

The Other Wise Man **by Henry Van Dyke**

As abridged by Donald J. Wolfram (adapted)

"You know the story of the Three Wise Men, and how they traveled from far away to offer their gifts at the manger-cradle in Bethlehem. But have you ever heard the story of the Other Wise Man, who also saw the star in its rising, and set out to follow it, yet did not arrive with his brethren in the presence of the young child Jesus?"

Artaban lived in Ecbatana, among the mountains of Persia. He was "a tall, dark man of about forty years, with brilliant eyes . . . under his broad brow." "His robe was of pure white wool, thrown over a tunic of silk; and a white, pointed cap, with long lapels at the sides, rested on his flowing black hair." This was the dress of the Magi.

He welcomed to his home one starry night, nine friends of differing age, but all Parthian nobles. As the fire rose, "it cast a bright illumination through the whole apartment, revealing its simplicity and splendor." Artaban told of the study he and three of his other friends had made of the ancient writings and the stars that indicated the imminent coming of the Blessed One, the Messiah: "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall arise out of Israel." (Num. 24:17)

Tigranes, a skeptical friend, said in contempt: "The tribes of Israel are scattered through the mountains like lost sheep, and from the remnant that dwells in Judea under the yoke of Rome neither star nor scepter shall arise."

"And yet," said Artaban, "it was the Hebrew Daniel . . . honored and beloved of our great King Cyrus . . . who wrote 'Know, therefore, and understand that from the going forth of the commandment to restore Jerusalem, unto the Anointed One, the Prince, the time shall be seven and threescore and two weeks.'"

Then he told of the study of the stars he and his three friends had made, indicating that the time had come. If the sign appeared that night, he would ride swiftly on his favorite horse, Vasda, and in ten days would meet his companions, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, by the ancient Temple of the Seven Spheres, in Babylonia, and set off together for Jerusalem.

He had sold his possessions and bought "three jewels -- a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl -- to carry them as tribute to the King." The first one was "blue as a fragment of the night sky, [the second] one redder than a ray of sunrise, and [the third] one as pure as the peak of a snow-mountain at twilight."

Artaban asked his friends to go with him on the pilgrimage, in order that they might have "joy together in finding the Prince who is worthy to be served."

Tigranes said, "This is a vain dream." Another friend said, I cannot go. "I am guardian of the royal treasure, but fare you well." Still another said, "In my house sleeps a new bride." He could neither go himself nor take her along.

Finally his oldest and most loving friend said, "It is better to follow even the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst. And those who would see wonderful things must often be ready to travel alone. . . . Go in peace."

When all his friends had gone Artaban went out on the roof and observed the stars. As he watched "a steel-blue spark was born out of the darkness beneath . . . Tiny and infinitely remote, yet perfect in every part." "It is the sign," he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him."

"Before the birds had fully roused . . . the Other Wise Man was in the saddle, riding swiftly . . . westward."

It was a ten day ride to the appointed meeting place, the Temple of the Seven Spheres. "Late into the night, and in the morning long before sunrise," he was in the saddle.

Through "the fertile fields of Concabar," "among rich gardens watered by fountains from the rock," "over many a cold and desolate pass," "down many a black mountain-gorge," "past Seleucia which Alexander built; across the swirling floods of Tigris and the many channels of Euphrates," he traveled, "until he arrived, at nightfall on the tenth day, beneath the shattered walls of populous Babylon."

But the temple was a three hours' journey still, and his horse Vasda was "almost spent." As they pressed on the horse sighed "with apprehension." There was something wrong. "The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying across the road." He was a poor Hebrew exile, almost dead, in the grip of a deadly fever.

"Should he turn aside, if only for a moment, from the following of the star, to give a cup of cold water to a poor, perishing Hebrew?" "God of truth and purity," he prayed, "direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which only you know."

He brought water from a nearby canal and mixed a potent remedy "which he carried always in his girdle -- for the Magians were physicians." "Hour after hour he labored . . . at last the man's strength returned; he sat up and looked around him."

"I am going to Jerusalem," said Artaban, "in search of the one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer of all men."

"I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought," said the Hebrew, "not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. May the Lord bring you in safety to that place, because you have shown mercy to the sick."

The first beams of the sun cast a long shadow as horse and rider reached the Temple of the Seven Spheres. Artaban could see no trace of his friends. Under a little cairn of broken bricks was "a piece of papyrus." "We have waited past the midnight," it read, "and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert."

"How can I cross the desert," said Artaban, "with no food and with a spent horse? I must return to Babylon, sell my sapphire, and buy a train of camels, and provision for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only God the merciful knows whether I shall not lose the sight of the King because I tarried to show mercy."

Once he purchased camels and supplies for the journey, he set out to the land of the Hebrews. There was the cruel desert. "Arid and inhospitable mountain- ranges," "shifting hills of treacherous sand," "fierce heat" by day, and "bitter, blighting chill" at night. Then the "gardens and orchards of Damascus, watered by the stream of Abana and Pharpar . . . the long, snowy ridge of Hermon . . . the valley of the Jordan, and the blue waters of the Lake of Galilee," **and finally Bethlehem!**

"It was the third day after the three Wise Men had come to that place and had found Mary and Joseph, with the young child, Jesus, and had laid their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh at his feet."

"I shall surely find him," said the Other Wise Man, "though I be alone, and later than my brothers. This is the place of which the Hebrew exile told me that the prophets had spoken, and here I shall behold the rising of the great light."

"The streets . . . seemed deserted . . . From the open door of a cottage he heard the sound of a woman's voice singing softly . . . hushing her baby to rest. She told him of the strangers from the far East who had appeared in the village three days ago, and how they said that a star had guided them to the place where Joseph of Nazareth was lodging with his wife and her new-born child, and how they had paid reverence to the child and given him many rich gifts."

"But," she said, "the travelers disappeared again, as suddenly as they had come. . . . The man of Nazareth took the child and his mother, and fled away that same night secretly . . . Ever since, there has been a spell upon the village; something evil hangs over it. They say the Roman soldiers are coming . . . to force a new tax from us."

As Artaban listened "the child in her arms looked up in his face and smiled . . . It seemed like a greeting of love and trust to one who had journeyed long in loneliness and perplexity, fighting with his own doubts and fears."

The young mother "set food before him . . . Artaban accepted it gratefully; and, as he ate, the child fell into a happy slumber . . . and a great peace filled the room."

Suddenly there was a shout from the street: "The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children." "The young mother's face grew white with terror. She clasped her child to her bosom, and crouched motionless in the darkest corner of the room, covering him with the folds of her robe, lest he should wake and cry."

Artaban "went quickly and stood in the doorway of the house. His broad shoulders filled the portal from side to side, and the peak of his white cap all but touched the lintel."

"The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and dripping swords. At the sight of the stranger in his imposing dress they hesitated with surprise."

"I am all alone in this place," Artaban said, "and I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace."

"He showed the ruby, glistening in the hollow of his hand like a great drop of blood."

"The captain was amazed at the splendor of the gem . . . He stretched out his hand and took the ruby."

"March on!" he cried to his men, "there is no child here. The house is empty."

Artaban prayed, "God of truth, forgive my sin! I have said the thing that is not, to save the life of a child. Two of my gifts are gone. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

"But the voice of the woman, weeping for joy in the shadow behind him, said very gently:

'Because you have saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.'

Artaban traveled on to Egypt "seeking everywhere, [in crowded cities] . . . at the foot of the pyramids . . . [and even looking] up into the face of the crouching Sphinx." He found himself in an obscure house of Alexandria, taking counsel with a Hebrew rabbi.

"The Messiah," read the rabbi from a parchment, "will be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." "Those who seek Him will do well to look among the poor and the lowly, the sorrowful and the oppressed."

And so he traveled from place to place. "He visited the oppressed and the afflicted in the gloom of subterranean prisons, and the crowded wretchedness of slave-markets, and the weary toil of galley-ships."

"Though he found none to worship, he found many to help. He fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and healed the sick, and comforted the captive; and his years passed more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle that flashes back and forth through the loom while the web grows and the pattern is completed."

"Three-and-thirty years of the life of Artaban had passed away, and he was still a pilgrim and a seeker after light. His hair, once darker than the cliffs of Zagros, was now white as the wintry snow that covered them. His eyes, which had once flashed like flames of fire, were dull as embers smoldering among the ashes."

"Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he had come for the last time to Jerusalem. He had often visited the holy city before, and had searched all its lanes and crowded hovels and black prisons without finding any trace of the family of Nazarenes who had fled from Bethlehem

long ago. But now it seemed as if he must make one more effort, and something whispered in his heart that, at last, he might succeed."

"It was the season of the Passover. The city was thronged with foreigners. . . . Artaban joined a group of people from his own country, Parthian Jews who had come up to keep the Passover, and inquired of them the cause of the tumult, and where they were going."

"We are going," they said, "to the place called Golgotha . . . where there is to be an execution. . . . Two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly. . . . Pilate has sent him to the cross because he said that he was the 'King of the Jews.'"

Those words felt strangely familiar to Artaban. They were words that had led him a lifetime over land and sea. And now they came to him like a message of despair. Could it be that the king had arisen, but he had been rejected, and now he was about to die? But he said to himself, "The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men. It may be that I will find the king at last, in the hands of his enemies, and will come in time to offer my pearl for his ransom before he dies."

Just then a troop of soldiers came dragging a young girl down the street. She was, she said, daughter of a merchant of Parthia, but her father was dead, and she was being sold as a slave to pay his debts. "Have pity on me and save me. I am a daughter of the true religion of the Magi. Save me from a fate worse than death!"

Artaban trembled. It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm-in Bethlehem-grove of Babylon and in the cottage in Bethlehem—the conflict between the expectation of faith and the impulse of love. Twice the gift he had consecrated to the worship of religion had been drawn to the service of humanity. This was the third trial, the final and irrevocable choice. Was it his great opportunity or his last temptation? He could not tell. One thing only was clear: it was inevitable. And does not the inevitable come from God? And was not the deed of love what he must do?

He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant, so full of tender, living luster. He laid it in the hand of the slave. "This is your ransom, daughter! It is the last of my treasures which I have kept for the King."

Just then came an earthquake. "The walls of the houses rocked to and fro. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. . . . A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his gray head resting on the young girl's shoulder, and the blood trickling from the wound."

Artaban knew that the quest was over and it had failed. But even in that thought there was peace. It was not resignation or submission. It was something more profound and searching. He knew that all was well. He had done the best that he could from day to day, and been true to the light that had been given him. He knew that even if he could live his life over again, it could not be otherwise than it had been.

"There came a voice through the twilight, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance, in which the notes are clear but the words are lost. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one."

"Then the old man's lips began to move, as if to answer, and she heard him say in the Parthian tongue: 'Not so, my Lord! For when did I see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty, and give you drink? When did I see you an alien and take you in? Or naked, and clothed you? When did I see you sick or in prison, and come to you? Three-and thirty years have I looked for you; but I have never seen your face, nor ministered to you, my King.'"

The sweet voice came again, faint and far away. But now it seemed as though she understood the words:

"Truly I say to you, Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you have done it to me."

"A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain-peak. A long breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips.

His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King."