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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas Day — 1868

Charles Kingsley

How will it dawn, the coming Christmas Day?
A northern Christmas, such as painters love,
And kinsfolk, shaking hands but once a year,
And dames who tell old legends by the fire?
Red sun, blue sky, white snow, and pearled ice,
Keen, ringing air, which sets the blood on fire,
And makes the old man merry with the young,
Through the short sunshine, through the longer night?
Or southern Christmas, dark and dank with mist,
And heavy with the scent of steaming leaves,
And rosebuds mouldering on the dripping porch;
One twilight, without rise or set of sun,
Till beetles drone along the hollow lane,
And round the leafless hawthorns, flitting bats
Hawk the pale moths of winter? Welcome, then,
At best, the flying gleam, the flying shower,
The rain-pools glittering on the long white roads,
And shadows sweeping on from down to down
Before the salt Atlantic gale: yet come
In whatsoever garb, or gay or sad,
Come fair, come foul, 't will still be Christmas Day.

How will it dawn, the coming Christmas Day?
To sailors lounging on the lonely deck
Beneath the rushing trade-wind? Or to him
Who, by some noisome harbor of the East,
Watches swart arms roll down the precious bales,
Spoils of the tropic forests; year by year
Amid the din of heathen voices groaning,
Himself half heathen? How to those — brave hearts! —
Who toil with laden loins and sinking stride,
Beside the bitter wells of treeless sands
Toward the peaks which flood the ancient Nile,
To free a tyrant's captives? How to those —
New patriarchs of the new-found underworld —

Who stand, like Jacob, on the virgin lawns,
And count their flocks' increase? To them that day
Shall dawn in glory and solstitial blaze
Of full midsummer sun; to them that mourn,
Gay flowers beneath their feet, gay birds aloft,
Shall tell of naught but summer: but to them,
Ere yet, unwarned by carol or by chime,
They spring into the saddle, thrills may come
From that great heart of Christendom which beats
Round all the worlds; and gracious thoughts of youth;
Of steadfast folk, who worship God at home;
Of wise words, learnt beside their mothers' knee;
Of innocent faces upturned once again,
In awe and joy to listen to the tale
Of God made man, and in a manger laid:
May soften, purify, and raise the soul
From selfish cares, and growing lust of gain,
And phantoms of this dream which some call life,
Toward the eternal facts; for here or there,
Summer or winter, 't will be Christmas Day.



Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 't is to be a man; to curb and spurn
The tyrant in us: that ignobler self
Which boasts, not loathes, its likeness to the brute,
And owns no good save ease, no ill save pain,
No purpose, save its share in that wild war
In which, through countless ages, living things
Compete in internecine greed. Ah, God!
Are we as creeping things, which have no Lord?

That we are brutes, great God, we know too well:
Apes, daintier-featured; silly birds who flaunt
Their plumes unheeding of the fowler's step;
Spiders, who catch with paper, not with webs;
Tigers, who slay with cannon and sharp steel,
Instead of teeth and claws — all these we are.
Are we no more than these, and born but to compete —
To envy and devour, like beast or herb;
Mere fools of nature; puppets of strong lusts,
Taking the sword, to perish with the sword
Upon the universal battlefield,
Even as the things upon the moor outside?

The heath eats up green grass and delicate flowers,
The pine eats up the heath, the grub the pine,
The finch the grub, the hawk the silly finch;
And man, the mightiest of all beasts of prey,
Eats what he lists: the strong eat up the weak,
The many eat the few; great nations, small;
And he who cometh in the name of all —
He, greediest, triumphs by the greed of all;
And, armed by his own victims, eats up all:
While ever out of the eternal heavens
Looks patient down the great, magnanimous God,
Who, Maker of all worlds, did sacrifice
All to Himself! Nay, but Himself to one:
Who taught mankind on that first Christmas Day
What 't was to be a man; to give, not take;
To serve, not rule; to nourish, not devour;
To help, not crush; if need, to die, not live.

Oh, blessed day, which giv'st the eternal lie
To self, and sense, and all the brute within;
Oh, come to us, amid this war of life;
To hall and hovel, come; to all who toil,
In senate, shop, or study; and to those
Who, sundered by the wastes of half a world,
Ill-warned, and sorely tempted, ever face
Nature's brute powers, and men unmanned to brutes.
Come to them, blest and blessing, Christmas Day.
Tell them once more the tale of Bethlehem;
The kneeling shepherds, and the Babe Divine:
And keep them men indeed, fair Christmas Day.

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