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Mrs. Slocum - Connie

CAST

Handwritten: Mother, Ruth, David, Sarah, Florence, Norma, Gerry, John, Nancy, Helen, Jerry, Susan, Maxine, Betty, Lynn, Eda, Beverly, Juanita, Doris, Reverend
FATHER (Bob Bradley)—solid family man, 35-38
MOTHER (Grace Bradley)—trim, attractive, 35ish
BETH BRADLEY—the narrator, strong voice and presence, 10-11
CHARLIE BRADLEY—traditional kid brother, 8-9
RALPH HERDMAN—ragged, scroungy, slouching manner, touch of adolescent cool, 12-13
IMOGENE HERDMAN—loud, bossy, crafty, 11-12
LEROY HERDMAN—tough, sure of himself, 10-11
CLAUDE HERDMAN—tough, combative, 9-10
OLLIE HERDMAN—looking for trouble, Claude's usual partner in crime, 8-9
GLADYS HERDMAN—small, wiry, fiesty, 7-8
ALICE WENDLEKEN—prim, proper, pain in the neck, 10-11
MRS. ARMSTRONG—largish woman, managerial in voice and manner, 50ish
MRS. SLOCUM—pleasant, motherly woman, 35-60
MRS. CLARK—35-60
MRS. CLAUSING—35-60
MRS. MCCARTHY—a younger, less imperious version of Mrs. Armstrong, middle 40s
MAXINE—10-11
ELMER HOPKINS—12-13
HOBIE—9-10
DAVID—8-9
BEVERLY—7-8
FIREMAN—25-30
FIREMAN—25-30
SHIRLEY—5-6
JUANITA—5-6
DORIS—9-10
REVEREND HOPKINS—middle to late 40s
Extra angel choir members, baby angels, shepherds.

Total:
4 males
6 females
8 boys
9 girls

Even the good old ones
but the good old ones
they just went and packed.

BUT ONE
THEY JUST WENT AND DROVE

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

by Barbara Robinson

Sets: Much of the action takes place on the forestage in front of the curtain, in short spotlighted scenes. The two interiors—living room-dining room, and church—can be full or partial sets, with minimal furnishing and set decoration. The set piece which serves as a focal point for the Herdmans, stage left, is a simple climbing structure like a jungle gym. Mrs. Armstrong's hospital bed can be a single bed on casters, or a rollaway cot. It is especially effective for Mrs. Armstrong to be elevated above stage level on a movable platform.

Staging and lighting directions given here are for a traditional proscenium stage with usable apron space and reasonably broad light facilities (spotlights, dimming capacity, etc.). The set piece and elevated platform are devices used in the first professional production at the Poncho Theatre in Seattle, and are included here as suggested staging. The play has also been mounted successfully in limited space and less formal settings. In such productions the absence of full sets and sophisticated lighting will seem appropriate to the nature of the play.

The play has no intermission.

Note: In the first production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, a different opening scene was used. It is included at the end of this script as a suitable alternate for certain audiences.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

As the play opens the curtain is down. House lights down. Spotlight up on BETH, sitting DS.R.

BETH. The Herdmans were the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars, even the girls, and talked dirty and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken down tool house.

(Spotlight up on set piece, s.l. During BETH's speech the HERDMANS come on from the wings left and position themselves on and around the set piece, with GLADYS at the top level, in a pose reminiscent of the first illustration in the book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.)

BETH. There were six of them—Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys—and they went through the Woodrow Wilson school like those South American fish that strip your bones clean. They went around town the same way—stealing things and tearing things up and whamming kids . . . so it was hard to get away from them. There was only one safe place.

CHARLIE. *(offstage, singing)*
Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
Because there are no Herdmans there.
And Jesus loves us, as they say,

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Because he keeps them miles away.

BETH. That's my little brother, Charlie. That's what he said when the Sunday school teacher asked what was his favorite thing about church. Charlie said, "No Herdmans." That made the teacher mad because all the other kids said nice things about God and Jesus and good feelings. But old Charlie told the real truth — *No Herdmans!*

(Spotlight off BETH. HERDMANS exit s.l. Curtain rises on living room-dining room set. There is a table and four chairs s.r.: A door u.r.c.: A sofa, lounge chair, end tables, one with telephone, s.l. 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.)

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.

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER 7

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.)

MOTHER. 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.)

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

But the boys
they just went
and packed.

*

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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 closeful of mice.

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

BETH. Bedsheets.

CHARLIE. Oh, boy, some choice . . . a bathrobe or a bedsheet. Come on, let's go watch tv. (They start out.)

MOTHER. (entering from kitchen with coffee cup) You know, Mrs. Armstrong works very hard to give everyone a lovely experience.

BETH. Oh, Mom, Mrs. Armstrong just likes to run things. (They exit.)

MOTHER. They're right, of course. She directs the pageant, she runs the potluck supper, she's chairman of the Bazaar . . . I think Helen Armstrong would preach the sermon if anyone would let her.

FATHER. Is that George Armstrong's wife?

MOTHER. Yes.

FATHER. Well, maybe she'll try to manage the hospital, because that's where she is. I saw George at the drug store and he told me his wife broke her leg this morning. . . . she'll be in traction for two weeks and laid up till the first of the year.

MOTHER. The first of the year! . . . Why, they'll have to cancel Christmas.

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FATHER. She's in charge of Christmas?

MOTHER. Well, she's in charge of the pageant, and she's in charge of the bazaar. . . . I feel sorry for Helen, but who's going to do all those things?

(Lights offstage: Spotlight up DS.L. on MRS. SLOCUM, telephoning.)

MRS. SLOCUM. Yes, I'll take over the bazaar, Edna, if you'll do the potluck supper. I don't know what in the world we'll do about the pageant, unless. . . . How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. SLOCUM: Spot up DS.R. on MRS. CLARK, telephoning.)

MRS. CLARK. I just can't, Edna. I've got company all Christmas week. . . . How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. CLARK: Spot up DS.L. on MRS. CLAUSING, telephoning.)

MRS. CLAUSING. . . . How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. CLAUSING: Up on MRS. McCARTHY, DS.R., telephoning.)

MRS. McCARTHY. Hello. . . . Grace. . . ?

(Spot off MRS. McCARTHY: Stage lights up on living room-dining room set. MOTHER hanging up phone with stunned expression.)

MOTHER. Bob . . .

They just went out

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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?

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(Spot off MRS. CLAUSING: Up on MRS. McCARTHY, DS.R., telephoning.)

MRS. McCARTHY. Hello. . . . Grace. . . . ?

(Spot off MRS. McCARTHY: Stage lights up on living room-dining room set. MOTHER hanging up phone with stunned expression.)

MOTHER. Bob . . .

They just want

But the good old "..."
they just went and packed.

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FATHER. What?

MOTHER. I have to direct the Christmas pageant.

FATHER. Does that mean I have to go?

(Stage lights down: Spot on BETH, DS.R.)

Move to new spot

BETH. Our Christmas pageant isn't what you'd call four-star entertainment. Mrs. Armstrong breaking her leg was the only unexpected thing that ever happened to it. It's always the same old Christmas story, and the same old carols, and the same old Mary and Joseph . . . and that's what my mother was stuck with . . . that, and Mrs. Armstrong.

Move spot to table

(Spot out on BETH: Up on MRS. ARMSTRONG in hospital bed s.l. She is in the middle of phone conversation. The phone conversation and the family conversation are to be simultaneous, with the phone conversation to be background. Key parts of MRS. ARMSTRONG's conversation are underlined and should be heard. This dialogue can be blocked, just as movement is blocked, and MRS. ARMSTRONG's speeches are deliberately lengthy and full so the audience can be aware of her droning on in the background.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. . . . tell you again, Grace, how important it is to give everyone a chance. Here's what I do—I always start with Mary and I tell them we must choose our Mary carefully because Mary was the mother of Jesus . . .

(Spotlight up on dinner table scene DS.R. FATHER and CHARLIE seated: BETH setting the table, pouring water, etc. MOTHER on telephone.)

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MOTHER. I know, that, Helen.

MRS. ARMSTRONG. Yes, and then I tell them about Joseph, that he was God's choice to be Jesus' father. That's how I explain that. Frankly, I don't ever spend much time on Joseph because it's always Elmer Hopkins, and he knows all about Mary and Joseph . . .

CHARLIE. I thought Mrs. Armstrong was in traction. How can she talk on the phone if she's in traction?

BETH. What do you think traction is?

CHARLIE. Like when they put you to sleep?

FATHER. No such luck. . . . Beth, we need salt and pepper . . . and napkins . . . (BETH exits to kitchen.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. . . . but I do explain about the Wise Men and the shepherds and how important they are. And I tell them, there are no small parts, only small actors. Remind the angel choir not to stare at the audience, and don't let them wear earrings and things like that. And don't let them wear clunky shoes or high heels. I just hope you don't have too many baby angels, Grace, because they'll be your biggest problem . . .

(FATHER takes slice of bread, hands the plate to CHARLIE, who takes five or six slices, and reaches for butter.)

*

FATHER. You will leave some for the rest of us, won't you, Charlie?

CHARLIE. I'm hungry. Leroy Herdman stole my lunch again.

FATHER. How can you let him do that to you, day after day?

CHARLIE. How can I stop him? . . . Where's the chicken?

FATHER. (to MOTHER) Grace, where's the chicken?

MOTHER. (hand over phone) It's still in the oven.

But they just want and dance

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CHARLIE. I'll get it. *(He exits.)*

(This leaves FATHER alone at the table, as MRS. ARMSTRONG drones on in the background. He is obviously disgruntled about this situation and after a moment he gets up, takes hat and coat from rack at the door, and exits out the door.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. You'll have to get someone to push the baby angels on, otherwise they get in each other's way and bend their wings. Bob could do that, and he could keep an eye on the shepherds too. Oh, another thing about the angel choir. Don't let them wear lipstick. They think because it's a play . . . *(doorbell buzz or chime)*

MOTHER. Helen, I have to go. There's someone at my door.

MRS. ARMSTRONG. . . . that they have to wear lipstick, and it looks terrible. So tell them . . . *(doorbell again)*

MOTHER. Someone at my door, Helen. I'll talk to you later. *(hangs up; doorbell again; starts toward door, calling)* Yes. . . . yes, I'm coming . . .

FATHER. *(in doorway)* Lady, can you give me some supper? I haven't had a square meal in three days.

MOTHER. Oh, for heaven's sake, it's you!

FATHER. *(coming in)* I was very lonely at the table.

MOTHER. *(as they move down to the table)* Well, I guess Helen feels lonely at the hospital.

FATHER. Not as long as the telephones are working. *(BETH and CHARLIE enter with food.)*

CHARLIE. I'll bet she told you about no small parts, only small actors.

BETH. And getting someone to shove the baby angels on, and make the shepherds shut up.

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MOTHER. Yes. She suggested your father.

FATHER. Does that mean I have to go?

(Spot off family: Up on MRS. ARMSTRONG, in mid-sentence of yet another telephone directive.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. And, Grace, don't use just anybody's baby for Jesus . . . get a quiet one. Better yet, get two if you can . . . then if one turns out to be fussy, you can always switch them . . .

(Curtain comes down during this speech. Spot on BETH, DS.R.)

BETH. My mother didn't pay much attention to Mrs. Armstrong. She said Mrs. Armstrong was stuck in the hospital with nothing to do but think up problems, and there weren't going to be any problems. Of course, Mother didn't count on the Herdmans. That was Charlie's fault.

(Spot off BETH: Up on LEROY HERDMAN and CHARLIE, entering S.L.)

CHARLIE. Hey, Leroy, you give me back my lunch!

LEROY. Sure, kid, here. *(hands him a lunch bag)*

CHARLIE. *(looks inside)* You stole my dessert again!

LEROY. How do you know?

CHARLIE. Because it isn't here.

LEROY. What was it?

CHARLIE. Two Twinkies.

LEROY. That's right. That's what it was. *(starts to leave)*

CHARLIE. Hey, Leroy! You think it's so great to steal my dessert every day and you know what? I don't care if

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you steal my dessert. I'll even give you my dessert. I get all the dessert I want in Sunday school.

LEROY. (*interested in this*) Oh, yeah? What kind of dessert?

CHARLIE. All kinds. Chocolate cake and candy bars and cookies . . . and Twinkies and Big Wheels. We get refreshments all the time, all we want.

LEROY. You're a liar.

CHARLIE. . . . and ice cream, and doughnuts and cupcakes and . . .

LEROY. Who gives it to you?

CHARLIE. (*momentarily stumped*) Uh . . . the minister.

LEROY. Why? Is he crazy?

CHARLIE. No. . . . I think he's rich.

LEROY. (*pause*) . . . Sunday school, huh?

(*Spot off boys: Spot up on BETH, DS.R.*)

BETH. That was the wrong thing to tell Herdmans . . . and, sure enough, the very next Sunday there they were in Sunday school, just in time to hear about the Christmas pageant . . .

(*Spot off BETH: Spot up on ALICE and IMOGENE, DS.L.*)

IMOGENE. What's a pageant?

ALICE. It's a play.

IMOGENE. Like on tv? What's it about?

ALICE. It's about Jesus.

IMOGENE. (*visibly disenchanted about Sunday school*) Everything here is.

ALICE. And it's about Mary. Mostly, it's about Mary.

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IMOGENE. Who's Mary?

ALICE. I am. . . . Well, *probably* I am. I know the part.

(*ALICE walks off s.l.: IMOGENE watches her go, then looks out at the audience, wearing a cheshire-cat smile. Spot off IMOGENE. Curtain opens on church setting with risers in place. As curtain opens, kids are straggling in, with MOTHER herding them along.*)

MOTHER. Come on, Beth. . . . Charlie, you and David come. (*She leads the reluctant CHARLIE to a seat.*) Now, this won't take very long if you all settle down. . . . Today we're going to decide who will play the main roles in our Christmas pageant, but of course everyone will have an important part to play. You know what Mrs. Armstrong always tells you—there are no small parts, only small actors. Isn't that what Mrs. Armstrong always says?

ELMER. That's what she always says, but she never says what it means.

MOTHER. Don't you know what it means?

MAXINE. I know what it means. It means that the short kids have to be in the front row of the angel choir or else nobody can see them.

MOTHER. Well . . . not exactly. It really means that the littlest baby angel is just as important as Mary.

ALICE. (*full of herself*) I don't think anyone is as important as Mary.

BETH. Well, naturally that's what *you* think, Alice. I think Jesus is more important.

MAXINE. I still think it means short kids have to be in the front row . . .

BUT
CUT
THEY
JUST
WENT
AND
ON

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MOTHER. Girls, girls! . . . *Everyone* is important . . . Mary, Jesus, *and* the short kids. Now, is everyone here? Beverly, will you just step out in the hall and see if anyone else is coming? (*BEVERLY exits.*) Now you little children will be our angels, so please remind your mothers that you'll need bedsheets. . . . (*As she talks, the HERDMANS enter, with GLADYS bringing up the rear, having dispatched BEVERLY. Other children begin to murmur, wiggle around, poke each other, point at the HERDMANS.*) People in the angel choir will need bedsheets too, and if any of you have old bathrobes at home. . . . (*Aware of the rising clamor, she stops.*) . . . Now, what's the matter? (*As MOTHER turns and sees the HERDMANS, they move in. RALPH and LEROY shove their way onto a bench, causing a ripple of movement there: GLADYS does the same on another bench: IMOGENE, CLAUDE and OLLIE start across the stage to do likewise. To forestall any mayhem.*) Well, let's make some room there, for the Herdmans. (*A lot of room is made, like the parting of the Red Sea, and the HERDMANS occupy their space.*) Now what happened to Beverly?

GLADYS. I think she went home. I think she got sick.

MOTHER. Did she say she was sick?

GLADYS. She just left. All I did was, I just said "Hi, Beverly" . . . and she just left.

MOTHER. I see. Well, will someone please tell Beverly about the rehearsals? . . . the next four Wednesdays, after school. Plan to be here for every one.

ELMER. What if we get sick?

MOTHER. You won't get sick. Of course, Mary and Joseph must *absolutely* come to every rehearsal . . .

ELMER. What if they get sick?

MOTHER. They won't get sick either, Elmer.

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ELMER. Well, Beverly got sick and we didn't even start yet.

MOTHER. We don't *know* that Beverly got sick. Now, I want you to think about Mary. . . . We all know what kind of person Mary was. She was quiet and gentle and kind, and the girl who plays Mary should try to be that kind of person. Who would like to volunteer for that part? (*Everyone looks at ALICE, but it is IMOGENE who raises her hand.*)

MOTHER. Did you have a question, Imogene?

IMOGENE. No, I want to be Mary . . . and Ralph, over there, he wants to be Joseph.

RALPH. Yeh, right.

MOTHER. Oh. Well . . . Well, I'll just make a list of volunteers for these parts and then we'll all decide who it should be. (*writes on her clipboard*) Ralph Herdman. Now, who else would like to be Joseph? . . . Did you raise your hand, Elmer?

ELMER. No.

MOTHER. Just raise your hands, please, any volunteers. . . . Any of you shepherds? (*Her eye falls on CHARLIE, who makes every effort to seem invisible.*) Very well . . . Ralph Herdman will be our Joseph. Now, Imogene has volunteered to be . . . (*Tiny break here, as if she can hardly bear to connect IMOGENE with MARY.*) . . . Mary. I'll just write that down. . . . What other names can I put on my list? . . . Janet? . . . Roberta? . . . Alice, don't you want to volunteer?

ALICE. (*choking it out*) No, I don't want to.

GLADYS. I'll be Mary!

IMOGENE. Shut up, Gladys. I'm already Mary. You be a Wise Man.

MOTHER. Well, the Wise Men are usually boys. Of course, they don't *have* to be, and we could . . .

But the door
they just went
and packed.

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LEROY. I'll be a Wise Man!

OLLIE. Me, too. Claude, you wanta be a Wise Man? Raise your hand.

CLAUDE. What's a Wise Man?

RALPH. Just raise your hand! (*CLAUDE raises his hand.*)

GLADYS. What's left to be?

IMOGENE. Some angel.

GLADYS. I'll be that. What is it?

MOTHER. It's the Angel of the Lord, who brought the good news to the shepherds. (*There is a flurry of raised hands among the shepherds.*)

MOTHER. There, we do have some volunteers after all! Yes, Hobie, would you like to be a Wise Man?

HOBIE. No, I just wanted to say I can't be a shepherd. We're going to Philadelphia.

MOTHER. Why didn't you say so before?

HOBIE. I just remembered.

DAVID. My mother doesn't want me to be a shepherd.

MOTHER. Why not?

DAVID. I don't know. She just said, don't be a shepherd.

CHARLIE. I'm not going to be a shepherd!

MOTHER. (*reverting from pageant director to exasperated parent*) Oh, yes, you are! . . . What's the matter with all of you?

ELMER. I don't want to be a shepherd . . . Gladys Herdman hits too hard!

MOTHER. Why, Gladys isn't going to hit anybody! The Angel of the Lord just visits the shepherds in the fields and tells them Jesus is born.

ELMER. And hits them!

MOTHER. Elmer, that's ridiculous, and I don't want to hear another word about it, from anyone. No shepherds

But the boys
they just went and patted

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may quit . . . or get sick. Now that's all for today, boys and girls, and you can go. . . . (*There is a scramble for the door. BETH and ALICE move D.S. calling after them.*) . . . but I expect to see everyone here on Wednesday at 6:30! (*MOTHER moves D.S. and takes ALICE's arm.*) Alice, what's wrong with you? Why in the world didn't you raise your hand?

ALICE. (*miserably*) I don't know.

MOTHER. You don't know! Alice, I expected you . . .

(*Sounds of a scuffle offstage; yells—ouch! . . . Cut it out! . . . Let go. . . . Let me go!*)

VOICE. Mrs. Bradley! Get Gladys offa me!

MOTHER. . . . to volunteer. Don't you want to be Mary?

VOICE. Mrs. Bradley!! (*MOTHER exits, with an exasperated look at ALICE.*)

BETH. Oh, come on, Alice! (*mimicking her*) I don't know. . . .!

ALICE. I didn't dare raise my hand. Imogene would have killed me! She said, "I'm going to be Mary in this play, and if you open your mouth or raise your hand you'll wish you didn't." And I said, "I'm always Mary in the Christmas pageant." And she said, "go ahead then, and next spring when the pussywillows come out I'll stick a pussywillow so far down your ear that nobody can reach it . . . and it'll sprout there and grow and grow, and you'll spend the rest of your life with a pussywillow bush growing out of your ear!"

BETH. You know she wouldn't do that!

ALICE. She would too! Herdmans will do anything. You just watch, they'll do something terrible and ruin the whole pageant . . . and it's all your mother's fault!

But the host
they just went
and packed.

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(During the ALICE-BETH conversation the curtain closes behind them. At the end of the conversation they move off. The phone conversations are spotlighted in different areas of the forestage. Spot up on MRS. McCARTHY, telephoning.)

MRS. McCARTHY. Jane? . . . Edna McCarthy. Did you hear about the . . . Well, it must be Grace's fault somehow! How else would the six of them end up in a Christmas pageant, when they ought to be in jail!

(Spot off MRS. McCARTHY: Up on IRMA SLOCUM, telephoning.)

IRMA. Vera? . . . Irma Slocum. I just heard that Imogene Herdman is going to be Mary in the Christmas pageant, and I . . . Is that a fact? All six of them? Vera, I live next door to that outfit and I'd rather live next door to a zoo. Has Grace gone crazy?

(Spot off MRS. SLOCUM: Up on MRS. ARMSTRONG in hospital bed, or in wheelchair, with leg in a cast, propped out in front of her)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. Where did they come from? Who let them in? Imogene Herdman! . . . What kind of a child is that, to be Mary the Mother of Jesus? Where was Reverend Hopkins, I'd like to know. . . . He was what? . . . visiting shut-ins! Well, I'm shut-in, and he wasn't visiting me!

(Spots up on all ladies: Following speeches are simultaneous, till MRS. ARMSTRONG's last line.)

MRS. McCARTHY. I said, why don't you let them hand

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out programs at the door? Grace said we never have programs for the pageant, but I said. . . .

MRS. SLOCUM. . . . better nail down the church and lock up the silver service and hide the collection plates before they clean them out . . .

MRS. ARMSTRONG. What was the matter with Grace? Couldn't she have sent them away? Tell them to go home? Oh, I feel responsible . . . if I'd been up and around this never would have happened!

(Spots off all three ladies: Up on MOTHER and FATHER as they enter from the wings s.r. Each is carrying a grocery bag, and we can assume that some good friend in the supermarket has relayed MRS. ARMSTRONG's message.)

MOTHER. (in high dudgeon, mimicking MRS. A.) . . . if I'd been up and around, this never would have happened! Well, let me tell you . . .

FATHER. Don't tell me, I'm on your side . . . the car's over there.

MOTHER. Helen Armstrong is not the only woman alive who can run a Christmas pageant! I made up my mind just to do the best I could under the circumstances, but now I'm going to make this the best Christmas pageant ever, and I'm going to do it with the Herdmans! After all, they raised their hands and nobody else did, and I don't care. . . .

FATHER. Good for you, Grace. (trying to move her along) The car's over there . . .

MOTHER. And you're going to help me!

FATHER. (stopped by this) Does that mean . . .

MOTHER. You have to go!

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(Curtain up on church setting with kids sitting on the risers and on the floor. MOTHER, s.l., 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.

But the kids they just went and packed.

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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.) . . . and Joseph went up from Galilee with Mary his wife,

[REDACTED]

) . . . 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 . . .

[REDACTED]

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 ~~son~~ 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?

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

MOTHER. Well, they didn't have a bed in the barn, so

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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!

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 . . .

But the boys
they just went and
pattered.

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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~~ ^{Gosh}! He just got born! They're gonna kill a baby?

RALPH. Who's Herod in this play?

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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!

Go to cost?
(*Curtain falls. Spotlight on the HERDMANS as they enter from the wings s.l. and gather on and around the set piece. They are arguing about the pageant.*)

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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!

(*Spotlight off HERDMANS: Up on BETH, s.r.*)

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.

was over to stage
(*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*

But the good ones they just went and packed.

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to speak. BETH and ALICE meet DS. 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.)

BETH. 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 ~~the~~ 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.

ALICE. I don't care what it is, she drinks it. I've seen her three times with her mouth all purple. They steal, too—if you shake the birthday bank it doesn't make a sound, because they stole all the pennies out of it. And every time you go in the ladies' room the whole air is blue, and Imogene Herdman is sitting there in the Mary costume, smoking cigars!

BETH. (*angry*) And you wrote all this down? What for?

ALICE. (*nose to nose with BETH*) For my mother and Reverend Hopkins and the Ladies Aid Society and anybody else who wants to know what happened when the whole Christmas pageant turns out to be a big mess!

MOTHER. All right, everyone, let's get quiet. Beth, will you and Alice please come up here so we can get started. Now, this is our last rehearsal, and we're going to . . . (*MRS. McCARTHY enters in apron, carrying a baking pan.*)

MRS. McCARTHY. Grace, I just wanted to tell you that we're all back in the kitchen making applesauce

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cake. We'll try not to bother you . . . I guess this is your dress rehearsal.

MOTHER. (*glances at the uncostumed crowd*) It's supposed to be. . . Oh, Edna . . . didn't I hear that your niece had a baby a month or so ago? . . . A little girl?

MRS. McCARTHY. (*pleased and proud*) Yes! She's five weeks old, and . . .

MOTHER. Well, I wonder how it would be if I were to call your niece and ask if we could borrow . . . (*Mrs. McCARTHY, seeing the lay of the land and not liking it, leaps in.*)

MRS. McCARTHY. Grace . . . no! I could make up some lie and tell you the baby's sick or cranky or something, but the truth is that she's perfectly healthy and happy and beautiful, and we all want her to stay that way. So we're certainly not going to hand her over to Imogene Herdman. Sorry, Grace. (*MRS. McCARTHY leaves.*)

DAVID. Mrs. Bradley, you can have my little brother for Jesus.

MOTHER. (*newly hopeful*) I didn't know you had a new baby, David.

DAVID. He's not new. He's four years old, but he's double-jointed and he could probably scrunch up.

MOTHER. Well, I don't think . . .

IMOGENE. I'll get us a baby.

MOTHER. How can you do that?

IMOGENE. There's always two or three babies in carriages outside the supermarket. I'll get one of them.

MOTHER. Imogene! You can't just walk off with somebody's baby! . . . I guess we'll forget about a baby. We'll just use the doll.

IMOGENE. Yeh. That's better, anyway . . . a doll can't bite you.

But the good ones they just went and packed.

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MOTHER. And, Imogene . . . you know Mary didn't wear earrings.

IMOGENE. I have to wear these. I got my ears pierced and if I don't keep something in them, they'll grow together.

MOTHER. Well, they won't grow together in an hour and a half. What did the doctor tell you to do?

IMOGENE. What doctor?

MOTHER. Well, who pierced your ears?

IMOGENE. Gladys.

ALICE. (to BETH) She probably did it with an ice pick. I'll bet Imogene's ears turn black and fall off.

MOTHER. Well, we'll find something smaller. . . . Now, is that your costume? Is *that* what you're going to wear? (to the whole group) You're all supposed to have your costumes on today.

BABY ANGEL SHIRLEY. I can't find my halo.

BABY ANGEL JUANITA. My wings got all bent.

ANGEL CHOIR MEMBER DORIS. Janet's got my robe.

BABY ANGEL SHIRLEY. My mother doesn't have any white sheets. Can I wear a sheet with balloons on it?

HOBIE. I haven't got any costume. I was never a shepherd before.

CHARLIE. You have to wear your father's bathrobe. That's what I have to do.

HOBIE. He hasn't got a bathrobe.

CHARLIE. What does he hang around the house in?

HOBIE. His underwear.

MOTHER. All right . . . pretend you're wearing costumes.

DAVID. Are we going through the whole thing?

MOTHER. Yes, of course . . . (mutters and groans) . . . but first we're going to practice just the entrances, so all of you go where you're supposed to be, and we'll start with the shepherds. (Angels and Shepherds scam-

but once they just went and passed

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ble offstage. Angel Choir stand around waiting for the full run-through. RALPH and IMOGENE slouch over to the manger and sit down. MOTHER comes down off the stage and stands in the aisle, or sits in the first row of seats.) Just read the last few words, Maxine.

MAXINE. . . . shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night . . .

MOTHER. Music . . . shepherds! (Shepherds straggle in, pushing and shoving each other, and assemble around the manger.)

MAXINE. And an Angel of the Lord appeared to them and . . .

GLADYS. (bursting out from behind the choir) Sham-zam!

MOTHER. No, Gladys!

GLADYS. (swooping at the Shepherds) Out of the black night . . .

MOTHER. No! (takes GLADYS by the arm and heads her back to the choir risers) Go on, Maxine. (As MOTHER returns to her seat, GLADYS makes another threatening swoop toward the Shepherds.)

MAXINE. . . . a multitude of the heavenly host . . .

MOTHER. Music . . . angels!

(The Baby Angels come on and are corralled into position.)

MOTHER. Music . . . Wise Men! (LEROY, CLAUDE, and OLLIE enter, slouching aimlessly down the aisle and up to the manger. As they approach, IMOGENE holds up the doll by the back of the neck, waving it in the air.)

IMOGENE. I've got the baby here . . . don't touch him! I named him Jesus!

MOTHER. (hurrying on stage) No, no, no! You don't say . . .

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(RALPH grabs the doll. He and IMOGENE tussle over it as the shepherds scramble out of the way, creating a tangle of bodies and voices.)

MOTHER. (nerves fraying away) . . . anything! Mary doesn't say anything. No one says anything! Mary and Joseph. . . .

IMOGENE. (to RALPH) Let go! . . . Give it back! . . . (RALPH and IMOGENE are pounding each other, till MOTHER gets in the middle and separates them.)

MOTHER. (total exasperation) . . . make a lovely picture for us to look at while we think about Christmas and what it means! . . . Now, put the doll back.

IMOGENE. (disgruntled) I don't get to say anything. . . . some angel tells me what to call the baby. . . . I would have named him Bill.

ALICE. Oh, what a terrible thing to say! (scribbles in her note book)

RALPH. What angel was that? There's angels all over the place. Was that Gladys?

MOTHER. No, Gladys brought the good news to the shepherds.

GLADYS. Yeh . . . (yells at the Shepherds) Unto you a child is born!

IMOGENE. Unto me! Not them, me! I'm the one that had the baby!

MOTHER. No, no, no. That just means that Jesus belongs to everybody. Unto all of us a child is born. (big sigh)

IMOGENE. Why didn't they let Mary name her own baby? What did that angel do, just walk up and say "Name him Jesus?"

MOTHER. (fed up with this) Yes.

But the duos they just went and packed.

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ALICE. (Piety personified: We can almost hear the harps and violins.) I know what the angel said. She said . . . "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace". (There is a moment of amazed silence at this performance, so IMOGENE's response is loud and clear.)

IMOGENE. My ~~name~~ ^{GOSH}! He'd never get out of the first grade if he had to write all that!

(This throws the rehearsal into confusion. There is a babble of voices—shock, laughter, grumbling at ALICE, who marches offstage with her nose in the air, followed by Angel Choir members arguing with her ("Why did you have to say all that?" "We'll never get out of here!" "Nobody asked you, Alice"). The Shepherds, seeing a chance to escape, also scramble offstage, pushing and shoving and calling excuses ("Gonna get a drink of water", "Have to go to the bathroom", "Be back in a minute".) RALPH grabs the doll and throws it to LEROY who runs offstage, pursued by IMOGENE and the other HERDMANS. All this is simultaneous.)

MAXINE. (above the clamor) Mrs. Bradley, what should I do? Should I start over?

MOTHER. (sinking wearily on angel choir riser) Five minutes. Maxine. (calls to others) Five minutes! (MAXINE leaves.)

(Spotlight on BETH, DS.R.)

BETH. We never did start over. And we never did go through the whole thing. (MRS. McCARTHY enters

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s.r. and crosses, sniffing the air, to exit s.l., as BETH speaks.) The five minutes turned into fifteen minutes, and Imogene Herdman spent the whole time smoking cigars in the ladies' room. Then Mrs. McCarthy went to the ladies' room and saw all the smoke and called the fire department. And they came . . . right away.

MRS. MCCARTHY. (running on stage) Fire! There's a fire!

(She is followed by children running in from both directions. Sound of fire siren. Two firemen hurry up center aisle, carrying fire extinguishers and coiled hoses, shouting . . . ("Take the big hose in the side", "The place is full of kids", "Get the kids out", "Get everybody out", "Somewhere on the first floor") All the children, the firemen, MRS. MCCARTHY and MOTHER mill around the stage, herding children off s.r. and l. the HERDMANS are square in the middle of all this, grabbing at hoses, jumping on a fireman's back, etc. Lights down on set: Spotlight on BETH, DS.R.)

BETH. They cleared everybody out of the building and dragged a fire hose through the church looking for a fire to put out . . . but the only one they found was in the kitchen . . . all the applesauce cake burned up. Of course all the ladies were mad about that, and Mrs. McCarthy was mad, and my mother was mad.

(Spot off BETH: Spot up on MOTHER and MRS. MCCARTHY DS.L.)

MOTHER. Why in the world did you call the fire department about a little smoke?

BUT SHE JUST WENT AND

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MRS. MCCARTHY. It was a lot of smoke. The ladies' room was full of thick smoke.

MOTHER. It couldn't have been. You just got excited. And now look—the church is full of firemen and the street is full of baby angels crying and shepherds climbing all over the fire truck and half the neighborhood. . . ! Didn't you know it was cigar smoke?

MRS. MCCARTHY. No, I didn't know it was cigar smoke! I don't expect to find cigar smoke in the ladies' room of the church!

(Spot off ladies: Spot up on BETH.)

BETH. Alice Wendleken's mother was mad, too, and the whole Ladies' Aid Society was mad . . . and Reverend Hopkins said he didn't know what to think.

(Spot off BETH: Spot up on REVEREND HOPKINS and MOTHER, S.L.C.)

REVEREND HOPKINS. I've been on the telephone all day, and I can't make head or tails of it. Some people say they set fire to the ladies' room. Some people say they set fire to the kitchen. Vera Wendleken says all they do is talk about ~~the~~ ^{killing} and ^{stealing}.

MOTHER. That was Hobie Clark talking about underwear. And they didn't set fire to anything. The only fire was in the kitchen, where the applesauce cake burned up.

REV. HOPKINS. Well, the whole church is in an uproar. I don't know . . . Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me", but I'm not sure he meant the Herdmans. . . . Grace, don't you think we should cancel the pageant?

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MOTHER. I'll bet that was Helen Armstrong's idea.

REV. HOPKINS. We could blame it on the fire . . . makes a good excuse.

MOTHER. I'll bet that was Edna McCarthy's idea.

REV. HOPKINS. Every one seems to think it's going to be a . . . a . . .

MOTHER. Disaster? (*Obviously, that's the word he had in mind.*) Well, they're wrong! . . . It's going to be the best Christmas pageant we ever had!

REV. HOPKINS. But, Grace. . . . I don't think anyone will come to see it!

(*Spot out on them: Up on BETH, DS.R.*)

BETH. I didn't think so, either, and neither did Charlie . . . but we were wrong. On Christmas Eve the church was jammed full. Everybody came . . . to see what the Herdmans would do.

leave stage

(*Spot out on BETH, leaving stage area dark. MOTHER and FATHER enter from back of theatre and walk down center aisle to the stage. She is carrying tote bags, extra sheets, paper cups, etc. He is carrying a very large tree-type potted plant.*)

MOTHER. Wait till I turn the lights on. (*house lights up*) Now, watch your step.

FATHER. I can't even see where I'm going. I don't know what in the world you expect to do with this thing . . .

(*MOTHER puts her various burdens on the floor and rummages through the tote bag, looking for an extra script. She pulls out one or two extra halos, rolls*

but they just went down

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER 37

of scotch tape, box of tissues and a big white first aid kit with a red cross on the side of it.)

MOTHER. I thought it might look like a palm tree. (*looks at the plant*) I see now that it doesn't. . . . Oh, I don't have any idea what's going to happen tonight! We've never once gone through the whole thing, and the Herdmans still think it's some kind of spy story. It may be the first Christmas pageant in history where Joseph and the Wise Men get in a fight and Mary runs away with the baby.

(*They are setting up the tree, the manger, counting the shepherds' crooks, etc. during their dialogue. House lights remain up, so that when the pageant begins, the lights can go down, and we will see it as a play within a play.*)

MOTHER. Where are the kids?

FATHER. All the kids in the world are down in the basement, putting on bedsheets.

MOTHER. I mean our kids.

BETH. (*as they enter from S.L.*) We're here.

MOTHER. Well, go get your costumes on. It's getting late.

BETH. It's just going to be awful, you know. They look like trick or treat—all dirty and fastened together with safety pins and wearing their mouldy old sneakers . . . Mary and Joseph, I mean. They look like refugees or something.

FATHER. Well . . . that's what they were . . . Mary and Joseph. They were refugees, in a way. They were a long way from home, didn't have any place to stay, didn't know anybody. They were probably cold and

I never thought of that.
They don't see here that on
Christmas cards.

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hungry and tired . . . and messy. (*BETH is struck by the sense of this new idea: CHARLIE is not.*)

CHARLIE. I don't know about cold and hungry, but
Leave → they're sure messy. (*They leave.*)

MOTHER. Oh, dear. . . . Do you think I should . . .

FATHER. I think you worry too much. Now . . .
(*briskly, to get her mind off the HERDMANS*) . . .
I'm going to push baby angels onstage, and I'm going to
hand out shepherds's crooks and then push *them* on-
stage. . . . When do I do all that?

MOTHER. (*hands him script*) Just follow this script.

FATHER. (*flips through script*) Baby angels . . .
shepherds. . . . Wise Men . . . It doesn't seem to say
here where the fire engines come in.

MOTHER. (*in no mood for jokes*) Oh-h-h!

FATHER. Just kidding. (*He pats her shoulder, collects
the crooks, and exits.*)

(*During preceding dialogue Angel Choir members,
Shepherds, two or three HERDMANS, Baby
Angels drift on and offstage and are now more or
less in place.*)

MOTHER. Is everyone here? . . . Beth, I want you and
Alice down front where you can help the baby angels.
(*goes to wings and calls*) Will you all come on stage
please? (*With a predictable amount of shoving and
jostling, everyone assembles on stage.*) I just want to see
how you look. (*Brief pause while she sees, and the au-
dience sees, that they do indeed look like trick or treat.*)
Gladys, where's your halo?

GLADYS. Our cat buried it. . . . Listen, I think I ought
to say something besides the baby came. Why would
they all get up and tear off after some baby they don't

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even know? I ought to tell them it's Jesus, and I ought to
tell them where he is.

MOTHER. No, Gladys. You tell them, "Unto you a
child is born" . . . and that's *all* you tell them. Now,
let's all go backstage, and try to be quiet while people
are coming. And good luck!

ALICE. Mrs. Bradley, actors don't say good luck, ac-
tors say break a leg.

MOTHER. Yes, I know that, Alice, but in this case I
don't think . . . (*CLAUDE, LEROY, OLLIE and
GLADYS attack each other in response to 'break a leg'.
MOTHER separates them.*) For those of you who don't
know what that means, it's just a theatrical saying. It
doesn't really mean break a leg . . . your own or anyone
else's! (*They all exit, IMOGENE last, dangling the doll
upside down, by one leg.*) And, Imogene, try to remem-
ber that that's a baby. (*starts to exit, and adds*) And, for
tonight anyway, it's the baby Jesus.

(*She exits, leaving IMOGENE alone. House lights
down half. In this scene IMOGENE, surrounded
for the first time with the simple, traditional trap-
pings of Christmas (The stillness, the dim light, the
words 'The Baby Jesus' in her mind) reflects the
sense of wonder and mystery evoked in everyone on
Christmas Eve. She cradles the doll awkwardly in
her arms, takes a cloth from the manger and wraps
the doll in it . . . straightens her veil, smooths her
costume . . . becomes Mary. She looks out toward
the audience, and we sense that she is a little shy
about her own emotional reaction: That she hopes
there is no one there to see her in this uncharacteris-
tic moment. She exits s.l. House lights down. Stage
lights up half. MAXINE enters s.l. and lights*)

they just walk

candles across the back of the stage. (Note: can be light-cued, but more effective if battery operated candles are used) As MAXINE crosses to her place on the risers, Angel Choir starts 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' offstage, and then enters, single file, singing. They take their places on risers, s.r. ALICE and BETH should be ds. so we can hear their conversation. MAXINE on the u.s. end of top riser. When the carol is finished, MAXINE speaks.)

MAXINE. In the days of Caesar Augustus a decree went out that all the world should be taxed, and Joseph went into Bethlehem with Mary his wife, ~~with her~~. And while they were there she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

(Angel Choir sings Away in a Manger, as RALPH and IMOGENE enter s.l. They are hesitant, awkward, visibly sobered by this Christmas Eve service and by all the people watching them. IMOGENE handles the doll with a kind of motherliness, puts it up on her shoulder, as if to burp it. It may be necessary or useful for the choir to continue, humming, as BETH and ALICE talk.)

ALICE. Look at them, aren't they awful! What's she doing with the baby? Oh! . . . I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus, as if he had colic.

BETH. Well, he could have had colic, just like any other baby.

ALICE. I don't care. It looks awful. And they look awful. *So what?*

BETH. *So what?* They just came a long way and now

they don't have any place to sleep, and they've got a new baby to worry about.

ALICE. Who, Ralph and Imogene?

BETH. No. Mary and Joseph. *(RALPH and IMOGENE take their places at the manger.)*

MAXINE. And in that region there were shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

(Choir sings 'While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night' (one verse of this, and all carols). During this carol the shepherds enter down center aisle, collecting their crooks one by one from FATHER. They cluster in front of the stage, sitting and standing.)

MAXINE. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them. . . . *(no GLADYS)* . . . An angel of the Lord appeared to them. . . . *(still no GLADYS)* The glory of the Lord shone round about and they were sore afraid when the angel of the Lord appeared to them and said, Be not. . . . *(GLADYS, having chosen her moment, now roars up the aisle, around the shepherds, and up on stage with her message.)*

GLADYS. Hey! . . . Hey! . . . Unto you a child is born! . . . It's Jesus, and he's in the barn. . . . Go see him! *(When the SHEPHERDS hesitate, she grabs one to move him along, and then another one.)* Go on, he's over there. . . . Go on! *(Shepherds move on stage and gather around the manger.)*

MAXINE. *(though flustered, recovers)* And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host, saying Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men.

(Choir sings 'Angels We Have Heard on High' while Baby Angels enter s.l., steered along by FATHER.)

BUT THE BOYS
THEY JUST WENT AND

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We see him doing this because one angel comes on, turns around and goes back, and must be redirected. Another angel comes on, stops cold, and must be moved along. They join the crowd on stage, lining up in front of the angel choir. The first "Gloria" of the chorus is sung with a blast.)

MAXINE. When Jesus was born, there came Wise Men from the East to worship him, bringing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

(Choir sings 'We Three Kings of Orient Are' as LEROY, OLLIE and CLAUDE enter down center aisle, with LEROY carrying a ham, wrapped with a merry Christmas ribbon.)

ALICE. They look awful, too. And what's that Leroy's got?

→ BETH. *(craning her neck to see)* It's . . . it's a ham!

ALICE. A ham! I'll bet they stole it!

→ BETH. No, . . . I think it's the ham from their welfare basket.

ALICE. You mean it's their own ham? . . . Then they must hate ham.

→ BETH. Well, even if they hate ham, Alice, it's the only thing they ever gave away in their whole life. *(Choir hums 'We Three Kings' as Wise Men kneel at the manger.)*

MAXINE. Being warned in a dream that they should not return to their own country, the Wise Men departed another way. The shepherds also departed, praising God for all that they had seen and heard. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

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(Choir sings 'Silent Night'. It is assumed that the congregation would join in this carol, and as FATHER steps just inside the wings we see that he, too, is singing. MOTHER steps just inside the wings, s.r., and she too is singing. IMOGENE takes the doll from the manger and holds it. She is crying. Choir continues, humming.)

ALICE. Beth . . . Look . . . Mary's crying. *(She turns and leans back toward the wings where MOTHER is standing.)* Mrs. Bradley . . . Mary's crying.

Go to spot
(Curtain falls as the choir is humming. MRS. McCARTHY and MRS. SLOCUM come up from the audience and meet at the stage.)

MRS. McCARTHY. Could you believe that was Imogene Herdman? And all the rest of them? Irma, this was the best Christmas pageant we ever had, and I'm not sure why, but I think it was them. Could that be?

MRS. SLOCUM. Oh, I always get weepy about the pageant. I guess it's the children and the carols and all But you're right, this was the best one . . . and it should have been the worst.

MRS. McCARTHY. There was just something . . . different.

MRS. SLOCUM. Well, the angel of the Lord was different!

MRS. McCARTHY. Yes, but you know, I liked that! Had lots of spirit. Sometimes you can't even hear the angel of the Lord. *(starts off s.l.)* I must find Grace, and tell her . . .

↳ MRS. SLOCUM. *(following)* I just wish now that I'd let her have Eugene to be the baby Jesus.

But the dove
they just went and captured.

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MRS. MCCARTHY. (*stops*) Who was the baby Jesus?

MRS. SLOCUM. Why, it was a doll.

MRS. MCCARTHY. Oh, I don't think so, Irma. That was no doll.

MRS. SLOCUM. Well . . . it did seem real. (*They exit.*)

(*Spot up on BETH, DS.R.*)

BETH. It did seem real, as if it might have happened just that way. We all thought the pageant was about Jesus, but that was only part of it. It was about a new baby, and his mother and father who were in a whole lot of trouble—no money, no place to go, no doctor, nobody they knew. And then, arriving from the East—like my uncle from New Jersey—some rich friends.

(*The curtain opens behind her. FATHER looks out, as if he's the one who pulled the curtain, and crosses to meet MOTHER, who enters from the opposite side. She is smiling and is obviously pleased with the pageant, the HERDMANS, and herself. He hugs her and they have a conversation which we don't hear, but can surmise—they are talking about the surprise success of the whole thing, about GLADYS, about the balky baby angels, about the ham. As they talk they gather up shepherds' crooks, hymn books, abandoned pieces of costumes, and then leave together. BETH's speech is simultaneous with this action.*)

BETH. Because of the Herdmans, it was a whole new story—Imogene, burping the baby, and the Wise Men bringing such a sensible present. After all, they couldn't eat frankincense! And even Gladys—"He's in the barn.

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Go see him" . . . so the shepherds didn't have to stumble around all over the countryside. (*Behind her, IMOGENE enters, looks around the empty stage, then lays the doll in the manger and leaves.*) But I guess it wasn't like that for Imogene. For her, the Christmas pageant turned out to be all wonder and mystery, as if she just caught on to what Christmas was all about. When it was over we had a party in the basement, but the Herdmans didn't stay. They didn't have any cocoa and they didn't walk off with all the cookies, and they wouldn't even take their candy canes. (*Behind her MOTHER and FATHER and CHARLIE enter. About to close up and go home. FATHER is wearing his bathrobe. BETH moves back to join them.*)

FATHER. I guess that's about it. Any kids left downstairs?

MOTHER. No, everyone's gone. . . . You know you have your bathrobe on. You aren't going to wear it, are you?

FATHER. Why not? Maybe people will think I was a shepherd. I wouldn't mind being taken for a shepherd in this Christmas pageant.

CHARLIE. Yes, you would! When it was over some lady came up and hugged me because I was a shepherd. . . . Should I bring this ham?

MOTHER. It's the Herdmans' ham from their welfare basket . . . but they wouldn't take it back. Leroy said, "It's a present. You don't take back a present."

CHARLIE. Leroy said that? They must hate ham.

BETH. You and Alice Wendleken!

FATHER. . . . What about the lights?

MOTHER. They're on a timer. They go off at midnight.

FATHER. That's not far away. (*looks at his watch, and*

Put line of
they just went
and

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then at the others) . . . It's almost Christmas. (*We hear, offstage, the sound of carillon bells.*)

MOTHER. . . . almost Christmas, kids.

BETH. . . . almost Christmas, Charlie.

(*Lights dim: Candles still on, as they reach out to each other, to touch hands, to draw together. We hear (with the bells and rising above them) a reprise of lines from the pageant, spoken by different people, so there is a mix of voices and pace. The lines should flow together.*)

"And it came to pass in the days of . . ."

"And there were shepherds abiding. . . ."

"A multitude, praising God. . . ."

"I bring you good tidings of great joy . . ."

GLADYS. (*offstage*) Hey! . . . (*She runs on to c.s. (spotlight on her), and points at the audience.*) . . . Hey, unto you a child is born!

(*All lights down for slow count of 4-5. Lights up. Entire company on stage, to sing 'Joy to the World'. We should hear the first phrase in a strong burst.*)

CURTAIN

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever – Alternate

As the play opens, the curtain is down. BETH is sitting s.r. ALICE and MAXINE are sitting s.l. Spotlight on BETH.

BETH. The Herdmans were the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars, even the girls, and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken down tool house.

(*Spot up on MAXINE and ALICE.*)

ALICE. And that's not all! Somebody sent five dozen doughnuts for the firemen and the Herdmans ate them all, and what they couldn't eat they stuffed in their pockets and down the front of their shirts.

MAXINE. And they wrote this really really dirty word on the back of Naomi Waddell's favorite turtle, so now Naomi can't take it to the Y.M.C.A. pet show . . . her mother won't let her.

ALICE. What was the word? (*MAXINE whispers it.*)

ALICE. (*horrified*) Oh-h-h!

MAXINE. And that's not all! They did it with fluorescent paint, so it glows in the dark. When you can't even see the turtle, you can still see the word.

ALICE. And they put a whole bunch of tadpoles in the school drinking fountain, and Miss Barnes swallowed

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two or three by mistake. Somebody yelled, "Mildred, stop! You're drinking tadpoles! . . . but it was too late.

MAXINE. Did she get sick?

ALICE. Not right away.

(Spotlight on BETH, as ALICE and MAXINE move off.)

BETH. And that's not all! (Change of tone and delivery here, to say to the audience . . . Now I'm going to tell you about the Christmas Pageant and what they did to that.) . . . There were six of them . . . (During BETH's speech the HERDMANS come on from the wings left and position themselves on and around the set piece, with GLADYS at the top level, in a pose reminiscent of the first illustration in the book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.) . . . Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys . . . and they went through the Woodrow Wilson school like those South American fish that strip your bones clean. And they went around town the same way—stealing things and tearing things up and whamming kids. So it was hard to get away from them. There was only one safe place.

CHARLIE. (offstage, singing) Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, Because there are no Herdmans there. But Jesus loves us, as they say, Because he keeps them miles away.

BETH. That's my little brother, Charlie. That's what he said when the Sunday school teacher asked what was his favorite thing about church. Charlie said, "no Herdmans." That made the teacher mad because all the other kids said nice things about God and Jesus and good feeling. But old Charlie told the real truth—No Herdmans!

Join family
Get rid of box

The Herdmans moved from good to bad
through the Woodrow Wilson School like those
South American fish that strip your bones clean
And they went around town the same way—stealing things
and tearing things up and whamming kids.

PROPERTY LIST

Stage right (Dining area)

- 1 table
- 4 chairs
- a cup/saucer (offstage)
- 1 newspaper (hand prop—Father)
- 2 telephones (hand props)
 - Mrs. Clark
 - Mrs. McCarthy
- 4 plates
- 4 glasses
- knives, forks
- 1 plate with bread
- 1 butter dish
- 1 pitcher
- 1 hat
- 1 coat
- salt-pepper shakers (off stage)
- 1 plate with chicken (off stage)

Stage left (living room area)

- 1 sofa
- 1 lounge chair
- 2 end tables
- 1 telephone
- 2 telephones (hand props)
 - Mrs. Slocum
 - Mrs. Clausing
- 1 hospital bed
- 1 telephone
- 1 paper bag (hand prop—Charlie)

put
they just work

no curtain

were heads

the girl