Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

History of Warts: Ditherus Wart

Written by

Alan MacDonald

Published by

Bloomsbury

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

Text copyright © Alan MacDonald 2008
Illustrations copyright © Mark Beech 2008

The moral rights of the author and illustrators have been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced oor
transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7475 9466 6

All papers used by Bloomsbury Publishing are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.bloomsbury.com



Foreword

by

Professor Frank Lee Barking (M. A. D. Phil)

Since the dawn of time members of the hapless Wart family have been dogged by disaster. From facing flesh-eating ogres to grappling with gladiators and being kidnapped by pirates, Warts have looked Death in the eye and lived to tell the tale. Now, thanks to years of painstaking research, and literally hours of daydreaming, I am proud to bring you the absolutely true and epic saga of . . .

The History of Warts



Chapter 1

A Nasty Plot

Porcus Maximus IV, noble Caesar, Emperor of Rome, sat back in his golden throne. It was a tight fit. Lately his throne had got smaller or else his rear had got bigger, which for someone with the mightiest bottom in Rome was a growing problem.

'Sorry, Marcus,' he yawned. 'What were you saying?'

'I was speaking of the war, Your Excellency,' said Marcus Furius. As Captain of the Imperial Guard,

Furius protected the Emperor and advised him on matters he didn't understand. In Porcus Maximus's case, this covered pretty much everything.

'Ah, the war, good, and how is it coming along?' asked Porcus.

'Very badly,' said Marcus Furius.

'Oh dear! Badly? Remind me, who are we fighting at the moment?'

'The Gauls.'

'And they live in?'

'Gaul, Your Mightiness.'

'Ah yes, of course,' said Porcus, who hadn't the faintest clue where Gaul was. Like his bottom, the Roman Empire was expanding all the time and he found it difficult to keep up. 'But surely,' he said, 'we're meant to win the war or what is the point of us invading in the first place?'

'As always Your Majesty is right,' said Furius.

'Yes, of course I'm right, but why are we losing? It's very upsetting, Furius. Surely a bunch of girls can't be that hard to beat.'

'Gauls not girls, Majesty,' sighed Furius. 'There is a slight difference.'

'Yes, yes,' said Porcus. 'But I am the Emperor and

if we start losing wars it makes me look an idiot.'

Furius was tempted to say the Emperor didn't need any help looking an idiot but instead he rubbed his chin, and pretended to think.

'Perhaps, Your Worthiness, it could be the fault of your general,' he suggested with a sly, sideways look.

'Ah, the general. He's like the team captain, isn't he? The one who decides which end we're shooting into.'



'Something like that, Majesty.' Furius nodded.

'And who is our team captain at the moment?' asked Porcus.

Marcus Furius narrowed his eyes. 'I believe Caius Wart is leading our army.'

'Wart?' said the Emperor. 'And what nincompoop put him in charge?'

'You did, oh Gracious One. If you recall, I humbly offered my services but you felt Wart was a better choice.'

'Did I? Ah. Hmm.' Porcus blew out his cheeks. 'Well, I've no doubt I was right, I usually am, after all I'm the Emperor and that makes me practically a god!' He attempted to rise but found his god-like bottom was stuck fast.

'Of course a truly *great* ruler sometimes changes his mind,' suggested Furius.

'What?' said Porcus, still struggling to escape from his throne.

'I was thinking, Your Honour, it's not too late to remove Wart and promote someone else. Someone older, wiser, better-looking,' said Furius, turning sideways to offer his best profile.

'No, no one springs to mind,' replied Porcus. 'And

besides, I'm sure Caius will beat these girls in the end, even if they are quite tough. He's a splendid fellow, Caius, brave, clever, loyal – you could learn a lot from him, Furius.'

'Yes, Your Flabbiness,' muttered Furius.

'Pardon?'

'I said yes, Your Fabulousness.'

'Now do help me up, it's time for my morning bath,' said the Emperor. I've ordered extra bubbles today.'

Furius reached out a hand to his master and tried to prise him from his throne. It took a great deal of heaving and grunting before he finally shot out and landed on top of the Captain, flattening him like a folding deckchair.

'Have that throne seen to,' puffed the Emperor, 'it needs letting out a bit. And by the way, where am I eating tonight?' (Most nights Porcus Maximus dined out as a guest of one of his subjects. He liked to be seen in public and, besides, it saved him money.)

'I believe Hilaria Wart has invited you to supper,' replied Furius.

'Oh, Hilaria. Do I know her?'

'The wife of Caius Wart.'

'Excellent! And will he be there too?'

'No, Majesty, he is in Gaul with the army.'

'Pity!' said Porcus. 'Splendid fellow, Caius, and his sons – all splendid too. Titus, Smitus and . . . um what's the youngest one called?'

'Ditherus, Majesty,' said Marcus Furius.

'Yes, that's the one. Now back to important matters, Marcus: what in the name of Jupiter shall I wear tonight? Perhaps I should go in disguise? Remember the fun we had with Vesuvius when I arrived at his house dressed as Hades![1]'

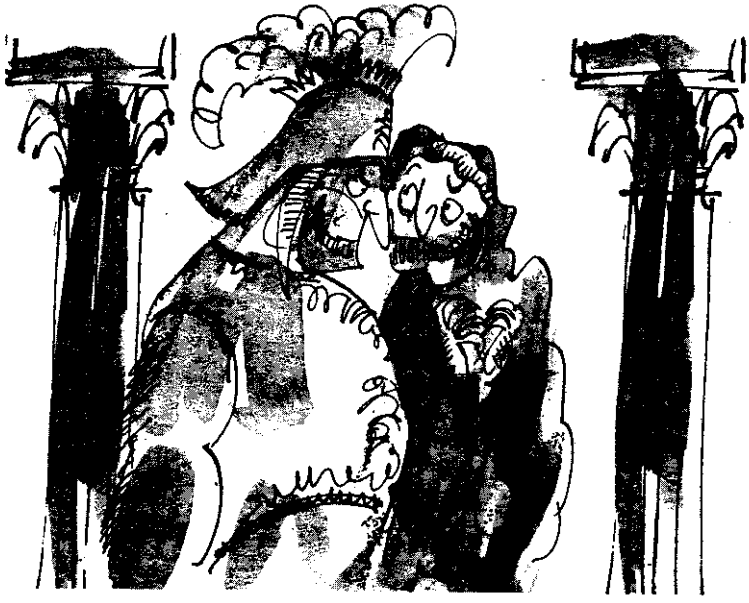
Marcus Furius waited until the Emperor had left the room, and snapped his fingers. Instantly a sinister-looking man dressed in black stepped out of the shadows, where he had been lurking for some time. Furius whispered in his ear and the man's wrinkled face broke into a cruel smile. A moment later he left, hiding something under his dark robe.

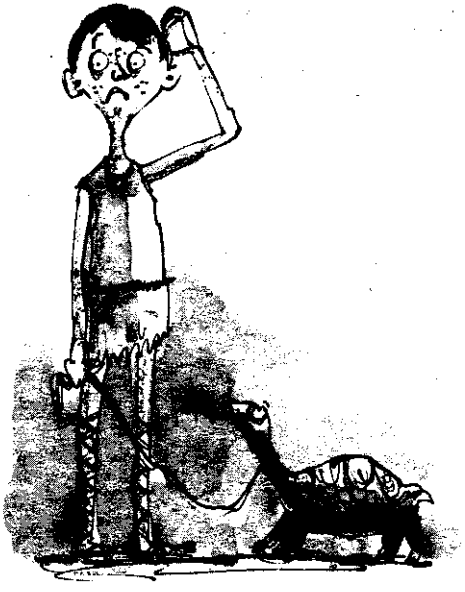
Furius watched him go. If his plan succeeded,

---

1 **Hades** – Roman god of the underworld. Hades was also the name given to the kingdom of the dead. (In other words it was Hell.)

Wart would no longer stand in his way. Then the path would be clear for him, Marcus Furius, to become the most powerful man in Rome – apart from the Emperor of course, who had the brain of a turnip.





Chapter 2

Down a Dark Alley

Ditherus Wart didn't know he was about to be drawn into a dark and dangerous plot. In fact he was just thinking how nothing really exciting ever happened to him. Two months ago his father and brothers had ridden off to fight the war in Gaul. Ditherus had begged to go along but as usual his dad said he was too young. Someone had to stay behind to look after his mother and the tortoise. So Ditherus remained at home, dreaming of the day

he would be old enough to do something brave and heroic.

To make matters even worse, it turned out that the Emperor was coming to supper.

'Not the Emperor!' moaned Ditherus, when his mother told him.

'Yes, darling, we're very lucky he wishes to honour us.'

'I don't see what's so lucky about it.' Ditherus scowled. 'Last time he stayed for hours and then he was sick in the fountain.'

'Dumpling, do try to understand,' sighed Hilaria, 'the Emperor is terribly important and if he's sick in our fountain that is also a great honour.'

Ditherus said nothing. It wasn't the throwing up he minded – most Romans burped, puked and farted their way through meals[2] – what he hated was having to endure a whole evening of Porcus Maximus talking about his favourite subject: Porcus Maximus.

---

2 Romans believed being sick was Nature's way of making room for seconds. Rich houses had a **Vomitorium** set aside for the purpose.

Worse still, Marcus Furius would be there, and he was as grim as a gargoyle and twice as ugly.

Ditherus realised his mother's lips were moving which meant she was still talking.

'... and that's why I need you to take Tidio to the market and buy a few things for supper.'

'Me?' said Ditherus. 'Why do I have to go?'

'Because, pumpkin, the Emperor is coming and I have a million and one things to do. I haven't even decided which earrings I'm going to wear.'

Hilaria held out a wax tablet with her shopping list. 'Now stay with Tidio and don't talk to any strangers. And please, please, darling, try to keep out of trouble!'

Ditherus couldn't see how anyone could get into trouble at a market.

The square was bustling with people when they arrived. Ditherus breathed in the rich smells of sausages, smoke, spices and the salty whiff of fish laced with the general stink of sweaty bodies. He pushed his way through the crowd with his loyal slave, Tidio, beside him.

Tidio spotted a stall selling stuffed dormice and



was soon haggling over the price. Tired of waiting, Ditherus seized the chance to slip away down a side street where the stalls looked more interesting. Tunics and togas fluttered in the wind like flags, and soothsayers tugged at his sleeve, offering to tell his fortune. Porcus Maximus's vacant face beamed back at him on everything from tapestries to Roman bath mats.

Ditherus felt a hand land lightly on his shoulder and spun round. A stooped old man, dressed from head to foot in black robes, bowed to him. His hood hid everything but his wrinkled monkey face and he smiled, revealing yellow teeth.

'You look for somethings?' he asked, wrapping a friendly arm round Ditherus's shoulder.

'Me? No.'

'Yes,' nodded monkey man, 'I have for you! Very good!'

From under his robe he produced something wrapped in a rich crimson cloth. He drew a fold back for a second and a flash of silver caught the light.

'What is it?' asked Ditherus, intrigued.

'Come, come! I show you,' said the man, beckoning with a crooked finger.

'Oh, I can't. I'm meant to stay with my slave.'

'Him slave? Him boss you about?'

'No,' said Ditherus. 'Him not boss me about. I do what I like.'

'Good, you come,' insisted the old man. He led the way between the stalls, glancing back all the time, smiling and nodding.

'Where are we going?' called Ditherus as he tried

to keep up. He looked around. The stranger had vanished. A hand suddenly beckoned from the dark shadows of an alley.

'Here! You come! Come!'

Ditherus hesitated. Stepping into a dark alley after a stranger was probably not a good idea. He might be a thief or a murderer or worse (though he couldn't think exactly what would be worse). But Ditherus had glimpsed something in that red cloth and curiosity got the better of him. He turned into the alley where the peddler was already unwrapping the cloth.

'See! For you!' He grinned crazily.

Ditherus took it in his hands. It was a *gladius*, a short sword – spotted with age and possibly blood. The hilt had a silver serpent curled round the letter B.

'This sword very good,' nodded monkey man. 'Is *grannyator*.'

'Grannyator?' said Ditherus.

'Yes, big famous. Fight other grannyator.'

'Oh, it's a *gladiator*'s sword?'

'Yes, yes. Gradeeeator. Very good!' Monkey man danced around pretending he was a gladiator

fighting off a whole army. It seemed to make him out of breath. He leaned on a wall and pointed at Ditherus. 'Now you.'

Ditherus raised the sword. It felt good – light, balanced. Even grasping it in his hand he felt taller, stronger, more heroic than usual. He tried a few tentative swishes in the air.



Monkey man clapped and grinned. 'Yes, yes! You make good gradeeeator! She is for you.'

'You think so?' Ditherus tried a lunge at his own shadow.

Footsteps approached down the alley. Ditherus spun round, forgetting the sword in his hand, and Tidio leapt backwards in surprise.



'Careful, master! That thing is sharp!'

'Sorry, Tidio. It's a sword.'

'I can see that. Where did you get it?'

'I met this, er . . . fellow. I think he wants to sell it.'

The old peddler nodded his head eagerly. 'This sword good. I give you very good price.'

'Please, master, we're late,' said Tidio. 'I don't think you need a sword.'

'My brothers both have swords,' argued Ditherus.

'That's different; they're soldiers! Anyway you don't know how to use one.'

'I do! I've been learning!'

Ditherus had spent hours poring over *The Big Book of Gladiators,* which had a double-page spread on swordplay for beginners with helpful diagrams.

'Master, what if your mother sees it?'

'She won't!'

The peddler was getting impatient. 'Twenty denarii[3],' he said.

'Ridiculous!' scoffed Tidio.

---

3 Denarii – A denarius was a silver coin, worth a day's wages.

'Sixteen,' countered the peddler, who had no objection to haggling.

'Please, Tidio. It belonged to a gladiator.'

Tidio examined the blade. 'It's certainly ancient – this looks like rust.'

'Very nice sword. Fourteen denarii,' said monkey man, leaning in close.

'Ugh! His breath is worse than a camel's!' said Tidio.

'Yes, very nice,' winked the peddler. 'Twelve.'

'We don't want it.'

'Ten.'

Ditherus had pulled out his purse and was checking the contents. 'I've only got five.'

'Five is good.' Monkey man snatched the coins and they disappeared into the folds of his black robe. He bowed to them with his palms pressed together, then turned and darted along the alleyway. Seconds later he had vanished, though whether he'd slipped through a door or scuttled down a hole neither of them knew.

'Well! He was in a great hurry,' remarked Tidio.

Ditherus was too busy examining his new sword to listen. He moved out of the alley to get a better

look at it. There was something written on the blade, though the letters were difficult to make out.

'Master, do me one favour,' said Tidio, leaping aside.

'What?'

'Next time you're going to practise, tell me, then I can wear a helmet.'

