

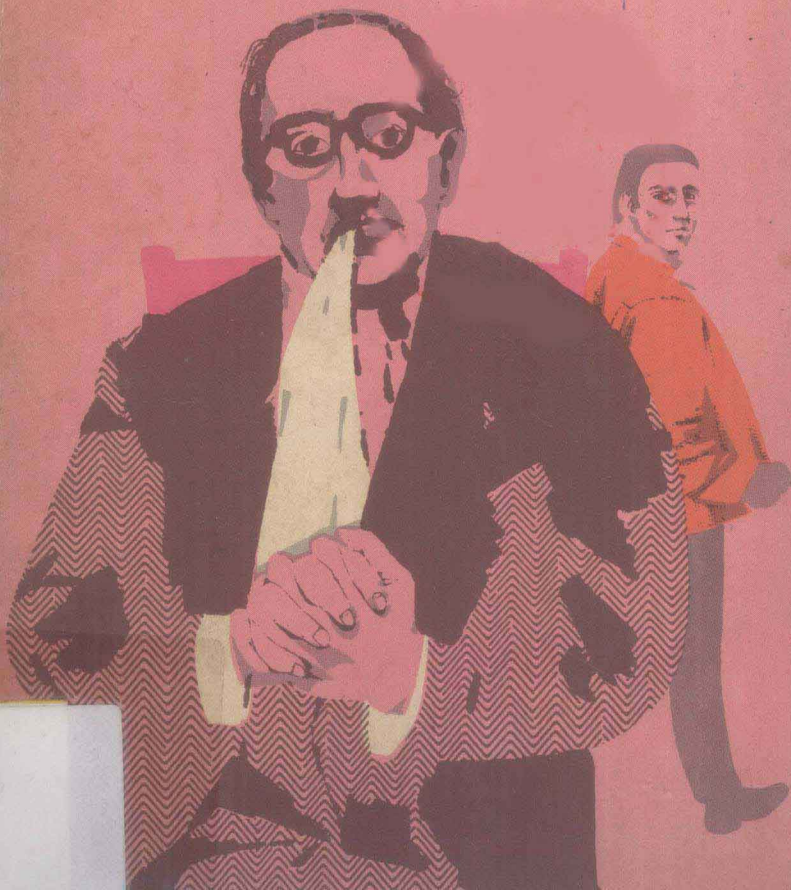


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# The Man on the Rock

Francis King



PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE MAN ON THE ROCK

FRANCIS KING

Francis King was born in 1923 in Adelboden, Switzerland, and divided his childhood between Switzerland and India where his father was an official in the government. When he was nine he came to England for the first time, to go to school, and subsequently won classical scholarships to Shrewsbury School and Balliol College, Oxford.

He joined the British Council in 1949, served variously in Italy, Greece, Egypt, Finland, and, most recently, Japan, where he was Regional Director of the British Council in Kyoto. He is now taking a sabbatical leave to write a book.

His other books include *To the Dark Tower*, *Never Again*, *The Dark Glasses*, *Rod of Incantation* (poems), and *The Widow* (Penguin). He has written articles for *Encounter*, the *London Magazine*, and other periodicals.





# *The Man on the Rock*

FRANCIS KING

PENGUIN BOOKS

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*To*

JOHN CROFT



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*All the characters in this novel are fictitious  
and no reference is made or intended  
to any actual person*

## TUESDAY

KIKI has gone out and I am watching her from my bed as she waddles across Prince of Wales Drive, a brief-case in one hand and in the other the bag from Mykonos into which she has stuffed the things she is going to take to the Laundromat during her lunch-hour. Now I feel sorry for having made her cry, even though the sight of her swollen body balanced on those absurd high-heeled shoes also renews my exasperation against her. She is going to be late, and when she returns home this evening, she will be tearful and discouraged:

‘A horrible day!’

‘Well, you know that he has this mania for punctuality.’ (Yes, that’s the kind of thing that I bring out. I suppose that a loving husband would at once rush to console her: ‘Oh, you poor darling! Tell me all about it.’) ‘Time’s money. You’ve heard him say that often enough. Though in our case – we seem to have unlimited time, but damn little of the other stuff!’

‘I did such a stupid thing. I thought that next month was October, not September. And now I’ve sent two people off to Athens to see a Festival that will be invisible.’ At that she would be half crying and half laughing. ‘What will he say when he finds out?’

Kiki is always making mistakes of that sort; I’m not exaggerating in imagining that example. Three nights ago she gave me two Quadronox tablets instead of two Veganin. How I slept, and slept, and slept! She became quite hysterical trying to wake me for breakfast, and that morning she was more than an hour late at the travel-agency where she works. I can’t think why old Pavlakis doesn’t sack her. Except that his father was once a tenant on the family-estate in Thessaly, and I dare say that he gets a kick out of ordering her about; I know that I should if she’d once seen me pattering barefoot up her village street.

There's that girl pushing the perambulator with the twins in it: at least Kiki, who speaks to everyone in the block, says that they're twins. 'Oh, wouldn't it be awful if Avgerinos turned out to be twins!' But she doesn't really find the idea awful at all. 'Well, if that little weed of a chartered accountant can produce two, it doesn't seem impossible.' 'Oh, do you really think so?' She pretends to be horrified. 'Don't be silly. Doctors nowadays can always tell those things in advance,' I say.

Avgerinos, I should explain, is a Greek name (because we are Greeks) which means 'Dawn'. Kiki has decided that this is what we are going to call our boy; it's a boy, she's already decided that. The name is to remind us of a dawn after a College Ball – not that I should have thought either of us needed reminding. It was then we decided to get married; or, rather, Kiki decided, because I had decided long before. 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning . . .' Kiki, who was reading English at the time, tends to quote things like that; it's odd, because Irvine, my American friend, has the same habit.

That girl with the pram certainly has a sexy way of pushing. The driver of the coal-van outside the paper-mills has got down to help her with it, as she waggles her tail up the slope into Battersea Park. I bet he wouldn't do the same for Mrs Mumfitt, who lives next door; in spite of her weak heart, weak bladder and varicose veins. She's stopped to talk to him now, stroking her blonde hair. I wonder if it's real; I wish Kiki were blonde. Oh, damn! Now that car has parked there, and I can't see them at all.

Silly oaf! Look at that grin on his black face as he climbs into the cabin. Must be at least fifty.

Well, I suppose I'd better drink some of this orange juice that Kiki has put here beside me. If I don't finish it by the time she gets back, there's always a scene. 'How do you think you'll ever get better if you don't do what Dr Arthurs told you?' 'To hell with Dr Arthurs!' (Lying in bed like this makes me bad-tempered.) Kiki blinks her eyelashes rapidly up and down, as she always does when she's upset or annoyed: 'I go to all this trouble to squeeze all these oranges, and then

you drink about half a glass all through the day. Apart from the waste.' Ugh! I've never cared for oranges, even though we had three or four acres of orange-trees on our farm at home; and since I was told to drink all this orange-juice, I care for them even less. Now a glass of 'retsina'—that I could swallow at one gulp even at this hour.

This cystitis makes me feel wretched: or do I feel wretched merely because Kiki goes out to work every morning, and I have to lie here alone for the next eight or nine hours? We Greeks would no more think of seeking solitude than we would think of seeking pain. Irvine used to grumble because, when he went for a rest to one of the islands, he could never go out for a walk alone without someone rushing off after him to offer him his company. That he chose to be by himself was something he could not explain: since even prisoners, monks or those suffering from infectious diseases are rarely condemned to solitude in Greece.

I never read books now; when I do read I prefer, like most Greeks, to read the daily papers. But I've got through all the back numbers of *Kathimerini* and *Vima* and *Thesavros* that my friend Christo brought me the Sunday before last, and in any case I am tired of reading about Cyprus. English stupidity, Greek megalomania and American interference: well, I've had enough of all three, thank you. If only we hadn't had to give the wireless back! But that was the second instalment we'd missed, and they wouldn't wait any longer. So here I am, with my thoughts, and this disagreeable sensation which I have from my cystitis. I feel somehow soiled, degraded, disgusted with myself: but whether that is a symptom of my illness or my solitude I cannot, as I have said already, decide.

I had the same feeling with that dose I got in Salonica. It was just before I met Irvine; I was only sixteen, though after all I'd been through everyone said I looked at least twenty. I caught it in that park which in those days lay thrown down like a crumpled, dusty pocket-handkerchief, between tram-lines that hissed and clanged perpetually with those mustard-coloured coffins on wheels which (so the Greek story went, though I don't believe it) had been bought second-hand from Hong Kong. They've changed all that now: there's the

new Institute of Macedonian Studies where there used to be a row of tin shacks which the owners called garages, the cobbles have been smoothed over with asphalt, and there are Italian trolley-buses whizzing along in the place of those Hong Kong coffins. In the park they have a refreshment kiosk, and they've tipped gravel into the holes where, on a rainy night, one could step in mud up to one's ankles. But the women are still there and the occasional tourists; the peasants, in the uniforms of soldiers, hoping to earn ten drachmas off the tourists to spend on the women; and the tattered urchins spying on the tourists, the soldiers and the women in between selling pea-nuts, shining shoes or scavenging for fag-ends.

Those women are too old, too ugly or too diseased to work in the houses. In any other European country, Irvine used to say, they would have made some attempt, however futile and pathetic, at elegance and youth. Few of them bother to paint their faces, which are pinched, tired and earthen from hunger, work and exposure; not one dyes her hair. Often they wear brown or black woollen stockings rucked about their angular knees, peasant blouses and peasant-kerchiefs, and peasant-pigtails which, in the rain, give off that smell of damp sheep huddled together which I know so well from my childhood. They are teased and bullied by the soldiers, and answer them back in shrill, strident voices, interspersing obscenities with screams of 'Let me go!' and the cackling that a hen makes when it's pulled off its eggs. When they have trouble with a policeman they must, as they put it, 'settle with the tax-collector' either behind one of the clumps of bushes or in the disused Jewish cemetery where they also take their paying clients.

The one who gave me my little present was an exception to this rule: I don't suppose she could have been more than seventeen. She came from Chalkidike, I remember she told me that. I dare say she had been sent as a child into domestic service and, after a few years of drudgery and bullying, had decided to run away. Perhaps the son of the house had seduced her. It makes me sick when I read in our papers about our 'enslaved brothers' in Cyprus and I think of a

little slut like that working from six in the morning until twelve o'clock at night for three or four pounds a month.

How clearly I see her now! After more than ten years. She was wearing a soldier's tunic, heaven knows where she'd got it, over a cotton frock in that terrible winter cold. Her hands, when I touched them, were swollen and raw with chilblains, and she had a smile that was like the grimace a cat makes when it's about to scratch you: you expected her to hiss. I was astonished by the fullness and beauty of her uptilted breasts (Kiki never had breasts like that), because the rest of her body was so emaciated that one could feel every bone. If you've been hungry as I so often have, you don't care for the feel of bones. Round her neck she had a bootlace with a cross dangling on the end of it; she told me that she'd had to sell the chain. She made love as they all make love in that park, as though she were scrubbing a floor. But what else can you expect for half a crown? Then, after I'd given her the ten-drachma note I'd got off a German sailor I'd led to one of the houses, she had the cheek to ask for more. 'Go to the devil!' I shouted at her, and I gave her a push so that she almost sat down on one of the bushes behind which we had hidden. Then I told her to do one or two things to herself which it would obviously be impossible for her to do, and made off laughing, while she screamed behind me.

Well, she got her revenge! Fortunately in Greece you don't have to see a doctor in order to get your penicillin, and as I managed to find a job the following day, on a road-gang, I had the money to pay for three shots. 'You'll need another to be sure,' the spectacled, stooping chemist said, handling me as if I were a cow. 'The hell I will! And how do you think I shall pay for it?' For, by then, the road-job had ended, as the foreman's nephew had arrived from his village looking for work, and mine was the work he was given.

Now I'm beginning to wonder. Do you suppose this 'cystitis' might be that old dose flaring up again? Should I mention it to the doctor? There you are, you see. Those are the sort of morbid thoughts that come into your mind when you're alone, with nothing else to occupy you. I wish I didn't feel so depressed. I wish I could stop thinking of that skinny

little skivvy – she gave it to me, didn't she? I wish I could stop thinking of all those nasty, ill-tempered things I said to poor Kiki, about her father, and the dirt in the flat, and the way she couldn't even make a cup of tea or boil an egg properly. God, I felt awful when she rushed off into the lavatory and I heard her being sick. I thought that after the first few months they began to feel better, but she just seems to feel worse and worse and worse. There are times when I hate myself, and the best thing then is to go out to pick up a girl, to play backgammon or cards at a café, or to dance in a tavern. Little chance of doing any of those things, except the first, in this god-awful country – even if I didn't have this plague.

I must get Kiki to move that ikon. If I lie on my side, as I'm doing now, I have to stare at it, and I'm tired of doing that. I'd rather have one of those pictures from *Esquire*; a blonde bursting out of her brassière, or lolling in a bath of foam. Funny how I've always liked blondes and I have to go and marry a brunette. I managed that badly. Married to the only daughter of one of the richest Greeks in London, and I can't even afford to pay the never-never on a wireless, let alone a telly:

We could sell that ikon, I suppose; I dare say it's valuable – must be, considering where I got it. Irvine was angrier with me then than I'd ever seen him before. We were touring Mount Athos in the yacht which he called a 'bargain' because, instead of paying five hundred dollars a month, he had got it through me for two hundred: which, none the less, allowed me a commission of twenty, though of course he didn't know about that. 'I can see that life in Greece is going to be much cheaper for me, now that I've got you,' he declared. How little did he guess then how much more expensive it was going to be! He was delighted, repeating over and over again: 'Three hundred dollars! Think of that! Three hundred dollars! That's what you've saved.' Like many people generous to the point of folly with those who appeal either to their love or to their pity, he could also be incredibly mean. When he invited his friends in to drinks, he would often decide to give them Martinis, only to change

his mind: 'No, let them drink "ouzo"! After all, if they come to Greece, they must get used to the Greek way of life, mustn't they?' His small change he kept in a little purse, and little purses on men are, I've always thought, an ominous sign. In restaurants while eager to press on me more food than I could possibly devour, he would calculate to the last farthing how much our share of the meal cost when we were with others. His tips were minute, unless the waiter was either handsome or full of complaints about the long hours he worked, the ill-temper of his wife, the health of his children or the soreness of his feet. Then he would shake the coins out of that horrid little purse of stained leather until they avalanched on to the clean tablecloth and even on to the floor.

We arrived at one of the Russian monasteries at dusk, and Irvine, who was standing at the prow of the yacht, a beige woollen muffler flapping its end around him as he held his little pink hands clasped over his little paunch, cried out: 'Spiro, Spiro, look!' 'O.K.,' I said. 'O.K. I can see.' I was lying in a deck-chair, half asleep and half awake, and furious that, instead of going to Rhodes or Cos or even Loutraki, we had come to this benighted peninsula with not a woman in sight and hardly a man who could be called a man. 'It's like a fairy-tale,' Irvine went on excitedly, in that voice of his which often made other Americans snigger and nudge each other: not educated Americans, of course, but people like accountants, storekeepers or the foremen of excavations. 'Some fairy!' I muttered to myself. 'Now, Irvine, you lazy boy! Open your eyes and look.' Thank God, I thought, that neither of the crew knew English. But that voice! You can recognize that kind of voice in any language, can't you?

We were entertained by the guest-master, who was called Father Zosimos, and leaned on a stick when he wasn't trying to lean on my shoulder or that of one of our crew – because (so he said) of his rheumatism. Irvine's grandfather had been a diplomat in the Tsarist Foreign Service, and Father Zosimos had also served in the Tsarist Foreign Service before the Revolution: so we were given the best of everything, which wasn't saying much. 'What a charming old fellow,'



Irvine said when we were alone in our cell. 'Charming,' I answered. 'I could see the fleas hopping about in his beard.' Irvine giggled at that: 'Spiro, Spiro, you naughty boy! *Che cattiva lingua!*' 'Look, how about leaving out the French?' I suggested, though I knew it was Italian. 'You're educated, I'm not. Try to talk to me in English only and, if possible, in words of one syllable.' Irvine loved that. He loved poverty, simplicity and ignorance, since he himself was rich, complex and over-educated. And I knew that, and used to play him up.

He began to shake some pills out of a bottle, and then looked round for a glass. 'I must take my entero-vio-form,' he said anxiously. 'I feel *uneasy* in my little intestine. Do you think that fish was off? It had a bitter taste to me.' Irvine was always fussing about his health, and sighing that I was so healthy. He picked up a carafe which was full of cobwebs and peered down into it.

'I'll get you some water,' I said, taking the carafe from him.

'Do you think it's safe?'

'Of course. Mount Athos is full of springs. The best water in Greece.' Now I felt sorry for him, as he stood there, perplexed and worried, while the single candle bounced the shadow of his paunch, little intestine and all, against the ceiling as though it were a balloon. I was thinking, as I have so often thought: 'He's a good man.' But it's a pity that the good are so often ridiculous.

That night Irvine hardly slept at all, and when he slept, he talked. I had heard people talk Greek in their sleep before, and English, and even French, but it was the first time I had heard anyone talk all three of these languages at once. At intervals, still in his sleep, he would rub his hands briskly together as though he were cold. All this, I needn't tell you, got on my nerves, and eventually I shouted out: 'Irvine! Stop it! Stop it! Irvine! Do you hear?' Then he woke up, and, sitting up in bed, looked all around him.

'Oh, oh, oh!' he moaned. Then he jumped out of the bed, brushing his hands over his silk pyjamas as if he were trying to put out flames.