

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

Never had she seemed to Paulus so beautiful; but there was a marked change; for however intellectual had always been the translucent purity of that oval brow, through which, as through a lamp of alabaster, shone the vivid mind within, there was now the mysterious effluence of "that Essence increate" who had come to abide in and had strangely transfigured the appearance of, the faithful-souled Hebrew maiden. And when Paulus, after she had embraced his mother, abstractedly took her hand, his heart was lifted upward with a species of wonder; and without adverting to it, he was asking himself to what marvellous kingdom she had become heiress, in what supernal court of everlasting joy and unsailable prerogatives was this beautiful creature destined to live, loving and beloved, adorning almost the glories which she reflected, dispensed, and multiplied, as if from some holy, mysterious and spiritual mirror.

"O dear Lady Aglais! and O legatus," she said with a gesture amazing in its expressiveness and pathetic fervor (she had brought the finger tips of both hands together under the chin and then lowered them with the palms outward toward her hearers, and so she stood in an attitude of the utmost grace and dignity combined, like one appealing to the candor and good faith of others)—"O dear friends! I was just now passing through my own garden on my way hither, when under the fig tree (where he used to sit pouring over the holy books of our people), I beheld my dead father, but standing, and not in his old, accustomed wicker chair; and he gazed upon me with large, earnest eyes; and as he stood, his head almost touched the leaves of that hollow, embowering fig tree; and he was so pale, so extremely pale as he was never during life; and he called me: 'Esther,' he said, and his voice sounded far away. Ah! my God, from what a long distance it seemed to come! And lo! lady, and thou, legatus, he said to me these words: 'I have been in the vast, dim house, and have seen our Father Abraham; and I have seen our great lawgiver, and all our prophets, excepting only two, Elias and Enoch; and I asked, Where were they? And in all the dim vast house none answered me, but the forefinger was pressed to the silent lips of those who waited. And, suddenly, there was the noise of innumerable armies coming swiftly from afar—but your ears are mortal and your eye veiled, and were I even permitted to tell you that which shook beyond this little world, the large world and its eternal thrones, your mind would not at present understand my words.

Enough, Esther, that I have been allowed to renew to you in my own behalf, and that of others among our people who have been called before you to that vast, dim, silent city, the exhortation which our ancestor Judas Maccabaeus sent with offerings to the high-priest; namely that you will pray for our spirits. Our innumerable company has just been thinned; the glorious Judas Maccabaeus our ancestor, and that holy mother of the Maccabees, and almost all who were waiting with me in the dim, vast kingdom of expectation, have gone for ever; and I, and a few, have been commanded to expect yet a little time; until the incense of holy prayer shall have further gone up in the presence of the Great White Throne."

Esther paused, her eyes dilated, and stood a moment with the hands again brought together; and so perfect a figure of truthfulness, and such an impersonation of sincerity, she looked that the Jewish servant, who understood not a word of the tongue in which she addressed the Greek lady and her son, gazed at her; his work suspended, his cask held high in air with all the marks of one who heard and accepted some sacred and unquestionable revelation.

"Go on, dear child," said Aglais.

"What passed further?"

"I asked the pale image what this meant, that he should term the condition in which he is waiting, and has yet to wait a little time—that vast, dim condition—a house, a city, and a kingdom." "The dwellers," he replied, "are watched in that kingdom by silent protectors, mighty and beautiful, whose faces, full of severe, sad love, are the torches and the only light those dwellers ever see; and the vast, dim city has a sunless and starless sky for its roof under which they wait; and that sky is the ceiling which echoes the sighs of their pain; and thus to them it has been a kingdom, and a city, and a house;

and, until the ninth hour of last Friday, they were numerous as the nations of men!" "And at the ninth hour of that day, I asked, 'O my father! what occurred when so many departed, and you and a small number were left still to wait?' And he gazed at me for an instant with a wan and wistful look; then lo! I saw nothing where he had been standing under the figtree."

"But it was at the ninth hour of the last Friday the Master had expired by the side of the penitent who was that very day to be with him in Paradise!" cried Aglais.

At Esther's arrival, Paulus and Aglais had both risen from a kind of semicircular wicker settle which occupied one of the corners of the roof; and they now, all three, when Esther had finished her strange, brief narrative, leaned silent and musing against the parapet; where, under the shade of a clustering rhododendron, they had a view westward (drawn, as people are who ponder, toward whatever object is most luminous) of the towers and palaces and pinnacles of the Holy City, then reddening in the sunset. One word respecting the spot where the little group was thus collected, and (among modern and especially western, nations) concerning its peculiar scenic effects.

The roof was an irregular parallelogram, protected on all sides by a low, thick parapet, at two opposite corners of which, in the diagonals, were two doors of masonry, bolted with massive round bars of iron, or left open; thus excluding or admitting communication with contiguous houses. The writer, many years ago, saw such parapet doors on the housetops of modern Algiers; nor was the arrangement unknown in the more famous Eastern cities of antiquity, where the roofs glowed with plants in vases. When on some public occasion the passages were opened, the richer inhabitants, far above the noise, dust, squalor, sultriness, and comparative darkness of the narrow and noisome

streets, could stroll and lounge for miles in mid air, among flowers; could cross even flying and embowered bridges (of which a privileged member possessed the keys, like those who have keys to the gardens of our squares), and so Dives, unseen of Lazarus, but seeing far down all things little and supine, could wander through parterres of bloom, and perfumed alleys, and shrubberies of enchantment, with effects of sunlight sprinkled so to speak with coolness and with shadows, soothed out of the noonday fierceness into tints various and tender; unsoiled of the stains and pains that stained and pained the poor sordid world below; until the hearts of those who thus promenaded amid circumstances of such delicious refinement and luxury, bearing and hearing news, and exchanging civilities, were lifted up, and became even like to the heart of Nabuchodonosor, the king. Sometimes the pecten-beaten dulcimer, or the fingered lyre of six strings, made long-forgotten airs of music beguile the declining day, and linger for hours longer, ravishing the night under the stars of the Syrian sky. Such the scene.

(To be Continued.)

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