

FORUM

Innocence revisited – 3

Since we began publishing this series, many kind readers have written in to make it clear that, while they acknowledge the connection between disaster and my career, I do not have a monopoly of it.

I have been enjoying their contributions and have put them aside for publication after the twelfth instalment.

If you would like to join us, you can write up to one thousand words, and you may use your own name or a *nom de plume*. There is a small reward if we publish you.

The incombustible man

Yes, he had pain here in his right foot, and yes, he had pain here in his left hand. And here too, and here, as well.

I reflected that he might turn out to be a good specimen of what has been termed the ‘And Here’ syndrome, and made certain that I had plenty of notepaper, for the syndromes displayed by a small proportion of litigants are miraculous creations upon which more care and ingenuity have been lavished than, say, upon the Space Shuttle. Sometimes they are to be seen in gorgeous technicolour – with my own eyes I have witnessed a film of a paralysed man chopping down a tree – and sometimes they appear in the flesh. At first they generate a sense of expanding wonder that such things should come to pass, but one can have a surfeit of amazement, and familiarity breeds *ennui*.

Getting near the end of his recital he must have sensed my scepticism and decided that now was the time for the big production number. Pained fingers deftly and rapidly removed his right boot and a great foot was placed on my table, apparently for my inspection. Apart from a touch of grime and some onychogryphosis there seemed to be nothing special.

‘Since I had my accident I can’t burn my toes.’

I wrestled with this communication but did not quite

This series is republished here by popular demand. We would like to extend the original series with fresh contributions. Please send your favourite anecdotes to the Editor for consideration.

Written by John Ellard AM, RFD, FRACP, FRANZCP, FRCPsych, MAPS



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make the grade.

‘I’ll show you.’

He produced a box of matches and with great precision struck one and held it under his big toe. The match burnt brightly and then went out. My comprehension followed it.

‘Happens to the other toe too.’

Off came the other boot, up came the other big toe, and the performance was repeated.

‘And my thumbs too. You have a go.’

I ‘had a go’ as requested, first with one match and then with two or three together. Down on my haunches, sighting carefully, I had no doubt at all that his toes and thumbs severally sat in the hottest part of the flame, as unperturbed as he was. There was no pain, no redness – not even a smell.

‘What do you think of that?’

I did not know what I thought of it then, and I do not know what I think of it now. I put it in my report to his solicitor and it was received without comment. Perhaps a court sat upon it and made a finding, but it did not reach my ears.

In another age more enthusiastic inquisitors might have tried to burn him *in toto* as a wizard. I do not know what success they would have had; perhaps he had the makings of a great career with the Fire Brigade.

Service life

Someone in the Mess suggested that I see him, so I went off to the 36th Evac. Hospital and found his ward. I remember the charge nurse; she had more coloured ball-point pens than I had ever seen – or have seen since – and was busy constructing rainbows which represented the rising and falling tides of the substances and juices produced by those under her care. Yes, she knew Private Smith; he was in that bed over there. No, she did not know how he felt: she had not spoken to him for some days. I went over to his bed, and she went back to her rainbows.

It was not difficult to know that I had the right man. He had stood on a jump mine. I understand from others that doing so produced an audible click, and then a moment in which all those nearby could anticipate their immediate futures. Then the mine would explode, rising into the air, and then explode again. One frequent result was to deprive the man who had stood on it of most of his limbs, and his genitals, and the others of their lives. They were usually his mates.

His silhouette in the bed told me the story. He had lost both legs, his genitals, and most of one arm. He had a colostomy; I forget what was done with his urine. I sat beside him and tried to talk to him, but he did not have much to say. After a while I did not have much to say either, and I felt that I had begun to freeze over, just as he had.

My duties took me elsewhere, and we did not meet again until the flight back to Australia. Fourteen hours in a Hercules is a long time, but we did not have much to say to each other on that occasion either. When we landed I watched until all the stretchers had been taken of the aircraft and loaded into the ambulances. Then I turned away, and went home with my wife and children, who had come to meet me.

Lesson learned

There is no end to the follies and tragedies of humankind, and when you think you have heard it all there is still more to come. We are capable of doing such terrible things to each other that there are no words to describe them, and there can be a time for despair. MT