

## King for a Day



'Come and join us Gary !'

Margaret had taken a breath between carols and gone across to the bench where he sat. She was tired and would loved to have sat there with him. The nativity and carols had been a marvellous idea, but it had taken quite some effort to organise both children and adults As always it was the regulars - the same people who, for the most part, would be counted on for Christmas Day lunch next week, when the church opened its doors to the city's poorest citizens. - like Gary

Margaret could not complain. It had been good fun. 'What about a street nativity and carol singing ?' she had suggested at the Church Council. 'At least the shoppers will know what Christmas is about !' Then things just happened. Arrangements were made for them to have two hours outside Millers Department Store in the town centre. They put up a stable and adults and children dressed up as characters in the Christmas story. They and a few choir members sang carols.

Margaret was pleased with the Nativity tableau. Three of the men were kings, dressed in fabulous dressing gowns and headgear and holding their gifts for the Christ Child. Both adults and children had dressed up as shepherds. Andy and Debbie, a young couple with their first baby made a perfect centre-piece, and the Rainbows Guides formed a choir of angels standing on a bench the other side of the stable to the kings.

As soon as Margaret saw Gary, she remembered. This was his Saturday patch. Every Saturday come rain or fine Gary was by the front door of Millers, playing his whistle and collecting a few coins from passers-by. Gary was one of those genuine 'losers' who found it difficult to fit into society along with others. He was no stranger to Margaret and her friends from the church. He often attended a service, especially on cold nights in winter. Gary never begged, but then he never refused a little 'help'. He would be there on Christmas Day for lunch; as much for the company as the food. 'I don't mind being on my own,' he would say, but the loneliness of his bed-sit got to him at times.

From Gary's earliest, after his father left home, Gary had felt alone. There was never time to be wanted. His mother was always out. His few friends were never encouraged to call and the friendships did not last. Adolescence brought new experiences of rejection. No-one had time, or even the inclination, to help, it seemed to Gary. He became frustrated and aggressive. Gradually, life lost its interest. He had no incentive to work or play. Drink? Yes, that had been a problem; but never the drugs. The small change from his whistling supplemented his allowances. He had an existence.

'Sorry, Gary. I forgot this is your pitch.'

'That's O K. It's good! I like the carols. Sing Silent Night. It's my favourite!'

Margaret returned to the group and soon had them singing again. Moments later, all eyes were on Gary as he accompanied them on his whistle. Margaret turned to grin at him. Gary rose to the encouragement with a few extra trills.

'That's good.' Several choir members and the wise men agreed and clapped.

'I always liked the Christmas play.' Gary stood beside Margaret. 'I never got a part though. He remembered Christmases at school. He was never trusted to dress up, or to remember lines.

'Why not have a part in ours?' Even while she spoke Margaret was rummaging in the plastic carrier bags beside the stool on which she stood to conduct the choir. 'Here. You can be a king! There's a purple robe here; and a towel for a turban!'

'But you've already got three kings.' Gary protested.

'The Bible doesn't say there were three - only three gifts. We're going to have four.' In her usual, pleasantly dominant way, Margaret would not be refused. She draped the robe around the bemused Gary and wound the towel round his head.

The children cheered, and Gary went to stand with the other three kings at the side of the tableau. John, dressed in red and gold, moved up to make room for him. 'At least you've got a real beard,' he said. 'Which is more than the rest of us have.'

'I haven't a gift to hold!' Gary called to Margaret. . For once Margaret was stumped for an idea. 'Oh you can play your whistle for the baby!'

And so he did.

Gary felt conspicuous but he had no need to; no-one would recognise him in his outfit. For the first time in his memory, he felt like a King. Wanted. Part of something. A family? He had felt a little of that belonging when they made him welcome on Sundays, though still he had the suspicion that they pitied him. It added to the loneliness. It was just like always finding him a prize at the school Christmas party because he never had one in his own right. Gary was always on the 'getting' end of the giving. He never talked about his Christmas presents as a child, the others had bigger and better gifts. He played his whistle and the children sang, 'Away in a manger'. It still troubled him that he had no gift. A king as he understood it was never on the receiving end.

At the end of 'Hark the Herald angels', Gary noticed what everybody else had already seen. A little girl - perhaps two or three years old - had come to the front of the tableau and was watching them all with great interest.

'Where's your, Mum ?' Margaret asked her. She did not reply. She was more interested in having a good look at the baby. There was no sign of anyone with the child. Margaret send one of the men from the choir into the store to see if a child had been reported lost and then started them on their last carol of the afternoon, 'O little town of Bethlehem.'

'Let's have one verse on the whistle only,' she called to Gary. 'After the second verse: all right?' By the time they reached Gary's verse the child had inspected the baby and Mary and Joseph, prodded the toy lamb that one shepherd held, and wandered round to the kings.

She arrived at Gary, as he started to play. Her eyes never left the whistle. She reached up, wanting him to let her play it. When the verse was finished, the choir sang on. Gary, wiped the whistle on his king's robe. He went down on one knee and pulled the child onto the other knee. He let her take the whistle and guided it to her mouth. 'Blow,' he said, and placed his fingers over the holes. She did not get the idea, but in the moments of her trying, Gary pictured himself on his father's knee. He remembered it had been like this, except that Dad had kept on until he learned to blow - and play. This was Dad's whistle. It was the only thing he left behind when he deserted them. Perhaps Dad had meant to leave it. Gary had never thought of that before.

'Come here, you naughty girl !' The child's mother had been found. She rushed to Gary, glared at him and snatched her daughter from his arms. 'You little horror,' she screamed at the child. 'Frightening me like that. There'll be no Father Christmas for you.' She hurried away, dragging the whimpering child behind her. Gary felt a deep, sad empathy.

'Gary, she's got your whistle !' Margaret realised before he did. 'Go after her !' Gary stood watching as mother and child disappeared into the Christmas crowds. 'No,' he said. 'Let her have it. It's the gift from the fourth king !' He didn't know why he said it, but it sounded right. The whistle was part of a past that was better gone. For the first time in years, Gary had been a giver. It was different. It was kingly.

'See you on Christmas Day, King Gary,' Margaret called after him. 'You've been a good king for us today.'

'King for a day !' Gary wondered. Maybe that royal feeling could last a little longer than a day.

***God spoke to Gary through a child - through love***

***God still speaks through the children***

***The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (1.2) says. In these last days God has spoken to us through his Son***

***That is the message of Christmas***

***God has spoken to us through his Son - Jesus***

***God has reached us through his Son - Jesus***

***God has saved us through his son - Jesus***

***God has given us a touch of royalty. He has made us, who believe, his children and the companions of the King of kings.***