



THE FIRST CHRISTMAS PRESENT

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HOW much the first Christmas present may have had to do with those of later times cannot be determined, but surely it had some real and lasting influence. The gold, frankincense and myrrh placed at the feet of the infant Jesus by the wise men from the East were like the first blossoms which prophesy the glory of orchard and forest when springtime has come. The story of the beginning of a custom so exquisite and so full of inspiration and prediction is worthy of more than a hurried reading.

The first Christmas present is associated with the night of the Nativity, but the visit of the wise men did not occur until after the circumcision of the child Jesus. By law this was required to be performed within eight days after birth. Eleven or twelve days had probably passed; the "overture of the angels" had died away, and the shepherds had returned to their wonted duties before the little town of Bethlehem was startled by the presence in its streets of strangers from a distant land. The first Christmas gifts were not received on the night of the Advent. They were like those of later times which were intended for the eve of Christmas, but which have been hindered by storms on land or on sea.

The Scene of the First Christmas

THE place is Bethlehem, but the Holy Family are no longer at the inn, in which "there is no room" for them. They are now in a house and by themselves. The dwellings of the poorer classes of that land and time were of primitive simplicity. The walls were of stone, often without cement or plaster; the roofs were of boughs or poles laid side by side and covered with mud and straw; the floors were of earth. They contained few rooms, if, indeed, there were more than one, and no windows such as are to be found in modern houses. The best of these buildings were hardly more sumptuous than the dug-outs of the American prairies or the crofters' cottages of Scotland and Skye, but because of the dryness of the climate they were not uncomfortable. Neither walls nor floors were damp. Jesus and Mary were in such a house, and were as well provided for as most other peasant people of their time and their means.

The strangers who appeared in the streets of that little town were wise men from the East. They were guided by a mysterious star. They sought one who was "born King of the Jews." When they found Him, in true Oriental fashion they first bowed their heads to the ground in salutation, and then presented to Him gold, frankincense and myrrh. The phrase, "wise men," or Magi, indicates that they came from Persia or Arabia; that probably they were followers of Zoroaster, and therefore that they were fire-worshippers. This is all that the Gospels teach us, either directly or by inference, concerning them.

The Gift-Bearers Pointed Out by Tradition

TRADITION, on the other hand, contains a bewildering abundance of detail, but there is little harmony between the various stories. The wise men are now called priests, then sages, then Kings. Their number is now three, then six, and again as high as twelve. Their names are Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Caspar, it says, was sixty years old and came from Arabia; Balthasar was forty, and black like those who dwelt in Saba; and Melchior was twenty, and his home was in Tarshish. The author of "Ben Hur" makes Caspar a Greek, Melchior a Hindu and Balthasar an Egyptian. If apocryphal stories had the quality of history it would be easy to compile a biography of these men. It is said that under the preaching of the Apostle Thomas they were converted and baptized; that they became missionaries, and were slain by the barbarians among whom they labored. The Roman church teaches that the Empress Helena discovered their bones and brought them to Constantinople; that from there they were carried to Milan, and that at last they rested from their journeyings in the "Shrine of the Three Kings" in the Cathedral of Cologne. The common belief concerning these strangers follows tradition so far as to represent them as three in number and of regal rank.

But did they come on camels or on horses? We know not. Were there three, six or twelve? We cannot answer. Were they young, or did they bend beneath the weight of years? Were they of Royal blood, and was one of them black? Did they utter any message when their homage was offered? Probably, but not a word has been preserved. Did one of them give gold, another frankincense, and another myrrh? This is unknown. Out of the darkness of the Gentile world they came; into its silence they returned never to be heard of again.

The Light That Led the Holy Elders

THE religious teachings of Persia were much like those of Judea. This probably resulted from the captivity of the Hebrews in Persia. Both people believed in one God and were the enemies of idolatry; but the Persian doctrine of God differed widely from the Hebrew. Their one god, Ormuzd, was engaged in a constant warfare with his great enemy, Ahriman. The former was symbolized by light and the latter by darkness. The Persians worshipped Ormuzd, the god of light, consequently the priest-sages of Persia and Chaldea were students of the skies. The stars were the words, and the constellations the sentences, which they most earnestly studied. They read the heavens as the Puritans read their Bible. Any unusual astral phenomenon awakened profound curiosity.

A conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars was then due in the astronomic calendar. The event occurs but once in eight hundred years. The appearance at that time of an unusual splendor in the firmament was associated with the prediction of a King by Balaam, himself "a wise man of the East." By "the light that led the holy elders with their gifts of myrrh" the Magi were guided to Bethlehem to offer their greetings to one whom they thought born to be an earthly King. Thus, representatives of the wisdom and religion of the great nations of Persia and Chaldea found their way into that humble household in Bethlehem with treasures and with homage fit for a King.

The Family in the Peasant Cottage

THE contrasts of that scene were many and striking. The mother of such a Child must have been more beautiful than either Murillo or Raphael has dreamed, but the surroundings were poor and the accommodations hardly decent. That bright flower of virgin womanhood and the sweet innocence of that Child would have added grace to a palace, but they rested in a peasant's cottage. Mary pondering on the meaning of her mysterious motherhood; the babe with no shadow from the cross yet resting upon Him; and the wise men full of dignity and reverence—at this distance all seem like visitants from another planet. Bouguereau has pictured three splendid Kings on their knees, with rich treasures outspread, before a Hebrew babe; but the glory of the canvas is the boy—not the gifts. John La Farge has painted three majestic figures on horses—one a priest, one a warrior and one a prophet; while the spaces of the air are filled with adoring angels; yet all alike are turned toward a humble home, and the King they seek is a little child.

But the contrasts of that scene are neither so great nor so striking as the contrasts of history, for slowly that Child has become the inspiration of a movement toward the Divine such as this earth never saw before and is likely never to see again. He is already the "corner-stone of humanity so entirely that to tear His name from this world would be to rend it to its foundations." Then three mysterious strangers bowed in veneration before Him; now there follow Him, along the Royal road which He has traced for them, millions and millions of worshipers.

Why Gold Was Chosen as a Gift

LET us now turn from the wise men to the gifts which they brought to Bethlehem. Gold is the most ancient and the most useful of metals. It was found in the ruins of ancient Egypt and Etruria. Abraham is said to have been "very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold." When the Israelites in the Exodus found the worship of Jehovah too spiritual they fashioned a golden calf, probably a copy of an object familiar to them in Egypt. Gold was worked into the tabernacle in the wilderness; it covered the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies; the candlesticks in the holiest place were of pure gold; into the garments of the priests this precious substance was woven. A white linen turban, in which a little of it was placed as an ornament, was called "a crown of gold." When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon she brought lavish gifts of gold—"one hundred and twenty talents." The Babylonian Empire was called "a head of gold." Babylon was known as "the golden city." Death was compared to the breaking of a "golden bowl."

In later times it was used to symbolize the precious results of the work of Christ. The new city, which in far-off vision blazed before the eyes of Saint John, had streets of gold. Gold is mentioned by Jewish writers as a foreign product. It came from Sheba, Arabia, and especially from Ophir. Ophir may have been an Arabian port, well known as a gold market. Tons of the precious metal are said to have been bulded into the walls of the temple. The history of Persia shows that in that period gold was abundant, and that much of it was imported from India and Africa. For generations it was not used as a standard of value, but only for ornamentation in building and dress, for precious vessels in the temples, and for gifts worthy of Kings. "The wise men" chose it as an appropriate present for one "born King of the Jews."

The Significance of Frankincense

FRANKINCENSE was a perfectly white resin which was obtained from the bark of a tree found chiefly in Arabia and India. An incision about five inches in length was made in the trunk, and from that flowed a white liquid which hardened into "a kind of vegetable material, brittle, glittering, and of a bitter taste." This delicate and odorous substance, made of the life-blood of rare trees, from the earliest ages was a symbol of purity and holiness. It was used for perfume and in sacrifices. It represented the holiness of God, and its burning was a celebration of that holiness. In prayer the worshiper invoked the Deity, and thus incense came to be an emblem of prayer. It was an inseparable accompaniment of worship in sanctuaries other than Hebrew. "On the altars of Mylitta and the Paphian Venus only incense was burned." The swinging of the burning censers to this day is a familiar sight in Greek and Roman churches. Its perfume pervaded the holy places of many sanctuaries in many lands, and it was a natural gift when the idea of Divinity was mingled with that of Royalty. The Magi honored a King whose birth had been heralded in the heavens by what seemed a preternatural splendor. The gold was for the King; the frankincense was in recognition of the mystery and the possible Divinity of the Child whom they sought.

Myrrh as an Offering to the Man Christ

MYRRH also was the congealed life-blood of a rare tree. It has been likened to the tears which a tree sheds when it is bruised. "It is a brittle substance, translucent, of a rich brown color, or reddish yellow, with a strong odor and a warm, bitter taste." It was found in the same countries as frankincense, but not in the same trees, nor was it extracted by the same process. The latter follows incision, and as it hardens it becomes white and is easily broken; but the former "exudes in small tearlike drops, at first oily, but drying and hardening on the bark, and its flow is increased by wounding the tree." It was well known to the ancients. With Egyptians and Jews, as well as with Greeks and Romans, it was an article of merchandise. It is frequently mentioned both in the Old Testament and in the New. Jacob directed his sons to take into Egypt of the best fruits of the land in their vessels, and to "carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds." "All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia." "I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense." "My hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet-smelling myrrh." When Jesus hung on the cross He was offered "wine mingled with myrrh." Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes for the purpose of embalming the body of Jesus. Myrrh is inseparably associated with the religions of the world. It was sometimes used in worship, but more commonly as "a perfume and a fumigator as well as a medicine." It was burned in temples, and was valuable in embalming the dead. It made the life of man more beautiful and the body less repulsive when the breath had departed. Its symbolism had to do with humanity more than Divinity.

The Characteristic Quality of the Gift

THE presents to Jesus from the priest-sages of the East were characteristic of the time and the land from which they came. They sought the birthplace of a King, but a King surrounded by an unusual atmosphere of religion. To an Oriental nothing could be so appropriate for a Royal personage as gold, with its wealth of value; for one possibly Divine, as frankincense, the congealed life-blood of Nature drawn from reluctant trees; and for a man, as myrrh, whose perfume made life more delicious and took away a little from the gloom and darkness of death.

The visitors also chose objects representative of the lands in which they dwelt. Gold was found in Persia and Arabia; the trees which yielded frankincense grew on the barren uplands of Arabia, or more probably in India; while myrrh dropped its rich brown tears probably about Saba or Adramyti. If they sought gifts worthy of a King; if they had some dim premonition of the future of the One whom they honored, and wished to present something that would indicate their faith as to what He would be in the coming years, the wise men could have found nothing more appropriate or worthy; and if they desired to offer gifts characteristic of their own sun-bathed, star-lit homes they could have made no better choice. In that humble house in Bethlehem, with its roof of mud and straw, its walls of rough stones, and its floor of earth, we must leave those mysterious and nameless Magi, and that Child, whose birth was the sunset of a long, dark and bloody day of history, and the sunrise of another whose dawn was at first enveloped in clouds, but in whose noontide, spirit and life, service and sacrifice, brotherhood and love, will forever be luminous and victorious.

The Desire of All Nations Had Come

IN THE appearance of those men at that time there was something singularly significant. They represented the long aspiration and hunger of the nations. Something more than curiosity caused their journey. The Messianic expectation had pervaded the East and probably had much to do with their presence. The immediate occasion of their visit may have been the wish to pay reverence to earthly Royalty, but more probably it was inspired by what has been beautifully called "the desire of all nations." The ideals of the past had failed, and spiritual and prophetic souls among many peoples were looking for some new and better faith. The East, as well as the West, was without any rational religion, but the lives of men were as dreary and their hearts as hungry as ever. The ancient faith spasmodically revived, then flickered, and then died away. It was the end of the old and the beginning of a new dispensation in other lands than Judea. The longing for some new and brighter light on human life's mystery was intense and universal. The melancholy of "the seekers after God," like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, was typical of a long-continued and widely prevailing sadness which was mixed with a dim yet prophetic anticipation. The wise men came out of nations from which in later times many were to do homage to Jesus as King in the realm of the Spirit. They were the precursors of the untold millions who were to find in Him "the desire of all nations," as was prophesied by the prophet: "And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come."

A FOUNTAIN among the hills never shows what a river will be when it reaches the ocean. A fountain of history has in it as little that is evidently prophetic as the springs in which the Columbia or the Amazon have their birth. The Christmas present of the Magi was the first in a beautiful and endless succession.