

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

Yonder came one whom Roman soldier had not seen for forty years, but who, in the generation preceding that of the legionaries at this moment listlessly watching his vehicle, had been the master of armies, and a sovereign among the sovereigns of the world. Arriving where Thellus and a group of the escort were waiting for the party in the grove, the vehicle stopped, and an old man of stately presence descended from it and said:

"Becurion, I have learnt in Rome that the new military tribune, Paulus Aemilius, had not yet returned from the north, but was on his way; doubtless, you can tell me where I shall find him."

"Sir," said Thellus, "I am more than a decurion, though still wearing the dress. Yonder stands the young tribune Paulus under the yew-tree."

Meanwhile the party in the grove had recognized Marcus Lepidus, the ex-triunvir, and his nephew, hearing Aclais and Dionysius pronounce the name for, as the reader will remember, Paulus himself had never seen him, ran to meet and salute his uncle, and led him to the place where Aclais and the girl were. In answer to immediate enquiries about Agatha, Lepidus told at great length, and in all its details, a catastrophe which we will recount merely in outline and in its issue.

Under a cliff, about a mile north of Lepidus's castle, a little creek ran into the shore out of the Tyrrhenian sea. The beach here was rich in shells, which Agatha took delight in gathering. One day at noon, he had accompanied her to this favorite resort, and while she amused herself in picking and sorting her treasures, he sat down in the shade with his back to the rock, and awaited her fatigue, while he took out Livy's History, of which he was in the habit of perusing a chapter every day and began to read. Thus seated and moving respectively, sheltered from the whole world, the cliff behind and the sea before they were so placed that his niece as she explored the shingles hither and thither, was sometimes in view and sometimes not. He had no suspicion of danger, and least of all of the particular danger which was impending. Once or twice, a considerable interval—say ten minutes—having passed without seeing her, he had turned his head, not from uneasiness, but curiosity, and had each time found that she was busy at her innocent work, only she had shifted the ground of her explorations a little. At last, when a quarter of an hour had intervened since he had seen her he looked round and discovered her nowhere.

He called and she answered not.

Ascending the small cliff, he failed to see her anywhere on land, but he beheld a boat of six oars at some distance up the coast, pulling swiftly north along shore, and in the boat he thought he could discern a female figure. Agatha, and he had stayed so long at the little creek, that the short winter daylight was now waning. There was no shore road by which, even were he young and vigorous, he could have run; the ground on the contrary was rough; the sea line was curved, several little inlets indenting the shore; and, finally, could he even have overtaken the boat he was alone. He was obliged to return to the castle, and, by means of his slaves, to cause inquiries along the roads and cross roads to be made, going forth himself that evening and all night in a carriage. He spent the next day similarly. All his efforts were fruitless. No trace, no news of his niece could be obtained. He, therefore, knew nothing better, and nothing else to do, than to hasten with his melancholy tidings to Aclais and Paulus.

As the four persons present agreed, after a short discussion, in a complete certainty that this was the work of Tiberius, Dionysius was asked whether he could not lay the facts before Augustus, and secure his intervention. He replied at once that, while there was no proof which he would not give them of his zeal in such a cause, all hope from the plan suggested must be thrown aside. First, whatever their own moral certainty might be, to advance such a charge against Tiberius Caesar, without having the smallest chance of making it good, would not only fail to work Agatha's deliverance, but would ensure the death of every one taking part in the accusation; secondly, Augustus was now sick and not to be approached.

"Well then, Germanicus?" said Paulus.

"A comparatively mean person, and

ordinary knight," said the ex-triunvir, could compel Tiberius to surrender the damsel if that knight could clearly show to the people, and to the soldiers, that Tiberius knew where she was, and had her in his power. Failing the means to show this, and to show it in a plain and patent way, Augustus himself, not to talk of Germanicus, would be unable to assist us.

Paulus took Thellus into the secret, and Thellus swore a voluntary solemn oath that if they could once learn where Paulus's sister was imprisoned, he would raise all the gladiators in Rome, and follow Paulus with them, whithersoever he should lead, and, if they had to burn the whole capital to do it, would rescue his sister.

"Flames shall not stay us," he cried, "by such acts fell the kings of Rome in former times, and by the same this tyrant shall come down too. Nay," continued he, "it is not the gladiators alone whom we can call to the doing; let the troops who know you, know this. Why Germanicus could now become master of the world. But, enough, I wonder beyond what touches us. Let us try, however, young tribune, what effect this talk is likely to have upon the hearts of valiant men; tell it to Longinus and Chaerius."

"Think you?" asked Paulus.

"Yes," replied Thellus, "they will both follow you to death—Longinus because he hates villainy in itself; and Chaerius, because he hates tyrants."

Paulus made the experiment. It proved Thellus to be right. Thellus was indeed a man who, however lowly placed, would, by his valor, eloquence, natural genius and capacity for influencing masses of human beings, but for that child of his poor Alba, but for his Prudentia making home bright and the world distasteful, have been the leader of some grand uprising; military at first political in the end.

"Surely," said Thellus, "we shall quickly learn where your dear sister lies cruelly hidden among her enemies from all her friends."

"And how, dear friend?" asked Paulus, resting his clinched right hand upon the mighty shoulder of the former arena-fighter.

"You remember Claudius, the freedman of Tiberius, who, thanks to you, instead of rotting now in the earth, after a horrible death is about to marry Beigna; he will tell us."

"Let us then hasten to Rome," said Paulus.

CHAPTER XVIII.

That night, when his mother, with her faithful old slave, Melma, had been comfortably lodged in a house of Thellus's selection, the following slight but formidable steps were taken:

First, Cassius Chaerius and Longinus went forth to visit various military posts throughout the city, and disseminate news of the heart-moving tragedy in which Paulus's beautiful young sister was to be the innocent chief sufferer, and of which Tiberius Caesar had begun to enact the cruel reality. Secondly, Dionysius proceeded to the palace of Germanicus Caesar (to whom Paulus had duly reported his arrival) to disclose to that able, powerful and well-disposed prince the dark story of Agatha; and to represent that the popularity of young Paulus, and the general hatred and fear felt for Tiberius; the excitement of a recent victory, to which no "triumph" had been awarded; the beauty and innocence of the youthful lady against whom a Tarquinian outrage so audacious had been perpetrated; the intrinsic atrocity and heinousness of the whole affair; the indirect insult to Germanicus himself, involving the affronting and oppressing the last representative of a noble line known to be under his protection; the glory acquired by the noble youth, his staff officer, of whose absence in battle so vile an advantage had been taken by the remorseless and shameless tyrant—were all combining to agitate the army in Rome, and to work up the soldiery into a state of indignation truly dangerous, in which a single word from an influential man, or but a clinched hand lifted on high, would create a volcanic uprising that would shatter the whole frame of the Roman empire into dust.

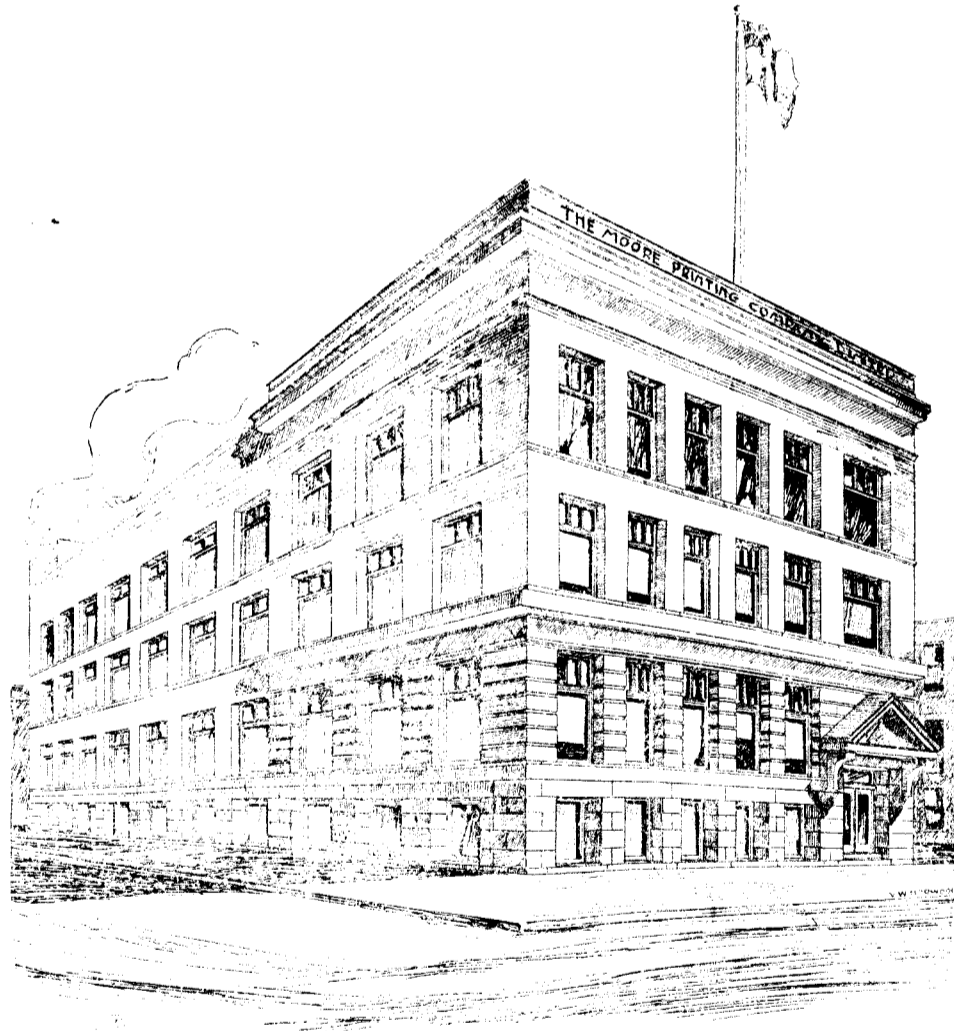
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