

Roman philosopher authored RLSS motto

By Jean Lathwell

Quemcunq̄ue miserum videris hominem scias or whomsoever you see in distress recognise in him a fellow man – motto of The Royal Life Saving Society.

By whom – and when – these familiar words were chosen for our Society's motto, we know not. Are there better words to prod the conscience and impel everyone to act from highest motives when faced with another human being's misfortune?

What kind of person placed, on all individuals, the responsibility of physically carrying out the edict "Whomsoever you see in distress recognise in him a fellow man"? He was a Roman philosopher, statesman, playwright, author, tutor, husband and father. Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C. – A.D. 65), born at Corduba (Cordova), Spain, was brought to Rome when very young. Educated thoroughly in rhetoric and philosophy, he was a brilliant lawyer during the reign of Emperor Caligula (37 – A.D. 41), rising to prominence as a pleader of causes. Entering public life, he became a senator. While studying, writing and living in rooms above a tavern on a noisy Roman street, he wrote to a friend: "It is impossible to find peace and quiet in this city!" He even once lived over a public bath where splashing and people exercising with dumbbells disturbed his thoughts.

In A.D. 41, Seneca was banished to Corsica at the instigation of the new Emperor Claudius' wife, Valeria Messalina, who charged him with improper intimacy with Claudius' niece Julia. Eight years later, Claudius' fourth wife, Agrippina, influenced Seneca's recall to Rome. He was raised to the position of praetor (magistrate) and appointed tutor to Agrippina's son Nero. Agrippina, said to have been a battleship among women, with a wheedling, nagging, sharp tongue, fed her husband poisoned mushrooms after persuading him to name Nero as his heir. Thus, Nero, through his mother's intrigues, became emperor at the age of 16 in A.D. 54.

He wisely chose two able, honest men as advisers – his old tutor Seneca took charge of the government and its officials while Sextus Afranius Burrus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard, looked after the armies. Nero, meanwhile, sang, acted, painted pictures, wrote poetry, played the lyre, organ and bagpipe. Much of the decency and moderation of the first five years of his rule resulted from the sane guidance of Seneca and Burrus.

Nero had written some dull tragedies, so he had his tutor write fine Latin versions of the old tragic Greek stories, which he and his friends acted privately in the palace. Nine of Seneca's dramas are free adaptations of Greek legends already treated by Greek playwrights. Euripides (480 – 406 B.C.), was a tragic dramatist, whose play *Heracles Furens* told the story of the madness of Heracles, son of the god Zeus and a mortal.

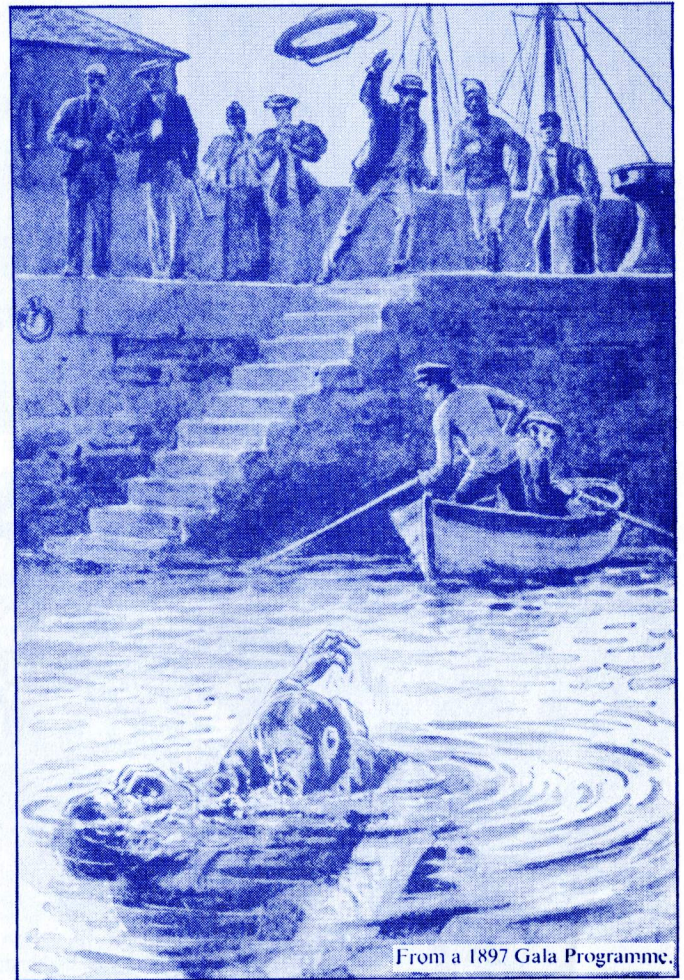
So it was that Seneca used the story and title *Hercules Furens* for a play which includes the line "*Quemcunq̄ue miserum videris hominem scias*". The *Cyclopedia of Practical Quotations*, revised 1896, translates line 463, using the spelling *Quemcunq̄ue* as – "When you see a man in distress recognize him as a fellow man".

An interesting paraphrasing of the motto was reported in *The Vancouver Sunday Sun*, January 25, 1925 as part of an article:

"The Royal Life Saving Society was incorporated by Royal Charter, and has as one of its patrons none other than His Most Gracious Majesty George V. Its chosen motto is descriptive of the good work done day in and day out:

"When you see a man in distress, recollect that he is formed of the same materials, with the same feelings as yourself, and then relieve him as you would be relieved"

Seneca wrote eloquently with numerous aphorisms (short sayings stating general truths) such as our motto. Nero said



From a 1927 Gala Programme.

that his style was like mortar without lime! Grotius' essay entitled "War On Others' Account" quoted Seneca as saying, "men are made for mutual help" and "I am willing to help a man who is perishing, but so that I myself do not perish; except I am to be the ransom of a great man or a great cause."

In A.D. 64, two-thirds of Rome had burned – Christians falsely accused of setting the fire were executed. Nero's unpopularity was so great that plots against him were being concocted in Rome by A.D. 65. Many distinguished men were involved, who, although aware of the dangers, still conspired – for the good of Rome. Seneca was implicated, arrested and, falling victim to the emperor's vengeance, was ordered to commit suicide. Denied the necessary tablet on which to write a Will, Seneca told his sorrowing friends and family that he would leave them the highest gift of all – the pattern of his own life.

He courageously opened his veins and when death did not come speedily, suffocated himself in a vapor bath at his villa near Rome, displaying throughout a truly Socratic composure.

Seneca believed that true wisdom gave a man the strength to meet his fate nobly – without flinching. So this great man – who once wrote, "one of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood" and our humane motto "Whomsoever you see in distress recognise in him a fellow man" – was forced, ironically, at 69 years of age, to take his own life. The Stoics lived by the rule, "my duty is to act the part assigned to me well." By that rule, Lucius Annaeus Seneca lived – and died.