

Balthasar

A Tale of the Three Wise Men By Anatole France



In those days Balthasar, called Saracen by the Grecians, reigned over Ethiopia. He was black but comely, simple of mind and generous of heart. In the third year of his reign, which was the twenty-second of his age, he went to visit Balkis, queen of Sheba, accompanied by the mage Sembobitis and by the eunuch Menkera. He had a train of seventy-five camels, with loads of cinnamon, myrrh, gold powder and elephants' tusks. While they were journeying Sembobitis would teach Balthasar the influence of the planets and the secret virtues of stones, and Menkera would sing liturgic songs to him; but he was not listening to them, being all intent upon looking at the little jackals who were sitting, with ears erect, on the sandy horizon.

At last, after a march of twelve long days, Balthasar and his companions smelt a sweet smell of roses and they soon gazed upon the gardens which surrounded the town of Sheba. There they met young maidens who were dancing under blossoming pomegranates.

When they came into the town they were amazed at the size of storehouses, sheds and workyards, which were stretching in front of them, as well as at the large quantity of merchandise stored in them. For a long time they walked along streets thronged with chariots, porters, donkeys and donkey drivers, until the marble walls, the purple tents, the gold cupolas of Balkis' palace came into view.

The queen of Sheba received them in a court cooled with fountains of perfumed water which fell in pearly streams with a clear-ringing sound. She was standing in bejeweled robes and she was smiling.

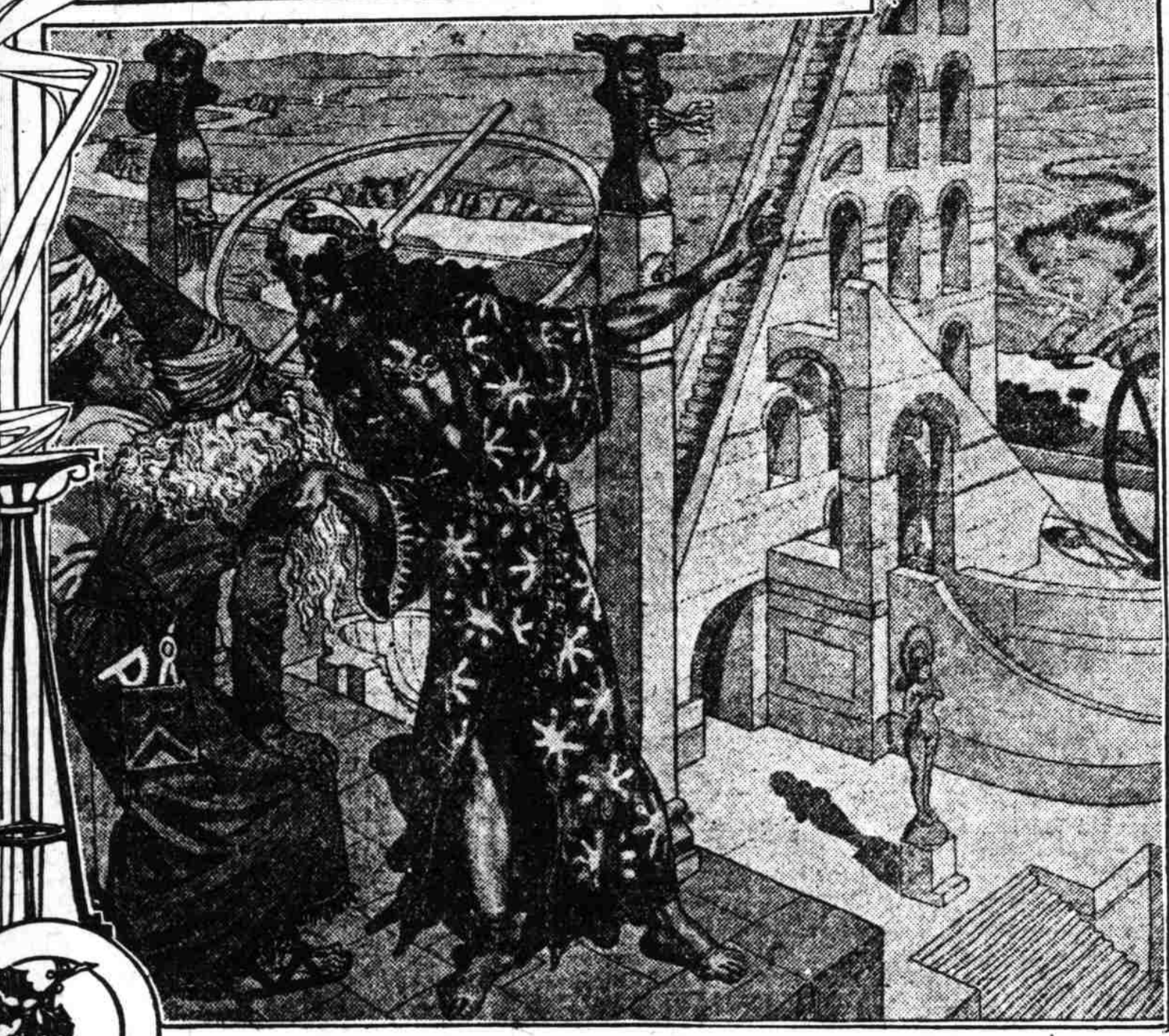
When he saw her Balthasar was deeply troubled. She appeared to him sweeter than a sweet dream.

"My lord," Sembobitis muttered to him, "be careful to conclude a good treaty of commerce with the queen."

"Take heed, my lord," said Menkera, "for she is said to use magic in winning the hearts of men."

Then, after bowing very low, the mage and the eunuch retired.

Balthasar, when he was alone with Balkis, opened his mouth, in an attempt to speak, but



he could not utter a word, and he thought to himself: "The queen will be angry at my silence."

But the queen was still smiling and did not look angry.

She spoke first and said, in a voice sweeter than music:

"Be welcome and sit down."

And, with a finger which looked like a ray of light, she beckoned him to some purple cushions on the floor.

Balthasar sat down, sighed a big sigh, and seizing hold of a cushion with each hand, he exclaimed hurriedly:

"Madame, I wish these two cushions were giants and your enemies, so that I might wring their necks."

And, speaking thus, he squeezed the cushions so hard in his clenched fists that they burst, letting out a cloud of white down. One of the little feathers whirled round in the air for some time and then alighted on the queen's neck.

"My lord Balthasar," said Balkis, blushing, "why do you want to kill giants?"

"Because I love you," said Balthasar.

"Tell me," said Balkis, "is the water of wells sweet in your capital?"

"Yes," answered Balthasar, much surprised.

"I also would like to know," resumed Balkis, "how they prepare dried fruits in Ethiopia."

The king did not know what to say; but she pressed him:

"Tell me, now, if you would please me."

Then, with a great effort of memory, he described the practise of Ethiopian makers of sweets, which consisted of stewing quinces in honey. But she was not listening to him. Then, all of a sudden:

"My lord, they say that you are in love with Queen Candace, your neighbor. Tell me truly, is she fairer of face than I?"

"Oh! Madame, how could that be?"—and Balthasar fell on his knees at Balkis' feet. The queen continued: "Then, her eyes? . . . her mouth? . . . her complexion?" Balthasar, stretching a hand toward her, said:

alighted on your neck, and I will give you one-half of my kingdom, with the sage Sembobitis and Menkera the eunuch into the bargain."

But she got up and ran away laughing a clear-ringing laugh.

That evening Balthasar had supper with the queen of Sheba and drank palm wine.

"So, really," said Balkis during the supper, "Queen Candace is not so fair of face as I am?"

"Queen Candace is black," answered Balthasar.

Balkis glanced at Balthasar and said: "One can be black and comely."

"Balkis!" exclaimed the king. He could say no more. Seizing her in his embrace he held the queen's forehead beneath his lips. But he saw that she was weeping. Then he spoke to her in a low, caressing, lightly singing voice, as a nurse would to her babe, and he called her his little flower and his little star.

"Why dost thou weep?" said he, "and what must I do that thou mayest weep no more? If thou hast any wish, tell it me, and I shall do even as thou wishest."

She had ceased weeping, and now she was in a dreamy mood. For a long time he pressed her to tell him her wish.

At last she said: "I wish to feel fear."

As Balthasar did not seem to understand, she explained to him that for a long time she had been wishing to be exposed to some unknown danger, but that she could not, because both the men and the gods of Sheba were watching over her.

"And yet," she added with a sigh, "I should so like to feel, during the night, the cold and delightful thrill of fear go through my flesh! I should so like to feel my hair stand on end! Oh! how delightful it would be to be afraid!"

She threw her arms round the neck of the black king and said, in the voice of a beseeching child:

"Here is night coming down upon us. Let us both go through the town in disguise. Will you not come?"

He assented and she, running to the window, looked through the lattice into the public square.

ing lamp, through the thick atmosphere of the place, reeking brutes fighting with fists or knives for a cup of fermented drink, while others slept, with closed fists, under the tables.

Balkis, perceiving some salt fish hanging from the rafters of the roof, said to her companion:

"I should like to eat of that salt fish with pounded onions."

Balthasar ordered the dish, but when she had finished eating, he discovered that he had taken no money with him. He took little concern and thought they could go out without paying. But the innkeeper barred their way, calling him a slave and calling her a donkey, at which Balthasar knocked him down with his fist. Some of the men, with uplifted knives, rushed upon the two strangers. But the black king, seizing hold of an enormous pestle used for pounding Egyptian onions, crushed two of his aggressors and compelled the others to retreat. He felt Balkis by his side, which made him invincible. The friends of the innkeeper, not daring to approach, hurled at him, from the back of the shop, oil jars and cups, lighted lamps, and even the enormous brass pot wherein a whole sheep was stewing. The pot fell with a crash on Balthasar's head and split it. He was stunned for an instant, but, gathering up his strength, he hurled the pot back with such vigor that the weight of it was increased tenfold. The crash of the falling metal was mingled with horrible groans, and with the shrieks of the dying. Taking advantage of the terror of the survivors and fearing lest Balkis should be hurt, Balthasar took her in his arms and ran with her through the dark and deserted streets.

"I love thee," whispered the queen.

And now the moon, peeping from behind a cloud, revealed, in Balkis' half-closed eyes, a ray of light damp with tears. They were going down the dry bed of a torrent. All of a sudden Balthasar's foot slipped on some moss and they fell down holding one another in a tight embrace. It seemed to them as if the world of the living had ceased to exist. And when at dawn gazelles came to drink from the hollows of the stones, the lovers were still wrapped in oblivion.

"There is a beggar," she said, "lying against the wall of the palace. Give him your clothes and ask him to give you, in exchange, his turban and the beggar's hair and the coarse cloth which girdles his loins. Make haste while I get ready."

And she ran out of the banquet hall, clapping her hands for joy.

Balthasar took off his tunic made of fine linen and all embroidered with gold, and tied the beggar's cloth round his loins. He looked a true slave. The queen soon reappeared in the seamless blue gown of the poor women who worked in the fields.

"Let us go!" she said, and led Balthasar through narrow lobbies down to a small gate.

III.

But now there came a big roar of armed horsemen and Balkis saw brave Abner who, at the head of her guards, came to release his queen, of whose mysterious disappearance he had heard the day before.

The mage Sembobitis and Menkera the eunuch who were standing by Abner's side gave a loud cry when they saw their prince lying motionless with a knife in his side. They raised him with the utmost care. Sembobitis, who was well versed in medical science, saw that he was still breathing. He dressed the wound while Menkera wiped the froth from the king's lips. Then they tied him on a horse and bore him gently to the queen's palace.

For a space of fifteen days Balthasar remained in a state of mad delirium. He spoke continually of the brass pot and of the moss in the torrent bed, and cried out for Balkis. On the sixteenth day, having opened his eyes, he saw Sembobitis and Menkera by his bedside, but he did not see the queen.

"Where is she? What is she doing?"

"My lord," said Menkera, "she is in private conversation with the king of Comagene."

"I must see her!" cried Balthasar.

And he rushed out toward the queen's apartment before the old man and the eunuch could stop him. When he came near the bed chamber he saw the king of Comagene coming out of it, all bedecked with gold and as bright as the sun.

Balkis, lying on a purple bed, with closed eyes, was smiling.

"Oh Balkis! Oh my own!" cried Balthasar. She turned a cold and hard gaze on him, and he saw that she had forgotten everything, and he reminded her of that night in the torrent bed.

"I really do not know what you mean, my lord. Palm wine agrees not with you. You must have been a-dreaming."

She rose to her feet and the gems in her gown clashed like hailstones and shone like lightning.

"My lord," she said, "now is the time when my privy council must assemble. I have no leisure for explaining the dreams of a diseased brain. Take some rest. Adieu!"

Balthasar felt as if he was going to die, but he made an effort to hide his weakness from the wicked woman, and, flying to his room, he fainted, his wound having opened again.

IV.

For three weeks he remained insensible, as if dead, and on the twenty-second day, when he came back to life again, he clasped the hand of Sembobitis, who, together with Menkera, had been watching over him, and he said, with tears:

"Oh! my friends, how happy you both are! But no! there is no happiness at all in this world, and everything in it is bad, since love is

At the same moment some brigands happened to pass by and saw the two lying on the moss.

Then they tied them to the tail of a donkey and went along their way with them.

The black king was hurling threats of death at them, but Balkis, although slightly shivering in the cold air of dawn, seemed to smile at some inward thought.

They walked through barren solitudes until the heat of the day began to make itself felt. She was now laughing, and the brigand chief having asked her the reason why, she replied:

"I am laughing at the thought of having you all hanged."

"Truly, my beauty!" exclaimed the brigand chief, "that is strange talk in the mouth of a scrubber of pots! And your black gallant? he will probably help you?"

On hearing these insulting words, Balthasar was incensed with rage; he threw himself upon the brigand and squeezed his neck so hard that he nearly strangled him.

But the brigand stuck his knife into him, and the poor king, rolling on the ground, looked at Balkis with eyes in which all life soon seemed to be extinct.

an evil and since Balkis is a wicked woman."

"To be wise is to be happy" answered Sembobitis.

"Then I will try to be wise," said Balthasar. "But let us return at once to Ethiopia. And, as he had lost all that he loved, he resolved to devote himself to wisdom and to become a sage. He had a tower built, from the top of which one could see several kingdoms and the vast expanse of the heavens. He used to go to its top every night, there to study the heavens under the direction of the sage Sembobitis.

"Sembobitis," he would say, "dost thou answer on thy head for the accuracy of my horoscope?"

And the sage Sembobitis would reply:

"My lord, science is infallible, but savants are not."

Balthasar, who had a fine natural genius, would say:

"Divine truth is the only truth, but it is hidden from us and we seek it in vain. And yet I have just discovered a new star in the heavens. It is a beautiful star, which seems as if it were living, and, when it subsides, it looks like some heavenly eye looking kindly down upon men. I sometimes even imagine that the star is speaking to me. Blessed shall be he who shall be born under that star!"

V.

But it had been noticed abroad, through the whole extent of Ethiopia and through the neighboring kingdoms that Balthasar was no longer in love with Balkis.

When the news reached Sheba, Balkis resented it bitterly. She commanded her grand vizier to get everything ready for a journey to Ethiopia.

"We shall start this very night," she said, "and thou shalt lose thy head if everything is not ready before the sun sinks to rest."

And when she was alone she burst into sobs.

"I love him and he loves me not," she cried in all sincerity.

Then one night Balthasar, who was on the top of his tower, observing the miraculous star, saw on looking down toward the earth, a long black line winding along the sands of the desert, like an army of ants.

As the caravan came nearer Balthasar saw distinctly the bright scimitars and the black horses of the queen's guards.

Then he saw her also; and he was troubled amazingly, and he felt that he was going to love her again. The star was shining in the zenith with marvelous brilliancy. Beneath, Balkis, in her litter of purple and gold, looked quite small, and she also shone like a star.

Balthasar felt drawn toward her as if by some irresistible force. But, turning his face from her with a great effort and lifting up his eyes, he saw the star again, and the star spoke and said:

"Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will!"

"Take thou a measure of myrrh, sweet King Balthasar, and follow me, and I shall lead thee to the Child who has just been born in a stable between a donkey and an ox."

"For that Child is the King of Kings, and he will comfort those who wish to be comforted."

"He calls thee, Balthasar, whose mind is still as dark as thy visage, but whose heart is simple, even as the heart of a child."

"He has chosen thee because thou hast suffered, and he will give thee riches, joy and love."

"He will say to thee: he poor and rejoice in thy poverty, for that is indeed true riches. He will say: true joy lies in the renunciation of self; love me and love men because of me for I am the only true love."

At these words peace divine shone like a bright light on the dark face of the king.

Queen Balkis, looking up toward Balthasar, knew that no love for her could fill that heart now full of love divine, and, turning, she ordered her caravan back to Sheba.

When the star ceased to speak the king and his two companions came down from the tower, and having procured a measure of myrrh, they formed a caravan and followed the star which went before them.

One day, being at a place where three roads met, they saw two kings who were coming with long trains of followers. One of them was young and white of face. He greeted Balthasar and said:

"My name is Gaspar; I am a king and I am taking a present of gold to the Child who has been born in Bethlehem of Judea."

The second king also approached. He was an old man and his white beard flowed to his girdle.

"My name is Melchior," he said. "I am a king and I am taking a present of frankincense to the Divine Child, who has come to teach truth to men."

"I am going thither also," said Balthasar; "I have vanquished my lust and therefore did the star speak unto me."

"I," said Melchior, "have vanquished my pride and therefore was I called."

"I," said Gaspar, "have vanquished my cruelty and therefore do I go with you."

And, lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them all it came and stood over where the young Child was.

When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

And when they were come into the house they saw the young Child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped him; and when they had opened their treasures they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh—as it is said in the gospel.