

Dear Reader,

You'll have noticed I'm getting on a bit in years, and I'm well aware that the phrases and situations I found so funny back in the 1950's and 60's won't amuse younger people nowadays. Indeed, some of the old comedy sketches would be considered distasteful or downright offensive today. And some of the things I found so funny back then might not tickle even my own fancy any more. Humour changes with the times, and so does one's own sense of humour. Doubtless some of the older humour was based on racist or sexist stereotypes or made fun of handicapped or mentally ill people. We should not mourn the loss of such ill-judged "humour". But somehow it does feel that today there isn't all that much left that we are allowed to laugh at, is there?

For this recounter (should that be raconteur?), another factor has entered the equation: the loss of the editorial skills of our dear Sarah – bless her cheerful heart! She was obliged to wield her red pen now and then when my text started to smell a bit overripe - or decidedly off. She sometimes admitted to me that some of the purple passages gave her a chuckle, but for a church newsletter there had to be some limitations. "Peter! It's Lent and right now you can't get away with that sort of thing!"

Bless you, dear Sarah, for your good-natured editorial services over several years and for your reluctance to wield the red pen on some occasions where maybe you should have done so. Let's see what I can get away with under the editorial gaze of our Revd. Maria. Welcome, Maria! I believe your gaze, too, will be as indulgent as Sarah's, but perhaps with different shades of emphasis.

For several of the situations I plan to outline I shall be indebted to an old friend, but he wishes to remain anonymous. "Peter, they're not my property, they are yours now and you must take the rap if some of them exceed the boundaries of what's deemed appropriate!"

Let me start with the story of the Musical Tramp. We no longer have the old tramps who used to roam from one village to the next, living chiefly on their wits. People are expected to settle down in one place so that they can better be controlled, documented – and taxed. Typically tramps were men, but I guess there must have been some women tramps, too. This story might have had some foundation in Britain say, as late as the first half of the 20th century, but the old-fashioned tramps are, I suppose, an extinct species - a thing of past days when society was not quite so controlled as it is nowadays and AI was still only some half-brained digital nerd's wild dream. Or perhaps just a twinkle in the eye of the nerd's daddy?

Now our old tramp was a musically gifted fellow who could accompany on the piano almost any of the popular songs of the two previous generations. He'd never learnt to read musical notation but picked up tunes easily by ear and harmonised them skillfully. His attitude to life and earning a living was "easy come, easy go", and he never liked to stay in the same place for long. In short, he loved his freedom. When the money had trickled away and the demand for his music had petered out in one village, he upped sticks and moved onto the next.

One evening towards sunset, he found himself trampling wearily along a lonely country road, still several miles from the next village. He was beginning to wonder whether he would have to sleep rough that night, under the hedgerow beside the road. He thought to himself: I'll just climb to the top of that hill and see what's ahead of me further along.

On reaching the brow of the hill his gaze met a long, straight stretch of the road – most likely one of those roads constructed by the Romans to facilitate moving their garrisons to new areas to keep the

natives in order. The road appeared to terminate in a rise topped about a mile or so ahead by a grand manor house, all of whose windows were lit up. The tramp's spirits lifted at the sight, and he decided to press on towards the manor. As he neared the grand edifice, the sounds of revelry greeted his ears. That looks promising, he thought – I'll just take a peep through that window to see what's going on.

A lively party was obviously in progress – a fancy dress ball. Hmm, that looks promising, thought our hero, and went to the main door where he knocked briskly. The door was soon opened by a gently swaying but good-natured looking young fellow, well dressed but clutching a nearly empty champagne bottle in his left hand, with his tie askew and jacket buttoned up unevenly. The young man grinned at the tramp inanely and exclaimed: "That's a brilliant outfit – you're the spitting image of a scruffy, down-and-out tramp! Come in, come on in, you're most welcome!! Here's the champagne, the cigars and caviare are just over there. Make yourself at home!". Well, this looks like a bit of oolright, mused the tramp.

After generously helping himself to several of the delicacies on offer, he paused to look around him. In the corner of the large main hall he spotted a grand piano, and noted that there as no music to be heard, only some drunken, tuneless bellowing. He made his way to the piano, sat down and started to play a popular melody. The party was soon swinging with wildly dancing revellers. There followed a good hour of wild enjoyment as people called out for one song after another, all of which songs the tramp carried through with his compelling rhythms. Meanwhile his pockets started bulging as people kept stuffing banknotes into them.

After a while the butler entered the hall, and observed that something was not quite as it should be. By the end of one song he had made his way towards the pianist, whom he gently tapped on the shoulder. "Excuse me, sir, but your privates are hanging out of your trousers.". Not in the least perturbed but in a politely apologetic manner the tramp replied: "Aw, sorry mate, I don't think I know that one. But jus' sing me a couple of verses, an' I'll soon pick it up!".

Have a lovely, revelry-filled week!

Blessings, Peter J