

Children of the Earth

by J.E.G. Dixon (December 2016)



Prelude

Two men of mysterious origin, named Asweron and Aspison, arrive on the beach of a remote lake in Northern Idaho, entrusted with the task of exploring Earth and reporting back to their sponsors in five years. As it happens, they land close to a log cabin which shows all the signs of habitation. It is unoccupied; but the owner himself appears mysteriously about two weeks later, having walked through the surrounding forest along a well-travelled footpath, which, the visitors learn, leads to "civilization." The owner's name is John Viggers. He is a former stockbroker of Los Angeles who, disenchanted with the evils of the modern world, has sought consolation in solitude. The recluse and his visitors are attracted to each other, and the former starts his new friends on their odyssey with an introduction to a former colleague of Toronto.

Episode 1 : The Lottery

The travellers spent their days exploring the city, the universities and libraries, the parks and beaches, the buildings and other monuments, the suburbs

and the environs.

They soon established a routine. They would go separate ways. The first week Asweron would research the different ways of creating wealth, while Aspison, furnished with Charles's membership cards, haunted the University or City Library. The second week they would exchange roles. At the end of the second week they would run over the various discussions and findings they had exchanged during that time.

As it happened, on the third day of their routine, Aspison returned to the house with an armful of books and, depositing them all on a table except one, handed this one to Asweron.

"Look at this. What do you think of it?"

Asweron took it and glanced at the title: *The Role of Chance in a Christian Universe*. He looked up, quizzically, at Aspison.

"The Christian, I would have thought, need leave nothing to chance, for all is laid down. Give me the book entitled, *The Christian in a Universe of Chance*, and I will read it. But you have something?"

Aspison delayed not in removing his friend's doubt.

"Now look at this," he said, passing to Asweron a small, square piece of paper covered with coloured numbers and printing. Asweron took one glance at it, and this time he was in no doubts.

"This is a 6/49 coupon. This morning I passed a booth where they were being sold and I asked about them."

"I found it in this book."

"And...?"

"And it is a winning number! The prize has to be claimed within one year of its issue. The year is up in one week. This coupon is worth over nine million dollars."

"Do you know its owner?"

"Technically, I am the owner because I have it. I do not know who purchased it. I only found the ticket on the way back to the house."

The next day Aspison, after some discussion with the head librarian, had little difficulty in persuading her to reveal the names and addresses of the other borrowers of the book in the previous twelvemonth period. She came up with one name only.

Aspison telephoned the number listed in the directory and the subscriber invited him to come and see him without delay.

Aspison, accompanied by his friend, was greeted at the door by a small

man in his fifties, with a greying goatee beard. He was dressed in black. And he introduced himself as the Reverend Ebenezer Slurge, the man who had borrowed the library book in question a year ago. He invited them into his house and seated them in the parlour.

Aspison put the question:

“Do you buy six/forty-nine tickets?”

“Yes. And I know what you are going to tell me! You have found a ticket and it’s the one I lost nearly a year ago!”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I keep a record of the tickets I buy, with the numbers, and the results. You see, I play the numbers game according to statistical methods. And there is only one ticket that I cannot account for.”

“So you know the numbers on the ticket, and the date of purchase?”

“Of course.”

The Reverend Slurge excused himself. He was away for two minutes; when he returned he was carrying a small register.

“I bought it on October 23rd and the numbers are : 3 7 19 22 23 and 44. And it is a winning ticket, worth nearly ten million dollars.”

“What would you do with the money, if you received it?”

“Why, I bought it for my Church and I will give it to my Church.”

“Do you act for your Church and with the knowledge of your Church, or do you buy these lottery tickets in your own name?”

“One does not buy these tickets in anyone’s name. You buy them anonymously. And anyone having a winning ticket in his possession can claim the prize. I take it that you have found my winning ticket?”

Aspison ignored the question.

“What is the position of your Church on games of chance?”

“The position of my Church on gambling is that, whilst it is not a sin in itself, it frequently leads to misery in the lives of gamblers, either because it induces an obsessive mania in losers, or leads to false expectations of happiness in winners, as well as to frequent family disputes. Since you say that you have my ticket, will you tell me what you intend to do with it?”

Aspison ignored this question too, and pursued his line of inquiry.

“Can you say what the position of other Churches is?”

“I have already stated my Church’s view of its possible consequences. But my Church also holds to the tenet that the individual is a free agent and responsible for his acts. We cannot protect them from everything they do.”

"And yet surely your Church proscribes and forbids some acts, doesn't it? Can you give me an example of any proscription?"

"Of course. 'Thou shalt not kill'."

"That is from your Bible?" And, without waiting for confirmation, Aspison pursued: "But the same Bible condemns all sin. Isn't gambling among the sins? Is anything sacred to a gambler?"

The Reverend Slurge sidestepped the questions and answered:

"I am not concerned with the theological positions of other religions. I observe the teachings of my Church. That is hard enough as it is. Now, will you be so good as to return to me my ticket?"

"But you have just told us that the holder is the legal owner and that the authorities are obliged to honour this ticket if I present it and claim the win?"

"That is correct. However, in this case, when we know who the purchaser was, I would have little difficulty in persuading a court that I am the one who has the more compelling title to it."

"There is not much time, is there?"

"No, but there's little doubt that the courts would act at once. But let's suppose that some mischance prevented the hearing. What if we split it? Say, I give you ten percent of the prize money?"

"Certainly not."

"Twenty percent?"

The Reverend Ebenezer Slurge went up to fifty percent. When that offer was still refused, the good churchman claimed that he could not in all good faith offer more since morally he regarded the money as the Church's. He then added:

"There is, however, a weightier consideration. Even if the law was not on my side, or could not act speedily enough, there is a higher court, and that is the appeal of one's conscience. I am the purchaser of that ticket; you know I am the purchaser of that ticket; I therefore request of you as a moral person that you return to me what is mine."

To the reverend's surprise, a surprise which in a way he never got over, for he never understood the act, Aspison simply took the winning coupon from his pocket and handed it to Ebenezer Slurge, with the words:

"May you use it wisely!"

"Not me, my Church. May I now ask to know who you are and where I can get in touch with you, so that my Church may write and thank you?"

That evening, when Charles and the visitors were at dinner, Asweron broached the question of the 6/49 lotteries:

“Who runs the six/forty-nine and other lotteries?”

“Why, the government, of course! That’s the whole purpose of the lotteries! To rake in millions of dollars by subterfuge instead of by the sometimes visible, and sometimes accountable, way of taxation.”

They then recounted the incident of the found ticket.

“You mean you just gave it back to him? And after his offer of a half? You must be out of this world!”

“That’s entirely possible!”

“But why? When you need the money!”

“Because it was not mine. It was his.”

A week later the city was in an uproar: the lottery foundation gave great publicity to Mr. Slurge and his recovery of the coupon, which he attributed to the intervention of Divine Providence. To the relief of the travellers, he made no mention of his benefactor, who had found the ticket and returned it to him. The librarian was not so considerate: she telephoned the chairman of the lottery corporation. The chairman called a second press conference. To this one he invited the librarian, Amy Vandusen as well as Mr. Slurge. Mrs Vandusen accepted; Mr. Slurge did not. Mrs Vandusen gave a detailed description of the gentleman who had found the ticket. The story spread like wildfire throughout Canada, and even beyond: Who in his right mind would spurn a gift from heaven of several million dollars? – who in this day and age was so honest as to turn in a find of several million dollars? – when the finder was assured of a handsome reward? The search was on for this mysterious person. And the press besieged the house of Mr. Ebenezer Slurge. He remained resolutely invisible.

Mrs Vandusen, having checked the holder of the card who had borrowed the book in question, telephoned Mr DeLisle to inquire of him whether she might reveal his identity to the press, in the light of his extraordinary act.

“To my mind, Mr DeLisle, the public have a right to know the person endowed with such unparalleled honesty. You will be held up as an icon to emulate. We need people like you.”

Mr DeLisle was as adamant in his refusal as Mr Slurge had been in his, and for very different reasons.

“I don’t think the public have any such right, as you put it, Mrs Vandusen. My right to my privacy is far more important. However, it was not I

who borrowed the book. It was borrowed in my name by a friend, and I dare not betray his wish to remain unknown. I am sure you understand that.”

Three weeks later an express, registered letter addressed to Mr. Charles DeLisle was delivered to his house. On opening it Charles found a cheque in the amount of one million dollars, ostensibly from The Church of Eternal Salvation. It was signed by the Reverend Ebenezer Slurge, and accompanied by a brief letter. At dinner that evening he announced casually to his visitors that he alone, of the three million citizens of Toronto, knew the identity of the Good Samaritans, and was immensely grateful to them.

“I have always wanted to have a million dollars!”

“We are very pleased for you. We won’t even ask you what you intend to do with it.”

“I’ve had the feeling that some good would come of your being here! But tell me, what would you do with it if it were yours?”

“Give it away, of course. But not to Mr. Slurge.”

“Let’s put the names of all the Ontario charities in a hat,” suggested Charles, “and draw as many names, or as few, as the parts you wish to divide the money into.”

Aspison and Asweron looked at each other in disbelief.

“But isn’t that another lottery?” said Asweron.

“I looked into the problem this morning,” said Aspison. “If the money were mine, I would give one hundred thousand dollars to each of the City and the University libraries, and four hundred thousand dollars to each of The Salvation Army and the Bahá’í. Of course, I would not reveal the origin of the gift, for they might demur.”

It was Charles’s turn to shake his head in disbelief.

“But surely,” he said, “there is no taint attached to that cheque? Surely you have earned it in a way? Or, if not exactly earned it, at least it is a pure gift, unasked and unexpected?”

“But equally surely, I have done nothing to earn it. The only money one can accept is the money that one earns by honest work.”

“I’m afraid,” said Charles with a wry grin, “that that would eliminate many jobs and activities in many countries these days!”

“I am glad you make a distinction between action and activity.”

Episode II: The Volcano

Shortly after entering the town of La Libertad, the two new arrivals came across a sizeable assembly of people—men and women of all ages and a smattering of children—gathered outside a large, forbidding, red-brick building. The visitors detected a palpable air of expectancy, almost of excitement, emanating from the people, who were whispering among themselves while keeping a careful eye on the tall, studded twin doors set in the middle of the front wall of the castle.

Suddenly the one of the doors was flung open, two uniformed men stepped out, followed by a civilian sandwiched between this pair and two other soldiers. The party was completed by a fifth man, in a resplendent uniform, who was clearly in command. Addressing the civilian he said in stern tones:

“This is the first time you have been imprisoned, Jesus, on the serious charge of disturbing the peace. Let us have no more of your silly preaching...”

“My preaching, as you call it, is not silly. If you were wise—or rather wiser than you are—you would listen to me with some profit for yourself.”

“I know well where my ‘profit’ lies without advice from you.”

“Indeed you do! As for my preaching, no power on Earth can stay me if I have the will for it.”

“Be gone! And if you care a button for your safety ...”

“Safety!” spat the man in contempt. “That is your creed—safety within the fortress of the powerful. Safety is the policy of conformity and cowardice.”

This man called Jesus turned and walked away from his former gaolers towards the people who now swarmed towards him and quickly surrounded him, partly to give him protection, but primordially to see him better and to touch him and to hear him again.

They all now turned and walked in silent and orderly procession along the road which led out of the town. The visitors followed, first at a discreet distance but bit by bit reducing the space between them until they came almost up to the people bringing up the rear.

Aspison turned toward Asweron and said:

“Locked up for preaching! His ideas must have been inflammatory stuff to frighten the authorities here.”

“Have we not seen in our travels through many countries the power of ideas to frighten the powerful? ”

“And always, in every case, it is truth against lies.”

The assembled people, to whom our travelers had now become attached, had

come to a low hill. They started to ascend it, with the difference that the man they called Jesus had worked his way through the people and was now leading them. When he came to the summit he stopped and turned to face the people, who looked up towards him in a mood of high expectation. A voice suddenly called out to him:

“Jesus! Tell us about that other Jesus, who lived in a far-off land many centuries ago!”

This Jesus looked toward the man who had spoken, espied him, and said:

“So, Manuel, you want to hear his story, do you? It is true, I have spoken of him before, but I did not reach the end. So, yes, let me tell you a bit more about him.

“This Jesus, who was of a town called Nazareth, not unlike this town of ours, was the very soul of what is called *charism*. These days, the word is bandied about and applied to any person of fleeting celebrity who sings a vulgar song or struts about like a peacock. But the word is Greek, and it means “a special gift of grace bestowed by God”. Jesus was so endowed. He walked the Earth like a god himself, the very figure of authority and uprightness. He bestrode the Earth like an Atlas, who commanded the very winds and waves to obey him. Here was a man who spoke with the voice of angels, and who also spoke with the voice of thunder against hypocrites and pharisees and the self-appointed arbiters of right and wrong. In a word, he put fear and trembling into the powerful—the successors of Caesar and the high priests of the temple and the rich in their mansions and the usurers in their banks—for they cared only for themselves and the spoils of the Earth and the life in the here-and-now. They gave not a fig for the poor and the weak and the old and the infirm. But this Jesus gave hope and comfort to the oppressed of the world, and brought down anathemas upon the heads of the powerful. He promised that the Kingdom of Heaven would soon be brought to this Earth of ours, and Justice and Peace would reign, that the humble and meek would be saved and the proud and vainglorious would be cast down into the everlasting pit of damnation and tormented with Fire and Brimstone for all eternity.”

Jesus, looking about him as always when talking to his people, spotted two uniformed men striding towards the hill where they were. He waited until they had arrived at the edge of the assembly, and then, pointing them out to his friends, addressed them directly:

“I see we have two members of the armed police come to listen to our words. I hope they are come to learn what to believe and how to live. Yet I fear

very much that they have been sent to hear whether I speak more ideas that offend the mighty. What do you think of that, my friends? "Ideas offending the mighty!" Yes; for you see, no matter how mighty, they have no defence against ideas, against ideas which refute their propaganda. You are welcome to hear what I have to say, and to report it back to your powerful masters. Let me continue.

"When he was about thirty years of age this humble carpenter had a vision in which he saw himself as the One who would build a new Heaven and a new Earth. To test himself he went into the desert alone and lived there for forty days and forty nights. And he came out therefrom transfixed and confirmed in his vision; and from that day on he preached the Gospel which you all know. But, firm as he was in his mind that he was indeed the Son of God, he set his feet on a course that would prove it beyond question. He corrected the teachings of the rabbis, he accused them of abuse of their office, he taunted them with their impotence, he threatened them with damnation, he claimed he was come to fulfil the laws and the prophets. All that and more he did in the full conscience that the powers were feeble in their very Authority. They felt the very foundations of their seats of eminence begin to shake.

"Jesus courted martyrdom, for he knew that his God the Father would save him and bring the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. So the powers took him away, and they flayed him, and they scourged him, and they hung him up on a cross between two ordinary felons, and so he died. Death by crucifixion is the most terrible death, a death that comes at the end only after three endless days of unimaginable agony. But Jesus the Christ was spared this torment by a soldier who mercifully broke his legs with an iron bar, so that he hung from his the nails in his wrists and his chest collapsed and so he was unable to breathe and gave up the ghost after six hours. When he knew he was at his end and his Father was not come down to save him, he wheezed out his last unspeakably sad words, which were these: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Then he died.

At that precise moment there was heard the sound of gun-fire from below the hill where the people were gathered. None ducked or cowered or ran: indeed, all, as one, turned toward the noise as to discover the source of the volley and, perhaps, its cause. They saw a troop of soldiers racing up the hill towards them, with bayonets affixed to their rifles. The officer who was leading them ran through the massed assembly, albeit with difficulty, until he reached Jesus of Nahuatl and laid hold of him and said with menace in his voice:

"You are preaching lies and heresy and I hereby arrest you in the name

of the People!"

He seized hold of Jesus, had him put in handcuffs, and led him down the hill.

A week or two later the self-same scene which the two travelers had witnessed on their arrival was re-enacted outside the prison. There were two differences. On this occasion the welcoming crowd was many times larger than the former one. And Jesus, when he was escorted to the exterior gate where he as awaited, was in a pitiful state. He was bloody and bruised; his clothes hung in shreds about him; and he could scarcely walk, or even stand. When the guards let go of his arms, Jesus tottered a few paces, and would have fallen had his friends closest to the gate not rushed forward and held him.

Another disciple hastened toward the guards and said to them:

"You will pay for this! What are your names?"

"None of your business. Now get that rabble-rouser out of our sight. If you have any concern for him you will take him away. If he comes in here again he will not come out." And they disappeared into the fortress and slammed the door shut with a noise that echoed menacingly within.

The people turned and made their way into the town with Jesus, giving him support and protection, until they came shortly to a *bodega*. There a few of Jesus's closest friends entered with him, and told their closest associates to spread the word to go home and they would hear as soon as Jesus was recovered well enough to meet with them again.

Asweron and Aspison in the meantime over the next few days made discreet inquiries about this man called Jesus. They talked to shopkeepers, to publicans, to policemen, to beggars, to newspaper vendors, to barbers, to restaurateurs; and they talked to anyone they happened upon in the street; and they formed a confused picture of him.

Some said he was a danger to the public peace and

should be locked up permanently, if not worse. Some said he was a harmless crank and should be left alone: "After all what harm, or what good, can he do by simply talking to a few people on a soap-box?" Others again had never heard of him. But some others – and they were fairly few – were of the opinion that, if the authorities were disturbed, there must be something in his words to disturb them, but rather than try to frighten or bully him into silence they should engage him in public debate. Then finally there were those who were, either openly or guardedly, critical of or hostile to the current despotic regime and yearned for the day when it would be driven from power.

Some few days later they heard discreet rumours about the recovery of Jesus and his plan to meet with his followers at the same place on a certain day and at a certain hour.

He did not disappoint them. He appeared brazenly – some thought needlessly provocatively – outside the very prison where they had last seen him, bloody and bent. Now, this day, he was as if nothing untoward or ill had befallen him. He was upright and alert, his step was firm and his eyes shone bright. When he saw that the word had indeed passed around and that many people were gathering to see whether in fact the rumour was true, this Jesus was pleased, and he said to them in a voice that was vibrant and unafraid:

"Come, my friends! I have good news to give to you!"

Whereupon he strode into the midst of his people, who made way for him, until he reached the outer limit of the assembly; and set out for the same hill from where he had spoken to them before. And when they had all gathered round him in expectation, he looked around him and began thus:

"My friends, do any of you remember that once people believed that the Earth was flat?"

The people looked around among each other, wondering whether it was a real question and that they were expected to answer, or whether it was merely a way of opening his speech, and that he really wanted to answer it himself. Finally a young woman called out:

“Yes, Jesus, but no one believes that any more, do they?”

“Ah, you sly one, you! You took the very next question out of my mouth! But ... (he looked all around him) ... do any of you here believe that now?”

If any did believe it, they were too shy to admit it, for no one spoke.

“And why,” said Jesus, “did people believe it in the past and distant days? Because the Church taught it. And what the Church taught was the Truth. But the Church taught it not with proofs, but with what it called Faith. If you did not believe what the Church taught, you were taught other lessons. These other lessons went by different names, and all were painful. Some even fatal. For a full thirteen hundred years – think of it, my friends: for well over one thousand years in that Christian Europe – not a single thinker came to challenge the current beliefs or to inquire into Nature’s laws. Thinker? Did I say ‘thinker’? There was no such thing! For over one thousand years the rational spirit of inquiry and curiosity taught by the Greeks about our world and about our own nature was stifled. Then, seemingly out of the blue, there came a man called Ferdinand Magellan. He did something extra-ordinary. He assembled a fleet of fifteen ships, and with them he sailed around the world. He sailed all round the world and returned to the very same port from whence he had sailed!”

Jesus paused, and looked around him, and saw that the people followed his every word in awe.

“No: that is not quite true, (he continued.). The poor brave man did not survive. Only a very few of his sailors returned home. But what he had done spread rapidly throughout Europe. Of course, people were still in thrall to the Church, and the Church merely pooh-poohed the event and dismissed it by saying that all it showed was that the Earth was like a saucer, that Magellan had simply sailed round the rim, and that the Earth was still flat. But Truth will out! There is no power that can stand up against Truth! Slowly but inevitably

the word spread far and wide, and people began to believe a different lesson. And, my people, do you know what that different lesson was – and is still today?”

Jesus looked about him, expectantly, and waited, and was finally rewarded by the sight of a hand raised, in the middle of the assembly, raised partly, and as it were self-consciously and uncertainly.

“Yes, Paolo! Tell us what that lesson is!”

“That voyage round the world opened man’s mind.”

“Absolutely! It opened man’s mind! What does that mean? It means simply, and beautifully, that hitherto man’s mind had been closed. It had been in a prison. The prison was the belief-system imposed by the Church. That voyage burst open the iron bars of the prison, and set us free to think for ourselves. We, and the world, would never be the same again. It was the beginning of a new age, of the age of science, of the discovery of the laws of Nature. It was one of the great moments in the history of mankind.”

Jesus paused and looked around again; and again all were expectant.

“My dear friends, did you know that everything in the Universe revolved and rotated about this Earth which we inhabit? Surely you knew that, did you not? You didn’t? You mean to say that you believe that this Earth of ours revolves around the Sun? Where did you get such a preposterous, such a heretical, notion? Did you not know that the Church taught that the Earth was the centre of the Universe, and that Man had been created by God as his special creature in order to bow down and to worship him for ever and ever and to submit for ever and ever to His Will? And then came Copernicus! Who was Copernicus?”

Another hand went up, this one a little less hesitantly. Its owner did not wait to be interrogated.

“Copernicus was a Polish astronomer who wrote a book in which he proved that the Earth went round the sun!”

“Proved?” exclaimed Jesus. “That is a very strong word, Miguel! Why, it is almost sacrilegious! It is certainly

heretical. How dare anyone make a claim about the Universe which contradicts the teaching of the Holy Mother Church? But you are right! What the Church teaches is dogma based on Faith. It cannot prove its teachings. But Science can. We are rational beings and we believe what our reason reveals to us. Yes, I mean: reveals!"

A voice called out from the crowd, not waiting to be asked:

"What is your next question, Jesus?"

Jesus looked sympathetically toward the voice, recognized its author, and said gently in answer:

"Yes, Gabriela. Ah, it is good to see you among your brothers and sisters of right learning! My next question is – and I think you know it already! – what is the name of the man of Pisa of Italy who dared to champion the discovery of Copernicus?"

"It was the famous Giordano Bruno!"

"Yes. And what happened to him?"

"Ah, the Inquisition persecuted him and harassed him and tried to make him retract his views, which he refused to do, because he knew the Truth that Copernicus taught and when he wouldn't deny the Truth, the Church burnt him at the stake. But the heat of the flames that consumed poor Bruno served only to throw a great light on the Truth."

"Yes, that is what that Roman Inquisition did to him. But what those purveyors of myths and lies did not know was that you cannot lock Truth up. Truth will always out, and other brave men and women will find it and pass it on until it is accepted throughout the world. And even by the Church!"

"And who came next, Jesus?"

"Ah, it is you, José Maria! I might have known. Would you care to answer your own question?"

"No, I wouldn't, Jesus. I am keen to listen and to learn, not to tell."

"Well, then, after Galileo, came more daring and curious minds, men who inquired into the structure and working of the human body– men named Paracelsus, Vesalius and

Servetus— until another named William Harvey wrought a great revolution, for beyond showing how the blood circulated throughout the body and replenished itself with the air we breathe, he investigated the procreation of all animals and established the law: *omne vivum ex ovo.*”

Here Jesus paused again, for effect, as was his custom, and, looking around him, said slyly:

“I know you all know that that Latin phrase means, ‘Every living thing comes from an egg’.”

We move on and meet one of the greatest scientific minds of all time, Isaac Newton. His ideas of the Universe, the sheer awesome majesty and cosmic vastitude of the Universe, appealed to both Science and Church. God is shown to be a geometer, a mathematician, and architect who created the Universe which unfolds according to strict laws discoverable by logic. Science was opening up new paths of inquiry and discovery in the worlds of physics and chemistry, and also in the lives of animals and plants. But none of this ruffled the Church’s feathers until... until a troublesome man dared to suggest—not only suggest but to prove—that the whole animal kingdom was inter-related, that animals were not created unalterably, and that man evolved, like all the species on Earth, from earlier existing forms so that men and apes were cousins. Well, the cat was well and truly loose among the pigeons and the pigeons got out! Try as the champions of reaction might, the pigeons could not be called back. The pigeons of Truth took wing and spread the new gospel of darwinism throughout the world. But Darwin did more than overturn the doctrine of man’s origins. There is no design in Nature, either visible or invisible, he said. More: many are the signs that show forms and features and behaviour proving only random forces for change at work. He searched for the soul of man and his genetic ancestors, but could discover nothing but matter. And when that matter ceased to be, so thought and spirit ceased to be. Had Newton searched for Heaven in the celestial emptiness of space, he would have found nothing—not even a resurrected body! Now here we have a

puzzle.”

Jesus paused here again, and looked around him as if to seek inspiration for an answer to the conundrum. But his ardent listeners knew that, this time, he was not looking for answers.

It was as if the Enemy and his spies were waiting for him to continue; for the moment he paused again, as if once more to look around him, this time to catch the mood of his audience, the Enemy attacked. The police came rushing upon them, swinging their batons indiscriminately among the people, uncaring whether they struck men or women, young or old. They hacked their way through the people, and round the people, until they reached their objective. They seized Jesus roughly, bound him with ropes, tied a last rope around his neck, and dragged him back with them to the town.

The people were aroused, and they stormed the police escort and they felled many of them, but, though in the minority, they were well armed and beat the men and women who dared to approach them. Until finally they arrived at the prison; the gates were opened, and Jesus was brutally manhandled and the gates slammed shut in the face of his followers now powerless to help their master.

Subsequent events were reported differently by the various sources of news; but what is incontrovertible is that, at the precise moment when the prison door banged shut on Jesus of Navuatl, the people not only of the town but of the whole province were shattered by an explosion of such magnitude that forever afterwards they could speak of little else. All, as one man, looked, albeit with horror in their eyes and fear in their hearts, in the direction of the cause of their terror. And what they saw was the volcano. The volcano that stood some miles away on the northern outskirts of their town. The volcano that had been extinct for over a thousand years. It had blown up. All that those good citizens saw, at that first moment, was a vast eruption of gases and dust rising into the air with frightening speed, and spreading

out in all directions. But – and this is what gnawed at their entrails – especially in the direction of their town, blown by the wind.

The people watched in growing alarm as the clouds of dust grew. Then there was a second vast explosion, and as they watched they saw huge rocks and boulders, spewed into the air and hurled, like pebbles, in all directions.

As the people watched in growing horror, wondering how they could protect themselves from the threatening clouds of dust and rocks, they saw yet another torment.. Fire! The dust rose and dispersed. And from the rim of the volcano there appeared an eruption of red-hot lava. This lava bubbled out of the volcano and formed into a river, and this river had nowhere to go but down. And as it flowed down its own side it grew and grew. And the side it flowed down was in the direct line of the town.

The good people of La Libertad watched in horror as it slithered and writhed towards them, like a prehistoric monster, and they collected their youngsters and what belongings they could in their arms and in their prams, and they scattered pell-mell towards the high ground on both sides of their town.

The burning river of red-hot lava poured out of the volcano for two days toward the town, and the closer it came the more clear it became that the prison lay in the direct line of its path. The prison warden was not slow to apprehend the danger. He sounded the alarm, and with all his guards and other staff he fled the prison in their cars and trucks, and those without such transport fled on bicycle and on foot. And when all the officers had reached relative safety outside the prison, the last man out, who was the warden's deputy, locked the outer door with his great key before taking off.

It scarcely needs saying that the friends and family of the prisoners, thus left to their fate in the doomed prison, swarmed round the castle, seeking all possible ways of forcing an entry into the building. It seemed almost at the last moment, when all was lost, that a prison guard came

running back to the prison and, rushing up to the main door, produced the key and opened the door, and let the beleaguered and seemingly doomed prisoners escape.

They were in the nick of time, as it seemed. They numbered over two hundred; but they managed to scamper up the hill on the east side of the prison and to escape the worst of the heat pouring off the red-hot river of lava, before this dantesque inferno reached the prison. But then came another extraordinary event.

Had anyone had the presence of mind to look up to the mouth of the volcano they would have seen that lava was no longer spewing out of its mouth, and that the flow had indeed ceased.

Moreover, the lava stream flowing down the mountainside towards the town had itself slowed, until it stopped; so that the head of the flowing stream, losing its momentum, slowed and finally stopped altogether at the very wall of the prison.

When the people were able to return to their homes which had escaped destruction, and before life had resumed its normal course, it was found that the whole governing body of despots and their acolytes had fled. The town – and indeed the whole region – had no government. This news could not have been more welcome. It took no time before the more enterprising among the people set up a Council of Citizens, which they formed from among the followers of Jesus, the outspoken enemies of the vanished régime, and the non-criminal state prisoners who had been liberated by the volcano.

As soon as Jesus was satisfied in his mind that the new government was working, and trusted by the people, he could not resist the opportunity to draw a lesson from the catastrophe which had just visited his people. So it was that, about a week later, the word went out that Jesus would speak to his followers. And how his followers had multiplied! When Jesus began to speak from his little hill, he knew that his voice would not carry so far as to reach the multitude of people who had gathered to hear him. But for them it was

enough that they were there on this occasion to see him, and to receive later a report of his words.

“My friends, we have all passed through parlous times. And we have come through with victory on our side. I tell you first that the evil-doers who oppressed us have been returned to our custody by our neighbours and they will be dealt with according to the principles of justice.

“I am conscious that in speaking today I have nothing to fear, and that whatever I may say is little likely to bring the weight of official condemnation upon my head. But I know too that what I am about to tell you will not be agreeably received by a large segment of our people; so all I can ask is that they, like you, listen with some attempt at understanding.

“‘God is angry at us! We have brought this punishment upon ourselves for our sins!

What must we do to atone for our misdeeds? How can we placate God in his wrath?’ These are the mutterings and the earnest soul-searching that are going on amongst our people at this very moment! The question is, rather, How can we, the people, console and reassure our fellow-citizens that they have done nothing wrong, that they are not sinners, and that God is not angry with them? The bigger question is, How can we convince our people that God has nothing to do with it? that God is not like that, and, even if he were the Creator of this Earth, he would not have created such an Earth as to burn in a horrible death the selfsame men and women and children which He had, apparently, also created. Think about this too. This Earth has been subject over millions of years to numberless natural disasters: earthquakes, tidal waves, famines, floods, heat-waves, lightning strikes and forest fires, freezings, not to mention volcanoes. Is there any sane person here, or anywhere on this Earth, who dare suggest that these disasters are the work of God and that he has visited them upon his own creatures, including even his innocent children? If there is such a monster, then his God is not my god.

“But we know very well, do we not? that these calamities are simply, and tragically for us, simply acts of Nature. If we would understand Nature and her ways, we must become students of Nature, that is, scientists. If you want to learn about God, you become a theologian. I do not expect a theologian to tell me about Nature; and I will not presume to tell him about God.

Jesus of Nahuatl paused, and looked about him at the throng of admiring and expectant people, and took a deep breath before picking up his tale.

Jesus paused again. This time his pause lasted many a moment, while he looked around him, and saw with thankfulness that his words had found their mark.

“Friends,” he said. “We have now to build a new society. All must play our part, whether small or large, with this one thought in our minds, that we are a part of a greater whole, and that when we build for others we build for ourselves too. And let us always remember that whatever we do, it is for others before it is for ourselves; for if we seek only our own good, it is harmful to others, and that when we bring down the commonweal we bring down our own as well. Whereas by doing good for all we raise ourselves up with our fellows.”

A few days later a public meeting was convened in the football stadium, to accommodate as many people as possible. When all were assembled, and the Council of Citizens had taken their places on a stadium erected in the middle of the ground so that they could all be seen, the pro-tem President advanced to the front of the platform and, taking the microphone, began to speak.

“Fellow Citizens, YOU ARE FREE!”

A great shout of happiness greeted those words, a roar of joy that could be heard a mile away.

“You are free to, and you are free from. You are free from all the dread apparatus of state control, with its arrest

and imprisonment and maltreatment and arbitrary rules applied only to us, the people, while they, the rulers, wallowed in unearned entitlements and privileges while preaching in the name of the People.

“You are free to create your own fortunes and happiness while taking care not to harm others’ enjoyment of freedom. You are especially free to choose a *métier* and an abode and your own circle of friends and associates with the idea of contributing to the extent possible to the welfare and prosperity and security of our community.

“I am bidden by my colleagues of the Council to give this pledge – that we will never unnecessarily intrude on your freedoms and private lives, and we will not impose unnecessary restrictions on your legitimate activities; and we ask you in return not to come running to us, the government, for help if you are in difficulties or have problems. You are free, and you must fight your own battles.

“Freedom is a precious thing to have; but it is too easily frittered or bargained away in return for promises of greater security or safety. There is only one way of ensuring the permanence of these new freedoms that we have so suddenly and unexpectedly gained: it is to practice them and to insist on them at all times, and to shame anyone you meet who would give up, even a tiny portion of them, for some slender return. For that would be the start of the descent into another despotism.

“We have to build a new commonwealth, to replace the corrupt and violent régime we have just got rid of. It will not be easy; but it will be done with everyone playing his part. And it will be founded on principles different from theirs; and I must say also, different from those which are the foundation of the huge countries to the north, where material things are the touchstone of one’s worth.

“Let us above all encourage the writer, the critic and the teacher. For literature is both the mirror of our times and the memory of our people; the critic holds us up constantly to first principles and high standards; the teacher – well, one school is worth a hundred hospitals, for if all hospitals were to close the results would be sad for families for a time; but if schools were to shut their doors the consequences for society would be calamitous and immediate and permanent.

"Now let us all depart, and return to our work or our recreations or our homes, and ever bear in mind the good of all in all that we do."

Asweron and Aspison were there to hear this speech, and on making their way out of the stadium they turned to each other with the same thought in their minds.

"Let us go and talk to Jesus. Why is he not on the Council?"

"And he knows something about the volcano that he hasn't told anyone."

It did not take them long to find him: the first people they asked pointed out where he was likely to be. He was in a boat-builder's shed. As soon as they appeared, Jesus looked up from the boat that he and a companion were working on, and greeted them saying:

"I have seen you in the crowds. You are strangers."

"Yes." And they explained very briefly what they were doing there. Then Asweron asked him: "We are puzzled, after listening to your words about the future of your country, why you are not taking a role in the governing Council?"

Jesus laughed a laugh of good humour, mingled with a tone suggesting amusement that the reason escaped them.

"Why, because I am not cut out for that sort of work. I want only to be a fisherman or a carpenter. Or both, at different times, depending on the weather. By learning to build boats I can combine the trades. We have a principle of labour which tells us that every trade, in varying degrees, admits people with the calling and aptitude for it, the education enabling them to succeed, and the intelligence to give something back to it."

Jesus looked questioningly at his visitors in turn, but his implicit invitation evoked no response. But Aspison opened a different line of inquiry.

"You are well read in the natural sciences. Have you studied volcanology?"

Jesus laughed merrily again, but this time his laugh did not conceal a slight surprise and discontent that his

secret had been divined.

“I have been studying our little volcano for years and I was sure it was going to come to life again after all these centuries. When it blew it was clear that it was only going to be a minor eruption. On the second day I saw the lava had stopped flowing and would not reach the town. But I set up an alarm in the prison, and everyone believed me.”

“You could so easily have ...”

“Yes! And I would never have heard the end of it, and the people would forever after be expecting me to perform other miracles. That is not my trade either.”

Asweron and Aspison took their leave of Jesus and La Libertad, content in the thought that here was one country and one people who seemed assured of a happy and prosperous and virtuous future.

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