

**LAST NIGHT IN DENNY ABBEY**

by

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## LAST NIGHT IN DENNY ABBEY

TIME: 1539  
PLACE: Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire  
SET: A room with a fireplace and cauldron at backstage centre and windows on either side, doors on stage right and left.

FURNITURE: A table with four chairs and two ecclesiastical chairs set against the wall, some shelves, a small cupboard and bookcase set in appropriate places.

### ACTION

ACT 1 Scene 1 Evening.  
Scene 2 Late evening.  
Scene 3 Mid-night.

ACT 2 Scene 1 Night.  
Scene 2 Later that night.  
Scene 3 Early morning.

### CHARACTERS

Elizabeth: Abbess.  
Heather: A nun.  
Mary: A nun.  
Felicity: A prophetess and nun.  
Dr Leigh: Commissioners.  
John Ap Rice:  
Spirit: Benedictine Monk and a Knights Templar.  
Angel:

**ACT 1 SCENE 1 EVENING**

(The Abbess ELIZABETH is in her room with HEATHER and MARY).

ELIZABETH: What a dreadful day, years of devotion, all for what! (She bangs her fist on the table and HEATHER goes to comfort her and she pushes her away)

HEATHER: We... all know how you must-

ELIZABETH: (Cutting in) Do... you... I've become part of this Abbey; it's the very air I breathe. I know every creaking beam and floorboard, every worn tile along the passageway, the smell of sweat from every wall; that familiar sound of keys locking every door.

HEATHER: Abbess, we've all become accustomed to some degree, but I'm sure our prayers and devotions have risen like incense to the Lord.

ELIZABETH: That's what I keep trying to tell myself. (MARY fiddles with her rosary beads) Would you please stop fiddling around with those rosary beads Sister Mary it's getting on my nerves?

MARY: (Soft voice) Sorry... Abbess...

ELIZABETH: Speak up child and stop that shivering, stand up when you're talking to me.

MARY: (Rises slowly) I said... I'm sorry... what more.

HEATHER: (Comforts MARY) Don't take it too much to heart Mary-

ELIZABETH: (Overlapping) Will you stop your interfering Sister Heather.

HEATHER: (Turns) I'm only...

(A spirit shouts offstage).

SPIRIT: Battleaxe! (Laughs)

ELIZABETH: Who's... what's that, I'll have his head?

HEATHER: Funny you should say that.

ELIZABETH: Funny is it?

HEATHER: I don't think you quite understand.

ELIZABETH: Perfectly, so that's...

MARY: It's... it's... him again.

ELIZABETH: Who's him, for goodness sake? (Pause) My patience is wearing rather thin. (Taps on the table)

HEATHER: Sorry Abbess, I should have told you before-

ELIZABETH: Indeed you should, carry on...

HEATHER: It all began last week, when I dug up that stone head in the vegetable patch. (Points to a stone head at the foot of the fireplace)

ELIZABETH: What about it?

HEATHER: This head seems to have released some kind of troubled spirit, that's if you believe in that sort of thing... er... Mary.

MARY: It's... that voice we just heard, it keeps following me-

ELIZABETH: (Overlapping) Pull yourself together child, why haven't been I told about this incident before?

HEATHER: We thought you had a big enough cross to bear and it being the last day.

ELIZABETH: Should anything like this ever occur again, I'd like to be informed immediately is that clear?

HEATHER: Understood.

ELIZABETH: Good!

HEATHER: Would you like us to remove the head Abbess?

ELIZABETH: I wouldn't dream of it, would you give the pottage a stir.

HEATHER: Right away (She stirs the pottage) what do you have in mind?

ELIZABETH: Sorry, my thoughts are not your thoughts my ways are not your ways, (Pause) although I must say I think it's the Abbey itself protesting at this upheaval.

HEATHER: Sorry you've lost me.

MARY: And me!

ELIZABETH: Not to worry sisters, I wonder where those commissioners have got to. (She goes to the window) What a foul evening the mists are brooding over the waters, like a witch's cauldron. (She sits and the others follow suit) Mary, you've read quite a bit of history, could you tell me more about this stone head?

MARY: It's... sometimes-

ELIZABETH: (Cutting in) Could you speak up Mary.

MARY: It's... sometimes used in the Knights Templar rituals, the... stone head is the Celtic hero Bran the blessed, it's supposed to offer some... kind of protection.

ELIZABETH: It's ironic to see the Knights Templar offering their services beyond the grave, still better late than never.

HEATHER: Although we could have done without this, you've been under so much strain.

ELIZABETH: You can say that again, (Sighs) Twenty-five nuns homeless and Sister Helen's suicide, dreadful business.

HEATHER: So young and beautiful.

ELIZABETH: She was such a dedicated nun, but a trifle willful at times. (Rises and looks out of the window) All because of King Henry's lust... where have those commissioners got to?

HEATHER: (Goes to the window) The weather seems to be getting worse, they should have been here hours ago; I doubt if they'll turn up.

ELIZABETH: I have no doubt whatsoever I feel it in my bones. Unfortunately they'll have to spend the night here.

MARY: (Rises) I can't... what about that evil spirit? (Stamps her feet) I can't... I won't spend another night in that dormitory.

ELIZABETH: (Grabs MARY) Sister Mary for the last time will you pull yourself together.

MARY: Sorry... I can't help it.-

ELIZABETH: Just think; you'll be in Coughton Court in Warwickshire the day after tomorrow... where's Felicity got to?

MARY: Er...I passed her room earlier and heard her speaking in a strange language.

ELIZABETH: Strange language?

MARY: She quite often does in her meditations.

ELIZABETH: Something else brought to my attention; I'll have words with Felicity.

MARY: But...what about the evil spirit?

ELIZABETH: Let sleeping dogs lie.

MARY: But... it's awake!

ELIZABETH: (Cutting in) For the last time, will you stop that whimpering. (Slaps her)

MARY: (Burst in tears) I'm frightened...

**ENTER FELICITY**

FELICITY: (Rushes in and stumbles) Sorry I'm late...I've been-

ELIZABETH: Speaking in a strange language, you look full of the joys of spring.

FELICITY: (Laughs) Felicity by name and joyful by nature.

ELIZABETH: And what's the reason, for this sudden burst of exuberance?

FELICITY: I've been speaking in tongues; Saint Paul says it builds you up in the Holy Spirit.

ELIZABETH: (Pause) But it's not the Catholic way, its irreverent.

FELICITY: But Saint Peter-

ELIZABETH: (Overlapping) Don't you dare defy me, you'll obey the Catholic tradition. Is that clear?

FELICITY: Yes, but I feel more bubbly than the well in the monastery garden...you look as though you've seen the ghost Mary. (Goes to her)

ELIZABETH: (Shouts) Hold it right there Sister Felicity, (FELICITY stops and faces her) So you've seen the ghost?

FELICITY: On several occasions, but I think it's finally got the message.

ELIZABETH: Is there no end to your charms?

FELICITY: It's got nothing to do with charms; I took authority in the Lord. (ELIZABETH is seething) Did I say something wrong?

ELIZABETH: Firstly you're late for Vespers.-

FELICITY: I didn't hear the bell.-

ELIZABETH: (Overlapping) Silence when I'm speaking.

FELICITY: Please forgive me Abbess.

ELIZABETH: That's more like it, where was I - secondly you've often been lacking in punctuality, thirdly it's obvious you didn't listen to today's arrangements; fourthly you took authority over evil spirits without consulting me. Furthermore I will not allow Protestantism to creep into my Abbey.

FELICITY: Sorry Abbess, it won't happen again.

ELIZABETH: I'm not convinced, have you been reading your bible during your meditation time?

FELICITY: Yes.

ELIZABETH: Would you bring your bible to me before you leave.

FELICITY: No... please, I beg you.

ELIZABETH: You should have thought of that before, I'm determined to root out Protestantism from our order.

FELICITY: But I'm Catholic through and through. (Stands firm) I will not let you take my bible.

ELIZABETH: You dare to defy me! (Points to her self) You leave me no alternative.

HEATHER: This is the last night.

ELIZABETH: (Shouts) Bring my cane Sister Heather.

FELICITY: And if I refuse?

ELIZABETH: You won't be coming to Coughton Court.

FELICITY: You'll leave me homeless.

ELIZABETH: Exactly.

FELICITY: You leave me no choice. (HEATHER brings a cane to ELIZABETH who swipes it through the air)



ELIZABETH: Mary and Heather would you kindly leave the room for a moment, Sister Felicity's facing enough humiliation.

**EXIT MARY AND HEATHER**

(Swipes the cane through the air) Sister Felicity, lie on the chair and lift up your gown. (She obeys) I take no pleasure in this. (She hits FELICITY three times she groans and ELIZABETH breathes heavily and FELICITY rises in tears) I hope that has taught you a lesson. (Goes to the door at stage left)

**ENTER MARY AND HEATHER**

HEATHER: (Comforts FELICITY) It's all over.

ELIZABETH: How I wish that was true, the Countess of Pembroke would have turned in her grave to see Denny Abbey being closed. At least she's left her mark in Cambridge. - It seems my only legacy is feeding the poor; I'll take the dole gate to Coughton Court, That's about my only recognition.

MARY: What... about Sister Helen?

ELIZABETH: How dare you accuse me?

MARY: You... you...

ELIZABETH: You... what, will you stop that timidity, it irritates me.

MARY: You whipped her twenty times and-

ELIZABETH: She was disobedient, I'm convinced her suicide was through fear of homelessness. I can't take every nun to...why should I justify myself before you.

MARY: That was the night I had the visitation.

ELIZABETH: Explain yourself.

MARY: A... Knights Templar stood there laughing at the foot of my bed in all his regalia.

ELIZABETH: Why didn't you scream, we were all asleep in the dormitory that night.

MARY: I... was petrified... goodness how I tried.

ELIZABETH: Do you think it's the same spirit we heard earlier?

MARY: Yes, that's him the same laugh.

ELIZABETH: Did he say anything?

MARY: That you've overstepped the mark, like you did with Felicity.

HEATHER: Mary, I think you've said enough.

ELIZABETH: I can take care of myself Heather, spirits and ghosts included. Felicity is not all innocence and light, is that so Felicity? (Pause)

HEATHER: It seems that things have gone far enough.

ELIZABETH: So you keep saying would you give the pottage another stir.

HEATHER: (Stirs the pottage) It seems to be simmering happily away.

ELIZABETH: I've decided Mary that Felicity can bed down here with you for the night.

MARY: That's... wonderful Abbess, that should take a load off my mind.

ELIZABETH: And mine, we all have some different challenges ahead.

HEATHER: (Goes to the window) I can see a lantern glimmering in the fen fog.

ELIZABETH: (Sighs) Just as I thought the commissioners turning up like a bad goat. Now compose yourselves my sisters, (They obey) good, it's imperative that you remain on your guard. I'm expecting that awful Dr Leigh.

HEATHER: The one you sent away with a flea in his ear, three years ago.

ELIZABETH: His companion was worse.

HEATHER: John Ap Rice, who asked me to grant him a favour to release me from my misery, I ask you.

ELIZABETH Say no more Heather about that lusty Devil.

HEATHER: I hear footsteps. (There's a knock on the door)

ELIZABETH: Please enter Dr Leigh, we've been expecting you.

**ENTER DR LEIGH AND JOHN**

LEIGH: (Holding a lantern) First blood to you Abbess.

ELIZABETH: It's good to see you in a fighting spirit Dr Leigh.

LEIGH: Victory at last, I've waited three long years for this moment.  
(Blows his lantern out)

ELIZABETH: So it would seem.

LEIGH: I think we've all met before.

ELIZABETH: Except for Sister Felicity.

JOHN: (Holding a large box) John Ap Rice, Felicity, ladies at your service. (Licks his lips and the sisters remain silent)

ELIZABETH: Losing your touch Mr Rice, you can put your box over there on the shelf. (He puts his box carefully on the shelf and returns) I wonder what's in it.

JOHN: Nothing to concern you.

ELIZABETH: Not to worry. (Laughs at DR LEIGH)

LEIGH: What's so funny?

ELIZABETH: Wearing a sword, are you sure you haven't got an army posted outside?

LEIGH: If I thought it was necessary, (Coughs) what a dreadful journey over those misty waters. The ferryman looked so gaunt it felt like a journey into hell.

ELIZABETH: Many a true word spoke in jest Dr Leigh.

LEIGH: I must confess, I wondered when I saw blue streaks of flame dancing on the waters.

ELIZABETH: Will of the wisps, that's an ill omen.

LEIGH: Are you trying..? (Rubs his hands together) I hate the freezing fens it's not fit to turn a cat out.

ELIZABETH: (He goes near the fire) Here, come and warm yourself by the fire.

LEIGH: I don't mind if I do Abbess. (JOHN and DR LEIGH move near the fire)

ELIZABETH: As you can see there's some hot pottage prepared for you.

JOHN: Hot pottage? Is there any chance of some meat to put some flesh on my bones?

ELIZABETH: You don't seem to have a problem there Mr Rice, besides we never eat meat here in the Abbey.

JOHN: You don't know what you're missing, in more ways than one.

ELIZABETH: I'd rather not go into that, if you don't mind. Heather would you serve these two gentlemen their meal.

HEATHER: At once.

ELIZABETH: Would you like to sit at the table. (They sit and HEATHER fills two bowls with pottage and puts it on the table with some bread)

JOHN: (He tastes the bread and throws it on the floor) It's as hard as a brick and as for this pottage. (HEATHER picks the bread up)

ELIZABETH: Perhaps you'd prefer some fresh fish from our pond Mr Ap Rice.

JOHN: My names John. (He goes to eat his pottage) Hunger's a sharp thorn.

ELIZABETH: Bon appetite!

LEIGH: Wait!

ELIZABETH: Anything wrong Dr Leigh?

LEIGH: This pottage could be poisoned.

ELIZABETH: Really Dr Leigh, that's not my style.

LEIGH: All the same.

ELIZABETH: Heather, would you taste the pottage?

JOHN: No!

ELIZABETH: No, Mr Ap Rice.

JOHN: My name's John, you taste the pottage Abbess.

ELIZABETH: Carry on Heather.

JOHN: No, that would be a waste.

HEATHER: Abbess?

ELIZABETH: Really gentlemen. (She takes the spoon and tastes the pottage) Satisfied? (They start eating) I feel... quite faint... (Swoons)

LEIGH: (Rises) What! (They stop eating)

ELIZABETH: (Recovers and laughs) Alive and well, gentlemen.

LEIGH: (Sits down and eats) That's not funny.

ELIZABETH: It's not all doom and gloom here in the Abbey.

JOHN: You could have fooled me.

ELIZABETH: Seems I just did.

LEIGH: (Notices MARY fiddling nervously with her rosary beads) Not your finest hour Abbess.

ELIZABETH: Er... what are you referring to... would you gentlemen care for some ale?

JOHN: Something a little bit stronger.

ELIZABETH: I think there's a bottle of wine-

JOHN: (Cutting in) Good, things need livening up around here.

ELIZABETH: Would you kindly serve the gentlemen Mary?

MARY: At once Abbess. (Looks around)

ELIZABETH: Over there in the corner Mary.

MARY: Ar... here we are. (Brings a bottle of ale and chalice and puts them on the table)

LEIGH: Thank you, Sister Mary. (She pours the ale into the chalice and he drinks) That's most refreshing.

JOHN: (Bangs on the table) What about my wine!

ELIZABETH: On its way John. (Mary looks around for the wine) I think it's over the other side MARY)

MARY: (Goes to the other side) I see it. (She brings a chalice and pours out the wine)

JOHN: About time, thank you for being so accommodating my sweet lass. (Puts his arm around her waist) You're shivering like a lump of jelly. (MARY moves away quickly) Come here, I won't bite. (Laughs)

ELIZABETH: How dare you John Ap Rice.

JOHN: Dare indeed Abbess, she's a nervous wreck.

ELIZABETH: Nonsense, she's just timid by nature.

LEIGH: Intimidated more-

ELIZABETH: (Cutting in) There's no need to be insolent Dr Leigh.

LEIGH: (Rises and touches the table three times) Insolent, now you listen to me, she's one of the half a dozen nuns who begged to be dismissed; when we were here three years ago.

JOHN: I was getting around to that.

LEIGH: Let me deal with this if I may John.

JOHN: She's all yours.

ELIZABETH: Surely this is all irrelevant, the Abbey's closed.

LEIGH: I'm coming to that. Sister Mary, do you remember saying that you lived against your conscience here in the abbey?

MARY: (Straightens up and confident) As you can see things have changed around here, the Abbess is taking me to her nephew's home in Warwickshire. (Pause)

ELIZABETH: Satisfied Dr Leigh? As you can see she's more fortunate than the other twenty-five nuns, you're making homeless, one of them committed suicide through the ordeal, poor soul.

LEIGH: That's not my responsibility, I'm under orders.

ELIZABETH: Exactly, I trust you enjoyed your meal gentlemen.

JOHN: It barely wetted my appetite.

ELIZABETH: I can imagine.

LEIGH: It will keep us going till the morning.

ELIZABETH: Good, it seems you'll be spending the night here.

LEIGH: (Looks out the window) Indeed, the weather's foul, it feels as though the Abbey's enshrouded with fog like a tomb. I certainly don't relish spending the night here.

ELIZABETH: An extra night Dr Leigh!

LEIGH: I'll have you out of here by morning, by hook or by crook!

ELIZABETH: All depends what's happened by morning.

LEIGH: I don't like the tone of your voice Abbess. (JOHN stares at FELICITY)

JOHN: (Grabs her) Don't I know you from somewhere?

ELIZABETH: Is it at all possible to exercise some self-control Mr Ap Rice?

JOHN: (Releases her) John's the name, (Turns to FELICITY) I remember you; you're Robert the Mason's daughter, (Laughs) the talk of-

ELIZABETH: (Cutting in) John, we've had quite enough from you.

LEIGH: Abbess, may I remind you, you're under our authority.

ELIZABETH: Then conduct yourselves in the appropriate manner.

LEIGH: Remember, I have the upper hand.

ELIZABETH: (Laughs) Have you, you're like puppets having your strings pulled by King Henry.

LEIGH: That seems more your area John.

JOHN: With pleasure, Abbess, the religious age is over in England, it's now about the glory of man and the king. (LEIGH arranges the chalices and bottles in order and touches the table three times)

ELIZABETH: Throwing God out of the window.

JOHN: Not too soon for me.

ELIZABETH: I didn't realize you were so superstitious Dr Leigh, old habits die hard-

LEIGH: I like to see things in order!

ELIZABETH: And touching wood?

LEIGH: Just... a....

ELIZABETH: As for putting things in order, you did that all right, you whitewashed my painting on the wall, fanaticism I'd say.

LEIGH: That was idolatry!

ELIZABETH: What! Heaven and hell and the last judgment, if that wasn't sufficient, you removed my altar and emptied my library.

LEIGH: I... shall never rest, until I've cleansed this country from Catholic idolatry.

ELIZABETH: Grinding your Protestant axe.

LEIGH: I've waited three long years for this; your... rich family can't keep you afloat this time Abbess.

ELIZABETH: What spirit is driving you?

LEIGH: Years of Catholic oppression.

ELIZABETH: I see religion and revenge, a deadly combination. Heather and Mary would you finish preparing our gentlemen's sleeping arrangements? Felicity could you clear the table before you go?