

## (1) “The Day of Judgment”

The cab-horses were taking it very easily in London; they had never been worked so gently before—even the coster’s donkey walked innocent of kicks and thwacks; and not in London only but in Paris and Rome and Kamtschatka and all the world over, because the Day of Judgment was at hand. Everyone knew it was: a great prophet had arisen and foretold it: eminent scientific men had discovered changes in the moon, which led them to believe its substance had become altered into something resembling, if not identical with, blood plasma. So the weak had respite from the strong, the sweater ceased to sweat, and the husband to beat his wife; and many other quaint things that men had done ceased to be done because the Day of Judgment was at hand. And an International Committee was formed to discuss the proper erection of a Judgment Throne, and competitive designs were sent in. It was finally decided to erect a huge gasometer—it was thought characteristic—a sort of sacrifice of the first-born of modern civilization. It was to be very big and very grand. The leading contractors sent in tenders. The Committee meant to be magnanimous, but habit was too strong for them, and the lowest tender was accepted. So the Judgment Throne was jerry-built. Nevertheless many millionaires and a few bishops offered their services as common labourers on the job, thinking thereby to do honour to the expected Judge of all the earth.

As the day approached it was curious to witness the behaviour of different classes and individuals. Most people were very much alarmed, and had tender consciences which made them do many foolish and virtuous things that they had never thought of doing before. The eminently pious sang many songs of praise and had special services for thanksgiving. The praise and thanks were not very genuine, but they had been singing hymns asking “How long, O Lord, how long?” all their lives, and it did not seem decent not to be grateful now that the answer “Soon” had come so unmistakably. Everyone believed it was coming and was secretly sorry—or nearly everyone, for there was a small minority who did not believe that Justice existed outside the human mind, and who had consequently practised it more consistently than anyone else.

They would have been glad, only they did not believe in the Day of Judgment.

At last the day came, and everyone was gathered expectant round the gasometer, which was beautifully decorated; and the chief of the Committee had got ready an address. Many died of excitement, many of fear, many committed suicide, but the rest waited expectant.

And there was heard through the heavens a sound, rushing in from infinite space. It grew more and more terrific—it crashed through the universe—a great peal of laughter. It was the laughter of God, which is much more terrible than the laughter of devils. And after that roar of laughter, no man who had heard it ever again looked his fellow in the face, nor could any meet the eyes of another. And after the laughter came a great voice, heard by all the inhabitants of the earth, “Behold, you are already judged.” And gradually men dispersed and the world went on as before, the strong oppressing the weak; the sweater returned to his sweating, and the cabby to his whip, and men knew that there was no such thing as Justice except that which they neglected to practise.

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