

1881.

**FAREWELL, Old Year, with all thy**  
All thy experience told! [cheer,  
With mind more stored our time we'll  
hoard  
As misers hoard their gold.

Yet, not as they their talent lay  
Apart, but to abuse,  
Each moment we most joyfully  
Will for our Master use.

Father above, in kindly love  
Our guide and counsel be;  
Assistance lend that we may spend  
Our lives in serving Thee!

**THE STRANGE HARPER.**

A STORY OF CHRISTMAS.



**N** those mysterious old days when King History, having been well-nigh dethroned by Queen Fantasy, had to assume a monk's garb and take refuge in a convent library—those marvellous old days when (if at any time) our Nursery Iliads of the Sleeping Beauty, and the Giant Killer, and Valentine and Orson, must have taken place—those wild old days when England was governed by the Seven, and France by the mayors of the palace, and the greater part of Europe had no settled government at all—there stood in the kingdom of Northumbria, a stately castle called Cedwertha. In that castle were assembled, one Christmas eve, a large company round the board of Kenelm the Thane, to celebrate, not the anniversary of Christ's birth, but the heathen festival of Yule. The feast was ended, and the banqueters left the board, and assembled round the blazing "yule-log," on the hearth. It was a stormy night, the wind roared fitfully, and cracked the boughs of the great oak-trees that stood in the castle yard. Suddenly Hilda, the fair daughter of the Thane, looked up with an air of surprise, and exclaimed,

"Methought I heard music within."

"And I too," said Osmond, the betrothed of the maiden. All listened attentively, and between the gusts of wind the notes of a harper became distinctly audible. Kenelm sent out a servant to ascertain what wandering minstrel was abroad that inhospitable night: and in a few minutes an aged man was brought into the hall, his long white hair bedropped with icicles, and a snowy harp in his hand.

"Come hither, aged man," said Kenelm, leading him to the fire. "A minstrel is ever welcome at Cedwertha." Hilda at the same time removed the old man's harp from his shoulders, and the active hands of Osmond filled him a beaker of mead.

"An old man's blessing be upon ye all," said the venerable bard, with something that almost averted them in his gentle tones.

"But oh, my harp, my harp!" he exclaimed, as he strove to shake the snow from the strings. "The cold wind and melting snow will render my sweet companion dumb," he added, handling the instrument as tenderly as if it had been a living thing.

"Nay, fear not for thy harp, said Hilda; "I'll e'en dry the strings by this good yule fire; but who art thou? an I dare ask thee thy name; and how comest thou to be abroad to-night?"

"I am Cædmon the bard," was the reply; "and I am on my way to Jar-row town, but I lost my way at night-fall, and have wandered farther and farther into the forest, until, seeing in the far distance the friendly lights of your castle, I played a measure on my harp to give notice to those within that I was wandering abroad in the darkness."

"And now, good Cædmon," said Hilda, "as the strings of the harp are dry, perchance thou wilt e'en play us some lay?"

"Of what shall it be?" inquired Cædmon, taking his harp in his hand, and tuning it with as much delight as if embracing a long-lost child.

"Concerning the glorious gods; Odin, or Balder the Beautiful," replied Kenelm the Thane.

"Nay, rather of Thor the Thunderer," said Sigurd, a fierce and warlike chieftain; "such themes, methinks, were fit for such a night as this."

"Canst thou sing us the tale of Sigmund the Dragon-slayer," inquired the blue-eyed Hilda, "and how he broke through the fiery wall that guarded the sleeping lady, and woke her from her magic slumber?"

"Or a lay of the British Arthur," said Osmond; "him with whom our forefathers fought?"

"I know not songs like those," replied the aged harper; "but I would fain sing a melody fitted for this joyous season." Suiting the action to the words, he commenced a low, soft, exquisitely tender strain on his harp, which, though not sufficiently stirring for the taste of Kenelm's warriors, filled Hilda's heart (one peculiarly open to impressions of beauty) with feelings she had never experienced before—of peace and rest and yet of longing. The words he sang, too, seemed in keeping with the melody. They were these:

"Holy and blest is the night,  
Soft are the slumbers light  
Of all things around, save the pair  
Who tend the fair child with bright hair,  
And sweet is the rest of the babe

"Holy and blest is the night,  
Shepherds list with delight  
To the glad hallelujahs that sound  
From the seraphs that hover around,  
Who tell that the Saviour is near.

"Holy and blest is the night,  
Tender, loving, and bright,  
Sweet babe is the smile on thy face.  
It hath come the glad hour of our grace,  
The hour, blessed Lord, of Thy birth."

"'Tis a song for a lady's bower," said Kenelm, rather contemptuously.

"A lullaby for a babe," said Sigurd.

"But who is this," inquired Osmond, "concerning whose birth thy song speaketh? Some great leader or captain, perchance, or a minstrel, or a good and glorious king?"

"It is," replied Cædmon, "He who, at this time well-nigh 500 years ago, was born in far-off Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the desire of all nations; so that in every land, men feeling, longing, yearning after a deliverer like unto Him, divine yet human, immortal yet submitting to death, have devised some being out of their own fantasy. In well-nigh every religion concerning which we know aught, some deity, good and beloved, is slain by a cruel enemy, and mourned over by heaven and earth, by the whole realm of nature, by that which is without life in creation, as well as by man; but He is immortal—His being is indestructible; and in His time He appears again as new-born. Of this immortal

though dying divinity, do they perchance dream when, in the far south, they adore the sun that riseth and setteth again. Him it may be that they signify when, in some of the marvellous tales they tell of your Sigmund the Wadring they relate that he was of the race of the gods, though in appearance a man; was dead and yet lived again. In other lands I have heard that they told of a kind being, a son of the gods, whom they called Prometheus, who suffered unutterable agonies because he strove to bring down the fire of heaven to cheer and sustain humanity. And of another such being told our forefathers, in that sad, beautiful tale of the pure, young god of love and light, slain by his blind brother's shaft, the White Balder. Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you."

Sigurd, whom the profound thoughts of Cædmon had totally failed to interest, made a gesture of impatience, and Kenelm thought this philosophy dangerous, as likely to lead to a new religion being introduced; but Osmond and Hilda were breathless with attention, and at last the latter said softly,

"Good Cædmon, tell us more concerning this Jesus of Nazareth."

Then once more tuning his harp, the missionary bard sang some simple melodies, or rather chants, in which the leading ideas of Christianity were unfolded. Most of the stern warriors in the hall fell fast asleep, for there was little in such music to stir the blood or kindle the imagination; and to most, even of those who listened, they were only as "a very lovely song sung by one that hath a pleasant voice." It was not so with Osmond and Hilda. To them Cædmon's visit was the commencement of a new life. He quitted Cedwertha early the following morning, but he left behind, in return for the hospitality he had received, the immortal seed in two young hearts.

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