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AN ETYMOLOGICAL EYE-OPENER

AUREEN FANT'S "actuarius" essay, quoted in our June issue, has spawned AUREEN FANTS actualities cosp., quite a letter from scholar Robert G. Espie that reflective readers will readily recognize as of major significance.

The psychological impact of Mr. Espie's discovery upon the self-perception of actuaries seems sure to be profound. It appears that, to live up to our heritage, we must abandon our allegiance to the advice by Aesop that is perhaps the item of guidance that actuaries cherish most deeply. Mr. Espie's letter reads:

The many actuaries who have read all LXXI Chapters of Edward Gibbon's The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire appear to have little noted, nor long remembered, the reference in Footnote 48 of Chapter XI. One Victorinus is described: "He ravished the wife of Attitianus, an actuary, or army agent." (The word "actuary" is in italics).

Gibbon does not state, nor even imply, that the existence of actuaries in the Roman army was the prime cause of the Decline and Fall.

The word clearly comes from the root "ago, agere" implying swiftness; hence the word's use to describe the Roman equivalent of today's court reporter.

My Latin dictionary gives for "actuarius" the meanings: swift, easily moved. Admittedly this latter characteristic of modern actuaries is better known to ourselves than to our underwriting and agency colleagues.

An interesting speculation is that the Romans may have used the term "canis actuarius" to refer to a hound dog.

Robert G. Espie

As if Mr. Espie's Latin dictionary did not give us trouble enough, the Editor's American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language gives among the derivatives of agere the words: agent, agile, agitate, ambiguous, fustigate, intransigent, prodigal and retroactive. The derivatives agony, demagogue and strategem also are said to come from the Greek cousin of agere, agein.

Senior actuaries will be wise if we continue to be our normal selves just as if this discovery had not burst upon us. Appropriate change in the Society syllabus and in the hallowed procedure for determining which examination candidates are to be judged to have passed, can be counted upon to produce, slowly but surely, future generations of actuaries who will emulate the hare rather than the much overpraised tortoise. E.J.M.

SLIGHTLY PERFECT

by Andrew C. Webster

"Writing from Hartford was George Malcolm-Smith, a former newspaperman who covered jazz and wrote a column called 'It Happens In Hartford.' Malcolm-Smith started one of his articles with a lead that must have sent many readers scurrying for a pencil.

"Take the number 80," it said. "Subtract your present age. Multiply the remainder by 7. Divide the result by 10. The figure thus obtained is the approximate number of years you have left to live, according to the American Expectation (sic!) Table of Mortality." (see below)

"Malcolm-Smith went on to point out that 'those ingenious fellows called actuaries were responsible for working out that neat little puzzle,' and he proceeded to provide a few observations about the actuarial type. 'He is nearly always a college graduate (B.S. degree) and a member of the University Club. A Phi Beta Kappa key rests on his slight paunch.... He walks to and from the office and knows precisely how many steps it takes. Tennis, rarely golf, is his game and he plays it with a grim, mathematical precision. He is a Republican and eyes the Social Security program with professional dubiety. He is sometimes seen in public places where he sticks to the proper Scotch and soda and does a sort of sedate schottische'."

Mr. William R. Williamson, Jr. sent us the above excerpt from the April 1979 issue of the monthly magazine Connecticut. George Malcolm-Smith, a colleague and friend of James E. Hoskins, was a public relations man with the Travelers (now retired). He wrote a play about an actuary, the story of which Jim Hoskins kindly gave us, to wit:

"Some years ago there was an article in a business magazine—Fortune, I think-in which actuaries were prominently mentioned. Shortly thereafter Malcolm-Smith was in a small gathering in which one of those present was Heywood Broun. Broun remarked that he was fascinated by the unusual creatures depicted in the article, and that someone

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