

Here and There About New Orleans - January 6, 1924

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IN ALL cities may be found music in the sounds of the streets, but New Orleans has a rich and consistent melody of its own which other cities in the United States have not. Often it reminds you of old Paris, where the hucksters do not cry their wares, but sing and chant them. In Paris there is the song of the strawberry vendor, the chant of the flower sellers, and wailing tune of the cream cheese women. They used to sell cream cheese in Old New Orleans, too, in little heart-shaped pats, with a dash of cream poured over it from a claret bottle. But those days have passed. Other songs remain, however. Every day, throughout the French quarter, you know the scissors grinder man is trundling his old wheel down the street by the little tune which he plays on a flute, and which you can hear a block away. It is a simple little tune, and by its repetition insinuates itself in your mind, so that it becomes a motif, in the song of the streets, like that simple and endless motif, which sings its way, over and over again, through one of the arias of Manon Lescaut which, once heard, you can never forget.

Yesterday we heard a huckster, singing a song of his cabbages and potatoes, a simple homely song, all the way down the street, and two little children, sitting on the curbstone, imitated the tune, till it was cast back and forth, between the huckster and the children, like a chant.

Occasionally comes a long, deep note from one of the steamboats on the river, that is like the throbbing note of an organ. In the night, the thrilling, long drawn-out emphasis of a certain kind of automobile horn comes like the opening of a symphony, and you listen expectantly for more, but the sound is stilled in the blackness of the night, and merged with the infinitesimal tunings of hundreds of other city instruments.

City music is like a modern symphony, soul wracking and restless, leaving you always listening, waiting for some simple tune that you can catch and hold to. And you find the simple tune in the city, where you don't in symphonies by modern composers. You will find it in the flute of the scissors grinder, and you will find it in the less subtle and rollicking tintinnabulations of the street organs.

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The street organs deserve a paragraph by themselves. In New Orleans, they have a full and happy jazziness, with none of the undercurrent melancholy which you hear in other cities. We have listened to hurdy-gurdies in New York, San Francisco, London and Paris, and the only ones which have the fullness of tone which you get in the New Orleans hurdy gurdy, are those of London. Every other night or so, an old negro and a little boy trundle a street organ to the front of our house, and play their entire repertoire, and we were so intrigued at

finding London hurdy gurdies in New Orleans, that the other night we were forced to run down three flights of stairs, to find out about it.

But this was not a lone instrument, as we had thought it, brought by some Cockney from across the sea. “No, ma’am, this heah ain’t mine. This heah piana belong to Mis’ Rosa Pulissa down on Drive street. Yes’m, she has twelve o’ them, and they comes from New Yawk.”

But why aren’t they played in New York instead of the plaintive, tin-panny instruments you hear there?

At the foot of St. Ann street, there was a huge steamer, trussed up to the dock, being stuffed and loaded like some huge fowl. You could hear the rolling thunder of an organ in the loading of the boat, and above the bass notes the shrill soprano of a derrick cried out. Settling ourselves comfortably on a bulkhead, we watched and listened while the rhythmical work went on. At fore and aft, barrels were rolled up gang planks and lowered into the bowels of the boat. And at two other gang planks, resinous logs were lifted and swung gracefully into the ship, giving forth an odor sweeter than incense. Far below the level of the dock, two sailors sat on a precarious plank and painted the rusty sides of the boat, gracefully and leisurely, while the gulls swung like separate notes of music around them.

We were not without company that afternoon. Other loungers sat along the dock and after a time a pleasant old man with a basket and baiting his two lines with tiny shrimp, lowered them between the planks of the pier close to the shore and sat beside them waiting. “It’s no use sitting at the edge of the pier in winter time,” he answered our query. “You either catch ‘em out in the middle of the stream, or as close to the shore, under the pier, as you can get. Sure, I catch enough for supper and tomorrow morning’s breakfast.” And he lit his pipe and settled his back against a bulkhead, and the calm expression of the fisherman settled on his face.

All of those who sit by the water have this still look of peace on their faces. They are not waiting for anything, not even for the fish to bite. They are as still as though in prayer, and without watching the mother-of-pearl clouds on the horizon across the river color their thoughts, the silent motion of the driftwood enters their souls. Perhaps they, too, without listening for it, hear the dimmed music of the city by the river.