

*THE WISE MEN.*

IT is a singular story, this of the Wise Men ; it is related by only one evangelist ; its facts have about them the rhythm of poetry and the strangeness of romance ; yet it so perfectly fits in with the other draperies of the Advent, and with our view of the proprieties, that if it had been wanting, we should have instinctively felt as if a chapter of the story had been lost. But we have not to mourn a lost chord in the music ; for St. Matthew has caught the " grand Amen," and given it a place at the very beginning of the New Testament. And yet what an air of mystery and of vagueness there is about it ! Who the chief actors are we are not told. They appear upon the stage ; they play their part in this Epiphany, and then they disappear in the oblivion and silence out of which they emerged. The Evangelist does not even stop to individualize, but groups them anonymously in the plural noun, the " Magi." Whence they came we cannot tell, except in a sort of conjectural way ; though their gifts of frankincense and myrrh would almost point to Arabia, where these herbs are indigenous. This, too, would almost be a literal fulfilment of the ancient prophecy, how they " of Sheba and Seba should offer gifts" ; but apart from this we have no certain clue to their nationality, any more than to their names. But if we may not read their history, or hear the accents of their speech, we can tell somewhat of their position and their character. That they were Gentiles both tradition and exposition allow ; and that they were men of intelligence and affluence we may easily detect if we read between the lines. Whether kings or not, they come in a royal way ; probably with a considerable retinue, and certainly with costly presents ; while the commotion into which Jerusalem is thrown by their presence and their strange questions—for the tides of

excitement went flooding streets and bazaars, breaking with suppressed thunders within the palace itself—shows that they were no common travellers, like those who brought the perfumes of Araby to their markets and fairs.

But if we may not read their names or their nationality—these are mere outward accidents that may easily be omitted—the Scripture does lift in part the veil that drapes them, giving us bright glimpses into their inner life, so that we may read their soul, hearing their very thoughts and aspirations. Evidently they were God-fearing men,—men whose eyes and hearts were set heavenward, reading the stars, listening for voices in the silences of the sky, and watching for the signalings of Providence. They were some of heaven's "outside saints"; nameless indeed to us, but not nameless in the Book of Life; members of that invisible communion, who, beyond the pale of Judaism, "feared God and worked righteousness." Nay, it would almost seem as if these men in a certain sense were favourites of heaven; for God speaks to them in direct revelations, warning them in visions of the night, and guiding them by a star. What the star was we cannot say with certainty. Some would explain it in a natural way, that it was nothing more than a remarkable conjunction of heavenly bodies; and Astronomy, reading backward through the centuries, says that there was such a remarkable conjunction about that time in the Zodiac sign of the Pisces. But such an explanation of the star is scarcely in harmony with the probabilities of the case; for any conjunction of the heavenly bodies, however remarkable, would have been fixed and regular in its appearance, and once vanishing, it would not reappear. This star, however, appears in their western sky, sets them on their journey, and then leaves them—as the tense of the verb "we saw His star" would imply. It certainly had vanished in Jerusalem, reappearing, however, as they journeyed towards Bethlehem, and hovering over the very house of the

new-born Christ, as no constellation could by any possibility be made to do except by miracle. And so probably the star was some supernatural light, possibly appearing to their vision only; and heaven, we may be sure, would never lend its lamp except to heavenly-minded, heavenly-hearted men.

But how came they to read so correctly the phenomenon of the star? How came they to know that it was the herald of a birth, a royal birth too, of One who was destined to be King? The same light might have shone for others and have been all meaningless to their vacant stare. It would have spoken in an unknown tongue; and though it had caught celestial accents, it would have been nothing more, in the truths it conveyed, than the spark of a glow-worm, or the dance of some *ignis fatuus* of the bog. The star could only speak into hearts that were prepared, ears that were trained to listening and interpreting. As the plate of the photographer must first be made sensitive to the light, before it can receive and retain the fugitive vision that plays before it, so the hearts of these strangers must have been made sensitive, susceptible to the heavenly vision. That is, there must have been a light in the heart or the light in the sky had been of no use. Nay, the sky may become one burning star, but if there be no light in the soul, no power of vision, the light itself will be but darkness.

And that the hearts of these stranger from the east had been enlightened, sensitized, we can attribute only to one or two causes. Here is the fact: that far away from Jerusalem, amidst the dense masses of heathenism, men's hearts had been set vibrating with new hopes. The expectation of the near coming of the Messiah had taken possession of them; and though around them it was yet night deep and dark, they were ready with their matins, their foreseeing hopes anticipating the dawn, and their eager hearts going

out to meet it. Whence came this expectation, these new and bright hopes? Reason could not give it; philosophy could not find it; none of their astrologies could read it, nor could their alchemies hold it in solution. It could only have been borne in to them by some revelation of God; and we cannot be far wrong if we attribute it to the unconscious influence of the Hebrew scriptures and the Hebrew faith. Judaism was a far-reaching and potent force, spreading itself out like an atmosphere, regardless of national or social bounds, and penetrating deeply into human thought,—conquering its conquerors, as Roman historians avow. To such an extent had the Hebrew faith diffused itself abroad—borne on the red tides of war, or on the wide eddies of commerce—that even in the outside nations there was a prevalent belief that the coming of the King who should redeem Israel, and through them bless the world, was nigh at hand. And so when the star appeared, strange phenomenon as it was, it created no surprise in the mind of these Eastern seers. It came to them in a supernatural naturalness, as a thing quite expected, and for which they were thoroughly prepared. It was in a sense an answering heliogram, or astrogram, if we may use that word—signaling back from the sky, and responding to the hopes and prayers that had long been flashed from the souls of these up-lookers. And directly the star appears, beckoning them westward, they yield themselves up to it. Wasting no time in empty talk and vain speculations, they prepare their gifts, call out the servants and the camels, then moving swiftly westward, as the star of the new Empire leads the way. They turn their faces towards the setting sun; but their hearts are turned towards the new dawn, the “day-spring from on high” which has visited them.

The light in the sky and the light in the heart were parts of the same light. They sang back to each other, as the choristers throw across the chancel the antiphonal strains

of the same sweet anthem. Had there been no light, no longing in the soul, the star had never risen in the sky; and had that light of the soul set, quenched in apathy and unconcern, the light of the sky had disappeared with it, dropping from the firmament like a falling star. It is not the eye that sees; it is the soul that looks through the eye as through an open window; and the outer vision is broadened or narrowed, as the light within is warm and bright or dim and cold. Set a child under the heavens and what does it see? Just an expanse of darkness, sprinkled over with tiny sparks; a pocketful of marbles or a string of beads is more and heavier than all the stars. Take the half-educated mind and bid him look up. He sees stars of different lustre; he sees a kind of order in their movements; he groups them into constellations, and, detecting some fancied resemblance, he calls one the lion, and another the crab. To him the open page of heaven is but a book of nursery tales; and instead of reading the stars, interpreting their language, he reads only the shadows of his own conceptions thrown upon the stars. Set now an astronomer under that same sky, and what a broadening and widening of vision! Each separate star grows into a world vaster than his own; the flat expanse of the child draws back into infinite distances, where worlds beyond all reckoning sweep round in their precise and orderly revolutions. That vision touches the infinite; it makes the very silences sing. Some one has said, "Sight is a faculty, and seeing is an art"; and it is so. The sight ever deepens upon the seer, and here the personal element figures largely in the equation. Speaking generally, we see what we are, the outer vision unfolding certain correspondences with our inner self.

Exactly so is it in our spiritual life. The horizon broadens with the years, keeping pace with the growths and expansions of the soul. The things of God which stood back from us, but dimly apprehended in the far distance,

now approach ; the truth which was vague before shapes itself into constellations whose light is both warm and bright. Let us take the Bible for example, and how it has grown upon us ! Scientists tell us that our worlds have all existed in a gaseous, vapoury state, and that by processes of cooling and condensation—throwing off their juvenilities—they have gradually assumed their present form of solidity and stability. Whether this be so or not, when we first came to the Bible, looking at it with childhood's vision and childhood's faith, it was a sort of dreamland, all enveloped in luminous ether, a haze of mist and mystery. Not that it was so really ; but it appeared so to our untrained vision. Our sight had not yet been correctly focussed ; we had not learned rightly to measure our distances, nor to distinguish between substance and shade. But what is the Bible to us now ? Not exactly what it was, perhaps. Some things we held as truths have proved to be only misreadings of the truth, as we have called the part the whole ; the temporal, eternal ; but in the " new thoughts of God " the years have brought us the disenchantment of some of childhood's illusions which has not been loss but gain. There are mysteries in the word we may not yet unravel—for are we not all baffled with the mystery of our own being?—but one thing is sure, the Bible is more to us to-day than it was to the dream of childhood. It is more real, more near ; one bright orb of revealed truth, its two Testaments making a rounded sphere, and its meridian lines, whether read backward through the Old, or forward through the New, all measured from the central Christ. Others may see in this Word but a production of human minds, a mechanism of revolving lights ; others may see in it but a nebulous comet, moving with eccentric orbit about some unknown centre ; but he who leaves heart and soul open to the light, who is content to learn the higher doctrine by doing the higher will—first " coming " in an absolute self-surrender that he may

“see”—will see in the Word, from its first page to its last, another Star of Bethlehem, each beam a tongue of fire calling him to the Christ. What we need is not more light but larger sight.

The shepherds were sent across to Bethlehem by a song in the sky, the Wise Men by a star whose very silence was vocal; but called by different voices, sent on different ways, their paths converge to the same bright shrine, the cradle of the Holy Child. Had the star appeared to the shepherds, they might not have understood its meaning, even though its vivid brightness had paled all the constellations of their Syrian sky. It would have awed, perhaps silenced them. Their thoughts kept low. Like the timid field-birds which flit from furrow to furrow, from hedge to hedge, never soaring high with the lark or striking out far with the swallow, their thoughts could read the sheep better than the stars, and they knew the pastures of the mountain better than the pastures of the sky. And so they needed the plainer verbal message. Heaven must speak to them in their own tongue; giving them directions they cannot misunderstand; telling where the scene of the Advent is—in the “city of David,” which is Bethlehem; and telling who and what is the Child now so strangely set in their midst, multiplying His titles, as “the Saviour,” the “Christ,” the “Lord.” But not thus did the Divine message come to the Magi. Here no word is spoken, no *Gloria* sung, no solitary angel appears. It is only a new and bright star that has shone out in their western sky. But it is enough. It announces to them a great fact, and it indicates the direction, but it does not enter into particulars. It does not throw out any hint of Bethlehem, nor does it announce the Advent of the Divine Child in any of the three titles the shepherds heard, but as “King.” The star did not light up the whole path on to its goal—that is not generally heaven’s wont in dealing with human lives—but it gave them light enough for the

present, for the next step, which is all they ask. And see how heaven speaks to them, as it were, in their native tongue. The skies to them were a familiar page. They gave themselves up to them; for they were, to their up-looking minds, as near and as real as earth. And as night unrolled the volume of their "book," all written over with letters of gold, they bent both mind and soul to spell out its secrets and to hear the stately processional marches of their half-vocal skies. True they threw upon the sky many random guesses at which astronomy would smile; their astrologies were perhaps fanciful and foolish in their minutiae, fiction rather than fact; but they did not study the skies for nothing, they did not seek the companionship of the stars in vain, for they spelled out some truth, even though it might be of an elementary kind. They had at least learned humility, self-littleness, as he always will, be he psalmist or not, who sets himself beneath the stars, "considering" the heavens. They had learned more of God, His greatness, majesty and glory; for what were the far-reaching skies, the countless stars, but the visible things of the great Invisible One? What were they but the embroidered robes, all resplendent and very glorious, of Him whom their inner souls had learned to worship and to love,—the unseen One whose name their lips scarce dare to speak? Yes, they were astral men, star-men, and so heaven speaks to them in their native accents, with a silent, astral voice. And they heard the message, for their heart had been long listening for it; and before Bethlehem had offered its rude and mean cradle, the Magi had set up within their hearts a throne for the Holy Child; while in their thoughts they had woven for Him right royal apparel, garments of purple, blue and gold. Looking into God's heavens they became seers. Reading well the Divine promises and purposes, the star shone in their faces so brightly, it left its light behind; and though we may never know their names, though they soon



retire into the obscurity out of which they now emerge, they can no longer be hid ; for as the sun itself is hidden, lost in its own light, so these anonymous sons of the East, long as time itself will be, will be at once visible and invisible ; at once hidden and revealed by the enveloping light of the star they saw and followed, the star that led them to the greater light, even " the bright and morning star."

It does not matter in what language heaven speaks to us, or what special portent it gives to us—indeed, there may be no portent at all ; it may be in ways so simple, so perfectly natural—but everything depends upon our attitude toward the voice or vision. We may rise and follow, getting into the track of angels and among the echoes of their anthems ; we may kneel before the Christ, spreading out before Him life's most beautiful and most precious things to have them made more beautiful and more precious by His touch. Or we may hesitate and refuse, as, alas ! many are doing now, playing the sackbut around the clay image of our enlarged self, and setting other feet to dance about it, or raking eagerly over the dust and ash heaps of a decaying world. Then heaven's star shines, but in vain, and heaven's angels sing in vain, while all the time the star is growing dimmer, and the music fainter, and the Christ is farther and farther away in the ever-widening, ever-darkening distance ! The wise men showed their wisdom in seeking and worshipping the Christ, who was more to them than all their gold and all their stars ; and shall we not be fools indeed if we hear and see but do not follow, and do not worship ? Will not this be the height of folly—the eternal folly ?

The Magi naturally think the King of the Jews must be born in the nation's capital, and so they repair at once to Jerusalem. What, then, means this uncertainty and doubt ? Like men who are suddenly enveloped in a fog, and who have lost the path, the wise men grope along the streets of Jerusalem bewildered, lost, spelling out the way, and ask-

ing in the bazaars, and in the temple's outer courts, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" What means this abrupt and total break in their correspondence with heaven? Why should the star disappear just when they need it most? Borne onwards, as it were, with wings, why must they now fold their wings and have to take to their feet, falling back on earthly guides, earthly supports? Could not God have led them *by* Jerusalem as well as through it, opening to them the very same path by which they returned? Or could not God have led them through it just as well as to it, lighting them easily through the labyrinth of narrow, intersecting streets? Why, then, should the star disappear? Was it so low down on the horizon that the city—and the temple—walls hid it from their view? for earthly things have a strange way of intercepting heavenly light. Not so; but God took away the star, calling it back to its native depths, because its absence now could do more than even its presence. The expression, "*We saw* His star in the East," implies that the vision was only for a brief time; it had not gone before them across the desert. It had given them an object and a direction, and having thus initialled the way, it had disappeared. But let us suppose that it had accompanied them all through their journey, indicating each turn, as it afterwards indicated the very house out of the hundreds of houses of Bethlehem—a star invisible to others, but bright and vivid to themselves all the way, and what then? They would have slipped through Jerusalem quickly as they could, awaking no interest, and making no impression—at any rate, no more impression than that produced by a passing dream. But God takes the star from them, leaving them, as it would seem, to their own resources; and what is the result? As if they felt the tightening of unseen reins, the force of circumstances—and how conventional is that large word "circumstance," which some use as a blind that they may not

see God—summons them to “Halt!” Eager to prosecute their journey, they are detained by a higher force, telling in the streets their story of the star, and asking, “Where is He?” It is a simple question, but the quiet voice gathers velocity and volume until it sweeps over Jerusalem like a cyclone, or a rushing wind of Pentecost. We read, “Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” The voice of the Wise Men beat against the unstable throne of Herod, making it vibrate with alarming fears; it was the spasm and tremor of an awakened conscience, the agitation of conscious guilt, and the fears of coming doom. Jerusalem too was “troubled” when we might suppose that she would have been glad, almost beside herself with joy. True there were some faithful souls within her walls, like those temple saints, Simeon and Anna, whose eyes had grown dim, watching for Him who should bring redemption and salvation to Israel; but, as a city, Jerusalem had grown luxurious, greedy of gain and pleasure-loving. What does Jerusalem want of a Christ? she prefers Herod or Barnabas. What does she want of a King? she hugs her fetters and cries, “We have no king but Cæsar”! And how deep the fair city must have sunk, how far she must have drifted on the backwash of paganism, when she could forget her ancient prophecies, or hope they might not be true; and when the very mention of her new King startles and affrights her like a sudden bolt from the blue! And Jerusalem never had a welcome for her Christ. She gave Him one, but that ovation was more Galilean than Judean, and even then “the city” frowned upon it, and threw the weight of officialism against it. Jerusalem gave the Christ no apostle, gave Him no couch—for we cannot find Him spending even one night within her walls; she only gave Him a few hosannas and broken palms, and then a cross and a grave. And so we are not surprised that Jerusalem, the only city that made Jesus weep—had no welcome for her promised King, and

that the mere mention of His name distressed, and almost angered her.

But this halt of the Magi does more than create excitement and make a perfect storm of fears; for Herod hastily summons the scribes and elders to enquire of them where the Christ should be born. The answer comes to their lips directly; they have no need to search for it—for has it not stood written in their Scriptures for centuries?—nor is there among them a dissenting or questioning voice. It is “In Bethlehem of Judea”; and then probably they unroll the Book of Micah and repeat the whole passage, though not exactly as the prophet wrote it. He spake of a Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah v. 21); they speak of a Governor who shall be “Shepherd of My people Israel,” as if they would tone down the tyrant’s feelings, explaining the “governor” by a pastoral metaphor, and turning the sceptre of authority and rule into a shepherd’s rod. And so the “sure word of prophecy” is attested and stamped afresh with the seal of the temple, and with the signet of Herod. God closed His heavens that His Scriptures might be opened. He covered and silenced the star that Jerusalem’s elders and scribes, and even Herod himself, might pay obeisance, however unwilling, to the Christ, the Holy Child now set in their midst. So the loss proved the greater gain; the star which was hidden gave the greater light.

The paradox is still true. There are times in life, in every life, when darkness is our brightest light: for it is the mother of lights to be, the womb of our new mornings. It is well at times that we grope amidst perplexity and uncertainty; it is a check to presumption, an antidote to pride. Next to a perfect knowledge is the knowing that we do not know. The knowledge of our ignorance is the alphabet, the beginning of all knowledge; and sometimes God calls in the star that has shone upon us, that we may look within

and look above to One who is more than all stars. But God never leaves those feet long in doubt that seek to walk in His higher ways, and that are in search of His larger blessings. If He does not light up the path on to the goal, He does give light for the next step, and light for the next step is all we need, and indeed all that we can use. The star was given them back just when they needed it, lighting up the road to Bethlehem, and then hovering over the very door that had such a treasure hidden behind it. So, too, the vanished light will come back to us at the right time, which is God's time, and it will guide us, if not to the full fruition of our hopes, yet to the fulfilling of His purposes, which is still better. He who seeks God's will alone will move forwards on a lighted path to find the Christ somewhere and anywhere.

They dreamed of a king, they inquired for a king; they find a Child born in the stable of a *khan*, first cradled in a manger, and now taken in to the hospitalities of a friendly house; born untimely, as all human reckonings would say, its parents, if not poor, yet following an unremunerative and somewhat lowly calling. But though their dream has so poor a realization, and though the royalties of earth are so signally wanting, where everything, to the unenlightened mind, was ordinary and commonplace, yet their Eastern believers are neither shocked nor startled. They prostrate themselves before the Child, and then, making their camels kneel down by the humble door, they untie their bales, open their "treasures"—for such is the wealthy word—and then they present their gifts, spreading out before the astonished parents and the unnoting child their royal offering—boxes of frankincense and myrrh, and bags of gold. Strange scene! It is Nature's salutation of her Lord, as she so early puts the crown upon His head. Her three kingdoms are here: the vegetable world sending its most precious things, the sweet frankincense, the everlasting myrrh; the

mineral world sending its best and highest—gold ; while the animal world sends the kneeling camels, and that highest, lordliest of all earthly creatures, a prostrating, worshipping humanity. So did Nature sing her *Te Deum* with the accompaniments of gold and perfume,—“Thou art the King of glory, O Christ.” And did not the eyes of the Seers look forward as well as backward and upward ? and are not their gifts in some sort a prophecy as well as a thank-offering ? We shall not put any undue pressure upon the narrative, laying violent hands upon it, if we say that their gift *was* a latent prophecy. In the Old Dispensation frankincense played no unimportant part. It scented the whole tabernacle, it threw its odours far over the outer courts of tent and temple. It was sprinkled on the loaves of the shewbread, and on the sacrifice of the altar ; together with stacte, onycha, and galbanum, it formed the sweet incense. And now as the Priest of a higher order than Melchisedec comes to make an offering of Himself, as the “Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,” the Magi prepare beforehand the frankincense, in a prophetic way sprinkling Him who is both Priest and Victim in the great sacrifice. So too, the myrrh looked away from Bethlehem to the near Calvary. The only other mention of myrrh we have in the New Testament is the myrrh they mingled with the wine at the Cross, but which Jesus would not take, and the myrrh and aloes of the embalming. And so the offices of the myrrh were friendly. It would have deadened the physical pain—but Jesus would not permit any artificial help in the terrible sufferings of the Cross ; and wrapped about the dead body, it would have helped to preserve it, putting its shield around the sacred dust that decay should not rifle and spoil it. The myrrh was thus a prophecy of the death ; and, borne from the distant East, it comes now to greet the Child—only yet a few days from its birth—and striking in with the gold and frankincense, with the greeting of stars

and angels, it whispers of the death that shall crown the life. For was He not born that He might die? and did He not live that He might die, taking upon Himself our nature, our flesh and blood, that He might go with it to His cross and His grave? Yes; and He took our humanity beyond the grave, for He took it, raised and spiritualized, up to His highest heaven.

Here the sweet idyl comes to an abrupt ending, as with one sentence the Evangelist draws about the chief actors the curtain of silence. We see them, warned of God not to return to Herod, departing homeward by "another way"—God's way, though "another," for all paths open to His sky—and returning nameless as they came. They did not leave their little human names in the Divine story, as some like to carve theirs on the walls of God's temple, so putting a daub of clay upon the gold; none of their words are recorded, save a solitary question and the brief statement of their errand; but they leave behind a deed, fragrant and immortal. These Gentile Seers are first to confess the kingship, the true royalty of Jesus, enthroning Him in their words and deeds, and saluting Him, not as Herod's soldiers did, in mockery, but with a true and reverent "Hail, King!" Their gold found for the Christ-child the safer shelter of Egypt—so becoming a shield of gold that foiled the steel of Herod; and their frankincense and myrrh inspiration has gathered up and embasketed, setting it by the gate of the New Testament, that all who enter to find and to worship the Christ may inhale its fragrance, the sacred perfume of a holy deed. Wise men they were indeed; and he only is wise in the highest wisdom who seeks and worships the Christ, consecrating to His service life's sweetest and most precious things, so giving the "All hail" of a glad, a life-long devotion.

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