BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE EMPEROR HELIOGABOLUS


A 24 hour Comic
The Emperor Heliodorus is pretty much forgotten, these days.

His only real claim to fame—or at least to popular immortality—is in a Gilbert and Sullivan song.

It's the Major-General's song from "The Pirates of Penzance."

CALM, Postinflation

I don't remember my Aunt Diane very well. She was in her mid-twenties when she died.

I don’t think I was sad when she died. Just relieved she wouldn't kiss me any more with her scratchy face.

When I was young I loved Gilbert and Sullivan.

My Aunt Diane (who died of Leukemia, when I was six) took me to see IOLANTHE. I was three.

(Pass is a story of truth, sorrow and hope."

I don't think I was sad when she died. Just relieved she wouldn't kiss me any more with her scratchy face.

I used to hate it when she kissed me.

But you can't fight back when you're a kid. People kiss you, and that's all there is to it.

YECCH!
But this isn't about me. This is about the life and crimes of the Emperor Heliosabulus (204 AD - 222 AD). He was fourteen when he ascended to the throne of Rome; eighteen when he was assassinated. No-one knows quite how he came to be in line for the throne.

He was named Marcus Aurelius Antoninus — and it is said that the army put him into office, because they liked his name.

He was called Varus, because his mother, Syrianiara, was unsure of his parentage. His schoolfellows rechristened him ‘Varius’ because he was the son of ‘various’ people.

I don't know if this is true or not...

None of the ancient writers have a kind word to say about him, though.

But then, he was dead, and they weren't.

Not then, at any rate.

They'd hardly be ancients if they hadn't.
Like I said, | was really | into Gilbert and Sullivan | when I was a kid.

When I was nine I won the local paper's Gilbert and Sullivan competition. I didn't really win - my entry wasn't the first in - but I got tickets to a local production of "Patience" - the first prize - anyway. Because I was mine.

The production (in my sister's school hall) was crap. I thought this was a real pity, because I quite liked "Patience". The hero, Bunthorne, is a parody of Oscar Wilde.

In fact, I read once that D'Oyly Carte (the producer) sponsored Wilde's American tour.

You mean, excluding my genius?

Don't say that again.

I have nothing to declare except my genius here.

So that the Americans would get the joke.

I read a biography of Wilde, back then. I think it was written by his son.

It said he was sent to prison, and died, in Frascati, a broken man.

I wondered what he was sent to prison for. The book didn't say.

I'll tell you when you're older.

Adults went vague when asked.

Eventually I decided he must have been a glamorous jewel thief, trading witty epigrams with the bulky officers of the law.

I was up all night with a sick carnation...

Like "Raffles", or "The Saint".

The truth was faintly disappointing...
Of course, Wilde's crime was essentially that of Heliogabalus.

To wit, having sex with someone of your own gender.

Or any of the interesting things Heliogabalus did.

Not suffocating people, or having them eaten by animals, or...

A banquet. Food consisting of flamingoes’ brains, the heads of parrots, peacocks, and pheasants. Saus’ widers. Peas with gold pieces, lentils with onyx, and ground pearls sprinkled (instead of pepper) over mushrooms and fish.

Violets and rose petals rain down from the ceiling.

And, as the banquet ends, the petals begin to fall.

The flowers continue to fall.

Heliogabalus thought this was very funny.

He even let the ones who succeeded in crawling to the surface of the petals live.
Thinking about what to do with the pretty flowers
I lost interest in Gilbert and Sullivan about the age of fourteen. Maybe earlier. I discovered Lou Reed and David Bowie.

I had a strong suspicion that a number of their songs concerned sex, a subject that had also...

...aroused my interest. Or begun to.

Gilbert and Sullivan weren't really into sex much. Not so as you'd notice.

I mean, the nearest that Gilbert ever got to sex was having middle-aged, formidable women fall for his heroes.

...and you won't hate me. I might because I am not a little baby. After all, bit bloody-thirty, will you?

Rah-e Shazia! Is there not beauty even in blood-thirstiness?

He also liked to swap baby's a lot. It's the question of identity that his stories so often and implausibly hinge on.

It is, perhaps, worth remembering Heliosphorus's age. His hormones were rushing through his body. I imagine him as having a real problem with pubic hair, although I have no evidence for this.

His curiosity about sex could be more easily gratified than mine was. For example, at plays, whenever a couple were meant to embrace, he would make them, um, do it...

You know.

Right! You two! I'm off and Rah-e Shazia! Bigger the singing... I want to see some real... ACTION!

Up there on the stage.
He did other things at the theatre. He used to kiss his boyfriends “in the grain” – claiming he was celebrating the festival of the Goddess Flora.

He would harness a number of naked women to his chariot, and have them pull him around.

He would normally be naked on these occasions.

Other things that pulled his chariot, at one time or another, include:

Four dogs.

Tigers (calling himself “Liber” – a name for Bacchus).

Lions (calling himself “The Mother of all Gods”).

Four stags.

Someone once told me that Helimopius’s chariot was pulled by crocodiles.

And he would invite groups of eight men to dinner.

Eight bald
or fat
or one-eyed
or deaf
or tall

or blind men to dinner. I don’t know why he did this either.

However, I can find no reference to this anywhere.
Tonight I will dine with eight dead men
In his four years as emperor (half as many years as he had strange men to dinner; as many years as he had lions, stags, dogs or naked women pull his chariot) Heliogabalus did lots of interesting things.

Not nice things; but nonetheless interesting.

For example, he created possibly the world's only penocryx.

He elevated men to high office, based on the size of their penises.

I’m honestly not making this up.

Quote: "...he did nothing else but keep agents to search out for him men with large organs."

Quote: "He made a public bath in the palace and at the same time made the baths of Plautianus available to the people, so that he might collect paramours from men with large organs. Careful attention was given to seeking out "from the whole city, and from among sailors, onobeli, which is what they used to call those 'who looked extra virile.'"

Quote: "(to High office) he appointed men whose enormous private parts recommended them to him... a muleteer... a cook and a locksmith."

He also instituted human sacrifices: boys from all over Italy.

And once every year he would run backwards down a street strewn with gold dust.

This last for religious reasons.

He would read their entrails himself.
Sometimes I think it peculiar that Heligobolus is so little known. I mean, everyone knows that Caligula made his horse, Incitatus, a senator.

Only he didn't. According to Suetonius, Caligula was only said to be planning to make the horse a consul. He didn't actually do it.

Nobody remembers that though.

Heliogabalus, on the other hand, did make his horse a consul.

I mean, did you know that?

Personally, I think it's because the histories of Heliogabalus's reign are so appallingly written.

Also, of course, because Caligula got there first.

Heliogabalus was just a weird kid with a thing about animals and big dicks.

I mean, he was seriously fractured.

Yech!

Heliogabalus was married four times (once to a Vestal Virgin. This was technically incest; also blasphemy). Four times to women.

He never used to make his horse a consul so that the people couldn't hear.

Once, at least, to a man, Zoticus.

"Aelius Lampridius", the author of the main biography of Heliogabalus, was one of six slap-dash pen-names adopted by an untrustworthy historian with a hellish prose style.

I mean, when your only real source for somebody was written by an unreliable biographer, pretending to be a team of six biographers, writing about ninety years later than the manuscript claims...
It was predicted by Syrian priests that Heliogabalus would die a violent death.

You'll die a violent death, said Marcus.

He thought this was really neat.

He had golden daggers hidden all over, so he could stab himself.

He had golden nooses prepared, so he could be strangled. He carried poisons in jewelled chalices.

He also had a tower built. At the base of the tower were boards of gold, strown with jewels.

He announced that no-one else had ever died as ostentiously as he would.

Despite the money he'd spent planning his suicides, he never got to use any of them.

My gods, I love you. I've lived.

His aides died first. Those he had fucked received a stake up the anus...

The soldiers found him in an army camp, hiding in a latrine-ditch, full of piss and excrement.

They threw his corpse into a sewer. Then dragged it around the circus track—naked, but pulled by nothing more exotic than a horse.

Finally his body was thrown into the Tiber from a bridge, weighted, so it would not float. If it floated, it might be found and buried.

But it sank.

And that was that.
UNDER THE WATER HE STILL DREAMS OF PARTIES AND PETALS. OF DINING WITH PANTHERS*
I almost forget to mention that: Helios Abbot also had trained big cats - lions and leopards. He'd let them in during banquets, to scare people.

Oscar Wilde also dined with panthers. His death was lonely and unmaimed.

That wallpaper is quite ghastly...

One of us...

... will have to...

Go...?

We bestow our kisses on the undeserving; and later, we die.

And, if we're lucky, we end up as a line in a comic song, always sung just a little too fast to be heard.

AN ALARM AND OUTBREAK 1 AM THEN LET ME DINE THAT I'M AN AUTHENTIC GHASTLY

Or we find ourselves lampooned on the stages of village halls.

And if we're unlucky, when we die, the last we can hope for...

... afterwards...

... is that somebody will drop a handful of petals.