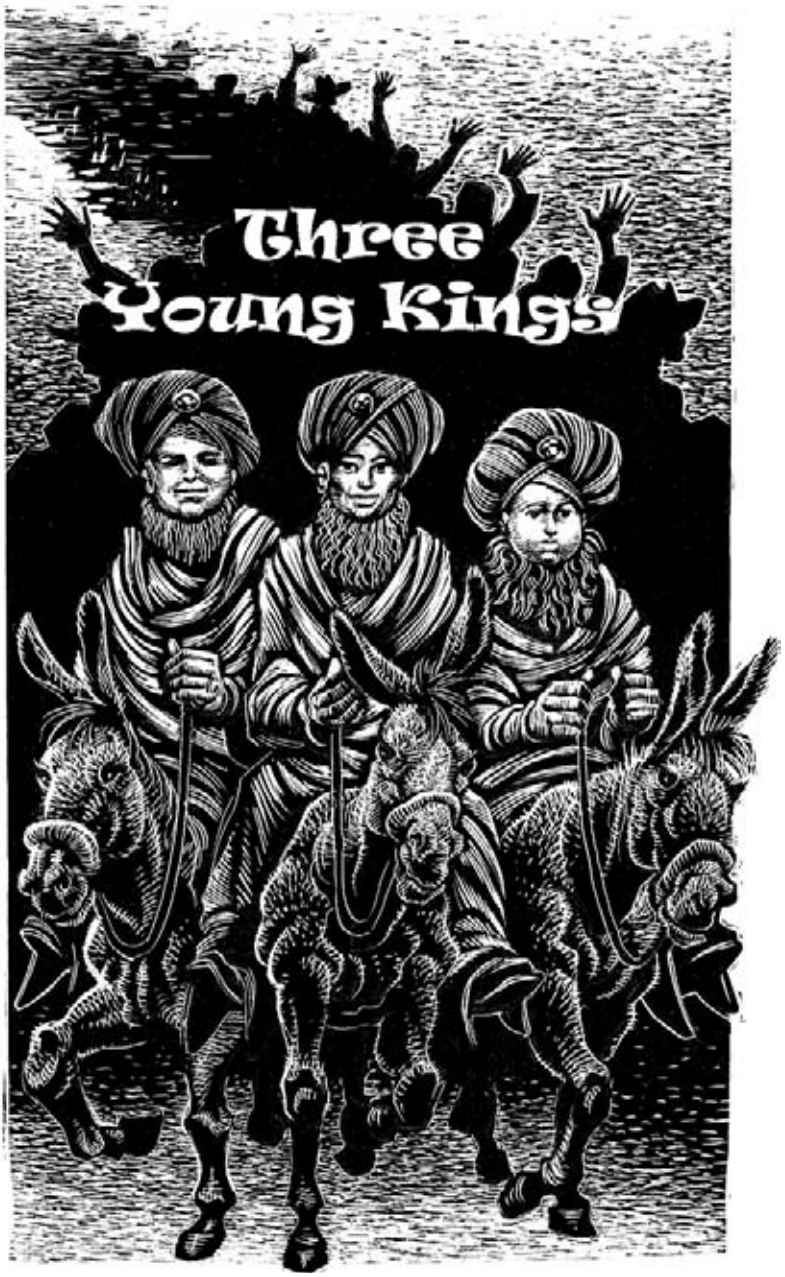
Three
Young Kings

This e-book is a publication of The Plough Publishing House,
Rifton, NY 12471 USA (www.plough.com)
and Robertsbridge, East Sussex, TN32 5DR, UK
(www.ploughbooks.co.uk)

Three Young Kings

George Sumner Albee

THE TOWN OF CÁRDENAS, a hundred miles to the east of Havana on the north coast of Cuba, is an old dog—a small, taffy-colored dog that is learning new tricks. Three times a week, nowadays, a ferry from Key West brings Cárdenas a boatload of American tourists, and these Americans, all of whom have such white faces that they appear to have been sick, seem strange and wondrous to the people of the town. Small boys follow them on the sidewalks and, when they speak, race around in front in order to watch their lips form the mysterious, incomprehensible foreign words.

As for the small girls, they clap their hands over their mouths and giggle, for the American women often wear hats, and, as everybody knows, a hat is a garment worn solely by men. But the little girls' mothers shriek at them and snatch them indoors, for the Americans are bringing money into Cárdenas and so they must be treated with the courtesy money deserves.

But this is the story of something that took place in Cárdenas in the days before there were tourists or a ferry. At that time the young men sat all day on the iron rocking chairs in the park under the royal palms, talking excitedly about the day when they would go to work and make vast fortunes and buy fast automobiles. The shopkeepers opened at ten in the morning, strolled home at noon for heavy dinners of rice and black beans, took two-hour siestas and returned to their stores to play dominoes until suppertime, setting their prices sky-high so that would-be customers would not interrupt them. The women mopped their white tile floors, cooked, gossiped and, at dusk, locked them-

selves into the houses behind their heavy hardwood doors. And the children, when they had fathers who could pay the tuition, went to school. The boys, in white shirts and neckties of the soft blue that is the Virgin's own color, attended the Escuela Pia. The girls, in blue pinafores with white stripes around the hems of the skirts, went to the Escuela de las Madres Escolapias.

Which brings us to three boys of the Escuela Pia: Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro.

Eduardo was sixteen, while Ramoncito and Lazaro were a few months younger. They were the oldest boys at the *colegio,* and the biggest. In fact, Eduardo amounted to a giant in Cuba, where the horses are the size of large dogs and the dogs are not much larger than rabbits; his nickname was Elephant. He had a flat, snub-nosed face and a cubical skull on which his hair looked like a coat of glossy black lacquer because he soaked it daily in scented brilliantine. Ramoncito was finely made, with a headful of tight little curls and eyelashes half an inch long over eyes the color of clear green sea water. Lazaro was the shortest of the three, but that did not keep him from being the heaviest. He was so fat that he exploded his clothes two and three times a day, popping shirt buttons and the seams of his knickerbockers or the buckles that fastened them at his plump knock-knees. Lazaro ate three huge meals a day, treated himself to custard éclairs on the way to school and fresh coconut macaroons on the way home, and devoted the recess periods to eating candy. Ramoncito's nickname was Monkey. Lazaro's was Macaroon.

The fact that they happened to be the three oldest students laid quite a few responsibilities on Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro. When the school's forty-seven boys scrambled into the bus for the annual picnic at St. Michael of the Baths it was Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro who served as monitors—umpiring ball games, arbitrating quarrels, seeing to it that appearances and

decorum were maintained in general. And at Christmas time, because they were the oldest, it was their duty to play the parts of the Three Kings of Orient.

Jesus' birthday in Cuba is a day to go to church, not a day for gifts. Gifts are distributed later, on the sixth of January, not by Santa Claus but by the Three Kings who carried gifts to the newborn Christ-child in the manger at Bethlehem. On the second of January, therefore, Father Miguel called Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro into his office.

"Seat yourselves," he directed them.

Father Miguel, who was eighty-two, was so frail that his white linen cassock appeared more often than not to be unoccupied. There was very little of him still in residence on earth. He had a small, poetically modeled head and a voice, and that was about all. His voice, after all the years away from home, still had the lisp of his native Asturian mountains, and it too was fragile—a faint, musical buzz, like that made by a small but energetic fly in the schoolroom on a hot afternoon.

"Children," he said, for he was so aged that he could no longer perceive the difference between sixteen and six. "I have done this many times, but it is new to you, so I must explain the procedure of the Three Kings. All the gifts your schoolmates will receive from their families and friends are upstairs in the janitor's room. The gifts for the girls are here as well; Mother Superior brought them over to me from Madres Escolapias. I want you here two hours before dusk on Day Five to load the mules, saddle the horses, and disguise yourselves in your robes and turbans. The robes will fit; they always do. Do you ride well?"

"Yes, Father," murmured the boys. All Cuban boys ride well, using neither saddle nor bridle but only a length of rope looped at one end around the horse's muzzle.

"*Bueno;* you will be handsomely mounted. Don Alfredo de la

Torre is sending me three cream-colored mares from his farm, with silver-mounted Mexican saddles and packsaddles for the mules. You will set out at dusk. It will take you three hours or so to deliver the presents; then you will return here and hand back the animals to Don Alfredo's foreman and hang away your robes. Understood?"

"Understood, Father," replied Eduardo when neither Ramoncito nor Lazaro spoke. He did not ask for leadership. It annoyed him, actually. But it was always thrust on him.

"Now go along to your homes," concluded the old priest, "and do not reveal to anyone that you are the Three Kings. We would not wish to sadden the hearts of any of the little ones."

During the next couple of days, as they discussed the roles they were to play, Ramoncito grew somewhat bitter about the "little ones." "What do we care if they find out the Kings aren't real?" he exclaimed resentfully. "We found out."

"That's no way to talk," replied Eduardo brusquely in his deep voice. "Before we knew the Kings did not exist, we thought they were marvels. We nearly went out of our heads waiting for them to come to our houses and bang the knockers. True?"

Fat little Lazaro offered no opinion one way or the other. Instead, he made a street map and planned the route they would take, so that they would be able to visit the houses on their list with the least possible amount of backtracking. Lazaro was efficient. Either that or he was lazy. Or it may be that efficiency and laziness are merely different names for the same thing.

WITH THE SCHOOL empty for the holidays, the playground seemed strange to the boys when they met there late on the afternoon of the fifth, a lonely square of red, grainy earth over which dry leaves skated. Land crabs had dug comfortable homes for

themselves in the basketball court.

They loaded the four pack mules one at a time, with Eduardo carrying out the heavier toys—the tricycles and the miniature automobiles—because he was the strongest, Lazaro arranging the boxes and parcels in accordance with his map, and Ramoncito, who was a passionate fisherman and good at tying knots, filling the large burlap sacks that would serve as their saddlebags and lashing them to the mahogany packsaddles. The mules, more intelligent than the horses, understood at once that they were being invited to join in some kind of game. They behaved well, neither balking nor biting. With the mules loaded, the boys saddled the three small, beautiful mares, who would have looked to an American as if they had pranced right off a merry-go-round. Then the boys put on their costumes.

The school had had the costumes for so many years that nobody remembered any longer who had made them originally—somebody's mother, probably. Whoever she was, she had used the same rich materials she would have used in embroidering an altar cloth for the church. Eduardo's robe was of turquoise satin belted with a gold cord, and on his head he wore a multicolored turban. Lazaro's robe was of heavy silver brocade, and his turban was of purple velvet. Ramoncito wore a mandarinlike coat of blue silk, ornately embroidered, and a wine-colored turban. They wore their ordinary shoes, because the belled Mexican stirrups would hide them when they were on horseback and the long robes would cover them when they got down to enter the houses. Last of all, they attached their long white beards with liquid adhesive, and, using an eyebrow pencil, drew the wrinkles of old age on their brown young faces.

Then, the horses ready, the mules waiting eagerly in single file on their lead ropes, the boys watched the sun go down behind the palm groves to the west. It sank, a giant illuminated peach

sending up a spray of golden searchlights through the massed clouds. After it was below the horizon, the sky was filled with dazzling lime-green light, and then, with no interval, it was dusk. It had been a fruit punch of a sunset, complete with maraschino cherries and lemon sherbet, but the boys had seen it every night of their lives, and they supposed that the sun behaved as extravagantly in all countries. To them it was merely a signal that the time had come for them to start.

"Mount," ordered Eduardo, and they swung themselves into the high-backed, embossed saddles. The lead mule brayed gaily in a spirit of adventure. Off they trotted.

"The top end of Princess Street," directed Lazaro. "The Montoros live there at Number 17."

"I believe thee," replied Ramoncito, whose secret intention it was one day to marry the middle Montoro girl, Gladys.

The houses of Cárdenas, like the houses in most Latin cities, are invisible. That is, you see nothing of them from the street except the front wall, which joins the front walls of the residences on either side and is plastered over with the same golden stucco. Inside the wall, from front to back, each house is divided into two long, narrow strips, side by side. One of these strips, which has no roof over it, is a tiled garden with a fountain, stone flower boxes, lime and mango and papaya trees, and an array of outdoor furniture. Here the family lives three hundred days in the year. The long strip on the other side, roofed over with faded vermilion tiles, contains the formal living room with its crystal chandelier and cumbersome mahogany furniture; the bedrooms, each of which has its own door opening into the garden; the dining room, with another chandelier and a big electric refrigerator from the United States standing in a corner; and the kitchen, where the food is cooked over square, cast-iron baskets of fragrant, glowing charcoal.

Behind the kitchen live the servants and all their relatives who are able to think up convincing hard-luck stories.

But there is something about the houses of Cárdenas that is stranger still, and this is that the richest man in the block may live next door to the poorest. There are poor neighborhoods and rich neighborhoods, but often a banker lives in the poor one and a shrimp peddler in the rich one. For this reason, as the boys dismounted at the Montoro house they could not help seeing the nine barefoot children of Emilio, the shoemaker, dressed in ragged shirts and nothing else, who stared at them hopefully as they took down the saddlebag containing the Montoro youngsters' gifts. Eduardo, whose voice was already so much deeper than many a man's, thudded on the door with the brass knocker and bellowed, "Do the good young ones of the Señores Montoro live here?"

Señor Montoro swung open the tall door, elegant in his starched white jacket of pleated linen. "Yes, sir, we have good young ones in this house," he replied. "May I ask who you are, gentlemen?"

"We are the Three Kings of Orient," boomed Eduardo.

"Enter, then. This is thy house."

The Montoro children, jabbering with excitement, accepted the presents that had their names on them as Eduardo and Ramoncito took them from the opened burlap sack. Hasty good-bys were said, the Kings explaining that they had a great distance to travel before morning, and they mounted and rode on.

"The shoemaker's kids are all crying," said Lazaro over the clip-clop of the hoofs. "I can hear them. They thought we'd leave something for them when we came out of the Montoros'."

"Maybe Jaime Montoro will give them his express wagon after he smashes it," said Ramoncito. "I'll bet there won't be a wheel left by noon tomorrow."

At the Cabrera house on Shell Street they delivered a fifty-dollar French doll to Myriam Cabrera, along with a dozen other packages. Mounting again, they turned into Anglona Street. By now it was dark, the only light on the street falling from unshaded bulbs at the intersections. They were conscious as they rode along, of people, grownups as well as children, watching them from the sidewalks. Everybody was out for an evening stroll in the cool bay breeze. Now and again somebody called out, "Look, the Three Kings!" and each time the voice was thrilled and reverent. There was mystery in the night. The mules felt it, pricking up their ears, and the horses, catching the murmurs of admiration, tossed their manes and lifted their forefeet higher than they really needed to, showing off. A group of men around the white pushcart of a *tamalero* cheered and waved. One of them, a farmer in high-laced boots with his sugar-cane knife at his belt, ran into the street and tried to feed his tamale to Eduardo's horse.

On Saint John of God Street the horses shied at the peanut seller who was chanting, "Peanuts, a little hot, peanuts, a little hot," and again there were watchers in the darkness under the rustling palms. Distinctly the boys heard a little girl ask in a trembling voice, "Mamma, will they come to us?" And they heard the mother's patient, desperate answer: "Who knows, soul of my soul? But if they do not come tonight, you must be valiant, for surely they will come next year."

On the lead mare, Eduardo, who knew a number of words which did not meet with Father Miguel's approval, muttered a particularly bad one.

"Now she's crying," exclaimed Lazaro, "because we've passed her house."

"If you think this is bad," said Ramoncito, "wait till we get down by the market. My brother Pepe told me when he was a

King he rode through four blocks of bawling beggar kids there."

"The poor are always with us," replied Eduardo gruffly. "Jesus says so in the Bible."

"He means they are always with us to remind us to do something about them, Elephant," said Lazaro. "That's what he means."

"What do you want?" Eduardo shouted back. "Am I to blame because there are families that can't earn a living? The cane crop is poor this year."

Eduardo's anger was something to be quenched promptly, it was well known. "No, Elephant, dear, you are not to blame," said Ramoncito. "We don't say you are."

"Then shut up, the two of you!"

"I just think," said Lazaro in the clear, sweet voice that permitted him, at fifteen, still to sing in the choir, "it's a shame to take gifts to rich kids like us when it's the poor kids that need them."

"Me too. My father is giving me a bicycle," added Ramoncito. "What do I want with a domino set and a silly card game that's supposed to teach me how to spell?"

"Father Miguel told us what to do," said Eduardo grimly, "and we're going to do it."

But not a hundred yards farther on a small boy of seven or eight, in a shirt made of second-hand cheesecloth washed white for the holiday, ran hysterically into the street crying: "Oh, Kings, Kings! We live here, señores, at Number 22!"

Eduardo reined in so sharply that he hurt his mare's dainty mouth. Leaning down from his saddle, he bellowed in a voice that frightened the boy nearly out of his senses. "What's your name? Is there light in your house, so we can see? Then take us there. Monkey, gallop back and get that girl that was howling!"

In the one-room house at Number 22, where an entire family

slept on the clay floor and the only light was that from the candle blinking in its ruby cup at the feet of the Virgin, they handed out half a dozen packages, Eduardo glowering, Ramoncito scared but resolute, and Lazaro struggling to control the giggle that always assailed him at the wrong moment. The gratitude of the little boy and girl embarrassed them so terribly that they got away quickly, shutting the rickety door behind them with a slam. They gathered around the horses.

"Well, anyhow," said Eduardo, "those two won't bawl all night. But now what? You know we ought to obey the father."

"Tú eres jefe," answered Ramoncito with a shrug. "You're the boss."

"I'm not the boss," roared Eduardo. "You always make me the boss, and then I get into trouble. Do you realize the scandal it will be if we go down to the market and give all this stuff to the beggar kids?"

"Clearly it will be a scandal," responded Ramoncito. "It has never been done."

"We're wearing eleven-yard shirts now," protested Eduardo, as we might say, "We're in hot water now." He turned to Lazaro. "What do you say, Macaroon?"

When a person of Spanish blood does not know what other answer to give, he answers with a proverb. "That which does not kill us," quoted Lazaro, "will make us fat." The saying did not fit the situation especially well, but it conveyed his meaning.

"All right," said Eduardo, "but you're both in this with me. Don't you forget it, either!"

"For an elephant," said Ramoncito, "you do a lot of talking."

Dramatically Lazaro crumpled his map and flung it into the gutter. They turned the horses' heads and trotted toward the market. In the street approaching it, Colonel Hangman Street, with its reek of fish heads and rotten cabbage, they drew rein.

Somebody had smashed the street light with a cabbage or a pebble from a slingshot, but there was light enough from the stars to see by; the stars hung just over the rooftops like green and red Christmas tree ornaments lowered from heaven on wires. Eduardo stood erect in his stirrups. "Hear me," he shouted. "Is this the town of Cárdenas, in Cuba?" That was a fine imaginative touch. "Are there good young ones on this street who have behaved well this year? If there are, come you all to the market!"

The market, a maze of heavy stone archways, was brilliantly lighted. Curious, laughing butchers and vegetable sellers at once gathered around the Three Kings as they entered, dragging their bulky saddlebags. Even as the crowd formed a ring, dirty, barefoot children with uncombed hair and noses that badly needed wiping were pushing and wriggling and, where it was necessary, kicking their way to its center. Recklessly Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro tore away tissue paper and ribbons, so that they could see what the gifts were, and passed them out. Arguments broke out in the crowd, but not among the children. They snatched their dolls and painting sets, their toy fire engines and scooters, and raced away shrieking, carrying the greatest news of their lives to brothers, sisters, and deserving friends.

In twenty minutes the saddlebags were empty. Not an all-day sucker was left. Even Ramoncito's white beard was gone, for it had fallen to the concrete floor and a youngster had snatched it in the belief that it was a toy. Streaming perspiration, and as hoarse as crows, the three boys thrust their way through the chattering, mystified, admiring crowd that jammed the sidewalk for a block, mounted and trotted back to the school under the late moon. The moon could not manage anything quite as spectacular as the sun, but it was doing its best. It turned the massed clouds over the sea into great clusters of white camellias, wrapping each cluster in shining aluminum foil.

SCIENTISTS SAY nothing travels more swiftly than light. This is not true; in a small town good news, bad news, any kind of news at all, travels faster. By the time the boys had hung up their costumes and turned over the animals to Don Alfredo's foreman, furious, gesticulating parents were already haranguing the boys' fathers. And by morning the anger had solidified into a demand that all three of them be expelled at once from school. The movement was headed by Triunfo Anilina, who had made a large fortune out of a small drugstore by selling medicines for much more than they were worth to people too sick to argue over price.

The druggist, sending around notes to everybody's house by messenger, demanded that all parents of boys attending the *colegio* meet there and put the matter to a vote at four o'clock.

At four that afternoon the outraged parents were at the school—not two hours late, nor even one hour late, as was the custom, but on the dot. Plump fathers with cigars, plump mothers with small, exquisite feet in high-heeled, patent leather shoes, they followed Triunfo Anilina into the large, cool room in which arithmetic was taught. There they squeezed themselves into the seats behind the students' small desks while the burly druggist arrogantly pre-empted the mathematics teacher's desk on the dais. As for the boys themselves, without anybody's ordering them to do so, Eduardo, Ramoncito, and Lazaro ranged themselves before the blackboard, standing with their backs to it. In their own minds they were guilty, convicted and ready for the firing squad.

"We are here," stated Triunfo Anilina curtly. "Let us begin."

He presented a detailed account of the crime that had been committed, using a number of large and impressive words he had picked up from his brother, a lawyer. It took him half an hour.

After this the fathers of the culprits spoke for the defense,

Eduardo's father offering to repay the cost of all the gifts, Ramoncito's father pleading that boys would be boys, and Lazaro's father volunteering to pitch Triunfo and all the other male members of the Anilina family, to whom he referred as cockroaches, through the window.

But Triunfo Anilina shouted down the defense, pounding the desk with his hairy fist and upsetting the inkwell.

"The thieves must be punished!" he cried.

"Then the truth of the matter," said Eduardo's handsome father, getting once more to his feet, "is that nothing will satisfy you—not honorable apology, not repayment, nothing. What you want is revenge."

"Yes, revenge!" gasped Triunfo Anilina, his linen jacket dark with perspiration. "What a scandal! It is the first time in the history of our *colegio* that this thing has happened!"

"Ah, Anilina," came a faint, musical buzz of a voice from the rear of the room, "you have a point there."

Every head turned as Father Miguel, pausing several times to gather strength along the way, came up the aisle in his long, tallow-colored gown. All the mothers and fathers had forgotten him.

Triunfo Anilina scrambled clumsily to his feet: "Take my seat, Father," he said.

"It is not your seat," replied Father Miguel. Standing on the dais, steadying himself with one small, dry hand on the edge of the desk, his bald skull reflecting the white light from the windows, he faced the parents. "Dear friends," he whispered, "it is so. For fifty years I have sent into the town, on the eve of Three Kings' Day, the three oldest boys of the school. And always they have distributed the gifts as I bade them, because they were good boys. Not until last night have they ever disobeyed me."

Behind the desk Triunfo Anilina jerked his head sharply in

agreement.

"But these three boys are good boys also, since all boys are good boys," continued Father Miguel, "so, in fairness to them, we must examine their misdeed very closely. Exactly what, we must ask ourselves, did they do? They took rich gifts, provided by the bounty of our beloved island, and carried them to babes who sleep on straw pallets, if they are lucky enough to find any straw in the streets around the market. Does the straw remind you of anything, señores and señoras? It reminds me of another Babe, swaddled in coarse cloth, who slept on straw in a manger because there was no room for him in an inn. And with this in mind it becomes clear beyond doubt that these are not good boys. No, they are something more than ordinary good boys. In the generosity of their hearts, the sweetness of their spirit, the courage of their will they are, indeed, Three Young Kings."

At the blackboard, arms stiff at his sides, Eduardo spoke out of the corner of his mouth to fat little Lazaro. "Giggle one time," he said, "and I advise thee that it will be thy last giggle."

In the schoolroom there was silence. Then Ramoncito's mother began to cry and Lazaro's father burst into boisterous laughter.

Father Miguel raised a hand.

"Now," he said, "if you will kindly help me to my house next door, a delegation from the neighborhood of the market is waiting. They wish to thank you for your sympathy and kindliness, which have so deeply touched them. They wish also to know the identities of the Three Noble Kings, in order that they may kiss their hands."