

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Sharp Practice

Anders Larsen

About the Book

Scientists have concluded that 90 percent of men shave at least once a day. That works out at a colossal twenty thousand shaves, or five months in front of the mirror, in a lifetime. Yet how many men have ever been given any advice or shown how best to shave? Here to fill that gaping hole is an indispensable guide to the ultimate shave. Shaving shouldn't be a chore, but a pleasure, and *Sharp Practice* will tell you how.

Revolutionize your morning ritual by learning some essential how-tos:

- Prevent rashes and cuts
- The importance of a good aftershave
- How to handle a cut-throat razor
- What is the ultimate luxury shave?

Along the way, you will learn about Che Guevara's beard, Ivan the Terrible's idea of fun, Alexander the Great and the severed head, and how cavemen invented the razor. Super-stylish, funny and practical, this is a must-have for all well-groomed men everywhere, and the perfect present for any young man about to shave for the first time.

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

INTRODUCTION: **WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK**

CHAPTER 1: **THE CUT-THROAT RAZOR**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THE DAWN OF MAN**

CHAPTER 2: **THE SAFETY RAZOR**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **ANCIENT EGYPT**

CHAPTER 3: **THE ELECTRIC RAZOR**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THE GREEKS**

CHAPTER 4: **PREPARATION**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THE ROMANS**

CHAPTER 5: **THE SHAVE**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THE MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND**

CHAPTER 6: **MOPPING UP**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET**

CHAPTER 7: **STROPPING AND HONING THE CUT-THROAT RAZOR**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **THIS MODERN AGE**

CHAPTER 8: **HEADSHAVING**

HISTORY OF SHAVING: **BEARDED REVOLUTIONARIES**

CHAPTER 9: COMMON SHAVING PROBLEMS

CHAPTER 10: MOUSTACHES AND BEARDS

CONCLUSION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

SOME USEFUL ADDRESSES

BOOKS REFERRED TO

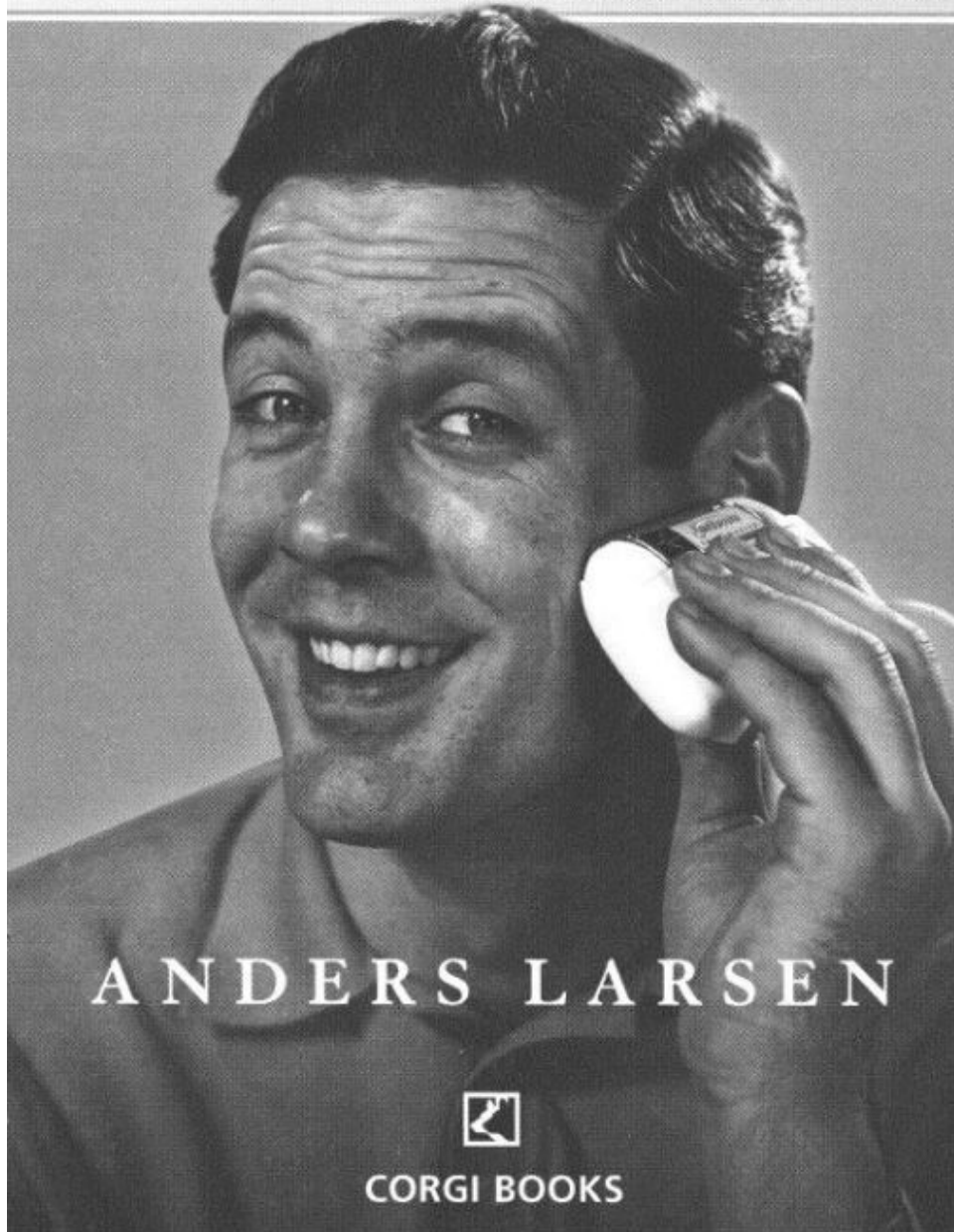
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About the Author

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Sharp Practice

THE REAL MAN'S GUIDE TO SHAVING



ANDERS LARSEN



CORGI BOOKS

To Trisha, who hasn't turfed out this old rascalion yet



‘To shave the beard is a sin that the blood
of all the martyrs cannot cleanse.’

Ivan the Terrible, Tsar of Russia

Shaving?

I STARTED WHEN I was about sixteen. A school disco was coming up, and I thought I had a chance with a girl I knew. I looked in the mirror and decided it was time to take off that fluff – time to become a man.

I didn’t own an electric, so I went down to the supermarket and picked up a cheap disposable razor and a can of shaving foam. It didn’t cost much.

Nobody offered advice, then or at any time in the future. Apart from anything else, I never asked. Instinctively, I knew that real men had to go through this on their own. Like St George off to fight my dragon, I entered the bathroom – my battlefield – certain that I would emerge victorious. I was going to look like Marlon Brando, Robert Redford, maybe even John Wayne. That girl was as good as mine.

Half an hour later I was rinsing bloodstains off the washbasin, and my face looked like I’d stuck it in a blender. And after I’d finished with the blade? Here came the good part: I could splash on the aftershave, and the sweet scent would compensate for everything. It would make me smell like a man at least.

Splash, splash.

‘AAARGH!’

Napalm.

When the raw alcohol burned into my face, my knees buckled and, to my eternal shame, I wept. The pain was appalling. I had no idea that this was what it took to be a man. Why didn't women have to do it?

Oh, and I blamed my razor for the fact that my girl went off with some gorilla awash with testosterone who'd been shaving since he was twelve.

If this type of beginning sounds chaotic, be advised that it's also the standard first shave for most men.

And the bizarre thing is this: we don't ask for advice on shaving *ever*. We go through years of learning the hard way. We turn thirty, but still don't ask our best friend what type of razor, shaving brush, soap or aftershave he uses. It's taboo. We walk around the streets with nicks, cuts, razor-burn and the stubbly bits we missed or skipped in sensitive areas. To advertise them, we stick on bits of lavatory paper to flap in the breeze like little red and white flags.

And that, my friend, is the tragic story of nearly the entire male population of the Western world. They've never been taught and, God help them, half don't have a clue.

This book will tell you how to shave, whether with an electric, a safety or a cut-throat.

Oh, you've been shaving for years, and you know all this?

Then you know all about honing, stropping, lathering and silver-tip badger? And you know about alum, styptic, linen, horsehide and Russian reds, monoterpenes and the stratum corneum, second and third passes, high carbon and stainless steel? How about Japanese Waterstone, Belgian Blackstone or Norton, 4000/8000 grit, madder root, aftershave lotions v. balms, King Camp Gillette, Colonel Conk and Dominica Bay Rum?

No, I didn't think so.

But let's face it: a book that was only about shaving would be hellish boring. So I've put in bits about Alexander the Great tossing severed heads about, Che Guevara smoking cigars in the jungle with Fidel Castro, and how I was attacked in an opium den by a Chinese man with a machete.

Confused? You will be. Read on.

CHAPTER ONE : THE CUT-THROAT RAZOR



THE WAY I see it, there are three different ways of shaving:

- the electric razor
- the safety razor
- the cut-throat razor.

I'll go through them all, but I'll start with the cut-throat since I use one myself and have done for years. (No, it's not dangerous at all.)

Here's how that happened.

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

It was a different age.

November rain sleeted across my face, through my hair and down my upturned collar. I was running for shelter - an overhang on the far side of the street - my feet splashing through monster puddles, my cheap shoes soaked.

Safe from the rain, I patted down my pockets and fished out a dry cigarette. A sign in a window caught my eye: The Oldest Shop in Dublin. Strange: after eight years I'd thought I knew Dublin quite well, yet I'd never noticed that

sign before. It looked like a shabby old men's shop, and I was intrigued. I pushed open the door and walked in, cigarette dangling from my lips.

That shop has long since closed down, but I still remember some of the details clearly. The display cases were dark wood, mahogany or teak, and well oiled. The floor was glossy tiles, black and white squares. The glass cases were full of steel and leather: hunting knives, carving knives and penknives. They had some switchblades on display. There may have been a sword or two. There were leather cases, hip flasks, hand-stitched boots and walking-sticks. A no-frills men's shop.

No one else was in there. I wandered down to the far end of the counter, not intending to buy anything. I remember wiping my face dry on my sleeve and having another pull on my cigarette. Back then we smoked in shops.

That was when it stopped me: a dull light fell on it, catching my eye. I was transfixed.

The shopkeeper shuffled over. He had white hair and a wrinkled face, and a pipe hung out of his mouth. 'It's what separates the men from the boys, sonny.'

We eyed each other through the drifting smoke.

'The disposables they sell now,' he muttered. 'They're for disposable men.'

'How much?'

I can't remember the price he told me. I was always terrible with money and still am. But it certainly wasn't more than ten pounds. That doesn't seem like a lot now, but I was a student then, and poor.

I rooted out the money in coins and notes, and the old man wrapped the blade in brown paper. There was no case, but it came with a strop, the essential strip of leather that keeps the blade dry and correctly aligned. It served me well, and the shopkeeper gave me advice: 'Always strop after you finish the shave, sonny. It's German, high-carbon

steel. You don't have to worry about sharpening it. They stay sharp for years.'

It was male advice: short, to the point, transactional. We didn't need to chatter.

I dropped the blade into my pocket and ambled back to the door. When I had it half open, he called after me: "Brando!"

I turned round. The old man was grinning. 'Marlon Brando used one. *Last Tango in Paris*. It's a great movie.'

I grinned back. 'I've seen it.'

Once outside, I flicked my cigarette butt into the gutter and turned my collar down again. The rain had stopped. Sunlight was fighting its way through the clouds. My hand brushed against the razor in my pocket. It felt like a friend.

I've used that razor for a long time now. It's travelled with me through Mexico, the Persian Gulf and the jungles of Thailand. It's been through wars and ditches. I was forty metres under water once when I realized I had forgotten to take it out of my pocket before diving at an oil-rig.

I've tried other blades, of course, but that one always draws me back. I think, at this point, there won't be another.

'And so,' you ask, 'where can I purchase one?'

Easy: you can lay your hands on a cut-throat razor in several different ways:

- You can find one in an old shop, like I did. This is a lot of fun, and it's a great way to buy one, as long as you take on board a few warnings, as you'll see below.
- You can buy one on the Internet. This might be the easiest option, if you feel comfortable buying things on the Internet.
- You can buy one in an old flea market. Be warned: this is a dangerous option and you should select it only if you

know what you're doing.

TOBY'S GRIZZLY BEAR

I had a stockbroker friend, Toby, who really liked the idea of the cut-throat razor. I was in London for the summer and we were having a few drinks together. In fact, we drank a lot. The lights grew dimmer and we approached that magical time of night when every word makes sense. I told Toby how it all worked - what to do and what to avoid - and I could see a crazy gleam in his eye at the very idea of the cut-throat razor. Looking back, of course, I should have warned him, as I'm warning you now.

That same weekend, Toby had arranged for us to go to a stockbroker's dinner-dance. I'd rented a tux, finished a fantastic shave and celebrated by splashing Colonel Conk aftershave all over my face.

Toby called me up as I was struggling into my tux. 'I can't make it.'

'What?'

'Something's come up. You'll have to go alone.'

This was going to be a disaster. I knew there was no chance I'd have a good night without him. I didn't know any other stockbrokers, and I was nearly certain I didn't have anything in common with them. My after-dinner conversation is about things normal people find barely acceptable.

'Dammit. What happened?'

He wouldn't say. He was humming and hawing and I was beginning to think he'd arranged something else on the sly.

This required drastic action, so I went to his apartment, which was round the corner, and I kept my finger on the buzzer until he came down.

When he opened the door, one side of his face looked as if a grizzly bear had tried to eat it. He was nearly in tears. 'I can't believe you shave with one of those horrible things.'

'Let me see the razor.'

When he showed it to me, I saw that he had gone into an antiques shop and bought an incredibly expensive one whose handle was studded with diamonds. It looked as if it had been made for the King of Sweden. But when I felt the blade, it was barely sharper than that of a kitchen knife. There was a nick in it and the edge was misaligned - a great-looking razor for a display cabinet. It was my first real experience of style over substance.

Be warned: 99 per cent of used razors need serious reconditioning work before they're going to be of any use. That's fine, if you're an expert with a hone and strop. But most people aren't. *That's why if you're a beginner with the cut-throat razor, you should steer clear of second-hand blades.* If you think you're going to have a positive experience using your grandfather's razor, with nicks in it and a patina of rust on the blade, think again. I'm not discrediting old blades - quite the opposite: it's rewarding to save a faithful old razor from the scrap heap and use it daily. And this can be even more important if it carries emotional weight with you. But save it until you've been using a cut-throat for years. It takes time to learn, and you'll only hurt yourself in the beginning.

Incidentally, I bought Toby a decent cut-throat a few days later. He's been using it ever since, and now he feels as I do about the cut-throat:

- It's a beautiful, ancient instrument that is still fully functional. You could compare the experience to driving a 1920s Mercedes, but with the performance of a state-of-the-art Ferrari.
- It gives you a smoother shave than the most modern electric or safety razor.

- It reduces or eliminates razor-burn and nicks.
- It can make you feel like a craftsman - which neither a safety nor an electric razor can.
- It's a whole barrel of fun, and your wife or partner will think you're nuts.

GERMAN AND FRENCH RAZORS

So, now that you know you should buy a new razor, I have some even more specific advice: buy one made in Germany or France. This may seem cruel to other manufacturers and, indeed, other countries, but I'm basing it 100 per cent on personal experience. And I'm going to restrict your choice even further: when I say Germany, I mean 'Solingen'. This is the town in Germany where they make the best blades. If you're holding a cut-throat razor with 'Solingen' on the blade, you have a product made from some of the finest steel in the world, which has the corresponding depth of craftsmanship behind it. The name 'Solingen' has been legally protected since 1938.

The biggest Solingen brand-name is 'Dovo'. This venerable company was founded in 1906 by Herr Dorp and Herr Voos - combine the first two letters of their names and you have 'Dovo'. Over many years, 'Dovo' incorporated six other cut-throat razor manufacturers. That makes for a wealth of manufacturing experience, combined with a very high-quality product.

Dovo make cut-throat razors that will last you a lifetime. Even the cheapest of their razors will serve you well, as long as you maintain them properly. Dovo blades are also quite reasonably priced. You can investigate their models at any number of websites. From there, it's easy: you pay your money and take your pick.