

French Lear or The Beggar King

Translated and adapted by F. J. Morlock

Table of Contents

<u>French Lear or The Beggar King</u>	1
<u>Translated and adapted by F. J. Morlock</u>	1
<u>ACT I</u>	1
<u>ACT II</u>	4
<u>ACT III</u>	4
<u>ACT IV</u>	6

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- [ACT I](#)
- [ACT II](#)
- [ACT III](#)
- [ACT IV](#)

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CHARACTERS

The KING
HIS ELDEST DAUGHTER
HER HUSBAND
HIS YOUNGER DAUGHTER
THE GRANDCHILDREN OF THE KING
PASSERS BY
THE PUBLIC CRIER

ACT I

The old king is seated on his throne surrounded by his two daughters, their husbands and their children, along with his councillors and his guards.

KING: Approach, my daughters. And you, too, my sons-in-law, heroes without reproach to whom I confided them. My daughters, and you, also, my sons-in-law, who have become my sons, and you, also, my little grandchildren.

Approach, my eldest daughter, and your husband and your children. I will give you on the spot a great joy. God has given me the greatest joys in the world. I am glorious. I've conquered a vast empire. From the vaults of my palace hang the banners of my conquering armies. I am dreaded by my humiliated neighbors who no longer dare to bear arms against me. I am proud. Pride is not stupid vanity. Pride is satisfaction in having acted well. I am

French Lear or The Beggar King

loved by my people. I am rich. I am happy. But, I am old. In new times, there must be new men. At my age there is no longer any hope. There remains only the pleasure of bringing joy to one's children. At my age one aims at repose in life while awaiting the repose of death. My daughters, I am going to share my empire between you two. There will be an Empress for the Empire of the North, and an Emperor for the Empire of the North, in other words, you, the eldest, and your husband. So also there will be an Empress for the Empire of the South and an Emperor for the Empire of the South, in other words, you, the youngest, and your husband. But, before initiating this solemn partition, I wish, my daughters, to know how you love me. You, the eldest, speak first.

ELDEST DAUGHTER: My father, your words would astonish others, but not me. For I know you to be as generous as you are glorious. And I understand that you aspire to rest after all your exploits. You have, indeed, deserved this rest. Your succession will be in good hands.

KING: Very good! You know me generous, it's true. But, that doesn't tell me how much you love me.

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Is it possible not to love someone who is generous?

KING: Agreed. But, how much do you love me?

ELDEST DAUGHTER: As one ought to love her father.

KING: Meaning ?

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Meaning, placing him higher in her heart than all other beings in the world.

KING: Even higher than her husband?

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Even higher than her husband. Didn't our father give us life?

KING: You hear, my son-in-law?

SON IN LAW: I hear, I hear. (aside) What you must endure when you want an empire!

KING: Continue, my daughter.

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Father, I love you as the greatest gift God can give to man. I love you like the Sun which warms the Earth, like the stars which light the night. I love you like the pure sky of Summer. I love you like the freshness of fountains in torrid days. I love you like flowers whose hardy perfume penetrates all that surrounds them.

KING: That's a good daughter who will raise my grandchildren in respect of my memory.

ELDEST DAUGHTER: I love you like hope. I love you like charity. I love you like goodness. I love you like justice.

KING: Stop! You have spoken well. You will be Empress of the Empire of the North and your husband will be Emperor. Now, my younger daughter, I am listening to you, and after the words of your sister, I ask myself, from curiosity, how you can say better!

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: You know very well, my father, that it is not possible to find more eloquent and beautiful comparisons than those my sister has spoken. I could repeat her words.

French Lear or The Beggar King

KING: Do that then, since you cannot speak better of your father.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Sire, our master, you want to share your realm. You say you are old; but age is not a sin, age is experience.

KING: Right! Right! But that is not the question.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: I beg your pardon, Sire, our master. Your hands are not debilitated, and our hands are less steady than yours. If, by the greatest of misfortunes, death took you from your people, we would do our best to be a worthy replacement for you. But, as long as you live, we ought to continue our apprenticeship, observing your example.

KING: If I understand you correctly, you think I'm going down the wrong path and you do not admire my generosity?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: I admire it, but I'm astounded by it. I have such confidence in you that I fear for your people the consequences of the rest you desire.

KING: I thank you much for that confidence, but nothing in your speech tells me you love me.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: I love you as one ought to love her father.

KING: That's the first thing your sister said. Continue.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: What more is there to say?

KING: Pay close attention to your answers. Do you love me more than your husband?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Not more. Differently.

KING: Weigh your words carefully. Which of us, me or your husband would you prefer to see die first?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Neither the one nor the other! I've never thought of that. It would break my heart.

KING: Youngest daughter, don't put me in a passion! Consider you are risking a realm.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Sire, our master, my sister said she loves you like justice. I have enough confidence in your justice to believe you will approve my frankness.

KING: My child, there is still time. Don't try my patience. I don't like quibbling. I don't like it when you evade answering a precise question, and hide it behind a seeming frankness which is nothing but hypocrisy. I'd really like to forget your strange attitude. Repeat word for word what your sister said to me. Come, my child, how much do you love me?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Sire, our master, I love you like salt.

KING: What?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Like salt

French Lear or The Beggar King

KING: All you present here, listen carefully to my will. There will be no empire of the North, there will be no empire of the South. There will only remain my empire which I bestow on my eldest daughter. My eldest daughter loves me, my youngest daughter hates me. Ah, my eldest daughter, I beg your pardon. I preferred your sister. What a mistake! In giving you my empire I correct a terrible mistake. And you, the younger, pack your bags immediately, with your husband that you prefer to me, and your children. Under careful guard, you will be escorted outside the borders of the realm. I drive you out and I renounce you. And I am going to rest my old age amongst those who love me. I have spoken.

CURTAIN

ACT II

A year later, the king is living with his eldest daughter who possesses the kingdom. The king is going down a corridor when he meets the Queen, followed by her guards. He tries to flee. The Queen has him seized by her guards.

QUEEN: Father, your attitude is intolerable. You pretend to be a victim. You take on the airs of a martyr.

KING: Daughter, I take on the airs of a man who is the victim of ingratitude. I have given you everything and you refuse me signs of respect before the entire court.

QUEEN: Why do you expect to be respected? You spend your time in the kitchens with the servants.

KING: That's because they've kept their friendship for me. To them, I am still the old king.

QUEEN: Aren't you ashamed to lack dignity to this degree? What can the court think when the Queen's father frequents the kitchen waiters?

KING: Possibly the Court thinks the Queen's father is not happy in his daughter's home!

QUEEN: In the days of your power, you wouldn't let anyone teach you a lesson. My sister knew something!

KING: What? You reproach me today for having despoiled your sister for you?

QUEEN: I've inherited your character and I won't tolerate anyone teaching me a lesson. You are an embarrassment here. This very day you will withdraw to a remote place, in the company of two or three servants you can share a drink with at the inns; if such is your good pleasure as fallen king.

KING: No, child without bowels! I do not accept your gift. It sticks to my body like the resin from a poisoned tree. From now on I shall make no scandal in your court. I am going to take the stick of a mendicant. And I will be a scandal throughout the whole world, which is larger than your court. And all will know how you've treated me. May your children one day renounce their mother, as you have renounced your father, daughter without bowels!

CURTAIN

ACT III

The wretched king wanders alone on the highway.

French Lear or The Beggar King

KING: Have pity on a man who has known happiness, who has known riches, who has known power!! A man is, indeed, more wretched who has fallen into misery after having been rich, than if he had been poor from birth. You who pass by, don't you recognize me? Don't you recognize your king? Give alms to your king if you please! Oh! Why do you go on your way shrugging your shoulders?

PEOPLE PASSING BY: He's a lunatic. Don't listen to him. Sometimes lunatics become dangerous!

KING: Why, no! I won't become dangerous, my friends! Dangerous men don't beg! See, I hold out my hand!

PEOPLE PASSING BY: If you have to give money to all the beggars on the highway, you won't have wherewith to pay for the inn when you get to town.

KING: I'm hungry, my friends.

PEOPLE PASSING BY: Pretend you are eating! That will appease your hunger.

KING: I am thirsty, my friends.

PEOPLE PASSING BY: It's going to rain! That will swell the streams! You will be able to drink!

KING: Formerly, you acclaimed me! Your voices drowned out the trumpets. You prostrated yourselves on my passing. Today, you'd let me die, mocking me.

PEOPLE PASSING BY: He's got delusions of grandeur. He thinks they respected him. He thinks they acclaimed him. Soon, he'll think he's Charlemagne. (laughing, they leave)

KING: Oh! They're gone! In the past I never knew that the highways of my realm were so deserted, so icy. I didn't know that the people of my kingdom had such hard hearts. Alas, men scorn the poor. Alas, men only respect the rich. These people who refused me alms would have been neither richer nor poorer for having thrown me small crumbs. Alas, day is waning. Is it possible that I must stay alone on the road with all the phantoms that walk in the night? Ah! I'm afraid of solitude! I'm afraid death will come to meet me. He, who, in his old age, is surrounded by his children, and grand children laughs at death. He looks it in the face and yells at it, "You can carry me off but my lineage will go on through centuries." How cold it is on the road where there is no posterity. Only a poor shed, I cannot stand any more. If they repulse me at this cabin, I have only an hour to live. There's a young woman and children in the door way. I hear a woodcutter cutting wood. I am going to speak to this woman.

You are poor people, but perhaps you will take pity on a wandering old man who is dying of hunger and can no longer put one foot before the other.

YOUNG WOMAN: Are you coming from far away?

KING: Oh, yes. From far away.

YOUNG WOMAN: We only have a little bread. Tomorrow my husband will cut another faggot, which he will try to sell, so you can eat a little. And you can rest.

KING: Thanks! You are better than my daughter.

YOUNG WOMAN: You have a bad daughter?

French Lear or The Beggar King

KING: Yes, very wicked.

YOUNG WOMAN: You say you came a long way? Have you crossed the Empire where they say the old king was driven out by his daughter?

KING: Are those your children who cling to your skirts?

YOUNG WOMAN: Yes. They've become fearful since our misfortunes.

KING: You've had misfortunes?

YOUNG WOMAN: Great misfortunes.

KING: I am old; I am dirty; I have a long beard. Will you allow me to hug your children?

YOUNG WOMAN: Of course. Come in. Don't be afraid. Let this beggar hug you.

(The children come to him. The king kneels and embraces them.)

KING: My poor little children, forgive your old grandfather king who reduced you to misery. But God is just. I am as wretched as you.

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Father! What happiness! You will stay with us.

KING: Ah, my daughter, my favorite daughter. Why did you tell me you loved me like salt?

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Salt! Salt, father. Didn't you understand it is a blessing despite its bitter taste? What good would be the bread we eat if it didn't contain salt? It is indispensable to life, and I wanted to tell you I loved you like life.

KING: You've always been a little argumentative, my little girl.

CURTAIN

ACT IV

A PUBLIC CRIER

The Town Crier appears with drums and fanfares.

TOWN CRIER: I, the Town Crier, obedient to the orders of the King, tell you that the eldest daughter of the king, her husband and her children, have been exiled to a place where they are ordered to remain quietly. The Youngest Daughter of the King assumes the crown. The King hopes that his youngest daughter will be nicer to him than his eldest daughter. He has reason to believe it having seen that his youngest daughter always was very honest to him while the elder gave pretty speeches and he knows it, to his cost. **BE IT PROCLAIMED** that the King advises his subjects not to be tightfisted when a beggar holds out his hand on the highway. Because no one knows with whom he may have to do, in the same way, nobody knows who is going to live and who is going to die.

CURTAIN

ACT IV