

FOLLOWIN' THE STAR

by

JOSIAH HOPKINS

**PARSON OF THE
COUNTRY CHURCH OF HOLLYWOOD**

PREFACE

Most generally when a feller tries to write a book, he tells you in the PREFACE why he wrote it and what he doesn't know. In the book he tries to tell you what he does know. I thought this story ort to have some kind of an excuse fer being printed, so I thought I'd write a sort of preface.

I would-a wrote more but it's supper time, and mighty few books are worth missing your supper to write. That explains why the book is so short. Then, too, I'd about run out of something to say. I remember a smart feller here in the neighborhood once said: "If you have anything to say, say it, it might help some; but if you haven't got anything to say, fer pity sake keep your mouth shet, there's been too much said already."

About the printin', I might say that we had it printed in big type so as the neighbors that can't read right well could sorter pick out the meanin' of the most of it.

With a hope that you can learn the secret of the Wanderin' Star and have Christmas every day, I am your

Friend,

JOSIAH HOPKINS.

P. S. Remember that Bill Ivans raises a lot of questions that he ner nobody else can ever settle. Fellers like Bill are kinder like somebody stirring up a yaller jacket nest. Easy to get 'em up, but powerful hard to get 'em settled.

—J. H.

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COUNTRY CHURCH OF HOLLYWOOD
HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

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A Talk

by

JOSIAH HOPKINS

A PRETTY good crowd of us neighbors was a-settin' around Lige Gupton's shoe shop in Goose Creek one Christmas Eve day. We got to talking about the first Christmas. Bill Ivans up and says that there's a piece in the McGuffey Second Reader that always sets him to thinkin' about Christmas. Lige Gupton asked him what the piece was. Bill said it was a poetry piece and then recited it:

*"Twinkle, twinkle, little star!
How I wonder what you are!
Way above the world so high:
Like a diamond in the sky."*

Then I asked Bill what about that little star-piece made him think of Christmas. Bill shet his eyes and talked fer quite a spell, and to the best of my rickollection, here's about what Bill Ivans said:

"I've allers had my ideas about that star in the Bible, and many a time I stopped my plow in the shade of a tree

at the end of a furrow and thought about the Bethlehem Star. It couldn't a been a genuine star, fer they are sorter fixed in a way. Least wise they don't go around a-leading people here and there. So, it is bound to have been a special Star that went here and there a-gatherin' folks to come and see the Babe of Bethlehem.

Lige Gupton was a-working at his bench putting a half-sole on a pair of shoes for one of Widow Walton's children fer Christmas. His mouth was full of shoe nails, so he waited a right smart while, but kept a-hammerin' on the soles. Then he sorter mumbled:

"Why don't some of you ask the parson what he thinks about that star?"

Well, I was kinder dazed by what Bill Ivans had said. Then, too, I knew Bill. He is always a-raising some question that splits up the neighborhood. The fact is that Bill Ivans was the one that tore us all up last Spring about them three swallerin' snakes. Bill asked Rudy Simmons what would become of three snakes with each one a-swallerin' the other one. Well, sir, there was no ending of that argument. It went on into Sugartooth and Obion Counties, a-dividin' neighbors as it went, and the last I heard of the argument, it was being talked of in Lincoln County. Then it got beyond any hearin'. Some said there would be jest three heads left. But others come back a-sayin', *"What would become of the snakes' bodies?"* So that wouldn't work. Others said—the leader of that faction was Grandpa Whortle—that there wouldn't be nothin' left. Sarah answered that by a-getting out a book and a-reading to all where it said that nothing could ever be destroyed. It all died down, but every now and then it would flare up

until I poured oil on the waters by saying that it was all idle words, and the Bible condemns idle words, where it says in Matthew 12:36: "*But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of Judgement.*" Of course that stopped 'em from public arguin', but they kept a-thinkin'. To tell you the truth, it's kept me from sleepin', myself, many a night.

So, as I was a-saying, I knew Bill Ivans, and I didn't want to get in a tanter and all tangled up in another neighborhood argument, so I went on home and read the verse in Matthew to Sarah, the verse that tells about the wise men a-followin' the Star. Sarah was making a fruit cake, and I sat there in the kitchen a-talkin' to her about the *Wandering Star*, and, lo, and behold, she burnt the fruit cake! Then I had to leave the house to keep from hearin' about the burnt cake. So, I got in the buggy and drove my horse, Dan, down to a quiet place by the water-mill and thought and thought about that Wanderin' Star all that afternoon. You neighbors might want to get jest what ran through my mind that day down there by Goose Creek.

To come right out with the truth, I believe Bill Ivans was sorter right, such as he is. Fer ages past the Lord had been a-promisin' that He would send a Messiah, somebody to show the world the way back to the Eden that man lost. There had been a site of leaders and teachers who made out like they had found the way fer a lost world to get back to Happiness again, but the leaders and their crowd wouldn't travel very fur before they'd come a-stragglin' back sayin' they must have taken the wrong fork of the road somewhere. This poor old broken-hearted

world has rolled on a-weepin' and a-waitin' fer a better day. Big fellers would rise up every now and then and get together big armies and bigger sticks and spears than the other fellers, and they'd beat down the little-stick crowd and call theyselves "*Conquerers.*" But, they passed out in time until the conquererin' business had grown sorter dull. Smart fellers would go off to theyselves and think out some new things, then they'd come back barefooted and with long hair and tell the people that "*learnin'*" was what the world needed. But, soon they'd straggle back a-saying that they had run out of "*learnin'*" and hadn't found God ner Happiness.

So, the Lord finally decided to try His plan again. You see, He had a right good plan in the Garden of Eden. First, He made a man and everything that man needed fer his happiness, no machinery, no clothes, no business, no competition, no hate, no rivalry, no newspapers, no preachers, no lawyers, no radios, nuthin' jest *God and Nature!* If the Lord had stopped there, everything might have been well and good, but the Lord put a sort of P. S. on Creation by makin' a woman. God said, "*It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a help meet for him.*" Of course, women can come back at us men and say woman was added to Paradise because God saw her value, and she was needed to complete man's happiness. Now let me say right here, once and for all, that's my sentiment, too. I do this fer two reasons: one is that God planned to add woman to Eden, and we all know that God knows best and never makes a mistake; the other reason is that Sarah is bound to see this sooner er later, so I might as well put it down right here now.

By the way, neighbors, there's something kinder puzzlin' to me about this versè in the second chapter of Genesis where it speaks about making a "*Help-Meet*" for Adam. That reads in the original Hebrew language like this—least, that is what a Hebrew-reading feller told me—it says: "I will make him an help—"*As Before*" for him. In other words, the word, "meet," means, according to many scholars, "*As Before*." If this is true, it might explain why the Lord added Eve to Paradise and allows us to think that man might have had some sort of wonderful companionship before his soul was brought to Eden. However, let's not let this get out in the neighborhood; it might split all the neighbors up like the question of the swallerin' snakes, fer such a reading in this verse might draw aside the curtain of mystery and let us glimpse man as existin' somewhere else a way before this little world was started spinnin' in space, and this earth then might be looked upon as jest a stage in man's eternal travelin' through the universe where what happened on a hill in Jerusalem, called Calvary, is offered to the souls of persons on this little old world.

But, as I was a-sayin', God had a right good plan in Eden, Love and God and the Simple life. God liked the way our parents lived in Paradise fer the Bible tells us in Genesis 3:8, "*The Lord walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening.*" Then, pride and egotism made the woman in the Garden say to Adam, "*Why can't we run this place to suit ourselves?*" That put the fat in the fire! God let 'em have not only the site of the Garden, but the whole earth. The Lord said, "All right, take it and run it your way!"

What a mess man had made of the world that once was a Paradise! War, Hate, Greed, and Lust put the whole world in the ash can, leavin' man no hope in this life. Oh, some could pile up gold, but others starved! Big fellers could conquer weaker people, but the rest were slaves! Palaces never have been able to make princes happy! Philosophy never has healed a broken heart! So, before the *Wanderin' Star* made its visit to this poor, tear-stained world, there was little or nothin' worth livin' fer! The grave was a gaping chasm, and the cradle a possible curse! There had been only one absolutely pure government: a theocracy (Sarah says that means, "Direct rule by the Lord") and that had failed in Eden! Human life was a dreary night of hopelessness without a friendly star!

Just then God sent the *Wanderin' Star*! It doubtless passed over every land, as Bill Ivans said, with its strange but friendly light. Surely, there was no land so hidden away from the paths of human travel that this brilliant Star failed to find. No people so sunk in superstition and ignorance but that it's glorious rays found their way to it. Millions of eyes surely saw that *Wanderin' Star*!

Some folks will ask, "If so many saw the Star of Bethlehem, why didn't they follow it to the Cradle of the Christ?"

Well, that can be explained in several ways. In the first place, many of those who saw the *Wanderin' Star* were like the little child who is supposed to be sayin' the piece in the McGuffey Reader about the star:

*"How I wonder what you are:
Way above the world so high."*

You see the world had been away from God so long they didn't know His sign when they saw it. Then, others were too busy doin' things that didn't amount to a hill of beans to see the light of the blessed Star.

But, the Bible tells us of three men who saw it! The difference between the three Wise Men who came to the Cradle in Jerusalem and all the others is simply this: while millions saw the Christmas Star, only these three followed it to its goal, the Christ. We are told of others who saw the Star. There was King Herod. He heard that the three Wise Men had come to town from the East a-followin' the Star, so he sent for them and asked them to tell him all about it. His plan was to kill the Babe that promised hope to the World. I don't doubt but that Herod could have seen the Star if he had been lookin' for it, but he was too busy featherin' his nest and plannin' to keep the people in subjection to his own power. Herod put out a lot of little baby lives, but there never has been a hand yet with power enough to quench the light of the Star of Bethlehem!

It is easy for me to understand how these three Wise Men got started. Here's my idea: some good old man in the far East, it may have been in Japan, or in China, or India, saw the light of the *Wanderin' Star*. You know all stars have a way of shinin' on any body that will look at 'em, white er black; rich er poor; Jew er Gentile; good er bad! So, this man moved when the star moved. It kept a-travelin' West. I don't think this first Wise Man to start owned the gold that was laid at the shrine in the Manger. Gold has a way of weighin' a feller down so that he's sorter hard to move. The first feller surely must have been pretty lightly tied down where he was. The ones that

travel the furtherest with the Bethlehem Star generally travel light!

The Star led this first Wise Man on towards Jerusalem, but at night when he'd stop—but always under the *Wanderin' Star* that'd stopped too so the traveller could get his rest—this Wise Man would try to get somebody to join him in his journey with the Star. I'm sure that this nightly stoppin' happened, for the Lord knows when to stop His Leadin' Light to let the human soul rest and gather strength. He did it when the Children of Israel were led by the Pillar of cloud by day, and the Pillar of fire by night. The Bible says the pillar of fire rested over the camp of the Isrealites at night. We need not only pillars of cloud to lead us in the day time, but also pillars of fire to show us where to stop at night. This first Wise man wasn't very successful in gettin' folks to go with him to the Cradle of the Divine, fer he only was able to gather up two more Wise men in all that long trip.

The second Wise man must a-been another feller that wasn't too busy to make the trip, ner too tied down. These two travelled on tryin' always to get together as many as possible to greet the Saviour. You see, this Star was so different from the other stars that these Wise Men knew that God was at the end of the *Wanderin' Star's* trail. The other stars were cold and motionless; this Friendly Star offered to guide all who would follow it to something that is Absolute, something Final and Eternally Good! It doesn't take such a smart feller to know that to find absolute Good would be to find God. So, they knew where the Star was a-takin' them. The folks these Wise Men asked to go with them would rather have wealth, clothes,

and the like than Peace; would rather stay put in the old order of things than to travel with a Star to God.

Finally, the two Wise Men picked up a man with gold who had found out that gold didn't satisfy. He showed he really was a Wise Man, for he took his gold to the Cradle of the Christ! This feller with the gold got me to thinkin' why the others took the things that they carried to the Divine Cradle. One carried frankincense, and the other took along some myrrh.

I was a-talkin' to a smart feller who told me some mighty interestin' things about this that throws a sight of light on these gifts. He said that at the time of the first Christmas, frankincense was generally used in worship, and that myrrh was associated with the idea of healing. That led me to get to thinkin' along this line: the Wise Man that took the frankincense had been faithful in his worship and the use of aromatic herbs and perfumes, but he felt that his worship was so imperfect, something was missing. The Wise Man who brought the myrrh had used this herb in his healing rites but felt that perfect life and health had never been found since Adam and Eve left Eden. So, the one brought his myrrh to the Cradle of the Divine Life expressin' his hope that Perfect Life and Health would only be found when Christ had His perfect way with the Human Race, or with such a part as would yield to His plan. The other Wise Man brought his frankincense to Christ and thereby yielded up all other modes of gettin' to God leaving that to the Mediator and Redeemer of a wrecked world.

The third Wise Man offered his gold, thereby admittin' its failure to satisfy, and thus presented to the

Divine Babe the homage of the Commerce of Business of the world. The Cradle became on that first Christmas night a shrine where these three Wise Men as the representatives of man's quest for Life and Happiness deposited the symbols of the old order and received in exchange the promise of a *Divine hope for the sons of men*.

It seems to me like a beautiful way to look at that Bethlehem Star by callin' it the *Wanderin' Star*. Has it not wandered across the centuries since that blessed night of the Babe's birth? Has it not shed its blessed light on each succeedin' generation of men? I know they have been indifferent to its rays many times; many like Herod have either tried to turn it to their own account, or even tried to blot it from the sky, but this Christmas it will offer hope again to all who suffer, to all who are sad, to all who have failed. How different does the crepe on a door look in the light of the Blessed Star! The monotonous and endless string of dreaded Todays and feared Tomorrows gather something that looks like a halo from the light of the *Wanderin' Star*! The Star that has guided us safely thus far surely will not leave us alone in hopeless darkness as we near the end of the trail!

This blessed Star of Bethlehem has led men and women from every condition of life into the very Presence of God. Then, God put the light within them to lead them on! Out of crime, and the hopeless night of aimless livin'; out of selfishness and pride into beautiful livin' for other folks; out of everything that is ugly and little and mean, this *Wanderin' Star* has lead human hearts to all that is beautiful and good!

This Blazin' Light of Hope has illuminated conti-

nents. It has lighted the way for all the real tenderness and human kindness that this selfish world has known. It has led humanity to think of the orphaned, the insane, the sick, and the aged. If men would walk in its pure light, there never would be another war! Its warm rays would melt the cold greed of the world and thaw the frozen, indifferent hearts of the world so that no one would ever be hungry or homeless again!

Men have tried every kind of a plan to heal the hurt of the world. Now would be a mighty good time to try God's plan. The greatest enemies pure religion has had through the centuries have been Hate and Greed. I noticed that when Christmas came in Germany, the American troops had great difficulty in hatin' the Germans. I confess that I simply couldn't do it. As I walked down a street in Coblenz on Christmas night, I heard the music of the world's favorite Christmas carol comin' from a German church. Some power beyond me drew me into that church. There, German soldiers and American soldiers were singin' it together:

*"Silent night, Holy night;
All is fair, all is bright."*

Gone was the hate that filled our hearts a few months before. It was Christmas! Who could hate on the anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Peace? That night I thought, "Why can't we have Christmas all the time?" We *can* in the steady glow of the *Wanderin' Star*!

One rainy night in France, all of the officers in my barracks were disturbed by the drivin' of stakes and loud talkin' just outside. It was a battalion of engineers goin'

up to the Front. It ocured to me to go out there and ask those buddies to give us a break and let us sleep. When I went out there, I saw a big sergeant directin' the puttin' up of some tiny tents to shelter the boys a little bit in that stormy night. Just as I was about to speak to the sergeant, he bawled out like the sound of a fog horn:

"Hey, you bullies! Don't drive them stakes down too deep. Remember: we'll be movin' on tomorrow!"

Not one word could I say. Tomorrow, they would be up there under the hell of machine gun bullets, shells, and gas, and where would I be tomorrow? For a long time, I lay there that night a-sayin' over and over to myself:

"Chaplain, don't drive *your* stakes down too deep, you'll be movin' on tomorrow! Where? That's the question."

Sit here with me by Goose Creek, neighbors, and let me whisper this to you: "Don't drive your stakes down too deep! You'll be movin' on tomorrow!"

But you say, "Parson, what's all this stake-drivin' got to do with the *Wanderin' Star*?"

Just this, the *Wanderin' Star* gathered only Three Wise men because the other millions of the world had their *stakes* driven too deeply to pull up and follow the star to the Manger in Bethlehem.

But you say, "You want me to leave my plans and go to an Eastern Inn with cattle, a few peasants, and a few Eastern Seers who had seen a strange Star in the East. Why, look who I am, and what I am doin'!"

Jest a minute, neighbor! I know there were no fine furnishings in the Manger. There may have been very few of the earth's great who made the pilgrimage to the

Cradle that first Christmas Night, but from that little room has come the best that is in the world today and the promise of all the best that is yet to come. Out of that little room came the Son of Man, the Friend of those who have failed, One who told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and One who died because He loved God and Man.

Of course, a lot of folks will think I've been hit on the head with a gourd or a wet cob when I tell you that I think what this world needs this Christmas is to get the posture of the Wise Men, that is, to turn the face towards the East! There is hope in the East today. No, I don't mean the nations of the East in the geography, but to the sunrise direction for the world! There is a Bible promise that this Christ will yet rule the world that crucified Him. Neighbors, I honestly believe it. Some think science and education will bring in the era of Happiness for the earth. It has failed to do it so far, and it offers no hope anytime soon. Why not take the Bible jest as it is and look to God to solve our problems and the problems of the world in His way? Jesus said He was coming back to finish what He began during His earthly life. If His return means only that His influence will pull the world up to the Paradise level again like the moon lifts the tides, I'd be powerful happy to see that, but His influence has not been able to do that durin' the past two thousand years. The church has had a good chance, but it can't even keep the nations of the world from cuttin' each other's throats. It looks to me sorter like the Lord will have to do it in person. Maybe that explains why the Bible closes with this prayer:

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Of course many who read this will know more in a

minute than I will ever learn during all my life, but let an old-fashioned country preacher say jest this to you: God wouldn't have sent a *Wanderin' Star* to guide men to Christ, if the learnin' of the world had been able to satisfy the longin' of the human soul. God has always let men do what they are able to do, and He always honors them fer it, but when men fail, God steps in. To me that's the why and the wherefore of the Christmas Star.

God never shows partiality. What He offers one set of people durin' one age of the world, He always offers all. Of course, the different things He offers may be sorter dressed up differently, but He offers them jest the same. We have a Star of Hope always above us if we'll jest only look fer it. The only difference is this: God has moved the Star from the sky and put it right in the human heart. By followin' the Light of God in your soul this Christmas, you'll be travellin' the path down which the Wise Men walked that first Christmas night.

Of course, I'm not a-sayin' that everything that Bill Ivans says is true, but I do want ter say that he might be right after all about the *Wanderin' Star*. When you think how God guides the wild ducks and geese from the frozen north to the sunny skies down South, surely, He would not deny to a broken-hearted, tear-dimmed world this Christmas the Light of Hope to guide them to Happiness and Peace.

I have an idea Sarah is a-wonderin' where I am, and maybe supper is waitin'. She was a-sayin' something about home-cured ham tonight with rice and red gravy. So, I guess I'll be gettin' on!

Oh, yes, there's one more thing. It's a pretty poetry

piece that might help you to git what I've been a-drivin'
at:

TO A WATERFOWL

Whither, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong
As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.

Seek'st thou the plashy brink
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean-side?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—
The desert and illimitable air—
Lone wandering, but not lost.

All day thy wings have fanned,
At that far height, the cold, thin atmosphere,
Yet stoop not, weary to the welcome land,
Though the dark night is near.

And soon that toil shall end;
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart
Deeply has sunk the lesson thou has given,
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

—W. C. BRYANT.

I wish you well, and hope you'll live long and prosper.

—*Josiah Hopkins.*