLER The trouble with that theory....

2 REVELLER It’s just another gimmick.

PALMERS It’s a bold attempt to solve pressing social problems. You know for the first year I don’t have to complete his tax returns....

2 REVELLER Well in that case mine’s another pint!

PALMERS Ah now gentlefolk! You see I’m a little short....

Attention turns to Zemlinsky and the two people with her, who although deep in conversation have been

glancing over at Palmers.

3 REVELLER You sure he's carrying cash?

ZEMLINSKY Yes, can't you see? He and that caged canary work strictly COD. I've followed them down from Harlesden. Every day that fat man just gets fatter.

4 REVELLER My Uncle Ollie, he's got an illness – makes him balloon up something chronic. How d'you know 't isn't that?

ZEMLINSKY Look, the only medical condition Mr Palmers over there suffers from is itchy palms. You'll never see him out of that coat. Custom-made and stuffed with pounds sterling.

3 REVELLER You keep telling us that.

ZEMLINSKY It's true.

3 REVELLER Don't see how it can be. You don't make a bean playing pubs and clubs – not out here in the sticks.

ZEMLINSKY All that's just a front. He's got some other deal going.

4 REVELLER What deal?

ZEMLINSKY Believe me, I've followed him. Closely. It's no accident he's holed up here.

3 REVELLER On Chads's doorstep, you mean?

ZEMLINSKY I do mean. Here for the joust re-enactment. But in the lead-up to that all sorts of other entertainments. Song, dance, and all those dreadful performance poets. Am I right?

4 REVELLER Well what's that got to do with anything?

ZEMLINSKY I'm still thinking that one through.

3 REVELLER Can't see it myself.

ZEMLINSKY Look, are you with me or not?

4 REVELLER Supposing we are, how are you going to relieve this Mr Palmers here of all this cash you say he's carrying?

ZEMLINSKY We'll bide our time. One morning, when he's strolling in town – on market day's probably best – I'll lure him into my tent. I'll read his Tarot cards – all good news of course. In fact I'll make it brim-full of gold. And here's the trick. I always put out dishes of candied fruit for clients to munch on while they're having their egos tickled. Only in his case he won't know what I've doused it with. Soon he keels over, spark out. I step outside, I implore you – passers-by – for help: client taken ill and all that. He'll be groggy when he does come round, but I see your tiny hospital here is still open for emergencies.

4 REVELLER And?

ZEMLINSKY That's where you take him.

3 REVELLER What about the money?

ZEMLINSKY I'll have bagged it.

4 REVELLER And made off while we're dragging him to A&E. Do we *look* stupid?

3 REVELLER And what if he doesn't like candied fruit?

ZEMLINSKY Look, are you with me or not?

4 REVELLER You've got to be joking.

3 REVELLER It's hare-brained.

ZEMLINSKY Oh well, take it or leave it. It's a golden opportunity.

Attention returns to Palmers et al.

2 REVELLER I tell you what. Why don't we put this wonderful royal initiative to the test. Why don't you ask that business partner of yours to play us some Hendrix, or Clapton, or what about a bit of Dowland....

PALMERS Um, well, he's not quite up to *that* standard.

2 REVELLER Pity.

PALMERS These things take time.

2 REVELLER Tut.

PALMERS I'll ask him to play *something*.

LANDLADY But make that the last. [*Bell rings, Landlady addressing whole pub*] Last orders at the bar, please! [*Resumes her collection of empty glasses.*]

PALMERS You having a rest over there, Star? Come on, a song for the road!

Star looks bored, sluggish, uninterested.

1 REVELLER [*Advancing on Star*] Come on, hup you!

STAR I'm too tired....

PALMERS Nonsense! Think of all that cash....

The cajoling goes on. Meanwhile, Madame Zemlinsky has been abandoned by her first two companions and is now in conversation with the two journalists.

1 JOURNALIST That's right, *Daily Screech*, that's us. One of the better publications. I do the stories, Melissa here the photos.

ZEMLINSKY Isn't this a bit out of the way for you – a godforsaken hole like this?

1 JOURNALIST Not at all. Fact is we think we're onto something.

ZEMLINSKY Juicy scandal, eh. My, the things they get up to, out in the sticks.

2 JOURNALIST Well to be honest it's something we think might interest you.

1 JOURNALIST We've been on your tail, see.

2 JOURNALIST Since Harlesden.

ZEMLINSKY Harlesden!

1 JOURNALIST While you've been trailing those two.

ZEMLINSKY And what would you know about that?

1 JOURNALIST No need to go into that.

2 JOURNALIST Not now.

1 JOURNALIST You must have read my touching accounts of Princess Moon.

2 JOURNALIST Mortified at the loss of her royal prospects, but now married off to a property magnate, bless her.

ZEMLINSKY Can't say I did read that. Knew she'd got a new toy boy. Didn't know he was in the property biz.

1 JOURNALIST Ah, the beautiful Princess Moon. Woman of destiny.

2 JOURNALIST Put all her faith in the royal astrologer, so busily searching out the meaning of her life neither noticed King Chads just didn't love her.

1 JOURNALIST 'What is love?' he asked .

2 JOURNALIST All written less in the stars, more in our columns.

ZEMLINSKY I don't have time for the papers.

2 JOURNALIST What a pity. Anyway, we've got this on good authority.

1 JOURNALIST There's been a bureaucratic gaffe.

2 JOURNALIST The Princess might have gone, but officially the post of Royal Fortune Teller, by a twist of the in-tray – well, it still remains.

1 JOURNALIST More important, it's vacant.

ZEMLINSKY Ah, I get it. King Chads is down for his blood sport, and you're after sport of your own.

1 JOURNALIST That's too too crass. All you have to do is apply for the job.

2 JOURNALIST You don't even have to get it.

1 JOURNALIST Once you're in, with all those royal flunkeys, any least bit of goss you get – well, leave that with us, we'll soon cook something up.

2 JOURNALIST Simple, innit.

ZEMLINSKY What's in it for me?

2 JOURNALIST We'll pay.

ZEMLINSKY How much?

1 JOURNALIST That depends on a) the quality of material, b) how long it runs.

ZEMLINSKY Well let's just say c) I'll think about it.

2 JOURNALIST Naturally. No need to rush.

1 JOURNALIST No rush at all. In fact I'll get us all another drink, before that charming landlady rings her bell. [*Goes to bar*]

Attention returns to Palmers et al.

PALMERS Come on, that's the spirit!

Sluggishly, Star takes the middle of the floor. He adjusts, plugs in his electric guitar, then, to exaggerated gestures, crashes out a single chord – whose echo is long. This inspires smiles and foot-tapping among what remains of the audience – except for the Landlady, who puts hands to ears. Palmers fondly pats his belly.

2 REVELLER That it then?

PALMERS The boy's had a very long day.

2 REVELLER If that's the best he can do, I don't see this as one of Chads's better schemes. Can he play any other chords?

LANDLADY Not tonight he can't. [*Bell rings*] Time at the bar! Let's be 'avin' your glasses, please!

Drinks are finished and people leave, with the Landlady collecting glasses. Remaining onstage are Palmers, Star and the Landlady.

PALMERS Well, Simon Star, I think you've earned a rest....

Star, sullen, shuffles to an inner door, walking his amplifier as a dog on a lead.

PALMERS I think after all we'll take that room.

LANDLADY [*As she tidies the place*] Just one night then, is it?

PALMERS That'll do us.

LANDLADY He doesn't practise after hours, does he?

PALMERS The boy's tired.

LANDLADY Well then, let me see – we'll call that eighty quid.

PALMERS [*Ensures Landlady doesn't get a view of the inside of his coat as he pulls notes and coins from one of his many purses*] Less thirty for my fee for Star here, which I make fifty....

LANDLADY [*Looks at the money glumly before pocketing*] And I suppose this would be your baggage.

Both Palmers and the Landlady eye the travellers' backpacks, each waiting for the other to pick up and carry.

LANDLADY Well, Mr Palmers – rooms are that way....

The same pause over the baggage, until finally the Landlady gives way.

LANDLADY [*Picks up bags*] Yes, Cecilia, rooms are that way....

PALMERS Lead on.

Exeunt Landlady, Palmers, Star.

I.2 Full light of morning. Enter Palmers, yawning, stretching luxuriantly. Sits, and now that he's alone checks the purses hidden in his coat. A smile, a chuckle. Half turns, to address Star offstage.

PALMERS Come on, Simon! Time to get up! [*He stands, arms akimbo, tosses back head, roars with laughter. Enter Star, wrapped in blanket, still sleepy, clutching guitar and chord book.*]

STAR I'm so tired! [*Slumps in seat*] How come you get the bed?

PALMERS [*Laughs*] Now don't be like that! What you need is a good breakfast – bacon and black pudding!

STAR Can't be bothered....

Exit Palmers, roars of laughter. Star remains sitting for a moment, then, forcing himself, stands. Takes up guitar (not plugged into amplifier), opens chord book, strums his famous chord. Pulls out pencil, writes something in chord book. Strums again, and at the same time sings a syllable. Repeats this, bundles his chord book away. Exit.

I.3 Enter Palmers, followed by bustling, disgruntled Waitress.

WAITRESS Breakfast, he says, half the morning gone!

PALMERS And that's for two, don't forget.

Exit Waitress, speechless. Palmers sits, waits. Enter Zemlinsky, bearing a much over-sized, artificial four-leafed clover.

ZEMLINSKY A-ha – a man of business.

PALMERS Oh, no, please – not today!

ZEMLINSKY [*Sits, brandishes fake charm*] You wouldn't want my Romany curse, not when I've got a knock-down price on this....

Palmers stiffens, draws hand over concealed purses.

PALMERS It's not even real!

Enter Waitress, bearing two breakfasts.

ZEMLINSKY How often what you call 'real' is only a world of appearance.

WAITRESS Suppose that'll be for three now!

ZEMLINSKY Very kind, but don't trouble. I'll have just whatever they're having.

Waitress places breakfasts before them with loud crash.

WAITRESS Oh, it's no trouble at all!

PALMERS Make yourself at home, won't you!

ZEMLINSKY I had a feeling we'd do business. [*Exit Waitress.*]

PALMERS [*Takes four-leafed clover*] Not for this we won't! It's plastic!

Zemlinsky places a pack of Tarot cards on the breakfast table.

ZEMLINSKY Never mind that, the real action's here, in the cards – they *never* lie. I'll show you what I mean [*starts to spread out cards*].

PALMERS Oh, no, really – I don't think so!

ZEMLINSKY [*Holds up a card*] It's all a matter of chance. Look at this [*holds a card – the V of Pentacles – under his nose*].

PALMERS What, precisely, am I supposed to be looking at?

ZEMLINSKY [*Points to female figure on card*] Well this is that stuffy waitress, or will be, if she doesn't

buck up!

PALMERS [*Scrutinising card*] A beggar woman – barefoot – outside in the snow.... [*Begins to eat his breakfast.*]

ZEMLINSKY [*Holds up another card, the IX of Cups*] Ah, now what have we here! This is you, I believe....

PALMERS [*Takes card*] It's a passing resemblance, I suppose.

ZEMLINSKY [*Snatches card back*] Oh come along! It's more than passing! This is the card of success – and I should know.

PALMERS You're well qualified in this, are you?

ZEMLINSKY I'll have you know the great Madame Zemlinksy – yours truly here – has practically filled the vacant post of Astrologer Royal.

PALMERS Didn't know there was such a thing – Astrologer Royal.

ZEMLINSKY You didn't? Well you do now – the job's as good as mine.

PALMERS I'm sure. As it happens I do have business myself at Chads's place. Probably we'll meet. Until then, why don't you just run along....

ZEMLINSKY You can't afford to wait till then – not with this. [*Turns over one further card*] You know why?

PALMERS All right, tell me why.

ZEMLINSKY Because we're definitely on to something.

PALMERS [*Laughs*] You fortune-tellers!

ZEMLINSKY [*Turns up next card, with a flourish*] Amazing!

PALMERS I really don't think so.

ZEMLINSKY No? What could be more apt for a man destined for Chads's court – than a king! Now is that a coincidence or what? [*Holds up the King of Pentacles, but upside down, orientation she feigns to notice only when Palmers takes the card from her.*]

PALMERS [*Looks at card then puts it on table*] What's it mean?

ZEMLINSKY [*Adjusts the card's position on table*] Silly me, I've got that upside down. It means wealth – very great wealth – wealth beyond imagination.

PALMERS [*Resumes his breakfast*] Those few cards tell you that?

ZEMLINSKY That and a great deal more, though what I think you really need is my extended reading. I *could* fit you in on market day. I've got a tent on the square.

PALMERS No time for that, I'm afraid.

ZEMLINSKY [*Eats*] All right, I'll let you have a preview. Your prospects for now, through handouts and tax incentives, are all very well – but what are the options for growth?

PALMERS That is a question we businessmen ceaselessly ask.

ZEMLINSKY Ah, but have you gazed like me into the murky crystal of fortune, or trodden the ruinous fields of war?

PALMERS Who said anything about war?

ZEMLINSKY Well let's put it another way. Do you really understand the cut and thrust of commerce? Do you, like me, have a feel for the lucky twists and turns?

PALMERS Mm.

ZEMLINSKY I am, sir, your student of chance – in a very chancy world.

PALMERS Eloquently put. I'm still not going to buy your lucky charm.

ZEMLINSKY I don't sell lucky charms. That – take it! [*She shoves the plastic charm closer to him on the*

table.]

PALMERS [*Handles the charm briefly, puts it down*] I'll leave it for the waitress. I'm sure her need is greater.

ZEMLINSKY Market day. Madame Z's tent. I can fit you in at noon.

PALMERS Another time perhaps.

ZEMLINSKY I'll do you a special offer.

PALMERS Sorry – no sale.

ZEMLINSKY It's your loss.

PALMERS Thanks but I'm in a rush. Got to hit the road. Now, where is that boy?

Exit Palmers, calling after Star. Madame Zemlinsky takes a final stab at the black pudding on her plate, gathers up her cards, and leaves, smirking. Enter Waitress, tutting, who clears the table and examines the four-leafed clover curiously. Exit Waitress.

I.4 Midday. A country road. Enter Star, with guitar, amp on dog lead, shambling and weary. He stops and turns, and with hands on hips waits for Palmers. Enter Palmers, tired, irritable.

PALMERS It's got to be time to eat! Let's stop.

STAR I was thinking....

PALMERS That's no good on an empty stomach. Come on, let's eat....

They stop at the roadside. Palmers takes his bread, cheese and ale voraciously, rolls, pants ecstatically. Star picks at his food, without really eating.

PALMERS Something the matter? No breakfast. Nothing now. You'll waste away.

STAR I was thinking....

PALMERS I've told you not to do that on an empty stomach.

STAR I was thinking about the money.

PALMERS [*Draws hands over concealed purses*] My boy, it's what everyone wants. Lord knows, it's hard to make a living. I am, mind, an optimist.

STAR We're broke!

PALMERS We're breaking even.

STAR Broke!

PALMERS You're such a pessimist!

STAR You said there'd be profits. Fame.

PALMERS All in good time, Simon. Trust your old friend Palmers. The road to riches is *up*-hill.

STAR With too many pubs and clubs. I'm dead, playing them.

PALMERS Now don't you worry about that. That's all about to change.

Enter Madame Zemlinsky.

ZEMLINSKY Sirrah!

PALMERS Now what would you say, Simon, looking at this! Someone's lost a cap of bells?

STAR Huh?

ZEMLINSKY Jest at your peril. This motley at first deceives. You mock. Then it's only a matter of time. Doubters half believe, then *beg* for my prediction.

STAR What's she talking about?

PALMERS I think she wants to tell your fortune.

STAR Oh. That's all right then. How much?

ZEMLINSKY For you, sir, the cost of a lunch (pity this bread's not a bit fresher).

PALMERS Cheap, eh!

ZEMLINSKY And a swig of that, if it's not too warm.

PALMERS Particular, isn't she!

STAR 'S all right. Have mine. I'm not hungry.

PALMERS Simon!

STAR Go on, take it.

ZEMLINSKY A bargain!

PALMERS Is that what you call it!

ZEMLINSKY Why not let *him* be judge of that....

STAR Yeah, right.

ZEMLINSKY [*To Palmers*] Exactly – you keep out of it. [*To Star*] Now, for this to work, you have to let me feel the vibrations.

STAR Do what?

ZEMLINSKY An object. Of sentimental value. That's the way we do it.

STAR [*Tries pockets*] Here. It's a ring [*hands ring to Zemlinsky*].
Zemlinsky crouches, holds ring firmly, confronts her client in trance-like meditation.

ZEMLINSKY Ah yes!

PALMERS Something coming through?

ZEMLINSKY I have your past. It floats, like a dream, a cloud. A cumulus, fringed with the orange of fire. Sunrise.

PALMERS There. Your life's been a sunrise. This is all worth it, I hope.

ZEMLINSKY Ah, an early tragedy. A death. Someone close. An uncle, or brother, or could it be your father?

PALMERS *You're* supposed to tell *him*!

ZEMLINSKY Your mother perhaps, whose ring this is – or was – or might have been.... I don't mind telling you, it's not that easy....

STAR It's incredible!

PALMERS Simon! This is quackery!

ZEMLINSKY Ah, I see we're onto something! She's light-, no dark-haired. There's colour in her cheeks. Ah, and a smile....

PALMERS Now isn't that amazing!

STAR You can *see* all that? In a vision?

ZEMLINSKY In its utmost clarity. You are, I think, that famous entertainer everyone talks about around the pubs and clubs.

STAR Don't know about famous.

ZEMLINSKY Who hasn't heard of Simon Star!

PALMERS Now wouldn't that be how she knows about your rosy ma? *Light*-haired, by the way.

STAR He's got a point.

ZEMLINSKY Well never mind the past – that's all done. My advice is, take good care, come the future.

PALMERS [*Making to go*] Stale bread, warm ale. It's about the right price. Take it. Come on, Simon.
Star leaves Zemlinsky his lunch. Zemlinsky returns ring, bites into bread, spits it out, produces Tarot card.

ZEMLINSKY [*Looks at card*] Swords, the Nine. A youth starts up in bed. His night is dark, troubled. Sirrah.

Sirrah. Fare well. Take care. [*Exit Zemlinsky.*]

PALMERS Mad!

STAR But it's strange about the ring.

PALMERS Pure nonsense. Now! If old Palmers told you your fortune, it'd go something like this. Assets – not worth much now – will soon be highly prized: keep writing those lyrics. And forget the pubs and clubs – that's the other thing. From tomorrow, you'll play for the King. That's a little something I've been working on.

STAR You're kidding me.

PALMERS Straight up.

STAR The King of England?

PALMERS He of the shire horn. He of the windfarm. He of the tabor.

STAR Now what's a tabor?

Exit Palmers, exit Star.

I.5 A busy street outside a pub, the Rose and Crown. Enter Zemlinsky and Client, each with a pint of beer. Street cries. Passers-by.

CLIENT Fifteen it is then.

ZEMLINSKY [*They sit at a table*] That'll do nicely.

CLIENT [*Puts bunch of keys on table, passes her coins*] What revelations then...?

ZEMLINSKY [*Tests shiniest coin in her teeth*] Um, no. But *that* ought to do us.

CLIENT [*Fingers lucky charm on key ring*] What, this?

ZEMLINSKY Exactly. Give it here.

Enter Palmers and Star at opposite end of stage, who for the moment don't see Zemlinsky and her Client.

CLIENT [*Hands over charm*] Right! Let's see what's in store!

Enter Pincher, looking busy, who passes close to Palmers and Star. He stops to talk to someone.

PALMERS Old Pincher? Surely not....

STAR Do what?

PALMERS If that's who I think it is.... Oh but look. There's that fortune-teller.

CLIENT So what you're saying is trust no one.

ZEMLINSKY For the moment anyway. You see, a man's bond is sometimes like a Japanese plum tree – pretty but fruitless.

CLIENT Just my luck!

ZEMLINSKY Though the sun changes signs. Then it starts to look better.

CLIENT Ah, so when's that then?

ZEMLINSKY That'd be any day now.

CLIENT What's it mean?

ZEMLINSKY It's either love or money.

CLIENT It's not the new mortgage?

ZEMLINSKY [*Indignant*] That's money, isn't it?

PALMERS You know if I were you I'd ask her about that Nine of Swords.

STAR That's just what I was thinking.

ZEMLINSKY Tell you what I'll do. Come back in a week's time. By then I'll have more on your mortgage.

CLIENT You've nothing on it now?

ZEMLINSKY Let me just try and think [*goes into trance-like state*].

Pincher is Sarf London. He parts company with the person he's stopped to talk to, while Palmers catches up with him. Star strides towards Zemlinsky, and stands off slightly while she finishes with her Client. Over the course of the following exchange between Palmers and Pincher, Zemlinsky shrugs shoulders and shakes her head. Her Client resignedly gathers up his keys and leaves. Star takes his place.

PALMERS Well now! If it isn't my old boss Pincher!

PINCHER [*Hesitant*] Palmers?

PALMERS Don't tell me I've changed *that* much!

PINCHER Long time since I saw yer larst. 'Ow are yer?

PALMERS [*Laughs thunderously*] Still the same old Pincher!

ZEMLINSKY About to play for the King, eh. That must mean you're heading for the estate.

STAR He's down for the joust.

ZEMLINSKY You always play for the King?

STAR Nah.

ZEMLINSKY Well I can't say I'm surprised you're about to now. I knew I felt *something* in that ring.

PALMERS So that's you over there on the corner. Ah yes, I see the sign. And been here how long?

PINCHER That 'ud be seven years now by my reck'nin'.

PALMERS Really that long! Should have thought Dean Street suited you down to the ground.

PINCHER Things went from bad t' worse very quick. *Very* quick.

PALMERS What happened?

PINCHER Bizniz wuz 'ard, mate. *Very* 'ard.

PALMERS That explains the low pay!

PINCHER Look, Palmers, sorry. Times wuz bad. Couldn't get a rate. Banks closin' in. Everyone wantin' 'is pound o' flesh. I see yuv med it up though, Palmers.

PALMERS Still the same old Pincher!

ZEMLINSKY You know it's so refreshing to find a man whose only aim is to satisfy his Muse.

STAR His what?

ZEMLINSKY You don't have to be coy with the great Madame Z – she knows everything! I could see from the start, here's someone prepared to go to the ends of the earth to satisfy his dream.

STAR [*He sees the possibility*] That shows then, does it?

ZEMLINSKY So unlike the bloke sitting here just now.... All he talked about was loot. That's not like you, now is it? An artist and all.

STAR Dunno really.

ZEMLINSKY Couldn't see the positives in anything.

STAR Some people!

ZEMLINSKY Absolutely!

STAR About this Muse thing....

Zemlinsky looks perplexed.

PINCHER You got bizniz 'ere, Palmers?

PALMERS With my partner over there, who's got a bad weakness for fortune-tellers.

PINCHER Nice-lookin' boy.

PALMERS We've taken advantage of Good King Chads's generous patronage of popular art. That guitar you see is one of many royal handouts, coming free with a chord book. Must say he's responded very

well – he’s got three chords under his belt, and can sing to them all! He even writes his own lyrics. Problem is he’s young and dreams.

PINCHER You done well, Palmers. Mean to say, what ’opes ’as anyone got of gettin’ a royal pick-me-up, what an’ all this talk o’ the Republic....

PALMERS Talk is all it is. There will be, Mr Pincher, absolutely no Republic. I say that as a man of the world.

PINCHER Alwez thought you ’ad it in yer, Palmers. I did, really I did.

PALMERS It hasn’t been easy, mind. Adaptability, that’s my motto.

PINCHER ’Daptability....

PALMERS You know my first move was into horology....

PINCHER ’Orology?

PALMERS Selling watches. [*Pulls out a half-dozen wristwatches pinned to a square of velvet*] Want to buy?

Pincher shakes his head.

ZEMLINSKY There are lots of different types. For you I think something ancient, in a glow – a radiant Erato.

STAR So how would that tie in with the Nine of Swords?

ZEMLINSKY Ah, that. A card people loathe. The world seems fit with its adman’s rills and streams – the sheen of its copper-coloured clouds. Then presto! Disease strikes. A man wakes with night sweats: the couch and its rosy quilt is a bed of lamentation, and *that* is the triumph of failure.

PALMERS Well now – my partner’s bound to be wondering. Promise to look you up. Such a pretty little market town – we might even stay a bit.

PINCHER See you then, Palmers. Do drop in.

Palmers goes over to other two. Exit Pincher.

STAR Failure?

PALMERS What’s this I hear, Simon? More gloom from the merchant of paradise?

ZEMLINSKY It’s never so cut and dried. I’m teaching your friend here the value of foresight. A life honed to its prospect of fortune.

PALMERS Such glib nonsense.

STAR There might be something in it....

PALMERS These are the charms of pauperdom, as anyone can see. Her own prospect of fortune’s a spell of make-believe, exchanged for a crust of bread.

ZEMLINSKY I wouldn’t be too sure about that.

PALMERS The fount of all knowledge can tell me if this is a good place for a room.

ZEMLINSKY That question, sir, is too mundane.

PALMERS Sorry I spoke [*exit Palmers*].

STAR I’m going.

ZEMLINSKY Then go well! At the King’s I’m told there’s a flourish of trumpets, masques, play, intrigue. And remember – fortune!

STAR Fortune.

Exit Star. Zemlinsky watches him go, then tosses back her head, chuckles wickedly. Exit Zemlinsky.

I.6 The Minstrels’ Gallery, the King’s country estate. Enter two Courtiers, a Juggler. Enter a wandering

Lutenist, who takes centre-stage, singing and playing.

LUTENIST

I took my fair maiden,
For love I was craving,
O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

Wishing to sway her,
I thought I would play her
A colourful song
On her passions to lean.

O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

She said, 'Don't be bashful,
And don't you be tactful,
Come here and sit by me,
Unbutton my dreams.'

O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

Enter King's Musician.

At this invitation,
With no hesitation,
I swelled all her fancies
Till they bust her seams.

O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

I gave her a squeeze-o,
I parted her knees-o,
Then we were united
In one perfect dream.

O down in the valley
Along by the stream.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Lays hands on Lutenist*] Salacious vagabond!

1 COURTIER Now what?

KING'S MUSICIAN It just won't do! [*Heaves Lutenist to feet, forcibly expels him from gallery. Moans and jeers from the rest.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN Don't dare show your face again! [*More moans and jeers. King's Musician struts to middle of floor and kicks away Lutenist's stool.*]

1 COURTIER Such a show of petty feeling....

2 COURTIER And frankly surprising. Is this the man whose saintly masses choir the angels of heaven!

1 COURTIER Whose madrigals...

2 COURTIER ...sung in a quincunx of trees...

1 COURTIER ...and from the King's high windows...

2 COURTIER ...over the King's marble floors...

1 COURTIER ...have bewitched the world's ambassadors!

KING'S MUSICIAN Yes! And for this! A world that glories in Philistinism!

1 & 2 COURTIER We're just having fun!

KING'S MUSICIAN But you forget – you all forget – I, I am Master of the King's Music.

1 COURTIER He bears it all so solemnly.

JUGGLER With good reason. It's rumoured the King's about to stump up more cash, for drum kits as well as guitars.

2 COURTIER Is that so?

1 COURTIER Why yes. I heard it myself.

KING'S MUSICIAN Take *that* with a pinch of salt.

JUGGLER [*Juggling*] If one pinch is enough. That masque with the pipe and tabors he said was 'dull'. This is what he wants.... [*He throws his skittles high into the air.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Takes first skittle in mid-flight, lets the others fall*] For the masque on my desk, this will be my whipstock. You'll have a suit of rhombs, and a bell for each ear [*beats Juggler*].

JUGGLER [*Cowed*] Now just a minute!

KING'S MUSICIAN That's it, come on! [*Beats him into retreat*] Show me a cartwheel, I'll pen a caterwaul! Come on, hup, higher.... [*Exit Juggler.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN Remind me. That's a suit of yellow rhombs.... [*Exit King's Musician. His skittle – whipstock – is thrown back from offstage.*]

2 COURTIER That, sir, is one of the world's young fogeys.

1 COURTIER Somebody get that lutenist....

Lutenist, Juggler, reappear, and with them resumption of earlier merriment.

CURTAIN

Act II

II.1 Night. Curtain rises on Star, dozing in a room at the Rose and Crown. His guitar is hanging up, and there are fresh manuscripts in evidence. A seductive twilight. Gradually, the sound of waves breaking on a shore. In his dream, Erato Electric is going to sing, though for the moment twilight conceals her. Then, dim light is directed to mouth of sea cave, where Erato Electric sits. She is not, it turns out, the Muse of classical antiquity as suggested by Zemlinsky, but is presented so: hair in dreadlocks; ring through nose; safety pin through earlobe; loose smock; tight leggings; Doc Martens. Though her song is lyrical, it is distorted through a vocoder, or some similar piece of electronics.

ERATO ELECTRIC

When the morning lights have risen
high above the sparkling sea,
the silver ship of Erato
will turn to leeward restlessly.

Crescendo of sea waves

When the soaring gull has driven
wide against the flying spray,
voyagers of a starless time
will lean to landward unafraid.

Crescendo of sea waves

When the Fates are all confounded
and the Furies all beguiled,
the silver ship of Erato
will turn to leeward reconciled.

Crescendo, then diminuendo, of sea waves. Erato Electric humming. Star sitting up, spellbound. Chorus, also through vocoder (or similar), is going to echo the last stanza. Simultaneously, Star picks up his guitar and approaches his Muse.

CHORUS

When the Fates are all confounded
and the Furies all beguiled,
the silver ship of Erato
will turn to leeward reconciled.

Crescendo, then diminuendo, of sea waves. Erato humming, Star strapping on guitar, both retreat into the cave offstage. Sounds, lights, fade.

II.2 Cabinet room, the King's country estate. A long table, around which chairs, and at the head the King's throne. Enter King, perturbed, flourishing household accounts. Paces impatiently, tosses documents down onto table. Sits on throne, takes up documents, reads perfunctorily, tosses them down again. Tuts, drums fingers, crosses, re-crosses legs.

KING Oh, for heaven's sake! [*Further spell of troubled inactivity.*]

KING Pshaw!

VOICE FROM WITHOUT [*Muffled, vaguely tuneful*] With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino!

KING What is he doing!

VOICE FROM WITHOUT [*Slightly more tuneful*] I gave her my fleas-o, I started to sneeze-o....

KING [*Rises suddenly*] Vassal!

Sounds from without, objects falling to floor. Enter Vassal, sheepish.

KING I told you to fetch my polo stick.

VASSAL [*Astonished*] Polo...?

KING Yes, idiot. Polo!

VASSAL Not pogo?

KING [*At pains to be patient, expresses himself syllable by syllable*] Go and fetch my po-lo stick.

VASSAL [*Touches forelock*] Right away.

Exit Vassal. Enter Chancellor, with his own copy of household accounts.

CHANCELLOR Sire, so sorry I'm late! [*Flourishes accounts*] I trust you've found a moment for these?

KING I've tried very hard to *avoid* a moment for these.

CHANCELLOR That isn't going to look good – certainly not in parliament. I cannot press the case strongly enough: with so many internal enemies, all of whom have long eyed these chambers – power, Sire, the very organs of state. It's only a matter of time, and something has to give.

KING Yes, yes, yes! I hope we're not going to have the Republican lecture!

CHANCELLOR I wouldn't presume to restate my personal view on that, as by now I know how well acquainted you are with it. Whatever your *own* view might be, public perception of this [*flourishes accounts*] won't equate to anything other than an awful lot of luxury lavished on yourself. In the wake of Princess Moon, that does your popularity no good.

KING I don't think public perception, or even popular opinion, is as wooden as you think – at least if you'd only succeed in keeping those wretched tabloids out of it.

CHANCELLOR That's never as easy as it sounds. They *always* worm their way in.

KING Well I've banned them from here.

CHANCELLOR They'll find a way, I promise. And what if they get their hands on these [*flourishes accounts again*]? Just listen. [*Reads from accounts*] 'Thirteen thousand jellies, tarts, and custards. A thousand sheep....' [*No response from King*] 'Five hundred stags.' 'Three hundred porks.' Ditto 'veals'. 'A hundred and four oxen.' And what's this? an 'unnumbered quantity of chickens'. Then there are 'quails, pigeons, seals, porpoises, swans'. This was a single meal!

KING Yes, yes, but it's not as if I'm entertaining friends.

CHANCELLOR You and I know that. But frankly if you will bring together these EU delegations, and the leading lights of global commerce, and that moneyed hypocrite from Extinction Rebellion, one can't see it as other than a jamboree for the rich and powerful.

KING Someone has to keep the EU onside, after you and your cronies managed to alienate them completely.

CHANCELLOR It was the will of the people, as I recall. You remember the referendum?

KING Will of the people that johnnie bombshell managed to hijack. Look, you can't make progress if people won't talk to each other. One *has* to bring them together.

CHANCELLOR But this is pure bad timing. You know how emotive talk is on the rising cost of living.

KING That's because we cannot trust you politicians to do anything of service to the people – *my* people. Made worse by all your petty infighting. If you could try for once to keep your petty narcissisms under control, *your* electorate, *my* people – you know, those who allow you a tiny glimpse of power [*flourishes his own copy of accounts*] – might be better placed to vote for what is right. Did you know the ordinary bloke now is in favour of a return to the EU?

CHANCELLOR Sire, the EU is well known as a sink of waste and corruption, quite apart from our membership fee – it cost us millions per hour, every single day, for which we got in return directives, all of them idiotic, and in the tens of thousands.

KING Yes, yes, yes. Spare me the propaganda.

CHANCELLOR Sire, please.

KING You think *this* is a high price [*flourishes accounts*].

CHANCELLOR I would remind you, Sire, of some of the EU's worst excesses.

KING Please don't. I've heard it all before.

CHANCELLOR [*persists with his argument*] Had it not been for us, your UK wind and wave reserves, worth billions as you know – *they* would be a 'shared resource'. I don't need to remind you to what extent the royal exchequer benefits from your windfarms.

KING Whereas your government would hive off all the proceeds into private offshore accounts.

CHANCELLOR I shall pretend I didn't hear that. In the real world money changes hands for goods and services. For the grandees of Brussels just signing a bit of paper would have converted a UK national asset into someone else's property. Given away – just like all our fish stocks.

KING And you of course are no stranger to giving stuff away. Ironical, isn't it, when you and your cronies *ceded* power in the first place, so supinely handing it to Brussels. You've even booted out all my hereditary peers. What a choice I've got: stay here with a ragbag of self-serving politicians, and wait for the Republic; or follow Eddie and Wallis into Paris, where I'm assured I'll be looked after.

CHANCELLOR Sire, all I say is we juggle weighty matters, in difficult times. There is, currently, a squeeze on the merchant polity, which makes it politically problematic that so much good living *appears* to be lavished on yourself. Debt is at an all-time high. Savings are worthless. The young cannot find work, let alone a foothold on the property ladder. As for indirect taxation....

KING All this belongs to *your* circle of power. Use whatever means you have to exercise it. *I* have to ensure my continuity. Let us hope Sir Gawain has some better news from Gaul, and has done what I asked.

CHANCELLOR Which was?

Enter Vassal, with pogo stick.

KING Really what *you* should do. Try to have some influence. Try to establish better relations with our former friends of the great Euro-leviathan.

CHANCELLOR Sire, you're looking pale....

KING [*To Vassal*] That, is not, my polo stick!

Exit Vassal, crestfallen.

CHANCELLOR I hope Sir Gawain has told the EU exactly what *I'm* telling you.

KING What exactly are you telling me, Sir Purse?

CHANCELLOR That the times call for prudence. [*In further examination of household accounts*] Alas we can't any longer blame your former mistress, the Princess Moon, whose wardrobe bill alone would have propped up the national economy.

KING Why don't you auction off some of that stuff she left behind? I'm always finding those leotards of hers, or beachwear, or one of her evening dresses. All curves and coruscations!

CHANCELLOR That wouldn't look good in the tabloids. She's still very popular with them, you know.

KING [*Slightly petulant*] And what have you done about *my* popularity!

CHANCELLOR Well, to be fair, there's been a good take-up apropos of this latest initiative for youth.

KING Now remind me. Which one is that?

CHANCELLOR Sire, the nurture and encouragement of a professionalised musicianship, at grass roots. Your generous commitment to instruments and tuition books – gratis – to any teenager who so expresses the wish....

KING [*Gloomy, uninterested*] Oh. That. Can't help thinking that's not one of your *better* ideas.

CHANCELLOR That, if I may say so, Sire, is not the attitude – not if you wish to retain what popular support you've managed to reclaim.

KING I personally can't stand the bim-bam in it! Give me Bach any day.

CHANCELLOR It's important you appear you can – or rather that you actually like it! Just at this moment there's every chance you can. I've invited a child of the new arts revolution here, with his agent. We've also appointed a new Astrologer Royal.

KING Astrologer Royal! I thought we'd got rid of all that mumbo jumbo.

CHANCELLOR The post was vacated but not dissolved. Anyway, you should view it as an opportunity. The world loves its coffee-break horoscope, even more so should the King have his cards or palm read. The tabloids, they'll love you for it.

KING I was hoping for a game of polo.

CHANCELLOR You know that's not good for you. You know what the doctor said.

KING [*Flourishes accounts*] It's these accounts need doctoring, not me!

CHANCELLOR Anyway there's no time. Why not at least look in on this musical protégé of yours....

KING [*Reluctant*] Oh I suppose so. And not forgetting Sir Gawain. He is back hotfoot from Gaul, I hope.

CHANCELLOR [*Puts rolled-up accounts in such a way that they're sticking out from one of his pockets*] And due to report to us here. But he's been delayed, I'm told, and anyway we're not likely to miss him. In any case a look in on our players is just the change you need.

King and Chancellor move together to an outer door.

KING Oh, very well.

CHANCELLOR And don't forget – try to look interested.

They both stop at the outer door.

KING Are *you* interested?

CHANCELLOR I have to admit it's not my cup of cocoa.

KING Shall you *look* interested?

CHANCELLOR You can, Sire, count always on my duty to the realm.

KING Ah, good Sir Purse!

Exeunt King, Chancellor.

II.3 The minstrels' gallery. Enter Fool, with a scroll, and a Lady. Enter Palmers, Star. Palmers ushers Star

to centre stage, where he plugs in his guitar. Enter King's Musician. Enter Zemlinsky. Star has learned three or four new chords, and a succession of notes, which he plays repeatedly. There is a lull when he stops to adjust his amplifier, strings, etc. Applause.

FOOL A boy and so masterful.

PALMERS [*Bows from waist*] My pleasure.

FOOL Your treasure.

PALMERS Yet what a struggle, getting him to this.

FOOL To bliss, to bliss – the verb 'to bliss'....

PALMERS Ah no. To this.

LADY The boy's his protégé.

FOOL [*Unfurls scroll*] A ditty! [*Reads from scroll*]

Good King Chads
in a razzmatazz
gave to the nation
music education.

PALMERS [*To Lady*] As you say. Though on me the technicalities are lost.... My, what the youth of the country gets up to today! I've an ear, an eye, can spot talent, can nurture, develop. Lo, success! It's a correct attitude of mind.

LADY As all things are, Mr Palmers....

PALMERS Give me the young, their ardour, passion. With these hands I mould.

FOOL Sir, you should try an ointment.

PALMERS What you see is the perfection of years.

FOOL

The perfection of ears
for musical careers –
as critical, we fears,
as gardens are to shears...

PALMERS I don't quite follow....

FOOL

We begs pardons:
shears are to gardens!

LADY Years, Fool! Ears, you wash! Is this all worth it, Mr Palmers!

PALMERS [*Feeling purses*] Oh I think so!

Star plays. Enter King, Chancellor, who position themselves at the periphery of events, but in earshot of the King's Musician, and not far from Madame Zemlinsky. Zemlinsky is thrilled to be in close proximity to the nation's highest, and looks them both up and down discreetly but thoroughly.

PALMERS The King – and I see someone with him....

LADY That – is our po-faced Chancellor.

FOOL

The Republican fixation
when it comes to building nations
is Sir Purse's aggregation
of revenge and pixilation.

PALMERS The King has an ear, I hear.

FOOL Two!

CHANCELLOR [*Discreetly elbows King in ribs*] Sire, you must show some enthusiasm....

KING Pshaw!

CHANCELLOR Duty, Sire!

KING [*Quiet*] Oh, very well! [*Now loud*] Ah, that strain! It had a dying fall. It came on my ear – like a sound – that breathes – on a bank of violets. Stealing, giving odour. [*Quiet again*] That do?

CHANCELLOR There's no need to over-do it!

PALMERS It's brought him a smile....

FOOL A simile: Life, vibrant as a lute string....

LADY Only a horn and hounds in the shires could drag him away – once here.

PALMERS In fact, I might say, for the head – let's be honest – of a restless state, he looks very cheerful.

LADY It's no surprise. The lad's accomplished a strange world of sound.

KING That antique song we heard last night – more than light air, it should have relieved my mind. But this!

PALMERS So, so gratifying – when the papers are all so full of his melancholy, what with so much greenhouse gas.

FOOL [*Reads from scroll*]

La lune, la lune,

La Princesse Moon,

who geared up the press

for her honeymoon.

LADY Fool! Do not mention the Princess Moon.

Exit King's Musician, upset at the success of his rival.

CHANCELLOR And that's his agent over there I was telling you about, Palmers Ltd, who's kept in touch with us right from the start. Very conscientious.

KING Good for Mr Palmers. What's the likelihood, do you think, of dispatching a clown to find the King's polo stick?

CHANCELLOR We shall shortly find out. He's here.

VOICE FROM WITHOUT With a ho, and a hey, and a ho noniney.

KING [*Voice rising*] Vassal!

VOICE FROM WITHOUT I coughed and I wheezed-o, I fell to my knees-o.... [*Enter Vassal, with pogo stick.*]

KING [*Voice rising*] Vassal! [*A break in Star's playing.*]

VASSAL Pogo.

KING Idiot!

Exit Vassal, pursued by King.

CHANCELLOR [*Claps hands*] To work!

Exeunt all, variously. As the Chancellor himself leaves, unbeknown to him Madame Zemlinsky whips the accounts from his pocket and secretes them about her own person, before darting off through a separate exit.

II.4 A busy street outside the Rose and Crown. Enter Zemlinsky and the two Journalists. Street cries. Passers-by.

2 JOURNALIST So you see stick with us and who knows where else we can get you an in.

ZEMLINSKY If it's all so easy why can't you get yourself an in?

1 JOURNALIST Ah, Melissa here's got a slight problem with that. Not only has she an interest in the Princess Moon's wardrobe, and what it all cost – and now that food banks are an accepted way of life....

2 JOURNALIST All goes back to a photo of Princess Moon sunbathing on the terrace. Looked so lovely, too.

1 JOURNALIST Chads can be so unreasonable. Won't let us anywhere near the place.

2 JOURNALIST But never fear. Whatever may befall, you can count on us to protect the people's freedom.

1 JOURNALIST Freedom of speech...

2 JOURNALIST ...freedom of the press...

1 JOURNALIST ...*your* freedom to think as *you* please.

2 JOURNALIST So you see – no small obstacle can *really* get in the way.

1 JOURNALIST What have you got for us?

ZEMLINSKY [*Produces Chancellor's copy of household accounts*] A document.

Enter Palmers and Star on opposite side of stage.

STAR But *why* do we have to come here? I'm bored.

PALMERS Because, Simon Star, you wouldn't want things to go wrong now, would you? What are you going to do when a string breaks, or you lose your plectrum?

STAR I've got spare strings. Ooh look, there's the fortune-teller.

PALMERS And those two journalists again.

STAR Wonder if she's open for business.

PALMERS When's she *not*?

STAR Uh?

PALMERS Never mind. Come on, we don't have time for this [*he bustles Star offstage*].

1 JOURNALIST [*He has now got and is perusing Zemlinsky's document*] Mm. Might be useful. You never know. [*Folds document and is about to tuck it away in a pocket.*]

ZEMLINSKY [*Whips document out of his hand and whisks it away into a pocket of her own*] Not so fast! You want this, you pay. That's what you said.

1 JOURNALIST Easy now! Sometimes we have to consider these things – analyse carefully, assess.

ZEMLINSKY Well you'd better do that quick, because I've got other business.

1 JOURNALIST [*After a show of hesitation*] Pay the woman.

2 Journalist hands Zemlinsky a roll of bank notes, which the latter holds up to the light one by one before surrendering the document.

ZEMLINSKY Okay, gentlefolk, it's a pleasure to do business. I'll see what else I can find.

2 JOURNALIST You do that.

Exit Zemlinsky.

1 JOURNALIST She drives a hard bargain.

Exeunt Journalists.

II.5 Cabinet room, the King's country estate. Long table, chairs, throne as before. Enter King, walking with aid of a stick, followed by the Fool, who paces around after the King, imitating his gestures.

KING ...all that dunce's fault, who can't tell a sporting lord from a smorgasbord.

Enter Chancellor, pensive.

CHANCELLOR Sire!

KING Ouch, God damn it! [*Clutches leg in pain. Fool clutches his own leg. Chancellor comes to assist King, is waved away by both King and Fool.*]

KING Get off, get away! I might as well have *ridden* that pogo stick!

FOOL A stick, a stick, my kingdom for a pogo stick.

KING [*To Fool*] This is for you, my pretty! [*King kicks Fool in seat of pants. Fool turns a somersault then squats in corner.*]

KING You do understand, the King *does not* fall off his horse!

CHANCELLOR We'll get a wheelchair.

KING Don't be so hideously grave!

FOOL

Doctor, doctor, please come soon,
that gift I received from Princess Moon,
that diamond-crusted polo stick
snapped in two when my horse took a trip.

Fool helps King, cussing and abusive, across the stage to an exit. Exit King. The Fool remains, sitting in a corner.

CHANCELLOR The King *does* fall off his horse!

Enter, with accompanying fanfare, Sir Gawain, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Sir Purse.

CHANCELLOR Ah, Sir Gawain. Did you do as the King asked, and forge a closer alliance with our European counterparts?

FOREIGN AFFAIRS For the honour of England, I did not! In fact I have driven myself wedge-like between the Teutons and Gauls, whose intent is to ride roughshod over our English sovereignty. With all Europe in their train, they seek our overthrow. I have uncovered plans to grant themselves the dizzy powers of enforcement, where EU law has a great spreading out, all canker-like, with its seed in Ulster followed by a great blooming out in all the assemblies in our shires.

CHANCELLOR What treachery is this!

FOOL

Brave Sir Gawain went to Gaul
to see what he could muster.
He stepped in a river
right up to his liver
and returned in a hail of bluster.

CHANCELLOR Quiet, fool!

FOREIGN AFFAIRS We have watched like dog-a-mangers while they have trumpeted their parliament, under an iron flag, with ancient ditties for anthem. They have girded up their civic lineaments with high conceits, whose issue they do not blush to name supreme over all courts, and that far-flung encroachment they call their frontier. That can yield only increase: a constitution, a global embassy, an office of central taxation, a standing army, a defence policy, recruitment of officers to uphold their law, a judiciary, a single policy for all foreign affairs, a central bank. Sir Purse, there are even whispers our own coffers will be plundered in meeting the cost of so high a flying.

CHANCELLOR [*Thunderous*] Our own coffers!

FOREIGN AFFAIRS With a nullity imposed on our trade concessions if we refuse.

CHANCELLOR It's an outrage!

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Worse by far, it has the cynical backing of one who now calls herself the new Princess Moon, La Princesse Lune, after the king's former mistress.

CHANCELLOR New Princess Moon! Who on earth would that be?

FOOL

La lune, la lune,

La Princesse Moon,

her rise, her political honeymoon.

Enter Lady Mort, the Secretary of State for Defence, in Tudor attire but capped in a modern military helmet. She is reading this morning's tabloid.

DEFENCE [*Reading from leader article*] 'Thirteen thousand jellies, tarts, and custards! A thousand sheep....'

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Lady Mort.

DEFENCE '...five hundred stags! three hundred porks! three hundred veals...!' Have you *read* this?

CHANCELLOR Lord help us, I'm undone. I'm leaked to the press.

DEFENCE '...a hundred and four oxen! An unnumbered quantity of chickens, quails, pigeons....' What does that mean, 'unnumbered'?

CHANCELLOR It means we've got a mole.

DEFENCE '...seals, porpoises, swans....' All this, according to the *Daily Screech*, is quite typical of any Friday-night dinner party given by the King. Just how do these stories get out? [*Forcibly hands tabloid to Sir Gawain.*]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS That's not all, Mort. I am late of Gaul, where news is of the direst import. Already plans are afoot to encourage a second referendum and crush any last moiety of English statehood, under the rampage of renewed EU expansionment. Mort, Sir Purse – I appeal to you both! English honour must be kept intact! What are we to do?

CHANCELLOR It behoves us all to reflect on this quietly. Our next move must be borne of care and attention. It would not do to be hasty.

DEFENCE I beg to differ, Sir Purse. The inescapable answer is war. We must march on Gaul.

FOOL

Mort went to Gaul,

while Purse he stayed at home.

I say hang it all,

let's ask the Pope in Rome.

CHANCELLOR For that we need the people's backing. I am not at all sure we would get it.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS You must do something.

CHANCELLOR But what?

DEFENCE Appeal to every loyal English heart. Stir up a potency of feeling! Anything – anything keeps us clear of porpoises.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Porpoises?

CHANCELLOR There are logistical difficulties, raising an army, what with all the cuts.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS You can rely on Essex.

CHANCELLOR Essex certainly.

DEFENCE Others will follow. Rake up some nasty Catholic rumour, resolved only through a march on France. I predict many, falling forward over limbs, eager under Chads's banner.

CHANCELLOR It isn't quite like that.

DEFENCE Well, whatever it *is* like, you must act now!

CHANCELLOR Look, just leave it with me for a day or two. I'll see what I can do.

Exit Defence Secretary, goosestepping; exit Foreign Affairs, leafing through the Daily Screech. Chancellor sits, a weary hand to his brow. Fool is following other two out, eavesdropping, but is called back by Chancellor:

CHANCELLOR [*His fingertips together, soliloquising*] I wonder. [*To Fool*] Back here, boy.

Fool cartwheels over to Chancellor.

CHANCELLOR I want you to go and find that merchant – that Palmers Ltd – and bring him here. Tell him it's urgent.

FOOL Urgent.

CHANCELLOR Very urgent. [*Exit Fool.*]

CHANCELLOR [*Stands and stalks the stage thoughtfully*] And *so* urgent I of all people should have seen what was plainly under my nose. The King can run up his debts, and even defy parliament, while a greater threat, with its greater drain, comes from across the Channel. A glance back over the recent history of our double entries ought to show how little our junior role in the union had to do with good honest bookkeeping. Why can't the King see it? It pains me to have to admit it, but Mort's right. The EU and its single market is intent only on squashing all efforts at our own enterprise, its grandees forever on the take – with neither myself nor Sir Gawain called upon to reveal the truth of it. We don't even explain it to parliament. And what's the alternative? Re-join our foes from across the Manche – into what kind of club? – and have all our cash simply soaked away in subscription fees and not even a thank you. Then we're supposed to be grateful when half of it is given back as grants. Enough's enough. Mort's *absolutely* right.

Enter Fool.

FOOL [*Flourish of trumpets*] Palmers on the upwave.

Enter Palmers.

PALMERS [*Bows deeply*] Sir Purse.

CHANCELLOR [*To Fool*] That'll do, boy. [*Exit Fool*] Thank you so much for being so prompt, Mr Palmers.

PALMERS I heard these were matters of some moment, and naturally, if I can be of any help at all....

CHANCELLOR As a matter of fact I think you possibly can.

PALMERS I'm intrigued.

CHANCELLOR You were summoned here of course because the King has a keen interest in the youth of his country, and has thrown a great deal of energy and enthusiasm into this latest initiative of his. He wanted to see his scheme in action – here on his own doorstep so to speak – and I can assure you he hasn't been disappointed. In fact King Chads the Good is utterly delighted with the passion and sheer raw talent your protégé has brought to courtly life out here in the wilds. A quite wonderful prelude to the joust.

PALMERS That, Sir Purse, is very, very gratifying.

CHANCELLOR All is not a bed of roses, however. In fact these very agreeable distractions sometimes cloud the King's awareness as to the more weighty issues of state – not of course helped by the pressures and mistakes when it comes to ensuring the succession.

PALMERS Heavy responsibility indeed.

CHANCELLOR Quite. The plain fact is there are enemies within, not helped by a lack of sympathy from abroad, whose sole intent is to destabilise his reign and bring about his downfall. The King is precariously placed, and will not accept for a moment that these external forces represent anything more than the rude health and open debating stance of a mature democracy. However, you and I, Mr Palmers, are men of the world, and *we* know better. We sometimes discover to our cost just how wicked people are.

PALMERS That is a human failing I have had to deal with all my professional life.

CHANCELLOR What complicates the issue is a hostile press. If we could only get *that* on our side, it would surely galvanise the English people into a lasting, concerted effort against our common foe. Yet the sad fact is, all our tabloids ever do – or the worst of them – is hold up the King and parliament to ridicule, which plays into enemy hands. Added to that we suffer leaks. Only today in the *Daily Screech* do we see revelations of the King's ordinary household expenditures, though how that newspaper got its information *I* couldn't say.

PALMERS Now there I might be able to help. Your new Astrologer Royal has close associations with two of the *Screech*'s staff.

CHANCELLOR Is that so?

PALMERS Why yes. Only yesterday I saw them together, no doubt hatching some plot or other. You ought to have her removed.

CHANCELLOR [*Thoughtful*] Possibly. Possibly not. Time will tell.

PALMERS Clearly you know best, Sir Purse.

CHANCELLOR That's what I like about you, Mr Palmers. You've a good notion of what's the pragmatic thing to do.

PALMERS I am after all a man of business.

CHANCELLOR That's exactly it, for there's a bit of business I would like you to carry through.

PALMERS I put myself at your disposal. I am always keen to do that.

CHANCELLOR Quite. But it is, Mr Palmers, a matter of national security. I entrust you with it as someone I can depend on, having no connection with parliament or the civil service, and in no small measure because of your integrity.

PALMERS What is it you would like me to do?

CHANCELLOR We have to fight the tabloids and get popular opinion on our side.

PALMERS I don't pretend I can do that.

CHANCELLOR *I* don't pretend you can either. However, you've surely heard of a band of mavericks and renegades out in the shires, led by a metric martyr.

PALMERS Who hasn't!

CHANCELLOR It's their help we must now enlist.

PALMERS Their help?

CHANCELLOR Exactly. I'm going to give you a document to deliver, which will outline in the clearest terms that the King and parliament are tacitly with them.

PALMERS How does that change things?

CHANCELLOR At the very least it gives them courage to exercise and publish their views, widely enough that *theirs* in the fullness of time becomes *true* public opinion, so nipping all this nonsense in the bud.

PALMERS Will it work?

CHANCELLOR It cannot fail, Mr Palmers, so long as you leave the statecraft to me, and do exactly as I instruct. Just remember, what you're being charged with is of the highest national importance.

PALMERS I will, Sir Purse, do my very best.

CHANCELLOR Good man! That's the spirit, you worthy of England. [*Puts an arm to Palmers's shoulders and leads him confidentially offstage*] Now, I'll have the document drawn up, and we'll meet again in due course.

PALMERS Sir Purse, I am at your service.

Exeunt Palmers, Chancellor.

II.6 The minstrels' gallery. Enter Star, King's Musician, Palmers, Lady, Fool, Zemlinsky. Star performs at his best, with notes, chords and effects, if still limited, all extended in range.

FOOL The King's hurt, so relishes these pursuits.

PALMERS I'm sad and happy at his pain.

FOOL That is perceptive, sir (I see you found a cure for those hands). A scrappy reign indeed – and jeopardised.

LADY Our fancy fool reckons to have the King's ear, just as he tires us all with paltry rhymes.

KING'S MUSICIAN It's all on a par – paltry rhymes, trite verse, mindless entertainment.... *I* sweat blood over masterpieces, yet all the King wants is saloon-bar karaoke. It's not as if I get paid, to speak of!

FOOL Madam! I beg at this solemn hour do take heed!

PALMERS Personally, I felt Chads was trying to show us the true meaning of democracy, setting my boy here alongside his much more cultured counterpart. You should be flattered.

KING'S MUSICIAN I don't share in those popular fallacies. As far as art is concerned, there's no *room* for democracy.

LADY If you believe our pretty fool, it's democracy *per se* we're all about to lose, cretin that he is.

FOOL You may make light.

LADY 'Light', for you, is a special kind of darkness, plain words a garbled foreignness.

PALMERS Nothing's ever that bad. You know, you really must hear this lovely new tune.

KING'S MUSICIAN As hens cluck.

FOOL We're all about to be dragooned.

LADY Cluck!

King and Chancellor appear at a distant doorway, looking in, the King with forced nods and grins, the Chancellor apprising him of important information. Star, having paused, resumes his playing.

KING'S MUSICIAN The boy's learned a new trick.

PALMERS Your eminent critique has I'm sure helped. We're both so glad your office – how to put it – if severe, is magnanimous.

ZEMPLINSKY And by the looks of it those worst fears of yours aren't far off the mark. Look, he's got the King's ear.

KING'S MUSICIAN Yes, well, as you say – the seed is his talent, the blossom will come with nurture. In whatever small way, if I must, I suppose you can count on my help....

ZEMPLINSKY Word is the King views it as nothing less than treason if he can't. Besides, it'd do us all good if you could teach the boy to sing.

FOOL Ideally songs of war.

LADY What utter nonsense!

FOOL The state is imperilled, at the hands of the Teuts and Gauls, whose oppressive law is backed by La Princesse Lune, soon to crown herself La Dame de Coeur, whose pikestaffs and porpoises only the reliable Essex stands to counter.

LADY What garbled news is this!

FOOL Mort plans to march on France.

LADY France!

FOOL After France, the Vatican – where there's a nasty Catholic tumour.

KING'S MUSICIAN What's this he says!

LADY Lord only knows!

FOOL The king fears his fall.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Takes Fool aside*] How's this the sort of news to put about?

PALMERS Such beautiful sounds!

LADY How mute's their parley in *his* feeble brain!

PALMERS My boy's in a twist. [*Moves towards Star, whose increasingly exaggerated posturing accompanies his playing.*]

LADY And's not out of place.

Music and dance. Exeunt all, Zemlinsky the last to leave the stage, grinning broadly.

II.7 The cabinet room, the King's country estate. Long table, chairs. Enter Chancellor, with two rolled documents, which he smooths out on the table. Enter Mort, the Defence Secretary, followed by the Fool, in an obvious parody of her, wearing the same kind of military helmet; enter Sir Gawain, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

CHANCELLOR Ah, Lady Mort, Sir Gawain. At last we play our hand [*flourishes document*].

FOREIGN AFFAIRS With this dispatch you promise such a rousing up, a sturdy throb to every noble English heart. How, and by what trickment is this yeoman Palmers charged to call our suit?

DEFENCE There is in the shires a man called Mack the Metric Martyr, in every sense imperial in his measures, and a force we know would gladly march on our foe. Only problem is a lack of arms.

CHANCELLOR The dupe Palmers feels himself ennobled to deliver into the martyr's hands this so-called diplomatic reconciliation, so giving that band of renegades a second public voice.

DEFENCE This is literally a call to arms, and a meting out of common English law.

CHANCELLOR [*Flourishes document*] Detailed here are precise map locations of state arms caches, and a time of night when the watchmen have been told to look away....

DEFENCE It's so simple. Mack and his martyrs let themselves in. They arm themselves....

FOREIGN AFFAIRS At that quiet and sacred hour, to the great glory of England, Mack and his men will start in their equipage out on the conquest of Gaul.

CHANCELLOR Exactly. Fool, get me the man Palmers.

Fool salutes then gosesteps offstage. Chancellor seals document in envelope.

DEFENCE That isn't all.

CHANCELLOR [*Hands sealed document to Mort*] Our intelligence network has identified the source of recent leaks to the press.

DEFENCE The Astrologer Royal.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS What poisoned agued soul!

CHANCELLOR [*Picks up and flourishes second document*] This is supposedly a memo from the King,

setting out his fears to *us*, his closest aides, in respect of what he ‘sees’ as continuing public opinion against the scourge of illegal immigration onto our fair shores, encouraged by our foes as punishment for leaving the EU.

DEFENCE With Mack on the march, on a first mission to sabotage immigrant encampments at the Port of Calais, that graphically will put the problem into sharper focus, and hopefully outrage our good citizens to the point they will back us in war.

CHANCELLOR Further, King Chads is encouraged to endear himself to the citizenry, by participating – a smile on his face – in all their proletarian entertainments – so spawning a legion of blockheads with electric guitars and chord books kingdom-wide, having tested one at court.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS King Chads and his famed initiatives.

DEFENCE In much the same spirit, the King has been persuaded to allow the Astrologer Royal to read his Tarot cards. She calls herself Zemlinsky.

CHANCELLOR But the King will be detained and arrive late at his apartment, so leaving Zemlinsky alone for a minute or two, where she will come across this memo, not of course written by him....

Re-enter Fool.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS But forged by your hand.

Enter Palmers, close on the heels of the Fool.

CHANCELLOR [*Hands memo to Sir Gawain*] Here, read.

FOOL [*Military salute*] Mr Palmers Ltd.

CHANCELLOR Ah, Mr Palmers. Good of you to come so promptly. As you see we have been in conclave over this hugely important mission we entrust you with, and so to speak have dotted every i.

PALMERS It’s an honour to serve my country, sir. I rest assured there is no risk whatsoever to my person.

DEFENCE Gracious, absolutely none. These metric martyrs are stalwarts like yourself. After all, what is your secret embassy beyond a delivering up of Mr Mack’s mail? [*Hands Palmers sealed document.*]

PALMERS Exactly as I thought.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS God’s speed, sir.

CHANCELLOR And one note of caution. Whatever you do, don’t open it.

PALMERS That thought never crossed my mind, Sir Purse.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Excellent fellow!

CHANCELLOR Mr Palmers, I wish you the best of luck. Lady Mort, Sir Gawain, to work! [*He whips memo from Sir Gawain’s hand.*]

Flourish of trumpets, exit Chancellor. Exit Mort, closely followed by Fool, imitating her steps. Exit Sir Gawain. Palmers alone on stage.

PALMERS [*Tears open sealed envelope, reads to himself, and can hardly believe his luck*] Arms dumps. Open, they say. ‘Just help yourself,’ it says here. Well now, the stalwart Palmers has his own, entrepreneurial view on that. Mr Mack the Martyr, what would you say if Mr Palmers here had a cache full of mortars, grenades and automatic rifles for sale! [*Ecstatic*] I’m going to be rich!

Exit Palmers.

II.8 King’s apartments. Enter Chancellor, who places memo on table. Enter Fool, followed by Zemlinsky.

CHANCELLOR Ah, our Astrologer Royal – the great Zemlinsky. Do come in.

ZEMPLINSKY At your service, sir.

CHANCELLOR The King as you know has the widest purview of all things metaphysic.

ZEMLINSKY Do what?

CHANCELLOR He's glad you're here.

ZEMLINSKY Thought he was keener on the outdoor life.

CHANCELLOR In his own mind action and contemplation are intimately connected. Once, as a teen, Prince Chads, while casting a fly, watched as a salmon, agitated at the disturbance his rod and line had made, in fact looked on entranced as it snapped fatally at his bait. There in that brief cosmic moment the youthful prince saw hunter and hunted intertwined in not only a universal, but a mystical embrace.

ZEMLINSKY Is that so?

CHANCELLOR Why yes. To him these signs run counter to a world of scientific determinism. He once sought for mystical truth in the Kalahari Desert – and saw himself pilloried in the English press for doing so. You must have read about it.

ZEMLINSKY I don't have much time for the papers.

CHANCELLOR As I have little time myself. I am sure you will understand I did think the King would be here to see you by now. Make yourself comfortable – we'll find out what has held him up. You have your Tarot cards, I see. [*Administers kick to seat of Fool's pants*] Come, boy.

Exeunt Chancellor, Fool. Zemlinsky waits patiently for a moment or two, looking around, running through her Tarot cards, checking her watch. Eventually she lights on the memo, which she picks up and begins to read. Re-enter Fool.

FOOL Madame, I am instructed to inform, the King will see you now – if you'll only step this way [*goosesteps offstage*].

ZEMLINSKY [*Nonchalantly replaces memo, and for a few seconds considers what the Fool has said*] Lay on, McFool [*goosesteps offstage*].

Re-enter Fool, who pockets the memo. Exit Fool.

CURTAIN

Act III

III.1 The King's Musician's chamber. Zemlinsky reclining. The King's Musician moping.

ZEMLINSKY The snake Palmers has buttered up the King.

KING'S MUSICIAN And has all but sold him that cube of flesh – that square-headed boy of his. A little entertainer, trussed up contractually. The King's so easily fobbed off, and I can't think why. Nowadays he'll buy the meanest jingle – bim even without the bam. What stupidity.

ZEMLINSKY Sour!

KING'S MUSICIAN I summon the fragrance of freshly fallen rose petals, all in a viol string. Or in a four-part invention, invoke the gates of heaven. I promote sweet faith in the laity at prayer, but all Chads wants is inanities.

ZEMLINSKY Beats me why you've agreed to help Star, in that case.

KING'S MUSICIAN It might look like a contradiction, a helping hand to a helpless rival. Fact is I cannot see how a blockhead can ever catch on the sacred mysteries my Muse imparts.

ZEMLINSKY A bit rash, don't you think?

KING'S MUSICIAN Not at all. As soon as that boy learns anything – the lute and its tablature – the King will lose interest. Though the King's rapidly losing interest anyway, preoccupied as he is with his one pet subject.

ZEMLINSKY And what might that be?

KING'S MUSICIAN I'm amazed you haven't noticed! His obsession's his family crest, which any blinkered monarch wants to see planted in as wide a soil as possible.

ZEMLINSKY These are only rumours. I've heard he's looking for a fallback position if ever the Republic takes hold.

KING'S MUSICIAN My reading is, Chads sent Sir Gawain off to Gaul on the pretext of patching up things on European soil, but really with the intention of precipitating war. Think of all those friends we lost. Now they are thought of as enemies.

ZEMLINSKY Hard to believe.

KING'S MUSICIAN You think so?

ZEMLINSKY My information is, he's already done a deal. The whole monarchy can decamp to Paris, in a slimmed-down version. He gets rid of the fleshpots and all the other hangers-on. Then he and closest family ride about the boulevards on bicycles.

KING'S MUSICIAN You've been listening to that court jester.

ZEMLINSKY Oh. And what's this I see?

KING'S MUSICIAN What's laughably called an exchange of ideas! While the boy fumbles with my art, I shall appropriate his – though to call it 'art' is stretching it a bit. [*Takes up guitar, plays some 1970s concept rock, very accomplished*] You see I'm learning.

ZEMLINSKY I see you *are*....

King's Musician plays for a few moments more. Then, as the final chord dies away, there is a knock at an outer door.

KING'S MUSICIAN Now who's that I wonder? The dunce for his lesson, or that clown his master, with news for me only? I'll bet on the clown.

ZEMLINSKY I'd better make myself scarce. [*Exit Zemlinsky.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Standing at outer door*] Ah, good sir! Do come in.

Enter Palmers.

PALMERS Eight sharp, as I think we said.

KING'S MUSICIAN That is what I like in a man, for isn't his bond the soundness of his business? Yes, you say – quite right. Sit down. There. You've caught me just in the act of composing. You know I can't help but close eyes – you'll excuse me – it helps me to think in musical patterns. I have a special tune that goes with flagstones – look, you'll see through the casement. There's a sandstone tower, whose squeaky weather vane I am always listening out for. Cherry trees never fail to give me inspiration. One day I hope to pen the essence of a breeze.

PALMERS A bit fanciful for my taste.

KING'S MUSICIAN You're a pragmatist. A no-nonsense man of commerce. It's the guiding hand behind your boy, and that's brought him on.

PALMERS Nice of you to say.

KING'S MUSICIAN Not at all. I've borrowed his machine, and have been got the better of. These poor hands are too set in the dictates of the old country ditties. I just can't master it!

PALMERS It's a special talent.

KING'S MUSICIAN And we've all got those, Mr Palmers. You, for example, see opportunities.

PALMERS Adaptability's my motto. I'm a man who likes to get to business.

KING'S MUSICIAN I've a feeling you're going to let me know what current business is....

PALMERS The small problem of the King and his favours.

KING'S MUSICIAN You're too polite. What you mean is current trends and the royal sensibility, which no man may establish in the reign of science – unlike statecraft, say. That's something I *could* have learnt.

PALMERS That's a way of putting it.

KING'S MUSICIAN The intense labours, year on year, and not so much as a royal hum. The boy comes along, and presto! Instant success! What should I do?

PALMERS [*Produces bundle of manuscripts*] Well you could take a look at one of these.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Takes manuscripts*] And what have we here! 'Baby I want you.' I see... 'Yah baby I want you.' Why, this is priceless ingenuity!

PALMERS Take time, have a good look.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Reads, turns pages*] Wonderful! Exquisite! Quite majestic!

PALMERS Just the kind of lyric the King loves, and guess what.... For sale.

KING'S MUSICIAN You'd have to charge too high a price!

PALMERS I'd hoped we'd come to that.

KING'S MUSICIAN I'm a poor musician. These are my rags. This is my humble abode. I have the view, a quill, a lute.

PALMERS But you know the King's house. You'd have an idea as to how to lay hands on his gold, say, or his silver, or jewels. Or items from his former mistress's wardrobe, which must be worth a pretty penny.

KING'S MUSICIAN You put me in a position.

PALMERS You can't go on as you are. Star's sweet voice has bewitched your employer. What you need to do is put up a bit of competition. [*Flourishes manuscripts*] These are just the ticket, I'd say.

KING'S MUSICIAN The King's jewels, you know – it wouldn't be easy.

PALMERS Not alone, I grant. It's surely not beyond the wit of man – and especially a man like you – to chivvy up a servant here, or a chambermaid there. All things I think are possible....

KING'S MUSICIAN Let's just suppose, for a moment. How much would you want?

PALMERS A casket. So big, say....

KING'S MUSICIAN Really I don't know....

PALMERS Well then so big....

KING'S MUSICIAN We'd have to rely on the King not knowing precisely what he *has* got tucked away. But I suppose that might just be the case.

PALMERS Rich people – they never know what they've got.

KING'S MUSICIAN When did you have in mind?

PALMERS Ah, I thought you'd see it my way! I'm off on business tonight, but I'll be back early tomorrow morning. I'll meet you at dawn, on the forest road, where it skirts the estate.

KING'S MUSICIAN Just you make sure there's a big bundle of manuscripts – in fact everything your pretty boy has penned that's new to the King's ear.

PALMERS [*Rises*] A deal!

KING'S MUSICIAN Not quite, I think. [*Flourishes manuscripts*] I can hardly call these my own with the boy still here. Can I?

PALMERS Ah, I've thought of that. [*Produces letter*] Bear in mind my Star's hardly a man of the world. [*Reads*] 'My dear boy, the worst thing has happened. It has ruined my plans. The King has got it into his head to march on France. Talk is all of the war effort. To help support it, he's certain to cancel his courtly entertainments, just as you were doing so well. Myself I'm of that age, and with my old wounds, when I've got to watch the crossfire. A man of my management flair can't get involved in that. I've got to take care, and sadly have gone into hiding – for hopefully these Europe-wide conflicts will one day blow over, and we can all settle down to civilised life. Please don't worry about me. I shall be fine. The good news for you is this. I bumped into an old friend, by chance, who is looking for someone like you – musical mind, natural talent. I said you'd pay him a visit, at his shop, where there's plenty of work. Here's the address....' Et cetera. What about that?

KING'S MUSICIAN And these rumours are right – about the war I mean?

PALMERS One hundred per cent!

KING'S MUSICIAN But how would *you* know?

PALMERS [*Taps side of his nose knowingly*] You'll just have to trust me on that one.

KING'S MUSICIAN I see. And supposing we have that trust – timing, you know, is crucial. I'll have that letter delivered to Star late tomorrow morning, which ought to give you plenty of time to get away.

PALMERS A good point. [*Hands over letter reluctantly*] Just you make sure you do deliver it. I'm sticking my neck out, getting him a job.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Ushers him out*] Just you make sure you do get him that job.

PALMERS Don't you worry about that. Tomorrow at dawn – and don't be late.

Exit Palmers. Re-enter Zemlinsky.

KING'S MUSICIAN Ha! The world's fools and dreamers flock to a mercantile shrine.

ZEMLINSKY Can't wait to relieve that goop of his heavy coat.

KING'S MUSICIAN Just as he'd fleece his own songbird. [*Already re-working Palmers's letter*] Now let me see, how are his o's? So – like cupped hands, open. T's uncrossed. The g's – alarming! – looping up from all this undergrowth. I's take a floating dot. But there!

ZEMLINSKY And tone, don't forget. Pompous!

KING'S MUSICIAN How's this! [*Reads*] 'My dear boy, a marvellous thing has happened. It has changed

our plans. The King in his glory is about to march triumphantly on France. Talk is all of the war effort. Support it we must, in whatever small way. This is the greatness of England. Myself I'm off on a secret dispatch – it calls on all my skills as a negotiator (it's very hush-hush). The King when I said you'd volunteer nearly wept, for the want of more Englishmen like you, with hearts of oak. You'll advance, I'm sure. All's to the greater good, though we hope these Europe-wide conflicts will one day blow over. Then we can all settle down to civilised life. Please don't worry about me. I shall be safe. It'll all be over by Christmas. Good luck.'

ZEMPLINSKY I can see that fool, marching to the drum.

KING'S MUSICIAN And without that bloated angel. What a perfect match! Now. Don't mix those letters. Come on. We've work to do!

Exeunt King's Musician, Zemlinsky.

III.2 Pincher's shop. Enter Pincher, shuffling, holding a plaque, and under his other arm a pile of sheet music. He hangs up the plaque, which has the inscription PINCHER AND PLUCKEM: EVERYTHIN MUSICKAL. The sheet music he plonks down variously. Exit and re-enter Pincher, shuffling, dragging a chair behind him. This he positions, sits on, dozes. Enter Palmers, who, while his former employer sleeps, examines the shop. He lifts manuscripts, and is careful to blow away the dust. For someone without musical knowledge, these he studies for some time. However, the overall conditions he finds fill him with loathing. He shakes his head, grimaces, shudders. Finally, he paces over to Pincher.

PALMERS Ah, Mr Pincher! Didn't I say I'd call!

PINCHER O! Palmers. 'Allo. Nice to see yer again.

PALMERS Ha-ha-ha! Still the same old Pincher!

PINCHER Yes, yes. Still the same ole Pincher. 'Ow are yer?

PALMERS Never better. How about you?

PINCHER Very well.

PALMERS And Mr Pluckem?

PINCHER Oh, now that's another story. 'E's not so well, that one. Spends all 'is time just sittin' in a chair out back. Just sittin'! Not a fit man, my friend.... Takes up all my time lookin' after 'im.

PALMERS I'm sorry to hear that. Especially as you seem so prosperous now.

PINCHER Huh!

PALMERS Everything so neat, tidy. All so well ordered. Plenty of stock – all first rate.... Must be a pleasure to make a purchase here. I expect you've made your fortune – you and Mr Pluckem.

PINCHER We manage. Ole Pluckem, God bless 'im, he does need lookin' after. It's a sad shame to see 'im wastin' away, just sittin' in 'is chair. Just sittin'. I wish I could do somethin' for 'im. Really I do.

PALMERS He's ill?

PINCHER Just old an' tired, an' wasted away. Think the move was too much. That's when it started. 'E'd wake in the mornin' coffin' 'is 'art out. Then come 'is back trouble. Started 'obblin about bent double, 'e did. Then 'e'd fall asleep, an' be no good for bizniz. I've bin runnin' the shop all on me own for a two-year. 'E just sits out back. I really need all my time to look after 'im. Really I do.

PALMERS Ah, it's a pity for the old days, Mr Pincher, when your own happy Palmers was young, strong, on top of things. Looks to me as if you let me go too soon. You need an assistant, just like the old days. But that's the thing about the old days. They're gone....'

PINCHER I do believe you're right, Palmers.

PALMERS So – what *about* an assistant?

PINCHER Well I don't know.

PALMERS Someone young....

PINCHER Mm.

PALMERS And hard-working....

PINCHER Very 'ard t' find, I should imagine.

PALMERS With a sound musical knowledge....

PINCHER Very 'ard.

PALMERS Someone who'd work for even less than I did!

PINCHER Very, *very* 'ard.

PALMERS Oh, come on. Don't be such a pessimist.

PINCHER You know such a person, Palmers?

PALMERS I probably do....

PINCHER Really?

PALMERS A delightful boy. Good and honest. No stranger to hard work. And with such a passion for music! What's more I've a feeling he'll soon be looking for work.... You'd do a lot worse, Mr Pincher.... He's just the person, I should say.

PINCHER Wouldn't ask for much in the way of pay, you say?

PALMERS Given the times, he's surprisingly compliant, Mr Pincher.

PINCHER Well why don't you send 'im round, let me 'ave a look at 'im?

PALMERS I'll do just that!

PINCHER When shall I 'spect 'im?

PALMERS Well let me see. I've a crowded diary today. Let's say I'll have him sent over in the next couple of days.

PINCHER Look forward to it, Palmers.

PALMERS You won't be sorry, Mr Pincher.

PINCHER Well, bye for now, Palmers.

PALMERS Goodbye, Mr Pincher. Give my regards to old Pluckem!

Exit Palmers.

PINCHER Mr Pluckem! Mr Pluckem! I've got some very good news!

Exit Pincher. Re-enter Palmers, careful not to be seen. He steals a manuscript and roars with laughter.

Exit Palmers.

III.3 Street outside the Rose and Crown. Enter King's Musician, Zemlinsky, each with tankard of ale. Street cries. Passers-by.

KING'S MUSICIAN *You* think it – Palmers thinks it – I'm not totally convinced. What makes *you* so sure?

ZEMLINSKY It's because I see everything, from where I am floating above.

KING'S MUSICIAN That's mere fortune-teller twaddle.

ZEMLINSKY Sit. Let me tell you what's to be. That steel ribbon the royal cartographer calls the Channel washes the feet of your destiny. I see success in all undertakings.

KING'S MUSICIAN How?

ZEMLINSKY There's quite a lot that comes my way when the King has his cards read. But hush! The street's no place for unguarded talk. Come on! Play my little game!

KING'S MUSICIAN Is that really necessary?

ZEMLINSKY It's a must.

KING'S MUSICIAN Oh, all right then!

They sit.

ZEMLINSKY An article....

KING'S MUSICIAN What?

ZEMLINSKY Come on, just give me any little trinket....

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Hunts through pockets*] Ridiculous!

ZEMLINSKY It's all to do with the world of appearance – something I thought you knew about.

KING'S MUSICIAN Here!

ZEMLINSKY Surprisingly a lucky charm!

KING'S MUSICIAN Just get on with it!

ZEMLINSKY To begin....

KING'S MUSICIAN To begin's to talk practicalities. You're sure these two trained monkeys you've got are capable of turning up in the right place at the right time?

ZEMLINSKY Of course. The forest road at dawn. What could be simpler?

KING'S MUSICIAN And they know what they're looking for? It's not just the cash.

ZEMLINSKY Don't worry. I shall hand you the manuscripts personally.

Enter two Drunks.

KING'S MUSICIAN I'll hold you to that.

ZEMLINSKY [*As fortune-teller*] The sun, as it moves from your opposite sign, softens what seemed a pernicious lie at first....

1 DRUNK What we got 'ere, gaffer's, a fortune-teller.

2 DRUNK That's what I do good, Nuncle.

ZEMLINSKY You're in a limbo, yet the planets urge you to place principles over popularity. It's time to show just how resourceful you are.

1 DRUNK Tell 'em!

ZEMLINSKY Gentlemen. Another time. My client's an important member of the King's house.

1 DRUNK Nah, n' don't butt in but! 'S rude. What the gaffer's got is Everyman's fortune!

2 DRUNK Everyman!

1 DRUNK So listen....

2 DRUNK Listen. You, sir, in common – are born (I think)....

1 DRUNK Said listen!

2 DRUNK You live (this – is livin')....

1 DRUNK 'Ope you're gettin' this.

2 DRUNK Pooph! You die! [*Keels over.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN Let's hope that's dying.

1 DRUNK [*Helps other up*] There's gratitude! [*Much singing, swaying, drunken exhortation.*]

ZEMLINSKY Gentlemen, please!

1 DRUNK [*Doffs cap*] It's been a pleasure [*holds out hand*].

KING'S MUSICIAN Oh for God's sake! [*Presses coin into his hand.*]

1 DRUNK Thankee, sir. You couldnee see your way clear to a little drap o' that ale....

KING'S MUSICIAN No I couldn't! [*Rises volcanically.*]

2 DRUNK T'ink we'd better go afore he gets upset.

Two Drunks wend their way offstage, singing and swaying.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Sits*] Let's hope yours is a better forecast.

ZEMLINSKY Ah, let me summon my genie.

KING'S MUSICIAN Genie?

ZEMLINSKY Genie.

KING'S MUSICIAN Just get on with it.

ZEMLINSKY The prediction is this. You'll soon have to sing our English armies over foreign soil.

KING'S MUSICIAN Any fool can see that.

ZEMLINSKY Ah, but what else? What happens when our English yeomanry has finally saluted Chads's victory? When English glory is hymned over the torn fields of France?

KING'S MUSICIAN Well, what?

ZEMLINSKY Suppose that boy at last thinks for himself, and decides to stay in the service of the King? The last thing you'll want when you get back is a renewal of old rivalries.

KING'S MUSICIAN The boy *can* 't think for himself.

ZEMLINSKY I can do his thinking for him.

KING'S MUSICIAN Look, exactly what is it you're getting at?

ZEMLINSKY Once I've paid off those two trained monkeys as you say, what's left I'll split with you fifty-fifty, with a bit extra thrown in for me for the manuscripts. That's what I call fair.

KING'S MUSICIAN Is *that* all! Well, fine. You just make sure I get the manuscripts.

ZEMLINSKY You really think they're that valuable?

KING'S MUSICIAN Who can say? Fashion's a construct. You never know what rubbish on the heap is suddenly recycled.

ZEMLINSKY So it's a deal?

KING'S MUSICIAN A deal. The forest road. And don't forget....

ZEMLINSKY I know – the forest road at dawn....

KING'S MUSICIAN Make sure your gorillas get him.

ZEMLINSKY Don't you worry about that. And don't forget your lucky charm.

KING'S MUSICIAN Oh, that....

ZEMLINSKY Also it's customary to pay, having had your fortune told....

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Tosses down coin*] Invest wisely.

Exit King's Musician.

ZEMLINSKY [*Tests coin in teeth*] Well – it must be my round at last!

Exit Zemlinsky.

III.4 Dawn. The forest road. Enter Palmers. Waits impatiently.

PALMERS What's the hold-up! Prissy musician! Meet me here at dawn, he says.

Enter two hooded Assailants, one with a dagger. Grunts from Palmers as they overpower him. Enter Vassal, who, on seeing dagger thrusts, throws up arms in horror. Exit Vassal.

PALMERS Argh!

Exeunt Assailants, dragging a floored Palmers.

III.5 Large hallway, the King's country estate. Semi-darkness.

VASSAL FROM WITHOUT Murther! Murther!

Nobody stirs.

VASSAL FROM WITHOUT [*Nearer*] Murther!

Sounds of people stirring. Enter Vassal.

VASSAL [*Runs hither and thither*] Murther! Save us! Murther!

Enter Chancellor, in night attire.

CHANCELLOR What's it, boy?

VASSAL [*Rants*] Murther – murther's bin a-done!

Enter Defence Secretary, Fool, Lady, Juggler, Servant, variously, in night attire.

CHANCELLOR What's it – murder?

FOOL

Murder, quoth he,
as the fly on his knee
fell to the swat
that the fly didn't see.

CHANCELLOR Who? Where?

VASSAL Ugh!

CHANCELLOR [*To Servant*] You!

Servant steps up, takes grip on Vassal.

SERVANT Gently does it.

CHANCELLOR Now.... Slow!

Vassal mutters.

SERVANT The forest road, he says.

CHANCELLOR Someone go.

Exit Juggler. Enter King, in nightshirt and long johns.

KING Can't a man sleep? What's my pretty boy?

CHANCELLOR A shock, Sire. Seen a man murdered, as I gather.

Exeunt Vassal, Servant.

KING On my estate!

CHANCELLOR Sad to say so.

DEFENCE Not Cook, I hope!

Re-enter Servant.

SERVANT Passed out!

FOOL

Cook was in a stew
when the murdered fly last flew....

CHANCELLOR That will do!

Exeunt Servant, Lady. General hubbub. Re-enter Servant.

FOOL Cook swears by garlic. A pinch to each nostril – so!

Servant gazes disapprovingly at Fool. Gets bottle and small piece of linen. Glares at Fool, exits. Fool shrugs shoulders. Loud chatter.

CHANCELLOR Now let's have hush!

Noise subsides. Enter King's Musician, in night attire, yawning.

KING'S MUSICIAN What's all the noise?

CHANCELLOR A bad business. Murder....

KING'S MUSICIAN Oh come come!

Re-enter Juggler, bearing Palmers's coat.

JUGGLER No sign of a body, Sire. Only this. [*Holds up coat.*]

CHANCELLOR [*Takes coat*] That merchant's coat. Buttons slit. Incredible – all these secret pockets, empty.

A letter.

FOOL That would be a letter.

King's Musician takes, examines coat.

CHANCELLOR Addressed, to – Star.

KING In God's name, read!

CHANCELLOR [*Reads*] 'My dear boy,' it says, 'the worst thing has happened.' Can this be?

KING Read!

CHANCELLOR [*Reads*] 'It has ruined my plans. The King,' and this is *as* written, 'the King has got it into his head to march on France.' Sire, this is peasant talk.

KING Just keep on reading.

CHANCELLOR [*Reads*] 'Talk is all of the war effort.' Sire, I've no idea how these notions get about.

KING I'm being very patient with you, Sir Purse. Just finish the letter.

CHANCELLOR Very good, Sire. [*Reads*] 'To help support it, he's certain to cancel his courtly entertainments, just as you were doing so well.' Scoundrel!

KING'S MUSICIAN Lily livered!

CHANCELLOR [*Reads*] 'Myself I'm of that age, and with my old wounds...' Sire, a coward! '...when I've got to watch the crossfire.' I'd have his head on a pike! And what's this? 'A man of my management flair can't get involved in that.' Management flair!

Chancellor unable to read. King's Musician takes letter.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Reads*] 'I've got to take care, and sadly have gone into hiding – for hopefully these Europe-wide conflicts will one day blow over, and we can all settle down to civilised life....'

Sound of phone ringing.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Reads*] 'Please don't worry about me. I shall be fine. The good news for you is this. I bumped into an old friend, by chance, who is looking for someone like you – musical mind, natural talent. I said you'd pay him a visit, at his shop, where there's plenty of work....'

Fool, Juggler, increasingly restless at sound of ringing, peer into corners, lift each other's garments, in attempt to locate its source.

KING'S MUSICIAN That, Sire's, more or less it.

King's Musician, curious at ringing, himself looks around and at everyone.

KING Well, Sir Purse, presumably there's something in all of this, so I hope you're at last satisfied with all this loose talk of yours when it comes to our friends in Europe. Now, one of you, give the boy his master's coat, and somebody fetch my suit and tie, and a sturdy pair of shoes.

Exit Servant. King's Musician switches letters. Fool, Juggler, by now in open search for source of ringing, in a kind of mummers' slapstick.

CHANCELLOR With respect, Sire, any impure impulse against our friends across the Channel is down to the will of the people, which you and I are powerless to apprehend.

Re-enter Servant with King's suit, tie, shoes.

KING [*Putting on trousers*] Nevertheless I shall try to apprehend.

CHANCELLOR What is it you intend to do?

KING [*Putting on jacket*] If an army's already been assembled, how far do you think it's got?

CHANCELLOR Not that far at all, I should have thought, given the time.

KING [*Tying tie, slipping on shoes*] Then I intend to head off its front line before it reaches the Channel, and parley with its leaders.

CHANCELLOR Sire, is that wise?

KING It is, Sir Purse, the only option. [*To Servant*] You, saddle my horse!

Exit King.

KING'S MUSICIAN Well all I can say is this Palmers, whoever he was, was an unscrupulous rogue!

CHANCELLOR It's been a cold night, I think, and a cool piece of work.

Phone still persistent.

DEFENCE Yet hark ye! An alarum! God speed the King, who cannot fulfil his reign alone. Get thee hence, prepare for war!

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Salutes*] To the glory of England!

Trumpets. Exeunt King's Musician, Juggler, Fool.

CHANCELLOR What a mess!

DEFENCE That's not all. [*Produces early edition of Daily Screech*] This morning's lead article isn't quite as we'd planned. Just look at the headline. [*Hands paper to Chancellor as they begin to walk offstage.*]

CHANCELLOR [*Reading headline*] 'King can't make state decisions without trusted astrologer.' [*He scans the article quickly*] And nothing here at all about the people rising up.

DEFENCE Nothing whatsoever.

CHANCELLOR Oh Lord!

Exeunt Chancellor, Defence. Re-enter King's Musician, Juggler, Fool, who are still not satisfied that the sound of the phone has been explained. All pull up individually, then return to centre stage.

FOOL It's a nabulum.

KING'S MUSICIAN You mean a tintinnabulum.

FOOL But small – a small tin....

All cup hands to ears and locate sound to Palmers's coat. Slight trepidation. Much head-scratching.

JUGGLER It's alive!

KING'S MUSICIAN Nonsense! [*Searches Palmers's coat, produces mobile phone. Inspects, handles it cautiously, shakes it, puts it to ear when ringing stops. Hands it to Juggler.*]

JUGGLER [*Phone to ear*] It speaks! [*Tosses phone in air. Exit Juggler in a flap.*]

FOOL [*Having caught phone, and put it to his ear*] It is a nabulum! Lord save us! [*Tosses phone to King's Musician. Exit Fool, also in a flap.*]

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Calm, having put phone to ear, and making his way slowly offstage*] A Mr Mack, you say... And you are? Yes, I see. [*Shakes phone*] Representing a Captain Spavento. I think I know that name. Well now. And what would Captain Spavento want exactly? What's that? To broker another arms deal.... Well, you'll have to tell me more about this.... What sort of arms deal?

Exit King's Musician, still in conversation.

III.6 The forest. Enter Palmers, a sack over his head, shoulders and torso, with rope bindings. Palmers in a thrash, trying to get free.

PALMERS Oh now for heaven's sake what, what has a humble man of business – me! Palmers! – done to deserve this dark...this dark dark dark!

Another thrash. Palmers gets one hand semi-free, which gesticulates.

PALMERS Ah! There! But I – just – can't.... Ugh! Go on, that's right – *don't* come undone! It's only after all me, Palmers! [*Struggles.*]

PALMERS Rage-on-rage! [*Tries to reach knots.*]

PALMERS I'm a man sinned against....

Manages to pull head through rent in sack.

PALMERS At last!

Goes down on one knee, composes himself.

PALMERS [*Struggles*] A plague on these bonds! [*Composes himself again.*]

PALMERS Look! I'm all in a truss.... [*Weeps.*]

PALMERS And had only that dear boy's dream at heart.

Sob. Reverential pause. Palmers rises, stamps feet.

PALMERS My money! *His* money! All we've worked for! [*Makes ungainly effort to leave.*]

PALMERS And the shame of it! [*Trips, writhes on ground.*]

PALMERS [*Struggles to feet*] Yet I shall I swear get even!

Exit Palmers.

PALMERS OFF Rage!

III.7 A sunny glade. Enter Zemlinsky, a large sack slung over one shoulder, a flagon of wine tucked under her other arm. She sets the flagon on the ground. The sack contains Palmers's many purses, which she now tips out.

ZEMLINSKY Ha! A fool and his money!

Enter King's Musician, in modern dress (apart from boots, which are Tudor), with lute, and a mobile phone on his waist band.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Sings and plays*] 'Ain't gonna be no poor man....'

While the King's Musician has been singing, Madame Zemlinsky has picked up four or five pebbles from the ground, polished them on her sleeve, and dropped them in her pocket.

KING'S MUSICIAN Profound ditties from a man who's nevertheless clueless. It's a lesson for you.

ZEMLINSKY [*Begins setting purses in two equal piles*] Me?

KING'S MUSICIAN How to bear the burden of mediocrity. How to follow the rise and fall of its fortunes.

ZEMLINSKY That poor boy!

KING'S MUSICIAN More benighted than his master, who I thought looked so fittingly vulnerable, bound, blindfolded, bouncing off these forest oaks.

ZEMLINSKY [*Drinks*] Mack and his martyrs'll get him.

KING'S MUSICIAN Who not even the calming words of the King can restrain, who yesterday rode to Southampton – Chads not it seems as keen on war as rumour has had it.

ZEMLINSKY Chads or no Chads leading his English army, you can just see it – a leaner Palmers, joined in battle on Gallic soil, cheek by jowl with that electric canary.

KING'S MUSICIAN Incredibly the boy's semi-literate. I had to read him my charming little letter.

ZEMLINSKY [*Another drink*] You did? How many times?

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Takes flagon*] Once was enough.

ZEMLINSKY [*Hovers over purses, now in two equal piles*] Hope it sank in. [*Surreptitiously empties purse from the King's Musician's pile into her pocket, fills purse with pebbles, puts it back on King's Musician's pile*] Now I wonder what price these manuscripts.

KING'S MUSICIAN Intrinsically they're worthless. That isn't to say this narrow world of ours, with its love of paradox, won't put a value on what is truly useless – that's central to *your* trade. Don't beat about the bush. How much do you want?

ZEMLINSKY The value *I* place on them isn't important. If as it's now clear the King likes a repertoire that suits a mangled ear, how much he'll thank you for them.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Sings, plays*] 'Ain't gonna be no poor man yah....' How much?

ZEMLINSKY You suggest a price.

KING'S MUSICIAN For me they'd make good kindling.

ZEMLINSKY But these are for the King....

KING'S MUSICIAN For the King a purse only.

ZEMLINSKY [*Transfers purse of pebbles from King's Musician's pile to her own*] A purse it is.
King's Musician twangs lute discordantly. Zemlinsky drinks from flagon.

KING'S MUSICIAN So, what plans do you have, now you've got your windfall? Departure, travel, a journey?

ZEMLINSKY I shall avoid France.

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Takes out, unfolds sack*] Heavens yes! I hear the air is clearer north.

ZEMLINSKY Much too cold!

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Puts Zemlinsky's purses into sack*] So heavy!

ZEMLINSKY Now look....

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Walks away with Zemlinsky's purses*] Take my advice – make that long journey north.... Understand?

ZEMLINSKY That's – ahem! – *my* share!

KING'S MUSICIAN [*Half turns*] And didn't I say? I have this special understanding – I am after all a permanent member of the King's house. [*Holds up phone*] I mean I converse with a witless band of mercenaries, who fight what they think is his cause. You, I said, are friendly *to* that cause. They'd be delighted to meet you, should I put in a word....

Exit King's Musician. Zemlinsky calmly fills remaining sack with rest of purses.

ZEMLINSKY Hah! All down, you see, to these powers I have – for have I not foreseen this moment? And left him something to remember me by!

Exit Zemlinsky, in opposite direction to King's Musician.

III.8 The minstrels' gallery, the King's country estate. Enter King's Musician, now almost fully attired as a modern (one Tudor boot has been exchanged for a contemporary shoe). He plugs in Star's guitar, and plays – highly professionally – some 1970s concept rock, suggestive of war. There is a background synthesiser, and smoke, light, and laser effects. Enter Fool, Juggler, dressed for war. Enter Lady, dressed as medic. Enter Star, with flak jacket, helmet, sub-machine gun, folded letter visible in pocket, fife, drum. Enter Chancellor, Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

CHANCELLOR The youth of England's on fire, whose silks lie in the wardrobe.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Armourers thrive.

CHANCELLOR Thoughts of honour reign solely in every man's breast.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Pastures are sold, horses bought.

CHANCELLOR See the sheen of all Christian kings, winged heels, English Mercuries. Expectation's in the air. [*Inspects ragbag representatives of army*] I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining on the start. The game's afoot. Follow your spirit. Upon this charge, cry 'God for the King, for England, and Saint George!'

Exit Chancellor.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS With the blast of war in your ears, imitate the tiger – stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood. Hide fair nature with a hard rage. Lend the eye some terrible aspect.

Exit Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Exeunt Fool, Juggler, lacklustre. Exit Star, puffed by the rhetoric. Exit Lady. Music, effects, to crescendo. King's Musician bows, exits.

III.9 Pincher's shop. Enter Pincher, shuffling, plaque in one hand, pile of sheet music in other. Hangs up plaque, with inscription PINCHER AND PLUCKEM: EVERYTHIN MUSICKAL. Plonks down sheet music. Exit Pincher. Re-enter Pincher, shuffling, dragging chair. This he positions. Sits, dozes. Enter Palmers, coatless, lean, hungry-looking, suited like a salesman, carrying a fedora.

PALMERS Ah, Mr Pincher!

PINCHER Oh!

PALMERS A very good morning.

PINCHER Wot can I do for yer?

PALMERS O-ho! Still the same old Pincher!

PINCHER 'S right, I'm Mr Pincher. 'Pincher and Pluckem: Everythin Musickal.' Do 'ave a look round.

PALMERS It's your old friend, Pincher. It's me....

PINCHER Palmers? Really? Wot's bin 'appenin' to yuh?

PALMERS Oh – it's a little problem I've had. Really nothing. A slight illness, which happily I've beaten off.

PINCHER Sorry t' 'ear that.

PALMERS Good things come from bad, Mr Pincher. What it has given me is an opportunity. I have completely re-thought my portfolio.... That's thanks to some very interesting business people I came across, while convalescing – in the delights of the English countryside – traders with a very different perspective on what is happening in England today!

PINCHER 'S'pose that's somethin'.

PALMERS Indeed it is, Mr Pincher! There is such wisdom in the business community, which always seems to understand intuitively what is in the hearts of the common English people – people just like you.

PINCHER Well I don't know really....

PALMERS But of course you do. The future of England won't be its monarch after all. What we see ahead is the age of the merchant king, men at the head of commercial empires, their interests and communications networks enveloping the globe! This is an exciting time, Mr Pincher.

PINCHER Dare say.

PALMERS An exciting time for us both, being men of capital and trade. Take as an instance that opening you have....

PINCHER Really I don't know, Palmers. Takin's is down.

PALMERS I wanted to talk to you about that.

PINCHER Really down.

PALMERS One learns the knack of turning it around. In commerce you learn a trick or two. Let me tell you how to get those takings up....

PINCHER I don't know, really I don't....

PALMERS When I say 'up', I mean really up.

PINCHER Really up?

PALMERS Astronomically up!

PINCHER Well, I s'pose it's worth consid'rin'....

Pincher gets up, walks, appears he could be swayed.

PALMERS [*Arm round Pincher*] Just you leave it to me.... [*Goes to plaque*] Ah, I can see it: 'PALMERS PLC'.

PINCHER Wot's that?

PALMERS I said, Mr Pincher, 'Planned profits from a minstrelsy' – now that our poor Mr Pluckem's confined to his chair.

PINCHER Poor Mr Pluckem.

PALMERS You need a flashing light. Tinsel. Pin-ups – not these lutes on the wall! No disrespect – look at all this dust!

PINCHER [*Wipes nose on sleeve*] On the other 'and....

PALMERS It'll guarantee a doubled turnover.

PINCHER You've looked into this, 'ave yuh?

PALMERS We merchants of rural England – we've mapped it all out. When I say doubled, I'm talking about the *first* year.

PINCHER First year?

PALMERS The world's changed, Mr Pincher. People part with their cash through the soft warm ambience you concoct around them. Every man of commerce knows it.

PINCHER Year two. In bizniz, that's the thing....

PALMERS Why, turnover, that's re-doubled. Then, you re-double again. It's a science, Mr Pincher. We fliers have a word for it: 'presentation'. Hard cash is in the packaging. Now. Repeat that creed!

PINCHER Packidgin'.

PALMERS When shall I get to grips?

PINCHER 'S all a bit sudden.

PALMERS When?

PINCHER Re-doubled, you said?

PALMERS And – re-doubled again.

PINCHER Well not till we've sin Mr Pluckem – t' see wot 'e sez like. Re-doubled, eh! [*Leads Palmers upstage*] Come along, this way.

Exit Pincher. Palmers moves downstage.

PALMERS Though can he survive, when I shake his petty little shop to bits, and turn it inside out! First you promise unbounded potential – it's the only way to get these sullen fools to work for half of nothing. Then you put the frighteners on, by inventing a business methodology. This is a first step in eradicating any danger of dissent. When they're worn down by that, you preach a company mission, bolstered by propaganda, trade fairs, the importance of exhibitions, roadshows. I can see it all now, Sir Geoffrey Palmers – Chairman! – supposing Chads lasts long enough and can hand out empire titles. This old shop of Pincher's is only the start, the first in a national chain. Europe's tomorrow, and after that the world.

The trick's this, to sell my minions a vision, tell them how medieval their England has become, and must outgrow itself. I say therefore a phone and a screen on every desk. These shall be toys, baubles, such an inspiration! Nor shall I ever fear to give the lead, which as far as I'm concerned is only a sleight of hand with per cent signs. I shall set targets. I shall impart to each minuscule salary the tinct of largesse, a little bit of pocket money, so that it looks like honest pay. *[As vow]* This, this only is the stuff that dreams are made of. For yes, it *will* be Palmers – Palmers, I promise – Palmers Plc.

Enter Page with trumpet. Fanfare. Enter Star, in trench coat, with fife and drum.

PALMERS Oh and my first customer.... *[Realises who 'customer' is, produces from top pocket and puts on dark glasses, puts on and pulls fedora over eyes]* Though not quite as I envisaged. What's been happening t'...I mean what can I do for you?

STAR An errand. For the Chancellor.

PALMERS *[Composes himself, his glasses, his fedora, his jacket]* Now wouldn't you say 'errand' is a bit demeaning?

STAR Well I dunno....

PALMERS Because you know England is its traders, who'll soon knock it into a republic. Mark old Palm – I mean mark an old palm reader's words.

STAR Got caught out by that, once, a palm reader.

PALMERS Yet I see you're not a man to get caught twice. So, what have you come for? *[Picks up and selects music scores]* Something to march to? Something brassy for military band? *[Starts to pile scores into Star's arms.]*

STAR *[Attempts salute]* For the glory of England!

PALMERS *[Piling on more scores, till Star is over-burdened]* All that sabre-rattling! Really it's had its day. The future of music is sales, and a nice job I could do you.

STAR Sales?

PALMERS My word yes, the length and breadth of the country. I need someone good – good, mind – to play my new tune, in my thousand and one new stores.

STAR Stores?

PALMERS Here – and all over Europe. It's all in my business plan. Interested?

STAR *[Thinks]* Could be, I suppose....

Palmer takes scores from Star and thrusts them into Page's arms.

PALMERS *[Ushers Star to door]* Now there's a good fellow....

STAR A tune, you say?

PALMERS A tune, I say. Just you go and tell the Chancellor you've learned a new one....

STAR A new one.... Now that's always difficult....

Exit Star, bundled out by Palmers.

PALMERS *[Calling after Star]* A peak I am sure you will climb.... *[Opens jacket to Page, to reveal row of watches pinned to lining]* Want to buy a watch?

Page shakes head, struggles to door under weight of paper. Exit Page.

PALMERS *[Downstage, and repeating vow]* As I say. The world is full of human putty. It will, I swear, be Palmers. It *will* be Palmers, Plc.

CURTAIN