

# Dum-diddle-dum-dum, dum-dum

It was a cold winter's morning as it often is and the sun was shining and yet the moon was still in the sky and the birds were tweet-tweet-tweeting away as if their very lives depended on it and then you see there's this tramp walking down the road towards you, approaching you as it were, although in a somewhat indirect manner it has to be said. This tramp, the usual tramp of expectation, wears a raggedy jacket and a preposterous battered hat cocked at an unreasonable angle with, would you believe it, a flower poked out the side of it at yet an even more preposterous angle. This tramp walks along the road, a step to the side this way and then a step to the side that way and gradually bit by bit he begins to make some progress down the road, you see. The tramp then stops, pulls up sharp right in front of you, turns out pocket numero uno, then turns out pocket numero duo, and trez and so on and so forth until at last, by something seeming more miracle than conjuring trick, he launches with a flourish, from some pocket deep within his many layered raggedness, a folded piece of paper. This paper he unfolds slowly, licking his lips and blinking his rheumy eyes and panting slightly in a manner more disquieting you would say than disturbing. Anyway, this tramp he unfolds the paper carefully, unfolding corner from corner, once, twice, thrice, foursies and fivesies, sixes and sevens, and then eight, which is well known to be the limit for folding for paper, and then nine and then fortunately for all before the laws of physics are altogether rewritten right here in front of us when we're least expecting it, ta-dah, the paper is unfolded, although still bearing quite clearly the imprints of its previous incarnation as a much smaller thing than the current thing that this tramp is now waving around with no little show in front of his own face and yours. The tramp then, he straightens up you see and tall and proud, as if for a recitation, which it could be, so as if for what he is about to do, for what we are about to receive, this recital, this recitation, we listen. The tramp coughs, a-hem, then a-hem again, as if at first he had failed to wrest our attention and then he begins to speak in a voice of sorts, familiar as you'd expect, a gruff regional accent of unknown provenance that tells of his years on the road, the wind, the rain, all of that, all as we would imagine you see, anyway, the tramp begins to speak. A-hem. If we'd paid for our seats we might at this point be tempted to venture words to the effect of gettonwivit or such like but as the event appears to be free and is in fact unanticipated if not unwarranted or uncalled for then we keep our

mouth shut, sh-tum, shut. This, announces the tramp grandly, will be the story of how I came to be here, what I did before I came to be here and how it comes that I'm standing here with this paper in this here hand. Ladies and gentlemen, this is... gerronwivit comes a call. This is, a-hem, this is the story of the one and only story of my life up until and slightly after the point at which we are now and beginning sometime ago before any of this had happened yet. Hear hear! Hurrah! Bravo! Catcalls, whistles, cheers, yelps, hoorahs and the full arsenal of all similar sounds resound around. But first ladies and gentlemen, if I may, for your pleasure, present an amusing anecdote, a light riposte, something to tickle your funny bones. Ladies and gentlemen, a joke! At this point the tramp makes a shifty movement with his belt and braces and there is a sense of a certain rearrangement, a realignment you might say, underneath his collected and assorted rags and tatters and what-have-yous. On completing his adjustments the tramp executes a short bow, followed by a low and billowing curtsy. Ladies and gentlemen, a man walks into a pub, that's how it goes, or a bloke if you prefer, whatever, a man walks into a pub, a bar, some sort of drinking establishment, heaven help us all, and there's a pleasant haze of smoke in the air, but not a fog, I hasten to add, not a fog, anyway this fellow, this chap goes up to the landlord, asks for a pint he does, as you would, oh yes. The landlord, or barman, comes back at him, quick as you like, but we don't serve food here. Ta-boom! At this the tramp shuffles and engages in some further rearrangement of his garb with some spit and polish to the shoes, a nice pair of brogues I notice, and a quick tweak of his drooping flower, then he shuffles some more and then seeming to believe in the old show business adage that the show must go on and all that, does so. Anyway, this man, he's got a chicken with him, so why the long face says the bartender. The chap leaves pronto. Another chap walks in, orders six vodkas. Bad day asks the barman, concerned for this fellow's mental well being, see. This fellow pulls out a photo from his pocket and says that's a picture of my wife that is, when she starts to look alright, I know its time to stop drinking. This man then finishes up, drinks his vodka, heads out and comes back in with a jump lead round his neck. Why the long face says the bartender, we've got a drink named after you. Oh yes, says this man, what's that then, Eric? At this the landlord gets a bit shirty see, and starts to harangue the fella. Words are exchanged, some of

**Joanne Tatham**

them words such as f\*\*\* and w\*\*\*\*\* and f\*\*\*\*\* and other things I wouldn't think to repeat in the current elegant company, oh no. The landlord then takes it upon himself to jump over the bar and he grabs the tramp around the neck, you asshole, he shouts, you wanker, you cunt, you son-of-a-whore, you shit of shits, you worm, you fucker, you fucking cunt, you fucking asshole, you fucking son-of-a-whore, you fucking shit of shits, you fucking worm and that's when that's when that's when, well that's when that's when that's when and at this the tramp makes a crumpling motion, curls up tight in a ball on the ground, rocking himself, backwards and forwards with arms around knees. Even worse was to follow and soon sniffs and snivels became clearly audible to all who had assembled, only looking for some fun mind you and now subject to this horror of a fellow human-being's mental collapse and breakdown. Understandably the crowd shuffles and begins to move off with a nervous cough here and there and a nervous glance here and there too. Suddenly just as the crowd are just at that point where they are no longer a crowd but more a loose grouping of people standing near, you see, but not too close, suddenly just at that point, the tramp rallies and he's back on his feet. Layeesangennlemen, he bawls, somewhat incoherently it has to be said, layseeangennlemen, may I beg your apologies, your indulgence, your forgiveness please. I don't know what came over me, a momentary lapse, I assure you, never to be repeated, never to be repeated, so please, if I may, your attention, a-hem, your indulgence, my lords, my ladies, my loves, may I present, ta-daah, my life! The tramp flourishes his grubby piece of paper and there is a smattering of applause in response. He clears his throat. Now then, it was a cold winter's morning, you see, as it often is and in fact not unlike this one and the sun was shining and yet the moon was still in the sky and the birds were tweet-tweet-tweeting away as if their very lives depended on it and there I am walking down the road you see, minding my own business and that's business that's nobody's business that is. Picture me if you will laideez and gen'men, I'm in my finest tippitty-tip-top finest attire, jacket tailored by the best and me hat cocked at an angle you'd have to see to believe if you will. So gradually I'm making my way along the road you see, a step to the side this way and then a step to the side that way and then all of a sudden, out of the blue, there's a scream. Now it wasn't one of them blood-curdling let-it-all-out full horror of it all screams, but loud enough all the same and by the sounds of it not a scream to be ignored, oh no. I stop, I listen and there it is again and quick as a you like, no messing around, no hesitation, no falteration, I leap over the hedge in the direction of the scream and there in the pond the frozen pond, the ice the freezing ice, is a little girl, a l'il girl will you. Mind you, seeing as she's trapped in the ice I can only see her arms and her head and no more and for all I know she might have

a disproportion about her whereby her top half is diminutive in relation to her lower limbs, anyway I weigh up the evidence for and against, the pros and the cons and on balance I surmise that this is indeed a little girl, oh yes, a very little girl and as such needs my assistance pronto. At speed then I race towards the pond and without thinking and with no thought of my own danger, my own fragile mortality, I head straight out onto the ice a-slipping and a-sliding as I go. The girl shrieks and the ice creaks but without thinking and with no discernible concern for my own being I make a grab for the girl, lift her right out of the water, then skedaddle quick as you like for dry land. Now it's obvious even to a humble man such as I that this little girl is in need of at the very least a blanket, a warming drink, perhaps a slug of something stronger, not that I'm a drinker myself haven't touched a drop in over forty years. Anyway, out I run onto the road and flag down a car and it turns out the gent behind the wheel is the girl's pa, the very same, and so it's no great surprise that he is effusive with his thanks for the saving of his little girl's life as recently accomplished by myself at no little risk to myself. Now, laydees and genel'men, we've known each other some time now and you're good people good honest generous people and we'd all do a good deed for the love of god, life, liberty etcetera etcetera and nothing more now wouldn't we. But now it turns out this chap, this l'il girl's pa is a very wealthy man indeed and he wishes to show thanks in a way that reflects his wealth and status with a small token, a sum, a payment to be made in recognition. How much is it to be, he asks, and well I'm not a greedy man but you know how it is, life hasn't always treated me well and I name my sum. A tenner, comes back the gent, is that all you want. Sir, I reply, you have made me a rich man. This chap is flabbergasted, shakes his head, thanks me again and with no further ado bundles the daughter into the back of his car and speeds off. Now here am I with more money than I've ever set eyes on, a man of limited means and limited, a-hem, requirements. The hedgerows and fields give me comfort for my sleep, the morning dew quenches my thirst etcetera etcetera, so what more could a man ask for, I ask. So quick as you like, I decide it's time I got away from it all for the holiday of a lifetime and I make my way pronto to the nearest travel agents. I walk into the shop and the girl behind the desk shrieks and I make a swift exit before there's any trouble and carry on down the street and would you know it there's another travel agents right next door, so I walk in and the same thing happens again, the girl shrieks and I make my excuses and leave. Next door there's yet another travel agents, so I walk in and this time the girl behind the desk asks can I help you sir and I say, I'd like to book a holiday please, that seeming as good a place as any to begin proceedings. The travel agent, ever so polite mind, asks me what I had in mind, would sir be looking for a safari perhaps or the tried and tested sun sea

and sand combination. I'm overwhelmed at the choices and so I say to the girl, I say, well what can I get for a tenner. A tenner, she says, you want a holiday for a tenner. I nod, oh yes, and retrieve the aforementioned sum from within my clothing, although not without a little groping and delving it has to be said and then with a steady hand present this aforementioned sum for the travel agents inspection. Off she trots to a filing cabinet at the back of the room, opens drawer numero uno, shakes her head, opens drawer numero duo, shakes her head and then opens drawer numero trez, bends down and rummages for some time until at last and not without a certain sense of achievement she brandishes with a flourish a folded piece of paper. I've got you a holiday, says she, a mega-economy-all-inclusive-round-the-world cruise and it's yours for a tenner. Yippee, says I, that's perfect, and off I head to the port pronto. Now, at the port, ladies and gentlemen, well I've never the seen the like, the little boats are as big as houses and the big boats are bigger than that. These ships are the largest thing, if you please, that I have ever clapped my gawd-blessed eyes upon. Well then, I says to myself, I wonder which one of these splendid vessels, these floating palaces, these ocean bound megatropolises I'm booked on for my holiday of a lifetime. I pull out my ticket and read "Princess" and it sounds more like a dog's name than a boat to me but that is that and all that and so I keep walking along the quay, checking the names of the ships as I go and then there it is, the last and the finest, a veritable wonder of the world, a towering gleaming shining citadel, if you'll excuse the language. Well, I'm gob-smacked, dumb-founded, lost for words! Hallelujah, I shout, Lord thank you, praise be and so on and so forth and I'm not a religious man, no sir god bless, no not at all, so anyways all this noise and commotion attracts the attention of a stiff looking gent in a stiff looking uniform with the hat, the medals, the buttons, the lot. Clear off, he shouts, clear off you riff-raff. Well this is too much for me seeing as I'm a regular fee paying ticket holding fully legitimised sea faring passenger. A-hem, says I, and I search for the ticket which having since restored it to a place of safety requires something of a fumble I'm sorry to say if not an out and out grope, begging your pardon, to enable its recovery. Then before I get a chance for any explanation or further clarification before I get the chance for any of this, the captain leaps from the gangplank and grabs me around the neck. You riff-raff, he shouts, you scum, you filth, you son of the cesspit, you shit of shits, you worm, you fucker, you fucking riff-raff, you fucking scum, you fucking filth, you fucking shit of shits, you fucking worm and that's when that's when that's when I finally manage to extract the ticket from where it had, a-hem, become lodged. The captain takes the ticket and inspects it. Hmmm, he says, there's a number of conditions attached to this ticket, a number of clauses and he tells me to come back at midnight so

that the other passengers don't see me. Well that seems fair enough to me and so I settle down for a quick snooze, somewhat more than a cat-nap somewhat in excess of forty winks I admit but nevertheless its not that long before I hear the bells of the port authority church clattering out the first of the twelve stokes of midnight and up I jump. The captain's waiting at the gangplank and over I saunter, a step to the side this way and a step to the side that way then up the gangplank we go and onto the ship. These, announces the captain, are the first class suites, well for the second time that day I'm lost for words, dumb-founded, gob-smacked and my jaw drops as I gawp at the wonders around me. The carpet is eight inches deep, a Rembrandt hangs on every wall and there's twenty-four carat gold trim on all the fixtures and fittings. Then we go down to second class and the carpet is four inches deep, a Gainsborough hangs on every wall and there's eighteen carat gold trim on all the fixtures and fittings, then down to third class, and the carpet is two inches deep, a genuine modern master hangs on every wall (although here I have to admit ladies and gentlemen that my artistic knowledge flounders somewhat) and there's nine carat gold trim on all the fixtures and fittings. The fourth class has one inch deep carpet, a good quality reproduction on every wall and silver trim on all the fixtures and fittings. All the time we're going down and down deeper into the ship, past the ballrooms the casinos the restaurants the shops the gyms. Then we're in fifth class and the carpet is more functional than opulent shall we say and there's a pleasant selection of prints etcetera etcetera on the walls and a beech veneer trim on the fixtures and fittings and still we keep going deeper and deeper into the ship and then we're in sixth class and there's still carpet, although admittedly somewhat like that they put in the social, if you will, in case there's a fight and blood is spilt, not that any of you ladies and gentlemen would have had cause to witness such scenes, oh no, and there's a few posters on the wall and it's all quite luxurious compared to the doss houses I've spent time in I can tell you. It has to be said that there's not so much in the way of fixtures and fittings and there's no trimming on what there is, but for these world weary eyes I tell you it's all still a wonder to behold. Now all this time we're going down and down deeper into the ship, through the crew's quarters the galleys the engine rooms the store rooms all of the rooms that a ship needs to do what a ship needs to do, if you'll excuse the turn of phrase and then right at the bottom of the ship, at the lowest reaches of this magnificent craft, the captain opens a door and ta-daah that's my cabin right there in front of my very eyes. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I was, if I may say, begging your pardon, blown away and while admittedly not of the level of luxury I have had cause to outline to you previous, this little room was more than sufficient for my old bones to lay themselves down in and rest. Then up pipes the captain, now then, he says, there's a little

detail, a small restriction on this mega-economy-all-inclusive-round-the world cruise ticket of yours, so what's that then I say, that he says is that you can only, a-hem, partake of the ship's facilities when all the other passengers are tucked up in bed away in the land of nod and fast asleep, comprehend? Mais oui monsieur, I reply, quick as you like, it's n'est pas uno problemo and I shall enjoy myself all the more in light of such an especial privilege. The captain leaves, and before you know it, before the counting of any sheep or such like, I'm fast asleep and off in the land of nod myself. Now, the next day, or night should I say, I rouse myself in the usual manner, as you do, then proceed straight up to the restaurant and well laydeez and gentlemen, what a feast, what a sight and not one for sore eyes either and I proceed to tuck in pronto. Next I go up on deck for my constitutional as it were, and taking a step to the side this way and a step to the side that way and gradually perambulating in a clockwise direction around the ship, port to starboard and back again or vice versa or one or the other, whichever which way, when all of a sudden before my eyes, surely the ninth wonder of the world, this ship being the eighth of course. Before my eyes a huge enormous gigantic ginormous swimming pool and so I peel off some of the outer layers of my garb so as to improve my ergonomity, you understand, and dive in. Well, I've never swum before but if I say so myself I take to it like a duck to water and so I swim a couple of lengths, beginning with the old doggy paddle, swiftly followed by the breast stroke, the front crawl, the back crawl and finishing with the butterfly stroke. By this time it's nearly time to retire to my quarters for the night, or day should I say, but I surmise I have just enough time for a jump off the diving board and so up I climb pronto, bend the old knees, count to three, uno, duo, trez and off I go, like a bird through the air and like a fish through the water. Then all of a sudden I see the face of the captain staring down and I think to myself, well I've blown it now this is it I'm for the high jump I'll be walking the plank etcetera etcetera but no the captain is laughing and clapping as I climb from the pool. That, he says, was the most amazing dive I have ever seen in my life and well, ladies and gentlemen, as you can imagine, I am truly humbled by such high praise from so high and mighty a man and so make to rearrange the old apparel, forgetting how most of it's now at some distance from its most regular inhabitant and so after a brief interval of coughing and fidgeting, I announce my gratitude indeed for his recognition of my lowly efforts. No, no, comes back the captain, let me thank you, you have given me a wonderful idea. How would you like to keep practising, at night of course and then put on a show for the other passengers. Well... I say, well... I've never been one for making a show of myself and then the captain makes me an offer I can't refuse. If you do this, he says, I'll pay you and then you could travel first class and well, laydies an' gennlemen, as happy as I

am in my lodgings this is an opportunity too good to be true and so we shake hands on it or rather we would have done only that despite their recent immersion mine are still, a-hem, somewhat soiled from the years on the road, the nights in the open, the wind, the rain and all of that and so he salutes me and off I head for my bed. The next night, or should that be day layseeangennlemen, seeing as night is day and day is night now, the next day I'm back up on deck practising. I do the back flips, the front flips, the double twists, the triple twists, the double, triple twists, the double triple twisted flips and so on and so forth and so on for the next day or night, if you please and the one after that, day after day or night after night. Ladies and gentlemen, if there was a name for it, I dived it and some more besides. After a number of days, or nights if you insist, the captain comes back up on deck. Oh no, I think, I've blown it now this is it I'm for the high jump I'll be walking the plank etcetera etcetera, thinking as how he's not happy with the way the dives are shaping up. Marvellous, he says, it's bloody marvellous, you're a miracle, he says, you're the Margot Fonteyn of the high board, the Laurence Olivier of diving, the Pablo Picasso of the swimming pool. Listen, he says, I've got an idea, we'll put up a special diving board for you, let you really show off your amazing skills. Alright, I say, why not and so I stay in my cabin while the diving board is built and then the day after, which is day not night, if you'll be so kind as to bear with me, is the day of the show and the captain comes down to my cabin and presents me with a new pair of swimming trunks, for it has to be said that my swimming attire was not, a-hem, entirely suitable for the ladies in the audience if you get my drift. So quick as you like, I'm changed and ready to go and up on deck I go and there all of a sudden before my eyes, surely the tenth wonder of the world, the pool being the ninth and the ship the eighth, before my eyes the tallest most highest towering tower higher than the eye could see, and I'm gob-smacked, lost for words, struck dumb and there's my fellow passengers with shouts of hear hear, hurrah, bravo and catcalls, whistles, cheers, yelps and the full arsenal of similar sounds. Ladies and gentlemen, I announce, I am just a simple man, not one for making a show, a fuss, a to-do or a hoo-hah or any of that but if I may first of all, for your pleasure of course, present an amusing anecdote, a light riposte, something to tickle your funny bones. Laydeesangenl'men, a joke! I proceed to make, a-hem, the necessary rearrangements then with a bow to the gents and a curtsy to the ladies, I begin. A man walks into a pub, that's how it goes or a bloke if you prefer, a man walks into a pub, a bar, some sort of drinking establishment, heaven help us all, and there's a pleasant haze of smoke in the air, but not a fog, I hasten to add, not a fog, anyway this fellow, this chap goes up to the landlord, asks for a pint he does, as you would, oh yes. The landlord, or barman, comes back at him, quick as you like, but we don't serve food here. Ta-boom! Anyway, this

man, he's got a chicken with him, so why the long face says the bartender. The chap leaves pronto. Another chap walks in, orders six vodkas. Bad day asks the barman, concerned for this fellow's mental well being, see. This fellow pulls out a photo from his pocket and says, that's a picture of my wife that is, when she starts to look alright, I know its time to stop drinking. This man then finishes up, drinks his vodka, heads out and comes back in with a jump lead round his neck. Why the long face says the bartender, we've got a drink named after you. Oh yes, says this man, what's that then, Eric? Ta-boom! The crowd are in hysterics, but the show must go on and all that so off I start up the ladder for the grand finale, the icing on the cake, the coup d'état etcetera etcetera. So up I climb, up and up and the ship gets smaller and the deck gets further and further away and up I go until the ship is just a speck on the sea below and well layees an' gennlemen, as you know, I've seen better days, what with the wind and the rain and the days on the road and all that and what with the thinning of the air I begin to feel somewhat dizzy, a little light-headed, shall we say, not to mention the vertigo. So up I climb up and up until the sea is just a puddle on the surface of the Earth and then the Earth is just a dot within the sky. Now by this time, layseeangen'men, I'm somewhat short of breath as you can imagine, so I keep thinking about the eight inch carpets in first class and I keep climbing up and up past the moon past Mars past the furthest planets of the solar system and on through the Milky Way until eventually I reach the top. Now mindful of the time it had taken me to ascend to this great height I thought I'd better begin the descent pronto, so without further ado I position myself on the board and off I jump, slowly at first then speeding up faster and faster and faster and faster. Down I dive through the Milky Way past the furthest planets of the solar system past Mars past the moon until eventually I can see the Earth again and the sea with the ship getting closer and closer and larger and larger. Quick as you like, I perform a double triple back flip twist, followed by another for good measure and I line up for the final descent. Now by this time there's quite a hullabaloo down on the deck, whistles catcalls, cheers, howls, hurrahs, the lot. Here he comes yells the captain and I perform a final twisted triple double flip and enter the pool, straight as an arrow, not a ripple on the surface. Down I go down to the bottom of the pool then, would you believe it, I smash straight through the bottom of the pool, through the first class suites and the eight inch carpets, though second, third and fourth class, through the ballrooms the casinos the restaurants the shops the gyms, through fifth and sixth class through the crew's quarters the galleys the engine rooms the store rooms all of the rooms that a ship needs to do what a ship needs to do, if you'll excuse the turn of phrase and then right through my own humble cabin and right though the steel hull of the ship. Now, ladies and gentlemen you must be

wondering where all this ends, well the end isn't there yet and so I kept on going down through the sea into deeper and darker and murkier depths, into deeper and darker and murkier depths than you would believe existed believe you me and then I hit the sea bed and still I keep going and that wasn't pleasant at all, you know how it is, sand in your eyes your hair your ears and anyway eventually, finally once and for all I stop and without further ado, for by now I'm somewhat short of breath, I make for the surface pronto. Up and up I go up through the murky depths and up until finally I break the surface and there's the captain waiting to haul me on deck, if you please. Now I've lead a quiet life ladies and gentlemen so nothing was to prepare me for the scene on board where alongside all the usual of expectation, such as the hurrahs, the bravos, the catcalls, the whistles, the cheers, the yelps and the whole arsenal of similar sounds there were singers singing dancers dancing conjurors conjuring etcetera etcetera, the works, all there, all for me and I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with these here eyes in this here head. Then the captain comes over to me and a hush descends and there's calls of gerronwivit and such like as he coughs and makes certain shall we say readjustments to his uniform. Well, he says, that was amazing, I've never seen anything like it in my life ever before and I doubt I ever will again. Now, I'm just a simple man a humble man you could say and I don't expect much in life, a hat on my head, a flower in my hat, a pair of shiny shoes on my feet, oh no I don't expect much and so all this praise is of discomfort to a man such as I. I squirm somewhat, I wriggle, I cough and I think it's best I was on my way and then up pipes the captain again, listen says he, just tell me how did you do it, how did you survive smashing through this boat after the dive. Well I squirm some more, not wanting to make a show of myself and then I cough and fidget some more, just for good measure you understand. Ladies and gentlemen, I say, I'm just a poor tramp you see, so you must understand that I've been through many a hardship in my life, oh yes, and then I take a bow, make my excuses, take my leave and, quick as you like, make my exit pronto. At this juncture the tramp shuffles and engages in the usual rearrangement of his garb with some spit and polish to the shoes and a quick tweak of his drooping flower and then he shuffles some more and coughs some more and the audience, who have been with us all this time and for that matter been with each other all this time and listening to the tramp all this time, they begin to shuffle and move off with a nervous cough here and there and a nervous glance here and there and that it seems is that.

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