

THE THING FROM AMERICA #9

From: Pete Doubleday

YOUR CREDIT
[7]

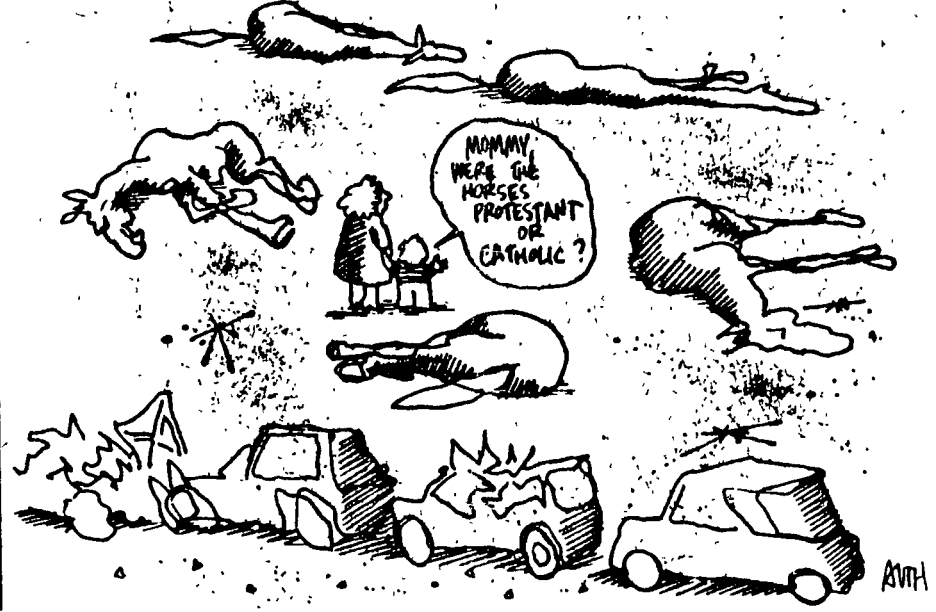
DEADLINE
SEPTEMBER 24TH

etc, and normally

302 Lordswood Rd
Harborne,
Birmingham B17 8AN
UK

Currently (to 24/9)
1416 GREEN RUN
RESTON
VA 11090
USA.

ETHICAL OR MORAL ISSUES? TENSE, NERVOUS POLITICAL PROBLEMS?



TAKE THE PHILADELPHIA ENQUIRER
SOOTHES AWAY PAIN - FAST!

Productorial

Well, this is dashed inconvenient, what? Here you are, all sitting snugly at home in your cute little English brick houses, waiting for your prepaid Thing to drop through that old fashioned letter-box wotsit you have over there, and suddenly you find that I've fled the country. Yes, emigrated, my friends; emigrated to the land of opportunity, of fast bucks, fast cars and not a few racy young ladies, or as we say over here, broads ... actually, I've never yet heard an American say 'broad'. Anyw y, so here I am, one week after the deadline as usual, and even if I proposed to slog my guts out over this typewriter, I would stand no chance of getting this to you in anything like a reasonable time. I am, in short, abroad, and the airmail from the USA to England takes about ten days, by repute. Sorry, therefore, but this is going to be one king-sized late issue.

And if you're going to accuse me of irresponsibility, then I'd rather not listen. When I started Thing I had no inkling that this was going to happen; even last issue, the chances of my making it over here looked so remote that I didn't want to burden you with my fears. No pomes break is going to tie my lifestyle down to his convenience (or, as we say over here, bathroom) when a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity comes up. There are more important things in life than the constancy and general lack of mobility of a harden, useful as that is to the hobby. Once again, then, you have every right to feel aggrieved, but don't expect me to lose any sleep over it. This extraordinary in us (adjective used correctly there, Northcott please note) is going to cost me a sight more than it will you, since the airmail alone will be at least 30c; the bad news is that, tardy as it is, issue nine will still set you back an iniquitous 25p. Look here, I'm producing this in considerable adversity, my friend, and no snivelling, penny-pinching whiner can persuade me to distribute it free.

Am, me; paranoid tautologies, that's all I seem capable of comin' out with nowadays: where's the cheery outlook on life that those who know me well cherish so dearly? Down the tubes with the rest of the crap, I should hope. Let us make a fresh approach to this problem. Let us, in fact, demonstrate that this is the same old Thing, complete with brainless disregard for layout and similar finer things of life, by blowhine straight on with the Ha and the token cartoon. Why use photocopy/litho if you can't break up the drivel with an inadequate picture, eh? They say that a picture's worth a thousand words, but then I never met a professional illustrator who wouldn't claim otherwise.

PT155B Thing Game Two Round 6 (see also note o/p)

BALLS (Richard Walkerdine - purple)

6a) (H62) N65 b) (N65) Birknhd; (166) Bolton; (A59) Derby
c) (D3) London; (G60) #61 46 - 2(COBL) & 1 (PIS) = 45

HAJIFAX (Richard Morris - black)

50 - 11 (SAFE) - 1 (COBL) - 1 (PIS) = 37

6a) (H12) H11 F10 F9 E8 E7 b) (E7) D7 D4
c) (172) Preston

COBLARS (Ken Bain - blue)

53 - 3 (PIS) - 2 x 5 (SAFE) & 2 (BALLS) & 1 (HAT) = 57

6a) (C6) London; (H7) Oxford b) (L67) Liv'p'l Birknhd
c) (J10) #49

PITFOL (Alan Parr - orange)

47 - 1 (BALLS) & 3 (SAFE) & 3 (COBL) & 1 (VALI) = 53

6a) (H19) Notts; (Oxford) A44 B45 J44 #1 short: #1 short: #1
b) (C44) D45 #44 G44 c) (G44) H45; (J7) J6

SAFE (Craik Miles - green)

12 - 5 x 2 (COBL) - 3 (PIS) & 11 (HAJI) = 17

6a) (H10) H11; (F8) D7 D5 D4 b) (C4) London; (K65) K67
c) (Sheffield) N24

Runs for round seven

(builds up to 12)

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1) (64) London - Gloucester (53) | 4) (42) Stoke - Bristol (55) |
| 2) (12) Hull - Leeds (21) | 5) (31) Manchester - Nottingham (18) |
| 3) (23) Bradford - London (65) | 6) (45) Peterborough - Liverpool (35) |

Sopwith - the waiting list (cont.)

There is one more manoeuvre - the Immelman (I), which consists of remaining on the same hex and reversing your direction by 180° (looping the loop, halfway); but this is reserved for aces. Within a turn, move 1 can never be '0'; if move 2 is '0', then so must be move 3.

Sign - this is taking up more space than I'd intended, never mind. The object is to shoot down the opposition before they get you. You can expend up to three rounds of ammunition in one move, although the same limit applies to one whole turn - so you have the choice of blasting away for one move and remaining silent for the rest of the turn, or else spreading your ammunition over the whole turn. A round of ammunition is expended by firing in one of the following directions:

Right (B in diagram) Ahead (A in diagram) Left (C in diagram)
and there is a limit of one round per direction per move.

If a plane is in the straight-line path of one of your shots, then damage is scored against him (and towards your ace-ship ((scnh))) according to the following schedule:

Target on next hex	Successful pilot an ace:	5pts	not an ace:	4 pts
Target two hexes distant	" " " "	4pts	" " "	3 pts
" three " "	" " " "	3pts	" " "	2 pts
" four " "	" " " "	2pts	" " "	1 pt

... where the successful pilot, of course, is you.

Planes also suffer one point of damage when they fly into a cloud, and one more for each move they remain there. No plane can fire through, or into, a cloud.

I think that the above covers all the salient details. The important thing to note is that, each turn, you only know the positions of the other planes at the beginning of that turn - so the game has a reasonable element of guesswork and bluff.

Next to Diplomacy and Railway Rivals, Sopwith is probably the game most suited to postal play, and it's certainly the one fastest growing in popularity. Get to it!

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Since I have less than ten lines here, I guess the best thing to do with them is to plug the Lone warrior crowd (I could have plugged the MIT gamers' convention this weekend, but for the fact that it came to my attention only whilst I was buying the RR maps), who appear to be outdoing Flying Dodo in terms of organisational complexity. I have here a list of postal fantasy campaigns (I think it's fair to call them that), "one of (which) had over twenty players at the last count! "; and they also claim to run a growing number of commercial (war)games too. If you're not interested, don't subscribe to Lone Warrior @ £5.75 pa from Jeff Bayton, 63 Beckington rd, Guildford, Surrey GU2 6BT; but if the idea of a personal wargames club of membership 400 and more grabs you and you want to check on detail, write Tim Killelay, 32 Shaw Crescent, Tuby, Sutton on forest, York YO6 1JF.

Thing game six: 1829 SBR 1

First off, I have something of importance to tell you. You are not, in fact, permitted to sell shares in the first round. Yes, yes, I know I didn't tell you this before; I only found it in a section of Keith T's postal rules headed 'Rule Clarifications'. However, I chose to go ahead with modified orders, since the only selling of import would have been intended to finance the purchase of Midlands shares, which don't come on to the market.

Capital at start : £420 Max share holding : 14

Only Ian and Mike refused the private company offered, so Dave was the lucky recipient of the LNWR Directorship. Ian ducked again, and the LNWR shares ran to the next round, leaving Mike with the Director's share of the GWR. Richard now fell silent and the next three bought GWR shares; the round ended with Ian buying the penultimate GWR share. John Froment thus holds the token.

	Pvt.C	LNW	GW	Money
Dave	E: S & M	3D	1	£0
John	W: C & HP	2	1	£55
Ian	W: -	1	3	£50
John	F: C & W	2	1	£0
Mike	W: -	1	3D	£50
Richard	M: L & M	1	~D	£110

Orders next for GR1, SBR2, GR2 and SBR3, please. I expect Dave and Mike will hold on to their directorships, but do submit conditional orders for the LNWR and GWR if you think it worth it.

THE HOUSE RULES FOR DIPLOMACY - A reprint almost verbatim from issue 1

- 1) All rules in the 1971 (American) Rulebook apply, except where modified or superseded below.
- 2) Intentional deception of the GM is rewarded with expulsion. Likewise, the GM undertakes not to interfere with the players' affairs in any way.
- 3) (A clause in Birks' legalese) Registration in a game creates a contract between player and gamesmaster. The latter agrees to run the game to conclusion, as efficiently and as accurately as he can, and, if he can no longer continue to run the game, to see that the game is somehow continued to a natural conclusion. The former agrees to play in a game throughout its length, or until his elimination. Failure of one party to abide by this agreement shall result in the forfeiture of all rights. ((or, put another way: Let's all be jolly decent, chaps ...))
- 4) Should a player miss two sets of orders in a row, his units will be placed in anarchy for the rest of the game. Barring extravagantly exceptional circumstances, I shall only allow a player to re-enter the game in the following way: at any subsequent time, he may send me one first-class a/c for each other player still with units in the game, and I will notify the other players of his reinstatement, which will take place with effect as of, and including, the moves of the following deadline.
- 5) Games will be run to a two-season year, the Spring season including Spring retreats and the Autumn season including Autumn retreats and Winter builds/removals.
- 6) Retreats and Builds/removals must be included with the appropriate season's orders. They may be made conditional on the events of that season, although, obviously, not on the retreats (unless builds) or builds/removals of other players.
- 7) Where necessary, the GM will make removals for the player as follows: units not on a supply centre will be disbanded first, followed by those on a foreign supply centre, followed by those on a home supply centre. Where a choice exists, units not attacked that season shall be given preference in retention. Should a choice still face the GM, he will resolve it by lot. If a player does not submit orders for all contingencies he must be prepared to abide by the result: complaints will be ignored. Where necessary, the GM will disband units without valid retreat orders.
- 8) Moves arriving after second post on the day of the deadline will be accepted only in the following cases: a) the envelope has a first-class stamp and is postmarked three days prior to the deadline or earlier (always accepted), and b) the relevant game has not yet been adjudicated (accepted only at GM's discretion). It is the player's responsibility to get the moves in, and not that of the GM.
- 9) Telephoned orders are acceptable, where possible.
- 10) For the convenience of the GM, orders are requested on separate sheets of paper for each game. Failure to comply will not result in an LMR, although seven sets of orders for as many games on four square inches of toilet paper in erasible biro may well have this effect. The GM takes a tolerant attitude to scruffy orders, if only because
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Thing Game Seven Diplomacy Double Deadline Spring 1901

Just to recap, the list of players with super new up-to-the-minute, state of the art addresses is officially set out below.

- AUSTRALIA Pamela George: 16 King's Parade, High Road, London N17 6QL
ENGLAND Mike Woodhouse: 45 Hectory Lane, Sidcup, Kent DA14 4QR
FRANCE Ian Ferguson: 59 Westfield Rd, Kings Heath, Birmingham B14 7BY to 2/9/82
 then: (Home) 5, Cherrytree Drive, Wickham, W'castle/Tyne NE16 4HQ
 (Term) Cayle Hall, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leics LE11 3TU
- GERMANY Allan Macgregor: 4 Horne Terrace, Edinburgh, EH11 1JJ
ITALY Craig Miles: (Home) for rest of summer: c/o A E Joyce, Systems Studies Ltd,
 Still House, 29 East Street, Farnham, Surrey GU9 7SW
 (Term) Flat 150, Griffin Close, Bristol Rd Sth, Northfield, B'ham B31
- RUSSIA Peter McDonald, 45.3 Clarence Rd, Chesterfield, Derbyshire
LUXURY Jeremy Tullett, 4 Grove Court, The Grove, Dorchester, Dorset, DT1 1XJ

Game Seven (B), the course, will appear on page seven also, below this report. OK? Currently I have three companies lined up for the course - I'd welcome more.

tournament itself. Alan is inclined to criticize this approach, but I would say that it is a perfectly valid approach to the problem of creating a scoring schedule. Let us consider the tournament.

The ideal Diplomacy tournament would be conducted over a series of several games, perhaps as many as seven or eight for a field of fifty to a hundred competitors. Everybody could then play a reasonable range of countries, which is important because, it has to be admitted, not all players are equally capable at following an ideal strategy for each country; but even more importantly, the chances of anyone lucking out on a handful of games and therefore doing much better than he/she should is much reduced. It would also be conducted in total isolation from the outside world, and with each board in a round isolated from every other board.

In these conditions it would be absurd to have a system as simplistic as that used at MidCon. However, when all nine boards play in a confused mass, with jabbering, drinking, socialising and cross-referencing going on at all times, and with only two rounds to cover the entire tournament, it is perfectly reasonable to make some concessions to administrative convenience. Here we have nine poor buggers forced to run their Convention lives around the need to be at the boards to adjudicate every ten minutes, and I think it quite equitable that we players should make some concession in return. And consider further: even in the perfect system outlined above, there are still flaws. Diplomacy bears little resemblance to chess, and there is no way of controlling what your opponents are doing in a game where they decide to be awkward. The most telling example in last year's event was the frequency of E/F/G alliances: as the victim of one of these, I have just looked up the rating of my prime opponent in the alliance (David Redfern), and discovered that he was placed twelfth in both the current and the proposed 'STARS' system. Twelfth! And yet he could have done so much better had he listened to the advice that all the players outside the alliance were giving him, because he eventually lost out by allowing England to stab him. I rate several places below him under any system, but in his place I could have done a lot better - as the configuration of the game turned out, I wasn't given the chance, and he was. For being a rank moron, therefore, he is rewarded with a highly creditable placing. I use this merely as an example which I can document; no matter how tight the rules, there will always be the alliance that is impossible to crack, the opponent who is impossible to turn aside, the ... this is beginning to sound like an advert for American express, but you get the picture. There is, therefore, a case for a loose and informal system. In particular, there is no reason to suppose that the playing conditions of last year will be substantially improved; as it was, the tournament ran with commendable smoothness.

The reader who lacks coolth with surmise at this point that I have boxed myself into a corner, because I have just admitted that the last year's system was darn good. Not necessarily so; hang tight, baby.

I can think of at least one major objection to last year's system, even taken for the simple method that it is. The boards for the second round were arranged 'on merit' from the scores of the first round, ie the first board was composed of the 'top' seven players, the next (featuring me and Nortcott!) with the second seven, and so on. This is a carry-over from the swiss system at chess and bridge tourneys. However, the curious fact is that the top seven (and to a less severe extent the next, and so on) are hereby penalised: they don't get more points for doing well against presumably better opposition in the second round, while lower down a player can strike lucky by facing a collection of dodos and stooges not normally to be found collected in one place outside the ranks of the FBI or CIA. JK, so the lucky first seven have a more predictable set of opponents, and can be reasonably sure that none of them will suddenly loll his tongue out of his mouth, trail it along the floor, rip out his eyeballs and sign his soul over to the Ayatollah; oig deal. There's still the possibility of some nerk like Redfern falling through the cracks, and on top of that, you're being unreasonably handicapped.

I find it amazing that no-one seems to have noticed the illogicality of this yet.

And I come all this way in a length-controlled issue, and I haven't even dealt with my subject matter, the STARS system, yet. Take a deep breath. As far as I can see, the STARS rating has very little to recommend it, mathematically speaking. I leave the more abstruse and detailed criticisms to one with more statistical training than I, but it occurs to me that a man like Alan who tosses off a table featuring the total, mean, median and most/second highest supply center holdings for each country, as though the median means anything, in this context (let alone any of the other statistics), has probably got as far as 'J'-level statistics and imagines that there is not much more to know about the subject. (He's a damn good Diplomacy player, though). A glance at his

rationale would seem to confirm this. If you have a copy of his article, please refer to it now. At point 5(a) he claims

"Differences in average s.c. holdings for each country are likely to be affected by the strength of the players who are (randomly) selected to play that country. This effect ... will tend to be minimised by having a larger number of players for comparison"

while at point 3(b),

"By calculating the first day's results independently of what happens on day two it is possible to know who is winning and by how much they are ahead of you. This is likely to affect diplomatic relations on the second day because you are unlikely to enter a mutually (and equally) beneficial alliance with someone who had a better score than you."

Ah, well; possibly it's his English which is lousy on the second point rather than (or as well as) his logic. Note the use of brackets: the contents are an optional qualification to the sense. Not all, indeed very few, mutually beneficial alliances are also equally beneficial; even assuming that the player in question has mugged up on his opposition; and what's wrong with this anyway? It's just another variable to take into account.

As for point one, I disagree that a field of seventeen sets of information will be so much superior to two fields of nine and eight respectively, although I'm not in a position to consult statistical tables to back this up. More important is that a country will be played differently on day two for several reasons: a player may either be far more cautious in protecting his position, or tactically suicidal in an attempt to improve his tournament rating. Players on day two may feel sorry for Austria (or in Midon's case, Russia) on account of the performances in day one's games. Conflating the two sets of data for what little extra significance you derive is, I think, counter-productive.

Let us make out the sort of 'advanced' rating system that we might be happy with in a Diplomacy system of any kind. Clearly, it will bear some resemblance to that of Jon Palfrey, which regrettably seems to have died the death now that no-one with access to a computer seems to have sufficient time to take it over. Alan's idea that we should have a country bias is a worthy addition, so long as we keep the results of the two days separate for this purpose. More useful would be an 'opposition factor', as in the Palfrey system - perhaps one that is used to sift out the board order for the second day in a more relevant hierarchy than that resulting from the 'Swiss' method: board one contains players 1,9,10,21,30,43,49, say (with, therefore, a broad spread of abilities), which is easy to manage with a field of 49 or 98 but slightly trickier with a non-swiss system. If we are to use the opposition factor to rate an individual's performance in each game, then clearly we will need an iterative process in order to refine the results of day one with their effects on day two, and the results of day two with their retrospective effects on day one, and so on; and this in turn will require a computer - they don't work out your Elo rating on the back of a used envelope, you know. So no problem; you can lose count of the number of loonies in this hobby with a personal computer. Let's make the sods pay for being allowed to spout off their inatuation by forcing one of them to bring his pet (or the apple of his eye, or whatever (is Vic there)) to Midon, while the little monster can actually be of some practical value, at last. Better still, why not persuade a distribution firm to loan us something, complete with software in return for the publicity of using it on a National Championship? Yes, I'm rambling again.

I shall summarise, then. If we are to use a system any more complex than that already tried and tested, then I vote that we use one with separate day entries, with country bias and with an iterated opposition factor. If desired, we can then add fancy touches like normalising the results for each country, or sliding the results on an exponential scale in order to reward those brilliant (or plumb lucky) enough to amass huge numbers of supply centres.

However, what's the point: The 'best' player in a Diplomacy tournament is determined to a large extent on subjective grounds, and this is unavoidably married in the system used to determine his worth. The only other thing, I would like to see is some mechanism to ensure that no-one plays the same country twice - perhaps we could use last year's results and pair off 1/A, 2/K, 3/C and use Italy as a wild card to vary this allocation. This won't be perfect, but who wants to play Austria one game and Russia the next?

I'm talking through the top of my inflated head, so tell me ...

(through sheer or artificial genius, the bottom of the page looms ...

Once more into the breach ...

Ah ... yes. I guess I'd better make another attempt on the editorial for this issue. Since I've only managed a half-page of ardent filippic so far, I doubt whether I'm making a whole lot of sense.

Oh, and if you're still holding your breath from page nine, then my advice is, you see a doctor immediately; OK? No, make that a psychiatrist.

Let's start at the beginning: I have not, in fact, emigrated (in fact, I'm never likely to; this place is a real dump. If France is the arsehole of the world, then America is, like, nrumm ... some other place. A nice place to be into, but pretty ugly if considered dispassionately). I shall be over here for a while longer, since I now have employment as a computer programmer with Telecommunications Control Corporation, at a salary of \$7.00 an hour, for a forty hour week (and I'll wager this is more than young Tullett is earning, for example). Sounds grand, doesn't it? Well, if you've ever put your hand to programming, and many of you have in an, ah, amateur capacity (this being, for Northern Chemists, about six pints), you'll recognise quite what a dumb job it is. All it requires is a logical mind; someone else does all the work, by flow-charting the task, and all you have to do is avoid screwing up on a simple translation job. And the Corporation? Well, they don't quite match up to A.G. Telefunken (just as well, since that lot are out now); in fact, despite the title, the firm only employs ten men including the two bosses. Americans tend to go big on this sort of thing; after all, 77% of business is the initial impression. And what do I do after the job ends? Well, I go home, don't I? Go directly to home, do not spend \$280. In fact, the profit I shall make on the whole deal is minimal, and mostly tied up in state and federal taxes until I get the green light to brave the red tape around January next year. Add in the extra cost of producing this object, and I probably make a slight loss. Of course, I get to see America. And suburban back lots are probably truly wonderful places. Really. Seeing anything outside of the back lot requires first, a car, and second, the ability to drive it, which legally speaking I don't have. Ever heard of public transport? The Americans haven't.

So, why am I doing this? Well, as I'm sick of answering all these impertinent questions, I'll leave that one for you to puzzle out for yourself.

And, whatever, I really must apologise for the lateness of this issue. I feel like I've been typing it for ever and a day. I started in a New York 'Y', three weeks ago, and I've been doing my best ever since I found a permanent address. Aren't you lucky I had the foresight to carry my typewriter across the Atlantic? It has since had an even more interesting itinerary. I was on my way up to Boston last week in order to collect the orders that my mother had brought across there with her (and as you will appreciate, this was a fairly essential part of the whole thing-making process), and being in a rush to type up as much as possible before I started my job, I took the typewriter with me. Three days to spare, and I have to pick Atlanta to visit before ending up in Boston ... finally, I realise that a 2,000 mile round trip, even in part by air, is not especially practicable, so I cut Atlanta out of the deal; which is unfortunate, because I sent my luggage on, already. It got all the way to Greensboro, North Carolina, before I could turn it back, which meant that typing anything in Boston was strictly out. I just had time to collect it before flying back with it to Washington...

Thanks, then, to my mother, who made this issue possible at all. Thanks also to my mother, whom several of you may be unfortunate enough to know, for dealing with orders and so on un-stateside. And thanks to Trailways Bus company, who did the best they could with my miserable instructions and gave my typewriter a holiday it'll never forget.

On Tuesday they electrocute a man. Here I sit, in Virginia, and I worry about my problems; in another part of the state sits a man who has been assigned to such a lousy jail that he thinks it's dehumanising him, and he'd rather be dead. This place stinks, and soon it stinks of barbecued flesh.

Waiting Lists

Yes, you're going to have to wait a while longer, yet. When I get back to England I shall start anything I've got lined up. Copwith (75p) has the names of Morris (ace), Brine and none else. Crusades (\$1.00) is empty, and I advise you to wait until I get my hands together. Diplomacy (\$1.00) is newly vacant; Abstraction (75p) still waits for three more mutual guesses, ... a (free) holds ill-fitness, 'rubb, Baskett, Ferguson and Gordon, and if nothing else I'm going to have to do some collecting for this one. Bouree? 50p, or 75.00 - enter now! Mr (h) Morris, rules and fair. 50p inc map - "roll up, roll up" (Barnum)

THE FAMOUS THING LETTERCOLUMN

Our renown spreads
around the globe "

Letrasnet would be so much simpler ... One of the main problems about being over here for such a long period of time is that there is absolutely no hobby feedback. I mean, I don't even know who won the zine poll, though I would hazard a guess that Ode produced a minor upset. Who has folded? What is going on at street level? Has life in the Diplomacy hobby changed at all while I've been away?

Naaan ... and even if it had, why should I care? The only concession I've been making to the lobby of late is the publication of a letter column where wits and luminaries can witticise and lumninate; and it also has at least two features not shared by any other zine - Woodhouse and Tullett. Apparently the last cover had some glaring technical mistakes;

Mike Woodhouse (Kent) "Re the 55 minute typing problem. Frankly, I think meths was a bad idea: like smack, it promotes only a feeling of drowsiness; speed, or if the overdraft can stand it, coke (about $\frac{1}{2}$ a gramme) would have been infinitely more efficacious. With the former pair one may feel that things are going along at a rate that is, as the vernacular would have it, the business. This is not the case, as bitter experience should have demonstrated to you by now."

Actually, Mike, I took the even easier way out and left the typing another couple of days; but this is not the sort of thing that one wants to advertise proudly on one's cover. If I can't find a stick of rock with an obscene message all the way through it, I'll try and bring you back something from a Grayhound Bus station - just don't expect it to be quality-controlled. But enough of these sordid matters and on to classical music, which is somewhat lacking over here - I'm undergoing Nielsen withdrawal symptoms.

Alan Parr (Tring) "I heard something by Hanson - 2nd symphony - for the first time yesterday, while idly listening to Radio Three. Aren't these postal games zines educational?"

I'll have you weaned from the Watts scholl yet, Alan. Actually, in my worthless opinion, Hanson was a lousy composer, as befits someone who conducts most of his own work through the dubious medium of the Eastman rochester orchestra. Should you wish to examine his oeuvre more thoroughly, and if you've any sense, you won't, then you'll probably need recourse to the Mercury Golden Imports label, which is of dubious sound quality but has the merit of being fairly cheap. Yet, out there, lurks an even weirder musical phenomenon:

Jeremy Tullett (Dorset) "Well, I'm sorry if I leave my particples hanging (can I be arrested for this?), but it does at least provide a source of amusement for the rest of your readers. Do you think we should go on the stage together? Move over Morecank and Wise!

"Naturally I am aware that most Oxford colleges have gone mixed - I only left last year at the tender age of 22, for heaven's sake. I merely chose St. Hilda's because I believed, rightly or wrongly, that it was one of the few to offer a Classics degree course. Doubtless you will tell me that S&I is merely one of the few that don't ...

"Hence; I've just been sent a tape of the Third symphony, and I await with interest Arnold's Grand Concerto (for orchestra, Hoover, electric floor Polisher and Revolver)."

Here we have a man, I trow, who would prove receptive to the finer nuances of P.D.Q.



"Sill, I suppose you psychiatrists hear this sort of stuff all the time."

with the best of them). P.D.U. is, of course, a joke, and some of his work is very poor indeed (I advise anyone against "The Romantic P.D.U. Bach", which is merely old ideas from the sixties recycled with smutty and embarrassing seventies 'humour'). Nevertheless, the 'Pervertimento' would definitely be very reasonable, nay appealing, baroque music were it not for the peculiar instrumentation; the entire record is worth it for the double reed and drone sections alone. Ah me; I get carried away. In answer to your query, my dear fellow, there are indeed several other colleges which feature Classics prominently, including my own; though in sooth it would be difficult to find anyone on that course answering to the name of woman in any but a purely biological sense. If you must patronise a tinpot public school nole like St Edmund's, then you should expect to be misinformed. Your choice of St Hilda's, I would guess, was dictated largely by the fact that it is our joint 'local'; if indeed one can have a 'local' whorehouse.

Oh, then, to another man with an Oxford Third:

Paul Brine (mersey) "In the normal run of things a third class degree is less likely to impress the judges than a second - but an Oxford Third! well, now, that's a different matter. Now I have to find some impressable judges (note impressable, not impressionable (see, this pointless pedantry rubs off after years in my company)). The sort that frequent the pubs of New Ferry are more likely to be impressed by fifteen pints drunk without puking, an ability to take on not less than three 'narus' sans losing one or more front teeth, or a criminal record as long as your arm (these are not common round here; but most people have one as long as mine). I reckon my best bet is to go seek some Tory Tarts in a Young Conservatives club somewhere other than New Ferry ..."

Mr Brine is noted for his complete inability to avoid hyperbole, and I would be interested in corroborative evidence on his home area of New Ferry. I've been meaning to visit it for some time; I suspect that when I do, it'll prove to be like Hamstead, only without the death. Perhaps an Oxford Third is what you need, Mike:

Woudhouse (continued) "On women (bless 'em). It has come to my attention that those I deem sufficiently attractive to merit further interest are rarely endowed with the brains God gave a retarded slug, whilst those with whom co conversation becomes more than '... fancy going to pictures?' are seldom more pleasing to the eye than said retarded slug. Now, I fully admit that this cannot be a general problem, so would someone kindly inform me of the whereabouts of a six-foot, beer-drinking female of 1400-plus? The tax advantages accruing to married men, not to men mention the increased size of mortgages, are just too good to pass up ..."

Ah, Mike, you pathetic romantic So what happened to this idea that Horrie Hearne was touting about that you were about to become the 'live-in boyfriend' of Mirks? (well, people are always complaining about how devalued the phrase is, so why not give it a fresh injection of meaning, say I). Look, if I knew the whereabouts of a custom-built job of those specifications, do you think I'd waste my time telling you? - although I suspect that I'd have to upgrade the fit to around 140 before she could even begin to comprehend how magnificent I am. Still, there must be less depressing things to talk about. Politics is always good for a laugh, for example: Allan MacGregor tells me that it's "nice to see someone sticking up for John Arsdon. We Liberal wet us have to stick together, you know". (Quite. Ian Ferguson sends me a slightly indigestible letter about North Sea Gas, Deregulation and the like: if I could understand it, I'd compress it, but since the main point seems to be that Ian finds the Tory policy of selling off British Gas to the 'public' inexplicable (sensible man) beyond the obvious profit à la Amer sham International for "City financiers", I'm sure you get the drift. He concludes:

"Maggie complains that the railwaymen are arguing over an outdated principle (an 8 hour day since 1919), yet she's just sacrificed 250 British lives for a principle dating from 1832".

Me, I prefer the standpoint of Paul Brine:

"How about an RR variant called ASHUR: instead of building a network and then using it, all you do is sta in one place until your patience runs out and then start dismantling the track. Just a suggestion!"

Sounds a lot like the Americans could use a suggestion like that, Paul ...

I have now run out of space, and time, and so can't fit in a letter from Nick Kinzett. But or! maybe bits will keep in the reirdicator until next issue.

Claustrophobia? In 20 cu ft! Ridiculous ...

Outside, the barbed wire was going up like tinsel on a Christmas tree. The hired goons had just completed putting the fence up to dissect the deer park, complete with watch-towers, search-lights and everything bar machine-gun emplacements. Charles 'Adolpin' Cozens was obviously pleased with his work: no-one would get into the Ball this time unless they had paid. What was left of crashers after the static defences had done their worst would be easy meat for the Officer Training Corps, the Porters, the Dobeiman inspectors and the whitewash. It was a smug Cozens who retired that night to his bed, secure in the knowledge that intruders to the Magdalen Commemorative Ball the next evening would be impaled, pinpointed, spotted, beaten, kicked, chewed up, blanched and ejected. Nothing would get by; of that he was sure.

One man was set against this machine of lethal deterrence. One man, armed only with a dinner-jacket, a S.O. spray and the simple charm of his personality, and a small piece of wood three inches long, would brave the screaming hordes of paid Mafiot men. Upon one man rested the hopes of all right-thinking people, who wished to see the aristocratic nose of Cozens rubbed into the ground. One man was totally freaked out of his mind on a mission of personal apotheosis.

That one man was me.

Yes, I crashed the Magdalen Ball. As you may have gathered from the preceding description of the defence procedures, the Magdalen Ball is held in some considerable esteem. Unless you crash it, it costs £68 for a double ticket to get in; and for this sum you get a bottle of vintage champagne, a bottle of white wine, a three course catered meal at midnight, George Melly (well, you listen to him; unless you go backstage to see him after the performance, you don't actually get him), Bud Flanners, jazz, funk, disco, cheap beer and more marquises (?) than you can shake a stick at ... and as an afterthought, presumably the girl you came in with. If you crash, there are obviously certain important bits of this that you miss out; but I still got to see the college in son et lumere, bounce up and down on the inflatable kiddy-cattle (yes, in a dinner-jacket), stand underneath the temporary fountains, and see all the fun of the fair. Naturally, I paid a price for all this.

Now comes a good time to tell you about William the Conqueror, a tale which ranks with the subject of female chimps' arses as one of my favourite opening gambits in small-talk. William the Conqueror was rather large; in fact, at his death he is estimated to have been six feet three in his hauberked feet and twenty stone. Sadly, the poor fellow died of internal haemorrhaging over a prolonged period after striking his side against a saddle halter. Perhaps his friends and undertakers should not, therefore have been surprised at the unfortunate turn that events took at his interment; his coffin was only six feet long, and when they tried to jam him in, he burst. Eventually his wife was treated to the sight of his body being poured into the coffin before it was lowered into the ground.

There is a salutary tale when you're over six foot and you're trying to hide in a wooden box five feet by two feet six by one foot six. Since that was the precise method by which I intended to enter the Ball, it preyed on my mind for some considerable time. Indeed, since the time I spent inside the box in question was twelve and a half hours, by the time I'd finished in there the darn thing smelt almost as bad as Williams' coffin. Fortunately I did not burst, because all the clothes that I would wear for the Ball were in the box with me and would have been quite unfit for resale; the major problem was now to avoid a ricked back or neck, or the sort of agonising leg cramp that means you lose control of your leg; because then I would never have got out.

The box in question was the window seat in my room at college, which has an overhang at both ends and is not easy to scrunch up into from a standing start in less than two minutes. I should point out that, from internal sources, I knew the approximate times that the porters would be checking the rooms for intruders, and so my original plan was to leap into the box for half an hour when I knew it was necessary. However, since this process would take me three minutes at least, I eventually played it safe and spent most of my time in there, only coming out for brief rests. Just to make sure I wasn't disturbed I fixed up an internal lock with the remnants of the original lock, two screwdrivers and the three-inch piece of wood: this was my only expense, so the Magdalen Ball came to me at the special cheap rate of 16p. (It also cost me a day that has probably been ruined for me, but that's another story.) I had twelve of a half box of going in there, and if anyone came to disturb my right to be in the Ball, then I can only say that I couldn't do the trick

again for the lousy effective pay of three pounds odd per hour.) Ever tried sleeping in a five foot wooden cabinet? It isn't nice, although getting to sleep is surprisingly easy; but waking up to find your scout cleaning your room while you fight back the urge to scream from the cramp is not something I'd care to repeat. I swear the woman knew I was in there, too; why else would she have taken a quarter of an hour to dust the cushion of the window seat? However, apart from that the much vaunted security precautions didn't bother me a jot; I was disappointed not to have been given a chance to test out my customised locking system.

So at seven thirty in the evening I finally made it out of the box, and donned my ball gear. This was my only remaining problem, because, this being a top-notch, upper-class and generally socially onnoxious do, the prescribed dress is full evening suit and black tie. I was not entirely able to make this suit, I had a dinner jacket, bought at the last minute from Oxford; I also had a bow tie, although it was white and stained with red wine from one of the more unfortunate parties I'd been to; I also had a white shirt - short-sleeved, admittedly - a pair of black trousers, though Oxford had not been as well stocked in these and I came away with a pair four inches too short: just as well, then, that they were ski-trousers with almost enough stretch in them; I had a pair of black socks, although they had broad red stripes down the sides. Yet I was missing something fairly important, something obvious, dangerously so ... black shoes. Let's face it, with the makeshift outfit I had otherwise I hardly need black shoes any other time. The possibility of borrowing a pair, size twelve, for the night was not high, so I had at length settled for a pair of brown suede. This is not a prepossessing outfit. Every time the OTC patrols went round I cowered in the back room, at least until nightfall. Well, it got me by; and the dinner-jacket, rolled up, made an extremely comfortable pillow for the window seat.

What you do when you're in, besides providing a few pleasurable shocks for your friends who were excess enough to pay, is not immediately obvious. Perhaps it was the depression resulting from spending twelve hours in a coffin, but all I did for the two hours before dusk was to go up to the showers and sit in one feeling inadequate. It came to me that I was little more than a social cripple; one of the better reasons for not buying a ticket in the first place was that I had no girl to go with. Ahhh... well, not entirely. I guess in the old days there was little difficulty in finding a piece of furniture for the night; one simply took some poor young innocent out of a finishing school or convent. In these days of so-called sexual liberation things are different, and if I may say so, they've changed for the worse. Oxford, 1982 must be some sort of transitional phase, because it is not yet fashionable for the girl to ask you out; oh no; what they do is to prod you into asking them out. I spent a very unpleasant evening two nights before in trying to persuade such a girl that there were tens of reasons I didn't want to go to the hall other than that I didn't want to take her, and I just couldn't get through. You know the feeling when it's the other person's initiative and you're waiting for them to make the move, to mutter "oh well" and to move on? Have you worked out a way to get out of it if they don't? I haven't, and I was stuck there for an hour while she stared downcast at me, waiting for me to change my mind. I finally had to walk the bloody woman home where, fortunately, someone dropped by to see her (at one a.m. - these odd hours students keep their advantages) and, in the best traditions of journalism, I made my excuses and left. And so here I am, evading the OTC, in the showers with nothing but an inferiority complex to keep me company. But am I going to do at an all-night social occasion where everyone else has brought a girl and arranged the social groupings of the night with whom they will eat meals, drink, sit around, etc? I don't dance, I don't like discos, and I can't stay in my room because a very friendly set of jazzmen are using it to crash out in between sets.

Well, I started by going to see my friends, and to be fair to human nature, it's not at all bad after all. All of them were genuinely pleased to see me, which is gratifying; considering the extent to which they were subsidising me. I was even offered champagne. Indeed, throughout the evening, I never had one curly look; people in a more lively knee came up and congratulated me on crashing the ball in the friendliest manner possible. Maybe I really am too cynical most of the time. Even the Junior Dean, who was theoretically in charge of the college side of discipline at the event, was unruffled by my illegal presence (and since we'd got him blind drunk at my party the week before, he definitely knew that I wasn't supposed to be there. But perhaps he was aware of the photos we have of someone holding him down while drunk and whipping him).

him). You definitely feel very good when people who've paid £33 are genuinely glad that you're there.

So, having boosted my spirits by rejoining humanity, I could concentrate on the main job of the evening, which was to find the Typical Face of the event. The typical face would be smug, puffy, well-fed and irredeemably upper-class. It would be thus because, after all, with tickets the price they were and priority given to the friends of people at college (ie mainly those with money and social connections), the affair would take on many of the characteristics of the London Season. Blue-collar would be out, breeding in; and, for the face for which I was searching, inbreeding would be all-important. They say that people look like the dogs they own in many cases; the upper classes have more in common with that other beast of status, the thoroughbred horse of often narrow parentage. And yet my search was futile, because I had seen the face for which I was looking only the previous evening, in the penthouse garret of an Aston man. It was after a drinking club party, of the kind so beloved by Oxford's upper crust, named the Ultimate Oblivion party after the cocktail there served. The affair was in truth a miniature and more exclusive copy of the Ball proper, and I was only at the denouement by accident; but I was rewarded by the view of one of the most self-indulged faces one can imagine, handle of Charles (what else?), with podge billowing out around a nose that was both aquiline and yet indistinct, and a chin which disappeared into an old fashioned wing-collar. This offal was very drunk indeed, and was mouthing off Cooder songs over and over again in a nasal, plummy twang. I don't have Ralph Steadman to convey this properly, but you get the idea; and so any Face I might see at the Ball would very definitely be an anticlimax.

Well, anyway, there were other things to see. The disco floor was a revelation; all those poseurs of the upper class are even more incapable at dancing than they are at anything else, and yet it is distinctly a la mode still to attempt it. Many a happy minute did I spend watching these cretins bob around the floor like arthritic gibbons. On a more fruitful side I found Kelly's act very good indeed; whoever booked him had an inspiration, because he is definitely at his best at 2:30am in slightly weird surroundings. He camped, he crooned, he postured, he sang a sarcastic song about pot; he was superb. There were some people who didn't see him, sadly for them; there were even some who did, but who couldn't quite make the aesthetic move down to his level from New Romantic and Heavy Metal, though, but I have to admit that they tried. There were some who didn't even go this far; some who stayed in their rooms in college all night with their poxy friends, drinking their private store of champers, and making polite, dithering conversation with cozy nonentities. And for this they paid £34. I can think of no greater indictment of the moneyed classes that they don't even spend it in style.

I made it through to the morning, and the end; I made it to the Survivors' Photo (at which the tollie further distinguished themselves by milling around in an undisciplined mob and then, when the photographer tried to get them back into line, yelling obscenities at him of the general level of wit of "fuck off, you Four"). Was it worth it? Well, I wouldn't have wanted to share a ticket with a stranger, as some were forced to do (including the girl I turned away): they all had a thoroughly miserable time for large parts of the evening, as far as I could see. Crashing was an end in itself, however, and the chance to see a slice of the world's most gloriously vile people was a bonus. If nothing else made it worthwhile, the Kiddies' castle would have done; it isn't often that you get the chance to act like a complete child at four in the morning on an air cushion in full evening dress. The organisation was superb; it is mind-boggling that the committee could spend half a year getting things booked in the middle of their degrees, or that the hired staff could spend three to four days just setting the tents and lighting up, and presumably the same in dismantling them, all for the one night. And why the college authorities allow it, let alone encourage it as they do, is beyond me; the more antisocial let more mess than JCI produces pollution in a week, and several stairwells were caked in vomit with embedded broken glass; one thoughtful chap had even put his glass down, walked up to flight of stairs, leant over the balustrade and very nearly filled the entire glass up again.

Next year the Ball will be held at Christchurch. Will I go again?

Well, now if I had a good reason ...