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A Wayne in a Manger

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Published by Michael Joseph

Extract

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A Very Special Time of Year



December sunshine, bright and brittle, shone through the classroom window and lit up the vicar. His sparse sandy hair shone like gold, his small black eyes sparkled and his cheeks shone as if they had recently been scrubbed.

'This is a very special time of year, children,' he said jovially, addressing the infants who stared up at him with open mouths. 'Can anyone tell me what it is?'

'Christmas,' volunteered a small wiry boy

with a feathery fringe, who began waving his hand in the air like a daffodil in a strong wind. 'It's Christmas.'

'It is indeed,' agreed the vicar, smiling beatifically. 'It's Christmas, and a very, very special time of year.'

'I'm gerrin a bike,' the boy told him.

'I'm gerrin a doll what can wet 'er nappies an' talk,' added a large girl with a round moon face and hair in untidy bunches.

This was the signal for all the children to shout out what presents they were hoping to receive from Father Christmas.

'I'm gerrin a remote-controlled car.'

'I'm gerrin a train set.'

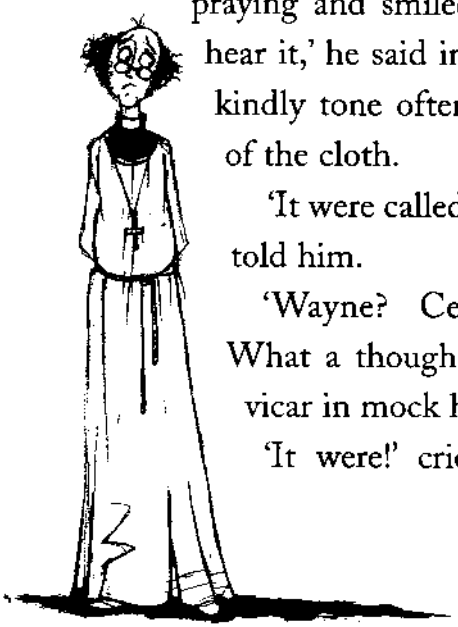
'I'm gerrin a . . .'

'Children! Children!' exclaimed the vicar, raising a hand like a crossing patrol warden stopping cars. 'Christmas is not just about presents,

you know. It's really a celebration of a birthday. It's about the birth of a very special baby.'

'I know what it were called,' said the small wiry boy.

The vicar interlaced his long fingers just beneath his chin in an attitude of a child praying and smiled. 'I'm very glad to hear it,' he said in that solicitous and kindly tone often possessed by men of the cloth.



'It were called Wayne,' the child told him.

'Wayne? Certainly not! What a thought!' cried the vicar in mock horror.

'It were!' cried the boy,



undeterred. 'Babby were called Wayne.'

'No, it wasn't called Wayne,' said the vicar, his jaw tightening and his voice quavering a little. He bit his lip momentarily. The poor man



had imagined that speaking to a group of small children about Christmas would be an easy enough task but he was now regretting he had ever agreed to visit the school that morning.

'The baby was called Jesus,' the vicar told him, slowly and deliberately.

'It were Wayne,' persisted the child, nodding vigorously.

'Jesus!' snapped the vicar.

'Wayne,' repeated the child. 'I know, 'cos we all sang about it in assembly: "A Wayne in a manger, no crib for a bed."'

*

Of all the activities that take place at Christmas, it is the infants' Nativity play that I most look forward to. Innocent children re-enacting one of the greatest stories of all time capture the essence of Christmas. To see Mary, aged six, draped in pale blue and tightly clutching Baby Jesus (usually a large plastic doll) to her chest, never fails to bring a tear to the eye. To see Joseph, a thick multicoloured towel

draped over his head (usually held in place by an elastic belt with a snake clasp) and attired in a dressing gown and red socks, always brings a sympathetic smile to the lips.

Then there are the shepherds (usually a motley group of little boys who scratch, fidget and pick their noses throughout the performance), the Three Kings (who invariably forget their lines or drop the gifts), the adoring angels clad in white sheets with bits of tinsel stapled to the bottom and uncomfortable-looking cardboard wings strapped to their backs and, of course, there's the grumpy Innkeeper, who very often steals the show.

There is something very special and heartwarming about the infant Nativity.