O Holy Night!

A CHRISTMAS STORY by ELINORE COWAN STONE

The voices of the boy choir rose above the rich roll of the organ as John opened the door and slipped into the warm, shadowy depths of the church—piercing high and sweet:

O Holy night!
The stars are brightly shining—

What was it the music made him think of? Of course—the buoyant flight of a breath-takingly beautiful silver plane, lifting, dipping, soaring. And nothing could be more beautiful than that.

It was cozy and pleasant to sit here making pictures in your mind. But that wasn't the only reason John liked to come. He liked the music. What was more, he thought a little guiltily, he liked it because it was Christmas music.

Of course he knew now that it was nothing but a bourgeois fairy story—about the little Lord Jesus and the Star and the strange magnificent kings with their rich gifts of gems and myrrh and frankincense. Anton had explained all that to him.

If Anton knew he came here he would be hurt and angry, even though he only slipped in after delivering his papers for a warm place to stay till Anton came from the lunch room where he waited table from early morning till five. Anton disliked all churches with a bitterness that John only vaguely understood, but which, out of his adoration for this moody, tempestuous, but to him always gentle big brother, he loyally tried to emulate. For this particular church, Anton had a specially contemptuous name. He called it "old Spencer Morrow's fire escape."

When John asked him why, Anton's mouth twisted in that bitter, angry way it had lately as he replied, "Because the old pirate is fool enough to imagine the fortune he put into building that monument to superstition will save the mean, grasping little thing he calls his soul from the mythical place he calls hell."

When He Played The Violin

John hadn't asked any more questions, because if Anton got too much excited he would go on talking for hours instead of taking out his violin, tucking it tenderly under his chin, and playing there in their little room as only Anton could play.

And Anton must keep up his practice, because any day someone might send for him again to come and play, as they used to do before hard times. Then Anton would get out the black suit with tails he kept so carefully packed away, and his white shirt, and go off down the street, his slim, beautiful fingers caressing the instrument under his arm. Sometimes he took John with him.

On such occasions, John would have to hold his breath and grip the seat tightly to keep from bursting with excitement when Anton came forward—lithe and dark and handsome—lifted his head, and began to play, his face a little pale, his dark eyes alight, as if above the heads of the audience he were seeing things strange and beautiful beyond the ordinary ken.

. . . When Anton played his violin, he seemed to forget all about "monuments to superstition" and even "the totalitarian state."

It was only since Anton had had to work in the lunch room instead of playing that he had been so restless and bitter.

It had all been very different two years ago, while Mother was still alive. Then, on Christmas Eve, there would be wreaths in the windows, and candles everywhere; and when Anton came in from playing somewhere—a little pale, and with that wide, shining look his dark eyes always wore when he had played and played well, of having come slowly back from far places of enchantment—there would be cries of "Merry Christmas," and surprises for everyone. Afterward, Anton would play Christmas music—ending always with "O Holy Night!"

For a moment John remembered it all—the brightness, the warmth, the spicy evergreen smells, the music—and the surprises—with a wistful nostalgia which brought to his eyes tears he angrily wiped away on his worn coat sleeves.

No Surprise Expected

Well, there wouldn't be any surprises this year.

Last year he had bought Anton a surprise with some of his paper money—a truly splendid scarf pin in the shape of a tiny violin. That was when Anton had explained to him for the first time about the proletariat, and had talked about the necessity for "class loyalty," and the gross absurdity of "bourgeois sentimentality" about religion and Christmas.

No, John did not think he would try surprising Anton again this year. And he knew this time that there would be no surprise for him, either.

So he had made his own plan. It would not be quite the same as being surprised, of course. It would lack that breath-taking moment of almost unendurable happiness and suspense that came just before the gift was actually unwrapped. But the plan had its points.

The money he had managed to save from his paper route would buy the tools he needed to finish the model airplane he had been working on since last summer. It would be the most beautiful model ever built, and it would really fly. His fingers—no less magically supple and sensitive in their own way than Anton's, though John did not know this—itched to be at it.

He would wait till the day before Christmas, carry his parcel home, and put it away unopened until Christmas Eve. Then, when Anton had gone, he would get it out and open it just as if it had been a real surprise. He was still planning happily and jingling his money in his pocket as he left the church and turned through the park, when he saw the old man again.

Park Bench Sitters

The old man was sitting huddled on one of the iron benches in the park. His hat had slid off, the book he inevitably carried had slid from his grasp to the dead leaves at his feet, and his head drooped on his breast, its silky white hair fluttering in the faint breeze.

John saw that he was asleep again. It was the old man's deplorable habit of dropping to sleep at the most inopportune times that had first caught John's attention.

Park benches, John knew from shrewd observation, were not spots to sleep on with impunity. Yet the first time he had come upon the old man he had been serenely nodding while a ratlike youth expertly rifled his pockets.

At the sound of John's feet on the gravel, the old man had awakened with startling suddenness, and the pickpocket had fled. John was just about to lift a shrill cry for Larry, the park cop, when the old man caught his arm with a swift dart of a thin old hand and said, "Hey, son, let him go! He's welcome to anything he found in my pockets. Don't bring that confounded officer over here asking questions. Can't a man shut his eyes in peace for a minute without getting mixed up with the law?"

John considered this wisely. Child of the street as he had been these two years, it was not strange to his philosophy that park bench sitters often shrank modestly from the attention of Larry. It did seem a little strange that such a clean, guileless looking old gentleman should be at odds with the law, but you never coud tell.

A Situation Grasped

His suspicions were still further confirmed by an incident that occurred while he was talking with the old man several days later.

They were sitting together when, in the midst of a sentence, the old man glanced over his shoulder, started, scrambled to his feet, and with a finger warningly at his lips, scurried into the bushes that flanked the bench.

A man was hurrying down the walk from the avenue, looking sharply from left to right. John made his eyes very blank as the man approached.

"Have you," asked the man, "seen an old gentleman about here? He'd been wearing a gray overcoat and carrying a book."

"Sure, Mack. 'Bout 20 minutes ago. He took the Seventy-Three car, going south." John lied hardily.

"Have you—does he come here often?"

"Naw," said John. "And I'm around here every day sellin' my papers. He was—was just walkin' by."

When the man had disappeared, the old gentleman emerged cautiously from the bushes.

"Well," he said, and there was a friendly twinkle in his old blue eyes. "I guess we disposed of that busybody. Son, you show an aptness at grasping a situation and a finesse in action that should take you far."

"Don't Believe In Christmas"

Now, when John saw the nodding old figure on the bench, he felt a troubled sense of responsibility, as he so often did in the case of Anton.

"Say, listen, Gramps," he began as the old man started awake at his touch, blinked, and smiled up at him a little vaguely, "ain't I told you it ain't safe to go to sleep here? Look what happened the first time. Anyhow, it's too cold."

It was indeed cold. The first real frost of a late season was in the air and a few feathery flakes of snow were drifting down.

"Say," offered John, moving a step nearer, "I know a good place if you want one. It's warm in that church over there. I'll bet you could slip in and stay, and nobody would ever know. There are cushions too, and sometimes there's music."

"Ah!" said Gramps, and turned to view the church with sudden interest. "Now that's an idea! Put old Morrow's fire escape to a practical purpose, eh? Good joke on him!"

For by this time, of course, the old man knew all about Anton and the international brotherhood of man.

As John turned away, Gramps hastily added, as if he could not bear to be left alone, "Hey! You're not going, are you?"

John hesitated, jingling his money.

"You sound like a bloated capitalist," observed Gramps.

"Most five dollars," admitted John with a glow of pride. "And it will be five by to-morrow night."

"Imagine having that much money in one pocket," Gramps sighed. "I wonder if I'll ever feel that rich again. And I suppose you're planning to spend it all for Christmas presents."

"Heck! We don't believe in Christmas at our house."

John tried to speak with a calm superiority, as a good comrade should; but he choked up a little over the words.

Has To Be Shared

"No Christmas — but of course! The observation of the Christmas myth is the lowest form of bourgeois sentimentality, isn't it? And yet, unless my memory fails me, Christ was a carpenter, and He also believed in the brotherhood of man."

John considered this in startled silence. He wondered if Anton knew that.

"Then what, if you'll forgive my curiosity," asked Gramps, "are you going to do with all that wealth?"

So John told him, a little reluctantly, about the tools. The old man listened attentively. They had often talked of the model before. Gramps knew a lot about planes, for an old man.

"No doubt your decision is a sensible one," Gramps said slowly when he had finished. His voice sounded suddenly tired and flat. "Certainly there's no bourgeois sentimentality about it. Your brother should be proud of you—and after all, not believing in Christmas can't be a more forlorn business than not having anyone who really cares for you to share it with. To be really [illegible] Christmas has to be shared. . . . Well, I must be getting along, and —" he smiled a wry little smile—"I think I shall take your very practical advice."

John watched him as he made his way a little stiffly across the park to the church, one of his shabby old books clutched under his arm, looking very old and tired and lonely.

In A Back Pew

John found Anton already at home, anxiously inspecting the fine black suit with tails that had hung so long unused. At last, it seemed, Anton was going out to play his violin again. A note had come to the restaurant that day. It was to be at someone's house, on Christmas Eve, and he was to have $50 for it. Anton was so happy that he was almost incoherent.

The next day was clear and bright; but a heavy snow mantled the ground and the trees bore nodding white plumes. It was too cold to linger in the park, but when John slipped into the church, he saw the old man, sitting there in a back pew, listening to the music.

John was glad they hadn't thrown him out. He looked so sad, however, as if he were thinking unhappy thoughts deep within himself, that John did not approach him, but slipped out again into the snow. And as he went, his hand involuntarily clutched at the precious money in his pocket as if he felt it slipping away from him.

For somehow, as he remembered that quiet old figure in the church, disturbing echoes of words crowded in upon him: "Christmas can't be happy unless it's shared." And the old man had no one who cared, to share Christmas with him. That meant that there would be no surprise for Gramps, either. And probably Gramps still liked surprises as well as anyone.

Gay Parcel

John fingered the money in his pocket and swallowed a monumental lump in his throat.

Well, suppose he did buy the old man a surprise, what should he choose? How could he possibly guess what Gramps really wanted, unless—but of course! A new book, a beautiful new book, so that he needn't carry around those shabby old ones any more.

John didn't know much about books, but after he had wandered about the book store, looking at covers until he was dizzy, he saw just the thing—a fine big book, richly bound in soft reddish leather with gold letters.

"That one," he said, pointing.

It was expensive—$5, the salesgirl pointed out. He could get the same book in a different binding, much cheaper.

"That one," said John firmly, and hurried out with the wrapped book under his arm before he should change his mind.

He went directly back to the church because he was afraid he might miss Gramps if he waited till tomorrow. Fortunately the old man was still there, his white head dropped on his chest. He woke instantly when John touched his shoulder.

"This is for you," said John, holding out his parcel, a little breathless with hurry and embarrassment. "But it's a surprise, and you musn't open it till Christmas Eve."

For a moment Gramps looked up at him as if hardly believing his ears. Then he took the parcel with the gay red and green ribbon the lady had wrapped it in, and looked at it.

"Thank you," he said at last. "Thank you. I—this is a surprise. You have made me very happy. I—I wonder if you will do something to make an old man even happier — spend a part of tomorow evening with me. We — we might have a snack to eat and manage a very pleasant time of it together."

"It's Christmas Eve"

Anton had already gone when John went out next evening. John was surprised when he found that the house at the address Gramps had given was so large and imposing.

Gramps couldn't really live here. But perhaps he was a janitor or something and lived behind. John rang the bell.

It was some time before anyone answered. John was about to go away when the door opened and a man turned on an overhead light and said, "Oh, yes. You are to come right in."

John, who had a street Arab's trained memory for faces, stared. But this was the man Gramps had run away from in the park. Then, right behind the man, was Gramps himself, smiling and holding out his hand.

"Oh, but, sir," cried the man, turning reproachingly, "you shouldn't be out here exposing yourself to the night air."

"Don't be an old maid, Hodges. It's Christmas Eve." Gramps didn't seem to be at all afraid now. "Aren't you satisfied with hounding me all the year long? Come in, comrade."

They went through a warm hallway into a great bright room where men were sitting and standing about. At once John felt at home, for they were all shabby men such as he had often seen lined up outside soup kitchens or employment agencies—men of all nationalities and complexions, but all strangely alike in their sullen, beaten look. Now they didn't look sullen or beaten, only expectant, and a little watchful perhaps.

In a few minutes there was dinner for everyone—an amazing dinner—with Gramps, in a rather rumpled suit, at the head of the long table, and to John's complete undoing, Anton, of all people, sitting at his right.

After everyone had eaten enormously, they went into another great room, and there were surprises for everyone from a tall, softly lighted tree. John had to pinch himself to believe that his own surprise was a set of delicate tools such as he had wanted with a longing that hurt, but finer than he had ever hoped to have.

Christmas Facts

During Shakespeare's Time Festivities Lasted for Twelve Days

Christmas has not always been a season for festivity, and when Oliver Cromwell was Protector all fun and feasting was forbidden at this time of the year.

There are a great many other things about Christmas which people do not know; the fact, for instance, that Norwegian farmers give their cattle tubs of home-brewed ale on Christmas Eve, or that at 12 midnight on the same day people in Madrid eat 12 grapes for good luck in the coming year. In Hungary they consider the needy, and all the richer citizens are levied so that the poor may have sufficient to eat and drink.

Few many know that there are 175 different kinds of holly, that during Shakespeare's time Christmas festivities lasted for 12 days, or that Christmas has been celebrated on more than 100 different days in various parts of the world? Our present holiday on December 25th we owe to Pope Julius I, who fixed the date in the year 351.

Smallest Churches Accommodate Six

A church in Guernsey, Channel Islands, has accommodation for six people, and is claimed to be the smallest in the world. It was built by a monk from stones, sea-shells, and home-made cement.

But it has some strong rivals. Hedge End Church, in Hampshire, Eng., holds only eight people and was built as a form of memorial to those who fell in the Great War.

Hackney, London, has a church, attached to some almhouses, which can only accommodate a congregation of 14; while the village of Grove in Buckinghamshire, has a church built for the benefit of the 16 inhabitants.

At Eldon, Hants, which has only nine inhabitants, the church has but one door, and, it is claimed, the smallest font in England.

The Great Surprise

Finally Gramps, whom everyone was calling "Mr. Morrow," took down the last parcel—square and bulky—and said, "Now this is my great surprise."

John recognized it by the ribbon. It was the book. His heart sank, for there were rows and rows of books about the room—some even more shabby than the one Gramps had carried, in a special case, carefully locked up.

And he had given the old man a book.

But Gramps' hand was on John's shoulder, and Gramps was saying heartily, "Why, I never in my life had one as fine as this!"

For the first time John remembered that in his haste yesterday he hadn't even looked at the title. Now he craned his neck to read it. The book was called "The Holy Bible."

Then everyone sat down, and Anton tucked his violin under his chin and played—German music, Italian music, Russian, Polish, and Hungarian music, and an Irish love song—something for everybody. And as he played, the faces—Polish, Irish, Italian, German, and Hungarian — were no longer even watchful, but soft and kind of shining.

When Anton had played a long time, he stopped and said to the old man, "Now I think we'll have a little real Christmas music."

He looked at John for a moment, and Anton's face, too, was soft and all shining as he began to play "O Holy Night!"

Netherlands Had "Early Christmas"

Night of Dec. 5th Was Observed As St. Nicholas Festival In Holland

AMSTERDAM—St. Nicholas paid a visit to good little children of The Netherlands on St. Nicholas' Eve.

With his Negro servant, Black Pete, the saint appeared astride his white horse, as is the custom of every Dec. 5.

At twilight, all the family are at home.

The doorbell rings, and there are St. Nicholas and Black Pete. The marvelously informed saint questions each child on his behavior, and presents are given to the whole family.

Goes Back To A.D. 345

There follow servings of "Bishop wine" for adults, chocolate milk for children. St. Nicholas songs are sung until late.

This "Early Christmas" goes back to December 6th, the year 345, when the Archbishop of Myra (St. Nicholas) died after being imprisoned by Diocletian and freed by Constantine. The prelate's surreptitious bestowal of dowries on three daughters of an impoverished citizen supposedly started the custom of presents on St. Nicholas' Eve—a custom later transferred to Christmas Day in many countries.

Once the Hollanders tried to abolish St. Nicholas' Day in favor of Christmas, but St. Nick and Black Pete were easy winners.

Glove Pledges

You may be unaware of it, but if this Christmas you send a pair of gloves as a present, you are making a symbolic gesture. In ancient times gloves were sent to mend broken ties, patch quarrels and cement friendships. They were supposed to represent the handshake of friendship; in the Middle Ages they were used as pledges of faith, and a king's glove was a guarantee of safe conduct in his territory.

Queer though it may seem, gloves were not first worn in cold countries, but in Egypt, where many fashions originated. The oldest pair in existence was found in the box of royal robes in King Tutankhamen's tomb. It was not until the eleventh century that Europe adopted the fashion, and in the thirteenth century the glovers of Perth founded their famous company.

Santa Claus Loses Pair of Reindeer

Santa Claus was anything but jolly — and all because of his reindeer.

Just before what was to have been Santa's triumphal entry into Bluffton, Indiana, one of his four reindeer broke a leg in trying to escape from a barn to the snow-covered countryside. Then a second deer broke away.

Santa finally got the other two harnessed to his sleigh, the smile back on his face and was off down Main St. in a cloud of snow to cheers and surprise of some 1,000 children, who thought he always drove four reindeer.

Peasants Forecast Christmas Weather

In some country districts of France a custom is observed which is supposed to enable people to forecast the weather on Christmas Day and throughout the coming year. Twelve onions are placed in a row and on each is placed a dab of salt. If by Epiphany the salt on any onion has melted, then the month represented by that particular onion will be wet. If the salt on the twelfth onion is dry, then Christmas Day, also, will be fine.

At Baux, in Provence, shepherds hold a watch-night service at which they pray for good weather. Each arrives carrying a lighted taper and a lamb and prays before a crib, as the shepherds did 2,000 years ago.