

A torrent of tears unequalled since

Love Story

IN the dim light I peered into the mirror; my eyes had become a vivid green and were staring back at me menacingly like those of an enraged tom-cat. A few seconds earlier my optician had poured some drops of a fluorescent liquid into my eyes and was now shining at them the sort of purple light you sometimes find at trendy parties—the kind which brilliantly shows up white shirts, teeth and dandruff.

I had been toying with the idea of getting contact lenses since I went to the US a few years ago. I arrived to find the nation blinking and squinting at me. Wearing "contacts" was the latest craze. The keener ones were wearing glasses as well. It is now established, I think, that 80 per cent of all Americans have perfect vision and yet 80 per cent (a different 80 per cent perhaps) feel compelled to festoon their eyes with some kind of ocular accoutrement.

My own astigmatic eyes were clearly beyond the scope of this concept but I subsequently learned that in England quite a number of people who wear contact lenses do have something wrong with their vision.

"And why do you think you need contact lenses?" asked the optician.

"Because I look more

handsome without glasses."

"Ah, I see — cosmetic reasons." The vision, conjured up by this remark, of lipstick, face powder and soap did not accord entirely with the new Omar Sharif image of myself I had now resolved to build.

"Well, let's have a look then." He pulled towards me a machine specially devised for the purpose by Heath Robinson. And look he did. And look and look. There can scarcely have been a square millimetre of either eyeball which did not escape close scrutiny.

After a long pause he concluded that my eyes were an unusual shape (he didn't say they were triangular, but that seemed to be the implication). Then came the dummy lenses. The sensation was rather worse than having a large chunk of coal in each eye. For the first 10 minutes they produced a torrent of tears unequalled since I saw A Man And A Woman or Love Story. But after a while the flood abated to a mere trickle.

"Hmm, you'll be fine."

"Oh?" I managed to murmur into the water haze before another wave broke from my eyelids and cascaded on to the floor.

For the next few weeks I underwent a series of tests, measurements and trial fittings. I expect it was like having a suit built by a bespoke tailor (I am not too well qualified to make this comparison as the mail order firm I patronise only ever

wants to know my waist measurement), as gradually and precisely the exact dimensions of my lenses were determined.

And so my contact lenses, hewn out of solid plastic, arrived neatly packed in an ornate little box of the sort which 50 years ago might have contained snuff — two tiny discs about the same size as my little finger nail, one with a small dot on it to indicate that it should go in my right eye (or left, I can't remember which).

The wearing instructions were to take it easy at first; not more than four hours a day for the first week. For the first seven days my eyes had had more than enough after 15 minutes.

When you travel by air the most risky part of the journey is landing and taking off. It is the same with contact lenses; wearing them is quite straightforward, but getting them in and out is perilous.

To insert them requires the interesting gymnastic exercise of holding the eye open with one finger from each hand and with another popping the lens in the eye when it's not looking. In the nature of things, the eye often is looking and blinks at the crucial moment, sending the lens spinning on to

the floor. Or it looks away, leaving the lens planted firmly on the bloodshot part. This was alarming at first because there appeared to be nothing to stop it floating round to the antipodes on the other side and being lost for good; or worse, doing some permanent brain damage. Apparently this cannot happen.

When a contact lens drops on to the floor it inevitably disappears and causes a major disaster alert. The emergency procedure is: remove shoes and feet (if they detach) and turn on all available lights.

In a power cut, give up and wait till daylight. Then

using conventional glasses scan the floor from a range of about six inches. After a fruitless search it is often wise to have another look in your eyes; they occasionally turn up there.

Removing the lenses has its own problems. The official method is to open the eyes wide then simultaneously tug at the eyelids and wink. The first 150 or so attempts had no effect — the lenses remaining stubbornly stuck to my eyeballs. At last (with an audible pop) my left eye surrendered. Fifty tries later, my right eye followed suit but not before my left eye had summoned rein-

forcements and was refusing to blink and deliver.

It was some days before I succeeded in removing both in one session. (There is an alternative method — using a little rubber sucker but this is frowned upon by the elite; it is too easy and besides, what will happen when the Bomb drops and all the little rubber suckers perish?)

Even in the early days of wearing them there are advantages. One of the greatest is the blissful relief when they are taken out. The eye relieved of its beam (or mote?) suddenly feels as fresh as a dewy spring morning.

Everyone who has ever worn spectacles in a bathroom or rainstorm knows how his sight is removed with the first puff of steam or drop of rain. Now I find that one blink with nature's own windscreen

wipers restores me to perfect vision in sauna baths and snow drifts alike.

Another advantage is that the eyes being rather stupid organs cannot tell the difference between contact lenses and anything else which passes their way.

When I get dust in my eyes now they simply accept it in the same phlegmatic way they have got used to the lenses.

But there is one quite big disadvantage—perhaps only for me. Last week I appeared with my eyes glistening with my new acquisition. With a salesman's smile and fluttering my now visible eye lashes, I waited for the rapturous compliments. After an hour and a half one person noticed the difference.

"How funny," she said, "you look without your glasses." — RICHARD BARR