

and good feelings. But old Charlie told the real truth—
No Herdmans!

(Spotlight off BETH. HERDMANS exit stage left. Curtain rises on living room/dining room set. There is a table and four chairs stage right; a door upstage right center; a sofa, lounge chair, end tables, one with telephone, stage left. As curtain rises, MOTHER, FATHER, and CHARLIE enter through the door. BETH moves back to join them. They are returning from church, and all except BETH wear coats. FATHER has a newspaper under his arm. CHARLIE speaks as he enters.)

START **CHARLIE.** I don't care what everybody else said, that's what they really thought. All that other stuff is okay but the main good thing about church is that the Herdmans aren't there, ever. *(CHARLIE drops his coat on sofa.)*

FATHER. *(taking his coat off)* That's not a very Christian sentiment, it seems to me.

MOTHER. *(collecting the coats)* It's a very practical sentiment. Charlie was black and blue all last year because he had to sit next to Leroy Herdman in school. *(She exits to hang up the coats.)*

FATHER. Is he the worst one? Leroy?

CHARLIE. They're all the worst one.

BETH. Ralph's the biggest, so if Ralph gets you...

CHARLIE. That doesn't make any difference. Gladys isn't big, but she's fast, and she's mean, and she bites.

FATHER. I'm sorry I asked. Just stay away from all of them.

CHARLIE. That's what I said. Stay away from them. Go to church.

MOTHER. *(as she enters)* I'm glad to hear you feel that way.

CHARLIE. *(suspicious)* Why?

MOTHER. No arguments this year about the Christmas pageant.

CHARLIE. I don't want to be a shepherd again!

MOTHER. Tell Mrs. Armstrong you want to be a Wise Man.

CHARLIE. I don't want to be *in it!*

MOTHER. Everybody's in it. Think how I'd feel sitting there on Christmas Eve, if my own children weren't in the pageant. Think how your father would feel.

(There is a moment of silence, as everyone looks at FATHER, knowing exactly how he feels on this subject.)

You'd feel terrible, wouldn't you, Bob?

FATHER. Well...actually, I didn't plan to go.

(as MOTHER starts to protest)

You know how crowded it always is, they can use my seat. I'll just stay home, put on my bathrobe, relax... There's never anything different about the Christmas pageant.

MOTHER. There's going to be something different this year.

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. Charlie's going to wear your bathrobe. *(She exits into kitchen.)* **END**

~~**FATHER.** *(calls after her)* You just thought that up, Grace!~~

~~**BETH.** *(to CHARLIE)* Why don't you be Joseph? Elmer Hopkins'll pay you a dollar to be Joseph, *(to FATHER)* Elmer's sick of being Joseph all the time just because his father's the minister. Nobody wants to be Joseph.~~

~~**CHARLIE.** Nobody wants to be *in it!*~~

~~**FATHER.** *(to BETH)* What are you going to be this year?~~

~~**BETH.** I'm always in the angel choir.~~

~~**FATHER.** Well, why can't Charlie be in the angel choir?~~

~~**CHARLIE.** Because I can't sing!~~

~~**FATHER.** From what I've heard in the past, that's not a serious drawback. *Away In A Manger* always sounds to me like a closetful of mice.~~

~~**CHARLIE.** *(to BETH)* What do you wear in the angel choir?~~

~~**BETH.** Bedsheets.~~

MOTHER. You have to go!

(Curtain up on church setting with kids sitting on the risers and on the floor. MOTHER, stage left, is setting up the scene.)

MOTHER The inn is back here, offstage...and the shepherds come in and gather around the manger...

LEROY. Where'd all the shepherds come from, anyway?

CLAUDE. What's an inn?

ELMER. It's like a motel, where people go to spend the night.

CLAUDE. What people? Jesus?

ALICE. Oh, honestly! Jesus wasn't even born yet. Mary and Joseph went there.

RALPH. Why?

ELMER. To pay their taxes.

OLLIE. At a motel?!

IMOGENE. Shut up, Ollie! Everybody shut up! I want to hear *her.* *(to MOTHER)* Begin at the beginning.

MOTHER. The beginning...?

IMOGENE. The beginning of the play. What happens first?

MOTHER. Imogene, this is the Christmas story from the Bible... Haven't you ever heard the Christmas story from the Bible? *(Pause, as she realizes that they have not.)* ...Well, that's what this Christmas pageant is, so I'd better read it to you.

(There is a chorus of groans and grumbles from all the kids as MOTHER looks for a Bible on the benches and finds one.)

BETH. I don't believe that, do you? That they never heard the Christmas story?

ALICE. Why not? They don't even know what a Bible is, and they never went to church in their whole life, till your dumb brother told them we got refreshments. Now we have to waste all this time for nothing.

MOTHER. All right now. (*finds the place and starts to read*)
There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all
the world should be taxed...

*(All the kids are visibly bored and itchy, except
the HERDMANS, who listen with the puzzled but
determined concentration of people trying to make
sense of a foreign language.)*

MOTHER ...And Joseph went up from Galilee with Mary his
wife, being great with child...

RALPH. (*Not so much trying to shock, as he is pleased to
understand something.*) Pregnant! She was pregnant!
(*There is much giggling and tittering.*)

MOTHER. All right now, that's enough. We all know that
Mary was pregnant. (*MOTHER continues reading, under
the BETH-ALICE dialogue.*) ...And it came to pass, while
they were there, that the days were accomplished that
she should be delivered, and she brought forth her
firstborn son...

ALICE. (*to BETH*) I don't think it's very nice to say Mary was
pregnant.

BETH. Well, she was.

ALICE. I don't think *your* mother should say Mary was
pregnant. It's better to say 'great with child'. I'm
not supposed to talk about people being pregnant,
especially in church.

MOTHER. (*reading*) ...And wrapped him in swaddling
clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no
room for them in the inn.

IMOGENE. My God! They didn't have room for Jesus?

MOTHER. Well, nobody knew the baby was going to be
Jesus.

IMOGENE. Didn't Mary know? (*points to RALPH*) Didn't he
know? What was the matter with Joseph, that he didn't
tell them? Her pregnant and everything...

LEROY. What's a manger? Some kind of bed?

~~MOTHER. Well, they didn't have a bed in the barn, so Mary had to use whatever there was. What would you do if you had a new baby and no bed to put the baby in?~~

~~IMOGENE. We put Gladys in a bureau drawer.~~

~~MOTHER. (slightly taken aback) Well, there you are. You didn't have a bed for Gladys, so you had to use... something else.~~

~~RALPH. Oh, we had a bed...only Ollie was still in it and he wouldn't get out. He didn't like Gladys, (yells at OLLIE) remember how you didn't like Gladys?~~

~~BETH. (to ALICE) That was pretty smart of Ollie, not to like Gladys right off the bat.~~

~~MOTHER. Anyway... A manger is a large wooden feeding trough for animals.~~

~~CLAUDE. What were the wadded up clothes?~~

~~MOTHER. The what?~~

~~CLAUDE. (pointing in the Bible) It said in there...she wrapped him in wadded up clothes.~~

~~MOTHER. Swaddling clothes. People used to wrap babies up very tightly in big pieces of material, to make them feel cozy...~~

~~IMOGENE. You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox? Where was the Child Welfare?~~

~~GLADYS. The Child Welfare's at our house every five minutes!~~

~~ALICE. There wasn't any child welfare in Bethlehem!~~

~~IMOGENE. I'll say there wasn't!~~

START ~~MOTHER. (raising her voice) ...And there were shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them, and the Glory of...~~

~~GLADYS. (Leaps up, flinging her arms out) Shazam!~~

~~MOTHER. What?~~

~~GLADYS. Out of the black night, with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo...~~

~~MOTHER. I don't know what you're talking about, Gladys.~~

GLADYS. The Mighty Marvo, in Amazing Comics...out of the black night, with horrible vengeance...

MOTHER. This is the angel of the Lord, who comes to the shepherds...

GLADYS. Out of nowhere, right? In the black night, right?

MOTHER. Well... In a way...

(GLADYS repeats her big line, almost to herself, as she sits down, looking pleased.)

GLADYS. Shazam...!

MOTHER. *(reading)* Now when Jesus was born, there came Wise Men from the East, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense...

CLAUDE. *(to OLLIE)* What's that?

MOTHER. ...And myrrh...

OLLIE. What's that?

MOTHER. They were...special things. Spices, and precious oils...

IMOGENE. Oil! What kind of a present is oil? We get better presents from the welfare!

LEROY. Were they the welfare? The Wise Men?

MOTHER. They were kings and they were sent...

IMOGENE. Well, it's about time somebody important showed up! If they're kings, they can get the baby out of the barn, and tell the innkeeper where to get off!

MOTHER. *(ignoring this turn of plot)* ...They were sent by Herod, who was...well, he was the *main* king, and he wanted to find Jesus and have him put to death.

IMOGENE. My God! He just got born! They're gonna kill a baby?

RALPH. Who's Herod in this play?

MOTHER. Herod isn't in the play.

LEROY. He's out to kill the baby, and he isn't even in the play?

IMOGENE. Well, somebody better be Herod. *(singles out a victim)* Let Charlie be Herod, and he says, go get me

that baby. And they say okay, because he's a king and all...

OLLIE. (*warming to this scenario*) But then they don't do it! They go back and get Herod! (*He makes a throttling gesture.*)

CHARLIE. I'm not going to be Herod!

MOTHER. No one is going to be Herod!

(The HERDMANS, caught up in the spirit of things, are ranging over the stage, arguing, shoving other kids out of the way. CHARLIE scrambles over the choir risers, other kids, and his own feet to get to his MOTHER.)

CLAUDE. No... Joseph gets the shepherds together and they go wipe out Herod! (*He makes a machine gun gesture.*)

CHARLIE. See? They're going to put one in, and it's going to be me, and I'll get killed!

MOTHER. (*desperate*) Forget about Herod! There's no Herod!

IMOGENE. And I run away with the baby till the fight's over!

RALPH. (*collaring a stray shepherd by the front of his shirt*) Somebody ought to fix the innkeeper... Gladys, you wipe out the innkeeper!

GLADYS. I can't! ...I'm an angel!

(Curtain falls. Spotlight on the HERDMANS as they enter from the wings stage left and gather on and around the set piece. They are arguing about the pageant.)

IMOGENE. Well, I wouldn't just hang around out in the barn. I'd go get a room.

CLAUDE. She said there wasn't any room.

IMOGENE. Then I'd throw somebody out. I'd tell them I've got this baby and it's the middle of winter...so either get out or move over.

RALPH. I'd go after Ol' Herod.

LEROY. I'd send the angel after him. She could just point her electric finger and turn him into a pile of ashes.

GLADYS. (*happily*) Yeh! ...Zap!

OLLIE. What's the name of this play? She never said.

CLAUDE. Christmas pageant.

OLLIE. That's no name. That's what it is.

GLADYS. I know a name! ...I know a name! I'd call it...
Revenge at Bethlehem! **END**

(Spotlight off HERDMANS: Up on BETH, stage right.)

BETH. ~~Revenge at Bethlehem! The Herdmans thought the Christmas story came right out of the F.B.I. files! At least they picked out the right villain—it was Herod they wanted to gang up on and not the baby Jesus. But the baby Jesus quit the pageant anyway. It was supposed to be Eugene Slocum, but Mrs. Slocum said she wasn't going to let Imogene Herdman get her hands on him. So we didn't have a baby Jesus, and that bothered my mother. She kept trying to scratch up a baby...even at the last rehearsal.~~

(Spot off BETH. Curtain up on church scene. Children are assembling for the rehearsal, in a motley assortment of costumes. MOTHER is counting noses, so to speak. BETH and ALICE meet downstage. ALICE is writing in a small notebook. They are, by this time, on somewhat testy terms—ALICE constantly on the attack, BETH on the defense.)

~~What do you keep writing in that book?~~

ALICE. It's...like a diary.

BETH. (*snatches the book and reads*) It is not. It's all about the Herdmans. (*reads aloud*) Imogene curses and swears all the time. Ralph talks about sexy things. Mrs. Bradley... (*gives ALICE a fierce look*) ...Mrs. Bradley called Mary pregnant... (*if looks could kill*) ...Gladys Herdman drinks communion wine... It isn't wine, it's grape juice.