

DION AND THE SIBYLS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

"You are right," returned Piso; "I meant to say that the prevailing notion has always been that it is in the east this personage will appear, and then his sway is to extend gradually into every part of the world. Old sayings, various warning oracles, traditions among common peasants, who cannot speak each other's languages and don't even know of each other's existence, the obscure songs of the sibyls, the dream of all mankind, the mystical presentiments of the world concur, and have long concurred, upon that singular subject. Moreover, the increasing corruption of morals, to which Horace Horace adverts," added Piso, "will and must end in dissolving society altogether, unless arrested by the advent of some such being. That is manifest. Haterius and others, who are learned in the Hebrew literature, tell me that prodigies and portents, so well authenticated that it is no more possible to doubt them than it is to doubt that Julius Caesar was murdered in Rome, were performed by men who, ages ago, much more distinctly and minutely foretold the coming of this person at or near the very time in which we are living; and, accordingly, that the whole nation of the Jews (convinced that those who could perform such things must have enjoyed more than mortal knowledge and power) fully expect and firmly believe that the being predicted by these workers of portents is now immediately to appear. Thus, Haterius—"

"No," said Pomponius Flaccus, shaking his head, looking on the ground, and pressing the tip of his forefinger against his forehead, "that is not Haterius's argument, or rather, that is only the half of it."

"I now remember," resumed Lucius Piso; "you are correct in checking my version of it. These ancient seers and wonder-workers had also foretold several things that were to come to pass earlier than the advent of the great being, and these things having in their respective times all duly occurred, serve to convince the Jews, and indeed have also convinced many philosophic inquirers, of whom Dionysius is one, studying the prophetic books in question, and then exploring the history of the Hebrews, to see whether subsequent events really correspond with what had been foretold—that seers who could perform the portents which they performed in their day, and who besides possessed a knowledge of future events verified by the issue, were and must be genuinely and truly prophets, and that their predictions deserved belief concerning this great, mysterious, and much-needed personage, who is to appear in the present generation. And then there is the universal expectation, to confirm such reasonings," added Piso.

The astounding character, as well as the intrinsic importance and interest of this conversation, its reference to his half-countryman Dionysius, of whom he had heard so much, and the glimpses of society, the hints about men and things which it afforded him, had prevented Paulus from asking these exalted gentlefolk to make room for him, and indeed her also, spell-bound.

"But how all this accounts, most noble Piso, for the visit of the Athenian to the court of Augustus, you have forgotten to say," remarked Pollio.

"He obtained," replied Piso, "the emperor's permission to study the Sibylline books."

"What a pity," said Flaccus, "that the first old books were burnt in the great fire at Rome."

"Well," resumed Lucius Piso, "he brought this permission to me, as governor of Rome, and I went with him myself to the quindecimviri and the other proper authorities. Oh! as to the books, it is the opinion of those learned in such matters that there is little or nothing in the old books which has not been recovered in the collection obtained by the senate afterward

from Cumae, Greece, Egypt, Babylon, and all places where either the sibyls still lived, or their oracles were preserved."

"But, after all," said Pollio, "are not these oracles the ravings of enthusiasm, if not insanity?"

"Cicero, although in general so sarcastic and disdainful, so incredulous and so hard to please," answered Piso, "has settled that question."

"He has, I allow it," added Pomponius Flaccus, "and settled it most completely. What a charming passage that is wherein the incomparable thinker, matchless writer, and fastidious critic expresses his reverential opinion of the Sibylline books, and demonstrates with triumphant logic their claims upon the attention of all rational, all clear-headed and philosophic inquirers!"

"I am not a rational, or clear-headed, or philosophic inquirer," broke in Apicius. "Come, do come to the camp; and do pray at last allow this foreign-looking young gentleman and rustic damsel to enter the doorway."

And so they all departed together.

The atriensis had meanwhile summoned the master of admissions, who beckoned to Paulus, and he, followed by Benigna, now entered the hall, which was flagged with lozenge-formed marbles of different hues, and supported by four pillars of porphyry. The adventurers passed the perpetual fire in the ancestral or image-room, and saw the images of the Mamurras, dark with the smoke of many generations; they crossed another chamber hung with pictures, and went half round the galleried and shady impluvium, inclosing a kind of internal garden, where, under the blaze of the sunlight, from which they were themselves sheltered, they beheld, like streams of shaken diamonds, the spray of the plunging fountains, the status in many-tinted marble, and the glowing colors of a thousand exquisite flowers. Near the end of one wing of the colonnaded quadrangle they arrived at a door, which they were passing when their guide stopped them, and as the door flew open to his knock, he made them a bow and preceded them through the aperture.

They noticed as they followed, that the slave who had opened this door was chained to a staple. Several slaves, who scarcely looked up, were writing in the room which they now entered.

The master of admissions, glancing round the chamber, said, addressing the slaves in general, "Claudius is not here, I perceive; let some one go for him, and say that the daughter of Crispus, of the One Hundredth Milestone, has been charged to communicate to him the pleasure of Tiberius Caesar touching his immediate manumission; and that I, the master of admissions in the Mamurran palace, am to add a circumstance or two which will complete the information the damsel has to give. Let some one, therefore, fetch Claudius forthwith, and tell him that he keeps us waiting."

During this speech, which was rather pompously delivered, Paulus noticed that, close to a second door in the chamber at the end opposite to that where they had entered, a young slave was seated upon a low settle, with a hide belt round his waist, to which was padlocked a light but strong brass chain, soldered at the nether link to a staple in the floor. This slave now rose, and opening the door, held it ajar till one of the clerks, after a brief whisper among themselves, was detached to execute the errand which the steward had delivered. The slave closed the door again, the clerks continued their writing, the steward half-shut his eyes, and leaned against a pillar in an attitude of serene if not sublime expectation; and Paulus and Benigna waited in silence.

During the pause which ensued, Paulus beheld the steward suddenly jump out of his dignified posture, and felt a hand at the same time

laid lightly on his own shoulder. Turning round, he saw the youth who had a few minutes before descended from the bronze chariot.

"Ought I not to be an acquaintance of yours?" asked the newcomer with an agreeable smile. "You are strikingly like one whom I have known. He was a valiant Roman knight, once resident in Greece; I mean Paulus Lepidus Aemilius, who helped, with Mark Antony, to win the great day of Philippi."

"I am, indeed, his only son," said Paulus.

"You and a sister, I think," returned the other, "had been left at home, in Thrace, with your nurse and the servants, when some business a little more than three years ago brought your father and his wife, the Lady Aglais, to Athens. There I met them. Alas! he is gone. I have heard it. But where are your mother and your sister?" Paulus told them.

"Well, I request you to say to them that Dionysius of Athens—so people style me—remembers them with affection. I will visit them and you. Do I intrude if I ask who is this damsel?" (glancing kindly toward Benigna, who had listened with visible interest.)

Paulus told him, in a few rapid words, not only who she was, but with distinct details upon what errand she had come.

He had scarcely finished when Claudius, the slave, arrived breathless, in obedience to the summons of the magister.

"The orders of Tiberius Caesar to me," observed this functionary in a slow, loud voice, but with rather a shamefaced glance at Dion, "are, that I should see that you, Claudius, learnt from this maiden the conditions upon which he is graciously pleased to grant you your liberty, and then that I should myself communicate something in addition."

"O Claudius!" began Benigna, blushing scarlet, "we, that is, not you, but I—I was not fair, I was not just to Tib—that is—just read this letter from the illustrious prefect Sejanus to my father."

Claudius, very pale and biting his lip, ran his eye in a moment through the document, and giving it back to Benigna, awaited the communication.

"Well," said she, "only this moment have I learnt the easy, the trifling condition which the generous Caesar, and tribune of the people, attaches to his bounty."

There was a meaning smile interchanged among the slaves, which escaped none present except Benigna; and Claudius became yet more palid.

"The prefect Sejanus has just told Master Paulus," pursued the young maiden, "that you have only to break a horse for Tiberius Caesar to obtain forthwith your freedom, and fifty thousand sesterces too," she added in a lower voice.

A dead silence ensued, and lasted for several instants.

Paulus Aemilius, naturally penetrating and of a vivid though imperfectly-educated mind, discerned this much, that some mystery, some not insignificant secret, was in the act of disclosure. The illustrious visitor from Athens had let the hand which lay on Paulus's shoulder fall negligently to his side, and with his head thrown a little back, and a somewhat downward sweeping glance, was surveying the scene. He possessed a far higher order of intellect than the gallant and bright-witted youth who was standing beside him; and had received, in the largest measure that the erudite civilization of classic antiquity could afford, that finished mental training which was precisely what Paulus, however accomplished in all athletic exercises, rather lacked. Both the youth easily saw that something was to come; they both felt that a secret was on the leap.

"Break a horse!" exclaimed the slave Claudius, with parched, white lips; "I am a poor lad who have always been at the desk! What do I know of horses or of riding?"

There was an inclination to titter among the clerks, but it was checked by their good nature—indeed, by their liking for Claudius; they all looked up, however.

"Your illustrious master," replied the magister or steward, or major-domo, "has thought of this,

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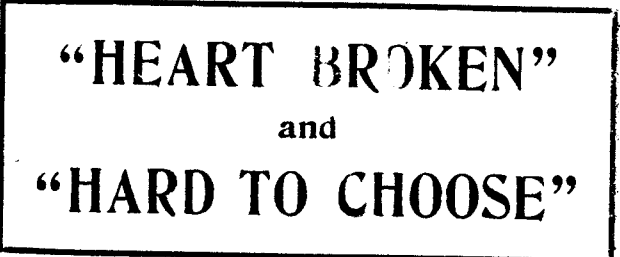
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One of the pictures is called

"Heart Broken"

We will not let the reader into the secret of what has happened, but one of the merry little companions of the woeful little maid who has broken her heart is laughing already, and the other hardly knows what has happened. Cut flowers nod reassuringly at them, and a bright bit of verdure covered wall stands in the background. There is something piquantly Watteauesque about one of the petite figures, suggesting just a touch of French influence on the artist.

The other picture presents another of the tremendous perplexities of childhood. It is called

"Hard to Choose"

As in the other picture, we will not give away the point made by the artists before the recipients analyze it for themselves. Again there are three happy girls in the picture, caught in a moment of pause in the midst of limitless hours of play. One of the little maids still holds in her arms the toy horse with which she has been playing. Flowers and butterflies color the background of this, and an arbour and a quaint old table replace the wall.

The two pictures together will people any room with six happy little girls, so glad to be alive, so care-free, so content through the sunny hours amidst their flowers and butterflies, that they must brighten the house like the throwing open of shutters on a sunny morning.

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