

DION AND THE SIBYLS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

efore the painful pause was taken, the attention of all present was arrested by a sudden uproar in the street. The noise of a furious trampling, combined with successive shrieks, whether of pain or of terror, was borne into the palace. Dionysius, followed by Paulus, by Benignus, by the steward, and Benigna, ran to the window, if such it could be termed, drew aside the silk curtain, and pushed open the gaudily-painted, perforated shutter, when a strange and alarming spectacle was presented in the open space formed by cross-streets before the left front of the mansion.

A magnificent horse of bigger stature, yet of more elegant proportions, than the horses which were then used for the Roman cavalry, was in the act of rearing; and within stroke of his fore-feet, on coming down, lay a man, face under, motionless, a wooden tunic ripped open behind at the shoulder, and disclosing some sort of wound, from which blood was flowing. The horse, which was of a bright roan color, was neither ridden nor saddled, but girt with a cloth round the belly, and led, or rather held back, by two long cavassons, which a couple of powerfully-built, swarthy men, dressed like slaves, held at the further ends on opposite sides of the beast, considerably apart, and perhaps thirty feet behind him. One of these lines or reins—that nearest the palace—was taut, the other was slack; and the slave who held the former had rolled it twice or thrice round his bare arm, and was leaning back, and hauling, hand over hand.

The animal had apparently stricken on the back, unawares, with a forefoot play and a pawing blow, the man who was lying so still and motionless on the pavement, and the beast, having reared, was now trying to come down upon his victim. But no sooner were his fore-legs in the air than he, of course, thereby yielded a sudden purchase to the groom who was pulling him with the taut cavasson, and this man was thus at last enabled to drag him fairly off his hind-legs, and to bring him with a hollow thump to the ground upon his side. Before the brute could again struggle to his feet, four or five soldiers who happened to be night, running to the rescue, had lifted, and carried out of harm's way the prostrate and wounded man.

"That is the very horse!" exclaimed the magister, stretching his neck between the shoulders of Dion and Paulus, at the small window of the palace.

"I observe," said Paulus, "that the cavasson is ringed to a muzzle—the beast is indisputably muzzled."

"Why is he muzzled?" "Because," replied the magister, "he eats people!" "Eats people!" echoed Paulus, in surprise.

"O gods," cried Benigna.

"Yes," quoth the steward; "the horse is priceless; he comes of an inestimable breed; that is the present representative of the Sejan race of steeds. Your Tauric horses are cats in comparison; your cavalry horses but goats. That animal is directly descended from the real horse Sejanus, and excels, they even say, his sire, and indeed he also in his turn goes now by the old name. He is the horse Sejanus."

At these words Paulus could not, though he cried hard, help casting one glance toward Benigna, who had been with him only so short a time before at the top of the palace, listening to the conversation of the tipsy patricians. The poor little girl had become very white and very scare-faced.

"Tell us more," said Dionysius, "of this matter, worthy magister. We have all heard that phrase of ill omen—such and such a person has the horse Sejanus—meaning that he is unlucky, that he is doomed to destruction. Now, what is the origin and what is the true value of this popular proverb?" "Like all popular proverbs," re-

plied the steward, with a bow of the deepest reverence to the young Athenian philosopher, "it has some value, my lord, and a real foundation, although Tiberius has determined to confute it by practical proof. You must know, most illustrious senator of Athens, that during the civil wars which preceded the summer-day stillness of this glorious reign of Augustus, no one ever appeared in battlefield or festive show so splendidly mounted as the knight Cneius Sejus, whose name has attached itself to the race.

"His horse, which was of enormous proportions, like the beast you have just beheld, would try to throw you first and would try to eat you afterward. Few could ride him; and then his plan was simple. Those whom he threw he would beat to death with his paws, and then tear them to pieces with his teeth. Moreover, if he could not dislodge his rider from the ephippia, by honest plunging and fair play, he would writhe his neck round like a serpent—indeed, the square front, large eyes, and supple neck remind one of a serpent; he would twist his head back, I say, all white and dazzling, with the ears laid close, the lips drawn away, and the glitter of his teeth displayed, and, seizing the knee-cap or the shin-bone, would tear it off, and bring down the best horseman that ever bestrode a Bucephalus. What usually followed was frightful to behold; for one a rider was dismounted, the shoulder has been seen to come away between the brute's teeth, with knots and tresses of tendons dripping blood like tendrils, and the ferocious horse has been known with his great fat grinders to crush the skull of the fallen person, and lap up the brains—as you would crack a nut—after which, he paws the prostrate figure till it no longer resembles the form of man. But the present horse Sejanus, which you have just beheld, excels all in strength, beauty, and ferocity; he belongs to my master Tiberius."

"Ah gods!" exclaimed poor Benigna; "this is the description of a demon rather than of a beast."

Dionysius and Paulus exchanged one significant glance, and the former said:

"What became of the first possessor, who yields his name to so unexampled a breed of horses? what became of the knight Sejus?"

"A whisper had transpired, illustrious sir," replied the steward, "that this unhappy man had fed the brute upon human flesh. Mark Antony, who coveted possession of the horse, brought some accusation, but not this, against the knight, who was eventually put to death; but Dolabella, the former lieutenant of Julius Caesar, had just before given a hundred thousand sesterces (£800) to Sejus for the animal; therefore Antony killed the knight for nothing, and failed to get Sejanus; at least he failed that time. Dolabella, however, did not prosper; he almost immediately afterward murdered himself. Cassius thereupon became the next master of the Sejan horse, and Cassius rode him at the fatal battle of Philippi, losing which, Cassius in his turn, after that resolute fashion of which we all have heard, put an end to his own existence."

"To one form of it," observed Dionysius.

"This time," continued the magister, bowing, "Mark Antony had his way—he became at last the lord of the Sejan horse, but likewise he, in his turn, was doomed to exemplify the brute's ominous reputation; for Antony, as you know, killed himself a little subsequently at Alexandria. The horse had four proprietors in a very short period, and in immediate succession, the first of whom was cruelly slain, and the three others slew themselves. Hence, noble sir, the proverb."

By this time the magister had told his tale, the street outside had become empty and silent, and the parties within the chamber had thoroughly mastered and under-

stood the horrible truth which underlay the case of the slave Claudius, and this new instance of Tiberius's wrath and vengeance.

The magister, Claudius and Benigna had returned to the other end of the room, where the slaves were writing, and had left Paulus and Dion still standing thoughtfully near the window.

Claudius exclaimed, "My turn it is at present; it will be some one else's soon!"

He and Benigna were now whispering together. The magister stood a little apart, looking on the ground in a deep reverie, his chin buried in the hollow of his right hand, the arm of which was folded across his chest. The slaves were bending over their work in silence.

(To be continued.)

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