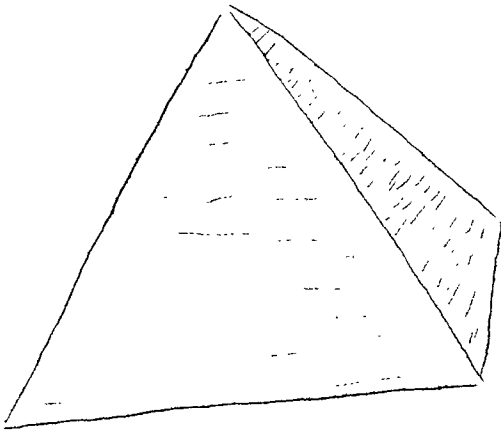


The (47) on the Mat



"I was so impressed,
I bought the company."

Hello and Wibblecombe to another episode in the continuing series of 'Mental Breakdowns - My Way' by Peter Doubleday, B.O. Er, A. This is the Thing, characterised by Derek Sutherland as follows: "Think of it in the same way as you would pay £1 for a (largely boring) copy of Punch."

Yes, this is the tingly boring Thing on the Mat, and it costs
£1 for three, £2 for eight and £5 for twenty.

It incorporates, in a purely metaphysical way, Chris Spall's Slap and Tickle, but not this time, sunshine.

In addition, and at no further expense, every now and again the wandering Jew appears in the form of Mark Smith, editor infraordinaire of The Hitch-Hiker. One Bernard Emblem thinks I am hoist by my own petard in having a fledgling under my wing whose zine name derives from HHGttG. Think again, sweetums. As any fule kno, The Hitch-Hiker is a Rutger Mauer fanzine dealing in terror and existential symbology. Mark has translated it from the original American of The Hitcher.

Anyway, he isn't present either.

But Peter is, and Peter lives at 302 Lordswood Rd, Harborne, Birmingham B17 8AN.

The next deadline is Saturday 23rd August. This may seem a little short, but wait 'til you see the games ... Sopwith orders are optional by this deadline. Nothing else is. The next issue will be free, so you can think of it in the same way as you would pay nothing whatsoever for a (largely mind-blowing) copy of The Watchtower (yes, I know, only in your most dreadful nightmares).

Peter is wondering if he has missed anything out, and the only thing he can think of is the CoA:

Pete Bates, 33 Means Drive, Burradon, Cramlington, Nthumberland NE23 7NS.
(091 268 3998)

Nick Simpkins: 41 Austin Place, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 1LT
(and not at Lucca Drive, as previously advertised)

There, that should be embarrassing enough. One more thing, for players in Game Fifteen: Rowland has sent me some corrections. He is right to say that I owe BoB 12 for Manhattan and Brooklyn. I have checked this on an RGR report, and it is the correct procedure. That will teach me to go thinking that, just because a 'town' has brackets around it, it must be different in some way, such as being merely a suburb; although I still fail to see the rationale behind it. He might be right about Neanderthal owing PRIC 1 for the junction at H34, but since that is before round 4, I do not care and am not going to check up. He is definitely wrong (hooray!) when suggesting that he only owes Eagle 2 for H24-H25 - junction at H25 costing one, plus two half-hexes parallel, innit?

An important notice for all subscribers and traders, under the Data Protection Act. Though I do not have a computer, and in fact can truthfully say that, at present, I would not take money even to touch one, it is an indubitable fact that I possess what is, in effect, an informal database. To wit, I have stored your names, addresses and credit on a set of file cards. Since the DPA was brought in so that ordinary citizens might be able to check where and when this sensitive information was passed from a permitted database to a rogue one, it follows that I am morally compelled to inform you of this fact. After all, information can as easily pass from my file cards to the subscription list for White Power Weekly, Punch, The Watchtower or The Readers Digest as it could from yer average home computer, bereft of modem. Unless you inform me otherwise, therefore, I am going to take your card and burn it, having first drunk your subscription.

Oh, by the way, there's a bible on the front page, in invisible ink - the lemon method. Just hold it over a flame to read it.

No contents. Barthes would love this.

REAL EDITORS DON'T

... try to explain brussels sprouts ...

The only point of an English garden, it seems to me, is that it is perfect for growing raspberries in. For ten months of the year, the garden is submerged beneath snow, permafrost, hailstones, anti-personnel raindrops, next door's footballs, and cat-piddle, but for two fitfully sunny months in the middle of the summer, when the brats next door are away and the cat has collapsed in a heap with furballs, the garden is perfect for growing things that need equal shares of sun and moisture. The raspberry rules supreme in this field. It is my favourite fruit (no comments please). Of course, the English being who they are, they tend to prefer growing vast quantities of grass in a pathetic attempt to convince the next-door neighbours that they really are country gentlemen, honestly, and that domestic beasts such as cats, dogs and in extreme cases, children, require grass to sustain themselves over the long pasture months. One day I hope to team up with my geneticist friends and create a cow which stands two and a half hands high - we'd make a fortune selling it to these people. And a whole collection of doll's house-like accessories - twee little bells, bovine petticoats (you've heard of cowslips, sir, haven't you? Wouldn't want your prize heffer to be mounted by the labrador, would you, in front of the whole neighbourhood? Well, there you are then), and rubber tweezers for milking purposes. Hours of fun for twisted psycopaths everywhere. However, in the meantime, I can only marvel at people who waste all that lovely fertile soil growing grass, begonias, and tedious, inedible things like that. There is something demented about spending an hour a day manicuring something so sickly that ^{it's to be avoided} every form of fungus, moss, toadstool or mushroom, which might happen to drift over from its proper place disfiguring the yards of working class nonentities. The English are, in short, a nation of law'n' order freaks. (I've said it before, but I like it, so I'll say it again.)

Mind you, all is not well at Raspberry Mansions, 302 Lordswood Rd. For a start off, my parents are also under the delusion that grass means class - consequently, we have something out there which resembles the Russian steppes minus interesting things like firs and boyar massacres. However, we do have our own collectivised raspberry farm, positioned cleverly in the windiest corner of the garden so that all the canes have fallen down in the wind and forced tight into the fence so that it is impossible to gain access to fifty per cent of the stuff. Needless to say, this fifty per cent is precisely where the most raspberries grow. I now have the scars on my wrist to prove this, although anyone looking at arms dyed bright red with juice might conclude something rather more sinister. Irritatingly enough, my parents have chosen to go on holiday at the precise moment when a plurality of the raspberries ripen, relying on my greed and obsessiveness to overcome my laziness far enough for me to pick the little baskets. As a result we now have the almost pavlovian sight of me rummaging around the wilderness, salivating madly, cursing roundly and damaging the delicate balance of our garden ecology in the pursuit of this wretched but compulsive fruit.

Which is why I mention brussels sprouts.

It amounts almost to a parable, really. Grasshoppers and ants are all very well, but what really brings home the futility of relying on others to do your work for you is the struggle between fresh fruit and frozen vegetables. Here we are, in God's Own Second Country, with just enough rain and sun to ensure bumper crops of wonderful raspberries, and what is the English cuisine famous for? Brussels sprouts. Here I am with a freezer-full of goodies to stuff into my gob every time the pangs of hunger set in, and what have I got for vegetables? Peas (hmmm), chips and brussels sprouts. Yecch. Brussels sprouts, the only vegetable in the known universe to have monosodium glutamate built in. It is almost possible, with supreme concentration, to eat a mound of brussels sprouts without noticing the appalling taste and greasy texture, but it is definitively impossible to avoid regurgitating the said taste at intervals of ten minutes for the rest of the evening. I have tried stewing them long, stewing them short, and even on one occasion barbecuing them (an accident, actually), but no matter what I do with a brussels sprout I cannot help wondering about the sanity of a nation which can market them in economic quantities.

And I confidently expect the part of the garden which isn't lawn to be turned over wholesale to the bloody things next year ...

ROYAL SEX AIDE IN NIG-NOG MERCY DASH

There are two questions that arise from last week's Constitutional Crisis. The first, of course, is why on earth we have such a dreadful press and whether we can lay claim to having any sort of educational system at all when a supposed 'quality' newspaper like the Sunday Times can concoct such a wilful mess of misrepresented gibberish and then splash it over the front page as an 'exclusive'. Well, that's two questions already, isn't it, mush, but I'm counting them as one. After all, there would be little danger in having a lobotomised press if people paid it no attention at all; but, sadly, people do tend to believe what they read in newspapers and even to adjust their view of the outside world to place what a newspaper thinks important over what a newspaper disregards entirely. Of course, this is an oversimplified view. Actually, what happens is that a newspaper shapes itself to fit popular prejudice and, ah, 'taste', and only then begins to manipulate its data to create Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt amongst its readers and thereby sell copies. One could claim that Joe Gormless would take exactly the same view as the average newspaper columnist if presented with the same putative facts. Indeed, I would so argue, so one is quite right. However, this begs a question (question, please, maestro): do we expect newspapers to do a little basic thinking on our behalf, or do we expect them to spout questionable 'common sense' at us? The answer is, from an anticipatory view, that we expect the latter. But in the sense of 'expect' that refers to exhortation, I would have thought that any responsible person would be worried when the press fails to do the former. It's much like Burke's theory of representative government. Writing on behalf of the educated classes, Burke pointed out that the ideal form of government would consist of everyone taking an interest in everything, reaching a conclusion in each case, and voting for some measure to be taken. This being impractical outside anarcho-syndicalist communes, which young Edmund wouldn't have understood anyway, we have representative government, which is to say not a government in which a representative is delegated to perform the will of his constituents and nothing but that will, but one in which the electorate chooses individuals which it trusts to make vital decisions on their own bat. If you disagree with your MP, as I am bound to do with Jill Knight on almost everything, you cannot complain that she should be doing what you want, because that isn't what she's there for. She is, in fact, there to do what is best for you. If you don't like the preponderance of her decisions you can vote her out next time, or in my case move down the road a few hundred yards and go through the whole miserable experience again with some right-wing Labour scumbag.

Burke's theory applies also to newspapers, as any follower of Carlyle and the 'Fourth Estate' would realise. In kind, they are much the same as a government. They have political influence both up and down the ladder of electoral process. They have roughly the same access to information pertaining to any political question; in theory, they are composed of roughly the same degree of intelligent and articulate people who can make points and reach a consensus in the same way as can a parliament. 'Course, it never works like that ... but then, parliament is not exactly a model reflection of Burke's theories, and on the whole we can put up with it because it is based on the general thrust of those theories...

In other words, to stagger back to my original question, we should indeed expect newspapers to act in a responsible and intelligent, and preferably in an educating, manner, and when as is the present case we find them operating in the contrary manner, we should scream blue murder. We should, in short, become a nation of Outraged of Tunbridge Wells. Much good it would do us, of course, but all I'm saying is that anyone pooh-poohing the importance of newspapers and the worrying implications of their degeneracy should go and wash his head out with nitric acid.

However, this is not what we were going to talk about here ... and so we come on to my second question, which is why this article is titled as it is. What exactly is wrong with a monarchy anyway?

The general thrust of every paper to comment on this 'Constitutional Crisis' has been

that the queen, by indulging in actual politics, is endangering her throne and the love and esteem in which all her subjects hold her. Consequently, the argument runs, she should shut up and get on with the business of breeding corgis. This is why we have a constitutional crisis (or in fact do not have, since the whole basic assumption that she was about to run Thatcher through with a toasting stick has been demolished). Of course, the argument is utter tosh. Constitutionally, it is a thick-headed piece of misinterpretation.

Constitutionally, in fact, we are still living in the age of the Glorious Revolution. The Glorious Revolution, so called because orange is such a pretty colour and for no other reason, gave us a bundle of paper guarantees of our constitution such as the Bill of Rights, the Triennial/Septennial/Quinquennial Act governing the duration of parliaments, and the lovely and enlightened Act of Succession which will no doubt soon be repealed so that Prince Harry can marry Grace Kelly's grand-daughter with the Pope officiating and thus double our GNP for the year. To this you can add late accretions such as the various Acts of Union which set down a unified monetary system and ironed out certain administrative difficulties in ruling the newly united kingdoms; the Act that created the Civil List and left the crown's estates to be managed by parliament; and one or two johnny-come-latelies such as Lloyd-George's Peerage Bills to restrict the influence of the Upper House. All these are fairly trivial in limiting the power of the crown; indeed, if one wanted to be Hobbesian about it, one could claim that what the crown has once granted, the crown is quite capable of taking away. Of course, in practice it isn't quite like that, but the essential point remains that all this rot we talk about the British Constitution is based on customary usage, established institutions and sentiment, for the most part, and very little on a paper basis, giving restitution in law.

And why is this important, you may ask? Quite simply, because if the queen should want to do something not specifically forbidden her by the written constitution, she can damn well do it and no P's and Q's about it. Specifically, the royal prerogative so far as I am aware still embraces full control of the Royal Household, the creation of unlimited new peerages, the command of the armed forces and, of course, an arbitrary freedom on choosing an Administration. At one extreme, the queen is entitled to call out the army for a military coup if, say, she thinks unilateralism is a dangerous nonsense. (Not very likely, I agree.) In between the extremes, she can tell Mrs Thatcher to go and play with her voodoo dolls somewhere else and try to form a new administration. And before you start crying that this is a demented throwback to a barbaric age of authoritarianism, consider just how 'representative' a method we currently have of choosing governments. Nobody elected Mrs Thatcher; they merely elected her party. Even less so did anyone choose the present cabinet, for all the good it might do with their current state of wimpy inaction: Mrs Thatcher not merely chose them personally (with some regard to the effects on the party of eschewing the wets altogether), but is now in charge of a cabinet almost entirely different to the one she had when the voters gave her a 'vote of confidence'. We do not, in fact, in fact, have a system allowing us to elect 'governments' at all; the most we can do is to veto them five years after the event.

Now consider the last example of monarchical government in an active sense, namely the early reign of George III, before he went off and lived his life talking to trees. Here, we are looking at a period of political crisis in which cabinets changed wholesale every two or three years, dependent upon international events, changing moods in the Commons, and the need to boost the economy at various points (notably during wars). Now, we may not want a political crisis. As distinct from a constitutional one, however, this is precisely what we have got at the moment, and it's no good sticking our heads in the sand pretending that it is not the fault of the system. It is. There is at present almost no recourse to changing the complexion of the government, however wacky and dangerous its policies may be. Similarly the crises of the period 1760-1787 would have been crises with or without the king's rather inept interventions; but the thing to note here is that, despite an almost congenital lack of ability to get the administration right, George III was nevertheless forced by the realities of the political system under which he operated to select cabinets which operated on a proper consensus basis (not this current farrago of "I do what I want and you agree with it!")

and which, on the whole, put the right parliamentary talent in charge of solving the right problems. Effectively, parliament acted as mediator between the political nation and the executive. If Mrs Thatcher had been Prime Minister in the 1760s, we wouldn't have a commonwealth because we wouldn't have the legacy of an Indian empire; we wouldn't have industry to destroy because the cotton mills would never have got off the ground; and we wouldn't have an EEC because France would now rule the whole of Europe. It is a measure of the unreality of most current conservative thinking that all these would be regarded as successes ...

Coming back to newspapers for a moment (and yes, it is relevant), have you noticed the full extent of the Sun's insidious influence on Fleet Street, or, as I suppose we shall now have to call it, the East India Docks? Even the Telegraph now has a Page Three. No, honestly. Of course, the print quality is so abysmal that, in my copy dated July 29th, Smamfa Fox looks like Joan Ruddock (a considerable step up in my humble libido's opinion). However, of the seven main stories, the following are sex-related: "See-through blouse lure at Dr Jaffe's"; "Manager 'squeezed' my breast"; "Family doctor 'fondled his lover's daughter'"; "Sex raticn wife loses cash appeal". Of the other three, two are sensationalist - "Axe killer woman to be retried"; "Woman killed by her grandson's friend" - and one, "Phone tap on CND", is an excuse for the rather fetching picture of Joanie. All the rest of the paper is as boring as usual, if not descending into hysterical closet fascism, but page three, now that's another matter: there is now a tradition to be kept up.

However, we are not concerned with free advertising for Dr Jaffe. No, I bring this up because of the national press's obsession with sex and the royal family. Novel? Recent? Not a bit of it. The king's sexual proclivities have been a major topic of informed discussion for centuries. The interesting thing about this is, many, if not most, of the crises which have led to the gradual decrease in the monarch's power have been sexual in nature. You might think that politicians would have based their calls for reform on something a little more substantial, such as national bankruptcy, say, or imminent apocalypse, but no: when George III's ministers tried to get rid of the reformer John Wilkes, he hit back with scurrilous press notices advertising a supposed liaison between George's mother and his chief minister. When parliament passed the Regency Act during the napoleonic wars, one of their main worries was to curb the power of the future George IV, who couldn't be trusted on account of his hanky-panky with Mrs Fitzherbert (aka Susannah York, tellie-pickers). Nobody thought much of Edward VII because he spent as much time as possible boffing actresses. Edward VIII made a hash of the monarchy's reputation by running off with an American commoner, and ... well ...

We may, by now, have legitimised royal sexual behaviour. Not only do the hoi polloi accept it nowadays, they positively wallow in it. I strongly suspect that any Windsor would be elected by a landslide if they were able to stand for parliament, and part of this is because, despite being rather dull people on the whole, they catch the popular imagination by their sexual exploits. I bring this up merely as an example of popularity, because they have quite enough power at their disposal without resorting to one of the few violations of the constitution they are capable of. The fact is, most of the transfer of power between what is still in theory the executive of this country - the monarch - and the legislative body - Westminster - has been nem. con. and the result of sexual scandal. Being on a purely personal basis, it has never been ratified by statute. If a future monarch should wish to regain some of the lost ground, I can see very little except a massive popular turnaround standing in his way.

So, why not the monarchy? On the whole they're good folk, passably well educated, secure enough in their own position not to structure manifestos according to the need to be re-elected next time. They are sympathetic to some of the more moderate worries of the British, such as child poverty, property developers, and conservation. They even have a vested interest in international affairs, which is one of the major weaknesses of present British governments. They could start by overhauling the judiciary, which is constitutionally their department, and by actually influencing Royal Commissions, which might thereby produce results instead of crappy documentation.

And if all else fails, they can always return to acting as the nation's panda bears, eliciting an obsessive instinct in their breeding habits.

HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING

and smoke
myself to
death...

Maybe it's the influence of the Commonwealth Games, which is the first sight of rowing I have had in a while, but I don't think I am prepared any longer to tolerate this smoking lark. When every breath you take knocks another tenth of a second off my time for the hundred metres, which has always been somewhere in triple figures anyway (add that in a car - my god, you don't think I'd run, do you?), it is time to call a halt. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. While I seem to be blessed with a high tolerance for alcoholism - not matched by anyone else watching me going alcoholic, it is true - and can switch between a truly vile level of consumption and nothing for weeks, I have this problem with cigarettes. Basically, I am an oral person. (Yes, thank you, and the same to you.) If I have nothing else to do, I shall stick one in my mouth and light up. I don't enjoy it, in fact it makes me feel slightly sick, but there it is and there goes another cc of my lungs. While I rowed, smoking was physiologically impossible, in that any form of nicotine consumption after an hour's trogging up and down a river resulted in the swift loss of a breakfast. Now that I'm not rowing, I have to find some way of giving it up.

But how?

Well, there are several options, if you look at it logically. The first is to watch every health programme going on TV. This is not a good idea. Quite apart from the theoretical possibility of tuning in while the good doctors are discussing an entirely new and fatal disease that you would otherwise not have known you had, there is the practical problem that every doctor on TV appears to want to compensate for his obvious intellectual inferiority by pretending you are an idiot. Remember back when you were at University (or not, as the case may be) and all the medical students divided their time between massive alcohol consumption and jumping into bed with the ugliest human specimen they could find? Well, by the time they have 'matured' they don't seem to have improved much. There is a reason why Conan Doyle made Holmes' bumbling side-kick a medical man, and that reason is simply that doctors are cretins - as you can see from TV. One presumes that the Beeb digs up the most convincing medicos they can find, and yet, what do we get? Miriam bloody Stoppard, Jonathan 'lives in a world of his own' Miller and Graham Gagen, a man who used to write a comedy programme for kiddies and has since regressed badly, that's who. If these are the creme de la creme, it is a wonder that out there on the golf links the average doctor can think straight enough to swing a club without amputating his leg in the process. I mean, have you ever seen such a disgrace as a programme for grown human beings which explains the human body by giving you an enormous mock-up of something like the teeth and clambering around inside it whilst making facile comments? (Bit like sex, really, as Ernest Hemingway would probably put it.)

And so I find that a medical warning - ... that smoking can have dire consequences for my ability to perform simple tasks like typing without wheezing is almost entirely useless. I can accept this intellectually, but making that giant leap to real life (always a problem for me) is a bit more difficult. This is clearly not the solution. No, what I need is a strategy, a cunning ploy. Let's take this logically.

First, there is the extreme option of detoxification. Short of a whole body pump, this means, practically, entering a clinic - something I haven't done since I was minus three months old. There are interesting apparent results coming from clinics, if you read the tabloids ... Loy George, Betty Ford, and so on. The most interesting thing to me is that the most expensive and socially exclusive ones are said to work best. Now, this could mean several things. It could mean, according to Conspiracy Theory, that the rich and powerful keep the methods that work to themselves, and foß us proles off with garbage. I don't hold with this personally, since as a graduate of Oxbridge I am clearly on the inside of the conspiracy and would have heard about it if it existed. Still, 50% higher cure rates is high enough to warrant some form of explanation ... Personally I suspect that the very simple reason is the difference in clientele. Obviously you would

have to use a control group of, say, South Bronx junkies being treated in the palatial mansion and rolling countryside of the average posh rehab centre, but my guess is that they would be so wretchedly alienated by the experience that they would be on a double dosage as soon as they made it back to their cockroach-infested slums. No, the reason that Betty Ford type centres work is that the people who can afford them have so much to gain from rehabilitation back into the cushy life they've just left that it is, in fact, a wonder that the success rate isn't a hundred per cent.

So, having comprehensively eliminated all medical and therapy-based methods of declaring peace on your lungs, let's look at the possible alternatives.

The first is shame. After a while, a family smoker will get pretty tired of seeing his mother wandering around wringing her hands and moaning "To think that a son of mine should have yellow-stained knuckles" as though she's Jewish. Unfortunately, shame has a tendency to cause you to scuttle off to a bolt-hole where you can soften the anguish by another ciggie or ten. This is clearly a non-starter.

The second is to obtain employment in a job which occupies the mind constructively for enough of the day that the thought of smoking never has time to take the mind over. Unfortunately, such jobs have been abolished as part of government policy.

At the other extreme, then, is poverty, which naturally follows on from this abolition. Initially, this seems quite promising. True, some of the poverty centres of the world, such as the South American slums, are burgeoning markets for tobacco companies wishing to dump their most lethal products, and it seems that even black migrant labour in South Africa is better able to afford a packet of twenty than someone on Britain's wonderful welfare system. However, by the simple expedient of visiting Cambridge, or Manorcon, or anywhere where alcohol is consumed, it is possible to set yourself up with a whole week in which you have absolutely no money to spend on anything. I tried this, nobly. I left myself with just enough money to get a bus to the next signing-on session ... and found the remnants of a packet of cigarettes on the bus, downstairs, in the non-smoking section. Selah. Then I got home and my father gave me a fiver because "You'll be needing something to keep you going to the next dole cheque, won't you?" Mrs Thatcher is right. You can't expect the state to support you, but there's always the family to fall back on. Even if you don't want to.

Then there's experimentation. I can't smoke cigars, owing to a certain shortage of funds, but I can always resort to the pipe, or to snuff, or even to chewing tobacco. Sadly, the pipe no longer holds the grip on me it once did - indeed, it makes me feel even more wretched than cigarettes do - and I need a complicated operation with a razor blade (on the snuff-box, dummy - it has rusted shut) to get at the snuff. This remains a possibility, although it doesn't really tackle the problem of all those gaping hours with nothing better to do with my hands that doesn't use up all the paper towelling in the house. I have not yet descended to the depths of Dr Snoggin's Estimable Tobacco Teabag Suppositories, so that leaves chewing tobacco. Now, here we are really on to something. Chewing tobacco feels horrible before you have even masticated it; leaves an oily black residue between the gums which has to be spat periodically out into a convenient receptacle; and tends to dribble down the back of my throat and make me hiccough violently. If there is any way of weaning myself off the curse of the weed by resorting to particularly vile methods of ingesting nicotine, this must be it. Alas, it appears not to be. You can get used to anything in time, in pursuance of addiction.

I have yet to hear anyone claim that you can get AIDS off a Silk Cut, so that removes the possible solution of panic hysteria.

So what am I left with? I have tried redefining a cigarette, not as a consumer product, but as a representative evil of a capitalist, consumer society, but this merely leaves me smirking like a bloated plutocrat every time I light up. I have tried compulsive TV viewing as an alternative to drugging myself senseless with a more dangerous narcotic, but they keep throwing Humphrey Bogart films at me and we all know how much he smoked. What I clearly need is the love of a good woman.

Actually, even a motheaten second-hand one would do.

SNAIL BAG

Thing 47 Page 9

First, a tale of two Americans:

Fred Davis Baltimore Thankyou for the two sample copied of Thing on the Mat. However, I've decided not to trade zines. I found about half the material in the zine incomprehensible, not being aware of the "inside" jokes of the British Postal Hobby, or some of your customs. Anything to do with English pubs remains a mystery to Americans, since we have no such institution here. However, I realise that you have put a lot of hard work into your zine. Here's a copy of the latest Bushwacker, with its report on the '86 Dipcon, as compensation for your sending me your copies.

I expect to be in Britain in September, and hope to see some of your hobbyists at a meet in London, if I can find out dates and location of same.

One shudders to think what Fred would make of Vienna, a zine composed entirely of in-jokes. I didn't even know I went in for them, myself. The comment on pubs is equally interesting, since it implies that Americans assume we are as insular and ignorant as they are. Of course I know there's no such thing as an American pub; why, some of the worst times of my life have been spent in a bar (I still remember being asked if I wanted to make up a foursome, and they weren't talking about bridge, either). Come to think of it, some of the other worst times of my life have been spent in a pub, so perhaps they aren't that different after all. As for DipCon, anyone out there who remembers Malc Smith may care to note that according to this copy of Bushwacker in front of me (and assuming it's not some form of fiendish in-joke), the Diplomacy tournament in #986 appears to have been won by him. I find this difficult to believe. At British cons he has difficulty staying upright, let alone speaking coherently and ordering sensibly.

Still, anyone interested in variants should contact Fred for a sample issue: ask me, and I'll give you the address. Bushwacker is the premier variant zine and has been for more years than most Brits have been in the hobby. Other than that, to be honest, it's not terrifically thrilling, but then you could say that about 90% of the zines in the British hobby, so who cares? I've still got Don del Grande, who finds Thing and Britain equally incomprehensible but has learnt to live with it by now on the grounds that every other British zine he subscribes to has folded immediately ...

Don del Grande California Just thought I'd let you know that the two major events reported in newspapers and magazines about the wedding are (a) Prince William and (b) "Andrew Albert Christian Christian Edward." Well, there were minor mentions of the dress - Diana's that is. There was even one TV picture of Neil Kinnock - what was he doing at the wedding? (Perhaps the Queen is getting ready "just in case" of a new government?)

Ah ... no, Don. Unlike you, we don't junk the political cronies of the losing party immediately the premier gets his or her hands on the pork barrel. It would have been a major breach of protocol for the Queen not to have invited Kinnock, however boring she may find the dreadful little twerp.

Funny - I always thought Sri Lanka and India had the honours of worst test-playing teams. (Speaking of which ... I haven't been getting the BBC Sports Report lately. What did Botham do to rate the cover of Punch?)

Eek! How does one go about explaining the major sports event of the summer? If you don't know by now, Don, it's going to be rather hard to explain the whole sordid business, but to give a brief hint: what drug is the least likely to assist an athlete to improve hand-eye co-ordination and stamina? Not cannabis, eh? Now guess how many England selectors think it is.

Paul Brine Wirral I suspect your 'decision criteria' for winning the ashes is too strict. To win the Ashes (if you aint got 'em) I'm sure you only have to win more

tests than the holders. So a 1-0 series win is enough to regain the Ashes. Otherwise the holders get to keep them.

OK, OK, I suppose I had better pass this information on to Don in case he's got the wrong end of the stick from what I said last time (which was meant to be precisely this, but my typing fingers suffered a short circuit). Goodness me, it's difficult explaining the obvious to an American.

Needless to say, I didn't send Fred a copy of the last Thing, with the rules for 'International Terrorism' ... In reference to the epitaph of which:

Don del Grande The only thing you probably love about America is that, since I live here, I have to mail my diatribe to you every month or so instead of you having to listen to me at closer intervals. (And speaking of mailing things, now that Greatest Hits is supposed to be folding, can you recommend any active British 'zines (or anything in Europe that is in English) to spend cold hard cash on, keeping in mind that the CURSE is likely to strike again?) (Hopefully this only applies to Diplomacy - I just started a trade for Rostherne Games Review

'Listening' to you at closer intervals? You don't think I'd live in ... ecch ... California, do you? Or are you referring to the telephone, in which case you might care to bear in mind the prohibitive rates cross-continent under your monopolistic non-ET-type system? And, of course, the American mails are not significantly quicker than International pidgeon post.

Paul Brine Recommend another zine - just for comparison, I want to know if the same 'pretentious claptrap' (an accusation once flung at me) and unadulterated filth is peculiar to Thing or whether it is the norm. If two would give a clearer picture - recommend three. As Mark Smith says, I may as well make the postie work for his living.

I see: it's embarrass Doubleday by making him alienate substantial portions of his trades time again, is it? Both of you would do well to subscribe to Geoff Challenger's 'Home of the Brave' (117 Shrubbery Rd, South Darenth, Kent DA7) which comes at \$50p a whack - photocopied and violently expensive, you see - and is, of course, going to win this year's zine poll, or I'm going to want to know .. the reason why. I suspect Sharp doesn't want me to publicise Dolchsöss, but it is also a damn' fine Diplomacy zine. Don would do well to try William Whyte's Now Eat the Rabbit, which is in the fine Thing tradition of being largely incomprehensible to Americans and which is unlikely to submit to the CURSE. (10, Salamanca, Roebuck Rd, Dublin 17, Eire.) And of course Prisoners of War (Doug Rowling/Wol Nichol, 223 Kinneil Avenue, Cardonald, Glasgow G52 3RU) is always worth mentioning, if only because I seem to be lacking the most recent copy, and where is it, scumbags, unless number 10 was the last one prior to folding?

That's a nice uncontroversial bunch. Now let's hear the Coventry mob whine.

Don del Grande After reading about the Hartland Trefoil rules for 1830, I did notice a couple of things that might be different from the Avalon Hill version. First, the AH rules do not expressly forbid looking at 'other corporations' treasuries, but the players are advised to stack the corporation money and not divulge it (although trains and tokens are open information). Second, corporations had better be able to afford trains when the smaller ones are removed, since the game ends immediately if any corporation has no train and cannot afford one. Also remember that the area in 1830 is extremely capitalist - they aren't known as "robber barons" for nothing - so there wouldn't be much call for spending good money to build track for other people. (By the way, I didn't see any mention of the PBM rules ((in Don's Life of Monty)). Were they that bad?)

No, merely unintelligible to a casual observer who hadn't even played the game at that stage. Anyone running a postal game of 1830 has got to be out of his head, anyway, haven't they? The conditionality of the orders must be mind-blowing.

By the way, have you ever played 1829, Don? The whole point of building track for other companies is to asset-strip the less profitable in the interests of the more profitable - something Gould, Harriman and Morgan would have understood quite well, I think. (Although they would have had it changed to 'profitable'. Damn my fingers.)

I very much doubt that there is anything in the Hartland rules about forbidding companies to disclose their capital - I am at this stage fairly sure that this is an invention of the scheming, conniving Welsh swine who owns the set I played with. I suppose this could also apply to the mandatory train rule you quote, but I doubt it, because Robin was quite adamant on the subject. We have a rule that closes the game on the first bankruptcy of a player, which seems more in keeping with the subject. Needless to say, such a bankruptcy will only occur (in the absence of a Dalek Zyczyzkyzki) after a player has been forced to fork out for one or more super-trains; so it will occur at the same point in the game. However, the practical results are rather different, because we have an interesting rule which says that money raised by the liquidator (as it were) to pay off a bankruptcy does not include the sale of shares in the bankrupting company, so that it is possible (in theory) to go bankrupt and win the game on the strength of your shares in a dominant but trainless company. I have not analysed the game closely enough to see whether this might occur in practice. It would certainly take a degree of ineptitude from the other players and a set of fortuitous circumstances; but it would be a rather interesting result ...

Andy Bell I found your comments on 1829 and 1830 very interesting - particularly your comments on predictability. It set me thinking about why Swansea Local *1 you find the game so predictable - is it due to playing with the same people, or due to deep analysis of the game? (Nope.)

I cannot understand why anyone would want to spend hours analysing the game - admittedly, there probably is a well defined 'best' strategy for playing the game, but would the introduction of one or two slightly less experienced players into a session where the other players are 'experts' screw up any 'master plans', or merely help the experts to gain more money than usual? Also, though winning a game is enjoyable, I play games for enjoyment, and I'd rather spend time playing than analysing. Although I've picked up some useful tactics, I'm nowhere near to developing a best overall strategy.

Playing the same game with the same people can lead to stagnation and predictability, which will obviously be accelerated by analysis. Nearly all my games of 1829 have been played with the same people (at University), and although certain patterns develop (like the mad dash to buy Midlands shares), there is still enough variety to make the game interesting. However, I am looking forward to my first postal game (in Trog), since I've never played against at least two of my opponents (you and Richard Clyne), and this may expose me to some new ideas.

It may expose me to universal Hobby ridicule, as well (so what's new?):

Iain Bowen 1830 - I first played this at Manorcon (yes, I know it's not what Swansea Local *2 you're supposed to do at cons, but dammit I like playing games).
 ('Salright, they can't arrest you for that yet, Iain.) I liked it; it had a better share-buying system, a far better track-building system and a generally better flow. I do think you are exaggerating the swiftness of train removal: I find that frequently in 1829 a similar rush through the 4 & 5 trains occurs. I think I'll enjoy playing 1830 again, but I would like to play 1829 using the 1830 rules

Don't tempt me - I am just certifiably insane enough to contemplate opening a list and risk ruining what has become a beautiful relationship with those hardy souls who play in Thing.

I find your attack on the 1829 Northern Board surprising; it is playable although the '3T' train is really needed. The game is not dominated by the first three companies, as the NER is bloody useless in a slow game.

I know, I ran it. As they say, two out of three ain't bad - in this case it's

bloody atrocious. Since I only played one game on the northern board, as I admitted, and since I didn't enjoy it enough to try another one, I shall desist from saying any more than that you are welcome to a game that requires 'fixes' like the splashy trains and tiles to make it workable. The major skill in playing 1829 (as opposed to sharebuying in it) is the blocking of other companies' ambitions. Obviously, the profitability of shares is contingent upon this measure. Hence one requires a game which is finely balanced, with all companies being able to secure a slice of the action in favourable conditions and yet not being sure of sufficient revenue if other companies start mixing it. So far as I can see, the northern board is so drivellingly badly balanced that one does not even begin to approach this magical point without tinkering with the basic set, which is likely to overbalance it in an opposite direction. Additionally, since the shape of the game is derived, thanks to the track-laying system, from the shape of the board, there is likely to be little one can do with a long, thin board with sparse clumps of profitability situated near to certain lucky companies. I could be wrong, but I'm not about to waste good sleeping time finding out.

Now, there's an attack on the game for you if you want. Actually, my original comments were more in the nature of a throwaway reference.

Iain Having said that, playing the game becomes increasingly futile, as the same thing happens every time. Except the last time we played, where I fucked the game up by refusing to buy shares; I just bought the steam packet lines (very slowly). This totally stopped the robotic style of play that I find occurs.

Well, there we are, then. Did I hear you use the word 'fuck'?

Andy I'm sure that someone's already developed a 'best' strategy for 1830, but I'm happy to learn as I play, and leave the 'experts' to their own devices.

Please put me down on the waiting list for 'International Terrorism'.

(Knickers.) I say, did I hear someone use the term 'fuck'? Do I really want a bunch of juvenile writers who get a kick out of using naughty words applying for apotheosis in my lettercolumn?

Jon Mundy - Impossible Another thing about the Germans ("I mentioned the war once to edit coherently but I think I've got away with it") is that they mollycoddle their children due to the fucking high standard of living.

I reckon the children very often get their own way, that's why they're so spoilt. And another bloody thing, they have alcohol free beer for kiddies - I mean, what a fucking disgusting concept. It's worse than that sterile one-cal - sugar free - diet coke or whatever and appalling dress sense. I've just been walking about Windsor and this appalling Boris ((pen pal)) was wearing the most loathesome gaudy yellow and blue chequered trousers. They seem to be in fashion in Germany, but walking about Windsor with him was terrible.

And lots more naughty words. I know I use an over-preponderance of expletives, but I do at least try to restrict them to points where they may have some sort of effect. Going overboard on four-letter words is like going down on a fish because you like the taste of caviare - initially an impressive concept, but pretty goddamn stupid when you stop to think about it.

This has been brought to you by the Committee for Natural Fucks, who would also like to draw your attention to the strange attitude of the TV censors. They have now evolved to a point where they can view a man and a woman going at it hammer and tongs in the buff with equanimity, and even maybe a woman and a woman ... but give them a pair of fully clothed individuals up against a wall, as in Quadrophenia, and there's the most nakedly obvious display of editing - so bad as to make one assume that the protagonists have developed a new method of contraception called total time-slip. We live in strange times, indeed. And now back to Jon's letter, which is useable if you ignore all the more sensationalist vocabulary.

Jon I never realised MM&M was that old (this is not an insult, it's just that I assume you are probably around ten - well, maybe it's wider - years older than me - which is fifteen and quite a lot. (*Wrong again, smoochums.*) Actually I also used to read MM&M in Pippin comic (along with such classics as 'The Herbs', 'Woodentops', 'Hector's House' and 'The Clangers'. Maybe 'Bagpuss' - it's all a bit vague - and 'Rupert'). Anyway I have a feeling MM&M disappeared when Pippin merged with Playland and became Pippin in Playland.

Eat your heart out, Dolton: discussion of real comics in a real mimeo zine. In fact, with the possible exception of TV21, I don't recall ever reading a comic that featured actual TV characters: it's a bit of a waste of the medium. The whole point of The Herbs is that they were cute and cuddly, and quite funny, on screen and mobile. In a comic they presumably lost what appeal they had altogether.

I I find that one of the advantages of listening to such melodic bands as Motörhead and Metallica is that with everything turned up full you haven't got a chance in hell of hearing FA else that's going on.

Ah ... yes. Indeed. After all, who wants to be educated?

Beefheart sounds good - maybe I'll buy some. I say that about everything.

(PMD)But I didn't actually say anything about the Captain. Read the latest NME and think again - I don't wish to be responsible for blowing your mind.

I'm afraid I can't comment on Shostakovich, since we haven't got that far in music yet. What is he, Romantic or 20th Century? (*Yes, yes.*) Anyway, we're only on classical. I don't even think I've heard anything by him - unless he was the one who wrote 'The Battle of Stalingrad' (or something similar, I can't say I really remember the title even though I know I've heard it).

Well, that makes it nice and easy for me, doesn't it? Either I say "no", and get howls of derision from everyone who knows you're referring to the first movement of his seventh symphony, which you probably are, or else I say yes and find out that you're actually interested in Beethoven's 1812 Overture. To be honest, there isn't that much difference in the quality of the music in either piece, so I'll just say "maybe". Yup, that should cover it.

Well - I went to Oxford today with the Germans, ie skipping school. Not too bad, I guess. Spent most of the time with a crazy mate of mine in electrical shops playing on electric keyboards. I'm afraid my repertoire has deteriorated since I gave up practising the piano. It basically consists of (all badly played and bits of them are slightly forgotten): Stairway to Heaven, Black Dog, A couple of Duets, Bach's Tocatta and Fugue in D (or is it A - it could even be something famous - well you know - it's the one at the beginning of the 12" of Sputnik's "21st Century Boy" and Skye did it) (*quite*), Haydn's Surprise Symphony, the bass chords of the Pink Panther theme, one of the movements of Beethoven's 1st symphony (the one used for 'Ludwig's' theme music, or was that before your time). But we managed to amuse ourselves, especially as this keyboard had really dudey syn-drums. Also bought five independent singles.

And then they wonder why we hate tourists in Oxbridge.

Sigh.

Steve Howe I listened to a Bartok String Quartet once. It was awful. I realise I Sarfend may be missing the point somewhat, in knowing bugger all about key signatures or structures and all that technical stuff, but am I being totally unreasonable in expecting to listen to music and hear a tune? I defy anyone to sit through a Bartok recital and come out humming the themes. Actually I think Bartok is symptomatic of what is happening to art as a whole - it is getting so insular (cliquish?) that it becomes inaccessible to the ordinary schmuck-in-the-street like me.