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The Herald Angels by RICHARD BARKER SHELTON

DRAWING BY M. MEYER



On the Still Winter Air Rose the Three Childish Voices.



"Seraphina, can't you take that piece of candy out of Thad's mouth? He nearly choked himself just then. You can have it back, Thad, when you've sung two verses. Don't be such a baby! Now, good and loud!"

"Hark, the herald angels sing—
Glorify the newborn King—
Seraphina, can't you take that piece of candy out of Thad's mouth? He nearly choked himself just then. You can have it back, Thad, when you've sung two verses. Don't be such a baby! Now, good and loud!"

"Hark, the herald angels sing—
Glorify the newborn King—
Schuyler bellowed lustily and beat time with a drumstick. Seraphina sang with much fervor and many false notes; while little Thad followed the tune manfully, and substituted a "la-lala" when the words proved elusive to his four-year-old memory.

The second verse brought to a successful issue, Schuyler dismissed the chorus and turned to the door. "You see if you can't teach Thad the words of that second verse while I go downstairs and get some joss-sticks for the censer," he told Seraphina.

Schuyler Van Brunt was working under difficulties. Doctor Post had told him of the old English custom of singing carols in the streets on Christmas morning. It had taken a strong hold on the boy's fertile imagination—so strong a hold that he had planned to smuggle Seraphina and Thad from the house, when Christmas came, and to sing a carol out-of-doors in true English fashion.

Then, just when he needed Doctor Post's advice most, there had been some vague trouble between the doctor and Aunt Margaret. Aunt Margaret no longer wore the diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand, and Doctor Post came no more to the house. It was very disheartening. Schuyler wanted to ask Doctor Post a score of questions about the carols. Did the people who sang them wear surplices, like the choir boys in the Christmas-procession at St. Jude's? Did they stand still or march around while they sang? These and other points sadly taxed his eight-year-old intellect. But his determination to sing that carol in the street never faltered. Hence the secret rehearsals in the nursery.

After much deliberation, he decided that surplices would lend dignity to the occasion, and this decision was furthered by the thought that night-gowns would make very passable surplices. Then, a tomato can suggesting possibilities, he added a censer to the properties. A tomato can punched full of holes, swung on the gilt cord that comes about candy boxes, and filled with burning joss-sticks, would make a beautiful censer.

It was Christmas Eve, and Schuyler's plans were complete. He felt sure they would put up a very creditable carol in the morning, even if Doctor Post's advice had not been obtainable. As he crept upstairs with the joss-stick, which he had begged from Agnes, the second girl, he felt that the last obstacle had been surmounted.

"Come on now, once more," he said as he entered the nursery door. "Elsa will be up with supper in a minute. We've just time before she comes. Stand up, Thad. Yes, I'll let you have a piece of the joss-stick if you'll sing good and loud. Now!"

Very early in the gray of the Christmas dawn Schuyler awoke, bounced out of bed, and began to rouse his cohorts. He tiptoed to Seraphina's little white cot and indulged in a series of vigorous shakes and punches. "Get up! Get up, Seraphina! It's time to get out and carol," he whispered hoarsely.

elder children dressed hurriedly, and between them they managed to put on little Thad's clothes. Then Schuyler crept noiselessly to the hall below and returned with coats and hats and mittens. When they had bundled themselves into these outer garments, each donned a "surplice." At the last moment Schuyler bethought him of the brilliant cord on his father's bathrobe, and at the imminent peril of discovery he stole into Mr. Van Brunt's dressing-room and returned with the coveted cord encircling his small waist. This finishing touch, he felt sure, made him quite like the altar boys at St. Jude's. He fished beneath his bed and drew out the tomato can censer filled with the joss-stick.

"Come on!" he whispered, and led the way down the wide stairs.

With a caution worthy of better things, he shot the bolts and opened the front door. The three grotesque figures stole silently out and stood on the stoop in the cold Christmas dawn. The air was still and biting; the silence of the streets appalling. Seraphina's mind reverted to the luxury of the bed she had just quitted.

"O-o-oh!" she chattered. "It's cold—aw-awful cold to be out in your nightie!"

Schuyler snorted scornfully. "Haven't you got enough on underneath it?" he demanded angrily, and Seraphina was silenced.

"O-o-oh!" echoed little Thad, and then, evidently thinking the sooner he caroled the sooner he would be back in the house, he began in his piping voice:

"Hark, er herald dangel—"

Schuyler thrust a hand over his mouth. "Shut up!" he said disgustedly. "Do you want Elsa to come out and sneak us back into the house? Come on, now!"

He led the way down the steps and around the corner, where he paused to light the joss-stick in the tomato can. When they started again, little Thad tripped on his night-gown surplice and went sprawling into the gutter. He was rescued, howling; but not until he had been promised unlimited candy could the march be taken up again.

"Who are you going to sing your carol to?" demanded the practical Seraphina.

"Ninny! To no one in particular," said Schuyler.

"You ought to sing it to some one," she persisted.

"Well, who?" he challenged; but Seraphina was unable to defend her point thus specifically. "I'll tell you," he compromised, "we'll go to Doctor Post's. We'll sing it on the way, and sing it to him, too."

Through the deserted suburban streets they marched; Schuyler in the lead, swinging his smoking censer valiantly; Seraphina ambling along in his wake; and little Thad bringing up the rear, his strange surplice bearing unmistakable evidence of the gutter from which he had been recently fished. And on the still winter air rose the three childish voices in the old, old hymn.

Doctor Post heard them caroling on the lawn, and came to the door in his bathrobe. The three strangely garbed figures met his astonished gaze.

"Good Lord! What have we here?" he gasped.

"We're heral dangels," piped little Thad.

"We're Christmas carolers," corrected Schuyler with much dignity.

"I'm frozen," chirped Seraphina. The doctor made a heroic effort to maintain his gravity.

"Come in, come in and get warm," he said. "Merry Christmas to you!" They fled up the steps into the warm, wide hall, the tomato can sending out its reek of burning joss-stick.

"I would like to ask if carolers generally wear surplices and carry censers?" Schuyler questioned doubtfully. The doctor's eyes twinkled.

"The best I ever heard did," he said gravely.

At that moment the telephone bell whirred wildly, and this is what they heard the doctor say:

"Hello! Yes, this is Doctor Post talking. Who? Oh, it's you, Margaret, merry Christmas! Perhaps, if you don't mind, I'll drive over with them. Thanks. Good-by!"



They came to sing me a carol in good old English fashion. No, don't trouble to send Elsa; I'll send them home in the carriage as soon as I can get Dan up. She's all! Good-by! Oh, Margaret, merry Christmas! Perhaps, if you don't mind, I'll drive over with them. Thanks. Good-by!"

The First Christmas

It often has been stated that the birth of Christ must have occurred four years before the date fixed on for the current chronology and that it is probable the event befell at some other time in the year than a few days after the winter solstice. The reason for the confident assertion is the ascertaining of the fact that Herod died about four years B. C.

The basis of this supposition is the report that at the time of the birth of Christ "there were shepherds abiding in the field, watching their flocks by night," a circumstance not natural in the latitude of Bethlehem near the shortest day. That is the height of the rainy season in Judea, and the date does not appear to have been observed generally before the fifth century.

Many students of Biblical history have argued that the story about the star of Bethlehem points to a date for the Nativity not later than May 8, B. C. 6. On that date the planets Venus and Jupiter were so closely in conjunction as seen from the earth that the apparent distance between them was equal only to the breadth of the full moon. These planets were



THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM.

then visible in the east a couple of hours before sunrise and must have produced a strikingly beautiful appearance and have been spoken of as one object. That was about fifty days less than two years before the death of Herod, a fact which harmonizes well with other conditions of the narrative, for it is probable that the mandate for the slaughter of all the children two years old and under was issued some months before his decease, and the limit of two years would leave an ample margin for any uncertainty as to the time of the appearance of the star, as related by the magi; also there were no paschal full moons on a Friday between the years B. C. 6 and A. D. 33 and no other following that till A. D. 60.

From this it would seem to follow that Christ was thirty-eight years old at the time of the crucifixion, and this would vindicate the sagacity of the Jewish doctors who affirmed that he was not yet fifty (forty) years old. It is remarked, too, that in the spring of the same year there was a triple conjunction of planets—Saturn, Jupiter and Mars—and that the first two named were in conjunction as seen from the earth no less than three times in the year preceding that is, B. C. 7.

Another theory about the star of Bethlehem which has been advanced is that the star seen by the magi is Spica, the leading brilliant in the constellation of Virgo, the Virgin. For many years before and after the Christian era the star was changing its place until it was then literally a "star in the east," and its movement in that direction may have been the very fact noticed by the wise men of some centuries preceding who expected that the prophecy about the Virgin would be fulfilled when its principal star reached the position noted. If this were so the visit of the magi from Bactria, in the far east, is easily explained, and the chief difficulty attending the explanation lies in the fact that such an important search as they undertook is noticed by only one out of the four evangelists.

The uncertainty of the centuries in regard to the date of the Nativity in year and month may never be cleared up. Its existence has been unfairly cited as reason for disbelieving the whole narration. The people of 2,000 years ago attached little importance to dates, except current ones, and it may be remembered that the destruction of Jerusalem occurred between the time of the Nativity and the writing of the gospels, at least in the shape in which it has come down to us.

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