

Vasda: But master, this pearl may ransom the Prince!

[Artaban lowers his eyes, but his palm remains outstretched.. Vasda hesitates, then slowly places the pearl in his hand. Artaban turns to the girl.]

Artaban: Here is thy ransom, daughter. It is the last of the treasures which I had kept for my King. Take it and be free!

[He places the pearl in her hand. The sound of a rumbling earthquake is heard. A voice is heard crying in the distance.]

Voice: It is finished!

[Lightning and thunder follow immediately. The sky darkens and a cloud of dust and smoke fills the air. The Creditor flees in terror. Artaban stumbles once more and strikes his head on a rock. Vasda and Shibyah rush to his side. Vasda pulls water and a cloth from his pack and sponges away the blood from Artaban's face. The noise subsides, all is calm. A voice is heard in the distance, very small and still. Shibyah turns to see if someone has called to them. Artaban looks up and all fades dark but a light upon him.]

Artaban: Not so, my Lord! When saw I thee an hungered and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw I thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? When saw I thee in prison? Three and thirty years have I looked for thee; but I have never before seen thy face, nor ministered unto thee, my Lord, my King.

Voice: Verily I say unto thee, Inasmuch as thou has done it unto one of the least of my brethren, thou hast done it unto me.

[A calm radiance of wonder and joy lights the face of Artaban. A long breath of relief exhales gently from his lips and his body relaxes. The lights fade away and all is dark. The end.]

The Other Wise Man

A play in One Act based on the inspiring story by Henry Van Dyke
by M. Ryan Taylor

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This version adapted for use in a play reading. For information on performing this work in a public setting, please write to: Vocal Works, 856 N 350 W, American Fork, UT 84003

Characters:*

- 1 Artaban
- 2 Abdus > Joshua > A Parthian Jew
- 3 Rhodaspes > A Woman > Shibyah
- 4 Tigranes > A Captain > A Creditor
- 5 Abgarus > A Rabbi > A Voice
- 6 Vasda

*Although it is possible to have one person on each part, only 6 people are needed to hold a play reading of this work; these numbers suggest possible combinations of parts, for example, reader #5 would read the parts of Abgarus, A Rabbi, and A Voice.

Scene 1 : A Parthian observatory at twilight.

Artaban: [looking to the sky] Soon stars will shine. The sun retires, no more to cast a blinding light upon the fabric of the sky and through that loose-wove veil that separates us from the eternal a little light peaks through and shimmers with the passing of the wind. Soon stars will shine, each point a distant window far, to far to see through clearly, yet viewed as one the shape of heaven dances on our minds like a song and we can almost feel the brightness of the city of the Lord and trace the outward shape of its mansions. Soon stars will shine; perhaps a new window will open tonight and shining shake its light upon a sleeping world, bathing us in hope, bathing us in expectation. Soon stars will shine. [He sees the approaching Magi and bids them enter.]
Welcome! Welcome! Peace be with you! Welcome!

Welcome! May peace shine upon you! Welcome! Abdus, come within and rest you! Here Rhodaspes, come Tigranes, here you'll better see the stars.

Abdus: The Stars are the thoughts of the Eternal.

Rhodaspes: They are the mirror of His will.

Abdus: They map the infinite and timeless.

Rhodaspes: Could man but chart their course and see their plan . . .

Abdus: See clear the mirror of our world . . .

Tigranes: . . . but they are numberless and strange.

Artaban: Welcome! Father! Peace be with you! Welcome! Here come let me help you. Abgarus has come! Here Rhodaspes, come Tigranes, help our father to his seat of honor.

[Abgarus motions for them to gather round the altar of flame and leads the company in a hymn to Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom).]

Abgarus: O Ahura! Lord of Wisdom!
O Holiness and Truth, look down and bless us!
O Ahura! O ye Good Mind!
O Mazda might thy flame of truth confess us!
 Arise in me, Ahura!
 Arise in me, Ahura!
 Arise in me, Ahura Mazda!
O Ahura! Lord of Wisdom!
Consume my pride within thy fiery ocean,
Strip bare my heart of all but true devotion,
Thy Righteousness refine and stay corrosion,
 Arise in me, Ahura!
Grant me a keener sight,
That I might teach the people by thy Light.

Vasda: No! My dear master, I will carry you . . .

[A Creditor, dragging a screaming young woman, enters.]

Shibyah: Let go of me, please, I can work to pay my father's debt. Please, do not sell me. I beg you, please!

[Artaban pauses to look on her with compassion. The girl sees him and with a burst of strength breaks free and falls at Artaban's feet.]

Shibyah: Have pity and save me, for the sake of the God of Purity!

Artaban: [with regret] Child, I cannot help you.

Shibyah: [taking his hand] Holy one, I am a daughter of the true religion taught by the Magi.

Vasda: Let go!

[Artaban places his other arm on Vasda to calm him.]

Artaban: Child, truly, I cannot help you.

Vasda: Master, we must go.

Shibyah: My father was a merchant of Parthia, but he is dead, and I am seized for his debts to be sold as a slave.

[Artaban looks into the eyes of the creditor.]

Creditor: The debt is great.

Shibyah: I will be dishonored! Holy one! Save me, I beg you!

[Artaban takes Vasda's shoulder and tries to rise. Vasda helps him. Once up, he places his palm out toward Vasda, beckoning for the pearl.]

Parthian Jew: The priests and elders say that he must die because he gave himself out to be the Son of God and thus they have incited the rage of the people. Pilate has sent him to the cross as he said that he was the 'King of the Jews.'

Artaban: [softly] The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men; it may be that I shall find my King, at last, in the hands of his enemies, and that I shall come in time to offer my pearl for his ransom before he dies. Come, be swift.

[He turns toward Golgotha, but stumbles after a few steps, and falls to the ground.]

Vasda: [kneeling at his side] Master!

[After he catches his breath, Artaban places the pearl in Vasda's hand. Vasda looks at him and shakes his head.]

Artaban: Vasda, you must take *our* pearl before the King . . .

Vasda: No master, come, please . . .

Artaban: I feel a rip in the stitching, my son . . . that I had listened to you . . . to be stopped now, so close to my goal, by my own stubborn pride . . . what a fool I am.

Vasda: You have loved much, my master.

Artaban: What good if I have failed my Lord. Twice already I have given away his gifts. Twice!

Vasda: The King of Light is merciful, my master.

Artaban: Run! Please, Vasda. At least I will know that you came before the Victorious One and offered this ransom for his life. It may not be too late.

[The men sit except Artaban who begins to pace as he speaks.]

Artaban: You have come tonight to rekindle your faith in the God of Purity, even as this fire has been rekindled upon the altar.

Abgarus: We do not worship the flame, but Him of whom it is our chosen symbol.

Artaban: Is it not the purest of all created things? Does it not speak to us of one who is Light and Truth?

Abgarus: The enlightened lift the veil of form, new light and truth are coming to them continually through the old symbols.

Artaban: Hear me, then, my father and my friends, while I tell you of the new light and truth that have come to me through the most ancient of all signs.

Tigranes: Artaban, there are important matters that require this council's attention. Do we really have time to discuss obscure signs?

Abgarus: There should always be a time to discuss matters of the spirit.

Tigranes: But plans must be made for the new . . .

Abgarus: How can we be guides and leaders to our people if we neglect to ponder the signs that the Good Mind has placed on our path to guide us? Artaban, tell us of this sign.

Artaban: We have searched the secrets of nature together, and studied the healing virtues of water, fire and plants, but the highest of all learning, the highest of all wisdom, is the knowledge of the stars; to trace their course is to untangle the threads of the mystery of life . . .

Tigranes: Long have we listened to you talk of the virtues of the stars. The stars are the infinite thoughts of the Good Mind, but the thoughts of man may be counted. There is much we do not understand, nor can understand; are there not many stars beyond the horizon, stars known only to the dwellers of Ophir and Punt?

Rhodaspes: This is true.

Tigranes: Are we to trust ourselves and our people to a half-knowledge, to this inexact science?

Artaban: Wisdom relies on faith as much as on knowledge.

Tigranes: You talk of wisdom? Where and how can one find wisdom? Should we seek it in the stars? Or should we dig for it in earth where we can touch and feel it? Wisdom, sought by every king and prophet casting eyes up to the sky, or casting glances to the pit where darkness groans and hides it, never guessing where to find it. This is wisdom, this is strength: admit you know nothing, the breadth or the length. Keep men searching for hope in the night, yet know in your heart that the darkness is equal to the light. The war will never end. Make both dark and light your friend.

Artaban: This does not satisfy me. The new sunrise will certainly appear in the appointed time. Is it not prophesied that men will see the brightness of a great light? A light that will never end?

Abgarus: Every faithful disciple of Zarathustra carries the prophecy of the Avesta in his heart, "In that day Saoshyant the Victorious shall arise in the east and around him shall shine a mighty brightness. He shall make life everlasting, incorruptible and immortal, and the dead shall rise again."

Tigranes: This is a dark saying, and it may be that we shall never

Artaban: Walking keeps me young.

Vasda: Walking will put you in your grave!

Artaban: Very well, buy a donkey when we leave Jerusalem.

Vasda: Jerusalem . . . how many times have we been here? What do we expect to find this time?

Artaban: Jerusalem, once more to Jerusalem I must come.

Vasda: But why, my master? In all our visits to this city we have not once found even a trace of the King. Why must we come again?

Artaban: My heart whispers that we may at last succeed.

[Very faintly the chant of a crowd is heard, repeated over and over, growing loud enough to be recognizable, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The crowd passes Artaban and Vasda who are dumbstruck. A Parthian Jew enters, intent on following the crowd.]

Artaban: Young man! What is going on? These crowds, this chant, where do they go and who is condemned?

Parthian Jew: We are going to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls. There is to be an execution. Have you not heard what has happened? All men speak of it.

Artaban: We arrived in the city this very hour.

Parthian Jew: Two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people. It is said that he has even raised a man from the dead.

Vasda: Tell me, why is this good man to be crucified?

Artaban: Hush, it is for the poor.

Vasda: But master, what good will you be to the sick and the poor with a broken leg?

Artaban: Vasda, please, I am not so fragile. Like this pouch I wear, I am threadbare and worn, but there is still something bright within me, and I must deliver it yet. See, the stitching is still strong. [Artaban tugs at the pouch, the cord breaks and the pearl falls to the ground, Vasda retrieves the pearl and places it in Artaban's hand.]

Vasda: This pouch is replaceable. You are not. I have watched you search through many lands: through cities and countryside, through prisons and galley ships, through slave-markets and lepers' colonies; and not content to merely search out the famine or find the plague-ridden, you have sought to heal, feed and comfort.

Artaban: Hush.

Vasda: I say you have fed the hungry and clothed the naked, healed the sick and comforted the captive; what more can you do? There is a time to serve and a time to be served. You have earned your rest.

Artaban: My search is incomplete and my gift remains ungiven.

Vasda: It is my duty to take care of you, but you will not let me. You may be able to continue the quest, I hope and pray for it every day, but I tell you that you will not last much longer if you will not let me buy you a donkey.

Artaban: Vasda!

Vasda: We will be able to travel so much faster, think of all the time saved . . .

understand it. It is better to consider the things that are near at hand, and to increase the influence of the Magi, rather than look for one, who may be a stranger, to whom we must resign our power.

Abdus: Yes, it is time we looked to the support of the new fire temple . . .

Artaban: My father, I have kept this prophecy in the secret place of my soul and I have read other words which foretell the rising of the Victorious One in his brightness. [He draws two scrolls from his cloak.] Long before our fathers came into the land of Babylon, there were wise men in Chaldea, and of these Balaam, the son of Beor, was one of the mightiest. Hear his word, "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall arise out of Israel."

Tigranes: Judah was a captive by the waters of Babylon, and the sons of Jacob were in bondage to our kings. The tribes of Israel are scattered through the mountains like lost sheep, and from the remnant that dwells under the yoke of Rome neither star nor scepter shall arise.

Artaban: See here the prophecy of the Hebrew Daniel, a mighty searcher of dreams and a counselor to our kings who won the trust and respect of our people, "Know, therefore, and understand that the time from the going forth of the commandment to restore Jerusalem until the coming of that Messiah, the prince, shall be seven and threescore and two weeks."

Abgarus: But, my son, these are mystical numbers. Who can interpret them, or who can find the key that will unlock their meaning.

Artaban: The Temple at Jerusalem has been rebuilt. My brethren and I have long studied the sky and calculated the time; it

falls in this year, for in the spring we noted two great planets meeting in the house of the Hebrews. We also saw a new star there, which shone for one night and then vanished.

Tigranes: A star that shines for one night is hardly to be considered an "Everlasting Light." [Abdus and Rhodaspes laugh]

Artaban: Tonight the two great planets meet once again. Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar are watching by the ancient Temple of the Seven Spheres while I observe here. If the star shines again, they will wait ten days for us at the temple.

Tigranes: Wait for us?

Artaban: Yes, from Borsippa we can set out together for Jerusalem, to see and worship the promised one who shall be born King of Israel. I have sold my possessions, and bought these three jewels - a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl - to carry them as a tribute to the King. Watch with me, come with me, that we may have joy together in finding the Prince who is worthy to be served.

[Abdus, Rhodaspes and Tigranes glance at each other with looks of doubt, wonder and pity. Abgarus folds his hands and looks down at them as if in deep thought. Tigranes rises.]

Tigranes: Artaban, this is a vain dream. It comes from too much looking upon the stars and the cherishing of lofty thoughts. It would be wiser to spend your time gathering money for the new fire-temple at Chala. No king will ever rise from the broken race of Israel, and no end will ever come to the eternal strife of light and darkness. He who looks for it is a chaser of shadows. Farewell.[exits]

Artaban: Wait, Tigranes, the time is near, you can see for yourself.

Artaban: I will pass through countries where plague and famine lies heavy on the land.

Vasda: I am not afraid.

Artaban: I will visit the prisons, the slave-markets . . .

Vasda: [falling to his knees] Please do not send me from you!

Artaban: [kneeling down] I dare not take a child to these places . . .

Vasda: [sobbing] He is my King too! [pause] I know I have no gift to bring him . . . but after Bethlehem . . . I have dreamed of kneeling down before him at your side. Please . . . do not send me away!

Scene 5 : Near the Damascus gate of Jerusalem.

[Vasda, now a grown man, leads the aging, white haired Artaban along the path toward the gate, but Artaban stumbles. Vasda helps his master to a boulder by the gate where he sits down.]

Vasda: Rest, my master. I fear you are getting too old for these long excursions on foot.

Artaban: Hush, Vasda.

Vasda: But will your old bones bear you on these journeys much longer? If you were to really fall and break something . . .

Artaban: Hush . . .

Vasda: Master. That centurion with the fever gave us a little money for your service to him. I could take a bit of that and buy a donkey, then you could ride . . .

homage to him, but this I know: those who seek him would do well to look among the poor and the lowly, the sick and dying, the sorrowful and oppressed.

Artaban: I thank you. I feel what you say is true, [pointing to the sphinx] there is hope in that smile. May God bless you and keep you.

Rabbi: And you. [exits]

Artaban: Vasda! Awake.

Vasda: Yes master? Is it morning already?

Artaban: Today you will head for home.

Vasda: Really master? But we have not yet found the king of light.

Artaban: You must take what little money is left and head back to Ecbatana.

Vasda: Without you . . . alone?

Artaban: You must report to Rhodaspes, your true master, and tell him all that has happened.

Vasda: But master . . .

Artaban: It is important that you tell him that I have not given up . . . that I still have faith . . .

Vasda: Master, my quest is not over until you have found the King.

Artaban: I will seek among the people of the dispersion.

Vasda: I was to go on with you until the end . . .

Abdus: [rising] Artaban, I have no knowledge of these things. In my house there sleeps a new bride. I cannot leave her, neither can I take her with me on this strange journey. This quest is not for me, farewell. [exits]

Artaban: But stay, stay for a moment . . .

Rhodaspes: I am ill and unfit for hardship, but this child, Vasda, from among my servants, I send with you to bring me word of how you fare. [to Vasda] Artaban is your master now, until you both return. [to Artaban] Farewell. [exits]

Vasda: [running after Rhodaspes] But master . . .

Abgarus: My son, it may be that the light of truth is in this sign. If so, it will surely lead you to the Prince and the mighty brightness. If however, it is only a shadow of the light, as Tigranes suggests, he who follows it will have a long pilgrimage and a fruitless search. [pauses] With men like Tigranes rising to power in the ranks of the Magi, I had hoped, that in time, a man of faith would take my place . . .

Artaban: Father, I have faith in the sign. I have faith that I will behold the face of the Victorious One. For this, my heart burns within me. Shall I not go?

Abgarus: It is better to follow even the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst, but those who would see wonderful things must often travel alone. I am far too old for this journey, but my heart will be a companion of your pilgrimage day and night. I will know the end of your quest. Go in peace. [exits]

Artaban: Farewell, dear father.

[Artaban watches him depart and then looks at the darkening sky.]

Soon stars will shine. A little light peaks through and shimmers with the passing of the wind. Soon stars will shine, each point a distant window, dancing on our minds like a song. Soon a new window will shining shake its light upon a sleeping world, bathing us in hope, bathing us in expectation. Soon . . . soon stars will shine.

[Blackout, except for a single point of light representing the Star of Bethlehem.]

Scene 2 : The Wilderness. A dark, windy, cloud-covered night.

Vasda: Master, must we hurry so!

Artaban: The caravan may leave without us if we are delayed any further.

Vasda: But master, the wind, the cold, my feet . . .

Artaban: . . . must keep up with mine.

Vasda: But master, I am so tired . . .

Artaban: If you had securely tied the horses last night we would not be on foot. We have no choice but to press . . .

Vasda: [falling to his knees and whimpering] Oh master, I can't.

Artaban: Our appointment is at midnight, is almost midnight now and we have many miles left to traverse. If you do not get up you will have to travel back to Rhodaspes alone.

Vasda: [after a moment] I will try.

Artaban: Come. [offers his arm]

Artaban: What did you say?

Rabbi: It is better to follow even the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst.

Artaban: My father said those same words to me. It seems so very long ago.

Rabbi: Young man, what is it you seek?

Artaban: A star and a scepter arising from the house of Israel.

Rabbi: [pause] You seek the Messiah?

Artaban: He that shall make life everlasting, incorruptible, and immortal. He who will raise the dead and bring hope to the living. I have witnessed the sign of his birth, but I arrived in Bethlehem too late to offer my tribute to the King of Light. I was told the child was carried into Egypt and here I have sought him, but to no avail.

Rabbi: If what you say is true . . . if the time has truly come . . . perhaps this knowledge will help you: Isaiah testified of the Messiah, saying, "He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him . . . Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." The King you seek will not be found in a palace, nor among the rich and powerful. His light will rise out of patient and triumphant suffering. I do not know how this will come to pass, nor how the kings and peoples of the earth shall be brought to acknowledge the Messiah and pay

Artaban: I am intrigued by it.

Rabbi: Intrigued?

Artaban: I have traveled far to see it.

Rabbi: Really? Your clothes tell me you are no idolater. Why should a magian travel so far from his home to see this?

Artaban: It was not my goal, no, not at all, but now that I stand here before it, it seems to be telling me to go home.

Rabbi: Telling you to go home? A pile of brick and stone?

Artaban: A trace, a sign, a word, a hope, as a footprint on the sand of the Nile: it fills, it shines, it washes away. We camped beneath the great and stately sycamores of Heliopolis. We followed wisps and whispers to the valley of the kings. We stood beneath the pyramids, and my heart was filled with wonder at the vanity of man, at my vanity. And now, this lion mocks me, this dragon of the desert; he crouches here calm eyed and a smirks and tells me to go home.

Rabbi: Young man, what makes you think that?

Artaban: He grins at my defeat. He mocks my efforts and my aspirations. I truly have chased the shadow of light and have not to show for it but “a long pilgrimage and a fruitless search.”

Rabbi: Perhaps . . . but maybe the Sphinx does not mock you. It may be that there is a touch of pity in his smile . . . maybe not even pity, but encouragement: a promise that even the defeated will attain victory and the disappointed will discover a prize, for it is better to follow even the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst.

[They start afresh, but Vasda stumbles over Joshua.]

Vasda: [tentatively] Master . . .

Artaban: Please, we must keep up the pace, they will think . . .

Vasda: . . . but master, look here! I tripped, I thought it was a log, then it moved . . . it breathes.

[Artaban stops and turns about slowly, pain in his eyes. He sees the figure lying there helpless. He bows his head.]

Artaban: O God of truth and purity, direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which is only known by Thee.

[He moves to Joshua's side, kneels and examines him.]

Artaban: This man is very ill, Vasda. If we do not help him he is sure to die.

Vasda: O master! I was startled, I'm sorry, you cannot afford to be delayed . . . I should have kept my eyes on the road.
Forgive me . . .

Artaban: You are not to be faulted for possessing the curiosity of youth. [removing his pack] I am sure this man will be very grateful for your keen eye and clumsy feet.

Vasda: But master, your appointment at Borsippa . . . the Temple of the Seven Spheres . . .

Artaban: [opening his pack] It may be that my friends will wait. Now make a fire; I need to make a tea of these herbs.

Vasda: [hesitating] Master? Are you sure? You were in such a hurry. You said that they can't afford to wait long.

Artaban: It is true that my friends may think that I have given up this journey. In that case they will follow the star without me.

Vasda: [frantic] Then you will lose your quest and it will all be my fault. Master . . . we should go now, I promise I can keep up, I can run if it is necessary!

Artaban: [pause] This man needs my help Vasda.

Vasda: But what is he? Nothing. You owe him nothing. He is not even of our people or of our faith. Surely to bring your gifts before the King of Light is more important than to save a filthy vagabond like this!

Artaban: Perhaps . . . it may be foolishness, but I cannot leave this man here to die when it is in my power to help him.

Vasda: Master?

Artaban: Now make a fire. [Vasda stares at him] Please.

[Vasda quickly gathers fuel and gets a fire started.]

Artaban: [chanted] This service, these vows and my thanksgiving; for thou hast laid the foundation of life everlasting, and marked the path to thy land of endless light.
This service, these vows, my adoration
I consecrate to thee, my Lord, my Prince, my King!

Vasda: Master, I'm sorry, but I must know . . . how can you be sure that this is the right choice?

Artaban: Vasda . . . Sometimes a rustle stirs deep in my heart, so softly, so simply, so pure that I know my pathway is sure. Other times I am surrounded with doubt, fog obscures my view, pathways divide and I can't see the ends.

Artaban: I am all alone here.

Captain: Stand aside, or I will run you through!

Artaban: [calmly placing his hand upon the captain's shoulder] I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this precious ruby [holds up the jewel with his other hand] to the prudent captain who has the wisdom to leave me in peace.

[Miriam's baby lets out a small cry. The captain steps back, pulling away from Artaban's grasp. He raises his sword as if to make a thrust, but then outstretches his empty left hand. Artaban places the gem in his hand and the Captain, looking at it, smiles. Hearing a noise behind him, he quickly turns about and walks on.]

Captain: March on! There is no child here. This house is empty.

Artaban: [falling to his knees] God of Truth, forgive my sin! I have lied to save the life of this child. Two of my gifts are gone; the sapphire and the ruby. I have spent for man that which was meant for God. Will I ever be worthy to see the face of my King? God of Truth, forgive my sin!

Miriam: [weeping for joy] May the Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace.

Scene 4 : Egypt.

[Artaban stands alone in deep thought. Vasda lies sleeping by a small campfire. A very old man, bent with age, approaches.]

Rabbi: You find this idol of the Egyptians impressive?

They fled away that same night secretly, [she approaches Artaban] and it is whispered that they headed toward Egypt.

Artaban: Why might not this child have been the promised Prince? [touching the cheek of the child] Kings have been born in lowlier houses than this, and the favorite of the stars may rise from a humble cottage . . .

[A scream sounds distantly, gradually more sounds of noise and confusion: wails, women's voices, a clangor of drums and horns.]

A Woman: [In the distance] The soldiers! the soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!

Artaban: Go inside, quickly! Vasda! Go in, watch over Miriam. Hide the child!

[Miriam, gripped with terror, claps her child to her bosom and crouches motionless in the dark corner, covering him with the folds of her robe. Vasda stands between her and the door. Artaban moves to stand between the doorposts. A Captain, bearing a bloody sword, enters the street]

Captain: [calling back over his shoulder] You, follow that woman; and you, up that street. Check every room. [to himself] Hmph! No resistance. I knew the men would flee if they heard another tax collector was coming! Fools.

[The captain sees Artaban, is startled momentarily, but then moves forward determined to thrust him aside. Artaban does not stir.]

Captain: Stand aside.

Artaban: I am all alone in this place.

Captain: Stand aside, I said!

Vasda: [sleepily] But master, is it not clear that to serve the King of Light is best; should we not go to him?

Artaban: Life's hardest trials lay not in choosing between paths of virtue and vice but in weighing good against good. [Vasda has fallen asleep.] Rest, Vasda. Sleep as only the young do. Dream of the Prince. Dream that we will yet behold his face. [he continues to work on the herbs]

[chanted] This service, these vows and my thanksgiving; for thou hast laid the foundation of life everlasting, and marked the path to thy land of endless light.

Joshua: [weakly] Who are you?

Artaban: Artaban of Ecbatana. And you?

Joshua: Joshua, of Borsippa. [pause] How long?

Artaban: Most of the night, it is almost dawn.

Joshua: Why have you sought me here to bring back my life?

Artaban: I am traveling to Jerusalem in search of one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer of all men. My servant found you here, near to death.

Joshua: But why stop? . . . when I am a Hebrew.

Artaban: God put you in my path . . . [urgently] but I dare not tarry any longer; I have missed the appointment with my friends and their caravan may soon depart without me. See, here is all that I have left of bread and wine, and here is a tea [pushing the cup into Joshua's hands] I have drought of healing herbs.

Joshua: May the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob bless and

prosper the journey of the merciful, and bring him in peace to his desired haven.

Artaban: Vasda, awake, it is time.

Joshua: Stay! I have nothing to give you for your kindness, but I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought, for our prophets have said that he should not be born in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Artaban: I thank you for this news. Farewell. Vasda, be swift.

Joshua: May the Lord bring you in safety to that place. May he grant the righteous desire of your heart, because you have had mercy upon the sick.

Scene 3 : A House of Bethlehem by a Well.

[Miriam carries a water pot from the house to the well and begins to draw water, she is interrupted by a babies cry that comes from the house. She puts aside her work and goes to pick up the child.]

Miriam: [soothingly] Hush, hush, my dear little one. Now is time for sleeping, not for fussing. [she sings] Lully, lullay, my little tiny child. By, by, lully, lullay. Lully, lullay, my little tiny child. By, by lully, lullay.

[The child stops crying. Miriam lays the child down and returns to the well. Artaban and Vasda enter. Seeing the strangers, Miriam begins to pack up her work, but is halted by Artaban's voice.]

Artaban: Ishshah?

Miriam: [hesitatingly] Yes?

Artaban: Would you please share water with two weary travelers.

Miriam: [contemplative] It was the strangest thing, they said they had been following a star.

Artaban: Yes?

Miriam: But it was all so silly . . . and frightening. The star shone a light on this lowly hovel, I have never seen anything like it before.

Vasda: [to Artaban] The King of Light?

Miriam: Yes, that is what they said, but when I was told that they, you, worshiped fire, I dismissed it.

Artaban: The fire is merely a symbol of the Prince, the Mighty Brightness, the King of Light.

Vasda: What happened next?

Miriam: When they went into the shed, they showered the young child there with many rich gifts and bowed low before him. I will never forget it.

Artaban: [excitedly] I was to be one of their company, but I missed my appointment with them at Borsippa, and thinking I had given up the quest, they left without me. Without camels or provisions I was forced to travel back and sell the sapphire that was to be part of my gift to the King of Light. Tell me, dear woman, where can I find this child? I may be late, I may be alone, but I too would bow down before the Prince and offer my gifts.

Miriam: [moving slowly toward the cradle] Your friends disappeared as suddenly as they came, and the family they visited were not natives of our city. They were from Nazareth. [picks up her child, for her comfort] Like many others, they came to be taxed and counted by the Romans.

Vasda: Miriam?

Miriam: Yes.

Vasda: So where are all the men? I have seen none but my master since we entered the city?

Miriam: Your master knows.

Artaban: [to Vasda] The men have taken their flocks with wagons of provisions into the hills to avoid the taxation. [to Miriam] . . . but what made you think I was a tax collector?

Miriam: I did not look at you closely, all I saw was white cloth; the tax collectors wear white.

Vasda: Master, is it right?

Artaban: Sometimes, Vasda, one must choose the lesser of two evils. It is good to honor a king, and taxes are necessary for many reasons, but these men cannot stand by and watch as food is stolen from the mouths of their children; that would be a greater sin.

Miriam: Once I looked at you more closely I could see . . . You are a Magian, are you not?

Artaban: You have seen men wearing the winged circlet before?

Miriam: Only recently. It caused quite a stir among the men.

Artaban: How long ago was this?

Miriam: A week ago three men dressed as yourself came leading a large caravan from Borsippa.

Artaban: They were looking for something, did they find it?

Miriam: Travelers?

Artaban: Yes, we have had little water for several days now.

Miriam: Oh! Excuse me . . . I thought . . .

Artaban: Yes?

Miriam: Well, there was a rumor . . .

Vasda: A rumor?

Miriam: Perhaps I shouldn't speak of it; it's not really that important. [turns toward the well]

Vasda: But why, if it's not that important?

Miriam: [pauses] You are strangers to me . . . strangers to this city, though . . . [she looks closely on Artaban]

Vasda: Ishshah, please, I will die of suspense.

Miriam: What?

Vasda: The rumor, Ishshah, a servant lives on rumors.

Artaban: Vasda, [with a smile] leave the poor woman alone.

Vasda: Oh Master, I have not had a tasty little rumor since we left Ecbatana. These caravan folk, they are as silent as . . .

Miriam: I'm afraid this tidbit will not satisfy your appetite, young one.

Vasda: Ishshah, I tremble with anticipation. [falls to a begging position] I thirst far more for that tidbit than for the water in your well.

Miriam: [a long pause, and a sly smile] You do look it. Hmm . . .

Vasda: Oh, Ishshah, please!

Miriam: Very well. [she sits on the edge of the well] My brother's wife overheard this soldier, a Roman captain in the local reserve, talking to one of his company at the Inn. [to Artaban, in an aside manner] This is a small town, they really should know better than to talk official business, openly, at the Inn.

Vasda: Official business? What did he say?

Miriam: Hmm . . . let me remember.

Vasda: You're doing that on purpose, just to torture me.

Miriam: Patience. [drawing in a long breath] He said that he had to travel to Jerusalem that night in order to deliver some documents to the main garrison, but that he must return to Bethlehem today, in order to oversee and enforce the taxation. [another long breath] That is all.

Vasda: A tax?

Artaban: That does explain the empty marketplace. I assume that this king taxes harshly.

Miriam: Have you not heard of Herod?

Artaban: We are from Ecbatana, his fame has not yet reached us.

Miriam: He is well enough hated here.

Vasda: Ishshah? Do you not respect and honor your king?

Miriam: I would honor and respect a king who honors and respects

his people, but Herod . . . [she spits on the ground] . . . he has murdered members of his own family! His wife and three of his sons! A man that would do that has no honor in him. How can one honor the dishonorable?

Vasda: But I've been taught that taxes are necessary, for the common good and defense of the people. To evade a taxation is to cut one's own . . .

Miriam: [getting heated] We have just been taxed and counted by the Romans, they 'protect' the people, if you consider enslavement protection. Now Herod sends forth his tax collectors, practically on the heels of the Romans' . . . our children may as well starve for all this 'king' cares.

Artaban: Vasda is young. He has not lived long enough to witness how cruel men can be. Forgive him.

Miriam: [calmer] Herod is not even our true king, he is an Idumaeen, appointed to rule this province by Rome. He's sought to buy the loyalty of the people by rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem, but we look for another . . . we look for someone to rescue us from our captivity . . . we look for our true king . . . We look for a son of David, a deliverer, a Moses; we hope in the words of prophets that he soon will come to lift us, to lead us, to throw off our yoke and to make us as one. We cling to the hope of his day.

Vasda: [pause] Ishshah?

Miriam: You may call me Miriam. I would invite you in . . .

Artaban: . . . but we are not of your faith, I understand.

Miriam: Come to the shelter of the porch, out of the sun. Come, have some water.