

Little Wise Man

Are YOU a wise man?

George looked down at the curious enquirer beside him and smiled. He was quickly aware that the little wise man in his red and yellow dressing gown and crown of gold card, was about five years old and would not be able to see his smile.

George never missed the school nativity play in the village church. He had been welcomed back every year since he retired from being the school's head-teacher. It was different now. All his children had moved on. As usual, today he had been received as an honoured guest by Miss Lane, the present school head. No place on the front row among the governors for George. His seat, in spite of his protestations, was in the choir stalls opposite the vicar. He wished he hadn't decided to wear the scarf. It looked so bright, and so long on someone of his stature. But it was the last Christmas present Elizabeth had given him.

Miss Lane seated him in the choir which seemed to be alive and aloud with children variously dressed as shepherds, kings and angels all excited and waiting for their special moment. Miss Lane quieted them with a whisper to frighten angels, before introducing George to the little boy next to him.

This is Jack, she explained. Jack is one of our wise men - one of nine! I know it's not true to the story, but we wanted everyone to have a part and boys don't want to be angels.

I remember, George replied meaningfully, but Miss Lane did not wait to hear. She was away to new duties.

Hello Jack! He greeted his pew companion.

Hello! Jack clutched a box covered with gold paper and stared in front of him in a way that to George's experienced eye, denoted a severe sight problem. It was then that Jack, without looking round had grasped the trailing end of George's bright blue scarf and asked, *Are YOU a wise man?*

George was taken by surprise. In all his teaching days, he could not remember any pupil asking him that particular question. With another adult he would have enjoyed some banter about whether Jack was asking if he was in the play, or if he possessed great wisdom, but before he could respond to Jack Miss Lane buzzed back. *Would you mind, George? We're short of helpers this afternoon. Would you mind just guiding Jack to his place with the other wise men? He doesn't see very well and I'm afraid he may miss the steps.*

I don't need any help, Jack protested. *I can find my way. I'll follow the star like the real wise men did?*

But they may still have fallen over. George wanted to keep the conversation going. He did not realise how much he missed these moments with the children.

No! They wouldn't fall over. They were wise. Anyway they rode on camels and camels don't fall over. He turned his face to George now. *Have you ever rid a camel?*

George was about to relate details of his holiday in Egypt when the vicar arrived to give an official welcome to the school and visitors. All went quiet. But Jack wanted an answer. He repeated in a loud enough voice to be hushed and nudged in the ribs by the girl the other side of him, *Have you ever rid a camel? Yes!* George's whisper was almost as loud. *I'll tell you afterwards.*

The short carol service proceeded with the school choir in full voice. Jack sat through all the carols, but still sang them heartily. He remembered all the words, plus a few from versions he had heard in the playground. At last the narrator, a very plump angel, announced the Nativity play and the highlight of the Carol service began.

The play took place on a raised stage at the front of the nave and under the chancel arch. Jack fidgeted in his seat, while holding tight to his golden box. The children took their places and spoke their lines as the narrator announced the visit of the angel Gabriel; Mary and Elizabeth's song together; Joseph and Mary on their way to Bethlehem; the innkeeper finding them a stable. Then nine shepherds processed to the stage carrying an assortment of toy lambs.

George found himself wondering about his role of little wise man's assistant. He would have to walk out in full view of the whole church! There was no time left to wonder. To a trumpet fanfare, nine kings rose to their feet, each holding a special gift for a very special baby.

Come on! said Jack, taking George's hand. George followed in a bemused sort of way, glad that his overcoat could be mistaken for a king's costume. Wrapping the long bright blue scarf round his head was as much for disguise as for effect. He put out a hand to steady Jack but it was refused.

I can see. I'm following the star and I know my way.

Of course! George realised how bright colours and the intense light from the star suspended over the stable were visible to Jack.

One by one the kings knelt and gave their gifts to Mary who placed them by the straw-filled crib. Jack wanted to be last, as he had been in all the rehearsals. *Go on!* He pushed George, who had till the last expected to stand back at this point.

I haven't a gift! Unusually, George was flustered now. Jack was eye-level to the bright blue scarf. He tugged the end of it. *Give him your scarf!*

With just a momentary flash of *What would Elizabeth say?* George pulled off his scarf, rolled it into a ball and gave it to smiling Mary.

Jack delivered his golden box, and the kings, all but one, turned smartly to the right as a fierce looking King Herod appeared. Ten wise men beat retreat.

George had to help Jack back up the steps. *I can see when the light shines,* he assured him.

George's thoughts were not on the words of the last carol. A little wise man's hand held on to his hand and he heard again the brave words, *I can find my way when I see the light.* Perhaps his faith in Jesus, the light of the world – the faith he had taught the children – had been somewhat neglected recently. And the scarf! Giving it away had somehow brought him a peaceful sense of release.

Mum! Jack's mother came to collect him. George recognised Sally as one of his former pupils.

We always said you were a wise man, she laughed.

Not me, replied George. *Jack's my little wise man.*