

The Other Wise Man
Adapted from a story by Henry Van Dyke

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You know the story of the Three Wise Men of the East and how they traveled from far away to offer their gifts at the manger in Bethlehem. But have you ever heard the story of the Other Wise Man, who also saw the star in its rising?

In this story by Henry Van Dyke, we'll hear how great was the desire of this fourth pilgrim in to come and worship the newborn king. And yet, like so many of us even today, what we hope will happen often takes unexpected turns.

This is the story of Artaban, the other wise man, who lived in a far off country among the mountains of Persia. Artaban was a very wise man who studied the prophecies and the stars to untangle the threads of the mystery of life. He believed the ancient words, "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

He and the other magi who lived in different cities saw this very star rising now over in the small country of Israel. As they contacted one another about this strange sight, they agreed to meet up together in Babylon and go by caravan to follow this star. It would lead them to the new born king.

Realizing that this was the most important event in the world, Artaban sold all of his earthly possessions. He bought three precious jewels - a brilliant blue sapphire, a vibrantly red ruby and a luminescent pearl. These fine gems he would give as tribute to the King.

Now the home where Artaban lived was a long way from Babylon. So Artaban gathered up his jewels, what provisions he'd need for the long trip, and set off on his fastest horse, Vasda. Onward and onward he pressed, until he arrived, at nightfall many days later beneath the walls of populous Babylon.

Vasda was almost spent, and Artaban would gladly have turned into the city to find rest and refreshment for himself and for her. But he knew he must continue steadily on to meet his waiting comrades. But suddenly Vasda stood still, quivering in every muscle before a dark object. Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying across the road. With pity Artaban began to minister to the half dead. He gave him water and moistened the sufferer's brow and mouth. He mingled a remedy which he always carried with him and poured it slowly between the colorless lips. Hour after hour he labored as only a skilful healer of disease can do. At last the man's strength returned; he sat up and looked about him.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"I am Artaban, a Magi. I am going in search of the one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer of all. I dare not delay any longer for the caravan that has waited for me may depart without me. But see, here is all I have left of bread and wine and a potion of healing herbs." The Man raised his hand to thank Artaban - and to thank God for this man who saved his life. He asked God to bless Artaban with a safe travel - and that he would find the child in Bethlehem as foretold by the Hebrew prophets.

Artaban and Vasda raced in haste to the Temple of the Seven Spheres. But when they arrived it was close to daybreak. There was no trace of his friends, the other magi. They needed to go without him. Artaban must now follow them across the desert and meet them at the birthplace of the Promised One.

Artaban returned to Babylon, sold his sapphire to buy a train of camels and provision for the onward journey.

On the third day he finally reached his destination - Bethlehem. In great anticipation he began to search for the Holy Child. Yet the streets seemed to be deserted. He could not find his comrades or the child. From the open door of a cottage he heard the sound of a woman's voice singing softly. He knocked on the door. The young mother invited him in as she cradled 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 new-born child. They paid reverence to the child and given him many rich gifts.

But the travelers disappeared again as suddenly as they had come. Then the man of Nazareth took the child and his mother, and also fled away secretly. The young mother laid the baby in its cradle, and rose to set food before Artaban - the plain fare of peasants, but willingly offered, and therefore full of refreshment for the soul as well as for the body. Artaban accepted it gratefully and felt a great peace stir in this place.

But suddenly there came the noise of a wild confusion in the streets of the village, a shrieking and wailing of women's voices, a clashing of swords, and a desperate cry: "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 and crouched motionless in the darkest corner of the room. She covered him with the folds of her robe, lest he should wake and cry.

But Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway of the house. His broad shoulders filled the portal from side to side. The soldiers came down the street clanging swords. At the sight of the stranger in his imposing dress they hesitated with surprise. The captain of the band approached the threshold to thrust him aside. But Artaban did not stir. His face was calm as though he were watching the stars. His steady eyes held the soldier silently for an instant. Artaban said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, 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.

The captain was amazed at the splendor of the gem. The pupils of his eyes expanded and the hard lines of greed wrinkled around his lips. He stretched out his hand and took the ruby.

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

The clamor and the clang of arms passed down the street. Artaban reentered the cottage. He turned his face to the east and prayed, "God of truth forgive my sin. I have said the thing that is not, to save the life of a child, and now two of my gifts for you are gone. I have spent for man that which was meant for God. 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 thee and keep thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

For over thirty years Artaban searched and searched for this King, the promised savior of the world. He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land, and the poor were crying for bread. He found none to worship, but many to help. He fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, and comforted the captives.

Three and thirty years of the life of Artaban passed quickly. He was still a pilgrim and a seeker after the Light. Worn and weary he came for the last time to Jerusalem. It was the season of Passover. The city thronged with strangers. But on this day a singular agitation was visible in the multitude. "What is the cause of all this tumult he asked?"

"We are going," they answered, "to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, where there is to be an execution. Have you not heard what has happened? Two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them, another, called Jesus of Nazareth. This man has done many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly. But the priests and elders have said that he must die because he gave himself out to be the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah."

"Is this the King that I've been searching for?" Artaban followed the multitude with slow and painful steps toward the outskirts of the city. Just beyond the entrance of the guardhouse a troop of Macedonian soldiers came down the street, dragging a young girl with torn dress and disheveled hair. As the Wise Man paused to look at her with compassion, she broke suddenly from the hands of her tormentors, and threw herself down at his feet.

"Have pity on me," She cried, "and save me, for the sake of the God of Purity. I am a daughter of a Magi. But my father is dead and I am seized to be sold as a slave. Save me from a life worse than death!"

Artaban trembled. It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm grove in Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem, the conflict between the expectation of faith and the impulse of love. Twice the gift which he had consecrated to the Christ child had been drawn to the service of humanity. This was the third trial, the ultimate choice.

Was this his great opportunity, or his last temptation? He could not tell. One thing only was clear in the darkness of his mind. He was the only one who could rescue this helpless girl. He took the pearl that looked so luminous, so radiant. He placed it in the hand of the young woman.

"This is your ransom, daughter! It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King."

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky deepened, and shuddering tremors ran through the earth. The wall of the houses rocked to and fro. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. Dust clouds filled the air. The soldiers fled in terror. One more lingering pulsation of the earthquake quivered throughout the ground. A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the Wise Man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his gray head resting on the young girl's shoulder. The blood trickled.

As she bent over him, 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, but saw no one.

Then the old man's lips began to move, as if in answer, "Not so, my Lord! For when did I see you hungry and fed you? Or thirsty and gave you drink? When did I see you a stranger and took you in? When did I see you sick or in prison and came unto you? For thirty three years I have looked for you, but I have never seen your face or ministered to you, my good King."

Artaban ceased and the sweet voice came again. And now the maid heard it say, "Truly I say unto you. Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto 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. He knew that his quest was ended. His treasures were accepted after all by the One who came to save the world. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

Amen