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Karel Jaromír Erben (1811-1870)

CHRISTMAS EVE

An icy wind – night black as the grave –
warm glows the fire within:
an aged woman nods by the hearth
and the maidens softly spin.

“O turn, my spinning wheel, and hum,
soon Advent will be past,
and Christmas here at last.”

A maiden's joy it is to spin
through the chilly winter evening;
reward one day will crown her toil,
she firmly trusts, believing

a youth will come for the busy maid,
and say “O follow me:
come, be my darling wife, and I
your faithful man will be.

“O give your hand to me, my love,
our troth with joy we'll crown;
and the maid who spun the tender flax
will spin a wedding gown.”

“O turn, my spinning wheel, and hum,
soon Advent will be past,
and Christmas here at last.”

II

O welcome, Christmas Eve, in all
your holy mystery:
what gifts to everyone you bring
for Christmas memory?

The farmer gets his plaited bread,
the cattle their reward;
the rooster, garlic; peas for hens;
to each his favourite food.

The fruit trees will receive the bones
from yesternight's repast;
and golden sucklings on the wall
feed eyes of those who fast.

“O I am yet a maiden young,
my heart is fancy free.
But the strangest feeling haunts my mind,
and seems to beckon me.

“Within the wood, within the wood,
in the manor park there grow
two very aged willow trees;
their heads are grey with snow.

“One gnarled willow nods and bends
toward the lake below,
where underneath the spreading ice
the hidden waters flow.

“And here, they say, when midnight strikes,
by the moon's uncertain beam
a maiden sees her fated man
on the surface of the stream.

“Then I who fear not midnight's spell
nor what false prophets say,
will go, and take the axe with me,
and cut the ice away.

“Then I will look into the lake
deep, deep beneath the ice.
And I will see my lover there
and gaze into his eyes.”

III

Marie and Hannah, two sweet names,
like Spring flowers undefiled:
and none could tell which of the two
was e'er the lovelier child.

A word from one girl to a youth
would set his heart aflame:
The other smiled – at once the youth
forgot the first girl's name. . . .

So midnight came: across the sky
stars shining through the gloom,
as round a shepherd stand the sheep:
the shepherd was the moon.

So midnight came, that night of nights,
the night of Christmastide;
upon the snow a footprint points
toward the waterside.

The one girl kneels above the ice,
and next to her, Marie:
“O Hannah, Hannah, dearest heart,
what vision do you see?”

“I see a cottage – very faint,
like Václav's home, I swear,
more clearly now – I see a door –
a man is standing there.

“He wears a jacket, dark and green,
a hat – well known to me –
and in the hat the flower I gave,
sweet Jesu! it is he!”

Then up she springs with racing heart;
Marie kneels next to her:
“God bless you, Marie dear, my love,
what vision see you there?”

“I see, I see – through a veil of mist,
in the gloom, obscurely,
some flicking lights of red – it seems,
like the chapel sacristy.

“Some white is there – a patch of black –
at last I see its shape;
a group of bridesmaids, and – O God!
a coffin decked with crepe!”

V

Another winter: icy winds;
warm glows the fire within.
An aged woman bends by the fire,
and the maidens softly spin.

“O turn, my spinning wheel, and hum,
soon Advent will be past,
and Christmas here at last.

“How full of mystery they are,
the nights of Christmas Eve!
Oh, when I think of years gone by,
my heart is stabbed with grief.

“For here we sat, a year ago,
the group of us together;
and before the year had run its course
two were gone forever.

“The one bent over baby clothes
and sewing busily;
the other laid below the earth
to rot eternally.
Poor Marie!

“And here we sat, a year ago
like only yesterday:
and before another year has passed,
who yet will pass away?”

“O turn, my spinning wheel, and hum,
for nothing on earth can last,
and life, like a dream, flies past.

“But better dream, with empty hopes,
in blind uncertainty,
than pierce the veil that hides the face
of fearful destiny.”

Translated by Alfred French