

THE FAMINE,
THE ALCHEMIST,
& THE PHILOSOPHER QUEEN



by John Cullinan

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CHARACTERS

NARRATOR 1

NARRATOR 2

THE ALCHEMIST

THE QUEEN

THE MAYOR

THE MERCHANT

THE NOBLE

THE FARMER

THE SEAMSTRESS

ASSORTED
VILLAGERS,
SOLDIERS, STEWARDS

SETTING

A lush and peaceful valley and the surrounding hills

TIME

Long, long ago, or thereabouts

(The Narrators flank the stage.)

NARRATOR 1

This is a wisdom tale.

NARRATOR 2

An ancient tale.

NARRATOR 1

(confused) But we've just made it up, this very day.

NARRATOR 2

Yes, but the *wisdom* is ancient.

NARRATOR 1

That is true.

NARRATOR 2

And so is this tale.

NARRATOR 1

Yes. This is a true, new story – full of ancient wisdom.

NARRATOR 2

And it begins as all great stories do . . . with a disclaimer.

NARRATOR 1

It was so . . .

NARRATOR 2

. . . *and* it was not so . . .

NARRATOR 1

. . . that once, long ago, a great town sat nestled in the crook of a lush, green valley.

NARRATOR 2

The town was the jewel of the kingdom – peaceful and industrious and happy.

(The cast enters, gathering as a group center stage.)

NARRATOR 1

Its farms produced abundant food. Its schools produced abundant knowledge.

NARRATOR 2

And its people had never known stress or strife . . .

NARRATOR 1

. . . at least as far as most people could remember.

(As one, the crowd sighs contentedly and smiles.)

NARRATOR 2

Now, the town was flanked by two great hills.

NARRATOR 1

And on each hill there stood a grand building.

NARRATOR 2

On the hill to the south was the magnificent palace of the queen.

(The palace is revealed.)

NARRATOR 1

A tall and sprawling home, with more room inside than any one person could ever need.

(The Queen takes her place, stage right.)

NARRATOR 2

The queen was loved by her subjects because she was fair and wise.

NARRATOR 1

Most people assumed that this was because fairness and wisdom were just inherent, queenly qualities.

NARRATOR 2

But the truth was that the queen's wisdom and fairness were borne from her love of the people . . . and from her own insatiable curiosity.

(The Queen stands on a stool looking out over the townspeople.)

NARRATOR 1

When she looked down into the valley from her palace on the hill, the queen often wondered what life was like for her subjects.

NARRATOR 2

And, not content just to sit and wonder, she would often slip off her crown, dress up like a peasant, and go down into the valley to learn from her people.

(The Queen takes off her crown and throws a simple shawl over her shoulders, then crosses to the crowd.)

QUEEN

Good day, fellow peasants.

(The crowd turns and welcomes her into the group.)

CROWD

Good day, your maj . . . madam.

NARRATOR 1

Meanwhile, on the hill to the north stood a tall, gleaming tower.

(The tower is revealed.)

NARRATOR 2

This was the home of the alchemist. A well-read man.

(The Alchemist takes his place in front of the tower.)

NARRATOR 1

A man of great learning . . . and a genius inventor.

NARRATOR 2

The alchemist was generous with his gifts, too. He used his brain in service of the kingdom.

NARRATOR 1

And he gave away his inventions wherever he saw a need.

NARRATOR 2

But, unlike the queen, the alchemist didn't spend much time among the people getting to know them.

NARRATOR 1

And so, more often than not, the inventions he gave away were solutions to problems that no one had.

(The Alchemist approaches one of the townspeople and hands them a small device that would make Rube Goldberg scratch his head.)

TOWNIE

What's this?

ALCHEMIST

It's to help keep your cows from climbing the trees and getting stuck.

TOWNIE

But cows can't climb . . .

(The Alchemist is already walking back to the tower.)

ALCHEMIST

You're welcome!

NARRATOR 2

And so, the days and months and years passed by in general peace and prosperity. . .

NARRATOR 1

. . . with the town flanked on one side by an alchemist who knew all about *things*.

NARRATOR 2

And a philosopher queen, who understood *people*.

NARRATOR 1

And life went on like this . . .

EVERYONE

. . . until the day the rain stopped.

NARRATOR 2

Each day, a gentle rain would fall upon the valley.

NARRATOR 1

Not a storm or a deluge, but just enough to water the crops.

NARRATOR 2

A rain so regular, you could set your watch by it.

ALCHEMIST

That's a fantastic idea!

NARRATOR 1

But on that fateful day, the rain did not come.

NARRATOR 2

The people of the town looked up to the sky at 2 PM.

(The crowd looks up.)

NARRATOR 1

And they shrugged their shoulders when the rain did not fall.

(The crowd shrugs.)

NARRATOR 2

But they quickly went about their business, thinking nothing of it.

NARRATOR 1

Until the next day, when the rain failed to fall once again.

(The townspeople look to the sky and each other.
They are starting to get nervous.)

NARRATOR 2

Day after day, and for weeks on end, the rain did not fall.

NARRATOR 1

And soon, the alchemist predicted there would be a problem.

ALCHEMIST

If the rain does not return, we shall soon run out of food.

NARRATOR 2

So the alchemist came up with a plan.

ALCHEMIST

I shall gather the wisest, the richest, the most powerful people in the town. We shall retreat into my tower until we've devised a solution.

NARRATOR 1

And that's just what he did. He sent out invitations and was soon joined by the mayor.

MAYOR

(crossing to tower) I shall lead you wisely in this time of crisis.

NARRATOR 2

The master of the merchants' guild.

MERCHANT

(crossing to tower) The market will solve this!

NARRATOR 1

And a minor noble and cousin to the queen.

NOBLE

(crossing to tower) I am a very important person, with a very important voice.

NARRATOR 2

The four ascended to the top of the tower and began to debate the solution to the oncoming famine.

ALCHEMIST

We must devise a way to make the clouds heavy with water, again.

MAYOR

Perhaps we should put out a poll first.

MERCHANT

Or, we could institute a tax cut on ponchos and make the ground more attractive to the rain.

NOBLE

Everybody listen to me!

(The others turn to the noble.)

NOBLE

(smiling) That's better.

(They all settle in to a quiet argument as they retreat behind the tower screen.)

NARRATOR 1

Soon, the alchemist and all his guests were so wrapped up in being right and hearing themselves talk, that they forgot what the initial problem was.

NARRATOR 2

Meanwhile, on the other hill, the queen was looking down over her people.

NARRATOR 1

She'd received the alchemist's invitation, but had refused to retreat to his tower.

NARRATOR 2

For the queen had observed something that made her curious.

QUEEN

The rains have stopped, and famine may come. But the people do not panic.

NARRATOR 1

Intrigued, she disguised herself and went out among the people.

QUEEN

Everyone continues to work. No one is leaving the town.

NARRATOR 2

She continued through the town until she came upon an old farmer, hard at work on his harvest.

QUEEN

What will you do when there is no more food? Doesn't the drought frighten you?

FARMER

Oh, I'm nervous enough your maj . . . I mean m'dear. It could well be that the rains don't come back. But I've lived a long time, and I've seen droughts like this before, even if very few others remember them.

QUEEN

How did you all get by, then?

FARMER

We put aside a portion of the year's crops, and rationed them out.

QUEEN

And now you do the same?

FARMER

We'll try. But there's not enough space to store what we need, and no time to build more.

NARRATOR 1

The queen pondered what the old farmer had to say as she continued to wander, until an old seamstress stopped her in her tracks.

SEAMSTRESS

Don't look so fretful, your high . . . young lady. The drought will not last long.

QUEEN

How do you know?

OLD SEAMSTRESS

After the last drought, long ago, there followed a harsh and snowy winter. When the snows melted that spring, they flooded the river and brought the farmland back to life. I imagine the same will happen again.

QUEEN

Isn't a flood as bad as a drought?

OLD SEAMSTRESS

Perhaps. But we can rebuild easily enough. I only hope there will be enough shelter for us when the river rises.

NARRATOR 2

The queen walked back to her palace on the hill, pondering all she had learned in the village.

NARRATOR 1

And when she arrived home and saw all the empty rooms, she knew what she needed to do. She called her steward.

(A steward emerges from the crowd and crosses to the queen.)

QUEEN

Have this wing of the palace turned into storerooms. Send messengers into the town. Tell the farmers to bring the food they're saving here, and have the rest of the people gather jars of whatever fresh water they can spare.

(The steward crosses back to town and gives the message.)

NARRATOR 2

And as the drought progressed into famine, the queen and her steward made sure that all who needed food and water received what was fair.

(The townspeople form a bucket brigade to the palace.)

NARRATOR 1

And when winter arrived, the snows were harsh and plentiful, just as the seamstress had said.

NARRATOR 2

And as winter turned to spring, the snows melted and the river rose.

NARRATOR 1

Once more, the queen called for her steward.

(The steward returns to the queen.)

QUEEN

Have this wing of the palace turned into a sheltering space. Send messengers into the town and let everyone know they should come and stay here on high ground until the river recedes.

(Steward gives the message, and the townspeople shuffle sideways toward the palace.)

NARRATOR 2

And so, the townspeople made the journey up the southern hill and waited out the flood in the grand palace of the queen.

NARRATOR 1

And when the river receded, the queen sent her soldiers and advisors into town with the people to help rebuild while the farmers replanted in the rich, renewed soil.

NARRATOR 2

Which is also about the time that the alchemist and his little council emerged from their tower.

(The alchemist and company appear from behind their screen.)

ALCHEMIST

Good news, my friends!

MAYOR

We have a solution to all your problems.

MERCHANT

You're going to love it.

NOBLE

It was my idea . . . mostly.

NARRATOR 1

The crowd turned in anticipation. They'd almost forgotten that the alchemist's council existed.

NARRATOR 2

And the council had pretty much forgotten about the nature of the town's actual problem.

NARRATOR 1

So it should come as no surprise that the alchemist and his cohorts found a solution to a problem no one had.

(The Alchemist produces yet another crazy machine.)

ALCHEMIST

It's a machine that will prevent your pigs from flying and scaring away the clouds.

(The crowd ponders this for a moment.)

CROWD

No thanks!

NARRATOR 2

And the townspeople along with the queen and all her servants went back to work restoring the town.

NARRATOR 1

And they asked the Alchemist to write down what had happened and what they'd done so that the next generations would remember.

NARRATOR 2

And it was so

NARRATOR 1

And it was *not* so that the town returned to its former state of peace and prosperity.

ALCHEMIST

And the alchemist started to question the wisdom of staying locked in his tower.

QUEEN

And the queen grew in wisdom as wide as her open doors.

THE END