Talk to the Hand

The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life
(or six good reasons to stay home and bolt the door)

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Extract

Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

Oscar Wilde

An apology is a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts: the part that is guilty of the offence, and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule.

Erving Goffman

Fuck off, Norway.

Paul Gascoigne, on being asked if he had a message for the people of Norway

Introduction:
When Push Comes to Shove

If you want a short-cut to an alien culture these days, there is no quicker route than to look at a French phrase book. Not because the language is different, but because the first lesson you will find there usually takes place in a shop.

"Good morning, madam."

"Good morning, sir."

"How may I help you?"

"I would like some tomatoes/eggs/postage stamps please."

"Of course. How many tomatoes/eggs/postage stamps would you like?"

"Seven/five/twelve, thank you."

"That will be six/four/two Euros. Do you have the exact money?"

"I do."

"Thank you, madam."

"Thank you, sir. Good day!"

"Good day!"

Now the amazing thing is, this formal and civil exchange actually represents what happens in French shops. French shopkeepers really say good morning and goodbye; they answer questions; they wrap things ever so nicely; and when it's all over, they wave you off like a near relation. There is none of the dumb, resentful shrugging we English shoppers have become so accustomed to. Imagine an English phrase book for French visitors, based on the same degree of verisimilitude – let's call it "*Dans le magasin*".

"Excuse me, do you work here?"

"What?"

"I said, excuse me, do you work here?"

"Not if I can help it, har, har, har."

"Do you have any tomatoes/eggs/postage stamps?"

"Well, make your mind up, that's my mobile."

This book has quite a modest double aim: first, to mourn, without much mature perspective or academic rigour, the apparent collapse of civility in all

areas of our dealings with strangers; then to locate a tiny flame of hope in the rubble and fan it madly with a big hat. Does this project have any value? Well, in many ways, no. None at all. First, it is hardly original or controversial to declare oneself against rudeness. (One is reminded of that famous objection to the "Women Against Rape" campaign: "Are there any women *for* rape?") Secondly, it seems that an enormous amount of good stuff has been written on this subject already, and the plate has been licked pretty clean. Thirdly, and even more discouragingly, as long ago as 1971, the great sociologist Erving Goffman wrote that "concern about public life has heated up far beyond our capacity to throw light on it". So, to sum up: it's not worth saying; it's already been said; and it's impossible to say anything adequate in any case. This is the trouble with doing research.

However, just as my book on punctuation was fundamentally about finding oneself mysteriously at snapping point about something that seemed a tad trivial compared with war, famine, and the imminent overthrow of Western civilisation, so is *Talk to the Hand*. I just want to describe and analyse an automatic eruption of outrage and frustration

that can at best cloud an otherwise lovely day, and at worst make you resolve to chuck yourself off the nearest bridge. You are lying in a dentist's chair, for example, waiting quietly for an anaesthetic to "take", and the dental nurse says, next to your left ear, "Anyway, I booked that flight and it had gone up forty quid." At which the dentist says, in your right ear, "No! What, in two hours?" And you say, rather hotly, "Look, I'm not unconscious, you know", and then they don't say anything, but you know they are rolling their eyes at each other, and agreeing that you are certifiable or menopausal, or possibly both.

Whether it's merely a question of advancing years bringing greater intolerance I don't think I shall bother to establish. I will just say that, for my own part, I need hardly defend myself against any knee-jerk "grumpy old woman" accusations, being self-evidently so young and fresh and liberal and everything. It does, however, have to be admitted that the outrage reflex ("Oh, that's so RUDE!") presents itself in most people at just about the same time as their elbow skin starts to give out. Check your own elbow skin. If it snaps back into position after bending, you probably should not be reading

this book. If, on the other hand, it just sits there in a puckered fashion, a bit rough and belligerent, then you can probably also name about twenty things, right now, off the top of your head, that drive you nuts: people who chat in the cinema; young people sauntering four-abreast on the pavement; waiters who say, "There you go" as they place your bowl of soup on the table; people not even attempting to lower their voices when they use the "Eff" word. People with young, flexible elbow skin spend less time defining themselves by things they don't like. Warn a young person that "Each man becomes the thing he hates", and he is likely to reply, quite cheerfully, that that's OK, then, since the only thing he really hates is broccoli.

By contrast, I now can't abide many, many things, and am actually always on the look-out for more things to find completely unacceptable. Whenever I hear of someone being "gluten intolerant" or "lactose intolerant", for example, I feel I've been missing out. I want to be gluten intolerant too. I mean, how much longer do we have to put up with that gluten crap? Lactose has had its own way long enough. Yet I still, amazingly, deny a rightward drift

in my thinking. I merely ask: isn't it odd, the way many nice, youngish liberal people are beginning secretly to admire the chewing-gum penalties of Singapore? Isn't it odd, the way nice, youngish liberal people, when faced with a teenaged boy skateboarding in Marks & Spencer's, feel a righteous urge to stick out a foot and send him somersaulting into a rack of sensible shoes? I will admit that the mere thought of taking such direct and beautiful vengeance – "There he goes!" – fills me with a profound sort of joy.

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Why is this not a handbook to good manners? Why will you not find rules about wielding knives and forks, using a mobile phone, and sending thank-you notes? I have several reasons for thinking that the era of the manners book has simply passed. First, what would be the authority of such a book, exactly? Why would anyone pay attention to it? This is an age of lazy moral relativism combined with aggressive social insolence, in which many people have been trained to distrust and reject all categorical answers,

and even (I've noticed with alarm) to dispute points of actual law without having the shadow of a leg to stand on. However, this is not to say that manners are off the agenda in today's rude world. Far from it. In fact, what is so interesting about our charming Eff-Off society is that perceived rudeness probably irritates rough, insolent people even more than it peeves polite, deferential ones. As the American writer Mark Caldwell points out in *A Short History of Rudeness* (1999), if you want to observe status-obsessed people who are exquisitely sensitive to slights, don't read an Edith Wharton novel, visit San Quentin. Rudeness is a universal flashpoint. My main concern in writing this book is to work out why, all of a sudden, this is the case.

Another argument against laying down rules of etiquette is that we no longer equate posh behaviour with good behaviour, which is a splendid development, posh people being notoriously cruel to wildlife and apt to chuck bread rolls at each other when excited. Who wants to behave like a posh person? I know I don't. I recently met a very posh person, the husband of (let's say) a theatrical producer, and when I asked if he was himself in (let's say) theatrical

producing, he just said, "Oh God, no", and refused to elaborate. Is this good manners? Well, the best you can say about it is that it's very English, which is not the same. As the anthropologist Kate Fox points out in her fascinating *Watching the English* (2004), it is a point of honour in English society to effect all social introductions very, very badly. "One must appear self-conscious, ill-at-ease, stiff, awkward, and above all, embarrassed," she writes. The handshake should be a confusion of half-gestures, apologies, and so on. And as for cheek-kissing, it is an established rule that someone will always have to say, "Oh, are we doing *two*?" Also essential in the introductory process, she says, is that on no account should you volunteer your own name or ask a direct question to establish the identity of the person you are speaking to.

I must admit that this last rule explained quite a lot to me. My standard behaviour at parties is to announce straight away who I am, and then work quite strenuously to ascertain the name and profession of the person I'm speaking to – mainly because I wish to avoid that familiar heart-stopping moment at the end of the evening when the host says, "So

what did you make of my old friend the Archbishop of Canterbury, then? Looks good in mufti, doesn't he? You seemed to be telling him off-colour jokes for *hours*." However, it turns out that asking direct questions is socially naff, while the "Oh God, no" response is the one that is actually demanded by the compensatory instincts of good breeding. No wonder I have so often ended up playing Twenty Questions with chaps who seem to pride themselves on being Mister Clam the Mystery Man.

"So. Here we are at Tate Modern," I say. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name. I expect you are front-page famous which will make this an embarrassing story to tell all my clued-up friends."

"Oh no."

"No?"

"Well, I'm known to a select few, I suppose. Mainly abroad. Nineteen."

"Pardon?"

"You've got nineteen questions left. You've just used one."

"Oh. Oh, I see. All right. Are you in the arts?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Eighteen."

"Are you animal, vegetable, or mineral, ha ha?"

"Mm. Like everybody, I believe, I'm mainly water. Seventeen."

"I see. Well. Look. Are you the Archbishop of Canterbury?"

"No. Although there have been some notable clerics in the female line. Sixteen."

"Do your bizarre trousers hold any clue to your profession?"

"How very original of you to draw attention to my bizarre trousers. Fifteen."

"Do you own a famous stately home in the north of England?"

"Um, why do you ask?"

"Just a wild stab."

"Well, I like your style, but no. Fourteen."

"I give up. Who are you?"

"Not allowed. Thirteen."

"All right. I was trying to avoid this. If I got someone strong to pin your arms back, where would I find your wallet?"

It's always been this way, apparently, in so-called polite society. People go out and meet other people, but only so that they can come home again without anyone piercing the veil of their anonymity in the

period in between. George Mikes made a related point in his wonderful *How to be an Alien* (1946): "The aim of introduction [in England] is to conceal a person's identity. It is very important that you should not pronounce anybody's name in a way that the other party may be able to catch it."

Until recently, of course, people did aspire to posh manners. Hence the immense popularity, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in both Britain and America, of books that satisfied middle-class anxieties and aspirations – and incidentally fuelled snobbery. Books such as Letitia Baldridge's *Complete Guide to the New Manners for the '90s* (referring to the 1890s) or the umpteen editions since 1922 of Emily Post's *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* existed because they were needed: as society became more fluid, people found themselves in unfamiliar situations, where there was a danger that they would embarrass themselves by punching the hotel porter for stealing their suitcase, or swigging from a finger-bowl, or using the wrong fork to scratch their noses. Cue the loud, general gasp of well-bred horror. Well, sod all that, quite frankly, and good riddance. Old-fashioned manners books have an implicit message:

"People better than you know how to behave. Just follow these rules and with a bit of good luck your true origins may pass undetected." It is no accident that the word "etiquette" derives from the same source as "ticket". It is no accident, either, that adherence to "manners" has broken down just as money and celebrity have largely replaced birth as the measure of social status.

All of which leaves the etiquette book looking a bit daft. "Wait until the credits are rolling before standing up to leave," I see in one recent guide to polite behaviour. "Don't text when you're with other people," says another. "A thank-you letter is not obligatory, although one can be sent to the Lord Steward of the Royal Household." I experience a great impatient ho-hum in the face of such advice. Once you leave behind such class concerns as how to balance the peas on the back of a fork, all the important rules surely boil down to one: *remember you are with other people; show some consideration*. A whole book telling you to do that would be a bit repetitive. However, I do recommend *Debrett's* for its incidental *Gosford Park* delights. There is, for example, a good, dark little story in the most recent edition about a well-bred country gentleman

with suicidal intent who felt it wasn't right to shoot himself before entering his own name in the Game Book. You have to admire such dedication to form. For anyone wishing to follow his example, by the way, he listed himself under "Various".

Manners never were enforceable, in any case. Indeed, for many philosophers, this is regarded as their chief value: that they are voluntary. In 1912, the jurist John Fletcher Moulton claimed in a landmark speech that the greatness of a nation resided not in its obedience to laws, but in its abiding by conventions that were not obligatory. "Obedience to the unenforceable" was the phrase that was picked up by other writers – and it leads us to the most important aspect of manners: their philosophical elusiveness. Is there a clear moral dimension to manners? Can you equate civility and virtue? My own answer would be yes, despite all the famous counter-examples of blood-stained dictators who had exquisite table manners and never used their mobile phone in a crowded train compartment to order mass executions. It seems to me that, just as the loss of punctuation signalled the vast and under-acknowledged problem of illiteracy, so the collapse of manners

stands for a vast and under-acknowledged problem of social immorality. Manners are based on an ideal of empathy, of imagining the impact of one's own actions on others. They involve doing something for the sake of other people that is not obligatory and attracts no reward. In the current climate of unrestrained solipsistic and aggressive self-interest, you can equate good manners not only with virtue but with positive heroism.

Philosophers are, of course, divided on all this – but then most of them didn't live in the first years of the twenty-first century. Aristotle said that, if you want to be good, it's not a bad idea to practise (I'm paraphrasing). In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes said that the rights and wrongs of picking your teeth weren't worthy of consideration (I'm paraphrasing again). In the 1760s, Immanuel Kant said that manners could not be reckoned as virtues, because they called for "no large measure of moral determination"; on the other hand, he thought they were a means of developing virtue. In November 2004, however, the philosopher Julian Baggini wrote in *The Guardian*, rather compellingly, that our current alarm at the state of manners derives from

our belated understanding that, in rejecting old-fashioned niceties, we have lost a great deal more than we bargained for:

> The problem is that we have failed to distinguish between pure etiquette, which is simply a matter of arbitrary social rules designed mainly to distinguish between insiders and outsiders; and what might grandly be called quotidian ethics: the morality of our small, everyday interactions with other people.

My small, personal reason for not writing a traditional etiquette book is not very laudable, but the phrase "a rod for one's own back" is a bit of a clue to the way I'm thinking. If my experience as Queen of the Apostrophe has taught me anything, it has impressed on me that, were I to adopt "zero tolerance" as my approach to manners, I would never again be able to yawn, belch, or scratch my bottom without someone using it as watertight proof that I know not whereof I speak. Is it worth it? *Zero Tolerance Manners Woman Ignores Person Who Knows Her Shock. "She walked straight past me," said wounded friend of 25 years, who was recovering yesterday at home. "She is also rubbish at punctuation, if you ask me. You should see her emails."*