

“The Week Before Christmas,” December 20, 1911 by Margaret Chanler Aldrich

This poem was first published in the *New York Times*, and then used by the National Consumers' League for its campaign to improve conditions for retail workers around Christmas.

Tw'as the week before Christmas, and all through the  
town

The shopgirls and packers were fast breaking down,  
While women of leisure lay soft in their beds,  
And visions of purchases danced in their heads.  
“I never go into those stores with bad air,  
But the time of their closing is not my affair,”  
Said a lady who shopped in a limousine car  
More roomy and lighter than tenements are.

And then as she dozed, there arose such a clatter,  
She rang for a maid to see what was the matter.  
She saw to her horror a flying machine.  
Come down through her chimney. Within it was seen  
An angry old Santa Claus, dressed like his picture,  
Whose face was her Bishop's and doctor's in mixture.  
He threw from his tonneau a muff which could purr;  
“Tw'as labeled “The voice of the sweated in fur”  
Kid mules which went tapping about the parquet—  
It's 11 o'clock, we're delivering yet!  
Each purchaser wants all his parcels each night—  
And to-morrow they drive us before the day's light.  
A phonograph sang with an opera voice  
(In Italian) “ ‘Tis Christmas, let all men rejoice!”  
But always the weary must pay when they break.  
And we can't keep a girl if she makes a mistake.

One hand on her Bible, and one on her cheek,  
The poor lady listened—a terrified wreck—  
While the gifts of her nightmare piled up on the floor,  
And that horrid Saint Nicholas handed her more!  
When she clutched at her Bible, he pulled off his cap  
Saying, “That's what I need for the people you trap  
Into working for wages on which they can't live.  
It's they who need Scriptures on how to forgive.  
But your mean little checks – \$5 here and \$10 there –  
For the sweated you doom to a hospital's care  
Are the devil's own credit, it alone knows  
The lives that are ruined by shops that won't close.  
If after long hours, girls reel from a store  
More dead than alive, to a friend at the door—  
Who offers to treat them, and one more goes under—  
‘Tis you are to blame, with your bargains and blunder.  
You patronize shops which are open at night,  
Then you open a Rescue and think it's all right  
I tell you conditions don't change for committees—  
It will take every woman in each of your cities;  
Good hours! good wages! a small dividend  
To the octopus owners – then world without end.  
. . . .  
Just then came the voices of children at prayers—  
“Dear Santa Claus, please send my mother car fares,  
She cannot work late and be walking home, too.”  
When away to his children the Santa Claus flew.