

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

One moment's pause, as if those without were listening for some answer, ensued; and then the door literally leaped from the hinge-side and the lock-side simultaneously inward, and Paulus armed, stood on the threshold, with Thellus, Chærias and Longinus behind him, all armed too, and having dreadful stains moist on their weapons. There was a strong light in the room. One glance revealed a history. Agatha put up both hands to her eyes to hide the scene which immediately followed; but the fearful fascination of it overmastered her, and she gazed on it spell-bound. Thus she beheld the encounter between the scarius and her brother. They met, neither at the door nor where Lygdus had been standing expectant; the assassin, now desperate, making a spring like that of a wild beast, and bringing at the same time the long knife he carried with a downward, searching and ravenous blow, scientifically aimed at Paulus's bare throat above the breast bone.

The young tribune, as we have intimated, had neither waited for nor in any way evaded the assault, nor yet had he like the other, sprung in the air; but with quiet, unfrowning brow, and his large eyes turned upon his enemy, he made one stride forward to meet the panther-like rush, caught in his left hand the right arm of Lygdus, before the excellently intended blow was delivered, and nearly wrenched it from the shoulder, causing him by the sheer pain of the grip to drop his knife, and flinging him fairly against the side wall, across the whole width of the chamber.

There Lygdus lay, astonished and still; while Paulus ran forward and knelt by his sister's side, taking her fair young head in both hands, and kissing her again and again. Thellus, following, and seeing on the couch a large woollen mantle or wrapper, took it, and stooping down also by Agatha's side, with Paulus's aid raised her gently, folded the mantle round her, leaving uncovered only the face (now smiling, and down which welcome tears were streaming), and took the young maiden in his arms as if he had been her father, or indeed, as a mother might carry her child.

"Lead on," said Paulus.

Upon which Thellus moved swiftly to the door, Paulus following, and Chærias and Longinus making way.

In the corridor, Paulus called Chærias and some of the armed men to form the advance along with himself, and bade Longinus and the others march behind Thellus, who, with his burden, was thus protected on every side. They quickly emerged from the house; Thellus on the way explaining to Agatha, who seemed as light as a baby in his mighty arms, that a female slave had admitted them (through downright terror) into the house only after they had set fire to a pitch-barrel in the porch; that they had experienced even some trouble in extinguishing the flames and that she would see the smouldering of burnt wood as they passed. He occupied her attention in this way to prevent her from noticing the mortal traces of the late struggle.

As they passed through the garden they were silently encompassed by group after group of armed men, till they arrived through clumps of trees at a postern in the enclosing wall.

"Whither are we going?" asked Agatha.

"To your mother," whispered Thellus.

The young girl closed her eyes and actually slept in the warlike man's arms.

Just as Chærias was opening the postern the measured tramp of soldiers (and apparently in vast numbers too) was heard in the street outside, as well as words of command not to be mistaken, given in cautious tones by the officers to the men. Paulus looked uneasy. Chærias hastily closed the postern, announcing that the whole street was lined with Praetorians. "Let us hasten," said Thellus, "to the other side of the garden." Arriving there, they found exactly the same phenomenon. "There is yet another door," whispered one of the gladiators, "leading toward the Esquiline and the Prænestina road." They hurried thither; but before they could reach it they became aware that the soldiers were now in the garden itself, and that the whole place was beleaguered. Retracing their footsteps in extreme anxiety toward a thicket, they saw torches in front of them, and perceived that they were intercepted; and

at this moment the horrible fact became evident that in every part of the enclosure, near the middle of which they had taken refuge in a little shrubbery, torches were flaring and troops swarming; and, that like a drag-net which is being closed in, the soldiers, under some intelligent and intended plan, were converging on all sides toward the centre.

"Eheu! eheu! (alas! alas!) cried young Paulus; our last hour has come! Men, will you stand by me and this innocent maiden?"

"To the death," they answered

"Who goes there?" called out some one close at hand, in the tones of an educated man.

Paulus stepped to the front: "Honest people," said he.

"Methinks," returned the same person, "that I ought to know that voice. Are you not Paulus the new tribune?"

"Yes," said he, "and who are you?"

"I am in search of you," replied the other; "but primarily in search of your sister, the young daughter of the Aemilians."

"What would you with us?"

"I have the orders of Augustus Caesar to deliver her into your hands."

The astonishment of Paulus and of those around him may be conceived.

"She is already in my hands," he said after a moment's bewilderment. The other approached, surrounded by soldiers who carried torches, and Paulus saw that he had been parleying with no less a personage than the dreaded Sejanus himself.

This personage, having satisfied himself by a glance, first at the young tribune, and then at the pale and lovely face of Agatha (who had awoke only to faint completely in Thellus's arms), smiled, and remarked that he had brought a palanquin for the damsel, and that she was still welcome to it. Thellus had very soon placed her tenderly therein; and Sejanus, having issued some order, which ran in echoes from officer to officer till it died along the distant battalions, laid his hand lightly on the shoulder of Paulus, who was moving away, and said: "I have still a commission to perform young sir; this signet is to be remitted to you. You seem to have gained favor in a very high quarter indeed."

Paulus had his mind too full of other thoughts to pay more attention, either to the object handed to him or to Sejanus's words, than just to say "Thank you," and to take the ring. Away then moved in separate directions the two processions; that of the soldiery to their various quarters, and that which had rescued and was guarding the young maiden to the lodgings of the Lady Aglæis.

It was midnight when the mother, who was waiting in indescribable suspense the outcome of that evening's expedition clasped her daughter in her arms. We will not try to describe that interview; we leave it to be imagined.

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