

"To Them That Sit in Darkness"

A Christmas Drama

By

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PLACE AND TIME

Bethlehem—Anniversary of Christ's birth in the year of His crucifixion.

SCENE

Late at night in a poor cottage on edge of village. Room is cold and bare. Rough table and benches. One low stool by fireplace, which is at right of platform. Door opens to outside at left front of platform. At back is a poorly shuttered window. A low wicker chair is also by the fireplace, facing audience.

As scene opens, there is a small boy of 12 sitting on the stool with his face toward the low-burning fire. He is whittling on a small piece of wood. His mother sits on the wicker chair close to him. Boy is concentrating desperately on the piece of carving. Platform is dimly lighted with candles.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MUSIC

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" would set the mood and scene before the curtain rises.

From the moment the bright star is seen through the shutters a violin solo of "O Holy Night" would be very effective if music is kept very low and soft.

CHARACTERS

PHEBE—Woman in early thirties. Soft-spoken. Sensitive. Dressed in very plain, straight garment with girdle around waist. Headdress of typical biblical woman. Dark shawl over shoulders. Flat-heeled shoes or sandals.

TIMOTHY—Straight bathrobe-type garment. Pieces of blanket around feet instead of sandals. Timothy is blind and must be careful to register blindness in all of his motions.

AARON—May wear either long or short garment. Dark colors; coarsely woven. Heavy, rough cloak. He is about the same age as Phebe. May be bearded. His hands are crippled. Fingers may be curled awkwardly, and his entire hand from wrist downward must be held stiff.

SHEREN—About 14 years of age. She may be dressed very richly and brightly. She is tender and compassionate and

WOMAN—She is much older than Phebe. Sad of face. Rich in voice. She is dressed somberly, but some trace of bright blue would be well. She should have a dark cape or hooded cloak. She sits in the chair by the fireplace with Timothy on the stool before her and Sheren on the floor beside him.

"TO THEM THAT SIT IN DARKNESS"

"To give light to them that sit in darkness" (Luke 1:79).

(Stage is quiet as the curtain opens. Then the boy gives a sharp, heartbroken exclamation and slings the small piece of wood he has been carving into the fireplace.)

TIMOTHY—It's no use, Mother. I will never be able to carve as well as Father did before his hands were crushed in the quarry. I see the things inside here *(points to his head)* and in here *(pounds his chest)* but, since I can't really see at all, I can't do it—that's all. I can't do it. *(Drops his head on Phebe's knee. She touches his head gently.)*

PHEBE—*(Tenderly)* You must have patience, Timothy, Son. The sleeping kitten you made yesterday was very nice. The old dealer at the market stall gave me the candles for it and asked for another one just like it.

TIMOTHY—But that's because I have a kitten. I can hold it and feel it. The little things I can see with my hands, I can do—but the other things! The whole world full of beautiful other things that I can never reach or see! Mother, why did I have to be born blind?

PHEBE—My dearest one, I do not know. But if 'twere possible I have loved thee more for being blind, Timothy.

TIMOTHY—Young Esau told me it's because my father, Aaron, blasphemes God and spends his time at the inn playing dice and drinking wine.

PHEBE—*(Sharply)* Young Esau has the spitefulness of a snarling jackal, Timothy. *(Thoughtfully)* I can't believe that God would let you sit in darkness just because your father scorns the idea of repenting and believing that Christ died for his sins. I cannot believe that God has shuttered your blue eyes forever, Timothy. I couldn't stand it—if it were true.

TIMOTHY—I wish we could have gone to Galilee last year when we first heard of the Galilean who could heal the blind. But now they say He is dead. They crucified Him!

PHEBE—Aye, Son. They crucified Him—last Passover time. Perhaps if we had gone . . .

TIMOTHY—It wasn't your fault, Mother. Father would not go. He laughed and said it would be a foolish journey. That if there was a man there who could do those great things he would charge a large amount of money, and we had scarcely enough for food and sandals.

PHEBE—Be patient, Timothy. We must have faith that someday you will see.

TIMOTHY—I try to be brave, Mother, but somehow I feel that He was the only One that could ever bring me light; and now He's gone. I'm hungry, Mother. Is there anything to eat?

(Phebe rises. Goes to table. There she unwraps a small hunk of bread. She pours the last of the milk from a pitcher into a small cup. She carries it to Timothy, who bows his head for a moment before eating it. When he lifts his head, he speaks.)

Aren't you eating too? Isn't there enough for both of us?

PHEBE—*(Bravely)* I'm not a bit hungry, Timothy.

TIMOTHY—But you haven't eaten much since day before yesterday. That's when you used the last of the flour. I know because I put my hand in the barrel yesterday while you were gone. The barrel is empty. We have no flour, have we, Mother?

PHEBE—Even if we haven't, Timothy, we have milk. We can live a very long time on milk. Tomorrow you can carve another kitten for the dealer and we will get a little flour. Your father may be home soon with the money from the firewood. He'll bring some meat with him.

TIMOTHY—*(His voice hardening)* Don't treat me like a baby! I know we'll have no milk. I know quite well Father sold the last goat yesterday and did not bring the money to you. Today he will not bring the money from the firewood either—or the meat!

PHEBE—O Timothy! Your ears are sharper than the meadow mice.

TIMOTHY—They have to be—they are both eyes and ears for

mé. Just you wait! When I get so I can earn lots of money with my carving, you won't have to sit in a cold house drinking stale goat's milk.

PHEBE—(*Putting her arm around Timothy*) I don't mind the cold or the stale milk as long as I have a boy like you. But we must stop this talking about your father. (*Phebe gets to her feet and moves about stage.*) There was never a better husband until his beautiful fingers were broken by the falling stones and he could no longer carve the birds and ships and flowers he loved so well. He grew unhappy first, then sullen and discouraged. The red wine mocked him into feeling gay, and for the first few times he won at dice. We must not cease to pray for him, Timothy.

(*Door bursts open. Cold blast of air follows the coarsely garbed man into the room.*)

TIMOTHY—Is it you, Father?

AARON—(*Roughly*) And who else would it be at this hour?

PHEBE—You—you did not bring the meat, Aaron?

AARON—(*Shrugs and lowers his head*) 'Twas my rotten luck. Each time I play I swear I never will again. They almost took the cloak from off my back. But they insist I join them. At least they make a fellow feel he's got some reason for living.

PHEBE—(*Sighing*) For myself I do not care, but Timothy needs good, hot broth.

AARON—(*Gruffly*) A fast won't hurt the lad. Tomorrow I will get another load of wood. Then we'll have meat and hot rolls filled with honey from the pastry shop.

TIMOTHY—(*Half weeping*) Tomorrow! Always tomorrow! I'm hungry now.

AARON—Keep a civil tongue, my lad. (*Sprawls on a bench by the table and turns to Phebe.*) Bartholomew, the grandfather of the innkeeper, was at the inn tonight. He talked us stiff all evening about the things that happened when he was keeping the inn. He says that it will be 34 years tonight since the man they called Jesus was born

in his stable. Imagine that, Phebe. The fellow that called himself King of the Jews was born in a cow manger. I don't have any use for those sactimonious Pharisees at Jerusalem, but I can't blame them for getting rid of a fellow with that much gall.

PHEBE—*(Stoutly)* But many believe that He was the Son of God, Messiah!

TIMOTHY—Even though He was born in a stable.

AARON—Baah!

PHEBE—Perhaps He died for us. The prophet Isaiah declared, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities."

AARON—Well, I'll take care of my own—.

TIMOTHY—He wasn't very old when He died, was He?

PHEBE—Just

TIMOTHY—That's your age, isn't it, Mother? Just think, you were a baby when He was. How would Grandmother have liked to cradle you in a manger with all the horses and sheep and things?

AARON—*(Proudly)* Your mother was born in a nice house, Timothy. They dressed her in long, soft dresses. She was the most beautiful baby in the whole world. *(Reaches out and puts his arm around Phebe.)* Then I think of how much you left to marry me, Phebe, I'm sorry—sorry I haven't made more of myself—

PHEBE—*(Touching him)* You try to overcome your faults with your own strength, Aaron. If only you would confess them to God and ask Him—

AARON—*(Pushes her away.)* Don't start that again. I—

(There is a rap on the door. Aaron opens it. Two figures stand there a moment before entering. One is a slender young girl. She has on a brilliant, rich gown under a dark, warm robe. The other woman is much older and sadder. She is dressed in quiet colors. The young girl stands quietly while the older woman throws back her mantle and faces Aaron.)

WOMAN—Peace to this house. Forgive us, Sir, for trespassing, at we are cold, young Sheren and I. 'Tis a bitter night out, although the stars are bright. We hoped that you would allow us to warm ourselves at your fire.

PHEBE—*(Quickly)* Come in. Come in. Throw off your cloaks and sit down. I would fix thee some warm milk but—

TIMOTHY—*(Breaking in bitterly)* We have no milk. We have no bread. My father thinks that we should fast because tomorrow is the birthday of the Man we call Messiah. But he does not believe in Him. He lost our money for meat, casting dice in the wineshop.

PHEBE—*(Horried)* Timothy!

AARON—*(Lifts a stick of wood from the woodbox.)* Another word from you and I shall thrash you.

PHEBE—*(Catches Aaron's arm.)* He's just a little boy—and we have guests.

(The older woman crosses to the fire and sits in the wicker chair. The girl sits down beside the boy's stool. She looks up at him and then gasps. One hand is raised to touch the boy's eyes. The woman watches.)

SHEREN—*(Gently)* You are blind!

PHEBE—Since birth.

TIMOTHY—Your hands are soft. They smell like the small cluster of bell-shaped flowers that grow by the creek. May I—touch them?

SHEREN—Here. *(She holds up her hands. His fingers run over them and down her wrists.)*

TIMOTHY—*(To Phebe)* Mother, I can see them with my fingers. Tomorrow I will carve them. I'll do them so nicely the dealer will have to pay a lot of money. I'll carve two of them together around a candle like this—

(Gropes for a round stick or candle and folds Sheren's hands around it. As she holds it, his fingers continue to move over and over her own. His face and entire posture show deep concentration.)

AARON—(Striding to him and stooping over him) No. No. Clumsy. The lines are all wrong. Here, like this. (His crippled hands awkwardly rearrange Sheren's fingers. They are cupping the candle now instead of being wrapped around it. Timothy explores the new arrangement and smiles in approval.)

TIMOTHY—My father was the finest wood-carver in Bethlehem before the stones rolled on his hands. I want to work with wood and stone just like him.

WOMAN—(Proudly) My Son worked with wood when He was small like you.

PHEBE—Is He a carver?

WOMAN—He was a Carpenter. My husband taught Him how to plane wood and nail the pieces straight. I have the first small thing He made. He was only three. (She reaches inside her garments and pulls out a small cross.)

PHEBE—(Drawing back slightly) Why, it's a— It's very nice.

WOMAN—(Wisely) ~~You do not like it.~~ I did not at first, but I put it away with His little clothes and now—now I would not part with it for all of Caesar's wealth. (Timothy has reached for the cross, and the woman places it in his hand.)

AARON—Timothy's first good piece was a star, wasn't it, Phebe? She put it away somewhere.

PHEBE—(Wistfully) We traded it last week for some oil. I often wonder how he knew to make it. He has never seen a star.

WOMAN—My Son had never seen a cross.

TIMOTHY—(To girl) What is your name?

SHEREN—My name is Sheren. My father's name is Jairus. We used to live in Capernaum. Now we live in Jerusalem.

TIMOTHY—(Awed) Jerusalem!

SHEREN—My father is a ruler in the synagogue.

TIMOTHY—It must be wonderful to live in Jerusalem and see

the Temple shining in the sun each day. I'm 12 years old, but I've never been to Jerusalem. I couldn't see the Temple anyhow—so I guess it doesn't matter.

WOMAN—My Son was 12 when He was lost three days in Jerusalem.

PHEBE—Lost? Three days? Weren't you frantic?

WOMAN—I thought my heart would burst. But when we found Him, I could not scold, for He looked at me as though I had failed Him, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" Of course He had to be about His Father's business there in the Temple courts. He had so little time—

SHEREN—(To Timothy) If Jesus of Nazareth were here, Timothy, He would make your eyes as good as mine.

TIMOTHY—That's what Mother and I have always thought. But now He's dead. They crucified Him. What kind of eyes do you have, Sheren?

SHEREN—Brown. My father says they shine like sunlight on wet, brown oak leaves, since Jesus raised me from the dead.

AARON—(Half rising from his bench) What's that? Raised from the dead? What crazy tale is that?

PHEBE—Aaron! (To Sheren) Don't mind his rudeness, child. I'm afraid the wine—

AARON—I had no wine tonight, Woman. They refused to let me drink without payment first. But answer me, Girl. What did you mean?

SHEREN—(Seriously) Just what I said, Sir. Jesus raised me from the dead. Really He did. I was very sick. A fire inside me seemed to take my breath. My skin was hot and red, and the pain was more than I can tell. I was so sleepy and all my breath went out of me at once. That is all I know except that when I opened my eyes again Jesus was there, and they told me I had died and He had raised me up again.

PHEBE—(To woman) She must have fallen into a deep sleep with fever.

SHEREN—No, I really died. The best physicians in the city said I was dead. But Jesus was nearby, and when my father heard of Him he went to Jesus and fell at His feet, begging Him to come to heal me. And Jesus did. Is it any wonder I loved Jesus?

TIMOTHY—(Excitedly to his mother) Remember, Mother? We heard something of it. Don't you remember the trader who stopped one day for water for his donkeys? He said Capernaum was buzzing with the story of the rich man's daughter whom Jesus had raised up. We never thought we'd see her, did we?

PHEBE—(To woman) Is this true?

WOMAN—(Nodding her head) His heart was ever full of compassion for the sorrowing ones. He wept for those who rejected Him.

AARON—An old innkeeper says He was born in his old inn stable just below the cottage here, that angels sang on the hillside over there. Do you know aught of those things, Woman?

WOMAN—Aye, it is truth, each word of it. 'Twas such a night as this with the stars flashing like lights on the fishing boats at night. And why should not the angels sing at the birth of such a Babe?

PHEBE—You knew Him as a baby? (Sheren raises her head as if to speak, but remains silent.)

WOMAN—Aye. I watched Him grow in favor with both God and man. I wept beside His brothers when He went forth into the world without a place to lay His head. They scoffed at Him, but He took scoffing calmly. "A prophet is without honor in his own country," He told them gently.

AARON—If His own family doubted Him, I do not see why my wife should grow upset because I fail to put my faith in Him.

PHEBE—(To woman) Sometimes I think my husband is far more blind than Timothy.

WOMAN—Yes, they doubted Him at first. But now they all believe. They could not doubt the empty tomb that Easter morning, nor

could they doubt the witness of the disciples who stood upon the mount and watched Him ascend into heaven on a cloud. They know. He'll come again—and then He'll truly reign as King.

PHEBE—Were you there when they crucified our Lord?

WOMAN—I did not leave until they laid Him in the Arima-thaeon's tomb.

PHEBE—But if He rose again, why did He have to die?

WOMAN—Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. The angel said, "He shall be called Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." And the prophets say there can be no remission of sin without the shedding of blood.

PHEBE—Then you believe that all who believe on Him will have their sins forgiven? that He has made one sacrifice for all?

WOMAN—Aye.

AARON—What happens to one who does not believe on Him?

SHEREN—He will be cast into outer darkness and punished for ever and ever.

AARON—(*Brushing her aside*) What do you say, Woman?

WOMAN—He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh to the Father but by Him. He came to His own and His own received Him not, for He was the Light and the world preferred darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

TIMOTHY—(*Passionately*) Anyone who prefers darkness to light should be blind for a while—just blind for a while, and he would soon see what it means to be shut away into darkness for ever and ever.

(*Silence for a moment*)

PHEBE—The hour is getting late. If you desire to spend the night at the inn, Aaron will light the lantern and take you there.

SHEREN—(*Quickly*) But we have already been to the inn. They sent us to you.

PHEBE—To us?

AARON—Why to us?

WOMAN—(*With quiet emphasis*) I asked to be directed to the poorest, neediest family in Bethlehem. They sent me here to the home of Aaron, the wine drinker and gambler.

AARON—(*Drops his head into his hands.*) God help me. They are right!

PHEBE—(*Goes to him quickly.*) They do not know how good you were before you became a captive to your sins.

TIMOTHY—Why did you want the poorest family, Lady? Did you bring us something?

WOMAN—Not food, my lad, not tonight—tomorrow perhaps. But He said, "Ye shall not live by bread alone."

PHEBE—(*Understanding a little*) You came to bring us word of Him?

SHEREN—Yes. That is why she came. Each year she plans to do the same, in memory of His birth.

WOMAN—At this same time I'll come each year to Bethlehem to bring the story of my Son and His salvation unto the poor and sinning in the humblest dwelling here. For we had no place to stay that night, and we were tired and hungry for milk and meat. The stable lad laid down his cloak against the hay, and there my Son was born.

AARON—You! You are the mother of Jesus?

WOMAN—Aye.

PHEBE—(*Rushes to her side.*) O my dear! Your Son was crucified!

WOMAN—(*Draws herself up proudly and smiles.*) Do not pity me, my daughter. I have been favored above all women. (*Her hand picks up the little wooden cross and replaces it inside her garment.*)

(*Aaron sits with head in hands at table. Phebe walks across to him and puts her hand on his head. He raises his head.*)

AARON—Wife, forgive me. I have made thee and our home the laughingstock of Bethlehem.

PHEBE— (*Gently*) Before your hands were hurt you were a better man than all of them.

AARON— (*Lifts his hands slightly and stares wretchedly at them.*) If they were only straight again!

PHEBE— (*Shakes her head sadly.*) They have twisted other parts of thee.

AARON— (*Passionately*) I did not mean for it to happen. God knows I did not!

WOMAN— There was One who came to make straight the crooked places.

(*Aaron turns toward her, then slowly pushes himself up from table and walks slowly to the small window in rear of stage. A gradual increase in the light draws Phebe to his side. Aaron lifts his twisted hands and speaks.*)

AARON— (*Stands, but drops his head into his hands in an attitude of prayer.*) God, God, be merciful to me a sinner. Straighten out my crooked places!

(*Aaron's hands slowly relax. He lifts his face and stares at them. He flexes his fingers slowly one by one and then drops quickly to his knees in thankfulness. Phebe kneels too. Sheren sits transfixed. The woman leans toward the puzzled Timothy.*)

TIMOTHY—What is happening? Why are you so silent?

WOMAN—He is here, Timothy. Do you not feel Him near? My Son is here; He has touched your father's hands and heart!

TIMOTHY— (*Awed*) You mean—? Oh, wonderful, wonderful!

WOMAN— (*Leans forward and takes one of Timothy's restless hands.*) When Jesus was a little boy like you He came to me and told me many things that He was meant to do. They were mighty wondrous things. I think He will do another one of them right now if you believe—