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A Christmas Story

Lucy E. Parsons

December 26, 1885

And here is my mail with a letter from Santa Claus who has not even forgotten me, although the halcyon days of childhood's sweet delusion have long since vanished from me. And the precious missive which the venerable old sire in his rambles through foreign lands has found and brought to me, becomes so interesting as I peruse its contents that I have determined to let the readers of *The Alarm* have the benefit of it.

The story is laid in a barbarous isle, and is the result of the very sudden advent of a ship-wrecked Christian, who in return for the many kindnesses which he has received at the hands of his new neighbors, proposes to carry a few of them back with him to his own country that he may show them the benefits of a Christian civilization in order that the benighted barbarian may return to his own country and become a missionary in the cause of Christian civilization and a good government.

The little missive which Santa Claus has so kindly brought me seems to be a report of those missionaries made upon their return to their native country. The report says:

“They carried us in an easterly direction across the angry waves of the mighty ocean on the wings of a huge and beautiful sea bird

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(they called it a steamship) and landed us upon the verge of a great continent where nature seemed to always smile. And when we alighted from our lovely sea bird we were placed behind a horse of steel who blew and neighed and panted, impatient to start on his long journey across the wide expanding continent, and when at last he was started, he carried us with lightning speed; he whirled through valleys, across plains, and climbed the mountainside with all the ease of a giant that he was, never tiring, never flagging, but always reaching out as if in search of more land to cover; time seemed to dwindle before his onward strides, and space was annihilated.”

A voice in the audience inquired: “How could he hold out?”

“Oh, he was driven by steam, a discovery which they claimed was the most wonderful ever made since their God had made the world.”

The missionary continued to read the report: “On the fifth day after our starting they landed us in the heart of a magnificent city. This was about 10 o’clock a.m., and the people whom we saw moving about in such apparent ease, driving about the avenues of wealth and marts of trade in magnificent equipages, arrayed in costliest raiment, our guide informed us, were the sole owners of all those enormous structures which so amazed us; that they were in fact the sole possessors of the earth and all it contained, and lived but to enjoy. In our admiration we exclaimed, ‘Mighty is the Christian Civilization! Great is their government!’” [Great sensation in the audience, and cries of ‘Let’s emigrate.’]

“Hold on, comrades, hear us through,” said the missionary, resuming: “We were shown all the wonderful sights in the arts and methods of warfare, and promised to be shown those of industry of this Christian people. We were conducted into marble halls where banquet boards were spread and lovely women came and went, fairy-like, all bespangled with precious jewels and gems of greatest worth. Their fair faces fairly beamed with contentment, ease

their people are happy and contented as they claim, then what do they need to be governed for? And in their religion they are hypocrites, inasmuch as they preach one thing and practice another.”

“And in their economical or industrial system they are robbers, fleecing old and young alike, and under the shadow of their altars they keep great engines of destruction that they may send their enemies to hell by the wholesale. As for my part, I move that we send missionaries among them at once, not to teach them how to die, but how to live; not to be soul-savers but body-savers. Teach them how not to make criminals of the people by overwork and poverty that their ministers may have a job praying them out of hell!”

In the midst of the great sensation and commotion which arose at this motion and the cries of “second the motion,” and “send missionaries at once!”—amid all this confusion Santa Claus seems to have lost part of the manuscript of this very interesting report, and the readers of *The Alarm* will have to be content with what is here given.

seemed so different from those whom we had been accustomed to seeing. These last were pale-faced, care-worn and hard-worked people, who seemed to have no time nor desire to stop and enjoy the beautiful displays in the show windows as the well-dressed ones whom we had during the day seen doing so; and in this struggling mass of hurrying humanity we could see little children of tender age looking as over-worked as those more mature in years.”

“While we were peering into these people’s faces, trying to make out why it was they looked so different from those whom we had seen at church and at the banquet, just then our guide stepped up and told us that these people whom we now saw were ‘only the working class; the lower element in our society.’”

“Working people, did you say?’ we asked. ‘Then do they not build those beautiful buildings which they are coming out of?’”

“Oh, yes; we have them do the work, but we superintend it.”

“Then of course they own them?”

“No. You see, it is like this: these people are the working class. It is the capitalists who own the property.”

“Then, if these people are the working people as you say they are, why is it they are not owners of this property?”

“Well, you see, it is very difficult for the heathen to understand the political economy of a Christian civilization. You see, it is like this: we employ these classes and pay them so much of their labor product, which we call wages; and of course this is a great blessing to them, for if they were not so employed by us they could not obtain the comforts of life they now enjoy.”

“But are they satisfied to simply receive wages for their work? Do they quietly submit?”

“No, not always; but we do not permit any interference on their part; we deal with them summarily.” [A voice in the audience: ‘What do you think of the Christian government and their boasted civilization?’]

“What do we think of it? Why, from what we could learn of their government it is simply organized fraud and oppression; because if

and happiness.” [Murmur in the audience: ‘Mighty is the Christian Civilization!’]

“As night grew on apace and sparkling wine from vine-wreathed cups was freely drunk, and toasts in quick succession were freely and hilariously offered, which ran about thus: ‘Happy, contented, and prosperous are our people under the benign influence of a wisely managed and Christian Government,’ and as the applause from the last toast echoed along down the granite columns of the banqueting hall which made the silken draperies quiver and fairly rent the magnificent frescoed ceiling, a strange apparition appeared and stood about midway in the hall so that none could help but see it.”

“That apparition was the wretchedest of women. And from her cavernous eyes, pale flashes seemed to rise, as when the northern skies gleamed in December. And like the water’s flow under December snow came a dull voice of woe from the heart’s chamber:

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Christian people,’ said she, ‘while at your banqueting board will you hear the prayer of the widow, the cry of the orphan? Without, the blinding snow falls thick and fast. Three months ago this day I, for the fifth time, became a mother, and on that very day I was made a widow and they were orphaned by my poor husband being crushed to a shapeless mass among the machinery in that man’s factory (pointing to the proposer of the last toast) and I swear to you that twice these twelve hours past we have been without a morsel of food or a bit of fuel, and I am afraid to return to my wretched hovel for fear they have already perished from cold and hunger. Oh! In God’s name hear their cries if not mine!’

For a moment all seemed transfixed; then a slight noise was heard, when from a recess emerged an officious person all done up in a large blue coat with brass buttons and quickly stepping up to the apparition, drew the thin, faded shawl over the pale, haggard cheeks and flashing eyes, thus stifling the cries for ‘mercy.’”

Voices from the audience: “Didn’t the Christians say anything?”

“Yes, they spoke for a few moments in whispers.”

“What did they say?”

“Well, from the ladies side could be heard sentences like these: ‘Pshaw! Such management, as to let such a creature make her way into the banqueting hall, and especially when strangers are present.’”

“Another lady of very matronly appearance spoke thus: ‘Oh! Did you hear the language she used about becoming a mother? Just as though we care how many brats she had or when they were born.’”

“From the gentlemen we could hear expressions like these: ‘Those fancied grievances from the improvident lower classes, in venting their supposed wrongs and annoying decent people, is becoming altogether too frequent. We must have the military well practiced in ‘street riot drill,’ and equipped so as to be ready to quell the first manifestation of an attempt on their part to force a recognition of the ‘justness’ of ‘righting their alleged wrongs.’”

Other gentlemen said: ‘Yes, yes, you are right. We have been reading the *Tribune*’s appeal to businessmen after the Thanksgiving Day street riot drill, and I have myself been soliciting contributions from among the propertied classes, with no small success.’”

“These, and many more expressions of a like tenor could be heard from all present.”

“The time having now arrived for leave-taking and a pleasant good-night, we soon left the room, and as myself and guide emerged from the magnificent building, our host seemed completely lost in praise of the ‘prosperity and hospitality of a Christian people.’”

“We were about to take a cab, when my attention was attracted, and I stopped, with one foot upon the cab step, and as I did so, I discerned several of the brass-buttoned fellows before referred to forcing along as many young girls, who were weeping and declaring they would not have been ‘soliciting’ upon the street if they had not been driven to do so. One said her aged mother was without ‘food or fuel,’ and another said, ‘Oh, sir, please, please let me

go just this time. I swear to you I have been trying so hard to get work, but I could not, and now my landlord has served notice upon me, and myself and little children will be thrown upon the street if the rent is not paid tomorrow.”

“On my turning to our friend, he guessed the question I was about to ask, and with an impatient wave of the hand, informed us that these persons ‘were only a lot of unfortunate creatures whom we in this Christian country turn over to the authorities to be dealt with. In fact, that is mainly what we have our government for, the taking charge of the lower classes.’”

“When the Sabbath bells pealed out calling these Christians to their gorgeous temples to worship their gods, we, too, were escorted to one of them, and introduced to the minister in charge as some ‘heathen who had been induced to come among us to learn the habits of a God-fearing people, that they might learn the ways of the Christian, in order that they might return to their own land and become missionaries.’ The minister very sanctimoniously declared that ‘we are faithful followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head,’ then mounted his gorgeous pulpit and took for his text words to this effect: ‘That it was as difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, unless they were very generous to the poor,’ and when the contribution box was passed around it was very generously remembered.”

“One fine day, after we had been in the Christian country but a few weeks, we strolled down in the midst of the marts of trade, and as we stood and gazed in wonderment and admiration at the towering buildings, these same buildings seemed to suddenly begin to take on a different aspect, as we heard the great clock in the tower begin to strike the hour of six, and as it did so there began to stream out from all these monstrous buildings a blackening stream of people, who, as they came forth, seemed to be hurrying helter skelter in every direction, as though their very life depended upon their getting somewhere in the shortest time imaginable. These people