

is that, to be Mary the Mother of Jesus? Where was Reverend Hopkins, I'd like to know... He was what? ...Visiting shut-ins! Well, I'm shut-in, and he wasn't visiting me!

(Spots up on all ladies: Following speeches are simultaneous, till MRS. ARMSTRONG's last line.)

MRS. MCCARTHY. I said, why don't you let them hand out programs at the door? Grace said we never have programs for the pageant, but I said...

MRS. SLOCUM. ...Better nail down the church and lock up the silver service and hide the collection plates before they clean them out...

MRS. ARMSTRONG. What was the matter with Grace? Couldn't she have sent them away? Tell them to go home? Oh, I feel responsible... If I'd been up and around this never would have happened!

(Spots off all three ladies: Up on MOTHER and FATHER as they enter from the wings stage right. Each is carrying a grocery bag, and we can assume that some good friend in the supermarket has relayed MRS. ARMSTRONG's message.)

MOTHER. *(in high dudgeon, mimicking MRS. ARMSTRONG.)* ..."If I'd been up and around, this never would have happened!" Well, let me tell you...

FATHER. Don't tell me, I'm on your side... The car's over there.

MOTHER. Helen Armstrong is not the only woman alive who can run a Christmas pageant! I made up my mind just to do the best I could under the circumstances, but now I'm going to make this the best Christmas pageant ever, and I'm going to do it with the Herdmans! After all, they raised their hands and nobody else did, and I don't care...

FATHER. Good for you, Grace, *(trying to move her along)* the car's over there...

MOTHER. And you're going to help me!

FATHER. *(stopped by this)* Does that mean...

MOTHER. You have to go!

(Curtain up on church setting with kids sitting on the risers and on the floor. MOTHER, stage left, is setting up the scene.)

MOTHER The inn is back here, offstage...and the shepherds come in and gather around the manger...

LEROY. Where'd all the shepherds come from, anyway?

CLAUDE. What's an inn?

ELMER. It's like a motel, where people go to spend the night.

CLAUDE. What people? Jesus?

ALICE. Oh, honestly! Jesus wasn't even born yet. Mary and Joseph went there.

RALPH. Why?

ELMER. To pay their taxes.

OLLIE. At a motel?!

IMOGENE. Shut up, Ollie! Everybody shut up! I want to hear *her.* *(to MOTHER)* Begin at the beginning.

MOTHER. The beginning...?

IMOGENE. The beginning of the play. What happens first?

MOTHER. Imogene, this is the Christmas story from the Bible... Haven't you ever heard the Christmas story from the Bible? *(Pause, as she realizes that they have not.)* ...Well, that's what this Christmas pageant *is*, so I'd better read it to you.

(There is a chorus of groans and grumbles from all the kids as MOTHER looks for a Bible on the benches and finds one.)

BETH. I don't believe that, do you? That they never heard the Christmas story?

ALICE. Why not? They don't even know what a Bible is, and they never went to church in their whole life, till your dumb brother told them we got refreshments. Now we have to waste all this time for nothing.