

Sid Johnson
and the
Two Wise Men



A Christmas Zine
by
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2022

Sid Johnson and the Two Wise Men

“Sid, how about you go with me to get the tree in the morning before Jimmy and Cora are out of bed?” said Pa. “We’ll put it in the smokehouse out of sight until we get back from church.”

Sid had never been in on putting up the Christmas tree. Every Christmas morning, he got up to find a fully decorated tree standing in the living room as if it had been placed there by Santa Claus himself. The past few Christmases he’d wondered how Ma and Pa did it. One thing for sure, they were good at hiding things. It had been three months since he had first discovered that their farm was a stop on the Underground Railroad. He still hadn’t figured out where they hid freedom seekers.

He was sound asleep when Pa tapped him on the shoulder and motioned that it was time to get up. Their breath frosted in the early morning air as they led their horse, Sandy, through the yard. She pulled a cart that they would use to carry the tree back.

“It feels like snow,” said Pa, “but I reckon we won’t see any until well after the new year.” Their feet crunched on frost that clung to fallen leaves. Pa had already picked out the tree he wanted in a little grove of balsam fir near the creek that ran along their property. The tree was well inside the grove and just about Sid’s height, nearly as tall as Pa. It was perfectly shaped except the lower branches were low to the ground. Autumn leaves were piled around it where the wind had swept them so that it was impossible to see the trunk.

“We’ll have to clear away those leaves, Sid, and cut out a few branches at the bottom, but it will trim up nicely.”

Sid got on his hands and knees and began scooping up leaves when he heard a muffled cry. It seemed to come from under the tree. Pa signaled for him to be quiet. The only sounds to be heard were of the creek gurgling as it made its way to a little waterfall down below and the sounds of birds heralding the new day. Pa pulled away the lower branches. Curled up together under a covering of leaves were two boys about Jimmy’s age, freedom seekers. Wide-eyed, they trembled in fright. Pa put his finger to his mouth to signal quiet. “I’m a friend of—” Sid couldn’t quite make out what he said—“Don’t be afraid. We’ll help you.” They seemed to understand, reaching up to let Pa help them out from under the tree.

There hadn’t been many freedom seekers coming their way after their barn burned. That was about two months ago. Pa said word that the Johnson farm was no longer a safe stop on the Underground Railroad would get out on the grapevine. He was convinced that bounty hunters were responsible for the fire, but there wasn’t any proof. In any case, their station on the Underground Railroad was compromised. Ma and Pa had decided that since they had family in California, it was time to follow. Sid had resigned himself to it, but nobody would have accused him of being enthusiastic about the idea.

“Do you have folks with you?” Pa asked. The bigger of the two boys shook his head. “Sid, bring up Sandy and the cart as close as you can.”

By the time Sid had the cart into the grove as far as he could get it, the tree was cut down. Pa had the boys

get into the cart and lie flat. “This may be a little prickly, but we can’t risk anybody seeing you.” They put the lower branches that Pa had trimmed off the tree over the boys, then lay the tree down on top. “Now Son,” said Pa, “we’ll stomp around where the boys were and pile some leaves over. Won’t stop a tracker with dogs, but it could confuse them, buy us some time. We have to be quick.” When they had the ground where the tree had stood covered to his satisfaction, Pa picked up a branch that had fallen from a nearby tree, “You go on ahead with Sandy. I’ll be right behind. I’m going to sweep away our tracks until we’re back on the main path. It may save us some trouble.”

When they got home, the sun was newly up on the edge of the horizon, sending golden light out across the cornfield and splashing it up against the house. “Have Sandy pull up by the smokehouse,” said Pa. They made quick work of it. Under Pa’s quiet direction, Sid opened the smokehouse door and held it. Pa lifted the tree and the boys darted inside under its cover.

Sid took Sandy to the open shed they’d built for her and Buttercup, their one remaining cow. Ever since Ma and Pa had decided to go West they had been selling off things, first the cattle, then farm tools. Ma said that once Christmas was over, she was going to start selling furniture. *This is my last Christmas on the farm.* It was an unhappy thought. There wasn’t time to dwell on it, though.

By the time he was back to the house, Ma had moved the boys from the smokehouse into the kitchen where they sat at the table eating porridge and drinking cocoa. “Son, we are calling this young man Levi—” she nodded toward the oldest who was almost as tall as Sid

—“and this young man will be Jacob.” They never used real names with freedom seekers. It was one of the many ways freedom seekers and those who helped them along the way had of protecting each other.

Once Sid discovered that Ma and Pa were helping freedom seekers, they let him help out. Unlike most of the freedom seekers Sid had seen, these boys were dressed in sturdy work clothes and wearing good shoes. Ma said they were coming up from Kentucky. Their mother had been planning their escape for a long time. She sent them with a guide who was to take them to family in British North America along with some other freedom seekers. But she stayed behind. Their guide had managed to keep ahead of a slave tracker with dogs until they were well into Illinois. But the dogs were gaining on them. The guide had the freedom seekers scatter. The boys got separated from the rest of the group. “All they know is that they are supposed to meet up at a mill on the edge of Alton,” said Ma. “So, we know exactly what we need to do.”

Sid knew that mill, too. *It's the only stop on the Underground Railroad that I know for sure.* His first real assignment as part of the Underground Railroad had been to take a freedom seeker to the mill. Even then, nothing was said to Liam Robinson, who ran the mill. No explanations were necessary. Liam Robinson had known what to do.

Dogs baying in the distance put an end to breakfast for Levi and Jacob. Ma flew into action. “Sid, collect the dishes. Wash and dry them immediately and get them put away. Boys, come with me. She led them out of the kitchen. Sid had to resist the impulse to see where she was taking them, but he was under strict

orders to stay put. Ma and Pa often reminded him that he didn't need to know where they hid freedom seekers. "You can't tell what you don't know." He had a feeling it wasn't so easy now with the barn gone.

Pa took a milk pail from the back porch. "Reckon I'd better milk Buttercup this morning, Sid." Sid put the last of the dishes away. In less time than it takes to tell, Ma was back in the kitchen stirring the oatmeal like she was just making breakfast. Voices called to Pa. Looking out, Sid could see Pa casually turn back from the shelter where Buttercup waited and wave a greeting to two men on horseback. With them were four large dogs on the leash. They were almost perfectly matched, tan with black spots. Their long necks and sturdy backs, long mournful-looking faces, floppy ears, droopy eyes, and wrinkled jowls told him they were bloodhounds, not just any bloodhounds, but purebreds. A chill ran up his spine.

"We're out lookin' for a pack of runaways off a plantation in Kentucky. Dogs tracked two up as far as that creek over there. It that on your place? We're tryin' to pick up the scent. Runaways don't vanish into thin air. They're on the loose somewhere around here unless somebody's interferin' with the law. We'd like to have a look around if you don't mind."

"Actually, I do mind," said Pa. He sounded as polite and reasonable as anybody you could ask for. "You can't even imagine how many trackers want to stop here, trampling down the corn, scaring the hens so they won't lay. Lord have mercy, last fall a couple of bounty hunters burned our barn to the ground thinking they were going to find runaways. I'll tell you what, I'm getting fed up with it. I don't mean to be rude. You all

strike me as real professionals who know what you're doing, but we're peaceful, law-abiding folk. This is Christmas Eve. Me and my family are trying to get off to the church for the Christmas program this evening and we have a pack of things to get done."

"I'd like to be home with my family, too. But we have a job to do. If those runaways are hiding out on your property, we could have them in a minute and be gone."

One man had been doing all of the talking. The other spoke up. "We can play it your way if you insist, Mr. Johnson. We can get a search warrant if that's what we have to do. It would take a lot less time to just let the dogs go and get on our way."

"If it were any other day than Christmas Eve," said Pa, shaking his head.

"So be it," said the first man. They left with their dogs. Pa turned back toward Buttercup and the milking.

"Was that wise, Ben?" Ma's brow was covered with worry lines as Pa returned with a pail of milk. "We always let them search."

"I didn't want those dogs near the smokehouse or the wagon. Those men are professional trackers, a cut above most of the riffraff that come our way. I could tell by the way they conducted themselves and how they handle the dogs. —" he shook his head—"Those dogs would pick up on the boys' scent on the wagon in a minute. Wouldn't take that long to hunt them down. This buys us some time. Then we have to figure out how we're going to get the boys out of here and on up

to the mill before night. We can't risk leaving them here while we're away at church."

Sid was stunned. He didn't know what to make of Pa's behavior. For years, Ma and Pa had been sheltering freedom seekers right under his nose without him ever knowing it. Men had gone through the barn and even the house tapping on walls and Pa hadn't so much as batted an eye. But he was clearly worried. "They might go get a warrant, but more likely they'll be watching the house like hawks circling around looking for prey."

Ma's mouth was set in a straight line. She nodded. "Sid, as soon as you finish breakfast, I want you to get out to the smokehouse and build up the coals so there is more smoke. Make sure the tree is well out of the way. If those men are professionals, they won't want their dogs breathin' in a bunch of smoke. I've already called Jimmy and Cora for breakfast. Best not say anything to them and I don't want 'em seein' the tree."

Further discussion came to an end as Jimmy and Cora bounded down the stairs for breakfast. Sid took his place at the table.

"I want you youngsters to stay clear of the wagon today," said Pa, helping himself to oatmeal. "Must have been a skunk in it last night. If you go anywhere near there, you'll be smelling to high heaven tonight."

"A skunk? P-eee-eww!" said Jimmy, grinning. "You'd be a stinky angel, Cora." He took a big bite of oatmeal.

"Won't neither," said Cora.

“Do you two know your lines for the Christmas play?” asked Ma.

Jimmy’s mouth was full of oatmeal, but it didn’t stop him. “We’b cumb to thee—”

Ma’s sharp look cut him off. “Manners, Jimmy. We don’t talk with our mouths full.”

He swallowed and said in a strong, clear voice, “We have come to see the newborn King.”

“What about you, Cora?” asked Sid.

Cora put her spoon down, folded her hands in her lap, and looked up at the ceiling. “Fear not. Behold. I bring you tidings of great joy.”

“Well done, both of you,” said Pa.

“Jimmy, I have to mop the kitchen floor. But as soon as I’m done, I want you to get in here and let me measure the hem on your costume. Yours is ready, Cora.”

“Even the wings?”

“Even the wings. No need to worry.”

Sid had just finished getting the smokehouse filled with enough smoke to set him coughing and was returning to the house when he saw Pa loading the wagon with wood. He had to smile. Pa had probably thrown a couple of skunk pelts in the bottom of the wagon. He’d pile wood over it, making it confusing to the dogs.

Back in the kitchen, Ma had Jimmy standing on a chair. Pins in her mouth, she was tacking up the hem to a long robe.

“I remember when I wore that, Jimmy,” said Sid. “I was a wise man once, too.”

“You were?” Jimmy’s eyes widened.

“Stand still,” Ma managed to speak despite the pins.

That’s when Sid had an idea. He hurried back outdoors to tell Pa.

“I think it would work, Son. But it means we’ll have to bring Cora and Jimmy into it and that is a little worrisome.”

“But they have kept Elijah a secret,” said Sid, remembering how Cora had found a boy about his age in the hay before the barn was burned. They’d helped to hide him from bounty hunters. It was right after Sid had discovered that Ma and Pa sheltered freedom seekers. “They’ve never said a word.”

“Your Ma has to have time to do it.”

By late afternoon, they were ready to leave for church. The sun was already beginning to set when Pa brought Sandy around with the buggy, Ma stepped out of the house followed by an angel and three wise men all dressed in costume with heavy mustaches, beards, and crowns. The wise men had black faces and hands. From a distance, Sid wasn’t sure which one was Jimmy. He silently prayed the plan would work.

It had quickly become a family project. Once Sid explained to Ma, she began to work on two more wise man costumes. Sid helped stitch up the long seams of the tent-like robes that were put on over Jacob's and Levi's clothing. Jimmy suggested flower sack cloth to cover their hair and even helped by pulled the stitches out of two heavy sacks Ma had among her sewing things. Jacob and Levi made crowns to wear over their head covering. The crowns would help keep the head covering from slipping off. Pa made heavy beards and mustaches out of lambswool with Cora helping him.

When the boys tried on their costumes, Jimmy insisted on trying on his, too. "What if we have Jimmy blacken his face so Levi and Jacob don't stand out?" said Sid, looking at the three boys. The head covering, beard, and mustache did not disguise two very black faces.

Pa agreed. "Burnt cork and charcoal dust should do it. I don't think that even Fredrick Douglass would disapprove in this case."

"Huh?" said Jimmy.

"Frederick Douglass is a famous abolitionist," said Sid.

"He has been outspoken on white people blackening their faces and imitating black people on stage," said Ma. "It ridicules black people. I agree. But we can make an exception in this case."

When Jimmy's face had been thoroughly blackened, Ma stood back, brow furrowed. "I think we should put

some charcoal dust on Jacob and Levi, too. It will flake off on their costumes and look more like they have painted faces.”

“And hands,” said Levi.

“You’re right, Levi,” said Ma. “We mustn’t forget the hands. Ben, are Jimmy’s hands blackened?”

“I want a black face, too.” Predictably, Cora wanted to be like the others.

“No sugar plum,” said Pa as he touched up Jimmy’s hands. “Your angel costume would end up a sight. Besides, it will help keep the secret if you look just like yourself.” That seemed to console her.

Pa was very deliberate in how people sat in the buggy. Jimmy and one wise man sat on the front seat with Pa. Ma sat in the back with Cora on her lap. In the middle was the other wise man, sitting next to Sid.

“Everybody know their lines?” asked Pa. The wise men and angel all nodded. “And remember, no matter what happens, we all stick to our parts as angels and wise men. . . Then off we go.”

Pa was pretty sure that the trackers had spent most of the afternoon going over the broad area on both sides of the creek and were just waiting for them to leave. They were more than likely going to be stopped. If all went to plan, the dogs would not be a danger. *But will all go to plan?* Sid swallowed a lump in his throat.

Pa turned the buggy to the road toward Alton. They were almost halfway there, and Sid was starting to relax

when he heard horses coming up behind them. Sure enough, it was the slave trackers. He looked around, noticing to his relief, that the dogs were all on leash. Even so, he thought his heart would stop beating when they hailed Pa and asked him to pull over. “Merry Christmas, gentlemen,” said Pa. “Had any luck in your search today?”

One tracker held back, holding the dogs. The other, who had spoken to Pa that morning, peered past Pa and Jimmy into the buggy. “Unfortunately, no,” he took off his hat briefly to Ma, “Evenin’, Ma’am. So, what have we here?”

“We three kings of Orient are,” said Jimmy, laughing like he was being spontaneous. Jacob shook his box of “gold.” Sid held his breath.

“And an angel,” yelled Cora.

“Nobody cares about angels,” said Jimmy.

Cora set up such a howl Sid could have sworn she was headed into a full-blown tantrum if he hadn’t known better.

“Don’t you fret, sugar plum,” said Pa. “Everybody has their part. We couldn’t have a Christmas program without angels.” Looking at the tracker, Pa shook his head. “Kids gets so worked up sometimes I wish we didn’t have to put them through it.”

“Come now, Cora, no need to get so upset,” Ma said in a soothing voice, just like they’d rehearsed it.

“You can say that again,” said the tracker. “Happens with my young ’ens every year. Get on with them, then. Merry Christmas to you and yours.”

They’d made it past the first hurdle.

“You can quit screamin’ now, Cora,” said Sid after they were well away. “You’ll have a sore throat and won’t be able to say your lines.” He hoped Liam Robinson and Priscilla Robinson and their two boys would be at the church when they got there. Everything depended on it.

He could see their wagon when Sandy pulled into the churchyard. Even so, he could feel tension mounting. His body felt too tight to fit into and he found himself barely breathing.

“Well done everyone,” said Pa when Sandy stopped in front of the church. “Boys, do you remember what to do now?” They nodded their heads.

“Go ahead, Sid. We’ll give you a minute to find Liam Robinson and Priscilla Robinson, then Ma and the angel and wise men will go in.”

“How come you always say both their names?” asked Jimmy.

“That’s because they’re part of the Society of Friends—Quakers,” said Ma. “They don’t like to make one person seem more important than another. Some people think men are more important than women, for example. So, they don’t say Mr. or Mrs.”

As Sid hopped out of the buggy and hurried inside, he could hear Jimmy saying, “But men are more important, aren’t they?”

He couldn’t see either of the Robinsons, but their oldest boy was with a bunch of boys at the back. When Sid asked, the Robinson boy nodded toward the tree. Priscilla Robinson was busy helping put presents for the children on an enormous tree that reached almost to the ceiling of the church. It was strung with popcorn and brightened with small packages placed on its branches. Sid wondered if Ma had remembered to bring theirs. Every family was to bring a small gift for a boy or girl.

“Why hello, Sid Johnson, Do you have something for us?—” Priscilla Robinson accepted three little packages from somebody, looking at them carefully —“are these labeled ‘girl’ or ‘boy’?—”

“or ‘either one’,” added one of the ladies who was helping.

“No, Ma has our packages. I came to tell you that your *nephews* Levi Robinson and Jacob Robinson are here.” Pa had said she would pick up on his cues, but even so, Sid felt like his heart was pounding faster than Sandy could gallop. He barged on with his rehearsed part. “Thanks for letting them come play with Jimmy. We have them in their wise-man costumes. Ma says you needn’t worry about that.”

“I thought the Younger boy and little Claude Barker was supposed to be wise men,” said one of the women helping with the presents.

Priscilla Robinson raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. Without a moment’s pause, she turned to the

lady, “The Bible doesn’t say how many wise men. You know children. Everybody needs to have a part. Let me go get the little scamps settled. I’ll be right back.”

“I would have thought they could use extra angels,” said the lady.

Priscilla Robinson followed Sid to the church door where Ma was coming in with a boy on either side. Jimmy was right behind with Pa, who carried Cora. Her wings stuck out to the side. “Oh good,” said Ma, “here’s Priscilla Robinson. I’m so glad you let the boys participate in the program.”

“Well,” said Priscilla Robinson, “we members of the Society of Friends see every day as holy and worth celebrating. But Christmas is an important reminder of peace and love for each other. I confess I do enjoy our community celebration. I hope the boys haven’t been too much trouble.”

“They weren’t any trouble at all, Priscilla Robinson,” said Jimmy before Ma could say anything. “We had fun with Levi Robinson and Jacob Robinson and—”

“Hey, Jimmy,” one of his school friends interrupted. “What you doin’ with a black face? You done turned into a darkie?”

For one horrible moment, Jimmy seemed flummoxed. Sid held his breath.

“Wise men is from the Orient, everybody knows that,” he said.

“Oh,” said the boy. “See ya.”

Priscilla Robinson whisked the two boys along with Jimmy over to the other side of the church where Liam Robinson appeared, putting them in a pew next to him. His older son was there almost immediately as if he had been called, sitting on the other side of the boys. Sid prayed Jimmy would remember what to do in case the boys forgot. Not all of those who came to the Christmas Eve Program would be pleased to know that there were two freedom seekers in their midst.

The church was packed. The program was perfect. The school chorus sang their carols without a single mistake—Sid was part of the chorus. The preacher read the Christmas story without going on and on about it. Joseph and Mary, carrying the baby Jesus—somebody’s baby sister all wrapped up. *Fortunately she had the good sense not to cry*, Sid thought, *if babies can be said to have good sense*. He wasn’t so sure they could.

The angels appeared to the shepherds, and after a moment of silent, agonized waiting in which she seemed to falter, Cora’s voice rang out like a little bell, “Do not be afraid. Behold, we bring you good tidings of great joy.” The wise men, five of them, three with black faces, brought their gifts. Baby Jesus had two boxes of gold and another two of frankincense. Somebody behind Sid remarked that they must have been short of myrrh this year and there was appreciative snickering from those nearby. When the actors returned to their families, Jimmy came back to sit with them.

Santa Claus came and excitement stirred through the crowd as gifts were taken from the tree and distributed to all the children under ten years old. Everybody who

was there got a Christmas bag that held an orange, an apple, some mixed nuts still in their shells, ribbon candy, and peppermints. It would be all the Christmas presents most families had. The school chorus sang “Silent Night,” and candles were passed around the room so that nearly everybody had one. Soon the room was ablaze with light. Liam Robinson and Priscilla Robinson slipped out as the carol ended and the candles were being blown out, even before the preacher said the benediction. Somebody said later that Priscilla Robinson apologized, but the boys were getting restless. “—and such well-behaved young men. Priscilla Robinson is going to have the dickens getting that charcoal off those two. It looked like it was there to stay.”

“Is it Sid?” Jimmy whispered.

“Not in your case.” Sid grinned at him.

The sky was clear above as they returned to their carriage. The stars seemed to hang lower than usual. Nobody said much on the way home. Sid was content to sit in the back with Jimmy’s head in his lap, looking out at the stars. *I wonder if the stars look like this in California? I wonder what it would have felt like to be one of the wise men and see that star. Maybe it won’t be so bad in California.* His thoughts bounced around like the carriage when it hit a bumpy spot in the road.

Ma carried Cora upstairs to bed and Pa carried Jimmy. *I wonder how many Christmas Eves he had to carry me upstairs to bed?* The last few years he had gone to bed right after they’d returned from the Christmas Eve celebration, vowing to stay awake until he could find out how and when the tree appeared in the

house. He knew it was the work of Ma and Pa, he just hadn't figured out how they did it without waking him.

When Jimmy and Cora were tucked into bed, Sid helped Pa carry the tree into the house. It smelled of smoke and balsam. They hung popcorn garlands around the tree. Ma brought out the precious collection of glass ornaments her great-grandmother had brought from Germany. Pa handed him a handmade wooden star that had been at the top of the tree for as many Christmases as Sid could remember. "Why don't you put the star on the top, Son? You're tall enough to reach."

When they had finished decorating and stepped back to look at the tree, Pa said, "It's hard to believe this is our last Christmas in this house."

Sid felt the lump in his throat that seemed to get stuck there every time he thought about leaving the home he loved.

Ma let out a great sigh, then looking at Sid, she said, "Whatever do you have on your good trousers, Sid?"

He looked down. His trousers were covered with black charcoal. He grinned. "I guess some of a wise man has rubbed off on me!"

"Lawsy! And the pillowcases will be covered with it, I shouldn't wonder."

Pa looked a bit sheepish. "I thought about washing his face, but I was afraid I'd wake him."

Wake Jimmy once he's asleep? Not a chance. When it was time for him to go to bed, Sid would turn his

brother over so he'd have a place to sleep. Jimmy wouldn't make so much as a mumble.

"Never mind," said Ma. "It was for a good cause. I wasn't sure we could do it, but you were right, Sid. Nobody paid that much attention. They were too busy looking at their own children."

"You were the one who thought to put charcoal on Levi and Jacob, too, Ma," said Sid. "They had charcoal smears on their costumes just like Jimmy."

"I'm not sure Priscilla Robinson will thank me for that," said Ma.

"I don't think I'll remember this as the last Christmas in this house," said Pa. "I think I'll remember it as the Christmas of the two extra wise men."

"And I think," said Sid, feeling the lump well up in his throat again, "I think I will always remember that this as the Christmas we found two wise men under the tree."

Christmas 2022

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