

DION AND THE SIBYLS

By Miles Gerald Keon

A CLASSIC CHRISTIAN NOVEL.

"Are you quite sure," asked Dionysius, "that you are thus determined? I should like to shake such a determination."

"You'll fail," replied Afer, smiling. "Which of your senses, then, has attested to you that very determination? Can you see, taste, smell, hear, or touch it? And yet you tell us you are sure of it. If so, you can believe in, and be sure of, something which has never been submitted to the criterion which alone you admit."

"A determination is not a thing," said Afer hastily, and with a little confusion.

"Was Julius Caesar a thing?" persisted Dionysius; "because if you believe that Julius Caesar existed, having heard of him and read of him, your senses of hearing and seeing do not attest to you in this case the existence of Julius Caesar, but simply the affirmations of others that he has existed. My hearing attests to me that Strabo says he has been in Spain; and this, if there were no other reason, would satisfy me that Spain exists; yet it is Strabo whom I hear. I do not hear Spain."

Augustus clapped his hands gently, and laughed. Domitius Afer, with visible anger, exclaimed.

"I mean, that I will take nothing but upon proof. Prove that the soul is immortal; prove that one supreme God exists. Every thing which a reasonable man believes ought to be demonstrated."

"I hope," said Dionysius, "to prove those two truths to your satisfaction. But as you say that all we believe ought to be demonstrated, I will first offer you a demonstration, that it is impossible to demonstrate every thing. To prove any proposition, you require a second; and to prove the second, in its turn, you require a third; and it is upon this third, if you admit it, that the demonstration of the first depends. But if you had fifty propositions, or any number, in the chain, what proves 'the last of them?'"

"Another yet," said Afer.

"But," said the Greek, "either you come to a last, or you never come to a last. If you never come to a last proposition, you never finish your proof; you leave it uncompleted; 'it remains still no proof at all; you have not performed what you undertook. And if you do come to a final proposition, which is supported by no other, what supports it?'"

There was a little start of pleasure in the company at the sudden and clear closes to which the Athenian was, each and every time, bringing what seemed likely to have grown into intricate and long disquisitions.

"My object, Augustus," pursued Dion, "was to show that we are all so made that we feel compelled to believe much more than we can prove. Otherwise, our knowledge would be confined within narrow limits indeed. He who knows no more than he can demonstrate, knows but little. May I now ask the distinguished orators Montanus and Capito, for their theories respecting the questions which interest us so much to-night?"

Quintus Haterius prevented any answer to this appeal. "The eloquent and learned thinker," said he—"who will yet, I have no doubt, be the ornament of the Athenian Areopagus—has placed me, and, I think, many others near me, completely on his side, in what has hitherto passed. Young as he is, he has made us feel the masterful facility with which he is able to throw light upon errors placed where truth ought to stand. The operation is highly amusing; we could pass a long evening in watching it repeated against any number of antagonists. But come, Dionysius, reverse the process; take your own ground; maintain it; raise there your system like your castle; and let those assail it, if they please, whom your aggressive genius on the contrary turns to assaults."

"Haterius is right," said Augustus. "I could assist at any number of these collisions; but they take a form which presents your mind to us, my Athenian, as a hunter and conqueror rather than a founder."

"But I am no founder," replied the youth, earnestly and modestly; "and I aspire to nothing of the kind. The fact is merely and simply this: After much study I have arrived at

the conviction—first, that there is one absolutely perfect and eternal Being who governs the universe; and, next, that what thinks within each of us never will die. Since you desire to hear the reasons which have brought me to these conclusions, I cannot decline to state one or two of them at least—though this place, this occasion, and this dazzling company befit the subject far less, I fear, than if a few studious friends discussed it, sitting under the starry sky, on some quiet, unfrequented shore."

"Now we shall hear Plato," said Tiberius, with something almost like a sneer.

"Pardon me," said Dionysius, "Plato may speak for himself. You have him to read; why should I repeat him? Those who miss Plato's meaning in his own pages would miss it in my commentary."

Juba uttered a taunting laugh, as she glanced at her new husband Tiberius, whom she always treated with scorn.

"You remember, Augustus," Dionysius continued, "that a few minutes ago, Antistius Labio, in answering one of my questions, stated that a force which could move itself was more excellent, as such, than one which required to be set in motion by another, as the mind of the architect, said he, is superior to the stones from which he builds a palace. Labio then very justly added, in reply to another question, that what was moved only by the force of something else possessed no proper force of its own, its force being but a continuation of the first, an effect of the impact. He finally assented, when I showed that it is impossible that every thing without exception which possesses force should have received it, because 'not having' goes before receiving, and because this is only another mode of saying that every thing without exception was once devoid of force. If a particular being has received the force it possesses, that particular being must once have been without it; and if all beings without exception who possess force have received it, they likewise without exception must all, in the same manner, have first been without it, a supposed state during which no force at all existed anywhere. That any being should ever acquire force, when there was nowhere any force for it to acquire, would be an unsatisfactory philosophy."

"There has, perhaps, been," said Tiberius, "an eternal chain of these forces transmitting themselves onward."

"If," said the Athenian, "you admit the existence of any one being who possesses a force which he never received from another, that being is evidently eternal. But to say that a being has received its force, is to say that its force has had a beginning; and to say that any thing begins, is to say that once it was not. A chain of forces all received is, therefore, a chain of forces all begun—is it not? Now, if they have all begun, they have all had something prior to them. But nothing can be prior to what is eternal; such a chain or series, therefore, cannot itself be eternal."

"No link is eternal," said Tiberius; "but all the links of the chain together may surely be so."

The Athenian looked round with a smile at Tiberius, and said, "If all the forces which exist now, and all those which ever existed in the universe, without exception, have been received from something else, what is that something else 'beyond all the forces of the universe?'" They would all without exception have begun. To say this of them, is merely to say that they were all non-existent once; and this without exception. In other words, the whole chain, even with all its links taken together, is short of eternal. If so, it has been preceded either by blank nothing, or by some being who has a force 'not' thus received, a force which is his own inherently and absolutely, as I maintain. Tell me of a chain, the top of which recedes beyond our ken, that the lowest link depends on the next to it, and this on the third, I understand you; but if I ask what suspends the whole chain, with all its links taken together, it is 'no answer to say that the links are so numerous and the chain is so long that it re-

quires nothing but itself to keep it in suspension. The longer it is, the greater must be the necessity of the ultimate grasp, and the stronger must that grasp be; and observe, it must be truly ultimate, otherwise you have not solved the difficulty; nay, the suspending force must be distinct from and beyond the chain itself or you do not account for the suspension. But I will put all this past a cavil. What I said respecting proofs to Domitius Afer, I say respecting causes to Tiberius Caesar. No one denies that various forces are operating in the universe. Now, of two things, one: Either there is a first force, acting and moving by its own freedom, which, being antecedent to all other forces, not only must be independent of them all, but can alone have produced them all; or else there is in the universe no force which has not some other antecedent to it. This last proposition is easily shown to be an absurdity; for to say that every force has a force antecedent to it, is the same as to say that all forces have another force antecedent to them; in other words, that, over and above all things of a given class, there is another thing of that class." Can there be more than the whole? Can there be another thing of a certain kind? Besides every force, is there yet another force? If any one is here who would say so, I wait to hear him."

No one said a word.

"Then remark the conclusion," pursued Dionysius. "It is a self-contradiction to contend that there can be one thing more of a class than all things of that class; therefore there is not, and cannot be, a force antecedent to every force in the universe; therefore there is, and must be, in the universe, a force which is the first force, a force which has not and could not have any other antecedent to it. Now this force, being the first, could be controlled by no other; by its action every other must have been produced, and under its control every other must lie."

"Do not you contradict yourself?" inquired Afer; "you show there cannot be a force antecedent to all forces, and still you conclude that there is."

"There cannot," said Dionysius, "be a force antecedent to all forces, because this would be one more of a class beyond all of a class. But there may be the first of the class, before which no other was; and this is what I have demonstrated to exist. That first force is antecedent, not to 'all', but to all 'others'; there you stop; there is none antecedent to 'Him'. As he is the first force, all things must have come from him. He made and built this universe; it is his imperial palace. You have asked me to prove that one eternal and omnipotent God lives. I have now given you an argument which I am by no means afraid, in this, or any other assembly, to call a demonstration. And it is but one out of a great many."

A low murmur of spontaneous plaudits and frank assent ran round that luxurious, but highly cultivated, appreciative, and brilliant company; and one voice a little too loud was heard exclaiming.

To be continued.

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"Hard to Choose"

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