

DION AND THE SIBYLS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

headache; and when I wanted to go and tend her, Crispina hindered me, saying she had lain down and was trying to sleep."

"What about the lover?" inquired Paulus—"the slave Claudius?"

"He has gone away all of a sudden, though his holiday has not expired. I really suspect that Benigna and he must have had a quarrel, and that this is why he has left the place, and why Benigna is so ill."

The clepsydra, or water-clock, on the floor in a corner, showed that it was now past the time when their evening repast was usually prepared. They were wondering at the delay, when Crispus, first knocking at the door which led from the passage, entered. He seemed alarmed. They put various questions to him which the circumstances rendered natural, showing him the paper that had been dropped on the landing. He said that he thought he could make a pretty good surmise about that matter but inasmuch as Benigna, who had been crying out her little heart, was much better, and had declared she would come herself when they had supped, and tell them every thing, he would prefer to leave the recital to her, if they would permit him.

Meantime he confirmed the news that the emperor had arrived at the neighboring town, that the festivities had begun at the Mamuran palace, and that in a day or two the public part of the entertainments, the shows and battles of the circus, which would last for several successive mornings and evenings, would be opened. He said it was usual to publish a sort of promissory plan of these entertainments; and he expected to receive, through the kindness of a friend at court, (a slave,) some copies of the document early next morning, when he would hasten to place it in their hands. While thus speaking to them with an air of affected cheerfulness, he laid the table for supper. Actuated by a curiosity in which a good deal of uneasiness was mingled, since he would not himself tell them all they desired to know, they requested him to go and send Benigna as soon as possible; and when at last he retired with this injunction, they took their supper in unbroken silence.

Benigna came. The secret was disclosed, and it turned slow-growing apprehension into present and serious alarm.

"What! Claudius a spy! The spy of Tiberius set as a sort of secret sentry over us! Who would have thought it?"

Benigna, turning very red and very pale by turns, had related what she had learnt, and how she had acted. Little knowing either the secret ties between her mother and this half-Greek family, or the interest and affection she had herself conceived for them, her lover had told her that she might help most materially in a business of moment entrusted to him by his master; adding that, if he gave the Caesar satisfaction in this, he should at once obtain his liberty, and then they might be married. She answered that he must know how ready she was to further his plans, and bade him explain himself, in order that she might learn how to afford him immediately the service which he required. But no sooner had she understood what were his master's commands, than she was filled with consternation. She informed him that her father and mother would submit to death rather than betray the last scions of the Aemilian race, and that she herself would spurn all the orders of Tiberius before she would hurt a hair of their heads. She mentioned with a little sob, that she had further informed Claudius that she never would espouse a man capable of plotting mischief against them. Upon this announcement Claudius had behaved in a way "worthy of any thing." He there and then took an oath to renounce the mission he had undertaken. He had neither known its objects nor suspected its villainy. But Benigna, whose mind he thus relieved, he

filled with a new anxiety by expressing his conviction that Tiberius Caesar would forthwith destroy him. However, of this he had now gone to take his chance.

"Did Claudius," asked Paulus, "intend to tell the Caesar that he disapproved of the service upon which he had been sent, and would not help to execute it?"

"No, sir," said Benigna. "We were a long time consulting what he should, what he could say. He is very timid; it is his only fault. He is going to throw all the blame upon me, and thus he will mention that I, that he, that we, were going to be married, and that, in order the more effectually to watch the movements of ladies to whom he personally could get no access under this roof, the bright notion had occurred to him to enlist my services, so as to render it impossible that these ladies should escape him; or that their movements should remain unknown, when lo! unfortunately for his plan, he finds I love these ladies too well to play the spy upon them; that I refused, and even threatened, if he did not retire from his sentry-box forthwith, not only to break off my nuptial engagement with him, but to divulge to the family that they were the objects of espial."

"Which you have done," said Aglais, "even though he has complied with your demands."

Poor Benigna smiled. "Yes," said she, "I was bent upon that the instant I knew; but what my dear, unfortunate Claudius had to say to Tiberius Caesar was the point. The Caesar is not to be told every thing. My head is bursting to think what will happen."

Here she broke into a fit of crying. They all, except Paulus, tried to comfort her. He had started to his feet when he first understood the one fact, that this young girl had sacrificed not only her matrimonial hopes, but the very safety of her lover himself, to the claims of honor and the laws of friendship. He was now pacing the width of the room in long strides with an abstracted air, from which he awaked every now and then to contemplate with a thoughtful look the anguish and terror depicted in the innocent face of the innkeeper's little daughter.

At last he stopped and said to her:

"Of what are you afraid?"

"The anger of that dreadful man."

"What dreadful man?"

She answered with a couple of sobs:

"The august, red-faced, big, divine beast."

"But neither you nor your lover have done any thing unlawful, any thing wrong."

"That is no security," said poor Benigna, shaking her head and wringing her hands.

"That ought to be a security," said Aglais; adding in a mutter, "but often is a danger."

"It is not even allowed by people that it ought to be a security," returned the girl.

"Until it is so allowed, and so practised too, the earth will resemble Tartarus rather than the Elysian Fields," said Aglais with energy.

Benigna began to cry amid her sympathetic audience, and said:

"It was so like the Elysian Fields yesterday, and now it is like Tartarus! They will kill him."

"For supper, do you mean?" asked Paulus, laying his powerful, white, long-fingered hand upon Benigna's head, while Agatha embraced her. "But then, how will they cook him? How ought a Claudius to be cooked?"

The young girl looked up wistfully through her tears, and said:

"You do not know that awful divine man."

"I think I half suspect him," answered Paulus. "But the red-faced, big, divine beast, as you call him, will reward Claudius, instead of being angry with him, and this I will show you clearly. Was it not

a proof both of zeal and of prudence, on Claudius's part, in the service of his master, to endeavor to enlist your assistance? And again, upon finding, contrary to all likelihood—as Tiberius himself will admit, and would be the first to contend—that you preferred virtue, and truth, and honor, and good faith, to your own manifest and immediate interests, and to success in love—upon finding this extraordinary and unlikely fact occurring, was it not clearly the duty of Claudius to his master to hasten away at once and tell him the precise turn which events had taken? Now, what else has been his conduct, young damsel? What, except exactly all this, has Claudius done? Will he not, then, be rewarded by his master, instead of being eaten for supper?"

"Ah noble sir!" cried Benigna with clasped hands, "what wisdom and what beautiful language the gods have given you! This must be what people call Greek philosophy, expounded with Attic taste."

CHAPTER XIII.

Next morning at breakfast, Paulus announced that he had resolved to go to Formiae and seek an audience of the emperor himself.

"How will you get one?" asked Aglais; "and if you get one, what good will it do you?"

"It will depend upon circumstances," he replied; "for, whether I fail to get speech of the emperor, or, succeeding in that, fail to get justice from him, process of law remains equally open, and so does process of interest. Both means are, I suppose, always doubtful, and generally dilatory. I spoil no chance by trying a sudden and direct method of recovering our family rights; while if I succeed, which is just possible, I shall save a world of trouble and suspense."

After some discussion his mother yielded to her son's impetuous representations, more with the view of undeceiving him, and reconciling him to other proceedings, than with any hope of a good result.

Paulus had taken his broad-brimmed hat, saying that in three or four hours he expected to be back again at the inn; but that if he did not reappear, they were to conclude that he had found a lodging at Formiae, and that he was remaining there for some good reason; when the door was flung open, and breathless, radiant, holding an unfolded letter in her hand, Benigna rushed into the room.

"Read, read," she cried, "and give me joy! I was unjust to the noble prince."

She handed the letter to Aglais, who read aloud what follows:

"Formiae.

"Aelius Sejanus, the praetorian prefect, greets Crispus, keeper of the inn at 100 Milestone. Our Caesar is so pleased with the slave Claudius, that he has resolved to give him his freedom and the sum of fifty thousand sesterces, upon which to take a wife and to begin any calling he may prefer. And understanding that he is engaged, whenever he becomes a free man, to marry your daughter Benigna, and knowing not only that good news is doubly agreeable when it comes from the mouth of a person beloved, but that to the person who loves it is agreeable also to be the bearer of it, he desires that your daughter, whose qualities and disposition he admires, should be the first to tell her intended husband Claudius of his happy fortune. Let her, therefore, come to-morrow to Formiae, where, at the Mamuran palace, Caesar will give her a message which is to be at once communicated to the slave Claudius. Farewell."

"I want to go at once to Formiae," cried Benigna.

"Well, I am even now going," said Paulus; "and if you intend to walk, I will guard you from any annoyance either on the way or at Formiae, a town which you know is at present swarming with soldiers."

This offer was, of course, too valuable not to be cheerfully accepted.

A few moments after the foregoing conversation, Paulus and Benigna left the inn of Crispus together. The roads were full of groups of persons of all ranks, in carriages, on horseback, and on

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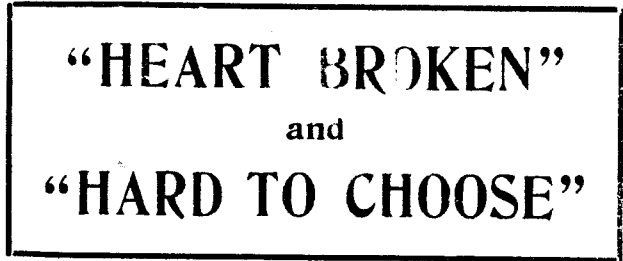
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One of the pictures is called

"Heart Broken"

We will not tell 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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