

STEVE REDWOOD



**WHO NEEDS
CLEOPATRA?**

reverb

12: THE CRUCIFIXION CONSPIRACY

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

*And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.
(St Luke)*

Bertie Senior's new-found happiness didn't last very long. It wasn't his son's latest grisly death, which he took in his stride; it was something far closer to the bone. One night he discovered three of his new wives wantonly disporting themselves with dildos in one hand and copies of his bank balance in the other, and came to three reluctant conclusions: first, that he wasn't perhaps as great a lover as he had believed; second, that dildos were an international conspiracy against the male sex; and third, that the young women had only married him for his money. Luckily, they hadn't been Temple marriages (which are for eternity), so he soon got shot of them. Quite literally, according to some evil tongues.

This unfortunate experience naturally led him to question the validity of the Mormon faith. He had, he decided, been a bit hasty in converting so quickly. Not only had the standard of Bertie's mother's cooking gone down in vengeful proportion to the number of wives he took on, he had also recently felt a couple of sharp pains in his chest. They might have been the result of his renewed marital activity, but they might also, he feared, be a Sign, a warning swish of the Reaper's scythe. It was time to search again for a dromedary-friendly needle.

I had a horrible fear that he might send us to check up on the origins of other religions. I didn't fancy that one bit. Sweltering in the Arabian desert with Mohammed? Starving with Siddhartha Gautama? Discussing the prophetic secrets of pyramids with Charles Taze Russell (before the end of the world in 1915, obviously)? No, thank you!

But we were saved from that. He decided to stick with the religion he knew.

"We still don't know if there are aliens or not," he mused one afternoon, as we looked out over the city he virtually owned, "but

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perhaps this isn't so important after all. There's an even greater question. Despite Moroni's trickery, we know there is a Creator, because Cain actually met him, and you said you might even have spotted him yourselves chasing Adam. But what about the story of Jesus? In particular, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection?"

I knew what he really meant: had Jesus truly sacrificed himself for *all* men, including filthy rich magnates like himself whose life had been as pure as snow driven through a chimney?

And I also guessed what this was leading to. I had a very bad feeling about it.

If, as I suspected, we were at least partly responsible for the very mysteries we were solving, might we not also somehow become responsible for the murder of the Son of God if we went to investigate it?

And if we did, there was Someone who might take it rather badly. The same Someone who, as far as I could see, had spent most of the Old Testament taking things rather badly. The Middle East still isn't very densely populated.

I put forward a host of irrefutable reasons why we shouldn't go to that particular place at that particular time. Bertie Senior listened with his usual attentiveness.



He didn't want to be accused of sending us back to film the Crucifixion just for the sake of sensationalism. The whole Programme, after all, was predicated on the idea of solving old mysteries. So, apart from finding out whether the Crucifixion ever really happened at all, we were told to try to solve the mystery of the two thieves.

St Luke says that one of the thieves crucified with Jesus believed in him, saying 'Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.' And that Jesus answered: 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.' Very heart-warming, and the kind of uplifting conversation that ought to grace all good crucifixions. But then both Mark and Matthew tell us that 'they that were crucified with him reviled him'. Not so nice at all: quite down putting, in fact.

So our first job was to see which of these two versions, if either, was correct.

Rather significant, I thought, that Bertie Senior should be so concerned over the fate of sinners.

Our second job, though, was the important one. Crucifixions were the in thing in those days, a way for the Romans to display their advanced civilisation to the surrounding barbarians. Six thousand followers of Spartacus had died in that manner along the Appian Way seventy years before as proof of Imperial enlightenment. So being crucified was nothing to write home about, even if your hands had been free to do so. Rising from the dead, though, was, even then, considered a pretty clever thing to do. If we could show that Jesus really did manage to pull off that little trick, then that would go a long way to proving that he was who he said he was. And as our technicians swore that they had now improved the TM enough for it to stay for up to five days in the past, we were confident we could come back with an answer.

"Oh, and if you can also film the Turin Shroud and the Oviedo Sudarium you might be in line for a bonus," added Bertie Senior, as he waved goodbye to us. I had no idea what the Oviedo Sudarium was, but it didn't sound very nice, so I mentally decided to forget that small task.

It was only as the Machine was about to take off that I had a disquieting thought: if Moroni was behind the Mormon religion, could he also have been behind other religions as well? Islam really didn't seem his style, not enough razzmatazz. But the Jesus story itself? When I thought about it, I realised it could easily have come from Moroni's twisted imagination: spirits impregnating virgins; water being transformed into a popular alcoholic beverage; evil spirits hitching suicidal rides in pigs; a saviour getting bumped off by the very people he's come to save; a prophet who acts as if his willy is no more than an irrelevant accident. Yes, this absurd story certainly bore all Moroni's hallmarks.

No, it couldn't be. I shrugged off the thought. I was getting obsessed.

What we were NOT expected to do was solve the mystery of the Nazca Lines in Peru.



“So you think you’re the first? Haven’t you ever asked yourselves,” said Jesus, “just why there was no room at the inn when I was born?”

He was in the courtyard of the Roman fort, and, far from being shackled, was wandering around among the soldiers.

We hadn’t. “Filled with paparazzi trying to get an exclusive on the Three Kings?” Bertie suggested. “Brits chasing the winter sun?”

If this strikes you as a not wholly appropriate manner to address the Son of God, bear in mind we’d just had our Time Machine confiscated the second we materialised, and not only that, but when they’d seen it, the Time Police drafted in for the event had laughed their helmeted heads off, treating my great invention as a prehistoric relic!

“Dr Flintstone, I presume!” one of them had quipped.

Sassy bastards! OK, so they had foldaway models they could slip into their shirt pockets, but where would they have been without my prototype? “You’re just pygmies standing on the shoulders of a giant!” I yelled (Jesus frowned), but they didn’t understand: ah well, culture was already well on the way out when we left: *Hello Magazine* had become required tertiary education reading.

Perhaps it was a good thing they didn’t understand. I recalled what their colleagues had said about being able to get round Temporal Paradoxes, and held my newly re-implanted tongue.

As for Bertie, after his recent experiences there was very little that could faze him.

Jesus almost came up to my left armpit, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Engelbrecht the Surrealist Sportsman immortalised by Richardson and Hughes. You can see why we were initially a bit doubtful about his claims. I personally believe that his small stature may well explain the mystery of Why the Stone was Moved, but we’ll get back to that.

Jesus didn’t seem to notice Bertie’s tone, anyway. “Time Travellers, that’s why! Hundreds of ’em! Supposed to have come to honour me, and then hog all the accommodation, leaving me and the Womb in a stinking manger!”

It struck me as a bit odd that he should refer to his mother as ‘the Womb’, but I suppose he might have picked up that way of thinking from the Holy Ghost. Some wasps, so I’ve read, have a similar habit of laying eggs in other creatures. And no one says how wonderful that is, or starts a cult to the Virgin Hymenoptera!

You think you got a big audience for your birth? I thought to myself. Just wait and see the full house when you snuff it! OK, as it happened, that’s exactly what he was doing, but I wasn’t to know that then.

I must admit that I felt no more friendly towards the other Travellers than he did. Until now, I’d assumed that we were the world’s only Time Travellers – apart from the Time Police, and, perhaps, Moroni – and when we get here, the place is packed out with them! All from our own future, of course. The ungrateful bastards could at least have stopped off en route, and shown their gratitude by leaving me a few bottles of far-future whisky.

Unlike Moroni, none of them seemed to pay any particular attention to Bertie. A few of them had vaguely heard of us – all right, of him! – but that was all. I began to wonder whether I’d been wrong in assuming Moroni to be from our future.

At that moment, a Roman soldier passed by, and for no reason at all, gave Jesus an almighty shove. Incensed, Bertie sprang forward, and knocked him to the ground. I expected him to be beaten to death by the other soldiers lounging by, but they just laughed, and one of them even offered him a cigarette.

A cigarette?

“You’re coming on well,” said Jesus, as he got up and dusted off some dried sheep dung and nodded approvingly at the man who’d just pushed him, “but you forgot to sneer and spit in my face.” He turned to us. “A few have got into the spirit of the thing, as you see, but some of them are such poor actors, it’ll look more like a medieval miracle play than a crucifixion! And there still aren’t anywhere near enough soldiers. I don’t suppose you’d mind slipping on skirts and helmets, and looking pitiless and aquiline for a bit?”

“You mean, these soldiers aren’t real? I mean, real soldiers?”

“Good Lord no, all the original soldiers got murdered by a Christian fundamentalist Traveller who came into the past to Save me. Before I could explain that I didn’t want Saving, she’d zapped the lot with some sort of Death Ray. Typical female emotional overreaction! Nearly ruined everything. The Time Police frisk the lot the second they arrive now, of course.”

As we knew to our embarrassment. When we’d stepped out of the TM in the early Friday dawn, two Teepees, dressed just like the ones who had brought us back from St Petersburg, in black uniforms (why

do these types never wear pink or turquoise?), had stopped us.

“Spoilsport or Pervert?” they asked.

“I don’t understand,” I said with as much dignity as is possible when one is being lifted, turned upside down, shaken, and frisked. They confiscated my pork scratchings.

“Most people who Travel here either want to stop the Crucifixion – without much success, as you must already know – or indulge in a bit of the old *schadenfreude*.”

The frisking suddenly became extremely – one could say *too* – thorough. “What’s this?” one of them sniffed suspiciously. “Why’s it hidden there?”

“It isn’t hidden,” I said, squirming, “it’s... it’s for my haemorrhoids.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but I didn’t feel like explaining that the surgeons had misplaced a couple of minor items when they were trying to put us back together after Roswell.

I thrust away the bowel-wrenching memory. Jesus went on:

“Trouble is, word’s got round that I spell trouble, and even the locals are keeping low-key now. Haven’t seen a Scribe or Pharisee for days! Pilate’s also been giving me a bit of a headache, tried to resign twice yesterday. Worried about his reputation. I’ve had to promise him a place on God’s right hand side in Heaven (luckily, he never thought to ask me just how far from his right hand side). Why, even the unclean spirits have made themselves scarce!”

I was beginning to think that this chap wanted to get himself crucified.

“I’m beginning to think you want to get yourself crucified,” I said. I usually like to say what I think, though I frequently have to make an exception with Bertie’s father, of course. And, these days, sometimes, with Winnie, too.

“What else do you suggest? I have to do something. Father’s obviously never going to shuffle off his immortal coil. Still fit as a bloody fiddle. A million press-ups – at his age! – and he doesn’t even break sweat! I’m heir to a throne I can never inherit. Unless I seize it by force.”

This I could understand. The same thing had recently happened in England, when Prince Charles, just before his fifty-eighth birthday, had finally lost patience and, after confiscating all her dogs and hats,

had the Queen locked up in the Tower. Her presence there greatly increased the revenues from tourism.

However, I couldn’t see how being crucified would help Jesus, unless he intended to take the nails with him and hammer them through God’s unsuspecting head.

“My crucifixion will be a great PR job. Future ages will worship me, not Father.”

I’m a real softie, as you know. Look how I’d forgiven Mabel for abandoning me in the Land of Nod! I didn’t want him crucifying himself for nothing, so I pointed out that God, in fact, was still worshipped – in my time at least – despite nagging doubts as to why he’d had to use the Holy Ghost instead of pleasuring Mary himself.

Jesus smiled. “Ah, but that’s just the first couple of millennia. People will finally come to realise that sending me down to be crucified to save the world, instead of having the guts to do it himself, was morally reprehensible. Only slightly less savage than Saturn eating his children, really. Hardly paternal. There’ll be a hate campaign on something called the Internet. By the third millennium, so the Time Police have told me, Christians will worship me alone, with Father seen as a servant of the Devil.”

I was a bit suspicious about what the Teepees might have told Jesus about the future state of Christianity. They must have realised that, just in order for them to exist, the Crucifixion, and everything that followed from the spread of Christianity, had to go ahead. In such a situation, they would not hesitate to tell little white lies to make sure the Crucifixion did go ahead. Indeed, I was later to find out that their pressure went beyond this. As for what they had done to the woman who had killed the original Roman soldiers, I dreaded to think.

And look what the bastards tried to do to us afterwards!

“But how will this help you get the throne?” I asked.

“When the angels find out that Father has just let me die, without lifting a blessed Finger to save me, I’m pretty sure they’ll back me in a coup.”

“Will you win?”

“I’m not a fortune-teller! But yes, I think I will. You see, God is only as powerful as the number of people who believe in him and worship him. And whatever happens, I’ll be treated with a bit more respect, that’s for sure!”

At this point he was felled by another ersatz Roman soldier hoping to make a good impression on him. This one remembered to spit. Wiping the spittle from his face, Jesus looked up, thanked him, and said with a rather cocky expression: “Oh, by the way, I intend to rise from the dead, wander around a bit before Ascending. Might take a stroll to Emmaus, always wanted to go there. Don’t you think that’s a rather super idea?”

I forbore to answer. I was pretty sure the Teepees had given him that idea, too.

(Judas later told us that Jesus was already dying from some horrible disease, picked up from all that laying on of hands and raising dead bodies without washing the divine digits after, and so he was simply trying to make the best of a bad job: better to go out with the glory of a Crucifixion than an ignoble wasting away. Maybe so. But Judas didn’t strike me as a particularly honest fellow. Come on, thirty pieces of silver just for pointing out the shortest chap in Jerusalem! Daylight robbery!)

I still wonder which came first in this ridiculous loop. Jesus had decided to get himself crucified because the Teepees (and other Time Travellers, no doubt) had told him that in the future he would be worshipped because of this act. But presumably they (like me) only got the story from the Gospels because it had already happened. But it only happened because Jesus had been told it was going to happen. Unless, of course, the Gospel writers had made the whole thing up, which meant that Jesus was about to do something which had never happened in the first place. In which case, he would be altering history, after all. But then the Teepees wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. But then they themselves would be the product of an alternate history.

Another of those endless circles. At least, all that had nothing to do with us. My earlier fears dissipated.

I scratched my head and dragged Bertie off for an early breakfast. Nothing but bloody unleavened bread: I’d forgotten it was still the Passover period.

I knew Jesus wasn’t due to be crucified until the third hour, which for some reason I never understood actually meant nine in the morning, so we struck up a conversation with another Traveller from the twenty-second century who was also being roped in as a substitute

Roman, and who had arrived a few weeks before us. An ornithologist, apparently, who’d spent his whole life studying hummingbirds. He revealed that the Gospel writers had indeed been a bit creative with the truth. The five loaves and two fishes, for example: in actual fact, that’s what had been left *after* the Sermon. It also transpired that the unclean spirits who drowned with the Gadarene swine were really a largish group of smallish Ayon pygmies, Travellers from Papua New Guinea, who had roused Jesus’ ire by a spirited defence of animism and an equally gutsy apologia for cannibalism. He chased them through the streets. A moneylender, still smarting from an earlier outburst of the prophetic wrath, told them how Ulysses had escaped the Cyclops Polythemus by clinging to the underside of the giant’s sheep, and persuaded the Papuan pygmies to do the same with the crazed pigs. No one, however, had mentioned the cliffs. It also seemed that Lazarus, although he *had* been raised from the dead, had tottered around in circles for a few seconds, groaned, said “Christ, I feel like death warmed up!”, picked his nose, and then keeled over again, as dead as a Monty Python parrot. Elisha had done a much better job.

Now, of course, all this wasn’t to say that Jesus wasn’t really the Son of God, simply that things weren’t as cut and dried as some would have us believe.

Anyway, we agreed to go along with his plans, and got our Roman uniforms. Bertie looked rather sweet; his Regenerated legs were surprisingly shapely. There were about a hundred of us in on the act. The other Travellers knew nothing – their function was to return to their own times, and confirm the historical reality of the Crucifixion. I must admit we felt a bit superior with our nice uniforms and our little secret. If only we’d known!

Well, I guess you all know the story, so I won’t repeat it, just clear up a couple of errors.

Judas, for example. We’d grown kind of fond of Jeez, eccentric or not, so we strung Judas up, made it look like a suicide, and used the pieces of silver to pay for snacks during the Crucifixion. That was the technicality the Teepees later used against us. (Yes, I know all about that story in Acts that, ‘falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out’, but that was just a bit of exaggeration by Peter, hoping to distract people from the three cock crows.)

The thunder and earthquake, of course, was just future technology, as was the Star of Bethlehem, which I was told normally crowned the Dome of the future World Stock Exchange.

But I do want to tell you about Bertie. I owe it to him. I know I may sometimes have spoken of him with a certain asperity, but when it really mattered, he came up trumps. British pluck at its best.

It will also help to clear up some apparent contradictions in the Gospels.

First, though, I have to refute those who accuse Jesus of being a cry-baby for shouting out on the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”. Let me tell you that he displayed amazing fortitude throughout the whole proceedings, and that when he uttered those words, he winked at Bertie and whispered, “That’ll turn ’em against him!” He was a credit to all people of unostentatious stature.

Ah, you say, and how come Bertie was so close, how come no one else saw the wink? Yes, well, those contradictions I mentioned...

You see, one of the thieves, cottoning on to the fact that the Roman soldiers weren’t soldiers at all, and feeling insulted at the prospect of being crucified by blackleg civilians, did a bunk half an hour before the Crucifixion was scheduled! No sense of history, of occasion.

“I’ve got to have two thieves!” yelled Jesus, who by this time was, not unnaturally – he’d been up all night – showing signs of tension. “Symmetry!”

Symmetry my foot! It was those Teepees putting pressure on him again. Well, they stepped in, made us draw lots, and poor Bertie drew the short straw. I’d like to think that this was an entirely aleatory event, even if the same unfortunate appearance that had secured us instant access to Leonardo’s studio probably influenced the distribution of the straws. And yet I now suspect there was something almost pre-ordained about his choice. As if all his other trials had been somehow leading up to this final apotheosis.

I could, I suppose, have tried to summon the SMM to get us out of there fast, but I realised that if I succeeded (unlikely, with the Teepees guarding the TM), I would in fact be changing the past. Jesus had died with thieves on either side of him. The Travelling zapper had created another hole in the past, and Bertie’s destiny was to fill it in.

Bertie himself seemed a bit doubtful about the honour.

“Fuckit, fuckit, fuckit!” said he.

For a moment, I thought he was conjugating a long-forgotten Latin verb, but then realised it was a heartfelt, if rather selfish, complaint against his destiny.

But Jesus whispered, “Don’t worry, I’ll see you’re all right!” After that, I didn’t feel so bad about it, and indeed was rather hurt by the mute reproach in Bertie’s eye.

We bade tearful goodbyes, and up went Bertie with a martyred expression.

“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,” he said, remembering to keep to their funny way of speaking, and Jesus swore he would, and that they’d share a bottle or two that very night in Paradise. But then he realised they could be heard, and he whispered to Bertie, “You’re better start reviling me, quick, or they’ll get suspicious”, so Bertie dutifully weighed in with some really vile insults, to which the other thief added heartfelt refrains.

But I noticed one Jew, who gave me the impression of being a doctor, scratching his head in surprise. He’d been even nearer than me to the cross, and must have heard the earlier part of the conversation. I guess the other gospel writers later dismissed his astonishing testimony, but St Luke chose to believe a fellow physician, and included a (doctored) version in his gospel.

Jesus got a bit more than he bargained for, poor chap. He was all hyped up to take his Crucifixion like a Man, and even used his knowledge of carpentry to coolly criticise the shoddy construction of his cross and the poor quality of the nails, but he hadn’t counted on the three crosses being so near to each other. That, I’m sure, is why he, supposedly a god – or, at this stage, a demigod – died before the other two, who were mere mortals. If you were on a cross next to Bertie, and if you happened to be so short that your head was not far above Bertie’s lower regions, wouldn’t you too yield up the ghost as soon as possible? And divine nostrils are well known to be particularly delicate.

It also explained why the group of mourning women were keeping their distance and ‘beholding afar off’, as the Gospels so tactfully put it. I asked someone which one was Mary Magdalene, wondering whether she’d be up for a quick drink afterwards.

Still, despite Bertie, Jesus managed to hang on for six hours up there, including three hours in almost complete darkness (something

arranged by the Teepees for effect), and it wasn't till the middle of the afternoon that he finally died.

At this point, I noticed two rather badly-dressed Sadducees get up and walk away, chuckling and eating bananas. I overheard one of them say: "So much for empty threats! Didn't have to wait long, did we?" It was impossible, of course, but I thought I recognised them.

The Teepees were ready, and the veil of the temple was rent in twain, the earth did quake, the rocks rent, and the ersatz soldiers went off to their nearby encampment for a celebratory drink, and, as they believed, to receive their Crucifixion Medals, before returning to their own epochs. My humming bird enthusiast invited me to join them. I gratefully accepted the offer, and had started to follow them when he said:

"I meant, well, of course you'll want to stay with your friend till... well, you know. We'll keep some drink back for you."

"Thank you," I said, my thirsty leg caught embarrassingly mid-air, "of course I couldn't leave while... See you later."

To pass the time – why did Bertie always have to do everything so *slowly*? – I secretly filmed Jesus being taken from the cross. Mary Magdalene had now approached, but not the other women. Was this a sign of interest in me? I do have a rather imposing figure, a noticeable air of rugged nobility, I can't deny it.

"Hsstt!" said Bertie, trying to catch my attention.

I moved closer, carving 'Maria loves N madly and rightly so' on the True Cross in order to disguise my real intention. "What?" I whispered.

"Jesus is dead now, isn't he? Can't you get me down now? This is bloody painful!"

I thought rather resentfully that it hadn't been that comfortable for me either, six hours on my feet like that! But before I could do anything, Mary Magdalene stopped her silent weeping, looked across at me and hissed:

"Oh no, you don't! You two have caused enough trouble. We're not having any more hitches. Shove off!"

As she spoke, her hood slipped back for a moment. I was only able to see her head for a second, but that was enough – Mary Magdalene was a Teepee!

I mouthed "Sorry" to Bertie, and went off to think about things.

Cross or no Cross, you don't cross someone as cross as her!

After pondering deeply, I decided I would, after all, join the other 'soldiers'.

Now there has been a lot of misunderstanding and quite unnecessary ill-feeling about this. I've been accused, not only of allowing Bertie to be crucified, but also of going for a booze-up while he was still hanging on the cross.

That has to be seen in the context of the following problem:

Our original brief had been to stay and film the Moving of the Stone as well, but Bertie's crucifixion had put that idea in jeopardy. It was impossible for me to save him, and I couldn't keep his corpse here for three days, because it might begin to decompose, and make it impossible to Regenerate him this time. The medics had been tetchy enough after the last Trip.

On the other hand, if we Travelled back now, it would leave the job half done. Jesus' dying was no proof that he was really a god. A lot of quite ordinary people have chosen that way to leave the world throughout history. The locals Jews, in fact, perversely took it as an obvious proof that he wasn't a god. The real test would be whether he would rise in three days or not.

Though the Teepees had assured him that this would indeed be the case, even Jesus himself wasn't a hundred per cent sure that he could manage that nifty little number. Towards the end, it had finally clicked as to why the Teepees were so desperate to help him. "If my body doesn't rise from the dead, history will be changed, and you lot are well and verily buggered," he said bluntly, "so you'd better make sure that if I don't manage it by myself, my body isn't there when they move the Stone."

I don't wish to sound unchristian, but perhaps Jesus was so insistent on this point because he didn't want future ages to find his bones, and learn how short he really was. People have certain minimum requirements of their gods. Religious discrimination of the lowest sort, but there you are.

In short, if I didn't leave Jerusalem quickly with Bertie (or Bertie's body) it might rot beyond Regeneration; but if I did leave, I would have no way of knowing whether Jesus really did rise from the dead or whether the Teepees moved his body for him. In other words, our mission would have failed completely.

But then I had an idea!!

It was such a good idea that I make no apology for having given it a paragraph by itself and two exclamation marks.

It concerned the little get-together that the hummingbird enthusiast had invited me to.

Those 'soldiers' all came from well into the future. So they would almost certainly have advanced medicines as well as advanced machines. Because, however advanced those Machines, there must always exist the risk of an accident, of being trapped in the past. Therefore, wouldn't it be logical for them to have anti-decomposition tablets, sachets of formaldehyde or something, to preserve them until they could be rescued? And if so, and if I could procure some, then I might be able to keep Bertie in good condition, and so be able to stay here the planned three days, and complete the mission.

I was almost feeling optimistic as I strolled towards the camp.

Because of the whistling, I didn't become aware of the unusual silence until I arrived there. The trestle tables, plastic mugs, and empty crisp packets were still there. The Travellers weren't. The encampment was deserted.

But not completely. There was one person still there.

A Teepee!

"Ah, I was waiting for you!" he said.

Funny how a far-future weapon looks so similar to our own. Though the one now pointing at me was probably capable of sprinkling bits of me in the asteroid belt.

"Can't leave witnesses," he said.

My first thought was that this sounded ominous; my second, that it sounded really ominous. I was beginning to piece things together. Jesus had said that some well-intentioned Time Traveller had massacred all the original Roman soldiers. So the Teepees had 'bussed' in a hundred new 'soldiers' so that he could go ahead with his highly eccentric plan to seize ultimate power. They clearly hadn't been expecting Bertie and myself, but a couple more soldiers made no difference.

But a hundred people who knew what had really happened couldn't be allowed to return to their own time to reveal that knowledge. Because then Christianity, at least in its traditional form, would be recognised as a put-up job, and that too would inevitably alter history.

I reacted to this slight contretemps in my usual way: I fell to my knees, and pleaded for mercy. My detractors have chosen to regard this as an act of cowardice. Nonsense: history teaches us that if you fall to your knees and plead for mercy, you sometimes *receive* mercy, which may give you a chance later on to skewer the balls of the bastard who made you plead for mercy in the first place.

OK, the blubbering might have been a bit over the top, but, come on, we all have our little idiosyncrasies!

"Oh stop that idiosyncratic blubbering, I'm not here to kill you," said the Teepee, his voice hinting a contempt which showed clearly that the obtuse fool was unaware of the deep cunning of my strategy.

"So why are you pointing that thing at me?"

"Because it makes people blubber, and that's one of the perks that make up for my low salary and this ridiculously tight and cod-sinister-looking uniform."

"Oh, I see." I stopped blubbering. "So what did you mean about 'can't leave witnesses'?"

"Actually, I phrased it rather badly. In fact, that's exactly what they are going to do: leave the witnesses. Here, in the past, in order not to have witnesses anytime else. Well, not exactly here, of course, but somewhere else, where they'll never be found."

"Why do you say 'they'? You're a Teep... from the Time Police, aren't you?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. By 'Time Police', I suppose you mean the people who confiscated your Time Machine this morning?"

"Of course."

"Yes, they are Time Police. But what makes you think there are Time Police from only one era?"

I had to think a few seconds.

"Of course! Each generation, there'll be new Teepees! They'll evolve, just as our police did from the Bow Street Runners!"

I began to feel a great relief.

"So you come from a different time from the Teepees who frisked us?"

"That's right."

"But your uniform..."

"...is exactly the same. Just because I'm wearing it doesn't mean it's necessarily mine. Couldn't it have belonged to someone else?"

I glanced at his weapon. “You mean...?”

“I do, indeed.”

“So why are you here?” I asked.

“I’ve been sent to help you.”

“Sent?” My mind immediately leapt to Moroni. “Who sent you?”

“That doesn’t matter. The important thing is that you and Bertie return to your own time with your Time Machine!”

Of course! My TM was the prototype. If it got stuck here in first-century Palestine, the later more advanced Time Machines might never get built.

But the Teepees – the other ones – must also have known this. I said as much to my new ally.

“Of course they know that! They fully intend to return your *Time Machine* to when it belongs. But without you and Bertie. They believe other machines will be constructed anyway, whether you are there or not, because the engineers will still have your plans.”

I didn’t point out that I had never let them see the original plans,

“But they still risk changing their own past! What have they got against us? Why, they even rescued us in St Petersburg after the Rasputin affair!”

“Maybe so. All I know is that this time they were ordered by someone from their future to stop you and Bertie returning, and that I was ordered by someone else even further in the future to stop them from stopping you and Bertie returning. For all I know, there may be other Time Police from still further in the future being told right now to stop me from stopping them from stopping you! So I suggest we get a move on!”

Just then, a strange tube-like object materialised beside us. Three Teepees – at least, I assumed they were Teepees – leapt out, with weapons already trained on us. Before anyone could fire, however, a net snaked down from above, enveloped the three, and swept them wriggling up into the sky, where they promptly disappeared.

“You see?” said my Teepee, lowering his weapon. “They’d been sent to stop me, and someone else was sent to stop them. You can’t imagine the stress in this job! We get a special bonus called the Philip K Dick Paranoia Dividend. There could be a thousand different factions playing leapfrog along the time waves, each one trying to stop the other from making illegal changes. Most unauthorised

changes do get Rectified sooner or later, because the further you go along the Line, the more potent the Time Custodians are, until you reach the Ultimate ones, but sometimes there are annoying delays. Once someone bugged around so much with the past – my past, your future – I found I was a women’s hairdresser with a lisp – a hairdresser, the indignity! – for three months until things were put right again. Another time I woke up in the morning and found my wife had three-foot-long pubic hair! It’s OK for everyone else: things change overnight, but since they change too, they are quite unaware of this. So if a woman suddenly sports three-foot-long pubic hair, they believe it has always been this way. But we have trans-temporal chips implanted which enable us to remember how things really were. We wouldn’t be very efficient otherwise.”

He shook his head sadly.

“And just when I’d got used to the Tuft of Venus, in fact found that I couldn’t really get turned on without it, some officious Custodian Rectified it!”

I wasn’t interested in these follicular follies.

“So what do I do now? Bertie’s still hanging around on the cross.”

“I know. They’re just waiting for you to take his body back to your Time Machine, where they’ll capture you, put you with the others, and take you where no one will ever find you.”

“But how did you know I’d leave Bertie on the cross and come here?”

“It was a fair guess. We do study the people we get involved with, whether it’s to save them or to kill them. We call it Profiling.”

I decided this wasn’t a good time to be offended.

“So what do I do now?” I repeated.

“Can you control your Time Machine from a distance?”

“Not the Machine itself. Only the Spatial Mobility Module.”

“That will do. Bring it here. They won’t try to stop that. They’ll be waiting in or around the Time Machine for you to arrive there with Bertie’s body.”

“And then what?”

“I come with you, and fry all the guards.” He looked lovingly at his weapon.

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“This aspect of it, yes.”

I wasn’t happy at the thought of all this cop killing. After all, they

had saved us in St Petersburg. He understood my expression.

“They’ll only be dead for a time, of course. They’ll be Snatched back into their own time, Resurrected, and given a day’s extra holiday as compensation for their death. Or maybe a month’s hard labour for cocking up!”

“There are Teepees at the Cross too,” I informed him.

“Hmm, they *are* being careful! This Bertie appears to be more important than I thought.”

I flushed.

“They’re after me too,” I said rather haughtily.

“Yes, it seems that you play some small part too.”

“Some small part!”

“Teepees at the Cross, too, eh? Let me guess... one’ll be Mary Magdalene, I bet, that’s their style, another... yes, another, I wouldn’t mind betting, could be the other thief, as backup...”

I hadn’t thought of that!

“But how do...?”

“The police mindset, the mindset. Well, no matter. We’ll have the element of surprise. Summon the Mobility Module now, time’s running out.”

I did so, and then cowered down behind a rock

“There may be Teepees in it. I don’t want to get in your way, under your feet,” I explained.

But the Module arrived safely, and empty.

“Come on, get in!” ordered my protector. “We have to move quickly now.”

I allowed myself to be thrust into the SMM.

“Golgotha ho!” he yelled.

We arrived in almost no time, and he blasted Mary Magdalene before she had time to even lift her hood or utter a ‘hail Mary’. He’d been wrong about the other thief, who was hanging there quite dead (unless there’d been a double-cross on the cross), but he blasted him too, just to be sure.

“Bloody hell!” said Bertie.

He wasn’t dead yet! Stubborn little bugger!

“Get him down! We’ve got about five minutes before the Teepees realise something is wrong.”

Just when you need a claw hammer you can’t find one! I yanked

and tugged, but couldn’t get Bertie’s nails to move a micron. I really didn’t see why Jesus had complained about their quality. I recalled Longfellow’s poem about the crossbill which had also tried to pull the nails from the Cross with its bill, getting it rather twisted in the process. And, yes, you guessed it, it also failed.

“Come on,” yelled my protector, “if we take too long, they’ll send a force to investigate!” I had no choice. The cross itself was too big to fit into the SMM. It was a Mohammed-Mountain situation: if I couldn’t pull the nails out of Bertie, I’d have to pull Bertie out of the nails.

Have you ever tried to remove upholstery from an Edwardian chair? Where bits of fabric are always left like untidy halos round the tacks? Well, the same thing happened with Bertie, though the left hand did come off quite easily for some reason.

Bertie screamed and swore at me something rotten. I forgave him, he’d had a rough day.

I got most of him off the cross, and into the SMM, then off we went at the same breakneck speed towards the Teepee control point where we’d been searched earlier. I spotted my Time Machine in a compound. Surrounded, as my new ally had surmised, by half a dozen unprepared guards.

I docked and, at a signal from him, opened the airlock into the TM. He plunged through, mowed down two Teepees who were in the way, then burst through the main hatchway into the compound, blasting away joyfully.

But one of the Teepees inside the TM wasn’t dead, and I spotted him raising a weapon in my direction. Acutely conscious that it was of paramount importance that I survive in order to get Bertie safely back to our own time, I put aside my natural warrior’s instinct, and selflessly used his body to shield myself. I congratulated myself on the wisdom of my decision as I felt at least three bullets thud into him. I knew he would thank me when he realised why I had done it.

“Right then, that’s it, mission completed!” said our ally, appearing at the entrance again. He noticed the surviving Teepee. “Tut tut!” He finished him off, sheathed his weapon, leapt in, and dragged the two bodies outside where he piled them on top of the others.

“It’s been an honour to serve Bertie – and yourself, of course. And I get a bonus! Have a safe journey.”

He slipped his hand inside his uniform – and disappeared. Another miniaturised Time Machine, I supposed.

I looked briefly at the carnage outside – however could Bertie be so important? – and set course for home.

Bertie didn't speak: the bullets had finally killed him.



Well, I was faced with the usual incomprehension and ingratitude when we got back. Bertie once again got all the credit, although all he'd done was dangle indecorously from a cross for a few hours, and receive a few bullet wounds, while I'd had to make all the difficult decisions.

After again showing his displeasure, which necessitated my immediate hospitalisation, Bertie's dad made me alter a few details. In the public version, for instance, Bertie insisted on sharing a cross with Jesus, and also told him a few jokes towards the end to cheer him up. Almost at once a cult sprang into existence hailing him as the new Messiah, with myself cast in the role of Judas.

Compared to his treatment at Roswell, Calgary had been a doddle for Bertie, although he himself didn't see it that way. Broken legs, bit of internal stretching and a few holes – our medical team, now with great experience and always prepared for the worst, had him up and moving in no time.

I spent a long time wondering what happened to the other 'soldiers'. And the thief who'd done a bunk. Had the Teepees murdered them? And then, one day, I was sitting with Maria watching a programme on Nazca in Peru, and marvelling at the long parallel lines and the enormous drawings created there in the red desert rock around two thousand years ago. In total, they cover an area of two hundred square miles, and the designs are so big that they can only be appreciated from the air.

Including an enormous hummingbird!

So that's where they took them! Those Teepees made damn sure they couldn't return to their own times to reveal what really happened in Jerusalem. No doubt they destroyed everything the Travellers tried to build, any messages they tried to leave. But they had forgotten the obvious. The mindset, the mindset...

Their landing strips still stretch into the distance, a constant reminder – to me at least – of how close these chronicles came to never being written.

As for Jesus, I guess I'll never know for sure what really happened. Maybe he really did do it by himself (after all, he only just failed with Lazarus) or maybe the Teepees shifted the body, to leave the tomb empty.

But last night I had a dream in which he appeared and said, "This is an oneiric circular. Thanks a million, you lot. It did the trick." Behind him, an enormous caged and fettered figure with a very loud voice – I'd say a voice of thunder if I didn't think you'd accuse me of exaggerating – was threatening all kinds of things, from plagues and boils to floods and meteor impacts.

I woke up, feeling rather pleased that Jesus really was the Son of God and not just one of thousands of madmen who have claimed to be divine throughout history.

Then I remembered Joseph Smith's visions, and once again was filled with doubt. Could Moroni be playing with me as he had played with the Mormon Prophet? Neither Bertie nor I ever heard or saw anything that actually proved that Jesus was a god.

And with beings like Moroni and, it appeared, even more menacing characters hanging around in the far future, and way too interested in Bertie and myself, it no longer made any sense to accept Pascal's famous wager.