

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

She hastily expressed her sense of this likeness in a muttered exclamation, in which the name of Paulus occurred. At the sound of that name the damsel opened her eyes and feebly cried "Where is he? Where is my brother Paulus?" so feebly, indeed, that none save Esther distinguished the words; and even she with difficulty.

Esther had the instinctive good sense to perceive that brutal and lawless violence were rulers of the present occurrence, and could alone account for the situation of the young lady before her, who was in the midst and in the power of persons evidently not her friends. How could she have fallen into their hands?

Just then the woman who had accompanied the young lady in the carriage pushed Esther aside, and peered close into the pale, still face of the former. "I fancied she spoke. Did she speak? Is she again in a swoon?" were her words.

"I will get some wine," said Issachar. And a servant who heard him brought ample store of wine and drinking-vessels whereupon the leader of the travellers, who had now entered the room, glanced at the motionless figure of her whom he was attending, and said to Issachar: "Master, I am in the service of potent persons, and must request you to furnish me with a fresh horse. I will leave the lame one and a sum of money with you until your own horse shall be returned to you."

"This poor damsel," replied Issachar, "is clearly in no state to travel. If you take her away now, you will carry her into Rome dead. A horse I can furnish for your necessity on the terms you mention, although you state not who the potent persons are whom you serve."

"I wonder at you, Lygdus," remarked the woman. "It matters not whom we serve," continued she, addressing Issachar; "we will pay you for anything we need. Thanks for the wine. Yes, we will take some wine; only a little, mind, Lygdus."

Lygdus having poured out some wine on the ground, with a mutter, helped himself to three cyathi in succession. He then smacked his lips, poured out a fourth measure from the testa, and standing astride, waved his hand to and fro, and said: "I am a man who knows how to do what I say I shall do, and in fact whatever I am told to do; that is—here he drank off the wine, refilled the goblet, planted his free hand with the fingers clinched upon his hip, and swayed his head in a defiant manner as he glanced at every person in the room successively—"that is, if it be the right kind of person who tells me and none else would dare. I am afraid of nothing. That is well understood. Men whisper as I go by, There goes Lygdus, What a man he is! He's afraid of nothing!"

Here he frowned and drank off his wine. And as he was now again stretching his hand toward the amphora, or ampulla or testa, the woman said:

"Beware! you have taken much to-day; you took some at the sea coast; you have taken some since; you won't reach Rome."

"Sea coast!" cried he, with the same attitude and gesture as before; "this next goblet is for the fainter, the fainting one, the pale damsel. Pereaam pejus, why does she faint? I don't mind stating here or elsewhere, that whatever I do, Cneius Piso, the great Cneius Piso and Sejanus the still greater Sejanus will say is well done. They will say when I get back to them, Euge, Lygdus, euge, good Lygdus; you are the man, because you are afraid of nothing."

Here the woman seated herself upon some cushions, shrugging her shoulders; and the other continued:

"Right, rest here. Let refreshments be brought; let the horses be fed outside. I halt here for half an hour and half that again. Let that fainting damsel have something to revive her! Ho! Who has got a flute? I can play the flute as well as any of the strolling female flute players."

Here Esther stole swiftly up to her father, took him aside, and whispered to him that it would be wise to humor this murderous looking guest; and asking Josiah Maccabaeus whether he did not remember the youth who had come to Eleazar's house with Germanicus's ring for the purchase money, she bade her father look closely at the features of the beautiful and manifestly high-born damsel, who was under the escort of so ruffianly a party. Issachar glanced at the pale face and started.

"What a resemblance!" he whispered!

In the same cautious tone, Esther replied by informing him that the young girl had only that instant called for her brother Paulus; for she was obviously distraught with ill-usage and her own terror, and thought that Paulus could be summoned to her rescue.

After interchanging a few more whispered remarks, Esther took a salver with some wine and bread on it, and returned to where the young lady was lying. The sour-faced woman, on hearing Lygdus express his intention of resting awhile, where they were, had already attended to her own comfort. Seeing the damsel on whom she seemed to have the duty of waiting to be in such good and tender charge as that of Esther, she rose from the cushion where she had been sitting, took it up, and placing it in a corner, with a smaller one for her head, settled herself at the angle of the two walls, in the attitude of one who is determined to have a slumber.

"Ay," quoth Lygdus, to whom Issachar had actually handed a tibia sinistra or melancholy deep-toned flute, and who had flung himself on a pile of cushions, crossing his legs like a Hindoo, "sleep you, and I will soothe you with a sad and solemn ditty."

And forthwith he began a most funeral and monotonous performance, with which he himself seemed to be ravished. He interrupted it only to sip a little wine, after which he proceeded again, rocking his body in tune to his strain, and producing over and over again about a dozen notes always in one arrangement.

It was a curious and fantastic scene in Issachar's dining-room by the dim lights of the little lamps for nearly an hour.

Meanwhile, Esther, by the tenderest and most soothing sympathy, had assuaged and revived the spirits of her who was apparently a prisoner to this horrible gang. Some earnest conversation passed between the fair girls in whispers, which ended in Esther's saying solemnly to the poor damsel:

"Yes, I promise it most sacredly; but I do not need this gold ornament; my grandfather has money."

"Keep it for me, then," replied the other. "How can I be sure they will not take it from me? Besides the objects in the case will prove to Velleius Paterculus that your tale is true."

"Be it so," said Esther; "but now I must at once leave you. The first requisite as well as the chief difficulty will be to trace you in, or follow you now through the immense labyrinth of Rome. To secure this end, measures must be taken without the loss of a moment; great energy is needed. Trust to Esther's love and Esther's zeal; as if Esther was your sister. And now anger not these persons by exhibiting your terror and grief. Be calm; and appear, if you can, more than calm, even cheerful. Heaven has sent you in me and my father friends who will watch and strive for you outside; and who will, besides, inform your brother Paulus, your uncle, the triumvir, and your well-wisher Velleius Paterculus, the powerful tribune of the Praetorians, into what a situation you have been cruelly and violently hurled."

"Oh! how kind, how good, how like a dear sister you are!" replied Agatha, while silent tears streamed down her fair young face, and she pressed almost convulsively in both her own hands the hand of the beautiful Hebrew maiden.

"There," returned Esther, gently wiping away the tears with her palm, and kissing Agatha—"there, smile now; drink this wine, and try to rest till you go."

And, leaving her, she retired from the apartment, beckoning to her father and Issachar to follow. Good and evil powers, angels calm and mighty, angels fierce and terrible were contending now for the destruction or deliverance of a poor little maiden, with all the wit and all the resources at the disposal

of one of these in the old Roman world, and with such weapons as the other found it necessary to wield.

Josiah Maccabaeus, upon learning what his daughter had to communicate, hesitated not one moment to give up their journey to Palestine in order to return to Rome and try every means for the liberation of Agatha.

Issachar placed a small house which he possessed in Rome at the disposal of his countryman, and to this house it was resolved that they would return that night. But the most necessary operation of all, because every ulterior measure depended upon it, was to watch and track Agatha to the place in the enormous city (more populous than London is now) in which her captors should lodge her. Without a knowledge of this spot, nothing could be accomplished either by fair means, or by contrivance, or by force, should force become possible under any circumstances.

For any of the friends then holding council to follow the carriage with its escort of four horsemen would be to throw away the last chance. The pursuer would be remarked. Issachar had in his service an active, intelligent and trustworthy Hebrew lad, generally employed by him out-of-doors and on errands between the great city and the lonely house where he lived. This lad now received his orders, and set forward toward Rome, riding a mule bare-backed, and with a wallet containing a few refreshments slung round his neck.

He had perhaps half an hour's start when Lygdus was informed that a new horse, in lieu of the lame one, was harnessed to the carriage, that all the others had received a feed, and that everything was in readiness. He thereupon nodded, drew a final wailing from his tibia sinistra, flung down that instrument, sprang to his feet, collecting his party, and without thanking Issachar for the hospitality upon which he had made so considerable an inroad, departed uttering curses similar in number and gravity to those with which he had called a halt.

Josiah Maccabaeus and Esther allowed an hour to pass, and then, ascending a carriage of old Issachar's, drove back to Rome to the small house already mentioned as the property of Issachar where they arrived late at night, and found their messenger expecting them. He had succeeded.


CHAPTER XVI.

Early next morning Velleius Paterculus was in his garden seated under a fig tree, with his writing tablets in his hand, when a slave approached and told him that an old man and a young girl in the attire of the despiciatissima servorum pars (the Jewish race) craved permission to speak to him in private. Habitually accessible and affable, as we have described him, he ordered the slave to show the strangers the way to where he was then seated. Josiah Maccabaeus, with his daughter Esther, having been accordingly introduced, the slave withdrew. During Esther's tale, Paterculus changed color, but preserved otherwise a singularly cold and grave demeanor. He wrote in his pugillaria the particulars of the place (the street, number and house) where Agatha was confined; but with the wariness of a courtier, professed some surprise that his present visitors should apply at all to him, who was not a praetor nor a judge. Esther said she only obeyed in this the request of Agatha herself, who deemed him to be not only a sincere friend to her mother, her brother and herself, but also cognizant in some way of the quarter whence the present trouble and danger emanated.

(To be Continued.)

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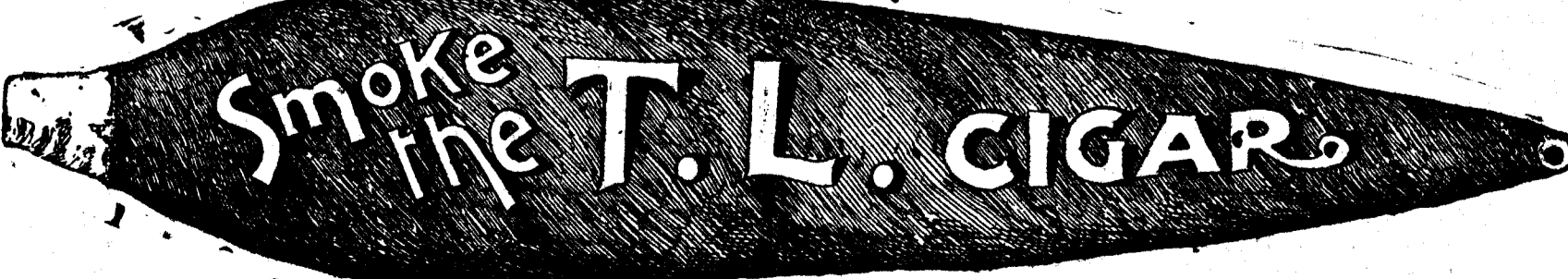
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