

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"Interesting," said the Fourth Mate, Puffing down his magazine.

"What is?" asked the Mate.

"This article on words," said the Fourth Mate. "On the origin of words, I mean. Words like 'lynch' and 'boycott' and 'derrick' ... Did you know that Derrick was the Public Hangman?"

"I did," said the Mate

"And the words are still being coined," said the Fourth Mate. "We have marconigram for radio message and quisling for traitor. And Asdic operators during the war used to talk of doppler, when they meant Doppler Effect. And . . ."

"I was around myself, once, when a word was coined," said the Mate.

"Oh," said the Fourth Mate. "I suppose you met Derrick in his official capacity?"

"No," said the Mate. "It was in my last incarnation but seven, when I was a Roman..."

"You've already told me about Appius Claudius," said the Fourth Mate.

"I know," replied the Mate "But, surely, even one of your tender years must have discovered that one averages more than one memorable event per incarnation. I think I told you — didn't I? — that at one time I'd been in the Colonial Civil Service in Britain. Frankly, I didn't do at all badly for myself while the job lasted. There was the Black Market (or should one say the 'Blue Market'?) in woad, and there was a nice little trade in War Department Surplus spears and swords and bows and arrows and such to the Picts and the Scots on the other side of the wall. Both Claudius, who was Tribune of the Eighth Legion, and myself were making a fortune. Then there was a bit of a scandal — the synthetic woad we were selling took the skin off some petty Chief or other — and the pair of us were recalled to Rome.

"We could, of course, have lived on our capital, but we were greedy. We decided to go into the Games racket. We toyed with the idea of buying a team of good, vicious lions—after all, the feed bill was small — and then Nero ruined everything by levying a stiff charge on the Lion Trainers for every Christian consumed. So, at the finish, we went shares in a professional fighter — a human (I suppose that you could flatter him by calling him that) fighter. Marius, the Macedonian Mauler, he called himself. He was a slave, of course — but his wife, Flavia, was a Freewoman. She sold him to us — but one of the terms of the contract was that she be employed — at a fat salary — as Trainer and Manager.

"He was an enormous brute, this Marius, and strong, at his best he could fell an elephant — well, not a full-grown one, but not a baby one, either—with a single blow of his fist. Big, he was — but, compared with Flavia, he was a midget. If trousers had been worn in those days, Flavia

would have worn 'em. But she was a good trainer and an astute manager, and for quite a while our investment was paying handsome dividends.

"Then the rot set in. We could tell that it was only a matter of weeks — or days — before he got the worst of it in the arena and it was a dead cert that Nero would give him the old 'thumbs down' when he did. Oddly enough, it was only Claudius and I that worried about it — Flavia could hardly care less. She seemed, in fact, rather pleased about the prospect.

"There was a woman at the bottom of it all, of course — although we didn't get to hear about it until later. It was a little blonde slave called Julia, who worked backstage in the Colosseum. She was a manicurist, or pedicurist, or something — anyhow, her job was keeping the claws of the lions and the tigers nice and sharp. Flavia had heard about this, and used to beat Marius up every night just to begin with and then nag until daylight.

"But as I said, Claudius and I weren't in the know. We told Flavia to cancel all Marius' engagements, then took him on a long, weary and expensive round of doctor after doctor. The first one we saw prescribed Guinness..."

"Guinness"? asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes," said the Mate. "We had a flourishing colony on the banks of the Liffey. Of course, the water wasn't so rich as it is now, but it still had plenty of body. The next doctor advised lampreys stewed in wine, and the next one suggested mice fried in bear's fat. Meanwhile, that clottish Marius had acquired the taste for Guinness, and that was one medicine that he kept on with no matter what else he was taking. Oh, it was ruinous.

"Then, one day, Claudius had a brainwave. 'All these doctors aren't doing any good,' he said. 'I tried Marius out on an elephant yesterday afternoon — only a baby one, too — and he couldn't fell the brute with half-a-dozen blows. Then it just blew on him through its trunk and sent him flying ...'

"The only people who'd buy him the way he is now," I said, "are the lion trainers. And the price we'd get we'd be well in the red."

"Oh, I'm not thinking of selling him yet,' said Claudius 'But we've seen all these doctors, and all they've done is run us into expense. But I know a good Astrologer.'

"The fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves, Horatio,' " I told him.

"Wrong period, wrong play," he said. "'When beggars die, then are no comets seen; the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes ...'"

"Marius ain't no prince" I said.

"'No, But unless we do something, we shall be beggars.'

"H'm. You've got something there. Who is this Astrologer of yours?"

" `Apollonarius'. They say that he's at least 200 years old. He claims to have been the Soothsayer who warned Julius about the Ides of March.'

"And a fat lot of good his warning did that time."

"Agreed — but Julius didn't take his advice. It was free, gratis and for damn all. But we, my dear Primus Marinarus, will be paying for it. We shall take it.'

"A psychologist yet," I said. "All right. Get hold of Marius. Try to make him remember his birthday and all the rest of it. Get him to wash his hands just in case this Soothsayer of yours does palmistry on the side ... "When we met the Astrologer, a little while later, I, for one, was quite willing to believe that he was old as people said. He was tall, but stooped, and as he moved he creaked and rustled. There was a dry, dusty smell to him. On, and in, his long once white beard were souvenirs of all the meals for at least the last 50 years. There were cockroaches.

"His house was the sort of house you see in a Charles Addams cartoon. Decrepit, it was, ramshackle, seemingly on the verge of collapse. There were stuffed snakes and alligators hanging from the ceiling. There were things in bottles, standing on shelves along the walls, at which none of us cared to look too closely. There was a big cauldron bubbling over the fire — and, judging by the smell of the steam, it would be better for our peace of mind if we did not enquire into the nature of the contents. There was a long, thin black cat that followed us round with an altogether too intelligent expression in its glowing, green eyes. Marius was scared stiff In spite of his bulk, his strength, he clung to my hand like a frightened child. I could feel him trembling.

" 'Well, gentlemen,' cackled the Astrologer, 'what is it to be? A cure for the worms? For toothache? For athlete's foot? Or would you' — and he leered, showing stumps of teeth like a neglected graveyard — be interested in my line of guaranteed aphrodisiacs?'

"It's Marius, here; said Claudius, 'You must have heard of him. Marius, the Macedonian Mauler. Used to be top of the bill at the Colosseum

"And now he's on the skids,' tittered the Soothsayer. 'Just a big, ugly hunk of perambulating lion bait He glared at Marius. 'What was your birth date?'

'I can't remember, Lord,' stammered Marius. 'But it ... it was dark ...'

"Where were you born?'

"I don't know, Lord, I can't remember it myself. But my mother told me that it was in the hold of a slave ship ...'

" 'H'm. Not much data to go on, gents —not enough to cast a horoscope. Let me see Tea leaves? No — it'll be quite a few centuries before tea is introduced into Europe ... The crystal ball . . . If either of you two gentlemen would care to slip along to the pawn shop ... I think I still have the ticket somewhere ... '

"No,' said Claudius.

'Then it will have to be the cards.' He produced a filthy and dog-eared pack from somewhere inside his robes. 'A small gamble, perhaps? Spot the Lady?'

"You're wasting everybody's time,' said Claudius. His hand went down to the hilt of his short sword.

"Such impatient young men,' grumbled the Astrologer. He spread the cards face down on a greasy table. 'Here, you!' Marius stepped forward. 'Take a card. Another. Another. Put them down, face up. Ah, what have we?

The Ace Of Clubs, and a dark lady, and a fair lady ... Take three more ... Jack of Hearts — that means that there's a sailor mixed up in this somewhere — Ace and King of Diamonds — that's two rich men.' He looked at Claudius and me meaningly.

"There was a lung silence, broken when Marius whined, 'Aw, gee, Boss, I was just gettin' interested!'

"'I'm sorry, boy', cackled the old man. 'This is the end of the penny section.'

"Throw the charlatan a purse of gold, Primus,' said Claudius in his best lordly manner.

"I threw the charlatan my purse. I was rather surprised when it managed to emit a feeble, almost inaudible, clink. The Soothsayer pounced on it, opened it 'I suppose it will have to do,' he sneered. 'Now, Marius, take one more card. What is it? Oh, dear me, the Ace of Gravediggers! However ... Put them together, now. Shuffle them. Take one card — don't look at it. Put it with the pack on the table. Give the others to me ...' One by one, starting at the top, he showed them to us. 'Ace of Diamonds, King of Diamonds, Ace of Clubs, Queen of Clubs, Jack of Hearts, Ace of Spades. A simple case. Take my advice, and all will be well.'

"And what is your advice?' asked Claudius.

"Take a sea voyage. Now, if I could interest you in my sea-sickness remedy...'

"We got out of the Astrologer's house without spending any more money, however. We went into a wine shop, leaving Marius to cool his heels outside.

"There's something in this sea voyage business,' said Claudius. 'There's a Phoenician galley loading at Ostia now—the Lady Ashtoreth and I know her Captain quite well. Did him a favour once ...'

'She's on the tin trade. Tyrrhenian Purple (rather better than our ersatz woad, old boy!) ivory, silk and such out, good Cornish tin home. I doubt if any recent copies of the Sporting and Dramatic Times have got as far as Cornwall. We should be able to sell Marius to King Mark, for a personal bodyguard, at quite a good figure ...'

"The sea voyage might do him good," I said.

"It might. Well see, anyhow.'

'Claudius paid for our drinks, we went outside and collected Marius, then caught the Underground for Ostia ...

"The Underground!" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes," said the Mate. "It ran through the catacombs. Very ingenious system — one line downhill from Rome to Ostia, one line downhill from Ostia to Rome. It was only a short walk from Ostia Station to the Docks, and in a very few minutes we were in the Master's cabin aboard Lady Ashtoreth, dipping our beaks into Captain Hanno's excellent Scotch. (He did an occasional trip to the wrong side of the Wall for tweed and canned haggis...) Everything, in fact, went swimmingly—until sailing day, the following morning. We heard a commotion on the quay, staggered on deck and saw no less a person than Flavia waddling up the gangway. There wasn't anything we could do about it. She had her ticket. Her baggage was all plastered with Lloyd Britannicus labels. She marched up to where we were standing, seized Marius by the ear and dragged him down to her cabin. We could hear the sound of blows and groans coming up through the ventilator.

" 'We should have known,' hiccupped Claudius. 'The dark lady. The Queen of Clubs. I'm going ashore right now to have a piece of that Astrologer.'

"But it was too late. Hanno had come on deck and was bawling at the top of his voice: 'In gangway! Let go fore and aft! All hands the sweeps! Hoist the mains'!!'

"And that was the start of a quite disastrous voyage. We didn't feel very strong when we sailed, and twelve hours later not even the last of the Captain's Scotch could make us feel any stronger. As you know— you can get very dirty weather in the Mediterranean at times. This was one of the times. All the sweeps had been shipped, of course, and the galley was riding to a sea anchor — but, even so, the motion was peculiarly horrid. It wasn't so much the pitching and the rolling, it was the way in which the ship was ... bending. And every time she bent there'd be a creaking of timbers — a creaking, did I say? A shrieking, rather — and we'd hear the water sloshing round in the hold. The Carpenter kept rushing up to the poop with his sounding rod and line, and every time that he reported to Hanno the Old Man's face would fall at least another three inches. Even we, mere passengers, could tell that the galley was getting lower in the water. So could the other passengers — Flavia and Marius. They came rushing up from below, 'Captain!' screamed Flavia, 'this is intolerable! My trunks are full of bilge water!'

"Hanno ignored her. He saw his Mate on the foredeck, put his cupped hands to his mouth and bellowed. 'Mr. Mate! All hands on deck! Lighten ship!' "We stood there and watched the sailors pushing the cargo override — the bales of silk, the bundles of ivory tusks, the big amphorae of dye. It helped — Lady Ashtoreth was riding a lot easier — but it wasn't enough. The Mate came up the quarterdeck and reported, 'All cargo jettisoned, sir!'

" 'Another half ton,' mused Hanno, 'would make all the difference... Take your men below, Mister, and start on the passengers' baggage.'

"This didn't worry Claudius and myself — we were travelling light. It didn't worry Marius, who didn't own a thing in the world. But it did worry Flavia. She went for Hanno like a wild cat —or like a wild hippopotamus — and if

he hadn't been able to snatch a belaying pin from the fife rail, just in time, she'd have done for him. As it was — the belaying pin bent on that thick skull of hers and was no more than a temporary deterrent.

"Mister Mate!" he screamed, 'here's your half ton!'

"Before Flavia could turn to defend herself they were on her — the Mate and half a dozen hefty A.B.'s. They picked her up (you could hear their muscles creak, even above the noise of the gale) and they threw her over the low rail. We saw her drifting away from the ship, her head and half her huge body above the water, her big mouth open as she screamed curses at us. She started to swim. Hanno groaned — but Marius groaned louder.

"Then — after all, it was roughly the same part of the world in which Jonah had his misadventure — we saw an enormous black bulk breaking surface, saw a white column of spouting spray lift high into the air. A sperm whale, it must have been. We saw the gigantic jaws open ... and close. Across the water drifted the sound of a gargantuan ... gulp ...

" 'The Ace of Spades,' I heard Claudius whisper. (The Ace of Spades ...'

"And that," said the Mate, "is why I always treat fortune-tellers with a certain amount of respect, even today."

"But you started off," said the Fourth Mate, "about names and the coining of new wards and so on ..."

"Oh yes," said the mate. "I'd forgotten after all, it was some little time ago. The new word. We stood there, as I have said, on the poop and after Claudius had said his piece about the Ace of Spades there was a long silence. We watched the whale (if it was a whale) dive, watched the tail lift high into the air and the great, black body dip smoothly from sight.

"Marius broke the silence.

"`I'm glad 'e ate 'er,' he said simply."