

# THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL

*Adapted by Arthur L. Zapel*



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# **THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL**

**By Henry Van Dyke**

**Adapted for Readers Theater by Arthur L. Zapel**

**CAST****READER 1**

*Man with deep voice*

**READER 2**

*Woman with low range*

**READER 3**

*Man with tenor range*

**READER 4**

*Woman with lighter voice*

The tonal range of the voices indicated are not precisely required.  
They are only indicated as a possible guide in casting.

### ***PRODUCTION NOTES***

This classic dream story written by one of the leading Christian writers of the Victorian period of literature is still, today, an inspirational gem suitable to the consciences of contemporary Christians.

This dramatized version for four readers holds closely to the original but takes license in dividing the narrative into many parts to provide change of voice and a more lively pace.

It is recommended that the readers be two men and two women. This permits a variety of tones and interpretations to hold the interest of the audience. The poetic and lengthy sentence structure of the narrative requires careful reading and careful listening. Without a change of voices and interpretations the concentration of both reader and audience might falter to the detriment of the message.

The use of two men and two women also makes reader selection and rehearsals easier since this may be comprised of two married couples.

No costumes or props are needed. Four lecterns or four chairs in line before the audience is the only staging required. In the conventions of Readers Theatre drama, the readers may perform more than one role. The context of their words explains who they are within the narrative.

It is recommended that all readers remain standing as they await their turn. This avoids the delays of ups and downs.

They must be aware that Readers Theatre is theatre of the mind — it is their reading that allows the audience to imagine what would be seen if one were there. Accordingly, the words should be spoken slowly and with care.

**READER 1:** It was the hour of rest in the Country Beyond the Stars. All the silver bells that swing with the turning of the great ring of light were softly chiming; and the sound of their commotion went down like dew upon the golden ways of the city, and the long alleys of blossoming trees, and the meadows of asphodel, and the curving shores of the River of Life.

**READER 2:** At the hearing of that chime, all the angels who had been working turned to play, and all who had been playing gave themselves joyfully to work. Those who had been singing, and making melody on different instruments, fell silent and began to listen. Those who had been walking alone in meditation met together in companies to talk. And those who had been far away on errands to the Earth and other planets came homeward like a flight of swallows to the high cliff when the day is over.

**READER 3:** It was not that they needed to be restored from weariness, for the inhabitants of that country never say, "I am tired." But there, as here, the law of change is the secret of happiness, and the joy that never ends is woven of mingled strands of labor and repose, society and solitude, music and silence. Sleep comes to them not as it does to us, with a darkening of the vision and a folding of the wings of the spirit, but with an opening of the eyes to deeper and fuller light, and with an effortless outgoing of the soul upon broader currents of life, as the sun loving bird poises and circles upward, without a wing-beat, on the upholding air.

**READER 4:** It was in one of the quiet corners of the green valley called Peacefield, where the little brook of Brighthopes runs smoothly down to join the River of Life, that I saw a company of angels, returned from various labors on Earth, sitting in friendly converse on the hillside, where cyclamens and arbutus and violets and fringed orchids and pale lady's-tresses, and all the sweet smelling flowers

which are separated in the lower world by the seasons, were thrown together in a harmony of fragrance. There were three of the company who seemed to be leaders, distinguished not only by more radiant and powerful looks, but by a tone of authority in their speech and by the willing attention with which the others listened to them, as they talked of their earthly tasks, of the tangles and troubles, the wars and miseries that they had seen among men, and of the best way to get rid of them and bring sorrow to an end.

READER 1: "The Earth is full of oppression and unrighteousness," said the tallest and most powerful of the angels. His voice was deep and strong, and by his shining armor and the long two-handed sword hanging over his shoulder . . .

READER 2: . . . I knew that he was the archangel Michael, the mightiest one among the warriors of the King, and the executor of the divine judgments upon the unjust.

READER 1: The Earth is tormented with injustice and the great misery that I have seen among men is that the evil hand is often stronger than the good hand and can beat it down.

The arm of the cruel is heavier than the arm of the kind. The unjust get the better of the just and tread on them. I have seen tyrant kings crush their helpless folk. I have seen the fields of the innocent trampled into bloody ruin by the feet of conquering armies. I have seen the wicked nation overcome the peoples that loved liberty, and take away their treasure by force of arms. I have seen poverty mocked by arrogant wealth, and purity deflowered by brute violence, and gentleness and fair dealing bruised in the winepress of iniquity and pride.

READER 4: There is no cure for this evil, but by the giving of greater force to the good hand. The righteous cause must be strengthened with might to resist the wicked, to defend the helpless, to punish all cruelty and unfairness,

1 to uphold the right everywhere, and to enforce justice  
2 with unconquerable arms. Oh, that the host of Heaven  
3 might be called, arrayed, and sent to mingle in the wars  
4 of men, to make the good victorious, to destroy all evil,  
5 and to make the will of the King prevail!

6 **READER 1:** We would shake down the thrones of tyrants,  
7 and loose the bands of the oppressed. We would hold the  
8 cruel and violent with the bit of fear, and drive the greedy  
9 and fierce-minded men with the whip of terror. We would  
10 stand guard, with weapons drawn, about the innocent,  
11 the gentle, the kind, and keep the peace of God with the  
12 sword of the angels!

13 **READER 2:** As he spoke, his hands were lifted to the hilt of  
14 his long blade, and he raised it above him, straight and  
15 shining, throwing sparkles of light around it, like the  
16 spray from the sharp prow of a moving ship. Bright flames  
17 of heavenly ardor leaped in the eyes of the listening  
18 angels; a martial air passed over their faces as if they  
19 longed for the call to war.

20 **READER 3:** But no silver trumpet blared from the battlements  
21 of the City of God; no crimson flag was unfurled on those  
22 high, secret walls; no thrilling drumbeat echoed over the  
23 smooth meadow. Only the sound of the brook of Brighthopes  
24 was heard tinkling and murmuring among the roots of  
25 the grasses and flowers; and far off a cadence of song  
26 drifted down from the inner courts of the Palace of the  
27 King.

28 **READER 4:** Then another angel began to speak in answer to  
29 Michael. He, too, was tall and wore the look of power.  
30 But it was power of the mind rather than of the hand. His  
31 face was clear and glistening, and his eyes were lit with a  
32 steady flame which neither leaped nor fell. Of flame also  
33 were his garments, which clung about him as the fire  
34 enwraps a torch burning where there is no wind; and his  
35 great wings, spiring to a point far above his head, were

1       like a living lamp before the altar of the Most High. By  
2       this sign I knew that it was the archangel Uriel, the spirit  
3       of the Sun, clearest in vision, deepest in wisdom of all  
4       the spirits that surround the throne.

5       **READER 3:** I hold not the same thought, as the great archangel  
6       Michael, though I desire the same end he desires, but I  
7       would seek it another way. For I know how often power  
8       has been given to the good, and how often it has been  
9       turned aside and used for evil. I know that the host of  
10      Heaven, and the very stars in their courses, have fought  
11      on the side of a favored nation; yet pride has followed  
12      triumph and oppression has been the first-born child of  
13      victory. I know that the deliverers of the people have  
14      become tyrants over those whom they have set free, and  
15      the fighters for liberty have been changed into the soldiers  
16      of fortune. Power corrupts itself, and might cannot save.

17       Does not Prince Michael remember how the angel  
18      of the Lord led the armies of Israel, and gave them the  
19      battle against every foe, except the enemy within the  
20      camp? And how they robbed and crushed the peoples  
21      against whom they had fought for freedom? And how the  
22      wickedness of the tribes of Canaan survived their conquest  
23      and overcame their conquerors, so that the children of  
24      Israel learned to worship the idols of their enemies,  
25      Moloch, and Baal, and Ashtoreth?

26      **READER 2:** Power corrupts itself, and might cannot save.  
27      Was not Persia the destroyer of Babylon, and did not the  
28      tyranny of Persia cry aloud for destruction? Did not  
29      Rome break the yoke of the East, and does not the yoke  
30      of Rome lie heavy on the shoulders of the world? Listen!

31      **READER 1:** There was silence for a moment on the slopes of  
32      Peacefield, and then over the encircling hills a cool wind  
33      brought the sound of chains clanking in prisons and  
34      galleys, the sighing of millions of slaves, the weeping of  
35      wretched women and children, the blows of hammers

1       nailing men to their crosses. Then the sound passed by  
2       with the wind, and Uriel spoke again:

3       **READER 3:** Power corrupts itself, and might cannot save. The  
4       Earth is full of ignorant strife, and for this evil there is no  
5       cure but by the giving of greater knowledge. It is because  
6       men do not understand evil that they yield themselves to  
7       its power. Wickedness is folly in action, and injustice is  
8       the error of the blind. It is because men are ignorant that  
9       they destroy one another, and at last themselves.

10       If there were more light in the world there would be  
11       no sorrow. If the great King who knows all things would  
12       enlighten the world with wisdom — wisdom to understand  
13       his law and his ways, to read the secrets of the earth and  
14       the stars, to discern the workings of the heart of man  
15       and the things that make for joy and peace — if he would  
16       but send us, his messengers, as a flame of fire to shine  
17       upon those who sit in darkness, how gladly would we go  
18       to bring in the new day!

19       We would speak the word of warning and counsel to  
20       the erring, and give knowledge to the perplexed. We  
21       would guide the ignorant in the paths of prudence, and  
22       the young would sit at our feet and hear us gladly in the  
23       school of life. Then folly would fade away as the morning  
24       vapor, and the sun of wisdom would shine on all men,  
25       and the peace of God would come with the counsel of the  
26       angels.

27       **READER 4:** A murmur of pleasure followed the words of Uriel,  
28       and eager looks flashed around the circle of the messengers  
29       of light as they heard the praise of wisdom fitly spoken.  
30       But there was one among them on whose face a shadow  
31       of doubt rested, and though he smiled, it was as if he  
32       remembered something that the others had forgotten. He  
33       turned to an angel near him.

34       **READER 1:** Who was it to whom you were sent with counsel  
35       long ago? Was it not Balaam the son of Beor, as he was

riding to meet the King of Moab? And did not even the dumb beast profit more by your instruction than the man who rode him? And who was it that was called the wisest of all men, having searched out and understood the many inventions that are found under the sun? Was not Solomon, prince of fools and philosophers, unable by much learning to escape weariness of the flesh and despair of the spirit? Knowledge also is vanity and vexation. This I know well, because I have dwelt among men and held converse with them since the day when I was sent to instruct the first man in Eden.

READER 2: Then I looked more closely at him who was speaking and recognized the beauty of the archangel Raphael, as it was pictured long ago:

READER 4: A seraph winged; six wings he wore to shade  
His lineaments divine; the pair that clad  
Each shoulder broad came mantling o'er his  
breast,  
With regal ornament; the middle pair  
Girt like a starry zone his waist, and round  
Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold  
And colors dipped in Heav'n; the third his feet  
Shadowed from either heel with feathered mail,  
Sky-tinctured grain. Like Maia's son he stood  
And shook his plumes, that Heavenly fragrance  
filled  
The circuit wide.

READER 1: Too well I know, *(The smile on his face deepens into a look of pity and tenderness and desire)* too well I know that power corrupts itself and that knowledge cannot save. There is no cure for the evil that is in the world but by giving of more love to men. The laws that are ordained for earth are strange and unequal, and the ways where men must walk are full of pitfalls and dangers.

READER 2: Frail is the flesh of man, and many are his pains

1 and troubles. His children can never find peace until they  
2 learn to love one another and to help one another.

3 **READER 1:** Wickedness is begotten by disease and misery.

4 Violence comes from poverty and hunger. The cruelty of  
5 oppression is when the strong tread the weak under their  
6 feet; the bitterness of pride is when the wise and learned  
7 despise the simple; the crown of folly is when the rich  
8 think they are gods, and the poor think that God is not.

9 Hatred and envy and contempt are the curse of life.  
10 And for these there is no remedy save love — the will to give  
11 and to bless — the will of the King himself, who gives to all  
12 and is loving unto every man. But how shall the hearts of  
13 men be won to this will? How shall it enter into them and  
14 possess them? Even the gods that men fashion for them-  
15 selves are cruel and proud and false and unjust. How shall  
16 the miracle be wrought in human nature to reveal the  
17 meaning of humanity? How shall men be made like God?

18 **READER 4:** At this question a deep hush fell around the circle,  
19 and every listener was still, even as the rustling leaves  
20 hang motionless when the light breeze falls away in the  
21 hour of sunset. Then through the silence, like the song  
22 of a faraway thrush from its hermitage in the forest, a  
23 voice came ringing: "I know it, I know it, I know it."

24 Clear and sweet — clear as a ray of light, sweeter  
25 than the smallest silver bell that rang the hour of rest —  
26 was that slender voice. Nearer and nearer it came, echoing  
27 down the valley, "I know it, I know it, I know it!"

28 **READER 2:** Then from between the rounded hills, among  
29 which the brook of Brighthopes is born, appeared a young  
30 angel, a little child, with flying hair of gold, and green  
31 wreaths twined about his shoulders, and fluttering hands  
32 that played upon the air and seemed to lift him so lightly  
33 that he had no need of wings. As thistledown, blown by  
34 the wind, dances across the water, so he came along the  
35 little stream, singing clear above the murmur of the brook.

1 **READER 4:** All the angels rose and turned to look at him with  
 2 wondering eyes. Multitudes of others came flying swiftly  
 3 to the place from which the strange, new song was  
 4 sounding. Rank within rank, like a garden of living flowers,  
 5 they stood along the sloping banks of the brook while  
 6 the child-angel floated into the midst of them, singing:

7 **READER 2:** I know it, I know it, I know it! Man shall be made  
 8 like God because the Son of God shall become a man.

9 **READER 4:** At this all the angels looked at one another with  
 10 amazement, and gathered more closely about the child-  
 11 angel, as those who hear wonderful news.

12 **READER 2:** "How can this be?" they asked. "How is it possible  
 13 that the Son of God should be a man?"

14 **READER 4:** "I do not know," said the young angel. "I only  
 15 know that it is to be."

16 **READER 1:** "But if he becomes a man," said Raphael, "he will  
 17 be at the mercy of men; the cruel and the wicked will  
 18 have power upon him; he will suffer."

19 **READER 4:** "I know it," answered the young angel, "and by  
 20 suffering he will understand the meaning of all sorrow  
 21 and pain; and he will be able to comfort everyone who  
 22 cries; and his own tears will be for the healing of sad  
 23 hearts; and those who are healed by him will learn for  
 24 his sake to be kind to each other."

25 **READER 3:** "But if the Son of God is a true man," said Uriel,  
 26 "he must first be a child, simple, and lowly, and helpless.  
 27 It may be that he will never gain the learning of the  
 28 schools. The masters of earthly wisdom will despise him  
 29 and speak scorn of him."

30 **READER 4:** "I know it," said the young angel, "but in meekness  
 31 will he answer them; and to those who become as little  
 32 children he will give the heavenly wisdom that comes,  
 33 without seeking, to the pure and gentle of heart."

34 **READER 1:** "But if he becomes a man," said Michael, "evil  
 35 men will hate and persecute him: they may even take his

1           life, if they are stronger than he.”

2   **READER 4:** “I know it,” answered the young angel, “they will  
3           nail him to a cross. But when he is lifted up, he will draw  
4           all men unto him, for he will still be the Son of God, and  
5           no heart that is open to love can help loving him, since  
6           his love for men is so great that he is willing to die for  
7           them.”

8   **READER 2:** “But how do you know these things?” cried the  
9           other angels.

10   **READER 3:** Who are you?

11   **READER 4:** I am the Christmas angel. At first I was sent as the  
12           dream of a little child, a holy child, blessed and wonderful,  
13           to dwell in the heart of a pure virgin, Mary of Nazareth.  
14           There I was hidden till the word came to call me back to  
15           the throne of the King, and tell me my name, and give  
16           me my new message. For this is Christmas day on Earth,  
17           and today the Son of God is born of a woman. So I must  
18           fly quickly, before the sun rises, to bring the good news to  
19           those happy men who have been chosen to receive them.

20   **READER 3:** As the young angel said this he rose, with arms  
21           outspread, from the green meadow of Peacefield and,  
22           passing over the bounds of Heaven, dropped swiftly as a  
23           shooting star toward the night shadow of the Earth.

24   **READER 2:** The other angels followed him — a throng of  
25           dazzling forms, beautiful as a rain of jewels falling from  
26           the dark blue sky. But the child-angel went more swiftly  
27           than the others, because of the certainty of gladness in  
28           his heart.

29   **READER 4:** And as the others followed him they wondered  
30           who had been favored and chosen to receive the glad  
31           tidings.

32   **READER 2:** “It must be the Emperor of the World and his  
33           counselors,” they thought. But the flight passed over  
34           Rome.

35   **READER 1:** “It may be the philosophers and the masters of



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*by Arthur L. Zapel.*

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