

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

No reader indeed of competent acquirements would fail to find his trouble and curiosity rewarded were he to look at the private Basle edition of the Sibylline Oracles, published in 1544, by John Oparinus in that town, and edited by Xystus Bethuleius. It contains that most wonderful acrostic which became a subject of critical disquisition with a host of great thinkers and celebrated authors during four successive centuries after the generation wherein Dionysius is represented by us as telling Paulus his opinions. We allude to the acrostic beginning "Idrosi de chthon Krioecos semeion ot'esai"

This acrostic Lactantius unhesitatingly identifies with the same concerning which Cicero (who rendered its meaning so far as he understood an enigma) to be solved by the event alone) defended the Sibyls from the charge of uttering senseless or random oracles. Saint Augustine of Hippo translated it (and his version survives); Theophilus (seventh bishop of Antioch, dating from St. Peter); St. Justin, philosopher and martyr; Origen (seventh book, ag. Celsus, p. 516); Eusebius (chap. 18), and other weighty authorities, all treat this acrostic as identical with the one discussed by Cicero and by Varro before the birth of our Redeemer. Natalis Alexander accepts the same position. That all this was a "pious fraud," invented three hundred years afterward, is an explanation which our readers would not thank us here for discussing; but which, were this the proper place, and were we sure of carrying with us the attention of those for whose satisfaction we are writing, we believe we could demonstrate to be historically and critically untenable.

Be that as it may, the initial letters of the acrostic spell our blessed Lord's two names, all down the lines, like a golden fringe, and relate his life and death in the text, darkly and briefly. We will quit the subject by merely asking if it is a pious fraud that the Sibyls predicted a Redeemer of mankind, born of a Virgin, just about to appear? What mean the well known lines in the 4th eclogue of Virgil—

"Ultima Cumaei venit jam carminis aetas;
Jam redit et Virgo."

If Virgil was a flatterer of his patrons were the Sibyls so? Was their meaning the same as that of Virgil's politeness?

This brief digression was essential to the issue of our present narrative. to which we now return.

Paulus and his mother were entertained hospitably, as was usual among the Athenians, and "tasted salt" in every house which they would care to enter. They took a little villa near Athens, where Dionysius, and a lady called Damarais, who had known Aglais when both were girls passed most of their evenings in witty and wise conversation during many peaceful years. Paulus was now past thirty-eight, and had never felt tempted to marry or forgotten the Syrian girl who had refused to share his fortunes when they began to dawn so splendidly. He had studied the "holy books" which Esther had stated to be the cause of her refusal, and there he found not only a religion and a code of morals worthy of the name, but, above all, the long series of predictions concerning him who was to embrace all nations in one flock, and abolish such barriers as had sundered him so cruelly from the love of his youth.

At last some change of scene and occupation became necessary to him, and his yearning remembrance determined the direction in which it should be made. The mother and son said adieu to Dionysius, to Damarais, and to Athens, and embarked in a Cretan vessel for Syria.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was early morning, in the thirty-second year of the Christian era, when a handsome, soldier-like, and majestic man, wearing the costume of a Roman legatus, or general, stood on Mount Olivet, southeast-by-east of Jerusalem. He was looking west. The Syrian sun had climbed out of the Arabian sands behind him, and it flung his tall shadow level and far over the scanty herbage among the numerous sad-colored twigs of the olive-shrub. Opposite, just below him, across the deep ravine of the Kedron brook, better known by the awful name attached to that with which it blends, "The Jehoshaphat Vale," shone the fiery splendor of God's temple. Its glorious eastern front, here milk-white

with marble, there breast-plated with gold, its half-Greek, half-Roman architecture capriciously and fancifully varied by the ornate genius of the Asiatic builders whom Herod, the Idumaeon, had employed, were of a character to arrest the least curious eye, and to fill the most stupid and indifferent spectator with astonishment and admiration. And yet this was but the second temple—how inferior to, how different from the first!

"Underneath him, fair Jerusalem, The Holy City, lifted high her towers; And higher yet the glorious temple reared

Her pile, far-off appearing like a mount Of alabaster, tipt with golden spires."

This was Mount Moriah, the hill of God on the left, as the Roman general gazed, facing westward, was Mount Zion, the city of David, now the palace of Herod the tetrarch, encompassed by the mansions of Hebrew nobles.

"Here I stand at last," thought Paulus, "after so many checkered fortunes, looking down upon the most beautiful, the most dazzling, and the most mysterious of cities! To see Rome thus may be the lot of an eagle as it soars over it, but has never been granted to human eyes. And even could Rome be viewed in this way, it would want the unity of whiteness. Ah! strange city! Wondrous Mount of Zion! wondrous Hill of Moriah! wonderful temple! Not temple of Jupiter or of Venus, or of Janus, or of this or that monster or hero, but Temple, say they, of God! The temple of God! What a sound the words have! What a sound! Homer's Iliad from beginning to end is not so sublime as this one phrase, this tremendous and dreadful appellation. And there it stands, flaming against the morning sun, in green marble below, in white marble above, in breast-plates and pinnacles of gold; too proud to receive even light without repayment, and flinging floods of it back. And this is the land of the prophets whom I have at last read; yonder beyond the wall, north, is Jeremiah's grange! This, too, is the age, the time, the day, the hour, to which they all point, when the God of whom they speak, and of whom the Sibyls also sang is to come down into a visibly ruined and corrupted world, and to perform that which to do is in itself surely God-like."

"But one thing is dark even in the glooms of mystery. How can a God suffer?—be thwarted, be overcome, at least apparently so, by his own creatures and these the very worst of them. What can these cries of grief and horror which the prophets utter mean?"

As Paulus thus mused, half-pronouncing now and then in words the thoughts we have sketched, and hundreds upon hundreds of similar thoughts, which we spare to record, some one passed him, going down the Mount of Olives, and in passing looked at him; and until Paulus died he never ceased to see that glance, and in dying he saw it yet, and with a smile thanked his Maker that he saw it then also—especially then.

The person who thus passed our hero was more than six feet in height. He was fair in complexion. His hair was light auburn, and large locks of it fell with a natural wave and return upon his neck. His head was bare. His dress was the long, flowing robe of the Jews girdled at the waist, and as Paulus afterward fancied, the color of it was red. He was in the bloom of life. Our hero could see, as this person passed, that he was the very perfection of health, beauty, vigor, elegance, and of all the faculties of physical humanity, and even the odd, and strange, and wild, and somewhat mysterious thought flashed through Paulus's mind:

"My God," thought he, "if there were a new Adam to be created, to be the natural, or rather the supernatural king of the human race, would not his appearance surely be as the appearance and the bearing of this person?"

And the person who passed was more-over thin, and a little emaciated. And he would have seemed wan, only that the most delicate, faint blood-color mantled in his cheeks. And he looked at the hero Paulus with the look of him out of whose hand none hath power to take those whom he picks from a vast concourse and elects. And Paulus felt glad and calm, and without anxiety for the future, and free from all bitterness of the past, and firm yet grave, and when his mind went actually forth to look upon the things that were around it, he saw nothing but the face and the glance. (To be Continued.)

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