

CHRISTMAS SPIRITS

Good night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are...

Crazy Christopher Kelly loved that phrase. I remember him using it whenever a pretty girl caught his eye. After watching her pass out of sight, he would wink at whomever was around, and in a husky voice, utter the famous words in an attempted imitation of Jimmy Durante, who of course had inspired the saying in the first place. As I got older and became more enlightened, I realized that the more voluptuous the young lady was, the louder Christopher would cry for Mrs. Calabash. Once I looked up the word 'calabash' in the dictionary, just for the heck of it. To my surprise, I found it referred to a certain type of tropical squash or melon. This knowledge gave me further insight into the personalities of Crazy Chris and Jimmy Durante.

Amongst other things, Christopher Kelly was a tuba-player in our high-school band. He was tall and gangling, and more renowned for his wit than his wisdom. (Or his ability on the tuba.) But I'll always be indebted to him for introducing Mrs. Calabash to me, because she and I have become lifelong friends. Although I rarely show her off in everyday conversation, she lives in a quiet corner of my mind - an unusual apparition, with Chris Kelly's wink and Jimmy Durante's nose, who nods approvingly over my shoulder whenever a well-proportioned female goes by. But Christopher and Mrs. Calabash, bless their souls, are not alone in my imagination. Their entourage includes a remarkably strange and diverse cast of characters, each of whom lurks in my subconscious, as the keeper of a particularly unique expression, which I've somehow borrowed and adapted to my own use. Together these spectres make a curious heap of mental baggage, but there's no ignoring them, and they cannot be forgotten.

For instance, there's Mr. McKinlay, who was our school band leader, and a sour Scotsman. His pronunciation of the name 'Beverrrlay' still rings in my ears and raises the hair on my neck, whenever I encounter someone by that name. Of course the original Beverrrlay was a childhood playmate of mine. We grew up together, and as surely as beautiful ladies and Mrs. Calabash are inseparably linked in my mind, Beverrrlay will forever be my patron saint of the Christmas season. It was her inspirational support during our high-school Christmas concert that first won her this distinction. But it was a simple two-word phrase, which she spoke one frosty December evening, and later transcribed into my yearbook, that sealed her image in my heart as my all-time favourite Christmas memory.

Beverrrlay's influence on my Christmas spirit dates back to my early high-school years, where as a member of the junior band, I found playing third trombone could be a very humbling experience. What phrasing there was in the music was monotonous, and seemed to add very little to the undertaking as a whole. Melodies were nonexistent. Most of the time was spent counting off rest bars, while everyone else was merrily playing the tune. In my junior band days, however, my proficiency with the instrument was such, that playing the part of third trombone was a significant challenge. I had all the positions down, but my tone was muddy, and I consistently misplayed the high notes. Sometimes I lost count and missed my cues completely. But no one tried harder than I did. And no one appreciated my efforts less than Mr. McKinlay.

I distinctly remember the incident which brought my trombone career to an all-time low. It was the dress rehearsal before our annual Christmas concert, and we were playing a medley of carols. Suddenly, in the middle of 'The First Noel', Mr. McKinlay threw down his baton, and pounded his open palm on the piano keys. GLORRRMMM... Everyone knew he was angry. That was not unusual, and we waited to see exactly where his wrath would land this time.

'Beverrrlay,' he bellowed, 'You're a very creative lass. I'm hearing noises coming from your bass clarinet that have never been attributed to that instrument before.' He had a vicious tongue, and although I hated to see Beverrrlay berated this way, I was inwardly relieved that it was her for a change, and not me. But Mr. McKinlay was not through. 'As for the third trombone section,' he roared, wheeling around, 'It sounds like 'H' in music.' The twin facts that I was the only member of the third trombone section, and that the musical scale stopped at 'G' were not lost on me, and my stomach turned over. Glowering directly at me, he spat out his words. 'If you can't contribute to the advancement of the musical cause, I suggest you simply go through the motions, and suck instead of blow! Now we'll start again from 'The First Noel', and remember it's supposed to sound joyful. Born is the blasted King of Israel!'

For the rest of the rehearsal I was too upset to play another note, although on reflection, I don't believe Mr. McKinlay even knew my name. Pretending to act busy, I rearranged my music, and blew the saliva out of the spit valve at the bottom of my trombone slide. Walking home after band practice, I caught up with Beverrrlay, who was heading in the same direction.

"So how's your Christmas spirit?" she asked, smiling. Beverrrlay had an infectious smile which squinted her eyes and spread across her face from one rosy cheek to the other. I wanted to smile back, but I couldn't.

'My spirit's been stolen,' I replied. 'McKinlay is hiding it with all the other things that don't exist. Like the 'H' in music. Or the 'L' in Noel.'

'I thought he was doing his best to put the 'L' back into Noel,' said Beverrrlay. She was still smiling. 'So what is the third trombone section going to do?'

'I don't know. My parents already have tickets for tomorrow night. If they weren't going, I just wouldn't show up,' I said. 'How about you?'

'I'm going to go and play as usual,' said Beverrrlay. 'If Old McKinlay doesn't like it, he can give me an 'F' for my music grade. Or an 'H' if that makes him feel happier.'

'You're right,' I said. 'We can't give him the satisfaction of scaring us away. And I'll be damned if I'll take his advice and just pretend to play.... Unless....'

Beverrrlay and I had known one another all our lives. Occasionally, in moments of great inspiration, the same thoughts occurred to each of us simultaneously, as though we could read each other's mind. Now we shared a telepathic glance, and both of us were smiling.

'Do you think we could pull it off?' I asked.

'No one likes him,' she replied.

'I wonder if he knows my name,' I said.

'If he doesn't, he'll find out who you are tomorrow,' said Beverrrlay.

As master of ceremonies of the Christmas concert, Mr. McKinlay had donned his kilt in honour of the festive occasion. It was an ancient garment in colourful Buchanan plaid, which he boasted had been passed from father to son for five generations. (The tuba section, who wouldn't trust any man

wearing a skirt, agreed that he and his forefathers were simply too cheap to buy themselves a new one.) As he strode up to the podium for the junior band presentation, I realized I had never felt so nervous in my life. From the corner of my eye, I saw Beverrrray wink at me, and I took comfort that I was not alone. I smiled, winked back, and waited.

'Thank you ladies and gentlemen,' Mr. McKinlay began, after relishing the applause. 'Tonight the junior band will play a medley of Christmas carols. We will start with 'Silent Night'. 'He raised his baton, and we brought our instruments to our lips, waiting for the down stroke. I was shaking like a leaf, knowing that whatever happened now was beyond my control. Then he lowered his arm and started to conduct the purest rendition of 'Silent Night' ever performed.... Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm.... Ah - it was music to my ears. For there was no sound at all. The woodwinds were fingering their keys, and the brasses were squeezing their valves, but everyone's lips were sealed. Everyone's lips, of course, except Mr. McKinlay's. His teeth were bared, and his face was contorted in a look of hatred most inappropriate to the season of Peace on Earth and Goodwill toward Men.

A few bars into the piece he tapped his baton, as if to stop us from playing, and turned to face the audience. 'The band wanted to play a wee joke,' he announced, 'And bring you their own interpretation of 'Silent Night'. We will now perform the music as written.' Turning back to the stage, we could see his expression conveyed the message 'Or else'. Once again he raised his baton and began to conduct. And once again the night was silent. Except this time, a few of the tubas, who were now enjoying the game, began slurping into their mouthpieces, and the audience started to snicker.

When Mr. McKinlay finally stopped conducting his concert for the deaf, I rose from my seat. My legs were trembling so badly, I could hardly stand, but I was determined to speak. In as loud a voice as I could manage" I said, 'Mr. McKinlay, we all decided to do as you recommended yesterday, and to suck instead of blow. That way we can't embarrass you by making mistakes.'

Most people think the word 'livid' means extremely angry. Actually livid means dark purple, as in the colour of raw liver. Mr. McKinlay was extremely angry and livid. He was also frothing at the mouth. 'I refuse to put up with such impertinence,' he choked. 'You are all dismissed.' Then he strutted from the stage, looking as outraged as any man wearing a kilt may appear.

Frankly, this was where the plan Beverrrray and I had concocted came to an end. There was no script for what happened next. As I stood watching Mr. McKinlay's retreat, I suddenly felt a hard shove propelling me from behind. (It must have been Crazy Chris Kelly in the tuba section - Who else?) I stumbled forward, and after several trips and turns found myself at centre-stage, looking out in the auditorium full of people. Most of them were confused, wondering if they were witnessing a skit of some kind. But the students in the audience, who were familiar with Mr. McKinlay, and could tell this was no joke, were laughing and applauding wildly. Behind me, the band members were starting to look at each other, trying to determine what to do next.

Standing by the podium, I vaguely recognized that I had become the accidental man-of-the-moment, and the next step was mine, if I chose to take it. That was when I decided that the show would go on, and the band would play its medley of carols. I still had my trombone in my hand, so I raised it to my lips and blew a low B-flat. BLAMMMM... That got everyone's attention. Mounting the podium, I announced to the audience, 'This time we really are going to play 'Silent Night'.'

Turning to face the band, I noticed that Mr. McKinlay had taken his baton with him. So having

nothing else to conduct with, I removed the slide from my trombone, and held it high in the air. It was then I realized that I didn't know anything about conducting a band. 'Geesuz, what do I do now?' I wondered. Give them a decisive downbeat, and then keep it moving in three-quarter time. I hoped that would be OK. After all, we were only playing Christmas carols.... For a moment I paused to make sure everyone in the band was paying attention. Looking about, I saw Christopher Kelly giving me the thumbs-up sign, and Beverrrlay was beaming around her mouthpiece. Taking a deep breath - Ready, Set, Go - I crashed my trombone slide downward, and the band plunged into 'Silent Night'.

At first I was counting too hard to listen to the music - 1,2,3... 1,2,3... But after a few bars, the strains of 'Silent Night' began to register, and it didn't sound half bad. By the time we reached the first repeat, I was starting to enjoy my role as conductor. I waved my trombone slide around in great, flourishing circles, setting the tempo for all to see. I was so engrossed in the business of conducting, I didn't notice Mr. McKinlay's return.

The poor fellow must have been under tremendous stress, and well aware of the sorry predicament he was in. He had a mutinous band to contend with, who wouldn't play for him, and which was performing well enough, thank you, without him. To add to his humiliation, the leadership of the band, which he had so imprudently abdicated, was now in the hands of the upstart third trombone section. Clearly this was a situation Mr. McKinlay couldn't allow to continue. He had to do something. But whatever means he attempted to regain control, especially if it included force, he would risk shattering his already crumbling credibility, with the staff, students, and their families as witnesses.

All these thoughts would have been swirling through his mind, and it's doubtful he was thinking very clearly. But I'll never know what plan of action he intended as he came across the stage to the podium. For as he was plotting his next move, I was furiously conducting the second verse of 'Silent Night', unaware that Mr. McKinlay was right behind me. In my enthusiasm, my arm brandishing the trombone slide swooped back, but when I tried to bring it forward for the upbeat, I felt some kind of resistance. Giving the slide a tug, I turned to see where it was stuck, and was aghast to find Mr. McKinlay standing within pouncing range. Yipes! For the next few seconds, my actions were driven by sheer panic. I felt I had to continue conducting at all costs, but my trombone slide was still being held somehow by Mr. McKinlay. And so I gave a mighty yank with both hands, determined to pull it free. To my great relief the effort was successful, and I raised the slide high in the air without missing a beat.

Everything happened so quickly, it wasn't until a split second later that I realized what I had just done. You see, while I was thrashing my arms around, conducting the music, the spit-valve lever at the end of my trombone slide had become caught in the ragged hem of Mr. McKinlay's venerable kilt. Then in my heroic struggle to break it free, well, something had to give. Unfortunately for Mr. McKinlay, the weak link in our tug-of-war was the century-old material of his sacred skirt. So when I finally wrenched my trombone slide loose, a great piece of his threadbare kilt was torn away too, and it stayed firmly impaled on the end of the slide.

What a moment to savour. There I stood, waving Mr. McKinlay's tartan like a revolutionary flag, over the heads of Mr. McKinlay's renegade band, as we finished performing the last few bars of Mr. McKinlay's Christmas music. But what had become of Mr. McKinlay?

Before answering this question, one should understand something of the construction of his antique kilt. Long ago, one of the Mrs. McKinlay's through the ages had sewn in a tweedy lining,

presumably to keep her crofter-husband's buns warm, as he rested on the rocky shores of the Outer Orkneys. This feature meant that all future Mr. McKinlay's had no need to wear underwear under this useful garment with its built-in knickers. Regrettably for the current Mr. McKinlay, who respected family traditions, my surprise trombone attack had carried off his inner woolies along with the rest of his kilt. And so he was left standing at centre stage, with only a few tattered tartan remnants, and the mysteries of clan McKinlay exposed for all to see. For just an instant he froze, his hands in the air, reaching for his kilt which swayed beyond his grasp, a look of absolute horror etched on his face. But needless to say, he didn't tarry in the spotlight for long. A moment later he scurried from the stage, looking as preposterous as any man who has just lost his kilt may appear.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace.... As he took his exit, the band finished playing 'Silent Night'. Oddly enough, Mr. McKinlay's de-frocking had happened so quickly, that most of the band members, who were diligently following their music, hadn't had a chance to notice anything unusual. I remember the look of wonder and delight on Beverrrlay's face, as she finally looked up and saw his kilt flapping from my trombone slide. Our eyes met, and we shared a conspiratorial smile. Of course it was the same squinty-eyed grin of Beverrrlay's that I'd known forever, but somehow it affected me differently tonight. I wanted to put my arms around her, like I'd seen guys do in the movies. It was almost as if we weren't kids any more....

Next I turned to the audience, who by now weren't sure if they were watching a Christmas concert or a circus. A few stodgy parents sat in rigid silence, but most of the crowd, who had seen Mr. McKinlay's ordeal down to the last detail, were howling with glee. In response to their excitement, I twirled the tartan above my head and yelled at the top of my lungs, 'Merry Chrrristmas Mr. McKinlay, wherever you are!' In the pandemonium, the kilt at last broke free from the trombone slide, and sailed out into the auditorium. Having heard enough Christmas carols for that evening, I started to think about making my getaway. For all I knew, Mr. McKinlay could have been organizing a posse at that moment, to lynch me in the wings. So, running to the opposite side of the stage from where he had disappeared, I called to Beverrrlay, 'Bring my coat and meet me at the Smoking Tree!'

It was clear and crisp outside, and I shivered as I waited for Beverrrlay to arrive. The Smoking Tree was where all the students addicted to cigarettes gathered during the day. But now everything was quiet, and I began to reflect on the night's events. Mostly I was scared stiff about the consequences I might have coming. Could I be expelled? What about Reform School? But I had done nothing wrong, really. It was Mr. McKinlay who had put himself in such a vulnerable position, and made us both victims of circumstance. One thing I did know. I would never be afraid of Mr. McKinlay again. I might even take up a musical career. Call me.... 'Maestro'....

I saw Beverrrlay's smile approaching through the darkness. 'Here's your jacket,' she said. 'And by the way, you've got a new title. Everyone's calling you Mr. McMaestro!'

'Hey, I like that,' I said. 'The night was a lot less silent than we planned, wasn't it?'

'You didn't see the very end,' she replied. 'They wrapped McKinlay up in a flag, and led him off to the staff lounge. I don't know what he's going to do for a pair of pants. But I heard Chris Kelly walking through the halls, shouting, 'Is there a bonnie seamstress in the huce?'

We both started to laugh until tears streamed down our cheeks. 'I wish we could have played 'The First Noel' too,' I said. Being band-leader was really a lot of fun.'

'No Noel was fine with me,' said Beverrray. 'I hated that music as much as you did. And I think it was best for you to retire a hero. In fact, Mr. McMaestro, you deserve a reward for bravery beyond the call of duty.' She reached into her purse for a package of gum. 'Cherry Chiclets,' said Beverrray. We looked at each other, and the same longing feeling I'd felt earlier that evening passed over me. I wanted to hold her close, and to share a triumphant kiss. But we were young, and had never done these things before, (with one another or anyone else.) And so we just gazed deep into each others' eyes and smiled. But of all the kisses that I've never received in my life, it is Beverrray's that I cherish the most.

'Cherry Chiclets, Beverrray,' I said. 'I'll never forget this night as long as I live. '

If the rumours are true, Mr. McKinlay packed up his bagpipes and left for Scotland during the Christmas holidays, never to return. One thing is for certain. He was never seen again in the halls of our school. Not long after, Beverrray's father was transferred to a branch office out of town. She moved away with her family at the end of the spring term, and we soon lost touch. In my imagination, I have watched her develop into a charming lady, with all the endowments of Mrs. Calabash. But somehow she has always maintained her air of innocence, and that school-girl grin I once fell in love with. As for me, I became an accountant, leaving all my musical fantasies happily unfulfilled, although I treasure my Christmas concert memories to this day.

Recently, I was looking through my high-school yearbooks with Christopher Kelly, (who is still crazy, and who still calls me Mr. McMaestro) and I noticed the autograph - 'Cherry Chiclets ... Luv Beverrray'. Somehow I couldn't keep from wondering if she might remember me at Christmas time as fondly as I remember her. So just in case she still has a soft spot for me in her heart, let me say to all the Beverrray's in the world, and especially the one most dear to me –

Cherry Chiclets, Beverrray my friend, wherever you are...

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