

LIBERTY

by

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Written Melbourne
This draft April 2007

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Cast

Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, aged 38.
A sculptor - passionate, direct, enthusiastic

Henri Grimaud, late 30s/early 40s.
A wealthy businessman – elegant, laconic, cynical and a devoted friend to Frederic.

Madame Bartholdi, aged early 60s.
Frederic's mother, a widow originally from Alsace, who lives with him in Paris. Fussy, ambitious for her son.

Setting

The play is set in Paris in 1872. The action takes place in Frederic's study. The staging requires a table covered in papers and a large rolled up map, an oil lamp or candlestick, a desk chair and an armchair. Additional props – tray, glasses, champagne bottle.

Frederic's study, Paris, 1872. The desk holds a small oil lamp and is covered in an untidy mass of papers. There is a hard chair and a small armchair.

HENRI enters unannounced. FREDERIC is absorbed with his sketches. He is not wearing a jacket, looks unshaven and has his sleeves rolled up.

HENRI I thought I'd find you in here.

FREDERIC Henri, how are you? I didn't hear the bell.

HENRI Why do I have the feeling that you've forgotten our dinner?

FREDERIC Dinner? Did we ...?

HENRI Yes, we did. We do. So go and get ready.

FREDERIC I'm sorry Henri. The committee is meeting tonight and they may try to reach me here. Do you mind?

HENRI So, you are still waiting.

FREDERIC Yes, but I really think this time (*beat*) or anyway very soon ...

HENRI (*HENRI draws off his gloves and picks up one of the sketches*)
And in the meantime you're still a prisoner of this cruel girl. It seems endless.

- FREDERIC Of course, it must end soon ... and, you know, she doesn't mean to be cruel. In fact, I believe she adores me!
- HENRI Well, frankly, after 5 years, all your friends find *her* a little tiresome. (*HENRI yawns and lounges in armchair*)
- FREDERIC I know ... but I can't give up now, Henri. I am so close ...but the waiting ... yes, the waiting is unbearable.
- HENRI They know, of course, that you had different plans for her ... that you meant her to live somewhere else?
- FREDERIC Well, they ... possibly they know, they didn't ask me anything about that. Anyway, she's not the same, not exactly the same. she evolved, she changed ... I'll show you. (*FREDERIC rummages about*). Look, this is one of the sketches I did for Suez and, and here is the current one, so you see ...
- HENRI (*HENRI looks slowly and carefully between the two sketches*). Yes, yes ... I do see. In the latest one there is definitely a noticeable difference in (*beat*) the curve of her little finger.
- FREDERIC Henri! Anyway, what does it matter? One can't improve on perfection.
- HENRI And who will you use as a model?
- FREDERIC I am thinking, perhaps, my mother.
- HENRI (*MADAME BARTHOLDI enters behind Henri*).Your mother!
(*FREDERIC indicates her presence with a glance and HENRI spins around*). Madame Bartholdi, how are you? (*Kisses her hand*).
- MADAME Good evening, Monsieur Grimaud. You find me as well as a woman may be who is obliged to depend on charity.
- FREDERIC Mother, really. It's hardly charity if you live with me.
- MADAME I would be a great deal better, Monsieur Grimaud, if my son were to have the recognition and success that he deserves.
- HENRI But, Madame, you must know, his work is admired everywhere.
- MADAME Oh yes, he is in great demand but he wastes his time in Paris dreaming about that (*beat*) woman ...
- HENRI That's an old story but she is an unusual woman.

(MADAME draws HENRI a little aside, FREDERIC's eyes return to his papers).

MADAME I don't believe it will ever happen. And, even if it does, I am quite sure he will never be paid.

HENRI Well, there you may have a point. Even if the Committee accept Frederic's design one wonders how they will raise the money.

MADAME And it wouldn't matter if he were not so stubborn. The Germans are not barbaric. If he would just go back to Colmar and negotiate for our property, I'm sure ...

HENRI I have been saying exactly the same, Madame, I even offered to go there myself on his behalf and negotiate ...

MADAME He's quite unreasonable.

HENRI Let's be honest, he has never been a good businessman.

FREDERIC I'm still here! *(Beat)* This is nothing to do with business. I am not going back to Alsace while it is occupied.

MADAME But you see, our dear Henri is most willing to do so for you.

FREDERIC *(Angry)* I have told you both before, I will not negotiate with the Germans for access to my own property in my own country.

MADAME I am sure I never asked you to do anything unpatriotic.

HENRI And if the Germans are there for ever. Will you really turn your back on everything your father built?

FREDERIC He would not expect me to beg for it.

(An awkward silence. MADAME leaves with sulky dignity).

FREDERIC Let us not quarrel. *(FREDERIC starts unrolling a map.)* I'll show you the site I have chosen. Right here, see. *(Beat)* Can you see it, Henri? The Atlantic lashed by storms. A wretched family from some God-forsaken Russian village looking for landfall. Terrified, without a word of English and barely an idea of what they are going to find. Just holding onto a scrap of hope that the future can be better than their squalid past. The harbour shrouded in a early morning mist ...

HENRI *(HENRI steps onto the chair, poses with the lamp and arm raised).* And then they see the face of *(beat)* your mother welcoming them to the promised land. *(imitates the heavy*

accent of Madame Bartholdi) Welcome children, welcome to the protection of my slums...

FREDERIC Slums are better than starvation.

HENRI My sweatshops and factories...

FREDERIC Better than persecution.

HENRI *(Drops the accent)*. If you don't like the city you can go to the prairies – but be ready to dodge the arrows *(he mimes arrow dodging)*.

FREDERIC At least they'll be free. Are we? Our home occupied by damned Prussians.

HENRI Oh yes, Freedom. *(Restarts the silly voice)* Freedom from civilisation! Freedom from culture! *(laughs)*

FREDERIC It's not funny, Henri.

(HENRI gets down from the chair).

HENRI So you want to pass the torch of liberte, fraternite, egalite to our American revolutionary cousins because you think they will tend it better than we did *(gives the lamp to FREDERIC with a mock bow)*. Yes, that is funny.

FREDERIC Europe's tired and decadent. The future is with the young countries. America, Australia, Argentina – they have space...

HENRI Damn great empty desert space is what I heard.

FREDERIC Space to expand. They don't need to invade their neighbours - they are too big to be attacked. No need for generals and armies.

HENRI Perhaps the generals will invent a need.

FREDERIC Space to breathe.

HENRI Yes, well I'm quite content with the familiar stink of the Seine, thank you.

FREDERIC Huh. Paris. Here no one cares about anything except money and position.

HENRI It's true. We fuss over our petty everyday concerns and take thousands of years of civilisation for granted but still *(beat)* it exists *(beat)* and it's what makes us who we are.

- FREDERIC In America people from different lands can come together to make a new civilisation.
- HENRI Frederic, I admit I am quite dependent on my chef but I know this much. You can't make a beautiful meal by taking a little of everything in the kitchen and throwing it together. You just get a tasteless mess. Anyway, *(beat)* what about what they leave behind?
- FREDERIC What does it matter?
- HENRI Listen to you! Why do you work yourself into a passion about Alsace? You're an artist – you can make your home anywhere, can work anywhere. Alsace is not the only place with fine food, high mountains, healthy climate. I grant you Colmar is a pretty town but there are many others with fine streets so
- FREDERIC So, I'm angry because I am forced to be an exile in my own country.
- HENRI And what kind of country is it where every man is an exile?
- FREDERIC *(Beat)* They are not all exiles. People choose to emigrate.
- HENRI You think a starving man has a choice? Anyway, it makes no difference. They will still mourn what they left behind.
- FREDERIC But they will gain things... things that are new ...different.
- HENRI As you have gained in Paris and yet you still yearn for what you think of as home.
- FREDERIC But the children who are born there. America will be their home.
- HENRI You think so? They'll never miss the fields their grandfathers farmed; the villages they fought over?
- FREDERIC Pah. History!
- HENRI Never wish they could see the settings for their family stories? Never wish the language they have to speak in the street was the same as the private language of home?
- FREDERIC Wouldn't they just be grateful?
- HENRI No doubt. But there's still an indefinable sense of loss, a space where something is missing and gratitude won't fill it. *(Beat)* A nation of exiles is a sad and restless place. Personally, I prefer to stay close to my roots.

The doorbell clangs. They stand silent then rapid footsteps approach and MADAME runs into the room with an envelope. FREDERIC sits down, hesitates then opens it. As he reads he covers his face with his hands which Madame and Henri interpret as distress).

MADAME My dear boy!

HENRI Those morons know nothing. It's their loss, Frederic, and they will regret it. Have they been listening to that bloody fool Eiffel? He is so full of himself, really, I don't know what ...

FREDERIC No. They have agreed. They have accepted my design. She will be built ... in New York Harbour. Oh God, after dreaming of this for so long I can hardly believe it.

MADAME At last, you will rich and famous and I will be able to find you a wonderful wife. You too, Henri.

HENRI Thank you Madame but please don't go to any trouble for me.

MADAME B *(Not listening)* We must have champagne *(she exits)*,

FREDERIC There is no time to waste now, Henri. I'll have to go back to New York. Come with me!

HENRI You know how I hate to travel.

FREDERIC I have to meet people, see the site. Come on. Why did you learn English if you just stay in Paris?

HENRI So I could go to Ascot and Henley! America is the last place on earth I'd want to visit. I hear New York is pretty much a sea of mud ...

FREDERIC You can have your boots cleaned easily enough

HENRI ... swirling with corruption and ...*(beat)* Irishmen.

FREDERIC New York is mud because it is still growing, being built by strong Irish hands. Maybe there is a little corruption but you can't avoid that when there is so much at stake. The mud says opportunity.

HENRI The opportunity to sweat in mud!

FREDERIC A man can make anything of himself there. He is not bound by accident of birth.

HENRI And will those who got there first not create a new elite and pull up the bridge behind them?

FREDERIC America is vast and rich. Why would anyone be turned away?

HENRI You really believe in your beacon of freedom.

FREDERIC Yes. With all my heart. I called her Liberty Enlightening the World. That's what America stands for.

MADAME returns with a tray, champagne and glasses. (FREDERIC pours two drinks and hands one to HENRI and one to MADAME).

MADAME To Frederic

FREDERIC Let's drink to America. *(To HENRI)* You'll come with me to New York?

HENRI Of course. To America *(beat)* and liberty.

Lights dim to a screen showing the Statue of Liberty and a strong voice reading the poem

VOICE Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

THE END