

CHRISTMAS COMES TO GUS MCGRAW  
A Nativity Play in One Act by Jewell Ellen Smith

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"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel..." *Isaiah 7:14* "...which being interpreted is, God with us." *Matthew 1:23*

TIME: Christmas Eve afternoon, 1900.

PLACE: The general store in Three Creeks, Arkansas, a remote farming and sawmill settlement, not far from where the meandering Ouachita (Wash-a-taw) River turns south to join the Red River in Louisiana.

CHARACTERS:

Gus McGraw, proprietor of the only store in Three Creeks

Bo-Jack McGraw, son of Gus

Reverend Moss, a Methodist circuit rider, newly assigned to the Three Creeks church

Miss Fannie Slater, a veteran school teacher

Sugar Plum, Miss Fannie's lap dog

Hank Garner, a woodcutter

Ly-die, Hank's granddaughter

Mrs. Ophelia Greer (Miss Oaf), a housewife

Greer nieces: Ollie, Nellie, Sue

Sheriff Tatum

Willie Hopper, a handicapped resident of Three Creeks

Mr. Epps, a retired sawmill foreman

Joseph Crawford, a stranger passing through Three Creeks

Mary Love Crawford, Joseph's wife

Emmanuel, the Crawford baby

Bo-Jack's companions: Melchior, Balthasar

Church organist

Angel girls (7 small girls)

Shepherd boys (3 small boys)

SCENE: Gus McGraw, the prosperous and frugal proprietor of the general store in Three Creeks, is alone in his one-room shop--thinking mainly of making money. He is busy readying his merchandise for what he hopes will be a rush of customers from the nearby sawmill and the turpentine still. After all, it is payday at the mill, and, Christmas Eve. Gus anticipates many sales, big profits, as soon as the mill whistle blows for closing time. He stokes his pot-bellied heater with more wood, sweeps up the floor, re-dusts the counter, re-shines the large red apples he has on display as well as the smaller apples hidden under the counter. He opens a fresh box of peppermint candy, counts the sticks and places them in the showcase. Now and then Gus happily sings snatches of "Dixie."

As country stores go, Gus' place is well stocked. Against the far wall (right stage) are three bales of hay. On the side wall hang carpenter tools, small farm implements, kerosene lanterns. A wooden bench holds three kerosene lamps, two of which belong to the local church. Near the bench is a half-empty can of kerosene.

In one corner Gus has arranged a variety of toys, including small red wagons and a dozen beautifully dressed dolls, still in their boxes.

On a long counter (in center stage) there is a hoop of cheese. Also, cans of sardines, crackers, chewing tobacco, Prince Albert smoking tobacco, and snuff. On the floor are sacks of flour, a basket of fresh eggs, a container of English walnuts and Brazil nuts, and a box of oranges. A glass display case is filled with dried raisins and candy.

The store is so constructed that there is a window behind the wood heater, not far from the front door. A person seated beside the heater could look out the window and see each customer as he or she comes up the road. Further furnishings include a yard-long measuring stick and a ledger in which Gus keeps detailed records of all purchases made "on a credit." There are two well-worn straight chairs in the room, one or two nail kegs which serve as chairs, a spittoon, and a small stack of firewood.

#### SCRIPT

GUS: *singing loudly, off-key, as he remembers "Dixie," not as it is*

Oh, I wish I was in the Land of Cotton,

Old times there can't be forgotten,

Look away, look away, Dixie Land!

In Dixie Land when I was born,

'Twas early on a frosty morn ...

Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray!

In Dixie Land I'll take my stand ...

Away, away, away down South ...

Oh, I wish I was--

*Enter Bo-Jack, a happy, husky 12-year-old*

BO-JACK: Papa?

GUS: *without turning around* Yeah. What is it, Bo-Jack?

BO-JACK: Mamma said for you to send her a dozen eggs.

GUS: A dozen eggs? Good Lord! What for?

BO-JACK: Mamma's gotta make another cake. A pound cake.

GUS: Another pound cake? To my certain knowledge, your ma baked three cakes and four pies yesterday! Not to mention that big ham she wouldn't let me cut!

BO-JACK: She said that--

GUS: 'Course I know tomorrow is Christmas Day, an' your ma's relations will be swarmin' in; an' them folks eat like horses! But three cakes is enough.

*Begins sacking up eggs, using the mesh see-through bag which Bo-Jack has brought*

I could 'a sold these here eggs. Your ma is gonna put us in the poor house. I swear she is!

BO-JACK: She said tell you the circuit rider's comin.'

GUS: Oh, no! That's all I need: a preacher on my hands! That new circuit rider stayed at our house in November. It couldn't be our turn again--not so soon.

BO-JACK: All I know is Miss Fannie Slater called Mamma on the phone an' said could we keep the new preacher tonight 'cause it was s'posed to be Miss Oaf's turn; but her husband is ailin' an' besides her brother has done come up from Louisiana (*Looz-anna*) and brought his gang of little girls.

GUS: Then, your ma said-- I can jist hear her. *makes voice go high and sweet* "Why sure, Miss Fannie! Me an' Gus will be glad to keep Reverend Moss at our house! After all, like I keep tellin' Gus, the Bible cautions us to be hospitable for we never know when we're gonna 'entertain angels unawares!'"

BO-JACK: That's 'zactly what Mamma said! Papa, how'd you know?

GUS: Me and your ma have been married 20 years. That's how. Here. *hands over sack of eggs* Be careful 'cause hens don't lay so good in the winter time.

*Turns to resume work*

BO-JACK: *lingering at the doorway* Papa?

GUS: What now?

BO-JACK: *eagerly, with much anticipation* Papa! late this evenin' the big boys are gonna dress up an' put on masks an' be "The Fantastic Riders!" Can I saddle ol' Jake an' ride with 'em? Please!

GUS: Well-- I--

BO-JACK: Charlie Goode said if you'll let me go, I can be one of the kings. That's what they're gonna play: "The Three Kings." They won't do nothin' but ride around an' sing-- like they always do. An' maybe shoot off a few firecrackers.

*Gus doesn't answer*

Please, can I go? I'm big! An' it's Christmas Eve!

GUS: *with some reluctance* Yeah, Son. I reckon you can go. You are gettin' pretty big. An', like you say, it is Christmas Eve.

BO-JACK: Whoo--pee-e! *Dashes out so fast the eggs bang against the door; Bo-Jack merely puts his hand under the dripping sack and keeps going.*

GUS: *calling after his son* You behave yourself!

*Turns to put the last stick of wood into the heater, begins talking to himself-- rather wistfully*

Ah, me! Young 'uns! I wouldn't mind being a saplin' of a boy again myself. My pa let me ride with "The Fantastic Riders."

We didn't call ourselves that but we romped around. We'd go from house to house, singin' an' cuttin' up. Sometimes our teacher would help us act out a little skit. Folks would give us good things to eat. Or maybe a few nickels an' pennies. Then we'd be on our way to the next house. Ah, that was fun. Then. For we were young. We thought we were celebratin' Christmas. Why we didn't ask ourselves. Now-a-days, since I'm a grown man, I do ask myself why folks make such a to-do, such a big fuss, over Christmas.

I say: "Why celebrate?"

Things in this old world look pretty bleak to me. Times are tough. Hard. It's all a man can do to make a livin'. On top of that, diseases an' disasters come like clockwork. Woe an' worry--tribulations--are as sure as night an' day. You can count on 'em comin'!

So, why?

Why celebrate?

There's nothin' to celebrate!

Oh, well. Christmas will come an go--like it always does. I reckon I ought not complain. In fact, I should be the happiest man in Three Creeks 'cause I stand to take in a heap of money today! Folks buy extra at Christmas.

*Proudly looks over merchandise, straightens doll boxes*

I'll sell ever' last one of these here fancy dolls--even if I did mark 'em up sky high. All these toys, too. An' these here nuts a' apples an' oranges. Before the sun goes down there won't be a dried raisin left--much less a stick of peppermint candy. I wish I could'a laid in more firecrackers and sparklers. They always sell.

Thank goodness today is pay-day over at the sawmill. At the turpentine still, too. All them fellers will buy stuff for their young 'uns--besides flour an' sugar an' coffee an' tobacco, an' all that. An' shucks, they can buy! Them guys git good wages: a dollar a day!

*Peers out the window*

Looks like it's gonna git dark early. Or, could be it's cloudin' up to snow. I hope to heaven we don't git no freezin' rain.

*Wipes dust from window panes, looks out again*

For goodness sake! Here comes that circuit rider now! He's hours too early! I wonder why the reverend drives a double buggy? Looks to me like feeding two horses instead of one would be a double expense. Unnecessary.

Now that man will set here in this store till closin' time. An' I'll have to talk to him the blessed evenin'!

I never know what to say to a preacher, 'specially one like the Reverend Moss. I ain't got nothin' against the old feller. I jist don't know what to say to "a man of the cloth," as my pa used to say.

Maybe I can think of something for him to do. Or maybe my customers will keep me real busy.

*Enter Rev. Moss, a venerable, dignified fellow whose many years and charges have made him wise, tolerant, good-humored. He wears his clerical vestments, carries a Bible and a small valise.*

REV. MOSS: Good evening, Mr. McGraw!

GUS: Evenin', Reverend. Come on in an' take a chair. An' please jist call me "Gus." Not Mister McGraw!

REV. MOSS: Of course, if that's what you like.

GUS: You're early this time.

REV. MOSS: Yes. I maintain it's better to be early rather than late. So all these 49 years I've been a preacher I've made it a policy as I go on the rounds of my churches that I get to my destination a bit early--especially in the winter, when the days are short and darkness sets in before we're ready.

GUS: I see.

REV. MOSS: Now today I wanted to get to Three Creeks by mid-afternoon for several reasons. One is I need to do a bit more work on my Christmas Day sermon.

GUS: Well, in that case, set right over here by the window. *moves chair* That'll give you light to read by an' you'll stay warm too--that is if this dad-gummed heater don't quit on me. I'm plumb nearly out of wood. *pokes up fire*

REV. MOSS: Thank you. You're very considerate. The second reason I'm early is that nobody from the church notified me where I'm to lodge tonight. So, I--

GUS: I can tell you that. You're to stay at my house. My wife, Minnie, just sent me word she's baking you a cake.

REV. MOSS: Ah, a cake! That's mighty kind of Miss Minnie. It'll be a pleasure to break bread with you and your family.

GUS: Don't mention it.

REV. MOSS: Let me see now-- There was a third reason for me to get to Three Creeks early. It was-- Uh-- I-- Right now it slips my mind, but it'll come to me. It'll come. Ah, yes! Now I recollect.

Miss Fannie Slater wanted me to meet with her and her school children so I could hear them practice their little Christmas songs for services tomorrow night. Yes, that was it: Listen to the children.

You know, Gus, it is the duty of grownups to pay attention to children. We older ones must encourage the younger ones. Teach them, too. Right from Wrong. Good from Evil. All that. We must teach them about Christmas, especially.

And, like Miss Fannie Slater says, encouraging children helps in teaching them.

GUS: Miss Fannie ought to know. She has been teaching school here in Three Creeks for 20 years. Maybe longer.

Miss Fannie is quite an unusual person. For one thing, she's crazy about dogs. An' she always keeps her a little shaggy lap dog. Soon as one konks out, she gits her another one. An' ever' blessed one she names "Sugar Plum"!

REV. MOSS: "Sugar Plum"! How quaint. Harmless, though, I'd say.

*Opens valise, takes out papers*

I assume that Miss Fannie will send me word what time the children are to practice. Meantime, I must make a few additional notes on my sermon.

GUS: Yes, Sir, Reverend, you do that.

REV. MOSS: *more to himself than to Gus* This year I hope to give my Christmas message a deep dimension. Tell why the Christ Child came and what the true meaning of Emmanuel is.

GUS: Emmanuel?

REV. MOSS: That's a name out of the Old Testament. Translated, its literal meaning is "God With Us." *opens Bible*

GUS: If you say so.

REV. MOSS: This is our first Christmas in the new century. But we must hold fast to the Old Story. I think I'll use a quotation from Isaiah, and then--

GUS: Now, Reverend, you go right ahead an' take down your notes. Once in a while, if it won't be any trouble to you, please glance out the window an' tell me if you see any customers comin' up the road. An' tell me who it is.

REV. MOSS: I'll be glad to.

GUS: That'll help me a lot. If it's somebody I know is "poor as Job's turkey," I'll hide these big apples under the counter so as not to tempt 'em. An' I'll bring out the little apples.

REV: My, my, Gus, you seem to think of everything.

GUS: Reverend, I've got a question for you. All my life I've been hearing about being "as poor as Job's turkey." An' I've heard about being "as poor as a church mouse." Now which do you figure was in worse financial condition, the turkey or the mouse?

REV. MOSS: *after taking a long breath, which is almost a gasp* I don't have the answer to that! All I can tell you is that in my 49 years as a minister I never saw a mouse in a church. Now about Job's turkey:

Job did have 7,000 sheep,  
3,000 camels,  
500 yoke of oxen,  
500 female donkeys,  
so that "he was the greatest of all the men of the East."  
But he didn't have a turkey!

GUS: I was jist wondering.

*Rev. Moss looks out the window.*

REV. MOSS: Here comes a woman in a buggy. But she's got her head and face so wrapped up I can't make out who she is.--my, my, I think it's beginning to sleet-- Ah, now I can see a little dog sitting beside the lady. So, it must be Miss Fannie Slater.

GUS: Right. That'll be Miss Fannie an' Sugar Plum. Doubt if she'll buy anything. But you never can tell.

Good Lord! The lamps! I clean forgot them lamps!

REV. MOSS: The lamps?

GUS: The two church lamps. Miss Fannie brought 'em in here Wednesday an' told me to fill 'em up. Said she'd pay for ever' drop of the coal oil, herself. An' me, I jist let 'em slip my mind.

*Hurries toward back of the store, muttering to himself*

I hope Miss Fannie ain't changed her mind an' is gonna ask me to donate this coal oil to the church! Donations can put a man in the poor house!

MISS FANNIE: *off stage* Sugar Plum! Hold still! How do you think I can wrap you up if you squirm and twist like a wiggle worm? Hold still!

*Enter Miss Fannie, with her dog, a satchel and a lap robe in her arms. She is so absorbed in trying to fold the lap robe around the little dog that she doesn't notice*

*Rev. Moss. From the doorway, she can't see Gus. Her cloak is sprinkled with sleet.*

I don't know why you object to being wrapped up! Don't you know this is the coldest day of the year! Sleet's coming down like blazes and it's all over you! See all these little pieces of ice? *brushes dog's fur furiously* Be still! If somebody was trying to brush the sleet off of me and keep me warm, I'd be glad of it!

Gus? Gus McGraw? Are you here?

GUS: *calling out* I'm here! I'm back here, fillin' up your lamps!

REV. MOSS: Good evening, Miss Fannie. *stands*

MISS FANNIE: *turning quickly* Why-- Why, good evening, Reverend Moss! I didn't see you sitting over there by the window. I noticed a double buggy outside, but I didn't think of it being yours.

REV. MOSS: Won't you take this chair? I believe it's a bit more comfortable than the nail kegs.

MISS FANNIE: No, no, keep your seat. I don't have time to sit down. I'm on my way up to the church to meet the children and just stopped by to pick up the lamps. Looks like you're busy with paperwork.

REV. MOSS: It's my Christmas sermon for tomorrow. Tell me, Miss Fannie--you know the Three Creeks people well, and this charge is still new to me--do you think the congregation will understand if I point out to them what the old Hebrew prophet Isaiah said was the reason the Christ Child was to come?

MISS FANNIE: Oh, goodness, Reverend! Don't ask me! I must confess I don't have the faintest notion of what Isaiah said. But I'm sure you can explain it to the congregation. You make Bible things pretty plain.

REV. MOSS: You're kind to say so.

MISS FANNIE: Be still, Sugar Plum! You have my curiosity stirred up, Reverend. What did Isaiah say?

REV. MOSS: Plenty! A person could spend a lifetime on what Isaiah foretold. But, simply put, mainly what he prophesied about the long-awaited Messiah was this:

*Counts on his fingers as he makes points*

He would be called "Emmanuel." As you probably know, that is "God With Us."

He would have the Spirit of the Lord God upon him and be anointed to do four specific things:

to preach good tidings to the poor,

to bind up the broken hearted,

to comfort those that mourn,

to proclaim liberty to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind.

Even more! In other words, Miss Fannie, Isaiah promised that God was coming to be with us in all of life's afflictions. Now Isaiah lived 700 years before--

*Gus interrupts*

GUS: *loudly* Here you are, Miss Fannie! Both lamps filled to the brim.

MISS FANNIE: That's fine.

GUS: Do you want to pay cash now? Or, do you want to charge it to your account? I'll be glad to mark it down in my ledger. *Picks up, opens ledger.* Twelve cents for the pint an' a half.

MISS FANNIE: I was hoping maybe you'd be glad to donate that little bit of coal oil to our program tomorrow night.

GUS: Now, now, Miss Fannie-- You-- You know-- You know uh-- You know business is business, an'--

MISS FANNIE: Never mind, Gus. I'll pay it.

*As Fannie is placing the 12¢ on the counter and Gus is scooping it up, Hank Garner, the woodcutter, calls from off stage.*

HANK: *very loudly* Hey, Gus! I've got your firewood out here!

REV. MOSS: *Peering through window* There's a man and a child in a wagon piled high with wood.

GUS: That's Hank Garner. It's about time he got here with that cord of wood. He promised it last week.

HANK: *Still offstage* Come show me where to dump it!

GUS: *Calling out to Hank* I'm comin'! *Turns to Miss F. and Reverend M.* Y'all excuse me. *Raises voice again* Hank, don't you dump it nowhere! Stack it up straight so's I can measure it!

*Starts out, comes back to grab up his yardstick; turns again to Miss F. and Reverend M.*

Hank Garner is an honest man. But he might 'a forgot that a cord of wood ain't a cord unless it's four feet by four feet by eight feet! *Exits as he speaks*

MISS FANNIE: *Shaking her head* Ah, there's nobody like Gus McGraw. You've got to know him a long time before you can overlook the greedy streak in him. Gus makes me think of the old saying about the greedy man and the flea.

REV. MOSS: I reckon I haven't heard that saying.

MISS FANNIE: Well, this old miser was such a money-grabber folks said: "He'd skin a flea for hide and fat!"

REV. MOSS: My, my.-- Tell me about this woodcutter, Mr. Hank Garner. I don't believe I've seen him in church, but I did notice his name on the roll. I've been studying the membership list so I can soon call everybody by name.

MISS FANNIE: Mr. Garner and his granddaughter are by themselves now, since Mrs. Garner died. They're fine folks.

REV. MOSS: You used to serve as church clerk, didn't you, Miss Fannie?

MISS FANNIE: Oh, yes. For 17 years.

REV. MOSS: Then maybe you can explain why Gus McGraw's name is listed on the roll three times! It must be a mistake.

MISS FANNIE: *laughing* No, Reverend, that's no mistake. There are three Gus McGraws!

REV. MOSS: Three? My! My!

MISS FANNIE: They're all first cousins--named for their old grandfather. You'll find out that the woods is full of McGraws.

REV. MOSS: Looks like having three men named "Gus McGraw" in a small settlement like Three Creeks would lead to considerable confusion.

MISS FANNIE: *delighted to share a juicy bit of information, she moves closer to the preacher and lowers her voice* No. There's never a mixup.

The first one is known as "Singing" Gus McGraw because every summer he gets out and organizes two-week singing schools. That is, he teaches people how to sing by shaped notes. Then, too, he goes to lots of singing conventions. So the name "Singing Gus" fits him.

The second cousin is known as "Lying" Gus McGraw because you can't believe a word the man says. "Lying Gus" fits him.

And the third Gus, our storekeeper, is known as "Greedy" Gus McGraw-- for obvious reasons!

REV. MOSS: My, my! What can I say? I've noticed through the years, Miss Fannie, that there's no such thing as perfection. Not in people, places, or things-- especially people.

MISS FANNIE: That's true.

REV. MOSS: Many factors determine a man's personality, his attitude toward life-- his whole character. Maybe this third Gus will change.

MISS FANNIE: Maybe. But I doubt it. Seriously doubt it. Reverend Moss, I've heard that in the Bible it says a leopard cannot change his spots. Is that true? Does the Bible actually say "a leopard cannot change his spots"?

REV. MOSS: Well, yes, in a sense, it does. If I remember rightly, it is the prophet Jeremiah who uses that figure of speech. I'll tell you what: I'll look up that quotation, Miss Fannie. When I come back in January, I'll be able to show you exactly where to find it.

MISS FANNIE: Good.

REV. MOSS: *warming to his subject* Ah, yes, the Bible indicates that a leopard cannot change his spots, but fortunately it does not say a man cannot be changed. On the contrary, the Scriptures teach that a person can become "a new creature."

*Miss Fannie nods her head.*

Now that's another of the great truths I must put in my Christmas message. When the Christ Child came to Bethlehem, "old things passed away; all things became new!"

The world hasn't been the same since!

Oh, my, my, Miss Fannie! I mustn't bore you with my sermon notes. Sometimes I get sort of carried away!

Tell me about the program you've planned for the children.

MISS FANNIE: It will be short and simple. Traditional. The children will sing. And, as always, we'll have the Bethlehem stable with Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus, and the shepherds and the three kings.

REV. MOSS: That's good. As I remarked to Mr. Gus, earlier, this is our first Christmas in the new Twentieth Century, but we must hold fast to the Old Story. Centuries come and centuries go, while God stays the same. Forever.

MISS FANNIE: Yes. Of course now I can't guarantee how the Three Kings will look! The older boys borrowed the king costumes to wear tonight when they go romping around as "The Fantastic Riders."

But they said they would be careful--especially with the golden crowns.

REV. MOSS: Oh, I'm sure they will. As careful as boys can be.

MISS FANNIE: I promised the children that you'd come hear them practice, but--

REV. MOSS: I will. I'll go with you right now. *starts to get up*

MISS FANNIE: No, no, the weather has turned off so cold and bad you ought not be out in it. You could catch your death.

You see, the church hasn't been heated since the fourth Sunday in November; so it's like an iceberg. I'll tell you what: we'll let the little singers come rehearse right here in the store.

REV. MOSS: But won't it be a lot of trouble to get the organ brought down here? I know it folds up, but still it's--

MISS FANNIE: That's no problem. The big boys can bring it, without batting an eye.

REV. MOSS: *settling back in his chair* If you think that's best, it'll be fine with me.

MISS FANNIE: Well, good. Sugar Plum, does it suit you? Of course! Poor puppy, your little paws are still like ice.

*Turns, picks up one of the lamps*

I think I'll leave these lamps here till later. Sugar Plum, if I didn't have to worry with you, I could take the lamps.

*Starts out the door, collides with Ly-die, who is entering with an armload of firewood; one or two sticks spill to the floor.*

LY-DIE: Oops! Hi, Miss Fannie! I didn't see you.

MISS FANNIE: Well, hello, Ly-die! That's quite a turn of wood you've got there.

LY-DIE: Yes, 'um. Grandpa Hank said bring in enough to last Mr. Gus till closin' time. So that's what I'm doin'.

*Dumps sticks near heater, brushes off her sleeves.*

MISS FANNIE: Reverend Moss, this is Ly-die. She's Mr. Hank Garner's granddaughter. Ly-die, this is Reverend Moss, who's our new pastor.

LY-DIE: Hi!

REV. MOSS: I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Ly-die.

MISS FANNIE: I'll be back in a little while. *exits, still fretting over Sugar Plum*

REV. MOSS: Ly-die, do you live near here?

LY-DIE: No, Sir. Grandpa Hank's house is quite a piece from here. It's way down on the State Line Road jist past a place they call Little Egypt.

REV. MOSS: Little Egypt?

LY-DIE: Little Egypt is pretty close to Oak Grove. That's where me and Grandpa Hank live. It's not far from the river.

REV. MOSS: I see. I've never been down as far as the State Line Road, or, the Ouachita River. You see, this is the first time I've had a charge in this part of Arkansas. I wonder how Little Egypt got its name. Do you know?

LY-DIE: No, Sir, I ain't got no idea. But Oak Grove got its name 'cause there's a jillion oak trees growin' on ever' hill. More'n you can count!

All them trees is how come Grandpa Hank got started cuttin' an sellin' firewood. He says oak is the best burnin' wood in the world.

REV. MOSS: He's right. It burns slow, puts out a lot of heat.

LY-DIE: Grandpa don't like to sell to Mr. Gus McGraw. He don't want to pay cash. He wants Grandpa to take the whole price out in trade.

REV. MOSS: Yes, I'm sure he does.

LY-DIE: Today, Grandpa aims to buy a heap of things--'specially oranges and apples and nuts and stuff for Santa Claus to put in my stocking.

REV. MOSS: Good for your grandpa!

LY-DIE: But I ain't a little young 'un no more!

How can I tell Grandpa I'm too big to hang up my stocking?

REV. MOSS: Don't try to tell him, Ly-die. Let your grandpa fix for Santa Claus. He enjoys it.

Did you ever hear the legend of how our custom of hanging up stockings on Christmas Eve got started?

LY-DIE: Got started? I thought Santa Claus has always been comin'.

REV. MOSS: No. Not always. I'll tell you about it. But first, maybe I should explain that the name "Santa Claus" is a corruption of "Saint Nicholas." That is, it is based on the name "Saint Nicholas."

*Ly-die pulls a nail keg closer to Rev. Moss, sits down to listen.*

LY-DIE: I never heard of anybody named Saint Nicholas.

REV. MOSS: It all started way back in the fourth century AD in what is now called Asia Minor, in the town of Myra. Living near Myra was a father and mother named Epiphanes and Johane. And they had a son named Nicholas. They were wonderful people. Rich. Religious.

Nicholas was such a good and devout young fellow that he was chosen to be a bishop, while he was still just a boy. When he became a man, Nicholas used his wealth to help many people.

He loved to give his money away--secretly--to those he discovered to be in need. Nobody ever saw him handing out bags of gold. He would toss the bags through a window at night, or leave the gold on the doorstep or some place like that.

In time, Nicholas was made a saint, and he became almost a mythical figure. Yet he was a real person. Stories and more stories are told about his secret acts of kindness. Once he saved a group of school boys from death. He rescued a boatload of drowning sailors. He even stooped to feed a notorious band of starving thieves and robbers.

LY-DIE: Goodness gracious!

REV. MOSS: The most famous tale about the generosity of the legendary Saint Nicholas--told and re-told a thousand times--had to do with a desperately poor man who had three lovely daughters, all of the age to be married.

The problem was the father had no money with which to arrange for their weddings, nothing to give them as dowries. In fact, he didn't even have money to buy food for his three beautiful girls.

As the days passed by, the father became frantic. Finally, one bitter winter night after the girls had gone to sleep, the old father sat by the fireplace, wondering what to do. He told himself that something had to be done. He had been out all day, trudging through the rain and mud, looking for work. There was nothing. As he pulled off his wet boots and socks and laid them out on the hearth to dry, he decided he would just have to sell his three daughters into slavery. Better that than to starve to death.

Tears ran down the old man's cheeks as he stared into the fire. Slowly the fire died out. He dozed off to sleep.

When he woke, it was morning. And there, in the top of one of his socks lay three bags of gold! Each bag was black with soot and ashes! By that, he knew that Saint Nicholas had tossed the gold down the chimney and that all three bags just happened to land in his sock.

The girls were saved! Each had a fine wedding! And their story was repeated over and over again until it became the custom for parents to tell their youngsters that their presents at Christmas time surely must be from Saint Nicholas--or Santa Claus, as we say in this country.

So now, it is a tradition--a harmless tradition, I believe--for children to hang up their stockings on Christmas Eve to catch whatever Santa Claus tosses down the chimney!

LY-DIE: *with delight* My stocking is always stuffed! And there's always three oranges.

REV. MOSS: The oranges stand for the three bags of gold!

LY-DIE: I guess they do! *notices doll display on the wall* Oh! Look! Look at the dolls! *runs to examine dolls* Whooo-o-o-eee! What dolls! They're the prettiest things I ever saw in my life! I wish--

*Enter Gus and Hank, arguing loudly.*

HANK: Gus, that don't make sense!

GUS: It does too make sense! Cash is out of the question!

HANK: I ain't askin' all cash!

GUS: That's what you said!

HANK: You better wash out your ears! What I said was you ought to pay me cash for the wood, but--

GUS: Me and you both will come out a heap better if you take the price 'a the wood out in trade! Like I told you!

HANK: Dammit, man! I say fifty-fifty! Half in cash. Half in trade. I don't know how the hell you think--

GUS: Watch your tongue, Hank! There sets the preacher--in case you hadn't noticed!

HANK: Preacher? *whirls around, grabs off hat* Oh, uh-- Uh-- Good evenin', Reverend. I, uh-- Uh-- Me and Gus here are just havin' our usual friendly argument. It don't mean we--

REV. MOSS: Think nothing of it.

GUS: My only concern is that in any deal I make I jist don't want to head myself toward the poor house!

HANK: Hush about the poor house, Gus! Come on and sack me up a pound of English walnuts and Brazil nuts, mixed; six apples and six oranges, and two sticks of peppermint candy. And some dried raisins.

And, I'll take one of them coal oil lanterns you got hanging up back there--the red one. Then cut me a thick rasher of cheese. And put some oil in the lantern. In January I'll be back to collect the rest.

GUS: *haughtily* Yes, Sir! Mister Hank! *turns to gather up goods*

*Ly-die runs to her grandfather*

LY-DIE: Grandpa Hank?

HANK: Yes, Sugar? What is it?

LY-DIE: Come see these pretty dolls!

HANK: Dolls?

LY-DIE: Hangin' right over here. *leads Hank to display* Ain't they pretty?

HANK: Well, yes, I guess so. But now, Sugar, you're gettin' too big to play with dolls! Entirely too big. Dolls are for little girls.

LY-DIE: *wistfully* If I had me one of them, I wouldn't play with it. I'd jist look at it.

REV. MOSS: *peering out the window* Gus, here come some more customers: a woman ridin' side-saddle on a bay mare, with a pile of little children sitting up behind the saddle.

The lady is holding some sort of a cage. *turns to Ly-die* Come look, Ly-die. Maybe you can tell who it is.

*Ly-die hurries to window*

LY-DIE: It's Miss Oaf! An' her three little nieces.

REV. MOSS: Yes, of course. Miss Ophelia Greer. I should have recognized her.

GUS: *to himself* Miss Oaf? Oh, Lord, help me! She is one hard lady to deal with!

*Snatches up basket of big apples, throws a towel over them, hides them behind counter, pushes smaller apples to a conspicuous place.*

I'll bet my right arm she's got a chicken in that cage! She'll want ever'thing in this store. *raises voice* Hank, here's your stuff.

HANK: *taking lantern, sack of fruit, etc.* All right, Gus.

GUS: No hard feelings?

HANK: No. No hard feelings, you old skinflint. It's Christmas Time. Come on, Ly-die. We've got to hurry so as to get home before dark. *two start toward door*

REV. MOSS: Mister Garner, I hope you and your granddaughter will be able to come to services tomorrow.

HANK: If we can, Reverend. If we can. You know I live a far piece from here, way down close to Little Egypt. Not more'n a mile from the Ouachita River.

REV. MOSS: Yes, I know.

*Hank exits. Ly-die lingers, looking at the dolls again, running her fingers over their ribbons and lace. Timidly, she approaches Rev. Moss.*

LY-DIE: I liked that story about Saint-- Saint-- What was his name?

REV. MOSS: Nicholas. I'm glad you liked it. At church tomorrow we'll have the real Christmas Story about the Baby Jesus. That's the greatest story in all the world.

LY-DIE: Yes, Sir. *exits, running* Wait for me, Grandpa Hank!

*Gus grabs a large cloth from beneath the counter and quickly drapes it over all the dolls.*

REV. MOSS: I see you're covering up the dolls. Are you getting ready to close up for the day?

GUS: Oh, no. Not for hours yet.

REV. MOSS: Then why are you hanging a cloth over your doll display?

GUS: Well, Reverend, I-- You see-- It's like this: I know-- Dadgummit, Reverend, I may as well tell you the truth. I wouldn't tell no lie to no preacher!

It's this way: Miss Oaf an' her husband are poor people. I mean real poor. He hasn't been able to hit a lick of work in years. Why Miss Oaf married that old down 'n out feller nobody can figure out. Oh, they're fine, honest folks,

understand, but jist plain ain't got nothin' in the way of money. An' if Miss Oaf was to see them dolls, she'd want to buy three of 'em for her little nieces. So, being as she can't afford 'em, it's best she don't never see 'em. Do you understand what I mean?

REV. MOSS: Yes, Gus, I think I do. *shakes his head, murmurs to himself* More's the pity.

*Enter Miss Oaf, trailed by three small girls, all bundled up, with scarves tied over their heads. The largest girl carries a worn-out basket with 11 eggs in it. The second child carries a fresh bunch of turnip greens half as big as she is. The smallest girl holds a bright red strip of cloth, which is tied around a wad of green onions. Miss Oaf has balanced on her hip what looks like a homemade bird cage with a live hen in it.*

MISS OAF: *very cheerfully* Good evenin', Reverend. Evenin', Gus. Girls, say "Good evening!"

THREE GIRLS: *in unison, dutifully.* "Good evenin'!"

REV. MOSS: Why, good evening, Miss Ophelia, and Little Ladies.

GUS: Evenin', Miss Oaf. Girls. What can I do for you, Miss Oaf?

MISS OAF: *setting down cage.* Whew! This hen is heavy. Just a minute, Gus. Girls, put your things here on the counter so Mister Gus can see 'em. Then I want you three to come sit down by Reverend Moss. And maybe he'll tell you a Bible story, or something, while I talk to Mister Gus. And you can get warmed up at the same time.

*Brushes sleet from children's wraps. Children place eggs, turnip greens, onions on counter--with the assistance of Miss Oaf, She leads them over to Rev. Moss.*

Reverend, these are my nieces: *taps each child on head to indicate which is which* Ollie, Nellie, and Sue.

They're from way down in Louisiana. (*Looz-anna*) They're going to spend Christmas with us. In fact, they'll be visiting for twelve whole days.

REV. MOSS: How nice. It always warms the heart to have children in the house at Christmas Time.

*Miss Oaf turns to Gus, Reverend continues talking to children.*

Speaking of visiting twelve days, I'll bet you little Louisiana Ladies didn't know that a long, long time ago people celebrated Christmas for twelve whole days--from about Christmas Eve till January 6. They frolicked all the time and feasted day and night.

OLLIE: They did?

REV. MOSS: Sit down right over here, and while your Aunt Ophelia is busy, I'll tell you about the Christmas in Bethlehem!

*Girls sit in semi-circle, backs to audience. Reverend M. shifts his chair so that they form a tight group which the audience can forget as the spotlight focuses attention on Gus and Miss Oaf.*

MISS OAF: Now, Gus, I've got some things here to trade you.

GUS: Miss Oaf, you know how I--

MISS OAF: Don't say a word till I finish tellin' you what I want to say. What I want to say is this:

The ox is sort of in the ditch at our house, what with having my brother and his children come unexpected like. So, I've got to have some things for them--startin' with a sack of flour. 'Cause, you see, Gus, I don't want the children thinking we're so poor we have to eat cornbread for breakfast!

Not on Christmas mornin'! I've got to bake biscuits. You can see that, can't you?

GUS: Sure, I see. Now, about the eggs you brought. I count only--

MISS OAF: Just wait till I finish tellin' you what I've got to have, and then we'll talk about the nice eggs and the greens and onions, and this fine, fat layin' hen!

I've got to have apples and oranges and nuts and three sticks of candy for Santa to put in their little stockings. That will--

GUS: You could tell 'em Santa Claus didn't know they had come up to Three Creeks. They'd understand that.

MISS OAF: *outraged* Gus McGraw! In all my born'd days I ain't never seen the likes of you!

GUS: It was just a suggestion. I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it!

MISS OAF: Well, you can keep such suggestions to yourself! Now the third thing I need is some coal oil to put in my lamp. I'm going to teach the girls about the long-time-ago custom of placing a lamp in the window on Christmas Eve to guide the Christ Child on his way.

GUS: I'm plumb out of oil, Miss Oaf. Honest, I am. I sold the last drop to Hank Garner less than ten minutes ago.

MISS OAF: I see some lamps settin' over there! Full of oil. I'll just buy one of them--lamp and oil.

GUS: Them lamps ain't mine. They belong to the church. Miss Fannie left 'em here. Now that lantern hangin' yonder is empty. 'Course I've got my store lamp, but I've got to use it tonight. I'm stayin' open late.

MISS OAF: Well, all right. Maybe you've got some candles.

GUS: No. No candles.

MISS OAF: Oh, goodness. Well, I'll have to think of some way to make a light for the Christ Child. *pauses* Gus, I heard that you had a nice selection of dolls this year. My little nieces are--

GUS: You don't see no dolls, do you?

MISS OAF: No, I don't see none.

GUS: *with egg basket in hand* Now, about these here eggs you brought. I don't think--

MISS OAF: There are eleven eggs in that basket. And this hen I brought is goin' to lay egg number 12 tomorrow to make you a full dozen.

GUS: Miss Oaf, how in the great wide world do you know this hen is gonna lay an egg tomorrow? Did she tell you?

MISS OAF: Don't be sarcastic, Gus McGraw! That hen is the best layer in my yard. Since the first day of December she has laid a nice, big egg ever' other day. She laid one yesterday and she will produce another one tomorrow!

Besides, I'm going to trade the hen herself to you. You can keep her, or, re-sell her to some of the sawmill fellers--along with these nice turnip greens and this nice bunch of fresh green onions.

The only other things I need, besides the flour and the stuff for the girls' stockings, is a pound of rice and a little bit of sugar. An' maybe a thin sliver of cheese and a handful of coffee beans. That's not asking too much, is it?

GUS: I reckon not, Miss Oaf. Like you say, I can sell what you brought to the mill hands.

MISS OAF: Here, you can put it all in this pillowcase. *takes pillow slip from satchel, hands it to G.* That way, it will be easier for me to handle.

GUS: Whatever you say, Miss Oaf. *turns to gather up groceries*

REV MOSS: Miss Ophelia?

MISS OAF: Yes, Sir?

REV. MOSS: I couldn't help overhearing you tell Mister Gus you want to teach the children about the old custom of placing a light in the window on Christmas Eve. Why don't you just borrow one of these church lamps?

MISS OAF: Oh! That would be wonderful! Yes! I could bring it back tomorrow. You don't think anybody would care?

REV. MOSS: I can't think of a soul who would object. Of course there's nothing in the Bible that says we ought to place a light in the window on Christmas Eve. But it's what I term a harmless tradition--started by the Irish, it is said.

MISS OAF: The Irish?

REV. MOSS: It all began with the innocent belief among the Irish people that each Christmas Eve night the Christ Child returns to earth and that he needs a lamp to show him the way to go.

Also, it has always meant that the family that places a light in the window would welcome the Blessed Child into their home. It's a custom that refuses to die out. And I think it helps to teach that the Christ came to be "The Light of the World."

MISS OAF: Why, yes. I hadn't thought of that.

GUS: Here you are, Miss Oaf. *Hands her pillowcase stuffed and tied up.*

MISS OAF: All right, Gus. The reverend here says I can borrow one of these church lamps. So that's what I'm aiming to do.

*Turns to children, picks up one lamp*

Ollie, do you think you can tote this lamp?

OLLIE: Yes, Ma'am! *takes lamp. Miss Oaf, children start leaving*

REV. MOSS: Miss Ophelia, if you've got time, you ought to take the girls up to the church. Miss Fannie is up there, having the children practice for the Christmas program. I know she'd be glad to have these little ladies sing with the other children.

MISS OAF: Girls, would you like that?

GIRLS: *in chorus* Yes, Ma'am.

MISS OAF: Fine. We'll go up there right now. *exits, followed by children*

GUS: Whew! I'm glad that's over with. *takes caged chicken to back area, near bales of hay* Old hen, you'd better lay another egg!

REV. MOSS: *dreamily, to himself* The Light of the World! Yes, I must get that thought into this sermon.

*Scribbles in notebook*

There's so much to tell. *looks out window* Gus, here comes a crippled man, using an umbrella for a walking stick. No, he's not coming here. He's turned and headed toward the sawmill. That man is badly crippled.

GUS: *now busy getting the big apples back on the counter* That's Mister Epps. Ever' payday he comes to the mill. I figure a bunch of the fellers owe him money, an' he comes to collect what he can. After a while, he will drag hisself on over here. He's got to have him a can of Prince Albert. Won't smoke no other brand.

REV. MOSS: Why is he so crippled up?

GUS: Years back, Mister Epps worked at the mill. He was the foreman over there. Then one day they had a terrible accident. Mister Epps come close to losing both legs! Folks said it was a miracle he didn't bleed to death on the spot. I reckon it was a miracle.

REV. MOSS: Miracles do still happen. *looking out window again* Ah! Here come two fellows. They're riding fine looking horses. Why, it's the sheriff! With a prisoner!

GUS: Prisoner? *hurries to window, voice takes on tone of disappointment* That's no prisoner. That's One-eyed-Willie Hopper. But Sheriff Tatum does have him handcuffed! I wonder what Willie's done?

REV. MOSS: I haven't heard of One-eyed-Willie Hopper. Who is he?

GUS: Well, uh-- Uh-- You might say One-eyed-Willie is the "village idiot." But, he's really no idiot. Willie's got plenty of gumption.

He's sort of a clown, a buffoon. Plumb childish, at times. Gets drunk pretty often.

REV. MOSS: He doesn't seem to be staggering right now.

GUS: No. He's walking plenty straight. Willie's sorry old daddy is to blame for him bein' like he is. He wouldn't make the boy go to school when he was a kid. So, now Willie can't read an' write.

'Course he is half blind, but he could'a learned somethin'.

*Enter Sheriff Tatum, a loud, blustering fellow, who is half leading, half pushing Willie along. Willie has a patch over one eye and is wearing handcuffs. It is apparent that the sheriff is in distress. He halts at the doorway, does not notice Rev. Moss.*

SHERIFF: *loudly* Gus, I need you to help me! Do me a favor!

GUS: Sure, Sheriff. What's up? What's Willie done now?

WILLIE: Nothin'! I ain't done nothin'!

SHERIFF: Gus, I'm sick as a dog! My dang head's splittin' wide open! I've gotta git to Doc Webb 'fore it plumb kills me!

GUS: That's bad. Let me--

SHERIFF: Keep Willie here a little while. Jist a little while. I'll be back 'fore dark.

GUS: Sure, Sheriff!

SHERIFF: Maybe the doc can gimme a powder, or somethin'!

GUS: Yeah. I hope so.

WILLIE: *to sheriff* Tell Mister Gus how come you got these here cuffs on me! An' 'splain to him about the deputy part, too.

SHERIFF: You tell him, Willie. I ain't got time. *stumbles out clutching his forehead*

GUS: Well, Willie, come on over an' set by the heater. Do tell us why you're wearing handcuffs.

WILLIE: Us? Who's us? *rubs good eye* Today my good eye ain't none too good. Is that your boy Bo-Jack over by the window?

GUS: No, that's not Bo-Jack. That's Reverend Moss. He is--

WILLIE: A preacher?

GUS: Yeah, he's our new pastor. But he won't bite you!

WILLIE: The only preacher I ever talked to told me I was headed straight to hell, an' I shore don't want to hear that again!

GUS: You needn't worry. *raises voice* Reverend Moss, this is Willie Hopper. Willie is jist a part of Three Creeks. He's been 'round here a long time.

REV. MOSS: I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Willie.

WILLIE: Likewise. You ain't gonna talk to me about hell, are you?

REV. MOSS: Why, no. I hadn't thought of it. We can talk about anything you like. Maybe Christmas. Would you like to talk about Christmas?

WILLIE: I reckon that wouldn't be too bad. I don't never think much about Christmas 'cept I know it's the best time in the world to git drunk!

REV. MOSS: *with dismay* Get drunk?

GUS: Uh-- Willie, you were going to tell us why Sheriff Tatum's got them handcuffs on you.

WILLIE: It's 'cause the sheriff is sick. I mean that man is sick. He's about to die! He told me-- He said-- Now these are the sheriff's 'zact words-- He said:

"Willie, ever' blessed year you git drunk as a hoot owl on Christmas Eve an' start a ruckus. Then I have to drag you off down to Junction City an' lock you up. This time, Willie, I'm too sick to drag you off nowhere. So, I'm puttin' these here cuffs on you. Today an' tomorrow you're gonna stay as sober as a judge-- as the sayin' goes. You'll ride with me, an' folks will figure you are sort of my Christmas Deputy! Agreed?" I said: "Yippee!" an' he clamped on the cuffs. You see, I always wanted to be a lawman!

REV. MOSS: My, my! That's remarkable. Quite remarkable.

GUS: Roy Tatum is a remarkable sheriff. If you two don't mind, I'd better git busy. The mill customers ought to be comin' in pretty soon. I see it's gittin' close to dark so I'll light up my lamp an' set it in the window. That way, they'll know I'm still open for business.

*Gus goes to fix the lamp. Rev. Moss turns full attention to Willie.*

REV. MOSS: Willie, you mentioned that you never think much about Christmas.

Would you like to hear what happened on the very first Christmas that ever was?

WILLIE: What do you mean--the very first?

REV. MOSS: What I'm asking you is would you like to listen to an account of what happened in Bethlehem when the Christ Child was born. Quite a celebration took place. Even the angels sang.

I'd like to explain that first Christmas to you. But it's up to you, whether or not you want to hear it.

WILLIE: Shore, I'll listen Unless you trick me an' start shakin' your finger at me. Then, I won't listen no more.

*To reassure Willie, Rev. Moss softens his tone, speaks as if to a child.*

REV. MOSS. Ah, Willie, this will be the story of the most beautiful, the most mysterious, the most wondrous event that ever happened to the world and the people in it.

God came down.

And he was a Little Baby.

WILLIE: *with awe* He was? God was a baby? I can't believe it! I thought God was an ol' man--somewhere way, way up high. Higher than the tree tops! Higher than the clouds!

Even higher than the stars!

I didn't know he ever even thought of comin' down here where we are!

REV. MOSS: Well, he did think of coming down here. And he made a sure promise that he would come. But the people on earth had to wait for him a long, long time, God told one of the ancient prophets to foretell that when he came he would be called "Emmanuel," or "God With Us."

Another prophet wrote that this Holy One would appear in Bethlehem of Judah. When, he didn't say. So, the people kept waiting and waiting for God's promise to come true. Still, nothing happened--not in Bethlehem or any other place.

WILLIE: God didn't never show up?

REV. MOSS: Not right then. But later on, in the days of Herod the King, there arose a situation in which many, many people had to travel to Bethlehem to pay taxes to the all-powerful Roman Empire.

In this crowd of travelers streaming into Bethlehem there was a man named Joseph and his wife Mary, who were from Nazareth.

So many taxpayers crowded into Bethlehem that day that there was no place for Joseph and Mary to stay. No place to sleep. In desperation, they took shelter in a stable.

WILLIE: They had to sleep in a stable? Me, I wouldn't stay in no stable! I'm like my ol' grandma. I want me a featherbed! An' you know what, Reverend? I've got me a featherbed. 'Fore my ol' grandma died, she made me one!

*Rev. Moss ignores Willie's remarks.*

REV. MOSS: The stable wasn't so bad. Of course there were probably some animals bedded down in there an ox, a donkey, maybe some sheep. But the stable was warm and the hay was soft and dry.

That hay turned out to be a good thing, for that very night Mary's Baby was born! And she wrapped Him up good in swaddling clothes and laid Him down to sleep on the hay in the manger.

*Pauses*

He was the Holy Child, Willie!

WILLIE: *in a whisper* Ah, the Holy Child!

REV. MOSS: That same night, not far from Bethlehem, there were shepherds out in the field, watching over their flocks. Suddenly an angel floated down from heaven and stood right by the sheep fold--not ten feet from the shepherds.

WILLIE: Wow! Didn't that near 'bout scare the pants off them shepherds?

REV. MOSS: Yes, Willie, the angel did frighten the shepherds. A whole host of angels came then. And the first angel said: "Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid! We bring you Good News! Good News for all people. 'Unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.'"

WILLIE: What did them shepherds say to that?

REV. MOSS: They didn't know what to do or say. I think they just stood there. The angels told them to go into Bethlehem to find the Holy Babe. They even gave the shepherds a sign of how they would know the Baby. He would be "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

The angels left, as quickly as they had come. As they floated back up to heaven, they were singing the sweetest song you ever heard. All about "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to man!"

WILLIE: An' them shepherds? Did they go to Bethlehem?

REV. MOSS: They did. They ran nearly all the way. And they found the Baby and Mary and Joseph, exactly as the angels had said.

Three other people found the Babe in the Manger, too. They were three great kings from the East. They found the Holy Little Child by following a bright, bright star which was shining down on Bethlehem. This was--

WILLIE: I bet you I've heard about that star! That is, if it's the same one my ol' grandma told me about when I was a little boy. Yeah! The big star! I don't remember hearing nothin' about the Holy Babe on the hay, but Grandma Hopper shore told me about that star. Yeah, I remember that. Plumb good. That star was bigger than the moon, my grandma said.

REV. MOSS: Did she tell you how Mary and Joseph and the Holy Child had to flee to the land of Egypt and hide?

WILLIE: I never heard that. How come they had to hide in Egypt?

REV. MOSS: The wicked King Herod planned to kill the Christ Child. God knew that. So God warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the Baby and flee to Egypt. In the middle of the night, Joseph--

*There is noise and commotion at the door. This, at the arrival of Mr. Epps, Joseph Crawford, his wife Mary Love, and their baby Emmanuel.*

*As the group enters, Mr. Epps is holding his umbrella over Mary Love and the baby. When he folds the umbrella, he gives it a shake and a shower of ice and sleet falls to the floor.*

GUS: Ah, it's you, Mister Epps. Bring your kinfolks on in out'a the weather.

MR. EPPS: I can't claim these fine people as relations, Gus. They're strangers to me, but I wouldn't mind bein' kin to 'em! They just happened to get here the same time I did.

JOSEPH: *extending his hand to Gus* I'm Joseph Crawford, and this is my wife, Mary Love, and our baby, Emmanuel.

GUS: Pleased to meet you. I'm Gus McGraw. What can I do for you folks? Are you just passing through Three Creeks, or have you got relations around here?

JOSEPH: Well, Sir, to tell you the truth, we're sort of lost. When we saw your light in the window, we just stopped. You say the name of this place is Three Creeks?

*Mr. Epps, walking with a severe limp, eases his way over toward the heater, shakes hands with Rev. Moss, and joins him and Willie. The three remain silent.*

GUS: Yes, this is Three Creeks. There ain't much here. Just my store, a sawmill, a turpentine still, our school, and the church. But folks around here like Three Creeks.

JOSEPH: We're trying to get to Little Egypt.

MARY LOVE: That's where my pappy moved to down by the river and we're goin' to his house for Christmas. *caresses baby* Pappy hasn't ever seen little Emmanuel.

GUS: Little Egypt? That's quite a ways from here. It's down on the State Line Road.

JOSEPH: Somewhere or other, back up the way, I guess we took a wrong turn. Now, I don't know what to do! It's nearly dark, the baby's tired out, and we--  
*There is considerable noise and commotion at the door as Bo-Jack and his two "Fantastic Riders" companions reach the store, carrying a portable pump organ. This, under the direction of Miss Fannie who has returned with Sugar Plum and her school children.*

*There are seven little girls costumed as angels, three small boys in shepherds' garb. Miss Oaf is with the group, for her nieces are among the angels. The church organist, dressed as an angel, is leading the smaller children.*

*Bo-Jack and his companions begin yelling at each other.*

BO-JACK: *off stage.* Hey, you guys! Step to your left! Left! Left! Not right! Git with it!

MELCHIOR: *off stage.* Shut up, Bo-Jack! This organ is heavy! Besides, it ain't easy to walk sideways!

MISS FANNIE: *standing in the doorway* Boys, be careful! You little children! Y'all come over this way! They've got to bring the organ in!

BALTHASAR: *off-stage* Hold it! Hold it! Bo-Jack, lift up your corner!

BO-JACK: *now in the doorway* If y'all drop this thing on my foot, I'll half kill ya! *Miss Fannie, with Sugar Plum in her arms, manages to squeeze past Bo-Jack. She stops to give instructions.*

MISS FANNIE: Boys! Boys! Turn the organ end wise! That way, you can get it through the door better.

*Enter Bo-Jack, Melchior and Balthasar, still struggling with and complaining about the organ. The three wear the Orient Kings costumes. They set the organ down almost in center stage.*

*Miss Oaf, the organists and 10 children surge inside, stop near the doorway. Joseph and Mary Love have to step aside. They move to the back of the store. Mary Love sits down on a bale of hay, spreads the baby's blanket on the hay and eases*

*him down on it. Joseph has to move the caged hen over so that he will have room to stand.*

*The smaller children become restless.*

SHEPHERD BOY #1: Miss Fannie, when do I say my part?

OLLIE: Do we sing now?

MISS OAF: Children! Shh-h-h-! Shh-! Quiet! Y'all wait right here till Miss Fannie tells you where to stand.

GUS: *slightly bewildered and very upset* Miss Fannie! What-- What's going on here? All these young 'uns? They--

MISS FANNIE: I knew you wouldn't care, Gus. So I decided to bring the children down here so Reverend Moss can hear them practice. And sing. With the organ. They haven't practiced with the organ, yet.

GUS: Oh. Well-- I-- I see.

MISS FANNIE: You don't mind, do you?

GUS: *throwing up his hands* I reckon not. Go right ahead.

*Turns, muttering to himself*

If my store gits turned into a church, that'll shore put me in the poor house.

*Raises voice*

Go right ahead. Let the young 'uns sing!

MISS FANNIE: It won't take five minutes. I'm just going to have the shepherd boys speak their lines and the little angels sing one song. Here, hold Sugar Plum for me.

*With obvious reluctance, Gus takes the dog. Miss Fannie turns to the children*

Bo-Jack, you boys put the organ right over here. And open it up. Just shove that crate of oranges to the side.

Miss Oaf, please line the angels up right about here, in front of the organ.

Now, Shepherd Boys! Y'all listen now while I tell you what to do. You three stay at the doorway till after you say your lines. Then, on to Bethlehem! That is, walk rather fast to this end of the store.

*motions toward Crawford family*

Stop there by that little baby on the hay. Remember, now, you're in a hurry to find the Baby Jesus. Do all three of you understand?

ALL SHEPHERDS: *nodding their heads, mumbling together* Yes, 'um.

*As Miss Fannie's instructions are being carried out, she goes over to speak to Rev. Moss.*

MISS FANNIE: Reverend Moss, I hope you won't be expecting too much now.

REV. MOSS: It'll all be fine, I'm sure. The children look wonderful.

MISS FANNIE: Why, good evenin', Mr. Epps. I didn't see you at first.

MR. EPPS: Evenin', Miss Fannie.

MISS FANNIE: Hello, Willie! I wasn't expecting to see you here.

WILLIE: Well, I'm here! I'm a Christmas Law Man! Jist waitin' for the sheriff 'cause I'm ridin' with him tonight!

MISS FANNIE: I see.

WILLIE: I'm glad I'm here, Miss Fannie. The reverend jist told me 'bout the first Christmas that ever was!

MISS FANNIE: I'm glad for you, Willie. *turns to children* All right, boys and girls. Let's begin. First Shepherd, you start. And speak up so everybody can hear you.

*Returns to Gus, takes dog from him*

SHEPHERD # 1: Let's go to Bethlehem!

SHEPHERD # 2: I want to see the Holy Baby!

SHEPHERD # 3: Do you think we'll really find Him?

SHEPHERD # 1: Sure, we'll find Him. The angels said so. Come on!

*Shepherd boys run across room, stop near Crawfords. Organist begins playing the hymn "Away In a Manger", the angel girls sing two verses. Rev. Moss, Mr. Epps, the Crawfords, the Three Kings applaud. One-eyed-Willie jumps to his feet, yells "Yippee!" and runs to Gus.*

WILLIE: *breathlessly* Mister Gus!

GUS: What is it, Willie?

WILLIE: You know my right eye ain't no good a'tall and the other one ain't much better, don't you?

GUS: Sure, Willie, we all know that. That's how come ever'body calls you One-eyed-Willie.

WILLIE: Mister Gus, tonight there's somethin' I can see plumb good. Plain as day! I don't need no eyes to see it!

GUS: What's that, Willie? What can you see?

WILLIE: *speaking fast, with much excitement* The first Christmas that ever was has done come again--right here to your store! It's 'zactly like it was in Bethlehem!

*Starts pointing with handcuffed hands to the several groups*

There's the angels!

There's the shepherds!

There's the Three Kings!

And there's the man named Joseph,

and his wife named Mary,

and the Little Baby Emmanuel!

I tell you, Mister Gus, it's that first Christmas that ever was done come back! There ain't no ox or donkey or sheep here in your store, but there's a little dog an' a chicken! They count!

An' there's the hay! Jist like in the Bethlehem stable! Can't you see it, Mister Gus? The first Christmas that ever was is right here with us! All around us!

GUS: *with great emotion* Oh, Willie, Willie! I see it! Yeah, I see it. Here I am, a man forty years old, an' for the first time I see what Christmas is. What it means. It means what this Crawford baby's name means!

Emmanuel! "God With Us!"

*turns to speak to entire group*

How could any of us stand life if God wasn't with us!

How could Willie cope with being half blind if God wasn't with him to help him see!

How could Mister Epps, here, put up with being crippled if God wasn't with him to help him walk?

An' the Reverend! How could Reverend Moss stand in the pulpit ever' Sunday, year in, year out, for 49 years, if God wasn't with him to tell him what to say?

Even me! Ol' Greedy Gus McGraw! God's with me, too!

God is with us all--no matter what our circumstances. That's how come He was a Baby in Bethlehem!

I've been tellin' myself there ain't nothin' to celebrate at Christmas Time. But there is!

God is with us through thick 'n thin! That's what we have to celebrate!

*Enter Sheriff Tatum, all bluster and smiles, his headache gone*

SHERIFF: Hi, ever'body! What's all the excitement? I thought I heard music.

GUS: Sheriff, you're jist in time to help us celebrate Christmas! Take off Willie's handcuffs so's he can pass out these apples!

*Grabs up basket of big apples, sets it in front of Willie*

SHERIFF: Come 'ere, Willie! *removes handcuffs; Willie starts handing out apples*

GUS: You Three Kings, pass around the oranges! Them dried raisins! And the candy! The nuts, too!

*runs to Crawfords*

Mister Crawford, you folks are gonna sleep at my house tonight! We've got plenty room, plenty beds, plenty vittles! Lots 'a cakes and pies! An' tomorrow mornin' we'll git you on your way. I'll show you the road to Little Egypt, myself!

JOSEPH: Why, thank you!

*Gus grabs up caged chicken, carries it to Miss Oaf.*

GUS: Here, Miss Oaf, take this fine hen back home with you. *rips covering from doll display* An' take three of these dolls for your little nieces! As presents!

MISS OAF: Oh, goodness! That's wonderful! Thank you, Gus!

GUS: Miss Fannie, here's that coal oil money back. *hands over the 12¢.* Ever' child gets a present: dolls for the angel girls, toys for the shepherd boys!

MISS FANNIE: *unable to hide her surprise* Children, did you hear that? Mr. Gus says each of you is to have a present!

*Children giggle, some jump up and down. Enter Hank Garner and Ly-die. Gus is surprised. Ly-die hurries to the rack of dolls.*

GUS: Why, Hank! You're back! What did you forget?

HANK: I didn't forget nothin', Gus. I jist want to buy one of them dolls for Ly-die. I decided she ain't too grown up for a doll, after all.

GUS: There's no more buying today, Hank! I want Ly-die to pick out which ever doll she wants. An' it's hers. It's a present! We're celebratin' Christmas!

*Ly-die selects doll; organist and Miss Oaf pass out other dolls and toys. Gus hurries to step behind counter, uncovers hoop of cheese.*

GUS: This here hoop of cheese is big enough for ever'body to take home a slice! Or, eat it here! There's plenty of soda crackers, an' sardines, an' all kinds of stuff. Y'all gather 'round!

*Sheriff, Willie, Epps, Three Kings, Joseph C., and Hank surround Gus. There's much laughter and merriment. Miss Fannie, with Sugar Plum still in her arms, steps over to speak privately with Rev. Moss.*

MISS FANNIE: *whispering* Reverend, I do believe our leopard has changed his spots!

REV. MOSS: No, Miss Fannie. It was not the leopard who changed the spots. It was God.

Christmas has come to Gus McGraw!

CURTAIN

The End

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