

NOT QUITE THE NOBLEST

"I was ashore last night," said the Fourth Mate.

"I know," said the Mate. "You made enough noise when you came back to wake the whole ship."

"I had a rather funny experience," went on the Fourth Mate. "I was walking along Pitt Street, minding my own business, when I ran right into this bloke. I thought it was old Dunning—you remember him, surely, used to be Third of the Byzantium — but it wasn't. It was his double ..."

"So the pair of you retired to the nearest pub and had more doubles to celebrate it," said the Mate. "As a matter of fact, a similar thing happened to me in my last incarnation but seven. I was Roman—not quite, perhaps, the noblest Roman of them all, as Bill puts it . . ."

"Bill?" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes," said the Mate. "Old Bill Shakespeare. He was a boy, if ever there was one ... I remember well the night in the Mermaid Tavern when he'd had enough sack to make him turn sort of pious and treated us all to the Night Watchman's lecture on the evils of drink from Macbeth. It so affected me that I signed the pledge the next morning."

"Oh," said the Fourth Mate.

"Effective for one incarnation only," said the Mate. "But where was I? Rome, wasn't it? Ah, the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome ..."

"Roman in the gloamin' by the bonny banks of Tiber," said the Fourth Mate.

"As you say," said the Mate, "but it wasn't in the gloamin'. The Twilight of the Gods wasn't yet, the barbarians had yet to sweep in from the East, the long dark night was yet to fall. Oh, we were sitting pretty, masters of the Western World, feared and respected all the way from Persia to China. It was good, in those days, to be a Roman. Good for most of the time, anyhow.

"But the day that I'm thinking of, it wasn't so good. The trouble was that there was a Royal Command Performance at the Colosseum . . ."

"I'd have thought that you'd have liked that," said the Fourth Mate. "I overheard one of the cadets referring to you the other day as a sadistic old so-and-so ..."

"Oh, that part of it was all right," said the Mate. "Lions v. Christians was always a good turn, although not much good for a gamble. And there was a new act — Amazons v. Elephants—that promised to be amusing. But it was, as I said, a Royal Command Performance. Which meant that a Certain Person had top billing, and that we, the conscripted audience for the best seats, would have to listen to this same Person accompanying himself on his lyre as he sang songs of his own composition. And we all knew that failure to applaud sufficiently would mean that the next Royal Command show would see us not in the stalls, but the arena. And I'm allergic to

cats.

"Well, we — the Knights, and the Senators, and the odd Consul or two, and the she-Bo's'n of the Vestal Virgins — all had to assemble in the Campus Martius, all dolled up in our best Sunday togas, straight from the laundry. It was a beastly day — a cold wind blowing down straight from the Alps, a thin, penetrating drizzle. We waited there, shivering, while the High Priest of Jupiter gave us a pep talk. He was quite cheerful, as well he might have been. He'd organised things so that He wouldn't get too jealous of the literally dazzling brilliance of his relation here in Rome, His Imperial Highness Nero.

"The drill was, then, that we marched in procession to the Colosseum, headed by a Centurion, a Standard Bearer, a couple of trumpeters and a drummer borrowed from the Tenth Legion. They didn't like it any more than we did — less, in fact. After a day like this all that we had to do was to send our muddy togas to the laundry—they had to put in a few hours' work getting the rust off their armour. (Or so the Centurion told me when he came up to me, before we started, to ask for a light ...)"

"To ask for a light?" demanded the Fourth Mate. "It was Sir Walter Raleigh who . . ."

"Who said anything about cigarettes?" asked the Mate. "Or pipes? Or cigars, for that matter? If you must know, it was for the Chief Vestal Virgin, an old flame of his, the drizzle had put her Sacred Lamp out. She was too shy to ask me herself — I had a bit of a reputation in those days. A true son of the She Wolf, they used to call me . . ."

"That can be taken two ways," said the Fourth Mate.

"So it can," said the Mate. "Why didn't you tell me before? It's too late now. Anyhow, the Centurion got to work with my flint-and-steel and managed to re-ignite the Undying Fire. His trumpeters blew a rather gurgling sort of fanfare and the drummer started rattling away. We all formed up then, by fours, and started marching down to the city behind the military. The day of a Royal Command Performance was, of course, a public holiday, but the seating capacity of the Colosseum was, after all, limited, so every wineshop along the way was crowded. There were loudspeakers though, on the lamp posts and in the taverns . . ."

"Loudspeakers?" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes. An ingenious system of voice pipes, installed at great expense so that even the humblest subject should not be deprived of the ineffable pleasure of hearing the voice of his Lord and Master upraised in song. I doubt if the legionnaires and their big, fat, blonde girl friends listened—they were too busy bawling their own bawdy ditties ...

She'll be wearing Caesar's laurels when she comes,

She'll be wearing Caesar's laurels when she comes, .

She'll be playing on his zither,

Just to get him in a dither . . .

And the laurels will all wither when she comes.

"Petrarch, they say, was responsible for that one.

"Anyhow, there they all were, warm and snug in the taverns, drinking their hot, spiced wine and smoking their . . ."

"Smoking?" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Don't interrupt," said the Mate, "Smoking, as I was saying, their sweat-socks over the roaring, open fires. Warm and snug they were, and we were cold and wet and miserable. I wanted to get an evening paper, but they weren't out yet ..."

"An evening paper? asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes," said the Mate. "Handwritten by Greek scribes on parchment. Not much good for lighting fires with, but ideal for emergency use as a rain cape. Not bad for wrapping up fish and chips either — parchment is more greaseproof than ordinary newsprint. But the evening papers weren't out yet, and the drizzle had changed into a cold, driving rain, and all of us in the procession were getting soaked to the skin.

"Marching on my right hand was Claudius, a retired Tribune. He was always an affable, cheerful sort of bloke and it took more than a little rain to put him out of sorts — after all, he had marched with the Legions over all Europe, and quite a bit of Asia and Africa, in all sorts of weather. He was singing happily to himself — one of the Eighth Legion marching songs. Outside him was Fabius, a long, thin streak of misery if ever there was one. The man on my left was a stranger — actually, I hadn't paid much attention to him — a very stout provincial Senator. Very stout? He was fat enough to attract the attention of the brutal and licentious soldiery in the taverns, and he was coming in for a deal of barracking:

'Wotcher, Fatso! Better clap hearty when the Emperor does his piece—or it'll be the lions wot'll be puttin' on weight!'

`Gam, Marcus! You've got it all wrong! 'Es one o' them ellerfunts wot's fighting the Ammerzons!'

"With all this going on, I just had to look at him. There was something vaguely familiar about his face. Where had I met him before? Tarentum? Philippi? Ephesus? Or was it in Colchester, when I was doing a spell (before they found me out) in the Colonial Civil Service? Yes ... Colchester ... I was almost sure that it was Colchester ..."

"Pardon me," I asked him, "are you Appius Claudius?"

"No," he replied. "I'm as miserable as hell."