

Playstage

Junior

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DEEP AND CRISP AND EVEN



The Legend of Good KING WENCESLAS

Written by
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Deep and Crisp and Even:

The Legend of Good King Wenceslas

Background to the Play and the Carol

These notes could appear in the programme or could be given by an announcer (in abbreviated form) before the play starts.

The Legend of “Good King Wenceslas”

Good King Wenceslas tells the story of a Bohemian king braving harsh winter weather to give alms to a poor peasant “on the Feast of Stephen” – St Stephen’s Day (December 26th). The king’s page boy accompanies him as he journeys towards the peasant’s home. The boy finds it hard to struggle through the snow and is about to give up; but the king tells the boy that it will be easier for him if he treads in the footprints that he has already made, and the boy is able to continue. The figure at the centre of this legend is a tenth century ruler of Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic) known to English speakers as Wenceslas I (other versions of his name include Wenceslaus, Venceslav and Václav). Wenceslas was known for his piety, though during his lifetime he was a duke, not a king. However, after his death, Holy Roman Emperor Otto I conferred on him the “regal dignity and title” of king – hence Good King Wenceslas.

The Carol

The words of the carol were written in 1853 by the English hymn writer John Mason Neale, who set them to the melody of a thirteenth century spring carol, *The Time is Near for Flowering*.

The Play

The Legend of Good King Wenceslas dramatizes the story that the carol memorably tells, taking the form of a narrative account of the events as told and experienced by King Wenceslas’s page boy, and incorporating words from the play within the dialogue. Wenceslas is depicted in the play as a king, rather than a duke, as this is the title he is most familiarly known by today. Throughout, Czech names have been chosen for characters, reflecting the story’s origin.

DEEP AND CRISP AND EVEN:
THE LEGEND OF GOOD KING WENCESLAS

CAST

Palace page boys:

ADAM

JAROSLAV

STEPHAN

KAREL

Adults:

KING WENCESLAS

JANEK, the Master of the Pages

OLDRICH, a peasant

Running time approximately 15 minutes

Number of speaking parts 7.

Singers required for closing carol.

Deep and Crisp and Even: The Legend of Good King Wenceslas

Time: The day after Christmas Day, in the year 930

Setting: The Royal Palace in Prague, in the Dukedom of Bohemia

We open on four identically dressed page boys (pages being young boys who work as servants in a medieval palace). Behind them is a small, well-polished table, with an ornate single chair. The boys act as a chorus for this opening scene, narrating from the front of the stage – kneeling or sitting across the stage to start with.

ADAM

Today is the Feast of Saint Stephen, in the year of Our Lord nine hundred and thirty.

JAROSLAV

The day after Christmas Day.

STEPHAN

We have eaten well, this Christmas, in the Royal Palace.

KAREL

Fresh carp. Caught from the palace fish ponds.

ADAM

A goose, which was so fat it had to sizzle all afternoon over the kitchen's largest fire.

JAROSLAV

Sweetmeats and candied fruits and cakes and custards covered with icing all the colours of the rainbow...

STEPHAN

...and piled so high that it's a wonder they didn't topple over.

KAREL

If only it was like this *every* day.

STEPHAN

(Standing and imitating an adult) You don't deserve any of this, boys! *(Angry and wagging his finger at the others)* If it was up to me, you'd have a hunk of bread smeared with goose fat for dinner on Christmas Eve – and you'd be thankful for it!

(The boys laugh at his impression.)

KAREL

(Still giggling) Lord, thank our pious king, Wenceslas!

JAROSLAV

He paid no attention to the finger-wagging of our master, Janek. He insisted that all of us page boys sat at our own table in the great hall of the palace for our Christmas feast.

KAREL

And that we ate what the adults ate!

ADAM

No wonder JANEK scowled in the corner like an angry dog.

JAROSLAV

I swear I could see steam pouring from his ears!

(Unseen, the boys' master, JANEK, enters behind them. He watches STEPHAN'S antics with keen amusement for a few moments.)

STEPHAN

(Still standing, and clearly imitating JANEK) Ha! You dine well, boys, this Christmas Day! But it's back to the scrapings from the king's table for all of you tomorrow!

KAREL

(Sadly) And now, it is "tomorrow".

ADAM

And Christmas is over for another year.

JANEK

Adam speaks the truth, boys! Christmas is indeed over!

(The boys jump to attention and turn to face him – all except STEPHAN, who continues his narration to the audience.)

STEPHAN

Now, everything's back to normal. And I think the king might be wanting his dinner – and that Master Janek is about to give me a hard time.

(He too stands to attention in front of JANEK, who wields a swishy cane.)

JANEK

That's right! Jump to it! The king has indulged you this Christmas, and that has made you sluggish! But I will accept no idling from you! *(He flicks the cane at them.)* You have the royal household to attend to! Your duties to perform! Now – which of you will serve the King his dinner? Adam? Jaroslav? Karel?

(The boys all look at their feet and shake their heads in turn as JANEK confronts them. He then stands in front of STEPHAN.)

JANEK

What about you, Stephan?

STEPHAN

Me, Sir?

JANEK

The most work-shy of you all. I expect you would rather be rolling and tumbling in the snow instead of serving the king, as is your duty.

STEPHAN

Oh no, Sir!