

DION AND THE SIBYLS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

"From Illyricum, I suppose. We shall now learn what progress those Germans have made. O Varus, Varus!" added he, in words which he had of late often heard to repeat, "give me back the legions, 'redde legiones! redde legiones!'"

A breathless silence lasted while Augustus perused the message taken from the neck of the carrier-pigeon. As he crushed the paper in his hands, he muttered something; and while he muttered, the scorbatic face of Tiberius (perhaps scrofulous would better render the epithet used by Tacitus) burned ominously. In what the emperor said Paulus caught the words, "danger to Italy, but Germanicus knows how."

"Varus lost the legions a thousand times, a thousand paces westward of this irruption," said Tiberius.

"A calamity like that," said Augustus, "is felt far and near. The whole empire suffers, nor will it recover in my time. Ah! the legions."

Paulus perceived that he himself was now forgotten; moreover, looking back, he saw the poor young damsel, left by him at the door of the Mamurra palace, still standing alone and unprotected; but some rascination riveted him.

In a moment a great noise was heard, which lasted a couple of minutes; a mighty roar, indistinct, blended, hoarse, as of tens of thousands of men uttering one immense shout. It was, had it lasted, like the sound of the sea breaking upon some cavernous coast.

Upon a look of inquiry and surprise from the emperor, Sejanus sent the slave who had brought the carrier-pigeon to ascertain the cause, and before the sound had ceased the messenger returned, and reported that it was only Germanicus Caesar riding into camp. Augustus fixed his eyes on the ground and Tiberius looked at Sejanus and at Cneius Piso.

The emperor, after a second or two of musing, resumed his way toward the rustic circus and the camp, attended by those around.

Paulus felt he had not gained much by his interview. He now touched the arm of Sejanus, who was about following the imperial group, and said, pointing toward the spot where Benigna still stood waiting:

"Yonder is Crispina's daughter, who is here in obedience to your letter."

Sejanus answered this reminder with a sour and peculiar smile.

"Good," said he; "she has come to announce the fine news to her betrothed. Let her tell him that he has only to break a horse for Tiberius Caesar to obtain his freedom. I have no time to attend any more to slaves and their mates. She has now but to ask for Claudius at that palace. He has orders to expect her, and to receive from her mouth the pleasing information I have just given you."

Saying this, he walked away.

Our hero conceived some undefined misgiving from these words, or rather from the tone, perhaps, in which the prefect had uttered them. Unable to question the speaker, he slowly returned to poor little Benigna, and said, "Well, Benigna, I have ascertained what you have to do; and, first of all, Claudius expects you within."

As he spoke, he knocked at the door. This time only one leaf of it was opened, and a slave, standing in the aperture, and scanning Paulus and his companion, demanded their business; while the sentries on either hand at the sculptured pillars, or antae of the porch, looked and listened superciliously.

"Is the secretary-slave Claudius here?" asked the youth.

Before the porter could reply, steps and voices resounded in the hall within, and the porter sprang out of the way, flinging almost into Paulus's face the other leaf of the door, and bowing low. Three gentlemen, two of whom apparently were half-drunk, their faces

flushed, and their arms linked together, appeared staggering upon the threshold, where they stood a while to steady themselves before emerging into the street.

"I tell you, my Pomponius Flaccus," said he who was in the middle—a portly man, with a good-natured, shrewd, tipsy look—"it is all a pretty contrivance, and there will be no slaughter, for the beast is to be muzzled."

"And I tell you, my Lucius Piso," returned he on the left, a wiry drinker, "my governor of Rome, my dedicatee of Horace—"

"I am not the dedicatee of Horace," interrupted the other; "poor Horace dedicated the art-poetical to my two sons."

"How could he do that?" broke in Pomponius. "You see double. Two sons, indeed! How many sons have you? Tell me that. Again, how could one man dedicate a single work to a double person? answer me that. You know nothing whatever about poetry, except in so far as it is fiction; but we don't want fiction in these matters. We want facts; and it is a fact—a solemn fact—that the slave will be devoured."

"I hold it to be merely a pleasant fiction," retorted Piso fiercely.

"Then I appeal to Thrasyllus here," rejoined the other. "O thou Babylonian seer, will not Claudius the slave be devoured in the circus before the assembled people?"

At these words our hero looked at Benigna, and Benigna at him, and she was astonished.

He who was thus questioned—a man of ghastly face, with long, black hair hanging down to his shoulders, and sunken, wistful, melancholy eyes—wore an Asiatic dress. He was not intoxicated, and seemed to have fallen by chance into his present companionship, from which he appeared eager to disengage himself.

Gently shaking off the vague hand of Pomponius Flaccus, he acted as the oracles did.

"You are certainly right," he said, but he glanced at Lucius Piso while speaking, and then stepped quickly into the street, which he crossed.

Each of the disputants naturally deemed the point to have been decided in his own favor.

"You hear?" cried Flaccus; "the horse is to paw him to death, and then to devour him alive."

"How can he?" said Piso. "How can he, after d—d—death, devour him alive? Besides, Thrasyllus declared that I was right."

"Why," shouted Flaccus, "if we had not been drinking together all the morning, I should think you had lost your senses."

"Not by any means," said Piso; "and I will prove to you by logic that Claudius the slave," (again at this name our hero and poor little Benigna looked at each other—she starting and turning half round, he merely directing a glance at her,) "that Claudius the slave will not and cannot be devoured by Sejanus—I mean the beast Sejanus."

Paulus, chancing to look toward the two prætorian sentries, whose general he supposed to be mentioned, observed them covertly smiling. More puzzled than ever, he gave all his attention to the tipsy dispute which was raging in the palace doorway.

"Well, prove it then," roared Flaccus, "with your logic!"

"Have I not a thumb?" resumed Lucius Piso; "and can I not turn it down in the nick of time, and so save the wretch?"

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed out the other; "and what notice will a horse take of your thumb? Is this horse such an ass as to mind whether your thumb be up or down, though you are governor of Rome?"

"Perhaps you think," retorted Piso, in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "with your rules of logic, that the horse is not properly trained to his manners?"

"Have I not told you," said Flaccus, "in spite of your rules of thumb, that the horse is not an ass?"

The rudeness and coarseness of Pomponius Flaccus had succeeded in sobering Lucius Piso. He here remained a moment silent, drew himself up with dignity to the full height of his portly person, and at last said:

"Enough! When you have drunk a little more, you will be able to understand a plain demonstration. But whom have we here? Why, it is our glorious Apicius, whose table no other table rivals for either abundance or delicacy. Who is your venerable friend, Apicius?"

This was addressed to a dyspeptic-looking youth, magnificently attired, who, in company with a person in the extreme decline of life, approached the door. Paulus and Benigna stood aside, finding themselves still constrained to listen while waiting for room to enter the blocked-up door of the palace. "Is it possible," replied Apicius, "that you forget Vedius Pollio, who, since you mention my poor table, has often kindly furnished it with such lampreys as no other mortal ever reared?"

The old man, whose age was not redolent of holiness, but reeking with the peculiar aroma of a life passed in boundless and systematic self-indulgence, leered with running, blood-shot eyes, and murmured that they paid him too much honor.

"Sir, you feed your lampreys well," said Pomponius Flaccus, "in your Vesuvian villa. They eat much living, and they eat well dead."

"I assure you," said Pollio, "that nothing but humorous exaggerations and witty stories have been circulated upon that subject. I can, with the strictest accuracy, establish the statement that no human being ever died merely and simply in order that my lampreys should grow fat and luscious. On the other hand, I do not deny that if some slave, guilty of great enormities, had in any event to forfeit life, the lampreys may in such cases, perhaps, have availed themselves of the circumstance. An opportunity might then arise which they had neither caused nor contrived."

"The flavor, in other words, never was the final cause of any slave's punishment," said Lucius Piso.

"You use words, sir," said Pollio, "which are correct as to the fact, and philosophical as to the style."

"Talking of philosophy," said Apicius, "do you hold with this young Greek, this Athenian Dion who has lately visited the court, that man eats in order to live? or with me, that he lives in order to eat?"

"Horror of horrors!" murmured Flaccus, "the Athenian boy is demented."

"Whenever there is anything to eat with you, my Apicius," said Lucius Piso, "unless there be something to drink with my Pomponius here, may I be alive to do either the one or the other?"

"Why not do both?" wheezed Vedius Pollio. "Whither are you even now going?"

"To the camp for an appetite," said Pomponius Flaccus, descending the steps out of the palace hall into the street, and reeling against Paulus, who held him from staggering next against Benigna.

"What do you two want here?" he suddenly asked, steadying himself.

"I am accompanying," replied Paulus, "this damsel, who comes hither by Caesar's order."

"What Caesar?" asked Pomponius.

"Tiberius Claudius Nero," returned Paulus.

He naturally supposed that this formal-sounding answer would have struck some awe into the curious company among whom he had so unwittingly alighted with his rustic charge.

"What!" exclaimed Pomponius Flaccus, "Biberius Cadius Mero, say you?"

Paulus started in amazement. "Ebrius, drunk," continued Piso, ex quo—How does it go on? ex quo—

"Ex quo," resumed Pomponius solemnly, "semel factus est."

The astonishment of Paulus and Benigna knew no bounds. Was it possible that in the very precincts of Caesar's residence for the time, at the door of an imperial palace, within hearing of two prætorian

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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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