

**THE
DASTARDLY DEEDS
OF LORD SWINDLEHAM**

or

THE RELUCTANT REGENT

A Short Comic Play

by Andrew Rice-Oxley

SchoolPlay Productions Ltd

THE DASTARDLY DEEDS OF LORD SWINDLEHAM
and THE RATBUSTERS

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CAST

Dave }	
Joe }	<i>Robbers</i>
Antonio	<i>Robber Chief</i>
Bully }	
Beef }	<i>Lord Swindleham's Henchmen</i>
Merchant	
Lord Swindleham	<i>The Lord Chamberlain & Minister for Home Affairs</i>
Slinky Siegfried	<i>The Royal Soothsayer</i>
Royal Treasurer / 3rd Soldier	
Court Usher	
Prince Frederick	<i>The Regent of Rogaria</i>
Lord Wiseman	<i>Minister for Foreign Affairs</i>
Mervin	<i>Magician</i>
Robin	<i>Mervin's Assistant</i>
Traveller / King Ferdinand	
1st Soldier	
2nd Soldier	
<i>Setting:</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Rogaria.</i>
<i>Time:</i>	<i>The Olden Days.</i>

THE DASTARDLY DEEDS OF LORD SWINDLEHAM
or
THE RELUCTANT REGENT

by **Andrew Rice-Oxley**

PROLOGUE.

Voice: *(heard through loud speakers front of stage).*

O people of Rogaria,
I make this prophecy to you -
"You will see much strife and discord
Lawlessness shall stalk the land
Corruption and disorder will not cease
Till one shall come from Larsony Wood
With secret, supernatural powers!"
I, Merlin, have spoken!

(Dramatic music immediately from 'Scheherazade' - the quicker section of the "Festival of Baghdad" or similar. Music continues for perhaps half a minute, then fades).

SCENE 1.

A clearing in Larsony Wood in the Kingdom of Rogaria.

(Spotlight on two Robbers, JOE and DAVE, seated on ground playing scissors/paper/stone game, or similar, to determine who swigs from the one wine flask. Each time one of them wins he chuckles, grabs the flask and swigs for as long as the other one will let him).

Dave: *(Watching JOE swigging).* Come on, you greedy swine, leave some for another go.

(JOE sets the flask down. They have another round of their game and DAVE wins. He grabs the flask but finds it empty).

Dave: Why you rotten little -

(He hurls himself on JOE and they grapple. Enter ANTONIO, the ROBBER CHIEF).

Antonio: Break it up, you two - there's someone coming! He'll be here in a couple of minutes. He looks rich too. Get under cover!

(They move far left and the spotlight changes to stage R to reveal two thugs, BULLY and BEEF, standing waiting to exact a toll from any traveller. Enter a MERCHANT, Stage R. He approaches the two "toll" men but takes no notice of them and tries to pass).

Bully: *(Blocking his way).* Just a minute - you can't pass here until you've paid your toll.

Merchant: What toll? What are you talking about?

Beef: The toll tax on this road, mate. That's what we're talking about.

Merchant: There's never been a toll on this road before.

Bully: Well there is now, so pay up!

Beef: Or go back the way you came.

(Pause).

Merchant: If I pay, it'll be under extreme protest!

Bully: Go ahead and protest - see if we care!

Merchant: How much?

Beef: Forty crowns.

Merchant: Forty crowns! That's absolutely outrageous! Where's this toll money going?

Bully: Maintaining the road, of course.

Beef: And freeing it from all cut-throats

Bully: Highwaymen.

Beef: And robbers.

Merchant: How come you're still here then?

Bully: Look mate, you're talking to government officials

Beef: Who don't like being insulted

Bully: In the course of their duty.

Beef: Either you pay up.

Bully: Or we'll beat your brains in!

Merchant: I'll pay up, but I'm warning you, I'll complain to the Prince Regent about you. *(He hands over the forty crowns to BULLY).*

Beef: A fat lot of good that'll do you, you'll see!

Bully: (*Laughing*). Well, thanks a lot mate. Reckon we can knock off now, Beef.

Beef: Yeah, don't reckon many more will be along now.

(*They exit stage R, chuckling*).

Merchant: Free from all highwaymen and robbers, eh? It'd better be.

(*He moves stage L and spotlight moves with him. The three ROBBERS suddenly emerge, grab the MERCHANT and take his purse*).

Joe: (*Emptying purse into his hand*). Hey, chief, look at this! He's only got one measly coin left.

Antonio: All right, mister, where's the rest of it?

Merchant: (*Angrily*) The rest of it is in some other scoundrel's pocket, that's where it is.

Dave: What are you talking about, mister?

Antonio: We're the only ones who work this stretch of the road.

Joe: Yeah, that's right.

Merchant: Except for the toll tax men.

All three Robbers: The toll tax men!

Merchant: They took forty crowns off me.

All three Robbers: Forty crowns!!

Antonio: Why, that's daylight robbery!

Merchant: Precisely.

Dave: This taxing is getting a bit much, chief.

Joe: The people of this land are being taxed so much there's nothing left for us.

Antonio: You're dead right there. It's getting so bad you can't earn a decent DIShonest living any more.

Merchant: Can I have my 'measly coin' back, please? I want to be on my way.

Joe: Can he chief?

Antonio: Yeah, it's not worth keeping.

Merchant: You're too kind. Why don't you lot turn completely honest?

Dave: What, and be taxed like everyone else?

Joe: You must be joking.

Merchant: You've got a point there. I'm reporting those toll men to the Regent. You can be sure of that!

(*He leaves*).

Antonio: The Regent pah! He's pathetic!

Dave: Yeah, this trouble only started when he took over.

Joe: That's right.

Antonio: When the King was ruling there were enough rich people about to keep us in business. If things carry on like this

Joe and Dave together: We've had it.

Antonio: Right so we've got to do something.

Joe: Yes, but what?

Dave: That's right, chief, what?

Antonio: I don't know, but I'll think of something. Come on, back to the den.

(Exeunt).

SCENE 2.

The Royal Court of Rogaria.

(Centre stage there is a throne on a dais. Hanging on the back of the throne there is a regal cloak and on the seat of the throne is a kingly crown. Otherwise there are just enough furnishings to suggest a King's Courtroom. The curtain opens to reveal a knot of three men in conference. LORD SWINDLEHAM, the ROYAL TREASURER and SLINKY SIEGFRIED, the ROYAL SOOTHSAYER).

Lord Swind: *(To SLINKY).* Right, get out till I call you. And don't overact this time.

Slinky: Very good, my Lord. *(He patters off obediently).*

Lord Swind: *(To TREASURER).* You know what to say, don't you?

Treasurer: Yes, my Lord.

Lord Swind: Good.

(Enter BULLY and BEEF with sack of money each. They approach LORD SWINDLEHAM).

Bully: Your money, Boss.

Lord Swind: *(Icily).* Not my money, Bully, the GOVERNMENT'S. Give it to the Treasurer.

(BULLY and BEEF do so, then hang around expectantly).

Lord Swind: Oh, your wages? *(To TREASURER).* Give them a crown each, will you? I dare say you've helped yourselves already.

Beef: What, us, Boss?

Bully: We wouldn't do that, would we, we're government officials?

Lord Swind: *(Unimpressed).* Get back to work then. There's more money to be collected yet.

Bully & Beef: O.K. Boss, right away.

(They leave. Enter USHER).

Usher: His Royal Highness, Prince Frederick of Rogaria and Lord Wiseman, Minister for Foreign Affairs!

(Enter PRINCE FREDERICK and LORD WISEMAN).

Lord Swind: Ah, your Highness! *(He takes crown from throne and holds it out to the PRINCE).* At last you can wear the crown and the Royal Cloak. *(He points to the cloak on the back of the throne).*

Prince: No, thank you very much! *(He sits uneasily on the throne).* I don't even feel happy sitting on the throne.

Lord Swind: But, your Highness, remember the law of our land. If, after twelve months absence, the King fails to return to his throne, and has no children, his REGENT must become king.

Prince: You've never stopped reminding me of that.

Lord Swind: And since the twelve months is over now and King Ferdinand your brother has not returned, YOU must now become King. *(Holds out the Crown to him again).*

Lord Wiseman: The Regent is not King until he is crowned.

Prince: Thank you, Lord Wiseman quite right.

Lord Swind: The Coronation is a technicality. You must assume your full powers NOW to reassure the people.

Prince: But the whole thing is crazy! My brother might return at any time. He's much more suited to be King than I am - he's stronger, braver, wiser

Lord Swind: But dead.

Prince: We don't know that.

Lord Swind: Reliable reports all say he is.

(TREASURER nods in agreement).

Prince: (*In angry frustration*). Oh, why did he have to go off on that Crusade? Why didn't he just stay at home? I don't want to be King. I don't even want to be a PRINCE. I'd much rather be plain Fred and live in a humble cottage.

(*LORD SWINDLEHAM hangs crown on back of throne*).

Lord Swind: A nice fantasy, your Highness, but there is such a thing as DUTY.

Prince: Don't talk to me about duty. I've been doing my duty for the last twelve months and it's brought me nothing but misery! I must be the most unpopular man in the country.

Lord Swind: A strong king does not court popularity.

Prince: I'm not strong and I'm not a king. How many times do I have to tell you?

Lord Wiseman: Your Highness, if I might be permitted to speak. I must point out that this excessive taxation is not doing our country any good.

Lord Swind: You keep out of this, Wiseman, you're Minister for Foreign Affairs, Home Policy has nothing to do with you.

Lord Wiseman: Oh yes it has. When Home Policy is so bad our image abroad hits rock bottom.

Lord Swind: (*Angrily*). You insult the Prince Regent! There is nothing wrong with my - I mean HIS Home Policy.

(*Sounds of angry rioting and protest can be heard off-stage*).

Lord Swind: (*To USHER*) Go and shut the Palace windows, will you?

(*USHER obeys, leaving the stage. Slight pause*).

Lord Wiseman: Nothing wrong, eh?

Lord Swind: No, nothing wrong.

Prince: What about that rioting, Swindleham?

Lord Swind: Every kingdom has rioting, your Highness. That noise out there has been whipped up by a handful of political agitators and left-wing extremists.

(*Sounds offstage are silenced. LORD SWINDLEHAM smiles*).

Prince: All the same, Swindleham, cutting taxes a little might help the situation.

Lord Wiseman: We don't need such high taxation.

Lord Swind: We need every penny we can raise.

Prince: What for?

Lord Swind: For security, for law and order, to preserve peace.

(Distant sounds of rioting heard Off).

Lord Wiseman: Where's all the money going, Swindleham?

Lord Swind: You know very well security, police, the army.

Lord Wiseman: Tax collectors! (*LORD SWINDLEHAM scowls*).

Treasurer: I have all the figures here, your Highness.

(TREASURER hands large book to SWINDLEHAM, who hands it to the PRINCE. PRINCE looks through it unconvinced. LORD WISEMAN tries to look too. LORD SWINDLEHAM takes book away from PRINCE).

Lord Swind: Well, if you're unconvinced by hard facts, your Highness, perhaps you'll listen to the Royal Soothsayer.

Prince: (*Eagerly*). Ah, NOW you're talking!

Lord Wiseman: Your Highness, the man is a charlatan! Your brother wouldn't have listened to him. He was totally opposed to such superstitious nonsense.

Prince: My brother had brains. I DON'T, so I have to resort to other methods.

Lord Wiseman: But this crystal ball stuff is all hoo-ha

Lord Swind: Your Highness, shall I call him?

Prince: Please do he can't do any harm.

Lord Wiseman: Can't he?

Lord Swind: (*To USHER*). Call the Royal Soothsayer.

Usher: The Royal Soothsayer!

(Enter SLINKY SIEGFRIED carrying Crystal Ball covered with cloth. He approaches the throne).

Lord Swind: The Prince Regent - soon to be King - requires a prophecy. Can you provide one?

Slinky: I will do my best, as always, your Highness. I will consult the celestial globe. (*He whips cover off crystal ball and stares into it for a while*).

Slinky: Oh dear oh deary, deary me.

Prince: What is it? What's wrong?

Lord Wiseman: Your Highness, the whole thing is just a load of

Lord Swind: Be quiet, something's coming through. I can tell from his face.

Lord Wiseman: A load of codswallop, that's what's coming through.

Slinky: (*In apparent pain*). Ah ah ah no, no no no

Lord Swind: What is it?

Slinky: I see ruin and devastation the country overrun by foreign powers the Palace attacked!

Lord Swind: What! Can't our forces repel them?

Slinky: No, no our forces are too weak, too weak.

Lord Swind: Do you see what WILL be or what MIGHT be?

Slinky: I see what WILL be if

Prince: If what?

Slinky: If nothing is done to prevent it. Oh, beware, beware doom ruin destruction. I see doom ruin, destruction. (*He is getting carried away*).
Doom - ruin -

Lord Swind: Thank you, O learned soothsayer, that will do.

Prince: But he's only just got going.

Lord Swind: He's told us all we need to know. (*To TREASURER*). Give him something for his pains will you?

(*TREASURER hands SLINKY some money and he leaves stage trying to smother a grin*).

Lord Wiseman: And just WHAT has that phony told us?

Lord Swind: That we need to strengthen our armies and security forces if we are to avoid national disaster. And that means taxes!

Lord Wiseman: Oh so that's it, is it?

Lord Swind: You see, your Highness, there is no alternative! The fate of the country is at stake.

Prince: Oh very well, if you must.

Lord Wiseman: Your Highness -

Prince: I've got a headache, I'm going to lie down. (*To LORD SWINDLEHAM*). I'll leave it all up to you. (*To USHER*). You may go.

(*USHER exits stage R and PRINCE stage L. LORD SWINDLEHAM dismisses TREASURER who exits also*).

Lord Wiseman: Two can play at your game, Swindleham.

Lord Swind: (*Chuckles*). Two can play but only one will win - me.

Lord Wiseman: Don't be too sure.

Lord Swind: I hold all the cards, Wiseman, and don't forget: I can out-bribe you any day.

(*He walks off, gloating, stage L*).

Lord Wiseman: (*Thoughtfully*). It all depends who you bribe. (*Exits R*)

SCENE 3

Larsony Wood. The next day.

(Enter MERVIN, the Magician, and his Assistant, ROBIN. MERVIN is carrying a box of small bottles and ROBIN a collapsible table. Various relics, charms etc. dangle from MERVIN'S belt. They move just R of stage centre).

Mervin: Right, let's set up here. Someone should be along soon. Let's hope the taxmen have left them some money.

(They set up the table and MERVIN sets out some bottles on it. ROBIN fools around like the mischievous scamp he is).

Mervin: Quit fooling will you! Here, have a dose of the invisible potion in case I need you for the usual trick. *(Gives him a spoonful from a special bottle which he keeps in his pocket).* But don't overdo it, O.K.? *(He glances stage R).* Someone's coming. Are you still there? *(He gropes around, until he has found him, ROBIN making it difficult for him).* Got you! Right, stay there!

(Enter a TRAVELLER).

Mervin: Ah I see a brave man.

Traveller: What do you mean?

Mervin: You must be a brave man, sir, if you travel this dangerous road through Larsony Wood without protection.

Traveller: I have the protection of my sword, that's good enough for me.

Mervin: What use is a sword against evil spirits and hobgoblins?

Traveller: Sorry, I don't believe in Old Wives' Tales.

Mervin: But nobody can be sure, can they? I can offer you, sir, for a very reasonable price - a whole range of lucky charms: rabbits' feet, talismen, magic medallions, the bones of holy men.

Traveller: I thought the King had put a stop to all that sort of nonsense.

Mervin: The King tried but he was a blockhead.

Traveller: Really?

Mervin: Yes, a blockhead and a narrow-minded bigot.

Traveller: A blockhead and a narrow-minded bigot really

Mervin: Yes, he couldn't see beyond the end of his nose God rest his soul.

Traveller: God rest his soul?

Mervin: Didn't you know he was dead?

Traveller: Indeed I didn't it comes as quite a surprise to me.

Mervin: Where have you been for the last five months, then?

Traveller: (*Casually*). Oh, abroad trying to put the world right.

Mervin: Very noble of you, I'm sure. Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. I like you. I can see you're a decent, honest sort of chap. You don't want my lucky charms. O.K. - fair enough. I'll let you have one of my infallible medicines instead for a special bargain price. (*Barring the Traveller's way*).

Traveller: (*Firmly*). No, thank you. Would you mind letting me pass, I've got business to attend to.

Mervin: (*Ignoring the request*). I've got something for all kinds of sickness headaches chills, bruises. This wizard hazel is excellent for bruises.

Traveller: But I haven't got any bruises.

Mervin: (*Aside*). Not yet you haven't.

Traveller: Can I pass, please?

Mervin: Certainly, certainly, but you're making a big mistake.

(*The TRAVELLER continues across stage bumping into the invisible ROBIN [to him not the Audience] who trips him up and kicks him in the shins*).

Traveller: What the hell? What's going on?

(*MERVIN rushes up to him*).

Mervin: Are you all right? Some ghoul just attacked you.

Traveller: Ooh my legs!

Mervin: NOW would you like some wizard hazel? As I said, it's excellent for bruises!

(*The TRAVELLER jumps up and twists MERVIN's arm behind his back*).

Traveller: You blackguard! I don't know how you did it but if you don't tell me I'm going to break your arm off.

Mervin: (*In agony*). It's just an invisibility trick.

Traveller: Go on.

Mervin: My assistant drank a magic potion that made him invisible. HE tripped you up.

Traveller: Show me the potion. (*He releases MERVIN who shows him the bottle in his pocket*). And how do you make him visible again?

Mervin: Easy, you just clap your hands like that.

(*He gives a magician's clap. MERVIN and TRAVELLER now both react to*

ROBIN'S presence thus making him appear visible again).

Traveller: Well, well well. Very neat (*Musing*). There's more things in heaven and earth

Robin: (*Who has been looking around him*). Master, some soldiers are coming. We'd better get out.

(They pack up the table and hurry off).

Traveller: Hey, wait a minute! I haven't finished with you two yet!

(He follows them off. Enter LORD WISEMAN escorted by two SOLDIERS. They move stage R).

Lord Wiseman: (*Shouting towards R*). Antonio! I know you're here somewhere. If you come on out, you might hear something to your advantage.

(Enter stage L., unaware of LORD WISEMAN and SOLDIERS, ANTONIO, DAVE and JOE).

Dave: What's the plan then?

Joe: Yes, come on, tell us!

Antonio: I'm still working on it, don't hurry me.

Lord Wiseman: (*Turning and seeing the ROBBERS*). Ah, Antonio and friends! Just the people I wanted to see.

(ANTONIO, DAVE and JOE shrink back suspiciously and draw daggers).

Antonio: Lord Wiseman?! What brings you to this neck of the woods? Got problems?

Lord Wiseman: I've got a little job for you to do.

Antonio: What's the game?

Lord Wiseman: To put an end to all this ridiculous taxation for a start.

Dave: Just what we wanted, chief! (*To LORD WISEMAN*). You're on.

Joe: Yeah!

Antonio: (*More cunning*). Is that all? What's in it for us?

Lord Wiseman: This!

(Holding out large bag of money. JOE and DAVE try to grab it but LORD WISEMAN whips it away).

Lord Wiseman: AFTER you've done the job.

Antonio: Right, you're on. What IS the job?

Lord Wiseman: I've sent the Royal Soothsayer here to these woods on a bogus errand. He'll be along any minute. Now, YOU know a soothsayer yourselves, don't you.

Antonio: We could contact one, yes.

Lord Wiseman: Right, here's what I want you to do.

(He calls the ROBBERS round for a conspiratorial whisper).

Lord Wiseman: Got it? I think I can hear him coming. Get to work then and I'll see you later.

(He exits with the SOLDIERS).

Antonio: Right lads, hide, pronto!

(They all dive behind the curtain. Enter SLINKY SIEGFRIED. He is carrying his crystal ball in one hand, a bag of money in the other and whistling happily. As he passes the centre of the stage, hands appear through the curtain and yank him behind. There is much scuffling and appropriate remarks such as "Get off, what are you doing?" from SLINKY and "Hold him still", "Get his legs, you clown" from ANTONIO. Then finally, from ANTONIO, "Let's get him to the den then". Enter the TRAVELLER pursued by MERVIN and ROBIN. The TRAVELLER has MERVIN'S magic potion in his hand. He moves stage L.).

Mervin: You can't take that from me - it's the only thing I've got which works!

Traveller: People who misuse magical powers don't deserve to have them.

Mervin: My livelihood depends on that stuff, you've got to give it back.

Traveller: You'll have to change your livelihood, won't you?

Mervin: I can't and I won't. I DEMAND that you give me back my magic potion!

(He advances towards the TRAVELLER).

Traveller: *(Mocking).* You demand! What impudence! I'll make the demands, not you. *(He draws his sword).* If you're within fifty yards of me by the time I count to three, your backside will taste the tip of my sword. One....

Mervin: Come on, Robin, let's get out.

(He rushes off R. followed by ROBIN).

Traveller: Two *(He chuckles and returns his sword to its scabbard. He then addresses the Audience).* It's high time I paid a visit to the Court. And this invisibility potion will help me to make a surprise appearance. It should be fun!

(He exits stage L. Enter furtively, stage R, ROBIN and MERVIN).

Robin: It's O.K. Master, he seems to have gone.

Mervin: *(Groaning).* Oh what shall we do? *(He sits down disconsolately).*
Without that bottle we're ruined finished!

Robin: Cheer up, where there's life, there's hope, Master.

(Enter ANTONIO).

Antonio: Ah! Mervin just the man!

Mervin: Don't talk to me, I'm ruined!

Antonio: Oh no you're not - you're about to make a fortune!

Mervin: You what? How come?

Antonio: Come with me and I'll tell you all about it.

(He leaves through centre curtain).

Robin: Come on Master!

(He follows ANTONIO, and MERVIN follows ROBIN, much happier).

SCENE 4.

Royal Courtroom. Later the same day.

(As curtain opens LORD SWINDLEHAM is whispering conspiratorially to BEEF at the left side of the throne. Enter the MERCHANT of Scene 1 carrying a scroll).

Lord Swind: How dare you enter the Courtroom unannounced!

Merchant: I have an urgent petition for Prince Frederick. It can't wait. *(He*

recognises BEEF). Hey, you're one of the rogues I'm complaining about.

Lord Swind: Rogues?! That's slander! This man is a trusted civil servant. Now, if you have a petition, leave it with me and get out. The Prince Regent is a busy man.

Merchant: I want to give it to the Prince myself.

Lord Swind: You heard what I said! (*LORD SWINDLEHAM snatches the petition out of the MERCHANT'S hand*). Beef, show this man out, will you?

(*BEEF crosses to MERCHANT, twists his arm behind his back and forces him out*).

Merchant: (*Shaking himself free*). You haven't heard the last of me, I'll be back!

(*Exit MERCHANT. BEEF returns. LORD SWINDLEHAM smiles wickedly and carefully rips up the petition*).

Lord Swind: Dispose of it for me, will you.

(*BEEF takes torn pieces off stage L and returns. Enter COURT USHER stage R*).

Usher: Lord Wiseman!

(*LORD WISEMAN enters smiling broadly*).

Lord Swind: What are you smiling about?

Lord Wiseman: You'll see.

Usher: His Royal Highness, Prince Frederick!

(*Enter PRINCE. He is excitable and on edge*).

Prince: Get me the Royal Soothsayer!

Lord Swind: Your Majesty, your crown (*Pointing to crown on throne*).

Prince: Don't waste time, get him now!

Lord Swind: (*To BEEF*). Summon the Royal Soothsayer, will you?

Beef: Certainly my Lord.

(*He hurries off. PRINCE paces about nervously for a while*).

Lord Swind: Could you tell us what is troubling you, your Highness?

Prince: I have a feeling.

Lord Swind: A feeling?

Prince: Yes, a feeling that something is going to happen.

Lord Wiseman: A premonition?

Prince: That's right. A premonition that something is going to happen. Something big!

Lord Wiseman: And you want the Royal Soothsayer to tell you what it is?

Prince: That's right. (*To LORD SWINDLEHAM*). He's bright, isn't he?

Lord Swind: Not as bright as his name would suggest.

Lord Wiseman: (*Slyly*). I dare say, Lord Swindleham, I dare say.

(*Enter BEEF. He whispers to LORD SWINDLEHAM*).

Lord Swind: It appears, your Majesty, that the Royal Soothsayer is missing.

Lord Wiseman: Oh dear, that's sad.

Prince: Missing? He can't be missing, I need him, I want him, I've summoned him, I'm the Prince Regent!

Lord Wiseman: Do not despair, your Highness. I know of a very good soothsayer who's readily available.

Prince: (*Cheering up*). Oh?

Lord Swind: What's all this? I thought you despised all soothsayers.

Lord Wiseman: Well, I DID. But your soothsayer was so impressive the other day, I thought I'd get one of my own. Will you see him, your Highness?

Lord Swind: Your Highness, this is highly suspicious and irregular. I strongly advise against consulting a completely unknown and unofficial prophet.

Lord Wiseman: Your Highness, his credentials are every bit as good as the Royal Soothsayer's, I can vouch for that.

Prince: I WILL see him. Any soothsayer is better than none. Call him!

Lord Wiseman: (*To USHER*). Fetch Mervin the Magician, will you.

(*USHER exits*).

Lord Swind: Your Majesty, I think this is a very rash move. Who knows what he'll say? It could be disastrous.

Lord Wiseman: For you, yes.

Lord Swind: What do you mean? You're plotting something, aren't you Wiseman?

Lord Wiseman: Me? Plotting? That's your line, not mine.

Usher: Mervin, Master Magician, direct descendant of Merlin, supreme Oracle in the mighty and illustrious Court of King Arthur!

(*Enter ostentatiously ROBIN followed by MERVIN. ROBIN is carrying, on a salver, a crystal ball covered by a cloth. They come to a halt in front of the*

PRINCE).

Mervin: (*Grandly*). Your Majesty summoned me?

Prince: Yes, I have this feeling. (*Puts hand on his chest*).

Robin: Indigestion? (*MERVIN scowls at him*).

Prince: Certainly not.

Lord Wiseman: His Highness summoned you for something much more serious.

Prince: Yes, I have had a premonition and I want you to explain it to me.

Mervin: A premonition? Aha, my grandfather was much skilled in premonitions and passed his secret arts on to me. Let me gaze into my crystal ball. (*ROBIN whips away the cloth and MERVIN gazes into it*). Ah Ah I see much disorder and confusion

Lord Swind: You see he says just the same!

Lord Wiseman: Just wait a minute, will you, Swindleham.

Mervin: I see rebellion, the palace overrun, the Prince Regent attacked and wait oh no killed!

Prince: What?!

Lord Wiseman: Do you see what will be or what might be?

Mervin: I see what will be if, if

Lord Wiseman: If what?

Mervin: If taxation is not cut down forthwith!

Lord Swind: (*Furious*). This is a put-up job!

Mervin: And if Lord Swindleham is not dismissed immediately.

Lord Swind: Your Majesty, this is outrageous! The whole thing stinks - it's a malicious plot!

Lord Wiseman: You know all about malicious plots, don't you Swindleham!

Lord Swind: That is a vile slur I'll not endure! I demand, your Highness, my right to challenge him to a duel!

(A hubbub is heard off stage).

Slinky: (*Off stage*). Out of my way, I demand an entrance!

(Enter SLINKY SIEGFRIED in a rage).

Slinky: Your Highness, I demand justice!

Prince: Oh no, not more demands!

Slinky: I have been kidnapped and held in brutal captivity! (*To MERVIN and ROBIN*). Who are THEY?

Lord Swind: Your intended replacements. But now the whole vicious plot is

uncovered!

Slinky: Your Majesty, I escaped my cowardly kidnappers and called the Palace Guard. They are now in custody and await your judgement.

Lord Swind: Bring them in!

(BEEF leaves stage L to get them).

Lord Swind: Now the truth will out.

(Enter, arms tied, ANTONIO, DAVE and JOE, dragged in by BEEF, BULLY and THREE SOLDIERS. They are thrown before the PRINCE REGENT. MERVIN and ROBIN try to make their escape but BULLY and BEEF prevent them. The TRAVELLER appears stage R, unobserved because invisible to all except the Audience. During the ensuing dialogue the TRAVELLER makes his way to the throne, mounts it and dons the royal cloak and crown).

Lord Swind: *(Pointing at MERVIN and ROBIN).* These two are involved also, Your Majesty. *(Pointing at LORD WISEMAN).* And Lord Wiseman is the ringleader.

Prince: Are these charges true?

Lord Wiseman: I'm afraid they are, your Highness, but our motives were entirely honourable.

Lord Swind: Honourable! Pah! Since when has treachery and deceit been honourable? Your Majesty, they've admitted their guilt. I demand the death penalty for the kidnappers and *(pointing to MERVIN and ROBIN)* life imprisonment for these characters.

Prince: The death penalty life imprisonment that's a bit steep , isn't it?

Lord Swind: Not for their vile crimes.

Lord Wiseman: *(Drily).* Are we allowed to speak in our defence before you execute us, your Highness?

Lord Swind: Traitors and deceivers don't deserve a hearing!

(The TRAVELLER claps his hands thus rendering himself visible. ALL turn towards him in amazement).

Traveller/King: Then we can dispense with YOUR trial, Swindleham.

All: *(Bowing, going down on knees etc. in astonishment and reverence).* The King!

King: Don't worry, I'm not a ghost. I just used a little magic. *(Holds up bottle).*

Mervin: *(To Audience).* MY MAGIC!

Prince: *(Running to King to embrace him).* Ferdinand! Am I glad to see you! My

feeling was right!

King: *(Shaking hands warmly)*. Frederick! It's good to see YOU again too. You don't mind if I take over now, do you?

(MERVIN and ROBIN have been turning their faces away hoping the KING won't recognise them).

Prince: Mind?! Nothing would please me more! It's all yours, brother. I'll leave it all up to you!

(He hurries far L and sits on a stool well out of the way).

Lord Wiseman: Your Majesty, where have you been?

King: Detained kidnapped, in fact. But I escaped.

All: Kidnapped?!

King: Yes and Lord Swindleham was the ringleader!

Lord Swind: Your Highness, there must be some mistake, I

King: No mistake, Swindleham. I have letters to prove it. *(Holds up some letters)*. You knew I was returning home alone and in disguise, in order to see how my subjects live. You hatched a wicked plot to seize me and hold me till you could make my brother Frederick King.

Lord Swind: Your Majesty, the letters must be forged, I

King: You knew you could wrap my brother round your little finger. You knew that once HE was King you could rule the country unopposed.

Prince: *(Out front)*. I dare say he could have done.

King: *(To SOLDIERS)*. Take him and all his accomplices *(pointing at BEEF, BULLY and SLINKY)* and throw them in the deepest dungeons.

(The SOLDIERS grab BEEF, BULLY and SWINDLEHAM and frogmarch them off. The ROBBERS, MERVIN and ROBIN contribute the odd kick as they go out. SLINKY tries to hide behind throne).

Lord Swind: *(As he is dragged off)*. This is a set-up. I've been framed!

King: ALL his accomplices, I said.

(ANTONIO and JOE grab SLINKY, haul him off and return. Whilst this is going on, LORD WISEMAN is whispering in KING'S ear).

King: Antonio!

(ANTONIO, DAVE and JOE approach apprehensively).

King: It seems you and your men are out-and-out rogues. But HONEST rogues, I gather. You kept your side of the bargain with Lord Wiseman. Pay them, Wiseman.

(LORD WISEMAN throws them bag of money which ANTONIO grabs gleefully).

King: But no more thieving now. You three will form part of my security guard.

Antonio: Thank you, your Highness, we'd be honoured.

King: Right - you start NOW. Stand guard round the throne.

(ANTONIO, DAVE and JOE take up positions round Throne. ANTONIO left, DAVID and JOE right. The three SOLDIERS return and take up positions left of ANTONIO looking suitably surprised at the elevation of the ROBBERS. LORD WISEMAN is whispering in the KING'S ear again, clearly about MERVIN and ROBIN to whom the KING now turns).

King: *(To MERVIN and ROBIN).* Approach, you two.

(They approach apprehensively trying to conceal their faces).

King: Lord Wiseman has put in a good word for you two. *(They look relieved).* But then he hasn't met you personally as I have. *(They look suitably alarmed).* What was it? 'A blockhead' and 'a narrow-minded bigot'?

Mervin: I didn't MEAN that, your Majesty.

King: *(To WISEMAN).* What's the penalty for insulting the King?

Lord Wiseman: One hundred lashes and four years' imprisonment, Sire.

King: And for assaulting the King? You can't deny you assaulted me.

Lord Wiseman: Two hundred lashes, cropped ears and seven years in prison.

King: Hmm. It sounds rather uncomfortable

Mervin: But, Your Majesty, we didn't know who you were!

King: What! A smart magician like you not know who I was?

Mervin: Your Highness, YOU have the only thing that made me smart.

King: Oh yes, the invisibility potion. I'm afraid I'm keeping that, in case I ever want to disappear again. *(Reflective pause).* I'll tell you what I'll do, you look decent enough chaps deep down. Here's my bargain offer. I'll pardon you if you'll accept honest appointments here in Court.

Mervin & Robin: Oh yes, certainly, Your Majesty, by all means.

King: You can become the official Royal Weather Forecasters. You can't possibly be worse than the experts.

(Enter the MERCHANT).

Merchant: *(To PRINCE).* Your Highness, my petition? *(Stops short on seeing KING)* King Ferdinand! *(Goes down on his knees).*

King: All petitions will be granted. *(Cheers).*
Taxation will be slashed. *(More cheers).*
By five per cent! *(Moderated cheers).*
Next year. *(Even more moderated cheers).*
But tonight, my loyal subjects, to celebrate my return, there'll be song and dance, merriment and revelling, fireworks and feasting!

(Delighted cheers. LORD WISEMAN prompts the USHER).

Usher: Long live King Ferdinand!

All: Long live King Ferdinand! Long live King Ferdinand!

(More cheers as curtain falls)

THE END