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Albert Libertad
The Legend of Christmas
Dedicated to the Grandchildren of the Year 3000 (or later)
1899

Retrieved on 2022-12-24 from <libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/albert-libertad-the-legend-of-christmas-1899>

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1899

Once upon a time, a long time ago, around the year 1900, there was a big heap of rocks and mud that the natives at that time called Paris.

It was the capital of a country favored with a temperate climate where cereals, vineyards, and the most beautiful fruits grew in abundance.

Approaching these heaps of stone, overcoming the pestilential odors given off by them, one saw that it was crossed by roads of all sorts: some wide, packed with fine houses, and others narrow, with, on each side, houses with the look of mousetraps, arranged in tight rows.

That day was the end of the year. It was celebrated by that village, but nature appeared to be sulking and the snow fell in large flakes. Despite this, all along the streets, the shops spread waves of light and eyes were drawn by the mass of oddly stocked victuals.

The strollers and buyers were numerous. Some, wrapped in warm furs, laughed blissfully, mocking the cold. Others, on the

contrary, walked fearfully; they were covered in rags, through which their bones appeared or their flesh showed.

From time to time, the latter assumed supplicant attitudes before the former, which is unfamiliar to you, dear children, but which consisted of holding out their hand while speaking disjoint words in a doleful tone. They begged for alms, which means that asked the fortunate for a portion of what they do not need so that they could acquire necessities for themselves and their children.

Three-quarters of the well-dressed passed by unmoved; some others, frugally, searched their pockets for the smallest offering they could give them.

When the ragged folk showed themselves to be too eager, some men, all dressed in the same manner, very heartily chastised them and chased them from the main streets; sometimes they even took them away after chaining their hands.

And there was, at the same time, so little humanity, so little respect for human dignity, that the very well dressed folks circled round and threw taunts and the poor wretches thus served, and the poorly dressed bowed their heads and squared their shoulders, trying to hide their crime of being poor by acquiescing to the acts of the men in uniform.

Those men were called agents of law enforcement, and they were kept big and plump; they had a mission to defend the well-dressed, the well-fed, against the ragged and destitute. They were, you will be astonished to learn, members of that same unfortunate class.

But we chatter on without getting to the subject.

A woman was lost in that crowd. Suffering was visible in her features, and poverty in the shabby rags that covered her. But on looking closely, one sensed that she was young, one saw that she was beautiful.

Many times her hand had traced the begging gesture, but she had never had the strength to finish. A last bit of pride shown in her eyes, her whole being rebelled against the debasement, the suppli-

cation. Often already well-dressed sorts had brushed past her, making rude appeals, and, as she lingered before a stand well stocked with succulent and tempting dishes, she felt at her neck the hot breath of a man who whispered: "If you want to go upstairs, there's the room and a round bit in it."

Dear children, you will hardly dare to understand these words, so surprising will they seem to you. In these barbaric times, the dignity of woman, her free choice, was no more respected than human dignity and liberty. The beauty, grace and youth of poor women were purchased by the well-dressed, the rich. None of their tastes were respected and the oldest, the ugliest—in furs—had the youngest and most beautiful women for not much more than a piece of bread.

In those days, they affected a greater morality and a great modesty. The free unions of the present were firmly excluded: love was always made through intermediaries or sold in special markets. Our poor unknown reddened, turned around. The man was old. He was ugly, with eyes sunk into the fat of his cheeks, two or three chins, a fat belly... Oh, her youth to this old man, to this ugly pleasure-seeker. She hesitated, then her beautiful face tightened. She squared her shoulders... She accepted.

She followed the man into a hotel, in some lane close to the high street. And in a plain room, where venal ruts were just as ordinary, she sold her body to the bestial caresses of the passer-by.

Satisfied, the man went on to other pleasures. She stood in front of the hotel, looking at the "round bit" as if lost, then gathered herself. The act that she had just committed was for this metal. This metal was for bread, for the child that was hungry; this metal was for coal, for the child who was cold... for her child, over there, in the attic room.

In a whirlwind, she entered a shop where the golden bread was spread out in all its forms. Some servants, who gathered around the well-dressed, stared at her suspiciously: "A pound of bread, please." For bread, dear children, that indispensable sustenance, was sold

like everything else. Someone served her and, happy to have bread of her own, the poor woman, she tossed the coin on the counter. It made a dull sound... A nasty voice said: "False. We can't take that, my dear." Brutal hands snatched the bread and pushed her outside.

She understood: she had been robbed, cheated. The last sacrifice of the mother for the child had been useless. Harsh words came to her mouth, against the gluttons who had eaten her flesh, breathed in her youth, without wishing to leave her a scrap of her well-being.

But her head quickly bowed and big tears poured down her cheeks; discouraged, weary, she made her way to the narrow lanes and bleak houses, leaving far behind her the quarter of luxury and abundance.

And, in the narrowest road, before the bleakest house, she stopped, followed a long alley, climbed the staircase, and, right at the top, catching her breath, softly she opened the door to her room.

Oh, the dreadful attic. Oh, the dismal slum. On the floor, a mattress, on which two or three sacks were thrown, close by a table of poorly joined planks, a stove whose three gaping holes seemed to emit cold, a gray trunk in one corner and that was all. A wan light crept in by a dormer whose broken pane let the breeze blow in. Did we say that was all? No. In one corner, almost sounding a cheerful note, a child's bed. In this bed all the material love appeared triumphant; a thousand little things embellished this nest. A child of six or six years slept there.

The woman's first look was for him. Alas! She had returned as she had left, hands empty, no bread, no wood, it was death, the inevitable death. His death, that of the little cherub, of that future. Her eyes streamed with tears; she approached the bed with slow steps. Oh, irony, the child in his dream, smiled at the sight of some far-off paradise, of your paradise, dear children.

Then, she held her breath, but a desire to kiss that innocent flesh, that flesh of her flesh, arose, imperious, and she placed her lips on the brow of the child.

The child slowly opened his big eyes, still full of ecstatic joy, casting them on his tearful mother, on the bare table, on the cold stove, and cried out sadly: "Oh, mama! It was only a dream... But what a fine dream! We were no longer hungry... we were no longer cold... ever."