

A Sartorial Affliction - Parkinson's Disease has changed Leo Coopers Life. But his greatest challenge, he says is his wardrobe.

It is nearly two years since I first wrote in these pages about facing the horrors of retirement, and, not long after, the onset of Parkinson's disease. Little did I realise then how my daily life and that of my family was about to be visited by almost total disruption. A lot has happened since the doctor passed sentence.

It has not (as you might have expected) been the obvious manifestations of the disease that have caused me to examine my very existence. Neither is it totally unexpected hazard of being suddenly semi-paralysed while fighting to preserve some balance (in more ways than one) in my present regimen.

All of this has come upon me gradually; I am handling the demands of the medical side with aplomb as I cram yet another handful of pills – recommended by a medical profession that has a somewhat hazy idea about treating Parkinson's- into my face and wash them down with various libations. It is even the horror of being struck rigid for a minute or so, unable to move, in the middle of the street where there is nowhere to sit down, nothing to hold on to, and the pavement is like a skating rink. I can even laugh at my soft-shoe shuffle, regular insomnia or the sudden unexpected onset of hand tremors all minor episodes which while not long lasting, do happen unexpectedly. No, main problems, surprisingly, are sartorial.

Once known as natty, if somewhat eccentric dresser, I am now faced with a wardrobe of suits, shirts, socks, and shoes into which I can no longer slip gracefully. You see, I have put on an enormous amount of weight- none of the doctors knows why – and I am boxing at about 19st (120kg). The immediate problem is what I can wear. To start with, I am unable to get into my dinner jacket, or my morning coat, or any of my socks or shoes. At the recent nuptials of a cousin, I turned up looking like a heavyweight Tom Kitten: bursting out of all over and popping buttons. More recently my tailor, who has dressed me since I was eight, moved out of London and is no longer doing tailoring for me. There is hardly a pair of trousers in my wardrobe that tailors haven't had a got at. Alas, the size of the darts in the trousers was becoming increasingly beyond them. A dart too far has been my trousers downfall.

In desperation, I resorted the mail order catalogues whose bronzed and smarmy geriatric models, harridans from the suburbs with tinted hair and accompanied by grizzled retired NCO's with neat white moustaches and social ambitions, gazed out at me from their walk-in Dora Bryan geriatric baths . They urged me to buy products that were tailor-made for those on the wrong side of 60.

The ads told me that I could buy two pairs of trousers (washable) at £19.99 a pair. This was my first major setback. The first pair I tried on came right up to me neck and left four inches dragging at the bottom .With shoes it has been even worse. Such is my weight that my feet have splayed out like dinner plates and I now look like one of the web-footed Disney characters. I can't get into any normal shoes. The gap at the top, ie, the place where you put your foot in, will not accept my swollen paws. The only hope is to have a pair made especially for me, which will cost well over £150.

I am left with a pair of furry flying boots from Australia given to me by a friend who had no further need for them. Wearing these, however, especially in high summer, is not conducive to any form of comfort or hygiene, and they attract some odd looks in the Garrick Club. My worst episode occurred when a pair of cheap shoes that I brought for £12.99 burst out from their Velcro fastening as I got off the train at Paddington, and one shoe fell down between the carriage and the train. I don't know if you've ever been left with only one shoe, standing on a busy railway platform, trying to draw attention of the uninterested staff to the fact that one of your £12.99 shoes is lying under the engine.

The problem was solved by a nice man with one of those long-armed tweezers with which they pick up rubbish from the station concourse. He had a bright idea of going down on his knees and fishing under the train. I staggered in to my next appointment, which was the office, where I left oily footmarks on our new carpet.

The problem with shoes is compounded when I finally prise myself into one old pair: it is almost impossible to take them off. I can't bend down that far. Whenever I spend the night away in my club or the office, I have to make sure that there is someone there who can help me in or out of my shoes, and indeed my sock if it comes to that, for they are another problem.

People have been very kind once they have spotted me in distress and convinced themselves that I am not drunk. Numbers of strangers have approached me, offering me an arm or helping me to sit down in a seat or lift up my legs from the platform to the steps of the carriage. These experiences have changed my view of people. Many old friends, too, have emerged, offering to come and see me or visit their own special doctor who knows more about Parkinson's than anybody else. Almost everyone I talk to claims to have an aunt who has suffered from the disease for years and is still playing golf. Others have sent me books which I've found quite incomprehensible, and diet sheets, suggestions and numerous homeopathic remedies by which they swear.

My morale has been immensely raised by these friends, and I hope they realise I am grateful to them for taking so much time and trouble.

The only problem is that there are so many choices. It has taken me a long time to work them all out. The jury is out at the moment on the efficacy of the various drugs I am being given. They all have various side-effects and each doctor says something different. The other problem is that I keep forgetting to take them and I rattle when I move. Alas, there are no cures available, but we will keep trying.

Recently I decided that I was being such a nuisance to the household that I would try and get up and dress on my own. I failed lamentably. It took me more than an hour to get dressed during which time I tripped over one of the dogs and woke Mrs Cooper from a rare slumber. Fortunately, she thought I was a bad dream and went back to sleep, but the damage was done.

I now scan anew the pages of journals such as *Saga*, *The Legion*, and other ex-service magazines, which see to specialise apart from cheap trousers and shoes, in problems of a prostate nature and other unmentionable diseases that appear to affect every former member of our gallant forces. At least it enables me to see what other offers are available in the cobbling department, or at least the haberdashery section. There is also mail-order catalogue, not to be missed called "Jolliman- Comfortable Clothing for Men": This means *fat* men.

Felix, my son, and his wife brought back from the US a pair of Black Watch tartan trouser, which turned out to be half a pyjama set. These were big enough to fit an elephant and long enough to come over my shoulders. Mean while, Emily, my daughter seeing the state of the weather in the mid summer, decided to take a pair of scissors and cut off one of my tracksuit bottoms to make me some shorts. Alas, her aim was not all that good, one leg now settles below the knee and the other above.

I am sorry to grumble so much. You may wonder why I have inflicted all of this on you, but it did strike me that if I was having all of these troubles, there must be other people out there enduring the same problems.

This is really a tribute to all of you who struggle to remain even vaguely decent, or at least looking as if you'd taken some care over your appearance, in the face of these

afflictions. I was further moved as I left the pub the other day, in uneven shorts, my furry boots and my Jolliman shirt, to overhear one of the regulars, among whom I count myself saying "Good God there goes the village scarecrow" Actually, I am really Velcro, not a scarecrow.

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