

BEING AN
ACCOUNT OF
THE LIFE
AND DEATH
OF THE
EMPEROR

HELOGABOLUS

by Neil Gaiman.

A 24 hour comic



The Emperor Heliogabalus 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.

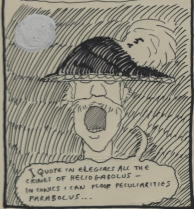
♪
-YANPAM PAM-PAM ♪
♪ PAM THE PAM-PAM
♪ HELIOGABOLUS...

HERE'S YOUR
STAMP, LOVE.
ANYTHING
ELSE?

CALL
POSTMASTERS



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



I QUOTE IN ELEGIES ALL THE
CRIMES OF HELIOGABOLUS -
IN CONICS I CAN FLOOP PECULIARITIES
PARABOLUS...

When I was young I loved
Gilbert and Sullivan.



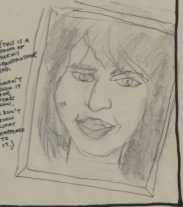
My Aunt Diane (who died
of Leukemia, when I was
six) took me to see
LOLANTHE. I was three.



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

(THIS IS A
SCENE BY
BRONKHORST
HALL.)

I DON'T
REMEMBER
IT
VERY
WELL.
I DON'T
REMEMBER
WHAT
HAPPENED
TO IT.)



I remember that she had
a hairy sort of scratchy
sort of 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!

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



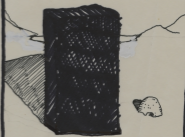
I went to see her in
the hospital, with my father,
before she died. It was
white. Everybody knew
she was going to die.

But this isn't about me. This is about the life and crimes of the Emperor Heliogabulus (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 Heliogabulus, because he was High Priest of Heliogabulus - a minor Syrian Sun-god.



He was also called Varius.

He was called Varius, because his mother, Symmianira, 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.



U.T...

Not then, at any rate.



They died later I expect...

They'd hardly be ancients if they hadn't.



Like I said, I was really into Gilbert and Sullivan when I was a kid.

THE BABY BARRAGE ETC W.S. GILBERT

THE WORLD OF GILBERT AND SULLIVAN. Vol I

WILLIAM THE PIRATE

CANNON THE ADVENTURER

BURNING CROSS

was all back of me... I think I got it from the school library... I think I got it from the school library...

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 nine.

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 THE GIBBERTS?

SO, LET ME SEE THAT REMIN...

I HAVE NOTHING TO DECLARE EXCEPT MY GENIUS.

THERE

THOUGH THE PHILISTINES MAY JUSTICE YOU WILL RANK AS THE PRODIGE IN THE HIGH AESTHETIC BAND... IF YOU WALK DOWN PISCARILLY WITH A POPPY OR A LILY IN YOUR AERIAL HAND...

So that the Americans could 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 France, 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.

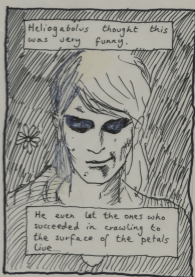
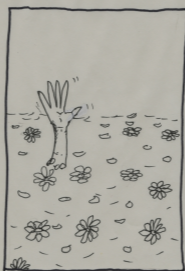
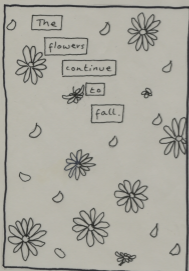
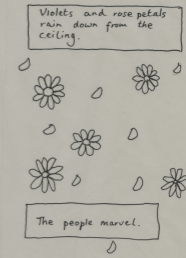
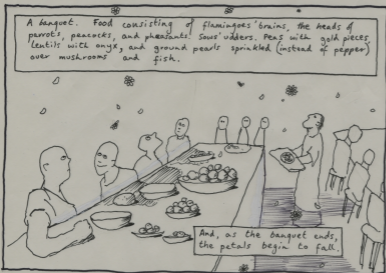
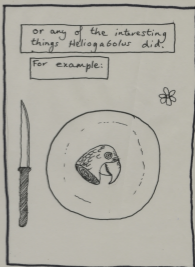
Eventually I decided he must have been a glamorous jewel - thief, trading witty epigrams with the bumbling officers of the law.

WILT INSPECTOR TEAL... I WAS UP ALL NIGHT WITH A SICK CARNATION...

Like "Raffles" or "The Saint".

OSCAR'S TRUMP PASTORAS

The truth was faintly disappointing...





THINKING
ABOUT
WHAT TO
DO WITH
THE
PRETTY
FLOWERS



I lost interest in Gilbert and Sullivan about the age of fourteen. Maybe earlier: I disliked Lou Reed and David Bowie.

IT'S A SOONFUL SMALL AFFAIR...
WHAT'S A SOONFUL SMALL AFFAIR?
MAYBE SHE'S PREGNANT, OR A LESBIAN.

LOU REED

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

um...

...aroused my interest. Or begun co.

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

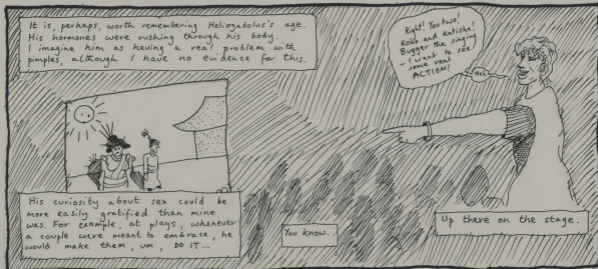


I mean, the nearest that Gilbert ever got to sex was having middle-aged, formidable women fall for his heroes.

AND YOU WOULDN'T HATE ME BECAUSE I'M JUST A LITTLE TEENY WEENY BIT BLOOD-THIRSTY, WILL YOU?

HATE YOU?
OH, KATISHA!
IS THERE NOT BEAUTY EVEN IN BLOOD-THIRSTINESS?

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



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

Right! You two! Koko and Katisha! Bigger the singing - I want to see some real ACTION!

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...

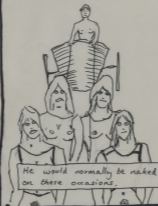
You know.

Up there on the stage.

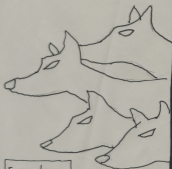
He did other things at the theatre. He used to kiss his boyfriends "in the grain" - claiming he was celebrating the festival of the Goddess Flora.



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



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



Four dogs.



Four stags.

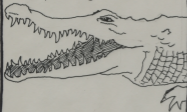
Lions (calling himself "The Mother of all Gods").



Tigers (calling himself "Liber" - a name for Bacchus).



Someone once told me that Heligabolus's chariot was pulled by crocodiles.



However, I can find no reference to this anywhere.

And he would invite groups of eight men to dinner.

Eight bald

or fat

or one-eyed

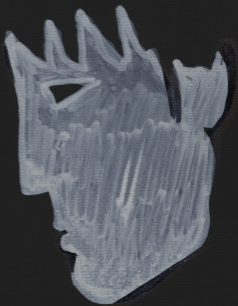
or deaf

or tall



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

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) Helioagabulus did lots of interesting things.



Not nice things; but nonetheless interesting.

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



THIS IS NOW THE IMPORTANT BIT

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

I'm honestly not making this up.

He did keep the men



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, ONOBEL, 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.



He would read their entrails himself.

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



This last for religious reasons.

It was predicted by Syrian priests that Heliosapius would die a violent death.

YOU'LL DIE A VIOLENT DEATH.

WOAH! NRB!

He thought this was really neat.

He had silken nooses prepared, so he could be strangled. He carried poisons in jewelled chalice.

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

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

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

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

My dear, I got a little far...

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.

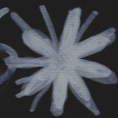
They threw his corpse into a river. Then dragged it around the circus track - naked, but pulled by nothing more exotic than a horse.

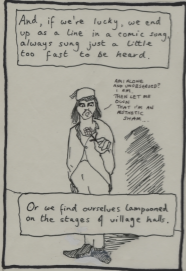
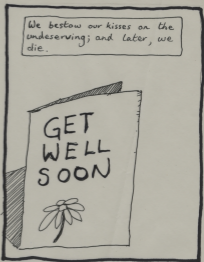
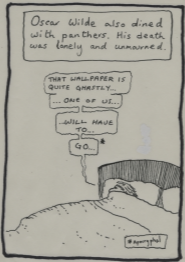
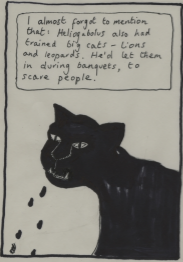
Finally his body was thrown into the Tiber from a bridge, weighted, so it could not float. If it floated, it might be found, and buried...

But it sank.

And that was that.

UNDER THE
WATER HE
STILL
DREAMS OF
PARTIES
AND
PETALS.
OF DINING
WITH
PANTHERS





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

... Afterwards...



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

signature