

CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE WORKHOUSE

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(A Poem by George R. Sims, 1847-1922)

It is Christmas Day in the workhouse,
And the cold, bare walls are bright
With garlands of green and holly,
And the place is a pleasant sight;
For with clean-washed hands and faces,
In a long and hungry line
The paupers sit at the table,
For this is the hour they dine.
And the guardians and their ladies,
Although the wind is east,
Have come in their furs and wrappers,
To watch their charges feast;
To smile and be condescending,
Put pudding on pauper plates.
To be hosts at the workhouse banquet
They've paid for – with the rates.
Oh, the paupers are meek and lowly
With their "Thank'ee kindly, mum's!"
So long as they fill their stomachs,
What matter it whence it comes!
But one of the old men mutters,
And pushes his plate aside:
"Great God!" he cries, "but it chokes me!
For this is the day she died!"
The guardians gazed in horror,
The master's face went white;
"Did a pauper refuse the pudding?"
"Could their ears believe aright?"
Then the ladies clutched their husbands,
Thinking the man would die,

Struck by a bolt, or something,
By the outraged One on high.
But the pauper sat for a moment,
Then rose 'mid silence grim,
For the others had ceased to chatter
And trembled in every limb.
He looked at the guardians' ladies,
Then, eyeing their lords, he said,
"I eat not the food of villains
Whose hands are foul and red:
"Whose victims cry for vengeance
From their dark, unhallowed graves."
"He's drunk!" said the workhouse master,
"Or else he's mad and raves."
"Not drunk or mad," cried the pauper,
"But only a haunted beast,
Who, torn by the hounds and mangled,
Declines the vulture's feast.
"I care not a curse for the guardians,
And I won't be dragged away;
Just let me have the fit out,
It's only on Christmas Day
That the black past comes to goad me,
And prey on my burning brain;
I'll tell you the rest in a whisper –
I swear I won't shout again.
"Keep your hands off me, curse you!
Hear me right out to the end.
You come here to see how paupers
The season of Christmas spend;
You come here to watch us feeding,
As they watched the captured beast.
Here's why a penniless pauper
Spits on your paltry feast.
"Do you think I will take your bounty,
And let you smile and think
You're doing a noble action
With the parish's meat and drink?
Where is my wife, you traitors –
The poor old wife you slew?
Yes, by the God above me,

My Nance was killed by you!
'Last winter my wife lay dying,
Starved in a filthy den;
I had never been to the parish –
I came to the parish then.
I swallowed my pride in coming,
For ere the ruin came,
I held up my head as a trader,
And I bore a spotless name.
"I came to the parish, craving
Bread for a starving wife,
Bread for the woman who'd loved me
Through fifty years of life;
And what do you think they told me,
Mocking my awful grief,
That 'the House' was open to us,
But they wouldn't give 'out relief'.
"I slunk to the filthy alley –
'Twas a cold, raw Christmas Eve –
And the bakers' shops were open,
Tempting a man to thief;
But I clenched my fists together,
Holding my head awry,
So I came to her empty-handed
And mournfully told her why.
"Then I told her the house was open;
She had heard of the ways of that,
For her bloodless cheeks went crimson,
and up in her rags she sat,
Crying, 'Bide the Christmas here, John,
We've never had one apart;
I think I can bear the hunger –
The other would break my heart.'
"All through that eve I watched her,
Holding her hand in mine,
Praying the Lord and weeping,
Till my lips were salt as brine;
I asked her once if she hungered,
And as she answered 'No' ,
T'he moon shone in at the window,
Set in a wreath of snow.

“Then the room was bathed in glory,
And I saw in my darling’s eyes
The faraway look of wonder
That comes when the spirit flies;
And her lips were parched and parted,
And her reason came and went.
For she raved of our home in Devon,
Where our happiest years were spent.
“And the accents, long forgotten,
Came back to the tongue once more.
For she talked like the country lassie
I woo’d by the Devon shore;
Then she rose to her feet and trembled,
And fell on the rags and moaned,
And, ‘Give me a crust – I’m famished –
For the love of God!’ she groaned.
“I rushed from the room like a madman
And flew to the workhouse gate,
Crying, ‘Food for a dying woman!’
And the answer came, ‘Too late.’
They drove me away with curses;
Then I fought with a dog in the street
And tore from the mongrel’s clutches
A crust he was trying to eat.
“Back through the filthy byways!
Back through the trampled slush!
Up to the crazy garret,
Wrapped in an awful hush;
My heart sank down at the threshold,
And I paused with a sudden thrill.
For there, in the silv’ry moonlight,
My Nance lay, cold and still.
“Up to the blackened ceiling,
The sunken eyes were cast –
I knew on those lips, all bloodless,
My name had been the last;
She called for her absent husband –
O God! had I but known! –
Had called in vain, and, in anguish,
Had died in that den – alone.
“Yes, there, in a land of plenty,

Lay a loving woman dead,
Cruelly starved and murdered
for a loaf of the parish bread;
At yonder gate, last Christmas,
I craved for a human life,
You, who would feed us paupers,
What of my murdered wife!"
'There, get ye gone to your dinners,
Don't mind me in the least,
Think of the happy paupers
Eating your Christmas feast;
And when you recount their blessings
In your smug parochial way,
Say what you did for me, too,
Only last Christmas Day."

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