

DION AND THE SYBILS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

In the middle of a very narrow street in this low and crowded quarter, where the Romans afterward under Titus were repulsed, he met a file of people, some mounted, some on foot, led by a richly-dressed and haughty-looking burly man riding a mule.

So narrow was the street that either Paulus would have had to go back as far as the tower of Marianne, or the richly-dressed and haughty-looking man about one quarter of the distance to the bridge between the street of the Cheesemongers and the court of the Gentiles. Paulus always full of courtesy, amenity and sweetness, was in the very act of turning his small Tauric horse, when the burly man in rich dress, who led the opposing file, called out, "Back! low people! Back, and let Caiaphas go by!"

"And who is Caiaphas?" demanded Paulus instantly facing round again and barring the way.

"The high-priest of Jerusalem," was the answer, thundered forth in rude and minatory tones.

"I respect," said Paulus, "and even revere that holy appellation; but he who uses it at this moment, for some present purpose, has flung against me who am a Roman general, the mandate of back, low people. Where are the low people? I do not believe that I am a low person. Where, then, are the low people?"

"Come on," cried the imperious voice of Caiaphas.

He himself, being the file-leader, began then to move forward, till he came immediately in front of the traveller who had so courteously spoken to him.

"If you want," said Paulus, "to pass me at once, I must get into the ditch, or throw you into it; which do you prefer?"

"I prefer," quoth Caiaphas, "that you should throw me into the ditch, if you either dare or can."

"Sir," said Paulus, "I am sorry for the sentiment you express or at least imply. But I will stand up against your challenge of throwing you into the ditch, because I both could do it, and dare do it, as a Roman soldier, only that there is one among you who has come to settle all our disputes, and who has a divine right to do so. For his sake I would rather be thrown into that drain by you—soldier, officer, general, and Roman as I am—than throw you into it."

"Let me pass," cried Caiaphas, purple with rage. Paulus, whose behavior at Lake Benacus against the Germans, and previously at Formiae, and afterward in the terrible Calpurnian House on the Viminal Hill, the reader remembers, made no answer, but, riding back to the Tower of Marianne, allowed the high-priest and his followers there to pass him; which they did with every token of scorn and act of contumely that the brief and sudden circumstances allowed. Caiaphas thus passed on to his country-house at the south-west-by-south of Jerusalem, where he usually spent the night.

Paulus then put his pony into a gallop and soon reached the bridge across the Tyropaeon into the courtyard of the Temple, commonly called the courtyard of the Gentiles. Such was the nervous excitement caused by his recent act of purely voluntary, gratuitous, and deliberate self-humiliation, that he laughed aloud as he rode through the Temple yard, coasting the western "cloisters," and so reaching Fort Antonio.

There his servant, the Roman legionary, who had before met him at the Golden-gate, and whose name was Marcus was awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXV.

That night the palace of Herod the tetrarch resounded with music, and all the persons of rank or distinction in Jerusalem were among the guests. The entertainment would have been remembered for years on account of its brilliancy; it was destined to be remembered for all ages, even till the day of doom, on account of its catastrophe, chronicled in the books of God, and graven in the horror of men.

Paulus, unusually grave, because experiencing unwonted sensations, and anxious calmly to analyze them, was assailed for the first time in his life by a feeling of nervous irritability, which originated (though he knew it not) in his having suppressed the natural desire

to chastise the insolence of Caiaphas that morning. He sat abstracted and silent, not far from the semi-royal chair of Herod the tetrarch. His magnificent dress, well-earned military fame, and manly and grave beauty (never seen to greater advantage than at that period of life, though the gloss of youth was past) had drawn toward him during the evening an unusual amount of attention, of which he was unconscious, and to which he would have been indifferent.

The "beauty of the evening" as she was called (for in those days they used terms like those which we moderns use to express our infatuation for the gleams of prettiness which are quenched almost as soon as they are seen), had repeatedly endeavored to attract his attention. She was royal; she was an unrivalled dancer. Herod, who began to feel dull, begged her to favor the company with a dance sola. Thereupon the daughter of Herodias looked at Paulus to whom her previous blandishments had been addressed in vain (he was well known to be unmarried) and heaved a fiery sigh. The mere noise of it ought to have awakened his notice, and yet failed to accomplish even that small result. Had it succeeded, he was exactly the person to have regarded this woman with a feeling akin to that which, some two-and-twenty years before, she herself (or was it Herodias? they age fast in the East) had waked in the bosom of his sister under the veranda in the bower of Crispus's Inn, leading out of the fine, old Latian garden near the banks of the Liris.

She proceeded to execute her ballet, her pas seul, her dance of immortal shame and infamy fatal. Cries of delight arose. The creature grew frantic. The court of Herod fell into two parties. One party proclaimed the performance a perfection of elegance and spirit. The other party said not a word, but glances of painful feeling passed among them. The clamorous eulogists formed the

large majority. In the silent minority was numbered Paulus, who never in his life had felt such grave disgust or such settled indignation. He thought that, had it been his sister Agatha who thus outraged every rudimentary principle of the tacit social compact, he could almost find it in his heart to relieve the earth of her.

Thus pondering, his glance fell upon Herod the tetrarch. The tetrarch seemed to have become delirious. He was laughing and crying, and slobbering, and clapping his hands, and rolling his head, and rocking his body on the great state cushion under the canopy, where he "sat at table." While Paulus was contemplating him in wonder and shame, the wretched dancer came to an end of her bounds. Indecency scientifically accidental, had been the one simple principle of the exhibition. Herod called the practised female before him, and, in the hearing of several, bade her demand from him any reward she pleased, and declared upon an oath that he would grant her demand. Paulus heard the answer. After consulting apart with her mother, she reapproached the tetrarch, and, with a flushed face, said that she desired the head of a prisoner upon a dish.

"What prisoner?"

"John," said she.

Paulus gazed at the miserable tetrarch "the quarter of a king," not from the height of his rank as a Roman general, but from the still greater height which God had given him as one of the first, one of the earliest of European gentlemen. He knew not then who John was. But that any fellow-creature in prison, not otherwise to be put to death, should have his head hewn off and placed upon a dish because a woman had tossed her limbs to and fro in a style which pleased a tetrarch while it disgraced human society, appeared to Paulus to be less than reasonable. What he had said, the tetrarch had said upon oath.

A little confusion, a slight murmuring and whispering ensued, but the courtly music soon recommenced. Paulus could not afterward tell how long it was before the most awful scene he had ever witnessed occurred.

A menial entered, bearing on a large dish, a freshly-severed human head, bleeding at the neck.

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"It was not a jest, then," said Paulus, in a low voice to his next neighbor, a very old man, whose face he remembered, but whose name he had all the evening been trying in vain to recall—"it was not a base jest, dictated by the hideous taste of worse than barbarians!"

"Truly," replied the aged man, "these Jews are worse than any barbarians I ever saw, and I have seen most of them."

Paulus recognized at these words the geographer Strabo, formerly his companion at the court of Augustus.

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