

Good King Wenceslas and the Night Visitors (2011)

It was the Feast of Stephen, and Good King Wenceslas looked out. He looked out in two ways. Firstly he was looking out of the palace windows over a snowy landscape, but more importantly in the king's mind, he was looking out for Stanley. Stanley was a nickname. His real name was Stanislav, and he had been the King's only friend during the two years when as a teenager he had been sent away to boarding school to finish his education. 'You need to spend some time with the peasants', his father had told him, 'if you're going to be their king'. If you weren't noble, you were a peasant – it was an easy system to grasp.

Stanley and the king had not met often since then. Stanley had become an adventurer and explorer, and was rarely in the country. But this year to the king's great delight, he had received a positive response to visit on St Stephen's Day.

The King looked out again. 'Hither page!' he cried, 'and stand by me, if thou knowest, telling: yonder peasant, who is he – It is Stanley isn't it?' The page screwed up his eyes. 'Hard to say sire,' he said. 'Wait a moment!' He fumbled in his jacket and produced a pair of spectacles. 'New glasses,' he explained...'got them for Christmas, now, let's see...yes, I'm sure that's him sire. Look, he's carrying a large present.'

'Let's go to the door to welcome him,' cried the king eagerly, but no knock came and the royal bell stayed silent and unring. 'Strange', said the king, 'Open the door, page, and let's see where he is.'

The page opened the door, a cold blast of air and swirling snowflakes entered, but Stanley was nowhere to be seen. 'He must have gone round the back,' said the King, 'perhaps he's up to his old tricks, trying to surprise me – well we'll surprise him. Come on.' The king walked briskly to the edge of the palace; the page hesitated a moment, rushed inside briefly then hurried after the king carrying an overcoat. 'You must put this on sire.' he insisted, 'it's too cold otherwise.' 'Look!' cried the king, 'there he is, in the distance, come on.' 'Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together, through the wild wind's rude lament and the bitter weather.'

But it took longer than they expected to catch up with the peasant. 'Stanley, you old rogue, Stanley, stop!' cried the king. The figure stopped and turned round. 'My name's Joseph', he said, 'I don't know any Stanley either. There's no Stanley where I live by St Agnes Fountain.' 'Oh!' said the king, 'well there seems to have been a mistake. Well, off you go my good peasant, and God speed you on your journey'.

'Well that was a waste of time.' said the King, as the peasant trudged away. 'Come on, we'd better get back to the palace. Stanley will be there by now surely.' But when they turned round, the palace was nowhere to be seen in the gathering twilight. 'Strange,' said the King, 'we can't be that far surely, well we just follow our footprints.' But they could not be seen either. The only ones that were visible were those of peasant Joseph. 'We can't afford to get lost in this weather,' said the King, 'and you didn't get a coat for yourself. We'll follow the peasant.' They found the going easier than expected and the page felt warmer and before long there was a cottage in front of them with a low door. The page pushed it open gingerly. There was a mooing and the smell of animals. 'It's the stable,' said the page, 'they'll live at the other end.' They found another door and there was Joseph. 'Now I'm sorry if I was a little brusque back there', said the King, 'but unfortunately we are lost, and need some shelter.' 'You're welcome of course,' said Joseph, 'but it's not the best of times: my wife Maria is expecting her first baby. I've been to find a midwife but couldn't, so I was bringing back some more wood for the fire when you saw me. You're not doctors by any chance?' 'Fraid not,' said the King, 'and neither's he.' 'No, but my wife has had six children,' said the page, 'and I know what to do. I'll help if I can.'

Some hour or so later, the King who had been given the task of making sure hot water was available, suddenly heard the unmistakable cry of a new-born child, and entering into the room, saw Joseph and Maria, a child in her arms, wreathed in smiles. 'Well that's done!' said the king, 'now I know you're excited, but I could do with some sleep.' 'There's only the stable,' said Joseph. 'That will do,' sighed the King, and took himself off, lying down on the straw. But he did not sleep for long. It was Joseph, shaking him. 'There are three men outside!' he said. 'Two are soldiers, and the third is dressed very strangely. They say they are looking for the King!' 'That's me' said the King. 'It

must be Stanley with some palace guards.’ The stable suddenly filled with people.

‘Your majesty!’ cried Stanley, bowing low. The soldiers saluted. Joseph stood and bowed his head. The King got up from his bed of straw. ‘How did you find us?’ he asked. ‘We could not see our own footprints.’ ‘I learnt from the Inuit how to track the lightest of animals through the snow, your majesty,’ said Stanley, ‘and then we saw the light from your fire that guided us like a star. I am so pleased to have found you... and who is this gentleman?’ ‘Joseph,’ said Joseph, ‘Joseph Lebenstein at your service.’ ‘An interesting name,’ said Stanley, ‘we would say living stone, and this... this is Mrs Livingstone I presume.’ ‘My wife Maria that you would call Mary,’ said Joseph. ‘Yes, and she has just had the baby this very hour,’ said the King, oblivious to this momentous meeting. ‘You know I must thank you for your hospitality, and give your youngster a present, but...’ he put his hands in his pockets, ‘Kings don’t carry money with them.’ ‘Perhaps I can help,’ said Stanley, ‘I had brought this as a present for you sire, but perhaps we could give it to the family. The soldier here has got it.’ A golden casket was produced. ‘It contains the same gifts as the Magi gave to the infant Christ,’ said Stanley. ‘I brought these all the way from Arabia.’ ‘Royal gifts indeed!’ said the King, ‘and now we should get back to the palace.’ ‘Yes,’ said Stanley, ‘there is another and faster way. I shall soon have you home.’ And so they left Joseph and Maria and the baby. Maria looked at Joseph and her baby, and the gold, frankincense and myrrh. ‘What does it all mean?’ she asked. ‘Search me!’ said Joseph.

Stanley left the palace the next day. ‘I have promised to visit the great Khan in Xanadu,’ he said, ‘Farewell until I need to find you and the Livingstones again!’

‘Well that was quite an adventure!’ said the page. ‘It really was like the first Christmas wasn’t it, with Mary and Joseph, and gifts. Do you think they’ll call the baby Jesus?’ ‘No!’ said the King. ‘No I think that’s most unlikely.’ He looked at the page. ‘Those new glasses of yours,’ he said, ‘you had them on when you mistook Joseph for Stanley, and a present for a sack of wood, and that made us follow him, and get lost and you had them on when the baby was born, didn’t you?’ ‘Yes sire!’ ‘Page... Mary and Joseph’s little baby – it’s a girl.’ ‘Oh!’ said the page. ‘Can I give you some advice?’ asked the King – ‘Your majesty?’ - ‘You should have gone to Specsavers!’

'Therefore Christians all, be sure,
wealth or rank possessing,
when you buy your specs make sure
there is effective testing'

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