

Chapter 1

'You know what Mr Hepplewhite is like: slightly disorganised, confused and despite the fact that we gave him the very same information some weeks ago, he's requested it again! He even phoned the office on the weekend and left his message on the answering machine. God knows how he became an architect!'

The man who spoke to me in a well-rounded voice could have been a bishop or a Shakespearean actor but it was Declan Doherty, my boss. As managing director of IKA Floor coverings, a wholesale and distributing company of PVC floorings, he was in charge of a small organisation and I was his architectural representative.

Declan was running our little team well! He was in his mid-thirties, handsome, always elegantly dressed and had impeccable manners to match. But I always found his voice the most impressive. A 'posh' English pronunciation and a very descriptive vocabulary - it never failed to impress me or anybody else he came in contact with!

There was, however, another side to Declan –or shall I say, another personality, which I discovered by accident: Declan lived in two worlds! Whilst in the business world, he had this great command of the English language, but when I heard him on the phone speaking to his mother in Ireland, I was at first stunned, thinking him to be a different person. But no, it was Declan alright - however it was with a thick and melodic Irish brogue that he conversed with his dear mother. 'Aye, mother, 'tis I will do! An' take good care o' yersel'. I'll be comin' to Europe in tree mont's time and be sure to see ye. An' also give me regards to Uncle Seamus and Auntie Gerti and the two wee-uns . . .' I had quickly walked away, respecting his private phone conversation, but felt that I

could have listened to Declan's quaint voice forever.

Sitting with Declan over an 'early morning cuppa,' which the secretary, Marilyn Bevan, had brought into his large and elegant office, I heard him explain: 'So, I just had to ring you on the car phone and ask you to call on Mr er White, something, before you go on your business trip for the rest of the week.'

'Hepple' I said. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Hepple! The name is Hepplewhite - the architect!' 'Oh yes, of course. Do have a pleasant week and don't sell too much! Ha, ha.'

This was his favourite joke which he repeated regularly.

'Have a nice week, Peter,' Marilyn had beamed from her reception desk as I had walked past on the way out.

'You too, Marilyn.' I picked up my large black case which I had left at the door and waved cheerily to her and to Norma, our accountant, who was already poring over large ledger sheets, searching for slow-paying customers and, even then, reaching for her telephone.

One quick visit to Mr Hepplewhite and his partners and I'd be off on my overdue trip to visit my business contacts in the northern country region.

Driving out of my designated car space, I took note of the weather. There had been rain during the night, but now the sun was shining which made the green of the trees come alive in glowing hues. Everything was bright and cheerful on this wonderful Melbourne morning, and I was driving to my first visit of the day and looking forward to it.

I was also thinking about the next year, when the company was going to send me on a training course to their headquarters in France and to their subsidiaries across Europe. This, combined with sightseeing in

famous places, was something I was really looking forward to. It would be a highlight of my career and the especially pleasing part of it was that my wife, Veronica, could go with me - so we both had something to look forward to.

Mr Hepplewhite's architects' office was located in the seaside suburb of Broughton. Leaning back comfortably in my typical sales representative's vehicle, a station wagon, the air conditioning was switched on and the car radio was playing soft, agreeable music. This would be a successful Monday morning, no doubt about it!

I became aware of lots of energy, thoughts and feelings. Soon I would have to turn left into Hills Avenue, a tree-lined road, which offered so much welcome shade in summer. It was also a very long and straight avenue. And far ahead, at the other end, was my first call for the day, Mr Hepplewhite and his group of architects in their modern, pleasant offices.

I liked calling on them because they were a friendly lot and always made me feel welcome. They appreciated the fact that each time I called I had something new and interesting to impart, be it technical information, samples or service. And from my point of view, they had one of the sweetest receptionists I had ever met. She was dark, very dark actually, with a pleasant face. Her eyes were bright and big, with long eyelashes, she had a cute little button nose, angelic cheeks and raven-black hair, which was teased to a big afro-style and looked like a permanent halo floating around her sweet and lovely face. She always had a bright smile, was always ready for a giggle and was also very smart! All in all, there were a number of good reasons to visit this establishment!

I turned left into Hills Avenue, but was not yet able to make out my destination; it was still too far away. On the way, I knew I would pass a veterinary surgery, an

elegant establishment, very modern and efficient. I knew the doctors and nurses well because they took care of my own cat's well-being. It was a constant joy for me to sit in the waiting room, with my cat in a cage at my feet, and observe the other patients. Some always looked really woebegone; others pretended that there was nothing wrong with them. They were the ones who had to be dragged into the consulting room. And others, again, were of sanguine disposition, straining on their leashes to get into the consulting room and get it over with! Just like humans, I thought. Some want to go on sick leave for any trivial reason; others take no notice of any symptoms.

Having completed my turn into Hills Avenue and gazing automatically ahead towards the veterinary surgery, which was about half way to my destination, I saw something that made me sit bolt-upright. Outside the entrance of the vet's were two men dancing!

'What?' My tranquil eyes snapped wide open and I looked again. Although still far away, I could definitely make out two men dancing. They were about the same size and holding each other in an embrace while dancing to the tempo of an imaginary English Waltz.

'What is happening to me?' I looked again, this time squinting, yet there they were, still dancing! All the time I was getting closer and seeing them more clearly. On and on they danced, on the spot, in front of the entrance. But having nearly reached the two, I suddenly noticed that they were not two men, but one man and his Great Dane! They were holding each other the same way: upright, hands and paws at each other's shoulder blades, staring into each other's eyes with utter concentration, but neither saying a word. The man was rather elegantly dressed in an expensive suit and his face was almost as red as a stop sign from embarrassment and effort.

Wondering what the problem was with the two and slowing down almost to a halt, I suddenly perceived the true situation. The man was trying to get the Great Dane into the veterinary surgery but the dog didn't want to go. Obviously the man had tried brutal force by positioning his dog in the doorway and trying to push him through. The dog had, in return, reared up on his hind legs and got a hold of his master exactly the way he, himself, was being held. Every time the man tried to push the dog through the glass door into the waiting room, the big dog took evasive action. Obviously, he was smarter than his owner because every time the man tried to push him hard against the door, he did not push back - oh no! Instead, he quickly side-stepped so that the man found himself in the doorway, with the dog on the footpath side!

So he had to resume his original position again, with the dog in front of the door and him on the road-side. Another push against his dog was parried again with a side-step (actually a 'Quick-Step', as they teach in dancing schools) and, once more, he found himself in the doorway instead of his dog! A step forward, side-step, reverse position and, again, round and round they went. If it had been a dancing competition and somebody had played the tune of the 'Tennessee Waltz' they would have won a prize for sure! They just kept looking at each other very seriously whilst pirouetting on the spot.

I had to drive on and was long past the two when I glanced into the rear vision mirror and saw that they were still dancing. And they really did look like two men dancing! Except one of the two had his trouser bottom rather low, with spindly, unattractive, legs sticking out!

'Hello Sharon,' I managed to greet the receptionist as I staggered into the architect's office. I wiped the tears from my face and stammered out what I had just seen. An architect, who happened to walk past, stopped with

alarm and then we all laughed.

Humour is infectious and soon everybody in the office knew what I had just experienced and they all cheered up. It was a good omen when a week started with such an hilarious event, I thought. After having conducted my business with Mr Hepplewhite and his team, I went on my way, with slightly sore ribs caused by the excessive merriment.

There is, however, a sequel to this story. Being a representative of industrial vinyl floorings, I had a lot of contact with veterinary surgeons, inspecting their floorings or ascertaining the type of floor cover they needed in their surgeries. Whenever I met with an animal doctor for the first time, I put the question to him or her: 'How do you get a Great Dane into the surgery when it does not want to go'. The answer was always the same: 'You can't!' And they invariably explained that they would have to visit the Great Dane at home, that is, make a house-call!

One day, in the middle of the region of Marooka in Victoria, I met a grizzled old vet who was different. He had a ramshackle old surgery and worked mainly outdoors. His patients were cattle and sheep; very few dogs and almost never what city slickers called 'pets'.

Dr. Sunborn showed me his old surgery and judging by his corded forearms I realised that his was a strenuous occupation and that he had applied his skills for a long time.

'Ian' I said during our conversation, 'I have a question for you and wonder if you can help me with your advice. Could you get a Great Dane into your surgery if it didn't want to go?' Naturally, I expected the same answer I always got: 'You can't'. But Ian looked at me with clear eyes from a much wrinkled and weather beaten face and said, 'Of course!'

'Whaat?' I gasped in amazement. 'How would you do this?'

'I'd sit the dog on a large bath towel outside the surgery and pull the towel inside with the dog on it! Of course, the owner would have to steady the dog while I did the pulling. Once the dog was inside, he would not be as brave as before.'

I had stared at the vet with a mixture of admiration and disappointment. There was truly a wise man, a master of his craft. And yet I felt disappointed that the dog was being outwitted; it simply did not seem fair!

My next stop was far from Melbourne. It was, in fact, in southern NSW where a country town hospital had new vinyl floorings installed and for some reason the administrators were not happy with the finished installation. I had been asked to inspect it to give my opinion.

Upon arriving in the town of Barerra near the border of NSW and Victoria, I glanced again at my list of appointments. My itinerary was to call on all the architects in this town, the government departments, the flooring contractors, inspect two large flooring installations and maintain contacts with the end-users of our PVC floorings.

The first visit in Barrera was at a flooring shop run by Frank Cleary. It was at the edge of the town and Frank was an old friend of mine. I had supported him for a long time because he always made me feel welcome. There was always a friendly smile, a cup of coffee and intense listening to any new knowledge I had to pass on and he always happily accepted new catalogues and samples. It was amazing how few flooring retailers treated visiting company representatives as part of their team!

'It's just a rep!' they would mutter when they saw somebody in a business suit and holding a clipboard folder

enter their establishment, and they would continue with whatever they were doing. Obviously they considered people like me an interruption to their work.

However, Frank Cleary was different. He would sit down with me and we would discuss his business and I would point out where I could help him with a special discount when his competition was too tough or I might offer to recommend him to a builder to help him win a contract that way.

On this visit, however, he informed me that things had been very quiet. 'There is a large building project in town, Peter, and despite our keen tender, somebody from out of town is quoting cheaper, with a different brand of flooring. I don't know how they do it!'

Since business was quiet due to a downturn in the economy, I realised how much he needed to win this contract. And he certainly needed my help. Plus, of course, I wanted to see my own brand of flooring installed.

I thought about this and hit on an idea: 'I tell you what we could do' I exclaimed. 'My company could donate 10 sqm of a Safety Flooring as a test installation. We always do this when a client needs convincing. This offer is only available to you! Your competitor from out of town will not be able to offer the same. Would this help you?' I asked.

'My word it would' he sighed with relief and his tiredness seemed to disappear. He clearly saw the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

'Also, mention that, if you win the contract, you would train the maintenance staff in the proper cleaning procedures, thereby ensuring that the ongoing maintenance costs are kept to a minimum.'

'Hang on - who would do the training?' he sounded alarmed as he did not wish to promise more than he

could keep. He was truly a decent businessman. I touched him soothingly on the shoulder: 'I would come from Melbourne, upon your completion of the installation, and conduct a training seminar for the cleaners. As you know, I always have floor cleaning equipment, like a buffing machine, in my car. For now, Frank, follow up your original tender for the project with a "Letter of Amendment" and list the extras we just discussed. I shall speak later on today to the manager of the project and recommend you.'

'This may help' Frank said quietly.

I had known Frank for almost 30 years and was aware that he would have liked to have sold his business and retire as he was getting on in years. But he had no son or other family members to hand over his business to. He was a bit tired but had to keep going, competing with big and well-established businesses from as far as Sydney. In my opinion, he belonged to a disappearing breed of flooring contractors: hard working, doing their own installations, giving good customer service, and yet being squeezed hard by big and rough-working competitors.

My next call in Barerra was to the large private hospital where Carl Boswell was the maintenance engineer. Right from our first meeting, about two years earlier, we had gotten on extremely well. So much so that at Christmas time I always brought him a bottle of wine or company give-aways, small attention-getting trinkets, like an attractive-looking ball point pen or a set of golf balls. In return, Carl would present me with a Christmas pudding that he'd cooked himself, as he was also a qualified chef and in charge of the hospital's kitchen!

The hospital, Star of the Sea, was run by nuns and always had a peaceful atmosphere. So, with pleasant

expectations, I had entered the hospital and asked at the reception for Carl Boswell.

'He will be with you in a moment', announced a serene lady at the reception. She had a very friendly face, with a happy smile that seemed to radiate cheerfulness. This was in marked contrast to some other health institutions, where the receptionists were overburdened and their smiles strained. Still, they all were doing a good job and doing it with dedication. I thanked her and relaxed.

A sister came by, clearly in a hurry, but stopped suddenly and asked me: 'Are you the representative of the manufacturer we got the new vinyl flooring from?' Realising that she was in a hurry, I answered 'Yes. I am Peter Frederick and call here regularly to make sure everything is alright flooring-wise.' I tried to hand her my business card.

'Well, we are not happy with the floor - it stains terribly in the operating theatres. They are full of iodine stains. Terrible.' And then she rushed off and was gone.

This surprise attack had taken my breath away and I had to gather my wits to say: 'I am sorry to hear that you are not happy with our vinyl flooring but frankly, iodine will stain any flooring. There is, however, such a thing as iodine stain remover and I shall give your maintenance engineer, Carl Boswell, the details!'

But I had not been able to voice this because, like I said, she was gone. Just by uttering an accusation whilst rushing past, she had deflated me somewhat. I felt this was terrible: being wronged and unable to defend myself! I must have shown a long face, because when Carl arrived he went out of his way to welcome me and cheer me up.

'Nice to see you again, Peter! How are things with you? Are you having a good day?'

'Well, just so-so, Carl, and how is your day?' 'We are very busy at the moment,' he explained as

We walked automatically to the hospital canteen. 'As you know, I am also in charge of the kitchen and do the cooking plus I'm in charge of the hospital cleaners.'

'Then you probably get two pay packets, I guess.' I had found my cheerfulness again. This had made Carl laugh cheerfully. When we arrived in the staff canteen, we went through a well practised routine - Carl filled up the coffee mugs from an enormous container whilst I selected scones for both of us.

'There was this lady, Carl, who rushed past me and criticised our flooring for accepting iodine stains and before I could reply she was gone.'

Carl giggled and waved a resigned hand - he was used to rough stuff.

'Are you are aware that there are very good iodine stain removers available?'

We had continued talking 'business' and I handed him an information sheet on stain removers. 'Here is one company you could try.'

Carl was a man of action. He excused himself for a moment and went to the nearest phone. Coming back to his coffee and scone he smiled. 'I have just phoned the company you recommended and they are sending me a sample bottle to try out.'

'Here is something for you, Carl,' I said, reaching into my carry case. 'This is French wine, all the way from Burgundy - for you - with best wishes from our company and me. Thank you for all your cooperation and hospitality during the year.' Carl, a keen connoisseur, perused the label with deep appreciation.

'Well, thanks, Peter! This is a real surprise! I shall enjoy it with my family, if I get a spare minute with them!' He giggled in expectation at the thought of

sipping it.

Suddenly he jumped up, rushed into the kitchen which was adjacent to the staff canteen and returned with a great smile on his face. In his hands he carried a Christmas pudding! 'Here is something for you, Peter. I cooked it myself.'

I knew from the previous years that his Christmas puddings were always very tasty and I accepted his gift with humble gratitude. After all, I knew of no other company representatives receiving a Christmas present from a hospital! It's always the other way round.

'Thank you very much, Carl, but you didn't have to do this - I wasn't expecting anything . . .'

Carl laughed and took the drained coffee cups to a special tray for washing up. 'You deserve it, Peter. Whenever I need help, advice or whatever, I can always count on you. You've never let me down.'

We took the lift to the second floor, where new vinyl floorings had just been installed. It looked great; smooth like a billiard table because Carl took care to supervise the subfloor preparations as I had advised. Only when the concrete was smooth 'as per the Australian Standard' and therefore to his satisfaction, did he let the flooring installer proceed with the next part of installation, the actual PVC.

Carl was a smart man! Normally, tradesmen were let loose with a minimum of supervision – and an installation could go wrong in a big way. This always amazed me as the installation of flooring is a major project and the costs are massive. Therefore, I have always felt that tradesmen should be supervised with the utmost attention. But in Carl's hospital, everything, whether flooring or cooking, was perfect. He made sure of that!

We looked into the operating theatres: The good doctors had been very generous with the iodine. They

were obviously splashing it about with wild abandon. They must shower in it, I thought, judging by the enormous stains on the floor. Of course, nobody can tell a doctor how much to use. In Europe, however, they use another substance, chlorhexidine, which is colourless and leaves no marks.

'I guess our doctors believe that sterility has to be seen to be effective!' Carl muttered.

After discussing with Carl the excellent installations, I met with his cleaners who wanted to know some details regarding cleaning methods. I left that friendly hospital in high spirits. I always did.

The next town was Barton, with a hospital to visit, a nursing home and a local flooring contractor. Calling on them all, I updated their sample files and discussed a few technical questions with them.

Having completed my appointments in that town, I headed towards Rock Gully, where I had four flooring firms, two hospitals and three architect firms to visit. Whilst driving towards Rock Gully, on a straight and well designed road, past fruit trees and vineyards, the phone in my car kept ringing constantly and, in hands free mode, I dealt with typical company representatives' matters, like answering queries from architects in other parts of the state, settling disputes, agreeing to discounts, organising to send off faxes at the next nearest post office, posting samples etc. In other words, my car was also my office.

Norma Hazelwood, our accounts' lady, phoned a few times and talked to me about customers who hadn't paid their bills and, asked if I could please call on them to pick-up a cheque? She always managed to sound really desperate.

'Yes, Norma, next time when I am in that area, I shall call on that customer and try to collect a cheque.'

‘When will you be in the area? That payment has been outstanding for ninety days and is very overdue.’ ‘When I return from this trip I shall work out my list of calls for next week and build-in a few debt-collections.’

Norma was a very nice, hard-working lady but somewhat lacking in humour. She was always serious about her job, which was not an easy one as people seemed to become more and more reluctant to pay their bills, yet she was responsible for getting the money ‘in’.

Sometimes my colleague and fellow representative, Ken Butterfield, who, like me, called on different areas, phoned me for advice or to discuss a problem he had encountered, asking what I would do in a certain situations.

It was late that afternoon, actually early evening, when I drove into “my Motel”, as I liked to call it. It was a small establishment run by an Italian couple who were extroverts and very service minded. The rooms were large, clean and the air conditioning was powerful but without the usual noise I had to put up with in other motels. After a long and hectic day I always looked forward to turning my car into the driveway of my favourite motel, which I considered my ‘second home’. The sun was setting behind the town’s fruit orchards and glowing deep crimson, the red soil was getting darker and the cicadas supplied the music to this, now tranquil, world.

With the expectation of a restful evening, I had parked my vehicle in the motel’s car park. Preparing to go to reception, I suddenly had the sensation of not being alone in my car! I glanced back at the interior of my station wagon, typically filled with lots of samples and catalogues, and immediately looked again: there was a cat sitting in the back seat, staring at me! It was a large,

beautiful, tabby cat, her long luxurious fur well groomed and she was wearing a red collar, studded with metal 'tips'. What a shock! I said the most stupid thing that came to my mind: 'Where did you come from?'

No answer came from the cat, just a stare and a blink. I could not imagine how that cat had entered my car nor how long had she been there, but I could see that she was well fed and obviously somebody's darling. There was no doubt that I had to find the owner the next day by driving back to all the places I had been!

As tired as I was by then, I had to drive to the nearest supermarket and buy cat food, kitty litter and milk and search for a cardboard box for a toilet - the works!

I laid out everything in my roomy station wagon as animals were not allowed in motel rooms. I spread out the blanket that I always had with me and my cushion, which normally supported my back whilst driving, all the time calmly observed by the cat. When I had finished preparing the cat's toilet, she reached into the box, scooped up a paw-full and let the fine grain run through her claws and seemed to be satisfied with my set-up. Wishing her a 'Good Night!' I gently closed the car door, leaving a window open slightly for fresh air.

The following day saw me calling on everybody I had seen the previous day, only this time with a cat under my arm. But everywhere I went, people waved a 'No', and suddenly some seemed less friendly than the day before. In fact, they made me feel as if I were peddling cats!

Country town after country town, shop after shop, architects, government departments, hospitals - I revisited them all with the cat. Finally, it turned out to belong to the very first shop I had called on! The owners of the cat were - yes - Frank Cleary and his wife Sue. At first, Frank Cleary looked surprised to see me again so soon. But his face was long and serious. When he saw

the cat he transformed into the happiest person in the world. It was his cat and since he and his wife had no children, the cat obviously was a much-loved member of the family.

Whilst I had been showing him new samples, running back to my car several times and taking things out and into the shop, the door must have been left open when 'it' happened. The cat had obviously jumped inside and spent the whole day sleeping in the back seat behind me! Only at the end of my day did it awake and start to stare holes into my back.

Mrs Cleary was phoned and told the good news and she arrived at the shop within a few minutes. When they discovered that their cat was not hungry and they realised how well I had looked after her, they could not thank me enough for the trouble I had taken.

Despite having lost a whole working day, which I had to make up somehow, I left feeling on top of the world. If I could only I could have delivered lost cats to their loving owners on a full-time basis - it would have been my paradise on earth!

