

The Other Wise Man, by Henry Van Dyke

In the days when Augustus Caesar was the ruler of many kings including Herod, who reigned in Jerusalem, there lived among the mountains of Persia a certain man named Artaban.

Artaban was one of the Magi, men who studied the stars to learn the truth about God. He and three of his friends, Caspar, Melchoir, and Balthazar had made a wonderful discovery. In ancient writings they had found a promise that at a special time a beautiful new star would rise in the sky, and at the rising of the star a great King would be born. He would be the Truth sent from the One God...the Son of the most High.

Artaban believed the time was near so he sold his house and all his possessions to buy three jewels as gifts for the new King. He had bought a sapphire as blue as the Persian night sky, a ruby as red as the first rays of sunrise, and a pearl as pure and white as the snowcapped mountains at twilight.

Each night he spent watching the night sky until at last! Could that be it?! There in the distant horizon at first it looked like a tiny spark, but it grew larger as it rose into the sky. First blue, then red, then at last a bright gleaming white light.

Artaban exclaimed "it is the sign! The king is coming and I will go meet him!"

With haste Artaban gathered some food and provisions for the journey. He had arranged to meet Caspar, Melchoir, and Balthazar at the temple in Babylon by midnight ten days from when the star would rise...he could not be late.

Artaban saddled Vasda, his fastest horse, and rode off into the night.

For ten days he rode over grassy hills, through lush valleys, climbing mountains, and crossing rivers barely pausing for food or rest.

On the tenth day with Vasda nearly exhausted Artaban knew they were only a few hours from Babylon when something startled Vasda. Artaban dismounted to find the body of a man in the road. Artaban turned to leave when there was a groan and a tug at his robe...the man was alive!

Artaban knew that without help this man would not survive the night, but if he paused he would surely miss his friends.

Artaban looked up at the star he had been following, "O God of Truth and Light, show me the way of wisdom which only You know."

And with that Artaban knew what he must do. Hour after hour nursed the man back to health giving him sips of water and medicine made up of herbs he carried with him.

When at last the man was strong enough the man told him, "I have nothing with which to repay you, but I will tell you this, from our prophets we have learned that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, not in Jerusalem, and that is where you must seek Him."

And with the Hebrew's blessing Artaban rode off reaching Babylon at the first light of dawn. Artaban's friends were gone, but under a brick at the foot of the temple he found a note, "We have waited 'til past midnight and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert."

Worn and exhausted Artaban knew that Vasda could not cross the desert. Reluctantly he sold the sapphire and with it bought a camel and provisions for the journey.

Week after week, month after month Artaban crossed the desert always following the star, always hoping to catch up with his friends, always praying that he would find the King.

Finally he came to Bethlehem. Searching the town he found a stone cottage with a young woman rocking her baby. Could this be the child he was looking for?! No, but she fed him and talked with him. Yes there had been strangers here and they brought odd gifts with them to Joseph and Mary and their son. But just as quickly as the strangers came, they left. And then Joseph and his family left in the night. No one knows why, but rumor has it that they went to Egypt.

Suddenly there was an uproar in the streets! Screams and shouts, swords clashing! Women crying out, "The soldiers! Herod's soldiers! They're killing our children!"

Artaban wasted no time. He motioned for the woman and her baby to hide and then he stood in the doorway. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ruby. When the Captain of the guard approached Artaban said simply, "I am here alone, and I have this gem for any soldier who will leave me in peace." Greedily the man snatched up the ruby and told the soldiers to march on.

Artaban looked again into the night sky, "O God of Truth, forgive me for telling that which was not true to save the life of a child and for once again giving to another a gift that was meant only for you. Will I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

In the morning Artaban rode off towards Egypt. He saw the pyramids and the Nile always searching. He found many to serve, but none to worship. For 33 years he searched until at last his body was old and tired and he thought to return one last time to Jerusalem in hopes of finding his King.

When he arrived, the city was busy preparing for Passover, but there was something more to the crowded streets with pushing and shouting. When he asked what was going on he was told, "Have you not heard? Two thieves are to be crucified and with them a man, Jesus of Nazareth, some say he is the Son of God, he is to be executed because He said that He was the King of the Jews."

Artaban's heart raced. Could this be? Could this be the King he had searched for all these years? Then he felt the pearl in his pocket. Maybe, just maybe he could offer the pearl to the enemies of the King and rescue Him!

Artaban turned to find Him when soldiers crossed his path. They were dragging a young girl. She was dirty, her hair was tangled, her dress was torn. She called out to him, "Help me kind sir! My father died owing a large sum of money, I am being sold as a slave to pay his debt. Save me from a life worse than death!"

Artaban had missed his king twice already because of helping someone in trouble. But helping this girl would be a true act of love, and wasn't that what this God was about?

Artaban placed the pearl in the hand of the girl, "This is your ransom, child." Then all at once the sky turned black, thunder rolled through the streets. The soldiers ran off as the buildings began to sway back and forth.

Suddenly a piece of tile from a roof fell and struck Artaban on the temple, he fell, bleeding. As the girl sat holding him she couldn't see who he was talking to, but she heard him speak out in his Persian language, "When Lord? When did I see you hungry and feed you? Or Thirsty and give you drink? When did I see you naked and clothe you? Or sick and in prison and visit you? I have searched for you thirty-three years, and I have never seen your face."

And then the girl heard the voice, gentle, but strong. "Whenever you served any of my children, you served me.

And then with a great peace, the other wise man found his King.