

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

The Sibyl moved toward the door, and seeing the Athenian, fixed her gaze upon him as she answered the question of his friend: "Because," she said, "you will see me no more. The time appointed for me has almost passed away. I am journeying even now to a holy land; for perhaps it will be granted to me to behold with these bodily eyes before I die him whom we have all announced. But you have deemed our words to be ravings, and the hopes to be false which we have declared to be true."

"Not I," said Dionysius. She took a small roll of paper from a fold in her mantle, and, handing it to him, said:

"Read, and remember this. Your name already is coupled with that of the beautiful and famous city which is the very capital of human genius and the centre of intellectual pride. You are Dionysius of Athens—of Athens, the lamp of Eastern Europe. But a race in the West, more famous and more polished than the Greeks, with a capital greater and more beautiful than Athens, will claim you one day as theirs also, and, for fifty generations after you shall have died, a warlike people will continue to shout forth your peaceful name over fierce fields of battle in a language now unspoken. Your reputation spans the past and the hereafter of two distant nations, like an arch, coming in honor out of antiquity and the east, and settling in a glory, never to grow dim, over the future of unborn millions at the opposite side of Europe.

"You were deemed its child by the fair city of the past, which connects its name with yours; you will be held among its parents by the still fairer city of the future—a queen city, where in many temples he will be adored whom your Athens at present worships with a simple statue as the unknown God: for he has come. Yes, my son, he has come."

The beautiful aged face was lighted up with the love of a child, yet the speaker bowed her silver locks in an attitude of unspeakable solemnity and awe as she pronounced the last four words. For some moments after she had ceased to speak, all who were present preserved the air and look of attentive hearers, like those who have been listening to a strain of music, and remain a while as though they were listening still, when it has died away. When the roll of paper, which the Sybil held out to him in her white and almost transparent hand, had been taken by Dionysius, she crossed the threshold, and, once more saying "Vale et Salve," disappeared.

In obedience to her more personal warnings, the whole party temporarily domiciled in that remote Lombard house made immediate preparations for a return to Rome. The groups of soldiers who out of interest for their hero their newly-made tribune, had loitered in the neighbourhood, although recovered from their hurts, came now to inquire from Paulus as the highest military authority within reach, what orders he had to give, and to receive from him requisitions or billets upon the quaestors of the several towns and stations along the road to Rome, for rations and lodgings, and small allowances, from post to post. These Paulus wrote out for them with a strange feeling of the immense social space which he had traversed upward within a few week's time; for he felt that, only a little while ago, he would have been taking the orders for which he was giving, and would have been almost as much in need of the billets he was dispensing as the decessions who now applied for them to him in behalf of themselves and their soldiers.

Thellus, with part of a centuria of convalescents, was to march, and, starting at once, he undertook to be never at more than a few hours' distance, even after they should overtake him, from Paulus and the Lady Aglais, who, with the slave Melena, were to make use of Dionysius's handsome travelling carriage, driven by some travelling carriage, driven by Dion's own coachman. The freedman Philip, leading the Sejan horse, started in company of Thellus's little column. A small carriage was obtained, in which Dion himself journeyed.

In short, considerable groups started for Rome by different means and in relations to each other more or less close, which constituted them all one company on the road.

And thus, we leave them, to notice events by which they were gravely affected, which had occurred, or were

even then occurring, elsewhere, and which were preparing a reception for them at their destination.

CHAPTER XV.

The reader will remember the adventures which happened one night at a certain house in the Suburra, and the share which Josiah Maccabeus and his daughter had in preserving not only a large amount of public treasure, but Paulus and his companions themselves from the fate which had been carefully planned for them, and of which there was so imminent a danger.

Josiah never had an hour's peace in that house afterwards, nor Esther an hour's happiness.

At last, the daughter was neither sorry nor surprised when her father announced to her that he would not be scrivener and clerk any longer to Eleazar, his wealthy countryman. In a modest if not parsimonious life of service, Josiah had saved sufficient means to place his daughter and himself above sordid penury while they should live together, and when she should marry to give her a humble portion, a portion far below what a maiden of one of Judah's noblest names might, without romantic or arrogant pretensions, have deemed suitable, but equal to all that Esther wished. Meanwhile, Josiah said that he had not announced to her his intention of ending his servitude with Eleazar until he had made all the preparations and taken all the measures which were necessary for carrying that intention into immediate effect.

It does not belong to the present work to look back beyond this last proceeding. The end was that Josiah determined to leave Rome for ever, and to return with Esther to the land of her forefathers. Esther, while at once acquiescing in this determination, remembered the gallant and noble young soldier whose life, and indeed professional prestige, she had saved from the schemes of catiffs; and she would have been glad to see him once more—glad again to hear him say a kind and sad farewell, with such words of gratitude and appreciation as formerly spoken by him, which dwelt in her recollection, and tended to persuade her that she would herself be recollected in like manner by him from time to time hereafter. Could she even have given him some token, one of their Syriac manuscripts, which, when he studied it, would remind him of the donor! But now the best was not to think of such idle whims. Josiah decided that they should embark at Astia in a ship which was even then on the point of sailing for the East.

The distance from their lodgings in Rome to the port was not more than fifteen miles, including the passage of the Tiber, the great place of embarkation (afterwards, from the reign of Claudius, so famous and so noisy with a whole world's traffic), being on the right or northern bank.

On a southern branch of the Via Astiensis, or Astian highway, not far from a crossed road or diverticulum, which, coming north-east from the coast, struck the branch highway where it was going north-west to the mouth of the Tiber, perhaps some seven or eight miles from Rome, stood a house in a shrubbery of oleanders and myrtles, a little apart from the thoroughfare. In that house lived an old Jew named Issachar, from whom Josiah had, by letter, claimed a night's hospitality for himself and his daughter. Accordingly, he and Esther, dividing a moderately short journey into still easier stages, had arrived, towards evening at the house of the cross-road (or rather the forked-road), with the intention of starting betimes next morning for Astia, and there going quietly onboard their ship by early daylight.

The evening meal was over; the weather was mild, and Issachar proposed to Josiah Maccabeus and his daughter to take a little stroll in a sort of arcade walk parallel with the highway, and formed of a double line of old ysaemores.

Here they were walking to and fro

upon the thick and rustling carpet of fallen leaves, conversing about Jerusalem and the affairs of their country, when their attention was attracted by the sound of wheels from the south-west.

"It is along the by-road from the coast lower down," said Issachar. "Carriages but seldom travel that road. It leads nowhere, save to the bare coast; or there is another southward bend from it toward the Circean promontory (Monte Circello), and a carriage went past early this morning attended by horsemen; it may be the same returning."

As he spoke the roll of wheels became louder, and a vehicle drawn by a couple of horses which seemed much blown, approached at a rapid rate. Four horsemen two a side rode by the carriage. As this last came better into view, it was apparent that one of the animals harnessed to it, and drawing it at a laboring canter, was seriously lame. The little group in the sycamore arcade could observe all this without themselves being at first discerned by the travellers. When nearly opposite the wicker-gate leading into the grounds, the principal rider, who seemed to have the whole of the small expedition under his charge, uttered two or three classical curses, in which the pleasing alliteration of peream pejus often recalled, and called a halt.

"This horse," said he, "will not hold out ten minutes longer; here is a habitation, we will change the brute; whoever lives here must give us a steed for love or money, or—"

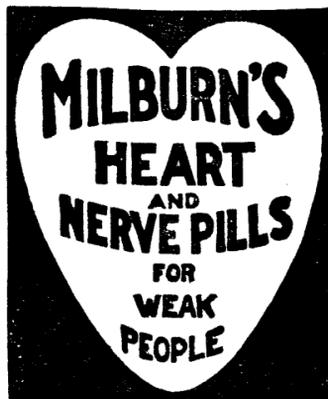
He went to the horn-window of the carriage, opened it, and using much fierceness of voice and manner, was heard by the group in the sycamore avenue to say, "How is she now?"

"She is insensible," answered a female voice; she will die if you do not give her some rest and encouragement."

"It would not be," replied he, "executing my orders or accomplishing the end in view, to let her die on our hands. Once she is in your mistress's house at Rome, she may die as soon as she likes. Out with her; we must carry her into yonder house while I get a horse changed."

Issachar, followed by Josiah Maccabeus and Esther, had meanwhile shown themselves, and were soon lending their assistance to a harsh-featured woman in supporting across the little lawn which separated the road from the house, a poor young damsel who had partially revived from a death-like swoon. Once across Issachar's threshold, she was laid gently over some cushions on the floor in the room where the family had just dined, and where a female slave had already lighted several little saucer-like lamps of scented or sweet burning oil. The daylight had not quite gone, or these lamps would hardly have enabled Esther, who was compassionately bending over the young girl, to recognize the wonderful likeness between her and the youth in command of the party who had come, a few weeks before, to Eleazar's house in the Suburra for the military treasure.

(To be Continued.)



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