

GOOD KING WINCESLAS

By Gary Peterson, Larry Nestor and Jim Lilly

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DEDICATIONS

**With love to my daughter
Kristen Renee Peterson**

**Rose Anne Swanson and
Roger Cornish**

**“The Kindness of Strangers”
is dedicated to
Tennessee Williams**

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GOOD KIND WENCESLAS

By Gary Peterson

Music and Lyric by Larry Nestor

Musical Arrangements

By Larry Nestor and Jim Lilly

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- WENCESLAS** [WEN-sez-lass] King Wenceslas should be played by a robust, 40ish man with a large voice and a playful twinkle. He is not Santa Claus, but surely could grow up to be him. (*52 lines*)
- ALOYSIUS** [al-oh-WISH-us] This lithe youth may be played by either a boy or a young woman, and should be portrayed as being perhaps a teenager. (*29 lines*)
- BOLESLAV** [BOWL-es-slav] This dark character is the opposite of his brother, and should be played by a man just a little younger than the King. In real life this man plotted against, and eventually overthrew his brother. (*25 lines*)
- QUEEN LUDMILLA** [lood-MILL-ah] Graceful and elegant, the woman who plays the Queen may be 20-35, and severely attractive. (*11 lines*)
- SIR RUTHVEN** [ROOTH-ven] A hardy, Arthurian-type Knight. (*13 lines*)
- LADY ELZBIETA** [ELLZ-bee-YET-ah] She is the ingénue, and may be played by a woman of any age that compliments her husband Sir Ruthven. (*3 lines*)

MONSIGNOR KOSKA [mon-SEE-nyor KAWSE-ka] The befuddled clergyman (*16 lines*)

DUCHESS KRYSTINA [kriss-TEE-na] Boleslav's wife is a self-satisfied socialite. (*4 lines*)

POOR MAN Humble and tattered (*1 line*)

EXTRAS The Baker, Doorman, Maid (*Susan*) and as many Servants as Practical.

[*Overture*]

SCENE ONE

The great hall of a castle in Bohemia, the evening of December 25, 925 A.D.

There is a large fire in the hearth and the long central table is virtually overflowing with hearty food, ready for a grand feast. COOKS and SERVANTS bustle in and out, placing the food, the wine, the goblets and the plates for the people who are about to enter. All is decorated in honor of the Christmas season.

OFFSTAGE CHORUS: (*At curtain rise.*)

Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen
When the snow lay 'round about
Deep and crisp and even—

TENORS:

Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel,
(*Ritard*) When a poor man came in sight
Gath'ring winter fuel...

(SERVANTS, COOKS, ATTENDANTS, etc. enter from various sides carrying all the food for the great Christmas Feast. They will set the large central table and hang decorations as desired as they sing the following song :)

(*SONG: "Feast"*)

SERVANTS: (*Singing*) Plates and goblets are in place

Chairs arranged with proper space
So guests won't have to squeeze
No, they can dine in comfort and ease
A banquet, delectable and pleasin'
To celebrate the season
Sav'ry soup, but please don't slurp
Oh, yes, it's permissible to burp

A feast
A festive feast
Fit for a fable
Shall be on this table tonight
Complete with candlelight
A goose
A Christmas goose
Roasted in it's own juice
Pumpkin pie, dumplings and puddin'
Ev'rything good 'n plenty

COOKS: We planned and cooked for twenty

SERVANTS: Beets, carrots, spinach, potatoes
Artichokes, melons, lettuce, tomatoes
Healthy, heaping mounds of most ev'rything
To satisfy a hungry King and Queen
Guests short and tall, fat and lean,
And some in between.

(Silently ALOYSIUS enters with his small dog, and stands to one side, looking on at the activity, and yearning to be a part of it.)

SERVANTS: *(Singing)* A feast!
What a wonderful spread
Raisin, and pumpernickel bread
Jams and jellies
To fill up bellies tonight
Spice from the East
After all, this is a feast!

ALOYSIUS: *(Singing to dog.)*
I'm glad you're here with me tonight
I get lonely when I see candlelight
It reminds me of the folks back home

Though this room is crowded, I feel alone
I don't dare to talk to anyone
They would think me very presumt'ous
So I'll visit with you, little pooch
While others dine on foods so scrumptious

SERVANTS: Some folks will eat too much
Like they haven't eaten in weeks
With tummies twice normal size
They will find it hard to rise!
A feast
A festive feast
Fit for a fable
Shall be here on this table tonight
Complete with candlelight.

(The table being set, the SERVANTS all exit, except for the DOORMAN who will remain to open the main doors for the nobility. ALOYSIUS takes his dog in hand and scuttles offstage without drawing attention to himself. The DOORMAN, with a great flourish, opens the main door.)

WENCESLAS: *(Entering with entourage)* And now, gentlefolk,
on to the feast!

Enter KING WENCESLAS, QUEEN LUDMILLA, MONSIGNOR KOSKA, BOLESLAV, DUCHESS KRYSTINA, SIR RUTHVEN, and LADY ELZBIETA

ALL: *(ad lib reactions as they see the table and decorations):*
Ahh!
Splendid!
Wonderful!

QUEEN: *(hangs on to WENCESLAS's arm):* The room is
magnificent, husband.

WENCESLAS: Thank you, the staff has done marvelously this
year.

QUEEN: Sir Ruthven, why don't you and your wife sit here—
(Indicates chairs at the table) Monsignor, here is your chair—
and brother Boleslav, you and Krystina sit here—

WENCESLAS: *(with good spirit)* That must mean this large chair is mine! *(Goes to throne-like central seat. ALL laugh. They stand by their chairs until the KING and QUEEN are seated.)*

ELZBIETA: What a magnificent table laid out this year!

BOLESLAV: I hope the food is just as good!

WENCESLAS: I understand that the chef has outdone himself with this fine Christmas goose.

SIR RUTHVEN: But why are there so many empty chairs, Sire?

WENCESLAS: *(understatedly)* I have invited the staff to join us for Christmas dinner.

KOSKA: What?

SIR RUTHVEN: Who?

BOLESLAV: The staff, Sire?

KRYSTINA: You mean the workers?

WENCESLAS: The cook, the servants, my doorman. And so on. I've begun a new tradition.

BOLESLAV: Starting this year?

WENCESLAS: *(Chuckles)* Starting today. My friends, each and every day of the year, we, the nobility, that is, we eat grandly and in fine array...

SIR RUTHVEN: *(acknowledging again the fine Christmas table)* Not so fine as this, M'Lord!

WENCESLAS: Aye, aye, granted. This occasion is special. Very special. On Christmas day we feast most especially well and I feel disposed to share our meal with all of the household.

QUEEN: *(Uncomfortable)* Not my handmaid, too, dearest?

WENCESLAS: Yes. I have sent word throughout the castle that all are to come and dine.

BOLESLAV: But-

WENCESLAS: *(Gestures)* Is there not enough?

(All are silent for a moment. They are plainly uncomfortable with the idea of having people of another caste at their table. But no one speaks up again.)

WENCESLAS: *(Finally)* Very well. *(Claps twice. The BAKER, the CHEF, the DOORMAN and a few SERVANTS come sheepishly into the room.)* Come in, come in friends, and welcome. Come on, we're only biting roast goose tonight! *(Many chuckle uneasily)* Will you, my lady wife, see to the seating arrangements?

QUEEN: *(Standing)* Of course. Monsieur le chef, perhaps you will be so good as to take this empty chair. *(Pointing)*

Thomas, you by Sir Ruthven's side. (*Warming to it.*) Warren, isn't it? Yes, you go right here...that's nice. Monsieur Groomsman, there is your chair by the Monsignor. And Susan; Susan you will sit at my very right hand.

(The various SERVANTS move to the chairs indicated, but do not sit until QUEEN LUDMILLA does first. The chair immediately next to KING WENCESLAS is left vacant for the time.)

BOLESLAV: Well, now that that's over, perhaps we can get to the meal.

ELZBIETA: (*noting the empty chair*) Isn't somebody missing?

WENCESLAS: Yes, Aloysius.

KRYSTINA: Who?

WENCESLAS: My page, Aloysius. (*To DOORMAN:*) Do you know where he is?

DOORMAN: (*abashed*) He is just outside the door, sire.

WENCESLAS: What? Outside you say? (*Rising*) Aloysius!

(When he stands, all the SERVANTS stand too, some chairs fall over. The NOBLES rise slower.) Aloysius, come in here!

ALOYSIUS: (*Entering*) You called for me, sire?

WENCESLAS: Boy, what were you doing outside the door? I told everyone to come to dinner tonight.

ALOYSIUS: Oh, Sire, I was certain you did not mean to invite me to this banquet. The others maybe, but, but Sire—I am not worthy to sit with such reverent nobility. I am only your page.

WENCESLAS: Come to the table, lad. Sit by my side. Don't you know it's Christmas? (*Reseating himself; ALL resume seat when he does.*) I feel a generosity this night such as never before. I feel that I must share the bounty of this table; that's why I invited you, all of you—so that we could partake together as one household. All men—and women—all people here, are brethren. (*To BOLESLAV*) And, now that I've said my piece, now we can eat.

KOSKA: After grace, surely, your Highness.

WENCESLAS: After grace, indeed. But, I should like my page to say the prayer this evening, Father.

ALOYSIUS: Me?

KOSKA: What?

BOLESLAV: (*Snide*) Another new tradition?

WENCESLAS: Did not our Lord speak of entering Heaven as a child? This youth is not much older than a boy, and I would

like to hear how he prays. Go ahead, Aloysius, would you please say our grace?

ALOYSIUS: *(To WENCESLAS)* Yes, Sire, and thank you. *(They bow heads. BOLESLAV is last.)* *(Singing, with simple depth, "Aloysius' Prayer")* Our Most Gracious Father, We thank you for the food you have provided for us, most especially today, when we all reflect on the birth of your Son, Jesus. May we be mindful of our family and friends, and thank You for the warmth of their company; bless our good King and his lady wife, and all the household of this castle and bless all those who cannot boast of a feast such as this one on this Christmas Night. Amen.

ALL: Amen.

KOSKA: Well spoken, Master Page, a very good prayer.

BOLESLAV: *(perturbed)* Now may we eat? All this talk has given me an appetite!

WENCESLAS: *(Grandly)* Now we may all eat. *(For a moment, no one moves.)* There are no servants tonight, so we must serve ourselves, you know. *(There is an uneasy chuckle, then first BOLESLAV, followed by the others, reach for what is before them...)* Aloysius, perhaps you would like some vegetables? *(He places a spoonful on his page's plate.)*

ALOYSIUS: Thank you, Sire.

(During the next few lines, they ALL eat some food from the table, or drink wine from goblets.)

WENCESLAS: So how does it feel, page, to be seated at the table and share with us our feast? Come, you may speak your mind; I wish to hear!

ALOYSIUS: It is all quite above me, Sire. As I said, I don't even know why you invited such a humble one as myself.

BOLESLAV: *(With a mouthful)* Hmmph! Nor do I.

WENCESLAS: I'm convinced we're not so different, all of us.

Boleslav and I just happened to be born to royalty. What does your father do?

ALOYSIUS: He is a small merchant in the city, Sire.

WENCESLAS: Oh? What is his trade?

ALOYSIUS: He is a sail-maker.

BOLESLAV: Not much need for sails in the wintertime.

ALOYSIUS: No, quite true. But some people use his cloth to cover windows and so stop the draft. Still it is a poor time for my family.

QUEEN: And what do your parents think of your being a page to the King?

ALOYSIUS: Oh, they are so proud of me for being a court, M'lady! They know that I am doing very well for myself.

BOLESLAV: (to SIR RUTHVEN, under) A page doing well for himself! My, haven't they got high aspirations! (The two chuckle)

WENCESLAS: During your prayer just now, you spoke of "those who cannot boast of a feast this night". Whom did you mean? Everyone in the castle is here. Did you mean some one of the townspeople?

ALOYSIUS: Yes, Sire. Many folk of your Kingdom go hungry, even on Christmas Day.

WENCESLAS: Here? In my Kingdom? But we're prosperous! This has been a fine year for all! Hasn't it, Brother?

BOLESLAV: (With food) Hmm? Ah, yes. A fine year a remarkable year actually. Commerce and agricultural reports were very good. This winter, though, has been quite cold, and business has been at a standstill for over a month. Yet the stockpiles and the granaries have good reserves.

WENCESLAS: (to ALOYSIUS) There, see? The merchants and the businessmen have their profits; the people are doing quite well.

ALOYSIUS: Not all the people, Sire. There are many within sight of this castle who have no food or money or even shelter from the cold.

WENCESLAS: What, on Christmas Night?

ALOYSIUS: May I show you? There is a moon tonight, right?

SIR RUTHVEN: Full moon tonight, yes.

ALOYSIUS: Then let me show you something out your window. I've noticed it on many nights before and I'm sure under the light of the moon it will be there to see again. (Hastily added.) Sire.

(WENCESLAS first looks around the table, then puts down his goose leg and stands. Many other rise when the King does, but only SIR RUTHVEN will accompany him as he follows ALOYSIUS to the "window". [Note: the actors may mime looking out of the window by actually looking over the audience.])

WENCESLAS: My, what a bright, beautiful night it is.

SIR RUTHVEN: The snow covering makes the landscape even brighter than usual under a full moon, Sire.

ALOYSIUS: (*pointing*) See! See that man, over there by the large tree.

WENCESLAS: Where? Yes.... Dressed all in rags, I see. What is he doing, I wonder?

ALOYSIUS: He's gathering firewood, Sire.

SIR RUTHVEN: Firewood?? Why at night?

WENCESLAS: And a cold night such as this!

ALOYSIUS: Perhaps he is embarrassed that he needs to do it at all.

WENCESLAS: Do you recognize him, Sir Ruthven?

SIR RUTHVEN: Nay, Sire. He is unknown to me.

(At this point MONSIGNOR KOSKA and BOLESLAV rise and join those at the window.)

ALOYSIUS: I know him.

SIR RUTHVEN: You do?

BOLESLAV: A relative, no doubt!

WENCESLAS: Who is he?

ALOYSIUS: Well, I do not know his name, but I have seen him in the town. He is a good man, who has fallen upon bad times.

WENCESLAS: Where is his home, then?

ALOYSIUS: Sire, he has no home. His house and all his possessions were forfeit, during this year that was so good to us he and many others.

WENCESLAS: No home, what then, does he live on the very street?

ALOYSIUS: They live in rough tents and lean-tos outside the city. Near the Fountain of Saint Agnes.

SIR RUTHVEN: Saint Agnes? Why that's two miles from here.

BOLESLAV: Humph! Squatters!

WENCESLAS: (*Turns to KOSKA:*) Is this true?

KOSKA: Sire, the land is Church property, and as such, they may use the land for pilgrimage and prayer. (*Pause*) Many people have been there a great long while about their supplications.

WENCESLAS: Why didn't anyone tell me?

BOLESLAV: Brother, you must understand. These people have debts that they refused to pay—

ALOYSIUS: Or could not pay.

BOLESLAV: Whatever. The property is seized and sold to collect partial remuneration. We almost always lose on the deal.

WENCESLAS: And what happens to the people?

BOLESLAV: They can go live with relatives or something till they get back on their feet. *(A pause)* You just don't understand the business end of government.

WENCESLAS: There's one thing I do understand...I'll not eat here like some great pig whilst any in my Kingdom starve on Christmas Night. *(Goes to the table.)* Come everyone. Bring the food. Sir Ruthven, you and the servants go to the butteries and bring anything you can get your hands on. Baker, I want fresh bread in one hour. Lots of it.

BAKER: *(Ready to leave on the instant.)* Yes, Sire!

WENCESLAS: Monsignor, perhaps you and the ladies will see if there be any clothes or furs that can be spared. Aloysius, my boy, bring the unused fire logs from the grate. And Brother Boleslav, you and I will visit the Treasury and see if we can't get an odd copper or two that would be better in the hands of some poor man than moldering on the floor of some deep vault. *(As they get up to do the bidding)* And everyone: Dress warmly! We have a long, cold walk ahead of us this night!

End of Scene One.

(As a cover for the scene change to Scene Two, the chorus continues the song)

BASSES: Hither, Page and stand by me,
If thou know'st, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he,
Where and what his dwelling?

TENORS: Sire he lives a good league hence,
Underneath the mountain,
Right against the forest fence,
By Saint Agnes' fountain.

BASSES: Bring me flesh and bring me wine,
Bring me pine logs hither,
Thou and I will see him dine,
When we bear them thither!

OMNES: Page and monarch forth they went,

Forth they went together.
Through the rude wind's wild lament,
And the bitter weather....

(If desired, or if more time is needed for the scene change, the song may be begun again, and sung to this point as a round. When the set is ready, or near so, the chorus should go on to the fourth stanza.)

TENORS: Sire, the night is darker now,
And the wind blows stronger.
Fails my heart, I know not how,
I can go no longer.

BASSES: Mark my footsteps, my good page,
Tread thou in them boldly,
Thou shalt find the winter's rage
Freeze thy blood less coldly....

SCENE TWO

(A desolate forest glade, covered with snow. There are rude huts and lean-tos here and there, with one predominant, Stage Left. On the last strains of the bridge song, a poor man dressed in gray rags enters Stage Right with a bundle of wood. He trudges across, looks briefly at the stars, then music)

(Song: "The Kindness of Strangers")

POOR MAN *(Singing:)* Kindness, once thought of as a virtue,
Now is wanting in a world selfish and cold.
I listen each night for the song of a nightingale,
Wond'ring if I'll hear it, before I grow old.

We all need the kindness of strangers,
A sympathetic smile to lift us when we fall.
When a sunbeam kisses a raindrop,
Soon there's a heavenly rainbow over all.

It will take a heart full of caring,
To serve another, espec'ly one who's low.
We all need the kindness of strangers,
To succeed amid dangers above and below.

GOOD KING WENCESLAS

We all need the kindness of strangers,
And ev'ry friend I got is a stranger I got to know.

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