

The Other Wise Man

In 1895, a man named Henry Van Dyke published a slim volume entitled, *The Story of the Other Wise Man*. It's an interesting and rather wonderful tale about a fourth wise man, who didn't quite make it to the manger with the other three. This morning, I'd like to share this story with you, considerably condensed and stripped of some of its excessively florid Victorian prose. As you hear the story of the "Other Wise Man," listen for how it brings together both our readings from Matthew—the reading for today, New Year's Day, and the reading for the Feast of the Epiphany, this coming Thursday. (Van Dyke's prose is in italics.)

In the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod reigned in Jerusalem, there lived in the city of Ecbatana, among the mountains of Persia, a certain man named Artaban. Artaban is a magus, or wiseman, and, on a late September night, he waits at his home for the arrival of a group of friends. He stands in the doorway to greet his guests, who are all followers of the Persian prophet, Zoroaster. After they have gathered around a flame on a small altar, Artaban addresses them, saying,

"You have come tonight . . . at my call, as the faithful scholars of Zoroaster, to renew your worship and rekindle your faith in the God of Purity, even as this fire has been rekindled on the altar. We worship not the fire, but Him of whom it is the chosen symbol, because it is the purest of all chosen things. It speaks to us of one who is Light and Truth."

He tells them that he has been searching the stars, looking for signs of the fulfillment of an old prophecy that a man of great light would come into the world, who would *make life everlasting, incorruptible, and immortal . . .* Artaban says, *"It has been shown to me and to my three companions among the Magi, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar."* The time is now, and the place is in the land of the Hebrews. Artaban tells his friends that he is about to leave for Babylonia to meet the other three and to travel with them to Jerusalem.

"I have made ready for the journey. I have sold my house and my possessions, and brought these three jewels—a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl—to carry them as tribute to the King. And I ask you to go with me on the pilgrimage, that we may have joy together in finding the Prince who is worthy to be served."

But, one by one, his friends express their doubt and their unwillingness, so, in the end, Artaban sets off alone. He has to ride wisely and well to keep his appointed date with the other magi, and so he *pressed onward until he arrived, at nightfall of the tenth day, beneath the shattered walls of . . . Babylon. His horse, Vasda, was almost spent . . . but he knew that it was three hours' journey yet . . . So he did not halt, but rode steadily across the stubble fields.*

But as they rode through a grove of date palms, Vasda slackened her pace and then stopped, before a dark object in the shadow of the last palm-tree. Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying across the road. His humble dress and the outline of his haggard face showed that he was probably one of the poor Hebrew exiles who still dwelt in great numbers in the vicinity. . . The chill of death was in his lean hand, and, as Artaban released it, the arm fell back inertly upon the motionless breast. . . But, as he turned, a long faint, ghostly sigh came from the man's lips. . .

Artaban's heart leaped to his throat, not with fear, but with . . . resentment . . . at this delay. How could he stay here in the darkness to minister to a dying stranger? What claim had this unknown fragment of human life upon his compassion or his service? If he lingered but for an hour he could hardly reach [the meeting place]at the appointed time. His companions would think he had given up the journey. They would go without him. He would lose his quest. But if he went on now, the man would surely die. If he stayed, life might be restored. . . Should he risk the great reward of his divine faith for the sake of a single deed of human love? 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 Thou only knowest.” Then he turned back to the sick man. . . He brought water from one of the small canals near by, and moistened the sufferer's brow and mouth. He mingled a draught of one of those simple but potent remedies which he carried always . . . for the Magians were physicians as well as astrologers— and poured it slowly between the colourless lips. Hour after hour he labored as only a skilful healer of disease can do; and, at last, the man's strength returned; he sat up and looked about him. “Who are you?” he asks Artaban, “and why have you sought me here to bring back my life?” “I am Artaban, the Magian . . . and I am going to Jerusalem in search of one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer for all men.”

Artaban tells the man that he can delay no longer. He gives him all he has left of his bread and wine, and a healing potion of herbs. As he is leaving, the Hebrew asks God to bless Artaban, and says, “. . . I have nothing to give you in return— only this: that I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought. For our prophets have said that he should be born not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem of Judah. May the Lord bring you in safety to that place, because you have had pity upon the sick.”

When Artaban reaches the meeting place, his friends have gone. At the edge of the terrace, he finds a little cairn of broken bricks, and under them a piece of parchment. He catches it up and reads: *“We have waited past the midnight, and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert.”* Artaban sat down upon the ground and covered his head in despair. *“How can I cross the desert . . . 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.”*

Eventually, Artaban does reach Bethlehem, but he finds the town strangely deserted. He can't find anyone to ask about his friends, until he hears, through the open door of a low stone cottage, the sound of a woman's voice softly singing. *He entered and found a young mother hushing her baby to rest. She told him of the strangers from the far East who 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 the travelers disappeared again,” she continued, “as suddenly as they had come. We were afraid at the strangeness of their visit. We could not understand it. The man of Nazareth took the babe and his mother and fled away that same night secretly, and it was whispered that they were going far away to Egypt. Ever since, there has been a spell upon the village; something evil hangs over it. They say that the Roman soldiers are coming from Jerusalem to force a new tax from us, and the men have driven the flocks and herds far back among the hills, and hidden themselves to escape it.”

As the mother tells this story, the child in her arms looks up at him and smiles, reaching out to grasp the winged circle of gold on his breast, worn by followers of Zoroaster. The young mother puts the baby in its cradle and offers Artaban a simple meal, which he accepts gratefully. *But suddenly there came a noise of a wild confusion and uproar in the streets of the village, a shrieking and wailing of women's voices, a clangor of brazen trumpets and 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 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. But 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. The captain of the band approached the threshold to thrust him aside. But Artaban did not stir. His face was as calm as though he were watching the stars . . . He held the soldier silently for an instant, and then 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 like a great drop of blood. The captain was amazed at the splendour of the gem. The pupils of his eyes expanded with desire, and the hard lines of greed wrinkled around his lips. He stretched out his hand and took the ruby. “March on!” he cried to his men, “there is no child here. The house is still.”

As Artaban reenters the cottage, he turns to the east in prayer: *“God of truth, forgive my sin! I have said the thing that is not, to save the life of a child. And two of my gifts 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 thou hast saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace.”

Artaban continues on to Egypt and beyond, searching for signs of the little family from Bethlehem. *He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land, and the poor were crying for bread. He made his dwelling in plague-stricken cities where the sick were languishing in the bitter companionship of helpless misery. 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. In all this populous and intricate world of anguish, 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 went by more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle that flashes back and forth through the loom while the web grows and the invisible 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. . . Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he had come for the last time to Jerusalem. It was the season of Passover. The city was thronged with strangers. . . But on this day there was a singular agitation visible in the multitude. . .

Artaban joins a group of Parthian Jews, from his own country, and asks them what is going on. *“We are going to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, 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. But the priests and elders have said that he must die, because he gave himself out to be the Son of God. And Pilate has sent him to the cross because he said that he was the ‘King of the Jews.’”*

How strangely these familiar words fell upon [his tired heart]. They had led him for a lifetime over land and sea. And now they came to him darkly and mysteriously like a message of despair. The King had arisen, but he had been denied and cast out. He was about to perish. . . But then Artaban thinks, “The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men . . .” Perhaps he has found the King just in time to offer the pearl— his only remaining treasure— for the King's ransom before he, Artaban, dies.

Artaban joins the multitude heading for Golgotha. But then a troop of Macedonian soldiers comes down the street, *dragging a young girl with torn dress and dishevelled hair.* Seeing Artaban, she breaks loose and throws herself at his feet. She is a Parthian, seized for her dead father's debts, and about to be sold as a slave. Recognizing him, by his dress, as a follower of her God, she pleads with him to save her. Once again, he is asked to choose between saving his gift for the King or using it in the service of humanity. *Was it his great opportunity, or his last temptation? He could not tell. One thing only was sure to his divided heart— to rescue this helpless girl would be a true deed of love. And is not love the light of the soul?*

Artaban gives up his pearl to save the young woman. At that moment, the sky darkens and the ground reels. Artaban and the girl he has ransomed crouch by a wall. But he is not afraid. *What had he to fear? What had he to live for? He had given away the last remnant of his tribute for the King. He had parted with the last hope of finding Him. The quest was over, and it had failed. But, even in that thought, accepted and embraced, there was peace. It was not resignation. It was not submission. It was something more profound and searching. He knew that all was well, because he had done the best that he could, from day to day. He had been true to the light that had been given to him. He had looked for more. And if he had not found it, if a failure was all that came out of his life, doubtless that was the best that was possible. He had not seen the revelation of "life everlasting, incorruptible and immortal," But he knew that even if he could live his earthly life over again, it could not be otherwise than it had been.*

A last pulsation of the earthquake brings down a heavy roof tile, which strikes Artaban on the head. He lies, breathless and pale, with his head resting on the young girl's shoulder. *As she bent over him, fearing that he was dead, 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.*

Suddenly, the old man's lips begin to move, and the girl hears him saying, *"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 take you in? Or naked and clothe 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." He ceased, and the sweet voice came again. . . But now it seemed as though she understood the words: "Verily I say unto thee, inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast 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. One long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The other Wise Man had found the King.

Amen.