

THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH

THE SIMPLE CHRISTIAN STORY AS FOUND IN THE BIBLE.

'T WAS TOLD ALL TOO BRIEFLY

The Short Story, however, contained the Means of the World's Regeneration—Rev. Dr. Talmage Treats the Event So as to Apply Some of Its Beneficent Teachings to the Practicalities of Everyday Life.

Entered according to Act of Parliament in Canada, in the year 1908, by William Baily, of Toronto, at the Dept. of Agriculture, Ottawa.

Chicago, Dec. 20.—In this sermon the story of the magi's quest receives a new setting and the lesson of Christian hope and encouragement is drawn from their experience. The text is Matthew ii., 1. "Behold, there came wise men from the east!"

When, in 596 A. D., St. Augustine was sent to convert the British Isles to Christianity, Pope Gregory commanded his missionary as far as possible to harmonize the Christian ordinances with the heathen feasts. The result is that many of the customs associated with Christmas have their origin not in the birth of Christ, but in heathen festivities. It is my purpose to-day to tell the simple Christian story, as found in the Bible, and to apply some of its beneficent teachings to the practicalities of everyday life.

The account of Christ's birth is not only simply told, but very briefly told. Some of us are apt to think too briefly. We would like to have known all the details of that wondrous event which is destined to transform the world. We deplore the loss of any fact relating to our Lord. But the historians would not have us concern ourselves with the accessories of the picture, but with that glorious life and death in which our eternal destiny is bound up. They briefly state the main facts and proceed to the narrative so momentous to the whole world.

The account of Jesus' birth is about as simply told as the record of her baby's advent which a fond mother writes in the family Bible. "Gertrude, or Jane, or Mary; born June 8, 1888." A dozen verses in all more than contain the simple story of Christ's birth. The second chapter of Matthew's gospel runs like this: "Now, when Jesus was born, in the days of Herod the King." In the east they did not reckon time so much by the year as by the time this or that king sat upon his throne.

Then the simple account of the nativity goes a step further. Christ's birth is hardly ever mentioned without an associate statement. When Jesus was born there was a year the wise men came from the east, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him." The magi have been the theme for many an artist's brush, poet's song, as well as minister's sermon. If in the short account of the nativity it was important enough to note the visit of these wise men, surely it will not be wasted time for us in a Christmas discourse to consider who were the wise men, from whence they came, what they did when they knelt and worshiped at the manger, where they went after they had seen the newborn Christ.

Who were the magi? They were the wise men. They were not fools, not ignoramuses, not silly star gazers. They were not tramps going from place to place because they were too lazy to work. They were the intellectual giants of the east. They were such intellectual giants that when they appeared in Jerusalem they startled all the sages of the Herodian era with their grasp of affairs and mental power. They belonged to a class that was the repository of all the scientific knowledge of the time. They were the observers of natural phenomena, the philosophers of their day, the leaders in the world of mind. When Matthew described them as "wise men" he knew that the description would be clearly understood as applying to men whose erudition and mental ability placed them among the aristocracy of knowledge.

Professor Sandv in his "Christmas-tide" gives a strange legend. He writes that the number of these wise men who came from the east was three. He writes that the first of

these magi was a very old man, with a long, white beard. His face was wrinkled with thought, and his limbs were tottering. His name was Melchior. The second was a very young man. His cheek was smooth and ruddy, his step firm and athletic, his arm strong and powerful. Yet his mind was clear as his searching eye. His name was Caspar. Truly he was a prince among men! The third sage was a middle-aged Moor called Balthazar. In his hair and beard was the blackness of the midnight. The muscles stood out in knots upon his swarthy neck. The legend declares that these three men followed the guidings of a huge bird, whose one eye glittered like a monster star. But whether the sages were three or five or ten, whether their names were Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar, whether the star in the east was the monster eye of a huge eagle or no, whether there is any truth among the many legends that are told about these noted travelers, this fact is certain—they were wise men. The Bible distinctly states that "there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem," saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?"

Where did the wise men come from? The far east? The word "east" is very indefinite. It might mean eastern Asia or China. It might and probably does mean Persia or India. At all events, the east was far off. It was so far off that these strange travelers must have startled the inhabitants of the western capital with their peculiar garb and their foreign accent. It was so far off that in all probability the wise men would have been unable to find the Jerusalem capital had they not been led by that wonderful star, the star of the east. Ah, yes, the magi, in order to find the manger, had many a weary day's marching. Traveling in their time had to be done on foot or on horse or camel back. They had to tramp through the parched deserts. They had to climb the loftiest of mountains and fathom many a deep valley. How tired they must have become! If Melchior was old in all probability he would never have reached the manger but for the strong arms of his two friends. But wherever the three wise men hailed from, that gleaming star would beckon them on and on and on.

Oh, that to-day we might see a great emigration from the faroff land of sin toward the manger. Oh, that to-day the prodigals in the far country might seek the old homestead of mercy, even as the Bethlehem caravan was sought of old. In imagination we can picture how the wise men started. Perhaps weeks, perhaps months before that first of all Christ-masses these Oriental sages were working diligently at their allotted tasks. One is studying in one part of the house, another in another and the third in still another. Perhaps Melchior, the aged astrologer, with an astronomical glass is silently and earnestly studying the heavens. Evidently the aged scientist is watching and waiting for the stars to change their relative positions. Suddenly a tremor of excitement shakes his frame. Silently, swiftly, awfully, dimly, there passes before the lens a strange light. It does not look so much like a star as a great orb of light, like a diamond glittering upon the finger of God, beckoning, always beckoning. In great excitement the old man staggers to his feet and calls his two companions, Caspar, the smooth-faced sage, rushes quickly into the room because he is younger than the swarthy middle-aged Moor. At first the three say nothing. They are too absorbed to speak. Then Balthazar opens a musty parchment written hundreds of years before, and begins to read from the Hebrew prophet Micah: "But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." "Yes," answered the old man Melchior, "that reminds me of another passage from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah: 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of peace.'" "Yes," may have answered the poetic young sage, Caspar, "that reminds me of what the Hebrew psalmist wrote, 'Thou art my son, I, I come; in the volume it is written of me.'" "Come, comrades, they shout to each

other, "Come, the star is beckoning us. Come! Come!" And they leave their instruments and their manuscripts and set out on their journey. Would that before the dawn of next Christmas many exiles from Christ might start and take this journey with the wise men! Would that all who are lost in the mountains of sin might leave behind their dead selves and seek the manger, which is afar off in the land of purity and love.

What did the wise men do when they found the manger? They knelt and worshiped. Yes, but more than that. They gave their presents, because, from time immemorial, the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh have always been suggestive symbols in worship. It is one act to bow at the manger; it is another act to give yourself as an offering to Christ. The motive which prompts the Christmas gifts is of more importance than the intrinsic value of the gifts themselves. I was never more impressed with this fact than by an incident which happened in my life many years ago. I was at that time a college student and had been for some months during the summer vacation preaching in a little Pennsylvania church thirteen miles away from the nearest railroad. I loved those old Pike county farmers for their honesty, sincerity and genuine piety, which I have never seen surpassed in any congregation. Not only did I love them, but I also respected their intellectuality. I think in reference to the size of my audience, I spoke there proportionately as much brain as I ever addressed in a metropolitan audience.

Well, the last sermon had been delivered, and it was time for me to go back to my studies. I was feeling very depressed at leaving the people. A drenching, heavy rainfall was adding to my gloom. I paced up and down the farmer's porch waiting for the little stage to take me to the depot. It was truly a minister's "blue Monday." As I was walking up and down, thinking how I had entered into the lives of these people and they into mine, I saw a big, awkward, gawky countryman coming down the muddy road. He stood about six feet one. The bottom of his pantaloons hardly reached the top of his shoes. He seemed to be all hands and legs and feet. He came up to the garden gate. He hesitated a moment and then was passing on.

I thought the man wanted to come and speak to me. I called: "Hello, So-and-so! Are you not coming in to bid me goodbye?" He opened the gate and came up the path. Then, dripping with rain, he stood first upon one foot and then upon the other. Then he said: "Mr. Talmage, I did want to come and say goodbye. You do not know how much you have been to me and my wife since the baby died. And, sir, as you are going away, I wanted to make you a present to show our love. As we are poor folks I could not give much, so we have picked two big apples to give you two of the biggest apples we have grown in our orchard. And here they are, sir. Goodbye, God bless you, sir. Goodbye." Well, my friends, I am not sentimental, but as that countryman turned and disappeared down the muddy road he left me crying like a child. I did not

value the apples for their intrinsic worth. I valued the affection which was the incentive of the couple who gave those apples to me. And I valued those two big apples so highly that I carried them home to Brooklyn to show them to my father and mother, when I told them the simple story of that countryman's love. So it is that the risen and glorified Christ, who once laid a helpless babe in that manger, values the gifts you bring to him. Below and beyond the gift itself he sees the motive that prompts it.

Where did the wise men go after they had seen the infant Christ and rendered their homage at the manger? Why, the Bible tells us explicitly they went back home. God spoke to them, he spoke to the hearts of many who have bowed at the manger, and they went back to their own country. History is silent about their later lives, but we cannot think that they would ever forget that strange experience. No man comes in contact with Christ without results. He probably thought of him as a world conqueror and bade his disciples expect to hear of his victories. Little could they have imagined the extent of his Empire or understand how, through the cross, he would attain his crown.

What is the simple deduction of this thought and lesson? If it is not this: After you and I have worshipped at the manger, in the full light of our later day, then we should everywhere, but first among our own people, tell the news, the glorious news, that Jesus, the Son of God, has been born. We must tell it to our children. We must tell it to our brothers and sisters. We must tell it to our parents and to all our friends and neighbors. "Behold, Jesus has been born! Jesus, our Saviour has been born! He lives! He lives! Jesus, the Son of Mary, lives! Jesus, the Son of God, lives!"

Thus our mission on this Christmas Day is to seek the manger and while we study its lessons and meditate on its humiliation to practice the sweet teachings of Jesus Christ, which cannot better be summed up than by briefly repeating one of the most beautiful of all Christmas stories. It is that written by Henry Van Dyke. It is appropriately called, "The Other Wise Man." Dr. Van Dyke wrote the story in great pain. It was the year his father died and a year of much physical suffering. One night while lying awake, unable to sleep and tossing upon his bed, he began to think of the legends clustering about the "three wise men." Then there came to him a vision of a "fourth wise man," who had the gentle name of Artaban. The abbreviation of the whole story is this: When the star appeared in the east, four magi felt that they must put their household goods in order before they took their journey. They decided to meet at a certain place at a certain time upon the edge of the

great desert. Artaban made ready for his journey by selling his house and worldly goods and buying three beautiful gems which he could carry—namely, a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl. On his way to meet his appointment Artaban came across a poor beggar who was dying, a beggar who had no friends, a beggar who was dying alone. After nursing the poor beggar until he died Artaban hurried on to meet his appointment, but the three magi had already gone. The other wise man had to retrace his steps, sell one of his gems, his sapphire, and buy a train of camels to make the journey alone.

The next scene in the story of "The Other Wise Man" is found in the village of Bethlehem. Jesus had been born, and the three magi had disappeared. As Artaban entered the village he heard the tramp of bloody Herod's troops, who had come to massacre all the male children in Judaea, with the hope of slaying the infant Christ. A poor woman rushes out, pleading for the rescue of her child. The young mother's face grew white with terror at the cry: "The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!" When a captain of Herod's troops wanted to enter this woman's house to slay her child Artaban stood in the doorway and offered to the murderous soldiers his second gem, the beautiful ruby, if he would save the child. Now two-thirds of Artaban's fortune was gone, and still he had not found Christ.

Then Artaban started on a journey to Egypt to find Jesus. He journeyed for him everywhere until he was a very old man. One day, in his wanderings to find the Saviour, he headed back to the city of Jerusalem. The capital of David was in great excitement. There was to be a public crucifixion of three criminals—two thieves and one a political prisoner, Jesus by name. As Artaban entered the city he saw a young girl in great distress. She was to be sold as a slave for debt. She broke loose from her captors and flung herself at his feet, begging for deliverance. Artaban gave his last gem, the beautiful pearl, for her rescue. And now all his money was gone. He was now an old man, and still he had not found Christ.

Just then the darkness of crucifixion began to gather around the cross and to settle over the temple. When the awful earthquake came, a heavy tile slipped from one of the houses' roof and fell upon the old man's head. But as he was dying a strange spirit appeared before Artaban and practically said: "Thou, O noble man, thou hast seen me all these years. 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." If the Christian living to-day cannot belong to the first group that started for the manger, if he cannot be Melchior, Caspar or Balthazar, perhaps he may belong to the second caravan. He may be Artaban. He may be the "other wise man." He may soon—aye, very soon—see his Christ face to face. He may see him before even another Christmas Day rolls around. He may see him to part from him again never through all eternity.

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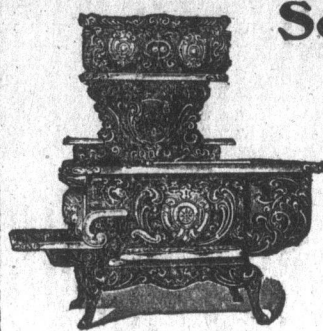
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