
Opening Extract from...

To the Letter

Written by Simon Garfield

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

Published in Great Britain in 2013 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

1

Design by James Alexander / Jade Design

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 85786 858 9

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

By Command of the Postmaster General.

NOTICE to the PUBLIC.

Rapid Delivery of Letters.

GENERAL POST OFFICE,
May, 1849.

The Postmaster General is desirous of calling attention to the greater rapidity of delivery which would obviously be consequent on the general adoption of *Street-door Letter Boxes, or Slits,* in private dwelling houses, and indeed wherever the Postman is at present kept waiting.

He hopes that householders will not object to the means by which, at a very moderate expense, they may secure so desirable an advantage to themselves, to their neighbours, and to the Public Service.

A slit in the door: a novel concept in 1849.

'We lay aside letters never to read them again, and at last we destroy them out of discretion, and so disappears the most beautiful, the most immediate breath of life, irrecoverable for ourselves and for others.'

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

'In an age like ours, which is not given to letter-writing, we forget what an important part it used to play in people's lives.'

– Anatole Broyard

'There must be millions of people all over the world who never get any love letters . . . I could be their leader.'

– Charlie Brown


POST LETTERBOX OFFICE
V R
4
4.0PM
4 BARNES CROSS
COLLECTIONS
A.M. P.M.
9.45 4.0 NOT SAT.
SUNDAYS
P.M.
3.45

Contents

An early pillar box, circa 1853: 'Not a single letter has been stolen'.

Chapter One

The Magic of Letters

> **Lot 512. Walker (Val. A.)** An extensive correspondence addressed to Bayard Grimshaw, 1941 and 1967–1969, comprising 37 autograph letters, signed, and 21 typed letters, with a long description of Houdini: 'His water torture cell simply underestimated the intelligence of the onlooker, no problem to layman & magician alike,' describing a stage performance by him where Walker was one of the people called on to attach handcuffs, and another at which he fixed Houdini in his own jacket, continuing with information about his own straight jacket, his 'Tank in the Thames' and 'Aquamarine Girl' escapes, and other escapology, including a handbill advertising 'The Challenge Handcuff Act', and promotional sheet for George Grimmond's 'Triple Box Escape'.
>
> est. £300 – £400

Bloomsbury Auctions is not in Bloomsbury but in a road off Regent Street, and since its inception in 1983 it has specialised in sales of books and the visual arts. *Occasionally* these visual arts include conjuring, a catch-all heading that offers a glimpse into a vanishing world, and many other vanishing items besides, as well as sleight-of-hand, mind-reading, contortionism, levitation, escapology and sawing.

On 20 September 2012 one such sale offered complete tricks, props, solutions for tricks and the construction of props, posters, flyers, contracts and letters. Several lots related to

particular magicians, such as Vonetta, the Mistress of Mystery, one of the few successful female illusionists and a major draw in Scotland, where she was celebrated not only for her magic but also for her prowess as a quick-change artiste. There was one lot connected with Ali Bongo, including letters describing seventeen inventions, and, improbably, 'a costume description for an appearance as The Invisible Man'.

There were three lots devoted to Chung Ling Soo, whose real name was William E. Robinson, born in 1861 not in Peking but in New York City (the photographs on offer suggested he looked less like an enigmatic man from the East and more like Nick Hornby with a hat on). One of the letters for sale discussed Chung Ling Soo's rival, Ching Ling Foo, who claimed that Chung Ling Soo stole not only the basics of his name, but also the basis of his act; their feud reached its apotheosis in 1905, when both Soo and Foo were performing in London at the same time, and each expressed the sort of inscrutable fury that did neither of them any harm at the box office. In order to cultivate his persona, Chung Ling Soo never spoke during his act, which included breathing smoke and catching fish from the air.

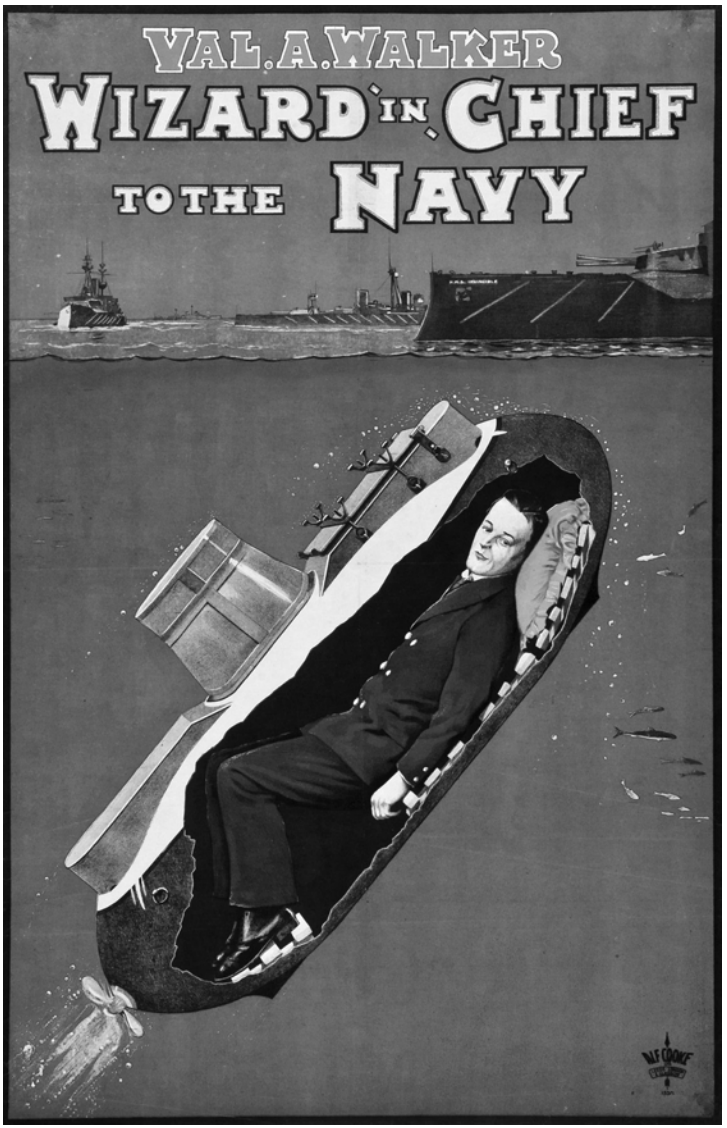
Between 1901 and 1918 Soo played the Swansea Empire, the Olympia Shoreditch, the Camberwell Palace, the Ardwick Green Empire and Preston Royal Hippodrome, but his career met an unforgettable end onstage at the Wood Green Empire – possibly the result of a curse laid by Ching Ling Foo – when his famous 'catch a bullet in the teeth' trick didn't quite work out as hoped. On this occasion, his gun fired a real bullet rather than just a blank charge, and, as historians of Soo are quick to point out, his first words on stage were also necessarily his last: 'Something's happened – lower the curtain!' Among the lots at the Bloomsbury sale were letters from assistants and friends of Soo claiming he had been born in Birmingham, England, at the back of the Fox Hotel, and

that the death may not have been an accident. 'We who knew Robinson,' wrote a man called Harry Bosworth, 'say he was murdered.'

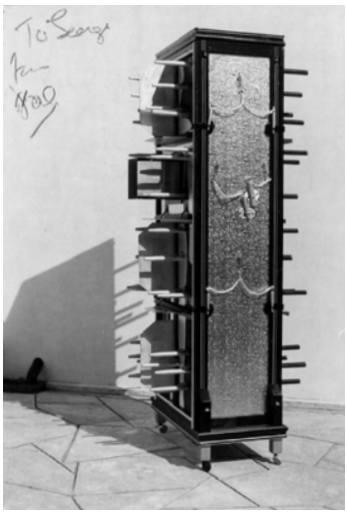
But the stand-out lot was the one involving the Radium Girl, the Aquamarine Girl, Carmo & the Vanishing Lion, Walking Through a Wall and the origins of sawing thin female assistants – the items relating to the life of Val Walker. Walker, who took the name Valentine because he was born on 14 February 1890, was once a star performer. He was known as 'The Wizard of the Navy' for his ability to escape a locked metal tank submerged in water during the First World War (a feat later repeated in the Thames in 1920, witnessed by police and military departments and 300 members of the press). After drying himself he received offers to perform all over the world. He subsequently escaped from jails in Argentina, Brazil, and, according to information contained in the auction lot, 'various prisons in Spain'.

Walker was the David Copperfield and David Blaine of his day. He appeared in shows at Maskelyne's Theatre of Mystery, next door to BBC Broadcasting House, the most famous European magic theatre of the time (perhaps of all time), surprising audiences with swift escapes from manacles, straitjackets and a 9-foot-long submarine submerged in a glass-fronted tank at the centre of the stage. And then there was the trick with which Walker secured his place in magical history: Radium Girl. This was known as a 'big box' restoration illusion, a process in which a skilled woman enters a cabinet and is either sawn in half or penetrated with swords, and then somehow emerges unscathed. Walker's role in this trick is fundamental; he is believed to have invented it in 1919, building the box himself and devising the necessary diversions and patter to make it the climax of his show.

The trick is one we've seen on stage or television for 95 years: an empty box on casters is displayed to the audience,



Britain's secret weapon: Val Walker contemplates his escape.



The Radium Girl illusion.

its sides and base are banged, an assistant climbs in and is secured by chains, the door is closed, knives or poles are inserted into pre-drilled holes, followed by sheets of metal that seem to slice the woman into three parts (feminists have consistently placed this trick in their Top Five). Weaned on cynicism and trick photography, we have become blasé about such things today, but Radium Girl was once quite something. The sheets and poles and swords are then (of course) all pulled out, the door is opened and the chains removed, and the woman is smiling and whole.

But then something even more dramatic happened: Walker got bored. He grew tired of the touring. He became envious of the acclaim and riches poured upon those he considered lesser talents, among them Harry Houdini. So one day Walker just quit. His professional disappearing act was, as might only be expected, an impressive feat: he gave up his Magic Circle membership in 1924, resumed his work as an electrical engineer, moved to Canford Cliffs, a suburb of Poole in Dorset with his wife Ethel, had a son named Kevin, and was never seen on a stage again. His gain, one imagines, but magic's loss.

At the end of September 1968, several decades after he retired from magic, Walker made one final appearance at a convention in Weymouth. But he came as a fan, not a star, and he had a particular purpose for being there, to see the

Radium Girl performed one more time. The magician was a man called Jeff Atkins, and Walker had rebuilt a new cabinet especially for him that summer in his garden. And it really was a last hurrah: Walker died six months later of a chronic and progressive disease (probably cancer), and many of his secrets went with him.

But not all: some of his letters remain, and are the source for much of the material you have just read, gleaned from browsing the files at Bloomsbury Auctions the day before the sale. His letters provide news of his great entertainments, but of a personal life that appears to have been conducted with modesty and decorum and a great care for others (until the end, as we shall see).

The more I read them, the more I wanted to know. Within a couple of days – from seeing the mention of Walker in the sale catalogue online, to skimming through these remnants of his life at the auction preview – I had fallen under the spell of a man I had never previously heard of. And I had become enveloped by a word he used more than once in his letters, his *milieu*, a world that relied for its buoyancy on deception, apparition and secrecy. But now the letters were letting me in.

Val Walker's correspondence, both inconsequential and profound, was doing what correspondence has so alluringly, convincingly and reliably done for more than 2,000 years, embracing the reader with a disarming blend of confession and emotion, and (for I had no reason to suspect otherwise, despite the illusory subject matter) integrity. His letters had secured what his former spiritualist medium colleagues could not – a new friend from beyond the grave. The folders now at auction not only prised open a subculture that was growing ever more clandestine with the cloaky passage of time, but presented a trove of incidental personal details that, in other circumstances, would have bordered on intrusion. I sat in that auction room and wondered: what else could bring back a

world and an individual's role within it so directly, so intensely, so plainly and so irresistibly? Only letters.

Letters have the power to grant us a larger life. They reveal motivation and deepen understanding. They are evidential. They change lives, and they rewire history. The world once used to run upon their transmission – the lubricant of human interaction and the freefall of ideas, the silent conduit of the worthy and the incidental, the time we were coming for dinner, the account of our marvellous day, the weightiest joys and sorrows of love. It must have seemed impossible that their worth would ever be taken for granted or swept aside. A world without letters would surely be a world without oxygen.

This is a book about a world without letters, or at least this possibility. It is a book about what we have lost by replacing letters with email – the post, the envelope, a pen, a slower cerebral whirring, the use of the whole of our hands and not just the tips of our fingers. It is a celebration of what has gone before, and the value we place on literacy, good thinking and thinking ahead. I wonder if it is not also a book about kindness.

The digitisation of communication has effected dramatic changes in our lives, but the impact on letter-writing – so gradual and so fundamental – has slipped by like an English summer. Something that has been crucial to our economic and emotional well-being since ancient Greece has been slowly evaporating for two decades, and in two more the licking of a stamp will seem as antiquated to a future generation as the paddle steamer. You can still travel by paddle steamer, and you can still send a letter, but why would you want to when the alternatives are so much faster and more convenient? This book is an attempt to provide a positive answer.

This is not an anti-email book (what would be the point?). It is not an anti-progress book, for that could have been written at the advent of the telegraph or the landline phone, neither of which did for letter-writing in the way that was predicted, certainly not in the way email has done. The book is driven by a simple thing: the sound – and I'm still struggling to define it, that thin blue wisp of an airmail, the showy heft of an invitation with RSVP card, the happy sneeze of a thank-you note – that the letter makes when it drops onto a doormat. Auden had it right – the romance of the mail and the news it brings, the transformative possibilities of the post – only the landing of a letter beckons us with ever-renewable faith. The inbox versus the shoebox; only one will be treasured, hoarded, moved when we move or will be forgotten to be found after us. Should our personal history, the proof of our emotional existence, reside in a Cloud server (a steel-lined warehouse) on some American plain, or should it reside where it has always done, scattered amongst our physical possessions? That emails are harder to archive while retaining a pixellated durability is a paradox that we are just beginning to grapple with. But will we ever glow when we open an email folder? Emails are a poke, but letters are a caress, and letters stick around to be newly discovered.

A story is told of Oscar Wilde: he would write a letter at his Chelsea home in Tite Street (or, looking at his handwriting, 'dash off' is probably more accurate), and because he was so brilliant and so busy being brilliant, he wouldn't bother to mail it. Instead, he would attach a stamp and throw the letter out of the window. He would be as certain as he could be that someone passing would see the letter, assume it had been dropped by accident, and put it into the nearest letterbox. If we all did this it wouldn't really work, but only people like Wilde had the nonchalant faith. How many letters didn't reach the letterbox and the intended recipient we will never

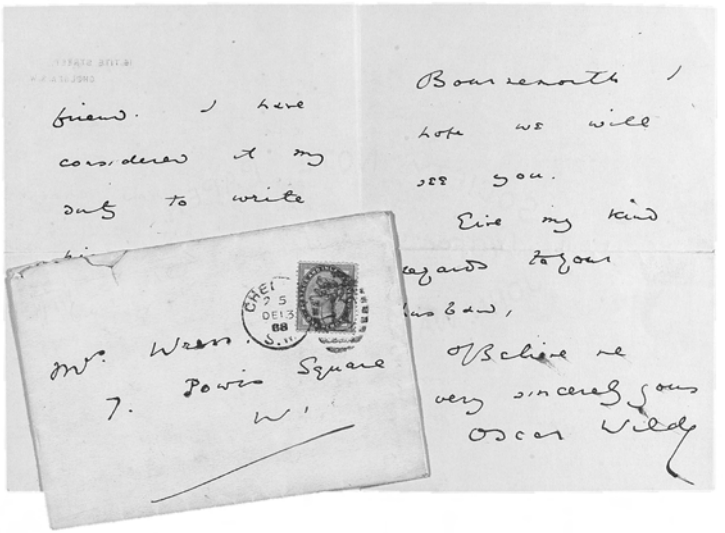
know, but we can be fairly sure that if the method didn't work well, or if too many were neglected because they landed in manure, Wilde would have stopped doing it. And there are a lot of letters from Tite Street and elsewhere that have survived him to reach handy auction prices. There's no proper moral to this story, but it does conjure up a rather vivid picture of late-Victorian London: the horse-drawn traffic on the cobbled street below, the bustle, the clatter and the chat, and someone, probably wearing a hat, picking up a letter and doing the right thing, because going to the postbox was what one did as part of life's daily conversation.*

There is an intrinsic integrity about letters that is lacking from other forms of written communication. Some of this has to do with the application of hand to paper, or the rolling of the paper through the typewriter, the effort to get things right

*** It's difficult not to mention Wilde's idiosyncratic postal system without also mentioning the exalted letter he could not send. *De Profundis*, written on 20 sheets of paper in Reading Gaol in the last months before his release in May 1897, is a study of sorrow, beauty and the position of the outcast, and it begins with plaintive regret: 'Dear Bosie, After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine, as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you . . .'**

What follows is an unapologetic account of an aesthete's life – his search for the exquisite in all things, his extravagances, his questing passions with Lord Alfred Douglas – and an account of the artistic consolations of a life devoted to Christ. Unable to send the letter from jail, he gave it to his friend Robbie Ross on his release, with instructions for it to be typed twice, whereupon certain passages were misread and excised. The original manuscript is held at the British Museum, where we may marvel at the succulent depths of his language and the calm certainty of his convictions.

'I have said of myself that I was one who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age,' Wilde writes. 'There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything. When we begin to live, what is sweet is so sweet to us, and what is bitter so bitter, that we inevitably direct all our desires towards pleasures, and seek not merely for a "month or twain to feed on honeycomb," but for all our years to taste no other food, ignorant all the while that we may really be starving the soul.'



Oscar Wilde writes to Mrs Wren in 1888.

first time, the perceptive gathering of purpose. But I think it also has something to do with the mode of transmission, the knowledge of what happens to the letter when sealed. We know where to post it, roughly when it will be collected, the fact that it will be dumped from a bag, sorted, delivered to a van, train or similar, and then the same thing the other end in reverse. We have no idea about where email goes when we hit send. We couldn't track the journey even if we cared to; in the end, it's just another vanishing. No one in a stinky brown work coat wearily answers the phone at the dead email office. If it doesn't arrive we just send it again. But it almost always arrives, with no essence of human journey at all. The ethereal carrier is anonymous and odourless, and carries neither postmark nor scuff nor crease. The woman goes into a box and emerges unblemished. The toil has gone, and with it some of the rewards.

I wanted to write a book about those rewards. It would include a glimpse of some of the great correspondents and

correspondences of the past, fold in a little history of mail, consider how we value, collect and archive letters in our lives, and look at how we were once firmly instructed to write such things. And I was keen to encounter those who felt similarly enthused about letters, some of them so much so that they were trying to bring letters back. I was concerned primarily with personal letters rather than business correspondence or official post, though these two may reveal plenty about our lives. The letters in this book are the sort that may quicken the heart, the sort that may often reflect, in Auden's much loved words, joy from the girl and the boy. I had no ambitions to write a complete history of letter-writing, and I certainly wouldn't attempt a definitive collection of great letters (the world is too old to accommodate such a thing, and lacks adequate shelving; it would be akin to collecting all the world's art in one gallery), but I did want to applaud some of the letters that managed to achieve a similarly gargantuan task – the art of capturing a whole world on a single page. *To the Letter* will begin its travels in Roman Britain, home of the earliest letters we have, with the discovery that the ancient method of opening and closing a letter – greetings and farewells – are those that we still use 2,000 years later. The letter hasn't really changed much in all that time. But now we may be at risk of letting it change irreversibly.

The auction took place on an autumnal Thursday only a few weeks after the close of the Olympics. A few yards from the auction room people queued to check their email at the Apple Store. Nearby, in Bond Street, there was Smythson, the posh stationer and leather goods shop. Its creative consultant Samantha Cameron, wife of the prime minister, had presumably been consulted on the display of a £50 box of Empire

notecards with an Indian elephant motif, one of the many items in the shop keeping elegance alive against the touch screen odds.

But amidst these symbols of the new and the old stood something timeless. Like a good novel, an auction house promises escape, drama and revelation, and the prospect of greater truth. It also promises commerce, of course, the prospect of proud ownership on one hand and profit on the other, an equation as old as the Babylonian market stall. Occasionally a good sale also offers proper history and biographical insight, and perhaps an understanding of life hitherto denied to us. The conjuring sale was one such occasion. How else would these startling people be remembered in an age when conjuring has been largely reduced to Las Vegas and bar mitzvahs? There just isn't much call for illusionists in the digital age, not only because there are so many other ways to spend an evening, but because the Internet has long laid bare magic's hidden compartments. Illusionists have been obliged to become postmodernists, the masterful showmen Penn & Teller performing tricks and then instantly revealing how they were done, confident that the gap between knowledge and the ability to apply it in performance will safeguard their profession for a while.

I learnt from Walker's letters that the girl in the Radium Girl illusion concealed herself behind a panel before the blades went through, and that the box was deeper than we perceived, but this didn't make me a magician. I wasn't particularly interested in how the tricks were done. I was interested in who had done them, and why, and how these people lived their lives. By the date of the auction I had become determined to buy Walker's letters, and so, on that Thursday afternoon I exchanged my credit card details for a cardboard bidding paddle and sat in the middle of the room as the lots tumbled towards mine.

Walker in a straitjacket.

First there were books to sell. These didn't have much to do with magic, or not directly. There was Dodgson, Charles Lutwidge, known to his readers as Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1930, the Black Sun Press, short split to head of upper joint, glassine dust jacket, chipped at spine ends and corners, estimate £4,000 to £6,000 – unsold. There was Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first edition in book form, 1891, first issue with misprint on p. 208 ('nd' rather than 'and'), darkened, corners bumped, estimate £750 to £1,000, sold for £700.

When it was time for the magic, one name kept recurring like marked aces. Bayard Grimshaw, who had died in 1994, was a recipient of a great many letters in the sale, and he appeared to be one of magic's few super-groupies. He was a magic correspondent for *World's Fair*, the weekly newspaper for showmen, and he became friends with many of magic's stars. Perhaps seeing a gap in market, and a gullible public, he also became a performer himself, touting a mind-reading act with his wife Marion. In so doing he achieved an illusionist's connoisseurship and the trust of the Magic Circle, and amassed a large hoard of oddments and correspondence. Perhaps he thought they would be valuable one day.

As a keen collector – stamps, tube maps, the usual male detritus – I had been to a few auctions before, but none were as sparsely attended as this. By the time the books had been sold there were about 15 of us left, and I recognised half of

them from the preview the previous day. Most of those who had attended for the books portion had drifted away, and although a few others joined us on the phone and online, the prices rarely exceeded their upper estimate, which filled me with hope. And those who were there seemed predominantly interested in the props and physical tricks rather than documents. But just as I began to feel confident that I would get the Walker letters for a steal, or at least something near the lower estimate of £300, a few of the items started going for three or four times their estimate, and a handful went for more than £1,000. One of these was a vast hoard of card tricks, the earliest dating from 1820, an array of 'forcing decks', 'moving pip cards' and 'waterfall shuffle' packs, the names themselves so alluring that I had to check my urge to buy them on impulse.

The lot simply titled 'Mentalists' was a collection of letters relating to mind-reading, with a detailed account of an act performed by The Great Nixon, and one letter from 1938 suggesting that The Great Nixon was such a phenomenon that he might be worthy of investigation in a laboratory. The Great Nixon was a sham, of course, and only as great as his stooge in the audience. But such was the allure of the performers in this period that I imagined an audience where few were prepared not to believe; they wanted the trick not to be a trick, but to be magic. The world held enough impending horrors in 1938, so why be cynical when you could be amazed? It wasn't like today, when magic can only be a trick, and the pleasure is not in the illusion but in figuring it out.

The auction wore on, through several items featuring Madame Zomah and seven letters mentioning the Piddingtons.* Surely it was only a matter of time before Henry the Horse danced the waltz. But then it was my time, lot 512. The bidding started slowly. No one was interested in the Radium

*** A married couple from Australia famed for their 'telepathy'.**

Girl anymore, much less Aquamarine Girl. But then of course it picked up. The bidding was soon at £200. I had promised myself and my wife I wouldn't go above £400. It went to £260, then to £280. I was so hooked now that I didn't even lower my hand between bids when a higher counter-bid came in. I just kept on going. I didn't even know who I was bidding against – an anonymous voice on the phone taken by an auction house staff member. Then the bidding stopped, and I was the last one interested. The gavel came down at £300 to no reaction whatsoever, no gasps, no applause, just another lot sold, and immediately it was on to lot 513. But I had triumphed: I got his letters, and his letters got me.

When I got them home I read again how to saw a girl in half (a trick box, a very supple assistant, a pair of electronically controlled feet at one end) and also how to make it look as though a cabinet was smaller than it was (black tape, a crafty angle to the audience, an assistant who can really hold her stomach in). But not all knowledge can be written down, and the art of magic, rather than just an explanation of it, cannot be taught but must be learnt, by example and crushing hours of practice. Even a full written explanation, quite apart from breaking the Magician's Code, would be like showing someone the cockpit of a plane and expecting them to fly. But occasionally the letters would preserve a record of well-honed stage patter:

> Today I'd like to show you one of the most fantastic stunts you are ever likely to see. Behind this curtain we have a very odd looking telephone booth. There is nothing strange about the inside. Open it and show. Except that there are small holes bored thru the top and base. Honey [Miss Honey Duprez] goes inside the cabinet and we thread the ropes thru these holes to the outside. Music whilst you do this. Put mike back on stand. After threading is done take up the mike again. We are going to try a

INDOCILIS
PRIVATA
LOQUI

President: Francis White, M.I.M.C.
Vice-President: Claude Chandler, M.I.M.C.
Secretary: John Salisse, M.I.M.C.
Treasurer: Colin Donister, M.I.M.C.

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

Hearts of Oak Buildings
Euston Road, London, N.W.1

5th October 1966

John Salisse, M.I.M.C.
34, Eton Avenue,
London, N.W.3
Telephone: HAMpstead 1948

Dear Mr. McComb,

I have been requested by The Policy & Finance Committee to write to you regarding the complaint from Mr. Val Walker that you have infringed his copyright for a trick which he registered in August 1934.

The main crux of the complaint would appear to revolve around the following extract from the Patent :-

" In which a tubular member is pushed through a substantially centrally arranged opening in the wall of the cabinet and out through an opening in the other wall of the cabinet".

Though perhaps the Patent has expired, the registration of the effect in 1934 by Mr. Val Walker proves ownership by him at that date.

If you can produce evidence of this effect being in somebody's possession prior to 1934, then this may well be a point for discussion with Mr. Walker.

We would welcome your comments.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN SALISSE

Mr. Billy McComb,
"Long Branch",
Allum Lane,
ELSTREE, Herts.

A tricky judgment: The Magic Circle intervenes in 1966.

> sequence of completely impossible effects. You'll notice a festive air about this place today . . . It's the manager's birthday. He's just turned 25 . . . he was 52 before he turned it.

Metal blades and an 18-inch square wooden tube are passed through the centre of the phone booth and, ostensibly, Honey Duprez. 'Pull out the tube and blades in the reverse order, crashing them to the back. Turn cabinet once to give girl time to collect knots and conceal them. Then with deliberate moves knock off the three catches and pull open box. Girl steps out. Let her come down front and bow. Then take her place and bow off after her.'

But the tricks were old and almost unperformable now; they belonged in a museum in Vegas. The descriptions reminded me of an old song Clive James wrote with Pete Atkin called 'The Master of the Revels', in which a showman has blueprints in his office of 'the first exploding handshake' and 'the charted trajectories of custard pies'. Where is Honey today? Where is that phone booth?

When it wasn't mourning the former careers and lost illusions of others, the bulk of Walker's correspondence was concerned with defending his own. Looking back at the end of a life, he had begun to worry about his reputation, and about how his cabinet tricks would be remembered after he was gone. Walker had heard that a young magician had begun performing a deep cabinet trick that sounded very like the Radium Girl, and that the trick had been supplied by another magician. Walker became convinced, without seeing the act in question, that the patent for his illusion – which he had registered in 1934 – was being infringed.

This became quite a battle; letters went back and forth for almost a year. 'I fear,' wrote John Salisse, secretary of the Magic Circle, 'that the thing may blow up into a holocaust.' As the letter trail advanced, so the secrets of the trick emerged. One

expert witness claimed Walker's case was futile, 'unless you claim that the whole idea of the penetration of a living person originated with you.' I felt a sadness as I read about the subtleties of the art, and about the great care invested in each illusion. I felt that great magicians shouldn't be allowed to vanish just like that.

In the autumn of 1968, Val Walker briefly re-emerged into the spotlight. He attended a magic convention in Weymouth, where he watched a man called Jeff Atkins perform his Radium Girl for the final time. 'I can never be sure whether it was 1921 or 22 when I built the original in Maskelyne's workshop under the stage,' he wrote. 'PT Selbit watched it in rehearsal and sometime later asked if I minded him using the basic idea for a different effect, which I certainly did not. It was his Sawing Through A Woman that emerged, using the identical cabinet dimensions. I have been both saddened and amused at the plethora of variations on the theme which the public has had to swallow during the intervening 40-odd years. I do not think my version of a penetration has been bettered in this long time.'

Walker informed the weekly magic magazine *Abracadabra* that now he had returned to the fold he was already looking forward to the next convention in Scarborough in a year. But he didn't make it. His letters show a progressive illness: 'I'm not sure I can attend . . .', 'I may not be able to meet you, try as I might.'

A few days before he died, he sent his last letters from a hospital on the south coast. In one of them, at the close, he said he could be 'reached at the address above'. He didn't actually write the word 'at'. Instead, in February 1969, more than two years before what is widely acknowledged to be the first standard email between two computers, he used an old but generally unfamiliar symbol in its place. The symbol was @.