

# Birthday in Bethlehem

A Nativity Play in One Act

By  
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# BIRTHDAY IN BETHLEHEM

## CHARACTERS

The Narrator

Mary

Joseph, a carpenter

The Angel Gabriel

Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome

Amos, a shepherd

Benjamin, a shepherd

The Innkeeper

Hepzibah, a donkey

Bathsheba, a sheep

Sheep, Shepherds, Oxen, Cows, Villagers, Caesar's Entourage, Singers, Musicians.

Running Time: Approximately 30 minutes

## A FEW NOTES

The piece is to be played with the knockabout good humour and melodrama found in the mediaeval mysteries. The poignant bits speak for themselves. The characters can speak in any number of regional accents. Caesar and the Angel Gabriel are both grand in manner and sound, though Gabriel is easily deflated. Caesar has eager minions to wait upon him, if the numbers are available. I have asked for an excerpt from *Aida (the Grand March)* for his appearance, though any suitably well-worn piece of martial music will do.

The setting should be simple, with a few props brought on and taken off to indicate scene changes. For the stable, a simple painted cloth, or large pieces of card, hung on a trundling clothes rail would do very nicely. Bales of hay may be made from dressed up cardboard boxes. Music should be live if possible, with instrumentalists or an organ, and maybe a small choir if the resources are available.

The star of Bethlehem is mounted on the end of a stick, worked probably by the NARRATOR to go with his words. The star should be silver, possibly with a long tail like a comet.

Appropriate Christmas carols can punctuate the action but remember that these will increase the overall length of the piece.

Masks may be used for the animal characters. I suggest that they are mounted on sticks and held in front of the face so that it's easy for a performer to double as a human or angel.

## **BIRTHDAY IN BETHLEHEM**

MUSIC.

*(The NARRATOR appears. As he speaks, he sets the stage with simple props for the first scene.)*

NARRATOR:

Once, in Royal David's City stood a lowly cattle-shed, where a mother laid her baby – in a manger for his bed. Mary was that mother mild – Jesus Christ her little child.

*(The music fades.)*

Our story begins a long time ago, and very far away, in a village called Nazareth –

Nazareth is a run-down sort of place, and the people who live there are very poor ...

*(JOSEPH enters. He has lots of carpentry tools with him and busies himself with bits of wood. He is an elderly man, and he is singing.)*

JOSEPH:

Roses are red, violets are blue,  
Honey is sweet, and so are you ...

*(He sighs contentedly as he hammers at something.)*

NARRATOR:

The locals may be poor, but this one seems happy enough. This is Joseph – and Joseph is a carpenter. Sawing here, hammering there and as he saws and hammers he can think of only one thing – or rather, only one *person* ...

MARY: *(Calling from offstage:)*  
Joseph! Joseph!

*(JOSEPH stops work, beaming.)*

NARRATOR: Yes, that one person is Mary.

*(JOSEPH sighs happily again. MARY enters. She carries a shopping basket.)*

Mary is Joseph's wife – and she's a lot younger than he is.

JOSEPH: Hello, Mary!

MARY: *(Startled:)*  
Oh Joseph, I didn't see you there.

JOSEPH: And where are you off to?

MARY: You *know* it's baking day today, Joseph. I'm off to market for olive oil and flour.

JOSEPH: Well, don't drop it now, will you?

MARY: Do I ever?

JOSEPH: There's a first time for everything, my duck.

MARY: *(Playfully:)*  
Get about your work, Joseph! I'll be back in time for lunch.

JOSEPH: Righty-ho! I've got some tables and chairs to finish in the workshop. Nearly done. I'll see you later ... *(He waves to her and goes out.)*

MARY: Bye-bye, Joseph ... *(She is left by herself.)* My Joseph is such a

*kind* man. He's a very good husband, all things considered – not like some. And that's what matters – to me, anyway. I know he's getting on a bit, but he does make lovely cupboards ...

*(As she turns to exit, the ANGEL GABRIEL suddenly appears.)*

GABRIEL: *(Grandly:)* Hail, Mary!

MARY: *(With a cry of alarm:)* Eek!

GABRIEL: Hail Mary – *full of Grace!*

MARY: You made me jump.

GABRIEL: Sorry.

MARY: It isn't right ...

GABRIEL: I said I was sorry.

MARY: And who are you, anyway – where have you come from?

GABRIEL: *(Puffing himself up and making an announcement:)* I am Gabriel, the Angel of the Lord.

MARY: An angel? Fancy that. Am I having a vision?

GABRIEL: Yes, Mary. A vision.

MARY: But visions are for special people – prophets and suchlike. I am just a simple village girl.

GABRIEL: A simple village girl who is blessed by God.

MARY: Whatever do you mean, sir?

GABRIEL: Mary, you are going to have a baby.

MARY: *(Shocked:)* Excuse me, I am *not!* Joseph and me – well, it isn't like that with him. Never has been. What are you suggesting!

GABRIEL: Mary –

MARY: *(Unstoppable:)* The very idea!

GABRIEL: Let me explain ...

MARY: No thank you! I've a good mind to –

GABRIEL: *(Bellowing:)* Mary, will you listen to me!

*(A beat.)*

MARY: Well? *(She listens.)*

GABRIEL: The babe in your womb is no ordinary child.

MARY: No?

GABRIEL: No. He is the Son of God.

MARY: The Son of *God?*

GABRIEL: *(Solemnly:)* The Son of God.

*(A slight pause. GABRIEL stares intently at MARY.)*

MARY: I don't think I want to hear any more. You're scaring me.

GABRIEL: You have nothing to fear, Mary. The Holy Spirit is with you.

MARY: *(Uncertain)* Go on ...

GABRIEL: And when your child is born -

MARY: Yes?

GABRIEL: He will be a King -

MARY: Ooh!

GABRIEL: And you will name Him Jesus.

MARY: *(Disappointed:)* Oh.

GABRIEL: What's wrong with that?

MARY: Well, I don't really like the name Jesus. Can't I call him Malachi?

GABRIEL: No! *(Getting carried away:)* He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest ... and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His Father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end ...

*(Music swells triumphantly as GABRIEL speaks. A pause.)*

Well, Mary?

MARY: Well ... I don't really know what to say. I suppose it's all a bit of a shock ... Just think – me, a mother ...  
*(She is deep in thought. Then:)*  
Mister Angel ...?

GABRIEL: Yes, Mary?

MARY: God knows I have always tried to be true to Him.

GABRIEL: Yes, Mary.

MARY: And I've thought of myself as His servant – His handmaiden, if you like.

GABRIEL: Yes, Mary.

MARY: *(Making her mind up:)* You may tell Him from me that whatever He wants, I will obey Him gladly, and do His bidding. There.

GABRIEL: *(Softly, as he bows to her:)*  
Blessed art thou amongst women ...

*(He exits. MARY is left alone, staring after him.)*

MARY: *(To herself:)* Amen. So be it - as they say in books ... But however am I going to tell Joseph? What is he going to say? I know he won't understand!  
*(She starts to cry.)* Whatever am I going to do?

*(She goes out as the NARRATOR steps forward.)*

NARRATOR: But we'll have to wait a bit to find out, because there's trouble brewing ... The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, has something to say – and as the Roman Empire stretches over most of the known world and the bits that haven't been discovered yet, Caesar Augustus is a Very Important Person.  
And what he says, goes ...