

DION AND THE SIBYLS.

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"Not since we came," said Paulus.

The officer thanked him and trotted back.

Meanwhile Paulus and his mother and the freedman had not been so absorbed in watching the occurrence and scene described as to remove their eyes for more than a moment at a time from their dearly-loved charge, the interesting little mourner who had begged to be allowed to rest under the chestnut trees. It was not so with Agatha herself. The child was at once astonished, bewildered and enraptured. Had the spectacle and review before her been commanded by some monarch, or rather some magician, on purpose to snatch her from the possibility of dwelling longer amid the gloom, the regrets and the terrors under which she had appeared to be sinking, neither the wonder of the spectacle, nor the amenity of the evening when it occurred, nor the loveliness of the landscape which formed its theatre, could have been more opportunely combined. She had not only never beheld anything so magnificent, but her curiosity was violently aroused.

Paulus exchanged with his mother and the old freedman a glance of intelligence and of intense satisfaction, as they both noted the parted lips and dilated eyes with which the child, half an hour ago so alarmingly ill, contemplated the drama at which she was accidentally assisting.

"That's a rare doctor," whispered Philip, pointing to the general of the Praetorian guards.

"No doctor," replied Paulus, in the same low tones, "could have prescribed for our darling better."

"Paulus," said Agatha, "what are these mighty beings? Are these the geni, and the demons of the mistress-land, the Gods of Italy?"

"They are a handful of Italy's troops, dear," he said.

She looked from her brother to the lady and then to the freedman, and this last with a healing instinct which would have done honor to Hippocrates, began to stimulate her interest by the agency of suspense and mystery.

"Master Paulus, and Lady Agathais, and my little one too," he said, in a most impressive and solemn voice, "these be the geni and these be the demons indeed; but I tell you that you have not seen all the secret. Something is going to happen. Attend to me well! You behold a most singular thing! Are you aware of what you behold? Yonder, Master Paulus, is the allotted portion of horse for more than three legions; the justus equitatus, I say for a Roman army of twenty thousand men. Yes, I attest, all the gods," continued Philip in a low voice, but with great earnestness, and glancing from the brother to the sister as if his prospects in life were contingent upon his being believed in this. "I was at the battle of Philippi, and I aver that yonder is more than the right allotment of horse for three legions. Observe the squadrons, the turmae; they do not consist of the same arm; and instead of being distributed in bodies of three or four hundred each to a legion, they are all together before you without their legions. Why is that, master Paulus?"

"I know not," said Paulus.

"Ah!" resumed the freedman, "you know not, but you will know presently. Mark that, little Mistress Agatha, and bear in mind that Philip the freedman has said to your brother that he will know all presently."

The child gazed wonderingly at the troops as she heard these mysterious words. "Who are those?" asked she, pointing to the squadrons of those still in column.

answered the freedman, with a mysterious shake of the head.

"And those," pursued she, with increasing interest; "who are those whose faces shine like dusky copper and whose eyes glitter like the eyes of wild animals in the arena, when the proconsul of Greece gives the shows? I mean those who ride the small, long-tailed horses without any ephippia (saddle-cloths), and even without bridles—the soldiers in flowing dress, with rolls of linen round their heads?"

"They are the Numidians," replied Philip. "Ah! Rome dreaded those horsemen once, when Hannibal the Carthaginian and his motley hordes had their will in these fair plains."

As he spoke, a strange movement occurred. The general or legatus dismounted, and, giving the bridle of his horse to a soldier began to walk slowly up and down the side of the road. No sooner had his foot touched the ground than the whole of the Numidian squadron seemed to rise like a covey out of the stubble field; with little clang of arms, but with one sharp, sharp cry, or whoop, it burst from the highroad into the meadow land. There the evolutions which they performed seemed at first to be all confusion, only for the fact that, although the horsemen had the air of riding capriciously in every direction, crossing, intermingling, separating, galloping upon opposite curves, and tracing every figure which the whim and fancy of each might dictate, yet no two of them ever came into collision. Indeed, fantastic and wild as that rhapsody of manoeuvres into which they had broken appeared to be, some principle which was thoroughly understood by every one of them governed their mazy gallop. It was as accurate and exact as some stately dance of slaves at the imperial court. It was, in short, itself a wild dance of the Numidian cavalry, in which their reinless horses, guided only by the flashing blades and the voices of their riders, manifested the most vehement spirit and a sort of sympathetic frenzy. These steeds, which never knew the bridle, and went thus mouth-free even into battle—these horses which their masters turned loose at night into the fields, and which came bounding and neighing at the first call, were now madly plunging, wheeling, racing and charging, like gigantic dogs at sport. Presently they began to play a strange species of leapfrog. A Numidian boy, who carried a trumpet and rode a pony, or at least a horse smaller than the rest of the barbs, ("Berber hoeses"), suddenly halted upon the outside of the mad cavalry whirlpool which had been formed and flung himself flat at full length upon the back of the diminutive animal. Instantly the whirl, as it circled toward him, straightened itself into a column, and every horseman rode full upon the stationery pony, and cleared both steed and rider at a bound, a torrent of cavalry rushing over the obstruction with wild shouts.


"That is Numidian sport, master Paulus," said the freedman; "but there is not a rider among them to be compared to yourself."

"Certainly I can ride," said the youth; "but I pretend not to be superior to these Centaurs."

"Be these, then, the Centaurs I have heard of?" asked Agatha; "be these the wild powers?"

The hubbub had prevented her, and all with her, from noticing something. Before an answer could be given the Numidians had returned to the highway as suddenly as they had quitted it, and the noise of their dance was succeeded by a pause of attention. The general was again on horseback, and our travellers perceived that two litters, one of carved ivory and gold, the other of sculptured bronze, borne on the shoulders of slaves were beside them.

Two gentlemen on foot had ar-



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rived with the litters along the broad pathway already noticed, and a group of attendants at a little distance were following.

This new party were now halting with our travellers beneath the far-spreading shade of the same trees. In the ivory litter reclined a girl of about seventeen, dressed in a long palla of blue silk, a material then only just introduced from India, through Arabia and Egypt, and so expensive as to be beyond the reach of any but the richest class. Her hair, which was of a bright gold color, was dressed in the fashionable form of a helmet, (galerus), and was enclosed behind in a gauze net. She wore large innaures, or ear-rings, of some jewel, a gold chain, in every ring of which was set a gem, and scarlet shoes embroidered with pearls. The lady in the bronze litter was attired in the stola of a matron, with a cyclas, or circular robe, thrown back from the neck, and a tunic of dark purple which descended to her feet. Her brown hair was restrained by bands, vittae, which had an honorable significance among the Roman ladies, ("Nil mihi cum vitta," says the profligate author of the *Ars Amandi*). She seemed somewhat past thirty years of age; she had a very sweet, calm, and matronly air; her countenance was in beautiful in features and general effect as it was modest in its tone and character.

Her companion in the litter of ivory and gold, was not more than half her age, was even more beautiful, with an immense wreath of golden hair, and with large blue eyes, darkening to the likeness of black as she gazed earnestly upon any object. But she had a less gentle physiognomical expression. Frequently her look was penetrating, brief, impatient, sarcastic, disdainful. She had a bewitching smile however, and her numerous admirers made Italy echo with their ravings.

Lucius Varius, said the fashionable world, was at that very time engaged upon a kind of sapphic ode, of which she was to be the subject.

Scarcely had these litters of palanquins arrived and halted, when the general officer dismounted once more, and walked quietly towards the spot with his helmet in his hand. At a few yards' distance he stopped, and first bowed low to the elder of the two gentlemen who had accompanied the litters on foot, and then, almost entirely disregarding the other gentleman, made an obeisance not quite so long or so deep to the ladies. The man whom so splendid a personage as the legatus, wearing his flaming paludamentum, and at the head of his troops, thus treated with so obsequious a veneration, did not return the salute except by a slight nod and a momentary, absent-minded smile. His gaze had been riveted upon our travellers, and chiefly upon the youth and his young, suffering sister, upon both of whom, after it had quickly taken in Philip, the freedman, the Thracian woman, and the Athenian lady it rested long—longest and last upon Agatha.

"Sejanus," said he finally, "who are these?"

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One of the pictures is called

"Heart Broken"

We will not let the reader into the secret of what has happened, but one of the merry little companions of the woeful little maid who has broken her heart is laughing already, and the other hardly knows what has happened. Cut flowers nod reassuringly at them, and a bright bit of verdure covered wall stands in the background. There is something piquantly Watteauesque about one of the petite figures, suggesting just a touch of French influence on the artist.

The other picture presents another of the tremendous perplexities of childhood. It is called

"Hard to Choose"

As in the other picture, we will not give away the point made by the artists before the recipients analyze it for themselves. Again there are three happy girls in the picture, caught in a moment of pause in the midst of limitless hours of play. One of the little maids still holds in her arms the toy horse with which she has been playing. Flowers and butterflies color the background of this, and an arbour and a quaint old table replace the wall.

The two pictures together will people any room with six happy little girls, so glad to be alive, so care-free, so content through the sunny hours amidst their flowers and butterflies, that they must brighten the house like the throwing open of shutters on a sunny morning.

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