Out of the Cave

edited by

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Athens	**2**
The City	**8**
The Railway	**13**
The Forest	**36**
The Climb	**51**
The Ridge	**59**
Above the Cloud	**78**
The Summit	**96**

Editor's Note

The reader may wonder how I came upon this story. This will be explained at the end. For now it is enough to say that I have written it down from memory, and to apologise for anything I have missed out or reported wrongly or failed to make clear. I have written it in the first person as it was told to me.

Athens

My death was easier than I expected.

I had been in the prison cell a month since my trial, plenty of time to think about dying. And about the trial. It was political, of course — the restored Athenian democracy flexing its muscles.

Democracy: rule by the ignorant, guided by emotion and self-interest rather than reason. I had tried for years to persuade the Athenians of this, and had attracted some undemocratic hangers-on such as Alcibiades and Critias. I expect you know what happened. First, the disastrous end of the long war with Sparta, thanks largely to my friend Alcibiades. Then the Spartan imposition of a puppet government; we called them the Thirty Tyrants, and Critias was one of them. They were soon expelled and the democracy was restored, but scapegoats were needed, and I was put on trial.

What was my crime? They came up with two charges which had little to do with politics: "Socrates does not worship the gods of the state" and "Socrates corrupts the young". I did not know my accuser, Meletus, and he clearly did not know me: the charges were mere caricatures of my ideas. But more of that later. In court I refused to apologise for my life's work but tried to justify it, and the jury of 501 fellow-citizens found me guilty.

Then came the decision on the punishment, and the death penalty was demanded. I had to propose an alternative, and I couldn't resist saying that all the good I had done deserved a reward instead: I suggested free meals for life at state expense, like the Olympic victors. Some friends hastily offered to pay a large fine, but I had done the damage: the vote, by a larger majority, was for my death.

The sacred ship was travelling to Delos at this time and executions were not allowed until it returned, so there was plenty of time to talk with my friends. They tried to persuade me to escape and go into exile, a quite normal procedure in Athens. I refused: if the laws of Athens said I must die, then I must die. Anyway, at the age of seventy I could not begin a new life somewhere else, and death was no great tragedy.

You may call me foolish, or even arrogant. But much of my life had been spent in trying to make the Athenians think, for the good of their own souls and the good of Athens, and I was not going to renounce that mission to save my life.

I had come to believe that death was a move into a better world, not mere oblivion (although even oblivion would be no worse than a dreamless sleep). My real self, my soul, could not die. I talked at length about this with my friends in the last days, but in spite of all my arguments I did not fully convince myself, and I found that our feelings are not easily controlled by our minds. I expected death itself to be a little difficult.

The time came. My wife and some other women were there, and several of my closest friends. I hoped to meet my end calmly, but my wife started weeping noisily and soon all the women had broken down into loud lamentations. I told them to leave, and my friends shepherded them out through the door. They could weep over my body later if they wanted to, but now I needed peace.

The prison officer handed me the cup of hemlock to drink. I had rehearsed this moment in my imagination. I told myself firmly that it was no more than a cup of wine, and asked the officer if it was all right to offer a little of it to the gods. "No, Socrates," he said with an uneasy smile, "we only prepare the correct dose." And so I said a prayer to the gods, and drank the poison. It tasted bitter, but I didn't let it linger on my tongue. All my friends too now burst into tears. Somehow this made it easier for me: I almost forgot what was happening as I urged them to be brave.

After a while my feet and my hands became numb, and I sat down on the bed. The numbness spread slowly; I felt that I was gradually losing control of my body, and I knew that when it reached my chest I would die. I lay flat. I think that I said a few words to Crito at one point, but my mind was busy with the excitement and the terror of what was happening to me: this was certainly a new experience! Then the numbness reached my chest and suddenly I could not breathe and felt that my heart was about to burst, but it did not last long: I think that my heart stopped beating, and my life

was over.

What happened next I can hardly describe. The world faded away: my friends, the cell, Athens, my own body, everything vanished and I was alone in the dark. But the darkness seemed to be moving: it was pouring towards me, surrounding me, holding me, and it was a warm, strengthening darkness. And then I was racing through it, entering deeper and deeper into it, exhilarated by the speed at which I could fly. A joy began to fill me, and with it another feeling grew: an expectation, a certainty that something or someone was coming nearer. Streaks of dim light broke the darkness; the light grew brighter until the darkness was divided into separate streams like pillars. And then the source of the brightness came into sight — an intense white, growing from a pinpoint until it was an orb as dazzling as the sun.

It *was* the sun. And the dark pillars were the trunks of trees, and I was lying on the ground looking at the sky. Well, this was a surprise. Trees? Leaves? Solid ground? I had not given much thought to what Elysium would be like; I had simply pictured myself meeting and talking to the great people of the past — Homer, Solon, Aeschylus and others — interviewing them in my usual way to find out the nature of wisdom, and hoping for answers at last. But was this Elysium? Or was I still in Athens? No: it was cooler here, there was an unpleasant smell in the air and a strange roaring sound in the background, and the grass here was greener. I stood up, baffled. My body and its senses still seemed to work, at least, and I was still clothed, and there was no taste of hemlock in my mouth. I wondered what my friends in Athens were seeing.

Then I became aware that a man was standing there, watching me. "Aware" is the right word, for now things grew really strange. I knew that he was there, but I could not see him. I knew exactly where he was, and I turned to speak to him, but he remained obstinately out of sight. I wondered if this was because I was dead and he was not, or if perhaps he was some kind of divine being.

He spoke. "Welcome, Socrates! You look dazed. That's not surprising — you expected something different."

"You're right. I did not think —". I stopped. He had not spoken in Greek, but I had understood him — and my words were in the same unknown language. Stranger and stranger.

"So is this the afterlife?" I said. "Am I in the land of the dead?" I was enjoying my new language.

"Not exactly. You have not yet reached the 'place of the blessed' which you were talking about before you died. For the time being you have been diverted, and you are still in the world."

That was a shock: it made no sense to me. "Diverted? In the world? How? Why? Where am I?"

He laughed and said, "I can tell you where, at least, although you should also have asked when. You are in a land which was on the unknown northern edge of your world, and you are speaking the language of that place. But the time is nearly two and a half thousand years after your life."

I stared at him, or rather I stared at the space where he stood. Two and a half thousand years? I struggled with the idea. At first I couldn't think why this had happened — unless...

Ah... Yes, of course! By now surely men must have learnt wisdom. They would be able to provide the answers which I had spent my life seeking. It would be much better to interview a man of these times than a Homer from before my day.

Perhaps I should explain. When I was young, I followed my father and became a sculptor. I also became interested in the current speculation about the nature of the world — how it came to be, what things are made of, and so on: what you call science. And I came to enjoy the cut and thrust of dialogue, and gained a reputation for a kind of quick wit which impressed listeners. This led a friend of mine, Chaerephon, to visit the Delphic Oracle and ask the god about me. I know that his question was the wrong one to ask, but the answer was very surprising. He asked "Is anyone in Greece wiser than Socrates?" The answer was "No".

I thought long and hard about that answer, and finally I abandoned sculpture, to the annoyance of my wife, and set out to discover what Apollo meant. I walked and talked in the streets and

stoas of Athens, interviewing specialists in their fields to find out if they were wiser than I was: politicians, teachers, artists, craftsmen and many others. The only result was that I infuriated the Athenians by showing up their ignorance.

They all prided themselves on their expertise and thought that this made them wise and knowledgeable, but they were deluded. No-one thought about the purpose of life or of their own occupations, or the meaning of such virtues as justice, piety, courage, goodness. They seemed to be more concerned with wealth or fame or possessions than with wisdom or truth or the state of their souls.

I decided that my own wisdom lay in knowing that I knew nothing, that I alone did not suffer from the delusion that I was wise. I alone dared to question conventional so-called 'wisdom'. So the charges against me were distortions of my methods. 'Corrupting the young' meant encouraging them to question, to search for the truth. 'Not worshipping the gods' meant daring to discuss their nature.

Questions, but no clear answers — until now?

"Excellent!" I said at last. "Now I'll find answers to all those questions which I baffled the Athenians with — which they killed me for."

"Perhaps you will," replied the stranger, "but not in the way you expect. Tell me, what difference would you hope to see in the people of this time, more than two thousand years later?"

I walked slowly round the grassy glade, thinking about that. Two thousand years must surely have made a great difference. Finally I said, "I hope that they have learnt to live by the words carved on the temple at Delphi: 'Know Yourself'. I hope that their greater knowledge has made them better people. As I used to say, goodness is no more than knowing what is good for you. I hope that they have discovered the true purpose of their lives: that politicians have learnt to seek justice, and to know what it is; and the same with artists and beauty, priests and piety, soldiers and courage, and so forth. I hope that each is concerned above all with the good of his soul. I hope that society works for the good of all its parts and everyone lives in peace, contentment and wisdom. Is that enough?"

He laughed. “Enough? I’m sure you remember the other inscription on the temple at Delphi: ‘Nothing in Excess’! I think I’ll let you see for yourself if your high hopes have been fulfilled. We’re in a city, you know — hence the noise and smell which you clearly find so unpleasant. We’ll take a walk through it and you can ask me about anything you do not understand.”

“Fine,” I said, “although I am very familiar with city life.”

“Follow me,” he said, and I think there was a twinkle in his invisible eye.

The City

We walked out from the grove of trees and found ourselves in some kind of park, greener than I had ever seen but otherwise familiar, except for the smoothness of the black path which we soon joined. There were people enjoying the trees and flowers; they looked like Athenians except for their paleness and the style and colour of their clothes, and they looked happy enough. And then I heard shouting, and saw a mother angrily scolding her child.

We left the park through a gate, and were suddenly in a different world. In Athens the roads were made of rough gravel and the most comfortable transport was an open horse-drawn carriage; most people walked. We were now standing next to what was clearly a road, but again smooth and black — and crowded with what at first looked like giant beetles of all colours, hurrying both ways. I know now about cars, but I was amazed then by their shiny shells with windows of transparent glass, their whisper-soft wheels, their magical horse-less movement. At first I did not realise that there were people inside them, people hurrying to get somewhere, hundreds urgently on the move. The cars seemed to explain the smell and the noise.

The stranger led me along the roadside to the left, past houses much bigger and better built than most of those in Athens, and with many windows of that crystal-like glass — I couldn't imagine how it was made. I began to notice that people ignored us. It was not surprising that they didn't see my companion, but I was surely conspicuous: I was wearing Athenian clothes, and I know that my looks are very noticeable — I am far from handsome, and some of my friends compared me to a Satyr. But here no-one seemed aware of me.

I was wondering about this when I heard a violent noise, and saw that one car had hit the back of another. "Stop and watch," said my companion. A man stepped out of the first car, fury distorting his face, walked back to the second car, shouted at its driver, banged his fist on the window, kicked the side. The second man climbed

out, and a loud quarrel started. We didn't wait to see its outcome, but walked on, hearing strange hooting sounds of impatience from the other cars behind.

I could talk for hours about my impression of this city, its differences from my Athens. The magical lights everywhere, buildings both ugly and beautiful, giant cars holding many people, streets as busy as the Athenian agora but with far more shops, the inexplicably moving pictures which I saw in one shop, an abundance of words neatly inscribed in windows and on signs. I couldn't read most of the writing: some of the letters looked Greek, others I didn't recognise. Athens prided itself on having things from all over the world for sale, but this put Athens to shame: there were objects of every conceivable shape, size and colour, and many whose purpose I couldn't guess. I managed to read the word BOOK on one shop, and had a look inside: it sold what clearly were books, though of a kind quite different from our scrolls, and there were probably more in that one shop than in the whole of Athens.

Looking into a window I suddenly realised that I couldn't see my reflection: I saw passers-by, but not myself or my companion. That explained why people ignored us, but not why they did not bump into us. I looked at my hand — yes, I could see it. I tried an experiment: I walked in front of a woman, waved my arms and spoke to her. She didn't notice, but somehow avoided me. This was a very unusual adventure.

I studied the people who passed me, trying to read their faces. What struck me most was how self-absorbed they seemed to be, how unfriendly to each other as they hurried about, many of them gazing at or talking to small tablet-like objects in their hands. I asked the stranger about this, but his answer made no sense to me: something about speaking to people far off and looking at pictures. Soon we arrived at another green park, went in and sat down on a bench.

"Now, what do you think of today's people so far?" he asked.

"Well, the world has totally changed, and I'm amazed by their inventiveness and ingenuity. But —". I stopped and looked up: there was a sound in the sky, and I saw something flying high overhead,

far too big for a bird. I turned to the stranger in wonder.

"Yes," he said, "it's another man-made machine. We are now in an age of machines, of mechanical and electrical devices."

"What do those words mean?" I queried.

"Well, they both come from Greek, so see if you can work them out!"

"Mechanical must come from our *méchané*: I think it's a crane in this language — in the theatre they used one to allow a god to fly down from heaven. Electrical sounds like *electron*, which is amber: but that doesn't help much."

"It would take too long to explain: briefly, electricity is the same force as lightning, but humans have managed to control it. You're right about the crane, but today machines do far more than lift or lower things. They help people with many everyday tasks, just as your slaves used to do."

"Used to do?" I said. "Yes, I was wondering about that. Are there no slaves now?"

"No," he replied, "slavery was abolished some time ago: one good thing which they have achieved."

"Good?" Slavery had been such a natural part of Greek life that I had never thought of it as being good or bad. I struggled with the idea for a while, and I think he was watching me.

"Anyway," he went on, "their machines can do most of the jobs which slaves did, not only heavy labour but also things like entertaining and educating and helping with cleaning and cooking, and many others which you can't imagine."

"I suppose cars are machines too, helping them to travel. But I can't imagine why they travel so much."

"Yes, and not only cars: these days people can go anywhere in the world within a day in flying machines like the one you just saw. They have visited the moon, and are even thinking of sending men into the sky to other worlds. But have they learnt wisdom or goodness? Have they found happiness?"

I was beginning to think that humans today were like gods, in their abilities at least; but had they learnt to use these abilities wisely?

— not that the gods in our stories always acted wisely! The stranger was, I think, watching me again as I put together my thoughts.

"I haven't seen much yet," I said, "but I guess that the answer to your question is no: they have not learnt wisdom. I've seen anger — that mother and that car-driver; I've seen the hurry which infects everyone, so that they seem too busy to think; I've seen greed as people crowd the shops; I've seen how they ignore each other, too taken up with their own concerns. But perhaps they are happier and wiser in other parts of the world."

He was silent for a moment, then said: "I am afraid not. For all their cleverness, most humans everywhere are still as far from finding the secret of happiness as ever. Knowledge has certainly grown, but not wisdom. You said that 'the unexamined life is not worth living', didn't you? But most people today are so distracted by the world around them that they cannot stop to examine themselves: their lives are too complicated, too full, too active, too noisy, too full of trivial distractions. If you tried to make them see sense, they wouldn't put you to death, but they would find other ways of stopping you."

Then what on earth was I doing here, I wondered. Just being shown that my life's work had no future, that mankind was incurable? He knew what I was thinking: "You were wrong, Socrates, when you said 'Goodness is knowledge', as if people would do what is good once they knew what it was. It's not so simple. There's a fatal flaw in human nature which makes it very hard for them to know what is good and even harder to do it. They need more drastic treatment than you thought."

"Then why am I here? Why have I been 'diverted', as you put it, and denied Elysium?" I was beginning to feel annoyed with the stranger: who was he to judge my life and to manipulate my death like this?

"You will know the answer soon," he said. "You are here partly for your own sake, and partly for the sake of this troubled world. Meanwhile let's continue our walk."

We soon came to a very large building with columns in front like the Parthenon. "A temple?" I asked, and he said it was. We climbed

the steps and went inside. It was like entering a huge quiet cave, cut off from the noise outside, and I was impressed by its size and architecture. But where there should have been a great statue of the god or goddess, I saw only a table with a metal cross on it. "Which god do they worship here?" I asked.

"Hush. Stand still and shut your eyes." His voice was compelling.

And as I stood there, the strangest illusion took over my mind. No longer was the temple a cave, but the world outside became the cave, dark and disturbed. The steps became the slopes of a high mountain, and the temple became — well, something like Olympus: a sun-filled heaven where the god dwelt, the true Elysium. I felt a longing to stay on that mountaintop.

"Come," the stranger gently interrupted. I reluctantly opened my eyes and followed him outside, down the steps and back into the cave of the world. I had no idea what it all meant, and wondered all the more who or what my companion was.

The Railway

1

We walked on through the streets, with plenty of sights to startle and puzzle my two-thousand-year-old eyes, and finally came to the biggest building I had yet seen. I followed him inside, and he led me to something like the docks at Peiraieus: a stone platform, beside which was a kind of elongated car about the size of a trireme, or rather a row of such cars. We climbed into one and sat down. I looked enquiringly at the stranger.

"It's called a train, and it is standing in a station," he said. "It's going to take us on a railway journey. We can talk as we travel." Then the train started to move, so smoothly and quietly that I wondered if it was indeed floating on water. It left the building and moved faster and faster — faster even than a galloping horse, faster than I thought possible, and I became afraid as the world flashed by. Then I told myself that I was dead and probably nothing could harm me: probably. The city stretched a long way, and I reckoned that it was of a size to make great Athens look small.

I watched for a time, and then gathered my thoughts and said, "You say we can talk. Well, I want to know about that human flaw which you mentioned, and why my efforts were misguided. And I want to know what happened in that temple, and who you are, and where we are going, and how long I have to stay here, and much more about these times, and what people believe now, and — oh, a hundred other things. But first tell me how this train moves: I haven't seen any oars or rowers."

He laughed. "Is that all? At least your last question is easy: the answer is the electricity which I mentioned — not Zeus getting angry, but a natural force which men have learnt to harness. You see, Socrates, today humans have learnt things about the world and the universe which you couldn't imagine, and they have used their knowledge to change the world, though not always for the better. Look out of the window and you'll see how completely they have

made the land suit their own needs: hardly anything is unchanged by human hands."

We were still in the city, but the buildings were now ugly and chaotic, serving purposes I couldn't understand, straggling on and on until at last we reached the countryside. Now I watched fields rushing past. It seemed to be a fertile land, with none of the dry scrub of Attica but rich crops of grass and corn, cattle grazing, fruit trees, but no olives or grapes. Mixed in with the farmland there were roads everywhere, lines of wooden posts like the masts of ships with cables between them, frequent villages. It was all very different from Greece.

At last I turned back to my companion, and he said, "Everything has changed since your time, hasn't it, except man himself; he is still the same extraordinary creature, far in advance of the animals he shares the world with."

"So I see," I said, "and he shows it even more in your time than he did in mine. How do you explain this today?"

"Well, there's one thing which makes humans special: their brains. What is inside your head, Socrates, is the most complicated and amazing object that is known in the whole universe. They are only now beginning to fathom what it does, let alone how it does it."

"Wait a moment. What do you mean by brain? What does it do?"

"You don't know? Oh, of course: you Greeks said that thinking takes place in the blood and the heart, didn't you. No: it's the brain in your head which thinks and makes you human."

"Do you mean that the soul is found in the head, and that's where our thoughts come from? — that's where our mind is?"

"Yes, although they wouldn't use the word soul today. Mind is the activity of the brain; but whether the brain produces mind or mind directs the brain is beyond even today's understanding. At any rate, the most important thing that man's mind has achieved is to develop consciousness."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, unlike animals, he is able to look at himself and the world from outside, as it were — to say 'I' and 'you', to think

about himself and his surroundings, to ask questions and to make decisions, and he is free to make his own life. And there's more: he has become aware that there is much more to life than the physical world he sees around him, that there are also spiritual truths which cannot be seen or touched."

"Spiritual? What do you mean?"

"I mean the sense of morality — of right and wrong — which every human possesses, the appreciation of beauty, the feeling that there is more to life than just living, the need to believe in a god and a reality beyond this world. Consciousness makes humans aware not only of the world and of themselves but of the spiritual realm, although many of them ignore it."

I took a while to digest that. It was an idea which had no exact equivalent in Greece in my day, but it might make sense of much that I had believed: man as a kind of amphibious creature, living at the same time in a physical world and what my companion called a spiritual world.

He gave me time for thought, then went on: "And consciousness has brought humans many wonderful gifts: language, creativity, discoveries and inventions, philosophy, religion."

"That has always been true," I exclaimed. "One of our poets said, 'Wonders are many, but there is no wonder greater than man'."

"Sophocles, I think: his plays are still read. But they were tragedies, and he was showing us that, for all man's glory and promise, there also seems to be something seriously wrong with him. Today the world is still plagued by violence and misery at every level: anger, hatred, terror, wars —"

"Even wars?" I interrupted. "So that hasn't changed." I thought back to the war years in Athens, the sheer stupidity of it all. Why do we never learn?

"Of course," he continued, "man has always dreamed that one day he will solve all his problems: the world will be at peace and everyone will be happy and prosperous. But again and again the dream turns into a nightmare: the endlessly climbing staircase, Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the hill and never quite reaching the

top."

"Or Tantalus never quite reaching the fruit," I added. "So you still remember our myths!"

"Why not? They are for all time — human nature hasn't changed. Like the heads of the Hydra, once one problem has been destroyed, two more take its place, and the promised paradise again moves out of reach."

"Very well," I said. "The Hydra had one immortal head which Heracles couldn't kill. What is this great flaw which man cannot overcome? How do you diagnose the human disease?"

It was a while before he replied, then "Try this," he said. "Look closely for a while at each person you can see here in this carriage. Don't worry, they won't mind: they can't see you. Try to imagine yourself into the head of each: try to imagine being them."

I did as he said, but of course it was hopeless. I finally turned back to him and said, "It's impossible."

"Yes, the imaginative effort is too great, isn't it. You don't know enough about them, about their lives or how they think. You see, people are all self-centred. I don't mean that in a bad sense, but literally, centred in themselves. Any person experiences the world and lives his life inside his own head, his own brain — or mind, if you prefer — and it is inaccessible to others."

"That's obvious enough," I said, "we are all self-centred. What follows?"

"Every person is also unique. In their lives they all build up a different set of experiences and develop different tastes, ideas, attitudes: they each have a unique mind-set. They all live at the centre of different worlds."

The train hurried on through the countryside, passing isolated houses and small villages. I gazed out of the window and told myself that in each house there lived people I would never know, but who were at the centre of their own lives, at the centre of their very different worlds. For me it was a new way of seeing, and I realised that in this conversation, for the first time in my life, I was not going to be taking the lead.

"All right," I said, "so each human is unique and self-centred. What is wrong with that?"

"The result is isolation: every man is an island. Or perhaps a better image would be that every man lives in his own cave, barely visible to others. Every person you meet is incomprehensible to you. You don't know what's going on inside his cave — in his head, that is. You can't imagine what it's like to be there. For example, you would find it very hard to imagine how someone could like something you dislike — such as, let us say, curry, or cigarettes, or city life."

"Well, I have no idea what your first two dislikes are, but I heartily disagree with your last one — or at least, I did in Athens. All right, we live our own separate and different lives, self-centred and isolated from each other. It's an interesting idea, but what does it lead to? Is it a flaw?"

"Look at the effect it has on the way people think of each other: they might possibly have learnt to empathise with each other, or to enjoy the differences between them, but all too often they have not. Instead they criticise and even despise each other."

"You're right," I said. "We are a quarrelsome race."

"That's because each is the centre of his own world but rarely remembers that all the other people he sees and meets are also centres. He tends to see them as objects, not real personalities like himself, and wrong when they differ from him. Dislike of curry is right and proper and normal; anyone who likes it is wrong and odd."

"Satisfy my curiosity, please," I interrupted. "What is curry?"

"A highly spiced food from the east which some love and some hate. But the same applies to everyone's ideas, behaviour, whatever: others think and do things differently than you, and you find that hard to accept, seeing your own viewpoint as superior. Is this attitude right?"

I saw now where he was leading. "I don't know what you mean by right. But it does seem inappropriate. In a sense all men are equal — there is no reason why one centre should be superior to another."

"Exactly! They could have been born as each other! But they do not see it that way, and are usually selfish as well as self-centred.

And because they feel threatened and annoyed by the world around them, they defend their caves by building walls across their entrances so that they can feel secure and in control."

"Or they make armour for themselves," I suggested, "or they wear masks — but I like your image. Stone by stone we build a barrier between our own selves and the world."

"You understand me well, Socrates."

I thought back to Athens and all the people I had known, and tried to see them in this new light: all living in their private caves and building barriers to protect themselves from a world which wanted to change them, and nurturing their own self-centredness. I suppose that in trying to prove their ignorance I had been trying to make them aware of their walls, to persuade them to tear them down and to be open to the truth. On reflection, I had to admit that my efforts had not been entirely successful; the two I mentioned, Alcibiades and Critias, were perhaps my most notable failures, completely self-centred, driven by ambition and self-pride.

He picked up my thoughts: "People in general are self-satisfied, and most lives remain unexamined. You know how much of people's relationships with others consist of image-building, self-justification, self-assertion, how much of their talk is criticism and grumbling and gossip, how many of their thoughts are of annoyance, irritation, impatience, resentment. Human nature has not changed: you met all of these in Athens."

This made me uncomfortable. "I wasn't perfect, whatever you have heard of me! Even for me it was very easy to see the faults of others, and very difficult to see my own."

"But at least you admitted your own ignorance, where others claimed knowledge and wisdom; or was that all irony?"

I was beginning to doubt my own attitudes, so I changed the subject. "I notice that you are talking about 'them' rather than 'us'. I am one of them, or at least I was, but I can't work out who you are: you sound human, but I don't yet know if you look human."

"All right," he laughed. "Thank you for the hint. We'll identify with humans and become 'us'." I didn't see how my invisible man

could identify with humans, as he put it, but this was a small step in the right direction. Perhaps he would soon become visible. That would make the talk easier for me: I was discovering how important a part gesture and expression play in conversation and missing them.

"It's a black picture you're painting about us," I said. "Surely man isn't completely selfish?"

"No: I have to admit that my picture is incomplete. There is also great altruism and compassion in man, he has times of peace and contentment and joy, he is capable of true friendship, deep love, wonderful goodness and even self-sacrifice, and real generosity to those in trouble; we must remember that. And the love of husband and wife or of parent and child at its best can be nearly perfect. Look at that family sitting opposite us: they seem completely happy and at one." Yes, I had been watching them, and they seemed to give the lie to his picture of mankind. Perhaps all four of them, parents and children, lived in the same cave!

"In some ways," he went on, "things have improved since your day: in most of the world life is now much more precious, and many governments really do try to work for the good of their people. But for the moment I'm focusing on what is wrong with mankind: the endemic disease which frustrates most good efforts in the end."

"So we're going to ignore the good side and talk only about the bad? That hardly seems fair."

"Yes, like a doctor ignoring what is right with you and focusing on what is wrong so that he can cure you. Are you happy with that?"

"Very well," I said. "So far, then, we have a race of creatures who are conscious of ourselves and of each other, but not unnaturally are centred on ourselves, and are all unique in character and experience. As a result we are selfish, quite unable to understand each other and tending to see others as inferior and wrong-headed, so to speak."

"That's a fair summary. I like your 'wrong-headed': to me, only my own head is the right one to live in."

At this moment the train slowed and I saw that we were entering a town. We came into a station and stopped. The family left, and a

group of three young men came on board and took over their seats. They were clearly friends, and were talking noisily, ignoring the looks of other passengers. I recognised their type from Athens, and suspected that they had been imbibing, although it was still early. The train started moving again, and soon it had left the town.

2

"The problem is," said my companion, "that they — sorry, we — are not just selfish. We often try to impose our will on others and are actively aggressive towards them."

"You are right, of course," I said. "The Athenians killed me: that was a rather extreme form of aggression."

"Yes, it was. And you probably saw others in Athens: bullies making their victims' lives a misery, thugs attacking people who don't share their race or class, activists resorting to violence when they can't get their way. Today we would add terrorists who kill to remove opposition to their ideas, or even just to get themselves noticed."

"I've come across some of those," I said. "So we not only build our walls and hide behind them, but we often bombard each other from them with words and deeds. I suspect that this is because we are lonely and want to assert ourselves and make others notice us."

"I think you are right. And that also explains another habit: we often try to reduce our isolation by belonging."

"What do you mean by 'belonging'?" I asked.

"Well, men have always had an instinct to be part of a group — a circle of friends, a gang, a society, a party, a religion or whatever. It makes us feel valued and less lonely."

"I certainly noticed that in Athens: factions and clubs which attracted members who wanted something to stand up for, or more often something to stand up against. If nothing else, it made life more interesting for them!"

"That hasn't changed. Humans seem to have a strong need and instinct to hold beliefs, and to find others who agree with them. And

as you say, they like opposition: when there are enough believers to call themselves 'us', they may look for a 'them' to fight against."

Beliefs: I had spent much of my time in Athens discussing the difference between knowledge and belief, what was certain and what was only an opinion, and trying to make people question their beliefs. Too often I had tried to extract knowledge from a person and instead been given mere opinion.

He knew what I was thinking. "Yes, that's one thing which hasn't changed since your time. People are all too happy to accept statements which cannot be proved to be true. I call these 'beliefs' as a convenient label, but I mean every opinion and idea from the trivial to the very serious ones which can even cause wars."

"I suppose that we can disregard the trivial," I said: "we are unlikely to argue over statements like 'curry is delicious'— and I don't suppose that curry-lovers form gangs!"

"No, but there are some things which sensible men would find trivial but others take seriously. Look at those three opposite us: they support a team who play a certain popular game, and they or some of their friends might well be willing to fight the supporters of another team, although it's only a game."

"That doesn't surprise me: there were rivalries like that in Athens. They were only looking for some excitement."

I looked out of the window, and had a shock: we were flying. Far below a river wound through trees and fields; alongside it was a road with tiny cars on it. It was like looking down from the Acropolis in Athens. I realised that we must be on a bridge, but how had they made it leap across the countryside like this? We quickly reached the land and I could breathe again.

"Excitement, did I say? I think there is enough excitement in your lives here already! But tell me, what are the really serious beliefs today, the ones which cause wars? In my time they were usually to do with mere conquest and power."

"That's been the case through much of history. But today they're mostly to do with politics and religion. In many places politicians who think they could govern a country better than the government

turn to violence to take it over. But the worst violence comes from religious people who try to impose their beliefs by force."

"Religions must have changed, then," I said. "I can't imagine anyone fighting for the honour of Zeus or Athene!"

"Religion has changed," he said. "It's an especially attractive kind of belief as it claims its authority from outside nature and reason, and it can't be proved — or disproved. But it can certainly be dangerous. In this time, you know, there have been atrocities which you couldn't imagine, made worse by the terrible weapons which we have invented: mass killing of innocent people — and often committed by ordinary men trying to impose their own beliefs for the benefit of mankind."

"Or of themselves, more likely," I commented. "The only benefit when the Athenians massacred the men of Melos was to Athens, as they admitted. Evil is evil, whatever the motive."

"You are right," he replied. "Perhaps today they try to disguise it better."

I thought I would test him. "Should I feel uneasy at this? After all, one of the charges at my trial was about my beliefs."

"But surely your aim was to prove how shallow men's beliefs were; what got you into trouble wasn't what you believed, but what you did not believe."

Yes, he did know about me. "Thank you. I'm glad that you don't believe Aristophanes, who showed me in one of his comic plays as the worst kind of sophist: the sort who could prove that black is white and invented new gods."

"I've read his 'Clouds'. Don't worry, other writers have done enough to reinstate you! But I guess that Aristophanes was partly to blame for your trial: people will believe anything, especially if it's derogatory. The power of beliefs is all the more surprising when we consider how we acquire them."

"You're absolutely right," I exclaimed. "It seems to me that beliefs are not usually thought out, but caught, like an illness. Men almost never use reason when they're deciding what to believe. I spent my life trying to show them that!"

"And that, Socrates, is why you are still so famous today." That was a surprise: was I still talked about, two thousand years later? "But I'm afraid that people today are still as reluctant to use reason as they were in your day. They can catch their beliefs, as you say, from their family, the media, their reading, education, words heard by chance. Some beliefs are local, like the religion of your country. Some are merely controversial — this is the policy of my party, because this is the opposite of what the others believe. And often people are converted to a belief by skilful persuasion and psychology."

"In my day the sophists developed the art of rhetoric for that purpose, as I'm sure you know."

"And many a merry battle with them you enjoyed as a result! Rhetoric is no longer taught as such, but it is still instinctive; and of course our advertisers use it all the time."

"Advertisers?" I asked. "What are they?"

"There is a story told of you," he replied, "that when you were walking around the market in Athens you looked at all the things from many lands which were for sale and you said, 'Who would have thought that there are so many things which I do not want!' You saw all the shops in the city: today we have even more things to sell, more things not to want, and advertisers are the people whose job it is to persuade us that we do want them. No doubt you would have been immune to them!"

"Certainly, if only because I had very little money."

"There's yet another thing which creates beliefs: pressure from our fellows — 'peer group pressure', we call it. This appeals directly to that need to belong. And it helps to bind the group together if the belief sets us against authority, or, better still, if it is an esoteric belief and we can feel superior to the ignorant majority."

"That sounds like the Mysteries which took place at Eleusis. It needs a strong mind to resist that kind of pressure, even if the belief is absurd or irrational."

We sat in silence for a while, and I gazed out of the window. I was beginning to feel that the world today was not so very different from my own; it was just more complicated and more crowded. But I

knew that I would not have enjoyed walking through today's streets engaging people in conversation as I had in Athens.

The train was now entering another town, and at the station here we left it: it seemed that to reach our mystery destination we had to change to a different train. My companion told me that there was a sixteen minute wait, and explained to me what a minute is; I was amazed that such precision was possible, or indeed necessary.

We sat on a bench to wait, and I was given a chance to think over our conversation so far. I had spent half a lifetime on a mission to cure what I thought was the one great human fault: ignorance. I tried to make people at least recognise their ignorance, and perhaps set out on the path towards knowledge of what is good. Now I was being told that it was selfishness, not ignorance, which was the problem: selfishness, along with an enthusiasm for beliefs. My teacher was leading me by a strange path, and I had no idea what the destination was. But I decided that I would follow him for the time being, if only out of curiosity.

He suddenly spoke: "The train is six minutes late." Six minutes, I thought, a tenth of an hour: what possible difference would that make? But I noticed people looking anxious and clearly complaining about the delay.

There was something which I had been wanting to ask my companion. "You seem to know a lot about me. How is that, more than two thousand years later?"

"As I said, you are still very well-known, Socrates. You've had many books written about you. It started with several of your friends, especially Plato and Xenophon, who wrote down your conversations and told us about your life. Our modern ways of thinking in this western part of the world owe a huge amount to you. After what you've seen, perhaps you don't think that is a compliment!"

Well, this was unexpected. I had written nothing, but it seemed that others had done it for me. I professed ignorance, but my ideas were still important. It was puzzling.

3

The new train arrived, and we boarded. It was much noisier than the first one: a loud throbbing sound came from underneath and there were rattles in various places. I think that it must have used some power other than electricity. Outside the land was changing: flat farmland was turning into rolling hills with more trees and fewer houses. Then the hills closed in on us and we were in a wooded valley, with a road beside us busy with cars, and a broad fast-flowing river.

I thought that there was one matter still to be settled: "You defined a belief as a statement which cannot be proved to be true. That raises another question: what can be proved and known to be true without controversy, and what can only be 'believed' and so left open to disagreement?" I knew more or less what his answers would be, but wanted to hear him express them.

"You're right," he said. "That needs to be looked into. I think we'll find it more important than you realise. But surely you, Socrates, are the expert in such matters, and you should take the lead in this."

"No," I said, "I want to hear what people say today."

"Very well. To begin with, tell me if you agree about what is real and can be known as true. First, we know that physical Things exist and have certain properties." He pointed to a large tree which we were just passing. "That is a tree, and it has green leaves."

"Certainly: that's common sense. Of course, there was Parmenides, who said that nothing we see in this world exists, but all is illusion. I think we can safely disregard him; though I'm not sure whether I exist in this world of yours!"

"We'd better assume that you do, so that we can go on talking. Next, we know that Events are real: common sense again tells us that the past really did happen. Socrates really did live and die in Athens, and we really did just change trains at a station."

"I agree," I said, "although this is more controversial: not all the details of the past can be known, and some may be disputed. You've probably heard of Thucydides, our historian? Well, when he was researching his history of the war he found that eye-witnesses

often give surprisingly different accounts of the same event." It was strange to think that I was history in this world; I wondered how much they knew about Athens in my time. If I had to stay here I might offer their historians my help!

"Certainly there's often doubt about the details," he replied, "and of course about the interpretation of them, but the Events in all their detail were real at the time even if they're not fully known or understood afterwards, as are Things even if not seen by anyone. Your death would have happened even if no-one knew of it today; that tree would still exist if no-one had ever seen it."

"I'll agree to that," I said. "What is your next kind of truth?"

"My third and last one is statements of Fact."

"Well, that sounds like a rather broad category. What kind of facts do you mean?"

"There are some which can be proved by observation, such as that the Earth has one moon, or that Socrates has a beard. Others are self-evident within their context: two plus two equals four, and always will while we use our present system of counting. And there are facts deduced by logic: bearded men do not shave, Socrates has a beard, therefore Socrates does not shave."

"At least I have not for over two thousand years."

"There are also predictions based on the regularity of nature: we know that an acorn from that oak tree will never grow into an apple tree, and the moon will continue to circle the earth for the time being, unless some unforeseen catastrophe happens. These are the facts which our modern science deals with."

I thought about that and then said, "Things, Events, and provable Facts: all right, I grant you your three truths, although there is a fourth which I would like to add."

"I think I know what that is," he said, "but tell me."

"You'll know, I am sure, that when I questioned Athenians, I often led them into a discussion of ideas such as beauty, piety, justice, and all the other qualities which should be sought for the sake of their souls. I might ask a soldier to tell me what courage is, and instead of answering he would give me examples of being courageous. I

made him see that these are not courage itself: what do these actions have in common which makes them courageous? What do beautiful things have in common which makes them beautiful? And so on. I tried to lead them towards a definition of the thing itself. We always failed, but at least they were shown to be as ignorant as I was."

"Yes," he said, "Plato recorded many of these conversations. They must have been frustrating for your victims!"

"Not if they learnt from them how to think. The point is that such universals must exist, even if we can't define them: if there is no reality called Beauty, how can we recognise beautiful things? My fourth category of truth would be these universals. You have already almost admitted that they are true: remember what you said about what you called the spiritual realm."

"But the point about the spiritual is that it can't be proved in the same way as physical things. The idea of courage doesn't seem to have the same sort of reality as a tree or your beard. But for the sake of peace I'll allow you your fourth category. Today they are called 'values', and they are much debated. By the way, Plato took your idea to a whole new level. He extended your universals to include things as well as qualities, the ideal tree as well as ideal courage, and he said that they are the only true reality: the world contains only imperfect reflections of them and is less real."

"I wonder why he said that?" I would love to have interviewed him on this subject: perhaps I would be able to when he too died.

"Now," he said, "that's enough about truths; we need to consider beliefs."

"Very well," I said. "Carry on."

"There are two main types of belief. First there are beliefs about things which we do not and cannot at present know for certain, but which are certainly either true or untrue: they cannot be both true and untrue. We'll call these Either/Or Beliefs."

"I take it that these beliefs become knowledge when enough evidence turns up."

"Correct — if we can judge how much evidence is enough. They would include things like disputed details of past events, or

predictions of future events, or hypothetical opinions which could be proved by experiment. For example, we may have an opinion about how tall that tree was, or the date of the Trojan War, or whether wars will stop happening in our lifetimes."

"Is there any chance of that?"

"Probably not."

Just then a man dressed in some kind of uniform walked past us along the passageway, stopping at each person. They all showed him something which I guessed was a pass for the journey. Luckily he wasn't aware of us.

My companion confirmed my guess, and added, "The trains follow a very regular system, and you can be pretty certain that you will arrive at your destination. But there is a very slight chance that something will go wrong, so until you arrive you are in an Either/Or situation: either you will arrive or you will not. But it is worth relying on your arrival. We call this 'faith', which is treating a belief as true because you judge that there is enough evidence."

By now I had found out how trains could travel so reliably, and I commented, "If only all of us could travel into the future on metal tracks, how much easier life would be! But I suppose that it would be much less interesting."

"Yes, unpredictability seems to be an essential part of being human, and also of the natural world. Now, there is one Either/Or question which has always been puzzled over: does God exist?"

"Well," I said, "I'm fairly certain that the Greek gods don't exist in the form which our stories give to them; but I suppose you mean the one God." This seemed to be a more suitable topic of conversation for a newly dead man.

"Of course," he said, "it depends partly on how we define God, but usually he is said to be spiritual and beyond our observation, and so his existence cannot be proved — unless this God were to provide enough evidence within our world to show us that he exists. Meanwhile we can at least say that God, as usually defined, either does or does not exist; there is no middle way. I think that we'll return to this later."

"I hope so."

"Have you noticed," he said, "how men do argue about such Either/Or beliefs?"

"Why not, if the argument is a weighing of evidence? But it strikes me that we shouldn't have called them beliefs at all; they are merely possibilities to be investigated."

"You're right; but all the same everyone insists on having opinions on such matters. In fact, the only reasonable attitude is to be agnostic, but we like certainty and find it very hard to say 'I don't know'."

"Yes," I said: "it's difficult to admit ignorance, as I know well. Now tell me about the second type of belief."

"These are opinions which can never be proved or disproved, and over which disagreement is quite reasonable. Everyone has these beliefs, and to some extent they define who I am. Again, I'm using the word 'belief' in the broadest sense. They include my tastes in music or art or literature or food, my political and ethical views, my preferred life-style, my opinions on all sorts of things. Now, are these beliefs valid?"

"From what we were saying earlier, I think that they are valid for you; no-one can say that you are wrong to believe curry is disgusting."

"Or — notice this — that someone else is wrong to like it. In politics party members of good sense hold opposing views on what should be done, and even in wars there may be intelligent men providing valid arguments on both sides."

"I suppose we should call these Both/And Beliefs."

"Exactly; and we must be careful to distinguish them from Either/Or beliefs."

"So both sides are right in most arguments over Both/And beliefs."

"Yes," he said, "and also wrong, insofar as their position excludes the other side's position. But we like certainty and find it very hard to say 'I may be wrong' or 'you may be right'; we don't like tolerance or compromise or indecision."

So in this respect the world had not changed; I thought of Athens, where a hundred opinions were heard in every street or stoa. "I wish some of our politicians had realised that!"

"Do you see how this makes conflict more likely?"

"Of course. When both sides think they are in the right, and are quite correct to do so, they will fight with all the more determination."

He went on, "However we arrive at our beliefs, whichever kind they are, we tend to stick to them with conviction: we all love a cause to fight for. Sometimes we call them our 'principles', and this seems to give them authority. And a vicious circle is set up: the more we are called on to fight for our position, the more strongly we believe in it."

"And in the end," I said, "the fighting may become real."

"Indeed. What is more, as you said, violence is exciting — it takes us out of our ordinary humdrum lives and absorbs our surplus energy. It has been said that the world's troubles are caused by man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

I laughed. "I like that! Humans simply have too much energy and find it hard to sit and think, or to examine and criticise their own lives. I expect that it's even harder with your modern life style as I saw it in the city."

Across the passage a loud argument suddenly broke out among the three young men. I had already noticed that I couldn't understand what people were saying, except my companion, but I could tell that angry things were being said. It stopped as quickly as it started, and they seemed to be friends again.

"Certainly those three find it hard to sit quietly!" I commented.

"Yes, that quarrel was well timed, wasn't it. But it wasn't serious, unlike many conflicts in the world at this time, which are not stopped so easily. It's no use trying to dissuade a terrorist by denying his belief or showing him the other side: his belief has become too precious to him as an excuse for self-righteous violence and an exciting life, even if his methods are clearly idiotic. It's no use trying to deny the truth of a scandal: most people like to criticise and want to believe the worst of others, and scandal adds some spice to life."

He paused, then added: “Wars have even been fought in the name of a religion which teaches love; rather than admit the inconsistency, they redefined love.” He spoke bitterly, or even angrily: I think it was the first sign of emotion I had heard in his voice.

“As I know only too well,” I said, “it’s no use talking of truth or justice to those whose religious beliefs are being threatened.”

“Of course ! — you yourself suffered from the true believers.”

“Yes, their beliefs came into conflict with mine. Though, as you said, I tried not to express any beliefs; I questioned, without finding answers.”

“And your questioning was fatal to you because it threatened the beliefs and self-pride of others. There was another who suffered the same sort of fate as you, four hundred years later.”

“I’d like to hear about him.” As I said that, I had a sudden memory of that temple in the city and wondered why.

“You will in due course,” he said.

4

He fell silent. I noticed that the train was moving more slowly as it followed the bends of the river, and also less smoothly: a rhythmic banging came from below which I couldn’t explain. A woman came past us wheeling a small cart with what I think was food and drink on it, though strangely disguised. But I was not hungry — would I ever be? And besides, there seemed to be no way to communicate with her.

“You seem to be saying,” I said, “that we should all be sceptics about any statement whose truth cannot be proved. I’m reminded of a conversation I had with Euthyphro, a priest, outside the court when I was visiting it about my coming trial. He was planning to take his father — his own father! — to court for allowing a man to die. The man was a poor dependant of the family and had killed a slave; Euthyphro’s father had tied him up and thrown him into a ditch, where he died. In accusing his father, Euthyphro claimed to be acting in accordance with the gods’ will. Was he right, or wrong,

or both?"

"That's typical of the human situation. I've read that conversation, you know, or at least Plato's version of it."

"You have?" A sense of the unreality of this whole situation came over me. Perhaps I was only dreaming back in the Athenian prison; but it was certainly an interesting dream.

"So," he said, "Was it either right or wrong, or both right and wrong? I suppose we have to say that murder is wrong, because it is destroying a person who has as much right to be alive as the murderer does. Everyone is entitled not only to his beliefs but also to his life."

"But Euthyphro's action was harder to judge. I guess that in your terms it was a Both/And situation."

"I think so. Life is full of such dilemmas. Let's find more examples. Socrates, look out of the window and tell me what you notice."

I wondered what this had to do with the subject, but did as he said. "I see cattle grazing in a field."

"Any dilemma there? Yes! There are people who say it is wrong to eat meat because it involves cruelty to animals; they're called vegetarians. There are good arguments on both sides, vegetarian and meat-eating, and no compromise will ever be found. What else do you see?"

"The road is in sight and there are cars on it."

"Cars were invented to make travel easier and they are now an essential part of life, but they have caused enormous damage to the world: roads everywhere, chaotic cities, pollution in the air (you smelt it), accidental deaths. Are cars good or bad?"

"Both, I suppose... I'm now seeing something which I can't explain: up that valley there are things like white masts with wings, and I think they are huge."

"They are machines for making electricity out of the wind. There's another dilemma: electricity is needed and that's a good way of making it, although not when there is no wind like now, but it seriously damages the land and the scenery. Some love them, some

hate them."

I looked for something which he couldn't use, and pointed out to him some writing on a wall beside the railway. Someone had painted a large "NO" which I could read, but this had been crossed out and replaced by a word I couldn't read.

"NO and YES," he said. "They're to do with a recent political decision which everyone was voting for or against. As usual, there were arguments on both sides, sometimes violent ones, and neither side could prove its case."

I laughed. "Yes and No don't seem to be very strong arguments! All right, how about this: I see a bridge across the river."

"A footbridge, I think. No dilemma there! But perhaps it shows where we should stand in most arguments — neither on one side nor the other! You see the problem, Socrates. When in doubt, we should refuse to take sides, preferring tolerance and compromise, or agnosticism. We should see most beliefs as a matter of taste or viewpoint, and none as more valid than another. We may often find ourselves saying 'he only believes that because...'. Finish the sentence for me, Socrates!"

"What? Well, how about 'because his friends believe it", or 'because his enemies don't believe it', or 'because he read it in a book', or... Ah, perhaps you want me to say 'because he needs something to believe'?"

"Full marks! So the world is full of contrary beliefs and controversy, and it's rare to find an ideal solution to any problem because every solution excludes as many people as it includes. We must accept that perfection can never be achieved in human affairs. We must be pessimistic about the future of the human world, because it seems to have a fatal flaw built into it."

My companion, whoever he was, had a very black view of humanity — and an almost rhetorical fondness for lists! But were things really so bad? "Surely," I said, "we can still live our lives happily enough? After all, many good things come our way, such as love and friendship and pleasurable activities, and unlike me most people manage to avoid any dangerous beliefs."

"Yes, many people's lives are like that; and then they die, and nothing matters to them any more. Or else it may be that the rumours are true and there is something more outside our caves than other people, and death is not the end but simply an end in time, so that we have no more chance to break down the walls."

"You are speaking in riddles," I said.

"And will resolve them in good time." There was a long silence. Even the chatter of our fellow-passengers seemed to have stopped for the moment. I felt that he was looking at me, probing into my mind, testing me in some way, but I did not know what he was looking for.

If the world was in such trouble, why had I been brought here? I decided that I was not going to follow him any further without stating my own case, and I did so at some length:

"You seem to be saying that mankind is lost and there is no hope of saving him, no solution. Well, I wonder how much you really know about what I was doing in Athens. When Apollo said that I was the wisest, I took it as a challenge from the god, and soon came to think that he had actually appointed me to bring the Athenians to their senses. And what was my method? Pure reason. Men have minds and can be persuaded to use them. They were simply mistaken, thinking that they knew what in fact they did not know — how to live well. All men desire happiness, and surely they can be persuaded by argument that the way to it is goodness, and shown how to recognise what is good and what is bad. Perhaps you would say that this means learning to demolish their walls and lose their self-obsession, and I accept this way of looking at it. But however you express it, doing wrong damages the soul and causes unhappiness, doing right heals the soul and brings happiness. I don't see why persuasion should not work, given time. Will no-one — I mean did no-one take over my work after my death?" Then a thought struck me: "Have you brought me here so that I can continue my mission in this modern world? — but no, you said that I was wrong and implied that my work was a failure. Perhaps you have no solution to what you call the 'human flaw', but my way at least offers hope."

As I said the word “hope”, I had a terrible shock. The world outside suddenly disappeared. Our carriage stayed bright, but outside was as dark as a starless night. It seemed that we had plunged into a cave, as if hurrying at full pelt into the underground realm of Hades. Was this the next stage of my journey into death? Then, as suddenly as we had left the world, we returned to it and there were trees around us and then houses and another town. Soon my heart stopped hammering.

The Forest

1

The train arrived at the station, and this was where we left it. We stepped on to the platform and walked out of the station into a small town, a quiet place, with few people around, and streets and grey stone houses climbing up the side of the valley. We crossed the main road and started up one of those streets. Above, a dull blanket of cloud hid the sky.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"From now on, we walk," he replied. "I'm going to take you up a mountain! Don't worry, it's not as high as your Parnassus, let alone Olympus. It's about the same height as Hymettus near Athens, where your honey came from."

I stopped and turned to face him (if you can face an unseen face). "I've never climbed a mountain," I objected, "not even Hymettus. What is the point?" Mountains in Greece were fearful places, savage, uncivilised, perhaps the home of monsters and oreads, or even gods. But then I again remembered my vision in the temple, where the steps had become a pathway to heaven and the summit had been a blessed place, set above the darkness of the world. What would I find at the top of this mountain? Was that where I would at last be given answers? My friend was watching me. To my surprise I realised that I could — well, not exactly see him, but tell his expression: I knew that he was smiling at me, and his smile gave me courage. Yes, certainly I would climb the mountain, or die in the attempt. Die? — I laughed aloud: how can the dead die? Was there a second death?

We walked on up the road, and soon turned off on a broad winding gravel footpath which climbed uphill through a forest; the trees on either side had clearly been planted in straight lines, but they were not fruit trees and I wondered about their purpose. After a while he said, "Socrates, I did listen to what you said before the tunnel. I'm not going to answer it directly, but at least I can assure you that there is a solution; you'll discover it gradually, so please be

patient." After a pause, he went on: "Others after you have made suggestions about how to solve the human problem, the problem of selfishness, either by philosophy or by political reform, but they have all failed."

"What kind of philosophy do you mean?" I asked.

"Many thinkers have tried, like you, to find a purely rational basis for morality, a way of persuading humans to live well and happily based only on reason. But in the end it seems that reason alone cannot solve our problems. Don't get me wrong, Socrates: reason is a great gift, and you were the first to show its importance, but it does have limitations."

"If I was the first, who followed after me?" It felt strange to be able to ask a question like that! I tried to guess which of my friends had been able to take on my task.

"Your young friend Plato was perhaps your most important follower, and he used both philosophy and politics at the same time. He designed a highly organised state which would be ruled by philosophers."

"That doesn't sound very practical," I said. Yes, Plato would have been my choice, a young man of great intelligence and potential, but what on earth did he mean by making philosophers into rulers?

"Ah, but by philosophers he meant those who had achieved enlightenment. They brought to their job as rulers a knowledge which would guide their rule; you see, they had been trained to find your universals and knew justice, beauty and the others, and The Good from which they all derived."

"How did Plato think that was possible?" I asked. "I had enough trouble looking for them!"

"Well, he set up a school at the grove of Academos — I'm sure you often walked there — and he designed an educational system which would produce philosophers. Over the entrance he put the words 'No-one without geometry may enter'."

"Geometry? Why on earth did he do that?"

"Because geometry deals with ideal objects, such as perfectly straight lines or perfect circles, which do not exist in this world. So

a training in geometry may be the first step towards the discovery of the universals, which also do not exist in this imperfect world."

"Ingenious!" I exclaimed. "Perhaps I should have made a proper defence at my trial and lived longer, and I could have attended Plato's school!"

"You would have been excessively old," he said. "However, you are right: it was impractical, as he discovered, and so have been all the other attempts to found ideal states."

"But I assume that much thought has been put into methods of government since my time. How do states rule themselves today?"

"I think that every possible system has been tried, but basically there seem to be two extremes in politics. At one end, the state controls its citizens, forcing them to conform and imposing systems which prevent conflict; at the other, the state interferes as little as possible, allowing its citizens freedom to damage each other."

"But both of these are failures," I said, "as the purpose of any government is surely to improve the lives of individuals."

"Yes, most countries do realise that now, and they do their best to compromise, to steer between the two extremes, like trying to avoid both Scylla and Charybdis."

I laughed. "The democracy in my Athens made a fair attempt to hit both at once!"

"But it was also a serious effort to govern well, wasn't it? The trouble is that human nature always gets in the way, and it hasn't yet proved possible to satisfy everyone at the same time. The result is a constant spate of laws passed in the hope of finally achieving perfection. 'Change' is the politician's answer to every problem. But all it causes is stress and confusion."

"That sounds familiar. Law-making was a national pastime in Athens too."

"And that's why no government has ever managed to be both effective and universally popular. The world cannot be perfected by passing laws; politicians' actions are always blighted by contradictory demands and unintended consequences."

"I suppose that all politicians should be sceptics, because they

are dealing with beliefs and not certainties. But in my time they of all people tended to be the most opinionated and dogmatic."

"They still are!" he said. "To be sure, it would be rather difficult for a sceptical politician to do anything: he would become a permanent fence-sitter, watching others argue, and telling himself that both sides are right or one is right but he can't tell which, and that argument is futile. Most policies are a choice between Both/And beliefs, or involve guessing the future; I wonder if politics would be more constructive if both sides started by admitting this?"

"Probably not," I said thoughtfully. "In practice the Both and the And are likely to be irreconcilable, and compromise not possible. It looks as if politicians should be pitied rather than derided! — they are expected to solve all the problems of the world, and have to pretend that their task is not impossible. You seem to be implying that democracy must be best because it satisfies the majority, even if the majority are deluded."

"Don't worry," he laughed. "I know your views on democracy, rule by ignorant amateurs! But perhaps it is the least bad system. Anyway, states these days are so populous that your sort of direct democracy is impossible; instead the people usually vote for a council to rule them, like your Boulé but with more power and chosen by vote rather than lot."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "Our use of lottery was absurd: how could we be sure that any randomly chosen person was competent? But if a perfect state is impossible, surely we need to approach the problem from the other end, as I was saying — to see if anything can be done about individual human nature."

The forest changed here, from the dull rows of planted trees to a more open and natural grove of what I recognised as beech trees. Among them was a small cottage, roofless and ruined, with a tree growing inside it. I stopped to look at it. "Who would live in the middle of a forest like this?" I wondered. My companion told me that it had been a shepherd's home long before the trees were planted.

"You might call him a peasant," he said. "Socrates, if we are going to find a cure for individual human nature, it has to suit everyone,

even this shepherd who spent his life here looking after his sheep. I doubt if you debated with anyone like him in Athens! Don't you think that your methods only suited sophisticated city dwellers and left out a man like this? His wisdom was of a quite different kind."

I couldn't answer that. But I did think that it was unfair: I couldn't have saved the whole world. I knew that my life was only a tentative start to the task of making mankind see sense.

2

We were soon back in the planted trees, leaving behind the beeches and the cottage, and returned to our conversation.

"In more recent times," he said, "many people have looked to religion for a cure."

"Really? Even though it's the most dangerous of beliefs, as we said?" I thought of the religion of the Athenians with all its stories of largely amoral gods and heroes, and of my own indictment by the half-witted Meletus for 'not worshipping the gods of the state'; I had my own views on the gods, to be sure, but they did not include atheism. "So religion has advanced since my time," I said.

"Perhaps. Most religions these days accept that there is a problem and try to solve it. But they tend to focus on the effects rather than the underlying cause, and to talk of God or gods laying down laws, which must be obeyed if you are to be saved from the world and its problems."

"What kind of laws?"

"Well, they may be laws about behaviour — be good and you will be saved. Or laws about belief — believe the right things and you will be saved. Or laws about ritual — do the right religious activities and you will be saved. Sometimes there are even laws about what you can eat and what you should wear."

"Ritual was certainly the most popular in Greece," I said, "along with attempts to bribe the gods with offerings and sacrifices."

"No doubt they were well-intended, though foolish. Anyway, in most of today's religions those who succeed in following the laws

are promised a reward in the form of a completely happy life after death, which makes the whole effort worthwhile even if it doesn't work in this life. But there are some difficulties here."

"From our previous discussion I think that I know some of them." I had heard in Athens from traders and visitors about some of the different religions of my own time: as well as the many human-like gods of Greece and the Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis, there were the animal gods of Egypt, the single God of Judaea, the savage Dionysiac religion of Thrace, the cult of the Mother Goddess in Asia, and others.

"Very well," he said; "take the lead and tell me."

"Firstly," I said, "religions are based not on sure facts but on the beliefs of a man or men, about which we must be sceptical: usually, I think, a mixture of Either/Or and Both/And beliefs."

"Agreed."

"Then religions offer a ready-made set of beliefs and so fulfil a human need; their truth is of secondary importance."

"A different angle on your first one, but I'll give it to you."

"Thirdly, which particular religion you follow depends on chance circumstances such as where you live."

"Certainly, and today especially your family and friends."

"And here's another: religion easily decays into mere superstition. In my time it was little more than a magical way of making us feel in control."

"That's very true," he said. "One more point: obeying rules is like painting over the cracks; as I said, it treats the symptoms rather than the causes, and our self-centredness remains. Of course, none of this should necessarily stop us following a particular religion if we want to, but it is as likely to be a human invention as to be true. Now, what is the central idea of most religions?"

"I suppose it is the existence of gods, or God. According to your earlier argument, this is an unprovable Either/Or belief and we should all be agnostics."

"Yes, but religions invariably take his existence for granted. They have to, because God is seen as the source of their authority. By

the way, the idea that there are many gods has almost disappeared since your day; it's not worth considering seriously."

"I'm not sorry to hear it," I declared. "I was happy to talk of 'gods', but to my mind the many were all different aspects of the one."

"And I should add," he said, "that we call God 'he' for convenience, but he presumably has no gender; after all, if he made the world, he must have invented gender."

"That's a difficult idea, but perhaps you're right; after all, we Greeks split God into male and female gods."

"What do you understand by God, then?"

I thought for a moment, and then said, "I see the one God as the maker and designer of the world and everything in it. He cares for it and for us, and he has put something of himself into the soul of man. He is to be honoured and prayed to in any way we know."

"No wonder the Athenians put you to death!" he said with an invisible smile. "The word God has much the same meaning today, at least for those who think that he exists. Different religions have different ideas, but what is common to most of them is that he is the supreme, invisible being who exists beyond or outside nature and is the creator of nature."

"But unfortunately you have said that we should not believe in him until proof appears."

"I know I have, and there can be no special merit in believing without proof. But the idea of God in some form is so universal that we can accept it as a hypothesis and see if we can prove it or disprove it: our only hope of solving man's problem may depend on it. If God made us, perhaps only God can put us right."

"If he exists. Does everyone today believe in this hypothetical God?"

"By no means. When they are asked, most people in this part of the world still say that they do; but not many give serious thought to what God is like or how he might be important."

"So how do they think of God?"

"Some are still happy with dim images of an old Zeus-like man

up in the sky. Some think vaguely of a force or a spirit pervading everything. Some see him as a tyrant, angry and condemning, too holy for us, and so they reject him. But to many God is little more than a word — even a swear-word, indeed: you often hear people saying things like 'O my God' or 'Good God', but they're only casual exclamations, never prayers."

"In Greece it was 'By Zeus' or 'By Apollo'."

"Yes. But if I remember rightly, you yourself tended to say 'By Dog'. That puzzles me: what did you mean?"

"To be honest, I have no idea. I wasn't the first to say it, and it seemed better than naming a god. But it's interesting that in this language it's the reverse of God!"

"So it is," he said, and paused for thought. "Anyway, today people can easily be persuaded that there is no God: more and more people call themselves atheists, although perhaps they should really be agnostic, as you said."

3

At this point the woods changed; the trees became more scattered and smaller and clearly not planted, and the ground was more richly vegetated. We turned to the left on a side path which soon emerged, to my surprise, in open ground above a steep slope, with a view over the valley and tree tops below us. We sat on a grassy bank and watched the world for a while. I saw the three lines running along the valley bottom — road, river and train — and woods and fields scattered on the slopes opposite. Beyond the valley I could make out in the distance the misty outlines of higher hills with their heads in the low cloud which covered the sky. I suddenly became aware of that cloud looming over the landscape, and I began to feel oppressed by it, and the sensation grew on me of being imprisoned in a vast cavern, a dim and misty world, cut off from the brightness above. Was it just an extension of my own personal cave, or was the whole world like that? In such a world it might well be difficult to believe in God.

My companion knew what I was thinking. "Yes, modern man does find it hard. The main reason is Science — you called it philosophy, the study of the natural universe. It has advanced so far since your day that there seem to be few mysteries left: the wonder which made men turn to God has departed. Nature seems to work very well on its own; the universe seems to be mechanistic and material, and God is not needed."

"What do you mean by 'mechanistic and material'?"

"That it runs itself like a machine, following fixed laws, and that it is made only of matter, without anything divine or spiritual in it."

That was a great disappointment. When I was young I had been very interested in science, but I had rejected it when I realised that all it did was to produce competing theories about what things were made of. There was Empedocles, for example, who said that everything was made from four elements — earth, air, water and fire — with two unexplained forces which brought them together or separated them. Or Anaxagoras whose theory was that everything was made of tiny bits of everything, and Mind decided what things came to be; that was a promising idea, but even his Mind seemed to be an impersonal and unexplained force. It was all unproved speculation, it never gave an answer to the question "why?" or "for what purpose?", and it led nowhere. So I turned from science to life: man, I decided, should above all study man. Were the scientists today still so blind, seeing the universe as purposeless? Was it more likely that they were misunderstood? I thought of Aristophanes's parody in his comedy, where he showed me spouting pseudo-scientific nonsense. I had enjoyed it: he was only making fun of the average Athenian's understanding.

"Is this really what your scientists still say today," I asked, "or is it only the popular view of science?"

"That's a surprisingly perceptive question, Socrates. Let me try to explain what science means to us today. Scientists work out the laws and mechanisms by which the universe and life have developed and exist now. But these laws tell us what does happen, not what must happen; they are no more than the regularities observed in

nature. Thoughtful scientists know this, and admit that the reason for these laws is still unknown; they tell us the how but not the why. But most ordinary people today are not so clear-headed: popular opinion imagines that scientists have explained how everything works and God is not needed."

"That," I said, "sounds to me like hearing how those trains worked and thinking that this explained their existence."

"Or if the universe is a book, we could say that science analyses the grammar and learns to understand the language, but that does not mean that the author does not exist." He paused before adding, "And there's another problem: man is so small and insignificant in the vast scale of the universe as we now know it that even if God exists he surely can't be interested in us."

"Is the universe so vast? What do you mean?"

He was quiet for some time, as if meditating, and then told me to look up. I think he was pointing at the sky.

Except that my eyes were open, what happened next was not unlike my experience in the temple. My vision was changed, and I found that I could see beyond the grey of the cloud, and even beyond the blueness of the sky above, to what was outside. It seemed then as if I had spent all my life locked in a small room; at last the door was opened and I discovered the unimaginable wonders of the cosmos. My mind travelled out and out, past the bright globe of the moon, past the blazing sun — neither a flaming rock nor a fiery chariot nor a god but something far greater — until I saw that the sun itself was only one of the stars, a tiny point of light in a vast emptiness, and the Earth an insignificant speck of dust circling it. And how many stars were there? More than a man might count in many lifetimes, certainly. I was about to return when I realised that this was not all. These countless stars, which I had thought were the universe, together formed only an island in space, and beyond were countless other islands, each as vast as our own yet looking as tiny as the stars seen from earth.

I pulled my mind with difficulty back from the immensity, overwhelmed by sheer scale. I stared at my friend in amazement —

who was he? But I had nothing to say.

"It is hard, isn't it, faced with that, to believe that there is a God who even knows about us. And if you could see back in time as well, you would discover that the universe is as old as it is large: humans have only been around for a brief moment in its existence. It needs a mental effort to stop thinking about quantity and to see quality as more important. A human is still the most complex thing known in the universe!"

It certainly was hard. He watched me with an amused expression as I struggled with this new perspective. I tried to remember where our talk had reached, and to find solid ground. As we stood up and returned to the main path I said, "You mentioned the 'laws and mechanisms' which science has discovered. Give me an example."

"Take life itself. We now know that the first living things were very small and simple, but from them developed gradually more complicated plants and animals until in the end came apes and from them man. We call this process evolution."

"That's not a new idea," I commented. "Anaximander said something like it before my time."

"Yes, but he was guessing, and our idea has been drawn from observations. And the mechanisms by which species develop — genetic mutation and survival of the fittest — have also been discovered, and are elegantly simple. There may be no need for a designer God to intervene at any point, and humans may be nothing but very advanced animals."

"This looks like a telling blow against a creator. How is it answered?"

"Easily: by pointing out that such an ingenious process as evolution might have been put in place by God in order to make us. Certainly it has worked amazingly well for us humans, even suspiciously well: man has advanced far beyond the needs of survival and has turned out to be much more than an animal. The human brain developed to help us in hunting for food; it's remarkable that it has been able to cope with everything which advancing civilisation has demanded of it."

"You mean things like language, thinking, the arts, science itself — and no doubt new skills in your world which I can't imagine. But might we not still be only advanced animals?"

Suddenly he pulled me to the side of the path. It was the first time he had touched me, and I realised that he did have a physical body after all. "Watch this!" he said. Down the path came a girl, and trotting at her feet there was a small white animal. When they were close to us, the animal gave a bark and ran over to us, sniffing and waving its tail. It was clearly puzzled, as was the girl, who stopped walking, looked in our direction, and then smiled. She called to the animal and it hurried back to her, greeting her happily, and they walked on down the path.

"What was it?" I asked, and he said it was a dog. That was a surprise: dogs in Greece were large and brown, used for hunting or guarding and sometimes as house pets, but this had been small and white. Everything was different in this world.

"You saw there," he said, "the difference between human and animal. To the dog, its mistress was a god, loved and worshipped and obeyed — usually! There's a huge step between a human and an animal, not only in the size of the brain but also in its quality. Humans have advanced beyond animals, and that may perhaps be seen as God's doing."

"But if our bodies are material, I guess that a scientist would not be able to find any difference between us and animals."

"That may be true, but there is more to it than that. Scientists work hard to explain nature without introducing the idea of a designer God or of any kind of spiritual reality, because science deals strictly with knowledge, not with belief. That's sensible enough, but it leads to a common fallacy which I think you talked about yourself; I think it was one reason why you abandoned science. It's called reductionism. It says that everything must be analysed and reduced to its most basic constituents — that is, matter — before reality is found." He stopped for a moment, and I think he was pointing at a plant beside the path. "Look at that fern: it could be said to be no more than an assembly of tiny cells, to which we give the collective

name 'fern'. What is real is not the whole but its parts: everything is merely a collection of basic elements which have been organised by the automatic processes of nature."

That was a mouthful, but I did manage to digest some of it. "You say this is a fallacy, though presumably it is true from a scientist's point of view."

"Yes, it's certainly possible to look at things like this — from below, as it were. It's true that a human is only a collection of cells made of molecules made of atoms made of quarks and organised by genes — no, don't ask! But if there is a God, it's also possible to view things from above. God wants to make a human, so he puts in place the means which will lead to humans: elements (created in the stars, by the way!), chemistry, the genetic code, natural selection. The human is what matters, the end product. That is where the greatest reality lies — at the top, not the bottom. And the same applies to everything: we can safely admire the fern without having to tell ourselves that it is nothing but a gene-propagation device."

"You lost me there," I said after some thought, "but I think I understand your meaning. It's like calling a poem only a collection of letters, or a picture only splashes of paint: quite correct, but utterly impoverished — it misses the point completely."

"Thank you: that was well put. Reductionism is correct, but misses the point: if there is a God he chose to use these means to make everything. It's a pity that this method of creation makes it impossible to prove God's existence from nature. Nature appears to work very well on its own and there is no clear evidence of God's action. But there are still several fundamental questions which science can't answer."

"I'm glad to hear that. Tell me what they are."

"First, why is the universe so rational? Scientists have found that it can be described by mathematics, but why does that work? — and why is it possible for a race of creatures produced by the universe to explain the universe?"

"I don't quite understand the significance of that. Perhaps you are saying 'why is it cosmos rather than chaos?', to use the Greek

terms: order rather than disorder. Give me an easier question."

"All right: why does the universe bother to exist at all, rather than not exist? Why does anything exist?"

I stopped walking and thought about that one. I looked at the ground I was walking on: why was it there? Wasn't non-existence much more likely than existence? How precariously everything existed! A sudden sense of nothingness came over me, desolation and emptiness. I felt dizzy, as if I was falling into a vast abyss, and had to tear my mind back again with an effort to the rich world of existence. A bird was singing in one of the trees to welcome me back, tiny bright flowers speckled the forest floor, a butterfly passed in a flash of colour. I had never been so aware of the beauty of the world and gazed in wonder at trees and grass, ferns and mosses and small berried plants, insects living their busy lives. Trotting down the path towards us came a small reddish-brown deer; it noticed us and bounded off through the forest. I turned to the stranger and wondered if he had arranged all this, but I could not tell.

"Could that deer see us," I asked, "and the dog too?"

"They were certainly aware of us, probably by scenting us: animals have sharper senses than ours and know that we are here."

As we moved on, I said, "I suppose that your scientists have discovered how the universe began?"

"Well, there is a hypothesis which so far hasn't been disproved. That's how science works, by the way: collect evidence, form a hypothesis to make sense of it, then test the predictions which that hypothesis implies. Ultimately the method comes from your own style of argument, Socrates!"

"Really? True, I did something like that, but I never applied it to science." My arguments had been used in the search for goodness, not scientific knowledge.

"Now where was I?" he said. "Oh yes, how did the universe begin? The best hypothesis says that about fourteen thousand million years ago the universe appeared as a single tiny point; then this point exploded in what they call the 'Big Bang', and space and energy and matter came into being, spraying out in all directions

with unimaginable power. The universe is still growing as everything moves apart."

"That sounds about as likely as some of the crazy creation myths which were around in my day!"

"But there is plenty of evidence for it. There's one more point," he said. "Recently it has become possible to think that the universe may have been designed with us living creatures in mind. We have discovered that if things were only very slightly different, if the conditions were not set as they are to an extraordinary degree of precision, our kind of universe and life could not have developed. For example — pick up that pebble on the path." I was surprised, but did as he said. "Now drop it... We wouldn't be here at all if that pebble fell at a slightly different speed — or as a scientist might put it, if the gravitational constant were different. It's either an extraordinary chance that we are here at all, or deliberate."

"I suppose," I said after some thought, "that we still cannot use that to prove that there is a creator God — the extraordinary chance must have happened."

"Some scientists argue that there may be countless universes, and ours happens to be the one which works. But that's only unprovable speculation, and it's only pushing the problem back: it still doesn't tell us why the many universes exist. It's just as reasonable to see a designer at work. Our home, the planet Earth, has a suspiciously large number of special features which make it possible for us to live here: its distance from the sun, its size, rotation, atmosphere, minerals, water, its moon, and many others — all just right for life to develop. Men have always been amazed and inspired by the world's beauty, complexity, ingenuity and variety, and seen them as the work of a master craftsman."

The Climb

At that moment we reached the top of the forest, and we stopped to look at the view which opened out before us. A grassy slope rose above us and ended not very far ahead in a steep rocky cliff, at the bottom of which I thought I could see some people. I guessed that the mountaintop was somewhere in the cloud beyond. How, I wondered, would we reach the summit if we couldn't see the way? And how would we climb that cliff? But I was becoming more and more certain that I had to achieve the top, that something important was waiting for me there. The way to Elysium at last, perhaps.

There was a gate across the path, and I opened it and went through. I heard my friend close it behind me. I turned to him — and was shocked to see behind me a man. He was an unremarkable man, with greying hair, pleasant-faced, clean-shaven like most men I had seen here, shorter than me, wearing clothes such as I had seen in the town below. I looked around to see if I could tell where my companion had got to.

"No need to search, Socrates," said the man, holding out his hand to me. "I am he! I have to apologise to you. I couldn't show myself until now: there were some particular people in the city and the train who would have been able to see me, and the girl with the dog, and that might have been awkward. But I know that none of them will be walking any further up this hill today. I'm sorry, it's been rather difficult for you, talking to thin air — and also for me, I may say, being thin air! And I'm afraid I may have talked too much. I'll try to be more human now."

I was enormously relieved, and said so, but I was also puzzled by his last sentence: more human? Did that mean that he was not human? He did not look like a god — in fact I was disappointed by his very ordinary appearance! And I also wondered why some people might have seen him. But the climb up the mountain would be much more pleasant with this new arrangement.

"Now," he said, "let's start up the slope. Where were we in our talk?"

"You were saying that it's reasonable to see God as the maker and designer of the universe, although scientists can't say that because it's unprovable. I think it's time to move on from the creation to the creator. What is your understanding of God today? – even if he is only a hypothesis!"

"Where shall we start? Perhaps with the first questions doubters tend to ask: 'where is God?', and 'how did God himself come into being?' or in other words 'who made God?'. Funnily enough it's science that helps us to answer these."

"Really?" I said, "Very well, I'll play my part. Where is God? I guess that he's not on Mount Olympus!"

"Thank you! But it's a foolish question. Firstly, 'where' can only mean 'where in the universe', because there's nothing outside the universe: by definition, the universe is everything."

"But you said that it started tiny and is growing, so presumably it has a limited size and there must be something outside it. It must be growing into something, if you see what I mean."

"No: it's now thought that space itself is growing, and the universe has no edge, although it is not infinite: it may seem like a vast expanding sphere, but it has no edge because it has at least four dimensions."

It was easier to follow his argument now that he was gesticulating to illustrate his points, but that last one was well beyond me and I said, "I have absolutely no idea what you mean!"

He laughed and stopped walking; then he pointed at the ground. "Look at the surface of the earth here. Imagine that there are two-dimensional creatures, completely flat, who live in the surface. They move around in their two-dimensional world, unaware of anything about us except the outline of our feet: they can't know that our bodies extend up from the feet, because that upward dimension does not exist for them. Do you follow that?"

"I do: it's a nice picture! I can imagine that they would have different races like us: squares, triangles, circles... But then they could only tell which race someone belonged to by walking right round him and counting his corners. Perhaps having more corners

would raise your status..."

He interrupted with a laugh: "You're being distracted! Now, if one of these creatures sets off on a great adventure, to travel as far as it can in a straight line, it will eventually find itself back here, where it started. It will be very puzzled, because it doesn't know there's a third dimension which allows the surface of the earth to curve."

"Do you mean that the world is round? That's interesting. But in that case I don't see how... Oh, never mind: carry on."

"Now look at us," he said, waving his arms, "in our three-dimensional universe. There might be a fourth dimension which we are not aware of; then we could travel through space for a very very long time in one direction, and find ourselves back where we started. The universe doesn't need to have an edge — there's no solid wall at the end of it. Instead it is like a four-dimensional expanding bubble, and we live in the skin of it, in the same way as those creatures live in the skin of the Earth."

I laughed. "I am glad I lived in the small simple world of the Greek philosophers!"

"Don't worry," he said, as we walked on: "our small part of the universe is simple enough. The point of all this is that there is no outside, so there is no other place for God to be. He is not outside the universe."

"Then presumably he is inside it?" I knew at once that this was a foolish comment!

"No! He made it, so he can't be in it. To say that God is in the universe is like saying that an author is in the pages of his book. If you are a character in a book the author is not in the world of the book with you nor outside it, but in another level of existence altogether. Do you see that? Plato wrote books about your conversations, but you yourself are not in their pages: you are a real person."

"Or at least I was," I said. "I have a strange feeling now that I really am a character in a story. But yes, that makes sense."

"So our answer to the question 'where is God?' might be 'in a different kind of existence which we can't imagine'."

"That's clear enough," I agreed, "even if it is an admission of

defeat. I suppose you want me to ask the second question. How did God come to be?" I thought of the Greek gods, all children of other gods: Athene — Zeus — Cronos — then Ouranos and Gaia, who were simply sky and earth. But no-one of any intelligence believed this.

"It's a slightly less foolish question," he said. "But if God made the universe, he also made Time. We've discovered that time is not quite the fixed dimension that it was thought to be: it's affected by relative speeds and by mass — on the sun an hour is very slightly longer than on earth, and if you travel very fast time slows down for you. So it's not an absolute, but part of the created universe."

I only grasped a little of that. But I hoped that I would have enough time in this world to find out more about today's science. Would I be able to interview some of their scientists?

"It's hard to imagine a being who is not in time," I said, "but I suppose that's what you are saying about God?"

"Yes. To ask 'how did he come to be?' or 'who made him?' implies a beginning in time; but as he's not in time he had no beginning, he never came to be, he has no age, he will have no end."

I considered this for a while as we strolled on up the hill, and finally said, "If God is not in space or time, it seems to me that we may find it impossible to say anything sensible about him at all."

"You're right. Humans are chained to space and time, but God is not: he is completely 'other'. We can only talk of him by using metaphors, or by saying what he is not. We say things like 'he's everywhere at once', but he doesn't fill the world like a gas; or 'he's in another dimension', but he made every dimension; or 'he's in heaven', but what does that mean? — it's only giving a name to the unimaginable."

"So God is a mystery beyond our understanding. I don't find that to be a problem. God should be honoured, not defined."

"All the same, this may be why many people try to redefine God. For example, there's the idea that God might be real for you but not for me, or different for you and for me."

"Really? I know what you would say about that. It's putting

God into the wrong category, taking him as a Both/And belief in which both sides are correct, rather than an Either/Or belief which is either true or untrue."

"Well said! God doesn't depend on people's perception of him. Others say that he is only a kind of personification of life or some such thing."

"In other words, that he doesn't exist outside ourselves; he is merely an abstraction." I had met this view — there had been Greeks who said that the gods only represented human emotions and natural forces. But they had more excuse: our gods seemed very unlikely to be real.

"That's what they seem to be saying. Our problem is that we can't imagine anything which doesn't have three dimensions and a location in space. We can imagine the invisible, like one of your gods wearing a cloak of invisibility."

"Or like you until we reached the gate!"

"I suppose so. We can also cope with the incorporeal or untouchable, like a ghost or a breath of wind. But man has always found it impossible to grasp the idea of something which exists without size or shape or body or location, but in some other mode or level of reality beyond ours. All we can say is that God is spiritual."

"That's a concept which we hardly knew in my day. Our gods were definitely physical and human-shaped; it made it much easier to worship them, and for them to act in our world. How does a spiritual God interact with a material universe?"

"Presumably the higher can always interact with the lower — the author with the book, the potter with the clay. But as he creates from outside time, we can't say that he simply started everything going and then sat back and watched; rather, he holds everything in existence — not that he keeps intervening and adjusting, but using those laws and mechanisms of nature."

"I suppose that he could intervene if he wanted to," I speculated. "That would be what we call a wonder, a miracle. I'd be disappointed to find that he limited himself to his own 'laws and mechanisms'." When I said this, he patted me on the back and smiled broadly; I

wondered why. I also wondered what we were going to do when we reached that cliff, which was now getting close. I had been right: there were two people there, one lying on the ground, the other sitting. But my friend had more to say.

"Don't under-estimate those laws; they are also miraculous. Scientists discover how things work, but the more they discover the more amazed we become. The Big Bang which started it off, Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Evolution, Genetics, Chemistry, perhaps even Mathematics: we may pride ourselves on discovering these things, but it's God who designed them and made them. And there are many things we don't yet know. There's a search on for a Theory of Everything, there's the problem of the missing dark matter, and... Anyway, scientists, whether they know it or not, are trying to fathom the creative mind of God — and finding it very difficult!"

"Your science does sound like a fascinating quest. But I don't suppose it can tell us why your increasingly un-hypothetical God made the universe?"

He laughed. "No, that is beyond it, and it always will be. Science is limited and takes no account of non-physical things. But we could see the universe as God's work of art, and perhaps he made humans specially as conscious creatures to appreciate it and to love him, and for him to love — although we don't yet know if there are other conscious species anywhere else, or indeed any life."

I thought back to my vision of the universe and said, "Surely in all that immensity there must be other Earths?"

"Our Earth is such a very special place that it may be unique, but for the moment that is still an Either/Or situation and we should be sceptical! However, you'll see later that humans do have a special position in the universe, and God does have a special concern for us."

His last words were almost drowned by a strange vibrating roar as we approached the foot of the cliff. I noticed two things. One was that the person lying there, a young woman, was clearly hurt, and the other that an object like a monstrous red-and-white insect was flying

noisily towards us. We sat down to watch what was happening. "It's another flying machine," he shouted, "called a helicopter." I stared at it in amazement as it came closer, so loud that I only just heard my friend apologise to me, "Sorry, Socrates, I didn't allow for this." Then he disappeared.

The machine came to earth on a flat bit of ground not far away, and out of it came two men, carrying what looked like a kind of bed. They seemed to be rescuing the girl, and I wondered how they had been summoned. They ran to where she lay, spoke to her and her companion, and tended to her; I noticed that one of them gently placed his hand on her leg, closed his eyes and spoke briefly. I think that her leg was broken, and I assumed that she had fallen while climbing the cliff. Then they lifted her carefully onto the bed, and the three of them carried her to the machine and climbed in. Like the giant beetle hanging from the crane which featured in one of Aristophanes's plays, it took off and flew away, leaving me shaken and bewildered.

My friend re-appeared, and explained: "I'm sorry: one of those rescuers would have seen me and might have asked me to help." We stood up and looked at the rock above us. "Now, Socrates," he said, "we have to climb this."

I gazed upwards, and a feeling of dread filled me: it would be like climbing the cliff of the Acropolis, and people had died doing that. And if that young person had slipped and damaged herself, how would an ancient person like me manage it? Dread changed to annoyance and I complained — rather childishly, I suppose: why had he chosen this hill? surely there was an easier way? did we really have to reach the top? I was going back down to the forest. My confidence had gone; this was something I had never experienced before, not even in the war where I had gained a reputation for courage in the fighting at Delion and Potidaia.

But then I again remembered that I was dead, and that I did really want to reach the summit. He led the way, showing me where to place my hands and feet and telling me not to look down. It turned out to be easier than it had looked, although my sandals

were not as good as his shoes. It was like a very steep and irregular staircase, and I found myself actually enjoying the sensation as we climbed higher. In Athens I would have struggled, but I was pleased to find that my new body was much more efficient than my old one. I wondered what would happen if I leapt off the rock, being dead, and was briefly tempted to find out. But all too soon we reached the top, walked a little further and stopped beside a small pile of stones to look at what came next. After a short descent the mountain became quite a narrow ridge, but it was more or less level until it finally rose into the cloud a long way ahead.

The Ridge

1

"Well, we're making progress," said my friend. "How do you think I'm doing? This is a new job for me, you know, and I'm afraid that I may be moving too fast — in the walking and the talking." A new job? Was I a job? I was picking up small scraps of evidence about him and about this experience, but so far I had not managed to form a hypothesis from them.

"The walking's fine, and so was that climb, to my surprise," I said. "I'm sorry about my grumbling at the bottom."

He smiled and patted me on the back. I felt a sudden relief, and realised that I had passed a test: not the climb up the cliff, but being ready to admit my weakness.

"As for the talking," I continued, "you're giving me a very rapid course in today's ways of thinking. So far most of it has made sense to me, although I have reservations, as you know. But what has happened to your objectivity? I thought God was meant to be a hypothesis or perhaps a belief, but you are beginning to talk as if he certainly exists. And we seem to have strayed a long way from trying to tackle the flaw in human nature. What has God to do with it? — except that if he designed us he seems to have made a really bad job of it!"

He laughed and replied, "Good: you have arrived at the point I was leading you to. Yes, we do still need to prove that God exists, and to solve the great problem of life. The two are not unconnected."

"A small task, no doubt," I commented sarcastically.

We set off again on a faint path down to the start of the ridge, which was wide enough for us to walk along together. On the left we looked down steep slopes into the valley, and I realised how high we had climbed already: we could see the town, looking as small as a child's model. On the other side the slope dipped more gently down to a lake and then rose again to other hills with their tops in the cloud. The lake had an odd feature which I did not understand:

it appeared to end in a straight wall. Was it man-made?

"Now," he said, "let's start with the existence of God. It seems that, if he exists, he has designed the universe to work without giving any decisive evidence that he exists. So we need some other kind of proof. What do you think would do?"

"I suppose that we need something which we can know for certain. On your terms that would have to be a Thing, an Event or a provable Fact."

"Quite right. Now, let's imagine that God wants to prove to humans that he exists. Which of those three do you think he would choose?"

This was a new idea! A ridiculous image came into my mind of the creator desperately trying to persuade his creatures that he existed, while they kept telling him that he didn't. "Well," I said, "it's hard to imagine any Thing which he could produce to convince us, if the existence of the universe itself doesn't. A huge monument with the words 'God Made This' would hardly do the job!"

"A nice idea, but you're right!"

"As for a Fact, that's what he's trying to prove — the fact that he exists. So we are left with an Event. Perhaps he could produce a great miraculous event." I tried to think of something suitable, but failed. A thought struck me: "But it would need to be a repeated event as he would need to convince each generation, and that's absurd."

"And no doubt," he said, "science would step in and tell us that a repeated event must in fact be natural, and would formulate a law to explain it! By the way, there have been a lot of attempts to prove by logic alone that God exists; but they've never been satisfactory, so perhaps you were right to dismiss the Fact approach. And some see the existence of the spiritual as evidence for God, but we need something more definite."

"Then it looks as if God needs a single extraordinary event. That's a pity: people in the future would have to take it on trust that the event had occurred."

"Yes, that's the problem with time," he said. "It's always possible to deny that something in the past happened, or to explain it away.

And the records of the event may be inaccurate. I wonder how accurate our records of your life are? There's been a lot of debate, you know, about how many of the things Plato wrote were your ideas and how many were his."

"Perhaps I'll be able to help." Why, I wondered, was it so important?

"Now, when should God produce his Event?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it clearly hadn't happened in your time. What conditions remained to be fulfilled?"

This was a strange conversation — making plans for our hypothetical God! "My time," I said, "was so used to stories of the gods' doings that I don't think they would have been impressed by our Event, whatever it was. We need a time when people are much more sceptical, or dissatisfied with their beliefs, or even atheists."

"I think," he suggested, "that we also need at least some people whose religion believes in one God, so as to get the story going; otherwise the Event might be completely misunderstood."

"All right," I conceded, "I'll allow you your monotheists. Then I suppose we would need a world where the news could be passed on: easy travel, not too many wars going on, good government. My own time would be counted out on all three, in Greece at least."

"Right," he said. "We have the religious environment and the political environment; anything else?"

I considered this for several paces. "Perhaps the right intellectual and literary environment would help. It would be best for the Event to be well reported and intelligently analysed; otherwise the news might be scorned by its hearers."

"Good," he said. "You are a quick thinker, Socrates: I'm glad you were chosen." Chosen? Questions tumbled through my mind, but I didn't interrupt him. He went on, "I think we have settled the conditions well enough. Now we had better plan the Event itself. We want to avoid the problems of belief which we found with religions; for example, we don't want an inspired prophet or teacher who claims to have a message from God."

"No, that would not be enough."

"Nor do we want someone to discover a miraculous scroll hidden in a cave or to have a book dictated to him by God, or some such device."

"Of course not: no-one would accept it."

"You'd be surprised!" he said. "Then perhaps it should just be a physical event, some kind of great wonder witnessed by many people."

"That seems possible." I was puzzled by the direction our conversation was heading, and knew that he was leading towards some predetermined conclusion; but this was a tactic I had often used myself, so I could not complain, and I decided that I had better keep playing along. "I think that we also want some kind of message from God: we want to know what he is like, and if possible how to deal with that flaw which we were discussing. A single physical event would bring no message beyond the fact that God must exist and that he knows we exist."

"You're right," he replied. "Knowing simply that God exists would hardly help at all; it would only inspire all the religions to new efforts."

"But we've ruled out a messenger because his words could only inspire belief, not knowledge. I think we are stuck. Anyway, where is this speculation leading? It's obvious that the Event which we have tried to plan hasn't happened even by your time, or everyone would know that God exists and would honour him. Is it about to happen now?" I wondered if perhaps I was to be part of it.

2

The ridge we were walking along suddenly narrowed at this point. On each side, out of sight until now, a steep rocky gully plunged down, cutting through the slopes so that the path was pinched into a narrow rocky crest. It seemed a perilous spot: I let him go first, and then picked my way across, reminding myself that the dead should have no fear and that I had enjoyed the cliff, but still

feeling nervous and trying not to look down.

"It has happened," he said, but I was not paying attention to him.

I reached the end of the narrow section with relief and found that the ridge broadened briefly into a small plateau. My friend was sitting on a smooth slab of rock and beckoned me to join him.

"It has happened," he repeated.

"What? The Event? Then..." I stared at him, wondering. Answers at last! And then there came to my mind the world of today and its hurrying, unthinking people, and my companion's analysis of the world's problems. Had the Event been a failure? What had gone wrong?

"The time arrived four hundred years after your death," he said. "The conditions were right, just as we planned. The monotheists we needed were a race called the Hebrews or Jews, and in the lands around them many people were discarding their old religions and searching for new answers. The political background we wanted, to allow the story to travel easily, was the empire of the Romans."

"Romans?" I said. "I have heard of Rome: it was a city in Italy. How did it become so great?"

"That's a long story; but by this time they had conquered or taken over all the lands round the Mediterranean Sea, including yours, and they really did bring peace and stability, at least to those who wanted it. But the intellectual environment which we needed was supplied largely by you Greeks — and you had a large part in creating it yourself, Socrates. Your people contributed the language, the literary standards and the rational framework which was needed."

I was getting used to these puzzling hints at a long future for my ideas, so I didn't comment. "Where did it happen?"

"In the land of the Jews. Their race has had a close relationship with God throughout their history, although a troubled one: they were often disobedient and often had to be called back to God by their prophets. And their land is much more central in the world than Greece — a place where eastern, western and southern races

meet. Perhaps that should have been another of our conditions: we didn't want to confine the message to our part of the world."

"Tell me, then," I said: "what was the Event?"

"It was the life of a man. He was called Yeshua bin-Yosef. Here he is called Jesus."

"A life? I thought we had disallowed the words of a man. How are you going to convince me that a life was special enough to qualify as our Event?"

"That's easy. He was God." As he said this, his face lit up and he almost seemed to glow.

He was God? I gaped at him. Not a god, of course, not like Zeus visiting us in a myth, but God. No, that was impossible. My mind jumped back to my vision of the universe, and I thought of the power of the one who had made it. And I thought of the problem we had in talking of a spiritual God, invisible, indefinable. God become a man? Never!

"Tell me," I said.

"This man was brought up in a carpenter's family in a country town. Remarkable stories are told about his birth, for example that he had no human father but was conceived by a miracle; that he was born in the humblest possible conditions, in a stable; that his birth was greeted by angels —". He stopped suddenly, and seemed to go into a trance with his eyes closed, as if his mind's eye was seeing visions. Then he shook his head, glanced at me rather guiltily, I thought, and went on: "His life was normal, as far as we know, until he was about thirty. Then he spent the last three years or so of his life walking around that region, speaking to large crowds and teaching small groups of followers — a bit like your own adopted way of life, except that you gave up sculpture rather than carpentry."

"Not unlike, I suppose, but I never spoke to crowds and I didn't teach."

"He did something else which I'm sure you didn't do: miracles."

"Miracles?" I said, remembering my own earlier words.

"He would touch the sick or the disabled and they would be well, and sometimes even the dead came back to life at his word.

Crowds followed him, bringing their sick to be healed. And there were also miracles of another kind." He shut his eyes again and seemed to be meditating deeply for a while; then he said, "Yes, it is allowed. Socrates, I am going to let you see for yourself."

Suddenly a great wind rose around me, the cloud enfolded me, and the hill disappeared in a swirl of air and water. I had no time to think or to be afraid. I found that I was being thrown about in a boat — a fishing boat, I think — tossed on a rough sea, and surely in danger of being overwhelmed. There were others in the boat who were desperately pulling down the sail and using oars in an attempt to steer into the waves. I could feel their panic. And then I noticed a man lying on a cushion at the back of the boat, asleep. How could he be? One of them cried out to him, "Master, we're going to die! Help us!" He woke, and sat up. Then he spoke, quietly, but I could hear him through the raging of wind and water and flapping sails. He said, "Peace: be still." And the sea was calm, and the wind stopped, and the men were left gasping with relief and looking at each other in amazement. The vision faded and I was sitting on the rock again; I felt my clothes and they were dry.

I turned to my friend. "What happened? Was that a dream?" He didn't answer. I shut my eyes and tried to see that man again, for I was sure that he was Jesus, and a warmth filled my heart as I thought of him.

"I don't know how you did that," I said at last, "and I don't know if it was real, but thank you. All the same, I am going to remain sceptical about your Event until I know more about it."

"I accept that," he said with a smile. "But the miracles of Jesus proved that he had power over the laws of nature. And who could have that power except the maker of the laws?"

"Anyone, I suppose, to whom the maker had given the power. Why couldn't he just have been the instrument of God? But go on. I hope that the evidence for these miracles is good."

"That's the problem, of course. However good the evidence, those who wanted to disbelieve it in the future would be able to. No-one disputes that Jesus was a real person, but these days it's

unfashionable to believe that the miracles really happened: science doesn't allow them. But the evidence is very good — even better than for your life! There were several biographies written within thirty or forty years of his life, in Greek, of course; and the news of him spread very quickly, even before the books were written."

"All right, for the moment I'll suspend my disbelief. Tell me more about him."

"The next part you can again identify with. The authorities arrested him secretly, and had him put to death."

"What?" I exclaimed. "God was put to death? What happened?"

"The official accusation was that he was aiming to be king and to lead the Jewish people in a rebellion against the Romans, but really it was because, like you, he was thought to be undermining their religion. He was crucified — nailed by the wrists and feet to a cross: an agonising death, one which they kept for slaves and low-class —." He stopped in mid-sentence and put his head in his hands. His emotion was enough to convince me of the truth of what he was saying. I watched him until he looked up. But I was puzzled.

"Crucified? Poison was much easier," I said. "Then that's the end of the story? You'll need more than that to persuade me that he was God and this was the Event." In fact, I was sadly disappointed; we wanted more than a few stories of miracles, and violent death didn't seem a sensible way to finish.

Suddenly I heard voices, and saw a party of walkers coming along the ridge after us: they must have been following us, but walking faster.

"No," he said. "That was not the end. After two days of death, Jesus returned to life."

I had been distracted by the walkers and only half heard him. "What? Say that again."

"He came back to life."

"You mean that he was killed and then he was alive again?"

So. Was this the Event we had been looking for? The ultimate miracle — but was the evidence good enough?

And then it struck me that I too had returned from death — or

had I? "Was he really alive?" I asked. "After all, I seem to be in the same position."

He said nothing, but waited while the walkers came near. They crossed the difficult section with a lot of chatter, and then stopped and sat down on the ground around us and took their bags off their backs, ignoring us. But I did notice that one of them kept looking in our direction with a puzzled expression.

We stood up and set off again along the ridge, which was rather wider now. "You see," he said, "like all the people you saw earlier, they didn't notice you — they didn't even see you. No, you're not really alive again in this world. But Jesus was. He was seen over a period of forty days by a lot of people — five hundred on one occasion, it is said. He spoke to them, he ate food with them; the wounds of his crucifixion were still on him. Then he finally disappeared."

"And after that?"

"After that his followers started spreading the word that he had defeated death and that he was alive and that he was God; and within three hundred years this idea had spread right through the Roman Empire and replaced the old gods and religions. That was the end of your gods, Socrates."

We walked on in silence. My mind was full and needed to settle down. The ridge widened and we came upon a pool of water, flat and smooth on this windless day. I picked up a stone and casually threw it, shattering the calm with a splash and a burst of ripples. That was the story of my day, I thought: the calm which I had achieved at my death now unsettled by the waves of new ideas with which my companion was disturbing my mind.

3

He watched me with amusement: he knew the effect he was having on me. I focused on the biggest wave and asked him, "What do you mean by 'he was God'? He simply can't have been God, if God is spiritual. Wasn't he just inspired by God, and brought back to life by God? Wouldn't that be enough to prove that God exists? How

can the author turn up in his book?"

"It all depends on what you mean by 'was'! People have been arguing about it ever since. Jesus said things about himself which were either the words of a lunatic or complete lies or a serious claim that he was revealing God to men in a unique way, speaking the words and doing the deeds of God, being God in the physical world. But to judge from other things he said, he was no lunatic and no liar."

"What did he say about himself?"

"If the reporting is correct, he said things like 'if you have seen me, you have seen God'; or 'God and I are one'; and when one of his followers called him 'my God' he accepted it. Remember, this was among Jews, who are very strict monotheists; to them Jesus was either an appalling blasphemer or the one God."

"But how on earth could a man be God? How do you explain it?"

"I can't explain it to you, Socrates. It's a mystery, like God himself. But all sorts of images and metaphors were used: 'son of God' was the most common."

"That makes him sound like Heracles, the son of Zeus."

"Maybe Heracles pre-figured him? But there were other phrases like 'image of God', 'word of God', and so on. Perhaps today we would talk of God projected or translated or transposed into humanity, or expressed as a human. There were endless discussions, and the conclusion was simply that he was fully human but also fully God, and that we can do little more than just state the paradox. At any rate, it wasn't like your Zeus visiting earth in human shape. This God was really human, human enough to suffer and die."

"Though God enough to defeat death," I said. "It really is an extraordinary idea. But I imagine not everyone agrees that he was God, whatever we mean by 'was'."

"No. A lot of people want to reject all the evidence or explain it away: miracles just do not happen, you see, in a universe governed by the laws of nature, and people don't return from death. This argument would be very persuasive, unless these things did actually

happen. It's not very convincing, after a well-attested event, to say 'Miracles cannot happen; this is a miracle; therefore this did not happen'. We might equally say 'This happened; this is a miracle; therefore miracles can happen'."

"Especially if there is a God and he is involved — but that's begging the question."

"There are others today who change the story to make it more acceptable. They say that the miracles and the return from death — his resurrection, as we call it — are not meant to be taken literally, but are metaphorical statements of important truths. Jesus is alive in spirit, and there is no need for him to have literally returned from death."

"A myth, in other words. Do the writings about Jesus allow this interpretation?"

"The best way to decide that is to read them. They don't sound at all like mythology or fiction or exaggeration, and in the early days no-one seems to have taken them as anything other than literally true. There were plenty of eye-witnesses, it was a time when memories were good, it's very hard to argue that the witnesses misunderstood or were deluded; even then they knew what was natural and what wasn't. The main argument against the story today is perhaps its age: how can we be sure of anything which happened so long ago?"

I laughed. "I'm hardly likely to agree with that, seeing that it happened four hundred years after my time! But I suppose I'm a special case."

"And no-one doubts that you lived and died and did what your followers say. It's certainly presumptuous to change history because it doesn't suit one's view of the world. But perhaps the best evidence is the effect the events had on people at the time. Jesus's followers were ordinary men — fishermen, some of them." Yes, I thought, I have seen them. "They were in despair when Jesus was killed, but were completely transformed by his resurrection: they started off a movement which would turn out to be more influential than Hebrew religion or Roman power or your Greek culture. You see —": he stopped walking and turned to face me, and I knew that

this was serious. “They weren’t just teaching the facts; they were telling the world how Jesus was the answer to its problems, and they experienced his supernatural life in themselves, his gift to them. Many of them in the end gave their lives because they were so certain that Jesus, although he was human, was also no less than God and the only one who could save mankind; he was making a God who is beyond our understanding visible and accessible to us, and bringing his love to us.”

This was too much for me to take in at once, and I picked on one thing he had said: “They gave their lives?”

“Yes: both the Jews and the Romans persecuted them from time to time. But the movement flourished, and today there are countless people all over the world who would claim to be followers of Jesus — who are sure that he was and is God and is alive today. They are called Christians, after the title given to Jesus: in your language he was called the Christ, in Hebrew the Messiah, which means the one appointed by God.”

Suddenly some instinct made me duck down to the ground and a surge of shock passed through me; a roar filled the sky above. Thoughts tumbled through my mind as I looked up and saw a dark shape flying away just below the cloud, faster than any wind. It was like something out of those stories which I had scorned: god or monster? My friend pulled me to my feet.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I don’t. But I suppose it was another of your flying machines.”

“If you had told your friends in Athens what you have just seen, would they have believed you?”

“I imagine not.”

“But if hundreds of Athenians together had seen it?”

“Then the others would have to accept that it happened, even if they hadn’t the faintest idea what it was. But what are you getting at?”

“If the story of this phenomenon had been passed on, say in the history of your Thucydides, what would later readers have thought of it?”

"I expect that they would have tried to explain it away. They would have said that it was wrongly reported or misunderstood or a complete invention. Oh, I see."

"In fact," he said, "you're right: it was yet another machine, another kind of aircraft. There was nothing extraordinary about it."

That was certainly not true, I thought. But I had been suspicious for some time that my companion, as well as laying on a series of special visions, was manipulating ordinary places and events to fit his argument. In Greece we would have called him a god, but I did not know what his status was here — although there had been a few small hints.

"I'm afraid that I've misled you a little, Socrates," he said. "The life of Jesus was not originally meant to be a proof that God exists; it was not planned as our Event — the Jews of that time already believed in God. Much more important was the message he brought, and what his death and resurrection achieved for humans. However, today his life is certainly the best evidence that God is real."

4

We set off again on the last part of the ridge, easy walking for some way, but ahead we could see that it steepened and finally disappeared into the cloud. I was beginning to feel nervous. What would happen there?

"Tell me about his death," I said. "Your God died. If he was God, that's even more extraordinary than his return to life. He must have deliberately allowed himself to be killed. It sounds like a bad mistake!"

"Do you remember that temple we went into? — actually it's called a church. Do you remember what was on the table, where you expected to see a statue?"

"Yes — oh, of course! It was a cross: a sign of crucifixion. So the temple, or rather church, was in honour of your Jesus. But a cross? — that's surely a sign of humiliation. Zeus had a thunderbolt, a sign of power, but your God is honoured by remembering his death?"

"Remember that it's also a symbol of his defeat of death — he didn't stay dead, the cross is empty. All the same, I agree that it's strange — the equivalent of the hangman's noose or the executioner's axe."

"Or even my cup of hemlock," I added. "That would make a strange symbol!"

"To be sure! Christians actually boast of the shameful and agonising death of their founder. The Greeks of those days found this hard to stomach at first: it seemed like folly."

"I'm not surprised. How can you justify it?" I had heard of crucifixion being used in Persia, but never in Greece: it was considered a barbaric method of execution.

Before he could answer, we had to stop suddenly: just ahead of us there was a crowd of what appeared to be small brown balls of fluff on legs, hurrying away from us in all directions. They were baby birds, and their mother (I guessed) was flying towards us in a panic on white wings. She landed in front of us and then did something remarkable. She flapped away from us on the ground, apparently trailing a broken wing and expecting us to chase her. Clearly she was trying to draw us away from her young ones, and we obediently followed her along the ridge for some distance, until her wing seemed to be miraculously healed, and she took off and flew back to gather her little flock which we had so carelessly scattered. We laughed at her ingenuity and continued on our way.

"It was a ptarmigan," he said, "a bird which lives up here all year round. She saved her chicks from us, and I hope she will manage to find them all! Now, you were asking how we can justify the death of Jesus. That has been endlessly debated. Its cause and its effects are clear enough, at least, but to say exactly how it works is much more difficult. It was an Event, more certain than any theories about it."

"You told me why it happened: Jesus criticised the Jewish leaders and threatened their religious and political beliefs. But that applies more or less to my own death too. I'm sure that there was more to it than that." My death seemed remote now, like a dream I had last night.

"Much more, yes. And it wasn't only that he set an example by facing death without bitterness against his enemies: you managed that too."

"But, if I remember rightly," I said, "he was half my age: his life was cut short, but I'm seventy years old and ripe for death. Compared with mine, his death sounds like one of our tragic plays. Perhaps it could have a cathartic effect like them — taking us through a deeply emotional experience to leave us at peace."

"So Aristotle was not the first to have that idea? But you're more right than you know: if we can identify with Jesus in his death and his resurrection it is like dying ourselves and then being re-born."

"Re-born?" An interesting idea, I thought: a new start to life, a chance to begin again. Was that what I was being offered in my time here? But I was dead: how could I be born again?

"Did you notice the bags which those walkers had on their backs? — rucksacks, we call them. They're a good image for the human condition. We all accumulate a load of troubles in our lives: guilt or regret, anger or anxiety, arrogance or despair. But we can't get rid of the load ourselves, we can't remove our rucksacks."

"I think that I see what you mean. But has no way been found to save us from our burdens?"

"No human method seems to work. But Jesus, it is said, took onto himself everyone's loads when he went to his death. It was as if he himself had done all the wrongdoings which humans had ever committed and felt all the grief which they have ever felt, and was suffering for them on our behalf."

"That's another remarkable idea," I said. "God suffered in our place? There is a similar story about Zeus, come to think of it, that he learnt to love mankind by suffering. But couldn't God simply have stopped our suffering before it happened rather than removing its burden afterwards?"

"How? He would have to control our behaviour, which would destroy our freedom. He took the great risk of making us conscious and giving us free will, which makes us human but also makes it possible for us to choose whether to love him or to ignore him."

I thought about that. "You mean that he couldn't stop all the suffering in the world without turning us into something like your machines."

"Exactly: machines under his control. And a machine can't love its controller. All the same, one of the most common and compelling arguments used today against God's existence is that a loving and all-powerful God would not let us suffer. Couldn't he at least stop natural disasters and diseases and the like? On the other hand, suffering reduces our self-sufficiency and makes more people turn to God than it puts off."

I hadn't thought about this before: if God made us and the world, why is there so much pain? Was it inevitable that humans, as he made us, must go wrong? Could he have made us in such a way that our self-centredness would not develop into selfishness? And why was nature often so cruel?

He watched me thinking about this, then said, "Socrates, there are many things we can't understand in this life. Our vision is limited. Imagine looking at the back of a tapestry: you see only confusing and complex shapes with little order. But when you move round to the front the pattern becomes clear and it all makes sense. You are still looking at the back, but don't worry: your time will come soon."

I hoped so. But I knew that I would have to escape from the cave of the world before these things would be revealed to me.

"As it is," he continued, "life is always bitter-sweet, and the death of Jesus confirmed that tragedy and suffering are an inextricable part of it, and that they matter. He might have taken the way of power and miracle and triumphed over his accusers; they even mocked him when he was on the cross and told him to save himself. But he chose the way of self-denial to help us."

I thought of my own death and felt a little uncomfortable. I wondered if I had been driven more by stubbornness or pride than by self-denial.

"Some people," he said, "describe his death simply as a sacrifice, like the animal sacrifices which the Jews made: Jesus dying to remove the barrier between us and God. Or as Jesus taking the punishment

which we deserve for our wrongdoing. Or as a payment, like a fine paid for our crimes."

"It's odd to think of God paying a fine when he could have just cancelled the debt. Sorry, I think I may be repeating myself."

"Yes, all such images fall short, although there is a truth hidden behind them. But you know, Socrates, the troubles of the world are not caused only by human selfishness. There is something else which encourages us to do wrong: spiritual forces of evil. Their leader is often called Satan." He spat out this word with what sounded like anger.

"Really? A kind of anti-God? I've heard of a Persian religion which believes that there are two gods: gods of good and evil, light and darkness."

"No, Satan is not a god, but a created being." He stopped walking, and seemed to be deep in thought. Then he spoke, slowly and deliberately. "God did not only create physical beings like humans; he also made spiritual beings. They too have the choice of good or evil, a choice between submitting to God or turning away from him, and some have chosen the wrong way. The human race has long been plagued by these evil powers; they explain the bias towards selfishness, and human ignorance of God, and the reason why this world feels to you like a cave. In his last days Jesus was attacked by them."

This was a completely new idea to me. "Do you mean that the men who tried and killed him were under the influence of evil powers?" Evil supernatural powers: they would help to explain the madness which I had witnessed in my life: war and conflict, greed and cruelty, all the human faults which I had tried but largely failed to make my fellow-citizens aware of.

"Yes. The world is permeated by them. When Jesus died, he was facing them and taking all their hostility on himself, absorbing their fury. It's as if ..." — he stopped, clearly trying to find a way of explaining it — "it's as if a deadly spear was being thrown at you and he jumped in front to take it instead of you."

That was a powerful image, I thought. He died to save us from

death, he allowed himself to be beaten by evil so that we would be sheltered from it. A thought struck me: "Like that bird! She was drawing the evil, us, away from her family. She might have died to save her chicks."

"Yes, that's good. Of course, she was only tricking us, but Jesus actually did die. On the cross, before he died, he cried out 'It is finished': his job was done, his mission was complete. But remember, that was not the end: he rose from death, and so his defeat was turned to triumph, and its benefits were available to anyone who trusted in him."

After a pause we walked on, and I asked, "What benefits? — what does that victory mean for us? What difference does it make?"

"How shall I put it? Jesus talked rather strangely of himself living in us, and of us living in him, identifying with him. You might say that his victory creates a door in the wall which we have built, through which he can come in — if we are prepared to open the door. Nothing else can achieve this."

"I see. No, actually I don't see."

"It's another of those back-of-tapestry mysteries which we cannot fully fathom in this life. The death of Jesus can release us from our slavery to selfish wrongdoing and the evil of the world. This has been experienced as a fact by countless people, but the method by which it does it is beyond our imagining. All we can know is that it was necessary and that it works. The gap between a perfect God and very imperfect humanity has been bridged by God becoming human and freeing us."

We were walking more slowly now as the slope steepened. I spent some time trying to work out what he was talking about. Then I remembered his mysterious statement that there was more outside our walls than other people. He must have meant God. And our walls kept God out of our lives. And the death of Jesus allowed God into our lives. I couldn't imagine what that meant in real life, but perhaps we would reach that point in due course.

A sudden gust of cold air made me shiver. I looked up and saw to my surprise that we were nearly in the cloud; wisps of mist were

beginning to obscure the world around us. We were still walking up the slope, though no longer on such a clear path. I stared into the monotonous grey cloud ahead, trying to make out where we were going.

The fog grew thicker. It depressed me, and I have to admit that I began to feel worried, and at the same time annoyed. I felt as if I was under attack and in great danger. I had the impression that the death of Jesus somehow opened up the way to God — but I had lived long before his time, and I was obviously not a Christian. Did that mean that I had no chance, that Elysium would be denied to me, that the realm of Hades awaited me, or perhaps that I would haunt this world for ever, or even that this climb through the cold grey fog would go on for ever? My companion trudged along beside me in silence, offering no help.

But at last the cloud began to grow brighter, sunlight seeping into it until we were walking in a silver mist with the white disc of the sun hanging over our heads and glimmers of blue coming and going. The mist thinned, the bright air was around us, my confidence returned, and we were above the cloud. I had never known or imagined anything like this, and felt like a god on Olympus: ahead was our ridge, broader now but narrowing to a pointed summit some distance away, and all around it was a sea of billowing white; jutting out of the white like islands were other mountain-tops. We walked on a little way and sat down on the edge facing the sun.

Above the Cloud

1

We sat and gazed at the cloud sea, its sun-lit waves and its archipelago of islands with the blue sky and the glorious sun above.

"Beautiful!" I said.

"But not absolute beauty, I think you would say."

"No: it partakes of beauty itself. But what beauty itself is I cannot tell."

"Say rather that it partakes of God, and you have your answer. God made this world, and when we are moved by beauty we are recognising his craftsmanship. He can't help making things beautiful because beauty is in his character. And the same applies to your other universals: goodness, justice and so on. They are characteristics of God."

After some thought I said, "All right, that is an answer, but it does assume that your God exists."

We sat in silence for a while; then he asked, "Can you swim, Socrates?"

"Swim?" That was unexpected. I wondered if he meant swim in this sea of cloud: might that be possible now, after death? "If you mean in water, then no: I've never learnt to swim."

"But you have seen people swimming, you know what water is like and that people can float in it, you know how swimming is done, the arm and leg movements. The only way to find out if you can swim yourself is to trust this evidence and jump in."

"What are you saying?"

"That in the end the only way to be sure that God is real is to trust the evidence that he is and jump in, to test the hypothesis in your own life. There's a gap between hearing the evidence and knowing for certain, and you need to make a decision to cross that gap. You'll remember that I called this decision 'faith'. With faith you can discover that God is real, not just an Either/Or belief but a fact."

"By evidence I suppose that you mean the Thing which is Jesus himself, the Event which is his life with its miracles, and the Fact that he is God. The Fact is the one which needs the most faith, I suppose."

At this moment I heard voices and turned to see that the party of walkers had emerged from the cloud. They were clearly excited, and they seemed to express this by holding small boxes or tablets in front of them. I had no idea what they were doing until my friend explained about cameras. Then he said, "Being human is frustrating. It's hard for them to enjoy beauty for long, to bathe in it and experience God through it. They try to capture it by taking photographs, but the camera is like a blindfold, getting between them and the beauty they see. Notice how they take pictures of each other and even of themselves, with the view in the background. What is important is not the scene but 'me in the scene'. It's another sign of the walls which they shut themselves inside."

There were two things I noticed about what he had said: he'd forgotten to say "we" and was talking only of "they" and "humans"; and he talked of "bathing in beauty". I tried to imagine what that would be like, but as a human I was presumably blindfolded myself, even if I didn't have a camera. I don't think that he was.

We watched the others until they set off along the ridge towards the summit.

"Now, Socrates," he said. "Let's consider the human disease again and see if we can find a cure for it, a solution to our self-centredness. I've been looking for a chance to use one of your favourite arguments, so here we go." He smiled at me and asked, "Socrates, if you had a broken table, who would you ask to repair it?"

I laughed. I had often used this method, and people joked about my fondness for craftsmen. "All right, I'll play along. A carpenter, I suppose."

"And if your shoes needed repair, who would you go to?"

"A cobbler, of course. I could do with one now!"

"If a wall of your house was damaged, who would you call on to rebuild it?"

"A house-builder."

"I'll omit the shipwright and the tailor and the others! In each case, you would ask the maker to do the repair work?"

"Yes."

"Now, if you wanted to find someone to repair the human soul, who would you choose?"

"I suppose you want me to say the maker of the human, God."

"But what would you have said to this question in Greece?"

"Well, I might have offered to help with the repair, but in the end each person has to learn for himself what is good for the soul and what is bad for it, and to repair himself. I only helped them in the search: I thought of myself as a kind of midwife, bringing knowledge to birth in others."

"It's interesting," he said, "that you talk of knowing what is good and what is bad. There's a story told by the Jews that when the first humans were made by God he set them in a garden, and told them that they could eat any of the fruit except the fruit of one tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But they were tempted by Satan, and they gave in and ate the forbidden fruit; that was the first bad deed. And that, the story says, was the start of all mankind's troubles, for in spite of — or rather because of — now knowing what was good and what was evil, man chose evil, and the world has suffered for it ever since. You seem to be saying, on the contrary, that man will always choose the good once he knows it. Human history does not support you, Socrates. You knew goodness in yourself and you trusted the power of reasoning, and perhaps that blinded you to the truth. You looked for wisdom: well, there is a Jewish saying that the beginning of wisdom is to fear God, to submit to him. As I said before, man needs more drastic treatment."

I shut my eyes, and tried to think. Either I could keep defending myself and my methods, or I could admit defeat and wait for him to tell me what that more drastic treatment was; perhaps I needed it myself. I battled with myself, and finally decided not to respond.

2

Suddenly a cool breeze whispered across the ridge and the light dimmed. I looked up: a small cloud was hiding the sun, but quickly passed. We stood up and started walking towards the distant summit.

"Tell me," I said, "what did Jesus have to say about these things? We agreed that the Event should include a message from God. I suppose that's where you are leading us."

"Yes, it's time I did that," he said. "You see, God loves us and wants to save us from ourselves. He could have simply forced us to be happy and good — but, as I said, this would have destroyed us and made us unable to love him. Instead he planned to set up a kind of parallel realm, a new Kingdom, which people could join."

"And Jesus told us about this?"

"Exactly. It was one of his main themes when he was talking to his followers. He saw his mission as founding this Kingdom of God on earth and inviting people to enter it. In it there would be a new relationship between God and man. God would not only be a king to his subjects, but also their father."

"Father in what sense? Did he mean our maker?" I asked.

"No, it was not just a word for the creator but a way of explaining how God wanted to relate to humans. He would be like an ideal human father who loves and looks after his children."

"I think that I always knew that," I said, "or rather, I hoped that it was true. Of course, we too had a father god, Zeus, but he was more concerned with begetting illegitimate children than with caring for us!"

"Not a good role model, certainly! Now, how do ideal parents relate to their children?"

"Well, they love them, protect them, guide them — they're always there for them." I felt a little guilty about this, for I had let my wife see to most of my children's upbringing while I was walking the streets of Athens.

"In the same way God loves each of us and we find our fulfilment in loving him."

"But how," I wondered, "can we love an invisible and silent God?"

"Oh, it needs practice: speaking to him, listening with our minds, worshipping him, praying to him, reading about him, obeying him, trying to know him better, enjoying him — always with the trust that Jesus is beside us, representing God for us and helping us. You see, human parents are a constant, conscious background to the lives of their children, and it seems that God wants to be the same for us. Human consciousness is meant to include awareness of God — a presence, an influence, like a light glowing in our minds. It was for this relationship that he made us."

"I wonder," I said, "if I experienced something like that. Sometimes I heard a clear inner voice, warning me not to do what I was about to do. I was never able to explain it."

"I know about that," he said: "Plato described it. It seems to have been a whisper of God breaking through. You were highly favoured, Socrates."

"Perhaps. But I suffered for it: it was my voice that told me not to escape from the prison."

"And that brought you here. I hope that you are glad to be here with me?" He laughed.

"Yes, but..." I felt somehow dissatisfied. Even above the cloud this was not Elysium, and my death was being postponed. It still seemed unfair that I had been picked out like this, although I had to admit that my friend's talk was interesting.

"Stay with me, Socrates!" he said. "Let me tell you more about today's world. If you'd been able to read the books in that bookshop in the city, you would have found a shelf called 'Mind, Body, Spirit', all about various belief-systems. There's a wide choice: astrology, spiritualism, crystal healing, eastern religions, paganism, anything goes however weird it is. If you visited the market where such beliefs are on offer today, you would probably say, 'Who would have thought that there are so many ideas I do not need!' You see, there's an emptiness in human minds without God, and many people are searching for something to fill the gap where God should be. Some

even resort to drugs."

"What do you mean by drugs?" I asked.

"Like the lotos which Odysseus's men took: they act on the brain to produce intense feelings, a kind of synthetic substitute for spiritual experience, but the cost is often terrible long-term damage."

"People who do that must be very unhappy with their lives."

"Yes, they may be suffering from anxiety or depression or boredom, which are serious problems these days; but everyone has a need for something to make life more fulfilling. Today they don't worship the kind of idols you had in your temples, but most people make idols of other things, worshipping money, fame, possessions, position, human love — anything to replace God."

"You said that we have a need and an instinct to hold beliefs. I guess you would say that this is a perversion of the need we have for God."

"Yes, or an attempt to find substitutes for God. But they all fail to satisfy in the end. It's that wall again: it cuts us off from God as well as other people, and inside it there is darkness and confusion and stagnation. If God is the air we are meant to breathe, we have sealed ourselves in airtight containers. If God is the light we are meant to live in, we have shut ourselves in the darkness of our own caves, and in the darkness we are unknowingly prey to dark forces."

At this point the path along the ridge came close to the right-hand edge which faced away from the sun towards the peaks of a range of higher mountains. As we reached the edge, I gasped: a great winged shadow lay on the cloud, and around its head was a bright rainbow ring of light. I turned to him in amazement: who or what was he?

"No," he said, "that's your own shadow and halo that you're seeing: you can't see mine and I can't see yours. It's a natural phenomenon: it's caused by the sunlight, like a rainbow, and it's called a Brocken Spectre."

I gazed for a while. Dark shadow, bright halo: it seemed that those were the alternatives for me and for all humans — darkness or light, Elysium or Tartarus, heaven or hell, with or without God. We

walked on along the edge, accompanied by our spectres; I wondered if his had only a halo.

"Let's imagine," he said, "a society where everyone is God-conscious, where no-one shelters behind their wall, where the Kingdom of God has taken over. Picture this." He stopped walking and looked out over the cloud, and I wondered if he was going to give me a vision, but it was words this time:

"There's no religion: it's redundant, just as those who have learnt to read no longer need to keep studying the alphabet.

"There's no war or conflict or selfish behaviour, because such things switch off God-consciousness like a cloud hiding the sun.

"Prayer is simply talking to God, and listening to him: it's a normal part of life, with no special ceremony or language; worship of God is the most enjoyable activity a human can do.

"History books include as a key event 'God became man and set up his kingdom on earth'.

"People meeting each other in the street chat about Jesus as well as the weather, and their 'Goodbye' really means 'God be with you'.

"Families openly learn about God and thank him and give their requests to him, and he answers them.

"Scientists see their task as discovering the way his creativity works, and are amazed by it.

"Artists seek inspiration from him as they try to help others to enjoy his creation, or to create their own new variations.

"Natural events like earthquakes or storms do not bring death and destruction, because all people are under God's protection or wise enough to avoid them.

"The most popular songs are about God, and books and films tell of light rather than darkness.

"Everyone is still different, not like the separate caves of our image, but like the branches of a tree which are all attached to the trunk; God makes use of their differences so that each can contribute to the whole."

He was silent for a while, then said, "But today the very word God is rarely spoken, and most people would be embarrassed to

name Jesus in public."

"In Athens we certainly didn't have that problem, at least. The gods were always being called on and most of us visited their temples. But a lot of it was only lip-service and ritual."

3

I was beginning to understand, but it was like one of those puzzles where all the pieces of different shapes and sizes have to be fitted together to make a square: complexity resulting in simplicity. There were still pieces missing, and the pieces I had did not yet fit together. But I began to feel more relaxed, more optimistic that the puzzle would work out.

"Speaking of religion," I said as we walked on slowly, "you were scornful of it earlier, and now you've said that ideally it would be redundant. But that church we visited seemed to me to be religious. Don't the Christians belong to a religion? Christianism, perhaps?"

"Not far off: it's Christianity. Is it a religion? The answer is no — but sometimes yes. I think I'll leave aside the yes for now and talk about the no. Do you remember that we said that religions are based on rules?"

"Yes, I do. They were rules about behaviour, belief and ritual, if I remember rightly."

"Well, Jesus spoke out very strongly against the religious leaders of the Jews who relied on rules and imposed them on their people. They obeyed the smallest letter of their law but ignored the true meaning of it, and Jesus called them hypocrites."

"I agree about ritual," I said, "but surely rules about behaviour might be beneficial?"

"Yes, rules like 'do not kill' and 'do not steal' help people to live together without hurting each other too much, and they were certainly an advance on mere self-interest, the law of the jungle. But ultimately they fail us."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing they tend to tell us what not to do, without

telling us what to do; they give little help with getting rid of our selfishness."

"That may be true of the Jews' laws," I said. "But in Athens we spoke of virtues like honesty and courage and moderation."

"Yes, but there may be a problem even with those. Obeying moral law may make you self-righteous — but in fact no-one can obey it completely, and everyone is guilty of failure."

"So you think that morality itself is a failure?"

"No, it's better than nothing: the world would be even more chaotic without it! But it's inadequate. "

"In what way?"

"Remember those things you saw from the train: morality couldn't shed any light on those dilemmas, or on many more serious questions which face us. And it doesn't give much guidance on how we can live better. Tell me about your own people in Athens. What would you say was their aim in life?"

I thought about that for a while, then said, "I think that most people had no aim beyond working and making money to support their family; most of them lived unthinking lives without any purpose other than survival. They made life a little more interesting by public entertainment and shopping in the market."

"Perhaps I should have asked, how did they judge success in life?"

"Oh, that's different. They longed to achieve wealth, or fame, or power, or possessions, or recognition, or even just pleasure, however much these damaged their souls — as I tried to show them."

"That hasn't changed: it's the same today," he said. "Achievement is everything, and often it overrides moral goodness. Jesus said something very different. He said that what matters is not what we achieve but what we become; not just what we do but what goes on inside our minds; not external rules but internal attitudes. Don't kill, of course, but also don't even think badly of anyone."

"In other words, look after our souls, as I said."

"Exactly! You were right in that, Socrates: it's the most important thing that you said. You have often been seen as a fore-runner of

Jesus. But he revealed the final secret of how we should live." He paused dramatically.

I played my part: "Well, what was the final secret?"

"It wasn't obeying rules as morality demands, or applying reason as you taught. Instead it was being humble, and loving everyone: humility and love."

I was surprised, even shocked. Was that all? Humility: there wasn't even a Greek word for humility, except perhaps *aidos* which really meant shame. It sounded like self-abasement, a feeble attitude and not a virtue. Then love: what sort of love? — for this, Greek had several words with quite different meanings!

"Careful, Socrates," he said. "Don't dismiss them. They are the answer to the self-centred and selfish behaviour of humans."

"Perhaps I don't know your language well enough. After all, I've only spoken it for half a day! Tell me what humility is and how it helps."

"Humility, being humble, is a state of mind, how I should think of myself and others. It means not valuing myself higher than others — recognising that I am not the only centre, remembering that each person I meet is also at the centre of his own equally important world. It means being prepared to say things like I'm sorry, you may be right, I may be wrong. It means not criticising, being sorry for my failures, judging myself but not judging others, seeing things from their point of view, enjoying the differences between us rather than making them a cause of dislike."

I remembered something he had said earlier: "I was struck by your statement that we might have been born as each other. I suppose that humility is remembering that. Any person I meet might have been me, and I should think of him as I would like to be thought of."

"Yes. And being humble doesn't mean putting ourselves down: after all, we too are centres and are loved by God. We're not superior to others, but nor are we inferior to them."

"I'm glad to hear that! Now tell me what you mean by love."

"Love is how I should treat others as the result of humility. Jesus actually said 'Love your neighbour, your fellow-human, as you

love yourself': again, you might have been born as him. He didn't mean liking or friendship or, obviously, sexual love. He meant that I should treat others as people like me, want for them what I would like for myself, and not do to them what I wouldn't like done to me. Love means helping the poor and the sick, being generous and kind, patient and thoughtful, giving our time and effort; it may even involve self-sacrifice. We are to love all and pray for all — the unjust and the self-absorbed as well as the virtuous. We are to do everything which Jesus did, in fact: we are to be his hands at work in the world. Love is the key to the Kingdom."

That was a very un-Greek idea, and I thought about how it might have affected our lives in Athens.

"We are to love everyone? Even the Spartans as we watched them destroying the fields of Attica?"

"Yes, Jesus said that we should even love our enemies, and not retaliate if someone hits us, and pray for those who persecute us. You may hate what someone does, but still love the doer."

"That's difficult advice! I found it easier to ridicule Meletus than to love him."

"But I think you said that you would prefer to suffer wrong than to do it, didn't you. And you lived up to that. You know, Socrates, you have been called 'a Christian before Christ' because of your enlightened ideas and your goodness and your concern for people. And your 'I know nothing' sounds like humility. If only you had lived five hundred years later!"

Another compliment: here above the clouds they were coming thick and fast! I couldn't help feeling pride in my achievement, and gave him a guilty glance. He smiled reassuringly and patted me on the back. It seemed that pride in things we have done well was allowable.

"Isn't there a danger," I said, "that love and humility may become rules?"

"Yes, there is, and they often do: humans like to make rules, to tabulate everything. And you're right, it is dangerous: being humble and loving from a sense of duty may only make us more proud of

ourselves. But Jesus offered freedom from rules; love is rather a state of mind. One early Christian dared to put it this way: 'Love and then do whatever you want'. Love will guide your every action. But remember that even if I give all my money to the poor, unless I have love it doesn't help me: it's just obeying a rule."

"I don't suppose the poor would mind that!"

"True, O Socrates! And, of course, we may need to train ourselves to love before it can become real. Now, I'm sure you can tell me why humility and love are important."

"All right, I think I can do that now. For ourselves they are the opposite of the selfishness which makes us build our walls, so I suppose that they help to demolish them, or at least stop them being made higher."

"Exactly. If we are to be happy and fulfilled, it's vital to get rid of our self-sufficient pride and to become open to the world around us. Jesus said that in losing our selves we will save them."

"I'm beginning to understand what that means. Secondly, I suppose that love and humility are the only way to bring peace to the world as a whole. That might be what you meant by the Kingdom of God: a world at peace."

"More or less. But it will never be the whole world until..." He paused, and I wondered what the 'until' was leading to, but he went on: "At present it's a kind of parallel realm, and its members have a kind of dual citizenship: of the world and of heaven. And by the way, even politics can help towards it by aiming to achieve justice."

"What do you mean by justice?" It was one of the subjects which I had often discussed.

"I mean changing society so that everyone has a fair chance in life — creating a level playing field, as they say. But this is easier said than done. Now, there's a third way in which humility and love help us."

"Yes, I know. It opens us to the God-consciousness which you were talking about. You implied earlier that by shutting out other people we are also shutting out God."

"Yes: in humbling ourselves in the world we are also humbling

ourselves before God, and in learning to love others we are made able to love God. Jesus offers us life with him, and we need to be humble enough to accept it: he has achieved for us what we can't achieve for ourselves — freedom from guilt, freedom from our selves, freedom to love. We just need to admit the existence of our wall, to recognise our need, to have faith that he is real, to talk to him, and to open the door and let him in to take control. "

"And that is how one becomes a Christian, I suppose." I saw that the other party had visited the summit and were now returning. I wondered what would happen when I reached it, and I was feeling increasingly nervous: would I have completed the puzzle and passed the test?

"Yes," he said. "And there is more to it than that. Jesus left the world, but in his place God in a third form was sent as a special gift. He was described as being like a wind or a fire, and called the Spirit. Actually in Greek he was called the *pneuma*."

"That means breath: the breath of God?"

"Not really: it's an image, of course. In most languages the spiritual is described by a metaphor like this: breath is invisible but still real, and gives us life. The Spirit who is available to help Christians is a spiritual force."

"Oh dear," I said. "So now we have three versions of God. It's growing complicated."

"But this is what Christians have always experienced: one God, but at work in three ways, three modes: Father, Son and Spirit. Look at it this way. I think that you told the time using water-clocks in Greece?"

"What? Yes, we did: water dripping from one jar to another."

"Well imagine that God is at the top, we live at the bottom, and the water is the Spirit. Water should run through from the top to the bottom, but the channel was blocked, until Jesus made himself the channel, the way through."

"We're in danger of mixing our images: now our caves are full of water, it seems!"

"Quite," he laughed. "Go back to the wind and the fire if you

prefer: the Spirit can blow away the cobwebs, bring in fresh air, scour out the dirt and dust, burn the rubbish, show you how to demolish the wall, give you power to work for the Kingdom, and bring light into your cave: that is, the love and the joy and the peace of God into your life. Being worked on like this can be painful, of course, and it's a life-long process, but the rewards are infinite."

So this was the "more drastic treatment" that he had mentioned. If all this was true, then life was more complicated than I had realised, and also richer than I had realised. But if the rewards were infinite, why hadn't everyone claimed them and set the world to rights? I had seen little evidence of love or joy or peace in this world. This Christianity seemed to have failed.

4

At this moment the other walkers passed us, still chattering and stopping to take photographs of the scene, of each other and of themselves. "Are any of them Christians?" I asked, thinking that I knew the answer.

"No," he said, "but one of them is coming close to deciding." Yes, that was what I expected.

He watched them go, and then beckoned to me, and we went over to the edge of the hill and sat down; I realised that I was in for a speech. He was silent for some time. Then he said, "You wouldn't believe the things that have been done in the name of Christianity. It teaches love and humility, it calls God father, it takes the humiliating death of its founder as a model; but it has often inspired arrogance and hatred. So-called Christians have slaughtered thousands for no better reason than that they belonged to another religion. They've even tortured and killed other Christians because they disagreed over details of belief. They've claimed a God-given right to exploit and damage the world. They've taken from the poor and accumulated huge riches in the name of God. They've connived with brutal governments to oppress people of different races. They've claimed the right to dictate to society what is right and what is

wrong. They've separated into rival versions of Christianity, rival Churches. They have buried the vital message of Jesus under a vast weight of doctrines and rituals, and failed to tell it to the world." He paused, sighed deeply, and added: "Perhaps today things are not so bad. Passion and violence have been replaced by sentiment and unthinking complacency."

I didn't comment, but stared out over the cloud at the mountain-tops.

"The problem is religion," he went on. "How would you define religion, Socrates?"

"I think that it is an attempt to get in touch with God, to make him aware of us."

"Exactly. But Christianity is not a religion. It tells not how man can try to reach God, as religions do, but how God reaches out to man. It claims to be simply the truth about God and man, and unlike religions it is based in history: Jesus was a real person. Deep Christians, if I can call them that, are the ones who know this and experience it.

"But, you see, there are two Christianities. One is real and deep, the other superficial and shallow. What shallow Christians follow is a religion, because a religion has developed around Christianity and gives them plenty of beliefs to cling to. For them, Christianity is confined to a single compartment of life, and only let out on special occasions. It has developed all kinds of religious accretions: special church buildings, special forms of words, rituals, initiation ceremonies, holy days, burial rites, hymns and so-called sacred music, strict moral law, ruling hierarchies. It has built up a jargon of obscure and often out-of-date words which are rarely used in everyday life. It has clung to traditions which have more to do with human culture than with God, and have not changed with the times."

After a long pause we stood up and walked on in silence. Then I said, "So the methods which God used to remove the world's corruption have become corrupted themselves."

"To some extent, yes. It is what one would expect in a world

which has gone wrong. In much of the world deep Christianity is spreading fast, but in this land there are many shallow Christians and many, the majority, who have abandoned Christianity altogether. Jesus never compelled people to follow him: they had to make up their own minds."

"Will it die out here, then?"

"No, it can't, because it is God's project. Shallow Christianity may disappear, but the deep will only be revealed more clearly. The world certainly needs God. Remember Sisyphus. Humans make huge efforts to improve the world, but as soon as one problem is solved another takes its place. They try politics, philosophy, science, religion, but in the end these are all just playing games. They are up against spiritual evil and human greed and selfishness: only Jesus can deal with these. But even the most brilliant of men are often thoughtless and ignorant about what Christianity is."

I had had enough of his rhetoric, and also of the theory of Christianity, and wanted to know what being a Christian meant in practice and whether it was worth bothering with. Suddenly he grabbed my arm and whispered "Look!" I turned and saw something which drove every other thought out of my head: gliding behind us and just above us, great wings balancing effortlessly on the air, came an eagle. In Greece I had only ever seen an eagle circling high in the sky over the mountains, but now I was on the mountain in his realm, and I saw beak and eye and talon and every feather. I gazed in worship of his animal grace and strength and beauty as he flew on towards the summit and disappeared beyond. I heard my friend whispering: "They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

We smiled at each other in delight, and walked on. "What were those words?" I asked.

"They were from a Jewish writer, telling of those who follow God. They are in the book which men call the Bible —"

"But that just means Book in Greek!" I said.

"Indeed, and it's the most important book in the world. In fact it's a whole library of books, written by the Jews in their Hebrew

language and by the early Christians in Greek. A guidebook for Christians, you might say. It's not easy being a Christian, but the book is a vital aid."

"Not easy? Why bother with Christianity, then?"

"You don't mean that, do you? Because it's true, of course! And because it makes sense of the world and gives a meaning and a purpose to life."

"Those people who just passed us seemed happy enough, and they looked like good people. Why should they want more? Isn't it enough simply to live an ordinary decent life as most people do?"

"Who would not be happy here, on a day like this? You might see them differently down in the stress of the world. Of course trying to be happy and good are important, but humans were made for much more than an ordinary decent life. As that same early Christian said, 'You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts find no rest until they rest in you'."

I pondered that, and then said, "All right, what I want now is a simple list of the things which make it worth being a Christian: just a list, no speech-making, please."

He laughed: "I hope you'll allow me a few short sentences as well! I should say first that I was simplifying things earlier. The religious activities which I seemed to scorn are in fact very valuable if they are used thoughtfully, even ritual: Christians really need to meet and learn from each other and worship God together and love each other. Christianity can't be a solo affair, and many shallow Christians may be led into deeper waters by others."

"Good, as long as they don't drown. I'm sorry, that probably wasn't a clever thing to say. Start your list."

He counted out the items on his fingers. "As a Christian I can find inner peace and security: knowing that I am loved by the maker of the universe is a great confidence-booster. The great privilege of prayer, which is the chief way by which God allows himself to act in the world. Someone to worship: human heroes always fail me, but Jesus is the ultimate hero who never fails. Forgiveness for what I do wrong, if I am sorry for it: but I must also forgive people who

do me wrong. Someone to thank for everything good: atheists, poor creatures, miss out on this. Awareness of God's presence through his Spirit which brings me joy and peace of mind and a growing friendship with Jesus. A worldwide community of like-minded people. Membership of the Kingdom of Heaven which lets me see the triviality of many of the world's concerns and makes me part of a campaign to save the world. Real compassion and love for the needy and the suffering throughout the world. A life guided and helped by God, and no fear of death. Even things which go wrong can be turned to good in God's economy. Eternal life. Not to mention the — "

"All right, all right!" I interrupted. "So life is altogether wonderful?"

"Often, but not always. Christians are not immune to pain and suffering and failure, and are still subject to feelings which fluctuate; nothing in this world can be perfect. But they are travelling in the right direction with a map and a compass, when most of the world is wandering through a bewilderingly complicated and foggy country with many tempting byways and dangerous pitfalls."

We hadn't needed a map to reach the summit, nor a compass but I had no idea what that was. We clambered up some rocks and found that we were there! I touched the heap of stones at the top with mixed feelings of triumph and relief and nervousness, poised here above the cloud sea, remote from the world below. This was my journey's end and everything depended on what happened now. Eternal life? What did that mean? Or perhaps eternal death…

The Summit

1

"Well, Socrates," he said, "congratulations! You've achieved the top, and survived all my talk. I'm sorry if I've said too much and made it all seem more complicated than it really is. But now you're wondering about your own future. Let's sit here on these stones and watch the sun go down."

"Do you mean that's the end of talk? Is there no more to say?"

"There is one more subject to think about. I'm surprised that you didn't suggest it: it concerns you deeply."

Yes, I knew what that was. Death. What was the point of life if death was the end? If I had achieved any wisdom, it was in the discovery that our true selves were our souls, which were divine and could not die, and the purpose of life was to care for them.

"You were wrong," he said.

Not again, I thought! "What do you mean? There's no life after death?"

"No, wrong about the soul, but much closer to the truth than most Greeks in your day. They thought that the soul was only what gives us life, didn't they? — that life cannot die and so the soul lives on, but only as a faint shadow of the person, without a mind."

"Yes, that's about right."

"But your new idea, I think, was that the soul is the real eternal self and discards the body at death, and that life after death is better than before."

"Yes, that's right, but only if the soul has been well looked after."

"We're told that when one of your friends asked how you should be buried, you said 'Any way you like, if you can catch me!' The body which was left behind was not you."

"And that's why I am puzzled to find myself with a body now!"

"Don't worry! As I said, you've only been diverted for a short time. You know, your ideas about death have been very influential. Most people today agree with you, and they think that after death

their soul will go to heaven if they've been good, and to hell if they've been bad."

"Is that a Christian idea?"

"Not exactly. You see, no-one is totally good and so no-one would get to heaven under this arrangement; it's not perfect goodness which is needed, but trust in what Jesus did in his death and resurrection."

"You mean that, to use your image, no-one can demolish their wall and escape on their own."

"Yes, they need help. But also people today are very confused about death. They call it an end to troubles and the body is 'laid to rest' and the person is 'at peace'. But it's also seen as an evil: the dead must be mourned and funerals are unhappy affairs. Death is an embarrassing subject, only to be talked about in hushed voices."

"I had a month in the prison to talk about death, and our voices certainly weren't hushed! Then what do Christians say about it?"

"For Christians the Kingdom of God spans life before and after death. This life is vital: I only have a body, but in it I develop my self, my soul if you like, the real me; to that extent the body really is important. When I die, that self is not lost, but transposed by God into another state, with a new kind of 'body': life after death is a gift of God."

"So where is this new life?" I knew at once what his answer would be.

"That question is rather like asking where God is. It's certainly not in the sky or under the ground as people used to think. Heaven is spiritual, like God himself, and so unimaginable; all our images of it are nowhere near the truth. And to say 'after death' is misleading, because that implies an endless life in time when it is presumably beyond time."

"Come to think of it, living for ever in time is an alarming idea! We would certainly run out of things to talk about."

"Even you might, Socrates! So the material world is our breeding-ground, our nursery, and when we leave it we are allowed to step out into the great outdoors, as it were. To call death a peaceful rest

after life is like calling adult life a rest from childhood."

"You're talking about the halo, but there was also the shadow. Does everyone end up in heaven?"

"From what Jesus said we know that the answer is no, not everyone does. There will be many who are so self-centred that they simply cannot become God-centred, who have rejected the kingship of God, who are lost to sight behind their walls and will not come out. Whether they have a moment of choice, a sudden tantalising glimpse of what is on offer, a complete inability to accept it, and then extinction, we cannot be sure. Perhaps that is what 'hell' means."

I was surprised that he did not know the answer, and suspected that he was still acting the part of a human: perhaps he was not allowed to divulge state secrets! But more importantly, he had given no hint of my own future.

"You seem," I said, "to be limiting life after death to members of the Kingdom of God, as you call it: that is, to followers of Jesus, Christians. If I may, I would like to make a protest on behalf of all those who lived before the time of Jesus, including myself — and also, by the way, those who don't know the Christian message because they are in the wrong place to hear it, or don't understand it, or don't believe it for good reasons. Are we all condemned?"

"Do you think you are condemned, Socrates?" he asked.

"I don't know." I shut my eyes, and a sudden huge dread filled me, as if the mountain had split open and I was standing at the edge of a gaping pit and losing my balance. "Socrates?" he said gently, and I opened my eyes. He smiled, and the terror faded. I have never known anything more reassuring than that smile.

"No, the answer to your question is hidden," he said. "Jesus opens the way to God, but does that way have to be taken in life, or is it still on offer after death? Is he the way for anyone who can submit to God when given the choice, even if they have not heard of him? We can only guess at the answer. But we can trust that God in his love will accept everyone who seriously wants to accept him."

2

I knew where I stood now. There were still gaps in the puzzle, but I felt that along the way I had put aside all the beliefs and understandings of my life in Athens, and was ready for this new thing. But I couldn't resist one last point.

"You said that we need faith to jump into the pool and swim, or to be sure that God is real. I'm pretty sure that he is, not least because I certainly died after drinking the poison in Athens and now I am on a mountaintop two thousand years later! But I still find it possible to doubt. How can I be certain?"

"I'm afraid that there is never complete certainty on earth. Faith is always a gamble, although the odds are very much on your side: it is a gamble well worth making. But it's only after death that certainty is possible."

"After death? But I —"

"Look!" he interrupted, pointing at the sun which was now half way down the sky.

I looked at the sun, something I could never have done in my life, for it was still high enough to dazzle. But my eyes were not blinded: I found that I could look straight into its brilliance without blinking.

As I looked, my vision was again changed. It seemed as if the light of the sun was moving towards me or I towards it, as if my first experience after death was being resumed. Beams of light caught me and wrapped themselves round me, until I was somehow enfolded in light, swimming in light. I forgot the mountaintop, forgot my friend, and waited eagerly for what would happen next.

What did happen? Everything, but nothing that I can describe. Words cannot begin to tell of it. It was as if I had gone beyond the appearance of things, stepped out of the shadowy cave which is the human world and my own self, into the real light outside, beyond the universe and into — what? Heaven? The presence of God? Behind and beyond, and out into an infinitely greater reality. The whole world, the whole created universe, seemed no more than a bubble, a tiny brief event.

I knew that I was beyond space and time, but that did not mean that all change and variety had ceased; on the contrary, the variety in the world was only a shadow of the infinite life beyond. I cannot explain how this was, but I knew it.

I knew why our universe had been made, and I knew why the human world is full of beauty and pain, of good and evil, of peace and violence; but although it was clear to me then, I cannot explain it now.

I saw mankind as I had never seen him before, each person busily making his own soul, but tragically and inevitably becoming trapped inside himself. I saw many who had asked for and been shown the way out of the trap, and were walking steadily, trusting their guide, out of the darkness. But I knew too that many had become so wrapped in themselves, so absorbed by the trivial, so unwilling to look beyond, that they had completely turned in on themselves and disappeared from my view.

I knew the love which God feels for humans, for each single person, and I felt the pain which he feels as they spoil themselves, the world and each other; and I wondered at it.

I knew how and why God, to rescue his creation, had himself put on humility and become a man, and had known life and death in the universe he had made, and I wondered at it.

I saw that suffering was a part of human life, but that in the end it was used by God for our good, to turn us to himself. I saw how he could change all our defeats into victories. And I knew that all the suffering we might face was nothing when compared with the glory and joy which awaited us.

I knew — I think that I knew everything: I saw the one simple truth which contains all truths, from which they all derive, and everything that man knows or tries to understand was clear to me.

And above all this I knew that I was in a place — but no place — as much greater than the physical universe as the forest is than a single leaf within it, or as the poet is than a single word he utters; and it was a place of joy, of beauty, of wonder, of music, of light and laughter, where God himself was the sun. And I did not want

to leave.

But I had no choice — yet. I was brought back, and it was as if the music faded, the light was hidden, and I was back in the cave of this world; but the joy remained in my heart. And indeed the earth's sun was sinking in a blaze of glory into the cloud, and the beauty of it was a reminder of what I had seen.

Well, that would have been a story for Plato to tell!

My friend was no longer beside me, and I wondered if I had at last lost my guide. I stood up and looked round, and had a shock. Standing beside the summit stones was a figure, but unlike anyone or anything I had ever seen: it was as dazzling as the sun, seemingly clothed in brilliant glowing white, and it was hard for me to make out any features except that it was taller than me. Instinctively I fell to my knees. Then he came forward and raised me up, and spoke in a voice that was not unlike my friend's but seemed to fill my head: "Stand, Socrates. You and I are equals."

"Is it you?" I said, foolishly.

"It is. Humans know me better in this form, and I no longer need to disguise myself."

"You are" — I searched in my memory for the word he had used — "you are an angel, a spiritual being. You were present at the birth of Jesus. Angel is Greek for messenger, and it seems to me that you have been giving me your message, although I do not know why. Do you have a name?"

"My true name you could not yet understand, but I am sometimes known in this world as Jeremiel. Yes, Socrates, the time has come for me to tell you why you are here. Let us sit again." We sat facing the setting sun which was just touching a mountaintop. "How truly beautiful your world is! How sadly it has gone wrong! But there is hope. You have heard that Christianity is shrinking in this part of the world. It is being replaced by apathy or atheism or irrationality, or by religion. The apathetic need to be shaken from their destructive cynicism and boredom, and excited by the idea that there is more to life than just living. The atheists need to accept that there may be a God, that there is a spiritual realm as well as a material, and that the

universe is not meaningless. The irrational need to be taught again that there is such a thing as truth, that it may actually matter what you choose to believe. The religious need to know that their religion has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is here.

"The world needs to keep hearing the good news that God is real, that he has shown himself here in Jesus, and that humans can only find peace by submitting to him. This simple truth does not change, but it needs to be translated for each generation. Many reject it because it seems old and out-dated, but it is needed now more than ever. Translations are needed into today's language, and need to appeal to many different kinds of people: the rational, the emotional, the needy, the religious, and more. You, Socrates, are taking part in one translation; there are others which tell the Christian message in different ways."

I considered that, then said, "I am? But why bring me into this? It is you who have been doing all the talking."

"I am not allowed to speak directly to humans like this: it would be interfering with their freedom. But I can say as much as I like to someone whose life on earth has ended. And before you complete your journey you are going to pass on what I have said to a living person."

"What, some new Plato? Will he believe me?"

"Perhaps he will think it was a dream. You will find out soon."

There was still something that I wanted to know. "Why me?" I asked.

He turned to face me. "I wanted someone from before the time of Jesus, who could see the story with fresh eyes. And I needed someone who would be able to follow my reasoning, because of the kind of re-telling that I had been entrusted with. Who better than the founder of the rational tradition, the first to examine human life and to open men's eyes to the nature of truth and of the soul? And you deserved answers to your questions. Your life, Socrates, was one of the most influential in history, and you are still well-known for your goodness and the manner of your death."

I was no longer surprised by this: there had been enough hints

earlier. I only wondered what would happen next. It was now almost dark, and the cloud had risen so that a thin mist was forming on our mountaintop.

My friend spoke for the last time. "You are now the messenger. The one to whom you are to tell your message will come here early in the morning; he wants to see the sunrise from the summit. He will be able to see you and to hear you. Tell him all that we have said and all that you have seen. Then your task will be done and you will go on to your journey's end. There we shall meet again. For now, God be with you."

I was alone. I lay down, and must have slept. When I woke the air was clear above the cloud sea and a faint glow along the horizon foretold the next day's sunrise.

Then I noticed you sitting a little way off, camera in hand, sometimes glancing at me with a puzzled look, and I knew that you were the one who would pass on my story.

I set out very early that morning so as to reach the top in good time for sunrise: if the unusually stable cloud inversion didn't break up I thought that it might be rather special. So it was that when I arrived at the summit by torchlight at about five in the morning, not at all expecting to see anyone else, I found an old man lying asleep, oddly dressed. I was puzzled, but ignored him and sat down by the cairn to wait for the dawn. As the first colour began to spread over the eastern sky, the man came over and sat next to me. We didn't talk, just watched; I took a series of photographs.

When it was light enough to see clearly, I turned to him — and found that the face was familiar. It took me a while to work out who he reminded me of: a face I had seen in an ancient Greek sculpture, Socrates of Athens. When I told him that, he laughed and — well, I hardly dare tell what he said. I'm not sure that I believe it even now. I told him my name, and he seemed surprised to hear it and looked at me suspiciously.

We sat and he talked for some time. At first I felt like the reluctant wedding guest nobbled by the ancient mariner, but soon I was gripped by his story. We then set off down the hill together. As we descended, the cloud at last began to break up and soon it was as fine a day as we could hope for; I was surprised that we met no-one else on the hill. It was a leisurely descent with many stops. He talked almost all the way, stopping only as we scrambled down the bad step. By the time we reached the gate into the wood and the end of his story, it was late afternoon. I took a photograph of him there, and he asked me to tell others what he had told me. And then he simply vanished.

It may have been a dream or a delusion, and when I loaded the photographs into my computer, there was no sign of him in that last picture; but I will let you decide about that. I think that I have left out a good deal of what he said, and I may not have remembered his exact words, but I have written them down as well as I can. It is for you to decide about them too.