

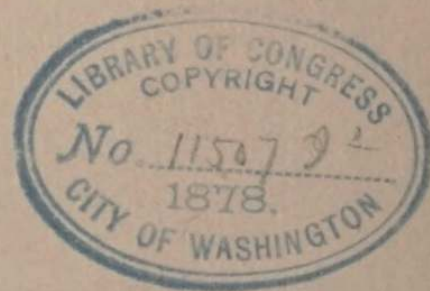


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Karl and Gretchen's Christmas.

BY
LOUISE W. TILDEN.

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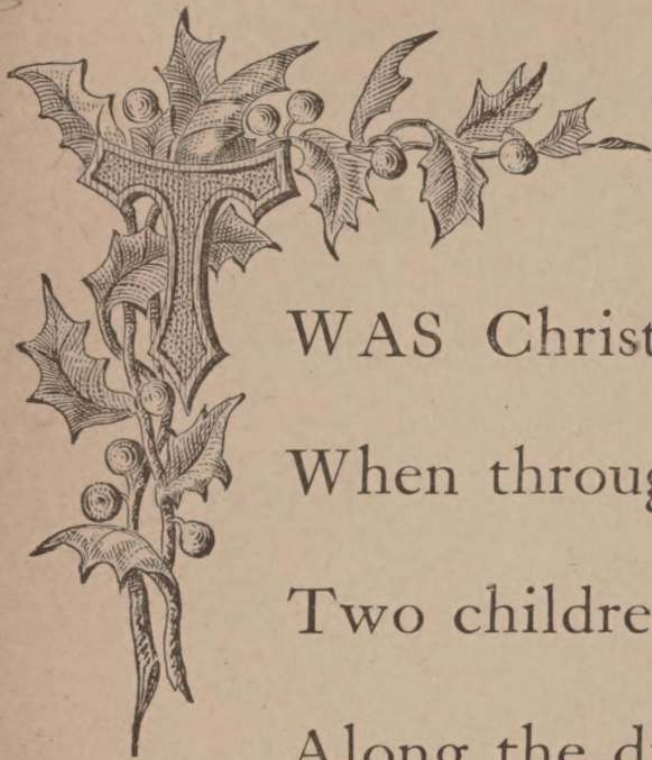


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KARL AND GRETCHEN'S CHRISTMAS.



WAS Christmas night, long time ago,
When through the softly-falling snow
Two children pressed with eager feet
Along the dim, deserted street.

Through many a window gleamed the light
Where Christmas fires shone warm and bright,
And sounds of mirth and music rare
Rang out upon the silent air.

But Christmas day had come and gone,
And night had stolen darkly on,
And still the Christ-child had not come
To Karl and Gretchen's humble home.

Beside their lone and lowly hearth
There were no sounds of joy and mirth,
No childish laughter rippling sweet,
No bounding hearts, no dancing feet.

CHRISTMAS.

5

The neighboring children, full of glee,
Displayed their treasures joyfully,
But Karl and Gretchen sat apart
With empty hands and aching heart.

Their mother, widowed, ill and poor,
Her slender hoard had counted o'er,
Yet turned away and weeping said,
“Ah, no! my children must have bread.”

Ere they had slept, the eve before,
Beside the threshold of their door
Each one a little wooden shoe
Had placed, as German children do.

And scarcely had the Christmas morn
'Mid gold and purple clouds been born,
Ere, full of faith, the children flew
To find what treasures filled each shoe.

But oh! what bitter, cruel grief!
What disappointment past belief!
They bent above the sanded sill—

Their little shoes

were empty still.



How could it be? A sad surprise
Looked from their tender, wistful eyes;
Yet, hoping still, they turned away
And sighed, "Perhaps he'll come to-day."

All day beside the cottage pane,
Poor Karl and Gretchen watched in vain,
Till o'er them fell the sunset ray,
And hope fled with the dying day.

They crept away to hide their grief
And find in tears a scant relief,
When, suddenly, through Gretchen's heart,
A thought, like sunshine, seemed to dart.

“O Karl!” she cried, with flushing cheek,

“Let us the gentle Christ-child seek!

It may be that he has forgot;

Come quick, dear brother, tarry not!

“Within a palace all of gold
He dwelleth, I have oft been told;
We’ll see it shining from afar,
Just like some brightly-beckoning star.

“Oh then we’ll kneel before his feet
And ask him, ‘Please, did he forget?’
And he’ll be sorry, I am sure,
Nor send us from his palace door.

“We will not let dear mother know
Lest she should fear to have us go,
But hasten home—it is not far—
Ere she can wonder where we are.”

The light of hope from each young face
Quick banished every tearful trace,
While visions of they scarce knew what
Sweet fortune, filled each glowing thought.

With eager haste their steps they bent,
To seek the Christ-child all intent;
And out into the storm they hied
With hope's bright beacon for their guide.

For hours about the quaint old town
The children wandered, up and down,
And still the golden palace sought,
And wondered why they found it not.

Then out across the dreary waste,
Lured on by distant lights they haste,
Which ever seemed to disappear,
As they with hopeful step drew near.

The storm had grown more fierce and wild;
The drifting snow in mountains piled;
While icy winds, like arrows keen,
Pierced through their garments worn and thin.

“My sister, are we almost there?”

Asked little Karl, with plaintive air,

“The way seems long, and cold, and oh!

How wildly beats the drifting snow!”

“Fear not, dear Karl, we must be near;”

Yet, while she spoke, a glistening tear

Its tale of disappointment told,

As o'er poor Gretchen's cheek it rolled.

Her scanty shawl she swift unbound,
And wrapped her little brother round,
And strove his failing heart to cheer,
Nor let him guess her growing fear.

But oh! the night was dark and wild;
No friendly star looked out and smiled;
The wind went shrieking to and fro,
And faster fell the deepening snow.

Now scarce could Karl and Gretchen lift
Their weary feet from drift to drift,
And eerie arms seemed pressing back
To force them from their onward track.

And as a wilder, ruder blast
Swept like some dark winged monster past,
Poor little Karl sank sobbing down,
And hid his face in Gretchen's gown.

“O Gretchen! Gretchen! I’m afraid!
Please take me home!” he wildly prayed,
“’T is fearsome here, and cold—and oh!
Dear Gretchen, I want mother so!”

Poor Gretchen’s heart was fit to break,
She felt so sorry for his sake,
And blinding tears unbidden came
At mention of her mother’s name.

Yet with a sweet, unselfish care
She soothed her brother's sore despair,
And sought with patient, tender tone
To urge his faltering footsteps on.

For still within her trusting heart
Her dear hope held its steadfast part;
She could not give it up—oh no!
Yet now—ah! whither should she go?

As sore bewildered,

Gretchen gazed

Around, and through

the darkness raised

Her troubled eyes,

as seeking there

Some sign of

promise in the air,



Within her aching heart there grew
A sudden thought which thrilled her through;
And ere the thought she dared to own,
A timid purpose it had grown.

“Dear Karl,” she whispered, bending near,
That he her low-voiced words might hear,
“Oft we have heard our mother say
The good God hears when children pray;

“Come, let us kneel together now,
And ask Him, please, the way to show;
It may be He will hear our prayer,
And guide our wandering footsteps there.”

Beneath the dark and stormy sky,
While wailing winds swept loudly by,
They knelt them down with reverent air,
And Gretchen prayed her simple prayer.

“Dear God, it’s only Karl and me,
Forgive us, pray, for troubling Thee,



But, please, the night is wild and drear,
And it is very dark down here.

“We can not see the way to go,
And fierce and wild the bleak winds blow,
And far from home our feet have strayed,
And we are very cold and 'fraid.

“Dear God, it's Christmas, and we've had
No gifts, to-day, to make us glad;
And, please, we thought if we could find
The Christ-child, he is good and kind,

“Perchance some little gift there ’d be,
Which he could spare for Karl and me ;
Dear God, we would not mind how small,
So we could have a gift at all.

“Please, Hans and Fritz and Katrine too,
And all the children that we knew,
Had some sweet token, every one,
And only Karl and I had none.

“We’re very tired, dear God, and fain
Some shelter from the storm would gain;
Please help us soon to find the way,
And keep us safe from harm, we pray,

“Amen.” The earnest, childish prayer
Went quivering upward through the air,
And in its pure and spotless track
A heavenly peace came floating back.

Now full of faith and courage sweet
They sought once more their weary feet,
And onward through the blinding snow
They pressed with toilsome step and slow.

“We’ll soon be there!” brave Gretchen said,
As round a sudden turn she led,
When—all at once—oh sweet surprise!
The golden palace meets their eyes!

A noble mansion, towering high
In brightness 'gainst the gloomy sky,
With massive front, that festal night,
Aflame with floods of golden light.

Now good Herr Kremwitz dwelt within,
And he had gathered kith and kin
From o'er the country, far and wide,
To keep the merry Christmas tide.

As moving 'mid the joyous throng
That whiled the hours with dance or song,
It chanced he rested just before
The heavy, carven, outer door.

And, standing thus, his ready ear
A timid knocking seemed to hear,
And wondering much within his heart,
He flung the portals wide apart.



From out the hall a flood of light
Streamed o'er the threshold, broad and bright,
Revealing to his startled gaze
A sight that filled him with amaze.

Two childish figures standing there,
With small hands clasped as if in prayer,
And tangled curls blown to and fro,
And tattered garments fringed with snow.

So young they seemed, so small, so slight,
To breast the wild and stormy night!
Such strange, sweet wistfulness there shone
Within the eyes that met his own!

Herr Kremwitz' heart, so warm and true,
All full of sweet compassion grew;
“Poor babes!” he said, “what seek ye here?
Whence come ye through the storm so drear?”

Oh then they fell upon their knees,
As fain his dreaded wrath t' appease,
While Gretchen's pleading tones rang clear—
“O, pray sir! dwells the Christ-child here?”

“All day my brother Karl and I
Have waited for him patiently,
But still he came not, and we thought,
O, sir!—perhaps—he had forgot.

“So then we thought that we would try
And seek his home—dear Karl and I—
For we have had no Christmas gift,
And happen he has something left.

“We did not know it was so far;
There was no light of moon or star;
And very fierce the wild winds blew,
And we were cold and frightened too.

“So then we knelt upon the snow
And prayed that God the way would show;
And after that we felt no fear,
And very soon He brought us here.

“Ah! when, at last, we saw the light
Gleam through the dark and stormy night,
We felt so glad and full of cheer!
O, sir! pray tell us, dwells he here?”

Thus little Gretchen trembling spoke,
While oft her tearful accents broke;
And half benumbed with fear and cold,
Her simple story all was told.

In good Herr Kremwitz' kindly eyes
A shadowy mist was seen to rise;
And reaching forth with friendly arm,
He drew them inward from the storm.

“Come in! come in! my children dear!
Ay, sure the Christ-child dwelleth here!
And, by my soul, this night shall be
A merry one for you and me!”

Ah! was it Heaven opened then
To Karl and Gretchen's raptured ken?
So wondrous fair the vision seemed
They almost feared they must have dreamed.

A stately hall stretched out to view,
All hung with silk of azure hue
Inwrought with silver, while o'er head
An hundred lamps their radiance shed.

And on the air, from secret bowers,
Was borne the subtle scent of flowers;
While crystal fountains, plashing near,
With murmurous music lulled the ear.

And oh! more beautiful than all,
Far down the oaken-paneled hall,
A shining tree! whose branches bent
Beneath their weight of ornament.

And stalwart men were gathered there,
And stately dames and maidens fair,
And happy children roamed about
And filled the air with song and shout.

Like snow-birds

driven from the storm

To seek some shelter

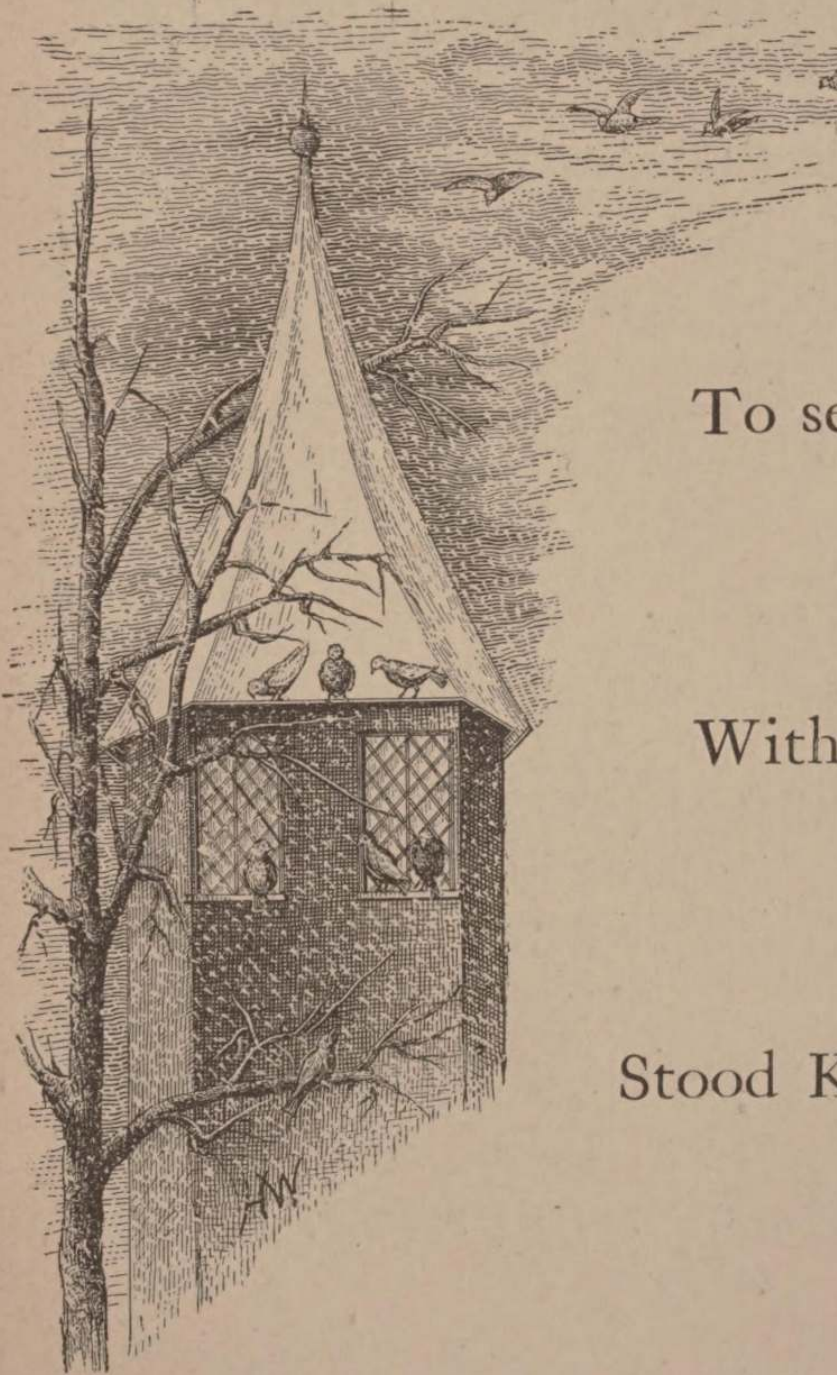
safe and warm,

With panting breast

and 'wildered eye,

Stood Karl and Gretchen,

sweet and shy.



The touching tale was whispered round,
And soon the little wanderers found
A throng of smiling faces sweet
Their timid, wistful glances meet.

Some gently smoothed their wind-tossed hair,
Some chafed their fingers blue and bare,
While others sought their names to know,
Or brushed away the clinging snow.

Before the fire, whose generous blaze
Cast far around its ruddy rays,
It seemed like Heaven itself to rest,
No more by cold or fear oppressed.

The weary world was all forgot—
Their humble home, their lowly lot—
While bright-winged moments fled away,
Like birds of Paradise astray.

Now came mine Herr, with smiling look;
One timid hand of each he took,
And saying softly, "Come with me,"
Led toward the bright and beauteous tree.

"Choose! choose! my children, what you will!
And little frocks and aprons fill!"
But at so fair and sweet a sight
They could but gaze in awed delight.

For, wonderful! what wildest dream
Could ever half so lovely seem?
What tree e'er on its branches bore
Such rare and radiant fruit before?

Like tiny stars the tapers gleamed,
And winked and twinkled, till they seemed
Almost to say with loving cheer,

“Dear Karl and Gretchen, welcome here!”

To breathe the children scarcely dare,
Lest all should vanish into air;
Spell-bound they stood, nor spoke, nor stirred,
Till good Herr Kremwitz' voice was heard—

“How now, my dears! you do not know

What you shall choose; is it not so?

Ha! ha! why this will never do!

Sit down! sit down! I'll choose for you!”

Lo! now, as in some olden tale,
Where gold and jewels dropped like hail,
From off the shining, wondrous tree
Aladdin's wealth seemed falling free.

A Fairy Prince Herr Kremwitz stood,
So kind, so bounteous, and so good,
Dispensing many a pretty prize
Most dear to little children's eyes.

'T was now a drum, and now a ball,
And now a lovely waxen doll,



With trailing robes of softest silk,
And feathery plumes as white as milk.

And now, oh joy! a gallant sled,
With tasseled cords all bright and red,



And now a pretty, painted tray,
With tiny cups and saucers gay.

Anon, in Gretchen's lap would fall

A dainty hood or plaided shawl;

While little Karl, with cap of fur

And jacket warm, would equal her.

And how their pretty, sparkling eyes

Grew big and round with glad surprise,

As scarlet mittens warm and new,

And socks and shoes were added too.

And books—ah, me! what precious store
Of ancient rhyme and nursery lore!
E'en dear old "Mother Goose" was there,
And "Cinderella," good and fair.

The hapless "Children in the Wood,"
Fierce "Blue Beard" and bold "Robin Hood,"
"Dick Whittington," so brave and true,
And "Jack, the Giant Killer," too.

Then down from off the shining tree
Great golden oranges took he,
And bags of sugar-plums, I ween,
That hung the drooping boughs between.

Ah! sure, it was a pretty sight
To see their wondering delight;
They could not seem to make it true,
And really knew not what to do.

One moment, in their glad blue eyes
The grateful, tender tears would rise,
That, how or why they scarce could tell,
Were changed to smiles ere yet they fell.

“They all are yours, my children dear!”

Herr Kremwitz cried, with hearty cheer,

“And may they prove an earnest true
Of happier days in store for you.”

“But come! now for some fun!” he cries;
“Here, Bertha! Hans! quick! bind my eyes!
We’ll have a game of ‘Blind Man’s Buff,’—
All ready? One—two—now be off!”

Lo! how they scampered! in a trice,
Adown the hall like merry mice,
Swift, twinkling feet flew here and there,
So light they fairly spurned the air.

And after them, at flying pace,
Came good mine Herr in rapid chase,
While shouts of laughter rent the air
As fast he followed everywhere.

Not one but joined the merry throng;
None were too old and none too young;
And Karl and Gretchen 'mong the rest,
The gladdest and the merriest.

In sooth it was a goodly game,
And all too soon the ending came,
Though loud and long the hall did ring
With joyous sounds of reveling.

But happiest hours will have an end;
The clock past midnight 'gan to wend,
Reminding all with silvery chime,
That now had come the parting time.

Herr Kremwitz rose, his kindly face
All beaming o'er with gentle grace,
And thus he spoke, while all drew near
That they his parting words might hear:

“Dear friends, it gives me joy to-night
To gaze upon this goodly sight;
To see your smiling looks, and hear
Your tuneful voices ringing clear.

“This is a time of jubilee,
A time when all should merry be,
For ‘Christmas comes but once a year,
And when it cometh brings good cheer!’

“So runs the old-time song; and yet,
Dear children, let us not forget
The meaning of the joy and light
That fill our hearts and homes to-night.

“There is a Gift—One dearer far
Than these poor earthly treasures are—
A Gift Unspeakable, Divine,
And, oh! this Gift is yours and mine.

“God’s Gift of Love that Christmas morn
When Bethlehem’s Holy Babe was born;
And ’t is this Love, so free, so great,
So dear, that now we celebrate.

“Ah! like some tender, glad refrain,
Oft sounding through our joy again,
Let this sweet thought ring, clear and true:—
‘God gave us Christ and Christmas too.’

“Come, let us kneel, ere now we part,
And every grateful, loving heart
Up to our God in homage lift
For Christ, our first, best Christmas Gift.”

The storm had ceased; and from the sky
The Moon looked down with tender eye,
Where Karl and Gretchen, 'neath her beams,
Lay smiling in their happy dreams.

Within one dimpled arm's embrace,
Close pressed against her rosy face,
Sweet Gretchen held her waxen doll,
The best and dearest gift of all.

While little Karl—oh happy boy!—
What pen could ever paint his joy,
As near his drum and darling sled
He laid his little curly head?

And, for the mother, wan and pale,
She pondered o'er the wondrous tale,
Till, from the sky, the dawning gray
Chased all the twinkling stars away.



And smiled, and wept, and smiled by turn,
Their strange adventures all to learn,
And felt her griefs grow less and less,
Lost in her children's happiness.

All bathed in floods of ambient light,
Through Heaven's wide windows streaming bright,
That lowly attic chamber seemed,
From all its ancient gloom redeemed.

Nor with that night's sweet joy and peace
Did all their happy fortunes cease;
And Karl and Gretchen found a friend
Whose generous bounty knew no end.





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