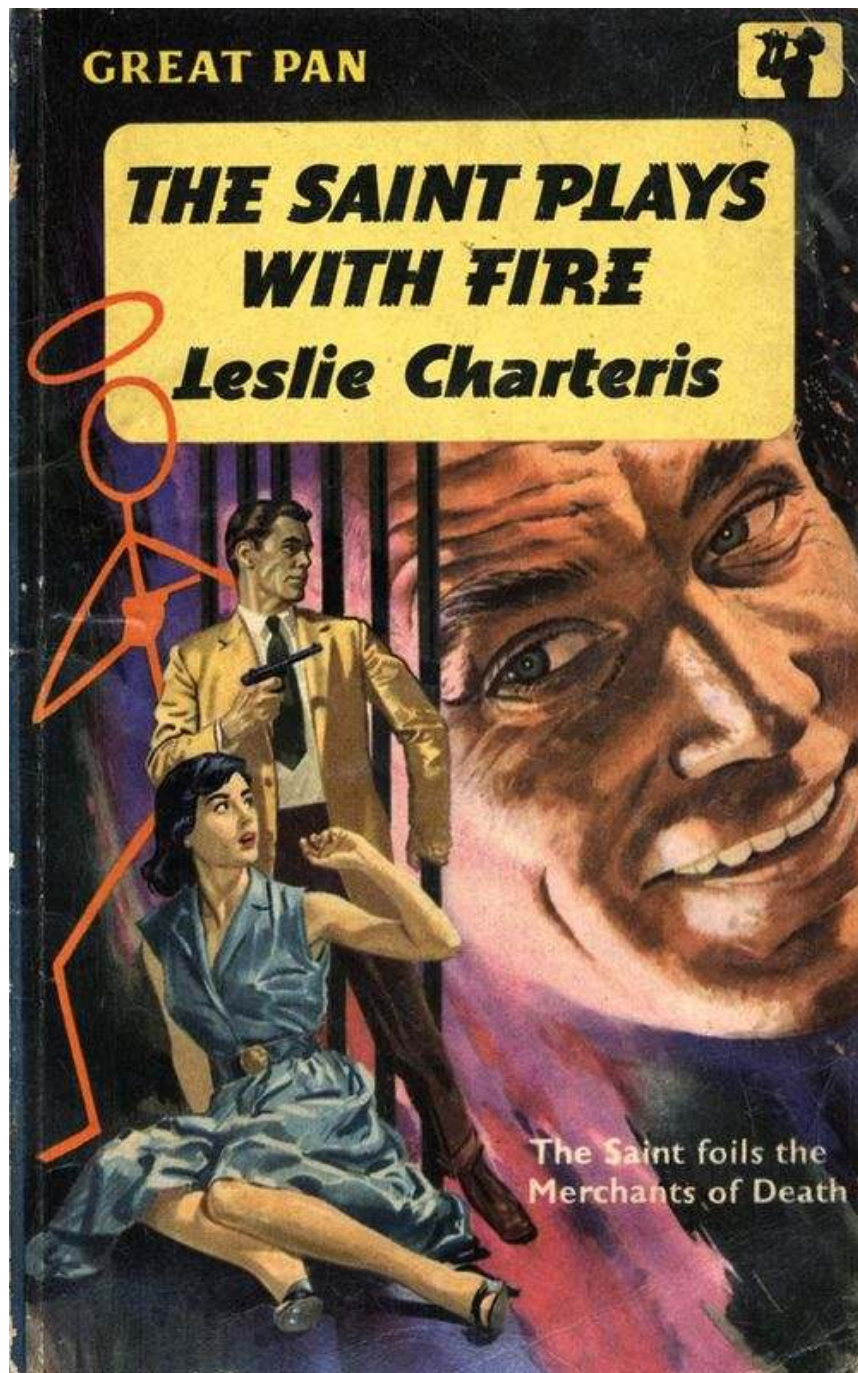




May 2017



Oh Lordy pick a bale of cotton, pick a bale of cotton, pick a bale a day. Sometimes putting together an issue of Vibrator feels like picking a bale of cotton, or at least picking away at it. Things happen and I respond to them. Pick pick pick. Occasionally I put on Stan Freberg's Banana Boat Song and feel better.

A Lot has happened in the last month, of course, as it always does, but probably most of it is too depressing to pick away at here. Probably the most depressing thing I have heard lately is Jeremy Corbyn's ability to put his foot in his mouth at every possible opportunity. Just when opinion polls (boo hiss) cut the Tory lead to 5%, Jeremy jumps in and says the Manchester bombing was our fault. Well, he's right of course, but being right doesn't butter any parsnips or even sell a lot of arms to the Saudis. Besides President Dumb has already got that covered.

And Roger Moore died. As they say, he had had a fair innings, although someone less likely to be dressed in cricket whites I can't imagine. He will always be The Saint to me. I bought all the Saint books when I was in my teens, and even tried to write like Leslie Charteris at one time. My annotated editions will be worth less than a fortune when I die. I liked the American editions where Simon Templar was depicted as a rather Latin spiv with slick greased hair. Roger Moore didn't exactly correspond to that image, but he made the role his own. And let us not forget George Sanders for his early cinematic attempts at handling the role. Sanders was the actor for who the epithet smooth criminal had almost been invented. His knowing drawl and insouciant manner and supercilious smile said it all.

Anyway I've ordered the boxed set of the Saint TV series (in colour!) and expect shortly to be able to enjoy many hours of Roger Moore raising an eyebrow.

I'm Graham Charnock, as I always say at this point, and this is my fanzine. I appreciate receiving your letters of comment, in fact it's the only thing that keeps me cheerful these days as I ferry members of my family between hospitals. Write to me at graham@cartiledgworld.co.uk. It's what the internet was made for, that and allowing terrorists to get together and make bombs and kill us all. Thanks Mark Zuckerberg.

AMERICA THE DAMNED

An occasional series

THE SULTANA TRAGEDY

The Mississippi river flows through the heart of America; for centuries it has been a trading and cultural conduit, linking the north and the south and yet constantly fostering division along its banks. One of the major tribes that populated the area, The Creek Indians was virtually wiped out in the Creek War of 1813-1814 where they were defeated by Andrew Jackson at Talladega, Emuckfau, Enotochopo and finally at the Horseshoe Bend of the Tallapoosa River when 750 Creeks were killed or drowned and 201 whites were killed or wounded, when the river must truly have run red with blood.

It was to the Mississippi as well that Abraham Lincoln's murderer, John Wilkes Booth, ran after the killing in the Ford Theatre in 1865. He believed crossing it would get him to safety among the defeated Confederate sympathizers who would celebrate him as a hero for his blow against the hated Union Republicans. The darkness and confusion however led him to row upstream, away from safety and he was eventually pinned down and killed by militia.

The Mississippi was of course central to the conflagration that became the American Civil War. In 1860-61 a number of Southern American states seceded from the Union proposed by Lincoln, and to which he had been elected President in March 1861. The state of Mississippi itself was the second southern state to declare its secession from the United States of America, on January 9, 1861. It joined with six other southern slave-holding states to form the Confederacy on February 4, 1861. Confederacy supporters hated Lincoln for his plans to disown them of their property, including of course their major chattels: negro slaves.

Mississippi's location along the lengthy Mississippi River made it strategically important to both the Union and the Confederacy; dozens of battles were fought in the state as armies repeatedly clashed near key towns and transportation nodes.

Troops from the state of Mississippi fought in every major theater of the American Civil War, although most were concentrated in the Western Theater. Confederate president Jefferson Davis was a Mississippi politician and operated a large slave cotton plantation there. Prominent Mississippian generals during the war included William Barksdale, Carnot Posey, Wirt Adams, Earl Van Dorn, Robert Lowry and Benjamin G. Humphreys.

Of course we all know the Mississippi River through its famous association with river boats, and Mark Twain who took his pseudonym from the regular call of a crew member rating the depth of the bottom clearance of the boat. Riverboats were not only used for passenger and trade transport, but recreational enjoyment including drink and gambling. Mostly they were typically designed to have a relatively flat bottom to avoid getting stuck in the famed Mississippi mud.

River boats came in two forms, as anybody who has ever watched the TV series *Maverick* will realize - side-wheel and rear-wheel, but they were all invariably of course powered by steam boilers feeding crude reciprocating piston engines. The *Sultana* was a side-wheel steamer.

The wooden steamboat was constructed in 1863 by the John Litherbury Boatyard in Cincinnati,. The steamer registered 1,719 tons and normally carried a crew of 85. For two years, she ran a regular route between St. Louis and New Orleans. It was primarily intended for the lower Mississippi cotton trade and was not built with any consideration of carrying passengers in large numbers.

River boats, during and after the civil war, were always at threat, mostly from Confederacy sympathizers, and setting fires was a common sport, which was often accomplished through the use of coal-torpedoes. There were either real or masquerade lumps of coal, hollowed out to contain high explosive and then seeded in a river-boat's coal bunkers. Specifically, Confederate sympathizers resented the use of such vessels to rehome Union Soldiers. Thus it was on just such a mission that the *Sultana* eventually arrived at Vicksburg, under the command of Captain J. Cass Mason where its master was approached by Lt. Col. Reuben Hatch, the chief quartermaster at Vicksburg.

Hatch was an unprincipled petty crook who had been caught out earlier in a fraud scandal, which had resulted in him dumping his financial records into the river. He had been prosecuted for his crime but unaccountably the case had been dropped. But Hatch's brother was Ozias M. Hatch — the secretary of state for Illinois and a friend and financial supporter of President Lincoln, who personally intervened on Hatch's behalf. So, not so surprising really. 'Honest' Abe was also prevailed upon to have the disgraced officer re-instated as Quartermaster and readily agreed, although he had never met the man and had had no real inter-action with him.

Thousands of recently released Union prisoners of war that had been held by the Confederacy at the prison camps of Cahaba near Selma, Alabama, and Andersonville, in southwest Georgia, had been brought to a small parole camp outside of Vicksburg to await release to the North. The U.S. government would pay \$5 per enlisted man and \$10 per officer to any steamboat captain who would take a group north. Knowing that Captain Mason was in need of money, Hatch suggested that if he could guarantee Mason a full load of about 1,400 prisoners, Mason would guarantee to give Hatch a kickback. Hoping to gain much money through this deal, Mason quickly

agreed to the deal. Neither man had any consideration for the ship's passenger – bearing capacity

When the *Sultana* arrived in Vicksburg it already had a history of mechanical failure. A boiler had sprung a leak on the way and been patched when it arrived, although contemporary reports suggest the repairs were never fully signed off and no one was entirely satisfied with its sea-worthiness.

So the *Sultana* lay against the loading dock at Vicksburg while literally hundreds of Union soldiers waited to be loaded under the eye of Quartermaster Reuben Hatch, no doubt totting up his per capita payment.

Although *Sultana* had a legal capacity of only 376, by the time she backed away from Vicksburg on the night of April 24, 1865, she was severely overcrowded with 1,978 paroled prisoners, 22 guards from the 58th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, 70 paying cabin passengers, and 85 crew members. Many of the paroled prisoners had been weakened by their incarceration in the Confederate prison camps and associated illnesses but had managed to gain some strength while waiting at the parole camp to be officially released. The men were packed into every available space, and the overflow was so severe that in some places, the decks began to creak and sag and had to be supported with heavy wooden beams

Sultana spent two days travelling upriver, fighting against one of the worst spring floods in the river's history. At some places, the river overflowed the banks and spread out three miles wide.

Near 2:00 A.M. on April 27, 1865, when *Sultana* was just seven miles north of Memphis, her boilers suddenly exploded. First one boiler exploded, followed a split second later by two more.

Recent theories suggest it was the overloading of the boat, with troops on high deck levels, which caused it to wallow in the shallow waters, putting stress on its boilers as the water levels constantly shifted, a factor riverboats were not designed for. This eventually leading to superheating of the steam and the rupture of the boilers.

Calculations of the death toll for this disaster put the number of deaths at 1196, although far more were injured. It has thus gone into history as the largest maritime disaster in US history before Pearl Harbour.

Who was to blame? Reuben Hatch for overloading the boat? Captain Mason for injudicious decisions regarding its sea-worthiness? Abraham Lincoln for failing to oversee his executive decisions? The jury is out. – Graham Charnock



LEIGH EDMONDS

I've been waiting for this issue of *Vibrator* for a couple of days. I had to go down to Melbourne today to have some more dental work done and you usually provide me with interesting reading material for such trips in advance. Disappointment, however, and I had to read a book about history in Australia instead. When I turned on the computer on arriving home there was the latest issue of *Vibrator*, only eight hours too late.

Never mind, today's trip was to get the skin cut away from the bolt that they inserted last January. This coming Wednesday I have to go to another operative who will begin attaching the necessary stuff to it. In that case, I suppose you could say that, in fact, the latest *Vibrator* arrived a couple of days early.

I did note Greg Benford's suggestion that the solution to book buying is to own more than one house. Unlike Ben, we only have two houses with plenty of books in both of them. The trouble is that somehow it has fallen out that all the stf and fiction is here where we live and most of the history and other academic stuff is out in our house in Springbank, a twenty minute drive away. This can be most inconvenient when there is a book out there that I'd like to refer to. There are two solutions to this problem, either to swap the books over or go and live at Springbank. The latter option is probably the simpler.

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GARY LABOWITZ

Last minute? Hah. I was once two weeks late sending out an N3F zine that had the election ballot in it. No sense even starting until the deadline is past! That's the Fandom way.

My brother used to write a song a day. I inherited his “little blue books” that he used in the Navy, while on duty in the China Sea, landing soldiers on little islands. He said he was on an LST, which stood for “Large, Slow Target.” Some of the songs were pretty good. He was a fine musician. I just wish I could get some of his shows produced. Actually, there have been many times, in New York and New Jersey, but never picked up by a publisher. Too bad. Once, Steve Allen was talking about the talent in America, and estimated that there are several thousand musicians who produce good to great songs. But, there can only be a few hundred published in any given year, and only a few of them become even a little bit famous. The odds, in other words, are against any given person breaking into the music scene. Of course, once one does ... then they are more likely to have more material accepted. And if they are any good at all, a person can become fabulously famous and perhaps wealthy. I think of Irving Berlin and the Gershwins; how lucky for us that they broke through. I wonder who we missed?

My brother had a song accepted by Decca Records (back in the 40's) that they wanted a few little changes in. My brother refused and that was that. He just wouldn't compromise with non-musician executives. Pity. Everyone I play his songs for likes them. Some they even say are great! Many have been used by some fairly famous singers in cabaret performances, and they always get a good response. He just never figured out how to market them.

Aha, a Robert Lichtman letter. I'm still surprised to see some of the old names in fanzines; and then I realize I'm one. Then I'm surprised to see that others remember me at all, much less anything I ever produced.

Concerning collections, and what the devil anyone can do with them, I came to the conclusion some time ago that I wasn't (repeat, wasn't) going to go back and read any of the stuff I had managed to accumulate. I had a full collection of paperback stuff all indexed by author, title, and content (using the Spears index), and that I lost in the first war. My ex- kept them all. I then got inspired to sell my fanzine collection by leaving it with a guy running a science fiction bookstore in Philadelphia. He disappeared by going out of business. I still had a few things that I sold myself (like issue #1 of The Recluse) and some then pros fanzines from when they weren't pros. What I still had left over at that time I carted around with me and finally gave it to Darrell Schwitzer a couple of years ago. Out of it all I kept a cover of Tightbean 29 (May, 1968) drawn by Jack Gaughan. I look at it all the time, since it is mounted just above my monitor on the wall. (The drawing, not the monitor)

Everything else, and I mean everything, went in the second war. I got to keep my telescope, a few pieces of photography equipment, and one bedroom set that my son got for his room when she threw him out.

Of course, I have since built a fine collection of “stuff” that now needs pruning. Do you know anyone who would want a full set of Playbills of Broadway shows from

1950 to 2009? I got them in my brother's estate. He went to damned near everything and kept them all. I keep thinking I will index them in a database and then auction them off. It's Americana, according to Friedman's auction house. They did his glass paperweight collection (the largest they had ever seen), and his art accumulation from his beach house in Barnegat Light. I miss him.

Anyway, I haven't started a blog (lie! I have one and post quotes in it on Tumblr, but it's not a REAL blog), and I haven't started an ezine. My current plan is to become the New Harry Warner of LOC fame. Maybe ... maybe not. But everybody has to start somewhere.

So I sit at my computer, and doodle and practice my calligraphy and pen and ink drawing. I'm even sending some "filler" scribbling to this zine. I just dare you to publish it.

Thanks for sending Vibrator. I hope you won't be distressed by my long ramblings. I give you full permission to edit it down to a reasonable size; but I can't see how you could leave anything out without destroying the flow. Your problem, not mine.

All the best, and hoping you are the same.

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JOHN NIELSEN HALL

Finally I have got around to writing long overdue LoCs and top of the pile is Vibrator of course. If I only respond to other LoCcers, do not assume that I haven't read or have no interest in the other content in Vibrator. I read the stuff about the West Virginia and Colorado Mine Wars and the current state of redevelopments in Archway and the Whittington assiduously. Years ago I patted Dick Whittington's cat. I was probably pissed at the time. I am so glad Pat is getting better.

My nephew in Las Vegas contradicts himself when he berates me for suggesting he should keep some record of his earnings. It turns out his earnings from the strip club were more than he thought, but it was the IRS apparently who advised him of this. Had he had his own record, this might never have happened. I used to advise my clients never to take the Inland Revenues word for anything. Make sure you have independent verification. I doubt my advice would change had I been practising in the USA.

David Redd wonders if he has a special talent for getting up my nose. Well, yes, it may be so. He does seem to press my buttons where ere he writes. This time however I am in agreement with most of what he says. I think we were all foolishly naive when we were younger and I apologise for suggesting he was unique in this

respect. I may have to eat more humble pie in the columns of Banana Wings. I think I accused David of much greater sins there.

Please don't give up on this excellent fanzine of yours. I enjoy it so much.

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MARION LINWOOD

Leigh Edmonds' mention of the Aussie city of Ballarat was rather coincident as I've just watched two TV dramas in which Ballarat is featured. The Doctor Blake Mysteries are set there and a recent episode I saw featured a grand house where rich folk lived who were nearly all killed by their blind daughter: Blake cleverly spotted blood splattered on a morning newspaper which established the time of the murders. I think I also spotted the same grand house in an episode of Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries which featured an Agatha Christie type murder on the train from Melbourne to Ballarat.

We have an area in nearby Brentford called The Butts (it used to be an archery shooting field) full of Georgian houses which have featured in such films as Miss Potter and Finding Neverland.

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JOHN PURCELL

First things first, Graham: thanks for the TAFF song on Facebook, you silly sod. I shall see you in a couple months. So will Valerie, but she will have her shots by then, ensuring her health.

We don't do shopping beyond necessities: groceries, gas station - whoops, sorry: petrol, I should say - and the occasional forays to WalMart to get other necessities for maintaining the household. Now we are budgeting a bit more for clothing and shoes for our trip abroad, but we normally just don't go shopping to just go shopping. What is needed is what gets purchased. Simple as that. As a result we rarely get the chance to peruse local scenery (which is massively boring) or see interesting folks from around the world (all we get here are University students from Southeast Asia, it seems), and most of the restaurants are Mexican or Chinese establishments. There is only one Indian curry house, and it's horrendous: once was enough; the Mongolian barbecue is okay, and there is only one Vietnamese noodle restaurant in town. Barbecue, on the other hand, we have plenty of those, but none of them match what I can cook on my backyard grill.

Great, now I'm getting hungry. I had better wrap this up and have lunch so I can take a nap.

Then you have to go on about the Whittington Stone and other things Whittington. We don't have anything like that here. Naturally you and a bunch of other British fans are going to have to show Valerie and I around London, pop into a pub now and then, and see the sights. It's beginning to sound like just walking around Croydon would be delightful compared to what we have here in College Station, Texas.

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JIM LINWOOD

You gave an excellent analysis of the Leopold and Loeb case. I first became aware of the sensational case when I saw the 1959 film *Compulsion* as a teenager. It was directed by Richard Fleisher (who went on to direct similar films like *The Boston Stranger* and *10 Rillington Place*) based on a novel by Meyer Levin which slightly fictionalised the case by giving different names to the characters. Orson Welles was Jonathan Wilk (Clarence Darrow), Dean Stockwell was Judd Steiner (Leopold) and Bradford Dillman was Artie Strauss (Loeb) – all three won Best Actor Awards for these roles at the Cannes Film Festival. *Compulsion* is a far better film than Hitchcock's *Rope* because the killers are depicted as mentally disturbed young men rather than the would be Nietzschean Ubermensch of *Rope*.

I was so impressed by Welles performance as Darrow that I bought a 45rpm record of his anti-capital punishment courtroom defence speech ("*This was the mad act of two sick children who belong in a psychopathic hospital*".); which you can now watch on You Tube. It lasts 10 minutes although Darrow's rambling oration lasted 12 hours.

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PHILIP TURNER

How enormously cheered up I was by Vibrator 39. In fact, by the top of page 7, I was experiencing a strong impulse to hurl myself off the roof. Sadly, especially for those on whom this letters column is inflicted, I lack the means to get up there.

Oh! Taxi Nic survived the trip through the black hole. Pity. His Rivers of Babble-on was snoot about the world's most edifying topic (zut allors in French money).

Having found very little to say so far, I suppose I'd better digress. What do pensioners do all day instead of working for a living to pay taxes to keep Mr. Corbyn and his fauxcialist buddies in champagne? I've been creating a poster of cover illos from bux wot I have wrote, edited or compiled. My A3 printer lets me put three rows of seven 2" x 3" pix on a sheet with some overlap space at the bottom for pasting on another sheet.

My ambition is to create a poster at least as tall as myself. Which raises an interesting question: given that people shrink as they grow older, if inspiration fails to deliver enough book covers and the poster ends up a little short of expectations, would it be cheating to try to live long enough to shrink to a height less than that of the final version of the poster?

Answers on a PC to the usual address.

As there is no copyright (sadly) on ideas, prolific publishers of fanzines could steal mine, do their own poster of covers and take it to conventions to try to claim "my poster is bigger than yours" bragging rights. I'm sure a Con hall decorated with mediaeval-style poster-banners would look very cheerful.

Just a thought.

p.s. That *Call My Bluff* connection demonstrates that your brain, despite its great age, is still firing on all cylinders. Did your Google search fail to turn up the volume of Sid James memoirs, in which he related the sad story of taking a 4d tram ride in an attempt to secure a post as a scullery lad? And his bitter disappointment when he discovered that the job didn't involve polishing whores?

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DAVID REDD

Thanks for the paper zine of 39. (Numbers reaching an impressive run now.) Your editorial seems to present a capsule taster of Modern Life only too accurately. Hope stresses have eased down now.

Stress, the main weapon of the consumer society against consumers. Maybe deadline stress rather than shovelling that snow killed Cyril Kornbluth? I appreciate your "sheer bliss of not having to attend hospital every day." After a close friend's final illness, when I drive past the hospital my car still wants to turn in. Of course it didn't end there – helping the family clear her house, etc. Was a bearer at her funeral this week, the house chain for selling our bungalow broke down (since repaired) and my car failed its MoT most terminally (still working on a replacement). And no space in my living quarters for any more books or vinyl. But it's the same for all of us now, just slight differences in the details.

Nic Farey has our number all right, referring to your "idle millionaire retiree readers". Afraid I failed his second item by £984,000. And spent it all.

Another tasteful cover. Although Vibrator now seems to be permanently an international one-size-fits-all publication rather than the British Edition, which a person of my vintage rather misses.

Good to find America the Damned back again. Actually, the most horrifying part was Virginia's Racial Integrity and Sterilization Acts being passed in **1924** and only repealed in **1964/1979**. What *were* Virginians thinking in between? Hitchcock had a good eye for America the Damned too, giving the USA what it wanted in *Rope* and *Psycho*.

Since the last Vibrator we woke up one morning to find the world changed overnight: UK immutable fixed-term parliaments were history because Mrs May wanted an election. A woman's privilege to change her mind, etc. I could go on to point out an elephant in the room nobody is discussing, then another ... but there are so many jumbo-sized holes in manifestos (debt, food security, extinction, etc etc) I'll simply wait for June 8th and vote LEAVE as usual. LEAVE your actual UK that is; in a Celtic nation we have the option. Whether we would have a future after leaving is a wider question. I shall wake up on June 9th again wondering if the world has changed overnight. Or has not.

Must mention to Leigh Edmonds that hospitals don't *have* to be alien. I learn from a "Scotland Inspired" podcast that years ago some hospitals had been built light and airy with views of greenery, and now modern studies show that natural views can reduce recovery times by 17%. So if you replace a spread-out old hospital with a modern barracks presumably you *increase* patient recovery times, and hence increase care costs, by that 17%? This is progress? Also to Leigh, I too get emails from strange characters, today's being "Sexy Becca" - best avoid all such offers for fear of being infected with the indescribably awful. Digital or physical.

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DAVE COCKFIELD

Vibrator 38 was as good as ever although I think that you excelled yourself with your latest instalment of AMERICA THE DAMNED in Vibrator 39. I very much liked the structure with the historical background of that era adding greatly to the story of Leopold and Loeb. I'm a big fan of courtroom dramas with the two Leopold and Loeb movies *Rope* and *Compulsion* as great contrasting favourites. The first is the better film but the latter does have the larger than life Orson Welles. When real events are depicted it is always interesting how accurate a screenplay is as producers often have to balance complete accuracy with the need to create a film that audiences will watch and be entertained by. This often generates the most criticism such films have.

It is a long time since I've seen either movie but I believe that they were both quite faithful, in spirit if not completely in fact. Music biopics are notorious for sanitising details of their subjects whereas War movies often just warp reality at the whim of

the Producer or Director to further their own agenda. Two classic examples are *The Longest Day* and *A Bridge Too Far*.

The Producer Darryl F. Zanuck, a veteran of both World Wars, wanted *The Longest Day* to be a faithful tribute to the men who fought on D-Day but also have a strong anti-war statement. When it was released it got a lot of flack for a number of scenes that showed the horror of war but which bent facts to an extent that they reflected badly on the 2nd Rangers Bn. They lost many men on the assault of Pointe du Hoc to destroy a strategic gun emplacement overlooking the beach. In the movie upon capture of the emplacement no guns were found suggesting that the loss of life had been for nothing. One soldier actually says, "we come up all this way for nothing". In fact the Rangers then found the guns an hour later behind enemy lines, destroyed them, plus all German communications, and closed the roads leading to the beaches. It was considered to be the most important event of the landings but this was never stated in the movie. Amazingly many US veterans regard the depiction of the attack as way too gung ho.

Richard Attenborough equally wanted to highlight the loss of life in *A Bridge Too Far*. Operation Market Garden, a masterplan created by Montgomery, was a total disaster and in the film the blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of General Browning played by Dirk Bogarde who ignores vital intelligence that could have saved many lives. At the end of the film he utters the chilling words, "As you know I always thought we tried to go a bridge too far".

His wife Daphne du Maurier wrote a complaint to *The Times* saying that the facts as presented were false with many of his supporters saying that he was just following orders from High Command so should not be blamed.

Another facet of movies that I find fascinating is how critics latch onto characters they don't like.

In *The Longest Day* the portrayal of Major John Howard by Richard Todd was derided as being inaccurate. Todd, who was one of the first Officers to land in Normandy on D-Day with the 7th (light infantry) Parachute Battalion, was asked to play himself in the film. He modestly declined saying, "I was there but I didn't do anything to make a film about". Major Howard, who led the capture of Pegasus Bridge, was a close friend whom he first met on the bridge so it was decided that he would play him.

In *Lawrence of Arabia* Anthony Quayle was considered to be totally miscast as a Senior Intelligence Officer. However during the Second World War he was a Special Operations Executive Officer working with partisans in Albania where he was an expert in reconnaissance, sabotage, and espionage.

Gal Godot is the star of *Wonder Woman* playing the part she created earlier in *Batman vs Superman*. It was said that she was miscast because she was a former

beauty queen and model and therefore unlikely to impress as an Amazonian warrior. In real life she enlisted and served in the Israeli Defence Forces, serving two years in the military as a combat trainer.

I think that in all three of these cases the casting directors knew what they were doing.

It was painful reading the short extract about your how your mother had a nervous breakdown when you were young. I was in my mid-twenties when I arrived home from work to find that my mother had been taken to hospital following a breakdown. I was not allowed to see her for a week. When I did she looked ghastly, was restrained, and constantly swore at me saying that I hated her and was responsible for her confinement and torture. The doctor told me that she would get better and that she was being given electric shock treatment. I just felt helpless as I seemed to have no say in what was happening. Three weeks later she returned home seeming to be quite happy but there were about two years of memory obliterated and she often had nightmares about the pain of the shock treatment. The support of my friends in the Gannets was the only thing that kept me sane when this was happening but I still agonise about the possible root causes of this breakdown and my total helplessness at the time.

Elections are upon us and I'm shocked that no manifesto mentions litter. I've just had a short holiday in Berlin, a city so clean that you could eat an English Breakfast off the pavement. My first thoughts arriving back in London were, "What a dirty shithole".

That thought still endures a month later.

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ROBERT LICHTMAN

You write that "I was ostensibly sacked from my first job as an advertising executive for missing a rather trivial deadline, although I maintain to this day it was really because I had not got to Harrow or Eton." My own most memorable firing was in 1970 when I had been working for over a year for the San Francisco sales office of Columbia Records. By that time I had grown my hair long, dressed beyond casually, and had been instrumental in providing combustible entertainment – at the office manager's request – on several occasions, most notably for star act Johnny Winter, who was coming to town to play at the Fillmore. How ironic, then, that I should be shown the door the day after sharing a joint with all the office staff except for him (he wasn't there) in a back room where all the promo copies of new "product" were kept. (Part of my job was sending out bundles of LPs and 45s to radio stations and reviewers.) The ostensible reason was that CBS/Columbia president Clive Davis – a name that may be familiar to you and possibly some readers – was due to visit the

office. Plenty of time to clear out any telltale lingering odors, but that was the excuse. Another reason was put down on the official records so as not to preclude my future employability, of course. Not that I needed it, because I developed my self-employment sufficiently that I didn't have a regular job again until after I left the Farm in 1980.

My own family situation was much the same as you describe for yourself in your "history of disillusionment." You write that your father "always earned enough to put a Sunday roast on the table, well, at least on Sundays. He earned enough so that, as far I can recall, my mother never had to do a day's work in her life, and could concentrate on catering to a happily blissful model household." In fact, my mother had been working when she married my father back in 1937. Some of the print detritus I ran across when cleaning up their stuff back in 1995 when both parents had gone into care homes was a stack of pay envelopes from my mother's employment with several downtown Cleveland department stores. She once confessed to me that my father had made her quit working because it disturbed his sense of being *the* family breadwinner. She didn't put it exactly that way, but that was the truth of it. But she did do the same sort of catering as did your mother.

Being in that perfect household, I wasn't exactly "under the spell of American TV," although I did watch the family sitcoms of my era – which were, so far as I can remember, "Father Knows Best" and "Leave It To Beaver." They were an entire generation before Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore, and their dramatic tension revolved around the children doing questionable things that they would later be "educated" about by the parental units. Since my brother and I had our own versions of those deeds, we were far from under the spell of the shows. As I dimly recall, we had to profess to our parents – we all watched the shows together – that of course, no way, would we do stuff like that (whatever it was), all the while maintaining a straight face.

"Non-stressful family values" weren't crack-free. I remember many occasions on which my father would loudly and nastily complain that dinner was late – he expected it on the table soon after he came home from work, with my brother and me seated for the "family meal." Other arguments were done behind the closed but not soundproof door to their bedroom, and some of them were about his bitterness at her not wanting to risk family savings on whatever big real estate deal he wanted to pursue. He used to leak about these when we had our ritual walks around the block. The one I recall most vividly was about how "if only your mother hadn't said no" he could have bought most of what later became the downtown area of a town near where this year's Corflu was held.

Thanks for the Leopold and Loeb instalment of "America the Damned." I of course knew about them from my high school American history class, but you do flesh it out here nicely. What I wasn't aware of – or perhaps never made the connection – was

that Hitchcock's "Rope" was based on their story. Your conclusion, that "America, it seems to me, more than any other country, has sought to mythologize the psychopath in its popular culture," is a declining state of affairs, I think. In this era of nutjobs (thank you, Trump, for reviving that term) doing mass shootings, the Dylann Roof isn't celebrated in story and song so much anymore (except perhaps by the alt-right types who applaud the killing of "them"). I guess that's progress.

Greg Benford's confession that he buys hundreds of books a year and stores them in Irvine, Laguna Beach and Mammoth raises the question for me of how many of them he has read. In my own, much reduced book-buying circumstances, I have a couple stacks of unread books totally just over two feet. That's more than enough with which to be well behind.

On the same subject David Redd writes that "if you don't buy something desirable when you have the chance, you have regrets forever." It all depends. On more than a few occasions, I have rushed to buy a very desirable book to me at full price, or at least Amazon's best price, only to encounter a stack of that title in one of the local bookstores that carries remainders at a much reduced price – so reduced at times that I nearly cry at my own profligacy and haste. But at least my original priced copy doesn't have the telltale marker swipe down one side of the edge of pages. If I wait twenty years or so to eventually sell off the book in question – which I may still not have done much more than skim at best so it will appear new – the absence of that marking may help bring a better price.

In his column ostensibly about driving taxi in Las Vegas, Nic Farey writes, "I've read that your allergies can alter as you age." I've read that, too, and in my experience this has actually happened. My belief is that over time there's the possibility that one's body may stop reacting to specific allergies. Moving around would seem to help. I don't remember what allergies I might have had when we moved from Cleveland to Los Angeles in 1950, but I distinctly recall that when I moved from L.A. to the Bay Area in 1965 I left the smog-induced allergies behind me. They mostly manifested themselves as excessive tear-duct outpourings as my eyes struggled to be free of the combination of dust, pollen and hydrocarbon exhaust. There were different versions of the first two in San Francisco, and my own "snot factory" did its best to deal with them. Moving to rural Tennessee in 1971 left those behind but before long introduced me to a new set of pollen allergens, most notably ragweed; but fortunately the latter never bothered me as much as the seasonal leafy and flowery effusions of the native trees and shrubs. Moving back to California in 1980, again I left all that behind – and as some sort of proof that allergies do indeed alter as you age I've never picked up anything from the new sets of irritants here, first in Glen Ellen and now in Oakland. This was particularly amazing during my quarter-century in Glen Ellen, since Sonoma County is considered a hotbed of allergies. Household dust isn't even as much a factor as it had been in my past. Fucking miracle, I say,

wishing Nic well – and I see in this morning’s Facebook that other than being awakened at the usual ridiculous times for blood draws he appears to be reasonably stable, even somewhat improved, and that he’s lucky enough to be in a hospital that serves decent food.

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TALES OF A LAS VEGAS TAXI DRIVER

By Nic Farey

A SERIOUS CASE OF THE ARSE

Woke up yesterday morning, apparently having sweated so profusely overnight that my tank top was soaked, and I had to replace it with the actually comfortably lighter (and, I think, more permeable) 'Long Live Those Darlins' t-shirt. The day before (Wednesday) I'd begged off work early, a notably unusual occurrence, having a substantial and not at all metaphorical pain in the arse going on, as well as an atypically excessive headache (not the permanent milder one) which was causing my concentration to lapse to the point where I nearly got in an accident trying to merge onto the 215 ramp off Warm Springs Road.

I got home and lay down, face down, obviously, for what I hoped might be a bit of respite and an easing of the hurty bits, with ever-dutiful and, one has to say, brave Famous Author(tm) Jennifer applying coconut oil to the affected area on the homeopathic recommendation of her friend Mag. I eventually passed out for about an hour, which as the sage Randmus Byser knows, is *not* considered to be actual sleep (qv Corflu Valentine).

My reluctance to visit medical facilities of any kind is well-known, but by about 6 o'clock Jennifer's insistent persuasion got me to go to the Southwest Medical Urgent Care, where I get diagnosed with a nasty case of cellulitis of the buttock and issued prescriptions for 14 days of antibiotics and a bottle of 800mg ibuprofen for the pain induced thereby, also a recommendation for cushions. What's left of my mind at this point pivots to the potential solution to the Squatter Madras problem* ("One has tried stuffing cushions up the Squatter's arse"), even though the perceived cause in his case was markedly different.

Well, that's somewhat interesting in a slow-motion car crash kind of way, observes the reader (Uncle J Bonkers), but what does it have to do with taxis and the price of catheters?

The company assigns individual cabs to particular shifts, although there are a few

"spares" that can go anywhere as needed. So when I moved from the 2-2 over to the 5-5 shift I couldn't stay with my much liked VW Passat (2947) and got assigned a Chevy Malibu (2970), which has a smaller passenger cabin but in fact drove very well and that I was definitely ok with. A week or so ago, I got told that, as part of the usual process, I'd be getting a newer vehicle, which turned out to be one of the Ford Fusions (2520), which is also quite all right. Roomier cabin, a bit less trunk space, but plenty of nice acoutrements like a properly working bluetooth, highly adjustable driver's seat and so on. In a flashback to the issues I used to have with 947, I drove it for *one day*, to find on the next that it had been "blacked out" for reasons unknown, though most likely a service/testing schedule. "OK then", sez I, "Just put me back in 970". "That's being cleaned up, had a bio." A 5-5 cab arrives which is apparently available, and to which I am assigned for that day. I'm warned by the outgoing driver that the cushion left in the front stays with it, due to the driver's seat being uncomfortable. I shrugged when I should have listened, stuffing the quite dirty-looking cushion into the spare tire space out of the way.

The driver's seat proved to be exactly as advertised, "uncomfortable" proving to be a bit of an understatement, but being me I decide I can tuff this out for a day, but will insist on a different cab on the morrow if mine is still unavailable. After about three hours in this fuckin junkpile, a different problem arises. I call the supervisor (per procedure): "Boss, something in this fuckin cab is making me *itch*, can I go in and swap out?" "Yeah, I guess you better. OK, I'll write that up". That shit-tip of a free pickle was full of assorted detritus which included what seemed like 400 different air fresheners distributed in every nook and cranny. I got back to the yard with the mad itch and a sore arse from the fucked up driver's seat, and got switched into a more amenable cab. The itch went away after an hour or so, the arse didn't. I had a restless night.

Next day (Monday), my 520 still out of the rotation, but I got a decent one, arse still sore as fuck, but a satisfyingly busy day which made it easier to ignore, and I slept like a log, felt better on Tuesday which was also good and busy (and back in my regular cab, wahey), though didn't sleep as well despite being knackered, and my appetite wasn't good either. Despite having just the one meal a day, I only ate a few mouthfuls before staggering off to bed. Wednesday highlights detailed above with worse arse. Up to this point I'd assumed that this was just an especially painful version of sweat/heat rash (basically nappy rash) which I've had before, until I got the actual (worse) diagnosis. Doing a bit of research, it turns out I may be predisposed to cellulitis since I have a bad reaction to insect/spider bites and also have an ongoing issue with athlete's foot. This makes two quite severe episodes in the last year or so. I read a recommendation that if you have 3 or more, a permanent course of antibiotic is suggested.

So I've got drugs, and the antibiotic in particular has some side effects, one of

which is proving a bit inconvenient. Apart from tiredness (which I expect I would hardly notice), a typical go-along with this stuff is diarrhea, which is of course manageable if it's not unexpected, despite the constraints of sitting in a cab for 11-12 hours, as long as you're never too far from a decent facility. However, so far I've not experienced any of the usual pyrotechnical pebble-dash explosions, rather, the spigot seems to be set at "constant trickle", which means that I'm walking around rather noticeably - er - smelling like arse. Well, not that I'm "walking around" much, but I'm sure you're getting my unpleasant drift, aren't you? The trickle seems to have lessened a bit since yesterday, so I have hopes of being back to work tomorrow without causing dogs and others with sensitive noses to flee in abject terror. Jen has suggested I could put a "maxi pad" back there to absorb the leakage, which sounds like a plan, although neither of us is sure whether it'll be any good at pong control. One has tried stuffing little trees up the Squatter's arse.

I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

We had another loss of a well-known and long-serving driver a couple of weeks ago. Sean, known as "Skittles" because of his multicolored painted nails, was one of the Elite radio dispatchers for my old employer YCS. I didn't know him that well, but we'd cross paths occasionally while I was at YCS, and probably more so since when he'd often be in the Terminal 3 pit at the airport, and I'd always stroll over for a chat. On the face of it, he could be a miserable, cynical bastard, which isn't uncommon these days for some of the longer-serving drivers who remember the days before the hated Uber, and rather more significantly before the cab companies decided that flooding the streets with more and more cabs was going to be their game plan. For all that, he was a dedicated and hugely knowledgeable driver, a standout among most of the riffraff we get behind the wheel these days. Skittles was only in his early-to-mid 40s. The first I heard of his demise was off a Checker driver who was staging with me at the California downtown, with the basic explanation that he fell asleep in his apartment one evening and simply didn't wake up. I've since heard some less savory explanations, which I'm going to discount and not repeat. There's a broad consensus that drivers are dropping dead due to overwork. We know of at least four the last year, one of whom croaked on the job (while staging in one of the airport pits, thankfully not with passengers). Sean was an experienced driver-dispatcher for the YCS "Elite fleet", envisaged as a rapid-response subset of the company's cabs, of which I was a part when I worked for them. They're the only YCS cabs with two-way radios (most other companies, including Lucky, have two-way in all cabs), and the dispatchers are simultaneously working drivers. This task is even more highly skilled (and procedural) than just being a working driver, and not everyone is up to it.

With attrition and that, I was told that YCS has been working their dispatcher-drivers 6 days rather than their usual 4 or 5, which was apparently the case with Sean. If the company's insisting on the "full" 12-hour shift (although I'll note that they

don't spend that whole time dispatching, they rotate on a one-hour schedule), that's a fuckin' ridiculously long week. Other drivers are known to work 6 (or even 7) days, simply because they need the income that a 5-day week isn't providing any more. I'm lucky enough that my 5-day (60 hour) week is so far making enough to pay the rent and other bills, adding in Jen's writing income, which while not entirely miniscule doesn't exactly amount to founts of riches. We can also consider ourselves fortunate that the general cost of living in the valley remains affordably low.

THE LICHTMAN PARSIMONIOUS FOOTNOTE, SOON TO BE A NETFLIX SERIES

* *Derek and Clive (Live)*, track 4

I remember when I first launched the original *Vibrator* as a three-sheeter duplicated on orange quarto it was full of Startling! Scurrilous News From fandom! That was because all my news came from and was invariably about ratfandom who always Spoke Like That! With an occasional Poot! thrown in for good measure. I haven't Pooted! for a long time now though. I am older and have a long grey beard and it does not seem seemly to Poot! All over the place. Beside there is no really Pootable fannish news these days. No sexual scandals of an Inchmery nature (which was actually before my time, anyway). And most of my Pootable heroes: Rob Holdstock, John Brosnan, Peter Weston and others are dead, or in Roy Kettle's case, half-dead. Even John Hall has now, I gather, stopped wearing black nail polish and eating cold baked beans straight out of a tin. And Peter Roberts long ago turned in his long flowing locks and orange flares for a commando buzz-cut and cargo-pants. These days if you want to see me getting angry, astonished, ecstatic or even mildly disgusted, you have to follow me on Facebook, and even there so called friends are likely to drop me like a hot potato these days, so perhaps, no, don't go there.

So where does one go to for today's flamboyant and over the top flashy fannish heroes? Jim Mowatt, a super healthy park runner, and not renowned as a libertine? Possibly not. Pat Charnock who has turned in her hot-pants for sensible jeans which conceal her varicose veins? Probably not. Alison Scott, whose most outrageous act so far recently has been to smuggle alcohol into a hotel bar? Obviously not. Even Sandra Bond has seemingly stopped knocking out thrash anthems with her beat combo Donutsh and has settled down to being a delivery driver, and has actually moved to South London! I know, amazing, isn't it? Rust never sleeps, eh, Sandra? And Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer now have gym equipment in their living room, although they may well argue it is solely for the use of their obese visiting American fans. What is the world coming to? Well, okay then, once more for old time's sake: FUCKING POOT!

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