



Three's Company!

Last week I talked about being on a tourist attraction at Hakone - a fake 'pirate ship' that took us across Lake Ashi. As you might have surmised from my comments, I wasn't so happy about the way that the tourist company tried to get extra money from their customers by encouraging them to purchase photos of themselves posing with a fake Pirate Captain.

It was harmless of course, and I guess I shouldn't be so critical, but I couldn't help feeling that it should have been a 'service' offered by the management. Just send the actor around the ship to pose with the customers, while at the same time have one of the staff members printing out the photos and giving them away as free souvenirs. The customers would be happy, they would show the photos to their friends, and it would be good advertising. I think this is a great idea! Don't you think I'm a good businessman?

I have to admit though, that I'm being a bit hypocritical in criticizing this company and their attempt to get more money from their customers, because I too, have been guilty of the same sort of thing. We go back thirty-some years to the time when I was trying to make a living as a musician. I had been very lucky to get a regular job - six nights a week! - playing flute and saxophone in a small 'dance orchestra' at one of the major hotels in Vancouver. I say 'orchestra' but there were only seven musicians plus the leader. We formed and re-formed into groups of different sizes over the course of the evening, sometimes playing light background music for the diners, and sometimes 'rocking it up' a bit to get them up onto the dance floor.

One of the groups was a strolling trio - flute, accordion, and string bass - and this was my favourite part of the job. The accordion player was an older guy with lots of experience, who knew every tune in the book, while the bass player and I were still at an early stage in our careers. So he would start in on a song, and we would listen for a minute while he played it through, then we joined in as we heard how it went. It was a wonderful learning experience - and we even got paid!

The restaurant was quite a 'posh' place, and was the venue of choice for people to have anniversary dinners. Many times each evening, the waiters would come out of the kitchen with some kind of cake or special dish, and this was our cue to instantly head for that table. One of the waiters would quietly tell our leader what the occasion was, and we would then break into the appropriate melody - the birthday song, or the Anniversary Waltz.

But it was what always happened next, that I now regret being involved with. As we clustered around the table cheerfully playing the music, our leader would move close to the person sitting at the head of the table, and through gestures (while we were playing), made it clear that a 'tip' was expected.

The customers never had the slightest idea how much was appropriate, nor were they prepared for this. As we tootled away, the candles on the cake fluttered, and the 'birthday lady' sat there in embarrassment, as her husband fumbled with his wallet below the table, counting out some bills. These he passed to our accordionist, who stuffed them into his own pocket without any break in the flow of the music. A moment later, we were gone.

On our next break, back in the small musician's room behind the stage, our leader would pull out the money and give some to myself and the bass player. Honestly speaking, I was a bit disgusted with this whole procedure. The customers were paying top prices for their meal, and in my mind this kind of thing should

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clearly be part of the service. But when I spoke up about this, the response of the leader was predictable, "Well, if you don't want your share, I'll happily keep it!"

When - years after this - I started selling sets of my woodblock prints, I sent them out postage free to customers. 'Service!' I also never charged for the cases in which the prints were stored. 'Service!' Both policies had to change in time, as I was simply unable to handle the expense ...

So, as I asked ... don't you think I'm a good businessman? :-)

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