

THE WORD

They come and they go, these parlour games played on fancy boards and with fancy counters, tiles or whatever. Mah Jong had its day, as did Monopoly. Now Scrabble is all the rage — and I, for one, will be rather relieved to see it superseded by some other ingenious method of wasting time. It's ... dangerous. Oh, I admit that the conditions were just right—but I'm not altogether convinced that the pentagram was essential, not for the actual calling, that is. There's always the chance, and not overly slim, either, that some desperate, point hungry player might stumble again upon that literally unholy combination of vowels and high scoring consonants. (Frankly, I shouldn't mind doing it again myself just once; just once and with proper safeguards.)

We were three nights out from Liverpool when I saw the game for the first time. I'd left the bridge at 8 p.m., as usual, and had made my usual rounds; then, on my way back to the officers' flat, I looked into the Smoking Room. There were three of them playing Scrabble — the others, with the Old Man, were playing cards. There was Mrs Wade, a middle-aged school-mistress, Mrs Haldane, the widow of an Australian businessman, and Mr Whitley. who was supposed to be an author of sorts—although I've yet to see anything of his in print.

Mrs Wade and Whitley were quarrelling violently.

"It is a verb!" Whitley was saying. "Mind you," he went on virtuously, "I wouldn't use it as such. I have too much respect for syntax. But it is a verb.

"It's not, I'm telling you. Oh, here's the Chief Officer, What do you think, Chief?"

"What's it all about?" I asked.

"Oh, you play the game like a crossword puzzle. Whoever starts does so in the middle, using as many tiles as possible—there a bonus of 50 points if you use all seven. Then the others build up and down and out from the original word — but it must be words, real words ..."

"It is a real word," said Whitley. "Look. Mrs Haldane went across from TAX, adding E and I and T to the X, and made EXIT. I added E and D, and got my D on a Double Word square, to make EXITED."

"EXIT is not a verb!" almost screamed Mrs Wade.

"But it is." Whitley picked up a heavy book. "It's in the dictionary. Here we are. 'Exit.' Verb intransitive. To go out; depart."

"Yes. It's in your dictionary. Your American dictionary?"

"Has anybody a better one?" asked Whitley, reasonably enough. "I think I've seen it used in TIME," I said cautiously.

"Yes — and 'balding,' too, no doubt. Americanisms!"

Well, they went on arguing about it until Whitley, with a very bad grace

indeed, withdrew the offending ED. The game finished shortly thereafter and Whitley excused himself, saying that he was going to write at least another chapter of his novel.

"Going away to sulk, he means!" snorted Mrs Wade. "What about you, Chief? Will you play?"

"I'd like to," I told her.

Oh, it's a fascinating game all right, especially if one happens to be, as I am, a crossword puzzle addict. Every night after dinner I'd make up the four — it was always the same; Mrs Wade, Mrs Haldane, Whitley and myself. At times both Mrs Wade and Whitley would get rather peeved with me; they — one, as I have said, a schoolteacher and the other a writer — thought that they were the only ones who knew anything at all about words, and I was able, now and again, to score heavily with the name of some essentially maritime article. Mrs Haldane was less egotistical than the others, but played a sound, cautious game never leaving the way open for those following her to make a really high score.

Did I say that we played every night? No — it wasn't quite every night, as a matter of fact. There were the five films—our ration for the voyage—to be shown, and one evening one of the other passengers, a rather too hearty life-and-soul-of-the-party type, decided to give an amateur conjuring show. It wasn't bad — although we would far sooner have played our usual Scrabble — and I don't think that anybody saw through more than half of his tricks.

It was for one of his tricks that he used the pentagram. He had borrowed some black, greasy crayon (used for making separation marks on butter cartons, apple crates and the like) from the Second Mate, and with it drew the five pointed star on the linoleum of the Smoking Room deck. In the middle of this star he put a bucket, and in the bucket he burned an envelope alleged to contain a pound note borrowed from the Captain. The trouble started when it was discovered that something had gone wrong somewhere, and that the incinerated envelope had contained the pound note ... The Old Man was still more annoyed the next morning when the Chief Steward reported to him that neither scrubbing brushes, soap, water nor newfangled detergents would shift that pentagram.

The night after the conjuring show we played Scrabble as usual. One of us remarked that our table was standing right in the middle of the pentagram, and suggested that "pentagram" would be quite a good word to use, although it would have to be built up from "pen" or 'pent.'" We were the only ones in the Smoking Room — the others were in the lounge where the life-and-soul-of-the-party -the-party type was maltreating the piano.

It was an uncomfortable sort of night — hot and sticky, and the ship was lurching just enough to make movement awkward and, for some reason, creaking far more than usual. We hadn't been playing for five minutes when Whitley and Mrs Wade were at each other's throats. She used a word—"leer" — and claimed that it was old Anglo-Saxon for a meeting. Whitley — having looked for it in vain in his dictionary, said that there was no such word and refused to allow the score. There was the inevitable

squabble about the American origin of the dictionary, and Mrs Wade, as she always did on these occasions, wished audibly for a real dictionary — the Oxford Dictionary, for example — and told me that my employers had been very remiss in not providing one.

Anyhow, we played on, and eventually the game reached the stage when there were very few tiles left in the box, and very few squares on the board on which to place tiles—to place tiles and to make sense, that is. It was my turn, and I was able, rather to my surprise, to get rid of four tiles — S, I, O and N went on to TEN to make TENSION. I picked up the last four letters, saw to my horror that I had Q (and I hadn't got a U either), X, Z and the two W's.

The others played. Whitley put an A on to a vacant I and scored a humble 2; that three toed sloth is to the Scrabble addict what the gnu is to the crossword puzzle compiler. Mrs Wade got a couple of N's with one E and exclaimed, "Thank God for the printer's measure!" Mrs Haldane found another vacant I and added a D to it.

It was my turn again.

I looked at the board; I looked at the seven quite impossible letters in their rack. I looked at the board again. What actually happened, I can't tell you. I can't remember picking up the tiles, I can't remember putting them down. But I must have done so. Suddenly, quite suddenly, I was staring at what seemed, even then, to be a most unholy combination of letters.

"There's no such word!" exploded Mrs Wade.

"There is so!" said Whitley automatically. "I'll check in my dictionary."

"Your American dictionary! Why, you can't even pronounce it!"

"I can," said Whitley.

He did.

There are some sounds not meant to be heard, ever. That WORD was one of them. Whitley slumped back in his chair, deathly white. Mrs Wade's florid complexion faded to a dirty grey. Mrs Haldane, naturally sallow, showed her horror by staring eyes and open mouth. Myself? Well, if I looked as bad as I felt I must have looked overdue for the graveyard.

And suddenly it was quiet. The normal creakings of the ship's uneasy movement were stilled, the crash and tinkle of the piano in the nearby lounge were no more than a ghostly tintinnabulation, incredibly distant, thin and dreary.

Overhead, the lights dimmed and faded, glowed faintly with a colour that was neither red nor blue yet, somehow, had the worst qualities of each. And it was cold.

Over the table, over the board, there was ... something. A mist it was at first — a pallid, greenish mist, swirling sluggishly, congealing slowly. The thing that, at last, stood on the board was not human — neither was it anything else. Its body could almost have been that of one of the smaller

dinosaurs ... Almost. Its head was more apelike than reptilian. It stank of burning sulphur.

"Well?" it asked irritably. "I haven't got all night, you know."

As it spoke, one horny toe was disarranging the tiles on the Scrabble board, shuffling them.

Whitley started to laugh. It wasn't hysterical laughter—the man seemed genuinely amused at something.

Tough guy, I thought. All right — I'll be tough too.

"What's the joke?" I asked (I hope) calmly.

"It is funny, Chief," he said. "Really funny, The pentagram—and I must warn you not to let any part of your bodies get inside it, its function is to step the demon from getting at us—the sacrifice, and then the WORD (I did some research on demonology once, for a novel)"

"The sacrifice?" asked Mrs Wade. "I can't remember any virgins getting their throats cut in here to-night."

"Last night," said Whitley. "In spite of the time lag it worked."

"Last night? Even then there wasn't a sacrifice."

"There was so. The Old Man's pound note."

"You called me away from a Poker session," said the demon sulkily. "No less than fifty-two souls in the kitty."

"That's just too had," said Whitley. The colour was back in his face now. "I suppose that the usual rules are still in operation."

"We play Deuces wild, of course ..."

"No, no. Wishes, and all that."

"Yes. I obtain my release by granting a wish"

"One wish each," said Mrs Wade.

"No. One wish. Period. Haven't you heard of the Award?"

"I wonder if I dare . . .," Mrs Haldane was murmuring. "But ... The Monkey's Paw ..."

I looked at Whitley, knew that he was thinking as I was, remembering Jacobs' tale of the three wishes, and the mutilated man called from the grave and knocking at the door, and the last wish being used to send him back . . .

'We shall have to be careful,' said Whitley, then. "A foolproof wish ... Hmm ... My novel . . . Hollywood . . ."

"I've got a ticket in the Irish Sweep," I said.

"But you didn't say the WORD. I did."

"But I put it down."

"And you," said Mrs Wade to Whitley, "only said the WORD because I told you to."

"We're all in this," said Mrs Haldane. "I think that we should be able to handle it like civilised people."

The demon laughed. "When you mortals start using that phrase, the Old Man puts on an extra shift of stokers!"

The widow ignored this.

"You'll admit, all of you, that what has happened has happened as a direct consequence of the interaction of the personalities involved. As I said —we're all in this together. The Wish, when it is made, should be something for the common good."

I could, I thought, give each of the others a quarter share in my Sweep ticket . . .

"The common good," repeated Mrs Wade. "That's easy." We waited to hear her proposal. "Bring us," she ordered, addressing the demon as though he were a half-witted juvenile delinquent, "a good, ENGLISH dictionary."

I have never been able to condemn Whitley for throwing that thick, heavy book over the side, and the Scrabble board and tiles after it.