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The Sign

A West Country Christmas Story



“I’d been out lookin to the sheep...

The wind penetrated
every corner of the ‘ouse”

The Sign - A West Country Christmas Story
Collected from storyteller Jim Binding of Porlock
Retold by R James Parham

Somewhere on Exmoor...

Mid-December brought a howlin north-easterly gale that roared down across the valley and flung itself with full force again' the farm. For days 'e raged and then un swung round to become a whinin easterly wind, which penetrated every corner of the 'ouse and sent ee out to work two-jacketed.

I'd been out lookin to the sheep, twas late an gettin a might dimpsey, and I was havin a quiet vive minutes leanin o'er the five-bar gate and thinkin to mesel. I thought tomorra t'll be Christmas, but out here on the quiet isolation of the varm tis no different t'any other day, with no soun' but the cows chewin their cud an the starlins

chatterin away to roost out on the
withy bed.

I thought about they town volks, wi' their
bright shops an office parties an central
yettin an such lake but for all that, I oodn't
change places wi' nar one o' um.

Then all to once I yeard zummut; me
puppy dog yeard it too an urned off down
the lane t' see what twas, but 'e was soon
back wi' a narrow-gutted lurcher snappin
to 'is 'eels.

Rough-shod hooves, ungreased axles,
drug chains an clangin buckets makes the
sound of a gipsy caravan unmistakable.

But tis the sound that goes with the warm
sunny days of summertime, cos the
gypsies always come in time for haymakin
and was gone agin straight a'ter Harvest
Home. T' see one in the lane on Christmas
Eve was most unusual.

A tall young gypsy fellow wearin an old
army overcoat tied round wi' a bit o'
binder cord was leadin a tired old cob. "Is
thee father about?" he said pleasant
enough, but Father had sid 'n a-comin and
had come urnin in from the kale field.



“You can’t stop here,” he said...
“Oh come on, mister, be a sport”

“You can’t stop here,” he said, ’fore the gypsy had even had chance to ask.

“Oh come on, mister, be a sport, my missus is none too good. I only want to pull in under the loo o’ the hedge for the night, I’ll be gone again fust thing in the mornin.” “Ay and so will all me vowls,” said Father.

“I ain’t no didicoy, mister, Joseph Kemp gives ee ’is word. You remembers my old uncle Manny Kemp, don’ ee? Well, I come yer cos I benn followin ‘ee’s sign.”

Course that was alt’gether different, cos everybody knowed and liked old Manny Kemp. He was the leader of the last family of true gypsies and always used to bring ’em along to help out in the harvest field.

But old age had caught up wi' een an we
'adn't seen nort on een for several years.

By this time Mother had come out to see
what all the hamshammy was about. Her
climbed up the steps of the caravan an
looked in dru the door, then her climbed
down agin. An lookin up t' Jo from about
the level of his binder-cord belt, her said,
"If you want to get to winter camp before
thik youngest of yourn is born, you better
way get a move on, young fella. Your
missus, as you calls 'er, is frightened t'
death an her's properly scrambled up wi'
the cold. Now then, seen as 'ow you'm
proper gypsy volk, you won't wanna come
indoors, so the best thing you can do is to
bed down for the night in the cowshed."



"So the best thing you can do is to bed
down for the night in the cowshed."

Mother, as usual, had took charge o' the situation. We took un into the yard an up t' the barn. Young Jo unhitched the horse an seed to un, gi'd un some oats an hobbled un for the night. Mother fussed about the young girl, wrapped her in her second-best shawl an helped her into the barn. "Ther's plenty of straw to make ee a bed in the corner an I'll find ee a bit o' grub an summut hot t' drink," an off her went.

Well, Father an me finished the sheep an saw to the beasts. At suppertime there was a right argy bargy goin' back an forth across the table o' the rights an wrongs o' putting up gypsies in the middle o' winter. But the baby stopped any more argument by arrivin wi' a tremendous gurt yell.



"Ther's plenty of straw to
make ee a bed in the corner"

Mother urred out t' the barn like a long dug, close followed by Father an me. Mother was there beside the girl, who was cradlin her baby an smilin, and Jo, well, there he was, just like any dog wi' two tails, kept walkin up an down the yard, shakin 'ands wi' everybody, sayin "Yer now, I got a son an I shall call un Manny, cos twas old Uncle Manny's sign that guided me yer."

The rest o' us set to: Mother ripped up her flannel petticoat for to wrap the baby up in, an Father an me made a crib for un out o' an old orange-box.



"Mother ripped up her flannel petticoat...
Father made a crib for un out o' an old orange-box"

Then everybody settled down for the night. The ice was meltin in the cattle troughs an the snow clouds was buildin up next morning, when Jo 'itched up 'is 'orse and backed 'is wagon up to the cowshed door. "We'm off now, mister, thank ee kindly," 'e said, then, turning ees 'ead, 'e hollered, "Be you all right in there, Mary?"

Any reply her might've made was lost in the noise of the rattlin old cart as Father an me stood in the lane and watched um go. "Wonder what old Emmanuel Kemp will make of his new namesake?" says Vather, and summut clicked in me mind.

"Yer, Dad, Jo called his wife Mary, they called their little boy Emmanuel, an 'e was born in our cowshed yer te Christmas."

"Ha! Git out with ee, boy, tis nort but coincidence. They only come yer cos they bin vollowin some old gypsy sign, yeard un zay so yerself."

But a'ter they'd gone, I went out to look for this yer sign, an twadn't too long 'fore I found what I was lookin vor. Twas there on the smooth bark of the old beech tree just outside the gate.

Tw'as a sign old Manny Kemp had made
all they years ago. Tw'as carved in the
shape of the Star of Bethlehem.



“We’m off now, mister...
There on the smooth bark of the old beech tree, ‘twas a
sign carved in the shape of the Star of Bethlehem.”