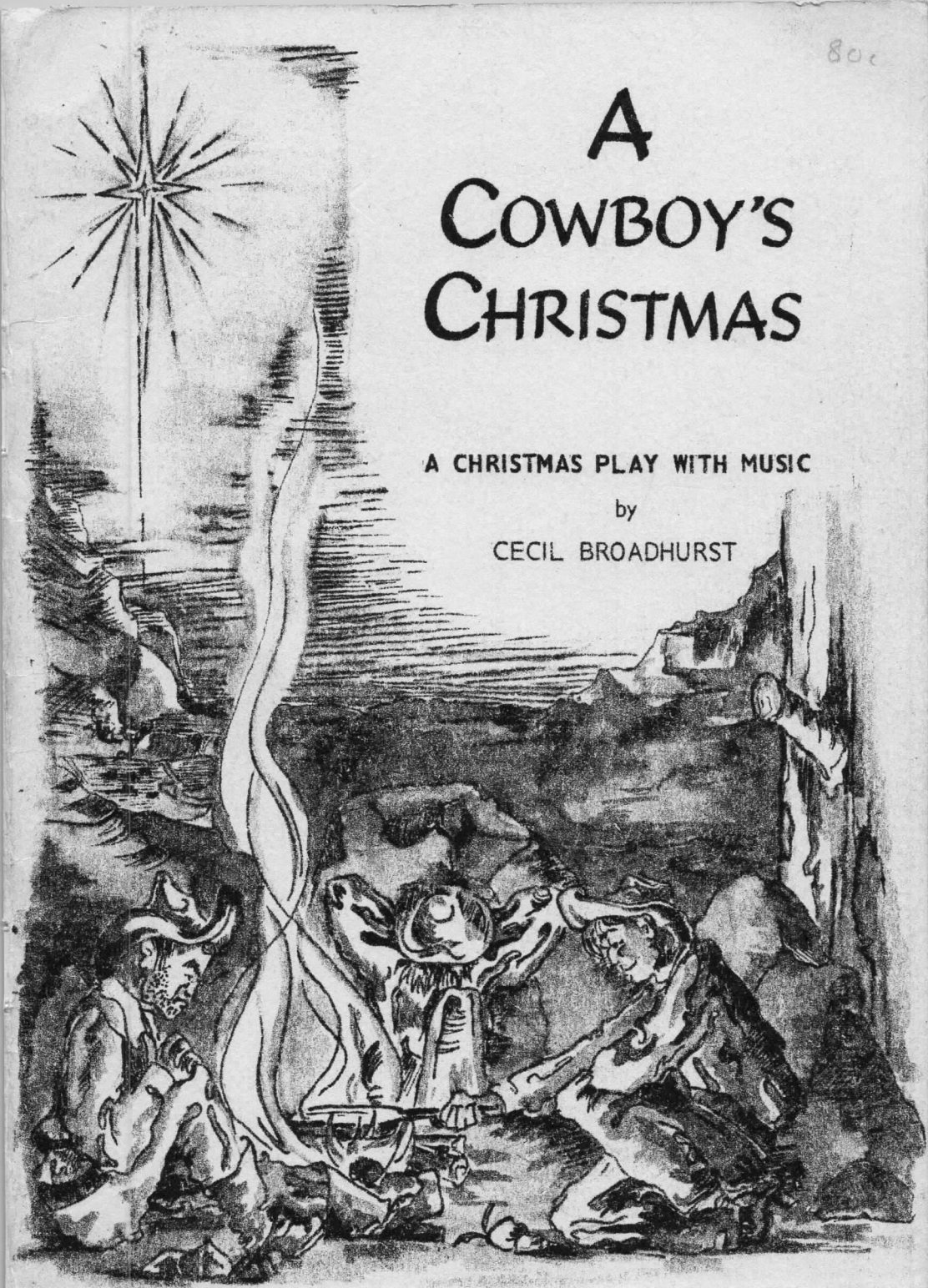
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A COWBOY'S CHRISTMAS

A CHRISTMAS PLAY WITH MUSIC

by

CECIL BROADHURST



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A COWBOY'S CHRISTMAS

PROLOGUE

(An old timer is sitting on a rock by his gold claim, somewhere in the South West. He is in his eighties and in contrast are a group of Navajo children, ages six to twelve, gathered round him. He is telling a story....)

MR. WHISKERS — And then just as a big black bear was comin' out from behind the rocks, old Musky Joe lifted his gun and let him have it. Boom, boom, clear 'tween the eyes. He were a cracker shot, Joe were, and the grizzly rolled over, whoosh, like that, deader 'n my Uncle Peter, 'n he's been gone for ninety years... Well, then old Musky went over 't bear and looked down and... say, what's eatin' you little duffers anyway? Don't you like this story?

CHILDREN *(Together)* — No, no, Mr. Whiskers. No, no. Tell us Christmas story.

MR. WHISKERS — Now, now. One at a time. What are ye saying any hoo? Why don't ye speak English so's a man can onnerstan ye. Say there, yoo Big Feller. What they all hollerin' about now?

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD CHILD — They say you tell to children no-good scarey stories. They want you to tell the story of the Jesus baby.

MR. WHISKERS — The little Jesus story? Ohhh. Yes. The little Jesus story. Well now, let me see. I remember I was told it once when I was a little boy. Mighty beautiful story. Yesiree! Let's see now. Ha. He was born a long time ago. Somewhere like this kind of country. Sand and little rivers, and a few hills. Yup. Shore was. Well, it all happened like this. You better sit ye down I guess. Yep. C'mon sit in here. Wal, let me see now. Once upon a time there was three cowhands. Their names was Wheezer, Castiron and Timber. They was riding hard in the hill country. The cattle wasn't used to this new grazin' land. Lotsa coyotes sneakin' roun', and baars, big, black, grizzly baars....

CHILDREN No. No stories of baars, Mr. Whiskers.

MR. WHISKERS All right, all right, there wasn't no baars. Just coyotes. Ennyhoo these cowpokes had to keep an eye on the herd by night, ye see. Waal, one time round December they was a' gittin' ready to roll up for the night and they got to grousin' some about the cold weather. Y'see every time....

SCENE I

(The scene is a sheltered valley somewhere in the West. As the curtain opens three cowhands are preparing to settle in for the night. They have been riding herd all day and have just spread their blankets. A small fire is glowing stage right. There is a bluish light that could be moonlight or the light from the stars. There are hills dimly seen in the distance. From them comes the occasional howl of a coyote and the monotonous call of a night bird accompanied by a host of crickets and frogs in a nearby creek. Timber is seated on a log stage left humming. Wheezer is pulling his blanket around him prior to rolling in for the night. Castiron is poking the fire, and blowing it into a flame. Timber sings "Gee Whippers".

WHEEZER — I don't see how you can keep up your yowling in this kind of weather.

CASTIRON — What's the matter, Wheezer? You'd think it was cold the way yore actin' up. Why, this ain't cold weather... you ain't even seen it chilly yet. Now back in '93 we had it so consarned cold round here yore breath used to come out of you tinklin' with icicles.

WHEEZER — Aw, bungle-wicky! Yer dreamin' it all up.

CASTIRON — Honest, it was turrible, simply turrible. Why, one day we wus in town to mail some letters and we saw a bran' new stature up in front of the Post Office, horse and rider. Beautiful white statue. When we got closer we found it wuz one of the boys who's waited so long outside he'd froze up. (hah, hah)

TIMBER — Well, Castiron, we're not livin' in '93 any longer. Jes don't let those yarns keep you from stokin' up a few flames out of this fire.

WHEEZER — 'Pears t' me, we'd have a mighty roarin' fire there if we could use some of your hot air on it.

CASTIRON — I never wus able to make you young critters believe me but you'll come to it. Catfish, you will. You'll discover that we had it a lot harder in the old days. We had tough times.

WHEEZER — What could be tougher 'n whut we got right here... colder 'n I don't know whut... ridin' herd in Blizzards 'n freezin' yer hands off.

CASTIRON — But the ones who found this country out here knew what they wanted and went after it, rain, snow, hail 'n everythin'.

WHEEZER — Eyewash, pure eye wash.

CASTIRON — When they wanted water, they dug a hole until they found it. Deep holes that meant life 'r death. They build their herds outa skinny stock they brought out with them across the range o' snow caps. Some froze war they stood, up there. They wuz fighters... fighters who fought for a noo world out here... right here.

WHEEZER — Aw yer dreamin' I tell ya.

CASTIRON — You listen here, Wheezer, my Pappy was one of them. They all got tough through fightin'... fightin' to make this a fit place to live in.

WHEEZER — Awwww!

CASTIRON — Sure! They brought all their wagons, hosses, guns, kids and women folk cause they wanted to build something new. This was their noo world.

WHEEZER — 'Pears to me they came for whut they could get out of it... that's all.

CASTIRON — There you go again, ye disbelievin', money-minded, old skinflint. Ye ain't got no heart in ye at all, I'm figgerin'.

(Wheezer grabs hold of Castiron, and there is a fight.)

TIMBER — Wheezer! Hold on there.

WHEEZER — Well, I'm fed up with all this talk, about pioneers, 'n heroes 'n things. There ain't nuthin' but three meals a day and a bed at night.

TIMBER — Well, it's more than three square meals a day and a shake down at night. It's the kick you get outa buildin' things and makin' life worth livin'.

WHEEZER — Aw bumble-wicky! How are you and me goin' to build things?

CASTIRON — You wouldn't understand if we was to put it into words of one letter.

WHEEZER — I'm goin' to bed.

(Exits grumbling stage left. Timber watches him.)

TIMBER — Arguin' about it ain't goin' to help none... that's bin tried too long now. It's got to be somethin' noo, somethin' different.

CASTIRON — I'd like to see the thing that would make old Wheezer different.

(There is a shrill whinny from the pack mules tied up by the creek, followed by a loud stamping of hoofs.)

TIMBER — Hey! That sounds like mules!

CASTIRON — Well, what d'ye s'pose is goin' on down there?

WHEEZER — *(Coming back)* Ho, thar, you four-legged, long-eared, scatter-brained... Probably seen a shadow and thought it was a coyote.

TIMBER — Them yore animals?

WHEEZER — Yeah.

(Wheezer goes off to get his gun and lantern. Comes back as Timber speaks to Castiron.)

TIMBER — Funny, ain't never heard them kick up like that before.

CASTIRON — Yeah, that's right. Well, Mr. mule skinner, do yer dooty. Go quiet 'em down.

TIMBER — An' don't go scarin' 'em worse either. Take yer gun and don't shoot till you see somethin'.

WHEEZER — The old days was all whipped cream and choklick cake c'mpared with this kind o' thing. No peace at all. No sleep either. One of these days I'm gonna pull outa here. *(Exits stage right.)*

CASTIRON — Pore ole Wheezer. He's the most miserable, unhappy critter I ever run across, always thinkin' the world's agin' him.

TIMBER — Good hand, though – one of the best 'round these parts. Funny ain't it?

CASTIRON — What d'ye mean, funny?

TIMBER — Well, he never seems to improve, does he? He just goes on bein' the same ornery mule skinner every day.

CASTIRON — It ain't no wonder his wife can't stand him.

TIMBER — Wife?

CASTIRON — Sure, they had a fight about six months ago, and he ain't been back since.

TIMBER — Oh, so that's it. Well, I guess he's like a lot of folks in the world, carryin' a load of trouble 'round with them and don't know where to dump it.

CASTIRON — Well, he dumps enough of it on us.

TIMBER — Yeah, and what do we do with it? We don't seem to help him none. You know, Castiron, we bin pardners a long time but we don't help each other with things that count most. Why, Wheezer wouldn't be so miserable if we gave a hoot for him and helped him like a brother, d'ye think?

CASTIRON — You ain't never goin' to be able to do anything with a ornery cuss like him. He's just like them lop-eared mules of his.

TIMBER — Castiron, do you think he was that way when he was a little cuddly baby?

CASTIRON Aw gersh, timber. You do come out with the goll derndest things.

TIMBER Maybe he's got miserable livin' with you and me...

CASTIRON You listen here, youngster. I bin livin' twice as long as you and I've knowd a lot of men. Why back in 1894 ...

TIMBER I don't want to know about 1894... I want to know whut we kin do with Wheezer right now, tonight.

CASTIRON Tonight?

TIMBER Sure, why don't we try being decent to him.

CASTIRON Now look, I ain't one to be undecent with no-one. I take to folks, in fact I like folks but Wheezer... Well I know I ain't done all I could for him or you either.

TIMBER Ain't there somethin' you could say? Couldn't you kinda fix things up? Take that scrap you just had.

CASTIRON If there's any fixin' to do that's Wheezer's job.

(They hear the mules and the crack of a whip and Wheezer's voice above it all.)

TIMBER Shore is funny the way them mules is actin' up. Ain't heard 'em quite like that before.

CASTIRON Wheezer'll beat the hide off 'em. He'll quiet 'em down.

TIMBER *(Laughing)* Maybe ghosts or somethin'.

CASTIRON Could be. Could be.

TIMBER You believe in ghosts, Cast Iron?

CASTIRON Can't quite say. I guess certain kinds. I figger ghosts and spirits is the same thing – and I believe in spirits.

TIMBER What kind of spirits?

CASTIRON — Y'know spirits is strange things. They's so many kinds. They's good ones and bad ones. The good ones is what makes a man outa you – good spirits. Then there's a pioneer spirit that makes you want to build things and go out and change things 'n make 'em better.

TIMBER — Yeah!

CASTIRON — 'Course there's the most important one – the Bible talks about a Holy Spirit.

TIMBER — Say, Castiron, you get good thoughts as well as hot air.

CASTIRON — I kinda think the whole world is ready for a mighty new spirit. A pioneering one, a fightin' one and a Holy Spirit all rolled into one.

TIMBER — I got a notion you're really ridin' now, pardner. If the world could only find some new man, who had all these spirits rolled into one. That would be somethin'.

CASTIRON — That would be a miracle like you read of.

TIMBER — The time's mighty ripe for it. You know if there was someone like that I knew, I'd follow him to the end of time.

CASTIRON — That's a mighty long ride, son. Here comes Wheezer back again.

TIMBER — Here's your chance, Castiron. Remember you ain't one to be undecent.

WHEEZER *(Enters)* — Whoever called a mule a sensible animal needs to have his head examined.

CASTIRON — Well, son, you're back soon. Whut's up out there?

TIMBER — What wuz it – coyotes, rattlers, or whut?

WHEEZER — Some strange lookin' gut prowlin' round down there.

CASTIRON — Someone tryin' to swipe a mule?

WHEEZER *(Crosses left.)* I don't know who he was or what he was doin'. He just seemed to come out of nowhere. He says, 'Good evenin'.' 'Good evenin'! What's good about it?' I says. 'What are you doin' round here?' Then he says, 'I came to bring you some good news.'

CASTIRON Good news! Maybe he brought the mail?

WHEEZER He said there was some kinda celebration over Pinto Mountain way and we oughta get in on it.

TIMBER Guess we ain't got much time for celebrations.

WHEEZER That's what I said. Then I told him to get away from the mules, and he just went like he came. Whoosh! My, he sure did move fast.

TIMBER Saay! Lookit there! That big light shinin'!

CASTIRON What light you talkin' 'bout, son?

TIMBER A bright light over that way.

WHEEZER Where's any light?

TIMBER It's over t' the East, sorta behind Pinto Mountain.

CASTIRON I'll bet that's what stirred the mules up . . . that's it . . . they couldn't figger it out.

TIMBER It can't be the sun.

WHEEZER Shucks no! It jes went down. I don't see no light. Yer plump pop-eyed.

TIMBER Saay! Lookee there! It must be the sun. Too bright for the moon and too yeller.

CASTIRON Yeah! Gosh it's brilliant like a diamint! D'ye think it could be a sign of sumpin' gonna happen?

WHEEZER Awwww!

TIMBER I'd sure like to get a better look at it.

CASTIRON It's so bright, lightin' up the whole trail across the Pinto.

TIMBER — Say, I'm sorta warm all over.

CASTIRON — *(Walks over, takes a good look.)* I think I see whut ye mean, son.

TIMBER — I feel sorta like I wanta ride over that way.

CASTIRON — Well, son, I kinda feel that way myself.

WHEEZER — What the thunder you two cookin' up now. You mean pack up and ride over Pinto tonight?

(They both look at him. Wheezer averts their gaze.)

TIMBER — Come on, Wheezer, let's go and get a look see.

WHEEZER — I knew it. I knew it. As soon as I opened my mouth, we'd have t'move. *(Throws his hat on the ground.)* Who wants t' ride over and see a light shinin'... maybe it's only a star or sumpin'.

TIMBER — A star. Mebbe you're right. Mebbe it is a star. I got a strange feelin' we oughta be headin' over that way.

(A chorus is heard singing very softly.)

TIMBER — What's that?

CASTIRON — What's what?

TIMBER — Singin'. It's singin', ain't it?

WHEEZER — I don't hear nuthin'.

TIMBER — Listen.

CASTIRON — Yeah, I hear it. Sounds kinda purty. Mighty purty.

WHEEZER — Say, what's got into you birds? I don't hear nuthin'.

TIMBER — Could be the wind, I guess.

CASTIRON — Mebbe, funny though. A purty noise like that and a purty light in the sky.

WHEEZER — Aww, bungle wicky! Fergit it.

TIMBER — Well, let's go saddle 'em, fellas. How about it, Wheezer?

(Timber and Castiron are packed. Timber goes out first.)

CASTIRON Gosh I'd like t' git a closer look. Shore is beautiful! Saaay! Mebbe it's that... naaw, it couldn't be. It couldn't be!

(Castiron exits. Wheezer draws near the fire and puts his hand into the strange light and looks at his hand with awe.)

CURTAIN

SCENE II

(The scene is the interior of an old barn. A huge beam crosses backstage over which is thrown a large blanket. A saddle, straps, etc. There is plenty of loose hay about. There is a door left and a larger one on the right.)

TIMBER — *(Calling to others.)* Sssssss! It's OK. Come on in. Look out for that old bucket there, Castiron.

CASTIRON — Consarned thing. What a place to put a... Hey, what is this place anyhow?

TIMBER — It's a barn, yet it ain't, somehow.

CASTIRON — There's somethin' strange about it, yet I don't know. Seems like I been here before, 'pears to me.

TIMBER — Shore is. Shore is strange – yet familiar. Funny thing about that light we saw. Came from here 'bouts, yet... I don't know.

CASTIRON — Yeah! It seemed to bring us right here.

TIMBER — But why this old hoss barn, that's what I can't understand.

CASTIRON — It all don't make common sense to me.

TIMBER — Couldn't be just imagination.

CASTIRON — Aww, no!

TIMBER — It seemed more like a beacon light guidin' us along. It lit up the trail like daylight.

CASTIRON — And the hosses just moved along so nice, like goin' home. I never seed 'em ride so sweet. Didn't use my spurs once. *(Sits down stage right.)*

(Door squeaks by Wheezer as he comes in.)

TIMBER — Wheezer, where'd you come from?

WHEEZER — Wasn't no sense in stayin' over there by myself, so I jest come along.

CASTIRON Yeah, you sure you didn't see no light at all, Wheezer?

WHEEZER Waal, yes and no. If it was a light (I ain't sayin' it was a light, mindya) but I s'pose I was followin' somethin' maybe...

CASTIRON Well, anyhow, we followed somethin' across those hills, and here we are.

WHEEZER An' it wus a long ride, too.

CASTIRON That's right enough. *(Goes to centre stage and sits down.)*

WHEEZER Wherever we are, or whoever's barn this is, let's make the most of it and turn in. I'm for gettin' some sleep.

(Music and singing is heard again.)

TIMBER Well, ya can say that again.

CASTIRON Listen! Did ya hear that?

TIMBER Hear what?

CASTIRON Singin'. That singin' again. Voices all singin' sweet like.

TIMBER Yeah! It is jes the wind though, ain't it? *(Starts to exit.)* *(Singing fades.)*

CASTIRON I don't know. Don't know if it is.

WHEEZER Hey, there's someone comin'. Ah kin see a lantern swingin' through here.
(Wheezer looks through crack.)

CASTIRON Well, mebbe it's the owner – d'ya think?

WHEEZER Looks like he could be anybody. We better be ready for him. *(Picks up gun.)*

CASTIRON Mebbe he seen us come in.

TIMBER P'haps he's jest comin' t' see if his milk critter's bedded down.

STRANGER *(Entering)* Oh, hello there! Greetings!

TIMBER Howdy, Mister.

STRANGER Is there anything I can do for you? I take it you are looking for a bed for the night.

WHEEZER Now hold on there, stranger – who are you anyhow – and what's all this business...

TIMBER *(Kicking Wheezer)* Take it easy, Wheezer – er, I got a notion this is your place, Mister, and we ain't tryin' to bust in... We don't figger on staying here long... we jest sort of... we... come over to... ah ...we jest...

CASTIRON Come along.

TIMBER Yes, come along.

STRANGER Well, that's mighty nice. We're not too well fixed here, but there's room for all of us. There's a lot of hay in the stalls and I think a few blankets – come to think of it – we ought to fit in very comfortably.

TIMBER Thank ye, Mister. My name's Timber. This here is my pardner, Castiron, and this'n here is m'other pardner, Wheezer.

STRANGER How do you do. My name is Joseph.

ALL Howdy, hello, *etc.*

JOSEPH Which way are you riding men?

TIMBER We wus headin' due East, Mister.

CASTIRON Straight as an arrow – yep... due east.

JOSEPH Then you must have come over from the other side of old Pinto.

TIMBER Yep... We wus up thar ridin' herd an' we saw a light in the sky t' the East, so we...

JOSEPH A light?

WHEEZER Do you know of any timber fires, 'round here?

JOSEPH Could it have been a star you saw? A very bright star?

CASTIRON Sure guess it could've been... Hugh!... a star... Say!

TIMBER Y'see Mister, it's all very strange. We wuz settlin' in fer the night up thar...talkin' on about lots o'things...

CASTIRON World affairs an' such topics.

JOSEPH World affairs?

WHEEZER Yeah, they tried to settle all the world's troubles... they always get round to that sooner or later, especially when a fella's tryin' to get a little sleep.

JOSEPH Well, this is very interesting. You see my wife and I have also been thinking along those lines. We've talked a lot about it lately.

TIMBER Well, Mister, we ain't larnin' and readin' men. We're just cow men. All we know is hoss flesh and how to operate it.

CASTIRON But, ridin' ten twelve hours a day, ya gets to thinkin' a lot. You know how 'tis, Mister? *(He sits down.)*

JOSEPH My wife and I did a lot of thinking about the future on our ride.

TIMBER Oh, you come a long way too?

JOSEPH Yes, a long way.

WHEEZER Why don't you give him some of that new world talk of yours, Castiron. That'll settle everything.

JOSEPH A new world?

CASTIRON *(Bashfully)* Well, you see, Mister, we was sayin' the world needed a new spirit...mebbe a new kind of man who could bring everyone to their senses like and start us livin' right...

JOSEPH And you saw light in the East, you say?

TIMBER Jest about the time we wuz talkin' about miracles and... saay!

CASTIRON Yaaah! Miracles!

WHEEZER That's right. It was jest about then... Oh, bunglewicky!

CASTIRON Say, we didn't only see that light, we felt it too. It sort of drew us along. *(Gets up and joins Timber stage centre.)*

TIMBER You're right. It did. Say, Mister! What did you say your name wuz?

JOSEPH Joseph.

CASTIRON Joseph!

(The singing is heard again, more clearly this time.)

CASTIRON Say, that is singin'. It's the same as over thar!

(The singers finish the carol.)

JOSEPH Yes, those voices are everywhere tonight. Those are angel voices.

CASTIRON Angels!

WHEEZER Don't believe it. Ain't no such thing! It's eyewash.

JOSEPH They sing, because something new has come into the world.

TIMBER Somethin' new. You mean someone who can put us on the right trail?

JOSEPH Yes. If you are willing to follow that trail.

CASTIRON I don't know as I am. I ain't so young now and new trails ain't in my line.

TIMBER Why, Castiron, we could hardly keep up with you this last trip. We'll ride this one together I figger.

CASTIRON — But I,m scared, Timber. Plumb scared. My old heart's poundin' fit to bust. There's somethin' here I don't understand. I'm scared.

TIMBER — So am I, Castiron. But I reckon this must be the end of the old world and the beginnin' of the new.

CASTIRON — Say, Mister, tell us all the news.

(Joseph draws the blanket revealing the creche. The singing of 'The Workers' Carol' is heard.)

WHEEZER — Whillackers, whillackers, it's him. He's come to make everythin' new. It was a light, Castiron. I didn't see it, but I felt it.

CASTIRON — I knew it deep down inside. I sorta knew it all the time. It made me want to ride and ride and ride.

TIMBER — I'd like to follow Him, Mister. Where do you figger his new trail will take us to?

JOSEPH — If you will keep to that trail it will take you to the new world you're lookin' for.

TIMBER — But, Mister, the whole world ought to know about this.

WHEEZER — 'Pears to me he should have a palace not a barn.

JOSEPH — You see, there was no room in the Inn.

CASTIRON — Well, we'll bring the inn folks here, and all the neighbours for miles 'n miles.

(A small group of people enter quietly.)

WHEEZER — Yeah! Let's get the Valley folks from over Pinto way.

TIMBER — And the Little Creek folks too. All of 'em.

(The Little Creek folks come in.)

CASTIRON — The families from up on the Mesa... let's git everybody from everywhere.

(The Mesa families enter.)

WHEEZER — 'Pears to me those angels must've covered a lot of territory.

TIMBER Sing out you angels! Sing out, neighbours!
Join in! Let's sing to hatin' men and scared men.
Sing for folks at home and busy city folk! Tell 'em all!
THERE'LL BE A NEW WORLD BEGINNIN' FROM TONIGHT!

(Timber sings. The chorus join in.)

CURTAIN