

When the Wise Man Appeared

By William Ashley Anderson

It was a bitterly cold night, vast and empty, a ringing void doomed with icy stars. Over Hallett's Hill the evening star danced like tinsel on the tip of a Christmas tree. The still air was resonant as the inside of an iron bell; but within our snug farmhouse it was mellow with the warmth of three cherry-red stoves.

The dinner things had been pushed back, and I was feeling relaxed and content, lazily smoking a cigarette, when Bruce entered the room.

He was dressed in a long white nightgown with a purple cloak of Tintexed cotton over his shoulders. In one hand he held a tall crown of yellow pasteboard and tinsel. From the other swung an ornate censer. On his feet were thin flapping sandals.

"What in the world are you supposed to be?" I laughed.

My wife looked at Bruce critically, yet with concern and tenderness in her eyes.

"He's one of the Wise Men of the East," she replied indignantly.

Her remark was an urgent reminder that I had promised to get Bruce to the schoolhouse in town in good time for the Christmas pageant. I shuddered and groaned at the thought of the cold and went out into the night pulling on a heavy coat, Bruce trailing after me.

The battery in the old car had gone dead, but by one of those freaks of mechanical whimsy that baffle man, its maker, the engine caught at the first turn of the crank, and off we went with a bang, bouncing and roaring across the rough frozen field.

That was a trick of the devil, for at the turn by the barn the engine suddenly died. My heart sank. I looked out the side of my eyes at Bruce, sitting there saying nothing, the crown and censer clasped in his arms, staring down that long endless lane that disappeared in the lonely hills.

It was a moment of deep breathless silence. The hills walled us in from all hope of neighborly assistance. Hallett's place was more than a mile and a half away, and the nearest turn of Route 90, even with the thin chance of a lift, was more than two miles away.

Well, I thought, it's not tragically important. Bruce said nothing, but his eyes were wide, staring now at the big star twinkling just over the ragged edge of the mountain. Then a strange and uneasy feeling stirred in me, because I knew the boy was praying. He had made his promises too, and he was praying that we would get to the schoolhouse in time for him to be one of the Three Wise Men.

I got out and strained and heaved at the crank, but it was useless. The still air cut like a knife. The cold metal clung to my hand. Every deep breath rasped my lungs until I sputtered. I rummaged through my pockets for my cigarettes. When I struck a light with fumbling hands and looked up through the smoke, Bruce was scuttling down the lane, one hand holding his skirts, one hand swinging the censer, the high golden crown perched cockeyed on his head. I hesitated between laughing at him and yelling for him to stop. I began once more to crank. Finally the engine began to cough throatily and I scrambled frenziedly into the car.

Just about where Fifth Street enters Stradsburg, I overtook Bruce. My heart went out to that small figure trudging along with the cockeyed crown on his head and the censer hugged to his stomach. He turned his face into the lights with a white-lipped grin. His gown was torn and he shivered violently.

"You shouldn't have gone off that way," I growled. "It's terribly cold!"

"I put twigs in the censer," he said, "and made a fire. I kept warm enough. I took a bearing on the star and made a short cut across Lasoigne's farm. I came out right back there by the new cottage."

"But look at your feet? You might have frozen them!"

We arrived at the school on time. I stood in the back and watched.

A good many years have passed since I last saw the story of Bethlehem and the homage of the Three Wise Men presented by children at Christmastime. It had become so old a story to me that it seemed strange to realize that to them it was new.

When I saw Bruce walking stifflegged on cut and chilblained feet with his two companions on the stage, kneeling by the creche, declaiming his studied lines, I regretted my laughter at the dinner table, then an uneasy awe rose up within me. I couldn't mull it out.

Going home Bruce showed me where the short-cut came out.

"That's where the Thompsons lived," I said, "before the place burned down."

"I know," said Bruce; "where the boy was burned to death."

As we passed the Lasoigne farm there were lights burning. I thought this was strange, because since George Lasoigne had gone off to war the old grandmother, who had lost her youngest son in the first war, had sort of shriveled up, and a gloom lay over the house; but as I slowed down I could see Lou Lasoigne through the kitchen window, smoking his pipe and talking with his mother and wife, and so I sensed everything was all right.

So far as I knew that was about all there was to the evening; but on Christmas Day, a farmer's wife, a neighbor of ours, came by with gifts of mincemeat made from venison and a jug of sassafras cider. She had shaken off her customary pessimism and was full of bounce and high-pitched talk. She went into the kitchen where my wife was supervising the Christmas feast. Since I have a weakness for the racy gossip of the countryside, I drifted toward the kitchen too.

"You must hear this!" said my wife, drawing me in.

The farmer's wife looked at me with a glittering but wary eye. "You hain't agoin' to believe it either." she said. "Just the same I'm telling you, folks up there in the hills see things and they do believe."

"What have you been seeing?"

"It was old Mrs. Lasoigne. Last night when she was a feelin' awful low she thought she heard something back of the barn and looked out. Now I'll say this for the old lady—she's got good vision. That she has! Plenty good! There warn't no moonlight, but if you recollect it was a bright starry night. And there he was, plain as her own husband, one of the Wise Men of the Bible come a walkin' along the hill with a gold crown on his head, a-swingin' one of them pots with smoke in them—"

My mouth opened and I looked at Rosamunde and Rosamunde looked at me; but before I could say anything, the woman hurried on:

"Now don't you start a laughin'-not yet!—cause that hain't the long and short of it! There's other testimony! Them Thompsons. You know the ones whose oldest boy was burned in the fire? Well, the children heard him first. They heard him a-singin' 'Come All Ye Faithful' plain as day. They went runnin' to the window and they seen the Wise Man a-walkin' in the starlight across the lane, gold crown and robes and fire-pot and all! Well, my goodness, they put up such a shoutin' and a yellin' that their parents come a-runnin'. But by then it was too late. He was gone. Just disappeared. Afterward they went out and looked but they couldn't find hide nor hair—"

"Did they see any other signs?" I asked faintly.

The farmer's wife scoffed.

"Old folks and children see things which maybe we can't. All I can say is this: Lasoignes and Thompsons don't even know each other. But old lady Lasoigne was heartsick and lonely and a-prayin' about her lost boy, and the Thompsons was heartsick and lonely because this was the first Christmas in the new house without Harry, and you dassent say they wasn't a-prayin' too! Maybe you don't believe that amounts to anythin'—but I'm tellin' you it was a comfort to them to see and believe!"

I swallowed hard, recalling the look on Bruce's face as he stared at the star, when I knew he was praying that he might not fail his friends. Well, not daring to look at my wife, I said with all the sincerity I can feel:

"Yes I believe God was close last night."

The farmer's wife looked at me in disbelief, for she knew I was not a very religious person. She stared as if an even greater miracle had been performed before her very eyes.