

THREE LITTLE SACKS

THE WORD WURCHER

In former times people depended much more than nowadays on a well-stocked memory, or at least one differently stocked with little reference to printed materials. Few could read, fewer still had many books, and pens and paper were expensive. So it was, for instance, that names of rulers were associated with tags and epithets which immediately summoned up qualities or events which located them in the history of their countries. In the United States we have a few ekenames like The Father of His Country, Honest Abe and The Great Communicator, but of these only the first and second seem to have settled in, although neither is much used. The Great Communicator is more of a movable epithet than anything else, has been applied to others before, and undoubtedly will be applied to others later.

In Normandy of the eleventh century there was William the Bastard who graduated to William the Conqueror in England and was followed by William Rufus (the Red), Richard Coeur-de-Lion (Lionheart) or Richard Yea and Nay, John Lackland, Bloody Mary, and the Good Queens Bess and Anne among the forty-odd monarchs since the Conquest.

In France there are many more, counting even from before Charlemagne with his built-in title of Great: Charles Martel (the Hammer), Pepin the Short, Charles the Bald, Charles the Fat, and many more. German has its Frederick Barbarossa (Redbeard), Henry the Fowler, and so on; and Russia checks in with its Ivan the Terribles and False Dmitris.

But it is Spain which has the longest and most interesting list of epitheted kings: Alfonso the Wise, Ferdinand the Saint, He of Rio Salado, He of the Dagger, Peter the Cruel (or the Justiciar, if you wish to rehabilitate him), Henry the Suffering, Henry the Impotent, The Catholic Kings (Ferdinand and Isabella), Philip the Fair, Philip the Prudent, Charles the Bewitched, and many more, including a whole line, the New Kings, starting with Henry II (He of the Graces). The lists given are purely representative.

The Spaniards took their love of epithets for their rulers with them to the New World, giving us among the viceroys of Peru the Viceroy of the Miracles, the Archbishop Viceroy, the Heretic Viceroy, the English Viceroy, and ... the Viceroy of the Riddle, whose story can be found among the Preuvian Traditions of Ricardo Palma under the title of "El Virrey de la Adivinanza."

José Fernando de Abascal, Marqués de la Concordia (Marquis of the Concord), found in the year 1815 that popular sentiment in

Peru, based on events in other New World Spanish colonies, was building up for independence from Spain. Abascal was a respected and effective viceroy who had already put down several minor insurgencies, and against his resolute measures the freedom movement could make little headway in Peru. If Abascal should leave, any new viceroy would be a much less formidable adversary, and, being in his early seventies, Abascal was perhaps getting a bit tired. At this juncture a clever Augustinian, one Father Molero, hit upon the idea of suborning the servant in whom the Viceroy reposed most confidence and inducing him to place three little sacks on the Viceroy's desk.

This was done, but the Viceroy, after examining their contents, angrily ordered them thrown into the street.

When two weeks later, however, the trick was repeated the Viceroy's anger gave way to prudence and he requested the Real Audiencia, the Royal Tribunal, of Lima to support his petition to the Spanish Court that he be relieved of his duties, as the Lima air did not agree with him and he needed the care of his only daughter, lately married and moved to Spain. And so in July 1816 -- for such was the leisurely pace of communication in those days -- he passed his office on to his successor and embarked for Spain.

What in the little sacks had impelled the Marquis to throw up his lucrative and prestigious post? Saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur, the components of gunpowder? A good guess, but wrong.

Simply this: salt, beans, lime.

Simply? Let us look at those three items through Spanish eyes and we see SAL - HABAS - CAL, pronounced SAL, ABASCAL! - "which by interpretation meaneth" GET OUT, ABASCAL!

MONTY PLAYS SCRABBLE

Sooner or later, it had to happen. The June 12 1983 NY Times reported that the Ritam Corporation (Fairfield, Iowa) has marketed an electronic Scrabble player with the name given in the above title. It takes from a few seconds to three minutes to make its moves, and is characterized by one person who played it as "slow, deliberate and sneaky". (A typical move: Monty placed VIS perpendicular to QUIDS to get credit for it and SQUIDS.) It congratulates opponents who make especially good moves by playing an excerpt from the 1812 Overture.

The basic console, with a 12,000-word vocabulary, costs \$150, and two expansion packs at \$30 apiece increase its vocabulary to 44,000 words. There is also a disc available for use on Apple II computers.