

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

## The FOUR wise men



*Includes the bonus story,  
The Night Before Christmas*

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The Four Wise Men  
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“How much longer now before we arrive, Grandfather?” asked Gillian, the hope and excitement she felt fully expressed in the tone of her young voice.

“Some time yet, I believe, child,” responded Dr. Who, who was bent over the control panel of his beloved time and space machine, the *TARDIS*, intently studying the readings on the metaphoric gauge through his spectacles.

“Will we return to exactly the same place that we first started out from?” enquired John. “That yard with all the junk?”

Dr. Who sniffed. “Quality second-hand merchandise, if you please.”

“But will we?”

“Yes, yes,” the old Doctor replied somewhat testily. He tapped on the gauge with a long forefinger. “Theoretically speaking,” he added.

“Theoretically?” pursued John.

Dr. Who drew himself up and inserted his thumbs beneath the lapels of his black frock coat in the way he always did prior to delivering a lecture. “I have extracted from the *TARDIS* log the co-ordinates for each of our destinations since you so very reprehensibly meddled with the controls in the first place.”

John winced, but said defensively “So...?”

“I have arranged them all in order, reversed the possible route we took for the overall journey, edited the result by applying a balance of probabilities theory I devised and produced a set of shortcut co-ordinates. In theory, therefore, you are both on your way home.” The Doctor beamed from John to Gillian as if expecting an outbreak of grateful applause.

“Well done, Grandfather,” offered Gillian, unwilling to have her dream of returning home shattered and wanting to keep the peace as well.

John, though thinking twice before provocation now, nonetheless ventured a further insertion on the subject with “It’s a bit hit and miss, then?”

Dr. Who darted a repressive look at him, opened his mouth to speak, suddenly thought better of it, clamped his mouth shut in the manner of a miser closing a purse and proceeded to make a totally unnecessary adjustment to the controls instead.

Surely, thought John, it wasn’t too unreasonable to throw a little bit of doubt on the proceedings in the circumstances. Ever since the old man had declared his purpose, after their memorable encounter with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, of trying for home and attempted to steer the *TARDIS* back through time and space to November 1964 on Earth, it had been either near misses, such as their brief visit to the Moon, where they had pipped two confused American

astronauts at the post, and after that Eastern Europe, where events had inexplicably unfolded back to front and made it their most peculiar experience yet, or a case of being absolutely way out when they had been transported to the scorched home planet of their very first adversaries, the Kleptons.

Gillian essayed another attempt to smooth things over. "Grandfather, if we're not going to land yet will you tell us another story?"

"Story?" Dr. Who looked at her vaguely, as if he had never heard the word before.

John opted to lend his sister a hand at this stage. "You told us one a while ago, remember. About what happened at that old orphanage on Christmas Eve."

"That was a spooky one," added Gillian, her idea suddenly not seeming to be such a good one after all as she belatedly recalled the nightmare in which a skeletal hand had prised up a floorboard from below and beckoned to her with a bony forefinger...

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, since it brought the accuracy of the Doctor's predictions into question again, the round glass column in the centre of the six-sided control panel began to rise and fall more sedately and the high-pitched grinding noise that indicated materialisation resounded around the control room.

Their latest journey had come to an end.

"There," said Dr. Who. "I told you it wouldn't be long before we came to rest, didn't I, h'mm?"

John was being determinedly tactful now. "Good show, Grandfather," he commented, unconsciously drawing on the expressions of Enid Blyton's Famous Five. "Let's have a look at the scanner-screen," he suggested.

When a dim picture depicting abundant greenery appeared it was obvious that wherever this was, it certainly wasn't a back street yard. John smiled inwardly in secret relief, for he was far from anxious to get home and end his travels anyway.

They stepped outside the blue police box. It was Gillian who was a little truculent now as she brushed leaves away from her face. "I suppose we're slap in the middle of a jungle," she complained.

John put an arm around her in lieu of spoken consolation. "Let's take a look around. I'd quite like to explore a good jungle," he said, rather too brightly.

Gillian rolled her eyes. "You would," she muttered, though in truth she was already rising above this latest unintended destination, the result of not inconsiderable practice.

Dr. Who removed his spectacles with one hand and fingered a leaf with the other. "Yes, just as I thought. Definitely Earth." He regarded the children benevolently, apparently well satisfied.

"But Grandfather..." Gillian began.

The Doctor wagged an admonishing forefinger at her. "Perfection is denied to us all, my child. Think of the vastness of space, the endless corridors of time. What is a modicum of slippage in projected co-ordinates compared to that, h'mm?"

"Nothing at all, Grandfather, is it?" John was moving away from the *TARDIS* as he spoke. "Do you think we are in a jungle?" he went on.

"I think I'll reserve judgement as to that until we have completed, at the very least, a basic exploration of the immediate vicinity," answered Dr. Who, as he and his granddaughter followed John through the trees and bushes.

They soon reached the periphery of what was not, in fact, a jungle but a fair-sized grove. The Doctor drew aside a curtain of obscuring foliage in order to provide them with a look at what lay beyond.

“It’s quite a view,” John remarked after some moments, making the best of it.

His sister gazed doubtfully at the prospect before them.

The uneven ground, sloping gradually downwards from the grove, consisted of dust and scattered stones before levelling out at what might be a track of sorts, its surface looking different, more like hard-packed sand. Intermittent clumps of vegetation, visible on the far side of it, completely lacked the exuberance of the grove. In the background were hills and valleys, of a dusky yellow flecked with patches of white, with only occasional touches of green. Perhaps, Gillian thought, fanciful all at once, this new destination was actually just pieces of scenery. The artist had used most of his green paint on the thick growth they had just pushed their way through... She smiled, pleased by this unusual thought.

When they stood on the stony land above the sandy trail Dr. Who’s eyes fell upon three dark, slender trees, high on a hill quite some distance away to his left and silhouetted against the sky. His gaze continued for some reason to dwell on them. What did the way they were positioned remind him of?

John’s voice broke into his thoughts. “Grandfather...”

The Doctor turned. “What is it, my boy?”

John leaned forward a little and squinted. “I’m sure I saw things moving...yes, you can just make them out. Riders, I think.” He pointed, away to their extreme right.

“Oh yes,” Gillian concurred. “Well spotted, John.”

Dr. Who’s long-distance eyesight, despite his age, was as good as theirs. “Dear me, yes.”

“Hard to tell how many there are. Wait till they get a bit closer,” advised John.

“They’re not travelling very fast,” Gillian observed.

John laughed. “That rules out the cavalry, then.”

The Doctor frowned at this levity. “It’ll be quite a time before they reach us, certainly, so I suggest we walk in their direction.”

“But Grandfather, do we want to meet them?” queried Gillian. “They might not be friendly.”

“How else are we to ascertain exactly where we are and in what period of time, child?”

Gillian sighed inwardly. If it meant safety she would have been happy never knowing.

The trio set off.

“We’ve lost sight of them now,” complained John, after a fairly lengthy trek.

Gillian nodded wearily. “It’s because we’ve come down into this valley.”

“We’ll soon pick them out again when we return to higher ground,” Dr. Who stated confidently. “Come, let us press on.”

Eventually, after an ankle-wrenching climb and another, shorter trairpse John stood on a hill topped with sparse sand and a few miserable weeds struggling to survive. He gave a triumphant cry.

“I can see them!”

The Doctor and his granddaughter were still clambering up the hill. “How far away are they now?” called Gillian.

“Not too far. There are four of them. On camels.”

John gazed at the quartet riding sedately along, outlined against the sky. Gillian arrived to stand beside him. "One less and they might have been the three wise men." She smiled reminiscently. "Last year's nativity play at school was quite good, wasn't it?"

"With the wise men being directed to Bethlehem by a tinfoil star suspended from a piece of gym equipment?"

Gillian frowned. "You always poke fun. Miss Leeson worked really hard to get it all done on time."

"Checking everything with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?"

Dr. Who interposed. "As a matter of fact, my dear boy, only Matthew mentions the wise men, or Magi."

"I didn't know that, Grandfather." John's voice held a genuine flicker of interest now.

"I wore a blue shawl and played a woman who took the last bed at the inn," Gillian continued, undeterred by the interruption. "You were the innkeeper," she added, eyeing her brother censoriously.

John smirked. "Yes. That was a laugh."

"You stood by the doorway and whispered to everyone going in that it was fish and chips or nothing, take it or leave it, and if they wanted mushy peas it was sixpence extra. All that giggling started then. Joanna Coombes told Miss McGovern all about it the next day."

"That sickening goody-goody and her snitching!" John exclaimed disgustedly.

"I couldn't stand her, myself," Gillian admitted.

The Doctor tutted. "All this chatter. Come along. Let us finish this – er – enjoyable little stroll. It will be interesting to meet our four travellers over there face to face and establish our whereabouts, will it not, h'mm?"

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"It's all very confusing," Gillian said to John in an undertone.

"You mean that they turned out to be the wise men despite there being an extra one?"

"Well it is, isn't it?"

"I'll say. What about the presents, for starters?"

"Presents? Oh, I see what you mean. The gold, frankincense and myrrh. Why are they part of the mystery? They must be in their travel bags."

John smiled mischievously. "But they carry a present each into the manger, don't they? I just wondered what the fourth one was taking. A selection box, perhaps."

They all sat together on a groundsheet of stiff, coarsely woven brown cloth which had been rolled up and strapped to one of the resigned-looking camels. Nearby were several rocky hills, one much larger than the others, of a burnt orange colour. The four men, all ancient relics of yesteryear swathed in robes, had provided their new acquaintances with a portion of unleavened bread apiece, heavy and more than a little stale, and a swallow or two of wine, heavily watered and thus a shadow of its former self.

Balthasar was a broadly-built, venerable-looking character with appraising eyes that seemed as old as time. He wore a decorated leather collar that extended over his shoulders and chest.

"I am always pleased to break bread with fellow travellers," he announced.



Caspar, his hair and beard grey and wispy, regarded the oddly-garbed newcomers in a restrained manner, though with a slight smile. "It is less than a hardship to share with you on this occasion. This bread would turn the stomach of my camel."

"He's quite right. It would," John whispered to Gillian, making her laugh.

"Hush, children," reprimanded Dr. Who.

Melchior, an anxious-looking old fellow, spoke up in a quavery voice with, "Surely a little privation matters nought when measured against the glorious event that approacheth."

"I dare say," Caspar riposted, "but it has still been a long, hard journey with precious little shelter along the way. We've rested only in snatches and none of us are exactly in the first flush of youth either." He looked at his piece of bread again, made an exclamation of disgust and tossed it over his shoulder. "What a treat for the vultures. They'll not fly again after they've pecked away at that."

Melchior was about to make an attempt to smooth things over when Balthasar chimed in gruffly. "We ate well in Jerusalem. There was no shortage of fine dishes at the banquet King Herod invited us to."

"The bread there wasn't crusty enough, though" Caspar persisted, less than seriously now.

"You're a miserable old grouch," Balthasar rumbled at him, but with a tolerant look in his eyes as he berated his old colleague.

The Doctor addressed the fourth man, Aranagar, a wizened old specimen with a sunken face, friendly blue eyes and an easy smile. "I take it that the four of you share but a single objective?"

Aranagar darted a penetrating glance at him. "To witness the birth of the one of whom the prophets of old spoke," he confirmed.

Dr. Who smiled benevolently. "A worthwhile pilgrimage indeed, then, lengthy and arduous as it has been for you all."

Melchior interjected. "Aranagar joined our party in Jerusalem. He heard of our quest and shared our eagerness."

Aranagar's eyes had narrowed somewhat. "You are but curious wanderers, you said, but presumably you do not always wander on foot and without travel bags or provisions?"

Both John and Gillian noticed Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior all turn towards the Doctor, obviously interested in his answer to the question posed by their colleague.

Dr. Who, though taken aback at being quizzed himself, rose above the situation with aplomb. "Oh dear me, no. In fact we have not done so on this occasion. Our transport awaits us a little way back. We had just secured it, having decided to pause for a time, when we noticed your group and on an impulse walked to meet you and exchange greetings."

Balthasar nodded approvingly. "That was most civil of you, my friend."

It was then that attention was abruptly drawn towards Melchior, who had begun to choke on a piece of the unappetising bread and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"There!" Caspar said triumphantly. "I knew how it would be..."

Balthasar, Aranagar and Caspar soon surrounded their ancient travelling companion, whom they patted on the back and urged to take a swallow of his wine, which he did. John and Gillian stared, transfixed by the sudden drama. The wine only made matters worse. Dr. Who was curiously slow to join in the attempts to resolve the crisis but was the one who did so by facing Melchior and bringing his knee up sharply into the old man's stomach. The bread, together with splatters of wine, flew out of his mouth.

“Well done, Grandfather,” congratulated John.

“We owe you a debt of gratitude,” Balthasar told the Doctor sincerely.

“Well, well, let us finish our wine, if not our bread, and then perhaps rest before we all move on again, h’mm?”

The four old men concurred with the suggestion and soon they had settled down for sleep. Dr. Who stretched out as well and closed his eyes. The children, though not particularly keen on the idea of sleeping at first, found themselves wearier than they thought after their trek across plains and up and down hills and in the end succumbed to the arms of Morpheus...

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When the Doctor woke him up John stared confusedly at an altered scenario. For one thing it was now dark, the inky sky a backdrop for what had to be “yonder star”, as he thought of it, glowing but palely and, surprisingly, seeming to convey the chill he suddenly felt in the marrow of his bones. It looked, he thought, like some mystical sword suspended in the heavens. The beauty he perceived as he regarded this legendary phenomenon was undeniable yet oddly indefinable. Mesmerised, he experienced difficulty in looking away. The depth and eloquence of his thoughts increased, for they were not those of the boy he was but of the man he would one day be. What was happening? Who was he? Young John or someone who didn’t even exist yet? A strange, welcoming lassitude began to creep temptingly over him, a comforting escape from the need to work it out...

Dr. Who stepped in front of him, blocking his view. “Wake up your sister, boy,” he snapped.

The interruption dissipated the cocoon of odd thoughts and feelings and John was soon himself again. It was then that he fully assimilated the other changes around him. Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior were nowhere to be seen and the four tethered camels had gone as well. Aranagar remained, slumped against a rock and still deep in sleep. Or was he dead?

“Quickly,” urged Dr. Who, breaking into John’s thoughts again.

Hastily recalling what his grandfather had told him to do, John shook Gillian awake. The girl stared about her, as bemused as he had been.

“We must be on our way,” the Doctor informed them. “Come along.”

John indicated Aranagar. “What about him?”

“He’ll sleep for quite a while yet, thanks to the sleeping powder I slipped into his wine,” Dr. Who explained, with a wintry smile. “I always carry a few, as on occasion it’s imperative that one gets enough rest.”

Something clicked in John’s mind. “You put it in while Melchior was choking!”

“It was a fortuitous distraction,” the Doctor commented.

Gillian glanced at Aranagar. “But why did you do it?”

“He joined the three pilgrims in Jerusalem. He just had to be an undercover emissary of King Herod’s.”

“Where are the others now?” Gillian asked.

“Where they should be, my dear child. On their way to Bethlehem.”

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The first light of dawn had appeared by the time they arrived back at the grove where the *TARDIS* was. Dr. Who ushered the children, who he had warned continually during the walk to avoid looking at the star, into the trees. He then ignored his own advice, pausing at the edge of the grove to turn and risk a brief final view of it. About to resolutely detach his gaze, he saw the sword-like shape twist, become an indistinct blur, then clarify into four intersecting strands. The small star at the centre was of an eye-aching white. Abruptly, the strands were bathed in a deep glow of a sinister, gaseous – looking red. The Doctor staggered as a boiling, volcanic fury was conveyed to him via his sight. Its terrible heat surged through his body. He crumpled to the ground, but in doing so broke the contact between his eyes and the enraged, vengeful entity in the early morning sky.

As he lay recovering, he chided himself for setting aside his own good sense. Like Lot's wife, he had foolishly looked back. The ferocious attack on him had undoubtedly been punishment for his interference in detaching Aranagar from the party of old men.

Had the revealing transformation of that mysterious intelligence been visible only to him? He thought it likely, since Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior were still being guided by the star. To Bethlehem at least, he thought, and smiled grimly to himself. His further intervention in counselling those ancient travellers to return home from there by an alternative route and to look no more at the star must as yet be unknown to that cunning enemy. It was fortunate, he reflected, that he had always wondered why a “yonder star” with good intentions should have included Jerusalem and a visit to Herod in the itinerary of the Three Wise Men.

Dr. Who was feeling quite himself again as he unlocked the *TARDIS* door and beckoned the children to follow him into the police box. Gillian was the last to enter and as she did so she glanced back and spotted, in the light shining from within, a lizard perched on a leaf. Hastily she slammed the door behind her. She had never cared for lizards.

Which, considering their next destination, was most unfortunate.

A sudden rush of wind, disturbing the still leaves and frightening away the lizard, and the *TARDIS* was gone.

**\*\*BONUS STORY\*\*****The Night Before Christmas**

*The story Dr. Who entertained his grandchildren with*

Yes, John, my boy, this does seem to be rather a long journey, doesn't it? What's that, Gillian, my child? A story? Well, I don't know... Oh, very well, then, let's sit down. Now, let me see... ah, yes, there was a strange little tale about an orphanage that old Mr. Twist told me. I suppose that might do, but don't blame your old grandfather if you have nightmares, will you, h'mm?

You remember the little yard, of course, where I was making a few repairs to the TARDIS when we first met? Yes, well, you're not very likely to forget it, I suppose... Mr. Twist lived a few doors away at Number Four and more often than not he was standing on the doorstep with a pipe between his teeth, opening and shutting his mouth to get the tobacco burning. We always nodded to each other and exchanged a few words. Sometimes he told the most dreadful jokes. There was one, I remember, about a woman who ran out of a fish and chip shop, screaming. Mr. Twist was sniggering in that way of his as he told me the punchline, which was, as I recall, 'Potato Fritter', or some such nonsense... now, Gillian, it wasn't that amusing, I'm sure, child...

A hundred yards along the road, on the opposite side to the yard, was an empty, dilapidated building. I had walked past it a number of times. It had been a shop until the 1940's and the name 'E. Topping' was still over the door. The rear of the old place was reached by way of a wide archway that bore, I remember, a date - 1811. Mr. Twist, who was between seventy and eighty, knew the property from when he was a boy, around the turn of the century, and recalled the details of a mysterious event that took place there in the year 1907. The house was a small orphanage for girls in those days, run by a Mrs. Patt and her assistant, Mrs. Pale.

Mrs. Patt and her husband Vernon lived at the back of the house. Vernon Patt was a glassblower - a small, miserly little fellow, according to Mr. Twist, and Mrs. Patt was cut

from the same bolt of cloth, if you follow me. The orphanage was associated with the local church in some way, but Mrs. Patt had control of the finances, which unfortunately made it easy for her to run the place along very frugal lines and put aside every penny she could for the benefit of her husband, whose comfort was the only thing that really mattered to her. Dear me, what a selfish pair they sounded. So the children's food was tightly rationed - a bite was more beneficial than a plateful, Mrs. Patt insisted. Clothes had to be worn until they fell apart. Heating was kept to a minimum to avoid pampering the body - that was another little edict. The children, it later transpired, often huddled together for warmth even in the daytime. What's that, Gillian? Oh, yes, Mr. and Mrs. Patt always sat by a good fire, you may be sure. They could afford anything they wanted, for even the extra money raised by occasional fund-raising activities didn't benefit the children at all and ended up in their purse.

Over the course of time several of the children, who had little resistance to chills and suchlike, died. Mr. Twist remembered a number of pathetic little funeral processions setting off from the orphanage and how Mrs. Patt and Mrs. Pale wept into their black handkerchiefs. Mrs. Pale, by the way, didn't live at the orphanage but came in during the day. She seemed to be a timid, wishy-washy creature.

It was just before Christmas when the police came to arrest the Patts for misappropriation of funds. All the children were watching at the windows, round-eyed, as the pair of them were taken away to be charged. A local shopkeeper, it turned out, had been asked by the church if he would audit the orphanage books and had proved rather more sharp-eyed than his deceased predecessor. There was now, however, no-one living on the premises with the children, so Mrs. Pale agreed to step into the breach.

The local sensation caused by the charges against the Patts was eclipsed only two days later, on Christmas Day, when a Mrs. Green called at the orphanage with a cake she had made for the children. One of the girls told her that Mrs. Pale had not been seen since Christmas Eve. A search was instituted, and the police involved again, but no trace of her could be found. Mrs. Green, who had the children's welfare at heart, took charge of the orphanage and things were run a great deal better from then on. Weeks passed, then months, then years, but no clue to the mystery of Mrs. Pale's disappearance came to light and eventually the case was largely forgotten.

The orphanage closed in the 1920's and a Mrs. Elsie Topping rented the house and ran a sweetshop there until World War Two. She died after the war and in 1950 the church decided to renovate the building with a view to selling it. Under the old floorboards two workmen came across...well, what do you think, children, h'mm?

The police set out to locate the current whereabouts of every child who had been present at the orphanage during that long-ago Christmas. Quite a few had died during the London Blitz. Those still alive all described how frightened they had been of the long pallid face and strange, hungry-looking eyes of the outwardly meek Mrs. Pale, who had spent every penny of her own money on alcohol and had then taken most of the children's already meagre portions of food for herself. How much worse would it be, they had asked themselves, with her in total charge?

On Christmas Eve, after Mrs. Pale had over-indulged herself in spirits to celebrate her promotion, she had sat in a drunken stupor. One of the girls, seeing the opportunity, had slipped her long yellow hair-ribbon around the neck of the woman they all feared and hated, crossed it and strangled her. Every girl had then worked into the night as they prised up the floorboards and consigned Mrs. Pale's body beneath them...

Do you know, they never did find out who actually killed Mrs. Pale. No, indeed. The survivors of those children all absolutely refused to part with that particular piece of information.

Was it one of them, or was the perpetrator of the crime already in her own grave, eh?

Why, your eyes are as round as saucers. My little story wasn't too frightening, was it? Well, never mind - at least it helped to pass the time!





The Doctor has created a new set of co-ordinates. He believes they will return the TARDIS to England in 1964, the home of his grandchildren, John and Gillian. Soon their travels will be over.

The time and space machine does reach earth, but in the era of the New Testament. The travellers see a group of riders and are astounded to find that they are the legendary Wise Men, for there are four of them instead of three!

When he discerns the reason for the variation from the Bible, the Doctor reduces the deputation, but frustrates the intentions of a powerful entity, which is soon burning with rage against him...

What is the shocking truth about 'yonder star'?

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