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CHRISTMAS BELLS

A One Act Play for Children

by

ANNA J. COOPER



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HANNAH, aged eleven, "the little Mother," who has the care of her two sisters, while the Mother works by the day, away from home. The Father is a soldier, across the sea.

NANNETTE, aged eight

ANNIKINS, aged four

THE THREE KINGS,—

Gaspard, a European,
Melchior, an Asiatic,
Balthazar, an African.

Chorus of Angels

Chorus of Shepherds

Sunshine Club of the Community Service. Soldiers. Red Cross Nurses.

SCENE I

Before the curtain rises, Christmas chimes are heard, playing distinctly,—“Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn, Whereon the Savior of mankind was born.” At the close of the chimes a pause of 30 seconds absolute silence; after which there sounds shrill and clear a single stroke of a bell. The curtain rises, disclosing a room of a humble family of three children. “The little Mother” is busy about the evening meal; Nannette is setting the table; Annikins, on the floor, cuts pictures for paper dolls.

NANNETTE. What are the bells ringing for?

HANNAH. Why, don't you know dear? They're ringing for the Christmas Child—for His birthday. This is Christmas Eve!

ANNIKINS. Is Christ Child coming here?

HANNAH. *(Thoughtfully)* Why yes, Annikins. He will come to us if we try to be kind and good.

NANNETTE. Sister, can't we possibly have a Christmas tree this year?

HANNAH. I'm afraid not, deary. But we'll try to be happy just the same. We'll play “make believe” and make each other wonderful presents. It's lots of fun! And write letters to Daddy, and we'll ask the Christ Child to bring Daddy safe home to us, and then mother will not have to work so hard down town. And we'll ask the Christ Child to bring us sweet Peace and Good Will. Because He is the Prince of Peace, and that's what He is coming for. And then I s'pose we ought to pray for Democracy, 'cause that's what Daddy is fighting for.

NANNETTE. What is Democracy?

HANNAH. I'm not sure I know, little sister. It's kind of hard to understand. But it must be what the Christ Child wants every where in the world—for it means every body will be good and kind to every body and there'll not be any poor people who can't get enough to eat, nor any unkind people who scorn and hate. Just all the world will love each other like you and I and Annikins love one another. Every body will be helping to make the world good and pleasant for every body else and so the Christ Child will come back to us again and He will be our Big Brother and all the people will be brothers 'cause you see they will all be His brothers. Come now Annikins, put away your paper dollies. Supper is ready.

(She smooths the child's hair, examines hands and face to see that they are clean, and lifts her into a high-chair at the table. The others take their places and, with bowed heads and folded hands, sing the grace)—

God is great and God is good,
And we thank thee for this food;
By thy hand must we be fed,
Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen.

ANNIKINS. Pass the sugar! *(correcting herself)* Excuse me sister, *please pass the sugar!*

HANNAH. Oo-h Annikins! *Don't* take quite so much, love! Uncle Sam says we can't have any more sugar till next month!

ANNIKINS. *(Confidentially to her big sister)* you tell the Christmas Child *I want some sugar,—hear?* *(Carol singers are heard outside)*

HANNAH. Hush, child, listen. It's the carol singers!

CAROL SINGERS.

Christmas where children are hopeful and gay,
Christmas where old men are patient and gray,
Christmas with peace, like a dove in its flight,
Over brave men in the thick of the fight.

Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight!

Immediately after the carols the Sunshine Club come bursting in, covered with snow. The boys wear mufflers. Some have ice-skates hung over their shoulders. Two of the boys lug in a tree all ready to set up. The girls have their arms full of trinkets for the tree and presents for the children. They are bubbling over with spirits and gayly shouting,—“Merry Christmas Hannah! Merry Christmas Nannette! Hello, Annikins! Merry Christmas!” Their leader gives the child a bear-hug, and presents her with a wonderful doll, almost as big as the four-year-old herself. Nannette gets a beautiful red dress and a string of beads. The children clap their hands in glee. While dressing the tree they sing.

There's a wonderful tree a wonderful tree
The happy children rejoice to see.
Spreading its branches year by year
It comes from the forest to flourish here.
Oh this beautiful tree with its branches wide
Is always blooming at Christmas Tide;
And a voice is telling its boughs among
Of the Shepherds' watch and the Angels' song;
Of a holy Babe in the manger low—
The beautiful story of long ago—
When a radiant star threw its beams so wide
To herald the earliest Christmas Tide.

(Joining hands, and singing, they dance around the tree)

HANNAH. (*A little shyly at first*) Oh thank you! Thank you so much girls. What a beautiful tree! Oh, we are so happy—I had no idea we would have a *tree!*

1st SUNSHINE GIRL. (*Hanging a small doll on the tree*) Here is a baby-doll for Annikins; skates for Nannette. And here, little Mother, is a gay peasant-kerchief and a picture storybook for *you*. I know you'll read the stories to the rest. Hannah never keeps anything all for herself!

HANNAH. (*Somewhat embarrassed*) Oh girls, I—I can't tell you how much—Oh, I mean you are *so* good and kind—I just don't know how to thank you.

1st SUNSHINE GIRL. Oh don't thank us at all, just thank the Christ Child!

2nd SUNSHINE GIRL. All who love the Christ Child are trying to make little children happy tonight, don't you know? We don't want a single child to be forgotten. His love will warm and cheer the loneliest child on earth.

HANNAH. (*Thoughtfully*) Yes. All for the Christ Child who was born tonight. To love Him is to love all little children.

SUNSHINE GIRLS. (*Putting on their wraps, waving Merry Christmas to all; shaking hands affectionately with Hannah*). Good night everybody! Be good children! Good night,—good night!

THE CHILDREN. Good night! Merry Christmas!

ANNIKINS. (*Piping up*) Au revoir-au revoir! (*Exit S.S. Club laughing and throwing kisses. A pause*)

NANNETTE. What a wonderful tree! (*They examine the presents*)

HANNAH. (*Bustling to hide her emotion*) Come now
(*takes Annikins by the hand*). The Christ Child has sent
us perfectly lovely friends and I am so glad you have
your Christmas tree after all! Kneel down children. An-
nikins, put your hands together. (*They all kneel and re-
peat a prayer*)

Oh holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
Oh, come to us—Abide with us,
Our Lord, Emanuel.

(*During the prayer the stage is gradually darkened, so
that the children are no longer visible*)

SCENE II

The Children's Dream City.

CHRISTMAS ANNO DOMINI. *Two strokes of a bell.*
*On the screen a still life night scene of the City of Beth-
lehem. Shepherds with flocks in the middle distance
chorus by radio transcription:*

HYMN. (*Chorus or transcription*)

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King
And peace to men on earth!

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But, in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

HYMN. *(Chorus or transcription)*

While shepherds watched their flock by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

"Fear not," he said, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind;
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind."

(A strong white light is thrown on the stage. A shining Angel descends and sings)

ANGEL.

"From Heaven above to earth I come
To bring glad news to every home;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
Whereof I now do tell and sing.
To you tonight is born a child

Of Mary chosen Mother mild;
This little child of lowly birth
Shall be the Joy of all the Earth.

*(There appears suddenly from all sides a throng of
angels who sing in chorus)*

ANGELS.

All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace.
Good will henceforth from heaven to men
Begin and never cease.

*For chorus of angels, "Glory to God:" from Handel's
Messiah may be used if preferred. Angels disappear
suddenly (effected by manipulation of lights). Enter,
left back, Shepherds wearing loose tunics, carrying
crooks, and singing:*

SHEPHERDS.

Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem!

*(Exeunt Shepherds right. The stage is dark. There
appears, dimly at first, a star just visible in the dark-
ness. As the star grows brighter the three Kings, L,
back, pass to the front, R, singing):*

THE KINGS.

We three Kings of Orient are,

Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain,
Moor and mountain,
Following yonder Star.

(Refrain)

O Star of wonder—star of night—
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

GASPARD.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, ceasing never
Over us all to reign.

MELCHIOR.

Frankincense to offer have I—
Incense owns a Deity nigh.
Prayer and praising, all men raising,
Worship Him—God on high.

BALTHAZAR.

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

(Refrain)

THE THREE KINGS.

Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Earth to heaven replies.

(Refrain)

(As the Kings leave, the stage is again dark. The star alone is seen, in the middle distance. Gradually one spot begins to glow till, in the full radiance, is seen the group around the manger cradle (based on Correggio's Holy Night). While the Chorus sings softly, the Shepherds enter and adore; later the Kings)

ANGELS.

Holy night, Silent Night!
All is calm all is bright
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace!

Silent Night, Holy Night,
Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from Heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Savior is born.

Silent Night, Holy Night,
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

SECOND CHORUS.

Sleep, Holy Babe, upon thy Mother's breast;
Great Lord of earth and sea and sky!
How sweet it is to see thee lie
In such a place of rest!
Sleep holy Babe, thine angels watch around,
All bending low with folded wings,
Before th'incarnate King of Kings.

*(The scene fades in darkness. A long silence.
Three strokes of a bell)*

SCENE III

1942. CHRISTMAS ON THE BATTLEFIELDS

*(Where now are "Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men?"
In a ghastly gleam of red, soldiers in helmets, gas
masks, marching, marching, marching, falling, dying.
Red Cross Nurses minister to the wounded)*

SONG OF THE SOLDIERS. *(The Rose of No Man's
Land)*

There's a rose that grows on No Man's Land,
And it's wonderful to see;
Tho'dimmed with tears
It will live for years
In my garden of memory.
It's the one red rose the soldier knows,
It's the work of the Master's hand;
Mid War's great curse
Stands the Red Cross Nurse:
She's the Rose of No Man's Land.

THE NURSES. *(Holding their arms aloft)*

Lord God of Love, let us have peace!
From War's vain sacrifice
Give us release.
Grant Peace the victories
War cannot know.
God of the Ages!
Hast Thou not seen
Thy fields and meadows green
Red with the blood of men where War hath been?
Dost Thou not know War's fearful endless roll—
The countless graves of those who paid the toll?
Teach us to build, Oh gentle Lord, not to destroy.
Forge these bleeding swords into plowshares,

thy fields to increase.
Lord of the lives to be—Let us have peace!

(They kneel)

God of the fatherless, we pray to Thee,
Father of all of us, hear Thou our plea;
Peace and Good Will to men are willed by Thee—
Lord God of Love, Let us have Peace!

QUARTETTE. *(Softly).*

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers Peace within.

Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?
On Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know and He is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.

Once more on the darkened stage there appears the shining way of the Angel, who spreads protecting wings over the sisters (sleeping center). Nurses still kneeling L, Soldiers R. Angel, elevated center, over children. Angel sings with deep significance and tenderness:

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

After the Angel's song of promise, Nurses and Soldiers, inspired with hope and courage, burst forth in a triumphal strain.

CHORUS.

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out the shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold:
Ring out the thousand wars of old:
Ring in the thousand years of peace!

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be!

The Christmas Chimes, which have been playing throughout the hymn, as if in the distance, now peal forth in a loud and joyful clamor. After which darkness, and again a silence.

SCENE IV (as in Scene I)

The children are discovered asleep at their prayer.

HANNAH (*Arousing herself*): Twelve o'clock! Dear me! Almost time for Mother to come home, and Annikins hasn't been put to bed! What will Mother say! (*Staring in front of her as if dazed*) But I have had a most wonderful dream! I thought I saw—(*rubs her eyes as if trying to make sure she's awake. Turns to waken the other children*) Annikins! Nannette! wake up! Wake up, Dear. We ought to have been in bed long ago!

ANNIKINS. (*rubbing her eyes and looking around—points center*): Christ Child! He was wight dere—'cause I seen Him!

NANNETTE: I dreamed I saw Daddy marching and the Angel was bringing him home to us.
Hannah gives her a startled, half incredulous look.

NANNETTE, (*Arguing the point*):

Well, didn't *you* say that the Christ Child would come to us if we tried to be kind and good? And didn't *He* say He loved little children and wanted them to come to Him? And didn't *we* ask Him to come to us just a little while ago?

HANNAH, (*slowly and dreamily*).

Yes, Dear—and may be—

(*Mother enters*) Oh Mama! (*Conscience stricken as she remembers her charges*).

NANNETTE: Oh Momsie! We've got a Christmas tree!

(*The Mother soothes her excited children and takes Annikins in her arms.*)

ANNIKINS: An'—An' Muvver! Christ Child Come! He
brought me some sugar!

*The tree is mysteriously alight. It glows marvelously
as the curtain slowly descends.*

TABLEAU