

THE GIFT OF TONGUES

Overnight, while the whole world slept, a fierce, unthinkable snowstorm. One of those tropospheric aberrations which are not so much unexpected as uncalled for. It was in the last week of November, a few days after Thanksgiving. I awoke at 7; a vision of the sparkling 4-inch snow cover that had just dropped over the Great Metropolis drew me to my bedroom window. The storm was gone, blown out to sea. The afternoon's temperature would climb through the 40's. Even before the first pallid streetlights staged their ascendancy against a smoldering twilight, the snow had mostly melted away. An oppressive dampness clung to the thoroughfares where, still, the remaining mounds of slush continued to hinder the movements of pedestrians driven by purposes anything short of the highest.

The afternoon was taken up with shopping and various errands in the commercial heart of the downtown area. On days such as these one can experience an urgent need to break the routine, to get in somewhere out of the bustle and cold, to find some place where one can rightfully do nothing at all and simply relax. Few solutions to this ambition are equal to finding a way to devote an hour or more to sitting in or strolling through the public areas of a luxury hotel, one of those ubiquitous Sheratons, or Hiltons, or Hyatt-Regencies, or the more regal Waldorf-Astorias, Westins or Ritz-Carltons ! It comes as something of a surprise to discover that there is likely to be more democracy in a five-star hotel than in the lower echelons. Modern luxury hotels are commercial thoroughfares, quite unlike the Grand Hotels of monarchy. Their natural siblings are the super-highway, the supermarket, the shopping mall. Whatever their elitist illusions, they will never be permitted to override the basic objective of money-making.

Like the Sheraton, where I choose to settle in that day at around 4 P.M. On any given day it may be host to as many as half a dozen conferences, meetings, dinners, receptions. Few delegations are likely to consist entirely of blue-bloods or CEO's. One commonly turns up Elks, Rotarians, Jaycees; retirees partied off by their office mates; the membership of the Association of Dental Technicians. In the distributions about the lobbies one may notice customers for the travel agencies, the restaurants, the tourist guides or the smart shops tucked

along the hem of the bounding facade. People coming in off the streets to use the restrooms and telephones. Tourists from Indonesia or Venezuela or Hoboken. Or, like myself, persons happy merely to be able to rest their feet for awhile before moving on, spectators to the jostling kaleidoscope . One even finds a discrete mode of accommodation for undeniably shady individuals who wait for, or hope to engage in private dealings with some of the monied, lonely or merely low-minded hotel residents.

Credentials for admission into these arenas are in fact few.

One ought to be presentably dressed, and behave as if one doesn't

feel out of place. Neither the registration clerks, nor the receptionists, nor the bellhops, nor miscellaneous attendants have any cause for being suspicious of your desire to share their company. You can use all the public facilities; stroll the corridors admiring the paintings on the walls; duck into the shops; use the barber shop or shoeshine in the basement. Returning to the lobby you are encouraged to drop into the upholstered pulchritude of cushion and couch where, for upwards of an hour, (after which you may at last begin to look a little strange to somebody), you may bathe your weary limbs in limitless comfort. Your eyes feast on the dazzling light cast from bulbs shielded by antique petalform stained glass ; or swim, embalmed in pastel of wallpaper and paint. Your nerves hum to the tingling furriness underfoot. Ears delight in the clash of voices rising above the currents of sound , so many rafts, laden with feverish chatter, navigating the swirling eddies.

Look around: there may be plates with crackers or cookies or nuts; or newspapers and magazines . You note the arrivals of new guests, the stragglers, the smug, the bewildered. Your imagination , stimulated by the clusterings of humanity, the broad movements of groups streaming like smoky wraiths from burning coals, entertains its private opinions, its speculations, its inventions, all free of charge. Part of nothing, yet you belong - as much as anyone -

far more than those who, because they crave entrance into some

established category, will always feel excluded. Some of the people you notice may actually be affluent; and so, affecting affluence , you, too are affluent! For one hour you are rich as the richest being alive ; and you have none of his burdens.

After all, what if it should turn out to be the case that you do have a perfectly good reason for being here?

Shortly after this thought crossed my mind I arose, imparting confidence in every gesture, and walked over to inspect the grooved black felt tableau with the plastic letters caught beneath the glass case hanging across from the grand helical staircase. All the announcements for conferences and conventions, trade expositions, seminars and community meetings are posted there. I scanned it briefly, on the lookout for those events which I might have the right, for which I might find the interest, or at which I might even feel under an obligation, to attend.

My curiosity now thoroughly aroused, ambivalent between astonishment and amusement, I study these names:

C.A.L.M:
Clergy Advocating Liquor Moderation

M.A.R.C.H. :
Maximizing Alcohol Revenues
Over the Christmas Holidays

It was stated that both conferences were presently in attendance and would be so until the end of the month. The first organization clearly, was composed of ministers. A pamphlet on the table before the bulletin board described the other as an umbrella group for advertising agencies and copywriters. As I tried to make sense of the information available to me, I became aware of the sounds of some kind of commotion at my back. I turned, to discover small groups of people quarreling and engaged in heated exchanges, running down the staircases and escalators, striding through the lobbies and out the front doors. An elevator in the corridor to the left opened up and two men stepped out. The older, jowled, paunchy and, (as one may easily deduce from his starched collar, pale blue suit and vest of Tyrean purple), a minister, wagged a stubby finger in the other man's face and blurted:

"May the alcoholics of the world damn you to hell-fire!"

His antagonist had to be a copywriter from MARCH. He was sallow-faced, his upper lip covered by a prickly moustache, short and innocuous, even sickly. I sensed a metabolism ravaged by a craving for large quantities of stress and perpetual crisis. He flapped his raincoat, (one of those trench-coats universal to the business world,

believing itself permanently in the trenches) , and snarled:

" Can the pious humbug ! It's not Sunday! And I'm not your congregation, you frigging cornball hypocrite! "

If I'd sought relief from boredom , I was not going to be disappointed .

The Sheraton conference staff had not considered the consequences of scheduling such constitutionally hostile organizations in the same week. Both ministers and ad-men make their livings from rhetoric; what harm could come from reunions of rhetoricians? C.A.L.M. had assembled 50 ministers from 18 Christian denominations to launch a campaign of pulp and pulpit to exert some influence on society to cut down on its' drinking during the holiday season. One can imagine the sort of things they came up with: A photograph suggests a gathering of grieving relations around a pile-up of wrecked cars. Strewn around the perimeter lies the damaging testimony of many broken bottles of whiskey and gin . The caption below states: Its' Too Late To Pity The Widow And The Orphan , When It was Your Drunk-Driving That Killed their Breadwinner!

As one had reason to expect, M.A.R.C.H.'s style was, at every level, more flamboyant. Compare the take of each organization with regard to the same hallowed fable: The Gifts of the Magi .

The C.A.L.M. conference quickly approved an ad featuring the 3 Wise Kings standing in the manger before the Christ child's makeshift cradle. Their arms and the ground before them overflow with gifts. Beneath this tender image, the immemorial crêche , the ministers had positioned this moral:

There Wasn't Any Liquor In The Gifts Of The Magi!

M.A.R.CH. twisted the same icon to fit an apposite purpose. Stretching the full of a highway billboard : Behold ! The dry splendour of the Arabian desert. An inky, cloudless, aquamarine sky, its' wholesome air tangy with Oriental spices. Above the sand dunes on the horizon, filling the right-hand corner, an exploding star! In the foreground, 3 camels amble single file from right to left. The 3 Wise Kings, dressed richly in exotic costumes, perch aloft, rocking on gem-studded saddles. With bottles of sparkling champagne in their right hands, (labels prominently displayed), goblets filled to the brim in the other, they are making merry.

Across the lower border of the sign , on a banner etched in the sand:

LET'S RAISE A TOAST
TO THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM!

This version had been censored after half an hour's discussion in the Lincoln ballroom on the 5th floor of the Sheraton. It ran too great a risk of offending people by too direct a reference to the Christ child. In addition, the word 'babe' had a secondary connotation: that of a woman of questionable morals. The rest of the hour was devoted to finding appropriate substitutes.

It had to happen didn't it, that a Baptist minister would, just then, wander by mistake into the Lincoln Room! The perverse inventiveness kindled in the delegation by the multiple innuendoes latent in the word, babe , made him blush crimson. He held his peace; but they weren't finished. An idea thrown out from the floor began to gather momentum. It had to do with the fun that the revelers were having in the tavern of the inn that had turned away the Holy Family!

" They must have been making whoopee in there! " someone shouted, setting off smirks and ripples of laughter about the room. "Say- that's a great idea! Why not show Joseph coming in from the cold for a nip!...Hey, that's rich!... Have the barflies take up a collection for the baby!...And..Well.. Hey, what about, right there at the far end of the bar, the Star of Bethlehem coming over TV during the CBS evening news!....Show the guys joshing Joseph, like maybe the kid isn't his.....!"

It was not to be tolerated, even for another instant! The gentle preacher rose from his seat and stomped ostentatiously out the door. It took no more than a minute to explore the other corridors and find the location of the C.A.L.M. meeting. Storming into the Roosevelt Room, he felt quite justified in interrupting the business at hand to tell colleagues about the sinfulness running wild at M.A.R.C.H. His impassioned account whipped them to collective fury. Without being too certain of what they intended to do , they formed themselves into a brigade that tramped through the halls back to the Lincoln Room. Following someone's sudden inspiration, they began pounding, all together, on the doors with their fists, and shouted:

"CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST!
CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST!
CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST! CHRIST!

....."

The delegation within fell silent, petrified with fear; a reaction that soon turned to anger once it realized what was happening. "Let'em in! ", someone cried, "We're not afraid of them creeps! " The doors were opened, the clerics poured into the ballroom spewing threats of hellfire and damnation. It took little time for the emergence of a coagulation of small groups pursuing private quarrels that spilled out into the hallways, corridors and lobbies of the Sheraton.

Just about the time I'd gotten up from my couch to scan the bulletin boards for announcements of conferences, or other events, to help me while away the remaining hours of the evening !

The morning newspapers dubbed it a riot, though no bones were broken and no police called to the scene. By dinnertime tempers had settled down. Representatives for each organization met at 9 for private negotiations. Although unclear as to the details, the papers stated that a reconciliation had been achieved by midnight. A certain Lutheran minister had acknowledged, or at least agreed to assume, the blame for the door-pounding stunt, and would be going home. The M.A.R.C.H. delegates who had played with the idea that the cold-hearted drunks at the bar of the inn of the Nativity might provide good copy, had already issued a formal apology.

I was out the door by 9:30 AM , headed in the direction of the Sheraton ; there was no time to waste! Under a crystal-clear sky, against icy winds, I strutted two miles to the downtown. A visitor from abroad might have concluded that Christmas had come early; every block in the commercial district was reeling with holiday decorations. Holly wreathes garlanded the lamp posts. In all directions one saw a palette dominated by Yuletide combinations of red, white and green. Great plastic reindeer frolicked in the parks; clusters of blinking colored bulbs festooned the pillared porticos of fashionable churches. Only lacking was the blanket of snow. Cloud banks massing on the horizon suggested that this oversight would be corrected by nightfall.

Nor had Madison Avenue been remiss in its endeavors while Holiness stalked abroad. Much as giant lonely evergreens lend a forlorn charm to Alpine mountain slopes, billboards promoting whiskey, eggnog, cigarettes and dangerous lifestyles dotted the grey cityscape. In the solemn vaults of the display windows of the major department stores stood glitzy clothing, expensive furniture, jewelry , toys and stuffed animals covered with the fur of animals murdered to lend verisimilitude to such lifeless dummies. Beggars, huddled outside the doors of Macy's, Neiman -Marcus, Bonwit-Teller and so forth , received scant charity from the sacred festival of consumer greed. Keener in its mercantile wisdom, the Salvation Army prospered where pan-handlers failed: a rotund Santa Claus, heartiness personified and certifiably pickled to the gills, rattled a handbell, which startling clang directed one's attention to the black kettle placed before him for the reception of conscience money. Staggering through alleyways from Skid Rows and bars many of these same pan-handlers would later be getting their meals at the Sally soup kitchens.

I entered the Sheraton around 10. Walking through the lobby to the information desk I was surprised to see some of the ad-men and ministers sitting together on the armchairs and couches, engaged in conversation and in amiable rapport. The receptionist took me for a journalist and sent me up to the Mezzanine. Coming off the escalator I encountered a long table on which stacks of pamphlets, magazines and glossy brochures from several organizations associated with C.A.L.M. and M.A.R.C.H. were arranged. At the center of this display rested a large pile of press releases . Producing it on such short notice must have cost some money; it had been typeset then printed, not photocopied, on a high quality bond paper. I picked up a copy and went back downstairs to the lobby, making sure that I was seated comfortably in an easychair before reading it:

JOINT COMMUNIQUE

"WE THE COMBINED MEMBERSHIPS OF C.A.L.M. (CLERGY ADVOCATING LIQUOR MODERATION) , AND M.A.R.CH. (MAXIMIZING ALCOHOL REVENUES OVER THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS) , ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THAT WE HAVE DISCOVERED THAT WHAT WE IMAGINED

TO BE A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS HAS TURNED OUT TO BE NOTHING MORE THAN A DISAGREEMENT OVER METHODS.

M.A.R.C.H. SPEAKS IN GOOD FAITH WHEN IT EMPHATICALLY ASSERTS THAT IT WILL NOT TOLERATE ANY BLASPHEMOUS IMPLICATIONS IN ANY ADVERTISING APPROVED FOR THE CHRISTMAS SEASON.

C.A.L.M. IS EQUALLY EMPHATIC IN ASSERTING THAT IT WILL REFRAIN FROM ALL INTERFERENCE WITH THE ENDEAVORS OF THE COPYWRITERS OF THIS GREAT LAND, ITS DISTILLERIES , ITS BARS OR ITS PACKAGE STORES, TO EARN THEIR GOD-GIVEN INCOME FROM RIGHTEOUS TOIL.

WE SPEAK AS PROFESSIONAL MEN. EVEN AS OUR SKILLS ARE LARGELY LINGUISTIC, EVEN SO DO OUR SUPPOSED DIFFERENCES TURN OUT TO BE MERE MATTERS OF LINGUISTICS. WE WANT THE SAME THING FOR OUR CLIENTS : THE GREATEST HAPPINESS FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER. THAT IS GOD'S WILL AND IT IS OUR WILL ALSO ! I

LET US BRING TO MIND THE MIGHTY WORDS OF ST. PAUL : "THOUGH I SPEAK WITH THE TONGUES OF MEN AND ANGELS AND HAVE NOT CHARITY IT PROFITETH ME NOTHING." WE MUST ALL PRACTICE CHARITY TO TURN A PROFIT.NDEED, WE KNOW OF NO CONFLICT BETWEEN THE LAW OF PROFIT AND THE PROPHET'S LAW .

C.A.L.M. AND M.A.R.C.H. ARE COMMITTED TO THE FORMULATION OF AN AGENDA MUTUALLY ACCEPTABLE TO EACH. TEMPERANCE NEED NOT RAIL AGAINST CONVIVIALITY, NOR SHOULD SOBRIETY UPBRAID JUDICIOUS IMBIBING. THERE NEED BE NO QUARREL BETWEEN THE SPIRIT AND SPIRITS OF CHRISTMAS . ABOVE ALL : THE WAY OF LIFE IS IN NO WAY INCOMPATIBLE WITH OUR WAY OF LIFE !!"

I stuffed this position paper in my coat pocket and staggered down the hall, searching for the nearest bar. At moments like these, what one absolutely has to have , immediately, is a DRINK!

