

Ryn- I'm glad you like them Rya.

Rya- It doesn't seem so bad to not be able to get around after Christmas comes. I only wish I could give you something.

Ryn- [sings] "While by my sheep I watched at night
an angel brought this message bright.
Said he, "A little child is born
and laid within an ox's stall
at Bethlehem this very morn
to lift us up from Adam's fall.

"Then I was glad
glad for the morning
glad for the morning of my Lord.

"And when I came to the manger bare
well found I could not go from there.
He looked upon my careworn face,
and humbly I did kiss his feet;
my heart let loose to his embrace,
my mouth became forever sweet.

"Then I was glad
glad for the morning
glad for the morning of my Lord.

"And when again to home I came
I found the child left me his name
this treasure I will guard with joy,
in memory of the heavenly boy."

CHILDREN OF THE NORTH

A CHRISTMAS PLAY

adapted from Raymond McDonald Alden's "In the Great Walled
Country" by Dixie and M. Ryan Taylor

This version adapted for use in a play reading.

Note: With only nine speaking roles, seven for children and two for adults (The Stranger and Grandfather Christmas), this play is ideal for a small family gathering or party.

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For information on performing this work in a public setting, please write to:
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Cast (in order of appearance):

Ryn (a shepherd)	First Child
Rya (his crippled sister)	Second Child
The Stranger	Third Child
The King (or Queen)	Grandfather Christmas
A Page	Courtiers and Townspeople

SCENE I - In front of a Cottage, two children are reading together.

Rya- “And 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.”

Ryn- “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid.”

Rya- “And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”

Ryn- I wish I could’ve been one of those shepherds and heard the angels singing. If it was today, I would bring the child the very best of our flock. It would be so wonderful to see the baby lying in the manger; oxen lowing, doves cooing in the rafters . . .

[A strangely dressed person enters wearing a backpack and toting an old-fashioned tape recorder]

Stranger- Pardon me for interrupting you, young sir and miss, is there an inn nearby where I could stay the night?

Ryn- An inn? [laughing] Oh, there are no inns around here. We don't have many visitors.

Stranger- I can imagine not, it was only by chance I found a passage through that wall of ice on the southern border of your country. The wall seemed to go on a long ways, both to the east and west. I could not see the end of it.

Rya- The wall surrounds our country on all sides . . .

Ryn- . . . and each side lies south of here.

SCENE V - [Grandfather Christmas' house, morning]

Grandfather Christmas- Good morning my grandchildren. What brings you here so early on this merry Christmas day?

King- Grandfather, there were no presents in the forest. We have come to ask why have you forgotten us?

Grandfather Christmas- I never forget anything, especially not my own. The presents were there. You did not see them, that is all.

First Child- But we searched long and carefully . . .

Second Child- . . . and in the whole forest we did not find a thing.

Third Child- Nothing that could be called a Christmas gift at least.

All Three- Only pinecones!

Grandfather Christmas- Indeed! And did little Ryn, the boy with the crippled sister, find none? [the three look away sheepishly] I see. The presents were there as I’ve said, but they were never intended for children who were looking only for themselves. I am not surprised that you could not see them. The gifts of Christmas are not to be taken for one's own, they may only be enjoyed in the sharing. Did not the angels sing songs, the wise men bear riches, and the shepherds give of their lambs to the young child? Was not the child himself a gift? You had better go home, and think about what I have said. Christmas will come again before you know it. [closes the door]

[Ryn is seen back at the cottage, passing his gifts to Rya.]

Rya- Oh Ryn, aren't they the most delightful things you ever saw?

Third Child- There are no presents in the forest. Only trees and snow.

Ryn- No presents! I have my bag full of them. I left many more behind than I brought away. There they are! I can see some of the things shining on the trees even from here.

[Ryn exits. The children run away to where Ryn had been pointing and then turn to each other disappointed.]

First child- I see nothing on the trees.

Second child- He must be sleep walking . . .

Third child- . . . yes, and dreamed that he found presents.

First child- . . . and filled his bag with cones from the evergreen trees.

[The king and the rest of the children enter.]

First Child- My king! What has happened?

Second Child- We went into the forest . . .

Third Child- . . . but there are no presents to be seen!

All Three- What shall we do?

King- It is the same in all parts of the forest. We must set out at once to visit Grandfather Christmas. I wish to ask him why he has forgotten us this year.

Stranger- [incredulously] Do you mean I have reached the top of the world?

Rya- Well, almost, Grandfather Christmas lives at the very top . . .

Ryn- . . . he's our neighbor, you know.

Stranger- This is a discovery! I had no idea I had traveled so far north!

Rya- Sir, our weather is mild as you can see, but you must have crossed hundreds of miles of ice and snow before coming to the wall. If I may ask, what makes you travel so far to our land?

Stranger- I am a collector of music.

Ryn- Really? What kind of music do you collect?

Stranger- Songs mostly.

Rya- What kind of a work is that? Ryn and I are shepherds.

Stranger- A noble profession, I'm sure. However, I am an ethno-musicologist doing research for my doctoral dissertation. I received a grant from the Vergesslichestadt foundation in Bonn to record [tapping on his recorder] the song traditions of America's northernmost Eskimo tribes. [hesitantly] I'm afraid I may have traveled a bit too far, you're not Eskimos are you?

Rya- [laughing] No, no, no . . . [laughing some more] do we look like Eskimos?

Ryn- Please excuse my sister, [aside] she doesn't get out much. [loudly] Besides, Eskimos don't tend sheep, it's much too cold down south of the wall.

Stranger- Oh dear!

Ryn - Come stranger. Your trip need not be wasted. We have many songs in our country, you could record them. It has been many hundreds of years since a stranger crossed into our land by chance. I'm sure you've not heard music like ours before.

Stranger- Perhaps this is a fortunate accident after all.

Ryn- Come with me to the palace. The king will gladly lodge you and there is no better place to hear song and story in our land.

Rya- Now you be careful Ryn, it's going to be dark soon.

Ryn- I think I'll stay over at the palace myself Rya, I'll see you in the morning.

Stranger- Goodbye child, I hope to see you again.

[They exit. Rya pulls out a crutch from beneath her chair and hobbles into the hut.]

SCENE IV - The forest edge by the Terline Tree. All the children have gathered together to sing carols and gather presents.

[Insert any carols you would like to sing together here.]

All- Merry Christmas!

King- Into to the forest everyone! Remember we each may only take what we can carry for our own. Good Hunting!

All- Goodbye! Farewell!

[Time passes. A small group of children wander out by the forest edge.]

First Child- There never has been such a Christmas Eve before!

Second Child- We've searched high and low and not seen anything but trees and snow!

Third Child- Could Grandfather Christmas have forgotten us . . .

First Child- . . . or maybe some dreadful accident has kept him away?

All Three- Oh, horror!

[They see Ryn approach with a full knapsack on his back and approach incredulous to question him.]

First Child- Ryn, what do you think about this strange Christmas Eve?

Ryn- Oh, are they not beautiful things? I think Grandfather Christmas was never so good to us before.

Second Child- What do you mean?

SCENE III - The town square, a large number of children are going about their business when the page enters, Ryn following closely.

Page- Good people, the king in his infinite wisdom has envisioned a way to bring greater joy to our Christmas season.

Ryn- The king? don't you mean . . .

Page- [aside] Hush Ryn! [to all] The king proclaims that instead of going separately into the Christmas tree forest to find gifts for family and friends as we have in the past, this Christmas Eve, and ever after, we will go into the forest together and pick out gifts for ourselves; thereby, no one can complain of what he has, or wish that some one had taken more pains to find what he wanted.

First Child- A bright idea!

Second Child- A bold, decisive action!

Third Child- What a good king we have!

First Child- So wise and great!

Second Child- Very wise indeed.

Third Child- Hurrah!

Ryn- This can't be good.

SCENE II - The Palace. The King is singing a carol by Richard Smert (1428-77) when Ryn and the Stranger enter.

King- “Nowell, nowell, nowell
Who ys there that singeth so
Nowell, nowell, nowell
‘I am here, Syre Cristesmasse’
‘Wellcome, my lord Ser Cristesmasse,
Wellcome to us all, both more and lasse,
Com nere, nowell.’
‘Dieu vous garde beau sire, tydinges Y yow bryng:
A mayde hath born a chylde full yong,
The weche causeth ye for to syng: Nowell.’”

Ryn- My king, may I introduce you to a stranger who has come by chance to visit our country.

King- Come, sit down and welcome!

Stranger- You are the king? but you're no older than Ryn here.

King- [with a smile] I don't expect you to understand, but I am actually a good deal older than Ryn or anyone else here, even you, I am quite sure. After all, I am the king - is that not how you choose the rulers in your land?

Stranger- No, I'm afraid not. How old are you?

King- Oh my, I don't remember rightly, time slips away here, it loses meaning after a while, but I was the first and am therefore the oldest.

Stranger- I see.

King- In any case, you are welcome to stay as long as you wish and partake of our hospitality. What brings you here?

Stranger- I am an ethno-musicologist doing research for . . .

King- A what?

Stranger- A collector of songs.

King- Well, you have certainly chosen a joyous time of year for that. It will be Christmas Eve tomorrow. You have come among us in a season of song.

Stranger- Splendid! A wonderful way to start. Could you sing me a song that might tell me a little about how you celebrate? For instance, in my country there is a very ancient tune called the boar's head carol:

“The boar’s head in hand bear I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary.
And I pray you my masters be merry.
Quot estis in convivio.”

Courtiers- [singing] “Caput apri defero
Reddens laudes Domino.”

King- Yes, we know that one. Every time Grandfather Christmas brings new children into the valley new songs from the birthlands travel with them. We also have carols of our own, of course; some are new, and others very old, taught to me by the Christmas Trees when I first came here. Yet I think I know the kind of carol you mean:

“Ae the Terline Tree a mirival is come
9 o’clock, chip a chock, greet all and some
greet all and some that cheer might abide
chinging and ringing the carols of Christmastide

“With mantle and glove cast by moon and starlight
a red sable coat trim with ermine so white

with trousers of blue like the dark midnight sky
comes Grandfather Christmas all thusky but spry

“Frae the Terline Tree a torrainfall set loose
10 o’clock, hollyhock, into the spruce
into the spruce to gather once more
from branches bowed under the presents in score
for friend and for neighbors they merrily swing
the gifts Old Man Christmas does bring”

Stranger- My! What is the history of that song?

King- History? Well, I don’t know quite what you mean. It is a living part of our yearly tradition.

Stranger- That is all very well, but I should think that children who have Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor could find a better and easier way. Your song tells me that you all go out on Christmas Eve to gather presents to give to one another the next morning. Why take so much trouble, and act in such a round-about way? Why not go out together, and every one get his own presents? That would save the trouble of dividing them again, and every one would be better satisfied, for he could pick out just what he wanted for himself. No one can tell what you want as well as you can.

King- This seems like a very wise saying.

Courtiers- Very wise indeed.

King- If we do this, no one can ever complain of what he has, or wish that some one had taken more pains to find what he wanted. Starting now we will follow this new plan. Page, proclaim to the people this good news.

[The page leaves, Ryn follows looking worried and doubtful]