The Bellman's Song (The Moon Shone Bright)

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The moon shone bright and the stars gave a light,
A little before 'twas day;
Our Lord he looked down on us,
And he bade us awake and pray.

Awake, awake, good people all,
Awake and you shall hear
How our dear Lord died on the cross
For us he loved so dear.

The fields were green as green could be,
When from his heavenly seat
Our mighty Lord he watered us
With his heavenly dew so sweet.

The life of man is but a span,
And cut down in an hour:
We're here today, tomorrow gone,
The creatures of an hour.

Instruct and teach your children well,
The while that you are here;
It may be better for your soul
When your corpse lies on the bier.

Today you be alive and well,
With many a thousand pound;
Tomorrow dead and cold as clay
When your corpse lies on the ground.

With one stone at your head, good man,
And another at your feet,
Your good deeds and your bad, good man,
Will both together meet.

So give your heed to what we sing,
While you're alive and sound,
It may be better for your soul,
When your corpse lies on the ground.

God bless the master of this house;

God bless the mistress here,
And all the little children
Around the table dear.

God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a happy new year. (sung to the melody of the last 2 lines)

Recorded by the Valley Folk on "All Bells in Paradise."

A.L. Lloyd believes that this was originally a secular May carol, which gradually collected this mass of verses at the hands of Puritan broadside writers. That Puritans had their hands in this version seems certain, but the last verse appears to be that of a wassailing song. The Oxford Book of Carols believes that the influence passed the other way -- that lyrics from this text passed into the May carols. The first printed version appears to have been in Sandys's "Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern" in 1833; this was a ten-stanza form generally similar to that used here.

The "Oxford Book" contains no less than three settings of the song (pieces 46-48); the recording I used has still a fourth melody.

The "Oxford Book" prints two additional stanzas:

3 O fair, O fair Jerusalem,
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end,
Thy joy that I may see?

5 And for the saving of our souls
Christ died upon the cross.
We ne'er shall do for Jesus CHirst
As he hath done for us.

If you truly wish to turn this into a Christmas piece, you can sing stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 9, plus perhaps Stanza 5 from the "Oxford Book," inserting this as the fourth (or second or third) verse:

And in the town of Bethlehem
A child was born that day;
His bed was in an ox's stall;
He in the manger lay.

A "bellman" is the English equivalent of a town crier; his task was to move about the town, ringing a bell and making public announcements.RW

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