

At the Juvenile Bubonic Plague Telethon

by Con Chapman

*Rahere, founder of St. Bartholomew's Church and Hospital, was
Henry I's jester, and had a special talent for mimicry.*

Eleanor of Aquitaine, Alison Weir



It's day three of the annual St. Swithun's Day Juvenile Bubonic Plague Telethon, and frankly, I'm getting a little worried about Rahere, the Clown Prince of the Plague as the marketing department likes to brand him. He's been at it non-stop except for bathroom breaks for almost sixty hours—smiling, cracking jokes, thanking Catapult Workers Union Local #103 for their oversized check—and I think he's on the verge of collapse.

He's done so much over the years for the kids who suffer from JBP—"Lahere's Kids" they call them. Some sicko court jesters joke about it, but everyone knows they're just jealous of Lahere's brilliant career: the early nightclub act with Boccherini of Florence, who played the handsome straight-man lush to Lahere's nutty buddy; the sold-out court dates before the crowned heads of Europe, bringing down the house with the funny faces and pitch-perfect impersonations of kings and their obsequious courtiers; and then, in the autumn of his years, critical recognition from the French for his films, derided in England, such as "Which Way to the Crusades?" I tell you, the guy's a virtual one-man medieval faire, and I don't add that last "e" lightly.



My job as Lahere's sidekick/straight man is to sit on the couch, make small talk, greet each guest, then slide down so that Lahere can relate one-on-one, as he does so well, with each lute-player or juggler or mime or damsel-ingenue-of-the-week being pushed by the studios. You've got to keep people watching, which isn't easy with the primitive state of broadcasting we're stuck with. Lahere tells a joke, I remember to laugh my easy, unforced, spontaneous chuckle, a monk writes down the set-up and the punch line, and scribes make copies that are distributed to the far reaches of Henry's kingdom by horse and carrier pigeon. You can understand why some folks are a little slow on the uptake.



"He's setting the house on fire tonight!"

But tell that to the network execs who try to cut back our hours every year. We say fer Christ sake (oops—I'll burn another decade in Purgatory for *that* one), it's St. Swithin's Day, everybody's still at the beach! Nobody's going to watch re-runs of *Everybody Loves Roland*, or *CSI: Edinburgh* or *Beach Jousting*—we can sell advertising for you during the slow months!



We're not like a lot of your fly-by-night disease-based charities. Every pence we raise—net of production costs, travel, “appearance fees” we pay to superstar knights—goes directly to St. Bartholomew's, where 90% of it ends up in the pockets of doctors so

they can buy expensive horses and vacation homes on the English Channel. The remaining 10% is spent on patient care for the kids or, if it gets there too late, to dignified mass cremations.



I don't let Lahere out of my sight—he's getting that glassy-eyed look he always has on day three when he's just about burned out, right before his last appeal, the one to push us over last year's grand total. He waves me off as I start to help him downstage for his big finale—"Maketh Someone Happie"—a schmalzy tune, sure, but one that allows him to leave the stage without a dry eye or a full wallet in the house.

"You know," he begins, "there's something each one of you can do to help make the Dark Ages . . . just a little bit brighter," he says, and after the lutes and the hautboys and sackbuts behind him begin to stir from the lower register, he sings: "Maketh . . . someone happie. Just maketh . . . someone happie—it isn't hard to do-o-o-o!"

I look out at the cynical courtiers who surround the king. They try, but they can't hold back the tears, and pretty soon the waterworks have started. Marie, the Queen, is bawling like a baby; Eubalus the Bastard is sniffing; William the Fat has buried his face in the second of his three chins. Time for me to make my way up the aisles, rattling my little pewter mug.

I hold out the can to Ethelred the Cheap, a guy who's been banned from Ye Olde Friars Club for always deducting the assize from his bill before computing his tip.

"Come on, Eth," I say, turning the corners of my mouth down to make a sad little frowny face. "Do it for the kids."



Ethelred smiles a dung-eating grin, then removes a lousy French sou from his purse and drops it ceremoniously into my cup, as if he wants a freaking jousting field named after him for his piddling contribution.

“Thanketh you,” I say, heavy on the sarcasm, “Thanketh you verie much. Your contribution of one (1) sou means that one (1) less flea-infested rodent will roam the streets of Rouen—and try saying *that* five times fast.”

“No problem,” he says with a little smirk as he looks around to see if Eleanor the Bodacious is watching.

I shake my head with ill-concealed contempt and start to move on when I feel a tug at my surplice.

“Excuse me.” It's Ethelred.

“What?”

“Can I get a receipt . . . for my oppressive taxes?”

