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The First Christmas in New England

Hezekiah Butterworth

They thought they had come to their port that day,
But not yet was their journey done;
And they drifted away from Provincetown Bay
In the fireless light of the sun.
With rain and sleet were the tall masts iced,
And gloomy and chill was the air,
But they looked from the crystal sails to Christ,
And they came to a harbor fair.

The white hills silent lay,—
For there were no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
That gray, cold winter day.

The snow came down on the vacant seas,
And white on the lone rocks lay,—
But rang the axe 'mong the evergreen trees
And followed the Sabbath day.
Then rose the sun in a crimson haze,
And the workmen said at dawn:
"Shall our axes swing on this day of days,
When the Lord of Life was born?"



The white hills silent lay,—
For there were no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
That gray, cold Christmas Day.

"The old town's bells we seem to hear:
They are ringing sweet on the Dee;
They are ringing sweet on the Harlem Meer,
And sweet on the Zuyder Zee.
The pines are frosted with snow and sleet.
Shall we our axes wield
When the chimes at Lincoln are ringing sweet
And the bells of Austerfield?"

The air was cold and gray,—
And there were no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
That gray, cold Christmas Day.

Then the master said, "Your axes wield,
Remember ye Malabarre Bay;
And the covenant there with the Lord ye sealed;
Let your axes ring to-day.
You may talk of the old town's bells to-night,
When your work for the Lord is done,
And your boats return, and the shallop's light
Shall follow the light of the sun.

The sky is cold and gray,—
And here are no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
This gray, cold Christmas Day.

"If Christ was born on Christmas Day,
And the day by Him is blest,
Then low at His feet the evergreens lay
And cradle His church in the West.
Immanuel waits at the temple gates
Of the nation to-day ye found,
And the Lord delights in no formal rites;
To-day let your axes sound!"

The sky was cold and gray,—
And there were no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
That gray, cold Christmas Day.

Their axes rang through the evergreen trees
Like the bells on the Thames and Tay;
And they cheerily sang by the windy seas,
And they thought of Malabarre Bay.
On the lonely heights of Burial Hill
The old Precisioners sleep;
But did ever men with a nobler will
A holier Christmas keep,

When the sky was cold and gray,—
And there were no ancient bells to ring,
No priests to chant, no choirs to sing,
No chapel of baron, or lord, or king,
That gray, cold Christmas Day?

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