

However, I said a word of greeting and encouragement to Hippostheneidas, to the effect that the very Gods were calling us on to action. After this Phyllidas went out to arrange for his party, and to get Archias plunged straight into his drink, Charon to see to his house, while Theocritus and I returned to Simmias on the chance of getting a word with Epaminondas.

XX. However, they were far on in an inquiry of no mean import, Heaven knows, but one which Galaxidorus and Pheidolaus had started a little earlier, the problem of the real nature and potency of the Divine Sign of Socrates, so called. What Simmias said in reply to the argument of Galaxidorus we did not hear; but he went on to say that he had himself once asked Socrates on the subject, and failed to get an answer, and so had never asked again; but that he had often been with him when he gave his opinion that those who claim intercourse with the divine by way of vision are impostors, whereas he attended to those who professed to hear a voice, and put serious questions to them. Hence it began to occur to us, as we were discussing the matter among ourselves, to suspect that the Divine Sign of Socrates might possibly be no vision but a special sense for sounds or words, with which he had contact in some strange manner; just as in sleep there is no voice heard, but fancies and notions as to particular words reach the sleepers, who then think that they hear people talking. Only sleepers receive such conceptions in a real dream because of the tranquillity and calm of the body in sleep, whereas in waking moments the soul can hardly attend to greater powers, being so choked by thronging emotions and distracting needs that they are unable to listen and to give their attention to clear revelations. But the mind of Socrates, pure and passionless, and intermingling itself but little with the body for necessary purposes, was fine and light of touch, and quickly changed under any impression. The impression we may conjecture to have been no voice, but the utterance

of a spirit, which without vocal sound reached the perceiving mind by the revelation itself. For voice is like a blow upon the soul, which perforce admits its utterance by way of the ears, whenever we converse with one another. But the mind of a stronger being leads the gifted soul, touching it with the thing thought, and no blow is needed. To such a being soul yields as it relaxes or tightens the impulses, which are never violent, as when there are passions to resist, but supple and pliant like reins which give. There is nothing wonderful in this; as we see great cargo-vessels turned about by little helms, and, again, potters' wheels whirling round in even revolution at the light touch of a hand. These are things without a soul no doubt, yet so constructed as to run swiftly and smoothly, and therefore to yield to a motive force when a touch is given. But the soul of a man, being strained by countless impulses, as by cords, is far the easiest of all machines to turn, if it be touched rationally; it accepts the touch of thought, and moves as thought directs. For here the passions and impulses are stretched towards the 589 thinking principle and end in it; if that principle be stirred they receive a pull, and in turn draw and strain the man. And thus we are allowed to learn how great is the power of a thought. For bones, which have no sensation, and nerves and fleshy parts charged with humours, and the whole resultant mass in its ponderous quiescence, do yet, as soon as the soul sets something a going in thought and directs its impulse towards it, rise up, alert and tense, a whole which moves to action in all its members, as though it had wings. But it is hard, nay, perhaps, altogether beyond our powers, to take in at one glance the system of excitation, complex strain, and divine prompting, whereby the soul, after conceiving a thought, draws on the mass of the body by the impulses which it gives.¹ Yet whereas a word thus intellectually apprehended excites the soul, while

¹ Compare *Life of Coriolanus*, c. 32, p. 229, with this difficult passage.

no sort of voice is heard and no action takes place, even so we need not, I think, find it hard to believe that mind may be led by a stronger mind and a more divine soul external to itself, having contact with it after its kind, as word with word or light with reflection. For in actual fact we recognize the thoughts of one another by groping as it were in darkness with the assistance of voice; whereas the thoughts of spirits have light, they shine upon men capable of receiving them, they need not verbs or nouns, those symbols whereby men in their intercourse with men see resemblances and images of the things thought, yet never apprehend the things themselves, save only those upon whom, as we have said, there shines from within a peculiar and spiritual light. And yet what we see happen in the case of the voice may partly reassure the incredulous. The air is impressed with articulate sounds, it becomes all word and voice, and brings the meaning home to the soul of the hearer. Therefore we need not wonder if, in regard to this special mode of thought also, the air is sensitive to the touch of higher beings, and is so modified as to convey to the mind of godlike and extraordinary men the thought of him who thought it. For as the strokes of miners¹ are caught on brazen shields because of the reverberation, when they rise from below ground and fall upon them, whereas falling on any other surface they are indistinct and pass to nothing, even so the words of spirits pass through all Nature, but only sound for those who possess the soul in untroubled calm, holy and spiritual men as we emphatically call them. The view of most people is that spiritual visitations come to men in sleep; that they should be similarly stirred when awake and in their full faculties they think marvellous and beyond belief. As though a musician were thought to use his lyre when the strings are let down, and not to touch or use it when

¹ Of the participle so translated only the termination remains. Reiske's *μεταλλευόντων* well completes this fine image.

it is strung up and tuned! They do not see the cause, their own inner tunelessness and discord, from which Socrates our friend had been set free, as the oracle given to his father when he was yet a boy declared. For it bade him allow his son to do whatever came into his mind; not to force nor direct his goings, but to let his impulse have free play, only to pray for him to Zeus Agoraios and to the Muses, but for all else not to meddle with Socrates; meaning no doubt that he had within him a guide for his life who was better than ten thousand teachers and directors.

XXI. This, Pheidolaus, is what has occurred to me to think about the Divine Sign of Socrates, in his lifetime and since his death, dismissing with contempt those who have suggested voices or sneezings or anything of that sort. But what I have heard Timarchus of Chaeroneia relate on this head it may perhaps be better to pass over in silence, as more like myth than history. 'Not at all;' said Theocritus, 'let us have it all. Even myth touches truth, not too closely, perhaps, but it does touch it at points. But first, who was this Timarchus? Explain, for I do not know him.' 'Naturally, Theocritus,' said Simmias, 'for he died quite young, having begged that he might be buried near Lamprocles, the son of Socrates, who had died a few days before, his own friend and contemporary. He then greatly wished to know what was really meant by the Divine Sign of Socrates, and so, like a generous youth fresh to the taste of Philosophy, having taken no one but Cebes and myself into his plan, went down into the cave of Trophonius, after performing the usual rites of the oracle. Two nights and one day he remained below; and when most people had given him up, and his family was mourning for him, at early dawn he came up very radiant. He knelt to the God, then made his way at once through the crowd, and related to us many wonderful things which he had seen and heard.'

XXII. 'He said that, when he descended into the oracular

chamber, he first found himself in a great darkness; then, after a prayer, lay a long while not very clearly conscious whether he was awake or dreaming; only he fancied that his head received a blow, while a dull noise fell on his ears, and then the sutures parted and allowed his soul to issue forth. As it passed upwards, rejoicing to mingle with the pure transparent air, it appeared first to draw a long deep breath, after its narrow compression, and to become larger than before, like a sail as it is filled out. Then he heard dimly a whirring noise overhead out of which came a sweet voice. He looked up and saw land nowhere, only islands shining with lambent fire, from time to time changing colour with one another, as though it were a coat of dye, while the light became spangled in the transition. They appeared to be countless in number and in size enormous, not all equal but all alike circular. He thought that as these moved around there was an answering hum of the air, for the gentleness of that voice which was harmonized out of all corresponded to the smoothness of the motion. Through the midst of the islands a sea or lake was interfused, all shining with the colours as they were commingled over its grey surface. Some few islands floated in a straight course and were conveyed across the current; many others were drawn on by the flood, being almost submerged. The sea was of great depth in some parts towards the south, but [northwards¹] there were very shallow reaches, and it often swept over places and then left them dry, having no strong ebb. The colour was in places pure as that of the open sea, in others turbid and marsh-like. As the islands passed through the surf they never came round to their starting-point again or described a circle, but slightly varied the points of impact, thus describing a continuous spiral as they went round. The sea was inclined to the approximate middle and highest part of the encompassing firmament by a little less than eight-ninths

¹ This word is not in the Greek text.

of the whole, as it appeared to him. It had two openings which received rivers of fire pouring in from opposite sides, so that it was lashed into foam, and its grey surface was turned to white. This he saw, delighted at the spectacle; but as he turned his eyes downwards, there appeared a chasm, vast and round as though hewn out of a sphere; it was strangely terrible and deep and full of utter darkness, not in repose but often agitated and surging up; from which were heard roarings innumerable and groanings of beasts, and wailings of innumerable infants, and with these mingled cries of men and women, dim sounds of all sorts, and turmoils sent up indistinctly from the distant depth, 591 to his no small consternation. Time passed, and an unseen person said to him, "Timarchus, what do you wish to learn?" "Everything," he replied, "for all is wonderful." "We", the voice said, "have little to do with the regions above, they belong to other Gods; but the province of Persephone which we administer, being one of the four which Styx bounds, you may survey if you will." To his question, "What is Styx?" "A way to Hades," was the reply, "and it passes right opposite, parting the light at its very vertex, but reaching up, as you see, from Hades below; where it touches the light in its revolution it marks off the remotest region of all. Now, there are four first principles of all things, the first of life, the second of motion, the third of birth, the fourth of death. The first is linked to the second by Unity, in the Unseen: the second to the third by Mind, in the sun: the third to the fourth by Nature, in the moon. Over each of these combinations a Fate, daughter of Necessity, presides, and holds the keys; of the first Atropus, of the second, Clotho, of the one belonging to the moon Lachesis, and the turning-point of birth is there. For the other islands contain Gods, but the moon, which belongs to earthly spirits, only avoids Styx by a slight elevation, and is caught once in one hundred and seventy-seven secondary

measures¹. As Styx moves upon her, the souls cry aloud in terror; for many slip from off her and are caught by Hades. Others the moon bears upwards from below, as they turn towards her; and for these death coincides with the moment of birth, those excepted which are guilty and impure, and which are not allowed to approach her while she lightens and bellows fearfully; mourning for their own fate they slip away and are borne downwards for another birth, as you see." "But I see nothing," said Timarchus, "save many stars quivering around the gulf, others sinking into it, others, again, darting up from below." "Then you see the spirits themselves," the voice said, "though you do not know it. It is thus: every soul partakes of mind, there is none irrational or mindless; but so much of soul as is mingled with flesh and with affections is altered and turned towards the irrational by its sense of pleasures and pains. But the mode of mingling is not the same for every soul. Some are merged entirely into body, and are disturbed by passions throughout their whole being during life. Others are in part mixed up with it, but leave outside their purest part, which is not drawn in, but is like a life-buoy which floats on the surface, and touches the head of one who has sunk into the depth, the soul clinging around it and being kept upright, while so much of it is supported as obeys and is not overmastered by the affections. The part which is borne below the surface within the body is called soul. That which is left free from dissolution most persons call mind, taking it to be something inside themselves, resembling the reflected images in mirrors; but those who are rightly informed know that it is outside themselves and address it as spirit. The stars, Timarchus," the voice went on, "which you see extinguished, you are to think of as souls entirely merged in bodies; those which give light again and shine from below upwards, shaking off, as though it were mud, a sort of gloom and dimness, are those

¹ See note on the Myths of Plutarch, p. 315.

which sail up again out of their bodies after death; those which are parted upwards are spirits, and belong to men who are said to have understanding. Try to see clearly in each the bond by which it coheres with soul." Hearing this, he paid closer attention himself, and saw the stars tossing about, some less, some more, as we see the corks which mark out nets in the sea move over its surface; but some, like the shuttles used in 592 weaving, in entangled and irregular figures, not able to settle the motion into a straight line. The voice said that those who kept a straight and orderly movement were men whose souls had been well broken in by fair nurture and training, and did not allow their irrational part to be too harsh and rough. Those which often inclined upwards and downwards in an irregular and confused manner, like horses plunging off from a halter, were fighting against the yoke with tempers disobedient and ill-trained for want of education; sometimes getting the mastery and swerving round to the right; again bent by passions and drawn on to share in sins, then again resisting and putting force upon them. The coupling bond, like a curb set on the irrational part of the soul whenever it resists, brings on repentance, as we call it, for sins, and shame for all lawless and intemperate pleasures, being really a pain and a stroke inflicted by it on the soul when it is bitted by that which masters and rules it, until at length, being thus punished, it becomes obedient to the rein and familiar with it, and then, like a tame creature, without blow or pain, understands the spirit quickly by signs and hints. These then are led, late in the day and by slow degrees, to their duty. Out of those who are docile and obedient to their spirit from the first birth, is formed the prophetic and inspired class, to which belonged the soul of Hermodorus¹ of Clazomenae, of which you have surely heard; how it would leave the body entirely and wander over a wide range by night and by day, and

¹ Lucian (Musc. Encom. c. 7) tells the same story of Hermodorus. Plutarch has probably made a slip, as elsewhere, in names. See p. 99.

then come back again, having been present where many things were said and done far off, until the enemy found the body, which his wife had betrayed, left at home deserted by its soul, and burnt it. Now this part is not true; the soul used not to go out from the body; but by always yielding to the spirit, and slackening the coupling-band, he gave it constant liberty to range around, so that it saw and heard and reported many things from the world outside. But those who destroyed the body while he was asleep are paying the penalty in Tartarus unto this day. All this, young man, you shall know more clearly in the third month from this; now begone!" When the voice ceased, Timarchus wished to turn round, he said, and see who the speaker was; but his head again ached violently, as though forcibly compressed, and he could no longer hear or perceive anything passing about him; afterwards, however, he came to by degrees, and saw that he was lying in the cave of Trophonius, near the entrance where he had originally sunk down.

XXIII. 'Such was the tale of Timarchus. When he died, having returned to Athens in the third month after hearing the voice, and when, in our wonder, we told Socrates of the story, he blamed us for not reporting it while Timarchus was still alive, since he would gladly have heard it more clearly from himself, and have questioned him further. There, Theocritus, you have all, tale and theory both. But perhaps we ought to invite the stranger to join our inquiry; the subject comes nearly home to inspired men.' 'Well, but', the stranger answered, 'Epaminondas, who puts out from the same port, is not contributing his opinion.' Our father smiled: 'That is just his character, Sir. Silent and cautious in speaking, but a glutton for learning and listening. That is why Spintharus of Tarentum, after spending no little time with him here, is always saying, as you know, that he never met any man of his own standing who knew more or who spoke less. So pray let us have all your own thoughts on the subject.'

XXIV. 'Then, for my part,' said Theanor, 'I think that the story of Timarchus ought to be dedicated to the God, as holy and inviolable. But it will be strange to me if any shall be found to discredit what Simmias tells us about the matter; thus, while they designate swans, serpents, dogs and horses as sacred, refusing to believe that men may be godlike and friends of God, yet holding that God is not a friend of birds but a friend of man. As, then, a man who loves horses does not care equally for all individuals which make the class, but always picks out and separates some excellent member of the class, and trains him by himself and feeds him and loves him beyond others; so it is with ourselves; the higher powers extract, if the word may pass, the best out of the herd, and deem them worthy of a very special training, directing their course, not by reins nor by halters, but by reason, through signs utterly incomprehensible to the general herd. Why, most dogs do not understand the signals used in hunting, nor most horses those used in the manège; but those who have learned know at once from a whistle or a chirrup what they are required to do, and easily take the right position. Homer clearly knows the distinction to which I refer. Some of his prophets he calls "readers of dreams" and "priests", others understand the conversation of the Gods themselves, he thinks, by sympathy, and signify the future to us. For instance:

*Thus they conferred: but Helenus, Priam's son,
That scheme, which pleased them, in his heart divined.*¹

And again:

*So the everlasting voice I have heard and known.*²

The mind of kings and generals is made known to outsiders through the senses, by special beacons or proclamation, or calls on the trumpet; and so the divine message reaches few of us in and through itself, and that rarely; for ordinary men signals are employed and these are the groundwork of what we call divination.

¹ *Il.* 7, 44-5.

² *L.* 53.

The Gods, then, regulate life only for a few, for those whom they wish to make blessed in a single degree, and truly divine; but souls released from coming to the birth, and now for ever at rest from a body, and dismissed into freedom, are spirits who care for men, in Hesiod's sense. For as athletes, when age has brought them an end of training, do not wholly lose the spirit of competition or of care for the body, but delight to see others in practice, and cheer them on and run beside them, so those who have ceased from the struggles of life, made spirits because of the excellence of their soul, do not utterly despise our earthly affairs, our discussions and our interests: they have a kindly feeling for those training with the same end before them, they share their eagerness for virtue, encourage them, and join them in their bursts, whenever they see them running with hope near at hand and already within touch. For the spirit does not help all men as they come. It is as with swimmers upon the sea; spectators on the shore merely gaze in silence on those who are out in the open, drifting far from land; whereas they run along the beach towards those who are already nearing it, they dash in to meet them, and with hand, and voice, and endeavour, hasten to the rescue. Such, Simmias, is the way of a spirit; while we are dipped beneath the tides of life, changing body for body, like relays on a road, he allows us to struggle out for ourselves, to be brave and patient, to try by our own virtue to reach the harbour in safety. But when any soul through a myriad of births has striven once and again a long-drawn strife well and stoutly, and when, with the cycle now wellnigh complete, it takes the risks, and sets its hope high, as it nears the landing-place, and presses upwards with sweat and endeavour, the God thinks it no wrong that its own spirit should go to the help of such a soul, but lets zeal go free, and the Gods are zealous to encourage and to save, one this soul and one that. The soul hearkens because it is so near, and it is saved; but if it does not hearken the spirit leaves it, and its happy chance is gone.'

XXV. As he finished, Epaminondas looked at me. 'It is nearly your time, Capheisias, to go to the gymnasium and not fail your comrades; we will take care of Theanor, and break up our conference whenever he likes.' 'Let us do so,' I said, 'but I think Theocritus here wants a few words with you while Galaxidorus and I are present.' 'By all means', said he; he rose and led the way to the angle of the portico. We stood round and tried to encourage him to join the scheme. He answered that he perfectly well knew the day of the return of the exiles, and had arranged with Gorgidas as to all that was necessary for our friends, but that he refused to take the life of any citizen without trial, unless there were an urgent necessity; also, looking to the body of the Thebans, it was specially convenient that there should be some person with hands clean and beyond suspicion, when the time should come to advise the people for the best. We agreed, and he returned at once to Simmias and his party. We went down to the gymnasium and met our friends, and, pairing off for wrestling matches, exchanged information and plans for action. We saw also Archias and Philippus, anointed and starting for the supper. For Phylidas, fearing that they might put Amphitheus to death first, called on Archias immediately after he had escorted Lysanoridas, and by suggesting hopes that the lady he desired to meet would come to the place, persuaded him to turn his mind to having a good time with the usual companions of his revels.

XXVI. It was now getting late, and the cold was intense, as the wind had got up. Most people had therefore made for their homes more quickly than usual. We had fallen in with Damocleidas, Pelopidas, and Theopompus, and were taking them with us, as others took others of the exiles. For the party had broken up immediately after crossing Cithaeron; and the bitter weather allowed them to muffle up their faces and pass through the city in security. Some of them were met by a