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CHRISTMAS PLAY 3

CHARACTERS

Melchior – Eccentric boffin, totally scatterbrained. One of the Three Wise Men

Celia – His wife, efficient, practical, professional

Charlie – Their teenage son, bright and keen on football

Crazy Joe – Travel organiser with huge personality, thinks he's the greatest comedian ever. Ideally with a strong accent, such as Australian or Birmingham

(We are in the main room of MELCHIOR and CELIA's house. MELCHIOR sits poring through books at a large desk totally strewn with books, papers, coffee cups and the general detritus of an out-of-control mind. CELIA is bustling round preparing to go out to work)

MELCHIOR Yes, yes, I think I finally have it. It's clearly significant, most significant.

CELIA What is, dear?

MELCHIOR The star, of course. The object of my last two weeks' work. The documents distinctly show that something of cosmic importance is taking place in the West.

CELIA (sighs; she would rather get on with her preparations) Let's have a look, dear. (crosses to the desk) What's this – *The Beano*? (picks up the topmost document)

MELCHIOR I was just using that to mark my place. It's here, look – in the Almanac. Taking into account the azimuth projection of the celestial phenomenon in question, its apparent spectral shift with respect to the sodium 'D' line, and making a correction for parallax, carpet tacks and the price of fish, it's perfectly plain that a birth has taken place. And not just any birth, mark you; oh no. This is a child of great consequence.

CELIA Where does it say all that, then?

MELCHIOR In *The Beano*.

CELIA (Returns to her preparations) Darling, I do love you very much, and I knew you were a few shekels short of a day's wages when I married you, but this is becoming rather frustrating. All you seem to be doing is sitting there all day, looking untidy with your nose in a book and your head in the clouds. We do have to run a household and raise a son, remember. I'm very happy for you and your sodium 'D' line, but at the moment it's only *my* hard work that's keeping body and soul together.

MELCHIOR I appreciate it must be hard for you, love, but bear with me a little longer. My work here, it's – well, I feel confident I'm on the edge of a major discovery. Something that will profoundly change the course of history.

CELIA All very fine and good, but something needs to profoundly change the course of washing up round here. (indicates the dirty cups)

MELCHIOR And Charlie's doing just fine. He's got his GCSE in Moderate Cleverness. Now all he needs is his 'A'-level in Extreme Cleverness and I'll be able to get him admitted to The Luminary Society, along with all the other magi.

(Enter CHARLIE in football strip, daubed in mud and kicking a football.)

CHARLIE Yo Dad! How's the search for ultimate truth?

- CELIA Let your father concentrate, Charlie. If we let him get this star thing out of his system, maybe he might come back to earth sometime and start doing something useful.
- CHARLIE Hey Mum – I scored twice today. You should have seen the first one – I dribbled all the way up the wing, past three midfielders, then chipped a gorgeous cross for Peppy to shoot. He hit the crossbar and I smacked it in off the rebound.
- MELCHIOR Hmm – dribbled, chipped, smacked. Must make a note to look them up in the dictionary sometime.
- CELIA That’s nice, dear. And the second one?
- CHARLIE That was an own goal.
- CELIA (Laughs, then abruptly stops as she sees the scowl on CHARLIE’s face) Sorry, dear, I wasn’t laughing at you. Now go and get yourself cleaned up. (Pushes him offstage) And leave your father in peace. (To MELCHIOR) Right, honey, I’m off to work now. Try and have a bit of a tidy up while I’m out. (They kiss)
- MELCHIOR No time for that, I’m afraid, my love. I need to head out west to find out more about this baby, so I’ve got the travel organiser coming round any time now.
- CELIA Not Crazy Joe again, I hope. I wish you’d use someone less disreputable, like Sheikh Alegg. Crazy Joe bugs me. You never know what sort of quality his camels are going to be.
- MELCHIOR I know that, but he can cope with the flexible travel plans we need. And he’s cheap.
(The doorbell rings. It’s a musical one and plays “We three kings”.)
- CELIA He’d have to be, since there’s only one breadwinner in this house. And for “flexible” read “totally disorganised”. Just be careful, honey. See you later. (She leaves and meets CRAZY JOE coming in.) In you go, Crazy. Welcome to the madhouse.
- CRAZY JOE (sweeps in and spreads himself majestically in a chair. He’s bizarrely dressed in preposterously bright clothing: Bermuda shirt, shorts, sandals and sunhat.) Well hello Melchior, my old mate. How’s tricks? Found any answers to Life, the Universe and Everything lately? Just kidding. Lovely wife still as lovely as ever, I see. And you’re still up to the elbows in boring old books. Good to know some things never change.
- MELCHIOR Well something has changed, Joe. Major events are occurring in the cosmos. I have seen the light.
- CRAZY JOE Touched by the little green men, you mean. What you need is a cracking good holiday. And it just so happens that I’ve had a couple of cancellations, you know what I mean, nudge nudge, say no more? (Produces brochure) How about two weeks in Ephesus? Lovely spot, good food, wine, and a nice drop of sunshine to drive away the winter blues.
- MELCHIOR It may have escaped your attention that we already live in a hot country.
- CRAZY JOE OK, never mind that. I’ve got some great deals going here. How about (reads from list) Parthia, Mede, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia (that’s a real cracker, that one), Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene. How does that sound? Go on, you know you want to.
- MELCHIOR Sorry, Joe, you’re not talking my language. I need to go west.

- CRAZY JOE Already gone, if you ask me. Just kidding, pal. (Gets out notebook) So what do you want Crazy Joe to do for you?
- MELCHIOR We need to travel west, towards Judea. It'll be myself and two other certified wise men.
- CRAZY JOE Certified is right. How long for?
- MELCHIOR Don't know.
- CRAZY JOE Where to, exactly?
- MELCHIOR Don't know.
- CRAZY JOE How much luggage? (gets ready to mime "Don't know")
- MELCHIOR Just some presents.
- CRAZY JOE (puzzled) Presents? Right. And the purpose of this interesting little jaunt, spending an unknown amount of time in an unknown location?
- MELCHIOR To see a baby.
- CRAZY JOE (Utterly confused for a moment, then regains former ebullience) Ah, I see, visiting the reli's is it? Brother's just had a kiddie, or your cousin maybe, and you want to be there to, er, wet the baby's head, know what I mean?
- MELCHIOR Not at all. The identity of the offspring in question is utterly unknown to me.
- CRAZY JOE You mean, you don't know who the father is.
- MELCHIOR Or the mother, or indeed the child himself.
- CRAZY JOE How do you want to travel? Camels or donkeys? Or I could do you a nice mule.
- MELCHIOR I guess it will have to be camels. We may have to cover quite a distance, you know. There needs to be a more civilised way to travel in this day and age. I've been working on a system of travel that involves burning oil in a metal box on wheels. It's just about perfected now, but unfortunately I seem to have lost the drawing somewhere. It's probably in the same place as the helicopter and spaceship designs I mislaid last week.
- CRAZY JOE Camels it is, then. Now, what about the pressies?
- MELCHIOR Strawberries, frankincense and myrrh.
- CRAZY JOE I must have skipped my sanity pill this morning. Run that by me again?
- MELCHIOR Clearly indicated in the Almanac. (picks up *The Beano*) Absolutely no doubt that those are the appropriate presents to offer to a baby of such great importance.
- CRAZY JOE OK, Mel, let me get this straight. You want me to set up a delightful little jolly for you to go out west visiting some newborn sprog. You don't know the kiddie, don't know where he lives, don't know how long for. Nice one.
- MELCHIOR I think you may be underestimating the significance of the whole thing, Joe. The great star – the intense light in the sky, pointing the way to the west – the sages of old spoke of such a thing. They foretold that a child would be born into the family line of the great King David of Israel, a child born to be king himself – a king of glory, a king strong and

mighty, mighty in battle, a king destined to reign for ever. The Jewish prophet Isaiah wrote that the increase of his kingdom and of peace would be without end. This is he, Joe! This is the event towards which all my studies, all the hours bent over books and poring through the ancient manuscripts, have led me. I *must* go. I have to see. I need to worship.

CRAZY JOE (after a pause) The strawberries could be a problem at this time of year.

MELCHIOR (Resuming the passionate flow) The psalmist wrote about him, hundreds of years ago. "Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty – he is the king of glory." The star is the sign in heaven for us to follow. There's no doubt at all in my mind. There's no time to hesitate.

(CHARLIE enters, dressed in a bathrobe)

CHARLIE Dad, there's no hot water.

CRAZY JOE Well, well, who have we here? (Rises to shake CHARLIE's hand)

MELCHIOR Of course not, it's still only 5 B.C. Crazy, this is my son Charlie.

CRAZY JOE Very pleased to meet you, Charlie. Now then, Mel, I think we can do the camels and fix you somewhere to stay in Jerusalem. But these presents, they're going to be the really tough part.

CHARLIE You mean the gold, frankincense and myrrh?

CRAZY JOE You mean strawberries, frankincense and myrrh.

CHARLIE No, gold. It's got to be gold.

MELCHIOR Charlie, sit down. (He sits on the edge of the desk.) How do you know about the presents?

CHARLIE Come on, Dad, it's obvious. The baby is not just a human child, but the son of God, right? So he deserves to be worshipped and revered with the gift reserved only for God – that's the frankincense. He's going to grow up to experience suffering and death for the sake of the whole world – that's the myrrh, the spice they use for embalming the dead. And he's going to be a king – not just any king, but the King of kings, reigning with authority over death itself. And a king needs gold.

CRAZY JOE Not just a pretty face, this kid.

MELCHIOR (thunderstruck) Charlie, that's fantastic – it's amazing. How did you figure all this out?

CHARLIE (Wiping mud off his face with the bathrobe) Simple, Dad – I pray and read the Bible. Now could I get a bath, please?

CRAZY JOE Well, now, if it's to be gold instead of strawberries, I think the whole thing's a goer. I'll get onto the camel man and get you a trip booked to Judea starting tomorrow.

CHARLIE (getting excited) To see the baby?

MELCHIOR Yes, that's right.

- CHARLIE Dad, dad, can I come too? Oh please, can I, can I?
- MELCHIOR No you can not. It's already arranged with The Luminary Society that Casper and Balthazar will go with me. I need you to stay here and look after your mother.
- CHARLIE It's not fair. You wouldn't even have twigged about the gold without me.
- MELCHIOR That's as may be. But you're staying and that's that, no more arguments. (His mobile phone rings, playing *O come all ye faithful*. It's buried under a heap of papers. MELCHIOR searches frantically) That's my phone. Where's the stupid thing gone – I know it's here somewhere – ah! (Finds it, but can't figure out which button to press or even which way up to hold it) Oh, how do you work this again – aha! (Presses the receive call button and puts on a very posh telephone voice) Luminary Melchior speaking, to whom do I have the honour?
- CHARLIE Put it to your ear, Dad.
- MELCHIOR Oh yes. (Puts it to his ear and speaks normally) Hello? ... What? ... Right. ... No. (Rings off) Serious news. Luminary Balthazar has caught the flu. He's much too ill to travel. Where can I find a replacement at such short notice? I can't go without a full set of three magi.
- CRAZY JOE Seems like the kid could put up a good case.
- CHARLIE Go on, Dad. Remember the gold. And if you let me go, I'll not mention the strawberries to anyone else.
- MELCHIOR But... you can't... you're not qualified... oh... all right, go and get ready.
- CHARLIE (triumphant) Yes! Result! (Starts to exit)
- MELCHIOR And you can carry the gold, since it was your smart idea.
- CHARLIE (running off) He shoots, he scores.
- CRAZY JOE Quite a kid you got there, Mel.
- MELCHIOR Amazing. Where did we go wrong?
- CRAZY JOE You know this whole king, son of God malarkey. I've never been much of a religious nut myself, but – I mean – is it for real? Can a man really be God and save people from eternal death? Is there a way to be at peace with God?
- MELCHIOR These, and other questions, will be answered in next week's pull-out supplement. Plus, ten things you never knew about premillennialism, and handy hints for making cut flowers last longer.
- CRAZY JOE (walking off with MELCHIOR) While we're having the Q and A session, how much longer are you going to keep running that old banger of a donkey of yours? It just so happens a mate of mine's trading his in. It's the new shape, much more economical on fuel than yours. I'm sure I could see my way to getting you a good price on it...