



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Christmas Promise

Maud Lindsay

There was once a harper who played such beautiful music and sang such beautiful songs that his fame spread throughout the whole land; and at last the king heard of him and sent messengers to bring him to the palace.

"I will neither eat nor sleep till I have seen your face and heard the sound of your harp." This was the message the king sent to the harper.

The messengers said it over and over until they knew it by heart, and when they reached the harper's house they called:

"Hail, harper! Come out and listen, for we have something to tell you that will make you glad."

But when the harper heard the king's message he was sad, for he had a wife and a child and a little brown dog; and he was sorry to leave them and they were sorry to have him go.

"Stay with us," they begged; but the harper said:

"I must go, for it would be discourtesy to disappoint the king; but as sure as holly berries are red and pine is green, I will come back by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding, and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside."

And when he had promised this he hung his harp upon his back and went away with the messengers to the king's palace.

When he got there the king welcomed him with joy, and many things were done in his honor. He slept on a bed of softest down, and ate from a plate of gold at the king's own table; and when he sang everybody and everything, from the king himself to the mouse in the palace pantry, stood still to listen.

No matter what he was doing, however, feasting or resting, singing or listening to praises, he never forgot the promise that he had made to his wife and his child and his little brown dog; and when the day before Christmas came, he took his harp in his hand and went to bid the king good-bye.

Now the king was loath to have the harper leave him, and he said to him:

"I will give you a horse that is white as milk, as glossy as satin, and fleet as a

deer, if you will stay to play and sing before my throne on Christmas day."

But the harper answered, "I cannot stay, for I have a wife and a child and a little brown dog; and I have promised them to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside."

Then the king said, "If you will stay to play and sing before my throne on Christmas day I will give to you a wonderful tree that summer or winter is never bare; and silver and gold will fall for you whenever you shake this little tree."

But the harper said, "I must not stay, for my wife and my child and my little brown dog are waiting for me, and I have promised them to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside."

Then the king said, "If you will stay on Christmas day one tune to play and one song to sing, I will give you a velvet robe to wear, and you may sit beside me here with a ring on your finger and a crown on your head."

But the harper answered, "I will not stay, for my wife and my child and my little brown dog are watching for me; and I have promised them to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside." And he wrapped his old cloak about him, and hung his harp upon his back, and went out from the king's palace without another word.

He had not gone far when the little white snow-flakes came fluttering down from the skies.

"Harper, stay," they seemed to say, "Do not venture out to-day." But the harper said, "The snow may fall, but I must go, for I have a wife and a child and a little brown dog; and I have promised them to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside."

Then the snow fell thick, and the snow fell fast. The hills and the valleys, the hedges and hollows were white. The paths were all hidden, and there were drifts like mountains on the king's highway. The harper stumbled and the harper fell, but he would not turn back; and as he traveled he met the wind.

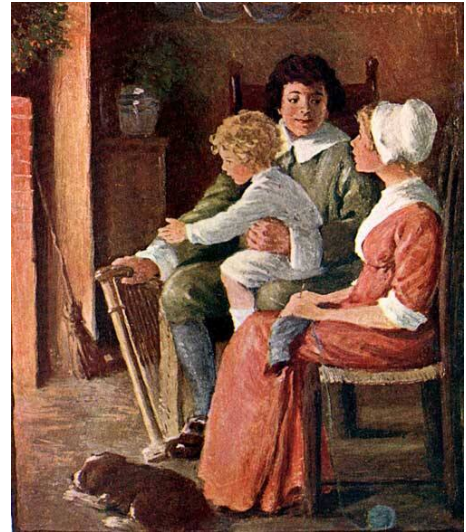
"Brother Harper, turn, I pray; Do not journey on to-day," sang the wind, but the harper would not heed.

"Snows may fall and winds may blow, but I must go on," he said, "for I have a wife and a child and a little brown dog; and I have promised them to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the

Christmas songs by my own fireside."

Then the wind blew an icy blast. The snow froze on the ground and the water froze in the rivers. The harper's breath froze in the air, and icicles as long as the king's sword hung from the rocks on the king's highway. The harper shivered and the harper shook, but he would not turn back; and by and by he came to the forest that lay between him and his home.

The trees of the forest were creaking and bending in the wind, and every one of them seemed to say:



"Darkness gathers, night is near; Harper, stop! Don't venture here." But the harper would not stop. "Snows may fall, winds may blow, and night may come, but I have promised to be at home by Christmas day to eat my share of the Christmas pudding and sing the Christmas songs by my own fireside. I must go on."

And on he went till the last glimmer of daylight faded, and there was darkness everywhere. But the harper was not afraid of the dark.

"If I cannot see I can sing," said he, and he sang in the forest joyously.

The snow ceased its falling, the wind ceased its blowing, the trees of the forest bowed down to listen, and dear children, as he sang the darkness turned to wondrous light, and close at hand the harper saw the open doorway of his home.

The wife and the child and the little brown dog were watching and waiting, and they welcomed the harper with great joy. The holly berries were red in the Christmas wreaths; their Christmas tree was a young green pine; the Christmas pudding was full of plums; and the harper was happier than a king as he sat by his own fireside to sing.

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