

Ansible



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TROPICON/FANHISTORICON SPECIAL. Thank you all for having me! Here's another of those extra issues of *Ansible* produced for cons where I'm a guest. Most of it comes from my apazine *Cloud Chamber*.

Infinitely Improbable

Oddity found in Charing Cross Road: *First Whisper of The Wind in the Willows* (1944) by Kenneth Grahame. This contains the storytelling letters to his son in which the great book's characters first took shape, plus a hitherto unpublished story about a different set of talking animals—including a mole. His widow Elspeth's occasionally glutinous introduction takes up nearly half the slim (89pp) volume, and without any apparent sense of irony tells the tale of the original mole that inspired it all. If you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them now. Apparently Grahame went out into the garden one night and found a robin and a mole having a tug-o'-war with a huge worm as the rope. The robin left in haste, but Grahame grabbed the mole and decided that his small son, then asleep, would like to see it next morning. So he placed the mole in a stout hamper in the kitchen, added some worm-laden chunks of turf in case it fancied a snack, weighted down the lid, and went to bed. During the night, evidently, the resourceful animal used its powerful digging arms to lever up the lid, and got out on to the kitchen floor. Where, bright and early next morning, the Grahames' aged and near-sighted housekeeper mistook it for a rat and beat it to death with her broom. Aaaahhhh.

Thog the Inadmissible. Our barbarian critic tries not to cite fan fiction from his dignified pulpit in *Ansible*, but rather liked this scene from a 'gay *X-Men* story' discovered by Nonie Rider: 'Remy was tight-strung, electric current racing through him. Logan shifted and settled back on his thighs; the sides of Remy's shirt pulled back to expose pale flesh to a blue gaze scorching through the blindfold burning into Remy's retinas transmitting along his nerves like a wild singing in the wind, wailing a seductive bludgeon that he couldn't refuse.'

Art Section: I nearly took a photograph last week. It was an alarming sight, a low lorry with bales of hay piled absurdly high on the back, bulging out several feet on either side of the actual vehicle: the whole thing was parked just outside our house, giving us a chance to contemplate it and realize that with the present state of Reading's roads, there was no way that load could escape the town without being scraped off or going backwards along a one-way street (such as the one we live on). Presumably the policeman haranguing the driver was of much the same opinion, as hinted by the impassive way he waved his arms in the air. It was only the lack of film in my camera which has spared you a picture captioned 'Hay-Wain by Constable'. [9/84]

On Stephen Baxter's novella in *The Web 2028*: If I'd ever wanted to write a parody of Steve Baxter it might well have contained a gung-ho argument to the effect that without NASA bureaucracy and safety regulations to impede the Dream of Space, a primitive Viking community could quite easily lash up a manned orbital rocket if only told about gunpowder. Well, Steve has now pre-empted that one.

Paging Dr Freud. The scene is a semi-formal occasion at dusk, set on and around the concrete banks of what seems to be a canal. There's an air of low-budget and vaguely forced festivity, as might attend an event at the Millennium Dome. Ambling crowds are dotted with police and security personnel. Hazel and I somehow find ourselves seated at a slightly elevated table to one side, eating with various functionaries and, unexpectedly, the Prime Minister. This is embarrassing: Hazel intensely dislikes T. Blair and prefers to change channels when his dread features appear on TV news. Now she's sitting practically next to him, projecting extreme discomfort, while across the table I feel I must be wearing a fixed and glassy smile. The seating arrangement shifts as people come and go. Now Hazel and the PM occupy adjacent chairs, and in what may be a spirit of campaigning bonhomie he puts a flirtatious arm around her shoulders. Grimacing horribly, she tries in vain to push him away, while I'm paralysed by the thought that taking appropriate husbandly action will get me shot by watchful security forces...

'That's appalling!' Hazel cried. 'How dare you have a dream like that? I feel ... psychically contaminated.' Of course I apologized profusely. But —where do these things come from, Dr Freud? I still have no idea.

Commonplace Book. *From the obit of Prince Johannes von Thurn und Taxis:* 'When Prince Johannes celebrated his sixtieth birthday in 1986, Princess Gloria arranged for the cake to be adorned with sixty chocolate candles sculpted in the form of the male member. The Prince, though, was embarrassed that this tribute to his virility should be paraded before his tenantry, whose children eagerly fell upon the illuminating trophies ...' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 1990) • *Dept of Second Childhood:* 'From an early age, [Bill] Gates was extremely energetic and used to rock incessantly in his cradle—a trait that is still said to be with him to this day.' (*Computer Weekly*, 30 March 2000)

Great Balls of Fire! I had a C.S.Forester moment, or Patrick O'Brian moment, when showing visiting Canadian fan Colin Hinz the sights of Reading. After the ruins of the 12th-century abbey where 'Summer is icumen in' was first written down, the triumph of Victorian town planning which placed Reading Gaol ('Oscar Wilde Slept Here') right next to the abbey, the lowering spectacles of gasometers and Toys- π -Us, and the municipal-Gothic frontage of the museum (containing the Bayeux Tapestry As Reproduced By The Leek Women's Institute, with a pair of discreet underpants added to the one flagrantly naked chap in the filthy Frog original) ... there is not an awful lot to see in Reading. So I took Colin to the local antiques centre, where he admired vintage carpenters' tools while I discovered some incredibly massive iron door-stops which proved to be French cannonballs from the Napoleonic wars. Gosh! I might have escaped if the proprietor, who knows me as an adjunct of discerning antique light-fitting buyer Hazel Langford, hadn't sneaked up and treacherously said, 'Three quid off to you, squire.' Got the thing very slowly home at cost of possibly semi-permanent lowering of one shoulder. It may be inspected by appointment. Gosh, again.

On R.A.Salvatore: *The Demon Awakens* ... the prologue duly begins 'The demon dactyl came awake.' (you may think a dactyl is a finger or a tum-ti-ti foot in poetry: here it's the whole demon) and ends, after pages of perverid exultation over the trouble this is going to cause, 'The dactyl came awake.' In due course the bad news leaks out to the public, or at least to one renegade monk: 'The dactyl was awake! / The world did not understand the coming darkness. / The dactyl was awake! / The Order had failed; their weakness had facilitated this tragedy! / The dactyl was awake! / [One frenzied paragraph omitted.] / The dactyl was awake!' Need I add that a huge magical amethyst of unknown powers, which this monk has intuitively lugged around for most of the plot, proves in the climactic confrontation to be a Blow Up Demon's Entire Volcano Stronghold charm? Or that with sequels in the pipeline, the final pages pose these ominous questions: 'What of the dactyl? Had the creature been consumed, or had it merely flown away before the blast?' Why am I reading this? For the money, of course.

Postcard from Teresa Nielsen Hayden, 10 April 1985: 'Strange dreams in Strathclyde. Was at a convention—Walpurgisnacht affair, shrieking costume fans everywhere. Heard rumour about some self-appointed Enforcers at con, meting out judgements to obnoxious costumed types. Retired to my hotel room to have shower; while momentarily dashing out of bathroom, wrapped in towel, to retrieve something, Enforcers and their shrieking retinue burst into room: 3 judges, all in Dominican nuns' robes and Groucho Marx nose-and-glasses (an extremely effective disguise I myself used one Halloween), plus assorted slavering yahoos eager to carry out their dicta. My towel is declared a costume, despite protestations, and I am condemned to stand in hotel lobby all night thus attired. Doing my best steely-eyed Clint Eastwood imitation I ask if they work for hotel or con committee: they answer "no" and I declare them to be without jurisdiction. Judges' followers and hangers-on laugh nastily and move toward me. At last, despairing moment, I draw myself up and announce: "Very well, but I'm writing to *Ansible* about this!" They all cringe away, I am saved, the dream ends, and I wake up....'

Consolations of Philosophy. 'What do you know about Schopenhauer?' said Hazel, who is following the Alain de Botton TV philosophy series. Me: 'Not a lot.' Hazel: 'Suppose I record it just in case ...' I unearthed *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* and read out the great man's entry. 'As a challenge, he held his lectures at the same time as Hegel, but without success. He retired to Frankfurt-on-Main as a lonely and unloved bachelor, befriended only by his poodle Atma, "World Soul". He was a personal and professional pessimist. He held a subjective idealism that the world is a personal fantasy ...' Hazel: 'Suppose I don't record it?' (The sf connection is of course that R.A. Lafferty crossed Schopenhauer's best-known title *The World as Will and Idea* with William Morris, yielding a story called 'The World as Will and Wallpaper'.)

In Typo Veritas. Robert Day notes that *The Bookseller* lists the new Arthur C. Clarke collection as *Greetings, Carbon-Based Biceps*.

Nature Notes. Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the queeting vole ... no, not a vole but a thing that went *Tap*. 'There it is again!' said Hazel. 'Bloody hell, even I heard that,' I admitted. We covered in nameless fear. Out there in the summer night the presence moved from window to window, making a sudden sharp ... *Tap*. Nothing at all could actually be seen. Eventually I went out, fruitlessly searched the garden for a while, and then at last found the occult manifestation clinging to a window-frame: a fat three-inch-long stag beetle which (bloody hell!) suddenly flew so fast that it almost seemed to teleport as it banged again at the window and bounced off into the night. Our garden continues to attract strange visitors....

The real show came at twilight a few days later as, in precisely the patch of sky visible from our dinner table, at least six equally enormous beetles disported themselves in the airspace around next door's syringa, puttering to and fro like helicopters with leggy, alien silhouettes. Mating flights? Later Chris Bell assured me that these beasts are a rare and protected species, so we should jolly well feel privileged.

On Swinburne: his most interestingly scandalous-sounding work, the play *La Soeur de la Reine* (written in French), must be a hoot. From Edmund Wilson's summary: 'Queen Victoria appears as a debauched and cruel tyrant who vents her passions in long French tirades. She makes a tumultuous scene of jealousy with Lord John Russell, who has been one of her lovers, and when he threatens to expose her scandalous life, she threatens to have him beheaded, as she has just done with the headmaster of Eton, who has been telling his students about Messalina.' At one stage Victoria also confesses how, after being rendered weak-kneed by a sultry recitation of *The Excursion*, she was unable to resist the advances of the philanderer Wordsworth. If Swinburne were writing today, he would be Kim Newman.

Wasp War! The wasps in the space over our bedroom window-frame had become too loud and terrifyingly numerous. Their exit hole was just reachable with a long pole when I balanced at the very top of our step-ladder, so Phase 1 consisted of my taking unerring aim with an artfully carved wedge of polystyrene fixed to the end of the pole and, distracted by sudden crazed wasp attack, falling off the ladder. Phase 2 saw the hole neatly blocked and great agglutinated gobs of wasp crawling frustratedly around. Phase 3: 'By Klono, Grey Lensman, the Boskonians are breaking down our screens!' ... in a steady snowfall of wasp-masticated polystyrene. Phase 4 got a bit manic as we unleashed ravaging cosmic energies, with Hazel standing on one step-ladder holding her Dyson vacuum cleaner while I, on the other ladder, had its extension tube taped to a wildly waving pole. Ever so many sucked-up wasps later (NB the secret is to squirt in fly-killer before you empty the cleaner) the surrounding air was clear enough for Phase 5, in which we used our very long poles to pack the wasp-hole with mandible-resistant aluminium foil. Then the little buggers ate through the foil and it was time for the planet-cracking doomsday weaponry of Phase 6: vacuum cleaner with long home-made extension pipe clamped to top of ladder for hours on end and inexorably sucking up all traffic to and from the wasp-hole. We didn't try to count the slaughtered wasps, but there were literally pints of them, nervously sealed into multiple plastic carrier bags and binned. Our old *Britannica* suggested an average colony size of about 5,000. Amazingly, we weren't stung once.

On Silverheart by Mike Moorcock & Storm Constantine: this collaboration leans rather heavily towards Moorcockian tradition as its hero Max Silverskin is afflicted with the 'silverheart' curse that will eat his heart if he fails to complete his quest on schedule (cf. Dorian Hawkmoon in *The Jewel in the Skull*, with the Black Jewel poised to eat his brain), and is then assigned a shopping list of four magical plot coupons, which seems modest for Moorcock (cf. the needed bull, spear, oak, ram, sword and stallion of the second Corum

trilogy) until you discover with a thrill of narrative innovation that the first three items each need to be assembled from three separate components. Need I mention that the relevant spare parts tend to be in high-security vaults and/or guarded by fearsome beasts? Knowing the ongoing war being waged in Maureen Kincaid Speller's garden, I hastened to tell her about the deadliest sentinel of all: "The creature that guards their territory is the most terrible—Gorpax, the slug king." / "Slug king," said Max, smiling. "What kind of beast is that? Couldn't it be vanquished with a barrel of salt?" No indeed: it requires a whole paragraph of Discovering New Powers Within Oneself.

Religious Numismatism Corner. 'Can I persecute some Christians?' Hazel asked wistfully. After some thought I advised against the project, which arose from a realization that all her most admired Roman emperors tended to favour this hobby. A diplomatic incident was narrowly averted in June 2000, when Hazel decided to treat herself to—if at all possible—an authentic coin of Julian the Apostate from a Reading shop that we hadn't previously explored. While I lurked in the background trying to avoid being sold first day covers, an aged and decayed numismatist mumbled something interminable over the counter to Hazel, who gradually realized that he was explaining how he'd used a stunning new scheme of mathematical logic to solve the riddle of the Trinity and revolutionize Christian theology forever. At this stage, her request for Julian the Apostate somewhat rapidly became Julian the This One I'm Pointing To Here.

At the end of July she bagged Caligula and Diocletian at a Criccieth antiques fair that was otherwise crammed with appalling chinaware. The most hypnotically awful items on sale, triumphing over strong competition, were Toby jugs with the heads of Cyrano de Bergerac at £75, Einstein at £78, and Scott of the Antarctic at £85. Which made me ponder on the fact that mere years ago I quite deliberately missed the chance to snap up a terrifyingly lifelike Terry Pratchett 50th-birthday Toby jug for only £50. Clearly I have no knack for investment.

Medical News. The doctor has started to take an alarming interest in my allegedly slightly high blood pressure. I waited in vain for, 'Just a shot in the dark, Mr Langford, but do you ever deal with the accounts department at Amazon.co.uk?'

Thog's Retro Masterclass features a naughty passage from Amanda M. Ros's immortal *Delina Delaney* (1935). Addressing the adored lady of the title, noble young Lord Gifford discusses the fashion sense of the cousin his mother would prefer him to marry. Is he perhaps *too knowledgeable* about intimate female accessories? Thog admires the finesse of the closing sentences which deal so neatly with this question:

'... She stands almost a six-footer, with her treads thrust into shoes you'd swear once long ago belonged to a Chinese madman; her long, thin wallopy legs enveloped in silken hose, with birds, fish, fowl, cabbage leaves, ay, by Jove, with every species of animal, vegetable and mineral rainbowed in coloured fashion over their flimsy fronts.

'Then her garters! Ah, ha!

'How I remember one fine day finding a lost one that at a time had fastened itself, I presume, above or below the knee, and, thirsting probably for a dash of fresh air, broke loose, and there it lay. That garter! Composed of every colour, resembling the amethyst, opal, emerald, jasper, garnet, onyx, pearl, and sapphire, terminating in a cat's face studded with diamonds. I remember perfectly examining the article at first, wondering under heaven what it was. I concluded it must be a necklet, and proceeded to carefully roll it up. As I coiled it, I couldn't fail seeing the word "garter" worked in emeralds about its centre ...'

Thog is also a great fan of Alfred Austin (1835-1913), Britain's worst ever Poet Laureate despite stiff competition. Observe the beauty of this couplet: 'His heart in holes as from the wash when socks come, / He must have been a most consummate coxcomb.' Here he sings about a mistimed appointment: 'Go away Death! / You have come too soon / To sunshine and song I but just awaken, / And the dew on my heart is undried and unshaken; / Come back at noon.' Hazel's favourite is this disembarkation at uncivilized Naples, where feisty seafood abounds: 'Then out they sprang,—first Miriam, Gilbert next, / Last Godfrid,—and the eager host pressed round; / Rude fishermen, hoarse women half unsexed, / And rude sea-urchins frisking o'er the ground.' Lastly comes a very blank verse denunciation, by a pure young lady, of the villainous pedlar who's trying to sell her sexy underwear and in particular a padded bra: 'And do they wear that lubricating lie, / That fleshless falsehood! Palpitating maids / Puff themselves out with hollow buxomness, / To lead some breathless gaby at their heels / A scentless paper-chase!' Oh yes they do....