

The Fourth Wise Man

By H. F. W. Tatham

You have all heard the story of the three Wise Men who came nineteen hundred years ago to see the Child that had been born in Bethlehem, and brought Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh, and how a Star led them and stood over the place where the young Child lay. But perhaps you have not heard the story of the Fourth Wise Man.

He had not seen the Star, and did not go on the journey with the other three. But he had seen a vision in the night, and though, when the morning came, his memory of what it had been was all blurred and faint, and grew fainter as the day grew brighter, as dreams will, and though he told no one of his vision, yet it was enough to make him go forth and sell all that he had, house and lands and goods, and change the money that he received for them and his other moneys for three great jewels that he could easily carry—an emerald, a ruby, and a diamond. These he hid in a belt cunningly made, and started forth upon his journey alone. They were to be given to the King when he found him; that was all that he knew.

But it was no easy road that lay before him, and the dangers and difficulties were great. At one time he was cast into prison by a ruler of a country through which he passed; at another he was compelled to fight and defend a town beleaguered by the savage natives of the neighbourhood; at another he was seized by pirates and carried off in their ship to sea. Time passed rapidly away, and his adventures in detail would fill volumes; but there were three events which stood out clearly from the rest.

He had come to a cottage by the roadside one evening, and saw a group of soldiers outside, armed as though for war, and a richly dressed man mounted on a horse, evidently in authority over them; in the midst of the group was a youth, hardly more than a boy. His hands were tied behind his back, his face was bleeding, his clothes were dusty and torn. On his face was a look of despair, but he plainly put constraint upon himself, and bit his lip to keep back the rising tears. But what most arrested the attention of the Wise Man was the loud and bitter weeping of a woman which at that moment burst forth from within a cottage. When the boy heard it he started visibly, and crying, ‘Mother!’ struggled wildly with the soldiers who held him; and at the same moment the cottage door opened and a woman rushed out and flung herself at the feet of the mounted man.

She was old and worn, and robed as a widow. Her torn and dishevelled hair, her tear-stained face, the hopeless agony written in her strained and haggard eyes were enough to move the pity of the hardest heart. But the man looked down on her and smiled coldly.

‘Mercy, my lord,’ she wailed, ‘leave me my son, my only son! I am a widow; his father and his two brothers have died in the King’s service; without him I cannot live in this desert, nor without him do I desire to live. Leave him to me, I entreat you!’

But the man laughed harshly. ‘You know the price,’ he said. And he named a vast sum; more, far more than it was conceivable that any but the richest could pay.

A bitter cry burst from the woman’s lips, and, flinging herself down, she beat her forehead in the dust. ‘Lead on,’ said the captain to the soldiers, and they prepared to obey. But the Wise Man stepped forward. His hand had gone to his girdle, where he felt the precious stones press against his side. They were presents for his King—but could he keep them back now? He drew out the great emerald and held it forth to the captain.

‘Is this a price rich enough to buy back a soldier for his mother?’ he said.

The captain laughed. ‘Ay,’ he said, ‘that is enough. But a fool art thou to give thy jewel for such a worthless wretch. Let him go, men; lead on.’ And he rode away. The Wise Man stood for a moment and then softly followed. The mother and son were in each others’ arms.

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Another scene. A market-place in a great city pavement, houses, and temples white beneath a burning sun; crowds of people of every class, rich and poor, gaily dressed and ragged; soldiers keeping back the pressure of the multitude; on the outskirts, jugglers, mountebanks, all those who haunt a fair; in the centre a platform, round which stood a group of unhappy beings, who, as could be seen at a glance, were slaves. They were chained together, and, as each was offered for sale, he or she was unfastened and led out upon the platform in the sight of all the crowd. Some looked brazen and defiant, some despairing, some overcome with shame and fear. And at the moment when the Wise Man obtained a clear view of the place a young girl was being led to the platform.

She was scarcely more than a child; her complexion was fair, almost white, and she had plainly been tenderly nurtured. She was overwhelmed with shame at her dreadful position, and her shame was mingled with a deadly terror. Suffering might and would be the lot of any slave, but for such a one as she was, worse was to be feared. She cowered down and buried her face in her hands.

But the auctioneer stepped up to her, and, rudely tearing her hands away, forced her to stand upright. Next he turned her round so that all the crowd could see her face, and then, in a manner that turned the Wise Man sick, he set forth to the crowd her claims to a high price as an article of sale. The brutal laughter that followed his coarse wit was intolerable to hear; but the praises had their effect. The bidding was fast and furious, and the prices were high. Then, little by little, the bidders fell away, and only two were left. One was a kind-looking old man with a long white beard; the other a man of middle age. His bloodshot eyes, his long curved nose, his thick sensual lips, and all the lines of his heavy and swollen face told of cruelty and worse. Heaven help the slave who fell into such hands as his!

‘Sixty thousand,’ said the old man. ‘Sixty-five,’ replied his rival. ‘Seventy,’ retorted the old man. There was a pause. Then, ‘eighty,’ came from the hook-nosed bidder. The girl turned an imploring look on the other; but he only groaned and turned away.

The hook-nosed man looked at the auctioneer with a satisfied grin. ‘Eighty thousand are bidden,’ said the latter; ‘will any one bid higher?’ And he raised his hammer. But just then a man stepped forward from the crowd. In his hand he held something which flashed red in the light, with a colour like blood. ‘I bid this,’ he said. There was a murmur in the crowd, and the girl, who had again hidden her face in her hands, looked up with the glance of one who had come back from the grave. The auctioneer took the ruby in his hand; ‘A noble jewel,’ he said, ‘and worth a king’s ransom. Canst thou outbid this?’ and he turned to the hook-nosed man. With a look of fury and baffled malice he turned away.

The girl in silence followed the Wise Man from the place. He led her from the crowd, and then turning, ‘Go in peace,’ he said, ‘thou art free.’ Then, with her incoherent words of thankfulness still ringing in his ears, he took his way along the road. After all he still had the diamond for his King, and the diamond was a jewel beyond all price.

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The last scene. More than thirty years have passed. The wanderer is becoming advanced in years, and his heart has often despaired of the success of his quest; but somehow he has gone on; and hidden all the while in his belt has lain the great diamond. For the last few days of his journey he has been conscious that many pilgrims and travellers are going the same way as he is—all converging upon the city which now rises opposite to him, built on a rocky hill, with the temple shining above it, as has been said, like a ‘mount of snow fretted with golden pinnacles.’ There is some feast to be held there, doubtless, and all these faithful believers are coming up to keep it. It was in the morning that he came near to the town, and some instinct led him not to enter the walls, but to pass outside to where a low bald-looking hill rose against the sky. There he sat down and waited, with a strange feeling of anticipation in his heart.

Indistinct murmurs rose from the city, and at times the shout swelled so that he almost fancied he could distinguish the words; but he was not certain of them. At last, as the morning drew on towards noon, he saw that a number of people were beginning to stream in twos and threes out of the gate and come towards the place where he sat. He rose up, and went down the hill towards a group who had paused a few hundred yards away. He still had the same strange feeling of anticipation.

When he came to the group he spoke to them, and asked what they were come out to see. One of them, who knew his language, expressed surprise that he did not know, and told him that there were three men to be executed on the little hill that morning—two were thieves, but the third was one who had claimed great powers and was said to have done great deeds. Some asserted that he made himself out a prophet; some that he claimed a rival kingship to that of the great Emperor, or even to God Himself. In any case, whether impostor, rebel, or blasphemer, he was to die that day. He had come, so all agreed, from an obscure town in the northern part of the kingdom—a district from which no good thing had ever come forth.

A strange curiosity kept the Wise Man chained to the spot, though the sight that was to be seen could have no attraction for one of his nature. By this time the people were coming out in a continuous stream, and presently the helmets of Roman soldiers appeared among the throng, and it was evident that what so many wished to see was drawing near. Closer and closer along the road came the dreadful procession, and still the Wise Man sat by the roadside and watched.

At last the soldiers were abreast of him; and then in their midst came some one at the sight of whom his heart stood still with pity and indignation. He was a man of little more than thirty, dressed in an old robe that had once been scarlet, and was here and there dyed to a more dreadful red with blood that had soaked through. On his head was a crown, but of thorns, and blood had streamed down the forehead and cheeks from the wounds that the sharp spikes had made. The face was that of one half fainting with pain and exhaustion, and he seemed to be bearing some burden in addition to the visible weight that pressed upon his shoulders; though in good sooth that was heavy enough, being a stout piece of wood seven or eight feet long, with a shorter cross-bar nailed at right angles across the top. The knees of the sufferer seemed failing beneath the weight, and even as he was passing the Wise Man he stumbled and fell. The Roman officer reined up his horse. A sudden impulse came upon the Wise Man. He stepped forward from the roadside and held out the diamond to the officer. And the man who had fallen on the road turned and looked upon him.

Then came in his ears a noise like thunder, and a flash passed before his eyes, and he knew no more.

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When he awoke he was in a very bright place, so bright that he could not lift his eyes but could only lie and gaze at the shining floor around him. But he was conscious that a voice had been speaking to him, and the sound was as the sound of many waters. And presently he was aware that a man stood near, though he could see nothing but his feet and the hem of his garment. Then the same voice bade him look up.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised his eyes. The white robe of the speaker dazzled them, but by degrees they reached the hand that hung by the side. On the third finger a green stone gave forth a radiance that he knew; it was his emerald.

Again he lifted his eyes. The necklace round the throat of the man caught them. It hung low on the breast in front, and in its very centre blazed a great red jewel with a heart of blood and fire; was it not the ruby?

Then for a moment he saw the face, but ere he could recognise it his startled eyes were dazzled by the intense white light reflected from the great diamond that shone in a circlet of gold around the wearer's forehead.

And the face? He knew it now; it was the face of the man who had looked upon him on the road to Calvary.

And so, after all, the King had received His jewels!