# The Voice of the City

O. Henry

Twenty-five years ago the school children used to chant their lessons. The manner of their delivery was a singsong recitative between the utterance of an Episcopal minister and the drone of a tired sawmill. I mean no disrespect. We must have lumber and sawdust.

I remember one beautiful and instructive little lyric that emanated from the physiology class. The most striking line of it was this:

“The shin-bone is the longest bone in the hu-man bod-y.”

What an inestimable boon it would have been if all the corporeal and spiritual facts pertaining to man bad thus been tunefully and logically inculcated in our youthful minds! But what we gained in anatomy, music and philosophy was meagre.

The other day I became confused. I needed a ray of light. I turned back to those school days for aid. But in all the nasal harmonies we whined forth from those bard benches I could not recall one that treated of the voice of agglomerated mankind.

In other words, of the composite vocal message of massed humanity.

In other words, of the Voice of a Big City.

Now, the individual voice is not lacking. We can understand the song of the poet, the ripple of the brook, the meaning of the man who wants $5 until next Monday, the inscriptions on the tombs of the Pharaohs, the language of flowers, the “step lively” of the conductor, and the prelude of the milk cans at 4 A. M. Certain large-eared ones even assert that they are wise to the vibrations of the tympanum proneed by concussion of the air emanating from Mr. H. James. But who can comprehend the meaning of the voice of the city?

I went out for to see.

First, I asked Aurelia. She wore white Swiss and a bat with flowers on it, and ribbons and ends of things fluttered here and there.

“Tell me,” I said, stammeringly, for I have no voice of my own, “what does this big - er - enormous - er - whopping city say? It must have a voice of some kind. Does it ever speak to you? How do you interpret its meaning? It is a tremendous mass, but it must have a key:’

“Like a Saratoga trunk?” asked Aurelia.

“No,” said I. “Please do not refer to the lid. I have a fancy that every city has a voice. Each one has something to say to the one who can hear it. What does the big one say to you? “

“All cities,” said Aurelia, judicially, “say the same thing. When they get through saying it there is an echo from Philadelphia. So, they are unanimous.”

“Here are 4,000,000 people,” said I, scholastic-ally, “compressed upon an island, which is mostly lamb surrounded by Wall Street water. The conjunction of so many units into so small a space must result in an identity - or, or rather a homogeneity that finds its oral expression through a common channel. It is, as you might say, a consensus of transla-tion, concentrating in a crystallized, general idea which reveals itself in what may be termed the Voice of the City. Can you tell me what it is?

Aurelia smiled wonderfully. She sat on the high stoop. A spray of insolent ivy bobbed against her right ear. A ray of impudent moonlight flickered upon her nose. But I was adamant, nickel-plated.

“I must go and find out,” I said, “what is the Voice of this city. Other cities have voices. It is an assignment. I must have it. New York,” I con-tinned, in a rising tone, “had better not hand me a cigar and say: ‘ Old man, I can’t talk for publication.’ No other city acts in that way. Chicago says, unhesitatingly, ‘I will;’ I Philadelphia says, ‘I should;’ New Orleans says, ‘ I used to;’ Louisville says, ‘Don’t care if I do;’ St. Louis says, ‘Excuse me;’ Pittsburg says, ‘Smoke up.’ Now, New York - “

Aurelia smiled.

“Very well,” said I, “I must go elsewhere and find out.”

I went into a palace, tile-floored, cherub-ceilinged and square with the cop. I put my foot on the brass rail and said to Billy Magnus, the best bartender in the diocese:

Billy, you’ve lived in New York a long time what kind of a song-and-dance does this old town give you? What I mean is, doesn’t the gab of it seem to kind of bunch up and slide over the bar to you in a sort of amalgamated tip that bits off the burg in a kind of an epigram with a dash of bitters and a slice of - “

“Excuse me a minute,” said Billy, “somebody’s punching the button at the side door.”

He went away; came back with an empty tin bucket; again vanished with it full; returned and said to me:

“That was Mame. She rings twice. She likes a glass of beer for supper. Her and the kid. If you ever saw that little skeesicks of mine brace up in his high chair and take his beer and - But, say, what was yours? I get kind of excited when I bear them two rings -was it the baseball score or gin fizz you asked for?”

“Ginger ale,” I answered.

I walked up to Broadway. I saw a cop on the cor-ner. The cops take kids up, women across, and men in. I went up to him.

If I’m not exceeding the spiel limit,” I said, “let me ask you. You see New York during its vocative hours. It is the function of you and your brother cops to preserve the acoustics of the city. There must be a civic voice that is intelligible to you. At night during your lonely rounds you must have beard it. What is the epitome of its turmoil and shouting? What does the city say to you?

“Friend,” said the policeman, spinning his club, “it don’t say nothing. I get my orders from the man higher up. Say, I guess you’re all right. Stand here for a few minutes and keep an eye open for the roundsman.”

The cop melted into the darkness of the side street. In ten minutes be had returned.

“Married last Tuesday,” be said, half gruffly. “You know bow they are. She comes to that corner at nine every night for a - comes to say ‘ hello! ‘ I generally manage to be there. Say, what was it you asked me a bit ago - what’s doing in the city? Oh, there’s a roof-garden or two just opened, twelve blocks up.”

I crossed a crow’s-foot of street-car tracks, and skirted the edge of an umbrageous park. An artificial Diana, gilded, heroic, poised, wind-ruled, on the tower, shimmered in the clear light of her namesake in the sky. Along came my poet, hurrying, hatted, haired, emitting dactyls, spondees and dactylis. I seized him. “Bill,” said I (in the magazine he is Cleon), “give me a lift. I am on an assignment to find out the Voice of the city. You see, it’s a special order. Ordi-narily a symposium comprising the views of Henry Clews, John L. Sullivan, Edwin Markham, May Ir-win and Charles Schwab would be about all. But this is a different matter. We want a broad, poetic, mystic vocalization of the city’s soul and meaning. You are the very chap to give me a hint. Some years ago a man got at the Niagara Falls and gave us its pitch. The note was about two feet below the lowest G on the piano. Now, you can’t put New York into a note unless it’s better indorsed than that. But give me an idea of what it would say if it should speak. It is bound to be a mighty and far-reaching utterance. To arrive at it we must take the tremendous crash of the chords of the day’s traffic, the laughter and music of the night, the solemn tones of Dr. Parkhurst, the rag-time, the weeping, the stealthy bum of cab-wbeels, the shout of the press agent, the tinkle of fountains on the roof gardens, the hullabaloo of the strawberry vender and the covers of Everybody’s Magazine, the whispers of the lovers in the parks - all these sounds, must go into your Voice - not combined, but mixed, and of the mixture an essence made; and of the essence an extract - an audible extract, of which one drop shall form the thing we seek.”

“Do you remember,” asked the poet, with a chuckle, “that California girl we met at Stiver’s studio last week? Well, I’m on my way to see her. She repeated that poem of mine, ‘ The Tribute of Spring,’ word for word. She’s the smartest proposition in this town just at present. Say, how does this confounded tie look? I spoiled four before I got one to set right.”

“And the Voice that I asked you about?” I inquired.

“Oh, she doesn’t sing,” said Cleon. “But you ought to bear her recite my ‘Angel of the Inshore Wind.’”

I passed on. I cornered a newsboy and be flashed at me prophetic pink papers that outstripped the news by two revolutions of the clock’s longest hand.

“Son,” I said, while I pretended to chase coins in my penny pocket, “doesn’t it sometimes seem to you as if the city ought to be able to talk? All these ups and downs and funny business and queer things happening every daywhat would it say, do you think, if it could speak?

“Quit yer kiddin’,” said the boy. “Wot paper yer want? I got no time to waste. It’s Mag’s birthday, and I want thirty cents to git her a present.”

Here was no interpreter of the city’s mouthpiece. I bought a paper, and consigned its undeclared treaties, its premeditated murders and unfought battles to an ash can.

Again I repaired to the park and sat in the moon shade. I thought and thought, and wondered why none could tell me what I asked for.

And then, as swift as light from a fixed star, the answer came to me. I arose and hurried - hurried as so many reasoners must, back around my circle. I knew the answer and I bugged it in my breast as I flew, fearing lest some one would stop me and demand my secret.

Aurelia was still on the stoop. The moon was higher and the ivy shadows were deeper. I sat at her side and we watched a little cloud tilt at the drifting moon and go asunder, quite pale and discomfited.

And then, wonder of wonders and delight of delights! our hands somehow touched, and our fingers closed together and did not part.

After half an hour Aurelia said, with that smile of hers:

“Do you know, you haven’t spoken a word since you came back! “

“That,” said I, nodding wisely, “is the Voice of the City.”