

THE OTHER WISE MAN

Abridged from the story by Henry van Dyke.
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In the days when Herod reigned in Jerusalem, there lived in Persia a man name Artaban. One evening he stood by the doorway to greet his nine friends. "Welcome!" he said; "welcome, peace be with you.

Then he and his companions sang a hymn. Then he told them:

"My three companions among the Magi - Caspa, Melchior and Balthazar have seen a new star which shone for one night and then vanished. They are watching by the ancient Temple, at Borsippa in Babylonia, and I am watching here. If the star shines again, they will wait ten days for me at the temple, and then we shall set out together for Jerusalem, to see and worship the promised one who shall be born King of Israel. I have sold my possessions and bought these three jewels – a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl to carry them as tributes to the King. And I ask you to go with me on the pilgrimage. They all declined his offer. Artaban went on to the terrace on the roof. The sky was clear. As Artaban watched, a star shone out of the darkness. He bowed his head. "It is a sign", he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him".

The wise man mounted his horse and rode swiftly westward. He arrived, at nightfall on the tenth day, outside the walls of Babylon.

He paused before a dark object in the shadow of a palm-tree and dismounted. He discovered a man lying at the roadside. His skin, dry and yellow as parchment, bore the mark of fever. He turned away with a thought of pity. But as he turned, a faint sigh came from the man's lips. The bony fingers gripped the hem of his robe

and held him fast. Artaban's heart leaped to his throat, not with fear but with resentment at his delay.

Then he turned back to the sick man. He brought water and moistened the sufferer's brow and mouth. He gave a remedy, which he always carried. At last the man's strength returned; he sat up and looked about him. "Who are you?" he said, "and why have you brought me back to life?"

"I am Artaban, and I am going to Jerusalem in search of one who is to be born King of the Jews. The Jew raised his trembling hand solemnly to heaven. "I have nothing to give you in return only this - I can tell you the Messiah must be sought not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem of Judah". Artaban rode in haste but upon arrival there was no sign of the caravan of the magi, He found a note under a pile of stones: Follow us across the desert". He had to sell his sapphire to make camel and food provision for the desert journey. He crossed it and came to Bethlehem on the third day after the magi had found Mary and Joseph, with the young child Jesus, and had laid their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh at his feet.

Artaban was weary, but full of hope. He had his ruby and his pearl to offer to the King. Through the open door of a house he heard the sound of a woman's voice singing softly. He entered and found a young mother hushing her baby to rest. She had met the Magi 3 days before and said: "we heard that the man of Nazareth took the child and his mother, and have fled to Egypt". The young mother laid the baby in its cradle and rose to give him food. Artaban accepted it gratefully; and a great peace filled the room. But suddenly there came the noise of a wild confusion in the streets of the village - a wailing of women's voices, and a clashing of swords, and a desperate cry: "The soldiers, the soldiers of Herod. They are

killing our children". 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 streets with bloody hands and dripping swords. At the sight of the stranger they hesitated. 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 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 splendour of the stone. He stretched out his hand and took it. "March on!" he cried to his men, "There is no child here. The house is empty". They passed down the street. Artaban re-entered the cottage. He turned his face to the east and prayed:

"God of truth forgive my sin. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

Artaban went to Egypt and took counsel with a Hebrew rabbi. "Remember, my son - the King whom you seek is not to be found in a palace, nor among the rich and powerful".

He journeyed on. Three-and-thirty years of the life of Artaban passed away, and he was still a pilgrim and a seeker after the light. Still looking for the King, he came for the last time to Jerusalem. It was the season of the Passover. The sky was dark. Thousands of people passed along the street that led to the Damascus gate. Artaban joined a group from his own country, and asked "Where are you going?" They answered, "to a 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. Artaban thought... could it be the same who had been born in Bethlehem thirty-three years ago, at whose birth the stars appeared in heaven, and of whose coming the prophets had spoken? Just beyond the entrance of the guardhouse a troop of soldiers came down the street, dragging a young girl. As he paused to look at her with compassion, she broke suddenly from the hands of her tormentors and threw herself at his feet, clasping him around the knees. "Have pity on me", she cried, "and save me, for the sake of the God of Purity. I also am a daughter of the true religion. My father is dead, and I am seized for his debts to be sold as a slave. Save me from worse than death". Artaban trembled. Was it his great opportunity, or his last temptation? He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so full of light. He laid it in the hand of the slave.

"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 the earth shook. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. Dust clouds filled the air. The soldiers fled in terror. But Artaban and the girl crouched beneath the wall. He had now given away the last of his tributes for the King. The quest was over, and he had failed! But even in this thought there was peace. A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on his temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his grey head resting on the young girl's shoulder, and the blood trickling from the wound. As she bent over him, there came a voice, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance. 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 in answer, and she heard him say:

"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.

"I say to you, in as much as you have done it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me".

Wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban. A breath of relief came gently from his lips. His journey was ended His treasures were accepted. Another wise man had found the King!