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The God Virus:
The Pontius Pilate Report

Complete and unabridged

American version

Translated from the original French by Gwilym Pernest

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1
Neither God, nor Master... Just Deus

2

M...

Camilla walked into the church.

Her mild green eyes were immediately drawn to the holy water stoup. Under it, a hideous red devil with bulging blue eyes shrieked hatred as a welcome.

While still outside, she had been given pause for thought by the Latin expression inscribed on the façade.

Terribilis est locus iste [This place is terrifying].

Almost unconsciously, she had raised the collar of her white blouse as if to protect herself against this warning.

Now, in the heart of this place of terror, a vague apprehension seized her, as if what she was going to find might strike her dead upon the spot. A slight giddiness blurred her vision and she suddenly felt that her whole existence was about to topple into a bottomless pit.

She shook her long mane of brown hair so as to drive this foolish idea from her mind. She wrinkled her lightly made up eyelids, pulled a little on her short skirt and crossed herself with a movement of the hand. Passing by three silent and contemplative tourists, she walked forward with cat-like grace across the black and white checkered tiles of the floor. The echo raised by her low-heeled shoes rang out in the nave like the sound of a tolling bell. She finally stopped and swept a rapid glance around her intriguing surroundings.

Hidden away in the South of France, the little church of Saint Mary Magdalene in Rennes-le-Château fully lived up to its faintly diabolical reputation as a far from normal religious building. The statues of the saints that stood in front of the luminous stained-glass windows were blatant examples of this: with a somewhat crazy-looking dog at its feet, the statue of Saint Roch sported a thigh with a visible wound, as if the dog had just bitten voraciously into the leg. Saint Anthony the Hermit was also

accompanied by a strange hog. While it was true that the standard attribute of the saint was indeed such an animal, this specimen had been decked out with threatening fangs.

These weird details were no more than a tiny fraction of the bizarre features that could be seen inside the building, such as the fourteen engravings of Christ's Stations of the Cross that showed no trace at all of the resurrection of the Son of God.

The heretic who had ordered and organized these works was Abbé Saunière.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, it had been whispered that this impoverished priest had found an immense treasure, of a value so great that he had not been able to spend it all, despite the millions of francs he poured into restoring his church. Moreover, he had had earthworks and constructions on a grand scale undertaken in the small village that constituted his parish, works that were very demanding for the period, requiring sums that would have been enough in those days to build a thousand churches across the whole of France. It was also claimed that the works commissioned by Saunière held hidden messages, in the form of a complicated puzzle that should lead to the fabulous treasure that the priest of Rennes-le-Château had stashed somewhere.

Inside the church of Saint Mary Magdalene, the three tourists were just then mulling over the set of clues. Beside the devil of the holy water stoup, the confessional box had a strange sculpture: kneeling next to a sheep, a shepherd was examining the animal's leg, which looked fractured and in peril of breaking off.

Above the confessional, a large fresco in relief showed Jesus on a hillock sprinkled with seventeen roses, surrounded by clean-shaven men and young women with faces suffused with love. At the foot of the hillock, a mysterious sack with a slit in it gave a glimpse of some ill-defined contents the color of gold.

Camilla took no interest in the esoteric symbols around her.

Her target was already there.

She had recognized his tall silhouette: the brief description she had been given of Thomas Anderson was precise.

Sitting on one of the wooden benches in the right-hand block, this well-built man, some forty years of age, with a shaven head, was gazing intently at the fourteenth picture of Christ's Stations of the Cross, where the body of Jesus could be seen being carried to his tomb, under the light of a full moon. Camilla walked quietly forward and sat behind the man wearing a

white polo shirt. A moment later, the three tourists walked out of the church and Camilla was left alone with her mark.

How ought she to approach him? Ought she to strike up a conversation here or wait until he went out? To hook this fish, was it better to play charm or indifference? It was absolutely necessary that he believe that this was a chance meeting and in no way staged.

Camilla was wondering what she could do when Thomas Anderson turned slowly around.

From below light-colored eyebrows, his steel-blue eyes stared at the nave for a moment before fixing on Camilla. Her heart started beating very quickly, her hands became damp with perspiration and she felt herself borne away as on the waves of a gleaming ocean. Just as if he knew the true reason for the presence of the young woman, Thomas smiled barely perceptibly. Camilla paid no attention to this, charmed as she was by the square-jawed face across which ran fine wrinkles.

For Camilla, these furrows represented not so much the marks of time as those of wisdom. In her mind's eye she saw herself huddled against his strong protective chest, whispering love into his delicate and symmetrically perfect ears, nibbling at his straight and aristocratic nose. Surely her twenty-nine years of life had prepared her to meet love at long last?

At that thought, Camilla blushed slightly. To hide her emotion, she turned away her head and started to scrutinize the statue of Saint Germaine. Thomas Anderson followed the direction of her gaze.

"That statue represents the first letter of the word Grail", he murmured in an attractive deep voice with a slight Swiss-German accent.

Running a nonchalant hand over her thick brown hair, Camilla wrinkled her tiny nose.

"The Grail?" she whispered with difficulty.

"Yes", Thomas said in a low voice. "If you take the first letter of each statue, the word **GRAAL**, the French for Grail, appears. Saint Germaine represents the **G**. Behind you, the statue of Saint Roch is the **R**. Then Saint Anthony the Hermit for the **A**. After that, Saint Anthony of Padua for another **A**..."

Resting his muscular arm on the back of the bench, Thomas Anderson leaned toward Camilla. As if he was making his confession, he adopted a confidential tone and whispered, "Saint Anthony of Padua is the patron of lost objects... and opposite him, above the pulpit, you have Saint Luke for the **L** in **GRAAL**. If you draw a line between the statues following the order of the word **GRAAL**, you get an **M**."

Thomas drew an imaginary **M** with his finger.

“These statues form an M around the statue of Mary Magdalene. One M after another...”

Camilla turned her head toward the statue of the woman who, according to the Bible, had been possessed by devils and had had the privilege of being cured by Christ in person.

“So Mary Magdalene is the Grail?” she asked.

“No. Like the other statues, she just symbolizes the first letter in her name: the M. Abbé Saunière wanted to stress that M. Besides, Saunière also had an M embroidered on his priest’s vestments: an M on a T-shaped cross.”

“So Mary Magdalene doesn’t embody the quest for the Grail?”

“No, I’m quite clear on that point. The Grail isn’t a cup or a vessel that held the blood of Christ, or even a quest to hide a secret marriage to Mary Magdalene or a hidden child of Jesus. The Grail has nothing to do with any of that. In fact, the Grail is the Pontius Pilate Report.”

“The Pontius Pilate Report?”

Thomas smiled and whispered, “This place isn’t really suitable for conversations... What would you say to talking outside?”

Camilla agreed to the proposal. In perfect unison, they stood up together. Five foot five and elegantly slim, Camilla was overwhelmed by Thomas’s impressive build. Her pulse once again speeded up, giving her a sensation like a stitch in her sensitive heart. Camilla’s emerald-green gaze wandered toward Thomas’s eyes, steely blue like the ocean. As if she were in a madcap dance, she felt everything spinning around her.

On either side of the altar, facing each other and both holding in their arms an identical baby Jesus, the statue of the Virgin Mary in her blue robe spangled with stars and the image of Joseph in glittering gold seemed to follow the two departing visitors out of the corner of their eyes.

The pair left the church in silence.

Outside, as the cicadas chirped, the June sun heated the air of the modest village hidden away at the foot of the Pyrenees. It was lunch time, and the plain streets of Rennes-le-Château were all but deserted. Walking side by side, Camilla and Thomas strolled along an alleyway, then turned right. They passed by the Villa Bethany, the magnificent building erected by the late Abbé Saunière.

“My name is Thomas Anderson, but everyone calls me Tom.”

“I’m Camilla.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Camilla.”

She smiled at him.

“Are you a treasure hunter?”

“Who can tell?” the forty-something fellow replied.

He chuckled in his deep voice. “Let’s go to the Magdala Tower, okay?”

Camilla consented.

Overlooking a valley of fertile fields, on the edge of the gardens of the Villa Bethany, the little tower in Gothic style stood firm and proud. Its smooth and massive stones shone brownish under the midday sun. The scent of lavender and of conifers hung in the air around the square structure with its tall, thin, circular turret that rose like some strange growth from the southern edge.

As Saunière had wished, the base of the tower stood in the corner of a huge, invisible, imaginary checkerboard. Around fifty yards from there, right across from this stone tower, the other corner of the checkerboard was occupied by a luminous glass tower: the Orangery tower. In his lifetime, the Abbé Saunière had experimented with the cultivation of all sorts of rare plants requiring heat to grow. The entries to the two towers were accessible from a belvedere that overlooked the gardens of the Bethany property, a fine large terrace with 22 steps shared by two stairways.

The towers also had their own internal staircases of 22 steps. While the Orangery’s went down into the bowels of the earth, the Magdala Tower’s climbed toward the sky, where on clear nights the 22 openings in its battlements contemplated the starry firmament of heaven.

In the welcome shade of a pine tree, Camilla and Tom sat on a park bench and gazed at the Magdala Tower.

“This tower is a homage to Mary Magdalene”, Tom said in his deep voice with its Swiss-German accent. “Logically, Saunière ought to have called the tower ‘Magdalena’, but he preferred a play on words, using the root ‘Magdala’, which means ‘tower’ in old Hebrew. Magdala, Maria Magdalena or Mary Magdalene as we would say... every time there’s an M...”

He chuckled slightly.

“You were saying that the Grail is the Pontius Pilate Report”, Camilla said. “What’s that?”

“Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator for Israel. He was in charge of the Roman Province of Judea and the city of Jerusalem from 26 to 36 A.D. According to the Bible, he was the person who condemned Jesus of Nazareth to death by crucifixion. Around 36 A.D., he was recalled to Rome to meet the Emperor and justify the actions taken during his term in office, and he drew up a document, a detailed report recounting all the events that took place at that time.”

“I’ve never heard a single word about such a report.”

“Of course not”, Tom snorted. “If that report were ever made public, an apocalypse would sweep away the Christian religion in an instant. The Vatican would never survive it, the Pope would have to seek political asylum in Switzerland and the last person to leave Saint Peter’s in Rome might as well turn the lights out, just as would happen in every Christian church worldwide. You’d even see people bringing priests up before international tribunals as a criminal gang or for crimes against humanity. The Vatican would far and away prefer an atom bomb to drop from the sky right onto its headquarters, rather than have the Pontius Pilate Report made available to the general public. Even if an atom bomb wiped the Vatican off the surface of the globe, the Church would still have the ability to run its affairs from elsewhere. Publication of the Pontius Pilate Report would leave no hope of that: every Christian building on Earth would be in ruins within the hour.”

“Where’s this report?” Camilla asked, fascinated.

“Ah, there’s the question!... To start with, the single copy, in Latin, was filed in Rome, was forgotten as the centuries went by, then was rediscovered, only to be looted in the end when the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 A.D. At that point, it disappeared again. Next, there are traces of it in the East. It was probably taken there by traders. Several faithful copies were made by scribes at that time, and it was translated into various different languages. The Church learned of the existence of the Pontius Pilate Report in Jerusalem and nearby countries. Officially, the Order of the Knights Templar had been set up to safeguard Christian pilgrims on their journey to the Holy Land. Unofficially, the Church granted them all the powers and means necessary to seek out the report and its copies, or the Grail, if you prefer. Once all the documents had been recovered, the Church felt it best to eliminate the Order of Knights Templar and so bury the secret of the Grail forever. Every single Templar was arrested and tortured. Any who had had any link, however remote, with the Grail were burned alive at the stake. Nevertheless, some Templars succeeded in passing on one or two copies of the report that they had kept secretly for themselves. These copies were handed down from generation to generation. It was one of these copies that Abbé Saunière found in his church of Saint Mary Magdalene. The Pontius Pilate Report or the Grail is the famous treasure people say he found in his church...”

Revealing attractive white teeth, Tom grinned maliciously.

“How did the Pontius Pilate Report come to be in that church?” Camilla asked.

“The story of the Grail of Rennes-le-Château is complicated. It starts with a confession by the Marquise d’Hautpoul, Marie de Négri d’Able. She was also known as the Marquise de Blanchefort. Just before she died, the Marquise confessed to her village priest and handed over to him the copy of the Pontius Pilate Report that she owned. The secret was too much for her to bear alone and she wanted this confidential material to be put into the hands of someone worthy of trust. The priest was called Jean Bigou and his Christian faith was shaken to the core when he learned about the Grail. He was even terrified for himself and his colleagues. You have to look at it from the viewpoint of the times: France was going through a period of political turbulence that within a few years was to lead to the 1789 Revolution. Publication of the Pontius Pilate Report might have shattered churches through popular uprisings against them. Then the revolutionaries might have triumphed not just in France, but all round the world, if the report had become generally known. So, Jean Bigou decided to hide the document. But he didn’t want the report to disappear forever, since he felt that the document was of great value for humanity. He must have believed that some future generation would be more capable of learning what it said and of accepting the truths it contained. So, he carefully hid the document away in the church at Rennes-le-Château. He also left a whole set of clues, a complicated track that was intended to let clever people work their way to the hidden item...”

Tom paused for a moment then continued. “After being declared a rebellious priest by the revolutionaries in 1792, Jean Bigou fled to Spain, where he passed away not many months later. Nevertheless, before dying he was able to tell Abbé Cauneille the secret contained in the Pontius Pilate Report and the name of the village where the document was concealed, although he didn’t let him know its exact hiding place. Abbé Cauneille in turn passed on the information to two other priests, Abbé Jean Vié and Abbé Émile François Cayron. Jean Vié had himself appointed priest for the parish of Rennes-les-Bains, just a few miles from Rennes-le-Château, with the secret hope of finding the Grail unostentatiously, without attracting attention. But he never succeeded in deciphering the mysterious clues left by Abbé Bigou. As for Abbé Cayron, he looked for an ideal successor to whom he could transmit the terrible secret and keep it safe. He thought Henri Boudet was a perfect choice. That was his unfortunate mistake. Yet Abbé Boudet seemed to be modest by nature, discreet and highly intelligent. A brilliant scholar, he had Greek, Latin, English and Old Saxon at his fingertips. More than that, he was supposed to be well regarded by literary and cultural associations in the region, but also by similar scholarly bodies in Paris with which he corresponded, exchanging texts. As a friend of his

family, Abbé Cayron believed he'd picked the right man in trusting Boudet, especially as he'd known him since he was a young child. Nevertheless, the secret revealed to him smashed Henri Boudet's conscience without hope of repair, and in an instant swept away all his thoughts of the divine. As he no longer feared the wrath of God, he became like a savage beast. The shattering of his faith turned him into a ruthless madman. One single obsession took over his tortured and sickly mind. He had to have the Pontius Pilate Report in his own hand. He knew that Abbé Jean Vié's searches had come to nothing, so he decided to take the place of the parish priest of Rennes-les-Bains. To achieve this, he had no compunction about murdering him."

"Murdering him?" Camilla exclaimed in amazement, her eyes like saucers. "That's impossible; no priest could ever do that..."

"Oh, I'm sure you're right", Tom replied ironically. "It's just not possible. Better than that, there's proof what you say is true. Since there's never even been a case of a pedophile priest in the Christian Church, it's obvious that there can't ever have been a priest wicked enough to be a murderer..."

Camilla blushed slightly.

"Are you sure about these claims?" she asked in some confusion.

"Oh, yes, I'm certain sure. Boudet killed Abbé Jean Vié in 1872 and in October of that same year he was transferred to Rennes-les-Bains. Besides, years later, Boudet was to become fearful that Saunière, well, I say Saunière, it might have been someone else, but it was most likely Saunière, had doubts about the death of Jean Vié. So, Boudet made alterations to the grave where Abbé Jean Vié was buried in Rennes-les-Bains. He forged the date of death on the tombstone, carving a false date so as to have an alibi for the day of the murder. That act may seem ridiculous, since no policeman would have gone to look at the grave to find out the date of death; naturally the police would have checked in the City Hall registers if they had ever run any inquiry. But if you think a moment, you have to admit that the action wasn't as stupid as it might seem at first sight. Saunière may have suspected Boudet of murdering Vié, but Saunière had no access to the records in Rennes-les-Bains City Hall. He would have needed to go directly to the cemetery to look at the date of death before making inquiries of his own. Later, I can just visualize Boudet imagining himself facing Saunière and his look full of suspicion. Boudet would've brought up his predecessor's death himself with some sadness and he would've said innocently that he remembered the day of his death perfectly despite all the years that had gone by, since he'd been at such-and-such a place with such-and-such a person. He would've cleverly produced some

document or photo that would've substantiated what he said. Boudet was good at manipulating consciences and he knew how to pull the wool over people's eyes. But the day that Boudet went to alter the date of Abbé Vié's death on the tombstone, he was seen in the cemetery by a couple of villagers and the news went round the region. That must've confirmed Saunière's suspicions, but in the end he never said anything about the murder, since he was too involved with Boudet and no-one else ever bothered about Vié's death."

"Except you", Camilla murmured. "How did you work all this out?"

Tom smiled.

"As a famous detective once said, my method is based on insignificant clues. All those little hints can tell you a lot if you know how to pay the right attention to them."

Camilla nodded, charmed by the man's gaze.

"Please go on."

Tom continued his tale. "Boudet was obsessed by the Pontius Pilate Report and he went back and forth across the whole district searching for it. Like his predecessor, he couldn't manage to decipher the cryptic clues left by Abbé Bigou. This priest had hidden away hints, engraved in the church, but also on the tombstones in the cemetery. Despite his every effort and the years he put into the search, Boudet never found the report or reports concealed at Rennes-le-Château. His obsession to hold Pilate's writings in his hand just grew all the stronger. Thwarted, he had the idea of looking for the document elsewhere: somewhere in the world there had to be copies like the one that the Marquise de Blanchefort had once possessed. The problem was that he needed money to carry out such laborious searches. So, as others had done before him, he decided to blackmail the Vatican. He set himself to writing a 310-page book, which he sent to the Pope, threatening to publish it if he didn't get the money he was demanding. In a letter he enclosed with this book, Boudet claimed he already had one Pontius Pilate Report and that he was well aware of the places where the other manuscripts were hidden, supporting his claims with some vague maps. He threatened to publish what he had written if the Vatican refused him and, if this refusal to pay continued, to give the world a second and much more explicit book: the Pontius Pilate Report itself. Boudet was lying, of course, but to make his lies more believable in Rome's eyes, since he couldn't actually call a spade a spade, he composed what appeared to be a coded work. He played around with mysterious allusions with multiple meanings so that no-one could tell that he didn't really have the report and so didn't truly know all the details that might be in it. In one sense, Boudet did truly know that the report was somewhere in Rennes-le-

Château. After going over the ground and studying the history of the neighboring villages, he came to the conclusion that a copy of the report was to be found in the tiny settlement of Arques, buried under a prehistoric stone monument. This rock stood in the middle of nowhere and was the subject of a local legend: people said that it was like a cork stopping up the entrance to a huge cavern, and the day that it was removed winds from all over the Earth would rush into the cavity and bring the end of the world. In this legend, Boudet thought he could see a reference to the presence of the report. Nevertheless, he couldn't recover it without attracting a lot of attention, since any effort of that sort would need dozens of men and machines to raise the rock. So, bedeviled by continuing uncertainty about whether or not the report was actually there, Boudet had the clever idea of not mentioning it in the book he sent to the Vatican. Instead of talking about the Arques monument, despite it being quite close by, he listed a whole range of stone monuments that in fact didn't exist and cooked up a tall tale about one that was made up of vertical rocks set in a circle: the Rennes-les-Bains cromlech. By this deliberate omission, Boudet wanted to highlight the Arques stone while not laying himself open to any possible claim he was mistaken. He was cunning enough to do the same for the village of Rennes-le-Château, quoting all the names of places including the word 'Rennes' but carefully leaving out the site where the Marquise de Blanchefort lay buried. The Vatican was terrified by this blackmail and chose to pay up, concerned by every sentence and understanding clearly what was written between the lines and the hints about Jesus Christ contained in Boudet's book. He became greedier and greedier and demanded huge sums from Rome. When the Church became reluctant to continue to hand over such a fortune, Boudet became angry and had his book privately published, just to show he wasn't joking. The book's title was 'The True Celtic Tongue and the Rennes-les-Bains Cromlech'. Boudet could speak English perfectly, but he'd composed the contents of his book on the basis of a ridiculous theory: every language on Earth was derived from English. Languages as ancient as Hebrew and Latin were supposed to have as their one and only root the language of Shakespeare. The appearance of this work brought criticism and mockery from all the academic societies of the day. No-one could understand why a man as learned and respected as Boudet had come out with such idiotic statements, nonsense that reflected badly on his intelligence and his reputation. The Vatican, on the other hand, understood perfectly and submitted to blackmail once again. That's when the Abbé Saunière arrived on the scene."

Tom broke off at this point.

Heading for the Magdala Tower, a group of tourists passed close by the bench where Tom and Camilla were sitting. Camilla watched them walking away and then muttered,

“What is this terrible secret that’s hidden by the Grail, then, and how can it push a man of the Church to become a murderer? I’m thinking again about the statues in the church spelling out GRAAL around the statue of Mary Magdalene. Are you certain Mary Magdalene isn’t the Grail? What I mean is, Pontius Pilate might have included in his report family details of the Jesus he condemned to death, maybe details of a marriage and even of a child he’d had with Mary, why not? That would be a sure-fire proof of a secret link with Mary Magdalene...”

She unconsciously touched the small silver cross that hung from a thin chain around her neck.

“Oh, wake up,” Tom said, “do you honestly think that Boudet went crazy simply as a result of Jesus and Mary Magdalene being married or having a child together? Do you believe someone can go insane and become a killer as a result of that? Historians have openly discussed the suggestion there was some sort of liaison of the sort or even that there were descendants. Have priests lost their faith? Not in the least. When books on the topic came out, did priests turn to drink, sex and vice, as happened to a lot of those mixed up in the Rennes-le-Château affair? No, of course not. The revelations in the Pontius Pilate Report are a lot more explosive than the damp squib of an affair between Mary Magdalene and Jesus or the possible existence of a child of theirs. The Grail is an atom bomb, compared to that. The Grail spills the beans on something far more important than gossip about the life of Jesus... Besides, if my memory isn’t playing tricks with me, King Louis XI said that the line of descent of the kings of France started with Christ himself... If you follow that view, the famous blue blood of the French royal family would come down from Christ’s blood through secret descendants... And if you look at the Bible, Christ’s disciples called him ‘Rabbi’. But this Jewish title was virtually never given to a bachelor. It was normally used for married men who were experts on religion. So, the Jesus in the Bible was almost certainly married...”

Tom chuckled. His blue eyes gazed at the attractive brunette sitting alongside him. “No, I can tell you again, Mary Magdalene isn’t the Grail. In the church, her statue is there only to stress the letter M.”

“What does the M stand for?” Camilla asked.

Tom hesitated for a moment.

“A word. Only a word. A word beginning with the letter M. This word was whispered into the ear of Abbé Boudet and he went so mad he became

a bloodthirsty killer. With a word, just one single word, the secret of Christ can be revealed and drive insane anyone supposed to...”

Tom fell silent for an instant before adding,

“Just a word beginning with M...”

Her mouth dry, her look haggard, Camilla wondered what or who that letter M could signify.

3

Nativity

Mary shivered.

The cool of the night that was falling made her forget her pain for a brief moment. She moved forward as fast as her legs would let her. Suddenly she stopped as if paralyzed. To support herself, she grabbed the branch of a tree with her dainty hand. The contractions were getting stronger and stronger. The teenager turned round, looking for her friend the elderly man in the gathering darkness.

“Joseph, where are you?” said she in a murmur, under her breath, almost inaudibly.

He could not be far, at least she hoped so. For several seconds, she paused, waiting for him. Then, still holding her swollen belly with one hand, she pushed onward. The cave could not be more than a hundred yards away.

Once there, she would be safe.

Nobody would come to seek her out and she would be able to give birth to this child that was giving her such pain. As she walked, she looked back frequently. She was afraid that the strangers who had come to the village the previous day might spring up out of the darkness and leap on her. She knew they had come for her. Three foreigners richly dressed in luxurious garments: every inhabitant of Nazareth had noticed their arrival and the villagers had wondered about the reason they were there.

Mary, for her part, knew exactly why.

She softly rubbed her rounded belly. The stress connected with their arrival had triggered contractions and put her into labor. The child would not be long in coming now. During the early weeks of her pregnancy, she had pondered the idea of an abortion, but that ran straight against her nature. She would not harm her child despite the harm people had done her. This child was innocent. With all her strength, she begged the starry

sky for the umpteenth time to let her give birth to a girl. There were times when parents let a newborn girl die, for they saw girls as useless mouths they would have to feed. That was the way of the times: a boy brought joy, a girl consternation. For Mary, the opposite was true. If only Providence could give her a girl, there would be no more problems.

Her frail body was wracked with another shudder. She raised the collar of her voluminous tunic. For quite a while, she had tried to conceal her pregnancy by wearing this loose clothing. However, she had not been able to hide any longer the all-too-visible swelling of her thin adolescent figure. Luckily, Joseph had been there: the only one with real compassion in this sad world. Despite the rumors, things had almost gone back to normal, until the day when the three strangers had burst into her life.

Mary arrived at the entrance to the cave. Turning, she peered into the darkness. Joseph was not there yet. He had told her to go on ahead, that he would catch up with her. The old fellow must have overestimated his strength, going for a bale of straw and trying to bring it to the cave.

She groped her way into the cave. With no light, she dared not go too far in. She crouched, grasping her lower belly. Her waters had broken nearly an hour ago.

The child would come soon now.

She was not quite yet a woman, but no longer a child, and was perfectly aware of the facts of life. She had seen a neighbor giving birth, helped by a midwife. However, the teenager would have to manage all alone. She groaned with pain and dismay.

In the distance, a flickering light appeared in the darkness. Trying to become as inconspicuous as possible, Mary flattened herself against the wall. The sound of a familiar hoarse breathing eventually reached her.

“Joseph, quickly, I am here!”

Steadying the bale of straw on his back with one hand, the old man entered the cave. Dropping his burden, he went to a crevice in the wall and fixed in it the torch he had held in the other hand. The light blazed in the darkness.

“You were not followed, were you?” asked Mary.

“Followed?” exclaimed Joseph in surprise. “Well... no, of course not. It will all be fine... Wait, I will put down some straw for you. You will be more comfortable.”

Joseph knew what he was about. It was not the first child whose birth he had assisted. He confidently supported the soon-to-be mother and helped her to lie on her back.

Thirty minutes later, the cries of the new-born babe were ringing out in the cave. With a precise movement, Joseph cut the umbilical cord, then gave the child to Mary. She began to weep softly as she clutched him to her breast.

Tears of relief and consternation.

"It is a boy," said she in a sigh. "A boy..."

Joseph wiped away the mother's tears with the back of his hand.

"Yes, it is a boy. A magnificent youngster..."

Joseph hesitated for an instant, then added,

"Jesus... What do you think of Jesus? Do you like it as a name?"

She started sobbing, nodding her agreement sadly.

"Jesus, yes... Jesus," said she, caressing the baby's wrist with the tip of her finger.

A trickle of water ran down the rock. The soft pitter-patter of the water could be heard. Joseph went and washed his hands in it. Then he took Jesus from his mother's arms and washed him thoroughly. The chill of the water made the new-born boy shriek in protest. Joseph was not to be diverted from his task, however. He took out long strips of cloth from the haversack he wore slung across his chest. Meticulously, he swaddled the child in these bands. It was not so much to keep the baby warm that people did this. It was more a case of limiting the child's arm and leg movements, so that its limbs would grow strong and straight.

With his other children, Joseph had done just the same. Every day, he had taken off the bands to wash each baby, then had smeared it with olive oil before powdering it with ground myrrh. After that, he had wrapped it up again until the following day.

However, for Jesus there was no myrrh or olive oil. In his haste, Joseph had brought nothing but the swaddling bands.

The elderly fellow mused to himself whether he might go back home that night. After careful thought, he felt he could not. So as not to worry Mary any more, he decided to keep his thoughts to himself. Putting Jesus down on the straw, he helped the young mother to clean herself. Mary looked on Joseph as her father, even if by his age he was more like her great-grandfather. So, she felt no embarrassment or shame before him. She picked Jesus back up in her arms, and sitting as comfortably as she could amidst the straw, fed the baby at her breast.

After this marvelous moment filled with emotion, Joseph went out to the threshold of the cave to enjoy the cool night air and stare at the starry sky. He did not notice the three shapes crouching behind bushes. They silently rose and came to the entrance.

“So! Where is this King of the Jews who has just been born?” rasped out a voice in a deliberately menacing tone.

Joseph was paralyzed with terror. His legs started trembling and he put a hand to his chest.

Inside the cave, Mary let out a small cry. The light from the torch had just lit up the faces of the three strangers who had arrived in the village the previous day. The young woman clutched the child to her breast, almost hard enough to stifle him. Taking a few steps backward, Joseph tried to pull himself together, but fear churned in his stomach.

“How did you get here?” asked he, stammering in a weak voice.

The answer was obvious, but one of the strangers felt he would enjoy mocking the old man.

“We followed his star which led us here, so we have come to pay homage to him”, said he scornfully.

Just above the horizon, the man pointed to Saturn and Jupiter at their heliacal rising, giving the illusion of a star of exceptional brightness. Armed with swords whose hilts they grasped firmly, the three men marched into the cave. In the light of the torch, their shadows seemed gigantic and fantastic. Their long black beards, carefully combed, their rich garments and the confidence of their almost cat-like movements were not enough to hide their real nature. They were brutes with a cynical air.

The one who seemed to be the leader of the trio went up to Mary.

Looking at the swaddled child, he demanded, “It is definitely a boy, is it not?”

Mary wavered for a moment, wondering if she might be able to lie to him successfully. Then, seeing the intruder’s smirk, she realized he was making fun of her and already knew the answer.

They must have hidden surreptitiously near the cave and witnessed the birth. They must even have seen the young woman cleaning herself. Mary blushed at this idea and could do nothing but nod silently in response to the man’s question.

Mockingly, the trio’s leader pulled a small box full of myrrh out of his bag and threw it disdainfully at Joseph’s feet. Next, he brought out a second box, which this time contained gold coins. Laying this valuable casket before Mary, he bowed down to her, a smirk playing over his lips. He grabbed the young mother’s arm and forced her to stand. With the child still clutched to her half-naked breast, Mary was brusquely led to the end of the cave.

The man whispered a few words in her ear.

Blushing and struggling out of his grip, she ran to take refuge with Joseph. With a savage grunt, the leader drew his sword from its sheath. He strode toward the terrified couple, scraping the threatening blade against the rock. The hideous sound this cause seemed to make him happy.

“Leave us alone,” pleaded Joseph slipping bravely in front of Mary to protect her with his body. “The child will never learn anything of this, I swear it. Take the gold and keep it for yourself. If we are asked, we will say that thieves stole it while we were asleep...”

The leader’s eyelid twitched nervously. He stopped scraping his sword-blade on the cave wall. A gleam of greed shone out in his dark eyes.

“There is gold enough there for three people to have a very good life,” added Joseph, grasping that his proposal had touched the brute’s one sensitive spot.

Avarice.

There was a moment’s pause, a hesitation. Joseph noticed a look of astonishment on the face of one of the strangers: the idea of going off with the gold had obviously never even crossed the blood-thirsty killer’s limited mind. By his offer, Joseph had sparked a painful bout of thinking that had set their minds racing. With a nod, the leader indicated to his men to follow him outside.

There was some tension between the three. Although they were whispering, Joseph realized that they disagreed about the course to pursue. After a while bursts of their speech could be heard in the still night.

“I tell you that there is no risk at all,” grumbled the leader. “He will never trace us. This it is what we should have done from the start instead of coming here. The old fellow is right...”

“What, though, if he does track us down?” interrupted one of the henchmen. “Treachery will not go unpunished...”

Oaths rang out. Joseph began to wonder if they would end by killing each other. As if to prove him right, the leader of the group brought his sword up to the neck of the man who was having qualms about treachery. The latter finally nodded agreement, rightly judging it was the only reasonable course at such a time.

Without a word, the leader came into the cave. He picked the box of gold coins back up and slipped it away under his robes. For a second or two, he glanced hungrily at the young woman’s body. However, time seemed to be pressing for him. So, with some regret, he went out and disappeared into the darkness of the night with his two accomplices.

Mary threw herself into the old man’s arms. She began to sob quietly, as if to release the nervous tension built up by the bursting of the three men

into her life. The dark eyes of the intruder had stared into hers, and she felt soiled by his lascivious glances. She shuddered and Joseph affectionately kissed her hair.

“All is over, everything will be fine now,” said he to calm her.

She shook her head in disagreement.

“I do not trust them. They might come back... we better get out and go a long, long way from Nazareth. Anyhow, if we stay here, others will come looking for him...”

She gestured at the child she was holding against her chest.

“It is no fault of his. The fault is mine.”

“Stop talking nonsense: it is no fault of yours,” cut in Joseph. “You know that full well.”

“Let us go away,” repeated the woman. “Far from here...”

The old man responded fatalistically, “Go away where? They will find us wherever we go!”

“What about the Temple? You said that you had family connections such that you know the chief priests. They could help us, could they not?”

Joseph seemed to hesitate.

“If they learn about the existence of this child, there is no doubt that they will try to hide him. However, I know the way that they think about the future and my worry would be what they might do later.”

He explained to her how he saw things.

“Do we have a choice?” asked the woman. “Is this not the real destiny of Jesus?”

She clenched her fists in anger.

“Revenge is no solution, you know that,” replied Joseph. “However, you are right about one thing: we have no choice. Can you walk?”

“Yes, if it is for that, to be sure. We have no money, though. I left home with nothing. I am afraid that there will be other men waiting for us in the village...”

Fumbling in the folds of his robe, Joseph produced a few gold coins. With a smile, he explained he had discreetly purloined them from the small box while the three men were outside the cave. Worried as she was, Mary had not seen the old man’s sleight of hand.

She smiled at him tenderly, for now they could leave immediately. However, a negative thought struck her.

“What of your children, though?” objected the woman.

Joseph brushed the question aside with a gesture. Taking the baby in his arms, he motioned to Mary to follow him. Together they went out into the night.

A few days later, the couple was in Jerusalem. As they fled, they had had the good luck to come upon the camp of some traveling merchants. They willingly helped them, asking no questions. A glimpse of the gold coins weighed heavily in this willingness.

Within the Temple, the chief religious dignitaries of the Jews listened to the tale Joseph had to tell them. While at first they paid only more or less polite attention, believing they were dealing with no more than some minor matter of adultery, things changed when they understood the true nature of the child brought to them by this elderly man whose face was tanned and furrowed by the passage of time. Despite his great age, Joseph was still full of vigor, and the passion with which he spoke came oddly from one with such a balding head, a mouth from which several teeth were missing and a tousled white beard. Licking his dry lips with his thin tongue, he begged his listeners to protect them.

Standing a little to one side of the other religious officials, a short-statured priest leaned against one of the immense columns forming the sanctuary enclosure. He stroked his thick black beard with the tips of his fingers, and stared with his greenish-yellow slightly cross-eyed look at Jesus. His bushy eyebrows never stopped moving into and out of a frown, giving the illusion that some dark moth was trying to fly off his broad forehead. The facts just revealed by Joseph brought him to think of a totally different future for Israel. The other priests would probably reach the same conclusion, he was sure. For an instant, he looked at Mary who was shyly keeping out of the discussions. She did not really seem to understand the scale of the situation. Her frail adolescent body, her rebellious gaze, her soft, light hair and her childlike face did not seem to fit the status of mother that any woman gained by giving birth. She looked even less like the mother of a child as prodigious as this Jesus.

After debating behind closed doors, the high priests promised unreservedly to help Mary. For greater safety, the couple would not stay in the city, but would go to the nearby town of Bethlehem. Joseph also convinced the priests to cover the costs of raising his other children back in Galilee during his absence. In exchange, the old man would agree to continue to look after the young woman and her child as if they were his. He willingly accepted.

As tradition required, Jesus was circumcised in accordance with the rites of religion. Once the priests had finished this task, they returned the child to his mother. An elderly man called Simeon, wearing a white robe

that failed to conceal the scrawniness of his body, came up to Mary and Joseph. He had been present at the debate and knew the fate in store for the baby. He insisted on holding the boy in his skinny arms. With a nod he thanked Mary for intrusting the child to him for an instant. Staring intensely at Jesus for a few seconds, he finally raised his eyes toward the high ceiling. As if talking to an invisible interlocutor, he exclaimed in a reedy voice, "Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace. I can die happy, for my eyes have seen the salvation that you have prepared in the sight of all peoples, this light to lighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel."

Again he looked tenderly at the baby. Handing Jesus back to his mother, he told her that her son would bring about the rise or fall of a great many people in Israel. Mary listened with disquiet to Simeon. She knew he was right, but she just could not bring herself to see her son as somebody who could break her heart by the dissensions and troubles he might later cause.

After a night's rest hiding in the Temple, Joseph and Mary headed for Bethlehem. Mary was still not fully recovered from giving birth, so they had to halt on the way many times. It was only as darkness was falling that they reached the town.

A faithful follower of the priests was supposed to be waiting for them so as to provide them with discreet accommodations. However, despite the precise instructions they had been given for meeting their host, Mary and Joseph could not manage to find their way in this town, unfamiliar to them. In the dim light of their lantern, all the streets looked alike. As the darkness gathered, they finally realized they were totally lost.

Joseph dared not ask the way. He trusted nobody, seeing everybody as a potential spy. Passing near an inn, he was on the point of going in and asking for lodgings for the night. However, he put the idea out of his head: it would be a sure-fire way of people picking up their track. Worn out, the couple had no choice but to take shelter in an empty stable and hope that daybreak would allow them to discover the route that would lead them to safety.

Joseph filled the manger with clean straw, then carefully laid Jesus in it. Exhausted, Mary collapsed on a pile of straw, closing her eyes for a few seconds as if to drive away her cares and woes. Finally, though, she stood up again and came to sit at the foot of the makeshift crib. Joseph found a small stool lying in a corner, and sat on it too, alongside the child. He was sleeping peacefully, but would not be long in waking and demanding his feed. Joseph took a piece of bread out of his haversack and started munching it mechanically. They were chatting in low voices when suddenly the door of

the stable opened. The noise woke Jesus and he started crying. Five figures came to a surprised halt.

A sheep bleated as it came into the building, followed by several others. After a moment's hesitation, the shepherds in their turn entered, in an embarrassed silence. One of them was leading a mule on a rope. The animal was tied up near the crib. Wrapped up in his swaddling bands, Jesus continued to whimper. Mary took him in her arms to rock him gently.

"Has she just given birth?" enquired the oldest shepherd politely.

Amazed to find a couple with a baby in a stable, he imagined that the birth had just taken place, and that the parents had not had time to move to a more appropriate place.

Joseph took advantage of this helpful misunderstanding so as not to give the true cause for their presence there.

"Yes," said he in agreement. "The mother could go no further. The child was born here. Can we stay? It is late and we..."

"Joseph?" cut in the old shepherd. "Are you not Joseph of Nazareth?"

A frown crossed Joseph's white eyebrows. Then a smile lighted up his wrinkled face. He had just recognized a childhood friend whom he had not seen for several years. They embraced affectionately as if they were close relatives. For some minutes, they chatted happily, forgetting how odd the situation was.

"Is it a boy?" asked the shepherd finally, pointing to the new-born baby.

Joseph grasped the implications of the question. His friend knew that the old man was a widower.

"Yes, it is a boy..."

He paused for an instant.

"He is my son. This is my young wife, Mary."

Mary could not bring herself to face the looks of the other shepherds who had sat down on the straw a few yards from the manger. She fixed her gaze on the blue eyes of her child. She went off into a corner and turned her back on those present so she could breast-feed the child in privacy.

The old shepherd gave his old acquaintance a friendly pat on the back.

"Oh! I am truly happy for you. As you are from the line of David, maybe this son is the king we are all awaiting for the salvation of Israel. In any case, the star that is shining announces some great birth!"

He and Joseph continued to talk about their childhood memories for a good part of the night. Then, like the others, they ended up by falling asleep on the straw in the midst of the handful of sheep that were there.

The next day, Joseph and Mary found their route again and were able to take refuge in the dwelling of the follower of the Temple priests. In hiding and living a clandestine life, virtually never going out of the house, they stayed there for months. Life had gone back to peace and calm for the couple. Jesus was growing bigger and stronger with each passing day. He was his mother's one true joy. Despite her apparent happiness, she was living in a state of permanent anxiety. At the slightest shout from a nearby alleyway, at the least shadow passing by the closed curtains of the windows of their lodgings, she was seized by vague fears. She was afraid for the life of her child. It was no use Joseph reassuring her, telling her that every day the passage of time was effacing any traces of how they had fled, she was nonetheless constantly on her guard.

She was afraid of what the future might bring.

Fate proved her misgivings true. In the middle of one night their host woke them to tell them of the arrival of a messenger from Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary did not even have time to gather up their clothes, such was the urgency. With the help of the messenger, they slipped out of the town which had sheltered them for a number of months.

They were lucky.

The guards of Herod the Great, King of the Jews under Roman tutelage, rampaged into Bethlehem. With appalling ferocity, they slaughtered all the male children aged under two. This latest in a long line of insane actions by the King of Israel was not censured by the Roman authorities, who turned a blind eye to this cruel carnage. As long as the King kept his people docile and the taxes coming in to Roman coffers, internal matters were of little interest to them.

In the martyred town, the wailing of the bereaved mothers gradually gave way to comments of consternation and incomprehension from the townsfolk. Rumors were rife, claiming that Herod's seers had had a vision of a heavenly birth, of a divine child who would risk overthrowing the sovereign's power. In his uncertainty, but trusting the predictions of his wise men, who nonetheless did not know at all where the divine boy-child was, Herod had ordered the massacre of all these innocent youngsters in Bethlehem and its environs.

Joseph and Mary, on the other hand, knew what it was all really about.

For many a long year, Egypt had been a land of refuge for the Hebrews. From famines to warlike invasions, from rebellions to civil strife, the Jews had always found a welcoming haven in that centuries-old nation. Once again, the land of the Pharaohs stood by this rule. The couple and their child were able to settle there without any worries, far from the troubles that had affected their lives up to then. As a hard and conscientious worker,

Joseph made it a point of honor to earn enough to provide for the mother and son. Everybody thought that this elderly Galilean carpenter was young Mary's husband and Jesus his legitimate son. Although the priests of the Temple regularly sent messengers to get the news about Jesus and bring money, Joseph did not want to live in dependence upon these religious folk. His mindset was that of a country craftsman, and would not let him do so. Anyhow, what would he have done with his time if he had no work? Being bored to death in some back room was not the sort of life he wanted. He was too fond of the open air and the pleasures of working with his hands.

Far from his children who had stayed in Galilee, he was sometimes sad. However, Mary's presence made up for the missing family affection of which he was so fond: she was a ray of sunshine for him, Jesus his cherished child. When with them, he felt as if his youth had returned.

In Israel, the elderly Herod the Great went crazy from the pain of a dread disease and finally died. The land was divided among his three sons, still under the control of the Romans who were the real masters of the nation. The death of Herod triggered a major armed struggle by the peasants who hoped finally to throw off the yoke of the occupying power. The revolt was violently repressed by the legionaries and two thousand Jews were crucified around Jerusalem to set an example.

Rome dominated the whole Mediterranean basin with a hand of iron.

When the situation in the region stabilized, Joseph felt it was time to go home. He spoke to Mary.

"They have lost track of us or maybe they think that Jesus was killed in the Bethlehem massacre. Unless the secret that he is alive has forever been..."

Musing, he did not finish the sentence. But Mary had understood.

"I hope so," said she. "I truly do."

"So, what are we to do? Do you feel ready to go back home?"

She hesitated for an instant.

"Yes, that would be best for Jesus. Here, he is merely a foreigner. There, destiny is waiting for him."

She sighed, as if worried about her son's future.

With the Temple's agreement, they returned to Israel. Nonetheless, the priests protested energetically when Joseph went to see them in Jerusalem: these religious men felt Jesus should remain with them in the city. The carpenter did not accept that at all. Mary and her child had a right to a normal life, not always under the thumb of the priests. Moreover, their constant presence around Jesus could only end by attracting attention to him,

so he would be traced again. In the city of Zion, the child was in danger. Joseph proposed a return to Galilee, to Nazareth. He did not consider that in any way foolish. Quite the contrary, nobody would come looking for them there.

After long secret discussions, the priests finally agreed to the old man's request, accepting he was right about Jesus' safety. The couple went back to live in the village where Jesus had been born. Joseph was greatly heartened by seeing his children once more.

He took on the legal paternity for Jesus. The official account was that while journeying the couple had married at Jamnia, a small town a few miles from Jerusalem. The priests had taken care of regularizing the marriage. In the village, questions came from all sides, but Joseph kept silent about his hurried departure and brushed off remarks about his prolonged absence with a gesture. After that, questioning gradually stopped and life went back to normal.

Years went by as an unchanging flow.

All danger seemed to have been avoided.

Time brought with it its sequence of events and occurrences and finally carried off old Joseph. Jesus was still only in his teens when his adoptive father died. Everybody was saddened by this death. Mary had not expected it, but Joseph's passing away had further unhappy consequences. The pain of losing the man whose help had warmed her heart when things were at their worst and the weight of the secret which now rested on her shoulders alone were too great a burden. Despite the promise she had made to her late husband, in a moment of deep distress she confided in an older relative, Elizabeth.

In the simple dwelling Joseph had built with his own hands, Mary poured out the whole tale of those years of silence, by the light of a dim lamp struggling against the gathering darkness of a moonless night. Elizabeth listened understandingly. The two women had no inkling of an arrival that had put a pair of curious ears just behind the door. At length and with many details, Mary revealed to the elderly woman the terrible secret that was tormenting her.

When she had finished, Mary felt relieved. But, like distant thunder, a cry rang out in the night.

A cry of despair.

Mary dashed to the threshold of the house. She saw her son running off. She immediately grasped that he had heard everything, that he knew everything. She wanted to run after him, but he was already disappearing in the distance. Devastated, she fell to her knees and began crying, holding

her face in her frail and trembling hands. She had just realized that day it was not just Joseph who was lost to her. She had also lost Jesus. She raised her head, sobbing, hoping for a miracle, hoping her son would be standing before her and would forgive her lies.

However, he was no longer there.

Then she realized that Jesus might well never return.

4

IXΘΥΣ

In the shade of a pine tree, sitting on a park bench near the Magdala Tower, Camilla was wondering what could be the meaning of the mysterious word beginning in M that Tom had mentioned. However, he did not seem inclined to provide any further details on that subject.

“As I was saying, Abbé Boudet went on blackmailing the Vatican and still had hopes of laying his hands on the Grail, the Pontius Pilate Report hidden in Rennes-le-Château. It was then that Abbé Saunière made his appearance in the tale. He was a thirty-three-year-old priest, charismatic, charming, a big fellow weighing over two hundred pounds. He was appointed priest for Rennes-le-Château and took over the church of Saint Mary Magdalene, which was in a appallingly ruinous state, with its roof almost completely missing. He set about restoring the building with his own money and contributions from the villagers. Like many priests, Saunière was staunchly royalist. At the time of the national elections that took place in 1885, he spoke out against the Republican Party in the sermons he gave in the parish church. Unluckily for him, the Republican Party won the elections that year and Saunière was accused of inciting public disorder. He was suspended for some months and had to leave the village. During this forced exile, he met the Comtesse de Chambord, Maria Theresa of Austria, the widow of the heir to the throne of France. The countess had learned that a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report was hidden somewhere in Rennes-le-Château, thanks to leaks from the Vatican arising out of Boudet’s blackmail. She gave Saunière the task of searching in the church, not telling him anything about the secret of the Grail, under the pretext important family documents were missing. She offered him a great amount of money to start restoring his church, as long as he was discreet. Saunière promised her that if he happened to find any of these documents during the work he’d hand them over to her...”

Tom went on to say that when Saunière returned from exile he had made a start on the most urgent repairs. Then, as time went by, he eventually began work on the altar, which was the most important part of the church and had been badly damaged by the effects of the weather. When the altar stone was moved, one of the Visigothic-style pillars holding it up proved to have a small hollow on the top. In it there were some remains, mostly bones. This was common enough, because relics were frequently placed in a church when it was established, often in the first stone laid, so as to consecrate that church to the saints involved. The pillar was about three feet high and a foot across, and Saunière later installed it at the back of the church to act as a pedestal for a statue. For some unknown reason, the stone was located upside down.

In the year 1887, Saunière was constantly supervising the repair work. The workers dismantled the pulpit, which was on the verge of collapsing. Under it there was a carved wooden column with a typical Corinthian capital that held a small glass bottle containing a parchment. When this column was moved, the bottle fell and broke. The document was given to Saunière who rapidly read it. Hinting at the whereabouts of the Grail hidden in the church, this parchment was one of the chain of clues, almost the last piece in the puzzle prepared by Abbé Bigou a century before.

The following day, enlightened by the indications in the parchment, Saunière picked out a flagstone inside the church and ordered two workmen to lift it. Using a crowbar, they raised the stone. On its hidden side, the flagstone proved to have a superb design in relief from the Carolingian period. It also hid the entrance to a grave in which human skeletons could be seen. Saunière went straight into this tomb, carrying a lamp, and within a few moments he came back out holding an earthenware container full of gold coins and jewels.

Saunière was an honest fellow. He realized he had found a small treasure, probably belonging to the Comtesse de Chambord, and that the family papers she had asked him to look for must also be somewhere in the crypt. However, this Countess had died some months earlier and he could not return the gold and documents to her. The first thing the Abbé felt he ought to do was to refer to his superiors to learn what should be done in such a situation. Being afraid that the news might leak out and that the tomb might be robbed during his absence, Saunière rather unwillingly lied to the two workers, telling them the gold coins were actually medallions from Lourdes of no value. The two workmen were not deceived and the news that the parish priest of Rennes-le-Château had discovered a treasure spread like wildfire throughout the region.

As soon as Abbé Boudet learned this, he rushed to Saunière's house. Boudet realized that by chance Saunière had found the Grail's hiding place. In fact, besides the gold coins, Saunière had found not just one but two faithful copies of the report in the crypt. Until then, the two priests had visited each other on a formal basis, but Boudet had not taken Saunière into his confidence, believing the priest of Rennes-le-Château was too firmly Christian to reveal to him the terrible secret of Jesus Christ. Besides, even if he had, Saunière would probably not have believed him, so inconceivable did the tale seem at first sight. Nonetheless, having two of Pilate's reports before his eyes, Saunière had to admit the truth when Boudet explained all the ins and outs of the whole story of Christ to him.

As with most of those who had been exposed to the secret, Saunière's entire world-view was shattered. By nature jovial, Saunière turned melancholic and suspicious overnight. A convinced priest before, his faith in Christ now fell apart.

The love that Saunière had had for the Vatican became anger. He rightly held Rome responsible for enslaving humanity so as to fulfill partisan interests. He wanted revenge for this crime against humanity.

Boudet confided in him about the blackmail and Saunière felt it was legitimate. He was not alone in this.

Around Boudet, there was a whole circle of people in the know about the Grail. As the secret was too heavy to bear alone, Boudet had shared it with his brother and several local churchmen. Among them, Boudet had a mentor: Abbé Henri Gasq, former priest of the church of Notre-Dame de Marceille. Lying a dozen or so miles north of Rennes-le-Château, this church was the incarnation of a perfect blackmail: all its ornamentation, from pictures to statues, including the atypical representation of the Stations of the Cross, had been designed exclusively to get money out of the Vatican by frightening with insinuations in full sight.

Learning the secret of Christ well before Boudet himself, Gasq had had the idea of putting pressure on Rome by decorating his church with threatening hints. The Vatican had been buying the Abbé's silence for years. Inspired by Gasq's tactics, Boudet decided in his turn to have his church and Saunière's decorated in the same way. Like a master blackmailer sending more and more compromising snaps to an unfaithful husband to keep him under control and make him pay greater and greater amounts, Boudet decided to step up the blackmail. He set about working on the churches at Rennes-les-Bains and Rennes-le-Château. He targeted his threats even more by adding details that screamed out the truth, displaying statues, pictures and other items revealing by hints the secret of Jesus. These included the excessively explicit Stations of the Cross in the church at Rennes-les-Bains

which the Vatican's agents were able to make disappear discreetly a century later during a renovation. However, after the death of the various people involved in the blackmail, the Vatican never dared to destroy all the works of the master blackmailers, for fear a scandal would erupt, drawing the attention of the international press to these little villages and their unusual decorations. Anyhow, the Vatican was more or less reassured: the works were in code and their sense could not be deciphered unless one had the Grail, so without prior initiation nobody could understand the secret of Christ exposed in these churches.

Generation had succeeded generation without anybody realizing that all the Saunière's and Boudet's creations were in no way a message or a complex set of clues intended to pass on to the world details of where a fabulous treasure was hidden or to reveal the Grail. No, everything had been designed with the sole purpose of blackmailing the Vatican, which paid up to purchase the silence of all the priests involved in the affair, making them extremely wealthy.

Naturally, these churchmen could have doffed their priestly garb and adopted the lazy lifestyle of rich men. However, the secret of the Grail was so terrible it could make anybody disgusted with life itself, especially such convinced priests who long ago had entrusted themselves body and soul to Christ. Like children who had been victims of a horrible rape by their own parents, not able to put it out of their minds or to start a new life somewhere else, the life of these priests had been irretrievably shattered and their only ambition was to attain justice by their own efforts.

Although supposed to embody love and forgiveness, they were from now on motivated by hatred for the Vatican and an implacable thirst for vengeance. This was the guideline for all they did for the rest of their lives. They wanted to bleed the Vatican financially, just as it had bled them white spiritually. They wanted to strike where it would most hurt the Pope and his unscrupulous henchmen, who were guilty of enslaving people's consciences with their lies.

Neither Saunière nor Boudet wanted details of the Grail to become public.

Boudet felt it was crucial not to destroy the Vatican, the goose that laid the golden eggs. He was so much happier to see its wealth slowly ebbing away and to savor the pain that these vast outlays must be causing it.

Saunière was quite different. Of a noble nature, he did not want humanity to suffer as he suffered. His desire was to protect his flock from the truth and to be able to continue helping the least fortunate so as to serve them on their quest for the divine, even if the divine spark no longer existed in him.

For what could he do? Should he reveal all in the name of truth and wipe out the belief of millions of indoctrinated people, humble folk for whom this religion was the only consolation in life? He did not want to spread evil around himself. There were secrets that could lead to chaos and anarchy. There were secrets it was preferable never to reveal.

For these varying reasons, the Grail would not be revealed.

For this last purpose, it was essential to ensure there were no other hidden reports and that nobody could come across a copy. Saunière had found two by mere chance, which meant that there was more than one, leading to a meticulous search all through the church at Rennes-le-Château. Helped by his servant Marie Dénarnaud, Saunière ransacked the church from top to bottom and even the graveyard, digging up tombs to make sure no further Grail was there.

He found no others.

However, Saunière and Boudet were afraid that the cryptic clues left by Abbé Bigou a hundred years early might lead to a hiding place that they had missed in their search. So, motivated by that doubt, Saunière destroyed the chain of clues by moving stones, replacing them or chipping away at their lettering to falsify the inscriptions. For his part, Boudet drew up forged documents to mislead anybody who set out to seek the Grail.

A three-sided network had been put in place: the Vatican, Saunière and Boudet, and then those in the know.

The Vatican discreetly paid the blackmail money into a bank account in Budapest. Saunière or sometimes Boudet would make the forty-eight hour train journey there to withdraw it. On returning, they would make a generous distribution of 'justice money' to the various religious folk in the region involved in the affair.

Amongst this group of companions, there was Gélis. He was priest of the village of Coustaussa, a few miles from Rennes-le-Château. Only Saunière and Boudet had in their possession a personal Pontius Pilate Report. In October 1897, Gélis asked Boudet to lend him his copy so he could consult it. One night a week later, when Boudet came to get back his Grail, Gélis refused: he had had a revelation from the Grail and wanted the secret of Christ to be made known to the whole world, because the lying had gone on far too long.

Boudet liked smoking and drinking alcohol when he was alone or with friends.

That day he must have had one drink too many.

The conversation became heated and Boudet seized the fire tongs. He struck Gélis several times on the head, but the victim managed to get up

out of his armchair and tried to escape. Boudet then went for the poor fellow with the ax used for firewood and finally shattered his skull. Boudet searched the vicarage and found the Pontius Pilate Report in a leather satchel. He carefully cleared up all the traces that might stand as evidence against him. He also laid a false trail for the police by writing 'Viva Angelina' with his trembling hand on a cigarette paper. The investigators were to concentrate their searches fruitlessly on finding an Angelina among Gélis's friends and acquaintances, never once suspecting they had been outwitted by Boudet's greater cleverness, so he never came under police suspicion.

That night, Boudet was still sorting out the crime scene when Saunière arrived. He was horrified by the murder and the blood that had splattered the walls. Boudet justified his actions and quickly left the vicarage. Saunière did not stay much longer. However, he could not leave his friend Gélis as he was: he respectfully moved the corpse to the center of the room, placing his arms on his chest like the carving on a tomb.

After Gélis's funeral, Saunière and Boudet stopped meeting each other. The murder of the Coustaussa priest destroyed their secret complicity. Still, Saunière did not report Boudet for fear that the secret of the Grail would become public.

Boudet was to die some fifteen years later. Before his death, eaten away by cancer, he destroyed his books and the Pontius Pilate Report, not wanting anybody to have the privilege of owning what he treasured so much. He did not wish his burial place to be at Rennes-les-Bains, despite the graves of his mother and sister being there, because just next to them was the tomb of Abbé Jean Vié whom he had killed decades before. As if he feared the wrath of heaven in the proximity of that dead body, Boudet chose to be buried in the cemetery at Axat near the grave of his late brother who had helped him write the book 'The True Celtic Tongue and the Rennes-les-Bains Cromlech', which had been written to blackmail the Vatican from the beginning of the affair.

In a last insulting gesture to the hierarchy in Rome, Boudet had engraved on his tombstone a sign that had previously served to frighten the Vatican; on a little sculpted book was written:

I. X. Θ. Y. Σ.

This abbreviation had been known for a long time in Christian history; it was pronounced 'ichthus' and stood for 'Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior'. The 'Y' in this word was engraved in the form of a capital 'I' with a tiny 'v' on top. So, if the inscription was looked at backward, a different reading emerged: 310 and XI. The book 'The True Celtic Tongue and the Rennes-les-Bains Cromlech' had exactly 310 pages and page XI was the

first on which there was a mention of the word ‘wheat’, a word of great importance for Boudet, as he quoted it more than thirty times in his work.

Tom sighed gently.

“Do you want to know what links wheat and Jesus? Well, don’t ask me just yet, I haven’t had time to go into that for the moment. I’ve only been able to look at the main strands in this business. In fact, to tell you the truth, I’ve not really taken any interest in some small features and the meanings of individual items, since I already know the overall sense of the set of works these priests wrote. I didn’t want to waste time deciphering absolutely everything. Looking at all the little points that still need attention would just be covering points of detail that historians can enjoy sorting out some day.”

Camilla nodded.

“What happened to Abbé Saunière?”

“Saunière’s last few years weren’t too impressive. The Bishop of Carcassonne, Monseigneur Billard, was Saunière’s accomplice and also a very easy-going boss to report to. But when he died, he was succeeded by Monseigneur Beauséjour, a Vatican thug. Beauséjour accused Saunière of making illicit charges for saying masses, since he knew full well Saunière had no way of explaining away his luxurious life style. The whole point was to undermine Saunière’s morale and suspend him from his work as a priest. Saunière never realized that the Vatican and the new Pope who’d just taken over were behind all these maneuvers, since the Pope was hypocritically telling him he would support him in the trial for unjustified charges for masses. In the end, Saunière was suspended from his post, became depressed and from then on had worse and worse health problems, since he started hitting the bottle more and more. In 1917, he collapsed and went into a coma. They managed to bring him round, but Saunière realized he had only a few days to live. So, he ordered his servant Marie Dénarnaud to burn his secret papers, papers having to do with the Grail. I’m sure he would have wanted to destroy the Pontius Pilate Report as well, but that wasn’t accessible to a dying man confined to his bed, and he didn’t want to take Marie Dénarnaud into his confidence.”

“So his servant wasn’t in the know?” Camilla asked.

“Marie Dénarnaud was a lot more than his servant; she was also one of his string of mistresses. Saunière never wanted to take her into his confidence for fear of destroying her devout character. He thought about some day telling her the secret of the Grail and how he was blackmailing the Vatican. He could foresee her in the future as an old lady holding the Grail who’d continue to be paid by the Vatican for keeping quiet. But when he was on the point of dying, Saunière decided it was best to take his secret

with him to the grave so as not to harm the woman he loved and to spare her the burden of this heavy and terrible secret. He did want to calm his conscience by confessing on his deathbed. So, Saunière made his confession to Abbé Rivière, a young priest he thought highly of. He confessed about the secret of the Grail, the blackmailing of the Vatican and the murders committed by Boudet. Abbé Rivière was completely astounded and shocked by these revelations, as if he'd seen the Devil in person, and he wouldn't give Saunière the last sacraments. As a result of what he'd heard about Christ, Abbé Rivière became depressed and eventually went mad. The madness that laid him low is something shared by a lot of people who came to learn about the Grail. A lot of them ended up involved in debauchery, corruption, sex and alcohol."

Tom smiled wryly.

"Surprising for a set of priests, don't you think? And everything stems from the discovery of the Pontius Pilate Report..."

Camilla thoughtfully muttered as if talking to herself:

"So when it comes down to it, Saunière never found any treasure..."

"That's right, apart from a 'crock' of gold coins he discovered in the crypt, Saunière found no treasure. Besides, there's a very simple fact that proves he didn't find any treasure: in his account books, you can see that he had to wait for money to arrive in order to pay off his debts. He sometimes had to stop the building works he'd started, since the money from the Vatican was slow in coming. People he owed cash to were constantly harassing him and he often took a very long time to pay them. If he'd really had all the gold he was supposed to, he'd never have put them off for so long."

Camilla was struck by a sudden inspiration.

"Do you know where the Grai is?" she suddenly asked. "You've worked it out, haven't you? That's why you're here..."

Tom chuckled and looked toward the Magdala Tower.

"You know where the Grail is, don't you?" Camilla insisted.

"Yes, I do know where it is," he said after a pause. "Observation of tiny clues is a precise science for people who know how to pay attention to these items, apparently insignificant. Saunière's hiding place is in such full sight that it becomes almost invisible in the mind's eye. You yourself walked right past the Grail without seeing it."

Camilla frowned.

"Hmm... Is it in the graveyard?"

Tom smiled.

“No, but that’s a good try. It’s true that Marie Dénarnaud, Saunière’s faithful servant, did say in her lifetime that people here were walking on gold without knowing it. So, a hiding place in the graveyard is indeed a possibility. But the tale of gold under the villagers’ feet is untrue. Saunière lied to Dénarnaud. He told her he’d found a treasure and that there were others all over the place buried in secret places. That’s how he was able to justify digging up the cemetery, in fact. Dénarnaud was naive, and right through her life she believed that the money Saunière or Boudet gave her came from selling that treasure. When Saunière died, she ended up with no money, convinced that fabulous treasures were buried close by.”

“Where is it then?” Camilla demanded.

“The Pontius Pilate Report is hidden in a safe,” Tom said mischievously.

“A safe? I haven’t seen any safes...”

“Who knows?” Tom chuckled.

Camilla realized that he did not want to reveal the mysterious hiding place to her. Changing the subject, she asked the question that had been on the tip of her tongue since the very start of their conversation.

“What precisely is in Pontius Pilate’s document?” she asked.

“What’s in it exactly? To tell the truth, I don’t know... What I do know, on the other hand, is what it doesn’t contain...”

Tom smiled enigmatically.

*
* *

Leo refocused his binoculars.

A hundred yards away the couple were still chatting away on the park bench. The man with the shaven head, that Thomas Anderson, was Satan incarnate and the young brunette beside him a poor sheep that had erred and strayed.

If Thomas Anderson were allowed to carry out his plans, an apocalypse would strike the World, the fires of hell would sweep away all human souls and the Kingdom of the Devil would reign supreme.

For an instant, Leo thought of running toward that Satan and driving a dagger into his body that lacked any true heart, so as to drive him out of the earthly realm and send him back to the infernal place where he should stay forever.

However, Hell would have to wait a while.

Goddess had clearly told Leo not to kill him, at least not until Leo had secured the Book.

That Book was pure evil, the forces of darkness incorporated into an object. In the past, the Book had seduced a multitude of souls, even those of churchmen who had believed they could confront evil face to face. Without exception, they had all been laid low by the power of the void.

Goddess had made it very plain the Book should never be opened, for this would set free an army of demons on the Earth. Happily, Leo was there: he was an angel at God's command to save humankind despite themselves.

Goddess was his Virgin Mary, his Madonna.

Who was she really? So far, Leo had no idea. He knew no more than the sound of her soft and charming voice. He was sure they would eventually meet. He had fallen deeply in love with her and at times he dreamed that her divine face was bending down to kiss him as he slept. In his dreams, she ended up merging with the image of his mother.

As a child, Leo had loved cuddling up to his mother, sharing her bed that was always soft and snug, falling asleep hugged to her large, heavy breasts. He was the only one to love that 'fat old witch', as his classmates called her when she brought him to school. His own physique had not been spared the mocking of the other children: his cauliflower ears stuck out grotesquely, but his voice and his face were so delicate that he could be taken for a girl. He had often had to use his fists in the schoolyard. An only child, in the loneliness of a life of poverty he had sadly missed the presence of a father.

Where was his father? He had never discovered. At times, he had hoped to recognize him among the shadowy figures that flitted to and from his mother's room. One day, he had daringly pushed her door ajar. It had opened onto a scene of sexual debauchery that had left a horrible taste in his mouth. Tied to the bed, his mother was undergoing the angry attentions of a black man with a huge penis. That filthy ape had spotted him behind the door and hastened off, leaving his mother still strapped to the bed.

Leo had gone up to her. Moved by the hand of God, as he now realized, he had throttled the throat of perversity. As if waking from a nightmare, he had found himself standing over his mother's lifeless body. Then he had fled and found refuge in the house of God.

Afterward, God had absolved him of his crime. He had shown him the light through the Bible and salvation for his soul through repentance. The Lord Jesus Christ now guided his steps and pointed out to him the enemies of the faith he must fight.

Leo was an angel, a divine soldier, the armed hand of God to punish sinners and even the Devil in person.

The Devil had taken on the shape of Thomas Anderson.

Leo lowered his binoculars.

His slender hand pushed back his long, straight black hair that flopped over his beardless juvenile face. Leo's androgynous figure, like a teenage girl's, advanced slowly. As he walked, his blue eyes never left the couple sitting in the distance and he wondered what they could be saying.

Leo stopped.

Thomas Anderson had just stood up from the bench. The young woman had done the same. Leo watched the couple separate and head off, each in a different direction.

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A cool, damp night had fallen some hours before in the village of Rennes-le-Château. A new dawn would not be long in bringing the realm of day. Already, like a luminous advanced guard, a full moon stood out against the darkness, reflecting the rays from the star which brings us life, currently hidden on the other side of the sleeping world.

Tom's bulky shadow glided along the deserted laneways, heading for the silent church of Saint Mary Magdalene. However, Tom did not go all the way to it. He stopped a few yards from the porch. Skillfully, he smashed the street-lamp with a stone that he shot from a catapult. Half-darkness took possession of the small square. Tom pushed the gate, which was not locked, and walked into the small garden.

Standing on a pedestal for steps high, the inverted Visigothic pillar was there. On it, as if in fear for its integrity, the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, its hands in the posture for prayer, gazed out on the presence of the intruder with a worried air.

Now so close to his goal, the man dressed all in black, with a woollen watch cap rammed down on his shaven head, was seized by a doubt. Tom wondered whether the Grail was still hidden under this inverted pillar.

He had thought over and over again about the reason for the pillar's upside-down position. He was certain there was no need to look for a metaphysical explanation or an esoteric meaning in it, but simply a practical and psychological sense. He thought he had grasped what had happened in Saunière's days: the priest had kept the Pontius Pilate Report with him for years, never letting it out of his sight. He feared thieves and in

particular Vatican thugs who hoped to snatch the valuable item from him. However, Saunière could not carry the Grail about on his person forever. He had read and re-read it and wanted to stow it in a safe place. He decided to make it invisible by the principle of public exposure; in full sight of everybody, it would disappear from foolish minds set only on hidden treasures. Saunière chose to inaugurate, with great pomp, a monument that would dominate the village square, a monument that would act as a hiding place in the heart of the place. In this way, the Grail would become invisible through the magic of its visibility.

Saunière decided to use the Visigothic stone, one of the pillars from the old altar in his church. The pillar already had a small hollow on top and by chiseling it out a little more he could put Pilate's manuscript inside. If located top downward, the stone's own weight made it into a formidable safe. Saunière was a burly guy, over two hundred pounds. He would have no trouble in raising the pillar and recovering his treasure whenever he liked. Nobody would have the idea of looking for the Grail under an inverted stone...

Nobody?

Several villagers knew the pillar had a hollow on top, so by turning the pillar upside down, he was bound to attract the attention of practical minds. So, Saunière added a psychological lock to his safe; any thief would make physical and mental efforts to break into a safe: if after that it turned out to be empty, the crook would be sure to fall into considerable mental distress. Thanks to the trick, his ability to think straight would be reduced and his brain would go into slow motion. For the moment, the thief would not work out that behind the empty safe there might be some trapdoor invisible to the naked eye.

"The safe as a decoy," Tom murmured to himself.

The criminal would go away dumbfounded, convinced for the time being that the safe was empty, and would look elsewhere for the hiding-place of the treasure. With this cunning ploy, Saunière would know immediately that somebody had come to break into his safe if he ever found the pillar moved or displaced and he would be able to recover the Grail hidden, not in the pillar, but under the four-step pedestal, long before the thief could work out where his mistake had been.

If Saunière had set the pillar right way up, this psychological lock would have not have taken effect and the thief would immediately have moved the Visigothic stone to search for the Grail hidden under its base. Thus, during a religious ceremony before a whole raft of guests, Saunière inaugurated the inverted Visigothic pillar upon which the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes stood in state.

Like an extremely perfectionist artist, Saunière added a final touch to distract attention from this pillar and insure that despite everything it would benefit from some security. Stirring up doubt by implanting in people's minds the idea that the Visigothic stone carried a coded message supposed to lead to the treasure that rumor had it he had found, Saunière had inscriptions engraved on the pillar and on its capital, following the adage that when a wise man points to the moon with his finger, the fool stares at the finger.

In the moonlight, Tom stared at the pedestal four steps high on which the pillar stood. Throughout his life, Saunière had had the possibility of retrieving the Grail. Had he recovered it and destroyed it? For the moment, it was impossible to guess.

Tom put down his big backpack. He took out several blankets which he spread out on the steps. He took a short crowbar and dismounted the statue from its support, then laid it down to one side. Tom started on the base of the monument then, with his muscular arms, he clutched the stone. This slowly tilted and eventually came to rest on the blankets.

Years ago the real Visigothic pillar had been classified as a historic monument and had long been kept in the village museum. It had been replaced by a faithful copy made of stone. However, nobody had touched the stones in the pedestal.

The moment of truth had come. Tom was at last to learn if his deductions were correct. His hand lovingly caressed the smooth cold surface.

"You're there," he whispered. "You must be there..."

Hammer blows broke the silence of the night and the solid joints of the stones. The crowbar plunged in to the heart of their dark mystery.

Then the iron forced loose a stone.

Tom groped inside the opening he had created. When he noticed the characteristic feel of cloth under his fingers, his heart started beating wildly. He plucked out two flat rectangular objects, yellowed with age. One was small and thick, the other broad and nearly a foot long. By their weight, there could be no doubt that they were manuscripts. Tom slipped the smaller into his jacket pocket and cautiously unpacked the larger, which was wrapped in a cloth that had once been white.

The moon lighted up a Latin inscription that Tom read.

... *Pontius Pilatus*...

Savoring this delightful moment, Tom shut his eyes for an instant.

"The Grail," he muttered. "The Grail..."

A barely audible footfall sounded behind him. Tom opened his eyes and grinned slightly.

"I knew you wouldn't be patient enough to wait for our meeting," he said without turning round. "You..."

A sixth sense warned him of danger.

In an instinctive reaction, he had just enough time to lean to one side. The action saved his life, as the heavy club that was coming down in a murderous swipe did no more than brush against his head, although it did strike him a blow on the left shoulder.

In anguish, stunned, Tom stumbled and fell.

A slim figure dressed entirely in black swooped toward the manuscript where it had fallen to the ground. As if it was a dangerous virus, the figure picked it up somewhat fearfully and pushed it into a dark-colored carryall. In a split second, a long thin dagger that glinted menacingly in the half-darkness appeared like magic from a sleeve.

"Die, Satan," Leo cried in his high-pitched voice. "Go back to Hell..."

A woman's cry halted his arm in its trajectory. Like lightning, Leo turned.

A white jet shot through the darkness.

Despite his hood, the pepper spray hit Leo's eyes. The burning was so sudden that he squealed in pain. Blinded and distinguishing virtually nothing in the gloom, he lowered his head and ran off into the night.

Camilla, trembling, went up to Tom.

His thick woolen cap had helped protect him from the mighty blow and his powerful musculature had preserved him from serious consequences. However, Tom was no more than half conscious. Leaning against the Visigothic stone, he looked as groggy as a boxer overwhelmed by a flurry of uppercuts.

After several long minutes, Tom finally came fully to his senses. The first thing he saw was the club on the ground. As if the last few moments had been edited out of the film of his life, he spat out angrily:

"If you wanted the Grail, you only had to ask. There was no need to hit me... I'd have given it to you in any case..."

He stood up, though with some difficulty.

"What? But it wasn't me that hit you!" Camilla protested. "Quite the contrary, I saved your life... it's lucky I was there, otherwise you'd be dead by now..."

She quickly explained what had happened.

"Oh.... Sorry... And a thousand thanks..."

Tom rubbed his bruised shoulder.

“*Scheiße*,” he swore, his slight German-Swiss accent coming through in his speech. “I had the Grail in my hand... *Scheiße*...”

“Who tried to kill you? Do you have an enemy?”

“An enemy?” Tom grumbled. “If only I had just one... The Grail is so terrible that the mildest-mannered nun would kill to keep it secret...”

Tom grabbed the club and tucked it away in his backpack. Out of this he took a large tube containing quick-setting mortar, and hastened to replace and fix the stone from the steps and the inverted pillar and its statue.

“What the eye doesn’t see...” he muttered once the job was done.

After making sure that everything was back to normal, Tom took Camilla by the arm and they left the small garden.

“Do you have an auto?” he asked.

“Yes, up there...”

Alert and frequently looking back to check, Tom followed Camilla through the streets of the village. A gray Mercedes sports coupé was parked near the Magdala Tower. The couple got in. The car started up and Camilla asked, “Where are we going?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Tom replied. “Just drive...”

The first rays of sunlight were appearing over the misty mountains. The car left the village and followed the winding road in the direction of Rennes-les-Bains.

Tom remained silent and thoughtful. After a while he took out of his jacket pocket the small object that had been stored with the Pontius Pilate Report. He looked at it for a moment, then carefully removed the yellowing cloth that wrapped it. A notebook with a dull cover became visible. With his interest growing every second, Tom flipped through the first few pages. After a couple of minutes, he could not help letting out a cry of surprise. Turning to the driver, he said to her, “Make for the freeway as soon as you can. We’re heading for Paris.”

“Paris?”

“Yes, Paris... Quick...”

At a moderate pace, the powerful car went through the village of Rennes-les-Bains. The vague gaze of Tom’s shining eyes suddenly focused on the Calvary that emerged as they went round a curve in the road. The work of the late Abbé Boudet, its statue of Jesus on the cross was highly unusual. The marks of the stab with a lance that a Roman legionary had given him to ensure he was dead could be seen on his side. However, this bloody mark was to be seen on the left side of Christ and not on the right as was standard practice. Jesus’ head was turned away from this wound, as

if in reproof of this gross error deliberately committed by the emblematic Boudet.

Tom turned his gaze away from the Calvary and resumed his reading of the notebook he had in his hand.

Abbé Boudet's notebook.

5

Reminiscence

Jesus opened his eyes.

His gaze slowly swept round the cave from which the darkness was slowly disappearing. A new day had just driven away the shadows of night, but not those that filled his heart. He had still not finished his journey toward that Enlightenment on which he set such great store. He had stayed sitting in the lotus position, his forearms resting on his knees, his hands hanging loose, for the whole night. Tiredness clutched at his mind, but he had sworn not to sleep until he found the way he should take to reach that lost awareness.

The way to past truths was close... so close...

His body, in pain from the prolonged immobility, was trying to intrude upon his concentration. Jesus ignored it. Once again, he shut his eyes.

The image of Nazareth, his birthplace, lighted up his memories.

Sheltering the village with its tiers of cubical white houses, the valley where he had grown up was like a corner of heaven that had fallen into a fold of the mountains, hidden away in the midst of a host of pomegranate and fig trees and vines. Around this hollow of cool greenness the sharp air of the mountains made its way; the heights opened onto the free and luminous horizon of Galilee. He saw himself as a child, running across the fields toward a small house separated a little from the rest of the village. His father had built it with his own hands. For Jesus, as for many children in Galilee, the family home was much more than a simple dwelling place: it was a sort of temple where decoration was limited to straight lines above the doors and on the walls bore passages from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. There the strength of a Jewish upbringing took on its fullest sense, lying as it always had in the unity of faith and in the powerful organization of the family, dominated by the ideas of nation and religion.

Thus, the great days of Israel shaped the childhood of Jesus; days of joy and sorrow, triumph and exile, uncounted afflictions and everlasting hopes.

The union of father and mother in the love of their children warmed and lighted up the bareness of these austere interiors where life was wholly spiritual, turned toward the Eternal: Yahweh the sole God, creator of the Universe.

Jesus thought once more of his late father who had guided him on the way toward God.

Joseph...

Jesus loved his father deeply. As a toddler, he had never been far from his side, following him around like an affectionate shadow, tugging on his robe in order to be picked up and carried. He looked on his father as a living god endowed with superhuman, magical powers. His beard fascinated him and he loved to stroke it like a small and delicate animal. Then his father would tickle him under the chin and he would chuckle with happiness.

He was not alone in considering Joseph a godlike superior being. His friends barely dared to come close to him, lowering their eyes timidly in his presence, as if the old man was of royal blood.

In fact, Joseph was this indeed.

He was of the lineage of King David, the only lineage whose genealogy was scrupulously monitored by the priests of the Temple, as from this line a future king was to be born. The Jewish scriptures were clear on that point: they announced the return of a king, who would have received the divine unction of God to re-establish the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Israel, to guide its people and free them from the foreign yoke. This king would be the Messiah, he who is anointed with the divine unction.

The 'Christ' in Greek...

When they were playing together, the other children never ceased to repeat this to Jesus; they saw in him the savior of the nation because he was the son of Joseph, a descendant of David. Enigmatic and mischievous, Jesus preferred to remain silent on the topic. This merely made his young playmates' conviction all the stronger.

Everybody thought Joseph was the true father of Jesus.

Nonetheless in the village rumors about his birth went the rounds. Some folk averred that Joseph was far too old to be his father. Joseph was reportedly senile and impotent. Mary was afraid Jesus might hear these serpent's tongues uttering wounding comments about him.

Then again, other stories were circulating about his conception. The Angel Gabriel was claimed to have visited Mary. Still a virgin, she was

said to have received the godly seed that had begotten the divine child Jesus. Moreover, Mary's virginity was stated to have remained intact even after she gave birth.

Amazed by the tales he heard, Jesus felt himself to have a fabulous destiny and measureless spiritual strength: he considered himself a divine child on two counts.

Divine as of the lineage of Joseph, that of the Kings of the House of David, and divine as the offspring of the Immaculate Conception.

Many believed in this latter version of the birth of Jesus, for the child performed incredible miracles.

Miracles...

As he sat in the cave, Jesus frowned almost imperceptibly. He dove back into the past, reliving these events as if they were happening for the first time.

One day, his mother gave him a jug so he could go draw water from the village well. On the way, he collided with one of his friends and broke the jug. He knew he would not be scolded, but did not wish to return home without water. The villagers were dumbfounded to see the little six-year-old boy crossing the village, carrying water in his cloak. Not one drop leaked out of the garment which he was using as if it was a leather wineskin.

Two years later, at the time of sowing, Jesus went out with his father to plant wheat in their field. While Joseph was sowing, the child was seen to put a few seeds into the earth. When harvest time came, after threshing and milling the grains of wheat, Joseph had so much flour that he had to give away the huge surplus. Nobody in living memory had ever seen such a yield for such a small quantity of wheat sown. Some villagers claimed they had seen Jesus plant just one single solitary seed.

Many were those who credited Jesus with divine powers. They became all the more numerous when this frail child with eyes blue as the ocean achieved miraculous cures.

One cold autumn Tuesday, Jesus had gone off with his half-brother James to bale up bundles of firewood. While James was gathering branches, a snake bit him on the hand. He shrieked and the few witnesses of the scene saw the younger boy rush to blow on the bite. James stopped crying and instead of seeing him die in terrible suffering, he was observed smiling and stroking the hair of his savior with the hand that had been bitten. Thirty feet or so away, the snake lay dead, the victim of the anger of the young prodigy.

A young woodcutter also had the luck to be saved by Jesus. The man was cutting wood in the neighborhood of the village when his ax slipped

and cut deep into his foot. As his lifeblood drained away, he was dying. The people who rushed to help could find no way of stopping the hemorrhage. Jesus arrived at that moment. He simply laid his hands on the injured leg and miraculously the woodcutter's vital fluid ceased pouring out before the amazed looks of the bystanders.

"The spirit of God must be in that young lad," whispered an elderly lady.

Everybody adored him in the village, seeing him as a prodigy, a divine being. However, what put him definitively on a standing equal to God's were the dead that he revived.

Twice, he brought back to life children who had just died.

The first resurrection took place when a sad accident happened. Jesus was playing on the flat roof of a house when one of his little friends, Zeno, tumbled off the top of the roof and fell to the ground. The children rushed forward. Horrified by the lifeless corpse, they ran off at top speed. Jesus, for his part, stayed with the dead child. The boy's mother, hearing the cries of distress from the children who were running in all directions in the middle of the village, realized what had occurred and came shrieking out of a nearby street. In the distance she saw Jesus kneeling, his hands laid on the chest of her son. She rushed up shouting, accusing Jesus for no good cause of having pushed his friend off the roof, wanting somebody to blame for the misfortune that was driving her near mad. Yet Jesus was not one whit dismayed. To the great surprise of his mother, he kissed the dead boy on the mouth. Life at once stirred in him again. Zeno sat up, looking haggard and coughing. His mother hugged him and rocked him gently, asking him if it was Jesus who had made him fall from the roof. Zeno replied that it was not, that he had fallen all on his own, but that it had indeed been Jesus who had brought him back to life. He added that he had seen himself floating above his own body and that he had been sucked back into it by Jesus' breath. From that day forth, the mother treated Jesus with absolute veneration, praising the Lord God for having sent his own son amongst them.

Another mother also had limitless adoration for this divine son. This came about because of the second resurrection Jesus accomplished.

A young girl with whom Jesus was very friendly was sickly and often ill. During a meal, this weakly little child fell from her seat. She wriggled pitifully in every direction, unable to speak, her face red, her eyes bulging. She rolled over on her back, seized by nameless terrors. As she began to lack oxygen, her lips turned blue. Jesus happened to be passing by at that very moment and saw the scene through the window of the whitewashed

house. He ran in. His young friend seemed to have given up the ghost, with her body as rigid as a stone statue.

“I will not let you die,” yelled Jesus. “Stay with us!”

He flung himself upon the young girl and lifted her up brusquely. He hugged her in his arms as if he were trying to transmit to her some divine energy, squeezing her with a strength that nobody would have suspected that he had. The child opened her eyes, her mouth twisted in an expression of pain. She started coughing and spitting. Jesus turned to her mother who had stood there motionless, so frozen by terror that she had been incapable of the slightest action.

“Give her milk to her now, and remember what I did.”

The mother fell to her knees and praised the Lord, unable to understand how such a miracle could have taken place. The news spread like wildfire. The villagers claimed that Jesus had come from heaven and that he had saved many lives. He was even credited with other incredible miracles by popular fervor. Folk said that he had saved crowds of people just by laying on his hands and that he would continue to do so all through his life. Such was his destiny.

Jesus was delighted by the faith that he aroused. He liked to help his neighbors and found it completely natural to do as he did. For her part, Mary was worried about her child’s actions. She was fearful that the prodigies Jesus performed might become widely known in the region. She was afraid for his safety. She often reprimanded him when he talked too much or revealed facts that he was not supposed to know to the astonishment of the villagers. Then Jesus had to promise his mother once again that he would not show off his knowledge, the ‘divine knowledge’ as she called it, for humankind was not ready to listen to it, at least not for the moment. This is what Mary told him.

Jesus was a mischievous child, so despite the promises he made he could not help himself from accomplishing prodigies, enjoying the ‘divine knowledge’ and the surprise at his deeds and words that he saw in the eyes of the adults with whom he spoke. He loved hearing his young friends repeating the fabulous tales that were told about him.

However, a rumor came to cast a shadow over the praises Jesus heard about himself, or rather about his family, which he cherished above all else. It was a conversation between two village women that he heard by chance when playing hide and seek. Concealed in a bale of hay, he overheard them saying things that were a shock to his child’s mind, and showed him one of the vices of the human estate and its tendency to malicious gossip.

"I tell you that that cripple is sleeping with Mary. It is obvious! Why do you think that he arrives just after Joseph leaves? That is no coincidence, I tell you. Anyhow, why would he come every day, if it were not for that..."

The younger of the two women moved her body obscenely. An unmistakable gesture, imitating sexual congress.

"Do you really think so?" asked the older of the two in surprise.

"There can be no doubt of it..."

Jesus almost choked. They were talking of the mysterious man who came to his house every morning. He limped and had a face with prominent cheekbones and a pointed black beard that made this thin forty-year-old seem even taller and thinner. All the same he had an undeniable charm despite his handicap and his too large aquiline nose.

Another feature made the enigma enveloping this unknown man in the black tunic all the deeper: his character. His whole personality was one of unrelenting austerity; he never smiled, never gave the slightest polite nod, never responded to the greetings courteously addressed to him. His dark eyes were perpetually moving. He was ceaselessly on the look-out, often glancing behind himself as if he feared a wolf was about to pounce on him. Or that an outraged husband might take revenge on him, said some. Nobody knew where he came from and where he returned each day. Some villagers thought they had seen him entering a cave five or six miles from Nazareth. Total mystery surrounded his daily presence in the village.

"I tell you that old Joseph is too senile to satisfy a young woman like Mary. The man must be her lover. There can be no doubt about it. Worse still, it has been going on for years..."

"I saw Joseph talking with the lame man just last week, though," objected the older woman. "He cannot be her lover, for Joseph knows him and is aware that the cripple comes to his house every day."

The younger of the two was thoughtful for an instant, as if upset by what the other village woman had told her.

"Then it is even worse than I believed," said she finally. "Old Joseph is incapable of satisfying his wife, so he has hired a man to do so. What filth! And he must even watch Mary while they are at it..."

Jesus would have dearly loved to rush out of his hiding place and explain all about the lame man, as the women called him. However, he had solemnly sworn never to speak about him. So, the child began to sob quietly, biting his hand until it bled in order not to cry out and reveal his presence. That instant, he promised himself that later he would do all he could to change people's mentality, that human mentality that did harm, often without wanting to or knowing, by wounding the deepest layers of a

person, the soul; words sometimes cut more harshly than the sharp edge of a sword.

Men are like that...

Still sitting in the lotus position, perfectly still, Jesus nonetheless twitched his eyelid almost imperceptibly.

He hated rumors and scandals. He had suffered from them and others were suffering from them still. He wished this human hypocrisy would end forever, that words turned into evil would no longer be a constant for humankind.

He remembered that he had drawn a veil in his mind over the conversation he had heard from the bale of hay, pushing this unpleasant event out of his memory, preferring no longer to think of it, as if it had never happened.

In the little village tucked away in the valley, the course of Jesus' life went back to its normal state, surrounded by perfect harmony where nothing could disturb his bucolic idea of the world, isolated as he was in the haven of peace represented by Nazareth. However, his idyllic view of existence changed suddenly. The reality of the outside world that he had refused to see burst in on his consciousness. A blow struck him that would shatter the protective cocoon where he had taken refuge.

Jerusalem...

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem to meet the priests of the Temple at the time of the Passover Festival, when the Jewish people commemorated their flight from Egypt under the guidance of Moses. The priests wanted to hear the news about Jesus directly from his parents' mouths. It was a condition they put on their aid. Jesus had just turned twelve. He insisted on going along. Joseph at first refused, but finally agreed, seeing his son's sad face. Nonetheless, Jesus was told he had to stay in the wagon that took them to the city and not leave it while Joseph and Mary were away. His parents were there for just the day, after which they headed homeward, but not noticing that Jesus was no longer in the wagon.

Jesus had disobeyed them. He was fascinated by the town as he had glimpsed it by lifting up the wagon's cover. He wanted a chance to come to know it. Thinking he had time to do a short, quick tour while his parents were away seeing to their business, he walked off calmly into the city.

It was a horrible shock for him.

As he went down to the poorer quarters in the lower town, he saw beggars pale with hunger, faces haunted with memories of the recent civil wars, tortures and crucifixions. Blood seemed to have run in torrents: the

Roman legions had slaughtered people in the streets and mass crucifixions had stained the nearby hills with hellish scenes.

Leaving through one of the city gates, haggard, fleeing from these visions of horror, he started wandering among these rocky valleys, in the gloomy ravines where quarries, pools, and the tombs of the kings mingled to set a sepulchral belt around Jerusalem. There, he saw madmen coming out of caves shrieking curses against the living and the dead. He went down a broad stairway to a spring as deep as a cistern, and found at the bottom, alongside the yellowish waters, lepers, paralytics, unfortunates covered in all sorts of ulcers. An irresistible urge forced him to look into the depths of their eyes, to drink in their suffering. Some asked him for help, others were apathetic and hopeless, yet others, apathetic, seemed to have gone beyond suffering.

He felt powerless. He who had so often cured people from his village, was unable to change the course of events. He felt in the face of the distresses of the human condition that he was.

Inwardly, he raged at the Temple for doing nothing to relieve this misery.

“What is the use of the Temple and its priests,” muttered Jesus, “if they cannot find remedies for all this pain?”

Suddenly, like a river swollen by an infinity of teardrops, he felt the misfortunes of those people, of that city, of that nation, of all humanity pour into his heart. Those desperate looks that he had seen would remain with him forever. A gloomy partner, human suffering would henceforth be at his side and never leave him.

He fell to his knees, raising his face toward the sun. Although his eyelids were closed, he felt the rays of the star that gives us life illuminating his inner darkness, restoring light where gloomy disillusion had reigned. So, once again, he felt himself united with the Lord.

God...

This original feeling of being united with God in the light of love was the earliest, the greatest revelation that he had always had within him. It gave him an unshakeable certainty, making his thoughts into an adamant shield and his words into a luminous sword. Religious consciousness was something born in him, absolutely independent of the outside world, even if he had had a Jewish religious education, like all the children of Israel, from parents devoted to the monotheistic cult of Yahweh, the only God.

From the very beginning, a truth had grown in the depths of his being like a shining flower emerging from dark water. It was like a growing

brightness that came to life in him when he was alone and resting. Then men and things, close or distant, seemed to him as if transparent in their inner nature. It was as if he could read their thoughts, see into their souls. Then the memory came to him, as if through a light veil, divinely beautiful and radiant beings leaning over him. Marvelous visions haunted his sleep or rose up between him and reality, through an authentic doubling of his consciousness. At the height of such ecstasies, which took him from zone to zone, as it were toward other skies, he sometimes felt himself attracted by flashing lights to immerse himself in an incandescent sun. From these trances he retained a feeling of inexpressible tenderness, an inexplicable strength. At that point he felt reconciled to all beings, in harmony with the universe. What then was that mysterious light that welled up from deep within him and bore him off to the most distant spaces, the light whose first rays had flooded into him from his mother's great eyes, and now united him to all souls through hidden vibrations? Was it not the source of souls and worlds?

He had given it a name.

The Heavenly Father.

A prophetic, messianic awareness arose in him, awoken by the shock of outside circumstances, by the sordid spectacle he had just seen in Jerusalem.

Mary and Joseph had not noticed the absence of their son. They joined a caravan heading for Galilee and went on their way believing that their son was asleep in the back of the wagon. However, when they stopped for a break they discovered he was no longer with them. For a brief while they thought he had gone off to talk to some people they knew who lived not far from Nazareth and who had also joined the caravan. They quickly found this was not so. Mary realized to her horror that Jesus had remained in Jerusalem.

Joseph and his did a rapid about face. On reaching the city, they searched for three days, all in vain. In despair and with nobody to turn to, Mary went to the Temple, hoping to get help from the priests, afraid to tell them that the divine child had disappeared.

Jesus was there, sitting among the priests, listening to them and asking them questions. They were amazed that a child could have such knowledge of the divine laws and the parables of the prophets, which he cheerfully explained, and never for a moment imagined that this was the child they sponsored, whom they had not seen since his return from Egypt.

"Jesus, what are you doing here?" grumbled his mother. "We were very worried and searched for you everywhere..."

“Is this child Jesus, the son of Joseph?” asked a priest in astonishment. “The divine child?”

Mary nodded in silence, looking downward like a little girl caught behaving naughtily.

“That explains how he is so surprisingly knowledgeable...”

The priests seemed reassured, smiling as if they had had a good joke played on them.

“We ought to have recognized those blue eyes,” said one of them. “But what is he doing here? We thought he was an orphan with no place to stay. We sheltered him here...”

Mary apologized and explained what had happened. Then she took her son by the hand and the two left the Temple, joining Joseph who was greatly surprised and relieved to see his son.

“Why did you seek me throughout the city?” inquired Jesus. “You ought to have known that I could find refuge in the house of the Heavenly Father.”

He pointed to the Temple, the only place in the city that was not terrifying in his eyes.

Joseph and Mary did not understand who Jesus meant by the Heavenly Father. Nonetheless, they asked no questions. Jesus had an enigmatic nature that they had accepted long since.

Their son took a last look back at the city and the surrounding hills where the crucified hung on their crosses. In the wagon taking him back to the sunny ridges of Galilee, a silent cry rose up from the depths of his heart.

One day, I will save these humans from their own madness...

Sitting in his cave, Jesus thought back to these events from earlier times. His childhood in the village of Nazareth had streamed past his mind’s eye. Now a tragic moment was bubbling up in his consciousness.

The moment he fled.

The terrible secret that his mother had hidden from him for so long was more brutal than a thunderbolt falling on him. There were times that he hoped that it had never really happened.

Forgive her, she did not mean it...

He saw himself once more behind the house door, one hand on the handle. His mother’s tears had not stopped his swift rush. He did not want to trouble her at such a painful moment. Elizabeth, an elderly relative, was there. She would know the words to console a widow at such a time of distress. He did not want to impose his presence, knowing that adults

sometimes needed to be together to share their sorrows and so he chose to creep silently away and come back later. He himself was inconsolable at the death of his father. However, the words he heard paralyzed him on the spot. Unable to make the slightest movement, he remained there motionless, listening to what he should never have heard.

His blood froze in his veins. His mouth opened and shut as he desperately tried to take a breath of air. Mary's words pierced him to the heart, smashing the structures of his consciousness like the fragile mirrors in which, as a child, Jesus had believed he saw reflections of heaven.

When his mother had finished confessing to her relative, the psychological spell that had rooted Jesus to the spot was broken. He cried out in despair.

Without even looking back, he had fled shrieking into the dark night. After going half a dozen miles, he took refuge in a cave. Recovering at least a semblance of calm, he had spent the night in meditation. At dawn, he had decided to undertake the most difficult of quests.

The search for himself; and for the Heavenly Father.

Not yet a man, though no longer a child, he set out toward the rising sun like a moth attracted by a flame. Making his living by doing odd jobs in the villages through which he traveled, he went farther and farther east. He knew instinctively that his salvation lay at the end of his route. Walking alone or traveling with caravans of merchants, he crossed areas of lush vegetation or of desert alike, always heading toward the new dawn with unshakeable determination. At each fresh stage, he steeped himself in the cults and beliefs that he encountered. At times, one of them seemed to match his expectations and inner aspirations. Then he would stay for long enough to gain a full knowledge of it, becoming a fervent disciple under the genial or the harsh eye of the master of the cult. However, his nature seemed to be such as never to feel satisfied or convinced by the doctrines taught and he always ended by setting off once more.

Always eastward.

The passing years eventually brought him to India. On the banks of the Ganges, now a young man, he tried to follow the lifestyle of a Hindu ascetic, believing that his religion would finally bring him the revelation of his whole being. For more than a month, he sat meditating at the riverside. However, he finally rejected Hindu intransigence. He shaved off his hair, beard and eyebrows, and donned the orange robes of a Buddhist monk. Once again he traveled many lands, following the trail taken by the illustrious Buddha. This wise teaching, neither philosophical nor religious, brought him much enlightenment about the more obscure parts of his

consciousness, and illuminating his mind with new understanding. Nonetheless, one question remained unanswered.

The Heavenly Father.

Years passed. He had become a slim man with great physical and mental strength, able to spend whole days meditating without eating or moving, or even giving the slightest sign of weariness. A number of disciples followed him round now, seeing in him one of the most amazing spiritual masters, with extraordinary gifts and knowledge. However, person had doubts about him: Jesus himself.

He was always at the mercy of an inner demon.

Hence, he gave up his orange robes and his disciples.

His desire to break into the secret heart of matters and his thirst for knowledge were stronger than anything else, stronger than the Buddhist wisdom that left him with an aftertaste of something incomplete and unfinished. He had heard a great Buddhist spiritual master speak of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the mysterious scroll placed in the past under the heads of mummies to accompany them into the next world that in symbolic form recounted the soul's journey beyond the grave. He had been told that in the sanctuaries of Egypt wise men lived who were in possession of divine knowledge. Could it be that the Egyptian priests had broken through into the inner most secrets of divinity? He had to find out.

As if he were undertaking a one-way journey, he headed west, toward the setting sun. From ship to ship, port to port, town to town, he traveled away from India and after much voyaging reached the land of the Pharaohs.

Providence guided his steps toward Thebes. There he heard of the existence of the Temple of Osiris and its priests.

The Initiates...

There had been power struggles, wars and the various invasions that had finally left the Romans masters of an Egypt that was now no more than a shadow of its former self. Despite them, the priests of the Temple of Osiris had been able to overcome all these trials and tribulations over the centuries like a reed in a storm; bending but never breaking, holding on to the inner essence of divinity, all of whose secrets they knew.

The Assyrian destruction of Thebes had in no way affected the Temple of Osiris and its centuries-old rites. Jesus knocked at its door. A servant brought him to a covered entrance-way where an elderly shaven-headed man soon joined him. The majesty of the man's features, the tranquility of his expression and the mystery of his dark eyes were disquieting for any inquirer. Jesus found he had the strength to meet his gaze. The priest of

Osiris questioned the newcomer about his home town, his family, his spiritual experiences. It was this short but detailed examination that decided whether any prospective disciple was worthy or unworthy of the mysteries.

The priest asked Jesus to follow him. They went through doorways and inner courtyards, then along an avenue cut into the rock, open to the sky and lined with sphinxes, until they came to a small temple that served as the entrance to the underground crypts. The door was hidden behind a life-size statue of Isis. The goddess had a closed book on her knee and was in a posture of meditation and rest. Her face was veiled. Jesus read an inscription at the foot of the statue.

“No mortal has ever lifted my veil...,” murmured Jesus.

“Whosoever comes here is putting his life at stake,” responded the priest. “Madness or death, that is what awaits those who are feeble or evil. The strong and the good find life and immortality. Many imprudent men have entered here and not come out alive. Once this door closes on you, it will be too late to turn back.”

Jesus nodded silently. The priest led him back to the outer courtyard and handed him over to the temple servants. For several weeks, he was given the most unpleasant chores. Finally, one evening, he was allowed to go through the doorway behind the statue of the veiled goddess. The priest gave him a small lamp already lighted and closed the door of the sanctuary behind Jesus.

In the light of the lamp, after he had cautiously walked a few yards forward, a cellar became visible. It was so narrow and low-ceilinged that Jesus had to crawl along it. He heard a voice coming from the end of the cellar.

“Here die all those fools who lust for knowledge and power...”

Thanks to the effects of acoustics, this statement was repeated seven times by distant echoes. Jesus did not allow himself to be impressed and crawled onward. The passage finally opened out and went steeper and steeper downward. Jesus slid down it, without any way of turning back, until he came to a hole. There on the edge of a precipice, his feeble naphtha lamp shed a dim light into bottomless shadows. He was wondering about plunging into this hole when his eyes alighted on a narrow opening to his left. He stretched out his lamp, and saw steps. He gripped the edge of the hole and leaped into the opening. A spiral staircase led upward. At the top of the steps, he reached a door which he pushed open. He was met by the fires of hell from under a long narrow vault at the end of which a fiery furnace roared. He took a moment to look around and walked gingerly forward. As he came closer to the

barrier of fire, he saw that the furnace was no more than an optical illusion created by a light screen of interwoven laths of resinous wood, supported by a metal framework. He rapidly dashed through them. After the trial by fire came a trial by black and stagnant water. He nearly drowned because the flooded tunnel that he had to swim through on a single lungful of air was so long. He came out into a sumptuously decorated room with a soft couch, before which was spread an abundant repast. However, the room had no obvious door, and it was impossible to go back. Jesus did not panic, but dried himself and put on the clean clothes which lay ready. He suspected that the food was also a trap, likely to be poisoned. So, he picked it up and threw it into the water from which he had emerged. Sweet music suddenly sounded. The sensuous notes seemed to come from nowhere. Through some hidden trapdoor, an ebony-skinned woman appeared in the room. She was completely naked and carried in her hand a goblet from which came a sweet and heady scent. For an instant, Jesus could not help looking at her mouth, red as a luscious fruit, her ample breasts and her shaven pubis.

“Do you fear me, handsome stranger?” whispered the woman sensuously. “I bring you the victor’s reward. Forget your sufferings; I am for you alone...”

She held out the goblet of sweet drink to him. He took it, went across to the water-filled hole and threw it away. The curvaceous female was nothing daunted and crossed to the couch, lying on it in an unmistakably sexy position. Jesus went and sat in a corner of the room, turning his back on her. He closed his eyes and emptied his mind. After a few minutes, he heard a noise behind him.

“You have triumphed over death, fire and water,” said the priest of Osiris who had just emerged into the room. More than that, you were able to triumph over yourself. You did not fall into the abyss of the senses. Follow me...”

He led Jesus into the sanctuary of Isis, where the other priests of the Temple, standing in a half circle and dressed in white, were waiting for him. Before a huge cast-metal statue of the goddess Isis, holding her son Horus in her arms, Jesus swore an oath of secrecy and of the most complete obedience. Then the priests greeted Jesus as a brother, as a future Initiate. However, in reality, he had barely been let over the threshold. Years of novitiate awaited him.

The dawn of knowledge...

Jesus opened his eyes. His limbs were aching from his lengthy motionlessness, but the signal of pain could not make its way into his consciousness, blocked as it was by his strength of mind and will, as if his

body belonged to some other person. Through a broad opening in the rock, his blue eyes gazed out on the sun, which was just rising over the horizon.

Or rather, setting below it.

A whole day had gone by without his really noticing it. The outside world and time had no hold on him. For a few more moments he stared at the reddening sun as it was swallowed by the depths of the earth. When it disappeared totally, darkness invaded the cave. Jesus then closed his eyes and went back into his own inner depths.

6

5. 4. 3. 2. 1

Tom closed Abbé Boudet's notebook and raised his eyes to stare unseeingly at the freeway stretching out before him.

Tom needed to get mad.

It was a necessity. It was essential.

He knew it would take little to bring on this primary emotion. He had a fiery temperament that was sometimes hard to control, despite his perfect knowledge of himself.

What should he do to reach the state of violent irritation?

Tom glimpsed at Camilla sitting beside him; she had driven for hours in total silence.

Could she make him mad?

He doubted it. She was in love with him, he could see so clearly by her eyes.

Tom pondered the reason for this sudden love. He knew that he somewhat resembled Camilla's father and that the more the memory of a father-daughter relationship was full of tenderness and joy, the more the lover was supposed to be physically like the father, because the childhood memory looked for the gaze of the beloved father in the future partner. Otherwise, more likely, it was due to Tom's square jaw and deep voice: a deep voice and a strong jaw were the ancestral heritage of dominant males. Over the course of evolution, men had always impressed by their voices in the race to find a mate and reproduce. The deeper a man's voice, the bigger and stronger he was felt to be, for logically he should have a big rib-cage and strong muscles to produce these bass notes. In the eyes of females, the dominant male had always been the best choice, capable of providing for their offspring and ensuring their future in a chaotic world. This genetic inheritance was still present in men and women. Even in the modern

societies of today's world, as a legacy from the stone age it was normal to believe what a deep voice said, for it was unconsciously associated with dominant individuals holding a top position.

Tom's deep voice had charmed Camilla just as the word of God had charmed mankind.

God was a dominant being and had the attributes of one. Besides, in the cinema, God had never been shown talking in a weak and high-pitched voice: a deep voice loud as thunder was essential when bringing the Creator on stage. God could hardly be imagined talking to Moses in a voice that had hardly broken when he said, "Thou shalt not kill".

When Tom revealed to Camilla the truth about God and his son Jesus Christ, the love she had for him was likely to turn to anger.

Paradoxically, we often dislike the people who do us good.

At the wheel of her Mercedes sports coupé, Camilla distractedly stroked the little silver cross she wore round her neck.

What would her reaction be when she learned the truth? The reality with a capital R that made one think of revenge? Would she rally to him or would she fight against him with murderous words? That was what was secretly at stake in their meeting. She was a valuable ally in the war against lies and Tom had to try to win over that sharp-tongued energy. Nonetheless, the gamble might be hard to win, for opinions, whatever they are, but especially religious ones, are carved into the marble of our thoughts. Opinions are so strong that they brush aside all reasons to the detriment of truthful facts.

Like the Big Bang, requiring a titanic triggering, opinion grew out of the firing up of millions of neurons as a new notion dawned. Like a shower of asteroids, myriads of pieces of true or false information, relevant or not, bombarded the earth of our thoughts. After this deluge of fire, the brain progressively cleared up its inner world so as to return to healthy repose and brush away the traces of the innovating cataclysm.

Only the connections between the most efficient and speediest neurons were saved. The millions of others were abandoned with the single practical aim of reducing activity so as to save the brain's energy.

So, this restricted network of neurons gave rise to opinions. As soon as an image, sound or word was linked to the subject in question, a specific opinion ran round this limited circuit and appeared to the conscious mind to be a guaranteed and convincing truth.

Every other outside or contradictory indication was rejected. This was because if the brain was to take them into consideration and remodel its

structure, a further revolutionary Big Bang and setting loose of neurons would be needed, with a consequent huge consumption of energy.

For all topics, whatever they were, from liking a soft toy, through politics, to the concept of God, everything had undergone a flood of information, creating networks.

Through taking the route of least resistance, opinions became unchanging.

Thanks to automated thinking, the brain selected economical circuits, blocking out the circulation of later information in other circuits that nonetheless existed.

Opinion was a restriction of the freedom of thought.

Opinion was self-sufficient, with an internal inertia giving selective comfort by affording people the weakness of certainties. People clung to restful opinions because they avoided the exhausting need to think and to have the brain make a huge effort that was tantamount to shaking up all the neurons.

Happily, intelligence and the noble faculty of thought could overcome this deep apathy and bring about a new flood that would sweep aside tyrannical opinions. Through a saving commitment, it was possible to reach other truths, truths that could be seen as really true, because they were based on up-to-date facts, not on an outdated and wrong opinion.

Tom looked at Camilla from the corner of his eye.

He had to win her over and for this he would have a trump card: the Pontius Pilate Report.

Tom stared at Abbé Boudet's notebook that was clasped in his hand.

Tom had to get mad. He had to let himself be carried away on a wave of rage.

So, he picked up his wide-screen cell phone.

"You don't mind if I watch the news?"

"Not at all," Camilla answered, concentrating on the road ahead.

Tom rapidly typed an address on the virtual keyboard of his phone. A webpage was displayed and he keyed in a username and password. A recording of the previous day's news program started running.

"Don't you prefer to watch the news live?" Camilla enquired, surprised to hear the theme tune of the main evening news.

"No, I much prefer this..."

For twenty minutes, to the accompaniment of the items presented by the evening anchorman, Tom kept on grunting discontentedly.

“Not happy with the news?” Camilla finally asked, briefly glimpsing away from the road.

“They really take us for empty-headed sheep,” Tom said angrily, shaking his phone. “News programs are always presented the same way: first worrying and macabre headlines, then all the wretchedness in the world. Even if everything’s true, the news items are just there to strike us and calm down any rebellion against injustices by hinting we better be content with what little we have. If we know that other people are doing better than we are, our level of satisfaction goes down. But when we’re forced to compare ourselves with people worse off than we are, wretches facing poverty and war, we feel happier with ourselves and our leaders. So we carry on being docile sheep. The tone used in mentioning the risk of epidemics or terrorism is anything but haphazard. Changing just a couple of words alters the reactions of millions of viewers. For instance, if they talk about ‘mad cow disease’ instead of using the scientific name ‘bovine spongiform encephalopathy’, the effect on our minds isn’t the same: a scientific or technical term allows us to judge the risks calmly, since it speaks to what’s called our ‘intelligent’ system of reasoning. When it’s an expression like ‘mad cow’, it unconsciously triggers in our brain the associational mode of thought by images, an emotional way of thinking that works by rapid, instinctive analogy. If the term is negative, it causes worry or even panic. The words the newscasters use can bend us to the will of the powers that be. Fear controls the masses and directs them toward the order and security represented by our leaders. That’s how they manipulate us...”

Tom grunted.

“The television news has another aim: to condition us ready for commercial advertising. That’s why at the end of the news they always broadcast pictures full of hope, positive reports about nature, beautiful, heartening, delightful images, the pleasures of holidays, sunshine and good weather... If they didn’t, our mind would keep remembering images of wars, death and horror and we wouldn’t listen to the adverts that come next. Worse still, we’d associate them with misfortune and that would take away any desire to consume. When our brains activate the zones associated with fear, they remain active for a long time if nothing calms them down. An advert for a car stressing how safe it is would be unconvincing after we’d seen blood and death. We’d wonder if the car was really as safe as all that. That’s not what the advertisers want, or the television stations. They’re trying to sell more advertising spots and have convincing results. They’re a bunch of villains in the pay of the powers that be, who play tricks on us so as

to brainwash us and sell us Coca-Cola at the same time. There's no such thing as a profit too negligible to take..."

Tom sighed.

"And after the television news it's the time for the art of selling us other products, making things we don't need at all seem like vital requirements. And that's done with films and low-brow programs. Broadcasts like those aren't there to entertain you, they're there only to prepare you to swallow the ads that follow them. For instance, they hook us with the suspense of a detective film or if one or another of the participants in a talent show is going to win a marvelous contract with some record company. You have to know that scenes of suspense trigger pleasure, since when there is suspense in the depths of the brain neurons begin putting out dopamine, which is a substance connected with pleasure or hopes of pleasure in the near future. In a situation of maximum uncertainty, exactly like the viewers watching this sort of program, neurons secrete dopamine in anticipation and so create an expectation of pleasure: you're hoping for pleasure, you don't know if you're going to get it, and the less sure you are, the greater the quantity put out. At that point everything's ready in the brain for a reward to arrive. And the reward always comes in the form of an advertising break..."

Rubbing his shaven head angrily, Tom went on:

"Once uncertainty has been brought to a maximum, when some extraordinary fact or simply details of a win are on the point of being given, to put it briefly, when a truth is being expected, an advert is broadcast. The result is that we're bamboozled by our brains that are listening keenly for the slightest bit of information, even advertising, and we drink in the details like cool water quenching our thirst for knowledge. So, the advert takes root in the depths of our brain. A sale's guaranteed when we see the item advertized in a shop, since it will subconsciously remind us of our previous pleasurable state and buying it will seem like absolute happiness. At least apparently, since appearances are loaded dice... Stimulation aids memorization and when we're subjected to this sort of conditioning through suspense, we don't follow the logic of thought, but the logic of emotion. We look at what is shown to us from the viewpoint of pleasure and our critical facilities are switched off. If we were shown a report on obesity, say, our critical capacity would be fully operational and stimulated and any adverts broadcast after it would be treated with circumspection. But television stations know full well what to do so as to disconnect our intelligence."

Tom shook his head in irritation.

“It’s often asked why the unemployed, subsisting on a meager welfare payment, will keep on buying the most expensive brand-named products instead of going for similar items that are cheaper, if less well known. In fact, people like that spend their days in front of the television to try to cope with the boredom of their lives. They’re continually bombarded with brainwashing adverts. Public opinion criticizes these poor folk, accusing them of being unable to manage their money. They’re claimed to be responsible for their own situation. But these people in reality are the victims of the power of advertising and not guilty of inability to organize their shopping... Children aren’t spared by this brainwashing, either. For children, it’s changes that attract attention: a classic ad is slipped into a pause in the cartoons and the little munchkins are caught by the difference in color and design. They’re totally hypnotized, ready to listen to the message. Their minds are like the flame of a candle, quivering at every draft, inconstant and sensitive to the slightest alteration...”

Camilla interrupted him:

“Surely people know what they’re doing. For example, if they buy a product they can’t really afford... They’re not that feather-brained...”

Tom snorted.

“We never realize how far unconscious automatic procedures govern every aspect in our life. We overestimate the role of the conscious brain. In fact, we spend almost all our time on autopilot: going down stairs, walking in the street, even when you’re driving a car like now. The conscious mind isn’t preponderant in our day-to-day behavior. It’s not the center of our inner universe. It’s replaced by our ‘hidden’ mind, and that’s what drives our actions, intuitions, prejudices and irrational fears. Believe you me, we’re almost always running on autopilot, the autopilot being the subconscious, and that’s what whispers to the conscious mind what it wants, even if the conscious brain feels sure it’s doing the deciding. So, whoever knows how to control the subconscious, can control the conscious mind, and people in general. Using the various media, the governments of the great powers shape subconscious minds so as to keep them believing lies. And they use these tricks to hide the secret of Jesus Christ...”

His voice angry, Tom spat out:

“There’s a worldwide plot; the great powers know full well about the secret of Christ, but they keep quiet for fear that their Judeo-Christian civilization would collapse if the secret were ever made public. They’ve been carrying on a thousand-year-old conspiracy since they’re afraid of the truth. They’re terrified that the world would go crazy thanks to that secret, a secret that drove Abbé Boudet insane enough to make him a murderer...”

Tom switched off his phone and opened Abbé Boudet's notebook, which he had in his hand.

"There, I'm angry now..."

Looking preoccupied, Tom plunged into a careful reading of the small manuscript. After over half an hour of intensive reading, Tom lifted his head. Perfectly calm and in control of himself, his eyes shining, he had a contented look.

Finally daring to speak, slightly uneasily, Camilla asked:

"Do you often get that mad?"

Tom smiled craftily.

"I needed to," he said. "It was completely deliberate. I tricked myself into getting angry. And I'm grateful to you for having helped..."

"What?" Camilla asked in surprise.

"Anger can be good sometimes, and is no enemy of thought. On the contrary, there's more chance of analyzing a conversation or a document in detail if you've just been upset a few minutes before. When you're angry, your mental sharpness increases, you read or listen to a problem and analyze it in depth, not just superficially as you would coming to it cold. On condition, of course, that the problem to be solved has no link to the source of your anger."

Tom tapped the notebook.

"I had to get angry so as to be able to go through the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb and analyze in hot blood the facts and arguments in it to see whether they were relevant or not. And I can tell you they are..."

"Where does that notebook come from?" Camilla enquired.

"Oh, yes. It's true, I'd forgotten to tell you. It was with the Pontius Pilate Report under the inverted Visigothic stone. It belonged to Abbé Boudet. You remember I told you that Boudet tried to lay hands on a copy of the Grail by any possible means and particularly by searching all round the world. He felt sure that some individuals had had or still had copies of the report. In this notebook, Boudet kept a summary of his correspondence with historians, with more or less dubious antique dealers, with fences and even with organized crime bosses. Boudet didn't succeed in getting a copy of the Grail directly, but by paying high prices he did manage to buy or have stolen for him various historical documents that reveal where copies are hidden away. And more exactly, where four copies are supposed to be concealed..."

"Did Abbé Boudet have time to recover any of these Pontius Pilate Reports?" Camilla asked.

“No, I don’t think so. He was probably going to, but when Abbé Saunière found the two copies of the report in the church at Rennes-le-Château, so Boudet had one of his own, his quest for the Grail was no longer needed. Just one copy in his possession was enough to calm his disturbed conscience...”

Tom looked at the notebook for an instant, then added, as if speaking to himself:

“Boudet must have given Saunière this notebook to strengthen the links between them a little more. The notebook would anyhow no longer have had any value in Boudet’s eyes, since he was already in possession of the Grail, so he never thought of getting it back. And Saunière hid it with his Grail under the stone.”

As if he was in another world, his eyes strayed to the three featureless lanes of the freeway.

“Now I know where the nearest Grail is and I’m going to head there and retrieve it...”

He turned toward Camilla.

“You’re free to help me or not in this search, as you wish... Will you help me?”

“I will,” the young woman answered without her green eyes ceasing for even a moment to scan the road.

Tom grinned.

“I knew you’d accept. Generally, people accept certain sacrifices easily if they think they’re free to say yes or no, if they think they’re in control of the situation and able to choose. If I’d told you, ‘You must help me, you have no choice’, I’d have been hustling your conscience and you’d certainly have refused. Mostly, people don’t realize they’re being manipulated by people who know how our brain works.”

“You seem to be an expert on human psychology,” Camilla said. “Are you playing tricks on me? I mean, are you working on my subconscious to make my conscience want to help you?”

Tom’s face turned grim.

“You heard the explanation just a moment ago... You never reveal this psychological secret if you really want to manipulate someone... I think of myself as a magician, a magician of the subconscious, and a magician never gives away his tricks to the general public, only to his assistant. And now you’re my assistant in the search for the Grail, aren’t you?”

Camilla smiled.

“We’re heading for Paris? A Pontius Pilate Report is hidden there, is that it?”

“Yes, that’s right. An authentic Grail is hidden in Paris. In a public monument, to be precise.”

“A monument?”

“Yes. Wait a moment, I’ll show you...”

Tom took his cell phone and in the search box of the web page, he keyed in the address of a free encyclopedia. Then he typed in the name of the monument. An article with a photo was displayed and Tom clicked on the picture to enlarge it.

“There you are,” he said, handing her his phone. “That’s where the Grail is.”

Camilla looked at the screen. When she saw the photo, she could not help letting out a short cry of surprise.

*
* *

Cardinal Fustiger furiously clenched his fist and banged it down on the table.

The laptop computer that had triggered his anger jumped a fraction of an inch into the air. Fustiger grabbed it and slammed the screen shut. He got up out of his comfortable beige leather armchair and left his office, tucking the computer under his skinny arm.

Wearing a blood-red cassock, the churchman strode rapidly along. His tall and scrawny figure swam in this priestly garb. His bony, craggy face was almost fully taken up by two immense eyes, broad and dark, with scattered golden reflections. His tiny nose and hollow cheeks accentuated the thickness of his heavy eyebrows, which in fact joined to form a single brow, so that his low forehead bore the line tradition associates with jealousy. Although he was over fifty, he still had a fine crop of hair, so black that it highlighted the paleness of his skin. Fustiger permitted himself the luxury of tinting his eyebrows and hair to stay looking younger and a good many bishops wrongly believed he wore a toupee.

The cardinal’s shoes clattered on the tiled floor of the Vatican City as he headed for the Pope’s office. In the corridor leading to its door, the two Swiss guards in their red, blue and orange striped uniforms stood aside to let the cardinal pass.

Fustiger knocked lightly three times and opened the door without waiting for an answer.

Sitting behind his desk, the Pope smiled at his visitor.

“Do come in,” he said in a hoarse voice, taking his eyes off the large wooden crucifix fixed to the wall.

His small gray eyes lighted up in his round face. The whiteness of his thinning hair and his skin toned in perfectly with his white cassock. The toll exacted by seventy years of life had left few wrinkles on his skin, so his little face still seemed ageless. His small stature and slight plumpness made him an ideal example of the image that the faithful expected in the Holy Father.

Fustiger put his computer down on the desk and opened its lid.

“What’s this?” the Pope asked as he saw the clock displayed on its screen.

“A countdown,” Fustiger grunted in his acid voice. “It’s just started. And you must have the same thing on your computer. The countdown is programmed for six days, six hours and six minutes. And I’ll spare you the seconds...”

The Pope stared at the clock.

“666, the Devil’s number... What does it mean?”

“What does it mean? That’s easy: it’s an ultimatum. The Sons of Abraham are giving you six days to declare your official support for the Israeli government. Unwavering support for their intention to enlarge their frontiers and take over certain regions. As guarantor of the Bible and Old Testament, you are seen by the Sons of Abraham as the official representative of God and so of the Promised Land for the Jewish people. So, they want you to take a stand in their favor, backed by Papal infallibility...”

“Never!” the Pope interrupted. “Do you understand? I shall never yield to such blackmail. If my predecessors were afraid of these accursed Sons of Abraham in the past and gave in to their demands, count on it that I personally am not in the slightest afraid of that wretched organization...”

“Before taking a rash decision, do please look at what they’re threatening...”

The cardinal leaned over and typed on the computer keyboard.

“They’ve made a bomb and look where it’s intended to explode...”

The Pope frowned as he read the screen. He felt as if his heart had stopped beating.

“That would be the end of the world,” he murmured. “The end of the world...”

The cardinal closed the apocalyptic display and went back to the countdown.

Horried, the Pope watched the seconds ticking away like drops of blood dripping from a dying man bleeding to death.

A dying man called humankind.

*
* *

Camilla looked at her watch.

Four thirty.

She had been waiting for more than an hour, sitting in her car parked on a service road off the Avenue Foch. Just before getting into a taxi, Tom had asked her to wait for him there.

In the young woman's head, a million questions swarmed. What terrible secret about the life of Jesus Christ could be contained in Pontius Pilate's report? She had in vain gone over and over this question from every angle, but no answer had come to calm her intrigued mind.

Tom had told her of a worldwide plot to hide this secret. Camilla knew Tom was not paranoid and was fully sane. But Tom had also said that if the secret was revealed, an apocalypse would sweep away the Christian religion in an instant.

Was Thomas Anderson the Antichrist?

In her rear-view mirror, a flashing orange light caught Camilla's green eye. A long white van in the Paris City livery, with a platform at the end of an articulated elevating arm pulled up right alongside the Mercedes sports coupé and its horn sounded three times briefly.

Camilla pressed the button to wind down her window. She was on the point of asking the driver if her car was in the way and had to be moved, but stopped short. The driver was none other than Tom, with a white helmet pulled low over his forehead. Tom smiled at her through the windscreen and signed to her to come and join him.

"Just slip on this white overall," Tom told her when she had got into the van.

The vehicle started off in the direction of the Place Charles-de-Gaulle where the Arc de Triomphe stood.

"How did you manage to hire a council vehicle?" she asked as she struggled into the overall.

"It's a long story..." Tom said in a mysterious tone.

Camilla realized she would get no further explanation.

Tom made his way out into the huge traffic circle where Parisian drivers were anarchically striving to take priority over each other to the accompaniment of a very French concert of horns. Accelerating fiercely, the van pushed its way through and headed down the most famous avenue in the capital of France: the Champs-Élysées.

Camilla paid little attention to the sumptuous store-fronts of the luxury boutiques. Less than a mile and a half away, at the end of the vast avenue, the obelisk of the Place de la Concorde stood against the pale sky.

According to Boudet's notebook, the Grail was hidden in the very heart of the obelisk.

"Just imagine, this hidden copy might have been found accidentally," Tom said.

"How do you mean?"

"When Paris was liberated in 1944, there was fighting between Allied and Nazi tanks. A shell fired by a German Panzer missed the obelisk by just two yards. I can just imagine the scene if the shell had smashed the obelisk open and the Parisians had discovered the Pontius Pilate Report. Hitler wanted the City of Paris reduced to ashes, but he was let down by his commander of 'Groß Paris', who wasn't prepared to burn down the most beautiful city in the world. Paradoxically, it could have been not German soldiers but the Parisians themselves who burned it if the contents of the report had become known to them. A revolutionary gale would have roared out and religious buildings would have gone up in flames..."

Tom chuckled and softly sang, to the tune *La Cucaracha*, a corny old song broadcast by the B.B.C. when France had been occupied by the Nazis.

"Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris loves the Krauts..."

Once again, Camilla wondered what the Grail could hold. What secret about Jesus could lead to revolution and anarchy? Could the Church and the top leaders in its hierarchy really be lying to the faithful of the whole world to hide this secret? Camilla drove this idea out of her head and concentrated on the distant obelisk. At last she would soon know all the ins and outs of the whole affair.

Five minutes later, the van reached the Place de la Concorde. It drew up alongside the pavement next to the Egyptian monument.

Some seventy feet high, but very slender, the giant block of granite proudly bore the hieroglyphs that showed it was the oldest monument in all Paris. Its sharply pointed bronze pyramidion, covered in gold leaf, shone in the sunlight.

Tom told Camilla to wait for him in the van, got out and climbed onto the platform mounted on the articulated arm. It rose to the top of the obelisk. Watched by intrigued tourists, Tom took a small piece of electronic equipment out of his pocket. Holding it in one hand to scan the stone, Tom brought the platform slowly down to the base of the obelisk.

Once his task was done, Tom restored the platform to its docking position and hopped out onto the pavement. He slid back behind the van's steering wheel.

"So?" Camilla enquired.

"It's empty," Tom cursed, doffing his white helmet.

He slipped a hand into his overall pocket and took out Boudet's notebook.

"Okay, let's go back to the starting line... Boudet writes that he bought the secret diary of John-François Champollion. According to the diary, when he was in Egypt around, Champollion discovered the hidden documents of an Egyptian scribe. The scribe said that Pontius Pilate had made him write out his famous report. Pilate stopped off in Cairo on his way back to Rome and there's where he drew up his report for the Emperor Tiberius. The scribe personally took down the report in Latin to the dictation of Pilate. Pilate paid him very well for his work and his silence but didn't realize that the Egyptian scribe was really a Jew and what's more a spy for the Temple in Jerusalem."

Tom scratched his head.

"So far, so good. To sum up, we know Pilate didn't write out his report in his own hand, he dictated it to a scribe, a scribe who was in fact a Jewish spy, and this spy made a copy of the report which he kept and a second copy that he sent to the chief Jewish authorities of the Temple in Jerusalem. Okay. Champollion discovered the private diary of the scribe cum spy and his copy of the report which was a faithful clone of the original. Champollion decided to hide this clone in the obelisk from Luxor and put all this down in his secret diary, a secret diary which Abbé Boudet bought and Boudet in turn recorded this secret in his own notebook..."

Tom tapped the notebook with one finger.

"Boudet didn't write down everything that was in Champollion's diary. Boudet just made a brief summary of it. And unfortunately we don't have Champollion's diary. Boudet must have destroyed it along with his Grail before he died. But luckily we do have this notebook and it's set down clearly in black and white that the Grail is in the obelisk from Luxor.

He sighed.

"But the obelisk is empty..."

“Maybe Champollion fished it out years later and hid it somewhere else,” Camilla suggested.

“No, impossible. Champollion died young at only 41, just after getting back from Egypt and before the obelisk was brought to France.”

“Somebody else might have found it,” Camilla insisted.

“No. My scanner’s quite clear: there’s no hollow inside the stone.”

Tom stared at the obelisk through the windscreen.

“According to Boudet, Champollion hid the Grail in it to get it back to France discreetly. I’d always wondered how someone who loved Egypt like Champollion could have committed the crime of chopping the top off such a monument to give it as a gift to a France ruled by a royal family that he hated. It’s as if a speleologist tore off a stalagmite to use it as a walking stick. It’s just not believable. But now I know the reason that led Champollion to such an act of vandalism. And at that, he was clever enough to take the top off the smaller and more damaged of the two obelisks in the Luxor Temple...”

Looking upset, Tom left his sentence hanging in mid-air. The word “two” had just sent a painful flash of realization into his mind.

7

Egypt 1829. The Great Pyramid of Cheops

The heat was stifling, like the waiting room for Hell.

Despite the burning sun, John-François Champollion stood at the foot of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. He did not mind the furnace-hot air and glaring light. In the two years he had spent in Egypt, he had become fully acclimatized to the environment. Wearing traditional Arab robes, he could be taken for a native, so good were his gestures and command of the local language.

Champollion scrutinized the desert that stretched to the horizon, the shining, desolate sand that lay all around.

It was perhaps at this very spot that Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte had claimed this land for France. It was to France, his homeland, that Champollion was soon to return: the voyage back was getting closer and he would be taking ship in the near future.

Champollion felt dizzy and he clutched at a large block of stone so as not to fall.

His state of health was worrying, but he did not care about that. It was true that the shock of Pontius Pilate's revelations had blown his mind. He had felt as if his brain was being torn apart when he had learned the secret of Christ.

With some degree of very human vanity, he had played with the fire of truth, unaware of the devastating and apocalyptic power of forgotten secrets.

However, what could he do against himself? It was his right as a scholar to question everything. The study of ancient history was a search for truth, whether the truth was pleasant or unpleasant. Besides, it was in his very nature to want to penetrate hidden mysteries.

By the age of five he had already solved his first mystery: reading, which he had taught himself from a prayer-book. His incredible intelligence had made him a brilliant linguist: by nine he could speak Latin fluently, by thirteen Hebrew, by fourteen Arabic and by seventeen Coptic, the language derived from ancient Egyptian.

Egypt had always entranced Champollion.

At nine, reading the dispatches from Egypt relating the Emperor Napoleon's exploits in the land of the Pharaohs, he had been enthralled by the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. This stone had an identical text, engraved in three different scripts: Greek, Hieroglyphic and Demotic, the third being a later, simplified version of hieroglyphs. Thanks to the stone, scholars had felt certain they would quickly be able to decipher hieroglyphs, whose secret had been lost for many centuries.

However, none of those who had attempted the task had managed to decode them.

As a child, Champollion had been fascinated by the origins of civilization. He had enjoyed finding the age of the world by referring to the Bible. He had counted and added up the ages of all the ancestors from Noah down to Adam: the world created by God dated from less than five thousand years ago.

However, was that certain?

A search for the real age of the world was a motivation from far within him. As time went by, Champollion had come to believe that hieroglyphs held the answer to this enigma. The oldest language of the oldest nation must necessarily reveal the secret.

Hence, he set about deciphering the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone.

After many years of research, his genius eventually clarified the mystery of that lost language, restoring to it its sounds, sense and life of the past. His work garnered him great prestige and, as he had become the number one on the subject, he was asked to date the fresco of a ceiling taken from a temple at Dendera that had been brought back to Paris. The fresco showed the sky, in which the twelve signs of the zodiac could be recognized. The zodiac was a matter of fierce debate, because some said it was more than 15,000 years old.

If that was really so, it put in doubt the Bible's version of the history of the world.

In the eyes of the Church, the Bible counted as a historical document. Scholars had referred to it to determine the date of the Flood: it dated to less than 2,400 before Christ. All prior civilizations had disappeared from

the face of the Earth at that point and any proof running counter to this claim would have shaken the Church's authority.

Champollion showed that the zodiac dated from the Greco-Roman period and was in no way earlier than the Flood. On the strength of his growing reputation, he was appointed Curator of the Louvre Museum, given the task of setting up an Egyptology Department. Moreover, his lifelong dream came true, as he obtained from the new King of France the funds he needed to organize an expedition to Egypt.

The Church became alarmed at this expedition, accusing Champollion of wanting to attack the Christian faith, passages in the Bible and the facts in them. He defended himself by stating he sought only the truth. Nonetheless, this truth was not the Church's truth and Champollion had to promise one concession to the King: if he discovered in Egypt anything at all that might contradict the teachings of the Church, he would not publish it.

He gave his word.

On this condition he was allowed to travel to the land of the Pharaohs. There, reading hieroglyphs, he found out that Egyptian civilization had been solidly established for millennia, long before the Flood, and had not been affected at all by any such apocalyptic inundation. This was a truth that went completely against the Bible's account. It was a proof of the historical inaccuracy of the Bible, the word of God in which Christians believed. An explosive discovery that Champollion noted down in his personal travel diary, thinking he had seen the worst.

Nevertheless, he was wrong.

The finding of Pilate's manuscript was a tremendous body blow. His entire being was affected by Christ's secret and his Christian faith was totally destroyed.

For the moment, he decided to keep this revelation secret. He did not want the Church and its spies to suspect anything. He was clever enough to stay the same as always, to play a conciliatory role, focusing his writings and personal correspondence on Egypt and its civilization, even making the critical comments he was expected to make.

That way, he could act freely.

He recorded his discovery in a small secret notebook and worked out a plan to take Pilate's manuscript home with him. It was as good as certain that his personal belongings and everything he acquired in Egypt would be thoroughly searched on his return: the Church had its eye on him and would take care that nothing compromising could come to cast doubt on the Bible.

He could trust nobody but himself to get the manuscript to a safe haven.

Hence, the only alternative he could find was to hide it in a place nobody would suspect. He did all he could to get the Viceroy of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, to offer France and her King the two obelisks from the Temple of Luxor. Thanks to his negotiations, Champollion obtained this valuable gift. At that point, he hid Pilate's manuscript in the left-hand obelisk. Night after night, he had carefully hollowed out the pink granite inside a rectangular hieroglyph so he could slip the manuscript into the space he had made. When he closed up the cavity with a piece of granite of precisely the same size, the hiding place became invisible and impenetrable; no eye or finger could uncover or unseal Champollion's painstaking work.

Then he had only to wait for the two obelisks, now the property of France, to be sent back to Paris. It had been agreed that the first obelisk would be erected in a square in the capital and the second, containing the manuscript, would be displayed at the Louvre.

In his initial planning, he had intended to send his precious charm in the first. However, moving these mammoth items weighing over two hundred tons each was a colossal task and involved dangers. Champollion feared that the very first attempt would end in failure; he could not risk the granite breaking and revealing its secret contents. It was better for the transport team to gain experience and get their hand in on the empty obelisk, so that in the case of a catastrophe, learning from any such disastrous experience, they would not make the same mistake again.

For this practical reason, the obelisk holding the manuscript was to go second. Champollion had no worries about its fate: France would never leave so valuable a monument in Egypt. She would do whatever it cost to get it to the Louvre.

He who had been up in arms against the mutilation of the Temple of Dendera and its zodiac was about to commit an equally horrendous crime by chopping down these two granite marvels. Nonetheless, it was a necessity. He had no choice.

Champollion sighed.

His gaze fell on the Great Pyramid rising into the clear blue sky.

As the Emperor Napoleon had said, from the top of these monuments forty centuries stared down at him and Champollion felt extremely weak against the forces of adversity and time. Once again vertigo overcame him and he had to clutch a block of stone for support. His face with its thick black beard was contorted with pain.

A burning wind began to blow, raising the sand in a dust devil that flashed with a thousand flames.

Getting his breath back, Champollion wiped his forehead and raised his head.

Ever since he had found Pilate's manuscript, a desolate wind had been blowing in the depths of his heart. He knew there would never be a cure for this evil.

As an irony of fate, in this land of the Pharaohs, which he had so much longed to see, his destiny was not to restore to life Egyptian civilization: in truth it had been to discover the tool that would destroy his own civilization.

Pilate's manuscript could sweep Christian civilization into nothingness in an instant as the long centuries had done to Egypt's. Nonetheless, Champollion had given his word to the King of France and he would keep his promise not to publish anything that might go against the teachings of the Church.

What did the future hold for him now?

For the moment, Champollion did not know.

His eyes looked toward the Great Pyramid. Its growing shadow threw onto the golden sand a dark shape like a threatening arrowhead pointing to an uncertain horizon.

8

Temptation

For day after day, Jesus had sat in the cave. Totally motionless, he was as inert as a stone statue. Only his eyelids betrayed the presence of a prodigiously intense mental activity; from time to time, tiny twitches affected these protectors of the irises.

Osiris...

In Egypt, in the temple of the god of death and rebirth, under the control of an Initiate Grand Master, Jesus followed his course of education. In his learning work, Jesus was left to himself. His Master gave him no help and Jesus was often astonished at his coldness and indifference. The Master expected absolute obedience from him but did not reveal anything beyond a given limit to him. Jesus then realized that he would not possess the truth unless it became an integral part of his inner self, a spontaneous act of his soul. Study and meditation continued.

He fully tamed his senses so as to develop his mind. No day went by without his meditating on the destiny of humanity or his wondering about himself.

He had always been struck by the grandeur of the thinking of Moses, who had tried to bring about the religious unity of nations by creating the cult of the One God and by enshrining this idea in a nation. He was surprised to learn the truth about him. More, he was astounded by it, having been brought up in the Jewish religion. He promised never to divulge this secret, for chaos would spring from this revelation. However, would the Jews believe the truth? He doubted it. He grasped what an abyss separated official Jewish doctrine from the ancient wisdom of the Initiates, the true mother of religion, but always persecuted by Satan, that is, by the spirit of evil, of selfishness, hatred and denial, in unison with absolute political power and the impostures of the priests.

In this way months and years passed.

Each morning, the Master seemed to read every single one of his disciple's thoughts, penetrating right to the innermost core of his ethereal being. Then the day came when he realized that Jesus was finally ready to receive the supreme initiation. After one last ceremony in the temple at Thebes, his head was shaved. Accompanied by the Initiate Masters, he embarked on a boat to travel down the Nile toward a destination he did not know.

The Great Pyramid...

The power of the pyramid was such that people said that food would dry up there without rotting and that sword blades would grow sharp by themselves in it. Jesus was told that Pythagoras himself had been initiated there long before him. At last he was to learn the final secret of the Initiates. At dusk, carrying torches, the priests of Osiris conducted him into the pyramid.

In the depths of the Pharaonic structure, they reached a crypt whose low ceiling was supported by four pillars set on sphinxes. In one corner there was an open marble sarcophagus. Jesus was laid in it after being given a mysterious mixed potion to drink. Leaving just a tiny naphtha lamp, the procession of the Initiates left the crypt. Jesus' Master remained a moment longer.

"No man escapes death, but this night you will experience resurrection," said he enigmatically. "You will pass through the gateway of the next world and find the light..."

He rested his hand on his disciple's body as a last blessing, then departed in silence. For a few more minutes the tiny lamp placed on the floor shed a dim light on the sphinxes in the crypt, then it went out and darkness reigned supreme. From nowhere, funeral dirges swelled and echoed softly in the tomb. An icy cold came over Jesus, paralyzing his every limb. Expiring, unable to make the slightest movement, he went gradually through the painful sensations of death and sank into lethargy. His life passed before him as a succession of images, like something unreal and his earthly consciousness became more and more vague and diffuse. He felt his body dissolving. He separated himself from it to rise above himself and went into ecstasy. A distant shining point appeared, almost imperceptible against the pitch black darkness. It came closer, grew, turned into a brilliant star as intense and immense as the sun. Jesus was drawn into its incandescent heart.

Then he met *it*.

Inside the pyramid, the occult symbol representing ascending convergence toward the supreme source of Enlightenment, Jesus attained the last stage of truth.

The Heavenly Father.

Man is a mortal God. God is an immortal man.

How true this ancient wisdom was! In the heavens, this was revealed to him.

How long he stayed in this sublime state in contact with the Sacred, Jesus never knew. From that moment of pure ecstasy and symbiosis with the world of the divine, where every secrets of humanity had been unveiled to him, he retained measureless spiritual strength.

His resurrection was a horrendous wrench. He felt himself flung back into his body as if into a corpse. He returned to the state of conscious lethargy and a terrible weight burdened his mind. He awoke. Standing before him was his Master.

“You have come back to life,” said he. “The light of Osiris raised the veil from the Mysteries. From this day forth you are an Initiate...”

Years passed.

Jesus had become an Initiate Grand Master, teaching the cult to novices worthy of learning the secret of the Heavenly Father and protecting them from the Evil One. His life followed the rhythm of the sacred rites and initiations.

A day came when, from young foreign novices arriving from Israel, Jesus heard tell of the religious community of Qumran, lying not far from Jerusalem.

Its members called themselves the Essenes.

While this community seemed to have been in existence for a very long time, it had not originated with Initiates, or at least not those known or recognized by the temple of Osiris. Nonetheless, there were reports of strange similarities in certain rituals. Furthermore, the points in common between the doctrines of the Initiates and of the Essenes were striking: love of others put forward as the foremost duty, prohibition of swearing an oath to testify the truth, hatred of lying, humility...

Bolstered by their study of nature, these religious folk at Qumran practiced medicine. They knew the properties and numberless effects of plants and minerals on the human organism and saw this knowledge as belonging to the secret domains of the higher degrees in their Order. They made it their duty to ensure this practice served to relieve the physical or mental anguish of their fellow humans. However, all of this seemed to be just a facade, because, according to several novices of Jewish origin who had stayed with them for some time before leaving, the Essenes lacked even the slightest idea of forgiveness.

This final detail intrigued Jesus mightily.

If the community had crossed the decisive threshold into the secret of the divine, it had to have discovered the Heavenly Father. Then how, as it must be acquainted with the Law of Causalities, could it take so radical a stance as not to preach forgiveness? There was an obvious inconsistency there, some impenetrable mystery.

An Essene mystery.

Their doctrines, their rites similar to those of the temple of Osiris, were they just an outcome of random chance? Were they an obvious plagiarism? In that case, how had they learned the customs of the Initiates? Were they also familiar with the Heavenly Father?

A doubt lingered and it was essential to clarify it. Jesus came from the Essene area and was thus invited by his peers to go there with the mission of infiltrating the religious community of Qumran.

Infiltration...

Passing himself off as a Jew in search of spirituality, he entered the Essene community on the shores of the Dead Sea by becoming a novice. For a year he strove to lead a novice's life in accordance with the extremely strict rules. The slightest misbehavior was punished; if anybody made a gesture during a meeting or a prayer session, the culprit was condemned to ten days of exclusion and to a month if it was a case of laughing. A lie or a burst of anger not kept under control, were subject to six months of such banishment.

The food was essentially bread with a few wild roots and fruits. Consumption of meat was forbidden.

As Jesus saw it, this sectarian rigor went against the Law of Equilibrium. If the bow of conscience was overdrawn by rigid obligations, in the end the bowstring of wisdom was eventually broken and the end result was the intransigence of ignorance.

Nonetheless, the Essenes seemed from other angles to follow kindly doctrines.

The most striking was the holding in common and sharing of the goods of the group in accordance with the needs of each member. Furthermore, the Essenes had given themselves the name of doctor, of physician, because their only avowed ministration to the public was that of curing physical and mental diseases.

This ambiguity was worrying and intrigued him, giving him all the more motive to penetrate this enigma.

At the end of his first year in the community, having proved his temperance, Jesus was admitted to ritual ablutions that consisted of bathing in cold water while wearing white robes. He had to swear a terrible oath

not to betray any of the secrets he was about to learn. Only then was he allowed to take part in the shared meal that was held with great solemnity and constituted the innermost cult of the Essenes. These brotherly banquets began and ended with prayers.

Jesus saw that there were worrying similarities with the practices of the Initiated, but he had not been able to get to the bottom of the mystery.

In a year, he had learned but little. The Essenes had a naïve view of the world: on one side stood evil, darkness and sin, on the other good and light. In a certain way, their requirement for worldly purity was such that they felt they were already in heaven in their earthly life, living among angels. Jesus understood one thing very clearly: the Essenes were all Jews venerating the holy writings of Moses. Indeed, it was this that had puzzled him most during the first month after his arrival: their sectarian attitude to identity and religion. Unlike the temple of Osiris, which granted the supreme teaching to any man worthy of receiving it, whatever his ethnic or religious origin, the community of Qumran welcomed only professed Jews into its ranks.

Indoctrinated like all children in Israel from his earliest youth, Jesus had a perfect knowledge of Jewish religious teachings and had been able to gain admission among the Essenes without their having the slightest suspicion of him.

These religious folk paid very special attention to one of the teachings in the Jewish scriptures: the future coming of the Messiah.

Of the Christ.

A vague, nagging expectation was affecting the people. In the depths of their distress, crushed by the Roman occupation, Israel was longing for a savior. For centuries, legends had passed on the dream of a divine child that was to be born in Bethlehem. The synagogues spoke of this in mysterious terms, astrologers calculated when this would occur and sibyls in their ravings had announced the fall of the pagan gods. The Earth was awaiting this spiritual ruler, who would be understood by great and small, by meek and rebellious, by rich and by poor.

This divine child would be of the house and lineage of King David, for from this ancestry a future king was to be born. The old prophets and the sacred texts were all categorical on this point: they announced the forthcoming arrival of a king, son of David, the Liberator sent by God to re-establish the sovereignty and independence of the Kingdom of Israel, to guide its people and free them from the foreign yoke. This king would be the Messiah, anointed with the divine unction, the Anointed of the Lord God.

The Essenes were obsessed with this Messiah, focusing their cult and hopes on the arrival of this Christ prophesied in the holy Jewish scriptures.

Besides the caves where they stored a range of books, the Essenes had a large library. In the night, unbeknownst to all, Jesus cast an attentive eye over the scrolls and manuscripts on its many shelves. He was astonished to find there a complete rag-bag of assorted books. He finally realized that these texts were present only to conceal by their mass the true scriptures of the Essenes. They must camouflage their knowledge with irrelevant books, using an elaborate code to distinguish true from false. Among this huge number of texts, Jesus could thus not hope to penetrate the secrecy that ruled in Qumran.

However, from a text he read by chance he understood the reason for the similarities between Essenes and Initiates. In another register, he was surprised to find his own name recorded in a Roman census of Bethlehem: he was undeniably the Jesus born in that town, though not familiar with it, for he was indeed the son of Joseph of Nazareth, descendant of King David and having as mother Mary of Jericho.

Apparently, the religious community of Qumran opened the final gates to its esoteric doctrine only to those with some claim to the title of Christ. Realizing he had no other choice if he was to break quickly into the Essene mystery, Jesus decided to go over to more aggressive tactics.

He did not want to mark time for year after year climbing slowly through the various ranks of initiation so as eventually to learn the finer details of the story. Besides, he had an indefinable sense of impending danger. The long frugal months spent within the community had strengthened his idea that he was facing a community of non-Initiated with some occult and evil aim. Even if appearances might lead the opposite to be believed, and attract a good number of the faithful in search of the absolute.

He had hesitated for a long time before starting along the path he was now about to take, realizing that that tortuously winding trail was perhaps of no return or might bring unforeseen consequences. Anyhow, he finally admitted to himself that the situation demanded it. For many nights he had gazed on the shores of the Dead Sea and prayed to the Heavenly Father. He had seen in dreams the images of another world, another time. A host of souls were threatened if he did nothing. Hence, despite his fears, he realized he had to set out on the dark path of Causalities.

During a meal with the other disciples, he solemnly stood up and, raising the palms of his hands toward the ceiling, he announced that a number of signs were telling him that he was perhaps the Messiah they were all awaiting. He humbly added that he had hesitated for a long while

before revealing this secret which weighed down his heart, having had a lengthy inner spiritual journey until he had had to bow before the evidence.

Before the Head of the Order, a man whose age was one hundred, he stated that he had been born in Bethlehem the year when a magnificent star had been seen in the sky.

They were all astonished and struck by this affirmation. They checked the records for the year in question, which did indeed mention the appearance of a star of exceptional brilliance. They also obtained by indirect methods a further proof of what Jesus claimed. The Temple in Jerusalem had registered the birth of this son of Joseph, because the lineage of the descendants of David was scrupulously checked and recorded by the religious authorities. They now saw from a fresh angle this charming thirty-year-old novice, tall in stature and with sky-blue eyes.

An angle simultaneously benevolent and self-interested.

As Jesus had assumed, the revelation of his true origin as a son of Joseph and descendant of David led his novitiate to proceed by leaps and bounds through the decisive stages. In next to no time he was admitted to the highest degree in the Essene hierarchy, a mere month sufficing for each of the years of religious obligations that he should have completed.

Finally the day came when Jesus was able to lift the veil from the Essene mystery.

Or rather the night.

On an evening memorable for the Essene Order and its new adept, Jesus received in greatest secrecy superior initiation into the fourth degree, awarded only in the special case of a prophetic mission, desired by the brother and confirmed by the elders. They had gathered in a cave dug into the mountain like a great hall, furnished with an altar and stone benches. The head of the Order was there with several elders. The old man's small white beard did not fully hide his boney face with its wan, unhealthy color that recalled a corpse's. He was wearing a tall, conical, red turban shaped like a pyramid that hid his bald head, but his cold, doleful eyes were nonetheless disquietingly vigorous, lighted by an inner flame suggestive of madness.

Two Essene prophetesses had also been admitted to the mysterious ceremony. Carrying torches and palm-leaves, they hailed the entrance of Jesus, who was dressed in white linen as befit a future king.

The Head of the Order presented to him a gold chalice, symbol of the supreme initiation, which held the wine of the vineyard of the Lord, the symbol of divine inspiration.

“Moses drank from this before you,” said the centenarian. “Abraham received this same initiation. We never offer this cup to a man in whom we have not seen with certainty the signs of a prophetic mission. Could you be the Messiah we all await for the salvation of Israel?”

Jesus remained silent. The elderly man seemed to appreciate this muteness.

That night, Jesus learned all the secrets of the Essenes. The revelations from the head of the Order chilled him to the core; he felt as if his blood had frozen in his veins. So he had begun to pray.

For the salvation of humankind.

Heavenly Father, give me the strength to overcome this trial...

For a long time, an apocalyptic vision haunted his mind.

In those days, a prophet by the name of John, known as the Baptist, was preaching on the banks of the Jordan, north of Qumran. Driven into the desert by his fierce piety, he had led the hardest of lives there, the most austere, amidst prayers and fasting. Covering his naked skin, burned by the sun, he wore a robe plaited from camel hair that chafed his flesh, as a sign of the penance he wished to impose upon himself and upon the Hebrews. He felt the distress of Israel deeply and expected deliverance in this hostile desert. With unshakeable firmness, scorning pain, he underwent without blinking every one of the adversities that nature made him endure.

The Baptist announced to all the imminent coming of the Messiah.

Borrowing from the Essenes their custom of ritual ablutions and adapting it to suit him, he had devised baptism with water from the Jordan as a visible symbol, a public fulfillment of the inner purification that he demanded. This new ceremony, his fiery preaching before huge crowds out in the desert, facing the holy waters of the Jordan, between the harsh mountains of Judea and Perea, seized imaginations and attracted multitudes.

The ceremony gave people what they did not find in the Temple: a vague and vast hope. They came from every corner of the Promised Land and even from farther afield to listen to the man of the desert who was announcing the Messiah. The populace, attracted by the promise of a glorious future, stayed there, camping out for weeks on end so as to hear that voice every day, unwilling to leave, impatiently awaiting the coming of that Christ.

A few weeks after initiation by the Essenes, Jesus also came to the Jordan desert, accompanied by a handful of disciples who now followed him around devotedly. The Head of the Order had advised him to see the Baptist, to listen to him preaching to the crowds, to submit to his public baptism and to weigh up the popular devotion that the prophet inspired.

“Then you will be able to tell us whether you are the Messiah whom we are all awaiting so enthusiastically,” the centenarian had added.

Jesus saw the Baptist, rough and ascetic, hairy of body and with a visionary’s head topped with a mane like a lion’s, standing in a wooden pulpit, under a rustic awning made of branches and goatskins. Around him, among the sparse bushes of the desert, was a vast horde, a tented city: travelers emerging from who knew where, deserters, Samaritans, Levites from Jerusalem, shepherds with their flocks of sheep and even Arabs who had halted there with their camels, tents and caravans, brought there by ‘the voice crying in the wilderness’. That thunderous voice was rolling out over the multitudes.

“Repent,” growled the prophet, “for the Kingdom of God on Earth is at hand.”

John tongue-lashed the priests of the Temple, calling them a generation of vipers. For them, he added, the ax was now laid to the root of the trees.

Then he spoke of the Messiah who would soon come.

“I indeed baptize you with water, but one mightier than I shall come, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose. He shall baptize you with fire...”

Some did not really seem to understand what that meant, not grasping the full extent of the sense. Others, however, were preparing themselves with malicious joy.

... he shall baptize you with fire... the fire of Gehenna...

“His winnowing fan is in his hand and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor,” added John. “He will gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable. Prepare the way of the Liberator, make his paths straight...”

For a long while, he exhorted the crowd with his fiery preaching.

Toward sunset, Jesus saw these masses of people pressing down to an inlet in the banks of the Jordan, all bending their heads, as if in token of allegiance, under the water that the Baptist poured over them.

Jesus approached.

John did not recognize him immediately, but saw he was an Essene by his linen robe. He watched him, lost in the crowd, going down into the water up to his waist and bending humbly to receive the poured liquid. When Jesus straightened up, the formidable stare of the preacher met the gaze of the Galilean. Then, understanding who this disciple truly was, the man from the desert shuddered at the steady glance of those blue eyes of such marvelous mildness. After a moment’s silence, he asked, as if regretting it:

“Could you be he whom we all await?”

His voice was strong and solemn, as resounding as thunder. Jesus saw in his eyes a gleam which at first seemed hard to define.

It was like a somewhat demented flame.

However, it was not madness reflected there. No more was it skepticism. Jesus read it as a touch of jealousy. Nonetheless, there was something else as well. Something like arrogance or self-satisfaction. The superior attitude of somebody who believes they have an advantage over somebody else. Jesus then understood.

He knows.

Letting none of this revelation become apparent, he bowed down his head in thought and crossed his arms over his chest. John knew that silence was the rule for Essene novices. Yet Jesus was no longer a novice and he took this muteness for a kind of bravado. The two men faced each other once again.

John the Baptist, my cousin...

Fantastic legends were going the rounds about John's life. His mother, Elizabeth, was Joseph's sister. She had given birth to a boy when she was well into her fifties. Everybody called her 'barren', such sterility being a sign of a divine curse. The miracle of nature had given rise to a craze about this birth, with people speaking of an angel that had come and filled the mother's belly with a divine emanation. Ever since, John had always stirred up a mystical infatuation about himself. As one of them lived in Galilee, the other in Judea, Jesus had only seldom met his cousin during his childhood. The difference of several years in their age had made Jesus the respectful junior of the older lad with a gaze like a wild animal's.

Standing waist deep in the river's water, John, now the Baptist, was staring at his junior whose image was engraved in his memory, pretending before the crowd not to know him. However, Jesus knew what he was really thinking.

Elizabeth has let him in on the secret.

After Joseph's death, Mary, Jesus' mother, had confided in a relative and this relative was, as a matter of fact, Elizabeth, John's mother. Mary had thought she could trust her, that she would keep the secret forever. At the time of their escape to Egypt, Elizabeth had already helped the fleeing couple by taking care of Joseph's children. Furthermore, the evening when Jesus had heard what he should never have heard, Elizabeth had assuaged Mary's conscience by sharing her secret. Nonetheless, this confided knowledge had been too heavy for John's mother to bear and she must in her turn have confided in her son in a careless moment.

He knows my true nature...

However, John had told nobody, sealing this confession forever in his innermost self. Jesus was well aware why.

Before the hushed crowd that was devoutly watching the scene taking place before them, instinctively realizing that they were present at a unique moment, the Baptist grinned slightly as his feline eyes stared into the blue eyes of Jesus.

And he knows that I know that he knows.

“Could you be the Messiah?” asked John once again, breaking the silence.

He crossed his arms over his chest, his right hand on his heart, his left touching his right nipple in the traditional greeting gesture of the Essenes. Jesus did the same then bowed down, requesting baptism from John.

John feigned unwillingness, saying:

“It is I who have need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!”

Jesus did not raise his head. He detected a simultaneous touch of sarcasm and of jealousy in his cousin’s comments.

He did not allow himself to be cowed, though.

“Let it be so now,” murmured Jesus, “for it is incumbent upon us both to do what is righteous”.

John then poured water over his head. After the baptism on Jordan’s banks, the two men exchanged a final glance. Jesus then left, disappearing with his companions among the rushes of the river.

Returning to Qumran, he went off to be alone in a cave.

Safe from unwelcome visitors, the Essenes had established a retreat for those among them who wished to submit to the trial of solitude.

A steep path led to this cave that ran back into the mountain face. The entry way led past two columns cut into the living rock. There, the hermit’s shelter hung above the sheer abyss, like an eagle’s nest. In the depths of the gorge, vineyards and houses could be seen; farther off the Dead Sea, immobile and gray, and desolate mountains. There were writings there, scrolls of the prophets and sacred texts, fortifying spices and herbs, dried figs and a trickle of water running down the rock. These were the sole nourishment for the meditating ascetic.

Jesus’ disciples camped outside, waiting somewhat feverishly to hear what they would be told at the end of his meditation by the one whom they already considered to be the Christ announced by John the Baptist.

Jesus had been sitting in that cave for several days. Exhausted, aching, tortured by the lengthy immobility and by the cold of the rock, his body

had given up all hope of bringing its torments to an end by disturbing his consciousness. This was lost in an inner world, in another, timeless, universe, untroubled by the real outside world or the pain undergone by that body which in the end had submitted in silence, accepting suffering as its fate, slave of the iron will of the mind that granted it no right to rebel.

Jesus had seen in his mind's eye all his life flowing past, down to the confrontation with his cousin, all the decisive stages in his existence that had finally brought him to this refuge overlooking the whole region.

Now the future was predominating over these images of the past.

What must I do?

"Could you be the Messiah?" John had asked.

These words once again struck his mind like a foul blow to his willpower.

Before his initiation by the Essenes, the question had not arisen, had no sense in his eyes. Now, however, after that initiation into the fourth degree which he had received a few weeks earlier in the Qumran cave from the Head of the Order, the question never stopped haunting and harassing him.

Could I be the Christ? Oh, Heavenly Father! Do please guide my steps...

Once more he hoped to attain the ultimate quest in his existence; he hoped that it would bring the solution.

The way of past truths...

A drop of sweat trickled down his temple. The end of that way still seemed so far away, so inaccessible for his consciousness. As always in each of his attempts, his inner demon prevented him from reaching that final stage in his existence for which he so longed.

Surreptitiously his mind wandered off in another direction, looking elsewhere among the windings of his synapses for salvation for his whole being.

Once more the thunderous voice of John echoed in his innermost depths.

Could you be the Messiah...?

Was he or was he not the Christ? Some already saw the Messiah in him.

... the King of God's Kingdom on Earth...

However, that Earth would be a land of desolation. Worse, all that would remain of the Kingdom would be the ashes of Gehenna.

That was the dreadful destiny of Christ.

Was any other outcome possible?

A painful stomach cramp made him open his eyes despite himself. Hunger was gnawing at him. How long had it been since he ate something? A day? Ten days? Twenty? He no longer knew. This voluntary fasting was disturbing his mind. He got the impression that the stones scattered on the ground were slowly changing into crisp loaves of bread and inviting him to get up and enjoy a meal. He saw himself biting deeply into a loaf. Its imagined flavor made his mouth water involuntarily. However, he refused to leave off his meditation to appease his hunger.

Man does not live by bread alone. The words that fall from the mouth of the Heavenly Father nourish him far more...

Those words were written within him, in the innermost depths of his being. The sensation of hunger faded away.

Overlooking the valley, he glanced for a moment at the sheer abyss. In a moment of doubt, realizing that he might be the Savior but also the Destroyer, he toyed with the idea of hurling himself into the void, so as not to bring chaos and desolation by his coming. He was ready to sacrifice himself if necessary, for the good of humanity. Once he had died, the danger would die with him. He even imagined organizing this death from the top of the Temple in Jerusalem. His sacrifice might perhaps reconcile this demented humanity by opening its eyes. However, he knew that this was not the solution and the gap he left would be soon filled. The region would sink into hatred even without him. As if angels had come to help him in mid-flight by holding him up in their hands and setting him down gently, the image of a fall smashing his body on the rocks below faded out of his mind.

This insane temptation gave way to another, subtler one.

He knew that these lands, these kingdoms stretched out before him could be subject to him if he wished. All would prostrate themselves at his feet, fulfilling his every wish and glorifying him personally. For a brief moment, the power and the glory of these kingdoms clouded his vision of the future. He could impose the Kingdom of the Heavenly Father on Earth through force.

However, he could not have himself adored like an incarnate living god, for such fervor was only legitimate if directed toward the Heavenly Father. Furthermore, force would breed violence, wiping out mercy. He swept this temptation to worldly power out of his mind and closed his eyes once more.

Could you be the Messiah?

John the Baptist's question echoed once again in his soul.

Since the blossoming of his consciousness in Egypt, he had found the Heavenly Father in himself and the certainty of the Kingdom of Heaven in the radiant beauty of his visions. The Initiated had taught him the secret of religions, knowledge of the Mysteries; they had shown him the spiritual decay of Israel. Where was the strength to seize it out of the abyss to be found?

Did the Christ not embody the solution in himself alone?

Two birds with one stone?

He could not answer this question except by going into his most inward depths.

Disquiet, worry then clutched him. He had a feeling of losing his marvelous happiness and falling into a dark abyss. A black cloud enveloped him. This cloud was full of all sorts of shadows. He could make out in it the figures of his brothers, his mother, the Essenes. Their faces, distorted by evil sneers, said to him one after another:

“Give up, it is impossible, you do not know what awaits you. Give up...”

However, an invincible inner voice responded to them.

It must be done.

He plunged deep within himself. The deeper the abyss into which he went down, the thicker the cloud around him became. For long, interminable hours he felt as if he were approaching something terrifying and unnamable.

A distant light finally came to aid his thought. Soft and reassuring, it guided him to its radiant source. Then the gloomy abysses of ignorance were split by a blinding flame and the black cloud evaporated in an instant.

He went into a state of lucid ecstasy which was typical of him, in which the deeper part of his consciousness awoke to him, opening up communication with the living spirit of things and projecting onto the screen of dreams images of the past and the future. Jesus considered the facts in the light which flooded his being and turned his intelligence into an incandescent focal point.

Then the truth appeared to him. Clear. Limpid.

Jesus emerged serenely from this vision, opening his eyes.

Around him, the sun was heating up the walls of the cave. A warm dew, like lovers' tears, dampened his feet, which ached from the prolonged immobility. Mists floated up off the Dead Sea.

How many days had it taken to reach that vision? He did not know. In his inner world, outside time had had no hold on him and had halted its

rushing progress. He rubbed his dark beard, smoothing it with his fingertips. It had grown considerably.

I feel as if I have been here forty days...

He would retain an undying memory of this cave where he had found enlightenment for the salvation of Israel, for the salvation of humanity. Nonetheless, a bitter sensation came over him. He was disappointed that he had not been able to gain access to the way of past truths. Yet again they were inaccessible. He knew why.

The inner demon...

He did not want any hint of this touch of disappointment to show through and be read from his face. His look should be one of fiery determination. He slowly stretched his legs and massaged them thoroughly for ten minutes or so. Then he stood up. Taking a handful of dried figs from an alcove cut into the wall, he cast his eyes along the valley he overlooked. Down there his destiny was waiting for him. He knew what to expect.

Barely bothering to chew them, he swallowed the figs hastily and went to quench his thirst at the trickle of water running down the rock.

Passing between the two columns cut into the living rock, he left the cave and set off down the steep path that led to the foot of the mountain. Down on the plain, he found his disciples. For weeks they had been awaiting his return. They were sitting on the bare earth, forming a circle of ten or so people. One of them was busily telling them what John the Baptist was saying to the crowds about Jesus' baptism. Engrossed in this, the disciples did not see Jesus standing a few yards from them, motionless and thoughtful alongside a clump of trees.

"John states that he saw with his own eyes, just after he baptized Jesus with water from the Jordan, that the heavens opened. The Spirit of God descended in the shape of a dove and settled upon Jesus. And a voice was heard from heaven saying, 'Thou art my beloved Son, my only begotten, and unto thee have I confided my heavenly will, my Holy Spirit.' Jesus is much more than God's chosen one; he is truly the Son of God and I am convinced that the Kingdom of God will..."

The man fell silent, his face growing pale. He had just seen Jesus. He leaped to his feet. All his companions did the same and bowed respectfully.

For a minute, Jesus remained silent, contemplating these faces that were waiting impatiently to hear what he would tell them.

His decision was made.

It would become irrevocable once he announced it in a few moments. From the depths of the death of his conscience which he had plumbed and

tasted in the cave, he trusted he would bring his brethren much more than the hope of life. He approached one of the disciples.

The messenger.

He bent to his ear.

“Go tell the Head of the Order that I am... the Messiah...”

He had whispered this sentence, spacing out each of the syllables, as if speaking reluctantly. However, they had all heard or read on his lips the final words which he had pronounced in a faint voice.

I am the Christ...

The eyes of the disciples flared with a living flame. Seeing these shining eyes, Jesus prayed inwardly that in the future this somewhat manic glow would stir up only faith and not minds to anger.

9

Goddess

His mind troubled, Tom stared at the obelisk through the windshield. Back in the white city van, he realized the full extent of his error of judgment.

“I made a mistake,” he admitted to Camilla. “Originally there were two obelisks at the entrance to the Luxor temple. Champollion had been given them both as a gift to France. Both obelisks were due to be shipped back there. But Champollion died quite young and unexpectedly and he didn’t manage to make the final arrangements transporting the second obelisk. After that, France never felt it worthwhile to recover that obelisk, especially since it was a time of troubles as the regime changed from a monarchy to a republic. In the 1980s, President François Mitterrand ended up by officially returning the second obelisk from Luxor to Egyptian Government care. So, that obelisk is still over in Egypt. Abbé Boudet wrote in his notebook that the Grail is hidden in the Luxor obelisk. In fact, Boudet wasn’t talking about the one taken to Paris, but the one that never left Egypt and is still there now.”

Tom pointed at the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde.

“That explains why this one’s empty...”

“What’ll we do now?” Camilla enquired.

“We’ll leave for Egypt this very evening. You’ll come with me, won’t you?”

Camilla nodded.

“Let me have your passport,” Tom told her. “I’ll take care of the paperwork.”

Camilla seemed to hesitate for an instant, as if she were afraid of letting him know her true identity from her passport. However, she had no choice.

“Perfect,” he said, slipping the passport into his pocket. “I’ll leave you here. We can meet later on at this address.”

He jotted down an address and telephone number on a slip of paper.

“Here you are. Call Martial for me. He’s a friend who works at the university.”

He pointed a finger at the address and gave the paper to Camilla. She slipped out of her white work overall and got out of the vehicle.

She hailed a taxi which took her as far as the Avenue Foch where her gray Mercedes sports coupé was parked. Getting behind the wheel, she drove off to her apartment, which was on the fourth floor of an attractive and striking building in the Sixteenth *Arrondissement*. The first thing she did was to take a relaxing bath. She enjoyed this moment of unwinding. As she got out of the bath-tub, the image she saw in her mirror flattered her female ego: just like a Greek goddess, her body was perfect and irresistible. She took a moment to dry her long brown hair and put on her make-up. She used some black eye-liner around her eyes so as to highlight their magnificent green color. She chose a light-colored pair of trousers, a yellow blouse and a black jacket with matching sneakers. She fed her goldfish, prepared a travel bag with some spare clothing, then dialed the number for the man called Martial.

A deep, warm voice agreed a meeting with the young woman.

Leaving the Mercedes in the underground parking lot, Camilla took a taxi. She showed her identity card to the security guards and was allowed to enter the university: Martial had warned them she would be visiting him. She left her travel bag in their lockers and went on in to the modern, functional building.

In the immense hall, a swarm of students were having coffee near the drinks and sandwich vending machines. There was the place where Camilla was to wait. Martial had explained that he was black, a West Indian, and that she could not miss him, as his hair and beard were totally white. Subconsciously, she was expecting to see a huge black man, built on the lines of an football player.

Five minutes later, a hand lightly touched her shoulder. Camilla turned around and was surprised to find that Martial was a man aged about fifty and short in stature: he was barely taller than she was.

Martial was wearing an impeccable suit and tie, and was of medium build. He had a high forehead and broad nose, and his beard was trimmed short, and together with his frizzy hair surrounded his head in a shape that reminded her of a full-face motorbike helmet.

After they had rapidly introduced themselves, Martial shook Camilla's hand firmly and linked his arm with hers in friendly fashion to guide her round the labyrinth of his university.

"Do you teach here?" she asked.

"Yes. I lecture in evolutionary psychology..."

Seeing Camilla's look of puzzlement, Martial thought it best to explain.

"Evolutionary psychology tries to explain the mechanisms of human thought on the basis of the theory of biological evolution. The brain, just like our marvelous hands or our upright posture, is a product of evolution, of the precise environmental constraints the ancestors of hominids had to face. Evolutionary psychology studies how the brain processes information and how the programs in the brain that handle information generate human behavior. To put it simply, all our present-day thoughts and behaviors derive from our evolution, so dear to the late Charles Darwin. Indeed, all the complexity of our human societies is clarified thanks to evolutionary psychology."

Martial smiled.

"I teach that branch of psychology in this university and I also do experiments with human 'guinea pigs'. These experiments permit me to explore our brain in depth. That allows me to understand and anticipate human reactions, so as to get a better grasp on the design of the prison in which our mind is shut up."

Martial's light brown eyes rolled upward and he tapped his skull with his hand.

"A gilded jail."

Camilla smiled amiably at him.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," she said politely.

"Not at all," he responded, checking his watch. "There are still two hours before I need to go collect the papers..."

"An examination?"

Martial shook his head.

"No, it's nothing to do with that. It's just a test to support my personal research. Three months ago, I invited a group of around fifty people to take part in a test. Today, the group is doing the second part of this test. In fact, though, to tell you the truth, it's only a formality, because I know exactly how all of them will respond to the questions in the test."

"How can you know their answers in advance?" Camilla asked, a frown on her brow.

“Thanks to the bias favoring affirmation. I’ll explain: the brain hates a vacuum, it’s not built to store sentences constructed in an interrogative form. The brain does not like questions very much. It has an annoying tendency to replace them with statements. Three months ago, I made the group complete a test containing a long series of questions on the lines of: ‘Did politician X accept bribes from corporation Y?’ or ‘Did the cyclist who won the last Tour de France take drugs?’ or ‘Did Moses receive the Tablets of the Law on a mountain?’. After reading sentences like these, with the passage of time the mind unconsciously removes the question mark and remembers them as statements.”

“How does that happen?”

“When you ask a question, the brain builds up a fictional situation, for example, it imagines a scene in which politician X is receiving a bribe in his office. Then it searches through elements of current affairs, in a newspaper article, on television or in a conversation to validate or rule out the hypothesis. Whatever happens, though, the scene has been constructed in the mind, in a fictional form, of course, but still in an affirmative mode. When the brain asks itself questions, it is obliged to create imaginary pictures like that. If later details come to hand to confirm or deny the question and provide a true solution, the brain removes or erases this fictional representation and classifies the solution among facts checked and verified. However, if no answer is provided for the question, the fiction remains and this question as dramatized, the imagined scene becomes rooted as a statement, a baseless affirmation that will become a certainty in the mind of the individual involved, which leads the question to be forgotten, driven out by the statement. The brain abominates emptiness, it needs an answer for every question and it’s the imagination that acts to furnish a response for everything. That’s why we all have certainties about everything, but above all about nothing. Because, most of the time, it is no more than our imaginations, fed by fictional scenes that have become statements in our brains, that govern our behavior in the real world...”

As they walked along the corridors with their floor-tiles forming a yellow and white checker-board pattern, Martial gazed at Camilla out of the corner of his eye.

“We are programmed to obey subconsciously invisible inward factors but also external factors that are all too visible for the subconscious. For example, if I give you an explanation while holding my hands like this...”

He put his hands vertically at the level of his chest.

“I’ll increase my ability to persuade you and I’ll get my message across much better. More than that, I’ll create an effective implication in you. We subconsciously note the gestures people make and any gesture, even an

insignificant one, can trigger a complex process without our knowledge. It's the same thing for colors and scents: blue calms us, just as does smelling lavender, for that matter. The odor of vanilla increases our desire to help others, mint adds to our physical strength and lemon helps our concentration. The smell of lemon also is able to force us to stay longer at table in a restaurant and, what's worse, to get us to eat more desserts..."

Martial grinned roguishly.

"Come to that, would you be hungry? The cafeteria does an excellent *tutti frutti* ice-cream. Let me get you one while we wait for Tom there..."

The young woman gladly accepted and let herself be guided by Martial.

As they turned a corner in the corridor, a teenager of mixed race with a fine golden skin color made an appearance.

She was wearing jeans and a jeans jacket and had her arms folded against her thin figure. She must have been around thirteen. She spoke to Martial.

"Pop, haven't you finished yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, Anna. Anna, this is Camilla. Camilla, this is my daughter Anna-Katherine."

Camilla held out her hand to the child, who blushed as she held out her own tiny hand to be shaken. Anna then mechanically stroked her long, curly, light brown hair. She was too timid to look directly at Camilla and her hazel eyes stared down purposelessly at her own pink shoes.

"She's shy," Martial said to Camilla. "Anna, you can wait for me in my office. If you like, you can play on the computer or connect to your friends in your virtual world, you know, Second Life..."

Anna nodded slightly and walked off silently.

"The refectory is this way," Martial indicated.

Situated under an immense glass dome, with more than a hundred tables full of students chatting over coffees, the cafeteria was warm and noisy.

Camilla glanced around. She did not notice Martial slipping something into her jacket pocket. She took a metal tray from a pile and headed for a refrigerated display where just two different types of dessert were on offer. Camilla's hand hovered for a moment over the delicious-looking ice-cream full of pieces of candied fruit then finally picked up a cake with a rather unimpressive and unappetizing appearance, labeled 'low calorie'. Alongside her, Martial picked up an apple juice and paid the bill with his university card. They went and sat at a table near the entrance.

"I'll perform a magic trick for you," Martial said.

He raised a finger in the air, waved it back and forth and said 'Abracadabra'. He pointed to Camilla's jacket pocket. She slipped her

hand inside and pulled out a piece of paper on which had been hastily scrawled 'You'll have the low-calorie cake'.

Camilla frowned.

"How could you tell?" she enquired in astonishment.

"I've been experimenting with these two desserts for a month now," Martial chuckled. "When there's just the ice-cream, the students all go for it. When there's just the low-calorie cake, nobody ever takes it. However, if you set both of them out together, it's the cake that wins out almost always. The reason is simple: if you have a delicious ice-cream in front of you, it's pleasure that has its say. In the presence of an uninteresting cake, it's the foreseeable lack of pleasure that comes out on top and people prefer to do without. However, when both are available, pleasure initially incites people to take the mouth-watering ice-cream, but then feelings of guilt emerge when they see the low-calorie cake: the pleasure they glimpse for a moment is affected by their bad conscience and so they go for the 'reasonable' solution represented by the cake. This is how we can shape people's choices without them knowing. For example, if your boyfriend wants a gold bracelet for his birthday, offer him a choice between the bracelet and a less expensive practical gift like a briefcase or a bomber jacket for the winter. He'll be bound to go for the practical and reasonable choice and you'll save money on the deal..."

"Your experiments are fascinating," Camilla said.

"They are indeed."

As if he were remembering a good joke, Martial's face adopted a wide grin.

"A few years back, I studied the behavior of viewers when they watched a politician make a speech on television that was disrupted by people who constantly broke in on what he was saying. Viewers had to concentrate to understand the arguments that were broken up by the interruptions and their brains associated that feeling of difficulty with the idea that the arguments put forward were poor. The outcome was a big drop in the credibility of the politician concerned. Ever since I published the results of the study, politicians have never stopped saying 'if you'd just let me finish' and trying to break in on what their opponents are saying in every possible way..."

Martial laughed softly and Camilla did so too.

"Well," he added, "Here's an amusing experiment you can do with your friends, the clever right foot test. Lift your right foot off the floor and make it go round in circles clockwise..."

Camilla willingly did as asked.

“While you’re making circles with your right foot,” Martial went on, “draw the figure 6 in the air with your right hand.”

Camilla did as he said, but her foot changed direction despite her, suddenly turning anticlockwise. She tried again, but despite all her efforts, her foot insisted on going anticlockwise.

She burst out laughing.

“You can try it a hundred times,” Martial said, “but it’ll never change. Here’s another little experiment. Answer these mental arithmetic questions as quickly as you can... as fast as possible, right? Okay, what’s... $15 + 6...$ $3 + 56...$ $89 + 2...$ $12 + 53...$ $75 + 26...$ $25 + 52...$ $63 + 32...$ I know, math is hard, but it’s a great exercise! So, let’s see... $123 + 5...$ Now, quickly, think of a tool and a color, quickly...”

Martial put his hand on the young woman’s forehead, closed his eyes and made a big effort at concentration, screwing his eyes up. He opened his eyes and looked at Camilla in silence. Then he dramatically took a notebook out of his pocket and wrote two words on the first page: ‘red hammer’. He handed the notebook to Camilla.

She was amazed.

“How did you guess?” she asked in astonishment. It’s impossible... that’s exactly what I thought of.”

Martial laughed out loud.

“There’s nothing impossible in it if you know how the brain works. More than 95% of people answer ‘red hammer’ if you get them to do this exercise.”

“Why?”

“In fact, there’s a bottleneck in the brain, we can’t do several things at once, such as drive a car properly while using a phone, or turn our right foot clockwise while drawing a six in the air with the right hand... After doing a string of calculations, the bottleneck is jammed and the primary brain, the instinctive brain, takes over for a task that’s urgent: that’s where the image of a hammer comes from. It’s like a hand-ax from the Stone Age, the first tool invented by humans for survival...”

“But why red?” Camilla asked. “Hand-axes weren’t red... It makes no sense...”

“Red is the first color that the instinctive brain tries to detect: in a lot of animal species, individuals with tones of red in their feathers or fur also have major concentrations of testosterone, the hormone for aggressiveness, in their bloodstream. So, in the animal world, red relates to dominance, to physical strength. Any animal and, thanks to our animal inheritance, the subconscious brain of humans also, any animal thus tries to spot this red

color as soon as possible in any adversary to work out whether combat is to its advantage or flight is necessary. That's why red comes automatically to mind when we're choosing a color for the hammer... This red also unsettles the mind detecting it with unconscious fear, primordial terror that reduces any desire to fight and encourages instinctive flight. Red subconsciously reduces the strength of an enemy seeing it, because inherited brain structures interpret the color as a sign of greater aggressiveness. Many Indian and African tribes used to cover their faces with red ocher before going off to war: they had intuitively worked out that they could gain an advantage from it. Why do you think British colonial troops and their famous red coats conquered an immense empire and dominated the world for centuries? The answer's in the question... because they wore red. When it wasn't necessary to hide during combat, but rather to show yourself, the color red was the secret weapon that cut away the mental ability of enemies through the subconscious fear it aroused... I analyzed the results of boxing, wrestling and taekwondo contests during the last five Olympic Games. Competitors are always given a red or blue outfit at random. Well, when I looked at bouts between fighters supposed to be at the same level, I found that red competitors won twice as many matches as blue... I sent the report to the International Olympic Committee so that they would stop using red outfits. And, you can be sure, I didn't dare to suggest they used pink as a replacement color..."

Martial winked knowingly at Camilla.

He carried on telling her about other experiments and anecdotes and time went by without her noticing.

Tom walked into the cafeteria.

He went across to the young woman's table. She raised her pretty face toward the shaven-headed man dressed in black. Tom winked at her meaningfully and she grasped the implied message: everything was ready for the journey to Egypt.

Camilla stood up.

"Excuse me a moment, I just have to powder my nose."

She walked across the refectory and headed for a long corridor where the ladies' restrooms were situated. However, instead of going in, Camilla glanced briefly behind her, then huddled up against a decorative column.

She rapidly dialed a number on her cell phone.

"It's me," she said. "No, he suspects nothing. Everything's going as planned..."

Her green eyes twinkled.

*
* *

Sitting on the leather chair behind his desk, the telephone hard up against his ear, Cardinal Fustiger grinned ferociously.

“Perfect, Goddess, perfect. In fact, there’s no point in taking those precautions with me. I know very well where you are and who you are.”

“Walls have ears,” the sensuous voice replied. “So I prefer to take precautions in case...”

“As you wish, Goddess. But may I remind you that this is a scrambled line? Anyway, however that may be, Leo carried out his mission to perfection: he recovered the Pontius Pilate Report from Rennes-le-Château and posted it to me. I’ll have it here by tomorrow.”

“Your man has done excellent work,” Goddess conceded, “that’s true. Yet Thomas Anderson is still alive and that poses a fresh problem: Mister Anderson is in possession of Abbé Boudet’s notebook. Boudet mentions the hiding place of other Grails in it and Mister Anderson is on the point of flying to Egypt...”

“Where in Egypt?” Fustiger snarled.

“The Temple of Luxor. But you have no need to worry. I’ll contact Leo. He’ll know what to do to forestall Mister Anderson in his quest for the Grail. Whatever Mister Anderson does, we’ll always steal a march on him.”

At the other end of the line, Goddess’s tinkling laugh rang out.

“I do hope you’re right,” Fustiger grumbled.

“No need to worry, I have the situation in hand. Despite this regrettable unexpected turn of events, our agreement still stands, doesn’t it?”

“Do I have any choice in the matter?” he grunted.

“To tell the truth, none at all...”

The Cardinal sighed inwardly.

Goddess could have demanded gold, authentic fortunes: the Vatican would have paid untold sums to recover the slightest piece of paper relating to the Grail. Instead, Goddess had made a ridiculous and malicious request. Devilish perversity was in the air these days and one had to adapt to these demons, Fustiger was sadly all too aware of that.

“You shall have what you asked for,” he said.

“Good, I’ll contact you later... Goodbye, my love...”

Goddess rang off and the Cardinal clenched his fist: he hated it when Goddess regularly whispered “goodbye, my love” to him to end their conversations.

Fustiger angrily ran a hand through his black hair: Thomas Anderson was still up and running. Even if he had not had access to the contents of the Grail, the information he already had were more than apocalyptic: if ever they were published, any hope of peace in the Middle East would vanish like a dream and war between Arabs and Jews in the Promised Land would break out more bloodily than ever. In the near future, millions of deaths were to be feared, thanks to an insane escalation of religion and hatred.

However, with the life of one single man, all those lives, those of innocent men, women and children, could be saved. It was in the interests of humanity to sacrifice one life for the future of millions of others.

The cardinal had not hesitated one instant to damn his own soul so as to save these lives from the forces of adversity. He would sacrifice himself through compassion, through noble self-denial. In his soul and conscience, he had taken the courageous decision to have Thomas Anderson eliminated.

“Hell is paved with good intentions,” Fustiger muttered, pulling at the pleat of his red cassock.

Because of this brave choice, the Cardinal risked ending up in Hell. Nonetheless, he had no other option: the future of his soul counted for little, but Thomas Anderson had to die for the good of humanity.

This sacrifice, self-sacrifice, Fustiger would do it for love.

Not for the love of God. Not even liked that damned Jesus.

No, Fustiger was doing it solely for the love of Deus.

On Judgment Day, Deus would appreciate this noble sacrifice and probably intercede in his favor to save him from Hell.

For the moment, however, Thomas Anderson was still alive.

Fustiger sighed in annoyance.

Leo had not been able to eliminate that devil Anderson and the Apocalypse threatened to strike the Earth at any moment. Nonetheless, Fustiger knew that Leo would find the resources necessary to accomplish his mission and prevent Anderson from doing real harm. Leo was driven by the anger coming from determination and faith.

Nothing could turn him aside from his planned objective.

Long ago, when he fled from his home after killing his immoral mother, Leo had decided to walk across the Alps and hide in Italy. He had crossed the border under the nose of the customs officers and had found refuge in the little church of a tiny village in Piedmont, lost among the mountains. There, an old priest had welcomed him into the parochial house. Leo had confessed his crime to him and the priest had absolved him, then

introduced him to the Bible and evils of pedophilia. For more than two years, Leo had suffered the wrath of this sadistic and immoral clergyman, believing he had to endure this Hell on Earth to achieve remission of his sins.

One morning, a couple of villagers discovered the horror of a reality that they had till then refused to see: Leo had impaled the priest on an inverted cross. The priest was trussed up with wire and his throat had been cut. The *carabiniere* who was called out urgently had been born in the village and was a devout Catholic, so he preferred to hush the affair up, afraid that the scandal might affect the region and the Church as a whole. The Vatican sent a team to clean away all traces of the murder.

Leo was brought to Rome and Fustiger met him. Leo flung himself on the Cardinal's feet, kissing them. When Leo confessed his story, Fustiger was deeply touched by that angelic face and the abomination of a life spoiled by the evil in this world. Whatever he thought himself, Leo most probably was a fallen angel sent to Earth to work for the glory of Deus.

Nonetheless, the Cardinal could not explain all that to Leo, particularly who Deus was. Leo had to believe that from now on he was a servant of God: the Vatican needed determined people with a blind faith who would work for the good of humanity.

As he thought of the future of humanity, Fustiger was stricken with dark thoughts that brought a grimace to his face. He turned his bulging dark eyes toward the screen of the computer installed on his desk; the countdown was ticking away the time that remained before the Sons of Abraham let off their bomb.

The Pope just had to accept their ultimatum and come out in favor of Israel using Papal infallibility. Otherwise, humanity would not survive the destructive blast of the bomb.

Fustiger sighed.

If the Pope refused, he would have to take the necessary steps.

It would not be the first time in the history of the Papacy when a Holy Father came to die brutally and tragically.

*
* *

Under a rising full moon that nibbled away at the growing darkness, the white taxi sped northward along the freeway.

The driver, an ageless Asian with a flat nose, glanced mechanically into his rear-view mirror: Tom and Camilla were sitting comfortably on the car's leather rear seats.

“Martial is more than a friend,” Tom said in his faint Swiss-German accent. “In fact, he is my mentor: I’ve been his ‘disciple’ for some time.”

“His disciple?” Camilla repeated questioningly.

“I mean I was his pupil in the university. I enrolled as a mature student and completed my degree in evolutionary psychology last year.”

“And before that? What were you doing?”

“Before?” Tom said with a laugh. “I was serving God in his earthly Kingdom and now I’m a fallen angel. When I fell, I wandered aimlessly on this Earth and met Martial. He was my Savior, my Messiah. At present, we’re even in association to combat State lies...”

In the twilight, his blue eyes lighted up with a dull glow.

“... and we’re going to drag the truth out into the full light of day, whatever it costs us.”

The taxi overtook an advertising van lighted with neon lights; the huge poster announced the imminent premiere of a science fiction film. In the background scene, extraterrestrial spaceships could be seen bombarding blazing skyscrapers as a mob of terrified townsfolk fled.

Tom pointed to the dazzling poster.

“For our distant ancestors, human sacrifice, offering a human life to the gods, was a way of regaining some form of control over events that at first sight seemed uncontrollable, events like floods, droughts or earthquakes. Nowadays, that sort of disaster movie is what takes the place of human sacrifice.”

“How do you mean?” Camilla asked in surprise.

“I’ll tell you: to drive away their feeling of helplessness when confronted with natural disasters, people had built up a notion of control through human sacrifice, since that kind of killing was within a codified, organized framework. It gave them back a sense of mastery over floods or droughts. The macabre ritual allowed them to combat the anxiety of the unknown. A disaster movie is the ritual for our days, since it permits people to fence their anxieties in, which makes them less painful and oppressive...”

Just like a professor talking to a young student, Tom defined his terms:

“Anxiety arises from a feeling of imminent danger. It’s a vague state without a known source. Western societies accumulate diffuse anxieties, like, for instance, anxiety about growing old or dying. Fear, on the other hand, is an emotional reaction linked to the awareness of a real and present danger, with a clear and visible origin. Disaster movies let our anxieties change and become transformed in real, visible fears. Fear allows people to clear the air, to free themselves of subconscious anxieties by blaming them

on a precise cause. That lets people eliminate an anxiety-inducing problem that they refuse to see and so to feel better. At least apparently. Since sooner or later they are bound to fall back into a state of anxious disquiet, as long as the cause of the anxiety has not been eliminated and in the absence of any new fear to relieve it.”

Tom looked closely at Camilla.

“These films play the game of governments, which encourage them, since they have every reason to transform our anxieties into fear, the anxieties for which they are responsible through their lies, which are clear to the subconscious mind but which the conscious mind refuses to see. Through fear, governments distract us from the source of our anxieties, the source of truth. Through fear, they control us: they channel our anxieties so as to bring out fears which serve above all else their own partisan interests. They frighten us by suggesting there are enemies hidden in the darkness who want to kill us and so they justify all their wars, which we support blindly...”

Tom sighed and ended by repeating the adage that was his trademark:

“It’s easier to believe than to think for yourself...”

Thoughtfully, Camilla gently stroked the little crucifix around her neck with the tips of her fingers and, to direct the conversation toward a subject she hoped to clarify to some extent, she asked:

“You’re seeking the truth, truth about Christ that you want to have burst out into the light and the proof of that truth is in the Pontius Pilate Report, isn’t that so?”

Tom nodded to indicate she was right.

“It’s time to take the wraps off Christ,” he said. “And you’ll be watching it from the front row.”

Lost in his thoughts, Tom fell silent. Realizing the time was not ripe, Camilla added nothing and the rest of the journey was in silence.

The taxi reached Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport. The driver got out of the car, politely opened the door for them, then took the large red case out of the trunk and put it on a cart. Tom paid the fare, adding a large tip, and pushed the cart.

Carrying her small travel bag slung across her shoulder, Camilla wondered once again what Tom’s large case might be holding. He had not wanted to tell her what was inside. In view of the short time required to go to Luxor and come back again, the case must contain something more than just a change of clothing.

Even at this late hour in the evening, the huge hall of the airport was still bustling; here and there tourists were hurrying toward boarding gates.

Tom and Camilla did not line up: they went to the First Class counter of Egyptair.

Tom handed the two French passports over to the check-in clerk who was sitting at her computer. She smiled at them and checked their identity, then checked Tom's case in and gave him back the passports together with boarding passes.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith," she said, "I wish you a very pleasant trip."

"Thank you," Tom answered.

He laid his hand on Camilla's shoulder.

She was dumbfounded: the clerk had just called them by a surname totally unknown to her. As they walked, she commented on her disquiet to Tom. His only answer was to hand her the passports.

Camilla looked at them: the photos were definitely theirs, but the identities were false.

"It's best to travel incognito," Tom said. "I prefer to take precautions."

"But they're forgeries," Camilla protested in a whisper. "We could get into big trouble..."

"Don't worry," Tom reassured her. "They're false but not fake, because they were issued by the passport office, so they're genuine, Mrs. Smith..."

"And my real passport? Where's that?"

"I used it for your photo and left it in a safe place. I'll return it to you as soon as we get back."

Glancing anxiously around, as if afraid somebody might have heard this conversation, Camilla acquiesced in silence. She wondered how Tom had managed to obtain such travel documents from the official authorities. However, she knew that Thomas Anderson was no ordinary man, so it did not greatly surprise her.

For a moment, Camilla was alarmed, realizing that Tom had had plenty of time to check up on her and verify her identity. Nonetheless, it seemed that he had not taken this elementary precaution, believing their meeting had been purely fortuitous and not seeing the young woman's double game. Because if Tom had enquired about her, he would have known who she really was and, as mistrustful as he was, he would never have risked taking her with him.

It was still strange to take along somebody unknown and even to get her a false passport.

There had to be some hidden reason.

Camilla's mind was disturbed when she ran over the evidence: Thomas Anderson must have fallen in love with her and he was taking her along on his quest for the Grail out of passion.

Camilla's pulse accelerated. Her love was reciprocated, then.

So, would she have the strength to betray him?

In the end, however, Tom would understand that it was in no way treachery, as she was also working so the truth would burst forth into the full light of day and they were in fact striving for the same purpose. When she told him the truth, Tom would even encourage her to do what she had pledged to do.

Light of heart and calm of mind, Camilla raised her green eyes up to look at Tom. He was walking along, alert and still holding his "wife" by her shoulder. The couple went through the security checks and into a V.I.P. lounge while they waited to board.

Enjoying the comfort, a glass of champagne in her hand, Camilla clinked glasses with Tom. Sitting face to face in sumptuous armchairs, they looked out through a huge bay window at the tarmac illuminated by a thousand lights and the brightly painted aircraft taking off for the four corners of the Earth. Off to one side and linked to the terminal by a curving white walkway that looked like a giant tentacle, the Egyptair Airbus was going through the last stages of preparation at the hands of the service staff bustling around it.

Camilla was happy at the thought of heading for Egypt. She had dreamed of this from a very young age, but had never had the time to carry out this childhood dream. As if he could read her thoughts, Tom said:

"You seem delighted to be going to Egypt."

"That's true," she agreed. "It's a fabulous country that I've always dreamed about."

"Yes, you're right: the pyramids, the Pharaohs..."

"To tell you the truth, I was thinking more of Moses."

Tom frowned.

"Moses?"

"Yes, the child in the bulrushes on the banks of the Nile, the flight from Egypt with the Chosen People, the Promised Land..."

"Camilla," Tom broke in, "I'd better tell you something right now..."

He groped for words for a moment. He hesitated a few seconds before stuttering out:

"Camilla, how can I tell you the truth... in fact... Moses never existed... Moses is a myth. Just a myth... he never existed..."

Greatly surprised, the young woman blinked several times, then looked at the man opposite her, wondering if he had gone off his head.

10

Cana

Jesus was tired.

His long walk to Jerusalem had exhausted his strength, already reduced by the days of fasting he had spent in the cave. However, he paid no attention to this. He walked briskly through the city gate. His disciples had struggled to keep up with him and from time to time had even had to run so as to keep pace with him. They too were exhausted. It was with some relief that they heard Jesus tell them to wait for him at the entrance to the city. They agreed in silence.

“Where are you going?” asked one of them, nonetheless. “You cannot stay alone, you know. It is against...”

“I know,” interrupted Jesus. “But we must act discreetly. Look at how many we are. The troop of us cannot all enter together unnoticed. The hour is not yet come for them to learn of my arrival...”

He pointed his finger in a precise direction. Toward the Temple whose high enclosing walls they could see in the distance.

“... besides, you know where I am bound: I seek a caravan for the remainder of the journey. Wait here with the others.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the disciple finally bowed respectfully.

Crossing the city, Jesus headed for the square in which the departures of caravans were organized. He was in luck. He learned that a group of merchants would leave for the North that very evening. For a fee, Jesus and his disciples could travel in the wagons carrying flour. The bargain concluded, Jesus went to a corner of the square where oxen were peacefully chewing the cud under a wooden lean-to, and lay down on the straw to rest. He kept his eyes wide open, however. His lively gaze swept round the square. He had not been followed and the merchants were no longer paying him any attention. So, he got up discreetly and slipped into a nearby narrow laneway.

He strode out rapidly toward one of the entrances of a very specific place.

The Temple.

Seeing the majesty of the monument, he stood admiring it for a moment.

Renovated and extended by Herod the Great, the same man who had ordered the massacre of the children from the Bethlehem area, the second Temple of Jerusalem was, according to travelers, one of the most beautiful and biggest temples in the Roman Empire. Pilgrims came from everywhere to bring alms and offer animals in sacrifice. During great festivals, thousands of beasts were sacrificed on its altars. In fact, the Temple had become more a slaughterhouse than a house of prayer. More than 7,000 priests were assigned to its service and during major Jewish holidays like Passover had to sacrifice nearly 200,000 lambs.

Jesus climbed the imposing stairway to the southern entrance. For a moment, he gazed at the splendor of the marble colonnades where priests strolled in their sumptuous robes. Then, he went forward into the Lower Courtyard.

As if lost in the crowds of Israelites, priests in their violet and purple vestments hurried to officiate in the sanctuary. There, they sacrificed goats and bulls to sprinkle their blood on the congregation while reciting blessings. Animals were penned in various enclosures scattered here and there all over the Lower Courtyard. The priests drew profits from the sale of animals intended for sacrifices. Moneychangers' tables had even been set up there, because it was forbidden to offer alms to the priests with foreign coins, such as those bearing the image of the Roman Emperor.

Jesus pushed through the crowd so as to head, like them, for the sanctuary situated in the central temple, lost in the middle of the huge courtyard, like an island isolated in an ocean of men and women.

Before he went in, he glanced at the Antonia Tower where Roman legionaries, spear in hand, overlooked from a distance the surging movement within the religious enclosure. Standing near the Temple's outer wall, this tower was a high point within the fortress that sheltered the palace of the Procurator, Pontius Pilate, which hugged the slope just below it. Because of its position and architecture, the tower dominated the Temple as if to remind everybody of the presence and strength of the Roman occupiers.

In the central temple, Jesus crossed the Court of Women and reached the sanctuary. Taking a very elderly priest to one side, he whispered a few words into his ear. He thought the old man was about to faint, as his eyes opened wide in amazement. For a good few seconds, he was unable to

respond to Jesus' request. Finally, the priest nodded and hastened away. Jesus remembered him. He had met him at the age of twelve when he had taken refuge in the Temple. The elderly man had not recognized him for the moment. Who, indeed, could recognize him after the passage of so many long years?

Jesus waited for ten minutes or so. The priest finally returned and led him into a room away from the crowds. Clad in purple, a man short in stature was already awaiting him, his back turned to the door. When the door closed, the man turned slowly, stroking his thick white beard. His greenish-yellow eyes, with a slight squint, moved to gaze into Jesus'. His bushy eyebrows wrinkled in a frown, then, as if reassured, he smiled.

"I recognize those blue eyes," chuckled the priest in a nasal tone. "They are still the same eyes. I was there when Mary, your mother, came here with Joseph. I was even present at your circumcision. I think you were twelve when I last saw you, is that not so? We thought that you were dead. Here you are, though, grown into a tall man, while I have become Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Temple, Head of the Sanhedrin."

Caiaphas.

Jesus nodded respectfully in silence. He knew that Caiaphas, over the past ten years or so, had achieved the masterstroke of achieving peaceful cohabitation between the two major religious groups in the Temple.

The Pharisees...

An exclusive group, some 6,000 in number, they bore a name that meant the 'separated ones', because they sought to differentiate themselves from the other Jews. Extremely patriotic, narrow-minded and haughty, they were the party of national restoration, but were prepared to accept a foreign occupation as long as their freedom of worship was guaranteed. Strict observers of the Law of Moses, their application of piety was through rites and practices, fasting and public penitence. They could be seen in the full light of day parading through the streets, their faces smeared with soot, chanting out prayers with an air of contrition and distributing alms ostentatiously. In parallel to Moses' written tradition, they accepted a tradition handed down by word of mouth and showed great keenness for the development throughout the land of Israel of synagogues as a place to interpret the Law. They believed in angels and in eternal life. However, these glimmers of esotericism that had come to them from Persia were drowned in them by the dark shadows of a gross, materialistic interpretation. Furthermore, though living in luxury and avidly intent on getting appointments and power, they were still the leaders of the democratic party and had the people under their control.

... the Sadducees...

These represented the party of priests and aristocrats. This group was made up of families who claimed to hold their functions by right of inheritance going all the way back to the times of King David. Extreme conservatives, they denied the existence of a soul and an afterlife. They mocked the Pharisees' practices and their extravagant beliefs. For them, religion consisted solely of ceremonial. They had held power in the past, but the Pharisees had excluded them from the Temple, although only for a time. Under King Herod the Great, they had recovered their places. They were hard and tenacious men, priests who liked the good life and had just one belief: in their own superiority. Besides that, they had just one idea in their heads: keeping the power that they had traditionally had.

For some seconds, Caiaphas stroked his white beard, looking delightedly at Jesus. In the past, the priests had had great plans for the divine child. His disappearance had dashed their hopes. Now, though, Jesus was back again. The image of a new future, a glorious future set the High Priest's mind racing. The emotion of seeing Jesus once again was so strong that thought he was going to open his eyes and find himself waking up in his bed.

However, this was no dream.

The divine child was definitely there in front of him. He had grown. His tall stature, long curly hair and black beard made this thirty-year-old with his sea-blue eyes very attractive.

After his disappearance, the priests had investigated and searched. They had sent agents to gather as much information as possible to as to try to find the child's tracks. It had been in vain, however. All that their agents had been able to report were the tales that were circulating about Jesus, especially his miracles. The sudden absence of Jesus led some folk to claim that he was the Son of God and that his Father had called him back to heaven.

Caiaphas felt sure that his return would trigger unprecedented fervor among the people in Galilee. He was delighted with the idea already. Stroking his white beard, he wondered whether Jesus really knew his true nature; as far as he knew, nobody had ever revealed this to him. His mother, Mary, had had to come in person to the Temple to explain about the disappearance of her son. However, she had said nothing of interest and had claimed that Jesus was unaware of the secret of his birth.

Now, Caiaphas doubted it. He was convinced she had lied and that Jesus was fully informed about his true nature. One proof was the presence of Jesus in the Temple, the abode of God: for what other reason would he have come here to see him if not to gain the aid of the servants of Yahweh to accomplish his destiny?

Caiaphas was inwardly jubilant. He knew he could come to an understanding with Jesus. They needed each other and they would find some compromise. To Caiaphas's advantage. The High Priest was certain of it.

"Well, I think we both know who you *really* are..."

Caiaphas emphasized the word. He had good news to tell him about the secret of his divine birth. However, for the moment he was given no chance to continue.

"Yes," cut in Jesus. "Besides, I have a proposal to make to you. Or perhaps more of a request..."

Caiaphas smiled and nodded slightly, then went and sat down on a solid wooden chair set on a small platform.

After Jesus had said just a few words, Caiaphas had to abandon his hopes completely, comprehending that the divine child would bring him no glory. He would bring only loss. The priest's removal from office.

His face grew dark. He listened to Jesus with ears that tried to remain attentive. However, his mind went off in every direction, as one by one his dreams were shattered and his future fell in ruins. He began sweating heavily, fearing he might even faint at Jesus' words, feeling his heart beating frenziedly in his chest.

When Jesus finished speaking, a leaden silence fell over the room. The two men looked at each other for a long while, one with hatred in his dark gaze, the other with compassion in his light-blue eyes.

Caiaphas brought his breathing under control, trying to tame the fire that was burning inside him. Rubbing his damp hands dry on his blood-colored robe, he rose from his chair and approached Jesus. His decision was already taken, but he had to refer it to the members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme tribunal for the Temple.

"I can take no decision for the moment," said he in a tone that attempted to sound neutral. "I will convoke the Sanhedrin and we will take a decision. Several days will be needed for deliberations. Meanwhile, you may take residence here..."

"I am leaving the city this night. I will return in a while. I have obligations..."

"I understand..."

Jesus bowed respectfully, then left the room. Once left alone, Caiaphas felt like smashing everything around him. However, he had to remain cool, think long and hard about the problem and find an adequate solution. That was how he had always acted, and how he must continue to act. For the

moment, he needed to gather together the seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin.

Then the time for action would come. The High Priest angrily clenched a fist.

Jesus returned to the square where the merchants were. Nobody had noticed his absence and lay back down in the straw among the oxen. This time, he allowed himself to sleep. His tiredness caught up with him and he let himself drift off into oblivion. He was awoken a few hours before nightfall by one of the merchants. He took a seat at the back of one of the numerous wagons, collecting his disciples on the outskirts of the city.

“Why did you not come to join us after concluding the bargain?” asked one of his disciples. “Had you other things to do in Jerusalem?”

Jesus smiled reassuringly.

“I slept on pleasant fresh straw. I was far too tired to come to join you.”

The disciple nodded. That very evening, Jesus saw him talking briefly with one of the caravan leaders. Jesus immediately guessed what their discussion concerned.

My margin for maneuver is narrow, paper thin...

The journey to the North of the country was long, as the caravan stopped frequently to rest the animals and do some trading, even if the bulk of the flour it was carrying was intended for Galilee.

The return to the region where he was born brought Jesus great inner joy. The recollections of these landscapes and their vales that had lingered in the depths of his memory were far from doing justice to the beauty of the region. Accompanied by his disciples, Jesus left the caravan heading for Lake Tiberias and walked farther westward, as far as Nazareth. For several days he had hesitated, wondering if it would not be better to stick to the original plan and continue as far as Capernaum, a settlement near the shores of the lake. However, he wanted to see his village once more. Besides and above all, he wanted to check people’s views on the Law of Moses. What could be better than to do this in his own village, in which he was perfectly aware of individuals’ mindsets. He knew that nobody would recognize him.

Time sweeps all away...

Thus he would know how far he might go in the future teachings that he had vowed to himself he would reveal to all men.

At the entry to his village, he told his disciples to await him, not to follow him. They obeyed docilely, worn out as they were by the long walk.

Jesus headed toward the synagogue, which lay at the other end of the settlement. As he passed by, he saw his house in the distance. It was still

there and he wondered if his mother was at home. However, he could not visit her.

She is in danger because of you. Do not try to see her again...

The village was deserted. On the Sabbath day, the villagers were all in the synagogue requesting the kindness and clemency of Yahweh, the one God, protector of Israel and his Chosen People.

He went into the stone building. Every eye turned toward him. He walked into the center of the gathering. He expressed a wish for peace upon them all. They all stared at him, wondering who this passing stranger might be. All the same, they welcomed him without asking any questions and Jesus joined in the ceremonies, sitting on a wooden bench. Beside him, a man of some forty years of age kept glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. The middle-aged man's face was not unknown to Jesus. Despite the years that had gone by and thick pepper and salt beard that hid some features of the face, he identified him as a neighbor near whom he had lived and who had been involved with Jesus in the village children's games. However, he did not think that the man recognized him. In fact, nobody seemed to know who he was.

A servant handed the newcomer a scroll of sacred text. Jesus stood up and unrolled it. It was a passage from Isaiah, a prophet of ancient times. As was the custom, Jesus read aloud.

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

He handed back the scroll to the servant and resumed his seat.

How false this text was. How completely false. Yet they are all convinced it is true. As I once was. Until the Initiated revealed the truth to me...

All the congregation in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him.

Jesus spoke in the language of the region, but had some difficulty getting back into its typical intonations. After so many years spent in foreign parts, he had forgotten the sing-song patterns, the harmony of his mother tongue. He spoke like a foreigner, groping for words, sometimes hesitating. Yet he knew that with a little practice he would soon master this way of speaking again.

Seeing that they were all looking at him in silence, he stood up again. He wanted to gauge their reactions.

"Today this passage of the Scriptures is accomplished in your hearing," said he. "The prophecy will soon come true..."

He stopped. It was as he had feared; unpleasant grimaces were deforming the features of the faces of some of the villagers in an unconscious reaction. Even here, in the land of his birth, the same causes had the same effects. Jesus shut his eyes, trying to escape that sad reality.

For a moment, he thought of revealing the truth to them. The whole truth.

He thought back over the writings of Moses which he knew by heart.

I cannot tell them the truth about Moses and his Law. They would stone me to death if I did that...

He had to be conciliatory and use careful strategies to enlighten minds.

So, he spoke to them of Elijah, one of the most glorious and most admired of the prophets among the Jews. However, the points that he raised about him triggered great anger among the Pharisees who were performing the ceremonies. They ordered the villagers to lay hold of the blasphemer.

“Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets: I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill,” protested Jesus.

Alas, it was too late. He had gone too far and narrow minds were unwilling to admit the relevance of his comments. Jesus was expelled by force from the synagogue. Scolding and insulting him, the people of Nazareth led the stranger out of the village. At first, Jesus thought they were just intent on driving him out. However, he quickly realized where he was being taken in this way. At the end of the track there was a cliff; they intended to throw him off it.

The two men who were holding his arms tightly inexplicably were suddenly flung to the ground. Three villagers rushed at Jesus. They suffered the same fate, without understanding what was happening. Two young men threw themselves at him. Yet Jesus could not be grasped, as if he were protected by an invisible shield, forming a barrier around him. Nobody could manage to catch him; he seemed to be one moment here, the next far away. Despite this, one man slipped behind Jesus and succeeded in catching hold of him with his sturdy arms. Not for long, however; he was shot into the air and fell heavily on his head.

Get away before your inner strength really hurts them...

Jesus started running. He dodged between the villagers who were bemused to have seen their fellows thrown to the ground by a supernatural force emanating from the stranger. Slipping between the buildings of the village, he hid in a barn. Nobody seemed to have followed him. A sound of running disabused him of this first impression. Through the gaps in the ill-fitting planks, he saw the man in his forties who had been sitting next to

him in the synagogue come close. The man was out of breath from running so fast.

He stopped just before the barn, leaning forward, waiting for a second wind that did not come. For five minutes, he stayed there, his hands clutching his thighs, his beard drenched in sweat, his face empurpled by the physical effort, spitting frequently, blowing his nose noisily with his fingers then flinging the greenish mucus to the ground. He straightened up, gazing into the distance.

“He has gone,” said he disappointedly, shaking his head. “Curse this village!”

Jesus realized that he was talking about him. So he softly slipped behind the man. When he turned round, his surprise was such that he fell to his knees, prostrating himself with his forehead touching the ground.

“Arise,” ordered Jesus. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, you are the Son of God, begotten through the Immaculate Conception and your mother is the Virgin Mary. I was not sure that I recognized you in the synagogue...”

The man rose slowly and stared into Jesus’ eyes.

“... but your blue eyes are so unusual that their brilliance is still imprinted in my memory. After what you did to those who wished to harm you, I have no further doubt. You are the Son of God. There is such strength, such power emanating from you! Big Simeon was whisked up into the air by the hand of God when he tried to lay hands upon you. Your Father is watching over you. You are truly the Son of God...”

“How is Simeon?” asked Jesus.

“He will recover, but forgive them, for they did not know what they were doing. They are the blind led by a one-eyed man...”

Jesus grasped that the one-eyed man was the Pharisee priest of the synagogue.

“Many believed that you were dead and had joined your Father in heaven. I knew, however, that this was not so and you would return one day. Your mother will be happy to see you again, she...”

“You must promise me to say nothing to anybody about my presence here,” interrupted Jesus firmly. “Not even my mother.”

He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

“Is she still here?”

“Yes, she still lives in the house that Joseph built.”

Jesus stood, musing.

“In two days she will be in Cana,” added the man in a confidential tone. “You could meet her there if you judge Nazareth and its villagers unfit for such a reunion...”

He went on to say that she was going there for the marriage of the only son of a close friend. Jesus knew who it was.

After getting him to promise the most absolute secrecy, Jesus left the man. He joined his disciples outside the village.

They were worried, but relieved to see him back. A boy of about ten had seen in the distance the wrath of the crowd dragging away a stranger by force. As he walked out of the village to go play with his friends, the child had met the disciples who had asked him if he had seen a man of Jesus’ description. They were disturbed by the long absence of their Master. What the boy told them plunged them into indescribable bewilderment and they were at a total loss, wondering if the stranger led by force out of the village was really Jesus and if so, why. They no longer knew what to do. Their Master had given them a clear instruction: to wait. Some wished to go to the village but others opposed this, not wanting to disobey the order. It was at that very moment, in this state of worry, tension and doubt that Jesus returned to his disciples.

“Was it you that the villagers were dragging along by force?” asked the disciples.

Hesitating for a moment, Jesus finally nodded.

“Yes, it was truly so.”

“Why, though? What had you done? What had you told them?”

Jesus waved away the questions with a gesture.

“A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country,” said he to end the discussion.

This sentence had a noticeable effect on the disciples, who nodded in agreement, seeming to understand all of the ramifications of meaning of this adage Jesus had pronounced.

Led by Jesus, the group headed northward. Jesus turned back and took a last look at his native village. He had learned much from that short but intense confrontation with its inhabitants. He now knew that it would be difficult to open the eyes of the Jews, steeped as they were in a centuries-old corrupt doctrine. Also, in future, he should never reveal to anybody the truth about the Law of Moses, the writings based on it and the prophets of former days.

The remedy would be worse than the evil...

To the surprise of the disciples who believed they would now make for the shores of Lake Tiberias, as had been long planned, Jesus headed for

Cana, a town not far from Nazareth. At first, Jesus thought that he could go there alone. However, when he suggested to the disciples they should wait for him beside the lake, they refused, claiming that they would henceforth be fearful for his safety. They no longer wished to leave him on his own. Whether he liked it or not, Jesus had to accept this constant presence at his side. He told them that he had to attend the wedding of a friend. They slept under the stars that night, and reached Cana the following day. The bride's father welcomed Jesus into his large house. The two of them spoke in private for over an hour. Then, Jesus and his disciples were invited to eat and to sleep that night in the spacious building, where on the next day the grand marriage celebration would take place.

Numerous guests arrived the following afternoon. Among them was Jesus' mother. As he sat watching on a chair, one elbow leaning on a massive table, Jesus thought his heart would stop beating.

Mother...

Time had halted in its course. A sight that seemed unreal, he saw Mary walking into the center of the room. His mother had not changed, as if the passing years had had no hold on her. A lump formed in Jesus' throat.

He thought back to his childhood at her side. Images of another time flooded over him. Happy images. One, in particular, stood out in his memory. He saw himself in his home in Nazareth. Some evenings, when she was already asleep, he would slip into the bed alongside her and cozy up to her. She often awoke and scolded him mildly, telling him that this was not appropriate behavior. However, she never sent him away. The warmth of the mother's body then warmed the son's, soothing him from within, kindling in him an intense fire, a flame that seemed eternal. Mary liked her son to come and join her in that bed where she felt terribly alone, like a prisoner sentenced for a crime she had not committed. She tenderly hugged Jesus in her slender arms and the two embraced till they were as one. The morning would arrive far too quickly. Jesus then got up quietly and went back to his own bed. Joseph knew nothing of these comings and goings. The old man slept on his own in another room.

The image of his father replaced his mother's. As a child, despite the love he bore him, Jesus had never understood why Joseph behaved so distantly toward him. It was as if this father feared to show a love that he could not accept. Now, though, Jesus knew that Joseph was not his father.

My true father is in Heaven...

Mary walked onward.

As she was about to look in his direction, he turned aside his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he could notice she was becoming disturbed. She

had stopped, frozen by the sight of the profile of a man she felt that she vaguely recognized. She shook her head as if to try to drive an impossible thought out of it. However, her eyes could not tear themselves away from that guest, sitting calmly and attempting, by resting his cheek on his hand, to play somebody perfectly at ease in company. This was not the case. A drop of moisture trickled down his face. Jesus wiped it quickly away with the back of his hand, fanning himself with the other hand for an instant, as if he were too hot. However, it was no drop of sweat that had just flowed.

It was a tear that he had not been able to hold back.

Jesus felt his mother's gaze still resting on him. Finally, he could not resist the temptation. He slowly turned his head toward her and his blue eyes gazed into hers. He thought she was about to faint, as if she were in the presence of somebody back from the dead.

She went deathly pale and clutched at the back of a chair for support. She softly whispered her son's name. She was unable to speak. Jesus discreetly put a finger to his mouth, a finger which he quickly moved away again. His mother had understood the message, though. She winked slowly. Then she went away, walking rather shakily.

The day and part of the evening went by without Jesus saying a word to his mother or speaking to her. This apparent coldness outweighed the injunction that Jesus had given by placing his finger on his lips; Mary could no longer hold herself back and she approached him. The festivities were in full swing and the supply of wine had soon come to an end. She used this as an excuse to start a conversation.

"They have no more wine," said she in a non-committal tone.

She hoped that Jesus would answer her, or that he might even hug and kiss her tenderly. This did not happen.

"Woman, what have I to do with you?" said he in a sharp and disdainful tone. "The hour for idle chatter is not yet come."

He rose from his chair and, followed by a few disciples, left the room where the banquet was taking place. He went into the inner courtyard. Seeing the empty wine-jars, he called the servants. In the dim night-time light, he ordered them to take the goatskin bags of water stored under a lean-to off to one side and to pour their contents into the empty water-pots intended for the ritual ablutions practiced by the Jews. The servants obeyed, watched by Jesus and his disciples. Oddly, a strong smell of wine started to float on the air. Jesus then ordered them to fill up the jugs used for wine and to take them to the guests.

As they went into the building the servants were dumbfounded to find that the jugs they were carrying no longer contained water, but wine. Trembling hands placed the jugs on the tables.

The guests tasted the wine.

One of them rushed off to find the householder, who was talking with the young bridegroom.

“Every man at the beginning sets out good wine and, when people have drunk well, the less good. You have kept the good wine until now...”

The guest congratulated him warmly.

At that moment, Jesus walked back into the room.

Realizing what had happened, some disciples and servants kneeled or prostrated themselves in silence before Jesus. Some of the guests were surprised, not understanding why they were doing so.

These looks of amazement or of adoration directed at him because of the miracle of water turned to wine would be repeated frequently in the future, Jesus knew it. That was the destiny set down for him in advance.

The thought made him sigh inwardly and unconsciously clench his fist.

11

A Notarized Document

In the V.I.P. lounge in the Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport, Tom put his glass of champagne down on the low table.

“Moses is a myth,” he repeated. “Just a myth. He never existed.”

Opposite him, Camilla went pale and stared at the forty-odd-year-old with his shaven head: either he was making fun of her, or he had gone crazy. How could he say such a stupid thing? It was as if he claimed that a historical figure like Napoleon had never existed.

“Do you feel okay?” Camilla asked, disquieted.

“Do you think I’m insane?” Tom asked. “Being insane means you live outside reality or you don’t accept it or believe in it. I’m perfectly rooted in reality, even if I may be the only one to accept it. It’s the people who believe in the historical truth of the Old Testament who are crazy, since they’ve turned their backs on reality.”

Camilla’s cheeks reddened and she said angrily:

“If the Old Testament isn’t a historical reality, then what is it?”

Tom sighed.

“To start with, let me tell you a little fable, a fable for children...”

He cleared his throat and started out telling a story well known to all Jews, Christians and Moslems on the planet: the tale in the Old Testament, the Jewish books contained in the first part of the Bible.

“A few thousand years ago, God created Heaven and Earth. Then light, then the seas, then plants, then the stars and the moon, then living creatures. Then God created man in his own image and from one of the man’s ribs God created a woman to be a wife to him. All of this was done in a few days. God put Adam and Eve in a magnificent garden: Eden. God told them that they might eat of the fruits of every tree of the garden save only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they disobeyed this

order, they would surely die. But the serpent came and tempted Eve, saying that if they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would not surely die, but would be as gods. And so the original sin was committed. God, in his wrath, drove the two miscreants out of Eden, not before making them mortal, and condemned them to the worst sorrows of earthly life. Leading a life of sweat and toil, Adam and Eve and their descendents then peopled the whole world with their seed. God saw that men were wicked and evil and had turned their backs on him. He repented that he had made men on the Earth and decided to destroy them with a flood of waters. Nevertheless, a just man, Noah, found grace in his eyes. God commanded him to make an ark and to come into it with his family and with two of every sort of living thing. God sent down the rain from the windows of heaven and the waters of the flood were upon the Earth. Every living substance which was upon the face of the ground was destroyed. When the waters were dried up from off the Earth, Noah went forth from the ark with his family and, with the animals he had taken into the ark, they were fruitful and multiplied and replenished the Earth. But the world was filled once more with evil people who wished to build a city and a tower whose top might reach unto heaven. God confounded their language, so that they could not understand one another's speech. Then, he scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of the Earth. And the name of that tower was the Tower of Babel."

Tom settled back in the depths of the comfortable armchair.

"Amidst all the people in the world, God chose one man. 'Abraham' he said to him, 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy house unto the land of Canaan'. Abraham obeyed and departed, leaving his native land, Mesopotamia, as Iraq was called in ancient times. He took with him his wife Sarah, his flocks and herds, camels and tents, and went forth. In this new land, corresponding to the State of Israel, God watched over Abraham and made him very rich. Miraculously, the decrepit elderly couple Sarah and Abraham finally had a son, whom they named Isaac. But one day, God wished to know if Abraham loved him more than all else. He said to him: 'Take now thine only son Isaac and offer him for a burnt offering upon an altar'. Submitting to the divine will, Abraham prepared to sacrifice his only son. But God, the great Lord, told him to lay no hand on Isaac, since he now knew that Abraham feared and respected him unconditionally. Isaac begot Jacob who himself had a son called Joseph. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him, since his father loved him more than all of them. So, they sold him to slave-traders and Joseph was taken to Egypt. But God came to Joseph's aid. One night, Pharaoh had two strange dreams. Only Joseph was able to explain them to the monarch. 'There shall be seven years of great plenty,' Joseph said, 'then shall there be seven years of famine.' Pharaoh was so

pleased with Joseph that he set him over all the land of Egypt. During the seven years of plenty, Joseph gathered up great stores. Then, in the following seven years, people came on their camels and went to Joseph to buy food from him. Among the crowds were Joseph's brothers, who had come from Canaan. They prostrated themselves before him, not recognizing him. Joseph forgave them and told them who he was, then invited his whole family to come and live in Egypt."

Tom shook his head very slightly.

"One day, after the patriarch Jacob had wrestled with an angel, God had changed the name of Jacob into Israel, Israel meaning 'who has fought with God' or even 'vanquisher of God'. So, all the members of his family were called the children of Israel from that time onward. After many long years in Egypt, the children of Israel became very numerous. The new Pharaoh, who had never known Joseph, said one day: 'The children of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply'. So, he ordered that the Israelites should be enslaved and his soldiers treated them harshly. Despite this, the people of Israel multiplied and grew. This Pharaoh then issued a cruel order: 'Every son that is born shall be cast in the river'. That is why, when Moses was born his mother hid him in a basket waterproofed with pitch and left it among the rushes along the bank of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter came down to wash herself at the river. She found the babe in its floating cradle among the bulrushes. She took it to her palace and raised it as her own child. Moses grew up; he took the side of the Israelites, killing an Egyptian. So, he had to flee and spent forty years away from Egypt. But one day, an angel appeared in the flames of a burning bush and God's voice was heard: 'The cry of the children of Israel is come unto me; and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt'. So Moses returned to Egypt and went and told Pharaoh to let the Chosen People of God go. But Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses. Then God became angry and smote the Egyptians with ten great plagues. The waters of rivers and streams were turned to blood. Next, frogs, mosquitoes and flies swarmed in the land. Each time, Pharaoh promised to let the Israelites depart, but as soon as God ended the plague, he hardened his heart and refused once more to let them go. Then there were millions of locusts that ate up everything as they passed, lice and illnesses of men and beasts. Finally, God slew the firstborn of every Egyptian family, but protected the Israelite families who had put lamb's blood on the lintels of their doors as he had instructed them to do.

Sheltered by this blood, the Jews lost not one single person. So, Pharaoh gave up the struggle and ordered the people of Israel to leave...”

After a brief pause, Tom went on:

“Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and so the Exodus began. Nevertheless, the Pharaoh changed his mind and set out with his army in pursuit of the fugitives. Cornered against the sea, Moses stretched out his rod over the waters, which divided to let the people cross on dry ground. Pharaoh and his army went in after them to the midst of the sea. Once safe on the other shore, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen of the host of Pharaoh, so not so much as one of them remained. And the people of Israel set out for Canaan, the Promised Land that God wished to give them. In the desert of Sinai, Moses went up a mountain and received from God the Tables of the Law, the famous Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, God’s ‘wrath waxed hot’ against the people of Israel, since when they didn’t see Moses returning, thinking God had abandoned them, had made an idol to worship: a golden calf. God wanted to exterminate his Chosen People, but Moses managed at last to repent of the evil he had thought to do to his people. Moses came down from the mountain and destroyed the golden calf, but killed three thousand Israelites to assuage the divine wrath. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert before reaching the land promised by God. Moses, their liberator, died during this time. Joshua became their leader and the people finally arrived in the Land of Canaan. ‘The living God is among you and he will without fail drive out from before you the inhabitants of this country,’ explained Joshua, ‘and we shall all live in his peace in the Promised Land.’ Nevertheless, at Jericho, the wicked people shut themselves up within the city walls. So, the Israelite priests blew their ram’s horn trumpets, the soldiers shouted a great shout and the walls of the city fell down flat. After this great victory, the people of Israel were able to settle in the land given them by God. The Israelites had been living for a long time in Canaan when one day the Philistines, the people of the sea, invaded the Land of Israel. To free his people, God chose Samson, who he gave amazing strength on condition he never cut his hair. But Samson was betrayed by Delilah, a woman he loved. She cut his hair while he was asleep and his strength was taken away. Then the Philistines seized him, put out his eyes and threw him in prison. David was still a young shepherd watching over his father’s flocks when the Philistines attacked the Israelites. Among the enemy was the giant Goliath. David alone wasn’t afraid of him and, armed only with a sling, he killed the giant. David became King and saved his people from all their enemies. God promised that the Christ, the Great Liberator, would be born of the House of David.

Solomon, David's son, built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, the Temple of Solomon in which God found a resting place. He also built sumptuous palaces..."

Tom closed his eyes for a moment.

"Look, I'd prefer to stop telling this childish fable at this point... What would be the point of me adding the tales of prophets like Jonah swallowed by a giant fish and spending three days inside it until the fish opened its mouth again and spit him out on a beach..."

Camilla protested.

"It's not a fable, it's a historical narrative told in the first part of the Holy Bible..."

Tom couldn't help bursting out laughing.

"There's not a word of truth in anything I've just told you."

Tom leaned slightly toward Camilla and raised his hands up to the level of his chest.

"Let's do this like a police enquiry, okay? We'll use facts and only facts to dig out the truth... Let's take Abraham first. According to the Bible, he set out with his herds of camels for the land of Canaan, the future Israel, around 1800 years before Jesus Christ... the problem is that camels did not begin to be gradually domesticated and used anywhere in the region until about 900 years before Jesus Christ. Before then, there's not a trace of bones, no pictures on vases, pottery, decorations on monuments. Let's carry on in the realm of the impossible: Abraham meets Philistines in Canaan. But the Philistines didn't reach the region for the very first time until seven hundred years later..."

Struck by a sudden intuition, Camilla interrupted him.

"As for the camels... the scribe may have wanted to enliven the story a little bit by adding camels..."

"The 'scribe', as you call him, was Moses in person. He's the man supposed to have written the Pentateuch, the first five books in the Old Testament, as you well know..."

With a barely perceptible smile, Tom continued.

"In his days, about 1,200 years before Jesus Christ, camels were still not yet present in the region. And yet Moses mentions them around thirty times in his narrative... and since we're talking about Moses... He was supposed to have left Egypt with 600,000 families, which was two-thirds of the whole population of that country in those days. Those were times when Egypt was at the height of its power, and its frontiers were tightly controlled by fortresses. If a horde of slaves had crossed these fortified frontiers, there'd have been written traces found in the state archives; the

Egyptian administration recorded absolutely everything, from major events right down to minor day-to-day management details. Do you think it wouldn't have made a note of the flight of nearly two million people? There's no way that could've happened. Besides, let's be realistic: the departure of nearly two million out of the three million inhabitants of Egypt would've been bound to cause a huge economic and social collapse. But there's no sign of the country having gone through any economic upheaval during that period. Nothing in the annals. Absolutely nothing."

"The Egyptians may have censored things out," Camilla suggested.

"In fact, out of centuries and centuries of archives, there isn't the slightest trace, not a single word mentioning the presence of Israelites in Egypt, even though they're supposed to have stayed there for 430 years according to the Bible. If you compare the Old Testament which mentions Egypt more than seven hundred times, there isn't even one monumental inscription on the wall of a temple, not a single text on a grave, not one papyrus. The absence of Israel is total... and this absence is reinforced in the Sinai Desert where 600,000 families are supposed to have lived for 38 years at the oasis of Kadesh-Barnea before they reached Canaan: despite this long stay, not a single archeological trace has been found. Modern archeological techniques allow the detection of even the slightest traces of the passage of simple shepherds. Yet not a vestige of the Israelites' long stay has been discovered there, or anywhere else in the whole Sinai Peninsula. Not a shard of pottery, not a single tomb. Isn't that odd?"

Camilla looked thoughtful and found nothing to say.

"Let's carry on looking at odd things," Tom said. "After Moses died, Joshua was entrusted with the conquest of the Promised Land. In a lightning war lasting just a fortnight, Joshua was to conquer all the cities of Canaan, massacring their civilian population, since God demanded it. At Jericho, the Jews' trumpets and shouting made the city walls collapse. The problem with this story is that Jericho wasn't fortified at the time of this supposed lightning war; the city wasn't even inhabited. Moreover, most of the cities mentioned had not yet been built. By comparing the various destroyed cities that actually did exist, archeologists have been able to prove that these destructions were spread out over some hundred years. So, there was never any lightning war... In fact, hieroglyphic inscriptions prove without a shadow of a doubt that Canaan was still an Egyptian province a whole century after the supposed conquest of the Promised Land by the Jews. Biblical Israel as described in the Old Testament is a myth..."

Seeing a flash of anger in Camilla's eyes, Tom felt he could put out the fire that was smoldering in her.

“Camilla,” he insisted, “the facts speak in my favor. Believe me, Abraham, Moses, Joshua never existed... they have no more of a historical basis than Homer’s saga of Ulysses...”

“You’re wrong!” she exploded. “Moses definitely existed and God punished the Pharaoh and the Egyptians who opposed him and his Chosen People.”

“Camilla, around 70 C.E., where was that God when the Roman legions swooped down on Israel and deported the Jewish people to teach them a lesson for having revolted against the Roman Empire? The famous Diaspora...”

Camilla went red. She groped for words, wanting to give a cutting riposte, but not finding one for the moment. Her pretty face was distorted by an unpleasant grimace. Finally she asked disdainfully:

“So how does Mister Know-it-all explain the birth of the Promised Land then, or the appearance of the Chosen People?”

Tom sighed.

“The story’s simple. So simple...”

*
* *

An adolescent figure walked forward in the airport building.

Like the angel he really was, Leo was dressed completely in white and carried a black violin case in his hand.

Since Goddess had told him that the Book had multiplied, a shadow of worry had perceptibly wrinkled Leo’s youthful forehead. He had thought that Evil was forever confined when he had recovered the Book from Rennes-le-Château. However, like a virulent plague, the forces of darkness embodied in an object had propagated themselves: other Books now existed, hidden all round the world, ready to let loose the apocalypse if their pages were opened.

Leo would see to it that this never happened, though.

God’s way would lead him to Egypt, birthplace of the great liberator Moses. Leo admired Moses: God had entrusted him with the task of freeing the Chosen People and Moses had not failed in his mission.

Leo would not fail in his divine mission, either.

He would find the Book hidden in the obelisk at Luxor before Thomas Anderson could. If that Satan once more crossed his path, this time he would not miss the chance to send him back to burn in hell.

Fortified by this resolution, Leo strode on as far as the corridor leading to the boarding lounges.

A security guard dressed in a smart blue suit and wearing a tie, standing behind the metal-detector gate asked Leo to put his violin-case on the conveyor belt of the hand baggage scanner. The case moved slowly into the machine's dark tunnel.

Leo walked through the metal detector.

Sitting at a screen, a second guard frowned as he noticed the violin trigger a soft warning bleep. The case came out of the tunnel and the guard stood up.

"Excuse me, sir, would you mind opening your baggage, please?"

"Of course," Leo answered, matching action to words.

The guard looked at the electric violin, made entirely of black metal, but edged with what looked like a bandolier full of golden bullets.

Seeing the guard's bewildered look, Leo explained:

"This is a 'New Design model violin which gives a sound as good as the best Stradivarius. I belong to an orchestra that's giving a concert in Cairo tomorrow evening.

"Why didn't you check this in with your hold baggage?"

"It's far too precious for it to leave my care."

The guard scratched his nose.

"And where's the bow?"

"Bows are always a security problem on airplanes," Leo said in his womanish voice. "It was sent yesterday on another flight with the bigger musical instruments."

The guard hesitated, unsure what to do, wondering whether he should refuse to let this strange violin onto the plane. A plump, balding man in his fifties came out of a small nearby room and walked over to them.

"A problem, Rashid?"

"Yes, sir. I don't know if I should let this gentleman take his instrument with him on the plane."

The official looked at the violin, frowned then examined Leo's neck.

He smiled, in on a secret.

"My late father played violin too," he said. "So I can recognize one at a glance."

Pointing a finger at Leo's neck, he went on:

"All great violinists, who spend hours and hours playing end up by having a callus at the base of the neck, where they tuck in the chin-rest."

He chuckled in friendly fashion.

“Of course you can take your violin with you, sir. Have a good trip.”

Leo bowed his head slightly as a gesture of thanks and picked up his violin.

He smiled, thinking that God was watching over him: the mark on his neck was the scar from when he had been stabbed with a screwdriver in a brawl. The ways of the Lord were inscrutable but always ended by having a noble sense sooner or later.

Walking on a dozen yards, Leo stopped in front of the display showing boarding lounges.

The emblem of Egyptair, the head of a pagan deity, caught his eye.

Leo’s mind flew to a distant horizon, to that past time when God bestowed his munificence upon Moses and his Chosen People to free them from Pharaoh’s yoke.

*
* *

Under Egyptian domination, Canaan prospered, with numerous flourishing city-states.

Around them, lacking any specific homeland, wandering in time and space, here, there and everywhere, a people of nomad shepherds eked out a living from its scanty flocks of sheep and lambs.

Not settled and not living in towns, these nomad people were called Israel.

Israel was seen as a lower-class group of people and despised by the rich and powerful Canaanite cities who nonetheless traded with these ‘gypsies’ of the Orient. In exchange for the products of their flocks, these poor Beduin of Canaan obtained the valuable cereals which were an essential part of their diet.

However, history with a capital H was about to sweep all away and invert roles. Israel would have its revenge over the haughty, wealthy Canaanite townsfolk. For the time being, though, what awaited these nomads, just like the Canaanites, was one of the worst upheavals they had ever suffered.

Egypt was not the power it had been in the past and no longer had the means to guarantee the safety of its colonies. Around twelve centuries before Jesus Christ, the redoubtable Philistines came from the West to land on the coast of Canaan and ravage the land. The region slid into war and chaos. Towns were abandoned and commerce totally disrupted in Canaan.

Some city-states even attacked others in order to survive, the strong preying on the weak in a period of anarchy and slaughter.

As the farmers of the devastated lowlands no longer were producing enough cereals to exchange them with the Israelite nomads, these were obliged to cultivate them for themselves and settle down in the highlands of Judea and mountains of Samaria. Avoiding the coastal area ruined by the Philistines, Israel took over those mountainous zones that had been sparsely populated until then and spurned by the Canaanites because of their rugged terrain and difficult access routes.

An enclosed space suited to a birth or genesis.

The scant few Canaanite villages present were overwhelmed by a flood of nomads and hundreds of rural settlements sprang up. In them stone buildings gradually replaced tents, and the former Beduin of Canaan little by little developed an Israelite ethnic identity. One of the oddities about these nomads lay in the fact that they never raised pigs and to distinguish themselves from their Philistine enemies who ate a good deal of pork, Israel would no longer eat any, so as to show its difference and its disgust.

There were them and the others.

These others, the Philistines, had settled permanently in the coastal regions of Canaan and their cities had begun to prosper. Two hundred years after the invasions, the tiny territory of the Israelite former nomads, inhabited by a bare fifty thousand people, was affected by a dream of coming down from the mountains to attack the Philistines and Canaanites, and to seize the fertile lands of the valleys. This mad and impractical dream nonetheless did come true thanks to a young shepherd called David. A megalomaniac, he brought the villages of Samaria and Judea together into a federation and had himself crowned its King. Leading a modest army with a motley collection of weapons, David swooped down on Canaan.

Every place where he set foot would become his.

David did not wish to leave alive any breathing creature, wanting to exterminate men, women and children to seize their lands. What he could not win by force, he intended to destroy, by cutting down the fruitful trees and stopping up the springs of water.

He invoked divine will to legitimize all the massacres he perpetrated: avid for power, human nature could always find an excuse for killing, denigrating the victims by accusing them of being evil monsters that must be eliminated.

The story of humanity always repeats itself in much the same way time after time.

Religious fanaticism was strong enough to move mountains and the blood-thirsty David was able to carve out some new territories for himself in Canaan. Nonetheless, David could not overcome the power of the Philistines, who were to remain in strength in the region for centuries. David's small kingdom coexisted willy-nilly with the Philistines and relations with this very powerful people in the neighborhood remained tense.

David died and Solomon his son took up the reins of the kingdom. When Solomon died, there was a split over the succession and the former nomad tribes separated. Two different kingdoms came into being: in the North, the Kingdom of Israel, whose capital was Samaria, and in the South, the Kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as capital.

Over the next three centuries, the Kingdom of Israel developed and prospered on former Canaanite lands: the plentiful water of the North allowed cereals to be grown, but also olive trees and vines. The lucrative trade in wine and oil enriched the villages situate near trade routes. These villages became flourishing cities. With improvements in diet and living conditions, the population of the Northern Kingdom was multiplied tenfold thanks to a very high birth rate: Israel now had a population of 400,000 souls. Samaria became an influential capital and a great administrative center, complete with a palace and its own temple to honor the gods.

Quite the opposite of Jerusalem.

In the South, an arid and hostile land, the Kingdom of Judah remained poor and marginalized with a sparse subsistence economy: its population was no more than forty thousand people and its capital was an unimpressive and unfortified little town of a thousand inhabitants.

However, the course of history was going to shuffle the cards once more.

When a territory became fertile and rich, sooner or later it stirred up greed among its neighbors: 720 years before Jesus Christ, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom and annexed its lands. The Assyrians had no wish to invade the Southern Kingdom, as it was too poor. Besides, they did not want to spread out over the region. They razed a city on their route, then went straight to Jerusalem to subjugate it through terror. To avoid destruction, the Kingdom of Judah agreed to become a vassal state of Assyria.

Paradoxically, this submission led to an unprecedented boom: a flood of refugees from the North boosted the population of Judah, the economy developed and the little Kingdom turned into a real State with an efficient administration. Its capital grew at lightning speed, with the built-up area and population increasing tenfold in just a few decades. As the city grew, it was provided with a defensive enclosing wall, with a clever system of

channels under the ground to ensure a water supply and above all with a temple, its very first.

With the Kingdom of Israel swept off the map, Judah was left alone to manage the Israelite inheritance. Jerusalem would be the town where it all happened.

Around 630 B.C., King Josiah was reigning over Judah, under Assyrian control. A descendant of the lineage of David, Josiah had a dream: he wanted to conquer the former Northern Kingdom. His wish was to re-unite all the tribes of Israel under a single King to form a single Kingdom: his own, based on Jerusalem. He felt he had both the duty and the means to do so. Indeed, suffering from internal strife and the attacks of the Babylonians, Assyria had pulled back from the Levant.

The temptation of breaking free was too strong for King Josiah to resist.

However, after a long dormant period, Egypt had just returned to its imperial pretensions: the country had the ambition of restoring its glory of former times. Egypt had taken control of one part of Canaan, ceded to it by Assyria, its ally for a time, and so became the only obstacle to Josiah's ideological aim: creating a great unified Kingdom of the people of Israel.

The Kingdom of Judah and Egypt were on the verge of a military confrontation.

A tiny kingdom against a huge country, like David against the giant Goliath.

So, King Josiah had the brilliant idea of inventing a text to pass on a message of hope, to galvanize and bring together the people of Israel. An account that would affirm that a small nation could triumph over the greatest of empires when that people was led by a great figure supported by God.

Like the mythical Moses in Egypt.

Josiah was hoping to play the part of a modern liberator and personify the holy alliance with God.

To do so, Josiah thus proceeded by stages.

The first stage was to discover 'by accident' during work on the Temple in Jerusalem forgotten books, supposedly very old, age conferring undoubted legitimacy and authority in everybody's eyes. These writings were officially handed over to the king who read them and tore his robes as a sign of consternation. A great actor, Josiah affirmed that these manuscripts contained the true lost history of their ancestors and that it was essential to publish them. Cobbled together from memories, remnants of old customs combining those of the North and the South, legends about the origins of various nations in the region, these writings were the fruit of the imagination

of scribes who had just drawn them up under the meticulous direction of Josiah.

The totally invented propaganda tale of a victorious confrontation of the Pharaoh by Moses was to become a national saga, a mythical but encouraging backdrop to strengthen faith and unite the people with a view to the coming conflict with Egypt.

While the myth of Moses embodied the struggle against the Egyptian enemy and victory promised by God through the performing of miracles, the myth of Abraham had been created to make a link with the past, to legalize the rights of a lineage to a territory and legitimize King Josiah. By means of long lists of generations, family alliances defining provinces and structuring time, Abraham was presented as the common ancestor of all the peoples of the region, as well as the father of Ishmael, the founder of all the Arab tribes. The underlying idea was that they all formed a united family going back to Abraham, the father to whom they owed obedience and especially to the King of Judah who was by implication his universal heir.

The myth of the patriarch Abraham also gave shape to the outline of a nation: his son Isaac had lived in the extreme South of Canaan and his grandson Jacob-Israel in the North. As for Abraham himself, founder of the family, he set Judah at the center of the universe, because that is where Abraham had settled. The tale of Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land had as its purpose to give even clearer details of the future borders for his Kingdom that were desired, showing what territory King Josiah wished to conquer. The Bible saga was in fact just a conquest written in the past tense depicting a promise for the future, an ideal, a conquest that Josiah hoped to achieve.

None of these "ancient" books dictated by Josiah to the scribes was a historical account. That was why they were full of divine interventions, exploits and miracles in which, among other things, God was seen as so bloodthirsty that he took the step of halting the sun and the moon in their course so as to give victory to the people of Israel. However, God, vindictive and pitiless, committed blunder after blunder, changing his opinion over and over again like a disorderly child: this showed that the mythical accounts had been written down hurriedly in one go. Josiah could not supervise everything, so gave the scribes free rein. He gave them instructions only as he read their work, so they rectified what they were writing with contradictions rather than having to start again from the beginning, because time was pressing.

Romanticizing their stories, the scribes made them up with their own knowledge, weaving fiction by recounting details contemporary to their era. They put in what was familiar to them, what their eyes and

consciousness could only see in the seventh century before Jesus Christ. They had a very poor acquaintance with ancient history and particularly the history of Egypt and its protocols: their ignorance explained the great number of grotesque errors and weird discrepancies to be found in the Old Testament. One example was the claim that camels were present in the region a thousand years earlier, when these beasts of burden had been domesticated for the first time only a couple of hundred years before. The story of camels simply described the caravan trade which was at its peak in the region in 630 B.C.: the caravans supposedly of the time of Joseph the son of the patriarch Jacob were in fact a picture of those of the Assyrian Kingdom in the times of King Josiah.

It was the same for the towns and kingdoms mentioned at the time of the patriarchs or of the Exodus of Moses: their construction or emergence was much later, although they were definitely there in Josiah's century. Despite not being correct from a historical point of view, the books ordered by Josiah still seemed 'true', as the scribes had constructed a fiction from existing kingdoms and cities known to everybody, cunningly bringing into the action real historic figures like David or Solomon.

However, everything said about them was no more than pure propaganda to exalt the Kingdom of Judah and King Josiah embellished the lives of his distant relatives with mythical exploits. Their memory served to build the ideology of a single strong people, of an Israelite monarchy unified under the legitimate dynasty of David. The Bible made out that the conqueror King David was master of a great and powerful Kingdom with its sumptuous capital, Jerusalem, at its heart. Reality, however, was quite different: David was master of no more than a tiny, poorly developed and sparsely populated land.

His son Solomon was presented as a great builder, the wisest of kings, so well known that the Queen of Sheba herself came to see him from the distant lands of Africa. Solomon had an empire such that no other could compete with it; he was supposed to be the constructor of the first Temple in Jerusalem where the God of Israel had found a place of rest. However, all that was just a tale from the Thousand and One Nights: at that time, as archeological evidence clearly shows, Jerusalem was no more than a modest mountain village without fortifications, temple or any palace.

The myth of the empire of David and Solomon served as a model for the great empire of Israel that was to come, setting out the boundaries hoped for by King Josiah in a future he imagined was near.

Recounting his own death and burial, which posed quite a problem of meaning, the first books supposed to have been drawn up by Moses in

person also contained a penal and civil code, a religious and health code: the Law. This was because no sovereign state could be governed without laws.

Also, no sovereign state could be governed without a king.

After the five called the Books of Moses, the Pentateuch, and those of the conquests, other manuscripts were produced as a continuation: the Books of Judges and of Kings. These writings demonstrated that without a king it was not possible to organize the nation, that it was impossible to judge without a hierarchy, because without a central power everybody did as they pleased and this led to anarchy. A southern document decrying northerners, the Books of Kings showed that only the Southern Kingdom, in the legitimate line of David, was called to govern the totality of the Israelite territories. In these books, the Northern Kingdom was seen as doomed to destruction because of the lack of belief of its sovereigns and the multi-ethnic nature of its population: having built Samaria, the accursed kings of the line of Omri were depicted as depraved apostates, governing a small, poor and marginal kingdom. However, in fact, as was confirmed by external written sources, King Omri was a great monarch, strong and influential, open to the outside world and having the means to build luxurious palaces in the flourishing cities of the North. However, as the Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed, Judah had been able to rewrite history to its own liking, attributing to itself the successes of the great kings of the North.

Adding a final touch to their work, the scribes, who never tired of praising him, presented King Josiah as a true Messiah, one having received divine unction, charged with restoring the unified monarchy and authority of David's line over all the Israelites.

Bolstered by these writings, once they had been made public, Josiah set out to achieve his dream of a great Kingdom of Israel. Nonetheless, this dream had to get past a final unavoidable hurdle: a new religion for shared worship.

Refugees from the Northern Kingdom had brought with them their traditions and cults. These cults were polytheistic: Samaria had built a temple to honor its principal god Elohim along with a multitude of goddesses. Judah had not escaped from polytheistic worship, either: while they honored a main god called Yahweh, there was also a pantheon of household gods, gods of the sun, moon and stars.

Having two religious cults in one land was a source of dissension.

Josiah wanted to be the sole King of a single people, a people united behind King and country, sharing a single, indivisible religion, a cult unifying the nation ready for the conflicts to come. So, taking the lowest common religious denominator of North and South, Josiah had another

stroke of genius: he imposed on his people one sole god with the generic name of the 'Eternal Lord'.

One single King, one single people, one single God.

If the writings of Moses prescribed the strict application of the Law with its total of 613 commandments, they equally insisted on the requirement of radical monotheism for Israel. Moses had destroyed the golden calf, the idol of the religion of Canaan, symbolically representing the victory of the God of the Israelites of the god of the Canaanites. As a new liberator, Josiah had to eradicate the 'infamous' idols hovering around Yahweh or Elohim that his people Israel, misled by time and forgetfulness, were worshipping.

Using an Inquisition before its day, Josiah undertook a vast reform by prohibiting and destroying by force all the temples and countryside sanctuaries in Judah, because it had been judiciously written in the 'accidentally' discovered books that the people of Israel should worship one sole God in one single place: the Temple of Jerusalem. By centralizing the place of worship in his capital, Josiah could adroitly control the economy, the State and people's mind. Jerusalem sucked the lifeblood of consciences by becoming the center of the universe for a people who could not honor their God unless they came all the way to the Temple.

Josiah's books set alight visions of a blind faith which spread like wildfire throughout the country. Thanks to these 'ancient' writings, Josiah had no difficulty at all in imposing a new religion and preparing the people for confrontation with Egypt.

The people of Israel were now ready to take up arms to recover what they considered was theirs. Through Josiah's genius, the Israelites in revolt believed they had been robbed of the lands of Canaan given to them by the Eternal. They were all convinced of this, because they had indubitable proof for it in a more than official document: the word of God contained in the 'rediscovered' manuscripts from the Temple.

A divinely notarized legal deed.

Because Josiah's writings were no more nor less than a legal deed intended to give legitimacy to the idea that the land of Canaan belonged to the Israelites. A forgery validated by a notary who could not be challenged: God in person. The Creator of the Earth could dispose of his works as he saw fit. The Lord had offered the Promised Land to his Chosen People and no mortal man could deny this divine will.

Stirred by the heavenly clauses assuring them that none could stand against them, the Israelites prepared to sweep down on Canaan. They hoped to drive out all those who had seized their Promised Land and recover what was owed to them.

Whatever it might cost.

12

France 1970.

Colombey-les-Deux-Églises

In the living room of the house called “La Boiserie”, the clock had just struck seven and nothing could be heard but the crackle of the fire on the hearth. On a low table, next to playing cards laid out in a successfully completed game of patience, a brimming cup released a thin twist of steam that climbed toward the ceiling.

Sitting comfortably in his armchair, Charles de Gaulle shut his eyes for a moment to drive away the trouble that still always tortured his conscience. He finally looked up sadly toward the French window.

Outside, the cold November night had glazed the dark landscape with an abrupt stillness. Despite the darkness, General de Gaulle could make out the immense, wild, gloomy horizons of the moorlands and forests, at the meeting point of the Provinces of Champagne, Lorraine and Burgundy.

He liked to take those simple country roads that ran from quiet village to deserted village, driving for hours and hours. For him, whatever the distance, the road was never long enough. His friends and family believed that the sight of these French landscapes struck a chord in his noble heart, that he enjoyed admiring them without cease while meditating on the future of France and its place in the world.

None of them had any inkling of the truth.

When he sat on the back seat of his Citroën DS, the monotony of the French countryside was his therapy in trying to forget: he concentrated his attention on these dull and ever-moving tones until he was hypnotized by them, splitting his soul off from his body so it could merge into a lifeless void. Then, his mind blank, like an animal drunk on infinite space, he felt alive once more, drowning his mind in the rustic kaleidoscope of the bucolic details that sped past before him.

However, when the road came to an end, his conscience took the upper hand and started to torture him once more.

How he would have loved to have lived on in ignorance, never to have read the Pontius Pilate Report or even the confessions of King Josiah.

The General sighed inwardly, thinking of Josiah's fraud.

That king had lied to his people by creating a false document supposed to come from God and the Jews had perpetuated the lie over the centuries, from generation to generation, even after being dispersed round the whole world by the Romans about 70 A.D., until finally Zionism had sprung up, a political movement laying claim to the right for a Jewish State to exist with the same frontiers as were described in the mythical conquests of Joshua.

A day-dream.

Believing in the legitimacy of their Land Promised by God, when it was based on the writings of a human forger, the Jewish community had united around Zionism and striven for this crazy idea. All the financial strength of the Jews had been mobilized to create a Hebrew State in Palestine.

Powerful and fanatical, with untold international ramifications, a small Jewish group calling itself the Sons of Abraham was also working behind the scenes to bring about this impossible dream. These Sons of Abraham had possession of a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report and had pressurized the Americans and the Vatican, threatening to make public the terrible secret of Jesus Christ if they did not eventually get their way.

An opportunity arose after the First World War: Palestine was put under a British mandate by a decision of the League of Nations when the Ottoman Empire, allied to beaten Germany, had been broken up. The Sons of Abraham finally achieved the creation of the precursor of a Jewish State in Palestine.

In the inter-war period, a major flow of Jewish immigrants settled in the Promised Land and in this precursor State. The Second World War broke out and when it ended, the horror of the genocide of Jews perpetrated by the Nazis led the Sons of Abraham to set up a real State in Palestine at any cost so their people would be sovereign and finally safe, sheltered from worldwide anti-Semitism. Brandishing the Old Testament as if it were a historical and legal document sent from heaven, the Sons of Abraham wanted to found a State that was far from legitimate and, in the view of some Jewish religious leaders, even ran counter to everything divine. Over time, most rabbis had developed an interpretation opposing the recreation of a Jewish State: God had decided that the Jewish people should be dispersed as a punishment for its sins. Only God, through his intermediary the Messiah, could restore Israel. Any attempt to do so ahead of time was

not just certain to fail; it ran the risk of bringing down divine anger. However, the Sons of Abraham convince orthodox rabbis that it was a divine commandment that the Jews should settle in the Holy Land and that following this commandment might even speed up the return of the Messiah.

As they wept for their brethren exterminated in the death camps, the Sons of Abraham threatened the U.S.A. with revealing the Pontius Pilate Report if a sovereign State of Israel was not quickly created. In 1947, the British handed back the mandate over Palestine they had been granted by the League of Nations to the United Nations Organization, the successor to the League of Nations.

The U.N.O., that useless bureaucratic institution, as General de Gaulle considered it, voted in Resolution 181: thanks to the partition of Palestine into a Palestinian Arab nation and a Jewish nation, the State of Israel was now official. It was all the easier to accept the creation of this country, because international public opinion was horrified by the Shoah, the six million Jews slaughtered by Hitler, so from compassion or as compensation, Westerners gave another people the land of a third party. The U.S.S.R and its satellites also backed Resolution 181, wrongly believing that this State would become a Communist country, as the Zionist ideology, characterized by sharing goods for the benefit of the Jewish community, was an ideology close to the socialist ideal.

The Arab countries, for their part, refused to recognize this outlaw State. Egypt, Syria and Iraq at their head, they attacked the State of Israel, aiming to destroy it. Against all expectations, the Jews won successive wars in 1948 and 1967. Israel seized new territories, expanding its borders by annexing the land taken by conquest from its Arab enemies. Jewish armies emptied these conquered zones of their Moslem inhabitants, perpetrating massacres, orchestrating terror and exile by bombing innocent villages, deporting all the Arab civilians so as to appropriate their property. The force of circumstances led the former victims of Nazi camps to become the new executioners of Palestine.

A human could change from sheep ready for slaughter into a butcher ready to slaughter in an instant.

The U.N.O. turned a blind eye to these frontiers born from warfare and, in violation of its own Resolution 181, recognized *de facto* the new borders of the State of Israel and accepted the commission of crimes against Palestinians. The Sons of Abraham were delighted, for at last they held the Promised Land. However, the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, sounded a cautionary note to all this joy, telling them that the Vatican cooking up something behind the scenes: the Church had compiled a

legal dossier intended to be weighty enough to threaten the Jews with throwing them all out of Palestine, hoping in this way to have a counter to the blackmail of the Pontius Pilate Report and, by showing its teeth, to calm the wilder territorial aspirations of the Sons of Abraham.

By penetrating the Vatican, and even sneaking out of it certain manuscripts, the agents of the Mossad had managed to microfilm all the secret archives. In particular, they had copies of the complete legal dossier made up of Egyptian papyruses, Mesopotamian documents and reports of a whole range of archeological discoveries.

The dossier proved without a shadow of a doubt that the Old Testament on which the right of the Hebrew people to claim Palestine rested was a forgery. The dossier was a meticulously detailed list of charges intended for international tribunals, a historical enquiry revealing the truth about what had happened at the time of King Josiah.

It was supported by the confession of the criminal Josiah.

The Vatican had in its possession a document dating from 600 B.C. in which King Josiah described his treacherous wrongdoings to Pharaoh Neko II: Josiah admitted he had made up the writings of Moses and had invented the myths of Moses, Abraham and also Joshua. Nobody knew how this written confession had come to be found in a temple at Thebes in the keeping of a group of priests who called themselves the 'Initiated', but during Napoleon's Egyptian campaign the document had been found among others and the Vatican had laid hands on the whole lot.

For the ultra-pious Sons of Abraham, Josiah's confession was the death-knell of their religious convictions. Their small group returned to being what it always had been: a political and financial group, even if some of its members still cherished the illusion that God was on their side despite all Josiah's lies.

The Vatican had never chosen to publish this confession. To start with, because the Old Testament was the basis for Christianity, the foundation of the Bible, and no Pope would be crazy enough to saw through the branch on which he sat. Furthermore, in retaliation the Sons of Abraham would have taken revenge by spreading the Pontius Pilate Report all round the world. In creating a legal dossier as a counter-weight to the blackmail by the Sons of Abraham, the Church was playing with fire, because Israel had nothing to lose. Revealing Josiah's confession would not change things: Israel was at war with all the Arab states. Even if international tribunals brought in a new U.N.O. resolution to replace 181, the Jews were ready to fight the rest of the world if an attempt was made to drive them out of Palestine.

There they were and there they would stay.

Whether or not there was a confession, whether or not it was legitimate, these lands were henceforth theirs.

Besides, who would dare to try to push out the Jews or make them return their lands to the wretched Arabs from whom they had snatched them, now Israel had the atom bomb? Who would dare to order the Americans to hand back the U.S.A. to the Sioux or the Apaches and abandon all their immense achievements and successes?

Nobody.

Through fear, force imposed respect and legitimization of such immoral situations.

The Americans and the Vatican had believed they were handing a poisoned chalice to the Jews by assigning them a right to the Promised Land. They were convinced that the State of Israel would be annihilated in a few months by the Arab armies, imagining that Israel would be just a brief interlude soon forgotten. However, the Hebrews had been more cunning and stronger, managing to raise a victorious Jewish army, equipped with airplanes and heavy weapons.

Now the U.S.A. had to continue tamely obeying the Sons of Abraham, blindly supporting Israel's every action. The Americans had ordered the Vatican to try nothing against Israel, because the Church, like themselves, had much more to lose than anybody if Josiah's confession, or especially the Pontius Pilate Report, was made public, a threat quietly still hinted at by the Sons of Abraham.

If the report were published, the Russians would certainly win the Cold War and many Christian countries would topple over into the Communist camp, because, after all was religion not the opium of the people, as Karl Marx had put it? In any case, publication of the report would bring the collapse of the Christian religion and all nations would turn to the "Reds" as an emergency exit from their now despised religious ideals...

General de Gaulle sighed.

He leaned forward and picked up the cup, drinking its contents in short, quick sips. His thoughts tended to wander over a sea of troubles ever since a French spy had infiltrated the Mossad and microfilmed part of the secret archives from the Vatican, including the famous legal document containing Josiah's confession. The spy had also microfilmed a translation of the Pontius Pilate Report and, faced with such explosive papers, had put them all personally into the hands of the General, the only person capable, as he saw it, of taking cognizance of them and of saving the world from the coming cataclysm.

De Gaulle sighed again as he thought of Israel.

It was an amazing story, all the same. Throughout the whole history of humanity, there had been thousands of conflicts and seizures of territories, mass deportations and changes in populations. Yet never once had a past act been rectified later on by international authorities.

All because of a book.

Because the creation of Israel did not arise from the Shoah or the Diaspora. If that were the case, the Armenian people had also suffered genocide in 1915 and a diaspora. Nonetheless, nobody had given them back the lands that the passage of history had snatched from them.

The difference was no more nor less than a book.

That book was the Old Testament. Apart from the Communist countries, which worked on shrewdly partisan lines, the Judeo-Christian nations had felt that the restitution of the Promised Land to the Jewish people was legitimate because of the Bible. For two millennia, the West had blindly believed in the historical accuracy of the Bible and the certainty God's will had assigned Palestine to the Hebrews.

Who could stand up against God's Holy Spirit?

Nothing and nobody. At least not as long as Josiah's confession revealing the fraud of the Old Testament had not been made public.

When the scandal broke, any ethnic minority would be able to lay claim to rights over lands they had held in the past, even without, perhaps especially without, 'divine legal deeds', such as Josiah had fraudulently made up. Because what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander, it was enough for any of these communities who had suffered in history to quote U.N.O. Resolution 181, a world decision acting as a precedent, to open the door to any historical border claims.

As the Old Testament was a forged document, Israel was illegal and nothing gave the Jews any right to own Palestine. The Arabs bereft of their lands had a right to bring suit against the U.N.O. and demand that their country be returned to them. Of course, a Devil's advocate might still try to justify these expropriations by arguing that historically the Jews had lived in the region before the Arabs. However, on that basis Egypt could lay more claim to Palestine than anybody else, as the whole region had been in its hands well before the Jews arrived, as shown by papyruses that proved this fact irrefutably, documents far more official and historical than the forgery made up of Josiah's writings and called the Old Testament.

Israel's illegality had triggered the Palestinian Arabs' diaspora. There was no good cause for the latter to accept this illegitimate state of affairs. Rather, the Jewish people ought to agree to the restitution of lands which had never really belonged to them. Descendants of the crook Josiah, the

Jews ought to give back what their criminal ancestor had willfully appropriated. As their false religion drew its origin from a crafty fellow who had chosen to seize a Kingdom for himself by imposing radical monotheism, Israelis should no longer follow the 'Jewish' faith. They should become citizens of the world, forgetting their false elitist beliefs, no longer God's Chosen People, but rather the Wise Men of the Promised Land, which they should return to its true owners.

Josiah's legacy had been the worst poison pill ever inherited by unwitting children. The Jews had been the victims of history, victims of the crook of an ancestor who had put them in danger, pushed them down a slope that grew ever steeper as centuries passed and which would end by leading them to future perdition. Paradoxically, if the Jewish spirit had survived time and the cataclysms of history, it was thanks to these writings, thanks to Josiah's lies. However, these writings were a plague turning the Hebrews into the sick men of time and with time everything would disappear...

General de Gaulle smiled sadly.

The irony of history was that Josiah's dream of a greater Israel had not come to pass in his lifetime, but two thousand years later, to the detriment of inhabitants who had lived there for two millennia, not just a few centuries, centuries that had nonetheless justified ownership in the eyes of the Christian world.

Would the Jews someday soon return those lands to the Palestinians?

He doubted it.

The near future was already mapped out: Israel had the atom bomb and would threaten to use it against its Arab enemies. The United States would blindly support Israel with their military power for fear of a nuclear conflict and the Arabs would have no choice but to exert pressure with their oil: the world economy would be dislocated, throwing millions onto the dole and stirring up new and bloody conflicts all round the world.

All of this because of Josiah and his crazy religion.

A human fraud.

Because of that misappropriation, the situation in Palestine would always be explosive: the Israelis would refuse to hand over what they had built up, while the poor Arabs stripped of their property would continue to struggle to reverse this historical aberration.

That was what the future held.

Worse, simply publishing Josiah's confession would change nothing.

Nonetheless, General de Gaulle had decided in his soul and conscience to reveal that confession to everybody simultaneously with the Pontius

Pilate Report. For many long years, he had hesitated. His mind had been tortured by the evil that would ensue from these revelations. However, after long agonizing and despite the worries still present in his mind, he had reached the unavoidable conclusion that he had to do it for the good of humanity.

To avoid future wars.

The truth would hurt and cause deaths in the short term. Communist countries would be reinforced by it for a while. However, if he did nothing, in the longer term, these centuries-old lies would destroy the world through wars of religion that had no place in today's world.

God was a boot stamping on an ant-hill and de Gaulle was planning to reveal what he knew about his son Jesus Christ. In a final volume of his 'Memoirs of Hope', he would crown his autobiography with the publication of Josiah's confession and Christ's secret.

General de Gaulle's sad eyes fell on the crucifix above the fireplace.

He still went to church on Sundays out of respect for his wife. However, every time he went there, he could barely contain himself from bursting out in crazy laughter and telling all the parishioners the truth about that Christ they all worshiped. Besides, when he died, he had no desire to be blessed by the Church, although unaware consciences could celebrate a mass to soothe themselves if they wished.

When he died...

A strange sensation came over him. His neck stiffened and a terrible pain paralyzed his whole body. Before he collapsed onto the floor, the outline of an unknown figure standing out against the French windows imprinted itself on his fear-stricken eyes. In a last lucid moment, de Gaulle realized that the threats he had received from the Sons of Abraham concerning the writing of his memoirs had not been just empty words.

13

Possessed

“Repent, for the Kingdom of God on Earth is nigh,” thundered Jesus in his powerful voice.

Before him, the crowd stood compact, almost treading on one another in their efforts to get closer, to touch him for just an instant, as if wishing to check he really had a physical body. Popular fervor was at its peak. As far as his eyes could see, Jesus made out more people coming toward him. Under the pressure of the crowd, he stepped back a few paces. His feet sank into the sandy soil of the shores of Lake Tiberias. Behind him, lay the fresh water of this immense natural reservoir. He did not turn to look how many yards he still had before he would fall into the lake. He was fascinated by this multitude come to adore him, standing before him in a dense, dark mass on the slopes of a small hill. His disciples had traveled throughout the region announcing to all the arrival of Christ at that place. So, this day men and women had responded to the call. Jesus could read in their eyes much more than devotion.

Hatred...

A feeling that he would not be able to sweep away. At least, not immediately.

“Repent,” repeated Jesus. “The Kingdom of God is nigh.”

His tone was less fiery, as if he said the words with regret. Facing the crowd, Jesus spoke about Kingdom, which he promised would very soon come into being. The more he talked, the more minds became heated, as a somewhat crazy hope came into their consciousness. The dense mass came even farther forward, pressing against him forcefully, risking crushing him at any moment. Taking two steps back, Jesus felt water on his feet.

He turned his head.

Twenty yards from there, he saw a fisherman. An hour earlier, before the crowd had arrived, Jesus had seen his comings and goings on the lake from

the top of the hill. Returning from fishing with his brother, the man had beached his boat on the sand and disembarked, astonished by the number of men and women surrounding Jesus. Now, while patching his nets, he was listening thoughtfully to Jesus.

Jesus squeezed past as far as him and asked him to take him away from the crowd. Understanding the uncomfortable situation, the man nodded agreement. Jesus climbed into his boat and joined the fisherman's brother in the stern of the craft. Afloat again, the boat moved a short distance from the shore. Jesus stood up as best he could, his feet slightly caught in the nets, and spoke shore-ward in a powerful voice. Ending his preaching with a sentence which drew applause, he sat down. Copying him, the crowd also sat, not seeming to want to leave, as if waiting to see what the man called by his disciples the Messiah would do next.

Jesus turned to the two fishermen. Both had a chestnut-brown beard, and pleasant, fine features from which large dark eyes shone. They looked very alike, leaving no room to doubt they were relatives. Jesus addressed the elder.

"You are Simon, are you not?" asked Jesus. "Your younger brother here is Andrew."

Simon nodded silently, astonished that this charming passenger knew their name, as if he had read it in them.

He is a mind-reader as well as a prophet, thought Simon in amazement.

Jesus pointed to the middle of the lake.

"Let us go to deeper water," was his instruction.

Simon dared not ask him why. He was under the charm of this man of some thirty years and obeyed him docilely. The oars were put in the rowlocks and the boat drew slowly away from the shore.

When they reached open water, Jesus stood up. Peering around the horizon, he appeared to be looking for something that he alone could see. He raised his head as if he were speaking inwardly to the powers of heaven. Then his gaze fell back on the blue waves of the lake. He next stretched out his arms and moved his hands in small circles. He stopped abruptly.

"Let down your nets," said he to the two brothers.

"Let down the nets for fish?" asked Simon, astounded. "We toiled all the night and took nothing. Usually, we are certain to catch some carp, but today I cannot tell what is happening. It is as if the fish have disappeared and..."

The fisherman cut short his sentence. A huge, dark, compact mass appeared under the surface a couple of cables' lengths away. The lake's

waters seethed as if it were boiling. Simon soon realized that this optical effect was due to fish leaping out of the water, wriggling as they headed in a mad dash straight for the boat. With the aid of his brother, he cast the nets. Two minutes later, they were on the point of bursting, so full were they of fish.

Seeing the amazed and delighted look of the two brothers, Jesus burst out laughing.

“There are far too many for this small boat,” said he with a chuckle. “Why not call over that boat which I see in the distance. Are they not your partner James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John?”

Simon stared at him in stupor and incomprehension.

“By God,” thought the fisherman, “he must read my thoughts.”

Simon nodded, then put his fingers to his mouth and whistled loudly. After that he made signs by waving his arms at the boat that was some three hundred yards away. Rowing forcefully, James and John quickly joined them. It was high time; Simon’s boat was threatening to founder under the weight of the fish that he had hauled out of the lake. The fishermen filled the two hulls as full as they could, right up to the limits of overload or even sinking, their gunnels nearly awash.

Seeing this miraculous catch, Simon fell to his knees at the feet of Jesus.

“Lord, do not stay in this boat, for it is unworthy of a divine being like you. I am only a humble fisherman and do not deserve even to look at you.”

The other three fishermen also kneeled. Jesus spoke to them, saying:

“Come with me and I will make you fishers of men for the glory of the Father who is in Heaven.”

Simon could not believe his ears; on the shore of the lake he had heard the sermon about the Kingdom of God on Earth and this Messiah was proposing no less than that he become one of his close followers. The miracle he had just witnessed made Simon even surer he was right; he was indeed in the presence of the Messiah, of the Son of God as the crowd had acclaimed him.

With barely contained joy, Simon agreed to leave everything behind and follow this divine being. The other three fishermen did likewise.

Boats began to appear from all quarters; from the lake or the shore, other fishermen had seen the miraculous haul of fishes and in their turn came to cast their nets into the deep waters.

“It is time to return,” said Jesus.

The two boats left the site of the miracle and rowed slowly toward the shore. They landed not at the foot of the hill where the multitude was

waiting, but a thousand yards farther on, near some sheds used for repair work and storing boats for the night. Simon and his younger brother got out by leaping over the side of the boat some distance before the hull ran onto the sand. John and James did the same. The father of these two was there; Zebedee staring in surprise at the load that his sons and their partners were bringing back. Before he had even had time to ask what had happened, James explained to him the miracle that had been performed by the Messiah in person.

Jesus observed the scene in silence, looking steadily for a moment at the sons of Zebedee as they chatted with their father. While James was tough fellow some thirty years old with massive fists and good sea-legs, his brother John was very different in nature. Unlike his brother, whose beard was thick and black, John was almost beardless. The few hairs that might have darkened the whiteness of his thin cheeks were in any case shaved off meticulously every day, as if he disliked having them invade his face and spoil its undeniable great beauty. His almond-shaped eyes topped by eyebrows that were just a straight line, his long, black, swept-back hair, his narrow, but long and straight, nose accentuated the sensation of delicacy in this young man aged around a score of years. From behind, his body could have been taken for that of a teenager, or even of a woman.

Jesus turned his gaze on Zebedee. The eyes of the old man with white hair and beard shot hostile glances at him. He was visibly unhappy to be losing at one and the same time both his partners and his sons, who were going to go off and leave him alone with two boats on his hands. His voice grumbled like thunder as he attempted to dissuade them from such folly.

In vain.

The for fishermen's decision was unshakeable. They tried to convince the old man that their choice was well founded, telling him once again about the miraculous catch of which they had just been the witnesses. Zebedee, however, was no longer listening to them. He stared at Jesus with burning eyes as if he were hoping to strike him down on the spot.

He doubts me...

Zebedee was on the point of saying something, but John spoke.

"We are following God's will," asserted the young man in a soft, mild voice.

The old man angrily muttered words nobody could catch, shrugging his shoulders. A great din had covered part of what he was saying. Rushing up from all sides, the crowd had finally caught up with the small group, submerging it, surrounding it and acclaiming Jesus as the Son of God that he was.

From the top of the hill they had all seen Christ's actions and the boats bringing back a prodigious amount of fish. They had been front-row spectators of an unbelievable phenomenon: a miraculous catch. Their belief in the Messiah had increased tenfold and now they risked crushing him in their wild frenzy.

The disciples rapidly formed a circle around Jesus, helped by the four fishermen. Jesus was able to break free from the crush of people and took advantage of this to embark once more in Simon's boat. In a powerful voice he called for calm. The cries of joy finally subsided.

"I must now leave you, but soon we will meet again," promised Jesus.

Turning to his disciples, he suggested to them that they distribute the fishes that were overflowing the two hulls in accordance with each one's needs.

Jesus came down from his improvised dais, made his way through the crowd and strode rapidly along the shoreline. He needed to get away from these people, to distance himself from all this. There was a lump in his throat. Sad feelings came over him.

What I did was wrong... but I had no choice. Forgive me, Heavenly Father...

There was another reason for his disquiet.

The Possessed.

Nobody seemed to grasp the full extent of this menace. Jesus was consternated and a thousand questions jostled in his head.

"May I join your group?" asked a man's voice, bringing Jesus' steps and thoughts to a halt.

Jesus turned his head. A red-headed man some forty years old was looking at him out of his small green eyes.

The long, tall, white, Customs building, constructed of shaped stones, cast a large and soothing shadow before its façade facing the lake. There, sitting on a chair in front of an office whose door stood wide open, his arms folded and resting on an attractive red tunic, the man smiled enigmatically, revealing large and astonishingly white teeth. He rubbed a hand over his broad forehead covered with reddish freckles to wipe away the sweat. Then he stood up, mechanically running his plump fingers through his carrot-colored beard, and scratched his big fat belly.

"May I join your disciples?" asked the man once more, bowing reverently.

For an instant, Jesus wondered if he could be serious.

A publican!?

On the death of Herod the Great, the tyrannical King of Israel under the control of Rome, the country had been divided between his three sons. Galilee and Perea had fallen to Herod Antipas, Judea and Idumea along with Samaria to Herod Archelaus, while the lands to the North-East of the Jordan had gone to Herod Philip.

These three kings each had a Chief Steward in their service. Their role was to organize tax collections throughout the country for their masters and the Romans. So as to carry out this heavy task successfully, these Royal Stewards relied on highly unpopular officials.

The publicans.

Such tax collectors, under the direct authority of the King or of the Roman Government, were generally wealthy men. Enjoying a good level of education and gifted with figures, they were notoriously dishonest, but as long as the cash they brought in matched the amounts expected and arrived at the proper time, the Royal Steward would have nothing to say to them and would close his eyes to the methods that the publicans used to put pressure on tax-payers, even if they included blackmail and intimidation.

The publicans had the habit of associating with themselves in each village an assistant who knew everybody well and from whom it was hard to hide the exact amount of one's income.

Jesus scrutinized the publican's face. He then realized that the red-head was in earnest and wanted to leave his privileged position to follow him.

Faith conquers all.

The sound of conversations could be heard in the distance. Jesus' disciples, accompanied by the four fishermen and a crowd of people who refused to go home, came up to the Customs Office where it stood right against the lake shore.

Jesus looked hard at the publican.

"Follow me!" said he.

The red-head did as he was told, left everything and followed Jesus. As they had not heard the publican's request, the disciples who had just arrived thought that it was Jesus' express wish that he should join their ranks. They were amazed that this plump fellow called Levi would follow Jesus without question or protest.

To gain acceptance from them all Levi took the first step and invited the whole troop to eat in his house. Showing no prejudices whatsoever, he invited all in the crowd to come with him. A few of his publican friends joined them and the number eating together was eventually around fifty. Levi's house was far from being a humble abode. It oozed luxury, from the entrance door made of rare woods to the richly furnished room where the

guests were invited to enjoy their meal. As if it were to be his last meal on Earth, Levi was lavish with the food, serving the best he had without counting the cost and choosing the most sumptuous of the wines that he had carefully stored in a cellar full of amphorae. Levi was ready to sacrifice all of that to gain the privilege of becoming Jesus' disciple. Jesus knew that the publicans who gathered taxes for the Roman occupiers were detested and feared by all the tax-payers in the country, who called them thieves. The Jews considered they were betraying their fellow-countrymen, despised them and saw them as like notorious sinners, who openly transgressed the Law of Moses.

By agreeing to eat at their table, Jesus had deeply shocked everybody present. However, nobody dared go against Christ's will. This disdain, as Jesus saw it, was unjustified and he had deliberately incorporated Levi into his group, to the great surprise of his immediate followers, who stared at the plump red-head with a black look.

They will come to know him and learn to live together.

A close disciple of Jesus, a partisan of John the Baptist, could not stand his Master sharing the same table as these tax-gatherers, whom he saw as corrupt.

"Why does the Master eat with publicans and those who have so little respect for the religious Law?" asked he of another disciple pointing to the crowd with a disdainful air.

Despite the buzz of conversation, Jesus heard the question.

"It is not those who are well who have need of a physician, but rather those who are sick," replied Jesus to the comment. "I have not come to call to repentance the Righteous, like yourselves, but rather sinners, those who transgress the religious laws. Also, though, those who doubt me I will call to repentance."

And it is mercy that I wish, not sacrifice. However, can he even understand this word?

The disciple nodded his silent agreement, then added, with a grimace that distorted his face:

"The disciples of John the Baptist often fast and pray, even the disciples of the Pharisees do likewise. So, why should these eat and drink without stint?"

With a jerk of his chin, he indicated the fishermen. Simon and his brother Andrew were eating hungrily.

"Why do they not fast?" said he insistently to Jesus.

Using a metaphor, Jesus told him that these fishermen were neither ready nor purified, as John's disciples might be, but that a day for this would soon come.

With a sweep of his arm, he indicated that the discussion was closed and that he would not return to this subject.

The remainder of the festivities took place without any disciple daring to express other criticisms. Jesus stayed with Levi for part of the afternoon, debating together at length. When the evening came, the red-head invited Christ to sleep in his home. When this proposal was put, Simon appeared uneasy. He came up to Jesus and begged him to come with him. It was true that he had nothing but a modest fisherman's hut which he shared with his brother, but he insisted on the Messiah coming there, asking him to do so as a favor. Jesus saw a strange glint in Simon's eyes. The fisherman was not telling him the true reason for his invitation. In the depths of those eyes, Jesus could see the distress of a man at the end of his tether, hoping to be given help.

Jesus accepted.

On the way leading to the lake, Simon confessed to him.

"I have received a message from my mother-in-law," said he. "She is unwell. I am afraid lest she may become Possessed... Can you cure her, Lord?"

Jesus remained silent. Worried, he followed Simon and Andrew as far as the lakeshore. On the sandy beach there stood a hut. About twenty foot by fifteen, build of wood, it had a thatched roof discolored by the sunlight. Simon and his brother went into the house, whose sole furniture was a table and six stools, as the beds were no more than mats lying directly on the floor. Alongside a naphtha lamp that shed a dim light, Simon found his mother-in-law on her sleeping-mat and he kneeled and laid a hand on her forehead; she was burning up with fever. Jesus entered in his turn. Huddled under a blanket, an old woman with long white hair was shivering with cold.

"Can you cure her, Lord?" asked Simon once more, standing up.

Jesus came and leaned over her. Then he ordered the two fishermen to leave them along. The two brothers went out in silence.

Night had just fallen. The stars were twinkling and the full moon was starting out on its course in the sky, illuminating the calm waters of the lake with its reflected light. It also lighted up the worried faces of the fishermen. Their anxiety grew as the minutes passed. Half an hour had gone by before Jesus finally came out.

"We are afraid that my mother-in-law will become Possessed; can you cure her?" pleaded Simon.

"The evil has departed," replied Jesus. "She is cured."

Seeing the surprised looks of the two fishermen, he added:

“She is well. She is preparing a light meal for us.”

Simon thought that Jesus was not just a prophet or a seer, but also an incredible healer. Was that not normal for the Son of God, though? Jesus was so humble that not once in the whole day had he heard him boast of these gifts. Only his disciples and the multitude saw him thus. Besides, this was legitimate after the miraculous haul of fish. The Messiah had now revealed another facet of his powers: the ability to cure the Possessed. Overcome with joy, Simon forgot to thank Jesus and went straight into the house to enquire about the state of health of his step-mother. Andrew followed him.

Jesus walked away from the modest abode.

The cool night air did him good. He went and sat beside the lake and let himself be caressed by the melodious sound of the waves coming to break on the sandy shore. However, this symphony of nature was not enough to assuage the deep disquiet that held him in its grasp.

The Possessed.

Simon had been right to worry about his step-mother. Nobody was safe from becoming possessed.

It all began with an uncomfortable feeling in the feet, a sort of pins and needles. Then the stomach was tortured by violent pains which became worse and worse until they were unbearable. From there, the disorder spread to the hands and head, as if they were being crushed in a vise. The joints felt as if they were dislocated and the fingers were affected by so fierce a contraction that even the strongest man could barely manage to move them. The victims of this disorder ended up by shrieking horribly about a fire that was consuming their hands and feet. Copious sweat poured off the whole of their bodies and their heads became heavy, leaving them dizzy. The disorder wiped out their memories and any people stricken by it walked like drunkards, no longer in control of their minds. Bouts of convulsions, depression and hallucinations then followed at an alarming rate.

A demon seemed to have taken possession of their bodies.

The fear of being seized by this demon and becoming ‘Possessed’ terrified the population. From one day to the next, neighbors, friends, relatives fell into this uncontrollable state. They were not longer themselves and their behavior was demented; they spoke of monsters threatening to devour them, or snakes crawling over their bodies. They no longer recognized anybody, and were icily indifferent to those formerly their dearest ones. Wracked by senseless fits of laughing, bouts of panic crying and nameless fears, they became extremely violent, hitting anybody

who came too close to them and slashing their own bodies with knives, sometimes even ending by cutting their own throats. Many of them finally died in a state of horrendous delirium.

Nobody seemed safe from becoming Possessed. The number of cases was already climbing.

The population had turned to the synagogues, seeking salvation as a defense against this disorder, offering animals as sacrifices to appease the wrath of the demons and giving alms to the priests so that they would implore God's mercy. However, despite all the incantations, the Scourge continued, striking even those who had entrusted their fate to the priests.

The Divine Scourge.

The Pharisees had named it the Divine Scourge, seeing in it God's punishment for the lack of faith of the Chosen People, corrupted and perverted by foreign influences. They attributed the Scourge to the shameful condition of sinners, men and women who transgressed the Law of Moses.

Everybody was convinced that it was a punishment from God and that those who became Possessed had sinned. They were paying in this way for their failure to observe religious precepts as they should.

Some foreign scholars might have seen in the disorder no more than a behavioral ailment, but they would have been very wrong. Many saw this as the end of days and the preaching of Christ, calling for repentance in preparation for the arrival of God's Kingdom, took on in their eyes their full messianic sense and coincided perfectly with what they expected.

The threat was still only limited for the moment. However, as Jesus knew, it could rapidly bring about the annihilation of the region and its population.

Sadly, that was the probable outcome of the Divine Scourge. Jesus was aware of what would happen if he did nothing to stop it. In a timeless vision, he could already see these legions of living dead, carrying torn-off limbs with a still functional arm, crawling through the dark shadows of lost sight toward the chaos of their shattered existence.

Why did the Kingdom of God not come to aid mankind? Why did the Kingdom of God not strive to eradicate Evil? That was one of its prerogatives. Jesus was amazed at its lack of action.

Then another question finally forced its way into his mind.

Is this haphazard, or is a superior will deliberately at work?

Everything pointed towards the second, rather than the first, idea being the truth.

If this is truly so, then it means that... Oh! That cannot be...

Jesus shuddered as he wondered whether the faculties within his power would be enough to counter the Scourge.

He prayed to the Heavenly Father for a long while.

Could he do something? Above all, should he act on his own, because he now knew that this Scourge was perhaps not just the outcome of adverse circumstances. In some high place, somebody was orchestrating it.

He sighed and looked at the sky as if he were seeking out that invisible enemy in the starry firmament.

That night, his dreams were full of fantastic beings with monkey-like faces, coming to take over human bodies and force them against their will to carry out demented acts.

The days that followed were similar to those preceding. Jesus continued to preach beside Lake Tiberias before even larger crowds, drawn there by the rumors and incredible tales of the Messiah's miraculous actions.

Several disciples baptized people to consecrate their belonging to Christ, as a promise committing them to be faithful to him for all eternity, come what might. Through this ritual, they also washed away the sins of the Jews who had transgressed the Laws of Moses and repented of it. The presence of Christ brought many in and they all hurried to receive from the hands of the disciples the water that was poured on their necks, in the ritual established by John the Baptist.

Jesus himself never took part in this ceremony, refusing obstinately to perform it. Nobody was upset by this, as the Son of God was above such matters. His baptism would be with fire, not with water, a ravaging and saving fire. Many people affirmed so.

Jesus brought together his closest disciples and told them that they should now make their way to Jerusalem. It was time for the priests of the Temple to come face-to-face with his divine authority. They all agreed and prepared themselves for the journey.

On the route southward to Jerusalem, they had to cross the region of Samaria.

The disciples were not very happy to travel across this district with a reputation for being dangerous, enhanced by the wildest rumors of mistreatment of Jews who passed through it.

The Samaritans cordially hated other Jews from the land, who returned like for like, especially those from the South, from Judea where Jerusalem was sited. This enmity had begun with the death of Solomon. The Kingdom built by the legendary King David, who had conquered and established the great land of Israel, continued by his son Solomon during his own lifetime,

was divided at his death into two rival Kingdoms; the Northern Kingdom called Israel and the Southern Kingdom called Judah.

Becoming the capital of the new Northern Kingdom, the city of Samaria grew up on a hill overlooking a main road leading to Jerusalem, itself the capital of Judah.

Later, when the invading Assyrians brought the Northern Kingdom to an end when they annexed it, they deported most of its inhabitants and replaced them with people brought from other conquered countries. The new cosmopolitan people who now lived in this region were called by the name of Samaritans.

After the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, Samaria and the rest of the country fell into Babylonian control, then passed through the hands of various different conquerors to end up under the Roman yoke.

After this old split, Samaritans had been accused of every evil by the southern Jews, especially of depravity; the holy writings of the Temple of Jerusalem lambasted them, denouncing their vices and particularly those of Omri, the King who founded Samaria the capital city, who was depicted as guilty of every perversion and transgression against God.

The Jews of Samaria, for their part, ignored these writings and based their faith on the books drawn up by Moses. For Samaritans, Mount Gerizim, which lay in their land, was the center of the world, the place expressly chosen by God to establish his Temple, instead of Jerusalem, and they had built a sanctuary to his glory there. According to them, this holy mountain had existed since before creation and had even escaped the Flood. It was with the earth of this place that Adam, father of all humankind, had been created. It was there that Abraham had gone to sacrifice his son Isaac to God.

These tensions, more or less mingled with hatred, between the two sister communities had worsened a century before when a High Priest from the Temple in Jerusalem had had the Samaritan sanctuary on Mount Gerizim razed to the ground. Since then, Jews traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem were at risk of attacks from Samaritans who were still keen on revenge.

Jesus knew that a good number of Jews detested the inhabitants of Samaria and considered them pagans, sinners, uncircumcised, by their mere presence soiling the land of Israel, the Promised Land offered to Moses by God.

If only they could learn that they are both in error...

It was onto these inhospitable lands that Jesus and his disciples traveled on their way to Jerusalem. On their journey, they passed close to Sychar, a

small town which was noted for having not far from it Jacob's well. Jesus was exhausted by the long walk; a mile or so back he had separated from his disciples to continue alone toward the water source, hoping to drink there. The disciples themselves had headed for the town of Sychar to seek food.

The heat was overwhelming. Jesus wiped his brow looking down to the bottom of the well. There was no rope or bucket with which to draw water. He resigned himself and sat down, looking at the wild olive trees that formed a sparse glade all round the well. An hour had gone by when a woman dressed in a red tunic, her black hair tied back, came along the path leading to the town. She was carrying a pitcher tied to a long rope, and surprised by the presence of a stranger she halted for a moment, hesitating. Trying to hide her dismay under a carefree attitude, she walked up to the well and lowered her pitcher into it.

Jesus stood up and looked at her for a few seconds. An ugly scar that ran across her cheek did not succeed in destroying the great beauty of this woman with very light eyes.

"Please give me a drink," requested Jesus when she had drawn the pitcher back up.

She looked at him for an instant before responding.

"How is it that you, a Jew, dare to ask me for water, me, a woman of Samaria?"

She was alluding to the tensions and segregation separating the two communities. Jesus sighed inwardly.

"If you knew the messenger of God and who it is that says to you 'give me a drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Elle she looked at him mockingly.

"Oh, yes? You have nothing with which to draw water and the well is deep. How then would you be able to offer me such living water? Are you greater than our patriarch Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did his children and animals?"

Jesus stared into her eyes.

"Rebecca, whoever drinks of this water will thirst again..."

He pointed to the well.

"... but whoever drinks the water that I will give will never thirst. The water that I will give will be as an inward spring welling up into everlasting life in heaven."

The woman had grown pale on hearing the stranger call her by her name.

“Sir,” said she in a stammer, “give me this drink so that I will not thirst nor have to come here to draw water.”

Jesus smiled tenderly at her.

She misunderstands the nature of this living water...

“Go, call your husband,” said he to her. “Then come with him here.”

Rebecca scowled.

“I have no husband...”

“You did well to say that you have no husband, for you have had five husbands and he whom you now have is not your husband, but another’s. In that you spoke truly. Go seek him nonetheless.”

Astounded, the woman lifted a trembling hand to her breast.

“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet...”

She swallowed painfully. She was on the point of departing when her gaze fell on Mount Gerizim. From her earliest childhood, one question had never ceased to trouble her mind. This stranger seemed to be a seer with immense powers of insight. Perhaps he could answer her. So, she daringly asked him:

“Or fathers worshipped God on this mountain. But you other Jews, you say that God is in Jerusalem, in your fine Temple where hundreds of priests busy themselves offering sacrifices and praying to him...”

Jesus understood that she wanted to know where Yahweh really lived.

“Believe me, Rebecca, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem will we worship the Father. You worship what you do not know. We worship what we believe we know.”

Jesus raised his eyes toward the sky, staring for a moment at the white clouds floating in the blue.

“Salvation will be for all the Jews. The hour will soon come when men will worship the Father in spirit and in truth in the depth of their hearts, for the Father seeks such to worship him. God is a spirit and those that worship him must worship his spirit.”

Rebecca looked at him in silence. At that moment, the disciples came along the path leading from the town. To end her talk with the stranger who was a prophet, Rebecca said to him in a friendly tone:

“I know that the Messiah must come, who is anointed with divine unction. When he comes, he will tell us all things.”

The disciples had heard what she had just said to him, and stood still, their arms full of the food they had sought, waiting for their Master’s reaction.

Jesus clenched his fist imperceptibly.

“I who am speaking to you, I am he,” said he as if with regret.

In surprise, Rebecca opened her big light eyes wide, blinking for several seconds. She let go of her pitcher, whose precious liquid content tipped out on the ground, and she ran off.

Jesus stared at one of his disciples. In his dark eyes, a question was reflected; he was wondering what the Master could have been speaking about with that woman.

Jesus said nothing. He picked up the pitcher that Rebecca had left behind and drew water from the well. The precious liquid, with its exquisite flavor, quenched his thirst and his conscience, which had been briefly bruised.

He joined his disciples who had settled down in the shade of a tree. As he sat down, Jesus was offered a slice of meat. He waved it aside.

“I have food to eat with which you are not acquainted,” murmured Jesus.

A spiritual food that nourishes not the body but the soul.

Disconcerted, one disciple asked another:

“Has any man brought him food to eat?”

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work,” said Jesus angrily.

With a parable, he criticized their behavior. However, they did not understand, thinking he was speaking of other people, and so were in no way offended.

After the meal, half a hundred Samaritans arrived at Jacob’s well. Rebecca had gone to the town and told of her meeting with a stranger, a seer who had looked deep into her mind and had told her intimate secrets that he could not have learned from any other person. This prophet had announced that he was the Christ. Many wished to see this man sent by Providence.

Rebecca had returned, but her lover was not with her. Jesus was sad at this.

I had so many things to tell them...

For two days, camping out near the well, Jesus spoke with the Samaritans. He liked the mild fervor with which they treated him. He could see in their eyes something else than hatred and desire for revenge when they conversed together.

Hope of a harmonious future is alight in them.

Keeping away from the Samaritans, Jesus’ disciples watched their Master from a distance as he taught those they considered sinners and

depraved. For them, it was a waste of time to rub shoulders with these Samaritans. They therefore pressed Christ to cut short these useless chats.

Jesus finally consented and they prepared to take the road to the Temple at Jerusalem once again. When the Samaritans asked where they were heading, one disciple, who did not wish to indicate their true destination for fear of stirring up old rancor, replied that they were making for Galilee.

However, the Samaritans bore no ill-will. They had fallen under the charm of this charismatic Messiah. Many believed in him, not because of the revelations he had made to Rebecca, but thanks to the teachings he had offered. Now, all saw in him the savior of the world on whom their hopes rested.

The group reached Jerusalem several weeks later, as Jesus stopped frequently to teach the Samaritans, much though his disciples disliked it.

At the gates of the City of Zion, it was agreed that Christ should not be allowed to go to the Temple alone. Somebody should escort him.

Jesus pointed to the one who would accompany him. They all nodded agreement.

With the disciple he loved, Jesus walked into the city.

14

Plagiarism

Silence hung heavily in the air-conditioned V. I. P. Lounge at the Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport.

Her face pale, Camilla looked at Tom.

“The old Testament isn’t a notary’s document,” she finally protested, shaking her long brown hair. “It’s a divine message speaking of Paradise...”

“No,” Tom cut her short. “There’s no doubt about it, the Old Testament, or more exactly the Pentateuch made up by Josiah is like a deed drawn up by a lawyer. The proof is, the words Paradise and Hell aren’t mentioned even once in it. There’s not a word about eternal life. On the contrary, after Eden, men were condemned to become mortal. The notion of eternal life doesn’t appear until the Book of Daniel, written a long time after Josiah’s books and tacked onto the Old Testament in the same way as other late texts. This idea of eternal life came from foreign influences and especially Greek beliefs. I tell you again, the Pentateuch is a notarized deed intended to legitimize a people and a nation that were going to be created. It’s a contract specifying that all the lands they set foot on will be theirs. It’s no more nor less than an everlasting lease for a territory and an alliance with God who will give them victory on the absolute condition that the Israelites must obey his laws and will, or to put it another way, those wanted by Josiah. Josiah managed to persuade his people that the Promised Land belonged to them and they should die for it. Josiah made up a ‘genuine forgery’ of a legal deed with God in person as the notary, the most powerful and legitimate being there could be, since God created this Earth. That’s what explains the part of Genesis which tells the story of the creation of the world, and how God could make what use he liked of it, so he’d awarded it to his Chosen People.”

Tom smiled.

“Josiah knew how to flatter the Israelites’ ego and pride with this notion of the Chosen People of God, a divinely privileged elite, which, like any elite, wanted to remain such at any cost. Josiah thought of everything to cajole their minds and drown them in a very human flood of egocentricity. The least significant and most feather-brained idler could now feel as important as the King in person and was ready to fight to stay one of God’s elect, the center of the universe, and so he would blindly obey the Laws of Moses.”

Camilla spoke more sharply.

“There’s no way you could bring people to believe a lie like that if there hadn’t already been an oral tradition telling the tale of Moses and the patriarchs.”

“Do you really think so?” Tom asked in his deep voice with its Swiss-German overtones. “Josiah made them believe that the books of Moses were the lost history of Israel and the rumor spread like wildfire. People believed in something that had been forgotten then rediscovered ‘by accident’, a bit like their being told that a new country had been discovered. No need of an oral tradition for that. Anyhow, for many generations, everyone believed it when they read the tale of Moses. That myth convinced the most erudite historians, the greatest, most famous scientists and even today the whole of humanity. So just imagine what the Israelites, whose minds had been anesthetized with the notion of being the Chosen People, would have been like in those days. And besides, anyone who found any fault with it finished up put to the sword. You couldn’t mess around with God’s will, or rather King Josiah’s. Dictatorships have always been like that.”

Tom paused for an instant before going on.

“The priests also followed Josiah blindly, since they too believed the books found were ancient, even though they were really pure fiction. Josiah had no trouble establishing his new religion aimed at creating Greater Israel, since Yahweh or Elohim already existed; it was just a ‘god-inspired’ reform suppressing polytheism. That was Josiah’s genius: simplification adored by all brains. Brains hate complication and love going for what’s easier and simpler. Hence monotheism, just one God, simple and without any other complicated idol associated.”

Tom’s steel-blue gaze stared into Camilla’s emerald-green eyes.

“When you re-read the Old Testament knowing the true story of its composition, you just have to laugh out loud at every page and ask yourself how you could have had the wool pulled over your eyes for so long with all the obvious things that leap off the page. You can easily spot Josiah’s hand when God says: ‘Then will the Lord drive out these nations from before you and ye shall possess greater nations and mightier than

yourselves’! It’s a real treat to re-read these books knowing what their aim was, reading between the lines with a picture of King Josiah in your mind’s eye. When you know the truth about these writings, God’s veil is torn off. You then wonder shamefacedly how you could have been so naive as to believe in divinity when all there is behind it is simply human fraud. It would’ve been enough to think instead of believing. But it’s in our genes to believe in some superior being, an eye watching us. So getting material evidence in the shape of a manuscript reporting what were supposed to be God’s word explains why humanity’s consciousness was anesthetized for so long...”

Like a schoolmaster, Tom went on to say that the majority of societies in the Near East had written down only administrative and legal texts or legends. Cultural and religious authority was transmitted among families through oral tradition. When Josiah reformed religion, it was the first time that a human text had had authority on this subject. Sacred texts invested with a ‘divine’ authority, these writings gained the force of law throughout the culture and for everybody, as opposed to the authority of the family or of tradition. It was a key moment in western civilization when a book offered a message of hope, a dream for the future: the idea that coming times might be better than those which everybody faced from day to day, that history had a sense and a purpose; it was a revolutionary idea.

Strengthened by legitimacy based on the Law and on a shared history, Josiah thought he could drag the Hebrews into his ambitious project. However, his dream of a great Kingdom unifying the Northern and Southern Kingdoms would never see the light of day.

Josiah was killed before he could achieve it.

In 609 B.C.E., Pharaoh Neko II and his army decimated the Hebrew forces at Megiddo and Josiah was left for dead, then captured. Before he died, Josiah was tortured and admitted the whole of his fraud, from the myth of Abraham to the Greater Israel he had thought up and imposed on his people through the writings of the imaginary Moses.

Overcoming the Egyptians and Assyrians, the Babylonians invited themselves to the party and invaded Judah to impose a protectorate under their control. Under the yoke of Babylon, successive Kings of Judah, believing that the Eternal was backing them, misled as they were by Josiah’s writings, plotted against this new occupying poser and its King Nebuchadnezzar. He decided to scotch Judah once and for all. In 586 before Jesus Christ, the Babylonians marched on Jerusalem, the first Temple, already attributed to Solomon, was burned down, the city turned into a pile of ruins and Judah was wiped off the map. A small part of the population, including most of the elite, was deported as slaves to Babylon.

The last King of the House of David was also exiled, and his children killed.

The captives lamented because there was no longer a King, a Temple, a country, or any territorial unity. The grandeur of Babylon drove them crazy with envy, particularly the sight of an immense, magnificent tower that foreign workers had built. The Hebrews hoped it would collapse. It was the origin of the tale of the Tower of Babel.

Being distant from Israel revived memories of the myth of the Exodus. The prestigious destiny of Abraham chosen by God to provide a prosperous land to his nation continued to be a message of hope. To survive far from this Promised Land, a distinct identity had to be constructed: through the priests, the exiles would do so by re-adopting a certain number of earlier traditions. However, divisions between these traditions were broken down: Josiah's reform would become the symbol of the Temple which was transformed or transposed into many synagogues. Instead of the King, there would be Moses and instead of the country the Torah, Josiah's books. All of this had as its backbone those books, which had become for the deported Hebrews a sort of portable homeland, a land that could be studied, copied, transmitted and celebrated.

Influenced by the foreign beliefs in a city as cosmopolitan as Babylon, the scribes in their exile busied themselves with the work of writing and rewriting the Pentateuch, adding to it notions which they had previously not known, such as the idea of angels. Thus they added a final personal decorative touch to the works of Josiah, also incorporating into them other supplementary writings. The scribes likewise poured out insults against the city that was their prison, Babylon, calling it the whore of Babel, mother of all vices.

In 539 before Jesus Christ, the Persians became the new masters of the Babylonian Empire and some of the deported Israelites won the right to return to the Land of Judah. They were called the Judeans. Judah turned into the Persian Province of Yehud and the Judeans thus became the Yehudim.

The Jews.

Thanks to the freedom of religion authorized by the Persians to make them more loyal subjects of the new masters of the region, the Jews were able to rebuild the second Temple of Jerusalem on the site of the first structure, wrongly attributed to Solomon. This rebuilding permitted the Israelite identity to be preserved around the priests whose importance had been reaffirmed during the exile. Synagogues sprang up throughout the country, worship no longer being centralized as under Josiah, even though the new Temple remained the privileged site where the Eternal had found a

resting place. The Jews called their sole God the Eternal, but also Yahweh or Elohim, according to Southern or Northern tradition, as these names had been firmly rooted in people's minds for generations.

Taking the form of scrolls of parchment kept in wooden boxes, the Torah brought from Babylon spread throughout the land, aided by the authority of the priests and of occasional prophets.

Officially, prophets were men sent by God to remind their fellow-men of 'divine' requirements and bring them back to obedience of them. Unofficially, prophets were an institution recognized by official religion, forming an integral part of the personnel of the sanctuary and playing a major role in worship.

The function of leading the multitudes along the path desired by the royal and religious powers that were.

To differing extents and in varying forms, the great religions of Antiquity had all had 'inspired' men or women who claimed to speak in the name of their gods. This was especially so in the nations neighboring Israel. Brought to frenzy by music, these seers fell into a collective trance, which spread as a contagion to the spectators. Wild visionaries, they were all alike called Nabih. The verb derived from this meant 'be delirious' and was not, as some linguists once believed, from a root signifying 'to call' or 'to announce'.

All kings used such hallucinated cranks to impress their people and lead the multitude by the nose. Among these demented folk, those who had visions in conformity with the teachings of official doctrine were awarded the noble title of prophets. The other psychotics were designated false prophets. However, the only real difference between all these mentally sick was whether or not they bore allegiance to the State's King and religion.

When alive, King Josiah had used leaders like this to manipulate his people. He had also managed to bring them into his writings by inventing imaginary prophets whose generic prophecies could be applied to anything and everything, prophets having supernatural powers, such as the mythical Elijah who multiplied food infinitely.

In Israel's religious development, prophets had played a considerable part. Not only had they kept and guided the people on the track desired by Josiah, adding their brick to the building of doctrine about the Promised Land and the notion of Chosen People, they had also allowed the notion of radical monotheism to gain a solid footing by affirming the existence of a single God and denying the existence of any other god.

As time went by, two powerful religious movements shared Josiah's 'spiritual' inheritance: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. These padded out

the Torah with other texts influenced by the beliefs of the various successive occupying powers. In fact, after the Persians there would be Alexander the Great and his Greek generals, then the Romans with a certain Pontius Pilate.

Under foreign domination, Israelite lands were no longer governed by the descendants of David and after Josiah's death the idea of the Messiah had changed completely. In the original custom, the Messiah or Mashiah was the anointing of a man with olive oil. The instatement of priests and prophets was consecrated with this ceremony in which oil was poured on their heads, anointing them. All David's successors had received this anointing, or were supposed to have received it, from one of Yahweh's prophets, or even from Yahweh in person, so the Kings were represented as being the adopted sons of Yahweh.

As a symbol of their legitimate accession to the throne of Judah through messianic dynastic continuity, Kings were the anointed of Yahweh, Messiahs.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom by Nebuchadnezzar, succession to the throne of Judah by a Messiah of the House of David could no longer take place. This was because the various different foreign occupiers always took care to place under their tutelage royal puppets who docilely obeyed protectors and not any sort of King descending from David who had a fierce wish to bring to life Josiah's dream of independence.

Nonetheless, the prophets captive in Babylon had fantasized about the arrival of such a King, such a Messiah. Believing in messianic times to come, they had predicted that one day a future descendant of King David would be anointed and, called the Messiah because of that, this Liberator would come to deliver and save the Land of Israel. Accomplishing Josiah's 'divine' plans, this Messiah would rebuild the nation, bringing peace, and through the restoration of David's Kingdom would destroy evil-doers and finally judge the world.

A Savior, a Liberator, a Messiah, or Anointed of God: a Christ in the Greek language...

Thomas Anderson broke off his narrative and looked silently at Camilla.

She was staring at him. For several seconds, Tom stared back into this gaze like a goddess's, then he thoughtfully added:

"The Jews dispersed the place of worship into many synagogues, instead of centralizing it exclusively in the Temple at Jerusalem, and Moses' Torah managed to survive despite all odds, despite everything that time had in store for them, these people accustomed to harsh treatment from history. Thanks

to Josiah and to the scribes imprisoned in Babylon, the Bible saga was sufficiently coherent to allow the survival of the Jewish people's identity... and its prolongation into Christianity..."

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* *

The door closed in just the same way as it had opened slightly.
Silently.

In the corridor, his back turned, the Swiss guard had seen nothing. His uniform with its red, blue and orange stripes seemed as empty of life as a stone statue.

Reassured, the Pope still turned the key in the lock. Two precautions are better than one. Catastrophes like those that had happened in the past should not be allowed to recur.

Wearing a white nightshirt, the Pope walked barefoot over the cool tiling. He slowly slipped between the sheets of his bed, so huge and so lonely. He propped himself up with a plump cushion and took his glasses off the small bedside table. His gray eyes flitted for a moment to the wall opposite, where a wooden crucifix was supposed to watch over his sleep. However, it was often that same crucifix which prevented him from getting his rest. The Pope had had it removed, just like the one that had been in his study, but the Vatican's public relations staff had pushed him into putting it back, for fear this heretical action should become known.

His eyes tired, the Pope stretched out his hand to grasp the thick file contained in a cardboard folder. Among other documents, the original papyrus with the confession of King Josiah drew the Holy Father's attention. He paused a moment to reread for the umpteenth time the Latin translation of the hieroglyphs.

As often, in the end his selection was the Pontius Pilate Report. Each of the sheets of the original manuscript had been detached and placed inside a plastic pouch, all of them held in a blood-red ring-back binder. The Pope's fingers feverishly flipped through those evil pages. He could remember the first time he had held that report in his hands: he had plunged into it, never a suspicion in his head that he was heading into an ocean of terror, every page carrying his mind off to multiple crossroads with horrifying echoes and mists.

Why had none of his predecessors ever destroyed this apocalyptic book?

In fact, he understood them well, for how could one destroy such a living creature?

When speaking of the Bible and in particular its second part containing the New Testament, Napoleon had stated that this book had some secret virtue, an indefinable, warm and effective something that worked on the understanding and charmed the heart. Napoleon had concluded that the Bible was not just a book, but rather a living creature.

The Pontius Pilate Report was also a living creature, apocalyptic it was true, but a living creature all the same, despite the hatred and consternation, the torments and desolation it brought. Like children who like to scare themselves, to play with matches that could set light on Earth the fires of Hell, the Popes who had preceded him had been bewitched by reading this document and had not been able to make up their minds to burn it, preferring to keep it in the Vatican.

They were right, too, for the secret of Christ should not fall into obscurantist oblivion because of a policy of sticking one's head in the sand. On the contrary, it was essential to be perfectly aware of the infernal secret of Jesus and, if it unfortunately came to be discovered and made public, to be prepared to face the end of time.

Thinking of the end of the world, the Pope sighed.

How much time was there still left before the Sons of Abraham put their threat into action? How much time before they let off the bomb which would ravage two thousand years of civilization in an unprecedented apocalyptic fire?

"140 hours," he whispered after a quick calculation in his head.

Closing his eyes, the Pope would have liked to pray for hemophiliac time to stop bleeding away its precious hours, so that that fateful and accursed moment would never arrive.

However, he could not.

He had stopped praying a very long time ago.

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Tom rubbed his hand over his cropped hair.

"The Bible is the best-selling book in the history of humanity. They might've done better than to print this collection of myths. Besides, it was lucky there was no copyright at the time, otherwise they'd have been able to sue the Old Testament for plagiarism."

"What do you mean?" Camilla asked, worried.

"Lots of tales in the Old Testament are copied from myths from the Sumerian civilization, where they'd been written two thousand years

before Josiah took them over more or less word for word, right down to the smallest detail, although always giving them a monotheistic flavor.”

As if to give more weight to his own words, Tom nodded gravely.

“Yes, Genesis, the creation of the world by Yahweh is ‘borrowed’ from a Sumerian legend. The story of Eden, Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit and original sin, is another cut and paste, just slightly fleshed out by Josiah’s scribes. As for the myth of the Flood, it’s plagiarized from a Sumerian poem almost down to the last dot on the last I. Josiah and his scribes also made pirate copies of other fables, like the tale of the child Moses found floating in a basket on the Nile: that comes from a fable on the life of the Mesopotamian King Sargon of Akkad, who was abandoned at birth on the Euphrates in a rush basket smeared with bitumen. Same thing for the famous ‘Ten Commandments’ given by God to Moses: they’re just a collage of the Babylonian Code of King Hammurabi that was engraved on a basalt column. You can go see that very column in the Louvre Museum: it inspired the myth of the Tables of the Law. Josiah certainly wanted to have God’s ten main commandments engraved on stone tablets to exhibit to the Israelites. He would have claimed they were the two Tables of the Law of Moses and that they’d been miraculously found somewhere where they’d been buried. But Josiah’s death must have prevented an umpteenth charade...”

A grimace distorted Tom’s face.

“In the half century of captivity in Babylon, the Israelite scribes had plenty of time to write and rewrite Josiah’s Torah, fine-tuning lots of little details from the Sumerian myths that Babylonians themselves had adopted, adding a few mystical ingredients of their own, like the notion of angels. The Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, the Psalms, all of that was inspired by the Sumerians or the Babylonians. The Old Testament is a grotesque plagiarism and the Christian Church was very annoyed when the Sumerian tablets recounting the epic of Gilgamesh were discovered and translated in the 1870s...”

“It’s not a piece of plagiarism,” Camilla interrupted. “On the contrary, it’s a set of diverse sources that agree with each other. The fact that the stories are universal and the details almost identical confirms the historical truth of Genesis or of Adam and Eve. The tale of the Flood is true.”

“No, Camilla, they’re not a set of diverse sources that agree with each other as you seem to think. It’s all definitely plagiarized: the same stupidities blindly repeated. In his day, Josiah had no way of checking on information that was already a couple of thousand years old, he had no means of doing so. He just contented himself with peddling old myths which he plagiarized, but giving them a monotheistic flavor. Josiah used

tales which came from Sumerian scribes who had tried to codify and explain the mystery of their presence on Earth, in the light of their own preoccupations and imagination. With their limited intelligence and poor knowledge of the period, the Hebrews believed them. Anyway, we believed them as well for two millennia... but had we any choice? Imposed by force as it was by the Church and institutions, hammered into our heads when we were children as an absolute historic truth..."

Tom sighed.

"Nowadays, no-one seriously believes in historical truth of Genesis, Adam and Eve or Noah's Ark. Nevertheless, if anyone's reluctant to see the truth, it's enough to think instead of believing: for instance the story of the Flood and Noah's Ark. God ordered Noah to take on board a pair of each kind of animal to save them from the Flood. Estimates of the total number of animal species living on Earth run from around a million to as many as twenty million. Let's strike a balance and say five million species: that means Noah fit ten million animals into his ship! No Ark could be big enough for that. Besides, how did the animals manage for food when they came off the ship onto an Earth that had been ravaged by the Flood? How did they succeed in breeding, when it's well known that just one pair of a species isn't viable for perpetuating it? And how did kangaroos get back to Australia or polar bears to the ice-fields?"

"What about God's hand in all that?" Camilla asked. "God could have done everything..."

Tom leaned his head slightly to one side and smiled.

"You have an unbeatable argument there, but it's unbeatable only in appearance. Let's stay with the facts, okay? Only material proofs can be used as a basis if you want a true opinion. The best respected geologists are absolutely clear on this point: there's no trace at all in the various geological strata on the Earth's surface, not the slightest sign of a total global flood that could have killed all the wicked of the Earth and destroyed their civilizations. There is no trace of any kind. Not one. But that didn't stop honorable scientists from trying in vain, and for good reason, to find the remnants of the Ark on Mount Ararat or even making an attempt to reconstruct Noah's boat on the basis of the technical specifications given in the Bible. It was a total failure, but that didn't open the eyes of those men, blinded by faith, who wanted at all costs for Noah and his Ark to have really existed. Yet there's one simple detail that ought to have opened their eyes: Noah had already lived 600 years when the Flood came and he lived another 350 afterward... Adam also lived more than 900 years... The whole bunch of ancestors of the Jews happily lived for hundreds and hundreds of years. But no-one's ever found even one single skeleton indicating that kind of

unbelievably long life. Believers close their eyes to these little lies, even thinking that God gave such lengthy lives to their ancestors. But from a purely practical point of view, it was a lot easier for Josiah's scribes to invent characters who lived for centuries than a lot of people with 'normal' lives, since they'd have had to make up all sorts of texts to fill in the gaps in generations..."

Tom chuckled.

"Some believers, a bit clearer-sighted, assume that these small lies are no more than a minor detail, one tiny tree in the midst of the forest of truth represented by these Biblical texts. But in fact, it's just one tree concealing a whole forest of lies, the lies of the whole Old Testament and it was with the support of these lies that the Christian Church gave us a long list of precise statements, official and undeniable, about the Cosmos and biology. But, of course, it's all untrue, it's a grotesque mistake, just as it's a grotesque error to consider the Christian religion as a way of gaining knowledge about things in general."

Tom's eyelids wrinkled.

"When science began step by step to destroy the scientific and historical claims that are there in black and white in the Old Testament, the Christian Church tried to distance itself from these Jewish writings, but it couldn't break away from them, since for millennia they've been the foundation on which Christianity's built. In fact, it's also above all because the Vatican has no choice in the matter, since Jesus Christ recognized the Old Testament while he was alive. Jesus was the Son of God and, of course, he couldn't be mistaken when he said that the Old Testament was indeed the true word of his Father and that he'd come to fulfill the Law of Moses, not to destroy it. Besides, if Jesus had recognized Greek mythology as true, the Church would've said 'amen' and would've worshipped Zeus and his fellow-gods. And if he'd said the Earth is flat, the Church would still be claiming that's so..."

Camilla blinked nervously and Tom fell silent for a moment, staring at her. Then he began again:

"The Jewish faith was able to prosper in the shadow of the giant called Christianity, since Christ recognized the writings in the Torah. If he hadn't, doubtless the Church would've wrung the Jews' necks or converted them by force. But it couldn't, since the Old Testament has always been the thorn in the paw of the Christian lion and Judaism the clever mouse that has been able to cope with this terrible monopolistic king of the religious jungle."

Camilla frowned.

“So according to Mister Anderson’s theories, why did Jesus Christ recognize the Old Testament if it isn’t truly the word of his Father? There’s no logic in that, the Son of God can’t have been that mistaken...”

Tom was hesitant to reply.

Was this an appropriate time to reveal the secret of Christ so brutally? He had already talked a great deal and Camilla needed to assimilate everything he had said before he told her the final secret. He had to go step by step after her long immersion in the abysses of untruth: to come suddenly to the surface of the ocean of truth could easily be fatal for her understanding. Tom wanted to be gentle with this fragile conscience that had allowed itself to be intoxicated by a religious rapture of the deeps.

Above all, he had to wait until he had in his hand the powerful tiller of the Grail, so as to voyage happily and in safety over a sea of truth based on facts. In that way he would avoid the Christian reefs to which Camilla, a shipwrecked sailor of ignorance, would try to cling.

Like a guardian angel all dressed in blue, a stunningly attractive stewardess came into the V.I.P. Lounge, bringing two fresh glasses of champagne. Tom took advantage of this intrusion to avoid answering Camilla’s question and he stayed silent.

When the stewardess left, seeing that Tom was not very keen to continue the conversation, Camilla tried to revive the dialogue by floating an overall enquiry:

“So, when it comes down to it, you don’t believe God created man, right?”

“Creationists believe that on the basis of Genesis,” Tom answered after a moment’s delay. “They even believe that before original sin, before Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, there was no death in Eden. They think that no animals ever died and, for instance, the lion had claws only to climb trees, not to kill for food. But after original sin, through the fault of man and especially of woman, death emerged and animals had to kill to survive outside the Earthly Paradise.”

Tom chuckled.

“All of that is preposterous. The Bible claims that our world and we ourselves were created in a few days around six or seven thousand years ago. Nevertheless, we know nowadays that it took thousands of millions of years after the Big Bang for our planet to be born and thousands of millions after that for modern humans to appear about a hundred thousand years back. On the Earth, the oldest rocks show no traces of life. So life hasn’t always existed on the Earth: it was born from matter. The building-blocks of life were carried to our planet by bodies falling from outer space

and life arose spontaneously in microscopic forms in the oceans. Barely one per cent of this life has really evolved. The rest has remained at the single-celled stage and only a few odd lines have evolved toward greater complexity. The life-forms that did transform became more and more complex over a long time, diversifying so that they developed from multi-celled microscopic life-forms to fishes, from amphibians to apes and to humans with all the multiple branches of millions of species that have split off and continued to survive when their evolution was well adapted to their environment. That's what Darwin said much more than a century ago."

A tiny glint lighted up Camilla's eyes.

"Tell me about Darwin's theory, natural selection... please."

For an instant, Tom wondered if she was pulling his leg. She must know that theory, like everyone else. So, where was she trying to get by taking him into that area? As Camilla looked insistently at him, Tom decided to give her the explanations she was asking for, though still puzzled by the reason for such a request.

"Well, to simplify things, Darwin noticed that for over ten thousand years people rearing animals didn't use their weaker beasts for breeding, since they'd seen that animals inherit characteristics from their parents to a certain degree. So, they carefully selected sires and dams to make the animal offspring stronger and more vigorous, like when you choose breeds of dogs or horses. This artificial selection by humans intrigued Darwin and he asked himself whether nature might not have the same practical approach as breeders and whether it selected the most vigorous animals, the ones most likely to survive in their environment. Natural selection..."

"Please go on."

"Darwin finally developed an accurate theory, a theory that's been confirmed since by other famous scientists and backed up by modern science. The theory goes like this: for there to be a selection, for a choice to be available, there have to be differences, bigger or smaller variations among the individuals in the same species. For instance, an animal can have teeth that are slightly larger, a body that's a bit burlier, or stronger muscles to run more quickly than its fellows. Moreover, these variations have to be hereditary, that is, they're written into the genetic inheritance and so can be transmitted genetically to their descendants. Like father, like son, since the son will have the same characteristics as his father, like longer teeth or a bigger body. All behaviors also have a genetic and hereditary component. Like a physical difference, a behavior variation can be transmitted genetically to descendants. But these physical or behavioral variations need to be advantageous for survival and allow individuals to survive predators or the hazards of their environment. They also need to have access to partners

of the opposite sex so as to reproduce. Individuals who have these advantageous characteristics generally survive and reproduce more than others, they have more descendants and, over generations, all of these physical or behavioral characteristics end up by being found throughout the genetic inheritance of the species. So, natural selection works like human selection which chooses the finest animals for breeding; in natural selection, individuals who have survived by having advantageous variations will spread them and make the species do well. On condition, of course, that these characteristics are, and remain, advantageous adaptations for their environment. Let's take a climate change, like those there have been so often on Earth in the past. An ice age sets in, snow falls, and everything becomes white. One animal species has gray fur and in this group, one individual has an unusual variation: white fur. Previously, no female would have mated with a white-furred male, because he would have been spotted very quickly by predators and wouldn't have survived long, so the animal would have died without leaving any offspring. But thanks to the snow, females will mate with him so that their young won't be seen by predators against the snow. Males with gray fur will have less chance to mate: females will be looking for 'white' partners, since 'grays' are an easy prey for predators. The gray branch will disappear in the end as 'white' offspring survive better and transmit this characteristic in their turn to following generations. The gray branch has died out, but if the snow starts to melt away a hundred thousand years later and the climate goes back to being snow-free, white animals will become more visible and then they'll be the easy prey, so their branch will disappear, since it's not adapted to its environment. Except if one or two individuals in the species happen to be born with an unusual hereditary gray, or even camouflaged, fur and can transmit this once again to the breed."

Tom nodded gravely.

"But evolution is the exception, it's extinction that's the rule. At one time or another, very many species have ceased being well matched to their surroundings and have disappeared. In the evolution of species, long duration is extremely rare. Even if it does take a couple of million years on average for a species to die out completely. Only those best adapted survive in their environment. Sometimes one branch of the species doesn't die out, for instance with the gray-furred animal, because it could leave the snowy areas and find some other habitat where it does fit in perfectly, which leads to branches of species spreading out here and there all over the Earth. In this way, you can get a separation within a single species, if two sub-populations are subjected to slightly different selection pressures. These two populations will evolve toward different forms and if this goes on for some time, in the end two different species can emerge, which then

follow different evolutionary ‘routes’ in response to the specific selection pressures they’re subjected to. For instance, the horse and the zebra, or the lion and the cat. For the human line, the genetic family tree is quite bushy: several species of hominids lived simultaneously with *Homo sapiens*, which is us. We lived side by side with Neanderthal men, who died out just a few tens of thousands of years ago. And contrary to what people think, men aren’t descended from apes: they share a common ancestor with them. And that ancestor wasn’t an ape.”

“What about the missing link?” Camilla asked.

“The problem of the missing link in the human line of descent, the creature half-way between apes and men, was used as an argument against the theory of evolution for quite a while. Later on, many hominids were discovered, to the point that nowadays the problem is more one of working out which are the ancestors of men, which of apes, and which are from lines that have died out. Even though creationists criticize the notion of evolution, evolutionary theory gives a perfect explanation for the transformation of living species over the course of generations, the modification and diversification of life, from its first forms to the set of living creatures in existence now, the outcome of selection through survival...”

Camilla interrupted him.

“The outcome of selection through survival? So how do you explain a peacock’s tail? Or the brilliant colors of birds, that make them visible to predators? If Darwin’s theory was right, we shouldn’t find in nature any animals that weren’t perfectly camouflaged for survival, and not animals carrying a handicap that puts their life at risk, like the peacock’s tail...”

“Except that sometimes there’s no predator to put pressure on certain animals and although Darwin’s theory is based on selection through survival, it’s just as much based on sexual selection. In the public at large, sexual selection is often forgotten about, and people identify natural selection with survival selection only. Well, that’s a mistake, since both these mechanisms are definitely at work in the world of living creatures. It’s not just the best adapted individual, the strongest one that has survived its predators and dominated its fellows, that will have the exclusive privilege of breeding. Choice by females also exerts considerable evolutionary pressure. They don’t simply choose the partner most likely to survive, but pick the one they think is a survivor and has a good chance of giving them vigorous young. It’s females that often select the best breeding males with advantageous characteristics for their offspring. While all the males on the planet, including men, are programmed by internal competition within their species to do nothing more than try to spread their

genetic inheritance over the biggest number of partners possible, females, for their part, are motivated by a single judicious choice; they pick their male for breeding carefully, seeing whether he has advantageous characteristics likely to allow their offspring, and the whole species, to survive, indeed, whether he's likely to offer shelter and bring security and food. And it's just because a handicap like the peacock's tail is a risk factor for survival that it's involved in sexual selection: individual females have an interest in breeding with males capable of surviving despite such a handicap: it's a handicap that bears witness to their capacity to survive, that proves their survival isn't due to a lucky chance. It's a kind of quality mark demonstrating aptitude for survival. An animal that's able to get over its handicap demonstrates he's superior to all his fellows, which shows promise for the future."

Tom smiled.

"So females have an interest in choosing as a breeding partner the male with the greatest handicap, who is for that reason the male best able to overcome this handicap. It's like the bower birds in Australia that construct monumental, colorful nests that are no use to them. Nevertheless, the time they spend building these structures shows females what vitality the male has, since he's demonstrating that he can survive even with limitations on the time he can spend looking for food. A hereditary behavioral handicap chosen by sexual selection. Sexual selection is equally valid for humans. For instance, skin color is caused by sexual selection and not from getting a tan that has become fixed forever and ever. In sunny zones, individuals with white skin are at risk from cancer because of ultraviolet rays and are at a disadvantage, with a lower life expectancy. But in less sunny places, those same individuals have an advantage, since their body saves on energy and nutrients by making less melanin, the dark pigment in skin..."

With an eye to directing the conversation, Camilla asked in a voice that she intentionally made sound naive like an ignorant little girl:

"What causes variations? Black or white skin color in men? The very first appearance of a bird with a red tail visible to all, when there hadn't been any before?"

"If giraffes have such long necks, it's not because one day an ancestor of the species finally gained a long neck by stretching it to reach the leaves on the highest branches of trees and then transmitted it to its descendants through natural selection. The son of a bodybuilder – you know, those ninety-seven-pound weaklings who take steroids to increase their muscle weight enormously – the son will never become muscular like his father if he does nothing about it. There's no innate transmission of acquired characteristics, changes that have occurred in the course of a life. If the son

when he grows up doesn't exercise to become a bodybuilder himself, he'll never have his father's muscles. If it isn't written into the genetic inheritance, it won't get transmitted. Shaping or changing your body with a tattoo or a scar can't be transmitted genetically, at most the same effect might be achieved through cultural imitation, through acquiring something not innate. Although the jury is still out on whether some acquired features or an intense stress might just modify the inherited genetic code of individuals, for instance, those accidentally exposed to nuclear radiation. Be that as it may, the real secret of variations lies in genetic mutations."

"Mutations?" Camilla slyly asked.

"Yes, genetic mutations, or to put another way, genetic variations, differences between individuals, come from mutations in the genetic code, the famous DNA contained in every one of our cells and which is found in every living organism, which, by the way, goes to show the common origin of species. This genetic code contains the building plans for proteins, which are the essential elements for developing life. In human DNA as a whole, there are something like twenty-five thousand protein-coding genes. These are 'written' with an alphabet of four letters, A, C, G and T, which go to make up 'words'. These words are the amino-acids, building-blocks for life, that link up to form proteins. Every protein is 'written' with a couple of hundred 'words', but DNA base pairs in total is amount to three thousand million 'letters', as many as in a dozen multi-volume encyclopedias. When the genetic code has to be transmitted from one generation to another at the moment of reproduction, it can happen that an error occurs, like a misprint in the printing of a text. One letter can be accidentally left out, swapped with its neighbor, or wrongly reproduced. This genetic aberration is transmitted to descendants and gives rise to individuals carrying new genes neither of their parents had. Most of the time, that's of no importance and there are few variations, if any, since one single letter changed out of three thousand million is very unlikely to be noticed. But sometimes the genetic code is seriously muddled up, which leads to differing individuals like animals with white fur instead and in spite of the black fur of their parents. These errors are due to random modifications of the genetic code. It's because of chance, a bug in duplication, a glitch. It's not the environment that dictates which gene is going to mutate and that's why you find in human populations a lot of variations not suited to their life environment, like rare genetic diseases. Most of the time, genetic aberrations seriously disrupt the functioning of the mutant organism, but just once in a long while the mutations are advantageous. That's when the process of natural selection comes into play: it sorts out the different variations due to genetic aberrations. I'm

going to give you an intentionally exaggerated instance. Let's imagine a mutant with a third arm in the middle of the chest and that that's an advantage for survival and that sexual selection finds it attractive; the mutant will transmit this new genetic inheritance to descendants and there'll be generations of three-armed people. In general, evolution doesn't go that fast. It's only through thousands of little steps between generations and in tiny doses that variations affect the genes of species: slightly stronger muscles, slightly sharper eyesight, all picked out by the decisions of natural selection and cumulative choices. So, every evolutionary innovation appears randomly and natural selection then favors one or another of these small evolutionary steps. There can also be much bigger evolutionary leaps, but they're very rare, major bounds forward that give a species extraordinary evolution in just a few generations, like the rather exaggerated instance of the third arm."

Tom looked at Camilla.

"Current species seem unchanging in the eyes of most of us. On our timescale, we don't see these changes. It's a mental obstacle that makes it difficult to accept the idea of evolution on the basis of tiny genetic mutations. Nevertheless, these mutations have written the story of living beings, starting with a simple cell and leading three thousand million years later all the way to the human species..."

Triumphantly, Camilla said:

"Time isn't what it seems. It appears identical for us because we all observe it from the Earth on which we travel through space, even if we can't perceive that. But if we leave Earth, time isn't the same and doesn't go by at the same rate everywhere, just as Einstein proved. Everything is relative. A thousand million years from our point of view on Earth may be no more than a single day for a being outside our world, like God. Yes, God created the Universe and humankind in a few days in terms of his time, but in thousands of millions of years in terms of ours... These genetic aberrations, you say they're due to a glitch in replication, to chance. Chance is no more than the total of what we don't know. Who says it wasn't God who caused these mutations to make humans over the course of his days by taking as a starting point tiny simple living organism? God may have shaped humans in his own image by making them go through different evolutionary phases, but in just a few of His hours. Genetic aberrations are one of his visible divine tools to make humans evolve toward Him... Have you heard of the sphenoid bone? The sphenoid is the first bone formed in human embryos. This little bone tucked in at the base of the skull has never stopped changing in human ancestors. Every major stage in human evolution has been the result of an alteration in the sphenoid, always in the same direction, and that has led to

an increasingly upright stance for the body and development of brain power. *Homo sapiens* is the outcome of the fifth adjustment of this little bone. That's how our human ancestors moved from all fours to walking on two feet. It wasn't, as some people claim, that the ancestors of humans got lost on the African plains and had to stand upright to get a better view of their surroundings, so that by standing on their hind limbs so often they finally stayed that way. Just as giraffes didn't stretch their necks to make them longer, humans couldn't force themselves into an upright stance all on their own. Through genetic aberrations, as you said yourself, the human sphenoid bone's position rotated and made humans stand upright. Our evolution comes from mutation in the sphenoid, a programmed internal mutation of our species, a divine mutation that deliberately adjusted the sphenoid to get humans to get up and walk upright, so as to stand face-to-face with God. And if we can't perceive human evolution, it's because it's all over. We are the final stage coming from God's hand, his masterpiece. It's no longer a question of timescale, it's a question of logic. We are the final touch in God's creation, not through natural, but through divine evolution..."

Camilla fell silent, with a brilliant smile on her face, delighted to have achieved her aims.

For the moment, Tom could not find anything to say. Somewhat disturbed, he looked toward the Egyptair airplane which they would soon be boarding.

15

Cure

Jesus was thinking.

Standing next to one of the five porticoes of the Bethesda pool, he was observing a multitude of sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed people who were waiting with growing impatience for the moving of the water. Standing close to the Temple, this water reservoir served for washing the animals due to be sacrificed. It also had a very unusual reputation: of curing the sick. A legend claimed that from time to time, an angel of the Lord God came down into the pool and stirred up the water; the first of the sick to bathe in it was then cured, whatever the disease suffered.

In fact, when the water began shivering and forming waves, it was the result of the replacement of dirty water by fresh clean water, brought through an ingenious system of underground pipes. All of this created the illusion of an invisible divine hand coming to stir it. Few people knew of this and the Temple staff kept the secret so as to perpetuate the legend, in this way making money from the presence of the sick in the place.

Jesus was offended that anybody would make money from the sick, taking advantage of their state of distress to get from them the little they still had. He would have liked to tell everybody the truth, but he knew that humans also needed hope, even false hope, to cope with their troubles.

For a dozen minutes he had been staring at a small bed on which lay an old man. This fellow was rubbing his belly, talking to himself in sentences which only he seemed to understand. He spoke confusedly of an intense fire eating his body up from the inside, then started weeping softly, as if resigned to his fate. The next moment, he began chuckling for no obvious reason.

Pushing his way through the wretched crowd, Jesus walked up to him.

“Do you wish to be made whole?” asked Jesus.

The old man’s pale face turned toward him.

“I have nobody to put me into the pool,” replied the old fellow, his face wan. “And when the water is troubled, while I am crawling toward it, some other person steps down into it before me.”

The messenger arrived at that moment.

Zechariah’s dark eyes sought out Jesus. Looking intently into the crowd, he finally recognized him, even though his back was turned. He elbowed his way up to him. He did not see that Jesus was up to something in front of a paillasse on which a paralyzed man was lying. Hidden by his long coat which acted as a barrier to vision, Jesus’ hands seemed to be busy around the invalid’s head. However, the messenger could not make out what he was doing exactly. When he arrived behind him, Jesus was crossing his arms over his chest.

“Rise,” said Jesus to the old man. “Take up your bed and walk.”

Zechariah was amazed at Jesus’ instruction. For a fraction of a second, he hesitated. Finally, he laid his heavy hand on Jesus’ shoulder.

Jesus turned. A gleam of embarrassment shone briefly in his eyes.

Did he see? No, I think not... he is trying to understand what I was doing... but he did hear me...

With a jerk of his chin, Zechariah invited him to follow.

“Caiaphas is waiting,” whispered Zechariah into his ear as they walked.

The two men walked side by side, pushing through the crowd. By chance, Jesus’ hand brushed against a hard object under the messenger’s tunic. A sixth sense alerted his mind, warning him of an imminent danger.

He was carrying a sword!

Zechariah made his way through a group of blind people, pushing them aside with no compunction and walked on ahead. He made for a door some way aside from the thick of the crowd, leading into the area where animals were kept. As he opened the door, he turned to invite Jesus to enter. It took him a few seconds to realize that Jesus had slipped away. Swearing under his breath, he walked into the room. There with a few quick words he ordered the guards hiding behind bales of straw to join him.

“Find him fast,” ordered Zechariah. “He cannot be far.”

The guards went out and slipped in among the throngs of invalids and blind. However, they had only a vague idea of what their target looked like; only Zechariah had seen him. He was furious to have been tricked in this way and wondered where that accursed Jew, whose blood should already have been spilled, could be hiding.

Jesus for his part found the person he was seeking. The old man was busy talking to another invalid, using crutches.

“The man who made me whole again simply said to me ‘take up your bed and walk’. Well, look! I can walk! It is unbelievable.”

“Who is that man, though?”

“I know nothing of him. He has made away in the multitude...”

Jesus went up to him and before the old man had time to protest, he dragged him off toward the entrance. There, Jesus spoke rapidly to the miraculously cured man. He finally gave a sign of agreement, laying his hand on his heart.

Jesus went out, going briskly down the building’s steps. He was about to walk off along a nearby street, when he came to an abrupt halt, like a butterfly stopped in full flight by an invisible spider’s web.

This imperceptible web was somebody’s distress.

The groans of a blind man rang out in his head. Sitting on the lowest of the steps leading to the pool, a young man a score of years old was weeping and lamenting his fate. His face turned to the sky, he implored God to restore his sight, pleading with him to soothe the disorder that was burning his flesh. Wearing a long toga, now creased and dirty, but which had once been of a fine red hue, the blind man had been there for a week, sleeping on the ground, paying no heed to the coins charitable people gave him, only accepting the pieces of bread brought him by locals who were moved by the distress of this man whom all took for a beggar. He had obstinately stayed there, hoping that the Bethesda pool would bring him health.

Jesus could not take flight before aiding him. He could cure him, he had the power to do so and his own safety was a secondary matter. Stopping for an instant, he went up to the blind man. He stroked his hair gently, trying to reassure him. Jesus then asked him to be calm and told him that he would give him back his sight. The blind man stopped crying and, with his other senses at their sharpest, he straightened his neck, hearing the stranger spit. Then there was the sound of fingers rubbing the earth for a few seconds. The blind man told himself that the stranger must be making mud from his own saliva mixed with earth. A mixture was then smeared on his eyes.

“Go wash your eyes in the pool of Siloam,” said Jesus to the blind man.

This pool was nearly a mile away. Jesus did not wish the blind man to come across the messenger.

“Wait...”

Jesus leaned over and whispered a good few words into his ear.

“Lord, if I recover my sight, it shall be done as you wish. I promise you this.”

Without another word, Jesus rapidly departed.

Helping himself along with a long piece of wood, the blind man began walking southward. However, after a minute, a doubt crept into his mind: he began to wonder if he was not the victim of a practical joke. He had no need to walk nearly a mile just to wash his eyes. So, he turned back to the Bethesda pool. He clumsily climbed its stairway.

Zechariah came out at that moment. Jesus had escaped him. He swore as he mechanically rubbed the pommel of the sword hidden under his light-hued tunic. He stood aside to let a blind man who was groping up the stairs go by him with faltering step and decided to question the paralytic with whom Jesus had spoken. He might perhaps have information to give him.

Inside the building, looking among those lying on beds and litters, he could not find him. He was wondering where the man could have gone when his attention was drawn to a small knot of people.

The old man was standing amid various lame and crippled people. They were feeling his legs.

“You can walk! It is unbelievable! How, though, can you be dry? Did you not bathe in the pool?”

Questions flew from all sides.

The old man seemed ill at ease, visibly anxious about the fuss he was causing.

“Not at all,” said the man with crutches. “It was a stranger who cured him...”

As soon as he had got up from his bed, delighted to have recovered the use of his legs, the old man had spoken to the first sick person he had seen. Now, however, he was bitterly regretting that outburst of joy.

“I must leave,” protested the beneficiary of the miracle. “Please let me...”

Zechariah immediately understood the situation. Pushing the people aside, he went up and grabbed the old man’s arm. With a grip of steel, he led him out. Seeing the situation, two guards emerged from the crowds to help their commander. He ordered one of his soldiers to take the individual to the Temple as fast as possible. The man’s protests were lost in the surrounding hubbub.

Zechariah commanded the other guard to seek out any sick person who had been in contact with Jesus and whose disease had disappeared.

Stoking his black beard, the messenger waited outside for his subordinates’ reports. He wondered what the reaction from Caiaphas would be when he learned that the mission assigned to him had unfortunately miscarried. Zechariah hoped to atone for his failure with a crucial piece of information: Jesus had the power to cure paralytics.

He was lost in his thoughts when his attention was drawn to a man walking out onto the terrace, his face dripping with water, his steps uncertain, rubbing his eyes dazzled by the sun.

“Is that the blind man from a moment ago?” muttered Zechariah to himself.

He was not sure it was. Yet, he felt it was indeed he.

“I can see! I can see!” cried the young man, falling to his knees, both amazed and rejoicing.

His joy did not last. Zechariah grabbed him ruthlessly.

An hour later, the two beneficiaries of miracles were side by side in a room in the Temple.

Caiaphas was in a towering rage. Jesus had escaped his trap. The divine child must suspect something. To start with, instead of coming to the Temple, he had preferred the Bethesda pool as a meeting place, a hundred yards outside the northern enclosure, as if he was afraid to meet here, in God’s dwelling place. Caiaphas had underestimated his adversary. Jesus was no longer in his eyes a valuable divine ally whose powers he wished to have at his disposal. Since their last confrontation, the priests of the Sanhedrin had decided to rid themselves of this man who could overthrow their rule if they did not stop him quickly.

The decision had been taken to kill him.

Jesus had sent a child to the Temple with a message. Zechariah, commander of the Temple guards, had gone and introduced himself as the personal messenger of Caiaphas. The two men had spoken and agreed on a meeting with Caiaphas within the pool enclosure. The trap should have worked, but Jesus had slipped through their net. Jesus had been born under a lucky star, but his good fortune would not last forever, Caiaphas promised himself.

Running his fingers through his thick white beard, still dressed in his ceremonial purple toga, the small priest stared at the two miraculously cured men who stood before him. Jesus had cured them and this affair had to be clarified, even if he was already doubtful about getting to the nub of the story. If the tale was real, the glorious vision he had hoped would come true for himself and for the Temple was at risk of disappearing, like a ship breaking up on a reef.

And the rocks of the reef were Jesus.

Sweeping the image of the divine child out of his mind, Caiaphas stared with his slightly squinting greenish-yellow eyes at the old man. He did not seem very talkative. For ten minutes, before Caiaphas and the ten priests

sitting either side of the throne where the spiritual leader sat, the old man had kept on telling the same tale.

“He put his hands on my head and said ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’. That is all. There is nothing to add. I stood up and was cured. What more do you want to know? I do not know that stranger. You tell me his name is Jesus; I am sure that is so, but I do not know him.”

“You say you have been paralyzed for thirty-eight years?” asked Caiaphas suspiciously.

“Yes, that is true,” replied the former paralytic.

He lowered his eyes so as not to look into those of the High Priest.

Caiaphas was sure that the man was lying. His doubts were taking shape.

“And you?” asked the priest of the formerly blind man. “You say that he made mud with his saliva and applied it to your eyes?”

“Yes, that is so. Then he told me to go wash my eyes in the pool. Then my sight was restored.”

“You claim you have been blind since birth,” grumbled Caiaphas, “but I do not believe that for a single instant. We will see...”

Unwillingly, led by Zechariah, the young man was forced to go find his parents. They returned to the Temple two hours later. The questioning began again and the High Priest interrogated the father and mother, rich merchants in their fifties with sumptuous garments.

“What?” exclaimed Caiaphas in surprise. “You say that your son was born blind? How then do you explain the fact that he can now see?”

“We know that he is our son and that he was born blind,” said his father in a quavering voice, clutching his wife’s hand. “How it comes about that he can see now, we do not know. Ask him, he can explain it himself...”

Clenching his fist, Caiaphas became angry and had the audience chamber emptied. Zechariah stayed with him.

“The blind man had no chance to talk to his parents alone, had he?” enquired Caiaphas.

“No, I took care he could not, just as you ordered.”

Caiaphas nodded in silence. Somehow the young man must have avoided Zechariah’s vigilance and found some hidden way of making his parents aware they should say he was blind from birth. The commander of his guard had failed him twice that day and for a moment Caiaphas considered replacing him. However, he was too involved in these affairs to dismiss him.

Rumors about the miracles performed by Jesus spread all round the Temple. Among the Pharisees, debates sprang up, some claiming that these miracles could not be from God, as they had taken place on a Saturday, the Sabbath, a holy day when no work should be done, other than what was required for the worship of Yahweh alone. However, others questioned this, asking how a sinner, a transgressor of the Law of Moses, could accomplish such feats if he were not sent by God. Some of them even saw this man is much more than just a prophet.

Only Caiaphas and a few other priests knew the truth. That truth had to be kept a close secret. Otherwise, the whole country would be at a loss and collapse into chaos.

After curing the blind man, Jesus had rapidly left the city and joined his disciples. In a few brief words, he told them what had happened, leaving out any mention of the miracles he had performed. For the disciples, it seemed obvious that Caiaphas wanted to do away with him because he was the Christ and would reduce to nothing the privileges of the Pharisees.

However, for Jesus, this obvious view was far from certain. There were features about which the disciples did not know and which were crucial to an understanding of the situation as a whole.

During the return journey, Jesus never stopped thinking about the trap that had been laid for him.

He wondered what was the real reason leading Caiaphas to want to have him killed.

Was it because he was the divine child but refused to obey the Temple's demands, thus upsetting Caiaphas's plans? Was it because of what Jesus had told him when they first met? Or was it because of the two miraculous cures?

In the last case, there were vast implications whose first impacts he had already imagined before he took the road to Jerusalem. As soon as he had returned to Galilee, he had had doubts about the Temple's actions. These terrible misgivings he had kept to himself, unable to speak of them without risking drawing down the fires of Gehenna on the Earth.

Now, clear as a twinkling star beginning to shine in the blackness of the night, certainty came to enlighten his mind about the Temple: it was no stranger to Evil. Caiaphas and the priests he paid had signed a pact with demons.

The demons of power...

So, it was logical for them to desire to kill him, he who had the power to cure. Jesus thought back to the curing of the paralyzed man and the blind man.

No, it could not be for that reason they had tried to kill him. His death had been planned long before he accomplished any miracles. The logical consequence was that it was because of his status as a divine child.

Seeing him worried, one of his disciples approached and asked him:

“Of what are you thinking? Do you believe that there is some other reason for Caiaphas to wish your death?”

Continuing to walk, Jesus turned his face toward him and looked at him for a moment before replying.

“He wishes to kill me because I am the Messiah.”

The disciple nodded in silence, then walked away, letting Jesus stride forward alone ahead of the group.

Caiaphas is not aware of my power to cure.

However, sooner or later he would learn of it. Then the High Priest would have a double cause to wish to kill Christ.

More than ever, the Messiah’s disciples feared for his safety and with redoubled alertness they watched over him all along the route leading them to Galilee. Two of them went ahead of the group, walking day and night, to announce Christ’s return to all and sundry. As if this return to his native land were a confrontation that he feared, Jesus walked slowly crossing Samaria, engaged in deep thought. Then suddenly, as if he had reached the end of a mental trail, a decision took shape in him. His disciples then found it hard to match the pace that he set. A few days later, they reached Galilee.

In a village, a horde of supporters who were awaiting him began to follow him. Among these people, there was a deaf man who spoke with great difficulty. Jesus secretly took him to one side and they found themselves alone in a glade. Asking the man to kneel, Jesus put his fingers into his ears and mouth, then let a trickle of his saliva fall onto the deaf man’s tongue. However, effect that Jesus had been hoping for did not occur. He repeated his actions with greater ardor. He lifted his eyes toward the sky, groaning.

Heavenly Father, I beg of you, grant me true balance...

Jesus then looked down at the deaf man kneeling before him.

“Let your ears be opened,” said he.

The deaf man blinked several times, astonished at hearing Christ’s words. He stood up and began to speak, thanking his redeemer. His speech, fluent and pleasant, had returned to normal. Enjoining him not to reveal to anybody how he had recovered his hearing, Jesus left him.

Jesus did not content himself with just this cure. He discreetly carried out a good few more, treating several paralytics and many of the Possessed.

A dozen days later, two blind men were lucky enough to cross his path. They started to follow the crowd who were walking behind Christ.

“Have pity upon us, son of David,” cried out one of the blind men to attract Jesus’ attention.

Jesus halted.

“Do you believe that I can do something for you?” enquired Jesus.

“Yes, Lord.”

They thought that Christ would give them alms in the form of a present of money.

To their great astonishment, Jesus took them by the hand and led them toward a house a few yards away, whose owner, an old white-bearded man, was watching the scene from the threshold of his home. Jesus requested and obtained from the old man permission to enter his house and be there alone with the blind men.

Once inside, at Jesus’ instructions, the two blind men tilted their heads back, opening their eyelids to the fullest extent. They heard Jesus rubbing his hands before placing his fingers on their eyes. They felt a mild emanation flowing over their irises. After minutes that seemed to them eternities, not able to understand why Christ had acted that way, they noticed a glow growing in the distance. First weak, then stronger, it grew and grew till it filled their whole field of vision. They blinked several times, and then, as if coming out of a gloomy nightmare, they saw the smiling face of Jesus who was looking at them each in turn.

Jesus knew that this cure would not go unnoticed. Everybody was waiting outside and they would see the formerly blind men. However, these two cures would be the final touch; he was prepared now and the rumors circulating about his healing powers could now come into the full light of day.

Nonetheless, on previous days he had been very circumspect in keeping confidential the healing that he did out of sight. Along with an instruction to fast in secret, all those affected by miracles had been enjoined by Jesus to reveal nothing. However, some of them could not help talking, spreading incredible tales on their miraculous cures. The day before, his disciples had come to find him and ask for an explanation of these insistent rumors that a good many formerly sick people were spreading concerning him. He had replied that he would tell them the truth the following day.

At first, the news of the miraculous cures could not be allowed to spread, because then he would have had to face a huge flood of sick from all round the district. However, now he was ready to handle such a flow. He had made preparations for it.

The two miraculously now not blind walked out of the house. They started to recount what had happened. Among the crowd, there were murmurs of astonishment and cries of enthusiasm. Even the Messiah's closest disciples were astounded and overwhelmed by this miracle.

When Jesus left the house, Simon, the former fisherman now become his disciple, who had been present at the miraculous haul of fish, fell to his knees at this umpteenth miracle.

"You are truly the Messiah, the Son of God," said he, his eyes shining with devotion.

For many days after that, Jesus healed without a halt. Traveling through the villages of Galilee, he poured out his powers on the Possessed, the blind, the deaf, those paralyzed and even lepers. Every time, he arouse the same stupefaction among his disciples and the villagers. Fervor about him grew and all saw in him the true Christ. A great multitude followed him around from then on, unwilling to leave him.

Jesus reached the shores of Lake Tiberias. There he boarded a boat, accompanied by Simon. The other disciples climbed on board other boats and all headed out onto the calm waters. From the center of the lake, Jesus saw in the distance people following the shore-line, feverishly seeking out his boat with their eyes and walking in the same direction he was traveling. After two hours of sailing, Jesus stepped out of the boat onto dry land at the northern end of the lake.

A large gathering of men, women and children were already waiting for him.

These excited swarming crowds were not there by chance. They had anticipated his planned arrival and their ranks were swollen by the coming of the crowds that Jesus had already met. Carried along by this general effervescence, the villagers from the surroundings of the lake had also joined this tide of people. Like a cleansing tidal wave sweeping away everything as it passed, this sea of folk had seen its waves growing thanks to the news of cures spreading like a forest fire, setting light to minds and beliefs.

Jesus advanced toward them, in the middle of a large stretch of deserted land covered with wild grass and with a few sparse shrubs scattered over the harsh landscape. There was nothing for miles around, no city, town or village, just one or two isolated farmhouses.

In the midst of applause, sick people were brought to Jesus. After questioning them at length, he pointed out those among them that he was going to cure. For those present, this choice was justified by the extent of their sins: illness was not a random event, but a divine punishment, the

sentence of God chastising the transgressors of the Law of Moses. Jesus had the power to remit the sins of certain people whose faults and failings toward God were pardonable. However, as for the others, those that Jesus did not cure or wish to cure, they were irredeemable sinners, as they were too perverted by their evil conduct, and forever carried the evil mark of their sins. Like lepers, they were moved aside, even driven off without mercy, although Jesus wanted to have pity on them. Nobody would consent to the sick that Christ had excluded remaining there, believing that their mere presence would corrupt the devout crowds with their evil ways.

Before an amazed public, Jesus performed cures on the sick. He treated all the Possessed who were brought before him.

When the blind recovered their sight, paralytics stood up and walked again, and the Possessed were restored to sanity, the astounded multitude thought that they had seen everything and that no other event could ever surprise them.

They were wrong.

Evening was coming and the daylight was beginning to wane. Simon came to Jesus, who was taking a rest after his long sermons of that afternoon.

“It is late,” said the former lake fishermen. “You should send these people home or to the nearest villages or farms. They can find food and lodging there.”

Carried away by jubilation, nobody had thought of bringing anything for an evening meal.

“There is no need for them to depart,” replied Jesus. “You yourselves should give them food to eat.”

“We have made no arrangements for that, though,” protested Simon.

“How many loaves have you?” asked Jesus. “Go see.”

Simon went off with several other disciples. They came back ten minutes later.

“We have found a youngster with five barley loaves and two small fishes,” explained Simon. “That is all that we have been able to find. Yet what is that for so many people? It is clearly not enough...”

Looking down at the loaves he was carrying in his arms, the former fisherman thought for a brief moment before adding:

“Unless we go ourselves and get food for all these people. But even two hundred *denarii* would buy only enough bread for each person to receive a small slice. There are so many of them! Besides, I am not sure that such a quantity of bread could be found...”

According to his estimates, there were at least five thousand men there, not to mention women and children. Jesus gestured to Simon and the others to follow him to a small hillock. A disciple had laid out a large, thin paillasse there for the Master to be able to rest and thus have at his disposal a sort of private space to isolate him from the crowd which sometimes jostled him, carried away by its fervor toward him, wanting to touch him or simply breathe the air that he was breathing.

Standing on the hillock, overlooking the silent crowd that spread all around him, he stared at faces lost in the mass. They expected so much of him, and among all these who adored him he felt so alone. He had the impression of being a shipwrecked sailor lost in the middle of an ocean of ignorance, tossed by the wake of a ship of incomprehension and slowly sinking.

Jesus leaned toward Simon and asked him to lay down the five loaves and two fishes in a large wicker basket that had been placed at the center of the paillasse.

“Make them sit down by fifties,” was the order Jesus gave his disciples.

In the midst of a good-natured hubbub, the crowd obeyed the instructions of Christ’s close disciples.

When calm was restored, and all were sitting or lying on the grass, Jesus took a loaf from the basket. He raised his eyes to heaven, lifting the bread up above his head.

Heavenly Father, give me the strength to accomplish what I must do...

The final rays of the setting sun, growing red in a burst of shimmering color, shone their last light on Jesus, projecting a gigantic shadow crowned with a divine halo behind him.

He broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to distribute. He took a second loaf from the basket and once again performed a blessing before breaking it. After the fifth loaf, everybody was astounded to see Christ take a sixth loaf from the basket, then a seventh, then another and yet another, which he blessed in their turn, raising them over his head. A murmur of astonishment ran through the gathering and those present finally realized that they were witnessing and incredible miracle.

The multiplication of the loaves.

Jesus sat in the lotus position beside the wicker basket and continued to take loaves out of it. Their eyes bulging in surprise, his disciples, aided by a score of village women trembling with emotion, distributed the food that Christ handed to them, going back and forth incessantly among the rows of men and women sitting on the grass. Astounded, they had stopped counting the loaves coming out of the basket. For more than an hour, at a

steady rhythm, Jesus dispensed not just bread but also fish in phenomenal quantities.

Night fell and shadows crept over the area. Hundred of fires were lighted, shining in the darkness as if they were an immense mirror reflecting the vault of heaven where the stars sparkled in the firmament.

The miracle came to an end, but the crowd continued to commune with Christ, eating the frugal meal that the Son of God had provided for them. All ate their fill and more than their fill, and once they were sated, Jesus ordered the scraps to be gathered up so that nothing would be wasted. They had started with five barley loaves and two fishes, but the disciples filled twelve baskets with remnants.

Voices rang out in the darkness, chanting the name of the Messiah, crying out their joy at being in the presence of the Savior. They all believed in him and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves to which they had been eye-witnesses strengthened their faith in him.

There was no doubt that he was truly the Son of God.

Then, knowing that they would come and seize him, so as to carry him in triumph like a divine king, Jesus fled into the night.

16

Three in One

Following the river upstream, southward, flying at over ten thousand feet, the airplane gave its two passengers a fantastic view.

The broad, dark brownish-green band of cultivated fields and villages contrasted with the Pharaonic desert, all sand and desolation. Like rutted and seamed shell, on either side the desert threatened to swallow up the land of the people who had drawn sustenance for their continuity from the Nile. The river seemed to be like a heavenly mirror, reflecting the divine will to give life to this infernal land.

A blazing sun was burning in the blue sky and a heat haze was rising from the shimmering earth.

Sitting in the back of the tiny craft, barely a score of feet long, Camilla turned her gaze from the landscape to Thomas Anderson. His back to her, he was talking to the pilot, using a microphone and headphones, because the noise of the engine was too loud for conversations other than shouted. In the Egyptair Airbus, the journey as far as the Egyptian capital had gone smoothly and Tom had reserved a small plane to get them quickly from Cairo to Luxor. The plane was of the 'Pilatus' make and Camilla had been surprised that the craft had the name of the man who had had Jesus Christ crucified.

Tom had explained to her that it was not just the airplane that had the name: it was the name of the Swiss company that built these aircraft. The origin of the name was Mount Pilatus, which was close to the enterprise's headquarters in the town of Stans. In the past, the mountain had been known as the broken mountain, but a late legend had arisen, claiming that the body and soul of Pontius Pilate lay in a lake on its summit. That had led to the mountain being seen as accursed over several centuries and inheriting the name of the Roman Procurator.

Tom seemed to know everything about everything.

As for Camilla, she was glad to know the Bible above all, especially the Old Testament. She knew every passage by heart. With passion, she had studied it for years in its slightest details. Even when just a little girl she had felt transported into a Paradisiacal world by each one of its pages, seeing the hand of God behind these divine writings.

However, the hand of God had nothing to do with it, she had to agree now.

King Josiah was the schemer in this deception, this human fraud. Nonetheless, Camilla's conscience had refused down to the last moment to open its eyes to this truth; she had believed until the last instant that Tom would commit some error in his tirade against the myth of Moses. Tom did not know who the young woman really was and had taken her through things point by point as if dealing with an ignorant child. Camilla had let him speak, revealing nothing of her own knowledge of the field, hoping that Tom would slip up and claim something false about the Old Testament.

However, that had not been the case.

Now Camilla's mind was in a whirl, her conscience stricken.

Perhaps people less well-read, not knowing the details of the Bible as she did, would just have shrugged their shoulders with a grin and swept away Tom's allegations with a wave of the hand. Camilla, though, knew Tom's comments matched perfectly in every detail with the times and facts. Everything that Tom had stated was based on implacable logic. Tom had managed to break through the mystery of the Old Testament by comparing it with historical reality.

For hours, between Paris and Cairo, Camilla had silently gone over and over all of this in her head. Analyzing rationally, persuading by main force her rebellious mind that still refused to accept the incontrovertible proofs put forward by Tom, Camilla had finally been obliged to admit the terrible truth: Moses was no more than a myth and the Old Testament a shameless bit of plagiarism.

It was like a devastating electric shock.

It was as if she was angry with herself for having believed blindly for so long in a lie, a lie which she had nonetheless received as a precious gift from her parents, who had bequeathed it to her as a fabulous treasure they had inherited from their own parents. However, of this fabulous treasure only the word 'fabulous', meaning 'based on fables' was real.

Despite nagging doubts, Camilla had hitherto been unwilling to accept this and other evidence, her childish soul forbidding her, as she preferred to travel in hope with the ideal of an Eden created by God rather than an

evolutionary Big Bang based on human science. Even though the Catholic Church no longer nowadays subscribed to a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, Camilla had so far always had faith in the truthfulness of the Old Testament that she and her creationist friends took literally. However, as the millennium changed, Pope John-Paul II had declared that the theory of evolution was more than just a hypothesis, which had been a bombshell for creationists and had caused a revolutionary reappraisal of their position. A new concept had appeared at that point in creationist circles. Termed 'Intelligent Design', no longer denying the phenomenon of evolution, this viewpoint claimed that certain characteristics of the universe and the world of living creatures were better explained by an intelligent cause than by random processes like natural selection or genetic mutations.

Tom had dismantled creation by God through revealing Josiah's fraud, but Camilla had been able to have the last word by pointing to 'Intelligent Design' by God in human evolution.

However, had she really had the last word?

Camilla looked at Tom as he sat in the seat normally reserved for the copilot.

She knew that he had not yet told her everything, in particular about Jesus Christ. What terrible secret could he reveal to her? What did he know about Christ? Besides, what could that man do against the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God? Was he the Antichrist? Above all, what was in the Pontius Pilate Report?

Unanswered questions were still jostling in her head.

As if he could feel the young woman's gaze resting on him, Tom turned round in his seat and smiled amicably at her.

"We'll be there soon," he shouted.

Then Tom looked hard at the altimeter and the G.P.S. once more. He took a thick wad of euro notes out of his pocket and gave them to the pilot. He rapidly tucked the money away in his bomber jacket. Tom tapped him on the shoulder and made his way to the rear of the cabin where his big red case was stowed. When he opened it, Camilla's eyes opened wide as she recognized a parachute pack and harness.

"Are you planning to jump?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard.

"Not on my own, it's a tandem chute. You're coming with me."

"But Luxor airfield isn't far now..."

"I know, but I decided a long while back we wouldn't be landing there. Trust me, I've several thousand jumps to my credit, including just over

eight hundred as pilot of a tandem... It'll be pure pleasure. You and me, united in the sky..."

Camilla blushed.

"What about the bag with my things?" she protested softly.

"We'll pick it up later. Besides, you'd better empty your pockets, since you'd run the risk of not finding anything in them when we get down: air pressure sweeps them cleaner than a pickpocket..."

The young woman nodded, her heart beating loudly, and handed over her house keys and wallet to Tom, who slipped them into a small sack he wore under his black polo shirt. Tom set about folding down the adjustable seats of the Pilatus, then helped Camilla put on a harness, while giving her advice for the jump.

Camilla listened attentively.

"Don't breathe through your mouth," Tom said. "Breathe normally through your nose. If you breathe through your mouth, you'll burst..."

"Burst?"

"I'm joking. Relax and smile, everything will be fine."

Tom could see the fear on Camilla's face.

Fear of the unknown.

Camilla's heart had speeded up, bringing a massive flood of blood to her muscles: her whole system was already at work, ready to fight off any infection caused by injuries, directing immune cells to the front line at the sites of scratches, bites or cuts in the skin. Her capacity for 'intellectual' reflection had decreased in an instant, because the brain gave priority to her instinctive memory so as to sharpen up the automatic animal reflexes crucial for survival. Selected to save man's ancestors from natural dangers and predators, these adaptive reactions, once wise, were no longer so in a large number of situations.

Worse still, through fear of an unknown event, the reptile brain in humans took back control of the whole person and sent them back to a stone-age level of consciousness.

Human brains were not a single piece, but rather made up of three quite distinct brains, which had emerged one after the other during the course of human evolution. The very distant ancestors of humans had passed through different evolutionary phases, from fish to amphibians, from reptiles to mammals, before ending with humans and their upright stance. The evolution of species was conservative, so humans had accumulated one after another a brain called 'reptile', then a brain called 'mammal' and, then as a final touch of creation, the brain called 'human' had overlain the other two.

Three in one.

The oldest brain in humans, the 'reptile', was a primitive brain, archaic and primary, hundreds of millions of years old. The reptile saw to the regulation of human's the basic life functions like respiration, heart rate and temperature, but it also ensured the satisfaction of primary needs such as eating, sleeping, or reproduction. The reptile, guaranteeing the immediate survival of the individual and the species, was the vigilant guardian of preprogrammed innate reflexes: faced with the same situation, a stimulus would always bring out the same immediate and basic response, such as flight or fight. These survival behaviors did not evolve with experience, not being able to adapt to a novel situation like a parachute jump, because the reptile brain had only a short-term memory. Instinctive memory was fixed, not allowing for the possibility of new acquirements: since the dawn of time, worker bees had carried out successive preprogrammed tasks in an unchanging and unchangeable way.

That was equally true for the reptile brain.

Very different from it, the 'mammal' brain had been grafted onto it some sixty million years ago. This second brain dealt with emotions and with learning through remembering.

This was because the mammal brain was memory more than anything else, a memory which acted from experience, a memory in which affectivity was closely intertwined.

The mammal brain was a keystone of memory and emotions onto which the 'human' brain had come to be added in its turn.

A fruit of the most recent stages of human evolution, this third brain was the last word in intelligence: it permitted language and logic, abstraction and intuition, creativity and thought with infinite ideas. Through past experiences, through processing recollections and through a process of imagining, the anticipation of acts was ensured.

If animals lived for the moment, buttressed by instinct, humans for their part lived in the future, thanks to their third brain, the seat of their consciousness. Like an orchestra conductor, this consciousness commanded the reptile, mammal and human brains, wiping away instinctive or emotional behaviors by education and culture.

At least in theory, because in the real world the three brains were deaf musicians who could not stay in tune.

Despite close connections, they co-existed with difficulty in the human skull, because they had never really been subject to true integration.

In fact, the human brain, the reasoning brain, could not easily exercise dominion over mammal emotions and reptile instincts. On the contrary, it

often occurred in reality that instincts and emotions exercised control over reason.

Processing of information gathered by one of the five senses was bottom upward from the reptile brain up to the human, passing through the intermediate mammalian brain. The reptile brain was the first to analyze information according to a record of safety or risk. In the case of danger, the reptile was capable of short-circuiting the whole of the other brains and of taking the reins of consciousness to impose its preprogrammed instincts.

The power of the reptile over the others was virtually total in situations of danger, but also, randomly, in situations posing no risk to physical safety. An unexpected triggering of fear, a somewhat stressful or upsetting situation, an insult or simply a black look could lead to an unpredictable, even animal, behavior. When the reptile won out over reason, instinctive violence could explode at any moment in an animal frenzy.

Human urges, whatever they were, were always the very primary tendencies of the reptile brain wanting to take control over consciousness and the body. Reason was a very shaky fence holding it back, and had to make titanic efforts to ensure it was not blindly obeyed.

Humans had inherited this primitive brain and, as in reptiles, it involved an instinct to conquer, to establish and defend a territory, a desire for dominance and power. Instinctive and brutal, this brain was responsible for certain 'inhuman' behaviors such as aggressiveness or hostility toward those not belonging to the same group as oneself, but also blind obedience of a dominant leader and respect for the social order: the ritual and hierarchical behavior patterns of modern industrial societies had a reptile component.

Worse still, governments used carefully chosen fears to ensure that reptile brains were awoken so that they would overbear the conscience, in particular at election times in order for order and the instinct for safety would triumph in totalitarian ballot boxes. Political leaders knew how people's brains worked and using fears, especially the fear of 'others', they turned humans into reptiles, reptilian puppets docile to every authority despite all reason.

The reptile brain was responsible for many of the sufferings of humanity, the horror of the errors of history, the history of men with amputated consciences.

The emotional mammal brain, for its part, was not blameless in this cruel destiny which scorned intelligence.

Memory was the brick, the deep structure of thought, giving rise to consciousness. It was the sole access humans had to the past and to learned

items. Furthermore, this memory, where consciousness quenched its thirst for recollections, was at the heart of the mammal brain.

This brain analyzed information gathered by the five senses immediately after the reptile brain. It did so not in terms of safety, but on an emotional plane by comparing it with memories, in terms of pleasure or pain, because the mammal brain was the center of emotions that could be summed up in a single word.

Desire.

This emotional desire had to be placated.

To achieve its aims despite reason which was keeping watch over it, the mammal brain had an unbeatable trump card.

The subconscious.

Because the mammal brain was the seat of the subconscious.

Colors, odors or behaviors, places or situations that flattered desire, slave of the senses, triggered the awakening of the subconscious. Insidiously, to assuage the desire of the mammal, the subconscious then dictated its will to the feeble consciousness, missing from its post of duty.

Emotion won out over reason.

Almost constantly, consciousness was infected by these feelings, as well as by parasitic reptilian instincts responsible for chaos, not only in the world, but also in the heart of every human.

Without a knowledge of the characteristics of their three brains, humans were always slaves, slaves of all those who could manipulate them from within or without, unbeknownst to them, slaves in a gilded cage in which their truncated minds took misplaced pride in being free...

"Tom?"

Tom empty gaze came back into focus on Camilla's eyes.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "An old parachutist's saying runs that only those who have made a big jump know why birds sing. And you'll be finding out very soon."

Camilla smiled timidly.

The height of the cabin did not allow him to stand up straight, so Tom went down on one knee while fixing the parachute on his back, then went and sat on the floor back of the pilot's small cockpit area, facing the rear of the plane. Camilla stepped over Tom and sat between his legs, her back toward him. He snapped the four clips of his gear onto the rear rings of the young woman's harness. Then he pulled on the connector straps to bring her slim body as tightly as possible against his own. Camilla rapidly twisted her hair into a bun and once it was tamed in this way she fixed around it the elastic strap of a pair of parachutist's goggles.

With his left hand, Tom pushed the sliding door of the Pilatus part-way open and glimpsed down. They were just over the Luxor Temple. The pilot slowed the airplane to its minimum speed, then turned and signaled with a jerk of the chin. Tom opened the door fully, using his foot.

The cool air of this altitude rushed into the cabin.

Tom checked no aircraft were immediately underneath them. Apart from a tiny helicopter flying off in the distance, the sky was empty. Tom and Camilla made a quick twist and she found herself hanging in emptiness. Holding the upper part of her harness in trembling hands, she closed her eyes for an instant.

“We’re off,” Tom murmured into her ear.

The tandem plunged forward.

Camilla’s eyes, dilated by fear, opened wide. She felt queasy for just a fraction of a second, then she was no longer falling, she was gliding, carried by the rush of air. She felt as if she had gone into a refreshing cascade whose invisible water was flowing all over her, combined with a giant fan whose undetectable blades were accelerating the air all around her. She was in the seventh heaven, having the sensation of floating, not of falling. Bewildered by the deafening noise caused by the speed of the airflow around her ears, she gazed with her child’s eyes at the world below as it grew, an unconscious exhilarated smile on her face.

Tom reached out to his pack and released the braking chute into position above his head, this being a small pear-shaped parachute rather like those deployed by powerful jet aircraft to slow them on landing. The tandem’s rate of fall stabilized at around a hundred and twenty miles an hour. Tom took Camilla’s hands and separated them gently to position them against the airflow. The young woman was in a state of total euphoria, no longer fully aware of herself, feeling free and calm, like cherubim in the heavens unconstrained by terrestrial gravity.

This lasted less than a minute.

At just over for thousand feet from the ground, Tom pulled the handle to release the main parachute. A large fuchsia-colored canopy unfolded instantly, thanks to the braking chute to which it was linked. The tandem was stopped short, as if held back by an invisible wall.

Silence fell.

“Now you know why birds sing,” Tom said.

Camilla could not help letting out a long yell of joy that rose into the infinity of the blue sky. Then she turned her face toward Tom’s.

“It was marvelous... thank you...”

Tom grasped the parachute controls, tugging on them to warp the canopy, and directed the tandem toward its target. Lying along the Nile, the urban area of Luxor seemed immense, a checker-board of low dun-colored housing with uniform flat roofs. The other side of the river, some two hundred and fifty yards or so wide at this point, was a contrast with the town. There, large cultivated fields spread out, hemmed in not too far away by the mountainous desert where the Valley of the Kings lay hidden.

Tom pulled one of the controls and part of the parachute moved inward and turned, so they lost altitude rapidly. Down below, the ruined Luxor Temple offered empty spaces where landing would be easy, since the archeological site stretched out over six hundred yards.

From the air, Camilla picked out a good number of tourist buses parked on the main road running round the site and along the sea-blue Nile several large cruise vessels were anchored at a bare cable's length from the shore. In the center of the town, there seemed to be busy throngs and the arrival was unlikely to go completely unnoticed.

Tom carefully selected a rather isolated spot and pointed the tandem toward it for a final approach. Camilla now had her knees lifted up to her chest and was preparing to land as Tom had just indicated to her. About thirty feet from the road, near tall rows of columns and huge blocks of stone scattered here and there, the tandem landed softly on earthy ground. A group of startled tourists watched the scene.

Tom paid no attention to them and released the clips linking him to his passenger. He took off his harness and pack and hastily rolled up the parachute canopy that was sagging on the ground. He hid the whole lot behind two large stones and Camilla also put her harness there.

Appearing from out of nowhere, an elderly Egyptian gardener started shouting at them. Tom approached him, holding out a hundred-euro note. He had a few brief words with the old man, who nodded and smiled, revealing a toothless mouth.

"Can you speak Arabic?" Camilla asked in surprise.

"Enough to get by," he replied modestly.

"What did you ask him?"

Tom chortled.

"To keep an eye on my parachute..."

Tom looked all around and frowned: normally there were a good number of police on duty here and Tom had even set aside some thick wads of banknotes so that these officials would turn a blind eye to his intrusion by parachute. However, the police were strangely absent.

"Let's go," Tom said.

Walking along the edge of the park with its religious remains thousands of years old, the couple headed toward the two high walls at the entrance to the temple. The obelisk appeared on their right, beside two sitting colossi, timeless guardians of the place. Running off to the left, a long alley of sphinxes also watched over the calm of the sanctuary.

However, the tranquility of the place was somewhat disturbed by a gathering of people at the foot of the obelisk. Tom and Camilla approached. Watched by the group of tourists, a European some fifty years of age, with a spectacular beer-belly, was surrounded by a dozen local police in blue uniforms, Kalashnikovs slung over their shoulders.

Holding a rectangular block of granite in his hand, the plump fifty-year-old was shouting and gesticulating.

"I've been trying to tell you for an hour now," he grumbled loudly in French with a strong Marseilles accent. "It wasn't me... understand? It was a woman who dented your pillar... God damn it, can nobody speak French in this dump or what?"

Intrigued, Tom approached.

"Do you have a problem?" he asked in his slight Swiss-German accent.

"You speak French?" the man from Marseilles exclaimed. "You can get me out of this mess, for chrissakes. I can't speak English, let alone Egyptian. These cops think it was me who pulled this bit of stone off the pillar. But it wasn't me, I swear on my children's life. It was a chick, a nice blonde piece, while the helicopter was looping the loop..."

"Helicopter? What helicopter?"

"Hold your horses for a moment, I'm coming to that: there was this helicopter that put on a show up in the sky for ten minutes. He went backward and forward, he even looped the loop, a really crazy show and everybody was watching him, as well. Me too. Except this guy bumped into me, not on purpose, though, and I turned round. And there was this broad back of me, standing on the base of the pillar pulling out this stone with Egyptian writing on it..."

Tom grunted in surprise. Understanding what had happened, he stepped a few yards to one side to get a better view of the obelisk. He was not the only one: a number of tourists were straining their necks to see the little empty space within a rectangular cavity near the base of the monument.

"And what was inside?" Tom enquired.

"I dunno, I didn't see properly. But what I do know is that the bimbo grabbed something from inside and shoved it into her backpack..."

Not understanding what they were saying, one of the policemen became irritated.

Without so much as a by your leave, he snatched the block of granite out of the hand of the man from Marseilles and stepped up onto the base of the obelisk. He put the finely carved stone back in its place and sealed the hole with an angry gesture.

*
* *

The helicopter was flying along the Nile at a bare seventy feet above the ground.

Leo was watching the landscape roll past before his blue eyes. He had the headphones of an MP3 player over his ears, blotting out the thunderous noise of the rotor with Gregorian plainsong that thrilled his heart.

Leo loved religious chants, that music written by the hand of God and inspired in his earthly creatures through the conduit of composers receptive to the divine. At the present day, divine music was alas submerged by devilish music, songs thumped out by delirious crowds who worshiped simple mortals elevated to the rank of stars in any evil collective madness. All these singers, all these idols were no better than the humblest street performer, pathetic fools who nevertheless were so conceited they gave their opinions about everything, especially politics, when they were no more than beggars on horseback having no divine essence in them that might confirm they had genuine heaven-inspired knowledge.

In the days of glory had court troubadours advised noble blue-blooded kings? Of course not, the wretches had been just mountebanks supposed to entertain God's divine emissaries. However, nowadays Evil misled the younger generations into worshipping these modern court jesters, distracting them from the sole legitimate worship they should have performed.

Worship of God and His Son Jesus Christ, Savior of humanity.

Leo unwrapped the scarf from around his head and took off his blond wig. Beside him, the Egyptian pilot with a bushy moustache was staring at the river speeding past beneath them, not daring to look at his passenger. A smile on the corner of his lips, Leo looked at the broad dog collar that the Egyptian was wearing around his neck.

By putting a butcher's knife to his throat, Leo had forced him to put on this collar. Then Leo had assured him that the little black box fixed to the collar contained enough explosive to blow his head off. Leo had waved his cell phone at him and stated that he could trigger the explosion from more than six miles away and that if anybody tried to remove the collar, a thermal detector would set off the explosive charge.

The Egyptian had diffidently retorted that without him the helicopter would crash. Leo had laughed and taken the controls of the machine for five minutes. Some time back, Cardinal Fustiger had treated his sponsored hit-man to helicopter pilot training so that Leo could take him quickly to the great estates of various notable folk where secret ceremonies were held.

Seized with terror, the Egyptian had collaborated docilely after that.

As they approached Luxor, Leo had disguised himself as a woman. When the helicopter landed alongside a road, Leo had taken with him a walkie-talkie tuned to the frequency of the on-board radio. Leo had not walked far before finding a taxi to take him all the way to the temple. The obelisk was under 'heightened surveillance', and the constant presence of tourists prevented him from acting freely. However, Leo had foreseen all this and by radio had ordered the pilot, whose helicopter was buzzing discreetly in the air, to create a diversion. In the grip of his fear of dying, the Egyptian had surpassed himself, attracting all eyes with his spectacular aerobatics.

Now that he had the Devil's Book in his hands, Leo was heading for Cairo.

However, he had one final task to complete.

The pilot knew his true face.

It was a pity that the explosive collar was only a bluff.

Leo turned round to pick up the case containing the violin that had been stored behind his seat. The black electronic instrument was disassembled in under a minute and the pieces it comprised were re-assembled in a different order. Leo fed gold-colored bullets into the clip and clicked it home into the butt of the long-barreled submachine gun.

Cardinal Fustiger had made him promise to kill absolutely nobody except Thomas Anderson.

However, the Cardinal would never know anything about it and, in the eyes of God and His Creation, Leo was doing no more than to rid the Earth of a spawn of the Devil who worshiped a false God.

*

* *

There was fear on the face of the Egyptian waiter with the bushy moustache.

Sitting at a table with Camilla, Tom glanced rapidly round the bar of the Sheraton Hotel in Luxor.

Apart from a few tourists, most of the customers were young Egyptians from the wealthier classes in the country.

They were afraid, too.

Straining their necks to see the television screens fixed to the luxuriously decorated walls, they were listening to the C.N.N. presenter announcing an imminent television broadcast by the President of the United States of America. Like fatal prophecies, the news subtitles scrolling beneath the impeccably coiffured head of the presenter were feeding the fears of the Egyptians present.

For them, time seemed to have stopped, as they hung on each word they read of the dreadful announcements that repeatedly plucked at their reptilian instincts.

Even if not all the news channels in the world blindly obeyed the established order, enjoying some limited and precarious independence, they still broadcast the fears orchestrated by others.

Never bothering to check the source, lest they miss a scoop, newspapers, television channels and radio stations always gave the public news that was on the same lines as the other media. They all tried to maintain at any cost their reputation as a reliable source of information, because, brainwashed by State propaganda, the public took as credible those news items that were on the same lines as what they already believed.

So, if the public had read a piece of news in the papers, the best way for the other media to be considered believable sources of news was to say the same thing. Any theory that tended to corroborate a belief, whether social, political or religious, that was already in people's consciousness fit naturally into media discourse.

Novelty, change, which was equated with disruption, were forbidden by unconscious self-censorship. Yet nobody complained, because world opinion was a blind mob building its truth on the faith of the majority view and not through any real search for information. The mob always formed its beliefs by reference to what was accepted by the greatest number of people.

On the television screen, Tom read a scrolling message in English warning of the imminent departure of Israeli troops and armored vehicles toward the Lebanese and Egyptian borders.

Theoretically, rumors were spread by people who were not in the know and news by those who were. However, the news broadcast by the media was more often of the nature of rumor, State-approved rumors that kept the masses anxious.

Media rumors stirred up the public's anxiety and when they faded away, as all rumors eventually do, the level of public anxiousness decreased.

So, it was constantly necessary to feed this machine for nurturing reptilian brains and not to cause any hiatus in this flood of programmed fears.

In any case, there was no risk of any real piece of news emerging from amidst this Machiavellian torrent.

News was censored not so much by holding details back, but quite the opposite, by a ceaseless deluge of alarming or useless pieces of news, such as a solemn announcement that a head of state had gone jogging. Flooding constantly into the television news in every country, the sheer number of such brain-washing trivia presented as vital news prevented the emergence of truths or State secrets, which were lost in the ocean of ignorance and neglect.

Tom looked at the men and women who were drinking in the newsreader's every word.

People were physically what they ate. A diet rich in sugar and fats made people unhealthy, misshapen and abject, while properly planned and balanced food of good quality enhanced the beauty of the whole body.

The same was true of the intellect.

Mentally, people were what they watched. Hours and hours spent watching this insipid television eroded the human brain, thus yielding power to the reptile or mammal brains, so that the emotions and subconscious of these latter took the reins of consciousness, all orchestrated by subtle puppet-masters working for the powerful of the world.

The brain subconsciously believed all the images that flooded into the mind. The hypnotizing capacity of television meant that it was possible to say the most preposterous things without the viewers doubting what was claimed.

Like a modernized version of Stalinism, it was a way of controlling the masses with images.

"The President is about to speak," Camilla said, putting her hand on Tom's arm.

Tom lifted his gaze to the nearest wall-mounted screen.

Standing behind a lectern, the charismatic American President wore a serious look suited to grave circumstances. He was not the representative of an elite detached from the real America; he was a leader typical of his people, dressing like a cowpuncher so as to look like his fellow citizens of

heartland America, symbolizing by his external appearance soothing internal values.

As in a narcissistic mirror, for the man in the street similarity was somehow reassuring. Somebody who spoke like him and was physically similar embodied the model of a perfect leader, regardless of any hidden true nature.

Left on its own, a duckling would start to quack in fright. If a mirror was placed before it, it stopped its noise, convinced it was no longer alone, but had a real companion, which was no more than its own reflection.

This illusion worked for humans, too.

When people serving in restaurants repeated their customer's order word for word, smiled when the customer smiled, scratched their noses when the customer did, they received much bigger gratuities than other waiters and waitresses who did not act in that way, using insincere mimicry.

It was easy to get what one wanted by feigning similarity, because the human ego loved what was like itself.

The power of words did not count as much as that of the narcissistic mirror.

"It is no more than just for a State and its people to aspire to national sovereignty, to demand lands which legitimately belong to them. The Promised Land belongs to the Jews and God in person granted them the right to possess those lands..."

The President spoke briefly, giving his unconditional support to Israel, threatening anybody who dared oppose the Jews' decision to retake possession of the lands of the Chosen People.

The Egyptians present in the Sheraton Hotel bar knew what that meant for them. Their government would mobilize all the reservists in the country to deploy the army against Israel.

The umpteenth war arising from a territorial conflict was about to start.

"What'll we do now?" Camilla asked, somewhat worried by the turn international events were taking. "Are we going back to France?"

"No," Tom said. "As long as I don't have a copy of the Grail in my hand, I'm not going home. In his notebook, Abbé Boudet indicates the location of for probable hiding places for the Grail..."

"There are only three left now, if we rule out the obelisk."

"Yes, that's true. Just three left..."

Closing his eyes, Tom thought for an instant.

"So, where are we going?" Camilla finally enquired impatiently.

“Jerusalem. Abbé Boudet wrote in his notebook that the Egyptian scribe who drew up the report to Pilate’s dictation was a Jewish spy. The scribe made two faithful copies of the original. One was found by Champollion and hidden in the obelisk, the other was sent to the Temple in Jerusalem by the scribe himself.”

“But the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, there’s only the Wailing Wall left.”

“I’d say yes and no. Yes, since the Temple was indeed destroyed, but no, since not all the Temple was eliminated. According to Boudet, there’s still a secret underground chamber which must have escaped destruction and that chamber was used for storing certain documents.”

“How did Abbé Boudet know that?” Camilla asked in surprise.

“Remember the Jewish scribe kept a personal diary that Champollion found along with the Grail. Champollion noted down passages from that diary in his own notebook and Boudet copied them over into his own notebook. Boudet says the scribe gives the precise location of a chamber in the Temple where all his correspondence was filed.”

“And you think the Grail’s there?”

“Well anyhow, Boudet felt sure it was. In his notebook, Boudet mentions he’d got hold of a plan of the Temple at a hefty price from a more or less shady antique-dealer in Jerusalem who he’d been writing from France. He also laid hands on a plan of the Al-Aqsa mosque that was built on the site of the destroyed Temple during the seventh century. Boudet compared the two plans in minute detail and found a wall in the mosque which might hide an access to the underground chamber.”

“But why did Boudet waste his time investigating the Grail in the Temple when he knew a copy was in the Luxor obelisk, a copy easily in reach?”

“Before making a long journey to get the Grail, Boudet wanted to be sure he was traveling to some purpose. He wasn’t one hundred per cent certain that the Luxor Grail was still there. Boudet was getting ready to head off and recover one of the four copies of the report when Abbé Saunière discovered the Grail in Rennes-le-Château. And Abbé Boudet’s quest for the Grail stopped short there.”

“So we’re heading for Israel, despite the war that’s building up?” Camilla enquired.

Tom nodded.

“Yes, since the Grail that’s in Jerusalem is a clone of the original Pilate sent the Emperor in Rome. It’s not just the copy of a late copy. The precise details in such a clone don’t suffer from the imperfections likely in any

copy that's been re-transcribed by copyists over centuries. So, we're off after the source of the Grail, a Grail in its pristine purity."

Camilla nodded gently, her green eyes glittering with varying highlights.

Tom smiled at her.

Until then, Tom had thought that he could quickly get hold of the Grail. First at Rennes-le-Château, then at Luxor. However, he had suffered two reverses. From the very start, he had not intended to divulge the secret of Christ to Camilla until he had the Grail in his possession. With such an irrefutable proof in his hands, Tom could have revealed all to Camilla, as she would not then have been able to deny the truth.

However, this initial plan was not binding.

After all, he had already torn the veil of mystery from the Old Testament to Camilla and the sharp brain of the young woman had accepted the implacable logic of State-sponsored lies manipulated by King Josiah.

Was it still necessary to wait until he had the Grail in his hands to tell her the secret of the Son of God?

Camilla was intelligent and despite her blind faith in Christ, Tom was convinced he could open her eyes without waving the Pontius Pilate Report under her nose. Even if he had never read it, Tom still knew its overall contents and he would reveal to Camilla the gist of what Pilate's contained.

The discovery of the Grail in Jerusalem would be no more than the cherry on the cake, the last touch, the final hammer blow driving the nail of truth into the cross of lies.

Without saying a word, Tom worked out a strategy.

He had to take precautions and prepare the psychological environment carefully before divulging Christ's secret, so as to get Camilla's mind ready to listen and open to ideas.

Tom smiled almost diabolically.

He knew the ideal place to achieve his aims.

Tom would wait until they were physically in the heart of Hell before revealing to Camilla the secret of Jesus.

17

United States 1789.

New York

His hand resting on his hip, George Washington looked at the reflection of his tall, noble figure in the mirror.

His hair, powdered white, his face pockmarked by a bout of smallpox and his single remaining tooth, cleverly hidden by ivory dentures, were not enough to make him old. He still felt young, fresh and spry despite his age of fifty-seven.

People said he had the soul, look and stuff of a hero.

Washington was never embarrassed by the tributes paid to him. He had traveled so far and survived so many battles and wars to reach the status which he now had.

First President of the United States of America.

Just a few days back he had sworn an oath of loyalty on the Bible and had had supreme authority conferred upon him.

Washington glanced at the Bible lying on his desk.

A new order was now in place.

Long ago, the Freemasons' Grand Lodge had initiated him into the true revelations contained in the Bible and the secrets of perfect knowledge made known by Christ in his lifetime. While the American people were not yet quite ready to learn the authentic esoteric Christian facts, a time would soon come when the veil of mystery would at last be lifted. Centuries of lies had obscured reason but the time would quickly arrive when the clouds of ignorance would yield to the light of heaven, which would flood the hearts of men with celestial Truths.

The pious descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers were powerful and would not be long in gaining supreme authority in the years to come. If, while he was in power, Washington did not reveal the truths which rule the heavens,

those Puritans would perpetuate the errors deeply rooted in them, because they were blinded by their Christian faith into believing they knew everything about the Holy Scriptures which they unfortunately took absolutely literally.

Washington had to establish the truth before dark ignorance triumphed yet again, as had happened throughout the world for century after century.

“Good morning, Mister President.”

Washington turned to the doorway. An elderly man was standing before the closed door.

His chubby cheeks, square chin and hooked nose seemed pale and motionless, an impression heightened by the heavy lids half closed over his large light-colored eyes.

“Who are you?” Washington asked.

The stranger bowed slightly.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said in a deep voice. “I am Abraham Israel, but you may call me Abraham...”

His gaze rested on the Bible. He jerked his chin in its direction.

“You think you know the New Testament, I imagine?”

He chuckled.

“Do read this...”

Pulling a manuscript out of his tailcoat pocket, Abraham proffered it to Washington, then went and sat in an armchair.

Intrigued, Washington stared at the manuscript he was holding.

“What is this?” he asked after a moment.

Abraham smiled enigmatically.

“An English translation of the Pontius Pilate Report... but do please read it... it is most instructive...”

After reading the first few pages, Washington felt he was on the point of fainting. He had to go sit in the armchair facing Abraham’s.

When he finished reading, Washington raised his head, his look haggard.

“Have no doubt about it, Mister President, that translation of the original manuscript is perfectly faithful, I can guarantee it. It would be a pity for the original to be made public, would it not?”

Thinking furiously, Washington remained silent. After several minutes, he eventually asked a question.

“What do you want?”

“Permanent support from you,” Abraham replied, smiling. “We Jews have always been the victims of persecution and we hope that in this new country we shall always have freedom of worship and be at liberty to live simply as we wish. I put my trust in you for the future of the Chosen People. Furthermore, I have equal trust in your successors, because if the support of the Presidents of the United States were ever withdrawn from us, the Pontius Pilate Report would be made public...”

Washington mechanically nodded agreement.

Abraham stood.

“I am sure we shall meet again, Mister President. Keep the translation of the Pontius Pilate Report; it is a small gift to cement our future friendly relationship. You may be sure that the Latin original is in a safe place...”

Abraham made for the door and grasped its handle. Without turning around, he added:

“I am convinced that our relationship will be fruitful, Mister President. Goodbye.”

He departed.

Washington was left alone.

His soul, faith and beliefs were irretrievably pulverized. He took several hours to emerge from the nothingness in which his shattered consciousness had taken refuge.

As painfully as in an agonizing childbirth, a certainty slowly took shape in him.

The new order which his Freemason friends and he himself had desired would no longer be possible, because a terrible doubt overhung it: if they had been lied to about Christ, what about the celestial Truths? Nobody could force upon the people truths which were perhaps just another set of centuries-old lies.

Washington’s glazed eyes finally focused on Pilate’s manuscript. He had to keep it secret. What could he do now?

First of all, he had to ensure Abraham Israel’s friendship at any cost. If he put his threat into effect, the publication of the Pontius Pilate Report would trigger horrendous upheavals, anarchy would reign, the clergy would be lynched and in no time the Union of the States would burst into a thousand pieces. Publication of Christ’s secret risked bringing civil war, not just in America but also in many other countries, particularly France where his friend the Marquis de La Fayette now was.

Some secrets absolutely had to be kept quiet if people were to live free.

Free in appearance.

18

Transfiguration

Jesus halted for an instant.

He looked at the big white building, two stories high and perhaps one hundred and fifty feet long. Then he went in through an entrance way; on either side, the two massive doors which closed it stood wide open. In an immense circular room the future supporters who had come to listen to his speech were already awaiting him. Jesus slipped between them until he reached an improvised stage: a large table had been set up with a chair on top of it. In a single agile leap, Jesus got onto the table. He remained standing for a few seconds, gazing at the hundreds of faces turned toward him. In their eyes, he could see impatience to hear what he had to say to them.

He sat down and began speaking, thanking the owner of the house for his kindness in letting him use it. He hesitated for a moment, then started preaching. After half an hour, the faces before him had become radiant, expressions joyful and smiles broad. Many were congratulating themselves on living at such a privileged point in time and they were keen for the Kingdom of God on Earth finally to take shape as soon as possible.

Jesus observed them in silence.

Although they knew what would be the consequences of this Kingdom, they still wanted it at any cost and nothing else had any importance for them. However, they were unfamiliar with the law of Causalities and the perverse outcomes to which it gives rise...

Among those present, he exchanged looks with one of his disciples. Jesus sighed inwardly, then went on:

“Beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the Sanhedrin and they will scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what you will speak: for what you are to say will be given to you in that

same hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit of God that speaks in you and none will be able to refute you. Brothers will deliver up their brothers and fathers their children. Children will rise up against their parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake, but whosoever endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one city, flee then to another, and if you are persecuted there, take flight to a third. But even so, you will not have completed the circuit of the cities of Israel before the Messiah comes in all his glory."

The audience sniggered.

"Fear them not. There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nothing hidden that will not be known. What I tell you now in secret, tell it in the broad light of day, what I whisper into your ear, preach it upon the housetops. Fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Fear rather God, who is able to destroy both body and soul in the fire of Gehenna. Whosoever declares himself for me before men, for him will I also declare myself before my Father, which is in Heaven. But whosoever denies me before men, him will I also deny before my Father, which is in Heaven."

Jesus closed his eyes for an instant, then opened them again to look around at those present.

"Whosoever wishes to follow me," continued Jesus, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and come after me. The others, those who are ashamed of me, those who wish to save their life without believing in me, will lose their life, but whosoever loses his life for my sake, will recover it in Heaven, in an eternal life."

Murmurs of approval in the room.

"I have come to send fire on the Earth. Would that it were already kindled, for I have a baptism of fire with which to be baptized! Do not think that I have come to spread peace on Earth. I come not to send peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's foes will be those in his own household."

Jesus' words were devilish. However, the monotone he was using contrasted strangely with what he was stating. This oddity passed unnoticed, though, and everybody was drinking in his words like sweet nectar of the gods.

"If any man comes to me and does not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple faithful to my cause. And he who does not take up

his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

He stopped, drinking down the goblet of water he had been handed.

“He that is not with me is against me,” continued Jesus. “Not long ago, a scribe said to me that wheresoever I went he would follow me. I answered him that I had nowhere to lay my head, not yet, for you all know where it will lie by and by...”

The audience silently nodded agreement.

“Another wished to follow me but asked first to go bury his father. I say to you, let the dead bury their dead, think no more on them and announce to all the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth.”

Further murmurs of approval.

“Yet another wished to say farewell to all his folk before joining me and bearing the cross...”

That accursed cross...

He stroked the wooden object hung round his neck. He would have liked to tear it off and throw it into the fire. However, he could not do that.

“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God. Your faith should admit of no hesitation...”

Jesus ran a hand through his hair.

These sermons were known to him by heart, as he had repeated them dozens and dozens of times to audiences that had sometimes been even more numerous. His statements were even passed on without him: they were transmitted by word of mouth, and at that in places where he had not yet gone, the message had been spread. He had even been told that scribes had taken it upon themselves to note down what they had heard being said about him, as well as his sermons. It was true that the miracles that he had performed proved that he was without a shadow of a doubt Christ, the Son of God, giving legitimacy to such writings.

Every time, the audiences had been bewitched by his words and their impact for the future.

They were all waiting with growing feverishness for the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Jesus, for his part, was hoping for just one thing: that that accursed Kingdom should never come into being.

However, the continuation of his statements ran counter to that bizarre thought.

“Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste of death till they see the Kingdom of God on Earth coming in its power and see me reign. Me, the son of man, the son of Adam like you all, I will triumph in the glory of God and his angels and render to each in accordance with his just deserts...”

The sound of an angry conversation could be heard near the entrance doorway. A woman’s voice rang out.

“I say he has gone out of his mind...”

The entrance doors closed suddenly and the rest of the conversation was not audible. Two minutes later, the owner of the house came into the room and approached Jesus.

“Your mother and your brothers stand outside, desiring to speak with you,” said he under his breath.

No, not them! They must leave, they are in danger...

With apparent calm, Jesus took on a surprised look.

“Who is my mother? Who also are my brothers?”

Grimacing, he shook his head as if to say that it was impossible and that they were impostors trying to gain the privilege of meeting him. He looked around the audience sitting in a circle around him.

“Here are my mother and my brothers,” said he, with a jerk of his chin toward the people present. “Whosoever does the will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

He made a sign with his hand for a disciple to come to him. He ordered him to drive away the disruptive people outside. Bowing respectfully, the disciple went off quickly, accompanied by the master of the house.

The incident now closed, Jesus went on with his intransigent preaching. Making a brief reference to what had just happened, he linked it in cleverly:

“Take heed so no man can deceive you, for many will come in my name, saying ‘I am the Messiah’, and they will mislead many people. Do not follow after them. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars and commotions, do not be troubled. All these things must first come to pass, but the end is not yet. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences. There will be great and fearful sights and signs in the heavens. All these are no more than the beginning of sorrow. Then they will deliver you up to be tormented and will kill you. You will be betrayed even by your parents and brothers and kinsfolk and friends. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. Many will succumb and will betray one another and will hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and

will deceive many. Because iniquity will prevail in those times, the faith of many will wax cold. Yet not one hair of your head will perish. It is through your patience, your constancy in faith that you will save your lives. The glad tidings of the Kingdom of God on Earth will then be proclaimed throughout the whole world. Then will come the end of days.”

Murmurs of satisfaction.

“Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, set in the holy place, when you see Jerusalem encompassed by armies, then you will know that its destruction is nigh. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of the city depart out of it and let those who are in the fields around return back into it, for these are the days of vengeance when all things that are written will be fulfilled. Woe to those who are with child or who are giving suck in those days, for there will be great distress in the land and wrath against the people. Many will fall beneath the edge of the sword and many will be led away captive into all nations. Jerusalem will be trodden down by those pagans. Pray that these things do not occur in winter. In those days there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world that God created to this time, no, nor will there ever be again. Except if the Lord God shortens those days, none will save their lives, but for the chosen people’s sake those days will be shortened.”

Nodding, Jesus smiled sadly.

“Immediately after those days of tribulation, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give her light, the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son will appear in heaven and all the nations of the Earth will beat their breasts and mourn. They will see the Son coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. When this begins, stand up and raise your head, for your deliverance will be near. Then the Son will send his angels with the great sound of a trumpet and they will gather together the chosen people from the four winds, from the end of the Earth to the end of Heaven. When you see all these things, know that the coming of the Son of God is nigh, even at the gates of the Kingdom of God on Earth. This generation will not pass away before all these things come to pass. As for that day and hour, no man, no not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, know it. Nobody knows it but my Father alone. Therefore be ready, for at an hour when you do not think it could be so the Son of God will come.”

Once again, he insisted on probable impostures in the future.

“Days will come when you will wish to see the Messiah and you will not see him. If they say to you ‘He is in the desert’, do not go forth. If they

say to you ‘He is in a secret chamber’, do not believe it. If they say ‘He is here’ or ‘He is there’, do not follow them. For as the lightning comes out of the east and shines even into the west, so will the coming of the Son be, to prove his divine nature. But soon it is likely that he must suffer a great deal by reason of certain among you who will reject him and have no faith in him.”

An angry buzz went round the room. In their suspicion, some of the audience swept a gaze over their own ranks searching for renegades who might have infiltrated the meeting.

“As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be also in the days of the coming of the Messiah. Recall: they ate, they drank, men married wives, and they gave their children in marriage until the day that Noah entered into the Ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot: they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted and they built. Yet the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, God made it rain fire and brimstone from heaven and it destroyed them all. Thus will it be on the day when the Messiah is revealed. On that day, let him who is on his housetop and has his belongings in the house not come down to take them away. Let him that is in the field likewise not return back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whosoever seeks to save his life will lose it and whosoever loses his life will recover it. I tell you, in that night, there will be two people in one same bed and one will be taken and the other spared. Two women will be grinding corn together, one will be killed and the other left.”

Jesus stopped briefly before concluding:

“Furthermore, of two men who are in the one field, one will die and the other will live.”

“Where, Lord?” asked a man’s voice. “Tell us where.”

The tone of the question showed great haste to see such an event occur.

They really wish for that day of desolation...

“Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.”

They all understood the hidden implications of the mention of eagles. However, they all assented, a smile on their lips.

Jesus closed his eyes, as if trying to escape from this collective madness. When the evening came, having concluded his speaking by preaching of the Last Judgment, he was relieved to be able to leave the gathering.

During the days that followed, Jesus went round the region speaking and healing. His earliest disciples, who had been accompanying him from the beginning, were astonished at his healing powers. As they walked

through a settlement of a dozen buildings lost in the middle of vineyards, one of them questioned him on this subject.

“Why did you not act sooner? Why did you wait so long before revealing to all this divine power?”

“The hour had not yet come,” replied Jesus laconically. “But now it is time to act so as to fulfill the will of my Father in Heaven, so as to submit to his Holy Spirit and so as to lighten the burden of those who suffer.”

At that moment, emerging from nowhere, a woman started crying out:

“Have mercy on me, oh Lord, Son of David! My daughter is grievously vexed by a devil...”

She began to weep. Jesus did not even look at this woman of some twenty years of age, her head covered with a buff kerchief. By her accent, they had all realized that she was not Jewish, but rather Greek or more likely Canaanite. Walking on as if he could not see her, Jesus tried to seem unmoved. She was held back by the disciples to prevent her from approaching their Master, but the Canaanite nonetheless struggled to follow him shouting even louder.

“Have pity on her,” begged Simon, approaching Christ after some minutes, “for she cries after us...”

“I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel,” replied Jesus in a sharp tone, continuing on his way.

The young woman succeeded in breaking free from the grasp of the disciples and came running to throw herself down at the Messiah’s feet.

“Lord, help me.”

Jesus stooped down and forced her to stand.

“It is not good to take the children’s bread and to cast it to dogs,” said he in a haughty tone.

The message was clear: cures were reserved exclusively for the children of Israel and in no circumstance for Canaanites, insultingly compared to dogs.

“That is true, Lord,” said the woman humbly, “yet dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table!”

The Canaanite woman was doing all she could to obtain Christ’s favors, not hesitating to demean and humble herself in her statements, submitting in a state of total subjection.

“Oh, woman, great is your devotion toward Israel! Let it be even as your faith wishes.”

Within the next hour, her daughter was cured.

This reticence to heal a Canaanite was legitimate in the eyes of a good many Jewish disciples. They would have been surprised if they had discovered that the intransigence that their Master expressed toward strangers was no more than a charade.

In fact, unknown to his close followers, Jesus healed without discrimination. Cures of non-Jews, Gentiles, were not carried out in secret for fear of triggering a flood of foreign sick that he could not have handled; he was capable of dealing with all requests, whatever their number. No, if Jesus behaved thus it was for fear that his healing might be learned about by one person in particular.

He did all he could to surround himself with the greatest degree of mystery on this topic, ordering all the Gentiles that he cured to hold their tongues. He also gave them very specific advice, which he told them in a confidential tone, as if these recommendations should in no case be revealed to third parties. Jesus insisted on fasting, which was crucial in his view and which had to be performed in the greatest privacy. He also forbade them from giving bread to dogs or any other animal. Faced with the astonishment expressed by some, Jesus stated that it was the profanation of a sacred item and should be avoided at all costs.

Despite his precautions, Jesus knew that sooner or later the care he lavished on foreigners would become known to all. However, he wanted to postpone this for as long as possible, together with the complications it would trigger.

Nonetheless, if this obscure worry was constantly in his mind, like a bad wound that would not heal, it finally diminished after the episode of the centurion.

That day, as he made for the town of Capernaum to the North of Lake Tiberias, Jesus was hailed by two old men. They explained to him that a centurion in the city had a servant of whom he was very fond and who was seriously ill, probably at death's door.

"The Centurion does not know that we have come to ask you for aid," said one of the elderly men in a croaking voice. "We are her on our own initiative, for the Centurion would never dare ask for such a thing of the Son of God. He knows of you, he has heard tell of you and of what you did with the loaves and the miraculous cures you have performed. Come and help him; he deserves for you to consent him that. He is a friend to our nation and he even had our synagogue built for us..."

Jesus grimaced, understanding the situation. The Roman was a God-fearer, a man interested in and fascinated by the Jewish religion and the Law of Moses. At the invitation of the Jews, the centurion must often have the privilege of participating in ceremonies in the synagogue. He could at

any moment embrace the Jewish faith and convert, becoming a proselyte. It was a common enough step, though many dared not take it because of the obligation to be circumcised.

Jesus hesitated to give help to the Roman's servant. He turned to one of his close disciples. In his dark eyes, Jesus seemed to note a change. Slight, subtle, almost unnoticeable, but definitely there. As if to confirm his impression, the disciple nodded imperceptibly.

Then Jesus perceived something else burning in those dark eyes.

True devotion... toward me...

Jesus turned to the two old men.

"Lead on. I will follow you."

Accompanied by his disciples and a host of supporters, he followed in the old men's footsteps. When he got to within a hundred yards or so of the Roman's house, Jesus saw a short, dark man about thirty years of age come hastily out of the building and run toward him.

The man was one of the centurion's friends. Learning unexpectedly of the two old men's action, the centurion was now sending an emissary.

"Lord," said this messenger to Jesus, "do not trouble yourself so much. The Centurion does not feel sufficiently worthy to receive the Messiah into his house. It is also for that reason that he dares not come in person to you..."

Contradicting what his friend was saying, the centurion appeared on the threshold of his house. Clean-shaven, a smart legionary uniform fitting his tall, sturdy body perfectly, the Roman was imposing in his build and demeanor. However, it was with hesitant steps, with trembling hands and with terror on his face that he walked toward Jesus.

"Lord, I have just learnt that my child is as gravely ill as my servant. He is lying in the house, sick of the palsy and grievously tormented."

The centurion knelt on one knee.

"I am not worthy for you to enter under my roof, but speak the word only and my son will be healed. I am a man under authority, but I have soldiers at my command, and I say to this man, 'go' and he goes and to another 'come' and he comes, and to my servant 'do this' and he does it. The Son of God must surely have the power to order the disease to leave the body of my child with but a single word..."

Laying a hand on the centurion's shoulder, Jesus turned to the crowd that stood behind him.

"Truly I say to you, I have not found so humble a faith in Israel," said he in a strongly admiring tone. "Many will come from the East and the West and will sit down with the patriarchs in the Kingdom of Heaven, but

the children of the Kingdom of Israel will be cast out into outer darkness and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

For an instant Jesus stared down the grimacing faces angled toward him.

Do they understand this warning? I doubt it...

“Go your way,” said he to the Centurion, “and as you have believed, so let it be done to you.”

Within the next hour, his child and servant were cured.

The obscure worry that Jesus had had about healing foreigners finally had a totally new light cast upon it when the disciple that he loved came and whispered a few words in his ear. Jesus’ face lighted up with immense joy. He raised his head to the sky.

Thank you, Heavenly Father. Thank you a thousand times...

To the South-West of Lake Tiberias stood Mount Tabor. Jesus set off for it to pray by himself. In fact, he was not completely alone: four disciples were given the privilege of accompanying him. Simon the former fisherman, his partner James and the latter’s brother, John, as well as Judas Sicariot climbed the mountain, following Jesus. At the top, overlooking the green plains of Galilee, they lighted a fire and sat around Jesus. He took a rye loaf from his haversack. He broke it into several pieces, than gave it to them.

Simon bit greedily into the bread. Tiredness from the journey weighed him down and his feet were hurting him cruelly. He did not know why Christ had brought them so far away, but he would have followed him to the ends of the Earth if that had been necessary. He had the great honor of being among the close disciples of the Son of God and every day that rose, he never stopped thanking God for granting him this immense privilege. Simon was equally happy that he was here with his former business partner who was still his friend, James, along with James’s brother John. He glimpsed at the latter: despite the long walk, he did not seem at all tired, even smiling with attractive white teeth that were in perfect harmony with the pale complexion of his shaven cheeks. Simon had always wondered what pleasure he could have in shaving every day. As for himself, he liked to wear his beard long and would not have cut it off for anything in the world. Besides, he thought it looked a little like Jesus’; only slightly, but enough to flatter his ego a little. Simon turned his gaze on Judas Sicariot. He had no need of his beard to make him look more like Jesus. You could have taken him for the Master’s brother or cousin, so alike were they: the same tall body, identical curly hair cascading down over their neatly trimmed beards and their pleasant faces, almost a perfect match in shape. Only his dark eyes contrasted with Christ’s lighter eyes.

Simon was not very fond of Judas Sicariot, who felt the same about him, but the two men kept this antagonism under control as best they could.

Simon turned his eyes back to Jesus. How handsome he was! His blue eyes were a sea of happiness into which Simon liked to plunge. He could not tear his gaze away from them. Christ's voice began to resonate, to vibrate in him, even more pleasant than the sweetest of melodies. The words Jesus spoke were as intoxicating as the best wines of the region. He felt all his bodied gently warmed and he let himself be carried away by this sensation of absolute bliss.

Then Simon, as also his companions, witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus: his face became as bright as the sun and his clothes shone with a brilliant whiteness. Emerging from nowhere, two men suddenly appeared at his side and began conversing with him. Without ever having seen them, for good reason, Simon still realized that they were Moses and the prophet Elijah, come down from heaven to talk with the Son of God.

Simon was dead tired. He wondered for an instant if he was not asleep and dreaming. He rubbed his eyes, but the vision of Christ and the two emissaries from God was still there. He was not alone in finding it hard to believe what he was seeing: James and Judas also had their eyes wide open, staring vacantly, dumbfounded as they were by this apparition. Only John seemed completely at ease with this unbelievable situation.

Simon listened to the conversation. Despite all his attention, he could hear no more than odd words concerning Christ's soon forthcoming departure for Jerusalem. When Moses and Elijah stood up to take their leave, Simon rose in his turn and approached Jesus with hesitant steps.

"Master, it is good for us to be here," said Simon in a mumble. "If you wish, let me make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

His voice was trembling as if deep inside him he was seized by an incomprehensible apprehension. He was about to speak further when a large black cloud darkened the sky. Shot through with flashes of light, the cloud covered the mountain for a moment before descending over the group, plunging them into darkness.

Like thunder, a growling voice rang out.

"Jesus is my beloved Son, the Chosen One, hear him!"

In panic, in the thickest darkness, Simon and the others had flung themselves to the ground, face down, as a sign of submission to God. There could be no doubt that the one addressing them was the Creator.

A hand was laid on Simon's shoulder. A warm and soothing hand. The hand of Jesus.

"Stand and have no more fear," ordered Jesus.

As if his fear had vanished in an instant, Simon raised his eyes toward Christ. Around him, there was no longer anybody other than his three fellow disciples. They all stood up, not daring to speak of what they had just experienced. Stumbling, they went down the mountain behind Jesus. He turned round to give them a final warning.

"Above all, tell no man of those things you have seen, even among yourselves..."

Simon listened with as attentive an ear as possible, but he could not manage to grasp all the words correctly. After this trial with the Almighty, he was finding it difficult to get back full control of his sense. Half-dazed, he had the impression he was discussing matters with Jesus, but he could not be absolutely sure of this. Besides, he could not fully understand those of the Master's comments that reached his befuddled mind. Jesus was speaking of his resurrection and mentioning Elijah, but it was all vague and Simon found the greatest difficulty in putting it all in order in his head.

When they reached the foot of the mountain, a crowd of supporters were awaiting Christ's return. As soon as Jesus approached, a man rushed up to him.

"Lord, I have brought you my only son, who is possessed by a demon. When he is seized by it, he is thrown down and his mouth foams, he gnashes his teeth and becomes completely rigid. I beseeched your disciples to cast the evil spirit out, but they could not."

Jesus turned to his close disciples who hung their heads as if caught misbehaving.

Soon I will delegate my healing powers to them... very soon...

Then his eyes gazed sternly at the host of followers. In their looks, those slightly demented gleams that sometimes frightened Jesus were still present.

Future vengeance...

Jesus could not stand those looks of hatred. Previously, he had had to bite his tongue and say nothing. Now, however, things had changed. Everything would be different.

"Oh faithless and perverse generation," said he, "how long will I be with you? How long will I suffer you?"

The supporters were surprised to be scolded in this way, not understanding Christ's abrupt change of mood toward them.

"Bring your son here to me," was the order Jesus gave to the father.

The father returned, leading his son, a lad of about ten, by the hand. However, before he had time to reach Jesus, the child flung himself to the ground, shaken by terrible convulsions. His eyes glassy, the boy was half-dazed; the earth beneath his feet seemed to be moving in waves and people looked distorted, seeming to rush toward the sky. He experienced a great intensification of colors, sounds and odors, then he experienced the feeling that his limbs were parting from his body, which, now a corpse, was floating above him in a cloud of a myriad colors. A face appeared before him, like a horrible, grotesque mask. He wanted to cry out, but no sound would come from his foam-covered mouth.

Jesus leaned over him, slipping his fingers into the boy's mouth to prevent him from swallowing his tongue. A faint flow of air stirred in the lad's throat. Shouting, Jesus shook him hard and the child became completely rigid. Many thought he had died. Jesus lifted him up and held him against himself, folding his arms tight around him. A few minutes later, wobbling slightly, the boy was able to thank his savior before an astonished public.

With a gesture of his hand, Jesus ordered the crowd to sit before him. They all obeyed in silence. With great joy that they could hardly hold in, they were expecting Christ to speak about the future of Israel. However, what they were about to hear would disconcert more than a few of them.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven," cried out Jesus. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see the Divine. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called heavenly children. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in Heaven."

Jesus stopped for an instant.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you will have to pay a price in compensation. Woe to you who are full and sated, for you will suffer hunger. Woe to you who rejoice at the coming of the Messiah, for you will know mourning and weeping. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets and we know what has become of them."

Jesus saw the surprise in the wide-open eyes of his followers. He had to open their eyes on a good few other points. However, he hesitated. To start gently, he had to be moderate and take precautions.

"Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law of Moses or the prophets: I have not come to destroy but to fulfill. For I say to you truly,

while Heaven and Earth have not passed away, not one jot or tittle will disappear from the Law. Whosoever breaks even the least one of these commandments or teaches others to do so, will be called the lowest in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whosoever obeys and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Jesus cast his mind back over the episode of the synagogue in Nazareth where the Jews had wanted to kill him because of the truths he had tried to tell them about Moses. He had learned his lesson well and he knew that he had to make some concessions in order to enlighten such narrow minds, even if it meant lying. After flattering their egos and their erroneous beliefs, Jesus felt that it was now time to smite them with the real truth.

The Heavenly Truths.

Heavenly Father, forgive me for this lie, but the future of these people depends upon it.

“In truth I say to you, unless your new justice surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no case enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘Thou shalt not kill’, and that whosoever killed would be in danger of the judgment of the courts. I say to you, though, that whosoever is angry with his brother will be called to respond before the tribunal. Whosoever says to his brother ‘idiot’ will have to respond before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Whosoever says ‘you fool’ will be in danger of the fires of Gehenna...”

Jesus wondered if they understood the full force of his words. He doubted it. He continued by insisting on the need to reconcile oneself with one’s neighbors and even one’s enemies. He paused briefly, checking on the reactions he was causing, then went on:

“You have heard that it was said in times of old, ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’. But I say to you that whosoever looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your eye offends you, tempting you to desires, pluck it out and cast it from you, and if your hand offends you, leading you to desires, cut it off and throw it far from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members should perish and not that your whole body should be cast into the fires of Gehenna...”

Jesus went on to speak about women. They should not be repudiated simply by drawing up a written deed of divorce on a whim, only if they were unfaithful. He wanted to offer protection for those women whose husbands were hard-hearted and cast them off for another. Jesus then affirmed that nobody should ever swear an oath by anything, but rather that they should simply say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, since anything added to these was bad.

“Lay up no treasures for yourselves on Earth, where moth and rust corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where there is no moth or worm to destroy them nor robbers to break in and burgle. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both your salvation and money. Therefore I say to you, take no thought for your life, for what you will eat, or what you will drink, nor yet of your body and in what it will be clad. Is not life more than food and the body more than the clothes which it wears? Consider the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet they find food. Are you not much better than they? Besides, which one of you by worrying can add one jot to the length of his life? Therefore do not worry over what you will eat and what you will drink, or in what you will be clothed. For all these things are sought only by the foolish. The Heavenly Father knows that you have need of such things. Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and every other thing will be provided for you more plenteously than you require. Take no thought for tomorrow: sufficient to the day is its evil.”

Jesus cast his eyes over the multitude.

“All things whatsoever that you would wish that men should do for you, do even so to them, for this is the true law and the prophets. Enter in at the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad the way that leads to destruction and many there are who go in through them. Narrow is the gate and cramped the way that leads to life and few there are that find it.”

For over an hour more, Jesus continued to speak at length on various subjects. One in particular seemed to be especially important to him; the question of false prophets who might come and pervert the crowd and lead it to its perdition.

The audience was struck by his new teachings. There were many mutterings, questions, expressions of incomprehension and astonishment when Christ finished his preaching.

Jesus paid no attention and returned to the summit of Mount Tabor. This time, he went completely alone to pray. He did not come back down until the following day. Then, after calling his close disciples to him, he chose twelve among them to become his apostles. The first six to be named were Judas Sicariot, Thaddeus, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and James the son of Alphaeus, the brother of Levi the publican. This latter was also picked by Jesus; the plump red-head with green eyes did not seem to miss his former privileged status as a tax collector, and despite the grueling long walks following Christ, which had burned off a fair part of his excess weight, he was still almost childishly jovial. Even though he had slimmed

down considerably, he continued to be quite proud to carry a well-rounded belly, of which he was fond in the way in which some can enjoy having a purse well filled with gold. His small plump fingers enjoyed running across this belly, rubbing and caressing it as if it were an invaluable treasure.

Jesus also called the fishermen from Lake Tiberias: Simon, Andrew, their partner James the son of Zebedee and his younger brother John. Finally, Jesus chose Simon the Zealot. He openly claimed to be Christ's brother. Even if this was not true, Jesus had done nothing to deny it, because he knew that Simon, also called the Zealous, liked people to consider him such.

He is indeed my brother, but a totally different sort of brother...

Jesus asked Simon the former fisherman to come with him and they went a little way off from the others. To distinguish him from Simon the Zealous, Jesus told the fisherman that henceforward he would be called by the name Simon Peter. He bowed respectfully on hearing this.

"Who do the people say that I am?" asked Jesus in a confidential tone, as if he had suddenly been struck by doubts.

This question astonished Simon Peter, because the Master knew full well what everybody thought about him. Simon Peter turned around for an instant. Behind him, fifty yards away, the crowd had camped out all night at the foot of the mountain, impatiently waiting for Christ's return. Amongst them, there were many sick, lame and Possessed whose families feverishly hoped that Jesus would simply lay hands on them to cure them.

"The brother of John the Baptist," replied Simon Peter looking right into Jesus' eyes. "But some say Elijah or one of the old prophets who is risen again..."

"But for you?" interrupted Jesus.

With a slight jerk of his chin, he indicated the apostles.

"Who do you say that I am?" enquired Jesus.

Simon Peter scratched his beard uneasily. He was wondering what Jesus was getting at and what response was expected from him, because, like all the others, he had no doubt whatsoever about the Master's divine nature. He recalled the episode of the cloud with flashing lightning that had come and enveloped them and the growling voice of God the Creator emerging from the firmament to ratify his own Son.

"For us, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," said Simon Peter in a firm and resolute tone.

Jesus' face lighted up with a satisfied smile.

"Blessed are you, Simon Peter, for the Father, which is in Heaven, revealed it to you. You are like a rock, and upon this rock I will build my

teaching and the gates of the sojourn of the dead shall not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Then you will understand that whatsoever you bind on Earth will be bound in Heaven and what you loose on Earth will be loosed in Heaven.”

Simon Peter could not understand what the Master meant about these bonds, but he nodded to show his devotion. Jesus ordered him to keep this conversation secret and Simon Peter went back to join the other apostles. From a distance, Jesus stared at one of the Twelve.

I am committed to a meeting that I cannot cancel...

He did not want to go, but he could not but do so. Otherwise, the consequences could be disastrous. However, this would be the last, the very last concession that he would make.

At least, that is what he hoped.

19

Gehenna

The old Imam Ali, with his white beard, grayish complexion and bulging belly brandished his long stick in the air, shrieking that God was great.

The thousands of Moslems present in the Al-Aqsa mosque chanted out their battle cry with him and flooded out in successive waves onto the esplanade where the immense Temple of Jerusalem had formerly stood.

Dressed in a dark djellaba, Thomas Anderson checked that his false black beard and matching wig were still correctly in place.

While the faithful had been listening to the preaching by Imam Ali lambasting the Satan Israel, Tom had had time to slip quietly away and make a brief visit to one particular part of the mosque. Thanks to Abbé Boudet's plans, Tom had easily spotted the old wall behind which there was supposed to be access to secret underground chamber. Tom's heart had leaped at the thought he could be just above the Grail. An old man in a djellaba had surprised him staring at the wall. Tom had had to improvise, passing himself off as a rich foreign Moslem donor, and he had chatted for a short while with this elderly fellow with his toothless grin who was the mosque keeper. After giving him a thick wad of banknotes, Tom had left the keeper and, mingling with the dense crowd of the faithful, he had gone back into the huge prayer hall with its rows of tall, white arches and countless lines of blood-red prayer mats.

Now, carried along by the angry crowd shouting out its hatred of the Jews, Tom was soon outside. Under the brilliant shine from the golden cupola of the Dome of the Rock, the mosque which stood less than two hundred yards from there, Tom elbowed his way out of the noisy mob.

The violence of crowds imitating a handful of fanatical leaders had always fascinated him and he had often wondered what main mechanism

came into play to short-circuit individual consciences and make them merge into a demented collective conscience.

Thanks to Martial, his university teacher in Paris, Tom now knew what happened. In his mind's eye he ran back over Martial's explanation of the point.

Everything was based on anonymity.

Warriors who hid their faces with war-paint or masks before going into battle were more likely to kill, torture or mutilate prisoners they captured than combatants showing their faces were.

In a crowd, an individual had the mask of anonymity, being invisible in the mass, and the bigger the mob was, the greater the potential collective violence could be. The impunity of anonymity woke up the reptilian brain, which took priority over the conscience. For thousands of years, humans had not been violent beings, because reptiles respected an authoritarian social order. However, with guaranteed impunity or more generally in day-to-day life in the absence of any strong constraint such as the presence of a police force, of some all-seeing eye, any reptile would happily feel at liberty to break the rules of collective living, giving free rein to its innate violence, its will to dominate or to seize whatever it lacked: reptiles respected only an iron fist and mistook kindness for weakness.

Tom watched the crowd shaking threatening fists and howling insults against Israel.

Even if reptiles needed direct surveillance and sanctions exacted by the law on their person so as to be respectful of rules, too many excessive controls could have counter-productive effects through increasing their frustration and defiance to the agents of authority. Frustration was often what lighted the fuse of the human bomb, or more exactly the reptilian bomb: governments took care not to make the collar of oppression too tight, because they knew that all humans reacted very strongly to any restrictions on their liberty. The best-known example was smokers ordered to stop smoking. They often increased their dose of cigarettes as if to say: 'People want to stop me doing what I like; okay, I'll do it even more!'

To sum it up, humans could not bear to have somebody decide for them.

When they had the chance to do so, people refused to do what they were asked to out of a spirit of contradiction, because, after all, they did not like the idea of being commanded, but wanted to be in control even if it was only of themselves, with typically reptilian bravado.

Nonetheless, they could be unwittingly manipulated, made to believe that something was best for them or even that it was what they themselves aspired to do.

In their role of puppet-masters, many leaders knew exactly what to do so as to tame the reptile and cajole the mammal that was in every human.

From a distance, Tom looked at the fat, elderly Imam Ali, who was walking along with difficulty, leaning on his long stick, surrounded by delirious partisans.

Ali was chief among the Islamic fundamentalists.

Tom felt he could read him like an open book: he knew exactly what went to make up such a person, what ideas were running round in the head of that old man wearing a turban as black as his soul.

His fundamentalist ideas were characterized by a closed mind, ignorance and the outright rejection of anything that did not fit in with his beliefs: a refusal to take into account new information so as to protect what was already held was a spontaneous reaction of the human brain. Ali needed order and responses, even if they were untrue, rather than having the anguish of unanswered questions. Certain, thanks to the lies in the Koran, that he now knew everything, Ali loved submission to religious authority and approved the abuse of power to impose his vision of the faith on everybody.

Like him, all believers who had faith, an intense and excessive faith, revealed through that their true nature hiding behind their religion: authoritarianism.

Ali and everybody who had blind faith could not stand the least contradiction, feeling they were under attack from anybody who did not share the same values in which their perverted brains had found a soothing refuge. The result was discriminatory attitudes and comments, racist or sexist, aggressive actions carried out by the reptilian brain detecting a threat to its crumbling mental integrity.

Faced with the contradictions inherent to humanity's lack of knowledge, authoritarian fundamentalists of all religions shut themselves up inside a bubble which they wanted to be unbreakable.

This bubble was the religious circle.

While the mutual help, co-operation and altruism of any religion were proven facts, they operated only inside the circle of identity in which everybody shared the same values. All those outside the circle were considered as dangers threatening the system of convictions and the more distant they were geographically, especially if they lived on another continent and spoke another language, the more they were seen as not being truly people, but perceived as inferior beings lacking human emotions and feelings.

This made anybody inside the circle insensitive to the misfortunes that might strike those who lived outside the religious bubble.

Through stupidity, through a foolish selective humanization, people did not ascribe complex emotions to other humans who were outside their bubble, not considering them capable of suffering as their own group could suffer. The consequence was that people willingly helped the victims of natural catastrophes if they belonged to their own circle or nation, but did little or nothing for unknown and distant victims.

Did people care about the slaughtering of animals on the African plains?

Very little.

It was the same for people living in other contexts. The egocentricity of each circle caused the value of universal fraternity to be scorned and virtually nonexistent.

Tom looked at a group of about fifty children who had just joined the crowd. In their turn, the children did as their parents had done: they started shaking their fists and angrily shouting out their hatred for the Jews.

This sight saddened Tom.

Moslem children were the innocent victims poisoned by the virus called Koran, repeating the errors that their ancestors had perpetuated over generations.

Tom would have liked to tell them all about their mistake, shouting to them that they should not glorify the Prophet because he was of the same dubious caliber as King Josiah.

He was itching to do it, but he dared not speak: he would have been stoned to death without anybody listening to the shocking factual proofs he could have produced.

Tom was outside their circle.

However, a time would come when the truth would win through as it soon was to do for Christ: after the shattering revelations about the Son of God, Mohammed would come next. Then humanity would be able to open its eyes to the sad reality of its spoiled history and mourn past errors, then go on to better things.

The children's shouts echoed in Tom's heart.

What a sad destiny children in the Moslem world and in the Western world shared! A child born into either had every chance of knowing only violence instead of the love which it should have been able to expect.

In the world of monotheistic fundamentalists, religion automatically triggered violence because it claimed to hold the absolute truth and so judged itself superior to all others, hence justifying belittling tirades against 'infidels', rants that could not but spark off physical violence, or

even murder, perpetrated on unbelievers. Indoctrinated through respect and love for their parents, children embraced this violence, which seemed to them legitimate and natural, thanks to their being infected with the false 'word of God'.

In the Western world, children's fate was barely any better. If they were not infected with the brutality of religion, they were not necessarily immunized against all violence.

"Elephant-calf syndrome," Tom muttered to himself.

Everything began with a mysterious set of events.

On an African reserve, something strange had happened. The park wardens found several rhinoceroses disemboweled. The first thought was that the animals had been killed by other rhinos in fights for sexual partners in the rutting season. Normally, though, in such combats serious wounds are rarely inflicted, as the dominant rhinoceroses do not go so far as to kill those dominated.

This was something hitherto unknown.

Besides, the social nature of these animals did not make them likely killers. The next idea was that it was a question of a virus driving some rhinos mad and that these then attacked others in an uncontrollable murderous frenzy.

However, when samples were taken no trace of a viral agent was found in them.

The mystery was as thick as ever.

Until one day when a team of wild-life reporters chanced to film an incredible scene.

A confrontation between an elephant and a rhinoceros.

The elephant used its trunk to throw the smaller animal over, and once it was on the ground it used its tusks to gut its victim in a brutal rage.

Elephant specialists were dumbfounded to see the pictures. They had never seen anything like it. They did not understand how the most sociable animal in the wilds could act in this way. To their knowledge, no such incidents had ever been recorded. These experts thought it was inconceivable for an elephant to behave in this fashion and kill another animal gratuitously in such circumstances without its life being in danger or its existence imperiled by any real threat.

Once again, the first idea was that the killer elephants had been the victims of a virus that had altered their behavior.

However, no pathogenic agent was found.

In the end, the explanation for the slaughter was simpler to understand than it seemed at first sight.

These killer elephants had not been born in the African reserve. They had been trapped at a very young age and released into the park in small, heterogeneous groups without any particular care.

Left to themselves, without any adults to guide them and teach them how to live in a group, their reptilian brain had won out over their mammal brain and these elephant calves had brought themselves up in the most complete anarchy, so when they became adults their sexual drives gained the upper hand over the social behavior patterns which were nonetheless in their genes, so they killed rhinos so as to be able to mount their females in an ungoverned reproductive frenzy. The most sociable animal in the wilds had become a hoodlum, a crazed killer with no morals and no guardian.

The problem was swiftly solved. 'Normal' adult elephants were brought into the park and order was restored, as the now grown-up calves spontaneously copied the behavior of the newcomers, adopting it as the correct thing to do and abandoning their chaotic urges, turning back into the truly social animals with reasonable behavior that they had been since time immemorial.

From animals to humans, there was just a small step. Through the absence of parents, or of affection and commitment from their protecting adults who were supposed to show them the way of good behavior, adolescents left to themselves were inclined to act violently to make up for the lack of guidelines and security that was badly missed at a key stage in their lives. It was not surprising, then, to see children committing sometimes incredible acts of gratuitous violence and behaving chaotically. Such behavior was just a cry for help addressed to the adults who had given up on their role as guides and did not realize that Western children were quite simply victims of elephant-calf syndrome.

Tom thought about the youngsters in socially disadvantaged urban areas, in the ghettos of rich cities, rejected by everybody, outside any educational system, whose day-to-day speech had a vocabulary running to no more than a sparse five hundred words.

Yet their parents were surprised at their violence.

If they had only known that words have the power to channel their children's violence.

A gorilla could equally well handle a vocabulary of five hundred words, but that was not enough to express all its resentments and for that reason it would get into a violent rage when it did not manage to make itself understood to its helpless trainers. Just as in the case of gorillas, when communication rested on a few key words and mimicry, human's brains did not possess the capacity to control aggressive impulses.

Children continued to be violent as long as they did not know the words needed to express their desires.

Hence, it was around the age of three that violent behavior was at its peak. In most cases, physical aggressiveness gradually decreased as a child grew. Children learned to control themselves, to manage their emotions by bringing into play other strategies to achieve their purpose, in particular thanks to spoken demands.

This was because words allowed people to understand the reasons for irritation, frustration or fear and by putting words to these stressful feelings people could express them verbally instead of giving them outward expression physically through a completely reptilian impulsive violence.

Deflecting the weight of their troubles with words, with a rich vocabulary, children, once they became adolescents, could verbalize physical violence instead of actually carrying it out and so could continue to master their emotions, free inside their heads.

However, through ignorance and the absence of a guide, a large number of adolescents rejected school and books with their saving words.

In a language desert, reptilian violence ruled.

Tom's mobile phone started ringing.

"Ah! It's you, Camilla!... Please be patient... Yes, I've finished; I was just about to meet you. I've found Abbé Boudet's wall... No, lady's privilege, we'll both go back there together tonight... Yes, right, see you in two seconds..."

He rang off and checked his watch.

It was time for him to be going. Camilla had been waiting for him for quite a while.

Casting a last glance at the growling crowd, Tom left the esplanade of the mosques and got back to the road where he found a taxi. This headed away from the heights of the old city, following a road that wound toward the nearby Hinnom valley. Five minutes later, the taxi dropped Tom by the roadside.

Not far from there, on a bench in the shade of a large and flourishing tree, Camilla sat pensively contemplating the landscape lying before her unfocused gaze.

The narrow grayish road that cut a gash across the Hinnom Valley was flanked by white hills covered in low houses and desolate hillocks where only a few groups of pines barely survived on the steep rocky slopes with meager vegetation, and soil scorched by a burning sun. From time to time, a car's engine noise drowned the piercing chirps of the cicadas and a slight

breeze brought a little coolness to the sweating bodies of the few scattered people walking in the heat of the day.

Tom walked up to the bench and sat down next to Camilla. She stared at the burly newcomer without recognizing him.

Tom took off his false black beard and matching wig. Camilla giggled in surprise.

“I didn’t recognize you...”

Theatrically, Tom stretched out his hand in front of himself and slowly gestured around the landscape of the deep, narrow valley.

“Welcome to Hell, Camilla,” he said enigmatically.

*
* *

Broad and dark, sprinkled with gold reflections, the huge eyes of Cardinal Fustiger had been staring at the telephone in his office for many minutes now.

He thoughtfully went back over the short conversation he had had with Goddess.

She had warned him too late and he now had to face the facts: Leo could not reach Jerusalem in time.

The Cardinal signed, uncrossed his long thin legs and stood up. Methodically, his hand tugged at the folds of his blood-red cassock, in which his scrawny body seemed to swim.

His eye was caught by the computer screen where the countdown was proceeding.

There were just for days left before the Sons of Abraham put their threat into operation by activating their bomb. At the thought of this vision of horror, the Cardinal’s boney, angular face was twisted by a dreadful grimace.

The world would be blown to smithereens if the Pope did not offer his support for Israel’s plan to extend its borders. In the unlikely event of the Holy Father’s refusal to submit to the ultimatum from the Sons of Abraham, the cardinal had already planned a little ‘accident’ for the Pope.

One man’s refusal must not lead to the death of others.

Through this plotted assassination, the Cardinal risked finding his soul consumed by burning nothingness or, at best, condemned to the torments of Hell.

The future of his soul, though, was of little consequence. He was acting from noble abnegation and compassion, for the good of humankind.

Besides, Hell was not as bad as all that.

Fustiger smiled devilishly.

He left his office. Clattering over the tiled floor of the Vatican City, his steps led him to the door of the Pope's office, where two Swiss guards stood on sentry duty. Paying them no attention, the cardinal gave three short knocks and opened the door.

Sitting in an armchair, dressed in his white cassock, the Pope gazed with his small gray eyes at his visitor's tall figure.

"What is happening?" the Pope asked in his hoarse voice when the cardinal had closed the door behind him. "Any problem?"

Fustiger nodded.

"Yes. I have just learned that Pontius Pilate had his famous report written by an Egyptian scribe. This scribe made a secret copy of the report and sent it to the Temple in Jerusalem while Pilate was traveling to Rome."

The Pope rested his crossed arms on his slightly rounded belly.

"What of it? The Temple was destroyed, and that copy with it..."

"That is far from certain," Fustiger cut in. "There seems to have been an underground chamber that may have escaped destruction."

"And the copy was in it?" the Pope enquired in alarm.

"Whether it was or not, Thomas Anderson thinks so. He is on the trail of that copy. He hopes to gain access to the underground chamber from the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He intends to return to the mosque this evening... and if he finds the report, I leave you to imagine the consequences..."

His eyes unfocused, the Pope mechanically stroked his thinning white hair. His mind drifted away, understanding what this report in the hands of the Temple implied for the history of what had gone on in those days: the Temple knew everything about what had really happened at the time of Jesus and this historical detail would have full impact, even two thousand years later.

"What will we do?" Fustiger asked.

"Warn our friends in the Mossad," the Pope replied after a moment, "about the presence of Mr. Anderson in the mosque tonight..."

The cardinal nodded approvingly and went out rapidly.

*

* *

"To Hell?" Camilla asked in simulated surprise.

She fully knew the significance of that place, but she wanted to let Tom think she was unaware of it. As a trick, to find out what he would say, Camilla assumed an air of innocence.

“Why do you say that?” she demanded.

Tom smiled.

“We’re now in the valley of Hinnom. In Jesus’ day, this place was a dump where fires burned constantly, fuelled with sulfur so as to burn the rubbish and keep its bulk small. It was also a dumping ground for dead bodies. The Israelites’ rituals included a lot of animal sacrifices and the carcasses were heaped here to be burned. The corpses of criminals were also thrown into these fires...”

Tom held his hand out in front of him.

“The Hinnom dump was ‘inaugurated’, so to say, by our old friend King Josiah. Before his reign, this site was a terrible place: the earlier Kings of Jerusalem had children burned alive there in honor of the Canaanite god Baal or the Ammonite god Moloch. When Josiah took power, he forbade these human sacrifices, which he considered too inhumane, and when he had the texts of the Old Testament drawn up, he took advantage of them to bring in his Eternal God and the prophet Jeremiah, to condemn these human sacrifices in threatening words. Josiah dictated his will through the mouth of the Eternal Lord, and to make sure these sacrifices would never again take place, he had the Hinnom Valley contaminated with rubbish and animal bones so as to make it impure. So, the valley became a dumping ground thanks to Josiah, a public tip where fires were permanently kept burning. The stench, smoke and flames there were a constant reminder to the inhabitants of Jerusalem what was the fate of anything that was no longer of use: destruction.”

Camilla nodded and Tom went on:

“Later the Hebrews remembered these sacrifices of children burned alive in Hinnom to such an extent that when people behaved badly it was common to say about them: ‘they deserve to be cast into the flames of Hinnom’. This name Hinnom is found again in the New Testament, the Christian writings that follow the Old Testament and together with it form the Bible. The place-name Hinnom or Ge-Hinnom in Hebrew was transcribed as Ge-Henne, Gehenna, and the scribes systematically added to it the note ‘of fire’: Gehenna of fire. Later, the expression Gehenna of fire was translated by the word Hell...”

A moment’s pause, then Tom added:

“Without intending to, King Josiah in some sense created the first image of Hell: the tip in the Hinnom Valley symbolically represented Hell, since

there were burning furnaces that never went out and stinking smoke. In the Bible, Jesus Christ refers to this Gehenna as a metaphor, so as to give a succinct description of the terrible punishments awaiting sinners in the next world.”

Tom’s gaze swept the valley.

“What’s paradoxical about Josiah, the ‘inventor’ of the image of Hell, is that he had absolutely no notion of Hell. The proof is, that in the Old Testament he was the author of, he never mentions Hell. In the chapters where all the rewards and punishments God gives to those who obey or disobey his commandments are described in detail, you find that Yahweh threatens transgressors with all sorts of dreadful diseases and curses, right down to being jilted: ‘thou shalt betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her’.”

He chuckled.

“Eternal God guaranteed sinners a whole swathe of suffering in their life on Earth, but this suffering would automatically end when they died. There isn’t a single word about a hell where suffering would continue for all eternity. Yahweh or more accurately King Josiah had no idea of a threat as unusual as Hell. Likewise, the figure of Moses never mentions the existence of Hell, despite the fact he was supposed to speak on friendly terms with God and to have been brought up in Egypt, a land where for centuries they had believed in life after death and rewards and punishment beyond the grave. Josiah invented a bloodthirsty God who could punish the sins of the fathers down to the fourth generation, a vengeful God who could condemn anyone who attacked his chosen people to suffering all kinds of torture, death, plague and natural catastrophes. Nevertheless, this God, favoring mass slaughter, used only earthly tortures, since King Josiah hadn’t even a notion of punishment after death. Hell was something he knew nothing about. Besides, Josiah was equally unfamiliar with rewards after death: Paradise isn’t mentioned anywhere in Josiah’s writings. It wasn’t till centuries later, under foreign influences, that the first vague inklings of a concept of eternal life started appearing...”

“What about the notion of sheol?” Camilla interrupted. “That’s in Josiah’s writings, for sure.”

“Sheol doesn’t mean either Hell or Paradise. It’s a very vague expression to indicate where souls separated from their bodies stay, the grave common to all humans. The Hebrews believed that the dead, whether good or wicked, gathered in sheol and led a twilight existence there each and all, in a place of oblivion and repose. People spoke of ‘going down to the abode of the dead’ as if sheol was near to the tomb where corpses were laid. But after the conquest of the Holy Land by the Persians, then by

Alexander the Great and his Greek general, the influence of foreign beliefs gave rise to a belief among the Hebrews in a twofold state after death: happiness for the just and lack of happiness for the wicked, which in any case didn't imply at all physical torments for the wicked, as is supposed to happen in the Christian or Moslem versions of Hell."

Camilla's eyes began to shine.

"You're not wrong," she said, approvingly. "That was indeed the case before Jesus died on the cross. Paradise didn't exist, or at least no longer existed. Ever since Adam and Eve and original sin, the entry to Paradise had been sealed. From that sad day onward, souls were prisoners of sheol. A great change happened when Jesus Christ went down into the abode of the dead. Lord Jesus was not abandoned there, because it was impossible for him to be held by the bonds of death. At His Ascension, Christ freed from sheol the souls of the righteous and took them with him to Heaven, to Paradise. Jesus went up to Heaven, he took the captives from sheol with him and, through his sacrifice, he gave the gift of eternal Paradise to humankind. The fact is that ever since, instead of going down into the abode of the dead, which has become Hell, all those who die in the faith go directly into the presence of the Lord and find salvation. Jesus Christ separated sheol into Heaven and Hell. Those who believe in him are saved and go to Paradise. As for the others, Hell awaits their souls..."

"Do you believe that?" Tom asked.

"Yes, Jesus changed sheol, the celestial destination created by His Father God. Jesus achieved this miracle through his sacrifice on the cross. He came down to Earth to die as a scapegoat for our sins, he interceded for us with His Father to redeem our sins. From now on, anybody who believes in Him will obtain eternal life in Heaven. That's the sole condition for the salvation of their souls. For unbelievers, those who refuse the salvation offered Jesus Christ, unfortunately the former sheol stands waiting for eternity. So, you must have faith in order not to be separated forever from God and the Lord Jesus, to live in Paradise, not in Hell.

Tom shook his head.

"Nevertheless, whether it's the Persian or Roman version, or even Greek Hades, Hell existed long before Christ's birth. So, Jesus couldn't have changed sheol into Hell, since Hell already existed *de facto* and was known to many civilizations centuries before the coming of the Messiah. And Paradise was in no way sealed up for them... But I don't want to argue about that oddity..."

Tom looked at the young woman.

“Talking of oddities, Camilla, that’s not the only one that affects the life of Jesus. In fact, there are many. A host of oddities...”

“Such as?”

“According to the Bible, an inscription was placed on the cross on which Christ died and this inscription read ‘Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Iudaeorum’ [Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews]. The Latin word ‘Nazarenus’, Nazarene, is supposed to mean that Jesus came from Nazareth. Trouble is, where the town of Nazareth stands today, there isn’t a single building or even the slightest archeological trace dating from the time of Jesus. The oldest remains found date from more than a hundred years after his death. Nothing else has been found by the archeologists, despite their searching the site for decades. There isn’t the least written reference to Nazareth in documents from Jesus’ days. Nazareth doesn’t seem to have existed at the time when Christ was born... and since we’re talking about his birth, Matthew’s Gospel has him born under the King of the Jews Herod the Great, while Luke’s Gospel says he was born when Quirinius was Governor of Syria. The problem is, that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. and Quirinius took up his post in 6 A.D., years after the birth of Jesus. An amazing contradiction in the dates... a strange failure for history to make sense, wouldn’t you say? So when *was* Jesus born? Weird, weird...”

Tom smiled.

“Let’s talk about Jesus’ fame. According to the Bible, with all the miracles he performed, Jesus became a celebrity and huge crowds followed him around, crowds that came from all round the country. At that time all Palestine and Galilee were under Roman control. More than anything else, the Romans feared gatherings that could degenerate into popular uprisings, since the vengeful reactions of the Jews were unforeseeable, the Jews being quick to rebel, affected by their collective mindset of being a chosen people. So the Roman authorities took great care to prevent any risk of insurrection and kept close watch on even the most insignificant agitator through an effective network of agents gathering information out in the field. The Roman authorities would never have left at large an individual who attracted great crowds after him and who could, moreover, accomplish miracles like the multiplication of the loaves: the Romans would’ve arrested him and enquired into the truth of these marvels. And, once they’d been convinced of the objective reality of his unusual powers, they’d have sent such an outstanding man before the Emperor so the aura of his presence would reinforce the Emperor’s authority. Be that as it may, the miracles performed by Jesus or his exceptional notoriety ought at least to have left some written traces...”

“Those written details,” Camilla interrupted, “are all in the Bible.”

“But that’s where the shoe pinches,” Tom replied. “There’s no trace of Jesus of Nazareth outside Christian writings. There’s no reference outside the Bible to the historical figure of Jesus. Out of the thirty-plus historians of the period who wrote so much about Palestine, not one ever mentions the name of Jesus. Never. Yet there are enough works by these historians still surviving to fill a library. And, despite that, there’s nary a mention of Jesus Christ in all these writings. No-one felt it necessary simply to cite Jesus as a historical figure who counted in his time and country. The incredible reputation of the Jesus in the Gospels is in total contradiction with the complete absence of Jesus from histories.”

Tom thought for a moment, then continued:

“Let’s take the Jewish historian Philo of Alexandria, for instance. He was already around twenty at the supposed date of the birth of Jesus and he passed away quite some time after Christ himself died on the cross. He wrote fifty volumes in which he quoted all the events and great figures of his times and of Israel, not even omitting Pilate. He knew and described in detail the Essene sect which lived on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He wrote fifty books recounting the history of the region and yet wrote not one line about Jesus! He never wrote anything about Jesus Christ in any of his works. He didn’t mention him once, nor even speak about the early Christians. Nevertheless, his work on the Essenes shows he was closely interested in anything to do with Palestine. If Jesus was the famous figure depicted by the Gospels, it’s more than surprising Philo never got to hear about him. All those miracles performed by Jesus before vast crowds would necessarily have had to be passed on by word of mouth by Jews going to Alexandria. Throughout his life, Philo took special interest in religion and philosophy. He’d surely never have neglected to speak of Jesus who was of his country and ‘race’. Exactly the same happens with all the thirty-odd historians contemporary with Jesus who wrote so much about Palestine. Yet not one of them ever mentions Jesus. The silence of the histories is deafening...”

“That’s not true,” Camilla protested. “The historians’ texts are limited, certainly, but they do exist...”

“Which?” he snorted. “I know them all by heart and I can count them on the fingers of one single hand. They’re all either interpolations or forgeries. For instance, do you really think that the historian Flavius Josephus would have given just ten lines to a figure as famous as Jesus when he wrote dozens of books about Israel? Those lines are forgeries added by Christian scribes long afterward. And those Christian scribes didn’t just forge a few lines; they did a lot removing of sections from historians’ texts. In every case, these writings have a gap affecting the years 29 to 31 A.D., the years

that correspond to the public life of Jesus Christ according to the Gospels. Why would they want to hide historical truths? What if the Christian scribes left gaps so as to suggest that the lost passages spoke about the life of Jesus?... Do you see what I'm getting at, Camilla?"

The young woman shook her head and Tom sighed.

"In the first century of the current era, Justus of Tiberias wrote a book about the history of the Hebrews. Every single copy of this book was destroyed by Christians in a 'grand clear-out' that lasted nearly two thousand years. Nevertheless, the patriarch of Constantinople who read it around 860 wrote that in no part of the book by Justus of Tiberias was there even the slightest reference to the birth of Jesus, to his life, or to the events and miracles concerning him. The same is true of the 900 or so Dead Sea Scrolls, the famous manuscripts found during the twentieth century on the site of Qumran that belonged to the Essenes. In all these writings, which are dated from 200 B.C. through to 63 A.D. and which were found, moreover, just a few miles from where Christ was supposed to have been baptized, in all these Jewish religious writings, there's never a single mention of Jesus. Not ever. Doesn't that make you wonder?"

Faced with Camilla's silence, Tom became annoyed.

"Since history books that aren't biblical don't seem to mean anything to you, let's have a look at the Bible itself instead. A reminder: the Bible is made up of a first part, the Old Testament, a collection of the Jewish writings of our friend Josiah plus various texts that were added on as time went by. Then there's the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, which is Christian. The New Testament starts off with three texts called 'Gospels', which means 'good news'. There's the Gospel according to Matthew, to Mark and to Luke. Overall, they tell more or less the same tale of Jesus, except that the details of it in one frequently contradict what's in the others. Then we have John's Gospel which recounts a story of Jesus that's again contradictory, a story which is chronologically different from the first three Gospels. Next, we have the 'Acts of the Apostles', which is an account of everything the apostles did after Christ died. After that comes a whole set of Epistles: they're letters, correspondence, telling the story of the earliest Christian communities. They also contain advice from their authors, teachings and clarifications about the new religion. And, right at the end of the Bible, there's one last text: the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, a text some consider to be a prophecy on the end of days. All these writings, from the Gospels to the Apocalypse, weren't put into the Bible in the order in which they were written, from the oldest to the newest, not at all. The texts in the New Testament were arranged in an order fulfilling the logic of the Christian religion's history: first the life of

Jesus, then his death, what his disciples did next, the story of the beginnings of the early Church, the birth of the first Christian communities and the building up of the new religion, topped off with an apocalyptic book about the end of the world which promises the coming of Christ..."

Tom looked at Camilla.

"Do you know how often the Book of Revelation, written forty years after Christ's death, mentions Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Quite a few times, I'm sure..."

"No, not once."

"What?"

"The Apocalypse only speaks of Jesus Christ and not of Jesus of Nazareth. And it's the same with all the Epistles. It's always a question of a spiritual Christ. No historical figure is ever associated with this spiritual being, who moves in another world, not on Earth. In the texts there's only a belief in a timeless Christ, cosmic and supernatural. There's never any mention of any Jesus of Nazareth, his miracles, his life, his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate..."

"That's not true," Camilla protested. "There are some passages referring to Pilate and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, his blood that washed away our sins."

"Those passages weren't in the original texts. The few historical references were added later, forgeries by copyists who put in their own annotations, annotations that weren't present in the original documents. The copyists had no difficulty in imitating the style of the author after copying several hundred pages and these books were copied by hand for century after century. These overly short historical references are fake. I can easily convince you of that... For instance, just look at Paul's Epistles. When Paul writes about Christ's crucifixion, why doesn't he ever give details? There's no indication of places, dates, no explanation of the part played by Pilate or of the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus to death... The reason for all that is simply that any comments in Paul about the life of Jesus are brief annotations made by copyists much later. When you look at the Epistles as a whole, what leaps to your eye is the total absence of Jesus, his supernatural birth, the events of his life on Earth, the miracles he performed. And above all, his teachings are never mentioned. For instance, Paul never says anything like 'Jesus telleth us' or 'Jesus saith', but you find things like 'Moses describeth' or 'Moses saith' scattered all through his writings. That's what's strange: you never find phrases, parables or prayers said by Jesus himself. The directives for the new religion to follow are never directly attributed to Jesus. It's equally surprising that new converts to the religion of

Christ don't ask any questions about Jesus. Nevertheless, they must've heard tell about the numerous miracles Jesus performed in his life. So logically Paul ought to have been faced with dozens of questions about Jesus, his life or his resurrection. And that's even truer since Paul, as it says in the 'Acts of the Apostles', had spoken to the apostles who saw Jesus resurrected with their own eyes a short while after the crucifixion. It would be normal for Paul to testify to that, either spontaneously or as a response to questions. But instead, when Paul writes it's to preach in accordance with the teachings in the Old Testament, just invoking Christ's name and never speaking about any recent historical events."

Tom dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Paul also explains a great number of teachings or possible behaviors such as wisdom, faith, or miracles as being all inspired by the Holy Ghost. It's God who consented to give him these through 'revelation'. There's nowhere a mention of any power transmitted by Jesus. In fact, Paul clearly states that he's on the look-out for Christ to come soon..."

"Yes," Camilla broke in. "Paul is waiting for Christ's return. And to clear up all those 'paradoxes' you've just listed and the lack of details about the life of Jesus for which you blame the Epistles and accuse copyists, the answer's very simple: Paul and the early missionaries weren't interested in Jesus' life but only in the meaning of his coming down to the Earth. Only the authors of the Gospels went into the historical circumstances of the life of Jesus. Further writings on that subject wouldn't have been any use and Paul sensibly focused his writings on the Spirit of God and his teachings."

Tom shook his head.

"Camilla, Camilla..." he muttered.

He looked hard at the young woman. She still did not grasp the truth that he was trying to get her to understand. He sighed inwardly and decided to take the direct route and lay his cards on the table.

"Didn't Jesus say that there's no blinder man than the one who will not see?" Tom asked. "Think not with your faith, but with your reason... In the Bible, Jesus promises the arrival of the Kingdom of God on Earth, he claims that this event is imminent, that it should be expected from one moment to the next. He also announces that the end of days is nigh, that the generation of Jews to whom he is making this prophesy will see it in their lifetimes. He even makes it plain that the end of days will come after the Gospel has been proclaimed throughout the world. But, two thousand years have gone by since those prophecies and although the Gospel has been spread everywhere on Earth without exception, no end of the world

has happened yet, no arrival of the Kingdom of God on Earth has taken place...”

Camilla opened her mouth to speak. However, before she had time to respond, Tom carried on in his deep voice:

“How could the Son of God made such a mistake? Isn’t he supposed to be omnipotent like his Father? While he was alive Jesus recognized the Old Testament. Jesus is the Son of God and so he couldn’t be mistaken when he said the Old Testament is truly the word of his Father and that he came to the Earth to accomplish the Law of Moses, not to abolish it. But you and I know now, rationally and precisely, that the Old Testament is the work of King Josiah, a purely human fraud. So how could the Son of God have given recognition to a fake? How could he get it so wrong?”

Tom shook his head and sighed.

“In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus pays homage to Noah. But nowadays Noah is known to be just a plagiarism of a Sumerian fable... When the transfiguration of Jesus took place, Moses and the prophet Elijah appeared at his side. But it’s known for sure that Moses and Elijah never existed, that they’re just pure invention. They only ever lived in Josiah’s fertile imagination. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ genealogy is set out and he’s said to descend from Abraham through his father Joseph. But you know as well as I do that Abraham never existed...”

Camilla covered Tom’s mouth with her hand.

“Those are human errors,” she said, “mistakes made by the faithful who thought they were doing the right thing when they touched the truth up a bit...”

Tom gently removed the dainty hand that was gagging him.

“Camilla, there’s no point trying to defend Jesus. The truth lies completely elsewhere...”

He smiled sadly.

“The simplest solution is always the best. The simplest solution gives an explanation for all the oddities I’ve mentioned to you, it also allows a rational account to be given of how a man can survive crucifixion, how a man can multiply loaves of bread to infinity, walk on water, calm storms or revive the dead... For an intractable problem, a centuries-old enigma, the most obvious, the most logical solution is clearly the right one...”

Nodding gravely, Tom insisted.

“The simplest solution is always the best...”

“And what is that solution?” Camilla asked.

For a good few seconds, a heavy silence reigned. Then, like somebody fearing to do infinite harm by admitting a hidden truth, Tom finally answered:

“Jesus isn’t the Son of God, or even the son of a man. Jesus is the imaginary offspring of an anonymous writer’s pen...”

“What do you mean?” she demanded, her eyes wide in surprise.

Tom looked upset.

“I mean Jesus doesn’t exist. He’s a myth. He never existed...”

Camilla giggled nervously.

“You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“No, Camilla, I’m in deadly earnest. Just like Moses, Jesus is a myth. He never existed. He’s a myth, only a myth...”

Camilla stared at Tom for a long while, wondering if he had gone out of his mind.

20

Neither God, nor Master... Just Deus

21

The Sea of Galilee

In the midst of a crowd of more than four thousand people, Jesus was sitting in the lotus position. Every eye was upon him. They were dumbfounded, still dazed by the shock of what they had just experienced: the multiplication of the loaves. Jesus brought such a quantity of loaves out of the basket that lay next to him that it was impossible to give any accurate count of them. What was certain was that they had all eaten their fill, and they were now praising the Lord God for having sent his Son among the People of Israel.

Jesus observed this human sea moving, gesticulating, talking, or congratulating one another. The Jews were delighted and many knew that the Kingdom of God on Earth would soon take shape. They were ready for it, even if it demanded terrible sacrifices. In their eyes, the future of Israel depended on it. They were convinced that under Christ's leadership, no obstacle could run counter to their glorious destiny to have the Promised Land. Was God not with them? In any case, they were sure of it, for Christ, the One anointed with divine unction, the Son of God in person was definitely present at their side. Furthermore, the miracle of the loaves to which they had just been witnesses could only strengthen their opinions on this point.

They could not know that for a good many of them the joy that was inspiring them now would soon disappear like snow in the sun.

Jesus would be putting an end to this crazy hope which he had aroused and to which he had given substance by what he had said. Now the words that would come out of his mouth would have a bitter taste for these supporters with their looks of hatred.

Christ stood up and the crowd quickly fell silent: for hours, even days in some cases, they had all been impatiently waiting for the Son of God's preaching.

Heavenly Father, give me the strength to find the right words ...

For over a minute, he kept his eyes shut, creating a void in himself. Then after a brief moment of meditation, he started to speak. The sentences that he made ring out with his powerful voice would be repeated tirelessly day after day as they were spread, because they most definitely had to outclass what he had said before.

To begin, Jesus spoke of what he had already mentioned after his transfiguration on Mount Tabor: a new preaching and a new justice. They were listened to with growing consternation, even irritation on the part of some. Jesus knew that he would be pouring oil on the fire as soon as he raised the question of enemies. He would have to take precautions and bring this delicate subject in with skill.

“I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I shall give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. Truly, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. There is nothing hidden that will not be known, and nothing secret that will not come to light.”

Jesus spread his arms wide.

“Take care that you do not do your acts of new justice before men, to be seen by them, otherwise you will have no reward from your Father who is in Heaven. Therefore, when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets, so that they may have glory from men. Truly I say to you, they already have their reward. No, when you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does, so that your alms may be in secret. Your Heavenly Father who sees in secret himself will reward you openly. I say to you: ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened. What man is there among you, who if his son asks for a fish will give him a serpent in its stead? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give of his Holy Spirit to them who beg it of him!”

Jesus brought his hands together.

“Further, when you pray, you must not be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, so that they may be seen by all men. But you, when you pray, enter into your private room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Heavenly Father who is there too, in secret. The Heavenly Father, who sees all, will

heed you.”

Frowning, he took on a serious tone.

“In your prayers, use no vain repetitions as do the heathen, for they think that they will be heard by speaking much. Therefore be not like them, for your Heavenly Father knows what things you have need of, before you ask him. Therefore, pray after this manner: Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our bread of wisdom and forgive us our desires and offenses, as we forgive those who offend against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil ...”

There was a murmur of surprise in the crowd. Jesus was well aware of the motive for this astonishment. He had made ready for it.

“Yes, if you forgive men their offenses against you, your Heavenly Father will forgive you also. No, if you do not forgive men their offenses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you.”

Fresh murmuring broke out among the crowd.

“You have heard that it was said ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. I say to you, though do not resist evil men. Whosoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If any man sues you at law and takes away your coat, let him have your cloak also. Whosoever compels you to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and he who wishes to borrow from you, turn him not away.”

There was some silly laughing that was virtually lost in the growing din.

“You have heard that it has been said ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. I say to you, though: love your enemies, do good to them that hate you. Bless them that curse you and pray for them that despitefully use you. Therefore, all things whatsoever you wish men to do to you, do even these to them so that you may be the children of your Father who is in Heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends his rain upon the just and upon the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you deserve? Evil-doers also love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what recompense do you merit? Wrong-doers do so also. If you lend only to those from whom you expect to receive, what gratitude will you earn? Even the wicked lend to others so as to be treated likewise.”

Jesus raised his voice yet more to ensure that he was heard in the uproar.

“Love your enemies, do good and give without seeking to receive in return. Great will be your reward, for you will become the children of the Heavenly Father ...”

Shouts of anger were heard among the supporters.

“The Heavenly Father is merciful to both the ungrateful and the wicked. Prove yourselves compassionate, as the Heavenly Father is compassionate. Be then perfect, even as your Father who is in Heaven is perfect. Do not judge others, so that you will not be judged yourselves, do not condemn, so that you will not be condemned, forgive and you will be forgiven.”

There was movement among the crowd. Some shouted out that this was betrayal, others, their faces distorted by scowls of hatred, came forward snarling, because they had understood what these words about enemies came to in substance. The comments had been the straw that broke the camel’s back: they were no fools and they could see that the new precepts put forward by the Messiah ran totally contradictory to those laid down by Moses, even if Jesus said otherwise.

One supporter challenged him, demanding to be told when the Kingdom of God on Earth would come.

Jesus gave an enigmatic response:

“The coming of the Kingdom of God is not to be observed, nor will they say ‘behold, it is here!’ or ‘behold, it is there!’, for the Kingdom of the Heavenly Father is within you and around you.”

A number of disciples intervened when a handful of fanatical Jews tried to seize Jesus. There were tense moments which the apostles tried to assuage peacefully. Judas Iscariot or Sicariot was the most active defender of Christ. All by himself he succeeded in calming the people’s wrath, but a host of supporters chose to head away, shaking their fists in anger.

Jesus watched them go, in no way disconcerted by this departure. He turned to the Twelve who had rallied around him, as if they feared for their Master’s safety.

“Do you desire to depart, you also?” asked Jesus in a soft voice.

He stared at the apostles one after another, finally letting his gaze rest on Simon Peter.

“Lord, whither would we go?” responded this disciple in a firm tone. “We believe in you and we know that you are truly the Son of God.”

Thomas discreetly pinched Simon Peter.

Several apostles had opened their hearts to Simon Peter, telling him how disturbed they were after the sermon criticizing wealth. As Christ was no longer concentrating on the imminent setting up of the Kingdom of God on Earth, they were asking themselves what would become of the rewards promised to them. Acting as a spokesman for the worries of his fellow disciples, Simon Peter put the question:

“We have left all and have followed you, what then will be our

recompense?”

Jesus remained silent for an appreciable while. Before the transfiguration, he had promised the twelve future apostles that when the Christ had sat upon his throne of glory in the Kingdom of God on Earth, each of them, under his authority, would sit on a throne with the power to judge the tribes of Israel. He had also promised those who followed him a hundredfold reward and eternal life. However, these promises did not come under his personal control and now the course of events had changed. Be that as it may, he would have to pay great attention in formulating his exact response to Simon Peter’s query.

“There is no man that has left a house, or brothers, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my sake, but that will receive a hundredfold more, and, in the world to come, eternal life. Many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

Disconcerted, the crowd had listened to the set of sermons with surprise, not knowing what to make of the new situation. However, after the miracles and the multiple cures, there could be no doubt that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Further, the Christ had as a duty to transmit the perfect will of God, his Holy Spirit, out to men, as had been done in the past by the prophets and Moses. From time immemorial, in the holy scriptures of the Temple and synagogues, the tale of Yahweh and his Chosen People had been a succession of orders and counter-orders. The Jews had become accustomed to the mood-swings of their wrathful and changeable God. They had to submit to his will, as passed on by Christ. Nonetheless, a good many Jews did not see things in that light, preferring to leave Christ. They could no longer recognize in him the future Messianic King; for a Messianic King he went far too far against the teachings of Moses by questioning retributive justice, the law of talion, an eye for an eye.

The Twelve, for their part, would remain faithful to Christ. The previous day, they had spoken at length with their Master, who had told them what he expected of them: the preaching and the new law had to be spread around the whole country. For that purpose, they were to go two by two to bring the good word. However, that would not be their sole mission. Jesus had delegated his powers of healing to his apostles so that they could cure the greatest possible number of sick.

Now they were ready to depart. In the midst of the crowd, Jesus gave them a few last-minute pieces of advice.

“Do not take the way to foreign lands, nor enter any city of Samaria. It is of no use. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

The message was clear: they should remain in the region and concentrate their efforts on the Jews of Galilee.

“As you go, preach, saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, comfort the dying, cleanse the lepers and above all cast out the devils.”

He looked at the apostles and, as if seized by a doubt about their integrity, he added:

“Freely have you received; give then freely. Procure neither gold, nor silver, nor brass for your purses in return.”

Jesus thought for an instant. The apostles would travel in pairs and would not be able to hide items from their partners if they were dressed as simply as could be.

“Carry neither satchel nor haversack, nor two tunics: go shod simply in sandals. Take nothing with you but the Divine Unction. In whatsoever town or village you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, enter his house and there abide till you depart. Whosoever will not receive you, when you go out of that house or city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against their ill will. On Judgment Day, it will go hard with them for not listening to your words. I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

As he said these last words, he looked long and hard at the apostles. Then he went toward a very large wickerwork basket in which there was a pile of bags containing small earthenware pots. In these receptacles was the Divine Unction able to cure all ills. Jesus distributed a haversack to each one. Plump Levi opened the cork stopper of one of the pots, as if to ensure that the miraculous oil was definitely inside.

This precious liquid emanated from Christ’s body.

They had all seen the Messiah’s hands giving off this divine substance which restored the sick to health. It was enough for Jesus to spit on his palms and mix his saliva using his fingers then apply it on the eyes of the blind. They then miraculously recovered their sight. Most often, Jesus allowed the Divine Unction dripping off his fingers to flow directly into the throats of the paralyzed or possessed. The result was prodigious and fantastic, arousing immense fervor toward Christ, the Anointed of God, showing his status as the Son of God.

Jesus had decided to give his apostles his healing powers. He had entrusted them with the receptacles he had filled with the Divine Unction that flowed from his hands. The previous day, the Twelve had been present while the final pots were being prepared and they were still just as amazed by Christ’s ability to make the miraculous oil stream from his hands. Their faith in him was all the greater and they all swore to obey such a master.

All but one.

The traitor had done his job perfectly and infiltrated the group. Jesus did not seem to suspect anything and had handed him a bag with the Divine Unction the same as to the others.

After that, Christ addressed the people once again.

He spoke on for a long while yet. However, few of those present listened with any attention. They were all waiting for him to use the divine essence that flowed from his hands to cure the sick who had newly arrived. Seeing these men and women all unwell to a greater or lesser degree, Jesus ended his preaching with a parable as was his wont.

He was brought one of the possessed who was blind and dumb. The demon was expelled and the dumb man was able to speak and see once more. The crowd was as astounded as always, never tiring of being present at these miracles, reinforcing the faith they had in Christ.

Pharisees in the pay of the Temple in Jerusalem were there. Scattered among the crowd, they had also been witnesses of the multiplication of the loaves and of the cures. Nonetheless, unlike the general public opinion, they considered Jesus' acts with a much more circumspect eye.

Their leader could not help muttering:

“This fellow casts out devils, but by the prince of the devils!”

Unluckily for him, Christ's followers heard him and he was dragged before Jesus. Standing there in his long ochre-colored tunic, the leader of the Pharisees did not remain alone for long: fearing for his safety, his fellow-worshippers forced a way through the crowd and came to where he was. Jesus stared for a moment at these Pharisees standing before him, some with arrogant looks, others with their eyes lowered because they were worried they might be stoned by the crowd hostile to them. Jesus was told what they had been heard to say.

“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation,” said he, “and if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot long stand. If the prince of demons rises up against himself and expels devils, he is divided against himself; how then can his kingdom stand? If I cast out demons by the will of the Heavenly Father, then his Kingdom shines out among you.”

Among the crowd, some supporters hostile to the Pharisees shouted out their anger, making as if to seize these blasphemers. Jesus calmed this frenzy of hatred, raising his arms with open hands toward the sky.

“It is true that I once said that he who is not with me is against me and he that does not gather with me scatters abroad. Nonetheless, whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man can be forgiven. Yet whosoever

speaks against the heavenly will cannot be forgiven, neither in this world, nor in the world to come, neither in this time, nor in the times to come. Every word begets its implication in Heaven. Every idle word that men speak, they will give account for it on the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Stroking his long dark beard, the Pharisee leader hesitated an instant, then asked:

“Master, we wish to see a sign from you ... a miracle coming from Heaven, so that we may believe in you ...”

The crowd expressed its astonishment with disapproving murmurs. It was surprising for such a request to be made after the host of miraculous signs which all had witnessed.

Christ’s reaction was just as disconcerting. Many expected that the Son of God would make a number of the angels who served his Father appear in the blue sky. He did nothing of the sort.

Jesus forcefully admonished these Pharisees who dared to demand a sign from him. He ordered them to be driven away. With gesture of bad temper, as if he had been shamed by not being able to bring about a miraculous sign to order, he ordered the apostles to gather around him. It was time for them to go and begin their mission. Jesus hugged each of them warmly in turn. Then he looked at them for a moment before giving them a final piece of advice.

“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.”

“Well ... we have forgotten to take bread for ourselves,” said Simon Peter. “We gave it all to the village folk. What then shall we do?”

Plump Levi snorted into his red beard.

“No, no, you are being foolish,” said he, grumbling at Simon Peter. “It is not of the leaven with which bread is made that the Master spoke, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. Is that not so, Lord?”

Jesus looked dreamily at the former tax-collector. A strange idea came into his head, but he drove it out as one would chase away a troublesome fly.

Jesus slowly nodded his head to show agreement with the publican’s question.

Hesitating for an instant, he finally added this enigmatic sentence:

“Beware of them both ...”

Jesus then asked the apostles to depart. He himself bade farewell to the crowd. The apostles embarked in boats to cross Lake Tiberias and so quickly reach the various places where numerous sick had been reported.

Simon Peter boarded the last boat accompanied by John. Each took an oar, they began to pull strongly and they drew away from the shore. From a distance, Simon Peter saw Christ's silhouette among the people, but finally it disappeared, swallowed up by the dark mass of the crowd. The apostle had sudden misgivings, wondering what his Master would do now: he had not wanted to say where he would go during the mission of the Twelve. Simon Peter was worried about him, because there were no more boats and Jesus would have to go on foot. Would he be safe? Simon Peter had seen the hatred in the eyes of some of the followers, a hatred which had always been present, but had now changed target, so that it was now directed toward the man that they no longer considered to be the Christ, but rather a traitor. Apprehension came over him, as if he feared never seeing him again. He did not yet know that he would see Jesus very soon and that he would be an eyewitness of the most extraordinary miracle that all humanity had ever known.

For the moment, Simon Peter and John continued rowing. The day was drawing to a close, but the sun was still casting powerful rays on Lake Tiberias. The name 'lake' was justified by its calm, pure waters. However, as often when evening approached, it deserved the other name frequently given to it: the 'Sea of Galilee'.

This was fully merited, because, thanks to thermal flows, the waters could be suddenly whipped up by a violent wind, turning the calm ripples of the morning into raging waves. Great breakers then formed, towering and powerful, threatening to overwhelm the flimsy boats that dared to venture out onto its suddenly hostile waters.

Simon Peter was fully accustomed to the Lake's changing moods. As a former fisherman, he was well able to take advantage of the elements to bring his boat safely to harbor. However, today the Sea of Galilee seemed not just to be choppy, but rather prey to the first stirrings of a terrible storm, a storm such as Simon Peter had never seen. Instinctively, he was expecting the worst and his instinct did not play him false.

The current flowed stronger and stronger. In vain he rowed with all his might, as he felt that the boat was not creeping forward even a fraction. With growing anxiety, he saw the waves rise more than four feet high, more even than ten feet for some, bulging like sheets suddenly swollen by a huge gust of wind. Besides, the wind was far from taking a back seat; it was howling so strongly in the ears of the fisherman that he thought that his eardrums would burst. The sun had disappeared behind huge dark clouds, painting the whole sky alarmingly black. Simon Peter felt sure that his last hour had come. At every moment the sea threatened to swallow up the tiny boat. He had never seen the lake transformed into the raging sea

that now confronted him. Beside him, John looked scared out of his wits. His forehead streaming with sweat, his eyes glazed and staring, his twisted mouth, deformed the usually sublime face of the young man, turning him into a fantastic, almost a demonic being. Simon Peter was frightened by the sight and looked away while he continued to row. The two apostles fruitlessly tugged their hardest on the oars, but the currents were too strong and Simon Peter grew distressed at the idea of dying in the middle of the very same lake that for years had provided for his needs by bringing him the fish from which he made a living.

Nobody could come to their aid. The boats bearing the other apostles might easily already have gone to the bottom. His turn must surely come soon. He prayed inwardly, pleading for a miracle from that darkly overcast sky. Yet no miracle came. Quite the contrary, the sea seemed to become even more furious and the night that was beginning to fall looked likely to be his last alive.

Then Jesus appeared.

Simon Peter did not recognize him immediately. In the distance, Jesus' silhouette stood out against the enormous waves, looking almost like a ghost. Simon Peter dropped his oar and started shrieking in terror. John also cried out, his companion's panic proving catching, as he did not know why he was squealing like an animal whose throat was being slit. He looked round in all directions, trying to spot the danger that must be about to strike them. Then, John finally saw Jesus coming toward them.

"Be of good cheer; it is I," shouted Jesus. "Do not be afraid, for I am coming ..."

Christ's face gradually managed to penetrate into Simon Peter's fear-fogged consciousness and he finally recognized him. The Master was there, among the raging billows, walking toward him along the curves of the waves. Simon Peter was left speechless, because Jesus was coming toward the boat, walking on the water.

"Behold," said Simon to John, "he comes to us walking on the water!"

John frowned and stood up.

"What!?"

John stared at the sea, then turned to his companion.

"He is walking on the water," said Simon Peter once more, pointing a trembling hand toward Jesus.

"You ... you are right, he is walking on the water," agreed John. "By God, it is unbelievable!"

Simon Peter agreed in silence, his eyes wide in amazement. He knew that he was a privileged eye-witness. He could hardly believe what he was

seeing. Yet there could be no doubt: Jesus was walking across the water toward them. Besides, what else could he have been doing? There had been no boat left available. So God, in his infinite mercy, was guiding the steps of his Son, making his feet as light as air so that he would not sink beneath the waves. God could even make his Son fly if he chose to do so.

“You are walking upon the water,” cried John to Jesus, making large gestures with his arms. “You are walking upon the water! Behold, a miracle! A miracle!”

Jesus continued toward the two men. When he reached it, he climbed into the boat. Simon Peter stood up and gazed at Christ with great relief. He knew that with him here, he was in no further danger. God would quell the storm so that his Son and his disciples would not drown. As if to prove the former fisherman right, the wind fell in an instant and the waves ceased in their massive swelling to become once more mere ripples gently rocking the boat.

However, a new worry seized Simon Peter. Was it really the Messiah and not a phantom come from beyond the grave for their downfall? Night had come and in the growing darkness, specters might make mock of the living and lead them to perdition.

“Lord,” said he, “if it is truly you, bid me come to you upon the water.”

Jesus smiled at him tenderly. He stepped out of the boat and walked a few steps on the calm water. He turned to the apostle.

“Come,” ordered Jesus.

Simon Peter came closer to the gunwale, staring at the lake’s dark waters. He cautiously set one foot outside the boat: it did not sink. So, he put his second foot to the water. Then he started walking slowly and with very short steps to approach Jesus. Unfortunately, the wind sprang up once again and Simon Peter was suddenly afraid that the storm would rise up again and the seas rage. He took a large step backward and his leg sank into the water.

“Lord, save me!” cried Simon, his face a vision of panic, not daring to move.

Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught hold of him.

“Oh you of little faith,” chuckled Jesus. “Why did you doubt?”

Holding him by the shoulders, Jesus helped him back into the boat.

Simon Peter was relieved at this and the wind once again ceased howling in his ears. John bowed down before Jesus.

“Of a truth, you are the Son of God,” said he.

As his sole response, Jesus closed his eyes for a moment, directing his face modestly downward.

Night had by now fallen completely and the darkness was intense. John lit a naphtha lamp. It was late and, lost as they were in the midst of the lake, even though it was now calm again, it was better to wait for daybreak rather than row into the unknown. Jesus was tired, as if the action of walking on the water had required a superhuman effort. He lay down on cushions at the rear of the boat. John did likewise. Simon Peter, for his part, could not get to sleep immediately. However, he was relieved by the presence of Christ. His eyes, blue as the ocean, were able to comfort him with a single glance. That night, Simon Peter was soothed by sweet dreams in which Jesus drove away the phantoms that were harassing him.

When he woke up the next morning, it was already broad daylight. John was rowing alone over the lake's clear waters. Simon Peter looked at the calm waves that were gently rocking the boat. Suddenly, a severe squall burst upon them and billows crashed into the boat, filling it with a threatening amount of water. Simon Peter rushed toward Christ.

"Aid us, Lord, lest we perish! The storm is returned once more ..."

Jesus leapt to his feet in a single bound. He looked first at the former fisherman, then all around himself, then the apostle once again. He raised an admonitory finger toward the sky and then the sea.

"Peace, be still!" shouted Jesus.

The wind immediately fell and a dead calm ensued.

"Why are you so fearful?" asked Jesus, his eyes gazing deep into Simon Peter's. "How is it that you have no faith? Be calm, for all is over."

Simon Peter was flabbergasted. Even the wind and sea obeyed the Son of God. He was not just his Father's strong right hand, but he himself possessed all the powers of the heavenly powers. These were capacities that he hid from everybody, because Jesus was a humble person, despite his divine parentage.

Now reassured and calm, Simon Peter was thinking intently about the other hidden powers that Christ might well have when miraculously the boat reached its destination. An instant before lost in the middle of the lake, an instant later, running ashore on dry land.

Simon Peter was dumbfounded by the hidden powers of the Son of God, Lord of the Wind and Sea, Master of Time and Space.

22

Son of God

A light breeze swept over the Hinnom Valley and caressed the sweet face of Camilla, whose eyes were rounded in stupefaction.

“Jesus is no myth,” she protested. “He’s a historic figure, even in school we were taught that ...”

“You’re right on that last point,” Tom responded. “They do teach that in schools ... Every Christian believes in his existence and even unbelievers consider Jesus to have been an exceptional historic figure, a man who really did live, although they wouldn’t accept he ever performed any miracles. Non-Christians believe that the story of Jesus was ‘enhanced’ by disciples who to some extent made up the tales of actions he performed when alive. But at the present day, the existence of a historical Jesus is never disputed and is taken by all historians as scientifically proven. That’s why Jesus is in our history books in the same way as Abraham Lincoln or Washington. In some history textbooks for kids starting high school, you’ll even find it stated that during his lifetime Jesus performed miracles, just as others made discoveries or carried out conquests. An incomparable and unique being ...”

“Yes,” the young woman cut in. “Jesus is unique. He is the Son of God.”

“Camilla, I’m sure you’ll agree with me if I say that to be genuine, for people to have historic status, they must above all be unique in their stories; their life must be theirs alone and not shared with others, even if there may be certain points in common with other people, or a few similarities in the broad outlines. Nevertheless, you don’t find historical figures who are identical feature for feature with others. Even if he has some events in his story the same as did other Roman emperors, Julius Caesar is a historic figure who is unique in himself. Louis XIV had a life quite like some other kings of France, but he’s marked off from them by

very many important details. Logically, it should be the same for Jesus Christ, shouldn't it?"

Camilla nodded agreement and Tom went on:

"Here's a little riddle: he was born of a virgin, his father was a carpenter. His birth was expected by wise men who came to bring him gold, frankincense and myrrh. As a child, he was persecuted by a tyrant who ordered the slaughter of thousands of young children. He was baptized in a river and performed miracles. He brought the dead back to life and cured lepers, deaf and blind. He was transfigured before his disciples and he used parables to teach charity, respect and love. He allowed himself to be taken prisoner so that martyrdom would crown his mission and according to some traditions he was crucified between two thieves. He came back to life from among the dead and ascended into the sky ... Who is he?"

"Jesus Christ," Camilla replied without the least hesitation.

"Wrong. It's Krishna, a divinity in Hinduism, and he existed many centuries before Jesus Christ. The similarities are astounding, aren't they? And I can tell you there are more than a hundred similarities between Jesus and the Indian Messiah. Just as is the case for Jesus, lots of people believe that Krishna really existed as a physical person. But Krishna's no more than a myth. His tale is very interesting and I greatly enjoyed reading his fable. His disciples gave him the title 'Jezeus', which means 'pure essence'. It's also intriguing to learn one old spelling for Krishna which was common in English was 'Christna'. Does that remind you of anything?"

Tom looked at Camilla for an instant before going on:

"Another riddle: I was born of a virgin on 25 December in a cave or stable, my birth was announced by a star in the East and was awaited by three wise men. I was called the Light, the Messiah, the anointed Son of God, the Son of Man, the Lamb of God. I was associated with Lamb, Lion and Fish. I taught in the Temple and was baptized at the age of thirty by the Baptizer. I had twelve disciples. I performed miracles and revived El-Azar who had died. I also walked on water and was transfigured on a mountain. I was crucified between two brigands. I was buried in a tomb and came back to life. Who am I?"

"Jesus Christ?" Camilla asked tentatively.

"Wrong again. It's simple, though: I'm Horus of Egypt. He was born 2,500 years before Jesus Christ. He was the son of the god Osiris and the Egyptian goddess of the Moon, the virgin Isis. In the Roman catacombs, they've often found images of Isis wrapped in a blue robe spangled with

stars and holding in her arms a child in swaddling clothes. The very same image is used for the Virgin Mary in our churches, except that Mary has Jesus in her arms, Isis has Horus. Horus was an extraordinary man. He was baptized by Anup the Baptizer. This fictional figure of the Baptizer gave rise to John the Baptist among Christians, who did no more than change the forename. In contrast, these same Christians didn't trouble their minds with adjustments to the fable of the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus: they simply copied an old Egyptian legend without even disguising the names. Horus in fact revived the mummy El-Azar and this name was copied as El'Azar in the Bible, Lazarus in the English translation. The personal descriptions for Horus included 'Iusa' or 'Iesu', 'KRST' or the 'Anointed One'. The stories of Horus and Jesus are identical down to minor details. The only crucial difference is that the myth of Horus came several thousand years before the myth of Jesus ..."

As if to add weight to his comments, Tom nodded gravely.

"Last riddle: I was born of a virgin on 25 December. I was a wandering Master. I was considered the Savior, the Redeemer. I was called the Son of God, the Light of the World. My holy day was Sunday, the 'Lord's day'. I had twelve companions and I performed miracles. I was buried in a tomb and after three days I rose again from the dead. My resurrection was celebrated every year. My religion included a eucharist or 'Lord's Supper'. Who am I?"

Perturbed, Camilla hesitated, not knowing what to answer.

"Do you give up?" Tom asked. "Speaking of giving things up, did you know that the cat is the only common animal not to be talked about in the Bible? All sorts of domestic animals are mentioned, but not cats. And that oddity is a result of the fact that the cat was an animal worshiped in the Egypt of the Pharaohs, King Josiah's foes, so Josiah took great care that the Old Testament wouldn't say anything good about the Egyptian enemy, not even symbolically, so it gave up all mention of cats. All these little details in the Bible have new light shed on them when you know the secret of how it was composed. But let's get back to the main point ... Have you solved the riddle? Please don't tell me it's Jesus Christ, since then you'll be wrong yet again ..."

Tom smiled.

"The right answer is Mithras, the sun-God of Persia, who emerged about 600 years before Jesus Christ. And I can guarantee you that if worship of Jesus Christ hadn't been imposed by force so as to overwhelm the worship of Mithras, well, we two would be discussing the historical reality of Mithras at this very moment. If the Emperor Constantine hadn't enforced the cult of Jesus Christ, we'd all be adepts of Mithraism, not of

Christianity. Just before the beginnings of Christianity, the worship of Mithras was the most popular and widespread of the ‘pagan’ religions of the period, all round the Mediterranean Basin and especially at Rome. Like Jesus Christ, Mithras was a savior for the end of the world. Mithras had the role of interceding with the supreme God on behalf of humans, to whom he promised the immortality of the soul. Just like Jesus, he preached frugality, cured all illnesses and revived the dead. People of olden times worshiped Mithras a cave where they performed baptism and communion. His followers believed in the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the dead. Before dying, Mithras gave a final meal to his disciples, during which he blessed the bread and water. Besides, the words of the Last Supper found in the Bible are borrowed from what Mithras said. The priests of Mithras performed a ritual with bread and wine, saying ‘who swalloweth my flesh and drinketh my blood remaineth in me and I remain in him’. The priests of Mithras put honey on the tongues of worshipers. Strange similarities with Christianity, aren’t they?”

Camilla’s eyes blinked.

“Already 1,500 years before Jesus Christ,” Tom declared, “in Egypt, people ate the internal organs of the enemies they killed and they drank their blood, so as to absorb their powers. These properties were extended to various animals which had been deified, then, as time went by, the blood, which was gathered in cups, was replaced by wine. They also practiced the sacrament of baptism by immersing disciples in water, washing away their sins, and allowing them to come back from the dead in another life, thanks to the resurrection of the Son of God ...”

Thoughtfully, Tom swept the valley with the gaze of his shining eyes.

“In ancient times, there were many myths about men who were sons of God and who died and were resurrected, after coming down to Earth to save humanity. These Saviors, these Sons of God, all shared the same similarities: their father was a god, their mother was a mortal virgin miraculously made pregnant by divine seed, most were born on 25 December, they died and then came back to life to transmit eternal life to men, they gave their disciples a chance of resurrection thanks to the rites of baptism. They have all sorts of different names according to the country, but they all have the same shared story, whether they’re known as Horus in Egypt, Mithras in Persia, Krishna in India or Jesus in Palestine ...”

“Those resemblances are the outcome of devilish imitation!” Camilla exclaimed. “It’s the Devil who copied Lord Jesus Christ in advance!”

“You really think it’s the Devil?”

“Of course! It must be him. Even if some people doubt it, the Devil exists and his biggest trick is to get humans to believe he doesn’t, so as to

work under cover. But I know he does exist. I can feel it ...”

“So you think the Devil copied Jesus in advance?” Tom asked. “That’s exactly what the early Church Fathers said when Celsus, a Greek philosopher, demonstrated with close reasoning and some irony that their Jesus was no more than a pale reflection of pagan mythologies. Already in the second century of our era, Celsus predicted that this Christian religion, claiming a monopoly of the supreme God, was a religious, political and social danger, that Christians were ready to soft-soap Roman emperors or cozy up to any old victorious tyrant, just as long as they could get their way. What Celsus said was prophetic, but alas for him and especially for humanity in general, no man is a prophet in his own land ...”

Tom sighed.

“According to you, then, the Devil maliciously copied the true story of Jesus into the myths of various countries before it really occurred in Judea? Camilla, you don’t have as twisted a mind as the Church Fathers. There’s a simple explanation for all these similarities, for the emergence of identical accounts over a number of different countries.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Camilla said after a moment’s thought. “I’m wrong. It’s not the work of the Devil. On the contrary, it’s the work of God.”

Tom frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“All these similarities, all these identical tales are the visions of prophets. God inspired men in the past so they would reveal to all the future coming of his Son Jesus Christ, to show us his all-powerful control over his Creation to us poor blind folk. That’s where the resemblances of Krishna or Mithras to Jesus Christ come from: they’re the work of his Father, a prophetic message from the Creator of time and space.”

Tom shook his head.

“No. The solution is more rational than that. As with all mysteries, above all, there’s an underlying human psychological basis. The reason all these myths are so similar, with a Man-God who dies and revives every time, a Man-God who performs miracles and has twelve disciples, is all these accounts are based on the movement of the sun in the sky. Wherever you are on the planet, you can see the sun and the twelve signs of the zodiac moving round the globe. Horus, Mithras, or Jesus are personifications of the sun. And if these Men-Gods traditionally have their birthdays on 25 December, it’s because in the past men noticed that every year the sun goes steadily down toward the South up until the twenty-first or twenty-second day of December. That’s the winter solstice. Then the

sun stops its southward movement for three days and starts moving back northward. In olden times they said that 'God's Sun' was 'dead' for three days before reviving on 25 December. Some cultures were afraid that the sun would continue moving southward, wouldn't stop and change direction and would disappear forever below the horizon, bringing the end of the world. On 25 December, people gave one another gifts to celebrate the fact that the end of the world hadn't come. The sun was restarting its life-cycle and its warming of the planet. The sun had a major part in the life of ancient times and people knew that without it, without its 'Light' that floods out over the world and the crops, they'd all die. The sun that rose every morning was the 'Savior of Humanity', the sun was the 'Light of the World', it came in triumph on the 'clouds of heaven', its halo shone like a 'crown of thorns'. For sailors, the rising sun 'walked on water' toward them. The disciples of the sun are the twelve months of the year or the twelve signs of the zodiac through which the sun must pass. In some cultures, the calendar began initially in the constellation Virgo and so the sun was born of a 'virgin'. Many cultures celebrated the renewal of the sun on 25 December or alternatively at the Spring Equinox, when the twelve hours of the day are identical to the twelve hours of the night, when the balance between light and darkness is in perfect harmony. That Spring Equinox is the origin of the Christian festival of Easter and the date of the resurrection of the Man-God Jesus. Currently, the Christian Church is the last religion whose flock, without knowing it, worship the sun personified. They go to church on Sundays, the Lord's Day, the Day of the Sun, they adore the mythical Man-God Jesus who is the sun incarnate..."

Camilla grimaced skeptically.

"How can you possibly get from the cycle of the sun to a mythical Man-God who came down to Earth to save humanity?" she asked. "Your reasoning makes no sense ..."

"It's tricky to understand and it'll need all your attention. After sun-worship, there was a second crucial psychological stage: that was people telling themselves that the 'resurrection' of the Divine Sun could be transmitted to us and make us immortal too, so death wouldn't be the end of our existence and the fear of dying wouldn't have any further hold over our minds. Nevertheless, a problem cropped up: how could a divinity like the sun transmit to men the power of resurrection if the sun itself doesn't have it, since it's eternal and so never dies? In olden times they used to say that the sun 'died' and 'came back to life' but this was only in a symbolic way as they saw it, because in fact people realized the sun was immortal, following an unchanging cycle and never disappearing. A divinity as powerful as the sun never tasted death, since it never was

extinguished. So, in the real world, the Divine Sun couldn't pass on resurrection, not knowing what the return from death to life really was. Faced with this dilemma, people came up with the idea of having the sun descend to the Earth to die, come back to life and transmit the newly acquired power of resurrection to humans, who in that way would be able to gain access to eternal life after their death. So religions described the sun coming down to the Earth, or all sorts of sky Gods, or even simply the seed of divinity, in particular of the sun or of the moon in the case of Mithras, to fertilize a human virgin on Earth: that's how Sons of Gods were born. These Sons of Gods had the title of Lord or of Savior and influences from the sun's life-cycle lingered on in the myths that recounted their lives. They were demi-gods, half-human, half-divine, who performed miracles like changing water into wine. They ended up by being martyred by men, but three days after their death they went to the dwelling-place of the dead to show all and sundry they were masters over death and that they could come back from the dead to return to the world of the gods ... a story and a cycle as unchanging as the sun's. Even if the details of these legends were arranged and adapted by the various cultures that adopted them over the course of the centuries, the myth of a Man-Son-of-God remained essentially the same. It's been touted about for thousands of years from one end of the Earth to another and every regional sect has developed a Gospel recounting the life and teachings of the Savior, and the sacraments established in the folklore such as baptism in his name to ensure divine resurrection. In Egypt, the Great Library of Alexandria had listed and copied meticulously all of these mythological texts and various different Christian sects that had access to these books used them as inspiration in fine-tuning their own myth of the Son of God. And when these same Christians came into political power in the world, they took great care to destroy the Alexandria Library completely so that the proof of their plagiarism would disappear with it forever. They destroyed nearly a million irreplaceable volumes, just so as to hide the truth about their Christ. One of so many crimes against humanity by the Church. But books are tough creatures and luckily still have enough texts available to us to know Mithras, Horus and Krishna, texts that prove Jesus is nothing more than a late compilation of plagiarized scraps of these myths from Antiquity ..."

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The Pope pushed the Bible away from him on his office desk-top and briefly closed his aching eyes. His body slumped back against the back of

his chair.

The sight of the Bible made the Holy Father grimace.

When, like him, one knew the secret of how it was composed, one wondered how anybody could still brandish the Bible and claim it was God's will that was written down in these texts, as did some ignorant Christian politicians so as to impose their backward-looking viewpoints.

Trying to enforce certain laws of Moses, like the prohibition of homosexuality, in modern times was a colossal error. All of that was supported exclusively by an obsolete and corrupt book, a 'divine' forgery invented by men to enslave men, in accordance with the plans of a man.

"Josiah ..." the Pope muttered.

Because of that king, millions of people had died and would probably go on dying.

In the Vatican, there were a good few more than a handful who knew about Josiah and Jesus' terrible secret. However, despite this horrendous burden on their conscience, nobody in the Roman Church had ever dared reveal these secrets.

Nobody?

To tell the truth, in the sixteenth century, in an incautious moment, Pope Leo X had said: "All ages can testify enough how profitable that fable of Christ hath been to us and to our company ..."

At the time, the matter was quickly hushed up and the words were lost in the flood of centuries-old lies, sounding only in an echoless collective mental vacuum. Since then, absolute discretion had been demanded from all and everybody well knew that apocalypse would be unleashed on Earth if anybody divulged Christ's secret.

The State lie had gone too far, to the point of no return, so it was impossible to pull back. The amazing Christian juggernaut had come up to speed and nothing could now stop it.

Except apocalypse.

Among those in on the secret, many were also afraid of having to answer to the law for having lied to the whole world, deliberately destroying human history. Did Thomas Anderson's 'The God Virus' not raise the possibility of suing the Christian Church for crimes against humanity?

Some would probably wish to do so and the Pope was counting on such a day never arriving.

To ward off that evil day, there was no alternative but to keep up the official lie, while trying to keep its negative effects as minimal as could be. With no way of turning back, Vatican officials could only go on doing

what the Church had always done: treating the faithful like children or raw recruits in basic training, controlling their minds by claiming, as their predecessors had done, that outside the Christian Church there is no salvation.

The Pope nervously drummed his fingertips on the chair's armrest.

Since the depths of time, Vatican officials had seen themselves as the guardians of the one true faith. They proclaimed loud and clear that there was a sole and single universal Church instituted by God to save all humankind and that outside it absolutely nobody could be saved. They brandished the keys of salvation, keys that opened the door to eternal happiness in Heaven, keys ensuring life after death, on condition they blindly obeyed the Church's men and laws.

Already in his day, Alexander the Great had grasped the usefulness of such a system aimed at convincing the masses to put up with the burdens of a dictatorship. All that was needed was to promise the deprived social classes some supreme reward after death, if only they would bear with resignation all the injustices they underwent.

The Church had inherited this system and could not keep its place other than by proclaiming its legitimacy and imposing its discipline on people on the basis of a right from on high entrusted to it.

It had established its limitless authority over humankind by setting rules that preached obedience, making absolute servility the image of the divine condition on Earth. For a long time, it had aspired to universal government of souls. Through this universal dominance of souls, it would control the bodies and actions of all people.

The Pope sighed.

On learning of Christ's secret, a critical observer from outside the Church might have believed that the Vatican officials were acting out of greed, or thirst for absolute power, that they led a life of luxury thanks to milking Jesus Christ, so that they did not wish to kill the goose which laid the golden eggs by revealing the secret. The outside observer might think that all these professionals of the divine were defending their social status and influence on public opinion to the bitter end, even if it meant lying, not wanting to saw through the branch on which rested their power and fame.

However, that observer would be making a big mistake.

The majority of the people in the Christian Church were totally unaware of Christ's secret and they acted in full good faith and innocently, convinced they had the keys to God's heavenly paradise so as to save humanity. In contrast, those admitted into the restricted circle knowing the secret thereafter acted nobly for Deus.

Of course, in the past Christ's secret as contained in the Pontius Pilate Report had burned out the consciences of many clergymen, even, or especially, the humblest, quenching irrecoverably the divine spark in them, wiping out their faith forever. Among them, some had become popes. No longer believing in the divine, they had become despotic tyrants, dazzled by their personal power. Their minds had been rotted by theocratic absolute power and laid the foundations of a hateful and authoritarian religion that had supported totalitarian regimes in different periods, such as Fascism or Nazism.

These popes had pretended to believe as an absolute truth everything that was in the Bible, play-acting about Christ by not even admitting the reality of the terrible secret to which they were privy, as if all this was no more than a baseless fable. They had lived in a state of willful but saving amnesia, so as not to collapse into an even greater madness, as had a good number of those who had dared to look the truth in the face.

In an egocentric mirror, these popes had proclaimed themselves as holders of the knowledge imparted by God and if Science itself contradicted it, it was Science that had to be wrong: the Bible and God's interpreters of it could not be invalidated. Bound up in their certainty that there was an unchanging truth external to the universe in which everything was in a constant state of change, these popes had even gone so far as to stir up wars of religion to benefit their own personal interests.

"Religion ..." the Pope murmured.

The people that it had been possible to save from death thanks to religion were very few in number when compared to the countless victims of the Inquisition, the Crusades or other wars of religion. In fact, religion had posed far more problems for humanity than it had solved. Whenever religion was flourishing, wherever it progressed, there had been a decline in human living conditions.

The Pope sighed once more.

He himself was the legitimate heir of all these predecessors, all those popes of limited intellect and he held in his hands the absolute power which had rotted the minds of so many clergymen.

"*Dictatus Papae*," he said under his breath.

Still valid to this day, the *Dictatus Papae* had been promulgated by Gregory VII in the eleventh century and stated, among other things, that the Pope could depose emperors, that only his Roman Church was founded by God, that rulers should kiss his feet. They also laid down that the Pope could not be judged by anybody, that nobody could overturn his decisions and that he alone could overturn all judgments. Gregory VII had

proclaimed in them that the Roman Church had never made a mistake and could not do so, because it was infallible ...

Mulling over the infallibility of the Church as declared by Gregory VII, the Pope thought of his own papal infallibility. Because of it, the Sons of Abraham were blackmailing him, threatening him with letting off their accursed bomb which would wipe out two thousand years of human history. An apocalypse was guaranteed if the Pope did not come out in favor of the extension of their territory desired by the Israelis.

The Pope turned his head slightly and eyes fell on the clock display on the computer monitor, where the hours were tirelessly ticking away, racing toward a fateful finish.

Suddenly, he had the strange feeling that with or without papal infallibility, despite his absolute powers, the fate of humanity now no longer lay in his hands.

*
* *

Camilla tossed her long brown hair.

"I can't agree with you at all," she said. "The existence of a number of mythical sons of gods doesn't prove that the Jesus who lived in Nazareth is a myth himself."

A grimace twisted Tom's mouth.

"I've already told you Nazareth wasn't even in existence in the time of Jesus. Three hundred year after Christ's death, the first Christian pilgrims began coming from the West to gather in the village that was claimed to be birthplace of Jesus. But no-one could manage to find the village of Nazareth, and for good reason: it existed only in the imagination of the Evangelists. So, the mother of the Emperor Constantine had the former settlement of En-Nasira renamed Nazareth. After that an attractive basilica was built, and then the grotto where Jesus was born and even the well where the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce that she was to bear the Son of God ... What is amusing, but at the same time annoying, about this story of Nazareth, is that the authors of the Gospels had Jesus born in this imaginary village so as to correspond with a prophecy found in the Old Testament, a prophecy which refers to the birth not of Jesus but of the mythical Samson, also engendered by the Spirit of God. This prophecy relating to Samson says the Savior of Israel is to be a Nazarene. The Evangelists thought that Nazarene meant 'inhabitant of Nazareth'. But in fact this word means 'devoted to God'. An error of interpretation led the

ignorant Evangelists to say the mythical Jesus was born in a town which didn't even exist ...”

Tom sighed.

“The authors of the Gospels were so keen to persuade people that the Old Testament really prophesied the coming and life of their Jesus Christ that they brought in too many mutually exclusive prophecies and that led them to contradict themselves over and again, as in the case of the date of Christ's birth: it was the Church that had to decide among them later and chose a Year 1 which in fact is incompatible with everything written in the Gospels. Quite often the Evangelists referred to prophecies having nothing to do with Jesus, either directly or indirectly, as with Samson. Naturally, they also brought in generic prophecies, ‘Nostradamus’ style predictions that are scattered all through the Old Testament and are so ambiguous they'll allow any number of interpretations, so anyone can read into them whatever's wanted, everyone can find something in them to suit a claim. The Evangelists also distorted the Old Testament a lot by changing the sense of words or phrases. For instance, they replaced ‘young woman’ by ‘virgin’. Besides, and above all, they made up the story of their mythical Jesus by following the few Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament to the letter: that way it was easy for them to impress believers with striking ‘similarities’, with prophecies apparently ‘coming true’. But appearances are deceptive ...”

A group of Jewish tourists walked close by the bench where Tom and Camilla were sitting. Tom waited for the group to get far enough away and then asked:

“Camilla, why do you think the Jews rejected Christ in his times? Imagine for an instant Jesus Christ appeared to us here and now, reviving the dead, walking on the water, multiplying loaves ... Without a shadow of a doubt, we'd all be convinced, believers and even atheists, Chinese or Arabs, we'd all of us to the last one fall to our knees before such a prodigy, the Son of God. Nevertheless, the Jews didn't do so in those days. Why didn't they recognize him as the Messiah and why are they still waiting to this day for the coming to the Earth of such a Messiah? Quite simply because Jesus Christ never came to Palestine amongst the Jewish people; he's a figment of the Evangelists' imagination. The myth explains a lot ...”

Tom looked at the Jewish tourists heading off into the distance.

“To please the Roman authorities, the Evangelists presented Pontius Pilate as a mild and affable man, whereas all the historians describe him as cruel and despotic. The Evangelists created a fiction of the Jewish people as responsible for Christ's death. This lie gave rise to hatred of the Jews and the birth of anti-Semitism. It was even the Church that threw the first

stone of this anti-Semitism in 787, forbidding Jews to own Christian slaves. Jews could no longer engage in trades and professions needing a lot of manpower, like agriculture. They had to resign themselves to practicing activities using only family labor in commerce and finance. We forced them to become bankers and businessmen, then we accused them of being in control of world finance! Because of the Evangelists' lies, these innocent people have been massacred in infamous pogroms in the name of a myth that they did not recognize ...”

Tom clenched his fist.

“That’s why the Jews didn’t recognize Jesus of Nazareth: he was just a myth. And it’s also why nothing about Jesus is found in Jewish annals, or indeed any historical writings. But if you don’t trust non-Christian texts to prove he was a myth, I can rest my case on Christian writings to demonstrate to you Jesus is definitely a fable.”

Camilla frowned.

“How’s that possible?” she asked in astonishment.

“Christian writings aren’t limited to just what you find in the Bible. Besides the Bible, there are more than seventy different texts, other Gospels, other Acts, other Epistles and Apocalypses which were forbidden by the Church. These texts are called ‘apocrypha’, which originally meant ‘hidden’ and most of them were destroyed by the Church. In the early days, there were dozens of Gospels considered genuine by the Church, Gospels that are even older than the four later kept in the Bible. Nevertheless, despite its ‘infallibility’, the Church ended up by changing its mind and purely and simply banning them. Why did the Church so viciously destroy all these texts, all this evidence for the existence of Jesus? Why this censorship? What had it to fear from these writings? The answer’s simple: when you read those of these texts that happened to escape destruction, you realize they have a lot of points in common with the tales in ancient mythology. You can also see how ridiculous the myth of Jesus is when he’s described as a vegetarian who revives a cockerel that’s been cooked for a banquet, as someone who strangles little birds just to show off how he can bring them back to life, who controls streams with his voice, a child Jesus who revives his little friends when they die or breathes life into clay statuettes. Too many miracles make miracles suspect and they cease to be credible ... If the historical reality of Jesus had been in no doubt, tales about his life and ministry, supposedly all coming from witnesses, would’ve been unlikely to arouse any debates within the Church to decide what was authentic and what not. But even if you just look closely at the ‘authentic’ scriptures retained by the Church, the texts which are part of the Christian canon and are found in the New Testament,

you can just as easily prove Jesus of Nazareth is no more than a pure invention. It can be done by close attention to insignificant details ...”

“Attention to insignificant details?” Camilla echoed, intrigued.

“Yes, attention to details, observation of trifles. Observation of tiny details is a precise science. If you know how to look for them and list them for immediate or later analysis, you can understand everything that people are trying to hide from us or don’t want to tell us. There are all sorts of minor details, but the ones that count are those that stir up a tiny spark of doubt in us. This spark can disappear as quickly as it appears if you don’t watch out. It is forgotten and never sets our mind afire. But if you cherish it and keep it alive, your mind catches fire and is lit up by the glow of truth. Often, in the stress and strain of action and the noise of our debates we have no more than a few fractions of a second to preserve that spark of doubt in ourselves ...”

Tom stared intently at the young woman.

“Let’s apply this observation of trifles to the Bible and particularly the New Testament, okay? We know that communities of Judeo-Christians formed quite early on all around the Mediterranean basin. If you take the word of the Acts of the Apostles, it was above all the work of Paul and a few helpers who put in great efforts to convince Jews and Gentiles, or non-Jews. You’d think that the arguments put forward to persuade the incredulous would at least in part be based on evidence about the miracles performed by Jesus, his teachings, how he was put to death by Pilate and about his resurrection. But Paul and the others never use any of these events to convince people. They prefer to preach by quoting texts from the Old Testament and invoking God ... That’s where a spark of doubt raises its head. A tiny spark, so much so that if you do nothing it disappears just as fast as it appeared. It seems insignificant and you pay no attention to it. However, let’s just take a look at this trifling detail and keep the spark of doubt alive in our mind. To stir it into a blaze, let’s have a look at the dates of the various books making up the New Testament and their respective places: first, there are the four Gospels relating the story of Jesus’ life, second, the Acts of the Apostles after his resurrection, third a collection of Epistles, the correspondence of the earliest Christian communities, fourth and last, the Apocalypse ...”

Camilla nodded and Tom went on:

“Logically, the four Gospels should’ve been written in the very first days of the beginnings of Christianity, in a period very close to Jesus’ resurrection. It’s the same for the book called the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ which originally formed a single work in combination with Luke’s Gospel. Then Christians should’ve written down the correspondence between the

Christian communities that sprung up a few years after the date officially assigned to the crucifixion and which runs over about fifty years, up to the end of the first century. Then finally you'd expect the Apocalypse to have been written."

A smile played over the corner of Tom's lips.

"We have fragments of all these original documents, scraps that have survived the centuries and come down to us. If you take a look at these texts, you find that the oldest Christian documents in our possession are the various Epistles, precisely dated to the years 30 C.E. to 90 C.E.. Then comes the Apocalypse, dating from around 70 C.E.. Finally, there are the fragments of the Gospels and Acts which date to 125 to 150 C.E.. Before that date, there's no trace at all of the Gospels ... As for the Epistles and Apocalypse, the assumed dates they were written and the datings of the fragments of texts we have coincide perfectly. But the same's not true for the Gospels, there's a difference of nearly 100 years between the date of their presumed composition and the oldest papyri containing these texts ... Another spark of doubt ... What if the datings for the papyri we have represent the date of their first composition?"

Tom gestured with his hand.

"Let's re-order the New Testament according to the dates of the fragments we have, so as to read the texts chronologically, from oldest to newest. As a historical irony, that turns out to mean reading the New Testament pretty much backward, from the last page to the first ... Using this reading schedule, it's easy to understand why the Apocalypse and the various Epistles don't speak of the life and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, because these incidents hadn't happened at that point in time. The episodes concerning Jesus of Nazareth that are noted down in the Gospels only appear later, not first, but the very last. Reading the New Testament backward corresponds perfectly with the datings for the fragments of these texts we have in our possession, and working that way takes away all the doubts the normal order stirs up in us. Everything becomes logical, understandable and clear ... no more incoherence or anachronisms ... the tale takes on its full sense and shows us that there was a slow building up of the myth of Jesus of Nazareth, topped off with a final touch, the Gospels ..."

Camilla protested.

"But the Gospels weren't written a hundred years after Christ died!"

"What if they were?" Tom said. "What if they really were made up a hundred years after? That would explain why the Epistles and the Apocalypse, not to mention all the historical writings from the period, make no mention of Jesus of Nazareth."

“But the Gospels recount specific events from the year 30 in the words of eye witnesses ...”

“So what? Just because something I’m writing talks about the Second World War, it doesn’t mean it has to have been written at the very moment that war was going on, or show that the writer lived through it. Only the dating of my manuscript can prove exactly when I wrote it. And as far as the Gospels are concerned, that dating is solidly fixed at 150C.E..”

Camilla thought for an instant then suggested:

“The earliest manuscripts of the Gospels were maybe lost, so we only have later copies ...”

“Other older texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament weren’t lost, though ...”

Camilla scowled.

“And what do you think happened at the time?” she demanded, irritated.

Tom chose his words carefully and finally said:

“What happened at the time can be summed up by an anecdote. Let’s imagine two politicians in the U.S.A. who’re in a broadcast debate because of their being contenders for the presidency. One’s a Democrat, the other’s a Republican. The Democratic candidate promises that if he’s elected during his four-year term he’ll discover a vaccine that’ll cure all known cancers. The Republican candidate replies, saying he’ll find that miraculous vaccine in under six months. So the Democratic candidate, not dismayed in the slightest, pushes the bid higher by saying he’s already discovered the vaccine but he’ll only release it if he’s elected President of the United States ...”

Tom chuckled.

In contrast, Camilla showed no emotion.

23

Italy 1549. Milan

The night was cool.

In the depths of a moonless sky, tiny twinkling flames had riddled the sea of shadows from one end of the horizon to the other and these millions of stars were shining with a steady glow. Not a breath of wind, not a shudder affected those lights that appeared to hang in a void.

Michel De Nostredame, his eyes raised, was dazzled and overcome by a slight trembling at the sight of the growing swarm of stars. The sky was suddenly furrowed by grayish horizontal lines that encircled the darkness.

Nostredame lifted a hand to his tired eyes, rubbed them to check he was not dreaming and, reassured, mechanically stroked his long white beard.

As on the other occasions, rumbling bubbles of burning stars whizzed out of the sky: within these bubbles, images started to move and jostle in a jerky mechanical dance.

Then future events began to parade past him once more.

De Nostredame stared at the grandiose spectacle, his concentration at its peak. Stretching his neck, constantly darting his eyes hither and thence, he took in the bubbles with historical ramifications that had begun filing past him one after another in an order which at first sight seemed anarchic and timeless.

For hours, his body immobile and aching, his mind soaked up the events to come. Then the last starry bubble finally disappeared, shooting back to its tiny spot in the sky.

The vision from this last bubble left De Nostredame full of fear.

He hastened back to the house, which his journey into Italy had led him to be using as his home. Silent and deserted, the small dwelling was poorly lit by the wavering flame of a nearly burned-out candle standing on a table beside a Bible and an ancient manuscript.

De Nostredame lit a fresh candle and sat on a stool as he scanned the old manuscript from beneath eyelids heavy with tiredness.

“Pontius Pilatus,” muttered the seer in his voice hoarsened by time.

When he had first read the secret of Christ noted down in Pilate’s manuscript, De Nostredame had had a fit and fainted.

His head had struck the ground violently.

From that day on, he had had the power to read the heavens like an open book and hitherto he had meticulously written down every detail that he had seen.

What was he to do now, after seeing that last bubble in the firmament, even if other visions were sure to ensue in days to come?

De Nostredame from now on would be tied to the future, he could not escape that: humanity would one day have need of his knowledge to unveil a bizarre heavenly secret.

He had to make his notes public. Not for glory; rather, as Plato had tried to do before him, to awaken humanity from the nightmare in which its mind had imprisoned it.

The images from the different bubbles jostled in De Nostredame’s head.

Sometimes it was impossible to give a precise date for the various episodes he had seen, those wars, catastrophes or attacks, built up in space-time. Besides, were he to tell anybody about these dates, would the foreseen events not fail to occur? Certainly, for men’s free will could ward them off, especially if they knew when the events would take place.

History could thus change the course of occurrences.

De Nostredame had no right to influence the movements of the firmament for the final battle against the Evil One. The bubble he had seen at the end was the last link in the chain of events and if he broke a single one of those links by divulging a true date, this final link might never come to exist, hence allowing the Evil One to win ultimate victory over humanity.

The dates that De Nostredame would set down in his writings would thus be no more than enigmas and the same would be true for all the words that were to be transcribed in a hazy way, their truthfulness shining forth only after the event in question had actually happened.

To make them easier to memorize, De Nostredame intended to compose them in the form of quatrains of lines that would have ten syllables in French.

“Ten ...”

Before anything else, De Nostredame had to write down the vision of

the last bubble, but as he thought of the following decade, he felt that he had better include in this writing the precursors of the second event, which was linked to the first.

He took up his pen.

L'an mil neuf cens nonante neuf sept mois ...

[In y^e Yeare one thousand, nine hundred, nine and ninety, seven Months]

In July of the year 1999, the breaker would have swept progressively over the whole world after its first appearance crashing onto the New World in the month of March.

A tidal wave summed up by a single word beginning in a specific letter.
M.

As every rule has some exception, disregarding his initial resolution never to give an exact date, De Nostredame ran no risk in mentioning a year and a month, for at that same period, war in the land of blackbirds, Kosovo, or otherwise in the Mahometan lands of Russia would distract attention and people would wrongly think that it was to these, indeed important, events that he was referring.

Besides and above all, the M tidal wave could not be turned aside from history by the free will of men knowing its date, for the unusual breaker which was promised would seem derisory in their eyes, but not in those of its originators who, as a paradox of time, would strive to act at the hour and date of the prophecy.

The upset would be so trivial to men's minds that even the Evil One would take no heed of it, thinking himself superior and master of the free will of all humanity.

On all the continents, millions and millions of people would see with their own eyes the incredible truth about the world appearing before them, but, blinded by their senses, none of them, or very few, would realize the extent of the occurrence and it would take place almost unnoticed.

Jesus Christ said that there was no blinder man than the one who would not see ...

Du ciel viendra un grand Roy d'effraieur ...

[From y^e Sky cometh a greate King of Feare]

Motionless in the emptiness of space, vast machines like winged stars would bring the great Savior who would terrify many a man with the very idea of the minds of men soon being set free.

Resusciter le grand Roy sur la crois...

[To bring back to Life y^e greate King upon y^e Crosse]

This new Savior would take on the emblematic role of another great Savior: Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

Avant apres Mars regner par bon heur.

[Before and after March reigneth through Joye]

Before that month of March 1999, happiness brought by the bliss of ignorance would reign in the hearts of all mankind, but once the Savior came, thanks to the certainty of true knowledge, genuine happiness would be attained by the releasing of minds from their gilded cages.

De Nostredame re-read what he had written.

L'an mil neuf cens nonante neuf sept mois

Du ciel viendra un grand Roy d'effraieur

Resusciter le grand Roy sur la crois

Avant apres Mars regner par bon heur.

De Nostredame frowned and stroked his long beard.

With a rapid stroke of his pen, he circled the words mentioning the cross.

The reference to the Son of Man was too obvious and De Nostredame had to be more than prudent when mentioning the new Savior, for the Evil One would work in the shadows of his creation.

He had to change those words while still keeping to the meter of the verse.

“Jesus Christ ...”

How could he represent him? Not with mention of the cross, as that was too explicit. Better to use an allusion to the hands nailed on the cross and the light of the heavenly body that provides or daylight and illuminates gnosis, perfect knowledge.

Hands, Sun, Gnosis; in French *mains, soleil, gnose*.

Three words.

“333,” whispered De Nostredame.

For his vision of the future, he would take the first three letters of the three words and make three groups of three letters.

MAIns, SOLeil, GNOse.

MAISOLGNO.

De Nostredame thought for a little and decided to create an anagram from these letters.

ANGOLMOIS.

He crossed out the phrase about bringing back to life the great King on the cross and substituted for it a reference to the great King of Angolmois.

The three syllables of ‘*d’Angolmois*’ were a good metrical replacement for ‘*sur la crois*’

This last word sounded quite like ‘Angoumois’, the province of France whose capital was Angoulême: the stupid and the uninitiated could easily be fooled into seeing a reference to various great Kings of France who had had links with the area.

“333,” muttered De Nostredame once again.

A double three-pronged maneuver to break free from the Evil One.

Nostredame re-read son quatrain with its intertwined senses, casting *Light like the Sun’s* on the Book of *Gnosis* written by *Hand*.

Because one decade after the new triple Savior, the Book would naturally come to *bring back to life the great King on the cross*, the true Jesus Christ.

De Nostredame glanced at the Bible lying on the table.

What a book had done, a book would undo.

Then war, presided over by the God Mars, the other meaning of the French word *Mars*, would break out all over the world.

The Papacy would not survive the revelations in the Book and those faithful to Mohammed would set loose infinite violence against the Book to protect Allah.

The Evil One.

De Nostredame re-read once more what he had written.

Even if his quatrain had resonances of the end of the world, of the end of days, the M tidal wave would cause no more than a simple breach.

Nonetheless, this breach would be fatal to space-time and would end in rough handling of the work of God the Creator, when the triple Book appeared.

“*Alea jacta est ...*”

The dice were thrown.

De Nostredame thoughtfully looked with his tired eyes at Pilate’s manuscript written in Latin.

“Pontius Pilatus ...”

A Latin pen-name would be a good omen for the publication of all his prophecies.

With a hasty hand, he scrawled a name at the end of his quatrain.

Nostradamus.

In the solitude of the gloomy and silent house, De Nostredame sighed.

If only the peoples of the whole world could realize that all his future

writings would not be produced with any aim at personal fame, but rather that they would be written with the sole intention of serving humanity, acting as an irrefutable proof for those who would strive to re-awaken the minds of men.

A proof that would reveal the diabolical truth.

“All is written in advance,” he muttered.

24

Investigation

The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was drawing nigh.

Several disciples had asked Jesus to journey to Judea so that the other Jews might also see the miracles which he performed, suggesting that he should not confine his actions to Galilee alone, but on the contrary should make an appearance all over the land. Jesus had replied that his time was not yet come, while theirs might arrive at any moment. This enigmatic response showed the deep disquiet Jesus felt at the idea of going to Judea and in particular to Jerusalem: he already had a premonition that his death would occur in that zone. It was true that Caiaphas was seeking to kill him, so that if Jesus risked visiting the region, the Chief Priest would seize the chance to do away with him. Jesus had preferred to remain in Galilee until then, because he knew instinctively that his death was not yet on the point of happening, as if he were protected by the Heavenly Father, unlike his disciples who could be called to Heaven from one instant to the next.

“None there is who hates you,” said he to them, “but men hate me because I bear witness that men’s works are evil. Go, then, to the feast in Jerusalem, for you are not in peril. I shall not go, as my time is not yet to come to an end ...”

A handful of disciples had thus departed for Judea without Jesus. However, in strange and sudden fashion, Jesus changed his mind.

This brusque change of heart came just after the episode of the plucking of ears of corn. That day, in company with a crowd of disciples, Jesus found himself before a vast field of rye. The apostles who were travelling around Galilee to bring the good news and cure the possessed were not present. Jesus carefully crossed the field with its golden crop gently swaying in the wind so as not to damage the soon-to-be harvested grain. On the other side of the field lay the track that would lead him to the village where he had decided to spend the night. Moving to the head of the

group made up of some one hundred faithful who had been following him since Lake Tiberias, he walked forward with arms outstretched, his fingertips stroking the golden ears of the crop which tickled his soft palms. However, all of a sudden, as if he had been bitten, he pulled his arms back against his body and came to an abrupt halt. His eyebrows, like stormy clouds floating over the blue lakes of his eyes wrinkled in a frown and his face was distorted by a worrying grimace. His pupils with their lilac highlights never stopped moving from one ear of grain to the next, glowing with increasing anxiety. A drop of perspiration trickled down his forehead.

He turned.

Behind him, the group had stopped like him, wondering why the Master was staying there right in the middle of the field. Jesus would have liked to ask the disciple whom he loved to join him. Faced with this difficult situation, they would together have agreed what they should do. However, the disciple whom Jesus loved was not there and so he had to take a decision by himself. So, after thinking long and hard, Jesus nodded to himself, having resolved what to do. To general surprise, he ordered that all the ears should be plucked off: not one should remain on the stalk. The group went to it, asking one another in whispers what the reason for this devastation might be. Nonetheless, the orders of Lord Jesus had to be carried out, for he was the Christ accomplishing the heavenly will of God his Father. The Holy Spirit of God should not suffer any disputing.

From a distance, an individual was watching the scene: it was the owner of the field, a wizened sixty-year-old with a toothless grin, his skin furrowed by years of unremitting toil, supporting his scrawny body with the aid of a long wooden stick. He dared not draw near, fearing this hostile horde of men and women. The only solution he could find was to go and seek out the Pharisees in the nearby synagogue, in the hope that the priests might act as mediators and make those destroyers listen to reason. His old legs carried him as swiftly as they could toward the synagogue, but it was not until half an hour later that he came back accompanied by two Pharisees. However, it was too late, for a great part of the field had been destroyed, with all the ears of grain plucked off the stalks.

Jesus was asking himself if that accursed harvest ought not to be burned when the priests accosted him.

“Why did you do this?” asked the Pharisees.

Jesus stared at them for an instant.

I cannot tell the truth to them ... nor to anybody else, either ...

With a gesture, he pointed to his disciples.

“They hungered,” muttered Jesus, so as to be heard by the Pharisees

alone. "Is that within your understanding?"

The priests looked at him doubtfully. Who could eat raw ears of rye straight from the stalk? Even a horde of starving lepers would not touch them, as they were inedible. Trying to get those misled Jews to see reason and not destroy the rest of the field, the priests thought they had hit the right note when they mentioned the Sabbath day, a day when it was forbidden to do any work other than those activities needed for the worship of Yahweh.

"You do that which it is not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day ..."

To cut short any debate, Jesus spoke of King David. To assuage his own hunger and that of his followers, he had not hesitated to eat the loaves of shewbread intended for worship, and this on a Sabbath, thus violating the holy day.

"The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, therefore every man is master even of the Sabbath."

At this, after a last glance at the plucked ears lying on the ground, Jesus signed to his disciples to follow him. They left under the astonished eyes of the two Pharisees who wondered what on Earth could have led to such a demented act. Jesus ordered the affair to be kept quiet, not wanting this tale to spread and stir up trouble. For several days, he stayed in the neighborhood of the place where the destruction had occurred, going from village to village, secretly questioning the inhabitants of the region.

After this episode of the ears of corn, Jesus suddenly decided to set out for Jerusalem in the greatest secrecy, accompanied by around a hundred of his closer disciples.

Many Jews were discussing him in the City of Zion. Some said that he was a good man, but others claimed he was brainwashing the masses by his teachings. However, nobody dared speak openly about him because of the fear aroused by the priests of the Temple. They were constantly reviling and slandering him and threatening all those who showed signs of accepting his doctrines. Very discreetly, they had promised a large reward to anybody who seized him and handed him over to them. There were a good few dubious characters who hoped to get rich thanks to this secret arrangement when Jesus arrived in the Province of Judea. His movements had to become much more cautious and he had to beware of traps that attempts were made to set for him during his journeys. Nonetheless, the crowds surrounding him dissuaded a good few would-be strong-arm men; public devotion for Christ made it almost impossible to get close to him with evil intent and even harder to carry him off without running the risk of being stoned by these adoring multitudes.

A divine force also protected the Son of God.

One night when he was sleeping in an old building which its owner had invited him to use, a dozen hit-men burst in with the intention of killing him. Dreadful noises came from his room, but when the disciples arrived, alerted by the shouts, they found just three bandits, the others having taken flight. The trio of criminals were in a pitiful state, with broken arms and legs, and dislocated jaws. They seemed to have been struck by a blast of divine rage. In the half-darkness of the room where Jesus was sleeping, the three had easily recognized the figure lying on the bed, but could not understand what had happened afterward. They had seen nothing but a huge shadowy form that rushed upon them quick as lightning and broke their limbs. Their accomplices had wisely decided to run away rather than face this shadowy divine anger. When the disciples entered the room, they found Christ calmly lying on his bed as if trying to go back to sleep after all the din and noise. Jesus had ordered them to expel the intruders without any more violence. He considered the incident closed and not worthy of further attention. The disciples' faith was nonetheless strengthened by this, for they understood the wrathful hand of God to be ready in all circumstances to protect the Son that He had sent to humans so as to spread his heavenly will, his Holy Spirit.

After a journey lasting several days, involving long, hard walking, Jesus and his disciples caught sight of the capital of Judea. As they entered the city, Jesus ordered them to leave him on his own, promising to meet the fervent group in the Temple where he intended to go later. He knew that he could not keep his presence in the city secret for long. Spies were everywhere, but he hoped to have time to do what he had come to accomplish and also to carry out another vital task despite the threat of death hanging over him. For several hours he went about his business in the town unrecognized. Wearing a long light-colored cloak whose hood hid his face, he walked hither and thence in the poorer quarters, especially the shopping districts. Then, after a good number of mysterious activities, he made for the Temple.

The profile of the monument was as impressive as ever and it was with a heavy heart that he climbed the imposing stairs to the southern entrance. For a moment he gazed at the splendor of the marble porticos where priests walked in their sumptuous robes. He went on in to the immense courtyard where thousands of townsfolk were going about their religious duties under the ubiquitous eye of priests in their violet and purple ceremonial robes. In one corner, near an enclosure holding goats intended for the sacrifices, Jesus spotted the disciples who were waiting for him. He walked rapidly toward them, glancing at the central building lost in the middle of the vast

courtyard. The sun's rays were shining on the impressive stones of the structure containing the sanctuary where sacrifices were performed. Jesus did not waste much attention on that place, which he considered ill-omened. He made for the group of disciples, but then, as he looked more closely at them, he stopped brusquely.

However, it was too late, as every eye was already fixed on him.

Understanding the situation, he instinctively realized that even if he turned back he would no longer be safe. Like an isolated fish seeking shelter among a shoal of its kind to escape a predator, Jesus had no alternative but to plunge into the midst of his disciples. He threw a black look at them: he had told them clearly to be discreet, but passions had been too strong and some had not been able to hold back from responding to the provocations of the Pharisee priests present in the Temple who had asked them why they were loitering there doing nothing, instead of paying homage to Yahweh, the God of Israel, by buying an animal for a sacrifice in the sanctuary. The tone had become heated, tensions had emerged and the name of the Messiah had been mentioned. The Pharisees realized that they were dealing with disciples of the Galilean prophet and when the roving gaze of the disciples turned on Jesus as he walked toward them, the priests immediately understood who the stranger with his face hidden by his hood had to be.

There were mutterings among the priests. Some set off to tell Caiaphas, others, curious, feverishly examined this tall man. Knowing that his identity had now been discovered, Jesus drew back his hood. He cast a soothing smile on some of his followers, who were in a state of panic that they had not remained discreet, for now their Master was in danger of being arrested by the Temple guards. Feeling that something strange was going on, the Jews present in the courtyard drew close in a massive crowd. The rumor went around that the Christ had come down from Heaven. Instinctively, every eye turned toward Jesus, whose naturally imposing appearance made his status as a Messianic King believable. Around him a circle formed, into which nobody dared to break, as if it were an impassable protective bubble gently tossed on an ocean of humanity with unbridled passions, animosities and curiosity.

Despite the dangerous situation in which Jesus found himself, he was not worried. He knew that as long as he was among that crowd, he was in no peril. Caiaphas would not dare lay hands on him without risking an uprising and consequent probable intervention by the Romans, whose legionaries, lance in hand, were watching the growing agitation from the top of the fortress called the Antonia Tower, which stood close to the outer wall of the Temple. However, one thing disturbed Jesus: his plan was at an

end and he could not do what he had come to the Temple to do.

I shall not learn what I had come to discover ...

Discretion had been an indispensable condition and now it was impossible for him to put his project into effect. It was strange to see Jesus' silent serenity contrasting with the growing din from the crowd. Standing in their midst, Jesus looked at these people who were staring at him. In their eyes he could see many queries and a sort of anxious expectation. They were all waiting for him to speak, to address them and say something to them, even if it was something trivial. However, many of them were expecting to hear divine words, heavenly speech coming from the mouth of the one whom the disciples called the Son of God. For Jesus, it was a chance to bring back to the path of truth these lost sheep misled by centuries-old lies.

So, Jesus started to speak. For over an hour, he taught without stopping. Standing in the middle of the crowd who were now sitting on the ground, he preached mercy. In the end a disciple brought him a jug of water. Taking advantage of the pause, an old white-bearded man stood and drew himself up to his full height and in a cracked voice asked the question which was tormenting his mind. A question which was for many the reason for their presence in the Temple.

“Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”

Jesus drank some of the cool water, thinking of the old man and his question. It was the sign of a constant preoccupation in human nature to thirst for eternity.

Does he know at all that he already has that eternal life in himself and that such life is a terrible burden? I cannot tell them that. They are not ready to open their eyes to the sadness of man's condition ...

Returning the empty jug to his disciple, Jesus spoke to all who were there:

“In the holy scriptures, in the law, it is written: ‘you shall love the Eternal Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength; you shall love your neighbor as yourself’. Love, love, as you love yourself. Love your neighbors without any distinction. Love also the Heavenly Father, who loves you. Love him with all your soul. There is no other commandment greater than this.”

Speaking directly to the old man, he added:

“Do this and you shall live.”

Using the elitist Law of Moses like a catapult to propel minds toward a universal truth, a key-stone in the structure of salvation, Jesus had just opened a breach in the walls of the fortress of Jewish beliefs. However,

some people had still not grasped that there was such a breach when the message was of love toward all humans, Jews and non-Jews alike. Many had nothing but scorn for foreigners and their cults, blinded as they were by their snobbish national pride and led astray by their false belief that they were the Chosen People of God. In their case, the sea of ignorance that had existed for centuries had swallowed their minds in its gloomy depths.

Can I save them from themselves?

This generation seemed lost forever as a result of lies told in past times. He needed to re-establish the truth for the salvation of future generations. However, the task was daunting. How could he make himself understood? There was nobody deafer than those who did not wish to hear. Luckily, not all were so obtuse, particularly his closer disciples who did listen with attentive ears.

Lowering his head slightly, he addressed them in particular as they sat close around him.

“Wish and you will be listened to; hope and you will be heard. If you truly desire from the depths of your being, from the depths of your soul, then your wishes will be granted. If two or three of you are gathered together on Earth and join their voices to ask for any thing whatsoever, it will be granted to them by the Heavenly Father who is above. The more hearts that join together, the greater will be the good will of the Heavenly Father. If an entire nation wished with all its heart, it could move mountains by its faith, for nothing would be impossible for it ...”

Jesus remained silent for a moment.

Heavenly balance ...

Should he speak to them of it now? This notion was difficult to grasp at first. He felt it would be more sensible to speak about this heavenly Truth at a more private moment, among a limited circle.

That mass of men and women never stopped staring at him with gazes in which curiosity, puzzlement, and, for some, hope were mixed. For several hours, under a sun barely veiled by a few clouds, Jesus continued to preach on the topic of mercy. The astonishment of the crowd grew greater and greater on hearing such ideas, which no man had ever before put forward within the walls of the Temple.

On several occasions, like annoying horse-flies, priests who were present had interrupted, trying to poke holes in his teachings, for they were afraid that the Jews might be mesmerized by this trouble-maker with his fascinating words. They had expected Caiaphas to order the guards to arrest Jesus, but fear of an uprising that would have provoked an intervention by the Roman soldiers within the Temple enclosure itself

dissuaded the High Priest from using force. Raging, unable to silence Jesus, but hoping to discredit him in public opinion, Caiaphas sent Abdias, the most talented of the rabble-rousing priests of the Temple. He was a high-ranking Sadducee, whose family had laid claim to a right to a post through inheritance since the times of David. An extreme conservative, unshakably sure of his own superiority, this man of around forty, with a deep and sensuous voice and a pepper-and-salt beard, loved to wear his priestly purple robes on his plump body so that all would bow reverently at his passage. Almost hidden by his prominent nose shaped like the beak of an eagle, his dark eyes were constantly on the move, betraying great internal agitation. Abdias had just one idea in his head: to cling on to the power he held, thanks to tradition. Jesus constituted a risk to his social standing, but he was convinced that with his oratorical talent, he would rip the disguise off this false Messiah and discredit him once for all in the Jews' opinion.

However, the verbal jousting to which Abdias resorted angrily turned out to the advantage of Jesus every time: his words were like so many arrows wounding the Sadducee's self assurance, the latter proving quite unable to counter these darts fired with skill and subtlety.

A further argument made Abdias' task more difficult. The rumor of the miraculous cures accomplished by Jesus was beginning to stir people's minds, spreading like a forest fire among the crowd. Abdias had to do something to extinguish this blaze that threatened to arouse faith in this counterfeit Christ.

"Is it lawful to cure upon the Sabbath day?" asked Abdias slyly, hoping that the answer he would get would be blasphemous in the eyes of the Jews.

Jesus realized that he wanted to compromise him through his miraculous healing.

Jesus remembered that in the many villages through which he had travelled the Pharisees had already to turn the Jews' opinions against him, alleging that it was forbidden to work on the Sabbath Day, other than when carrying out activities dedicated to worshiping Yahweh. Jesus, who cared nothing for that view, cured all the sick he could, whatever the day of the week, Sabbath included. Every time the Pharisees had attacked him on the point, Jesus had been able to use careful wording to show how ridiculous their objection was. On many occasions, in many places, Jesus had swept aside criticism by saying:

"Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil, to save life or to kill? What man is there among you that has one sheep and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath day will not lay hold on it and lift it out? How much

better, then, is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on Sabbath days ...”

The Pharisees from the Galilean synagogues had become enraged that they could not discredit Jesus and now Abdias was going to meet the same discomfiture.

“I have done good works and you all marvel,” said Jesus. “Moses, or rather the fathers, gave to you circumcision to perpetuate on your children and on the Sabbath day you circumcise a man, lest the Law of Moses should be broken. Why, then, are you angry at me, because I made a man whole on the Sabbath day? Judge not according to appearance, but by righteous judgment.”

The Sadducee ground his teeth. For a moment he remained silent, cursing inwardly. A Pharisee priest came to his assistance by changing the subject.

“Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders, for they do not wash their hands when they eat bread?” demanded the priest.

The Pharisees and Jews in general did not eat without previously having washed their hands carefully, in conformity with tradition. Jesus’ disciples were not always able to do so in their day-to-day wanderings and in the difficult living conditions which they endured to follow Christ. Jesus came to their defense.

“Hear me, all of you, and understand; it is not what goes into a man from outside, through the mouth, that can defile him ...”

There was a murmur of surprise among the Jews. They did not eat certain foodstuffs and meats, following God’s command, and were surprised to hear what Jesus was saying, as it implicitly suggested that no food would henceforth be classed as impure, so they could eat anything without breaking the Law. Could God have changed his mind? The Israelites were accustomed to Yahweh’s irascible nature and his frequent changing of opinion. He sometimes totally went back on his statements, using words that contradicted them, such sayings being found throughout the history of the Chosen People, noted down in the sacred scriptures of the Temple. Christ had the duty of transmitting, as the prophets and Moses had done, the new will of God, his Holy Spirit sent out to humankind. However, hearing such mind-boggling statements, some in the crowd began to think this Christ was an impostor. Irritated grumblings were heard. Jesus paid no attention.

“That which comes out of his mouth, this defiles a man,” added he. “Do you not understand that what comes from without cannot defile a man? For this does not enter into his heart through the mouth, but only

into the belly, from whence it is finally expelled, whilst what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. This it is that defiles a man, for it is from within, from the heart that come evil thoughts, murders, thefts, slander, greed, wicked deeds, insults, pride, folly, envy, desire ...”

His gaze swept over the crowd.

“All such evil things come from within and defile a man. Who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

On the Temple courtyard, a wind of disturbance began to be felt. Conversations became more animated.

“Is this not the one they were seeking to kill?” asked a beardless adolescent of his father, in a thin voice. “Yet here he stands in the midst of the Temple, speaking openly with no man to bid him be silent! Have the priests of the Temple seen in him the Messiah?”

Hearing this question, Abdias grew red with anger and categorically denied this was the case.

“We know well who this man is, but at the coming of true Messiah, none will know from whence he arises!”

“Who, then, is he?” asked the adolescent.

“He is the son of Joseph, a simple carpenter of the village of Nazareth ...”

Behind him, an old man in a patched toga nearly choked.

“Joseph?” said he in astonishment. “Why, I knew him well! If this is indeed his son, how, then, did he come by such wisdom and learning without studies?”

The old man, knowing Joseph was poor, had no doubt that the carpenter of Nazareth would have been unable to pay for any extensive education for his son. So where could his knowledge come from? Was he truly the Son of God as some claimed? Others said he was the Christ.

“Is it from Galilee that the Messiah shall come?” asked a female voice, rising above the others. “Do the sacred scriptures not say that it is of the seed of David and of the town of Bethlehem, the town from which David came, that the Messiah will arise?”

Among the crowd, a split was growing between those who believed in him and others who thought he was an impostor. Some people even tried to lay hands on this false Christ, but the dense throng of supporters around him dissuaded them from any unwise action.

Speaking again in a powerful voice, Jesus turned toward Abdias, who had just spoken of Joseph, his adoptive father.

“You know me and you know from where I come. I am not come of

myself but from him that sent me, who is Truth. You do not know him. I know him, for I come from him and he it is that sent me.”

“You bear witness of yourself, such witness is not true,” shrieked Abdias.

Jesus sighed.

“Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true, for I know whence I came and whither I go. You judge by the fleshly appearance. I judge no man and yet, if I judge, my judgment is true, for I am not alone, but I and the one who sent me. It is written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am one that bears witness of myself and the Heavenly Father that sent me also bears witness of me.”

“Where is this Father?” spat out the Sadducee.

“You know neither me nor the Heavenly Father. If you knew me, you would know from where I really come and also where the Heavenly Father of whom I speak to you is to be found. I shall go my way up toward him and you will seek me for your salvation, but you will be too tardy and you will die through your desires. Then, whither I go you cannot come.”

The crowd grasped that he was alluding to death, but did not comprehend the real meaning of these words.

“You are from this world beneath,” added Jesus. “I am from above and there I shall return. You are of this world and here you will remain. I shall no longer be of this world. I said therefore to you that you will perish from your desires, for if you do not believe in my teaching, nothing can save you.”

“Who are you then, in truth?” asked a woman’s worried voice.

“Even the same that I was from the beginning ...” replied Jesus, enigmatically.

He looked at the crowd.

“When you have been lifted up as the sons of men should be, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing of myself, but as the Heavenly Father has shown me, nor do I speak any thing but that which he has taught me. The Father has not left me alone, for I do always those things that please him. If you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

“We are of Abraham’s seed,” screeched Abdias. “We were never in bondage to any man. How dare you say that we shall be made free? We are no man’s prisoners nor slaves ...”

“Truly I say to you: whosoever undergoes desire is the bondsman of desire. My teaching will free you of it and you will be truly free. I know that you are of Abraham’s seed, but some there are amongst you who seek

to kill me, because my word has no place in them. I speak to you simply of the Heavenly Truths of the Father who is in Heaven. You follow the wrong path in continuing to do the deeds of your fathers ...”

Abdias threw a hate-laden glance at him.

“We are not children born of fornication. We have one Father: God!”

“If the Heavenly Father were truly your father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and came from him to you. You have for father the Evil One and it is his lusts that you assuage ...”

“You have a devil in you,” shouted the priest.

“No, there is no devil nor demon in me. You seek to dishonor me, but this you will not achieve.”

Jesus spoke once more to the crowd.

“Truly I say to you once more, if you keep to those sayings that I tell you, you will nevermore see death ...”

However, Abdias interrupted in an arrogant tone.

“Abraham is dead and the prophets also, yet you say that if a man keeps your sayings he will never taste of death! Who are you making yourself out to be? Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead?”

“If I honor myself, that honor is nothing. It is the Heavenly Father who honors me, he of whom you say that he is your God. You have never known him but I do know him and I work for him. Abraham, your ancestor, must rejoice to see my day; he saw my works and was glad, as they were for the Heavenly Father.”

Abraham never existed ... but they do not know this and do not understand the secret meaning of my words ... I cannot reveal it to them. Some would not believe it and others would want to stone me to death ... Oh! Heavenly Father, how can I open the eyes of these blind folk?

“You are not yet fifty years old, and yet you have seen Abraham!” cried out Abdias.

Jesus stared at him with his ocean-blue eyes.

“Truly I say to you, since before Abraham was, I have been ...”

There was a murmur of consternation among the crowd. Trying to calm down, Abdias scornfully threw out the comment:

“From the very beginning, your disciples alone have affirmed that you are the Messiah. From you, this has not been heard even one single time. How long will you make us doubt? If you are truly the Messiah, tell us plainly! Unless you are in doubt, for you have never once proclaimed this clear and loud ...”

Jesus smiled sadly and avoided responding directly to this question

about the Christ.

“That which I have told you, you do not believe. The works that I do in the name of the Heavenly Father, they bear witness of me. You do not believe, because you are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I shall give to them eternal life in heaven and they will never perish, nor will any man pluck them out of my hand. The Heavenly Father, who is greater than all, gave them me and no man is able to pluck them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Heavenly Father are One.”

This last sentence was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Among the crowd of Jews, many fanatically devout individuals were unable to continue to put up with the blasphemous statements of this impostor who claimed to be the Christ. Besides, seeing the charismatic Sadducee Abdias roughly handled in this way in the very dwelling-place of Yahweh was just too much. Until now, the other priests had successfully channeled the fervor of these groups of religious extremists that they knew well, ordering them to stay calm for fear of scuffles between them and Jesus’ followers. Such a riot would have brought intervening Roman legionaries into the Temple, causing immense harm to the reputation for independence, power and sovereignty that the Pharisee and Sadducee priests tried to maintain in relation to the foreign occupants, who were the true masters of the Promised Land. Such an incident could shake the religious control over Israel exercised by the Temple.

Now, though, the religious fanatics were outraged and came forward snarling, some brandishing stones ready to fling at Jesus.

“I have told you many a good word from the Heavenly Father,” thundered Jesus, loud enough to be heard over the tumult. “For which of these would you stone me?”

“It is not for good words that we shall stone you, but for blasphemy,” screamed a man from the crowd. “Because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God!”

Jesus understood what the man was referring to.

The Heavenly Father and I are One ...

Jesus had spoken of his spiritual union with the Heavenly Father, but some had taken these words as a claim, a declaration making him the equal of God. Around Jesus, his disciples were having trouble in warding off the hostile advance, ever stronger. Jesus tried to temporize so as to calm minds. Quoting the sacred scriptures of the Temple, he said:

“Is it not written in your Law: ‘I said, ye are gods’? Your Law called them gods, to whom the word of God came. Yet you say of him whom the

Heavenly Father has sanctified and sent into the world that he is a blasphemer, because you think that he holds himself equal to God? The Scripture cannot be broken; there cannot be double standards.”

The grumbling in the crowd intensified.

“I work for the Heavenly Father alone. Believe in his works, so that you may know and believe that the Heavenly Father is in me and I in him.”

Some rocks were thrown. Jesus realized he would have to leave quickly. Helped by his disciples who shielded him with their bodies to protect him from the crowd, Jesus was escorted out of one of the Temple’s many doorways.

25

Upping the Ante

On the narrow grayish road that slashed across the Hinnom Valley, two Israeli police cars sped past.

Tom waited for their screaming sirens to fade in the distance before continuing his conversation with Camilla.

“At the time,” he said, “before the Jews were totally driven out of the Promised Land by the Romans, the whole Jewish nation was waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the Liberator. His coming was believed in Palestine to be on the point of happening. They were all waiting for the arrival of that ‘anointed one’ of God to set the Chosen People free from the yoke of Rome and there were plenty of prophets who announced that the apocalypse was coming any day soon. It’s understandable: it was the reaction of people helpless against the Roman military occupation. A lot of crazies also popped up in Palestine playing at being the Messiah, but without any real impact, to tell the truth. A good few sects were proclaiming the coming of the true Christ, especially the ‘Messianists’, future Christians like Paul. These Messianists were a break-away branch of the Essenes, the Qumran sect. They believed in the Old Testament, the end of days, the Last Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and above all in the coming of a Christ who was to appear in the Promised Land. The Messianists had a certain degree of success with Jews, but it was nothing compared to how well they did with Gentiles, that is, non-Jews ...”

Tom felt that he had better explain.

“At that time, Jews came to about ten percent of the population of the Roman Empire. The explanation for such a high figure lies in the make-up of the Jewish universe. The world of Jews included people born Jewish, but also proselytes and God-fearers. The Jews have never been a hermetically closed grouping and the writings of Josiah, with their notion of God’s Chosen People, have always fascinated members of different

nations, who could become Jewish even if their mothers had not been. It was enough to embrace the Jewish faith wholeheartedly and observe all its rites and rituals, as well as obligatorily being circumcised. Those who took this last step were proselytes and thereafter were considered Jews. There were also God-fearers: they were non-Jews interested by the Jewish religion, by Israel and by the simplistic but unifying idea of the One God. God-fearers even attended synagogues, but they were hesitant about adopting the Jewish faith because of circumcision and the need to follow Moses' laws, particularly when it came to food prohibitions like the ban on pork."

Before going on, Tom wiped his forehead.

"It was at Antioch where the Messianists took the name 'Christian' and turned the world of religion on its head. They started an unprecedented schism within Judaism: future proselytes or God-fearers would no longer have to come to Judaism, Judaism would seek out non-Jews. For that purpose, it was enough to change the arrangements for joining. While continuing to base their views on the Law of Moses, although in a much less demanding form, Christians modified the pact of circumcision out of existence and threw out the Jewish sectarianism of food prohibitions, by allowing all foods. To put it in a nutshell, Christianity is a reformed version of Judaism and merged with it to create Judeo-Christianity."

Camilla was listening intently in silence.

"This reform met with success and Judeo-Christians saw their ranks growing exponentially among Gentiles, even if a large number of pure-bred Jews took a very negative view their transgressions of the Mosaic laws. But the period in question was one of burgeoning mystery religions and couldn't have been better for the expansion and development of the ideas of a Savior, the announcing of the end of days, or the salvation granted to all those who had faith in the coming of Christ. Besides, the proclamation of a heavenly reward like Paradise which could be gained through baptism was more than attractive. It also delighted the dim-witted, the poor and the wretched to think that Hell was reserved for the wicked. Humanity was at its readiest to accept the Christian message, especially in the times after Spartacus ..."

"Spartacus?" Camilla queried.

"Yes, the leader of the slave revolt against the Romans seventy years before the beginning of our era. Spartacus' early victories against the Roman legions had an amazing impact, affecting everywhere right out to the most distant parts of the Empire. All slaves had for a while the vague expectation they might become free. But the final crushing of Spartacus and his army of slaves took away all their hopes of recovering the status of

a human being. Six thousand slaves were crucified to set an example and slaves in the Roman Empire went back to being what they'd always been: mere tools for production, treated as animals or pieces of furniture at the total disposal of their owners. To be able to go on living like that, they needed at least some hope. And that hope was given them by the Christian religion in the shape of expectations that a Savior and the Last Judgment would soon come and bring everyone the end they deserved. The Christian religion embodied hope for all those slaves, the wretched and all the nations under the domination of Rome. This new religion finally imposed itself and distinguished itself from other cults like the worship of Mithras which was the religion of the enemy, of the Roman legionaries ...”

“And where was Jesus of Nazareth in all this?” Camilla asked.

“He hadn’t yet put in an appearance. All the same, everyone was waiting for his coming, just as some Christians are still waiting for him to return today, his coming on Earth and the Last Judgment ...”

Tom smiled and added:

“I imagine at the time it must have been a terrible shock when people finally learned that Christ had already come down to Earth in Palestine, hadn’t been recognized and even had let himself been killed to redeem men from their sins toward God the Father. Nevertheless, hope remained in the expectation of him soon returning, even if he never came back, or even came in the first place ... but hope makes life easier ...”

Tom raised his eyes up toward the sky before lowering them to look at Camilla.

“Overall the story of Christ could be summed up in a phrase: upping the ante. There was a progressive inflation of the fabulous claims people made. The decisive step in this tale was taken in Alexandria. People were waiting for the Savior, saying he was coming, and his arrival was imminent. But since he kept on not turning up, someone expanded the myth by claiming that if Christ wasn’t coming it was simply because he’d already come ... Remember the Christians were a dissident branch of the Essenes and among the Essenes who’d gone over to Christianity there was an oral tradition, a tradition which handed down the esoteric contents of the Qumran sect’s books, this sect not having survived the war between Jews and Romans in the seventies and the Diaspora. Among the manuscripts found at Qumran after the Second World War were the annals of the sect recounting the crucifixion and resurrection of their own Messiah around one hundred years before Jesus Christ ... That was the fable that was going to spread like wildfire, being passed on and setting Christians’ imaginations racing, as a lost secret brought back into the light. And everyone added his own two cents’ worth, his own tale, piling up

imaginary details. That's human nature ..."

Hearing this, Camilla remembered an event she had seen on television. There had been a riot in the Paris subway after a police check on an adult who had been travelling without a ticket. This offender had struggled violently and the police had had to bring him under control by using force. Some teenagers who had seen what had happened had shouted out that it was a scandal because of unjustified police violence. These youngsters, who were unwilling to accept any form of authority, had stirred up a riot among other young folk, claiming that the police had broken the arm of the offender, who had also magically changed from an adult into a teenager that had barely reached puberty, in their version of the tale. Word of mouth, transmitted by cell phones functioning like the famous bush telegraph, finally came to state that a black child had been killed by the police. Cameras from television stations came to film the rioting by these youngsters who were smashing everything to express their anger and hatred. Some of them spoke face to the camera and stated with total assurance that they had seen with their own eyes the police hitting the child and breaking its arms ... From that day on, Camilla had understood that rumor was a force capable of getting people to believe almost anything through a snowball effect that bid up claims.

Camilla also remembered her father's words; he used to tell her when she was still just a young girl that through rumor a tiny stain on the neighbor's white shirt would be sure to become cow's droppings on his young sister's handkerchief.

"Everyone believed that fable without asking any questions," Tom said, "just like us nowadays. No doubts about the historical existence of Christ have ever besmirched our modern society, so just imagine what things were like in the times of the Roman Empire when information was passed on by word of mouth, and it was impossible to prove someone didn't exist. You could set running any sort of rumor you liked, especially fantastic rumors, they were automatically passed on as true ... The Christians of Alexandria searched through the works in the Great Library to see if any writings tucked away in some corner might have details of the life on Earth of their Christ. Of course, they found nothing. But when they read the stories of Sons-of-God like Mithras or Horus, all these Saviors who had come down to Earth to save humanity, in all good faith they thought they could see their own Christ in them. They believed the 'historical' Christ they were looking for was a recent reincarnation of these thousand-year-old myths. As these Men-Sons-of-God all had the same characteristics, the same tales that were virtually identical, the earthly Christ who was their reincarnation necessarily had to have had the same destiny, the same story

and the same characteristics. So the Alexandria Christians calmly plagiarized the tales of Krishna, Mithras and Horus.”

“But if there really wasn’t any text about the historical Christ,” Camilla cut in, “surely that ought to have made them stop and think and stirred up some doubt in their minds ...”

“There’s no blinder man than the one who doesn’t want to see,” Tom replied. “And faith is blind. The Alexandrian Christians told themselves that since Christ’s life and death were borne out by the prophecies found in the Old Testament, the word of God, then documents should have attested it, but they must have been destroyed by Satan. So, it was legitimate to reconstruct them without any qualms: it was a pious fraud and that’s how the story of Jesus of Nazareth was gradually built up, often in contradictory layers. First, oral versions that spread like wildfire, then the writing down of all these fabulous tales. And if something was written, it had to be true. In those days, writing was still something magical, divine, that came not from humans, but from the Gods themselves. Christian apocryphal writings sprouted like mushrooms, telling the tale of an extraordinary Jesus performing miracles and mixing up the historical context and fictitious figures. Nevertheless, it seemed obvious to everyone that Christ had to have come to the Promised Land just a few years before the first Judeo-Christian communities formed in Palestine, hence at the time Pontius Pilate was in office there. Judeo-Christian communities all round the Mediterranean basin embellished the ‘historical’ figure of Christ each in their own way, but always taking care to respect the Old Testament, since the Messiah would necessarily have fulfilled during his lifetime the Messianic prophecies concerning him. The Old Testament acted as a sort of funnel down which the myths of Men-Sons-of-God plagiarized in Alexandria were poured so as to mix them inevitably into the tale of Jesus of Nazareth as we know it today ...”

“None of that’s possible,” Camilla interrupted. “Jesus of Nazareth can’t be an invention of Christianity. It’s Jesus of Nazareth who’s at the origin of Christianity and not the other way round!”

“Oh, but it is possible! It was indeed that way round. Jesus is definitely a creation of Christianity. Jesus is just a literary hero with the added benefit of allowing a party line to be upheld. He acted as living support for Christian teachings, maxims put into the mouth of this imaginary speaker created from nothing. Jesus is no more than a man invented by the collective imaginations of the period which everyone’s fancy has kept alive down to our times. He exists nowhere outside our heads.”

“I don’t believe you,” Camilla grumbled.

“What is marvelous pays no heed to factual history and makes mock of

improbability. The miracles and sermons of Jesus Christ were invented to convert simple folk, to convince the masses who were essentially mostly illiterate slaves ... Camilla, why do you think the Church deliberately destroyed more than seventy apocryphal Christian texts? Quite simply because it was possible to see in them the slow building up of the layers of the definitive myth with all their gropings and contradictions ...”

“I don’t believe you,” Camilla repeated.

“To make things seem more believable,” Tom said, “the Christians stuffed their texts full of period details without taking the trouble to check how reliable they were. That explains the contradictions and historical nonsense found in writings like the four Gospels in the New Testament ...”

Camilla flung a venomous look full of barely controlled anger at him.

Tom fell silent and remained quiet for more than a minute. A light and somewhat soothing breeze blew against the faces of the couple sitting in the shade of the large flourishing green tree.

“With the new tale of his coming to Earth,” Tom finally said, “Christ changed his complexion, taking on a new character and shedding his Jewish skin. He became a universal Savior identical to Mithras, not remaining just the Messiah of the Old Testament. The Christians split off definitively from the Jews by accusing them of having rejected Christ and having had him killed, a pure invention. With this new character, Christ’s religion finally became accessible to everyone, a mass religion with the revolutionary and attractive notion of a single God. And since eternal life was promised only for Christians, with Hell for all the rest, the psychological choice was quickly taken: if in doubt, it was best to convert. But above all, Christianity triumphed thanks to Constantine. Let me tell you the story of that Roman Emperor, especially how he found the Pontius Pilate Report ...”

Almost imperceptibly, Camilla blinked to show agreement.

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The Pope opened his tired eyes once more.

Sitting in his luxurious leather chair, wearing his trademark white cassock, he looked sadly at the little color calendar on his desk.

The photo for the month of June was of a magnificent sun lighting up a blue sea with heavenly tints. The Pope’s attention was drawn to one particular date: 24 June. That day was decreed to be the feast of John the Baptist as an insidious proof that Jesus Christ was truly superior in all

ways to his cousin the prophet of God: 24 June was the day of the summer solstice when the sun began its slow decline and 25 December, the festival of Christ's birth, was the day of the winter solstice when the new growing sun progressively and inexorably began to shine more and more.

Quite a symbol.

In the past, because of the tale of Christ's baptism by John, convinced that the Christian ceremony of baptism brought salvation and paradise, some men and women had not hesitated to slit the throats of their sons and daughters as soon as they were baptized. In the minds of these parents, such murders were the greatest gift they could give to their children: they were preserving them simultaneously from sin, a wretched life and Hell by sending them infallibly to Heaven thanks to baptism. They were sure that little children who had the luck to die immediately after being baptized would enjoy eternal glory, while those who died without baptism were damned.

Thinking of this absurd belief, the Pope could not prevent himself from sighing deeply.

How had they arrived at that state? More than that, how had it come about that they had reached a point of no return where the truth about John the Baptist and Jesus Christ could not be revealed without unleashing apocalypse on the Earth?

"Constantine the Great," the Pope muttered in his hoarse voice.

All the horror of the Christian world had its origin with that Roman Emperor.

Constantine's popularity with the troops had been such that he had been proclaimed Emperor on the death of his father. Nonetheless, for nearly twenty years, he had had to confront a number of pretenders to the throne before succeeding, with much bloodshed, in imposing his rule as the sole sovereign of the Empire. During these internal conflicts, his political and religious authority had been considerably weakened, to the point that the Roman Empire had almost been shattered into fragments.

To re-establish his shaky authority and hold onto his Empire, Constantine had realized that he absolutely had to reinforce the imperial cult around his 'divine' figure.

For the Master of Heaven was the Master of the World.

As High Priest of Mithraism, the official religion, Constantine was considered to be the son of a god on Earth, the only son of the One God, the Sun God. On his coins, statues and banners, he was shown with the features of the solar divinity, lighting up the Empire with his rays. Constantine was Sol Invictus incarnate, the invincible and victorious sun

celebrated on 25 December, at the winter solstice.

The legionaries worshipped Constantine as a god, but, unfortunately for him, that was not true for everybody.

Slaves, in contrast, revered him only through fear.

These slaves were the keystone of the Roman system, their work ensuring the smooth running of the Empire and its centuries-old administration. Without them, without these indispensable servile masses, the imperial régime would be unable to hold its own and would collapse like a house of cards. Until that time, a tyrannical hand of iron had prevented any attempt at breaking free, but, owing to the many unfortunate events during the internal struggles, this iron hand was no longer in a position to put down yet another rebellion in a sea of blood. Simultaneously the pillars and the whipping-boys of the imperial machine, the slaves might revolt at any moment, become free and bring about the collapse of Rome and its despotism.

As soon as fear disappeared, liberty would be raising its head over the horizon.

However, Constantine was a cunning strategist and felt he knew what to do to ensure that these servile masses and even the lower classes would remain subservient to him, willingly putting chains on their own necks. Constantine believed he had found the means to dominate all these minds and lead them by the nose to kiss his feet, no longer out of fear but out of pure devotion.

“Jesus Christ,” the Pope thought.

Christianity had flourished amazingly in the three preceding centuries and had spread among all classes in society, but particularly among the lower classes and especially the slaves. Worshipping their Lord Jesus Christ, Christians were trouble-makers who did not recognize Constantine as their only Lord, refusing to make any concession to Mithraism, the cult of the sun as personified and embodied by the Emperor. He thus decided that he would take the first step and establish a single religion.

Their religion.

Constantine was a visionary, but he had grasped that the very pragmatic Roman tolerance which allowed various religions in a single Empire governed by a single Emperor was bound to be a source of dissension. He had to bring minds to uniformity by means of a single common denominator, impose on all a sole State religion working on behalf of the Emperor and in the long run, suppress all other cults.

Above all, though, as Constantine was in the grip of the fear of a general rebellion, he had virtually no alternative if he wanted the masses of slaves

to be docile and continue to keep in working order the administration of his Empire in decline. So he decided to make it all or nothing and put his money on the Christian horse, renouncing the pagan Mithraic religion and converting to Christianity.

He won his bet, as his daring paid off better than he had expected.

First of all, Constantine forbade all forms of persecution of Christians, those murderous persecutions of which they had been the victims. He included Christianity among the official religions, then as a final touch he recognized this cult as the sole State religion.

By delivering the Christians from the deadly threats that hung over them, by lavishing money and properties upon their communities, by imposing their cult as the sole true religion, Constantine gave them the illusion that he was the Savior, like a second earthly incarnation of Christ, a fact about which Constantine openly boasted.

He was the Christ, the anointed of God, His only Son.

Now believing that they were serving their Savior incarnate, the slaves remained slaves with no desire for freedom, kissing the chains that bound them, bowing down before the megalomaniac gaze of Christ-Constantine.

Through Constantine's devious manipulations, Christianity paradoxically became a renewal of the former Imperial cult and the deification of the Emperor. Christianity turned into the religion of absolute power in the hands of Christ-Constantine.

Christian writers, the heads of the Church, also preferred to come to an agreement with so generous an Emperor as this, the man who had formerly slaughtered them, committing numberless crimes. They gave him the effective support of their organizations to guarantee the advantages of the status that they had just achieved after three centuries of hard work. Hoodwinked by Constantine, they became zealous agents of his cult of personality.

The previously rebellious Christians turned into troops of docile servants entirely submissive to the Master of Rome, confining the faithful all round the world to the limits of the churches and, by passing on the good word, they molded every mind to ensure blind obedience to him.

According to the fable of Jesus Christ who had obeyed God even on the cross, Christians should also submit to the will of his Son newly incarnate on Earth in the person of Constantine-Christ on whom all depended for their lives ...

The Pope rubbed a hand over his balding head.

One might wonder how such a feat had been accomplished, how the pagans of the Empire had been converted to Christianity, how the

polytheistic Mithraic religion had ceded its place to Christianity and its one God. In fact, it had not been very difficult: Master of Mithraism, with a double nature, human and divine, Constantine was the only son of the one Sun God. It was enough to change the wording a little: Constantine-Christ was from now on to be the only Son of the One God.

Besides, the striking similarities between the fable of Mithras and the fable of Jesus Christ made this religious substitution easier: they had almost the same story, similar beliefs and sacraments that were virtually identical, like baptism. So, Jesus Christ was proclaimed the new Mithras, the new sun, or Neos Helios, a title that had been used by the Roman emperors as their own, taken by some as the etymology of Noël, and his birthday was fixed as 25 December to cut the ground from under the pagan festival of the winter solstice.

Now Master of the Empire and adored by all as the incarnation of Christ, like the Son of the one God, the cunning Constantine would have had everything arranged perfectly for himself, had it not been for the holding of the Council of Nicaea.

Constantine decided to bring together nearly three hundred bishops from all round the world to clarify certain points of dogma, restore order to the young Church, which was prey to internal quarrels, and, above all, to define which writings from the rapidly expanding Christian literature would make up the Bible. Every piece of writing having to do with Christianity was sought out and catalogued.

It was then that the Pontius Pilate Report was found by chance in the secret State archives.

It was read out in a plenary session of the Council and disaster swept over Constantine and the bishops, who realized what infernal secret was hidden behind Jesus Christ. The Emperor became furiously angry, came close to forbidding the Christian religion forever and imposing a return to Mithraism.

It was, however, too late; there was no going back.

For years, the Emperor had made too much of the charade of his conversion, playing the part of Christ-Constantine. Even his mother had lent a hand in the pretence, claiming to have discovered the True Cross of Christ during a journey in the Holy Land. If the true story of Christ came out into the light of day, horrendous ridicule would sweep away his supposed new earthly incarnation: Constantine would lose his divine nature, which allowed him to remain as Master of the World.

Constantine threatened personally to cut the throat of any bishop present who dared to reveal the contents of the Pontius Pilate Report. So that

nobody could ever again suspect Christ's secret through any sort of deduction, Constantine ordered State censoring of all Christian or historic writings. He then carefully selected which texts should go to form the Bible, those whose details gave away the least possible amount of the real truth, also taking care to work in some judicious corrections.

The Church acted in full conformity with Constantine's orders and indeed went a great deal farther, for it feared the wrath of those who had been hoodwinked if Christ's secret ever came out into the light of day. So, it took good care to destroy all the libraries containing ancient Greek knowledge, all the pagan temples and sanctuaries like those of Horus or Mithras.

Apart from grammar, it prohibited Greco-Roman education, languages, sciences, philosophy and above all mythology. Keeping people in ignorance allowed it to protect its lies.

In the Middle Ages, these measures led to the illiteracy of ninety percent of the Christian world. The mental activity of the Western world was paralyzed, no longer open to knowledge even of its own surroundings; what it had learned before, it now forgot. The skills of reading, writing and reckoning, no longer taught, vanished. Even kings were no longer able to write their names at the foot of a parchment.

The world was mummified by Christian theology.

The Earth was now believed to be flat and rectangular in form like the tabernacle of Moses and the sun to circle around it: in just a few centuries, there was nothing left in the Christian world of the heritage of the Classical Greek philosophers and their ancient knowledge. Henceforth, obscurantism, ignorance and fear lorded it over the Earth.

Established and built up into a despotic State apparatus, the Church eliminated every other religion in a bloodbath, becoming a monopolistic religious vampire. Its battalions of barely literate monks destroyed at the bishops' orders, burning houses and libraries, bringing in what was to be a Christian tradition: burning at the stake for heretics. Calm in their irresponsibility, they ensured the salvation of the souls of non-Christians by cutting their throats, to snatch them out of the Devil's clutches despite themselves.

As outside the Christian Church there was no salvation.

For those not given to much thinking, it seemed to be noble Christian charity that led the intolerant Church to pile up heaps of corpses, as the excuse given for these crimes was that it was God's work ...

The Pope rose from his chair, walked to his window and gazed at the Papal City lying before him.

He knew that without Constantine's cunning maneuverings the Western world would probably have been Mithraic and that the Vatican City would never have seen the light of day.

The Pope thought of Constantine's last years: after the discovery of Pilate's report, he had become even more unbalanced. He had even killed his own son and then had his wife murdered in the year following the Council of Nicaea. A decade later he had died suddenly, and had been hastily baptized on his deathbed. After reading the report, Constantine had determinedly refused to be baptized while alive.

Despite his crimes, the grateful Church had beatified the Emperor, inheriting from him absolute theocratic power. This power, together with the secret of Christ, had been a mix that made popes madmen or megalomaniacs. When the Constantinian dynasty came to an end, one Bishop of Rome took on the imperial title of Pontifex Maximus, then another, becoming sovereign of the Pontifical State, showed his megalomania by having himself recognized as the Vicar of Christ, declared the 'Heavenly Emperor and Lord of all Majesty'. The power and authority of Jesus-God were henceforward in the Pope's hands, as he had total control, nominating kings and emperors.

Christianity meticulously made of him another Christ-Constantine and demanded total submission to his divine authority. Those unwilling to recognize him, deemed heretics, were punished with prison, torture, or burning at the stake.

Now inheritor of the imperial cult, the Pope reigned as had the Roman emperors: through terror, a terror that took material form as Hell. The terrible eternal sufferings in Hell would scare anybody and drove people to blind obedience of the new Master of Rome, he who held the keys of salvation and Paradise.

Outside the Pope's church, there was no salvation and Hell was waiting for non-Christian souls.

As they succeeded one another, the various Popes did all they could to maintain the terrifying tool for controlling minds and consciences that was Hell. They also invented an antidote, a remedy based on extortion, a very human Purgatory, so that the simpler-minded, believing that they were bound to perish in the fires of Hell for completely illusory sins, would hand over all their property, giving it to the Church when at death's door. All these weak-minded people believed that they could use 'indulgences' to buy salvation for their sinful souls if before dying they bequeathed their riches to God's representative on Earth. This mirage of Purgatory and indulgences was vastly profitable for the Holy finances of the Vatican, funding the luxurious lifestyle of wealthy ecclesiastics in the Middle Ages

while the enslaved peasants, fearing Hell if they disobeyed, worked without respite for their divine masters.

The Pope sighed inwardly.

If only those unfortunate people had been able to realize that they were already living in a genuine hell, and indeed were slaves because of it.

The Pope took down from a bookshelf a red notebook in which he kept a record of speeches and declarations by major figures now dead. He rapidly flipped through the pages until he found the note he was looking for, one written in the very hand of Pope John-Paul II. That courageous Pontiff had tried to assuage that fear of Hell, sweeping aside the murderous terror that had been wielded by many a mad pope. John-Paul II had wanted to tell the truth about that Hell, or rather about a much greater worry: burning nothingness.

The Pope read the handful of lines, his eyes tired:

‘Burning nothingness is not a punishment externally imposed by Deus, but a condition resulting from the attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life. It is the ultimate consequence of desire. Rather than a physical place, burning nothingness is the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from Deus, the source of all joy. Eternal damnation is thus not the work of Deus, but actually our own doing.’

That was what John-Paul II had wanted to state, but upon mature reflection, he had understood that he could not do so, because he would then have had to explain the difference between Hell and burning nothingness, but above all the notion of Deus-God.

That was totally unthinkable.

These truths could not be stated without the Church falling into a massive crisis of dogma. In 1999, such comments might have acted as a trigger for apocalypse. So, on giving his public audience to mark the end of the millennium, John-Paul II had changed the wording of what he said, ‘Deus’ became ‘God’, ‘burning nothingness’ was replaced by ‘Hell’ and the word ‘desire’ yielded to the word ‘sin’. Certain mocking atheists had taken this declaration to be an admission that Hell was not a physical place, so Hell did not exist.

Yet physical Hell did exist and anybody could see this by opening, not so much a critical mind, but simply eyes.

The Pope’s gaze halted on the page opposite the one written by John-Paul II, reading there a quotation that particularly moved him.

A comment from the radical French priest Abbé Pierre.

“Those who have put all the food on their own plate, leaving others’ dishes empty and who, having everything, say with a fine expression and

good conscience, 'We who have everything, we are for peace.': it's to those people that I'll keep shouting. I'll say to them, 'The first people to use violence, the aggressors in any violence, that's you!' And when evening comes, in your beautiful houses, and you're about to hug your little children, with your calm conscience, well in God's eyes, you probably unconsciously have more blood on your hands than there will ever be on those of some despairing man who has taken up arms to try to break out of his desperate condition!"

The Pope raised his unfocused eyes.

The Roman Empire had not ceased to exist.

If the Vatican with its Christianity was the heir to the Roman imperial cult, the Roman Empire, for its part, had also survived into the modern world. It had never disappeared, but shone out more than ever before, now even dominating the whole world, a violent world where the stronger reigned over the weaker with an iron first in a psychological velvet glove.

The modern Roman Empire had in its pay faithful legionaries in blue police uniforms to guarantee the tranquility of its rich and fanatical legionaries in army green to quash any wish for freedom on the part of the inhabitants of poor, colonized, scorned and exploited countries, as had been the case for Rome under its dictatorial rulers.

The peoples of Earth lived in the hell of wretched poverty. They were just production tools, wage slaves eking out a meager pittance. They worked for the order and continuity of the administration of the Empire formed by powerful financial and political groups, the new Masters of Ancient Rome, modernized as multinationals.

Kept in the most total ignorance distancing them from the truly divine, these modern slaves sought in consumer goods an end in itself, to show that they were still there despite everything, that they had no chains around their necks, although in reality they kissed their chains just as in the time of Constantine the Great. As in those past times, still unchanged, they did not seek to become free, but only to serve and please their Masters thanks to cunning modern conditioning, like unemployment: a tool for coercion that kept the workers in a position of weakness relative to the powerful. Unemployment was deliberately created and would never be abolished; the wretchedness of society brought the social order of obedient masses; it was even possible to have the luxury of allowing the occasional riot in society to hoodwink people into believing they still had their liberty.

The Roman Empire had never come to an end.

In submission to their rich masters, the servile crowds worked docilely for the powerful, no longer hoping for anything more than a better situation

in a paradise, not on Earth, but only in Heaven. Nowadays, imprisoned minds no longer escaped other than by admiring and to admire stars from show business or sport that they worshiped like Gods, like incarnate 'Constantines', suns, or rather, distant stars divinely inaccessible, in this way making up a selection of divinities in various domains, re-inventing polytheism, a modern polytheism in an ancestral monotheistic world.

A paradox of time.

Through a hierarchical infernal circle, while exploited from the start, certain slaves were enraptured to exploit in their turn other poorer slaves by means of the credit they won for their submission to the rules of the Empire. They acquired a rabbit hutch that they pompously termed an 'apartment' and recovered their investment by imprisoning in it a slave-tenant of a lower class than their own, a slave-tenant treated as no more than a piece of furniture at the disposal of the owner.

The Roman Empire had never come to an end.

The spearhead of this Empire was the American ogre, an ogre that joyfully killed on the electric chair creatures whose only crime was often no more than to be black, thus transgressing God's command 'thou shalt not kill'. At the same time as this action turned it into an abominable impenitent sinner, it set itself up on the moral high ground in respect of 'unnatural' sexual relations or the virginity supposedly required of women by God's 'divine laws' as noted down in the Holy Scriptures. This ogre knew full well that the Bible was an invention of men, full of fables, but pragmatically made use of it to dominate other humans, the other peoples under its power, by trying to impose, through meticulous globalization, a cultural imperial cult of Christ-Constantine.

The ogre wanted to wipe out cultural differences so as to impose unity and acceptance of its opportunistic beliefs, just as the Church had done for millennia. It knew the contents of the Pontius Pilate Report, but pretended to believe in the story of Jesus Christ, in order to find in this fable an excuse for eliminating other religious 'errors' that did not bring noble salvation for the soul and to impose, as Constantine had attempted to do, a single global State religion, suppressing differences and bring the unity of an Empire, welded onto the ancient Constantinian imperial cult.

The American giant was a worthy successor to that Empire and the leaders of its various factions came to pay homage to the Pope, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, not out of respectful allegiance but to impress on the crowds of slaves a clear message, a thousand-year-old adage which they themselves scorned totally: for all known crimes there was implacable human justice, while for crimes not known there was the justice of God.

The pernicious fear of God enslaved all humans, so that they respected

the laws of the Empire even in the absence of representatives of that law.

Impunity did not exist; omnipotent God's eye was ubiquitous.

Without the cult of God, the imperial system could not maintain itself. Without a God present everywhere to make all bow in submission from divine fear or the hope of heavenly justice beyond the grave, frustration and avarice would raise the slaves' heads.

The Empire could never permit that if it wished to endure.

No, the Roman Empire had decidedly never come to an end.

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Held-in anger brought a bright red to Camilla's cheeks.

"Christianity is not the cult of Christ-Constantine but of the Lord Jesus Christ!"

"No," Tom said calmly, "Christianity and its churches are truly an institution devoted to promoting political powers by forcing people to obey in order to attain salvation. Christians are reduced to infants who can see nothing but threatening fires, even a good few of the Christian clergy as well, because of their faith. There's no-one as brainwashed as the brainwashers themselves. And it's like that in all religions."

Tom sighed.

"Humans always tend to worship the God of their fathers without asking any questions ... Have you heard of the electric banana syndrome? It's an experiment they did with chimpanzees. They put a stool in a room and hung a fake, scented, banana from the ceiling. This attractive lure was connected to an electric current. They sent a monkey in, he climbed on the stool to grab the banana and he got a very painful electric shock. They did the same with six more monkeys, and all of them got the same electric shock because of their greed in trying to catch hold of the banana. After that, they put them all together in the room. This group of seven chimpanzees were called the 'old hands'. None of these 'old hands' dared climb up on the stool to take the banana. Next they brought an 'uninitiated' monkey into the group, one who'd never experienced the electrified banana. This monkey saw the banana and tried to clamber up onto the stool. The other monkeys held him back to stop him getting a shock. The new monkey couldn't understand why they were trying to stop him getting the banana, so he struggled and used force, naturally getting violent in the effort to grab the tasty food. It ended up as a fight of seven against one, and the 'ignorant' monkey took a beating. They took one of

the seven ‘old hands’ out of the room, sending in a second ‘uninitiated’ monkey. He, too, tried to take the banana at any price and also got beaten because he couldn’t understand the danger represented by the banana. What was striking was that the first ‘uninitiated’ monkey joined in with the group of ‘old hands’ in this corrective action, out of imitation; he hit the second ‘uninitiated’ monkey by copying the group. They kept on replacing one ‘old hand’ after another with a new ‘ignorant’ monkey and the same sequence of events took place: all the monkeys hit the newcomer, who was struggling to get hold of the banana; the ‘old hands’ did this to stop him getting an electric shock, whilst the ‘uninitiated’ did it just to copy the group. They finally took out the last ‘old hand’ and even removed the stool and the fake banana. But when they brought in a new monkey, the other ‘ignorant’ ones leapt on him and hit him, since they thought they knew that was the way you had to welcome any newcomers into the group. Afterward, it made no difference when they exchanged the ‘uninitiated’ chimpanzees one by one for fresh specimens; the tradition of beating up newcomers had taken definitive root in the group, and even got more and more violent, as if it was a greeting ritual that had to be perfected ...”

Tom smiled.

“When the last ‘old hand’ left, the real reason for hitting new arrivals had disappeared. Most of the time, knowledge is handed on not through personal experience but by imitation and the origin of traditions and custom sometimes is lost. As generations go by, we’ve transmitted beliefs, but forgotten their roots. As I said, people have always tended to worship the God of their fathers without demur and that’s through the electric banana syndrome.”

“You have no right to attack people’s beliefs!” Camilla grumbled.

“Look, I’m down to earth, I’m just interested in facts. If your beliefs are based on a fake book, this has to be said. It shouldn’t be cherished as if it were a divine work. Your Bible is a fraud, a human fraud and your literary hero Jesus Christ is no more than a myth, a character from a novel that could have been thought up by any good author, like James Fennimore Cooper in America, Dickens in England or Victor Hugo in France.”

“Oh, yes, is that so? And does Mister Know-it-all know at least that the great Victor Hugo used to say there was one book that held all human wisdom enlightened by all divine wisdom, a book that people reverently call The Book with capital letters. And that Book is the Bible ...”

Tom smiled mockingly.

“Victor Hugo was just a novelist with a vivid imagination and he was amazed to read the Bible, the very first novel to be printed in the history of humankind, a work of total fiction with imaginary characters, but really

enthraling ones, at that ...”

Camilla grew irritated.

“What about Michael Faraday? He wasn’t a novelist, he was a famous scientist, a very down-to-earth fellow, just like you, Mister Anderson ... One day, one of his friends found him in tears, resting his head on the Bible. The friend asked him if he was ill and Faraday told him he wasn’t, but was just very sad to see how men went astray when they had this holy book to guide them.”

“Leonardo Da Vinci,” Tom retorted, “was one of the greatest geniuses of all times and his comment on the Bible and Jesus was that a lot of people have made a living from illusions and false miracles, tricking the ignorant. He said it was ignorance that blinds us and leads us up the wrong path and that we had to open our poor mortal eyes ... To tell the truth, I don’t know if Da Vinci saw through the mystery of Christ because he had a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report or simply through the pure deductions of a genius. However that may be, he’d definitely realized Jesus was just a myth and only the faith of Christians kept this alive. Moreover, Pope Pius XII declared in 1955 that the question of whether Jesus existed was a matter for faith and not for science ... a flagrant admission he didn’t exist ...”

Camilla shook her head.

“No, you’re wrong. Jesus can’t be a myth, because if that was really true, we’d have known about it for a very long time.”

Tom could not contain himself.

“So why didn’t you know about the similarities between Mithras and Jesus before I told you about them? Just because the Church took good care to cover up all these truths with a leaden shroud so there’d never be any doubts. For two thousand years, the Church has been running a program of historical eradication, destroying or forging all the writings having anything to do with Jesus, directly or indirectly. Never forget it’s the winners who always rewrite history. The Church had full powers for a long time, it was the only school there was and it taught its State lies with the goodwill and support of the various successive political regimes, political powers that had grasped the value to them of getting their subject peoples to believe there was a Paradise and a Hell. Even today, governments all round the world are still supporting that old Christian Church, which is ‘reassuring’, since our leaders are afraid of the anarchy and chaos that would break out of thousands of millions of Christians learned about the State lie they’re the victims of. Just imagine the reaction of the folk who live in ghettos, or in the poorer social classes when they grasp they’ve been lied to, so as to get them to toe the line, just like sheep

being taken to the slaughter. What do you think these people will do when they learn their hope of a Christian Paradise, their faith in Christ aren't based on any historical figure, but just on a myth from ancient times, a lie thousands of years old carefully kept secret by the Vatican? I can envisage what'll happen: when the lie of Christ is burst open, Christians will burn their own churches, humankind will exact a reckoning from the governments who've been accomplices in the fraud and the Vatican will be hauled up before the courts for crimes against humanity."

"You're crazy, Jesus is no myth," Camilla responded stubbornly.

"All the historical manuscripts that might have provided evidence of the existence of Jesus have been destroyed, mutilated or falsified. That's a fact you can't deny. If Jesus had really lived, why would they have bothered to hide the proofs of his historicity? If the Church had no guilty secrets, why take such actions? There's no smoke without fire ... Camilla, there's a host of myths which are quite rightly seen as myths and which are similar all down the line to the fable of Jesus. The only difference between these myths and the myth of Jesus, is that the story of Jesus is taught in schools as a real historical account. That belief has been handed down in the same way as the monkeys passed on the tradition of welcoming new arrivals by giving them a beating. Thanks to the electric banana syndrome, the myth of Jesus Christ has been transmitted amongst us; the 'old hands' who knew the fables of Men-Sons-of-God gave way to 'uninitiated' with blind faith, and these ignorant folk passed on the myth of the Son of God as if it was a historical narrative."

"That's Satan leading you astray ..."

Tom chuckled.

"Satan? Do you even know what that word means? It was used to designate the opponent or adversary in Jewish courts. That's its origin. Everyone who was opposed to the projects of King Josiah or to the priests of the Temple was put in the enclosure for the accused, the opposers, the 'Satans'. Moreover, this hidden enemy is an old mythological refrain that priests have been clever enough to use in getting everyone to rally round them in through the fear it inspires, since it's easier to have an enemy you can blame for all your troubles. It relieves you of any personal responsibility."

"Well, if it's not Satan leading you astray, you have to be absolutely crazy!"

"Being crazy means you're outside reality or you don't believe and accept it. I definitely accept reality. If there's any craziness here, anyone not in the real world, it's Jesus of Nazareth."

"I won't let you say such things about the Lord Jesus. He sacrificed his life for us, he carried his cross to Calvary to redeem men's sins. And that's why I'm proud to wear this cross round my neck."

She lifted a hand to her silver cross.

"It's true that in the Gospels," Tom said, "there's a quotation from Jesus saying that whoever doesn't take up his cross can't be his disciple. The problem is that the emblem of the earliest Christians was the fish. The cross was an Egyptian or Roman symbol, not Christian. The cross emblem was chosen by the Church centuries after the Jesus myth originated and to support this choice of a 'designer' logo, the Church added the quote about the cross in the Gospels, putting it into the mouth of its literary hero ..."

"You're despicable," Camilla said, turning her head away. "Despite all your so-called evidence, I believe Jesus existed. I know he did. I have faith in it."

"You have Christian faith all right, since you were born in a Christian country. If you'd been born in a Moslem country, you'd worship the Koran and Mohammed blindly without asking yourself any questions. Let's imagine Greek mythology was still taught in schools in the way it was in Classical Antiquity. Well, at this very moment you'd have absolute faith in Zeus and the gods of Olympus, the whole pantheon of divinities, you'd be convinced of the historical truth of the Greek myths. Like Christians and Moslems the whole world round, you've been indoctrinated since childhood, you've had no choice, no time to think things over carefully. It was your parents who poisoned your mind, just as your grandparents had done to them. They inoculated you with the God Virus, that terrible mental disease, and genetically speaking you were doomed to have faith."

"Every single thing you've said to me is just empty words, which are nothing compared to my faith in Jesus Christ. You won't convince me, you won't turn me away from him. I know that Jesus lives and nothing can change my faith in the Lord."

"If you won't admit the truth, if I haven't succeeded in persuading you with pure reason, that's no problem. I've another way of convincing you what I'm saying is true ..."

"Oh, yes, and what might that be?" Camilla asked scornfully.

"With the Pontius Pilate Report. I expect to find it still here in the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem. Then you won't be able to deny the evidence any longer."

Camilla stared at Tom.

"What's in the Pontius Pilate Report?" she asked. "Do you really

know?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know exactly. What I do know is that it doesn’t have the story of Jesus of Nazareth in it, since that’s a myth. Nevertheless, since the report drove people who read it out of their minds, it must contain very explicit historical details. Pilate must have written that the Messianists were waiting for their Christ to come soon, but that he hadn’t yet come and wouldn’t come either, since the story of the Messiah who was to liberate the Promised Land was just a fable made up out of nothing so the Jewish people would still have some hope under the Roman occupation. Pilate must have written that he never met the Messiah during all his tour of duty in Palestine. And since his report will have been dated precisely in his own hand and drawn up years after the presumed death of Christ on the cross, years after Christ was supposedly sentenced to crucifixion by Pontius Pilate himself, the myth would be put in the spotlight. Everyone who’s read it would understand that the Messiah Jesus Christ was an invention and that the Christian religion was based on a lie, a hoax. That document is the proof that Jesus Christ is nothing more than a legend and that he’s never lived outside the imagination of Christians.”

Camilla looked steadily at Tom.

“I’ll help you find the Grail,” she said, “just to prove to you how wrong you are. Pontius Pilate’s report must contain something different from your myth. I’m sure of that and my intuition never deceives me.”

“A woman’s intuition?” Tom responded, a smile on the corner of his lips. “Okay! Well, we’ll see who’s right this evening ...”

They stood up from the bench.

In the valley of gehenna, the soothing breeze had stopped blowing.

26

Nicodemus

Dressed in a loose white tunic, Jesus sat on the ground.

Around him, some hundred close disciples also sat, forming a human shield. Then, at the edge of this protective circle, the inhabitants of Jerusalem gathered, feverishly awaiting Christ's teaching within the very precincts of the Temple. The Pharisees priests had tidied things up: the devoutly fanatical individuals who had tried to stone Jesus had been banned from entering. Caiaphas wanted no repetition of the previous day's situation, when Romans legionaries had been on the brink of intervening. Happily, Jesus' flight had calmed the inflamed minds of these fanatics and order had been restored in a few minutes. Caiaphas had received a messenger from the Procurator Pontius Pilate requiring him to furnish an explanation of the incident inside the Temple. The High Priest had grudgingly had to comply with the Roman's demand, but had chosen to lie about the nature of the problem.

Caiaphas knew that Jesus was still somewhere in the city and would probably come to taunt him as he had the day before; the divine child was surely seeking to stir up a popular uprising that would overthrow the power of the priests through intervention by the Roman occupying forces. Jesus wanted to take up the reins of religious power, but Caiaphas would not allow this to happen.

However, rather than forbid him from entering the Temple, with the clashes which that might have caused, the High Priest had preferred to allow him in, hoping in this way to make it easy for his hit-men to capture him. He had to wait for the right moment. His disciples would not always be there to protect him and sooner or later Jesus would make a mistake, Caiaphas was certain of that.

That would be the very last mistake in his life.

Jesus knew full well that all of this smelt of a trap and that if he and his

disciples had been able to go into the Temple without difficulty, this was not out of Caiaphas' goodness of heart. He was preparing some form of ambush so as to lay hands on him. Jesus was not fooled, but had no alternative. He had to come back to the Temple. Naturally, he would have liked to enter incognito, but his face was now known to all and he would have been seized immediately. Hence, he had had no choice but to return in strength. He risked being arrested, but he knew that Caiaphas would not dare cross that line as long as there was a threat of people rioting and the consequences which that would bring. He knew that the High Priest was prudent.

All the same, it was a big risk to take, but he had to learn what was happening. He could not remain in the dark. From the top of the Mount of Olives where he had taken refuge for the night, the sight of the lights of the Temple had just added fuel to the fire of questions that was burning in his mind.

The answers to all his queries were to be found down there.

The previous day, after his actions in the town, he had headed toward the Temple where his disciples were waiting. He did not seek confrontation with the Pharisees or Sadducees. He had gone there to continue the inquiry that was the motive for some of his actions and to gather essential information to confirm his suspicions.

For the true motive that had brought him to Jerusalem was not to preach to the crowds or to try to spread his message of universal peace in this sanctuary where the Law of Talion prevailed above all other.

No, the real reason was completely different: his combat against the Divine Scourge and the possessed had led his steps to the City of Zion. That was where the focus of the evil seemed to be, but also, for certain, the source on which Jesus had to draw secretly to counter the Scourge. Discreetly, over several months, he had carried out a painstaking inquiry and his initial suspicions had proved correct, his most recent information now even incriminating the Temple directly. Was the Temple the origin of the evil? In any case, Caiaphas appeared to be fully aware of the situation and to accept it with a troubling carefree folly.

Caiaphas has made a demented pact with the inner demons ...

If he was really responsible, how could he have dared to do so horrible a thing? If he was flirting with the Divine Scourge to feed his ambitions to have occult powers, his condemnation in Heaven was signed, sealed and delivered for all eternity.

The Heavenly Father would see to that.

However, all this was just supposition, despite everything, even if the

facts did seem to bear it out in part. Jesus absolutely had to clarify his somber uncertainties with the light of truth.

Sitting in the midst of the crowd, he wondered what moment would be the best for slipping away and carrying on with his investigations. He grinned. Caiaphas' room for maneuver was limited and he knew how the High Priest would organize his trap. However a great surprise would await him when he tried to clap him in chains. At that point, Jesus would be free to act.

Jesus reckoned that he ought to wait for nightfall to bring his plan into operation. Hence for the moment, he concentrated on his role of crowd preacher which was so dear to him.

Throughout the morning, he spoke of goodness of heart and of mercy. When the sun was at the zenith, Abdias arrived on the Temple esplanade. The Sadducee with his pepper-and-salt beard had not been able to sleep that night, obsessed by his spoken jousting with Jesus, who had made him look ridiculous before his followers. That very morning, Caiaphas had ordered him not to seek a confrontation if he met Jesus again in the Temple. The temptation to get even with this false Christ was stronger than the formal order from the High Priest: Abdias sneered and headed for the dense mass of men and women surrounding Jesus. Accompanied by a score of priests in their purple robes, he disdainfully strode through the sitting crowd dressed in many colors, advancing without any care as if he were walking over weeds on which it was normal to trample. Behind him, between two Pharisees, a pretty brunette in her early twenties was being dragged along by guards, her feet barely touching the ground. Her tunic had been torn half off her, baring frail shoulders that bore the trace of blows, and the woman was pale with fear, her eyes brimming with tears of pain. Part of the crowd fearfully got up and stood aside to allow the clergymen and their prisoner to pass. She was pushed before Jesus where he remained seated and fell a couple of yards from him. She remained prostrate on the ground, not daring to move, sobbing quietly.

"Rabbi," said Abdias in a falsely reverential tone, "this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the Law commanded us that such women should be stoned. What do you say of this?"

The previous day, Abdias had been surprised by the preaching of forgiveness that Jesus had extended to all, especially the enemies of Israel and the transgressors of the Law. In his eyes, such clemency and mercy showed up a weakness in the false Christ and Abdias would profit by this flaw to overthrow him: Jesus would fall into the trap of forgiving the sinful woman. That would prove to the Jews that Jesus was not there to fulfill the Law as he gave it to be understood, but rather that his teachings ran clearly

counter to the Law of Moses and brought it into question. Through his stratagem, Jesus would be brought to reveal himself as in reality a false Messiah, an enemy of Israel, profaner of the Law, and he would fall from the pedestal on which the ignorance of the mob had set him. Rubbing a plump hand over his well-rounded belly, Abdias was inwardly jubilant as he imagined getting his revenge over that usurper.

Jesus did not say a word in response to the Sadducee's question. He simply looked down and wrote a few words in the dusty soil with the tip of his finger. The priest insisted forcefully, a smile playing over his lips, believing that Jesus' silence was an admission that he was powerless and that the fall of the false Christ was imminent.

Jesus continued to stare at the mysterious inscription that he had just traced on the ground.

The Heavenly Equation ...

He slowly began to rub out the last few words with his fingertip. Then, as he came back to the first word that he had written, he stopped erasing. His eyes remained motionlessly focused on those two syllables.

Desire ...

At that point, he raised his head. He had to catch Abdias in his own trap. He knew that no Jew could obey every single one of the laws of Moses to the letter, because they were so numerous, constraining and severe that they often verged on the ridiculous. One day or another, everybody had broken some of Yahweh's laws. Nobody could claim the contrary.

"He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone."

Lowering his gaze, he drew a line all around the word 'Desire'.

Abdias took several seconds to grasp that he had been caught in his own trap, once again causing him to lose face before the people, and he clenched his fist in anger. He went red with rage, searching for some possible retort. However, Jesus' sentence was as sharp as the edge of a sword and no word could blunt it.

Nonetheless, Abdias did not wish to let things rest at this point without reacting. He was still thinking about what he could say when his gaze fell on the central temple building, lost in the middle of the immense esplanade of the Lower Courtyard. Beside a doorway, he recognized the figure of Caiaphas looking in his direction. Abdias had disobeyed his orders by once more confronting Jesus. The sign the High Priest made to him with his arm was unmistakable. So, casting down his dark eyes to stare at his sandals like a small child caught misbehaving, Abdias went over to join him.

The other priests were unsure what to do when their leader inexplicably left them. They stood bemused for a moment, then one after another headed off in the direction of the central temple building into which Abdias had disappeared. They were so disturbed by Abdias' spineless reaction that they forgot their captive.

When Jesus raised his head, the young woman was there, alone among the crowd. Kneeling and holding her tunic in a trembling hand so that it would not slip off, she stared at Christ with her eyes brimming with tears.

"Woman, where are your accusers?" asked Jesus, rising to his feet. "Has nobody condemned you?"

"Nobody, Lord," replied the young woman in a weak voice.

"Neither then do I condemn you. Go and try nevermore to succumb to the temptation of desire."

The prisoner stood up and hobbled out of the Temple. With a gesture of his hand, Jesus ordered those who were standing to sit down once more, which they all did. Jesus swung his head round to look at the hundreds of Jews who had just witnessed the scene.

Many would have let her be stoned without the slightest hesitation ...

Stoning was an abominable practice. The Heavenly Father in no case wanted people to kill in his name, for whatever reason. It was absurd to believe such human lies. More so to say that stoning was a law of Moses. The Jews were all unaware of what he knew: Moses had never existed. If that became known, the whole nation would founder into chaos. Luckily, onto that historical farce, influences from other civilizations had been grafted, bringing heavenly notions such as Paradise or Hell, but even these ideas had been mutilated and few grasped their true sense, or especially the real destiny of humankind.

He, as an Initiate, was perfectly familiar with all of this and had to prepare himself to pass on this knowledge for the salvation of humanity. First, to some of his apostles when he rejoined them. Then, to his host of disciples when their souls were ready to hear the Celestial Truths. That was his mission on Earth.

However, would he be able to accomplish that titanic task? At times he felt so powerless against the forces of the Evil One. He had the impression of being the toy of some greater power that dictated his words and channeled his actions without his being aware of it. Then he asked himself whether his own life was real and whether he too might not, like Moses, be a product of the imagination of some neurotic heavenly scribe who wished to see him act with some hidden aim.

Jesus swept these ideas out of his head.

“If any man thirsts for knowledge, let him come to me and drink,” said he to the crowd. “He that believes in me shall see rivers of living water flowing in the depths of his being. I am the light of the world. He that follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life ...”

For several hours he preached without a pause.

Abdias finally came back out of the central building. He was fuming with rage: on the one hand because he had not been able to unmask the false Christ publicly and on the other because he had had to apologize to Caiaphas. The High Priest had given him strong rebukes. Abdias had not enjoyed being reprimanded in that fashion by a simple Pharisee, being a Sadducee of noble lineage, a descendant of David. However, Caiaphas held the reins of power and he had to obey him. His fists clenched in anger, Abdias strode forward rapidly, shoving the crowd aside with his sturdy arms. He glanced in the direction of Jesus, still preaching on the Temple esplanade. He had just promised Caiaphas that he would go home, but curiosity won out and he wanted to hear what Jesus was saying. So, threading his way through the people sitting on the ground, he came up close to the man he considered to be an impostor and stood silently stared at him with his dark eyes.

Jesus did not even glance at the Sadducee. Also standing, surrounded by his close disciples, he continued to talk.

For ten minutes or so, Abdias listed without uttering a word, boiling with rage. At his feet, a man spoke under his breath to his wife.

“Some say him to be the son of a man named Joseph, a simple carpenter of Nazareth, and that ...”

Abdias could not control his anger.

“He is not the son of Joseph,” shouted out the Sadducee, almost despite himself.

A heavy silence fell over the whole gathering. Every eye turned to the man in his forties dressed in a purple robe. Jesus looked at him too.

“Indeed he is not the son of Joseph,” said a voice from somewhere in the crowd, “Jesus is the Son of God ...”

As he heard these last words, Abdias went red with rage. Wiping his plump hand across his sweaty brow, he opened his mouth as if to say something. However, at the last moment, he wavered before speaking. What he had been on the point of saying was unlikely to do Jesus any harm. Quite the contrary, it would have glorified him in a totally unexpected way and if the Romans then laid their hands on the divine child, the Temple would not survive the upheaval that would follow. As he could not speak freely, the priest clenched his fist and glowered full of

hate at Jesus.

Staring with his sea-blue eyes into the two dark depths of the Sadducee's, Jesus grasped what was going through Abdias' mind.

"Woe to the world because of its offences," chided Jesus. "Indeed, it must be that offences come, but woe to the man by whom the offence comes!"

For several seconds, Abdias returned Jesus' stare. The, cursing into his beard, he turned and headed off at a quick pace.

The sun was going down rapidly. The day was drawing to its close; the darkness of night was replacing the light and stars like flowers on a dark background were beginning to adorn the sky. Jesus told the crowd to return to their homes. After a quarter of an hour, when they had dispersed from the immense esplanade, he made for the imposing central temple building. His hundred or so close disciples followed him, wondering anxiously why their Master was not also leaving this hostile place.

Arriving at one of the entrances, Jesus told his followers to leave him on his own and to go and await him on the Mount of Olives. Seeing their incomprehension and legitimate fear, aroused by worries over their Lord's safety, he reassured them with a soothing smile. He repeated his instruction and his disciples reluctantly obeyed it.

Jesus then went into the central building and found himself in the Court of Women. The place was apparently deserted. He immediately spotted guards hiding behind the columns of the buildings that surrounded the open central courtyard.

Zechariah was surprised to see Jesus alone, without any disciples to ensure his protection. The chief of the guards thoughtfully stroked his black beard for an instant. Jesus doubtless wished to see Caiaphas on a one-to-one basis so as to be able to discuss matters with him without anybody hearing what he had to tell him. The thirst for power had been stronger than prudence and Jesus had now fallen into this simple trap.

Raising his heavy hand, Zechariah signaled to his soldiers to deploy. In under ten seconds, every exit was blocked. Sword in hand, Zechariah jubilantly advanced with a feline suppleness like a tiger on a select prey. His cuirass, fitting perfectly over his red tunic, would not be needed. There would be no combat, as Jesus was already at his mercy and in a few seconds, the false Christ would be begging him for clemency, prostrate at his feet.

However, contrary to what Zechariah expected, Jesus was not perturbed in the slightest. He even grinned briefly. Zechariah was disconcerted for an instant by this stoic calm, but did not let it show.

“We meet again at last,” growled the guard commander. “This time you will not escape me ...”

The episode at the Bethesda Pool when Jesus had escaped the ambush he had laid for him was still fresh in his mind and he resented Jesus for having slipped through his fingers in that way. Now revenge would be sweet. Standing motionless in the middle of the Court of Women, Jesus was staring at him.

Stopping a yard away from Jesus, Zechariah returned the gaze from those blue eyes and plunged into the depths of their blue ocean. Those eyes were so mild and pleasant to look at that for a short while Zechariah forgot all his hostility toward this prisoner. Infinite time seemed to pass before Jesus spoke at last in his melodious voice.

“For yet a little while I am with you, then I go to him who sent me. You will seek me, but not find me. Whither I go, you cannot come.”

The sense of these words was beyond Zechariah’s understanding. He wondered where Jesus planned to go and why he had said that if they sought him they would not find him. It was incomprehensible. Still returning his captive’s gaze, Zechariah finally worked out that he was just playing for time and hoping for his disciples to come to his aid.

He had to act quickly. Zechariah raised his massive hand to seize hold of Jesus. However, his hand clutched empty air. Carried onward by his rush, he continued forward for a few steps, dumbfounded. He turned round lightning fast, and looked all around, seeking his prisoner in the growing darkness. He was so shocked that he almost dropped his sword on the flagstones of the courtyard.

Jesus had disappeared.

One instant before him, the next instant gone like a puff of smoke.

Zechariah rubbed his eyes, believing he was dreaming. Alas, the nightmare was all too real: Jesus had well and truly vanished. A drop of sweat ran down the guard commander’s forehead. Night had by now fallen completely and he raised his head toward the starry sky, wondering if Jesus had not somehow taken refuge with the help of God himself. While he was going back over Jesus’ enigmatic words, his soldiers had lit torches.

Zechariah finally growled in rage, brandishing his sword menacingly. Followed by his totally bewildered guards who watched him cursing about Jesus’ disappearance, Zechariah ran to inform Caiaphas. Passing before the Nicanor Gate, he strode into the sanctuary and found the High Priest in discussion with several Pharisees. Seeing his guard commander arrive with a startled face and followed by his soldiers, Caiaphas realized that something serious had happened. Before listening to any explanation, not

wanting anything to become known of what had occurred, he invited Zechariah and his men into a chamber of the central temple building, a small room with a table and a few chairs, lit by a dozen naphtha lamps fixed to the white walls.

Standing before Caiaphas, who had sat on one of the chairs, Zechariah told him what had happened up to the moment of the arrest.

“So why have you not brought him here, if you have him?” asked Caiaphas in astonishment.

“Jesus spoke to me,” said Zechariah in justification. “Never had I heard a man speak thus ... his words were so ... strange! I still do not understand them. Then when I tried to lay hands upon him, he had disappeared ...”

He explained what had happened. Caiaphas fumed with rage and with a gesture of his arm ordered Zechariah to leave the room.

“What of you?” demanded the High Priest of the other guards. “Did you also allow yourselves to be duped?”

Lowering his eyes, like a child caught misbehaving, one of the guards tried to justify the actions of the group. Caiaphas listened to the soldier’s excuses and realized that the troop had been able to do nothing to arrest the divine child. Regaining a semblance of calm, Caiaphas nodded thoughtfully.

Jesus was the most powerful of the enemies whose paths he had crossed in his life. Jesus had not only the power of disappearing, but also the ability to cure the possessed. That power was the worst of all. As if to annoy the High Priest, or rather to hint to him that he knew what was going on in the Temple, Jesus had sent there some of the possessed whom he had miraculously cured.

Jesus was a serious threat and Caiaphas asked himself whether that very afternoon any notable folk or Pharisees had believed the words of that accursed divine child. The High Priest feared that dissension might break out in the religious coalition of the Temple, a fragile coalition that it had cost him much effort to arrange between Sadducees and Pharisees. As for the mob that followed Jesus’ preaching, it was condemned forever because it no longer respected the Law.

A Pharisee called Nicodemus came into the room. Having poor sight, the very elderly man in his priest’s garb was surprised to see Caiaphas surrounded by a swarm of guards. He made his excuses and was about to leave, but Caiaphas signaled to him to draw near. Knowing that Nicodemus had been present at some of the preaching on the previous day, Caiaphas questioned him about his opinion of Jesus.

The old priest hesitated, knowing Caiaphas’ hostility toward Jesus.

Prudently, he replied:

“Does our Law judge a man without first hearing his case and learning what he does?”

Seeing that Nicodemus seemed to be under the influence of Jesus’ charm, Caiaphas became annoyed with this priest who was not part of the restricted circle of clergy knowing the true nature of the divine child.

“Are you too from Galilee?” cried he. “Study the Scriptures! You will see that it is not from Galilee that the Messiah will arise.”

Nicodemus begged forgiveness for his offence and walked backward out of the room, his head hung low. With a sharp gesture, Caiaphas also sent away the guards. Left alone, he rose from his chair, stroking his white beard. With a frown twisting his bushy eyebrows, he directed his yellowish green and slightly squinting eyes toward the open door. He wondered where Jesus might be at that moment. Without a doubt, that redoubtable enemy must have fled far from Jerusalem, so the prospects for eliminating him were now reduced. Caiaphas clenched his fist in anger.

Contrary to what he believed, Jesus had not fled; he had changed his light-colored clothes for a black robe with a large hood that hid his face completely. Passing as a simple worshipper, Jesus had discreetly walked around the central temple building. He had looked into isolate empty rooms. For two long hours, slipping from one column to the next, he had eavesdropped on the conversations of many Pharisees and Sadducees, trying to overhear statements that would have confirmed his suspicions about Caiaphas, words that would have clearly linked the Chief Priest to the Divine Scourge. However, despite all his efforts and the risks that he ran, Jesus had not been able to gather further facts that might have corroborated or brought fresh detail to the information that he already possessed.

The Temple began to empty. Empty-handed, Jesus realized that unfortunately it was time to depart. He left the central building, crossed the Lower Courtyard esplanade of the Temple, virtually deserted but for the few Jews still there, and made for the southern exit. The cool of the night was pleasant and he pushed back his dark hood and looked up toward the vault of heaven where a myriad stars were twinkling. As he reached the marble portico, he was on the point of going out of the Temple when a hand emerged from nowhere and seized his arm. In the half-darkness barely relieved by the flaming torches in their sconces on the colonnades, an elderly man with trembling hand began to whisper to him:

“Lord, we know that you are a Master come from God, for no man can do these miracles that you do, except if God is with him ...”

“Who are you?” asked Jesus.

“I am called Nicodemus ...”

Letting go of Jesus, the elderly man invited him to go off to one side to the less exposed area behind a column. The Pharisee seemed to hesitate, then, after a few seconds’ silence, he made a request.

“There is a mystery that haunts me now that I am reaching the end of my life and I would wish for you to explain it to me ...”

Jesus looked at him thoughtfully.

“I swear to you that I shall answer your question, if you yourself reply sincerely to the question that I shall ask you. Do you accept this?”

This time, Nicodemus hesitated not one single second and rapidly nodded.

“Yes, Lord.”

Jesus questioned him and Nicodemus was astonished at the incongruity and banality of his queries. Besides, what Jesus asked would not long remain in the old man’s rather forgetful mind. Nonetheless, had he taken the time to think it over carefully, realizing instinctively that Jesus would not ask something so insignificant as it appeared at first sight and that underlying it were ramifications of incredible extent, this might have clarified for him a terrible mystery concerning events that were stirring the region. However, Nicodemus’ thoughts were focused on something else and he responded to Christ’s questioning without grasping its full implications and indeed forgetting it the next minute.

Then, in his turn, he asked the question that had been the bane of his life for decades.

“How may I come to see the Kingdom of Heaven?”

“Truly I say to you, except if a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” asked Nicodemus in astonishment. “Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus was amused at this childlike reflection on the part of the old fellow.

“You must become an ethereal fluid as clear as water and a spirit so as to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. That which is born of the flesh will remain flesh and that which is born of the spirit will remain spirit ...”

Seeing how disconcerted Nicodemus’ face was, Jesus simplified:

“Do not marvel that I said to you that you must be born again. The wind blows wheresoever it will and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell

whence it comes nor whither it goes. So it is for every man who becomes a spirit once more.”

“How can these things be?”

“You that are a priest of the Temple, a master of Israel, do you not know and understand these things?”

Jesus looked him right in the eye.

The spiritual teachings of the Pharisees are virtually non-existent. They are barely taking their first faltering steps. They understand nothing of the divine. Just imagine, they make no difference between the notions of God and of the Heavenly Father, when these two terms are clearly distinct one from another.

He sighed inwardly.

“Truly I say to you, I speak of what I know and I bear witness what I have myself seen. Yet you do not accept my testimony. For if I have told you of earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?”

“I beg of you, Lord, explain this to me ... I am not as the other Pharisees. Lord, I would wish to know. I beg of you ...”

For over a minute, Jesus looked steadily at Nicodemus. He was close to the end of his life and his meeting with the Heavenly Father would not be long in coming. Jesus had the duty of preparing him for it. However, he thought hard about how to present the truth in such a way that the old man might grasp its full extent.

“No man ascends to Heaven but those who have come down from Heaven: the sons of man, the sons of Adam. These sons of man must be lifted up again, so that whosoever judges himself righteous in himself shall not perish once more, but have eternal life in Heaven. The Heavenly Father so loves the world that he has given to his sons lives which all believe to be unique so that they may no longer perish, but have eternal life in Heaven.”

Jesus paused for a moment, then went on:

“The Heavenly Father does not send his sons into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through them might be saved. He who does the will of the Heavenly Father will not be condemned but he who breaks loose from it is already condemned. Further, this is the condemnation: when light is come into the world beyond, some men will love darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every man that does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds may be reproved by the Heavenly Father. Yet he that does according to the Heavenly Truths can come full calmly to the light, for he

has wrought the will of the Heavenly Father.”

Using images, he explained:

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was cast into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, the fishers drew it to shore and sat down and set the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So it shall be at the end of the age: the angels will come forth and sever the wicked from among the just and cast them into the furnace of fire of the underworld. There, there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus raised his face toward the starry sky.

“The Heavenly Father loves his sons and has shown them in the heavens all the things that he has made himself. He will show them works yet greater that will leave them dumbfounded.”

He rested his gaze on Nicodemus.

“The Heavenly Father brings the dead back to life and breathes life into them. The same is true of his sons, who can restore life, transcend what they will. The Heavenly Father judges no man on Earth and he has given free will to the sons, who thus have their future in their own hands, that they may respect of themselves the sons of man. Those that do not respect the sons of man, do not honor the Father who sent them. If you believe in my word, if you believe in him who has sent us here and in eternal life in Heaven after the Judgment, you will no longer pass from death into empty life. This is so, at least if your soul is pure. Do not be astonished at this saying, for the hour is coming when all those that are in their tombs will hear the voice of the Heavenly Father and come forth from their graves. Those who have done good will be resurrected to life in Heaven. Those who have done evil will be resurrected to Judgment and everlasting torments in endless suffering.”

Under the pale moon that had just risen, Nicodemus swallowed with difficulty.

“Is there ought that you can do for me?” asked the priest.

“I can do nothing of myself. I judge according to my understanding and my judgment is just, for I do not seek to satisfy my will, but rather that of the one who sent us here. Yet my judgment cannot be of any use to you. Only that of the Heavenly Father counts in the weighing of souls ...”

Jesus spoke to him further at some length about the Judgment of Heaven.

Nicodemus began to understand the extent of those truths.

“Yet what is an evil spirit?” queried the old man.

Jesus reflected for an instant. Then he answered, again using an image:

“When an evil or impure spirit is driven forth from a man, not wanting

to go toward the light, it wanders in deserted and dark places, seeking repose. As it finds none, it says to itself: 'I shall go back to the dwelling-place from whence I came out'. Once there, it finds it empty and swept clean. Then in despair, it goes off and finds other spirits yet more evil than itself, which all together return to that dwelling to settle there. Thus does the state of that man become worse in the end than in the beginning."

Nicodemus nodded in silence, grasping the outcome of that sad condition.

Jesus continued:

"Labor, not for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures into everlasting life, the nourishment of my teaching, for this it is that the Heavenly Father has sealed."

"What shall I do, that I might accomplish the works of God?" inquired Nicodemus.

"This is the work of God, that you should believe in me," said Jesus amusedly.

Seized by a doubt, thinking of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves that he had been told about in respect of Christ, the old priest asked:

"What miracle have you done greater than did the patriarchs, so that I should believe in you rather than in them? Our fathers ate manna in the desert, miraculous food fallen from the heavens, as it is written: 'Thou gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger'."

Jesus sighed inwardly. He was perfectly familiar with those scriptures. However, he could not divulge the truth about the secret of their composition.

The Pharisees scrutinize their Scriptures because they think that with them they will have eternal life. However, they are mistaken.

He had to be careful to spare the Jew's susceptible feelings.

"Truly I say to you that neither the patriarchs, nor Moses, gave you that bread from the heavens. The true bread from Heaven is that which the Heavenly Father gives, that which really comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world. This bread is the heavenly teaching."

"Lord, evermore give me of that bread!" exclaimed Nicodemus.

"I am the bread of life. He that comes to me shall never hunger, he that believes in me shall never thirst. I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of the Heavenly Father that sent me. Yes, this is the will of the Heavenly Father that sent me: whosoever follows me and applies my teachings will have everlasting life in heaven and will be raised up on the Day of the Last Judgment. I am the bread which came down from Heaven ..."

Indignant mutterings were heard from a dark corner behind a column. Jesus launched a penetrating gaze into the darkness. Realizing they had been detected, two elderly priests emerged from their hiding place. As they passed by chance, they had heard an unusual conversation, so had crept up and listened to the comments being exchanged. However, the last words uttered by Jesus had shocked them profoundly. They were fully familiar with this divine child, whom they had seen many a time in the Temple. They knew that he had been born of Mary and were astonished that Joseph's adopted son could now be claiming that he had come down from Heaven. Jesus looked at the two Jews in their violet and purple priestly vestments. Then, pointing to Nicodemus, he said to them:

"Do not murmur among yourselves. No man can come to me unless the Heavenly Father who sent me draws him to me. I shall see to it that he is raised up at the last day, the Day of Judgment. Is it not written in your holy texts that all your sons shall be taught by the Eternal and that the peace of his sons shall be great? Therefore, whosoever has heard and learned from the Heavenly Father comes to me. He who believes in eternal life in Heaven believes in me, I who am the bread of life. Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness and are dead. Now, this is the bread that comes down from Heaven, so that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from Heaven. If any man eats of this bread, he shall live forever in heaven. The bread that I shall give will come from my flesh, from my body, from all my being and I shall give it for the life of the world."

Nicodemus understood full well that Jesus was speaking in metaphors and that it was in no way a case of eating his flesh like a loaf of bread, but rather that this bread of life was a symbolic representation of his teachings and inner knowledge. However, the two Pharisees were obtuse and were taking Jesus' statements literally, without understanding they had to read between the lines.

"How can you give us your flesh to eat?" asked one of the two, astounded.

Jesus sighed.

"Truly I say to you, except if you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will have no life in you. Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have eternal life and I shall raise him up at the Day of the Last Judgment. For my flesh is indeed heavenly food and my blood is indeed a heavenly drink. Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him. As the living Heavenly Father has sent me and I live by the Father, so whosoever eats me, even he will live by me. This is that bread which came down from Heaven: it is not like the manna which your

fathers ate in the desert, who are now dead. Whosoever eats of this bread will live forever in Heaven ...”

Once again, only Nicodemus understood that Jesus was not speaking literally, but figuratively, and that to drink his blood was an image signifying to take a swallow from the fountain of his inner teachings, which were like a divine drink. Jesus saw the incomprehension in the eyes of the two Pharisees, realizing tiredly that their narrow minds could not grasp the obvious implications of what he had just told them in metaphoric form. He would have to talk to them like children, never using language figuratively, only in a pedestrianly literal way, if he wanted them finally to comprehend the true sense of his statements.

How can clergy supposed to have any knowledge whatsoever of the divine be so obtuse that they think my body can be physically eaten? Ignorant cannibals ...

He smiled inwardly.

... of course, they do not possess the knowledge of the Initiates, but to go so far as to believe that somebody can be physically eaten in order to gain heavenly salvation requires a very limited intellectual capacity indeed ... Men always think they understand what is said to them, but are often mistaken. Errors of interpretation that may have severe consequences in the future ...

Jesus was about to tell them that he was speaking in parables, explaining to them the symbolism represented by that bread of life and that blood but he was cut short.

A noise of running was heard. Guards were coming, alerted by a third priest who had slipped away discreetly when his two companions had been noticed by Jesus.

So Jesus hastily fled out of the Temple. He quickly caused his pursuers to scatter by hiding in a barn. After a while hiding behind the piles of straw, he finally crept out cautiously.

Slinking along the dark streets of the city, he thought once again of the revelation made to him by Nicodemus. The old man had not seemed to grasp the full impact of the answer he had given to Jesus’ question.

Caiaphas is the instigator of the evil ...

In the cool of the starry night, Jesus turned and looked toward the Temple, the silhouette of which stood out against the moonlit sky. He stood there for a moment and muttered, as if talking to himself:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets who make known to you the will of the Heavenly Father and stone those who are sent to you, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers

her brood under her wings ... but you would not have it! Now I leave you desolate and you will not see me again. Truly I say to you, you will not see me once more until the time comes when you will say: blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Covering his head with the large hood of his tunic, he hastened away and disappeared into the darkness of a narrow laneway.

27

Legacy

Only slightly obscured by the drifting wisps of scattered high clouds, a full moon to some extent drove away the darkness from the esplanade of the mosques.

On the vast square, deserted at this time of night, Tom and Camilla walked slowly forward.

“You know what you have to do?” Tom inquired.

“Yes, I have it,” Camilla replied.

Wearing a dark Arab djellaba with a large hood that completely hid her face, the young woman was uneasy: she was afraid of what they would have to do to recover the Grail from the Al-Aqsa mosque. However, if Pilate’s report was indeed hidden in an underground room in the heart of the ruins of the Temple of Jerusalem, she had to find it. She just had to prove that the Lord Jesus Christ was no myth, to prove it to herself, to Thomas and to the whole world.

When Tom had laid out his plan for recovering the Grail, she had been horrified. Tom had reassured her that it was in no way theft, but rather that they were rescuing a piece of humanity’s heritage. She had finally come round to his point of view and agreed.

At present, thanks to her unfortunate tendency to believe herself capable of anything, she was convinced she was on a mission for the Lord. She would not fail to accomplish the mission that a divine providence had entrusted to her.

Even if fear was still gnawing at her entrails.

“Don’t worry, I’m ready,” she told Tom.

He nodded.

Using a long staff to walk with, Tom mechanically checked that his white beard was still stuck in place and his black turban had not slipped.

Disguised as the Imam Ali, his belly padded to make him seriously plump, Tom walked forward copying the heavy tread of the Islamic preacher.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom looked at his companion.

He wondered what she was thinking.

Had she fully realized that the Jesus Christ myth was a symbol of the cycle of the sun? Was she beginning to understand that all the time she had been worshiping the star that gives us life and that the Bible was a scripture to the glory of the Invincible Sun? Besides, this sun had not just influenced beliefs, it had also given a direction, both literal and figurative, to the scriptures.

The direction in which people wrote was characteristic of the route the sun traced in the sky.

At the dawn of time, Northerners wrote from left to right, because in the northern hemisphere, if one turned southward to follow the sun's course, it appeared to go from left to right, from the East to the West. In the southern hemisphere, the sun's route appeared to be from right to left, and this direction had been imitated in writing, in particular in Arabic script.

In silence, Tom looked at Camilla.

Would she become his ally when he found the Pontius Pilate Report and she realized that everything he had said was absolutely true?

Nothing could be less certain.

Love could become ferocious hatred in just an instant.

For that matter, did she still love him? Was she still in love with him after what he had told her about King Josiah and his human fraud, and about the myth of Jesus of Nazareth? Had he not completely put her off any sort of loving feeling toward him? From the start, Tom had known that such a love was doomed to failure. How could a couple like them last over the long term if the two most crucial common points of a couple were missing from the start?

The two common points were religion and politics.

Without these two foundations for a couple, the relation risked being stormy and at the slightest tempest the family ship would founder. It was possible to be an introvert and have an extravert partner, one could be sociable and the other solitary, one could even be emotionally stable and the other have big mood swings, but without the same religious and political convictions, a couple started with a major handicap.

So, Camilla would end up by hating him, that was given in advance, it was just a question of time. Love and hatred were two links in the same chain. Psychologically, love could flip over into being hatred, because hating a love that had become impossible made the separation less hard to

bear. The human ego felt it was not losing much if it considered itself to be losing a detestable person, which allowed it to find a way forward.

Tom did not want to listen to his heart, that heart which had its reasons that Reason could not fathom. He did not want to let himself be carried away by the torrent of passion that he could feel roaring within him. For good cause, ever since their first meeting in Rennes-le-Château, he had been forcing himself to shut his eyes to this utopian love, a love which probably was making him unconsciously afraid.

Once again, the same question: did she still love him?

Tom had broken down part of her mind and part of her heart with his successive crushing revelations. In the past, clergymen had gone mad on learning the secret of Christ. If Camilla had been a man, she certainly would have become angry enough to hit him physically to make him shut up, as Islamic extremists would wish to do when time came to divulge the secrets of their Prophet. However, Camilla was not a man and her female violence was not turned outward like a man's in totally reptilian brawls: women turned their violence inward and expended it in 'relations'.

Women were experts in relations between individuals. Not being able to let loose their violence physically like men, they had to allow their aggressiveness to escape by causing harm to people through an attack on their interpersonal relationships. As if it were an internal safety-valve, as a release route for their pent-up reptilian violence, they spread gossip, told other people's secrets, criticized, ridiculed or excluded a person from their group of friends or colleagues. The evils of aggressiveness were assuaged by the saving grace of malicious words.

The invisible violence of women was not in the slightest less than men's all too visible violence, a reptilian violence which combined with the ancestral inheritance of egoism to form the darker side of humanity.

As if seeking a heavenly culprit for this terrible legacy of inhumanity, Tom looked up toward the starry sky.

In men and women there was a certain ambivalence, a dual nature rooted deep within everybody: a tendency to compassion and altruism in parallel with a potential for unheard-of violence and indifference toward the sufferings of others. That was because of the legacy termed egoism.

The history of humanity began with a pleasant story.

Over millennia and generations, through slow successive stages, the earliest groups of hominids had finally acquired a hereditary characteristic of mutual aid, cohesion and altruism. In them, as in a good few mammals, like rats and mice, empathy was indeed strongly present, but only in the context of the group of known friends, so that everybody had a potential

antipathy to anybody outside this select circle. All these innate behavioral characteristics had lasted because they gave a decisive advantage in terms of survival and they had spread, fixed in the genes.

Passed on to modern humans, just like their marvelous hands, or their inestimable upright stance, altruism was thus part of the legacy inherited from those long dead ancestors.

Anywhere on the planet it could easily be observed, even in those huge impersonal megacities where cold collective indifference seemed to reign. The excessive number of people there led every individual to feel no longer responsible and inhibited innate altruism, but all the same it was enough for a pretty woman to smile at a man she passed in the street for him to feel the wings of altruism sprouting and spontaneously help a disabled person up a flight of steps, if somebody of the sort was around at that instant in time. As soon as one individual took the decisive step and did some altruistic act, a crowd of other benevolent strangers would rally round and take a hand in the task out of imitation and conformism. Just a tiny trigger was sufficient to detonate an explosion of human altruistic generosity.

However, at one point in the past, this beautiful tale of human altruism had nearly fallen by the wayside.

A parasite had appeared among the first altruistic communities: the egoist. This selfish creature had taken advantage of other people's good will and of the sharing of natural resources that altruists automatically organized. Worse still, not taking part in the perilous expeditions needed to find food, just letting others bring their daily rations to them, egoists had had a better chance of survival and had eventually spread their parasitic genes in the group, which within a few generations had become composed primarily of egoists.

With too many of them, the system of mutual aid and cohesion no longer worked, so the selfish had caused altruistic communities to collapse, driving them back into the age of savage animal terror.

That could have been the end of the emerging human race, lost in an evolutionary dead end.

However, a fruit of chance and the random genetic mutations that can alter not just the physical structure of any living creature, but also lead to surprising innate behaviors, new-born altruists emerged who had a revolutionary weapon built into their genes: the detection of egoists.

Better still, this newly emergent class of altruists not only had the capacity to detect the selfish, but also, thanks to innate indifference or even hostility and violence toward them, could calmly punish, exclude, or

indeed exterminate the egoists found in its communities.

Even when they were ill and needed help, the pleas of the selfish left the new altruists icily cold: paradoxically, the altruists then acted selfishly to suit the circumstances, as against inborn selfishness. Above all, this novel inherited hatred of egoists made altruists, who by definition desired the good of others, capable of unleashing unprecedented violence in order to wipe out these parasites who took advantage of the group and threatened its survival.

When one of them infiltrated into the group, egoists became the enemy to strike down, a shadowy foe responsible for all ills who had to be eliminated at any cost.

That was an inheritance from evolution, the legacy called egoism that the ancestors of humans had passed on to humankind.

Through natural selection, pure altruism had died out, while selfish altruism had survived and spread round the whole world, like a salutary antibody protecting against a lethal germ.

It was this kind of altruism that had become built into the human genetic inheritance, so strong a legacy that from the age of six months onward, after watching a cartoon of two people interacting, one altruistic, the other egoistic, babies chose the modeling clay figure of the altruist rather than that of the egoist, which they systematically rejected when offered the two.

Even when they became adults, people preferred to punish themselves rather than let an egoist get away with things: the ultimatum game was a striking proof of this.

The game consisted of having a participant playing client faced with a participant playing banker who held the sum of \$1,000 and could divide it between them in whatever way seemed best. The banker could, for example, keep \$900 and offer \$100 to the client, or suggest a fifty-fifty split. However, in every case it was the client participant who had to decide whether to accept or refuse, a refusal of the one offer the banker was allowed to make meaning that neither of the two could pocket any of the money.

From a totally pragmatic point of view, the best course was always to accept whatever sum the banker offered, even if it was no more than \$10. Nonetheless, all the client participants had refused over-selfish offers from bankers. They preferred to punish the egoistic bankers, even though knowing they were punishing themselves as well, rather than let them selfishly prosper with impunity.

Ancestral behavioral genes had won out over the desire for money.

Client participants had been motivated by cold-blooded vengeance, a

fruit of internal workings that brought a sly feeling of soothing satisfaction, a pleasure imprinted in the brain which was so great that the client participants had accepted the detriment which it would bring by the pure and simple loss of the sum offered.

Revenge was not the only consequence of the legacy of selfish altruism.

There were others even more monstrous: indifference or violence toward egoists eventually spread and became general, offering a choice between collaborating or opposing others, explaining how humanity had been capable of the best, but above all of the worst. In the place of the selfish, humans had found scapegoats attracting all the hatred of the altruists, shadowy enemies that crafty Manichaeian moral authorities had accused in order to serve their own partisan interests. Subliminally, 'others' had been perceived as undetectable hidden egoists and that had led to fratricidal fighting, absurd wars, or abominable genocides in the name of a hereditary behavior.

Altruistic humans had become as wolves toward their fellow humans, this being boosted by a latent acquired egoism which was a glittering distraction in a crazy psychological spiral with respect to the innately selfish enemy, capable of inflicting terrible suffering on any of their fellow humans, as long as somebody holding high authority asked them to do so.

Furthermore, a scientific experiment had corroborated this fact.

Human guinea-pigs had been led to believe that when they pressed a red button they were giving a very painful electric shock to an elderly lady sitting on a supposedly electric chair behind a pane of glass. Of course, this was untrue, as the elderly lady sitting on the chair was an actress who simulated the effect of the shocks that were supposed to have been received. Under the cover of science, wearing the obligatory white coat, another actor pretended that it was possible to train the lady's brain to solve difficult mathematical equations correctly in under five seconds. Hearing the shrieks of pain from the actress who deliberately deceived them by giving wrong answers, at first the guinea-pigs had hesitated a little before carrying out the order to push the red button. However, their hesitations did not last for long: their altruistic brains eventually had switched off, unconsciously yielding to innate indifference and violence that had necessarily ruled when facing a shadowy selfish enemy. Thanks to the reptilian tendency to obey, higher authority had the moral and psychological power to designate subliminally who such egoists were, and divert the primary function of the selfish altruist legacy toward fearsome objectives. The German people had fallen foul of this tendency under Nazism, when they had carried out conveyor-belt killings of Jewish children, as Jews were made out to be notorious egoists who had hoarded

vast wealth to the detriment of the German people.

The Shoah was one of the horrendous consequences of the so-called legacy of selfishness. Worse yet, humanity had learned nothing from its monstrous past mistakes and many more genocides were gestating under the wing of innate egoism, which for many a year had no longer been the victim of altruistic anger. On the contrary, altruistic humanity was unwittingly working on behalf of innate selfishness, because this parasite had taken over the highest levels of power.

Like a shark following fish, innate egoism had survived in the wake of the altruistic group. Through intrigue, it had come into power and diverted the gut feeling of hate toward it onto other people, other communities, onto scapegoats found for the purpose.

Innate selfishness had patiently conquered the world, culturally speaking, and without thought for fair shares had gathered most of the wealth into its hands. Imposing its new doctrines on an enslaved humanity, this sly parasite had woven a web all around the worlds in which altruistic consciences were held prisoner ...

Camilla came and laid her hand on Tom's arm.

"Are you really sure there's just one night-watchman?" she asked him.

"Yes, I'm certain," Tom replied, a slightly worried look in his eye. "Don't worry, it'll all be okay."

They covered the last fifty yards at a quicker pace.

Camilla hung back a little and Tom knocked on the door of the mosque. Less than a minute later, the door opened and an old Moslem dressed in a djellaba and carrying a tiny electric torch gave a toothless grin as he thought he recognized Imam Ali.

Tom uttered a word or two in Arabic, pointing to an imaginary spot behind the watchman's back. Puzzled, he turned round and Tom dropped his long stick and leapt on him. With a forceful hand he held a chloroform-soaked pad to the old fellow's nose, sending him into a deep sleep in an instant.

Tom supported his body, letting it slide gently down to the ground.

"Quick, go in," he ordered Camilla.

Trembling, she did as she was told, picking the staff up and closing the door behind her. Tom tied his unconscious victim up and gagged him.

"Follow me, it's this way ..."

In the half-darkness lit up by their powerful torches, they crossed the vast prayer-hall with its tall white arcades strewn with countless rows of blood-red mats. Behind a beautiful period door, they found a long corridor, which they entered.

“It’s here,” Tom said, pointing. “This is the wall ...”

He took off his false white beard and black turban, as also his long dark tunic. From round his waist he unwound the hundred and fifty feet of rope that he had used to simulate a huge belly. Then he took his staff from Camilla to extract from it a long metal bar that was hidden inside the wood.

With a forceful kick, Tom knocked down part of the white wall. The bricks fell into the open cavity formed by a conduit and shattered on its floor, sixty feet down. Tom kicked the wall several more times to enlarge his original hole. Sticking his head in through this, Tom lit up the bottom with his powerful electric torch.

“You go first,” he said, turning toward Camilla. “I’ll help you down.”

She reacted by taking off her djellaba so Tom could tie the rope to the safety harness that the young woman had around her waist. Once he had lowered her down to the bottom, Tom tied the rope to the banister of a nearby staircase, tied the metal bar to a cord and hung it over his shoulder in the small of his back, then rappelled down the conduit.

“Left or right?” Camilla inquired as soon as he reached her.

A corridor lined with shaped masonry, ten feet high by ten wide, ran in the two opposite directions.

Tom and Camilla’s torches swept round the dark space.

“I’ve read ants always find the shortest route between their nest and any source of food,” Camilla stated. “It’s a pity we haven’t their instinct to guide us ...”

“Instinct?” Tom responded. “Do you think they find the shortest way by instinct?”

“Don’t they? They certainly can’t count how many steps they take with their little pairs of legs ...”

Camilla giggled nervously.

“We go right here,” Tom said, stepping out. “You know insects can’t count. And if ants always find the shortest way, it’s by a very practical method: they secrete a pheromone when they move, a substance that indicates to other ants which path to follow. The stronger the concentration of the pheromone is, the more the trace attracts ants. If there are two different ways to the same source of food, the intensity of the smell becomes greater more quickly on the shorter route: any ant taking the shortest way makes a return journey, and so doubles the concentration of pheromone, whilst the other ants taking the longer path have only covered part of the way, so haven’t strengthened the trace so much ...”

Camilla nodded in the darkness. Hearing the deep voice of the man she

was following reassured her somewhat.

“So insects really can’t count?” she asked, so as to carry on with the conversation.

“No, and animals virtually can’t either. For instance, apes have just five classes of neuron, which let them count only up to five.”

“Why only five?”

“In the evolution of species, it wasn’t necessary to distinguish larger numbers: animals make a visual estimate of how many adversaries they’re facing before making the choice of flight or fight. And five foes were already enough for the brains of primates to have a motive for flight ...”

The tips of Tom’s fingers brushed against the wall, out of which clear water was seeping.

“I remember a tale on those lines,” he said as he walked onward. “There was a crow that was disturbing the birds in a pigeon loft. The farmer took a rifle and hid inside it. Except, the crow wasn’t stupid and waited till the farmer went away. So the farmer came back with an accomplice: the accomplice came back out of the pigeon loft so as to make the bird think it was now empty. But the crow still wasn’t tricked and waited for both men to go. Finally, it took six men to hoodwink the bird and get to shoot it ...”

Tom’s torch paused for a moment on a patch of darker-colored masonry.

“Thanks to our animal inheritance, we’re also limited to five groups of neurons sensitive to quantities. If we don’t count the objects in our mind, when we’re asked to make a visual estimate of the quantities in two sets of objects both containing six different items and to say which of the two has more items, we can’t do it. We have to resort to numerical symbols and count in our heads, and it’s no longer the five groups of counting neurons that are activated, but others that take over from them in different regions in our large brains.”

Tom gently tapped the back of his head with his torch.

“The fact such regions are missing in crows was fatal for the bird in the tale ...”

He unslung the metal rod and banged the wall with it. A hollow sound rang out and Tom handed his torch to Camilla.

“We’re there, the room must be behind this wall.”

“But there’s no doorway, are you sure it isn’t farther on?”

“No, the corridor ends in a dead end in both directions. Abbé Boudet’s plans were pretty accurate: we’re at the rear of the secret room.”

Tom felt with his hand for a crack between two stones into which to force his metal rod. After ten minutes of heavy effort, a large stone finally fell to the ground with a dull thud and Camilla hastened to light up the gaping hole.

"I can see papyruses," she exclaimed. "Boudet was right ..."

The opening was not wide enough for Tom, so he asked:

"Our time is short, do you feel up to going in all on your own?"

Camilla nodded.

"It's okay by me, as long as there are no rats ..."

Tom thought of adopting a facetious tone and telling her that if there were any rats, it was because the Church had issued edicts forbidding the destruction of these rodents, as they were considered to be working to achieve God's ends, being propagators of the epidemic during times of plague. On the same lines, Pope Leo XIII had declared that anybody who was vaccinated ceased to be a child of God: smallpox was a punishment ordained by God and vaccination thus a defiant challenge to his heavenly will ...

Tom refrained from telling her what was going through his head; the time and the place were hardly suited to that sort of conversation.

Camilla held her torch between her teeth as she scrambled through the narrow opening.

"Leave the papyrus scrolls," Tom told her. "Look for a sort of large book with 'Pontius Pilatus' written on it. It's probably bound in leather and likely to have a strap round it ..."

In the secret room, huge blocks of stone had fallen from the low roof, not merely blocking the main entrance but also reducing the amount of floor space considerably.

"I hope it's not under the rubble," Camilla sang out after five minutes of fruitless searching. "I ..."

She stopped talking.

Luck had smiled on her.

In the beam of her torch, she had just spotted the Grail among a pile of papyri scattered over the floor.

"I've found it!"

Tom was about to congratulate her through the narrow opening in the wall when a sound of hurrying footsteps made him turn around.

Before he could move an inch, three red laser beams were shining on his chest. He slowly and cautiously raised his hands in the air.

"Camilla," he said, "whatever you do, don't move. Don't move a

muscle ...”

*
* *

The young nun walked into Cardinal Fustiger’s office and closed the door behind her. While her head remained hidden by her wimple, her young fine-featured face bent to kiss the Cardinal’s hands.

He smiled and in his turn he kissed the newcomer, on the forehead.

“Hello, Leo,” he said. “Have you the book with you?”

Leo pulled off the wimple that had disguised him.

“Yes,” he replied in his rather feminine voice. “Here it is ...”

He drew the manuscript that he had discovered in the obelisk at Luxor out from under his black nun’s habit. The dark and slightly bulging eyes of the Cardinal, with their scattered golden highlights, began to shine with a bright glow. Fustiger grabbed the Pontius Pilate Report and looked at its outer cover for several seconds before asking:

“You haven’t looked inside, have you?”

Leo shook his head and the Cardinal smiled delightedly.

“Good, perfect ...”

Fustiger opened the safe concealed behind one of the paintings on his wall and deposited the Luxor manuscript in it alongside the other that Leo had recovered at Rennes-le-Château. Recognizing the satanic Book that he had sent by post, Leo was surprised that the Cardinal had not yet burned it. However, he made no comment to this effect.

The Cardinal, wearing his usual blood-red cassock, sat in his chair and invited his protégé to take a seat. If he had brought him here to Rome, it was for one simple reason: the Pope was vacillating about the ultimatum from the Sons of Abraham and their accursed bomb. If the Pope did not quickly take a stance in favor of Israel and the extension of its territories, the Cardinal would have to see to defusing the bomb himself.

That implied the physical elimination of the Holy Father.

For a brief moment, the Cardinal asked himself if Leo would be prepared to take on such a dirty deed without hesitation. However, he knew that it would be enough to present the matter simply: the Pope was possessed by Satan and it was necessary to save his soul by sending him to Heaven.

Recently, having some doubt about Leo’s mental health, the Cardinal had set him a little problem to work out, an enigma that it was impossible

for ordinary people to solve in under five seconds. He had told him the story of a young woman who was at her mother's funeral. This girl had seen a young man that she did not know. She had found him fantastic, the man of her dreams. It had been love at first sight and she had fallen hopelessly in love with him. A few days later, the young woman had killed her own sister ...

The Cardinal had asked Leo what had motivated the young woman to kill her sister.

This was a test that Fustiger had read in a psychology magazine. The test was used by a well-known American psychologist to find out if a person had a killer's mentality. A good few serial murderers had been subjected to this test and they had given the expected response to the question. Everybody who hit on this answer naturally, without spending a long time thinking it out, spontaneously, from gut feelings, was a potential psychopath.

Such people felt no fear and had no form of compassion: the sight of somebody else suffering sadness or pain left them unmoved. They had a low frustration threshold and their violence could be unleashed at any moment. They were fully aware of social rules, but they did not respect them and felt no guilt when they broke them. They considered that they had the right to do so, because they obeyed only their own value systems.

In Leo's case, these values were enshrined in the Bible.

Leo had responded to the Cardinal's enigma completely as expected, giving an instant correct reply.

As if he was remembering a good joke of which he wanted to remind Leo, the Cardinal said to him in a light-hearted tone, echoing Leo:

"Well, yes, naturally, the young woman did indeed kill her sister because she expected the young fellow to turn up again at the new funeral ..."

*

* *

Sitting in the chair, Tom turned his head.

Through the jute sack he could see nothing, but the door had just opened. He heard it close again and footsteps slowly approaching him.

The handcuffs that had been cruelly hurting his wrists were removed.

"You always get yourself into the most incredible situations," a deep voice said, without a trace of any foreign accent.

That voice was known to Tom. He recognized it immediately.

“Alan?” he asked. “Is that you?”

As the only response, the jute sack was suddenly whisked off and a harsh light temporarily blinded Tom’s eyes, leading him to blink furiously.

After several seconds during which his sight was blurred and painful, Tom finally managed to focus on the figure of the newcomer.

Alan was there, smiling mockingly. Beneath a thick crop of white crew-cut hair, the Israeli’s square face was crossed by a long scar running from the chin to the forehead and crossing the right socket, from which the eye was missing. A black eye-patch like a pirate’s hid this empty socket. The fifty-odd-year-old man, tall and broad like a mountain, dressed in a dark suit, went to sit at the other side of the interrogation table.

Tom took advantage of this pause to glance round the small room where he was being held: apart from a large one-way mirror set in one wall and the two chairs on opposite sides of the table, the place was empty.

“You’re lucky it was me that took the phone call from the Vatican,” Alan said. “I was given to understand that it was in Israel’s interests for you to be permanently removed from the scene. It seems you’ve become a wicked terrorist, holding documents that put the safety of the Jewish nation in great peril ...”

Alan burst out laughing.

“Your old bosses want to see you killed because of Pilate’s manuscript, is that it?”

“Do you know about Pilate’s report?” Tom asked in astonishment.

“You know that in the Mossad we know everything. I learned of its contents long before I came to know you. The Vatican’s secret archives hold no secrets for me ...”

Pensive, Tom asked:

“So you’ve also known about King Josiah for a long while, have you? The Vatican has a file of evidence to justify clearing the Jews out of Palestine, do you know that?”

“But we have the Pontius Pilate Report ... so the score’s even ... the ball’s in their court ...”

Alan chuckled for a few seconds then went on in a more serious tone.

“Israel exists, that’s an incontrovertible fact, and it’s my job to protect it. Is the State of Israel legitimate or not? I don’t know and I don’t care. I’m not a lawyer or a historian, just a soldier who must defend his nation and that’s what I do, without the slightest compunction about what it takes. Europeans conquered what is now the United States to the severe detriment of the Indian tribes, many of whom were exterminated without anybody bothering to complain, and the U.S.A. became a legitimate country in

everybody's eyes. So, how come people want to judge my nation, which was definitely present in this land in the past? What's done is done, and there's no sense committing fresh injustices by forcing the Jews to leave the lands that they have made prosperous way beyond anything the Arabs ever did or could do. We've created a modern, prosperous nation in the land of Palestine, an extremely wealthy country compared to what was there before ..."

Tom nodded.

"You know, American Indians used to destroy any surplus food or wealth they had so as not to stir up jealousy in neighboring tribes, with the aim of not provoking wars caused by greed. That wise act was considered folly by Europeans, who got rid of the Indians in order to turn their country into the richest nation in the world ..."

Alan smiled and his one blue eye stared at Tom.

"Who are we to judge different cultures? Is that what you mean?"

Tom smiled in his turn.

Alan stood up and stood before the one-way glass. He asked in Hebrew for a drink to be brought. A minute later the room's door opened and a soldier in a black ski mask and jumpsuit came in and put a tray with fruit juices on the table. Tom waited until he was alone with Alan once more before asking him a question.

"If the secret of King Josiah chanced somehow to become known to the Israeli people, what would happen?"

Alan gave Tom a glass of orange juice, then took one for himself before sitting down once more.

"Not a lot," Alan replied, "you can be sure of that. One day or another, we know they'll learn about it in some way. It's just a question of time. But no Jew will be willing to move out so as to leave space for the Arabs; at most they'll be conceded a little more land or a few more rights. We've already thought over that scenario, and we know what to do in order to reverse any tendency to the contrary, so that the country's interests are preserved. Moderate and not very nationalistic citizens systematically change their votes to a nationalist candidate if an image of the Israeli flag is projected to them for sixteen milliseconds, which is too short a time for them to notice it consciously. Before elections, television broadcasts pictures of the Israeli flag subliminally in its political programs and the most moderate of Jews magically turn into the most ultraconservative nationalists. Strange, isn't it? We can influence electoral trends, because the flag gets people's votes. That way, we'll always have a nationalist majority to ensure the continuance of our great nation ..."

Tom thought silently, knowing full well that reptilian dictatorships were primarily subliminal democracies where order and security outweighed conscience. The strength of a flag was a lot greater than people believed, so that waving it in electoral campaigns was never an insignificant act: it influenced reptilian public opinion by heightening the thirst to belong to a group, to a dominant nation.

"I'm going to have you thrown out of Israel," Alan said. "It's the best I can do before others lay their hands on you: the Vatican has a long reach and we must find a quick fix ..."

He pointed to his one good eye.

"It's thanks to you that I still have this, and I haven't forgotten the big debt I owe you. But after today we'll be quits ..."

Tom smiled at him and nodded.

Alan must have been cherishing the desire to do him a good turn for a long time. In every human there was a need for reciprocity. This constituted the foundation of the earliest societies, the platform of mutual aid allowed the first humans to survive in the heart of a hostile environment. The instinct to return like for like was deep-seated in the behavioral inheritance and in the Paleolithic any member of the clan who did not share this hereditary behavior had been excluded from society. The sexual selection stressed by Darwin had chosen this innate characteristic and had permitted group cohesion in the face of adversity.

Nevertheless, rooted as this was in our genes, it was also a consequence that any people unable to exercise the capacity for reciprocity felt terrible frustration in their deepest depths. Hence, it was always vital to ensure that the beneficiaries of an action or gift should be in a position to return the compliment or to ensure that the present given was presented as gratitude for some good action on their part whose scope was not measurable.

Too extravagant a gift prevented recipients from exercising the 'right to reciprocity' and made them distant or even aggressive toward the generous donator.

It is less dangerous to harm most people than to do them too much good, as the French thinker François de la Rochefoucauld had said.

Paradoxically, people disliked those who did them good deeds ...

"What about Pilate's manuscript?" Tom inquired. "Can I have it back?"

Alan shook his head.

"Don't ask me for the moon."

"Can't I even read it? Just leaf through it for a few minutes. Go on, you could do me that small favor ..."

Alan got a pack of cigarettes out of one of the pockets of his jacket. He lit up a 'cancer stick', as he called them, and looked long and hard at Tom.

"What do you think the Pontius Pilate Report contains?" Alan finally asked.

"The proof that Jesus is a myth, no?"

"A myth?" Alan asked in surprise. "You think Jesus is a myth?"

He burst out laughing then went on in a more serious tone:

"Well, yes, you're right, the life of Jesus does make a very nice fable ..."

He dropped the cigarette on the floor, crushed it under his heel and gestured with his hand toward the one-way glass. Realizing that Alan would not let him consult the manuscript, Tom made a last request:

"Could you arrange a flight to Prague?"

"Prague? Yes, if you like. I'll do the necessary for you and your lady friend ..."

The door opened and three soldiers in black ski masks and black jumpsuits came into the room.

28

U.S.S.R 1953. Kuntsevo

In his dacha near Moscow, Joseph Stalin checked the armored door of his room. He looked round nervously, ensuring once again that everything was securely locked and bolted. He had to be more than prudent because of all those who would wish to kill him, especially the Jews.

Stalin knew that he was not mad and that the Jews were plotting to assassinate him, just as they were plotting to destroy the U.S.S.R.. He knew equally well that they had thought up a devilish secret plan to seize Palestine then use their new nation to take power over the whole world. Stalin was well aware of their projects, yet he had made the dreadful mistake of serving their Promised Land up to them on a tray.

However, could he really be blamed for what he had done? Well of course not. All the responsibility lay with his experts, who had told him that the creation of the State of Israel would lead to the emergence of a Communist country, a future bulwark for the Russians against American capitalism. His one error was finally to have accepted that the arguments put forward by his specialists were well-founded, those specialists who had assured him that Zionism, which held all property in common for the good of the Jewish community, would infallibly lead to the development of a State with a communist ideology.

Stupid.

Stalin had made some amends for his mistake by having that crowd of self-proclaimed experts, really spies in the pay of the Jews, executed by firing squad.

Grunting with contentment, he went and sat in his comfortable chair. He picked up a leather bag from a low table. In it were fresh expert reports.

From a red cardboard document wallet he took a summary that predicted the inevitable fall of Communism in general, and Marxism-

Leninism in particular, if draconian measures were not taken urgently, since humans were not made for these styles of living. With great attention, Stalin had read and re-read it and knew its contents by heart.

These alarming pages were based on two striking experiments.

One was referred to as the 'frustrated monkey syndrome', being an experiment carried out with a monkey, A, that had received a banana as a reward for completing a task well. Monkey A had been pleased with itself and had willingly accepted the banana. The test had been repeated with monkey A once again successfully performing the required task. However, when monkey A had seen that another monkey, B, that had not managed to accomplish its task, was also rewarded with a banana, monkey A had felt frustrated and had angrily thrown its reward on the floor.

The report stated that people's frustration would put human grit in the works of the clever machinery of Communism. That frustration would be aroused in any workers, indeed in any intelligent or hard-working and meticulous people, by seeing that idiots and the lazy earned the same as they did. Frustration would scuttle the system, which soon would be unable to progress. Any system that did not achieve advances was a system that could not long survive in place. In view of the characteristics of the human brain, which was similar to a monkey's brain, Communism and all its diverse ramifications were utopias doomed to failure. As corroboration for this crushing conclusion, although in a totally different context, a second experiment had been performed with children from orphanages all round the country, children of ages between three and six, brought up completely without religion of any sort in their lives. After an initial check to ensure that these orphans definitely had no concept, not even the haziest, of God, or notion of the supernatural, the experimenters had told them the story that an old woman, satirically given the name Maria, had died the previous day. Maria was supposed to have hidden a treasure in one of ten boxes of different colors standing in a ring in a room, a treasure that Maria had wanted to give as a gift to the orphanage. Each child had been asked to guess in which box Maria had hidden her treasure. Alone in the room apart from one experimenter, each child had had to walk around the boxes before pointing to the one in which they thought the treasure might be hidden. On the wall a picture of a woman supposed to be Maria had been hung. When the child passed by the blue box, a concealed accomplice made the portrait fall off the wall. Three-year-old children paid no special attention to the incident, simply shrugging their shoulders and saying that the picture had been badly attached. However, the older children had had a very different reaction: they had systematically halted before the blue box and pointed to it as the one where the old lady's

treasure had to be hidden.

All of these orphans had instinctively interpreted the falling of the portrait as a message from the other world sent by the late Maria.

This gave proof that a belief in supernatural spirits was not something that was acquired in the course of life, thanks to culture, but rather that this belief was an innate behavioral characteristic that appeared automatically as a child's intelligence developed. Virtually from birth, humans inherited the conviction that the dead were watching them and this futile innate conviction inexorably gave rise in them to a belief in the divine in the shape of a God.

God was within us, according to the report, and because of this characteristic of the human brain, Marxist-Leninist State atheism was inevitably bound to face major ideological disturbances that would lead to the fall of its system. To tell people that God did not exist was almost like saying the Earth was not round, but flat. Innate religious views were stronger than education, stronger than reason or logic, and much stronger than any State propaganda.

Unless the evil could be rooted out from its very origin.

The report proposed the detection by means of a simple test of all those predisposed toward the paranormal, or a strong belief in invisible heavenly forces, and hence in God, all of which ran counter to atheistic Marxist-Leninist doctrine. This test consisted of getting people to walk a straight line with a blindfold over their eyes. If they tended to veer to the left, this showed that the right hemisphere of their brains was strongly dominant. This was the hemisphere that was swift to establish associations between items with no obvious link, giving a divine interpretation for totally natural events.

The report recommended applying the line test to the whole population of the U.S.S.R., sending to the gulag all those who wandered to the left, because logically they were potential opponents of the system. There was no other solution to be found: suppressing religions from one day to the next when they were actually innate had been a mistake. It would have been better to set up some spiritual cult as a substitute, so as to try to wean the population gradually away from the divine that lurked inside everybody, and at this moment it was necessary to face up to this terrible 'divine' poison that was in people's minds.

Stalin approved this proposal to deport all those carrying this poison and he was on the point of signing it into law in the immediate future.

Since he had climbed into power, he had undertaken numerous purges, which had eliminated millions of men and women who had represented a

real threat to his power or a definite obstacle on the route to the society of which he dreamt.

His dream was of a nation of new humans that would dominate the whole world.

Soviet scientists like his faithful Lysenko were categorical about it: it was possible to transmit acquired characteristics, so Soviet citizens that adapted to the mold of the new man would transmit it to their descendants. This would bring the spontaneous birth of a new generation of innately new men. Some Western scientists objected that this was impossible, but Stalin knew that bourgeois science was essentially false, and proletarian science true, by definition.

Through work, knowledge and culture, the new man would be a human raised out of the common herd to attain understanding of the majesty of science. That would definitively solve the problem of the frustrated monkey syndrome: when all Soviet citizens had achieved the higher intellectual level of the new man, similar from one individual to another and egalitarian, they would no longer be frustrated by seeing incompetents around them, as there would be none left. All Stalin had to do was to ensure that the idle and the stupid also underwent transformation into new men, or that they were eliminated permanently by the necessary purges.

Stalin thus had to be absolutely inflexible in his line of conduct, as he had been up till now. He had to continue sending to the gulag those who arrived late at work, and from now on even those who simply could not keep up with the production rates that were allotted.

Besides, the coming war with the Americans would finally wipe out the weak, as it would be a war in which only the strongest and toughest Soviet citizens would survive and transmit their acquired strength tenfold to their children.

Stalin stroked his moustache in contentment.

He was going to wipe the United States off the map of the world, sweep aside those deeply unwell from the world of the living, the worst sick there could be on the Earth: the unwell who did not even realize they were ill.

The Americans were poisoned, contaminated by that innate 'divine' poison.

It was enough just to listen to them to realize this: in all sorts of circumstances, when they were afraid or surprised or even when they were making love, Americans had only one pathological expression on their lips: 'Oh my God'.

Not merely happy to flaunt their illness in public through their day-to-day speech, they did so also through an uncontrollable obsessive behavior:

many of them incessantly made the sign of the cross, whatever the place they might happen to be.

Very sick, but without knowing they were.

Stalin would give them a radical treatment, as he had the perfect remedy to cure them once and for all.

Stalin glanced at the leather bag.

Adolf Hitler had had in his possession a weapon worse than the atomic bomb, a weapon of mass destruction that could have wiped the Americans out completely, a weapon that could have brought the Second World War to a close overnight. However, paradoxically, this weapon would also have destroyed Germany and other Western countries and so would have led to the triumph of Communism on all continents. Hitler had thus not been able to use it against his transatlantic foes. The height of irony, though, was that for reasons Stalin could only guess at, Hitler had actually bequeathed to him this terrible weapon.

Stalin plunged his hand into the leather bag and pulled out an old manuscript.

Pontius Pilate's report had much more devastating force than the most powerful and radioactive Soviet atom bombs and Stalin was soon going to reveal it to the whole world.

Then the American imperialist system would implode and collapse from within.

The political leaders of that country must most probably already know the secret of Jesus Christ, thus certainly no longer believing in God, but they continued to play the part of pious Christians by encouraging children at school to learn prayers and catechisms so as to brainwash the younger generation into believing blindly. The fear of God permitted all the injustices of wealth and every sort of inequality.

The American people believed they would win a reward in heaven as compensation if they allowed themselves to be led like docile sheep by the powerful. So no doubt would ever be cast on God in the minds of all these poor folk, their leaders had pushed their vicious propaganda so far that they even had the motto 'In God We Trust' inscribed on their coins.

They knew that, without this blind faith in God, the whole unjust capitalist system would fall in ruins.

Once the secret of Christ was unveiled, that would be the end of God, that God who made the Americans act so stupidly, those Americans who dared not revolt for fear of Hell, who remained good little pawns waiting for a Paradise that existed nowhere but in their heads.

As Karl Marx had so rightly said, God was the opiate of the masses.

The Pontius Pilate Report would brutally cut off the Christian world from this 'divine' poison. When the people who had been mocked woke up to find that their phantom God had vanished, that the fear of Hell no longer had any force and that Paradise did not exist, these haggard crowds would head straight for the only real ideological alternative: Communism as embodied by Stalin.

Then he would be adored by the entire world, as the faith that Christians had had in their Jesus Christ would be diverted toward Stalin.

A new map of the world took shape in his head.

Stalin grunted in satisfaction.

For eight years, since he had first got possession of the Pontius Pilate Report, he had not been able to put into practice this plan for the destruction of the U.S.A.: their atomic bombs had dissuaded him from it. Stalin knew that to take revenge, when they realized they had nothing left to lose, the American leaders would have bombed the U.S.S.R. and reduced it to ashes with an apocalyptic nuclear holocaust. That was the reason that had held him back until now from divulging the secret of Christ. However, he now also had the atom bomb and could respond in kind.

Better still, the forthcoming completion of the rocket defenses of Moscow would allow him to contemplate the West from behind a protective hedge of missiles. The man in charge of building it, Lavrentiy Beria, had promised him that this shield against American attacks would soon be operational.

As he thought of Beria, Stalin's forehead creased in irritation.

Beria knew of the Pontius Pilate Report and of Stalin's plan to broadcast it so as to destroy the Western world and provoke a nuclear war. Beria had tried to dissuade him from it, claiming that only Moscow would be spared by the atomic war and that Stalin, though the victor, would be left ruling over a world in ruins. According to Beria, the game was not worth the candle. Stalin had retorted to him that the death of a man was a tragedy but the death of millions of humans was a mere statistic. Whatever the number of casualties, his final victory was assured, thanks to the Pontius Pilate Report. In his glorious project, it was necessary to do no more than wait for the U.S.A. to attack first, after Christ's secret became known, for world opinion to turn against that wicked aggressor and move toward sympathy for the U.S.S.R. as the innocent victim of its attack. Alternatively, in the unlikely event that the Americans did not start hostilities, the Soviet Union could unleash its nuclear fire to liberate people from the lie of Christ and set them free from the chains of tyrannical capitalism.

Stalin started sweating profusely and he put Pilate's manuscript back down on the leather bag.

He envisaged getting rid of Beria as soon as he was no longer necessary for his project. He had seen him a few hours previously, but, as was his habit, Stalin had kept his intentions perfectly concealed from their target: Beria believed that he still had Stalin's full confidence. Stalin was past master at playing on human nature and reassuring anybody. Beria would not understand what was happening when finally he was executed by a bullet in the back of the head, imagining to the last that it was all a terrible mistake and that Stalin had nothing to do with his condemnation to death.

Beria's treachery was unpardonable. Stalin had had people killed for much less: he had had individuals sent to their death simply because they had spelt his name wrongly or had wrapped up a flower-pot in a newspaper with his photograph in it ...

With a trembling hand, grimacing, Stalin rubbed his belly. A spasm of pain ran through his whole body and a dreadful thought sprung to his mind.

"Beria ..." Stalin muttered. "He's ... he's ..."

His eyes glazed. He dragged himself up from his chair with difficulty. Everything around him seemed to go out of focus. Whirling infernally, the image of his mother appeared before him and she tilted her head slightly as if she were about to reproach him one further time for not having become a priest. He felt like bursting out laughing, telling her what the ministry of Christ was really based on, but the words would not come out of his mouth.

He managed three more steps and collided with his bed, onto which he collapsed.

Unconscious.

29

Divine Envelope

Jesus stopped abruptly.

“Who touched me?” said he, grumbly.

Around him, the apostles halted, looking at one another in astonishment. Surrounded by a vast crowd that was following him as his feet trod the green and fertile land of Galilee, Jesus was in direct contact with villagers who sometimes jostled him in the bustle of the walking amid the people’s fervor.

“Who touched my garments?” said he again.

As nobody came forward to own up, Simon Peter said to him:

“Master, you see the multitude of villagers pressing close upon you ...”

“Somebody touched my mantle,” cut in Jesus. “I ... I felt that strength was drained out from me ...”

In the burning, dazzling sunlight, he looked all around, searching with his piercing gaze for whoever had done it. Seeing herself discovered, in fear and trembling, an old woman with white hair threw herself at his feet.

“Lord, forgive me. I said within myself that if I might but touch your garment, I should be made whole ...”

Many knew her. They were aware that she had been diseased with an issue of blood for some years, an illness that no physician had been able to treat. However, it was for a totally different ailment, new and unbearable, that she was now seeking a cure. Jesus helped her stand up and his sea-blue eyes gazed deeply into hers. He then lowered his gaze to the chest of the old woman: holding her two clenched fists over her heart, she had pressed her long thin arms against her off-white tunic.

In Jesus’ eyes, a tiny spark of worry flickered. He took her apart from the crowd. Going off alone with her to the soothing shade of an olive tree, Jesus whispered at some length into her ear. During this time, some

villagers muttered amongst themselves that they had seen something like a haze coming off Christ when the old woman had gone up behind him and had clung to his robe with the despair bred by the disease that was undermining her. Others had even seen surprise in her eyes when she had let go of the hem of Christ's garment. She had looked at the palms of her hands before clenching them forcefully and bringing them to her chest.

"Woman, be of good comfort, for your faith has made you whole," said Jesus in a loud voice so as to be heard by all. "Go in peace and be cured of your ailment."

She nodded in silence, bowing reverentially. As if hiding a fragile and valuable little animal in the hollow of her palms, she ran off with her fists still clenched over her heart.

That same day, she was cured, her ailment having left her.

Jesus went up to Jairus. This man in his forties, wearing a purple tunic, his face serious and grim, was the leader of a synagogue. An hour earlier, he had come to seek out Christ and had flung himself at his feet, begging him.

"My little daughter lies at the point of death; I beg of you, come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be healed and will live," he had said imploringly.

Jesus had listened while he recounted the disorder that was afflicting his twelve-year-old child. Jesus had then set out, in the company of his apostles and disciples, as also of the hundred or so villagers who had been present at his preaching and did not want to leave the Messiah. Now, as he watched the old woman who had touched his robe heading off into the distance, Jesus said to Jairus:

"We are nearly arrived at your house. Let us make haste, for your daughter awaits us."

At that moment, a young servant girl emerged from between two clumps of olive trees, coming from the house of her master Jairus. She was in tears.

"Your daughter is dead," said she to Jairus, sobbing. "You need trouble the Messiah no more ..."

Jesus cut in, speaking to the father of the child.

"Do not be afraid," said he, so that he would remain hopeful. "Only believe and she will be saved."

Jesus did not permit any of the crowd of disciples to follow him farther, ordering all to remain at that spot. Only Simon Peter, John and his brother James were allowed to accompany him. The four set out behind Jairus, who stepped up the pace. His home was the first building in the village

and they reached it in five minutes. Inside and outside the big, white, two-storey house, there were many people gathered, family and friends, in tears and crying out in loud lamentation.

Walking into the building, Jesus addressed those present.

“Why do you make this ado and tumult?” grumbled he. “Cease this weeping and wailing. The child is not dead, but asleep ...”

Some burst into nervous laughter because of these last few words. Jesus paid no attention to them and ordered them all to leave. Jairus and his wife took care of sending everybody outside. Jesus then asked his three apostles and the parents to wait for him. Unaccompanied, he went into the one of the numerous rooms on the ground floor where the child was. She was lying on a small bed.

Simon Peter could not see what Jesus was doing, but after a few minutes of heavy silence he heard his Master exclaim:

“Young girl, I say to you, arise!”

To the astonishment of her parents, their daughter appeared on the threshold of the room, staggering slightly. Jesus was behind her and asked them to give some food to the young girl cured by miracle.

Jairus flung himself at Christ’s feet. He kissed them, then stood back up and took his child by the arm to lead her to table. Jesus and his apostles slipped discreetly away, leaving the parents alone to enjoy this prodigious return.

In the days that followed, a tale spread around the whole district. Not the tale of the resurrection of the young girl, because that sort of miracle was already credited to Jesus. This time the news that was causing a sensation was about the old woman who had touched the fringe of Christ’s robe. A rumor quickly went the rounds: the mere action of brushing against her cured all ills, as a divine force emanated from her.

Indeed, there were two other sick people who were miraculously cured after touching the Son of God. However, Jesus had been displeased at their behavior, as if he feared some catastrophe would be caused by it. So, he gave strict instructions to his disciples that nobody should henceforward be allowed to come up to him and touch him unless he had invited them to do so.

The apostles took care that this order was fully respected and on occasion, some of them showed great harshness to all those trying to approach Christ without being asked, sometimes even using instinctive brutality.

Simon the Zealous was among them. This apostle, who openly laid claim to being Christ’s full brother, even if that was not so, protected his

Master with extreme zeal, which led many to say that his nickname of 'Zealous' was well deserved. Short but very stocky, with sturdy legs like tree trunks, broad shoulders and arms whose veins showed through the skin, he had a round face, prominent nose and low forehead. As if afraid that somebody might seize him by it in a brawl, he kept his beard trimmed very short, doing the same with his black hair. His dark eyes reflected unwavering determination on behalf of the cause that vibrated in his heart. Protecting Christ was an almost sickly obsession, his divine mission entrusted to him by his brothers. He devoted himself to it almost angrily, with unshakable tenacity, professing a great love for Christ. Yet this love did not seem to be mutual. Jesus was mostly cutting, cold and distant toward him and this strange attitude was reaffirmed during the episode of the children.

Ten days or so after the incident of the old woman who had touched his robe, in the midst of a crowd of villagers, parents approached Christ to introduce their children, hoping that he would bless them by the laying on of his hands. However, the Zealous drove them violently back, cursing those who invited themselves without prior authorization.

Jesus became angry and lambasted the Zealous, using harsh words. The apostle could not understand why his Master sometimes used cutting words to him, when he had sworn absolute faithfulness to him and was doing no more than to apply strictly the instructions that he had been given. Nonetheless, the Zealous made no complaint: Christ spoke harshly to a good few people.

After chiding him, Jesus addressed the other apostles.

"Allow the little children to come to me and do not forbid them," said he.

He kissed the children and laid his hands affectionately on their heads. He let them leave, except for one little lad whom he hugged against his legs.

"Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," stated Jesus. "Whosoever does not receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child, shall in no wise enter into it."

He swung round his head, casting his glance over the great number of villagers surrounding him. Standing in the middle of the little village with its narrow streets that wound higgledy-piggledy between its modest whitewashed buildings, Jesus asked the multitude aloud:

"Do you know who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"

Looking at his apostles, one after the other, he gently tapped the child on the head.

“Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever, therefore, makes himself humble and pure as this little child, that same will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Fixing his gaze on Simon Peter, he stared at him for some seconds before speaking once more.

“While I was away, you asked one another who was the greatest among you, did you not?”

Simon Peter lowered his eyes, like a child caught misbehaving, wondering how the Messiah could know. He had revealed that thought to nobody. How could Jesus be aware of it? It was incredible. However, Simon Peter knew that for Jesus nothing was impossible: he was the Son of God and his infinite power was able to plumb the depths of hearts and minds with a single look. Nothing could be kept hidden from him.

“If any man wishes to be the first,” continued Jesus, “he will be the last of you and the servant of all.”

Hugging the child in his arms, he smiled sadly as he spoke to the crowd.

“Whosoever receives one such little child because of my words is receiving me, and whosoever receives me is receiving him who sent me. This child, who among you is the smallest and the least, in truth is great, greater than all of you together ...”

He warned those who did harm to children, threatening them with the worst of heavenly punishments and with eternal damnation. Finally, he concluded:

“Take good care never to offend or despise any one of these little children, for, I tell you truly, their angels see all and are always in the company of the Heavenly Father.”

He kissed the little boy and allowed him to go.

Simon Peter was ill at ease. When he had left his Lord beside Lake Tiberias, having his mission to go and cure the possessed and preach the love of Christ, he had a doubt in his mind: what was his place among the Apostles? Would he become the greatest of them all? However, the Messiah had read his thoughts and had seen this misplaced ambition in his heart: to be the first among them, supplanting the others.

Simon Peter thought of something that had happened while Christ was away and that he had forgotten to mention. He confessed ruefully, as if to make up for the sin that stained his heart.

“Master, we saw somebody driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not one of your disciples.”

Jesus frowned for a moment, then his face lit up with an amused smile.

“Do not stop him! There is nobody who can do a miracle in my name and immediately after speak badly of me, for whoever is not against us is for us.”

Simon Peter nodded in silence. The group was about to set out again when a heavily built man of about thirty pushed past everyone, rushed forward and knelt at Christ's feet.

“Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asked.

Jesus smiled at him and helped him up.

“Why do you call me good? It is only the Heavenly Father who is truly good ...”

And you have already inherited eternal life; it has been running through you forever ...

“Do you know the commandments in the Laws of Moses?” Jesus asked. “Those which say ‘thou shalt not commit adultery’, ‘thou shalt do no murder’, ‘thou shalt not steal’, ‘thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor’, ‘honor thy father and mother’ ...”

“All those rules I have kept since I was a child,” said the big-bellied thirty-odd year old.

Jesus looked at him for a moment; he was dressed in a brand-new red tunic, had large expensive rings on his perfectly manicured fingers, and was clearly a very wealthy person.

“One thing is still lacking,” said Jesus. “Sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor. In that way you will lay up treasure in heaven. Then you can join me and follow my teachings.”

The man's fleshy mouth was contorted by a nervous tic. Without adding a single word, he went off sadly. Jesus watched him heading away, realizing that he would never give up his property. Speaking to the crowd, Jesus said,

“I tell you truly, it will be hard for the wealthy to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, I can truly say to you that it is easier to push a rope through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to make his way into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Hearing that, several Apostles were dumbfounded.

“Who can be saved, then?” asked a village woman.

Turning to her, Jesus replied,

“For humans, it is almost impossible, but for the Heavenly Father all things are possible.”

Looking out of the corner of his eye at the Apostles, he added,

“Sell your property and give what you obtain to charity. Get yourselves

everlasting purses, a never-ending treasure up in Heaven, where thieves cannot break in and steal it and pests cannot devour it. Wherever your treasure is, that is where your heart will be also.”

A strange expression fled across the face of several of the Apostles who were wondering if this message could be aimed directly at them.

Which was unthinkable.

Jesus saw a doubt reflected in those eyes that never stopped gazing at him in astonishment.

Understanding what disquiet the Master’s words had aroused among his followers, Simon Peter acted as spokesman.

“Lord, we have forsaken everything for you and followed you, what shall we receive for this?”

In Simon Peter’s eyes there seemed to be no trace of greed. This was not true for some of the others.

“You asked me that same thing at Lake Tiberias, and my answer remains the same. Do not worry, for anybody who has given up a house, a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, a child or land for me will receive a hundred times as much in return and will live forever in Heaven. Many people who are prominent now will be insignificant, but many who are insignificant now will take their places.”

This promise seemed to calm the raging fire burning in some minds.

Before leaving the village, so as to bring matters to a close, and end his preaching, Jesus decided to offer one last speech in the form of a parable.

“Listen. A man went out to sow seed. While he was sowing, some of the seeds fell along the path. They were trodden underfoot and eaten by the birds. Some of the seeds fell on rocky ground where there was little soil. They sprouted very quickly, because the earth was not deep. When the sun came up, these seeds were scorched and because they had shallow roots, the seedlings dried up and died. Some of the seeds fell in the midst of brambles and as they grew up together the brambles choked them. Some of the seeds fell on good ground: they sprouted and grew well, so that the crop was a hundred times what was sown. Anybody who has ears to hear should listen to this!”

Many of the villagers nodded in agreement without saying a word, wrongly thinking they had understood this last message from Christ.

Simon Peter was not among them. He approached Jesus and told him that he was not clear about the parable of the sower.

“You cannot understand the parable?” Jesus asked in pretended astonishment, a smile playing on his lips. “How, then, will you understand more complicated matters?”

Simon Peter lowered his head, not noticing his Master's teasing look.

"What the man is sowing is the heavenly word," Jesus explained. "When somebody hears the heavenly word without understanding it, the Evil One comes and seizes what has been sown in that person's heart: this is like the seeds that fell along the path. The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for people who hear the heavenly word and welcome it with joy. As they have no roots in themselves, they are people of the moment and have no staying power. So, as soon as there is any trouble or difficulty putting the heavenly word into practice, they give up. The seeds sown among the brambles represent a person who hears the heavenly word, but is so taken up with day-to-day business, the charms of money, or other desires, that the word is stifled and never comes to fruit. The seeds planted in good ground stand for people who hear the heavenly word and understand it: their noble and generous hearts retain it and their constancy makes it fruitful."

The fruit of deliverance...

Jesus often expressed himself by means of metaphors and simple comparisons so as to be understood more easily by the village folk, generally poorly educated and unaccustomed to talk of abstract ideas. However, he also used more complicated parables to transmit a more esoteric teaching. Many saw in them no more than obscure stories, but those who took a real interest in his teachings found food for thought in them. Hence the words with which Jesus frequently brought his preaching to a close: 'Anybody who has ears to hear should listen to this' or 'who have ears to hear, let them hear'.

Simon Peter questioned him about parables, wanting to know why the Master spoke to the populace in that strange way.

"To you, the apostles, it will be given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to others it is in parables, so that, seeing, they may not see and, hearing, they may not understand ..."

Only the wisest will understand, because not all are ready to accept the unacceptable human condition. For generations they have been blinded by King Josiah's lies ...

Simon Peter nodded silently, wrongly thinking that Jesus' last comment was alluding to the words of the prophet Isaiah, taken from a passage in the sacred Temple scriptures.

"As for you," added Jesus, speaking to the apostles, "blessed are your eyes, for they will see; blessed are your ears, for they will hear. Truly I say to you, many are the righteous who have wished to see those things that you will see, but have not seen them; many who have wished to hear what

you will hear, but have not heard them!”

In particular, he explained to them the mysterious, complex metaphors that he frequently used, statements which at first sight appeared impenetrable to each and all. Nonetheless, Jesus never went into the deeper sense of what he said, as if the apostles were not yet capable of grasping the full implications.

In secret and with many precautions, Jesus had decided to commence progressively giving them in dribs and drabs the wisdom of the Initiates of the Temple of Osiris. However, this would not be for them all, as if he feared that some were not worthy of it.

The group was about to set off once more. The Twelve went ahead of Jesus to clear the way. With his powerful voice, Jesus called to them, each by his name. They turned back toward him.

Jesus had to ensure one thing, clear away a growing doubt. The effect of surprise was crucial. The moment seemed appropriate.

“One among you is a traitor,” said Jesus to the apostles facing him.

He swept his penetrating gaze over the Twelve. In the eyes of one of them, he saw much more than the stupefaction that for a few seconds brought a grimace to his face.

I was sure of it, I had seen correctly ...

The apostles looked at each other in consternation, wondering who Christ was talking about, but he added not one word and, picking his way through the bewildered crowd that had witnessed the scene, he walked off calmly. After a moment’s hesitation, not knowing how to react, the Twelve finally followed their Master.

Simon Peter had immense love for Christ and, as he walked behind him, he asked himself how the spirit of treachery could beat in the heart of one of the apostles. How and why could somebody wish to betray the Son of God? It was unimaginable. Only a madman could want to commit such a folly, because the fires of gehenna would be the only wages of any act of betrayal. God would not forgive the slightest disloyalty toward his Son.

After all, there was not the least doubt that Jesus was truly the Son of God.

Many a time Simon Peter had been a direct witness of this. He had been present at so many miracles revealing the divine powers of Christ that there could be no question of his being an impostor, just a simple magician as some of the Temple’s spokesmen claimed, wishing at any cost, even at the price of lying, to discredit the Son of God.

If Jesus was not a divine wonder-worker, how could he walk on the water and order storms to subside? How could he multiply the loaves, or

make wine from water, as at Cana? How could he drive the demons out of the possessed, cure all ailments and even bring the dead back to life? How could he make the Divine Uncction flow from his hands if he was not himself the anointed of God?

Simon Peter had already had the answer to all these questions given him by God in person when Christ was transfigured on Mount Tabor.

Jesus was truly the Son of God.

God's influence over Jesus was undeniable: the Almighty communicated with his Son, passed on to him his divine word by transmitting to him his Holy Spirit, his divine will.

The traitor among the apostles had been detected by the Father and revealed to the Son.

Simon Peter swore to himself never to betray the Master. It was an honor to be at the service of the Son of God. The former fisherman felt privileged, touched by divine grace, having within him a tiny part of the immense powers that had been conferred on Christ.

Unconsciously he brought his hand to his belt and touched the small flask containing the Divine Uncction. With it he had cured a good number of the possessed. He remembered his apostolic mission when he had left Christ near Lake Tiberias. He had travelled through a great part of Galilee, endlessly performing cures and passing on the merciful message of Christ. Simon Peter had spread the Master's teachings, using simple words. However, he had decided to recount some of Christ's parables in various villages, even if he did not understand them all, even if he did not grasp the full extent of the Holy Spirit of God contained in these figurative expressions. In contrast, he knew that soon all would become clear and that Jesus would guide him to the light.

In secret, the Lord had promised him that.

Simon Peter heaved an inward sigh. He had not yet attained the level of faith that Christ probably was expecting from him. As a proof of this, he had often found himself unable to cure ailments when the Master was not there. Before they left, he had warned his apostles that this might happen, as if he was expecting it. Jesus had told them that a lack of faith could counteract the effects of the Divine Uncction. Despite all his faith, many times Simon Peter had not been able to relieve the sick.

Rejoining Jesus and the other apostles had been a delight for Simon Peter, who felt at his ease only when with the group. It had become a true family for him and just being with them warmed his heart, even if his relationship with certain members were sometimes difficult.

However, Jesus was there. The Son of God was the sun, casting light

into people's dark corners and bringing an indefinable well-being by his presence alone.

Memories jostled in his head. Simon Peter thought back on the miracle that had perhaps most affected his life: the day when Jesus had walked on the waters of Lake Tiberias. The apostle could no longer recall on which precise day this amazing episode had taken place.

It was the same for the calming of the storm.

To tell the truth, it now seemed to him that these two miracles had happened on two distinct occasions, on different days. He could not say for certain. The fear of dying that he had felt probably had a good deal to do with this inability to remember. In the apostle's view, another obvious reason might explain these gaps in his memory: if everything was rather confused in his mind and he could not exactly recall what had happened, as during the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, it was likely to be linked to the divine powers of Christ. These emitted such an aura, so intense an invisible halo, that they confounded mortal senses. One never emerged completely unscathed from a confrontation with heavenly forces like those which the Son of God possessed, capable to some degree of perturbing a lesser mind.

Such was the power of Christ.

Lost in his thoughts, Simon Peter carried on following his Master at a brisk pace.

After several days of walking, Jesus and the disciples accompanying him found themselves on the western shores of Lake Tiberias. Jesus decided not to linger there but to go directly to the other shore, to the East of Galilee. He had recently promised certain travelers who had told him of the situation in this northern part of the Decapolis that he would do so. Jesus embarked in a fishing boat with some of the apostles, while the others and a great number of fervent disciples climbed into whatever vessels they could manage to hire.

Crossing Lake Tiberias, they reached the opposite shore, in the region of the Gadarenes. As soon as Jesus disembarked, a huge fellow, half-naked and clothed in rags, ran toward him. He was of impressive size, easily two heads taller than the already tall figure of Christ. This man in his thirties, with his long and filthy hair and beard, had once been a well-to-do townsman. Now, possessed by demons, he had become mad and lived in tombs whose sanctity he had violated. His presence hung over the narrow sloping path that climbed up to the heights and many of the people from nearby villages no longer dared use it, as the possessed man was extremely violent and many had been beaten by this giant for no obvious reason. The previous month, half a hundred angry villagers had twice

captured him and bound him, once with ropes, the second time with chains, but his strength was such that he had freed himself by tearing off his bonds or snapping them. Since then, nobody had made any further attempt to control this possessed man who was always howling, day and night.

“What have I to do with you, Son of God most high?” shouted the man to Jesus in a cavernous voice. “Have you come to torment us? I beseech you, do not torture me ...”

He suddenly fell to his knees, his head raised to the sky, his mouth open and twisted in pain, tears running down his grimy face. Jesus looked at his huge body, on which there were many infected cuts that the man had inflicted on himself, slashing at himself with sharp stones. Those on his fore-arms were in the unhealthiest state.

A hundred yards from there, on the high plateau overlooking the lake, pig-farmers were watching what was happening with an amused air. They bred hogs for the Roman occupiers and had had to put up with the disturbing presence of the possessed man. Learning from gossip that the man claimed to be the Christ would soon be arriving, these farmers had decided to give the possessed man a fright. They hoped to get him to leave, so they told him that the Son of God was soon going to land there with his disciples. Christ was coming, so they said, to punish him for his behavior. The possessed man had been deeply upset by this. However, rather than running away as the breeders had expected, he had stayed there wandering up and down the lake-shore, awaiting the arrival of the Son of God with mixed fear and longing.

“What is your name?” asked Jesus softly.

“My name is Legion,” replied the kneeling man.

His voice had become fainter and higher-pitched, like that of a child.

“Legion, because there are many within me ...”

He tapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“I pray you, Son of God, drive them out from me.”

His voice had deepened again. However, the next instant the child-like voice was heard.

“If you expel us, send us to the swine and let us enter into them.”

He raised his arm to point to the plateau where the animals were feeding.

Another of the possessed arrived, emerging from nowhere. He was a fellow in madness to the man called Legion and the two men shared a tomb.

From up on the plateau, the pig-breeders were watching Jesus down below talking to the two possessed. They could not hear what Christ was

saying. Surrounded by numerous disciples who had disembarked on the shore with him, Jesus had laid his hands on Legion's face. The breeders were wondering what he was doing when a strange noise diverted their attention.

They turned toward it.

Then they saw a terrible sight, powerless to prevent what was happening. Seized by a sudden madness, the thousand or so pigs that they had penned up there had broken out of their enclosures and were rushing toward the cliffs, leaping off into emptiness and smashing into the deep waters of the lake. The few animals that did not die from the fall were drowning.

After a brief moment of stupefaction, the pig-farmers rushed off to the nearby villages to rouse out the population so they could come and see the incredible slaughter. Villagers from several settlements came to the shore where Jesus and his disciples were. After the surprise of seeing a handful of pinkish bodies floating way out on the lake, a further surprise was awaiting them: the sight of Legion the Possessed and his companion sitting with Jesus, chatting calmly. The villagers were astounded to discover that the former possessed man had become the person he had previously been, a calm and thoughtful man who spoke with great ease, demonstrating wide learning. Now wearing a white tunic that one of Christ's disciples had given him, Legion was free of his violence, which had disappeared forever.

Each standing in his boat, the two fishermen who had brought Christ's disciples over the lake told the villagers what they had seen. The village folk became frightened. They did not want to be near such a man, who could drive out demons and send them into pigs.

Seen as a worrying phenomenon, Jesus was asked to leave. He made no objections, seeing around him faces contorted by fear and ignorance.

It is better to go.

He and his disciples together climbed back into the boats. Legion came up to the gunwale of Christ's and begged him to allow him to go with him.

"Go back to your own house, for your family awaits you," advised Jesus. "Show them what great things have been done. Tell those around you also that I shall return ..."

Legion nodded agreement and headed away toward the Decapolis.

For Jesus and his companions, the return journey was swift. Even though the boats had no sails, the favorable wind aided the rowers in their task.

When they stepped out onto Galilean soil, making their way away from the shore, a strange sight met their eyes; on a sloping path surrounded by

vegetation, a woman in her forties was riding along, astraddle on a donkey, when she bumped into a bush. Her leg came off at the knee. She turned around, leant down, picked up her leg from the ground and started off again on her journey, carrying it in her arm, without the slightest word or cry of pain. Yet they had all seen the blood flow. It was not a wooden leg, but her real limb.

Horror took the place of consternation.

Simon Peter was astonished by the amazing numbers of sick and especially of lepers that they had met and were still meeting upon their way. During his apostolic mission in the region, surrounded by a generalized chaos that left his mind reeling, he had seen nothing but dismay and suffering. What had also profoundly upset him was the distress of women who were giving birth prematurely, their children still-born.

Even animals were not spared: there were numerous shaggy-coated cattle which had lost the tips of their tails and of their muzzles, hobbling on rear legs with swellings around the hoofs. The death toll for many species was astounding, but what was even more surprising for the population was to see hens laying eggs with no shell.

All these occurrences gave support for the Pharisees when they said that this was a punishment from God for the lack of faith of the Chosen People, corrupted and perverted by foreign influences into transgressing the Law of Moses. The Pharisees declared that this was a divine chastisement: the Jews had sinned and they were now paying the price for their insufficient devotion toward religious precepts and Yahweh, the god who protected Israel.

Many felt that the end of days was near.

Simon Peter spoke of his thoughts with his Master.

“The time is nigh,” replied Jesus after a moment’s silence. “The time is nigh ...”

At least, so he hoped.

30

Harmony

It was dinner time and the hotel's elegant restaurant was packed.

Nonetheless, the waiter had succeeded in finding a table for Camilla and Tom in a quiet corner, a little away from the noise and bustle, with a one-hundred-euro note having greatly facilitated matters.

Camilla had already noticed that Tom spent without a second thought; he had to be either rich or careless about money, which seemed to burn a hole in his pocket. Once again she asked herself if it was his money or his secret connections that had managed to get them out of the Israeli prison.

She thought back over how she had been captured in the Al-Aqsa Mosque by men in black, armed and wearing ski masks. She had been tied, gagged and blindfolded. She had had the fright of her life, but at the same time she had felt a strangely exciting tremor run through her, a feeling she had never felt before.

It had a scent of adventure.

That same morning, Tom and Camilla had been expelled from Israel and sent to the Czech Republic, travelling on new fake French passports. Since then, Camilla had been Madame Kidd and she and her husband had accommodation in a high-class Prague hotel. They had taken three rooms, as Martial, Tom's West Indian friend, the university professor who Camilla had met in Paris three days earlier was going to join the couple.

The only explanation Tom had given was that Abbé Boudet had indicated where a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report was to be found in the Czech capital, but that it would be very risky to recover it.

Camilla had fully understood that Tom had been very afraid for her in Jerusalem and did not want to put her in further danger when getting at a fresh Grail. He was too fond of her to want to see her back in the firing line, so Martial would be helping him in her place.

Camilla's emerald-green eyes gazed at the man in his forties with a shaven head who was sitting at the opposite side of the table.

For hours before, they had wandered together along the main shopping streets of Prague. As she had brought very little spare clothing with her, Tom had bought her a number of outfits, in particular a magnificent white evening gown that she was now wearing. Tom had also bought some things for himself: his elegant black tuxedo covered him but did not hide the fact that his figure was powerfully muscled.

Disturbed, Camilla lowered her gaze.

Had she allowed herself to be bewitched by Satan from the very start?

In his presence, feeling his diabolic glow, she no longer wanted to be good and prudent. She wanted to feel his warm breath on her face, for him to crush his mouth against hers, for their tongues and saliva to mingle and for his dark male form to embrace the lightness of her body. She was dreaming of snuggling in his massive arms, so that he would hug her tight to him and never let her go. She wanted to build a new future with him and create a new small being who would have her eyes, together with the colossal strength and the intelligence of its father ...

Camilla looked up again.

No, Tom was not the Devil, or the Antichrist either.

He was just a prodigiously clever man, who simply through pure deduction had broken through the secrecy that surrounded Abbé Saunière and Abbé Boudet and Rennes-le-Château. He had also removed the veil that shrouded the Old Testament, proving the fraud perpetrated by King Josiah.

However, carried away by these successes, he had applied the same approach as he had taken with the myths of Adam and Eve, the patriarchs and Moses to the Lord Jesus Christ: Tom had started from the conclusion that Jesus was a myth and had built an implacable logical structure to try to demonstrate this. His brilliant mind had been blinded by the trickery of King Josiah and he had made this single case into a general rule, although what was true for one was not necessarily so for the other.

Camilla was certain that Tom was mistaken.

Not everything was a myth, the Lord Jesus Christ did exist, Camilla was unshakably convinced of that. Even if the facts that Tom had put forward seemed to show that Christ had never lived on Earth, she knew, despite them all, that Jesus had definitely had a real historical life.

Fortified by this certainty, Camilla felt she had to regain stature in Thomas' eyes. She could do that with the Pontius Pilate Report in her possession and prove to the whole wide world that Jesus was no myth.

For Thomas had seen one point correctly: when they read the Pontius Pilate Report, some clergymen like Boudet had gone mad, because they had really believed that Jesus was a myth. However, Pilate's document did not contain the genuine truth, as Pilate had lied, so as not to have to confess that he had had the Son of God crucified, so as not to face the consequently probable rage of the Emperor Tiberius. Pilate had lied to save his skin by drawing up a false report in which he denied he had ever met Jesus Christ, claiming that this Jesus Christ had never existed and that his story was a mere fable invented by the Jewish people to find a pretext for an uprising against the Roman occupants, who could be portrayed as guilty of deicide.

Camilla now had a duty to broadcast the Pontius Pilate Report throughout the world, demonstrating that Pilate had lied to save his own life. She was duty-bound to show the consequences that this lie had had on clergymen who had lost their faith, like Abbé Boudet, who had become a blood-thirsty killer. Above all, though, Camilla had to stamp out once and for all any argument suggesting that Jesus was a myth, which could swell up after these documents appeared. That would mean laying the Old Testament to rest and decrying with an apologetic *mea culpa* the all-too-human fraud committed by Josiah.

That was the divine mission to which she had to dedicate herself.

However, before anything else, it was essential to find the Grail that was concealed in Prague.

Camilla smiled at Tom, but his stare was vacant and he did not seem to notice her.

Seized by doubt, Camilla asked herself if he truly loved her, if her love was reciprocated. She felt him so distant as well as so close that for a brief moment she was unsure what to think about that love.

As so often, Tom was physically present, but his mind was elsewhere.

Finally noticing Camilla's insistent stare, Tom's attention came back to focus on his companion.

"Martial won't be long now," Tom said, glancing at his watch. "It's nearly an hour now since he caught a taxi at the airport."

Camilla looked steadily at Tom with her green eyes and mischievously commented:

"So, you're really not prepared to tell me where the Pontius Pilate Report is hidden. I bet it's tucked away in some old tomb, but they've built a bank guarded day and night right on top of it ... Am I right?"

Tom smiled.

"Who knows? Be patient, I'll be telling you soon, since we'll get up to

spin speed when Martial gets here. Okay?"

Camilla nodded her head then asked in a more serious tone:

"Tom, in all your calculations about the myth of Jesus of Nazareth, don't you think you might have forgotten some essential logical step, left out some key element, not taken into account some value?"

"What kind of value?" Tom asked, frowning.

"I don't know ... God, for example ..."

Tom burst out laughing.

"Forgive me ... God? In working out the myth of Jesus?"

He cleared his throat.

"You know, the progress of science since the Age of Enlightenment has made it possible to explain the world more and more satisfactorily without having to bring in any God. There was a famous conversation between Napoleon Bonaparte and the scientist Laplace on this topic. Laplace had written a book on celestial mechanics, the system of the Universe. Bonaparte commented to him: 'Monsieur Laplace, I cannot find in your massive work about the Universe one single mention of God'. Laplace replied, 'Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis'. Other scholars were upset by this response to Napoleon, finding it unacceptable for Laplace to rule out a hypothesis that was precisely the one that would explain everything. Laplace retorted that the hypothesis did indeed explain everything, but it was completely unable to provide predictions, whilst as a scientist his duty was to put in the necessary work to enable precise predictions to be made ... In a period when scientific knowledge was in its infancy, the principle of economy tipped the balance more in favor of religious explanations, which provided simple answers for the complex questions facing humanity. This, unfortunately, justified recourse to the God hypothesis even in rational reasoning. Luckily, though, times change ..."

Tom looked hard at the young woman.

"Have you heard of the paradox of divine harmony?"

Camilla shook her head very slightly.

"It's also a sort of equation, a test in logic which allows us to work out whether God exists or whether he is a purely human invention ..."

Tom cracked his finger-joints.

"Let's start by supposing that God does exist and that he's completely ubiquitous and omniscient, as well as the creator of the whole human race. He knows in detail what humans are like, since they're his own creation. So, he knows if he speaks to them through various different prophets as intermediaries, his divine message will be deformed and lead to different religions and wars waged in his name. Hence, as he's infinitely wise and

infinitely powerful, he'd talk directly and simultaneously to all the humans in the world in their own specific languages and dictate to them his will in the strictest sense, which should be perfect for the beings that he's created. Since the divine being is one, one single document containing the divine word should appear on the Earth. In the end, God will be definitely present everywhere and the same for everyone, he'll harmonize human minds in his worship for his almighty glory. That's divine harmony. That proves the existence of God ..."

Tom pulled a skeptical face.

"Now let's imagine there is no God, he exists only in the human imagination. On every continent, in different periods, nations will believe in a supreme divinity or even in a multitude of gods. Men fight wars to impose their beliefs in the name of this god or these gods. There's a multitude of religious writings supposed to contain the one true divine word, texts that disagree as much as the Bible and the Koran do, for instance. In the end, you find scattered over the various continents religions that are totally contradictory one of another. Some speak of re-incarnation and many gods, others of direct access to Paradise and a single God, others of very strict rules about foods if people are to gain salvation. It's an anarchic chaos of divine rules, the exact opposite of the first case, showing no God can be involved."

Tom raised his hands up to the level of his shoulders.

"Now let's look at what sort of a state we find on Earth. Is it divine harmony or the opposite?"

Tom smiled.

"You see, Camilla, if God exists, if he's present in everyone's mind and everywhere, as well as all-powerful, how can humans have such different beliefs? It wouldn't be God that changes message from one country to another, it would be men like King Josiah who write religious texts to serve their own interests. Neither more nor less. Since God as he's supposed to be couldn't change his ideas and words from one place to another: by definition he's unchanging and absolute perfection. Unlike the men who made him up. Of course, it's a lot easier to believe in God than to take the trouble of thinking, thinking over this paradox of divine harmony, the heavenly harmony that ought logically to be an unavoidable reality if God existed. No believer dares to look truth in the face, for fear of seeing no-one reflected in the mirror of reality. Like the little duckling that quacks in fear when it's alone, but stops when it's given a mirror in which it thinks it sees a fellow-duck, when it's only its own reflection. All on their own, humans are frightened. They need illusions, smoke and mirrors, to be able to bear their status as intelligent beings lost in the

immensity of the Universe. Man isn't God's creation, but every god is a creature invented by men. That's what explains the huge number of divine beings that are to be found in the human universe."

"So you don't believe in God?" Camilla asked.

"I've stopped believing," Tom admitted. "Didn't I tell you that I'm a fallen angel?"

Tom smiled enigmatically.

*

* *

From his office window, the Pope watched the light of the dusk rapidly lessening: the invisible sun would soon be swallowed up by a world of shadows, declining beneath a dark horizon that was out of sight.

Outside a lowering, weeping sky had not stopped pouring down an uninterrupted flood of water since early afternoon. The torrential rain lashed down on the Vatican City, in rods like the bars of a vast prison.

His expression sad, the Pope turned away from this gloomy sight and his tired eyes lit on the shelves of his book-cases. On one, an old book chanced to attract his attention: one of the first printed Bibles in the history of humankind.

The Pope thoughtfully peered at that thick and invaluable volume.

When published, this Bible had made the whole Church quake with fright, being seen as a synonym for the apocalypse, the embodiment of the end of Christianity.

For a long time, the Church had prayed that the accursed day would never come on which the Bible would be accessible to all.

At the peak of its power, profiting from the disappearance of the great libraries of the ancient world and the virtually total absence of any form of publishing in Europe, the Church had gained a *de facto* monopoly over all writing and information. People had been deliberately kept in the dark. They had been discouraged from reading the Bible, in those few cases in which some had access to a copy, and in the times of the Holy Inquisition, the Church had even formally prohibited the possession of books of the Old Testament.

For centuries, fearing that the secret of Christ would come to light because of its unbelievability and the strident way it ran counter to reality, the Church had forbidden the historical study of the Bible. It had been afraid that the faithful might examine it coolly, calmly and collectedly and would no longer listen to what fanatic priests told them about it.

This was because the Bible was a double-edged sword that allowed the true story of Jesus to trickle out of its text to all those who could open their eyes.

Unable to oppose progress in those days, the Church thought its last hour had come when the invention of printing by Gutenberg permitted the widespread diffusion of the Bible among Christians all round the world.

However, what it had expected with fear and trepidation did not come to pass. It was not the power of the Church that was nearly destroyed, but the power of monarchical States. An example was the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, where the peasants laid claim to living in accordance with the teachings of the Bible by trying to share income and distribute wealth evenly. They started by forming assemblies which had rapidly turned to revolts against the authority of the rich and powerful.

With amazement, the Church realized that no Christian could come to discover the truth hidden between the now all-too-visible lines of the Gospels. Even with the evidence set out in words before them, nobody could manage to demystify the fable surrounding the life of Jesus and this, as the Church saw it, was thanks to one simple reason: the catechism.

Indoctrinated from their earliest youth, irretrievably marked by the convictions passed on by their parents, believers had long been bewitched by the preaching of ignorant priests and their pious lies had molded everybody's mind. From fiction to reality, there was just one step, which the mind could easily take: the propaganda of religious instruction and catechism classes took deep root in people's minds from childhood and the sweet images of which they dreamed turned into unshakable certainties which reading the Bible could inevitably only end by encouraging.

The Pope walked forward a pace or two and stroked the spine of the printed Bible with his fingertips.

For one simple reason, the Church should never have had any fear about the Bible being made available to the general public.

This reason was the Koran.

Just a single reading through this religious scripture easily revealed Mohammed's trickery and fraud, yet, despite all the book's contradictions, in the blindness of faith, not one Moslem could see this obvious truth emerge from it. In view of that, the Church had not really had anything to fear from the Bible, for the story of Jesus was considerably more complex to unravel than the simple tale that Mohammed had copied and made up, but which nonetheless convinced the faithful ...

Moving on from the Bible, the Pope's fingers slipped slowly over the titles of the various works in the bookcase. His hand came to rest on a

dark notebook that stood between two very old books. The Pope took up this small black book and stared at the photograph on its cover: a monk could be seen there, watering a bush, a shrub that was supposed to be Moses' burning bush.

The Pope sighed.

In the sixth century, Emperor Justinian had founded the monastery of Saint Catherine whose chapel was supposed to have been built at the precise spot where the burning bush had stood in the Sinai Desert. Even today, a monk watered the bush in question every day.

As he thought of this absurdity, the Holy Father sat in an armchair and opened the private notebook that had belonged to Pope John-Paul II. He had written in it in his own hand his comments on a number of important dates in the history of Christianity.

By the light of a bedside lamp next to him, the Pope flipped through the pages and read a number of relevant passages.

... 1054 The East-West Schism.

The Patriarch of Constantinople claimed that it was essential to use leavened bread for the Eucharist. The Pope, Bishop of Rome, declared that the bread used had to be unleavened. Christianity split into two forms, Catholic and Orthodox, after the two Patriarchs, of Rome and Constantinople, excommunicated each other mutually. The schism led to deaths right down to the 1990s, civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, of Catholics against Orthodox, all because of a question of yeast in bread ...

... 1099 Jerusalem Liberated.

During the First Crusade to set free the Holy Places, Crusader troops entered the city and the Moslem Governor surrendered on receiving a formal promise that the civilian population would be spared. The whole of this population, made up essentially of Jews, Moslems and Orthodox Christians, was put to the

sword in the next few hours, Crusaders raping women and children before slitting their throats or ripping open their bellies. Seventy thousand civilians were massacred. Every living creature in the city has been killed, was the proud report of the commanders of the Crusaders ...

...1231 Foundation of the Inquisition.

Pope Gregory IX decided to set up an institution dedicated exclusively to the eradication of heresy and witchcraft. Inquisitors were chosen from among the Franciscan and Dominican Orders. In 1251, Pope Innocent IV authorized the Inquisition to use torture. This greatly eased the difficulty of obtaining admissions of guilt. During its history, the Inquisition burned more than one million people. The last witch was burned in 1788, the last 'heretic' in 1826. The Church never disowned the Inquisition; it ensured the historical continuity of the institution down to our days by simply changing its name: in 1542, the Inquisition was reborn under the title of the 'Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition'. It was re-baptized at the start of the twentieth century the 'Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office', then finally it was renamed once more in 1965 the 'Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith' and in 1983 the 'Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith'. I had no choice but to swear allegiance to the powerful branch of the Church constituted by the Congregation and to its obscure leader, Cardinal

Ratzinger, who unfortunately will be my successor. That is what they have decided. Oh Deus, may you find it in yourself to forgive me ...

The Pope lifted his eyes from the text and thought for a brief moment about the life of Benedict XVI. He smiled sadly and went back to reading the manuscript.

... 1347-54 The Plague.

All over Europe the Black Death, the first great epidemic of plague in the continent, reigned in terror. Catholic prelates quickly pointed to a supposedly guilty party: they claimed that the Jews had poisoned the wells. This rumor spread across the whole of Europe and pogrom after pogrom took place. In Germany, no fewer than 300 Jewish communities were totally wiped out, while nearly 2,000 Jews were burned alive in the city of Strasburg ...

... 1378 The Great Schism of Western Christianity.

On the death of Pope Gregory XI, Urban VI was elected. However, he proved so overbearing that the French contested the election and appointed their own Pope: Clement VII. Within a few months, the Catholic world had split into two camps. Both of the two Popes tried to eliminate his competitor by force. At the Council of Pisa, the two Popes were finally deposed and a third, Alexander V, was declared legitimate. Unfortunately, the successors of the other two refused to yield their places and there were three popes until 1417 ...

... 1391 The Start of Violence against Jews in

Spain.

During the Moorish domination of Spain, the three Mediterranean monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, had co-existed peacefully for various centuries. However, this co-existence of several religions in lands now controlled by Christian kings displeased Catholic prelates, who never stopped spreading anti-Semitism among the populace but also in the highest circles of the powerful. In 1391, stirred up by the bishops, the mob destroyed the Jewish ghettos of Seville, Barcelona, Valencia, Toledo and other major towns. The destructive frenzy of the year reached its peak in June in Seville, where the crowd, egged on by Archdeacon Martínez, slaughtered more than 4,000 Jews ...

... 1431 Joan of Arc Burned Alive.

The death of Joan of Arc ensured the fame of the little shepherdess who should not have been able to read or write, nor for that matter to ride fiery warhorses or wield a sword, and who furthermore apparently expressed herself at her trial in the language of lawyers and theologians, an absurd claim ... Ridiculous. As in the case of Jesus, her secret is hidden, or more likely lost. So, when it is claimed that Joan of Arc cried out the name of 'Jesus' three times before dying at the stake, I have to have my doubts ... If the little peasant had truly had the quick wits and gift for banter claimed for her, she would have been more likely to shout to the English: 'You didn't like the

raw truth, but cooking me won't improve its flavor!' ...

The Pope chuckled.

John-Paul II had been a man overflowing with humor who himself was good at witty derision even in serious events.

... 1492 The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

The 'Most Catholic King' of Spain expelled more than 160,000 Jews. The Pope encouraged other European monarchs to follow the Spanish example. In all Europe, the bishops put all their weight into persuading governments to forbid the entry into their territories of the Jews who had been expelled. Spanish Jews had held major positions in the country's administration, like finances, and their expulsion marked a turning point in the history of Spain. The end of the country's hegemony and the beginning of a long decline ...

... 1527 The Sack of Rome.

Mutinous Imperial soldiers, many of them Protestant, massacred a great part of the population of Rome and pillaged the city. The Pope was saved by his Swiss Guard. He shut himself up with them in the Castel Sant'Angelo while the people were slaughtered. The holy foreskin of Jesus was stolen, but thanks be to God, Jesus' other holy foreskins were to be found in the towns of Charroux, Conques, Metz, Antwerp; even Stoke-on-Trent in the English Potteries District had once claimed to hold one ...

... 1559 The Index.

As the invention of printing gave a growing number of people the chance to become better informed, the

Church reacted by publishing its Index, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. To keep this list carefully up to date, the Sacred Congregation of the Index was founded by Pope Pius V in 1571. During the course of its existence, this institution regularly published a list of books that Catholics were forbidden to read. Before the Church officially discontinued this index in 1966, it had 'put on the Index' thousands of books and hundreds of authors whose works were prohibited: in France, this affected Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas Senior and Junior, Gustave Flaubert, Anatole France, Victor Hugo, Jean-James Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Voltaire, Émile Zola; in England, Francis Bacon, Daniel Defoe, Edward Gibbon, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, John Stewart Mill, John Milton, Jonathan Swift and more recently Graham Greene; elsewhere Copernicus, Erasmus, Galileo, Luther, Machiavelli, Unamuno in Spain, even King Frederick II of Prussia ...

...1600 Giordano Bruno.

He was burned alive in Rome, having been sentenced for heresy. He had dared to claim that the sun might be a star like any other, to state that the Universe was infinite and to express the hypothesis that there could be life-forms elsewhere than on Earth, in a Universe having countless worlds just like our own. After an eight-year trial, during which confessions were dragged out of him by torture, he was condemned to death as an 'obstinate and unrepentant heretic'. Giordano Bruno's hypothesis was a harbinger of the

failure of the Church's haughty ethnocentric theories: for it, humans and the Earth were at the centre of the Universe. Science, over the centuries, demonstrated that the Earth revolves around the sun, which is just an ordinary star forming part of a rather common-or-garden galaxy: the Milky Way ...

The Pope quickly turned several pages.

... 1848 A Wind of Revolt.

The population of Rome rose up against the Papal dictatorship. Pope Pius IX fled the city. A republic was proclaimed, but the Pope was put back into power the following year by French troops. Dissidents were shot. The Papal States returned to being an absolute monarchy where the sovereign could say, like Louis XIV of France, 'I am the State'...

... 1861 Louis Pasteur.

The progress of medical science posed a challenge to the obscurantism of the Catholic Church: Louis Pasteur demonstrated the vital part played by microbes in disease, putting into question the statements of the Church that children died because this was 'God's will' ...

... 1870 The End of the World Once Again.

In the U.S.A., a new movement started, which would come to be known as 'Jehovah's Witnesses', with some links with various Adventist groups. They proclaimed that the end of the world would come in 1914, 1925, 1975 ... In light of the successive failures of the prophecies to come true, they became less forthcoming

about the matter after that ...

... 1903 Vatican Bankruptcy.

The Vatican was on the edge of the abyss, menaced with bankruptcy. Some believed that the empty coffers were a result of the actions of Leo XIII who had just died. Rumors accused this Pope of having dipped deep into the Vatican's wealth to fund personal wants. That is not so: those responsible for this penury were Abbé Saunière and Abbé Boudet, together with their clique of master blackmailers who bled the Vatican white for many years ...

The Pope pensively raised his head.

He had personally never visited Rennes-le-Château, but he had seen a large number of photographs of the site, especially of the interior of the church of Saint Mary Magdalene that had been arranged by Saunière and Boudet. He recalled one particular shot that he had been shown: above the confessional box, a fresco with details in relief showed Jesus on a hillock over which were sprinkled seventeen roses, surrounded by clean-shaven men and by women, one of whom, a red-head lying on the ground, was holding her belly in an unmistakable way. At the foot of the hillock, a slit sack could be seen, containing golden ears of corn.

All round the fresco, there was a wall painting showing a landscape with scattered boulders and various plants here and there. In the distance a splendid palace and a ruined village could be seen, as could the figure of an elderly lady who was looking closely at a dark shrub. Right at the front of the picture, one to the left and one to the right, two sections could be picked out that were separated by the large fresco with its details in relief, over fifteen feet wide. However, the eye could easily bring together these two sections at a single view: a hare's head and its body, in grayish stone.

"The rock of the hare," the Pope murmured.

To think that the secret of Christ lay exposed to public view, set in the broad light of day by a simple fresco and wall painting and that nobody could see the flagrant truth emerging from these images.

There was no blinder man than the one who would not see, as Jesus had said.

Luckily for the Church, which had survived the blackmail and threats of

the two Abbés, present-day visitors did not want to see in all these hints left by Saunière and Boudet anything more than indications of the hiding place of a treasure.

How far they were from the truth!

It was exclusively a question of a massive blackmail scheme put into place by clergymen as revenge for the official lies that the Vatican had been maintaining since days long past.

As he thought of that blackmail, the Pope suddenly remembered that he too was the victim of blackmail, of a particularly odious kind.

Just three days were left before the Sons of Abraham put their threats into effect and let off their bombshell that would mean the end of the world.

Then two thousand years of Christianity would be blown to smithereens.

*
* *

In the hotel's elegant restaurant, Tom could not keep his eyes off Camilla.

She was so beautiful in her white evening dress. Her green eyes ranged around the room like two majestic butterflies flitting from table to table as the wealthier clientele from Prague ate. Camilla's gaze finally fixed on a stunning young woman of amazing beauty, sitting with her boyfriend.

Tom looked thoughtfully at Camilla.

Just as any other woman would unconsciously have done, Camilla focused on the least impressive parts of that beautiful woman's body. Had Tom shown Camilla a photograph of herself, however, Camilla's eyes would have spontaneously sought out the most attractive parts of her own body.

This unconscious trickery was a clever ploy by the brain to preserve 'self-esteem', that set of representations of their physique, their intellectual capacities or their position in society that people built up for themselves. The fact that they saw only the imperfections in the ravishing bodies of models helped them bear the comparison and still feel happy about themselves.

Yet Camilla had no reason to be jealous of even the most beautiful women. She herself was possessed of incomparable beauty, the beauty of a goddess.

"Her nose is too pointed," Camilla finally said.

Then, as if regretting having said it, she bit her lip.

The most ravishing of Eve's daughters could become a slanderer when she was ovulating, because then a hormone was released by the body, a hormone which was capable of changing the behavior of the sweetest of females into the worst of sharp tempers. The 'natural' reason for this was very simple: when ovulating, fertile women had to attract men at any cost and they improved the odds of that by disparaging potential rivals. Furthermore, besides this unconscious destructive tendency, ovulation caused physical effects on faces that made them more resplendent, so that men, being good reproductive males, instinctively perceived them as more attractive, and were fated to be drawn to these fertile females.

When they ovulated, women held all the trump cards, thanks to this combination of scorn and splendor.

That was nature's legacy.

Camilla slowly turned her gaze toward Tom the sight of those eyes moving brought further images into the forty-something's mind.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Camilla asked after an instant, fluttering her eyelids. "What are you thinking of?"

"I'm thinking about your eyes," he replied, absent-mindedly.

"My eyes?" she echoed, blushing.

For a second, she lowered her gaze, then raised it again to focus on Tom.

"Do you like them that much, then?" she asked in a rather bold way.

"No ... yes ... no ... er, well, yes, yes, of course I like them, they're magnificent ... But that wasn't exactly what I was thinking of, not your eyes in particular but human eyes in general ... They're really extraordinary, you know ..."

"Oh, I see!" she said, disappointment just detectable in her voice. "And what's so extraordinary about them?"

"What do you think is the only animal on earth with the same sort of eyes as humans, a colored eye with clearly visible white all around it?"

"I don't know ... monkeys or some breed of dog ... or maybe pigs?"

Tom shook his head.

"No, in fact out of all the millions of animal species on Earth, we're the only one to have an eye like that, since it's actually a terrible drawback that isn't conducive to the survival of the species that has it."

"A drawback? How do you mean?"

"Look, let's say you're a tiger standing opposite me. I'm your prey and I'm deciding how to run away, but rather than turn my whole head, I

instinctively turn my eyes to one side, let's say the left, to see if the way is clear."

Tom did as he had described.

"Because of the white around my iris, you can immediately see which way I'm looking, and so which way I've decided to run. I've lost any chance of surprise when I run leftward, since you as a tiger have already been able to anticipate this and you can catch and kill me. In contrast, a fully colored eye without any white visible around the iris would let you glance to the left without betraying which way you're looking and which way you'd like to run away, so you'd gain a vital second's advantage over the tiger and manage to escape ... or perhaps not, but that'd be a different matter ... Having gaudy red feathers visible to all my predators would also be a handicap, but the sort of handicap you can get round by running away. With a white eye, there's a heavy penalty on the one weapon you have for survival: flight. Even for a predator, it's a disadvantage, since it indicates what way you're going to attack, giving your prey a head-start, so they can run sooner ... you'd end up with an empty belly and eventually die, with no chance of transmitting your handicap to any offspring."

Camilla nodded then asked in perplexity:

"Well why did humans select for a characteristic with such a drawback, then?"

"This kind of eye was selected by human nature at a distant period in time when humans had already learned how to defend themselves from predators with rudimentary weapons. Humans are social beings who talk to other humans. The action of looking at people straight in the eye bolsters their egos, which reinforces cohesion and confidence. It's very flattering to see somebody in your group is taking an interest in you, and that's possible even at some yards' distance with our sort of eye. The first human to get an eye like that through random genetic mutations will have had an instant social success, so everyone will have been keen to breed from that distant ancestor who boosted the ego of those others whose irises were as big as their eye-sockets ...".

Tom broke off what he was saying.

He had just noticed his friend and mentor Martial at the other end of the restaurant.

Wearing a white polo shirt and trousers, which matched the color of his beard and hair, the West Indian made for Tom and Camilla's table. They stood to welcome him.

"Please excuse my lateness," Martial said, kissing Camilla's hand, "there must have been an accident somewhere, because all the roads are

completely jammed.”

Tom took a step toward the newcomer.

“That’s no problem,” Tom replied, giving him a bear-hug and clapping him on the shoulders. “We’ve finished eating, but you might like something. Are you hungry?”

“No, thanks. I feel a bit bloated and queasy. You know, I’m not a good flyer, not like you ...”

Martial winked at him and gesturing to the couple to sit back down, he took a seat himself.

“What about Sachem?” Tom asked. “Did you leave her with the neighbors?”

“My daughter can take good care of Sachem,” Martial answered in his deep voice. Anna’s grown up a lot. If she can manage without her dad for a few days, she’s also perfectly capable of looking after Sachem, be sure of that.”

“Who’s Sachem?” Camilla asked politely.

“She’s our cat,” Martial replied. “We adopted her about three months ago to cheer up our house a bit. Two men and one girl wasn’t much of a combination for a big house.”

Camilla frowned.

“Two men? What are you talking about?”

“Oh!” Martial responded. “Hasn’t Tom told you we live together?”

Camilla felt as if she had been struck by lightning and her heart had stopped beating.

“Well, I hope I haven’t put my foot in it,” Martial said to Tom, “What exactly have you told her? ... I bet you couldn’t help letting a few secrets slip out, could you? We did agree we’d tell her the truth as soon as we had a Grail in her hands?”

Tom nodded.

“We did, but events have overtaken that and the Grail is a long time coming. I couldn’t leave her in the dark and anyhow, we had decided to tell her, Grail or no Grail ... She knows all the truth about Josiah and Jesus of Nazareth. But I haven’t spoken to her yet about the ‘Virus’, or you, or me, or my former life ...”

Her face white as a sheet, Camilla was listening without hearing, lost in the midst of the ruins of her shattered world.

“Are you ... are you homosexuals?” she finally asked Tom.

He opened his eyes as wide as saucers, glanced at Martial and the two men simultaneously burst out laughing.

“No, of course not!” Tom exclaimed. “Whatever put that bizarre idea in your head?”

“We’re not homosexuals,” Martial confirmed. “But even if we were, would it be a dreadful crime?”

Martial looked at the young woman before adding:

“It’s true that for Catholics and the Pope, homosexuality is still a horrible sin and even, as some see it, a mental illness. But homosexuality is no disease; we’re all born sexual, but more accurately bisexual. Animals and humans, thanks to our animal inheritance, all have two neural sexual circuits that live side by side in the brain: one termed ‘masculine’, the other ‘feminine’. That makes every animal, including humans, fundamentally bisexual. However, chemical signals emitted by partners are what most often blocks one out of the two circuits. For example, in rats, the pheromones in a male’s urine inhibit the ‘feminine’ circuit in other males and also trigger an innate attack reflex and physical repulsion. In contrast, in females this same urine sparks off ovulation and sexual concourse by activating their ‘feminine’ circuits. The boundary zone between the two sexual circuits is narrow, so it’s enough for one to be activated instead of, or at the same time as, the other for radically different behaviors like the homosexuality or bisexuality that is innate in all to emerge. In nature, homosexual behavior is definitely present in all animal species, so it shouldn’t be seen as a blemish, but just as something given by nature. In men and women, homosexuality is also as natural a tendency as heterosexuality, an ancestral structure that natural chance has given us. We should respect this animal legacy in the same way as we accept the color of our skin: we’re born the way we’re born and we shouldn’t be ashamed of what we are. In any case, the greatest geniuses were often homosexuals, like Leonardo Da Vinci: it’s difference that brings out the genius in any creature ...”

As if it was a conductor’s baton, Martial waved his forefinger.

“In the past, homosexuality seemed abnormal to everybody, like a shameful disease, because standards were imposed by Mosaic religion. Luckily for humanity, mind-sets have changed thanks to the ebbing of religious fundamentalism, so in the end, in future generations, and Tom will agree with me on this point, it’ll be religion that’ll be seen as the illness of past centuries that affected humans, who should have been ashamed of it, as they were of homosexuality previously ...”

Tom nodded and Martial continued:

“The ban on homosexuality derives from the wishes of one single man: King Josiah. That fraudster made up the tale of a one true God and the mythical Moses so as to impose the ‘Mosaic’ laws. Josiah prohibited

homosexuality, adultery and sex with animals in the same chapter of them, all leading to a death sentence. Do you know why, Camilla? Just because that devilish Josiah wanted the largest possible number of boys and girls so as to populate Israel quickly. He forbade homosexuality because he was a meticulously pragmatic man who needed troops to fight his Egyptian enemies. Anything that might limit procreation was banned, any human sexual behavior that didn't lead to begetting children was prohibited by Josiah. Josiah imposed a 'typical' family pattern so that his armies would be swollen with new recruits in a short space of time. Anything that might prevent, run counter to, or compromise this family planning for war, like zoophilia, adultery, or homosexuality, would get you condemned to death. To be frank with you, I see Josiah as a Nazi ahead of the event and nobody can contradict me on what he was like. History speaks out in my favor ..."

Martial spat out a comment from behind his white beard:

"When the Pope is asked if he's going to take a more liberal stance on questions like divorce, condoms, or homosexuality, he hypocritically replies that he can't change any line of conduct because they obey divine precepts, the will of God written in the Bible, even though he knows perfectly well that it was King Josiah who stole the identity of God to bring in these Fascist Mosaic Laws. Yet the Pope and his Church long ago made an arbitrary choice among them by picking out those they felt would be useful to them from those they felt wouldn't, culling the list totaling 613 'sins' imposed by Josiah. The Church simplified the old Law greatly in putting forward just seven deadly sins, not keeping more than a few other 'sins' and getting rid of others that were very unpopular or too trammeling."

As if about to impart a confidence, he leaned forward.

"I tell you, Camilla, I'm an unrepentant sinner, a transgressor of all those laws ordering you to do or not to do certain things, laws from another age, because they're not divine, but human. They came from a frustrated king who imposed his manias on humanity. You have to live according to your times: civilized countries don't apply the death penalty nowadays, even though it seemed natural generations ago, yet it's there in black and white in the Bible's laws. In theory, humans have become 'sinners', transgressors of the 'divine' will by no longer observing Josiah's orders to execute pretty much everybody, such as adulterous women, which was something still done just a few centuries ago. As the French proverb says, '*autres temps, autres mœurs*', new times need new customs. Through wisdom, modern people have already broken free from some of the fetters that bound their minds, so it's enough to put the facts before their eyes for them to wake up to the truth. Yes, I tell you, it's sufficient for people just

to open their eyes ... After all, isn't the mythical Jesus Christ claimed to have said that those who wanted to hear should listen and that those who wanted to see should look?"

A smile played over the corners of Camilla's mouth.

"What's that?" she said, feigning astonishment. "Jesus is a myth?"

Disconcerted, Martial turned toward Tom.

"I thought you'd told her about Jesus?"

"You can see she's making fun of you," Tom replied. "I told her, but she didn't believe me."

Martial smiled.

"Ah, so that's why you're so keen to find the Prague Grail: to prove to her that you're telling the truth ..."

Tom responded.

"The Grail is here, Abbé Boudet was sure of it. I've prepared a plan to get hold of it."

He got up from the table.

"Let's go to my room so we can discuss it without interruptions or distractions. I have the plans and photos of the place where the Pontius Pilate Report is hidden ..."

Camilla and Martial stood up in their turn.

The three were heading across the still crowded room toward the exit when Martial spotted the restaurant's guest book set on an easel.

"Just a second, please. I always make a point of reading guest book comments. They're a real goldmine of information about human behavior."

"Can you read Czech?" Tom asked with a chuckle. "You won't get much out of it if you can't ..."

Martial flipped through the last few pages of the book to have been inscribed.

"Passing tourists always leave a few words in English ... look, there you are, here's a tourist who put in a few words ..."

Martial squinted and then read out aloud:

"I am not a Catholic, but out of respect for their Christian views, I feel it would have been a nice gesture not to have included meat on the menu today, because we are in Lent ..."

Martial laughed quietly. He took up the pen that was attached to the book by a thin golden chain and quickly scrawled a few words.

Camilla's eyes opened wide in surprise as she read over his shoulder what Martial had put in reply to the tourist: 'You are perfectly right, and in

order to respect other myths inherited from our ancestors, it would also be an elegant gesture for you to trim your pubic hair today, so as to honor the cult of Jason and the Argonauts and their Golden Fleece ...’

As he read this cutting response, Tom burst out laughing and clapped his friend on the back in friendly fashion.

31

Lazarus

The star that gives us light had completed its dark route on the other side of the globe. Once again it was on the point of coming forth and searing the high mountains of Galilee with its rays. Months and months had gone by since Jesus had returned to his native land, after long years of solitary wandering across the world.

Surrounded by a host of fires that had burned through the night, among hundreds and hundreds of faithful disciples sleeping peacefully under the stars, Jesus was sitting in the middle of the encampment.

Alone.

Willingly shipwrecked in an ocean of humankind.

He had found no rest and the arms of Morpheus had not rocked him into sweet and restorative dreams. His mind had never stopped tormenting him, preventing him from closing his eyes.

For day after day he had been there. He was waiting.

Alone among his followers.

The sun bursting over the horizon did not bring his isolation to an end. Even if men and women were beginning to awake and stir all around him, gesticulating and bustling over the futilities of daily living, nobody could break through into his solitude.

His inner solitude.

This loneliness was infinitely deep and only the disciple whom he loved was able to bring some warmth to his heart, lost in the icy abysses of the void. Slowly turning his head, Jesus looked at the fine-featured figure where it lay still sleeping, bundled up in a pink blanket. However, despite everything, despite that benevolent presence, he felt alone against the forces of adversity. Jesus often laughed, but that apparent mirth hid anguish, as he knew that the shadows of evil could descend on the land at

any moment. The first fruits of that chaos were already beginning to appear on all sides.

Yet he could do nothing to quash it definitively.

The only hope, the sole salvation for Israel depended upon the messenger. The future of those people now lay in his hands. Powerless to affect events, Jesus was impatiently awaiting his return. That cruel wait had been going on for endless days and Jesus had the disturbing impression that centuries had gone by since he had left.

His hope of seeing a messenger soon come was fulfilled. However, it was not the messenger on whom he had been counting so much that presented himself before him.

The dawn saw the arrival of a sturdy young man with powerful legs who had walked day and night to reach Christ rapidly. He had been sent by Martha and Maria Magdalena, the two sisters of Lazarus, one of Jesus' friends.

"Lord, he whom you love is sick ..."

The two sisters' envoy explained that their brother was in a critical state and that they needed Jesus to come and bring him help. They were in anguish and only Christ's presence could save Lazarus from certain death.

His face somber, Jesus remained thoughtful for a long while. He could not leave; he had to wait for the messenger's return. The fate of all those people depended upon it. He knew what would happen to Lazarus, perhaps in a few hours, in a few days at the outside, but he could not go and aid him. For an instant, Jesus hoped that the messenger whom he had been awaiting for so long would appear and bring a resolution to the tragic situation. Alas, this did not happen. So, a lump in his throat and pain in his heart, Jesus gave Martha and Maria's envoy a new message to take.

"This sickness does not lead to death ..."

From the first words, the young man scowled, overcome with doubts, thinking that Christ was saying that merely to calm the sisters. He had seen Lazarus for himself and the sick man already looked far more like a corpse than anybody at all healthy. So, he assumed that Lazarus was doomed and that even Christ could do nothing for him, except utter consoling phrases to lessen the sisters' sorrow.

Passing close by, Simon Peter heard a few words here and there. Inwardly, he told himself that what was afflicting Lazarus could not be so grave, because the Master was not going to go and treat him, but was saying that the sickness would not lead to death. Reassured, Simon Peter walked off to leave Christ in private.

As he spoke with Jesus, the messenger from Lazarus' sisters went from

surprise to surprise. His doubts were replaced by stupefaction. Now he realized the full scale of his task. With no further delay, he set out back southward.

For two more days, Jesus remained there, only very rarely finding any rest. His conscience suffered pang after pang over the fate of Lazarus, whose destiny was not in his hands. He hoped that the emissary whom he had sent would be able to save his friend. If he arrived in time and did exactly what he had been asked to do, Lazarus would live. Jesus tried to reassure himself. Had he not successfully sent the apostles to cure the possessed? The envoy would be able to do the same, as the situation was less critical than it might appear at first sight.

It was in the early afternoon of that second day of extra waiting, while he still sat in the middle of the camp, that Jesus finally saw arriving the man whose coming he was longing for so much.

The messenger.

Jesus leapt to his feet and walked toward the man who was hastening in his direction. For a brief moment, he had the impression that he was heading toward the shadow of his conscience. Jesus kissed him affectionately on the cheek and his blue eyes stared questioningly deep into the dark eyes of the messenger.

“The Kingdom of your Father is nigh!” exclaimed the latter.

Jesus closed his eyes for a few seconds, savoring this response that was sweet as divine nectar.

At last ... thank you, Heavenly Father ...

He took the messenger to one side to speak to him. As Simon the Zealous passed by, he was invited to join this secret discussion.

Then, like the general of an army, Jesus roused his troops. Among his disciples, he had already designated seventy-two faithful who were to proceed on their mission two by two. As the apostles had done some time before, these seventy-two would go out in his name to cure by means of the Divine Unction. Gathering those chosen, he spoke to them one final time.

“The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Let us then pray to the Lord of the harvest that he will send out laborers to gather in the crop. I send you forth as lambs among wolves ...”

For many minutes, he passed on numerous pieces of advice, warning the seventy-two against hostile welcomes and he cursed any towns that might refuse to see miracles performed. He also affirmed that the Kingdom of God on Earth was close.

Galvanizing his disciples like a centurion his century of troops, he

added by way of conclusion:

“Behold, I give you power to tread on serpents and on scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. Nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding, do not rejoice that spirits are subject to you henceforward, but rather rejoice because your names are written in Heaven ...”

Acclamations rang out from every direction. When calm was restored, after the exchange of a few friendly hugs, the seventy-two headed off in different directions.

Seeing the disciples leaving two by two, Simon Peter was perplexed. He wondered what now would be the mission that he and the other apostles would accomplish. He wondered most particularly where Christ intended to go, since he was sending in his place that troop of rather inexperienced disciples to face the legions of Possessed announced to be on all sides everywhere in Galilee. As if Jesus could read his thoughts, he said to the twelve apostles:

“Let us go into Judea again.”

Simon Peter almost choked.

“Rabbi, the Jews of the Temple of late sought to stone you to death, yet you wish to go there again?”

“I must go to Bethany, for Lazarus.”

Jesus had the premonition that something unfortunate had happened to the messenger that he had sent to save his friend. Stroking his beard with his fingertips and looking down at the ground, he said in a whisper, as if speaking to himself:

“Are there not twelve hours in the day? If a man walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. Yet if a man walks in the night, he stumbles because the light is not with him...”

The fate of Lazarus now perhaps lay entirely in Jesus’ hands. In any case, whatever the reason might be, Christ had to return to Judea.

Lazarus or no Lazarus.

That was his destiny.

Raising his head, Jesus said the ambiguous words:

“My friend Lazarus sleeps, but I shall go, to awake him out of sleep.”

Simon Peter protested.

“Lord, if he sleeps, he will do well, so there is no need to go there.”

Believing that the state of health of the Lord’s friend was not serious, the apostle Thomas added:

“Yes, if he rests, he will be cured!”

Jesus knew that the physical end of Lazarus was just a question of time and that he was perhaps already too late.

“In the eyes of all, Lazarus is dead! Do you understand? He is dead!”

Jesus stared at the apostles one after another, finally resting his gaze on Simon the Zealous.

“I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that now you may believe. Nonetheless let us now go to him.”

Jesus thought once more of what the messenger had told him. He knew those people would be saved and that he had been right to wait rather than thoughtlessly rushing off to aid Lazarus. Such an action would have had devastating effects and all that he had carefully orchestrated would probably have collapsed in ruins. However, he was now free to act. His heart and his duties were now converging on the same goal: Judea. He hoped that it was not too late to bring his friend back to life.

The little town of Bethany was situated a scant two miles from Jerusalem and its Temple. Thomas was sure that Christ would be arrested and killed there by Caiaphas’ hit-men. As if resigned to this in advance, he said laconically:

“Let us also go there, so that we may die with him.”

Simon Peter spread his arms wide as if wishing to use his body as an obstacle to prevent Christ from going where certain death was waiting for him.

“God preserve you from that, Rabbi! No, that will not befall you.”

Jesus stared at him for a brief instant, amused.

“Get you behind me, Satan,” said he, a smile on his lips. “You do not savor the works of the Heavenly Father. You have only thoughts of men.”

Accompanied by a still numerous crowd of disciples, Jesus and his apostles set out for Judea. The premonition that Jesus had had about the envoy from Lazarus’ sisters proved to be exact. Walking during the night, the young man had fallen in a ravine. He had broken his leg and, having fallen on his head, had suffered from a severe injury that had brought partial memory loss. When Jesus found him lying abed in a little village through which he was passing, the messenger had a vacant look and no longer remembered his meeting with Christ. Jesus hastened the pace, very rarely pausing, even continuing onward for a good part of the night. The group following him was accustomed to these long marches and despite their fatigue they remained with the Messiah, not wishing to part from him.

During this journey across Samaria Jesus nevertheless did not remain inactive. He took advantage of it to cure any sick whom he happened to meet.

That was what happened with certain lepers. On the outskirts of a village, ten lepers saw Jesus go by on his way to Jerusalem.

Not daring to come close, they cried out:

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Jesus gazed at them for a moment, then ordered them to go quickly to the Temple in Jerusalem. The lepers looked at one another in astonishment. They had expected that Christ would lay his hands on them to cure them. In resignation, they made for the City of Zion. However, on the way, to their great surprise, after a few hours of walking they were purified. One of them turned back toward his home in Samaria. He met Jesus once more on his route and flung himself at his feet to thank him. Jesus was disturbed to see this man retracing his steps, wondering if his other companions had not also turned aside from the road to Jerusalem.

“Were not you all ten cleansed?” inquired Jesus. “Where are the nine others?”

Realizing that he had disobeyed Christ’s instructions, the leper hung his head in embarrassment. Jesus did not hold it against the man, understanding that the man’s silence meant that he alone had turned back, so the other nine lepers were indeed on their way to Jerusalem.

Seeing dismay in the eyes of the man he had cured, who had just raised his head, Jesus spoke to him soothingly.

“There are not found that returned to give me thanks but you, the Samaritan. Arise and go your way in peace, your faith has made you whole.”

When evening came, the troop following Christ were worn out by their long walk. Jesus came to the decision to halt for the night. He sent two disciples on ahead to the next village, the buildings of which were already in sight from the road. At their Master’s bidding, the pair had run on to get a supper ready and find some stables in which to sleep. However, before the group had reached the settlement the two disciples came back, at a loss what to do. They were not welcome in the village, because they were heading for Jerusalem. The bitterness of the Samaritans against Jews from the South was still as strong as ever. Jesus thought little of it and decided to go on to another village.

Simon the Zealous did not take this rebuff kindly, though. He began cursing those Samaritans and whispered a few words in John’s ear. John nodded then went up to Christ.

“Lord,” asked John, “do you wish us to command fire to come down from the heavens and consume them?”

His eyes flicked briefly to one side, pointing out Simon the Zealous.

Jesus turned to face the apostles and reprimanded them severely, making no distinctions among them.

“You do not know what evil spirit is moving you. I am not come to destroy men’s souls, but to save them.”

Simon the Zealous knew that this message was aimed at him personally, at him and his brothers. He was upset to find his comments had been repeated. Giving John a black look, he set off after Christ, who had just started out once more.

After several days more of walking, they finally reached Jericho. In that city, the news of their arrival spread. From all sides, people came out of their homes to see the one who was stated to be the Son of God. A large crowd joined the troop and the town’s streets were soon jammed.

Zaccheus was the chief publican of Jericho. In his curiosity, the tax-collector sought to see who this Jesus, of whom he had heard so much, actually was. Always money-conscious, he hoped to gain some profit from his meeting with him. However, being a short man, he could not see him in the crowd. He ran on ahead of the townsfolk and climbed a tree. Like lava flowing from a volcano, the dense mass of men and women was moving slowly forward. In its midst, surrounded by his apostles as if they were a praetorian guard, Jesus finally came into Zaccheus’ view.

Seeing the man in his red robe up in the tree, Jesus stopped. Levi, the former publican who had become one of the Twelve, muttered a few words in his ear.

“Zaccheus,” said Jesus then, “make haste and come down, for today I must abide at your house.”

Surprised and flattered that Christ knew him, Zaccheus came down from the tree and pushed his way through the crowd until he reached Jesus. He led him and his disciples to his huge house, the largest in the town. At the sight of that beautiful and luxurious building, over a hundred fifty feet long by a hundred fifty broad, and several stories high, the crowd regretfully felt they had to leave Jesus.

“He is going to be a guest with a man that is a sinner against the Law of Moses,” said scattered voices in astonishment.”

Zaccheus knew that Jesus was inclined to mercy and alms-giving. To flatter him and get into his good books, as also to cut short any argument that might make Christ change his mind at the last moment, Zaccheus lied with an aplomb that verged on insolence.

“Behold, Lord, I shall give the half of my goods to the poor and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation or inadvertently, I shall restore it to him fourfold.”

Jesus was not fooled, but did not wish to make him lose face before the crowd.

“This day salvation has come to this house, for he also is a son of Abraham. For I have come to seek and to save those which were lost.”

Zaccheus bowed respectfully.

Night had almost come. After these long days of exhausting marches, all of Christ’s disciples were able to eat and sleep a little more than had been usual since the start of their journey. Jesus allowed the group a few hours of rest before setting back out on the way to Bethany, which they did as soon as it dawned.

Levi, the former publican, knew Zaccheus very well, even if the tax-collector had not recognized the plump redhead among Christ’s apostles. Levi had put forward the idea of going to stay at Zaccheus’ house because he knew that the chief publican of Jericho was obsessed with money and was always trying to expand his circle of acquaintances and sphere of influence. Christ, as a son of David, along with his companions, was sure to be received as royally as a king and his court, for Zaccheus hoped some day to get back a hundred times what he would give to Jesus.

Levi had hit the nail on the head and Zaccheus was a most thoughtful and open-handed host. He saw to it that Christ and his disciples lacked for nothing. Zaccheus got his servants to bring them the best wine that he had available to him and had hundreds of chickens slaughtered to feed Christ’s entourage. He sent out for all the mats that were available so his guests could sleep on them. He left his luxurious bedroom at the disposal of his noteworthy guest and because of the shortage of space he even slept outside his own home.

As soon as day broke, Jesus set out once again. Learning that he was already heading for Jerusalem, many townsfolk gathered around the house where he had spent the night and began following him toward the exit from the city. The apostles had to elbow people out of the way so that their Master could walk on without being jostled.

Two blind men were sitting at the roadside. Hearing the footsteps of a crowd, they inquired what was happening. They were told that it was Jesus of Nazareth. The blind men stood up and started crying out:

“Oh you Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on us!”

Some townsfolk told them to be silent and not to bother Christ. Despite this, they shouted even louder.

“Son of David, have mercy on us!”

Passing close by, Jesus finally heard them. He called them to him.

“What would you have me do for you?” asked he.

“Lord, we would wish to have sight restored to us!”

Jesus carefully wiped his hands on his voluminous robe, then rubbed them one against the other, raising them toward the sky. After a few moments, to the accompaniment of astonished muttering, Divine Unction began to seep out of his palms. He told the blind men to kneel. He gently raised their eyelids one after another, mingling a few drops of his saliva with the Divine Unction and then applying the mixture with his fingertips to their pupils. Ten minutes later, the blind men could see again. The population was astounded by these miracles. In the eyes of many, the flame of faith grew into indescribable veneration.

Among this crowd of devout people there was one whose gaze was laden with hatred and rancor. His dark eyes stared at Christ’s back as he imagined strangling him with his own hands. He raised them, but rather than gripping the neck that lay open to him he put them on Jesus’ shoulders.

“Let us go, Lord, for Lazarus awaits you.”

Jesus turned and smiled at him, not detecting the bitterness in his look.

Giving the signal for departure, Jesus put himself at the head of the troop. It was only at the beginning of the afternoon that he reached the neighborhood of Bethany. In Lazarus’ home, numerous neighbors and friends were trying to console his sisters. Four days had already gone by since the burial of their brother, who was now resting in a tomb.

Coming from Jerusalem, a rich friend who had a horse had just ridden past Jesus on the road. After exchanging a few words, the rider had gone off at a gallop to tell Maria Magdalena and Martha of his meeting with Christ. When she heard this news, Martha rushed to meet Jesus, while Maria, too upset by the death of her brother, stayed prostrate with grief in the house.

Young Martha ran till she was breathless. Her slim figure crossed several olive groves. She had no great distance to cover: Jesus was already there, walking at the head of a large crowd.

Tears streaming down her face, she flung herself into Jesus’ arms.

“Lord,” sobbed the young woman, panting for breath, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died ...”

She sniffed several times before going on sadly:

“... but I know that even now, whatsoever you will ask of God, God will give it to you. My brother had such faith in you ...”

Jesus gently stroked her hair.

“Your brother will rise again,” said he.

She raised her rebellious face toward him, then toward the sky.

“I know that he will rise again in Heaven, in the resurrection, at the end of days.”

“I am the resurrection. He that believes in me, even if he were dead, would still live. Whosoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

The young woman dried her eyes with the hem of her tunic.

“Yes, Lord, I believe in you even as my brother believed in you. I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Jesus told Martha to go and fetch her elder sister. The young woman ran off and came back fifteen minutes later accompanied by Maria and many neighbors and family friends.

Maria Magdalena threw herself at Jesus’ feet, crying.

“Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not be dead.”

When he saw her tears and those of the people who were with her, Jesus shuddered inwardly. Faced with such sadness, he could not hold back his own tears, carried away by compassion.

“Where have you laid him?” asked Jesus.

He was led to the other side of the town. Some hundred yards beyond the last houses there was a cave with its entrance at the level of the ground; it was just a small cavity where Lazarus had liked to hide as a child. In his teens he had said that he wished to be buried there when he died. A huge stone now blocked the entry.

Tears had not stopped pouring down Christ’s face.

“Behold how he loved him!” murmured somebody in the crowd.

“Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind, have prevented his friend from dying?” asked a man from Jericho who had followed him hear.

Jesus approached the sepulcher. Turning to the villagers, he made a request:

“Take away the stone!”

A gleam of surprise flickered in Martha’s eyes. She walked up to him.

“Lord, by this time he must stink, for he has been dead four days! ...”

She thought that he wanted to pay his last respects and see her brother for one last time. However, even for Christ that would not be seemly. Jesus did not desist in his attempt. He pointed his finger at several sturdy fellows and they began pushing the heavy stone aside.

“Did I not say to you that one day if you would believe you would see the glory of the Heavenly Father?” asked Jesus, looking at Martha.

As soon as the stone had been rolled back, Jesus glanced into the hole at

his feet. Then he smiled happily.

Raising his eyes to the sky, he said:

“Heavenly Father, I thank you that you heard me. I knew that you hear my words always, but because of the people that stand by me here I said it, so that they may believe that it is truly you that sent me.”

Lowering his head, he cried out in a loud voice:

“Lazarus, come forth!”

Astounded, those present saw hands emerging, then a head. The dead man’s body was completely swathed in bandages. Jesus helped him out of the cave.

“Loose him and let him go,” ordered Jesus.

After a moment of panic, the villagers rushed toward Lazarus, whose staggering gait showed that he was not yet fully recovered from his resurrection. His bindings were loosened. Martha and Maria Magdalena, together with most of the crowd, were weeping for joy, thanking God for the miracle that He had just consented to his Son.

Lazarus’ face was pale and he was having difficulty catching his breath. He drank thirstily directly from the jug the water that he was handed, then rinsed his face and his half-naked body. After that the very first thing he wanted to do was to thank Jesus. He flung himself into his Savior’s arms.

“You brought me back to life, Lord. I was dead ...”

“It is of no matter, my friend,” replied Jesus, all modesty. “It is of no matter ...”

For some people from Jericho who had followed Christ, it was a real shock to come face to face with the divine powers of the Son of God. For his disciples, on the other hand, things were different, as they had already been present at a resurrection.

A little before this, on entering a town called Nain, the disciples following Christ met a funeral procession. Jesus had approached the coffin and looked at the only child who was lying in it, mourned by his young mother, who had already been widowed. To everybody’s surprise, Jesus had laid his hand on the boy’s neck. Then, after a few seconds, he had placed his other hand on the dead lad’s face.

“Do not weep any longer,” is what he had said to the boy’s mother.

Then he had added in a powerful voice:

“Young man, I say to you, arise!”

At that point, the dead child had sat up, coughing and glassy-eyed. After a few minutes, he had begun to talk. Everybody had been stricken with fear and had started to glorify God.

The disciples who had been there in Nain were not overly astonished at the resurrection of Lazarus. It was just one more of the endless proofs of the divine ancestry of Christ, Son of God, confirming their faith in him, demonstrating undeniably that they had made the right choice when they had left everything to follow the Messiah.

When evening came to Bethany, many villagers had yet to get over the emotions that had affected them as they saw Lazarus return to life. Everywhere in the environs and even as far as Jerusalem, the news had spread and a large crowd had invaded the narrow streets of the small town.

Jesus had taken refuge with his friend back from the dead in the latter's house. Martha and Maria had prepared an excellent meal and their brother ate it with great relish. Just after his resurrection, Jesus had spoken in private with Lazarus. Afterward, the revived man would not talk about what he had seen in the other world, in sheol, or about what had happened there. Everybody gathered that it was because Jesus had requested him to keep these matters secret. It was a fair divine bargain not to reveal God's doings; if silence was the price to be paid to return from the land of the dead, then many would willingly keep silent.

At the end of the meal, Maria Magdalena took a pound of a perfume of pure spikenard, extremely expensive, and with it anointed Jesus' feet, then used her hair to wipe them delicately. The house filled up with the scent of this perfume. Even though he considered that he did not merit such an honor, Jesus let her do this, as he understood that it was her way of thanking him for bringing her brother back to life.

The apostles had also been invited to the sisters' meal. Judas Sicariot, who had not uttered a word the whole time they were eating, stared at Christ in a strange fashion.

"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii to be given to the poor?" asked the apostle.

Not grasping the hidden implications in Judas' words, believing that the reproach was aimed at Maria, Jesus came to the woman's defense.

"Let her alone," replied he. "It was for the day of my burying that she had kept this perfume."

Pensively, he added:

"You have the poor with you always and whenever you wish you may do them good, but me you will not have always."

To change the topic of conversation, sensing some strange tension in Judas' speech, Simon Peter asked innocently:

"What are we to do now? Are we to leave for Galilee?"

Jesus remained silent for a short while, looking intently at the Twelve,

one after another.

“Tomorrow we shall go up to Jerusalem once more ...”

Simon Peter leapt up from his chair. Groping for words to dissuade the Master from going to a certain death, he stammered for some seconds before managing to express himself clearly:

“No, not to Jerusalem! If the Son of God goes to Jerusalem, he will be killed ...”

“We shall go up to Jerusalem,” broke in Jesus to end the discussion.

A heavy silence came over those assembled. A few apostles looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes, not daring to raise their voices to prevent the Master from committing such madness. Sitting back down with an aching heart, Simon Peter asked himself what passion could be driving Christ for him to want to go to Jerusalem where death inevitably awaited him. What was the reason for this incomprehensible sacrifice? What fervor could motivate such an act?

Sitting opposite him, Jesus seemed to be looking at Simon Peter without seeing him, as if staring right inside the apostle’s head and reading the thoughts scurrying around within it.

Pensively, his eyes unfocused, Jesus added, after over a minute of silence:

“The future of the Son of God is already accomplished: he will be delivered to the Gentiles, mocked, spitefully treated, spat upon, beaten with rods, crucified and put to death, but on the third day he will rise again ...”

A lump in his throat, Simon Peter listened to these words with their prophetic resonances.

Rising from the table, Jesus smiled sadly.

32

Golem

Tom walked out of his hotel room and found himself in the corridor with its deep, dark red fitted carpet.

He was freshly shaved and wearing jeans and a gray tee-shirt. He walked across and knocked at the door opposite his own.

After a few seconds, Camilla opened her door.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” Tom asked politely.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, hastily doing up the last buttons on her pink blouse.

“Are you ready?”

Camilla nodded. She took a step forward, but her high-heeled shoe caught on the saddle board of the threshold and she lost her balance, stumbling into Tom, her head hitting his chest. He held her from falling with his strong arms.

Camilla slowly raised her emerald-green eyes to look the burly man in the eye. For some seconds, but seconds that seemed interminable, their looks met, mingled, fused.

The young woman’s lips pouted ever so slightly and the muscles in Tom’s neck tensed, his head feeling heavy as a rock at the top of a giddy precipice, sliding inexorably toward the temptation of empty space. Tom noted a subtle perfume with hints of vanilla inflaming his senses and the desire to kiss Camilla was overwhelming.

He closed his eyes to drive away that urge. However, the image of those lips remained imprinted in the depths of his mind. Why should he fear those lips? Was it because he knew so much on the subject? For Tom was very aware that if a first kiss went badly it could instantly cut short an otherwise promising relationship. Women can be attracted by a man, but find their interest vanishes completely after a first kiss.

For most men, an intense kiss was essentially a step taken toward sexual intercourse. For women, it was a way of moving a relationship on toward a more deeply emotional stage, but also a way of evaluating whether the other involved would be a good long-term partner.

From a totally Darwinian perspective, a kiss permitted the exchange of saliva, and allowed the pheromones of the other to be perceived unconsciously as noses were brought close. The transmission of extremely complex information that ensued subconsciously determined to what extent a person was genetically compatible with another.

However, at the dawn of time, a kiss had had another primary function: it was a distant legacy of the feeding practices of apes. Among such primates, mothers fed their young by transferring pre-masticated food from mouth to mouth, bringing their lips against those of the baby. Lip contact in this way was associated with the pleasure of eating. In humans, the action had also served to soothe hungry children when food was scarce, then later had come to be a way of expressing love and affection in general.

Tom opened eyes again.

There were times when he would have wished to know nothing, to be no more than an unaware animal, an animal never questioning itself, living without answers, without a past or a future, just for the present moment. How he would have loved to know nothing and simply to be enraptured by a kiss, a kiss that would stimulate the center in the brain linked to pleasure, a specific center also stimulated by the worst of hard drugs, which, by releasing dopamine within the head, led people to become 'hooked' on those lips pressed against their own as they might on cocaine. How he would have loved not to know ...

However, he did know.

Moreover, Camilla did not know what he knew.

He thought of 'The God Virus', all that it implied and especially the lies that had been a blemish on his relationship with Camilla from the very start.

Tom was just a villain who was not worthy of this innocent and attractive woman, and should take his sea-blue eyes off her.

So he did so.

Camilla pulled herself together when she saw those big blue eyes turning away from her, straightened up, apologized politely and locked the door of her room.

In silence and feeling somewhat awkward, Tom and Camilla took the elevator and went down to the hall of the hotel where breakfast was served.

Martial was already drinking a coffee. They exchanged greetings.

“Well, well!” Tom gently mocked his friend. “You look exhausted this morning. Up to things all night, were you?”

“Seriously,” Martial responded, “I did sleep badly. You know ... the excitement of at last reaching the final goal: the Grail.”

Camilla sat down and asked the hovering waiter to bring her some tea.

“About the Grail,” she said calmly, “you’re going to have to explain to me why it’s supposed to be in the oldest synagogue still in operation in Europe. You just showed me the photos last night and then you waved me out of the room so you could make your plans to lay hands on the Grail as a man thing ... or perhaps I should say as a thief thing ...”

Tom smiled.

“This is no theft, as you well know. We’re talking about a world heritage that has to be recovered ... and I’m very sorry about yesterday evening, but I didn’t want to bore you with technical details ...”

Camilla was not fooled. She realized that the Grail had to be particularly well guarded and that Tom did not want her to be worried by a potentially dangerous plan that might put at risk the life of the man she loved.

“Be that as it may,” Tom went on, “Abbé Boudet was sure the Pontius Pilate Report was in the synagogue, because of the Golem.”

“The Golem?” Camilla asked. “Isn’t that the Jewish myth about a man-like monster made out of clay that was brought to life by writing a verse from the Bible on its forehead?”

Tom nodded.

“Yes, that’s it exactly. It’s that same legend that later on gave the inspiration for the tale of Frankenstein’s monster. A quick recap: the Jewish legend says it was Rabbi Loew who created the Golem in Prague in the sixteenth century. He brought it to life by writing the word ‘EMET’ on the clay of its forehead, ‘EMET’ means ‘truth’ in Hebrew. The Rabbi also put in the Golem’s mouth a piece of parchment with God’s name written on it. Afterward, the creature escaped from the Rabbi’s control, becoming an evil being that wreaked havoc in the town. To kill the Golem, all you had to do was to rub out the first letter of the word ‘EMET’, since the word ‘MET’ means ‘death’. But since the Golem had got too big for the Rabbi to reach the first letter on its forehead and rub it out, he used a trick. He asked the Golem to help him tie up his shoelaces. The plan worked: the monster bent down, so its forehead came into reach and its creator was able to turn it back into what it had been made out of, clay ... The legend also claims that the body of the Golem is hidden away in the Old-New

Synagogue in Prague, somewhere in the attics which are used to store old parchments and unusable Hebrew manuscripts, since the Jewish religion forbids the throwing away of any written materials that contain the name of the Almighty, even personal letters or legal contracts that begin with an invocation of God. So, the Golem or what remained of it is supposed to have been put up in the attics of the synagogue with all these documents ...”

Tom took a sip from the cup of hot chocolate that the waiter had just brought him.

“That’s how the legend goes, but let’s look at the facts now. The confessed aim of Rabbi Loew was to defend his community against pogroms. The Golem was intended to fight off the fanatical Catholics and their bishops who regularly stirred the population up against the Jews. For instance, in 1389, when more than three thousand Jews were massacred during their Passover. Rabbi Loew’s was to gain protection from pogroms like that. Well, from the moment the story of the Golem appears the Jewish community in Prague began to prosper and was never again troubled by Catholic fanaticism ... a strange coincidence, don’t you think?”

“So you think the Golem might have really been the Pontius Pilate Report?” Camilla queried.

“Yes, the Rabbi had laid hands on a copy of the Grail and he threatened the Church with making its contents public if the pogroms continued. The Catholic clergy had to handle the Prague Jews with kid gloves after that. At the same time, Rabbi Loew made up the myth of the Golem so the Jews around him wouldn’t get any inkling he was blackmailing the Church so they’d be left in peace. With the specter of the Golem, everyone believed that the Jews now had a powerful protector, a protector with the word ‘truth’ on his forehead ...”

“That might just be a chance coincidence,” Camilla objected.

“In the case of the Golem, I don’t believe in coincidences ... Wasn’t it you that said that chance is nothing but the sum of what we don’t know? What you don’t know is that Abbé Boudet had proof the Golem was indeed the Pontius Pilate Report: while looking for the Grail, Boudet paid a very large sum for a letter written in Rabbi Loew’s own hand that mentioned the blackmail in terms leaving no room for doubt. That letter was copied out in Boudet’s notebook, the one I found at Rennes-le-Château.”

“Come to that, where is Boudet’s notebook?” Martial asked. “Do you have it with you?”

“No, I left it in a safe place in Paris. But you needn’t worry, all of it’s

in here ...”

Tom tapped his forehead.

“My memory’s photographic, as you well know.”

Martial smiled at him.

“Right, so all we have to do now is get hold of the Grail.”

“How do you intend to do that?” Camilla asked.

Tom shook his head.

“That’s a secret. Besides, Martial and I have a lot of shopping to do this morning. I must to get hold of some cell phones and one or two other items which are, let’s say, a little more sensitive. Luckily, I know a former mercenary who lives here.”

“Will he be willing to help you?” Camilla asked.

“What I like about mercenaries,” Tom replied, “is that they’ll do anything if the price is right ...”

The rest of breakfast passed by in a virtually Trappist silence, all three being occupied with in the twisting and turnings of their innermost thoughts. Finally Martial and Tom said goodbye to their young lady friend.

When the two men left, Camilla returned rapidly to her room.

She sat on the bed, got out her cell phone and dialed a number.

The phone was answered after a few rings.

“It’s me,” she said, “... No, I’m still with Thomas Anderson ... No, definitely not, he doesn’t suspect anything ...”

Camilla gave a small tinkling laugh.

*
* *

Sitting in his office chair, Fustiger smiled gloomily as he spoke into the telephone.

“So what do you intend to do?” the Cardinal asked.

“You needn’t worry on that score, I have a plan,” the sensuous voice of Goddess replied. “Within twenty-four hours Mister Anderson will have ceased to be any sort of a threat, I promise you that. I’ll take personal care of him, so that he’ll never again be a threat to the interests we share ...”

Fustiger was silent for a couple of seconds.

“Would you not like Leo to come and join you in Prague?” he asked. “It’s not too late for that.”

“No, I prefer to work alone. Besides, if Leo was here, there’d be a risk of blowing my cover. So, better not.”

“As you wish,” Fustiger responded tartly. “What about the Grail in the synagogue?”

“If it’s still there, it’ll be in my hands shortly.”

“Perfect ...”

“Please don’t forget our agreement, my dear Cardinal; it’s the only reason I’m working for you, do keep that in mind.”

The Cardinal was about to retort that it was impossible to forget so perverse a request but he contained himself.

“Very well,” he finally said. “Our agreement stands ...”

“I’ll soon be coming to visit you in Rome ... I’ll call you back tomorrow, though, to give you the news about our friend Thomas Anderson ... Goodbye, my love ...”

Goddess rang off.

The Cardinal hung up as well and looked up at Leo, who had been listening to the conversation over the loudspeaker.

“She has a bewitching voice,” the young man said, his eyes shining. “If she comes here, can I meet her?”

Fustiger stared at his protégé, realizing that he had fallen in love with Goddess.

“Well, of course,” the Cardinal answered after an instant. “You’ll see Goddess when she’s here ...”

He turned his gaze to his laptop computer where the count-down was still ticking away.

The day after tomorrow, apocalypse, was what he thought.

The Pope had still not reached a decision about the ultimatum from the Sons of Abraham. The fatal hour was getting dangerously close without the Holy Father having chosen officially what line to follow.

Yet there was no alternative, so the choice was easy: it was essential to agree to back Israel’s intention to extend its frontiers.

Thinking hard about the Holy Father’s disturbing silence, Fustiger asked himself if the Pope might not be hoping for the bombshell to burst in the end. Did the Pope think he could survive the apocalypse, so that with God dead, he could be reborn from his ashes like the phoenix for the glory of Deus?

If that was the Pope’s idea, the Cardinal could not let him perpetrate such a folly, because in no case could Deus be triumphant. The winner would be the dark, eternal Evil One who would gain new splendor thanks

to the intermediary of Mohammed.

The cardinal's bulging eyes looked at the androgynous figure standing opposite him.

"My child ... I have the gravest fears about our Holy Father."

"What fears are they?" Leo asked.

Fustiger chose his words carefully.

"I fear he may be possessed by a devil ... By Satan in person ..."

To give added weight to his accusation, the Cardinal gravely nodded his head.

*
* *

A series of thuds made itself heard.

At the wheel of the large black saloon car, Martial seemed not to notice them, his attention divided between his thoughts and driving the vehicle through the streets of Prague.

Camilla, on the other hand, was worried by them.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"No, what?" Martial responded. "I can't hear anything unusual ..."

"Yes, ... listen, there's the noise again ..."

Martial stopped the car at the side of the road and turned on the hazard warning lights.

"I know what it is," he said. "It did the same thing this morning when I was leaving the garage where I hired the auto: it's the spare wheel which is loose. I'll see to it, it'll only take a minute, I just have to tighten the retaining cable ..."

Camilla nodded and took advantage of the temporary absence of the driver to have a look at herself in the courtesy mirror on the sun visor. As she sat in the front passenger seat, she checked her lipstick in the mirror and her eyes finally focused on the reflection of Martial, who had just opened the trunk in order to sort out the problem.

Thirty seconds later, Martial was back behind the wheel and looking at his watch.

"The synagogue is just two turnings farther along, so we're in plenty of time."

Camilla smiled at him.

She had been allowed to accompany him only on condition that she would stay in the vehicle on her best behavior, definitely not taking any

part in the plan the two men had prepared.

The car moved off again and after a couple of minutes Martial parked it between two others in a two-way street.

Like fairy-tale castles with their resplendent colors, the tall buildings round about rivaled one with another in status and beauty. However, Martial and Camilla paid scant attention to this magnificent architecture which made Prague one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, concentrating on observing the rear of the small Old-New Synagogue that was not even twenty yards from them.

Its color was pale. Its wide, square base was two stories tall and had the odd feature of being topped by what looked like a sort of huge, pointed, triangular hat, constructed of bricks and dark brown tiles. It was inside this dark, pyramidal roof-space that the Golem was stored: some eighteen or twenty feet above street level, a small metal door decorated with the Star of David that gave access could be seen. Forming a ladder, there were also a dozen or so bars fixed in the wall of the synagogue, climbing up to the Golem door, but unfortunately this ladder did not come down to ground level, the first bar being several yards up and not within easy reach of any normal person.

All round the synagogue, the streets were busy, many locals and tourists strolling in them. Camilla wondered what Tom would do to get into the Golem chamber without being arrested by the police.

The two men had told Camilla nothing of their plan, other than to say that she would enjoy the surprise of seeing it in action. Just as long as she stayed quietly in the car ...

"I'm in position," Martial said into a walkie-talkie. "Can the hen be put into the chicken-coop?"

"Affirmative," Tom's voice crackled out of the radio. "Green for go."

Martial slipped on a pair of black gloves, picked up a small sack from the rear seat and got out of the vehicle. Dressed in jeans and a simple long-sleeved white polo shirt, he went down the few steps of the paved pedestrian street that led to the synagogue entrance, disappearing from Camilla's field of vision. He did not return for ten minutes, and then it was without the sack.

"The hen is ready," Martial said into the walkie-talkie. "She just needs a visit from the rooster to be able to lay her egg."

"The rooster is on his way ..."

Camilla was both nervous and amused by the makeshift code they were using.

"What was in that sack?" she asked.

“A bomb,” Martial answered gravely. “And I’ve put it in the synagogue. At Tom’s signal, it’ll explode and cause unprecedented carnage ...”

Camilla looked at the West Indian in his fifties with his white beard.

“You are joking, aren’t you?”

“Of course, I’m just teasing you. You’ll see, it’s a surprise ... look, here comes Thomas ...”

Dressed in a baggy jacket and blue jogging trousers, carrying a big sports bag on his back, a bearded cyclist was pedaling slowly along the sidewalk. With a pair of B.M.X. goggles balanced on his nose and a large cap pulled down on his head, Tom was, as usual, unrecognizable: he was a master of the art of disguise.

He stopped at the steps down to the small pedestrian street, got off his bike, picked it up and carried it down them. However, he did not continue on his way toward the entrance to the synagogue: four more steps went down to the right. He descended them and came into a small internal courtyard at the foot of the Golem's building.

Tom leaned his mountain bike against the wall and glanced rapidly around him.

Nobody.

He put his big sports bag down on the ground.

He took out three rods made of black metal each about a yard long, comprising small detachable tubes that could slot one into another and were linked by two thin steel cables. Tom assembled the three rods to make one single long bar and fixed a small hook into one end of it.

He slung his bag on his back again, then dialed a number on his cell phone. Less than ten seconds later, shouts were heard in the street close by: thick white smoke was pouring out of the interior of the synagogue.

The moment for action had come.

Tom put the hook over one of the bars on the wall and with a sharp tug undid the single bar, which opened out into a long metal rope ladder. Tom quickly climbed the rungs of his ladder, reached the bars fixed into the synagogue wall and climbed up them to the Golem chamber door. Once there, he put a tiny explosive charge on the lock and flattened himself against the brown bricks.

At that height, Tom was fully visible and surprised passers-by had stopped to watch what he was doing. The explosion made these spectators shout in fear.

Tom kicked the door open and disappeared inside.

A loud siren shrieked out and panic reigned in the street.

Inside the parked car, Camilla was also trembling to see the man she loved performing these dangerous actions.

“Was it really a bomb that you put in the synagogue?” she asked Martial anxiously.

“Yes and no ... it was just a harmless smoke bomb that Tom triggered by remote control. Don’t worry ...”

All round them in the street, panicking people were running in all directions. Close by, rolling white smoke from the bomb was pouring out of the synagogue door.

Martial calmly used his cell phone to call the fire brigade. In English, he told them that the Old-New Synagogue was on fire.

Aghast, Camilla listened to him telling this lie.

“But the police will come too,” she stammered when he had finished speaking. “Tom will never be able to get out without being arrested ...”

Martial smiled.

“Nothing venture, nothing gain ...”

Helpless, during the following few minutes, Camilla saw two fire trucks and a police cruiser arrive, all with flashing lights and blaring sirens. A witness of Tom’s break-in told one of the policemen what he had seen. The officer drew his pistol and pointed it toward the Golem chamber entry, from which thick black smoke was now emerging. In the meantime, the Czech firemen, wearing white helmets and breathing masks and with oxygen tanks on their backs, had gone into the synagogue.

Five minutes later, Camilla bit her lip hard enough to draw blood: the firemen must have gained access to the roof by some other route, because one of them, dressed in the standard blue fire-resistant overalls with yellow reflective stripes, had just appeared through the smoke at the Golem chamber door. Still wearing his helmet and breathing mask, he came down the metal bars and then the rope ladder that Tom had used before him. When he reached the ground, his interest seemed to be drawn to the abandoned bicycle, which he picked up and carried away with him.

A policeman knocked on the car window.

He gestured to the driver to move along.

“That’s fine,” Martial muttered to himself, “I’ve an appointment I mustn’t miss ...”

Martial started up and the saloon car headed off into the streets of Prague.

“Are you abandoning Thomas?” Camilla asked, her face a picture of

dismay.

“Of course not. He’ll be with us soon, I told you not to worry.”

The car drove on, stopping a few streets farther on.

Bemused, Camilla saw a fireman approaching on Tom’s bike. The firefighter dumped the mountain bike on the sidewalk and climbed into the back seat of Martial’s vehicle.

“Let’s go,” Tom said, taking off his mask and helmet.

Camilla giggled nervously.

“I nearly died of fright ...”

Tom smiled tenderly at her.

Martial glanced at his friend in the rear-view mirror.

“So? Did you find it?”

Tom’s face darkened.

“No, the Grail wasn’t there anymore. I found this in the place ...”

Tom fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a piece of old red cloth.

Camilla’s eyes grew round in surprise as she recognized a typical Nazi armband with its black swastika.

33

Germany 1945. Berlin

Adolf Hitler mechanically stroked with his right hand the ancient manuscript of Pontius Pilate that his SS had found in the old synagogue in Prague.

Dressed in his dark green uniform, his black tie perfectly knotted, Hitler leaned back in his chair. He looked at the Roman's report where it lay on his office desk and could not help thinking once more about its closeness to his own case. The similarities in convictions and even acts were strange, bewitching, worrying, indeed.

Was that not a sign of the hand of God, a heavenly, armed hand required by a shared destiny?

Hitler had always believed that he had been sent by God, his messenger and guide, or *Führer*, to a new world order desired by the Creator of all things. He had a providential mission to accomplish for Him, a divine mission that even a whole lifetime would have been hard put to it to complete. Through his faith in this mission entrusted to him by God, he in fact had powerful intuition, a divine gift, which allowed him to guess others' thoughts and to exercise magnetic control over crowds. He spoke to them in prophetic tones and knew how to win them over with the strange aura of his personality.

Germany had given herself unstintingly to the Führer, in whom she saw reflected her dreams and ambitions, rather than he seizing her. His overwhelming victories from 1939 to 1941 had strongly reinforced the population's belief in the infallibility of their guide. They were ready to die for him and Hitler had had himself officially granted the right of life and death over every German citizen.

The fascination exercised by Hitler went well beyond the borders of Germany. Even in foreign countries there had been several cases of women who committed suicide out of despairing love for him, a man seen

as a virtually divine incarnation.

The ancient slogan of the Reich had been: '*Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Gott*' [One People, one Nation, one God]. Hitler had changed it and symbolically taken on the title of 'God' by replacing it with his own title 'Führer'. Germans no longer needed priests: through Adolf Hitler, they could communicate directly with God. Considered a Messianic Savior by the German people, Hitler knew he was God's prophet and that God had watched over him in all sorts of circumstances, particularly when he had been the target of assassination attempts.

"*Gott mit uns*," Hitler murmured, "God is with us."

So it would never be forgotten that the German Army was fighting in the name of God, Hitler had had engraved on the belt-buckles of all his soldiers '*Gott mit uns*': God was with them and the troops of the Third Reich were doing no more than to accomplish the precise will of God's Holy Spirit ...

When he thought of the real nature of this Holy Spirit, Hitler's face was traversed by a grimace of hatred and he tapped his fingertips nervously on Pontius Pilate's manuscript.

Paradoxically, while this report gave strange evidence that Hitler was probably the armed hand of one and the same will of God that the destiny of the Jews had repeated over the millennia, the manuscript's main content was the terrible proof that God did not exist.

God did not exist.

The Christian God did not exist, no longer existed, never had existed.

What was to be said of the Nordic paganism that Hitler admired? Was that, too, a human fable? Was everything no more than a beautiful lie?

Hitler had suddenly come back down to earth, his voyage through the unreal ending abruptly when the Pontius Pilate Report reached his hands. Until then he had always followed his impulses rather than reason, but he had awakened brusquely to the world as it truly was, a world where such hunches were not divinely inspired.

A world empty of everything.

Hitler no longer believed in the divine. The divine did not exist, it had collapsed in a heap in his view when he had learned that it was nothing but a human invention, pure and simple.

Hitler had believed until then that his rise to absolute power had been arranged by the hand of God. Being realistic, Hitler now had to recognize that God had had no hand in his destiny, his meteoric climb into the highest spheres of power. If he had succeeded in building a great empire on his own, he owed this not to God but to God's Church, or rather to the

organization that claimed to be such.

The Catholic Church had wished to be the sole religion in his empire and had flirted with Hitler. It had supported him by ordering its faithful to obey the Führer as a religious duty, it had given him full power in Germany in 1933 through the mediation of the *Zentrum*, the German Catholic Party, and its political leader Monsignor Kaas. Hitler embodied the New Order, replacing decadent bourgeois and democratic societies.

The Church was keen to renew its power and had been irked by its exclusion from such power by democratic institutions through its separation from the State in many countries. It had been terrified by the French ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’, that ‘monstrous notion’ as it had seemed to one Pope, which was contrary to God’s laws and flowed out in the shape of diabolic democracies. So it had done all it could to support totalitarian nations and become their sole State religion.

In Italy, Mussolini had been described by the Pope as the man of providence because he had made Catholicism the State religion. In Spain, from the very first days of the Republic in 1931 onward the Church had condemned this government and encouraged the faithful to take up arms against democracy. It had supported Franco when he stirred up a civil war, its priests blessing the cannons, for cannons were holy, if the holes they smashed in walls allowed the Gospel to flourish. In a joint letter addressed to bishops of the whole world, by the Spanish bishops, it had taken an official stance in favor of the war, a war presented as a noble crusade, even rejoicing at the executions of Republican prisoners, because at the moment they were put to death, they became reconciled with God. However painful their death might be, it brought them something more valuable than life itself, thanks to divine mercy. If there had been no war, those now dying gloriously in its battles would have had a morally insignificant life, practically insignificant in religious terms, doomed to end in some nondescript fashion leading them to a dubious future beyond the grave.

Hitler had always had great admiration for the way in which the Catholic hierarchy kept control over its faithful, systematically denying scientific facts that contradicted it. This Church, which imposed its ‘own reality’ to the detriment of the real had physically backed Nazi Germany, stating that it was not possible to refuse anybody the right to safeguard the purity of a race and to draw up the measures necessary for that purpose. It had handed over to Hitler’s government its genealogical files and archives, which had allowed Christians to be picked out, and so all the Jews to be identified. It had also whispered in Hitler’s ear the idea of ordering the Jews to wear a yellow star: more than five hundred years earlier, the

Church had itself ordered the wearing of a distinctive sign, a yellow circle, taking over an old custom of the Arab world which obliged Jews to wear yellow clothes, hats, or badges. Hitler was sorry to have imposed this yellow star: the accursed Jews had worn it proudly and ostentatiously and this sign of belonging to a group had even reinforced their solidarity, the cohesion of the pack. It would have been better to force them to go around without a stitch on them, like the wild beasts they really were. Hitler had read a report from an SS officer describing the last minutes of deportees led into the gas chambers: as long as the Jews remained clothed, there was a need for vigilance, as some of them still might try to play at being heroes, but once they were completely naked there was no further risk of that.

There were no naked heroes.

In their nakedness they lost their status as human beings to become just frightened animals, submissive and unaware like docile oxen heading for the slaughterhouse. Hitler should have forbidden clothing for all the Jews, that was what he should have done long since. With that thought, seeing in his mind's eye the streets of Berlin invaded by hordes of naked Jews, he could not help pulling a face of deep disgust. To imagine that repulsive race wandering around naked before the Aryan people was an outrage to beauty and the purity of the German lands.

Just because God did not exist anymore, Hitler was not suddenly going to have regrets about having exterminated the Jews of Europe, quite the contrary. The Jews were sub-humans, a radically inferior race, but also extremely dangerous. Hitler had always had the inner conviction that there was a Darwinian struggle between different and very unequal races. The superior race, the Aryan, needed to be purified of all foreign elements, Jews, homosexuals and handicapped so as to dominate the world by brute force. That sort of force could only triumph if it eliminated any sort of weakness without exception.

To fulfill this implacable law of nature, Hitler had long ago decided to allow himself no compassion. That was why he had always fought against his inner feelings as forcefully as he combated inferior races: with unparalleled severity. An ape will trample to death any other ape not forming part of its community and what was true for primates was also true for men, nature was cruel, so they had the right to be so as well.

Life never forgave any weakness.

The so-called humanity of man was a wishy-washy stupidity thought up by insignificant parish priests, pity came from original sin, so, as he saw it, to feel pity for the weak ran counter to the laws of nature ...

As he thought of original sin, Hitler's mind turned to the Old Testament. If the cult of Jesus was false, the same was probably true for the Judaism

practiced by the sub-humans with their Old Testament, that Old Testament which was the essential base on which Christianity was built. Hitler had always wondered why the Vatican, steeped in the humanitarian attitude required of it by protocol, had so obligingly kept silent about the extermination of Jews in the gas chambers. Hitler knew that the Vatican was fully informed: a few Jews had escaped from the death camps and had sent the Pope a detailed report about the situation.

With his clear vision of the matter, Hitler now understood why the Vatican had maintained this knowing silence.

The Church wanted all the Jews to be eliminated, because, aided by their total disappearance, over the long term it could ensure that the Old Testament, the flawed foundation for its religion, slowly faded away.

It was perhaps true that archaeological research in Palestine had already proved that the Old Testament was not a historical account, but rather a flagrant myth. Hence, besides the Pontius Pilate Report, the Old Testament was also capable of causing the fable of Jesus to collapse, since he had recognized the Mosaic scriptures as the true word of God.

Christianity was a house of cards that in the end must collapse because of its false and shaky foundation, the Old Testament.

Hitler was sure of that now.

It was all just a myth.

Unfortunately for the Vatican's cunning plan, the Jews would survive the war, as would the Old Testament: the hope that Hitler could wipe their accursed race off the face of the Earth would not be fulfilled. Worse still, international Jewry had triumphed by infiltrating the highest spheres of American power and was already pulling the strings of his own personal future.

"Amerika ..."

Hitler deeply regretted going to war with the transatlantic giant. He had made a colossal mistake in allying himself with Japan to take Stalin in a pincer movement. Those Nipponese dwarfs had never opened a front in Russia and Hitler had had to confront the powerful Red Army on his own, while those slit-eyed midgets had put superior smiles on their yellow faces, but had run after a stopped bus and had got a kick in the pants from an America that was out of their range.

Hitler should have ensured American neutrality in this war, keeping their immense economic potential out of the conflict. Nazi Germany and the United States had so many points in common, so many affinities that they could have become great friends.

To start with, they both detested Communism and homosexuality,

seeing both as perverse and unnatural diseases.

They shared the same conviction that the strong should lord it over the docile weak, but, more than that, they had similar historical legacies: the Germans had exterminated the Jews to impose the superiority of the Aryan race on their lands, while the European settlers had, for their part, exterminated the Indians, those inferior races that soiled the American paradise by their presence. In both cases, Darwinian order had triumphed through brute force to guarantee the dominance of a pure European racial stock.

Hitler considered sex between an Aryan German and a person of Jewish race as zoophilia: white Americans felt just the same as he did, because they never, or hardly ever, mingled with inferior races such as Negroes. The various different ethnic groups lived each in its own neighborhoods and never mixed. The children of the Negroes did not go to the same schools as white youngsters, they could not drink from the fountains reserved for whites and in public transport Negroes could not sit in the seating assigned to whites.

Nazi Germany and the United States had so much ideology in common that it was a great pity no area of political understanding had been found. Nonetheless, ever since Hitler had taken power, he had received the support of the most influential American industrialists and bankers. They had worked behind the scenes to make Hitler acceptable to public opinion and Hitler had even been awarded the charming title of Man of the Year 1938 by Time Magazine.

The financial support provided to Hitler before 1940 by American capitalism had been astronomical and had allowed him to re-arm Germany rapidly with the aim of waging war: this influential sector of the American economy was clear about the nature of Nazism, but had helped it financially out of personal interest, fully aware that this would end in a war involving Europe and probably the United States.

However, war was a business like any other, which sometimes could offer a million-fold return on the initial investment.

His eyes unfocused, Hitler gazed at Pilate's manuscript.

It was one of those powerful American bankers, Prescott Bush, that Hitler had contacted to serve as an intermediary in his negotiations with President Roosevelt.

Holding the Pontius Pilate Report, Hitler had a dreadful weapon, a new armament capable of changing the course of the war, the most powerful of all the arms ever made on Earth.

Hitler had proposed a bargain to the U.S.A.: unless the Americans

accepted peace with the Third Reich and joined with it in attacking the Soviet Union, he would broadcast the Pontius Pilate Report to the whole world.

Obviously, not wanting this apocalyptic weapon unleashed on his territory, Roosevelt had accepted. He had given his word of honor to Hitler.

Together, they had worked out tactics to turn round Germany's catastrophic situation: she was on the point of losing the war; it could be no more than a question of weeks.

Convinced that the German people did not deserve to survive him, because it had not proved to be the strongest side, Hitler had even ordered an unprecedented burned-earth campaign, including the destruction of industries, military installations, stores and the means of transport and communication, but also power-stations, water-works and everything essential for even the basic survival of his fellow-citizens. Hitler considered that the German people, which had failed in the aims assigned to it, deserved such a fate and that if the Führer's life was to end, then all Germany should disappear with him.

Germany was at bay, caught between two fronts: to the West the Americans, to the East the Russians. Roosevelt had asked Hitler to let the Russians break through to the gates of Berlin. Then, just as they believed victory was won, the plan was to take the Red Army in a vast pincers movement: masters of the sky, American bombers would pulverize the concentrated enemy forces, while on land their new transatlantic ally's army would come to reinforce the Germans so as finally to crush the millions of Russian soldiers caught in the trap. Roosevelt had also promised to hand over a thousand aircraft to re-equip the Luftwaffe rapidly.

For this plan to succeed, the most absolute secrecy had to be maintained, with nobody informed, not even Hitler's closest collaborators. So that Stalin would likewise suspect nothing, the Americans had to continue fighting the Nazis on the Western Front right up to the moment of the reversal of alliances. Hitler had agreed to this; any of his troops who fell to the fire of the power that would become his new ally would be dying for a good cause, for the forthcoming resurgence of the Third Reich.

Certain of his final victory, Hitler had not ordered any strategic withdrawal of his forces. Hitler had usually insisted that his troops should hold out to the last man. Until now he had followed the line of conduct that he had set for himself, on the basis that only cowards and weaklings retreated. He could not now change tactics. Hitler did not want a sudden withdrawal of his armies and the concentration of too many units around

Berlin to awaken doubts in Stalin's mind. The fate of his soldiers was thus of little consequence: in any case, his best men had long since been thrown into the fight and many killed. Virtually only mediocrities had survived this far and he had no need of mediocrities for his Reich to endure.

Only the strongest should dominate.

Similarly, Hitler had given no counter-order to his burned earth projects, so as to lull the suspicions of the spies and traitors who surrounded him. Anyhow, his new American allies, with their massive economic strength, could help him rebuild in no time at all.

Hitler sighed.

The moment had finally arrived when the boastful Russians had reached the gates of Berlin. Hitler had deployed the German IX and XII Armies to trap the enemy in a pincers movement. His General Staff was horrified at his strategy, wondering why their Führer was rushing to strip the Western Front of troops, leaving the way open to the Americans. Besides, the German IX and XII Armies were outnumbered as much as ten-to-one by the enemy facing them and had been broken up so badly that their dispersed formations were unable to combat the crushing superiority of the Red Army. Hitler's generals thought he was moving around on maps phantom armies that had almost been wiped out and doubted the sense of such unrealistic maneuvers, believing their leader had lost touch with reality, or even that he had gone mad.

Hitler could read all this in their eyes as if in an open book.

He knew by heart all the works he had ever read, with whole pages and chapters photographically engraved in his mind. With real mastery that had always impressed his General Staff, Hitler had at his fingertips very accurate figures about enemy troop strengths and even reserves of ammunition. How could one doubt his infallible memory? How could one believe that he was not aware of the strength of the forces in the field, the remaining units and the arms they had available?

Of course, in the past Hitler had made fatal strategic mistakes that he could not admit without showing his weaknesses to his generals. This was different, though: it was a stroke of genius.

Nobody could suspect that the Americans were going to become the allies of Germany, as Hitler had kept the secret to the bitter end, even if his tongue had run away with him slightly when he had mentioned to his close circle that just as his hero Frederick II of Prussia had been saved by a reversal of alliances when on the point of disaster, so too the Allies would cease their fight against the Third Reich and shift their attacks to the Soviet Union. Hitler had also let slip that a wonder weapon would radically

change the situation, though not that this miracle weapon was the Pontius Pilate Report ...

The resounding crash of Russian mortar bombs hammering the bunker where Hitler had taken refuge gave him a start: the enemy were very close, at most a hundred yards away.

Roosevelt, or rather the new President of the United States, Truman, had not kept the word of honor that had been given.

However, Hitler had often done the same, happily breaking every diplomatic or non-aggression pact that he had personally signed in the name of Germany.

The bitter bit.

The U.S.A. had never really planned to ally themselves with Hitler, for international Jewry had infiltrated the highest levels of the American administration and corrupted those who made the decisions.

Hitler now realized that the only thing that they had wanted was to gain some time. The bunker's communications links could be broken at any instant, so Hitler would be cut off from the external world and would not be able to put his threat into practice.

Hitler rapidly thumbed through Pilate's manuscript. New pages bearing a German translation had been interleaved with the yellowed original sheets. On the flyleaf, Hitler scrawled a few words: 'To Comrade Stalin from the Führer, Adolf Hitler'.

He took the report and slipped it in between two other books in one corner of his office.

Hitler had decided to make a gift of this apocalyptic weapon to his worst enemy. It was not out of vengeance against the Americans but from deep conviction: Hitler had never hidden his admiration for Stalin, the only man who had been able to lick the subhuman Slavs into shape. The Western Powers were decadent nations, so the peoples of the East, governed by a hand of steel, would always be stronger than them, those Chinese monkeys.

The stronger race should dominate the world; that was a law of nature.

By making a present of the report to Stalin, he was ensuring that the iron man of Moscow would have the ultimate weapon available to sweep aside the Western world and impose the reign of brute force, the rule of the superior race.

Hitler stood up from his chair.

It was all over now: all he could do was to leave the world stage by putting a bullet through his head.

Hitler was going to die, but that would bring him eternal peace.

God would not sit in judgment on him, since God was just a mirage.

On the other hand, whilst God did not exist, his so-called representative on Earth had passed his compliments to Hitler, telephoning him personally just a few days back: the Pope had said in an emotional voice that the Führer was a blessed man, a gift from Heaven for Catholicism, and he had promised never to forget him, or his striking prophetic book. With regard to this work, the Pope had sworn that ‘Mein Kampf’ would never be put on the Index, the famous list of books forbidden by the Church. The Vatican was grateful to the Führer for having obliged the pupils in German schools to start their day with a prayer to Jesus Christ, thus guiding their young souls toward the only salvation possible. On a less devout level, the Pope had also made Hitler an offer to help him to escape and hide. Hitler had obviously refused, but the Pope had insisted, extending the proposal to all the major figures in Nazism. Hitler knew that the proposal was intended to cover the Pope, buying the silence of the Nazis, so that the world would never learn of the Vatican’s complicity with the Third Reich. Before hanging up, the Pope had blessed Hitler and with a last few words had told him that he would pray for him so that the Lord Jesus Christ would watch over him in his future combat.

“Jesus ...”

The story of Jesus was a Jewish invention thought up in Jewish lands; Jesus was himself a Jew, like all his family. This Jewish fable should not, logically, have spread anywhere else but Israel.

Yet, like a sly and dangerous serpent, the figure of Jesus had succeeded in spitting its poison of mysticism over the higher races of the whole world.

Hitler headed for the door and put his hand on the handle.

The hour was coming fast: he would have to walk off the world’s stage for ever.

Before leaving his office, Hitler cast one last glance on Pilate’s manuscript and could not help clenching his fist and shaking it angrily, cursing that foul Jewish bastard, Jesus Christ.

34

Lamb of God

Under a stormy and overcast sky, Jerusalem stood proud in its beauty.

Jesus remained motionless looking at it for a long while, not daring to go farther, as if at the last moment he were hesitating to cross its threshold. The impressive pillars of the wall surrounding the city seemed like so many hostile Cerberuses straight out of the Greek myths, achieving by their respectful mass the protection of the sanctuary whose inviolability they guaranteed.

The Kingdom of God on Earth...

Jesus was in the midst of an immense crowd that had come from the villages round about and even from the capital of Judea. Moved by absolute faith, they bore witness for him to everybody, for the previous day he had resuscitated Lazarus from among the dead.

In the centre of the human tide that surrounded him and pressed in on him from all sides, Jesus was nonetheless still free to move where he liked. His crucial private space was ensured by the apostles who saw to it that there was always a safety zone all around their Master.

Speaking to two disciples, Jesus gave instructions.

“Go into the village over against you. Straightaway you will find an ass tied and her colt with her, on which no man ever has ridden. Loose him and bring him. If any man asks you why you do this, say that the Lord has need of him. Straightaway he will send him here.”

The disciples bowed respectfully, wondering how he could know that a donkey colt was to be found there. However, he was Christ and his powers were limitless. They went off and indeed found a young donkey hitched just outside the door of a white building. Its owner was astonished at the arrival of two men not known to him, but he allowed them to take the animal away with them as soon as he learned that Christ had ordered this.

The two disciples quickly came back and laid their mantles on the donkey colt's back. Jesus leapt astride it and made for one of the entries to the city.

Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king comes to you, riding on the colt of a she-ass ...

He rode on like that for about a hundred yards and was passing a dead tree when Simon Peter called his attention.

“Rabbi, look: how soon the fig tree that you cursed has withered away!”

The previous day Jesus had passed by that spot on the way to Bethany. Seeing the fig-tree with its luxuriant leaves, he had been smitten with a sudden desire to eat a fig. He had approached the tree to pick a fruit, but had found none.

“No man will ever again eat of your fruits,” was what he had muttered then.

Simon Peter had heard him. In one night, the tree had lost all its leaves and had died.

Jesus continued riding onward, not worrying over Simon Peter's words. The apostle thought that with faith, nothing was impossible. Had the Messiah not said many times that prayer could move mountains? Everything that one asked for in a prayer full of faith was granted: God fulfilled requests made to him if they were fervent.

For the moment, the fervor was entirely monopolized by Christ. The crowd was in such rapture that they were scattering their outer garments where the donkey was to tread. Some were cutting branches from the trees and strewing them all along his way.

A few yards from the entrance to the city, Jesus finally halted his steed. Thoughtful, he pondered what was to come soon.

“The hour is come when the Son of Man should be glorified ...” he began in a powerful voice.

However, seeing that crowd drinking in the very least of his words, he thought of the destiny of humanity. So, rapidly changing his subject, he spoke to them of a heavenly truth that was dear to him.

“Truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit. He that loves his life will lose it, whilst he that hates his life in this world will keep it into life eternal in Heaven ...”

Then, coming back to what was on his mind, he turned to the apostles.

“If any man serves me, let him follow me and where I am there also will my servant be. If any man serves me, him will the Heavenly Father honor.”

He looked at the walls of the city.

“Now my soul is troubled and what shall I say? Heavenly Father, save me from this hour! Yet for this cause I came to this hour. Heavenly Father, may your Name be glorified ...”

In the distance there was a clap of thunder. A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd, some claiming that an angel had just answered Christ.

“That voice rumbling in the heavens is not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of this world, now will Satan be cast out. And I, once lifted up from the Earth, shall draw all the Righteous to me and gather them around me.”

Simon Peter was listening to him anxiously. Had the Messiah not just hinted at death, at his own death? Did that rising from the earth not imply his sepulcher, after all? Was it not some fatal reason that brought him to Jerusalem? Only the day before he had already mentioned the death of the Son of God ... What was that strange sacrifice? What passion was inspiring the Messiah?

Of course, that very morning he had announced the coming of the Kingdom of God. However, was this not merely a lure to draw attention, to distract minds, so that nobody would understand his true aim?

Worry flooded through Simon Peter, but he hoped that he was mistaken about the meaning of the words he had just heard.

Cleverly, to assuage his fears, he asked:

“We have heard in the law that the Messiah abides forever amongst us.”

However, the reply did no more than worsen his disquiet.

“Do you believe that?” inquired Jesus. “For a little while yet the light is with you. Walk while you have light, lest darkness come upon you, for those that walk in darkness do not know whither they may be going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become the children of light. I came as a light into the world, so that whosoever believes in me will not remain in darkness. If any man hears my words, but does not believe them and obey them, I do not judge him, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world. Those who reject me and do not receive my words will find one that will judge them: the words that I have spoken to them, those same words will judge them in the last day ...”

Simon Peter had already stopped listening. The fear of losing the Master was turning into a certainty for him. For a little more time, the Messiah would remain amongst them. The apostle promised himself that he would do all he could to divert him from the strange destiny he had set for himself, to save him despite himself.

The young donkey which Jesus was riding walked on and, passing by the eastern gate to the city, made for the Temple. The townsfolk were astonished to see these thousands of people surrounding the rider, who were pouring into the streets of Jerusalem like a powerful wave that could not be turned back. Many hastened fearfully away, but at least as many joined this odd parade when they learned that Christ was coming to them.

As they drew near Yahweh's sanctuary, acclamations rang out. His disciples were delighted and began to praise God aloud for all the miracles that they had seen.

"Glory to the Lord! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel! Glory to the Son of David!"

With a low roar, the crowd invaded the Temple esplanade. Dismounting from the young donkey, Jesus followed them in. Several Pharisees in their purple robes intercepted him on his way, indignantly complaining of the chanted words and the intrusion.

"If these held their peace, the very stones would immediately cry out," said Jesus.

The clergymen grasped what he was hinting at, understanding that those people could at any moment become uncontrollable and stone anybody who opposed his entry. However, most of them were happy, well-behaved, showing no obvious hatred, simply glad to see the coming of Christ. Seeing their growing and catching enthusiasm, Jesus smiled broadly.

At last we are here. The end is near ... so near ... Heavenly Father, give me the strength to face this trial ...

The smile was wiped from his lips in an instant.

Before him, less than a dozen yards away, stern dark eyes were staring at him.

The Head of the Order ...

The patriarch of the Essenes, unchallenged Master of the religious community of Qumran, was standing there, motionless, lost in the midst of the crowd. The cold, gloomy eyes of the hundred-year-old man had lost nothing of their vigor, always lit by a somewhat crazy gleam. The features of his bony face with its pale, unhealthy complexion had sharpened even further, making him look even more cadaverous. Beneath the pyramidal shape of the tall, conical, red turban that hid his baldness, a spark of life seemed to run through the Head of Order when he lifted his skeletal hand to his small white beard so as to smooth it with his fingertips.

Jesus had not seen him again since his departure from Qumran, after being initiated to the highest level, the fourth degree, an initiation that they

had granted him because of the special status of a prophetic mission.

The Christ ...

The details of these memories of the very recent past flooded back into Jesus' memory. Those long, strict months spent within the Qumran community learning the mysteries of the Essenes came flowing out of the backwaters of his mind.

Not blinking even once, the Head of the Order stared at his former disciple.

Jesus sustained this visual jousting. The two men did not exchange one word, but Jesus was perfectly aware of what his old Master wanted.

So, reluctantly, Jesus lowered his gaze and moved away. Making a whip out of pieces of cord, he drove out all the buyers and sellers who were there on the esplanade. With a violence that his disciples had never suspected in him, he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the pigeon-sellers. He broke down the rails of the animal enclosures and shooed away the oxen and the sheep.

"Take all this away from here," growled Jesus in a terrible voice. "Do not make the House of God into a house of haggling merchants!"

He set about whipping all those who were trying to carry merchandise through the Temple.

Forgive me, Heavenly Father ... I cannot act otherwise ...

Ringed by an astonished and frightened crowd, he began crying out:

"It is written in the holy scriptures: 'My house shall be called by all nations a house of prayer'. But you have made it a den of thieves!"

A novice approached fearfully. Recently admitted into the Temple, not knowing Jesus at all, this adolescent was amazed at the passivity of the Temple clergy toward this madman. Despite the fear that gripped his entrails, he plucked up the courage to advance toward the stranger.

"What sign can you show to us, seeing that you do these things?" asked he in a shaky voice.

Jesus looked at him for a moment before replying with a sigh:

"Destroy this temple and in three days I shall raise it up again."

"Six and forty years were needed for the building of this temple, yet you will raise it up in three days?" queried the novice in naive astonishment.

The Jews present could not understand what Christ was really alluding to in speaking thus.

Simon Peter, for his part, did have his own notion. He had been carefully listening to Jesus' words, somewhat worried. Had the Master not already mentioned this tale of three days? Simon Peter remembered that

he had touched on it when talking of the crucifixion of the Son of God who would come back to life on the third day. Could it be that when he spoke of a sanctuary the Lord was referring to his own body? Hence those words heightened the apostle's anxiety, because he gathered that Jesus was expecting to die soon.

Despite the very strict instructions from Caiaphas, a Pharisee came up in his turn, not able to bear the thought of a novice being able to defy Christ while he himself had to stand idly back under the disdainful gaze of all the Jews who thought the priests' passivity due to fear.

"By what authority do you do these things?" growled the purple-robed Pharisee. "And who gave you this authority?"

Jesus looked at him without seeing him. Behind the Pharisee, the pyramidal headgear of the Head of the Order was distracting Christ's thoughts.

"I also shall ask you one question only," said Jesus after a moment's silence. "If you will answer it for me, I shall likewise tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John the Baptist, whence did it come, from heaven or from men? Answer me this."

The Pharisee hesitated. If he answered that it was from heaven, Jesus would riposte by asking why then he had not believed in John the Baptist. On the other hand, if he answered that it was from men, he was in danger of being stoned, as many of the Jews present considered John a prophet.

Prudently, the Pharisee replied:

"I cannot tell."

"Neither can I tell," retorted Jesus, "neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Jesus saw the Head of the Order nodding his head vigorously, as if he approved of his former disciple's response.

Pushing haughtily through the crowd, Abdias appeared. Since their last confrontation in this very spot, the high-ranking Sadducee priest with his deep and sensual voice, and his pepper-and-salt beard, had never been able to swallow the fact of the fruitless verbal struggle which he had made to unmask the false Christ, ending in his loss of face before everybody. The episode of the adulterous woman in particular had stuck in his throat and he had sworn to take advantage of the slightest opportunity to wipe out the affront that he had suffered. For a long while he had been mulling over plans for a trap into which Jesus might fall. After days and nights of ceaseless thinking, he had finally found a subtle and cunning ploy that would have the impostor condemned by the Roman authorities. From behind his prominent aquiline nose, the dark eyes of the plump man in his

forties were in constant motion, betraying the great inward agitation to which he was prey. Believing he could lull Jesus' suspicions, Abdias started by flattering him in a dulcet tone.

"Master, we know that you are true and care nothing for any man, for you take no heed of the rank of a man, but teach the way of God in truth ..."

Jesus looked at him, a smile on his lips.

He never gives up, even when it is all over. He is really pathetic ...

Clearing his throat, Abdias cast the line that he thought he had cunningly fashioned to catch his fish.

"Say then to us what your opinion is: is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar? Should we pay or should we not pay?"

Jesus was perfectly aware of the implications and craftiness of the trap, not as crude as it might seem at first sight. A few yards away, the Head of the Order was still watching Jesus.

"Hypocrites, why do you tempt me into a trap?" retorted Jesus.

Yet it is all over ...

He realized that this was a personal action, motivated by a desire for revenge.

"Bring me a denarius of the tribute, so that I may see it," said he.

Abdias held up a denarius.

"Whose is this image?" inquired Jesus, pointing his finger at the coin. "Whose is this inscription?"

Not seeing what Jesus was getting at, Abdias replied:

"Caesar's."

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's," answered Jesus then.

Laughter rang out amongst the crowd, amidst which could be heard the gravelly laugh of the Head of the Order. Having lost face yet again before everybody, Abdias went red with rage and marched off, jostling people out of his way. Jesus sat down in the middle of the courtyard and the Jews all did likewise. Replying to the questions that were fired at him from all sides, Christ spoke at length, touching on many subjects, such as resurrection in Heaven and the status of men and women, like angels having no spouses in the celestial firmament. Jesus also talked about the Pharisees in unbending and sharp terms, sometimes even vindictive, as he accused them of having no remorse about John the Baptist.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites that you are, for you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against all men. For you surely will not

enter it yourselves, as by your teachings you prevent from entering those who wish to do so. You turn them away from what is Divine ...”

He continued with a series of spoken attacks carefully targeted on the religious practices of the haughty and vain priests.

For the rest of the day, Jesus taught the people, speaking continuously. At several points, he mentioned Kingdom of God on Earth. Among that host of attentive ears, Jesus’ own sometimes seemed distracted from hearing. He was waiting for something that did not seem to be going to happen.

He was introduced to a number of sick whom he cured miraculously by simply laying his hands on them. Those who were seeing this sort of feat for the first time were disquieted, realizing that this man from Galilee was truly the Messiah, the Liberator, the Anointed of God. Sitting among them, Jesus watched this unshakable and timeless belief growing bright in their eyes. He knew that nothing could undo that growing fervor and that soon it would be made holy by God, in circumstances that the annals of the Temple would not soon forget.

As the event drew near, tiredness overcame him.

The final act is coming ... this is the end. My fight finishes here and these folk will shine in heaven. Oh! Heavenly Father, give me the strength to settle the destiny of these souls whom you have entrusted to me ...

Seeing a disturbance around the temple building that held the sanctuary, he rose to his feet. The crowd did the same. A young lad some ten years old approached, worming his way between the people’s legs and finally reaching Christ. Tugging on a fold of his tunic, the boy whispered at some length into his ear.

Pensively, Jesus nodded agreement in silence. Then he headed for the southern exit from the Temple, ordering everybody to leave as he was doing and to leave him on his own. The crowd reluctantly left him and began to disperse into the streets of the city. As unmoving as one dead, the Head of the Order stood there watching him. Jesus discreetly made a secret sign with his fingers. The old man gave a barely perceptible consenting nod. He took one last glance at Christ before leaving, disappearing into the flood of people.

Jesus rapidly gathered his apostles around him, giving them precise instructions. He took Simon the Zealous to one side and had a few words with him. Next he did the same with Simon Peter and John as also with their respective brothers, Andrew and James. Jesus then headed northward, out of the town and onto the Mount of Olives. From there, the eye could see the harsh mountains of the region and in the distance a small

stretch of the Dead Sea like a leaden mirror from which sulfurous vapors were rising. Jesus stood for a long while looking at this view from on high of Judea and its capital.

“Look,” said James, pointing at the Temple, “what stones! What buildings!”

Lost in his thoughts, his gaze unfocused, gripped by vague apprehensions about what future could be shaping over the horizon of the new day, Jesus murmured:

“Of all that you see, the days perhaps are coming in which not one stone will remain upon another: all will be laid low. Jerusalem, if only you had understood this day the message of peace! Now, though, it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will cast a trench about you and encompass you around and press in upon you from every side. They will crush you and lay you even with the ground and your children within you and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time when you were visited in grace by the Messiah.”

There was a silence for a while. Simon Peter finally spoke:

“Rabbi, tell us, when will these things be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the world?”

Jesus answered not one word.

Simon Peter went back over the sermons on the end of days that the Master had given in the past when he spoke of false Christs arising in his name, wars and famines to come, pain and tortures for those acting in his cause, the ruin of Jerusalem at the arrival of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth. All those distant preachings jostled in the apostle’s head, where disquiet reigned. Were those times close? Simon Peter did not know what to think. Perhaps the events that Christ had said would come shortly were finally on the point of happening, even if he had said not a single word about them for a considerable while. What then was the true reason for Jesus’ presence in Judea? In the Temple, he had once again mentioned the Kingdom of God on Earth. Would this now at last come to be? Or had he spoken just to reassure the disciples, so that none would guess that at the end of the road to Zion there was not a throne of glory but only a fateful death?

Simon Peter was uneasy. He did not like to see Jesus not ringed by his supporters, especially in Jerusalem, as he could be arrested at any moment. Jesus was not worried about this, as if it could not happen, or rather as if it was of absolutely no consequence to him. By his imprudent actions, there was no doubt that he was seeking to be arrested.

Together with the deadly condemnation that would ensue.

Simon Peter could still not understand why Jesus was inviting his own ruin in this way. He could not comprehend that mania of wanting to die. Jesus had said that he would rise again on the third day, but despite all the faith that Simon Peter had in the Son of God, such a miracle seemed to him impossible.

It was true that Lazarus had been brought back to life. However, there was a crucial difference between the death of a man who had quietly slipped from his bed up to Heaven and the fate of a man crucified, dying in atrocious agony. There was a difference between a natural death and a death by crucifixion that would leave untreatable internal injuries, irrevocably destroying the body, crushing out the very least spark of life, so no fire, even divine, could rekindle the flame of existence in that definitively chilled hearth.

The sun set in a bed of red clouds and like a dying man being carried off to the firmament of his life, was finally swallowed up by the darkness. Jesus had stayed on the Mount of Olives until the twilight of the fiery star. Silent and contemplative, he had said almost no word.

Two hours earlier, Jesus had sent Simon Peter and John into town.

“When you have entered the city, a man will meet you, bearing a pitcher of water,” bade he. “Follow him into the house into which he will enter and say to the owner of the house that the Master asks him where the guest chamber is, in which he may eat the Passover meal with his disciples. Then he will show you a large upper room furnished: there make ready.”

Night had fallen. Accompanied by James and Andrew, Jesus went back down into the city and made for the house where the other apostles were waiting.

On the upper floor, Jesus’ host had adorned with a luxurious carpet the white-walled room with its sober furnishings. According to oriental practice, the disciples and the Master should have lain in threes to eat on four long couches set around the table. However the host had decided to do otherwise; around the large rectangular table were set on either side richly carved chairs symbolizing the promise of the near future.

Thirteen thrones.

On the table, there were as many chalices as there were guests. Of these cups, the Messiah’s was made of gold. Jesus recognized it as soon as he walked into the room. It was from this very chalice that he had drunk on the night of his initiation by the Essenes of Qumran, under the guidance of the Head of the Order.

Jesus sat at table and the Twelve did likewise. After the meal, Jesus

rose to his feet.

“With great desire I wished to eat this Passover meal with you before I meet my destiny,” said he “for I say to you that I shall never again eat of it until my fate is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.”

He took the bread that lay before him and raised it above his head, then broke it, distributing it to his disciples.

“Take this and eat, this is my body.”

Next, picking up the gold chalice full of wine, he gave thanks and handed it to Judas Sicariot who was sitting opposite him.

“Take this and drink of it, all of you,” said he in a strange tone. “This is my blood, the new testament in my blood, which will be shed for you and for a multitude for the remission of their sins.”

The apostles passed the cup from one to another, all sipping from it.

“I shall not again drink of the fruit of the vine,” added Jesus, “until the Kingdom of God has come.”

Amongst the Initiated of the Temple of Osiris, a brotherly feast marked the first degree of initiation. Communion in bread, the fruit of the blade of wheat, signified awareness of the mysteries of earthly life as well as the sharing of the gifts of the earth and hence the perfect union of the affiliated brethren. At the higher degree, communion in wine, the blood of the vine infused by the sun, indicated the sharing of heavenly gifts, participation in the spiritual mysteries and in divine knowledge.

Nonetheless, while the words Jesus had just spoken about the bread clearly implied a promise of future revelations of the mysteries of life, the connotations of the wine were very different. Here, the blood spilt in no way referred to a higher initiation and took on a very specific sense that only a handful of apostles had fully grasped.

Simon Peter, for his part, was bewildered. He could not understand the Master’s words.

Perhaps, rather, he had the impression of being the only one really to understand them.

Speaking of spilt blood, Jesus had given Judas a long, hard stare.

Was he trying to warn Judas that he was going to lay down his life? There was nobody deader than those who would not hear, according to what Jesus often said, and Simon Peter had the unpleasant sensation that among the other apostles nobody had heard this announcement of sacrifice and sufferings to come.

Of course, the Messiah was speaking of his coming and that of the Kingdom of God. However, were those not just reassuring words to distract attention from the real final act that was to be played out soon?

The act of his sacrifice.

Simon Peter now knew the reason. The Master had announced it indirectly: his blood would be shed for the remission of sins. By his death, the Son of God hoped to redeem before his Father the offences and transgressions of the religious laws of all humanity and hence wipe out forever all sin from the Earth, even the original sin of Adam and Eve.

Why, though? What was the use of it?

In Heaven, paradise awaited the souls of all those who followed the Messiah, while gehenna was waiting for all the others ...

A brief confidence that Jesus had imparted to him and that Simon Peter had not fully grasped at the time came back to his mind: ‘... true paradise is not open to men, for the entrance is sealed by sins...’.

Simon Peter thought for an instant.

Had Jesus used the word ‘sin’ or had it been another word? Had it not actually been the word ‘desire’? To tell the truth, Simon Peter could no longer remember exactly. However, as he recalled this confession, a truth was suddenly illuminated in him: paradise was closed, the Eden of Adam and Eve had been sealed after their original sin and the souls of the Jews had no access to it any more.

Consternation.

Were they all still shut up in sheol? Without doubt they were, otherwise why would Jesus wish to sacrifice himself? Was it not precisely to free them from there? Did he not want to liberate them by wiping away their sins and absolving at the same moment the original sin which blocked the way to paradise?

Simon Peter now had a clear view of the situation.

Jesus wanted to reopen the access to paradise, which was sealed, and to do so Jesus had no other alternative but to sacrifice himself before his Father’s eyes. Then the souls of men would be able to shine and no longer suffer the wrath of the offended Creator.

Jesus would save sinners from legitimate divine anger, even those who were going to kill him. On going up to heaven, he would gather mankind around him so that they no longer languished in darkness ...

Sitting at the end of the table, Simon Peter gazed at Christ with measureless love. The apostle promised himself to do all he could to protect the Savior, for wicked humanity did not deserve the Son of God’s sacrifice. However, would he have the strength and power to divert him from his destiny? Inwardly he began praying with all his heart.

Among the apostles, a dispute broke out.

As the Kingdom of God on Earth was now nigh, James wished to know

what place he would have in it. Already in the past his mother had come to make a request to Jesus; she wished her two sons, James and John, to sit at the right and at the left of his throne on the day of the coming of the Kingdom. As John looked on powerlessly, having signaled to Christ that he had no part in these pretensions, James had insisted, supported by his mother. Jesus had replied that it was not for him to assign such a privilege, for these privileges were already allotted to those whom God had picked and prepared.

The result had been indignation from the other ten apostles. Jesus had brought them all together and had spoken severely to them. Once again he had to repeat these reprimands.

“You know that the kings of the nations exercise lordship over them and that those who are great men use and abuse their authority upon them. Whosoever wishes to be great among you, let him be your servant, and whosoever wishes to be chief among you, let him be your slave. Even thus the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as an offering for many. He who is the greatest among you, let him be as the youngest and he that is chief, let him be as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at table, or he who serves there? Is it not he that is at table? Yet I am among you as the one that serves!”

Several apostles grumbled at this. Noting a vague tension in the air, Jesus added, to calm them:

“You are those who have continued with me in my tribulations. Thus I appoint you each to a kingdom, just as God appointed a kingdom for me, so that you may eat and drink at my table when I sit upon my throne of glory in my Kingdom, and may also sit on twelve thrones, having power to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Faces relaxed and smiles appeared. Seeing greed shining in the eyes of some of them, Jesus sighed inwardly. He would have to show them what humility was.

He left the table, put his outer robe on a chair and picked up a cloth, which he tied around his waist. At that moment, one of Christ’s disciples came into the room. Somewhat surprised to see the Master in this garb, the man in his twenties with a long black beard bowed reverentially.

“We could not wait to bring to you good news,” said he as if to apologize for unexpectedly intruding. “I am this moment arrived in the city to bring you tidings of the seventy-two disciples that you sent to fight against the possessed in Galilee ...”

He stated that the demons had been subjected by the name of Christ and the seventy-two were performing miraculous cures wherever they went.

Jesus listened absent-mindedly. One thing disturbed him: how could somebody coming from outside the town have found him so rapidly? This house was off the beaten track and few people knew he was there. If the messenger had been able to reach it so quickly, even guided by close disciples, other cunning folk with worse intentions might do the same. Nonetheless, he knew that for the moment he was at no risk, sheltered by the powerful protector who stood surety for the Kingdom of God. Unconsciously, his look shifted to one of the Twelve. A strange sensation came over him then and a confused idea wormed its way into his head.

The traitor ...

A drop of sweat formed on his forehead. However, he let no sign of his worry become apparent.

When the messenger withdrew an instant later, Jesus went down to the door of the house and collected a basin. He poured water into it, and climbed back to the upper storey. He started to wash the apostles' feet and dry them with the cloth bound round his waist. The last to receive this honor was Simon Peter. He began to protest.

"Rabbi, how can you wish to wash my feet?"

By this gesture of humility, Jesus was inverting roles: generally it was a servant who washed the feet of the guests invited by the master of the house.

"What I now do, you do not yet understand," replied Jesus. "Soon, though, you will understand."

"No, you shall never wash my feet!"

"If I do not wash you, you will have no part with me," said Jesus.

His tone was firm and brooked no opposition.

Simon Peter rested his bare feet on the central bar of the basin. He did not like to see Christ humble himself to this lowly task.

"Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head," pleaded the apostle, visibly uneasy at seeing the Master bending before him in this way.

After drying his feet, Jesus stood up once more.

"He whose body has been washed need not wash anything but his feet to be fully clean. You are clean, but not all ..."

He cast a piercing gaze at one of the Twelve. However, his look did not have the effect for which he had hoped. Jesus thoughtfully put back on his outer robe. Sitting on his chair, he spoke to them all:

"Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord and you say well, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Master, have

washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, so that you should do as I have done for you. Truly I say to you, the servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. Knowing these things, happy shall you be if you do them."

Jesus remained silent for a short while before continuing:

"It is not of all of you that I speak. I know all whom I have chosen, but it seems that the Scriptures will be fulfilled: 'mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me'."

Watching the traitor out of the corner of his eye, Jesus saw not the slightest reaction on his face.

"This I tell you now, before it comes," insisted Jesus, "so that when it does come to pass you will sadly realize that I am indeed the Son of God."

There was still no reaction. Jesus decided to speak clearly and precisely.

"Truly I say to you that one of you will betray me."

It was like a thunderbolt. The disciples looked at one another, not knowing whom he was mentioning. Grimaces of uncertainty and mistrust distorted their tense faces. Simon the Zealous discretely drew the dagger that was always at his side, ready to leap on the wretch that Christ would surely name. However, his action remained in suspense.

Jesus was disconcerted by the nonchalance of the traitor who was in perfect control of his emotions and feigning astonishment.

Could it be that I am mistaken?

Jesus fell deeply silent and a heavy quiet settled over the room.

At the end of the table, Simon Peter signed to John who was sitting right beside Christ. With an insistent gaze, Simon Peter gave him to understand he should ask the Master whom he had just been mentioning.

Leaning slightly forward, John whispered into Jesus' ear. He turned his face toward Simon Peter. After a few seconds' hesitation, Jesus took a piece of bread which he dipped in the sauce of the plate that lay before him. Then, after a fresh glance at Simon Peter to let him know with flick of his chin for a sign that he was going to pick out the traitor by giving him the bread, Jesus leaned forward.

Seeing the arm moving in his direction, Judas Sicariot instinctively stretched out his hand and took the piece of bread. Somewhat surprised, he brought it to his mouth, chewed it and swallowed it. He stood up, walked round the table and leaned toward Jesus to whisper a few words to him.

"What you must do, do quickly," responded Jesus with an absent air.

Judas hastened out of the room.

Simon Peter saw the anxiety on the Master's face. He had just sent off Judas the traitor to do his dirty work. Simon Peter could understand what emotion was flooding into Christ at the approach of his arrest. Could it be that Jesus would renounce the sad fate he had allotted himself? A faint hope sparked in him when Jesus suddenly rose to his feet. He told everybody to go and wait for him outside. All the apostles did so apart from Simon Peter who came toward him.

With a single glance, Jesus saw that Simon Peter had grasped the situation.

"When I sent you forth without purse, or haversack, or sandals, did you lack anything?" inquired Jesus.

"Nothing."

"Now let him who has a purse take it and his haversack and let him who has no sword sell his mantle to buy one, for the hour of the decisive struggle is at hand ..."

"Lord, I saw two swords below."

"Two swords? It is enough ..."

Jesus and Simon Peter went down and took up the weapons which they each slipped under their robes.

Outside, James and Thomas did not seem to understand the gravity of the situation. Slightly tipsy from the wine that they had somewhat overindulged in to celebrate the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, the two had begun to sing a hymn to the glory of Christ. He quieted them and they all plunged into the dark streets of the city of Zion. As if he were pursued by a ghost, Jesus frequently turned round and took care that the eleven apostles did not scatter. They went along a steep path that led to the city ramparts, but found themselves confronted with gates that were locked and guarded by a handful of legionaries. However, a few coins were as good as a key in opening them.

They left the town and crossed the Kedron Valley. They walked quickly and made for the Mount of Olives. Under the scant light of a moon veiled by clouds, the group plowed on rapidly through the darkness. Whatever the danger was, Simon Peter could see clearly that Jesus wanted to put the greatest possible distance between them and the threat. He conveyed his worries to the Master.

"All of you are at risk of perishing this very night, because of me," said Jesus, turning round.

Then as if speaking to himself, he recited a Jewish verse which came into his mind as if it were an evil omen.

“I will smite the shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad ...”

Once again he spoke to Simon Peter.

“After I return here, I shall go before you into Galilee.”

Simon Peter shook his head.

“Though all men fail you, yet I shall never fail you.”

He was ready to fight to the end to save the Son of God. Seeing his faith driving him to total self-sacrifice, Jesus tried to preserve his loyal disciple from an avoidable death.

“Simon Peter, truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows at dawn, you will deny me. Do you understand?”

Simon Peter shook his head once more.

“Though I need die with you, yet I shall not deny you.”

All the other apostles said the same. Simon the Zealous was also ready to defend his Master to the death. Caressing the hilt of his dagger, he followed Jesus like his shadow, constantly looking from side to side, his lively eyes darting over any spot in the least bit suspect. He was also mulling over the nature of the threat that Christ had noted and frequently glanced at the other ten apostles. Had Jesus not said that one of their group was a traitor? Simon the Zealous would have to be on his guard.

The troop arrived at Gethsemane, a garden situated on the Mount of Olives. An olive grove and an oil press stood there.

“Sit here while I go and pray yonder,” ordered Jesus, resting his hand on Simon the Zealous’s shoulder.

With slight movements of his eyes and chin, combined with the pressure of his fingers, Jesus indicated to him that nobody should leave. The Zealous grasped Christ’s meaning and gave a barely perceptible nod of his head.

Jesus called Simon Peter, John and his brother to walk with him. They strolled off some fifty yards.

“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful,” confided Jesus to the trio looking toward the other apostles. “Stay here and watch over me.”

Distress and melancholy overwhelmed Jesus. He wandered off a dozen paces and fell to his knees. He started praying fervently that the fatal hour might pass far from him.

“Heavenly Father, for you all things are possible!” said he under his breath. “Let this cup pass from me, if it is possible ...”

The cup of destiny ...

“Nevertheless, not as I wish, but as you wish! If such is your will ...”

For a long while he invoked the heavenly powers. He prayed with such intensity that his sweat turned into big drops of blood that fell to the soil.

He stood up groggily and stumbled to the trio.

He found them asleep on the ground all three.

“Simon Peter, are you asleep?”

He shook the apostle.

“What, could you not watch with me one single hour?”

He woke up John and his brother.

“Watch and pray, so that you do not enter into temptation to sleep once more. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Thick clouds hid the moon with their gloomy mass. Jesus looked toward the other eight apostles. The darkness was too profound to be able to make out anything whatsoever. Nonetheless, Jesus knew that Simon the Zealous was watching to see that the troop did not disperse. The presence of all of them was necessary to foil the traitor’s plans.

Yet Jesus vaguely felt danger drawing close.

Once more, he went off to one side to pray.

“Heavenly Father,” begged Jesus, “if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, then let your will be done ...”

He remained prostrate for a quarter of an hour before getting up again. For the second time he found the trio asleep. He sighed and went off murmuring:

“If this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it ...”

He stopped brusquely and turned.

It was strange that they had fallen asleep once more at such a moment, all the same. Jesus looked in the direction of the other disciples. The veil of clouds parted slightly and let through a few pale moonbeams. Jesus then saw seven recumbent figures.

The wine ...

There could be no doubt that the traitor had mixed into it plants with soporific virtues. Jesus had barely taken any, but the others had drunk deep, to the point of becoming tipsy. Jesus mechanically counted the figures lying there.

Seven...

Not all of them were there. Jesus recalled that the traitor had had just a few sips of wine, claiming that he had an upset stomach.

Under the impact of this realization, a section of his mind seemed to break down, the sword of Damocles to fall, and his thoughts went into slow motion. How long ago had the traitor left them? For sure a long

enough time to allow him to surround the access points to this place.

It is all over ...

Looking at the three men, Jesus muttered, fatalistically and to no clear purpose:

“Sleep on now and take your rest. It is too late. Behold the hour is at hand and the Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of sinners ...”

They will break the Law of Moses. The law which says ‘thou shalt not kill’ ...

As if to prove him right, the sound of armed troops rang out through the night. Torches giving off a thousand sparks pushed back the darkness.

Pulling himself together, Jesus shook Simon Peter and John.

“Rise up now! Let us be going! He that will betray me is at hand!”

The din raised by the troops and the crash of feet in step striking the ground also woke up the other apostles. Simon the Zealous leapt to his feet and rushed toward Christ. Coming only half awake out of a deep sleep, terrified at the sight of armed men who looked like demons emerging from the bowels of the earth, Jesus’ other disciples ran off shouting.

The moon broke through the veil of clouds and cast its pale light on the garden. Then the traitor’s tall figure stood out ahead of the troops. Simon the Zealous stopped short in his mad career. Seeing the traitor’s face, he stood perplexed, his arms dropping to his side. After a moment’s hesitation, he sheathed his dagger, turned around and made off into the night.

When Jesus recognized the man who was handing him over, his blood ran cold.

It is not possible, not him ...

The sight, like a Machiavellian mirror, left him astounded.

Time seemed to stand still.

35

Mea Culpa

Tom had no regrets.

Even if his quest for the Grail ended here in Prague and it was all over, he had no regrets.

He knew that action brought more regrets than inaction, that people felt sorrier about what they had done than about what they had not.

However, that was just normal, because the instinct to be sorry for what they did allowed humans to draw lessons from failures they ‘carried out’. Regret constituted an adaptive advantage selected over millennia that favored prudence: being sorry meant that people avoided returning to an unpleasant experience that left regrets, regrets about action.

However, as years went by, this tendency was bound in the end to be inverted: inaction, actions ‘not carried out’ came to torment the mind. While action was gradually forgotten over time, inaction came back to haunt people, because the consequences of a regrettable action were identifiable and limited, but the consequences of inaction, in contrast, were limitless.

As time passed, once the difficulties linked to a past situation had faded into the distance, people were inclined to over-estimate their capacity to act effectively. Thanks to that, they forgot the exact context that had made them hold back, so could no longer explain to themselves why they had not acted, this inaction becoming inexcusable in their mind’s eye.

Tom raised his blue eyes to the sky.

To have the fewest regrets in life, you had to act.

Act and forget.

Rather than not dare, then remember it.

To free oneself from current regrets due to actions taken, the best route was not to withhold from acting, but rather to increase one’s tolerance of

failure, learning to manage it.

Living with the ‘regretting’ process was essential, because it had advantages when making decisions. It allowed projection into the future and choosing wisely through calculating, ‘I’ll have fewer regrets with that choice’.

Being sorry was primordial in managing any situations involving choice, particularly by producing ‘regrets in advance’. Hence, regrets were a secondary effect of our capability to take a decision.

Take a decision was exactly what Tom had just done.

“We’re heading back to France,” he told Camilla and Martial.

As they stood on the sidewalk in front of the luxury Prague hotel, still lit by brilliant sunshine, with their limited luggage beside them, the young woman expressed surprise at the choice.

“Do you mean the last place a Grail might be hidden mentioned by Abbé Boudet in his notebook is in France? We went to Luxor and Jerusalem and came here to Prague when the fourth hiding place was so close?”

Tom smiled.

“No, you’re barking up the wrong tree. The place indicated by Boudet is in Thailand, in the city of Ayutthaya, the former Siamese capital.”

“So why are we going back to France?” Camilla inquired.

“So far, we’ve followed the Grail from its most likely to its least likely hiding place. There was really a Grail hidden in Egypt and in Israel, but there wasn’t here in Prague. And the chances of finding the Grail in Ayutthaya are nil. The city was completely destroyed by the Burmese in 1767.”

Martial’s face was a picture of perplexity.

“So why did Boudet mention it in his notebook?” he asked. “It makes no sense.”

“Boudet clung to the hope the Pontius Pilate Report survived the destruction of Ayutthaya. To coin a phrase, where there’s hope, there’s life. If the Grail really was there at one time, it far from certain it’s still there. Besides, for this hiding place, Boudet didn’t mention any precise spot, he just wrote the name of the city and that it’d be necessary to explore it to find what had become of the Grail. So, mission impossible.”

“We’re returning to France, then?” Camilla said.

“Yes, we’ll take stock of everything once we’re there. We’d better get out of Prague before the police get too interested in guests at the hotels here. They must already be looking for the thieves who stole the

Golem ...”

Martial concurred.

“I’ll go and get the car. Wait for me here.”

Tom protested.

“No, let me, I’ll go. You needn’t drive every time, you’re not Monsieur and Madame Kidd’s black chauffeur. Besides, you’re older than me, rest your wise old bones and let madcap youth take the wheel ...”

“No, you know I like driving, I don’t mind doing it at all.”

“All right then, I’ll drive to the airport, then you can pilot the plane, okay?” Tom said jokingly.

Martial smiled but shook his head and Camilla took a hand in the discussion.

“Just toss up for it,” she said. “Here you are ...”

She rummaged in her wallet and gave Martial a coin. She winked at him discreetly without Tom seeing her.

Martial quickly looked at the two sides of the coin.

“Tails I win, heads you lose,” Martial flippantly told his friend.

“I may be green, but I’m not a cabbage. Heads I win!”

Martial tossed the coin in the air but Tom was quicker, caught it on the fly and clapped it onto the back of his hand.

“Tails,” Tom announced. “All right, I lose. You’re lucky today.”

“Cheer up, I’m leaving you in good company,” Martial replied.

He headed off down the access ramp leading to the hotel’s underground garage.

Camilla smiled at Tom.

“You know, sometimes it’s not a question of luck ...”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

He frowned and Camilla pointed to the coin she was still holding in her hand.

“I gave him a coin with two tails. It’s a trick coin ...”

Tom began laughing.

“He really fooled me: first of all, the trap sentence to distract my attention, so I thought I was being more cunning, but in the end I didn’t see he was tricking me ... When the wise man points his finger at the moon, the idiot looks at the finger and I was an idiot. But in my defense I can say I didn’t know he had a secret accomplice ... Why didn’t you give the coin to me?”

“Perhaps because I fancied being alone with you ...”

Camilla fluttered her eyelashes over her emerald-green eyes.

They chatted together for a few minutes, going back over the adventures that they had shared up to that moment, but which seemed to be coming to an end now.

“You know, I loved that tandem jump over Luxor,” Camilla finally said. “Perhaps we’ll have the chance to do that again some time.”

“Why not? I ...”

A dull thud was heard, accompanied by the alarms of cars in the street sounding.

“Martial!” Tom shouted.

He ran toward the access ramp, with Camilla on his heels. They slipped past the automatic barrier blocking the entrance to the underground car-park and found themselves in Hell.

Fire fuelled by gasoline from smashed tanks had taken hold of several cars parked side by side. As if they were living, feeling creatures with an instinctive fear of fire, the sirens of their alarms were screaming at the flames as they gave off thick, hot smoke, black and menacing.

Tom rushed toward Martial’s car, but halted abruptly.

A horrendous sight had stopped him in his tracks.

At the wheel of the flaming auto, Martial was shrieking in agony, his voice clearly audible despite the surrounding din. Held in by his safety belt, he was waving his arms like a lunatic, trying to escape through the shattered window in the driver’s door. His face and body were aflame as he drowned in a hellish furnace. Martial was trapped by the fire that was devouring his flesh, already melting off him.

Tom made to go and help him.

However, Camilla prevented him by grasping his arm.

“No,” she shouted. “It’s too late ... Keep back!!!”

As if to show she was right, Martial’s screams were suddenly cut short and his desperate movements from side to side ceased.

“Come on!” Camilla shouted. “There’s nothing more we can do!”

The thick, black smoke was rapidly filling the parking lot and they ran the risk of being suffocated at any moment.

“Come on!” she shouted once again. “Let’s get out of here! Quick!”

Tom realized that he could do nothing further for his friend and regretfully took Camilla’s hand. Together, they made rapidly for the exit which was slowly beginning to disappear in the smoke, as if swallowed up by darkness in the full light of day.

Alone and thoughtful in his office, Cardinal Fustiger was sitting with his body leaning slightly forward.

Lying on the table before him, a book was monopolizing his attention.

The image on the cover of 'The God Virus' fascinated him deeply: it was bewitching, disconcerting, maddening.

Fustiger watched those magical circles like snakes coming alive, but ceasing to turn as soon as he looked directly at them.

At the very instant when he was going to take detailed interest in the red cross and the crucified Christ, the telephone rang.

Fustiger picked up the handset.

"Pronto ..."

"Hello, my love."

Goddess' sensuous voice echoed in the earpiece.

"So," Fustiger inquired, "was the Grail in the synagogue?"

"No, it wasn't there anymore."

"And Mister Anderson?"

A tinkling laugh rang out.

"Mister Anderson is no further threat to us. I drove him off the road, so to speak ..."

More laughter.

"What did you do?" the Cardinal asked.

In a few short sentences, Goddess explained what had happened.

"Perfect," Fustiger responded. "But how did you come by explosives in Prague?"

"Mister Anderson went to see a mercenary and bought materials from him, in particular explosives to blow open the door to the Golem chamber. When Mister Anderson left, I had a word with the mercenary myself and did a little shopping at his place ..."

Fustiger was alarmed.

"Are you not afraid the mercenary could be a witness against you some day?"

"The mercenary won't be causing any problems ever again: he's dead. Heart attacks can come so unexpectedly nowadays ..."

Fustiger closed his eyes for an instant.

"Peace be upon his soul," he said.

“I’ll be coming to see you in Rome soon. I’ll be in touch. Goodbye, my love ...”

Goddess rang off and Fustiger hung up his handset.

The Cardinal grinned with pleasure and his face lit up with joy.

Thanks to Goddess, he had got rid of Thomas Anderson, but more than that, he had won a place in the Heavenly Paradise. He would not be going to Hell for ordering the planned murder of Mister Anderson. Only Goddess would suffer for wittingly killing innocent people.

The Cardinal’s face darkened for an instant.

He had just looked back at the screen of his laptop computer where the count-down was still running. The Pope had still not decided to give his support to Israel, using his Papal Infallibility.

Hell awaited Fustiger if the Holy Father refused to knuckle under to the ultimatum from the Sons of Abraham, for then he would have to order Leo to do away with the Pope.

The Cardinal sighed.

He would have to sacrifice his soul and nobly condemn it to Hell, so that the Sons of Abraham’s bomb would not ravage humanity. At the idea of the apocalypse that he would ward off by having the Pope killed, Fustiger thought of the other apocalypse that he had just prevented.

In a different domain, Thomas Anderson would also have triggered an unprecedented apocalypse by denouncing the myths of Moses and of Jesus Christ before the whole world. Fortunately for the history of humankind, through the intermediary of Goddess, the Cardinal had eliminated that demented threat.

Fustiger’s eyes went back to the cover of ‘The God Virus’.

As he read the Latin inscription ‘Argus Apocraphex’ on the red cross, he could not help bursting out laughing. His large, bulging eyes, dark but with scattered golden flecks, began shining as brightly as a hundred stars on a pitch-black night.

*
* *

Standing near the window, Tom observed the unmarked police car that was parked down the street.

He looked at his watch.

Half an hour to midnight.

He had only just come back from the police station with Camilla. They

had been separated and had undergone a long interrogation by investigators from the crime squad. Camilla had kept the secret of who she really was, saying nothing of consequence and playing the part of an innocent French tourist. However, the Prague detectives were no fools, wanting to shed light on this case of murder, because they were certain that it had definitely been a bomb that had caused Martial's car to catch fire. With mingled doubts and suspicions, they had finally escorted Monsieur and Madame Kidd back to their hotel, after confiscating the two fake passports.

The inquiry was to continue the next day.

"You were brave," Tom praised Camilla, turning toward her. "A lot of people would have cracked in your position ..."

In Tom's spacious room, Camilla was sitting in one of the two armchairs in the sitting area of the room section. On the small, low, wickerwork table, a laptop computer and a printer were running, emitting occasional faint buzzes.

"What'll happen tomorrow?" the young woman asked anxiously.

"Nothing new. They'll try again to squeeze something out of you, then they'll leave us in peace. I want to help them as much as I can, since I want them to catch Martial's murderer if he's still around. They have a clue from the traces of explosives found in the remains of the car and they can maybe work their way back to whoever's behind it all ..."

Camilla looked at him for an instant, then asked:

"You know who tried to kill you, don't you?"

At the thought of his friend who had died in his place, Tom's face grew grim.

"Yes, I know who wants to kill me."

"Who is it?"

Tom hesitated for a moment before answering.

"It's the Vatican."

"The Vatican? But that's crazy! Why? Because of the Pontius Pilate Report?"

Sadness on his face, Tom was suffering from two-fold remorse.

His first qualm was that he had escaped his own death only thanks to that of his friend. Martial had left his daughter, Anna-Katerine, an orphan. Destiny, or rather the devilish and unfathomable law of series, had had it in for his friend's daughter. The child's mother had also died years before in a traffic accident, burned alive at the wheel of her car. Even though he knew that Anna-Katerine still had her maternal grand-mother who would take care of her until she came of age, Tom felt guilty that he was alive,

instead of her marvelous and irreplaceable father.

His second qualm, which had been nagging at him from the very beginning, was to have deliberately lied to Camilla. He had gulled her without compunction, even though she had throughout been a formidable ally in his quest for the Grail.

Tom felt no better than a crook. He was tired of lies and of the accursed mask that soiled every part of him.

The lying had gone on for too long. He owed her the truth.

It was what he should have done from their first meeting in Rennes-le-Château instead of playing tricks on her.

"I had a childhood dream," Tom confided to her. "The dream was to be a Jew, one of God's Chosen People, and to return to the Promised Land, fight for it, or even die for Israel. Unfortunately for my childish dream, I wasn't Jewish. My parents are not Jews, they're Swiss citizens just as I am, so my childhood ambition couldn't come true. So, almost on the rebound, you might say, the young lad I was decided to become a Swiss Guard and protect the Vicar of God on Earth: the Pope. You see, Camilla, when I was young I was a convinced Catholic. I knew the Bible pretty much by heart and I wanted to do God's work. But fate ruled otherwise. When I grew up, before I could apply to the Vatican, I had to do my Swiss military service. I was put into the rangers. Then the Swiss secret service recruited me. I worked for them for nearly fifteen years. I also worked alongside major secret services like the Mossad, the C.I.A. and the British M.I.6 ..."

Tom came and sat facing Camilla.

"One day," he went on, "just before Christmas to be exact, I succeeded in foiling a plot by a small, mysterious group called the 'Sons of Abraham'. This group had managed to hack into a Swiss database and set up false entries in the birth register. The Sons of Abraham had the plan to infiltrate the Vatican and its Swiss Guards by having supposedly Swiss men with fake Swiss passports apply to join. My government warned the Pope unofficially and he made a point of thanking me personally. I remember the day when I met the Pope. I was in seventh heaven and the Pope must have read it in my eyes. We spoke together at some length and he offered me the post of Commander of the Swiss Guard. I saw Providence in it, the hand of God. At last I would fulfill my childhood dream, so I accepted. I felt like an angel on Earth, an angel at the service of God to protect the Holy Father and his earthly kingdom ..."

Tom smiled ruefully.

"But, just a few months later, I became a fallen angel ..."

“What happened?” Camilla inquired.

Looking troubled, Tom told his tale.

“I’d gone to see the Pope in his room. But he wasn’t there. The door wasn’t locked and I saw a thick file lying on the bed. And instead of leaving, I was tempted to find out what was in it. I’m curious by nature and fifteen years living a spy’s life had only made my curiosity stronger.”

“What was in the file?”

“The proof of the human fraud perpetrated by King Josiah. With my own eyes I saw the original document, and its translation, in which Josiah admitted to Pharaoh Neko II how he’d made up the figure of Moses and the myth of the patriarchs. In the file, there was also evidence from archaeology, various papyri and Mesopotamian documents proving without a shadow of a doubt the Old Testament was a clumsy forgery and based on plagiarizing old myths. And in the second part of the file, there was the Pontius Pilate Report, as well ...”

“So you’ve read it?” Camilla asked in astonishment.

“I had no time, all I did was read the historical summary of the report, the story of the Grail and the Church over the centuries. Before the summary there were also documents about Mithras and the myths of Men-Sons-of-God. I was there in the Pope’s room for several hours, but at the moment I was going to make a start on the Pontius Pilate Report itself, the Pope came into the room ...”

Tom closed his eyes for an instant.

“He saw me with the Pontius Pilate Report in my hand and was dumbfounded. He looked at me without a word for quite a while and then I asked him if Jesus Christ was a myth, like Moses.”

“What was his answer?” Camilla asked.

“He gave no answer at all. He must have seen in my eyes the divine was shattered in me, my Christian illusions were lost and gone forever. The Pope was frightened by my look and he called two guards to arrest me.”

“What did you do?”

“I remembered a triple killing that happened in 1998. The Commander of the Guard, his wife and a private first class were all found shot dead. The inquest concluded the P.F.C. had gone off his head, killed the couple and committed suicide. The problem, and it had already troubled my mind when I read the report at the time, was the caliber of the gun found at the spot didn’t match the wound in the P.F.C.’s throat ... So a little light came on in my head and I realized that in 1998, the P.F.C. must have read the Pontius Pilate Report and in his distress had spoken about it to the then

Commander of the Guard who had gone on to tell his wife about it. The Vatican's hit-men saw to finding a solution ...”

Tom sighed.

“I didn’t fancy becoming a staged suicide myself. So, I broke the jaws of the two guards and ran for it ...”

For a long while he had wandered aimlessly. Dishonored, accused of embezzling Vatican funds on trumped-up evidence, Tom became a fallen angel; hunted by Interpol. The difficulty was not living under an assumed identity, as he was accustomed to doing so and knew that he would not be tracked down, the real problem was that his entire world had been destroyed. He had always prided himself on being a logical person, so now wondered at how blind he had been for all those years, without the slightest shadow of a doubt ever causing him to look closely at the details. How could he have been so naive, when just a step back caused the truth to spring to your eyes? It was impossible to walk on water or multiply loaves as Jesus was supposed to have done, it was impossible to part the waters of the Red Sea to let the Chosen People cross as Moses was claimed to have done. All of these things were impossible, but yet he had believed all these myths without hesitation.

He needed to understand why.

He wanted to know why the Bible had convinced him that Moses and Jesus were real people, he wished to find out why all the Christians in the world were affected by the same belief syndrome, without any of them, the uneducated and intellectuals alike, having the slightest doubt about the truthfulness of the details contained in the Bible.

Above all, he had to track down the guilty party.

The guilty party was easily found: it was he himself.

Tom realized that everything was inside his head, but also in other people’s heads, in that black box that hid the truth of the divine. He had to open it up and see what mechanisms worked away in the shadier parts of reasoning.

Tom went off to Paris and enrolled in a university course in evolutionary psychology: he had clicked on their internet site and welcome page.

“Evolutionary psychology studies how the brain handles information and how the programs in the brain that deal with information generate human behavior.”

Tom found his Messiah, his Jesus Christ, his Savior.

Martial.

Thanks to him, Tom realized why the Bible had universally taken life in

the minds of people. Within every human, there were two complementary mechanisms that acted in an unbeatable, invisible pincers maneuver.

The first mechanism was the bias in favor of affirmation.

The brain hated a vacuum, so had an annoying tendency to fill gaps with positive statements. When people put a question to themselves, or read something, they constructed a fictional situation taking place in their imagination. This made-up scene finally came to be anchored in their mind as a positive statement, a baseless affirmation which nonetheless became a certainty for the brain of the individual concerned if nothing came to cast a shadow of a doubt on this conviction.

In the case of the Bible, any such shadow had been swept aside by a powerful light: the electric banana syndrome.

Forming the second jaw of the pincers, this mechanism had been put in place culturally, just as the monkeys had transmitted a tradition by hitting any newcomer, without questioning what they were doing. People had always had a tendency to worship the God of their parents without raising even the slightest query; children believed what their parents had believed before them, trusting them through instinctive respect and love.

Caught between a religious culture transmitted by the electric banana syndrome and the bias toward affirmation which gave support to false certainties, Christians' minds were prisoners of their own illusions.

That was what was in every human's black box.

Through living in the illusions of lies, Christians had finally come to believe in them and had turned aside from reality.

Without the electric banana syndrome and the bias toward affirmation, if either of the two was missing, a religious belief could not survive and hold its own. Hence, it was sufficient to suppress one of the two factors for humans to become aware that reality was quite different.

Tom now wanted to shout out this truth in the face of the whole world so that humanity would awake from its religious nightmare.

Without a second's hesitation, Tom turned to his Savior.

From the moment he had first sat on the classroom benches of his university, he had felt a liking for Martial. When Tom confided in him, Martial was not very surprised by the crushing revelations about Moses or Jesus Christ, so they agreed to bring about the destruction of this State lie.

It had to be done in the form of a book.

Martial had a friend who owned a small publishing house, who had already brought out one of his works on psychology. Scenting a world best seller, this friend had offered a good sum to the two men and had eventually paid both of them one hundred thousand euro in advance so as

to have exclusive rights to the book.

With his skilful psychologist's style, Martial took charge of writing the text, helped by Tom's photographic memory, which allowed him to reconstitute faithfully whole pages that he had read in the Pope's dossier. Furthermore, to support their claims, Tom went round the whole world seeking out factual evidence, building up in this way a solid file of irrefutable archaeological proofs, copies of Egyptian papyri and Mesopotamian texts certified by the greatest experts in the world, a file almost identical to the one the Pope held in secret, or indeed even fuller in so far as the Jesus myth was concerned.

After three years of intense work, Tom and Martial's book was at long last ready to go to print, just awaiting the discovery of the Grail so that photographs and the translation of Pilate's manuscript could be added as a final touch.

The book's name had been chosen by Martial: 'The God Virus'.

This referred to the inherited illness, the planet-wide pandemic that had corrupted the whole of humanity at the dawning of time: even if culture shaped the details of religious convictions, a belief in the divine was innate in modern humans, because of the contamination of their inherited genetic code by the God Virus.

The book was intended to be issued simultaneously in English and French, and Tom and Martial were looking forward to an unprecedented avalanche. They expected that day that the book came out would be apocalyptic in a good number of countries.

Westerners had often asked themselves how intelligent, educated men like the Islamic kamikaze pilots of 11 September 2001 had been able to do what they had done and believe that this inhuman butchery would take them to paradise. When 'The God Virus' was published, Westerners would have to turn the question round on themselves: how had they been able to do what they had done in the name of the Bible and believe that this literary fraud would lead them to paradise? Was it not supposed that the mythical Jesus had said that people saw the mote in their brothers' eyes and not the beam in their own?

Like a huge storm, the book would smash to splinters the beams clouding humans' vision and this literary hurricane would do greater damage to minds than ever had come from September 2001.

More than that.

In comparison with the publication date of 'The God Virus', the date 11 September would fade into insignificance, almost turning into a happy public holiday, so vast would be the ravaging global earthquake triggered

by the book. The number of dead it caused would certainly be greater than those killed by the Hiroshima bomb.

However, this saving apocalyptic fire was necessary to free humans' minds.

There would be chaos and discord, bloody fratricidal struggles, bonfires of human beings on which religious fanatics would burn the book.

Politicians would not hold back, but try to extinguish the fire by banning the publication of 'The God Virus' in the so-called civilized world. They would find clever phrases to brainwash the less intellectually endowed, who would unthinkingly approve this censorship, terrified at the idea of having to reason things out for themselves.

However, once 'The God Virus' was launched, nothing could change the situation. A new order would eventually come into place, a world order that would wipe away all the fears orchestrated by the powerful figures hiding in the shadows.

Then, after the apocalypse, the time would come for settling scores, with untold consequences.

When the truth came out, the Papacy could not survive, not even with the most abject and apparently sincere of apologies. The people who had been cheated would want to sue their churches for crimes against humanity and the Pope would have to request political asylum in somewhere like Switzerland. Catholic and Christian Democrat parties everywhere would collapse and there would be a witch-hunt to find out who had known about the myths of Moses and Jesus, in order to bring them before international tribunals.

From his earliest childhood, Tom had ostentatiously worn a wooden cross around his neck. He had thrown it away on the day when he had had to face up to the truth about the Jesus myth. It would be the same for all Christians: continuing to wear a cross would be as ridiculous for an adult as wearing the badge of the Mickey Mouse Club. For their own peace of mind, some people would even change their name: the fact that the element 'Christ' was in a forename would lead to mockery, so they would no longer want to be 'Christine' or 'Christopher', but rather 'Mythtine' or 'Mythtopher'.

Public places would also change their names: this would affect anywhere called after an element of the Jesus myth. Hence, for example, the 'Saint-Lazarus' station in Paris would have to be renamed quickly, before pranksters put up fake signs calling it the 'New Minotaur' station; Jesus College in Cambridge or Trinity College in Dublin would likewise have to race to find a more acceptable label for themselves.

Christians thought of men and women who had not been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ when children as ‘abnormal’, but things would be different after the publication of ‘The God Virus’. Others would now see the Christians ashamed of having been baptized, as the victims of some petty fraud, humiliated at having been so credulous ...

Thinking hard, Camilla had so far listened to Tom’s monologue without a word.

Now she asked, “And do you really think your book will produce that big a tidal wave in Christians’ minds?”

Tom’s face darkened.

“To tell the truth, I’m no longer one hundred percent sure ... yet a little while back I believed so. But, a couple of weeks ago I saw my mother and father. I told them everything, all the proofs Jesus never lived and I felt certain they’d believe me. But my own parents wouldn’t believe me, just like you ... They’re very Catholic, you know. They said they had faith and believed in Jesus who sacrificed himself for the salvation of humanity and that it was offensive to say such things about him. I told myself they must have misunderstood, so I went point by point with them through the whole myth of Jesus of Nazareth. And yet they kept on saying those were just my beliefs and theirs were in the faith of Christ brought back from the dead. They rejected all the factual evidence. It was like trying to convince people from the Middle Ages the world is round, not flat, and it goes round the sun, as well.”

Tom sighed.

“I told my parents about my ‘The God Virus’ and they said they’d never read a book inspired by Satan, that true believers would never read a book that offends everyone who’s put trust in the one who gave his own life for the salvation of humankind. My own parents think a demon has possessed me and my book was written by Satan in person ...”

Looking bitter, Tom mentioned his dead friend.

“Martial had envisaged that sort of reaction of rejection. He knew our book would be claimed to have been written by Satan. So, to mock this, he wrote 333,333 words precisely. Our book is exactly 333,333 words long and $333 + 333$ equals 666, the Devil’s number, the Number of the Beast. And the plus sign ‘+’ symbolically represents Jesus Christ’s cross. Martial loved secret coded messages and he’s put them in all through the book.”

Tom smiled sadly.

“When rock music came and stirred up minds during the 1950s in the United States, certain Americans said such music had been invented by the Communists to destroy their nation. When the Americans read ‘The God

Virus', some of them will wonder if it isn't the Chinese Communists, or even Satan in person, who wrote it to smash their Christian nation. But a century later, people will laugh at such outdated ideas ..."

Tom spread his arms wide.

"Even if a lot of people will wake up and free themselves from Christianity, it's likely to take a while for all of humanity to lay the Jesus myth to rest. Not everyone can get cured from one day to the next, unfortunately. Max Planck, the famous physicist, used to say a new scientific truth doesn't win out because of convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but because these adversaries die out and a new generation grows up for which the new ideas have become familiar ... If I can't save all the fathers and mothers from their blindness, I can save their children yet to be born ..."

Tom fell silent for an instant before continuing.

"The world is ill, it's paranoid, and like any paranoid, it will be convinced that I, as the doctor trying to cure it, am in fact part of a plot aimed at destabilizing it. It runs alone against the evidence, but trusts its brain or its neighbor with the same symptoms as it. It doesn't want to think about the evil affecting it, preferring to believe its imagination and religious lies."

Camilla lowered her face slightly.

"More than three people out of every four on Earth are believers and there are more than two thousand million Christians ..."

"So what?" Tom interrupted. "You're trying to suggest that if believers are more numerous than unbelievers they must be right? You're wrong if you think that. There are just more sick people than well, that's all. The God Virus, and here I don't mean my book, but rather the religious sickness that's infected the genetic heritage of humanity, the God Virus transmitted itself like a world-wide pandemic, but luckily, thanks to random genetic mutations, new individuals were born free of it and have pushed back the disease, despite culture and the bias toward affirmation. These healthy carriers are called atheists. And now 'The God Virus', and I mean my book, 'The God Virus', will be a prescription, and a tough one at that, for those God-sick people there still are on Earth ..."

Tom looked at Camilla.

"If my book isn't a miracle cure for the God Virus that humans suffer from through heredity, it will, on the other hand, be extremely effective in countering the evil effects of another book that's never done anything but worsen the sickness: the Bible."

"Do you honestly aim to outclass the Bible with your book?" she

demanded.

“Yes, I do indeed.”

“Your book can never out-do the Bible because ... because ...”

She groped for a heavy-weight argument, but could not find one.

“... because the Bible was there first,” she finally said.

Tom burst out laughing.

“The paintings in the Lascaux cave were there from the very beginnings of the history of humankind. Whilst they were the peak achievement of art and information for their age, the arrival of television definitely relegated them to the category of prehistoric and obsolete. The same will be true for the Bible when ‘The God Virus’ is issued. It’s all just a question of time. Yes, Camilla, it’s our duty to question the beliefs that were taken to be true up till now. If people had clung to the certainties of the Church, which not so long ago was brandishing the Bible and still claiming on the basis of it that the Earth was flat and the sun went round it, it would never have been possible to get into space, or to have invented those vast satellites that allow us to communicate, we’d have been stuck in the age of ignorance. There’s one last rotten beam holding up lies which has to be pulled down, and that beam is the Bible. What one book has done, in this instance the Bible, another book will have to undo.”

Tom nodded his head.

“Yes, what one book did, another book can undo, and that book will be ‘The God Virus’.”

“You sound like a prophecy by Nostradamus,” Camilla responded mockingly.

“Who knows?” Tom replied, serious. “I’m perhaps just one link in a chain, a human chain of links who over the centuries have tried to reveal the truth about the world as it really is. Maybe I’m no more than one soldier among others, a soldier in an army of the sub-conscious mind trying to bring the truth to light, a collective sub-conscious genetically transmitted, just as the God Virus is, to counter it. And if I’m the end of the chain, like any end I’ll not be there for long: others will take over from me, adding a link to the chain of truth, just as I added my link to the long chain of all those historians, philosophers and writers, known or unknown, who worked to bring Truth with a capital T out into the light of day ...”

Tom hesitated an instant before continuing. However, he had to take the plunge and tell her the truth.

“... and I had hoped you’d be one of them. I hoped you’d add a link to the chain of truth as well, with your writing ...”

Camilla frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

“I lied to you, Camilla. I’m a good actor and like any actor I lie to bring about the victory of truth, to spread it, unlike politicians who lie to hide the truth ... politicians like your father ...”

Camilla’s cheeks went bright scarlet.

“You ... you know my father?”

“I know who you are. I have done since the beginning.”

“How could you?”

“The answer’s very simple: the publisher bringing out ‘The God Virus’ is Gabriela Da Silva ...”

Camilla was thunderstruck.

“I went to places world-wide to find proof that Moses and Jesus were myths,” Tom continued. “I went looking for evidence all round the world, Egyptian papyri, Mesopotamian texts, archeological reports, in short, anything that could show they were myths. I didn’t expect to discover the Pontius Pilate Report in this research, since I knew the Church had tidied things up a long time ago. Yet, chance brought my steps to Rennes-le-Château and after some weeks of investigation, through observing tiny details, I worked out that the village was the hiding place of a Grail. Martial and Gabriela Da Silva were happy to learn this, since it would bring the final touch, the last proof, for ‘The God Virus’. But Da Silva didn’t want me to recover it immediately. She had another plan in mind. And that plan was you, Camilla.”

“Why me?” she muttered.

“Because you’re editor of the most widely-read Christian magazine in the world, especially taking into account its United States edition. Da Silva says you’re the ‘Stormy Petrel’ of Christianity and can bring down a storm of criticism on a book or have it bathed in the brilliant sunlight of praise, just as you wish. Da Silva was afraid of the acid comments that might drip off your pen. She thought you might put ‘The God Virus’ on the banned list in your magazine, which would have involved heavy financial losses for her as a publisher.”

“And why didn’t she say anything to me about it?”

“Because even though you’ve been friends since childhood, you’d have done her no favors. Faced with a choice between Jesus and her, you’d not have hesitated for an instant. She was waiting for you to come over to our side, then would have apologized profusely and admitted to you she was going to publish ‘The God Virus’ ...”

Like a bad dream, scenes went past in Camilla’s mind’s eye.

She recalled the meeting with her friend Gaby. This attractive blonde in

her thirties was not just a publisher, but also an investigative reporter with a considerable reputation who worked for major newspapers world-wide. Gaby had come and seen her to propose they worked together on a project: she was investigating a man called Thomas Anderson, a secret agent who, according to her sources, was in possession of information concerning Christ's life, information which he had stolen from the Vatican and which showed there had been a State cover-up. Thomas Anderson was likewise on the point of discovering a treasure related to Jesus Christ, a treasure hidden in Rennes-le-Château. Besides, Thomas Anderson had been in that little village lost in the South of France for some days already and it was only a question of time before he found the treasure. The clock was ticking against Gaby and Thomas Anderson had already spotted her, so she could no longer work in the open. However, the scoop of the century was there, fame and maybe even fortune. Camilla could help her in her investigation, because Thomas Anderson did not know her. She could even be at his side when he found the treasure, as Thomas would not distrust an unknown attractive woman: he was rather a talkative fellow for a spy and liked to recount his exploits when he was with a pretty woman.

Gaby had already experienced this.

Camilla did not hesitate: she had always wanted to be an investigative journalist, she secretly admired Gaby's work the scent of a mystery had her enthralled ...

"You are a powerful ally in the battle against lies," Tom said. "We needed you. The initial plan was for me to discover the Grail and you to be the first to read it, since you can understand Latin. Its contents would have shaken you and I was then to tell you the secrets I'd found out about King Josiah, the proofs I hold that Moses was a myth and the others. I'd also have had to tell you about the book 'The God Virus' and that its publication was imminent. The assumption was, with the Pontius Pilate Report in your hands, proving Jesus Christ was a myth, since you're an intelligent woman, you'd have come over into our camp. Gabriela Da Silva would then have admitted to you she was the publisher of 'The God Virus' which was about to appear in the United States. She was expecting your support, your devotion to the cause of the 'Virus', persuading conservative, and especially religious, groups against censoring the book."

Camilla swallowed with some difficulty.

"So you knew all about me?" she asked.

"I know you spend your time part in France and part in the United States, you're half French and half American, your mother's French and your father's American and more than that he's a very influential Republican Senator, close to the President. I've seen his photo in a

magazine ...”

Seeing how pale Camilla’s face had become, Tom felt sick.

“I’m sorry to have lied to you for so long. The initial plan didn’t go as we intended and I had to improvise to bring you over to my side. I still hoped to find the Grail so I could tell you everything. But things got out of hand and nothing went as I’d have liked it to.”

Thoughtfully, Camilla murmured:

“And what if the Pontius Pilate Report was no longer in Rennes-le-Château, if Abbé Saunière had burned it before he died, what would you have done?”

“Martial had thought of that, he always thought of everything ... the Grail is just the icing on the cake, ‘The God Virus’ has enough authentic historical evidence for it to be able to bring you over to the side of truth. At least, I thought so ... Martial also told me that if the Rennes-le-Château Grail wasn’t there any more, I should establish some strong link with you before talking about the Jesus Christ myth, such as a parachute jump, for instance. Martial wanted me to get really friendly with you, and doing a tandem jump would bring about open complicity between us through action and emotion ...”

Tom lowered his eyes.

“That’s what I did over Luxor ...”

It was too much for the young woman to stand. Camilla leapt to her feet, as did Tom.

“You really tricked me,” she spat out. “And I bet the feelings you seemed to have for me were just as faked!”

She made for the door.

“No, Camilla, wait ...”

He put his arm around her waist to stop her from leaving.

Furious, she swung round and slapped him.

Cut to the quick, Tom did not react. Camilla freed herself from his grasp and went out, slamming the door behind her.

Tom was left alone in the room.

Alone in a pit of despair that swallowed him whole.

36

Final Combat

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus watched the traitor approach

Behind him, a mixed band of Temple guards, Pharisees and Sadducees advanced, menacingly. Armed with staves and swords, most of them also carried torches or lanterns. When the traitor raised his arm, the troop halted.

Ringed by Simon Peter, John and James, Jesus tried to contain his emotions. In his astonishment, he had not even found the strength to get out the sword that was hidden under his tunic. His heart was beating nineteen to the dozen at the sight of the devious betrayer. The man covered the last few yards separating him from Jesus at a slow, feline pace, like a tiger creeping up on a cornered prey.

The moon was veiled once more by thick clouds. Cast by the light of the torches, wavering and worrying shadows seemed to haunt the garden of Gethsemane. Yet the shadow that came up to Jesus was no ghost.

For a brief court instant, Judas Sicariot savored the moment as he saw the fright in Jesus' look. His dark eyes glanced at John, who stood at one side of the so-called Messiah. Judas would have liked to tell the apostle that the true treachery was not his but Jesus'. Appearances were often deceptive. However, he did not want to give any explanation now, as the place was not appropriate. So, he leaned over and kissed Jesus on the cheek.

"Hail, Rabbi."

"Friend, do you betray me with a kiss?" asked Jesus in a tone which he tried to keep firm.

Judas had agreed to kiss him, so as to pick him out for the men going to arrest him, because some of them did not know him by sight. Stepping hastily backward, the traitor wiped the smile off his face when Simon Peter drew out a sword from under his robe.

“Whom do you seek?” demanded Jesus of the troop of men.

“Jesus of Nazareth,” replied a deep voice.

“I am he!”

The legend of the supernatural powers of the Messiah was firmly set in people’s minds, so now some of the group were hesitant to lay hands on the Son of God. Fearfully, some of the men retreated and fell when their feet became entangled in the roots of a pine tree.

“If you seek me, let these men go their way.”

Jesus waved his hand toward the three apostles.

A Temple guard named Malchus came forward and brusquely laid his enormous hand on Christ’s shoulder. Simon Peter raised his arm and clumsily swung his sword at Malchus’ head. With a rapid movement, the guard dodged the cutting edge of the weapon, which clattered harmlessly against the right shoulder-piece of his armor. However, the trajectory of the blow had intercepted his ear and he grunted like a wounded animal. In the light of the torches, Simon Peter saw something dark detach itself from the guard and fall to the ground.

With a grimace, Malchus stepped back, clapping a hand to his ear. There was a stir among the troop and his fellows made as if to fling themselves on the apostle.

“Stop!” ordered Jesus in a powerful voice that brought an immediate stop to any violent intentions. “Simon Peter, put up your sword into the sheath; for all they that take the sword will perish with the sword.”

Reluctantly, Simon Peter drew back behind Christ. The apostle saw his Master walk forward a few paces and bend over, looking in the darkness for the severed ear. Despite the shadows dancing over the ground, wavering as the flames of the torches flickered, Jesus found it and took it up in the hollow of his palm. For a brief moment he looked at it, then he stepped toward Malchus. He gently pushed aside the arm of the guard, who had been holding a hand to his wound. Jesus put his own hand there. Intrigued, a Pharisee raised his lantern to light up the scene. When Jesus withdrew his hand, Simon Peter was astounded to see that the ear he had just cut off was once again in its place.

Jesus turned to the apostle, who was still holding his sword in readiness.

“Do you think, then, that I cannot pray to God, who would quickly give me more than twelve legions of angels?”

Hearing this, guards muttered worriedly one to another.

Off to one side, Judas knew that these comments were uttered solely to impress the troop, gain a little time and seek an escape which was not available.

Judas signed to Zechariah, the commander of the armed men. Seeing the shadowy figures moving, Jesus grumbled:

“Are you come out against me, as against a thief, with swords and staves to seize me? When I was with you daily in the Temple teaching, you laid no hands upon me ...”

A score of guards leapt at him. Simon Peter would have wished to intervene, but he realized that he could do nothing to help his Master. Rage in his heart, he began running to avoid arrest, hoping that his flight might lead to some later chance of setting him free.

Under vigilant escort, Jesus was taken by force toward the city.

Stretching out in a long column, the troop of Pharisees and guards advanced by the light of their torches, moving through the darkness of the night at a rapid pace. With a clatter of arms and armor and the thud of sandals hitting the ground, the first men of the vanguard passed by a small cabin. Awoken by these unusual noises, a young man came to the threshold of his modest dwelling to see what was causing this nocturnal disturbance. Wearing no more than a sheet knotted around his waist, he stepped close to the marching column. As they had not seen the young man come out of his house, the men of the rearguard thought he was some disciple of Christ's who had come to the aid of his master and they quickly grabbed the intruder, who was seized with panic at the sight of these individuals with their menacing swords. Leaping like a startled horse, he succeeded in breaking free from their grasp and ran off totally naked, leaving behind his sheet in the hands of the guards. They shrugged their shoulders, grinning foolishly, and started running to rejoin the troop.

Behind them a cautious shadow was trailing them at a good distance.

Simon Peter had not lost hope of saving his Master. Whilst the others had fled in fear, he was no coward. Still clutching the sword that he had slipped under his garment, he hastened his pace. A suspicious sound suddenly made itself heard a few yards away.

With a movement he tried to make lightning fast, but still rather clumsily, he swung round, drawing his weapon.

It was John catching up with him. Making their way stealthily, the two men spoke in low voices. John had also preferred to flee rather than share Jesus' sad fate, but he had hopes of freeing the prisoner and had followed the escort at a distance by another path. For a quarter of an hour the two apostles together continued stalking after the tail end of the troop. Up ahead, the vanguard of the column finally arrived at Caiaphas' house.

In its courtyard, numerous fires had been lit. The night was cold and the Chief Priest's servants were waiting for the return of the men who had set

out to arrest Christ.

Standing next to a brazier, a stooped old man was poking with the end of his walking stick at glowing embers that had fallen outside of it, trying to revive their flames.

His flame, his inner flame was dying away and he knew that the end of his days could not be far off. When the troop entered the courtyard, he rejoiced to see that they had arrested Christ. The old man, called Annas, was Caiaphas' father-in-law and as his life drew to its close, he was asking himself questions about existence that only this man, brought here by force, could resolve for him. Naturally, Caiaphas had no notion of his plans. Annas had a confused impression that, despite his son-in-law's negative comments, Jesus knew the secrets of the otherworld. Rumors had been circulating about the esoteric teachings of Christ which opened the way to celestial happiness. Hence, Annas had waited all night to meet Jesus and converse with him before Caiaphas passed a terrible sentence upon him.

As the guards marched into the courtyard and regrouped in sections around the fires, Annas signaled to their commander Zechariah, who was marching before the prisoner. At an order from their officer, the armed men holding Jesus led him toward the elderly fellow.

"Are you the Messiah?" asked Annas.

Distrustful, knowing that whatever he said would be held against him, Jesus looked at him for an instant before responding.

"If I told you who I really am, you would not believe it. Likewise, if I asked you about the Messiah, you would not answer me."

Annas sighed. However, he did not let this evasion trouble him and he questioned Christ about his doctrine and his disciples.

"I spoke openly to the world," replied Jesus. "I always taught in the synagogue and even in the Temple where all the Jews resort, and I said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask rather those who heard of me what I said to them. They know what I said."

One of the guards slapped Jesus.

"Dare you answer the high priest so!"

"If I have spoken ill, bear witness to the evil of it," protested Jesus. "But if I have spoken well, why do you strike me?"

Annas realized that dialogue with Christ was impossible; he would not speak with him. Warily, the old man signaled to the troop's commander to take the prisoner away. He was locked up in a small cell on the ground floor of Caiaphas' sumptuous palace. A number of guards were posted before its door. Zechariah enjoined heightened vigilance upon them: it was

possible that Christ's disciples would make some attempt to free him. Going round all the sections, Zechariah likewise ordered all his other men to stay where they were, so as to be ready for any eventuality. His sharp eyes glanced up and down the white colonnades set around the courtyard, as if one of them might be hiding some infiltrating foe.

Then, somewhat reassured, he went outside the building. Patrolling right round the imposing edifice, he made certain that none of Jesus' partisans were lurking in the neighborhood. Once he had finished this inspection, he went back into the palace to wait until Caiaphas awoke. As soon as dawn broke, Zechariah would be able to announce to him the success of his mission.

Before going inside the residence, he glanced briefly at his men. They were warming themselves around fires and braziers with the servants who had brought them snacks and fuel.

A figure slipped in amongst these domestics.

With his hood hiding most of his face, Simon Peter had managed to get into the courtyard with John's assistance. John knew the building well, as one of his aunts had been a doorkeeper there and as a child, he had frequently visited her. John had knocked at the door reserved for the staff of the house. The doorkeeper, an elderly woman with a toothless smile, had not forgotten him despite the passage of years. They had exchanged a few words, then John had come out and led Simon Peter in from where he was waiting outside. His aunt had been doubtful for a moment about the identity of the friend that her nephew presented to her. She had been warned against the risk of intruders, followers of Jesus seeking to free him. She had suspiciously asked Simon Peter whether he was one of the Messiah's disciples. With a reassuring smile, lying brazenly, he had declared that he was not. The two apostles had separated after that. Knowing his way round, John had made off to look inside, whilst Simon Peter had gone out into the courtyard to await his return.

As he mingled in the conversations so as to merge with those present, his Galilean accent almost betrayed Simon Peter. Faced with distrustful servants who asked if he was not one of the prisoner's disciples, Simon Peter had to declare loud and clear that they were wrong about him and that he was totally unacquainted with Jesus of Nazareth.

An hour later, John finally rejoined him. He told him where Jesus was locked up, saying that it was impossible to break him loose. Choosing not to stay there, but rather to go and try to find some other solution to save Jesus, John left.

Simon Peter had still not resigned himself to abandoning his Master. Stroking the pommel of the sword he was carrying hidden under his tunic,

he waited for a chance to arise.

With God's aid, nothing was impossible.

Trying to look natural, Simon Peter advanced toward the brazier closest to the cell where Jesus was confined, and joined the guards warming themselves at it. Silently, he spent an appreciable time observing the door behind which the Son of God was confined out of the corner of his eye. Mechanically counting the number of guards present, he realized that any direct attack would end in his death: in less than ten seconds swords would be thrust into him from all sides.

He was wondering what else he could do when a guard who had noticed the apostle's constant glancing toward the cell violently tugged back his hood.

"Did I not see you in the garden with him?" asked he suspiciously.

Simon Peter denied this forcefully, looking down at the ground. Putting his hood back up, he decided to linger no more in this place where he was in danger of being arrested at any moment.

He hurriedly fled the area.

Outside, day was breaking. A rooster started crowing. That night, Simon Peter had thrice denied his Master, he who had sworn a few hours earlier never to do so. Jesus' words echoed in the apostle's head, the phrases that Christ had uttered about his disciple's denials.

It was a prophecy coming true.

Seeing himself powerless to save him, Simon Peter clenched his fists and began crying bitterly.

In the dawn's early light, Jesus was shoved out of his cell and taken to face his judges.

Although they normally met near the Temple, the seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme tribunal of the Jews, had made an exception and hastily gathered in full session in one of the large rooms in Caiaphas' home. The sacrificing clergy, priests in purple, yellow or violet tunics, turbans on their head, sat solemnly in a semicircle. In their midst, on a higher chair, Caiaphas presided, wearing his formal headgear. At each end of the semicircle, sitting on two small platforms each bearing a table, there were two clerks, one for the defense, one for the prosecution.

After walking down a long corridor, officers of justice, bearing straps and ropes, came into the large chamber. Their arms were bare and their looks hostile as they pushed forward Jesus, who had his hands bound behind him. The guards had been reprimanded for not searching the prisoner properly, especially as they had not found the sword hidden under his white tunic. The officers of justice had found it. They were now

watching over the captive closely, as if he had some invisible weapon concealed upon him that he could wield at any moment.

Caiaphas stared at the prisoner at some length. Both the captive and the Chief Priest knew that this tribunal was just a masquerade of a trial. There were only prosecution witnesses and no defending advocate. For the seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus was already found guilty. However, they had to go through the official procedures.

Caiaphas would have preferred for Jesus to have died in a brawl staged by hoodlums outside the town. In that way, the Temple would have had no part in his tragic death, as no link could have been established. Circumstances had, alas, prevented this. In Jerusalem, Caiaphas could not simply have his throat slit without there being consequences. In a few hours, many disciples of Christ would have learned that he had been captured by Temple guards and if he were found dead or disappeared forever, an accusation of murder would be brought before Pontius Pilate. Then he would take advantage of it to order Caiaphas' arrest and imprison the members of the Sanhedrin. The Roman Procurator detested Caiaphas and all the Jews, so he could not be given a chance to do away with the Temple's religious powers.

Above all, Caiaphas wanted Jesus' death to be a great, morbid spectacle; crucifixion would show all the Messiah's disciples that he was not the Son of God, just a simple mortal, a human usurper. Then, the Jews would stop glorifying Jesus, would forget him and would turn back once more toward the true place of worship and its servants.

Officially, the Sanhedrin would condemn Jesus because he had said that he was the Messiah. According to the law of the Temple, this claim was a terrible blasphemy equating to the crime of lese-majesty against Yahweh. Furthermore, to discredit him definitively, Jesus would be presented as an impostor, scorning Moses' precepts.

Nonetheless, such a condemnation did not give the Pharisees the right to crucify a Jew. Pontius Pilate alone had that power and, for him, declaring oneself Christ or violating the law of the Temple was of no significance.

Hence, in order to induce the Roman Procurator to order crucifixion, Caiaphas was going to arrange for false testimony that would make Jesus appear to be a plotter calling for revolt against the Roman authorities. The priests could not accuse Jesus of sedition openly, as in the eyes of the people that would have been seen as devotion to Rome. It would be done, therefore, unofficially by witnesses in Caiaphas' pay.

The Chief Priest brought them in and they each testified in turn before the assembly. Seeing the wretched performance of these accusers, Caiaphas sighed in annoyance. Most of the testimony did not even agree,

but luckily for him Pontius Pilate had crucified many a victim for less than what they claimed. These rough-and-ready affirmations were not being trotted out to convince the Sanhedrin: all of this was no more than a dress rehearsal prior to the real action before the Roman Procurator. Caiaphas also wished to discover what Jesus' reaction would be to his accusers before they all had to face Pilate.

From the start, Jesus had remained silent.

The cup of destiny was in his hand and nothing seemed able to prevent him from having to drink it, whatever he said or did. He was fully aware that against all this testimony his own words would not suffice to clear his name before Pilate.

One last witness was brought into the meeting. It was a young novice recently admitted to the Temple. Pointing a finger at Jesus, his face worried, the adolescent affirmed in a shaky tone:

"I heard him say that he would destroy the Temple and within three days build another ..."

Caiaphas was delighted. Wanting to destroy the Temple, could there be any more indisputable proof of sedition, calling for the demolition of buildings and armed struggle against Roman authority? In any case, the Chief Priest would strive to have it presented as such.

"Do you answer nothing?" asked he, approaching Jesus. "What is it which these men witness against you?"

Faced with the silence and unperturbed expression of the prisoner, Caiaphas very nearly exploded. However, he made an effort to keep his calm. With his slightly squinting eyes he glared at Jesus for more than a minute.

"By the living God," exclaimed the priest finally in a theatrical fashion, raising his arms to the sky, "I adjure you to tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God!"

In such a drumhead court, Jesus knew for sure that the question was purely rhetorical and that even if he denied it, the clerks would happily write out his condemnation for declaring himself Christ before the Sanhedrin.

So, Jesus said what Caiaphas wanted to hear.

"You say true, I am ..."

Caiaphas could not help but smirk. The crime had been committed in full hearing of the Temple's tribunal. Nonetheless, his smile was immediately wiped away when Jesus added:

"Besides, I declare to you that henceforward you will see the Son of God sitting at the right hand of the power of God and coming in the clouds

of heaven ...”

This phrase of investiture irritated Caiaphas and he straight away understood the allusion.

An allusion to a word of honor scornfully ignored.

He became mad with rage and tore Jesus’ robe.

“Blasphemer,” shrieked Caiaphas.

Turning to the members of the Sanhedrin, he addressed them.

“What need have we of any further witness? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?”

They all made believe that they had not noticed the humiliation just inflicted upon Caiaphas and they all condemned Jesus to death, as guilty.

The prisoner was led out by the officers of justice. As he walked, they spat on his face and slapped him with the palms of their hands. A little farther on, some of the guards joined in and pummeled him out of pure maliciousness. Mockingly, one of these brutes flung a cloth over his face:

“Prophecy now, Messiah, tell us who it is that is striking you.”

Caiaphas watched the scene with evil pleasure. When the escort disappeared at the end of the long corridor, the Chief Priest returned to his seat.

Jesus’ fate was now confirmed. It only remained to convince Pontius Pilate of the danger of sedition which he represented.

That, though, was a detail already arranged.

At least, that is what he believed.

An hour later, escorted by his personal guard surrounding Jesus, Caiaphas arrived at the Antonia fortress where the Procurator’s palace stood.

The legionaries on sentry duty were not willing to allow such an armed troop to pass. The hubbub that arose in the courtyard brought out Pilate, who had been passing nearby. Wearing a long, white toga, his face acerbic, the top of his head bare of hair, his nose long and straight, Pilate looked Caiaphas up and down disdainfully.

“What do you wish?” asked he sharply, rubbing a hand over his pepper-and-salt locks. “Who is this man?”

He pointed at Jesus with his bound hands.

“What accusation do you bring against him?”

“If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up to you,” replied the Chief Priest bowing slightly as a sign of deference.

“Take him, then, and judge him according to your law.”

Pilate turned away.

“It is not lawful for us to put any man to death,” said Caiaphas quickly. “To death?” asked Pilate turning back toward him. “Who is this man?” “Jesus of Nazareth.”

A gleam crossed the Procurator’s eyes.

He ordered his men to seize the prisoner. When they took him into the praetorium, Caiaphas made as if to follow them, but Pilate wished to speak with the captive alone. The Chief Priest had to wait outside. In the high-ceilinged, spacious audience chamber with its tall white columns, before which the soldiers on duty seemed as motionless as stone statues, Pilate walked by Jesus without paying him the least attention. The Roman went to his throne and sat on it. Five yards from there, the two legionaries who were escorting the prisoner forced him to kneel. Pilate, stroking his long, thin, hairy legs, set to staring at him in silence.

For over a minute, Jesus sustained his burning look. Pilate finally asked in an ironic tone:

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

From the tone that Pilate used, Jesus understood that Pilate indeed seemed to know him. Jesus was astonished by this.

“Do you say this thing of your own accord or did others tell it to you about me?”

“Am I a Jew?” chuckled Pilate.

Becoming serious once again, he added:

“Good, let us get to the facts. Your own nation and the high priests have delivered you to me. What do they accuse you of doing?”

Jesus felt some vague confusion in the Roman, as if he wanted to help him in some way. Could that be? However, to defend himself against the accusations brought against him was no use: Jesus had too many prosecution witnesses against him.

Moved by a sudden inspiration, Jesus directed the conversation to a different subject.

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my people would fight so that I should not be delivered to the Jews. Yet my kingdom is not of this place.”

“Are you a king, then?”

“You say that I am a king,” sighed Jesus. “To this end I was born and for this cause I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everybody that wishes the truth hears my voice.”

“What is truth?” asked Pilate.

Jesus had no chance to reply. Evading the legionaries’ vigilance during

the changing of the guard, Caiaphas had pushed his way in, driven by a fear of a one-to-one interview between Jesus and Pilate. The Chief Priest came into the chamber in the company of a multitude: these were the prosecution witnesses who had met him before the palace. Pilate was indignant at this intrusion, but he did not show this at all, signaling to the soldiers who were intercepting them that they could let the intruders past.

Pilate listened unwillingly to the testimony. Jesus was accused of every evil; he was arousing the nation to revolt against the authorities, preventing payment of the tribute due to Caesar and claiming himself to be greater than Caesar.

His seditiousness was more than evident.

Caiaphas was certain that the sentence of the Roman Procurator would be the death penalty by crucifixion. However, he had a great surprise when Pilate spoke:

“I find in this man no fault at all.”

Startled, Caiaphas opened his mouth, stuttering pitifully. It took him some time to grasp the full import of what he had heard.

“But ... but ... he stirs up the people throughout all Jewish lands, from Galilee to Judea ...”

“I have heard enough of this,” cut in Pilate.

One of the sentries came rapidly into the room. A messenger from Herod Antipas was requesting an audience. Pilate received the Ethnarch’s envoy with marked disdain. Herod Antipas had been in residence at Jerusalem for some days and on learning of the arrest of the Messiah had demanded to see Jesus of Nazareth, for he was a Galilean and supposedly subject to his jurisdiction. Pilate was obliged to accept this request, whether he liked it or not, to avoid any possible trouble that Herod Antipas might stir up for him in Rome. In any case, the prisoner was henceforth under Roman authority and the ruler of Galilee had no more than a limited right of overview with regard to the fate reserved for Jesus.

Escorted by a legionary guard, Jesus was brought in and Pilate took advantage of the circumstances to hustle Caiaphas and his henchmen out of the audience chamber.

Lying less than a thousand yards away from the Antonia Tower fortress, the late Herod the Great’s palace was majestic, with its multiple terraces, its vast porticoes, its white marble cladding with inlays of jasper and porphyry, its roof plated in gold and silver.

On the death of the King of the Jews, the land had been divided between three of his sons: Archelaus had received Judea and Edom together with Samaria, Philip the territories to the North-East of the River Jordan and

Antipas Perea and Galilee. Later, Rome had deposed Archelaus and turned Judea into a province under the control of a Roman Procurator.

Since Archelaus had been exiled to Gaul, Herod the Great's palace had been occupied only by the ghosts of past times and former glory, and by a few caretakers who saw to it that its prestigious appearance was preserved. Some Roman Procurators had also resided there, but Pontius Pilate had preferred to fix his dwelling in the Antonia fortress.

Antipas visited the palace frequently to savor the splendor of the place.

However, this was not his only reason.

Antipas was tall and burly, with a beard and long hair of an almost pure white. He gazed at the view of the Temple which lay before him as he stood on one of the palace terraces. From there, each morning when he was in residence, he enjoyed seeing the sun rise on the city of Zion and cast its brilliant rays on the historical capital of Judea.

Some time ago, his half-brother Philip had embellished the town of Panias and renamed it Caesarea, in honor of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar. When Archelaus was deposed, the Romans had designated Caesarea as the new capital of the region, but in reality Jerusalem had always unavoidably remained its true heart and it was from there that the successive Romans Procurators had governed the group of provinces with an iron hand.

Antipas was not truly a king in his own country, just a native administrator under the yoke of the occupying power, a puppet raising taxes, a figurehead ruler there to make the people believe in the illusion of Israel's sovereign status. As long as Antipas tamely worked for Rome, his future was assured.

Nonetheless, Antipas still had hopes of gathering all the Jewish provinces together under his rule, worming Judea out of the hands of Pontius Pilate. In this way, he as Tetrarch would indeed become, as his late father had been, King of the Jews in everybody's eyes, even if in reality Rome would still hold the keys of power. That was Antipas' dream and to achieve it he was intriguing with Tiberius, the current Emperor of Rome.

As he saw it, the land that he coveted belonged to the descendants of Herod the Great and so, legally and historically, to him. He wanted to recover what was due to him. His half-brother Philip, weak in mind, senile and decrepit, would not oppose him and would soon be sidelined. After Judea, nothing would prevent his becoming ruler over the other provinces and his accession to the paramount throne of Israel.

Antipas was swimming frenziedly in this ocean of megalomania when a

servant appeared to alert him to the arrival of Jesus.

The Tetrarch turned on his throne, or more exactly the throne of his late father, where it stood in a splendid chamber with a white marble floor. Around him, whispering among themselves, a dozen priests in their clerical robes were comfortably seated on chairs with fine sculptured decorations.

Antipas looked at them for a few seconds.

The teachings of the Temple differed from his own beliefs and he sometimes regarded it somewhat negatively. Nonetheless, Pharisees, Sadducees and wise men of all faiths were always given a warm welcome by the Tetrarch, keen as he was to gain occult learning and vision.

However, this morning the priests present were exclusively from the Sanhedrin. They had come to inform him of the judgment pronounced earlier.

He raised his arm.

The murmurs were immediately stilled and the legionaries who were waiting outside in the corridor with their prisoner were ushered in by the servants.

As soon as Jesus came before Herod Antipas, images of past times flooded into his head and filed quickly before his mind's eye.

Jesus remembered an episode in his childhood when his elder cousin, John the son of Elisabeth the 'barren' woman, had come to visit him in Galilee. From rumors passed on by the villagers of Nazareth, John had gathered that Jesus had spent time in Egypt. So as not to be outdone, John had told everybody that he too had gone to the land of the Pharaohs and that there he had even seen Jesus in a cavern. Jesus had never reproached him for his invented tales.

He recalled coming face to face with John, now the Baptist, on the River Jordan where he had received baptism from his rough hands.

That had been their last meeting.

John the Baptist had been arrested and imprisoned by Herod Antipas.

From his prison, unbeknownst to his jailers, as if he had doubts about Jesus, John had sent him one of his disciples bearing the message:

"Are you he who should come or must we look for another?"

As if he did not wish to reply to that question, avoiding it subtly, Jesus had answered the messenger and the other disciples of the Baptist who were with him:

"Go your way and tell John what things you have seen and heard: how the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. The dead are raised and to all the gospel is preached. Blessed are they, who

will not be offended by me.”

Jesus had then praised John to his own disciples. He had described the Baptist as a great prophet and had lauded the baptisms he performed.

Jesus had never known if his cousin had received his reply, for he had been beheaded shortly after, on Antipas’ orders.

On this topic, the Baptist’s disciples told this tale:

Herod Antipas had married Herodias, the wife of Boethus his half-brother. John the Baptist had railed against this illegitimate act and told Antipas it was impermissible to marry a brother’s wife. Mad with rage, Antipas had had John thrown in prison for this remark. However, the Tetrarch had not dared to kill him, for he was a prophet and the ruler feared the anger of the mob. However, Herodias was also enraged with the Baptist and desired his death. A chance to achieve this came on Antipas’ birthday, because Herodias’ daughter danced for him and his guests. Under her charms, the Tetrarch swore to grant the young dancer whatever she desired. At this, her mother ordered her to demand the head of John the Baptist. Contrite, Antipas had had to have the prisoner decapitated.

Yet all this was no more than rumor. Jesus was fully aware of the true reasons for the arrest and death of his cousin.

After the Baptist’s death, other rumors had begun to circulate: those which said that Christ was John resurrected. Antipas himself had seemed to confirm the truth of this to his servants, stating that it was the reason that Jesus could perform miracles. The Tetrarch was thus seeking to see the wonder-worker come back to life, probably for a delayed repentance.

However, in reality, it was not from any remorse that Antipas wished to meet Jesus. Many a time, he had attempted to have him captured by his hit-men, but had never succeeded.

Jesus was now before him, finally at his mercy. The tetrarch’s hazel eyes stared into the prisoner’s. He had the impression that he recognized that gaze. In the very depths of those eyes, Antipas read a truth which confirmed what John the Baptist had told him under torture before dying.

Antipas began to ask questions. However, under this interrogation, Jesus was as if made of the same substance as the floor on which he had been made to kneel by force.

Marble.

No expression crossed his face and he said not one word.

Far from being offended by this, Antipas went on with the questioning. Craftily and slyly, he brought in the one single question that was the true cause for Jesus being brought before him.

The phrasing he used was subtle and Jesus did not seem to grasp its

hidden meaning.

Faced with the prisoner's unwavering silence, Antipas was inwardly delighted: Jesus did not know what he and Caiaphas knew. The Chief Priest had told Antipas this on several occasions, but the Tetrarch had wanted to ensure it was so for himself.

Herod Antipas was now calm about his future.

All the tension and hatred that had built up in him recently evaporated in an instant. Just the day before, he had been promising himself that he would personally strangle Jesus for the affront that he had inflicted on him a few days earlier.

More precisely three days ago.

On his way to Jerusalem, not far from Jericho, Jesus had met two Pharisees, close contacts of Antipas. When they realized where Christ was heading, of their own initiative they had attempted to dissuade Jesus from continuing to his final destination by feigning to be his bosom friends.

"Get away and depart from here, for Herod will kill you," was what they had told him in a falsely confidential tone.

However, Jesus had not been fooled by their tricks intended to make him afraid. He understood the anxiety that had gripped them at the thought of his going to the city of Zion.

"Go and tell that fox, Herod: today I cast out devils, tomorrow I shall do cures and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it is not fitting for a king to perish outside of Jerusalem."

The two Pharisees had reported these remarks to Antipas who had been plunged into a black bad temper.

Ironically, what Jesus had said was coming to pass and Antipas' anger had been assuaged, as his own future was now assured.

Seeing a radiant and mocking smile light up the Tetrarch's face, the priests of the Sanhedrin abandoned their reserve and insulted Jesus violently, accusing him of treachery to Israel. Antipas also made some scornful and offensive comments. At his orders, to humiliate the prisoner yet further, Antipas' guards dressed Jesus up in a splendid royal mantle, purple in color.

Unaware that Pilate wanted to pardon him and believing that the charges leveled against Jesus would send him to the cross, Antipas sent the captive back to the Roman procurator. Before the legionaries of the escort, he stated that he approved and backed the death sentence demanded by the Sanhedrin.

Returning to the Antonia fortress, Jesus found himself face to face with

Pontius Pilate once more. He was about to dismiss the soldiers on duty, so as to talk alone with Christ, when the hubbub of a crowd was heard.

Curious, Pilate rose from his throne, walking forward a dozen yards out onto the terrace. Below it, the circular paved area had been invaded by a seething mob. Seeing them, Pilate smiled.

He knew what that crowd desired: they wanted Christ to be freed.

He would make their wish come true.

Pilate entered the audience chamber and gestured with his chin for Jesus to join him on the terrace. Still wearing the purple mantle, his hands bound, Jesus obeyed.

“Behold your king!” exclaimed Pilate to all and sundry.

Instead of the ovation he expected when Christ appeared, angry grumblings rang out.

“Death!” came the shouts.

“Crucify him!” cried other hysterical voices.

For an instant, the Roman Procurator was speechless.

Caiaphas had not previously played all his cards. He had hastily brought together a horde of his followers on the circular paved zone to oblige Pontius Pilate to change his mind.

If Caiaphas had been surprised by Pilate’s decision to set Jesus free, he had eventually worked out the reason for it.

Pilate wished to become Emperor in place of the current ruler of Rome and he must already be envisaging himself in the heart of that city, adored by a joyous crowd that was throwing bouquets of flowers as he passed by with his escort. Helped by this wonder-worker Jesus, he must surely overthrow Tiberius and seize the reins of Empire, for Pilate thought of Christ as a great magician with supernatural capacities. The Procurator was perfectly acquainted with all the miracles that he had accomplished. All his acts and deeds must have been reported to him by numerous eye-witnesses who had been present at them. These were no rambling tales told by drunkards, but genuine facts, backed by various reliable sources. Pilate must be convinced that this Jesus was the man that he needed to achieve his personal ambitions.

Caiaphas had similarly grasped that this was the reason that Pilate had always more or less opposed the arrest of Jesus; his Roman legionaries were worryingly complaisant, preventing any armed force from gathering to seize him, alleging the risk of an insurrection.

To change Pilate’s opinions was a difficult task. Nonetheless, Caiaphas hoped that pressure from the crowd and the fear of bloody rioting if the prisoner were released would induce the Roman Procurator to condemn

Jesus to death.

Unseen in the midst of the crowd, the Chief Priest signed to his roughs to stir the people up once more.

“Death! Away with him! Crucify him!”

Pilate finally cast an amused glance around that mob that wished to see him condemn Jesus to crucifixion. He had realized that those present down on the paved area were not followers of Christ but of the Temple, hostile to his coming. For over a minute, he silently savored the pleasure of being an all-powerful sovereign, his subjects at his feet imploring his favor. Even if they were no more than a band of those Jews whom he detested, the sensation of power over those men and women was heady.

It would not be he, the great Pontius Pilate, who would go back on his word concerning the freeing of Christ, but rather this wretched mob. He knew how unintelligent minds worked and how a superior mind could hold the ascendant over them.

Dogs always end up by eating out of their master’s hand.

On the terrace, four legionaries stood on duty at each corner. A fellow in his thirties with a brutish face and rather limited intelligence stood just behind Jesus: Julius was the commander of the guard, recently promoted by Rome, despite Pilate’s protestations. He had had to obey Rome’s injunctions; Julius was from a very influential Roman family, some of whose members were personally acquainted with the Emperor.

Pilate signed to Julius to draw near. He gave him a precise order. Five minutes later, the commander of the guard returned with a prisoner called Barabbas, laden with chains.

During recent festivals, the Procurator had adopted the habit of releasing a prisoner, whichever one the crowd demanded. This was a means for Pilate to show the extent of his power, with the right of life and death over all. He also enjoyed seeing the mob at his feet and, like Tiberius, granting or refusing what the crowd begged.

This practice was slightly megalomaniacal and Pilate was going beyond his prerogatives, but Rome did not yet know about it. Pilate took care to keep secret some of his activities so that he could act as he wished. In any case, even if Rome learned about it, it would be enough to point out that it was sometimes wiser to free a prisoner to prevent a revolt than to crucify a thousand, as taxes were inevitably hit by the negative effects of a lack of labor.

As with donkeys, one should use the stick, but also the carrot, judiciously.

Yet nobody could accuse Pilate of being weak: he was responsible for

so many deaths that the most blood-thirsty of killers might have been rendered nauseous just by imagining the gallons of blood that the Roman Procurator had had spilt.

“Whom would you have me release to you?” asked Pilate of the crowd. “Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

By suggesting Barabbas, Pilate was certain what would happen: the mob would choose to let Jesus go rather than see Barabbas free and unpunished. After all, this criminal had committed an atrocious murder by slitting the throat of a Sadducee priest of the Temple.

Contrary to Pilate’s expectations, voices chanted the name of Barabbas.

“Barabbas?” said Pilate, somewhat disconcerted. “What then shall I do with Jesus ...”

“Crucify him!” came the shouts.

Pilate gazed at the mob with a haughty air.

“Shall I crucify your king?” chuckled Pilate, mocking them.

“We have no king but Caesar!” rang out a voice.

Fearing that some missile might be flung that would kill one of them, Pilate signaled to the legionaries to remove the captives from public view. For over a minute, he silently scanned that growling crowd.

“As I find no fault in this man, I shall set him free,” proclaimed Pilate then.

“We have a law and by our law he ought to die, because he has made himself out to be the equal of God,” screeched a hysterical man.

“If you let this man go, you are not Caesar’s friend,” cried out a voice directed at Pilate. “Whosoever makes a king of himself speaks against Caesar.”

The voice seemed familiar to Pilate. He frowned as he saw the figure who had just spoken. Despite the large hood that hid his face, Pilate recognized Caiaphas.

“You brought me this man, saying that he was stirring up the people and perverting the nation,” replied Pilate. “I have examined him and have found no fault in this man relating to those things of which you accuse him. Nor yet did Herod, for he has sent him back to us.”

Lying with aplomb, he hoped that mention of the name of the Tetrarch of Galilee would calm minds.

“You see this; this man has done nothing worthy of death. I shall release him ...”

Cries of rage burst forth.

“... having had him chastised with whips,” added Pilate hurriedly,

believing that this would suffice to dissipate the tension.

However, quite the contrary happened. The crowd roared even louder and a voice rang out amidst the tumult.

“He called himself king: we have no king but Caesar,” came the shriek. “If you spare him, you are his accomplice against Caesar, and a traitor!”

Pilate blinked several times as he looked at the man in a red mantle lost in the midst of the crowd who had just struck him this body-blow. Pilate noted a movement behind him. His gaze turned toward Julius who was advancing toward him, his hand on the hilt of his sword. His subordinate’s eyes had lit up with a gleam that he knew very well.

Covetousness.

Whilst absolute loyalty toward the governor of a province was unquestionable for soldiers, a higher loyalty could overrule it: loyalty to Caesar, the Emperor of Rome. The slightest sign of disobedience or weakness in carrying out his orders was punishable by death. Such was the law of the Empire.

Pilate had put himself in a tricky situation by wishing at all costs to free Jesus. He might lose his own life if he persisted in this and did not apply the laws of the Empire with full rigor. He could already be seen as an accomplice in blasphemy against Tiberius, for anybody who claimed to be the equal of the one whom the Romans considered to be a living incarnation of the gods was committing an act subject to capital punishment. He had to condemn Jesus to death; if he did not do so, Pilate would be showing that he did not believe in Caesar, the sole ruler of all peoples.

The opportunistic commander of his guard would have the right and the duty to kill him. Happily filling the vacant post, he would gain a rapid and legitimate promotion for having executed a procurator disloyal to the Emperor’s authority.

“What you ask shall be done,” said Pilate hastily, stepping forwards so as to put some space between himself and his subordinate’s sword.

Julius calmly let go of the hilt of his weapon, as if nothing had happened, as if the problem had never arisen.

Pilate rubbed a hand over his forehead, which was drenched in sweat. He had underestimated the new commander of his guard, believing he was dealing with an empty-headed brute. Julius had an overweening ambition and Pilate promised himself to do all he could to have him transferred, whatever the cost might be.

Among the crowd, many believed that Pilate had finally acceded to their request because of their obstinacy. Retaining remarkable dignity in the

face of this public affront, Pilate took an ewer of water that stood in one corner of the terrace. He washed his hands meticulously, as they were moist from the fear that he had felt when he saw Julius' naked blade.

His eyes unfocused, Pilate cursed Jerusalem, promising himself that Jesus' blood would fall on the Jews and their children.

37

AA

Room 101.

Camilla hesitated for an instant.

Standing before Tom's door, she dared not go into the room of somebody who was making her suffer so much.

She had cried the whole night long. The tears had never stopped flowing down her cheeks and she had virtually not slept at all.

She felt mentally exhausted, as empty of energy as a flat battery. She hated Tom for having deliberately played with her feelings, she was angry with herself for having been so naïve from the first day onward and she hoped never to see him again.

However, she did not want to remain alone in her room: the police superintendent who was investigating Martial's murder would be there soon and she did not want to meet him all on her own.

Camilla's hand hovered for a few seconds, then she made up her mind and tapped in the four numbers of the code on the key-pad.

1001.

The bolt slid back and Camilla gently pushed the door open.

Lying on the bed, covered by a white sheet, Tom was still sleeping. Noiselessly, Camilla closed the door and went to sit in one of the two arm-chairs in the sitting area of the room. On the small, low, wickerwork table, the laptop computer and printer were now both turned off. A strange photo attracted Camilla's attention.

Lying across the printer's paper tray, this large-format photo showed Jesus Christ crucified on a red cross, with an M in the same red shade painted on his body. On the crossbars a phrase in Latin was inscribed: 'Argus Apocraphex'.

But what was the most striking was the dozen or so concentric circles in

three colors that surrounded the cross. Like mesmerizing eyes revolving on themselves, these roundels had a life of their own: as soon as Camilla looked at one of them, it stopped moving, while the others mysteriously moved even more strongly.

Camilla rubbed her eyes and looked again.

Once again, the circles began shifting in a maddening and incomprehensible whirl.

Camilla picked up the photo and went to sit on the edge of Tom's bed. The previous night, she had promised herself she would be cold and distant with him, but, now that she was so close to him, her heart seemed to be beating fast again.

"Thomas, wake up ..."

She shook him gently.

Tom opened his eyes.

He immediately raised himself on his elbow and smiled at Camilla.

A timid grin.

"Good morning ... are ... are you all right?"

She pointed to the photo.

"Why do they go round?"

Tom adopted a conspiratorial air.

"Because you're still asleep and dreaming. None of this is real. Or perhaps you're a character in a novel that a writer God is composing at this very minute. You have to live according to his words and so you're living in a book ... No, I'm pulling your leg. It's nothing mysterious, just an optical illusion, an illusion due to a bug in our brains."

"A bug?"

"Yes, and this bug is a genuine detector of life, whether real or imaginary. Our mind assigns life to objects that sometimes aren't alive. And this bug was a crucial advantage in the evolution of species Darwin was fond of, so it was selected by nature."

"How do you mean?"

"I'll tell you: from the point of view of evolution, this ability constituted a major advantage for survival, since it was an early warning system alerting attention, whether to detect prey or predators like snakes. This bug in our brains lets us 'strip off' the camouflage of, say, a snake hiding in among ferns ..."

Tom pointed a finger at the photo.

"These circles are like a snake's skin and your brain goes on the alert to warn you of a real or imaginary danger. Imaginary in this case, but it

would have taken the same action with a real snake hidden in the branches of a tree, for instance. Identifying an enemy in a couple of seconds can be a matter of life or death: it's better to run away for no real reason than to stay where you are and be in danger, better to see life in inanimate objects than not notice it in living creatures. The ancestors of humans had this bug in their brains and that allowed them to survive better. Individuals carrying the bug transmitted this innate vision of nature to their descendants, whilst those who didn't have this life-form detector died bitten by snakes or eaten by predators, so couldn't transmit their 'normal' vision without the bug to any offspring. Natural selection. That's why your mind sees movements in these circles when they're absolutely motionless. We've all inherited this bug from our ancestors."

Camilla nodded and Tom confided in her:

"This photo is the cover for my book, 'The God Virus'. It's phenixgraphic dot com that created this image of turning serpents, specially for the book."

Camilla frowned.

"Why did you put the Latin words 'Argus Apocraphex' on Christ's cross?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know. Martial added it two or three weeks ago. He just told me to think about it. But I haven't had the time to puzzle it out. And now Martial isn't here anymore to tell me ... on the other hand, I do know why Jesus has a red M on his body."

Tom chuckled.

"I was the one who had that idea, picking up Abbé Saunière's first thoughts. With just the letter M, you can shout out the truth about the Jesus myth to the whole world. Besides, Jesus' body and cross are perfect for the purpose ..."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, the red cross forms the letter T and Jesus' body, with its arms in the air, has the shape of the letter Y."

The tip of Tom's forefinger traced the outline of Christ's body, drawing a Y.

"All you need to do is to add the letter M to get the three-letter group: M.Y.T. That points to the word 'MYTH', all the more strongly so in French, since '*myt*' and '*mythe*', the French word for 'myth', would be pronounced identically in that language. With just one single letter, you can reveal Christ's secret to anyone ... Initially, 'The God Virus' will be published in French and in English for English-speaking countries like the United States. Your friend the publisher Gabriela Da Silva also promised

me that the ‘Virus’ would be published world-wide in several other languages. I’m thinking of Italian and Spanish, to start with. It’ll be just a question of weeks, of months at the very most, after the first versions come out. And as soon as the ‘Virus’ is on the point of being published in France and the United States, the Vatican will try to ban it in other countries, churches will threaten anyone who reads it with anathema, or hellfire and brimstone. In very Catholic lands like Italy, Spain and the Latin American countries, there will doubtless be censorship by the State. But thanks to the internet, Christ’s secret will be spread, all the same. There’ll no longer be anything to hold back the movement of rebellion by Christians against the lie of Christ. An army of minds angry at being cheated will pour down in waves on the churches, and even if it can’t destroy them, because the State police will protect these historical buildings, this army will still be able to show everyone Jesus is a myth ... by putting an M on every crucifix ... A revolution is under way thanks to this army of the Ms and nothing will be able to stop it. Of course, there’ll be clashes, innocent warriors sentenced to prison for having put blood-red Ms on crucifixes. They’ll be martyrs for the truth, martyrs cruelly punished by a Law in the pay of the Church. But in the end this truth will win everywhere in the world, and the Law will have to take its side against the Church. The army of the Ms can’t be beaten. It’s only a question of time. Then people will tear off the crosses they wear round their necks and replace them with crucifixes having a very visible red M. Da Silva has already thought up some merchandising ideas for products based on the book: crucifixes with an M on, a line of clothing with an M ... Da Silva never loses sight of business opportunities and, to be frank, she has nothing but dollars on her mind. But that’s not important: the crucial thing is for the ‘Virus’ to be spread as widely as possible, in whatever form it may be.”

Camilla was silent for a moment, then finally asked:

“You say you went back to an original idea of Abbé Saunière’s?”

“Yes, that’s right. You’ll recall that in the church of Mary Magdalene in Rennes-le-Château, if you take the first letter from each statue, the word GRAAL, French for Grail appears. And if you draw a line from one statue to the next following the order of the French word GRAAL, you get an M. Remember, too, that Abbé Saunière had an M embroidered on his priest’s vestments. An M intertwined with an A on a T-shaped cross.”

“Normally ‘A’ and ‘M’ stand for ‘*Ave Maria*’, ‘Hail Mary’ in Latin,” Camilla said.

“You might think that at first. But when you know, as we do, that Saunière and Boudet blackmailed the Church through all sorts of visible hints and decorated their churches with the sole aim of getting money out

of the Vatican, the letters M and A take on their real meaning ... Saunière also had the same intertwined M and A engraved on the inverted Visigothic pillar, the column that hid the Pontius Pilate Report in Rennes-le-Château ... On the pillar, you find the cross symbolizing a T, as well, and on either side of this cross there are two different natural figures forming an R and a Y ... So, on that column, starting from the letter M and going anti-clockwise, you get an M, then a Y followed by a T-shaped cross, next an R and finally an A. That spells out the run of letters: M.Y.T.R.A. Mithras, that's what it's all about ..."

Tom looked at Camilla.

"Boudet knew the myth of Jesus of Nazareth. He'd done research into ancient mythology and spotted the striking similarities with Mithras. From that he deduced the relationship and how there'd been plagiarism by the Christians ... And Saunière engraved it all in stone ..."

Troubled, Camilla said nothing.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to shave and shower. Order breakfast if you like, I'll not be long."

With an air of triumph, Tom wrapped himself in the sheet as if it were a Roman toga and headed off into the bathroom. When he came back a quarter of an hour later, wearing the bathrobe provided by the hotel, Camilla was already eating breakfast in the room. Sitting in an arm-chair, she was enjoying a cup of tea and a croissant while watching the television fixed to the wall. Tom came and sat in his turn and served himself a hot chocolate.

On the television, the C.N.N. news network was announcing the death of a Palestinian woman suicide bomber and five Israelis in an attack in Jerusalem the previous evening. During the report, C.N.N. broadcast a video of the suicide bomber claiming that her forthcoming martyrdom for the Palestinian cause was in the name of Allah.

"They're swelling the ranks of future candidate suicide bombers by giving air time to that recording," Tom grumbled.

"How do you mean?" Camilla asked.

"Because there's no such thing as an unknown hero. This kind of bomber is a publicity seeker. They play at being heroes sacrificing their lives for a cause, but they'll only do it if they get recognition. If Islamic suicide bombers blew themselves up, but no-one ever got to know who they were, where they lived and who their families in Palestine are, gaining increased prestige from their sacrifice, in a word, if they had to die without anyone knowing their identity, well, there'd be very few, if any, such bombers. Human beings refuse to sacrifice themselves if they gain no

advantage whatsoever for themselves or their families. Glorification by other Moslems is the primary source of motivation for these publicity-seeking bombers. No such thing as an unknown hero. Paradoxically, if it was only Allah who knew about their deed, without any human knowing they've made a hero's sacrifice, these suicide bombers wouldn't be willing to die. That's why I say publicity like this on C.N.N. is the fertile breeding-ground for new bombers ..."

Tom fell silent for an instant, then went on:

"It's sad to tell, but most of these suicide bombers are people full of love, not hatred, as you might think. They need compassion and intimacy, not hatred and destruction. But they feel excluded from society and go back to the most primitive form of belonging for human beings: the tribe. In a tribe, relationships are so strong the value set on life and death is no longer the same. They're prepared to sacrifice themselves for the leader asking them to, a leader who's loved above all else and guides the little group of just a few individuals. They're ready to sacrifice their lives, like comrades-in-arms in wartime who don't hesitate to fling themselves on a grenade, so as to shield the rest of their group with their bodies and save their lives. Islamic suicide bombers are killing themselves altruistically and the cherry on their cake is they believe that becoming 'martyrs' opens the gates of paradise to them. They change into assassins blinkered by their own minds from start to finish ..."

Hearing this last comment, Camilla remembered the details she had read about the origin of the word assassin.

It was derived from the word 'hashshashin' which described Moslem killers, recruits to suicide troops living in Alamut, an arid and mountainous region in what is nowadays Iran. These hashshashins belonged to a Moslem sect led by a man called Hassan, nicknamed the 'Old Man of the Mountain'. He was seen as a prophet capable of opening the gates of Allah's Paradise. In fact, within the fortress set on a mountain top where Hassan resided there was a paradisiacal oasis maintained by slaves in the greatest secrecy. This park imitated the appearance of the gardens described as being in the Paradise of Allah and was hidden from all the members of the sect, who did not know it existed. When Hassan needed to send a member of his sect to do some foul deed, he called the chosen one to him and told him that as the sole prophet of God to hold the keys of Paradise, he would send him there, then bring him back to this world. Hassan was thus promising to give to the chosen man a foretaste of what pleasures eternal life had in store for true believers. The chosen man was then drugged with hashish, after which he was induced to take a powerful sleeping draught and, once he was asleep, was carried into the garden

hidden within the fortress. When he awoke, the chosen man truly had the impression that he was in the Paradise of Allah: he found around him rare perfumes, delicious foods served on silver-gilt dishes, wine, opium and hashish in profusion, all in the midst of incredible luxury. Above all, the chosen man was surrounded by young slave-girls, mostly virgins, keen to fulfill his every sexual desire.

Sex, drugs, alcohol.

The chosen one really believed that he was in Allah's Paradise and spent an unforgettable time before he was drugged with the sleeping draught again. He woke up in a bare room in the fort, back to his lackluster day-to-day life, and Hassan then told him that thanks to his powers the chosen man had had the luck to taste the Paradise of Allah in secret and that he could return there by dying for the true cause. A smile and a joint on his lips, the selected hashshashin set off, without the slightest fear of dying, to kill the enemies pointed out by Hassan, the enemies of Allah.

Struck by another thought, Camilla asked:

"But don't you think your book 'The God Virus' will also be a shot in the arm for the suicide bombing campaign?"

"Why?" Tom responded in amazement.

"You reveal King Josiah's secret, don't you? Israel will seem even less legitimate in the eyes of the Palestinians whose property it took and suicide bombers will be all over the place ..."

"History has already thrown its dice. Israel has become a legitimate State through the course of events and nothing can alter that situation. Revealing Josiah's secret will cause little harm to the Israelis, maybe none at all. Paradoxically, the people who have the most to fear from the secret of Josiah and the Promised Land are the Palestinians, the suicide bombers and Islam in general."

Camilla frowned.

"How can that be?"

"Because Mohammed was the prophet of God, the same God the Jews and Christians worship. In the Koran, Mohammed recognized in his own lifetime twenty-two prophets from the Old Testament like Adam, Noah, Abraham, or Moses, and to a certain degree Jesus himself. The problem is, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus are myths ... How could Mohammed, the messenger of God have made such a huge blunder? How could he have recognized the Old Testament and its myths as true? He really put his foot in it, since if he'd truly been sent by God, he'd have shown up Josiah's fraud for what it was. God would have told him to: God

is all-powerful and all-wise and so would know some day Josiah's secret would be revealed by scientific archaeological discoveries. This One God wouldn't have made the mistake of letting his omnipotent, all-seeing nature be brought into question as I'm doing now. Mohammed was ignorant and acted as a fallible man and not as a prophet of God."

Tom smiled at Camilla.

"Remember Mohammed laid down one of the obligatory pillars of Islam, which is pilgrimage to Mecca. In that 'holy' city stands the Kaaba: it's a cube-shaped black building supposed to have been put up by Adam, destroyed by Noah's Flood and rebuilt by Abraham in person. Besides, the Kaaba contains a holy black stone that the Angel Gabriel is supposed to have put directly into Abraham's hand ... those are foundations of Islam ... The three monotheistic religions, Jewish, Christian and Moslem, form a pyramid with a shared base, that's the Old Testament. Trouble is, the base has absolutely no solidity, it was made up bit by bit, word by word, by Josiah. The three monotheistic religions stand on emptiness. When their base collapses, the whole structure collapses and Islam is right on the top of it. Islam supports itself on Judaism and Christianity, on Abraham and Jesus, so it has even farther to fall. The crunch will be harder for it ..."

Looking preoccupied, Tom added, as if talking to himself:

"Mohammed never performed a miracle in his lifetime and himself admitted he was no more than a messenger, not to be compared to Jesus or Moses. Nevertheless, he was cunning enough to find another ploy to impose his new religion ..."

"You seem to know Mohammed's life story particularly well," Camilla commented.

Tom nodded.

"Yes, that's true. To let you in on everything, while I was researching the Jesus myth, I also took an interest in Mohammed's life and I've even started writing a book about him myself. I've given it the title 'The Sage of Mecca'. It's ironic, of course. As soon as it's finished, which will be in just a few months, it'll be published as a follow-up to 'The God Virus'. And I can show I'm a prophet who sees the future: a death *fatwa* will be pronounced on me and my descendants for a thousand generations, since the shocking revelations about Mohammed are even more amazing than those about Jesus. Believe you me, alongside 'The Sage of Mecca', Salman Rushdie's novel 'The Satanic Verses' will seem sickly-sweet complimentary propaganda in favor of the Prophet. My book will be so outrageous in comparison that Rushdie's work might even come to be acceptable bed-time reading for Bin Laden ..."

Tom chuckled, then went on more seriously:

“After Judaism and Christianity have collapsed, it’ll be Islam’s turn. Moslems will also break free from Mohammed’s lies, since they’re just as much victims of human fraud as the Jews and Christians. Moslems will burn their own Korans and tear down their mosques, following the example of the Christians in the army of the Ms. Then the children held captive through brainwashing by Islamic States and Koranic law will be free, liberated from that blood-thirsty Mohammed ...”

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* *

Lying in his huge bed, dressed in white pajamas, the Pope turned his sad gaze away from the over-bright window of his room.

A new day had dawned as he had awoken, but what was so new about it? Outside, bull-headed human folly continued to shake the world with its daily flood of atrocities.

All of it because of the Koran, a copy of which the Pope had in his hand.

This Koran had been presented to him by an imam and, in the interests of peaceful co-existence and respect for religious consciences, the Pope had accepted this accursed gift.

That day, he would have loved to burn it before the reporters’ cameras that were pointed at him and to have told the truth about Mohammed. If just one Pope had been brave enough to do so in the past, there would never have been all those religious wars, wars that were still smoldering on all around the planet. Nonetheless, if Mohammed’s secret had been divulged, then Christ’s would also have come out into the full light of day and the Church would not have survived the cataclysm.

The Pope looked long and hard at the Koran.

In his lifetime, Mohammed had passed on the so-called word of God which had been given to him by the Archangel Gabriel, known in Arabic as *Jibril*. Being illiterate, Mohammed had dictated his ravings to his disciples, who in some cases had jotted them down on whatever they had to hand, such as palm leaves, camels’ shoulder-blades, or stones. However, the greater part of ‘God’s words’ had been learned by heart by these believers. After the death of Mohammed and several of those ‘living memories’, as a prudent measure for fear that the divine word might disappear as suddenly as it had appeared, the Moslems brought together all the texts they had and also wrote down those parts of ‘word of God’ that

had hitherto been transmitted orally to disciples.

The Koran was born.

Disagreements rapidly emerged, in particular in what order the Koran should bring together these various texts, the different chapters called *surahs*. Some wanted the *surahs* to be put into the Koran chronologically, from the oldest to the most recent, which seemed logical. However, in that order, contradictions in the divine words became all too flagrantly apparent: Allah commanded one thing, then the next month, Allah had changed his mind and even said the opposite of what he had originally ordered.

A distressing aberration.

In the Koran, there were countless contradictions that leapt off the page: this demonstrated the changeable nature of Allah, or rather of Mohammed, who had imposed his will for more than twenty years in accordance with his whim of the moment, a groping and defective will.

Hence, the *surahs* of the Koran were not put into chronological order, but arranged by decreasing order of length. This trick not only permitted the puzzlement arising from contradictory verses to be somewhat reduced, but also allowed the clear and progressive upping of the ante that was in it to be hidden from view.

Mohammed found himself in direct competition with Judaism and Christianity. As a good tactician, he had found a way to out-do them: he out-bid them.

In Mohammed's every saying there was an all too visible upping of the bids in respect of Paradise and Hell. By way of comparison, in the extensive Christian Scriptures, the words 'paradise' and 'gehenna' are present fewer than twenty times, while in a Koran only a fifth of the length of the Bible, hundreds of verses strive to terrify or to lure with these two notions, the real cutting edge of Islam.

Islam was the religion of fear and greed, of the stick and the carrot.

Mohammed promised Moslems infinite voluptuous delights. In comparison with the Christian Paradise, the Moslem Heaven was the acme of the overblown: it had become a place where pure water, wine and honey ran in streams from fountain-heads studded with rubies and diamonds. In this fabulous paradise, every Moslem had a great estate with at least 80,000 servants and 72 virgins. These girls were called by the name '*houri*'; they were ravishingly beautiful young women of pure musk and free from any natural impurity or defect, modest and living shut away in villas covered in pearls. In this Paradise, food was provided on gold plates, three hundred dishes at every serving, each containing different and sumptuous

foodstuffs. Wines and liqueurs flowed in everlasting abundance, clothes were magnificent and spangled with jewels, feet sank into luxurious carpets, bodies stretched out on gently yielding mattresses and heads lay on soft silk pillows. Moslems lacked for nothing in the Paradise of Allah. Further, so that they could enjoy all these delights, God gave the elect perpetual youth, beauty and vigor, and surrounded them with music and singing that charmed the heart through all eternity.

Mohammed promised all that to his followers, but also even for the worst criminals in his troop of assassins, by allowing all sins to be redeemed by the crown of 'martyrdom'. Any murderer who lost his life in battle against the unbelievers became a 'martyr'.

For unbelievers, Mohammed's imagination had likewise run riot: in the Koran, Mohammed described in graphic detail the tortures in store for any who opposed him, for all who did not join in his follies. God's Hell was divided into seven regions, one of them reserved specially for Christians, an inferno where all unbelievers without exception, that is, all non-Moslems, would suffer eternal damnation. Allah's Hell was sadistic perversion in its purest form ...

The Pope shook his head.

He preferred not to think of these details, so demented were they: the raving mind of Mohammed had been given free rein to think up what he himself would have liked to do to his opponents. However, lacking the means on Earth, he had had to move his frustration across to that fictional hell. In any case, to quench his angry thirst for blood in the here and now, he had ordered all unbelievers to be massacred.

One after another, the Pope opened the Koran at the all too many pages indicated by small book-marks, where the verses all said the same thing: 'Slay them wherever ye find them'.

The Pope closed this Koran dripping with hatred.

Nobody had ever dared to make a comparison between Stalin and Mohammed. The Pope, however, did dare to do so. As if Stalin were Mohammed reborn, the two men shared disturbing similarities, almost uncountable analogies. They both suffered from megalomania and had set up personality cults, one using the atheistic Russian system of apparatchiks of which he was the absolute master, the other using the worship of God, whose sole Prophet incarnate he was. Both living quite frugally, without real luxuries, despite the fortunes at their disposal and the power they had won, they both preached the same sharing of wealth among the poor and wretched, along with fraternity and equality for men. They both had a world-view, a global map drawn up in their minds that they wished at all costs to turn into reality. The respective doctrines that they had put in

place were regimes of terror and they had spread their fanatical dogmas all around by force of arms and opportunistic wars. They hated the Jews, whom they had been unable to win over and they had exterminated them as soon as they had had the chance ...

The Pope closed his eyes for an instant.

The two tyrants had never halted in the killing of all those who had even dared to speak out against them. Their routes through history were littered with countless corpses and their hands were smeared with the blood of all the innocent victims who had had the misfortune to cross their paths.

There was one single noteworthy difference between these two blood-thirsty killers. Stalin had been glorified in his lifetime by the whole world, before it had discovered the true picture of the horror and crimes to be laid at the door of the 'Little Father of his People'. Mohammed, on the other hand, had been hated while alive, but glorified after his death, finally appearing to be a holy man, a good man with a noble and romantic heart, venerated by the whole world, which was ignorant of his true nature thanks to Islamic propaganda.

Nowadays, no discordant voice sounded out to point to the true historical trajectory of Mohammed, that delightful route lined with the corpses of all those who had turned down the incomparable offer made them by the Prophet: submit to the Messenger of God or taste the steel of his sword.

Unwilling to bow their heads, many wise men and women had lost them to Mohammed's own hand for not agreeing to join his demented collective pandemic of madness.

How many heads had fallen? How many wise scholars had opposed him and found his blade responding to their mild words? How many women had died for refusing to hide their faces and bodies beneath humiliating veils and robes? How many ...?

Mohammed had had executed or had killed with his own hand many innocent folk and Mohammed must still be in Hell or more probably lost in burning nothingness, a consequence of all the successive murders he had committed.

Of course, Moslems knew of Mohammed's 'warrior' side, but they justified all this slaughter as legitimate self-defense, arguing that the Prophet had been attacked and not the attacker and that he had done no more than to defend himself nobly to save his life from the unjust aggressions of infidels.

A purely defensive strategy on the part of Mohammed, so defensive that hordes of conquering warriors had spread out from Arabia all the way to

Spain and even to France. There, luckily, Charles Martel had managed to halt the lightning 'defensive' expansion of Islam and its jihad.

The Moslem's argument that their war had been 'defensive' was enough to make one laugh, but the Pope was not in the mood for merriment.

The Pope could not utter a single one of all these truths about Mohammed. He would be craftily made out to be racist toward Arabs, even though he adored that people more than any other in the world, a people that from the very start had been able to find Deus in its divine worship, but which sadly had been turned aside from this by Mohammed the blood-thirsty. The Pope dared to hope that one day, the renewal of Deus would shine out from among the Arabs. However, for that to happen this people would have to reject the Evil One, which was impossible as long as Islam remained its cultural religion.

Through ignorance, nobody would be freed from the Evil One and Mohammed.

The Pope sadly set the Koran down on his bed and took up a collection of *hadiths* from where it lay on the bedside table.

If non-Moslems had only a very vague acquaintance with the Koran, for the most part, they were totally unfamiliar with the *hadiths*. The Koran was defined as the word of God spoken through the mouth of Mohammed while the *hadiths* were the personal words and acts of Mohammed reported by his close companions and likewise noted down. From these *hadiths*, a great number of relevant facts could be learned about Mohammed's private life: after the death of his first wife, he fell prey to his evil passions and grossly infringed the sexual morals that he imposed on others. Young Aishah became his third wife at the age of six and, according to her own statements, once she was nine years old, she had actually had 'conjugal' relations with Mohammed. Pedophilia was one of the features of the Prophet kept discreetly concealed. There were also his fits of epilepsy in which a paroxysm of cataleptic dementia gave him visions of a being called *Jibril*. Aishah stated that the Prophet was a victim of black-magic spells, prey to such hallucinations that he imagined he was doing things that in reality he certainly was not doing.

That was Mohammed's mental state: a blood-thirsty madman affected by visions due to epileptic crises, a lunatic who had taken a liking to Yahweh, the blood-thirsty God invented by King Josiah, that God who ceaselessly commanded the massacring of any men, women, or children who crossed the path of the Jewish people.

Spurning his own commandment 'thou shalt not kill', the tyrannical God of Israel demanded the law of talion, an eye for an eye, and continually ordered the extermination of all those opposed to his divine

will, all those occupying the Promised Land, such as the Canaanites, a God who authorized human sacrifices, burned earth and the enslavement of enemy peoples.

Mohammed had taken over for his own purposes this murderous God who demanded that all the opponents of the Chosen People be slain forthwith and he had used the Laws of Moses as the foundation for Islamic Law. Even today, still living in the Stone Age, Islamic States still prescribed sentences of stoning to death for homosexuals and adulterous women, the stoning so dear to Josiah, his mythical Moses and his vengeful God.

Who had said that God is Love?

Not Mohammed in any case ...

The Pope put down the book with the collection of *hadiths* and picked up the remote control for the television.

On the small flat screen fixed to his wall, the Pope had just seen the news of the suicide bomb attack by the Palestinian woman in Jerusalem. Weary and afflicted, he used the remote control to turn off the television sound.

That suicide bomber believed that she would attain God's Paradise through her sacrifice. In a video, she had brandished the Koran, claiming that she would go to Heaven, while the evil Jewish infidels would go to rot in Hell.

Ironically, the opposite would be true.

The Pope knew that the soul of that woman would not enjoy eternal life in Heaven. Her fate would be to remain in the world of perpetual sufferings for having killed five innocent victims.

How could anybody believe that by murdering human beings a place in Paradise could be won with impunity? That Moslem woman was totally ignorant of the celestial laws ruling the heavens. In her ignorance, she even disregarded the contents of the Koran that she had brandished to justify her action. If she had only taken the trouble to think instead of believing, she would have realized a strange thing that nobody seemed to see, even though it was written in black and white: the Paradise of Allah was reserved exclusively for men.

There was nowhere any destination set aside for Moslem women. The description of Allah's Paradise was nonetheless particularly precise, speaking of the delights that awaited Moslems, for each of whom 72 virgins would be provided. However, these were not Moslem women; these virgins were *houris*, creatures made by God as a reward for every Moslem man. In the Koran, there was no trace of what would be the

destiny of Moslem women: in fact, they were excluded from this macho Paradise and found no place in any of the lying promises made by Mohammed called *surahs*. Worse still, Mohammed had stated in a *hadith* that women constituted the majority of those in Hell ...

Yet these Moslem women still absolutely insisted on believing that they, too, would have some share in the delusion called Paradise.

Caught in this cultural snare, they accepted the sufferings of a hell on Earth, they put up with being beaten by men and considered inferior to them because the *surah* entitled 'The Women' stated so in black and white. Eyes lowered, because of rules backed by *hadiths*, they endured being seen as less intelligent than a man and having to wear all-enveloping garments that encroached on their measureless inner beauty. Their husbands, in some cases at least, with their moronic consciences lulled by having imposed Allah's will on their wives, went off and drank beer without any compunction.

The word 'Moslem' meant 'submissive to God', but these women were subjected not to a divine will, but to a male chauvinist world-view: Mohammed's.

The minds of these women were willing captives, prisoners of the Prophet and of his mouth-watering Paradise, whose keys they hoped to win through submission ...

An image formed in the Pope's mind.

In some Asian countries, monkeys were caught with a cunning trap: it was enough to fix a large transparent jar solidly to a heavy wooden table and to put an orange inside it. A monkey would soon come along and stick its paw into the jar to grab the tasty tidbit. However, the circular opening of the jar was just the same diameter as the orange and so it was impossible to pull the paw back out while still holding on to the fruit. When the hunter approached, the monkey was unwilling to let go of its hoped-for treat and stupidly allowed itself to be caught ...

The minds of Moslem women were like the paw of such a monkey. They refused to let go of the promised Paradise when they had a chance to free themselves from its tyranny and recover their freedom.

However, their minds could not face up to losing the promised reward, so women continued to be the submissive slaves of men, the masters in Islam. Moslem women were their own jailers and did not aspire to any intellectual independence, which greatly facilitated the perpetual flourishing of the despotic religion of Islam, which trampled on even the most elementary of women's rights.

The Pope sighed.

Who was he to stand in judgment on that thousand-year-old tyranny, when he was himself the inheritor of the Church which for so long had seen women as garbage that could be beaten, tortured, raped, or enslaved? Yes, for a long time, the Church had held that women had no souls and it was only slowly and reluctantly that this same Church had finally admitted that women might have an immortal spirit. Furthermore, it was not so long back, in the 1950s, that Pope Pius XII had even strongly condemned painless labor, forbidding women to bring a child into the world without agony, banning them from the right to treat their 'diabolical' bodies as they wished.

However, at the dawn of time woman had been considered a divinity incarnate upon the Earth. She had been seen as a goddess, because, as if by magic, from one day to the next she became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a new being. Man saw in his sweet companion a magical creature endowed with divine powers, capable not just of creating offspring on her own but also of giving him a sexual pleasure that took him to the seventh heaven. Nonetheless, with the arrival of domestication of animals, men finally understood their role as reproductive males, grasping that it was their sperm that engendered the child and that without them women did not have the power to give life. Men's machismo gained the upper hand and pushed women off their pedestal to take their place there themselves ...

The telephone rang.

The Pope put down the television remote control that he had had in his hand and picked up the handset from the bedside table.

"Pronto ..."

At the other end of the line, Cardinal Fustiger wished him good morning and asked politely what sort of a night the Holy Father had had. Then he reminded him that the Sons of Abraham's bombshell would reach its zero hour the next day. The Pope hung up after telling Fustiger that he was very much aware of this, but that it meant that he still had twenty-four hours to reach his decision.

The Pope meditatively wondered if the promised apocalypse would really be the end of the world.

Of course, the Christian God would perish, but Deus would not be affected in any way. Then the consecration of Deus might be possible among the ashes of ravaged Christianity ...

The Pope shook his head.

If the Church was destroyed by the apocalypse, it would most surely not be Deus who would shine. On the contrary, it would be the eternal Evil

One who would be the true winner, through Mohammed as his intermediary.

And that, the Pope did not want.

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Tom set his empty cup down on the low table.

“Since Mohammed never performed any miracles, being just an ordinary man, Moslem pseudo-scientists absolutely insist on seeing in the Koran the commandments of God and not the ravings of Mohammed. They claim that Mohammed couldn’t have known in his day, that is, in the seventh century, certain scientific truths contained in the Koran. This is supposed to prove *ipso facto* that it’s not the words of an illiterate fellow like Mohammed but really God’s words. These Moslems state Mohammed hints at the Big Bang theory and even at the constant expansion of the Universe, which no-one knew about in those days.”

Tom cleared his throat and recited Surah 51, verse 47:

“‘We have built the heaven with might, and We it is Who are making the vast extent thereof’ ... That might impress the ignorant, but if you look at the original verse, what Mohammed actually says is more like: ‘We have made it of vast extent’. These pseudo-scientists take phrases out of their context and sneak words into the text to give it totally different meaning. What’s amusing is that in the very next verse, Mohammed says Allah has spread out the Earth, just as one does with a carpet ... of course a carpet is completely flat ... You see, Camilla, any phrase pulled out of context gives a different impression. These pseudo-scientists say Mohammed couldn’t know the sun was a ‘great light’ and the moon ‘gave back’ the light of the sun. But we shouldn’t take the Arabs of those days for mentally retarded, everything Mohammed said was well known at that time, there were reputable astronomers who had a clear familiarity with the skies, as the Greeks had had a thousand years before them. Unfortunately, all that vast knowledge was frozen, mummified and driven out by the arrival of the Moslem religion. All this wisdom was destroyed, since it wasn’t in conformity with the Koran’s views, based on the Old Testament ...”

Tom smiled.

“These pseudo-scientists profess to be astounded Mohammed says that with a drop of sperm you can create a living being. Nevertheless, they’re forgetting the domestication of animals had happened several thousand years earlier and stock-breeders had long since grasped the functioning of

reproduction in animals and also in humans ...”

Tom referred to Sahīh Muslim, compiler of the two sole collections of hadiths considered excellent by all Moslems around the world, and quoted his Book 3, Hadith 608.

“Doubtless inspired by Allah the All-Wise, Mohammed claimed women ejaculate like men. Men’s sperm is thick and white whilst women’s is thin and yellow. And he added the resemblance of a child to its father or mother depends on which of the two liquids reaches the woman’s uterus first ... a magnificently scientific statement ...”

Tom sneered.

“What’s amusing and annoying at the same time, is that these Moslem pseudo-scientists close their eyes to the other ‘scientific’ claims made by Mohammed, or rather by Allah in person through the Koran. For instance, it states woman was formed from man, referring to the fable of Adam’s rib, that Adam himself was made out of the dust of the soil and that the heavens and the Earth were created in six days ... Unless, of course, they’re special days, God’s days corresponding to millions of years ...”

At this allusion, Camilla felt herself blush.

“You know,” Tom said in conclusion, the true strength or success of the Koran lies in the fact you have to recite its verses aloud, chanting them like a psalm. And the melody of the verses finally comes to haunt Moslem readers, like a motif which comes back from time to time even when they no longer have the Koran in their hands. Some of them think it’s God who’s intoning the Koran inside them. But, of course, there’s a physiological reason for all that, a reason hidden in our brains: it’s the auditory associative area, which is capable of recording any music or melody we hear. This area is totally independent of consciousness, it runs on its own and is like a sort of tape-recorder. At any moment, it can send back to our mind a melody it’s holding. And even if we aren’t aware of it, even without thinking about it, This independent area can play back just for itself a melody it’s heard, for hours, as an endless loop, without us having the faintest idea about it or hearing even one single note of music in our head. And then suddenly the auditory associative area ‘turns the sound up’, so to speak, and our mind is attacked by a melody without knowing why. Advertising agencies use and overuse this auditory associative area to hijack our secret tape-recorder, so it’ll end up sneaking their message into our consciousness. You know, ads on the television always use some little jingle that’s easy to remember, a jingle that you eventually come to hum without even noticing ...”

Tom hummed a little jingle.

"The finest fish that you could wish, ready to make a tasty dish, that sort of thing ..."

Tom laughed.

"That's the great strength of the Koran: getting itself into that secret area ..."

He tapped his head.

"Everything goes on in this little black box."

Pensive, Camilla nodded mechanically and glanced at her watch.

"You seem anxious," Tom said. "Do you have some problem?"

Camilla confided in him.

"Yes, I'm worried about having another session with the superintendent who's investigating Martial's murder."

Tom stood up and came to stand behind the young woman where she sat in her chair.

With his strong hands, he massaged Camilla's neck and shoulders and she began to feel her stress disappearing. In silence, Tom gave her a soothing massage for five minutes.

It might be thought that to reassure a woman one had to talk to her, comforting her with soothing conversation. However, that was not so: the contact of hands in silence was the most powerful of tranquilizers and all speech just empty words that in no way assuaged the contained stress of a woman. Tenderness was better than long spiels and contrary to what was received opinion, it was men who needed to confide in somebody and talk when in stressful situations ...

"You know," he finally said in a soft voice, "you don't have to stay, you can go back to France if you like. I'll take care of the superintendent."

"Go back to France? How? I don't have my fake passport any longer, the superintendent confiscated it."

Tom smiled.

"A good spy always has a few spare passports to hand. I had others made just in case."

"Do you have them with you?" she asked.

"Yes, Madame Kidd, I'll show you."

Tom walked to the big mahogany chest of drawers. He pulled out a wide drawer and groped with both hands beneath it. A small brown block the size of a pack of cigarettes fell onto the navy blue carpet. When he saw it, Tom's eyes opened wide in surprises and he bent down to look under the drawer: four more brown blocks were taped there. Tom grabbed the two passports that he himself had taped on the underside of the drawer and

saw a piece of white paper folded in four that was tucked into one.

Tom got back up, unfolded the paper and quickly skimmed through it.

“What is it?” Camilla inquired, intrigued.

Tom pointed to the brown block on the floor.

“That must be the same explosive that was used to blow up Martial’s car. And this ...”

He showed her the sheet of paper.

“This is supposed to be a leaf torn out of Martial’s diary.”

“Did Martial keep a diary?”

“No. That’s just it, he didn’t. Martial never kept a diary, as far as I know. Yet it’s definitely his writing. I recognize it ...”

“So it’s a forgery, then? So what does the page say?”

“Martial writes he’s afraid for his life, since I’ve threatened to kill him over the royalties from our book. He says he suspects me of wanting to do away with him so as to lay my hands on all the profits from the book ...”

Tom pensively ran things over in his mind and a shadow of doubt grew in him.

“Tell me, Camilla, did you let anyone know we were here in Prague?”

“Well, yes ... I told Gaby ... I mean Gabriela Da Silva, your publisher ... I rang her to say how we were getting on with our quest for the Grail ... In fact, I rang her several times ... But you surely don’t think Gabriela’s mixed up in all this?”

“To the best of my knowledge, the only person who has hand-written notes from Martial that would allow a perfect forgery to be made is Da Silva. And if you’ve been phoning her, that explains how whoever is on our trail has been able to get one step ahead of us, like at Luxor.”

“But that’s not possible! What reason could she have to do that?”

Tom sighed.

“Money, the root of all evil. I bet the Vatican’s made her some juicy offer. I know she tried unsuccessfully to get exclusive publication rights to all the works produced by the Vatican. That’s worth a mint of money. She’ll earn as much from that as she would have with ‘The God Virus’. Better still, she won’t have religious fundamentalists camped outside her door, the sort of fanatics who would want to lynch her for publishing the Devil’s book ... I should never have trusted Goddess ...”

“Goddess? Who is Goddess?”

“The nickname for Da Silva among newspaper reporters is Goddess, because of her initials: G, D and S, from Gabriela Da Silva, ‘GDS’, Goddess, you get it. Didn’t you know?”

“No.”

Tom closed his eyes for an instant and in a flash a picture formed in his mind. He rubbed his eyelids energetically with the tips of his fingers.

When he opened his eyes, somewhat disturbed, he tried to let nothing show.

“I’ll lay odds,” he said, “that an anonymous phone call will spill the beans about the man who provided the explosives and the police will find evidence I’m involved in Martial’s murder when they search his place. And the police will be back here to arrest me and go through my hotel room with a fine-toothed comb ... An anonymous call, not so soon as to arouse the superintendent’s suspicions about whether someone’s trying to frame me, but not so late that I’d have time to run for it ... Camilla, go to your room, get together your essential things, we’re off ... the police are surely on their way this very moment ...”

“Where are we going?” Camilla asked, leaping up from her chair.

“To Thailand,” Tom answered without hesitation.

“To Thailand? You want to discover the Grail in Ayutthaya? I thought it was impossible to find ...”

Tom looked hard at Camilla.

What could he reply to that? That he had had a flash of intuition, he who knew all about the illusions the brain’s faulty senses gave us? That he had just had a vision of somebody waiting for him in Thailand, against all logic? What response could he give?

“It costs nothing to try,” Tom said. “Quick! Time’s pressing ...”

Camilla nodded and hurried out of the room.

Mecca 610. Jabal-al-Noor: the Mountain of Light

Mohammed was enjoying the spectacle of the setting sun.

Alone on the summit of the mountain, so high in the twilight sky, so near the divine, he was looking at the city of Mecca at his feet.

All around him, as far as the eye could see, the high desert mountains of the region had been scorched all day long by the infernal heat. Now, the cool of the evening was beginning to soothe this land of desolation.

His beard bushy and very black despite his forty years, his forehead broad and head large, his straight nose topped by the half-moon shapes of his eyebrows, which accentuated somewhat his somber but captivating gaze, Mohammed loved to come here.

He had performed many spiritual retreats here, as he liked to get out of the town and took refuge on this mountain where he meditated at length. This was necessary for him, as he always felt somewhat ill at ease in Mecca.

At this moment, his thoughts went out to his adored wife, the chosen one of his heart.

At the time, malicious gossip had claimed that he had married his employer Khadijah, a rich widow engaged in trade nearly fifteen years older than him, just for her wealth. At twenty-five years of age, Mohammed had become the trusted right hand of this lady in her forties after he had had the luck to be noticed by her on account of his probity when leading her trading caravan to the lands of the North. Khadijah had then proposed marriage to him and Mohammed had accepted with despairing resignation.

How he would have wished to befuddle himself with the juices of young and barely nubile girls, to enjoy to excess those bewitchingly beautiful faces, drinking from their intimate fountainhead, as happy men could become drunk on alcohol.

However, he could not.

Already in his teens, he had wanted to go to a feast, but had been overcome by an inexplicable sleepiness, such that he had not been able to get to the event. Afterward, the same thing had happened every time that he had come close to any festivities. Similarly, when he was in the presence of girls, their great beauty made his heart beat faster than he could comprehend and a black veil came over him, disturbing his sight for a long while. How he would have liked that black veil to affect those angel-faced girls, not him: he was weary of undergoing that inexplicable blinding in their presence and he was counting on one day being able to live a normal life like other men.

He had hoped that with time, the evil would depart.

However, despite all the years that had gone by, the trouble still lingered within him.

So, despairing of his case, he had married Khadijah. The slightly faded beauty of this woman, who was mature but queenly, had allowed him to live out his manly passion: she had given him children. She had likewise brought him to know true love, an authentic love nothing like the libertine impulses of youth which urged men to change frequently from one woman to another for the pleasures of the flesh.

Thanks to his spiritual retreats, Mohammed had at last understood why this disorder had lurked within him from the very first: through it he was protected from vice by the powers on high.

He raised his head toward the sky, which was beginning to be spangled with the divine stars.

Thanks to them, his married life with Khadijah ran very smoothly, he was an honest and sincere man liked by all, he continued his trading activities successfully and he even sorted out law-suits between people: his sense of justice and his integrity had won him the nickname ‘the trustworthy’.

What more could he ask of Heaven?

Mohammed prepared to spend another night under the canopy of the sky. How many days had he been here? To tell the truth, he was no longer too sure, but he cared nothing for that. His spiritual retreat would end when it ended, even if this was the very first time that he had stayed so long.

He lit a fire just in front of the small cave four yards long by two wide where he sheltered during the day from the furnace heat outside.

As he sat cross-legged watching the small flames dancing up and dying back, he did not immediately see the figure standing before him. The

person took a few more steps toward him and Mohammed finally noticed somebody was there.

For a moment, Mohammed wondered whether he was dreaming or having an unreal vision. However, the man standing before him was definitely real. Dressed all in white, a sword in his belt, the stranger had a pale, clean-shaven face. Mohammed thought it must be some foreigner, but the stranger disabused him of this misconception by speaking to him in his own language.

“I am Jibril sent by your Lord and you are the messenger he has chosen.”

“The messenger?” asked Mohammed. “Of the Lord?”

Jibril’s face was briefly twisted by a grimace of pain and he came to sit by the fire.

“The messenger to transmit the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am on the Lord’s mission, being also his messenger, and the way of God has brought me to cross your path. He has chosen you to continue what I have done till now: to bring to the pagans the message of the Book.”

Mohammed nodded.

He was acquainted with the Book of the Jews and Christians. Through his journeys in the North, he had some familiarity with their religions. However, he had only a sketchy knowledge of the Book.

“I do not know how to read,” said Mohammed.

Jibril was not listening.

An intense pain had come over him and he felt on the point of fainting, so strong it was. He raised his white tunic and looked at his hairy belly. A stab wound had cut deep into the flesh and through lack of treatment the long gash had become infected. A foul stench seeped out of it, and small maggots crept around it.

Mohammed stared at the suppurating wound.

“Were you attacked?” asked he.

“No, it was I who was the vengeful arm of God,” replied Jibril proudly. “God is great. I slaughtered the spawn of Satan who wanted to stop me from carrying Christ’s message. They worship a secret book. They tried to turn me aside from God’s call.”

“A secret book?” asked Mohammed in astonishment, handing Jibril a goatskin water-container.

He drank a few sips and took a manuscript out of his cloth haversack.

“This is the Message of Pontius Pilatus. The man who had the Lord Jesus Christ crucified. The infidels wanted to begin soiling the name of

Jesus, but they had their just deserts. God is great ...”

Jibril grimaced.

“Have you read the Message?” inquired Mohammed.

“It is written in Latin ...”

“Ah!” said Mohammed, believing that the stranger did not know that language.

“No, you misunderstand. I can read Latin.”

“Why then did you not read it? Do you not wish to learn why those infidels worship this book?”

“What good could be learned from the man who killed the Son of God? None at all ...”

Mohammed looked at the manuscript.

“Read it to me, if you will. I enjoy the tales of books.”

Jibril hesitated, not wanting to read the Message. However, his curiosity finally won the struggle. Ever since he had had the Message in his possession, he had felt an irresistible urge rising in him.

A call from the past, a call, as it were, from yesterday.

Jibril opened the manuscript and translated as he read the Latin.

As he went from consternation to horror, Jibril’s mind gave way.

Two hours later, Mohammed rose and approached Jibril’s body which was lying on the rocks. Mohammed closed the eyelids of the dead man: the contents of the Message had drained Jibril’s last reserves of strength.

The truth had laid him low.

“So that is the Holy Spirit of the Christians ...” murmured Mohammed.

Wandering forward, he went to sit in the cave and rested his back against its wall.

“The works of Moses and the Fathers are true,” said he in under his breath. “Those of Jesus are false ...”

For several hours, he meditated upon the Message.

In the heart of the night, strange noises echoed.

Mohammed was seized by a great terror, such as he had never before experienced.

As had happened to Moses, a burning bush appeared not far from him and Jibril’s corpse was enveloped in a blinding light.

Mohammed felt his mind breaking free of his body, which he saw at a distance. At that moment, he perceived a diffuse presence, a divine presence.

An angelic voice became audible: Jibril’s.

It spoke to him at length, tracing a map of the world before him.

At the dawn of a new day, the light gradually drove away the darkness of night.

As if awaking from a lucid dream, Mohammed stared at the sun climbing above the horizon.

His somber eyes took in the sight of the city of Mecca lying innocently before him.

Mohammed slowly turned his gaze toward Jibril's corpse.

The sight of his sword finally inflamed his reason beyond remedy.

39

The Gospel According to Judas

Judas Sicariot was sitting on his bed.

Through the window he could see the clear blue of the sky. Far off, big black clouds threatened to darken this day which had seemed to promise radiant sunshine.

The house where he was lodged was his own home. It was large and beautiful and he had always enjoyed the special scent of its woodwork. Although a Galilean, he could recall often coming here during his childhood at the times of Jewish festivals. His room was on the upper floor and overlooked the lower old town of Zion. For a very long while now he had not been here.

In fact, he had not visited the place since he had been with the Messiah. Recalling this, he could not help a grimace from distorting his face. He lowered his dark eyes to the purse containing the thirty pieces of silver that he had been given as a reward for the capture of his Master.

Now it was time to fulfill his destiny. Taking up his red mantle from where it lay on the bed, he stood, then made for the half-open door. The creaking of wooden steps turned him to stone; several individuals were creeping up the stairs leading to his room. A drop of sweat ran down the side of his face and immediately disappeared into his black beard. His hand trembling, he made to grasp the dagger that he constantly carried with him.

However, it was too late.

Like a whirlwind, two figures violently pushed open the door and flung themselves on him. Before Judas could react, two menacing blades were at his throat.

Recognizing his assailants, Judas did not know whether he should be glad or frightened. They were two of his own disciples, whose rich father had recently entrusted to him the difficult task of educating them

spiritually.

No more than fifteen years old, these adolescents with their beardless and spotty faces were brothers. Both were wearing white linen robes; the elder was called Nahum, the younger Achaz.

“You have betrayed the Messiah and you must perish,” said Nahum in a strangely detached tone.

Although his hand was armed with a long-bladed dagger, Nahum’s head barely reached his master’s shoulder. Despite his skinny body, the elder boy was still possessed of great physical strength. Even though he was younger by a year, Achaz was almost as tall and much more sturdily built and his ferocious vitality worried Judas.

Seeing the determined looks of his assailants, Judas realized that they would not hesitate to put their threat into practice.

Against all expectation, Judas did not resist. He raised his hands to his face and began sobbing like a child feeling neglected through the absence of its mother.

“I should not have done it,” whined Judas. “I should never have listened to the Messiah ...”

Lowering his arms, he raised his head toward the ceiling.

“God, God, why did I obey your Son? I am just a wretched criminal ...”

Disconcerted for an instant, Nahum lowered his arm.

“You ... you mean that it was the Messiah who asked you to betray him?”

Judas gazed tearfully toward the adolescent and nodded between two sobs.

“Why, but why?” asked Achaz.

Slowly slipping out of the reach of the younger lad’s dagger, Judas went and sat on the bed.

He held his head in his hands for a moment.

“How did it all start?” muttered he as if speaking to himself.

Frowning and wiping away his tears with the hem of his sleeve, he made an effort to concentrate.

“In fact, we were in Judea. It was there that everything truly began ...”

Speaking in a sad voice, Judas recounted what had happened on the day when Jesus was with his twelve apostles in Judea. Walking into the house where they were to spend a night, Jesus found the Twelve gathered sitting in pious attitudes around a large table. When he approached them while they were saying grace over the bread, Jesus started to laugh. Upset and not understanding their Master’s mocking, the disciples asked him the

reason for his laughter. He replied that he was not mocking them.

“You do not do this of your own will,” added he. “Yet thus it is that your God must be praised, is it not?”

“Master, why do you speak so of your Father?” exclaimed Simon Peter, bewildered. “You are the Son of God!”

“How do you know that?” chuckled Jesus. “In truth, none of you knows who I really am.”

Hearing this, the disciples became inwardly angry, cursing him in their hearts. Jesus asked them why they were upset and added that God was pushing their souls toward bitterness. Then he gave the order that if one of them felt sufficiently strong to attain perfection, the perfection of absolute knowledge, he should come and stand before him.

One after another, they responded that they had the strength needed for that purpose, but not one of them dared take the next step.

Except Judas, who rose to his feet.

However, he could not meet and sustain Christ’s piercing gaze. He humbly lowered his eyes.

“I know who you really are and from where you come: you come from the immortal Kingdom of Barbelo. I am not worthy enough to pronounce the name of the one who sent you.”

Seeing that he was ready to accede to higher knowledge, Jesus shut himself up alone with Judas to teach him the mysteries of the Kingdom, telling him that it was possible for him to reach it, but that there would be a heavy toll to pay in exchange. Judas would be unjustly blamed and cursed by all.

“When will you reveal these things to me?” asked Judas.

That day, Jesus did not respond, but bade him farewell.

Then, a few days before Passover, Jesus raised the veil of the mystery by revealing all to Judas. As he had undergone several esoteric apprenticeships with various masters, Judas knew in part these secrets of the afterlife: the true God was hidden from the eyes of men by Yahweh, a lesser God who had created the world. Yahweh, the God whose greatness was recounted by the sacred scriptures of the Temple, was a possessed demiurge, bad-tempered and jealous. Yahweh was responsible for all the imperfections of the world.

The world that he had created was infected with evil, darkness and sin.

Jesus was a spiritual Master charged with guiding men to a knowledge of the true, hidden God. He was not the son of Yahweh.

“He is the Son of the true God ...”

In his room, Judas stared with his dark eyes at the two adolescents who were listening to his words with growing astonishment. Judas continued speaking to them for quite a while, telling them mystical details about the heavens and the gods, also mentioning his premonitory dreams about his own future that he had recounted to Jesus.

A disastrous future, in which he would be stoned by the eleven apostles and the new man who would replace him so that the apostles would always be twelve in number, as for them that figure represented perfection.

Twelve.

The number of the perfect, unchanging cycles, of nature and of life, the unit for measuring time and space.

However, despite that figure, the other apostles would not attain perfection.

The perfection of absolute knowledge.

Judas alone would achieve it.

“I remember that Jesus told me this: now that all things have been taught to you, raise up your eyes and look at the cloud, its light and the stars that surround it. Henceforth, the star that opens the way to knowledge is yours ...”

Judas heaved a sigh.

“My star is now shining out on the world and I have become the guide, the protector of divine knowledge. However, to reach this state, I had to pay the worst of prices possible: betrayal of my Master.”

“Why, though, did the Messiah ask you to betray him?” inquired Nahum. “I do not understand ...”

Judas looked at the elder lad for a few seconds before responding.

“As you know everything that I have just told you, you might for a moment think that if I betrayed him it was from a personal wish, because the Messiah wanted to reconcile men with the creator God, Yahweh, the God of the Jews. In fact, it is quite the contrary, it is necessary to stir up men’s hatred for that divinity, so that all may come to see that Yahweh is no more than a demiurge. Those who believe that the Messiah has come to the Earth to reconcile men with Yahweh their creator are greatly mistaken. His mission is nothing of the kind ...”

For year after year, Jesus had sought the perfect person across the whole world. Performing miracles, assuaging the sufferings of the humanity begotten by Yahweh, he had ceaselessly crisscrossed many a land, gathering around him twelve disciples likely to have among them the perfect man.

Judas it was that was chosen.

Modest, lowering his gaze in accordance with customs of politeness, he had the fortitude and the spiritual strength to attain absolute knowledge. Also to accept the terrible mission that would make him the apostle accursed by all.

That mission was to betray Christ.

Yet this was no evil action, it was a sacrifice, an act of worship, something good and pious. Judas was the sole person to whom Jesus had revealed the celestial truths. The most important of them was that earthly men had a divine spark imprisoned in their bodies that should be liberated. Jesus himself represented such a spark of divinity that it was essential to set free. The body died but the spirit continued living; Jesus thus had to die in order to break loose from the prison of his body. Hence the resurrection of humanity would be achieved, for in that glorious state, freed of the jail of his body, the divine spark of Christ would guide the sparks of all men toward the true divinity, the Supreme God, and would save them from Yahweh.

Such was the true mission of Jesus on Earth: the redemption of humanity, created by the demiurge, so as to lead souls to the real Kingdom of Heaven.

“You will be greater than them all, you will sacrifice the man who lives within me,” said Judas. “The brilliance of your star will eclipse all others ...”

Judas heaved a small sigh.

“That was what Jesus told me. However, to surpass everyone by sacrificing the envelope that contains the Messiah was more than I could do ...”

In the nearby street, the crying of a baby could be heard.

“Often, to speak to us in secret, Jesus appeared to us as a child,” murmured Judas sadly.

“Do you mean that he is the essence of innocence, like the mind of a child?” asked Nahum.

“No, you do not take my meaning,” replied Judas, looking hard at him. “Jesus appeared to us physically as a child. He is the Son of the true God, not of Yahweh. Jesus can take on whatsoever appearance he wishes. Yet he will not do so in order to escape. He will sacrifice himself for us.”

The brothers nodded in silence.

“I cannot allow Jesus sacrifice himself for us,” said Judas, suddenly rising from the bed. “I cannot. I must save him. The humanity created by Yahweh does not deserve to be redeemed by his sacrifice and sufferings. Other solutions can be found. I know an apocalyptic secret about which I

hesitated to tell the Messiah. I should have spoken out. I was cowardly. Still, it is not too late to change Jesus' fate and save humankind from Yahweh ... I must go to the Temple to return this money and try to negotiate his freedom ..."

Weighing in his hand the purse which had hung from his belt, he looked at the brothers.

"We shall come with you," said Achaz.

Judas bowed respectfully. The three quickly left Judas' house and made for the Temple. As they walked rapidly alongside Judas, Nahum and Achaz were thoughtful.

"Master, if the Messiah does not save us, if he does not bring about the redemption of humanity by his death, who will do so? How can our spirits be liberated? How can the vital energies be set free from our evil material bodies, in which the souls of men are prisoners? Who will denounce Yahweh?"

At Nahum's questions, Judas smiled sadly.

"Do not worry yourself about that, as my star of destiny will see to it. Nonetheless, I shall tell you everything later on ..."

Silently, the two brothers nodded and continued striding along the narrow streets of the lower town, a total labyrinth for anybody entering for the first time. However, this was not the case for the trio, who were fully familiar with all these old white-washed buildings massed higgledy-piggledy one against another and the dark alleys, often so narrow as not to be visible at first glance, that wound their way between them.

They arrived before the Temple.

Close to its southern entrance, glancing furtively toward an adjacent lane, Judas stopped suddenly. He had just seen John disappearing from a crossroads a score of yards further on from there. He ran as quickly as he could and caught up with the apostle in another alley. The two brothers who were following their Master arrived a few seconds after him. They knew the beardless apostle by sight. Out of politeness they stayed back a little from the conversation that had just begun, noticing Judas and John speaking in an undertone, as if afraid that their words might be heard by some third party, even though the place was almost deserted. Just an occasional passer-by walked past without taking notice of them.

Judas spoke at some length, sometimes gesticulating with his arms as if to give greater weight to some of his arguments. For many minutes, John listened in silence. His gentle face, marked with a noble gravity, expressed agreement as he nodded from time to time, as though to indicate that Judas was right.

Nahum watched the two men with great interest. John was in no way hostile toward Judas, despite his betrayal, and even seemed in full agreement with him. This went to confirm Judas' explanation: Jesus had indeed asked him to betray him for the salvation of humanity. Nahum imagined that John most probably had been taken into his confidence by Christ himself. Nahum resolved that when he got a chance he would ask Judas if this was in fact the case.

For the moment the two apostles were too busy speaking for him to bother them. Hoping to overhear something of the conversation, Nahum was all ears, but only a word here and there reached him. It was not enough to work out what they were saying. However, Nahum could easily guess what the subject must be. For a further ten minutes the two apostles conversed, then they parted, not before exchanging a brotherly hug.

Judas watched John going off into the distance. Turning round, he signaled to Nahum and Achaz to follow him.

Together they went into the Temple, onto the immense esplanade where the animal pens and the money-changers' tables that Jesus had overthrown the previous day were still lying.

From there, they went on into the sumptuous central building that held the sanctuary. Going to the priests who were presiding over the animal sacrifices, Judas spoke, demanding that the Messiah be set free.

"I have sinned in that I betrayed an innocent man at the risk of his blood."

"What is that to us?" exclaimed a Sadducee. "You look to that, you alone."

Judas turned around, looked at the young brothers and, after a brief moment's hesitation, took the purse containing the thirty pieces of silver and flung it at the Sadducee's feet.

However, the priest turned his head away disdainfully. An unpleasant silence ensued and Judas was forced to accept that he must depart, seeing that he could not purchase Christ's liberation. Leaving the reward for treachery lying on the floor as if it were infected with the plague, Judas left the building accompanied by Nahum and Achaz.

In the Temple courtyard, the three heard scraps of conversations among the people: Christ had been handed over to the Roman Procurator. The brothers gave their Master a worried stare. He nodded slowly. He realized that there was no alternative but to go to Pilate's palace.

Judas and his young disciples slipped out of the Temple and made for the Antonia fortress at a brisk pace. As they drew close, a strange activity attracted the threesome's attention; access to the streets leading to the

circular paved area lying in front of the palace was controlled by sturdy fellows in voluminous, long, dark robes. When he saw Caiaphas dressed in layman's clothing, Judas instinctively grasped the situation: the men in dark robes were the Temple guards.

Judas ordered the two brothers to wait for him. He walked up to Caiaphas. For over a minute, the two men spoke in a low voice. Nahum and Achaz did not know the High Priest, so they wondered who he might be and who the tough-looking fellows with him were. They saw Judas pointing his arm at them. Caiaphas seemed to ask Judas a question, but he shook his head as a sign of refusal. Caiaphas then nodded and Judas called his two young disciples to follow him. Standing aside to let them pass, the Temple guards allowed them onto the circular paved zone where a considerable crowd was already present. Silent and attentive as musicians awaiting the signal from their conductor, they were waiting with growing impatience.

Finally, a cry rang out and the crowd began to roar and stamp rhythmically, chanting Pilate's name. He appeared a moment later on the balcony of his palace. Looking at the crowd which he believed to be made up of Christ's disciples, he invited his prisoner to join him. Jesus came forward in his purple robe, his hands bound.

For Judas, time seemed to stand still. He was no longer listening to the words spoken by Pilate, or the shouts of anger of the partisans of the Temple whom Caiaphas had gathered together in haste so as to make the Roman Procurator change his mind about Christ's fate.

As if he could sense one gaze even more hate-filled than the others resting on him, Jesus turned his head slightly and directed his ocean-blue eyes toward Judas. From up on the balcony, the Master scrutinized the traitor. Yet for him, the other man was the real traitor.

Unconsciously, Judas clenched his fists in rage. Whilst he had loved him sincerely before, Judas now detested Jesus. Spurned love had turned into murderous hatred and he would have liked to have a lance in his grasp so as to kill him with his own hand, as Jesus had betrayed him far worse than his other brethren.

However, Christ had to die on the cross. That was Caiaphas' will. Thinking of the tortures of crucifixion, Judas raised a hand to his neck and with a sharp movement tore off the little wooden cross that he had ostentatiously worn for so long. Now he loathed it and flung it to the ground.

Impassively, Jesus watched the most faithful of his apostles rid himself of the symbol of his brethren. Seeing the calmness and rather haughty look of the prisoner, Judas gnashed his teeth in wrath. Without his really

knowing why, a recent event came back to Judas' mind.

The anointing at Bethany.

Jesus, who preached mercy, a sense of sacrifice and the greatest austerity, had not batted an eyelid when Lazarus' sister had anointed his feet with a very costly perfume. Judas had reproached Jesus for it, but he had not grasped the implications, believing that the criticism was aimed at Maria Magdalena. Judas, for his part, had clearly seen that his Master was suffering from delusions of grandeur, so close to his goal and seeing the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth through usurpation of the throne drawing near.

Judas was delighted to see the comeuppance of the man whom he saw as a totally evil traitor. For a good few minutes, seemingly outside time, Judas looked back over his past and saw the various stages of his life alongside the man he had formerly considered to be the Son of God. The miraculous cures at which he had been present passed before his mind's eye. He thought back to the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor and the appearing of God who had come to accredit his Son.

The Chosen One.

Around Judas, all seemed calm and quiet. The crowd surrounding him was affected by gentle rippling movements more or less in slow motion, like ears of wheat rocked by a faint breeze. When Jesus disappeared from his field of vision, carried off by the legionaries into the palace, time was suddenly restored to its normal course for Judas. The cries of the partisans rang painfully in his ears and a blast of hatred began to agitate that crowd which now was shifting to and fro violently, affected by squalls of rage.

As though emerging from a bad dream, Judas shook his head and rubbed his temples energetically. How long had he been standing there in their midst? He had the impression that it had been barely a few seconds. Yet the faces around him were no longer those of an instant earlier, as if people had moved in an instant, or perhaps he had.

Realizing what had happened, Judas clenched his fist in anger and shook it in the direction of the palace into which Jesus had just disappeared. Cursing that sorcerer who could manipulate time and space, Judas wiped his forehead, trying to concentrate on the here and now.

Behind Judas, an old fellow on the verge of senility chuckled in a gravelly voice, explaining that Claudia was probably the cause of Pilate's refusal to execute Jesus. The Procurator's wife must have had an erotic dream about the prisoner and now want to put her fantasies into practice. Claudia led her husband by the nose and could get him to do whatever she wished.

Judas paid no further attention to the old man's obscene imaginings and directed his attention to Pilate.

"As I find no fault in this man, I shall set him free," proclaimed Pilate.

"We have a law and by our law he ought to die, because he has made himself out to be the equal of God," screeched a hysterical man.

"If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend," cried out a voice directed at Pilate. "Whosoever makes a king of himself speaks against Caesar."

The voice was familiar. Judas looked in the direction from which it had come. A few yards from him, lost in the sea of humanity, his face hidden by a voluminous hood, Caiaphas had just made the comment.

"You brought me this man, saying that he was stirring up the people and perverting the nation," replied Pilate. "I have examined him and have found no fault in this man relating to those things of which you accuse him. Nor yet did Herod, for he has sent him back to us. You see this; this man has done nothing worthy of death. I shall release him ..."

Cries of rage burst forth.

"... having had him chastised with whips," added Pilate hurriedly, believing that this would suffice to dissipate the tension.

However, quite the contrary happened. The crowd roared even louder and a voice rang out amidst the tumult.

"He called himself king: we have no king but Caesar," came the shriek. "If you spare him, you are his accomplice against Caesar, and a traitor!"

Judas savored the dart that he himself had just loosed.

He glanced around him to check that Nahum and Achaz were nowhere close to him. They were not. As soon as they had arrived on the open space crammed with people, Judas had elbowed a way through and deliberately disappeared into the midst of the crowd. The two brothers had not succeeded in following their Master and had soon lost him from sight.

"What you ask shall be done," said Pilate to those present.

On the balcony, the Roman Procurator took an ewer of water to wash his hands, as if to show all concerned that he was not responsible for the death sentence that he had just pronounced on Christ.

Having gained their way, the Temple supporters ceased their angry grumbling and began to disperse slowly. Judas watched Caiaphas going away among the flow of people.

For some ten minutes more, Judas remained there. He thought back over the lies that he had told Nahum and his younger brother.

A liar had to have a good memory. Judas excelled in this art.

In the past, he had read the sacred scrolls of an oriental sect with their ridiculous concepts of the world. Using this nonsense, he had craftily adapted it for his purposes. Improvisation had worked wonders and the brothers had swallowed his fantastic mumbo-jumbo hook, line and sinker. However, while Judas had succeeded in avoiding the danger to his life that had been hovering in his room, he had not completely rid himself of his two disciples in doing so. Hence he had had to act out the incident in the Temple, returning the coins he had received for the capture of Christ. It was of no consequence, as that money had been a mere token of what he was really to be paid by Caiaphas.

Caught up by circumstances, Judas had had to go to Pilate's palace. When the trio had been faced by the disguised guards, who were under orders to allow through nobody other than Temple supporters, Judas could have asked Caiaphas to prevent the two brothers from gaining access to the circular paved area, or even to have them arrested. That would have undermined the lies that he had cunningly put together, though, and Nahum and Achaz would have some day come back to kill him.

Now there was no further risk of their harming him. Judas had been totally successful in gaining dominance over their immature adolescent minds, so that from now onward they would eat out of his hand like obedient dogs.

The area was virtually deserted. Judas glanced rapidly around it with his dark eyes. Nahum and Achaz were not there.

Perfect.

They must have been horrified by the roaring crowd, crying out its hatred of Christ and its desire to see him crucified. They must have left the ranks of that incomprehensibly hostile populace, believing that Judas had done the same in an attempt to find some other solution for freeing Christ.

Judas would now have to lie low for a while, so as to escape the vengeance Jesus' followers. Soon enough everything would be back in its proper order.

He walked off briskly.

During the following days, many of Christ's partisans sought to find Judas in order to punish him for his treachery. Nahum tried to make them see reason, but in vain. Hatred for Judas was too great and no other truth, no other heavenly concept, could shake them from that belief: Judas was a wretched criminal who had betrayed the Son of God.

Nahum despaired of ever getting them to understand the immense sacrifice to which his Master had consented for Christ. As if a prophecy were being fulfilled, Judas was rejected by all, accursed throughout the

generations.

Nahum did not stand idly by at this. Until the end of his days, he never ceased trying to rehabilitate his Master's battered honor and to open people's eyes to the real nature of Yahweh, the possessed, bad-tempered and jealous demiurge. He wrote the Gospel of Judas to recount the events of the period as they had really occurred. From shame, he did not relate the tragic fate that had smitten the most faithful apostle of Christ.

For, in his view, the death of Judas was an injustice and an unnamable abomination.

After Judas left the circular area before Pilate's palace, he had disappeared and nobody knew where he was to be found. For some days, Nahum and Achaz searched for him in vain, looking in every nook and cranny of the city of Zion.

Nahum was worried. He feared that his Master would do something foolish in his despair. Rumors finally began to spread about him: it was claimed that Judas had hanged himself, stricken by remorse. Nahum did not find them hard to believe. He had seen that Judas was greatly affected by that treason, orchestrated by Christ himself. Not having found any way of aiding Jesus, Judas must have taken some irremediable step. He must have killed himself, bereft of Christ, mad with sorrow, his heart broken to find himself considered by all as a vile wretch to be shunned, when his apparent disloyalty had been a noble and courageous action to save all humanity.

In fact, the circumstances of Judas' death remained a mystery. What was indisputable was that he was found on a plot of waste land, a rope around his neck, the middle of his body ripped open, his bowels scattered around. On Judas' handsome face in its final repose, the expression suggested that his conscience was at peace after his suicide.

In their thirst for revenge, Christ's followers must have broken down the branch from which Judas had hanged himself, then slashed open his belly and scattered his intestines on the ground. In the end his corpse disappeared, carried off by some noble and charitable soul.

Everybody thought that there could be no doubt that Judas had paid with his blood the price of his treachery. Henceforward, the wretch would be suffering divine wrath for all eternity in the fires of gehenna.

Nahum, though, kept Judas' memory alive in his heart, because he knew him to be in the heavenly paradise of the true Supreme God.

40

City of Angels

Bangkok.

The infernal heat outside contrasted with the heavenly air-conditioning in the airport limousine. They had been stuck at a junction for ten minutes. Tom sat in the rear of the comfortable car with Camilla and looked at the busy street through the tinted windows.

Preparing to cross the road, a young mother took her small daughter by the hand. The child had an ice-cream cone in the other hand. She brought it up to her mouth, but as it touched her delicate lips, the ball of ice-cream came away from the cornet and fell at her feet. Looking sad, the little girl tugged on her mother's hand. The woman looked at the empty cornet, then at the ground where the ice-cream had finally landed.

Spontaneously, the mother and daughter both began laughing.

In his head, Tom imagined the same scene in his own country. The mother would certainly not have laughed; she would probably have scolded the little girl to get her to pay more attention to what she was doing.

A different culture gave things different values.

Everything was different here in Thailand with respect to Europe or the U.S.A., even in a capital city that was attuned to Western ways. The capital was called 'city of the gods' by its inhabitants.

Tom had a conviction that he knew all about Thais, down to the least of their hidden secrets. However, he had never lived in this country; in fact, it was the first time he had ever been there.

Buddhist monks would definitely have told him that this certainty came from one of his former lives and that Tom had lived in the Kingdom of Siam in the past. Nonetheless, the monks would have been making a big mistake, as the reason was a good deal simpler. Martial had lived for some

months in Bangkok while completing a case study. He had written a long and detailed report, not on the Thais themselves, but on the ‘basic’ *homo sapiens*, as Martial put it.

There was only one race of humans on the Earth, despite skins being black, white, yellow, brown or red. In every country round the world, with no exceptions, humans were universally similar: the basic *homo sapiens* with innate behaviors that at the very most might have a few very minor variations in behavioral genes to distinguish one from another. However, different cultures in each region of the globe modified to a greater or lesser degree these basic humans, leading to a ‘deviant’ *homo sapiens*, varying from the true nature that was written in the genes like an inscription cut in marble.

Martial had wanted to study this basic *homo sapiens* that slumbered in the depths of every human, lulled asleep, or rather held in check, by all the various deviating cultures. Martial might have tried to study the basic *homo sapiens* in the Amazonian jungles, investigating groups of humans who had never seen civilization, but he had preferred to carry out a large-scale study looking at the patterns of millions of people. Above all, unlike the natives of the jungles of the Amazon, who could have a deviant culture despite everything, Martial was convinced that the basic *homo sapiens* in Thailand was virtually free of all deviances, thanks to the neutrality and kindness of cultural Buddhism.

Martial was not wrong.

In this marvelous land of permanent smiles, Martial had been able to draw up a precise description of the basic *homo sapiens*, a being that was inside every human, whether born in Russia, Mexico, or China, before the deviant culture of whatever country it was came into play to train, or rather to format, according to the current national pattern. Martial happily quoted the case of baby orphans sent to another country: from Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia, black, white, or yellow, these babies were initially similar examples of the basic *homo sapiens* which the particular culture of the new land taking them in transformed into deviant forms of *homo sapiens*, deviating to match the customs of their adoptive country. According to which destination fell to them by chance, these orphans could end up by having radically different social behaviors and a life the exact opposite of what would have been the case elsewhere, all governed by the regional cultural differences that tinkered with the basic universals of *homo sapiens*.

For day after day, Tom had read and re-read Martial’s paper.

He had learned an enormous number of things about himself, what he was truly like, what he would have been by instinct if Swiss culture had not intervened to a greater or lesser degree. He had discovered the basic

homo sapiens hidden within himself, as indeed within every human on Earth.

Without exception.

Like clones with identical genes, the basic *homo sapiens* was first and foremost an altruistic being with a day-to-day carefree attitude that allowed continuing onward when faced with adversity. Such creatures were always rebuilding their morale with mental tricks that were bereft of any logical reasoning. This carefree nature led them to live from day to day, with no care for the morrow ...

On this point, though, Martial had determined that there were two distinct sub-groups among 'basic' humans: the patient and the impatient, or, more figuratively, ants and crickets.

While among human genes there was indeed the carefree attitude of a cricket chirping every day without worrying about the next, there was also a second category of different examples of the basic *homo sapiens* who were potential ants, taking an interest in the future and projecting themselves into it to build something bigger, more ample, more expansive. The ants represented patient humans who built progressively, thinking about the day after tomorrow, while the impatient cricket enjoyed what it had that very same day, as quickly as possible, looking at most to the next day, but to no farther distant future.

These two innate behaviors had been chosen by natural selection and transmitted to the human genome, each having some advantages when it came to survival. It was easy to see the benefits of the gene for a patient basic *homo sapiens* and what crucial developments that form had been able to bring to the human race, such as mastering agriculture with its annual cycles. However, at first sight it was a little harder to grasp how the gene for impatience and its desire to enjoy the here and now, often to the detriment of the future, had been able to continue being transmitted.

However, the reason was clear and simple: in nature, an opportunity that arose might never again return, so the impatient would be able to profit from it by allowing themselves to be guided by the hereditary call to immediate satisfaction. It was also true that focusing on the present moment, combined with taking relatively little notice of the long-term future, was advantageous in situations of immediate danger where it was necessary to take rapid decisions, not think too much. Besides, these impulsive people, appreciative of instant sexual pleasure, had had more chances to spread their genes over a crowd of partners and thus had had numerous descendants, as compared with the patient ones who had looked for a more structured love-life. Hence, the gene for impatience and rapid pleasure had maintained itself in the population alongside the gene for

patience and the desire to build things up slowly, sometimes even mixing and merging ...

The airport limousine finally made it past the junction and went down a street with rather less traffic.

Tom looked at a group of men with orange high-visibility vests, sitting on their motorcycle rickshaws parked along the curb. They were all discussing together, most of them gesticulating to give more weight to their comments, which seemed not to have much impact on the others' point of view.

Seeing them, Tom smiled.

Whilst the official national sport of Thailand was Thai boxing, which partially fenced off the reptile in everybody, as in each country in the world, the true national sport on an unofficial level was gossiping. Although the altruism of the basic *homo sapiens* was proven, this altruism was coupled to detection of egoists, gossip being just one among many of the consequences of this detecting, this subconscious seeking out of egoists. The outcome was an incessant exchange of spoken information about all and sundry, cheerfully feeding rumor and lying slanders.

Tom sighed inwardly.

Lying was second nature in the basic *homo sapiens*. In nature, even plants lied: certain flowers secreted a cocktail of chemicals that imitated the pheromones released by female wasps to attract their sexual partners and using this deceptive scented message, the flowers guaranteed they would reproduce through pollination by drawing male wasps to them. Like a flower of evil arising from this same nature, the basic *homo sapiens* lied with a facility that was rooted deep within. What with fake smiles, simulated orgasms and crocodile tears, humans did not just lie with words, they also lied by omission, or by using the countless forms of non-verbal fraud: make-up, wigs, falsies, cosmetic surgery, or even just perfumes of famous makes to mask body odor, were all part of the immense array of human trickery.

Tom remembered how he had asked Martial why humans were so willing to lie. Martial had replied that it was simply because it was effective and that the best liars had gained an advantage with respect to their fellows in the pitiless struggle for success in reproduction, the moving force in evolution, so they had transmitted their genes into the basic *homo sapiens*.

This inherited behavior ran in all of us, as did idleness: the basic *homo sapiens* favored the lowest possible expenditure of energy and botched work done in a hurry, just enough to be left undisturbed, especially when

there was no vigilant eye present to check. Martial had made it clear that before the Industrial Age, Europeans, too, had been typical of the basic *homo sapiens*, favoring quickly cobbled together work: a policy of productivity at all costs and propaganda for work done well had changed the innate behaviors of our basic internal beings, rendered deviant by transmitted culture, a culture that was still being perpetuated so as to keep under control the true nature of all humans, which was always creeping back to the surface.

In his report, Martial had described the fate of children before the industrial era: new-borns were hung from a hook near the hearth, so that they would not get cold, and left that way the whole day long. When the parents came home from the fields in the evening, if the child was still alive, so much the better, otherwise it was easy to make a new baby. Had it not been for that culture which had educated them and corrected these sinister inherited attitudes, humans would still be bringing children into the world for purely sexual reasons, not inspired by their hearts, and would still not concern themselves about children, however large and soulful their eyes, or give them the love they deserved ...

Tom closed his eyes.

Martial had clearly stated that one should not be taken in: politicians were keen to control minds, but also bodies and their behaviors. The outcome was cultural programming to change the innate nature of the basic *homo sapiens*, to get people to work well, to force them to take proper care of their offspring, so that children would quickly grow numerous and this would make available a large and culturally hard-working labor force. Europeans and their American cousins were convinced that if they had only a limited number of hours of work each week and enjoyed paid leave permitting them to go off on vacation, it was because they were cared for out of pure generosity and nobility of heart.

Nothing could be less true.

Using his Eternal God as a front, even King Josiah had fixed an obligatory day of rest in his era: the Sabbath.

For the Master of bodies was the Master of minds.

Politicians were interested only in bodies and their productivity: the powerful knew that it was good for performance if bodies were not tired out, but on the contrary well rested so as to work even harder. So the deviant examples of *homo sapiens* were ordered to engage in sport so as to keep physically fit, to be careful about hygiene, to eat a good, balanced diet and to take vacations in the sun. To ensure that they followed these instructions to rest, they were expected to come back with a fine tan to prove that they had truly accomplished this duty.

Henceforth, such specimens of *homo sapiens* embraced the chains that enslaved them, believing they were doing what they themselves wanted to.

Poor puppets, they prided themselves on working well, on not lying, on behaving exactly as the puppeteers wanted to see them do in favor of the powerful of the world ...

Camilla laid her arm on Tom's.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing at a luxurious building. "That's our hotel! It's like a palace out of the Thousand and One Nights ..."

Tom agreed.

"Yes, it's like you ... amazingly beautiful ..."

Feeling herself blushing, Camilla dared not turn her mild eyes on Tom.

*
* *

In his office, sitting in his chair without really seeing him, the Pope was looking at Cardinal Fustiger who was seated opposite him. His look troubled, the Pope was in the middle of a telephone conversation with the President of the United States.

The telephone was in hands-off mode, so the voice from the loudspeaker echoed round the room.

"The Vatican has more to lose than I have in this affair," the President said in his mother tongue. "If the Sons of Abraham's bomb goes off, I'll be just one victim among many others and I'll play the innocent. Think it over ... You'll be the one and only guilty party in the eyes of the world ..."

Cardinal Fustiger nodded at the President's comments.

The Pope had still not reached a decision about the ultimatum from the Sons of Abraham. However, there were just a few hours left before the fateful deadline was reached.

Fustiger hoped that the President's appeal would finally convince the Pope to do nothing stupid.

Otherwise, Fustiger would have no choice but to use the last resort he had available.

Quite simply to eliminate the Holy Father.

In the past, in 1978, the 'Holy Ghost' had inspired the cardinals in the Vatican to choose a new Pope: John-Paul I had been designated. However, once he had reached absolute power, this Pope attempted to divulge the secret of Christ. He had tried to reveal the contents of the Pontius Pilate Report. At the time, there had been no choice but to silence this demented

Pope definitively.

So, after barely a month as Pope, John-Paul I was assassinated: he was forced to drink a poison. Nonetheless, he had struggled, so his shirt had been torn and his glasses broken in the scuffle. To stop him from crying out or biting, one of his own slippers had been shoved into his mouth. Once he was dead, under the pressure of time, he had been laid in his bed still dressed in a shirt, not nightwear, and his will, his broken spectacles and pair of slippers, with one bearing the marks of teeth, had been hidden. Autopsies on the corpse of a sovereign pontiff were forbidden, so the murder could be disguised as a natural death. Officially, John-Paul I had died in his sleep from a bout of uremia.

With Leo to support him, Cardinal Fustiger would unfortunately have to resort to the same tactics.

Fustiger once again asked himself why the Pope refused to accept the ultimatum. Did the Pope think he could survive the apocalypse and, with God dead, be reborn like a phoenix from its ashes for the glory of Deus?

Fustiger had to dissuade him before it was too late.

Speaking to the Pope in Latin so that the American President would not understand, the Cardinal said:

“You know, it will not be Deus who will come back to life from the cinders of the apocalypse: it will be the Evil One and Mohammed ...”

The Pope nodded.

“I know,” he replied, reverting to English. “I know ...”

After a moment’s silence, he went on:

“Mister President, I shall make my speech at midday, Rome time. I shall take a stance in favor of the expansion of the frontiers of Israel, using my Papal Infallibility.”

The Cardinal heaved a mental sigh of relief. With these words, the Paradise of Deus was once again awaiting his innocent soul.

At that idea, deep joy coursed through him.

*
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Tom swallowed with difficulty.

Lying on a lounge beside the swimming pool, clad in just a swimsuit, he had been waiting a quarter of an hour for Camilla.

She had just appeared at the other end of the long open-air terrace.

The two-piece swimsuit that Camilla had bought for herself in the hotel

shop showed off really well her body, divine as that of a goddess. In the golden sunshine, her long brown hair swung to the rhythm of her feline walk, like a panther's. Time seemed to stand still, and not just for Tom: the handful of tourists there, men and women, stared at the angelic natural beauty as she walked past them.

Camilla came and sat next to Tom, who blinked unconsciously.

Sitting up, Tom opened the parasol, then signed to a young steward in a white uniform to come across, ordering cool drinks from him.

"Thomas?" Camilla asked. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course ..."

"Yesterday, when we were in Prague, you mentioned the God Virus."

"Yes, that's the title of my book ..."

"You said the title of your book referred to an inherited disease, a global pandemic that had contaminated humanity's inherited genetic code."

Tom nodded.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "Do you want me to explain? Okay ... You remember the photo you saw yesterday? The photo with the cross, Jesus with the red M and the serpents going round behind him?"

"Yes."

"I told you why those circles go round. It's an optical illusion. It's due to a bug in our brain that really acts like a life detector. It lets us see a snake hidden on a tree branch. The bug animates objects that are completely still, like a snake when it's sizing up its prey. The bug gives life to things that have often never been alive ... like the photo with the turning serpents. Our brain alerts us to any real or imaginary danger, in that particular case imaginary. Because of the bug and all the various outcomes due to optical illusions, humans saw with their own eyes, or rather imagined, life in tree branches, ferns, the reflections off water, on the ground, in fire ... to cut a long story short, wherever they looked. They imagined there was life in rocks that happened to roll down a steep hill, or in a rumbling volcano, or that there was a 'sign' in a falling twig ... Our brilliant brains can 'break through' camouflage on animals' skins, spotting the striped fur of a predator crouching among bushes. We're able to see, recognize, or just plain imagine any sort of animal from a simple outline, or a few spots ... And because of that, we end up seeing, or rather imagining eyes, faces, animals or fabulous creatures hidden anywhere or in anything. Humans saw life everywhere, when really there was nothing there. And that was the origin of animism ..."

Camilla nodded.

She knew that animism was the very first form of religion to appear on

the Earth: it was characterized by the fact that primitive humans believed that natural objects like rocks had a spirit and so were alive.

“That’s how the God Virus was born,” Tom went on. “And just like in Genesis in the Bible, it was the serpent, or more precisely the turning snake, that was responsible for the woes of humanity. It was the snake that made us taste the fruit, not of knowledge, but of ignorance and imaginary ideas.”

Tom looked at the young woman.

“You see, Camilla, humans are social mammals, it’s set in their genes, carved into their deepest depths over the millions of years that their evolution took. And when you say social animal, you imply a hierarchy and a search for the relationships between dominant and dominated. In a given environment, social animals systematically try to identify themselves as dominant or dominated. Once the relationships have been worked out, everything is fine. Contrary to what you might think, dominated animals aren’t unhappy, when they find their place, they are calm ... this characteristic dominant and dominated structure, was naturally enough applied by social humans to the ‘spirits’ in nature. And, of course, comparing themselves to the strength of the sun, and the powerful rumblings of thunder, humans worked out they must be the dominated party.”

The steward brought the drinks that Tom had ordered.

“The God Virus decisively turned a corner in its evolution when humans became settled and started practicing agriculture. They began to believe the dominating spirits were interested in their lives and what they did, having unlimited access to what they were thinking. They started to speak to them so as to win a bit of their power, a bit of their mercy, mostly to ward off the worst tricks of the weather. But above all, since the spirits seemed interested in them, humans were able to tell them about their panicky fear of death ... We’re the only kind of animal to know we’re going to die one day. Other animals feel it when their time comes, but never foresee it, not even imagining it, so they don’t know that they are bound to die one day or another. They live carefree from day to day as if they were immortal. Humans, on the other hand, know they’re going to die, that they’re mortal. And so a problem crops up in their heads.”

“Why?” Camilla asked, hypnotized by Tom’s verve.

“Because humans have brains made up of three parts: there’s an ancient reptile brain guaranteeing survival, a mammal brain with emotions and memory, and a human brain, called the intelligent brain. It’s this human brain that holds the information that we’re going to die some day. But the reptile brain doesn’t want to know anything about it, doesn’t accept it.

This information in the depths of the brain disturbs the reptile in us. It senses a vague danger, both close and distant simultaneously, as death is, and it triggers an instinctive fear linked to survival, which causes permanent anxiety, unending stress. The human brain is able to dominate the reptile and its terrors, so as not to go mad. But that demands an intelligent effort all the time, an incessant effort which wastes a lot of brain-power and energy. So, nature found a much simpler and more economic remedy. In a sense, it's the mammal brain that acted as referee, finding an 'acceptable' compromise between the reptile brain and the intelligent human brain ... The mammal brain is where emotion and the subconscious are sited, but also pleasure and desire. And it was this desire to carry on enjoying the pleasures of existence that led the mammal to picture death not as the end, but as a passage through to another life. So, the mammal brain calmed down the reptile and helped the human brain's intelligence up to a higher level. The mammalian sub-conscious gave rise to this false certainty in the mind through a powerful and uncontrolled emotional faith. At that stage, the God Virus became definitively settled in the sub-conscious emotive mammalian brain."

Tom thought for an instant before going on.

"Then came the final stage in the pandemic ... You remember, I've already mentioned to you the genetic mutations that can cause aberrant innate behaviors to arise that neither of the two parents had, behaviors totally useless from the point of view of evolution, but which nevertheless are still preferred by nature, by sexual selection, to be more precise. Like those bower birds in Australasia that build monumental colored nests that don't have any real usefulness, but the hours spent putting together these constructions show females what vitality the male has, since he's capable of surviving even with only very limited time available for searching for food ... Humans haven't picked up the habit of building useless nests, but have come to believe they're watched over by the dead ..."

To emphasize what he was saying, Tom nodded gravely.

"Yes, through a genetic behavioral aberration, one human or a group of them developed an innate behavior pattern of believing the dead were watching them. And this strange behavior actually was a major asset for the survival of the human race. To give you an idea of how far this genetic aberration goes and its full value, I'll tell you about an experiment that Martial did. He went to grade schools to get children aged six or seven to do a test. One after another, the children passed the test, which was easy enough for everyone to get the top prize: a piece of candy. The candy was in a big bowl in a separate room. And one by one the children went alone into this empty room, Martial first telling them to take just one piece, since

otherwise there wouldn't be enough for everyone. Martial had hidden a video camera in the room, but any child going in thought it was completely on its own. The outcome was that the number of children taking a lot more than one piece was somewhere of the order of thirty percent. Some of them even took whole handfuls of candy. There was one small consolation: no-one actually walked off with the bowl itself ..."

Tom chuckled and Camilla did so too.

"Martial did the same experiment with other children, but this time he put a great big mirror behind the bowl. The outcome this time, with the mirror there, was only ten percent of the children disobeyed the rule of taking just one piece. The temptation to break the rule was still there, but the mirror dissuaded almost all the children from stealing. And even the ones who did take more than one piece were a lot more restrained, taking only two or three, not great handfuls, as had happened without the mirror."

"How come?" Camilla asked, intrigued.

"It was thanks to the reptile brain. The reptilian section of the brain respects social order and the established hierarchy. But as soon as it feels it can grab something without being punished, it comes to life and can short-circuit rational thought and lead to instinctive thieving. The mirror has a psychological effect on the reptile brain: it sees eyes looking at it, eyes which in fact are in its own body, but the ancient reptile perceives them as someone else's and so stays on its best behavior, fear of being caught with a hand in the till, or in this case in the candy-bowl. Martial did the same experiment again, allowing two pieces of candy to be taken, but it didn't change the results, since it's breaking the rules that the reptile loves. With no eye watching it, the reptile happily gives itself permission to break any established rule whatsoever ..."

Tom drank a little of his fresh coconut juice.

"Okay, let's get back to humans who think the dead are watching them: like the reflection in the mirror, it's like a permanent watchful eye affecting the reptile through the influence of the mind. Humans are altruistic by nature and work for the good of their groups. When they are in their groups, their reptilian side respects the hierarchy and allows their innate behavior of altruism to have free rein. But as soon as the reptile is alone and can act with complete impunity for its own benefit, even to the detriment of the group, when its acts become invisible to others, then the reptile in humans wakes up and permits itself all the things that are socially forbidden. This reptile side is programmed for survival, never letting go a chance to grab something it might need, but seizing it as soon as it can, as long as it's sure not to be punished, since it's afraid of one thing in particular: being excluded from the group it depends on for survival. The

rational human brain has trouble keeping this reptilian instinct under control. Some people manage to, but most don't. So, nature gave them a hand through a genetic behavioral aberration: the belief the dead are spying on us reinforces or mind's dominance over or reptile side. Thanks to these watching dead, thanks to the threat from these permanently present eyes that see everything, the reptilian brain can no longer systematically take over the conscious mind. The well-behaved reptile stays in its place because of the eyes of the dead ..."

He leaned forward slightly.

"I need you to think hard, Camilla ... At the dawn of humanity, there were two groups of humans: the group believing the dead were watching over them and the group of 'unbelievers'. These 'unbelievers' soon broke up the cohesion of their groups: as soon as it was alone, the reptile awoke in them and grabbed the group's provisions. The group was undermined from inside and ended up collapsing: its cohesion was cut away by general suspicion, since no-one knew who was doing the stealing, what with everyone stealing for sure one day or another, as soon as they had the chance thanks to guaranteed impunity. So, the groups of 'unbelievers' always ended by splitting apart, because of the unstable nature of the reptile side, which put the survival of the group in peril. The members of such a broken group would head off and join the groups of 'believers', which were much more stable. Then 'unbelievers' had children with 'believers' and a new generation was born with the innate conviction the dead were watching over them ... Of course, in these groups of 'believers' there were still some thieves, but only a minority, not numerous enough to break up the cohesion of a 'believer' group ... It's like nowadays in or modern societies: there are thieves, reptiles who permit themselves to do anything forbidden by society, but not enough of them to bring or system to a collapse. It was the same in those days and the groups of 'believers' prospered and developed, whilst the 'unbelievers' progressively died out."

Tom sighed.

"Altruistic humans have a system for detecting egoists, which even allows them to be excluded from the group. The failing in this detection system is that the reptile side acts when no-one can see it and every human is a potential reptile, a sort of undetectable Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. A Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde above suspicion, except in the eyes of the dead who ensure Jekyll doesn't become Hyde. These imaginary ever-present eyes were lacking in the groups of 'unbelievers', so their Mister Hydes worked in the shadows and ended up by destroying them ... The reptilian Mister Hyde in all of us is Evil incarnate. Or human conscience, through or human brain, is the embodiment of Good. We built up religious

myths to describe this duality of Good and Evil, exteriorizing it and extending it to the universe outside ourselves, when it's really only or inner selves. Or internal chaos, mixed instinct and thought, mingled Evil and Good ..."

He fell silent.

Camilla reflected for a moment, then asked:

"Okay, let me see if I've understood this correctly, the God Virus was born from a bug in our brains, the turning serpents that were the origin of animism ... then came the belief death was just a passage to another life and the dead were watching us ..."

"Yes, that's it. And all of that was transmitted from one generation to another in two complementary ways: innate and cultural. As my father used to say, cats don't have puppies, or if you rather the standard saying, like father, like son ... First of all, behaviors and beliefs were transmitted to children through heredity. They're as inborn in us as drinking or eating. But there was also culture which played a big part, all of it controlled by Darwinian selection."

"Darwinian selection?" Camilla echoed.

"Have no illusions, Camilla, all religions have gone through natural selection to get where they are today. I'll explain ... At the start, religious concepts were rudimentary, being transmitted culturally, but with an innate basis. Just like genetic mutations, they developed more or less at random and in every direction. So, a multitude of more or less effective, more or less far-fetched ideas gradually built up. And through natural selection only those religious concepts that were based on effective ideas, easy to remember, actually developed, whilst the others withered away. Little by little, the passage of time did its work and the concepts improved, gradually coming to include elements that went beyond rational thought, but not too much. For instance, the ideas that trees or rocks could think haven't lasted, but those saying divinities had unlimited access to humans' thoughts were successful. The human mind doesn't adopt just any belief in the supernatural: it's limited itself to a very restricted number of ideas on the topic, concepts linked to the living and the dead, to morals and to social exchanges. That's why religions have common features all round the world ..."

His throat dry from talking, Tom drank some more of his coconut juice.

"The religious concepts which survived over time became more complex to form the earliest religions. Just like an animal, a religious concept can evolve and reach an improved form through the process of natural selection. So, religions themselves became improved and more

complex in a Darwinian sense. It's amusing to see how some religions, which are the outcome of evolution and natural selection, deny the truth of this system as an explanation for the origins of humans and animals: they reject the very mechanism which actually gave birth to them. Through natural selection, fishes became amphibians, amphibians developed into mammals and from mammals, humans emerged. A slow process of evolution and it's exactly the same for religion."

A smile playing over the corner of his lips, Tom continued.

"Over a period lasting tens of thousands of year, it's known there was animism, then polytheism with many gods, next henotheism with many gods but one preferred, then monolatrism recognizing many gods but accepting only one as true and finally monotheism triumphed with just one single god. Some Christians see in this Darwinian selection of religions a teaching sent by God, who doesn't burden humans with more than they're able to handle, a God who respects or freedom of belief. God is wise and a good teacher, not imposing Himself too suddenly on the humans He has created ..."

Tom gave Camilla an ironic look.

"The appearance of writing allowed specialist men of letters to arise, who fought against their competitors by taking political power and creating easily recognized, stable, codified brand-names: that's how religious multinationals came into being ... You know, Camilla, when a macaque kills the dominant male, he comes to power and takes care to kill all the young offspring of the females so that they'll become fertile again. That's a terrible law emerging from natural selection that hasn't been abolished by the Christian and Moslem religions, which are also the outcome of natural selection. When they've gained power, they've taken great care to smash any form of competition on their home pitches ..."

In a confidential tone, Tom added:

"To tell you the truth, I'm delighted all the other religions have been destroyed and it's the Christian and Moslem faiths which have triumphed all round the world."

"Why?" Camilla asked in puzzlement.

"When it's properly constructed, religion is a hermetically sealed bubble, a logical system that Martial called 'Gödelian', a non-demonstrable and irrefutable closed system, which thus is inaccessible to science. By basing itself on the Old Testament, the Christian faith made the fatal error of sticking its nose into science and geology, committing the mistake of handing us a long list of precise, official and undeniable claims about the cosmos and biology which we now know are untrue. The church

has definitively lost all its battles against science. Thanks to all these errors, thanks to that crook Josiah and his Old Testament on which the mythical Jesus and blood-thirsty Mohammed based themselves, thanks to all that, the Christian and Moslem religions are no longer irrefutable hermetically-sealed bubbles. They have visible defects, design flaws, and Mother Nature never forgives the slightest weakness. When the truth about Josiah, Jesus and Mohammed comes out, their religious bubbles will be shattered. That's why I'm happy in the end for those two religions to dominate the world and for them to have rid us completely of other religious bubbles which might have been 'perfect', bubbles without a flaw. Thanks to their design failures, humanity will finally rid itself of Christianity and Islam, a fundamental step in getting cured of the God Virus."

Tom looked around him.

"Luckily for humanity, it wasn't Buddhism that won all around the world as it did in Thailand, since Buddhism is truly a 'Gödelian' system not accessible to science. Science can't prove, at least not yet, that Buddhism is untrue, in the way it can for Christianity and Islam. The founder of Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama, paid great attention never to meddle with science. Every time a disciple asked him about it, Gautama took good care to give the unstated impression he knew the answer himself but it was no use for the disciple to be told it. Gautama said the disciple should concentrate his mind and knowledge exclusively on how to break free from the cycle of reincarnations and attain Nirvana. It wasn't necessary to know all the rest. Gautama invented a 'Gödelian' religion without any obvious flaw. Clever guy ... And when I say guy, I don't mean there's any proof Gautama ever really lived. He may be just a myth, like so many others. I'm still investigating him and I'm sure I'll find the flaw in his 'Gödelian' system ..."

Camilla stared at Tom.

"You seem obsessed with the need to rid humanity of every form of the divine, isn't that so?" she demanded.

"Yes, that's true. I want to free humanity from the God Virus. Ninety-five percent of the world population are sick with the God Virus, believing the dead are watching over them. I'm contaminated with the virus myself, but I'm cured thanks to Martial. I realized how I was afflicted and became an atheist, even if I'm at risk of a relapse in moments of crisis or danger, when I might be tempted to pray to a God who exists nowhere outside our own heads. The world has less than five percent of true atheists, who are a gift from nature, since they're immune to the God Virus, thanks to a random genetic mutation. They have no trace of the virus in them and they

are the saviors of humanity. Thanks to them, humans have started to change the way they see things. With time, true atheists have succeeded in influencing human culture and so cured a good number of those sick with the Virus. With my book, I'm joining the combat against this disease and I know it's a race against the clock."

"A race against the clock?"

"Yes, we're racing against time. I know what the future holds for us if we can't get rid of the God Virus ... Do you know the story of Easter Island? When Dutch sailors discovered the island in 1722 on Easter Sunday, they found it covered with low vegetation. Not a tree to be seen. Just a few hundred inhabitants were still eking out a wretched living there. Without any trees to build boats, they couldn't go fishing in the ocean, even though it was teeming with fish of all sorts. Nevertheless, three centuries earlier, Easter Island had been covered in a tall tropical forest that sheltered an extensive fauna of land and sea birds. The trunks of the palm-trees could be used to build solid boats and the fiber from their bark could be made into ropes. The population of the island was nearly 15,000 strong. But a drought came along. So, the inhabitants of the island called on their gods for the rains to return. To honor them, they carved out hundreds and hundreds of giant stone statues, the biggest over sixty-five feet tall and weighing 160 tons. There was also internal competition between the various rival clans on the island, their different priests trying to show their superiority and devotion to the gods compared to the other groups. So, there was a frenzy of stone statue building, more and more of them, more and more colossal. But to move these heavy statues from the quarries to their proper places, they needed many tree-trunks for the blocks of stone to roll on and many ropes to pull them. In the end, competition to honor the gods was so great the island had no trees left! The soils were exposed to erosion, harvests declined and the birds were the first creatures to be wiped out. Then it was the turn of the human population, which had to resort to cannibalism to survive ..."

Tom looked sad.

"That's what we're in for if we can't get rid of the God Virus. It'll be the same situation as for the Easter Island people, but on a global scale."

"How do you see the future?" Camilla asked.

"Gloomy. Because of the divine wait-and-see attitude connected with the God Virus, humankind will eventually die out. If you believe you're going to go to Paradise when you die and there's life after death, you don't worry yourself about or future on Earth. You let pollution spread, give AIDS an easy time and neglect the true worth of the only life you really have. Like on Easter Island, you cut through the branch on which you're

sitting. And in the distant future, when the sun starts to die, when we might have had the chance of reversing the process thanks to the progress of science, people who're contaminated by the God Virus would say it's God's will if the sun is dying and it's a sin to go against this will. But long before that, when humans become sterile because of all the filthy chemicals which are poisoning our blood, God maniacs will forbid the genetic treatments that would allow humans to reproduce. They'll say these go against nature and God's will. But even before that, we'll have destroyed all the forests, cut down all the trees, swept the oceans clean of their fish, burned up all the crude oil in a dollar-filled bonfire, melted all the Polar ice, heated up our planet till it suits the taste of speculators in genetically-modified agriculture. Carefree, or careless, we'll not have tried to get off our Easter Island blessed by all the gods before it's too late, before the priests start telling us it's not too serious, there's no need to panic, but we ought to get down to praying God for a space in Paradise. We'll not have made any attempt to travel to other worlds viable for life in our galaxy, other planets within reach of science, if there was a non-divine, political will to put the funding in place ... However, we'll not see our wretched fate as too urgent, since we'll be certain God is watching over us, protecting us even as we go down to ruin. So, with this divine wait-and-see, we'll joyfully look forward to death and when our eyes finally close, and we bow down before that God because of the virus which is in us, humankind will become extinct forever ..."

Tom slowly looked up to the sky.

"And that'll be the end of the beautiful lie."

41

Cross

Brutus the Centurion rode into the courtyard of the Antonia fortress on his powerful black steed. His cohort was all present and correct, formed up in several long ranks. Spears and swords glittered in the sunlight.

Brutus paid no attention to his legionaries, immediately turning his small malevolent eyes on the prisoner.

Kneeling in the middle of the courtyard and still wearing the mantle of royal purple that Herod Antipas had bestowed on him, Jesus watched the rider approach.

Holding the reins in one hand and in the other the cane that he used as a riding-crop, Brutus stopped his horse a few yards away from Jesus. As broad as he was tall, his arms and thighs imposing in their dimensions, so huge as to seem almost unreal, the square-jawed, clean-shaven Centurion dismounted from his steed. He unhooked the chin-strap of his helmet with its tall red plume, took it off and hung it on his belt.

In five steps, he had reached Jesus. He raised his head, but Brutus clicked his tongue.

“Tut-tut ...”

With a sharp movement of his wrist, he struck the cheek of the sentenced prisoner with his cane. Jesus had to lower his head. The Centurion looked at the man at his feet for an instant, then handed him the cane.

His gaze fixed on the Roman’s sandals, Jesus took the cane offered to him. Brutus returned to his mount and from the saddlebag he took out a crown woven from sharp thorns. With a flick of his chin, he ordered a legionary to lead his horse to the stables.

Heavenly Father, may your will be done ...

Blood flowed into Jesus’ blue eyes.

With his sleeve he wiped them, but this just spread this precious fluid over his face. The crown of razor-sharp thorns which the Centurion had just thrust down sharply onto his skull had cut deeply into his head, wounding his forehead and scalp, causing the blood which was streaming over his black beard and his long curly hair to spurt out abundantly.

Jesus clenched his teeth and bore the pain. He knew that this was just the first stage in the torture that he would have to endure.

I must ... for the salvation of Israel ...

Brutus chortled at the spectacle.

“Hail, King of the Jews!” said he in his deep voice.

In the courtyard of the Antonia fortress, the cohort of legionaries began laughing as one man, seeing their commander bow respectfully, one knee to the ground, before the prisoner who held a cane as if it were a royal scepter.

The thorns were so sharp that Brutus had himself slightly gashed several fingers.

Taking the riding-crop back from the prisoner’s hand, the Centurion brought it down several times on the crown. The sharp points penetrated even more deeply into the wounded flesh, bringing a further flow of blood. Satisfied with the blood-covered face he had before him, Brutus rose.

Jesus stoically raised his eyes toward his torturer.

The Centurion was not pleased at this attitude, which he saw as a provocation and struck Jesus violently with the cane several times.

However, far from sating his brutal instincts, Brutus felt that the punishment was insufficient, so threw down the cane and let fly a blow so powerful it would have floored a camel.

Jesus collapsed on the ground, his mouth full of blood.

Brutus disdainfully spat on him and signaled to his soldiers to pick him up, an order which they obeyed. They took off the purple mantle but left the blood-stained diadem alone. With stumbling tread, Jesus walked toward the colonnades. There stood the great wooden cross that was to be used for the crucifixion.

Normally, those to be crucified had their arms tied to the *patibulum*, a wooden cross-bar six feet long and weighing nearly a hundred pounds. After proceeding to the Hill of Golgotha, the place of execution, carrying this heavy burden, it was hooked onto a permanent upright. The condemned men then had their hands and feet nailed. These wretches’ torment could last several days, death not coming until long after this.

However, Pilate had brought in novel procedures.

In order to save time, as well as avoid any possible attempt at freeing prisoners, these were taken to Golgotha directly in carts, tall wooden crosses awaiting them there.

Jesus was not to be carried in a cart; his journey to the place of execution would be made on foot. Furthermore, a huge cross had been brought into the palace courtyard: Jesus was to carry it all the way to the hill.

Wearing a white tunic, barefoot, Jesus looked at the cross for an instant, then tottered slowly toward it and took its crossbar on his shoulder. It was so heavy that it was almost impossible for him to straighten up fully. Jesus painfully started walking. The base of the cross made an unpleasant noise as it scraped against the ground.

The massive gates of the Antonia fortress opened. Outside, waiting with feverish and malevolent impatience, Caiaphas and many of his followers from the Temple rejoiced in the spectacle that was now presented to them.

Surrounded by legionaries, his face covered with blood and dragging his cross, Jesus made his way out of the palace. He had taken barely a dozen steps when a sharp burning sensation ran over his back. Brutus' whip had just cracked across it and the small lead balls fixed to the ends of the long plaited leather strands brought a grimace to Jesus' face.

Caiaphas could not help smiling in satisfaction, realizing that Pilate wished to revenge himself for the insult he had suffered before the Jewish people by making the prisoner pay for it. Pilate's initial mercifulness toward Jesus had turned into immeasurable hatred. The humiliated Roman had ordered his legionaries to submit him to the worst outrages and for the long way leading to Golgotha to be made into a journey of endless agony.

Only death would bring it to an end.

As if to confirm Caiaphas' reasoning, Brutus let fly several other lashes that tore Jesus' tunic. Blood flowed, staining the cloth.

Jesus attempted to remain imperturbable, trying to dominate the pain that was coursing right through him.

As far as the hill ... hold out until the hill ...

The whip continued cracking, its blows like the bites of a serpent.

Tirelessly. Pitilessly. Cruelly.

Brutus seemed to be enjoying the prisoner's sufferings. He stayed a few steps away from him, but came up and kicked him from time to time when he appeared to want to halt and get back his breath.

Smoothing his white beard with his hand, Caiaphas watched the cohort escorting the condemned man march away. In a few hours at most, the

destiny of the divine child would be sealed forever. At that moment with its happy outcome, the High Priest mulled over the future of the Temple for an instant. Now that the menace of Christ was definitively countered, he knew that shortly the Temple would gain fame such that people would come from all over the world to prostrate themselves there, that they would even fight to have scant honor of kneeling before its walls.

Thinking of the Divine Scourge and the hordes of possessed who would pour into Jerusalem from all parts, Caiaphas smiled wolfishly. He mechanically felt the purse that hung from his belt. Soon the Temple's coffers would be as full as those of Rome. With a last glance at the legionaries forming the rear-guard of the armed procession leading the divine child to his death, Caiaphas departed. Head held high, he savored the warmth of the sunshine on his skin, walking briskly and joyfully toward his home.

In the distance, as if filled with divine anger, dark clouds were advancing over the valleys and the Jordan, lowering and threatening, cutting off the radiant sunshine in those areas, and even moving ever so slightly faster in their course toward Golgotha Hill where they seemed to have a rendezvous.

They were not alone in heading there.

The cohort's men were already having trouble keeping in order the vociferous crowd that pressed against them from all sides. The legionaries had to use their spears to hold back the most fanatic Temple partisans who would willingly have stoned Christ.

Protected by Pilate's soldiers, Jesus continued onward toward his fate.

His shoulder battered, short of breath, he could hardly raise his head. Through a veil of blood obscuring his sight, the streets of Jerusalem went by in an almost unreal procession. Was he truly now in the City of Zion, or was all this just a bad dream? Would this reality perhaps end if he stopped believing in it? For a short instant, he concentrated his mind on no longer being attached to it.

However, Brutus' whip brought him back to the sad reality of the waking nightmare he was enduring.

For how long had he been walking like this? He no longer knew. Time seemed to have stopped in its tracks an eternity ago.

An eternity of agony.

How long had he been carrying that cross? He could not tell for certain. Around him, all was a macabre whirl. Aggressive faces mingled in a demented dance, cries of hatred ringing out as they spat on him.

Heavenly Father, forgive them ... they do not know what they are

doing ...

Among that sea of crazed and grimacing faces, in that ocean of anger in which this ignorant human nature had plunged, here and there pitying faces were weeping at his torment. A few disciples were there, lost in the midst of the Temple followers, floating in that hostile flood, hoping to get close to the Son of God to come to his aid. The legionaries were careful to keep everybody away at lance point.

Just to the hill ... hold out until the hill ...

Painfully, step by step, Jesus went inexorably forward.

The shouting gradually grew less.

Jesus realized that he had just passed through the city's defensive wall. How long had it taken to reach this point? How many streets had he walked? How many steps had he climbed carrying that huge cross? How many times had he fallen, bent under the weight of his burden? How many times had he staggered in pain under the lashes of Brutus' whip? He had no idea.

His head felt on the point of bursting and he made an effort not to collapse.

For the worst was yet to come.

The slope of Golgotha rose before him like an uncrossable barrier. His legs began to tremble and he grasped that he would never be able to climb up that fierce, white, rocky giant.

His gaze unfocused, he looked at the surroundings. Around him, most of the Temple partisans had not deigned to accompany him all the way to the place of crucifixion, so fewer were following behind him.

Seeing the condemned man stop, Brutus became furious. His whip whistled out repeatedly and Brutus shouted. Jesus clenched his teeth.

Heavenly Father ... give me the strength to accomplish this ...

He started forward again, advancing even more slowly, with feeble step climbing the steep slope.

A red veil obscured his sight.

Heavenly Father ...

Jesus fell headlong, the cross ending on his back.

An instant later, Brutus flung himself on Jesus. Dragging his head backward by the hair sticky with blood, the centurion slapped him several times.

Jesus came round. As he had fallen, the crown of thorns had jabbed a little deeper into his head and blood was flowing once more. Brutus let go of the prisoner's head and signaled to two of his soldiers to relieve him of

his burden.

Brutus was upset, because he realized that the captive could go no farther while still carrying his cross. It was clearly more than his strength would permit. Any further harsh treatment risked killing him.

Brutus grunted discontentedly. The man due to be crucified could under no circumstances be allowed to die before his time. The centurion looped his whip and hung it from the pommel of his sword. With a grimace, he scratched his enormous biceps and swept his gaze round the crowd.

A well-built fellow came into his field of vision. Returning from the country with a sack slung over his shoulder, the man in his thirties with a thick beard had the ill luck to catch the centurion's eye.

"You, come here," ordered Brutus.

He instructed him to carry Christ's cross.

At Brutus' threatening and angry look, the man obeyed, his head bowed. With difficulty, he raised the cross from where it lay on the ground and headed up to steep path leading to Golgotha.

The cohort resumed its march.

Even without his burden, Jesus was finding it hard to walk. His legs could barely hold him.

Heavenly Father ... endure ... continue ... above all, no stopping ... no more stopping ...

Making one last effort, he drew himself up, still having a noble bearing despite his terrible sufferings. Sounds of weeping and moaning made their way into his bemused consciousness.

He slowly turned. A small group of women had been following him since he left the Antonia Tower. Railed at and jostled by the majority of Jews hostile to Christ, they had resolutely stayed near him.

It was there that he saw her.

Trembling, his mother Mary was looking at him in anguish. She had wept so much that the source of her eyes' moisture seemed to have dried up forever. She bough her hands to her heart and beat her breast.

Seeing her thus, Jesus wished he could comfort her, encourage her, tell her not to worry about him, that this torment would soon come to an end and that he would not be long in returning to be among them.

However, he could not.

He made an attempt at a sad smile which he tried to make reassuring. His teeth streaked with blood, his distorted face, his beard and hair reddened by the liquid flowing from his veins, all conspired to frighten more than one of those present. Those women in tears, lamenting and

beating their breasts, touched him to the bottom of his heart. His mind wandering, his thoughts went to the future that would await him if he did not get all the way to the end of this route, the way of destiny that was snaking out behind him now.

“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me,” said he in a feeble voice, “but weep for yourselves and for your children. For perhaps the days are coming, in which they will say: blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore child and the breasts that never gave suck ...”

Shedding copious tears, the group of women listened to Christ’s words.

Brutus approached, a looming threat, muscles flexed. Jesus turned and faced the giant hill of white stones. Slowly, he began walking again.

The slope was too steep for his limbs, exhausted by his sufferings and successive falls. Even relieved of the weight of the cross, he found the greatest difficulty in putting one foot before the other.

Clenching his teeth, he called on his body for one last effort.

Hold out as far as the top ... hold out ...

Painfully, he made his way almost to the summit. However, his bare and bleeding feet slithered on the white rocks and he fell full length. His head slammed into the ground forcefully, a dull thud being heard. A little lower down the slope, Mary shrieked in terror and tried to come to the aid of her son. A legionary armed with a lance blocked her path.

Jesus stood back up at once. Nonetheless, he started staggering. Brutus grabbed him by the hair and dragged him along mercilessly to get him to climb the last few yards up to the plateau at the top.

The place of torment.

Jesus’ head was aching horribly. Before his misted eyes, everything seemed to whirl around him, too fast to follow. He knew he would not be able to remain conscious for much longer.

Brutus let go of his hair and shoved him in the direction of a large square tent, striped blue and white, which stood fifty paces farther forward.

The centurion and his prisoner entered this canvas structure. Just inside the door, two guards stood on either side, seemingly awaiting Jesus’ arrival. They immediately closed the two flaps of cloth.

Lounging on top of a big wickerwork basket, a Roman officer with a weasel face smiled sardonically in response to Brutus’ salute. Ever since he had been removed from his privileged posting as commander of Pontius Pilate’s guard, this man called Marcus no longer took any pleasure in such military honors, which he suspected might conceal subtle mockery. Marcus was badly shaved and his uniform was scruffy. He hated having to supervise the foul work of crucifixions on Golgotha. He felt he had been

demoted to a mere grave-digger, a night-soil carrier. He could not stand the stench of the rotting corpses, nibbled at by vermin and left nailed to their crosses for day after day as a warning to all those who might dare defy the authority and orders of Rome. Marcus hoped that Julius, the accursed Roman who had deprived him of his post as commander of the guard thanks to string-pulling by his family, would eventually put a foot wrong, so that he could get back his place with the Procurator. He knew that Pontius Pilate appreciated his total devotion.

Besides, he was the one to whom Pilate had chosen to entrust the mission of taking care of the crucifixion of the man that they had just brought to him. Pilate would know how to show his gratitude if everything ran smoothly.

For several seconds, Marcus gazed at Jesus, weighing him up from head to feet, without ceasing to clean his nails with the aid of a small dagger. Uncrossing his skinny legs, he smiled in satisfaction and nodded slowly. He put the thin blade down on the wicker basket that was serving him as a seat. His hand then mechanically tapped the white loincloths carefully folded and piled next to him that were intended to hide the nakedness of those to be crucified. He looked at Jesus' blood-stained and tattered robe that barely covered the body wounded in every part.

"Strip," ordered Marcus scornfully.

Jesus was so weak that he felt incapable of raising a hand. Nonetheless, he tried to obey. His whole body trembled involuntarily.

"Have no fear," chuckled Marcus with a smile that revealed teeth like a carnivore's fangs. "Your sufferings will soon be at an end ..."

Amused by the situation, he burst out laughing somewhat manically.

His head pounding, Jesus removed his tunic with difficulty and stood completely naked.

Heavenly Father, give me the strength to accomplish what you have fixed as my destiny ...

His head started spinning like a top. Marcus' face seemed to be grotesquely distorted, the tent blurred and a dark veil fell over Jesus, who collapsed on the floor.

Unconscious.

His spirit flew off, as if escaping from the tortured fleshly body, rising above him to find elsewhere some temporary safety.

Outside the legionaries of the escort, having completed their mission, were leaving Mount Golgotha and making back for the Antonia fortress. The crowd was now being held back by a fresh detachment of a hundred other legionaries, from a cohort that had just been ordered to Israel from

Helvetia, and so almost totally unfamiliar with the country.

To them, the place of torment seemed just like an anteroom to Hades.

Circular in shape, this hell on Earth took the form of a broad plateau where the corpses of the executed slowly rotted where they had died, among the skulls and bones that the dogs and carrion birds had not completely consumed.

It was not unusual to come across hounds with a leg or an arm held in their fangs, heading off to enjoy their meal in some calmer spot.

Some of these dogs became accustomed to human flesh so quickly that in that neighborhood packs of them gathered to attack women and children, crazed by the scent of humans. More than once, legionaries had had to be called in to slaughter these dangerous animals.

To the great distress of the townsfolk, Pilate had done nothing to solve this problem definitively. Quite the contrary, he let matters get worse, so as to give rise to absolute terror, because the Procurator had it in his mind that for Jews the very idea of ending their days unburied and in the belly of a dog would take away all thought of sedition.

At the place of torment, piled here and there and as if stained with dull ocher, hundreds of crosses lay waiting for a flood: the flow of victims from any future revolts. As if delighting in the long-present blood that had soaked into their wood, these crosses seemed to miss the good old days when thousands of insurgents died day after day on Mount Golgotha. However, for the moment these happy times were over and only a few of these blood-drinkers were privileged enough to quench their macabre thirst with the fluid of life of a handful of brigands.

All the trees that stood there had been dug up by the roots and the few sparse bushes still surviving had to do so in between the hundreds of holes into which the feet of crosses were inserted when they were being raised.

Once they were in place, they were visible from a long way off.

Overlooking Jerusalem, Golgotha had not been chosen at random by the Roman occupiers: the macabre sight of the crucified was a daunting omen for those still thinking of challenging the total power of Rome. The Mount's reputation was well established.

All around this sinister circular plateau there was an earthwork through which five paths led.

Mounted Pharisees came up along one of these paths. The horses stopped on the western side where the slope of the mountain was less severe.

One of the riders dismounted rapidly and came to join the disguised Temple guards scattered among the crowd which was once again patient,

calm and silent. The Jewish guards discreetly saluted their commander and gave him a brief report on the situation.

When he pulled back the large hood of his dark tunic, Zechariah's dark eyes gazed at the tent which Jesus and Brutus had just entered. As if to reassure himself, Zechariah felt the hilt of the sword which was hidden under his clothing with his heavy hand. Ever since Jesus had left Pilate's palace, Zechariah had been constantly following him from a distance, keeping an eye on the big picture, supervising the arrangements that Caiaphas had had put in place to avoid any risk of an uprising that might attempt to free the false Christ.

However, Zechariah had realized from the start that there would be no problems: the legionaries deployed outside the Antonia fortress had been impressive and the demonstration of strength more than sufficient as dissuasion. Thinking of Jesus' inevitable death, Zechariah had smiled, taking pleasure in seeing how far the divine child had fallen, humbled to the extent of carrying that cross, the symbol which his disciples wore ostentatiously. They could in no way come to his aid.

Nonetheless, Zechariah had remained cautious. So as to meet any contingency, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been threatened in secret, with a ban on any gatherings. All around Pilate's palace and even outside the city walls, the Temple guards had forcefully dispersed any meetings of disciples, or of townsfolk who were favorable to Christ and saw in him the Son of God.

Only partisans of the Pharisees or Sadducees had been authorized to follow the impostor. Moreover, hidden amidst that crowd hostile to Jesus, Caiaphas' personal guards had been strategically stationed.

As a last barrier, they would see to it that no spontaneous wave of popular feeling could arise and bring help to the false Christ. Such a wave might conceivably have overwhelmed the cohort by its numbers and have carried off by force the man who many considered the Savior of Israel.

Zechariah glanced all around him.

Despite the threats, a few of Jesus' disciples had still managed to mingle with the crowd. Almost all of them were women. Zechariah sighed, but he still knew that because they were so few there would be no incidents.

The crucifixion would soon be in progress.

On the surrounding heights, their fists clenched, many people who had been making for the town had stopped to watch the sad spectacle from a distance. Camped on the outskirts of Jerusalem, foreign merchants who had come there for the Passover festivities had swollen with their numbers the crowd already present. Prey to an unhealthy curiosity, they were

flowing there up the gentle western slope and were hastening to see with their own eyes this terrible place with its devilish reputation, so as to have the opportunity of watching a crucifixion.

On the way, a cart drawn by two horses overtook them. Driven by a legionary, the vehicle was bringing two brigands condemned to death for their crimes. Lying on its rough floor, groaning at every jolt, dressed in rags, the two thieves had their hands and feet tied, while their faces and bodies were swollen from the beating they had received upon their arrest.

When it reached Golgotha, the cart stopped a dozen paces from the tent. Legionaries roughly seized the dirty, unshaven captives, cut their bonds and drove them at lance point toward the large square pavilion with its blue and white stripes.

Some fifty yards from there, Zechariah stood watching the scene attentively. The tent's cloth flaps were drawn back and the commander of the Temple guards saw Jesus emerge.

He was only half conscious. Held up by two legionaries, dragging his feet, he was unfocused, absent.

Apart from a modest loincloth and his crown of thorns, he was completely naked.

Seeing the bloodstained body, hacked about in every limb, Zechariah smiled evilly.

Brutus' whip had ploughed into the flesh as deeply as slashes from sharp knives. Blood was continuously seeping out of the gaping wounds.

Jesus must be suffering atrociously. However, Zechariah was disappointed not to detect the least sign of pain on the red-stained face of the false Christ.

He was incredibly stoical at such a time, as if his mind were elsewhere, its links with its fleshly envelope broken.

Zechariah clenched his fist.

"Just wait until you are on your damned cross," muttered the chief guard. "Then we shall see if you can still bear the pain ..."

Lying on the ground with the two others, the cross that Jesus had carried all the way to the foot of the Mount was waiting for the final punishment.

Seeing the state that he was in, for fear that he might die before his due time, a legionary approached and gave Jesus some acid wine mixed with gall. However, Jesus tasted a sip, spat it out and refused any more.

He was laid down on the cross and held there by force lest he might struggle while his hands and feet were nailed. Yet Jesus did not writhe or even blink. Not a cry came from his throat as if everything that had been done to him and was still being done to him did not affect him at all.

At lance point, the two brigands were driven out of the tent. They had exchanged their rags for loincloths that hid their genitals.

Carrying a wooden sign, Marcus also left the tent. While the former commander of Pilate's guard knelt to fix the sign at the top of Christ's cross, his men forced the two thieves to lie on their crosses.

When the nails went through their limbs, their cries tore the air and rang out for a long time.

Paying no heed to their howls, the legionaries tied cords around the wooden bars and their wrists so that their forearms could bear the weight of their bodies. Without this final touch, their nailed hands would not have borne the burden: they would have been torn in half and would have let the crucified victims fall.

After inspecting his soldiers' work, Marcus gave them a small sign with his chin. With the help of ropes, the guards pulled on the crosses to raise them and fix each in a hole in the ground. When Jesus' cross had finally been raised in between the two others, a murmur of satisfaction ran through the crowd standing there.

Marcus looked at Christ's cross for an instant, then stepped back a few paces and turned toward the silent crowd. From his weasel head his eyes stared at the hate-filled faces glaring at the crucified man. Marcus gave precise orders and the legionaries allowed the multitude to come closer until they were only a score of yards away. After casting one last rapid glance around him, Marcus departed.

Zechariah allowed a sigh of relief to escape him. The fate of the divine child was irreparably sealed. Zechariah was well aware that after all he had endured Jesus would not long survive on the cross. Whilst the strongest men with the most stamina might last beyond crucifixion for several days, the guards never left them slowly dying for that length of time, as they had other duties awaiting them. Generally, after five or six hours the legionaries broke the bones in their legs. They then became unable to straighten up to breathe more easily, and the suffering men stifled in a few moments, their chests compressed by the weight of their bodies.

Zechariah knew that for Jesus it would not be necessary to give this final blow. He was already having difficulty in keeping upright, slowly but surely dying of asphyxia.

Zechariah was delighted at the sordid spectacle he was beholding: the divine child crucified covered in blood from head to feet, the crown of thorns jammed into his scalp and causing a bright red liquid to flow out over his beard and his long sticky hair, trickling down his face with its

distorted features.

However, one thing spoilt this glorious sight: the sign that Marcus had fixed to the cross. On it there was an inscription carved in Greek, Roman and Hebrew script.

‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews’.

Zechariah grimaced. Caiaphas would not appreciate this little detail. Zechariah should go and inform his master. Regretfully, internally sad not to be able to watch the punishment until the very end, he made off quickly.

A few paces from him, her eyes reddened by her distress, Mary was watching the son whom she had carried in her womb and to whom she had given birth.

Casting her mind briefly back into the past, she remembered the destiny promised to the divine child by the priests of the Temple.

A glorious future.

Yet it was those same priests who had just knocked down the pedestal on which they had once wished to set the divine child and had brought him to his crucifixion.

Surrounded by other women who were giving her moral and often also physical support, when she seemed on the point of fainting at this vision of horror, Mary stood trembling twenty yards from the cross. Right up against the ranked legionaries who were watching so that nobody would step across the invisible line beyond which no civilian was authorized to go, she was hoping for a miracle to occur.

Her son could not die. It was inconceivable for her.

For over a minute, she kept her eyes shut so as no longer to see the terrible scene of this son martyred and stained with blood.

She prayed for celestial forces to intervene.

When she opened her eyes again, nothing had changed. Then for over an hour she set to praying more fervently.

Near the large square pavilion, four veterans of the Roman army were arguing. Lost in the midst of the foreign merchants, two disciples of Christ had mentioned in speaking to each other the curative power of their Master’s mantle. The four legionaries had overheard their various comments. Opportunist and greedy, believing they could get a good price for it from the Jews, they had taken advantage of Marcus’ absence to sneak into the tent and pick up Christ’s clothes. The torn and bloodstained tunic was cut into four equal pieces. However, the red mantle was a trigger for discord. It was seamless, having been woven as a single piece, and two of the veterans did not wish to tear it for fear it would lose too much of its value on being sold.

“Let us not rend it,” proposed one of them. “Let us rather cast lots to find who shall have it.”

The three others finally agreed.

Mary was watching the scene from a distance. She saw the four playing dice for a reddish mantle. Her fine eyebrows wrinkled in a frown, then she finally realized that it was the garment that Jesus had been wearing when he had appeared on the balcony of Pilate’s palace. By succeeding in sidling in among the crowd, Mary had been a secret witness of the public sentencing of her son.

Casually, the four veterans eventually went to sit in the shade of the crosses to escape from the blazing sun, waiting for the order to finish off the condemned men. However, for the moment these were not yet to die.

The torment was to continue.

With that aim, using a long cane at the end of which a sponge was fixed, a young legionary gave them sour wine at frequent intervals. Jesus obstinately refused to drink any, though.

The heat suddenly died away. Thick, dark clouds hid all of the blue of the sky, concealing from sight with their gloomy bulk the star that gives us life. Such darkness in the middle of the day did not bother the crowd of Temple supporters. Some of them began once more to insult the false Christ.

A louder voice rang out above the tumult.

“Oh you that offered to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself from the cross,” yelled a Sadducee. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!”

Mockingly, the veterans raised their heads toward Jesus.

“He is supposed to have saved a multitude others, yet himself he cannot save!”

They burst out laughing evilly. Recently arrived in the region, they were unaware of the Messiah’s powers, not having heard any more than vague rumors about him, and those only that same day.

“Let him save himself if he is the chosen of God,” cried the Sadducee who was close to the legionaries.

“Oh you, if you are the King of the Jews?” asked one of the soldiers. “Come down from your cross and we shall believe in you!”

Fresh outbursts of laughter were heard.

The Sadducee added in irony:

“He trusted in God, so let God deliver him now, if he will have him, if he really has an interest in a man who boasted of being his Son!”

Realizing who the man being crucified between them was, one of the criminals began shouting out in a desperate voice.

“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save me ...”

“Be silent, you fool!” cut in the other thief. “Do you not fear God, you who are in the same condemnation? We, indeed, justly, for we are receiving the due penalty for our deeds; but he is the Son of God!”

In this moment of distress, he was trying to clutch to the slightest hope of salvation, attempting to flatter this Christ of whose supernatural powers such great accounts had been given to him.

“Lord,” said he in addition, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Until then, Jesus had remained absolutely stoical, distant from all that he was undergoing, as if all this was no more than a bad dream. He had not cried out when the nails had been hammered into his hands and feet; pain had become as if a second nature for him. As if he were suddenly becoming conscious of what was around him and the presence of the thief, he turned his head toward him. His bloodshot eyes contemplated the other crucified man for an instant.

His voice was hoarse and distorted by the pressure on his larynx caused by the weight of his hanging body. He spoke with difficulty.

“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise,” croaked Jesus painfully in a cadaverous voice.

His head fell back against his neck. Once more, Christ tried to straighten up on his legs so as to be able to breathe normally. However, all his limbs were growing tired too quickly and he had difficulty in keeping upright. Under its multiple layers of dried blood, his face lifted to look at the crowd, with their grimaces of hatred and scorn.

A familiar face drew his attention.

John was there. The apostle had joined Mary.

Christ looked at John for more than a minute, then his lips twitched as if he were trying to say something to him. However, no sound emerged from his swollen mouth.

Jesus’ gaze shifted to his mother.

A shudder ran through her as she looked fixedly at her child with sorrowful eyes.

Jesus stared back at her, then, with a strange, sad smile he said to her in a choking voice:

“Woman, behold your son.”

Next he spoke to John, adding:

“Behold your mother ...”

John was astonished at this comment for an instant, but then understood that at this moment when death was about to carry him off, thinking of what would become of his mother, Jesus wanted the apostle to keep Mary close to him and watch over her till the day she died.

John nodded silently, thus making a formal promise to him that his wish would be fulfilled.

The torment of Christ and the two brigands continued. How many hours had they been there? They could no longer tell, still struggling against the exhaustion that would equate to inescapable death.

Once again the cries of the other two crucified men made Jesus turn his head. They begged him to save them, to bring a halt to their agonies.

He, too, could hold out no longer.

He raised his face toward the sky, pleading to his Lord.

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani,” cried he painfully. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Misunderstanding what he was saying, the four veterans chortled.

“This man is calling for Elijah,” snorted one of them.

Having a vague acquaintance with the history of the Jewish people, they thought that Jesus was calling upon Elijah, a prophet from former times.

The young legionary brought the sponge soaked in sour wine fixed to a cane, trying to give Jesus a drink. But he refused obstinately.

“Let him be,” said the oldest of the veterans with a sneer. “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”

There were fresh bursts of mocking laughter.

Christ lowered his head, his strength at an end. He could no longer remain upright. To draw in a breath was becoming more and more difficult and he knew that he was dying. His legs were failing him, wracked by cramps. Held up only by the forearms tied to the wooden crossbar, his body was slowly slipping downward.

He was choking, gradually being suffocated.

The dark mass of clouds was suddenly split. Like arrows fired from the sky, the sun’s rays pierced the darkness, concentrating their light on Jesus’ cross.

A luminous halo appeared around him.

“I thirst,” said he in a murmur.

Raising his face to the cross, the young legionary was amazed by the unbelievable vision facing him. He swallowed with difficulty. Now he was certain that there before him was the living incarnation of a God on

Earth. He raised his hand again and this time the crucified man accepted the sour liquid with which the sponge was soaked.

The wine trickled along his mouth.

The next minute, a grimace of pain ran over his distorted lips.

“It is finished,” sighed he.

He raised his face to the sky.

“Forgive them, for they do not know what they have done ... Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit ...”

He gave a hoarse cry, then his head tipped forward.

Death had taken him.

All around the bloodied crown of thorns, the halo shone with an eerie light. Despite himself, the young legionary dropped the cane and, as if in slow motion, the sponge fell to the ground. His feet started trembling and their vibration spread to his whole body. It took him some instants to realize that this trembling was not coming from within him.

The ground was being shaken by a violent tremor.

For some seconds, pushed hither and thither, rocks rolled and were split. Among the crowd trapped by the wrath of the elements, there were cries of terror and amazement.

In the distance, like ships breaking free from their moorings, tombs burst their seals and opened, as if to bring the spirits of the dead back to life. In the very heart of the city, the skies rumbled and the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from top to bottom.

Calm returned as if nothing had happened.

The frantic rush of townsfolk fleeing from Golgotha and beating their breasts nonetheless attested to the catastrophe that had just occurred. Many feared an even stronger repetition of the earthquake.

The young legionary watched them leaving. After that, he turned his gaze upon Christ. Like gloomy shields, the black clouds had completely intercepted the rays of the sun that for a moment had broken brilliantly through them. Once more, masters of darkness, they had obscured the sky.

Around the crown of thorns, the shining halo had been extinguished forever.

“Truly,” murmured the young legionary, “this man was a son of the gods ...”

42

Reptile Star

Bangkok.

In the charmingly Asian decor of the tea room attached to their hotel, Tom and Camilla were looking at one of the many television screens fixed to the walls.

They were all showing a recorded American talk-show in which the famous presenter was busy interviewing the no less famous Jarod Loto.

He was a well-known Hollywood actor as well as an international singing star, at the cutting edge of the form of alternative rock called by the glorious name of 'Neo Rock'.

Jarod Loto's turquoise blue eyes charmed whoever met him for the first time. He was as handsome as a Greek god and, with his long hair and growing Messianic beard, some of his fans thought they could see in him the re-incarnation of Jesus Christ in person. Yet Jarod Loto was far from being an angel: upsets in his love life and his tangles with the law had led to several court sentences and had hit the headlines of the yellow press.

Blinded by the virtually religious love they bore him, his fans had not believed all the gossip carried by the press about their idol. They had denounced a media and police, not accepting the word of honor of the police officers who had simply told the honest truth about the facts. If Jarod Loto had killed all his family, had been arrested covered in blood from head to foot and with the murder weapon on him, signing a handwritten confession, his fans would still have screamed that it was a miscarriage of justice and a plot and that his confessions had been extracted by compulsion.

Nonetheless, Jarod had been under no compulsion when he had finally admitted the facts of which he had been accused. He confessed he had used drugs and had drunk to excess in parties and that he had indeed been drunk on the notorious day when he had been arrested by the police as he

drove his sports car.

Far from turning his fans off him, this event led them to forgive him and praise his honesty, and they had continued to worship him like an earthly divinity incarnate. Making amends, Jarod had admitted that he had a drink problem and had gone off on a detoxification course at a Catholic medical centre. According to Jarod, thanks to prayer and love of the Lord, he had been able to climb out of the hell of his alcoholism and addiction: Jesus Christ had saved him from the claws of his demons. From that day on, Jarod had never stopped thanking the Lord at the least occasion.

“I want to thank the Lord Jesus Christ, because it’s thanks to him I’m where I am today.” Jarod then spoke about the car accident in which he had recently been involved. Thanks to the crucifix he wore around his neck, he had walked away unhurt from the wreck.

A close-up of his red car wrapped around a tree filled the screen.

Tom listened to Jarod Loto’s interview with a mocking expression on his face.

How many people were in the same case as Jarod, believing that it was thanks to some amulet that their life had been saved, forgetting that skilled engineers had spent lifetimes working to save others’ lives by designing airbags and other structural features that absorbed the impact in a car crashes? Poisoned by the God Virus, they forgot all those countless others who died on the road, despite having a cross around their neck or having had their bus blessed by a priest, victims who had had the delusion that the Lord Jesus Christ would guarantee their safety. Just as what got noticed was only the occasional train that arrived late, not the ninety-nine percent that were on time, people took an interest only in those few alcoholics, drug addicts or sick folk who claimed to have overcome their problem by praying to the Lord. They forgot the doctors and the medicines that had really saved them, in the same way as they forgot the ninety-nine percent of unknown patients who died praying without God taking any hand whatsoever in the matter. They even forgot the millions who died in earthquakes, tidal waves, or hurricanes that came from earthly creation and thus were the work of a child-killer God in person.

Only the lucky survivors could talk about it and thank Heaven for having saved them. The dead could no longer express their resentment against the divinity that had killed them ...

The television was now showing a short clip on Jarod Loto’s huge collection of sports cars.

The star presenter’s voice-over made the comment:

“ ... you seem to like cars a lot ...”

Tom smiled.

The mere sight of a sports car triggered in men the activation of a zone in the brain well known to scientists studying animals, because this zone was identical in all male mammals, humans included. It was related to males having striking distinctive sexual characteristics, external signs of power, thanks to which females were seduced. Examples were the long shiny canines of gorillas, the splendid horns of the ibex, or the majestic antlers of a stag.

Through buying a sports car, a man acquired such a sexual characteristic indirectly, a feature that stimulated that particular zone in the brain and soothed the dominant reptilian cortex as in all other dominant males. This ancestral animal behavior involving seduction and the domination of rival males was always present in men. A man driving a sports car could thus show off how powerful he was, which boosted his primary brain and enhanced his self-esteem, subconsciously reflecting the idea that owning such a machine, like a dazzling plumage, would entrance members of the opposite sex.

Human behavior patterns were tied to stimuli coming from the depths of time and could not easily be got rid of or controlled.

This opened the way for the extremes of the consumer society and of keeping up with the Joneses, or outdoing them in the race to acquire ...

The program continued: at the wheel of a red Ferrari convertible with the hood down, Jarod Loto was driving slowly along Sunset Boulevard, mobbed by delirious fans who were rhythmically calling out his name as they ran along the sidewalk.

"... why are you so popular?" was the question from the presenter's voiceover.

"To tell the truth, I don't know ..." Jarod's voice responded.

Tom, in contrast, did know the reason.

An experiment had been done with macaques. They could choose photographs of other monkeys in their colony, photographs associated with a reward: apple juice. The pictures of dominant males brought rewards of a smaller quantity of fruit juice than did those of ordinary monkeys, choosing which yielded a much larger amount. Despite their sweet tooth, the apes systematically chose the photographs of leading males, even though the reward was less.

They were ready to give up on their preference for sweet-stuffs in order to see the photos of these dominant males; the macaques had a primary instinct to pick out the leading animals in the group so as to be able to associate rapidly with them and avoid a good few conflicts. That was

worth reining in their liking for sweet things.

Humans, as primates, continued to have the reflex of perceiving stars instinctively as the dominant animals in the pack: to observe them, to understand their way of living and reacting, even to get close to them were important for the modern *homo sapiens* who always believed subconsciously it might be feasible to achieve an alliance of value with them, impossible though this was.

Furthermore, the action of identifying with famous and socially valued people had favorable effects on self-esteem. People who failed their exams, or in their work or love-life, diverted their bruised minds toward a football team or a film star and any success by these went some way to restoring their damaged self-image, the genuine triumph of one became, through a saving psychological identification, a compensatory success for the others, the countless people cheated by life.

A glorious life obtained falsely, second hand.

Besides, in the end, if all these stars whose stock in trade was success and triumph were loved so much, it was also through an effect of familiarity: through seeing the faces of idols everywhere, people came to like them. This phenomenon was termed ‘the effect of mere exposure’: if subjects were shown an unknown symbol twenty or thirty times one after another, they finally became convinced that this symbol had some positive meaning, although their very first impression was often negative. Going beyond cultural differences, many of our behaviors belonged to a common heritage of all humankind and this inherited characteristic relating to ‘mere exposure’ went back to the time when our ancestors had to be distrustful on their very first exposure to various unknown elements in nature that were potentially dangerous or sources of new foodstuffs that could turn out to be deadly.

The groups of hominids who by instinct had perceived unknown things as positive had paid a heavy toll, as their over-bold members had died, reducing their numbers.

In contrast, the groups of individuals who had instinctively seen unknown items as negative, but then positive, after repeated exposure to them which demonstrated that they were not dangerous, had survived their surroundings better and had transmitted this cautious innate behavior called ‘mere exposure’ to all humanity.

This made it easier to understand why brands like Coca-Cola spent incredible amounts of money just to be seen as often as possible by the maximum number of people: the effects of mere exposure influenced the choices made by consumers, who automatically turned to an image that had become positive through force of perpetual repetition. It was exactly

the same for stars and even for their dreary caterwauling if heard often enough, as it was for politicians. They had known the phenomenon for a long time, so, with an eye to giving people a positive image of them through the effect of mere exposure, they willingly took part in numerous television broadcasts in order to be seen as much as possible, just as did Jarod Loto.

“... you were also seen arm-in-arm with a beautiful Japanese model. Rumors about a secret love affair ran all round Hollywood. So how did your fiancée, Shannon, react to all these suspicions?”

As if this comment had been scripted in advance, Jarod Loto was not upset by the very personal question posed by the presenter.

“You know, I never listen to rumors ... Shannon knows I love her and that she’s my only love now. A few years back you might have seen me making out with several different actresses and it’s true I had a few affairs that came to nothing. But with Shannon, it’s serious and she knows I’ll always be faithful to her ...”

Jarod Loto was speaking forcefully, as if to convince himself of something that he knew was really impossible.

Tom smiled.

Love between men and women could be summed up by single words: ‘competition’ for the man and ‘choice’ for the woman.

Men were in a state of permanent inner competition, driven by innate programming to spread over as many partners as possible their genetic inheritance, getting their millions of spermatozoa to as great a number of eggs as they could. In the animal world, the ancestors of men had, of course, been in external competition with other species to survive, but had also and above all been in internal competition with their fellows to impose their supremacy. Hence the anecdote about the two brontosaurus running away from a tyrannosaur that aimed to devour them. One of the brontosaurus said, “It’s stupid running, we can’t run quicker than a tyrannosaur”, but the other answered, “I’m not trying to run faster than him, I’m just trying to run faster than you ...”.

This internal competition was above all sexual competition to seek out partners and transmit a genetic inheritance. Genetically ‘faithful’ males who had just one single partner had only limited numbers of descendants, while ‘unfaithful’ males had a mob of partners and numerous offspring, with the new male children reproducing the behavior inherited from their fathers: in an inexorable exponential progression, the supremacy of the faithless gene had won the upper hand in the genetic inheritance of men.

The illusory cultural desire for men to be faithful thus ran counter to

their internal inherited programming which inclined them to be fickle and have the greatest number of partners possible. Modern men had great difficulty resisting the siren call of these genetic tendencies present in them since time immemorial. They had to force themselves to dominate these inclinations and not act as their sex dictated, but rather with a noble heart through respect for women.

Instinctively aware of their own nature and thus of those of their fellow-men, identical to this, men suffered from the animal fear that their offspring would not carry their genes, giving rise to jealousy carved into the stone of their genetic inheritance. Hence they were afraid of infidelity from their partners, a female infidelity that was triggered by the primal instinct to bring the best genes to a child, even if it meant intercourse with attractive males, especially at periods of ovulation, followed by a return to the protecting male then inducing him to raise what was not his child, but the vigorous child of some other man, who had provided the offspring with health, sturdiness, or intelligence that were lacking in the poor man cheated upon.

Women, for their part, also looked on male infidelity with horror. Whilst a man would be afraid his partner might have sexual relations with other men, a woman's nightmare was that her partner might be smitten by another woman and take up with her, leaving her all alone with their children.

If, for a man, competition was the rule and meant that in the end he would never be in love for very long, a woman was guided by the concept of 'choice'. She had to make a judicious choice because she could carry only one fertile egg in her body, one child that would be born after a pregnancy requiring a huge investment. Hence, she had to pay attention to selecting the ideal partner, most likely to support the mother and child in the future.

In view of this, it might seem surprising that women let themselves be seduced by men who they knew to be unfaithful, because they had already had other partners and even other children, men who were likely to take a powder sooner or later.

The response to this was given by the behavior of a female quail shown a video of a male of the species, strutting before another female, seducing her and mating with her. As soon as the quail shown the video was brought together with this male, she would be attracted by him and consent to couple with him. From an evolutionary point of view, the reason for this oddity was that a male who had already been 'tried and tested' by other females offered a relatively good guarantee of reliability in breeding and reproduction was the greatest subconscious motivation for all living

beings.

The same was true of women.

This sort of behavior could be seen in scenes from day-to-day life: a man approaches a woman on a station platform and engages her in conversation, with it becoming quickly apparent that they hit it off together. A few yards away, another woman, hitherto indifferent, comes closer, pats her hair into place and begins to look insistently in their direction, thinking that the man must be of interest because he has been able to attract the attention of an unknown woman, paying tribute to the pragmatic reasoning that if the other woman has chosen him, she must have had good reason to do so.

The choice of sexual partners was a complex task and for a female of any species whatsoever it was difficult to know which was the right male, the one that would best provide for the future of their offspring. A female could not afford to make a mistake, so had to invest time in ensuring that she was making a good choice, which sometimes explained the length of the conversations that a man had to conduct in order to win the confidence of a beauty. In a context of competition and natural selection, such as had ruled over the evolution of living creatures, any saving of time was worth having. That was why women undertook a form of espionage: they observed which men had been chosen by other women and in a sense took advantage of the effort they had put into sorting and judging before taking their pick of the right man.

In modern times, money had pragmatically been substituted for the judgments of other women and allowed the best selection for the future of their children to be infallibly detected ...

“... yes, children. I want to have children with Shannon.”

“There are those who say you are too immature to establish a stable family and you communicate with your fists more than with any talent ...” the presenter said, referring to the brawls between Jarod and paparazzi who were not so scrupulous about respecting his private life.

“That was before the Lord Jesus Christ and Shannon came into my life. I’ve changed, I’ve grown up, thanks to them ...”

In a more confidential tone, he added:

“You know, I’m going to tell you something: apart from the Lord and Shannon, nobody knows what’s really in my heart or even in my head ...”

Tom sighed inwardly.

Jarod was wrong, as Tom also knew what the star had in his head.

Like all humans, Jarod had three brains. Each was independent, each worked for itself without any co-ordination.

The first, reptilian, brain was the first to be provided with the information that the senses perceived and it was the controller of the tyrannical minds of humans. The reptile was a dishonest liar, mischievous and sly, thieving and idle, greedy and pernicious, violent and impulsive, dominating and megalomaniac.

As for the second, mammalian, brain, it was hardly any better, as it had just one wish: to sate its desires by any means possible and in particular through the subconscious, which dictated its will to consciousness, the consciousness set in the third brain, the brain termed human.

In the end, this third brain did not succeed in imposing its intellectual supremacy on the minds of many men, because many men were not so much humans as reptiles, just like Jarod Loto.

The reptile star.

Power, sex and violence, those were the motives of reptilian men at the steering-wheel of their lives, proceeding without any truly human consciousness along the ancient route of existence. They tended to stupidity rather than humanity, humanity that was an unconscious and powerless passenger allowing itself to be driven at high speed toward a fateful U-turn that would take it back to the age of barbarous obscurantism ...

Tom frowned.

The recorded program by Jarod Loto had just been interrupted by a news flash.

Wearing the obligatory suit and tie, an announcer broke in to say that the Pope was about to make an important statement live from the Vatican.

*
* *

Cardinal Fustiger rubbed his hands together with contentment.

Sitting in front of his computer screen, he was watching the Pope's speech being broadcast live over the internet.

His pleasure was interrupted by the ringing of his telephone.

"*Pronto*," he said, picking up the handset.

"Hello, my love."

The sensuous voice of Goddess sounded in the earpiece.

"Good day," Fustiger replied. "Are you in Rome?"

"No, not really ..."

Goddess gave a little tinkling laugh.

"I'm in Bangkok."

"Why?" he asked in astonishment.

"I followed Mister Anderson. He unfortunately managed to get away from Prague. I think he's looking for another Grail that might still be in the city of Ayutthaya."

"Do you need my help?"

"In fact, I need Leo's help. Get him here quickly in your private jet, I'll be waiting for him ..."

The Cardinal looked up to the ceiling of his office.

"So you intend to meet Leo?"

"No. I'll get in touch with him on his cell phone as soon as he arrives and give him the instructions to follow."

"What do you intend to do?"

There was a short silence.

"I'll have to play it by ear, according to how things go. First of all, I'll wait and see if our Mister Anderson finds the Pontius Pilate Report in Ayutthaya, which isn't very likely, to tell the truth. After that, I'll see how matters lie and I'll have Leo there ..."

The cardinal approved.

"You know you must get Thomas Anderson out of the running at any cost. Our agreement is dependent on that ..."

"Oh, I do know, no need to remind me ..."

Irritation crept into Goddess' voice.

"You keep your promise and I'll keep mine."

"I am a man of honor," the Cardinal replied.

"And I am an exceptional person ..."

Goddess laughed briefly.

"I'll contact you later. Goodbye, my love ..."

Fustiger thoughtfully hung up the phone.

His large, bulging, dark eyes with scattered golden flecks once again focused on the screen where the Pope was still speaking in favor of Israel.

The Cardinal clenched his fist angrily.

As one threat disappeared, another that had been thought to be definitively dealt with resurfaced.

He mind went to Murphy's Law.

After the Second World War, Murphy was an American aeronautic engineer who was studying the human capacity to withstand deceleration forces. He was using a rocket-propelled sled on rails, with a hydraulic

braking assembly at the end of the run. To find out exactly what the deceleration was, he had the idea of putting strain gauges on the pilot's harness. For the first test, a chimpanzee was used as the experimental subject, being strapped into the pilot's seat, and Murphy's assistant wired up the harness to the sensors.

However, after the test, Murphy saw that these strain gauges had a reading of zero for the deceleration forces, which was, of course, impossible. Aghast, he realized that his assistant had fitted the sensors backward. Frustrated by the failure caused by his assistant's error, he said something on the lines of: 'If that guy has any way of making a mistake, he will.', which he later expanded to 'If there's more than one way to do a job, and one of those ways will result in disaster, then somebody will do it that way'.

This phrase became well known after a press conference when Captain Stapp, the test pilot, was asked how it was that nobody had been seriously hurt during the numerous tests. Stapp responded that this had happened because his team had taken 'Murphy's Law' into consideration, explaining what law that was. He added that in general it was essential to look at every single possibility before a test, especially any that could have a bad outcome.

From that day on, a good number of similar maxims had been thought up, mostly by unknown geniuses, principles covered by the umbrella term 'Murphy's Law'.

Cardinal thought through a few of these variants: 'Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.'; 'Even if nothing can possibly go wrong, something will.'; 'If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.'; 'If you perceive that there are four possible ways in which a procedure can go wrong, and circumvent these, then a fifth way, unprepared for, will promptly develop.'; 'If everything seems to be going well, you have obviously overlooked something.'; 'Every solution breeds new problems.' ...

Fustiger grunted.

He thought he had finally got rid of the Thomas Anderson problem. However, as in Murphy's Laws, what ought to have gone smoothly had run off the rails.

Thomas Anderson's life was now once again in his hands and in the eyes of Deus, Fustiger would be held responsible for it.

His face grim, the Cardinal picked up his telephone and dialed a number.

“Get my plane ready, please,” he said in Italian.

At the other end of the wire, the pilot’s voice inquired what would be the destination.

“Bangkok,” Fustiger replied. “Bangkok ...”

*

* *

Tom was astounded.

As far as he knew, this was the first time ever that a Pope had dared to bring in his Papal Infallibility to take sides in a political problem such as Israel’s.

By doing so, by recognizing the legitimacy of the Promised Land and the extension of territory desired by the Israeli Government, the Pope was bringing weighty support, an almost divine backing, to the Jewish State.

The Pope had spoken briefly but clearly: he had reminded people that, by virtue of the divine help promised to him through the person of Saint Peter, he enjoyed the infallibility which Jesus Christ had graciously bestowed upon his Church. The Pope had also spoken of the Old Testament, Moses and the Promised Land, God’s right to give his Chosen People what He had created. The Pope had quoted verses from the Bible that proved that the territories claimed by the Jewish State belonged to this people by divine right and that nobody should or could oppose the divine will included in the Holy Scriptures.

As God’s official representative on Earth, the Pope was the guarantor of the application of God’s will as revealed to men and he had exhorted the governments and peoples of the whole world to obey God lest otherwise they suffered from God’s righteous anger ...

Tom wondered what the reason might be for this charade, what hidden factor was truly at stake so as to have pushed the Pope into acting in this way.

Through this Papal intervention, Western governments could gain some sort of legitimacy for the imposition of a resolution of the United Nations recognizing the territories that were to be annexed by Israel through brute force and the millions of Christians all over the planet would simply say ‘amen’ to that.

Tom sighed.

The Pope had not felt it appropriate to remind Christians unaware of the fact that it had been only in 1870 that Papal Infallibility had been voted in by the First Vatican Council on the order of the Blessed Pope Pius IX. Six

years earlier, this Catholic despot had published a document listing the numerous ‘errors’ of modern thought: civil marriage, tolerance in Catholic countries of the rites of other religions, freedom of religion, the possibility of progress through reason, non-intervention by the Church in sciences, criticism of the temporal power of the Pope ... To ensure that his obscurantist condemnations would never be questioned, the megalomaniac Pius IX had finally had his Papal Infallibility voted in with retro-active effect.

Hence, no Pope had ever made a mistake, they could not and would not ever err ...

Furthermore, in 1909, thanks to this Papal Infallibility, Pius X, the successor to the Blessed Pius IX had not made any mistake in affirming the irrefutably historical nature of the events recounted in Genesis: the Earth had thus been created by God in a few days, woman had indeed been modeled out of one of Adam’s ribs, Noah, Abraham and the patriarchs were indubitably historical figures ...

Tom smirked ironically.

That showed just what the Papal infallibility put forward by the Pope was really worth.

Yet Tom knew that many Christians would swallow this lie by the Church, one of so many.

He clenched his fist.

The lies had gone on for too long.

Tom just had to find the Grail in Ayutthaya and, with or without the Pontius Pilate Report in his hands, he would hurry back to France and have ‘The God Virus’ rapidly issued by a fresh publishing house. His current publisher, Gabriela Da Silva, known as ‘Goddess’ from her initials GDS, had obviously let him down and Tom would manage without her to reveal to all and sundry the secret of Christ and his manipulative Church, the tale of Josiah and his Promised Land. He had to do it in memory of Martial, so that his friend would not have died for nothing, and so that, thanks to the millions of copies that would be sold, his daughter Anna-Katerine would benefit financially from the work done by her late father.

“We’re leaving for Ayutthaya tomorrow,” Tom said, turning to Camilla as she sat beside him.

The young woman put down her cup of tea.

“Do you think we’ll find the Grail?”

“I hope so. Abbé Boudet had considerable hopes it was still in that town.”

“How did he know there was a Pontius Pilate Report hidden there?”

“Boudet bought a stolen letter, a very old letter originally addressed to Louis XIV. The letter was written from Thailand by a mysterious figure who called himself ‘The Antichrist’. Boudet didn’t succeed in discovering the true identity of this ‘Antichrist’, but when it comes down to it, that’s not really of any importance. The Antichrist was in possession of a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report, a copy in Latin that he most probably had received as a family heirloom from some distant relative who had belonged to the Knights Templar. In his letter, the Antichrist warned the Sun King about his intention to evangelize the Kingdom of Siam ...”

Seeing Camilla’s rather perplexed look, Tom felt he had better run back over the period of history in question.

“The Kingdom of Siam is the old name for Thailand, and in those days the Kingdom was ruled by King Narai. This King had a political adviser, a Greek called Constantine Phaulkon, an upstart adventurer who had a gift for foreign languages and had won Narai’s confidence. The political situation in Siam was delicate, since the Dutch were threatening to destabilize the country by their commercial and naval strength, or even take control of Siam. So, Phaulkon got the idea of playing the French card against Dutch power, as a political and military counterweight. French missionaries had already been in the region for a good while and Phaulkon convinced them it was in France’s interests to build close links with Siam. These missionaries echoed Phaulkon’s statements, reporting King Narai was a great admirer of the Sun King and he was inclined to convert to Catholicism, with all his people. So, in 1685, King Louis XIV sent off a diplomatic mission to Siam, taking along with it Jesuits who thought they were off to convert Narai and the Siamese to Catholicism. But the ambassadors were surprised to learn that Narai wasn’t at all willing to become a Catholic, nor were his people. Phaulkon’s comments had been exaggerated and given an over-optimistic tone by the missionaries already in Siam who had clearly been hoping for battalions of monks to come ashore and help them convert the country by force. After this, King Louis XIV toned down his objective of converting the place to Catholicism and France just established commercial and military links with Siam ...”

Tom paused briefly before going on:

“That’s where our Antichrist comes onto the scene. He seems likely to have been in the second group sent in 1687: that was in fact a military mission with over six hundred soldiers who settled down in Siam for some time. So, among those officers and other ranks, there was the man we know as Antichrist. He wrote the famous letter sent to Louis XIV that Boudet bought. The letter said the Antichrist had a copy of the Pontius Pilate Report and had given it to a high-ranking Buddhist attached to a

temple in the city of Ayutthaya, the capital of Siam at that time. The Antichrist said if France and the Vatican tried to convert the Siamese people to Catholicism by force, the secret of Christ would be revealed to the Siamese to dissuade them from taking up this religion and this secret of Christ would even end up by spreading like wildfire as far as Europe ...”

Camilla nodded and asked:

“Why did the Antichrist do that?”

“It’s hard to tell ... but I think he didn’t want to see the Christian religion and its mythical Jesus Christ spread round Siam by religious fanaticism, with all that means in terms of massacres, blood-baths and forced conversions, just like what was going on in those days in another continent, America ...”

Tom stayed silent for a moment, then added:

“Be that as it may, despite all its missionaries, Christianity has never been able to penetrate Siam or elsewhere in Asia, because of its intolerance for the other religions present.”

“Its intolerance?” Camilla queried.

“Yes, its intolerance. The Christian religion is intolerant, since it believes all other religions are wrong and it alone can ensure salvation for the soul. That justifies in its own eyes its intolerance and its systematic desire to forbid other competing religions so it can save humanity, as it deludes itself into thinking. Whether it’s in China, Japan, or elsewhere, all the rulers of Asian countries rejected this intolerant religion and its fanatical missionaries who dictated to them, saying they should ban all other cults ...”

Tom ceased speaking and there was an awkward silence from Camilla.

“Do you think that Pilate’s manuscript is still in Ayutthaya?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know ... We’ll see tomorrow ... I ...”

Tom frowned.

He turned around and his steely blue eyes gazed round the tea room.

Nobody.

Yet Tom had the feeling he was being watched.

“A problem?” Camilla inquired.

Tom shook his head.

“No, it’s nothing ...”

Looking worried, as he had a unsettling premonition, Tom smiled at Camilla.

A smile that he hoped seemed reassuring.

Massachusetts 1692. Salem

Young Sarah was running as fast as she could.

She had kilted up her long dress and was holding it in her delicate hands. She was out of breath and her legs ached, but she had to try to escape through the forest.

Daylight was beginning to fade rapidly and she would soon be surrounded by total darkness.

Her worst fear.

She could already feel the forces of evil coming toward her and their cries inexorably getting closer and closer.

As she ran, she was bold enough to turn and look to see how far away her pursuers were.

An unwise move.

Her tiny foot caught in a tree-root, she fell flat on her face and from her ankle there came a sharp snapping noise.

Sarah shrieked like a wounded animal.

Her face covered in mud, she desperately stabbed her fingers into the dark earth, trying to crawl onward.

She managed to cover a few yards before coming to an abrupt halt, paralyzed by sheer terror.

All around her the ferns and tree-branches were moving toward her.

Sarah screamed in fright as she saw thousands of red-eyed snakes slithering slowly toward her in order to crush her in their slimy bodies.

She began rolling around on the ground to try to escape from Satan's evil clutches.

For she knew that it was Satan who had taken possession of her body.

At first, she had not understood why she was suddenly overcome by

floods of tears for no reason, nor why she could no longer pray to the Lord Jesus Christ properly, nor why she sometimes involuntarily muttered incomprehensible words. Later, she had started to make noises like those uttered by wild animals. She had suffered from fits and episodes of paralysis and had experienced moments when she could not breathe, as if a huge weight was crushing her chest, burning with the effort to draw breath. Following these crises had come moments when she howled as if mortally wounded and, out of her mind, she had run around on all fours, baying like a dog.

Now she knew that she was possessed by the Devil, a Devil that was slyly trying to gain control over her body. Up till now, Sarah had been able to resist becoming totally dominated, but she knew that she could not fight off his absolute mastery of her forever. She already saw what he saw in his world, she had horrible visions, coming directly from the infernal kingdom of Satan: she could see what lay around Satan and these surroundings seeped through those malevolent eyes into her world.

To describe the horrors she saw was beyond words and she had hoped that the Lord Jesus Christ would come to aid her. However, even the Lord seemed powerless against the Devil ...

The baying of hounds came closer.

“There she is!” cried out a voice. “Make haste!”

Lanterns flaring like the fires of Hell lit up Sarah’s face. Her eyes unfocused, she vaguely saw the devilish faces leaning over her.

“She is a witch!” rang out a man’s voice. “Kill her!”

“We cannot be sure of that,” protested another.

“We can indeed be sure that she is a witch,” said a woman. “For did she not confess to me that she was possessed of Satan?”

“You have truly heard!” said the man’s voice triumphantly. “Let her be hanged!”

Among the group of villagers, some opposed this.

“We have not the full evidence needed. One possessed may not be a witch ...”

“Hearken to me,” cut in a man, “there is a simple means by which we may know if Sarah be a witch or no ...”

The man explained his plan briefly and it was approved by a majority.

“Hold her fast, let her not escape, for I shall return speedily ...”

A quarter of an hour later, the man finally came back with a piece of cake wrapped in a cloth.

“This is a morsel of cake which I found in Sarah’s lodging ...”

The man approached Sarah, who was pinned to the ground by powerful arms. By the light of the lanterns, the young woman was raised up, her dress pulled back and her legs spread.

“Make water, witch, make water ...”

Sarah struggled to get free, but a violent punch to her lower belly knocked all the fight out of her and, sobbing, she began to urinate on the piece of cake that was held against her private parts.

The man took the cake dampened with her urine and gave it to one of the hounds being held on their leashes.

The animal wolfed down the piece of food.

The group of villagers stood in silence.

“Nothing is happening,” said somebody after a while. “Sarah is no witch, for were she one she must have felt great pain ...”

“Truly said,” said another, more boldly, “when the hound ate the cake, were Sarah really a witch, she must have cried out in pain, by reason of the invisible particles that are in the water of all witches ...”

There were nods and assenting murmurs. It was indeed well known that the poisonous and malignant particles that were to be found in the urine of witches were tightly linked to their whole malevolent being. When they were eaten by a dog, the witch herself must logically suffer extreme pain.

“Set her free.”

Sarah was gently propped up against a tree.

“We were mistaken. We came near committing grave injustice ...”

The group of villagers discussed the matter together for some ten minutes.

Then the conversation was brusquely interrupted.

The dog to which the cake had been given began to growl and whine strangely. By the light of the lanterns, the horrified villagers watched a scene of possession: the dog began biting at stones so fiercely that its fangs were broken, then, with its mouth bleeding, it tried to leap at the throat of its master, who barely managed to control it with the leash, his hands trembling.

Three men were needed to bring down the animal with blows from pitchforks, so uncontrollable and dangerous had it become.

“It was the mildest of all my hounds,” sobbed its owner. “I cannot understand ...”

If he in his sorrow was not able to grasp the evidence for a moment, that was not the case for all.

“Sarah is truly a witch!” cried out somebody. “Kill her!”

“Kill her,” shrieked another, “let her be hanged this instant!”

“No,” rang out a dissenting voice, “she must be taken before the Governor ...”

“Why so? She is guilty, she is a witch, as all have seen! Kill her!”

The villagers flung themselves on Sarah as she lay against the tree. As if awakened to the reality around her, Sarah started to scream, scratch and bite. She tried to free herself from those hands that burned her like the bites of serpents. However, they were too strong by far and she was rapidly bound.

Then, as if in a nightmare, she saw a noose put round her neck.

In a last moment of clarity, she realized that nobody would find her body, for the villagers would burn her corpse and none would ever learn what had happened.

Save for her murderers.

And the eye of God.

44

Resurrection

A cohort appeared, marching up the gentle western slope.

At its head, Brutus climbed the last few yards of Mount Golgotha. Meeting Jews who were running down in panic, some of the soldiers could not help commenting aloud on the earthquake that had just occurred.

“None of this is a good omen,” said one of them, looking up at the black clouds that entirely covered the sky. It was dark in the very middle of the day.

“What if this Christ were really a son of the gods?” added another. “They say that he ...”

“Silence in the ranks,” rapped out Brutus. “The first man to say another word will find my sword in his belly ...”

The centurion hastened the pace.

Forming a long column that pushed its way through the still-present crowd by brute force, the legionaries advanced onto the wide Golgotha plateau where the three crosses stood. On the command of their officer, the soldiers formed a semicircle around the place of execution.

Two soldiers made toward the first thief crucified. Using their lance shafts, they broke the bones of his legs. The unfortunate man gave a hysterical shriek like a pig being slaughtered and collapsed, held grotesquely upright by his wrists tied to the crossbar. He could no longer hold himself up on his outstretched legs as he had done until then, so his chest was compressed and he stifled to death in just a few minutes. While the pair of legionaries went off to deal with the other brigand, Brutus made for Christ’s cross.

With a satisfied air, the centurion tensed his huge biceps.

The prisoner was well and truly dead. There was no need to break his bones to kill him. Having completed his task of finishing off the second

thief, one of the two legionaries approached Christ. To ensure that he was really dead, he stabbed him with his lance. The long blade went into the ribs and through the whole body.

A mixture of blood and water gushed from the wound.

Brutus yelled an order to his troops. They immediately deployed to disperse the remaining spectators. These docilely left the hill. Many of them went off satisfied that they had been present at the crucifixion of the false Christ. As they saw it, the earthquake was just a coincidence and not at all any sort of remonstrance by Yahweh. Others, particularly the foreign merchants there for the festivities, were much more circumspect and wondered whether they might indeed have witnessed the putting to death of the King of the Jews, as the inscription at the top of his cross had stated.

A divine king.

His eyes full of tears, the apostle John left Golgotha, pushed forward by the Romans' lance-shafts. Mary and two other women were unwilling refused to go back into the town. They hid behind bushes at the top of the downward slope, praying for Jesus, whose body they could see in the distance.

After making certain that no group of Temple partisans was lurking there with the crazy idea of stealing Christ's body by force to exhibit it as a macabre trophy all round Jerusalem, Brutus and his cohort were able to head back to the Antonia fortress.

Posted to watch over Golgotha, the troop of legionaries just arrived from Helvetia remained on guard.

A starless night finally came and the shadows completely devoured the last traces of daylight.

Here and there, the camp fires of the soldiers picketed on the edge of the sinister hill were lit. Shivering but unwilling to listen to reason, Mary was still there, huddling in the arms of a close relative and of young Maria Magdalena. Mary was not prepared to abandon Jesus' body; she was not resigned to his death and ruled out mourning for that son to whom she had given birth.

On the gentle western slope, two lights appeared and moved swiftly nearer.

In the light of the naphtha lamps held by the figures that passed close by, Mary recognized the garments of Temple priests.

Pharisee's garb.

A score of yards farther on, brandishing a torch above his head, a legionary called on the two clergymen to stop.

“Halt!”

The Pharisees obeyed.

“I am Joseph of Arimathea and a member of the Sanhedrin; this man is Nicodemus. We have come to recover the body of Jesus the Nazarene so as to give it decent burial.”

“Oh, come now!”

The legionary snorted at the incongruousness of the request.

“What manner of folly is this?” he asked, lowering his torch. “Can you not smell the stench hanging on the air? It is the stink of corpses rotting and gnawed at by vermin ... No man crucified has the right to any form of burial. Go, leave this place ...”

Sturdily built, the man called Joseph stepped forward, proffering a parchment.

“I bear authority from Pontius Pilate.”

The legionary snatched the document and stared at it for more than a minute, hesitant as to what attitude he should adopt. Shining out in the darkness, another torch drew close: Marcus, the former commander of Pilate personal guard, inquired as to what had brought the two Pharisees there.

“Let them proceed,” was his order to the legionary after he had been shown the parchment. “Pontius Pilate’s orders are not to be questioned.”

Marcus went back into the night. The legionary allowed Joseph and Nicodemus to pass.

Mary and the other two women hurried to follow them. Since they emerged from nowhere, the legionary thought that they must be in the company of the two men and he permitted them to join the two.

When the trio of women caught up with the Pharisees, Joseph seemed upset by their unexpected arrival. Nicodemus, on the other hand, made no objection at all.

Quite the contrary.

He wanted to talk, to share the feelings that were overwhelming him at so unusual a moment. Grasping that he was in the presence of close disciples of Christ, Nicodemus opened up to them.

In the Temple, he had overheard a conversation between Joseph of Arimathea and his servant; Joseph was instructing him to go and buy cloths to shroud Christ’s corpse. Nicodemus had pestered Joseph to get an explanation from him. After some hesitation, realizing that in any case the whole town would learn of his action the very next day, Joseph had admitted that in secret he was a fervent disciple of Christ, whom he

believed to be the Son of God. He confessed this to Nicodemus all the more easily because he knew that the old man had himself had a private conversation with Jesus and that the myopic clergyman had been charmed by his esoteric teachings.

So as to give Christ decent burial, Joseph had had no hesitation in asking for an audience with Pilate and pressing him to give him the disposal of the executed man's corpse. Pilate had consented to his request and had given him a document to this effect.

Nicodemus had been moved by all these revelations, by this secret conversion of the high-ranking Sanhedrin member. He was astounded that Pontius Pilate had authorized the burial of Christ. Was this not an avowal, late though it might be, by the Roman in authority that he regretted having had Jesus crucified and that he now saw him as the Son of God?

Nicodemus was sure of it.

At the insistence of the elderly man, Joseph of Arimathea had agreed to his accompanying him and the two men had set out for Golgotha. On the way, Nicodemus had bought a mixture of myrrh and aloes.

They were now preparing to release Christ's body from the gloomy place of execution.

At the foot of the cross, raising his naphtha lamp at arm's length, Joseph of Arimathea stared into the darkness.

As if he feared that evil forces might see what he was readying himself to do, he asked Nicodemus to set down his lamp a few yards from there and did so himself with his own. In the half darkness, barely making out the shape of the cross, the three women waited anxiously for a chance to touch Jesus' body one last time. From his knapsack, Joseph took out a short crowbar, which he handed to Nicodemus. Then he took out a rope ending in a noose. With a skilful flick of the hand, he threw this lasso, which closed around the wooden upright.

Tensing his muscles and leaning slightly backward, he grunted softly to indicate that he was ready.

Nicodemus knelt at the right-hand side of the cross and stuck the crowbar into the hole at its base. Despite his considerable age and his scrawny arms, he was still able to lift the weight without difficulty. He used his shoulder to push it farther out of true.

It tilted little by little to the side, slowed in its movement by Joseph. When the left crossbar touched the rocky soil of Golgotha, Nicodemus guided the opposite one to the ground.

In the dim light of the naphtha lamps, Joseph took the crowbar from Nicodemus' hand and pulled out the nails from the crucified man's limbs.

Then he cut the bonds around the wrists. While the women were silently mourning over Jesus, Joseph took a shroud cloth and gently wrapped it around the head into which the crown of thorns was still incrustated.

Mary fell at her son's feet and kissed them. In the twilight, sobbing, young Maria Magdalena did likewise.

Light broke through the clouds in the sky. The moon's rays made their way down to the place of execution. When the light brightly illuminated the body torn in all its limbs, Mary remained frozen for a moment before letting out a small cry. Her hand started trembling and she brought it to her mouth.

Joseph hurried to get out of his knapsack other shroud cloths and wound them skillfully around the rest of the body. His task accomplished, he straightened up. With the hem of his sleeve, he wiped away the sweat from his forehead that was flowing down as far as his black beard. After an instant, he leaned down once more, raised the body and supported it on his back and shoulder.

Nicodemus picked the two naphtha lamps up and led the group on its way. The priests and the three women walked silently in the night. Clenching his teeth as he bore the heavy load, Joseph carried Jesus at a pace that he tried to make as rapid as he could. They arrived at a tomb cut into the rock.

Bending over, Joseph went down the stone steps and laid Christ's body on the ground. Nicodemus followed him and used the mixture of myrrh and aloes in accordance with Jewish custom.

Then the two Pharisees climbed back up.

"To whom does this sepulcher belong?" inquired Maria Magdalena as they emerged.

"It is my own," replied Joseph. "It was intended for my burial ..."

Rolling across it a large stone set there for that purpose, he sealed its entrance thoroughly.

Mary remained motionless and silent for an instant before the tomb of her son. Then she stepped slowly backward before turning completely away from the tomb.

Under the black clouds veiling the silvery moon, chasing a shadow that no longer existed, Mary ran off into the night.

For a long while she made her way gropingly through the surrounding gloom.

The light of day finally drove away the darkness. A chilly morning rose over a shivering Jerusalem.

All through the town, rumors had not stopped ceaselessly circulating by

word of mouth: when Christ had died, the seals of tombs had been broken and they had opened to allow the spirits of the dead to come back to life. Many people had seen the dead all swathed in white emerging from their graves to haunt the city with their presence.

Commentaries on the supernatural events surrounding the death of Jesus spread like wildfire throughout the city and many townsfolk were convinced that these were a divine authentication from Yahweh, mourning his Son.

Caiaphas, for his part, scorned this chatter. He was in a deadly temper.

Joseph of Arimathea's betrayal had taken him by surprise. The man had not even deigned to come at the Chief Priest's bidding to explain his actions. The facts were clear, however. Caiaphas had already interrogated Joseph's servant. In any case, this man had spoken to the other servants in the household as soon as dawn had woken them and the news had spread very quickly through the whole Pharisee community.

The previous night, before falling asleep, Caiaphas had enjoyed himself, picturing Jesus rotting on the cross for some days before finally being devoured by dogs avid for human flesh.

His dream was not coming true and this worried him.

For Zechariah had just reported to him that yet another rumor was running round the town.

It was said that Jesus had himself stated that if he died on the cross he would come back to life three days later. By stealing his body, his most faithful disciples might well induce people to believe that this prophecy had come true and this final swindle would be even worse than the others. That would give rise to a divine legend about Christ and thus simultaneously destabilize the Temple.

That could not be allowed to happen.

Caiaphas walked out of the Temple.

Once outside, he directed his greenish-yellow eyes with their slight squint to the visible crack that the earthquake had caused. He stopped for an instant to give instructions to the workers who were to fill up the gaping fissure, then he headed determinedly toward the Antonia fortress.

A legionary brought him into a long bare corridor while he waited for Pontius Pilate to consent to allow him an audience. Caiaphas recalled that the previous day he had stood patiently for a good while in this same restricted space before the procurator had received him. For fear that an army of Christ's disciples might come to set him free from his cross at the last minute, alleging that it was not appropriate to leave the crucified men exposed in that way on a holy day, the Chief Priest had asked Pilate to

finish them off by having their legs broken. Pilate had agreed to his request.

“You have written a title saying ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’, have you not?” had been the question that Caiaphas put to him next. “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews’, but rather ‘This man said: I am King of the Jews’...”

“What I have written, I have written,” had been the comment with which Pilate had interrupted him in a sharp tone.

The interview ended on those words, Caiaphas realizing that he could not ask for too much from the Roman, who had lost face when Jesus was publicly condemned.

However, Caiaphas had had no alternative. He had by far preferred to rouse Pilate’s wrath than to leave Jesus alive.

The divine child still alive was too great a threat to the Temple.

A legionary came to call Caiaphas.

In the high-ceilinged, spacious audience chamber with its tall white pillars before which the soldiers on guard seemed as motionless as stone statues, the Chief Priest did not feel at all intimidated. He walked forward, head held high, till he reached Pilate’s throne. Rubbing his long, thin, hairy legs, the procurator stared at him in silence, ironically, as if savoring the trick he had played by authorizing Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus.

Caiaphas realized that it was just pettiness on the part of a man who had been publicly affronted. For a start, Pilate had had the sign fixed at the top of Jesus’ cross to humiliate the Jewish people. Caiaphas knew this: it was all mean-spirited vengeance supposed to assuage the rage that must be boiling inside him. Caiaphas had expected it.

However, the episode of Joseph had taken him by surprise.

“What do you wish?” asked Pilate harshly after a brief delay while he rubbed his hand over his sparse pepper-and-salt hair.

Pilate, wearing a long white toga, with his long, straight nose, put a sour look on his face as he cast an eye up and down Caiaphas, a look that was now definitely scornful.

“Sir,” said Caiaphas reverently, “we remember that the deceiver said, while he was still alive, that after three days he would rise again. Command, therefore, that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away and say to the people that he is truly risen from the dead. This last imposture would be worse than all other and would risk stirring up grave troubles in the town ...”

“There can be no question of my legionaries standing watch over a tomb,” cut in Pilate.

His fiery look bored into Caiaphas' eyes. He remained silent for a few seconds, then added in a tone that made some attempt at greater affability:

"You Pharisees have a guard, have you not? Go your way and make the tomb as secure as you can. This I authorize you to do."

This sudden kindness was strange and Caiaphas asked himself if the Roman might not be saying that to make mock of him. However, Pilate signed a permit allowing him to post a detachment of Temple guards around the tomb that had initially been intended for Joseph of Arimathea.

Caiaphas bowed respectfully and left the palace. As he walked, he thought of Pilate's volatile temperament. His sudden changes of mood and his odd actions were really strange, indeed incomprehensible. Caiaphas was close to believing that the procurator was not right in the head. It seemed that it was a common fate among Romans to be driven mad by power. Caiaphas, in contrast, would not be driven crazy when the Temple became all-powerful. He would know how to keep a cool head on his shoulders.

He walked into the Temple and made for the sanctuary. Once there, he summoned Zechariah to give him precise orders. The commander of the guard assembled an impressive squad of men. They made for the tomb and were deployed all around it, so as to ensure a permanent watch.

Caiaphas was satisfied.

Everything was finally returning to its proper order. He knew that the gossip that was still a talking point for the inhabitants of Jerusalem would be certain to fade away after a few days: Jesus' corpse would not rise from among the dead and would eventually rot and be eaten by worms. Then the disciples and other sympathizers blinded to the truth by this false Christ would have no choice but to turn to the Temple. Especially when the hordes of possessed came down on the city and only Caiaphas had the divine power to stop this wave of humans become beasts.

Caiaphas cheered up at the thought of this glorious future just over the horizon. However, on the evening of the second day, while dining serenely in his palace, he was surprised to see Zechariah unexpectedly turn up in his dwelling. Looking terrified, the commander of his personal guard gave him a detailed report of the events that had taken place just after sunset.

Caiaphas almost choked when he was told that Jesus' body was no longer lying in its sepulcher. Zechariah had to repeat his step-by-step account of what had happened several times at the insistence of Caiaphas, who was groping to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"What then?" asked Caiaphas, finally grasping what had occurred.

“Then? Well ... you see ... when I found that the sepulcher was empty, it served no further purpose to remain in that place. I ordered the men to return. They are in the courtyard and await your orders ...”

Feeling himself at fault, Zechariah lowered his head.

Caiaphas was fuming with rage. He clenched his fist, itching to strike Zechariah for not having been capable of ensuring the security of Jesus’ tomb.

“What shall we say?” asked Zechariah, regaining some confidence.

“What tale can you tell?” spat out Caiaphas. “I would not wish this to become known, but I am sure that those serving-women have already spread the news around ...”

Thinking of the serving-women who had been present at the moment when the body was removed, Caiaphas angrily combed his white beard with his fingers. After a long minute’s thinking, he spoke to Zechariah:

“If any man asks you, you will say that the disciples of Christ came by night and stole him away while you and your men slept, so as to make the people believe in a resurrection. That is all. Not one word more. Do you understand?”

Zechariah nodded in silence. Caiaphas gave him a large sum of money and ordered him to spread what he had just said all around as soon as possible. Paid to pass on the news as Caiaphas wished it reported, Jews from different backgrounds and neighborhoods began to tout it about the city streets that very evening.

However, an incredible tale was already spreading as fast as a horse could gallop throughout the town, driving out any other version of the news.

This tale was the one that the Temple serving-women had told.

Five of them had gone to take a snack to the guards on duty at Christ’s tomb. Heavily armed, some sixty men had taken turns to mount watch over the tomb day and night. On that second night at their post, they had felt the earth start quaking. The servants had fallen to the ground, trembling with fear. Zechariah had shouted out orders to his men, who had turned out rapidly and formed a semicircle around the sepulcher.

A luminous shape had descended from the sky.

Despite the seal that the guards had previously fixed on the stone, it had rolled to one side, leaving the entry to the tomb open. The shining form had then taken on the appearance of a being with a glowing face dressed in a garment as white as snow. It had come and sat on the stone. The guards had been ready to cross swords with this angel from God. However, they had found themselves no longer capable of the slightest movement. Stiff

as corpses, they had been totally paralyzed.

“Fear nothing,” was what the apparition had said to the women. “You seek Jesus, who was crucified; he is not here, for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”

For fear of triggering the anger of the glowing angel if they did not obey, two of the servants had climbed to their feet. Shaking in their shoes, they had gone into the sepulcher which was as bright as a sunny day.

It was empty.

“Go quickly and tell his disciples that the Son of God is risen from the dead,” had been the luminous creature’s next utterance. “Say that he goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him.”

The five servants had then taken to their heels as fast as they could go, crazed by the vision they had just had. For several more minutes, the angel had seemed to enjoy the spectacle of the guards at its mercy. Then it had disappeared in an instant, like a puff of smoke. Gradually getting back the ability to move, the guards and their commander had been able to do nothing but note that Christ’s body had really disappeared.

All through Jerusalem, the serving-women’s story set people’s fervor ablaze and many were expecting to see the Messiah returned to life.

Maria Magdalena was not among them. She had shut herself away in an ancient building in the old town and had heard nothing of the events that had happened during the night.

That morning, with pale and wan sunshine barely beginning to push back the night, she made for Jesus’ tomb. Her slender figure stopped for an instant, overcome by a strange dizziness. She shook her head and her long, curly, red hair that fell over her slim shoulders waved slowly. Her small nose wrinkled with pain and she grimaced for a few seconds, rubbing a hand over her belly. Then her sweet, still almost childish, face returned to its natural beauty and she set out on her way once again.

Yesterday she had taken this path to go and see the tomb from a distance, but she had not dared to draw close because of the guards. Today she hoped to summon up the courage necessary to bear the lecherous looks of those men and beg them to allow her to approach the sepulcher.

The relative of Mary, Jesus’ mother, had promised to join her at the tomb. With her beside her, Maria Magdalena would be bold enough to face the guards.

She hastened her pace and her sandals, whose laces clasped her slender, golden-skinned legs, slapped against the dusty surface of the path. She mechanically raised a hand to check that the aromatic spices that she had prepared were still safe in her bag. The rough cloth of the haversack she

had slung over one shoulder rubbed painfully against her delicate skin. Maria paid no attention to this. Her green eyes went to the top of the slope up which she was climbing.

At the summit, Mary's relative was already awaiting her.

As she lived outside the city of Zion, this elderly, white-haired lady was as in the dark as Maria about the disappearance of Jesus' body. They exchanged just a few words, then walked on together, reaching Christ's final resting place.

They were amazed to see that the Temple soldiers were there no more and that the stone no longer blocked the entrance to the sepulcher. Somewhat apprehensive, they walked forward then went down the steps cut into the rock.

His back to them, wearing a white robe, a young man was kneeling on the ground.

The elderly lady let out a small cry and the stranger turned rapidly.

"Have no fear," said he. "I know that it is Jesus the Nazarene whom you seek, he who was crucified. He is not here. Look, see the place where they laid him. He is no longer there; he is risen. Go your way, tell his disciples and the one called Peter that he is gone before you into Galilee. There you shall see him, as he said to you."

Fearfully, the two women nodded their heads in silence and retreated prudently under the amused gaze of the young man with his beardless face.

Once outside, Maria Magdalena threw down her bag and left her companion behind, running till she was breathless. Turning back over and again for fear she was being followed, she zigged and zagged in her route to reach the precise spot for which she was making.

Outside the town, a modest whitish house stood in the midst of an abandoned olive grove. It was in this place, which they had kept secret, that the apostles had taken refuge. Maria hammered on the locked door. At her insistent repeated knocking, somebody finally came to the door. Prudently, Simon Peter opened it just a crack and let the young woman slip in. With a quick glance at the surroundings, he secured the house once again, putting a large wooden bar across the door.

"They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher!" said Maria, short of breath and red of face. "And I do not know where they have laid him ..."

She told them what had just happened.

The eleven apostles looked at her in embarrassed silence. On modest chairs, well worn by years of use, Christ's lieutenants were sitting around a large rectangular table. Apart from a couple of other elderly pieces of

furniture, including a rickety wardrobe leaning insecurely against the dirty walls, the house's single room was empty.

This lonely dwelling belonged to a farmer who had left everything to follow the Messiah. Abandoned since then, the humble property was awaiting the return of its owner. Simon Peter had taken advantage of his absence to shelter there. Using several disciples, including Maria Magdalena, he had contacted the other apostles scattered around the town to gather them around him.

Since Christ's death, the dissensions that had been smoldering for a long time had burst out, leading to tensions between various apostles. Nonetheless, the eleven had grasped the necessity of meeting to take stock of the terrible situation. Since the previous day they had stayed there, sleeping on the floor when fatigue overcame them, discussing all night, voices sometimes raised as they tried to impose their views on one another.

This was no longer the time for disputes. The burning question on everybody's mind was the resurrection of their Master.

In the night, John gone off to Jerusalem to get some food. He had come back empty-handed, his face as pale as if he had seen a ghost. The ten bearded men had concentrated their attention on the clean-shaven disciple and he had told them the tale of the Temple serving women. They had all been dumbfounded by this incredible revelation. Faith had lit up their spirits and many of them had hoped to see Jesus back with them very soon.

Nonetheless, Simon the Zealous had stirred up a debate, claiming that all this was just rumor orchestrated by the Temple so that the trusting apostles would make for the place of burial to check on the truth of the reports and thus fall into an ambush.

After that, suspicion had come over the apostles. Only Levi the former tax-collector and John remained certain about Christ's resurrection and they had tried in vain to convince the others.

"They have taken away the body of the Lord!" exclaimed Maria once more before the silent apostles.

Stroking a hand over his close-cropped black beard, Simon the Zealous gave her a strange look, wondering if she might not be part of the plot he was sure had been hatched by the Temple.

John spoke once more.

"You see that the tale of the serving-women is true. Maria Magdalena has brought us the proof of it. She herself has seen an angel dressed all in white, who confirmed to her the resurrection of our Lord."

Once more he fervently recounted the events that had happened at the sepulcher. Next, he went on to a description of the crucifixion at which he

had been personally present, speaking of the earthquake and the marvelous halo that had emanated from Christ's head.

Simon the Zealous grumbled. He spoke again in a further attempt to force himself on them as their legitimate leader and to dictate his view of matters.

Maria stood listening without saying a word. She was thunderstruck by what she had just heard. Was the resurrection of the Messiah really possible? After all, he had never spoken to her about it. She recalled Jesus' confidences about rebirths. She had not fully grasped the content of this esoteric apprenticeship, as Jesus had told her only one small part. However, he had never said anything about resurrection.

Interrupting the Zealous, she expressed her own doubts about the Master's return.

Then she hesitated for a few seconds, wondering whether or not she should reveal the occult teachings that Jesus had made her promise not to pass on to the others. However, he was no longer with them and it was time to share this heavy spiritual inheritance.

Fumbling for the right words for a moment, not knowing where to start, she finally spoke of the original sin of Eve and of Adam: Jesus had stated to her that it was a cleverly engineered lie, like all the Jewish scriptures, and that there had never been any sin. It was men who had brought sin into being when they behaved in conformity with the habits built into their inconstant nature. That was why Good had come down to creep into them and blend with their nature, so as to unite itself with their deepest roots.

Maria stopped for a brief moment before going on:

"All which is born, all which is created, all the elements of nature overlap and are united one with another. All that which is composed will be decomposed, all will return to its roots and matter will return to the origins of matter."

She explained that it was with this introduction that Jesus had discoursed on being attached to matter, which gave rise to an unnatural passion, creating a disturbance, a desire enslaved by the senses.

He had gone on to describe the wanderings of the soul in the otherworld and the various atmospheres with their multiple manifestations that it had to traverse by rising up to become free of the Heavenly Judgment. Like ingrained behaviors of which humans could not rid themselves, desire and ignorance inevitably chained their souls to this lower world and prevented them from access to the divine.

Every act of humans had infinite consequences for their future, from birth to death, even including their sicknesses, and distanced them from the

divine. Jesus had come among them to rid them of the ignorance and desire responsible for all evils.

“He prepared us so that we might become fully human beings. Henceforward, Jesus is present in us ...”

Tapping her chest at the level of her heart, Maria looked at the apostles one by one.

“... for it is within us that the Son of God lies, those who seek him will find him.”

To conclude, she spoke to Simon the Zealous, as if she could read the thoughts in the back of his mind.

“Set no rule other than that to which Jesus bore witness and do not add laws to those of him who made the law, so that you will not become slaves to them.”

Andrew stroked his chestnut beard. His fine and pleasant features adopted a frown and his large dark eyes reflected uncertainty.

“Tell me, what do you think of what she has just told us? For my part, I do not believe that the Master spoke thus. These thoughts differ from those which we know.”

Simon Peter concurred, approving his younger brother’s comments.

“Could it be that the Master would speak thus, with a woman, of secrets which we do not know?” asked he, as if talking to himself. “Should we change our customs and listen to this woman? Did the Master truly chose her and prefer her to us? I doubt this ...”

Unable to contain her emotions, Maria Magdalena started crying.

“My brother Peter, what is in your head? Do you believe that all on my own, in my imagination, I invented all these things? Can you think that when speaking of our Master I might lie?”

Levi came to Maria’s defense.

“Simon Peter, you have always been a hothead. I see you now attacking this woman as would do our foes. Yet, if the Master made her worthy, who are you to put her aside? Surely the Master knows her well and loved her much more than he loved us. This you know full well. Let us thus allow the Messiah to take root in us and grow. We should go forth to announce the good news of his return to all, not seeking to establish other rules, nor other laws, than those to which Jesus himself bore witness.”

Simon Peter gave no response and Simon the Zealous became upset, taking Levi’s last words as a criticism aimed at him.

A heavy silence fell.

John finally rose from his chair and spoke to them all.

“So as to clear away all doubt, we must go to see his tomb. Thither I shall go. Simon Peter, will you accompany me?”

The apostle in question slowly nodded his head.

The two men quickly left their companions and set out on their way. Keen to see what was really the case, Simon Peter walked faster and faster. No longer able to stay calm, he started running. John kept up with him without difficulty and even increased speed. After a long run, John came first to the entrance of the sepulcher.

However, he did not enter it. He leaned down and scrutinized the interior as if to ensure that it was truly empty. Simon Peter finally joined him. Panting from the intense effort, he took a moment to catch his breath. Then, he went down into the tomb.

The cloths that had shrouded Christ lay on the ground. Carefully folded, the shroud cloth that had been used to cover his head lay separately off in one corner.

John went down in his turn. They stood there in silence for several minutes, contemplating the empty tomb.

Now realizing that the tale recounted by the Temple serving-women was true, Simon Peter laid his hand on John's shoulder and suggested that they should return to tell the other apostles.

On their way, they met Maria Magdalena. She said not a word to them, her self-esteem wounded by Simon Peter's comments. Returning alone to the sepulcher, she still did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected. She expected to find his corpse there.

In the distance, she could see the entrance to the tomb where the one whom she loved so much had been laid to rest. She could not control her emotions and started crying once again. Losing Jesus had ripped her heart in two. Her face streaked with tears, she approached the sepulcher and leant down to look inside.

It was not empty.

Sitting where Jesus' body had lain, one at the head, the other at the feet, two men dressed in white stared at her. She recognized the young, clean-shaven man whom she had met previously.

“Woman, why do you weep?” asked he.

Maria looked at the two strangers. Were they angels from God? How could their presence in this place be explained if that were not the case? Yet they both seemed to have a fleshly body. However, she dared not touch them to check that this was so.

“I weep because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”

A shadow obscured the sun.

Maria turned her head. Against the light, she could only make out the vague shape of a human figure.

“Woman, why do you weep?” asked the amused voice of the new arrival. “Whom do you seek?”

She hoped that this man would be able to give her some information. He might perhaps even be the person who had carried off Christ’s body to put it in some other place.

“Sir, if you have borne him hence,” said she in a determined tone, “tell me where you have laid him and I shall take him away.”

“Maria!” chuckled the man.

Recognizing that voice, the young woman began to tremble. She slowly turned completely round and took a pace back to as to get a better view of the man obscured by the sunlight.

Then she saw him.

Dressed in a white robe, it was Jesus who was there.

Whilst he was no longer wearing the crown of thorns, the multiple long cuts on his forehead were a lasting reminder of the imposition of that bloody diadem. All trace of blood had gone from his long curly hair and his beard. All the same, his face was still swollen. The wounds of the crucifixion were still evident; his hands and bare feet bore the holes made by the nails, which had cut through the flesh and had not yet fully healed, an unhealthy-looking liquid seeping from them.

“Master ... you ... you are risen ...”

Maria tried to come close and hug him.

“No, do not touch me,” was the order he gave.

He seemed afraid of the touch of the woman’s arms, as if such a physical contact would re-open his wounds and make him faint. After an instant, he added:

“For I have not yet ascended to my Father.”

He stared at her with his blue eyes.

“Go to my brethren and say to them that I shall ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Maria nodded her head silently. She realized that the man brought back to life had not yet accomplished his divine ascension nor his definitive return to Earth. He had no longer any physical body, despite outward appearances.

An appearance identical to that of the angels in the interior of the sepulcher.

Jesus was in a transitional stage, like a chrysalis, so any human contact might disturb his transformation.

The young woman backed away. With a movement her trembling hand, she blew him a kiss. Then, she ran off.

Jesus watched her as she went away. When she disappeared in the distance, he raised his eyes to the sky.

Heavenly Father ... your will be done ...

Tears of grief ran down his face as he clenched his bruised fists.

45

Déjà Vu

The movement of the train was gently rocking the passengers.

The landscape, mostly of paddy fields, rolled by endlessly under a burning sun.

Sitting face to face, Tom and Camilla looked out on this lush green picture through an open window.

With a hot but soothing breeze blowing over his face, Tom was still worried.

At the last minute, he had chosen to take the train to go to the city of Ayutthaya instead of travelling by car, which would nonetheless have been a quicker journey than by rail.

Tom had the feeling he was being followed.

For that reason he had preferred to be in a railway carriage where he would be able to watch the comings and goings at his leisure, rather than in a car which could easily be followed by a team of professionals without the slightest suspicion.

So far, Tom had not noticed anybody suspicious, but the feeling of being tracked was not fading all the same.

A Thai came past with a box full of crushed ice and drinks.

“You like something for drink?” he asked, in an attempt at English.

“Yes,” Camilla replied in the same language. “An iced tea, please.”

She handed a hundred-baht note to the peddler.

“Tom, would you like something?” she asked.

“No, thanks ...”

The expression ‘déjà vu’ lit up in red lights in Tom’s mind.

He was certain that he had already seen this scene; that he had lived through it in identical fashion.

Tom smiled.

He had read in a scientific journal that the human brain could get out of synchronism in recording what was happening: sometimes what one had just seen in the present moment got into the part of the brain reserved for past events. That gave the individuals involved the sensation that they knew a given place or had already lived through a given situation, when in fact they had just absorbed the images. Their brains deceived them by making them believe that it was a long-past happening, already recorded and filed a good while back. A simple natural error in the 'perfect' composition of the two hemispheres.

It was as if you were recording a sequence on a videocassette player, but the machine had a one-second delay, so the recording was replayed almost immediately, giving the sensation you had already seen it.

Martial had put forward another, much simpler, hypothesis to explain the sensation of *déjà vu*: when somebody looks at a familiar scene, the zones in the brain used to detect novelties remain at rest, but they are systematically activated when faced with a new situation. If these zones suffered a brief blip through a moment of tiredness or stress, an unknown scene might then be perceived as familiar by the mind.

The sensation of *déjà vu* was just a minor glitch in the brain.

"Please, ticket ..."

Tom raised his head.

The ticket-inspector in his brown uniform and peaked cap was holding out his hand toward him.

Tom handed over his own ticket and Camilla's.

The inspector quickly scrawled something on them with his pen, handed them back to Tom and turned to a couple in their forties sitting on the other side of the carriage.

Tom had heard the couple talking: they were Italians who clearly did not speak English and they were at a loss how to tell the inspector that the woman had lost her ticket. While the man was clearly European, his wife, with her swarthy skin, looked Asiatic and could easily be taken for a pure-bred Thai.

When the inspector saw her, he smiled mockingly: he had mentally classified the woman as a prostitute accompanying a passing sex-tourist. With a haughty air and looking down on her, the inspector asked her something sharply in Thai.

However, the woman replied in Italian, saying she could not speak either Thai or English.

The inspector's haughty attitude disappeared in a flash, and without

thinking he bowed slightly.

Tom intervened and acted as interpreter. The situation was quickly resolved, with the Italian paying for another ticket and the inspector going off to check on other passengers.

Tom thoughtfully went over in his mind the episode he had just witnessed.

The reptilian side of the average *homo sapiens* obeyed every form of social hierarchy and before anything else, in the first instants of any meeting, tried to work out which place it occupied in that hierarchical scale, a little like dogs that sniffed one another to discover which had dominant or dominated status. Always wishing to dominate as soon as there was a chance to do so, to rise as high as possible in the hierarchy, 'to get to be the cat's whiskers', as Martial put it, the reptile rapidly judged others on outward appearances, so as to establish relationships of dominant and dominated or of equals. Sometimes appearances were deceptive, as with the Italian woman who had proved to have a clearly higher social status than the ticket-inspector. So, he had unconsciously pulled in his horns and returned tranquilly to his correct ranking.

However, it did happen that what was called the 'check-point syndrome' broke up the instinctively established social hierarchy.

Martial had travelled in Africa and had crossed the path of many a minor local official manning a check-point in the middle of nowhere in some desert zone where the only usable road had to be kept under permanent observation against smuggling of all sorts. With passport and vehicle documents all in perfect order, Martial should normally have been able to travel without let or hindrance, but over and over again he had been tormented by check-point guards who refused to raise the barrier blocking the road. They had kept Martial waiting for hours under a burning sun on the pretext of checking his passport and in the end had only let him through on payment of an 'administration charge' in American dollars.

From then onward, Martial had realized that without an ever-present hierarchical eye to watch over them or a cultural ethical honor to control them, the petty officials guarding checkpoints, wearing their impressive uniforms, would let their reptile side befuddle them and take precedence over their true rank: they would see themselves as omnipotent, proud of their office, and instead of respecting the instructions they had been given, they would impose conditions according to their own arbitrary will. They would award themselves the title of 'Commandant General of the Check-point' and become haughty tyrants profiting from their little bit of status to try to rise as high as possible by pushing others downward.

Martial said that any man with a uniform or a weapon, from a postman

to a soldier, to a sheriff with his shiny star, could become this sort of reptilian tyrant thirsty for power in the absence of such an eye ...

The train had just stopped in Ayutthaya station.

On the platform, a crowd of street vendors rushed up to the windows of the carriages.

Camilla and Tom picked up their small travel rucksacks and got out onto the platform.

Tom looked at these happy men, women and children, with a smile always on their lips.

It was very difficult to be happy, because a small voice in our heads prevented us from being satisfied: it endlessly reminded us that our lives would be better if only we had such and such a thing or accomplished such and such an action. The first human beings that had never been satisfied had had an advantage relative to their easily contented peers: the little voice of dissatisfaction had encouraged them to make more and more efforts to survive, to keep going forward, and these unsatisfied ancestors had passed on this small voice to all humanity ...

Cultural Buddhism had gagged that small voice, claiming that contentment was to be found by desiring what one had, not what one had not.

Thais were able to be content with what they had to hand from day to day, being convinced that contentment was not dependent on objectives to be reached, objectives which most of the time were ultimately disappointing. For them, happiness was just taking advantage of the present moment, knowing how to take it as it came and not seeking to have it conform to desires or preconceived ideas.

That was the key to happiness.

Whoever looked at the world through eyes humbly turned only to the present could find happiness ...

“Where are we going?” Camilla asked.

“To the temple of Na Phra Meru Rachikaram,” Tom answered. “It’s the only temple from the period that’s still standing and in use nowadays. That’s where we’ll begin our search for the Grail.”

They left the station and took a tuk-tuk, one of the motorized tricycles that were used as taxis, and it carried them to the temple.

Once they were there, in the welcome shade of a tall palm-tree, Tom cast an eye over the huge building with its tall white colonnades and its brown roof topped with golden ornaments that looked like claws tearing the sky.

At the entrance, a long queue of young Buddhist monks with shaven

heads dressed in orange robes stood patiently waiting in single file.

“What are they doing?” Camilla inquired.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Tom admitted.

“So Mister Know-it-all doesn’t know?” Camilla responded mockingly.

She laughed quietly and Tom copied her.

“Anyhow, there are lots of them.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what Abbé Choisy said in his day.”

“Abbé Choisy? Who’s he?”

“He took part in the first diplomatic mission sent by King Louis XIV in 1685 to try to convert the King of Siam. He told the tale of his journey in his ‘Journal of a Voyage to Siam’. In his book, Abbé Choisy said the great number of bonzes in the temples was easily explained: such monks weren’t subject to compulsory labor for the King, unlike other Siamese citizens, who had to work like slaves on royal tasks, at the King’s pleasure, and this did often please the King ... that’s why there were a lot of bonzes: to get out of forced labor ...”

“That’s nonsense,” Camilla said. “All those men are just looking for spirituality ...”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that ... They don’t work, they get free meals and they’re left alone. What might the true motivation of all those men be, when they face the choice between the life of a slave and a calm religious life?”

As if he was asking a question that made no sense, Camilla shrugged her shoulders.

Tom pointed a finger at the procession.

“When I see these young monks, I’m reminded of what Martial said he’s seen here in Thailand: the same look, the same stupidity in the eyes of a young Buddhist novice that he’d seen in those of an Islamic terrorist he’d met in a prison when he was doing psychological research. Martial said that novice was mild by nature and believed in the truth of the teaching he was given, but if he’d been born in an Islamic country, he’d have been totally different, he could have been the worst sort of religious fundamentalist who would have cut the throat of any non-Moslems or stoned them to death without even blinking ... and vice versa ... we’re Christians, since we were born in a Christian country, but if we’d been born in a Moslem or Buddhist land, we’d have accepted those other religions blindly, without questioning them at all ...”

Camilla looked at the procession.

“Do you think all those novices are idiots?” she asked, annoyed.

“No, far from it; on the contrary, the meditation they practice will make them new men. Through meditation, that is, through mental effort, you can change your state of consciousness and hence your personality. In the long run, you become a different person ... For instance, if you let off a firecracker without warning, a monk expert in meditation will show no fear, not even surprise on his face. Through will power the monk can modify an automatic reaction of the brain that’s normally uncontrollable for all humans. Meditation also makes you sensitive to the emotions expressed by others, building up real compassion, a compassion which is like a new conscience and which is developed by mental training. In short, meditation allows you to reach new states of consciousness ...”

“It’s a kind of communing with divine forces ...”

Tom smiled.

“Oh, no! Nothing of the sort in it ... It’s a natural phenomenon. Keen body-builders add muscles to their bodies by practicing daily with dumbbells and they can change their outward appearance completely. Keen meditators add strength to their brains and change their inward appearance, modifying their neural connections. They modulate their neurons, bring new ones into use or even create new connections, all of which makes them new people with different personalities. For instance, it’s known the blind develop hearing capacities that are out of the ordinary, since the zones in their brains normally given over to vision are mobilized to analyze sounds. Likewise, the deaf often have very sharp visual analytic abilities that let them lip-read. It’s all a question of interlinkings; an unused part of the brain is directed toward some other form of sense.”

Tom took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

“The case of Phineas Gage sticks in my mind: in 1848, he was a construction hand on the railways and an iron tamping bar was blown right through his head when a charge of black powder went off prematurely. He got up barely stunned and people said it was a miracle. He was more or less unhurt. But his personality started to change. Before the accident, he was kind, sociable and reliable, thoughtful and reflective. Afterward, he became impulsive, irascible and grumpy, using a lot of swear-words and being very erratic in his behavior. All of that was because of the iron bar that had destroyed part of his brain, and with it many of its internal connections. It’s these internal connections that Buddhist monks break down or modify, it’s no more than a change in internal programming, a circuit diversion as happened accidentally to Phineas Gage ...”

A Thai novice barely eight years old was standing before Tom.

“Master waiting you,” he said in his small voice, using the best English he could manage.

Tom smiled at the little lad with his shaven head and orange robe.

"I think you must have the wrong person," he replied, also in English.

The young monk shook his head.

"No, Master say me you here sure."

He smiled.

"Come, Master waiting you so, so long. He say you coming so, so long ..."

Astonished, Tom glanced at Camilla and spread his arms in a gesture of puzzlement.

"I haven't a notion what he's on about," he said in French.

"Let's go and see ... with a bit of luck we might get some information about the Ayutthaya Grail."

Tom approved.

"I'll follow you," he said to the novice. "Can my friend come, too?"

"Yes, can come. My name Rowan. Follow, please ..."

They followed Rowan along the side of the building and climbed the white steps that led into the temple. Rowan asked them to take off their shoes and leave them and their rucksacks with another young monk. Rowan took them into a huge hall where a giant statue of the Buddha in the lotus position, gleaming with gold, was set on a white pedestal decorated with bouquets of bright flowers.

Before the Buddha, an elderly monk was sitting on the floor. He had to be near seventy. He was dressed in an orange robe, but the striking feature was his huge ears, out of proportion to his small head, wrinkled by the passage of many decades. When he saw Tom and Camilla, he raised his scrawny arm and indicated to the crowd of monks clustered around him that he should be left alone.

"This my Master," Rowan whispered to Tom.

Tom nodded in silence.

In a few moments, all the monks had left the hall. Rowan came and sat beside the Master, who gestured to the two foreign visitors to come and sit before him.

He spoke in Thai and Rowan interpreted.

"Master happy for see you at last. He wait this moment so, so long."

Tom smiled politely.

"Please thank your Master for his kind welcome. Please ask him if he knows of an old book, written in Latin, which would be here since the first French ambassador was sent to Siam ..."

Rowan smiled.

“Yes, Master knowing why you here. Already say me. Book you wanting, with him.”

Tom frowned.

“The book I want is with him? I’m not sure I quite understand ...”

“Yes,” Rowan replied. “Book of Pontius Pilatus ...”

Tom almost choked.

Seeing Tom and Camilla’s disconcerted faces, the Master started laughing. He said a few words.

“Not feel surprised,” Rowan translated. “Everything written beforehand.”

The Master added some comment. Dipping his hand into a cloth bag that was nearby, Rowan grasped an object wrapped in an opaque plastic bag. The novice took off this bag and showed the yellowed cover of a manuscript.

“Pontius Pilatus,” Rowan said, pointing his finger at the characters written in Latin.

Tom was still dumbfounded and a new sensation of déjà vu invaded him.

“It’s incredible,” he muttered, closing his eyes.

He felt as if he were asleep and dreaming, yet he was not dreaming and he was wide awake.

“This book for you,” Rowan said. “Master wait you come for give you book.”

“But how did he know that?” Tom asked. “It’s incredible, it can’t be ...”

Rowan questioned the Master.

“Master say if he saying truth now, you not believing. You not ready yet for accept.”

Tom’s head was in a whirl. A thousand questions were jostling in his mind. How could something this improbable come to pass? How could the Master know that he was seeking out the Pontius Pilate Report? There had to be something that he was missing, some rational explanation that he could not see.

The Master spoke once more.

“Master ask what you doing now.”

“Er, well ... Please thank your Master for the moment. I’ll use this book wisely and make public its contents which have been kept secret for too long. The world ought to know ...”

Rowan translated and the Master seemed disappointed.

“Master hope you joining him, become disciple. He hope you choosing

path of awakening, not useless way of Book.”

The Master spoke at some length.

“He say must not let illusion of senses guide you. You like character in book. Character in book, but other person turning pages for you. This world illusion, where your spirit prisoner. While you run and not meditate words of Master, always you prisoner of reality which only illusion. Illusion of reality.”

Tom thoughtfully mulled over the Master’s words, then replied:

“Please tell the Master that in the book ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’, or more exactly in the sequel to that story which is called ‘Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There’, Alice learns from the Red Queen that to stay where she is on the chessboard on which she is standing, she has to run and that to move forward you have to run twice as fast. That’s also the case for the chessboard of life and the evolution of all things: if you stop running, stop advancing, humanity will in the end die out.”

Rowan translated and the Master started laughing. Then he spoke again.

“Then world stopping clock of illusion and waking up from illusion of reality ... Master say again why you not joining him for awakening.”

Tom smiled ruefully.

“Please thank your Master, but I prefer to be enraptured by my senses and believe that I’m alive within this illusion which I think is the only true one.”

Rowan translated, then interpreted his Master’s response.

“Then again cycle of rebirth coming for sweep all away like sea wave sweep sand wall of your life on beach of illusions. Then again useless prison holding your mind and hiding real picture of world. What you thinking you know, you having only in hand. But what you really wanting know so, so far from your hand. One day, if not too much late, you coming back see Master for understand what your mind miss. Now time for continue your way. Master wish you good fortune, like custom in Thailand.”

Tom bowed respectfully.

The novice put Pilate’s manuscript back into the white plastic bag and handed it to Tom.

He took it and slipped it under his arm.

After thanking the Master one final time, Tom and Camilla slipped away politely.

They left the temple and caught a tuk-tuk which brought them to a luxury hotel in the city.

They took two rooms.

As the hotel was nearly full because of a seminar being held there, Tom and Camilla found themselves assigned rooms on different floors.

Holding their respective keys in their hands, they took the elevator to the third floor where Camilla had her room. The young woman stepped out of the elevator along with Tom, who politely accompanied her as far as her door.

"Here we are, this is it," she said, pointing to the room.

She stared at Tom.

"This story still seems incredible, that monk who was waiting for you so as to give you the book ..."

"Yes, it's really strange. You'd have thought it was out of a science-fiction novel ..."

"Don't you see a divine hand in all this?" she asked.

Ill at ease, not knowing what to say, Tom looked away and Camilla added:

"So, are we headed back to Bangkok tomorrow morning?"

"Yes," Tom answered. "But first let's get some rest. I want to savor this magic moment calmly and stop running ... I'd like to catch my breath a bit ... the quest for the Grail is over ... it ends here ... we've won ..."

Camilla smiled at him and looked at the manuscript that Tom was carefully keeping tucked under his arm.

"Will you read it now?"

Now he had the Grail in his hands, Tom wanted just one thing: to read it for himself.

However, he had made a promise to himself.

So, he handed the manuscript to Camilla.

"Ladies first. You should read it. I already know what it'll say ..."

Camilla took the book.

"Beware, Camilla," Tom added, "your last illusions about Jesus Christ are going to melt like snow in the sun."

"We'll see," the young woman replied with a mischievous smile.

Tom smiled at her.

"Enjoy the read," he said.

Tom went off to take the elevator to the upper stories.

Camilla entered her room.

She lay down on her bed and shut her eyes for an instant. Then she sat up and arranged a few cushions so as to be sitting comfortably. Next, she took the Grail out of the thick, white plastic bag.

With a careful and hesitant hand, she stroked the old cover, yellowed by time. Finally she opened the Pontius Pilate Report and began reading its first words, written in Latin.

Provehito in Altum Apocalypsis ...

Camilla wrinkled her little nose.

*
* *

Leo was light-hearted.

He was in seventh heaven.

Goddess was so close to him. She was at Ayutthaya, just as he was.

Leo had the impression he could feel her aura all round him. He might even have walked past her in the street without knowing. Might she have been that attractive blonde who had looked at him so insistently?

It was quite likely.

Leo let his imagination rove, already seeing himself in Goddess' arms, kissing her passionately.

Leo's cell phone started ringing.

"Hello, my love ..."

Leo's heart began beating wildly.

"Hello, Goddess ..."

"Where are they?"

"In a hotel. They've each taken a room. I'm there myself. I've also taken a room. I think Thomas Anderson found the Book in the Buddhist temple. He came out with an object all wrapped up under his arm, and it was the same size as the Book from Rennes-le-Château ..."

Goddess remained silent.

"What am I to do? I could get into Satan's room and kill him ..."

As if Goddess was doubtful that Leo would gain the upper hand in close combat with Thomas Anderson, she said:

"No. I prefer you don't."

"So what am I to do?"

Goddess thought for an instant, then outlined a new plan to Leo. When Goddess had finished, she asked:

“Do you think you can do it?”

“Yes, it’s feasible, I’ll sort it out ... and anyhow the hired van is already parked just outside the hotel ... and the Vatican’s diplomatic airplane is waiting for me at Bangkok airport. Yes, it’s doable.”

“Perfect, go for it. Call me when it’s over, right?”

“Yes, Goddess.”

Goddess hung up.

Leo got up off the bed and rummaged in his sports bag that was lying on the floor. In amongst a long black wig, some pairs of handcuffs and various chains, Leo found the bottle of chloroform for which he was looking.

There was a knock at the door.

Leo went to open it.

A young chambermaid was there with a large wheeled linen basket.

“Room service,” she said in English. “I forget to change towels this morning for this room. So sorry ...”

Leo looked at the Asian woman and the set of keys hanging round her neck.

God’s providence was decidedly watching over Leo at every moment.

A smile on his lips, Leo stood aside from the doorway to let in the young woman and her wheeled basket.

*
* *

The telephone in his room rang and Tom answered it.

“Hello ...”

Camilla’s trembling voice could be heard.

“Tom ... it’s me ... I ... Jesus ...”

Camilla could not finish her sentence. She began crying.

Thinking he understood the situation, Tom tried to console her.

“Calm down, Camilla. It’s nothing ... Jesus is nothing but a myth, that’s true, but life goes on ...”

“No!” she protested over the telephone. “Jesus isn’t a myth ... it’s worse than that! A lot worse ... Jesus is no myth, no, not a myth ...”

She burst out sobbing.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked in surprise.

Camilla was about to say something in reply when she suddenly let out

a cry of terror.

Tom heard sounds of struggle and then a thump, followed by silence.

The line went dead.

Tom hurled himself out of his room like a tornado. He ran toward the fire door leading to the stairs down to the lower floors.

However, this door was chained and padlocked.

Tom frowned, because that same door had not been locked an hour earlier.

“*Scheiß*,” he growled.

He rushed toward the elevator at the end of the corridor. He pushed the call button and after a minute the elevator finally arrived. Raging, he swept into the elevator car and, without realizing it, said a mental prayer for Camilla to be still alive.

Without her, he was no longer anything.

On the third floor, when the elevator doors opened before him, Tom found himself face to face with a young chambermaid with long black hair. Her face bent over the large wheeled linen basket that she was pushing, she paid no attention to Tom and took the elevator with her load.

Tom rushed to the other end of the corridor.

Room 303.

Tom hammered on the door of Camilla’s room, which was locked.

No answer.

With a violent kick, he smashed the door open and ran into the suite. He rapidly searched the rooms and the cupboards.

Camilla was no longer there.

Tom was about to go out when his attention was drawn to an object that was shining on the carpet.

It was Camilla’s little silver chain and cross.

Tom grabbed it and ran out.

He sprinted as far as the fire door and swore when he saw this one too was chained and padlocked shut.

He was making for the elevator when his cell phone started ringing.

Tom frowned.

Apart from Camilla, nobody knew his private number.

Intrigued, Tom pressed the button to receive the call.

“Good day, Mister Anderson ...”

It was a sensual woman’s voice that he heard.

Tom had the impression he knew that voice, but he could not manage to

identify it.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“That’s really not important. Just listen carefully, Mister Anderson, that is if you ever want to see your sweet little friend alive again ...”

The caller gave a little chiming laugh.

“I’m listening,” Tom spat out.

“Good! So ... you’re going to catch the first plane for Paris and there you’ll behave yourself and wait at your late friend Martial’s place. I’ll contact you on this number three days from now. Then we’ll arrange a meeting ...”

Tom was no fool, he knew full well that this proposed meeting was just an ambush where he could be murdered.

“Until then, Mister Anderson, please don’t do anything unwise ...”

“What sort of unwise thing?” Tom asked.

“Foolish actions like talking to journalists about your book ‘The God Virus’. Ah, yes! If you were thinking things are desperate and that you ought to broadcast your book over the internet, you should know that there’s no chance of that: all your computer files and those of your late lamented friend have been wiped completely. There’s nothing left, not even the shortest written note. All your proof has been destroyed. You’ll see that when you reach Paris ... So, be good and keep reminding yourself that Camilla’s life is in my hands, right?”

“You’re lying,” Tom retorted. “You can’t have wiped all my computer files ...”

“You think so?” the voice chuckled. “Do you believe this, just because when you were in Prague, you were still able to download the photo of your book from your internet file? Alas, that file no longer exists in any shape or form ...”

Furious, Tom clenched his fist.

“If you touch one hair of Camilla’s head, I’ll find you and I’ll kill you with my own hands ...”

“Don’t worry, Mister Anderson, as long as you’re wise enough to carry on obeying me, Camilla will be safe ... I’ll phone you soon ... Goodbye ...”

The phone went dead.

Tom put the phone back into his pocket.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

His days, even his hours, were numbered now, as were Camilla’s.

There was no way out of it.

Tom felt trapped like a rat in a cage.

In a waking dream, the episodes that he had lived through with Camilla up to then flowed past one after another in his head, until the last moment when Tom had entrusted the Pontius Pilate Report to Camilla, the manuscript which the young Buddhist disciple had given him ...

As if he had had an electric shock, Tom suddenly opened his eyes.

“The Grail ...” he murmured.

One hope was still left.

It was what Tom should have done from the very start, as well.

He quickly fished the phone out of his pocket and selected a number stored in its memory: the number for a travel agency that could arrange reservations of plane tickets.

46

Ascension

Simon Peter fearfully lowered his head.

He nervously drummed his fingers on the table where a small naphtha lamp stood, struggling to provide some light in the dark and gloomy room.

Simon the Zealous's grim look frightened him. Although shorter than him, the Zealous was solidly built, with sturdy legs, broad shoulders and worryingly muscular arms.

Simon Peter was afraid that the Zealous would be carried away by anger and resort to fisticuffs to force his point of view on everybody.

The disappearance of Jesus had left an empty place: the place of the Master whom all obeyed. Simon the Zealous, saw himself as suited to this vacancy. Openly proclaiming himself Christ's full brother, he felt he was fully entitled to take up this torch and impose his view of the situation.

From dawn to dusk, he had never stopped denying Jesus' resurrection.

"The empty tomb does not signify that the Messiah has returned," insisted this disciple yet again. "It merely confirms that his corpse was stolen, no more than that. The Messiah is dead and he will not come back to life."

In the modest dwelling that stood isolated in the midst of an abandoned olive grove, ten apostles were sitting around the table. Thomas had just taken the initiative of departing for the city, hoping to glean there some further information about the resurrection of the Master.

In the feeble light of the lamp, John cast a furtive glance on Levi. As if to encourage him, he winked barely perceptibly. John stood, made for the door that was held shut with a heavy wooden bar and leaned against it.

"And what do you make of all these statements?" inquired this sentry of the Zealous.

All day long, details of the experiences of close disciples had not ceased

arriving. Many men and women had seen the two angels in Christ's tomb, appearing and disappearing as the fancy took them. Dressed in shining raiment, they had repeated to all the same message.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? Jesus is not here, but is risen. Remember how he spoke with you when he was still in Galilee. He said that the Son of God must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day rise again."

Hearing John's question, a skeptical expression appeared on Simon the Zealous' face. In his view, all of this was no more than rumors orchestrated by the Temple, with the connivance of some of the circle of followers. The Zealous felt sure that if the apostles went off with the disciples to meet the Christ supposedly back from the dead, they would fall into a trap carefully laid by Caiaphas.

"And you, Simon Peter, what do you think of this?" asked John.

Simon Peter remained silent in embarrassment.

When Maria Magdalena had come back to the house to tell them that she had met Christ near his sepulcher, he had not believed her. He had thought that the young woman had made up this vision to make fun of him or take revenge on him, as he had cast doubts on her affirmations about the esoteric doctrine that she claimed the Master had revealed to her in secret. However, further eyewitness accounts had emerged. Several other women also declared that they had seen Jesus, some of them even having flung themselves upon his wounded feet to kiss them. Telling them where the apostles were sheltering out of public view, Jesus had instructed several of them to take a message to the apostles.

"Go, tell my brethren that they should go into Galilee. There they will see me."

Simon Peter was convinced that the Lord had returned, as he had appeared in various guises to a good few people. He had been seen in a fair number of different places with considerable distances between them and it was humanly impossible to move from one to another that quickly, even on horseback. Maria Magdalena had told the truth: Jesus was in a transitional state of glory, like the angels, not yet having fully completed his ascension to his Father nor a definitive return to the Earth.

Simon Peter was sure about this resurrection and had thought that Simon the Zealous would finally come round to the same view. However, the more the witnesses that had come to the house, the more skeptical the Zealous had been. With an increasingly paranoid lack of trust, he was coming to believe in an over-arching plot of which they were the victims.

Because of that, Simon Peter did not openly state his opinion for fear of

a violent reaction from the Zealous, who would have seen his certainty as a betrayal. Remaining fearfully silent, the other apostles had taken the same course. Only John and Levi had dared to stand up to the Zealous.

There was a knock at the door.

John could not prevent a small grimace of discontent running over his beardless face. As if regretfully, he turned and raised the heavy piece of wood that barred the door. Outside, the pitch black of night had been present for a long while.

Two bearded men in their fifties came in quickly. John closed and barred the door behind them and leaned against it once more.

The newcomers looked at the nine sitting apostles and at a silent inviting gesture from Levi, they sat at the table with them. Simon the Zealous frowned in suspicion.

“Who are these people?” asked he.

“They are Cleopas and Neko,” replied Levi. “I know them well. They are disciples.”

Nodding, Simon the Zealous let go of the handle of the dagger he kept hidden under his robe and thoughtfully rubbed a hand over his black beard and his hair, trimmed short.

After a moment’s hesitation, searching for his words, Cleopas began to speak.

During the afternoon, he had set out with Neko for Emmaus, a village lying eight miles or so from Jerusalem. They were speaking about Christ’s death when a stranger had come up to them and while walking along with them had asked them:

“What manner of communications are these that you have with each other as you walk?”

Cleopas and his companion had stopped walking.

“Are you only a stranger in Jerusalem, for you would be the sole inhabitant not to know the things that came to pass there in these last few days!” had been the response from Cleopas.

“What things?”

“We spoke concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who proved himself a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. Or high priests delivered him to be condemned to death and have him crucified. We trusted that it would have been he who would have redeemed Israel. Today is the third day since these things were done and this morning certain women also of our company made us astonished. They were early at the sepulcher and when they did not find his body they came, saying that they had seen a vision of angels, who said that the Messiah was alive.

Others of those who were with us went to the sepulcher and found it even so as the women had said. Yet the Messiah they did not see.”

The stranger had replied:

“Oh fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Messiah to have suffered these things to enter into his glory?”

Starting with Moses and recalling in turn all the ancient prophets present in the Holy Scriptures, he had run through in detail with them all the prophecies relating to Christ.

Resuming their journey, they had reached Emmaus. The stranger made as if to go on farther.

“Stay with us,” had been Cleopas’ proposal, “for it is near night and the day is far spent.”

They had gone into Cleopas’ house together. At table, the stranger had taken the bread and after reciting a blessing, had broken it. Taking the bread he handed them, Cleopas and Neko had eaten a piece each. Then, as if their eyes had been dashed open, the stranger’s face had changed into that of Christ. He had smiled at them for an instant and then had suddenly disappeared.

Cleopas and Neko had found themselves alone. Astounded, they had hurried back to Jerusalem to spread the news of the resurrection of Christ. Finally, when they were in the city, a disciple from the inner group had directed them to the dwelling of the apostles.

John was the first to speak.

“So?” asked John in a loud voice. “What more need you hear to believe in the Master’s return? The Lord has really come back to life and has appeared to Cleopas. I ...”

He stopped, even his breathing briefly paralyzed. His face went pale and he raised a trembling hand in front of himself, pointing to the wall opposite the door.

They all turned in the direction he was indicating.

Jesus was there.

In the feeble light of the naphtha lamp, Simon the Zealous had not recognized Christ. He leapt to his feet and unsheathed his dagger.

“Peace be upon you,” said Jesus.

The Zealous grunted loudly in surprise as he recognized him.

“I saw him come through the wall,” murmured John in a choked voice.

Simon Peter was aghast, as if he were facing a specter.

“Why are you troubled?” asked Jesus. “Why do you doubt? Why do

such thoughts arise in your hearts?”

Like a child caught misbehaving by its father, Simon the Zealous hung his head in shame, completely disconcerted.

The disciples grasped that the Master was alluding to the doubts they had had about his resurrection, as if Jesus had heard all the conversations about him that they had had during that day.

“Look upon my hands and my feet, to see that it is I myself! Touch me and understand that a spirit has no flesh and bones, such as you see that I have.”

Despite his urging, none of those present dared touch him. Jesus raised his hands in front of him, then pointed to his feet; the marks of his crucifixion were still clearly visible. He gently raised his white tunic and showed his side pointing to the spear wound that had penetrated his side, thrust at his stomach and lungs. Despite the dim light, everybody saw the horribly mutilated body.

As if Jesus wanted to prove that he was not some apparition, but definitely had a fleshly form, he asked:

“Have you here any food to eat?”

John stepped forward and took out of his haversack a piece of cooked fish and a small amount of honey. Jesus took them and ate before them. Then he invited them all to sit down again. Remaining on his feet, he looked at them one after the other. Finally, he said:

“Today the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you are fulfilled. All these things had to come to pass, for they were written in the Law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms concerning me.”

Page after page, he expatiated on the holy scriptures of the Temple recounting his coming.

“Thus it was written that the Messiah was to suffer and to rise from among the dead on the third day and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Behold, I shall send upon you what God my father has promised to me. Yet for the moment remain in the city of Jerusalem, until I come back to you and bestow upon you power from on high.”

The apostles nodded in silent agreement.

When Thomas returned in the early dawn, he could not believe that Jesus had been there a few hours earlier.

“Unless I myself see in his hands the print of the nails,” said he obstinately, “unless I put my finger in the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

His wish came true eight days later. Like the first time, Jesus appeared by night in the midst of the eleven apostles who had gathered in the same house. Despite the barred door and the thick walls, Christ overcame the physical obstacles and entered the room as if his fleshly body were nonexistent.

Thomas was dumbfounded.

“Peace be upon you,” said Jesus to the apostles.

Then he spoke to Thomas:

“Reach hither your finger: behold my hands. Bring your hand and thrust it into my side and be not faithless, but believing.”

Thomas obeyed.

“My Lord and my God!” exclaimed this apostle, retreating.

“Because you have seen me, you believe,” chided Jesus. “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

Faced with this reprimand, Thomas blushed.

Jesus spoke to them at length and gave precise instructions, breathing into them the first fruits of God’s Holy Spirit. The apostles steeped themselves in these divine commandments.

The next day, the eleven went to the Mount of Olives. An immense crowd was already there. Ever since Jesus had returned, the inhabitants of Zion had been in a turmoil. Many were expecting to see with their own eyes Christ come back to life. Minds had been fired by a rapidly passed on faith that had spread throughout Jerusalem and its surroundings, and they all had just one wish in their head: to come and meet the Son of God who had returned from among the dead.

The previous day, angels had fulfilled the wishes of some by bringing a divine message: Christ would come to them the next day on the Mount of Olives.

For fear of the Temple, which had never ceased repressing more or less violently any gathering in favor of Christ, this news was circulated by whispered word of mouth and hundreds of people came together from dawn onward at the place named by the emissaries of God.

The eleven picked their way through the compact crowd that was bunched on the lower part of one slope of the hill. Higher up there was a large table covered with baskets containing small pieces of bread and jugs of wine. Nobody had dared draw near to it, as onlookers had claimed that it had come down from the sky all by itself.

Simon Peter walked forward, knowing what he had to do.

He turned to the crowd and addressed them for some time in a loud

voice, speaking of the redeeming sacrifice in the new and eternal alliance that Christ had offered to his Father, washing with his blood the impure minds of men. Simon Peter took a large loaf from behind him and raised it above his head to bless it. Then he broke it.

Simon Peter claimed that the Messiah was truly present, his body and blood in the shape of bread and wine, and that he had been offered as a sacrifice on the cross and then revived. He told them that the bread and wine were a sacrament that gave Christ's death a cosmic meaning, a sacrifice for the remission of sins.

After glorifying the Lord, the apostles took the pieces of bread from the baskets and the crowd came to them, eating Christ's body and drinking his blood, so that the Son of God would enter and be present in every one of them.

In this way the Lord would wipe away the sins from within them, if the men and women present confessed their sins in their hearts. Ubiquitous and almighty, God understood all about his creatures and would forgive their past offences, as his Son had sacrificed himself for them, to redeem humanity.

Simon Peter fell silent and looked at the quiet and devout crowd.

It was necessary to have all sins washed away, to be pure, for the earthly Jesus to take shape and appear to them. Nobody should have a soul soiled with impurities. Seeing the wine poured, then drunk by the host of people, the apostle thought of Jesus' blood poured out on the cross. Through this sacrament, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which showed in concrete form and in the here and now the eternal presence of Christ's sacrifice, a feeling of well-being and absolute communion with the Son of God spread among the crowd.

Everybody had the conviction that they were one with both Heaven and their neighbors and that they could understand their inner thoughts. An air of mirth and jollity spread through the gathering.

Simon Peter also felt a growing sense of blessedness coming over him. He was sure he knew what it was: the Holy Spirit was descending upon them with the aim of building unity through the remission of sins.

Then Jesus was there.

Appearing from nowhere, he made his way through the crowd which stepped back to let him through, ecstatic at this heavenly apparition. Like a mild but penetrating perfume, they all noticed a sort of spiritual ether diffused all around him. Simon Peter saw him approach, resplendent. As he stared at Christ's white robes, the apostle saw them become bright as the sun and he was forced to blink repeatedly, so painfully brilliant was the

sight. At the top of the hill, surrounded by the eleven who pressed around him, Jesus turned to the crowd.

In a mellow, attractive, bewitching voice, he spoke at length.

Those gathered there drank in each word as if it were divinely enrapturing nectar.

Finally, Jesus introduced his apostles as his emissaries who should be obeyed. The Son would have to go and join his Father in Heaven, since his glorious state was only transitory and he had to return to God's presence. By coming back to life, he had demonstrated to all his detractors the absolute power of his Father, as also the reality of life in Paradise after death for those who submitted to the divine will of God, his Holy Spirit.

"All power has been given to me in Heaven and on Earth. Go therefore into the world and preach the gospel to all nations. All those who believe and are baptized will be saved, but those who do not believe will be damned to perish in the flames of gehenna."

Pointing to the apostles with his charming hand, he added:

"Here are the signs that will accompany those that have always believed in me: in my name they will cast out devils; they will speak new tongues. They will take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them. They will lay hands upon the sick and these will recover."

Then he spoke to the apostles, ordering them to remain a little longer in Jerusalem.

"John the Baptist baptized with water and henceforward all must be so baptized for their salvation. John truly baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence ..."

His close disciples nodded silently, wondering what he meant by that.

"Lord," inquired Simon the Zealous, "is it now the time when you will restore again the Kingdom of Israel?"

Jesus rested his gaze on the man with his low forehead.

"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which my Father has kept in his own power. Yet I say to you that you will receive power, the power of the Holy Spirit which will come down upon you. Then you will be witnesses for me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and into the uttermost parts of the Earth. Among all nations you will teach disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. You will teach them to observe all things whatsoever that I have commanded you to do. I shall be with you always, even to the end of days ..."

As if to summon celestial forces, he raised his arms and face toward the sky.

In a state of total exaltation, Simon Peter saw Jesus' head lit up by a strange, beautiful and blindingly bright. Christ rose above the ground and a cloud hid him from the crowd's view. Like tiny nestlings awaiting a beakful of food to come from above, all those present had their faces stretched toward the blue vault of the sky, their eyes gazing at the divine infinite, waiting for the return of the Lord.

His neck aching, Simon Peter wondered whether he would come back to them. Two men in white robes came and stood beside the apostles.

"You men of Galilee," said one of them, "why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has just been taken up into heaven from in your midst, will come back in the same manner as you have seen him go into heaven."

Simon Peter looked respectfully at the two angels and acquiesced with a reverent bow. Then he made off down the hill. This triggered the general departure of the crowd, who dispersed in silence, their eyes full of happiness. For a long while afterward, they remained steeped in that heavenly meeting and the holy sacrament with the body of Christ. They all hoped to be able to commune with him over and again through this eucharist instituted by the Son of God in person.

During the following days, the eleven chose by lot who was to replace Judas Sicariot, the target of divine wrath. Then, when they were once more the Twelve, the Holy Spirit finally descended upon them.

The Twelve had gathered in a house and were sitting at table. There was a sudden noise outside, like a violent gust of wind, and an air flow penetrated into the room. Somewhat dismayed, Simon Peter saw tongues of fire appear above himself and all his companions. These moved rapidly around the room in concentric circles, then separated out into twelve blindingly bright spheres which settled, one on each of the gathering.

Though he had been shivering with cold an instant before, Simon Peter felt gentle warmth spreading through him. Coming from no identifiable source, a small, soothing voice reassured him, making him aware of the Holy Spirit of God that was descending upon him. Their faces lit up with a brilliant glow and a bluish halo formed around each person's head. They all drank in the perfect will of the Creator and received holy power into their most hidden depths.

At that instant, Simon Peter became aware that he had in himself a divine power: he could wipe away or leave untouched the sins within anybody. The apostle started speaking the foreign language which had been dormant in him. With disconcerting fluency, he conversed with himself. He gained the impression of being one with that language, understanding all its subtleties and going back to its origins, its devising

and creation by God.

The divine haloes disappeared when the Holy Spirit left them, but their powers remained in them. On the next day, the Jews of Jerusalem were able to note this; as the apostles preached the word of Lord Jesus in the midst of the crowd, the many foreigners present heard the Twelve speaking in different tongues.

Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, from Pontus and from Asia, from Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, from the Libyan territory of Cyrenaica, Cretans and Arabs, they all heard them announcing the Gospel of the Son of God and the wonders of his Father, as well as reproving the people for having crucified Christ.

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

That day, more than three thousand souls joined them.

Defying Caiaphas, Simon Peter and John went up to the Temple. As on every other morning a man crippled from birth was there. He was left at the door of the Temple so that he could beg for alms. The man was around forty; he was dirty and hairy, his face black with filth, his clothing stained. Everybody knew him. Seeing that unclean hand stretched out toward him, John stopped. He leaned and whispered a few words into Simon Peter’s ear. Simon Peter nodded agreement and fierce determination lit up his face. Looking hard at the beggar with his wasted limbs, Simon Peter said to him:

“Look on us. Silver and gold, I have none, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”

Grasping him by his right hand, he pulled him toward him. In an instant, the man’s feet and ankles gained strength and the cripple leapt to his feet and began to walk. The crowd standing there were amazed and all those who had seen the miracle immediately wished to be converted, requesting to be baptized in the name of the Lord.

Simon Peter and John walked into the Temple accompanied by the former cripple. Between Simon Peter’s preaching and the presence of a man so miraculously cured, many indeed were the Jews who came to join the ranks of the earliest community of the Christ.

This swelled exponentially day by day, converts selling their goods and property to put them into the common pool and meet each member’s needs. The apostles lacked nothing: people brought to their feet entire fortunes, permitting them to organize and develop the community.

The resurrection of Christ had been the triggering factor for this and now all minds were alight with a genuine hope for heavenly salvation.

Living in joy and simplicity, in brotherly communion, the proselytes broke bread according to the new custom, praising Christ. Every day, the Lord added to the community more who would be saved.

Caiaphas was furious at the mass conversions of Jews and foreigners.

He had the two apostles arrested. He would have liked to have them strangled in his presence, but it was impossible to do that: Simon Peter and John had a powerful protector and the High Priest dared do nothing so radical against them. Through threats, Caiaphas tried to persuade the two apostles to cease in their apostolate.

In vain.

The apostles continued their preaching with impunity, both in the environs of the Temple and even inside the Temple compound. They laid on hands and cured the possessed who were streaming into the city. A fervent crowd pressed around them on all sides.

It was virtually no longer possible to get close to them, to such an extent that the sick were even brought to lie in the streets on beds and litters, so that at the very least the shadow of one of the apostles would fall on them as they went by on their way.

Faced with the growing threat posed by the apostles and disregarding their powerful protector, Caiaphas succeeded in arresting them through a ruse and flung them into the public jail. However, when the guards came to fetch them from their cell, they were no longer there. Despite the jailers standing watch before the door, the apostles had miraculously escaped.

An angel of God had come to deliver them.

They were found teaching Jesus' doctrine within the very Temple itself. Zechariah and his men set out to take the apostles and bring them before the Sanhedrin, but without any violence, for fear of being stoned by the massed crowd of disciples that now watched over them.

The Sanhedrin wanted them to die, but one of its most influential members, Gamaliel, argued it out of this view, stating that, just like all similar movements in the past, Christ's following would in the end destroy itself, as it was simply the work of man and not of God: if God was not with them, their movement would peter out as quickly as it had grown.

Caiaphas hesitated for a long while. It was not Gamaliel's speech that convinced him to spare the apostles, rather the threat from their powerful protector, whose messenger had come once more to refresh his memory, waking him from sleep to do so. Hence, raging because he could not have them done away with, Caiaphas ordered them beaten with rods until the blood flowed, then set them free. The apostles rejoiced in this beating, knowing that they had to suffer as Christ had suffered on his cross for the

salvation of humanity.

One fellow called Stephen was not so lucky. Bringing about great prodigies and signs among the people and curing the possessed, he was arrested by the Sanhedrin. The confrontation between the Pharisees and Stephen turned violent: the clergy were overcome with anger and had Stephen stoned.

Seeing that there was no reaction from the Roman authorities, Caiaphas became bolder and harassment of Christ's proselytes became more widespread and more and more violent, even reaching bloodshed.

In a period of considerable disturbances and chaos, most disciples and apostles had to flee to escape the wrath of Caiaphas. A civil war was brewing, a fratricidal struggle that menaced the Promised Land with devastation at any moment. As Jesus had prophesied, dissensions between fathers and sons broke out and false Christs arose, sowing further discord and doubts. An unprecedented famine ravaged the land and the end of days seemed so close that there were many who asserted that the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth would soon take place.

Many of Christ's disciples were hoping for it, praying for the return of the Son to set up this Kingdom and for his Father once again to rule Israel, bringing peace and harmony.

Since he had been taken up into Heaven, few people had had the privilege and honor of meeting the earthly Christ.

Saul was one of them.

Years had gone by since Jesus' ascension into Heaven as Saul headed along the road to Damascus.

His legs, with their muscular calves, were tired out by this long walk. However, his determination was stronger than his fatigue. Nobody had ever succeeded in forcing upon him a point of view different from his own and his exhausted body was not about to gain the upper hand over his firm will to continue forward.

Under the burning sun, copious sweat was pouring down his face and his long black beard. He wiped his forehead and turned to those accompanying him on this journey. They were worn out, but dared not complain, for fear of having Saul's anger unleashed upon them.

Saul could not stand hand-wringing and appeals for mercy. He was brutally insensitive and that was why the Temple made use of him as the cutting edge in repressing the new communities of Christians that were emerging. Defying Roman authority, he brought a reign of terror for Jesus' disciples through his violence and savage murders.

Blood had never stopped running wherever he went.

Saul halted suddenly. With difficulty he raised his face toward the sky. A bright glow descended over him and enveloped him in its painful brilliance.

As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice emerging from nowhere.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

With an effort and trembling with fear, Saul asked:

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus whom you persecute. Arise, though, and go into the city and you will be told what you must do ...”

The voice fell silent.

Staggering, Saul stood up. Although his eyes were wide open, he could no longer make out his surroundings. One of his companions came and took him by the hand. They had all heard the voice coming from the sky, but had not seen anybody.

Saul was led to a house situated inside Damascus. As he was very weak, he was put to bed and spent three days without being able to drink or eat. His condition worsened.

A sort of tingling affected his feet, while his stomach was wracked by a violent pain that became stronger and stronger until he could not bear it. The pain spread to his hands and his head, as if he were being crushed in a vice. Evil-smelling sweat poured off his body.

A doctor called to his bedside could only note the state into which the patient had fallen. In an undertone, he told Saul’s companions that he would not recover.

Still blind, but not deaf, Saul heard this death sentence pronounced on him. Knowing his end was near, he began to pray to Yahweh.

At that point an elderly man came to see him.

“I am called Ananias. Brother Saul, the one who has sent me is the Lord, even that Jesus who appeared to you on the way as you were coming. I am sent so that you may receive back your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Ananias laid his hands on the dying man’s eyes. Saul felt a liquid spreading over them. A sort of scale finally formed over them, then fell from them. His sight returned.

A man with wrinkled skin and a white beard grinned at him, revealing missing teeth.

“The Lord appeared to me in a vision,” said Ananias. “He led me to your house so that I might put my hand upon you, so that I might cure you of your blindness. When he said your name to me, I protested, for I had

heard from many about you, about how much evil you had done to his saints at Jerusalem and that you had authority from the high priests of the Temple to bind and repress all those who call on the name of the Lord. Yet the Messiah said to me to go my way for you are a chosen vessel for him, who will bear his name before the Gentile nations, and kings and the children of Israel.”

Ananias spent several hours in silence at his bedside watching over him. Then he helped him to drink and gave him a piece of bread to eat.

“Rest now, for the redemption of your soul is not yet complete. The Lord will come and show to you all that you must endure in his name.”

Disturbed, Saul nodded his agreement without saying a word. Once again alone in his room, he tried to stand. However, vertigo and a feeling of weakness came over him. He had to remain lying on his bed.

His surroundings started to change in an alarming fashion.

Everything around him moved and changed place and the furniture took on grotesque shapes. Like paws, the feet of a low table took on a constant circular movement. Where it stood on a shelf, an amphora stretched out to an enormous length and the liquid inside it trembled rhythmically like a beating heart. The walls buckled and the floor began to form waves. Saul raised himself upright with difficulty and saw his reflection in a mirror on the wall. His body was floating over the bed. His face changed drastically and his features burst.

A violent wind arose and blew on him.

One of Saul’s companions came into the room. He was no longer a man; the demon with a diabolical expression that had hidden behind his face could now be seen.

Saul tried to scream. Not a sound came from his mouth at that moment.

The changes in his surroundings were frightening, but what alarmed him even more were the transformations he could feel taking place within him, in his deepest depths.

A demon was breaking into him, taking possession of his body, his senses and his soul. Saul stood up suddenly, jumping and shouting to try to rid himself of it. Finally, exhausted, he collapsed on the bed. He would have wished for suicide, to cut short his painful destiny, but his body no longer obeyed him. His head felt extremely heavy and a freezing cold came over him.

He was seized by a dark whirlwind and he was plunged in terror into darkness.

He came through into another world where the notions of space and time were different. His body seemed unfeeling to him, inert, alien.

Was he in death? Was that the passage to the hereafter?

His first impression was that he had become a corpse, then that he was outside his own body. The image of himself that he saw overwhelmed him: his limbs had separated from his trunk and his head was floating in the air and looking in his direction.

Emerging from nowhere, the corpses of the men and women he had killed with his own hands flung themselves on his body, which belonged to him no more, and hacked and stabbed it with daggers.

In a few seconds, they reduced it to shreds. Then his former victims disappeared. However, the vapors of the tortures they had undergone remained and sank deep into Saul.

The pain was terrible. For an eternity, he endured the torments to which he had subjected those faithful to Christ. Empathy for them finally washed over him.

At that point, a light appeared and enveloped him.

An incredible spectacle of forms and colors opened to him: fantastic multicolored images spread out before him, opening into circles or spirals, then closing again, like fountains of suns pouring out, marshalling themselves, marching and countermarching, in a constant flow of turning, whirling, sparkling, weaving side to side, climbing and falling.

Melodious sounds became optical impressions, building up an image of new shapes and hues, in which pink, yellow and green predominated. The colors transformed into sounds, the sounds into flavors.

Saul was bemused by a growing desire to remain in this strange and charming world, to allow its bright abundance and marvelous sweetness work upon him.

Well-being came over him, such well-being as he had never known before. He wondered if in this place were the first fruits of the celestial paradise that the disciples of Christ proclaimed to everybody, to all those who had themselves baptized in the name of the Lord.

He felt a strange feeling of hope and became happy and impatient to see what this divine and harmonious universe in which he was immersed had in store for him.

Suddenly, stars started shining, then came together into a thick rain of sparks that poured down upon him.

From this flow of stars the Lord descended.

This intense moment was the peak and culmination of blessedness for Saul. Never had he known such a feeling. For a long time, his senses were in ecstasy, soaking in immeasurable enjoyment.

Christ impregnated him and the Holy Ghost bathed him in its divine

aura.

Saul delighted in this perfect will of the Creator and realized what task henceforth awaited him.

When Saul regained his fleshly body, a deep change affected his whole being. He, the evil, blood-thirsty man of previous days, now wanted to be a mild shepherd, propagating his new faith around the whole world. He knew that the salvation of his soul and the forgiveness that Jesus had just bestowed upon him had created an infinite indebtedness: now, with merciful conduct, he had the mission of spreading the Gospels of the Lord.

Saul spent some days with Ananias and Christ's disciples. He was baptized in accordance with the custom ordained by Jesus.

With unshakable determination and faith, the fierce enemy of yesterday set off to preach the good word, becoming one of the Founding Fathers of the religion of the Lord, inspired in his apostolate by the Paraclete.

47

Totem

Tom mingled with a group of visitors.

Once inside the Vatican museum, he worked his way right into the middle of the throng and merged in thoroughly.

Nobody could recognize him: he was wearing a wig that gave him short black hair, thick eyebrows and a long false nose. He was wearing brown-tinted contact lenses, and his fair skin was covered in make-up that gave him a dark tan.

Tom knew that while he was in the crowd, he could not be spotted. He wandered along like the average tourist.

However, as soon as he went into action, Tom ran the risk of being recognized by the Swiss Guards who had been under his command until just a few years before.

Had enough time gone by to make them all forget the face and figure of the commander who had had to run away, the commander who had been accused of embezzlement and who had broken the jaws of two of his soldiers?

Tom would soon find out.

He was getting close to the strategic point.

At an angle in a narrow corridor, a plaited cord formed a symbolic barrier to access to a small stairway.

Tom knelt down and pretended to tie the laces of his black shoes. A quick glance around reassured him that nobody was paying him any attention.

He ducked under the cord and rapidly climbed the stairs, only to come face to face with a young Swiss Guard.

"Excuse me, sir," the soldier said, "but this section of the museum is not open to the public ..."

“Oh!” Tom answered, all innocence. “I’m sorry, I must have mistaken the turning ...”

Tom glanced backward and saw that nobody else was there. He opened the small mineral-water bottle that he had been carrying in his pocket. Pulling a large handkerchief out of the same pocket, he poured the liquid from the bottle onto it.

Surprised, the guard watched what the stranger was doing, but when he smelt the characteristic odor of ether, he realized that something untoward was happening.

However, he had no time to do anything.

Tom leapt on him and his powerful fist held the handkerchief over the guard’s face. The young soldier struggled weakly for a moment, then collapsed.

Tom knew the place like the back of his hand. He dragged the unconscious body into a storeroom that was to his left. He stayed there for more than two hours, waiting till the very end of the afternoon, when the premises would become somewhat emptier.

The guard had eventually come round, but Tom had tied him up with his shoelaces. He had also blindfolded him and gagged him with his socks.

Tom used ether a second time to put the guard to sleep, then dressed himself in his uniform before leaving the small room. The suit with its red, blue and orange stripes was a reasonable fit, and with the black beret pulled down to cover his face partially, Tom set out into the labyrinth of the Papal City.

He met several clergymen and other guards on his way, but nobody seemed to be interested in him. Keeping his eyes down, Tom finally arrived at his target.

The Pope’s office.

However, the two guards standing at their posts at the end of the corridor indicated that the Pope was actually in his office at that moment in time. Tom would have to wait before continuing with his bold plan.

The wait was not long.

Twenty yards from where he stood, the Holy Father’s door opened and a priest in a black cassock came out of the office. When he saw him, Tom stood rooted to the spot in amazement. He stood there flabbergasted, blinking fast without realizing it. He wondered if he was the victim of a hallucination, but the hallucination was striding quickly toward him. Tom’s heart began beating so hard that he felt it must be audible for a mile all around.

The priest passed him by, paying no attention to the astounded brown

eyes staring at him, because the clergyman was concentrating on a cell phone with a large screen, on which he was composing a text message.

Not noticing Tom, the priest walked off.

Dumbfounded, his face an image of surprise, Tom rubbed a hand across his forehead.

Like fitting pieces of a puzzle into place one after another until the picture is finally revealed, Tom put together scenes in his memory and made up a diabolical image inconceivable just a minute earlier.

Without a word of warning, Tom had run smack into the wall of reality.

"I was blind," he muttered. "How could I have been so stupid ..."

He clenched his fists, took a hold of himself and hurried off in pursuit of the priest.

He had already gone out into the lush greenery of the Papal City's gardens. Tom gradually caught up with him and followed him discreetly from a distance as far as the great medieval tower that in the past had housed Vatican Radio. The black figure of the priest stopped a moment to look at the tall radio antenna that towered into the sky.

Then he walked into the building.

Tom waited a few moments and then entered in his turn.

He cast a cautious glance at the stairs that led to the upper floors, but his attention was drawn to the massive door that gave access to the basements of the tower. Tom had never had a chance to visit them and regretted not having done so when he had been employed by the Vatican.

With a hesitant hand, he opened the door.

The neon lights on the ceiling were alight.

Tom went down the fifty or so steps of the spiral staircase and ended up in a long corridor. This went forward for about ten yards, then came to a T-junction.

Tom was going to continue forward when men's voices were heard: somebody was coming toward him.

To his right a door stood ajar.

Tom slipped through it and came into a large white-walled room whose only adornment was a table and a few chairs. There was also a tall old metal cabinet with a rickety door: Tom hid inside as best he could and slowly closed the door on himself, leaving it open just a crack.

It was just in time.

Dressed in his red cassock, Cardinal Fustiger walked into the room.

He was not alone.

The priest in his black cassock was there too.

Through the crack, Tom was able to observe him at leisure.

Despite the total absence of his white hair and the fact that he was completely clean-shaven, Martial's face was perfectly recognizable.

Because the priest was none other but Martial.

When he had seen him, Tom had wondered if he was seeing a ghost.

However, Martial was no phantom come back to haunt the living: he was well and truly alive and was smiling at the Cardinal.

The two men sat and continued talking.

"At long last you'll be meeting my young protégé," Fustiger said. "He'll be surprised to see you in flesh and blood ..."

"Yes," Martial's deep voice replied. "I ... just a moment, please ..."

He looked at his cell phone's big screen, as it had just beeped.

"A text message ... Darn it!"

"What's up?" Fustiger asked.

"Thomas Anderson isn't in. He's here, in Rome. According to the last signal, he's actually very close ..."

"What are you doing?" Fustiger asked.

Martial looked up a number in the phone's memory, dialed it and groped for a small object in his pocket with his free hand.

"I want to know why he's here," he said. "So I'm calling him ..."

At that very moment, Tom's cell phone began playing a musical ringtone.

Tom jumped out of the cabinet as fast as he could, but with impressive dexterity Martial darted his hand toward his crossed legs and brandished a revolver that had been hidden in an ankle holster.

Tom stopped short, doubting what course to take.

"Not so fast," Martial said. "If I were you, I wouldn't do anything stupid ... Sit down ..."

With his gun, he pointed to the chair at the other side of the table.

Tom realized he had no choice and did as he was told.

In a somewhat surrealistic way, the two men weighed each other up with their gaze.

"Why?" Tom asked. "Why have you done this?"

"And you?" Martial replied calmly. "What are you doing here?"

"You're holding Camilla hostage. I was looking for something to offer in exchange to set her free."

"What?"

"The Grail. I was going to steal the Pontius Pilate Report that the Pope

has. Besides, that's what I should have done from the very first, instead of running around looking for the others ..."

Martial smiled sadly.

"Yes, you should've done that, but you didn't. And now it's too late. The dice have been thrown."

Tom looked steadily at the man who had claimed to be his friend.

"How did you manage to follow me without me noticing?"

"Oh, that was easy!" Martial exclaimed. "The cell phone I gave you is bugged with a GPS tracker. I get the exact position where you are with only a few minutes' delay. The last time I checked, you were over Turkey, in a plane that I thought was flying to Paris. I thought that you were obeying my instructions to the letter, I got to Rome and forgot to keep an eye on what you were up to ... I should have known that you'd do something stupid like this."

Tom could understand now how the others who were also after the Grail had stolen a march on him every time: Tom's phone had never stopped telling Martial how things were going.

A scene came back into Tom's memory.

"When I caught the plane in Prague for Thailand, you were on the same flight, weren't you? It was you two or three rows back from me, with your head wrapped in bandages as if you had been burned ..."

Martial nodded.

"Yes, that was me ... but now you can take off your false nose and that hairpiece; you look ridiculous like that ..."

Laying his beret on the table, Tom took off his disguise completely, removed the contact lenses and used his handkerchief, still damp with ether, to clean the make-up off his face.

"It's true that you don't like make-believe," he said mockingly, throwing his handkerchief on the table.

Martial closed his eyes for a second.

"Do you really know why I did all this? Or are you really only interested in your own insignificant self ..."

"Do tell me, I'm keen to know ..."

"You like matters simple, so I'll say one word to you and you'll understand."

"Just one word?" Tom asked, sarcastically. "And what might that be?"

"Totem ..."

Tom's expression suddenly darkened.

American Indians had not invented the wheel; they had had not the

faintest idea of it. It was only with the arrival of Europeans that the wheel was brought to the New World.

Paradoxically, however, while the Indians had never thought of a piece of apparatus as simple and elementary as the wheel, they had, in contrast, invented a complex device, a sort of revolutionary machine like a truly uncrackable safe, an amazing anti-theft system that allowed them to leave their camp without any fear of their personal belongings being stolen during their absence.

This anti-theft system was the totem.

With its multiple huge eyes painted on the wooden pole set up in the centre of the camp, the totem was the eye that the reptile in every human feared. The totem had a psychological effect on the archaic reptile brain that saw every eye, real or false, as that of a genuine being. Respecting the order and hierarchy established by the presence of somebody else, for fear of being punished, the reptile remained obedient to social conventions.

Thanks to the totem, with its make-believe eyes, theft was almost nonexistent among American Indians. Furthermore, to avoid arousing the reptile among their neighbors and to live in peace, Indians even took the step of destroying their extra crops, their unwanted surpluses of foodstuffs or of any sort of wealth. Ignorantly, Europeans saw just folly in these practices, when in fact they were basic wisdom intended to keep in check the reptile inside every human.

Martial started to speak again.

“We had this conversation some time ago, when I explained to you that with no eye to keep watch on the reptile in us, believing that there can be no punishment, the reptile in an athlete will use drugs to win, the reptile in a web-surfer will make pirate copies of music and films by downloading them without paying, the reptile in an industrialist will put on sale banned products to increase profits, the reptile in a banker will stick a hand in the till. Without police as an eye to maintain surveillance, the reptile in every human can be awakened and will start seizing everything the person lacks. This eye in the form of police is necessary and an eye is even needed to keep watch on the eye: the police will become corrupt as soon as there is no eye set over them to keep them on the straight and narrow. The reptile is stronger because of psychology: without an eye keeping watch, the reptile is aroused and feels free to break all the established rules. That’s in its basic nature; it wants everything, always more, it’s instinctively greedy and can’t control itself if it feels that it’ll go unpunished. ‘What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over’ is its motto ...”

Still aiming his gun at him, Martial looked at Tom.

"You know full well that the Indians invented the totem and we invented God, that permanent eye above our heads. And thanks to that eye in the sky, human conscience dominates the reptile. The eye of God is necessary in the world, God's eye is an absolute requirement, and to abandon it would be egregious folly. Wherever there is an established society, a religion is needed: the laws deal with known crimes, while God's eye keeps watch over secret crimes, as well as keeping in check the reptile inside every human. Just imagine what would happen if our 'The God Virus' were to be published, imagine that we destroyed the mythical Jesus Christ, his Christian God and the notions of Paradise and Hell ... I know what would happen: there are more than two thousand million Christians in the world, getting on for half the world population, and that half of the world is a reptile time bomb. If Christians realize that they've been lied to, that God and Jesus Christ don't exist, that there's no Heaven to reward their submission to established authority, nor Hell to help in calming angry victims and frighten criminals, if Christians realize all that and the eye in Heaven disappears, their reptile side will go haywire, they'll become uncontrollable. It'll be total chaos ..."

"I know all that," Tom interrupted. "But it's a necessary chaos if a new, more intelligent order is to be born ..."

"Necessary?" Martial spat out. "Murders will multiply like Jesus' loaves, let alone thefts and rapes. From the moment when one thousand million Christian men have nothing to fear any more, when there is no longer the eye of God and when the reptile becomes predominant, what do you think will remain of society to enable a new and intelligent order to come into being? Take just one small detail as an example, even if it's no more than male faithfulness: all these Christian philanderers will become shameless and let their reptile side rip. They'll let their dicks govern their actions, no longer fearful of God's gaze. In third-world countries where contraceptives are nonexistent, they'll sire children left, right and center, and those children will grow up without fathers. Generations of chaotic and violent children with no guidelines, who'll all suffer from the elephant-calf syndrome ... and what's already a violent world will get more so, with no limits. Do you really think that your new 'intelligent' order will be born from that? You've lost touch with reality and so you're completely mad."

Martial shook the revolver.

"Religious values are crucial in every Christian country, and without them people would have no morals. Christians fear God's punishment and they hold back from letting their reptile side dominate, but if they no longer have a God to answer to, if there's no longer any fear of punishment

from God in the hereafter, if the eye disappears, evil will triumph in the world. You know, even in a Buddhist country like Thailand, one of the kings of Siam finally introduced the notion of Paradise and Hell into monarchical Buddhism because the Buddhist religion did not keep control of the reptile masses well enough. The philosopher Kant said in his days that even if the concept of God is not provable, it is necessary for humans to believe in the immortality of their souls and that God will punish or reward them in accordance with their actions on earth, otherwise human morals will be undermined ...”

Tom interrupted him.

“But Nietzsche said that a snake that doesn’t slough its skin will die and in the same way a mind ceases to be a mind if it stops changing its opinions ... I changed my opinion about religion, my mind’s become a mind again, I was liberated by the knowledge that you taught me and my reptile side hasn’t predominated over my intelligence. It’ll be the same for other Christians.”

Martial shook his head.

“No, you’re different, you have mental capacities that allowed your intellect to be turned topsy-turvy, and you still to keep control of yourself despite all the sections of your conscience that crumbled into ruin. But you know, Tom, not everybody can run a hundred yards in under ten seconds. Just think for a moment of all the insignificant people who make up the majority of the population, people who mostly live in poverty and are exploited. Their whole life rests on a single hope: hope in God. Without God, if those people realize that their life of submission and fear has no justification for being, they’ll let the reptile side take over, natural violence will break out and they’ll go off and grab whatever of other people’s property catches their eye, because before they die they want to enjoy the one and only life that really exists: life on Earth. And society will collapse back into the Stone Age.”

Martial looked Tom right in the eye.

“Now you understand why I’m acting as I am: I don’t want to disturb this precarious equilibrium, to saw through the branch on which or modern society is balanced. There are truths that it’s best not to make known. It’s better to live a lie and be happy than live in a truth of chaos; it’s better to accept the aberrant behaviors of religions than the behavior of humans freed from the eye of God. Between the cholera of chaos and the plague of religion, I’ll choose the plague of Christianity.”

“So you’ve sworn allegiance to the Pope?” Tom asked.

“Well, yes, in a way I have. Besides, the Pope agrees with my point of

view. He told me that religions are necessary for humankind, and above all his religion ...”

Martial chuckled.

“The Pope has read our ‘The God Virus’. He told me that he very much enjoyed reading it. He’s also read the notes for your work on “The Sage of Mecca”. He loved them. Nonetheless, the Pope doesn’t want these two books published and I agree with him for the reasons I’ve just given you. So, I did what was needed to calm the frustration of our publisher Gabriella Da Silva. As a sweetener, she got what she’d always wanted: lifetime exclusive rights to publish every book produced by the Vatican. She’s even going to have the right to publish the so-called secret archives of the Vatican next month, and the memoirs of our dear Pope ...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tom asked. “Why didn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“Because if I’d told you the truth directly, it would have changed nothing: you’d still have wanted to publish ‘The God Virus’, you’d have kept on with your quest against Jesus just the same without me. In your eyes, you are the embodiment of the Antichrist and nothing can dissuade you from completing the mission you’ve assigned yourself. To tell you the truth, at the start I was a bit like you. But as ‘The God Virus’ was being written, I realized just what we were creating: the detonator for a reptile bomb. I tried to get you to understand, that’s why I went on with the writing until it was finished: I hoped that when you read ‘The God Virus’ in full, you’d realize for yourself that we’d gone too far, and that by destroying the eye of God, we’d be simultaneously destroying humanity. I hoped you’d get it by yourself. But you didn’t get it, you went obstinately on and refused to look in the eye at the truth I wanted you to discover ... But I wasn’t miserly with hints and pointers; in despair I even put the inscription ‘Argus Apocraphex’ on the cover of our book. I told you to think about it. Yet I’m sure that you didn’t even try to understand its true meaning ...”

Tom closed his eyes.

The photo used on the cover of ‘The God Virus’ came into his mind.

He saw the turning serpents in action, together with the red cross of Christ with the inscription ‘Argus Apocraphex’.

As if coming suddenly out of a thick mist, Tom grasped what all that meant.

In the dictionary, the Latin word ‘Argus’ was defined as a ‘vigilant man’, a ‘watcher’ or a ‘spy’ and the expression ‘to have the eyes of Argus’ meant ‘to be alert and sharp-witted’: in Greek mythology, Argus was a

giant shepherd who saw everything, because he had a hundred divine eyes set all around his head, and as at any one time fifty eyes would be asleep but the other fifty awake, it was impossible to escape his vigilance.

As for 'Apocraphex', it referred to the word 'apocrypha' and its primary sense was 'hidden'.

So, 'Argus Apocraphex' could be translated by 'the hidden watcher' or 'the hundred hidden eyes'.

Those hundred hidden eyes were symbolically represented by the turning serpents, which were identical to watchful pupils, to irises in three colors that never stopped watching, perpetually turning on themselves.

Tom opened his eyes again.

"You created a sort of totem with Christ's cross and the turning serpents as a backcloth ..."

Martial responded:

"You've finally got it. Without those 'godly' eyes observing us from Christ's cross, without the vigilant eyes keeping watch on the reptile that's in all of us, humankind would hurtle to perdition."

Tom remained doubtful.

"Don't tell me tall tales, your heart is as cold as the tiling of a public restroom, if you were given permission to split open the skull of a still-living man to see what was in his head, you'd do without the slightest compunction. Humans have always been your guinea-pigs, so why are you suddenly so interested in what happens to them? That's not like you. There's some other hidden reason, an 'apocryphal' reason, isn't there?"

Martial leaned forward slightly.

"Did you know my daughter's a Catholic?"

"Anna-Katherine? No ... But how could that be?"

"You know how much she loves her grandmother on her mother's side and that she spends a great deal of her time at her place. That grandmother is a died-in-the-wool Catholic and she transmitted the Christian virus to Anna. And because I spent years more concerned with my professional life than with the life of my child, well, I didn't notice until it had happened. Anna owns a Bible and prays to the Lord Jesus Christ every night before she goes to sleep. Don't you find that ironic?"

Tom didn't know what to say, but Martial went on:

"Do you know my daughter detests me? She hates me because she holds me responsible for the death of her mother. In her eyes, it's me that should have died the day of my wife's car accident."

"How do you mean?"

"The day of the accident, I was due to go to the school and pick Anna up. But at the last minute something related to my work cropped up and I asked my wife to go instead of me. She died on the road there. Anna believes that if I'd gone to fetch her from school, rather than worrying only about my 'wretched little job', her mother would still be alive. She even believes it was the Devil in person who exchanged the parts we played. My daughter sometimes dreams that it wasn't her mother who was burned alive, but her father, and when she wakes up and realizes I'm still alive, not her mother, she cries ..."

"Did Anna tell you all that?" Tom asked in astonishment.

"No, not to me directly, to my avatar."

"Your avatar?"

"Anna spends hours every day on the internet in the Second Life virtual universe, you know, that three-dimensional world, like in a video game, where you can create the person you like to represent you. This virtual person is what's called your 'avatar'. In Second Life, you can buy land, do business, meet other people and even work. A real 'second life', but virtual. I was worried about Anna because she was spending more and more time on that to the detriment of real life and I found that odd. So, I took steps to find out what sort of existence this 'Second Life' was for her. She'd left details of her avatar and password on a piece of paper, so I was able to get into her account. I checked on the sites she went to and the names of her friends ... strangely, there wasn't a single boy, only girls' names. That aroused my curiosity, so I created an avatar for myself as well, a female avatar like my daughter's. I waited for her to log in and arranged to meet her 'by chance'. We got on well at once, because I did already know what her general tastes were and even the names of a few of her favorite music groups. We became 'friends'. Gradually, I even managed to become my daughter's best friend. Then she confided in me ... That's how I know everything about her now. In particular, I know she's a lesbian. She only likes girls; she hates boys, and that's probably because of her father who she holds responsible for the death of her mother ..."

Martial sighed.

"When I realized all this, as well as coming to understand that 'The God Virus' would trigger the reptile bomb, I saw that I couldn't destroy my daughter's life for a second time as I had on the day when I let my wife take my place in the car, or rather in destiny. I saw I couldn't smash Anna's childhood dreams, especially Jesus, who she loves more than anybody in the world. Just imagine her reaction if she saw the name of her detested father on the cover of a book that wipes out her Father in Heaven ... She would think I'm the Devil in person and would end up

believing I deliberately murdered her mother ...”

Martial shook his gun.

“You can see, Tom, I’ve done my daughter too much harm for me to add yet more. When I realized that, I started hoping that ‘The God Virus’ would never see the light of day. But you were there, Tom. I knew if I asked you to give up completing the book for the good of my daughter, you would have refused, on the grounds that she was owed the truth about Christ. I knew that if I’d asked you directly to abandon the book for the sake of the future of humanity, you’d have laughed in my face. I could see it in your eyes, you were determined to go the whole way and ready to die and take the whole of humanity to its tomb with you just to ensure the triumph of the truth about Christ. So I clung to the foolish hope that you would give it all up of your own accord when you fully realized that the cure was worse than the disease ...”

Martial stabbed a threatening finger of his free hand toward Tom.

“Unfortunately, that hope melted like snow in the sun and in the end I found myself with my back to the wall ... You were going for my daughter, so what else could I do? You didn’t really leave me any choice.”

Tom smiled sadly.

“So you tried to get me killed at Rennes-le-Château or even to have me arrested for murdering you as you did in Prague ...”

“Yes, you’re right, I did hope you’d rot in jail for the rest of your life so my daughter could live normally.”

“Who was the guy in the car? The man who died in the explosion in Prague?”

“Just a hobo. When I reached Prague, I went straight to the car rental firm. It wasn’t on the following morning, as I led you to believe. And that night I didn’t sleep a wink. I spent the whole night going round in the hire car looking for a man my size. I finally found one near the railway station. He was my build and even had a beard. I invited him to have a drink and doped him with a hypodermic of anesthetic. I locked him in the trunk and there he stayed the whole time without you or Camilla having the slightest inkling. It is true that at one point he woke up and started banging on the lid of the trunk. I gave him a little booster with the needle, and after that he behaved perfectly to the end ...”

“Have you no compunction about having killed him?”

“Well, you know, being committed to a religion is dangerous, because its first consequence is to turn you into a potential murderer, in fact the worst kind of murderer: one whose conscience is clear because he does his killing in the name of God. My conscience doesn’t bother me either, not

because I kill in the name of God, but because I don't believe in him and so I have no fear of divine punishment. What are a few lives worth if you can save millions of others in return? The choice isn't so hard to take."

"And what about the fact you'll never be able to see your daughter again?"

Martial shook his head.

"Even if I'm physically dead for her, I'll still be present in her mind, like a pure spirit freed from the constraining bonds of the body ... Through Second Life, I'll still be able to follow how she grows up, develops and builds a life for herself. From now on, I'll be no more than a creature of the mind, and my life with my daughter will be in that virtual world. For Anna, I'll no longer be the wicked father that I was, but rather a friend she loves. I've also taken care that Anna will never go short of money. I had several life assurances covering my death, and she'll get a good sum when she reaches eighteen. More than anything, I took steps to ensure she'll be happy in her future life when she takes a partner ... all thanks to my friend the Cardinal."

"What do you mean?" Tom inquired.

"We have an agreement. In exchange for the small services I've done for the Papacy, the Pope in person will come out officially in favor of homosexuality: he's going to recognize the value of homosexual couples and authorize them to get married in church ..."

"And you really think they'll keep their promise?"

Martial smiled.

"I think they haven't really any alternative ... Isn't that so, Monsignor Fustiger?"

Martial's hand holding the gun slowly turned away from Tom and the revolver ended its movement pointing at the Cardinal's head.

*

* *

Leo took one last look at Camilla as she lay chained on the couch, then closed the heavy door of the jail.

Leo was happy.

At last he was going to see Goddess.

She was there, the Cardinal had said so.

With joyful heart, Leo walked the length of the low-ceilinged cellar. Stopping at the steel-armored door, he tapped in a series of numbers on the

keypad.

The bolts slid back, he pushed open the door and then closed it as soon as he had gone through.

He mechanically checked that the bolts had shot home.

He walked along the corridor, but when he reached the angle in it, unfamiliar voices reached his ears.

Tiptoeing cautiously, Leo approached and cast a brief glance around the room.

His blood boiled.

The cardinal had a revolver pointed at his head. A West Indian priest was holding the revolver and for a moment Leo could not understand why he was acting in this crazy way. However, when he saw Thomas Anderson at the other side of the table, Leo suddenly realized what the situation was: incarnate in Thomas Anderson, Satan had taken possession of the curate's mind from a distance and the Devil was forcing him to commit murder.

Leo pulled his pistol with its long silencer out of its holster.

What should he do?

If he put a bullet through Satan's head, would the diabolical enchantment cease immediately? Would the priest come back to his senses? That could not be absolutely guaranteed and Leo could not take the risk of seeing the priest shoot Fustiger despite the death of Thomas Anderson.

Leo had no choice.

Before all else, he had to save the Cardinal.

Which implied doing away with the priest.

*
* *

Martial saw only a shadow and his strength flowed away from him.

In slow motion, he felt himself falling, saw himself collapsing on his side, or, more exactly, he saw the world tilt through an angle of ninety degrees.

A small voice was whispering to him not to resist, to let himself go, just to close his eyes and then all would be well.

His head hit the floor and a taste of blood came into his mouth.

An immense lassitude came over him and he wanted to close those eyelids that had become so heavy.

Yet he tried to put off that meeting with death.

For it was death that had just struck the back of his neck.

As if in a dream, Martial saw Tom diving to the ground and simultaneously heard him let out a cry like a wounded animal as he grasped at his thigh.

The shadow approached, one hand held high.

Through a gathering fog of darkness, Martial recognized the androgynous silhouette of Leo and in a last effort he put his shaking hand into the pocket of his cassock.

A smile on his lips, Leo continued toward Satan. Satan was on the ground, dragging himself along wretchedly on his back and twisting in every direction, his face distorted by a grimace of dread and fear. With one leg stiff and unresponsive, Satan could no longer stand up; he was paralyzed and could do no more than twist and turn his upper body and use his arms in an attempt to escape from the vengeful hand of God.

However, Satan was at the mercy of that hand, embodied by Leo, who savored the moment.

At long last he was about to send the Devil back to Hell.

At the very moment when he was about to pull the trigger of his pistol, a soft voice was heard.

“Leo ... Leo ...”

Leo’s finger halted in its path.

He had recognized Goddess’ voice.

She was there behind him, just a few feet away.

For a couple of seconds, Leo closed his eyes, imagining Goddess in a long red dress, with her splendid golden hair and her gaze, like that of Eve, resting on his back.

He opened his eyes and saw Satan at his mercy, huddled on the floor, immobilized by the bullet in his leg.

The Devil could wait a few minutes before dying.

Love, on the other hand, could not wait.

Leo turned around.

Yet his gaze revealed nothing but emptiness.

Once again, Goddess’ voice sounded.

“Leo ... Leo ...”

Then Leo realized where the voice was coming from: the West Indian priest was holding a small circular device against his throat and was calling him.

“Leo ...”

“Goddess? Is it ... is it you?”

Dumbfounded, Leo walked toward Martial.

Martial strove to say something more, but his strength failed him.

His last breath sighed out of him, his hand fell away from his throat and the device that disguised his voice rolled across the floor.

Sitting on his chair, hitherto a silent observer, the Cardinal began to shout.

“Leo! Look out!”

It was too late.

Leo barely had time to start to swivel around: Tom was already hurling himself at him.

The two men swayed, then Leo’s head smashed into the table.

There was a sharp crack.

Tom leapt at Leo’s lifeless body and without a thought for the corpse with the broken neck seized his weapon.

“Don’t move a muscle!” he ordered Fustiger.

Holding the pistol threateningly, Tom stood up. He glanced at Leo’s corpse, then at Martial’s.

Tom thought that, ironically, it had been Martial who had saved his life: of course by distracting the killer’s attention but above all by having told him one day the tale of the partridge.

When a predator approached its brood, before it could find them, the partridge would show itself, moving away with a limp and keeping one wing motionless, as if unable to fly. Certain of its prey, the predator would allow itself to be led away from the brood, something that it would not normally do if it thought it had to deal with an uninjured bird. As soon as the predator was far enough away from the brood, the partridge would stop dangling an easy prey before it, its wing would become fully functional as if by miracle and the bird would fly off under the puzzled eyes of the predator.

Tom had put this tale into practice.

It had worked.

He had been merely grazed by the killer’s bullet, but, having no weapon with which to defend himself, he had had to improvise to survive.

“Where is Camilla?” Tom asked in a menacing tone.

“Just at the end of the corridor,” the Cardinal replied, a sneer on his lips. “She’s in a cell ... but you can’t release her because the cell is locked with a keypad. Naturally, I don’t propose to give you the code to open it ...”

Tom stared at the cardinal.

What could he do?

Tom could not contact the Italian Police, as they had no right to intervene in the Vatican. He could not seek out the Commander of the Swiss Guards, because the man was probably one of Fustiger's hit-men: in here, Tom could trust nobody.

So, what was he to do?

Besides, time was pressing, Fustiger's accomplices could arrive at any moment.

Tom sighed inwardly.

He had no choice but to revert to his original plan: to steal the Pontius Pilate Report that the Pope possessed and so have a bargaining chip with which later to set Camilla free.

Tom picked up Martial's revolver, slipped it into his pocket and took off his belt.

"What are you doing?" the Cardinal demanded.

Tom seized the Cardinal by the shoulder and pushed him face down to the ground. He tied his feet and hands behind him, then took a handkerchief off the table so as to make a gag out of it.

"I'll see you later," Tom replied. "I'll ring you. Till then, behave yourself ..."

Tom put his black beret back on his head and closed the door behind him.

He had to act quickly and he hoped that fortune would favor him.

Crossing the lush green gardens of the Papal City once more, Tom hurried to get back to the door of the Pope's office.

On arriving, Tom was pleased to see that the two Swiss Guards were not at their post.

First checking that there was nobody else around, Tom went into the office.

He rapidly searched the bookcase, but the Grail was not there. Tom sat in the Holy Father's chair and forced open the drawers of the desk with a letter-opener.

Without meaning to, he moved the computer's mouse with his elbow; the screen saver gave way to some sort of countdown timer that was halted.

Intrigued, Tom began to tap keys, looking for the file associated with this strange countdown.

Tom suddenly swore.

Before his eyes a message emerged, an ultimatum sent by the Sons of Abraham: if the Pope did not use Papal infallibility and take a stance in

favor of the extension of its frontiers desired by the Israeli Government, the Sons of Abraham were threatening to send journalists all round the world a certain computer file.

This file contained the Grail, pages scanned from Pilate's manuscript together with other documents from the period, complemented with notes recording expert opinions and reports of analyses of the inks and paper proving the irrefutable authenticity of all the documents.

Tom wiped his forehead with his beret and put it down in front of himself.

He had before his eyes a genuine bomb, an apocalyptic bomb; if it was let loose, it would immediately wipe out the Papacy and the Christian world.

Tom's eyes shone as an idea came into his head.

He got busy on the computer keyboard.

He had been working for a few minutes when the door opened.

Dressed in his white cassock, the Pope appeared in the doorway.

As he recognized Thomas Anderson, he let out a cry and the two Swiss Guards came running.

Tom raised a hand.

"Stop!" he shouted to ensure he would be heard. "I've reactivated the Sons of Abraham's bomb ..."

The two guards tried to enter the room, but the Pope blocked the way with his arm.

Tom looked the Pope straight in the eye, and raising a finger he added:

"All I have to do is push this key and the Pontius Pilate Report will be sent instantaneously to the e-mail addresses of newspapers the world over, just as the Sons of Abraham planned ..."

Tom laid his finger gently on the 'Enter' key.

"No, wait. Do not do it, I beg you, do not do it."

The Pope's hoarse voice was trembling with fear.

He gestured the guards, walked into the office and closed the door behind him.

"Do not do it," the Pope pleaded.

"Lock the door, then," Tom ordered.

The Pope did as he was told and uneasily approached the fake Swiss Guard.

"Please, please, do not do it ..."

"And why shouldn't I send it?" Tom asked.

The Pope hesitated.

“You have no idea what is in it ...”

“Oh, but I have!” Tom exclaimed. “I know ...”

“No,” the Pope cut in, “you do *not* know what it *really* contains ...”

He put heavy emphasis on the word ‘really’.

Struck by a doubt, Tom made a proposal.

“Very well, tell me what it *really* contains, I’ll decide whether or not to send it.”

Realizing he had no choice, the Pope silently nodded agreement.

He groped for words, not sure how to begin.

Tom thought he might help him along by saying:

“The Pontius Pilate Report is clear historical proof that Jesus never existed, isn’t it?”

“No, quite the contrary. It proves he *did* exist ...”

Seeing the surprised look on Tom’s face, the Pope sighed and added:

“Oh, if only Jesus were no more than a myth, because a myth is timeless and always keeps or recreates some element of a true oral tradition. Even with scientific proofs that demonstrate that a myth is untrue, there is always some hope that the story did happen elsewhere, at a different time but in similar circumstances ... The Pontius Pilate Report is concentrated deadly venom. If you spread its details around, chaos will ensue. More than two thousand million Christians will have their faith shattered, the world will go mad and Islam will take over and will reduce to slavery the consciousness of all believers. Do not let a false prophet triumph over Jesus Christ. For the balance and future of the world ...”

Tom interrupted him.

“Well, then, try to convince me. Tell me what’s in that report.”

The Pope grew thoughtful, understanding that the fate of humanity depended upon that man, who could trigger apocalypse with just one finger, through a single stroke on the computer keyboard.

“What does the report say?” Tom insisted.

The Pope grinned in embarrassment.

“It simply recounts the Gospels. It tells exactly the same tale as in the Gospels. I can assure you that what is written in the New Testament is absolutely correct, down to the last word ... Jesus did indeed accomplish everything that is stated in the four Gospels and even the things found in some of the Apocrypha. And a great deal more besides ...”

Hearing these statements that ran totally counter to all that he held certain, Tom could find no answer.

Confession

A faint divine glow began to dispute the dominance of darkness. At first fearfully, like an advance party pressing forwards into hostile territory, it gradually became bolder, as its brightness chased away the blackness of the night. The latter seemed unwilling to engage in combat, preferring to give way to that powerful celestial fire which would not delay in arising in full to impose the rule of the day.

In an intensifying blend of vermillion and ocher, an incandescent crescent burst over the horizon. Majestic, like an absolute ruler, the sun continued climbing slowly, but magnanimously left a little more time for the last troops of darkness to scuttle off into nothingness.

It was saluted as a hero liberating them from the yoke of terror, cold and darkness by the birds that began to glorify its arrival, singing till their throats hurt, but grateful and joyous at this happy outcome. They started ranging around the sky, in which a few stars could still be seen, dashing hither and thither in a crazy dance, drunk on the pure air with its exquisite scents that rose up into the sky. Winging their way through the beautiful cottony white clouds that floated in the now blue firmament, they gave the impression at times that they actually rested on them, as if to find a divine and heavenly dwelling-place there.

Jesus watched the spectacle of life and light bestirring itself under the protection of the Creator. He walked slowly through the paradisiacal garden where a symphony of colors and scents mingled, his hands gently caressing the tall red blooms with their heady perfume. He shut his eyes for a moment, allowing the gently warmth of the sun to wash over their closed lids, relishing the filtered rays that crept into him.

Heavenly paradise ...

Was the Heavenly Father's paradise similar to this angelic place? Jesus knew that the delights and joys of the firmament were immeasurably more

intense than those of this spot, which was definitely earthly, though idyllic. However, he liked to savor this haven of peace where he now was, a foretaste of paradise reflected in a true mirror, as it were.

He walked to the door of the modest but attractive whitewashed building that stood in the center of the marvelous garden. Through one of the ground-floor windows he got a glimpse into the bedroom. Wrapped up in a pink blanket and deeply asleep, a frail, slim body lay on the large bed.

My lover ...

Through the window opening, Jesus stared for some time at the sleeping figure.

He sighed.

Despite this person at his side, he felt alone, lost in the ocean of his tormented mind, with its swells of unbridled thoughts, passions, regrets, and its breakers of emotion, like tidal waves sweeping him into dark and bottomless abysses.

How he would have loved at that moment not to have been the Savior of Israel and never to have wandered along the unpredictable path of Causalities.

Yet he had had no choice.

How had it all started?

When all was considered, everything had started and flowed naturally from his birth, his divine conception.

The Immaculate Conception ...

Sent by God, the angel Gabriel had come to visit Mary. Then, thanks to the perfect will of the demiurge, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus' mother had received the godly seed so that she could bring a divine child into the world.

The Son of God.

Mary's virginity had remained undefiled even after she gave birth.

That tale was circulated with fervor among his followers. Jesus knew that it was all lies, that this tale of the Immaculate Conception had been thought up at the time by his mother herself, so as to spare her innocent young child from learning the gossip that was going the rounds about his birth: Joseph his father was too old, senile and impotent to have begotten Jesus.

Yet Jesus was truly a divine child. Not the child of God the creator, nor even of the sacred lineage of King David, which he would have been had he been Joseph's son.

No, Jesus was a divine child of a completely different sort.

From another bloodline.

The inner demon ...

His grandmother, Mary's mother, had been a courtesan who lived near the palace of Cyprus, in Jericho. One evening, she had taken her young and ravishingly attractive daughter to one of King Herod the Great's feasts. At his first sight of her fragile beauty on the threshold of womanhood, time seemed to stand still, as did his heart. At the end of the evening, he had dismissed his guests and had had the young girl secretly held by his guards. Her mother, seeing the advantages she could draw from this, had whispered to her that she should obey the old king's every whim. Mary had not dared go against her own mother's wishes and had joined Herod the Great in his bed.

She had been raped ...

Disgusted and deeply wounded, Mary had fled into the night, her legs spattered with vile blood. She turned her back forever on her own mother who had sacrificed her virginity on the altar of greed. She made her way northwards and took refuge with an old friend of her family, whom she felt she could trust. She had been right: Joseph took perfect care of her, sheltering her as if she were his own daughter. However, very quickly the girl saw with horror that her belly was swelling ever bigger. Mary grasped that she was carrying within her the fruit of her sexual intercourse with the king. In the end her mother caught up with her and, on seeing her daughter pregnant, she realized that her future could be assured for her: Mary was about to give birth to a child of Herod the Great.

The king had fallen deeply in love with the young girl. He had had searches made for her everywhere, but in vain, so when her mother told him that he was to become a father once more, the old man's heart had begun to beat with affection for the child. He was hoping for a boy, already envisioning a future heir to his throne.

Mary, for her part, hoped that the heart beating within her womb was that of a girl child. She naively believed that the king would eventually lose interest in her or even turn away from her completely in scorn if she did not have a baby boy. She feared that she would have to return to the bed of that foul old creature, who had so violently taken her maidenhead.

Now aware of where Mary was, and calculating that she would soon give birth, Herod the Great sent three envoys.

The three wise men ...

As a child, Jesus had heard people recounting that tale, told in Nazareth to explain the presence of these three strangers at the time of his birth. In this case too, it had been Mary, his mother, who had spread the rumor to

cut short awkward questions about the arrival of these sumptuously clad outsiders, who had introduced themselves to some folk as the representatives of Herod the Great. They had thought that they would loosen the villagers' tongues more readily through fear if they mentioned Herod's name in their attempts to find Joseph's house as quickly as they could.

Jesus now knew why these three emissaries had come from the king.

Not to pay homage to him as a divine child or the son of the king, but just to trick Mary into coming back with money and their splendid clothes. Herod thought that the young girl was just like her mother: greedy. If gold did not win her over, the envoys had orders to seize her by force and bring her back to the palace in Jericho with her child.

Herod the Great had chosen to send some of his foreign mercenaries. He was too much of a paranoiac to trust his own soldiers. However, a few days later, after the mercenaries had headed away with the gifts and the gold, a sudden whim made the king doubt their honesty. So, he took two of his guards into his confidence and sent them off with orders that they should catch up with and discreetly follow the trio. When, a little later, the two guards saw these fellows on the point of embarking on a ship heading west, they realized the mercenaries had betrayed the king. The delightful life of luxury which the 'wise men' had been expecting to enjoy was brutally cut short by the blades of Herod's soldiers' swords.

Jesus sighed.

Raising his sea-blue eyes towards the sun, he thought back to Joseph and Mary, who had fled from Nazareth after his birth. Like foolish and delicate moths attracted to the light of a candle, flying towards its enchanting divine light, but burning their wings in its devastating flame, they had thought that they could bring the crazy whirl of events to a close by seeking refuge in the Temple at Jerusalem.

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Tom nodded silently. He was overwhelmed by these revelations about Jesus, the divine child, son of King Herod the Great.

"One must think oneself back into the context of the period," the Pope said in his hoarse voice. "When Herod used the help of Roman legions to seize the throne by force in Jerusalem, he deprived the Temple and Sanhedrin of political power. The Temple group were hoping to regain their political status and no longer be limited to a purely spiritual role or to

acting as a religious tribunal. When they saw Joseph and Mary arrive with Herod's son, the high priests immediately grasped their stroke of luck; they had in their hands the probable future heir to the throne. They aimed to bring him over to their side, then, when the opportunity arose, they would make use of him, placing him on the throne. By an intrigue, by a ruse, even if necessary by means of force, but emphasizing above all the child's divine bloodline, his royal lineage, so as to give the throne legitimate status as against the Roman occupiers of the realm, their plan was to use Jesus as a faithful puppet brought up and trained in the Temple's cause and their partisan interests. Joseph and Mary were not taken in by them, realizing that the Temple clergy were bound to think in that fashion about Jesus if asked for help. For Mary, revenge for being raped by Herod must have been a motive. She must have hoped that one day her son would take power and overthrow his bloody-handed father, perhaps even eventually killing him."

The Pope paused for an instant before continuing.

"For that was the sad truth about the period: Herod the Great was a crazy and perverted killer, a man who had raped many women and put to death members of his own family, including several of his sons and even his wife. His reign was one long, sordid bloodbath in an effort to cling to power and thwart the plots against him, which emerged even from within his own family. Hence, the birth of Jesus, a future claimant to the throne through the intervention of the Temple, seemed in his eyes to constitute a great danger."

"How did Herod find out about the Temple's plan?" Tom asked.

"In the Bible, there is reference to a man named Simeon who was present on the day when Jesus was brought to the Temple to be circumcised. He was aware of what Jesus could become and he rejoiced that this divine child might bring Herod's downfall and the restoration and the reinstatement of the Temple priests. He envisaged him as a light setting the nation afire and bringing the glory of Israel. Simeon saw in him Israel's salvation, as also that of the Temple. Sadly, he had the defect of not knowing when to keep his mouth shut and one of Herod's spies finally reported what he had said to the king."

"And Herod's reaction was the slaughter of the innocents," Tom murmured as if to himself, as he recalled the passage in the Bible.

"Yes, you are quite right," the Pope agreed. "Livid with rage, Herod had Simeon tortured and before he died he revealed the fact that the divine child was in Bethlehem. Herod was not sure exactly where Jesus was, so that he had all male children aged two or under in Bethlehem and its environs put to death. Herod also had Mary's mother killed, for he

believed her involved in the Temple plot. Happily for Jesus, the Temple had its own spies to alert Joseph. So, parents and child fled to Egypt. As for Herod, he thought that the child was dead and chose to take no measures against the Temple or the Sanhedrin, for his shaky hold on power also rested on the Sadducee clique, who were more or less faithful to him. A little less so in the case of the divine child.”

He mopped his brow with his cuff, never taking his eyes off the computer keyboard over which Tom’s hand hovered.

“And then?” Tom asked.

“The Temple’s initial plan underwent a completely new development when Herod died. The Temple finally learnt an incredible secret: four days before his death, Herod had amended his will so as to make Jesus his main heir.”

Tom’s jaw sagged open at this surprise.

“What?” he managed to croak out.

“Herod’s madness knew no bounds,” the Pope said. “He was dying in terrible agony, eaten away by worms. However, his madness did not arise from that disease. He had contracted another illness in his youth: syphilis.”

Tom nodded without saying a word. Whilst that disease could be relatively mild in some cases, in others it attacked the brain, many long years after the patients had been infected with it, and turned them completely insane. The French novelist Guy de Maupassant had caught this pox and twenty years later had had to be taken in a straightjacket to a Paris clinic: he had become a megalomaniac and claimed that God had announced him as His son from the top of the Eiffel Tower. He imagined that he could see immense distances and could admire Russian or African scenes from Paris. He demanded that the door of his room be left open so that the Devil had a way out and stated that his brain was trickling out through his nostrils and that his internal organs had disappeared. He ceaselessly talked to the walls in a murmur, and said that the pills that the staff forced him to swallow directly controlled his gestures and words.

Tom imagined for a moment what a king with unlimited power would do if affected by such an illness. As if he were reading his thoughts, the Pope added:

“Herod’s period in power was a reign of madness. He was responsible for such carnage that it is impossible to list all his victims. When he felt death creeping over him, he even ordered all the notable Jews of Jerusalem to come to Jericho. He had all of these Jews gathered at a racecourse and gave secret instructions: as soon as he died, his soldiers were to massacre every one of them without exception. Herod wanted this slaughter to

spread grief throughout all the families of the kingdom, forcing them to shed real tears on the long awaited day that he left this life ... Happily, when he died his sister Salome ordered these notables freed. She lied to the troops, claiming that this act of clemency was the last wish of her brother Herod the Great.”

Tom thought this over for a moment before asking:

“But why put Jesus in his will if he thought his son was dead? He was really out of his mind ...”

“No, despite his madness, he still had occasional moments of sanity. One of the king’s spies had tracked a Temple messenger leaving for Egypt, where Joseph and Mary had taken refuge. The spy saw Jesus there and the messenger ended his life on Herod’s torture rack, being questioned about what he was planning. Herod saw plots everywhere and thought that some priests were in league with the Egyptians to overthrow him.”

The Pope remained silent for an instant, then added that when Herod learnt that Jesus was still alive, he had been deeply moved. More than that, when the child’s physical appearance as described to him precisely, Herod realized that Jesus resembled him a great deal, having his blue eyes. His heart beat faster for love of this son whom he had never seen. Before dying, he changed his will and split his kingdom into a tetrarchy: four parts, of which three were to go to those of his sons of an age to rule. Archilaus was to have Samaria, Antipas Galilee and Perea, and Philip the territories to the north-east of the Jordan. Jesus, for his part, was to have the most flourishing and most prestigious kingdom of Israel: Edom and Judea, including the city of Jerusalem. Jesus was the new king and was to bear the title King of the Jews.

Perplexed, Tom frowned.

“But I thought Herod’s will was read before a gathering of Jews in the presence of the royal family ...”

“Yes, that is true. Indeed, it was Archilaus, one of the inheritor tetrarchs, who read it to them. However, he falsified the reading, for he had inherited only the least attractive part, Samaria. He was jealous of Jesus, whom he considered a bastard, and publicly claimed that the lands of Judea and Edom had been left to him, so that he was the king. He gave himself the bonus of the city of Jerusalem and the people chanted out his name, believing that he was their new true king. The troops and their officers swore loyalty to the new king and wished him a happy reign.”

The Pope continued, pointing out that there had naturally been dissension between Archilaus and Antipas. The latter had not appreciated Archilaus’ strong-arm tactics in appropriating for himself the most coveted

territory in the kingdom, together with the title of king. Antipas did not wish to breathe any word of this before the people, as he also believed that he could profit from the crazy will of a king who had given Judea to an illegitimate child who was not even of an age to reign. Antipas hoped that he could have this immense province fall into his hands, since in order for the will to be validated, it was necessary to have the approval of Augustus, the Emperor of Rome. In the final analysis, he would be the one who decided. So, both Antipas and Archilaus took ship with their respective delegations for Italy, both hoping to convince Augustus of their rights to Judea and Edom, as well as the title of King of the Jews.

Control of the country was entrusted to Philip for a while. He was feeble-minded and had little ambition to ask for anything more, content with what Herod the Great had bequeathed to him. The king's death and the departure of the claimants to the throne were the signal for numerous popular uprisings against the Roman occupying forces. Chaos and anarchy reigned over the Promised Land. The Roman legions put down the revolts in a bath of blood, more than two thousand Jews being crucified around Jerusalem.

Augustus received the two Jewish delegations and finally made a decision about the will: Philip was nominated Tetrarch of Trachonitis, Batanea, and Auranitis; Antipas Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. As for Archilaus, he had greatly displeased the Emperor Augustus by declaring himself king and taking the throne of Judea without awaiting permission. Archilaus lost his title of Tetrarch, being reduced to mere Ethnarch of Samaria.

For a while, Augustus decided to keep secret from the Hebrew people the fact that Jesus would at a future date become King of the Jews, this so as not to provoke further clashes such as had already occurred between the various Jewish factions in the land. So, while he waited for Jesus to be of an age to reign, Augustus designated Archilaus Regent of Judea and Edom, as his 'self-proclamation' had united the people around him and Augustus could not install another man as Regent without stirring up even more strife. Chaos had continued for long enough in the region, so that this concession was necessary.

Archilaus no longer held the title of king, but was promised by Augustus that he would be set up as provisional king until Jesus could be crowned, if he merited this by his actions as Regent. One of the conditions was that he was to find Jesus and insure his physical safety.

The two delegations returned to Israel. Archilaus was furious, seeking Jesus not to guarantee him a glorious future, but rather to kill him. In his view, if the child died, Augustus would have no option but to nominate

him King of the Jews and grant him the provinces that he governed as Regent. He took good care that this fact should be kept secret, nobody learning that he was merely the Regent and not the all-powerful sovereign that he claimed to be. It was not in Antipas' interest to spread word of the matter, since he hoped that when Jesus was murdered, Augustus would depose Archilaus for having betrayed his confidence, leaving him heir to everything.

All of these schemers were seeking Jesus with the aim of having him die. However, the Temple priests had their spies: they had learnt the secret of the tetrarchy and how the survival of their protégé was at risk. Rightly fearing for Jesus' life if he remained in Egypt, they authorized Joseph to come back to Israel and hide his family away in Nazareth until the moment when the divine child would be ready to govern. The priests patiently waited for the time to come when they could resume political power over the land.

The hostile camps did not know much about the bloodline of the child Jesus, aware only that his mother Mary was from Jericho and that an elderly man by the name of Joseph was his guardian. The late King Herod had known how to keep his personal affairs top secret and had given out very little information about his heir. The strong-arm men sent by Archilaus and Antipas searched Egypt and Judea in vain for the royal child.

Many years went by before one of them, spying for Archilaus, eventually learnt a crucial piece of information while hunting around in the depths of Egypt: the man Joseph was perhaps originally from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He wrote a letter to the Ethnarch of Samaria to inquire what he should do and whether he should go to the village of Nazareth to do away with Jesus. Sadly for Archilaus, the Temple intercepted the message. The priests realized that the divine child's life was in danger and that it would not be long before he was found, wherever the attempt was made to hide him. Even if he was not fully ready for consecration, the priests had no option but to bring Jesus out of the shadows and into the limelight of the stage of Israel.

The priests also grasped the fact that the King of the Jews could never be crowned without conflict as long as Archilaus held power. Revealing the truth about the will of Herod the Great would plunge the country into fratricidal struggles. As at the moment of the late King's death, it would lead to a period of anarchy, because Archilaus would not allow himself to be deprived of his kingdom without a murmur. Rather, he would stir up popular uprisings to keep himself in power. Archilaus was the key to future clashes.

The letter sent by Archilaus' spy was highly compromising. It would be enough to have the renegade Regent sentenced by Augustus. So, the priests sent a delegation to Rome to present the missive to the Emperor, accusing Archilaus of being a tyrant without a shred of goodness in him. They also announced that Jesus the son of Herod the Great had been found and that he was capable of taking on his function as King of the Jews. As the Temple had hoped, Augustus summoned Archilaus to Rome, confiscated all his property and sent him into exile in Vienne near Lyons in France.

However, at the last minute an unforeseen event stymied the Temple's plans: Jesus had run away when Joseph died. Hence, the priests also had to set about seeking Jesus. Seeing that these clergy could not produce him to set him on the throne as King of the Jews, while waiting for the intended coronation, Augustus put a Roman Procurator in charge, taking advantage of this to order a general census to be taken of the population and its property.

As Antipas' hit-men were still on the track of Jesus and hoped to get to kill him so as to put their Tetrarch on the throne of the kingdom, the priests took steps to have Jesus recorded as born and resident in Bethlehem when the Roman census was being taken in that town. Thus, Antipas' searches would look southwards and not to the north, which was where the divine child seemed to have gone to ground.

The Pope stopped for a moment. He looked long and hard at Tom before adding:

"When the census was held, the priests added to the lists the name of Jesus, the issue of Joseph of Nazareth and Mary of Jericho. They could not set down that his father was Herod the Great, for that would have been too obvious a trick and Antipas' men would not have been fooled by it. On the other hand, Jesus had a birthmark: a sort of inverted heart on the upper part of his wrist. Herod the Great had that same mark, which proved that Jesus was indeed his son. Herod knew that Jesus had this mark on his wrist, for his spy who had seen Jesus in Egypt had reported this detail to him ... Besides, Herod himself had noted in his will that his heir Jesus had such a birthmark, so that he could be formally identified. Hence, Antipas' men were looking for a child with a heart on his upper wrist. That is why the priests made their false census declaration perfect by stating that the child Jesus had a birthmark in the shape of an inverted heart on the upper part of his wrist. It was all intended to make Antipas concentrate the search in the region of Bethlehem. However, the priests' own searches also remained fruitless: they never found Jesus, so that in the end one Roman Procurator after another governed over Jerusalem."

Tom had listened to the Pope's account with great attention. He thought back to the will of Herod the Great.

"I thought that the fourth tetrarch was Herod's sister, Salome ..."

"No, in the will she was not designated Tetrarch, she was merely mentioned as inheriting certain cities. Besides, Augustus and the Empress were also included in that will. They were bequeathed gold and silver coins. Hence, it was not a question of the number of people listed in the will making each of them become a tetrarch. The term tetrarch does indeed imply the splitting of a State into four parts. However, in that will the tetrarchy was not in effective existence. The name of Jesus was erased and historians came to think that Salome was the fourth tetrarch required to make up the number. Besides, if historians had concentrated somewhat harder upon the terms used, they would have understood that something was rather odd: why, Mister Anderson, should Archilaus be named Ethnarch if he had inherited Samaria, Judea and Edom? The title ethnarch was used to designate somebody who governed one single province. Yet officially he had three under his control. The Romans were very punctilious about the law terms that they used, especially in a document with legal force. This oddity reveals the adjustments that were made to the will and that it was in fact forged by the early Church in order to suppress details of Jesus' life on earth."

The Pope sighed:

"All of that is a counterfeit from the time of Constantine. All reference to Jesus' true bloodline was removed to make him appear to be the Son of God, replacing Mithras in the State religion. It was essential, above all, for Jesus not to appear as the son of any man, even if that man were a king. All the documents were destroyed or falsified later ..."

The words the Pope was uttering were harsh: an acceptance of guilt that was intended to be sincere. However, Tom was not fooled. He knew that the Pope, by making amends in this way, was trying to convince him of the rightness of the Church's actions.

"What did Jesus think of Herod the Great's will and the tetrarchy?" Tom inquired.

"He knew nothing about it and never learnt of these matters," the Pope responded. "Had he known, I would probably not be here trying to convince you not to make an irreparable mistake."

His gaze was fixed on Tom's hand.

"However, I will come back to that soon," he added. "The Temple never revealed anything to Jesus' mother about the tetrarchy or the regency, for there was the fear that Mary might change sides, feeling that

Archilaus might be a good guardian, not taking seriously his desire to kill her son. She might have believed that it was all lies from the Temple, intended to keep control over her. The priests did not want her to slip out of their grasp. Mary was a woman and women always remain somewhat unpredictable in the eyes of the clergy, so they preferred to keep the matter of the tetrarchy secret. After all, it was of little importance for the child's future, for in any case it had long since been intended that, when one day he became King of the Jews, he would act in full conformity with the Temple's demands, tetrarchy or no tetrarchy. Mary knew that, and it was more than enough for the priests."

The Pope smiled sadly.

"Jesus was kept in ignorance of all this information. He was simply led to believe in the destiny dangled before him, that he would one day become King of the Jews and that he should prepare himself for this. Until the day when by accident he learnt the truth about his real nature ..."

The Pope's gaze left Tom's hand and moved to the window of his office. Outside, the sun was casting its last rays on the Vatican City.

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In the gentle warmth of the rising sun's rays, a tiny, enjoyable tremor ran through Jesus.

As if set free from matter, he felt good, somehow much lighter. In this garden with its thousands of flowers where he was strolling, he was enraptured by heady perfumes, joining in divine symbiosis with those paradisiacal scents as they rose into the air.

The harmonious twittering of the birds, singing the praises of the heavens, finally brought his walking to a halt and he raised his eyes towards to blue vault of the sky. A playful, gentle gust of wind blew against his face, caressing his beard and his long hair, tickling his ears as if an angel were trying to slip a divine secret into them.

... *An open secret* ...

Jesus' face darkened in a fraction of a second. An icy wind swept through him. Once again, he found himself alone in midst of the heavy silence of his own world. In the dream of his life, on the edge of his consciousness, he teetered between day and night, between the light of the present and the darkness of the past.

His mother's confessions that he had heard after Joseph's death, when she had confided in Elisabeth, were a terrible upheaval, irremediably shattering his child's mind.

He was not the son of Joseph, descendant of King David, in whom the people was awaiting a Savior. Nor was he the Son of God begotten in an Immaculate Conception.

He was the son of the bloodthirsty Herod the Great.

He had been conceived on the wrong side of the blanket and the harm was forever done.

His childish dreams fell in shattered fragments in an instant when he realized from what his mother said that he was no more than the Temple's puppet, conditioned into working for it.

My Master ...

The mysterious man who came each morning to teach him, who had set more than one gossip's tongue wagging in his village, had made mock of him. That man, for whom he had had great esteem and deep devotion, seeing him even as a second father, had betrayed him. That Greek Master with his vast knowledge and his eternal black tunic, with his limping gait and the goatee beard that accentuated yet more the sensation of length in the slender body of that man in his forties, had espoused the cause of the Jewish religion and had worked for the Temple.

Throughout all those years of apprenticeship, pulling the wool over his eyes and indoctrinating him with a faith in his royal future, the Master had shaped him for his intended function, craftily leading him to adore and respect the Temple and its priests as much as Yahweh.

Jesus was not a divine child as the Master had claimed: he was just a whelp of Herod's, a tarnished bastard, the outcome of a rape, whom they had wanted to use as a peg to bear the title of King of the Jews, a shoddy Messiah, the Christ, as his Master had whispered to him in Greek, planning to have him act exactly as the Temple's cause required and, like a good henchman, docilely prostrate himself at the feet of the clergy.

The psychological shock of these revelations had been harsh for Jesus' mind at the time. The whole universe that he had constructed for himself, that people had built up out of lies for him, had been destroyed, swept away by the hurricane called reality.

There no longer appeared to be anything of it left. Only the Heavenly Father seemed still to be throbbing within him, but so far away, so deeply buried in the remotest part of his wounded soul that Jesus thought that never again would he be able to enjoy the company of the divine being that had set his heart afire in the happy days.

A new day ...

In the paradisiacal garden where he now stood, Jesus turned towards the sun, whose warm rays lit up his tormented face.

For a long while, he had made towards it and towards himself, always towards a new dawn, seeking himself and seeking that Heavenly Father who seemed to have abandoned him.

Methodically, using facts and pointers to guide his search, Jesus had thought long and hard on the evening when he had fled his family home and taken refuge in a cave.

Despite the lies needed for his conditioning, the Greek Master had given him a neutral account of the beliefs of the Pharisees and Sadducees. These groups had, by common accord, thought it best for the future King of the Jews to form his own views about Yahweh and the celestial laws governing creation.

The Sadducees were certain that souls died with the body and that there was no eternal life. For them, it was essential to get as much as possible out of life on Earth, naturally on condition that the Law was kept.

Honoring the elders so much that they dared not contradict them, the Pharisees took every verse of the Law literally. However, alongside the written tradition, they also accepted an oral tradition, believing in angels and the life everlasting, that souls were immortal, that in the next world they were judged on the basis of their faults or merits and rewarded or punished. They attributed to destiny everything that happened, not, however, depriving men of the power to consent to it or not, so that, whilst everything took place according to God's orders, it was still a matter for men's wills to choose between good and evil. They also accepted that certain souls might be kept captive or come back to life in another body.

Rebirths ...

This esoteric notion coming from Persia had always fascinated Jesus. It was that notion of rebirth that stirred his mind on that night of worry, as he stood alone in the darkness of the cave. For him, all of that was no human imagining, no theoretical concept. It seemed so concrete and logical: as winter came, did the flowers of the fields not die before they could be reborn the next year? Did the Sun not die every dusk, only to shine out again at the new dawn? Was that work of the demiurge, that cycle of deaths and rebirths, clearly present throughout nature, not a heavenly law from which men could not break free?

That knowledge came from the regions of the rising sun and it was there that he would find the source of wisdom. He was sure that everything was linked to this.

He and the Heavenly Father. The soul and rebirths.

Setting out in search of that Whole, of that One and of himself, walking towards that luminous east, after years and years of an endless inner journey, Jesus arrived in India. For many long months, on the banks of the Ganges, he strove for a future as a Hindu ascetic. That religion had fully assimilated the notion of rebirth: an immortal soul endlessly reincarnated, passing from death to life and from life to death.

The life of men was an incessant whirlwind of lives and reincarnations. Just as all the buckets turned around the axle of the waterwheel, so men were reborn over and again from a mother's womb.

Some adapted perfectly to this cycle of rebirths, fully satisfied by it, since it signified the return of youth, love and the thirst for sated desires. Yet poverty, illness, pain, age systematically brought a somber note to that idyllic cycle that for many might appear a fountain of youth giving eternal life.

The one true eternal life is that obtained in heaven ...

The cycle of rebirths had been turning since the dawn of time and was ruled by the law of Karma: any act, great or small, came back to affect the actor with the same force as that of the initial action. The law of Karma was itself based on chains of causes and effects, thus keeping the cycle of rebirths moving. Going beyond the limits of birth and death, Karma was patient, impersonal and inescapable. Hence, good came to reward good and evil was returned for evil. Whether touching the body, words, or mind, the problem or benefits that arose in current life were the fruits of such actions carried out in previous lives and also in the present life itself.

The Law of Causalities.

Any act, even apparently tiny and harmless, set loose an infinite succession of uncontrollable and immeasurable consequences. Was it not said that the flutter of a butterfly's wing might unchain the gales of the gods?

Jesus sighed.

In the end he had rejected Hindu doctrine, because in India men had used these undeniable heavenly Truths to enslave their fellow men, imposing human laws and defining castes of lowly status where their fatalistic peers were confined, making yet more hierarchical their dominant, thinking animal society. The intransigent water-tightness of castes was an aberration, a very human racist structure that set a god at the controls of nameless folly, turning soul and intelligence towards a bottomless pit. Men were responsible for their own sufferings through their interpretations, through that immeasurable vacuum in their heads

which religions had stuffed full, providing an illusorily saving answer for these castaways of the subconscious.

The secondary causes of the creations that passed before its eyes could be explained to humankind. Nonetheless, the first cause remained concealed and none could come to understand it other than by undergoing death. The history of religions was always one of narrow-mindedness, superstitions and falsehood. Nothing was true but the religious history of humanity.

Every religion is an error, a human interpretation ...

Jesus had gone towards the disciples of Buddha whose words five hundred years previously had decried Hinduism and its sectarian derivatives. Gautama Buddha's teachings were neither a religion, nor a philosophy, nor a system. They were just an outline of facts, of things as they were, describing the Heavenly Truths in a pure, uncluttered and scientific manner.

A science of the mind ...

However, humans had a very strong religious feeling. Hence, they could not help deifying all sorts of things. Not being a god, nor a divine messenger, nor even a prophet, but simply a man, Gautama had had the misfortune, for his technical teachings, of being elevated to the rank of the gods, of having monuments and statues built to his glory that had turned people aside towards that mirage called religion. Ceremonies, recitations and incantations had distorted the original sense of his teachings, turning them into a religious dogma. In his own times, Gautama had predicted the future decline of his lessons about things: this was inevitable, because everything must one day disappear. The one permanent thing in this world was the impermanence of things. Paradoxically, it had not been wars, nor famines, nor political ideologies that had been responsible for this decline, but rather those in whom he had trusted to preserve his teachings. In fact, as generations of disciples had succeeded one another, transmitting Buddha's precepts, they had in the long run introduced into them personal opinions, their own doctrines, rites, quarrying miscellaneous features from this religion or that philosophy, believing that in the end all was one, or that at some point Buddha had also spoken of them.

Jesus had spurned all these devout frills and late interpretations, sticking to the essentials, studying the technical guidelines for telling the diamonds of truth apart from the dross and pebbles.

He methodically mused on the words of Gautama.

As a pragmatic reformer, Buddha had taken a good number of undeniable Heavenly Truths from Hinduism, such as the cycle of rebirths

and the law of Karma. His teaching could be summed up in a phrase: suffering and the end of suffering.

Suffering and the end of suffering ...

Life was unsatisfying, unstable and painful in nature. A momentary respite brought through the enrapturing of the senses, the enjoyment found in life was really a pernicious form of suffering, because it took on a pleasant appearance. People thought that pleasure brought happiness, because they had never known anything but that form of happiness. A prisoner shut away in a cell for many long years finally became used to this, accustomed to his condition, and accepted it. Men were so immersed in suffering that they no longer even noticed it.

Despite short and illusory periods when a semblance of happiness seemed to suffuse one's whole being, earthly life was only suffering. This suffering came from ignorance, whose perpetuating factors kept the world in its endless rotation.

Among these factors was the set of beliefs, philosophical or religious, views and opinions. There was also human pride. However, the greatest was the set of attachments, fascinations, hungers and desires.

Desires.

Desires gave rise to a thirst to live, the rapture of sensations on which the soul became drunk and clung to life once more, an unwitting captive of the jail of rebirths and the implacable jailer Karma.

The Heavenly Equation ...

Desire which was not curbed or which was succumbed to was equal to the cycle of rebirths, because the being enchained itself over and again to this rotation by wishing to establish or re-establish this fatal wish, deluded into hoping this was the way to be rid of it. When there was a lack, when there was the will to get, when there was loss or interruption of enjoyment, when what was wished for was not obtained, then desire surged up, bringing its thirst for life, leading to suffering and being caught in the gears of the endlessly turning wheel of existence.

By bringing desire to an end, by eliminating ignorance through knowledge, by identifying the process of causality working within all actions and in particular those leading to suffering, this disappeared for ever and, free from Karma, the cycle of rebirths no longer had any place.

By following Buddha's teaching, it was possible to attain this ultimate goal of existence: after long internal effort, through Enlightenment, through that inner Awakening in which previous lives appeared as clearly as in an open book, the soul's salvation was to be found at the end of that heavenly route. Then in turn people became a Buddha themselves, an

Awakened One in whom ignorance no longer had any roots in a mind filled with infinite knowledge, perceiving the world such as it truly was. Then, upon the physical death of the body, freed from rebirths, they attained Nirvana.

Jesus put into practice the Law of Balance and the middle way, lying between the two extremes consisting, on the one hand, of merely reveling in the physical senses and, on the other, of the total suppression of every form of sensuality, severe ascetic conduct with countless prohibitions. It was the same as with a musical instrument, if the string of salvation was too tight it would break, if too slack it would produce off-key notes. Jesus remembered Hindu practices for attaining the divine, by starving the body until it became feeble and befuddled, or by spinning round and round in a ritual dance, so as to come into contact with celestial forces. All these sensations were false, he knew that now, and the most insignificant alcoholic could reach the same supposedly spiritual and divine state by getting drunk. Yet those who persisted in such rituals had mostly never taken any strong drink and could thus not compare the sensations, so believing that their gestures or their silences held the key to the sublime knowledge that was next to heavenly.

Jesus soberly strove to follow in Gautama's footsteps, naturally heading towards the Himalayas, towards those breasts of stone resting on a body of magma, thrusting up into the sky, silent and calm, clad in a top of snow many times torn by men who had set out to conquer their souls.

However, despite his years of assiduous practice in this high place of spirituality, Jesus did not reach Enlightenment. Every time he had attempted this, an unexpected obstacle had prevented him from attaining Nirvana.

My inner demon ...

He was the son of the bloodthirsty Herod the Great.

A residual karma had been transmitted to him by this bond of blood and, whilst Jesus did not suffer from the acts of his monster of a father, neither was he fully acquitted of them. In the remotest depths of a subconscious collective mind, a barrier had risen, lifted by tortured souls, those martyred by Herod, their spirits thirsting for vengeance shaping a curse of generations of which Jesus was the victim. If the way to Nirvana was hard, harder still was the route that Jesus must complete, moving forward with this immense heavenly burden.

Even being aware of this, rigorously identifying its cause, Jesus could not manage to rid himself of it. Then he realized that it was perhaps in vain that he was striving to attain Nirvana. He might never achieve it.

Unable to discover it for himself, he sought to find another route to it. Above all, he had to know what Nirvana was.

On this point, for year after year Buddhist spiritual Masters had proved unable to answer Jesus' question of what Nirvana was. All they knew was what Nirvana was not: Nirvana was no longer being in the cycle of rebirths. Some claimed that only the male soul could reach it.

Whilst Gautama Buddha's Enlightenment had conferred upon him infinite knowledge comparable to an immense forest, he had not chosen to divulge more than a single leaf of one of its trees, thinking that all that learning was not necessary to reach Nirvana and that by gaining Enlightenment men would attain this knowledge for themselves. Hence there was no point in drowning them in an ocean of facts when it was already difficult to understand and keep afloat in the streamlet of consciousness that meandered its way to Nirvana.

Jesus had always been motivated by a desire to break through into the secret heart of things, a thirst for knowledge that was stronger than all else. He was aware that it was probably these innumerable questions that he endlessly asked himself that had also prevented his progress along the way to Enlightenment. Yet that was his nature; he could not help doing so, trying to gain an overall vision of the work of the demiurge so as to understand all its ins and outs. He could not be satisfied with the single leaf from one tree that constituted Buddha's teachings, wanting to stroll through the whole forest of infinite understanding. He knew that the experience of absolute truth was beyond all conceiving, even less any expressing in words, but, if he could not enfold it in an inward vision, he at least wanted somebody to whisper these truths into his ear.

In this aspect, by its lack of a definition or a determination of Nirvana, Gautama's teachings left him with a sensation of incompleteness, of something unfinished. He would so have liked Buddha to reveal more, much, much more.

He heard tell from a great Buddhist Master of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, its mysterious scroll that formerly had been put beneath the head of mummies to accompany them into the next world and which told in symbolic form of the soul's journey beyond the grave. In those Egyptian sanctuaries there lived sages in possession of the divine science. Could it be that Egyptian priests had broken through into the ultimate secret of Nirvana and of divinity?

Jesus had to find this out, so he left his own disciples, who saw in him a being with extraordinary gifts, some of them secretly believing him the reincarnation of Gautama, the Bodhisattva returned to the world to save all

creatures. Jesus went off towards the setting sun and came to the place of the Initiated.

There, Jesus discovered what that Nirvana was.

The Kingdom of Heaven ...

In a dimension outside space and time, there was a heavenly Kingdom where measureless joy reigned. Words had not the power to describe the happiness that emanated from it. Far from the Earth, its torments, its madness and its futile desires, that world was inhabited by angels. Religions had often described these sublime and luminous beings as the emissaries of a divine will. This was true in a certain fashion. However, these heavenly messengers had not come from the first creation and had not been begotten by the demiurge to communicate demands.

Angels ...

Angels were disembodied humans who had crossed into a higher stage in the process of development of their being. Through the night of time, through the simple evolution undergone by all things, freeing itself from its bodily and earthly bonds, the human soul had transcended its original nature. Liberating themselves from the law of Karma and the cycle of rebirths by following the path of the Buddhas, the first men had become these bodiless celestial beings and taken over the heavens.

Every fleshly death gave rise to a timeless, mathematical interlude, during which the soul recovered the memories of its previous lives, added up its acts and calculated the sum of its errors. However, even if the soul vowed to do better, once back on Earth, it forgot its good resolutions, became enraptured with life and returned to the same errors, paying the tribute of Karma.

In their thousands, angels had come back down to Earth to aid human souls to conduct themselves correctly for their salvation. Nonetheless, the power of these new heavenly beings was very limited: they could not act on matter, having no longer any earthly envelope. They could not bring their bodily kin to understand other than by dreams and premonitions, or through certain more receptive humans who could serve as their spokespeople. Their assistance went by priority to those who were close to Awakening, giving them a heavenly helping hand. While the heavens were daily gaining new angels, these earthly guardian angels had evolved even further, reaching a higher spiritual level.

Archangels.

Their spiritual force seemed limitless, their compassion for their earthbound kin immense and their powers over all things highly effective.

Their ethereal nature was sublime, even more so than that of the angels. These, when working for the salvation of humanity, were simultaneously also taking steps to reach that ultimate degree of spiritual evolution, adoring their Archangel brethren with infinite love.

In these heavens with their hierarchy of love, a supreme force finally arose from the firmament.

The Heavenly Father ...

And there was light.

A blinding and splendorous light, illuminating the nothingness with a new clarity, sweeping away the old, darkness and its ancient ignorance. Through a divine consecration, the Heavenly Father took possession of the Kingdom of Heaven.

His appearance and accession took place to the acclamation of the angels, who grasped that the heavenly laws would evolve in the future and that the heavens would indeed become the celestial paradise for all humans ...

In the paradisiacal, but nonetheless terrestrial, garden where he had found refuge, Jesus dreamily wandered, caressing with his fingertips the flowers with their heady scents. He raised his eyes towards the blue sky thinking of the true nature of the Heavenly Father, that divine being that now reigned over the firmament.

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“How do you know all this stuff about Jesus’ beliefs?” asked Tom in astonishment.

The Pope looked for a moment at the man sitting at the computer, his hand casually resting on the edge of the keyboard.

“We had a document,” he admitted finally. “It was discovered during Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt. It was drawn up by Jesus himself before he died.”

The pontiff’s eyes turned to the large crucifix of solid wood fixed on one of the walls of his office. He glanced at it for an instant before sighing gently. Once again, his small grey eyes stared at Tom’s hand.

“The file that you have before you in that machine also contains the document. The Sons of Abraham used the Mossad to steal the original and sent us a copy as a computer file to blackmail us and insure they had our whole-hearted support for Israel. It reveals certain details with which Pilate was not familiar and which are not included in his report.”

Tom nodded, then asked:

“According to Jesus, who is the Heavenly Father?”

“The manuscript was very old and seemed to have a good number of pages missing, in particular those revealing the nature of the Heavenly Father. Nonetheless, at one point Jesus mentions the Heavenly Father and his incredible nature, which, according to Jesus, is so obvious, so logical, that nobody had ever thought of it before.”

Quoting from the Gospel according to Thomas, the Pope added:

“‘Let not him who seeketh cease from his search until he findeth. When he findeth, he shall be troubled. When he be troubled, he shall marvel, and in splendor shall reign over all’. That sentence seems to be the key to uncovering the mystery ...”

“And I imagine you’ve got your own little theory about the identity of that Father?” Tom cut in, in a mocking tone.

The Pope was irritated and stayed silent for some seconds. However, he finally said:

“Jesus also designated the Holy Father with the name of Deus to distinguish Him from God, the demiurge who created the Universe. These are two separate heavenly entities. Some religions have clearly made the distinction between these two beings. Others have mixed them together, making just one, or even several in one divine group. However, in fact they are totally distinct ...”

“You can stop peddling your pious clap-trap to me,” Tom snorted. “Next thing, you’ll be trying to get me to swallow the idea that you believe in the law of Karma like Jesus. Come on, let’s get down to the nitty-gritty ...”

The Pope became annoyed.

“The law of Karma is the only doctrine capable of explaining the inequalities in human conditions and the apparent injustice of this world, where the righteous can be seen suffering and the wicked triumphing. These wicked people had been righteous folk in past lives, but humans turn from victims into executioners in the twinkling of an eye. That is in their nature, driven by desire and the thirst for sensations. It is innate in creation.”

Regaining a certain calmness, he added:

“That does not mean that all the evil in the world is to be attributed to the demiurge. Human ignorance and human free will are responsible, with the choice of doing good or ill. So, if you want me to get to the essentials, here they are ...”

He took the Bible which was on one of the shelves of his bookcase. He thumbed through it for a moment, then closed it.

"All the teachings of Jesus, the esoteric details recounted in the work, or at least certain parts of it, have to do with the Heavenly Father and rebirths."

"So those are Jesus' beliefs?" Tom said, doubtfully.

"They are the reality of heavenly matters," the Pope protested.

"Oh, yeah?" Tom said, mockingly. "So why have you never told Christians around the world? I'm sure they'd have been delighted to learn that Hindu dogmas are closer to 'heavenly matters', as you call them, than the Bible itself."

"We were too far gone along the path of lies," the old man muttered. "The truth would be a terrible shock to people's minds. Besides, Catholic teaching is not so far from heavenly realities. It brings salvation through repentance ..."

"That's just your opinion."

In the midst of a tension that could virtually be cut with a knife, the two men stayed silent. The eyes of the atheist and the clergyman engaged in visual jousting. In the end the Pope lowered his gaze to the Bible that he had in his hand.

"In the Apocrypha and the Bible, we find the true teachings of Jesus if we understand that over and again he is alluding to rebirths."

Opening the Bible and taking a page at random, he read:

"'Before Abraham was, I am' ... or again 'I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was' ... that shows how certain he was of the original cycle of rebirths and the fact that it had been on Earth since long before the known ancestors of the Jews."

He turned a few pages.

"Here too, when he speaks of that which is bound on Earth being bound in Heaven, what is loosed on Earth being loosed in Heaven, he is referring to the desires that chain people to the cycle of rebirths and how we must free ourselves from them. Again, when he speaks of selling all one has and giving the proceeds to the poor as alms, he is preaching detachment from material goods to eliminate the attractions holding the soul captive to rebirths. The same again when he speaks of the fate of the rich."

He flicked over a few pages more.

"Often the word desire has been confusingly translated as 'sin'. Now where was it ... ah, yes, here we are ... the Gospel according to John ... 'Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin'."

He closed the Bible.

“I could keep on giving you example after example.”

Tom was listening, trying to pay attention. Though somewhat niggled by this theology lesson, he still did not wish to interrupt the Pope any further, for fear of getting bogged down once more in futile dispute, causing the old man to lose the thread of his thinking before he had led him to fresh revelations. Revelations that were all in the computer file and which Tom had threatened to send to journalists the world over if the Pope did not tell him its contents.

The pontiff was putting all his efforts into this, hoping to convince Tom not to make an irreparable mistake, striving hard to be as explicit and persuasive as he could.

“The most interesting conversation is the one he had with Nicodemus. It is there that you can find the true doctrine of Jesus, his teachings on rebirth and the role of the Heavenly Father.”

The Pope smiled sadly.

“Look for yourself and you will be astonished by all the comments which come through in their true meaning.”

He offered the Bible to Tom, but Tom shook his head to indicate this was not necessary.

“What is disconcerting,” the Pope added, “is that when Europe opened up to the East and Buddhist and even Hindu preachings spread among us, nobody drew the parallel with the words of Jesus, even though the similarities were blatant ...”

Tom burst out in annoyance.

“That’s perhaps because the Christian religion thinks itself better than all the others, so Christians don’t actually look closely at their own system. The celebrated case of the beam in the eye. Since, if you’re going to understand a system, you have to get outside it, and Christians are too soaked in their own, where critical approaches are not admitted.”

“You are probably right,” the Pope conceded, his smile frozen. “Probably ... However, some people did notice and draw the parallels. That was the case of Rosicrucianism or the Freemasonry which arose from the gnosis passed on by Peter ...”

“The Apostle Peter?” Tom queried in astonishment.

“Yes, the Apostle Peter. However, I will come back to that point later. Not being able to silence those secret Gnostic orders, the Church proclaimed them impostors and accused them of heresy and sorcery. These orders are fully aware of the true nature of the Bible as is the Cabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross. On that topic, it is interesting to note

that the teachings of the Pharisees survived the Diaspora and that their belief in rebirth lasted through until the emergence of the Cabbala, always under the influence of the gnosis bequeathed by Peter. All these groups, all the esoteric learning of these groups has as its foundation rebirths, which are a reality, an unavoidable heavenly law.”

Tom scratched his chin.

“Since you mention it, can you be reborn as an animal?” he asked. “As a white rabbit, say?”

Engrossed in his thoughts, the Pope did not see the grin in the corner of the atheist’s mouth, sparked by amusement at such beliefs, which he saw as ludicrous.

“Hindus believe that we may be reborn as an animal,” the clergyman replied. “That is, of course, totally ridiculous, for it is enough to look at nature to understand something obvious: human beings can reproduce only with other human beings, and not with rats, cows, or monkeys. The same is true of the human soul, incompatible with the minds or bodies of animals.”

Tom grinned ironically and could not help speaking harshly.

“When I think of Buddha’s teachings, which are technical and hard to grasp, which weren’t aimed at little children, and when I compare them to the Church’s spiritual heritage, which teaches a story that any five-year-old can understand and believe easily, I see a world of difference, an abyss, between them. You went for ease and simplicity so as to convert people in droves at the youngest possible age, didn’t you?”

The Pope did not rise to the bait, realizing that it was useless to try to continue discussing the Heavenly Truths with this man, whose heart was hermetically sealed against the divine. Taking the Bible, he looked at it for a moment.

“This does not contain just revelations about rebirths,” he said finally, looking up at the other man. “There is something else. A teaching other than that of rebirth. A very different teaching ...”

He hesitated a few seconds before continuing. He was supposed to laud Holy Writ, but pronounced words that sounded strangely in his mouth:

“The Gospels contain demented, evil words ... devilish words ... and these words came from the very mouth of Jesus himself ...”

Unconsciously, his eyebrows moved, giving the impression of a fragile butterfly beating its wings.

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Its multicolored wings strove to turn its frail body, dizzy with the vertigo of altitude. Flitting from flower to flower to taste their mild and intoxicating nectars, the butterfly was finally free and victorious, liberated from the bonds of Earth to dominate the firmament.

A new and measureless dimension.

Throughout its existence, the caterpillar had awaited this single day when, rising above the sufferings of the microcosm, it would finally rub shoulders with the divine. It had prepared itself for this. It had worked for it all its life.

Now, all its efforts during its harsh life were rewarded. Even the previous day, huddled in its cocoon hanging above a deadly fall, it had not understood why birds twittered at the top of their voices as they cut through the air. Now, having become a butterfly, it would also have liked to begin singing the praises of the sky.

Only butterflies know why the birds sing ...

Jesus slowly stretched out his arm and the butterfly came to rest, huddling in the hollow of his palm. Just like the chrysalis emerging from its envelope to become this radiant creature, mortal man had transcended his bodily being and had developed into an angel with an immortal halo.

Everything changed some day. It was simply a question of time.

Jesus serenely thought back over this human evolution.

Men, the first Buddhas, had been able to break out of the cycle of rebirths by their own efforts and reach the divine. They had judged themselves and this earthly judgment had become heavenly. Yet this difficult way leading to happiness no longer had any reason to survive after the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven and the consecration of the Heavenly Father.

Previously, in the mechanical darkness of nothingness, every bodily death had led to a timeless interlude in which the soul had access to the lost memories of its previous lives. Surrounded by a body of desires, the soul had then been brought to find once more an earthly envelope through the unavoidable balance of Karma, not at random, but rigorously triggered by the linkage of causes and effects.

However, a light had broken through the darkness, torn apart nothingness and lit up that ancient system with a saving ray. Just like a moth hypnotized and attracted by the beauty of its light, the soul now rushed towards it, towards its sublime cosmic and conical access formed by a gigantic incandescent maelstrom spinning gently on its own axis.

Within it there were different spheres of heavenly deposition, different atmospheres with multiple manifestations in which, becoming aware of its

liabilities, the soul rid itself of its impurities, its evil inclinations and even of its desires, coming out more or less purified.

Then, rising into his Kingdom peopled by angels, the soul could come to meet the Heavenly Father. As the Egyptian Book of the Dead recounted it, the soul was then weighed by him and by his Archangels.

Some mediums called that light, that divine route, the way of God.

The way of Deus ...

It was a new era, a creation that was in no manner inferior to the creation of the demiurge. The heavens were colonized by an army of sublime beings, whose hierarchy was based on love, empathy and compassion. Among these celestial troops stood the Archangels, the guardian angels and the angels. In the ranks of the latter, since the arrival of Deus, there were many human souls that had joined them, swelling the population of the heavens with their exponentially growing presence.

How many could they be? Millions? Billions?

Jesus could not have said with any precision.

These new angels were inebriated with paradisiacal happiness. They tasted joy, Truth, no longer the pale copy that their mortal coils had believed they had on Earth. Through ignorance, they had believed that pleasure brought some happiness. Yet that was no more than an unsteady, unsure happiness. From the start, they had known no other than this sickly form of happiness, of deceivingly agreeable enjoyment that gave an illusion of soothing the sufferings of existence.

Thanks to the Heavenly Father, now they knew Truth, the truth found in the Kingdom of Heaven. Deus worked to deliver human souls by freeing them from the cycle of rebirths, giving them the status of angels. Defying the demiurge and his henchman Karma, Deus had power, had spiritual force enough to establish new heavenly laws, new Heavenly Truths for the salvation of humanity.

Through his cosmic emanations, Deus sets free human souls from the chains of Earth and converts them into angels ...

Sadly, there were still millions and millions of men and women who, though having gone through the light and its various spheres, remained laden with a powerful 'karmic' residue and an aura impure with desire. Slaves of that desire, unable to break free of this earthly bondage, they were drawn irresistibly towards a human body by Gaia the Earth. As if responding to a siren's call, they could not remain indefinitely in the Kingdom of Heaven and they ended up by flinging themselves back into the ocean of sensations and its deep desires. These souls enslaved by the senses and Karma had as their tyrannical master the Evil One.

The earthly body ...

Yet, since the arrival of his Kingdom, it had been the Heavenly Father who had personally given bodies their just deserts according to his Judgment and his aims, according to a will which was his alone, more or less baffling Karma and its law of causes and effects.

Henceforth, it was Deus that inspired earthly life; that conferred upon all a new birth.

From the dawn of time, through the workings of the demiurge, men had inherited eternal life flowing through them, but an eternal life on Earth, made up of perpetual restarting and of suffering. Before it was reincarnated on Gaia, Deus revealed to each soul an overview of its future, its free will to do good or ill at each crucial crossroad in its existence. Deus also revealed to it its true nature and promised to uncover even greater doings when the soul itself became an angel.

Yet the reincarnated soul forgot all about these privileged moments and retained no more than a few fleeting heavenly images.

The sensation of déjà vu ...

Giving the impression that there was one single life, bodily rebirth systematically erased memories of the past, making this consciousness of former times inaccessible.

Deus had authorized guardian angels to give spiritual guidance to these castaways of the subconscious so that they might do good, so that men could themselves save their own world through the intervention of their benevolent actions. Through these heavenly emissaries as intermediaries, Good had come down to make its way into men and had merged with their nature, uniting itself deeply with their roots and with their blood so as to inspire in them a saving earthly repentance.

This earthly repentance had the strength to raise, to propel the soul above the 'karmic' residues and the auras of desires when it was in the maelstrom of light, allowing Deus to free it totally from its bonds on Earth.

True repentance was one of the keys to the heavenly paradise.

In the heavens, there was more joy over a single person who repented than for ninety-nine righteous men, for at times these were soiled by desires deeply seated within them and, despite the efforts of Deus, he could not free them from themselves. These righteous men saw their way to the divine barred by their over-strong propensities to terrestrial desires and to bonds that chained them inexorably to the cycle of rebirth.

This was not the case for those who were repentant.

The same applied to the soul of children stillborn or dead in infancy, as their consciousness, clean of any impurity and of the desires of an adult person, inevitably opened to them the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus raised his mild face towards the sun with its warm and calming rays.

All the souls of the dead went towards the light of Deus, irresistibly attracted by its bewitching brilliance lighting up the void.

And yet, there was one sort of being that feared that light.

Demons ...

The opposite of angels, demons were evil souls that refused to head towards the heavenly light for fear of the Judgment of Deus, preferring to remain in the darkness. Their earthly works had been terrible, abominable and by instinct they feared the sentence of the Heavenly Father. Not wishing to enter into a body because they were afraid of suffering some further punishment, the chastisement of Karma, they wandered endlessly in the burning nothingness, tormented by the spirits of their victims.

A sort of Hades ...

From time to time, a demon returned to the Earth in search of calm, going back to familiar places, believing it could soothe the pain of exile and torments. Yet it was invisible and inaudible in the midst of its kin and this non-being was a further torture. Then, at a loss what to do, it joined other demons that had returned to Gaia, ending up by haunting various places, steeping themselves in the sufferings of their fellows in a malignant union. Through violent maneuvers, chaotic and irate, they sometimes appeared to the living, who were terrified by these malevolent beings.

When mediums went into a trance to contact the angels, loosening the links between their souls and their bodies, it sometimes happened that one of these demons took advantage of this to commandeer the empty space and drive away the unfortunate unconscious owners, who found themselves forced to wander in the beyond. The demon then profited once more from an earthly life.

Whilst all evil souls were afraid of the light of Deus, some overcame their aversion and dared to face up to the heavenly gaze, believing that they could defy it. The Heavenly Father was not fooled about their true nature and rejected them as useless fish were thrown back into the sea if caught in fishermen's nets.

Demons condemned themselves to wander forever through the burning nothingness where evil souls were consumed.

The butterfly finally flew away from Jesus' hand and settled a short distance away on the first magnificent flower that it found.

Like it, human souls were so thirsty with desire that they quenched their longings as fast as they could by taking over the first body available, not even noticing that above them there shone the light of Deus.

Others refused to see the irresistible appeal of that light. Inconsolable, they remained close to their corpses for some time, not accepting their physical death, wishing to get back into their bodies and as ghosts haunted their burial places, totally blinkered.

The fear of the unknown ...

The butterfly flew off once more and rested its body with its multicolored wings on another flower.

Jesus had himself long sought the ideal flower, the flower of divine knowledge. Finally he had found it among the Initiated of the Temple of Osiris in Egypt. There he had heard all the Heavenly Truths, old and new, from before or after the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. He had learnt that the Kingdom of Deus reached even down to the Earth, to every human, in the midst of all beings through the imperceptible presence of its angels and through measureless spiritual ramifications.

In absolute terms, it was not possible to come face to face with the Heavenly Father other than by dying, ascending towards him through his divine light, and being reborn once more if one's soul was still soiled with impurities. However, the Initiated had another means of coming into contact with him: a drink which contained cannabis. This plant had the virtue of making visible to the consciousness a different dimension, where one could perceive a space cut up into a thousand facets. After a long apprenticeship, through spiritual preparation of the soul, it was possible to overcome one's bodily envelope to rise up towards the light of Deus.

From that first meeting, Jesus and the Heavenly Father had been one. Deus was in Jesus and Jesus in Deus. There was a close and infinite spiritual union between them.

For a non-Initiated person, this practice might have seemed just a trick, a befuddling of the senses as with alcohol. Yet this was not delirium, these were not the representations twisted by a mind drunk on cannabis and wishing at all costs to believe in the dreams that arose from hallucinations. Contact with the Heavenly Father was undeniable. As a proof, Deus had allowed future images to seep into Jesus which had become reality upon his return.

Prophetic visions.

Thanks to the wisdom of the Initiated, through his meeting with Deus, Jesus had finally resolved the enigma of his life. The crucial stage of his sublimation had been achieved in the heart of the Great Pyramid at the

place where all energies were focused on point that linked the atom, seed of all being, with the spirit of creation. He had conquered inner peace and a profound certainty had come over him. From the shattering of his earthly being, which he had trampled underfoot and cast into the distance, a new energy had arisen, radiant. That definitive event had taken place in the unfathomable depths of the mind.

Then he had been free, master of his actions, liberated from the order, Initiated himself, given over to the breeze of the mind, which might throw him into the abyss or carry him up to the summit, higher than the zone of storms and giddiness. However, this mission could not be defined for him by anybody; he had had to find it for himself. For such was the law of the Initiated: nothing outside, all within.

Jesus had soberly remained in the midst of the order, becoming a Grand Master, scheduling his life by its holy rites and initiations.

Until the day when the folly of the Essenes had violated the sanctuary of his existence.

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Standing with his gaze fixed on the Bible, the Pope paused for contemplation.

“Jesus was sent by his fellow Initiated to the Essenes,” he said finally. “He was intended to find out who this religious group were, if they had discovered the secret of Deus and if they were making good use of the Heavenly Truths.”

The Pope moved his eyes to look at Tom where he sat before the computer screen.

“What do you know about the Essenes?” he asked point blank.

Tom’s brow wrinkled.

“From memory, I can recall that they thought themselves the purest group in Israel. They were part of a community that lived separately from other people and was certain it was right. The group would get its own back on the day of the Last Judgment, when God came to the Earth and assumed his Kingdom, after the final battle during which evil would be annihilated. The Essenes had a simplistic view of the world: on the one side there was evil, darkness and sin, on the other good and light.”

The Pope smiled gravely.

“In reality, the Essene community was the secret religious branch of the Zealots ...”

Tom frowned.

He was fully aware of the history of the Zealots, all about whom he had studied in some depth. The Zealots or Zealous Ones were radical groups whose members, fanatical Jews, combated Roman power by force of arms. They also could attack those of their compatriots who were felt to be too lukewarm in their commitments or suspected of collaborating with the Romans, or foreigners who sullied the Promised Land by their mere presence. They were so ardent in their love of their faith and freedom that the most unusual forms of death, the most atrocious tortures, whether they suffered them themselves or saw them inflicted even on those who were dearest to them, left them totally unconcerned. With unshakable firmness and scorning pain, they underwent without flinching all the evils they had to endure at the hands of the Romans, maintaining that there was but one single God who should be recognized as Lord and King in spite of the Emperor of Rome. They had fundamental faith in the religion of their Jewish ancestors, and extreme veneration for the Temple of Jerusalem, where they nonetheless did not worship, because they felt it was occupied by usurpers. Yet primarily it was because they were excluded from it. In Hebrew, their name *quiniim* meant ‘the jealous ones’.

“Jesus discovered this by infiltrating the Essene community,” the Pope said. “They were not a group of Initiated, despite the similarity of rituals. All of that was just sophistry. They killed without hesitation those who insulted God or spoke of him with scorn. The Essenes mimicked the Initiated without knowing their secrets, nor the Heavenly Truths, nor even Deus. The plagiarism occurred thanks to a Jewish novice who had been admitted to the Temple of Osiris, but had remained there for no more than a short while before being expelled. That novice then joined the Qumran community ...”

The Pope continued, explaining that whilst the Essenes claimed that they were insulated from any foreign influence, basing their faith strictly upon the Law of Moses, observing it to the last letter, in fact they happily accepted esoteric trends from outside. Their beliefs were similar to those of the Pharisees, but with the folly of fanaticism and sectarianism overlying them.

The Pope’s expression became serious.

“As a former Catholic, what do you think is meant by the Kingdom of God on Earth?”

Tom mulled this question over for an instant before answering it.

“Well, when men’ve become good and spiritually ready, God’ll come down to Earth and set up a Kingdom to rule over his creation ... something like that, anyhow, isn’t that so?”

“And when is this to occur?”

“Way off in the future some time, if ever ...”

“You are wrong,” the Pope said. “The Kingdom of God on Earth has already been achieved, and in a very concrete, very real form.”

Tom stared at the cleric, wondering if he was having his leg pulled.

The Pope continued:

“In fact, for Jews in those days, the term ‘Kingdom of God’ meant something else, as the expression was later to take on a quite different sense for us Catholics.”

“So what’s that something else?” Tom inquired, curious.

“The Temple of Jerusalem! The Kingdom of God on Earth and the Jerusalem Temple mean the same thing. One single thing. For all Jews, in the days of Jesus, the Kingdom of God was already in force, having already come down to the Earth, and it was present in Jerusalem. The Temple was the dwelling-place of God, his Kingdom in the Promised Land. That was the Kingdom that the Essenes coveted. Indeed, they were prepared to do anything in order to win it. That was their prime objective. They had others, however ...”

The Pope went over the secret plan of the Qumran community in minute detail.

By means of a generalized armed uprising, they aimed to drive out the occupying forces, restore national sovereignty and royalty, together with the prestige of the Temple, or more precisely the Kingdom of God on Earth. Zealot troops were ready, just waiting for the signal to be given by the Head of the Order. That was to be their final combat, in their desire to root out the evil embodied by their Roman enemy.

For this purpose, they needed a Messiah, a Liberator sent by God, a warlord who could galvanize his troops and rouse up the people to follow him by his natural charisma.

That Messianic King would be the Christ, God’s anointed.

In the past, the Essenes had made several attempts to bring this plan into play, imposing their Christ, but each time it had been a bloody failure. At their first attempt, their candidate for this work had been captured and crucified. The Essenes tried to bounce back by claiming that this Messiah had come back to life. They wrote a text glorifying him, but this tale made little headway among the Jews, who were no fools.

The Pope looked at Tom.

“I know that on the basis of that document you concluded that the four Gospels had been inspired by that story in elaborating a myth of Jesus. However, that is in no way the true case.”

Tom nodded, saying nothing, thoughtful.

“Their final attempt,” the Pope went on, “also met with disaster. It was at the time when Herod the Great died, in that period of general chaos when thousands of Jews were crucified for having revolted.”

The Pope fell silent for an instant before going on to recount how the Essenes had learnt from the experience of these failures what their errors in strategy were and how they might remedy them.

Hence, they patiently set about preparing their troops, no longer in a thoughtless and anarchic manner, but with perfect co-ordination, just like the Roman legions that they would have to confront. Nonetheless, the forces of this underground army were not enough to overthrow Roman military power. Only a massive popular uprising could do that. If every Jew took up arms to drive out the occupiers, then victory could be achieved.

The Essenes realized that to bring together a whole people, to federate an entire nation, it would be necessary for more than just some minor actor to play at being the Messiah. They needed a true legitimate king.

A king with divine powers.

To be recognized by all the Jews, he would have to be not merely a descendant of the pure lineage of the House of David, but also, like the prophet Elijah, able to multiply food or bring about great and prodigious signs. Hence, the Essenes wished to stage a fable that would be accredited by incontrovertible facts and real eye-witnesses.

The Messiah would also have to incarnate the Son of God, so as to have an aura of wide-ranging international dimensions. In that way, when peace reigned once again in Israel after the expulsion of the enemy from the country, he would gain some legitimacy with respect to foreign powers and their beliefs. Thus, it was essential for there to be undeniable similarities between the life of this Christ and details of cults such as those of Mithras or Horus. Hence the small details, such, for example, as the twelve disciples who surrounded the Messiah or his birth under a brilliant star, which in the end should bring Rome and Egypt to see in him certain legitimacy, a celestial essence or a true rebirth of gods worshiped by one or another of them.

A true Son of God incarnate.

In that way, the stability of the kingdom and the solidity of the Christ's coronation would be insured. The Essenes had thought of every last detail, from the initial period of chaos to the long years of Christ's reign under the control of their community. They had a global overview and the concessions relating to the life of Christ which they would tell or have him

do, identical to features of Horus or Mithras, were no more than the first fruits of diplomatic relations that would be re-established to hold the sovereignty of the Promised Land after the interlude of warfare with these same neighbors.

The coronation of their Christ was the culmination of the Essene plan, like Yahweh in person taking possession of his Kingdom. After the seizure Jerusalem and the Temple, after the arrival of the new Kingdom of God on Earth and the re-instatement of royalty, the day would come to pay off old scores.

The day of the Last Judgment.

Those who had not repented in time and rallied to their cause during the course of the insurrection, those who had collaborated with the enemy or with Herodian underlings would have to pay with their lives for their betrayal: they would be roasted alive in the fires of Gehenna, in that dump on the edge of Jerusalem where the corpses of criminals were burnt with other rubbish.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

That law of talion was the theme of the Essene plan.

To bring it into play, they sought out the ideal candidate from among the thousands of monks in their brotherhood. To penetrate the Essene mystery, Jesus had openly declared himself as a potential Christ and the Head of the Order quickly saw in him the one whom they were awaiting. On every point Jesus matched the Messianic King that the community of Qumran wished for, and finally he was initiated into the Essene secret.

When he met the Head of the Order, Jesus was very reluctant to take on the role. To convince him, so that he could see the enthusiasm aroused by the future coming of the Christ, the Head of the Order invited him to go and see John the Baptist and give a definite answer after that.

“The rebel forces were ready for action,” the Pope went on. “John the Baptist was their leader, waiting for the Christ who would come soon. It was just a question of time, the time required to fit the ideal candidate for his function. John the Baptist was also the precursor who was to condition people for an uprising. He had invented a sacrament, a mystical baptism which was supposed to wash away men’s sins, in other words to absolve symbolically those who had transgressed the laws of Moses or those who had worked for the enemy. Through this baptism, Jews and even non-Jews committed themselves in the eyes of God to devote their every effort, their body and soul, to the Christ, and for the establishment of his Kingdom in Jerusalem. As a very down-to-earth repayment, they would gain salvation, a tacit dismissal of all charges on the day of the Last Judgment.”

“So John was a kind of recruiting officer?” Tom asked. “And his baptism was just a sort of formula, an unspoken enlistment contract or safe-conduct?”

The Pope nodded gravely.

“Through baptism, he strove to gather as many people as he could. He called on them to repent so that on Judgment Day they would be spared from the vengeful fires or even rewarded for having taken up arms in support of the Christ. He spoke in warlike terms, he threatened the Temple priests, and he promised that whilst he baptized just with water, the Christ, for his part, would baptize with fire. That was not fire in some metaphoric sense, but literal fire. A fire of vengeance and war that was to burn Roman legions and Herodians alike.”

Quoting from the Gospels, the Pope declaimed:

“His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable, the fire of gehenna. Prepare ye the way of the Christ, make his paths straight ... whosoever opposeth him shall be chastised ...”

He paused an instant, then continued:

“The Essenes had patiently prepared the ground. For years, they had never ceased spreading the rumor that the Messiah was soon to come, a rumor that had endlessly run by word of mouth among the desperate people. The Essenes based themselves on former beliefs and used the writings of the prophets that we find in the Old Testament. They took a good number of phrases out of their context and quoted them. In this way they were sure that when their candidate made his appearance in the full light of day, he would match those prophesies on every point and he would immediately gain true legitimacy in everybody’s eyes.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’ll agree with you on that,” Tom admitted. “With general enough prophesies, you can cover almost anything, a liberator descending from So-and-So, who lived in such-and-such a place or died in whatever way, possible or unimaginable. All you’ve got to do is make your choice and not be afraid of having to do the splits to link up different texts and different ages. That’s what happened with this Essene Messiah, didn’t it?”

The Pope agreed.

“Those rumors of his coming became firmly rooted in the mind of every Jew in the land. Even among the Pharisees who set the highest importance on each word of the Torah ...”

He screwed up his eyes, trying to find the train of thought that he had just lost.

“Oh, yes ... John the Baptist was waiting for the arrival of that Christ. The Head of the Order sent him a message telling him that he had at long last found the Messiah, who would come to meet him on the banks of the Jordan. When John the Baptist recognized that Christ as his cousin Jesus, he was jealous of him. John had been an Essene for many a long year and would have liked to be chosen himself as the Messianic King. He had the presence and appearance for it, and he *was* from the true lineage of the House of David. He knew that his cousin Jesus was not, for he knew the secret of Mary’s rape. Jesus’ mother had confided in Elisabeth and her relative had in turn confided in her own son John.

“Why didn’t John spill the beans to the Head of the Order?” Tom inquired. “He’d have been able to get rid of one rival very quickly ...”

“That is hard to tell. I believe that he would certainly have done so, had it been possible to deprive Jesus of the role of liberator. However, as the Essenes saw it, in respect of their plan, that secret might have been a bonus, a trump card, for the fact that he was a son of Herod’s would probably have brought over to his cause a good few Herodians wearied by the reign of Antipas. That would have avoided the general civil war that was smoldering away between the various Jewish factions, focusing combats exclusively on the Roman occupiers. Victory would have come much more quickly in that case. The Essenes were striving to bring people together and no longer to be divided, so that they could free themselves from the Romans. John was aware of that, so he said nothing. He may have hoped that his cousin would slip up in some other fashion, so that he could take his place. Alternatively, the secret of the true lineage of Jesus might have really been such as to trigger the anger of the Head of the Order. Thus, John may have wished to reveal the secret later on, when Jesus had already been put in place and it was too late to replace him by searching for another candidate. Then the Essenes would have had no option but to depose Jesus and take John in his place in such an emergency. If John had told the secret before Jesus took on his functions, another candidate could have been found to replace him in playing that part and John would have gained no advantage. If this were so, waiting until the last minute before uncovering the truth of his cousin’s lineage would have been to John’s advantage. However that may be, he never let out Jesus’ secret, for he was arrested and executed by Antipas.”

The Pope thought for a moment before adding:

“As far as we can tell, John was something of a megalomaniac and perhaps uncontrollable. For that reason the Essenes did not choose him to

play the leading role. They were afraid that the madness of power would make him into a tyrannical despot over whom they could have no control.”

“Why is it Jesus agreed to take the part?” Tom inquired. “Was he hungry for power, as well?”

The Pope sighed.

“Once dragged into the heart of the Zealot machinations, he had no way of backing out of them. He was caught by the gearwheels of Causality and the effects are still being felt to this day ...”

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With a slightly stronger beating of its wings, the butterfly rose up into the sky.

Jesus watched the fragile new being with its splendid multiple colors flying off into the distance.

He, too, had gone far away, far from the uproar of civilization to be alone in the Essene cave, which, like an eagle’s nest, overlooked the district around Qumran. There, wearily, for day after day, he had striven in vain to achieve contact with the Heavenly Father and beg him for help.

Would he be the Christ or not? Should he accept the role or not? What would be the consequences of such a decision? If he took on the part, could he avoid the deaths a civil war would bring, freeing himself from the Zealots’ crazy plans? He was surrounded by the Head of the Order and his henchmen, and his room for maneuver seemed so narrow, practically none. What should he do? If he refused to be that Liberator, if he did nothing, some other man would take his place, another who would carry out the Essenes’ instructions without cavil. Thousands of men and women would perish because of Jesus if he did nothing. So, should he be that Christ or not? Yet would that cure embodied by him not be worse than the disease? As he wound his way along the obscure path of Causalities, might it be that instead of reducing chaos, he would accentuate it to the utmost, leading to the total destruction of Israel and all its people?

These were the questions scurrying around in his head. He hoped that Deus would resolve them by showing him what was entailed by each decision, active or passive.

However, lacking cannabis to set himself free from time and space, he found his dialog with the Heavenly Father most difficult. His angels might well be all around Jesus, mentally shouting themselves hoarse in an

attempt to transmit to him celestial directives, but he could not manage to understand. All was vague, confused, chaotic.

Was it because of bad vibrations coming from that region that he could not achieve any contact? Probably. Thanks to his journeys, he had come to notice that some lands were more suited to divine contacts than others, which seemed cold, sealed and austere.

Qumran was a spiritual desert.

Realizing that Deus could not come to his aid, he had no option but to find the solution for himself.

Heaven helps those who help themselves ...

The one way out open to him was to reach Awakening by the path of consciousness that had been taken by Gautama Buddha and that he had himself tried to follow in the past, time after time with no success. That Enlightenment would confer upon him the power of seeing the future, because, having an overall view of the system and being aware that such-and-such a cause would bring about such-and-such an effect, he would see all acts before him in their correlation with the law of Causalities. The new mind of an Awakened One cast itself loose from the limits of the skull, pushing back the borders of its knowledge into the infinite, reckoning the consequences of the slightest actions, even the beating of a butterfly's wing. He was also able to read the mind of any man like an open book and determine his future from his secret thoughts. No crowd, not even a whole army could escape from this universal vision, from that inner third eye.

That visionary power was identical to what Deus and his angels had.

The dark path of Causalities was then lit up by a precise and dazzling light. The Essenes did not know that through hatred and the desire for vengeance with no possible forgiveness, they not merely chained themselves to the cycle of repeated lives without any salvation feasible, but also would heap unhappiness upon themselves and upon their offspring through that law of Causalities and Karma of which they were totally ignorant.

They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

Jesus had to attain that Awakening and gain the third eye that could untangle the tragic situation into which Israel was being plunged.

Become a Buddha ...

Before the Heavenly Father had come into the equation, men becoming Buddhas had been very numerous and on the physical death of their bodies they had reached the firmament of happiness. Gautama had been one of the very last Buddhas to reach salvation by Enlightenment. In his lifetime

he had revealed the way leading to the stage of Awakening. He had long hesitated to uncover this path, this way of the Buddha, but he had judged that humanity had to know of it. As a scientist, he had pointed out the pathway, but not what was to be found at the end of this spiritual route.

Nirvana and the Kingdom of Heaven were one and the same.

Nowadays, Buddha's teaching and way were no longer necessary, terrestrial 'self-judgment' had been obsolete since the arrival of the Heavenly Father.

Of course, that entrance remained open to offer access to salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven, even bringing the Awakened One the status of an Archangel now. However, the path was difficult.

Few had made their way along it recently.

It was true, too, that the aid of guardian angels in attaining salvation implied a regression and a spiritual weakness that led men no longer to be able to gain it by their own efforts, requiring seraphim and light to reach the Kingdom. However, the Heavenly Father would always be there now. There was no use in learning how to catch one's own fish, as it were, when Deus gave them away as inner nourishment for all souls.

Whilst for humans, if they followed Buddha's route, salvation was almost impossible, for the Heavenly Father all things were possible.

Yet Jesus needed that Awakening for the salvation of Israel and the souls who lived there.

He calmly reflected on where he should direct his consciousness in order to achieve that aim. In the Buddhist religion, some Masters had split away from the original branch, teaching the way of the Bodhisattva, the way of Gautama returning as a spirit to save souls through compassion. That teaching was indeed based on fact, as there were similarities between the story of the Bodhisattva and that of the guardian angels. Perhaps Gautama had chosen to lose his wings and come back to Gaia, being born again to save humanity, but had forgotten his higher consciousness and his celestial mission.

In India, Jesus' disciples had seen in him the Gautama returned to earthly life. Jesus wondered if he had at some stage been a supreme being that had opted to lose his divine envelope to come down to this lower world once more. He would have to explore those routes.

Nonetheless, for days and nights he had vainly gone up and down these inner pathways and many others besides, finding the truths of the past inaccessible to him. He could not gain access to those memories of previous lives. He decided to run through one by one all the images of this present life that he had been living. However, nothing happened, there was

no saving revelation. He could not work out the formula for reaching Enlightenment. A more than human talent was needed to solve it. Only a handful of beings had succeeded in doing so in the past. Jesus did not have within him that faculty of adding, subtracting, performing the complex arithmetic that would open up in his brain the solution for that Awakening.

For the umpteenth time, he had again failed in his attempt to become a Buddha and he knew that this was due to his inner demon.

Then a question had come to torment his mind, never leaving it.

Could I be the Christ...

Other demons materializing through crazy temptations tried to corrupt his conscience. He was forced to drive them away one after another. Yet one slyer than all the others sprang up before him.

After the Zealot war, he knew that the Kingdom of Israel and the Temple would welcome him with open arms. By force, thanks to the coronation making him an absolute monarch, he would be able to impose the crowning of the Heavenly Father in the heart of all the Hebrews, wiping out their false beliefs.

He drove this delusion of grandeur far from his mind. Yet the idea of revealing to the Jews all about the Heavenly Truths and the Kingdom of Heaven dug itself into him.

The spiritual collapse of Israel is a bottomless pit.

Being pragmatic, if he could not avoid taking on the part, Jesus could see the Christ in a different light. It would be a unique chance to correct the errors of the past and the trickery of King Josiah. However, he did not want to be a bloody-handed liberator at the head of an armed rebellion, flinging the fires of gehenna wherever it passed.

If he took possession only of the Temple, the Kingdom of God on Earth, he would gather around him the various religious parties, obliging them to listen to one another and come to terms for the good of the country. Jesus was almost certain that the Essenes would be satisfied with the Temple, soothing their rancor at having been so long excluded from priestly power. Of course, the supreme ambition of the Zealots, the armed branch of the Essenes, was to re-establish the sovereignty of Israel, install a legitimate royal family and bring about the departure of the Roman occupying forces who soiled the Promised Land by their very presence. Jesus knew how to go about dissuading them from this. A project took shape in his head.

At first, he would have to establish the credentials for his divine status, as Christ, before the people by the miraculous draft of fishes. In that way, the Head of the Order would no longer be in a position to replace him with another candidate. Next, he would take possession of the Kingdom of God

on Earth by becoming a sort of spiritual sovereign, a preacher spreading forth the heavenly word, a new Supreme High Priest. He would thus unite around himself all the various Jewish protagonists. Then, he would refuse to order the people to rise, would even ask them not to do so. Lacking the support of all the citizens of the land, the Zealots troops would have no chance in the face of the legions. Worse still, if the Essenes did launch their offensives, the Romans would track down those stirring up the rebellion right into the heart of the Temple and the Head of the Order and his disciples would be driven out of it. The Kingdom of God on Earth would be at risk of being destroyed because of the Essene priests who would be there, having plotted against Rome.

Faced with the more than likely occurrence of that terrible outcome, the Head of the Order would know how to dampen the ardor of the Zealots. As half a loaf was better than no bread, the Essenes would be wise enough to content themselves with the Temple, understanding that it would be dismantled stone by stone if they persisted in their bellicose folly. As they saw it, that building was the earthly dwelling-place of their God Yahweh and the most precious item that Israel possessed. They would never run the risk of seeing the Temple reduced to ruins by the Roman occupying forces.

Two birds with one stone ...

With those tactics, Jesus could simultaneously ward off a civil war and teach the Jews the Heavenly Truths.

As Gautama had said, ignorance was the cause of pain and suffering. The Jews would continue to suffer if they remained in ignorance, wallowing in the centuries-old lies of their religion. Jesus would have to spread among them a fresh spiritual teaching, but not Buddha's, which was far too technical and complex. Besides, ever since the Heavenly Father had taken possession of the Kingdom of Heaven, Gautama's precepts were no longer required. Up in the firmament, nothing was unchangeable: heavenly laws, too, had evolved since the arrival of Deus in his Kingdom.

Jesus' mind went back to another Kingdom, very earthly in this case.

The Kingdom of God on Earth.

To gain success for this plan, the Kingdom of God on Earth would have to fall into Jesus' hands quickly and above all without violence.

Would the Pharisees and Sadducees of the Sanhedrin accept his rule as a new preacher, as a new Supreme Priest? Had they not wanted him as King of Israel? They would willingly welcome him if he dazzled them by suggesting he would work for their benefit as they had foreseen in the past, so as to restore their political power, even if he had no intention of doing

so. He would also frankly reveal to them the Essene threat, so as to force them to approve this exceptional anointing, out of fear of a civil war.

However, before venturing into that pathway, he had to meditate the action by going into his deepest inner self, so as to sweep away the doubts which were already rising before him. For hours, he had to struggle against his own gloomy thoughts, which were inclined to dissuade him from acting thus. Yet a revealing glow finally emerged within him. He went into a state of lucid ecstasy, throwing onto the screen of dream images of the past and the future, contemplating the truth of all things.

A beam lit up his mind and he finally understood what the angels who had endlessly fluttered around him had been whispering to him. The Heavenly Father was entrusting Jesus with a mission: that of saving those humans, guiding their steps towards the Kingdom of Heaven. For their salvation, Jesus would have to see to it, by using carefully chosen precepts, that the souls of Israel returned to life in heaven on the day of the celestial Judgment of Deus, no longer being reborn in the blazing furnace of the desires of this earthly world below.

Life everlasting in heaven as an angel ...

He would undertake to free his folk, not from Roman dominance, but from their enslavement to false religious values. Deus was entrusting all those human flocks to him so that he might lead them, as a shepherd would, to the celestial pastures where they would enjoy an everlasting life of happiness.

However, to reveal to men the Heavenly Truths and the nature of Deus was inconceivable. Furthermore, nobody would have believed him. It had cost Jesus years of initiation before he had achieved the awakening of his senses and grasped the truth of things. Without them, it was virtually impossible to accept that reality, the secret that humanity mistrusted. He must not rush into unveiling that esoteric knowledge, too unbelievable for narrow minds with naïve wants. He had to use moderation and simplicity in preaching the celestial word.

Parables seemed the wisest way of teaching.

Jesus could put the finishing touches on all that when the time came. He came round from that vision now knowing what he had to do.

Outside the cave, a group of some thirty Essene disciples had been waiting for his response for days and days. Had he said that he was not the Christ, would they have killed him? There was no doubt that the Head of the Order would have got rid of a candidate who knew his secret plans and refused to participate in them. If that could have untangled the situation, Jesus would not have hesitated to die, but it would have served no purpose.

So, walking up to the messenger who was to go back and inform the Head of the Order, Jesus whispered in his ear that he was indeed that Christ whom all awaited.

The eyes of the Essene disciples lit up brightly, realizing that their project for a great sovereign state of Israel was at last under way. Their leader was Judas Sicariot, his nickname due to the *sica*, a small curved dagger that never left his side. His somber gaze was perturbing and an indefinable something in him sometimes frightened Jesus. Among the group, there was also Simon the Zealot, called the Zealous, who also constantly had about him his sharp dagger of the same sort. His was a demented fanaticism and it was said of him that he had already used this weapon many a time to murder Romans with a stab in the back. Through his physical strength, his exaltation his unbending determination, he had the others in awe of him.

It was with this near military escort that Jesus would have to travel and work. His room for maneuver was severely reduced by it, but he had to put up with it. In his company, the small troop made for Jerusalem. They were to make for the North of the country by joining a caravan and Jesus took advantage of the need to go and seek one out to make an incognito trip to the Temple.

As he had foreseen, Jesus spoke with Caiaphas. Highlighting the risk of civil war and of the Zealot forces that would ravage Jerusalem, he asked to be allowed to take his place as Chief Priest through a novel anointing, both festive and solemn, of the Kingdom of God on Earth. As compensation for granting this request, Jesus let it be understood that he would work to restore the political power of the priests. Through his legitimate descent from Herod the Great, he could take over the running of the country. He knew that the priests already had everything cut and dried and were just waiting for him to be present so as to set their obscure plan in motion. He dazzled them with the prospect of turning into reality the project that they had wished to put in place years before. The proposal was a tasty one and the lure of political power over the Promised Land more than attractive. Jesus was convinced that the Sanhedrin would not refuse his offer.

Promising to return, Jesus had left Caiaphas and had headed for Galilee with his Essene companions.

On the way, he had gone to Nazareth test the beliefs of his fellow-countrymen and their faith in Moses. Wishing to see just how far he could go in revealing the truth, he soon perceived that minds had been closed by centuries of lies and that his future teachings proclaiming the heavenly word would have to take this very much into account so as not to tread on any Jewish corns. Many of them were hoping to see the arrival of the

Liberator driving out the enemy, a hope that had never ceased being fed by rumors cunningly put about by the Zealots.

In the region around Lake Tiberias, Jesus preached under the constant scrutiny of Judas, who was there to make sure that their Christ spoke and acted in conformity with the wishes of the Head of the Order. The enthusiasm aroused by his presence was phenomenal, huge crowds coming to hear him speak or just to get a glimpse of him in the distance, lost in the midst of a sea of humanity. It was in that context of popular rejoicing, before thousands of witnesses ready to report to everybody the least of his gestures, that Jesus performed a supernatural action.

The Rock of the Hare ...

At Qumran, in the Essenes' library, numerous manuscripts were preserved. In one of them, very old and in a pitiful state, Judas Sicariot had found a passage telling a surprising tale about Lake Tiberias: on its shore there stood a huge rock in the shape of a hare. If it was struck, it allowed exceptional catches of fish to be made. The document recounted the story of ten young lads who had used a long thick block of wood to bang continually on this rock before embarking in their boats and bringing nets crammed to bursting point with fish back to the shore.

Judas had gone to the North of the country to check on the accuracy of the account. As indicated in the work, Judas found the place where the rock stood. The waters of the lake had nonetheless risen considerably in the meanwhile and the rock in question was now almost completely submerged. By banging on it, Judas worked out that in fact it was partly hollow, and must be linked to great underground cavities running out under the lake. A forceful blow to the rock, which was like some fantastic gong, produced a dull sound that echoed and was amplified exponentially in the rocky caverns lying beneath the lake. The result was that the fish were disorientated and terrified, and rushed in their shoals to the surface. All that was needed was to cast nets in order to gather an exceptional catch.

When Judas reported this to the Head of the Order, he immediately grasped the advantage that could be drawn from it: through a catch which would appear miraculous to all, any candidate could be consolidated in his status as Christ, accrediting his divine powers. Nobody then would be able to put in doubt his celestial lineage as the Son of God.

However, there was no time to be lost in profiting from this unique opportunity, because in a few decades the rock would probably be completely covered by the water, which would eventually pour into the underground cavities, filling their hollowness. The amazing resonance box would then disappear forever.

At Judas' bidding, before an astounded crowd, Jesus had to play-act the farce of the miraculous draft of fish. All the witnesses, whether villagers or fisher-folk, believed in the authenticity of the undeniable facts, hence in the supreme powers of Jesus.

Amidst all the euphoria, among the universal human rejoicing, just one man seemed to realize what had truly happened.

Zebedee...

The elderly man, father of the apostles John and James, must have known the centuries-old secret of the rock. Furthermore, he would have been aware of the short-term consequences. For, as it was recorded in the text in the Qumran library, if that panic was triggered in the fish so as to catch them, their reproductive cycle was thrown out of kilter. In the past, the lake had ended up by being emptied of its fish and had become virtually a watery desert. The fishermen of those days were no fools, so they had agreed never to use the rock again and to keep its existence secret. Nature had then slowly come back into its own and achieved balance.

Zebedee was furious with Jesus, but he did not let the cat out of the bag about the trick, for he would have had to confess the secret of the rock. He feared that that news would spread and that ill-intentioned folk would come and use it to fish and swiftly grow rich without thought for the future of the lake, whose fish would disappear forever. Zebedee was afraid of losing the peaceful life as a countryman that he so loved and of having to leave that region of which he was fond above all other. For him, silence was preferable to scandal.

The people's enthusiasm was growing, with the tale of the miraculous draft of fishes spreading like wild fire, setting minds ablaze with a fervent desire to communicate the story to others. The news of the Christ's coming had spread to every corner of the Promised Land. Jesus judged that it was time for him to untangle the chaotic situation that could not be long in coming, by being anointed in the Temple as he had envisaged.

For his part, the Head of the Order had agreed that when popular frenzy had been whipped up sufficiently and the miraculous catch of fish had been made, Christ would go to the Temple to enjoin its staff to join his cause. The Essenes did not want the precious Kingdom of God on Earth to fall in a blood-bath if they could help it.

In the greatest secret, the Messiah was to negotiate in person with the Sanhedrin so as to bring them over to his side. As the Essenes saw things, the miraculous catch of fish proving his undeniable divine lineage was more than enough, more than convincing to win anybody over to the cause of Christ.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem with his troop, Caiaphas tried to have him killed. The High Priest was too crazy to allow Jesus to get in his way. He had other projects, other ambitions and this Messiah was like an annoying gnat that had to be crushed. Whilst he had believed initially that Jesus had come to ask for help in assuring his royal future as a son of Herod the Great, Caiaphas' eyes were quickly opened when he grasped that the divine child wanted no more than to take over his place and his prerogatives.

Jesus had to return to Galilee.

The Essenes had foreseen opposition from the Pharisees and Sadducees, and thought little of the matter. Christ was to continue conditioning people ready for the final combat.

Jesus, on the other hand, was terrified, because the situation was trickling out of his hands. Like caged wolves, now that he could not offer them the Kingdom of God on Earth in compensation, the Essenes were dangerous and unpredictable, and Jesus had to do as they said. At the slightest false step, the slightest sign of weakness, the slightest doubt about him, Judas could easily murder him under the influence of his Zealot alienation. Jesus could see that in his dark glances.

Gazes of hatred and madness ...

Jesus wanted to press on, believing he might still be able to get the terrible string of events back on track, praying the Heavenly Father to intercede on his behalf on the way of Causalities.

Paradoxically, it was a different evil which brought salvation from the slough into which the Essene plans had fallen.

The Divine Scourge ...

In an apocalyptic vision, Jesus saw the image of hordes of Possessed pouring towards Jerusalem forming within his head.

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The Pope drummed his fingertips on the cover of the Bible he was nervously grasping in his hands.

"For you, when you were still a Catholic, what was the significance of the Possessed that Jesus cured?"

Tom frowned.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"I mean, what was the ailment afflicting those men and women referred to by the term Possessed?"

Tom reflected for a moment before answering:

“Well, if you stick to the texts, they must’ve been possessed by demons, by diabolical creatures, by spirits or by the slaves of Satan ... that’s part of Christian folklore, isn’t it? That’s why you came up with exorcism ...”

The Pope’s face grew serious.

“The Possessed were not in the grip of diabolical beings. They were simply ill ... poisoned by ergot of rye.”

Tom’s jaw sagged open in surprise.

He was very familiar with that illness. He had once read a fascinating book on the topic.

Ergot was a fungus, *Claviceps purpurea*, that infected the ears of most cereals like wheat, but particularly ears of rye. Out in the fields, it was easy to recognize the parasite by its long curved excrescences, measuring as much as two inches long, ranging from dark purple to black in color. Whilst it was simple to see the ergot before the grain was harvested, once it had been gathered and ground, it was no longer possible to spot its presence: contamination of flour by its sclerotes was a serious problem because of the toxic compounds which poisoned humans. Eating flour prepared from grains affected by ergot caused ergotism.

The oldest evidence of it came from the time of the Assyrians, 600 years before Jesus Christ. The most recent cases were mostly from the Middle Ages, but there had been an outbreak in the seventeenth century in Sologne in France, with a total of nearly ten thousand deaths. This disease which at times had ravaged entire populations was called by the names ‘the Holy Fire’ or ‘Saint Anthony’s Fire’.

Even more recently, cases of ergotism had occurred in 1926 in the Soviet Union and in 1951 in France in the village of Pont-Saint-Esprit, an episode known as the incident of the accursed bread. The history of humanity offered a long succession of epidemics and of isolated outbreaks of ergotism.

The effects of ergot were terrible: by disrupting the circulation of the blood, it brought gangrene of the limbs, whose extremities became mummified, blackened and finally fell off. The disease triggered an alternation of sensations of great cold and great heat in the body, the latter comparable to burning coals and often leading to death.

During the Second World War, while working on the possible medicinal applications of *Claviceps purpurea*, the composition of which was highly complex and many-layered, a scientist synthesized one of the numerous alkaloids contained in ergot and invented L.S.D. By chance, this scholar

came across the hallucinogenic, psychotropic and schizophrenic effects of his creation.

Whilst the effects of L.S.D. were now better known, those of *Claviceps purpurea*, much more powerful and harmful than any drug, remained more mysterious, as they had not been the subject of in-depth study. Nonetheless, it was easy to judge what the victims of ergotism must have had to endure mentally, besides their physical pain: delirium, behavioral changes, disordering of perceptions and of consciousness.

Measureless, diabolical madness.

Staring vacantly into nothingness, Tom muttered to himself:

“That’s what made people think they were in the grasp of a demon ... Possessed ...”

For an instant, he wondered why he had never made this connection before, a link which was childishly obvious. However, he realized that when he had been a Christian the question had never arisen, because the Possessed were the Devil incarnate, whilst after his religious apostasy, seeing everything as myths, he had no longer taken an interest in the sense or the weight of the words, scornfully rejecting them.

As if reading his thoughts, the Pope said to him:

“Nobody has really ever made the connection between the Possessed and ergotism, whether it was in the days of Jesus or much more recently in Salem in America, where they hanged the victims, accusing them of witchcraft ... on that point, one detail comes to my mind ... I believe that it was during those trials that the prosecution made an alleged witch urinate on a piece of bread so that it could be given to a dog. The dog went mad and began to bite stones with such force that it broke its teeth on them. To the prosecutors, that constituted evidence that the alleged sorceress was truly a witch. However, in reality, they never imagined that the bread used in that experiment was contaminated with ergot ... the ‘Divine Scourge’ or ‘God’s Scourge’, as the Jews called it cut down whole generations of men and women in their ignorance, when it would have sufficed merely to separate the black ergots from the healthy ears.”

The Pope’s voice sounded full of regret.

“In Jesus’ time, contamination of flour brought an unprecedented epidemic. Ergotism causes very varied effects and each person reacts differently, with symptoms totally unlike from one patient to another. It all depends on the ripening of the fungus. The species that predominated in those years was the worst of all: it did not cause just possession or gangrene ...”

The Pope fumbled for words.

“... the ergot attacks the nervous system ... those affected can lose their sight or the use of their limbs ... all the sick whom Jesus cured were poisoned by ergot. Every single one ...”

In Tom’s mind’s eye, an image popped up: the picture of a vast stretch of golden ears of grain spattered with dark excrescences. Visualizing a passage from the Bible, he remembered the scene when Jesus tore off ears of corn.

“Jesus knew, didn’t he?” he suddenly asked. “That’s why he ravaged that field ...”

The Pope nodded, understanding to which field Tom was alluding.

“Jesus saw the first cases of possession and he immediately understood what the cause was. When he fled to India, he stayed for a while in Assyria, precisely where an epidemic of ergotism had afflicted the population some centuries earlier. The Assyrian scholars not merely knew the cause of the ailment, they also had other knowledge ... of how to cure the disease. In Jerusalem, Jesus was able to find the ingredients necessary for making a miracle cure. He had learnt the secret of that remedy when he had been initiated by an Assyrian Master.”

“So what’s the cure made of?” Tom asked.

The Pope sighed.

“Alas, that miracle cure did not go beyond an oral transmission. The physicians of those days asked a high price for their knowledge, so if they made it available in writing, accessible to all, they would have been cutting their own throats, financially speaking. They were an élite and wanted to remain so by means of the knowledge they had. Their collected wisdom has not survived, being lost with the passage of time. What is known is that the cure came in the form of a clear liquid with a slightly yellowish tinge. The epidemic that struck Israel was the worst of all and the original Assyrian remedy was not effective enough. Jesus must have played at being a chemist to adjust the cure, finding the right balance and the correct proportions for each ingredient. Once that had been done, Jesus was able to cure all those afflicted by ergot.”

The Pope thought for an instant before continuing:

“When Jesus had to go back to Galilee after having survived Caiaphas’ attempt to murder him, he was in trouble because he had not been able to untangle the Zealot crisis as he had hoped. The situation was totally beyond his control. He was at a loss and no longer was too sure about what to do. Besides, there were those Possessed whom he was now increasingly meeting, which for a while left him completely undecided about what action he should take. However, after intense reflection, he

took the decision to save them all by using the Assyrian remedy on every one of them.”

Tom adopted an expression of astonishment.

“Why didn’t he say where the trouble was coming from, that ergot was the reason for the disease. It would have been a lot simpler!”

“That remedy would have been worse than the ailment. It would have triggered a civil war, which was precisely what Jesus wanted to avoid.”

Tom frowned.

“I don’t get it.”

“The ergot epidemic was not natural. It had been knowingly caused with the aim of poisoning the entire Jewish population. It was a deliberate action. Jesus realized that only the highest authorities could have had the capacity to arrange such madness.”

“But who could’ve done that?” Tom said, fearful of the answer.

The Pope gestured with his arm, but avoided the question as if the moment for revealing that stunning information had not yet come.

Apocalypse

Jesus had methodically sought the precise balance of ingredients for composing the Assyrian remedy.

The Evil was of an extremely radical kind and he had had to strive mightily to create a new antidote efficacious for all. For a long while, he had feared that the rumor of his healing powers might spread before he had the ability to treat all the manifestations of the ergot disease. A flood of sick whose sufferings he would be powerless to assuage haunted his thoughts.

In the greatest secret, he prepared that medicinal oil, on occasion having to mix it with his own saliva to heighten its therapeutic force for some of those poisoned. He had had to try it out on quite a number of the victims: those who had gone blind, deaf or crazy had been his experimental subjects to determine the final composition of the mixture.

Now, it was totally infallible.

Nonetheless, the early versions of the Assyrian mix had proved effective on certain patients. That was the case for the young blind man and the old cripple at the Bethesda pool, the very first victims of ergotism to be cured by Jesus. In exchange for the cure, Jesus had made them swear never to reveal to anybody that their handicaps had developed suddenly from one day to the next: they were to lie, the sightless man claiming to have been blind from birth and the cripple paralyzed for many a year. Through these precautions, Jesus intended to delay as long as possible any mention of a contamination of the City of Zion, as that would have triggered panic and general chaos. He had no wish to see mass gatherings of crazed crowds, hordes of folk rushing hither and thither, with their inevitable sequel of many people trampled to death.

When he went to the Bethesda pool, Jesus had had two notions in mind. The first was to make discreet final arrangements with Caiaphas for his future coronation in the Temple. The second was totally pragmatic:

ergotism had spread into many regions, so Jesus wished to check whether Jerusalem was also affected by the Scourge. He knew that victims would seek refuge in this place with a legendary reputation for miracles. What he had seen in Samaria and Galilee was confirmed: the Evil was being propagated.

The Divine Unction ...

When the remedy was finally ready, Jesus was faced with a conundrum: if he simply used a phial containing an oil that could root out the ailments of the blind, the crippled or the Possessed, people would have eventually realized that it was merely a simple potion that cured a common disease. In that case, the Zealots would have obliged him to tell them what the disease was, explaining to them the ins and the outs of the situation. Judas was no fool, so Jesus would not have been able to lie to him with impunity. Indeed, they would have tortured him to get him to tell: Simon the Zealous was so skilful with his dagger that he could have made even an Egyptian mummy talk. Once they had learnt the truth, the Zealots would have had an unheard-of advantage for their armed insurrection, the people would have rallied to them as one man, raising a gigantic army, whether or not Christ was with them.

Jesus had ventured out on the unforeseeable path of Causalities and the war that was precisely what he wanted to avoid threatened to break out in any even more terrifying and bloody way than ever.

He detested lying and play-acting, but had no choice: it was a necessary concession to make while he found out the origin of the contamination and all its ramifications.

Cunningly hidden under his long-sleeved tunic, tiny wine-skins containing the Assyrian remedy were strapped flat to both his forearms. All he had to do was squeeze them against his body, pretending to wipe his hands on his clothing, and the liquid would trickle down onto his palms. Sometimes, when the bystanders were attentive to the slightest of his gestures, just like a magician distracting attention so that nobody would see the trick he was playing, Jesus feigned prayer, begging for heavenly powers: entwining his fingers and bringing his elbows together, he knelt and leaned forward until his head touched the ground. In this way, he hid his sleight of hand with his body and the folds of his robe. Then he pressed the two bladders one against the other and the pressure he exerted brought the oil out in a long smear over his hands.

Just a small amount was needed for a cure, his saliva often acting as a complement. However, to cope with the flow of sick, he had to be able to exchange empty bladders for fresh: inside his fawn robe, refills were hidden away in undetectable double seams.

Nobody had ever had the least doubt about the miraculous origin of the Divine Unction, as his Zealot disciples had taken to calling it, as it truly emanated from Christ, God's Anointed. However, on several occasions the secret had nearly come out by accident and been seen by all: that was what happened when a white-haired old lady had clung to him. Yet another victim of the ergot, she had tried to seek salvation from it by touching the hem of his robe. Unwittingly, she had squeezed one of the bladders hidden inside the garment and the precious liquid had suddenly gushed out spreading over her hand. When that upset had occurred, Jesus had taken the sick woman to one side and ordered her with the greatest secrecy to go off alone and lick the Divine Unction, which was like a heavenly effluvium that emanated from all parts of his body and would cure the Evil.

After that, Jesus commanded his disciples to allow nobody to approach him without his telling them to do so. He untiringly strove to cure the greatest number of those poisoned that he could, working in the full light of day. However, in the case of foreigners, he acted much more discreetly: he feared the reactions of the Zealots if they learnt that he was not treating only Jews, but also the infidels who sullied the Promised Land merely by being there.

The Canaanite woman ...

Before Judas and his henchmen, Jesus had brusquely sent away this foreign woman who had flung herself at his feet, proclaiming with a perfectly assumed pose of scorn that cures were to be granted exclusively to Jews, to the strayed sheep of the house of Israel. The young woman had then humbled herself in her remarks, humiliating herself, descending into a state of total servility. Jesus had seen the unhealthily mocking look of Simon the Zealous, rejoicing at the foreign female's discomfiture. Jesus realized that if he simulated disdain he could grant to her, like a bone tossed to a dog, the cure that she was imploring him to provide for her daughter. In secret, as many a time before, he sent the apostle John to give some of the Divine Unction to the child. When his Zealot disciples learnt of the miraculous curing of the young Canaanite girl, believing that mere faith in Christ had been the cause of it, they became yet more exalted in their support for Jesus.

Even Judas now saw him with a new eye. Around Jesus, there was only a very small circle who knew that he was no more than a candidate chosen to play the role of the Messiah. This miraculous cures and the Divine Unction that trickled off the hands of the colt on whom they had laid their bets were stunning revelations for them and now they looked on him as if

he truly were the authentic incarnation, the reborn form of the Master of Justice, the Founder of the Essene Order.

The trick of the bladders had changed their beliefs.

Jesus was able to note the effects of this change in their convictions when messengers came from a centurion to beg the goodwill of the Son of God in curing the servant and then the child of the Roman enemy. Uncertain as to whether he should become involved or not, fearing that if he agreed to do it this would be seen treachery in the bilious eyes of the Zealots, Jesus had turned towards Judas, who had given him a barely perceptible wink, as if to say he could do as he thought best. Judas could feel that Christ wanted to aid the centurion and he did not wish to go counter to that higher will.

Judas had changed. Up till then, he had always been cold and distant with Jesus, considering him no more than a simple disciple of lower rank than his own. From the very start, Judas had pretended to respect him when in front of everybody, but if he had judged that Christ was showing the slightest sign of weakness or of betraying the cause of Greater Israel, he would have had not the least compunction in getting rid of him before it was too late. In doing so, he was scrupulously obeying the instructions of the Head of the Order, with whom he corresponded regularly by messenger. Judas saw to it that everything strictly followed the initial plan; at the slightest variation from it, he showed a furious intransigence that all feared.

The miracles of the Divine Unction turned his point of view about Jesus upside down. From then on, he considered Jesus as a superior being. Jesus gained a psychological advantage over Judas, who wished to allow the Son of Yahweh to do whatever he liked. Judas felt that he no longer had any right to command this heavenly child for whom the Zealots had longed. On the contrary, it was for Jesus to order what his Father willed and not for men to impose their wishes on Yahweh.

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Tired of standing while speaking to a sitting man, the Pope went and sat on an armchair in the corner of his office.

“Judas wrote letters to the Head of the Order,” he said. “Jesus discreetly had one intercepted to find out what was in it. He had a pleasant surprise on learning that Judas was politely opposing the instructions of his leader and was presenting Jesus as being the genuine Christ to whom obedience was due. Judas expressed a wish: to put into practice the true

will of Yahweh which he believed emanated from him through the intermediary of his Son. Nonetheless, Judas did not dare to stand up openly against the Head of the Order and carried on applying the initial Essene plan down to the last letter. Even if he was sorry to do so, Judas left Jesus no time to lay out his own wishes, even if they came from his Father. Jesus realized that it would require very little for Judas to begin obeying him rather than the Head of the Order. If Judas started following Jesus' commands, the remaining rank and file in the Zealot troop would do likewise, because Judas was their unchallenged leader. He was the right arm of the Head of the Order."

The Pope fell silent for a moment, then continued:

"On Mount Tabor, Jesus staged a divine consecration, accreditation from Yahweh in person, so that Judas would definitively consider him the Son of God and would obey him blindly."

"That's the episode of the transfiguration, isn't it?" Tom asked in surprise. "But if my memory isn't playing me false, I don't think the Bible speaks of the presence of Judas ..."

"It is the winning side that always rewrites history," the Pope responded, "and Judas the traitor did not deserve to be mentioned, was not worthy of being present on the day when Jesus appeared in all the glory of his divine nature on Mount Tabor. Yet Judas was indeed present on that day, and was not alone. John, Peter and James were there too, for they were to be the witnesses who would confirm to Judas what he was supposed to see, so that he would be convinced that all of it was no dream, but rather reality, and that they had all seen and heard the same things that he had."

A sketchy smile appeared on Tom's lips.

"Martial did a study of mountaineers' travel notebooks. He was struck by the mystical terms used in them. They spoke of strange noises, angelic voices, of hallucinations of colors, burning bushes or bodies surrounded by light. The mountain climbers were in a state of intense emotional tension and they all spoke of great fear they hadn't ever experienced before. Some of them even saw themselves at a distance as if their minds had drifted away from their bodies. Martial researched the subject and the verdict could be in no doubt: altitude triggers religious visions through a physiological mechanism. All of those phenomena are the outcome of tiny epileptic fits and are caused by the release of endorphins into the brain when you climb a mountain. And those little fits are hallucinogenic. Moreover, a lack of oxygen upsets the brain, so it loses its bearings. It brings a sensation of a diffuse presence, as if some divine being was near you. And isolation magnifies the effects. Mohammed received the Koran

from the hands of the Angel Gabriel after he had been sheltering in the Hira cave on the mountain to the north of Mecca for many a day and night ...”

Tom chuckled mockingly. Nodding gravely the Pope sighed.

“However, that was not the case for Jesus and his apostles on the day of which we are speaking ...”

As if wishing to confess something, the Pope leaned his body slightly forwards.

“Jesus knew how to remove the toxic substances from ergot and extract its hallucinogens, those found in L.S.D. That drug was used by Assyrian sages in order to come into contact with the gods. Jesus had tested it himself, which was the reason that he left his Assyrian master: he had realized that the sages were on the wrong track. It is not contact with the gods that one achieves with ergot or L.S.D. Despite appearances, it is just delirium, imagination allowed to run riot because of the wanderings of the mind.”

“And that’s different from cannabis?” Tom asked, with an ironical glance.

“Yes, it is different. Used properly, cannabis is indeed efficacious in tuning in to Deus and communicating with him, tuning in to the same spiritual wavelength as him. Ergot or L.S.D. make the mind chase its own tail, feeding it an imaginary and corrupting delirium. That may seem like the divine, people may believe that they are on a mystical pathway, but it is not so.”

Tom grimaced mockingly, but the Pope paid no attention and went on with his explanation in a confidential tone:

“During his time among the Assyrians, Jesus had learnt another skill: hypnosis. Knowledge of that had been circulating since era of the Sumerians, 4,000 years before the time of Jesus. That nation had written down all the methods for it on their clay tablets, using it in connection with magic and their religion. By combining hypnosis and ergot, Jesus brought Judas to believe that Moses and Elijah were there as his supporters. The final touch in the illusion of the transfiguration was the divine accreditation by Yahweh in person recognizing Jesus as his Son in a powerful and thunderous voice. Hypnosis and the hallucinogenic effects of the ergot worked perfectly as required and Judas became convinced that it was all true, that it was a fact that God had come in person to recognize his Son Jesus. From then onwards, Judas worshiped Jesus with an immense fervor.”

"I suppose that with that cunning trick it was the same for the other three," Tom interjected.

"Yes and no," the Pope replied enigmatically.

Tom frowned and the clergyman added:

"Yes, for veneration also reached its peak for two other apostles, but no, for of the four people present around Jesus on that day, one was not under the influence of any drug ..."

The Pope smiled enigmatically.

"Do you know that the term carpenter used at the time to indicate Jesus' father's trade, or even sometimes Jesus' own profession, could also be translated as magician? Like any magician, Jesus needed an assistant planted among the audience. That assistant was John ..".

The Pope cleared his throat, then went on to say that Jesus had met John during his stay in Qumran. John was an Essene disciple who had climbed to the highest rank in the religious community. He had been attracted to it by spiritual and merciful feelings, seeking the absolute and divine communion with the firmament. When he was initiated into the final secrets by the Head of the Order, he was completely dumbfounded by the thirst for vengeance on the part of his fellows, by their crazy wish to grasp the reins of all political and religious power through an armed insurrection that could not fail to bring an endless flood of deaths. John did not oppose that terrible project, knowing that it was impossible to dissuade his Essene brethren from committing an irretrievable error. He was dejectedly waiting in Qumran, praying that this last battle would never take place, when Jesus met him for the first time. Despite their different ranks in the hierarchy, the two men had hit it off extremely well and a secret complicity arose between them, nobody else being aware of this.

However, John did not let his new friend in on the Essene plans for fear that Jesus might fully accept them. Nonetheless, after having received the ultimate initiation, in a moment of deep distress, Jesus confided in John, speaking to him of that crazy folly. John agreed with him and this difficult situation brought them yet closer together. Later, John became Jesus' hidden accomplice, helping him in his work for the salvation of Israel. It was even John who had insisted on his friend going ahead with the staging of the transfiguration scene when Jesus was still, despite everything, reluctant to manipulate Judas' mind.

Immediately after this transfiguration on Mount Tabor, knowing that Judas would henceforth be unshakably and certainly on his side, Jesus began preaching differently. All the Essene doctrine that Jesus had so far been spreading was no more than Zealot craziness, a question of

haranguing crowds so that they would rise up against the Roman occupiers, so that they would take to the field of battle against that enemy who bore the eagle as a standard.

He had spoken of the fratricidal war that would break out, yet was an unavoidable necessity, the divisions between members of one and the same family joining opposite sides, of betrayals of brother by brother in a generalized chaos. Then there would be famines due to the ravaging of the fields as part of the burnt-earth policy of the Roman foe who would wish to stamp out the Jewish uprising completely. Jackal-like, the armies of neighboring kingdoms would join the Roman eagle in crushing the rebellion and would invade Jerusalem so as to pillage it. However, they would have to hold out during those periods of desolation, because God would never abandon his Chosen People. Through their constancy of belief in Christ, the Hebrew people's salvation was assured. The times were near when the royal house and the sovereignty of Israel would be restored to the legitimate descendant of David, the Lord's anointed, and the new Kingdom of God would come into being, the Temple would be surrounded by the true servants of Yahweh, so that He could regain possession of His earthly dwelling, occupied by usurpers.

Then would come the end of days, the end of the conflict and the Liberator would come in all his glory to Jerusalem. That would be a time of reckoning, the hour of the Last Judgment: the ravaging fire of gehenna for their enemies, Herod Antipas and his collaborators burnt alive in the rubbish tip on the edge of the holy city.

For those who had fought on the side of Christ, a hundred-fold reward was promised, very earthly lands and treasures, but also life everlasting in heaven.

To bind the people even more strongly to their cause, the Essenes had been clever enough to put God in the forefront, there to protect Christ by sending down his Holy Spirit, his divine will on him, but also on the combatants. These latter, if they happened to die for that greater Israel, would find everlasting life in Paradise awaiting them. The Son of Yahweh promised that, just as he pledged to send to eternal suffering in a heavenly gehenna the souls of the enemies of the nation who would be annihilated by God for having opposed his Holy Spirit.

As the last act, Yahweh would come and take possession of his Kingdom and peace would reign once again over the Promised Land.

The Pope paused for an instant and stared at Tom.

"When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God," he went on, "he was not alluding to his creation, as everybody knew, but to what already existed, what was in Jerusalem. When Jesus told the people of the coming of the

Kingdom, they all understood that this was to be a renewal, the imminent arrival of a Kingdom of God which would drive out the religious usurpers who were in the Temple. The term Kingdom of God on Earth that specifically referred to the Temple also served to include the notion of legitimate royalty restored to the descendants of King David.”

The Pope smiled sadly.

“When Jesus spoke of repenting because the Kingdom of God was nigh, in his case that meant making amends for one’s misdeeds against God by rallying to his cause, to the holy war that would break out very soon. The final struggle would come in the near future, even if he did not specify its date precisely, for the date had not yet been fixed by the Head of the Order who was waiting for the grapes of wrath to be ripe before he unleashed hostilities.”

The Pope mechanically stroked the cover of the Bible that he had in his hands.

“Once he was free of constraint from the Zealots, Jesus was able to preach differently. He was clever enough not to get rid of the Essene terminology, but rather to use it as a launching pad for his new ideas, twisting it out of its original sense, so that people who had become accustomed to it and believed in it would not be too disoriented. Jesus wanted to give a fresh image, a fresh definition to each Zealot word. With that stratagem, he also intended to handle the susceptibilities and beliefs of the Essenes gently so as to bring them over to his cause without a clash. However, Jesus did not openly declare the new definitions for the terminology that he was hijacking, for the people were not yet ready to receive the full blast of his Initiate spiritual teachings. That would have been too strong a shock. Nonetheless, these words are implicit, they appear in their true sense when one is familiar with the knowledge of the Initiated. That is why I spoke to you just now of Jesus’ knowledge of rebirths, of the Heavenly Truths, so that you could differentiate one and the same word said by Jesus in the Bible, either as being from the Zealot period and spoken under constraint, or from his post-Zealot days, that is when he spoke freely and as an Initiate. All these terms have a secret double meaning.”

The Pope went on to state that in that post-Zealot period, Jesus had energetically proclaimed a new justice that should overcome centuries-old hatred for one’s enemies: the law of Talion should no longer be valid and love for all should prevail. Friends or enemies, Jews or non-Jews.

Jesus did not talk any more of the Kingdom of God, but, cunningly, he spoke of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. Through that ambiguity, he left unscathed the hope of the Zealots who thought it was a

question of the Temple, but in fact he was referring to the Kingdom of Heaven, accessible through the coming of knowledge, through awareness of the Heavenly Truths spreading to all.

Jesus wanted to hammer home the Heavenly Truths, but they were difficult to understand, not to mention accept. He had to take things slowly, so that this new teaching, which was to lead to salvation of the soul through learning, would be accessible to all minds. Jesus had to prepare people gently and the use of tales based on images, such as parables, seemed the best compromise for changing mentalities and convictions given deep roots by false ancestral beliefs.

To sink the Zealot plan for insurrection and despotism definitively, Jesus twisted the fierce term ‘Last Judgment’ out of its original meaning. Previously, he had stated that those who did not repent in time would perish and that there would be no clemency whatsoever for them. That notion represented punishment or reward for everybody, the good being sorted from the bad in accordance with their warlike exploits or their unconditional backing for Christ. Now, in Jesus’ mouth the phrase ‘Last Judgment’ secretly designated the weighing of souls by the Heavenly Father at the time of the physical death of each person.

After the change in the situation, the symbolic ‘gehenna’ of the Essenes was used to indicate Gaia and the rebirth of souls in this world below, the hell of lives on Earth, this lower universe, as contrasted with heaven. Further, sins and sinners no longer represented transgression of the divine will of Yahweh, but were associated with desires and their temptations, which chained the soul to the cycle of rebirths. Paradise and the life everlasting in heaven were the cutting edge, Jesus’ divine mission which was to guide humans out of the cycle of lives and bring them to become celestial beings, angels in the company of Deus.

Tom frowned.

“But nowadays it’s definitely the Zealot and not the post-Zealot sense of the words that governs Catholic dogma, isn’t it? Like hell for anyone who disobeys God’s will, or salvation on Doomsday for anyone who’s been baptized ...”

The Pope leant forwards.

“It is fortunate that you are seated, for otherwise you would fall over in surprise when I tell you why that is so ...”

Enigmatically, he added no more to that subject and changed the topic of conversation, to continue with the historical narrative. Jesus began lambasting the rich Jews who were secretly subsidizing the Zealot armed rebellion, as also the Pharisees. In their case he had hitherto done so out of

obligation as an Essene because they had perverted the Law of Moses, but now he was doing it because of their false beliefs that turned the people aside from the Heavenly Truths and hid the keys to divine wisdom.

These beliefs were similar to those of the Essenes, but they existed only as an oral tradition. The Head of the Order had the brilliant idea of setting them down in writing and spreading them so as to supplant the Pharisee versions, because scriptures were seen as divine words and those who presented them were considered to be the emissaries of Yahweh. However, those scripture would have been just as much lies serving their interests as were those of King Josiah.

“So Moses is definitely a myth, then, is he?” Tom demanded.

The Pope avoided that question.

“For countless years, the Jewish people had been accustomed to contradictions in the holy scriptures supposed to recount the will of their god. One day he said one thing, the next the exact opposite. The Hebrews believed that Yahweh was an irascible, changeable, capricious being, as he himself says in the Old Testament. It never crossed their mind that it was the various people in political and religious power after Josiah who used the scriptures to impose their wills on the subject people. A sort of criminal or civil law code that developed over time, as do the legal and criminal codes of all countries as they go through revolutions, republics, monarchies, or constitution-writing. At that time, writings were magic, as impressive as television might be for a primitive man, and these scriptures were considered divine.”

“But what about Moses?” Tom insisted. “Can we agree he was just a myth made up by Josiah?”

Reluctantly, the Pope nodded.

“Jesus was aware of that, for the Initiated knew of Josiah’s tricks. Jesus attempted to uncover that centuries-old lie, but minds were closed and everybody was convinced of the reality of these ancient writings. Hence, Jesus treated susceptibilities gently and the mortar of the mind hardened for ever over these lies, so that they were believed in irremediably throughout the generations. Jesus was not taken in by the laws of Moses; he knew they were forgeries, but he did not wish to reveal this, for fear chaos would break out in the land. Not all truths are good to tell. A humorist once said that one may laugh, but not with everybody. Jesus was in the same position: one may tell all truths, but not to everybody. Besides, nobody would have believed him ...”

Tom interrupted him.

“Just like you today. If you announced the truth about the myth of Moses to all and sundry, no-one would believe you; they’d think you’d gone out of your mind. Even if you produced solid evidence, historically undeniable facts. Believers are infected with the God Virus that they’re injected with by the Bible and no truth is strong enough to cure them. Only new generations can maybe step back and get the broad picture needed and accept the truth. That Moses myth has become real for humanity and a mental cure’s going to take a long while ...”

The Pope sighed.

“Jesus officially recognized the Old Testament, which is a heap of monstrosities. He ought to have disowned it, but he was afraid of the chaos that would ensue. Hence, he kept silent, feigning that he deemed it truthful, even though he knew it was a falsehood, and all mankind lapsed into folly because of these lies recognized by the child of God. Later, the early Church modified and shaped the Gospels to support and bolster the Old Testament. As sciences emerged, it was horribly frightened by the scientific truths which were beginning to shake that base, but it could not distance itself from it, for it had been accredited by Christ himself.”

Seeing that the Pope was in a mood to confide, Tom questioned him:

“So where does Satan come into all this?”

“That term served to designate the opponent, the Roman foe. Afterwards, the growing Church labeled with this word all those who opposed its beliefs. We know where that error of interpretation led ...”

Tom realized that he was referring to the wars of religion or to the Inquisition, to the scientists who had been publicly burnt at the stake for having expressed an opinion contrary to religious totalitarianism.

“However, let us return to the history of Jesus, if we may” the Pope proposed.

He continued by explaining that immediately after the new line was taken in Jesus’ preaching, there had been violent reactions from the most militant Zealot partisans. This was especially so when they learnt from Christ’s mouth that an armed uprising was no longer authorized by the Father and would have to be canceled. Furthermore, they could not stand the forgiveness or love for one’s enemy which he now preached. They considered that a betrayal and a good many of the troop left Jesus because they could also clearly see that, despite what he said, the new precepts ran counter to those of Moses.

Without an insurrection, these partisans knew that the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth would not take place. It could not happen soon, in any case, and Jesus took care to be vague on the subject, no longer

speaking directly of it, but on the other hand proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven and the life everlasting.

Judas then intervened on behalf of Jesus.

He succeeded in calming the rage of the Zealots, who docilely fell in behind him, their leader with his rock-solid faith. For them, as for the Head of the Order, who was worried by the change in the situation, Judas found a way of driving away their fears by means of hard-hitting phrases which lastingly anesthetized their hate-filled minds: any who abandoned the Son of God had no faith in Yahweh and would perish in the fires of the heavenly gehenna because of their willfulness. Jesus was truly the Son of Yahweh and the Father would restore the Promised Land to the Children of Israel when He deemed it fit to do so. There was no need of an army around Jesus to decimate his enemies, as legions of angels would deploy when the moment came to annihilate the Romans and the renegades and establish Christ upon his throne of glory in the Kingdom of God on Earth. In his great mercy, Yahweh intended to preserve the lives of the Chosen People in that way. They must not try to hasten matters by an armed insurrection, which would be doomed to failure, not having God's support. Hence, everybody should allow the Son to work in accordance with the Holy Spirit of his Father, following his own wishes, and not impose human demands on him while they awaited the definitive arrival of God in his Kingdom in Jerusalem.

For his part, Jesus remained prudent and did not openly rebel against the Head of the Order, choosing rather to rub that steel-fanged creature up the right way. Even if he did not enjoy manipulating and lying to the crowd, Jesus set in motion the second multiplication of the loaves that had been envisaged for a long time.

As the first time, Judas had gone on ahead with John. The two men had purchased a colossal quantity of loaves and fishes, which they had discreetly transported in wagons. In a field in the back of beyond, not overlooked from anywhere, they had dug a deep, narrow hole into a small hillock and they had hollowed out a number of spaces within it to store the food. On the surface, the three-foot-wide opening was hidden by a trapdoor covered with earth and grass, a small hole about a foot across being cut in the center of it. The day before Christ went there, Judas cautiously raised the trapdoor that totally camouflaged the entrance and slipped into the underground chamber. John shut the trapdoor and ensured that everything was truly hidden. Then he put a thin mat on top and placed a wicker basket with a removable base above the small hole. Judas spent the night in the chamber. In the morning the multitude came there, warned

by word of mouth of the imminent arrival of the Son of God at that deserted spot.

“I am sure that you can guess what came next ...” the Pope concluded. “All of that sleight of hand was to bring people to believe that Jesus was indeed the Son of God and to rally them around him. It was the cunning ploy of the Head of the Order.”

“This is incredible,” Tom muttered. “I can scarcely believe I’m hearing this from you ... anyhow, everything Jesus was said to have done after that is just a legend, isn’t it? I mean ... things like how he walked on water ...”

The Pope shook his head.

“No, there you are mistaken. Jesus did indeed walk on the water ...”

Seeing Tom’s startled face, he added:

“I am sure that I will be telling you nothing new if I say that there is no effective means of stopping a ‘trip’ due to L.S.D. or to ergot. According to the dose, the context, those involved and their states of mind, the effects may vary considerably and trigger more or less strong visual, auditory or sense hallucinations. On occasion, the organism does not assimilate all of the chemical. Particles become lodged in the organism, later breaking loose and cause a further unforeseen and uncontrollable experience. Some people have gone through ‘flashbacks’ several years after they took their last dose. Do you understand what I am implying?”

Tom thoughtfully nodded in silence.

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After his apostles had taken the last boats to cross Lake Tiberias, Jesus found himself alone, lost in the middle of the crowd that pressed in upon him from all sides. Their fervor was great all around him because of the multiplication of the loaves, even despite his new preachings which had led a good number of Zealots to turn from him. The population saw in him the Son of God and whatever he did, whatever he said, they believed in him, the Savior of Israel.

Jesus had difficulty in making his way through that dark mass of people. His gaze fell on the lakeshore: an old flat-bottomed boat was grounded there, half covered with mud and grass. He ordered it dug out of the mud and refloated. A dozen country-folk did as he said and quickly cleaned the vessel, much smaller than those in which the apostles had embarked. In it there was only a single oar.

That did not matter, as Jesus was going to use a method of rowing that he had learnt in the East: he stood and held the oar vertically, pressing it with one hand against his right shoulder and bent his right leg around its shaft. Keeping his left foot flat against the bottom of the boat while the was in the water hooked around the blade, he began a backwards and forwards movement, raising his leg at the end of each stroke to bring the oar back to its starting point. By means of this technique, one single oar would suffice to drive the boat forwards. All the same, to insure he remained balanced and stable, Jesus took care to grasp with his left hand a cord that he had fixed to the port side of the boat.

The vessel was frail and its freeboard dangerously low, but Jesus did not intend to go far, just to travel along the shore so as not to have to put up with the flood of people. He preferred to be alone, isolated in the midst of the lake's waves, rather than in the middle of the pushing waves of the crowd. They watched him head off, fascinated by his strange way of rowing. From a distance, thanks to the regular swaying of his standing form, it was possible to think that he was walking on the water. That was what was assumed by a good few late-comers who witnessed it, not having been present when the tiny boat had been refloated.

Jesus was not really a sailor and he was taken by surprise by a current that carried him several hundred yards away from the shore. He tried to get back closer to it, but his efforts were in vain. A slight breeze arose and small waves formed on the surface of the lake which till then had been calm and motionless. He noticed a boat not far away, one of those that his apostles had taken. The current bore him towards it, so that it was more sensible to try to reach it than to attempt to go back to the land.

Pulling hard with his leg on the oar, thanks to his powerful muscles he quickly closed the gap and finally picked out John and Simon Peter. The latter began crying out in fear on seeing him arrive, standing in the middle of the water, and his fear spread as if by instinct to John. Jesus shouted to reassure them, wondering why Simon Peter was afraid of him. When he was no more than thirty yards or so away, John, now standing, started to shout, saying that Jesus was walking on the water.

From the signs he made with his hands, Jesus grasped what the situation was in an instant: Simon Peter was the victim of hallucinations. Jesus and John knew that the ergot that Simon Peter had swallowed on Mount Tabor could trigger perturbations of the senses long after. The waves stirring on the lake must have shaken his body, so that Simon Peter was once more under the influence of ergot. It was essential not to contradict his crazy visions, because he could become violent, with the risk

of overturning the boat and drowning them all. The first thing to do was to calm Simon Peter in his delirium so as not to worry him.

Still standing, Jesus continued to row slowly with his leg and when he reached Simon Peter's boat he set the oar down and went on board it.

Simon Peter stood up and Jesus saw in his eyes that he was clearly reassured. Dusk had come and the darkness was growing progressively greater. A sudden look of worry flashed harshly in Simon Peter's eyes.

"Lord," said he "if it is truly you, bid me come to you upon the water."

Jesus stepped out of the larger boat. He took a couple of steps on the flat bottom of his own vessel and turned towards the apostle. In his mind, he was convinced that Jesus was walking forwards on the water.

"Come," ordered Jesus.

Simon Peter came to the gunwale, not seeing anything but the black waters of the lake. He cautiously put one foot out of the boat, expecting it to sink into water. However, his foot was firmly set on the bottom of the other boat. Now convinced that he in his turn could walk on water, he made his way slowly forwards with tiny steps, approaching Jesus. Suddenly terror seized his mind and he took a huge pace backwards. He missed his footing and his leg plunged into the water. Simon Peter shrieked and Jesus caught him in the nick of time, just before he fell overboard. Holding him by his shoulders, Jesus helped him back into John's boat.

By the light of a naphtha lamp, Jesus and John laid him down in the stern of the boat, pretending they wanted to sleep, but in fact closely watching Simon Peter's reactions. The two men did not want to row back to the land, fearing that yet another delirium might induce Simon Peter to throw himself into the water without their being able to intervene in time. John and Jesus took turn and turn through that night keeping watch over Simon Peter. He finally fell asleep and when morning came John judged that they could return in complete safety. He let Jesus sleep, as he had been on watch for the greater part of the night, and set about rowing solo. However, Simon Peter woke up and began shrieking like the elements that were storming in his mind. He flung himself on Jesus, who leapt to his feet. His eyes boring into Simon Peter's, Jesus finally managed to do what he had been unable to on the previous day because of the darkness: hypnotize him to root out his demons.

A great calm then came over Simon Peter. He plunged into a beatific state, as if he were absent, lost within his mind, his notions of space and time lastingly overset.

Simon Peter always moved me by his naive candor and the generosity of his heart ...

Jesus had admitted him to the number of his closer disciples at the time of the miraculous catch of fish. Simon Peter had a noble mind, great goodness of soul and a candid nature. Even if he was something of a chatterbox and sometimes rather exaggerated in the tales he told, his integrity towards Christ was never in question. He knew how to keep his place and serve his Master with full honesty. Just once, however, he allowed his conscience to be carried away by the temptation of future power, dreaming of grandeur and of supplanting the other apostles, of being the first of all, musing about whether he was indeed the greatest among them. Simon Peter did not know that he talked in his sleep and John, who had gone off with him on the apostolic mission against the Possessed in the land of Galilee, reported to Jesus what he had heard without the sleeper knowing it. When he returned, Simon Peter was scolded by Jesus and became convinced that his Master could read him like an open book. So, he swept those bad thoughts out of his mind and thereafter concentrated exclusively on his faith in Christ.

That faith had failed him during his first apostolic mission, as it had the other apostles. Jesus had indeed warned them that they would not manage to cure the sick if their faith in Christ was not real and sincere.

I had to lie so as to keep the secret of ergotism ...

More than once, Simon Peter had failed to cure cripples or the blind. He was sure that his lack of faith was the cause of this. In tandem with faith, he imagined that the Divine Unction which Jesus had given him could cure all ills. He did not know that the Assyrian potion was effective only for those suffering ergot poisoning with its multiple ramifications of symptoms. Simon Peter had anointed all the sick he had met. Apart from John, the other apostles had done likewise. Jesus could not reveal the truth and ask them bluntly to distinguish only the manifestations of ergot which could be cured, thrusting aside those suffering other diseases or handicaps not curable by the Unction. Jesus had to keep the secret so that the truth about the deliberate contamination of the fields with ergot would not set off an unprecedented civil war.

Only Jesus could have the luxury of selecting which sick he would cure: people imagined that he worked in this fashion to distinguish with his divine vision the good or evil souls of the sick, those that could be miraculously cured and those that could not. In fact, Jesus strove to avoid those paralyzed in accidents or blind from birth, treating only the victims of ergotism.

Thanks to these extraordinary cures, everybody saw Jesus as the true Christ, having no doubts about him. This was also the case for the apostles, who were firmly convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. They had been totally won over to him, obeying him rather than the Head of the Order. Besides, at this point the latter was entirely under the psychological influence of Jesus and had a wait-and-see attitude. At the pressing insistence of Judas, he allowed his protégé the freedom to act as he wished for the restoration of greater Israel. Jesus took good care to preserve this status quo by putting in place the last preparations that the Head of the Order wanted.

So, he officially instated his Twelve Apostles.

For fear of a future royal despotism as under Herod the Great's rule, the Essenes wanted to impose on Christ when he was consecrated an assembly of twelve apostles with whom the new king would have to come to some working arrangement, not being able to take any decision without the agreement of the majority.

This number twelve had been ingeniously chosen to give those who held Roman or Egyptian beliefs that the Messiah was a living incarnation of gods worshiped in other countries who were surrounded by precisely twelve faithful followers.

Seven members of that gathering had already been designated by the Head of the Order: Judas, Thaddeus, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Simon the Zealous and John. These were all Essene disciples who had gone through an apprenticeship at Qumran under the eye of the Head of the Order. He did allow Jesus the privilege of selecting the other five apostles. Jesus was not taken in by this apparent favor, knowing that the Head of the Order thought that if he ever wished to take an independent line after his consecration, he would never hold an absolute majority in the assembly, because these seven Essenes were in the pay of the Head of the Order.

Or at least that was what he thought.

To free himself of this trammeling, Jesus sought out his five ideal candidates. Nonetheless, he did not wish to recruit them from among the ranks of the Zealots, wanting to have beside him men without ingrained hatred. There were two formal conditions which had to be fulfilled by all the members of that assembly: being a Jew and speaking a foreign language. The apostles would have to be capable of dialog and negotiation in the various languages of neighboring countries so as to flatter their egos, thus avoiding a good few future conflicts and guaranteeing the safety of the restored sovereignty.

The seven Essenes all spoke foreign languages: either they had been taught one at Qumran, or their personal trajectory had given them the

chance of acquiring one. John was one in the latter situation. His mother had died giving birth to him and his father Zebedee had taken a new wife, a Cretan who could also speak Libyan. She had filled up some time by teaching John Cretan and James, his elder brother, the dialect of Libya.

John sometimes went to visit his father Zebedee and his brother, and he took advantage of these trips to go fishing with them. He was well acquainted with Simon Peter and his younger brother Andrew, who went partners with his father. These two brothers similarly spoke a foreign language: Simon Peter had married an attractive girl from Pamphylia, whilst Andrew had had a wife from Cappadocia. They had had fiery love lives, learning the languages of their respective wives out of affection. However, in the end they had left them, almost on the same day.

As they matched the required criteria in every way, John proposed to Jesus he should recruit the three fishermen to install them in the function of apostles. Jesus hesitated, because he did not think he would have to go so far as the effective setting-up of the assembly that the Head of the Order wanted. He was counting on gaining possession of the Temple by bringing Caiaphas over to his side, so that the institution of the Twelve Apostles was not necessary. Nonetheless, establishing that assembly in the Kingdom of God on Earth was useful in keeping the Head of the Order sweet. So, Jesus agreed and took advantage of the staging of the miraculous catch of fish to persuade the three fishermen to join the ranks of his closer disciples.

However, Jesus needed Judas' backing. He made no difficulties about it and accepted Jesus' request, even when Levi and his brother were picked out to be the last two apostles. Judas had the policy of casting the net wide, especially among those who had transgressed the Law, and of not refusing any of them who rallied to the cause. Besides, Levi spoke the Romans' tongue fluently, whilst his brother knew Egyptian.

Jesus liked Levi a great deal, as he had found him pleasant from the start. His constant good humor added a touch of gaiety among that troop with their hate-filled stares. The acceptance of Levi by the others, particularly the partisans of John the Baptist, was not achieved without a struggle. Jesus had to come to his defense, alleging that they had to recruit publicans or fisher-folk, not just from among the Righteous, the Jews already committed to the cause of a greater Israel. Mass support was the essential condition for the final combat, they all knew that, and they should accept the presence of such repentant sinners at their side.

There were equally palpable tensions with the three fishermen from Lake Tiberias, reproached by the Baptist's partisans for never fasting and for eating gluttonously, fasting being an action showing an attitude of

dependence on God. For Jesus, fasting was an aberration, because it was contrary to the Law of Equilibrium. All food prohibitions were crazy constraints that damaged the harmony of the soul.

Only moderation is praiseworthy ...

The Essene apostles accepted their five fellows more or less well enough, knowing that in any case they need not fear being put in the shade: they were all to receive the same reward. Once Christ had been definitively set upon the glorious throne of David, the apostles would sit on twelve thrones around him. To keep them under his control, the Head of the Order had promised them fabulous riches as well as effective power over the Tribes of Israel.

Most of them were greedy for wealth, so that it was with disquiet and astonishment that they heard the new preachings of Christ which tongue-lashed the rich. They wondered whether the fortunes promised for when the Kingdom of God on Earth arrived would really be paid over to them. Besides, with armed insurrection no longer on the agenda, they questioned whether the imminent establishment of the Kingdom would in fact happen, worrying about their respective thrones.

It was Simon Peter who acted as the spokesman for the others who dared not ask Christ directly. Jesus cleverly replied that besides everlasting life in heaven they would receive much more. Reassured, the apostles understood him to be promising very concrete worldly riches even more fabulous than those promised by the Head of the Order. In fact, in saying this Jesus was referring only to his esoteric teaching, which would offer them far more than all the futile wealth of the world put together.

Just before they were officially designated, the three former fishers, as well as Levi and his brother, were informed by Simon the Zealous of the reward promised to those holding the title of apostle. Simon Peter was not really interested in such riches, even if the attractions of power did sometimes rather go to his head. He was not greedy, he liked a simple life and was well able to content himself with whatever he had, thanking God for having granted him his existence. To serve the Son of God was the greatest treasure that he could get. Jesus could count on his faith, his unconditional support and his love that transcended the borders of the heart.

You were always there when I needed you, my friend ...

After his transfiguration and the establishment of the Twelve Apostles, Jesus was struck by a doubt: he feared that he had rushed matters and been too quick to preach the new justice without being absolutely sure that Judas had fully come over to his side. Jesus discreetly asked Simon Peter about

this. He could not understand what Jesus meant when he inquired what the apostles thought of him.

The question made no sense, as the answer was so obvious. Without any exception, all the Twelve thought that Jesus was the true son of God. Jesus was relieved, because he knew that Simon Peter, who was fond of chatting away with the others even though they clearly had very little in common, was describing Judas' true opinion of him.

The apostles never for an instant doubted his status as Son of God, even when he had been put in a tricky situation by the Pharisees who had come to spy on him during the second multiplication of the loaves.

Make a sign in the heavens ...

The Pharisees had nearly caught him out by asking him to make a sign in the sky so that they could believe in him. That day, things had come close to being ruined. It would have been a disaster if one of the apostles had been seized by a suspicion and backed the priests in their request. Luckily, this had not happened and Jesus rebuked those skeptics who could not see the miracles that had come from heaven and demanded yet more, never satisfied and always doubting the Holy Spirit of God.

The apostles and the population were dazzled by the miraculous cures. Whatever was alleged from the Temple, such as claims that Jesus was not the Son of God but a skilful magician, nobody would believe in those lies.

After that unfortunate episode, Jesus sent the apostles off on their mission to cure those affected by ergot. He told them to stay only in the region of Galilee, that true dwelling of Israel, and not to go into Samaria. This was not so much to content the Zealots, who looked on Samaria as a soiled land, but because it was necessary to concentrate efforts in Galilee where the Scourge was at its alarming peak.

Jesus was aware of how greedy certain apostles were: in their thirst for wealth, they would not have hesitated to sell the Divine Unction to the sick in distress. He warned them formally not to do so, but to give it at no charge. To insure their integrity, he ordered them to go off as frugally provided for as they could be, without a haversack where they might hide money. As he had announced this aloud in the midst of the crowd, the apostles would be obliged to behave properly, because they knew that if they yielded to temptation, the villagers would report to Christ what they had done.

Jesus was aware that his Zealot emissaries would not always be welcomed by the population. He was worried about the reactions of Simon the Zealous, who would not have hesitated to 'command fire to come down from the heavens', as he called it, on the houses of those guilty of such

unfriendliness. The Zealot troops had stolen several catapults from their Roman foes and might use them against Jewish villages unwilling to rally to the cause of Christ. Jesus was afraid that Simon the Zealous or somebody else would call on these fanatic partisans to revenge an unpleasant welcome with a bombardment of flaming projectiles. To avoid such madness, which could burn down whole villages, Jesus had to lie by claiming that God in person would deal stringently with all those who did not welcome his servants: it would suffice to point them out to Yahweh by shaking off the dust from their sandaled feet before their houses.

Jesus had the impression that he was sending out wolves in the midst of sheep. However, he said the exact opposite to his apostles and ordered them to behave as harmlessly as doves. Jesus did not know whether Simon the Zealous, who had a killer mentality, would be able to control his ferocious animal instincts. He hoped that the man who claimed to be his full brother, when he was no more than one of his Essene brethren, would keep to his strict instructions.

As he watched the apostles embarking on their mission, seeing John and Simon Peter going off in the last boat, Jesus felt as if he were alone at the tiller of a vessel that was to carry the folk of Israel to a safe haven.

Happily, John would be there once more, as a loyal mate for the ship, and Jesus had detected in Simon Peter the makings of a future helmsman on whom he would be able to rely in opening up to all his esoteric teaching as an Initiate. At a future date that he hoped was close, he wanted to spread among the Jewish people the keys that would open the true Kingdom of Heaven.

However, for the moment the use of parables was unavoidable, so as to be gentle in preparing the consciousnesses of Hebrews whose knowledge and culture were limited. He had to use comments in the form of images so that the Heavenly Truths could make their way into minds narrowed by centuries of lies.

The terms Paradise and Hades, coming from other religions but adopted by the Essenes, were good metaphors for introducing the secrets of humanity. The esoteric teaching contained in those messages would implicitly include the true nature of the Heavenly Father, in generic wordings that many would take literally without understanding their hidden meaning.

That was necessary so that only the wise would understand at first. Then, as minds gradually opened up to the divine, everything would become clear and parables would no longer be taken literally. At that point, Jesus would finally reveal all to those Jewish people.

Deus had entrusted him with that mission. He knew that the secret had been kept for too long and that because of that evil, occult and crazy religions were being born and would be born for a while yet in the world. Rather than disciples going to the wisdom of the Temple of Osiris by becoming Initiates, the Temple's wisdom would from now onwards go out to the disciples and divulge to them the ultimate truth by means of the celestial word that brought salvation.

Jesus also had to spread expressive, clear and concise teachings to change the behavior of the Jews, such as preaching alms-giving, universal love, or forgiveness despite the law of Talion.

Jesus hoped that the Jews would refrain from practicing this new justice too openly before people, which would get them noticed. His teaching was double-edged: boasting about one's good deeds set up harmful links, leading not to humble individuals who could free themselves from the cycle of rebirths, but braggarts with sly longings for glory and fame among their fellow humans, who would in this way bind themselves in the chains of earthly existences.

Instead of gaining the reward of access to the Kingdom of Heaven, they would find themselves reborn in the world of Gaia here below by desires for recognition rooted in the depths of their souls.

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* *

The Pope closed his eyes and leaned his head back for an instant to pick up the thread of his thoughts. When he raised his eyelids and straightened up, he brought his gaze back down to Tom.

He was about to speak when Tom cut him short.

"Once treated with the Uncction, were people definitively cured of ergotism or not?" Tom inquired.

"Yes and no," the Pope replied, after a moment's hesitation. "The experts whom we consulted in secret on the subject could not be categorical on the point. According to them, eating more of the contaminated bread might lead to developing another form of the disease. If one continued to eat it, the ailment would return, but perhaps not always, for those who had been sick sometimes developed antibodies that could block the effects of the ergot."

The Pope smiled sadly, then, thinking of the Possessed cured by Jesus, he added:

“The Unction allowed the L.S.D.-like effects of the ergot to be eliminated, and those afflicted to be cured of their ailments and their madness. Jesus was believed to be driving out the demons that had taken possession of their bodies.”

Struck by a sudden thought, Tom frowned.

“Why didn’t Jesus use the Unction on Peter when he had his flashback on the boat? You know, when Peter went delirious and thought he saw Jesus walking on the water.”

The Pope sighed.

“Jesus preferred the effects of the ergot to fade away by themselves. He did indeed think, as did John, of employing the Unction on Peter that night when they were together in the boat. However, had he made use of the Unction on Peter, his visions would have ceased immediately. In that case, he would have realized that he was the victim of hallucinations and had not been seeing reality. That would have posed a serious problem for Jesus. It was not the same with the Possessed, who believed that Jesus was driving demons out of them and that it was those demons who were responsible for their apocalyptic visions. In Peter’s case it was different, for had he told Judas of his visions, Judas might have had doubts when recalling the events of the transfiguration. Peter and Judas had never in their lives taken drugs, but if they recounted what they had experienced, then eventually perhaps somebody might have told them that such visions were caused by a drug. It was crucial that there should be no doubt in their minds, above all Judas’ mind. That is the reason, furthermore, that Jesus told Judas and Peter, as it is stated in the Bible, to tell no man of those things they had seen on Mount Tabor ...”

Changing the subject, the Pope went on to the topic that he had wished to deal with from the start.

“Ostensibly, Jesus was traveling the land to bring the new justice,” he said. “In fact, he was investigating the origin of the Divine Scourge that was beginning to ravage the country. From the start, he had doubted that it was a natural contamination. Ergot does arise spontaneously when certain climatic conditions coincide. However, had that been the case, the source of the infection of the crops would have been along the edges of the fields, on their boundaries, and the ergot would then have been carried gradually by the wind, rain and insects to the rest of the land. However, the crops were infected right in the center of the fields, not on their edges. Only human sowing could explain that oddity. Jesus finally had proof that it was indeed the hand of man that was responsible for the situation. He already had suspicions of which criminals were doing this, for only the

highest authorities had the knowledge necessary to contaminate the fields and the means to act on such a large scale.”

“So who’d done it?” Tom inquired impatiently.

The Pope let the suspense hang for several seconds.

“Jesus felt sure that it was the Temple ...”

Tom’s eyes widened in surprise.

“So that’s why Jesus didn’t breathe a word about contamination with ergot, is it?”

“Yes, you have understood perfectly. Had Jesus revealed that secret, the civil war which he wished to avoid would have broken out even more bloodily than ever, for the people would have rallied as one man behind the Zealot plan for an insurrection, so as to punish the priests of the Temple for deliberately poisoning the Jews and the Promised Land.”

“But why such craziness?”

The Pope sighed.

“Caiaphas was greedy. He had fallen prey to the demons of power. He wanted even greater power, and did not hesitate to sacrifice lives to insure his personal future. The epidemic of ergotism would create hordes of the Possessed, blind, cripples, who would have poured down to Jerusalem, for the Temple had the capacity to cure them miraculously. Just like Jesus, Caiaphas held the secret of how to manufacture the Assyrian remedy. Caiaphas, however, intended to make a fortune out of these cures and of the mock rituals and prayers that would accompany them, so as to induce people to believe that the hand of God was involved in these supposed miracles. The Temple would become wealthy and Caiaphas hoped to become the greatest High Priest of Israel of all time. The Temple would gain such fame from these miracles that people would come from all round the world to worship there. Caiaphas did not even rule out that thanks to them Israel might win its independence from Rome or that the Emperor himself might embrace the Jewish faith. Nothing was impossible, given the kind of miracles of which the Roman legionaries would have spoken back in their countries. Proselytes would join the ranks of the Jews in growing numbers, to the glory of the Promised Land, and the wealth of the Temple would be immense, just as would be Caiaphas’ own”.

“Except it was Jesus who got the glory for those miracles ...”

“Yes, and that is why Caiaphas never denied Christ’s power to heal, for had he done so publicly, revealing exactly what was going on, he would have been cutting through the branch that supported him and from which he still hoped to make a fortune. Caiaphas limited himself to stating that Jesus was a magician, attempting to cast aspersions on him, but not going

too far into the matter, for good cause ... Caiaphas preferred to discredit him by playing the card of not recognizing him as the Christ.”

The Pope smiled sadly.

“Caiaphas was angry that Jesus had stolen a march on him, winning people’s faith through his miraculous healing, instead of the Temple and Caiaphas himself harvesting the benefits from ergotism.”

“So Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead because of that?” Tom asked.

“He did indeed. In fact, he had three good reasons. Firstly, he wished to hide forever Jesus’ true bloodline, his descent from Herod the Great. The will creating the tetrarchy was still valid, so that Caiaphas feared that the Roman authorities might recognize Jesus as the legitimate heir to the throne of Israel and put him in power, to fulfill the pledge made by Augustus, the previous Emperor of Rome. That secret had been well kept, known only to priests who were members of the Sanhedrin, with a strict prohibition on revealing that Jesus was Herod the Great’s son, for if the Romans laid their hands on Jesus, the throne of Israel could legitimately be restored to him and the Temple, or more exactly the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas at its head, would not have survived the upset. They were all well aware that Jesus would have swept as clean as a new broom once he was on the throne ... The second reason was that Jesus was the cutting edge of the Essene movement and that he embodied their insurrection and sedition. Were he to be eliminated, the Zealot project for an uprising would be finished before it began and the Sanhedrin would be sure to remain in religious power over the country. The third and final reason, as you now know, was the fact that he was curing the Possessed in the Temple’s place. Jesus was a trouble-maker who had to be removed quickly from the scene so that the Temple would flourish and Caiaphas would insure wealth by performing miracles himself.”

Tom frowned.

“But why didn’t Caiaphas do miracles at the same time as Jesus? That would have broken Jesus’ hold over the people, wouldn’t it?”

“In absolute terms, yes. Nonetheless, Caiaphas must have been fearful of Jesus’ reactions, that he might start talking, revealing to the people the whole scheme for miracles. Then Caiaphas’ plan for using ergot would have collapsed.”

“So really Caiaphas even had a fourth cause for wanting to do away with Jesus,” Tom said thoughtfully.

The Pope nodded and the two men fell silent, each lost in thought. Over a minute had gone by before the Pope finally began speaking again.

“The Possessed were a factor intended to make people devoted to the Temple, its priests and their prayers and sacrifices of animals. The sick and their families were supposed to look for help to the Kingdom of God on Earth and make it wealthy. Caiaphas knew that human psychology is like that: when people cannot understand something in a rational way, they turn to the divine to explain the unexplainable ...”

Tom nodded his head.

“Yes, that’s a constant in humans.”

Tom calmly explained that Martial had done a piece of research on the topic. He had given sequences of numbers to complete using logic to bright students at a university. In secret, he had split them into two groups, red and green. The red group received one hundred number sequences, all perfectly capable of being worked out by logic. The green group were given sequences of which only the first thirty made sense, the remainder being totally unsolvable. Urged on by Martial, who claimed that they were all doing the same exercise, the whole lecture theatre set out to finish it within the given time limit. When the guinea pigs in the green group reached the fateful pages which could not be solved, they were overcome with puzzlement, uncertainty and growing anxiety. Their dismay was even greater when they noticed that their neighbors were continuing to complete logical sequences with disconcerting ease. They did not imagine for one moment that they were the victims of a trick. Exasperation was followed by despair or prostration, especially on the part of some ‘greens’ who thought they were cleverer than some of the ‘reds’ who were effortlessly completing the whole exercise. Dismay among the ‘greens’ was total, but in their pride they attempted not to let anything of this show.

At the end of the test, Martial gave all these students a text with several accounts of episodes such as mediums bending teaspoons by the power of thought, ghostly women met by drivers whose cars had broken down and even Jesus walking on water. The great majority of students from the red group, who had managed to solve all the sequences perfectly well using logic, responded that all of this was just an illusion or a trick, trying to find a rational answer based on a proven fact, suggesting, for example, that Jesus might have been able to walk on water because of an exceptionally low tide. For the green group, responses were quite the opposite from the red’s: they credited paranormal forces of darkness or the power of God to explain the unexplainable.

The intellectual dismay that they had undergone was the reason for this.

The Pope sighed.

“The intellectual distress of the Jews at the time of Jesus was boundless. That is not unexpected, for it was inexplicable and traumatic to see women

give birth to still-born babies and hordes of the Possessed emerging from one day to the next. Even animals were affected by the Scourge, for they were given feed contaminated with ergot. Animals are just as susceptible to ergot as humans are, and they develop the same symptoms. The Jews gave their stale bread to their hens to eat and they began laying eggs without shells ...”

The Pope continued, stating that whilst Jesus had presented fasting as a praiseworthy action, that had been under constraint from the Zealots. He did not follow that sort of practice, because all prohibitions of the sort were absurdities contrary to the Law of Equilibrium. However, he had finally advocated it, as he considered fasting as an effective measure for holding back to some extent the tide of ergotism. This health precaution would at least prevent the consumption of contaminated bread by the population.

It was also necessary to avoid infecting animals. Claiming that sacred items should not be profaned, Jesus ordered that dogs or other animals should not be given what was holy: bread. If they ate ergot, dogs could go crazy and turn on their masters, attacking them or even devouring them.

The extent of that madness in animals had become plain to Jesus when he crossed Lake Tiberias and landed in the district of the Gadarenes with a host of disciples. There the man called Legion, a well-to-do man in his thirties from the Decapolis, crazed by ergot, begged him for help. This Possessed man had developed multiple personalities and he asked Jesus to expel the voices that were crowding his head. In his madness, Legion made a bizarre request: to have his demons driven out into the swine that were feeding on the high plateau overlooking the lakeshore. When Jesus laid his hands upon him to make the Divine Unction hidden in the bladders strapped to his forearms flow out, an incident occurred. Disturbed by the disembarkation and extensive presence of men and women, the pigs were seized by panic. Breaking out of their enclosure, they rushed to the cliffs, flung themselves into the void, and crashed into the waters of the lake.

All there connected the miraculous curing of Legion with his request: Jesus had expelled the demons and driven them into the swine. On that day, only Jesus realized that the pigs had been infected with ergot and that their deaths had been caused by their madness.

A question niggled at Tom.

“Didn’t Jesus ever run out of Divine Unction?”

“Yes, he did,” the Pope said. “When Jesus had none left, or if he was faced with treating a disease other than ergotism, so that he could do nothing about it, he took water, blessed it to assign divine power to it and gave it to the sick. Placebo effects are always surprising. Later on, his disciples did the same, but when they could not achieve a cure, they

claimed that the sick lacked faith in Jesus Christ. The water that they blessed survived as a tradition and became holy water.”

Thoughtfully, Tom nodded his head gravely.

“When I think of the situation the Jews were facing then ... it must’ve seemed like the end of the world ...”

The Pope looked at him for a couple of seconds, then stated:

“In its origin, the Zealot expression ‘the end of days’ simply meant the end of the period of war and suffering that would break out because of the armed insurrection. That ‘end of time’ logically would happen when Christ came to his throne in Jerusalem and through the Last Judgment. However, in the popular mind the term finally took on a quite different sense ... in fact, when the Jews saw their hens laying eggs with no shells or members of their families becoming Possessed, the ‘end of days’ gained an esoteric, apocalyptic meaning, as the end of the world, the destruction of the Universe. This error of interpretation gained a new lease of life when the Apocalypse of John, the Book of Revelation, was written and put right at the end of the New Testament, bringing the crazy hope that Christ would return. The text is crammed with symbols and shot through with popular beliefs. Originally, its purpose was to strengthen Christian faith during persecutions by Satan, the Roman foe. In it one finds the symbol of the beast, which implicitly designates Rome, and the return of Christ at the end of days for the Last Judgment is prophesied. You now know for yourself what its initial sense truly was. However, for Christians, that idea of the end of time and the return of Christ to sit in judgment on humanity has always fired the popular imagination ... this belief in the end of the world even brought peaks of craziness in the year 1000, or more recently in 2000. Succeeding generations have been convinced that the document was describing their future, when, of course, it did nothing of the sort.”

The Pope rubbed the cover of the Bible that he had in his hands.

“The end of days has never occurred and will never take place. Jesus has been dead for many a long year and he will never be consecrated in Jerusalem.”

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Once the Twelve had departed on their mission, Jesus at last found himself alone and able to pursue his inquiries into the Divine Scourge far from the sight of Simon the Zealous or the other Essene apostles. Jesus went around Galilee looking for evidence. However, most of the fields had

already been harvested and there were no longer any visible traces of the presence of ergot. Nonetheless, Jesus learnt that some late crops in the region had not yet fallen under the sickle and he made for the places involved. Accompanied by a crowd of devoted disciples, he crossed one of the fields, heading for a nearby village so as to continue his investigations.

He was deeply shocked when he saw that the field in question was contaminated with ergot. He decided to destroy it and ordered his disciples to tear off all the ears of rye. He would have liked to burn the crop, but the unexpected arrival of its owner and two Pharisees dissuaded him. As he left the accursed place, he had one last hope: that nobody would gather up the scattered ears.

For several days he stayed in the area, going from village to village to question the inhabitants discreetly. He finally learnt a vital piece of information: a peasant had seen Pharisees from the Jerusalem Temple cutting some ears of grain. The peasant remembered it all the more because the passing priests had taken ears blackened by the sun and gone back off towards Judea.

Jesus' suspicions of the Temple were being confirmed. From the start, he had been astonished that the Kingdom of God on Earth was not acting to stamp out the Scourge, as this was within its remit. His Greek Master, the cripple, as the gossips of Nazareth had nicknamed him, had given him an account of the epidemic which had hit Assyria several centuries earlier and said that the Chief Priest had the knowledge to cure those poisoned. Yet this knowledge would never be activated, because the Temple was the secret guarantor that such an epidemic would never break out in the Promised Land. A discreet network of Pharisees periodically checked to make sure that the fields were not contaminated. This information was not passed on to the peasants, because knowledge was power and the Temple intended to keep it as its own exclusive privilege.

The inaction of the Temple over the ergot was disturbing. Jesus finally realized that it was a planned and deliberate choice. He grasped that it was probable that Caiaphas and his henchmen had knowingly poisoned the fields. The High Priest must be hoping for crowds of sick to pour into Jerusalem so that he could benefit from the cures that he would orchestrate.

However, this was all supposition and he had to gain formal proof that it was truly Caiaphas behind this horrible machination before he could find an appropriate solution against that madness, without triggering vengeful civil strife.

The peasant's tale was worrying and pointed a little more clearly at the guilty party.

Caiaphas ...

Despite the risks that he would run, Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem and continue his inquiries. Besides, he wanted to go there to stock up on Divine Unction: he would personally buy the ingredients needed for the Assyrian potion. That task normally fell to his friend Lazarus, but he was unwell and could not travel. Jesus would deliver to him the ingredients required for making the Unction.

Lazarus was an old friend of John, who had thought of him when the logistics for cures had to be set up in a hurry. When Lazarus met Jesus in Galilee, a close friendship had immediately sprung up between them. Jesus had been able to trust Lazarus with complete tranquility. The man from Bethany now saw to preparing the remedy and sending it to Jesus in amphorae supposedly containing wine.

Lazarus sent his sisters Martha and Maria Magdalena to deposit these jars in specific secret locations. The young women did not know what the amphorae they carried in their wagon really contained. In fact, they were not interested, doing it for the love of Christ, feeling adoration and immense passion for him ever since he had cured Maria Magdalena of her Possession.

Jesus or John went discreetly at night to pick up the jars and refill from them the bladders hidden in Christ's robe, hiding the remainder among their personal belongings.

For these two reasons, investigating the Scourge and gaining resources to eradicate it, Jesus left for Jerusalem.

On the way, he escaped a murder attempt by a dozen hoodlums attracted by the reward promised by Caiaphas for killing Christ.

My inner strength ...

More than once it had allowed him to pass through the midst of assailants wanting to strike him without their being able to catch him.

As a boy he had learnt the art of combat from his Greek Master: the Temple wanted the protégé trained to be as brave and courageous a warrior as King David had been. In Asia, Jesus had perfected his skills in hand-to-hand fighting among monks who had taught him the art of dodging blows and of using the adversary's own strength to bring him to the ground. The criminals who had entered his room by night to murder him paid the price for their audacity to that inner strength.

Jesus was not asleep.

Dressed entirely in black, his head cover by a hood so that none would recognize him, he had slipped out to collect a jar of Unction hidden in an isolated barn two or three miles from the old building that he and his disciples had found for their rest. On returning along a by-way, he was

surprised to see from a distance men climbing through the window into his room, which was on the ground floor. The blades of their knives glittered in the moonlight. Jesus waited for the last intruder to get into the room then rushed silently and climbed over the windowsill himself. He snuck after the group. They tiptoed towards the shape lying in the bed, thinking it was Christ. To make people believe that he was still there, Jesus had left rolled-up clothing under his blanket.

Jesus flung himself on the hit-men like a frenzied shadow. Shrieks of pain and fear rang out in the face of that invisible angry force that broke limbs like wisps of straw. The hoodlums took to their heels in total disarray. When Christ's disciples, alerted by the shouts, entered the room, they found just three there in a pitiful state, not having been able to flee, as they could not even walk. Jesus was lying peacefully in his bed under the blanket, as if trying to sleep despite the surrounding din. He did not want his disciples to know that he was responsible for unleashing such brutality.

He preached compassion and non-violence, so could not allow his brutal behavior to become known to all, for fear that his merciful teachings would suffer. The action had unfortunately been necessary, because the would-be killers, not finding him in his bed, could have wandered around the building, slitting the throats of disciples at random. Whilst the law of Talion should not continue in force, his rule of turning the other cheek to an aggressor was sometimes not in fact applicable when lives were in danger. Although his preaching had heavenly overtones, they were still just specific recommendations intended to dissuade the Jews from rising against the Roman occupiers who controlled Jerusalem and its Kingdom of God on Earth.

The Temple...

With a host of disciples, Jesus continued on his way to the City of Zion.

There, after a visit to the trading districts to buy and have sent to Lazarus large quantities of the ingredients needed to make Unction, Jesus made for the Temple to bring his inquiry to a close. Wearing a long white cloak with a large hood, he hoped to remain incognito, and so operate undisturbed. However, his disciples who had reached the esplanade before him had not managed to stay discreet and the Pharisees present had realized that they were dealing with partisans of Jesus. When his disciples' surprised looks fixed on their Master, the priests grasped that the stranger with his face hidden by a hood was none other than the supposed Christ.

Jesus had no alternative but to take refuge in the midst of his numerous disciples, unable to get away without being arrested by the Temple guards.

A rumor spread that Christ was present and the crowd on the esplanade drew near.

Despite the dangerous situation that Jesus was in, he knew that as long as he was among that mass of people he would run no risk. Caiaphas would not dare lay hands on him for fear of a popular uprising and consequent Roman intervention: legionaries were watching the growing agitation from the top of the Antonia tower.

Jesus stood and watched the throngs staring at him. They were all waiting for him to speak. This was a chance for Jesus to lead back to the way of truth those sheep that had strayed because of centuries of lying.

So Jesus spoke. On foot in the center of the crowd, who had finally sat, he preached at length. Unable to have his guards seize him, Caiaphas sent the skilled orator Abdias to try to discredit Jesus.

However, the verbal jousting that Abdias engaged in with bitterness continually turned out to Jesus' advantage; his words were like arrows wounding the pride of the Sadducee who was totally incapable of countering these skillfully and subtly fired missiles.

Anger finally rose among Abdias' numerous supporters and the confrontation between the two sides threatened to lead to bloodshed. Stones began to be thrown, so Jesus wisely chose to flee, protected by a hundred or so disciples who helped him get out of the Temple.

The next day he returned.

He was not seeking confrontation, just hoping to confirm the tale he had been told by the peasant about the black ears of corn collected by passing priests. When he came to the entrance to the Temple, surrounded by a crowd of disciples like a praetorian guard, they all managed to go inside without any clashes. His face was now known and Jesus judged that there was no point in trying to remain incognito. He was well aware that it all smelled of a trap, that he was rushing into the lion's den and that if he had been so easily able to enter the Temple this was not out of Caiaphas' goodness of heart. The priests must be planning an ambush to capture him. Jesus was not fooled, but he had no choice.

Still, Caiaphas' room for maneuver was limited and his actions clearly foreseeable. So, Jesus would be able to foil these ploys.

The Pharisee priests had tidied things up: the devout fanatics who had tried to stone Jesus had been forbidden to go onto the esplanade. Caiaphas did not want a repetition of the previous day, when the Roman legionaries had come within an ace of intervening.

Nonetheless, despite formal prohibition by Caiaphas, Abdias renewed his attacks. He was outraged when he heard Jesus described as the son of Joseph or even as the Son of God. Abdias knew the divine child's true bloodline: Jesus was just one of Herod the Great's bastards. For a

moment, he mulled over revealing this crucial information to discredit once for all the false Christ, seen as a descendant of the pure line of King David.

Scandal ...

In Abdias' eyes, Jesus read his thoughts.

The previous day, Abdias had already alluded to this, stating that the Jews were not children born of fornication, having one father: God. Jesus had fully understood the implication about his own birth, but had not riposted. Now the impetuous Abdias was on the brink of letting the cat out of the bag. Jesus did not wish his secret revealed, because how then could he have continued to preach a message of love, mercy and non-violence when he carried within him the mark of the gory beast who had made so much blood flow?

Like father, like son.

He would no longer have been credible to his listeners, who would have turned away from him in instinctive repulsion, rejecting his teachings, sullied by impure blood.

Jesus wanted no scandal of that sort and grumbled at Abdias, trying to dissuade him from talking. The priest went off without revealing anything. Jesus realized that the Temple had nothing to gain from spreading details of that blood link, for fear that the powerful Herodian group, tired with the reign of Antipas, might turn to Christ and support him, as the son of Herod the Great.

As the day came to an end, Jesus dismissed the crowd and his disciples to go alone into the central temple. As he had foreseen, an ambush was laid: guards were hidden behind the pillars of the Court of Women. However, Caiaphas was not there, having ordered Zachariah to supervise the arrest.

Jesus' task was made all the easier for him: Zachariah's gaze was one of the least resistant. When the troop deployed and surrounded its target, Zachariah walked up jubilant with joy. Jesus stared into the eyes of the guard commander, who arrogantly met him in visual jousting. Zachariah drowned it that ocean of hypnosis.

"For yet a little while I am with you, then I go to him who sent me. You will seek me, but not find me. Whither I go, you cannot come ..."

With these intriguing words Jesus seized control of Zachariah's mind. Captive of an enrapturing celestial voice, immersed in the two blue floods of Jesus' eyes, Zachariah quickly fell into an artificial sleep, wandering on an astral plane. For him, time stood still. Not until half an hour later did

his mind brusquely return to his body. He raised his heavy hand to grab Jesus, whose image still lingered in his dilated pupils.

It met empty air. Jesus was long since gone.

Zachariah growled with rage, brandishing his threatening sword, cursing the disappearance of the prisoner. The guards were totally bemused by their commander's behavior and his sudden change of attitude: when Jesus had said that he was leaving and that nobody should stop him, Zachariah had not batted an eyelid, even nodding slightly as if to give his consent. Rather astonished, the guards had stepped aside to allow Jesus to leave.

Night had finally fallen and they had lit torches, not daring to bother Zachariah who seemed lost in thought, still standing in the middle of the Court of Women.

Meanwhile, Jesus had changed from white clothing into black and hastened to seek out evidence relating to the Scourge. As far as he could, he explored the Temple meticulously, peering into empty rooms, opening jars to check on their contents. He hoped to find ergot-infected ears of corn. Sneaking from column to column, he tried to eavesdrop on conversations between the priests there. Despite all his efforts and the risks he took, though, Jesus did not succeed in gathering proofs to corroborate the information that he already had.

Unfortunately, the time came to leave.

Nicodemus ...

Crossing the esplanade, he was on the point of leaving the Temple when Nicodemus caught him by the arm. Despite his poor sight and the surrounding darkness, the elderly Pharisee had recognized Christ by his height, his celestial bearing and his imposing walk with its godlike paces.

The two men had been able to chat simply for quite a while before Jesus was discovered by hostile priests and forced to leave the Temple in haste.

"Pharisees of the Temple came into Galilee and gathered ears of corn ... uh ... blackened by the sun ... do you know of this?" had been Jesus' question.

"Yes," had been Nicodemus' reply, "I was there when the priests brought those black grains before Caiaphas. He asked me to leave, but as I left I turned and beheld him smiling in delight and rubbing his hands in pleasure ..."

With these words that rang out like a verdict, Nicodemus provided the final proof that Jesus lacked: Caiaphas was indeed the instigator of the Evil.

Jesus was now on the horns of a dilemma.

He had always known that he must finally confront this problem. Subconsciously, he had refused to see this inevitable outcome. He had hesitated, taking his time to get formal proof of the involvement of the Temple so as to put off the inevitable moment that had to come finally. Now obliged to open his eyes to the fatal reality, he lamented being unable to get around it or free himself from it.

For the dilemma was unsolvable.

He had thought to counter the Scourge by tirelessly performing cures.

However, that was just a daydream; he might as well try to wipe out an army of hydras.

Nonetheless, what else could he do? No solution could be envisaged. If the secret of the ergot was let out, civil war would break out and Zealot madness would spread throughout Israel, hordes of peasants would burn Jerusalem to the ground and slaughter the responsible authorities. Yet if the secret was kept, the Temple would continue to spread chaos over the Promised Land, hoping to profit richly from the poison.

The equation was insoluble.

Jesus hoped that Deus would work in his favor within the celestial Equilibrium, so that he could come back to Jerusalem and defuse the crisis through a divine intervention.

Yet who was he to oppose the higher will of the firmament?

The designs of God are inscrutable and even Deus probably would be unable to do anything about them ...

Having meddled with the divine, having tried to play at apprentice gods, the Jewish people had to pay the penalty.

Somewhere in the heavens it was already written that the Promised Land would one day become a place of desolation and that its people would inevitably be punished, as guilty accomplices of the celestial crime of King Josiah.

Neither Jesus, nor even Deus, could do anything to change that destiny. Just postpone its date. Whether it was in this century, in a thousand or two thousand years, the Jews would have to answer to the firmament for calling themselves God's chosen people without his agreement. There were crimes with no statute of limitations: the Judge called demiurge patiently waited for the executioner Karma to carry out the sentence on the criminals.

It was just a question of time.

Still, Jesus could not leave his fellows in distress. He had to save them from themselves and from the Scourge.

So, he returned to Galilee.

For many months, aided by the apostles, he strove with might and main to cure the sick in his region, but also in neighboring areas. The pandemic was growing from day to day and Jesus had a hard time of it combating its effects at this level.

Like Noah, he was in command of a vessel that had to survive the chaos, loading aboard with him a whole people to save them from the elements. However, the ship was leaking at every seam and the harder he bailed, the higher the threatening water rose.

Noah's Ark was a myth, rotten, built of the wood of lies. In the end it must be lost with all hands, taking down with it the Promised Land and its 'self-chosen' people.

Jesus still hoped to ward off that tragic fate whose first signs were gathering on the horizon.

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Stroking the cover of the Bible that he was holding, the Pope looked at Tom.

"Are you acquainted with the force of prayer?" he asked. "When you were still a committed Catholic, did you ever experience the fulfillment of your prayers?"

"No, never."

"There is perhaps no great harm in that. Indeed, it may be all to the best, for if we pray too much we disturb the Heavenly Equilibrium."

Tom frowned and the Pope added:

"There is a tribute to be paid to Karma that sees to the balance of good and evil. When I was a newly ordained priest, a customs policeman came to make confession. He was horrified, for he had just obtained the post for which he had so longed. For years he had endlessly and fervently prayed to be posted near to his home town, of which I had just become priest, but when he was finally transferred there, he realized the cost of his prayer ... it was a tiny station near the border with France, with a staff of just three. In fact, because of budget constraints, when the third man retired, it was not intended to replace him. However, the mayor of the place suddenly fell ill and could no longer walk. Being an influential man in the region and personally knowing members of the government, he requested the third post be maintained. That allowed him to be carried by the policemen every evening to his room on the second floor of his house. When the new policeman took up his post, he realized that he owed the continuation of

the position that he had had his eye on to the mayor's illness. Each evening, when he carried the mayor, the policeman was heartbroken to see the man's distress and how his health declined day by day. A few months later, the ailment carried the mayor off in his sleep. The policeman knew for sure that he had won the post by his prayers, and that if the mayor had not fallen ill, the position would have been done away with and he would never have been able to return to his home town ..."

The Pope sighed.

"A price must be paid for each request, like a parent's prayer for a premature baby to survive which involves another baby's death ... in the firmament, there is a Heavenly Equilibrium to be respected and Karma sees to the balance of good and evil. The Heavenly Father intercedes in favor of one prayer or another. Deus perceives all our thoughts, all our wishes, even the most intimate. In his infinite goodness, Deus concedes everybody's requests, knowingly disturbing the balanced forces to make prayers come true, even if a tribute has to be paid to Karma. If you truly wish for something from the depths of your being, from the deepest part of your soul, it will be granted. A group prayer has even more chance of being fulfilled: the more hearts there are united, the more their force is multiplied, the more their prayers are answered."

The Pope stopped for an instant, then continued:

"However, a sacrifice is demanded. Nobody can gain any good thing without some evil having to compensate for it, a debt to be paid to Heavenly Equilibrium. That is why one should not pester Deus except for the most crucial of reasons, and then being ready to pay in return the price of one's arrogance in asking. Those who have evil thoughts should not be surprised: for the evil they desire, a greater evil will be repaid to them. I personally strive to keep my spirit as neutral as possible: I no longer wish nor pray; I weigh every thought carefully ..."

"I suppose Jesus prayed every day for Deus to take a hand on his behalf?" Tom inquired, wanting to cut short these confidences.

The Pope nodded.

"Chaos was general and people thought the end of days, the end of the world was upon them. Jesus also hoped a time was nigh: the time when some happy outcome for the crisis would appear on the horizon. Yet despite his prayers, Deus was unable to halt the chaos. On the contrary, it was spreading daily and a further factor came to worsen the situation ..."

He calmly explained that the Head of the Order was growing impatient. Jesus had been shilly-shallying for months and did not seem to want the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. The Head of the

Order was asking himself questions, beginning to doubt his Christ. Through Simon the Zealous, called to Qumran for the purpose, the Head of the Order sent Jesus an ultimatum: if he did not quickly take possession of his Kingdom, the Head would take matters into his own hands, ordering the Zealot armies to rise against the Roman occupiers and attack Jerusalem.

On returning to Galilee, the Zealous passed on this warning. With Judas present, Jesus listened in silence. He was cornered by reality and had no further options. He could not avoid the destiny of the Christ. If he did not at least obtain possession of the Temple, the civil war that he had hitherto been trying to avoid would begin at last.

At that point, in despair, he decided to send his own ultimatum to Caiaphas. Jesus would threaten the Chief Priest with revealing all about the Divine Scourge and the Temple's involvement in it. If Caiaphas did not hand him the keys to the Temple, Jesus would uncover the whole truth to the people and the Roman authorities.

Obviously, this plan had been going around in Jesus' head for some while, but he had been convinced that Caiaphas would refuse, much preferring the civil war that would have ensued from revealing this information to the people to losing the power which he so cherished. Caiaphas would rather cut through the branch on which he sat than transfer power to Christ's hands. Besides, he must think that his subjection to the Romans guaranteed him impunity for his crimes and probably thought that the foreign troops could crush once and for all any Zealot insurrection that might occur.

However, with nothing left to lose, cornered by Zealot folly, Jesus decided to play a tricky game with Caiaphas. He hoped the priest would back down, fearing condemnation by Rome for having reduced tax income through the chaos of the Scourge. It was his last resort.

Naturally, if Caiaphas refused, Jesus would tell nothing to anybody. He did not want to throw fuel on the fire, stirring up yet more the violence and warfare that would then be inevitable by revealing truths that would have destroyed the entire Promised Land.

His threat was pure bluff.

Before Simon the Zealous, Jesus commissioned Judas to be his emissary to Caiaphas. Jesus lied to the two Essene apostles, claiming that a missive from Yahweh had come down from heaven and Judas was to hand it to Caiaphas. After reading it, the priest would submit to Christ's will. Thus, the Son of God would be able to gain possession of his Father's Kingdom without shedding blood, under the benevolent gaze of the legions of angels that Yahweh would dispatch to Jerusalem.

Jesus designated Judas, because he was deeply loyal, more of a leader's man than the leader himself, so to speak, besides being the only one who could persuade the Head of the Order not to take an irreparable step. Jesus told a tall tale, claiming that the Temple was just a first stage and that the legions of angels would later aid him to restore the Royal House of David and drive their enemies out of the land. Above all, it was essential not to oppose Yahweh's Holy Spirit by starting an armed insurrection against the Romans, at the risk of provoking divine wrath for the Chosen People.

In his game of bluff with Caiaphas, Jesus played a joker.

He very carefully composed a letter to the Chief Priest, threatening to reveal all, insisting how he could not avoid condemnation at Rome for having sunk the country into poverty. Jesus urged him to rally to his cause for the sake of Israel's future, promising him forgiveness and the safeguarding of certain of his prerogatives. Thereafter came the arrangements desired by the Head of the Order relating to protocol and ceremonies, investiture speeches or the festivities that were to last several days.

Jesus was no fool, knowing that Caiaphas could pretend to accept, then have him killed when he came to Jerusalem. Jesus ensured he had a guarantee: he told Caiaphas that any treachery on his part would lead a third party to reveal the Temple's actions to the Emperor in Rome. Hence, Caiaphas had no choice but to accept or refuse Jesus' proposal. Jesus also warned him that the idea of bribing his messenger would in no way provide an escape route, because Christ's death or arrest would immediately bring the Chief Priest's downfall through the divulgence of his secret. Furthermore, the emissary sent to him was absolutely faithful, so that any attempt to corrupt him would end in failure, whilst Jesus might in that case take sanctions penalizing Caiaphas by reducing his prerogatives within the Temple. Caiaphas was simply to reply to Judas that he accepted God's request, handing the keys of his Kingdom to his Son, and submitted to Christ's will.

Moved by crazed hatred, Caiaphas might feign compliance and then try to kill him later, accepting the wrath of Rome and perhaps even his own death when the secret became known. However, if that was his game, Jesus knew a trick worth two of that: he would be surrounded by a people's praetorian guard, so that neither arrow nor poison could reach him, for as long as it took to clean out the Temple.

Then he would bring together the various religious parties, obliging them to come to an understanding and get on together for the good of the country. Once on the throne of the Kingdom of God on Earth, Jesus was

sure that he could calm the ardor of all these protagonists and defuse the Zealot human bomb that threatened to explode.

“You see, Jesus was playing all or nothing with that letter and had thought of everything down to the last detail,” the Pope concluded. “Except fate ...”

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For day after day, Jesus had waited for Judas to return to Galilee.

He had given him strict instructions on how to carry out his mission and knew that Judas would not fail him. First, Judas was to meet the Head of the Order in Qumran. Next, he would go to Jerusalem. Before making for the Temple, he had to hand a further letter to Stephen who was now in the City of Zion.

Stephen ...

He was an old friend. Stephen was also an Initiate of the Temple of Osiris and Jesus had told him from the start what was happening in the Promised Land. Stephen had asked for some of the Assyrian remedy to help the Jewish people. Jesus had provided him with some and from then on Stephen had worked mightily to cure the Possessed. By chance, Simon Peter had crossed his path while on his mission and had wanted to stop him, because that stranger was not one of Christ's disciples. So as not to make waves for Jesus, who was in a tricky situation, Stephen stated that he acted in Christ's name when he accomplished his miraculous cures. Before his apostles, Jesus had then had to back his statement by declaring that those who drove out demons in his name were *de facto* working for him.

Judas was to give to Stephen a letter in which Jesus had noted down the details of his investigations and the formal proof of Caiaphas' guilt. If Jesus were captured or died, Stephen was to continue the combat against the Scourge. If he judged it necessary to halt Caiaphas' folly, as a last resort he should denounce him to the Roman authorities. However, Jesus strongly advised against doing this, because Rome's iron fist would probably tear down the Temple to set an example and the Zealot war would finally break out all over the land, made legitimate in the all Jews' eyes as a revenge on those who would have destroyed Yahweh's dwelling-place.

The messenger.

It was not Judas who arrived that morning, but a man sent by Lazarus' sisters. He was very ill, his state worsening a little more each day. Jesus knew that the disease would not lead to his death, despite all appearances, but in the end would clear up by itself. It was simply a question of time. However, the patient went through more and more worrying stages until the last phase in the symptoms: the body became rigid and chill, the sick person lost consciousness, the eyes rolled up and the heart's beat was so weakened that it seemed to have stopped. The body then went into a longer or shorter period of lethargy, after which the patient finally came out of a sleep akin to death, reviving and awaking.

Jesus had to warn Lazarus' sisters, who knew nothing of this, because their brother had not wanted to disturb them too soon to no purpose and had planned not to tell them these characteristics of his ailment until the last minute. Obviously, though, Lazarus had suddenly gone into the lethargic state without having had time to explain to his sisters. They believed that he was dying and had sent a runner to ask Christ for help.

However, Jesus was not free to go in person to warn Martha and Maria against making the mistake of thinking their brother dead and burying him alive. Jesus had to wait until Judas returned. He could not afford the luxury of thoughtlessly going off to Judea to save his friend himself. For Judas to waste days trying to find him was unthinkable, because the doors to Kingdom of God on Earth risked being slammed shut forever.

Judas alone knew the exact date for Christ's investiture: to smooth matters, and ease the task of preparation, Jesus had requested Caiaphas to set the earliest possible date for his Messianic entry. If he arrived late, even if by only a couple of days, the Chief Priest might change his mind or find some cunning countermeasure. The iron had to be struck while it was hot. It was a matter of speed, taking advantage of the psychological shock of the bluff to attain the throne of the Temple.

To save Lazarus, Jesus found a compromise: the messenger could perfectly well inform Martha and Maria, as he was a sturdy young man with impressively muscular calves, so that he could quickly reach Bethany, walking day and night. The sisters' man had understood how important the mission assigned to him was and hastened to depart.

It was not till two days later that Judas reached Jesus' camp. As Jesus had so hoped, Caiaphas had come over to him and given his word of honor. The date for the investiture was in a week's time and Jesus must now make haste to take the road to Judea.

He gathered his troop together. Among them he had formed six groups comprising twelve faithful disciples each.

The seventy-two ...

The number was a multiple of twelve, having divine properties, as all believed, and would give those disciples mental support in their mission. They would need this to face up to the sufferings of the Jews stricken by the Scourge, the human distress that they would encounter on their way. In the name of Christ, these seventy-two would go in pairs to cure the Possessed by means of the Divine Unction.

To combat the spread of the Evil, which had never stopped increasing at a giddy pace, Jesus had got Lazarus to produce great quantities of Unction. His friend must have worked day and night to make the amounts Christ had asked for, which was doubtless why, exacerbated by fatigue, the end phase of his illness had suddenly hit him. Jesus exhibited to the seventy-two the amphorae full of Unction that had secretly been delivered to him, and they all believed that Christ had made the precious liquid seep out of his hands. Jesus made a final speech to galvanize that army of faithful, about to confront the horrors of ergotism. In the presence of the apostles, so as to tread on nobody's corns, he made the same comments that he had already uttered at the time of the mission of the Twelve. In a good cause, he did not hesitate to lie, telling the seventy-two that they now had divine powers capable of seeing them through all dangers. He also proclaimed a Zealot harangue similar to those he had made in the past to flatter the egos of those present. These were all necessary concessions, because the Kingdom of God was now nigh and passion could not be allowed the upper hand over reason.

Speaking for all to hear, he also requested prayers so that the wish for further reinforcements could be fulfilled. As soon as he was on the throne of the Temple, Jesus would order more workers to go and destroy the crops contaminated with ergot: these workers would be the Pharisees in Caiaphas' pay who had deliberately and carefully infected the fields. Now they would have to set that madness right.

Furthermore, Jesus would send thousands of Temple priests around the country to treat all those sick from the ergot in the name of Christ. With gold from the coffers of the Kingdom of God, Jesus would be able to produce Divine Unction in astronomical quantities and definitively root out the Scourge.

Money was the sinews of war in the struggle against the Scourge and until now it had been sadly lacking. Judas, who was in charge of accounts and the common purse, had been amazed at times at the colossal sums for which Christ asked him. Initially, that cash had been intended for financing the armed insurrection, but Jesus spent it like water to purchase the rare and costly ingredients needful for the Assyrian remedy.

With coffers virtually empty and Judas not daring to accuse his Master, rumors spread that Judas had stolen the money. He was totally loyal to Christ and kept the truth to himself, not blaming the Son of God who was secretly working for greater Israel.

When the seventy-two left, Jesus ordered the apostles and other disciples to make for Judea. Learning this, Simon Peter nearly choked, because he knew that Caiaphas was seeking to kill Jesus, so that entering his stronghold was like going into the lion's den. Jesus did not wish to say that he was going specifically to take possession of the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem. He feared unfortunate initiatives from the Zealots or even Essene apostles carried away by bloodthirsty desires for vengeance who might set in motion a premature Last Judgment so that the campfires along their route became impromptu fires of gehenna in which the Romans and Herodians met by chance along the way were burnt alive. To avoid any bloody excesses, Jesus intended to tell them only on the very morning of his Messianic entry.

Only Judas, Simon the Zealous and John knew the plan.

Jesus told everybody that he was setting out to save his friend Lazarus. Since the previous day, Jesus had had worrying premonitions, feeling certain that something unfortunate had happened to the messenger from Maria and Martha. He had to go himself to aid his friend. He could already envision how the sisters might believe him dead and inter him. He imagined the poor man buried alive, coming round from his coma, crying out in horror of death, but finally encountering it in a few days for lack of food and water.

He had not been able to go to Bethany, in order not to disrupt his future consecration, so as to have everybody believe in him, especially Simon the Zealous, who had personally expressed polite doubts about Jesus' real determination to see the Kingdom of God on Earth soon established.

Now, though, his destiny converged on Judea and he must head there quickly. Followed by a crowd of disciples, Jesus and his apostles took the road southwards. Jesus' forebodings about Lazarus' sisters' messenger proved true. Walking through the night, the young man had fallen into a ravine and lost his memory. Jesus now knew that his friend's fate lay entirely in his hands. He increased the pace, halting only rarely, even traveling for a good part of the night. Those gathered around him were accustomed to long marches and despite their fatigue remained with the Messiah, unwilling to leave him.

On the way, Jesus was not inactive, though, taking a moment to cure the sick he met.

Lepers ...

At the entrance to a village, ten lepers called to him from a distance. Such sick folk never came close to healthy people, because the fear that they aroused meant they would risk being stoned. It was known that leprosy was contagious, so close proximity with lepers was avoided and they were kept carefully out of the way. However, this sudden epidemic of leprosy that was surging up all over the Promised Land was not in fact that disease and was not transmissible: Jesus knew that it was just one more of the numerous forms of the ergot sickness. Consumption of that poison brought necrosis of the hands and arms or even legs. For the great majority of the poisoned, with their faces covered in discolorations and worrying pustules, it was the fingertips that became mummified, turning black and falling off in the end.

There were obvious similarities with leprosy, but it was indeed ergotism that had struck the sick spoken of as lepers. To show everybody that they were not contagious and to offer them some comfort, Jesus affectionately kissed these patients before giving them the Divine Unction. However, no disciple dared to do the same, for Christ was God's anointed and no earthly ill could affect him. They all waited for the Unction to take effect and cure them before risking any direct contact with those miraculously healed.

If the Assyrian remedy was applied before the terminal phase of necrosis of the limbs, the supposed lepers emerged unscathed, seeing the unhealthy discoloration of their skin disappear and their members become once more sensitive to touch. They were cleansed and could return to a normal life.

The rumors of such miraculous purifications were such that it was claimed that lepers' fingers grew back, even though this was not true at all. Other gossip affirmed that as soon as Christ laid on his hands, lepers were cleansed. In fact, several hours, indeed sometimes several days, were needed for the skin to recover a fully healthy appearance.

From a distance, Jesus looked at those ten lepers who sought his aid. An idea crossed his mind: he would definitely cure them, but in exchange they would have to go and show themselves in the Temple. They would precede Christ so that the news of his coming would spread all through the City of Zion. By telling of their extraordinary cure, these lepers would set afire the minds of Jerusalem's inhabitants and create a climate favorable to Christ. In this way, Jesus intended to prepare the ground for his future consecration with popular enthusiasm. Without laying his hands on them, he ordered the lepers to go immediately to the Temple. Disconcerted, the ten patients did as they were told. They had hoped to be cured by Christ, but he had not even deigned to touch them. He had simply given them a wineskin with water to drink. However, after several hours of walking, the

lepers were cleansed: unbeknownst to them, they had all been drinking a little Unction diluted in the water. Amazed, they hastened on to announce the prodigious miracle to the Jews of Zion and tell them they were forerunners of Christ's arrival. Of the ten, one single man chose to turn back and go to his home in Samaria. He met Jesus on the way and fell at his feet to thank him. Jesus was worried to see this man coming back, wondering if his companions also had turned away from the route to Jerusalem. However, the Samaritan was the only one who had disobeyed Christ's instructions. He did not blame him for it and spoke soothingly to him so as not to make him feel guilty.

Lazarus...

After several days of wearisome forced marching, the day before his consecration, Jesus finally reached the township of Bethany. As he had feared, he learnt that Lazarus had been buried. Young Martha went to meet Christ. Seeing her sadness, he spoke reassuring heavenly words, then asked her to get her elder sister. Martha returned with Maria Magdalena who flung herself at his feet, weeping. The sorrow of the woman he loved was catching and Jesus could not hold back his tears.

Inwardly he hoped that he was not too late, because four days had already elapsed since the burial. Jesus was led to the tomb, entry to which was blocked by a stone. He picked out some sturdy lads from among the immense crowd following him and told them to take away the stone. As soon as the entrance was clear, Jesus looked into the tomb.

Completely swathed in shrouding bands, Lazarus was sitting with his face raised towards the light that he could just make out through the cloth covering his head. Jesus called on him to come out and Lazarus stood up with difficulty. Before the dumbfounded spectators, Jesus helped the miraculously cured man up out of the ground. Like Horus with El-Azar, Jesus had the impression he was reviving a mummy. Martha, Maria and most of the crowd were crying with joy, thanking God for the miracle that He had just granted to his Son.

Jesus could not tell them the truth. He had been too steeped in lying for too long. He was trapped in his play-acting and could not come down off his pedestal, for the character of Son of God that he was playing allowed him to keep Zealot folly under his control. He had no alternative, it was for the good of these people. Besides, this resurrection had come at the ideal moment: the enthusiasm that it would arouse would be unprecedented. The next day, when he was consecrated, a human tide would carry him forward, protecting and covering him all the way to the Temple. In that way, nothing unfortunate could happen to him. Jesus took

Lazarus to one side and explained the situation to him. His friend swore to tell nobody what had really occurred.

At dawn, as Jesus had hoped, news of the resurrection and Christ's arrival had spread as far as Jerusalem. When he left the village of Bethany where had spent the night, thousands of men and women were waiting there for him. He told them that the Kingdom of God on Earth was at last going to come and that the hour of its glorious arrival was drawing near.

The Head of the Order had insisted on Jesus entering the City of Zion on a young donkey. In this way the event would correspond precisely with the writings of an ancient prophet who foretold a royal Messiah, stating that the humble King of the Jews would save Jerusalem riding the foal of a she-donkey. The previous day, Simon the Zealous had gone to a village over against Jerusalem and bought such a beast. He had asked the seller, who owned a white house, to leave the animal tied up outside his home so that Christ or one of his disciples could come and fetch it.

In the presence of the Zealots, Jesus adopted the feigned role of Liberator. Calling on heaven as his witness, he took advantage of a roll of thunder in the distance to harangue the crowd.

"That voice rumbling in the heavens is not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of this world, now will Satan be cast out. And I, once raised up from this Earth, shall draw all the Righteous to me and gather them around me."

Jesus had to convince them that he would judge the Temple Pharisees and condemn them for their collaboration with the Roman foe. Once elevated to the throne of the Kingdom of God on Earth, Christ would gather around him the Zealots and the Righteous, those Jews who had supported the Essene Christ and his assembly of Twelve Apostles. Then, helped by legions of angels, he would re-establish royalty and sovereignty, driving out the foreign occupiers.

All that was what he had given the Head of the Order to understand, via Judas. However, Jesus had lied. Once in control of the Temple, he would go no further. He would make the religious parties work together for the future of the nation. The Head of the Order would have to content himself with the prestigious Temple, soothing his rancor at having been so long excluded from the priesthood, and the smoldering threat of civil war would soon be no more than a distant memory.

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As if lost in thought, the Pope muttered to himself:

“Christ’s Messianic entry ...”

He opened the Bible that he was holding and consulted the Gospel of John relating to the matter. His eyes looked for one particular paragraph. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it: and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal ...”

“What does that mean?” Tom inquired.

“It is a parable of rebirths. Here it signifies that death is not a bad fate or misfortune. However, if one loves this present life too much, one binds oneself to the cycle of rebirths through the desire to quench that thirst for life, whilst the true purpose of existence is to hate earthly life so as to be chained to it no longer and shine out as an angel in heaven.”

The Pope fell silent for a moment before continuing:

“When he entered Jerusalem, Jesus recounted this celestial parable to the people who were following him. As soon as he was on his throne, he wanted to begin telling them the real celestial laws that rule the heavens. However, he never got the chance ...”

The Pope went on to say that Jesus went into the Temple on a wave of popular fervor. The Head of the Order was already awaiting him there. Jesus knew what the old man wanted: he wished to clean the place up quickly, driving out those who sullied the Kingdom of God. If Jesus did not give him a taste of what he had promised, the Head might have doubts and order the Zealot troops to attack Jerusalem. The Head absolutely had to believe that Jesus would work docilely for him. Once officially established on the Temple throne, Jesus’ situation would change entirely and he would be able to work differently. However, for the moment Jesus must avoid rubbing him up the wrong way, so had to demonstrate a Zealot intransigence that would flatter the old man’s ego.

So Jesus made a whip out of cords and expelled all the buyers and sellers from the esplanade. He violently overturned the money-changers’ tables. He broke open the animal pens and drove away the oxen and sheep.

Caiaphas had given strict orders not to get in Christ’s way, but a young novice recently admitted to the Temple, not knowing Jesus, was astonished by his colleagues’ passivity. The adolescent boldly went up to Jesus and asked him by what right he was acting thus.

The Pope halted his narration. Looking back into the Bible, he read aloud:

“Destroy this temple and in three days I shall raise it up again.”

He raised his head and looked into Tom’s eyes.

“That is what Jesus replied in the presence of the Head of the Order,” the Pope declared. “When he speaks of destroying the sanctuary, he is simply referring to the envisaged sweeping aside of the Sanhedrin and its religious authorities. His consecration festivities were intended to last three days. On the third day he would have put a new priesthood in place ...”

Tom nodded silently and the Pope continued his account.

A Pharisee came to the novice’s rescue and challenged Jesus, asking him for whom he was working. Jesus did not wish to answer that he was acting on behalf of the Zealots or Essenes, so as to maintain his independence from them later. However, the Head of the Order was there and he could not put him out of the picture by not showing him some sign of allegiance. So Jesus cleverly brought in John the Baptist, glorifying him before God to elude the question. The Head appreciated that posthumous homage.

Caiaphas sent the Sadducee Abdias to try to worm compromising statements out of Jesus, calls for sedition against the Roman occupiers. Caiaphas already had it in mind to get Jesus sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate and wanted tangible evidence, genuine eye-witnesses able to report Jesus’ words as the cutting edge of the Zealot movement egging the Jewish people into armed struggle.

The Pope sighed.

“Jesus should have realized that Abdias was not acting out of vengeance, but at Caiaphas’ orders. He should have understood that everything had been prepared down to the smallest detail. Then Jesus would have grasped that Caiaphas had gone back on the word he had given and was preparing to have him sentenced by Pilate. Naturally, Jesus did understand that Abdias was setting a trap for him when he asked if it was permissible to pay taxes to Caesar. However, he believed that Abdias was going beyond Caiaphas’ instructions out of petty revenge. As Jesus saw it, everything was already over, his consecration was under way and would become reality in a few hours, so nothing could now change that destiny. Especially not personal action by Abdias.”

The Pope sighed again.

“Jesus used to say that there was nobody blinder than those who did not want to see. That was his case that day. He was sure that his bluff had worked perfectly and Caiaphas had no choice but to rally to him. He was grievously mistaken ...”

The Pope continued his account: Abdias's trap was not as crude as it seemed and apparently allowed only two ways out: either Jesus supported the foe and lost his Zealot backing, or he supported the Zealots and risked punishment for his statements. Abdias was certain that Jesus would not betray his Zealot brethren and would condemn himself publicly.

Not wanting to run counter to Zealot precepts which urged people not to pay taxes, Jesus replied that what was Caesar's should be rendered to Caesar, what was God's to God. With this maxim, which has become famous, he avoided the trap of a penalty from the Romans and handled the Head of the Order's susceptibilities gently. The Head appreciated this riposte, because he knew that the final combat with the enemy was not yet due to start and that an aggressive offensive had to wait. In this, the Head of the Order was obeying Christ. He had told the Head that he would take possession of the Temple without any combat being needed, without Roman intervention. Yahweh would see to it. Jesus had impressed upon him that he should in no way provoke the foe, so as not to risk thwarting the plans of God his Father.

All day long, Jesus waited for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to come and prostrate themselves at his feet.

Under the Head of the Order's watchful eye, he filled in the time by pronouncing celestial but also pro-Zealot speeches criticizing the Pharisees. The hours went by without any delegation from the Temple appearing. The annals of the Kingdom of God on Earth should have recorded the detailed circumstances under which Yahweh consecrated his Son by handing him the keys of his terrestrial dwelling.

However, nothing happened.

Caiaphas sent Jesus a young messenger: the Chief Priest was apologetic, the envisioned consecration would not take place that day, because it had taken longer than anticipated to organize the ceremonial protocol. Caiaphas promised that the next day all would be ready to welcome Christ into his Father's dwelling. Jesus believed this lie, engrossed in his desire to defeat Evil. He ordered the crowd to disperse and gave a secret signal to the Head of the Order to indicate that he would send Simon the Zealous to keep him updated about the situation.

Jesus gathered his apostles and fixed a rendezvous for that evening. Then he went off to the Mount of Olives with just John and Simon Peter and their respective brothers. Jesus needed to think over what had just occurred. He was worried about Jerusalem. If his consecration did not occur as planned on the following day, if the Temple did not recognize him as the Messiah, the Head of the Order would order Zealot troops to attack the city and take it by force. A crazy, bloody civil war would break out,

the Roman legions would put down the rebellions in a whirlwind of killing and nothing would be left of Jerusalem.

Jesus pushed that vision out of his mind. That could not happen. Caiaphas had no alternative but to accede to his request. Jesus was master of the game, Caiaphas just a docile pawn. At this point Jesus judged that he no longer needed a close guard or a host of disciples to protect him. For fear of being sentenced by the Roman authorities for his involvement in the Divine Scourge, Caiaphas would keep his promise.

Jesus was sure of that now.

The Head of the Order had planned a meeting for that evening, at a place kept secret until the last moment. He told Simon the Zealous where, and he passed it on to the other apostles. For his part, Jesus sent John and Simon Peter on to meet a man, ostensibly a water-carrier, with a pitcher who was to lead them to the house. The two apostles would lay out the food that had been delivered there. All round a large rectangular table we set richly decorated chairs symbolizing a promise for the near future.

Thirteen thrones and thirteen chalices.

“It was the Head of the Order who had ordered that meeting,” the Pope said. “If things had run smoothly, Jesus’ installation would already have happened. The Head wanted to get Christ and the Assembly of Twelve together for secret discussions about the country’s future. He enjoyed the trappings of occult ceremonies and had also organized that feast in honor of Christ to celebrate his accession to the Kingdom of God. However, the fact that Jesus had not been consecrated dissuaded him from participating. He made his excuses at the last minute ...”

The Pope sighed.

“Having the document that Jesus wrote before dying and comparing it with the Gospels, we were able to reconstruct the true chronology of what happened at the time ... the events that led him to the cross ...”

The Pope raised his eyes to the large, solid wood crucifix and Tom instinctively followed his gaze.

*
* *

Jesus rose from the table.

“With great desire I wished to eat this Passover meal with you before I meet my destiny,” said he “for I say to you that I shall never again eat of it until my fate is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.”

The apostles nodded in silence. Jesus looked at the Twelve. They seemed happy for Christ to ascend to his glorious throne the next day.

He took the bread that lay before him and raised it above his head, then broke it.

“Take this and eat, this is my body.”

Imprinted with powerful symbolism, communion in bread signified for the Initiated of the Temple of Osiris the knowledge of the Master and the future promise to reveal its esoteric secrets to his disciples.

Picking up the gold chalice full of wine, he gave thanks and handed it to Judas Sicariot who was sitting opposite him.

“Take this and drink of it, all of you,” said he in a strange tone. “This is my blood, the new testament in my blood, which will be shed for you and for a multitude for the remission of their sins.”

At the higher degree, communion in wine, the blood of the vine infused by the sun, indicated the sharing of heavenly gifts, participation in the spiritual mysteries and in divine knowledge. As Jesus spoke here, however, its connotation was totally different.

Jesus gazed hard at Judas to see his reaction to these words.

In secret, the Head of the Order had ordered that the alliance between Christ and the Assembly of Twelve should be sealed in the blood of those they would supplant.

During their meeting at Qumran, Judas Sicariot had had to promise to the Head that as soon as Christ was instated, the heads of the highest in the Sanhedrin would fall, washing away their sins with blood. That afternoon, Simon the Zealous had also been told of the plan by the Head of the Order, passing on word to the other Essene apostles.

That spilt blood would seal before God the alliance between his Son and the Twelve ...

Handing him his chalice, Jesus hoped to discover Judas’ opinion on the subject by using a sentence with a hidden implication.

Was he personally involved in that crazy choice or was it only the Head of the Order’s will? Jesus wondered if he could count on Judas’ support to dissuade the Head from applying that terrible sentence.

However, despite Jesus’ direct allusion, Judas’ face showed no sign.

Jesus sighed inwardly. There was no solution but to impose a categorical veto on that planned madness, hoping that it would not cause other problems and that all would obey him docilely.

The apostles passed the cup from one to another, all sipping from it.

“I shall not again drink of the fruit of the vine,” added Jesus, “until the

Kingdom of God has come.”

He was longing for day finally to rise and bring his installation in the Temple. Everything would be different then: from the throne he would more easily be able to impose his will on the various people concerned, especially the Head of the Order.

He was lost in his thoughts when a dispute broke out among the apostles.

As the Kingdom of God on Earth became more real, James wanted a privileged place in it.

Taking advantage of a secret link between his brother and Christ, James hoped to profit by it. He had become a money-grubber and Jesus sometimes was sorry to have chosen him as an apostle. John himself was also surprised at this side of his brother's character: craze for power had gone to his head and changed his formerly humble nature. However, John had assured Jesus that James would return to being what he had always been when he understood that the reward of governing the tribes of Israel promised to the apostles would never materialize. When the illusion of worldly riches evaporated, James' soul would gain the upper hand again. Beside Christ, in the Kingdom of God on Earth, James would be able to become an Initiate. John was sure of it.

Calming the others' indignation, Jesus told them that the privilege of sitting at his right or left hand was not his to grant. Only God could do that. The Essene apostles understood his implication: the Head of the Order had long since prepared and destined Judas Sicariot and the Zealous to work in the highest positions.

Jesus tried to calm the greed of some by speaking of humility. Several apostles were indignant at this. Feeling their tension, Jesus had to calm them by promising them yet again that they would each have a throne and power over the Promised Land.

It was a necessary lie before his consecration. Later, reality would overtake such promises.

Jesus wanted to make them understand what he hoped of them in the future. He had to handle their greedy minds carefully, showing them what humility truly was.

He left the table, put his outer robe on a chair and picked up a cloth, which he tied around his waist. At that moment, one of Christ's disciples came into the room. Somewhat surprised to see the Master in this garb, the man in his twenties with a long black beard bowed reverentially. He said that he had not been able to wait to bring him good news. The seventy-two disciples that Christ had sent to Galilee were accomplishing their mission

with success, curing the Possessed wherever they went.

Jesus listened absent-mindedly to the messenger.

One thing disturbed him: how could somebody coming from outside the town have found him so rapidly? This house was off the beaten track and few people knew he was there. If the messenger had been able to reach it so quickly, even guided by close disciples, other cunning folk with worse intentions might do the same. Nonetheless, he knew that for the moment he was at no risk, sheltered by the powerful protector who stood surety for the Temple: Caiaphas. Logically, he would take care that nothing happened to Christ. Unconsciously, his look shifted to Levi. A strange sensation came over him then and a confused idea wormed its way into his head.

The traitor ...

Jesus knew that Levi the ex-tax-collector was a traitor in the pay of his master, Herod Antipas. This was just a supposition, but had been confirmed by his look when directly accused before other apostles. He had had doubts because of some strange behavior by Levi and of surprising him in discussion with unknown messengers.

Rather than eject him, only for him to be replaced by another spy of Antipas impossible to detect, Jesus had preferred to keep him close, watching him closely and thus foiling his hidden actions.

Jesus now wondered if he had committed an error in leaving the wolf in the sheepfold. He had a premonition of imminent danger. Had Levi had time to warn Antipas of his presence there? Would an armed troop appear and seize him? Antipas wished his death, probably knowing they shared a father and that this was a threat to his power: Herodians tired of his reign might rally round Christ if they knew his true bloodline.

Jesus showed no sign of his worry.

Showing what the phrase ‘being humble’ meant to him, he set about washing the Twelve’s feet, despite Simon Peter’s protests. When he finished, he spoke:

“He whose body has been washed need not wash anything but his feet to be fully clean. You are clean, but not all ...”

He stared hard at Levi, trying to spot a glimpse of the plot in his eyes. However, all innocence, Levi did not even blink. Jesus thoughtfully donned his outer robe. Sitting on his chair, he addressed them all:

“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord and you say well, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, so that you should do as I have done for you. Truly

I say to you, the servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. Knowing these things, happy shall you be if you do them.”

Jesus remained silent for a moment before continuing:

“It is not of all of you that I speak. I know all whom I have chosen, but it seems that the Scriptures will be fulfilled: ‘mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me’.”

Jesus tried to unbalance Levi’s Olympian calm by quoting a psalm of David known to all the Jews: one recounting betrayal.

However, Levi showed no reaction, as if in no way involved.

Could Jesus be mistaken? Could his premonition of imminent danger be wrong? However, Jesus trusted his sixth sense which had never failed him hitherto.

“This I tell you now, before it comes,” insisted Jesus, “so that when it does come to pass you will sadly realize that I am indeed the Son of God.”

By stressing a divine bloodline, Jesus lied to frighten him, to make him feel guilty and suffer remorse for betraying the Son of God, thus attracting the ire of Yahweh.

However, Levi must have had no belief in those tall tales and still did not react. Jesus decided on a direct frontal attack.

“Truly I say to you that one of you will betray me.”

It was like a thunderbolt. The disciples looked at one another, not knowing whom he was mentioning. Grimaces of uncertainty and mistrust distorted their tense faces. Simon the Zealous discretely drew the dagger that was always at his side, ready to leap on the wretch that Christ would surely name.

Jesus was disconcerted by Levi’s nonchalance, as he mastered his emotions perfectly, feigning astonishment. Jesus fell speechless and a heavy silence hovered over the whole room.

What was the strange feeling that had come over him? Was he really in danger there or was it just his imagination?

At the end of the table, Simon Peter signed to John who was sitting next to Christ. With an insistent gaze, Simon Peter gave him to understand he should ask the Master whom he had just been mentioning.

John leant slightly forward and whispered in Jesus’ ear. He turned his face towards Simon Peter. After a few seconds’ hesitation, Jesus took a piece of bread which he dipped in the sauce of the plate before him. Then he glanced at Simon Peter again to let him know with a gesture of his chin that he was going to pick out the traitor by giving him the bread. Jesus

leant across the table.

Seeing the arm coming his way, Judas Sicariot, who was sitting beside Levi, instinctively stretched out his hand and took the bread. Somewhat surprised, he brought it to his mouth, chewed it and swallowed it. He stood up, walked round the table to Jesus and muttered a few words to him.

They were short of wine and Judas was offering to go and buy more.

“What you must do, do quickly,” responded Jesus absent-mindedly.

Judas left rapidly.

A few minutes went by during which Jesus remained vacant-eyed and disturbed. His hands became damp and his heart beat wildly. His mind was ablaze. His instincts whispered to him that he should not stay in that house. He was in danger.

Jesus leapt to his feet. He told them all to go and wait for him outside. The apostles did so, apart from Simon Peter who came towards him.

With a single glance, Jesus saw that Simon Peter had felt danger, too.

“When I sent you forth without purse, or haversack, or sandals, did you lack anything?” inquired Jesus.

“Nothing.”

“Now let him who has a purse take it and his haversack and let him who has no sword sell his mantle to buy one, for the hour of the decisive struggle is at hand ...”

“Lord, I saw two swords below.”

“Two swords? It is enough ...”

Jesus and Simon Peter went down and took up the weapons which they each slipped under their robes.

Outside, James and Thomas, slightly tipsy from the wine that they had somewhat overindulged in to celebrate the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, together had begun to sing a hymn to the glory of Christ. He quieted them and they all plunged into the dark streets of the city of Zion. As if he were pursued by a ghost, Jesus frequently turned round and took care that the eleven apostles did not scatter. They went along a steep path that led to the city ramparts, but found themselves confronted with gates that were locked and guarded by a handful of legionaries. However, a few coins were as good as a key in opening them.

They left the town and crossed the Kedron Valley. They walked quickly and made for the Mount of Olives. Under the scant light of a moon veiled by clouds, the group plowed on rapidly through the darkness. Whatever the danger was, Simon Peter could see clearly that Jesus wanted to put the greatest possible distance between them and the threat. He

conveyed his worries to the Master.

“All of you are at risk of perishing this very night, because of me,” said Jesus, turning round.

Then as if speaking to himself, he recited a Jewish verse which came into his mind as if it were an evil omen.

“I will smite the shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad ...”

Once again he spoke to Simon Peter.

“After I return here, I shall go before you into Galilee.”

If they were tracked, they would all have to hide separately outside Jerusalem. Then Jesus would sneak back into the city and join a caravan, preceding them on the way to Galilee. It was better for him to flee to his native land to take stock of the situation, and for the apostles to catch up with him there. He secretly hoped that if he were arrested by Antipas’ men, Caiaphas would be able to exert pressure to have him freed.

Simon Peter shook his head.

“Though all men fail you, yet I shall never fail you.”

He was ready to fight to the end to save the Son of God. Seeing his faith driving him to total self-sacrifice, Jesus tried to preserve his loyal disciple from an avoidable death.

“Simon Peter, truly I say to you, this very night, before the rooster crows at dawn, you will deny me. Do you understand?”

Simon Peter shook his head once more.

“Though I need die with you, yet I shall not deny you.”

All the other apostles said the same. Simon the Zealous was also ready to defend his Master to the death. Caressing the hilt of his dagger, he followed Jesus like his shadow, constantly looking from side to side, his lively eyes darting over any spot in the least bit suspect. He was also mulling over the nature of the threat that Christ had noted and frequently glanced at the other ten apostles. Had Jesus not said that one of their group was a traitor? Simon the Zealous would have to be on his guard.

The troop arrived at Gethsemane, a garden situated on the Mount of Olives. An olive grove and an oil press stood there.

“Sit here while I go and pray yonder,” ordered Jesus, resting his hand on Simon the Zealous’ shoulder.

With slight movements of his eyes and chin, combined with the pressure of his fingers, Jesus indicated to him that nobody should leave. The Zealous grasped Christ’s meaning and gave a barely perceptible nod of his head. Jesus was now reassured about Levi: the Zealous would not let him

leave. The traitor could not go and fetch Antipas' men.

However, was it perhaps too late? Was an armed band already surrounding the house that they had left? Would they trace him to here?

Jesus could go nowhere else. This was a secret rallying point in case of an emergency. Judas was sure to come here and join them. Judas must already have gone back to the house. He would probably have seen an armed troop bursting into it. If that was so, he would know what to do and would go and get Zealot reinforcements from the Head of the Order before coming here.

Jesus had no choice but to wait for him patiently. Besides, dashing off at random was the best way to fall into the traps that were slyly waiting in the heart of the darkness.

Jesus called Simon Peter, John and his brother to walk with him. They strolled off some fifty yards.

"My soul is exceedingly sorrowful," confided Jesus to the trio looking towards the other apostles. "Stay here and watch over me."

Distress and melancholy overwhelmed Jesus. He wandered off a dozen paces and fell to his knees. He started praying fervently that the fatal hour might pass far from him.

He knew that by prayer he could invoke the celestial powers of Deus to push aside the cup of destiny offered to him: the cup of his perdition.

He could feel it. He was sure now. His instinct whispered it to him.

That fateful cup was already being pressed upon him and nothing seemed able to prevent destiny from bearing it to his lips.

"Heavenly Father, for you all things are possible!" said he under his breath. "Let this cup pass from me, if it is possible ..."

The cup of destiny ...

"Nevertheless, not as I wish, but as you wish! If such is your will ..."

He hoped that the fatal dawn just emerging on the horizon would never become day and that Deus would intercede in his favor in the heavenly equilibrium.

For a long while he invoked the heavenly powers. He prayed with such intensity that his sweat turned into big drops of blood that fell to the soil. In very great anxiety, the body could perspire blood instead of sweat. He knew that. It was a phenomenon comparable to the sudden whitening of the hair after a moment of intense stress. For an instant, he wondered if his hair had gone white as well. However, he drove that thought out of his mind.

He stood up groggily and stumbled to the trio.

He found them asleep on the ground all three.

“Simon Peter, are you asleep?”

He shook the apostle.

“What, could you not watch with me one single hour?”

He woke up John and his brother.

“Watch and pray, so that you do not enter into temptation to sleep once more. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Thick clouds hid the moon with their gloomy mass. Jesus looked towards the other eight apostles. The darkness was too profound to be able to make out anything whatsoever. Nonetheless, Jesus knew that Simon the Zealous was watching to see that Levi did not run away.

Yet Jesus vaguely felt danger drawing close.

Once more, he went off to one side to pray and implored Deus to favor his fortune.

“Heavenly Father,” begged Jesus, “if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, then let your will be done ...”

He remained prostrate for a quarter of an hour before getting up again. For the second time he found the trio asleep. He sighed and went off murmuring:

“If this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it...”

He stopped brusquely and turned.

It was strange that they had fallen asleep once more at such a moment, all the same. Jesus looked in the direction of the other disciples. The veil of clouds parted slightly and let through a few pale moonbeams. Jesus then saw seven recumbent figures.

The wine ...

There could be no doubt that Levi had mixed into it plants with soporific virtues. Jesus had barely taken any, but the others had drunk deep, to the point of becoming tipsy. Jesus mechanically counted the figures lying there.

Seven...

Jesus recalled that Levi had had just a few sips of wine, claiming that he had an upset stomach.

Under the impact of this realization, a section of his mind seemed to break down, the sword of Damocles to fall, and his thoughts went into slow motion. How long ago had Levi left them? For sure, a long enough time to allow him to surround the access points to this place.

Fatalistically and with no clear aim, Jesus muttered to the trio that they could sleep on, for now nothing could save him from his destiny.

As if to prove him right, the sound of armed troops rang out through the night. Torches giving off a thousand sparks pushed back the darkness.

Pulling himself together, Jesus shook Simon Peter and John.

“Rise up now! Let us be going! He that will betray me is at hand!”

The racket raised by the troops and the crash of feet in step striking the ground also woke up the other apostles. Simon the Zealous leapt to his feet and rushed towards Christ. Coming only half awake out of a deep sleep, terrified at the sight of armed men who looked like demons emerging from the bowels of the earth, Jesus’ other disciples ran off shouting.

The moon broke through the veil of clouds and cast its pale light on the garden. Then Judas’ tall figure stood out ahead of the troops. Simon the Zealous stopped short in his mad career. Seeing face of his Essene brother, he stood perplexed, his arms dropping to his side.

Why was Judas there with an armed troop? What was happening? Judas always acted in accordance with instructions from Christ or the Head of the Order. With a discreet secret sign of his fingers, Judas ordered him to leave the place quickly.

After a moment’s hesitation, sheathing his dagger, the Zealous obeyed the instruction and made off into the night.

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The surprise made Tom’s eyes open wide.

“So, when Jesus refers to the traitor, in the Bible, he really means Levi?”

The Pope nodded.

“Yes, and Jesus was mistaken about that traitor until the last moment, when he realized that his premonition concerned Judas.”

“But Levi was really a traitor?”

“Oh yes, undeniably: Jesus made no mistake about him. However, Levi had no intention of having Jesus arrested, quite the contrary ... Levi drank very little of the drugged wine and awoke before the other apostles. He immediately grasped the situation and hastened to warn his master.”

Tom frowned.

“But what happened with Judas? Why his betrayal?”

The Pope sighed.

“By unfortunate chance, Judas opened the letter supposed to have come from God, and the one addressed to Stephen, probably a short while after he met the Head of the Order at Qumran, when he was heading for Jerusalem. It must have been a great shock for him and he went directly to the Temple to find Caiaphas ...”

The Pope continued by saying that when confronted by Judas, the Chief Priest had laid his cards on the table. Realizing that he could bring that lieutenant of Christ over to his side, Caiaphas explained to him what the disease of ergotism was and how there was a foreign remedy to cure it. Judas was dumbfounded and understood how Jesus performed his miracles. When Caiaphas spoke to him of the effects of certain extracts of ergot, Judas realized that the transfiguration had been no more than a stage illusion by which he had been gulled.

Caiaphas then laid out to him the project that he had for the Kingdom of God and Israel's future: through the miracles that would be lavishly performed in the Temple, he hoped to gather behind him a nation of devout Jews and even gain independence from the Roman Emperor for the Promised Land. Judas let Caiaphas convince him that the whole world would be at their feet if Jesus died. For the good of the nation, the Essene Christ had to perish.

The world views of Pharisees and Essenes were not so different one from the other. The Zealot movement had been born during the war of the Maccabees against the Greeks of Syria and in its origins was a branch of the Pharisee movement. Only its radicalism and religious fanaticism distinguished it from Pharisaism.

Judas must have been weary of struggling all his life to see the Kingdom of God shine out some day. Now he felt in himself a new divine mission to accomplish for the good of all Jews. He realized that if he continued to serve the Head of the Order and his false Christ, it would not lead to a radiant Promised Land but a country ruined by fratricidal wars. Besides, above all, Judas did not want to see the Kingdom led by an absolute usurper of the throne who had lied to the people by faking miraculous cures so as to be worshipped by all, a crook who was not even a noble Son of David but simply one of the bastards of the accursed Herod the Great.

Boundless hatred sprang up in Judas. He began to hate Jesus for having betrayed him thus, for having pulled the wool over his eyes, as on Mount Tabor. His self-respect was injured; he was humiliated to the depths of his being.

He was in such mental dismay that he accepted the hand offered him by Caiaphas, yesterday's enemy, and renounced his Essene brethren. Judas

was not greedy, but immense wealth and the second rank in the Temple were his anyway as soon as he began serving the Chief Priest. However, it was primarily through love for the Kingdom of Yahweh at Jerusalem that he became a turncoat. The original Essene plan was dead in his eyes and only Caiaphas' project could really be achieved for the glory of the Chosen People.

Judas tore up the letter addressed to Stephen and reached an agreement with Caiaphas to set up a trap.

Tom nodded his head gravely.

"When I think if Judas hadn't opened those letters the bluff would've worked and Caiaphas would've agreed to Jesus' request ... the world would be very different today ..."

"No, you are mistaken, Caiaphas would never have accepted Jesus' ultimatum, for a very good reason: he was innocent of part of the charges brought against him by Jesus. He was not the one responsible for the ergot. Caiaphas believed that the contamination of the fields was natural, a gift from God so that the Temple might flourish once more."

Tom's forehead wrinkled.

"But the fields had really been deliberately contaminated, hadn't they? So if it wasn't Caiaphas, who was it?"

The Pope looked at Tom.

"That is so incredible that I dare not tell you yet ..."

Enigmatically, the Pope added nothing more on the topic, going on to the events surrounding Jesus' arrest.

Peter tried to intervene and brought his sword down on a guard who was trying to seize Jesus. Poorly skilled with weapons, he succeeded merely in cutting off the attacker's ear. At least, that is what he thought. In fact it was no more than an earring that his blow removed. Jesus ordered everybody to calm down and insured that the guard was not seriously wounded. Peter and the other apostles finally fled and Jesus was arrested.

He was led before the Sanhedrin. Its members already believed him guilty. However, they wanted to have him sentenced to crucifixion, because such a death would demonstrate to all Christ's disciples that he was not the Son of God, but a mere mortal usurping the title.

The Sanhedrin could have people arrested for civil, criminal and religious offenses and impose a wide range of penalties, including vicious floggings for serious transgressions. The stoning of adulterous women was forbidden by the Roman authorities, but in secret it was practiced, so that the Laws of Moses would be applied. Nonetheless, the Sanhedrin had no right to pronounce death sentences. That penalty lay in the hands of the

Roman Procurator alone and Caiaphas would apply himself to wheedling it out of him.

In the Sanhedrin, as a dress rehearsal, Caiaphas brought out the witnesses whom he would present before Pontius Pilate.

In fact, Jesus was truly a conspirator, because he was at the cutting edge of the Essene movement and the statements he had made during his pro-Zealot period were more than enough to condemn him: they exhorted the people to a concerted revolt against legal authority. Caiaphas' accusations were thus legitimate and not made up, far from it. Nonetheless, Caiaphas did not have available to him true witnesses able to prove Jesus' sedition, a sedition that had to serve as the principal charge if he were to be condemned to death by crucifixion. Caiaphas had had to hire actors, who were atrocious hams. However, they would have to do; Pilate had crucified prisoners on slighter evidence in the past.

Jesus made no protest at the interrogation, because he had really uttered the preachings of which he was accused. Caiaphas was delighted that Jesus made no attempt to defend himself. However, Jesus reminded him of something. He declaimed the first words of the investiture ritual that the Chief Priest would have had to say during the ceremonies celebrating Christ's accession to the throne of the Temple: "Ye shall see the Son of God sitting on the right hand of God's power and coming in the clouds of heaven ..."

Caiaphas went crazy with rage. He had given his word of honor to Jesus, but had deceived him. The Sanhedrin knew it, but its members pretended not to notice that Caiaphas was suffering the worst of humiliations before them all.

The Sanhedrin confirmed the condemnation of Jesus and he was taken before Pilate. He heard the witnesses against Christ and, contrary to what Caiaphas expected, the Roman Procurator declared Jesus innocent.

Meanwhile, Herod Antipas had sent a messenger to ask Pilate's permission to meet the prisoner, which was granted.

When Jesus came for the very first time to see Caiaphas in the Temple, the Chief Priest had hastened to tell Antipas the whole of the Zealot plans. The two men had agreed to kill Jesus and John the Baptist, thus cutting off the two main heads of the rebellion.

Antipas had had the Baptist arrested and executed. He had had him tortured and before dying the wretched prisoner had confessed what Antipas already knew: Jesus was indeed his father's illegitimate son.

Caiaphas had told the Tetrarch that Jesus knew nothing of Herod the Great's will. Despite this, Antipas wanted to be certain of this for himself.

Cleverly and craftily, he interrogated Jesus, who had been brought by the legionaries to the late Herod's palace. Antipas gained confirmation that Jesus was unaware that their father had drawn up a will in which he was nominated King of the Jews.

For a long time, Antipas had feared that the Roman authorities would recognize in Jesus the divine child cited in the will. However, this was not the case. If Jesus had known that he was mentioned in the will, there is no doubt that he would have claimed the title King of the Jews to sort out the crisis and gather the whole population around him, avoiding a civil war. The history of the civilized world would have been totally different. However, Jesus never learnt anything of it. Only Antipas and his inner circle, along with some Sanhedrin members and the highest Roman authorities were aware of the will. Jesus believed that he was just one more of the bastards of whom Herod had had so many, so that he could not claim any political power whatever without strong backers like the Temple or the Herodians.

Once in a while, Jesus spoke of his real father, saying that he was in heaven. In fact, in this way he was hinting at the sad fate of Herod, who had become a demon fearing the light of Deus, lost in the firmament of nothingness, tormented by his victims.

Antipas was reassured to note that Jesus knew nothing of the will. The hatred he felt for him drained away. Antipas no longer held against him Christ's statements, reported to him by two Pharisees. These clergymen, acquaintance of Antipas, had met Jesus on the way to Jerusalem three days before. Fearing that Christ with his troop would swarm into the city and seize power, they tried to dissuade him from going there, saying that he was at risk of dying there. In indirect words, Jesus hinted that that very day he would drive demons out of the Possessed, the following day he intended to save his friend Lazarus and the third day would bring for him the accomplishment of his glorious destiny on the throne of the Temple. He also added that he would continue on his way towards Jerusalem, because it was not fitting for a king to die outside the City of Zion.

With these comments, Jesus was alluding to his Herodian bloodline and presenting himself as a true king.

"An angry man is an easily predictable man," the Pope stated. "He no longer thinks rationally, but furiously. His mental faculties are impaired. Jesus wanted Antipas to be mad with rage by having him told that he claimed to be a king of equal status to his rank of Tetrarch. Jesus wanted Antipas not to be thinking clearly so that his ability to react and oppose him would be diminished. That is how Jesus intended to predict and counter Antipas' plans. Jesus had also uncovered his spy Levi and thought

that he held a major trump card against any maneuvers by Antipas. Above all, Jesus judged that Antipas was not truly a threat to him, for he was convinced that Caiaphas would see to it that Antipas could not harm him, because of his bluff.”

The Pope cleared his throat.

“To mock him without him knowing, Antipas had him dressed in a royal mantle, purple in color. Antipas laughed at this ostentatious sign and at Jesus, who did not understand its meaning. Jesus did not grasp the implications: he was really the King of the Jews, designated in his father’s will, but had no idea of that. Only Antipas could understand and appreciate the breadth of that mockery and he was delighted that Jesus would soon die. He sent Jesus back to Pilate. He did not wish the death of Jesus, but he was forced to sentence him to crucifixion, for had he not done so, he would have become an accomplice in blasphemy against the Emperor. Pilate was unwilling to lose his own head by trying to preserve the life of one whom Caiaphas’ false witnesses had made out to be a leader in sedition.”

Tom frowned thoughtfully.

“So Jesus was crucified and died on the cross. That story was true, then. Just think, I believed it was all a myth ... but of course, he didn’t come back to life ... that’s just a legend his disciples put about ...”

“No, you are mistaken,” the Pope interrupted. “Jesus did indeed come back to life.”

Tom’s eyes grew round in surprise and the Pope added:

“The whole key to the mystery of Jesus’ death lies in one tiny detail. Whole generations were enthused by the tale of Christ, imagining the hand of God behind his resurrection. Yet there was one factual detail that everybody neglected. I myself, despite studying the Bible with great fervor, had never paid any attention to that small detail until the day when I was initiated into the true history of Jesus ...”

The Pope’s eyes lit up with a strange glow.

“The detail is the crown of thorns. In itself it provides the solution to the mystery. Yes, the crown of thorns is the key to the mystery, the key that can unlock the whole enigma of Jesus’ death.”

Looking at the Bible that he had in his hands, the Pope smiled sadly.

“The Bible is like one of Agatha Christie’s books. I remember one particular novel by that authoress in which the victim is given a fruit juice by her servant and on drinking it says ‘Everything tastes awful today’. She dies of poisoning, the servant is accused of the crime. At the end of the novel, that sentence, which is just a tiny detail, is highlighted to

demonstrate that the one word ‘everything’ shows that she had drunk another drink which the real murderer had given her five minutes before the juice provided by her servant. There are sometimes details that we do not see because they are too visible, and these factual items are the pillars supporting the greatest mysteries. It suffices to discover them, to remove the supports, and the foundation for the mystery disappears in an instant.”

Meditatively, the Pope fell silent, turning his attention to the crucifix.

“I can’t see what you’re trying to get at,” Tom said finally. “What’s the link between Jesus’ crown of thorns and his death?”

The Pope took his eyes off the crucifix and observed Tom for several seconds.

“It is my turn to ask you a question ... In your opinion, Mister Anderson, why a crown of thorns? What was the purpose of setting a crown of thorns on the head of a man who was about to be crucified?”

The wrinkles on Tom’s forehead deepened.

“To mock him, to spurn him, wasn’t it?”

“That is what everybody believes. No, the true purpose was quite different. It was a totally practical purpose, furthermore ...”

In a more serious tone, the Pope added:

“Imagine the scene for an instant: Jesus has a crown of thorns thrust down on his head, blood streams out and eventually forms a thick, red mask that completely changes his face. He is no longer recognizable ...”

The Pope’s eyes once more stared at the crucifix. Tom frowned.

“But why make his face unrecognizable, that makes no sense ...”

Tom stopped in mid sentence. A surrealistic scenario flashed into his mind. He shuddered and stared at the crucifix.

“You mean ...”

The Pope nodded his head.

“Yes, you have understood correctly. It was not Jesus who died on the cross.”

Tom’s jaw fell so open in surprise that he thought it was dislocated. After a long minute of utter amazement, he raised his hand in the direction of the crucifix and managed to stutter out:

“But ... but if it wasn’t Jesus who was crucified, who was it on the cross?”

The Pope turned his gaze on Tom.

“In the Gospels, whose death is recounted as occurring in that same period?”

These final words were like a thunderclap. Tom got the impression that his whole body had been struck by a bolt of lightning.

Apocalyptic lightning.

Absolution

Carrying the cross on his back, Jesus was in agony.

He was at the end of his tether. The centurion Brutus' whip continued to lash at him, tearing his flesh and he wondered if he could hold out much more. However, he had to press forward, to keep climbing until he reached the summit of Golgotha.

The fate of Israel depended upon it.

However, at the foot of Golgotha, his fatigue was too great for his little remaining strength and he collapsed. Brutus had orders not to kill the prisoner, but had the duty to torture him to the limit. In Christ's eyes, nobody should be able to read anything but imminent death, not the stoicism of a man who knew that he would survive these torments.

Everybody had to believe that this was no mock crucifixion: minds had to be impressed by the trickling blood, giving the illusion that this way of sufferings could only lead to death.

Somewhat annoyed, Brutus decided nonetheless to have the cross carried, so that Jesus could reach the plateau at the top still alive.

Struggling painfully to his feet, Jesus finally noticed the weeping and sighs that had not ceased accompanying him since he had left the Antonia fortress. Amongst a group of tearful women he recognized his mother, Mary. Her distress touched him to the quick. He wished that he could reassure her, telling her not to worry about him, that his suffering would end as soon as he reached Golgotha. He also wished that he could tell her that, despite appearances, he would not die, but would soon come back to be once more with those he loved.

Yet he could not reveal to her that secret.

If the slightest doubt was aroused in anybody about what was happening, the Divine Scourge would sweep over the land worse than ever.

Pilate had promised him that if he acted in accordance with his wishes, contamination of fields with ergot would cease definitively. If not, Pilate

had threatened to continue, and even to extend more widely, the poisoning of the crops.

Jesus knew that if he did not reach the top of that hill or if Pilate did not keep his promise, chaos would spread throughout the land and corpses of innocent people would be strewn over poisoned fields. However, Jesus had no alternative but to take the Roman Procurator's word for it.

What could he do against the power and madness of the Roman? He was at his mercy. He could merely pray the Heavenly Father to give him the strength to accomplish his destiny to save those folk.

In a moment of weakness and distraction, seeing those women weeping over him, Jesus let slip forbidden confidences. He told them of the future that awaited if the Scourge persisted.

Brutus approached, a looming threat, muscles flexed. Jesus took a hold on himself and fell silent. He painfully dragged himself up the slope and made his way almost to the summit. However, his bare and bleeding feet slithered on the white rocks and he fell full length. The impact was terrible. A dull thud was heard.

Jesus stood back up at once. Nonetheless, he started staggering. Brutus grabbed him by the hair and dragged him along with barely contained rage to get him to climb the last few yards up to the plateau at the top.

The place of torment.

Jesus' head was aching horribly. Before his misted eyes, everything seemed to whirl around him, too fast to follow. He knew he would not be able to remain conscious for much longer.

Brutus let go of his hair and shoved him in the direction of a large square tent, striped blue and white, which stood fifty paces farther forwards.

The centurion and his prisoner entered this canvas structure. Just inside the door, two guards stood on either side, seemingly awaiting Jesus' arrival. They immediately closed the two flaps of cloth.

Lounging on top of a big wickerwork hamper, his face stubbly, his uniform scruffy, Marcus looked Jesus up and down, cleaning his nails with the aid of a small dagger. Uncrossing his skinny legs, the Roman officer smiled in satisfaction. He put the thin blade down on the wicker basket and his hand mechanically tapped the white loincloths carefully folded and piled next to him that were intended to hide the nakedness of those to be crucified. He looked at Jesus' blood-stained and tattered robe that barely covered the body wounded in every part.

"Strip," ordered Marcus scornfully.

Jesus was so weak that he felt incapable of raising a hand. Nonetheless,

he tried to obey. His whole body trembled involuntarily.

“Have no fear,” chuckled Marcus with a smile that revealed teeth like a carnivore’s fangs. “Your sufferings will soon be at an end ...”

Amused by the situation, he burst out laughing somewhat manically. He knew that the prisoner’s tortures would end here and that he would escape a horrible death by crucifixion.

His head pounding, Jesus removed his tunic with difficulty and stood completely naked.

His head started spinning like a top. Marcus’ face seemed to be grotesquely distorted, the tent blurred and a dark veil fell over Jesus, who collapsed on the floor.

Unconscious.

Brutus the centurion mercilessly dragged Jesus up by the hair and gave him several slaps of a violence that would have made a camel stagger. Jesus finally regained consciousness. Taking a jug of water, Marcus gave him a drink. Jesus thirstily drank the liquid, which mingled with the blood in his mouth.

Marcus picked his dagger up from the hamper and returned it to its sheath. He took the loincloths and set them carefully on the ground. Then he opened the basket’s lid. A large piece of scarlet cloth hid its contents. The Roman officer removed this, revealing that it was in fact a fine red robe, and dropped it carelessly to one side.

Then Jesus saw what was in the basket.

Judas ...

Curled up in a fetal position, Judas was stark naked. His whole body was bloody from the lashes of a whip that had lacerated his flesh. His head bore a crown of thorns identical to Jesus’ and his face was red with blood and unrecognizable. He was half conscious and his vacant, gloomy eyes seemed to gaze into those of his twin figure. Jesus took several seconds to realize that the bloody puppet before him was no less than a devilish mirror showing his own reflection, because he too was in that same pitiful state.

That vision of horror disturbed Jesus deeply and he asked himself how they had reached such a point.

His memory replayed the events that had taken place a few hours earlier.

Jesus saw himself on the terrace of Pilate’s palace, overlooking the mob hostile to him. Lost in the midst of that raging ocean of humanity, hatred in his eyes, Judas stood watching him.

The two men cast challenging looks at each other for a long while.

Suddenly, the uproar around him triggered an unexpected reaction in Judas: the ergot that Jesus had got him to take at the time of the transfiguration surfaced in the twinkling of an eye within his organism and his mind was disturbed by it.

Jesus immediately grasped the situation on seeing Judas walk a few steps forwards, then go rapidly backwards, pushing through the crowd like a drunken crab. His fixed and haggard gaze confirmed to Jesus what Judas was going through: a resurgence of the effects of the ergot.

In Judas' mind, everything was calm and quiet around him. The mob surrounding him swayed gently, as if in slow motion, like ears of wheat blown by a light breeze. When Jesus disappeared from his field of vision, taken into the palace by the legionaries, time suddenly came back to its normal rhythm. The cries of the partisans rang painfully loud in his ears and a gale of hatred began moving that crowd, now shaken violently by squalls of anger.

As if emerging from a bad dream, Judas shook his head and rubbed his temples energetically, wondering how long he had been there. He had the impression that it had been barely a few seconds. Yet the faces around him were not the same as an instant ago, as if people had moved in a flash. Then he realized that it was he himself who had unconsciously moved. Caiaphas had indeed told him that the hallucinogenic effects of ergot might re-emerge some day, even months or years after it had been taken.

Judas cursed that sorcerer Jesus for tricking him on Mount Tabor, considering him guilty for the residues still troubling his perceptions of time and space.

Judas mopped his brow, trying to concentrate on current reality.

Caiaphas was striving to have Jesus condemned to death. Judas listened to the shouts and comments coming from all sides. However, Pilate seemed determined to free Jesus.

Judas then decided to strike a fatal blow.

"He called himself king: we have no king but Caesar," rang out his shriek. "If you spare him, you are his accomplice against Caesar, and a traitor!"

Pilate blinked several times as he gazed at Judas in his red mantle, visible in the midst of the mob like a flame in the night.

By trying to pardon Jesus, Pilate had put himself into a tricky situation. Julius, the new commander of the guard, saw a chance to gain rapid promotion, being ready to cut the Roman Procurator's head off if he continued to support the man who had blasphemed the Emperor Tiberius.

“What you ask shall be done,” said Pilate hastily, taking several paces to put some distance between him and his subordinate’s menacing sword.

For the moment, Pilate preferred to lose face rather than lose his life. However, when he was back in the audience chamber, he dismissed all the guards, ordering them to leave him alone with Jesus, and then his repressed anger burst out like a thunderous storm.

Shrieking out his rage, he overset vases and sculptured busts, which smashed on the floor. Seizing a sword hidden under his throne, he slashed the air of the room as if to kill invisible foes and hacked at the tall, white columns, eventually shattering his weapon’s blade on them. He furiously flung what remained of the sword onto his throne, which he then showered with fierce kicks. His face purple with exasperation, shamed by the unprecedented public humiliation, he began beating his chest with an angry fist.

Jesus, still wearing the robe that Antipas had had put on him, his hands bound, watched the scene in consternation. Pilate saw his look and decided to go back out onto the terrace.

Judas was still there, down below. He was once again under the influence of the residues of ergot. His eyes unfocused, he did not seem to notice that apart from a handful of Jews, he was alone on the circular area.

Recognizing the man in the red mantle, Pilate looked at him with growing interest.

An idea struck him.

Pilate went back inside the room and called for the centurion Brutus. The imposing, impressively built soldier listened to his superior, scratching the end of his square jaw. Then he bowed and hastened to leave.

He returned ten minutes later, dragging behind him on a chain an individual with bound hands and head covered with a jute sack. Pilate removed the sack and looked at this newcomer, whose face was slightly distorted with fear.

“Jesus, come here,” ordered Pilate.

Jesus obeyed and stood facing Judas. The sight Pilate saw of the two Jews was more than disturbing: the prisoners were both dressed in red robes and it could be thought that one or the other of them was no more than an unreal reflection of the other.

Apart from tiny details, their overall build was identical: the same height, the same bone structure. More striking, though, were the faces: the same beard, the same hair color, the same skull shape.

For Romans who shaved daily, nothing could look more like a bearded man than another bearded man. It was true that the two men were not

twins, not even brothers, and differences were perfectly visible, but Pilate knew how to go about erasing those few dissimilarities.

Pilate came up to Judas and spat in his face.

“Because of you, I was humiliated before everybody. However, he who laughs last, laughs loudest ...”

With a gesture, he ordered Brutus to take him away. The centurion replaced the sack on Judas’ head and forcefully dragged him out of the room.

Pilate turned to Jesus.

“I have a bargain to offer you: your life for that stranger’s.”

“He is no stranger,” replied Jesus. “His name is Judas ...”

“Judas Sicariot?” inquired Pilate. “He is the one who betrayed you, is he not? You will have no remorse, then, if he dies in your place ...”

Seeing Jesus’ inscrutable expression, Pilate realized that he had to put forward some more compelling argument to sway him and bring him over to his side.

So, he admitted that he had ordered the chaos caused by ergot. He stated that if Judas did not die on the cross in his place, the infection would persist and even spread to fresh lands. Jesus would be responsible for the coming carnage if he did not comply with the Roman’s demands.

On the other hand, if Jesus agreed to co-operate with him, Pilate promised faithfully to stop the contamination of the fields and even champs to eradicate the Scourge from the Promised Land.

Pilate also told him what he expected from Christ in return.

“It is your choice,” concluded Pilate with a crafty look. “The future fate of poor innocents is in your hands ...”

Jesus thought he would faint, so cruel and inhuman was the dilemma.

What should he do? What was this strange path that the powers of darkness had just laid out before him? Where would it lead if he ventured out on it? Had he even any choice, when saving a multitude of souls was at stake?

One single way was open to him. His mind was already beginning to head along it.

Yet, for an instant, he was on the point of turning back, thinking that his own death would finally stop the motion of the wheel of evil occurrences that he had always wanted to halt.

Could his death save those people? No, there was no chance of it. On the contrary, if he died, that would bring thousands upon thousands of deaths all around the land. Through his fault, through his death, the

firmament would be haunted by the souls of the Jews cut down by the Scourge.

Jesus was responsible for those lives.

Then he realized that his true physical death would bring chaos, whilst his apparent death would bring a dawn of salvation. He could save those folk through his abnegation.

Nonetheless, one man still had to die physically to pull Israel out of danger. If Jesus were that man, the atrocities and consequences of ergot would persist.

Another was needed.

Judas ...

Through his sacrifice, the salvation of a multitude was guaranteed and his aura would win heavenly felicity in the presence of Deus, his soul would sit close to him through eternity in his Kingdom of Heaven. That was the noblest of human destinies. Alas, fate had decided that this would be not for Jesus but for Judas.

Standing before Pilate, Jesus agreed to submit to his will.

Brutus the centurion was the Procurator's man for dirty deeds, being also a sort of confidant who knew in full all his superior's secrets and actions. He it was that ensured that thanks to the crowns of thorns the faces of the two prisoners were totally unrecognizable. Before escorting Jesus onto Golgotha, Brutus flogged Judas. The small leaden balls fixed to the ends of the long strands of plaited leather slashed deeply into that body, which soon was just a mass of gaping bloody wounds, like the furrows of a plowed field. Judas felt no pain, though: Pilate had had him given a strong dose of a derivative of ergot to make him docile and apathetic.

Judas' mind floated away from his bodily envelope. He was no longer present within himself, but wandered in the nothingness of a lost consciousness. His eyes vacant, he had borne all his pains without realizing what he was enduring.

Now, as he huddled inside the wicker hamper, his dark eyes continued to flit around without his perceiving the slightest external sign.

Brutus the centurion brushed Jesus aside with his arm. He grabbed Judas and pulled him out of the basket. Like a wooden puppet with strings cut, Judas collapsed on the ground. With his mighty hand, Brutus dragged him halfway up by the hair.

Marcus compared the two naked bodies. Like a sadistic perfectionist painter, a stickler for detail, he took his dagger and cut macabre gashes in certain of Judas' wounds to make them similar to those of Jesus. Blood poured out in abundance, but Judas did not flinch.

Once this task was completed, taking advantage of the fact that Brutus was still holding Judas up, Marcus quickly slipped a loincloth around him. He ordered Jesus to hide in the basket, then commanded his two legionaries to take Judas outside.

A few instants later, escorting two brigands at lance-point, other legionaries came into the large square tent, striped blue and white. Marcus had the two condemned men's rags stripped off and their nakedness hidden with a loincloth. They were led out to be crucified with Judas.

Marcus and Brutus went out of the tent. Jesus was left alone.

How long did he stay there, huddled in the hamper? He had lost all sense of time. The seconds that slipped by seemed like minutes, and the minutes like hours.

Some legionaries took advantage of the absence of their commander to come and steal Christ's clothing. Jesus heard them arguing amongst themselves. They greedily hoped to get a good price for the belongings of Christ, whose disciples had mentioned his magical powers. The legionaries took the white tunic, torn and stained with blood. Seeing Judas' red mantle on the ground, they thought it belonged to Jesus and also took it with them as they left.

Outside, on the crosses set up on either side of Judas', hearing the comments of Jews insulting Christ, the two thieves finally realized who the man between them was. One of the criminals began crying out in a desperate voice.

"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save me ..."

"Be silent, you fool!" cut in the other thief. "Do you not fear God, you who are in the same condemnation? We, indeed, justly, for we are receiving the due penalty for our deeds; but he is the Son of God!"

In this moment of distress, he was trying to clutch at the slightest hope of salvation, attempting to flatter this Christ of whose supernatural powers such great accounts had been given to him.

"Lord," said he in addition, "remember me when you come into your kingdom."

As if he had suddenly become aware of what was around him and of the presence of the thief, Judas turned his head towards him. His dark eyes, swimming in blood, looked for a moment at the other crucified man. Then, in a voice hoarsened and distorted by the pressure on his larynx caused by the weight of his hanging body, he spoke with difficulty.

"Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise," croaked he painfully in a cadaverous voice.

In a delirium triggered by the hallucinogenic drug that Brutus had forced him to swallow, Judas' mind now thought that he was Christ, being certain that he was truly the Son of God. The insults flung at him, mocking him with the name Messiah or Son of God, had penetrated into his subconscious. He had passed on the information to his bemused consciousness, convincing him that he was indeed Christ through a self-hypnotized shortcut.

He tried to straighten up on his legs so as to be able to breathe normally. However, all his limbs were growing tired too quickly and he had difficulty in keeping upright. Under its multiple layers of dried blood, his face lifted to look at the crowd, with their grimaces of hatred and scorn.

A familiar face drew his attention.

The apostle John was there.

Judas looked at him for more than a minute, then his lips twitched as if he were trying to say something to him. However, no sound emerged from his swollen mouth.

Judas' gaze shifted to Jesus' mother who was standing beside John.

A shudder ran through her as she looked fixedly with sorrowful eyes at the man she took to be her child.

Jesus stared back at her, then, with a strange, sad smile he said to her in a choking voice:

"Woman, behold your son."

Next he spoke to John, adding:

"Behold your mother ..."

Affected by a delirium that only he could have perceived, Judas thought that the woman was John's mother and that the two did not know this.

John was astonished at this comment for an instant, but then supposed that the crucified man wanted him to keep Mary close to him and watch over her till the day she died.

John nodded silently, thus making a formal promise to him that his wish would be fulfilled.

Not for a single moment, did John doubt what he was seeing before his very eyes: the crucifixion of Jesus. He was far from imagining that it was Judas who was nailed to the cross.

John had seen Judas a few hours earlier near the Temple. Watched by two young brothers who stood at a respectful distance from their Master, Judas had spoken in an undertone to John. Judas had claimed to him that he was no traitor and that the real treachery came from Jesus himself. He explained to John what ergot was and how the fields were naturally

contaminated. He told him of the Assyrian remedy and how Jesus had tricked everybody and especially them at the time of the transfiguration. He also revealed to him Caiaphas' project, of which he was a firm supporter. He wanted to win John over to their cause.

Judas felt deep friendship for John. He knew how much John loved Christ, but Judas had to open his eyes to his betrayal. However, Judas was unaware of the secret complicity uniting the two men, so that John was fully informed of all Jesus' actions.

Without hatred, John had listened to his self-justification, understanding what ravages learning the truth had done to Judas' heart. John did not hold it against him. Any other man would have done similarly. There were truths worse than poison, which could turn healthy men with noble convictions into lunatics.

John was surprised to learn that Caiaphas was not involved in the Divine Scourge. He was equally astonished that the Chief Priest believed that the contamination was natural when everything pointed to human machinations. John guessed that Caiaphas did not possess Jesus' knowledge of ergot, so that his judgment was faulty.

Not wishing to hurt Judas even more, John had left him after a brotherly hug, as if to console his tortured soul.

John had headed away, hoping to be able to set Jesus free by force. However, he quickly saw that this plan was not feasible. So, realizing that all was lost, he had discreetly joined the crowd, not wishing to leave Jesus alone in that terrible trial.

His heart aching, John watched the crucified men's sufferings.

How many hours had they been there? They could no longer tell, still struggling against the exhaustion that would equate to inescapable death.

Once again the cries of the other two crucified men made Judas turn his head. They begged him to save them, to bring a halt to their agonies.

He, too, could hold out no longer.

He raised his face towards the sky, pleading to his Lord.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Judas lowered his head, his strength at an end. He could no longer remain upright. To draw in a breath was becoming more and more difficult and he knew that he was dying. His legs were failing him, wracked by cramps. Held up only by the forearms tied to the wooden crossbar, his body was slowly slipping downwards.

He was choking, gradually being suffocated.

The dark mass of clouds obscuring the sky let through rays of sunlight that were concentrated Judas' cross. In a striking optical effect, a luminous

halo appeared around him.

“I thirst,” said Judas in a murmur.

A young legionary gave him a drink. The sour liquid trickled along his mouth. The next minute, a grimace of pain ran over his distorted lips.

“It is finished,” sighed Judas, in the grip of inner delirium.

He raised his face to the sky.

“Forgive them, for they do not know what they have done ... Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit ...”

He gave a hoarse cry, then his head tipped forwards.

Death had taken Judas.

The sun’s rays were reflected in the dried blood of the crown of thorns, making it glitter like a divine halo, and Judas’ soul rose up out of his battered body.

Inside the wickerwork basket where he was still hiding, Jesus felt Judas’ ether detach itself from his body. He realized it was all over.

Judas must now be seeing the light of Deus, that light so intense, blinding and enchanting, which lit up the other world by its shining, attracting souls to it. Like a lighthouse guiding to a safe haven, that sublime light swept darkness aside to bring towards it all the shipwrecked sailors who had lost their vessel, or rather their fleshly envelope.

Suddenly the ground quaked for several seconds.

Heavenly Father, forgive them what they have done ...

Deus showed his disapproval by unleashing Gaia’s wrath. Jesus knew that it was not a reproach for the choice that he had had to make, condemning Judas in his stead, because that option was the sole way to save those people.

No, that heavenly anger was quite different: it was intended to show men their folly in wishing to kill anybody, whatever the reason.

Inside the basket, Jesus unconsciously clenched his fists.

*

* *

The Pope turned his eyes away from the crucifix on the wall and looked gravely at Tom.

“Pilate had not had his last word ... like a skillful magician, he tricked all the Jews. He knew how to distract the gaze of all the spectators present ...”

Tom's eyebrows seemed on the point of flying away, agitated by the blast of surprise.

"So that means it's not Jesus shown on that crucifix, but Judas?"

"Yes," the Pope responded. "The crucifix symbolically represents the man who sacrificed himself for the good of humanity. Hence, on every cross in the whole world the man represented being crucified is indeed Judas the Iscariot."

Tom nervously scratched the back of his head.

"But all this is incredible ... a face stays recognizable, even covered in blood, doesn't it?"

"They all wore beards in those days. A beard breaks up the line of a face. What then remains to identify an individual? The forehead? It was covered by the crown of thorns ... The nose? Judas had the same nose ..."

"But the eyes?" Tom cut in. "The color of the eyes?"

The Pope shook his head.

"How far away do you think that it is possible to distinguish the color of a man's eyes? Try for yourself: you will see that at only ten yards it is no longer possible to make anything out. Besides, the eyebrows cast a shadow over the eyes. Hence, more than thirty feet away, nothing can be distinguished and those familiar with Jesus were kept a good way off."

"You're right," Tom muttered, "the Gospels clearly say Jesus' mother was watching her son's crucifixion from a distance ..."

"Quite so. Furthermore, Pilate carefully staged Jesus' crucifixion so that nobody would imagine for a single moment that there could be a last-minute substitution. Pilate had a cross brought from Golgotha for Jesus to carry back there. He wanted a set of images to soak into the minds of the spectators there, so that they would all be convinced that the man whom they would see dead on the cross was naturally the man who had carried it. As a finishing touch to dupe them totally, Pilate had set on Judas' cross a notice written in several languages saying that the crucified man was Jesus. Picture the scene for an instant: people knowing Jesus well pass close to the cross, they see the crucified man, they pay attention to the least detail to attempt to identify him and wonder who that strange man is ... but the notice is there, minds are confused by that notice, hypnotized by it ... as it is written, that cannot but be true ... so they are convinced that they are seeing Jesus ... it is just an illusion of the mind which wishes to believe that what is written on a certified official notice must be true ..."

Tom nodded.

"Yes, you're right. It's like a troupe of actors looking from the street up at the top of a building. People gather, the actors claim they can see a man

hanging out of a top-storey window, on the point of suicide and the passers-by, even if they see nothing, are convinced that this is so and finally come to imagine, or really to see the suicide clinging to the window, claiming this to other passers-by. It is a powerful psychological lure that has disconcerted more than one behavioral psychologist.”

Tom giggled nervously.

“Martial did that experiment himself: he hired a dozen actors and tested the reactions of a guinea-pig. Martial showed them all several sheets of paper all with two circles drawn on them, one slightly bigger than the other. Martial then asked which circle was the bigger of the two. The guinea-pig was requested to answer first for the first sheet and naturally indicated the larger one. Except all the actors, one after another, absolutely straight-faced, pointed out the smaller one as bigger. Martial then continued the exercise by asking the actors’ opinions before going on to request the guinea-pig’s. He was at a loss as to what to say. His mind was in a whirl and he wasn’t happy to be contradicting what everyone else claimed. He eventually took the actors’ line and saying the smaller circle was bigger. And the strangest thing about the experiment is that the guinea-pig ended up by believing it, by being convinced of it: at the end of the exercise, Martial took the guinea-pig to one side and told him he was in fact the victim of a trick and the smaller circle was really smaller. Believe it or not, the guinea-pig no longer believed Martial and claimed against all evidence that the smaller circle was bigger. Martial tested dozens of guinea-pigs and almost all reacted the same way.”

Tom chuckled for a few seconds.

“Well, I can easily imagine what happened in the mind of the people there when they saw the notice on Judas’ cross ...”

Pensive, he let his mind roam. The Pope remained silent, also lost in thought. After more than a minute, Tom finally murmured as if to himself:

“Just think, Mohammed actually said so in the Koran ...”

Quoting verse 157 of Surah 4, An-Nisa, The Women, he declaimed:

“... they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them ...”

As the Prophet’s name was mentioned, the Pope grasped the chance of talking of that subject. He looked at Tom’s threatening hand casually resting on the edge of the computer keyboard. At any moment, it could press a key and send the truths contained in the file to a host of journalists.

“Do not let that accursed Mohammed and his crazy religion supplant our Christian civilization. If you reveal the secret by sending the file, the vacuum will blow the minds of Christians around the world. Moslem

fundamentalists want no more than that to force their domination on the world and the lost minds of Christians will inevitably turn to those God-crazy men in despair. Christian love and compassion will disappear if you do that. Christianity may be based on a terrible lie, but our religion does promulgate part of the Heavenly Truths of Deus. I must tell you that Mohammed also cheated and furthermore he perverted the heavenly laws by spreading false precepts to impose his foolish religion.”

“I know all that,” Tom protested. “And you know I know, since Martial let you read my notes for ‘The Sage of Mecca’ ...”

“Yet did you know that Mohammed had the Pontius Pilate Report in his hands? You did not, did you? Mohammed learnt of Pilate’s document and was aware of everything, the Essene plan to impose their Christ by staging false miracles right through to the crucifixion of Judas. He understood on what lies the Christian religion was based. Nonetheless, he said nothing, for he realized that he could do as the Essenes: orchestrate God’s will by supposedly divine scriptures. He knew that what had worked elsewhere could work in his country. The same causes would have the same effects. He realized that history could be repeated in his favor if he had the right ingredients to make up the sauce. Human beings are like that: they willingly swallow what esoteric teachers cook up if the pots emit an attractive odor or have a charming color, so to speak. As a game or out of cynicism, Mohammed played at apprentice prophet, to see how far he could take his fellow men’s minds. He passed himself off as the emissary of God to serve his own personal and tribal interests. Naturally, he was virtually alone and without accomplices to play his tricks. But his strength and cleverness came from finding a powerful ingredient that other religions had often lacked for imposing themselves on the world.”

“The ingredient was violence, wasn’t it?” Tom inquired.

The Pope smiled sadly.

“Yes. Mohammed imposed his will through bloodbaths and slaughter. His climb was up a stair of the corpses of those who tried to oppose him. He had no hesitation in having killed, or killing himself, those who stood in his way. He conquered and dominated minds by his bellicose madness to satisfy his demented ego. He alternated carrot and stick as one would with a donkey to lead men’s minds wherever his perverted thoughts wanted to take them ...”

Tom could not help bursting out laughing.

“Golly gosh! Coming from the mouth of the Pope himself, that’s surprising. You know they’ve proclaimed fatwas on people for less than that?”

Tom did not like to say that he himself, because of his book 'The Sage of Mecca', would be in the grip of the most terrible of fatwas hitherto seen and that even if he hid on Mars, the most ignorant, the most idiotic Islamic fundamentalists would set to doing higher degrees in engineering just to build a rocket to get there and cut his throat. If his life was the price to pay for the truth to come out, then he would calmly bare his neck to the knife. His body might die, but his spirit would never surrender.

However, Tom preferred to change the topic.

"I suppose if Mohammed knew Jesus' secret, but said nothing, it was because his own religion would've been harmed by it. If people had known how Jesus went about doing his miracles, Mohammed's pathetic trickery would've been far too obvious. So, Mohammed did no more than discredit Jesus' status as Son of God to haul himself up to the same level as him, casting doubt on his mother Mary's virginity and admitting that Jesus' crucifixion was a put-up job. Just like me, Christians have always believed Mohammed said it to insult the Christian religion, but the surah I just quoted to you is doubtless the only true thing in the whole Koran. I realize that now ..."

Gravely, the Pope nodded agreement.

"But let's get back to where we were, right?" Tom said. "What happened after Judas' crucifixion?"

The Pope let out yet another of his interminable sighs and went on with his tale. Pilate had infiltrated a spy into the Sanhedrin. The spy's name was Joseph of Arimathea and he very secretly claimed to be a disciple of Christ's to be able to keep an eye on all parties. Pilate tempted him with a heap of gold if Joseph would openly come out as a disciple of Christ and take away Judas' corpse. Joseph knew that if he refused Pilate would be likely to have his throat slit. So, he obeyed Pilate's orders.

Joseph commanded his servant to buy grave-cloths for Christ's body, to which he had to give decent burial. Pilate had ordered Joseph to confide in his servant, knowing full well that the man would talk and that the news would spread like wildfire within the Temple. The Pharisee Nicodemus overheard the conversation and demanded that Joseph allow him to accompany him. He saw no difficulty with that, because Nicodemus was short-sighted and would not be able to identify Judas' body.

Once they reached Golgotha, the two men lowered Judas' cross and laid it on the ground. However, they were no longer alone; Jesus' mother had arrived on the scene with Maria Magdalena. Whether he liked it or not, Joseph had to carry out his work in the presence of these women. Yet the night was dark and the obscurity favored Joseph, who quickly covered Judas' face and body with the shrouding cloths. Joseph then transported

the corpse into a sepulcher which belonged to him and blocked the entrance.

Using his agents in the town, Pilate had word circulated that Jesus would return to life in three days. Caiaphas was worried by this rumor, because if Jesus' disciples took advantage of it by stealing the body, the trick would make people believe that Christ had truly risen from the dead and would give birth to a divine legend likely to destabilize the Temple. Caiaphas sought authorization from Pilate to have Judas' tomb guarded. Pilate willingly agreed, because he knew that this would reinforce the conviction of the population when the news of the disappearance of Christ's body spread in the town: even the Jewish guards on duty would not have been able to withstand the angel of God who would come to take the earthly envelope of the Son of the Lord.

In fact, Pilate bribed the Temple serving-women assigned to take meals to Caiaphas' guards. The food was drugged, the guards fell asleep and Pilate's men stole Judas' corpse. The serving-women whose palms he had greased then spread about the tale that the Roman Procurator desired.

Thereafter, Caiaphas in vain told everybody the true story of the removal of the body, as nobody believed the truth that he told. The more blatant Pilate's lie, the more easily it pushed aside the truth. Yet Caiaphas was not lying when he stated that his guards had fallen asleep. Obviously, he could not explain that it was thanks to his own servants who had drugged them. That detail would have done great harm to his reputation. Caiaphas claimed that Christ's disciples had stolen the body, because he was fully convinced of that. He was a long way from imagining Pilate responsible for that removal.

Pilate had Judas' remains brought to his palace. The corpse was washed to remove the bloodstains, the crown of thorns was removed and the hair carefully combed to hide the deep gashes all round the scalp. The body was then dressed in clothing that concealed the traces of the crucifixion and the lashes of Brutus' whip.

Pilate's agents carried Judas to a piece of waste ground. They hung him from a tree there and disemboweled him so that his entrails would be scattered on the ground. The intention was for stray dogs to devour the body so as to make it a strong symbol.

Rather than having Judas' body disappear completely, Pilate believed that it was more appropriate to send a clear message to everybody: those who opposed Christ or betrayed him in the future would suffer God's wrath in the same way. The fear of God was always the best way to bring anybody into line.

The branch from which Judas was hanged finally broke and his corpse fell to the ground. A rumor spread of his suicide, or even of Yahweh's vengeful hand striking him down, so many of the townspeople came to see the corpse. Nobody dared touch it, simply looking at Judas' face, which was peaceful, not imagining that his clothing concealed a terrible secret: he had been crucified. The palms of his hands bore strange wounds. However, none of those who came from Jerusalem approached close enough to Judas to spot this unusual detail, the macabre sight of his scattered viscera anyhow distracting their gaze.

When minds had been sufficiently shocked, Pilate had Judas' corpse removed and disposed of definitively, thus erasing forever any proof of his punishment.

The Pope stopped in his narration for a moment. He groped for words for a few seconds, then continued:

"In no case were families allowed to retrieve the bodies of those who were crucified. That was the worst of deaths for them, for the souls of such dead remained eternally in sheol. They believed they would wander forever in the other world if they had no appropriate burial. The risk of dying like that strongly dissuaded Jews from acting against the Roman occupying forces. Pilate had ergot fed to the Golgotha dogs to make them mad and dangerous as wolves, so that they would devour the corpses of the crucified. The final fate of those who died on the cross was to end up in the mouth of one of these dogs."

The Pope leaned forward slightly.

"Yet in the case of Jesus' supposed body, Pilate authorized retrieval for burial ... that was an unprecedented action, but nobody has ever questioned it! What was the reason for that extraordinary clemency? The answer is so simple that in itself it almost reveals the whole mystery of Jesus' resurrection: Pilate did not want Judas' corpse left visible for several days, for fear that it might eventually be recognized ..."

Tom nodded.

"I've a question that's been nagging me ever since you said it was Pilate who was pulling the strings. I'll ask you it now: why did Pilate act like that? What was his aim? What was his game, doing that?"

The Pope thought at some length before answering.

"Pilate was mad, this madness in large part caused by the ergot that he took every day. Pilate drugged himself with a strong derivative of ergot, which scrambled his brain. I say that in order for you to realize that it was the logic of a man no longer rational. Pilate had a deep-seated hatred for the Jews. Do not ask me why, for I do not know, yet I do know that he

hated them to such a degree that he was willing to sacrifice his life so as to see them swept off the face of the Earth. Pilate embezzled part of the Roman taxes to finance the contamination of the fields. He offered a fortune to an Assyrian scholar to spread the ergot fungus over the crops. This expert was assisted by agents who were mostly Roman soldiers whom Pilate had bribed ...”

Looking serious, the Pope continued his account, alleging that Pilate wanted the Jews to die poisoned by ergot, to become Possessed killing one another in a bloodbath. He wished chaos, poverty and human degradation to submerge Israel. If the Jews discovered the truth and its crazy implications, that would in no way bother Pilate: their revolts would be a good excuse to send in the Roman legions to massacre the people. Pilate was past master in composing false reports for Rome and knew how to pick the right words to justify his actions. In the upper circles, nobody suspected that the Procurator was acting out of total madness.

The arrival of the Essene Christ changed matters somewhat. The civil war desired by the Zealots was a burning fuse that would lead to a bloody explosion like a cyclone sweeping aside all in its path. Pilate liked this new situation and allowed Jesus to act, so that it would become even tenser. He was not disturbed by Christ’s healing, because, in any case, Jesus could not checkmate the Scourge unaided: the most important thing was that these miracles were pushing the Jews into the Zealot camp. An alternative power was growing that could crush the Herodians and the Temple clergy. Pilate rejoiced over these coming fratricidal struggles and dreamt of an apocalyptic future in which, between the ergotism epidemic and civil war, the Hebrew people would be wiped out of the land.

However, months went by and the war still did not break out, so that Pilate finally realized that Jesus would do anything to avert the looming conflict. As Pilate saw it, these dubious maneuvers were of no consequence, as Jesus could not rein in the Zealots’ hatred forever, so it was just a question of time before the Promised Land was swept bare. Israel’s days were numbered now and Pilate concentrated his efforts on infecting fields.

Levi kept Pilate informed of the slightest action by Jesus. The Roman Procurator was fully aware of the false miracles orchestrated by the Essenes. Besides, Pilate knew who Jesus really was, because he was a guarantor of the secret of the tetrarchy by reason of his office. When Jesus made his Messianic entry into Jerusalem and was arrested, Pilate judged that the cutting edge of the Zealot revolt did not meet his expectations, so that fate had to be given a helping hand to trigger the outbreak of civil war. Pilate would put fuel on the smoldering flames by revealing the secret of

the tetrarchy to all and declaring Jesus the King of the Jews under the will of Herod the Great, validated by the Emperor himself.

In doing so, Pilate was acting in conformity with his prerogatives under a legitimate notarized deed, fully legal from a Roman viewpoint, so Pilate for once had no need to hide his actions. He knew full well what would result from this public announcement: Antipas would not inertly allow Jesus to take the reins of political power and war would break out, more deadly than ever, between the various Jewish parties.

Besides, despite the efforts of Jesus' disciples to counter its effects, the epidemic of ergotism was still growing and would totally annihilate those Jews who did not die with swords in their hands.

Pilate rejoiced at the dreadful outcome of the publication of Herod the Great's will.

However, an unforeseen event put a stop to this project.

On the terrace of the Antonia palace, when the Roman Procurator and Jesus found themselves before the horde of partisans of Caiaphas, Pilate initially thought that they were faithful disciples of Christ come to demand his liberation. Pilate hence presented Jesus as King of the Jews and was about to go on to proclaim Herod's will publicly. However, he rapidly dropped that idea when he realized that the mob was to Jesus and was demanding his death. However, Pilate would not grant them that folly. Feeling all-powerful, he mocked the Temple partisans by calling Jesus their king.

Pilate often had bouts of paranoia, so, when he saw the mob growing more agitated, he feared that it might invade the palace and kill Jesus. He lied, promising that he would have Jesus flogged, judging that this would calm the ardor of the Jews present, even if, in fact, he had no intention of doing it.

Then there was the sudden surprise: a cunning accusation was made that Pilate was a traitor to the Emperor because he recognized Jesus as king. That was an obvious blasphemy, because to proclaim oneself king was to declare oneself the Emperor's equal, so that anybody claiming to be king against Caesar's will was liable to death. Pilate had no chance to respond that Jesus was a king recognized by the Emperor himself, because Julius the guard commander saw a chance to win rapid promotion by eliminating his renegade superior and laid hand on his sword. Julius did not know that Jesus was a legitimate king and that Pilate's comments were in no way a blasphemy against the Emperor. However, Pilate did not get the time to explain that to him; to save his life, he had to say hastily that he was sentencing Jesus to death.

Pilate lost face publicly and for a brief moment he did not know what to do in these new circumstances.

Nonetheless, Pilate was like a cat: he always fell on his feet and had always been clever enough to take advantage of whatever events, good or bad, fell to his lot. In the case of Jesus' death sentence, Pilate had not played his last card: when he saw the resemblance between Judas and Jesus, an incredible plan had formed in his head.

Informed by Levi, Pilate knew that the new concepts being preached by Christ, even if he denied it, contradicted the Laws of Moses. They did not observe continuity, in the straight line of Jewish beliefs. On the contrary, they went off in another direction more or less opposed to the Temple scriptures. At any moment, a real schism might arise, giving birth to a new branch of Judaism. Pilate now had the idea of getting that new branch to supplant the old: with its foundations in some divine occurrence, that novel faith would sweep away all the Jewish beliefs and their synagogues.

The divine event would be the death and resurrection of Christ. That would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt his status as the Son of God, to whom submission was due.

Later, Pilate felt he would be perfectly capable of playing the part of an esoteric guru. He would pull the strings of a puppet named Jesus so that other dogmas, other places of worship would push out the Pharisees' forever.

Despite the various conflicting Jewish factions, the country's unity persisted and had a common denominator: the ancestral cult of the Patriarchs which was the moving and unifying force of the Jews. If that cult was replaced by another, national cohesion would fall to pieces and cause an unprecedented upheaval, such that the Temple's power would become just a distant memory. Whilst Pilate detested the Jews, he hated the Temple and its priests even more. To see them disappear forever would bring him measureless joy and he had no intention of depriving himself of it: he would play the trump card of Christ's resurrection.

Pilate's overview was accurate and penetrating.

He could afford the concession of stopping the ergot epidemic, because the idea of a new religion would destroy not merely individuals, but the whole foundation of the Chosen People: absolute faith in the Torah. Without that, the Hebrew nation would no longer have a soul; it would not survive that loss.

Besides, in the Gospels, Caiaphas would be attributed the intention of killing Jesus so that the people and the nation should not perish entirely. In them there would be an account of the fear that a new religion would be

born, that all the Jews would believe in Jesus and that Rome would profit by it by suppressing the Temple and even the nation to give it to other kings from neighboring countries under a protectorate.

That was an undeniable historical fact, on which Pilate intended to base his efforts to have the Jewish people eradicated from the Promised Land.

A religious civil war would break out, nobody would be able to remain neutral, and the conflict would spread to every home in Israel, between members of the same family. The confrontations desired by the Zealots or stirred up by divulging the secret of the tetrarchy would not have involved more than a tiny part of the population, the vast majority waiting and seeing. The future combat between Christ's partisans and those of Judaism promised to be much more terrible and universal. Under Pilate's control, the cult of Jesus would cause more ravages in the land than hundreds of legions putting down rebellions. It would not be a case of a handful of clashes restricted to certain areas, but rather generalized chaos where every person, every home would be affected without exception.

Religion was the only force capable of destroying everything at its passage.

In Pilate's mind, high on ergot, the resurrection trick was a better ploy for the destruction of Israel than public announcement of the tetrarchy.

Furthermore, playing at being a god was far from uncongenial for his ego. His mouth was already watering at the idea of the final touch he would put to his plan when he felt it appropriate. This final touch would be to reveal to all the secret of how Christ's resurrection had been rigged, but also how he had staged all his false miracles. He thought that he would also accuse Jesus of having ordered the Scourge by means of the contamination of fields with ergot.

When Christ, his church and disciples were masters of the Promised Land, such revelations would be the death knell of the Jewish people.

Then the divine whirlwind that would have swept aside the old Jewish beliefs would hit the cult of Christ, which in its turn would be blown away by the storm of truth. The nation would collapse into deep chaos, bereft of its mystic beliefs, its character, soiled, no longer having any rallying point, and it would end expelled and replaced by other ethnic groups.

The Pope stopped for an instant in his narration, then continued, concluding:

"If the religious foundations of national unity no longer existed, the whole superstructure of the Promised Land would inevitably fall in ruins. Without that religious basis to give a structure to their country, the Hebrews must finally disappear completely. That was Pilate's project ..."

The Pope lowered his head slightly.

“Besides, Pilate did not totally abandon the project of a civil war between Zealots and Herodians, because an opportunity arose. Some while after Judas’ crucifixion, Antipas came in person to see him and try to intimidate him. Antipas threatened to communicate to Rome that Pilate had lied in a public audience when he claimed that the tetrarch did not desire Jesus’ death, whilst Antipas had clearly stated to the legionaries of the escort that he gave approval for a death sentence. For his silence, Antipas hoped to have Pilate’s support when he petitioned Tiberius, in order to accede to the country’s throne. Pilate had no time for this blackmail and detested Antipas. Furthermore, when Pilate had had ‘Jesus King of the Jews’ written on the notice, that had been a deliberate goading of Antipas to make him furious. However, Pilate’s opportunistic nature grasped the opportunity of this visit to pretend to be Antipas’ bosom friend and he promised him solid support in Rome. Pilate hoped that Antipas would eventually ascend to the royal throne, so that the Zealots would raise their troops against him. Pilate was betting on every card in his effort to wipe out the Jewish people.”

Tom gestured agreement. Pensively, he murmured as if to himself:

“If rebirths are a reality, Pilate and Hitler are perhaps just one being ... that hatred for the Jews passed through rebirth and dictated the behavior of the new spirit ...”

Not knowing if Tom was speaking in earnest or not, the Pope did not reply. Remaining silently embarrassed, he directed his attention to his office window.

Outside, the star-spangled night was shining its flowers of darkness on the papal city.

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* *

To the rhythm of hooves drumming against the ground, the vehicle raced through the darkness.

In the blackness of the night, the wagon shook the wickerwork hamper in which Jesus huddled. The bumps in the road had re-opened the cuts from the lashes he had received from the whip, and his skin burnt where the blood was still trickling out of certain wounds.

Jesus clenched his teeth.

He knew that this was the final trial in his route of pain and that it would all be over as soon as he reached Pilate’s palace.

As if to confirm his idea, the massive gates of the Antonia fortress opened and the wagon drew to a halt a few moments later.

Marcus and Brutus seized the basket and carried it into the building. Striding briskly along the empty corridors, they came to a small whitewashed room lit by naphtha lamps.

The basket lid opened and Jesus raised his head with difficulty. Naked, cut about, and cramped by the long period of immobility, he could not get to his feet. Brutus gave him a friendly hand and helped him out of the hiding place. Jesus staggered across the room and managed to sit, with some difficulty, on the stool that Marcus brought him.

As the light of the lamps flickered over the empty walls, Jesus looked at the two men. Marcus' skinny figure contrasted with Brutus' burly frame. He came over and, holding it with tweezers, cut through the crown of thorns.

After delicately removing it, the centurion lavished care on him; raising his arm with its immense biceps, he pulled out the last few thorns still stuck deep in Jesus' forehead. He was agreeably surprised at such gentleness from one who had made him suffer so much with the lashes of his whip.

Brutus and Marcus grasped him softly by the arms and lifted him to his feet. In one corner of the room, a large tub of water stood waiting. Sticky with blood, Jesus pictured for a couple of seconds the pleasure it would be to bathe in it.

Not for an instant did he imagine that the bath would be worse than the crucifixion that he had escaped.

Not for a single instant did he suspect that the liquid vital to life would be for him the worst element in nature, far worse than the fire of gehenna.

Water ...

Brutus suddenly grabbed Jesus by the hair and plunged his head into the water. Marcus took advantage of the surprise to seize Jesus' hands and tie them behind his back, also binding his legs.

Jesus reared like a panicking horse. However, Brutus had foreseen his reaction and kept him in the vise-like grip of his monstrous arms. In terror, Jesus gulped a large amount of water, part of which made its way into his lungs. They were run through by an intense burning sensation and, despite the liquid in them, they felt as if a thousand fires were blazing in them.

Why was Brutus trying to kill him? What madness had come over him? Jesus had no idea. At a complete loss, sunk in an abyss of incomprehension, Jesus felt his life ebbing away. He was dying: death was grasping him in its evil clutch.

When he was on the point of drowning, Brutus pulled his head back out of the water. Jesus was enraptured by the gasp of air that for a while quieted the burning in his lungs. He began spitting and wheezing.

Marcus smiled wolfishly, seeing fear in Jesus' streaming eyes. He had barely got his breath back when Brutus plunged his head back into the tub. Seconds went by, seeming like minutes and Jesus wondered whether this time he would make it back to life. After what seemed like unending suffering, Brutus once more saved him just as he was about to drown.

For a brief moment while his lungs sucked air, Jesus' anguished mind asked itself why Marcus and Brutus were acting like that. Apparently, they could not stand the idea of a man condemned to crucifixion walking away from it unharmed. They wanted to see him dying slowly, as he should have perished on the cross. Pilate was not aware of their actions, and if he had been present the Roman would surely have ordered his soldiers to stop this madness.

However, Pilate was not there to save him and Brutus continued killing him, for each new immersion gave Jesus the feeling that he was dying. He could not overcome the terror of that sensation. At each ducking in the dark fluid, panic clutched his mind, swallowing up his will in nothingness, and that fear had the upper hand over him.

How many hours did the suffering last? Jesus quickly lost all track of time.

After endless time, Pilate came into the room. He was dressed in a long red cloak that hung down to his hairy legs.

On seeing him, Jesus felt his heart start beating wildly. He was saved; Pilate was there and his torment would finally cease.

Indeed, Brutus relaxed his grip. Marcus drew his dagger from its sheath and cut Jesus' bonds, letting him fall onto the flagstone floor. Followed by the centurion, Marcus walked out of the room.

Pilate calmly sat on a stool, staring at the tortured man. Jesus was physically and mentally exhausted. However, now that Pilate was there, his nightmare was over.

At least, so he thought.

Brutus returned with a heavy plank, which he put on the floor. A haversack slung over his shoulder, Marcus joined him a moment later, carrying a thick block of wood. His eyes glazed, Jesus did not understand what tricks they were planning. Brutus came up and dragged Jesus by the hair to the plank. Then he forced his hand down flat on the wood.

Next, Marcus leapt on the prisoner.

With three blows of a hammer, he nailed Jesus' palm to the plank. The pain was so agonizing that despite his exhaustion Jesus found the strength to shriek. Heedless of his cries, Brutus and Marcus hastened to hammer a long nail through his other hand. Then they took the block of wood and nailed Jesus' feet to it. He writhed like a caterpillar with its body cut in two.

"Jesus, you must obey me," said Pilate. "I am he who can aid you, who can bring your suffering to an end. Yet if you do not obey me, I shall inflict pain upon you ... great pain ..."

As if to give weight to these words, Marcus stuck a sharp piece of wood deep into Jesus' side. Marcus looked at the wound with contentment: it was supposed to correspond to the lance blow that Judas had been given on the cross by a legionary wishing to insure that he was dead.

"No! Not that side," grunted Brutus, "it was the other side ..."

"It matters little," cut in Pilate.

He leant towards Jesus.

"All this is needful," stated Pilate. "It is for your good ... Nobody must have any doubts on seeing your body brought back to life ... remember that you died on the cross ..."

Pilate gave a sibylline chuckle.

Brutus took a pair of pliers and pulled the nails out of the tortured limbs. Jesus shrieked, but the centurion paid no attention and tied his hands behind him once more. He dragged him by the hair to the tub. Just before his head was plunged into it again, Jesus saw Pilate's delighted look.

A memory made its way back into his battered brain: he recalled his very first meeting with the Roman Procurator.

He seemed a man well intentioned toward him, perhaps even spiritual despite all the crimes alleged of him, and when Pilate asked him if he was a king, Jesus had the sudden inspiration to speak to him of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Heavenly Father. Circumstances had not allowed that initial conversation to go any farther.

At the moment his head was pushed under the water, Jesus realized that no Heavenly Truth could ever reach into Pilate's inhuman heart.

His cruelty was a bottomless gulf.

For more than an hour, Brutus took malicious pleasure in grinding Jesus down mentally, bending him to the future demands of his superior. Brutus knew that he would succeed in this task, because he was well versed in this practice, which he himself termed an art.

Panic totally overwhelmed Jesus. The dark liquid finally drowned his willpower and part of his mind broke. He could not control his fear of

death. Through his instincts, it dominated his will, carrying him off into the abysses of animal terror. In that titanic leaping between nightmare and the reality in which he was becoming lost, Jesus came out into the primary source of his life, the dawn of his first awakening when he had not yet acquired awareness of his own consciousness.

Then, like a sun blazing in absolute nothingness, the woman who had given birth to him rose above the cosmos.

Mother ...

She was there, shining and splendid, vigorous and beautiful, like an immense goddess. He was enraptured by her look; he drank the divine and nourishing liquid that flowed from her flesh. She cuddled him, hugging him tenderly. The love he had for her was measureless and he belonged to her entirely, body and soul.

The hug became stronger and stronger, until it was painful. He could no longer breathe. He sought an answer to that terrible sensation in the eyes of his mother who was directing a tender gaze on him.

In a childish plea, Jesus protested:

“Mother, stop, you are hurting me ...”

She gently caressed his cheek.

“You must obey me, Jesus. Do you understand?”

“Yes, mother, I promise ...”

Coming from nowhere, a deep voice echoed out, ordering him to kiss his mother’s foot. Jesus docilely kissed it. He looked at his mother’s face leaning over him, lit up with a magnificent glittering smile. He wanted her to take him in her powerful arms again, to protect him with her presence merging into his.

Worrying shadows ran across that angelic face, distorting its delicate features. The divine vision then blurred and Pontius Pilate’s scowl bored into Jesus’ dilated pupils. He took some time to come round from the waking nightmare into which his mind had retreated.

Realizing what had happened, Jesus reddened with shame. Satisfied, Pilate gently caressed his damp hair.

“That is well, Jesus,” chuckled the Procurator. “Now we shall be able to work together for the future of Israel ... never forget that at your slightest disobedience, this tub of water awaits you and the Scourge will slaughter thousands of innocent people ...”

“You promised to halt the poisoning of the fields,” whimpered Jesus.

“My word is my bond,” said Pilate reassuringly, putting his hand on his heart. “From tomorrow, the diseased fields shall be destroyed. Thanks to

your courage, you have saved a host of souls. Yet if you wish this to endure, you must continue to obey me.”

Jesus nodded in silence. He knew that he had necessarily to collaborate and espouse Pilate’s cause for the sake of those people.

A figure emerged from the shadows of the room.

Levi walked towards Pilate’s standing form and set one knee to the ground.

“Stand up, my faithful friend,” ordered Pilate. “Take a seat.”

The plump redhead stood up and went to sit on a stool. His sardonic gaze rested on Jesus’ body, collapsed on the floor. Seeing his mocking apostle, Jesus realized just how wrong he had been about him. When he suspected his treachery because of his secret actions, Jesus had thought that he knew for whom Levi was working. As he was a former tax-collector stationed in Galilee, it was logical to assume that he was still working for the lord of that land: Herod Antipas. In fact, Levi was no underling of the tetrarch, but rather of Pilate, and had always been in his service. Levi was fully aware of the nature of the Divine Scourge, because he was personally involved in contaminating fields with ergot.

Later, at his Roman master’s behest, Levi had joined Christ to be able to spy on him. Jesus had allowed himself to be won over by the tubby redhead’s joviality and his open mind, seeing a potential Initiate in him. He had given both him and his brother the standing of apostles.

When Jesus discovered Levi’s betrayal, he thought that his younger brother James was his accomplice. However, Jesus quickly realized that he was no spy: Levi used him without his knowledge to gather and collate information about all Christ’s action.

James, the son of Alpheus, was simple and ingenuous in nature and allowed his brother, of whose intrigues he was totally unaware, to bend him to his will. James felt true love, even passion, for Christ and was one of his most faithful disciples.

James is good; he is from a different mold than Levi’s.

Jesus sighed inwardly.

If he had been more clear-sighted, he would have detected Levi’s involvement with ergot. Especially when he had gathered the apostles on the shores of Lake Tiberias, just before they set out on their apostolic mission to cure the Possessed and he had told them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.

With those words, Jesus intended to warn them against the bread that had passed through those clergy’s hands, for he suspected them of responsibility for the contamination of flour. He did not want the apostles

to eat it and be poisoned with ergot. However, he could not tell them explicitly, at the risk of uncovering the secret of ergotism, and he did not wish to give them any more precise instructions.

Levi assumed that Jesus was keeping the secret of the Divine Scourge so as to stage miraculous cures and thus monopolize the Jews' devotion for himself. Besides, overhearing a scrap of conversation between Jesus and John without their knowing, he had learnt that Christ wrongly believed the Temple involved in ergotism. So, mentally, Levi was sure that Jesus did not wish to speak in any shape or form of that subject, for fear of the sleight of hand behind his supposed miracles becoming known.

Levi put a foot in his mouth when he revised Jesus' primary meaning, stating that the Master had to be speaking figuratively and not literally, so that it was not yeast, but rather the Pharisees' teachings that they must distrust.

At that moment, a small light came on in Jesus' head and he wondered if Levi knew of the poisoning of bread. However, he had driven that bizarre thought out of his mind and hidden it away in his memory.

Now those comments from a past time took on special significance and appeared in their true sense.

Horried, Jesus listened to all the information which was carelessly spilled out before him. As if he were not there, or rather, as if he were just a pet dog, Pilate and Levi chatted happily without worrying in the least that he was there with them.

The two men spoke at length together. They had not been able to communicate other than through messengers for some time now, so this happy encounter allowed Levi to recount verbatim to his master all that he had gone through in the long months of absence.

Going back step by step over the major episodes, they exchanged anecdotes and repartee like warm friends. Amidst chuckles and loud laughter, they also described the Divine Scourge as if it were a hugely amusing show.

At this, Pilate remembered his promise to Jesus. As if to stroke a pet lying at his feet, Pilate ordered Levi to take the necessary steps to destroy all the contaminated fields and get rid of the poisoned flour.

Pilate then explained what he expected to do next concerning Christ's resurrection. On that point, Levi reported what Simon Peter had confided in him a few hours earlier.

The Passion...

Simon Peter claimed that during the days before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he had thought long and hard about that act, which necessarily

would entail the arrest and death of Christ, for such was Caiaphas' will. What passion was moving Christ to wish to go to Jerusalem where death inevitably awaited him? What was the reason for that incomprehensible sacrifice? What fervor could be motivating him?

Even if Jesus had tried to reassure his entourage by claiming at the last moment that he was going to take possession of the Temple, his Father's Kingdom on Earth, all of that was just camouflage so as not to frighten his disciples.

Because in veiled terms, Jesus had revealed his passion: his blood would be shed for the remission of sins. Through his death, the Son of God expected to redeem before his Father the offenses and transgressions of religious law of all humankind and thus wipe out forever all sin from the Earth, even the original sin of Adam and Eve. Then, human souls could shine out and no longer undergo the wrath of the angered Creator.

Jesus would save from legitimate divine wrath all sinners, even those who were going to kill him. Ascending up to heaven, he would gather men around him so that they did not fall into the fires of gehenna.

Lying curled in a fetal position on the cold flagstones, Jesus listened with surprise to Simon Peter's reported comments.

Simon Peter is wrong ...

The whole chronological structure of what the apostle called 'Passion', that sacrifice for the redemption of humanity's sins, was an error of interpretation. To explain Christ's Messianic entry, Simon Peter's imagination had built up an impeccably logical construction and he had given a special sense to the phrases uttered by Jesus, reading into them meanings totally different from what had originally been intended.

That imaginary edifice was nonetheless logical and perfectly factual, with the finishing touch of the crucifixion corroborating it.

Pilate adored Simon Peter's tale.

In that imaginary passion, he saw a novel concept to rally the whole Hebrew people behind Jesus. That was the first stone in the edifice of a future cult of Christ that would outclass the former Jewish beliefs.

Pilate realized that the strategy of propaganda based on the Passion was brilliant and would unite the nation around Jesus' death. Through that sacrifice, the Jews would feel a sort of diffuse debt towards the Son of God and would repay what they owed by rallying in their masses to Christ's cause.

Levi looked long and hard at Jesus, then spoke to Pilate.

“What is odd is that Jesus foretold that he would be betrayed and crucified, and would die on the cross. He also foretold that he would come back to life ...”

“What?” asked Pilate in astonishment.

Levi explained to him that two nights before, in Lazarus’ home, Jesus had stated before the apostles that he would be mocked, spat upon, scourged and crucified, but that he would rise again on the third day.

Pilate frowned and ran a hand through the sparse pepper-and-salt hair on his balding head. He snapped his fingers to order Brutus to pick Jesus up and help him to sit on a stool next to him.

“Did you really foretell your crucifixion?” inquired Pilate when Jesus was at his side.

Naked, his body aching and his mind befuddled, Jesus had to make an effort to concentrate and recall the episode. He remembered then that Simon Peter had said, speaking of Christ, that if the Son of God went to Jerusalem, he was bound to be killed. That had stuck in his mind, recalling to him the myth of Horus, that Son of God. Horus’ destiny had been sealed in an old, little-known legendary tale: he had been delivered to unbelievers, mocked, insulted, spat upon, beaten with rods, and crucified, but had ended up by coming back to life three days later.

Not watching his tongue, staring vacantly, Jesus had briefly run through that fantastic account in an audible voice. He had not realized that the apostles had heard him and imagined that he was speaking of himself, when in reality he was referring to Horus.

Jesus calmly explained that misunderstanding to Pilate, who burst out laughing.

“Perfect,” chuckled the Procurator. “What has been said, is said ...”

Pilate thought rapidly and added:

“If you said that once, it means that you said it several times ... at least, that is as rumor will have it ... do you understand, Jesus? Prophecies which come true always strengthen faith ...”

He sneered.

Levi spoke once more. In a few words, he related the previous evening and the meal with the other apostles. Levi was worried by a strange detail that Simon Peter had revealed to him: Jesus had indicated with a piece of bread who would betray him.

“Jesus truly foretold that Judas was to betray him,” said Levi.

Pilate turned his head to Jesus.

“You did nothing, though you knew that he was to betray you? Why so?”

Uneasily, like a child caught misbehaving, Jesus hung his head and explained the confusion there had been between Judas and Levi.

Pilate burst out laughing.

“History will retain only your greatness of soul in allowing the traitor to act ...”

Paying no further heed to Jesus, Pilate spoke once more with Levi. The Procurator informed him that he had ordered a certain Joseph of Arimathea to recover the corpse supposed to be Christ’s and hide it in his tomb. Doing this, Pilate also intended to stir up dissension within the Temple, because that Joseph was a dignitary of the Sanhedrin. When the news of the conversion of a high-ranking member of the clergy to Christ’s cause came out, solidarity amongst the priests would be undermined.

Like the cunning strategist that he was, Pilate planned Christ’s resurrection, working out the slightest details in a clear overall scheme.

Jesus found the conversation hard to follow.

In his exhaustion, his mind wandered, letting in memories of other times. These dominated his thoughts.

Simon Peter ...

Jesus remembered the extreme devotion of the former fisherman toward him from the very first day, especially when he had cured his sick mother-in-law. Fortunately, she had not been poisoned by ergot. She was afflicted merely by a simple fever and Jesus had been able to bring her temperature down rapidly; he always carried with him medicinal plants to concoct useful remedies. He had learnt this secret skill during his stay in Assyria, as also that of laying on hands, both having always been more than essential to him for treating all sorts of mild ailments.

After that cure, Simon Peter had been completely devoted to him.

Simon Peter was a married man. He left his wife to follow Jesus. The couple were not getting on well and Christ’s arrival broke the few remaining links with his spouse. Jesus did not blame him for that. There were separations which were preferable to that incomprehensible hatred that with the passage of time could overtake love.

Simon Peter immediately strove to serve his Lord as best he could, even if he disliked the Zealot preachings that Christ propounded. He was not fond of these crazy harangues ordering the people to rise against the occupiers and the thought of that bloody future strife wounded his sensitive nature. Nonetheless, his faith in the Son of God was stronger than those qualms that sometimes filled his fragile human heart with monotonous

languor. Simon Peter knew of the Zealots' doings, but did not wish to be personally involved, preferring to be Christ spiritual disciple rather than one of his fanatical partisans blinded by destructive frenzy.

It was with great, if contained, joy that he heard Jesus' new and radical teaching: the Son of God was at last merciful, preaching love towards all without distinction, and inwardly Simon Peter felt in tune with it.

He had a powerful gift of empathy and any creature's suffering caused him deep emotion.

Jesus had seen in him a future Initiate, and had wished to teach him esoteric heavenly knowledge, offering him the keys to the firmament.

Those which guaranteed the secret of the Kingdom of Heaven and the nature of Deus.

"... indeed, that is what Simon Peter told me. He does not believe that the Messiah will return ..."

Jesus' mind was brought back into focus by the words of Levi recounting Simon Peter's skepticism over Christ's powers.

Simon Peter had expressed doubt about the effective resurrection of Christ. A return to life was impossible after such torments, after so violent a death, after stab with a lance as terrible as had been described to him by John, who had witnessed the scene.

It was true that Jesus had revived Lazarus. However, that death by crucifixion had left incurable internal damage. It had destroyed the body definitively, eradicating any spark of life. No divine power, not even that of the Son of God raised up to heaven, could rekindle the flame of existence in so shattered an earthly envelope.

There were miracles that could not run counter to the laws of nature. Nonetheless, Simon Peter had confided in Levi: he still hoped that such a miracle might happen.

He was waiting, torn between doubt and hope.

Pilate nodded attentively.

"Yes, Jesus, how did you really deal with Lazarus?" asked the Procurator sharply.

Jesus explained the ailment afflicting his friend and what had truly happened on the day of his resurrection.

Pilate chortled.

"Your destiny is truly a chain of singular events. The scribes need not add much in order for your life to seem divine ..."

Levi spoke once more, recounting what Simon Peter had gone on to tell him.

Just before his arrest, while also prophesying Simon Peter's denial, Jesus had stated that when he came back to life, he would go on before his apostles to Galilee.

Pilate listened thoughtfully.

A fresh place of worship was necessary, so as to establish a religious counterweight to the Temple.

The North of the country seemed to be a wise choice for opposing the powerful South, such that a new holy place would arise and cast Jerusalem into oblivion.

For long minutes, deep in heavy thought, Pilate unconsciously scratched his face where the stubble of his beard was beginning to sprout.

"A tale like Mithras' life ..." muttered Pilate to himself.

He finally turned his head towards Jesus.

"You will become the Son of God and we will have the power of God on our side. For my part, I will be his divine will, his Holy Ghost. I will dictate what God wants. Are we agreed, Jesus?"

Jesus nodded in silence.

"Never fear," added Pilate, "I will be a good and merciful God ..."

Saying this, he burst into somewhat demented laughter.

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* *

Standing near the window, the Pope looked out at the night with its twinkling stars.

He allowed that void in his soul, which had never left him since he learnt the true story of Jesus, to wander out to the star-spangled firmament. As if he feared that his faith in Deus might be dimmed, to bolster his belief, his mind lit up with a saving spark in the form of a memory.

"Deus' power is such that it set off an earthquake when Judas died."

Faced with that claim, Tom grimaced disdainfully.

"Let's just say it was a happy coincidence."

The Pope paid no attention to this remark and went on:

"The stone seals of tombs were shattered by the quake and Pilate took advantage of that to stage a number of resurrections: he sent his agents to play at ghosts. They removed remains from graves to make people think that the dead had come back to life. Pilate's men were dressed in white shrouds and they amused themselves haunting sepulchres whose seals had opened. Eye-witness reports of these ghostly apparitions rapidly ran

around Jerusalem and set people's imagination afire. The rumor that Christ would come back to life on the third day after his death was also spread at that time. After Pilate's men stole Judas' corpse, it was the false account of the Temple serving-women that was on the lips of the population of Jerusalem. Once minds had been cleverly prepared for his return, Jesus was able to make an appearance ..."

The Pope let out a small sigh.

"Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was not chosen at random. Joseph was a high dignitary of the Sanhedrin corrupted by Pilate and involved in shady affairs. His whole fortune was hidden in his sepulcher: he had had a deep alcove dug out in it in which to hide his gold and even himself in case of danger. Access was totally undetectable, hidden by a flagstone that acted as a trapdoor. There was also an ingenious system of openings for ventilation and to see if there was anybody in the offing. Pilate knew of this and made use of it to have his 'angels' appear. Remember that in those days, men went bearded. Romans, in contrast, were clean-shaven. Pilate chose two handsome young legionaries. They were very easily dressed up to look like 'angels': they could appear and disappear at will, moving the flagstone ..."

The Pope continued his account: the previous day, Zechariah and the Temple guards had seen that the tomb was completely empty. When they took their place in it, the two 'angels' put down shrouding bands carefully folded so that it seemed that Jesus himself had placed them thus before ascending to heaven. Then, they set about playing the part of divine emissaries when visitors arrived. These were impressed by their presence and their descriptions of their meetings with these 'angels' caused a sensation, the tale growing and being decked out with exaggerations, as always in this sort of situation. There was an escalation in the accounts, especially those of people who had not seen them, but who brazenly claimed that they had personally observed these creatures of light in their shining robes. For once, the professional liars in Pilate's pay had no need to add their cunning inventions.

Jerusalem was in an uproar at the words of these 'angels': as he had himself predicted several times on different occasions, Jesus had come back to life on the third day and gone on before his disciples to Galilee. They would all meet him in the North of the country. Thanks to these statements, Pilate hoped to see a mass exodus of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the city's economy would be ruined and the Temple would be deserted.

The angels accused Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, to whom Christ had been handed over, as sinners, transgressors of the Law of Yahweh. They

were responsible for the murder of the Son of God. Supposed to be the trustees of Yahweh's earthly dwelling, the Pharisees and Sadducees had betrayed him by having his Son crucified. God was sure to depart from that accursed Temple, sullied by murderers and sinners, and establish himself elsewhere.

Jesus then made his appearance.

He showed himself in a number of places to a host of people. In locations that he could not reach, rumors were spread to confirm his presence. Maria Magdalena had the luck to meet him, to see him with her own eyes, and she wished to embrace him in her arms. However, Jesus kept her at a distance, because the slightest physical contact with his wounds was still extremely painful. He risked fainting, so great was his suffering.

Maria believed that the resurrected man had not yet accomplished his divine ascension or his definitive return to Earth. Jesus no longer had a physical envelope despite outward appearances. He was in a transitory stage, like a chrysalis, and any human contact might interfere with his transformation.

Jesus sent these witnesses to the apostles to tell them to go to Galilee with the people.

Since Christ's death, certain tensions that had been smoldering between the apostles flared up openly. Nonetheless, the apostles had understood the need to meet and take stock of the situation. Simon the Zealous was disturbed: he had lost not merely his Christ, but also his mentor Judas. He had always boasted of being Jesus' blood-brother and he was under the delusion that he was capable of anything, so the idea of legitimately taking up the torch formed in him. He thought himself strong enough to impose new rules, new commandments for the country's future. He hoped to see the renewal of the Kingdom of God on Earth, so dear to him as a Zealot, and the re-establishment of the royal house of Israel. He could imagine himself, weapon in hand, at the head of the rebellion.

Informed by Levi, Pilate was aware of these dissensions in the group and this worried him considerably. That group was intended to be the base for the future religion and if it was divided before leaving for Galilee, the mortar of faith that he had to impose on everybody would never seal up the cracks in Jews' minds. Besides, the Zealous was trying to force his views on the others. An end had to be quickly brought to that situation.

Pilate suddenly changed his initial plan: contradicting his 'angels', the exodus from Jerusalem would wait, with Jesus finally making for Galilee only once things were back in order. Above all, Pilate had the new

intention of definitively hammering the nail of fervor into the minds of the population.

For the moment, however, it was urgent to get the apostles back on the right track.

Jesus had to go see them, to discipline them. Given details by Levi, Pilate knew the layout of the house where the eleven apostles had gathered. To make an impression on the minds of his lieutenants, Pilate had the notion of having Christ appear as if by magic. At dusk, taking advantage of a brief moment when the group would go out to get some air, Jesus snuck into the house and hid himself as best he could in the old wardrobe.

As in any good magic trick, Pilate had need of accomplices in his audience. Apart from Levi, John was an integral part of his plan. It was these two who persuaded the others to leave the house to stretch their legs after a night and a day of almost total immobility.

Claiming that he would need an acolyte in continuing his mission, Jesus had asked Pilate to take John into his confidence. Jesus would answer for John as for himself, so Pilate accepted. That was a relief for Jesus who found in John comfort to support him in that terrible trial. Jesus needed a true ally in the camp of that enemy for whom he now had to work. However, his sole motive was the good of the people, the eradication of the Divine Scourge and an attempt to break the chain of destiny that faced him.

To make people believe in the apparition of a spirit, there was no better preparation to insure minds were ready to accept it than to hear a ghost story. Pilate ordered two of his henchmen to pass themselves off as disciples of Christ and recount the fantastic tale of what was supposed to have happened at Emmaus. However, the pair were late in coming and John decided to work alone with Levi, hoping to distract attention enough for Jesus to be able to slip out of his hiding place. Pilate's men arrived at that moment and in the end the play was performed before the apostles as initially planned. John then spoke out, attracting people's gaze, and Jesus made an appearance. John claimed to have seen him coming through the wall and the apostles, conditioned by the tale from Emmaus, believed him.

Jesus was starving after a long day during which he had eaten virtually nothing, so he hastened to ask for food. His appearance immediately dissipated all the doubts and dissensions. The apostles were deeply impressed and their devotion to him grew stronger than any personal considerations. Henceforth, Christ's mind irretrievably dominated theirs. The apostles were docilely subject to him, body and soul.

The Pope turned his gaze from the window to Tom.

“The Apostle Thomas was not there. When he returned after Jesus’ departure, he would not believe that he had come back to life. We find his words in the Gospels ...”

He opened the Bible that he was still holding and consulted John’s Gospel on this point. His eyes sought out one particular paragraph. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

“Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe ...”

Tom joined in:

“That’s where we get the expression ‘doubting Thomas’ for someone who believes only what he sees ...”

“Yes, and Thomas was not able to see Jesus immediately. He had to wait a week, because Jesus was exhausted. His wounds had become infected for lack of proper treatment. Pilate was afraid for his protégé’s health and allowed him a period of total rest. Luckily, Jesus knew the virtues of certain plants in aiding the healing of wounds. Once he was more or less returned to health, he was able to come back into the limelight. Levi and John staged the same scene again, having Jesus appear as if by miracle. They took advantage of the poor light in the room, so that as soon as Jesus slipped out of his hiding place the other apostles believed that he had once more come through the wall to enter the house.”

Tom frowned.

“Right, so Jesus managed to get them to believe he’d come through a physical object, in this case a wall. But how did he get out of the place? What did he do to seem to leave through the wall? It’s impossible ...”

The Pope shook his head.

“You do not understand. Jesus did not leave via the wall. He went out in the simplest way: through the door. The Bible speaks of an amazing entrance, but says nothing about his exit. He just walked through the door which John opened for him.”

Tom nodded.

“I get it now ...”

The Pope went on with his account: Jesus gave orders at length for the following day when he would make an appearance on the Mount of Olives before the people. The apostles soaked in his commands, which they took for divine, when in fact they were straight from Pilate. God’s Holy Ghost, the perfect celestial will, came from the deranged mind of Pontius Pilate.

He wished to impose a divine trinity, one sole God incarnate in three distinct elements: the Father was Yahweh, Jesus played the Son and the Holy Ghost was Pilate himself.

By word of mouth, so as to limit the number of spectators, the rumor of Christ's coming was circulated and several hundred people gathered on the Mount. These men and women would be eye-witnesses able to certify that Christ had returned and to pass on his demands. They were given bread, which they ate. They also drank wine. They were unaware that the bread they had swallowed contained the powerful hallucinogenic derivative of ergot.

The mix of alcohol and L.S.D. was an explosive cocktail that left them all tipsy. They were overcome by a heady well-being, convinced that they were now one with heaven, as with their neighbors whose inner thoughts they believed they could hear.

Into that incipient collective delirium, Jesus appeared and added a final touch.

Before the eyes of that crowd, staring and glazed, Christ emerged from nowhere. Dazzling in the bright rays of the sun, his white robes burnt into their dilated pupils as a painfully brilliant vision.

With a mild, beautiful and enchanting voice, Jesus hypnotized the crowd. It was his first attempt at that sort of collective hypnotism. Nonetheless, with the aid of the cocktail of alcohol and L.S.D., he succeeded in imposing his will of their minds. They believed that the Holy Spirit had descended upon them.

In a sense, that was true.

However, that higher will dominating the multitude did not come from God, or even Jesus, but from Pilate. To bring the spectacle staged by the Procurator to a close, Jesus persuaded their minds that he was rising up into the air. Like nestlings stretching their necks for food, men and woman turned their faces to the firmament, befuddled by the sky where they thought that they had seen Christ disappear. They would have remained like that for hours, if Pilate's 'angels' had not intervened, telling them to leave.

These 'angels' had been given the task by Pilate of ensuring that the acts and speeches of the apostles and of Jesus were in conformity with his expectations and of providing a detailed report of them.

That day, the people heard Christ's Passion stressed: the Son had redeemed the sins of humanity before his Father. This redeeming sacrifice sanctified a new alliance, confirming the eternal pact between the Chosen People and Yahweh.

By the sacrifice of his body, Jesus had washed in his blood the impure minds of men.

To commemorate that act, so that it would be everlastingly present in the Jews' hearts, Pilate had the notion of communicating the event and thus directly involving people in Christ's cause.

Levi had described to Pilate Jesus' practices with bread and wine. Marked with a strong symbolism, they signified the Master's knowledge and the divine science revealed to his disciples. Distorting that brotherly partaking of bread and wine, Pilate decided to give it a meaning that was no longer secondary, figurative or spiritual, but primary: it would be claimed that there was a real and substantial presence of Christ in the shape of that bread and wine, of his body and blood offered as a sacrifice on the cross and resurrected. That bread and wine was a sacrament, the sacrament of the Eucharist that gave Christ's death a cosmic meaning as a sacrifice for the remission of sins. Through such a custom, Christ would penetrate into everybody, wiping away sins and purifying through repentance.

The repentance that Pilate wanted was atonement for having honored the Temple and its religious connections that had betrayed and had killed the Son of God.

In one sense, this repentance went farther than the Zealot teachings, because Pilate much preferred the Essene commandments and their simplistic concept of the world.

Pilate had no use for Jesus' doctrine, occult and secret. He could make nothing of it and wanted nothing to do with it, because it was too complex to bring people together or condition their minds. The Essene concepts put about by Jesus when he was still completely under the control of the Head of the Order were ideally minimal for being understood and accepted by everybody.

As always, Pilate liked to combine carrot and stick to accomplish his aims. The notions of paradise and hell would be the cutting edge of his strategy to impose his demented will, or more precisely his 'Holy Ghost': those who came over to his side would receive the reward of happiness in heaven, whilst those who rejected Christ, ignored or combated him would undergo the worst torments beyond the grave.

Pilate did not want the Jews to wait and see. He wanted them to make a clear choice of which side they were on: either Christ's, or the Temple's. Pilate had a crafty idea for getting the whole nation behind his puppet.

This idea was baptism.

It had fallen out of use some time ago, because Jesus did not look kindly on it.

Originally, as instituted by John the Baptist to consecrate devotion to Christ, it had been above all a promise to be faithful to God's son in his combat against the Roman foe.

Henceforward, it would be no more than a simple sign of submission: it would be the crucial safe-conduct to reach paradise. Without that baptism, men were condemned to perish in hell.

The fear of dying without baptism would haunt minds and parents would rush to give a future life in heaven to their newborn, thus being tools in the bending of generations of little children to the desires of an evil mentality.

Hence, Pilate pushed Essene precepts into the foreground, as they corresponded perfectly to the Hebrews' expectations. He did not realize that this hope was not exclusively Jewish, but beat in every human heart, deep-rooted in human nature with its simple need to explain the complex divine.

Jesus was obliged to present that doctrine as his own, coming from God and his Holy Ghost. He validated by his authority the apostles to whom the people owed obedience. He invested them with supposed celestial powers, on exactly the same lines as what had been done in the past. Backed by the force of the Holy Ghost, they would head off to spread the new religion, starting in Jerusalem, then everywhere in the land and even to the four corners of the Earth: with these words, Pilate intended to galvanize and flatter all Christ's disciples so that they would feel themselves entrusted with a divine mission on Earth that was to be spread to all humankind. In fact, Pilate could not have cared less if this religion never went beyond the boundaries of Israel: it had been set up as a merely local affair to destabilize and destroy the Jews for whom he felt an unhealthy hatred.

To build up the legend, Jesus must stay no longer among men: he was to join his Father in heaven. However, he comforted his people by assuring them that he was always with them.

Despite many days of rest, he was still weak and his wounds needed to heal completely. Pilate also wished to use Jesus, though not immoderately, rather, at intervals in case of absolute necessity. He did not want to expose him unnecessarily and have the opposing camp capture him or even truly kill him. Jesus was too valuable and Pilate preferred to keep him in his hands like a treasure.

Furthermore, Pilate was afraid that Jesus might declare the truth openly, so in the end he decided to jail him in a dungeon of his palace. As for the apostle John, he was obliged to act as Pilate wished because of his Master

being held hostage. At the first sign of betrayal or disobedience to orders, Pilate had sworn to have Jesus killed.

For the moment, however, Christ was still to work outside.

Pilate had little confidence in the apostles who were to insure the propagation of Christ's doctrines, especially after the dissensions which had broken out within the group. He wanted to make sure of their total devotion to his 'Holy Ghost'. Initially, he encouraged them to find a replacement for Judas. Through trickery, Matthias was nominated the new twelfth apostle. Chosen in part for his innate oratorical talent and the many languages he had acquired over his lifetime, Matthias was an agent of Pilate and would work in accordance with his superior's orders.

Of the twelve apostles, three were now Pilate's puppets. With this fifth column infiltrated among the other nine, there was no problem in drugging their food. Jesus could then hypnotize them, making them believe that tongues of fire were baptizing them with the Holy Spirit. This came down upon them and they were filled with this higher force, which dominated their minds. They were convinced that this power from on high was given to them through the interceding of the Son of God who had gained the promise from his Father that they would be granted this privilege.

Following the Procurator's orders, Jesus molded minds so that they would tamely do what was in Pilate's 'holy' mind. This also somewhat enhanced in them the foreign languages that they had learnt long ago: when the brain is drugged, consciousness takes refuge in different parts of the brain, particularly those storing foreign languages. Instead of speaking mentally or aloud in its normal tongues, it spontaneously converses in different languages, believing it perceives all their tiniest subtleties, lured into a deep neuronal ambush.

From the next day onwards, the apostles were able to put into use those languages which they so happily felt they mastered. They received instructions to perform mass conversions: to impress the crowd of Jews, they preached Christ's religion in various tongues.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem believed that the languages spoken by the apostles came from a new divine power granted them by God, not knowing that in fact the Twelve had known them long before.

To stir up popular fervor yet more, demonstrating that the apostles had undeniable celestial status, Pilate organized a skillful piece of play-acting.

Each morning, a man paralyzed from birth was taken by charitable folk to sit before one of the Temple gates so that he could beg for alms. That filthy, hairy man was known to all. Pilate had him taken away and killed, replacing him with one of his agents, who played the role of the cripple.

When Peter was walking past this beggar, John whispered into the former fisherman's ear that through the power of the Holy Spirit he could get him to walk. Peter believed this lie in the name of Jesus Christ, he ordered the paralytic to stand. The crowd of onlookers was dumbfounded and all the witnesses to the miracle rushed to convert at once, asking to be baptized in the Lord's name.

Caiaphas was furious at the mass conversions of Jews and foreigners.

He had the two apostles seized. Caiaphas would have liked to have them garroted. However, it was impossible to act so, because the apostles had a powerful protector: Pilate had warned the Chief Priest that if anything whatsoever happened to the Twelve, the Temple would be held responsible and would answer for it to Roman justice.

Caiaphas could not understand Pilate's personal involvement in wishing to defend the apostles and suspected that the Procurator had converted secretly. Caiaphas would have liked to nip the growing Christian movement in the bud by cutting off the heads of its main leaders. Nonetheless, Pilate's warning was serious and could not be taken lightly.

Through threats, Caiaphas attempted to persuade the apostles to stop their actions. However, the apostles paid him no heed and continued their preaching in the environs of the Temple and even inside the enclosure.

At that same time, many Possessed flooded down to the city in the hope of being cured there. Having stocks of Divine Unction, the Twelve were able to achieve miracle cures that definitively brought the popular masses over to Christ's cause. Jesus' resurrection had been a triggering factor and now, as if in a flood tide, minds were fired by a true hope of heavenly salvation, carried along by the wave of baptism, which all accepted.

The apostles' actions became too much for Caiaphas to swallow, so he defied Pilate and had them arrested. However, they were helped by a man called Gamaliel. He had the rumor spread that they had been set free by an angel of God so that his own involvement in liberating them would not be known: Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin and, just like Joseph of Arimathea, was secretly working for Pilate. When the Sanhedrin met to confirm a death sentence for the apostles, Gamaliel skillfully opposed this with his eloquent pleading. In the end, Caiaphas had to cut short the debates: Pilate had again sent him a messenger to threaten him and the Chief Priest could not run the risk.

Thus the Twelve were able to continue their work in Jerusalem with impunity.

Nonetheless, if the Temple could do nothing against them, it was a different matter in the case of Christ's proselytes. With regard to them, the

laxness of the Roman authorities had allowed a free hand to those who fanatically opposed the new religion. Pilate had given up the idea of a mass exodus of the population and was now counting on fratricidal struggles to set the city ablaze.

A period of chaos and bloody violence divided the region. Many left Jerusalem, particularly the apostles, who were intended to continue spreading the will of the 'Holy Ghost' through the country.

The Pope halted in his narrative.

His troubled gaze wandered out through the window to the stars of the firmament. Then, as if a detail had suddenly come back to him, he added:

"People gave up everything in the hope of obtaining baptism and life in heaven. They gave their wealth to the apostles, who were able to build and organize the new cult ... a man called Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property to offer the money and win a place in paradise. However, they were not completely out of their minds and they kept back part of the price for themselves. Simon the Zealous was aware of the amount of the transaction and did not hesitate to strangle Ananias and Sapphira for that act, which the Zealot considered an affront to God. Peter willy-nilly had to cover up the crime, to avoid the murder becoming known to all, which would turn the people away from the apostles ... You see, Mister Anderson, there were murders on both sides. The early Christians were not innocent lambs as people like to imagine. Some were much worse than Caiaphas ..."

His voice bitter, the Pope finally went and sat in an armchair in one corner of his office.

*
* *

Despite great tiredness, Simon Peter was happy.

The good news desired by Christ, announcing salvation for all, had gone before him to the land of Galilee. Everywhere, people hastened to receive from his hands the baptism necessary to gain access to paradise. For day after day, endlessly, he had baptized in the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The water of Lake Tiberias had never stopped flowing over necks bent in submission to God.

How many had received salvation from his hands since Jesus' resurrection? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Simon Peter no longer had any idea. The faces of all those men, women and children mingled in confusion in his memories.

Sitting in his boat, facing the rising sun, he was rowing peacefully, returning to dry land. With a man called Nathanael and the apostle Thomas, accompanied by John and his brother James, as also Levi and Simon the Zealous, Simon Peter had the previous day taken to his vessel to go and fish as he had done when he lived from the fruits of nature. However, that night the lake had given nothing to the fishers. Naturally, he was empty-handed, but he was content at having been able to commune once more with those peaceful waves that rocked his sailor's heart.

A powerful voice was heard from the shore.

"Children, have you any food?"

Resting his oar for an instant, Simon Peter turned. Roughly eighty yards away, a figure stood on the lakeshore. Simon Peter imagined it to be a villager come to buy fish.

"No," was his shouted answer.

He was about to resume his rowing, but stopped in mid-movement. All around him, the waters of the lake became agitated, as if they were boiling.

"Cast the net!" cried out the stranger.

John obeyed the instruction. In a few minutes, the net was full of carp, thrashing somewhat frenziedly.

"It is the Lord!" exclaimed John.

At these words, Simon Peter's look lit up with overwhelming love. As if unable to resist a mermaid's call, he girded up his long tunic and cast himself into the water. Swimming with fiery determination, he soon touched bottom and began running towards the resurrected Christ. He fell to his knees, his arms hanging loose at his sides and looked up towards his Lord. He looked into Simon Peter's streaming eyes, the pupils of which glittered with a thousand points of light.

Jesus had always been fascinated by what the amputated beliefs of men could think up, especially in respect of 'miracles'. Such acts, setting aside natural laws and attributed to a divine power, were in fact, like chance, just the sum of ignorance.

Knowledge ...

Knowledge was the most powerful weapon for manipulating and dominating anybody. From his earliest youth, Jesus had had to channel such knowledge so that he would never lose control of it.

Jesus remembered his Greek Master, who had come each morning to teach him. Besides many languages, the man, nicknamed 'the cripple' by the gossiping women of the village, had bestowed on him vast erudition, which he had to keep absolutely confidential. Learning was not to be passed on to just anybody. Only the highest elites and the Son of God

could access it. At least, this is what his Master had stated. Besides, his mother Mary had told him much the same thing: the 'divine knowledge' that he now possessed should be kept secret and not used indiscriminately. She particularly feared that Jesus' 'miracles' might become known in the region and that the heirs of Herod the Great might pick up the tracks of the divine child and kill him.

In an uninterrupted flow of sequences buried in the depths of his being, these 'miracles' now flooded back into Jesus' memory.

The very first event that had deeply marked the minds of those who lived around him was when he smashed a jug containing water drawn from the village well. Practical for a mischievous child of six, putting his Master's teachings ingeniously into application, he had smeared pine resin all over his long mantle, until it was fully watertight. He then used it as one might a goatskin container to carry water to his home.

A few years later, Jesus went out with his father Joseph on the day that he was planting corn in their field. His Greek Master had given him seeds from a distant land and Jesus had sown them. At harvest time, the crop seemed extraordinary and divine to the local peasants who had never seen such a yield and set it down to Joseph's son's heavenly powers.

This belief was confirmed by the episode of the snake that bit the hand of James, Jesus' half-brother. Jesus rushed to help him, and as if blowing on the wound he sucked out the poison before it could spread into his bloodstream. In this way he saved the life of his older sibling. To crown their astonishment, the snake was found dead: its poison fangs had broken on its victim's bone and it had not survived that injury.

The Master's medical knowledge was considerable and Jesus realized that the Greek scientific tradition was a thousand years ahead of the rest of the world.

A young woodcutter also had the luck to be saved by the knowledge which Jesus had learnt. The man was cutting wood when his axe slipped and cut into his foot. He was bleeding to death. People ran up but were unable to stop the hemorrhage. Jesus arrived at that moment. Knowing the vital pressure points in the human body, he pressed his hands on the man's leg and under the astonished eyes of the spectators the woodcutter's blood stopped pouring out of him. They all looked on Jesus as a prodigy, a divine being.

That day, though still a child, he had fully grasped what frenzy could be stirred up in ignorant minds by superior knowledge.

Zenon ...

It was the same when Zenon, his playmate, had fallen from a roof and died. At least he would have died irremediably had Jesus not given him the kiss of life, breathing into his lungs and massaging his heart vigorously.

At another time, a little girl had choked on a piece of bread. Jesus had then forcefully gripped the girl's body and by squeezing the top of her belly hard he had expelled the unfortunate food that was blocking her throat. He had told her mother to remember what he had done, so that if the same thing happened again, she would herself be able to replicate this basic technique.

Amongst all the inhabitants of Nazareth, not one had seen through the mystery to the facts in the widely-known events of Jesus' childhood. They had all credited them to the divine hand of God through the intervention of his Son.

At that time, enjoined by his mother and his Greek Master, Jesus had had to keep secret the truth about these actions. Later, when he incarnated the Essene Christ, circumstances had counseled him not to reveal the secret of the new 'miracles' that he was performing. He had been pushed center stage and could not come down from the pedestal on which he had been set. The part of God's Son that he played allowed him to keep Zealot madness in check and thus avoid civil war.

In that Messianic period, apart from the fantastic cures of victims of ergotism, Jesus had been able to put his knowledge of medical science at the service of people.

He remembered the day when he met a funeral procession on the outskirts of a town called Nain. People had the unfortunate tendency to bury those who they thought had passed away too rapidly, when in fact they were not dead. In a good few cases, it was no more than an apparent decease, a coma misleading minds. The bodies of the sick could start running in slow motion, life virtually imperceptible. If care was not taken, somebody who was still really alive could be condemned to certain death by being buried. When he could, Jesus liked to check that all life had genuinely left the body of the deceased, which he did at Nain.

He went up to the coffin and put his hand on the neck of the supposedly dead boy. The pulse was still beating feebly. With his other hand, Jesus discreetly slipped out from under his mantle a phial of salts, which he put under the lad's nose. The pungent smell stirred his sleeping brain at the same time as Jesus' loud injunction stimulated his hearing, so that he came to, his consciousness reactivated.

The astounded crowd cried out that it was a miracle.

Of course, only Jesus knew that there was nothing miraculous in all that. He recalled the experiment that his Greek Master had shown him when he was still just a young boy. The Master had caught a fly on the wing and drowned it in a jug of water. When it was dead, which it undeniably had to be, as it was no longer moving, he had put it into salt. He declaimed some magic utterances to impress Jesus, and restored the fly to life. Shaking its wings, it had finally flown away, circling the Master as if to thank the man who had given it back the life which he had taken from it.

When Jesus did something similar with Jairus' daughter, who had been suffering from symptoms that apparently had led to certain death, the news of her resurrection swelled the wave of fervor towards Christ.

That popular frenzy had sometimes deceived itself by mistakes that worked in favor of Jesus.

Cana ...

Attending the wedding of the son of an old friend of his family, Jesus had been there that morning when the wine merchant had come with his wares. To relieve the host, somewhat overwhelmed by the preparations for the festivities, Jesus had himself taken delivery of the wine, helped by Judas Sicariot. The merchant had apologized for not having brought all the wine in appropriate jars, because he had not got enough of them available: he had had to put the rest of the wine in water-skins. Nonetheless, to compensate for that unacceptable state of affairs, wishing to keep a good customer, he had put in them wine of a much better quality than the original order. During the evening, when all the wine in the jars had been drunk, Jesus went out into the yard. He ordered the servants to take the skins and pour their contents into empty jars that usually held water for ablution. He did not want to spoil the taste of the higher quality wine by putting it in the jars that had held the other batch. In the gloom, the servants did not see that the skins normally used for holding water contained a very different liquid. They were amazed and thought that Jesus had transformed water into wine.

Jesus was uneasy at this error and was going to explain the truth of it. However, Judas Sicariot, grasping what the mistake was, ordered him with a glance of his dark eyes to keep silent. They must not waste that misunderstanding, because it came at an ideal time, just before the 'miracles' of the draught of fishes and the multiplication of the loaves were staged.

In a similar way, although in different circumstances, he had not been able to clear up another case of cross purposes.

Rebecca...

In Samaria, at Jacob's well, near Sychar, he met Rebecca. The ugly scar that ran across her cheek did not detract from the great beauty of this woman with the very light eyes and Jesus immediately recognized who she was. It was the first time in his life that he had seen her. However, on his way he had met her lover, a man called Samuel. He was leaning against a tree, his eyes brimming with tears, and he told Jesus the reason for his sadness. He loved Rebecca, who had already had five husbands, and Samuel, himself married, could confide in nobody from the region for fear that they would inform his wife of that clandestine relationship. In his despair, he did confide in a stranger making his way to the well: Jesus. Samuel hoped that Jesus could meet Rebecca and speak to her, serving as a go-between in that impossible love affair, because the young woman was angry with him and did not want to see him again. Jesus had agreed and Samuel had described Rebecca's appearance, telling him that she went to Jacob's well every day to draw water.

Living water ...

Meeting this woman with her insatiable amorous passions, Jesus was inspired to speak to her of living water: his teachings, which he soon would communicate to all from the Temple, would take away desires with a river of truth and enlighten dark minds with the light of a life of salvation. Through knowledge, all would be freed of their insidiously pleasurable desires and detach themselves from the cycle of rebirths to insure for themselves an everlasting life in the firmament as angels. Through that water pouring out like a divine fountain, through his precepts deriving from the Heavenly Truths, nobody would ever again thirst for life, but would shine in splendor in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Rebecca had been impressed by these esoteric statements and by the fact that Jesus knew her name and the story of her life. She was not far from seeing in him the Messiah.

Judas Sicariot had returned from the town at that moment and Jesus had reluctantly had to claim that he was that Christ ...

"Lord, you are here! My heart rejoices ..."

Simon Peter's words brought Jesus' consciousness back to the present. He helped the apostle to his feet and hugged him warmly in his arms. Simon Peter's eyes glowed with a thousand lights at the sight of the earthly envelope of Christ and at having been once more a witness privileged to see a miraculous draught of fishes. Simon Peter stared delightedly at Christ.

He was not alone.

Besides Pilate's underlings who had gone to the 'Rock of the Hare' to stir up the fish, Jesus had a further good escort: the Procurator had imposed a bodyguard on him. Thirty yards or so away, Simon Peter saw those beings who looked confusingly like Romans, because they were clean-shaven. He knew, though, that under those misleading physical appearances angels of God were hidden.

The apostles' boat was beached and the net bursting with carp was hauled onto the shore. There, Jesus had already set a fire, on the embers of which a small fish and some bread were laid to cook.

"Bring some of the fish which you have now caught," said Jesus. "Come and dine."

The apostles and the man called Nathanael sat around the fire and silently watched the food cooking. Just like the others, the apostle Thomas dared not speak to Christ. It was the third time that he had appeared to him since his resurrection from amongst the dead and Thomas was dumbfounded by this divine presence of the Son of God.

Jesus seemed lost in his thoughts and said no word to them. Finally, they ate the fish with a good appetite and shared the bread that Jesus offered them.

At the end of the meal, Jesus rose.

"Simon Peter, do you love me?"

The apostle answered in the affirmative. Jesus asked a second time, pointing to the other men.

"Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?"

Jesus emphasized the last words. Simon Peter looked with his candid eyes at Christ.

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Yet, despite this response, Jesus insisted.

"Simon Peter, do you love me more than these do?"

A shadow of irritation ran over the apostle's face.

"Lord, you know all things," said he in a somewhat upset tone. "You know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep," replied Jesus to placate him.

Did Simon Peter understand where this was leading? Jesus doubted it. Yet he had to make him understand that amongst the apostles sitting round the fire, one was not a faithful friend and that his sayings and doings were not to be trusted. However, Jesus could not do this explicitly because the man was present himself: Levi was keeping an eye on his slightest actions and one word too many would have aroused his suspicions.

Jesus avoided the eye of the former publican, adding:

“Truly I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you wished. When you have become old, you will stretch forth your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish ...”

Jesus knew that John had told nobody the truth about the situation. John was obliged to be submissive to Pilate’s will for fear that he would have Jesus killed.

Jesus had thought long and hard and had vowed to speak to Simon Peter as soon as he met him. However, he could not tell him all the ins and outs of the dreadful situation in the light of his resurrection. If he told Simon Peter the truth, would he believe him? No, for sure he would not. There were truths which were unable to drive out mystifications that had been burnt into people’s minds.

There were veiled secrets which could not be unveiled.

Nonetheless, Jesus had to speak to him, because he could not let the apostle spread lies. He hoped to nuance, to correct all that by telling him the true heavenly laws that governed the cosmos.

Naturally, he was fully aware that it would be perhaps no more than words writ in water against Pilate’s ‘Holy Ghost’. All the same, Jesus was convinced that he must talk with Simon Peter, profiting from this scheduled encounter. He would doubtless never again have an occasion to do so.

Yet how could he go about it? Levi was definitely there and his presence prevented him from putting his decision into practice. Inwardly, Jesus began to pray for the Heavenly Father to come to his aid.

A few minutes later, Deus did take a hand. Juggling with the Celestial Equilibrium and Karma, Deus acceded to Jesus’ request. With some urgency, a messenger ran up and murmured into Levi’s ear. Although right beside him, Jesus heard only a few of the hastily muttered words, but enough to realize that it was a question of cash directly concerning Levi. He was such a money-grubber that he dared not leave the matter for later. Levi stood up, looking at Jesus and wondering what course to follow. However, his decision was rapidly taken, for what could Jesus do even if not watched so closely? Nothing, because he was condemned to obey Pilate tamely if he wanted the fields infected with ergot to be destroyed. Reassured, Levi followed the messenger and they went off at a brisk pace.

They had scarcely left his sight when Jesus told Simon Peter to come with him.

As he walked along the shore beside Christ, Simon Peter kept his eyes on the peaceful lake so dear to his heart. The noise of footfalls was heard. At a respectful distance, John was following them.

“Lord, what of him?” asked Simon Peter.

Jesus glanced over his shoulder.

“If I wish him to stay close to me until I come to him, what does that matter? You just follow me.”

He went and sat on a rock and invited Simon Peter to do the same. John also sat, some thirty yards away, waiting for Jesus to finish his talk with Simon Peter.

For some minutes, Jesus remained silent, thinking over what he should or should not say. He wanted to tell him about the Heavenly Truths, so that Simon Peter could absorb them and spread among men their primordial substance, perfect knowledge. Yet if Simon Peter began openly preaching in a way different from what Pilate’s ‘Holy Ghost’ required, the Roman’s suspicions would be aroused and the apostle would lose his life. It was thus crucial for this esoteric knowledge to be transmitted only in confidence, under a seal of secrecy and exclusively to worthy people capable of understanding its deepest content.

How, though, was he to explain to Simon Peter in so little time knowledge which Jesus himself had spent years working on before he could absorb it completely and perceive all its breadth and depth? The task seemed daunting, but time was pressing and he had to be quick in getting down to passing on the Heavenly Truths by means of figurative statements.

To get into the heart of the subject, Jesus touched on the notion of the spiritual being fallen into the material realm, having to free itself from it in order to get out of the cycle of rebirths.

“Who knew the world found the body, but he who found the body, the world is not worthy of him ...”

Going from surprise to surprise, Simon Peter listened to Jesus describing the laws that governed the heavens. He felt thunderstruck when Jesus stated to him that the demiurge, the creator of the world, was an evil being, as was the cosmos he had begotten. For over an hour, Jesus covered many topics, hoping that the apostle would manage to assimilate it all. To conclude, Jesus said to him:

“Blessed is the lion which the man eats, for the lion will become man. Cursed is the man whom the lion eats, for the man will become lion ...”

The lion was the symbol for devouring passions, desires overwhelming the mind. A man had to devour that lion to eradicate it forever from his

being and above all not be devoured by les passions that lead to other desires, chaining the soul to the cycle of rebirths.

His face fearful, Simon Peter nodded gravely.

“I have a question, Lord ... Who is Deus?”

Thoughtfully, Jesus remained silent for some seconds. Should he divulge the incredible nature of the Heavenly Father? He was not sure that men were ready to accept the inconceivable evidence.

Jesus enigmatically replied:

“Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death. Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will rule over all in glory.”

These words stamped themselves deep upon Simon Peter’s mind. He bowed respectfully. In conclusion, Jesus stated:

“I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood: I am there. Lift up the stone and you will find me there ...”

Simon Peter nodded his head, grasping the allusion. As Jesus had already specifically asked him to note, he wanted no places of worship and above all no religion in his name.

The mission seemed a heavy task for Simon Peter, who suddenly found himself very much alone against the forces of adversity.

“Lord, upon which amongst the apostles may I relay? You have told me to put no trust in Levi ...”

Jesus looked at the apostles sitting some way off, around the fire.

“Thomas you may trust. Trust no other amongst them ...”

Simon Peter acknowledged this with a blink.

“Go now with the others,” commanded Jesus.

His head full of images, Simon Peter went off to join the apostles. As soon as he was far enough away, John came and sat next to Jesus.

“Your mother knows that you are alive,” said John to him. “She realized that you did not die upon the cross. She confided in me in a moment of weakness. Still, I made her promise to reveal this secret to nobody.”

“How did she discover this?” murmured Jesus quietly.

“Your birthmark ...”

John explained that the night when Joseph of Arimathea had taken away Judas’ corpse, Mary had had a chance to look at it from very close. The rays of moonlight had strongly illuminated Judas’ body and Mary had been

struck by a noteworthy detail: Jesus' birthmark was not there. Despite the blood that had congealed in dark patches, Mary should still have been able to pick out that mark in the shape of an inverted heart on the upper part of Jesus' wrist. She had realized then that it was not the mortal remains of her son that Joseph was going to bury. She had not dared to speak of this to anybody. However, just before he departed for Galilee, John had met her and she had confided in him, freeing herself of the bonds that crushed her spirit.

Jesus mused on the fact that the birthmark had not been visibly missing during Judas' crucifixion, as the upper part of the wrist had been held against the transverse bar of the cross. Pilate had taken good care to hide the absence of that birthmark, which at one stage had allowed Jesus to have himself formally identified by the Essenes as the son of Joseph of Nazareth, a descendant of King David and born in Bethlehem.

"What will they do with my mother?" asked Jesus.

"I have already taken steps to care for her. She will remain in Jerusalem. She will lack for nothing ... I mean financially ..."

The promise that John had made to Judas on the cross, to take care of Mary, was being curiously fulfilled.

"She also told me that she wanted to see you once more ..."

Jesus nodded his head slightly. He did not know if he could see her. He could not act as freely as he wished. Pilate held him in a grasp of iron.

Jesus remembered the time when he had met her again after years of separation.

Cana ...

She had not seen him since his flight to the Orient. When she walked into the house in Cana where the wedding guests were gathered, she had not recognized her child: she had thought she was in the presence of the ghost of a younger Herod the Great. The same tall body, neat beard and long, curly hair, the eyes an identical blue, Jesus was an almost perfect picture of his father. She had finally realized that she was in the presence of her own son. However, he had not been able to speak freely to her and had been distant towards her.

On infiltrating into the Essene community, moved by premonition, he had claimed that his father and mother were long since dead and he had no close family. Later, his sixth sense had proved correct: had the Head of the Order been able to lay hands on his mother, he would doubtless have used her as a means of exerting pressure to get Christ to fulfill his demands, not hesitating to kidnap or even kill her.

If she were discovered, she would run grave danger. At Cana, unable to speak to her himself, Jesus sent John in his place. The apostle had a brief talk with Mary, requesting her not to meet her son but to keep away from him. He obscurely hinted at an imminent danger of death. Mary consented not to approach Jesus. Nonetheless, she changed her mind when she heard of the Zealot ideas that Christ was preaching. She was horrified to learn that he was ordering the people to rise up against the Roman occupiers and the Herodians to restore the legitimate royalty of Israel.

With her son's half-brothers, she tried to meet him and make him see reason, believing that he had gone out of his mind. She could not get into the house where Christ was speaking. Learning of her presence, he sent John again. To convince Mary, John had to take her into his confidence about the situation. She then realized the extent of the crisis. She agreed to take refuge in Jerusalem for Jesus' sake and her own.

Mother ...

Any Zealot menace now seemed excluded.

Jesus gazed into the distance. Simon Peter had joined the figures sitting around the fire. Since Christ's resurrection, Simon the Zealot had become Jesus most faithful disciple, more of a king's man than was the king himself. He had spared no effort in spreading the message of the 'Holy Ghost', rejecting his Zealot past even if he still expected the time would come when God would restore royalty in Israel. On this point, at Pilate's command, Jesus had gone softly with the Zealots' consciences to bring them over in masses to Christ: he had claimed that his Father had fixed the time for this on his own authority and that it was not for anybody to know that hour. Simon the Zealous had been deeply marked by Christ's return to life and he put all his crazy enthusiasm into imposing faith in the Son of God. He sometimes let his violent nature run away with him, forgetting his resolutions to be merciful and forced baptism for salvation on people by fear.

The apostle Thomas had also broken completely with his Essene brethren. Humbly, like them all, he had given up any idea of reward, wealth or effective power over the tribes of Israel as promised by the Head of the Order. The apostles' greed had disappeared since Christ's resurrection, changing their view of things, breaking down their egoism. They wished to taste the promised paradise and feared that their greed would prevent their access to it, as Jesus had hinted in the past. Entire fortunes were laid at their feet by the proselytes, but they wanted nothing of these treasures for themselves. Human nature was like that: one day murderous and lusting for material goods, the next willing victims sacrificing themselves for an abstract notion. Thomas was now working

body and soul for Christ, devoted to him with the most extreme and seamless love. Jesus appreciated Thomas and had full confidence in his abnegation.

“Lazarus is in danger,” said John. “Caiaphas is searching for him ...”

“Why?” asked Jesus in astonishment.

“Some Jerusalem traders spoke to Caiaphas’ spies. They have learnt that our friend was the recipient of the rare ingredients that we ordered for the making of the Divine Unction. However, Lazarus was able to flee from his home with his sisters ...”

Pensively, Jesus let his eyes wander over the lake’s blue waters. Caiaphas would not hesitate to have Lazarus killed, like any other who stood in the way of his somber ambitions.

Whilst Lazarus had been able to escape what seemed certain death, Stephen had not been so lucky. His friend, the Initiate of the Temple of Osiris who had cured a goodly number of Possessed in his name, had been stoned to death at Caiaphas’ orders. Among Christ’s disciples, a marvelous tale was going the rounds about Stephen’s confrontation with the Sanhedrin. It was even claimed that on that occasion Stephen’s face had been surrounded by a halo of divine light, like an angel.

“What will you do now?” asked John.

Thanks to his agents, Pilate had long been aware of the village from which Jesus originated and the legends recounted by the folk of the region about the birth of the Son of God. The tales of the Three Wise Men or of the Immaculate Conception had become fully believable upon Christ’s resurrection and that had tickled Pilate’s fancy. He had ordered these fables incorporated into the scriptures that Jesus was to write down so as to replace those of the Temple.

“I must draw up the good news of my rebirth,” murmured Jesus. “As Pilate’s ‘Holy Ghost’ desires ...”

His sea-blue eyes unfocused, without bitterness, he let his mind rock on the waves of a thinking agitated by bile.

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Tom frowned.

“What? Jesus wrote the Gospels?”

“Yes,” the Pope replied. “Or more precisely the draft that allowed others to write the story of his life. Besides, if you reflect for a moment, how else could certain statements, certain details that only Jesus could

know, be in the Bible? He alone could recount them and we find his hand in the various Gospels. Jesus was forced to produce the draft when in prison ...”

The Pope continued by saying that Jesus’ draft had been handed to Pilate’s scribes and to John who had to write a document announcing the ‘good news’. John produced a chronologically acceptable story, embroidering Jesus’ death at the Jewish Passover and drawing a parallel between the slaughtering of the paschal lamb and of Christ, the Lamb of God sacrificed for the ransom of men’s sins.

Levi also wrote a tale. In his fictional chronicle, he invented the birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem and highlighted Christ’s Passion, his agreeing to sacrifice himself for humanity’s salvation, going just once to Jerusalem where an inevitable death awaited him. Later, Levi’s text served as the basis for the writing of the synoptic Gospels, made up by branches of Christianity wanting to pass on their faith in the Lord to various target communities, for example, the people of Rome. Then, the circumstances, date and place of Jesus’ birth were established from Levi’s lies, not in any case corresponding to the reality of the times.

On Pilate’s instructions, avoiding the notion of Roman foes by threatening with divine wrath all who opposed Christ, the scribes cunningly twisted the bellicose exhortations that Jesus had uttered at the start of his Zealot ministry to present them in a noble light. People were to endure dissensions and suffering but keep the faith, in the name of God’s Son.

However, Pilate had no monopoly on texts describing Christ’s life. Numerous people wished to contribute accounts of what they had directly or indirectly witnessed at the time. Most often transmitted orally and written down late, many narratives covering diverse episodes concerning Jesus set minds afire. Simultaneously, despite the historical realities that later would give some historians the impression that Jesus was just a legend, mythical and unbelievable creations appeared. Those writing such manuscripts could recount incredibly untrue things, as Jesus’ true resurrection was in everybody’s mind and the wool could be pulled over anybody’s eyes. Hundreds of documents arose thus and among them the warlike Zealot words of Christ’s very first days were also present, those in which he evoked fratricidal strife and coming famines.

“Famines did take place,” the Pope stated. “However, they were not caused by the burning of fields by the Roman legions stamping out a Zealot rebellion. Paradoxically, they were the result of a promise made by Pilate to Jesus: he had to burn the fields and flour contaminated by ergot. That led to a period of countrywide famine. Pilate must have been amused

by this promise made to Jesus, which in the end led to worse misfortunes for the Jewish people, already prey to violent warfare between religious sects ...”

The Pope fell silent for a few seconds, then continued. Like a prophecy fulfilled, the old Zealot statements about famines and conflict now stole a march on the reality of the day. Even though these words had been uttered to describe a future combat against the Roman legions, they corresponded to what was really happening at that point, thus giving yet more credit to Christ as a prophetic oracle par excellence.

In that period of great disturbances, many hoped for the return of the Son of God, that he would definitively re-establish the Kingdom of God on Earth and that his Father would dwell there to bring peace and harmony to Israel. They were not waiting for Christ to arise, but simply to return.

Despite the strong opposition of the Pharisees and the bloody actions of their fanatical partisans who tore the country apart, nothing could stop the butterfly effect, or better the snowball effect of enthusiasm linked to Jesus’ resurrection. In a climate of insecurity, Christian places of worship still managed to prosper and multiply to the detriment of the synagogues which were beleaguered by Judeo-Christians.

Caiaphas was not alone in trying to hold back the Christian tidal wave: the Head of the Order also attempted to do this. He wanted to regain control of a situation that had escaped him. Still striving for his greater Israel and the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem, he thought he could divert fervor back in his favor by presenting a new Messiah to the people. He failed lamentably, as did all the other Essene impersonators who tried later. These henchmen of the Head’s in vain tried all the cleverest stratagems, even claiming to be Jesus in person; they were considered false Christs.

The Head was caught in his own trap, hoist with his own petard, because he himself had ordered Jesus, from the very start of his pro-Zealot preaching, to warn the population against all those who might come presenting themselves as the Messiah. Jesus had cautioned them against a false Christ, an Antichrist who before the end of days would try to oppose the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth and establish an order contrary to Christ’s. In fact, the Head of the Order had feared that, as a reaction against the Essene Christ, Caiaphas might undermine his plan by supplanting him with another Christ, a Pharisee impersonator Christ. Jesus had thus affirmed that Christ, to prove any claimed divine status, would flash from one side of the sky to another like lightning, which it was clearly not in just anybody’s power to do.

So, the Head had thought he had scotched any potential counterattack by the Temple. Later, having broken free of Qumran, Jesus had continued

to utter these warnings so that the Head could not slip in a replacement for him at the last minute.

Pilate finally had the Head of the Order killed so that he would not disturb his project for a new religion in the Promised Land. The decapitated Essene movement took decades to get over this completely. However, it later regained strength. It was responsible for the Zealot armed insurrection that grew into a war of independence, finally ending in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the 'second' by reference to the first, wrongly attributed to Solomon, and in the Jewish Diaspora. As it were, just deserts for this nation who had used false divine documents to seize territory which in no way belonged to them.

The Pope drummed his hand on the arm of his chair.

"Eleazar was one of the Zealot military leaders," he said. After the destruction of Jerusalem, he commanded the last pocket of Jewish resistance at Massada. Facing the Roman legions, the Zealots preferred to commit suicide with the women and children rather than surrender. Such was Zealot folly, which disappeared with the death of all its combatants between 66 and 74, during that war between Jews and Romans. The Essenes did not survive the disappearance of their armed wing, either, and deportation finished off their community, just like the Sadducees. Only the Pharisees managed to reorganize themselves and the Jewish religion around the Torah, which was to lead to rabbinical Judaism."

Tom nodded, then asked:

"What about the Essene scriptures? Can you clarify about them? It's obvious now I was barking up the wrong tree about them ..."

"Yes, indeed. I know that you believe it was the Essenes who first drew up the myth of the Messiah, who was to come to save Israel and that thereafter this was bid up into claiming that he had already come and been rejected by all, finally leading to his crucifixion. However, you now understand that this is not true. In fact, the Essenes were afraid of Roman investigations discovering that they were formally linked with the Zealots. So, to hide their secret actions and not suffer Roman justice, they had several libraries, with hundreds of books of all sorts, maybe even Judeo-Christian later, and they had code their books so as to distinguish real from false."

Tom grimaced.

"This whole story's very complex."

The Pope sighed.

"The story of Jesus is complex, which is why nobody has ever succeeded in solving the true jigsaw puzzle of his life. Humankind has

always been in possession of the various pieces in the puzzle, but nobody has ever managed to fit them together. It is difficult for a non-expert to lighten the shadows of the past, for all the various participants of the period took specific care to hide what incommoded them. As an example, the Judeo-Christians during the war between Jews and Romans: they destroyed the majority of documentation of pro-Zealot teachings uttered by Jesus in his lifetime and disowned them totally, to avoid being considered the Zealots' accomplices. Hence, they broke away from Judaism and even from the Jews to save their lives. They gave prominence to Jesus' message of love, his message of peace, tolerance and even submission to the Roman 'enemy', so as to avoid the very worldly punishment of the edge of a Roman sword ..."

The Pope fell silent for an instant and Tom asked:

"What became of Jesus?"

The Pope looked briefly at Tom.

"He finally escaped from prison after years spent in a dungeon in the Antonia fortress ..."

The Pope went on to say that at John's express request, Jesus intervened personally with Saul. He had been the Temple's right-hand man in repressing the growing Christian communities. John took the initiative of converting Saul to Christ's religion so that he would stop persecuting and even killing innocent souls. On the way to Damascus, his travelling companions had not truly been people encountered by chance: in reality they were close friends of John's entrusted with drugging Saul and play-acting the return of Christ to Earth for his benefit. After a long, exhausting walk, Saul collapsed, and with the aid of mirrors John's men concentrated the sun's rays on their target. However, the ergot-based drug given to Saul was not free from all toxins. A poison attacked his nervous system, leaving him blind. The scheme was not going as initially planned and Saul was urgently transported to Damascus. He remained there several days before Jesus, alerted by John, could find the necessary ingredients and make the Assyrian remedy. Jesus explained to Ananias, a long-standing Initiate friend, what treatment to give Saul and how to administer Divine Unction to him to counter the toxic effects of the ergot. When he was cured, Ananias gave him a dose of ergot L.S.D., because Jesus had agreed to help in John's original plan to convert Saul to Christ's religion so his killings would end. Drugged, Saul thought himself at the gates of paradise and he enjoyed divinely euphoric sensations before meeting the Son of God in person in a shower of psychedelic light.

Jesus, who wanted no church, was wrong to convert Saul to Pilate's 'Holy Spirit' doctrine, because the former key player in the Temple's

campaign became the leading light in Christ's cause and spread his new faith as far as Rome. Saul was a fanatic, a fiery soul who devoted himself unstintingly to an ideal. His ideal was essentially religious. For him, God was everything and he served him with absolute loyalty, first persecuting those whom he considered heretics, then preaching of Christ when he became convinced that in him alone was salvation.

In Israel, for that salvation, Jews converted in masses. Nonetheless, it was not an all-engulfing tide as Pilate had hoped. The twilight of Moses' Laws did not come, because the Procurator had underestimated an egocentric characteristic of humans: the liking for belonging to an elite. The nationalistic notion of the Chosen People was a psychological factor for unity and the Jewish religion was deeply seated in generation after generation shaped by King Josiah's lies, almost a genetic inheritance.

Pilate would have liked to wipe out these pockets of resistance once and for all, but circumstances prevented him. In fact, Pilate was under scrutiny from Rome: at the highest levels questions were being asked about his term in office. There was puzzlement over the declining tax revenues, information from various sources speaking of conflicts between religious groups without intervention by the legions to restore order, or tales of fields of crops burnt for no obvious reason.

Despite Pilate's reports confidently denying that anything of the sort was true, doubts grew and spies were dispatched to Israel. Pilate learnt of this and acted very prudently. Nonetheless, the long, detailed inquiry by the spies confirmed suspicions and evidence of Pilate's hidden actions was sent to the Emperor.

Pilate was obliged to return to Rome to plead his cause.

He knew that it was useless lying to the Emperor and that if he did, he would die slowly over months of horrendous tortures. It was better to explain everything in a detailed report, attempting to convince those concerned that it was appropriate to suppress the Jews of Israel, describing that people as the long-standing enemy of Rome, who had often caused and would always cause clashes. Pilate's pen strove to emphasize that it was legitimate to try to annihilate those Jews, whether through ergot poisoning or through a new cult destroying the religious foundations of that nation rebellious to Rome. Pilate revealed all, giving precise chronological details of the deliberate contamination of fields with ergot of rye, the Temple being fully aware of the Divine Scourge, but holding back in the hope of gaining benefit from it, the Zealot plan and their orchestration of false miracles through Christ, the latter's role thereafter, right down to the fake resurrection staged by the Procurator. Pilate presented his involvement as a noble task, indeed lacking the Emperor's

prior permission, but working for him and his Empire because the Jews did not recognize Tiberius as their living God incarnate.

The Emperor was impressed by this frankness, by arguments not lacking logic from a Roman viewpoint, and flattered by the expressions used by Pilate about him. He decided to spare his life, but condemned him to banishment in harsh confinement in Gaul.

Pilate eventually died there.

His face filthy and bewhiskered, Pilate became completely mad, the substances derived from ergot having eaten away his brain. As proof, from his prison, he converted to Christianity, entrusting his own spirit to the 'Holy Ghost', which was something he had dreamed up himself. He had gone completely out of his mind and, in a last delirium, hanged himself from the bars of his cell. His wife Claudia also converted to that 'Holy Ghost' when Pilate was recalled to Rome to answer for his administration. Refusing to accompany him, she stayed in Jerusalem, joined the group of Jewish Christians and became Saul's mistress. Later, these Christians convinced themselves that Pilate had been summoned and executed by the Emperor for having had the Son of God in person killed.

Obviously, this was not so, the truth was quite different.

Tiberius minimized the affair, not grasping the full extent of this 'Holy Ghost' sweeping over the Empire. However, he died shortly afterwards and his successors on the throne did not see matters with the same eye when they learnt of Pilate's report. They took draconian repressive measures against the early Christians. Worried to see the spread of the infant Christian faith, fearing that some other place of worship might supplant the center of the world that was Rome, one Emperor even ordered his legions to raze the village of Nazareth to the ground. Successive Emperors strove to nip in the bud this false religion, of whose origin they were fully aware: it came from no divine source, but was the creation of one man.

Habitually tolerant of the different religions in its Empire, crushing exclusively those sects that threatened the balance of power, Rome nonetheless hounded the disciples of Christ, as also his doctrine, so mild and respectful of authority. Historians put forward various hypotheses to explain that oddity. However, none of them knew what the Emperors knew: Christianity derived from a human fraud.

Nonetheless, Rome could not directly tell the true story of Jesus, because that revelation would have thrown the suspicion of the peoples of the Empire on the entire Roman administration. At the slightest famine or natural epidemic, the effigy of Pilate would have been resurrected to the accompaniment of howls about a tyrannical plot, which, in the end, would

have led to the destabilization of the whole Empire. Furthermore, revealing the secret to try to cut short the Christian movement would not have worked at all: the proselytes would never have believed it. They were ready to die as martyrs to win their paradise rather than listen to reality. Faith withstands everything, even logic and clear-cut truth.

The virus of religion had been inoculated and nothing could now eradicate it.

All the participants at the time decided for these reasons to hide the Pontius Pilate Report. The Sanhedrin did likewise when the Egyptian scribe sent a copy of the document to the Temple. If the people learnt that the Roman Procurator had been responsible for the Divine Scourge, it would have been like a spark to kindling and rallied all the Jews to the Zealots. Besides, the direct involvement of the Temple through its willful passivity, knowing for sure that the fields were contaminated by ergot, made it the undeniable accomplice of Rome. The people would have stoned the Sanhedrin if that had become known.

So nothing of the secret leaked out, either from the Temple or from Rome.

Unable to rid themselves of it, the Roman authorities finally tolerated Christianity, though not accepting it. For the next few centuries, the religion Pilate had created navigated murky waters, between flat calms and the storms of torment due to the decline of the Roman Empire which needed a scapegoat for its failings.

The Pontius Pilate Report faded from memory, lost in the midst of semi-official archives.

On his accession, the Emperor Constantine backed the Christian religion as the right horse in the race to reunify his Kingdom. When Pilates report was later discovered by accident, there was no going back. In full agreement with the highest authorities of the Church, when they were informed of the grave crisis that threatened if the true nature of the 'Holy Ghost' became known, the decision was taken to seal Jesus' life in a leaden coffin.

The censors set to work. Realizing the full value of the various texts, all the authentic significance of each word set back in the context of the period, they hastened to destroy them so that the secret would never seep out and scream the truth to all those Christians, ignorant deaf who alas would now never hear anything. Efforts were made to suppress almost all the writings in circulation, especially those relating Jesus' childhood, because the 'miracles' recounted in them might unfortunately appear in their true guise. If any experts in the old Greek medicinal lore had taken an objective interest in the deeds credited to the child Christ, they would

have realized that these were no miracles, just cures achieved by relevant skills.

Stressing Christ's Passion and his sacrifice to redeem humanity, three Gospels deriving directly from Levi's text were selected, as was John's work. There was retouching, there were additions, various rewordings, all aimed to insure that the Zealot statements present were swamped by the flow of narrative and did not let the cat out of the bag. These traces of Jesus' Zealot past had flummoxed exegesis, so interpreters were still wondering about the meaning of the intransigent words put in Christ's mouth.

The passages describing the apostles' use of Divine Unction to cure the Possessed were erased, so that nobody would ever suspect that it was simply a case of applying a remedy to an ailment. However, evidence of the practice had slipped past the censors' vigilance in the mass of multiple copies. In one case, in Mark's Gospel, there was a blatant affirmation, stating that the apostles drove out demons and cured many sick by anointing them with oil.

The censoring ordered by Constantine was nonetheless effective and it successfully hid all the truths about what had happened in Jesus' century and especially about ergotism. Later, when episodic epidemics of ergot struck Europe and America, although fully aware of the secret of the Scourge and the source of contamination, the Church let the Evil run its course. These new Possessed reinforced everybody's faith because there was no remedy but prayer and this allowed the Christian will to be imposed by speaking of sorcery, not disease. The Church even had cities opposing its divine view poisoned.

The madness of power had terrible effects on minds.

The perfect knowledge transmitted by Jesus himself was also pulped by the Church. Censors attacked the writings bequeathed by the secret cutting edge of Gnosticism, unaware that he was also one of the heads of the early Church.

In a final meeting before he was jailed in Jerusalem by Pilate, Jesus revealed a great part of the Heavenly Truths to Peter. When he saw him, Peter was already prey to great internal disquiet: he could not understand why the Holy Spirit had left him. It was true that he could still cure men and women afflicted by ergot, thanks to the Divine Unction. However, despite all his faith, he could not reproduce miracles on those crippled from birth, as he had believed he had done in the Temple when Pilate had craftily substituted one of his underlings for a cripple well known to the townsfolk.

In that period of doubt, owing to the revelation of the true laws that governed the Universe and came directly from the mouth of God's Son, Peter's dismay grew even greater. He then realized that Jesus had come down to Earth to reveal the evil nature of his Father and his creation. He suspected that something had happened between Son and Father in the firmament, and that the promise of redemption might no longer be valid. Peter wondered whether Jesus had truly come to redeem humanity's sins. Peter was no longer sure on that point, because Jesus had stayed vague, even asking him to continue to preach the 'Holy Ghost' to mankind. Peter tried to delve into the depths of the God-Deus mystery, striving to determine its intentions. His deductions and beliefs fused with the essence of oriental mythologies to provide precise conceptual images of this. In secret, he set up Gnosticism, explaining the possibility of individual salvation through a mystical course of initiation, also revealing that the 'Holy Ghost' was neither as holy nor as perfect as the primitive Church proclaimed.

The Church strove to spread its concept of salvation for all through baptism, whilst gnosis, in its esoteric teachings, restricted it to the initiated alone. This fundamental difference worked in the favor of Christianity and later of Islam, because salvation through just joining was much more attractive than personal effort to acquire initiation painfully distilled. That, too, was the reason that these monotheistic creeds had spread so swiftly in comparison with other religions requiring specific individual efforts. Humans took the path of least resistance; their brains shunned complexity and wanted to simplify everything so as to have a quiet life. They had always needed to be guided spiritually, to be dominated by institutions set in stone and bound in iron. Alone, they were like sheep terrified by the wolf of intellectual freedom, social animals longing for structures incorporating all their needs.

Helped by this human characteristic and by successive political powers, the Christian Church had little difficulty in outstripping the Gnostics and denigrating them to justify their elimination. As time went by, sentences became harsher and harsher, forcing Gnostic groups into a clandestine existence or destroying them.

However, the 'perfect knowledge' bequeathed by Peter did not pass away entirely and Freemasonry was one of its historical heirs. Furthermore, gnosis trickled into Shiite Islam, where its influence was undeniably felt. This influence also permeated Judaism, its echo being perpetuated in the Cabbala.

Peter never split it off from the early Church, that burgeoning religious sphere. On the one hand, because that was Christ's will, on the other

because he wished to remain one of the masters on board of that vessel laden with redemption. Besides, if he had abandoned ship, some captain blinded by primary faith would have taken the helm and steered it onto the reefs of ignorance. So, with great discretion, Peter navigated in the Christian wake all the better to impose another doctrine, able to act freely and initiate those chosen into gnosis without suspicions arising that they were members. Peter even pretended to reject the Gnosticism that spread wherever he went, to the extent of openly criticizing it. Thus, he achieved the masterstroke of never being discovered, keeping hermetically sealed the secret of his faith.

To hold his place as Christ's worthy heir, preventing Levi or some other from seizing the torch of the faith from him, Peter was obliged to lie, embellishing his life story with miraculous deeds. An example was when he claimed that, to pay a debt when he was on the shores of Lake Tiberias, Jesus had told him to cast a line and he had caught a fish with a coin in its mouth. His disciples touted about this fable together with many others that were grafted onto the writings in the Church's canon. In the struggle between leaders wanting to set their own stones in the building, the apostles or Saul did likewise, trying to gain a certain legitimacy by making ever wilder claims of fantastic exploits, pure fables that seemed totally normal in the light of the miracles accomplished by Christ.

Informed on by one of his peers, Peter was executed in Rome. As he himself requested, he was crucified head downwards. It was not to endure even greater martyrdom, but simply to send a message to the whole world: Christ's teachings should be looked at from a different viewpoint, in a direction contrary to traditional angles.

Gnostic to the end.

The Pope gave a small sigh.

"For his whole life, Peter was torn between the salvation for all advocated by Pilate's unhealthy 'Holy Ghost' and individual salvation as described to him by Jesus at their last encounter. That dilemma, however, corresponds with the reality of things, two true and complementary concepts of salvation. Salvation for all because Deus had the effective power to take souls out of the cycle of rebirths. Yet individual salvation is also important, for it allows total suppression of the residues of desires that sometimes Deus does not manage to eradicate and that push souls into rebirth. In this matter, Peter held the two keys leading to the authentic paradise. However, I believe that the individual key was of use only in Jesus' times ..."

"How's that?" Tom asked. "What do you mean?"

“Two thousand years have gone by. The Vatican and I myself are deeply convinced that individual salvation is no longer current. Deus has greatly increased his heavenly power since then. Nowadays, he can without a doubt save all human souls from the cycle of rebirths, except those of murders who return to the hell of lives on Earth, or, indeed, to the burning nothingness in certain cases, if the soul is black and instinctively refuses the light of the Judgment of Deus.

The Pope nodded gravely at what he had said and added:

“Thanks to the Christian Church, the faith of the devout towards our Heavenly Father brings him a greatly enhanced spiritual force and the mere fact of loving him and worshipping him reinforces his power in the firmament. At this moment, Deus is capable of freeing anybody from the cycle of rebirths, so the cycle has become obsolete at human level.”

Tom frowned.

“If I’m following your logic, where do those new arrivals come from? I mean, if Deus saves all human souls, then who’s reincarnated in new-born babies’ bodies? Mathematically, it doesn’t work out ...”

The Pope smiled mischievously.

“The Cosmos is infinite, Mister Anderson. Souls in search of an earthly body do not come exclusively from our dear old Earth. Besides, the souls of animals inevitably eventually to a higher plane, for everything evolves on all levels of creation ...”

Thoughtful, his eyes unfocused, Tom nodded silently. The Pope ceased speaking and turned his gaze to the large crucifix on the wall. After a minute or two, Tom did the same. Then he muttered, as if to himself:

“When I think of the wooden cross I wore so long around my neck, or the crucifix I entrusted all my prayers and inner thoughts to, and it turns out it was really Judas ...”

“The story of the cross had a strange twist,” the Pope replied in a voice that tried to be gentle. “The Zealots had chosen as their emblem the cross of the crucified so as not to forget who were the real enemy to defeat: the Romans. All Jews should wear that wooden cross around their necks as a sign of solidarity and to distinguish the faithful from the unfaithful on the battlefield. Jesus wore it all the time, even when he broke free from the Head of the Order, so as not to cause an open breach with the Zealots. Later, Pilate dictated his ‘Holy Spirit’ and did not want that cross as an emblem. He wanted something else, but left the choice to Jesus. So Jesus chose the fish, symbolically shown as two arcs of a circle overlapping. Deus inspired that choice in Jesus with a heavenly vision. That fish does not indicate the water of baptism, as might be thought: it represents the

spiral found at the very heart of nature and the Universe, in the spiral of a scrap of D.N.A. or the spiral that is the structure of galaxies ...”

The Pope let out a slight involuntary snort.

“The Church later imposed the cross on Christians as an emblem replacing the fish. Over the history of the Church, through arbitrary political choices, there was a resurgence of the cross, just as there was of the Eucharist. Originally, the Eucharist had been instituted by Pilate’s ‘Holy Ghost’. However, with no more drugs in the bread, no more ergot L.S.D., that practice gradually died out over the decades, for the apostles who had been taken in by that trickery could no longer bring down the ‘Holy Ghost’ on the crowd. Under the influence of Mithraism, the Church brought back in the Eucharist centuries later, for it had the need to impose uniting sacraments.”

The Pope fell silent and stared into Tom’s eyes as if to read his thoughts. Tom sustained the old man’s gaze.

“Now that I know the truth about Jesus,” Tom said, “I fully realize how mistaken I was about him. Just imagine, I believed that Jesus was just a myth ...”

Tom giggled nervously.

“To err is human,” the Pope responded. “Jesus’ life is a set of coincidences that can lead one to believe it a myth. For example, the name Lazarus which somewhat resembles the Egyptian mummy El-Azar. That is by chance, as can happen with many words in the world of language. Jesus truly lived, and because of the similarities with Horus and Mithras, deliberate or not, the cult of Jesus easily outclassed them, for it overlapped with previous beliefs. Besides, there were eye-witnesses who did not bring mere imaginary tales, but truthful, factual accounts. That swept away the legends of the past.”

Tom nodded.

“What became of Jesus afterwards?” he asked.

Like a small child caught misbehaving, the Pope slowly lowered his eyes. Clearly ill at ease, he cleared his throat. Finally he rose from his armchair and approached the window. Outside, in the depths of the night spangled with the flowers of darkness, his eyes sought out the lights of the firmament.

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The mild heat of the sun warmed his closed eyelids, exquisite scents delighted his nose, which wrinkled in pleasure, and the twittering of birds formed a happy symphony that hugged his mind with a melody of salvation.

Then Jesus opened his eyes and looked around him.

Hosts of colors were a rapture for his sight: magnificent flowers crowded round on all sides, birds with sumptuous plumage darted hither and thither, chirping out a hymn to life. Fluttering from flower to flower, butterflies with multicolored wings added their ocher and pastel shades to that rustic composition. Elegant cottony clouds drifted across the blue sky in which pride of place was taken by the fiery star that cast its rays on that idyllic scene like a good father resting his strong protective arms on his children's shoulders.

The paradisiacal garden in which Jesus liked to wander was not just an enchanting sight for him: this place was a refuge for his soul. Jesus had a gaping ulcer of memories that left an unhealthy mark paining his mind. There were wounds that might never be cured, that formed definitive scar tissue only through oblivion.

Nonetheless, in that divine place on Earth, Jesus had found some semblance of inner peace.

A haven of peace ...

His hands delicately stroked the tall red flowers with their heady scents. With slow, serene step, he walked forward among these splendid displays.

A score of yards from there, a little to one side, a dead fig-tree was in stark contrast with the rest of the scenery. Yet just the previous day the tree had been contributing to the attractive view of vegetation, its attractive leaves all present.

In one single night its leaves had fallen.

Jesus knew that the fig-tree had already been dead inside for days, despite its outer appearance. It had been eaten away from inside by insects that had killed it. A strong gust of wind had finally blown away those leaves, which for a while had still given the misleading illusion of flourishing life.

Life is merely an illusion ...

Jesus made for the threshold of the attractive white building which rose modestly in the center of the garden. Through one of the first floor windows, he glanced into the bedroom. Bundled up in a pink blanket and deep in slumber, a delicate, slender body was still lying there on the double bed.

My lover ...

Despite what some great Buddhist spiritual Masters might say, love was not a desire in itself. On the contrary, love transcended all beings. Love did not bind the soul to this earthly world below, but raised it to the divine firmament. Only its sexual aspects made beings captives of the cycle of rebirth through a craving for pernicious pleasures.

The love that most men and women felt for each other was, alas, a love of convulsive impulses, driven by the flesh, not the soul. When preaching in the past, Jesus had advocated celibacy as the ultimate weapon in order not to be shipwrecked on that reef of lust.

Jesus, for his part, was above all such sensual addictions. In his Hindu phase, he had learnt to master his senses, even, or perhaps especially, during sexual acts. He could enjoy them without being enslaved by them, was totally detached from them, dominating them, not dominated by them. This gave a feeling of divine power, for, without hesitation, he had the strength to brush aside in an instant all these impulses in which the soul became lost.

Jesus was thus capable of pouring forth love for all, capable of loving physically without that thirst of desire. Maria Magdalena had had the good fortune of knowing such platonic love with him. Jesus, captivated by that slim siren's eyes, could not refuse to give her the tenderness that she so wanted from him.

Maria, Lazarus' sister, had fallen victim to the ergot and had become Possessed. Jesus had managed to drive those 'demons' out of her, and the special day of that meeting had set the seal of a fierce love on them. However, circumstances demanded that they should not stay together: Jesus feared for Maria's safety if their union became known to the Head of the Order, aware that he would certainly use the young woman as a means of exerting pressure on the Messiah to make him work in accordance with the Essene plan.

So, Maria stayed on the sidelines. Helping Lazarus, she transported amphorae of Divine Unction in her wagon, hiding them where her brother indicated. That was never far from where Jesus was. Her mission accomplished, she took advantage to join her lover and slip into his bed. Despite Jesus' precautions, this affair quickly became known to the apostles, so he was forced to present Maria officially. To cut short any debate, not wanting his love thought a prostitute, Jesus wedded Maria before the Twelve, who kept the marriage secret at Jesus' express request. The apostles followed his instructions, because since the miraculous cures they had considered Jesus the true Son of God, to whom total submission was due, so the Head of the Order learnt nothing of the wedding.

Jesus often confided in Maria, gradually trying to teach her the laws governing the Heavenly Father's Kingdom. In contrast, he never told her the truth about Divine Unction and ergot. It was not to keep her ignorant about him: rather, he judged that Maria's shoulders were not broad enough to bear the weight of that terrible secret, so she might unburden herself to some evil ear when she felt lost and far from him. Some dangerous truths could disturb the most attractive of minds and were best kept hidden.

His interludes of tender passion with Maria were brutally cut short when he was imprisoned in the Antonia fortress. Only after escaping did he learn from John that his wife had given birth to his child. Thinking him now in the Kingdom of Heaven, not wishing news of this birth to harm Christ's divine status, she had finally taken ship with the child for an unknown destination.

Maria is far away now ...

Through the window, Jesus once again looked into his bedroom. The pink blanket was empty, carelessly dropped on the large bed.

Two slender hands covered Jesus' eyes.

He gently removed them, kissed them softly, then turned.

John was there, gazing at him tenderly, as if wanting to eat those two eyes like blue apples.

John, my sister soul ...

Jesus leant forwards, as did John. The two men kissed at length, mouths open, the tongue of each searching out his ethereal counterpart's. Jesus' heart was beating wildly; he felt as if he were growing wings.

Wings of love.

Jesus pulled his mouth reluctantly away from his lover's and stared into those eyes that shone like two jewels. In the billows of their almond-shaped light-colored ocean, Jesus caught a saucy glint. John whispered a few words in his ear. In the echoes of that sweet voice, Jesus felt his soul tilt and he smiled tenderly.

"I love you," said he in a whisper.

"I love you too ..."

The love affair between Jesus and John had begun the very day of their meeting at Qumran. Since then, that shared sentiment had never left them. When Jesus announced that he was marrying Maria, John had not been at all upset. He knew that his lover was able to offer noble love to many, divine love, so that he would be selfish to want him just for himself.

John kept out of Maria's way, so she knew nothing of the two men's liaison: conscious of Maria's rebellious and still immature character, Jesus

did not want her to force him to make the impossible choice between her and John.

The apostles were aware of the two people enshrined in Christ's heart. Some of them narrow-mindedly considered this a scandal, but they never spoke of it, for fear of shattering people's faith in the Lord. Besides, if such was his will, who were they to judge God's Son? The Head of the Order, seeing in Jesus the inevitable candidate to embody his Essene Christ, also closed his eyes to this passion when told the facts.

John was soberly described as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' and nothing further was mentioned. After Christ's resurrection, Pilate's 'Holy Ghost' had condemned love between two men. Now, looking back, Jesus wondered whether the Procurator had not laid down that dogma to discredit Christ later, if his affair with John became widely known.

Pilate ...

Jesus would never know what the Roman had had in his crazy and perverted mind. By now he had surely been put to death for poisoning the fields with ergot, causing Rome's tax income to drop.

"About what are you thinking?" asked John.

Jesus smiled at him.

"About us ..."

Circumstances, or rather destiny, had led Maria to leave him. Jesus was now united with John, and John alone, by a pure love, free of all harmful impulses. He would share his days with him for the rest of his earthly life. Surrounded by that paradisiacal garden, they would be happy together, far from human torments.

In the blue sky, a flight of birds drew Jesus' attention. He watched them make for the horizon where they finally disappeared.

What will become of my soul at my death?

For letting Judas perish on the cross in his place, even if this action had saved a multitude of souls who would have died because of Pilate's ergot, Jesus would not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

He knew that.

He was doomed to be reborn in this world of Gaia below, for he was responsible for a man's death. Even though he had saved lives throughout his existence, there were celestial misdemeanors that could not be effaced.

He would have to pay the penalty for that courageous crime.

To protect the people of Israel, Jesus had not hesitated to sacrifice himself, condemning himself to inevitable rebirth in the gehenna of earthly

torments, letting Judas be glorified and transfigured by his crucifixion, opening the gates of the celestial paradise to him.

Although Judas might have murdered Romans in the past, Jesus knew full well that Judas' soul was bound for heaven, whilst his own was doomed to be re-incarnated on Earth.

The celestial paradox of martyrs ...

Being a martyr, dying violently to save lives effectively, atoned for all evil behavior or crimes in the past. It carried the soul beyond torments and conveying it to the firmament where Deus, who had been able to establish this new celestial law, welcomed it to his bosom.

Jesus, however, had not died a martyr. He was alive and kicking, but accursed for Judas' murder. It was an injustice. However, the created cosmos was governed by certain unavoidable basic laws and even Deus himself could do nothing for Jesus. It was an undeniable heavenly injustice but Jesus knew that the demiurge's world was far from just.

In that dark future, obliged to wander in tortured minds, in those future lives, long before he fell back or he died, he would be alone entombed on the fringe of time and space.

Nothing could alter that horrendous damnation.

There will be no celestial absolution ...

Of course, to escape the implacable Karma, one chance of salvation was still possible: Buddha's way. If Jesus reached that Enlightenment, he would free himself from all heavenly judgment, propelling his soul into Nirvana. Thereafter, the state of an Awakened One even assigned a status not as an angel but as an Archangel, so Jesus might see himself sitting in Deus' immediate presence, if his aura was prodigious.

However, Jesus would never attain Awakening.

He was the son of the bloodthirsty Herod the Great and that inner demon blocked to him the way of Buddha leading to celestial happiness. He was resigned to that.

"Jesus, let us walk ..."

John was there, watching him with his beautiful eyes topped with delicate eyebrows. With John, in this life, Jesus would not be alone. He could leave his burden of memories behind and cross his fingers to wish for a happy future rather than cross swords against a painful past.

The two men held hands and strolled side by side through that paradise of a garden, alongside the white building. It reminded Jesus of Judas' house. Since its owner had died, it was rumored to be accursed and that strange phenomena had occurred there. When he heard this gossip, Jesus had realized the truth, horrified: after expiring on the cross, Judas had not

immediately succeeded in his ascension. In distress, Judas had returned to haunt his house for a while. However, lighting the other world with its brilliance, the light of Deus must finally have attracted Judas' soul to the Kingdom of Heaven, where it would henceforward shine.

Let the habitation be desolate and let no man dwell therein ...

Christ's disciples believed that this quotation contained in the Temple's holy scriptures was a prophecy referring to the home of Judas the traitor. Many proselytes dug into the Jewish scriptures, seeing in them prophecies recounting the life Jesus had had as Christ. Taken out of context and read separately, each sentence could simultaneously mean much or little. Hence, it was easy to give a prophetic sense by twisting the ancient words when they referred to only one context and did not announce a future which was already in the past.

That textual illusion stirred up even greater faith in Christ, leading to limitless blind devotion and the conversion of whole crowds to the 'Holy Spirit'.

Who could halt that crazy making of higher and higher bids?

Jesus himself could not.

At first, he had thought of telling the whole truth and had set down in writing full details of all the decisive stages in his life, all the key episodes that had finally brought about this incredible situation. He had also included the celestial laws and the nature of Deus. He had hoped to issue this document to the Jews. However, he did not do so, because he realized that the harm had been irreparably done.

Even if he went in person to confess his noble crime to the people, nobody would believe him. He would be accused of being a cunning double with a twisted imagination.

Even if they believed him ...

He did not wish to venture forth on the unforeseeable path of Causalities any more. He had already braved it too often in the past. It was better to disappear completely and no longer cherish the illusion of being capable of countering the effects of past actions by divulging the truth. Striving to save the Hebrews from a somber destiny, he had stirred up an unprecedented tempest by his actions, like a butterfly beating its wings and causing a storm.

Jesus would never again risk sowing a noble wind, for fear of reaping an unforeseeable harmful whirlwind. He would not take that responsibility again, having caused enough damage. He was sorry to have believed himself sufficiently strong to tame the way of Causalities, intending to offer the Jewish people a future of salvation.

What would come of his interference in the heavenly order? What had he truly bequeathed to the Children of Israel? Salvation?

Only the future would tell. The die was cast.

Jesus had sent the manuscript with his revelations to the Temple of Osiris in Egypt.

Guided by the Heavenly Father, the Initiated would choose for themselves the opportune moment for revealing the secret. If not heavenly absolution, Jesus hoped to gain human absolution from future generations. They would grasp that all he had done had been for the good of Israel. The madness of the divine that had set minds afire and continued to burn hearts would end by itself when men were wise enough to accept the truth, realizing that it was physically impossible to come back to life after a death from crucifixion. Given time, reason always gained the upper hand over religious passion.

At least, he hoped so.

In life, there was no God to honor, nor Master to glorify.

Just Deus to love.

“Kiss me,” murmured John.

As if at risk at any moment of being whisked away by a celestial hand condemning him to wander in the other world, Jesus clutched his lover with fiery ardor.

As if he wanted to join his soul one further time before dying.

Epilogue

Looking towards the window, the Pope finally concluded.

“There, now you know all the truth about Christ.”

Tom nodded in silence.

So, John had been Jesus’ lover. Christ was ‘A.C./D.C.’.

As the height of irony, the Church had for centuries condemned homosexuals when Christ had been one himself.

No Christian had ever dreamt of imagining such a secret love affair. Yet there were many points in the Bible where John was clearly designated as the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’.

With that reality in mind, taking into account all the truths about Christ that the Pope had just revealed, every Christian should be asked to re-read the Gospels. All the actions reported, all the words put into various characters’ mouths took on a totally different sense, an incredibly simple and clear-cut sense when all the initial occultism was stripped away.

It was enough to open one’s eyes to see: small details that had till then seemed anodyne took on their full value and appeared in their true light. Then the insoluble mystery of Christ became perfectly clear.

The Bible was illuminated with a fresh brilliance.

Humanity had been carried away. The engine of its consciousness was racing in the empty vacuum of religion, overheating all the gears of collective intelligence and so, in the end, imposing a distorted truth on all generations, past and present.

“You know the truth about Christ,” the Pope repeated. “And now you are aware of the existence of Deus and of the celestial laws governing heaven ...”

Tom mockingly interrupted him.

“Well, then, why don’t you want me to spread the truth right round the world? If I do that, your one true God’ll die and you can teach a new

doctrine in his place: the doctrine of Deus and your famous ‘celestial laws governing heaven’. I reckon in some way I’m the messenger of Deus on Earth, a sort of fallen angel bringing the final truth to the world ... Don’t you think so?”

The Pope turned and looked at the man whose hand was carelessly poised over the computer keyboard.

“Your book ‘The God Virus’, on the myth of Moses, or, as you wrongly saw it, the myth of Jesus Christ, would have brought unheard-of violence. All round the world thousands of innocent clergy would have been murdered, churchmen whose only crime was to be the victims of a lie with which they could not cope ... The same would happen with the Sons of Abraham’s bomb and the true contents of Pontius Pilate’s report made public: it would bring total chaos, churches burnt and clergy lynched in those lands where Jesus Christ represents the only palliative for a wretched life. Imagine Africa or South America, where people’s misery is such that the slightest spark is so inclined to set off crazy violence. If people found out that they have been fooled, they would take up arms and revolt in a bloodbath to get justice. States would collapse and bloody anarchy would triumph.”

The Pope sighed.

“The Christian Church is the victim of its own lie and has no option but to continue the play-acting for the faithful. We cannot go into reverse. It is impossible. You must understand one thing: our prime motivation is not to deceive people, our main reason for acting as we do is our fear of seeing those millions of possible deaths, but also our fear of seeing Islam triumph in the world. Were Christianity to disappear, there would be a vacuum, which would quickly be filled by the lunatic Moslem religion: there are potentially two thousand million Christians who would turn to that other God ...”

In a more confidential tone, the Pope added:

“God is also called the Evil One, for his creation is evil and we are all its prisoners. Only Deus permits us to escape from it. Were Christianity to collapse because of the Pontius Pilate Report, it is not Deus who would be born from its ashes, rather the bonfire of Islam that would flare up for the glory of Allah, the Evil One. It would be apocalypse ...”

Tom grimaced skeptically.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t convince me at all. The one thing I’m sure of now is that in some past life I must’ve been an honest cop. I really adore justice. Every crime should be punished and you know full well the Vatican is guilty of a crime against humanity through its actions and lies.

Truths are meant to be uncovered some fine day and they always win out, whatever people do ... And anyway, you needn't worry at all about the future of Islam. After Jesus is finished with, it'll be Mohammed's turn, I promise you, fair shares for all ..."

Tom lifted his forefinger for a brief instant, then, under the Pope's horrified gaze, he hit the 'Enter' button on the keyboard.

"No!" the Pope shrieked. "No!"

A metal ram smashed down the door.

Assault rifles at the ready, five Swiss guards burst into the room. Tom immediately put up his hands.

In his red robes, Cardinal Fustiger appeared in the door opening.

On seeing him, the Pope said in a tiny voice:

"Anderson has re-activated the Sons of Abraham's bomb and triggered it ... it is the end ... we are lost ..."

The Cardinal stepped forward in a fury, grabbing a pistol from the belt of one of the Swiss guards.

"You deserve to die here and now," Fustiger snarled, pointing the weapon at Tom's head. "Have you any idea of the number of deaths you are going to cause with that bomb?"

Tom turned his head towards the Pope.

"Don't worry," he said. "That file from the Sons of Abraham hasn't gone to any journalists. I've just sent it to a friend, but if that friend doesn't see me alive and kicking in Paris within twenty-four hours, then the file will be handed over to the press ... So, for the moment, it wouldn't be too advisable to kill me as you've already tried to do ..."

"What are you saying?" the Pope cut in, surprised. "Try to kill you? You claim that about me? You are raving ..."

The Pope approached Tom.

"I have never given any such order."

Seeing Fustiger's shift in look, the Pope questioned him:

"Is that not so, Eminence?"

Fustiger seemed embarrassed by the presence of the Swiss guards. He asked them to go out and wait in the corridor, on the grounds that the situation was now under control. Then, able to talk freely, Fustiger spoke to the Pope.

"You are too timid and you know it," he said in an undertone. "Did you think that we could stop Anderson and his 'God Virus' simply by asking him politely? You are wrong. There is a price to pay for everything ..."

"How many people did you order killed?" the Pope asked sharply.

“Only Anderson! He posed an apocalyptic threat with his book on the myth of Moses, which insidiously puts in question the legitimacy of the Promised Land. Peace in the Middle East would have become a mere pipe-dream and war would have broken out once more between the Jews and the Palestinians they robbed. How many deaths would that bring? That is without reckoning the consequences that would arise from the deceptive revelation of the myth of Jesus, which might have been believed, bringing with it further chaos and yet more countless deaths! For those reasons, it was essential to prevent Anderson doing that harm and you agreed with me on that point ...”

“Yet I asked you to prevent the publication of his book, not to kill him!”

“You are too feeble and you do not look reality in the eye, as I dare to do. There was no option but to have him eliminated.”

As if he doubted the Cardinal’s word, the Pope demanded:

“Was there truly nobody else but Anderson? Have there been no others, not even in the past?”

“No, of course not!” Fustiger snapped in a louder voice. “Apart from Anderson, I have never ever ordered a human being killed. Had I succeeded in ridding us of this Antichrist Anderson, I would have been saving millions of lives by sacrificing just one: his. It was for the good of humanity.”

“Were you not afraid of hell, or, worse still, the burning nothingness?”

“I took the risk of condemning my soul out of my love for humankind. I did it as a noble self-sacrifice. Naturally, I knew that my soul would be damned for having ordered the killing, but I am sure that there is no demon in me, my soul is pure and it would not have meant refusing the light of Deus, nor of being banished to the burning nothingness.”

The Pope closed his eyes for a brief moment.

“Yet Deus might have rejected your soul, so that then you would have ended in the burning nothingness ...”

“I know that,” Fustiger cut in, brandishing the pistol that he had in his hand. “However, it is my belief that on Judgment Day, Deus would have interceded in my favor because of my noble sacrifice. Deus would have admitted me to his presence by redeeming me from my crime. He has that power. If not, Deus would have seen to it that I went to hell: here, on Earth, being reborn. I was ready to face that if I could save millions of people ...”

Tom coughed discreetly.

“I’m sorry to break in on this fascinating metaphysical discussion, but there are more urgent things to sort out. Like, for instance, freeing me and Camilla as well ...”

“Camilla?” the Pope queried.

The Cardinal explained the whole situation to the Pope, then Tom spoke again.

“I’d like to remind you if I’m not in Paris in twenty-four hours from now, my friend will ‘explode’ the bomb of the Sons of Abraham ...”

The Cardinal snapped.

“If we let you go, you will do it yourself once you are free, in any case ...”

“No, not at all ... I’m proposing a trade. My freedom and Camilla’s in exchange for not releasing the file. If you let me go and set Camilla free as well, you have my word of honor I’ll not set off the Sons of Abraham’s bomb. No media, no journalist will ever lay hands on the file, you’ve got my word on that.”

The Pope thought the proposal over, then asked:

“Have I your word?”

Tom nodded solemnly.

“I believe you,” the Pope said. “Even if I do not know why you will keep your promise, I believe that you will ...”

The Pope spoke to the Cardinal.

“Set them free.”

Fustiger threw a hate-laden glance at Tom, letting him know clearly that this was just a short suspension of his sentence before he met his fated end.

His imminent death.

*

* *

Paris.

Tom checked his watch. Camilla would not be long in coming back from the Saint Sulpice church.

Sitting at one of the pavement tables of a crowded bar, under a radiant summer sun, Tom sipped the pear juice that he had ordered.

He took off his dark glasses and laid them on the table beside a red cardboard folder. Tom’s steely blue eyes gazed at the file in that folder.

The file was not his, it was not the file that he had spent so much time compiling so as to prove that Moses and Jesus of Nazareth were myths:

Martial had truly destroyed all his notes, all his archaeological evidence, all his handwritten and computer files, even those dealing with the life of Mohammed.

Martial had wiped out ‘The God Virus’ and ‘The Sage of Mecca’.

Tom had nothing left.

Except that red folder.

It contained sketches, maps and photos that Tom had downloaded from the internet that very morning, from websites specializing in the history of Rennes-le-Château.

Tom opened the folder and his eyes fell on the photograph of the church of Saint Mary Magdalene.

He unconsciously clenched his fist.

He was angry with himself for having been such an idiot for so long, obstinate and blinded by the illusory myth of Jesus. He prided himself on being a master in the observation of minute details, but he had walked right past the truth without seeing it, without noticing those insignificant features which nevertheless shouted out the real story, as visible as the nose in the middle of a face.

Abbé Boudet and Abbé Saunière had blackmailed the Vatican by adorning their churches with statues, paintings and various other works of art that told the true life of Jesus of Nazareth, the one that the Pope had revealed to Tom. In their days, the Vatican had been terrified and had paid the colossal sums demanded by the blackmailers, amounts of money that had allowed Saunière to have building work done on the scale of the Pharaohs, quantities of cash that at the time would have been sufficient to construct more than eight thousand churches all round France. The money paid over by the Vatican, still visible nowadays in the shape of Saunière’s monumental buildings, was only the part of the iceberg that could be seen: the whole fortune of the Roman Church had flowed away into the hands of various blackmailers and that had led to the near-bankruptcy of the Vatican at the start of the twentieth century.

Tom turned over the photograph of Saunière’s church and looked at the next snap: inside the church, on the front of the oaken confessional, there was a carving of a shepherd who seemed to be taking an interest in the leg of a sheep, which appeared broken and on the point of falling off.

Tom frowned.

In order to read the true story of Jesus through Saunière’s works, the first thing that it was essential to do was to set aside all the false clues. It had to be kept in mind that Saunière and Boudet had been afraid that somebody might come across a possible third Grail that might still be

concealed somewhere in Rennes-le-Château, one of the Grails hidden by Abbé Bigou a century before Abbé Saunière had taken up his post in the parish. Abbé Bigou had set up an elaborate trail of clues to protect the hiding place of the two Grails he had definitely had in his possession and it was this trail that Saunière and Boudet had destroyed or falsified, going as far as to make up new false hints so as to lead astray anybody who might set out to find the Pontius Pilate Report.

Furthermore, so that nobody would ever know that his personal fortune came from his blackmailing of the Vatican, Saunière spread around the word that he had found a fabulous treasure. Saunière even intelligently fed that rumor by setting out emblematic clues visible to everybody and allowing it to be implied that these led to his treasure.

The sculpture of the shepherd and the sheep with the broken leg was one obvious piece of evidence of this stratagem: an ancient local legend claimed that in the 1640s a young shepherd from the district had found the entrance to a cave brimming with gold when a sheep from his flock had fallen down a hole, breaking its leg.

Saunière had made use of this wonderful tale to distract attention from the real source of his fortune and he had even gone to the extent of having the date '1646' engraved on the right-hand pillar of the porch of his church so that treasure hunters would make the link between the priest and the story of the shepherd.

Saunière had cunningly turned eyes away from the truth with all his theatrical poses, with all those false clues.

That was why generations of treasure seekers or budding detectives had never succeeded in their efforts, because they had all tried to decipher clues which served solely to take them off on false trails. When one analyzed all Saunière's works the overall picture became blurry and incomprehensible. A careful sorting had to be undertaken, which was not possible unless the contents of the Grail were already known.

Once the sorting was done and the distracting dross eliminated, the key phases of the real life of Jesus appeared as if by magic.

After wondering if Abbé Saunière had not also wished to recall the epidemic of ergot of rye and the consequent gangrene in animals which had also taken place at the time of Jesus, Tom put to one side the photo of the sheep with the injured leg and attentively examined the next picture. It showed the fresco above the confessional.

In large-scale relief, this mural showed a glorious Jesus, standing on a tall hillock on which seventeen roses were scattered. At his feet clean-shaven men and several women were prostrate, their gazes full of love.

Among the women, a young redhead lay on the ground holding her belly in an unmistakable fashion. This was surely Mary Magdalene pregnant by Jesus.

Tom set aside that obvious detail, as also the slit sack at the base of the hillock which showed golden ears of rye. He looked at the seventeen roses on the mound: they were an allegory for Saint Rosalind whose feast day was 17 January. She was known for having miraculously changed bread into roses, concealed in her apron. The hillock was thus allegorically full of hidden bread ... the mural alluded to the miracle of the loaves multiplied by Jesus. Besides, to confirm the allegory, at Jesus' feet one of the female figures was carrying bread in her gray apron.

The roses growing out of the mound were like loaves emerging from the hillock which was stuffed full of bread.

Tom smiled as he thought that this was the sort of pointer which had frightened the Vatican and had driven the then Pope to pay the price of the blackmailers' silence.

Tom took a magnifying glass out of his backpack from where it lay on the ground and minutely examined the wall paintings on either side of the fresco. On the left there was a splendid palace and on the right a ruined village. It would be hard not to see the parallel with Herod the Great's magnificent palace and Jesus' village, razed to the ground by the Roman legions. Tom frowned.

However, if that village in ruins actually represented the original Nazareth, how could Saunière have known that detail? After all, Pilate had drawn up his report before the destruction of Nazareth and so the Grail could not have mentioned that historical event ...

Logically, it seemed that Saunière Boudet must have been in possession of other related documents, compromising manuscripts on the true life of Christ, perhaps written by his own hand, or even, indeed, a secret work on Mary Magdalene and Jesus' child.

Boudet and Saunière had also made insinuations about a tomb in some of their works. Was it Jesus' grave hidden somewhere in the region? Perhaps Mary Magdalene had finally found Judas' corpse, spirited away by Pilate's men, and had brought the unrecognizable body with her, believing it to be Jesus, to give it a decent burial in the South of France.

Some thought the Holy Grail could thus also involve the Blood Royal through Jesus' descendants or even the blood of Judas, dead on the cross in Christ's place.

At Rennes-le-Château, where the enigma of Christ had flourished, anything was feasible.

Tom studied a detail of the mural with his lens: beneath the ruined village of Nazareth stood the figure of an old woman looking closely at a dark bush.

Tom reflected for an instant.

The bush everybody knew about was the burning bush, but the one in the picture was clearly not in flames ... Saunière knew Christ's tale and the myth of Mithras, and must rightly have wondered about the historical reality of Moses and his burning bush. The old woman thus represented the look of past generations casting doubt on the foundations of Judeo-Christian faith in the light of Christ's secret.

Tom put down the lens and gave the picture a last glance.

At the lower right, with its typical Corinthian capital, could be seen painted the top of the wooden balustrade in which Saunière had found the glass phial containing the parchment that had allowed him to discover the Grail hidden by Abbé Bigou. Saunière had wanted to show Vatican that he had found the Rennes-le-Château Grail thanks to the final clue concealed in the phial.

Tom picked up a further set of photos, showing the statues spelling out the word Grail and forming the famous letter M by their strategic layout. That M did not indicate the word 'Myth' as Tom had believed from the very start.

He had been completely mistaken.

He had believed that one word could reveal the secret of Christ. He had been wrong about the M and had imagined apocalyptic implication in that letter through a terrible significance with infinite consequences. However, the M did not lay bare any 'Myth' with a truth that would shake the heart of Christians. That M simply meant 'Mithras', as Saunière had had carved on the inverted Visigothic pillar or represented by the letters M and A on the T-shaped cross, all embroidered on the priest's robe that Saunière had ostentatiously worn throughout his life.

Tom glanced up for a second, then turned his attention to another photo.

He smiled as he grasped the implications of the plaster dog that had bitten the thigh of the statue of Saint Roch and the boar with menacing fangs at the foot of Saint Anthony the Hermit. The dog and pig represented the animals stricken by madness because of the ergot of rye.

Tom next looked at the picture of the red devil holy-water stoup with bulging blue eyes proclaiming its anger by way of greeting at the door of the church. Who else could it portray but the bloodthirsty Herod the Great? He was the red devil, Jesus' monstrous father had not wished to murder somebody illustrious but unknown to him when he slaughtered the

innocents, but rather his own bastard son, owing to the royal blood in his veins. Jesus constituted a threat to Herod's power, not because of any supposed divine birth, but because of his bloodline.

Herod's own blood.

Tom put away the snapshot of the red devil, then the photo of the low relief on the altar where Mary Magdalene was alongside the Great Pyramid of Egypt, inside which Jesus had received his mystical initiation, and next looked at the general plan of the church.

One striking detail leapt immediately to his eyes.

In the sacristy there was a cupboard door, at first sight totally anodyne. However, when it was opened, it became clear that this cupboard was not just a storage space, but also hid a second door allowing access to a small secret room, called 'the cell', a chamber accessible only through that cupboard. Saunière had doubtless had the false cupboard built to symbolize the scene of Jesus hidden in the wardrobe before appearing 'resurrected' to the apostles, making them think that he had come through the wall.

In the sacristy, there was also a stained-glass window with Christ on the cross, but Christ with the marks of the lance blow struck by the Roman legionary on his left side, not the right as was habitually the case. Abbé Boudet had also deliberately shown that error on the statue of Christ in a Calvary at Rennes-les-Bains. In the church there where Boudet had been priest, it was likewise possible to see a large painting in which Jesus Christ was depicted with impressive muscles, yet again with the wound on his left side. This painting in addition had the oddity of showing a hare's head on Jesus' knee, together with a rock beside a lake: the Rock of the Hare.

"*Terribilis est locus iste*," Tom muttered as he looked at a further set of photos.

That was written on the façade of the Rennes-le-Château church. The Latin sentence comprised 22 letters, a number found over and over again in Saunière's works: the entrances to the luminous glass tower of the Orangery and the stone Magdala tower were accessed through a central belvedere with 22 steps laid out as two stairways. Both towers additionally had their own inner stairs with 22 steps. Whilst the Orangery's plunged into the bowels of the earth, Magdala's rose up towards the sky where the 22 crenellations of its battlements contemplated the starry paradisiacal firmament on clear nights.

It was hard not to see in these last details, in these two towers, Jesus' own beliefs. The glass Orangery tower represented the luminous being Jesus going to 'hell' metaphorically with its downward stairs, while Judas,

the somber being with a stony soul, rose towards the sky and its paradise by the upward steps in the Magdala tower.

“Two,” Tom whispered.

This number revealed the true story of what had happened at the time, because there had been two Christs: Jesus escaping his fate and Judas dying on the cross in his place. Saunière had symbolized this above the altar of his church by putting two identical baby Jesuses, perfect twins, one in the arms of the statue of the Virgin Mary, the other in Joseph’s.

Tom looked at the ground plan of the Orangery tower.

In that tower, Saunière experimented with all sorts of rare plants needing warmth to grow, so that must have been where Saunière planted rye to cultivate ergot. Had he tried to reproduce the Assyrian remedy that allowed Jesus to cure the Possessed? Possibly, but Saunière’s main aim must have been to have the black excrescences to send to the Pope of his days and step up the blackmail pressure.

According to the plan, the Orangery and the Magdala towers were both perfectly set in an imaginary checkerboard, invisible and immense, a checkering that was also found in the tiling of Saunière’s church. He had put two towers on a chess board.

Why?

Jesus was the King of the Jews. Numerous stars of David could also be seen in the region where the clique of blackmailer priests had been based. So, Jesus was the king and in chess, when you castled you put the tower-shaped piece alongside the king, then moved the king to safety on the other side of that castle.

As had happened on Christ’s cross, a piece of lesser value was sacrificed in place of the king.

That representation of the replacement of Jesus by Judas was to be found once more in the church of Notre-Dame de Marceille where Abbé Henri Gasq, Boudet’s mentor, had been priest. On the reliefs showing the Stations of the Cross, the final, fourteenth panel depicted two identical Christs, one, having been crucified, being put into a tomb, the other carrying his clone, holding him under the armpits. To reinforce the idea of a double, the clothing that Christ had worn in the thirteen previous images here dressed his perfect twin.

There could be no ambiguity, no double meaning, no metaphysical interpretation.

Calling a spade a spade, Henri Gasq had been loud and clear in squeezing money out of the Vatican.

Saunière, for his part, had preferred to be more mysterious and subtle in his works. Nonetheless, he had taken care that the carvings of the Stations of the Cross in his church did not show Christ's resurrection. They ended with a fourteenth station showing Jesus being put in his tomb at night under a full moon, which was sacrilege for the Jewish religion and even for the Catholic faith, which never buried the dead after the sun had set.

Tom leaned over and fished out of his backpack the book which he had downloaded from the internet and printed on foolscap sheets.

It was the book by Abbé Boudet entitled *La Vraie Langue Celtique et le Cromlech de Rennes-les-Bains* ['The True Celtic Tongue and the Rennes-les-Bains Cromlech'].

The Abbé had had the book privately published to show his teeth to the Vatican, to prove he was not joking and that he was prepared to write something more explicit if Rome did not pay for his silence.

Tom flipped through the pages held together by two red clips.

Here and there on the pages, he spotted certain key words: Jesus Christ, resurrection, parasitic plant, plant curing all ills ... He also noticed passages referring directly to the Divine Unction: "... eyes harmed, hurt and closed by the disease ..."; "... took a few drops of that liquid, with which they dampened their eyelids ...".

The hints were abundant on every page.

As soon as he had a moment, Tom vowed to himself he would buckle down to a close reading of that book.

As he looked at it, Tom thought of Abbé Boudet's tomb, on the headstone of which he had had carved the 'ichthus' I.X. Θ.Y.Σ., which did refer to the Savior Jesus Christ, but also pointed to page XI of his 310-page book 'The True Celtic Tongue'. That page XI was the first one to mention the word 'wheat', quoted more than thirty times in the work.

Tom sighed.

He had been blind for so long and was still angry with himself about it.

He put the manuscript on the table and picked up the photograph of Abbé Boudet's tomb. On it, the inscription E-C-C-I-11 was carved. Boudet had wished to leave a final message by quoting the Bible: Ecclesiastes Chapter 1, Verse 11.

Tom recited the text under his breath:

"There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after ..."

"Hiya!" Camilla said, sitting next to Tom.

Tom smiled at her.

“Have you got the photos?” he inquired.

“Yes.”

A waiter came by at that moment and Camilla ordered an iced tea.

“You were right,” she told Tom. “There are things back to front in Émile Signol’s paintings, just look ...”

She took a digital camera out of her handbag and brought up on its screen the snapshots she had taken in the Saint-Sulpice church. There were four gigantic pictures by the painter Émile Signol in the four transepts of the church, two on either side, facing each other.

On two of the paintings, Signol had signed his name with the N backwards. That was not all: more strikingly, in a painting of Christ crucified the sign on which ‘Jesus King of the Jews’ was written in three languages had its inscription entirely reversed.

“Yes,” Tom said after looking at the photos. “My memory wasn’t playing tricks on me, I thought I’d seen those inversions some years back ... Moreover, when you think back, you realize you can find things reversed like that all over the place, in a lot of artists’ works over the centuries, even on Saunière’s grave where the *INRI*’s got its N written backwards ...

The waiter brought the iced tea and Tom paid him.

“What do the inversions mean?” Camilla asked.

“In fact, it’s not one meaning, but two. The first is directly linked with the real teachings of Jesus, the Gnosticism the Apostle Peter kept alive. So as not to get into hot water with the Church, artists put in those inversions to say they were in on Christ’s secret, initiated into his real esoteric teaching, and you had to look at Christ’s teaching from a different viewpoint, from an angle contrary to the traditional ideas the official Church wanted. So, those backwards Ns or other inversions were a sort of sign you belonged to the gnosis passed on by Peter ...”

Camilla nodded.

“And what’s the second meaning?”

“For anyone who had the secret of the Grail, moving things round just meant the exchange there had been between Jesus and Judas on the cross. Just that ...”

Camilla thoughtfully drank her iced tea in silence, going back over what Tom had told her.

He thoughts went back to the Heavenly Father that Jesus had met in the firmament. Who was he? Whilst she now knew the mysterious secret of Christ, that secret merely sent her on to another mystery: the nature of Deus.

Camilla was sure that in the end she would discover the truth about that enigmatic heavenly force for which Jesus had never ceased working. Tom had told her about his secret interview with the Pope, when he had quoted passage from the Gospel according to Thomas to hint at the nature of Deus: 'Let not him who seeketh cease from his search until he findeth. When he findeth, he shall be troubled. When he be troubled, he shall marvel, and in splendor shall reign over all.'

According to the Pope, that sentence was the key that could unlock the mystery of Deus...

Tom was putting the red folder away in his backpack and Camilla asked him:

"What are you going to do now?"

Tom smiled sadly.

"You know I was bluffing and I wasn't able to re-activate the bomb set by the Sons of Abraham. So, there was no friend receiving the Pontius Pilate Report by e-mail ... I bluffed to learn Christ's secret and to get us freed, that's all ... So, I've no longer got anything apart from this red folder, which hasn't any real value ..."

"But you've still got Abbé Boudet's notebook, haven't you?"

"Yes, I hid it securely in a safe at the bank and Martial wasn't able to destroy it. But Boudet's notebook is completely useless for uncovering Christ's secret, since it simply lists where to find Grails which are gone now. There's nothing in that notebook by way of revelations about the real life of Jesus of Nazareth ..."

"You're going to give up, then, are you?" Camilla asked.

"Oh, no, not at all ... I still dream of seeing red flags, this time not with 'Myth' written on them, but simply 'Mithras', red flags with a reversed cross on, red flags waving over ruined churches. And I still dream of people turning off their T.V.s and getting out and simply breathing the air of truth they're lacking ... Camilla, truth must out, whatever it costs ..."

"How do you plan to set about that?"

"The problem is, I've no evidence any more. The only proofs I still have about Jesus' secret are in Saunière and Boudet's works. It's true they're factual, visible evidence, but if I claim they're absolute truths, I'll just be laughed at. The Vatican's henchmen will say I have an amazing imagination and I'll be publicly scorned. So, my only option is to whisper Christ's secret instead of shouting it out loud. And the whisper will be a novel ..."

"A novel?" Camilla asked in astonishment.

“Yes, a novel, and when I think it over, that’s not too bad an idea. That way, Christians can make their own minds up, they’ll realize what the truth is not through undeniable scientific proofs but through their imagination, the same imagination making Moses or Jesus live in their hearts. A novel to oppose the most popular work of fiction: the Bible itself. If humankind reads the truth in the shape of a novel, their imaginations will stir into action their minds which have been put to sleep by State lies. In a work of fiction, I can pass on emotions ... A scientific book like ‘The God Virus’ would’ve been too aseptic, too clinical for most people but a novel’s different. I want my readers’ hearts to beat, I want them to sweat, shout, cry, fling the book down in anger or make a fuss of it ... a novel as alive as a human being, like a real friend letting you in on a terrible family secret that’s been hidden from you all your life ...”

His eyes shining, Tom added:

“My mind and my soul will be in the book. As long as it’s around, as long as readers hold it in their hand, I’ll still be alive for them, even if I’ve been dead and gone for a long time. The book will make me immortal, immortal in people’s minds ... I’ve always wondered what created a legend, if it was what you do in your lifetime or rather the memories you leave behind when you die ... my novel will be a legend and I’ll live on in it, despite being marked for killing ...”

Tom smiled.

“But for the moment I hope to live long enough to write the sequel to what’ll be my novel.”

“A sequel?” Camilla queried.

“Yes, I’ve got a trilogy in mind, a divine trilogy. The first volume, of course, will be about Moses and Jesus, the second about Mohammed. What I’ll reveal about the Prophet of Mecca will be like an atom bomb in the Moslem world, believe you me ...”

“And the third volume?” Camilla inquired curiously.

“The third volume is the last of the divine trilogy, so since in the Bible the book of the Apocalypse is the last thing you read, my last volume will also be a book of apocalypse ...”

“The end of the world?”

“Who knows?” Tom replied with a serious air. “But anyhow, the word ‘apocalypse’ means ‘revelation’. So, it’ll be the final revelation and humanity will at last be able to wake up ...”

He chuckled.

“It’ll be a big surprise ... Satan ... but no, my lips are sealed ... you didn’t hear it from me.”

Tom winked and looked at his watch.

“Time for the off.”

Camilla nodded, quickly drank up the rest of her iced tea and stood.

“Ah, yes,” Tom said as he stood up as well. “I forgot to give you back this ...”

He fished out of his pocket the slim chain with its little silver cross that Camilla had lost in the hotel room at Ayutthaya when she was kidnapped.

Tom handed it to Camilla.

For a few seconds, the young woman stared at that Christian symbol, which she had proudly worn all her life.

Finally she looked away and shook her head gently.

Tom slipped the cross back into his pocket, picked up his backpack and put on his dark glasses.

Together, hand in hand, the couple headed out onto the crowded Parisian pavements, where office workers were flowing out in a steady stream from nearby buildings for their lunch break.

“In fact, did I already tell you about Mohammed?” Tom said as they walked. “His life alone is a real science fiction story. Did you know Mohammed had a strange ailment? Well, just imagine, he ...”

His words were lost in the growing noise of the crowd.

THE END

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As Thomas Anderson mentioned, I am no more than a link in a chain, one line in a chain of humans who over the centuries have tried to reveal the truth about the world as it really is. I am just one soldier among many, a soldier in an army of the subconscious seeking to bring about the triumph of the truth of things. And if I am just one end of the chain, like every end I shall not remain so for long: others will take up the torch, adding fresh links to the chain of truth, just as I have myself put a further link on the long chain of all those historians, philosophers, and writers, whether known or unknown, who have striven to bring into the spotlight the Truth with a capital 'T'.

This is the reason that, before bringing this manuscript to a close, I wish to salute them and I shall cite their various books, journals, magazines or Internet sites, honouring these valuable authors who each had one or more relevant items of knowledge, one or more pieces of the jigsaw, whether it was on the mystery of Jesus itself, or, more generally, on the enigma of our existence. Thanks to them, I was able slowly but surely to bring together each vague piece of the puzzle and form a clear overall picture to constitute this modest work. Thanks to all these authors, their brilliant minds and their courageous words, I managed to attain the aim set for this novel: laying bare (in a novel way?) the secret of Christ, or even, to a lesser extent, the secret of our existence.

So, I should like to express my thanks to all these writers and complete the listing of the various sources, references and quotations that permitted me to accomplish my humble task in this world.

Without them, I am nothing, nothing more than a simple link without a chain ...

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... and to bring to an end the list of quotations and references, I shall make mention of three sources of great value: the book *Les Grands Initiés* by Édouard Schuré, together with the historian Flavius Josephus and his *Jewish Antiquities*, as also the Old and New Testaments, without which all this 'beautiful lie' would not have been possible...

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A divine trilogy to which I listened over and again for months, day and night without tiring of it, a transcendental leitmotiv ...

And now that I have mentioned a *divine trilogy*, I shall take advantage of this to honour my two spiritual masters: Philip K. Dick and Bernard Werber, the latter himself a disciple of K. Dick, even if Bernard has preferred to follow the voice of God rather than the way of Deus...

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And, to conclude this manuscript, before turning a new page, I shall simply say:

The final combat for Truth has just begun; the Book is in the hands of the M army, in your hands ...

Anna K. Dick

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