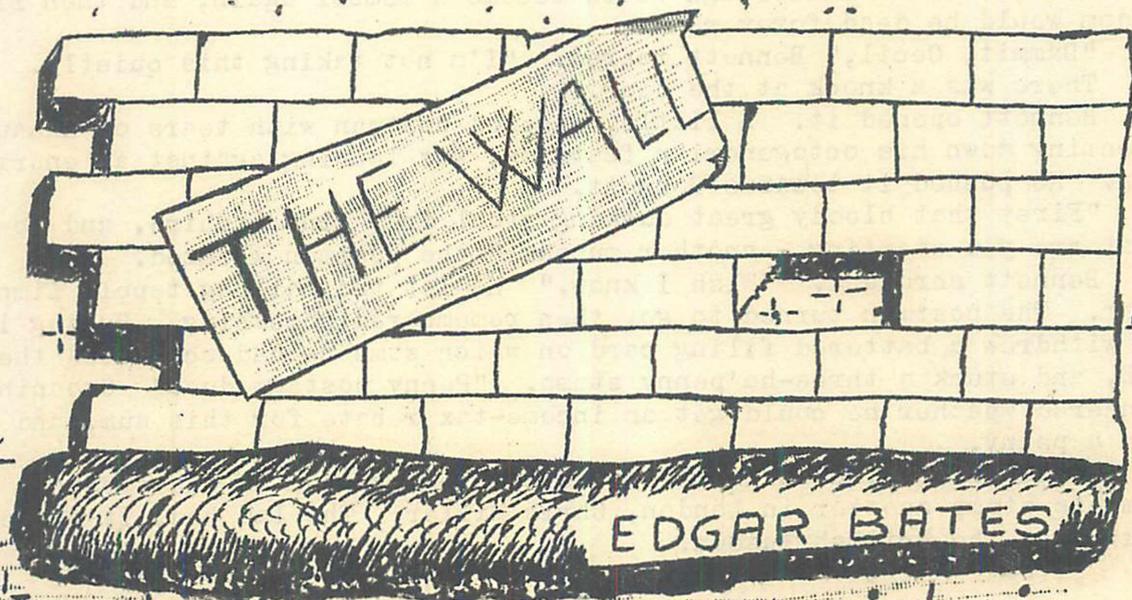


ROUND ROBIN SERIAL

Cast off the shackles of blossoming bye-laws, join us in a tale of fannish fantasy. Here the fabric of OMPA is split asunder by conflicting intrigues -- REBELLION!



PART ONE.

"Tales of Lichtman"

Ron Bennett was a worried man. For perhaps the first time in his fannish career, he had problems other than being the sole member of Harrogate fandom. For the twentieth time that morning, he read the little buff-coloured slip of paper. But still he could find no loophole. The words stared at him, chuckling triumphantly. Some printed, others typewritten; every one of them symbolising the relentless, inhuman power of Bureaucracy:

"This is to notify you that proceedings will be taken against you concerning an infringement of Copyright. In the 27th Mailing of the Off-Trail Magazine Publishers' Association, one Bruce Pelz did make copyright ELEPHANTS in his magazine Pachyderm. You did, by publishing another magazine, Skyhack, purported to have been produced by an elephant, namely one Cecil Bennett, infringe that copyright.

Kan Pelzer

.....Copyright Office, British Museum."

It was ridiculous.

"Why," Bennett complained to Cecil, who was sitting disconsolate and disowned on a witch's ducking stool, "Skyhack appeared almost a year before Pelz was /I

admitted into OMPA."

It was unfair.

"Besides, I didn't even produce Skyhack. George Locke was behind it. I made that perfectly clear in the last "kyrack."

It reeked of fandom. It stunk of a vicious fan, who would go to any lengths to destroy the fabric of OMPA, to discredit the treasurer. With Bennett spending three years in stir, the organisation would wither to a mere ten pages of Constitution, Norman Wansborough would become a member again, and then British Fandom would be dead forever.

"Dammit, Cecil," Bennett roared. "I'm not taking this quietly. I shall..."

There was a knock at the door.

Bennett opened it. A little, wizened postman with tears of exhaustion streaming down his octogenerian features, was leaning against an enormous mailbag. He pushed it towards Bennett.

"First that bloody great ducking stool from Lincolnshire, and now this. What are you starting - another museum?" the postman wheezed.

Bennett shrugged. "Wish I knew." He let the mailbag topple limply to the floor. The postman turned to go, then remembered something. He dug into a pocket and withdrew a battered filing card on which someone had scribbled the words POST CARD, and stuck a three-ha'penny stamp. "Penny postage due." Groaning, Bennett wondered whether he could get an income-tax rebate for this sum, and handed the man a penny.

A slow horror, undefinable but sickening, gnawed at his stomach. It was from his stamp spotter in London, Chris Miller. The lad had, it seemed, been working at the British Museum.

Ron,

Been looking through the fanzine files, and I found one of the rarest stamps in the world. The Victorian Penny Black was stuck on one of the zines. It is a very good copy, and is overprinted ENEY'S FAULT VENUS.

Bestest,

Chris.

PS: Also wrote to Norm Shorrock and you know who. The race is on!"

The card also bore the stamped legend:

MILLER'S SPOTTING AGENCY
You have stamp problems?
We'll lick 'em.

It was bloodstained. The horror in his stomach clawed at his lungs, and he gasped for breath. After a while, he recovered his composure, slipped the card into his wallet, and turned his attention to the mailbag, which was moving sluggishly towards the toilet. Bennett opened it, and waited while a man crawled out, carrying a heavy suitcase.

"Bill! What brings you over here? And what's the Houdini stunt for?"

William L. Donaho stretched to his full height, blinked at the glare of daylight, and grinned. The floorboards creaked nervously under the weight as he moved to pat Cecil on the flank. Cecil staggered under the blow, then manfully

sloshed Bill with his trunk.

Ron took the suitcase from Bill, and staggered. "What's in it?"

"It's your copy of Habakkuk 6. I figured it would be cheaper to fly over with it myself than send it by freight."

"But - but how come you've delivered it to me in a mail-bag? It might be the fannish thing to do, but..."

"Waal, it's like this," the big man drawled. "I was a coupla cents short of the fare from King's Cross, so I told 'em there that I was a professional body-guard... I gave you as a reference, citing the incident when I knocked that roscoe outa that motel manager's mitt. They accepted me as a mail-bag guard. I guess they thought a mailbag was the best place to hide me."

"Anyway, it's great to see you, Bill. How long are you staying?"

"I dunno. Quite a while, I guess. I want to mosey around London a bit. See the British Museum." He leaned forward confidentially. "I've a certain interest in stamps to check for you know who."

Bennett had forgotten about the card from Miller and its sinister connotations. Some sixth sense warned him that his old buddy from the Colonial Excursion days was not all that he seemed. He decided to accept him for the time being, and smiled. "I'm just going down to London myself. There's some sort of trouble to iron out with the museum, so I'll show you round myself."

The A.I. was its usual dreary self. On either side, gaunt lifeless trees speared through the all-pervading mist, whilst the gutters were filled with decayed leaves, water, mud, and broken milk bottles. The tarmac was a slick, treacherous surface upon which vehicles skidded if the drivers so much as touched the brakes. And it had taken the three hitch-hikers - Ron and Cecil Bennett and Bill Donaho - seven hours to reach Newark-on-Trent, a mere third of the distance to London.

"I told you we shouldn't have brough that goddamn elephant," Bill cursed, shaking the Nottinghamshire muck from his turnups.

Cecil trumpeted, pitifully. He was thinking of his native climes in Africa, comparing the sun-kissed rain forests with England's bitter murk.

"It's not Cecil's fault. It's just that there haven't been any ten-ton lorries passing this way. It's most unusual. There are usually dozens."

They plodded slowly through the long winding streets of Newark. "Is this place any relation to the Newark the Newark Road, North Hykeham refers to?" Bill asked, suddenly.

Bennett nodded.

"Let's go along and see Archie, then? It can't be far away."

"No. If once we get off the main A.I., we'll never get to London."

Bill looked at the Main A.I. He shook his head sadly, and followed Bennett. A few miles further on as they passed through the out-skirts of the town, Bill grabbed Ron's arm. "Look over ther! It's another of those things."

Through the mist, across a field, they could see a tall, wooden contrivance. "You're right. It is another ducking stool. And look - there are some people near it.. It's new, too; they've e just finished erecting it."

Cecil began trumpeting in terror, straining at his leash. Bennett dug his heels in, murmuring softly: "Don't be frightened. There's no danger, Cecil. Don't Don't be frightened." The loud trumpeting died down to a pathetic whimper. The people in the field heard the animal's cry, and began to walk towards the travellers. Suddenly, one began to run: the rest broke into a trot and....

"Oh, Ghod, they're armed," gasped Bill Donaho.

Bennett went pale with fear. "If only a car would come now."

"On this deserted lane?"

"Ghod, THIS ISN'T THE A.I.! We must have turned off somewhere."

There was sign post a few yards away. Bill read: "North Hykeham $\frac{1}{2}$ mile."

"You!" Bennett accused the American. "You deliberately led us astray..."

"Hey, just a minute..." Bill protested. "You've got it all wrong."

"No time for that," Bennet snapped. "All aboard Cecil - and hopetthat he can still run after this long march. "

They scrambled onto the dephant's back, as the first of their pursuers vaulted a low hedge further down the road. They were no more than twenty yards away, and running fast.

"Hang on tight," yelled Bennett, and kicked Cecil's hide. The faithful animal lumbered heavily into motion. The armed men and women, brandishing their swords and spears as they ran, redoubled their efforts and one or two cried out in their frenzy: "They're evil." "Catch the fiends." "Burn them." "Duck them."

The elephant slowly accelerated. The first peasant reached Cecil's side, tried desperately to clamber on board. Bill swung a massive fist. It caught the man on the side of the head. He collapsed in a heap in the gutter. The others clustered around him, shaking their weapons furiously. They made no further attempt to follow; the last the travellers saw was of a mist enshrouded group helping their comrade to his feet.

After four or five miles of winding lanes, it was a relief to get back onto the main road. "That was a close thing." gasped Bennett.

"It was." Bill was silent for a moment, before he continued: "What in hell is going on here? I thought witch hunts went out centuries ago."

"So did I - until I received that ducking stool in the post."

"Who sent it?"

"Someone in Lincolnshire."

"Archie Mercer?"

"Nonesense. He's the nobkest, most good-hearted fan in England."

"But somebody must have sent it. And it was only half a mile from his home that we were attacked just now. It's too much of a co-incidence."

Ron Bennett thought for a moment, then laughed. "This is all beginning to turn out like an Erle Stanley Gardner plot. First, the ducking stool, then the letter of threatened proceedings by the British Museum, then the Card from Chris Miller - BLOODSTAINED - and with a hint of trouble. Then you arrive. And finally, this crazy attempt on our lives..."

"Ours?"

Bennett stared at him.

"After all, I'm only going along with you for the trip. I ain't involved."

"You are. Those peasants - they would have killed you too. You're in this as deeply as I am."

Bill shook his head. "I'm getting brownd off with this hitch-hiking, anyway. Think I'll catch a train from the first station we come to."

"You mean - you mean you're going to leave me here, undefended?"

"I'm only a meek and mild fan-ed. I hate violence."

Bennett laughed. "You - who smashed a gun from a landlord's hand?"

Bill Donaho rolled his big, soft brown eyes, managing to look positively bovine. He clasped his hands in front of him, and muttered short phrases of prayers. "An accident. I was clumsy."

"But - I need protection. And - I can trust you."

"How much?"

"Three dollars a day."

"Done."

They shook hands on it. "Come on Cecil. Let's get to London before it becomes a museum piece."

London didn't present a very different picture to the A.I. More houses, possibly. Certainly more traffic. But the fog and the drizzle and the sodden gutters were there. It was the following day; Bennett and Donaho were weary after a full night of tramping along the A.I. Lifts had been few and far between, possibly due to Cecils disconcerting habit of breaking wind every time the driver applied his brakes.

They found their way to Bloomsbury, arriving there fairly early. The gates of the Museum were just opening. Bill was all for entering them at once, but Ron Bennett held him back. "There's a post box, down at the corner. I wonder - if it could be the one from which Chris Miller posted his cards?"

"Maybe." Bill shrugged.

Bennett examined it carefully. Suddenly, he saw something on the pavement a few yards away. He bent down.

"What is it?" Bill whispered. He could see a small brown patch.

"It looks like blood. Dried, congealed blood, it's discoloured the cement... ..And here's another spot. There's a whole trail - leading towards the museum gate." He smiled. "And - Chris left these bloodstains before it had started raining. They dried. Otherwise, they would have been washed away."

"So what?"

"It's lesser clues than this that have solved cases for Perry Mason"

They followed the stains through the gates, across the forecourt to the museum, and up the steps of the museum itself. They led straight through to the Reading Room. Nobody stopped them, and they found themselves in the vast, circular room. And there they lost the trail.

They searched under various desks, and behind book-cases, but could find no more blood.

"His wound must have clotted over," Bennett surmised. "Somewhere, lost in the labyrinths of the Museum, Chris may be lying, mortally wounded, beyond all aid"

"He must have been making for someplace. I'd say, to the fanzine files."

"Brilliant! Have a GDA card. Now, where in hell do we find them - ah, here's a custodian. We'll ask him."

The old gentleman had never heard of fanzines, though. "Are they a form of pornography?" he asked.

Bennett shook his head. "We're friends of Chris Miller. I believe he worked here, and used to study the fanzine files."

"Oh, those things. I'll take you to see them. Chris should be down there -- though, come to think of it, I haven't seen him about today." The old man led them down numerous stone steps, along cold and dusty corridors. Eventually, he came to a heavy iron door which was slightly ajar. "In there. You'll find them on the left. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've some work to do..." And the custodian vanished up the corridor. Bennett cautiously opened the door; The room inside was in darkness.

"There must be a switch somewhere," he muttered, while he felt in all the obvious places. He found it, and pressed it. There was a click, but no light came. "Bulb's blown."

"Or - was taken out," said Bill. He fumbled in his pocket for a torch, switched it on. The battery was almost flat; a yellow circle of light flickered fitfully. He waved it about, searching for any sign of fanzines, of Chris...

Bennett snatched it from his hand. "Gimme here." He pointed it to the ground. A few inches from his feet was a large gob of congealed blood. He touched it with his boot. The outer skin broke and the sluggish ichor coozed out. It was bright green. Bennett passed the light along the floor. A few feet further on, there was another glob - and another...

Nervously, they followed the trail. Several times, Bennett darted the feeble light about the crypt, as though he would catch an intruder lurking out of sight in the darkness. On one side, there were tall shelves filled with dusty magazines. On the other, a low table. A few yards ahead was what looked like a ladder. A ladder....

Or.....

"Another ducking stool!"

Donaho nodded agreement. "You sure we haven't travelled back in time to the middle ages?"

Bennett said: "I don't think so. What more natural place than a museum in which to find one?"

It was constructed, as far as they could tell, of mahogany, and was heavily infested with wood-worm. The stool itself was raised high above their heads, as though poised there preparatory to plunging its victim into the pond. Bennett studied the lever by which you worked the thing for the moment, then grasped it. "Give me a hand, Bill."

Together, they raised the lever slowly, watching as the stool came lower and lower.

There was something in it. A lumpy form, bound to the stool with tight bonds. Ron shone the torch at the figure, and was violently sick.

When he had recovered himself, he examined the corpse. "Poor, poor Chris. What could he have done to deserve such a death?"

The cause of death was apparant at once. He had been severely lacerated by claws. The face and parts of his body had been torn almost into strips.

Bill Donaho said slowly: "What incredible creature could have done that?"

"What indeed?" Bennett studied the claw-marks very closely. At length, he said: "They seem to have been caused by toe-nails."

"Toe-nails?"

He laughed, a touch of hysteria converting the high notes into a ludicrous giggle. "Toe-nails. That's what I said. Toe-nails!" Silence. Then he added: "There appears to be something else, also..." He dug into his pockets, drew out a transparent plastic device ruled with a large number of convergent lines.

"What's that?"

"A gadget for measuring the size of stamp perforations." Bennett laid the gauge against one of the claw marks, moved it along until he got a match. "Fifty-two denier," he said.

"But that's not a stamp term, is it?"

"No. It's a scale used in measuring the dimensions of the weave of a stocking."

"A stocking?"

"Presumably that which covered the toe-nails that killed poor Chris."

"Then it must have been a woman who did the deed."

Bennett nodded. He bent towards the body again. "There's yet another thing, too. Ghod, I wish there was more light..."

Bill said: "I'll look around a bit, and see if I can find any other clues... Hey, here's a fanzine... Nirvana, by the looks of it. Printed in blue. It appears

to have been mailed naked, like Hyphen. Wonder what stamp it had on it... The stamp's been torn off. It must be - it must be that Penny Black that Chris was talking about."

Bennett hardly heard him. "There's something about those marks - what in hell do they remind me of?"

He continued to examine the body. Suddenly, the battery gave out entirely, and the vault was plunged into an absolute darkness.

"You haven't got a match, have you Bill?"

No reply.

"Bill, don't go off wandering round too much...Bill, where are you?"

No reply.

Suddenly, the big iron door slammed shut.

"Bill!"

For a moment, there was absolute silence, then there were a number of short, yellow flashes, punctuated by sharp cracks. Bennett crumpled under the heavy shock of .45 bullets. He fell against the stool and Chris Miller's corpse. One hand grabbed desperately at the edge of the stool. Slowly, he began to haul himself upright. Blood was beginning to trickle from the side of his mouth and he coughed deep in his throat.

A scream pierced the musty air of the dark vault - a scream vibrating with sheer evil. And the next moment a clawing, ravening terror had sprund on Bennett, it's sharp talons cutting deep into his flesh.

Bennett fell to the ground under the onslaught, which ceases as suddenly as it had started. He lay there, covered in blood. He was teetering, hanging on to a shred of consciousness, his body limp, and his mouth slackly formed the words:

"Toe-nails....sexy....toe-nails."

And the dust around him glowed.....

END OF PART ONE

This has been part one of a round-robin serial, entitled THE WALL, and was produced for the 27th Mailing of the Off-Trail Magazine Publishers' Assoc. Further chapters will be produced for consecutive mailings by various members of OMPA, and all protagonists will be drawn from amongst this group. The next instalment will always be written by the character left 'hanging over the cliff' at the end of the previous part. In other words, Ron Bennett now has to get himself out of the mess you've just seen him get into.