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The Soldier and the Woman

A Play in One Act

Elaine Morgan

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-06234-6

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THE SOLDIER AND THE WOMAN

Produced on B.B.C. Television on the 29th December 1960, with
the following cast of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

SIMON, an innkeeper *Colin Blakely*

RACHEL, his wife *Rosalie Crutchley*

AN OFFICER *Thomas Heathcote*

A SOLDIER *Douglas Blackwell*

The action of the Play passes in the stable of an inn in Bethlehem

SCENE I

Early morning

SCENE II

Late afternoon

SCENE I

SCENE—*The stable of an inn in Bethlehem. Early morning.*

The only door is across the corner up R and there is an unglazed window in the wall R. Up L, there are three stalls, with their doors facing R, so that the interiors are unseen. Down L there is a long, sturdy rough-hewn bench, about six feet long, three feet wide, and of a height convenient for milking or for resting a bucket on while mixing a mash for pigs. A bucket and an opened sack of grain stand on the bench. Between the bench and the stalls are some sacks of grain. On the wall down L there is a shelf for wine jars. Under the window R there is a manger, with hay in it. The hay is flattened and hollow. The manger has recently been repaired and three of the slats gleam new wood. A milking stool stands down C. There is a quantity of loose hay in the corner down L and scattered about the floor. Various wooden and earthenware implements of rural husbandry are in evidence.

When the CURTAIN rises, rural morning noises filter in through the open door—crowing and lowing and the rattle and splash of a well-bucket. RACHEL is unseen in one of the stalls. She is in her early twenties, strong and dark and full of life. SIMON, the innkeeper, appears at the door. He is aged about thirty-five and is stolid, anxious and preoccupied with his business cares.

SIMON (*calling*) Rachel!

(*RACHEL emerges from the stall. She looks pleased with herself*)

RACHEL. Here.

(*SIMON grunts*)

SIMON. Oh. (*He comes into the stable, closes the door and looks around him in surprise*) Where are they?

RACHEL. They're gone.

SIMON. When?

RACHEL. In the night.

SIMON (*looking towards the manger*) What—with the baby and all?

RACHEL. Of course, with the baby.

SIMON. Oh. (*He sounds hurt and disillusioned*) I see.

RACHEL. What's the matter?

SIMON (*crossing to the bench down L*) Oh, nothing. (*He mixes a mess of husks in the bucket for the pigs*) Not the first time people have skipped

in the night—but I can usually tell that kind right away. I wouldn't have expected it of that pair, somehow.

(RACHEL *smiles secretly to herself, but lets Simon go on*)

She wasn't barely fit to travel, was she?

RACHEL (*crossing to the manger*) Oh, she was all right. She was a lot stronger yesterday.

SIMON. Mm! So she should be. I saw Martha sneaking out of the kitchen five or six times a day taking her bits of the best of everything. (*Slightly bitter*) I suppose they were afraid I was going to charge them for that.

RACHEL (*testing the gleaming new slats in the manger*) He made a good strong job of mending the manger.

SIMON (*still disgruntled*) So he should, it's his trade. I suppose they reckon that'll count as payment in kind. Some'll do anything rather than part with cash. (*He crosses to the manger and examines it*) It was well enough as it was before. (*He is determined not to be mollified*) It was only meant for hay. Anybody'd think it had to hold the weight of the world.

RACHEL (*crossing to c; softly*) I expect their baby is all the world to them, the same as ours is to us.

SIMON (*still hurt; it is not the money that bothers him*) I wouldn't have minded if they'd come to me—if they were really hard up, I mean, if they'd come to me fair and square, the way they came that first night, and said straight out, "Look here, landlord, we're in a fix". But it shows you, doesn't it, what opinion they had of *me*, after I'd done my best for them—if they felt they had to go off in the middle of the night with her as weak as she was. What did they think I'd have done to them? (*He shakes his head*) No, it beats me.

(RACHEL, *smiling almost mischievously, moves to L of Simon and holds out something to him in her hand. SIMON, puzzled, extends his palm and RACHEL puts two coins in it*)

(*Astonished*) It's gold!

(RACHEL *nods*)

He gave you this?

(RACHEL *nods, still smiling*)

When?

RACHEL. Last night.

SIMON. You were here when they went, then?

RACHEL. Yes. I helped them to pack.

(SIMON *examines the coins and bites one, vaguely uneasy and suspicious*)

SIMON. How'd he get hold of this kind of money?

RACHEL. Those foreigners brought it, remember? And *she* gave me this. (*She produces a pot of frankincense, removes the lid and holds it up to Simon*) Smell. That was a present, too.

SIMON (*half to himself*) But *why*?

RACHEL (*inclined to be resentful, as if she were thought unworthy*) You mean—why did she give it to me?

SIMON (*thinking hard*) No, I mean why did *they* give it to *her*? I just couldn't see what they were making all the fuss about, it was only a baby.

RACHEL (*deprecatingly*) Oh, well—fakirs, Simon. They always act a bit queer. Maybe they think new babies are lucky.

(SIMON is unconvinced and tosses the gold in his palm, wondering)

SIMON. All the same, I wish we could have understood what they were saying.

RACHEL. I only wish they'd come a month ago when our David was born, then perhaps they'd have given the things to me. Because I'm sure this one couldn't have been a patch on David. I felt like bringing him out yesterday and telling them, "If you think *that* baby's worth making a fuss about, what about *this* one?" (*Her face and voice are radiant with the ineffable complacency of new motherhood*) But then I thought—(*tolerantly*) "No, David's a month older, it wouldn't be fair to compare them." What was He like? Theirs? It *was* a boy, wasn't it?

SIMON. Mm? Boy—yes.

RACHEL. What did they call Him?

SIMON. I never heard.

RACHEL. That was why I really came out here last night. It was the first proper chance I'd had, with the place so full. I thought, "It's coming to something, there's all this excitement about it, and it's *our* stable, after all, and me so rushed off my feet I must be nearly the only one that hasn't seen it."

SIMON. Did you see Him?

RACHEL. Not properly, even then. She had Him all wrapped up ready to go, and I didn't like to ask her to undo Him; it was so cold. (*She smiles*) I could see His little nose, that's all.

SIMON (*curiously*) You didn't see His eyes?

RACHEL. No, He was sleeping. Why? Was there anything wrong with His eyes?

SIMON. Oh, no. Nothing *wrong*.

RACHEL (*jealous at something in Simon's voice*) David's got beautiful eyes. (*Her own eyes flash indignantly*)

SIMON (*amused and tender*) Yes, he has. Like his mother's.

RACHEL (*appeased; almost purring over the richness of her life*) Mmmmm. Almost time for his feed. (*She stretches, feeling liberated*)

I'll have a bit more time to give to him today; it's nice to think the rush is over now till next time.

SIMON (*collecting himself*) We must get a few rooms ready right away, though.

RACHEL (*dismayed*) What for now?

SIMON. There was a messenger from Jerusalem, an hour ago; they want some rooms prepared for their officers¹.

RACHEL (*startled*) Officers? (*Her face closes with hatred*) Herod's men!

SIMON (*stolidly*) Yes.

RACHEL (*bitterly*) Do we have to put up Herod's men?

SIMON. You know we do.

RACHEL. How long will they be staying?

SIMON. I don't know.

RACHEL (*agitated*) What are they coming here for?

SIMON (*shrugging*) He said he didn't know what it was about, but at the rate they were riding they'd be here long before noon. Herod's half out of his mind again about something, and he's got them all as jumpy as crickets.

RACHEL. Couldn't you tell them we're full?

SIMON. But we're not, now.

RACHEL (*half beseeching*) You could say we were.

SIMON. Why would I want to say that? Their money's as good as anybody else's.

RACHEL (*bitterly*) Is it?

SIMON. Of course it is. (*Defensively; blustering a little*) Oh, I know the things people say about Herod; but I dare say it's not all his fault; he's got to keep in with the Romans, hasn't he, or he'd be finished.

(RACHEL regards Simon coldly and without sympathy)

(*He grows more heated*) Well, it's true, isn't it? I mean, you've got to speak as you find, that's what I say—and if you ask me, it was time we had a strong man running things.

(RACHEL is silent and scornful)

(*He goes on, frowning and not looking at Rachel*) Look how much better the roads are. And not half the crime, either. At one time it wasn't hardly safe to travel, bandits and murderers everywhere.

RACHEL. I can well believe Herod wouldn't put up with that. He'd rather do all the murdering himself.

SIMON. Now, look—where's the point of talking like that? Has he ever done anything to us? No. Well, then. I don't say he's not—I don't say he's . . . (*His eyes dart unconsciously to the door. He sidesteps even this furtive criticism*) But anyway, it's none of our business. (*He mutters to himself, rattled*) If you're running an inn, you can't afford

to have—ideas about things like that—pick and choose. Take people as they come. (*Brusquely*) Come on, they'll be here soon. (*He takes the frankincense from her*) We can sprinkle some of this in their bedrooms.

RACHEL (*grabbing the pot from him; alarmed*) No!

SIMON. Now what's the matter?

RACHEL. I don't want them asking questions.

SIMON. What do you mean—"questions"?

RACHEL (*hiding the pot under the pile of hay* R) About those people. (*Agitated*) Put that money away.

(SIMON looks blank)

(*Impatiently*) Those people last night.

SIMON. You mean—the carpenter? What makes you think they'd want to . . . ? (*He dries up, struck with a fearful surmise*)

RACHEL (*with a transparent pretence of calm*) I don't suppose they will—why should they? There's nothing to show there's been *anybody* here, is there? (*She moves to the manger and tries to ruffle up the hay. It is not very convincing*) Come on, let's fill it up. (*She crosses to L, collects an armful of hay from one of the stalls then crosses towards the manger*)

SIMON (*intercepting Rachel*) Rachel. What have you been doing?

RACHEL. Nothing. (*She drops the hay and stands still*)

SIMON. Who were they?

RACHEL. I don't know who they were. Joseph somebody. You ought to know, you saw more of them than I did.

SIMON. Why did they leave in the middle of the night? They paid you with gold, so it wasn't me they were running from.

RACHEL. They had to get away.

SIMON. From what? What had they done?

RACHEL. I didn't ask them, Simon. I didn't need to ask them. We've lived too long under Herod to start asking questions when people have to run away in the dark.

SIMON. But who could have warned him, in the middle of the night, like that? Did anybody come?

RACHEL. I never saw anybody.

SIMON. I'm sure they weren't planning to go yesterday.

RACHEL. I told them, "You'll never make it," I said. "There are soldiers everywhere, they always bring in extra troops at a time like this." I told them to leave it one more day, and it would be safer. But they wouldn't wait.

SIMON (*with compassion*) Fools. (*He comforts Rachel*) Ah, well, that wasn't your fault. You did your best, you warned them. I wonder what they'll do to them.

RACHEL (*half proud, half frightened*) They can't do anything to them. They're well away by now.

SIMON (*sharply*) How do you know?

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