

Modern English Macbeth



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About The Author

Warren King has been teaching English literature for thirty-five years in English comprehensive and public schools.

During the 1980's he was seconded to the national Shakespeare and Schools project to help develop methods of teaching Shakespeare in the classroom to bring the plays to life for pupils of all ages. After the project ended he continued that work as an adviser in to a London Education Authority, where he worked with teachers in creating Shakespeare projects in schools and helping English teachers, both primary and secondary, to make Shakespeare lively, comprehensible and enjoyable for their pupils.

He has created and conducted workshops in Shakespeare for both teachers and students, visiting schools around the UK and continental Europe.

As well as producing several books about the teaching of Shakespeare and writing articles for educational journals, Warren regularly addresses groups of teachers, showing them ways of developing GCSE, Key Stage 3 and A Level Shakespeare resources.

These modern English Shakespeare novelizations stem from his realisation that although so much good work has been done on textual aspects and the broad grasp of plot, little has been done about resources that would give students a complete grasp of the complexity of a whole Shakespeare text in one short reading.

Modern English Macbeth

Act One Scene One

Somewhere and nowhere. A terrifying storm. Lightning, with blinding white glimpses of a weird landscape. Each flash gives birth to an earth-shaking crack of thunder. Out of the darkness three voices wail.

'When shall we three meet again,
In thunder, lightning or in rain?'
'When the hurleyburley's done,
When the battle's lost and won.'
'That will be ere the set of sun.'
'Where the place?'
'Upon the heath.'
'There to meet with Macbeth.'

A cacophany of bloodcurdling yelps and inhuman screams, cutting through the noise of the storm.

'I come, Graymalkin!'
'Paddock calls.'

Lightning momentarily reveals three deformed shapes linking hands in a grotesque dance.

'Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.'

A mighty crash of thunder, a terrifying whiteness, then darkness and silence.

Act One Scene Two

Duncan, King of Scotland, was conferring with his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, at a fortress near Forres. Matters could not be worse. The rebels, led by the northern Thane, Macdonwald, had made an alliance with the Norwegian king and the two forces were preparing to roll across Scotland like a tidal wave.

Two sentries brought a limping, bleeding soldier to the King. The man clutched his torn side, resisting an overwhelming desire to pass into unconsciousness. It was clear that he had something important to tell the King.

'What bloody man is this?' said Duncan. 'I can see he's just come from the battlefield so he'll be able to give us the latest news.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Malcolm. 'This is the sergeant who struggled so valiantly to save me from captivity. Hello, brave friend. Tell the King how things stand.'

The man winced. His breathing was laboured but his eyes shone. 'It was on a knife-edge,' he said. 'The armies were like two spent swimmers clinging together to prevent themselves from drowning. Then the merciless Macdonwald -' the sergeant spat with disgust - 'that most vile of men! - brought in some reinforcements from the western isles. After that fortune began smiling on him.'

Duncan and his sons exchanged glances. Lennox, a close ally of the King, was there too. Their faces expressed the seriousness of the situation.

'But it was all in vain,' continued the sergeant. He tried a smile and winced again. 'Because brave Macbeth - how well he deserves that name! - disregarding his own safety, brandishing his sword, which smoked with hot blood, carved his way through the troops until he faced the cursed rebel. He didn't stop - no handshakes or farewells - until he had unseamed him from the navel to the jaw and fixed his head on our battlements.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Duncan. 'Valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!'

'But it wasn't over yet,' said the sergeant. 'Can you believe this, King of Scotland? No sooner had the western islanders taken to their heels than the Norwegian tried again. Armed with reinforcements he began a fresh assault.'

'Didn't that dismay our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?' said the King.

The sergeant attempted a laugh. 'Yes,' he said. 'As much as sparrows dismay eagles or hares lions. If I'm completely honest I'd say they were like overworked guns, their barrels exploding, as they lay into the enemy.' He slipped to the ground. 'I'm weak, I need help.'

'You've done well,' said Duncan. He turned to an attendant. 'Go, get him to a doctor.'

As the sentries carried the sergeant out another newcomer, even fresher from the battlefield, arrived.

'It's the worthy Thane of Ross!' said Malcolm.

'And in a hurry,' said Lennox. 'Bursting to tell us something.'

'God save the King!' said Ross.

'Where have you come from, worthy Thane?' said Duncan.

'From Fife, great King,' said Ross. 'Where Norwegian banners have been flying freely. Norway himself, with the help of that most disloyal of traitors, the Thane of Cawdor, began a terrible assault. Until Macbeth, absolutely fearless, confronted him head on and, matching him point for point, blow for blow, ground him down and, to conclude -' Ross grinned. 'The victory fell on us.'

Duncan spun round and beamed at his council. 'Great happiness!' he said and clapped his hands.

'So now,' said Ross, 'Sweno's in disarray. 'And we didn't even allow him to bury his men until he had paid us ten thousand dollars.'

'That Thane of Cawdor won't have a chance of deceiving us again,' said Duncan. He placed his hand on Ross' shoulder. 'Go and see to his immediate execution and with his former title greet Macbeth.'

'I'll take care of it,' said Ross.

'What he has lost the noble Macbeth has won,' said Duncan.

Act One Scene Three

It was beginning to grow dark. Thunder rumbled and the heath was covered with mud. Three deformed shapes crept out of the slime.

'Where hast thou been, sister?'

'Killing swine.'

'Sister, where thou?'

'A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And munched, and munched, and munched:

'Give me,' quoth I:

'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.

Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,

And, like a rat without a tail,

I'll do, I'll do and I'll do!

'I'll give thee a wind.'

'Thou'rt kind.'

'And I another.'

'I myself have all the other;
And the very ports they blow,
All the quarters that they know
In the shipman's card.'

'I'll drain him dry as hay:

Sleep shall neither night nor day

Hang upon his pent-house lid;

He shall live a man forbid.

Weary se'nights nine times nine

Shall he dwindle, peak and pine:

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

Look what I have.'

'Show me, show me!'

'Here I have a pilot's thumb,

Wracked as homeward he did come.'

A drumbeat, marking the progress of an army on the march, could be heard approaching.

'A drum! a drum! Macbeth doth come.'

The three joined hands and began moving slowly in a circle.

'The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about:
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine.
Peace! The charm's wound up.'

Macbeth and Banquo walked ahead of their troops.

'What a day,' said Macbeth. 'Victory and filthy weather. I've never seen so fair and foul a day.'

'How far is it to Forres?' said Banquo. He stopped short as three human shapes rose in front of them. 'What are these?' he said. 'So withered and strangely dressed that they don't look like anything that lives on the earth.' He shut his eyes tight then opened them again. 'But they are definitely on it.' He took a step towards them. 'Are you living creatures? Or something that we should fear?'

The three women cackled hysterically then hopped about saying 'shhh' and placing their bony fingers on their skinny lips.

'You seem to be women but your beards cast doubt even on that,' said Banquo.

'Speak if you can,' said Macbeth. 'What are you?'

'All hail, Macbeth!' cawed the first witch. 'Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!'
Macbeth and Banquo glanced at each other.

'All hail, Macbeth,' screamed the second witch. 'Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!'

Macbeth laughed nervously. Banquo stared at the women.

'All hail Macbeth!' cooed the third witch. 'That shalt be king hereafter!'

'Good Sir,' said Banquo as Macbeth recoiled. 'Why do you start and seem to be afraid of things that sound so favourable?' He turned back to the three creatures 'Are you real or what? Who are you? You greet my partner showing knowledge of who he is and promise him great things, including the hope of royalty - which makes him speechless. You don't say anything to me. If you can look into the future and tell who will prosper and who won't, speak to me then.'

They looked up slowly, their eyes boring into him.

'Hail,' said the first, somberly.

'Hail,' said the second.

'Hail,' said the third.

There was a pause. When the first witch spoke again her voice was like iced water.

'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.'

The second witch shook her head slowly. Her voice was low and snake-like.

'Not so happy, yet much happier.'

The third witch pointed at him. 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. So, all hail, Macbeth and Banquo.'

'Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!' said the first witch. They glided backwards and began merging with the gloom.

'Stop!' said Macbeth. 'Is that all? Tell me more. I know I'm Thane of Glamis as a result of Sinel's death. But Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor is alive and well. And as for being king! It's no more believable than being Thane of Cawdor. Tell me where you get this strange information. Or why you stop us on this blasted heath with such a prophetic greeting. Speak up, I command you!'

They had gone.

'These are bubbles of the earth,' said Banquo. 'Where have they gone?'

'Vanished into the air. And what seemed solid melted like breath in the wind. I wish they had stayed.'

'Were we seeing things?' said Banquo. 'Have we gone mad?'

Macbeth gazed at his friend for a moment then he laughed. 'Your children will be kings.' He doubled over and roared. Banquo began laughing too.

'And you'll be king,' he said, slapping Macbeth on the back.

'That's not all. Thane of Cawdor too. Isn't that how the song it went?'

'That very tune,' said Banquo. 'And the words too.'

They heard someone coming and two shapes - men on horseback - emerged from the darkness.

'Who's that?' said Banquo.

The two men dismounted and showed themselves to be Ross and Angus.

After warm greetings and hearty handshakes Ross addressed Macbeth.

'The King is delighted with the news of your success,' he said. 'He's especially impressed with your courageous rampage among the formidable Norwegian ranks. Reports about you came thick as hail and everyone raved about you.'

'He's sent us to thank you,' said Angus. 'And to escort you to him.'

'He's going to reward you,' said Ross. 'And for a start he's told me to address you as Thane of Cawdor. And so - ' He bowed. 'Hail, most worthy Thane, for that's your title.'

Macbeth drew in his breath.

'What!' exclaimed Banquo. 'Can the Devil speak the truth?'

'The Thane of Cawdor is alive,' said Macbeth. 'Why do you dress me in borrowed clothes?'

'The man who was the Thane is alive,' said Angus. 'But he's under a heavy death sentence. What he was up to I don't know exactly but he's committed capital treasons:

that's been proved and he's confessed. So that's the end of him.'

Macbeth reflected on what had happened. Glamis and Cawdor, they had said. Two thirds of the weird women's words had already proved true! 'Thanks for your trouble,' he said. He leant over to Banquo and spoke softly in his ear. 'Don't you have hope that your children will be kings?'

'If you follow that to its logical conclusion it might yet bring you the crown in addition to Thane of Cawdor,' said Banquo. 'But this is very strange: sometimes, to bring us to destruction, the forces of darkness tell us truths - convince us with simple facts, to betray us in more serious matters.'

Ross and Angus were talking quietly a few yards away. Banquo looked towards them. 'Cousins,' he said. 'A word.' He patted Macbeth's arm then left him.

Macbeth was immersed in confusion. What did it mean? He tried to apply reason to it. The weird women had told him two truths as innocent prologues to the imperial theme. This couldn't be bad. Nor could it be good. If it was bad why did it promise such success for him, beginning with an indisputable fact? He was Thane of Cawdor after all. But if it was good, why did it make him think about doing something so unnatural that it made his hair stand up on end and his heart pound furiously - knocking against his ribs? His worst moments of fear in battle were nothing to the horrors of his imagination now. The thought that kept coming to him was so outrageous, so unsettling, that he was losing all sense of reality.

Banquo whistled. Macbeth glanced up: they were watching him and laughing.

'Look at him, said Banquo. 'Wrapt in thought.'

Macbeth smiled at them. But his mind was still full. If it was his fate to be king then Fate would make him king without his having to lift a finger.

'He's having difficulty with his new honours,' said Banquo. 'Which are like new clothes that don't really fit till we've worn them for a while.'

Macbeth snapped out of it. Come what may, matters would run their course.

'Come on, Macbeth,' said Banquo. 'We're waiting for you.'

'Forgive me,' said Macbeth, hurrying towards them. 'My exhausted brain was full of battle details. Gentlemen, I won't forget the trouble you've taken.'

A young groom stood waiting with horses, which the two captains now mounted.

'Let's go,' said Macbeth.

Before galloping off Macbeth went up close to Banquo. 'Think about what's happened,' he said, 'and when we've got more time to ourselves, when we've weighed it all up, we'll discuss it again. But let's drop it now. Come friends.'

Act One Scene Four

Has Cawdor been executed yet?' said Duncan. 'Haven't those I sent to do it returned?'

'My Liege, they haven't,' said Malcolm. 'But I've spoken to someone who witnessed it. He said the traitor confessed his treasons very frankly: he implored your Highness' pardon. He was deeply repentant. Nothing he ever did in his life was as much a credit to him as the way he faced his execution.'

The King's eyes showed his sorrow. He shook his head sadly. 'There's no way of reading a man's true intentions in his face. He was a gentleman on whom I had built an absolute trust.'

There was excited shouting and the sound of horses in the courtyard. Duncan went out on to the deck and looked down. 'Oh worthiest cousin!' he exclaimed when he saw Macbeth dismounting.

Macbeth and Banquo hurried up the stairs and joined the King and his advisers. Duncan embraced Macbeth then stood back and looked at him.

'I've been racking my brains trying to think of a way of thanking you,' he said. 'It's impossible. I wish you had done less - that would have made it easier to thank you. I could never repay you.'

'Having the chance to fulfill my duty to you is reward enough,' said Macbeth. 'Your Highness' only role is to receive our duties. By protecting you we are only doing what's expected of us.'

'Welcome,' said Duncan. He turned to Banquo. 'Noble Banquo, you've deserved no less and no-one should think you have. Come, let me embrace you and hold you to my heart.'

'And if I grow there,' said Banquo as Duncan embraced him, 'the harvest is all yours.'

The King invited everyone to be seated. He walked slowly to his chair of state. His face was grave, now.

'My undoubted good fortune and happiness must be tempered for a moment with some serious business,' he told them. He beckoned to Malcolm, who rose and went to the chair beside his father's.

'Sons, kinsmen, thanes,' said Duncan, 'and all those close to me: you should know that we are making our eldest, Malcolm, our heir, and from now on he will be known as the Prince of Cumberland. It is an honour that carries profound responsibilities.'

The assembled men clapped then they all got up and congratulated the young prince. Duncan called Macbeth to him.

'We'll go from here to Inverness and honour you with a visit,' he said.

'It'll be my pleasure,' said Macbeth. 'I'll be the messenger myself and take the joyful news to my wife. I beg leave to go now.'

As Macbeth hurried down to the courtyard where a fresh horse was waiting the thoughts that had not left him for a moment became even more insistent. The Prince of Cumberland! That was a new development - a step over which he would trip unless he could jump over it: it was in his way.

He suddenly became aware of his thoughts and they appalled him. It was a good thing that no light could show his black and deep desires.

And yet ... he wished that it would happen. Exactly what, he daren't think about but it would be something that the eye would fear to look at.

As he rode off Banquo was telling the King about Macbeth's astonishing performance in the battle.

'Hearing about his valour is like a banquet to me,' said Duncan. 'Let's follow him. He's so diligent that he's sped off ahead of us to prepare a royal welcome. He's a cousin without equal!'

Act One Scene Five

Lady Macbeth held the letter which the messenger had just brought her. She paced her room, reading it aloud.

They met me in the day of success. They have supernatural knowledge. When I tried to question them further they vanished into the air. While I was still standing there, wrapped in wonder, some messengers came from the King, calling me Thane of Cawdor: the title which the weird sisters had only just saluted me with! And they had also referred me to the future with 'Hail, king that shalt be!' I had to tell you this my dearest partner of greatness so that you wouldn't miss the joy of knowing what has been promised you. Think about it and farewell.

Lady Macbeth clutched the letter to her heart. He was Glamis already and also Cawdor now! And she knew he would be ... what he had been promised!

And yet She didn't think he could pull it off. He was too full of the milk of human kindness to do what was necessary. He wanted greatness, he wasn't without ambition, but he had no ruthlessness in him. Whatever he wanted to achieve always had to be done honourably. No, he would never betray anyone. And yet he still wanted something he shouldn't have: what he wanted screamed out: 'If you want me you must do such and such!' But he feared to act on it.

She couldn't wait for him to get home so that she could pour her influence into his ear, persuade him away from all the excuses that kept him from wearing the ... the round golden shiny headpiece that fate and the supernatural seem to have crowned him with already.

There was a knock at the door. She thrust the letter behind her back guiltily. 'Who is it?' she called.

The door opened and a servant came in.

'The king comes here tonight,' he said.

'Shhh!' She said. 'Don't say it! Isn't your master with him? If it were true he would have given me notice.'

'I beg your pardon, Madam, but it is true. Our Thane is on his way. A messenger's just arrived, so out of breath that he could hardly talk.'

'Go and look after him. He brings great news.'

When the servant had gone Lady Macbeth went to the window and looked out over the battlements to the country through which the royal party would ride.

'Even the raven - the bird of death - that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements is hoarse,' she said aloud. She closed her eyes and raised her arms to the sky. 'Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts. Take all my femininity away and fill me from the crown to the toe top full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood, stop me from feeling pity so that no natural feelings can get in the way.'

She put her hands on her breasts. 'Come to my woman's breasts, you spirits of evil, and suck gall from me where there should be milk. Come thick night and shroud me in the dunnest smoke of hell, so that my sharp knife won't see the wound it makes, nor that the light of heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry, 'stop! stop!'

She became aware of a noise below. She opened her eyes. It was Macbeth, surrounded by adoring members of the household. She turned and ran.

'Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!' she cried, rushing into his arms.

He lifted her, held her close and kissed her.

'Greater than both, according to the all-hail hereafter,' she murmured as she kissed his ear. 'Your letters have transported me beyond the immediate present: I feel the future in this moment.'

He put her down. 'My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight.'

'And when's he leaving?'

'Tomorrow as he intends.'

'Oh never shall sun that morrow see!'

She dragged him upstairs, pulled him down on their bed and began unbuckling him.

Some time later she lay, propped on her elbow, stroking his hair and staring into his eyes.

'Your face, my Thane, is like a book where one may read strange things.' She kissed him. 'To deceive everyone look like everyone else. Be welcoming: show welcome in your eyes, your hand, your tongue. Look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it. We must provide for . . . him that's coming. And you must leave tonight's great business to me. Business that will shape the rest of our lives.'

Macbeth said nothing. She kissed him again then looked at him with a question in her eyes. He sat up and lifted his clothes from the floor.

'We'll talk about it later,' he said.

'Only be positive,' she said. He was getting dressed. 'To hesitate is fatal,' she said. 'Leave it all to me.'

He went down to give the servants their instructions.

Act One Scene Six

Duncan and Banquo rode side by side as they approached Inverness.

'This castle is pleasantly situated,' said Duncan. 'The air appeals to my senses.'

'Look,' said Banquo. 'Swifts have built their nests here - proof of the delicacy and freshness of the air. See, there's no jut, frieze, buttress or corner that these birds haven't used. I've noticed that wherever they breed the air is delicate.'

Lady Macbeth ran out to meet them.

'See, see, our honoured hostess!' exclaimed Duncan.

A dozen grooms came to help them. The courtyard was swept so clean that one could see the great grey stones that paved it. Duncan smiled.

'People take so much trouble over my entertainment. It can be a problem but I do appreciate it.' He kissed his hostess.

'Anything I could do, doubled and then doubled again, would be nothing compared with the honours your Majesty piles on our house. For everything you've done in the past and now these new honours, we are deeply in your debt.'

Duncan looked around. 'Where's the Thane of Cawdor? We tried to catch him but he rides fast. He's got something special to come home to, which helps his speed.' Duncan looked admiringly at Lady Macbeth. 'Beautiful and gracious hostess, we are your guest tonight.'

'We are your servants,' said Lady Macbeth. 'Everything in our home is yours.'

'Give me your hand,' said Duncan. 'Conduct me to my host. We love him greatly and will continue our favours to him. Lead the way, if you please, hostess.'

Act One Scene Seven

The great hall echoed with laughter and companionable shouting, the clatter of huge dishes and the sounds of musicians playing in different parts of the torch-lit room. Duncan sat back, relaxed, comfortable in the knowledge that he was surrounded by friends and loyal supporters. It was good to know that Scotland was safe after the upheaval which the rebellion had created. His host was unaccountably preoccupied, staring into his tankard, but the beautiful hostess was as charming as ever, organizing the serving men and attending to the needs of the guests.

Macbeth swept his plate aside and tapped distractedly on the table. He got up and, pushing past the people in his way, made it to the door and out into the fresh air of the courtyard.

What should he do? He faced the tower wall and pressed his forehead against it. If it could be all finished and done with when it's done then it may as well be done quickly. If only the repercussions of the murder could be controlled. If only all the danger could end with Duncan's death -. If only the death blow could be the end of it -. If only we could escape the consequences of our actions here on earth - skip the life to come -.

Macbeth climbed up to the battlements and looked up at the sky. There were no stars.

The trouble was that we have choice: we have freedom of choice. But if we choose violent options they come back to plague us. And it was that law, that even-handed justice, that was the problem. When we poison others we poison ourselves.

Duncan. Macbeth sighed. What was he to do?

The King trusted him completely. For two very good reasons: first as Macbeth was his cousin and his subject -both very powerful arguments against murder - and then as he was Duncan's host, who should shut the door against his murderer, not bear the knife himself!

Macbeth walked slowly down the stairs and back into the courtyard. And anyway, Duncan was so gentle as a man, and so strong as a king, that his virtues would cry out for revenge at the brutality of his death. There would be outrage at the slaughter of such a good man: everyone would be so filled with pity that the whole nation would grieve.

No, there was no excuse - only vaulting ambition, which threatened to overreach itself and bring him crashing down.

A dim light fell across the courtyard. It was his wife, coming from the great hall.

'Hello,' he said. 'What's the matter?'

She came across to him. 'He's almost finished eating,' she whispered. 'Why have you left the banquet?'

'Has he asked for me?'

'Of course he has!'

'We won't go any further with this business. He's honoured me lately.' Macbeth's voice was almost pleading. 'And I've earned golden opinions from all sorts of people. I want to enjoy them like new clothes - not cast them aside so soon.'

'Were you drunk when you dreamt of wearing a king's robes?' she said. And has that dream slept since then, waking now, sick and trembling at what you wanted to do?' She snapped her fingers. 'From now on, that's how much I value your love.'

When he didn't say anything she took his arm and shook it.

'Are you afraid to be the same in your actions as you are in your desire? Do you want to spend the rest of your life longing for a crown, knowing that you're nothing more than a coward, letting 'I don't dare' answer 'I want'? Do you want to eat fish without getting your feet wet like the poor cat in the saying?'

'Stop,' cried Macbeth. 'Please don't. I would dare to do anything a man should do. There are some things no human being should even think of doing.'

'What animal were you then when you thought about it, only to break your promise to me? When you dared to do it, then you were a man. And the more you dared the more of a man you were in my eyes. There were no excuses then and now you're all excuses: they're just pouring out - making themselves! And unmaking you!'

He turned away and she went round him and faced him squarely. 'Look here,' she said. 'I have breast fed and I know what a tender thing it is to love the baby that milks me. I would rather pull my nipple from its boneless gums and dash its brains out than break a promise I've made to you!'

They stood glaring at each other. But Macbeth's gaze began to soften and admiration crept in.

'What if we fail?' he said.

'We fail!' she said adamantly. 'But if you keep your nerve we won't fail.'

They were silent for a long time. Then she spoke again, fast and low: 'When Duncan is asleep - which shouldn't be too long, after the ride he's had - I'll make sure his two chamber attendants are so drunk that they won't be able to remember a thing. And when they're lying sleeping like pigs, what can't you and I do to the unguarded Duncan? And what can't we pin on them? They'll take the blame for what we do!'

She crept into his arms and he held her close. 'You should have only boys,' he said. 'Your qualities are so masculine. Won't everyone think, once we have smeared them with blood and even used their daggers, that they've done it?'

'Who would dare think otherwise after we've had our say?'

Macbeth's uncertainty had evaporated. 'I'm ready,' he said. 'And all my muscles are wound up for this act. Let's go. We'll go back and put on an act. False faces must hide the secrets of false hearts.'

Act Two Scene One

Banquo's son, Fleance, couldn't sleep. His father hadn't come in although it was very late. He got up and went outside. It was chilly. His father's voice came from behind him.

'What's the time, boy?'

'I don't know,' said Fleance. 'But the moon's gone down.'

'She goes down at twelve.'

'I think it's later, Sir.' The boy turned.

'Wait,' said Banquo. 'Take my sword.' He yawned. 'There's economy in heaven: their candles are all out.' He took his belt off. 'Here take this too. I'm so tired. And yet I don't want to go to sleep. Merciful powers! What horrendous dreams I've been having!'

There was the dull light of a torch and the sound of voices.

'Give me my sword!' said Banquo. 'Who's there?' He relaxed when he heard Macbeth's answer: 'A friend.'

'What Sir?' said Banquo. 'Not yet in bed? The King is. He's had a wonderful time and hasn't stopped talking about you.' He took a diamond out of his pocket. 'This is for your wife who he calls a very kind hostess. And he's gone to bed as contented as a baby.'

'I'm not tired,' said Macbeth.

'I dreamt about the three weird sisters last night,' said Banquo. 'They've shown you some truth.'

'I don't think about them,' said Macbeth. 'But when we have an hour to spare we could talk about that business. If you don't mind.'

'Whenever you like.'

'Alright then. I'll let you know.'

'As long as I'm not compromised,' said Banquo. 'I'm all yours.'

'In the meantime sleep well,' said Macbeth.

'Thank you, Sir,' said Banquo. 'The same to you.'

When Banquo and Fleance had gone Macbeth instructed his servant: 'Go tell your mistress to ring the bell when my drink is ready. Then go to bed.'

It was totally silent. And pitch black. It was now or never. Macbeth stared into the darkness. And as he looked it seemed that a dagger hung there. He closed his eyes and opened them again. It was still there. He peered. It didn't waver. Was it really a dagger? Its handle towards his hand?

He tried to clutch it. His hand went right through it: it was still there and yet he couldn't feel it. Was it only a dagger of the mind, a false creation of a fevered brain?

He could still see it as he drew his own, real, dagger: it was pointing the way to Duncan's room. He knew he was seeing things and yet it was so real. And now there was blood on it, which hadn't been there before.

It was ridiculous. There was no such thing. He knew it was the violence in his mind that was coming out in the form of a bloody dagger.

His mind was filled with images of fear and horror and he stood there, overwhelmed by them, until a bell rang and brought him back to the business in hand.

'I go, and it is done: the bell invites me.' He began walking. 'Don't hear it, Duncan; for it's a knell that summons you to heaven or to hell.'

Act Two Scene Two

As soon as the King's chamberlains passed out Lady Macbeth rang the bell then went into the dark courtyard to wait for her husband. She was excited: she had drunk some wine and it had filled her with fire.

What was that!

No it was nothing: only an owl.

The sound of snoring came to her. It meant the doors were open! He had done it! The doors were open and their snores were pouring down the stairs from the bed chambers.

'Who's there?'

Her husband's voice! They had woken up and he hadn't done it! They had been caught in the attempt, not the deed itself! How could he have missed the daggers? She had lain them out, ready. It was so easy: if Duncan hadn't looked so much like her father as he slept she would have done it herself.

There was a stumbling noise in the doorway and she rushed towards it.

'My husband!'

'It's done! Didn't you hear a noise?'

'I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry. Didn't you say something?'

'When?'

'Now.'

'As I came downstairs?'

'Yes.'

'Listen. Who's sleeping in the room next to his?'

'Donalbain.'

Macbeth dropped the daggers and peered at his hands in the dim light of his wife's torch. 'This is a sorry sight.'

'A foolish thought to say a sorry sight!'

'Someone laughed in his sleep and another cried 'Murder!' And they woke each other. I stood listening. But they said their prayers and went back to sleep.'

'Two of them are sharing a room,' said Lady Macbeth.

'One of them cried 'God bless us!' and the other 'Amen'. As though they had seen me with these hangman's hands. Listening to their fear I couldn't say *Amen* when they cried 'God bless us!'

'Don't think about it,' she said.

'But why couldn't I say *Amen*? I needed a blessing and *Amen* stuck in my throat.'

'We musn't think about it: it will drive us mad.'

'I thought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more! Macbeth has murdered sleep.'" Macbeth put his head on her breast and she cradled him. 'The innocent sleep' he

muttered - 'sleep that removes our worries, the death at the end of each careworn day, the balm of hard work, ointment of painful minds, chief nourisher in life's feast -'

She pushed him away. 'What are you talking about?'

'And it kept crying 'Sleep no more' so that I thought it would wake the whole house up. 'Glamis has murdered sleep and so Cawdor will sleep no more! Macbeth will sleep no more!'

Lady Macbeth stamped her foot. 'Who was it that cried like that? Come on, Thane. You make a mockery of your manhood, behaving so foolishly. Go and get some water and wash this filthy witness from your hands.'

When he came back from the well with the bucket she was holding the daggers. 'Why on earth did you bring them out? They have to stay there. Take them back and smear the grooms with blood.'

Macbeth drew back and looked at her in terror. 'I'm not going back there. I'm afraid to think about what I've done let alone look at it.'

'Weakling!' she said. 'Give me the daggers.!' She snatched them from him. 'The dead look no different from sleeping people. Fearing the dead is like a child fearing a painted devil. If he's bleeding I'll put some of it on the groom's faces because it must look as though they've done it.'

Macbeth was left alone. He couldn't believe what he'd done. Suddenly there was a booming noise. Someone was knocking at the gate. Who was it? Why was it that every noise appalled him? He looked down at his hands and started. Could all the water in the ocean wash this blood off? It was more likely that his hands would turn all the earth's seas red!

'My hands are the same colour as yours, ' said his wife as she joined him. 'Although I'm sorry to say I don't feel any guilt. There's someone knocking at the south entry. Let's go to our room.'

She took his hands and guided them to the bucket. 'A little water clears us of this deed. See how easy it is? Listen: more knocking. Go and put your nightgown on: it must seem as though we've been to bed.'

He wasn't listening. She shook him. 'Don't be so lost in your thoughts.'

'It's better not to think,' he said.

As he walked away, still in a state of shock, helped by his wife, the knocking came again. He wished whoever it was would wake Duncan.

Act Two Scene Three

The porter had been drinking all evening and it took his wife a long time to wake him. As he staggered out into the misty morning he muttered to himself.

'What a knocking this is! This is the gate of hell, this is. Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, in the name of Beelzebub? We've got all sorts here, I can tell you. Here's a farmer who hanged himself for being too greedy and losing everything. Alright, alright, new inmate, I'm coming! I hope you've got enough towels: you'll sweat enough in here! Knock, knock. Alright!. Here's a hypocrite who sat on both sides so well you didn't know where he was.'

He shivered and began running. 'It's too cold to devil-porter it any longer. Alright, alright!' He drew back the enormous bolts to admit an impatient Macduff, the great Thane of Fife, accompanied by Lennox.

'What time did you go to bed that you're having such a good lie in?' said Macduff.

'Oh very late, Sir,' said the porter. 'Drinking all night. And now I'm suffering: drink does three things to you.'

Macduff and Lennox walked towards the courtyard, followed by the porter. 'And what are they?' said Macduff.

'It makes your nose red, it makes you sleep and it makes you piss. Lust, Sir, it encourages and discourages: it makes you want it but it makes you unable to do it. It makes you and breaks you. It turns you on and it turns you off. It excites you and it dulls you. It makes you stand up to fight and it stops you from standing up!'

'I think you had too much last night.'

'Yes, but I've thrown it all up.'

'Is your master awake?' said Macduff.

'He is now, with all that knocking,' said the porter. 'Here he comes.'

Good morning, noble Sir,' said Lennox.

Macbeth wore a white robe and soft slippers. 'Good morning to you both,' he said.

'Is the King up?'

'Not yet.'

'He told me to call for him very early. I'm almost late.'

'I'll take you to him.'

'I'm sorry to trouble you,' said Macduff as Macbeth took them to the bed chambers.

'It's no trouble,' said Macbeth. 'There's the door.'

'I'll just go and wake him,' said Macduff. 'That's what he told me to do.' He went in.

'Is the King leaving today?' said Lennox.

'He is. Or so he intends.'

'It was a wild night where we stayed,' said Lennox. 'Our chimneys were blown down. And they say wails and strange ghostly screams were heard in the air. And there were prophesies of dreadful civil war and all sorts of terrible things. Owls flew about all night and there's been talk of earthquakes.'

'It was a rough night,' said Macbeth.

'I can't remember anything like it,' said Lennox.

There was a sudden commotion, a great clatter and banging.

'Oh horror!' It was Macduff's voice - screaming. 'Horror! horror!

Macbeth and Lennox rushed to the entrance. 'What?' 'What's the matter?'

Macduff stumbled out. 'Chaos has broken out!' he cried. 'Someone's stolen the life from the Lord's anointed temple!'

'What's that?' said Macbeth. 'The life?'

'Do you mean his majesty?' said Lennox.

'Go and see,' said Macduff. He covered his face with his hands. Don't tell me to speak. Go and look then speak yourselves.' They hurried off up to the King's bedroom. 'Wake up! Wake up!' shouted Macduff. 'Ring the alarm bell! Murder and treason! Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm! Wake up! Ring the bell!'

Lady Macbeth came out as the bell started tolling. 'What's going on? All this noise! Tell me, tell me!'

'Oh gentle lady,' sobbed Macduff. 'It's not suitable for a woman to hear. It would kill you.' He embraced Banquo, who had also just come out. 'Oh Banquo! Banquo! Our royal master's been murdered.'

'What! In our house!' exclaimed Lady Macbeth.

'Too cruel anywhere,' said Banquo. 'Dear Duff, I beg of you, tell me it's not true.'

Macbeth and Lennox returned. Everyone looked at Macbeth.

'If I had died an hour before this tragedy I would have lived a good life,' he said. 'From this moment there's nothing important in life.'

Malcolm and Donalbain came down the stairs. 'What's wrong?' said Donalbain.

Macbeth approached them and put an arm around each. 'You are and don't know it,' he said. 'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood, has been turned off. Its very source has been cut off.'

'Your royal father's been murdered,' said Macduff.

'Oh!' Malcolm slumped against Macbeth. 'Who did it?'

'His chamberlains,' said Lennox. 'Their hands and faces were all smeared with blood. So were their daggers, which lay unwiped on their pillows. They stared like madmen, quite desperate.'

'Even so!' exclaimed Macbeth. 'I'm sorry about the anger that made me kill them.'

'Why did you do that?' said Macduff.

'I couldn't help it,' said Macbeth. 'Anyone would have done the same. My love for royal Duncan was stronger than my reason.' He swept the air in front of him.

'Here lay Duncan, his silver skin laced with his golden blood, the jagged wounds an affront to nature itself. There ... he pointed to the side - 'the murderers, soaked in the evidence of their deed, their daggers obscenely dripping blood. Who could have helped himself if he'd had a heart at all?'

Macduff was about to say something when Lady Macbeth moaned and thrust her hand up dramatically to her forehead. 'Help me!' she said and dropped down.

'Help the lady,' said Macduff and servants ran to her assistance.

They all gathered around her, showing their concern. Malcolm whispered to his brother: 'Why aren't we taking charge of this? This is our business.'

'We'd be fools to say anything at all,' said Donalbain. 'It's too dangerous. Let's get out of here.'

'Careful with her there,' said Banquo as the servants lifted Lady Macbeth. 'And when we're all dressed let's meet and inquire into this violent piece of work. I'm determined to oppose this malicious treason.'

'So am I,' said Macduff.

The others murmured their agreement.

'Let's go and get dressed then and meet in the great hall,' said Macbeth.

Malcolm and Donalbain watched them go.

'What will you do?' said Malcolm. 'We'd better not hang about here. I'm going to England.'

'Ireland for me,' said Donalbain. 'It'll be safer to split up. I don't trust anyone, least of all our closest relatives.'

'This poisonous arrow hasn't landed yet,' said Malcolm. 'The safest thing is to get out of its way. So let's find our horses right now. And I don't think we should be too fussy about making our farewells!'

Act Two Scene Four

The news of Duncan's death came to Ross at the castle of a friend. He immediately mounted his horse and rode hard until he came within sight of Inverness, which was almost completely hidden by the black fog. His horse was tired so he dismounted and led it up the hill towards the castle gates.

An old man was labouring uphill, puffing and gasping, and Ross drew alongside of him.

'Hello, Father,' he said. 'What news?'

The old man shook his head. 'Never seen the likes of it,' he said. 'I've seen some strange things in my time but this dreadful night made them seem like child's play.'

'Well,' said Ross, 'You see, the heavens, troubled by the acts of humans, threaten the scene of their violence: that's what's happening. It's daytime, according to the clock, but darkness strangles the sun. It's hard to tell whether it's night or day, the way darkness entombs the face of day.'

'It's unnatural,' said the old man. 'Just like the business up there.' He lifted his stick and pointed. 'Last Tuesday a falcon, surveying its prey, was hunted by a mousing hawk and killed.'

'And I hear Duncan's horses, the most perfect examples of their type, went wild, broke out of their stalls and refused to be controlled,' said Ross. 'As though declaring war on mankind.'

The old man beckoned to Ross who inclined towards him. 'They say they ate each other!' he said.

Someone was galloping towards them. He stopped when he recognized the Thane of Ross. It was Macduff and they greeted each other.

'How are things?' said Ross.

'How do you think?' said Macduff. He looked up at the sky. 'Can't you see?'

'Do they know who did it?'

'The ones Macbeth killed. Duncan's grooms.'

'No! What for?'

'They were bribed. Malcolm and Donalbain have stolen away and fled. Which places suspicion on them.'

'Even worse,' said Ross. 'What ambition, to kill one's own parent. So I suppose Macbeth will be elected.'

'It's already been done and he's gone to Scone to be crowned.'

'Where's Duncan's body?'

'Carried to Colme-kiln, the sacred resting place of kings.'

'Are you going to Scone?' said Ross.

'No, Cousin,' I'm going home to Fife.'

'Well I think I'll go.'

'Well I hope it will satisfy you,' said Macduff. 'Goodbye. I don't think our new clothes will fit better than our old.'

Macduff rode off and Ross mounted his horse too. 'Farewell, Father,' he said.

'God's blessing be with you,' the old man said. 'And with those who work to right wrongs and turn enemies into friends.'

Act Three Scene One

It had all happened so fast. Banquo was a guest of the King at Forres once more but it was a new king now. It was difficult to know what to think about it. Macbeth had it all now: King, Cawdor, Glamis - everything. Just as the weird women had promised. And Banquo feared that his friend had played a terrible hand to get it. Still, they had prophesied that it wouldn't stay in his line but that he himself would be the root and father of many kings. If it had all come true for Macbeth wouldn't it happen for him too?

Heralds at the entrance to the state rooms came to attention and blew a brassy fanfare. The King and Queen emerged into the courtyard.

'Ah,' said Macbeth. 'Here's our chief guest.'

Banquo went across to them.

'It would be a gap in our great feast if he wasn't going to be there,' said the Queen.

The Royal couple smiled graciously.

'We're having a formal banquet tonight, Sir,' said Lady Macbeth. 'And I'll expect you.'

Banquo bowed. 'Whatever your Highness commands I will obey. I am bound to you with an indissoluble tie.'

Macbeth swept the formality aside by putting his arm around Banquo's shoulders and walking him aside. 'Are you going out this afternoon?'

'Yes, my Lord,' said Banquo.

'Pity,' said Macbeth, 'because I would have valued your good advice in today's council. But tomorrow will do. Are you going far?'

'A few hours ride, there and back,' said Banquo. 'I'll be back by suppertime. Unless my horse has difficulty. In which case it will be a bit longer.'

'Don't miss our banquet.'

'I won't, my Lord.'

Macbeth beamed at him and gave him a playful punch. Then his face became serious. 'We hear our murderous cousins are hiding in England and Ireland,' he said. 'Refusing to admit the cruel murder of their father, telling outrageous lies to anyone who'll listen. But more of that tomorrow when we'll work on state matters together. You'd better go then. Goodbye. See you tonight.'

They started off in different directions. Then Macbeth turned and called after Banquo: 'Is Fleance going with you?'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'Well I wish you a good trip.'

Courtiers, thanes and aides milled about in the courtyard.

'Find ways of amusing yourselves till seven tonight,' said Macbeth. 'We will spend the afternoon by ourself. God be with you.'

He went to a private room where an attendant waited.

'Are those men here?' he said.

'They are, my Lord,' said the attendant. 'Outside the palace gate.'

'Bring them to me.'

While the attendant was gone Macbeth paced. It was all very well to put on a pleasant face for his guests but that wasn't how he felt. He was on edge. To become king was nothing. But to stay king: that's what really mattered.

Banquo was the problem. He was a big threat: it was his great dignity that was so frightening. And he was fearless. And careful. Banquo was the only person in the world he feared and when Banquo was around he felt inferior, as Mark Antony had done in the presence of Octavius Caesar.

He remembered the way Banquo had reproached the witches when they'd first put the name of king on him. And he had insisted that they speak to him. And when they did they looked respectful and hailed Banquo as the father of a line of kings. On his own head they had placed a fruitless crown and put a barren scepter in his hand! To be wrenched away by a hand not of his own family - none of his sons succeeding him. So it was for Banquo's descendants that he had corrupted his soul. He had murdered the gracious Duncan for them! Stuck thorns in his peace of mind just for them. And given his precious soul to the Devil to turn Banquo's sons into kings. All that for the seed of Banquo! Rather than that he would defy Fate and fight it to the death.

The attendant returned with two rough-looking men.

'Go to the door and stay there until we call,' said Macbeth. When the attendant had gone Macbeth nodded to the men. 'Wasn't it yesterday that we spoke?'

'It was,' said one of them.

'Well now,' said Macbeth. 'Have you thought about what I said?'

The two men exchanged glances.

'You know that it was he who kept you in such a low condition in the past, not me. I told you that yesterday. I told you everything that Banquo's done to you.'

'You did,' said the first man.

'Yes I did,' said Macbeth. 'And I went further, which is the point of this meeting. Are you really so forgiving that you can let it go? Are you such Christians that you'd pray for this man and his children when his heavy hand has oppressed you and your children for ever?'

'We are men, my Liege,' said the first.

'Well you pass for men,' said Macbeth. 'Now, if you have any manhood in you at all I will give you a job that will remove your oppressor while at the same time tighten your bond with me: I'm sick and won't be well until he's dead.'

'I'm so bitter, my Liege,' said the second, 'that I don't care what I do.'

'Me too,' said the first. 'I'm so tired of hardship that I'd do anything to try and mend my life or else be rid of it.'

'So both of you know Banquo was your enemy?'

They nodded.

'Well he's mine too. And so much so that every moment he lives is a knife wound in my heart. I could blow him out of sight with naked power if I wanted to but I mustn't because certain friends who are his as well wouldn't like it. That's why I've come to you - to do it in private.'

'We'll do anything you ask of us,' said the second man.

'Even though our lives -' the first man began.

'Your courage is outstanding,' Macbeth interrupted. He went to the window. 'Right! Within the next hour I'll advise you where to plant yourselves and you can go and get ready. It must be done tonight - and some distance from the palace. And remember, I require a good, clean job - no bungling or botches. His son, Fleance, will be with him. His death is just as important to me. I'll leave you alone, now, so that you can make up your minds in private. I'll come back in a little while.'

'We've already decided, my Lord.'

'Alright. Off you go. I'll come to you straight away.'

They went out and Macbeth smiled. Good. That was it then. If Banquo's soul was going to heaven it would go tonight.

Act Three Scene Two

Lady Macbeth rang for a servant. When he came in to her room she said: 'Has Banquo gone from court?'

'Yes, Madam, but he's coming back tonight.'

'Tell the king I'd like to see him when he's free. Just for a few words, tell him.'

Lady Macbeth couldn't settle down to anything. She felt very painfully that we gain nothing and waste everything when we get what we want without it bringing us happiness. It would be better to be Duncan than to be alive but tortured with fears and doubts.

She heard Macbeth's footsteps approaching and she ran to the door to meet him.

'Oh hello, my Lord,' she said, taking his hand. 'Why do you hide away with your sad thoughts? They should have died with the person they're thinking of. You shouldn't worry about things you can't do anything about. What's done is done.'

'We've wounded the snake, not killed it,' he said. 'And it will recover and bite us. It will take forever to get rid of these nightmares that shake me nightly. It would be better to be with the one we killed, because we gave him peace, than to be king and be tortured like this. Duncan's in his grave. After the fever of life he sleeps well.' Macbeth smiled grimly. 'Treason has done him a favour. Nothing - neither steel nor poison, personal problems nor politics - nothing can touch him any more.'

Lady Macbeth sat down and drew him down beside her. 'Come on, my love. Don't look so downcast. Be bright and jovial with your guests tonight.'

He looked up at her and smiled. 'I will, my love. And I hope you will be too. And I want you to pay particular attention to Banquo. Treat him as a special guest - in every way: how you look at him and what you say to him. We must be careful not to drop our guard.'

He sunk his head into his hands and sobbed. She put her arms around his neck. 'You must stop this,' she said.

'Oh, my mind is full of scorpions,' he said. 'You know that Banquo and Fleance are still alive!'

'But they won't live forever.'

'That's true,' he said. 'So cheer up.' He smiled. 'Something dreadful's going to happen to them by nightfall.'

'What?'

'Let it be a surprise, dearest darling,' he said. He went to the window and looked out. 'Come darkest night, and blindfold the caring eye of gentle day. With your bloody and invisible hand rip to pieces those lives that keep me in a state of fear. Ah, the light's getting thick and crows are flying into the dark woods: all the good things of day are closing their eyes while the things of night are waking up.'

He turned. 'You don't understand what I'm saying, do you? But just wait, and you'll see. Once you start doing evil things you get strength from continuing with them. So. Come, let's go.'

Act Three Scene Three

The two murderers waited beside the road. The parkland was disappearing into the deepening gloom and they knew that it wouldn't be long before they would be completely invisible to anyone passing. A figure came slowly towards them from the direction of the palace. He seemed to be looking for them and stopped in front of them.

'All ready?' he said.

They had never seen him before.

'Who told you to join us?' said one of them.

'Macbeth.'

'He doesn't have to be suspicious. He's told us what to do and we're doing it.'

'Alright then,' said the other. Come and stand with us. It's almost dark. Our traveller won't be long now.'

They waited without speaking until the newcomer said: 'Listen, I hear horses.'

The horses came nearer and then they heard a voice - Banquo's - shouting to the grooms. 'Bring me a light!'

'It's him,' said one of the murderers.

'The grooms are taking the horses,' said the other. 'And they're walking.'

'Everyone walks from here to the palace gate,' said the stranger.

'Alright, get ready.'

'Banquo's voice came out of the dark: 'Looks like rain tonight.'

They jumped on him. 'Let it come down, then!' one said.

Banquo struggled and fought but it was no use. They pinned him to the ground with their knives.

'Oh treachery,' he gasped. 'Run, Fleance, run, run. Oh you devil,' he sighed with his last breath.

They chased after Fleance but he disappeared into the dark woods.

'We've only half done the job,' one of them said.

'Well, anyway,' the other said. 'Let's go and tell him what we've done.'

Act Three Scene Four

The huge doors of the glittering state dining room opened and the King and Queen stood there, smiling. Behind them the long table was set for a banquet. The anteroom was crowded: everyone of importance in Scotland had been commanded to attend - from the great thanes down to the lesser lords and their ladies - and almost everyone had obeyed.

'You all know your own rank,' said Macbeth. 'Come in and sit down. From the greatest to the least you're all most heartily welcome.'

They filed past the King and Queen and took their seats: the more powerful a man was the nearer he sat to the royal couple at the head of the table.

When they were all seated Macbeth stood up and smiled round at them.

'Ourself will mingle with you and play the humble host,' he said. He swung round and beamed down at his radiant queen. 'Our hostess will keep her place for now: she will receive you later.'

'Greet our friends for me, Sir,' she said, 'for I welcome them with all my heart.'

While acknowledging the clapping and table thumping Macbeth glanced up at the doorway and saw that a new face had appeared among those of the servants. It was one of the murderers.

'See?' Macbeth said to his wife. 'They greet you in turn with their hearts' thanks.'

Lady Macbeth smiled graciously at the applauding guests. When the noise had subsided Macbeth spoke again.

'Both sides are even, then. Enjoy yourselves. In due course we'll drink a round of toasts.'

He made his way to the doorway, stopping every now and then to greet one of the guests, until he stood beside the murderer.

'There's blood on your face!' he said.

'It's Banquo's then.'

'It's better outside you than inside him. Has he been dealt with?'

'My Lord, his throat is cut. I did that for him.'

'You're the best of the cut-throats. But whoever did the same for Fleance would be even better. If you did that you would be the best of them all.'

'Most Royal Sir.' The murderer came closer. 'Fleance escaped.'

Macbeth stared at him. He felt one of his fits of terror coming on. Just when everything was going perfectly; when he was feeling safe - as firm as marble, as solid as rock, as free as air. Now, suddenly, he was enclosed, cramped, full of the most painful fears and doubts.

'But Banquo's safe?'

'Yes, my Lord, quite safe, buried in a ditch with twenty deep gashes in his head - each one of them enough to kill him.'

'Thanks for that,' said Macbeth.

Banquo's death was all very well but Fleance was the issue: he was the mature snake - his escape breeding venom in time - even though it had no teeth at present. There was only one thing in the world to be feared - the seed of Banquo.

'Go now,' he said. 'We'll talk again tomorrow.'

Lady Macbeth watched him and became concerned when he stopped halfway to his chair and seemed to be lost in thought. She got up and went to him. 'My royal Lord,' she said. 'You're neglecting your guests. They might as well be at an inn, paying for their meal, without the warmth of your hospitality. If it was just food they wanted they could have stayed at home. Ceremony adds flavour to the meat: without it it's tasteless.'

'Thanks for reminding me,' said Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth went back to her place and Macbeth clapped his hands loudly. 'Now!' he said. 'Bon appetite! And your good health!' He took a tankard from a table and raised it. They all stood up and drank.

Lennox, who sat at the top end of the table, signaled him to return and sit. He walked towards his old friend who was seated beside Ross.

'All the greatest in the land would be under one roof if we had been honoured with Banquo's presence,' he said. 'I hope I'll have cause to confront him for his discourtesy rather than pity him for any accident.'

'He is at fault for breaking his promise,' said Ross. Ross indicated the vacant chair beside Lady Macbeth's. 'Will it please your Highness to grace us with your royal company?'

'The table's full,' said Macbeth.

Lennox pointed to the empty chair. 'There's your place, reserved for you,' he said.

Macbeth looked up. All the colour in his cheeks drained away. He swayed.

'What's the matter?' said Lennox.

Macbeth backed away, not taking his eyes off his chair. Then: 'Which of you have done this?' he shouted.

There was a change of atmosphere as people stopped eating and talking and looked at him. 'Done what?' they asked each other.

They watched as the King pointed to the empty chair.

'You can't say I did it!' he screamed. 'Don't shake your gory locks at me!'

Ross sprang to his feet. 'Ladies and gentlemen, rise: his Highness is not well.'

'Sit!' cried Lady Macbeth. She was moving fast to her husband. 'Sit, worthy friends. His Majesty is often like this - has been since childhood. Please, just stay seated. It's only a brief fit. He'll be himself again in an instant. Take no notice of him: if you give it too much attention it will make him worse. Carry on eating and take no notice of him.'

She reached his side: she took his arm and spoke urgently into his ear. 'Are you a man?'

'Yes, and a bold one, daring to look at something that would frighten the devil!'

Lady Macbeth dragged him to the side of the hall. The guests had turned back to their conversations.

'What nonsense!' she said. 'This is just a picture of your fear - the same thing as the dagger which you told me led you to Duncan. Come on, now - these outbursts are ridiculous, far more suitable for women telling winter's tales. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

Macbeth was even paler now, and his face showed real fear.

'Why are you pulling faces?' she said. 'When all's said and done, you're only looking at a chair.'

'Oh yes?' said Macbeth. 'Look! Look there! What do you say now?' He stepped forward and shook his finger at the chair. 'Why, what do I care? If you can sit there nodding then you can speak, too, so say something! If the dead won't stay in their graves then we should feed them to birds of prey. That would stop them!'

'Has this foolishness completely destroyed your manhood?'

Macbeth seemed to come to himself again and he looked at her. 'As true as I stand here I saw him.'

'Fool!' she said.

'Blood has been shed before now,' he said. 'In the olden days, before we became civilized, and yes, since then, too, there have been murders too terrible for the human ear. There was a time that a man would die when he had his brains knocked out and that would be the end of him. But now they rise again with twenty gashes in their heads and push us off our chairs. This is even more unnatural than Banquo's murder.'

'My dear Lord,' said Lady Macbeth, 'your noble friends are wondering what's going on.'

'I've forgotten myself,' he said. He addressed the guests. 'My most worthy friends, don't be amazed. I have a rare illness which is nothing to those who know me well. Come, let's drink to love and health then I'll sit down.' He snapped his fingers at a serving man. 'Give me some wine.' The man poured from a pitcher. 'Come on, fill it up,' said Macbeth. He took the chalice. 'I drink to the whole table. And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss. I wish he were here.' He raised the chalice and held it up with both hands. 'To all of you and to him, we drink. And all of you drink too.'

They stood: they watched him empty the chalice then they raised their own tankards. Before they could drink he flung the chalice across the room. It landed with a mighty clatter on the stone floor.

'Go away!' she shouted. 'Get out of my sight! You should be in your grave! Your bones are marrowless, your blood is cold: there's no intelligence behind those eyes you're glaring with!'

They all looked from him to the chair and back again. They shook their heads and began muttering to each other.

'Just think of this as a normal occurrence,' said Lady Macbeth as loudly and firmly as she could. 'That's all it is, except that it's spoiling our pleasure.'

But it was clearly more than that. The King seemed to have shrunk. His face was so pale and pinched that his features were quite changed. He coughed - a choking, gurgling cough - and saliva foamed around his lips. 'I dare to do anything a man dares,' he muttered. He covered his eyes with his hands and whimpered. Then he stood up straight and looked fiercely at the empty chair. 'Come at me like the rugged Russian bear, or the armour plated rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger: take any form but that!' He pointed and covered his eyes. 'And I wouldn't turn a hair. Or come back to life and challenge me to single combat. If I flinch then, you can call me a coward.'

He flung himself to his knees. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His red eyes contrasted starkly with his white face. 'Go, please go, horrible ghost. Unreal thing! Go!'

Suddenly he looked round at the stunned guests. He stood up unsteadily. 'It's gone. And I'm a man again.' He was speaking haltingly, as though in pain. 'Please,' he said. 'Sit down.'

'It's too late. You've ruined the atmosphere and destroyed the dinner with an astonishing loss of control,' whispered Lady Macbeth fiercely.

'Can it be?' he said. He was speaking softly, as though to himself. They were all gazing at him in silence. 'That something like that can happen without your being amazed? You make me doubt my senses when you can see such sights and keep your colour while I'm drained of mine.'

'What sights, my Lord?' said Ross.

'I beg of you,' said Lady Macbeth. 'Don't talk to him: he's getting worse and worse. I'll say good night to you all at the same time. Go now.'

The lesser lords at the lower end of the table waited respectfully for the thanes.

'Ignore the order of going!' Lady Macbeth almost screamed. 'Just go as quickly as you can!'

Lennox was reluctant to leave but Lady Macbeth told him with a look that his presence wasn't wanted.

'Good night,' he said. 'I hope his Majesty will be better soon.'

As the last one left Lady Macbeth dismissed the attendants and closed the doors. Macbeth was slumped on the floor.

'It will have blood,' he said. 'They say blood will have blood. Gravestones have been known to tell on murderers and trees to speak their names. Soothsayers have used birds as omens to reveal secret murderers.' He stood up. 'What's the time?'

'Late.'

Macbeth sat on his chair and adjusted his crown. 'What do you think of Macduff, refusing to obey my command to come to our great banquet?'

'Did you ask him why he wasn't coming, Sir?'

'I've heard it unofficially, but I'll ask him personally. I'll get to the truth: there's not a household among them where I haven't got a spy.'

Lady Macbeth looked at the shadow which her husband had become. His nose ran and dried spittle encircled his mouth.

'I'm going to find the weird sisters early tomorrow morning,' he said. 'I want to hear more. I'm determined to know the worst. It's my top priority. I've waded so far into blood that I couldn't turn back now. There are some dreadful things I want to do that I must act on before I can think about them.'

'You're badly in need of a good sleep,' said Lady Macbeth.

'Come,' he said. 'We'll get some sleep. This episode tonight is the fear that inexperience in evil brings. It won't happen once I'm used to it. This is all new to us.'

Act Three Scene Five

Somewhere far beyond the light of the sun the weird sisters huddle. Thunder sounds in the distance. They sense the approach of the queen of darkness and suddenly she's there. They scream and give vent to their fear with animal noises of all kinds.

Hecate towers over them, piercing the dark with her fierce gaze.

'How did you dare
To trade and traffic with Macbeth,
In riddles, and affairs of death;
And I, the mistress of your charms,
The close contriver of all harms,
Was never called to play my part,
Or show the glory of our art?
And, which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.
But make amends now: get you gone,
And at the pit of Acheron
Meet me i' the morning: thither he
Will come to know his destiny.
Your vessels and your spells provide,
Your charms, and everything beside.
I am for the air; this night I'll spend
Unto a dismal and a fatal end:
Great business must be wrought ere noon.
Upon the corner of the moon
There hangs a vaporous drop profound;
I'll catch it ere it come to ground:
And that, distilled by magic sleights,
Shall raise such artificial sprites,
As, by the strength of their illusion,
Shall draw him on to his confusion.
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'hove wisdom, grace and fear;
And you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy.
Hark! I am called: my spirit, see,
Sits in a foggy cloud, and stays for me.'

Act Three Scene Six

Lennox rode, alone, by an indirect route, to a late night meeting with a friend about matters that deeply worried him and some other Scottish noblemen. He wore a disguise.

He arrived at the castle of his friend and entered by a small gate at the side. Over dinner he spoke cautiously at first.

'In our former conversations I only hinted at these matters. I still say only that things have been done in a strange way. Macbeth pitied the gracious Duncan and, snap! Duncan was dead! And the brave Banquo was out too late. You can, if you like, say that Fleance killed him. Because Fleance fled, didn't he?' Lennox shook his head. 'The moral is, it's foolish to be out so late. And who can help thinking how monstrous it was for Malcolm and Donalbain to kill their gracious father? How it grieved Macbeth! Didn't he immediately kill the two criminals, who were in the grip of drink and sleep? In pious rage? Wasn't that a good thing? Yes and very wise, too, because it would only have infuriated anyone who had heard them deny it! So, I think, all in all, that he's behaved most admirably. And I also think that if he had Duncan's sons under lock and key - which please God he won't! - they'd soon find out what it means to kill a father. And so would Fleance!'

Lennox's friend put a hand on his arm. The two men sat in silence for a few moments then Lennox spoke again:

'Anyway, for being so outspoken and for absenting himself from the tyrant's feast, I hear Macduff's in disgrace. Do you know where he is?'

His friend nodded. 'Duncan's son, whose birthright the tyrant stole, has gone to the English court. He's been received most graciously by the pious Edward. Macduff's gone there. Malcolm's got the holy king's support in persuading the Earl of Northumberland, whom they call Old Siward, and his son, the renowned Young Siward, to help us. With the assistance of those two and God we could restore food to our tables and sleep to our nights, instead of this feast of bloody knives we've got at present: and so that we can pay homage to our rightful king and receive honest rewards - things we're longing for now. Well, anyway, this news from England has so enraged the tyrant that he's preparing for war.'

'Did Macbeth send to Macduff to command him to attend the feast?' said Lennox.

'He did, and when he got a blank refusal - 'Sir, not I' - the surly messenger turned his back and muttered darkly, as though to say, 'You'll regret this.'"

'Hmmm,' said Lennox. 'And that might well make him cautious. If he's got any sense he'll stay as far away as possible. I wish some holy angel would fly to the court of England and bring us a message from him before he returns so that our country, suffering under an accursed hand, can live in hope.'

Act Four Scene One

In a dark cave deep below the mud and slime of a lonely heath, the weird sisters have gathered around a boiling cauldron. A table is covered with foul-smelling, disgusting items, some half recognisable and others unfamiliar: they slither or flap, give little leaps, or seem to breathe. Thunder rumbles and cracks in the distance.

'Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed.'

'Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whined.'

'Harpier cries, 't is time, 't is time.'

Each hag fills her apron with items from the table. They approach the cauldron.

'Round and round the cauldron go;
In the poisoned entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom, sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' th' charmed pot.'

They join hands and lean over with their faces in the vapour from the cauldron.

'Double, double, toil and trouble:
Fire, burn; and cauldron, bubble.'

They take the items one by one and drop them into the cauldron.

'Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.'

'Double, double, toil and trouble:
Fire, burn; and cauldron, bubble.'
'Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf;

Witches' mummy: maw, and gulf,
Of the ravined salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock, digged i' th' dark;
Liver of blaspheming Jew;
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Slivered in the moon's eclipse;
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips;
Finger of birth-strangled babe,
Ditch-delivered by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab:
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
For th' ingredients of our cauldron.'

'Double, double, toil and trouble:
Fire, burn; and cauldron, bubble.'

'Cool it with a baboon's blood:
Then the charm is firm and good.'

A resounding thundercrack, right in the cave, brings Hecate, riding on its back.

'O, well done! I commend your pains,
And every one shall share i' the gains.
And now about the cauldron sing,
Like elves and fairies in a ring,
Enchanting all that you put in.'

The cave fills with stange creatures. They form an eerie choir which sings until one of the sisters shrieks, and they all scatter.

'By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes!'

Macbeth stood at the entrance to the cave, bewildered as to how he had come to be there. He could make out the dark shapes of the sisters against the dull light of the coals beneath the cauldron.

'What are you up to, you secret black and midnight hags?' he said.

'A deed without a name,' they said in unison.

'I call on you in the name of the evil magic you profess,' he said. 'I don't care how you come by this dark knowledge you have, I just want some answers. Even if the Devil himself gives you your powers, answer my questions.'

'Speak.'

'Demand.'

'We'll answer.'

'Say, if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths, Or from our masters.'

'Call them, let me see them.'

Two of them swooped on him and held him down while the other plunged her hand into the foaming cauldron and pulled out a ladle. As she stirred she poured some liquid from a flask.

'Pour in sow's blood, that bath eaten
Her nine farrow, grease, that's sweaten
From the murderer's gibbet, throw
Into the flame.'

She filled the ladle and advanced on Macbeth. She placed the ladle against his lips. The other two squeezed his nose and held his mouth open. He kicked and squirmed as the foul liquid trickled down his throat, but they were strong and he was unable to stop them.

He felt sick. His head ached. The weird sisters had disappeared and he seemed to be in a featureless place lit with a bland grey light.

A head wearing a helmet hung in the air before him. 'Tell me, stange creature Macbeth began.

'He knows thy thought,' a witch's voice said. 'Hear his speech, but say thou naught.'

'Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!' the head cried. 'Beware Macduff: beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.' It faded and disappeared.

'Whatever you are, thanks for the warning. You've guessed my fear accurately. But just another word.'

'He will not be commanded. Here's another, More potent than the first.'

A blood-smeared child began to take shape. 'Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!' 'I'm listening.'

'Be bloody, bold and resolute: laugh to scorn The power of man, for none of woman born Shall harm Macbeth.'

He disappeared.

'Then live, Macduff: why do I need to fear you? And yet I'll make doubly sure. You won't live.'

A child sat before him. It had a crown on its head and a branch of a tree in its hand.

'What's this, looking like a prince? And wearing a crown?'

'Listen, but speak not to't.'

The apparition looked up into Macbeth's eyes.

'Be lion-mettled, and take no care

Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:

Macbeth shall never vanquished be,

Until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill Shall come against him.'

He was gone on the last word.

'That's impossible. Trees can't walk. Birnam wood will never come to the castle at Dunsinane! What wonderful prophesies. Excellent.' He threw his head back and laughed. 'Dead enemies, don't rise out of your graves until Birnam wood walks. That means King Macbeth will live the natural length of his life, only giving it up to old age. Excellent! And yet -' Macbeth looked about for the invisible witches. 'My heart aches to know one thing: tell me - if your magic extends that far - will Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?'

The voices came all at once: 'Seek to know no more.'

'I must know! If you deny me this then let an eternal curse fall on you! I want to know! I have to know!

'Show!'

'Show!'

'Show!'

'Show his eyes and grieve his heart; Come like shadows, so depart.'

The grey light brightened until it was a white blaze. Music was playing and what looked like a parade was taking place. There were several main figures, wearing crowns and waving as though to adoring crowds. They came closer and the leader waved specifically at Macbeth. Terror gripped him as he recognized him.

'You're the image of Banquo!' he cried. 'Away!' The golden crown caught the light and Macbeth covered his eyes. 'Ah! your crown's searing my eye-balls!'

The second figure was passing him now. He also looked like Banquo. The same hair exactly. 'And the third is like the others. Filthy bags! Why are you showing me this?'

The fourth figure was just like the others. 'Start! Eyes!' cried Macbeth. 'Does this go on forever?'

There were a fifth and sixth and then a seventh. 'I don't want to see any more! And still, an eighth.' The eighth carried a mirror which reflected even more, stretching back as far as his eyes could see.

'And some of them are carrying triple scepters. Horrible sight! Now I can see it's true,' he said as the bloody Banquo came into view and leered at him. 'He points at the kings, claiming them as his issue. Can it be?'

'Aye, Sir, all this is so: - but why
Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?
Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites,
And show the best of our delights.
I'll charm the air to give a sound,
While you perform your antic round;
That this great king may kindly say,
Our duties did his welcome pay.'

Macbeth was treated to a pageant of music and dance, with nothing dark or unpleasant about it. Round and round the dancers went, making him feel sleepy. He dozed and immediately found himself waking beside his horse in the open air of the heath.

'Where are they?' he said, looking round to see only the white sky and the flat heath. 'Gone?' He sat up. 'Let this day be forever cursed in the calendar.'

Lennox had come with him and he was still waiting where Macbeth had told him to.

'Did you see the weird sisters?' said Macbeth. Lennox frowned. 'No, my Lord.'

'They must have come past you.'

'No, I saw no-one.'

Macbeth remembered how they had vanished into the air the first time he had seen them. He wasn't going to take any notice of them. 'I thought I heard the galloping of horses. Who was it?'

'Messengers, my Lord, bringing you word that Macduff has fled to England.'

'Fled to England?'

'Yes, my Lord.'

Macbeth was furious. He should have done it before it was too late! If you want to do something you should do it at once. From that moment there would be no hesitating: he would act as soon as he had the idea. And he had an idea right now: he would surprise Macduff's castle and put his wife and children and anyone else he could find there to the sword. He wouldn't brag about it like a fool, he would give the order right away, before his anger could cool. And no more spirits!

'Where are these messengers?' he asked Lennox. 'Come on, take me to them.'

Act Four Scene Two

'What's he done, that he's had to flee to England?' said Lady Macduff.

'You must try and understand,' said Ross. 'And have patience.'

'He had none! It's madness. I know he's not a traitor but now it will look like it!'

'You don't know what's in his mind,' said Ross. 'There may be some wisdom in it.'

'Wisdom! To leave his wife, his babies, his castle, all his possessions, in a place he's fleeing from? He doesn't love us. Where's his fatherly instinct? Even the tiny wren, the smallest of birds will stay and fight an owl to save her chickens. His fear's greater than his love for his family. Don't talk to me about wisdom! There's no reason in his flight!' She flung herself down on a chair and sobbed.

Her young son ran to her and stroked her hair. Ross put an arm around her.

'Control yourself, my dearest cousin, I beg of you.' He went to the door, looked into the corridor, closed the door and came back to her. 'Listen. Your husband is noble and wise. He's clever and has a deep understanding of the politics of the present time.'

Lady Macduff looked doubtfully at him.

'I daren't say any more - but I'll just say this: the times are bad when the most loyal people are accused of being traitors - when we listen to rumours just because we're so afraid, and don't even know what it is we fear but are just battered by troubles - coming from all directions.'

He kept looking towards the door as he spoke. 'I can't say any more,' he said. 'I have to go now but I'll be back soon. Things can't get any worse so they'll either end or start getting back to how they were.'

He ruffled the boy's hair. 'Bless you, my pretty cousin.'

'He's an orphan even though he has a father,' said Lady Macduff.

'I would look a fool if I were to stay any longer,' said Ross. 'I'd start crying and embarrass you. So I'll go at once.'

When he had gone Lady Macduff drew the child on to her knee. 'Your father's dead, Sweetheart. What will you do now? How are you going to live?'

'Like a bird, Mother.'

She brightened up, then. 'What? By eating worms and flies?'

'By eating whatever I can find, I mean. Like they do.'

'Poor little chicken.' She cuddled him. 'You've never had to be afraid of nets, or bird lime, or any other trap.'

'Why should I, Mother? No-one would want to trap such an unimportant bird. Anyway, my father's not dead, whatever you may say!'

'Yes he is. What are you going to do for a father?'

'No, the question is, what are you going to do for a husband?'

'Hrumph! I can buy twenty at the market!'

'You'd have to sell them again. What would you do with twenty husbands?'

'Clever boy,' she said and hugged him.

'Was my father really a traitor, Mother?'

'Yes he was.'

'What's a traitor?'

'Someone who swears and lies: swears to love you and protect you without meaning it.'

'And are all those who do that traitors?'

'Every one,' she said. 'And they should all be hanged!'

'Who'd hang them?'

'The honest men, of course.'

The boy laughed. 'Then the liars and swearers are fools: because there are enough liars and swearers to beat the honest men up and hang *them!*'

She laughed. 'God help you, poor monkey.' Then her face became serious again. 'But what are you going to do for a father?'

'If he were really dead you'd be crying and if you weren't it would be a good sign that I'd soon have a new father.'

'Little chatterbox. You could go on forever.'

The door burst open and a travel-worn man came in.

'Don't be alarmed, fair Madam,' he said as she pushed the child from her and sprang up. 'You don't know me, although I'm well aware of your rank. Listen, I haven't got much time. You're in immediate danger. You must leave right now. Take your little ones and go! I'm sorry to frighten you like this but not to warn you would be far worse. Go now: the danger is close.' He made for the door. 'Heaven protect you. I dare not stay any longer.' And he was gone.

Lady Macduff looked about desperately. 'Where can I go to? I've done nothing.'

There was some screaming somewhere and the child ran to her and clung to her. They stayed, frozen, listening to the commotion outside, then two men appeared in the doorway and came in.

'Who are you?' said Lady Macduff.

'Where's your husband?' one of them said.

'I hope he's not anywhere so unsanctified that someone like you might find him,' she said.

'He's a traitor,' the one with the shaggy hair said. The boy rushed at him and kicked him in the shin. 'You lie, you shaggy-haired lout!' he cried.

'What?' The man grabbed him as he was about to kick him again. 'You egg!' He drew his dagger and thrust it viciously into the boy's spine. Blood spurted on to his face. 'You traitor's spawn!'

The boy turned pale and blood trickled out of his mouth and down his chin. The shaggy haired man rubbed his shin. Lady Macduff stood with her mouth open, unable to scream.

The boy fell heavily against his mother. 'Run,' he sighed. 'I beg you.' He slipped to the floor and lay still.

Lady Macduff moved then. She began running, dodging round the men who tried to catch her, and out into the corridor. 'Help! Murder! Help! My babies!' she cried.

The men followed her.

Act Four Scene Three

Malcolm ushered Macduff out into a garden at King Edward's palace. The sun shone out of a cloudless sky. 'Let's find some shade and pour our sorrows out to each other,' he said.

Macduff frowned. 'Let's rather take our swords and defend our poor country like brave men,' he said. He followed Malcolm towards a shady bower beside a fountain. 'Every day there are new widows and orphans. New howls of grief reach up to heaven every day.'

Malcolm sat down and invited Macduff to join him on the bench. 'I'll only weep for what I think is true,' he said. 'And only believe what I know to be a fact. Perhaps what you've told me is true, and if and when I discover that then it will be the time to take up swords. After all, this tyrant, whose name blisters everyone's tongue, was once considered noble and honourable. And you loved him greatly: he's done nothing to you yet. I'm young and powerless but how do I know you're not trying to win favour with him by deceiving me? It's possible that you think there may be some advantage in offering up a weak, poor, innocent lamb like me as a sacrifice to an angry god.'

Macduff looked at him with indignation. 'I'm not treacherous,' he said.

'Ah, but Macbeth is. You see, a good and virtuous nature may give way under pressure from a determined king.' Malcolm watched his visitor closely as he talked. 'But it doesn't matter what I think - it won't change what you may or may not be.'

Macduff looked at the ground. 'That's the end of my hopes, then.'

'Perhaps it was just that - your action in coming to England - that made me suspicious,' said Malcolm. 'Why did you leave your wife and children in such a hurry and unprotected?' Macduff's chin had sunk to his chest and Malcolm touched his hand. 'Please don't let my suspicions put you off. You must understand that I have to protect myself: you may be truly honourable, whatever I may think.'

'Bleed, bleed, poor country!' groaned Macduff. 'Tyranny's foundation is very firm when goodness won't stop it: it can commit its crimes openly. Its claim to the throne has become unassailable because everyone lives in fear of it!' He stood up. 'Goodbye, my Lord. I wouldn't be the scoundrel you take me for the whole of Scotland. And the rich East as well!'

Malcolm patted the bench and indicated calmly for Macduff to sit down again - which he did. 'Don't be offended,' he said. 'I'm not absolutely certain that you're someone to be feared. I can see our country sinks beneath the yoke. It's crying, it's bleeding: and every day a gash is added to her wounds. I also think there would be many people prepared to join me in an effort to regain my rights. And here in England, gracious Edward has offered me thousands of men. But for all that, once I had defeated the tyrant, my poor country would have more misery than it had had before - more suffering and more evils from the one who succeeds.'

'Who would that be?' said Macduff.

Malcolm stood now, and looked down at the unhappy thane. 'I mean myself. I know enough about myself to realize that I have so many potential vices that should they be given reign the venomous Macbeth would seem as pure as snow. And the miserable country would consider him a lamb compared with my boundless evil.'

Macduff shook his head. 'Impossible. You wouldn't find anyone more evil than Macbeth in hell!'

'I agree he's bloody, lecherous, greedy, false, deceitful, bad tempered, malicious, full of every sin you can name. But there's no end to my lust - none. All the wives, daughters and mothers in Scotland couldn't satisfy my lust. I would stop at nothing. It's better that Macbeth reign than such a man.'

Macduff stood up and shook his head sadly. 'Excessive behaviour has brought many kings down. But you'll still be preferable to him. You will still be able to take your pleasure: there are enough willing women in Scotland. You can't be so insatiable that you'd get through all the women who'd be prepared to give themselves to the king if he wanted them.'

'Perhaps so,' said Malcolm. 'But in addition to that I have such a bottomless greed that if I were king I would top the noblemen for their lands; I would want this one's jewels, that one's house. And the more I had the more it would make me want so that I would manufacture quarrels with the good and loyal and destroy them just for their wealth.'

'This greed is bad,' said Macbeth. 'Worse than a bit of lust: it's brought many of our kings to grief, but don't worry: there's enough wealth belonging to the crown in Scotland to satisfy you. These two vices, weighed against your virtues, can be accommodated.'

'But I don't have any virtues!' exclaimed Malcolm. 'Not the virtues that would make a good king, such as justice, honesty, temperance, stability, generosity, perseverance, mercy, humility, devoutness, patience, courage, fortitude. I've no taste for them: but I've got limitless variations on the vices. Indeed, if I had power I would turn all peace into war and destroy all the harmony on earth.'

'Oh Scotland! Scotland!' Macduff shook his head.

'If such a man is fit to govern, tell me,' said Malcolm. 'Because that's what I am.'

'Fit to govern?' Macduff was incredulous. 'No, not to live. O unhappy nation! When will you see your wholesome days again? Your royal father was a saint. The queen who bore you, more often on her knees than on her feet, lived every day as though it was going to be her last.' He turned and began walking to the palace. He stopped. 'Farewell. The things you've told me have banished me from Scotland. Oh, my heart, your hope ends here.'

'Macduff,' said Malcolm, coming towards him. 'Your noble reaction has removed my suspicion and convinced me of your honour. I'm placing myself under your leadership and withdrawing my allegations against myself. I'm not like that at all. I've never been with a woman; I've never perjured myself, hardly ever coveted

something that wasn't my own and never broken a promise. I'm truly your and my poor country's to command. And I can tell you now. Even at this moment, Old Siward is setting out with ten thousand men. So let's go. Why are you so quiet?

'It's hard to reconcile such welcome and unwelcome things at the same time. Who's this?'

A man was walking towards them across the lawn.

'He's our countryman but I don't recognize him,' said Malcolm.

Macduff suddenly began running towards the newcomer. 'Ross! My dear cousin, welcome!'

'I recognize him now,' said Malcolm. 'Pray God remove the circumstances which makes us strangers.'

'Amen to that, Sir,' said Ross.

'Are things still the same in Scotland?' said Macduff.

'Alas, poor country!' said Ross. 'Almost afraid to know itself. It can't be called our mother, but our grave - where no-one ever smiles anymore; where no-one takes any notice of the groaning and shrieking of torture; where violent sorrow is commonplace. No-one asks who's funeral the bell is tolling for and good men's lives are shorter than the flowers they wear in their hats - dying even before they begin to fade!'

'What's the latest?' said Malcolm.

'News that's only an hour old is already stale. There's something new every minute.'

'How's my wife?' said Macduff.

Ross hesitated before he spoke. Then: 'Why . . . she's well.'

'And all my children?'

'Well too,' said Ross. He bent down to smell a rose.

'The tyrant hasn't interfered with their peace?'

'No, they were at peace when I left them.'

Macduff raised his voice. 'You're holding something back. Out with it.'

Ross ignored him and spoke to Malcolm: 'When I was on my way here everyone I met said this is the moment. Your presence in Scotland would inspire everyone to fight. Even our women would respond.'

'Let them take comfort. We're on our way. Gracious England has lent us Siward and ten thousand men. You couldn't find a more experienced and better soldier.'

'I wish I could answer that with similar comfort. But I have words that should be howled out in the desert air where there are no ears to hear them.'

'Concerning what?' said Macduff. He looked tense. 'Is it about the political situation or something personal?'

'Something shared,' said Ross. He looked at his cousin now. 'But mainly to do with you.'

'Quickly, let me have it,' said Macduff.

'Don't hate me for ever,' said Ross. 'Because this is the worst news you've ever heard.'

'Ha! I've already guessed it,' said Macduff.

'Your castle was surprised; your wife and babes savagely slaughtered. If I were to relate the details to you it would kill you.'

Macduff bent forward as though he had been hit in the stomach and stayed unmoving for a long time.

'Come on,' said Malcolm at last. 'Don't muffle yourself. Say something. If you don't give expression to your grief it'll break your heart.'

'My children too?' said Macduff.

'Wife, servants, everyone they could find.'

'And I had to be away at the time! My wife killed too?'

'I've told you.'

Malcolm put his hand on Macduff's shoulder. 'There's some comfort: we're going to get revenge.'

'He has no children,' said Macduff. He stared at Ross. 'All my pretty ones? Did you say all?' He kicked the exposed root of an apple tree. 'Oh hell-kite!' He turned back to Ross. 'All? What? All my pretty chickens and their mother at one fell swoop?' He walked away from them and cried.

'Take it like a man,' said Malcolm.

'I will,' said Macduff. 'But I must also feel it like a man. Nothing was as precious to me. Did heaven watch and not come to their help? Oh, it's my fault. They were killed because of me! Not because of their faults but for mine. Heaven rest them now.'

'Let this sharpen your sword. Let grief turn into anger,' said Malcolm.

'I could waste time crying,' said Macduff. 'But gentle heavens, let's not delay. Bring this fiend of Scotland and me face to face. Bring him within my sword's length. If he escapes let my punishment be that heaven forgives him.'

'That's more like it,' said Malcolm. 'Come let's go to the King. Our army's waiting: there's nothing left to do. Macbeth is ripe for shaking. Cheer up, gentlemen. It's a long night that never finds the day.'

Act Five Scene One

The success of the rebels had forced the King to retreat to his northern castle at Dunsinane and it was from there that he was conducting the war.

It was late. A doctor stood in a recess of the wall of a dark corridor with one of the Queen's gentlewomen-in-waiting. 'I've watched with you for two nights but I'm beginning to doubt your story,' he said. 'When did you say she last walked?'

'Since his Majesty went into the field I've seen her rise from her bed, put on her nightgown, unlock her cabinet, take out a piece of paper, fold it, write on it, read it, then seal it and return to bed. And fast asleep all the time.'

'It's very unnatural to behave as though she were awake while being asleep,' said the doctor. 'Apart from this sleep walking and the writing and so on, what have you heard her say?'

'Oh, I wouldn't dare tell you, Sir.'

'You may tell me, and it's appropriate to do so.'

'Not to you, nor anyone. There's no witness to confirm it.' There was a point of candlelight some way along the corridor. 'Shhhh!' she said. 'Look. Here she comes. This is exactly like it was before and there, you see? Fast asleep. Watch her and don't move.'

'How did she get that light?'

'It was at her bedside. She has a lighted candle with her all the time. She's ordered it.'

'You see?' said the doctor. 'Her eyes are open.'

'Yes, but she can't see anything.'

Lady Macbeth stopped near them. She was examining her hands closely.

'What's she doing?' whispered the doctor. 'Look how she's rubbing her hands.'

'She always does that. As though washing them. I've known her do that for a quarter of an hour.'

'There's still a spot here,' said Lady Macbeth.

'Listen!' The doctor took a notebook and a piece of chalk out of his pocket. She's speaking. I'll write it down.'

'Come out, damned spot,' said Lady Macbeth fiercely, rubbing violently. She stopped, as though listening to something. 'One - two. Two o'clock: it's time to do it. hell is dark. What my Lord? Shame! A soldier and frightened? What do we care who knows when no-one can question us? But who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?'

'Do you hear that?' said the doctor.

'The Thane of Fife had a wife,' continued Lady Macbeth. 'Where is she now?' She returned to washing her hands. 'Will these hands never be clean? No more of that, my Lord - no more of that: you're ruining it all with your nervousness.'

'Dear, dear,' sighed the doctor. 'You've done some things you shouldn't have.'

'She's said things she shouldn't have,' said the gentlewoman. 'God knows what she's done.'

Lady Macbeth lifted her hands to her face. 'They still smell of blood,' she said. 'All the perfumes of Arabia couldn't make this little hand smell sweet.'

'What a sigh that was,' said the doctor. 'Her heart is heavily burdened.'

'I wouldn't have her heart in my bosom for anything,' said the gentlewoman.

The doctor shook his head. 'Well, well, well.'

'I wish it were well, Sir.'

'This goes beyond the practice of medicine. Still, I've known some who've walked in their sleep and have lived good lives.'

'Wash your hands!' shouted Lady Macbeth. 'Put on your night-gown. Don't look so pale. I'll tell you once more:

Banquo's buried: he can't come out of his grave.'

'That too?' said the doctor.

'To bed, to bed, there's someone knocking at the gate,' said Lady Macbeth.

'Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done can't be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.' She lifted the candle and returned down the corridor.

'Will she go to bed now?' said the doctor.

'Straight away.'

'There are terrible rumours about,' said the doctor. 'Unnatural acts will create unnatural scenes like this. Sick minds let out their secrets in the dead of night. She has more need of a priest than a doctor. Oh, may God forgive us all! Look after her. Take away anything that she could use to harm herself with. And don't take your eyes off her. So. Good night. She's stunned my mind and amazed my sight. I think I know what's going on but I dare not say anything.'

'Good night, doctor.' The gentlewoman followed her mistress.

Act Five Scene Two

As the rebels had advanced they had been joined by some of the most powerful thanes in Scotland, and now they were only a few miles from Dunsinane, the castle to which they had driven the King. They set up their camp and prepared themselves for the final thrust.

'The English forces are close,' said Menteith. Malcolm and Macduff are burning for revenge and as they marched people were so affected by their cause that they could have recruited the sick and dying - even the dead!

Angus traced a finger across his map. 'We'll meet them near Birnam Wood.' He pointed to a thick line. 'They're coming this way.'

'Does anyone know whether Donalbain is with them?' said Caithness.

'Definitely not, Sir,' said Lennox. 'I've got a list of all the officers. Siward's son's there, and a lot of smooth faced youths.'

'What's the tyrant up to?' said Menteith.

'He's dug himself in to Dunsinane. Some say he's mad: others, more charitable, call it courageous anger, but one thing's for sure: He can't keep his suffering country under control.'

'Now he can feel his hands sticky with his secret murders,' said Angus. 'Now, as men desert him in droves, he knows what it was like for Duncan. Those who are still with him don't have their hearts in it. Now he feels his title hanging loosely on him like a giant's robe on a dwarfish thief.'

'He must be as revolted by himself as we are,' said Menteith, 'and it's no wonder he's behaving like a madman.'

They sat until late talking about how they were going to restore the rightful king to the throne, even if it took every drop of their blood to heal their country.

Act Five Scene Three

A young officer came into the campaign room where Macbeth was pacing among his closest advisers.

'Don't bring me any more reports!' said Macbeth. 'I don't care if every single one of them deserts me: nothing will bother me until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane.' He laughed and some of those present joined him.

'What danger is the boy Malcolm? Wasn't he born of woman? The spirits that know everything that's going to happen to human beings told me: 'Don't be afraid, Macbeth:

no man that's born of woman will ever have power over you. That's what they said.'

He went to the window and leant out. 'Then fly, treacherous thanes!' he shouted to the open countryside. 'And join the English weaklings!' He turned back to his silent officers. 'My strength of mind and courage will never collapse with doubt or shake with fear,' he told them.

A servant came in and stood looking as though he hoped he wouldn't be noticed.

'The Devil damn you black you cream-faced loon!' screamed Macbeth. 'Where did you get that goose-look?'

'There are ten thousand ...'

'Geese, scoundrel?'

'Soldiers, Sir.'

Macbeth raised his arm and the boy cowered. 'Go and prick your face and cover your paleness with blood, you coward!' he yelled. 'What soldiers, clown? Damn you! Those white cheeks of yours are hideous.'

The youth trembled. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak.

'What soldiers, whey-face?'

'The English force, Sir.'

Macbeth took him by the scruff of the neck and marched him to the door. 'Get your face out of here!' He opened the door and threw the boy out. 'Seyton!' he called. 'I get fed up when I see Seyton, where are you?'

The doctor, who had been sitting among the attendants, rushed across to Macbeth, who pushed him away.

This was a crisis and it would be solved one way or another. It made no difference how it ended: he had lived too long. His career had turned into a dry, withered scrap like a leaf about to fall. All the things that one should enjoy in old age - honour, love, respect, friends - he wouldn't have now. Instead he'd have curses - perhaps not spoken aloud, but heartfelt - lip-service - mere air - which he would rather do without.

'Seyton!'

His ensign appeared. 'What can I do for you?'

'What's the latest?'

'They're close.'

'I'll fight until my flesh has been hacked off my bones. Give me my armour.'

'You don't need it yet,' said Seyton.

'I want to put it on. Go and get it. Send more horses out. Search the countryside: hang anyone who talks of defeat. And get my armour.'

Seyton left and Macbeth turned to the doctor. 'How's your patient, doctor?'

'Not sick as much as troubled with incessant fantasies that stop her from sleeping.'

'Well cure her of that, then.'

The doctor shook his head.

'Can't you treat a sick mind? Remove a terrible experience from the memory? Rub out the troubles printed on the mind and cover over the terror of a guilty heart with some pain-killing drug?'

'That's something the patient must do himself.'

Macbeth stared at the doctor for a moment then he made a dismissive gesture. 'Throw medicine to the dogs! I don't need it.'

Seyton came in, followed by two servants carrying Macbeth's armour.

'Come, put it on. Where's my commander's baton?' He pointed at the doctor. 'Doctor, the thanes are fleeing from me.' He turned back to Seyton. 'Come on, hurry. If, Doctor, you could analyse a sample of my country's water and diagnose her disease, then bring it back to perfect health, I would applaud you to the rafters and the echo of that would applaud again'

He snarled at the servants: they had positioned one of the pieces incorrectly. 'Pull it off: go on, pull it off. Doctor, what rhubarb or senna or other purgative drug would purge these English.'

He walked away from the servants, who had only half finished dressing him. 'Bring it with you.' He strode to the door and out, towards the battlements. 'I won't be afraid of death and destruction till Birnam forest comes to Dunsinane.'

The doctor whistled softly to himself. If he were far away from Dunsinane, no money on earth would bring him back.

Act Five Scene Four

'Not long now, cousins,' said Malcolm. 'Scots will soon be able to sleep safely in their beds.'

'We have no doubts at all,' said Menteith.

'What wood is that?' said Siward.

'Birnam Wood,' said Menteith.

'Right,' said Malcolm. 'Tell every soldier to cut down a branch and carry it in front of him. That will conceal our numbers.'

'I hear the insolent tyrant has stayed in Dunsinane and doesn't seem to mind our laying siege to it.'

'There's nothing else he can do,' said Malcolm. 'Everyone's deserted him: the ones who've stayed have been forced to and their hearts aren't in it.'

'There's no point talking about it,' said the impatient Macduff. 'Let's get on with it.'

'Macduff's right,' said Siward. 'We can speculate as much as we like but the issue will only be settled by fighting. So let's go.'

Act Five Scene Five

'Hang our banners on the outer walls,' said Macbeth.

Seyton snapped his fingers and the soldiers moved about the dark battlements, hoisting the flags and banners.

'They're still coming,' said Macbeth. 'Our fortifications will make a mockery of any siege. Let them sit there until disease and famine destroys them. If they hadn't been reinforced by my people we'd have met them face to face and pushed them back to England.'

A long mournful wail went up somewhere inside the castle.

'What's that noise?' said Macbeth.

'The cry of women, my Lord.'

Seyton went to find out why they were crying. Macbeth stared over the battlements to the darkness in front of him. He had almost forgotten what fear was like. There was a time when he would have shuddered to hear such shrieks in the night and his scalp would have crawled as though it had life in it. He had indulged in so much horror that nothing could disturb him any more.

'What was that about?' said Macbeth when Seyton returned.

'The Queen is dead my Lord.'

'She should have died later. This isn't the time.'

How the days stretched out - each one the same as the one before, and they would continue to do so, tediously, until the end of history. And every day we have lived has been the last day of some other fool's life, each day a dot of candle-light showing him the way to his death-bed. Blow the short candle out: life was no more than a walking shadow - a poor actor - who goes through all the emotions in one hour on the stage and then bows out. It was a story told by an idiot, full of noise and passion, but meaningless.

It was getting light. A young soldier stood behind him, reluctant to deliver his message.

'Lost your tongue?' said Macbeth. 'Come on. Out with it.'

'My gracious Lord,' said the soldier. 'I want to tell you what I think I saw but don't know how to say it.'

'Well just say it.'

'While I was standing watch on the hill I looked towards Birnam and suddenly I thought the wood began to move.'

'Liar!' said Macbeth. 'Rogue!'

'Be angry with me if I'm lying. It's only three miles away. You can see it: a moving grove.'

'If you're lying I'll string you up on the nearest tree. And you'll hang there, alive, until you shrivel up with starvation. If you're telling the truth I don't care if you do the same for me. I'm not so sure anymore. I don't believe the fiend that lies with a

straight face. 'Fear not, till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane!' And now a wood is coming to Dunsinane.'

He placed his hands on either side of his mouth. 'To arms! To arms!' he cried. A drum began to beat and soldiers took up their positions, ready to march out to the battlefield.

If what the soldier had told him was true there was nowhere he could go - nor could he stay. He was thoroughly sick of life and wished the world would just come to an end.

He buckled his breastplate and pulled on his helmet. 'Ring the alarm bell!' Whatever happened - hurricane or ruin - at least he'd die fighting!

Act Five Scene Six

'This is close enough,' said Malcolm. 'Throw down your branches and reveal yourselves.' He called Siward to him. 'You'll lead the first onslaught, Uncle - you and your noble son. We and worthy Macduff will follow up, as planned.'

'Right,' said Siward. 'If we engage with the tyrant's troops tonight, let us be beaten if we don't fight to the death.'

'Sound the trumpets!' cried Macduff.

Act Five Scene Seven

Macbeth surveyed the scene. Most of his men had deserted and corpses lay everywhere. They'd trapped him. like a bear tied to a stake. he couldn't escape: he had to stay and fight. But anyway, there was no such thing as a man who wasn't born of a woman. That was the only thing he had to fear.

Young Siward had spotted him and came towards him. 'What's your name?' he said.

Macbeth drew his sword. 'You'd be terrified to hear it.'

'Never,' said the young Englishman. 'Even if you call yourself by a worse name than any in hell.'

'My name's Macbeth.'

'The Devil himself couldn't pronounce a title more hateful to my ear.'

'No, nor more frightening.'

'You lie, despicable tyrant! I'll prove that with my sword.'

The young man fought bravely but before long he was lying at Macbeth's feet, his heart pierced by a king's sword.

'You were born of woman,' said Macbeth. 'But I laugh at swords wielded by any man that's born of woman.'

* * * * *

In another part of the battlefield Macduff was looking desperately for Macbeth. If only the tyrant would show his face! If he were to be killed by anyone else his murdered wife and children's souls would never rest. He couldn't strike out at the poor soldiers who had been forced into this. Macbeth was the only one he would use his sword on. It was either Macbeth or back to its scabbard unused.

He heard a great shout: that's where he'd be. If only he could find him! He'd never ask for anything again.

* * * * *

Malcolm and Siward had secured the castle's surrender. The drawbridge was down, waiting for them to enter.

'This way, my Lord,' said Old Siward. 'It was a peaceable surrender: the tyrant's people are fighting each other while the noble thanes have done well in the battle. It's almost over: there's not much left to do.'

'We've encountered enemies that have joined us,' said Malcolm.

'Enter, Sir, the castle,' said Siward.

Act Five Scene Eight

Macbeth sat on a hill, ready to fight anyone who dared come near him. He wasn't going to fall on his sword like a Roman in his situation would have. Why should he? As long as there were enemies to kill the gashes would look better on them.

He didn't hear Macduff come up behind him.

'Turn, hell-hound, turn!'

Macbeth turned. 'Of all men I've avoided you,' he said. 'But go away. My soul is too heavy with your family's blood already.'

'I've nothing to say,' said Macduff. 'My sword is my tongue. You bloodier devil than words can describe!'

'You're wasting your time. It'll be easier to dent the air with your sharp sword than draw my blood. Save your sword for vulnerable chests. My life is charmed. I can't be killed by anyone who wasn't born of a woman.' Macbeth turned and began walking away.

'Forget your charm,' said Macduff. 'And tell the evil spirit who told you that that Macduff was pulled prematurely from his mother's womb.'

Macbeth whipped round. 'Curse the tongue that tells me that,' he said, 'Because it strikes fear into my heart. And curse these cheating fiends who keep their promises in small things and deny us our greatest hopes. I won't fight with you.'

'Then give yourself up, coward, and live - to be a public spectacle. We'll advertise you, as we do with our more unusual freaks, with a sign hung from a pole: 'Here you can see they tyrant.'

'I won't give up to kiss the ground beneath young Malcolm's feet and then be jeered at by the common rabble.' Macbeth drew his sword. 'Even though Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane and I'm facing a man not born of woman I'll fight to the bitter end. Come on, Macduff. And damned be the one who first cries, 'stop - no more!''

Act Five Scene Nine

'I wish we hadn't lost so many of our friends,' said Malcolm.

'Some men have to die in battle,' said Siward. 'For such a famous victory I think we've been let off lightly.'

'Macduff's missing, and your noble son.'

'Your son's been killed my Lord,' said Ross. 'He was scarcely a man but he died like a man.'

'Dead?' said Siward.

'Yes, and carried off the field,' said Ross. 'Your sorrow musn't be measured by his worth because if it is it will have no end.'

'Were his wounds on the front of his body?'

'Yes, on the front.'

'Well then, he's God's soldier. And so that's the end of it.'

'He's worth more grief,' said Malcolm. 'And I'll give him that.'

'He's not,' said the young man's father. 'They say he died bravely and did his duty. And so, God be with him! Look here comes good news!'

It was Macduff. And something hung from his hand. As he came closer, followed by soldiers of both sides, all cat calling and laughing, they saw that it was a human head.

'Hail, King,' said Macduff. 'Because that's what you are. Look at the usurper's head. We're free!' He took a spear from a sentry, pierced the head and raised it up above the battlements. 'I see you're surrounded by the kingdom's finest, all thinking the words with which I greet you now: Hail, King of Scotland!'

They all knelt in a ring around Malcolm.

'Hail, King of Scotland!'

'We won't waste much time in rewarding each and every one of you,' said the King. 'My thanes and cousins, you are now earls - the first earldoms Scotland has ever awarded. I'm also going to call our exiled friends home and flush out the cruel agents of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen who, we believe, killed herself. These things, and whatever else God calls on us to do we'll perform in due course. So thanks to all and we invite you all to see us crowned at Scone.'

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