

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



King Matt the First

Janusz Korczak

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About the Book

This moving fable follows the adventures of Matt who becomes king when just a child and decides to reform his country according to his own priorities. Ignoring his grow-up ministers, he builds the best zoo in the world and decrees that children should be given chocolate every day. He fights in battles, braves the jungle, and crosses the desert, but perhaps the most life-altering thing of all is that the lonely boy king finds true friends. This timeless book shows us not only what children's literature can be, but what children can be.

About the Author

Janusz Korczak was born in 1878. He was an educator and paediatrician who introduced progressive orphanages into Poland, trained teachers in what is now called moral education, and defended children's rights in juvenile courts. In 1942, when his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto was evacuated, Korczak refused offers of help for his own safety, saying, 'You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this.' Korczak and the children walked together to the train bound for the death camp at Treblinka.

King Matt the First

Janusz Korczak

Translated by Richard Lourie
With an introduction by Esmé Raji Codell



V I N T A G E

Introduction

'WHAT MAKES THIS children's book one of the greatest of all time?

First comes the question of what makes a great children's book, period. It must have humor, adventure, excitement, friendship (romance is optional, and only in small doses). The main character must be one that comes to life on every page, and one that the reader mourns the loss of upon closing the cover. It must have mischief and naughtiness, but placate adults with a lesson or two so that the child may read in peace. Any profanity ought to be hidden in the middle, further along than most grown-ups are likely to read. If it has the effrontery to lack pictures, it must compensate with lots of lively conversation. The bad must be punished and the good rewarded; enemies are those who misunderstand children. Wishes should be granted, unless they are too greedy. There should be animals. And sweets. And days off from school. And some absence of parents.

These are elements intrinsic to the popular works of J. K. Rowling (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), and Louis Sachar (*Holes*). The other common factor is the overriding idea of the child as a hero, one who can succeed against great odds. In this canon is *King Matt the First*. Conceived for the reading and listening pleasure of orphans by a pediatrician who also happened to be one heck of a writer, *King Matt the First* endured a turbulent era to enjoy a celebrated status among children in Poland comparable to J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

I came across this book in the mid-1980s when I was working in the children's department of a bookstore. As a bookseller, when I looked at a shelf, I didn't see just books, I saw presents. I saw a row of gifts that authors were trying to give: their world view, their stories, wishes, warnings—the very best of themselves, wrapped up in words.

But.

It's one thing for a writer to give a gift to a child; it's another for that gift to be received. Some gifts are like scratchy sweaters or lipstick kisses and are received as such. But every now and then there comes a bike, a beautiful shining bike of a book, the book that makes children shout "Thank you!" without prompting, and at the same time allows them to ride away from you as fast as they can go.

The plain, brown binding of my first copy of *King Matt* gave no indication, really, of this bike of a book; in fact, it seemed to be trying to disguise itself as a book for grown-ups. But the words made clear its true audience, words so deftly written by Janusz Korczak, pseudonym of the renowned and sometimes controversial Polish pediatrician Henryk Goldszmidt. He introduced progressive orphanages into Poland and directed two of them before being interned at the Warsaw ghetto, where he ran one. His love and concern for all children was evident in the more than twenty books he authored, his treatise *How to Love a Child* among the most popular. Dubbed "the Karl Marx of Children," he worked indefatigably to defend children's rights in juvenile courts, and as "the Old Doctor," a popular radio personality of the times, he was able to dispense his message of compassion and respect for children to a wider audience. Like the hero of *King Matt the First*, he founded the first national children's newspaper and ran his orphanages with the help of a children's parliament. Indeed, *King Matt the First* appears to be the most graceful and lasting

manifestation of Korczak's visionary assessment of the rich moral life and potential of children.

King Matt the First recounts the adventures of a boy who, after the death of his father, is left with the overwhelming task of ruling a country. Determined not to be a mere figurehead, he struggles to navigate through the guile and ambiguity of his advisers in order to implement his reforms. And what reforms they are! Summer camps in the forests, on mountains, and at seashores so that poor children might enjoy nature! Schools outfitted with seesaws and carousels! The building of a zoo with a menagerie that is the envy of the world! Korczak could have succeeded through his plot fixtures alone: unforgettable is the gift of the biggest doll in the world given to the fire chief's daughter, and fabled are the days during King Matt's reign when the children got to run the kingdom while the adults toiled in school. Any child delights in such extravagances, and in this way Korczak spoils all children like a generous old uncle who comes bearing armloads of lollipops. But at the heart of this story is a child who is wholly alone, dealing, in turns, with conflicts that academics will recognize as Erikson's stages of psychosocial development: the need for autonomy and rebellion against overprotection; the playacting of an adult role in order to determine where initiative is acceptable and what actions are not allowed; the pleasure of industriousness and the desire to persevere; and ultimately, the resolution of an identity, built on outcomes of previous crises and relationships with others. The boy who begins the story merely wearing a crown ends it as a true king, a visionary leader who has built his place in history not only through accolades but by failure and painful loss, a boy whose fate is determined not only by his choices, but by the choices of those who surround him. The ending of *King Matt the First* is jolting, like waking from a dream at the scariest part only to find that by some miracle you are still intact.

The fate of King Matt is particularly poignant when juxtaposed with the fate of the author and the children who inspired him, who were not afforded a miracle. On August 6, 1942, Korczak and the two hundred children in his orphanage followed behind the green flag, their symbol of children's freedom, to the train station, where the group was taken to the gas chambers at Treblinka. Korczak had several opportunities to escape, but he refused: "You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this." While he could not offer rescue, he could offer comfort, and so, like a true father, he stayed with them to the very last of all of their breaths.

I imagine that Korczak had a sense of what was in store for them. How do you prepare children for such a world that would kill them? By imagining a better one. Korczak knew that the power of story is a path to utopia. If his vision of a better world would not be realized for his children, then maybe it could for children of another generation. I think the legacy of *King Matt* is not only in the surviving of the manuscript, but in the sharing of it, as Korczak did by reading it aloud to his charges. To read this book aloud to a child is to celebrate a message of great hope. If there is a miracle, it is that within all the rubble and ruin of war, a story survived, with words that click along like the spokes of a fleeing bicycle. Each word in the story, though disguised, is the same word over and over: Live! Live! Live for the children who didn't get to live. Live as if the world were your kingdom.

Generations later, I was working as a schoolteacher, many countries and an ocean away from where this book was written. I read this book aloud to children who had the luxury of waking up from bad dreams. I soon discovered that *King Matt the First* asks a lot of its reader in a modern context. When I first read this book to children who were predominantly African-American, I waited for them to explode with righteous indignation. I withered at the

prospect of explaining to thirty-some expectant faces that the author probably included things such as African cannibals eating salted flesh because he was sitting in a room full of two hundred kids and wanted to say something that made them go “Eeeeeewwww.”

But I didn’t have to explain it, because the children didn’t identify with it, and created their own chorus of “Eeeeeewwww” just as kids might have half a century ago. It’s clear that King Matt is, in fact, partial to the Africans, and that they are more trustworthy and adept than their white counterparts in his kingdom. Klu Klu, the heroine of the story, has her own moments where she doesn’t think much of the white people, referring to them on occasion as “barbaric,” mirroring the white people’s flip appraisal of her as “savage.” Generally, I think characters throughout the book are prejudiced and suspicious of one another, which sounds pretty realistic to me and, evidently, to my young listeners as well. These prejudices stood in the way of progress in the kingdom, which the children recognized immediately as the unfortunate case in real life. I wonder, though, if I had been reading to a group of predominantly Caucasian American children today whose economic or geographical demographic might still segregate them from people of color, I might have been inclined to abridge the book simply to avoid introducing unnecessary negative stereotypes to an audience that doesn’t have enough multicultural exposure to counter them. Or maybe I would have taken a deep breath and read it uncensored, putting it into context. I don’t know. Even though I consider *King Matt* a masterpiece of world literature, I don’t see the book as untouchable. The general rule I have found when it comes to all children’s books is that adults should read a book to themselves before sharing it with children. This makes it easier to determine what is best to discuss based on individual values.

Another key to sharing this book is to expect the best from young listeners. I had underestimated the children in their ability to see the universal qualities of the book; I came away with a renewed admiration for Korczak's bravery not only as a human being but as a writer and as an advocate of children. I thought the book was flawed because it says incorrect things. A book for children in which people never say incorrect things is equally flawed in its dishonesty. In this, *King Matt* is controversial.

The last great gift of *King Matt* is candor. Outspoken, impetuous, and inventive, King Matt and his friends Felek and Klu Klu are Everykid, the children who ask "Why?" and, as often, "Why not?" But unlike Everykid, King Matt is in a position to demand the answers. This book is a portrait of a child's attempts to give his best gifts to the world. It teaches grown-ups not only what children's literature can be, but what children can be.

Long may the green flag wave!

—Esmé Raji Codell



WHEN I WAS the little boy you see in the photograph, I wanted to do all the things that are in this book. But I forgot to, and now I'm old. I no longer have the time or the strength to go to war or travel to the land of the cannibals. I have included this photograph because it's important what I looked like when I truly wanted to be a king, and not when I was writing about King Matt. I think it's better to show pictures of what kings, travelers, and writers looked like before they grew up, or grew old, because otherwise it might seem that they knew everything from the start and were never young themselves. And then children will think they can't be statesmen, travelers, and writers, which wouldn't be true.

Grownups should not read my novel, because some of the chapters are not very nice. They'll misunderstand them and make fun of them. But if they really want to read my book, they should give it a try. After all, you can't tell grownups not to do something—they won't listen to you, and you can't make them obey.



AND SO THIS is what happened.

The doctor said it would be very bad if the king didn't get better in three days.

The doctor's exact words were: "The king is seriously ill and it'll be bad if he doesn't get better in three days."

Everyone was very worried. The Prime Minister put on his glasses and asked: "So then what will happen if the king doesn't get better?"

The doctor did not wish to give a definite answer, but everyone understood that the king would die.

The Prime Minister was very worried and called a meeting of the ministers.

The ministers assembled in the great hall and sat on comfortable armchairs at a long table. On the table in front of each minister was a sheet of paper and two pencils: one was an ordinary pencil, but the other was blue on one end and red on the other. There was also a little bell in front of the Prime Minister.

The ministers had locked the door, so they wouldn't be disturbed, and all the lights were turned on now. But no one was saying a word.

Then the Prime Minister rang his little bell and said: "Now we will discuss what to do. For the king is sick and cannot rule the country."

"I think," said the Minister of War, "that we ought to summon the doctor. And he will have to state clearly whether he can cure the king or not."

All the ministers were very afraid of the Minister of War because he always carried a saber and a revolver, and so

they did what he said.

“Fine, let’s summon the doctor.”

They sent for the doctor at once, but the doctor could not come, because he was just putting twenty-four cupping glasses on the king.

“Too bad, we’ll have to wait,” said the Prime Minister. “But meanwhile let’s discuss what to do if the king dies.”

“I know,” replied the Minister of Justice. “According to the law, after the death of the king his eldest son inherits the throne. That’s why he is called the successor to the throne. If the king dies, his eldest son takes the throne.”

“But the king has only one son.”

“That’s all he needs.”

“All right, but the king’s son is little Matt. What kind of king could he be?”

“Matt doesn’t even know how to write yet.”

“That is a problem,” replied the Minister of Justice. “Nothing like this has ever happened before in our country, but in Spain, Belgium, and other countries, kings have died and left little sons. And that little child had to be the king.”

“Yes, yes,” said the Minister of Mail and Telegraphs, “I have seen postage stamps with pictures of little kings like that.”

“But, gentlemen,” said the Minister of Education, “how is it possible to have a king who does not know how to write or count, who does not know geography or grammar?”

“Here’s what I think,” said the Minister of Finance. “How will the king be able to do his accounts, how will he be able to figure out how much new money is to be printed if he doesn’t know his multiplication tables?”

“Gentlemen,” said the Minister of War, “the worst thing of all is that none of my men will be afraid of such a little child. How will he deal with soldiers and generals?”

“It’s not only a question of the military,” said the Minister of Internal Affairs. “No one will be afraid of such a little child.

We'll have constant strikes. I won't be able to guarantee public order if you make Matt king."

"I don't know what will happen," said the Minister of Justice, red with anger, "but I know one thing—the law says that after the death of a king his son inherits his throne."

"But Matt is too little," shouted all the ministers.

A terrible quarrel would have surely broken out, but at that moment the door opened and a foreign ambassador walked into the hall.

It may seem strange that a foreign ambassador walked in on a meeting of the ministers when the door was locked. So I must tell you that when they sent for the doctor they forgot to lock the door. Later on, some people even said that it was treason, that the Minister of Justice had left the door open on purpose because he knew that the ambassador was coming.

"Good evening," said the ambassador. "I am here on behalf of my king to demand that your next king be Matt the First. And if he's not, there will be war."

The Prime Minister was very afraid, but he pretended that he was not in the least concerned. With the blue end of his pencil, he wrote "Fine, let there be war" on a sheet of paper and handed it to the foreign ambassador.

The ambassador took the paper, bowed, and said: "All right, I will inform my government of this."

At that moment the doctor came into the hall, and all the ministers began pleading with him to save the king, for there could be trouble or even war if the king died.

"I have already given the king all the medicines I know. I have put cupping glasses on him, and there is nothing more I can do. But we could call in other doctors."

The ministers took his advice. They summoned famous doctors to come consult on how to save the king and sent all the royal automobiles to the city to fetch them. Then they asked the royal cook for dinner because they were very

hungry. They hadn't known the meeting would last so long and so they didn't eat dinner at home.

The cook set out the silver dishes and poured the best wine into the carafes, because he wanted to stay at court even after the death of the old king.

And so the ministers began eating and drinking and even began to grow merry. Meanwhile, the doctors had gathered in the hall.

"I think," said one old doctor with a beard, "that we must operate on the king."

"But I think," said another doctor, "that we should put hot compresses on the king and he should gargle."

"The king must take powders," said a famous professor.

"Drops would be better, of course," said another doctor.

Each of the doctors had brought a thick book with him and each pointed out that his book said to treat the illness a different way.

It was already late and the ministers very much wanted to go to sleep, but they had to wait to hear what all the doctors said. There was so much noise in the royal palace that the little heir to the throne, Matt, the king's son, had already woken up twice.

I ought to see what's going on, thought Matt. He rose from his bed, dressed quickly, and went out to the corridor.

He stood outside the door to the dining room, not to eavesdrop, but because in the royal palace the door handles were so high that little Matt couldn't open the door himself.

"The king has good wine," shouted the Minister of Finance. "Let's have some more, gentlemen. If Matt becomes king, he won't need the wine, because children aren't allowed to drink wine."

"Children aren't allowed to smoke cigars, either. So we can each take a few cigars home," cried the Minister of Commerce loudly.

"And if there's a war, gentlemen, I assure you that nothing will be left of this palace, because Matt won't be able to

defend us.”

Everyone started laughing and shouting: “Let’s drink to the health of our defender, the great king, Matt the First.”

Matt didn’t really understand what they were saying; he knew that his father was sick and that the ministers often held meetings, but why were they laughing at him, Matt, and why were they calling him the king, and what kind of war could there be? Matt did not understand at all.

A little sleepy and a little scared, he went farther down the hall, and outside the door to the council room, he heard another conversation.

“And I’m telling you that the king will die. You can give him all the powders and pills you want, nothing will do any good.”

“I bet my life the king won’t last a week.”

Matt stopped listening. He dashed down the corridor, past two other royal chambers, until, breathless, he reached the king’s bedroom.

The king was lying in bed. It was hard for him to breathe, and he was very pale. The same good doctor who treated Matt when he was sick was sitting by the king’s bed.

“Daddy, Daddy,” cried Matt with tears in his eyes. “I don’t want you to die.”

The king opened his eyes and looked sadly at his son.

“I don’t want to die either,” said the king softly. “I don’t want to leave you all alone in the world, my son.”

The doctor put Matt on his lap, and no one said any more.

Matt remembered that he had already done something like this once before. That time it was his father who had put him on his lap and it was his mother in the bed, pale and breathing with difficulty. Daddy will die like Mommy did, thought Matt.

A terrible sadness tugged at his heart, and he felt a great anger and resentment for the ministers who were laughing at him, Matt, and at his daddy’s death.

I’ll pay them back when I’m the king, thought Matt.



THERE WAS A great procession at the king's funeral. Black crepe was wound around the streetlights and all the bells were rung. The band played a funeral march. Cannons and soldiers went by. Special trains brought in flowers from the warmer countries. Everyone was very sad. The newspapers said that the whole nation wept for the loss of its beloved king.

Matt was sitting in his room. He was sad, too, for even though he was to become king, he had lost his father and was now all alone in the world.

Matt thought of his mother. It was she who had given him the name Matt. Although his mother had been the queen, she had not been distant and haughty at all: she played games and blocks with him, told him fairy tales, and explained the pictures in his books to him. Matt had not seen very much of his father, because the king was often with the army or with his guests, entertaining other kings. And he always had meetings and consultations.

But whenever the king could find a free moment for Matt he would play ninepins or go out riding with him down the long tree-lined paths of the royal gardens, the king on a horse, Matt on a pony.

But what would happen now? He'd be stuck with his boring foreign tutor, who always looked as if he had just drunk a glass of vinegar.

And was it really so much fun to be a king? It probably wasn't. If there really was a war, you could at least fight. But what does a king do in peacetime?

Matt was sad when he was alone in his room, and he was sad when he looked through the gate of the royal gardens at the servants' children playing happily in the palace courtyard.

Seven boys were playing war, their usual game. They were always led into attack, drilled, and commanded by a small and very jolly boy. His name was Felek. That's what the other boys called him.

Many times Matt had wanted to call him over and even talk with him a little through the gate, but he did not know if he was allowed to and what would happen if he did, and he did not know what to say to start a conversation.

Meanwhile, proclamations had been posted on every wall saying that Matt was now the king, that he sent greetings to his subjects, and that all the ministers would stay on and help the young king in his work.

All the stores were full of photographs of Matt. Matt on a pony. Matt in a sailor suit. Matt in an army uniform. Matt reviewing the troops. The theaters showed newsreels about Matt. All the illustrated magazines in the country and abroad were full of Matt.

To tell the truth, everyone loved Matt. The old people pitied him because he had lost both parents so young. The boys were happy that now there was a boy whom everyone had to obey; even generals had to stand at attention and grownup soldiers present arms when Matt was there. The girls liked the little king on his handsome pony. But the orphans loved him most of all.

When the queen was still alive, she always sent candy to the orphanages on the holidays. After she died, the king had ordered that the candy continue to be sent. And though Matt knew nothing about it for a long time, candy and toys were being sent in his name to the orphans. Only much later did Matt learn that an entry in the budget could make people very happy without his even knowing about it. Six months after Matt had succeeded to the throne, he chanced

to acquire great popularity. That means that everyone was talking about him, not just because he was the king, but because he had done something that people liked.

I'll tell you what happened. For a long time Matt begged his doctor for permission to take walks around the city or at least to be brought once a week to the park where the children played.

"I know the royal gardens are beautiful, but it's boring to be alone even in the most beautiful gardens."

Finally, the doctor promised, and he applied through the marshal of the court to the palace administration; at the council of ministers, the king's guardian obtained permission for King Matt to take three walks every two weeks.

It might seem strange that it was so difficult for a king to go out for an ordinary walk. But the marshal of the court only agreed out of gratitude to the doctor, who had recently cured him when he had eaten a fish that was none too fresh. And the palace administration only gave its agreement because it hoped that now it would be given money to build a new stable, and the Minister of Internal Affairs (who was head of the police) only agreed to get even with the Minister of Finance. Every time the king went out for a walk, the police would receive three thousand ducats and the sanitation division a barrel of eau de cologne and a thousand gold ducats. Before King Matt left for his walk, two hundred workers and one hundred cleaning women would clean the park thoroughly. Before each walk, they would rake the park and repaint the benches. All the paths would be sprinkled with eau de cologne, the dust wiped from the trees and leaves. The doctors made sure that everything was clean and free of dust, because dirt and dust are unhealthy. The police made sure that there were no bad boys in the park who would throw stones, punch and shove, fight and shout, when the king was out walking.

King Matt had a wonderful time. He wore regular clothes so no one would recognize him. And it never even entered anyone's mind that the king would come to an ordinary park. King Matt walked all around the park twice and then asked if he could sit on a bench by the square where the children were playing. He had only been sitting there a little while when a girl came up to him and asked: "Do you want to play?"

She took Matt by the hand and they started playing together. The girls were singing songs and going around in a circle. Then, while they were waiting to start a new game, the girl started talking to Matt.

"Do you have a little sister?"

"No, I don't."

"What does your daddy do?"

"My daddy is dead. He was the king."

The little girl must have thought Matt was joking, because she broke out laughing and said: "If my father was the king, he would have to buy me a doll that reached up to the ceiling."

She told him that her father was a captain in the fire department, that her name was Irenka, and that she loved the firemen, who sometimes let her ride on their horses.

Matt would gladly have stayed longer, but he only had permission to stay until forty-three seconds past forty-two.

Matt waited impatiently for his next walk, but it rained, and they were too worried about his health to let him go out.

The next time, Matt was playing ring-around-the-rosy with the girls when a few boys walked over and one of them shouted: "Look, a boy playing with girls."

They started laughing.

King Matt noticed that he really was the only boy playing ring-around-the-rosy.

"You should come play with us," said the boy.

Matt looked at him closely. It was Felek! The same boy Matt had wanted to meet so long ago.

Felek looked closely at Matt, then shouted at the top of his lungs: "This kid looks just like King Matt!"

Matt felt terribly embarrassed because everyone had started looking at him. He began running away as fast as possible toward the adjutant who had brought him to the park and who was also disguised in regular clothes. But, either from haste or from embarrassment, he fell and scraped his knee.

At the council of ministers it was decided that the king could no longer be allowed to go out for walks. They would do everything the king wanted, but he could not go to regular parks because there were naughty children who would pick fights with him and laugh at him. The council of ministers could not allow the king to be laughed at; it was an insult to his royal honor.

Matt was very upset, and for a long time he thought about his two days of happy games in the park. Then he remembered Irenka's wish: She wants a doll that reaches up to the ceiling.

Soon that was all he could think about.

I am the king, after all, and I have the right to give orders. And everybody has to obey them. I'm learning to read and write just like all the other children. The multiplication tables are the same for kings as they are for everyone else. Why be a king if you can't do what you want?

So Matt rebelled, and during an audience he demanded very loudly that the Prime Minister buy the biggest doll in the world and send it to Irenka.

"Your Royal Highness deigns to remark . . ." the Prime Minister began to say.

Matt knew what would happen—that unbearable person would talk for a long time and say a lot of things that didn't mean anything at all, and in the end, nothing would happen with the doll. Then Matt remembered how once that same

minister had started to explain something to his father in the very same way. The king had stamped his foot and said, "That is my absolute wish."

And so Matt stamped his foot just like his father used to, and said very loudly: "Mr. Prime Minister, that is my absolute wish."

The Prime Minister looked at Matt in surprise, then wrote something down in his notebook and mumbled: "I will present your Royal Highness's wish at the next council of ministers."

No one knows what was said at the next council of ministers, because their meeting was held behind closed doors. However, they did decide to buy the doll, and the Minister of Commerce ran around to all the stores for two days inspecting all the largest dolls. But a doll as big as the one Matt wanted was nowhere to be found. Then the Minister of Commerce summoned all the doll manufacturers to a meeting, and one manufacturer agreed to make the doll in four weeks at his factory, for a very high price. And when the doll was ready, he displayed it in the window of his store with a sign: *The Purveyor to His Royal Majesty's Court has produced this doll for Irenka, the daughter of a captain in the fire department.*

Right away, the newspapers began featuring photographs of the fire department fighting fires, as well as pictures of Irenka and her doll. People said that King Matt loved to watch the fire trucks go by and to watch fires. Someone wrote a letter to the newspaper saying he was ready to burn his own house down if their beloved King Matt loved fires. Many girls wrote letters to King Matt saying they, too, wanted dolls badly, but the secretary of the court never read those letters to Matt, because he had been strictly forbidden to by the Prime Minister, who was very angry about the entire affair.

Crowds of people stood in front of the store for three days looking at the king's present, and it was only on the fourth

day that, by order of the prefect of police, the doll was taken off display so that the crowds would not block the trolleys and cars. For a long time, people talked about the doll and about Matt, who had given Irenka such a beautiful present.



EVERY DAY, MATT would get up at seven o'clock in the morning, wash and dress, shine his boots himself, and make his bed. This custom had been established by his great-grandfather, the valiant king Paul the Conqueror. After washing and getting dressed, Matt would drink a glass of cod-liver oil and sit down to breakfast, which could not last more than sixteen minutes thirty-five seconds. That was because Matt's grandfather, the good king Julius the Virtuous, had always taken that amount of time for his breakfast. Then Matt would go to the throne room, which was always very cold, and receive the ministers. There was no heat in the throne room because Matt's great-grandmother, the wise Anna the Pious, had nearly been asphyxiated by a faulty stove when she was a little girl, and in memory of her lucky escape, she had decreed that the throne room not be heated for five hundred years.

Matt would sit on the throne, his teeth chattering from the cold, while his ministers told him what was happening throughout the country. This was very unpleasant because, for some reason, the news was always bad.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs would tell him who was angry at them and who wanted to be their friend. Usually, Matt could not make heads or tails of any of it.

The Minister of War would list how many fortresses were damaged, how many cannons were out of commission, and how many soldiers were sick.

The Minister of the Railroads would say that they had to buy new locomotives.

The Minister of Education would complain that the children weren't studying, were late to school, that the boys were sneaking out to smoke cigarettes and were also tearing pages out of their workbooks. The girls were calling each other names and arguing, the boys were fighting, throwing stones, and breaking windows.

The Minister of Finance was always angry that there was no money, and he didn't want to buy new cannons or new machines because they cost too much.

Then Matt would go to the royal gardens. For an hour he could run and play, but it wasn't very much fun to play alone.

So he was always ready enough to go back to his lessons. Matt was a good student, because he knew it was hard to be a king if you didn't know anything. He quickly learned how to sign his name with a grand flourish. He had to learn French and all sorts of other languages so he could speak with other kings when he went to visit them.

Matt would have been a better and more willing student if he had been able to ask all the questions that came to his mind.

For example, Matt had been wondering for a long time whether it was possible to invent a magnifying glass which could make gunpowder catch on fire from far away. If Matt could invent a magnifying glass like that, he would declare war against all the other kings, and on the day before the battle, he would blow up all his enemies' ammunition. He would win the war because he would be the only one left with ammunition, and then he would be a great king, even though he was so little. But his teacher shrugged his shoulders, made a face, and wouldn't even answer Matt's question.

Another time, Matt asked if it was possible for a father to pass his intelligence on to his son when he was dying. Matt's father, Stephen the Wise, had been very intelligent. And now here was Matt sitting on the same throne and

wearing the same crown, but he had to learn everything from the very beginning. Would he ever know as much as his father had? But what if, along with the crown and the throne, he could have inherited his great-grandfather Paul the Conqueror's courage, his great-grandmother's piety, and all his father's knowledge?

But that question did not meet with a friendly response, either.

For a long time, a very long time, Matt wondered if it was possible to get ahold of a Cap of Invisibility. Wouldn't that be dandy—Matt would put on the cap, go wherever he liked, and no one would be able to see him. He would say that he had a headache. They would let him spend the day in bed so he could rest. Then at night he would put on the Cap of Invisibility and go into town, walk around his capital, look in all the store windows, and go to the theater.

Matt had been to the theater only once, to attend a gala performance when his mother and father were still alive; he remembered practically nothing about it because he had been very little then, but he knew that it had been very beautiful.

If Matt had a Cap of Invisibility, he would go from the gardens to the palace courtyard and make friends with Felek. And he could go everywhere in the palace, to the kitchen for a peek at how the food was prepared, to the stables to see the horses, and to all the other buildings he was not allowed to enter.

It may seem strange that so many things were forbidden to the king. And so I must explain that there is a very strict etiquette at royal courts. Etiquette tells how kings have always acted. A new king cannot do otherwise without losing his honor and without everyone ceasing to fear and respect him for not respecting his father the king, or his grandfather the king, or his great-grandfather the king. If the king wants to do something differently, then he must

inquire of the master of ceremonies, who watches over court etiquette and knows what kings have always done.

I have already said that King Matt's breakfast lasted sixteen minutes thirty-five seconds because that's how long it took his grandfather and that there was no heat in the throne room because that's what his great-grandmother, who had died a long time ago, had wanted and there was no way of asking her if the room could be heated now.

Once in a while a king could make little changes, but then there would be long meetings, as there had been when Matt wanted to take walks. And it was no fun to ask for something and then have to wait and wait.

King Matt was in a worse position than other kings because etiquette had been established for grownup kings and Matt was a child. And so there had to be certain little changes. Instead of tasty wine, Matt had to drink two glasses of cod-liver oil, which he didn't like at all, and instead of reading the newspapers, he only looked at the pictures, because he still could not read very well.

Everything would have been different if Matt had had his father the king's intelligence and a magical Cap of Invisibility. Then he would have really been a king, but now, as things stood, he often thought it might have been better to have been born an ordinary boy, to go to school, tear pages from his workbooks, and throw stones. One day Matt got an idea: when he learned how to write, he would write a letter to Felek, and maybe Felek would write back, and that would be almost like talking with Felek.

From that time on, King Matt worked hard at learning to write. He wrote for days on end, copying stories and poems from books. He would even have given up his time in the royal gardens and would have just written from morning to night, but this he could not do, because etiquette and court ceremony demanded that the king go straight from the throne to the gardens. And there were twenty footmen ready to open the doors which led from the hall to the