

SHELL SHOCKED

The Cane Mutiny

By Art Stevens

A good friend of mine thought he was being frightfully amusing when he sent me a cane as a birthday present. He said I might need it any time soon and I would have one at the ready.

I'm not sure if he was being funny or downright serious. I've used canes several times in my life. I once stepped on a tennis ball as I ran to return a shot from my opponent. I thought I had broken my ankle but fortunately it was only a severe sprain. "Only" a severe sprain? I couldn't walk for almost two weeks and needed a cane to get around.

Another time I needed a cane following arthroscopic surgery on one of my knees. I only needed it for a few days and then stored the cane at the back of a clothes closet. I've never needed a cane since.

I'm reasonably active and my legs are in good shape. And I'm not so senior a citizen yet that I view a cane as a necessary concession to age in the near future. So I now have a cane at home and feel obligated to use this birthday present in some way lest my friend think I'm unappreciative and ungrateful.

Since friendship is more important to me than enmity, I decided to demonstrate to my friend that his birthday present was useful and timely. Holding my breath I threw myself down the stairs inside my home hoping that I would either sprain something severely or break it. Then I could say a hearty thank you to my friend for his foresight and visionary thinking. But the carpeting was too thick and all I was able to do was to hit my head and see stars.

I needed an aspirin not a cane. So I tried it several more times but couldn't even succeed at spraining my big toe. I could swear the cane stared at me balefully as if I had let it down. I decided to use the cane anyway even if I didn't need it for support. I took a walk and practiced using the cane. I passed a Baptist church and found myself being led inside by some parishioners.

The minister was an old time Baptist and he was in the process of curing some people. He removed an eye patch from one parishioner and excitedly told him that he will now be able to see again out of that eye. The supplicant looked around and began to shout, "I can see. I can see. Praise the Lord." The entire congregation began singing gospel hymns with tears rolling down their eyes.

I was led to the front. My cane was my invitation card. The minister looked me over and put his hand on my head. He said, "Lord, I am your shepherd. Let one of my flock learn to walk again." He then grabbed my cane and threw it away. I didn't have the heart to tell the minister that I had no problem walking at all. So I walked back and forth across the front of the church.

The congregation burst into a new round of gospel hymns and I was given a hug by every single member. I found my cane and left the church. I gave the cane a stern warning. "Don't you ever do that to me again."

I decided to walk a few blocks. Since I still had the cane I allowed it to assist me in walking. I was about to cross a street when a little old lady approached me and said, "Here, you poor man, let me help you." And she escorted me across the street. I thought to myself that the scenario should have been just the opposite – that I should be the one helping an old lady cross the street.

As I got closer to home I ran into a few of my neighbors. Each saw me with the cane and asked me what had happened. I could see the sympathy barometer rising. I began to make up stories. "I hurt myself bungee jumping." "I sprained my knee saving a deer from being run over." "My wife was having a nightmare and bit me on the ankle." No one questioned my story. Using a cane allows you a fair degree of disbelief immunity. Whatever I said was entirely credible to a sympathetic neighbor. When I got home I had a difficult decision to make. What should I do with this unique birthday present? Should I simply begin using it even though I didn't need it? Or store it in a closet and wait for the day, hopefully many years into the future, when I might need it?

I compromised. The cane now hangs on a wall in my home as an objet d'art. It can now be appreciated for its symmetry, sleekness and its artistic message rather than as a medical device. I plan to give it around twenty more years before I remove it from the wall, dust it off and lean on it again.

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