
S G L O D I O N

SGLODION 1.5 from Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, England, RG1 5AU.

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Secrets of the Universe Revealed

In 1987 I was a guest of Conspiracy, the British Worldcon, whose fan room sponsored and published Platen Stories--a hefty collection of my efforts for fanzines. The response did wonders for my ego, which had to be held in check with a surgical corset. In 1989, as a guest of the very wonderful Orycon 11, I lusted to relive the glory of a Collected Me, but general inefficiency delayed this until, with a despairing cry of "Bloody hell, only two weeks to go," I rapidly hurled together this assortment of my scribblings since Conspiracy. Torn raw and bleeding from the wellsprings of the human soul, it is a harrowing epic of war and peace, of sons and lovers, of mice and men.... "Comparable to Lionel Fanthorpe at his best!" (Locus).

A Week of Sunday

"We're asking fans to write about what they do on their day off," said mighty Irwin Hirsh, secure in his possession of an infallible editorial Formula.

I wonder. In those John D. MacDonald thrillers, Travis McGee has the luxurious habit of taking advance instalments of his retirement whenever time allows. In theory I have the same approach to my day (or quarter-day, or whatever it is) off: relaxation comes in little fragments, scattered through the grey toil of the week like those rare edible bits found in a convention breakfast. While admittedly the Langford life-style isn't as exotic as McGee's, it does give me the advantage of not needing to spend this precious free time recovering from debilitating encounters with sub-machine guns or assassins armed with meat-cleavers....

Monday. Here I am reading a book, as respite from a long day of reading books. Reviews and publishers' reports (I am apparently the Gollancz expert on everything hero editor Malcolm Edwards can't stomach reading) mean endless skiffy epics of mega-genocide across the galaxies, where the fabric of time and space disintegrates in chapter six and that of style and syntax on page two. Or, alternatively, fantasy trilogies whose middle volume comprises a 3500-mile trek across harrowingly familiar landscapes to within sight of the mountain-ringed stronghold where the Black Lord in the East (wielder of Dark Powers, uncountable Troglodyte Hordes and remorseless Capital Letters) is

gloating beneath his onion domes and refusing to continue the disarmament talks. Instead, now it's well into the evening, I can relax with an early Michael Innes detective story, a lightweight mathematical work, a straight modern novel...or even some SF/fantasy which, oh joy, I don't have to review! Maybe wine tasters feel like this after a day of austere judgements on spat-out mouthfuls, and fancy a long uncritical swallow of honest plonk.

Tuesday. Here I am redecorating the house, or to be more precise, tearing it apart. Endless hours of glowing green screens and tatty grey typescript have left me wanting to sublimate it all, to wrench down rotted shelving like a macho man and strip old wallpaper with the merciless cool of Rambo. "Take that!" I cry as weevil-infested timbers (representing for the moment the bony structure of the publishing executive most recently responsible for remaindering me) fail to resist my crowbar. Sometimes I can keep up this crazed killer enthusiasm for whole minutes.

Wednesday. In the garden the story's much the same as indoors. Rank grass is attacked with a sickle plus a rotating electric lash thing which would have brought moans of envy from von Sacher-Masoch. Gigantic weeds are wrested from the ground, disgusting insects tossed over the wall for our neighbours' edification. After these delicate attentions the back garden always manages to look less kempt than before, and to camouflage this I kindle vast bonfires of dead leaves (available all the year round thanks to hordes of holly trees: evergreen also means ever-shedding, a permanent case of arboreal dandruff), cardboard boxes in which review copies have arrived, and freebie computer newspapers which appear faster than they can be wrenched from their polythene envelopes, let alone read.... Of course the proper thing to do with a garden is dig it, but here we meet the final stubborn residue of Hazel's one-time archaeological leanings. Our garden is not to be dug. Rather is it to be turned over a spoonful at a time, the grains of soil brushed delicately away with dental probe and toothbrush, to reveal an inexhaustible historical bounty of clay pipe shards, portions of earthenware beer-bottles, sheep scapulae, small indestructible plastic toy parts, powdered glassware, previous owners' lost marbles, and further fragments of the Great Megalithic Victorian Kitchen

Sink which is slowly being assembled next to our back door, a process not unlike the reconstruction of Abu Simbel.

Thursday. Here I am chatting with Hazel about nothing in particular. It's surprising in retrospect to consider what a vast conversational stock of nothing in particular we've worked our way through in 13 years. External events are mere raw material, as I remember thinking last time we drove into North Wales:

H: "There was a llama in that field...."

D: "I wanted to ask you about the car park notice in Welshpool."

H: "Either that or a sheep with a very long neck."

D: "The Welsh bit of the notice had a couple of words I couldn't find in the English text. Something about boating. They were underlined and bright red, which the rest of the Welsh wasn't, and I couldn't believe it, it really did say BUM PUNT."

H: "...Fool. It means five pounds. I never even thought of it your low-minded way. Look, another saint."

D: "How can you tell? Looks like a sheep to me. There was a rare breeds farm back there: it could have been a rare breed. The llama."

H: "No, the sign, nearly all these Llansomething villages come from obscure Welsh saints. Llangadfan, St Cadfan with a soft-mutated C. I wish there was a book of them."

D: "Maybe Jan Morris is working on it.... My favourite saint was the gorgeous lady who kept getting propositioned by someone you couldn't say no to, the Pope maybe, and her saintliness showed itself with a miraculously off-putting growth of beard."

H: "You didn't shave very well this morning, is that an excuse? (That was a heron that just flew over.) She could be the patron saint of transsexuals."

D: "Why not? Everyone else has got one. I expect Jan Morris is working on it."

H: "I could make a collection of all the different sorts of milk bottles we buy on our travels."

D: "I forgot the camera again.... Bit difficult to put milk bottles in an album. Could you compress them for easy storage? Or you could just keep Polaroid snaps of your milk bottle collection while the originals stay in a bank vault."

H: "Fool. Sea water too. The sea has a special different smell everywhere. I could collect water samples...keep them in the milk bottles. I could sniff them and Harlech or Barmouth or Milford-on-Sea would sort of come back to me."

D: "Snorting it's safer than injecting it."

H: "Fool."

Friday. Here I am having lunch with Chris Priest. This is supposed to be business, as in how we're definitely going out of business, but cheerfulness will keep breaking in. He tells me the latest appalling things about his little Harlan

Ellison rumpus. "I got a letter from XXXX saying YYYY about Harlan, but the bugger won't let me publish it!" I tell him the latest appalling things about L.Ron Hubbard's merry men. "At Conspiracy, XXXX told me that YYYY of Author Services had rung some big wheel at SFWA to ask how much a Grand Master Award for L.Ron would cost...but the bugger won't let me quote him." We decide that using the Ansible Information Ltd computer-manual equipment to produce embarrassing fanzines about Harlan and L.Ron is lots more fun than actually turning a profit. It is impossible to figure out how the world's most inept salesman (me) should be in league with the world's most inept accountant (Chris) to flog software to the masses. We agree that such speculation is unimportant since we're bound to go out of business in a month or so. We've been agreeing this since the middle of 1985.

Saturday. Enough of this savage toil. Here I am watching the television. It is an old Monty Python rerun, and quite enough TV for the average week, thanks very much. (Hazel masochistically sits in on the nine o'clock news so she can tell me about the latest achievements of our glorious government, such as dismantling another portion of the National Health Service.) I usually keep quiet about this modest media requirement, since there's a widespread theory that it can only be accounted for by cultural snobbery of the most overweening and pretentious variety. It isn't permissible simply not to like TV (or theatre, or movies); this has to be a loathsome pose. We hearing-impaired snobs are just too snooty and aesthetically upmarket to Make An Effort and follow a fugitive soundtrack. This has been an exposure of the dark side of Langford.

Sunday. Here I am in the pub. It's late, and the beer has lost its virtue, and my old mate Martin Hoare is telling me in excruciating detail how he would have organized Conspiracy '87 and made it ever so much more better, with parenthetical comments on the overweening superiority of his Seacon '84, the boringness of Interzone (evident to his ideological unsoundness detector without the need actually to read it) and the despicability of all Leeds fans and conventions. I find myself impelled to speak of cheerier subjects like graphics adaptors and RS-232 interfacing. Is my fannish pose failing? The urge is to get back to the little green and amber screens which fill my days, and settle down to serious creativity along the lines of a fanzine article for Irwin Hirsh....

Jetbuff Ltd: British Cons of 1988

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Very early in their productive lives, fans learn that convention reports can be infused with remarkable cool and street credibility by avoiding such mundane topics as the convention. Staying in the bar and overhearing gossip is merely the first twist of the focussing wheel which will eventually

provide that totally original, unpredictable view of the proceedings. To dwell at length on Petri-dish breakfast food and Krakatōa bowel movements is always innovative and worthwhile; but true masters of the form will be careful to fill most of their report with minute descriptions of How I Got There and, if appropriate, How I Got Back Home. This is the approved formula for witty and individual reportage, as used by all the best practitioners. Six million fanwriters can't be wrong.

It's thus embarrassing to realize that virtually the only memories I brought back from Follycon at Easter involved the journey home. (Pause for standard excuse about total euphoria during the con itself, meant not so much to be believed as to avert destroying lightning bolts from Follycon committee folk too numerous to mention but largely called Alison.)

Ah, that endless Monday-afternoon rail journey. Famous Geoff Ryman had a reserved seat but was too nice to kick out the dear little white-haired lady pretending with great thespian ineptitude to be asleep therein.

"No," Mr Ryman said nobly, "I'll slum with you lot in steerage."

We found seats, and Geoff leaned back in languorous anticipation of a long snooze after staying up all Sunday night, and the padded back of the seat fell irrevocably off. Behind was a lethal-looking cluster of edged metal brackets and mediæval pointy bits. It was a bad train for tall fans, Geoff sitting sternly bolt-upright for the whole trip while Dermot Dobson, unable to do likewise because of injuries on the spinal frontier, groaningly paced the aisle and at set intervals rolled up his shirt to show off the surgical corset. This was on the whole less revolting than Martin Hoare's very similar gesture, repeated through the weekend, which allowed you to relish the interesting stigmata of his chicken-pox. A sickly lot, fandom.

Much later in 1988 I laid the groundwork for a heavily travel-oriented con report by attending the World Fantasy Convention in short bursts via commuter train--a grave mistake, not least because it reminded me of the Follycon incident so embarrassing and repercussive that I didn't want to sign my name to any account of it....

THE BOTTOM LINE

It was a convention, Jim, but not as we know it. I was braced for the fact that World Fantasy Convention really means World Horror Convention, but not wholly for the further translation to World Horror Professionals' Trade Fair For People With Expense Accounts.

Penetrating this event was an act more frustrating than it might sound, since the West London Ramada Hotel's front wall had this long row of glass doors, all offering delusive glimpses of Ian Watson drinking beer and all, as it eventually

turned out, locked.... In the bar I found Bob Shaw, who piteously cried "A fan!" and babbled awhile of eldritch hotel prices beyond the grasp of sanity. In the book room, Greg Pickersgill was brewing blasphemous, unspeakable theories, which he then spoke, of convention profitability at fifty quid a head and whose pockets he thought were being lined. (I cannot believe his horrid insinuation that this high-turnover professional event doesn't publish accounts.) Terry Pratchett related with glee how he, Bob and Harry Harrison had requested beer to fuel them for a panel, only for the Gopher In Charge to explain it was soft drinks only because, "We're trying to make a profit, you know." It must have been the huge influx of famous American authors and publishers which made everyone go on, and on, about money.

Soon I saw the bright side of this, when famous American publisher Dave Hartwell lured me off for lunch. At last the gravy train had stopped at my station. Yes, he and Kathryn Cramer wanted to commission a major piece for...The New York Review of SF? Sure enough, Mr Hartwell was exercising his vestigial fan credentials, and even permitted me to pay for my own food.

Returning from this spree, I was nobbled by evil Harry Harrison, who lured me with beer from the straight and narrow path, sat me with spurious friendliness at his side, and conveyed via his usual genial mix of spittle and animal impressions the words, "I've always wanted to make this introduction, Dave!" From across the table came a slow voice saying, "I've read your reviews of me," and I gazed into the argute visage of Stephen R.Donaldson. It is merely to be recorded that my heart did before too long resume its beating.

Free wine kept appearing in an endless succession of sponsored parties, clearly a good thing were it not that I missed all the later and more debauched ones through having to run for my train exactly as London SF fandom moved in for large-scale gatecrashing. The first time I looked into the main programme, it was full of a mass autograph session hampered just slightly by the shortage of mere credulous fans to beg the autographs. (A scheduled reading by six Interzone stalwarts was later dropped at the discovery that the audience was outnumbered by, well, six to one.)

Next time I noticed the programme, a weird mid-afternoon banquet plus awards ceremony was in progress--allegedly the major highlight of the convention. Its actual £20-a-head food was reputedly invested with all the bowel-churning terrors perfected by the Union of Hotel Caterers; the cruellest rumour concerned a table mix-up which led to three mere fans, possibly the only persons present who'd actually paid for the meal out of their own pockets, being bumped from their places in mid-hors d'oeuvres. I believe the committee gave them some alcoholic compensation, but Charlie Brown and Andy Porter were later beset with suggestions

for striking headlines based on the fact that one of these unfortunates was called Stephen King. Lots of people won awards; the Ramsey Campbell Award (as the British Fantasy trophy is affectionately known) went to Ramsey Campbell, and Karl Edward Wagner walked out in strong hysterics because--if I interpreted him correctly--David Hartwell had given too many awards to David Hartwell.

In some ways it was probably a good trade fair, replete with luxury, freebies, influential business contacts and smoke-filled rooms. A mere change of name might eliminate the bewilderment and recriminations arising from the fact that many fans understand something slightly different by the word "convention". On my final, empty-pocketed journey home (note the traditional demands of this classic literary form) I was saved from rail-borne dehydration only by the solicitude of Diana Wynne Jones, who will be getting another rave review shortly.

The Plain People of Fandom: Is that all? What about the ever so embarrassing bit you mentioned?

Myself: Rats. I was hoping you'd forgotten that.

THE STATE OF THE ART

Despite my years and dignity I'm still not immune from totally cretinous actions, and Follycon saw one of my regular lapses. Given three tons of grubby papers to sign for contributors' and editors' copies of the Steve Jones/Kim Newman 100 Best Horror Novels anthology of fave raves from the grave, I drunkenly allowed myself to be led astray by the wiles of Ramsey Campbell's daughter Tammy. The woman tempted me and I did sign, adding an extra L.Ron Hubbard on this sheet, a spurious H.P.Lovecraft on that.... Reader, be warned that such momentary follies can make life bad for a long, long time.

After a terrific wiggling from S.Jones, I managed to blot my crime from memory. (OK, I'm not wholly bad, I did offer to locate sufficient contributors to the book who had sufficient compassion and/or sense of humour to accept copies with signed endpapers "defaced" by the abominable Langford.) Guilt surged up all over again at the rumour--gleefully passed on via the Malcolm Edwards transatlantic gossip line--that Harlan Ellison himself was going to kill me for this. Guilt geysered from my ears at the news that the surplus multi-signed copies were to be sold to idiot collectors at one hundred bloody pounds. "Suddenly," as Steve wrote to me in an otherwise almost forgiving letter, "it doesn't seem so funny any more, does it?" Er, no, squire. (Well, maybe just a bit.)

The book was much in evidence at the Fantasycon, though with typical acumen the publishers had made actual copies hard to find--limited to specimens of the amazing super special expensive edition which turned up at a late-night launch party while I was on a train, and faded again at the light of day. The party saw the great alleged Pickersgill/Pringle

Purloining Project, eagerly related by Steve and Kim to everyone who would listen: "They tried to nick books costing £100 each" is one story, and "You expect the books lying round at a launch party to be freebies" is the other.

Next day I had a glimpse of Neil Gaiman's copy, and was furtively relieved to find that late authors like M.R.James and Robert E.Howard had also signed--officially--via astral rubber stamp; while my own acts of folly were as nothing to the inadvertence of those who'd signed too near the edge and run into trimming trouble (half a Brian Aldiss here, two outlying loops of an otherwise missing and anonymous author there, like dismembered relics of who knows what foul crime). And what was this rumour that Ramsey Campbell Himself had succumbed once or twice to the same loathsome temptation as me? Or that...but let's not be contentious, since the recriminations are now past.

Thus my embarrassing confession for today. I still cringe at the memory of those fraught months between Easter and Hallowe'en. Reader, know that promiscuous forgery leads to no good, and desist!

(Signed)

Claude Degler.

Best Foot Forward

One neglected literary form is the covering letter you send with your deathless manuscript. Thanks to industrial spies, I've secured several examples familiar to editors the world over. The challenge is to detect the subtle reason why in each case the recipient reached for his or her trusty rejection slip without finishing the covering note, let alone starting the manuscript. Match your wits against the professionals!

* Dear Editor,

What you're waiting for is a new idea to shake up the fuddy-duddy world of science fiction. Well here it is! Based on the mindbogglingly innovative concept of Earth being struck by a giant alien meteor with startling results, my novel Lucifer's Footfall: The Forge of Shiva's Earthdoom is....

* Dear Sir,

I see you publish science articles, so you'll love my enclosed poem The Joy of Superstring Theory, a true epic in nineteen thousand heroic couplets. Mrs Gilbey of our village Literary Circle thought it was VERY INTERESTING and I know you will not need no more recommendation....

* Sir,

I cannot reveal my blockbuster plot to you as yet, since you would steal it and have it published under some house name by one of your tame hacks, thereby defrauding me of millions. I am on to the games of you "publishers". Before submitting the outline I want a firm contract guaranteeing a seven-figure advance and 110% of gross film rights. For the present I am not revealing my address--attempts to trace me and steal my notes will be

useless. Kindly reply via the classified advertisement columns of....

* Attention: Editor,

Revelations chap. xiii clearly shows us the clue. We know it takes Halley's Comet 76 years to complete one orbit but are you aware that if you add 2000 AD to Archbishop Ussher's 4004 BC and divide the total by 76 it goes exactly 79 times? Since 1989 is actually the year 2000 this shows that the Second Coming will occur on 12 November. My manuscript conclusively proves....

* Dear Mega-Ed,

I was having this ace game of Bludgeons and Blackguards with my friend Irving when we realized the excitement of our role-playing campaign would make an incredibly triff novel! So here, based on that month of fun, is Lepermage of Elfspasm, a brill fantasy dekalogy in which a lovable crew of Elves, Dwarves, Cats, Boggits, Men and a token Voluptuous Nymph go up against the Cold Dark Dread Force of Chaos Blood Death Evil, which....

* Darling Editor,

I saw your picture in The Bookseller and at once knew we would become very close friends! I am 19 and very experienced. Perhaps we could have lunch together. Or breakfast. Of course I will be quite delighted to buy the meal! (Don't you love champagne?) Here is my photograph for you to keep. To fall in love sight unseen--it's like something from a mediaeval romance, isn't it? Speaking of which, I know you'd like a peep at the enclosed MS of my richly romantic historical novel, I Was Edward II's Teenage Groupie....

* Hi, Editorperson,

There's never been a novel like this! Imagine the excitement of a plotline in which all the past Dr Who's meet up with Darth Vader, Superman, Gandalf, Marvin the Paranoid Android, Indiana Jones, Crocodile Dundee, Captain Kirk and Spock, Snoopy, Judge Dredd, Roger Rabbit, James Bond, E.T., Mickey Mouse, Rambo and Jimmy Swaggart! I am sure a big outfit like yours will have no trouble sorting out copyright problems, and then....

* Deer Idiotr,

Plees find enclosed my novvle, it is handwrote Im afraid but you will not Mind this becuase GENIEUS cant be mistakken can it? No retern post enclosed sinse this will nott be nessary as you will See....

* Dear Sir or Madam,

The MS herewith is a very first draft. I could change almost anything on request. For example, in the slave bondage orgy scenes I am open to suggestions (your knowledge must be so much greater than mine). Just say the word and I'll alter the lard to cod liver oil, or the protagonist's name to--well, it's a teensy bit obvious, should we tone it down to Steelram or Goatfetish? Also there are details about bestial fellation which need checking in the light of your mature experience. I'm willing to take advice on any point. Just send a fully

detailed letter of instruction and comment, and....

* Dear Skiffy Editor,

This is a guaranteed SF best-seller--you don't even need to read it! My change of name will assure its success. I have the legal documents all ready to fill in: the final decision is yours. Do you prefer Isaac Amizov, Alfred C. Clarke or Roberta Heinlein? I had also thought of H.G. Welks, but do not think this would be such a good seller....

* To Whom It May Concern:

Not merely a work of high entertainment--my novel is more. Here in fictional guise are the truly shocking facts about the conspiracy of scientists, theologians and armed librarians who control us. Intentionally I have given over six chapters to exposing the jealously guarded truth about gravity alone--not a pull as Communism would have you believe, but a push! Unless you too are blind to reason or controlled by laser signals broadcast from Chinese UFOs, you cannot fail to....

* Dear Gagged Lackey of the Thatcherite Junta,

Your lickspittle rag won't dare publish this, but....

You see the common fault in all these? Not one of them addresses the editor correctly, as "O Mighty Being From Whose Fundament The Illumination Of The World Proceeds".

Misleading Cases

(In the High Court today, Mr Justice Gleet summed up in the case of Stupefying Software Ltd vs. Halibut:)

Members of the jury, the facts of this case have already been put to you several times by counsel, with such matchless eloquence as to render them in all respects unintelligible. Numerous weighty documents have been placed in evidence, and although these purport to be elementary "software manuals" devised for easy assimilation by the meanest intellect, it would perhaps not be unjust to suspect that their meaning eludes you, as it eludes me. Let me therefore strive to convey to you, probably for the first time, what this litigation is about.

Stupefying Software Ltd, as its managing director has informed this Court, is devoted to expanding the frontiers of knowledge, freeing mankind from mental drudgery, and (whether this be desirable or no) hurling its customers into the twenty-first century. To this laudable end, the company manufactures various useful computer "programs".

It is agreed that the defendant, Mr Alfred Halibut, purchased one such item, a light-hearted and diversionary game entitled MegaRambo Nukefest. Nor is it disputed, irrespective of the loathing with which one might regard it, that this was delivered in good working order.

Stupefying Software Ltd has consequently argued, with a smugness which you may or may not have found intolerable, that its part of the contract was

amply fulfilled. Yet even the most bovine and slumbrous occupant of the jury box (I do not by this phrase wish to call undue attention to the snoring gentleman in the back row) must have dimly gathered that Mr Halibut disagrees.

The point at issue is an interesting and legally lucrative one, concerning as it does the unwritten aspects of the transaction. Let me strive to offer some examples sufficiently elementary for your limited comprehension. Were you, as a keen gardener, to order three tons of horse manure for the delectation of your roses, the technical fulfilment of this order would not impress you should the substance be unloaded on top of your car. Were you the proprietor of a lodging-house whose regulations prohibited cats and dogs, you would not feel debarred from ousting a tenant who, while adhering to the actual letter of the law, had established in his room a small colony of wolves and a puma.

You may ask whether these analogies have any relevance, but I hope you will not, since should you do so I would instantly order your committal for contempt of court. Mr Halibut claims that despite providing him with a superficially functional program, Stupefying Software has acted as unreasonably as the villains of my examples.

On receipt of his computer disk, Mr Halibut attempted to copy its contents for purposes of what is termed "backup". This process, the Court has been informed by authoritative if semi-literate expert witnesses, is to the computer user as important as life insurance, as psychologically vital as underclothing. You may therefore consider that on attempting to use his copy, Mr Halibut was rightly perturbed to be greeted with the message, "STUPIFYING SOFTWARE THEIFGUARD PROTECTON SYSTEM, YOUR ATEMPT TO DO ILLEGAL COPYING HAS FALED HA HA!!!"

Despite the anguish and distress of hazarding a "master" disk in actual use, the defendant was resolved to test his newly acquired educational product. This time he encountered the no less peremptory remark, "THIS PRODUCT IS PERSONIZED WAHTS YOUR NAME ?" Having typed his reply, he was ejected from the program with the derisive retort, "ILEGAL USER !!" By trial and error, and (as he has told this Court) the application of considerable intelligence, the defendant deduced the humiliating need to type his name as it appeared on Stupefying Software's receipt; that is, as "A HALBIT", in capitals.

Mr Halibut admits that his MegaRambo Nukefest game thereafter functioned as advertised, displaying tasteful and graphically artistic nuclear detonations over the relevant tracts of South-East Asia. However, his pleasure was further muted by the fact that one-quarter of his computer's screen was effectively unused, instead showing the words, "THIS POGROM REGISTERD FOR; A HALBIT 299 MAFEKING VILLAS LONDON NW27 UNAUTHORIZED USE BY OTHER OR TRANSFER OF LICENSE IS ILEGAL UNDER COPYRIGT ACT PLEASE REPORT ILEGAL COPYING TO STUPIFYING SOFTWARE

AT ONSE !!!"

The defendant claims to be deeply insulted.

Speaking for the plaintiff, the managing director of Stupefying Software has told the Court that without such basic precautions, Mr Halibut would be inevitably tempted to bulk-mail illicit copies to his numerous and unsavoury acquaintances, to advertise them for sale with criminally photocopied instructions, and to hawk them at less than cost on the streets of Singapore.

Here Mr Halibut's case strays from the broad paths of law and reason into the murky undergrowth of the controversial. Such prejudice and distrust, he alleges, left him thunderstruck. How, he movingly enquired until I was compelled to silence him, how could Stupefying Software imagine him capable of misconduct on this scale? His eyes having been opened to the corruption of the software world, Mr Halibut made haste to stop payment of the cheque he had sent to Stupefying Software and which through an oversight had not yet been cleared.

For, as he argues and you may feel bound to agree, if such untrustworthiness is indeed prevalent, how could Mr Halibut be sure that forged copies of his cheque would not be disseminated to numerous and unsavoury computer dealers, or hawked at large discount on the streets of Singapore?

You may think this reasoning disingenuous. Repelled and nauseated though you might be by Stupefying Software Ltd and its products, you may feel that the company's action for non-payment is justified and must succeed. However--

(At this point the jury, all coincidentally computer owners who had struggled with ponderously protected disks, found Mr Halibut not guilty without leaving the box, gave him three cheers, and begged that all costs should be borne by Stupefying Software.)

The Great Con: a plagiarized fable

It is a story that they tell, of how a great Convention Organizer sought to build a convention which should be a monument worthy of his incomparable love for science fiction. A convention it should be of perfect grace and beauty, more marvellous than any other convention had ever been or could ever be, so that to the end of time it should be a wonder, and fans would treasure it and speak of it and delight in its celebration of his love. And this convention he said was to be, because the pearl is lovelier than the most brilliant of crystalline stones, Pearlcon: The Ultimate Science Fiction Convention.

Year followed year as he devoted himself to preparing and adorning Pearlcon. A great hotel was chosen in a place of beauty, amidst snows and hills and valleys and winding rivers and convenient access by road, rail and air. Here was planned a Guest of Honour speech of cunning workmanship; and about it grew programme strands of strange and

lovely originality, and a promised 24-hour bar as exquisite as a jewel.

With every month of effort the Organizer learnt new possibilities, new interests, new features of holistic and multi-streamed appeal. "Those were pretty things," he said of his early plans for quizzes and panels and Women In Science Fiction; and had them put aside into special interest rooms where they would not hamper his main design. Greater and greater grew his cosmopolitanism. With awe and amazement fandom saw the Pearlcon progress reports sweeping up from their specialist beginnings to a superhuman breadth and height and catholic magnificence. They did not know clearly what they had expected, but never had they expected so sublime a thing as this. "Wonderful are the miracles," they whispered, "that love of science fiction can do."

From the central thread of the main programme the Organizer now looked out into a vista of marvellous branching alternatives soaring and floating on either side, of tea parties and soft toys and body-painting and computer workshops and silent movies and self-defence classes and obsolete printing equipment and marshmallow interest groups and mediaeval smithcraft and community singing and Regency history and corporate management strategy and Logan's Runs and construction of orbital lasers and raffia-work, all perfect and unobtrusive in their balance.

Very often would the Organizer look on the planned flow-chart of that vista, deeply moved and yet not fully satisfied. The Ultimate Science Fiction Convention had still something for him to do, he felt, before his preparation was done. Always he would order some little alteration to be made or some recent alteration to be put back again, a Coca-Cola special interest display or a exhibition of dragons in fretwork. And one day he thought that Pearlcon's multiple appeal would be clearer and simpler without the heavy emphasis of the main programme; and after regarding it very steadfastly for a long time, he had the main programme dismantled and removed.

At the next committee meeting he said nothing, and the next and the next. Then for two more he stayed away altogether. Then he returned, and as the subcommittees again stood awed by the serene vastness of their achievement, he saw that only one thing there was to mar the absolute harmony. There was a certain disproportion about the centre of things, the dear immortal cause of all this beauty. A little blot of crudity and bias and parochialism lay incongruously in the glorious expanse of Pearlcon's celebration of the entire universe. It was as if the total summary of human aspiration were labelled, "Made in Taiwan".

Long the Organizer mused, but no one knew the thoughts that passed through his mind.

At last he spoke. He pointed to the phrase that jarred, enshrined in Pearlcon's very name, the

phrase "science fiction".

"Take that thing away," he said.

Endless Loops

"Software," said Charles Platt in menacing tones, "is a disease. Never get into software, Dave."

I laughed. They laughed when I sat at the keyboard, but then I started to hack the operating system. There comes a turning point in life when with horror you find yourself thinking, If (DayOfWeek=Thursday) and (DayOfMonth in [15..21]) then DoBSFAMeeting; ...with a semicolon. It is a bad sign when you end sentences with semicolons.

The program counter clicked to the next instruction. If BSFAMeeting and (Month=January) and FoolishPromiseToPaulKincaid[November] then OhShit;

I was a featured speaker. I had been writing nothing but software for a solid month, and my brain was firmly embedded in one of those spaces that Bill Gibson writes about but never, never visits. I ported myself along a British Rail communications interface to the Paddington data terminal and...stop that...got to the celebrated BSFA pub. Buzzing fragments of indexing routines were milling behind my eyes before I'd so much as touched a drop, while before my eyes was the book entrepreneur Gamma, who had touched a drop.

"Accept data," this SF landmark seemed to say. "I am now Barrington J. Bayley's literary agent. Data entry terminates." He fell over.

Unreality error in central processor, I thought. Some ideas are too perfect and appropriate to be spoiled like this by coming true.

"What's happening tonight?" "I think it's a slide show." "What?" "The barman said." "No, Langford's talking." "Oh, him." "What about?"

"Himself. As usual," interposed Greg Pickersgill.

Thinks: If I open my mouth, all that will come out is 64 kilobytes of hex core dump and error messages.

"Slide show...?" "Gosh, they've arranged the chairs in rows for us. They never did that for the BSFA before." "Langford's going to...."

"Who are you lot?" said the new arrival with the slide projector, before anyone could ask him to renew his membership.

"You didn't confirm your booking," added an implacable barman shortly afterwards, logic centres firmly locked against unauthorized tampering. Had he taken massive bribes from slide-show organizers? No, once again it seemed that a committee person had faithfully followed the traditional British SF Association algorithm of If AllSeemsWell then Repeat DoNothing until CockUp;

Over the ensuing squabble came doomy Pickersgillian rumbles of "THIS IS SHABBY! THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION!"

I huddled in a corner, trying to scrape semicolons from the ends of my thoughts and wondering

if I was going to be let off. But Gamma was slurring into a telephone with the resource and acumen which has made him what he is today (i.e. a man whose income is 10% of poverty-stricken Barry Bayley's). In mere minutes, powerful data compression routines had squeezed the entire meeting into the legendary Troy Club.

This, as will emerge, was all too appropriate. A venue resembling the Black Hole of Calcutta though less airy and wholesome, the Troy Club is best known as the site of innumerable launch parties for Brosnan/Kettle novel collaborations called things like Spew and Secretions. "You should join," secreted Gamma, fondling a representative of the management. "All sorts of SF people are members. Terry Pratchett, and, er, me...and there's Terry Pratchett, and whatsisname who writes those Discworld books, and, and...."

System in naked terror mode, I conveyed. Unable to accept input. Mr Kincaid had decided I was giving a talk after all. The eager BSFA crowd was pressed hard against my chest, making it something of a challenge to draw breath and hold them spellbound. I duly failed to hold them spellbound with the story of the unpublished Guts!--called by Ramsey Campbell "The first horror novel I don't even dare to read!", and now the first horror novel that even Grafton Books don't dare to publish.

(They accepted and paid for it in 1987; by the week of that BSFA meeting they'd just ticked their way into breach of contract for non-publication. Over the last year the authors have fielded upwards of eight hundred enquiries about publication date--six of them not from Neil Gaiman--by advising that seekers after truth write to Grafton editor Nick Austin and bother him. Nick himself dives under tables and out of windows when he sees me coming. [Later: we kept the money and retrieved the book.]

Better to draw a veil over my reading from the Guts! chapters tastefully called "The Chyme of Midnight" and "The Lights Are Going Out", which probably went Repeat ReadWordNotLoudEnough; If EndOfSentence then PauseNotLongEnough; until EndOfMS; ...Like that but less witty and dramatic. My audience seemed to be many echoing miles distant, a neat trick in a bar scarcely larger than a British Rail toilet.

Eventually firm hands were pressing beer on me, too late to lubricate thoughts still all tangled in algorithms and program loops. Abigail Frost and Avedon Carol united to claim the existence of deep structural flaws in the programming of my outmoded hairstyle. I failed to convince BSFA boss Paul Kincaid that important parts of me seemed to have been left behind in random-access memory. Gamma gave an impressive demonstration of how much saliva he could balance in his beard before falling over again. Greg Pickersgill probably said something extremely rude. I probably misheard it.

Next morning, eyes still not quite in focus (which had been routine for two weeks), I toyed

with the idea, glimpsed dimly at the BSFA thrash, of writing some science fiction. But the programming work was calling and there was no time. Charles Platt was right, you know.

If (Software=Disease)....

If (Blood=PriceOfAdmiralty)....

Question:=(ToBe) or (Not ToBe)....

Is anyone out there well-informed on the cold turkey cure?

Eva D.Fanglord Interviews....

INTERVIEWER: David Langford, how did you come to write a book of alleged SF and fantasy parodies appearing in 1988 under the wholly new imprint "Drunken Dragon Press" and bearing the wholly ludicrous and inept title The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two?

DL: Well....

INT: Would you consider yourself influenced by the satirical traditions of Aristophanes, Swift or L.Ron Hubbard? Are the political subtexts of your meta-fictions to be regarded as chiefly of ludic or didactic import? Do you generally prefer to work in the Gothic or the post-Gothic mode? Do you suffer from cognitive estrangement or is it just the beer? Am I going too fast for you?

DL: It's not fair. You've got a great long list of questions there and I haven't got a list of answers.

INT: Arising out of that reply, would you not accept that the semiotic paradigm...all right, have some questions from the easy list. Gee, Mr Langford, where do you get your crazy ideas? What name do you write under? Ever had anything published? Why don't you write up this great SF plot of mine into a novel and we'll split the royalties? Can you tell me the secret of getting into print? Of course you believe in UFOs?

DL: OK. In the post-war austerity of the 1950s, as all Europe still groaned under its immense hangover and a million SF writers were busily erasing "radium gun" from their manuscripts and inserting "atomic blaster"...a child was born. It was without the faintest inkling of his awesome literary destiny that the youthful David Langford first took hold of a crayon and began to glimpse the mind-enhancing possibilities of sticking it up his nose. Soon, with strange precocity....

INT: This fills me with strange nausea. Can we talk about the book a bit now? Preferably--for space reasons--without mentioning the title.

DL: The title has been brilliantly lifted from a critical essay I put together in 1984, and of course you will deduce that this significantly titled piece has a prominent place in the book.

INT: Of course.

DL: You'd be wrong. Rog Peyton (who with his Andromeda Book Co. partner Rod Milner is Drunken Dragon Press) desperately seized on this name when

he realized I was never going to think of a good one. The second choice was "Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid", being the title of a Smithian space-operatic spoof I also published years ago, and which is also not featured in the book.

INT: Ah, but I see you have a supposed Doc Smith parody here, featuring Cosmic Agent Mac Malsenn, whose last name looks suspiciously like an anagram.

DL: Dangerous, these anagrams. The fanzine title I stole from Ursula Le Guin, Ansible, turned out to be booby-trapped--it rearranges as "lesbian". As for Mac Malsenn, he started as a parodic Lensman in a very early and never to be reprinted tale called "Scourge of Space", but by his fourth or fifth story Malsenn was being used to poke fun at all sorts of supertechnological, universe-busting SF written in the Analog or post-Analog mode. You know, the sort of story that's based on a daft speculation reported in New Scientist and has to be written, published and given its Hugo in about five minutes before the notion is hastily evicted from the austere mansions of respectable physics.

INT: Aha. I suspect some of the other pieces in Dragonhiker are generalized parodies too--the Brothers Grimm skit is about the whole fairy tale tradition, the horror novel extract is ripping (as it were) the guts out of the raw-liver chainsaw-subtlety trend rather than any particular author, and this one called "Jellyfish"--

DL: If you want to get technical, that's a pastiche rather than a parody--I wasn't sticking barbs into Damon Runyon's unique Broadway style, just revelling in it and wondering what a straight SF/fantasy story by Runyon would be like.

INT: Any regretted omissions?

DL: I'm saving a few authors for a possible follow-up, which will probably be called "Sex Pirates". (Tremble in your shoes, Roger Zelazny.) The present book? In the blinding clarity of hindsight, I wish I'd dwelt on the sort of grotty moral instruction Piers Anthony keeps shoving in--you know, one of his dimwitted but ever so worthy heroes debating whether it was wicked and deceitful to disguise himself as a tree when the horde of invincible bogeymen was after him, and deciding that henceforth he will practise no more such immoral deceptions. And I half-wish I'd extracted the Anne McCaffrey piece from its niche in the introduction and let it go on and on and on like her later novels, with hundreds more names of characters--I mean C'Ters--and drunken dragons who are barely relevant to the plot.

INT: Drunken dragons...could that be where the press name comes from?

DL: Put it down to synchronicity. Drunken Dragon Press Ltd (the "drunken" is a real breakthrough, being one of the words supposedly forbidden in a British company name) came into being with a loud spung! before I'd finalized that brief skit, whose lack of dragon sobriety seemed independently inevitable....

INT: Speaking of insobriety (this is a highly contrived link of the sort we interviewers put in for the sake of something laughingly called continuity), I notice that many of the stories feature bars or pubs, even the Moorcock spoof "The Mad Gods' Omelette".

DL: Ah yes, I can see you inserted that highly contrived link to lead up to my totally out-of-context remark that "Omelette" was very nearly published in New Worlds Quarterly. Hilary Bailey and (I think) Charles Platt persuaded me to shorten it and make it funnier, and I was all set to leap aboard the New Worlds bandwagon to become a New Wave degenerate with lots of sex, drugs and entropy, when NWQ folded. Instead I had to wait around years and years for cyberpunk--sex, drugs and RS-232 communications interface protocol.

INT: Hey, how about a cyberpunk parody?

DL: What, when even bloody Harry Harrison has attempted one? I toyed with a Bill Gibson heroic fantasy, and got as far as the first sentence. "The sky above the Dark Tower was the colour of a crystal ball, tuned to a dead etheric plane." Then for some reason I hid under the bed.

INT: Speaking of non-sequiturs, how come you chose to spoof an Asimov detective story rather than his SF?

DL: John Sladek's already done a hilariously cruel assault on the Laws of Robotics, in The Steam-Driven Boy...and I had a little fun with them myself in "Sex Pirates". As well as being fresh ground, Asimov's later detective tales are prone to a kind of agonizing, ponderous triviality which seemed ripe for leg-pulling. Likewise those endless, static Frank Herbert scenes where every meaningful twitch of a nostril is analysed in pages of involuted subtlety and sotto voce italics.

INT: But you don't pull James White's leg too cruelly in the "Sector General" parody, which is very nearly a straight story....

DL: My liking for James and that series is fairly evident, yes. Also, he's bigger than me.

INT: Whereas your liking for A.E.van Vogt is, um, well concealed. What's all this in the acknowledgements about that piece being a former collaboration--whatever that might be?

DL: It's a longish story, dating back to my days with the Oxford University SF Group. In the 1970s, OUSFG stalwart Allan Scott and I drunkenly agreed that we should work together on a parody of van Vogt's Null-A books. There were many exciting technical constraints, like the new scene, plot device or man coming in with a gun every 800 words, the totally irrelevant chapter-head quotations, the astounding bits of super-science which for true authenticity must all be inconsistent with each other, the hero's development of unlimited super powers while he remains incredibly slow on the uptake, and the all-important need for a tale of rattling excitement which never actually quite makes sense.

INT: That doesn't extend to van Vogt's third and much later effort Null-A Three, which by way of exciting novelty has a stupefyingly tedious and rambling plot which never so much as threatens to make sense.

DL: Quite.... I made notes on other important statistics from The World of Null-A, such as the remarkable number of times its hero Gilbert Goss-eyn, when not making "cortico-thalamic pauses" (don't ask), was either bound and gagged, or compelled for excellent plot reasons to bind and gag other people. Ever wondered about the formative SF influences of John Norman? Allan's research consisted of listening to old Goon Show recordings and stealing the jokes. We wrote alternate scenes of this world-shaking literary critique, and the result was decidedly odd, partly because A.E.van Vogt has never been quite as funny as Spike Milligan, and partly because (and this is a pitfall about which I warn all would-be parodists) Allan hadn't actually read The World of Null-A.

INT: So this wretched thing did get finished as a collaboration.

DL: Yes, but time passed. Continents rose and fell, the universe dwindled towards its heat death, and I moved house. When I eventually tried to reconstruct the van Vogt spoof from a rubble of bygone civilizations and cardboard boxes, I could only find copies of my scenes. This immediately led to another useful bit of wisdom for van Vogt parodists. After constructing a chaotic but vaguely connected story in our author's inimitable manner, it will be made ever so much more convincing if you then go through and cross out every other scene.

INT: Especially, perhaps, the ones full of old Goon Show jokes?

DL: No comment. After long minutes of revision, I ended up with what appears in Dragonhiker. (Also, of course, with a death threat from Allan.) In homage to the second title in van Vogt's series, The Pawns of Null-A, it's called "The Spawn of Non-Q". Be warned: just as John W.Campbell said, the

morning after you've finished "Spawn" its hidden truths will reach critical mass in your forebrain and convey the dazzling, universe-busting inner meaning, which will be that you have a hangover.

INT: That's quite enough. Have you considered turning your stupendous literary genius to parodying other SF forms? You do break briefly into Lewis Carroll-style verse in Dragonhiker, but it strikes me that such astonishing brilliance as yours could also parody non-fictional clichés like the syco-phantic author-interview....

DL: Please accept this huge bottle of single malt whisky as a grateful tribute to your brilliant interviewing skills, and change the subject.

INT: Er.... Thank you, David Langford!

Gaffer, Chief Grip, Best Boy

The usual credits to the editors who kicked me into producing these pieces. Original appearances: "A Week of Sunday" in Larrikin ed. Irwin Hirsh and Perry Middlemiss; "Jetbuff Ltd" (a regular column title) and "Endless Loops" in Pulp ed. Avedon Carol, Vincent Clarke, Rob Hansen and John Harvey; "Best Foot Forward" and "Misleading Cases" (with apologies to A.P.Herbert) in the computer magazine 8000 Plus; "The Great Con" (with apologies to H.G. Wells) in The Caprician ed. Lilian Edwards and Christina Lake; "Interview" in the BSFA's Vector ed. David Barrett. All copyright © Dave Langford, 1987, 1988, 1989. The exhausted Langford is now going off to get some sleep, as it is written:

"The city slept. Men slept. Women slept. Children slept. Dogs and cats slept...." (March of the Robots, "Leo Brett", 1961.)

"He slept the sleep of the tired. He slept the sleep of the weary. He slept the sleep of the exhausted. For he was tired, and weary and exhausted." (Negative Minus, R.L.Fanthorpe, 1963.)

"The author shot himself after bringing forth this monstrosity, didn't he?" (Robert Chambers, The King in Yellow, 1895.)

S G L O D I O N 1.5

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