

PROLOGUE

Epiphany Book

Because there was no room for them in the inn.

St Luke

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace

Isaiah

‘COME on, let’s face it!’ said the speaker hidden behind the high wooden backed booth at the far end of the tavern. ‘If a man walked in here and said he was the Messiah of the second coming would you believe him? Most likely you’d say he was drunk or mad or both!’

STOP! PRESS THE ‘PAUSE’ BUTTON!

Let’s get the scene properly set: The Who, Where, When, What, Why basic rules of the reporter.

When: January 6.Evening.

Where: Murphy’s Tavern. Holiday revellers long since gone.

Who: Murphy; one Stranger at the bar; the unseen speaker in the booth. And perhaps the speaker’s invisible audience. It could be the One above, millions below, or just you – the single auditor.

Why: The question most asked since before the Creator laid down the Garden of Eden tenancy rules for Adam. We do not know for sure whether Adam himself actually asked the question as he arose from the dust that was his womb. If he did, doubtless stony silence was what Adam received by way of a reply from Him who had raised him up. The eternal question: Why? One to which there has so rarely been a satisfactory response throughout history.

THE STAGE IS DRESSED AND LIGHTED: PUSH THE ‘RESUME’ BUTTON

‘Listen to me,’ said the hidden speaker. ‘For centuries “Messiahs” were burned as blasphemers or chained up as lunatics. Why? They are a bit kinder today – they put it down to too much drink. It’s always been crazy when you think about it. The responses, I mean. When hundreds of millions have confidently asserted: HE will come again! Details as to how and when have varied according to the

age, prophecies believed, and personal belief. But most have said they really look forward to the event.'

SO, continued the speaker, for the Second Coming it simply boils down to.....

Any time

Any place

Any one

.....The three things that never change, and have never changed.

Has He already been and gone without our noticing? Hardly likely – unless He knocked on the door, received no answer and decided like an irate landlord the current leaseholders were not worth waiting for. But I personally know that isn't so.

Is He here? A child, a man? Is He on some Death Row, waiting not for a cross this time but fiery death in a chair or in the stink of a gas chamber?

Is He being held, bound, drugged, stupefied in your local asylum for the mentally ill in London, New York, Moscow, Tokyo or in ten thousand other hell holes? Bound and gagged because He said: 'I am Christ!'

If still a child is He now studying in a Los Angeles high school or in a Cairo madrassah; if an infant is He now having a grazed knee bound by a comforting carer in a Vladivostock nursery. If full grown is He a street cleaner, beggar, dishwasher, tailor, motor mechanic, stock market shares trader – any one of a billion human beings in any one of the world's thousands of towns and cities?

All areas of natural speculation, and although in the nature of things there is no reason why they could not be matters of fact, I know that they are not a reality. For I know the reality! He *is* here – but He is none of these things.

Let's consider the matter. Some 2,000 years ago a carpenter and a country girl had a child. Since then hundreds of millions have believed the carpenter was foster father to the child, whose mother was a virgin and whose true father was God. They believe the child grew up to be miracle worker, a healer, a man-god who was executed and then rose from the dead.

Right? Right!

And almost from the start those who believed were taught that there would be a second coming of this Son of Mary and Joseph, the Messiah. He would return – and there were many in the early days who believed it would be as early as the day after tomorrow. The urgency seems to have gone out of it all in recent centuries. But it's still a central core of the faith – He will return.

But here's the odd thing. As soon as there's more than a hint that the Return is imminent – or has indeed taken place – the non-believers scoff, career churchmen ruffle their skirts, and believers either panic or hope the Coming will not be too soon – a distant day after a very distant tomorrow will do. The rarest creature on the planet – apart from a true new Messiah – is the man or woman who will eagerly say: 'Welcome, Lord.' The world is still full of innkeepers with No Vacancies signs on their doors.

'Why is this,' you ask. Why is the welcome mat so conspicuous by its absence? Is it because most of us hate unexpected change (unless it's the big one on the lottery)? Or is it because believers and unbelievers alike equate the Messiah's Second Coming with the Immediate End of the World. Armageddon? A big mistake, that. He is hardly like to return and immediately say, 'Well, that's it, folks! YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED! I'm here again to wrap it up on behalf of my Father.'

Just what will happen, only He can say – and he's not talking at the moment. But it's unlikely that history will be repeating itself this time around – at least not in detail.

Nevertheless, although Daniel and John the Evangelist might have been a bit over the top with their prophecies, a mite heavy with the sulphur, brimstone and fire in the new recipe – you can bet your bottom dollar, shekel, pound, yen, rupee or deutschmark that something nasty this way comes – if this time around the world ignores what He has to say.

The signs are not good.

And while I speak of 'He' as a gender convenience and a bow in the direction of tradition it may well be that the new Messiah is a female. I KNOW the Messiah is with us – but I do not know whether it is boy or a girl.

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I DO know the Messiah is the child of Joe and Mirriam Richardson. Joe, in a hypnotic trance, went through the Golgotha Gate, back to Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and entered into the persona of Christ. I don't know how it happened, it may have been some form of previously unknown spiritual or physical symbiosis bridging space and time, a link across millennia. As for the why, in some way Joe became an instrument in a new act of creation. For that, he paid with his life. My role in the affair may carry an even greater price tag. For both of us – another Why.

What does it all mean? In part it means accepting – or rejecting – a paradox. The return of Christ was set in place at the end of His last earthly incarnation and triggered by people living 2,000 years in His future. Now.

Murphy finished straightening an ornament on top of the miniature Christmas tree at the back of the bar, a little glittery cross that had been standing lopsided. It seemed at times as though he'd been adjusting the cross for an eternity.

He joined the stranger at the bar and said, 'It's really weird the way he's carrying on – talking nine to the dozen. He wasn't drunk when he came in – otherwise I'd have barred him. He's sober – he's only had two large whiskies. He came in the day after Christmas and sat there talking – he wasn't talking to himself, if you know what I mean, he was the same as tonight. He's talking to someone – but there's nobody there with him. It's almost as though he's rehearsing a speech. Every night for the past week he's done it.'

The stranger sipped at his light beer, then said, 'He has company of sorts – but it's nobody you can see.'

'Christmas, December 25. You might think it strange that the second coming took place on that date,' the stranger said, apropos of nothing and everything.

'I've never thought about it,' Murphy said.

‘Not many people have – they haven’t caught up with it yet,’ said the stranger. ‘The first time around it was what you might call a convenience date – a handy point of reference for the people of the time. So why use the same date now? Well, let’s just say the Big Planner who arranges these things occasionally likes a touch of synchronicity. A fable has long since become fact – so why not use accepted fable-fact to reinforce continuity?’

Murphy gave the stranger a sideways look; he was finding it difficult to focus on the man; seen at a glance from the corner of his eye the stranger looked eight feet tall and broad as a tank. Frontal views, and in straight focus, there was a difference. Then he was 5 ft 6 inches tall and thin and pale as a consumptive Victorian poet.

Murphy pointed to a book the stranger had brought with him. ‘A Christmas present?’ he asked.

‘You might call it that,’ the stranger said.

‘Is it a best seller?’

‘It’s not exactly what you might call a best seller, there are only two copies – one kept by the Author, and this one. But it’s never been out of the Top Ten in the literary discussion stakes.’

‘What are those red wax tabs on the pages?’ asked Murphy.

‘They are seals,’ said the stranger.

‘What kind of seals?’ asked Murphy. ‘There seem to be a lot of them.’

‘There are seven of them. They are to prevent the book being read – except by a person who has the key to the seals.’

‘That’s a funny kind of book,’ said Murphy.

‘I would not call it funny – in a humorous sense,’ he replied. ‘It is the Last Book of Daniel. Altogether not much of a laugh.’

‘So when are you going to break the seals?’ Murphy asked.

‘I’m not,’ said the stranger. ‘It is not for me.’

‘You said it was a Christmas gift,’ Murphy said.

The stranger nodded affirmation. 'It is a Christmas and birthday gift for a newborn child. I am merely a messenger.'

Murphy gave the stranger an odd look. 'If you don't mind me saying so it's a funny sort of gift to give to a baby, not even a second-hand book – more twelfth-hand I'd say.'

'Twelfth-hand? Oh, no! More – much, much more – than that,' murmured the stranger.

'It's leather – it has a faint smell of goat about it. If it's a gift, why isn't it gift-wrapped?' asked Murphy.

'This gift has never had need for wrappings,' the stranger said.

'What is the book about?' asked Murphy 'I've never heard of it.'

'It concerns prophesy,' said the stranger. 'It contains the futures of all mankind.'

'What do you mean "futures"'? 'There can only be one.'

'Not so!' said the stranger. 'No future is ever set in stone – therefore no prophesy can be exact.'

The stranger finished his light beer and stood up. Murphy thought he'd grown several inches taller since entering the tavern. Nodding to the speaker in the booth he said, 'I have to go. I would appreciate it if you would give the book to him when he leaves – he knows of the child. Also give him this card to go with the book.'

Murphy, reluctantly, took the book and the card, which said, 'For the chosen one.' 'But who is he?' he asked, pointing to the speaker hidden in the booth.

'His name is Kirkham, Doctor Kirkham, and he helped in his own small way to open what he calls the Golgotha Gate. He is, you might say, a godfather for the child for whom this book is destined.'

'He must be the fellow mixed up in all this Messiah business. The one whose friend was killed! There have been all sorts of opinion polls about that pair,' Murphy said.

The stranger replied, 'I take little notice of opinion polls. It was an opinion poll that nailed Christ to the cross.'

Murphy understood little of this. ‘And who are you?’ he asked.

‘Michael,’ said the stranger.

‘That’s a good Irish name!’ Murphy declared, a sense of relief in his voice, ‘very popular in Ireland.’

‘It was a popular name, one might say everywhere, aeons before there were snakes or saints in Ireland,’ said Michael, for the first time smiling.

Suddenly there was a loud cry from the hidden speaker. ‘Why?’ he shouted. Then again, ‘Why?’ Michael said, ‘Why? Interesting question – the eternal question.

‘There is a tale that the serpent, a distant relative of mine (he had legs in those days), asked that question the day before the creation of Eden.

‘Our Master said, “Serpent, I have a job for you.”

“Yes, Lord,” said the Serpent, basking in the rays of the newly created sun and not too happy to be disturbed, but only too aware that when HE wanted something done it was best to obey without question.

“Tomorrow I am planning a Paradise for my new creation, Man. And you have an appointment there. This is what I want you to do.” And so he unveiled His plan for Eden.

‘The serpent said: "I don’t understand. Please repeat it."

‘The Creator repeated His plan

“Why?” asked the serpent.

‘He received no reply – as so often seems to be the case,’ said Michael.

Michael salvaged two soggy potato crisps from a glass dish and chewed on them. ‘The Serpent actually asked two questions. The first was: “Why are you putting rotten apples in your new Eden?” The second was: “Why must I be the fall guy?”’

Michael shook his head as though a sad thought had crossed his mind. ‘The serpent was deprived of his legs, Man lost his innocence and Death came into the world. The Serpent was also con-

demned to loss of speech, hence his hissing. That's what you can get for asking the wrong questions – and forgetting that freewill has its limits. There are some who say it was a pretty harsh sentence – for a first offence. Especially for the Serpent – who was only carrying out orders.'

'Does that include you? Is that what you think,' asked Murphy, relieved that he'd finally caught hold of a few words of a conversation that for the most part had flown high over his head.

'Sorry,' said Michael, suddenly in a hurry, 'I can't stay to discuss the whys and wherefores in more detail. But you – any one of you – might consider this: Is the answer to be found in the question itself?' As he passed through the swing doors into the dark night he called out, to no one in particular, 'I've lots of messages to do. It's a busy time for me – I must fly!'

The monologue had ceased and there was a brooding silence for several minutes before the speaker rose and approached the bar, empty glasses in hand. 'I apologise for any inconvenience – I have been in a state of confusion recently, and I rarely drink. Thank you for your hospitality, and good night. I have a funeral to attend tomorrow,' he said and began heading for the exit.

'Before you go,' Murphy said, 'I have something for you. The customer who was at the bar left this book for you – he said you are Dr Kirkham. Is that right?'

Kirkham nodded. 'I saw his reflection in your bar mirror – I thought I had seen him before somewhere. Did he give his name?'

'Yes, his name is Michael,' Murphy said as he handed the book and card to Kirkham.

'It would be,' murmured Kirkham. He read the card. 'Someone else will have to complete the delivery,' he said. He stared at the book and held it gingerly as though he'd been handed a ticking bomb. He fingered the seals. 'They look like red wax but I get the feeling of enormous strength.'

'What is the book for?' asked Murphy.

'It could hold the key to the future,' Kirkham said. 'It could open the door to hell – or a new Eden. Much will depend on the reception given to its new owners.'

With that he passed out into the night. As he left Murphy called after him, 'I remember you.'

You're mixed up with that Messiah man. It's him you're going to bury!

The souging wind blew in little eddies of snow as the door swung to and fro. But there was no reply from Kirkham.

Murphy locked the door behind him and returned to the bar. He shivered; the wind through the door had chilled the room. 'I need a drink – several drinks,' he muttered. As he drank he began carefully to pack away, ready for another year, the Christmas tree decorations. As he reached for the glittery little cross he saw it was once again lopsided. 'That's that for another year,' he said as he taped the lid firmly to the shoe box that was the permanent home of the gaudy little baubles and the cross. 'It ought to be cleaned – or replaced,' Murphy murmured. 'I wonder how much crosses cost now.'