

SCENE ONE

The First Night

At first, the stage is dark and silent, with our eyes only being able to discern the faint outlines of windows and angular walls in the blackness. It seems for a moment there is just stillness, until, suddenly, a BRIGHT BURST of WHITE LIGHT shines from the top of the stage. It has the radiant whiteness of moonlight and seems to be shining through something - what we soon discern as a window - and lights like a spotlight upon the figure of a MAN center stage. The LIGHT also reveals that we are in a monastic abbey dominated by large windows, cold stone, and simple crucifixes of wood hanging upon the walls. The abrupt entrance of the LIGHT is accompanied by loud, ominous MEDIEVAL MUSIC, which, far from heralding a hopeful piercing of the darkness, indicates we might be heading soon to a darker place.

As the LIGHT grows in eminence, the MAN on the stage becomes more discernible to us. HE is kneeling down, facing us, HIS head bent down and HIS hands clasped in prayer. HE wears the gray cloak of a Franciscan friar, which, though flowing, moves not at all, for the MAN is deathly still. Indeed, HE is so still that we might even wonder if HE is a man or a statue. Either way, we shall come to know him as JOHN CLYN - Guardian of St. Francis's Abbey in Kilkenny, Ireland.

Suddenly, CLYN raises HIS head and peers out at us. When HE does so, the MUSIC abruptly stops, as if compelled into silence by HIS having come awake to the world. CLYN pauses a moment, as if listening intently for something. Hearing it - or perhaps not? - HE rises and goes to a nearby table, on which rests an unlit candle. HE strikes a

tall match, lights the candle, and walks towards one of many large windows that dominates the abbey.

Looking out the window, CLYN pauses a moment, searching for... something. Whatever HE thinks HE heard before, HE seems determined to find it - something, anything that may be there. Eventually, HE surrenders the search and turns pensively back into the abbey. CLYN walks again across the abbey to put the candle back on the table. It is then we notice a LARGE MANUSCRIPT on the table itself with quill and ink nearby.

As if afraid it may break apart, CLYN tenderly opens the MANUSCRIPT to a page marked by a long strip of cloth. HE picks up the candle and holds it over the MANUSCRIPT. HE takes a finger and begins to run it alongside some words on the page. As HE does so, a VOICE - a WOMAN'S VOICE - is projected from the back of the stage:

WOMAN'S VOICE*

It is the two hundred and sixtieth day since the pestilence came upon us to drain the life out of this land. The sickness is so contagious that whosoever touches the sick or the dead is immediately infected and dies and the penitent and the confessor are carried together to the grave. Many die of boils and abscesses and pustules on their chins or under the armpits or on their necks. Others die frantic with the pain in their head and others spitting up blood in copious quantities until they seem like rivers gushing blood. Scarcely one alone has ever died in a house and commonly husband, wife, children, and servants went the one way - the way of death. How curious it is to think, of all the people who came before me and all who will come after, that I, John Clyn of the Order of Friars Minors and of the Abbey of Kilkenny, have seen these things with my very own eyes and lived as witness to tell of their devastation.

Suddenly, a PIERCING SHRIEK sounds from the back of the stage. It is a terrible, animalistic sound - half-human, half-beast - and is terrifying in its intensity. CLYN barely twitches upon hearing the noise, which only grows and grows in the moment. CLYN

*The voice of the actress playing Basilia de Meath.

turns HIS glance over to a chamber door towards the back of the stage from where the terrible SHRIEKS are emanating.

After a pause, CLYN methodically walks towards the chamber door. HE reaches into a pocket in HIS cloak, removes some keys, unlocks the door, and slowly opens it. The chamber beyond seems an endless hole of blackness. CLYN walks into the room and disappears from view. We can see no more, but still hear the SHRIEKS wreak their havoc on our ears... SHRIEK... SHRIEK... SHRIEK... until the sounds grow muffled... then more muffled... then more muffled... until silence has been restored.

A moment later, CLYN exits the chamber and closes and locks the door behind HIM. HE appears unruffled by the SHRIEKS. CLYN walks back over to the table with the MANUSCRIPT. HE contemplates the MANUSCRIPT for a moment and then, as if reaching some decision, pulls up a nearby chair, sits, takes the quill in HIS hand, and begins to write on the pages. The WOMAN'S VOICE returns again to grace the stage and translate for us HIS words as HIS writes them.

WOMAN'S VOICE

As I recount the ravages of this pestilence, I am filled with sadness to recall there was ever known a world before the day it forever changed the hopes of man. It had its first beginnings in the East, where, passing through the Saracens and infidels, it slew eight thousand legions of them. It then came to Italy by boat, then up to Germany and then France, where it seized the papal court in Avignon. There the churches and the cemeteries were not sufficient to receive the dead, and the pope ordered a new cemetery to be consecrated for the depositing of bodies, of which over fifty thousand have since been buried. By Christmas, in Dublin alone, where the pestilence first came to this land on ships from the continent, over twenty thousand souls have perished. In a similar time, twenty-five friars have died in the Franciscan Convent of Drogheda and twenty-three in the Franciscan Convent of Dublin - and as for why I alone have survived this curse, I can only wonder.

Just then, we hear the SOUND of HORSE HOOVES outside the abbey. CLYN freezes and listens expectantly for what comes

next. The pause is so great that it seems for a moment nothing will follow at all, until...

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Someone is knocking on the large double doors that lead into the abbey.

Feeling some trepidation, CLYN goes to the abbey doors and stops in front of THEM. It seems HE contemplates whether HE should open the doors at all - but, a decision made, HE opens the doors in one great sweep of HIS arms. In the doorway we find a man clad in fine episcopal garb, which HE wears like a saint would wear a hallow. There is a bishop's diadem atop HIS head and jewels arrayed across HIS vestments and a general sense of superficial opulence. This frippery is contrasted by a stern, unrelenting expression that bears an unforgiving glower and that couldn't be shifted into a smile even in the midst of Christ's second coming. The man in question is RICHARD LEDREDE, BISHOP OF OSSORY.

CLYN

(Surprised.)
Your grace.

CLYN bends down and takes LEDREDE'S hand, as if to kiss it, when LEDREDE pulls it away hastily.

LEDREDE

I appreciate the intent, father - but times being what they are and the pestilence being what it is, I should hate to perish on a point of protocol.

LEDREDE sails into the interior of the abbey, looking here and there, observing every shadow, as if expecting to find something. We sense CLYN is less than thrilled by HIS presence.

CLYN

It is an honor, your grace.

LEDREDE is too busy examining the premises to respond to this - though we also sense that HE feels it a bit below HIM. Abruptly, LEDREDE turns and stares intently at CLYN.

LEDREDE

You are John Clyn?

CLYN

I am, yes - guardian of the abbey.

LEDREDE

I know of you more than I recall of you.

CLYN

It has been almost a year since a visitor of your station has come to the abbey.

LEDREDE

As Kilkenny has rotted in its pestilence, so have all great men fled to their estates.

CLYN

I rejoice, then, that your life has been spared.

LEDREDE

So far, at any rate - though every day brings new dangers...
 (Glancing mysteriously around the abbey.)
 ...of many varieties.

LEDREDE turns back and stares intently again at CLYN.

LEDREDE

You seem well for a man in your circumstances.

CLYN

As with you, the Lord has been good to spare me.

LEDREDE

Indeed, yes, all of Ireland has heard of you and your tending of the infected - and your continued survival all the same.

CLYN

I do what God gives me the power to do and am grateful to serve as the means for bringing hope to others.

LEDREDE

As am I.

LEDREDE sweeps HIS eyes grandly across the stage like the beam of a lighthouse searching the sea.

LEDREDE

You are alone here?

CLYN

(Eyeing the chamber door.)
Yes, your grace.

LEDREDE

What of your brothers - your fellow friars?

CLYN

Dead, your grace.

LEDREDE

You mean all?

CLYN

Yes, your grace.

LEDREDE

How long now?

CLYN

The last died ten months ago Thursday next.

LEDREDE

Ten months - and yet you alone have survived.

CLYN

Yes, your grace - I alone.

LEDREDE

You have never contracted the pestilence?

CLYN

No, your grace - but I was previously struck with another great sickness from which I was delivered. You might say that deliverance is what inspires me to deliver others. It is a great blessing for me to be kept alive for such a purpose.

LEDREDE

It is a question indeed whether living in such times is a blessing or a curse.

CLYN

If it be from God, I would think it can only be the one and never the other.

LEDREDE

That is a most agreeable attitude.

LEDREDE casually begins to meander around the abbey and eventually stops at the table with the candle.

LEDREDE

I was riding by the abbey on my way to the cathedral when I saw the light coming through the window. It seems here such a little thing - and yet, when the world out there is so dark, even this little light appears as a beacon.

(Perhaps mockingly, turning to CLYN.)

No doubt you find that appropriate.

CLYN does not respond, so LEDREDE continues to meander.

LEDREDE

You would understand my surprise to expect anyone still to be here in residence - here as well as anywhere in Kilkenny - considering the recent news from St. Mullins.

CLYN

I had heard the rumors, your grace.

LEDREDE

Yet you are still here and pay them no heed.

CLYN

I am here to take care of the abandoned and infected.

LEDREDE turns and looks around the emptiness of the abbey.

CLYN

There were many people here - sick, helpless souls - before the rumors about St. Mullins began. Come news of the miraculous cure at the well, those that could walk rose and left and those that could barely walk, crawled.

LEDREDE

And yet, as I said, you remain.

CLYN

The helpless will return and, when they do, I will be here.

LEDREDE

I sense, then, you are unconvinced by St. Mullins and his well.

CLYN

I do not believe in cures, except by prayer and grace - though would there be a cure, I would be the first to rejoice. As it is, the sick shall return, for they have nowhere else to go for safety - and alas, no estate.

LEDREDE

Indeed - it is a pity.

An uneasy pause descends, as CLYN and LEDREDE consider EACH OTHER - until eventually:

CLYN

Why are you here, your grace?

At first, it seems LEDREDE will not be answering this question - but just when HE begins to open HIS mouth...

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

More knocks are sounding from the doors leading into the abbey - this time, wild and more desperate than the ones we heard from Ledrede.

CLYN rushes over to the abbey doors and opens them. A wild-eyed, sweating, delirious MAN stumbles into the abbey. HE has blood splattered against HIS face and spits out blood as HE staggers in and collapses on HIS knees. HE emits a great cry of pain and holds HIS head in HIS hands. (We shall come to know this man as MATHIAS.) CLYN rushes to MATHIAS and scoops HIM up in HIS arms, while an appalled LEDREDE backs away.

LEDREDE

Christ Jesus... infected by the pestilence!

MATHIAS turns HIS wild eyes in the direction of LEDREDE and, for a moment, the TWO exchange a glance. We sense THEY might perhaps know or recognize EACH OTHER. This moment is quickly broken when MATHIAS breaks into guttural coughs that cause HIM to spit up more blood - this time on CLYN. CLYN tears open the top of MATHIAS'S shirt, revealing dark purplish sores across HIS neck - the result of swollen lymph nodes. It is the most devastating symptom of the pestilence.

CLYN

He is very far gone.

LEDREDE

As should I be from this vision of Hell!

LEDREDE holds HIS sumptuous garments up to HIS mouth to prevent another breath of potentially foul air and quickly makes for the abbey doors.

CLYN

I pray you find your estate peaceful, your grace.

LEDREDE turns and glares at CLYN, before hurriedly exiting through the abbey doors, slamming them with dramatic finality.

MATHIAS

Jesus, help me... help me!

CLYN

You are in the very best place to be heard.

MATHIAS cries out again in agonizing pain. HE grabs hold of CLYN desperately, wracked by chills and convulsions. CLYN holds HIM tightly as MATHIAS continues to struggle and convulse. At first, we think CLYN is just holding MATHIAS as HE screams, but then we notice that HE is whispering into MATHIAS'S ear. We cannot tell what HE whispers, but we sense it is some sort of prayer. Gradually, MATHIAS ceases to scream and HIS chills recede to much lighter tremors.

MATHIAS

I can't see... I can't see...

CLYN

It is common - as is all of this.

MATHIAS

As it is common also to die.

CLYN

Come - there will be a place for you here.

CLYN slowly helps MATHIAS to rise with HIS wobbly legs. It is a difficult task, but, bit by bit, THEY manage to ascend. It is then that CLYN finally looks squarely at MATHIAS and recognizes something in HIS face. CLYN stares at MATHIAS for a moment, as a memory percolates in HIS mind. MATHIAS stares back at CLYN quizzically.

CLYN

You were the one - the one who came into town and declared the miracle at the well.

MATHIAS is about to say something when yet again HE is raked by guttural coughs. CLYN releases any thoughts swirling in HIS mind and helps MATHIAS over to a bench in the corner of the hall. CLYN lays MATHIAS down and removes a basin of water and a cloth from underneath the bench. HE dabs the shivering MATHIAS's head with water.

MATHIAS

I know I'm going to die.

CLYN

You cannot know, my friend - for if there is anything this world has taught us, it is unpredictability. You will stay here, and insofar as you do, you will never be alone. You delivered me from my unwanted guest and so it is only fitting that I shall try to deliver you, as well.

CLYN smiles slightly at MATHIAS, who, facing death's door, can only stare back lamely in reply.

The LIGHTS dim on CLYN and MATHIAS, as a SPOTLIGHT lights on the MANUSCRIPT on the table and a familiar VOICE arises to reads from its pages:

WOMAN'S VOICE

As the pestilence raged with ever greater violence, I have found myself looking upon a wide world of desperate faces, searching for hope behind every stone and clinging to any mere shadow of it for their sustenance. I have tried my best to be the source of faith for the people of Kilkenny and beyond in the face of this devastation and in the face of false idols. Recently, there came a rumor from County Carlow that the water at St. Mullins was effecting cures from the sickness. It grew so much that many thousands might be seen there together for many days and the very streets of Kilkenny were emptied of life to a greater degree than the pestilence itself ever effected. Men and women came to walk through the waters in hope of saving themselves from the cruel and remorseless hand of fate. They left in the hundreds and then in the thousands for the journey to the well - and all of it for nothing... nothing.

End of SCENE ONE.

SCENE TWOThe Fourth Night

The LIGHTS rise again on the abbey. A few nights have passed since we last were present within its walls. MATHIAS is sitting upright on a chair next to a table. There is a goblet of wine by HIS side and HE is eating from a bowl. It seems HE is barely able to eat at all as HIS chewing is slow and labored and HIS swallowing ever more so. Still, HE manages through and occasionally must stop to cough as before. HE then turns and looks rather uncertainly at the chamber door from which we heard the shrieks early in the last scene.

It is only now that we can take some time to examine MATHIAS closer. HE is no longer in clothes drenched with sweat and blood. HE is wearing a light, white shirt and equally simple pants. Still, the simplicity and cleanliness of the clothes cannot hide the fact that the man retains a dirty look. Indeed, we sense HE has been ravaged by life, like a weathervane that has been stuck on the roof too long and seen far too many a storm. This no doubt explains a certain apathy of soul that emerges from HIS bearing.

After a beat, MATHIAS has done with whatever thoughts are in HIS mind insofar as the voice behind the chamber door is concerned and returns to eating. Just then, CLYN enters from the side of the stage carrying another bowl and another goblet on a tray. HE sees MATHIAS eating and smiles.

CLYN

You are eating some.

MATHIAS

I feel I can stomach it.

CLYN

That is good... very good.

MATHIAS gestures to the table.

MATHIAS

You are joining me, father?

CLYN

Oh, no - this is not for me, but for the little one.

CLYN smiles again and walks towards the chamber door. HE knocks on the door and waits a moment. We don't sense HE knocks expecting a response - merely for politeness. HE reaches into HIS cloak, removes the key, unlocks the door, and opens it. CLYN then enters the chamber and closes the door behind HIM. We hear some MUMBLINGS from inside the chamber as CLYN speaks some words. Some MUMBLINGS seem to come from CLYN, but others from another person entirely. MATHIAS turns and listens, trying to hear the words. Another moment passes and CLYN emerges from the chamber. HE closes and then locks the door behind HIM, putting the keys back in HIS friar's cloak.

MATHIAS

Do you never let her out?

CLYN

I had at times, when the others had left after the rumors of the well - but since you're here, it is better, for her sake and ours, that she remains inside. She can be dangerous, even at her most tender of years. The rage of whatever hell lives inside her can empower even the smallest frame. It is something she and I - and God above all - are working on together. She is my greatest friend here and the longest of my companions. I think it most inappropriate ever to give up on her.

MATHIAS

Where did you find her?

CLYN

I didn't - for she found me, as do all blessings.

MATHIAS

(Incredulously.)
Blessings?

CLYN

To be found is a blessing, if ever, indeed, you are lost.

MATHIAS scoffs to HIMSELF and returns to eat from the bowl.

CLYN

Why do you react so dismissively?

MATHIAS

You make it sound like I'm one of those who is "lost."

CLYN

I know you are - in many things.

MATHIAS

You don't know anything about me.

CLYN

Well, let us say you remind me of someone - someone very close to me - and through that, I feel I know you.

MATHIAS is suddenly wracked again by a guttural cough. CLYN goes to HIM and puts HIS hands warmly on HIS shoulders.

CLYN

It is good - your cough grows lighter still.

MATHIAS

I still feel the pain pounding in my head.

CLYN

It will continue to pound, but less each day - until, in time, you are well.

MATHIAS

You believe that?

CLYN

You are strong and have weathered it well, with a constitution God Himself has blessed...

(A slight smile - cheekily.)

...or perhaps it was a gift from the well.

MATHIAS

You prod a sick man, father.

CLYN

You talk more now, too, and with spirit - which is also good.

MATHIAS

You're right - I was the one who came and declared myself saved by the well.

CLYN

So if I understand correctly, you had the pestilence before... and now again?

MATHIAS

Perhaps before it was just... distemper.

CLYN

The waters cure at least that, it would seem.

MATHIAS seems rather to dislike this conversation and rises from the chair in great pain.

MATHIAS

I am tired and need to rest.

CLYN

You should eat a little more.

MATHIAS

I am no longer hungry.

CLYN

You need more sustenance to support your recovery.

MATHIAS

I will put my faith in God for that, as you might say.

CLYN

Yes, I would recommend you do - as you had his name on your lips when you came here

MATHIAS

Having a name on your lips is different from having a feeling in your soul.

CLYN

That is true - but those who lack belief...

MATHIAS

Oh, I believe in many things, father - the sun and the moon and the grass and the dirt... the dirt above all, because it's there before my eyes and supports my every step and I can always count on it to be there... and then again, of course, it's also where we shall ultimately all return, isn't it? In that, I figure I would be well advised to pray to the dirt. We will be spending so much time together in eternity.

CLYN

Are you finished?

MATHIAS

Not yet, dirt be praised.

CLYN

Are you sure you won't stay?

MATHIAS

I told you before - I'm tired.

CLYN

In that case, the bed is ready for you, as I changed the sheet this morning.

MATHIAS

(Beginning to hobble out.)

Thank you, father.

CLYN

(Approaching MATHIAS to help HIM walk.)

I will be saying prayers in an hour, if you are still awake and care to join me.

MATHIAS

(Stopping CLYN - not talking just about HIS walking.)

I can manage, father... thank you.

MATHIAS exits, as CLYN considers HIM disappointedly. A moment of silence dances uncertainly across the stage. CLYN slowly moves towards the chamber door and knocks on it again. HE waits a moment before unlocking the door and entering. We hear more MUFFLED sounds from the chamber just beyond from both CLYN and someone else. CLYN then re-emerges with the tray, the bowl, and the goblet. HE closes and locks the door and walks with the tray towards the exit, when...

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Yet again, more knocks from the abbey doors - this time, sounding almost polite in nature, as if someone were arriving for tea. CLYN turns in surprise and puts down the tray on a table. HE walks to the abbey doors and opens them.

In the doorframe we find an elegant, well-dressed woman standing upright like a tower. There is something about HER that indicates great age, but HER face and bearing is that of a woman in full flower at about 50. SHE wears a headdress on HER head typical of the

upper classes and always seems to have a smile on HER face, as if carved there by some force - though we sense not a heavenly one. We shall know this rather remarkable woman as ALICE KYTELER.

Beside KYTELER stands a pathetic, dirty young woman, aged about 20 and with a shaved head - or at least a head with some stumble, shaved rather recently.[†] SHE is dressed in simple maidservant clothes and seems all the more miserable huddled next to the great lady. HER glance is not unlike that of a child in the hands of some abductor - and, indeed, SHE has equally been traumatized into a deathly silence. HER name is BASILIA DE MEATH.

KYTELER

(Pleasantly - as if knowing HIM.)
Good evening, father.

CLYN

(Cautiously.)
Good evening, my lady.

KYTELER

I do hope we're not late.

CLYN

Hardly so, for I was not expecting you.

KYTELER

Weren't you? Ah, then, in that case, we must be early.
(To BASILIA, as one would command a dog.)
Come.

KYTELER swoops into the abbey. BASILIA follows behind HER in well-disciplined lockstep and with a distant gaze that barely takes in the surroundings. CLYN closes the abbey doors and approaches KYTELER, still with some caution.

CLYN

I am John Clyn, guardian of the abbey.

KYTELER

Yes, I know.

[†]Alternatively, the actress could have her hair swept up in a rag on her head.

CLYN

How may I be of service to you?

KYTELER

Why else, but that you heal the sick?

CLYN

I care for the sick, my lady - but only God can heal.

KYTELER

I see - and yet I gather He heals rather few these days.

CLYN

As I see it, we are blessed to have even that to celebrate - and besides, even those who may not survive still do not die alone. Everyone else is afraid to touch them, but here, if they die, which most do, they do not do so unloved. Sometimes the greatest thing a man can do is simply to be present.

KYTELER

Ah, well, father, I suppose that's one way of looking at things - but then again, if you squint hard enough, you can see whatever you like, can't you? As for myself, I was quite preparing to squint my way passed all the rotting bodies on the road as we were traveling to you - but, fortunately, most of them have been picked clean by the birds. All that remains are skeletons now - so light in their form, so innocent in their simplicity, so unweighted by the evilness of flesh, so unencumbered by sin or thoughts of the same. Why, I imagine God is none too displeased by this human perfection, which is perhaps why He saves so few - and as for those who remain alive to enjoy these times, we are all of us waiting our turn before the pestilence comes and spirits us away. In that regard, you may forgive my forwardness, as the Lord forgives my sins - or, at least, so I'm told - but it would seem best for you just to let the sick die rather than prolong their hopelessness... but then, who I am? Not God. Not John Clyn.

(A mysterious smile.)

In that, we have two things in common.

KYTELER smiles at CLYN, who considers HER almost fearfully.

CLYN

(Tentatively.)

If I may ask...

KYTELER

Yes?

CLYN

Who are you?

KYTELER

(Amused by this, as if expecting HE should know HER.)
Who am I?

KYTELER laughs and moves passed CLYN further into the abbey. SHE begins to circle around the abbey - although, unlike Ledrede, not looking at anything, per se. SHE just circles and circles, as if to some programmed rhythm in HER head, like a vulture would circle its prey.

KYTELER

If you want to know who I am, you might consider me a pilgrim of truth, forever in search of what is actual and real. I have heard much of you and how you have survived and cared for the sick. Your reputation precedes you and is one I desire to witness - and so, here I am.

(Turning and gesturing to BASILIA.)
...or should I say, "here we are?"

CLYN looks at BASILIA, as if not having quite registered HER presence. BASILIA doesn't even look at HIM, but rather stares lamely at the floor.

CLYN

I say again that the abbey is only open for the sick.

KYTELER

I had thought we are all, in the sight of God, "sick."

CLYN

By sick, I mean the infected, for whom I must make room.

KYTELER

(Glancing about at the empty abbey.)
It seems you have enough room for another pestilence or two.

CLYN

The sick will come again when the rumors of the well have been proved false.

KYTELER

Oh, yes, I did hear about that - and such a shame for God to disappoint the vulnerable.

CLYN

Is it God?

KYTELER

Isn't it?

CLYN

Either way, my lady, while I can harbor you for a night if you need a roof over your head, especially considering the lateness of the hour, I must keep the abbey free for the sick thereafter and expect you to leave in the morning.

KYTELER

Ah, but my maidservant, Basilia, is sick... as you can see.

KYTELER shoots a glance over at BASILIA and, as if on cue, BASILIA immediately begins coughing and doubles over in agony.

KYTELER

Surely, father, you would not deny her.

CLYN

Very well, then - she can stay here.

KYTELER

(Hearing the "she.")

Ah, that is merciful - but how can she be alone, without the one who takes care of her?

KYTELER shoots another glare at BASILIA, who, again, as if on cue, looks up pleadingly to CLYN.

BASILIA

Please, father - I would like her to stay, as well.

CLYN

Ah, but...

BASILIA

(Desperately.)

Please.

CLYN looks at the fear in BASILIA's eyes and then up at KYTELER again, who smiles at HIM calmly.

CLYN

Then you shall both stay.

KYTELER

That is good of you, father.

CLYN

I will say, again, after the young woman is healed...

KYTELER

Oh, we wouldn't dream of sampling your goodness further.

By now, KYTELER has circled the room and ended up next to the chamber door. A LOW GROWL emerges from the chamber, as if the person inside has sensed HER presence and is somehow repulsed by it. KYTELER turns towards the GROWL with amusement, as it grows gradually in intensity. BASILIA reacts with fear and backs away further into the shadows.

KYTELER

It seems we are not the only guests here.

KYTELER slowly puts the palm of HER hand flat against the chamber door. Violently, the door shakes as if the person on the other side were trying to break out and leap towards HER. The GROWL has now turned into the animal-like SHRIEKS from before - loud and unbearable. The intensity seems even greater, as if KYTELER is feeding it from HER hand on the door. BASILIA covers HER ears, as KYTELER listens with amusement. Eventually, SHE removes HER hand from the door and the SHRIEKS and the shaking of the door immediately cease. KYTELER turns and stares glibly at CLYN - "well?"

CLYN

(Simply.)
She is sick.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

KYTELER

My, my - you are a popular man.

CLYN

The popularity belongs to God.

KYTELER gestures to BASILIA to come to HER, which BASILIA quickly does, as if fearing some great punishment for disobeying. CLYN moves towards the abbey doors to open them. HE is just about to do so, when...

KYTELER

Perhaps it's Robert Artisson.

CLYN freezes upon hearing the name. HE turns and notices that KYTELER and

BASILIA have both disappeared into the shadows of the abbey. CLYN pauses for thought, which is swiftly interrupted by... KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

LEDREDE'S VOICE

It is I, the Bishop of Ossory!

CLYN snaps out of HIS thoughts and opens the abbey doors. LEDREDE stands in the doorway with an acrid look on HIS face. Fortunately, we are spared the worst, because HE has tied a fancy cloth around his mouth.

CLYN

It is my honor again, your grace.

LEDREDE

I come asking not for your honor, but your duty.

LEDREDE enters the abbey and immediately looks around for MATHIAS.

CLYN

(Understanding.)
The man has retired to his chamber.

LEDREDE

(Almost disappointed.)
He is still here, then... still alive.

CLYN

He is indeed, your grace.

LEDREDE

Has he spoken much to you?

CLYN

He has spoken little, in truth.

LEDREDE

Indeed - and what then has he spoken "in truth?"

CLYN

I would hardly have cause to know - but he has said little, all the same, and none of it remarkable.

(After a beat.)

Should he have said anything?

LEDREDE

(After another beat.)

No.

CLYN

Then he has lived up to expectations.

LEDREDE

(With the afterthought of a lie.)
I was asking in regards to the well.

CLYN

(Not believing HIM.)
Of course - and in that, again, nothing.

LEDREDE removes the cloth from HIS
face.

LEDREDE

I will keep this direct - and short.

CLYN

I will do whatever I can to help your grace.

LEDREDE

I trust you know of the accursed woman, Alice Kyteler.

CLYN

Alice Kyteler?

LEDREDE

Yes - the witch... the damned witch.

CLYN

I recall her, your grace - though it has been many years.

LEDREDE

Twenty-five years, father - twenty-five years this autumn.

CLYN

Your grace has a good memory.

LEDREDE

Hardly that, but simply that the image of the woman is seared
into my mind - and justly so, so that I might see her and
condemn her when she returns... as she has.

CLYN

Your grace?

LEDREDE

Dame Kyteler was seen two weeks back in the vicinity of Kilkenny
- once in town and once out of it. One of the sightings came
from a shopkeeper who knew her well when she lived here. I
questioned the man thoroughly and trust his account.

CLYN

I would have thought the lady would be dead by now.

LEDREDE

As well she should be, as she would be of advanced age - but the devil can instill the body of youth in the carcass of the old. I would put nothing passed him and so nothing passed her. Besides that, she was seen here again but last evening.

CLYN

Last evening?

LEDREDE

Last evening.

CLYN

I gather that was the reason you came to the abbey before.

LEDREDE

It was.

CLYN

Forgive me, your grace - but why did you not tell me this at the time?

LEDREDE

Caution, above all - for the Kyteler woman has always bewitched men around here and turned them into her pawns. In my own time with her, she used her powers to keep friends with the Lord Chancellor and thwart my prosecution of her - even so much as to affect my own imprisonment. By the time I was freed and we had received a confession from her maidservant - and burnt that same maidservant at the stake - the Kyteler woman had fled and nary a whisper of her remained. It was twenty-five years ago that she disappeared with the young daughter of that same maidservant and escaped the reach of justice. I have vowed ever since to bring her to the stake for her abominable crimes and I will not rest until she herself is burnt alive...

(Glaring at CLYN.)

...and all who harbor her.

CLYN

Certainly, I will keep my eyes very well open.

LEDREDE

Keep them sharp, for evil requires at least that.

CLYN

I will, your grace.

LEDREDE

The woman is dangerous, as you well know and as evidenced by her litany of crimes - the murder of four husbands, the practicing of sorcery to control the faithful, the sacrifice and dismemberment of animals to practice the blackest of the arts... and as for the humiliation of my own imprisonment, I have neither forgiven nor forgotten.

CLYN

Thank you for confiding in me, your grace.

LEDREDE nods and turns to exit, when HE abruptly turns.

LEDREDE

I should have mentioned, but both sightings of the Kyteler woman indicated she was traveling with what seemed to be a young woman.

CLYN

Oh?

LEDREDE

I would not be surprised if it were the daughter of the same maidservant we burnt alive - in which case, take heed, for the daughter, too, is accursed.

CLYN

Accursed?

LEDREDE

Born, as she is, from a bewitched mother - and raised by a bewitched woman - she must also be brought to justice, no matter the cost.

CLYN nods carefully. LEDREDE takes one final glance around the abbey and exits through the abbey doors. CLYN pauses for a moment in thought so all the mess in HIS head can sink into some insane order.

KYTELER

Well done, father.

CLYN turns to find that KYTELER has entered from the darkness, with BASILIA beside HER.

CLYN

I thought I recognized you.

KYTELER

Ah, you believe all that, I see - that little elixir of witches and sorcery. I would have thought you were a more discerning, grounded sort. The Bishop, poor man, has always been infatuated with my undoing and spent much of his life conjuring up tales of my wickedness - for how else is such a man to understand the one person in Kilkenny who he could never control? It is vanity, that is all - and besides, even if I did have the bad luck to have four husbands die by my side and to inherit their various

KYTELER (CONT)

estates, I would ascribe it more to the climate than to murder... either that or blessed fortune.

KYTELER turns hauntingly to BASILIA and begins to stroke HER hair with eerie gentility. BASILIA seems to shudder at the touch of HER fingers.

KYTELER

If there be murder ascribed anywhere, let it be to those who torture a maidservant and then burn her to death at the stake as her young daughter watches the skin drip off her body.

BASILIA evinces a tearful gasp and runs offstage, as if desperate to get away from KYTELER. KYTELER smiles and turns pointedly back to CLYN

KYTELER

Burning a young mother, father - now that's the devil for you.

CLYN considers KYTELER for a moment and wonders whether HE should bother to say anything in reply... but decides against it.

CLYN

I should warn you, if you stay - there is another sick man here in residence still.

KYTELER

Wonderful - I do so love companionship.

CLYN

He is healing well, but I cannot vouch for his discretion when he leaves.

KYTELER

Ah, well, alas, it would seem that's far more your problem than it is mine.

CLYN slowly nods, seeing HE is getting nowhere.

CLYN

I will set you up in a room.

CLYN moves to exit...

KYTELER

Bless you, father.

CLYN stops in HIS tracks, as if stung by the mocking tone of the comment. We then see instead that HE has stopped for another reason. MATHIAS has entered surreptitiously off to the side of the stage. It's not clear how much HE has seen or not seen. An awkward silence descends as MATHIAS stares at KYTELER and KYTELER stares back at HIM.

CLYN

As I mentioned, my lady, we have another guest here.

KYTELER

Yes, I can see that.

MATHIAS

Good evening, madam.

KYTELER

Good evening to you.

CLYN

Our friend here is ill with the pestilence, but now in recovery.

KYTELER

Oh, well, it is generous of God to keep some of us still around.

CLYN

As I said, I shall set up a room for you in the back of the nave.

KYTELER

Thank you, father - and anyway, I should find my maidservant, lest, encouraged by the atmosphere, she starts praying.

(To MATHIAS.)

Goodnight, sir.

(To CLYN.)

Goodnight, father.

KYTELER smiles again and exits into the darkness of the abbey.

CLYN

You could not sleep, I take it.

MATHIAS

I tried to, but the pain is too much.

CLYN

Perhaps a walk outside will clear your head.

MATHIAS

Perhaps.

CLYN nods and begins to walk offstage again, when...

MATHIAS

You had mentioned you were going to say prayers, father.

CLYN stops suddenly and turns, with a big smile lighting on HIS face.

CLYN

Ah, yes - so I was... and so we shall.

The LIGHTS dim again, as a SPOTLIGHT lights on the MANUSCRIPT on the table and the familiar VOICE returns:

WOMAN'S VOICE

As I think upon the people who journeyed to the well of St. Mullins and the hope that propelled each step, I cannot but imagine the disillusionment that lies before them and how many will perish before their return. I walk about the abbey in these ever darker hours and I feel loneliness in my heart to hear seldom more than my own footsteps. Even the recent addition of a visitor or two has done nothing to soothe my seclusion and my sense of want - and, indeed, in their faithlessness of form, has even multiplied my despair - for those who came before at least called to God and remembered His name. These behave as if there is no such concern in their soul - perhaps the most tragic martyr to the pestilence by far - and yet there is one among them whom I pray is worth saving. Here, all I can do is keep up the faith that remains within me and wait with anticipation for the day when the people from St. Mullins will return.

End of SCENE TWO.