

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

In a small tray of pottery he then laid some whitey-brown leaves resembling the coarse description of paper called hieratica, which he set on fire, and which burnt with a hissing sputter and emitted much smoke. In a moment the whole atmosphere of the room was changed; those standing round the couch drew involuntarily a long inhalation; and Paulus, who in the midst of his ravings had been respiring irregularly and with painful difficulty, heaved a free and even breath which it was a relief to hear. At the same time the faintest conceivable under-tint of color came, in that artificially produced climate and chymical atmosphere, timidly and flutteringly into his cheeks. The physician set a large phial on the table, saying that the patient would soon sleep, and that the moment he awoke he must be made to take a portion of its contents, which he specified. Finally he went for Lady Aglais, brought her back into the room, told them that Paulus would, beyond all doubt, recover; that he would in the morning feel a ravenous appetite; that he must not be allowed to eat to the extent he would wish; that the best decoction of meat (in modern phrase, good light, pure soup) ought during the night to be made ready for his breakfast, after which it would be well to give him a small quantity of generous wine. He proceeded to fix the diet to be afterwards used. But Charicles forbade them to let the patient leave his bed until he should have finished the contents of the large phial, the method and times of taking which he particularly and accurately described. The last direction which he gave was not to permit Paulus to talk too long; but, whenever he should be inclined overmuch for conversation, to entertain him with music instead.

"Remember," said Charicles, "that nothing has been now done except to give you the battle-field for fighting this illness, and the time needed to do so. I have effected nothing except to abate the delirium, to quiet the nervous fury, to quicken the blood, to relieve the breathing, and to promote the sleeping inclination of your son, lady. He would have died tomorrow of nervous exhaustion, insomnia and anaemia combined. The easier breathing, the quicker blood, the reduced imagination, the lull of the quivering nerves, the power to sleep (which will soothe and foster his whole system), all unite to give you a chance of beginning, remember, merely beginning, your contest with this illness in the early morning. That phial is what you must carefully administer. Then adhere strictly to the diet, and your son will be able to travel in a fortnight."

After a light repast he took his leave, and started upon his return journey to Rome the same night. But Dionysius remained.

CHAPTER XII.

"What does thy wisdom think of this imperial grant, my necessitous husband? asked the Lady Plancina of Cneius Piso, as they sat together near a large brazier of burning logs in the most secret room of the Calpurnian House, which, as the reader may remember, was surrounded by the willows and beech-trees of the Viminical Hill.

"May the infernal gods destroy that old dotard!" cried Piso, his sinister face quite informed with a sort of livid light. While he uttered the imprecation, he gently rubbed his left hand over the back of his right.

"That is saying, not doing, is it not?" pursued his partner. "And the sweet youth, who, when he felled your slave, Lydus, to the dust, left that mark upon your hand at the fringe and fag-end of his blow: what say you of him? Won't he greatly enjoy our property? He'd have marked your face, too, only for the thickness of your mask, the other night."

"But still you are to have the property of Vedius Pollio, after this Paulus, observed Piso.

We may remark that Plancina wore an out-door dress, as if about to take an airing. "A compliment," said she, "to my youthfulness, I suppose. Now, I had imagined that I was old enough to be this lad's mother. But, no doubt, since you say so, I shall succeed him in the property. For, in the first place, I shall naturally live much longer than he will; and, in the second place, through politeness, and out of consideration for my expectant state, this new-made military tribune and land-owner

will, of course, abstain from marrying; for you must remember that it is only in case he should die before me, and so die without an heir, that I am to have the reversion. When I think of it in this point of view, I feel sure that the young patrician will even see the propriety of very soon committing suicide on purpose to let me enjoy the estate. Shall we write him a little note hinting that such is the only course left for him to pursue in common decency."

"Your note," said Piso, looking up with a ghastly expression which suddenly came into his face, "will not induce him to die."

"Could you induce him to die?" said the woman, "for bear in mind that it is not yesterday we began to expect the property now estranged from me and from mine."

"Those who have been known to expect it," replied Piso, "and being known so to do, have acquired a moral right to it. Ever since old Pollio began to have such a paunch, I have thought of the wealth he could leave; I have watched the growth of his obesity with unremitting attention. But he was fattening for another."

"Could you induce that other to die," repeated Plancina, "before somebody else induces him to marry?"

Piso said nothing.

"Have you heard me?" asked this woman.

Piso, with tears in his eyes, again exclaimed: "He was fattening for another!"

"You insufferable driveller!" cried Plancina, leaving him abruptly, and then quitting the house alone on foot.

The enormous extent to which husband-poisoning had been carried in Rome, not very long before the date at which we have arrived, is well known; and there was such a deadly and ferocious ring in Plancina's voice, as she pronounced the last words, that Cneius Piso was roused from his tender musings upon old Pollio's disappointing death and useless corpulence, to glance at his wife as she left the room. Her face, which was mobile in feature, but always like the whitest paper in color, presented to his familiar eye so questionable an expression that he mentally asked himself whether she could gain anything by his own demise. A tress of black hair had accidentally escaped from the garter or pile on the top of her head, to which it ought to have remained bound and hanging down her cheek in front of the ear, made her complexion seem still more pallid. Her thin, black, sharply pencilled eyebrows were as tautly drawn as a bowstring when the reher is levelling his arrow; and under them here yes, which, when calm were of some very dark tint, flung from their cave a kind of yellow or tawny fire.

When she had left the room, Piso rose, stretched himself, yawned and muttered with a smile, "No, no. I am necessary to all her schemes. But old Pollio's estate must come to her. I wonder did Augustus guess that his grant to yonder youth was so framed as to be a death-warrant?"

CHAPTER XIII.

Late in the night of that day, shortly before the setting of the moon, a lady, closely veiled, descended from a hired carriage, dismissed it, saw it return toward Rome, and then began herself to walk along the solitary road in the direction of the famous Tivoli grotto, upon the banks of the Anio. Quitting the road after a time, and passing through the fields, she reached a curved row of ancient yew trees which presented their convex face outwards, enclosing on three sides what seemed to be a garden, bounded by shrub covered rocks. The trees, which stood close together, were interlaced by an impenetrable hedge of some kind of cactus. In the very centre of the convex, however, was a gate of pales, and the gate was open, and in the gateway was a figure stand-

ing, the figure of a tall and stately woman. As the lady, who made straight for this gate approached, she suddenly noticed the form of the woman, and paused with an involuntary start. She whose appearance occasioned this emotion was leaning with both hands upon a long staff, and looking upwards, lost in contemplation as she gazed upon the countless worlds that rolled through the blue and luminous immensity. She was clad from throat to foot in a long, black robe, the hood of which, intended to be drawn forward over the brows, had fallen back in neglect, and disclosed a beautiful affluence of flowing, snow-white hair, which glittered as if a cascade of cold glories was pouring perpetually around her calm temples and oval head.

With the snowy hair, her eyebrows were nevertheless of a pale-brown color; she had a perfectly colorless face, a straight nose, the nostrils of which were clearly defined, delicate, and almost transparent; while her calm, large, violet eyes had so clear and, at the same time, so solemn an expression, that the thought came, What can that be which her eyes have seen. Some of the light of the heavens seemed to stream back again from her countenance as she gazed.

The lady stood still, looking at this figure in silence and wonder, till suddenly she felt a species of shock; for the great violet eyes had fallen and were bent upon her. Recovering herself, the veiled visitor advanced a few steps, and with a low obeisance, said in a disguised voice:

"Wondrous and venerable Sibyl, I have come to you in my distress."

"There are," replied the woman slowly, "no more oracles for the Sibyl to give. Deiphobe who lived and sang in this grotto—Deiphobe, my sister, is dead; and these hands have buried her. The urn of my sister Herophila has long stood upon its dusty table in its solitary vault upon the shores of the Euxine Sea. Ah! why recount the names of the scattered choir whose last sighs I (far-wandering) have been permitted to send and receive? The nine are gone; their warnings will be heard no more; their warnings have been given. Read! The time has come, when I the tenth have but to reach the East and die."

A bell at a great distance, swinging its melody from a mountain-top upon a gusty night, touching the ear with a faint and interrupted music, would give alone an idea of the songs which slowly uttered these words. The veiled lady, after a short pause, said, still disguising her voice:

"No oracles or prophecies have I come to seek; I am a needy woman; my son is very sick with hurts received in battle; I cannot afford to pay a doctor; the nurse relies upon herbs; I fear she is ignorantly giving my son poison; I know that in the garden of this grotto all medicinal plants were cultured by you, or rather, it seems, by your sister; and that she used to effect cures among the poor people by means even of poisonous herbs; for poisons rightly used will cure persons if sick, whom they would kill in health, but my boy's nurse has no such skill. Show me then, I pray you, the various herbs in your garden, in order that I may know how to guard my child from unintentional poisoning."


"Enter," said the Sibyl, "there are only two poisonous plants in this garden. Here is one which kills by slow degrees; it is easily recognized, you see. There is, however, a malady in which it is the only remedy. Here is the second; it a certain death for a person not already ill to drink as much of its decoction as a scallop shell would hold. A minute quantity nevertheless has saved life in certain cases."

"The veiled lady, without ceremony, gathered considerable quantities of each of these herbs, and stowed them (carefully separated from each other) in two pockets or folds of her robe.

"What is your son's malady?" asked the Sibyl.

"A dreadful fever consuming a body weakened by wounds and by a night's exposure to rain and cold while in a state of insensibility."

(To be Continued.)



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