

delved in earth to get thy gold, bent backs have paid the price of these fair goods, a little child hath slaved into the night so He might be broidered and tricked with lace. Go, take thy wealth and give it to the poor, He will receive it then, for they are He.

[The Kings depart. Mary takes no notice of them, her thoughts are far away.]

Mary: Oh, I do give to you my precious Son, to all the sons of mothers in the world, a sword shall pierce their hearts and also mine. I would not have Him be more God than man, and still He must not be more man than God. Oh, He must feel the very depths of pain, so He may know, and knowing, He may love. His love were naught did He not suffer too. Like them as men, an like Himself as God, a thousand fold more great. I give my Son unto the money changer and the scribes, and pharisees, they'll mock at Him and gamble for His coat, and drag Him in the dust. And yet I would not have it otherwise, if He may love enough, my Son, my Son. [pause] My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For he hath looked upon the low estate of His handmaiden: for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

– The Readers Sing: *Silent Night* –

THE STORY OF THE NATIVITY

by Susanna Clayton Ott
edited by M. Ryan Taylor

Dedicated to Lillian Burkhart Goldsmith

“This play is yours, my friend, that you may make it theirs.”

Editors note: This fanciful retelling of the story of the nativity was originally published in 1915, during the first World War. These hard times surely have influenced the re-writing of this story. Mary's rejection of the kings' gifts of worldly wisdom, might of arms, and wealth made from the enslavement of the poor were certainly meant as a social commentary on the time (no less poignant today). Mary's particularly harsh rebuke of the King of the North certainly speaks an anti-war sentiment. Also noteworthy is her repetition of the thought that it is Love which encompasses all true knowledge.

The first production was performed December 24th & 25th of 1915 at exposition park in Los Angeles, California.

This version has been adapted for use in a play reading.

Copyright © 2005 Vocal Works. All Rights Reserved.

For information on performing this work in a public setting, please write to:
Vocal Works, 856 N 350 W, American Fork, UT 84003

Cast (in order of appearance):

A Woman, who speaks the prologue
Five Shepherds of Judea (First Shepherd, Second Shepherd, etc.)
An Old Shepherd
A Shepherd Boy
Melchoir (his brother)
The Angel Gabriel
The King of the North
The King of the South
The King of the East
Joseph, a Carpenter of Nazareth
Mary, the Mother of the Child

A note on using this play for a play reading: If you don't have enough people to fill all the roles, here are a few suggestions for doubling up:

A Woman > Mary Gabriel > Joseph Shepherds > Kings

Prologue (optional): You who are come to hear, the play is yours.

It is for each and every one of you
As you may think; a play for rich, or poor,
Or wise, or simple, Christian, pagan, Jew,
Or those strange creeds of other hemispheres,
Who call Him Oromazd or Varuna.
The name, it matters not, tonight, perhaps
In some strange wise He is the same to each,
These others merely fashioned Him by their
Own virtues, customs, laws as was their need.
That which you bring, tonight, so shall you find;
It is but as it is for you and me.
For if the tale to you is tale divine,
Then so it is, –the play is surely yours!
But if, instead, the tale is but a tale,
It is still yours; for 'tis a lovely thing,

Mary: My friend, he knoweth much, who loveth much and 'tis not found in books. For love is the commencement and the end, the height and depth of all there is to know; the key to human hearts, the greatest book e'er wrote, and not by man, but God, Himself.

King of the North: I bring Him kingly power and knightly sword, I bring dominion over land and sea. I bring the strength of twice ten thousand men, who have not know defeat. Take Thou our sword, 'tis drawn from now but in Thy cause, great King.

Mary: Might is not right! And thou hast trodden down thy neighbor's field, and burned his house and church, in so-called righteous war, because the cause was thine! The gift which thou hast brought is tears of widowed wives, and children's cries to whom the fathers' ears are deaf! He needs it not! He does not wish thy lands. All lands are His. He knows not Ethiopia from Ind, the same to Him is Macedon and Cush. The Man without a country! No nation His! Lay here thy sword and let it rust, but not with widows' tears and blood of dead men's hearts, but with the kindly dew that makes the grass to grow where thou hast trod it down and with thy bloody heel! So take thy gift and go!

[The King of the North turns away in shame.]

King of the South: I bring Him frankincense, and myrrh, and chains of gold, and broideries intricate, and robes of purple dyes from the Phoenician town, a damask silk that cost a dozen years to weave, so fine it is with fingers skilled. I bring the ransom of an hundred kings, imposts of lands, ten cities's tax, the wealth he may not spend in twice a human span.

Mary: He needs no other wealth than charity. Blind men have

Fifth Shepherd: I have a secret sin, and so my gift would be unclean.

Mary: Dost thou sorrow for thy sin?

Fifth Shepherd: Aye! Aye!! I grieve, Lord God, most sore I grieve!

Mary: Then is thy gift most pure, a contrite heart, at which the gates of paradise do lift so high a hundred sinners are let in. Depart in peace, my son, and sin no more.

[The shepherds depart.]

All Kings [enter singing]: We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship Thee, the Father everlasting. To Thee all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein. To Thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry.

Joseph: Thou'rt welcome, friends.

King of the South: Peace rest upon this house.

Joseph: And peace with thee, and with the friends with thee.

King of the North: We come to worship at the shrine of Him, who's Master of us all.

Joseph: He resteth here.

King of the East: O, King of Kings, for whom the centuries have laid their ears upon the ground to hear the coming of Thy feet, I bring to Thee the sum of all the knowledge of the earth, it's wisdom, its philosophy; communion rare of scholars, who have spent their lives in searching for the truth, the whence and why, for I am old, and soon will pass, the day is young for thee.

Whose loveliness for twice one thousand years,
Has fed the hungry, lifted up the lame,
And made the blind to see. It has been fair
Enough that centuries have lived by it,
And fairer still, when they have come to die. –
And you, that one, who stands alone and says,
“This is the end; there is no God!” and still
Is not afraid, but lives that, somehow, good
May not be lost, the play is yours, my friend.
I know not quite what you may get from it,
And yet I know you'll hear with sympathy. –
And you, –if such are here, and there are such,
Wise men, who by their subtle reasoning, –
Oh, faith is not a thing of argument! –
Do hold this Christ is charlatan, a poor,
At best, deluded rhapsodist, that's dead
Two thousand years, to whom mere time alone
Ascribes these mysteries, –the play is yours!
For be He charlatan, yet from this worse
Than naught have men in their necessity
Shaped for themselves, out of themselves, this end
Toward which they reach, but never may attain!
They may not love enough, yet from their own
Imperfect love they wrought this perfect one.
And so the play is yours, not that you see
That men have failed, but failing, have aspired! –
Tonight, the text of you especial creed,
Does matter not, if when tomorrow comes,
You'll do a deed of charity, or speak
A Kindly word of him, your enemy;
Or say to her, your sister of the street,
“I, too, have sinned, the difference is that your
Temptation was not mine”. Oh, then, my friend,
The miracle is wrought, and Christ is born!

– The Readers Sing: *O Come, All Ye Faithful* –

First Shepherd: Oh, ho-ye! Ho-ye! Come ye up the hill and see the star!

Second Shepherd: It winks its eye and becks for me to come.

Third Shepherd: I left Melchoir to watch and ran along.

Melchoir: Ye-oh! Ye-oh! Ye-oh!

First Shepherd: I heard him call. There's naught to fear tonight, the sheep lie strangely still and flat upon the ground.

Shepherd Boy: 'Tis beautiful! See how it rests upon the tree as if it were a bird!

Fourth Shepherd: 'Tis a strange star should come down from the sky and roost him in a tree.

An Old Shepherd: Aye, aye, I, too, would see a star roostin' in a tree!

First Shepherd: And also winking his one eye at thee, O Nathan-Ben-Elezier, like wanton of the street.

An Old Shepherd: I, too, did read the stars, when I was young. It is the highest learnin' of them all.

Second Shepherd: As high up as the sky! [All laugh at the joke.]

Melchoir: Ye-oh! Ye-oh! Ye-oh!

First Shepherd: And he still calls.

Shepherd Boy: Grandma has told me often the tale of how the wise men have foretold a star would come and rest upon the roof of where is born the King of the Jews. O, Nathan, say, and could this be the Star of which they spoke?

Mary: It's like a cross! Oh, men have died on such a tree, until the very name, itself, hath come to mean a pain that must be borne. –He must know pain like other men, so leave the cross, my friend.

Fourth Shepherd: 'Tis but a string of beads, yet it hath charm against the evil one.

Mary: A string of crimson beads like drops of blood. Oh, I will clasp it warm about his neck.

Shepherd Boy: O, Mother, dear, I made a song, I made it as I came along, it is a song that mothers sing when baby's sleep is on the wing. [he sings]

Sleep, little Jesus, sleep,
The lambs no longer leap.
Birds on their nest
Have gone to rest
Sleep, little Jesus, sleep.

Sleep, little Jesus, sleep,
The stars a watch will keep,
With their one eye,
Up in the sky,
Sleep, little Jesus, sleep.

Mary: And didst thou make this song?

Shepherd boy: Aye, and with my heart.

Mary: A singing heart! Oh, let they heart so sing, my son, and may its song be heard. And thou, who standest there along, what hast thou brought?

Fifth Shepherd: I brought no gift.

Mary: No gift unto thy God?

of Nazareth.

Joseph: I am the man.

First Shepherd: Come in, this is the place. God's lamp above, I knew it had not lied. His Love ran faster than our feet and rests upon the roof.

Second Shepherd: We seek the Child. We bring Him gifts and would bow the knee.

Joseph: Enter.

First Shepherd: Unlearned are we except in love.

Mary: Who loves know all; it is a gift forever shared yet, sharing, ever doth remain entire.

First Shepherd: My gift is but a lamb, and yet it seems th mean some other thing, I know not what. There is a song, "O, Lamb of God", dost know it, ma'am?

Mary: Oh, aye, I know; this very night I heard it sung. The air was full of song.

Second Shepherd: I've brought to Him a shining cock, 'twill wake Him like a little clock. O, cockerel, my little dear, come lay ye down by Jesus here.

Mary: A cock! Somehow my heart doth stop and then run on apace at sound of that dread word! I seem to hear, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice!" I know not what it means, but still I thank thee, friend.

An Old Shepherd: I leave with Thee my staff; I need it not, for my poor legs do feel the joy of youth e'er since great Gabriel hath said that Thou art born.

An Old Shepherd: Maybe! Maybe! I, too, have heard the tale. And strange things than this hap every day. I sometimes think that if great Master Sun arose but once in each man's life, he'd stand in awe before the wondrous sight, and reckon the world were at an end. But that we see the sun rise every day, 'tis common like our wives do grow, when married forty years. Aye, aye, I, too, have heard the tale!

Third Shepherd: It becks as if it would have us go with it.

Fourth Shepherd: More like as not it would bewitch.

First Shepherd: And turn us mad; or maybe to an owl.

Second Shepherd: I dreamed a dream, last night. A devil pinched my leg, and in the morn, when I awoke, the spot was there, still red, -And now, here is the star!- And yet, they way there's naught in dreams!

An Old Shepherd: Oh, no, he is a friendly star. See how he bows at us. I, too, would bow at him. Good eve, fair sir. We'll speak polite, for e'en the de'il is pleased at fair spoke words. -Good even, sir, what would thou have of us poor, unbooked men?

Gabriel: Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, good will toward men!

First Shepherd: I fear! I fear!

Second Shepherd: Oh, heavens! I am afraid!

Gabriel: Fear not, for I bring ye good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all men: for there is born this day, in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord. And this is the sign unto you; ye shall find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And His name shall be

Jesus, and His mother shall be called Mary, and the man whom His mother hath married is Joseph, a workman of Nazareth. A star shall go to show the way, and it shall come to rest above the place where shall lie the Child, Jesus. Go, ye and find the place.

First Shepherd: And hath he gone?

Second Shepherd: Good heavens, what a scare!

Shepherd Boy: The Star! The Star! It is the Star, and we may go to see the King!

An Old Shepherd: Oh no, oh, no, that's going far, –But yet he were fair spoke,– And still! And still! –But oh, my very bones seemed filled with joy! I go! Lord of Heaven, I go!

Fourth Shepherd: We'll go and take Him gifts.

Third Shepherd: 'Twas Gabriel, Himself! The very same. I'll go with thee.

Second Shepherd: I'll take my cock, all shining like the day.

First Shepherd: And I will take, for Jesus' sake, a lamb as white as driven snow.

Fourth Shepherd: O, Nathan, Dost thou think he'd like a necklace made of beads that have a charm to help a teething time?

An Old Shepherd: Why would He not? Is teething such a pleasant business as that? Aye, take the beads!

Shepherd Boy: O, Nathan, I have naught that I may take. I may not go, because I have no gift!

First Shepherd: And why not sing for Him? A song would be a

King of the East: Lord have mercy upon us!

King of the North: O, Lord, let Thy mercy be upon us as our trust is in Thee.

All Kings: O, Lord, in Thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded.

– The Readers Sing: *Angels we have Heard on High* –

Mary: Oh, I hear voices, Joseph, voices singing.

Joseph: Nay, I hear naught.

Mary: Oh, I do hear! The air is full of song. Canst thou not here?

Joseph: Nay, surely naught.

Mary: 'Tis so? Perhaps Joseph, it is my heart that I do hear: “We praise Thee, we bless, we worship Thee.” The heart of every mother sings at such a time. Her heart could fairly burst with song. [pause] Thou dost not hear “Thou that takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us”?”

Joseph: I do not hear.

Mary: It is all heaven and all earth that sings within my heart, Joseph.

Joseph: There is someone knocking at the gate.

Mary: 'Tis people who are come to bow the knee; but oh, my heart bows lower than their knees!

Joseph: What wouldst thou, friend?

First Shepherd: We seek the man that's called Joseph, a carpenter

King of the South: And all the miles from where the Indus flows
across the desert hast thou walked?

King of the East: Aye, all the way I walked.

King of the South: Then I, too, walk.

King of the North: And I; but what way shall we walk?

King of the East: Patience, it is a virtue I have learned. The Lord
will show to us the way that we shall go.

[Suddenly it is night again. There is the blare of trumpets, and
Gabriel appears to the kings as he did to the shepherds.]

Gabriel: Ye learned men, who from the farthest ends o' earth have
come to seek Him born to-night, I bid ye see the star there
in the sky. Do follow it and ye shall know the way.

[And Gabriel is no longer there.]

King of the East: The Lord hath spoke. So set our faces toward the
star, and in His glory shall we walk.

[The Kings sing as they begin their journey.]

King of the South: O, Lord save Thy people and bless Thine
heritage.

King of the North: Govern them and lift them up forever.

King of the East: Day by day we magnify Thee, and we worship
Thee world without end.

King of the South: Vouchsafe, O, Lord, to keep us this day without
sin.

very pretty gift, and would it not, O, son of him, who's
called Elezier?

An Old Shepherd: Aye, aye, a song, a sweet and pretty gift, the
kind of song that's made for baby's sleep.

Shepherd Boy: Oh, I will sing to Him with all my heart.

Second Shepherd: Then come, let us away, the night grows old,
and sing so time will pass more pleasantly.

First Shepherd: O, Mary, Mary, Mother mild,
We go to seek thy Little Child,
We go to worship and to pray,
The Star leads on to show the way.

Second Shepherd: With hearts of love and happy song,
Come, brothers dear, let's march along,
O'er snow crest and woodland drear,
We know not hunger, cold not fear . . .

Third Shepherd: For Little Christ is born tonight,
A Babe, a God, oh, wondrous sight!

Shepherd Boy: Out gifts are very, very small,
But Jesus dear, they are our all.

An Old Shepherd: A bit of bread, a sup of wine,
On which our Little Lord may dine.

Fourth Shepherd: A string of beads.

Second Shepherd: A cock to crow.

First Shepherd: A lambkin white as driven snow.

All the Shepherds: And so we march across the down,
Until we come to David's town.

– The Readers Sing: *As with Gladness Men of Old* –

King of the North: We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship Thee, the Father everlasting.

King of the South: To Thee all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the Powers therein. To Thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry.

King of the North: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth.

King of the South: Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory.

King of the North: The glorious company of the Apostles praise Thee.

King of the South: The goodly fellowship of the Prophets praise Thee.

King of the North: The noble army of Martyrs praise Thee.

King of the South: The Holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge Thee.

King of the North: The Father of an Infinite Majesty.

King of the South: Thine adorable, true and only Son.

King of the North: Also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter.

King of the North & the King of the South: Thou are the King of Glory, O, Christ. Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

King of the North: Good even, friend.

King of the South: Good eve to thee, and canst thou tell us of the

way to seek the King, who's born this night to all the universe?

King of the North: We, too, would know the way to Bethlehem.

King of the South: Far from the south, where Father Nile doth flow from out the snows of Ethiopia. We've journeyed here, and we are spent and done.

King of the North: And we from where the North Star hangs all bright upon the dipper's lip. We come to bring our fealty unto the new-born King. We bring the gift of mailed hand and strength of nations great in arms. We draw our swords in His good cause, the cause of Christ the King.

King of the South: And we bring gifts of gold and frankincense, rich fruits from far oases of the plains, and raiment rare; a king must feast, and must be robed to suit his royalty. But here a stranger comes, an aged man with beard upon his breast. We'll ask of him.

King of the South: Peace be with thee, Brother.

King of the East: And peace also with thee, and with thy house.

King of the North: God be with thee. And dost thou know the way to Bethlehem?

King of the East: We, too, would know the way to that same town. Far from the plains of Ind to find the place we've journeyed here as flies the bird across the trackless wastes of the unchartered skies.

King of the South: And hast thou walked the way?

King of the East: Aye, all the way. It were not meet to ride upon so rich a quest.