

XXII.

A VISION OF JUDGMENT.

I.

Bru-a-a-a.

I listened, not understanding.

Wa-ra-ra-ra.

"Good Lord!" said I, still only half awake. "What an infernal shindy!"

Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra Ta-ra-rra-ra.

"It's enough," said I, "to wake----" and stopped short. Where was I?

Ta-rra-rara--louder and louder.

"It's either some new invention----"

Toora-toora-toora! Deafening!

"No," said I, speaking loud in order to hear myself. "That's the Last

Trump."

Tooo-rraa!

II.

The last note jerked me out of my grave like a hooked minnow.

I saw my monument (rather a mean little affair, and I wished I knew who'd done it), and the old elm tree and the sea view vanished like a puff of steam, and then all about me--a multitude no man could number, nations, tongues, kingdoms, peoples--children of all the ages, in an amphitheatral space as vast as the sky. And over against us, seated on a throne of dazzling white cloud, the Lord God and all the host of his angels. I recognised Azrael by his darkness and Michael by his sword, and the great angel who had blown the trumpet stood with the trumpet still half raised.

III.

"Prompt," said the little man beside me. "Very prompt. Do you see the angel with the book?"

He was ducking and craning his head about to see over and under and between the souls that crowded round us. "Everybody's here," he said.

"Everybody. And now we shall know--

"There's Darwin," he said, going off at a tangent. "He'll catch it!
And there--you see?--that tall, important-looking man trying to catch the
eye of the Lord God, that's the Duke. But there's a lot of people one
doesn't know.

"Oh! there's Priggles, the publisher. I have always wondered about
printers' overs. Priggles was a clever man ... But we shall know now--even
about him.

"I shall hear all that. I shall get most of the fun before ... My
letter's S."

He drew the air in between his teeth.

"Historical characters, too. See? That's Henry the Eighth. There'll be a
good bit of evidence. Oh, damn! He's Tudor."

He lowered his voice. "Notice this chap, just in front of us, all covered
with hair. Paleolithic, you know. And there again--"

But I did not heed him, because I was looking at the Lord God.

IV.

"Is this all?" asked the Lord God.

The angel at the book--it was one of countless volumes, like the British Museum Reading-room Catalogue, glanced at us and seemed to count us in the instant.

"That's all," he said, and added: "It was, O God, a very little planet."

The eyes of God surveyed us.

"Let us begin," said the Lord God.

V.

The angel opened the book and read a name. It was a name full of A's, and the echoes of it came back out of the uttermost parts of space. I did not catch it clearly, because the little man beside me said, in a sharp jerk, "What's that?" It sounded like "Ahab" to me; but it could not have been the Ahab of Scripture.

Instantly a small black figure was lifted up to a puffy cloud at the very feet of God. It was a stiff little figure, dressed in rich outlandish robes and crowned, and it folded its arms and scowled.

"Well?" said God, looking down at him.

We were privileged to hear the reply, and indeed the acoustic properties of the place were marvellous.

"I plead guilty," said the little figure.

"Tell them what you have done," said the Lord God.

"I was a king," said the little figure, "a great king, and I was lustful and proud and cruel. I made wars, I devastated countries, I built palaces, and the mortar was the blood of men. Hear, O God, the witnesses against me, calling to you for vengeance. Hundreds and thousands of witnesses." He waved his hands towards us. "And worse! I took a prophet--one of your prophets----"

"One of my prophets," said the Lord God.

"And because he would not bow to me, I tortured him for four days and nights, and in the end he died. I did more, O God, I blasphemed. I robbed you of your honours----"

"Robbed me of my honours," said the Lord God.

"I caused myself to be worshipped in your stead. No evil was there but I practised it; no cruelty wherewith I did not stain my soul. And at last

you smote me, O God!"

God raised his eyebrows slightly.

"And I was slain in battle. And so I stand before you, meet for your nethermost Hell! Out of your greatness daring no lies, daring no pleas, but telling the truth of my iniquities before all mankind."

He ceased. His face I saw distinctly, and it seemed to me white and terrible and proud and strangely noble. I thought of Milton's Satan.

"Most of that is from the Obelisk," said the Recording Angel, finger on page.

"It is," said the Tyrannous Man, with a faint touch of surprise.

Then suddenly God bent forward and took this man in his hand, and held him up on his palm as if to see him better. He was just a little dark stroke in the middle of God's palm.

"Did he do all this?" said the Lord God.

The Recording Angel flattened his book with his hand.

"In a way," said the Recording Angel, carelessly. Now when I looked again at the little man his face had changed in a very curious manner. He was

looking at the Recording Angel with a strange apprehension in his eyes, and one hand fluttered to his mouth. Just the movement of a muscle or so, and all that dignity of defiance was gone.

"Read," said the Lord God.

And the angel read, explaining very carefully and fully all the wickedness of the Wicked Man. It was quite an intellectual treat.--A little "daring" in places, I thought, but of course Heaven has its privileges...

VI.

Everybody was laughing. Even the prophet of the Lord whom the Wicked Man had tortured had a smile on his face. The Wicked Man was really such a preposterous little fellow.

"And then," read the Recording Angel, with a smile that set us all agog, "one day, when he was a little irascible from over-eating, he--"

"Oh, not that," cried the Wicked Man, "nobody knew of that.

"It didn't happen," screamed the Wicked Man. "I was bad--I was really bad. Frequently bad, but there was nothing so silly--so absolutely silly--"

The angel went on reading.

"O God!" cried the Wicked Man. "Don't let them know that! I'll repent!
I'll apologise..."

The Wicked Man on God's hand began to dance and weep. Suddenly shame overcame him. He made a wild rush to jump off the ball of God's little finger, but God stopped him by a dexterous turn of the wrist. Then he made a rush for the gap between hand and thumb, but the thumb closed. And all the while the angel went on reading--reading. The Wicked Man rushed to and fro across God's palm, and then suddenly turned about and fled up the sleeve of God.

I expected God would turn him out, but the mercy of God is infinite.

The Recording Angel paused.

"Eh?" said the Recording Angel.

"Next," said God, and before the Recording Angel could call the name a hairy creature in filthy rags stood upon God's palm.

VII.

"Has God got Hell up his sleeve then?" said the little man beside me.

"Is there a Hell?" I asked.

"If you notice," he said--he peered between the feet of the great angels--
"there's no particular indication of a Celestial City."

"Ssh!" said a little woman near us, scowling. "Hear this blessed Saint!"

VIII.

"He was Lord of the Earth, but I was the prophet of the God of Heaven,"
cried the Saint, "and all the people marvelled at the sign. For I, O God,
knew of the glories of thy Paradise. No pain, no hardship, gashing with
knives, splinters thrust under my nails, strips of flesh flayed off, all
for the glory and honour of God."

God smiled.

"And at last I went, I in my rags and sores, smelling of my holy
discomforts----"

Gabriel laughed abruptly.

"And lay outside his gates, as a sign, as a wonder----"

"As a perfect nuisance," said the Recording Angel, and began to read,

heedless of the fact that the saint was still speaking of the gloriously unpleasant things he had done that Paradise might be his.

And behold, in that book the record of the Saint also was a revelation, a marvel.

It seemed not ten seconds before the Saint also was rushing to and fro over the great palm of God. Not ten seconds! And at last he also shrieked beneath that pitiless and cynical exposition, and fled also, even as the Wicked Man had fled, into the shadow of the sleeve. And it was permitted us to see into the shadow of the sleeve. And the two sat side by side, stark of all delusions, in the shadow of the robe of God's charity, like brothers.

And thither also I fled in my turn.

IX.

"And now," said God, as he shook us out of his sleeve upon the planet he had given us to live upon, the planet that whirled about green Sirius for a sun, "now that you understand me and each other a little better,...try again."

Then he and his great angels turned themselves about and suddenly had vanished...

The Throne had vanished.

All about me was a beautiful land, more beautiful than any I had ever seen before--waste, austere, and wonderful; and all about me were the enlightened souls of men in new clean bodies...