

MAD KING HAD

A-salt the walk, a-latch the lattice

Mad King Had come out to play

Latest hour, bedroom tower

Up till dawn, and dead by day

A'latch the lattice, a'lock the door

Mad King Had fell all the way

Poor King Had-ob, the witch's sha-dow

Darkens walls, and leads astray

A'lock the door, Afraid of shadows

Listen and you'll hear her say

At the latest hour, in your sleepless bower

Stay up till dawn and die to-day

The sleepless nights began in summer, and it was not until the late winter that the tragedy of King Had was immortalized in the rhymes of schoolchildren. In the spring before, the crimes of a woman had been brought to the attention of both royalty and common people by the gossip of scandal involving the husband of a young noble matriarch. It was normally beneath the business of a king to involve himself in such petty trials as the one of a young woman accused of nefarious magic. Such superstitions were not terribly common in such a cultured capital as King Haddard's city, but the particular case he involved himself with was not like any other. The young woman, they said, was an enchantress, and could captivate men in ways that bespoke of certain evil. The woman stood a head higher than even the formidable King himself; a quality that some believed proof enough of her use of magic, for how could such a very tall, and so very skinny woman capture the interest of otherwise healthily undersexed husbands?

While the King Haddard was not a young man, he was not old enough to be prone to such things as sleeplessness, like what the men who came into dementia suffered from in their twilight

years. He was not old, even though his wife was long since passed away. He was not old, even though he had not taken a lover since her passing.

His maids spoke to each other about him, the man who demanded solitude when he rested. They whispered and he heard them whispering, he knew how they spoke of his failing virility. This bothered him, much as it would bother any man. Perhaps even more, having been born into a station that had shielded him up to now from any serious criticism in his adult life.

King Haddard had not won his throne by conquest in war or in politics, but quite unremarkably. He was born the only inheriting child of his family, the royal house before his own. He was born a king, and now approached his winter years as a tired, paranoid relic of his own father's glory; a man who had taken a hundred cities and a hundred virgins for his legacy. They spoke of this, the maids and footmen, they, who had once loved him for his gentleness now ridiculed him for it within earshot. They did not fear him; no one feared him, not until the winter.

The woman on trial was sentenced to imprisonment by the king, who attested to her use of magic himself. While she awaited trial, the King, in order to see what all the fuss was about, went to her cell and spoke with her. Their conversation was private, however when he came out of her holding cell, he proclaimed that she would be sealed in his castle's own, though long since unused, dungeon. The declaration created a royal scandal of the century. Many assumed this was his way of taking her as a mistress; indeed, his servants saw him go down to the dungeons many times, always looking fevered and riled. This was when the rumor of his madness began, even before the madness had thought to look for him.

It wasn't until the young woman vanished from her cage in the deep underground that the real gossip began. Many people were certain that he had released her, some even claimed that they had seen her lounging around the King's summer home, luxuriating in the sunshine and awaiting the doting favor of the king she had enslaved. But it was also said that the King, realizing the cunning and power of the sorceress, had her slain and burned deep in the forest. These rumors flowed until they became a vile torrent King Had could no longer ignore.

One morning at the onset of winter, King Had stormed from his chambers, his heavy winter robes in a fit about him. He burst into the breakfast hall of the servant's quarters, a small room beside the kitchens where the king had never set foot before, much less in his bedclothes. He had

charged in and set about his staff accusing and threatening, informing them that if their whispers continued to disrupt his sleeping hours, in fact if their gossiping continued at all he would run them out of his kingdom altogether; or better yet, he would personally run them through with a sword.

Wild threats rarely quiet young mouths as well as one would like, but in this instance it did precisely that. The servants were so frightened by their master that not a single word was ever again spoken in any way ill of the King. Most of the servants realized how perilously close they had been to losing their homes and maybe even their lives.

As a group, the experience solidified their loyalty, but King Had knew nothing of this and knew nothing of their change of heart. What the servants could not know, is that it wasn't their gossiped whispers that kept him awake at night. The whispers that kept him from sleeping were not theirs.

Though the talking behind his back was ended, still the King complained of his restless nights. He refused the tonics of his physicians, for he knew it was not his anxious mind that kept him awake, it was the whispers he heard through his walls. One night, in a fit of rage, the king gave rise to his garrison, and his soldiers swept through the castle to wake his staff from their beds and rid the royal home of all service men and women, sending them from his employ and into the winter cold. The soldiers were then ordered to guard the outside, to assure not a living soul would walk his halls in the night and disrupt him in his bedchamber.

King Had knew he had, at irrelevant cost, finally won himself a night of unbroken rest. He settled into his welcoming bed watching the glow of a solitary candle and for the first time in months, began to feel himself relax. But the poor King had mistaken silence for assurance, for it was then, alone in his castle with no one to cast blame upon, that the whispers again rose up and surrounded him. In a livid fury he rose to rout the incessant gossiping from his house, when he then remembered that no one but himself there remained. The King, turned furious tempest, wrecked his room, destroyed his possessions and bellowed foul oaths, terrible things that could be heard by his freezing garrison at the gate so many floors below him. He screamed throughout the night, throughout the rooms of his house and its echoing stone halls.

By the time morning came, he had fallen listless, communicating only by what his eyes could say. In the following days, news spread. His benefactors came to speak to him, offering comfort; even offering their homes as refuge from the mysterious ‘whatever’ that ailed him. But the King only stared, his bloodshot eyes and black under-circles telling these friends that none of their proffered comforts would bring him peace.

He refused all help, and instead summoned a carpenter. The carpenter, later interrogated by those same benefactors, gave the confused reply, “I’m simply to remove the wall cover and refinish it with fresh paper.” When asked why, the carpenter wrung his hands and become the picture of angst. “He only says that the stain on the wall needs to be taken away. But I don’t know to what he refers!” And the people were left to wonder what this riddle meant.

For King Had, this was no riddle. His nights had become much a repetition of the nights before, where he would sit on the end of his bed staring intently at the wall. The wall was recovered with what the carpenter explained to be a ‘tranquil’ shade of pale yellow, and still the King remained intense, his maniacal eyes gazing deeply into the wall.

If you looked closely, at least as closely as a mad King would, you too would see it, the darkening of the wallpaper, the faintest shadow the size of a very tall person, though thin like a spirit. With each passing night the stain grew, red-hued and dark according to King Had. He spoke at the wall and the shadow that stood there ever watching him, ever whispering throughout the night, though it never spoke as plainly to Had as he had begun to speak to himself. The King’s soliloquies initially were just confused; however, within mere days, fell into nonsensical whispers that conveyed him towards his final descent into madness.

He would not leave his bedroom; he refused all food. Friends and relatives came to see him, but he only sat, wasting away, always sitting at the edge of his bed, bloodshot eyes locked on the stain that only he could see – the stain that spoke in whispers that only he could hear. They looked for the stain on the wall, they humored him and even some lied and agreed to be able to see it, but it was none of it true.

The physicians were at a loss, blaming a variety of maladies but never matching one another’s diagnosis. In the daytime, the gossip about the king resumed, but because his subjects could remember him as a good king, they fretted, wondering what was to become of him.

At night, alone in his bedchamber, Had even refused sleep, mesmerized by the form emerging in the wall before him. The shadow of the woman had developed in the days he had waited for it, staring at the wall, waiting for the whispering entity to emerge and meet him. Slower than watching water boil, but as certain as the laws that ensure its eventuality, the woman's appearance became clear to him, and only to him. So much so, that one night, after weeks of such little movement, King Had suddenly rose. Wrenching his mirror off his wall, he threw it with all the brawn of his madness out of the window, breaking the glass, and then followed by putting himself out through the same window, where he met his death many stories below at the feet of his guardsmen.

The legacy of a family was ended in that night, and the castle of King Had's inheritance has remained unoccupied in the decades thereafter, by all but a sole proprietor; a nameless deaf custodian who has no fear of whispers.

The legend remains though, and as legends will, has been embellished and honed. It tells of a shadow-etched wallpaper, the shadow of a young witch, so they say, and if you dare to walk the castle's many rooms, she may appear as she once did to the King Haddard, and bewitch you into throwing yourself from the tower, to find your ending on the ground below, where the grass grows freely untended; where a mad king once fell from grace.

We hope you have enjoyed

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