

A Respectable Birth

A One-Act Play for Christmas

By Kevin Stone

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DEDICATION

For Mr. Capps, my first drama teacher.

SYNOPSIS

Simon, a well-to-do man living in Bethlehem, awaits the birth of his son. He has charged his servants with the task of preparing a cradle, and they embark on a frantic, last-minute search for something suitable. Simon's night is interrupted by someone at the door—a pregnant woman and her husband seeking a place to stay. Preoccupied with his own business, Simon callously turns the couple away.

Abigail, Simon's sister-in-law, arrives in time to help with the birth. She and Simon discuss an ancient prophecy which mentions Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. The servants return with an improvised crib, which is nothing more than a manger which they have found in a nearby stable. Simon loudly rejects the manger and sends the servants out to find a "real" cradle.

The servants take the manger back to the stable. A few moments later, Mary and Joseph enter the stable. After seeing that his wife is comfortable, Joseph finds the manger and begins to consider its usefulness.

Back in Simon's house, Abigail sees a falling star and wonders what it portends. Simon dreams of what his son will be like as he opens the gift he received from Abigail—a blank scroll. Three shepherds arrive in a state of high exhilaration, bearing news of angels, songs, and a baby in a manger. Just as the shepherds are leaving to find the baby, Simon receives word that his son has been born and the servants arrive with a cradle "fit for a king."

In the stable, Mary and Joseph care for the baby in the manger. The three shepherds arrive and reverently approach the child. In Simon's house, Abigail is bending over the ornate cradle which holds her nephew. In the play's final line, we learn the name of Simon's son—Judas Iscariot.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 3 w, 5 flexible)

SIMON: A pragmatic businessman with a mercurial disposition; soon to be a proud father.

ABIGAIL: Simon's sister-in-law; a romantic and a poet at heart.

DORCAS: The wry household maid with the ability to either fuel or extinguish Simon's temper.

MEGDALAH: Simon's servant and Reuben's self-appointed boss. *(Pronounced Meg-DAH- lah.)*

REUBEN: A high-strung, perpetually nervous servant who forgets things.

3 SHEPHERDS: Excited by the appearance of the angels.

MARY *(non-speaking role)*

JOSEPH *(non-speaking role)*

INNKEEPER *(non-speaking role)*

**The following parts can be male or female:*

Megdalah (change the name to Bart/Bartholomew)

3 Shepherds

Innkeeper

PRODUCTION NOTES

In the shepherds' scene, the three shepherds are giddy with excitement after what must have been a life-changing experience. Their intensity throughout the scene must never lag. Their lines are designed not to create personalities but to assemble a mosaic of high-powered emotion. Three shepherds, one voice.

Abigail recites from Micah 5:2. Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Gehenna: Jewish equivalent to the Christian understanding of "Hell."

Bedlam: A truncated form of the word Bethlehem which came into usage as a popular name for an English asylum, the Hospital of St. Mary's of Bethlehem, in London.

SETTING *(See diagram at the end of playbook.)*

Main Stage: Simon's home in Bethlehem. SR is an open doorway leading to the rest of the house. DSR, in the corner, is a chair and a desk containing a candle, various small scrolls, some reed pens, and an ink well. SL is a door, leading outside, and an open window through which a starry night is visible. Also on stage are a floral arrangement, a basket of bread, and a small table with some candles. DS are stairs leading directly to the audience level.

Stable: An open doorway UPS leads into a small area strewn with straw. Abstract lighting dimly reveals the entrances to crudely constructed stalls. The manger is hidden within one of these stalls. Above the stable build a rustic wooden framework. Let two of the pieces of framework jut out and cross each other, forming a slanted cross almost directly over the manger.

PROPERTIES

firewood	hammock
bag/basket with a wrapped scroll	manger
pillows, sheets, frills	amateurish mobile
lamp and blankets	fancy, ornate crib

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Simon's home. The door, SL, opens, and MEG enters carrying a load of firewood. She stops, quickly adjusts as the load shifts, and then very carefully, with one foot, closes the door behind her. She sighs and begins to step away from the door when REUBEN enters abruptly. The swinging door hits Meg, who drops the wood.)

REUBEN: Meg! Oh, Meg! Oh—!

(HE sees what he has done and turns to flee. MEG grabs him.)

MEG: Oh no, you don't!

REUBEN: Sorry, sorry, sorry!

(MEG drags REUBEN inside and shuts the door.)

MEG: Yes, you are! You're sorry!

REUBEN: I was just looking for you!

MEG: Well, you found me! At least tell me what you want!

REUBEN: I'm really sorry, Meg! Terribly sorry! The most sorry I've ever been! 'Cept for that time you lost your eyebrows.

MEG: I wouldn't bring that up again.

REUBEN: But that was an accident, too!

MEG: I see the similarities.

REUBEN: I didn't know you were standing there!

MEG: Reuben—

REUBEN: Honest! I never would've barged in like that—you know that—it's not like me, except—

MEG: Forget it!

REUBEN: OK!

MEG: Just—forget it!

REUBEN: All forgotten!

MEG: Good. Give me a hand.

(THEY begin gathering the fallen wood.)

REUBEN: You're not mad at me, Meg?

MEG: Did I say that?

REUBEN: Oh.

MEG: And my name is *Megdalah*.

REUBEN: I know. But when I get excited, I—forget things.

MEG: Like the last half of people's names?

REUBEN: Meg-da-lah. I remember it now.

MEG: That's because you've calmed down. What got you excited, anyhow?

REUBEN: I almost forgot! Meg, it's the most important job I've ever had! And I've *failed!*

MEG: You forgot to gather the wood. It's not the first time.

REUBEN: It's worse than that. A thousand times worse! Oh, I hate being a failure, Meg!

MEG: Think you'd be used to it by now.

REUBEN: You gotta help me, Meg! (*MEG growls.*) Da-lah! Megdalah! We're supposed to find a cradle!

MEG: A cradle? A baby cradle?

REUBEN: For infants.

MEG: (*Motioning with her head toward the door, SR.*) For her baby? (*REUBEN nods.*) This is a fine time to be thinkin' of that. She's already in labor.

REUBEN: (*Whining.*) I know, I know. Dorcas just told me—and that's what reminded me we gotta get a cradle.

MEG: You need to get a better *memory*, Reuben.

REUBEN: It's not like I can go to the marketplace and *buy* one.

MEG: Have you tried?

REUBEN: I watch the sales.

MEG: (*Starting to exit, SR, with her wood.*) And in the meantime, you're in trouble. Again. And you're on your own. I'm tired of pullin' you outta scrapes.

REUBEN: *We're* in trouble.

MEG: (*Stops and turns.*) You've been saying "we" all along, haven't you?

REUBEN: Both of us are in trouble.

End of Freeview

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