

Preface of *The First Christmas* by Lew Wallace

I heard the story of the Wise Men when I was a small boy. My mother read it to me; and of all the tales of the Bible and the New Testament none took such a lasting hold on my imagination, none so filled me with wonder. Who were they? Whence did they come? Were they all from the same country? Did they come singly or together? Above all, what led them to Jerusalem, asking of all they met the strange question, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

Finally I concluded to write of them. By carrying the story on to the birth of Christ in the cave by Bethlehem, it was possible, I thought to compose a brochure that might be acceptable to the Harper Brothers. Seeing the opportunities it afforded for rich illustration, they might be pleased to publish it as a serial in their magazine.

When the writing was done, I laid it away in a drawer of my desk, waiting for courage to send it forward: and there it still might be lying had it not been for a fortuitous circumstance.

There was a great mass Convention of Republicans at Indianapolis in '76. I resolved to attend it, and took a sleeper from Crawfordsville the evening before the meeting. Moving slowly down the aisle of the car, talking with some friends, I passed the state-room. There was a knock on the door from the inside, and someone called my name. Upon answer, the door opened, and I saw Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll looking comfortable as might be considering the sultry weather.

"Was it you who called me Colonel?"

"Yes," he said. "Come in, I feel like talking."

I leaned against the cheek of the door, and said, "Well, if you let me dictate the subject, I will come in."

"Certainly, that's exactly what I want."

I took seat by him, and began:

"Is there a God?"

Quick as a flash, he replied, "I don't know: do you?"

And then I --- "Is there a Devil?"

And he --- "I don't know: do you?"

"Is there a Heaven?"

"I don't know, do you?"

"Is there a Hell?"

"I don't know, do you?"

"Is there a Hereafter?"

"I don't know, do you?"

I finished, saying, "There, Colonel, you have the texts. Now go."

And he did. He was in prime mood; and beginning, his ideas turned to speech, slowing like a heated river. His manner of putting things was marvelous; and as the Wedding Guest was held by the glittering eye of the Ancient Mariner, I sat spellbound, listening to a medley of argument, eloquence, wit, satire, audacity, irreverence, poetry, brilliant antitheses, and pungent excoriation of believers in God, Christ, and Heaven, the like of which I had never heard. He surpassed himself, and that is saying a great deal.

The speech was brought to an end by our arrival at the Indianapolis Central Station nearly two hours after its commencement. Upon alighting from the car, we separated: he to go to a hotel, and I to my brother's, a long way up northeast of town. The street-cars were at my service, but I preferred to walk, for I was in a confusion of mind not unlike dazement.

To explain this, it is necessary now to confess that my attitude with respect to religion had been one of absolute indifference. I had heard it argued times innumerable, always without interest. So, too I had read the sermons of great preachers---Bossuet, Chalmers, Robert Hall, and Henry Ward Beecher-----but always for the surpassing charm of their rhetoric. But--how strange! To lift me out of my indifference, one would think only strong affirmations of things regarded holiest would do. Yet here was I now moved as never before, and by what? The most outright denials of all human knowledge of God, Christ, Heaven, and the Hereafter which figures so in the hope and faith of the believing everywhere. Was the Colonel right? What had I on which to answer yes or no? He had made me ashamed of my ignorance: and then---here is the unexpected of the affair--as I walked on in the cool darkness, I was aroused for the first time in my life to the importance of religion. To write all my reflections would require many pages. I pass them to say simply that I resolved to study the subject. And while casting round how to set about the study to the best advantage, I thought of the manuscript in my desk. Its closing scene was the child Christ in the cave by Bethlehem: why not go on with the story down to the crucifixion? That would make a book, and compel me to study everything of pertinency; after which, possibly, I would be possessed of opinions of real value.

It only remains to say that I did as resolved, with results---first, the book "Ben Hur," and second, a conviction amounting to absolute belief in God and the Divinity of Christ.

Lew Wallace's preface (iii – viii) to *The First Christmas* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902). *The First Christmas* is a reprint of the story of the Wise Men from Book I of *Ben-Hur*.