

JOY TO THE WORLD

Every day for the last two weeks the violinist had been showing up at around one o'clock near the entrance to Macy's . Though not an altogether ideal location for his line of business, he was surrounded by most of San Francisco's department stores. Before him to the north of Geary Street stood Union Square and its belt of luxury hotels. To his left descended the bustling traffic and clanging cable cars of Powell Street. Numerous Middle Eastern and Japanese discount electronics shops around the corner did a brisk trade. The theatre district at Geary and Mason lay a block off to the west, while the view towards Stockton on his right was commanded by mountain ranges of office buildings and giant stores.

Macy's itself was something of an obstacle to the exercise of his profession : half of the long block had been staked out by being flooding with its own choice in music: canned semi-classics, 'pops' favorites, medleys of Christmas carols that assailed the ears through shrill loudspeakers placed every few feet along the wide-windowed perimeter.

Self-interest dictated that there be no equality between conspicuous consumption and conspicuous benevolence, the identifying elements of the Christmas spirit. From their enlightened perspective the former had always to take precedence over the latter: the magnates who set the policies at Macy's would not willingly interpret the Christmas spirit in such a manner as to encourage the practice of charity towards the many crippled, blind or otherwise handicapped street performers about Union Square. Huddled together in groups, the noxious whine of Christmas Mazak obliged them to manipulate their harmoniums, penny whistles, mouth organs or drums at the fringes of the mercantile colossus.

Such as the man of exemplary resourcefulness and courage, both arms amputated at the elbows, who sat atop a wooden stool near the Powell Street end of the block. By placing the raw tips of his blunted stumps on the keyboard of an CASIO electronic piano, he was able to make music through rocking and shaking his body in all directions. The violinist always dropped some change in his cup as he moved to his own place on the block, down another hundred feet .

Or the beggar woman, draped in rags, her bloated eyes swirling in her collapsed face like mists over dark

swamps. With her old flabby body propped against a lamppost, she tootled 'Jingle Bells' on a tin flute all the long afternoon.

Or the pitiable old man in a tattered oversized Navy coat, the puffy red flesh above his stubby beard ravaged by alcohol, dragging his club foot down the street at noon to a rocky cleft, a sheltered niche, a cleft between the stone fronts of two stores, wherein he whanged a lugubrious guitar until midnight, sometimes until two in the morning.

The managers of Macy's were under much pressure to clear away this mess of eye-sorey riff-raff. There was no permanent way to do this. The best they might hope to accomplish was to sweep them away from the building's facades during business hours. Only after dark, in the eerie silence following the last sputterings of the loudspeakers, did the beggars make their move towards the deserted entranceways of Macy's. Their profit margins rose immediately.

But that violinist? Well... he was an anomaly. Obviously neither crippled nor crazy; you could hardly even call him a beggar.

He wasn't making a fortune yet he seemed to be doing well; well enough at least to justify his coming back there on schedule all through the month of December. In one respect only was he like all the others, in that he only played Christmas carols. He knew them all: Silent Night; Adeste Fideles; O Come All Ye Faithful; Old Little Town of Bethlehem; Joy to the World; White Christmas; Drummer Boy,.....

Relative to the relaxed standards applied by official music critics and other taste makers to the music of the streets, his playing was exceptional. For one thing it was filled with genuine feeling. If one could imagine it, he believed in what he was doing! Unlike his competitors, all clearly motivated by the need for ready money, it appeared that he was trying to produce real music. Not that he was in any sense a professional; anyone who listened critically for more than a few minutes could tell as much. No symphony orchestra would have hired him. It could not, all the same, be denied that his renditions often equaled, even surpassed, the stuff coming over Macy's Muzak.

His appearance was always proper, even clean-cut; always a brightly colored tie and even brighter smile. His opened instrument case, an artifact of velvet and leather, was raised off the trampled filth of the sidewalk by being

rested on a pair of Xerox - paper cartons. In a few words, he epitomized all that there is to be epitomized in the Yuletide message of Joy and Cheer, of Peace on Earth, and Good Will towards Men, of Love of Neighbor and Forgiveness of Trespasses - except, of course, where Macy's was involved .

Verily that beatific smile , (which in that heavenwards shafted, truth-seeking face , was combined with a softly veiled gaze seeping between meek lowered eyelids) , left no doubts in the minds of the passing throngs as to the musician's firm belief in the Awesome Blessedness of Christ's Miraculous Birth, nor his profound reverence for the Sanctity of the Holy Clime.

His testimony of witness had undoubtedly exerted a strong impression on the hearty, gangling, goofy-eyed adolescent who waltzed past him down the street. The young man wore a frayed sweater and corduroy trousers, his hair close-cropped, his complexion unhealthy and pale. Etched onto the otherwise vapid field of his face lay the kind of horrible grin one sees only on the faces of the adherents of modern cults. Imaginations of TV antennae circled his brow; gossamer motorcycles, finer than angel's wings, guided the trajectories of his heavy work boots. His passage across the long thoroughfare of Geary from Stockton to Powell took the form of a single extended pirouette.

As he danced past , he dropped some glossy, oblong object on top of the piles of change and bills covering the floor of the opened instrument case of the violinist . The false bonhomie of a leer twisted his face into an extreme of disfigurement as he boomed: " MERRY CHRISTMAS, BROTHER!! " ; or rather it was more in the nature of a guffaw, while he continued spinning down the street.

The violinist nodded, as he did automatically whenever anyone put anything into the case, to be followed by a swift glance downwards to estimate how much money he'd received. What he saw was a pamphlet, nothing less than the GOOD NEWS OF REVELATION casting its wondrous splendour upon the dross of coin! Like a lighthouse beacon over a perilous sea, he recognized a single phrase in huge, grotesque letters printed over a crude drawing in green ink:

.....SATURDAY THE RABBI CAME FOR DINNER.....

- Jews for Jesus! As this realization of the youth's affiliation flashed across his mind, a blind rage

mounted to his arms and fingers, rendering him incapable of further playing. Violin and bow were lowered into the case. With energy more appropriate to wrestling with an archangel , he fished out the pamphlet, shred it to bits, threw the scraps onto the ground and danced on them:

" TRAITOR!" he shrieked in the direction of the callow young missionary, still in hearing range:

"ENEMY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE! DIRTY SELL-OUT! ANTI-SEMITES! I STOMP ALL OVER YOUR CHRIST! I STOMP ALL OVER YOUR CHRISTIANITY! MAY YOUR CHRIST ROT IN HELL A MILLION YEARS! HERE'S WHAT I THINK OF YOU, YOU SLIMY COWARD!!"

Petrified with terror, the acolyte of " Jews for Jesus" froze in his tracks.

As spontaneously as it had arisen so did the fit pass over, as such things will. The violinist fell silent, all his anger spent. A perceptive eye, so rarely to be found on the streets, would have recognized his exhaustion. He'd either chosen to ignore, or , as is more likely, had merely forgotten the existence of the object of his scorn as he stooped over the case and took up his instrument. With that indescribably sweet smile lifted to the heavens, in delectable combination with the gentle tenderness of his loving, inward-searching eyes, he played " O Little Town of Bethlehem" ever so sweetly.

Pedestrians scurrying in all directions hastened past him , stunned: surely the Apocalypse was surely at hand! Only a lone cab driver, seated in a taxi which had been parked alongside the curb and from which he had seen the entire incident from beginning to end, laughed long and loud.

The callow proselytizer -unknowing of his offense if indeed there was one - crossed Powell Street and disappeared into the crowds. Within a quarter of an hour, the old faces had vanished to be replaced by others. Once again it seemed as if nothing on heaven or earth could arise to disturb the tranquillity of the gracious season.
