

# POINTS OF VIEW

BY THE BY:

## Social Skills and Sepia

*The first time I saw Ken even mildly irritated was on the eve of his daughter's wedding. He was alone in the kitchen, a tumbler of whiskey in one hand, a smokestack of a hat in the other. When he put the hat on, it wobbled and fell off. A female voice somewhere behind us said with peered authority, "Ken, you don't wear a dress hat. You carry it. You don't wear the gloves either. You carry them." "Should I carry my trousers as well?" he asked. From that moment, things turned belly up. At the reception lunch, Ken sat with his back to me at the round top table. Hunched over his plate, he looked as if he'd been decapitated. The first course was apparently a half smoked Havana cigar set in rinsed toothpaste and surrounded by diseased docken leaves. It was about this time that Ken's button-hole disappeared - he reckons it fell into the docken leaves and that he ate it. His speech, with its one-liners painfully copied from a joke book, did nothing to dent the guests' bovine stupefaction, or his daughter's rictus. He was so unnerved that he toasted "all those who have contributed to this memorial day."*

*In the bar afterwards I tried to console him. "Foppery, foppery," he muttered, staring at the optics. "Bloody stupid wedding rules. I've done it all wrong, haven't I? From saying 'I do' for the groom who at that point in the service looked as if he was having ECT standing up, to probably excoriating his mother's corns when protocol says I have to dance with her." He lit another cigarette from the one he was smoking and crushed a third in the ashtray. "Tell you what though. I think I now know what it must be like for someone with a mild learning disability trying to cope with some of our inane social do's and don'ts. Isn't it Leland who divides social behaviours into the essential and the desirable?" (Yes, amongst others; Leland, 1993, Ed.) "Very clearly, there's a third, miscellaneous category made up of evanescent fashion, foppery and eccentricity."*

*A man with clown's hair clapped him on the back. "Great speech Ken. Really enjoyed it." "Thank you. It's nice to see you again." "Actually, we haven't met. I'm on the groom's side." Ken stared after the stranger and shrugged. Two more drinks appeared. "Slainte," Ken said, "Where were we? Social skills. We're assessing some adults on the Adaptive Behaviour Scale. Do you know it?" "Vaguely." "You should do. It and Gunzburg's PACs are perhaps amongst the most popular." (Sorry to interrupt again. These are references to Nihira et al., 1993, and Gunzburg, 1996, Ed.). "Part One of the ABS is about adaptive behaviour - basic self help skills, interpersonal skills and all that. A lot of the items are good common sense - eating, drinking etc. But a few are plain silly . . ." "Ken, shouldn't you, on your daughter's wedding day, be mine host extending the glad hand . . .?" "I daren't. I've made enough gaffes already. In the months to come it's the bride and groom I want people to remember, not me, the eight-stone unco-ordinated weakling."*

*"So, please, can I go back to the ABS? Near the beginning of Part One there are at least two goody bags of Brownie points which you can claim if you don't show certain behaviours or features. In your case, my friend, you'd lose a good few." "Let's not personalise this, Ken," I said. "But I'm going to," he insisted, "you're a very slow eater. One point away. You don't polish your shoes. Another point away, You wouldn't know what to do with a napkin at a table. Your sense of colour combinations in clothes suggests monochromacy or indolence. I bet you don't hang your clothes away neatly at night. You walk with your toes turned in. Your shoulders slump. That's at least five more points to deduct. Clinically speaking you're a couch potato. Just look around you. A lot of the guests, acutely etiquette sensitive, have gone pear-shaped over the years. Protuberance is standard. They're aware of it of course. Witness the formal photography on the lawn - useless attempts to pull in decades of distended stomachs with muscles that are now inert flab, or at least disguise unsightly bulges with crossed hands. Do you get the gist? It's unnecessary fault finding. Like the favourite Irish habit of pricking a reputation. Last week I was in a Dublin pub and we were talking about a neurosurgeon. We all agreed he was good at his job but then someone said did we know he picked his nose?"*

*It was my round and I also bought Ken another packet of cigarettes. "Then there's the difference between can and does," he went on. "For instance, there was this man worked in my father's business. Genius with figures. But more than indifferent to godliness and cleanliness. Would cross the street to avoid them. Washed his face and shaved alright. Bulking was the problem. He preferred to sit in his own miasma, mentally solving enormous financial problems down to the last exact farthing. No matter where you stood you were always downwind of him. He used to have a quarterly bath. Perfectly competent of course but depressed for days afterwards. The ABS asks if you can wash and bathe but there's nothing about frequency. So the genius would get eleven points minus two or three for sweaty oxters and the like. And yet he was a bigger social problem than someone with a learning disability who does need help with personal cleanliness. Only nobody dared say so openly. He was too valuable. The bathing frequency thing is interesting. In a little survey we did some years back, parents' replies about their child's bathing ranged from 'every day of course' as if it was an unnecessary question, to 'whenever he needs one' - presumably whenever he became an insect promenade . . . Back in a minute."*

*I looked around. A few feet away, below a horses-and-plough painting, two elderly couples, obviously wedding guests, sat at a low table, silent, mummified, staring into the middle distance through rheumy eyes. On his way back, Ken stopped briefly by them. "How's it going?" he asked. It was like throwing iced water on their faces. "Great. Marvellous atmosphere." Ken sat down beside me. "They're bored rigid," he said, "Rather be anywhere than here. Yet etiquette demands they tell lies." He was silent for a minute. "Did I ever tell you about Harry?" "No", I said. "Down's Syndrome. Early thirties. Portly. Dignified. An only child. His father was born into a middle-class home in an age when men doffed hats or caps, wore braces, all of them smoked, most helped old women across the street, offered seats on trams. He's the only man, that father I mean, who, now in 1996, still wears an old fashioned hat and doffs it, still wears braces and a woolly tie on a beach picnic. But he reserves most of his old world courtesies for company he's familiar with, like his friends at the church. The day he offered to carry a woman's suitcase in a*

railway station and she asked him if he was weird or just a dirty old man was the day he gave up a lot of public good manners."

"Harry seems to have inherited his dad's good manners, his civility, his sense of decorum. He even wore a hat for a while, but doffed it continuously at everybody. So he was persuaded he looked better without it. All his other manners are excellent: shaking hands, pleased to meet you, I'm well thank you, please come in; I'll carry that for you, please take a seat, here's mum and dad, I'll carry the tray; it's been a pleasure, safe home, bye bye. God bless. And in a world largely bereft of manners, it is Harry's natural courtesy rather than his condition which attracts attention to himself. And that attention can be nasty. The job in us doesn't like easy, ingrained manners." "Hold on, Ken" I said, "you attack wedding etiquette for its foppery, yet Harry's manners are themselves foppery." "Exactly. And his foppery is outdated, obsolete. But you miss the point. He's a genuinely kind and considerate man who lives quite comfortably by a set of simple moral principles. All of which make most of the rest of us look self-centred yahoos. And when a yahoo nowadays displays charm and consideration, it's most likely cynical. . . . My point quite simply is that the ABS can't reflect Harry's enviable superiority not only in deportment but also in unalloyed niceness."

Ken signalled for another round. "Given all the difficulties, though, the ABS compilers did a good job on Part One. Note the tense. Basically, they asked themselves what social skills are needed to cope with everyday problems. That was okay the day they published the scale. Unfortunately, some of the items are already in sepia. Shopping, for example. Others sound so naive. For example: 'uses public pay phone.' Once upon a time you could go into a phone box and expect to speak to another human being. Not any more. The other day I had to ring Belfast International Airport. My inquiry couldn't have been simpler. But the machine that answered didn't know that. The disembodied voice ground on, listing different departments and telling me what buttons to press. All I want, I shouted, is a human being - man, woman or child - whom I can talk to. In desperation I punched a button and the machine passed me on to another machine. I ran out of coins, patience and confidence. You can't, I discovered, offend an answering machine but by God it offended me. They all did. What next? One day, some wee woman with a crisis of conscience will go to a confessional only to be told to speak her bit and wait for a computer to decide the penance."

Ken's daughter came up with one of the flower girls. "Dad, you'll have to socialise. Yes, really. The dancing starts in a few minutes." "I'm not leaving here until I have to. It's too risky." She mock pouted and drifted away. Ken lifted his glass and was about to sip when his eyes widened. "There's the groom's mother," he whispered hoarsely. "Heading this way. For the etiquette dance. Why does she remind me of Offa's Dyke? With huge shoulders and bosom to match she deserves a severe weather warning. . . . Ah, there you are Jean. Yes, I'm looking forward to the dance too. My pleasure." Back in the reception room, now mysteriously curtained off into thudding, caterwauling half-light she lifted him clear of the floor and gripped him in such a way that his chin jammed in her cleavage. An Amazonian and her rag doll. Minutes later, as the lead singer grunted into the microphone for the last time, she dropped the rag doll to much applause and drollery. Blue-faced and gulping for air, Ken tottered past me and out into the shrubbery. "A close call," he said

*rubbing his back and shoulders. "Very close. Once more round that floor and you'd be hushed and reverent at my wake. Are you familiar with wake foppery?"*

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## **References**

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