

# “Purpura Lapillus”

By Christopher Blayre

“Whilks!” The Merchant hardly raised his voice. It was only when a passer-by slackened his pace before the Establishment, and looked in the direction of the Stock-in-trade with an expression of interest (which expression the Merchant had learned by long experience to gauge with surprising accuracy) that he ejaculated on a note of interrogation his everlasting monosyllable: “Whilks?”

The Establishment occupied by prescriptive right some eight feet of the roadway against the kerb. It was of semi-nocturnal habit, arriving at its post—known as its “pitch” —late in the afternoons. At each corner sooty flames struggled through greasy lamp chimneys to irradiate the Stock-in-trade. A few yards away a constant procession of omnibuses punctuated the throbbing life of the Edgware Road. The Stock-in-trade, piled high against the back of the barrow, a pale yellow heap of shells, diffused a marine aroma which fought for supremacy with the more pungent perfume that spurted continuously from a little pipe projecting from the façade of the Sausage and Mashed Emporium on the landward side of the pavement. The roadway below the barrow was strewn with empty whelk-shells, the lately-evicted inhabitants of which lay coiled in small circular plates of doubtful cleanliness, disposed along the front of the Establishment.

“Two penn’orth, Daddy, and fat ones, ladies for choice,” said Albert. Albert was a wag, and also a regular customer. Daddy looked up in nervous greeting—he knew Albert and prayed to Neptune that he might be in his good mood. Albert’s bad mood was recognisable by a tendency to critical sarcasm that had been known to blight trade for half an hour at a time.

“Pick ’em out where you like, Albert, you’re a judge.” Thus Daddy, slavishly obsequious. “Whilks!” The word formed a full stop to his every utterance. His lips once unsealed by the necessities of commerce, it seemed a pity not to include his trade-announcement, as a recurrent termination. “Whilks!”

The Professor was returning home, dog-tired after a day of research culminating in a lecture. With the semi-unconscious habit of the Systematic Zoologist, he murmured to himself as he reached the Establishment, “*Buccinum umdatum*.” He paused and cast a rapid glance over the heaped-up shells. The Whelk Barrow, like its aristocratic rival the Oyster Stall, is often a happy hunting-ground for the Professor. At both Establishments an infinite world of marine life may be found encrusting the shells—Polyzoa—Ascidians—Annelids—you never know what you may find. He paused.

“Whilks?” said Daddy. A new customer perhaps. A cut above his usual clientele no doubt—but who knows what strange cravings may suddenly develop even in a Toff whose normal tastes would lead him to Whitstable natives and Champagne wine? Daddy had once sold a plate of “Whulks” to one whom he identified from the picture-postcards as a Cabinet Minister.

The Merchant kept an anxious eye upon Albert. This patron, the small plate poised upon his left finger tips, was detaining the vinegar which he grasped in his right hand. A Lady wanted it, and was on the verge of becoming articulate. Daddy trembled. Albert’s small eyes were fixed in what Daddy could not but realise was a baleful glare upon the Stock-in-trade. Bad luck! Albert was evidently in his bad mood. Slowly he replaced the plate upon the barrow and handed the vinegar to the Lady, with the deadly observation, “You be careful what you’re eating, Marm! A ripple of disquiet visibly ran over the clientele. It was, I believe, Dr. Johnson who observed that

the only requisite for the perfect enjoyment of Sausages is implicit confidence. It is the same with Shell-fish. They share with the Egg, and Cæsar's wife, the imperative necessity of being above suspicion.

"Now then, Albert, what's wrong with you? Over-eaten yourself at the oysters?" Thus Daddy anxiously, and with ill-concealed alarm, hoping to carry the war into the enemy's country with a rapid thrust of wit. But Albert was not to be disarmed. He had *facts* to go upon. The Storm broke.

"Ere! what yer givin' us? Whilks! I don't think. What's this?—and this?—and this?" With unerring eyes and dirty fingers he rapidly picked from the heap three smaller univalves, thicker in texture, whiter in colour, which he exhibited to the clientele in the palm of his hand. From one of them as it rolled over, a small stream of yellowish purple fluid oozed.

"Strewth!" cried the Patron as he dropped the shells among the plates already decked with the red and white blobs which had once inhabited the discarded shells, "they're poisonous— and that's the poison."

The stricken business came to a standstill, but the crowd immediately increased in density. Daddy became active and vocal in distress. "They're all right," he said loudly, "they're only Dogwhilks—a smaller size—just as good, but I don't serve them, not never—'cause why? Not that they're *bad*, mind you, but because they're small, and I always give my customers good measure—full portions—you know that, Albert"—this despairingly, in a last effort to propitiate the foe.

"Oh, yes! we know all about that— don't we?"

The Lady chimed in: "My sister's 'usband 'ad a niece what ate a wrong whilk. She 'ad spots— orful—and she doied."

The crowd became murmurous. Half a dozen hideous reminiscences sprang to the lips of the bolder cognoscenti. The Professor picked up the damning evidence. "*Purpura lapillus*," he observed, the habit of a lifetime over-mastering appreciation of his audience.

There! the gentleman says they're poisonous—'e knows." Thus Albert springing to greet a heaven-sent witness for the prosecution.

"Not at all," said the Professor. Then, catching sight of the agony depicted on Daddy's features, he went on: "They are only a smaller whelk, but as the man says, they are not eaten, for the dye in them makes them unattractive." The Merchant threw him a glance which was a Benediction, and the Professor had an inspiration.

"I will take these," said he. "Have you any more?" In the manner of nervous conspirators he and Daddy picked out another three from the heap.

"I am glad to have them." And with a look of infinite comprehension he put sixpence into Daddy's hand—ostentatiously—and disappeared into the Edgware Road.

"E's dotty," said Albert. The crowd was confused by the multitude of testimony, and dissolved, divided between admiration of the knowledgeable Albert's heroic defence of the public, and sympathy for the mad Toff who was doubtless on his way home to commit suicide.

Business did not recover that evening. The "windy crowd" were not allowed to forget that a great and learned Toff had convicted Daddy of selling a poisonous winkle called "Purple bilious" as whelks. The Office of this Propaganda was the Establishment of the Oyster Merchant a little farther down the street.

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After his solitary meal the Professor returned to his study to put in a few hours' work on his Monograph of the British Mollusca. He was, as previously recorded, dog-tired. On his blotting-pad lay the half-dozen Dog-whelks which he had put down when he came in. Where they lay, the white paper had absorbed a patch of the fluid which, upon exposure to light, becomes a deep purple stain. The Professor looked at it with weary eyes. "*Purpura lapillus*," he murmured again, "and this is Tyrian Purple."

It seemed such an anachronism. The animal that yielded its marvellous colour to the dyers of Tyre and Tarsus, fifteen hundred years before the Augustan age, to become later the distinguishing mark of the Officials and Nobility of the Roman Empire, sold on a barrow in a side street, and the subject of a costermonger's quarrel with a 24-carat cad! And then an echo of his early schooling came down the dream-vista of Time—"for no man buyeth their merchandise any more, the merchandise of gold of purple"—and he smiled wanly over the later Revelation. And again, "the soldiers put on Him a purple robe, and said Hail! King of the Jews." A world of thoughts crowded in upon him.

The Professor stretched himself and stared at the ceiling. Evidently he was in no mood for Systematic Zoology. His eyes fell upon the purple patch again—wondered whether it was not exactly the breadth of the purple border of the *toga praetexta*; as a professor he would have come under the *jus togae praetextae habendae*. He would have been indistinguishable in the Forum from the Consuls, the Praetors, the Augurs, the Aediles, so far as his apparel went. Perhaps as an Augur he would have worn his purple in stripes on the *trabea* in the Dawn of Science. And—as the picture became clearer, the scene more actual—the Professor rose, drew his toga more closely round him, gathered the flowing end over his left arm, and stepped forth from his house to join the groups converging upon the Coliseum.

It was a *première*—he must hurry, for the application for seats from the would-be "first-nighters" had been Overwhelming. Titus had completed the Monument which his father, Vespasian, had not lived to see perfected. The widowed Domitilla, and her daughter and namesake, would be there. A new denarius had been struck with the Coliseum on its reverse as a souvenir of the occasion for the tourists who had flocked to Rome from all parts of the Empire. His seat was in the podium, level with the Emperor and the Senators. Beyond him the Vestal Virgins were early corners, and their views upon the fashions prevailing at court and their speculations upon the coming show forced a treble note upon the great chord of sounds that filled the air imprisoned under the velarium. The gradus had been filled to overflowing since the night before, especially the popularia—which reeked to heaven.

Strangely enough the experience was almost a new one to the Professor. He had once been taken to a contest at the National Sporting Club, and it had made him feel sick; this, and a rat-hunt at Oxford, constituted the limits of his experience of *circenses*. The afternoon wore on. He looked anxiously towards the seats of the Vestal Virgins when the Star-Retiarius disembowelled a really most deserving Secutor—but no one fainted. Then he pulled himself together, reflecting that the Virgins seldom or never faint in the Operating Theatres of our Hospitals. The two spectacles had much in common.

The chariot-races appealed most vividly to his London-bred senses. Some of the observations and epigrams exchanged between the competitors reached his ears with startling distinctness. A shocked memory of the current vernacular of competing omnibus drivers in the Edgware Road came over him like the echo of a song. At first he did not like to look at the Empress Marcia and her ladies, but when at last a constant repetition and unlimited application of the same word had

dulled its primary significance he looked towards the Imperial Box. The ladies were much amused.

It seemed a terrible thing to the Professor that the Keepers should have allowed the Council of the Zoological Society to sacrifice no less than four magnificent African lions, merely to make this opening performance a success. He was on the Council himself, and could not remember the matter ever having been brought before them—clearly the Secretary and Curator were taking too much upon themselves—but then he reflected suddenly that Africa is much nearer to Rome than to Regent's Park, and that the settlement of strikes among the Transport Workers was conducted in the Imperial City with a hatchet. He felt indeed a certain shamefaced satisfaction when the last lion successfully ate most of a rival Professor of Zoology before he could be induced (with red-hot irons) to return to his cage beneath the podium. The rival Professor owed his unfortunate experience to a rash suggestion that man—including the Emperor—was derived from the apes. He so far forgot himself as to shout "Bravo Toro!"

Nevertheless he had a sick headache when he walked home with the Professor of Applied Mathematics in the evening. A dreary dog this Professor. He had lately been allowing himself a relaxation in Pure Mathematics, and had, after four months' assiduous work, proved that there was no possible solution to a problem which he had himself invented. He had talked of nothing else for four months and the mood was still on him. The Professor shook him off in the vestibulum of his house. He would have liked to come in and cadge a drink—the Professor's Falernian was justly celebrated—and go on talking. But the Professor was firm. At the ostium he picked up his letters and reached the atrium dog-tired—still.

Seated at his desk, his head fell forward on to his blotting-pad from very weariness. A sharply pointed object dented his forehead and he raised himself again to a sitting position with a start. The six Dog-whelks were still there—fishermen call them "Stinkers." It occurred to the Professor that like many phrases in common use among seafaring folk the name was amply justified. He was clearly in no mood for Systematic Zoology.

He went to bed.