

## Covidron, Tale Three

Human race had to experience various plagues, epidemics and pandemics from the very beginning of its existence. Got me thinking If ancient texts contain any references, descriptions, tales, stories... of these things.

A search through Loeb Classical Library, a series of books which presents important works of ancient Greek and Latin literature, yielded a few interesting results.

Here's an excerpt from one of the top results I got for term "plague".

The author is Herodian, according to Wikipedia a minor Roman civil servant who wrote a colourful history in Greek titled History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus in eight books covering the years 180 to 238, and he describes the plague that hit Rome around the year 188 AD, when Commodus was running the Roman empire. It's a very vivid tale, makes you wonder what sources Herodian used to describe events he didn't witness personally in such detail.

Just at this time a plague struck Italy, but it was most severe in Rome, which, apart from being normally overcrowded, was still getting immigrants from all over the world. The result was a tremendous toll of life among men and beasts of burden. On the advice of his doctors, Commodus retired for the time to Laurentum, a cooler spot, shaded by huge laurel groves (which give the place its name).

The doctors thought this place was safe because it was reputed to be immune from infectious diseases in the atmosphere by virtue of the redolent fragrance of the laurels and the pleasant shade of the trees. The inhabitants of the city followed the doctors' orders, too, by filling their nostrils and ears with sweet scented perfume and making constant use of incense and aromatic herbs. Some said that if the sweet-smelling scent filled the sensory passages first, it stopped them inhaling the polluted air. If an infection were to get in, they said, the scent drove it out by its greater potency. In spite of this the plague was rampant, causing enormous loss of life among men and all the animals that came into contact with men.

At the same time there was a famine in the city, which was due to a man called Cleander, a Phrygian by birth who was one of those normally sold by public auction. He became a slave of the imperial household and, as Commodus gained power, he did too, until finally he was raised by the emperor to such a position of honour and power that he had control of the bodyguard, was appointed chamberlain and was put in command of the soldiers.

His greed and insolence led him to covet even the position of emperor. He amassed a large sum of money and bought up most of the corn supply, but then cut off its distribution, the idea being that, if he first caused a shortage of supplies and then won people over by generous distributions when they were desperately in need, he would gradually gain the loyalty of the people and the soldiers. He also built a huge gymnasium which he made over as a public bath to the people, trying in this way to entice them to support him. But the Romans hated him because they held him responsible for their troubles and loathed his never-ending greed for money. First they organized themselves in the theatres and shouted insults at him all together but finally they went in a mass to where Commodus was living on the outskirts of the city, and set up a shout demanding Cleander's blood.

While this riot was taking place all round the area, Commodus was spending his time enjoying himself in the secluded quarters of his palace without any idea of the commotion going on, because Cleander

prevented news reaching him. Then suddenly, without any warning to the people, the whole imperial cavalry appeared on the scene, fully armed at Cleander's orders, charging and cutting down anyone they came across. The mob, without weapons and on foot, could not stand up to the armed horsemen. They turned and ran for the city. Some were just cut down by the swords of the soldiers and trampled under foot by the horses, but many others died in the crush of the crowd [and the horsemen] as they stumbled on top of each other. The cavalry were unchecked in their pursuit right up to the city gates, slaughtering those who fell without mercy. But when the people that had stayed behind in the city saw the horror of what had happened, they locked the doors of their houses and climbed on to the roofs, from where they pelted the horsemen with stones and tiles. The horsemen began to get a spell of their own treatment because there was no one to fight with at close quarters and the mob was hurling things at them from a safe distance. Unable to stand the heavy casualties they retreated, leaving many of their number dead. Under the steady hail of stones the horses stepped on the rolling pebbles and slipped, throwing off their riders. A large number were killed on either side before the urban cohorts, who hated the cavalry, came to the rescue of the people.

Even though there was a civil war raging, the fear of Cleander's power was such that no one was prepared to tell Commodus what was going on. In the end Commodus' eldest sister, Fadilla, who had free access to him as a sister, ran in to the emperor with her hair all dishevelled and threw herself down on the ground, looking exactly like someone in mourning. "My lord," she cried, "here you are blissfully unaware of what is going on, while you are in deadly peril. But we, your own family, are going to be destroyed. The Roman people and most of the soldiers have deserted you. Our own people are doing the sort of thing we never expected to happen to us at the hands of any barbarian. Your past favourites are now your enemies. Cleander has organized the soldiers and the people against you. Because of mutual hostility and antagonism his bitter enemies [the people] and his warm supporters [the entire cavalry cohorts] are up in arms, and involving the city in civil war by destroying each other. If you do not immediately put to death this wicked servant of yours, who has already caused so much disaster to some people, and will almost certainly bring it down on us too, then both sides will be the ruin of us."

When she had finished she tore her clothes. Some of the attendants, who were encouraged to speak up when they heard the emperor's sister talk, unnerved Commodus completely. He was absolutely terrified at the urgency of the danger which threatened, not sometime in the future, but then and there.

Cleander, who knew nothing about Fadilla's denunciations, though he had his suspicions, was summoned, and on arrival was ordered to be arrested and executed. Then his head was stuck on the end of a long spear and sent out to the people, who had longed to see this welcome sight. So the troubles came to an end and both sides stopped fighting; the soldiers, now they saw the man for whom they were fighting was dead, were frightened of the emperor's anger, since they realized that they had been misled into foolhardy actions which he viewed with displeasure; the people had had enough once they had taken their revenge on the man responsible for their troubles. The two sons of Cleander were put to death as well, and anyone who was known to be a friend of his. Their bodies were dragged through the city and shamefully degraded in every way until finally the mutilated corpses were thrown into the sewers. Such was the end of Cleander and his supporters. One might say that nature is anxious to demonstrate in the person of one man that some trivial unsuspected quirk of fortune can raise someone from the meanest depths to the loftiest heights and then cast him down again.

Commodus now feared there would be popular violence and an attempt to remove him by revolution. Nevertheless, on the advice of his friends he returned to the city, where he was welcomed with great honour by the people and was escorted in procession back to the palace. But after the experience of such a crisis his general suspiciousness led him to strike mercilessly and give a ready hearing to any accusation without admitting creditable witnesses to his presence.

He cut himself off from his interest in moral studies and continually gave his whole mind to the slavish pursuit of unrestrained physical pleasure day and night. Any person of moderation or anyone who even mildly reminded him still of what he had been taught was driven from the court on a charge of conspiracy, while clowns and performers of scurrilous acts gained complete control over him. He began to train to be a charioteer and to take part in combat with wild animals, practices which his flatterers praised as though giving him a reputation for courage. But his participation was less than proper for an emperor of modesty.

There were certain portents which coincided with these events; some stars shone continuously by day, others became elongated and seemed to hang in the middle of the sky. There were frequent cases of different kinds of animals born as unnatural monstrosities with abnormal shapes and deformed limbs. But the strangest event of all was one which caused dismay at the time and perturbed all those who practised augury and interpreted spontaneous auspices to forecast the future. Without any warning of a rainstorm or clouds gathering, there was a small preliminary earth tremor; then either a flash of lightning occurred in the night, or a fire broke out somewhere as a result of the earthquake. Whatever the cause, the entire temple of Peace, the largest and most beautiful of all the buildings in the city, was burned to the ground. The temple was also the richest in Rome, since it was adorned with offerings of gold and silver that had been placed there because they were safe. Everyone used it as a deposit for his possessions. That night many rich were reduced to penury by the fire. Though everyone joined in deploring the destruction of public property, each person was thinking of his own private loss.

After gutting the temple and its entire precincts, the fire spread to a major portion of the city, burning down some magnificent buildings. The temple of Vesta, too, went up in flames on this occasion, exposing the statue of Pallas to view. The image, reputedly brought from Troy by the Romans, is venerated and kept concealed. Our generation were the first ones to see it since it had been brought to Italy from Troy. For the Vestal Virgins snatched up the image and carried it along the Sacred Way from the temple to the palace of the emperor. Very many other fine parts of the city were destroyed as the fire raged for several days, consuming everything in its way, and was only finally stopped when the rain began to fall and checked the blaze. Thus the whole incident was regarded as supernatural, since people on that occasion were convinced that the fire had begun and was ended by the force of divine will. Some people forecast from the occasion that the destruction of the temple of Peace was a portent of war. And, as it turned out, subsequent events confirmed this prophesy, as I shall relate.

As a result of all these tragedies falling on the city one after the other, the people of Rome no longer viewed Commodus in such a favourable light. They alleged that it was the executions he had ordered without trial and the other mistakes he had made during his life that were the cause of this succession of disaster. It was no secret how he behaved, nor did he even want it to be. He was now brazen enough to prove the allegations against his private conduct in public. Such was his state of mental derangement that first he refused to use the family name and gave orders that he should be called Heracles, son of Zeus, instead of Commodus, son of Marcus. Then he took off the dress of a Roman emperor and took to

wearing a lion skin and carrying a club in his hand. Or he would dress himself up in purple and gold, making himself a laughing-stock by wearing clothes which gave the impression of feminine extravagance and heroic strength at the same time.

Apart from his public appearance he also changed the months of the year, abolishing the ancient names and calling them all after his own titles, the majority of which were supposed to refer to Heracles, who was a very brave man. All over the city he set up statues of himself, and what is more in front of the senate house he put up one of himself as an archer with a bow stretched ready to shoot. For he wanted even the statues to inspire the senate with fear.

After his death the senate removed the statue and replaced it with one of Liberty. Throwing off all inhibitions, Commodus now gave orders for the celebration of public shows, at which he promised he would kill all the wild animals with his own hand and engage in gladiatorial combat with the stoutest of the young men.

As the news spread, people flocked to Rome from all over Italy and the neighbouring provinces to be spectators at something they had never seen or heard of before. The topic of conversation was about Commodus' marksmanship and how he made sure he never missed with his spear or arrow. He had the finest Parthian archers and Mauretanian spearsmen with him as his teachers, but he was more skilful than any of them. At last the day of the show came and the amphitheatre was packed. A special raised enclosure was put up for Commodus benefit so that he could spear the animals safely from above without endangering himself from close quarters, a demonstration of his skill but not of his courage.

He shot down deer and gazelles and other horned animals (apart from bulls) by pursuing them as they ran and stopping them dead in their tracks with a well-timed shot just as they made a dash for it. The lions and leopards and other fine animals of this kind he speared from above by running around the enclosure. One never saw him take a second shot and it was always a fatal wound. As the animal dashed away he caught it with a blow through the head or the heart. This was his only target, and his spear only hit a part of the body that wounded and killed the animal outright. Wild beasts were brought from all over the world for him to kill, species which we had admired in pictures but saw for the first time on that occasion; from India and Ethiopia, from the North and South they came. All of them, if any were previously unknown, were now on show for the Romans to see as they were killed by Commodus.

His marksmanship was generally agreed to be astonishing. For instance, on one occasion he used some arrows with crescent-shaped heads to shoot at Mauretanian ostriches, birds that can move tremendously quickly because of the speed at which they run and because of their folded back wings. Commodus decapitated the birds at the top of their necks with his arrows, so that they went on running around as though they had not been touched, even when their heads had been cut off by the sweep of the arrow.

Once when a leopard had dashed out and pounced on a victim summoned into the arena, Commodus pierced it with a javelin just before it savaged the man. The animal was killed, the man was saved; Commodus forestalled the point of the teeth with the point of his spear. On yet another occasion a hundred lions were released simultaneously from the subterranean traps and Commodus killed them all with exactly a hundred spears. The bodies lay in a long line where they fell for everyone to count at leisure and see that not a single extra spear had been used.

So far Commodus was still quite popular with the mob even if his conduct, apart from his courage and marksmanship, was unfitting for an emperor. But when he ran into the amphitheatre stripped and carrying his weapons for a gladiatorial fight, the people were ashamed to see a Roman emperor of noble lineage, whose father and forebears had all celebrated great triumphs, now disgracing his office with a thoroughly degrading exhibition, instead of using his weapons to fight the barbarians and prove himself worthy of the Roman empire. He had no difficulty in overcoming his opponents in gladiatorial fights by merely wounding them, since they all looked upon him as the emperor rather than as a gladiator and let him win.

But his madness reached such a stage that he even refused to stay in the palace any longer and was intending to go and live with the gladiators in their barracks. Orders were issued that he was no longer to be addressed as Heracles but by the name of a famous gladiator, now dead. He removed the head from the enormous statue of the Colossus which represents the sun and is revered by the Romans. On the base he inscribed the usual, imperial family names but, instead of the title "Germanicus," he put "Victor of a Thousand Gladiators."

At last it became imperative to check the madness of Commodus and to free the Roman empire from tyranny. On the first day of the new year he was going to . . . The Romans keep the festival in honour of the most ancient of the local Italian gods. The story is that when Cronos (Saturn) was driven from his kingdom by Zeus he came to earth as this god's guest, and was secretly hidden by him while in fear of the power of his son, Zeus. This is how that part of Italy came to get the name of Latium, from the Greek word *lathein* "to hide" being transferred into the local language. This is why to this day Italians celebrate the Saturnalia first in honour of the god who hid away, then keep the new year sacred to the Italian god.

Statues represent him with two faces since the year begins and ends with him. During the period of the festival, the Romans make a special point of exchanging friendly greetings and giving each other the pleasure of interchanging gifts and sharing together the produce of the land and sea. This is also the occasion when the eponymous magistrates assume the distinctive purple toga of their annual office.

In the middle of this general festivity Commodus planned to make his public appearance before the Roman people, not from the palace, as was usual, but from the gladiators' barracks, dressed in armour instead of the purple-bordered toga of the emperors, and escorted in procession by the rest of the gladiators.

Commodus communicated his intentions to Marcia, his favourite mistress. She was treated just like a legal wife with all the honours due to an empress apart from the sacred fire. When she was told of Commodus' extraordinary plan which was so undignified for him, she fell on her knees earnestly begging him with tears in her eyes not to bring disgrace on the Roman empire and not to take the risk of entrusting himself to gladiators and desperadoes. But she achieved nothing by her many entreaties and left in tears. Commodus then summoned Laetus, the praetorian prefect, and Eclectus, the chamberlain, and gave them instructions to make arrangements for him to spend the night in the gladiators' barracks, from where he would start the procession to the festival sacrifices, dressed in armour for all Rome to see. They made every effort to try and dissuade him from any action unworthy of an emperor.

Commodus in a fury dismissed the two men and retired to his room as though he were going to take his usual mid-day siesta. But instead he took up a writing tablet (one of the kind made out of lime wood cut into thin sheets with two hinged pieces that close together) and wrote down the names of those who

would be executed that night. Heading the list was Marcia; then Laetus and Eclectus, followed by a great many leading senators. Commodus' intention was to be rid of all the remaining, senior advisers of his father, since he felt embarrassed at having respectable witnesses to his degenerate behaviour. He was going to share out the property of the rich by distributing it to the soldiers and the gladiators, so that the soldiers would protect him and the gladiators amuse him.

After writing on the tablet he left it on the couch, thinking no one would come into his room. But he forgot about the little boy, who was one of those that fashionable Roman fops are pleased to keep in their households running around without any clothes on, decked out in gold and fine jewels. Commodus had such a favourite, whom he often used to sleep with. He used to call him Philocommodus, a name to show his fondness for the boy. This young lad was playing about aimlessly when Commodus left the room for his regular bath and drinking session. He ran into the bed-chamber as he normally did, picked up the tablet, which was lying on the couch—only to play with, of course—and then ran out again.

By some extraordinary chance he happened to meet Marcia, who was also very fond of him. She hugged and kissed him and then took away the tablet from him, because she was afraid that he would destroy something vital without realizing it while innocently playing with it. But as she recognized Commodus' writing, she became much more curious to have a look at the contents. Finding it was a death warrant, and that she was going to be the first victim followed by Laetus and Eclectus and the others in the same way, she let out a cry. "Ah, Commodus," she said to herself, "so this is all the thanks I get for my loyal affection and putting up with all your vicious, drunken behaviour for so many years.

A fuddled drunkard is not going to get the better of a sober woman." Then she sent for Eclectus, who normally visited her in his capacity as the official chamberlain, quite apart from the gossip which said he was having an affair with her. She handed him the tablet and said, "There you are; that's the festival we are going to celebrate tonight!" Eclectus grew pale when he saw what was written. As an Egyptian he was characteristically given to act upon his impulses and be controlled by his emotions. Sealing up the tablet he sent it by one of his trusted messengers to Laetus to read.

He too came to see Marcia in a panic on the pretext of consulting her and Eclectus about Commodus' orders to move to the gladiators' barracks. While they gave the impression they were working in the emperor's interests, they agreed that they must strike first or be struck down, and that there was no time for delay or procrastination.

The plan was to give Commodus a lethal dose of poison, which Marcia assured them she could easily administer; she normally mixed and handed the emperor his first drink so that he could have the pleasure of drinking from his lover's hand. Commodus returned from his bath and Marcia put the poison into the mixing bowl, adding some fragrant wine, and gave it to him to drink. Accepting it as a loving-cup which he normally drank after his frequent baths or bouts in the amphitheatre with the animals, the emperor tossed it off without a thought. At once he fell into a coma and went to sleep, thinking that the drowsiness was the result of his exercise.

Eclectus and Marcia told everyone to keep away and go home so that they could leave the emperor in peace, they said. This normally happened to Commodus on other occasions after he had been drinking heavily. He would take frequent baths and meals but have no set time for his sleep because he used to get caught up in a nonstop round of various pleasures, to which he was a compulsive slave at any hour. For a while he lay quiet, but, as the poison reached his stomach and bowels, he was attacked by

dizziness and began to vomit violently. The reason for this may have been that the food and excessive drink he had taken earlier were reacting to the poison, or it may be that he had taken an antidote to the poison—a practice of the emperors before each meal. At any rate, after a prolonged bout of vomiting, Marcia and the others grew frightened that he would recover by getting rid of all the poison, and destroy them all. So they got hold of a strong, young athlete called Narcissus, and persuaded him to go in and strangle Commodus in return for a large reward. Narcissus rushed into the chamber of the emperor, as he lay there overcome by the effects of the poison and the wine, and strangled him to death.

Such was the end of Commodus after thirteen years' rule since his father's death. More nobly born than any emperor before him; he also had more handsome looks and a better physique than any other man in his day; as for more virile accomplishments, he was a better marksman and had a surer hand than anyone else; but all this talent he debased by corrupt living, as we have seen above.

Social distancing seems to be the trending topic during these days. How to prevent personal exposure to getting contaminated by coronavirus. Experts suggest limiting face to face interaction, work remotely if possible, no handshakes, no hugs outside the home, no high-fives, standing 2m (~ 6 feet) away from any person in public, restrict travel, not attend group gatherings (no theaters, sport events, restaurants, bars...).

Since I need a practical example on these kinds of things, I brainstormed the embodiment of the above virtues. The result was, Nuns.

So, without further ado, some recommended Nun tagged movies I found at Mr. Skin and cndb forum:

Anne Heywood... in La Monaca di Monza

Gloria Guida... in La Novizia

Olivia Pascal... in Behind Convent Walls

Eleonora Giorgi... in Storia di Una monaca di clausura

Laura Antonelli... in The Eroticist

Florinda Bolkan... in Flavia the Heretic

Leslie Caron... in Madron

Toni Collette... in 8 1/2 Women

Anita Ekberg... in Sour Omicidi

Myriem Roussel... in La Monaca di Monza

Jenny Tamburi in . . . The Sinful Nuns of St. Valentine

Kathleen Turner.. in "Crimes of Passion". She just dressed as a Nun for one of her "tricks", but only showed legs. She did other nudity in the movie.

Elisabeth Shue... in Cousin Bette

Michelle Bauer... in "Spirits (1990)"

Ornella Muti... in "Tales of Ordinary Madness (1981). Was naked in the film and was shown at her funeral in a Nun's Habit

Iris Berben... in "Mißverständnis, Das (1985)"

Paola Morra in Suor Omicidi (1978)

Laura Tovar... and friend in "Un Macho en el hotel (1989)"