

The Reluctant Nuns

by

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SCENE ONE

A meadow in front of Shaftesbury Abbey during the middle of the thirteenth century. A group of children holding a blanket or sheet are tossing up a felt puppet shaped like a knight on a horse. They are singing but we do not hear any sound. To their right a FRIAR is standing on a mound of earth holding forth to an audience of country people. Most of the listeners are peasants or artisans but there are one or two groups of minor gentry. The friar gesticulates wildly but once again we hear nothing. Alongside the friar stands a formidable-looking man-at-arms with a pile of Crusader shields alongside him, CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. He stands stiffly motionless though he occasionally glances over the crowd noting their reactions.

PREACHER. Jerusalem has been lost! There are Turks and infidels within the Holy Sepulchre! Men of Wessex, King Louis of France needs you, the Pope needs you, Christendom needs you, take the oath today and leave for the Holy Land — become a Crusader!

A mixed reaction from the crowd: some cheer but others mutter. We hear the children singing for the first time as they toss up the Crusader puppet.

CHILDREN *(Singing)*

Cowardy, cowardy Whosalem,
He hasn't been to Jerusalem!

PREACHER Stop that!

Someone makes children keep quiet.

1st MALE. Hey, why isn't an English lord leading the Crusade?

2nd MALE. That's right; we're not going unless there's an English leader.

PREACHER *(Embarrassed)* King Louis of France is an experienced Crusader and, what is more important, he is a devout Christian.

2nd MALE We don't want no French lording it over us.

3rd MALE We want the Duke of Cornwall!

4th MALE No, Simon de Montfort!

2nd MALE Don't be daft, he's French.

4th MALE Course he isn't. He's more English than you are.

1st MALE. We want the King of England, Henry III.

5th MALE We want King Richard the Lion-Heart!

PREACHER. King Richard is dead and is doubtless jousting in Paradise with Saint Michael at this very moment.

2nd MALE We want King Richard the Lion-Heart!

SEVERAL VOICES IN UNISON We want King Richard! We want King Richard the Lionheart!

PREACHER (*Striving to make himself heard*) I told you we can't have King Richard the Lionheart — he's been dead for over fifty years.

3rd MALE Well, bring him back to life again!

2nd MALE Yes, we want a miracle right now!

LOUD CRIES A miracle! We want a miracle!

The CAPTAIN comes up in threatening aspect.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR That's enough now.

Hubbub dies down.

1st POOR MAN What's in it, Preacher, if you take the oath?

The Friar attempts to ignore him.

2nd POOR MAN Well, go on, tell us. What d'you get?

PREACHER (*Slight pause. With dignity*) What you get is the satisfaction of serving God and doing your duty. Also, if you die in battle you may hope for a place in Paradise amongst the saints.

2nd POOR MAN And while you're alive?

PREACHER Your local lord will provide for you — is that not so, Captain?

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR (*Gravely*) That is indeed so. But we only take fit men — Palestine is a long way off.

BEGGAR I'm fit — if I weren't I wouldn't be able to walk around begging.

One or two people titter.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR I said that's enough.

1st MALE But well, isn't there any....wages?

PREACHER. (*Trying to be severe*) We want men devoted to God, not worshippers of Mammon!

1st MALE You've still got to live.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR goes down to the man and speaks to him privately.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. The Saracen towns in Palestine are rich — you take my meaning?

4th MALE I think I do.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR And they are full of young women.

4TH MALE Is that so?

Pause.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR The Pope understands the needs of warriors far from home. Take the oath today, you won't regret it.

WOMAN'S VOICE (*Shouting out*) What about us, Preacher?

PREACHER Wives of holy warriors who fall in battle will receive a pension.

The WOMEN cheer.

2nd WOMAN Don't mind me, Cuthbert, you go ahead and take the oath.

Titters

1ST WOMAN Wouldn't do you any good. You wouldn't get a penny.

2ND WOMAN Why not?

3RD WOMAN You're not properly married like we are — you're just a slut.

Turns away in disgust.

2ND WOMAN Look who's talking! Enough been there to fit out a crusade.

3RD WOMAN You shut it!

Women start fighting.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR Here, stop that! I'll have you all put in the pillory if you don't keep quiet.

Tumult subsides a little. CAPTAIN HARFLEUR approaches two men who are standing by themselves. One is a handsome young man who looks as if he belongs to the gentry and his companion looks as if he might be his squire which indeed he is.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR Good day to you, sir. You look as if you might be a knight of the realm. We need someone to lead the local Crusaders. Are you going to enlist for the Holy Land? We'd be glad to have you.

SIR ROGER DE PURBECK (*Coldly*) I hadn't thought of it.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR frowns and walks on. The children form a circle around SIR ROGER.

CHILDREN (*Singing*)

Cowardy, cowardy Ripolee,
He hasn't been to Tripoli!

SQUIRE HODGE-PODGE Hey, off you go now!

Shoos them away.

SIR ROGER You're not in any great hurry to tear off to Palestine again, are you, Hodge-podge?

SQUIRE HODGE-PODGE No, I'm certainly not. I saw enough with your father. It's true the pillage is pretty good but the climate is revolting.

SIR ROGER I only wish Christians would stop all this fighting. *Amor vincit gladium* : love conquers the sword. That's my motto. I think I'll have it painted on my coat of arms.

HODGE-PODGE You ought to go to the South of France — Provence is the place for the likes of you. They have Courts of Love there.

SIR ROGER I know. It's the land of the troubadours.

From far off we hear a disembodied voice singing

VOICE Our yesteryears have vanished quite,
And days to come may never be,
Fair maid, take thy delight, delight,
Before the shadow falls on thee.

SIR ROGER But I would not be accepted there.

HODGE-PODGE Why not?

SIR ROGER Alas, I have no lady. But what is this?

A new group enters from the left. It consists of a middle-aged man of substance and his wife and two daughters. The man looks as if he belongs to the lower gentry. The women are extravagantly dressed in late Medieval costume including tall conical hats with ribbons dangling. The young girls are both pretty and attract a lot of attention of which they are by no means unaware. The group crosses the meadow and sits on a bench at the back face to the audience.

SIR ROGER Hold me, Hodge-podge, I feel faint.

SQUIRE HODGE-PODGE *(With real concern)* Master! Have you got an attack of the St Vitus?

SIR ROGER No, Hodge-podge, this is not a sickness. Did you ever see such beauty?

HODGE-PODGE Begging your pardon I did. *(Looking after the ladies)* Still, they're not bad either of them. I'd say the younger one's better.

SIR ROGER No, no, Hodge-podge, you are not a knight and so you are no judge of beauty. The younger compared to the elder is like a candle-flame compared to the moon.

SQUIRE HODGE-PODGE continues to give assistance to his stricken master. While this is going on a few males are coming forward to take the oath from the PREACHER and, after kneeling and swearing the Crusader oath, they are each given a shield by the CAPTAIN. A young man is about to go forward but a dark figure wrapped in a cloak reaches out a hand and holds him firmly by the wrist.

YOUNG MAN Leave me alone. *(Tries to disengage himself but he cannot.)* Leave me alone! What do you want from me?

CLOAKED FIGURE Do not take the oath. Do not set out for Jerusalem.

YOUNG MAN hesitates.

CLOAKED FIGURE Of all who go from here, none will return.

YOUNG MAN I cannot draw back now — they have counted me in the number.

CLOAKED FIGURE I will take your place.

YOUNG MAN Who are you?

The CLOAKED FIGURE draws back his hood and we see that his face is a skull. The YOUNG MAN recoils in horror. The CLOAKED FIGURE takes his place in the queue and kneels before the FRIAR. He is given a shield and the company stand together at one side of the stage.

The CAPTAIN goes to stand before the party sitting on the high bench. He bows to the ladies and shows deference to the man.

SIR GEOFFREY DE MELBURY Well, Captain, I've rarely seen such a miserable bunch of recruits for Palestine.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR (*Grimly*) We will make fighting men out of them.

SIR GEOFFREY They almost make me want to take the oath myself..

PREACHER And now, men and women of Wessex, rather than listen to me speak I'm sure you'd rather see a real Crusader in person. (*Points to a lavishly got out knight on a charger at the edge of the stage.*) Here he is, the gallant knight who went to Jerusalem with the Duke of Cornwall, Sir William de Palermo!

The Knight dismounts and goes round beating on his armoured chest so everyone can see him. General admiration especially from the young women present. He goes over to the would-be crusaders and stands talking amiably with them.

1ST GIRL Isn't he handsome!

2ND GIRL What do you mean — we can't see his face. He might have warts all over it for all you know.

1ST GIRL (*Scornfully*) It's quite obvious he's dark and handsome under all that armour.

2ND GIRL They say he's in love with the Emperor Frederick's daughter. (*Giggles*) He's got a whole harem of Sarsen women in Tripoli — he keeps them in a stable like war-horses..

1ST GIRL I think that's wrong... Still I suppose they are infidels.

1st BYSTANDER Hey! didn't someone say there was going to be a bit of a joust?

2nd BYSTANDER Yes, let's have some action.

3rd BYSTANDER Hey, Captain, isn't there —

4th BYSTANDER It's all right — they're starting.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR comes forward and addresses audience.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR And now, to celebrate this great occasion which marks the rebirth of Holy Land Crusading Sir William de Palermo who has won the palm in Sicily three times is going to give an exhibition of jousting in the new style he has developed.

SIR WILLIAM comes forward amidst immense acclamation and walks towards the family on the benches. He inclines himself as far as his armour permits and after exchanging some words which we do not hear, the younger daughter,

extremely flattered, tears off a ribbon from her head-gear and hands it to the knight who sticks it into his helmet. He bows once more and returns to his horse.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR Is there anyone amongst you prepared to take a tilt?

Everyone hesitates.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR Come on, men of Wessex. No one? If there is no local man ready to engage, I will encounter Sir William myself. But surely...?

SIR ROGER DE PURBECK comes forward a little but HODGE PODGE tries to pull him back by force.

HODGE-PODGE No, no, master — you're no jouster. That one's *Il Maestro* — I've seen him in Palestine.

But ROGER DE PURBECK pushes HODGE PODGE aside and goes towards the group on the benches. He inclines himself and begs a token from the elder of the two young women.

LAURENTIA Do not joust with Sir William, I beg of you. You will be cast down.

SIR ROGER Your grace and beauty will give me courage.

LAURENTIA eventually gives him a ribbon from her head-gear. He retires and puts on his armour.

A tilt between the two knights when neither is thrown. They go back and prepare themselves once more. At the second tilt SIR ROGER DE PURBECK is thrown from his horse. Acclamation. SIR ROGER DE PURBECK tries to get up, drawing his sword, but SIR WILLIAM comes over at once.

SIR WILLIAM Keep down, you fool! Keep down!

At this point the ABBESS and a small group of nuns arrive.

ABBESS Will you all please remove your sinful bodies from these sacred precincts! This meadow is part of the Abbey of the Holy Virgin and King Edward, Saint and Martyr. It should be a place of prayer and contemplation, not a fair-ground and jousting-field!

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. *(Somewhat aggressively)* My lady, I regret but I am here to recruit Crusaders to defend the Holy Sepulchre.

ABBESS Learn to fight with virtue rather than arms. Our patron was a martyr, not a hired entertainer.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. God needs warriors for the Holy Land, my Lady.

ABBESS This is the Holy Land here! Do you not know what Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman?

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. I only know what the priest tells me.

ABBESS He said, "The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on the mountain top nor in Jerusalem. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

FRIAR *(Interposing)* Lady Abbess, the Pope has called all Christians to help in this holy war. We must defend the Holy Sepulchre and protect Christians living in Palestine.

ABBESS Protect the interests of the Venetian merchants you mean, and others who care nothing for the Cross of Christ. Do you have a licence to preach, Friar?

FRIAR I do indeed. *(Shows it)*

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR And I have a commission from King Henry III to gather men for King Louis' crusade.

Things are beginning to get nasty. The ordinary people warily watch the confrontation, keeping quiet for the moment but ready to erupt when they see who's winning. Amongst the crowd is a second FRIAR, dressed in a different habit, and he strides forward.

DOMINICAN FRIAR Lady Abbess, need I remind you that Pope Innocent, whose authority is invested in me, has on more than one occasion said —

SIR WILLIAM *(Hastily intervening)* A moment. We stand reprov'd by this honoured lady. I see now that it was wrong — grievously wrong — to commence a pagan joust so near to the precincts of holy Abbey. The fault was not yours, worthy friars, but lies entirely with me. *(Looking around, he sees that the mood of the crowd is still ugly.)* Friends, let us remove ourselves to the hilltop nearby known, I believe, as Cwm Palladwr — there we may joust to our heart's content since it is not holy ground. Do you wish for a third chance, Sir Roger?

SIR ROGER I shall be ready for you, Sir William.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR and the FRIAR glare at the ABBESS.

ABBESS Captain Harfleur, I must ask you to kindly inform me in advance if you wish to hold meetings for the recruitment of crusaders on land belonging to this Abbey.

Everyone starts to move, albeit reluctantly. The ABBESS and her nuns remain to see that everyone has left. SIR WILLIAM returns alone.

SIR WILLIAM Lady Abbess, a word with you. *(The ABBESS looks at him enquiringly.)* I would be lying if I said I was a friend of the monastic orders.

ABBESS I do not doubt it.

SIR WILLIAM However, there is a difference between jackdaws and vultures. You saw the friar amongst the crowd?

ABBESS The Franciscan?

SIR WILLIAM No. Not the preacher. The other, the one in the black habit.

ABBESS Well?

SIR WILLIAM He is a Dominican and he has authority from the Pope to inquire into the beliefs current in this country — I think you know what that means.

ABBESS Why should that concern me?

SIR WILLIAM Your — how shall I put it? — your views on crusading are hardly those of Pope Innocent IV, Your Ladyship.

ABBESS That is a matter for the Church to decide. *(Slight pause)* And who, may I ask, are you?

SIR WILLIAM *(Changing his manner)* Sir William de Palermo, professional joust, gamester, amateur philosopher, philanderer...

ABBESS I see. But why do I not know you? Who dubbed you knight?

SIR WILLIAM The King of Sicily, the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II himself.

ABBESS That profligate and atheist! I begin to understand. He makes men knights if they win against him at chess. *(Slight pause)* I thank you nonetheless for your intervention and warning.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR returns and looks suspiciously at SIR WILLIAM and the ABBESS.

CAPTAIN HARFLEUR The crowd awaits you, Sir William. You must come at once if you intend to joust.

ABBESS Go in peace, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM inclines himself and follows CAPTAIN HARFLEUR. .