

The Christ Upon The Hill

William Cosmo Monkhouse

(1840 - 1901)

PART ONE

A couple sat o'er the fire, and they were bent and gray;
they burned the charcoal for their lord, who lived long leagues away.
Deep in the wood the old pair dwelt, far from the paths of men,
and saw no face but their poor son's, and a wanderer's now and then.

Their son, alas, had grown apace, and left his wits behind;
he was as helpless as the air, as empty as the wind.
With puffing lips and shambling feet, and eyes a-staring wide,
he whistled ever as he went, and little did beside.
He whistled high, he whistled low, he whistled sharp and sweet;
he brought the redbreast to his hand, and the brown hare to his feet.
Without a fear of beast or bird, he wandered all the day;
but when the light began to fail, his courage passed away.
He feared the werewolf in the wood, the dragon in the dell,
and home he fled as if pursued by all the hosts of hell.

"Ah, we are old," the woman said, and soon we shall be gone,
and what will our poor Michael do when he is left alone?
We are forgotten of all men; and he is dead, I fear,
that good old priest who used to come and shrive us thrice a year.
We have no kin," the mother said, "we have no friend," said she.
The father gazed upon the fire, and not a word said he.
Again she spoke, "No friend or kin, 'Death, only Death,' is near;
and he will take us both away and leave our Michael here.
And who shall give him bite or sup? And who shall keep him neat?
Ah, what were Heaven if we must weep before God's mercy seat!"

And when the woman ceased, the man a little waited still,
and then he said, "We have one friend—the Christ upon the Hill."

PART TWO

The Christ upon the Hill—so gaunt, and lean, and stark and drear.
It made the heart with pity start; it smote the soul with fear.
High reared against a cliff it stood, just where the great roads met;
and many a knee had worn the stone wherein the Rood was set.
For deadly was the pass beyond, and all men paused to pray
for courage, or to pour their thanks for dangers passed away.

But not for fear of beast or fiend, but boding deeper ill,
the charcoal-burner and his wife slow climbed the weary hill.
Before the Rood their simple son lay stretched upon the ground,
and crumbled black bread for the birds that hopped and pecked around.
(For he had gone before with feet as wild and light as air,
and borne the basket on his back that held their frugal fare.)
And they were faint, and ere they prayed, they sat them down to eat;
and much they marveled at their son, who never touched his meat,
but, now the birds were flown away, sat up and only gazed
upon the Christ upon the cross, as one with wonder dazed.

Full long he sat and never moved; but then he gave a cry,
and caught his mother by the wrist, and said, "I heard a sigh."
"It is an image made of wood, it has no voice," she said.
"Twas but the wind you heard, my son." But Michael shook his head
and gazed again so earnestly, his face grew almost wise;
and now he cried again and said, "Look, how he closed his eyes!"
"Tis but the shadow of a bird that passed across his face,"
the mother said. "See, even now it hovers near the place."
And then the father said, "My son, the image is of wood.
And do you think a man could live without a taste of food?"
"No food?" the silly youth replied, and pointed to a wren
who, with a crumb upon Christ's lip, had just alighted then.
And now the old man held his peace, the woman ceased to strive,
for still he shook his silly head and said, "The man's alive."

"It is God's will," they said, and knelt, and knew not what to say;
but when they rose they felt as though all fear had passed away.
And they could smile when Michael left his dinner on the stone.
He said, "The birds will feed the Christ when they are quite alone."

PART THREE

The couple sat before the fire, more old, and sad, and poor,
for there was winter at the heart and winter at the door.
It shook the roof with shocks of wind; it caked the pane with snow;
the candle flickered on the sill, like a soul that longed to go.
'Twas Michael's beacon—gone to feed the Christ upon the Hill;
and midnight long had passed and gone, and he was absent still.
And now and then they turned a log, and now they dropped a word:
"Twas all the wind," the mother said. The father said, "The bird."
"I hoped that it was God himself," the mother muttered low.
"It must have been the fiend," he said, "for to deceive him so."
And then the mother cried aloud, "What matter it" she said,
if wind, or bird, or fiend, or God, for he is dead—is dead!"
"Hark!" cried the man, and through the storm a note came high and clear.
It was the whistle of their son, that sound they longed to hear.
And then a cry for help, and out into the snow they ran;
and there was Michael. On his back he bore a helpless man.

"He lives, he lives," he wildly cried, "his wounds are dripping still."
And surely, red from hand and side, there ran a tiny rill.
They brought Him in and laid Him down upon the warm hearthstone.
It was the Christ, but not of wood; but made of flesh and bone.
They washed His wounds, and at their touch they turned to purple scars,
like a young moon upon the breast, on hands and feet like stars.
They brought to moisten His dry lips their hoarded flask of wine;
they wrapped Him round with blankets warm, and waited for a sign.
And soon without the help of hand, he rose upon His feet;
and like a friend beside the fire, He took the vacant seat.

He sat up in the chair then, and straight began to shine
until His face and raiment poured a glory most divine.
The thorns upon his forehead broke out in leaves of gold;
the blood-drops turned to berries, like rubies rich and bold.
The blankets that bewrapped Him flowed into folds of white
bestarred with gold and jewels that sparkled in the light.
The very chair He sat in became a crystal throne;
the oaken stool beneath His feet turned to a jasper stone.

He stretched an arm to Michael and touched him with His hand,
and he arose beside the throne an angel, bright and grand.
And then His lips were opened; and strong and sweet and clear,
like water from a fountain, His voice was good to hear.

“I am the King of Glory. I am your brother, too.
And even as you do to Me, so do I unto you.
You took Me in and clothed me; you washed My body pierced.
You gave Me of your wine to drink when I was sore athirst.
And you have suffered also, and you must suffer still.
I suffered upon Calvary; I suffered on the Hill.

But I’m the end to sorrow, and I’m the end to care;
I come to bring you comfort and save you from despair.
Your son, your only son, is safe and beautiful to see;
and though you miss him for a while, you know he is with Me.
And I will give him peace and joy, as no man ever knew.
A little grief, a little pain, and I will come for you.”

He rose, His arms around their son; and through the open door
they only saw a whirl of snow, and heard the tempest roar.

