

Synopsis

ASHMEDAI

ACT I

An idyllic far-away country, somewhere in the heartlands of the great continent, where for 500 years no war has been fought. Despite occasional droughts that have befallen the country, its people are happy and love their good king. Only the king's advisers and his son, who is commander-in-chief of the Army, long for war.

The king despises the queen, whom he married only in order to prevent the outbreak of war between himself and her father. He is in love with the Landlady, whom he visits frequently.

One summer night, Ashmedai, king of the devils, appears in the country and makes a bet with the king that his peace-loving subjects, who observe the tenets of religion, culture and philosophy, will turn into conquerers within a year's time. The idea seems so absurd to the king that in the end he agrees to the bet, more as a joke than anything else. Moreover, for the duration of the year the king is allowed to live together with his landlady. Ashmedai assumes the king's physical traits, and nobody in the whole kingdom is aware of the change that has taken place.

As soon as Ashmedai ascends the throne, various acts of terror occur, which turn the peace-loving peasants slowly into blood-thirsty individuals. They start wearing knee-boots, harass the minorities in the country, execute those that are different from them and are anxious to cross the mountains and conquer the lands lying beyond.

The king, aghast at the incredible metamorphosis of his people, realises that he is helpless to halt the terrible change, as nobody, not even his son and the queen, seems to have noticed Ashmedai's possession of the king's body. None of his subjects, not even the priest, appears to question the fact that their good old king is capable of perpetrating such deeds of folly. Nobody seems to query the ruler's power and competence to do whatever he pleases. No citizen arises to criticise or condemn his actions, and finally a terrible war breaks out.

ACT II

A year later, The war has caused terrible destruction. The fields have not been worked, the towns are laid in ruins and the smell of rotting corpses fills the air. There is hunger and squalor all through the land. The king and his daughter (the landlady's daughter) are somewhere in the mountains.

Ashmedai "the king" appears. He has won his bet, and, as previously agreed between them, the defeated king is now to return to his throne. The king refuses, because his belief in his kind and simple subjects has been shattered: he sees that he has never known his people and does not want to rule over them any longer. Ashmedai, whom the king tries to catch hold of changes into a rooster in his hands, just at the moment when the queen and her entourage appear. They fall upon the rooster and devour it.

As in the first act, we are again in the Royal Palace, which is now completely destroyed. The king refuses to continue the war. The son, who has lost a leg in the war, tries to persuade his father - with the help of his advisors - that there is no way of putting an end to the war and that there can never be a return to the former peasant society. He and the Counsellors try to explain that they have no control over the war, but that on the contrary they themselves are subject to the terrible laws of warfare. The king remains adamant in his refusal and is lynched in the market place, by the furious masses. His naked body is dragged onto the throne for trial, and he is found guilty. Ashmedai appears again, sitting in all his legendary splendour on the throne and congratulates the people on the wisdom of their judgement. However, the masses refuse to believe in the existence of Ashmedai, after he has relinquished the king's lineaments. In an apocalyptic scene, the whole of the physical world disintegrates and vanishes. Only the king's naked body remains on stage and the daughter bends over him in despairing loneliness.