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The Imitation Fool;
Carnival II

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Native-born Cologners are a proud race. They speak often of their herrliche Vaterstadt, their "glorious father-city" - especially during Karneval. You can be sure it was glorious to them even when 80 per cent destroyed. Thus it is not surprising to find several disdainful words for strangers in the Kölsch dialect.

The Kölner calls them Pimmock, and by that he usually means a stranger who puts on airs. For the non-posing alien, there is another word, Imi. It derives from "imitation". Just after World War II, the battered city of Cologne was flooded with refugees and occupation troops. Native Kölner found they could differentiate themselves mainly by means of their inimitable dialect. For instance, the word Blootwoosch. It comes from the High German Blutwurst and means blood sausage. The Kölner says it with a cadence between the "o's". An early post-war Karneval song goes:

"Say Blootwoosch once, it's not hard at all.
Say Blootwoosch once, I guarantee you,
He who can't say Blootwoosch right, that is
An Imi, an Imi, an Imitation Kölschen for sure."

There's assurance for you! The Kölner regards anyone unfortunate enough to be born outside of Cologne as someone who can do nothing better than imitate him.

One other Kölsch word is important for the comprehension of Karneval, and that is Jeck. It means "fool". It takes a certain amount of courage to be a Jeck, and in this respect, the Kolner is dauntless. "Every Jeck is different," he cries, "but they're all nice." Once when I was pushing my way through a Karneval crowd, a helpful bystander shouted: Jeck loss Jeck elans! ("You fool, let another fool get through!")

It was 7 a.m. on February 13, or Wieverfastelovend, the women's Fastnacht, when I set out to be Jeck. Friends had advised that the Cologne Market Hall was the site of unusual Karneval brawls on this day, pagan ceremonies presided over by women.

But it was quiet and businesslike in the vast hall at the southern end of the city. From behind a heap of cabbage came the plaintive song of a wandering trio. Here and there were market sellers in Karneval costumes - gypsy, clown, pasha. But what had happened to the festival? A wrinkled crone gave the answer over her trays of apples:

"They banned our Karneval two years ago. It was too wild. We had thousands here. They tore down the fruit stands, stole vegetables. The Prince was here, with all his varlets. They threw tomatoes at him, climbed all over the stalls. Half the prostitutes in town came out, stripped themselves naked and pranced around. The bands played like mad. Cost thousands of marks to repair the damage. Roman iniquity... (she chuckled). Things got out of hand."

Nevertheless, the tradition of celebrating Karneval in the marketplace was still kept on this day. At 11 a.m. (the fool's hour) crowds packed the Old Market to see this year's Prinz Karneval as he opened the "street Karneval" in an official ceremony.



A gay crowd

The audience was a gay one: old men with zany derbies, children in 18th century uniforms with tricorns, students with paper noses and false spectacles. And the women: beefy 200-pounders in short white skirts and fool's caps, teen-agers in gunnysacks with hideous green cellophane Cleopatra wigs, doing menacing war dances, whooping, and rollicking. While waiting, wine bottles were passed down the lines. And everyone sang the women's Fastnacht song:

"Gals, listen well to what I say,
It's important, so be still.
By the fellas we are always playing
Just the second violin.

But on Wieverfastelovend things explode
We'll show the fellas once
What the butter costs.
When we gals, we juicy gals,
Get really in the swing,
Then the fellas, the wretched fellas
Will have no equal rights with us!"

Arms still locked for Schunkeln (swaying), the crowd took up another Karneval song:

"With a pi with a po with a papernose on your face
You can go around the world.

You get fun for half the price,
And best of all you can
Lead everyone else around by the nose,
With a pi with a po (etc)..."

Then with a rattle of drums and the shrilling of fifes, the "Old City Corps" marched on to the square, resplendant in red and green grenadier uniforms. Behind them came the Prince and Cologne's Lord Mayor in a coach and four. The crowd's bellow of "Alagf!" echoed from the ruins of the old Rathaus down to shell that is the remains of St. Martins Church on the Rhine bank.

Lord Mayor Burauen's voice boomed over the loudspeakers: "I'm not well!" - a reference to carousing on the previous night which his fellow citizens well understood. He went on: Let the heavens continue to shine on our marvelous city. Everything is being rebuilt and Cologne will be more beautiful than ever before."

Then he introduced "His Craziness" Prince Walter I, in private life a movie theater owner. Walter in turn presented his "court" - "Her Loveliness the Virgin Carla" (played by a man), and "His Dextrousness the Cologne Peasant Hans."

Addressing the throng, the prince promised that the Rosenmontag parade would be so huge that the city wouldn't be large enough for it, and that he would "strew caramels before every house." (cheers). A tub speaker took over then and regaled us with remarks like: "The Kölner is baroque - as soon as he sins he thinks about absolution. But you women, you think about absoluteness!"



A swig....

After the ceremony, the women took over the square in the quest of absoluteness. They stormed the police lines, grabbed the officers and whirled them around before giving them resounding kisses. One florid maenad planted her large foot on my seat and sent me sprawling. Then she snorted triumphantly and took a swig from a handy flask. Other women were enjoying their freedom by swatting men with short flails. Worse punishments have been known to befall the male on Wieverfastelovend. A friend tells of a lad who got fresh with some market women. They grabbed the youth, surrounded him, and shoved his head repeatedly under their skirts until he nearly fainted.

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It was early afternoon. Throats were raw, and heads were swelling. With a friend I slaked my thirst in several taverns and then laid down a good base of goulasch. At 3 p.m. there was another ceremony at the north gate of the city - the Eigelsteinpooz.

This was the re-enactment of a legend from the Thirty Years War: A poor peasant boy seeks the hand of a pretty maid. She refuses in hopes of a better match. He goes off to war and becomes a field marshal. The girl gains nothing and earns her living selling apples.



....from a handy flask

On his return to the city, the great commander, Jan von Werth rides through the gate on a proud charger. He spots his former love, Griet, sitting on her apples. "Griet," he says, "If I'd done that (married you)!" And Griet replies: "Jan, if I'd known that (you would become famous)!"

Although it had no connection with Karneval, this fateful encounter is now a part of Cologne's Fastnacht tradition. That afternoon, the Jan von Werth Cavalry cantered up to the Eigelsteinpooz in shining morions and cuirasses to replay the legend.

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Cologne's Street Karneval had begun. It is difficult to translate the mood which had seized the city into words. Being Jeck is part of it. The taxi driver wears a silly wig. A complete stranger bumps into you and offers you a drink of Mosel. The strong swinging rhythm of Karneval songs issues from meat markets and flowershops. A teen-aged girl clad mostly in sequins seizes your hands and starts to waltz with you. Your feet ache from a morning of standing with a tight-packed crowd. Your head feels like it's going to take off. There's a constant dinning in your ears. But you can't stop from joining in.

From the University of Cologne came a group of instructors who were determined to share their costly skills at entertainment with the general populace. In a trice they formed a marching band. Instrumentation: six tin horns, one harmonica, three false noses and cardboard tophats. The effect was dignified and respectable. I joined this upright band on its march through downtown Cologne.

Ah, it was a pleasure to see how we advanced down the Zülpicherstrasse in two neat columns, horns blaring and drums thumping. Admittedly, we halted somewhat jerkily in front of the first saloon. We entered, to the faintly recognizable tune of "When the Saints Go Marching In." Considerably strengthened, we emerged 15 minutes later and set out for the Hohenstaufenring and the inner city. A herd of urchins followed.

We serenaded the customers of another tavern on the Hahnenstrasse, not forgetting however to wet our whistles. Then we proceeded to an unused bandstand in the New Market where we chaunted the Lydian measures of the old Karneval ballad, Der Treue Husar:

"Once there was, a loyal husar.
He loved his maid, a whole year long.
A whole year long, and much much more.
His love never came to an end."



"The public demands..."

On into the crowded Schildergasse we marched, by this time noticeably out of step. A girl in tights waltzed our color sergeant away, but we played on. One who listened carefully would have discovered that we were performing several different numbers at once, but to us it was dulcet antiphony. So moved by the euphony was our maestro, that he led us up the Hohestrasse to the North German Radio building. "The public demands it," he cried.

The doorman wept.

Downstairs in the canteen, the waitress censured us: "I've served you ten beers and you break six glasses on me!" Nobody had even heard them smashing.

After the refreshing pause, the band marched on to the fair set up next to the Cologne's Cathedral. Half were lost in a deadly centrifugal machine called "The Rotor", and the rest vanished in a house of mirrors. For those of us who remained, the night ended in a sacrifice dance at a tavern called Brungs.

Next morning, I met several members of the Wieverfastelovend band. Sipping tomato juice, we counted up the losses. They included: five hats, four paper boutonnières, three drums, two rubber noses, one tin saxophone, and a stomach.

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One of the curious aspects of Cologne's Karneval is its relation to the Catholic Church. The brow that is painted today for a spree is marked with the ashes of penitence tomorrow. From drinking, dancing, and drollery, the good Cologne Catholic transforms overnight into the devout observer of the Lenten fasting customs. What does the Church say to Fastnacht?

"Fundamentally," said Prelate Dahl, "Karneval is a religious festival. And although the church assents to it, we have practically nothing to do with it." Father Dahl is the press representative of Cologne's vicar general.

"Let me put it this way," he continued, "the Church indulges Karneval, but it does not encourage it. For a time some years ago there was an almost anti-Karneval attitude in the Church. We had special prayer hours introduced during Fastnacht - the so-called 'Forty-hours-prayer'. It was well-attended. This was stopped mainly because so many churches were destroyed in the war and there wasn't enough room."

Prelate Dahn speaks with authority about Karneval; he is a native Kölner, broad-faced, bald, with bags under his eyes. He wore the black, crimson-trimmed soutane of the cathedral chapter. Was I familiar with the ecclesiastical year, he asked. "It's interesting," he said, "to note what the liturgy expresses during the Karneval period."

"Before Christmas, in the Advent season, the mood is joyous. At Mass, the celebrant wears a white chasuble, the color of gladness. But already, three Sundays before Ash Wednesday, the liturgy takes on a solemn mood. The priests wear violet chasubles - the color of penance. In other words, the Church services show a presentiment of the Lenten period. In this respect, the rhythm of the ecclesiastical year runs counter to the secular festival (Karneval) which reaches its highpoint on Fastelovend."

Father Dahl allowed that he, himself had often participated in Karneval sessions: "From the Church's point of view, secular festivities are fine. We'll even join in the celebration. But we don't want any excrescences."

Cologne's Catholic clergy does "join in." A friend described to me the Karneval caper arranged by the nuns at her hospital. She said the nuns put on silly hats, tiptoed a bit, and danced. After all, it was Wieverfastelovend. Monks are known to have their own private Sitzungen during Karneval too.

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While Karneval may be a cause for silent concern by the Church, it is a cause of outright headaches for Cologne's police force. "I'd rather go into a gun battle any day than manage Karneval," said one official. "And don't quote me."

In addition to a princely traffic problem, the police have to deal with extra drunks, pickpockets, rowdies, and professional criminals who take advantage of the festival spirit to revenge themselves on cops. "It takes finger tip sensitivity," said the director of the public safety division. "We have to exercise understanding for turmoil and the little mischief; the difference between fun and trouble."

The main problem, Rosenmontag traffic, requires weeks of planning: a specially arranged parade route, importation of 1,000 extra police from several Westphalian cities (in addition to the 1,000 regulars), and the training of flying squads to clear up parade stoppages. In addition, the Cologne police manage six special aid stations - one in each district - for drunks on Rosenmontag. "We're lucky to have warm weather this year," said the director. "That means less drunks. Last year we had hundreds."

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Over the years, Karneval has bred its own special race in Cologne - the professional "Karnevalists". These are the singers, farceurs, and "tub speakers" who make a good part of their living solely from Fastnacht. Cynics criticize this breed as having commercialized Karneval to the point that it is no longer a true folk festival.

On the other hand, it is this tribe of non-court jesters who give much of the necessary tone to Karneval. They write its songs and tell its jokes. Moreover, they conscientiously cultivate the festival's traditions - especially through the use of the Kölsch dialect.

One of the best-known Cologne Karnevalists is a 65-year-old author named Hans Jonen. This stocky fellow with the shuffling gait of a clown is chairman of a company called the Muuzemündelcher (a name taken from Cologne's globular Karneval pastry) - which includes all the leading Fastnacht entertainers.

Jonen himself is a Büttenredner of some 35 years experience. "Many try, many fail," he said of his calling. "I grew up with it." He became a pro after a dozen years as a grammar school teacher. Other tub speakers were once housepainters, electricians, and such.

Many Kölner think that the professional Karnevalists can live a whole year from their Fastnacht earnings. Jonen denies this. "We get a fixed sum for our Sitzung appearances," he said. "It ranges from \$5 to \$10. At the most we make five 'shows' a night; but that's only during the close of the season. I figure I make about a fifth of my annual earnings during Karneval."

There are three categories of Büttenredner, the rotund Jonen says: Satirists, caricaturists, and jokesmiths. The caricaturists pick out a specific theme or type - the bachelor, the cop, the housewife, and do a sketch. The jokesmiths simply string together a conglomerate of quips and puns. The satirists work over local and national politics. Jonen is one of the latter.



A trunkful of medals

"What sort of assault are you going to make on me this year?" Chancellor Adenauer asked of Jonen last January. "Herr Kanzler, I have some terrific City Hall indiscretions to make public," Jonen replied (Adenauer was Lord Mayor of Cologne in the 1920's).

Jonen's 1958 routine took him a year to work out. He comes on in an astrologer's costume under the title: "A star contemplates earth." His rhymed bantering ranged from burlesque on taxes ("Is your wallet empty, lax? Then turn the wallet in for tax.") to badinage on the parking place shortage in Cologne ("They're going to tear down the Cathedral to make room for those who want to come and see the Cathedral")

Besides the wage, Jonen and his colleagues receive a fancy medal from each Karneval society for every appearance. The medal is meaningless in so far as every entertainer gets one. Still, Jonen is immensely proud of his "medal collection". He has 270 of them mounted in a glass wall-case - the fruit of three year's Karneval work. "I have trunks full in the basement," he said.

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