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The Three Kings of Cologne

Francis Jenkins Olcott

Now, when the Children of Israel were gone out of Egypt, and had won and made subject to them Jerusalem and all the land lying about, there was in the Kingdom of Ind a tall hill called the Hill of Vaws, or the Hill of Victory. On this hill were stationed sentinels of Ind, who watched day and night against the Children of Israel, and afterward against the Romans.

And if an enemy approached, the keepers of the Hill of Vaws made a great fire to warn the inhabitants of the land so that the men might make ready to defend themselves.

Now in the time when Balaam prophesied of the Star that should betoken the birth of Christ, all the great lords and the people of Ind and in the East desired greatly to see this Star of which he spake; and they gave gifts to the keepers of the Hill of Vaws, and bade them, if they saw by night or by day any star in the air, that had not been seen aforetime, that they, the keepers, should send anon word to the people of Ind.

And thus was it that for so long a time the fame of this Star was borne throughout the lands of the East. And the more the Star was sought for, and the more its fame increased, so much the more all the people of the Land of Ind desired to see it. So they ordained twelve of the wisest and greatest of the clerks of astronomy, that were in all that country about, and gave them great hire to keep watch upon the Hill of Vaws for the Star that was prophesied of Balaam.

Now, when Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, His Star began to rise in the manner of a sun, bright shining. It ascended above the Hill of Vaws, and all that day in the highest air it abode without moving, insomuch that when the sun was hot and most high there was no difference in shining betwixt them.

But when the day of the nativity was passed the Star ascended up into the firmament, and it had right many long streaks and beams, more burning and brighter than a brand of fire; and, as an eagle flying and beating the air with his wings, right so the streaks and beams of the Star stirred about.

Then all the people, both man and woman, of all that country about when they saw this marvelous Star, were full of wonder thereat; yet they knew well that it was the Star that was prophesied of Balaam, and long time was desired of all the people in that country.

Now, when the three worshipful kings, who at that time reigned in Ind, Chaldea, and Persia, were informed by the astronomers of this Star, they were right glad that they had grace to see the Star in their days.

Wherefore these three worshipful kings, Melchior, Balthazar, and Jasper (in the same hour the Star appeared to all three), though each of them was far from the other, and none knew of the others' purpose, decided to go and seek and worship the Lord and King of the Jews, that was new born, as the appearance of the Star announced.

So each king prepared great and rich gifts, and trains of mules, camels, and horses charged with treasure, and together with a great multitude of people they set forth on their journeys.

The Child

Now, when these three worshipful kings were passed forth out of their kingdoms, the Star went before each king and his people. When they stood still and rested, the Star stood still; and when they went forward again, the Star always went before them in virtue and strength and gave light all the way.

And, as it is written, in the time that Christ was born, there was peace in all the world, wherefore in all the cities and towns through which they went there was no gate shut neither by night nor by day; and all the people of those same cities and towns marveled wonderfully as they saw kings and vast multitudes go by in great haste; but they knew not what they were, nor whence they came, nor whither they should go.

Furthermore these three kings rode forth over hills, waters, valleys, plains, and other divers and perilous places without hindrance, for all the way seemed to them plain and even. And they never took shelter by night nor by day, nor ever rested, nor did their horses and other beasts ever eat or drink till they had come to Bethlehem. And all this time it did seem to them as one day.

But when the three blessed kings had come near to Jerusalem, then a great cloud of darkness hid the Star from their sight. And when Melchior and his people were come fast by the city, they abode in fog and darkness. Then came Balthazar, and he abode under the same cloud near unto Melchior. Thereupon appeared Jasper with all his host.

So these three glorious kings, each with his host and burdens and beasts, met together in the highway without the city of Jerusalem. And, notwithstanding that none of them ever before had seen the other, nor knew him, nor had heard of his coming, yet at their meeting each one with great reverence and joy kissed the other. So afterward, when they had spoken together and each had told his purpose and the cause of his journey, they were much more glad and fervent. So they rode forth, and at the uprising of the sun, they came into Jerusalem. And

yet the Star appeared not.

So then these three worshipful kings, when they were come into the city, asked of the people concerning the Child that was born; and when Herod heard this he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him, and he privately summoned to him these three kings and learned of them the time when the Star appeared. He then sent them forth, bidding them find the young Child and return to him.

Now when these three kings were passed out of Jerusalem the Star appeared to them again as it did erst, and went before them till they were come to Bethlehem.

Now, the nearer the kings came to the place where Christ was born, the brighter shined the Star, and they entered Bethlehem the sixth hour of the day. And they rode through the streets till they came before a little house. There the Star stood still, and then descended and shone with so great a light that the little house was full of radiance; till anon the Star went upward again into the air, and stood still always above the same place.

And the three kings went into the little house and found the Child with his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him, and offered him gifts.

And you shall understand that these three kings had brought great gifts from their own lands, rich ornaments and divers golden vessels, and many jewels and precious stones, and both gold and silver,—these they had brought to offer to the King of the Jews. But when they found the Lord in a little house, in poor clothes, and when they saw that the Star gave so great and holy a light in all the place that it seemed as though they stood in a furnace of fire, then were they so sore afraid, that of all the rich jewels and ornaments they had brought with them, they chose from their treasures what came first to their hands. For Melchior took a round apple of gold in his hand, and thirty gilt pennies, and these he offered unto our Lord; and Balthazar took out of his treasury incense; and Jasper took out myrrh, and that he offered with weeping and tears.

And now after these three kings had worshiped the Lord, they abode in Bethlehem for a little space, and as they abode, there came a command to them, in their sleep, that they should not return to Herod; and so by another way they went home to their kingdoms. But the Star that had gone before appeared no more.

So these three kings, who had suddenly met together in the highway before Jerusalem, went home together with great joy and honor. And when, after many days' journey over perilous places, they had come to the Hill of Vaws, they made there a fair chapel in worship of the Child they had sought. Also they agreed to meet together at the same place once in the year, and they ordained that the Hill of Vaws should be the place of their burial.



So when the three worshipful kings had done what they would, they took leave of each other, and each one with his people rode to his own land rejoicing.

How They Came to Cologne

Now, after many years, a little before the feast of Christmas, there appeared a wonderful Star above the cities where these three kings dwelt, and they knew thereby that their time was come when they should pass from earth. Then with one consent they built, at the Hill of Vaws, a fair and large tomb, and there the three Holy Kings, Melchior, Balthazar, and Jasper died, and were buried in the same tomb by their sorrowing people.

Now after much time had passed away, Queen Helen, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, began to think greatly of the bodies of these three kings, and she arrayed herself, and, accompanied by many attendants, went into the Land of Ind.

And you shall understand that after she had found the bodies of Melchior, Balthazar, and Jasper, Queen Helen put them into one chest and ornamented it with great riches, and she brought them into Constantinople, with joy and reverence, and laid them in a church that is called Saint Sophia; and this church the Emperor Constantine did make,—he alone, with a little child, set up all the marble pillars thereof.

Now, after the death of the Emperor Constantine a persecution against the Christian faith arose, and in this persecution the bodies of the three worshipful kings were set at naught. Then came the Emperor Mauricius of Rome, and, through his counsel, the bodies of these three kings were carried to Italy, and there they were laid in a fair church in the city of Milan.

Then afterward, in the process of time, the city of Milan rebelled against the Emperor Frederick the First, and he, being sore beset, sent to Rainald, Archbishop of Cologne, asking for help.

This Archbishop with his army did take the city of Milan, and delivered it to the

Emperor. And for this service did the Emperor grant, at the Archbishop's great entreaty, that he should carry forth to Cologne the bodies of the three blessed kings.

Then the Archbishop, with great solemnity and in procession, did carry forth from the city of Milan the bodies of the three kings, and brought them unto Cologne and there placed them in the fair church of Saint Peter. And all the people of the country roundabout, with all the reverence they might, received these relics, and there in the city of Cologne they are kept and beholden of all manner of nations unto this day.

Thus endeth the legend of these three blessed kings,— Melchior, Balthazar, and Jasper.

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