

Befana

Based on a traditional Italian tale.

Thousands of years ago, the three Magi left their country on an important journey. They had heard that the son of God, Jesus Christ, had been born and they wanted to present gifts to his parents. They took with them gold, incense and myrrh. High in the sky, a bright star shone to guide their way.

Their journey took them through many small villages, and at each one, more people would hear about their quest and ask to join them. Bakers, carpenters, candle makers and more all rushed to join the journey to meet the son of God. Only the Magi knew to follow the shining star, so their new friends all followed them closely.

At one village, the Magi encountered an old woman who lived alone in a run-down cottage. Word had reached her about the birth of Christ and the pilgrimage that people were making, but she hadn't rushed to join them. The Magi were curious and visited her to ask if everything was okay. She explained that she was too busy with her housework: the wood needed chopping and the well had to be cleaned out. She said that she would catch up with them if she had time, but right now her house was more important.

Accepting her answer, the Magi and their caravan of followers set out into the desert. The next day, the old woman realised that she had made a grave mistake in staying at home. She knew that she mustn't arrive empty-handed, so she flitted around her house, gathering up gifts of wood and food. Finally, she set off into the desert to find the Magi.

Unfortunately, the Magi had travelled all night and were far away by the time the old lady left. Their footsteps in the sand had blown away and, of course, she didn't know to follow the star. She wandered the desert for many days and nights before accepting the fact that she would never find the place she was looking for.

The old lady wasn't angry, she knew it was her mistake, and she was still feeling generous. So, at



the next village, she handed out the gifts she had brought to the children. She became known as Befana.

Nowadays, Christians celebrate the feast of Epiphany on the 6th of January (Befana comes from the Greek word for epiphany). In Italy, Befana is a very popular Christmas figure, who delivers presents to children who have behaved. They leave out stockings for her to fill, and look out for her flying a broom with a black shawl over her dress that is sooty with dirt from the chimneys. If the children haven't behaved, they are likely to find onions, garlic or coal in their stockings instead.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What is a "quest"?
2. Find a word with a definition closest to "came across or discovered".
3. Which word tells you that the woman considered her mistake very bad?
4. What does the word "flitted" tell you about how she moved about the house?
5. Find and copy a word that tells you the old woman liked to give things to people.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

What chores did the old woman have to do?

I

Why might people have wanted to join the Magi on their journey?

S

What did the old woman do before she left the house?

S

What did the old lady do once she realised she wasn't going to find the Magi?

R

What celebration is linked to Befana?