

SETTING: *Various locations in and around the castle of Queen Margaret and her son, Prince Harold including The Throne Room, The Royal Guest Room, The Village Green and the slums known as Poor Town. Set is minimal; two benches and a cube are arranged in different configurations to indicate various locations. Light and sound should be used to establish place and time as well.*

AT RISE: *A road outside the Castle. LITTLE BOY BLUE runs in, carrying a shepherd's staff and a horn. He blows his horn, looks around, crosses to center, and blows his horn again, rather desperately. OLD MOTHER HUBBARD enters opposite, begging.*

HUBBARD

Alms for the poor... Alms for the poor...

BLUE

Excuse me! Have you seen a flock of sheep wandering down this road?

HUBBARD

No.

BLUE

What am I going to do?! One minute they were in the meadow and the next minute they were gone. No doubt it's those bandits!

HUBBARD

*(Looking about nervously)*

Bandits...

BLUE

Since King Baldric's death they've taken over the roads and highways. No one is safe anymore. This will teach me to fall asleep in a haystack...

*(He starts to exit.)*

HUBBARD

Please, young man – could you spare some alms for a poor woman with children to feed?

BLUE

Sorry...

*(He blows his horn again then hurries off.)*

HUBBARD

*(Calling after him)*

But my cupboard is bare!

*(PETER PIPER runs in behind her, carrying an empty peck basket.)*

PETER

Excuse me!

*(He crosses to her.)*

You haven't seen anyone carrying a peck of pickled peppers, have you?

HUBBARD

No.

PETER

*(Freaking out)*

I've been robbed! I've been robbed! That darn cow!

HUBBARD

Cow?

PETER

I was in my garden picking a peck of pickled peppers when I looked up and saw Little Boy Blue's cow in my cornfield so I went to chase her out and when I got back this is all I had left...

*(He shows her the empty basket.)*

An empty peck! No more pickled peppers! No doubt it's those bandits! Ever since King Baldric's death, they've taken over the roads and highways. No one is safe!

*(He starts to exit.)*

HUBBARD

Wait! Do you have any alms you could spare an old woman trying to feed her children?

PETER

Sorry...

HUBBARD

Please! My cupboard is bare! *Please!*

*(He exits. She starts to cry.)*

Will no one help me?

*(MARIGOLD enters, looking at a map. She spies HUBBARD.)*

MARIGOLD

Excuse me – I seem to be lost...

*(HUBBARD sobs louder. MARIGOLD hurries over to her.)*

You poor woman! Why are you weeping?

HUBBARD

My children are hungry. The cupboard is bare. We have no food, no money. I have been reduced to begging on the road. But no one will help me.

MARIGOLD

No one? Surely, if you brought this matter before your King...

HUBBARD

King Baldric is dead.

MARIGOLD

Oh no! I was not aware... I am from the Kingdom of Flora, far across the sea, and have been traveling these many months with a message for His Majesty. Who is ruling in his place?

HUBBARD

We have no ruler. His Royal Highness, Prince Harold, has yet to be made king.

*(She starts to cry again.)*

MARIGOLD

So you have no one to turn to in your time of need.

HUBBARD

No one. The kingdom is in ruins. Bandits have taken over the countryside.

*(MARIGOLD pulls a small money bag off her belt and hands it to HUBBARD.)*

MARIGOLD

Here. Use this to feed your children.

HUBBARD

Bless you, miss. Bless you.

MARIGOLD

Now I ask a favor. These roads are unknown to me and I have lost my way. Where is the castle of the late King?

HUBBARD

Follow this road two leagues west. The castle gate is through the woods and across the Royal Bridge. But beware of the bandits! No one in the kingdom is safe.

MARIGOLD

I have been trained in the art of self-preservation. No doubt my skills will keep me safe from harm. Goodbye – and good luck.

HUBBARD

Goodbye, miss.

*(MARIGOLD exits. HUBBARD holds up the sack of money. NED, a bandit, enters behind her back.)*

And thank you!

*(NED puts a hand up to his mouth and hoots like an owl – a signal to the other bandits.)*

NED

Hoo! Hoo!

*(HUBBARD turns around and sees him.)*

Good afternoon.

HUBBARD

Good afternoon.

*(She tries to walk past him. He steps in front of her.)*

NED

Not so fast. What've you got there in your hand?

HUBBARD

Nothing.

NED

It don't look like nothing. It looks like something.

*(He snatches it from her and holds it up to examine it.)*

It looks like money, is what it looks like.

HUBBARD

Please. I need that money to feed my children.

*(She reaches for it. He holds it out of her reach, taunting her.)*

Please!

NED

*(Mocking her)*

Oh, are your poor little kiddies hungwy? That's so sad...

*(She stomps on his foot.)*

Ow!

*(She grabs the sack and starts to run off opposite. BILLY, another bandit named for the club he carries, enters and blocks her way.)*

BILLY

Going somewhere, darling?

NED

Get her, Billy!

*(BILLY swipes at her. HUBBARD eludes him and tries to exit yet another way. NED blocks her way. HUBBARD starts to back up.)*

HUBBARD

No, please... I beg of you...

*(She is standing center. The BANDITS start to circle her.)*

NED

Did you hear that, Billy-boy? She begs of us.

BILLY

I hear her, Ned. Beg a little *louder*, dearie.

*(They stop circling.)*

NED

Now hand it over...

*(NED grabs her.)*

HUBBARD

Help! Help!

*(MARIGOLD suddenly enters.)*

MARIGOLD

Leave her alone!

*(They all turn to her.)*

NED

Well, well, well... what have we here?

MARIGOLD

You heard me. Unhand her at once – or else.

*(BILLY approaches her.)*

BILLY

Or else what, dearie?

MARIGOLD

I don't want to hurt you.

*(The BANDITS laugh.)*

NED

Hurt us?

BILLY

It's you ought to worry 'bout getting hurt, darling...

*(BILLY raises his club and brings it down. MARIGOLD calmly stays the club with one hand then uses it to send BILLY sprawling across the road. She turns to NED, who is still clutching HUBBARD.)*

MARIGOLD

Let go of her.

NED

I don't think so.

*(He puts a choke hold around Hubbard's neck. HUBBARD gasps. On the ground behind MARIGOLD, BILLY starts to stir.)*

MARIGOLD

She needs that money to feed her hungry children.

NED

Is that so...?

*(BILLY sits up and grabs his club. HUBBARD notices and gasps. NED claps a hand over her mouth before she can warn MARIGOLD.)*

Too bad!

*(BILLY stands up and brains MARIGOLD with the club. She slumps to the ground. NED flings HUBBARD to the ground as well, snatching the money bag from her in the process. BILLY and NED run off. HUBBARD crawls over to MARIGOLD.)*

HUBBARD

Dear girl – are you all right?

*(MARIGOLD moans then sits up, rubbing her head.)*

MARIGOLD

Oh, my head... What happened?

HUBBARD

One of the bandits hit you with his club.

MARIGOLD

Bandits?

HUBBARD

They were just here, trying to rob me. Don't you remember?

MARIGOLD

No.

*(She stands up and stares at HUBBARD a moment.)*

Who are you?

HUBBARD

I am the beggar woman you met on the road.

MARIGOLD

And who am I?

HUBBARD

I don't know. You never told me your name. Have you no recollection? No memory?

MARIGOLD

None whatsoever.

HUBBARD

The blow you suffered must have knocked you senseless. Come with me.

*(She tries to lead MARIGOLD off. MARIGOLD resists.)*

MARIGOLD

Where are we going?

HUBBARD

To the castle of the late King Baldric. You were headed there when you met this misfortune. Come. As you helped me, so I shall help you. Come. Let us away to the castle.

*(With music underscoring, she leads MARIGOLD off. The scene shifts to the Throne Room. ELLINGTON enters and looks around.)*

ELLINGTON

Your Majesty?

*(Nothing.)*

Hello...? Queen Margaret? Hello?

*(He waits another moment, then turns to leave, bumping into QUEEN MARGARET, who is entering. She carries a handkerchief and has been weeping.)*

ELLINGTON

There you are, Your Majesty – I have come to report...

*(He notices her tears.)*

Your Majesty – are you weeping? Why are you weeping?

MARGARET

You'll think me a foolish woman, Lord Ellington – after all, my husband has been dead for six months now. It's just...

ELLINGTON

You loved King Baldric very much.

MARGARET

And I miss him with all my heart.

ELLINGTON

He was a great man. A great king.

MARGARET

Yes. I only hope my son, Prince Harold, will be as great a King as his father...

ELLINGTON

And as lucky in love.

MARGARET

Oh, I have no doubt he will be. The Princess Marigold is said to be the perfect princess – dainty and delicate as a pea blossom.

ELLINGTON

Princess Marigold?

MARGARET

From the Kingdom of Flora, across the sea. She will be arriving today.

ELLINGTON

Today?

MARGARET

Yes. I realize Prince Harold is not to be crowned King until next year, but our law states that in order for a prince to be crowned King, he must be first be wed to a princess. Princess Marigold's early arrival will give them time to fall in love with each other before his coronation.

ELLINGTON

Let's hope they fall in love quickly then.

MARGARET

Why? Is something wrong, Ellington? If so, tell me at once!

ELLINGTON

It's the bandits, ma'am. Their attacks against the kingdom have increased.

MARGARET

Oh no!

ELLINGTON

They have taken over the roads and highways. Livestock has been stolen from the meadows, crops from the fields, people have been attacked...

MARGARET

Have they reached the Royal Bridge?

ELLINGTON

Not yet, but it is only a matter of time. Then all who reside on the village green will be in danger as well.

MARGARET

What are we to do?

ELLINGTON

Without a king, we are powerless to do anything.

MARGARET

But Prince Harold is not to be crowned King until next year.

ELLINGTON

If we wait that long, Your Majesty, there will not be a kingdom for your son to rule.

MARGARET

I must discuss this with Harold at once. Lord Ellington, where is my son?