

# The Story of the Last Trump

H. G. Wells

1.

The story of the Last Trump begins in Heaven and it ends in all sorts of places round about the world...

Heaven, you must know, is a kindly place, and the blessed ones do not go on for ever singing Alleluia, whatever you may have been told. For they too are finite creatures, and must be fed with their eternity in little bits, as one feeds a chick or a child. So that there are mornings and changes and freshness, there is time to condition their lives. And the children are still children, gravely eager about playing and ready always for new things; just children they are, but blessed as you see them in the pictures beneath the careless feet of the Lord God. And one of these blessed children routing about in an attic—for Heaven is, of course, full of the most heavenly attic, seeing that it has children—came upon a number of instruments stored away, and laid its little chubby hands upon them...

Now indeed I cannot tell what these instruments were, for to do so would be to invade mysteries...But one I may tell of, and that was a great brazen trumpet which the Lord God had made when He made the world—for the Lord God finishes all His jobs—to blow when the time for our Judgment came round. And He had made it and left it; there it was, and everything was settled exactly as the Doctrine of Predestination declares. And this blessed child conceived one of those unaccountable passions of childhood for its smoothness and brassiness, and he played with it and tried to blow it, and trailed it about with him out of the attic into the gay and golden streets, and, after many fitful wanderings, to those celestial battlements of crystal of which you doubtless read. And there the blessed child fell to counting the stars, and forgot all about the Trumpet beside him until a flourish of his elbow sent it over...

Down fell the trump, spinning as it fell, and for a day or so, which seemed but moments in heaven, the blessed child watched its fall until it was a glittering little speck of brightness...

When it looked a second time the trump was gone...

I do not know what happened to that child when at last it was time for Judgment Day and that shining trumpet was missed. I know that Judgment Day is long overpassed, because of the wickedness of the world; I think perhaps it was in A.D. 1000 when the expected Day should have dawned that never came, but no other heavenly particulars do I know at all, because now my scene change to the narrow ways of this Earth...

And the Prologue in Heaven ends.

2.

And now the scene is a dingy little shop in Caledonian Market, where things of an incredible worthlessness lie in wait for such as seek after an impossible cheapness. In the window, as though it had always been there and never anywhere else, lies a long, battered, discoloured trumpet of brass that no prospective purchaser has ever been able to sound. In it mice shelter, and dust and fluff have gathered, after the fashion of this world. The keeper of the shop is a very old man, and he bought the shop long ago, but already this trumpet was there; he has no idea whence it came, nor its country of origin, nor anything about it. But once in a moment of enterprise that led to nothing he decided to call it an Ancient Ceremonial Shawm, though he ought to have known that a shawm may be the last thing it was likely to be is a trumpet, seeing that they are always mentioned together. And above it hung concertinas and melodeons and cornets and tin whistles and mouth-organs and all that rubbish of musical instruments which delight the hearts of the poor. Until one day two blackened young men from the big motor works in the Pansophist Road stood outside the window and argued.

They argued about these instruments in stock and how you made these instruments sound, because they were fond of argument, and one asserted and the other denied that he could make every instrument in the place sound a note. And the argument rose high, and led to a bet.

“Supposing, of course, that the instrument is in order,” said Hoskin, who was betting he could.

“That’s understood,” said Briggs.

And then they called as witnesses certain other young and black and greasy men in the same employment, and after much argument and discussion that lasted through the afternoon, they went in to the little old dealer about teatime, just as he was putting a blear-eyed, stinking paraffin-lamp, to throw an unfavourable light upon his always very unattractive window. And after great difficulty they arranged that for the sum of one shilling, paid in advance, Hoskin should have a try at every instrument in the shop that Briggs chose to indicate.

And the trial began.

The third instrument that pitched upon by Briggs for trial was the strange trumpet that lay at the bottom of the window, the trumpet that you, who have read the Introduction, know was the trumpet for the Last Trump. And Hoskin tried and tried again, and then, blowing

desperately, hurt his ears. But he could get no sound from the trumpet. Then he examined the trumpet more carefully and discovered the mice and fluff and other things in it, and demanded that it should be cleaned; and the old dealer, nothing loth, knowing they were used to automobile-horns and such-like instruments, agreed to let them clean it on condition that they left it shiney. So the young men, after making a suitable deposit (which, as you shall hear, was presently confiscated), went off with the trumpet, proposing to clean it next day at the works and polish it with the peculiarly excellent brass polish employed upon the honk-honk horns of the firm. And this they did, and Hoskin tried again.

But he tried in vain. Whereupon there arose a great argument about the trumpet, whether it was in order or not, whether it was possible for any one to sound it. For if not, then clearly it was outside the condition of the bet.

Others among the young men tried it, including two who played wind instruments in a band and were musically knowing men. After their own failure they were strongly on the side of Hoskin and strongly against Briggs, and most of the other young men were of the same opinion.

“Not a bit of it,” said Briggs, who was a man of resource. “I’ll show you it can be sounded.”

And taking the instrument in his hand, he went towards a peculiarly powerful foot blow-pipe that stood at the far end of the toolshed. “Good old Briggs!” said one of the other young men, and opinion veered about.

Briggs removed the blow-pipe from its bellows and tube, and then adjusted the tube very carefully to the mouthpiece of the trumpet. Then with great deliberation he produced a piece of bees-waxed string from a number of other strange and filthy content in his pocket and tied the tube to the mouthpiece. And then he began to work the treadle of the bellows.

“Good old Briggs!” said the one who had previously admired him.

And then something incomprehensible happened.

It was a flash. What ever else it was, it was a flash. And a sound that seemed to coincide exactly with the flash.

Afterwards the young men agreed to it that the trumpet blew to bits. It blew to bits and vanished, and they were all flung upon their faces—not backward, be it noted, but on their faces—and Briggs was stunned and scared. The toolshed windows were broken and the various apparatus and cars around were much displaced, and no traces of the trumpet were ever discovered.

That last particular puzzled and perplexed poor Briggs very much. It puzzled and perplexed him the more because he had, had an impression, so extraordinary, so incredible, that he was never able to describe it to any other living person. But his impression was this: that the flash that came with the sound came, not from the trumpet but to it, that it smote down to it and took it, and its shape was in the exact likeness of a hand and arm of fire.

3.

And that was not all, that was not the only strange thing about the disappearance of that battered trumpet. There was something else, even more difficult to describe, an effect as though for one instant something opened...

The young men who worked with Hoskin and Briggs had that clearness of mind which comes of dealing with machinery, and they all felt this indescribable something else, as if for an instant the world wasn't the world, but something lit and wonderful, larger—

This is what one of them said of it.

“I felt,” he said, “just for a minute—as though I was blown to Kingdom Come.”

“It is just how it took me,” said another. “ ‘Lord,’ I says, ‘here’s Judgment Day!’ and then there I was sprawling among the files...”

But none of the others felt that they could say anything more definite than that.

4.

Moreover, there was a storm. All over the world there was a storm that puzzled meteorology, a moment's gale that left the atmosphere in a state of wild swaygog, rains, tornadoes, depressions, irregularities for weeks. News came of it from all the quarters of the earth.

All over China, for example, that land of cherished graves, there was a duststorm, dust leaped into the air. A kind of earthquake shook Europe—an earthquake that seemed to have at heart the peculiar interests of Mr. Algernon Ashton; everywhere it cracked mausoleums and shivered the pavements of cathedrals, swished the flower-beds of cemeteries, and tossed tombstones aside. A crematorium in Texas blew up. The sea greatly agitated, and the beautiful harbour of Sydney, in Australia, was seen to be littered with sharks floating upside down in manifest distress...

And all about the world a sound was heard like the sound of a trumpet instantly cut short.

5.

But this much is only the superficial dressing of the story. The reality is something different. It is this: that in an instant, and for an instant, the dead lived, and all that are alive in the world did for a moment see the Lord God and all His powers, His hosts of angels, and all His array looking down upon them. They saw Him as one sees by a flash of lightning in the darkness, and then instantly the world was opaque again, limited, petty, habitual. That is the tremendous reality of this story. Such glimpses have happened in individual cases before. The lives of the saints abound in them. Such a glimpse it was that came to Devindranath Tagore upon the burning ghat at Benares. But this was not an individual but a world experience; the flash came to every one. Not always was it quite the same, and thereby the doubter found his denials, when presently a sort of discussion broke out in the obscurer Press. For this one testified that it seemed that "One stood very near to me," and another saw "all the hosts of heaven flame up towards the Throne."

And there were others who had a vision of brooding watchers, and others who imagined great sentinels before a veiled figure, and some one who felt nothing more divine than a sensation of happiness and freedom such as one gets from a sudden burst of sunshine in the spring...

So that one is forced to believe that something more than wonderfully wonderful, something altogether strange, was seen, and that all these various things that people thought they saw were only interpretations drawn from their experiences and their imaginations. It was a light, it was beauty, it was high and solemn, it made this world seem a flimsy transparency.

Then it had vanished...

And people were left with the question of what they had seen, and just how much it mattered.

6.

A little old lady sat by the fire in a small sitting-room in West Kensington. Her cat was in her lap, her spectacles were on her nose; she was reading the morning's paper, and beside her, on a little occasional table, was her tea and a buttered muffin. She had finished the crimes and was reading about the Royal Family. When she had read all there was to read about the Royal Family, she put down the paper, deposited the cat on the hearthrug, and turned to her tea. She had poured out her first cup and she had just taken up a quadrant of muffin when the trump and flash came. Through its instant duration she remained motionless with the quadrant of muffin poised halfway to her mouth. Then very slowly she put the morsel down.

“Now what was that?” she said.

She surveyed the cat, but the cat was quite calm. Then she looked very, very hard at her lamp. It was a patent safety lamp, and had always behaved very well. Then she stared at the window, but the curtains were drawn and everything was in order.

“One might think I was going to be ill,” she said, and resumed her toast.

7.

Not far away from this old lady, not more than three-quarters of a mile at most, sat Mr. Parchester in his luxurious study, writing a perfectly beautiful, sustaining sermon about the Need of Faith in God. He was handsome, earnest, modern preacher, he was rector of one of our big West End churches, and he had amassed a large, fashionable congregation. Every Sunday, and at convenient intervals during the week, he fought against Modern Materialism, Scientific Education, Excessive Puritanism, Pragmatism, Doubt, Levity, Selfish Individualism, Further Relaxation of the Divorce Laws, all the Evils of our Time—and anything else that was unpopular. He believed quite simply, he said, in all the old, simple, kindly things. He had the face of a saint, but he had rendered this generally acceptable by growing side whiskers. And nothing could tame the beauty of his voice.

He was an enormous asset in the spiritual life of the metropolis—to give it no harsher name—and his fluent periods had restored faith and courage to many a poor soul hovering on the brink of the dark river of thought...

And just as beautiful Christian maidens played a wonderful part in the last days of Pompeii, in winning proud Roman hearts to a hated and despised faith, so Mr. Parchester's naturally graceful gestures, and his simple, melodious, trumpet voice won back scores of our half-pagan rich women to church attendance and the social work of which his church was the centre...

And now by the light of an exquisitely shaded electric lamp he was writing this sermon of quiet, confident belief (with occasional hard smacks, perfect stingers in fact, at current unbelief and rival leaders of opinion) in the simple, divine faith of our fathers...

When there came this truncated trump and his vision...

8.

Of all the innumerable multitudes who for the infinitesimal fraction of a second had this glimpse of the Divinity, none were so blankly and profoundly astonished as Mr. Parchester.

For—it may be because of his subtly spiritual nature—he saw, and seeing believed. He dropped his pen and let it roll across his manuscript, he sat stunned, every drop of blood fled from his face and his lips and his eyes dilated.

While he had just been writing and arguing about God, there was God!

The curtain had been snatched back for an instant; it had fallen again; but his mind had taken a photographic impression of everything that he had seen—the grave presences, the hierarchy, the effulgence, the vast concourse, the terrible, gentle eyes. He felt it, as though the vision still continued, behind the bookcases, behind the pictured wall and the curtained window; even now there was judgment!

For quite a long time he sat, incapable of more than apprehending this supreme realisation. His hands were held out limply upon the desk before him. And then very slowly his staring eyes came back to immediate things, and fell upon the scattered manuscript on which he had been engaged. He read an unfinished sentence and slowly recovered its intention. As he did so, a picture of his congregation came to him as he saw it from the pulpit during his evening sermon, as he had intended to see it on the Sunday evening that was at hand, with Lady Rupert in her sitting and Lady Blex in hers and Mrs. Munbridge, the rich and in her Jewish way very attractive Mrs. Munbridge, running them close in her adoration, and each with one or two friends they had brought to adore him, and behind them the Hexhams and the Wassinghams and behind them others and others and others, ranks and ranks of people, and the galleries on either side packed with worshippers of a less dominant class, and the great organ and his magnificent choir waiting to support him and supplement him, and the great altar to the left of him, and the beautiful new Lady Chapel, done by Roger Fry and Wyndham Lewis and all the latest people in Art, to the right. He thought of the listening multitude, seen through the haze of the thousand electric candles, and how he had planned the paragraphs of his discourse so that the notes of his beautiful voice should float slowly down, like golden leaves in autumn, into the smooth tarn of their silence, word by word, phrase by phrase, until he came to—

“Now to God the Father, God the son—”

And all the time he knew that Lady Blex would watch his face and Mrs. Munbridge, leaning those graceful shoulders of hers a little forward, would watch his face...

Many people would watch his face.

All sorts of people would come to Mr. Parchester's services at times. Once it was said Mr. Balfour had come. Just to hear him. After his sermons, the strangest people would come and make confessions in the beautifully furnished reception-room beyond the vestry. All sorts of people. Once or twice he had asked people to come and listen to him; and one of

them had been a very beautiful woman. And often he had dreamt of the people who might come; prominent people, influential people, remarkable people. But never before had it occurred to Mr. Parchester that, a little hidden from the rest of the congregation, behind the thin veil of this material world, there was another auditorium. And that God also, God also, watched his face.

And watched him through and through.

Terror seized upon Mr. Parchester.

He stood up, as though Divinity had come into the room before him. He was trembling. He felt smitten and about to be smitten.

He perceived that it was hopeless to try and hide what he had written, what he had thought, the unclean egotism he had become.

“I did not know,” he said at last.

The click of the door behind him warned him that he was not alone. He turned and saw Miss Skelton, his typist, for it was her time to come for his manuscript and copy it out in the specially legible type he used. For a moment he stared at her strangely.

She looked at him with those deep, adoring eyes of hers.

“Am I too soon, sir?” she asked in her slow, unhappy voice, and seemed prepared for a noiseless departure.

He did not answer immediately. Then he said: “Miss Skelton, the Judgment of God is close at hand!”

And seeing she stood perplexed, he said—

“Miss Skelton, how can you expect me to go on acting and mouthing this Tosh when the Sword of Truth hangs over us?”

Something in her face made him ask a question.

“Did you see anything?” he asked.

“I thought it was because I was rubbing my eyes.”

“Then indeed there is a God! And He is watching us now. And all this about us, this sinful

room, this foolish costume, this preposterous life of blasphemous pretension—!”

He stopped short, with a kind of horror on his face.

With a hopeless gesture he rushed by her. He appeared wild-eyed upon the landing before his man-servant, who was carrying a scuttle of coal upstairs.

“Brompton,” he said, “what are you doing?”

“Coal, sir.”

“Put it down, man!” he said. “Are you not an immortal soul? God is here! As close as my hand! Repent! Turn to Him! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

9.

Now if you are a policeman perplexed by a sudden and unaccountable collision between a taxicab and an electric standard, complicated by a blinding flash and a sound like an abbreviated trump from an automobile horn, you do not want to be bothered by a hatless clerical gentleman suddenly rushing out of a handsome private house and telling you that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” You are respectful to him because it is the duty of a policeman to be respectful to Gentlemen, but you say to him, “Sorry I can’t attend to that now, sir. One thing at a time. I’ve got this little accident to see to.” And if he persists in dancing round the gathering crowd and coming at you again, you say: “I’m afraid I must ask you just to get away from here, sir. You aren’t being a ‘elp, sir.” And if, on the other hand, you are a well-trained clerical gentleman, who knows his way about in the world, you do not go on pestering a policeman on duty after he has said that, even although you think God is looking at you and Judgment is close at hand. You turn away and go on, a little damped, looking for some one else more likely to pay attention to your tremendous tidings.

And so it happened to the Reverend Mr. Parchester.

He experienced a curious little recession of confidence. He went on past quite a number of people without saying anything further, and the next person he accosted was a flower-woman sitting by her basket at the corner of Chexington Square. She was unable to stop him at once when he began to talk to her because she was tying up a big bundle of white chrysanthemums and had an end of string behind her teeth. And her daughter who stood beside her was the sort of girl who wouldn’t say “Boo!” to a goose.

“Do you know, my good woman,” said Mr. Parchester, “that while we poor creatures of earth go about our poor business here, while we sin and blunder and follow every sort of base end, close to us, above us, around us, watching us, judging us, are God and His holy angels? I

have had a vision, and I am not the only one. I have seen. We are in the Kingdom of Heaven now and here, and Judgment is all about us now! Have you seen nothing? No light? No sound? No warning?"

By this time the old flower-seller had finished her bunch of flowers and could speak. "I saw it," she said. "And Mary—she saw it."

"Well?" said Mr. Parchester.

"But Lord! It don't mean nothing!" said the old flower-seller.

10.

At that a kind of chill fell upon Mr. Parchester. He went on across Chexington Square by his own inertia.

He was still about as sure that he had seen God as he had been in his study, but now he was no longer sure that the world would believe that he had. He felt perhaps that this idea of rushing out to tell people was precipitate and inadvisable. After all, a priest in the Church of England is only one unit in a great machine; and in a world-wide spiritual crisis it should be the task of that great machine to act as one resolute body. This isolated crying aloud in the street was unworthy of a consecrated priest. It was a dissenting kind of thing to do. A vulgar individualistic screaming. He thought suddenly that he would go and tell his Bishop, the great Bishop Wampach. He called a taxicab, and within half an hour he was in the presence of his commanding officer. It was an extraordinarily difficult and painful interview...

You see, Mr. Parchester believed. The Bishop impressed him as being quite angrily resolved not to believe. And for the first time in his career Mr. Parchester realised just how much jealous hostility a beautiful, fluent, and popular preacher may arouse in the minds of the hierarchy. It wasn't, he felt, a conversation. It was like flinging oneself into the paddock of a bull that has long been anxious to gore one.

"Inevitably," said the Bishop, "this theatricalism, this star-turn business, with its extreme spiritual excitements, its exaggerated soul crisis and all the rest of it, leads to such a breakdown as afflicts you. Inevitably! You were at least wise to come to me. I can see you are only in the beginning of your trouble, that already in your mind fresh hallucinations are gathering to overwhelm you, voices, special charges and missions, strange revelations...I wish I had the power to suspend you right away, to send you into retreat..."

Mr. Parchester made a violent effort to control himself. "But I tell you," he said, "that I saw God!" He added, as if to reassure himself: "More plainly, more certainly, than I see you."

“Of course,” said the Bishop. “This is how strange new sects come into existence; this is how false prophets spring out of the bosom of the Church. Loose-minded, excitable men of your stamp—”

Mr. Parchester, to his own astonishment, burst into tears. “But I tell you,” he wept, “He is here. I have seen. I know.”

“Don’t talk such nonsense!” said the Bishop. “There is no one here but you and I!”

Mr. Parchester expostulated. “But,” he protested, “He is omnipotent.”

The Bishop controlled an expression of impatience. “It is characteristic of your condition,” he said, “that you are unable to distinguish between a matter of fact and a spiritual truth...Now listen to me. If you value your sanity and public decency and discipline of the Church, go right home from here and go to bed. Send for Broadhays, who will prescribe a safe sedative. And read something calming and graceful and purifying. For my own part, I should be disposed to recommend the ‘Life of Saint Francis of Assisi...’ ”

11.

Unhappily Mr. Parchester did not go home. He went out from the Bishop’s residence stunned and amazed, and suddenly upon his desolation came the thought of Mrs. Munbridge...

She would understand...

He was shown up to her own little sitting-room. She had already gone up to her room to dress, but when she heard that he had called, and wanted very greatly to see her, she slipped on a loose, beautiful tea-gown negligé thing, and hurried to him. He tried to tell her everything, but she only kept saying, “There! There!” She was sure he wanted a cup of tea, he looked so pale and exhausted. She rang to have the tea equipage brought back; she put the dear saint in an armchair by the fire; she put cushions about him, and ministered to him. And when she began partially to comprehend what he had experienced, she suddenly realised that she too had experienced it. That vision had been a brainwave between their two linked and sympathetic brains. And that thought glowed in her as she brewed his tea with her own hands. He had been weeping! How tenderly he felt all these things! He was more sensitive than a woman. What madness to have expected understanding from a Bishop! But that was just like his unworldliness. He was not fit to take care of himself. A wave of tenderness carried her away. “Here is your tea!” she said, bending over him, and fully conscious of her fragrant warmth and sweetness, and suddenly, she could never afterwards explain why she was so, she was moved to kiss him on his brow...

How indescribable is the comfort of a true-hearted womanly friend! The safety of it! The consolation...!

About half-past seven that evening Mr. Parchester returned to his own home, and Brompton admitted him. Brompton was relieved to find his employer looking quite restored and ordinary again. "Brompton," said Mr. Parchester, "I will not have the usual dinner to-night. Just a single mutton cutlet and one of those quarter-bottles of Perrier Jouet on a tray in my study. I shall have to finish my sermon to-night."

(And he had promised Mrs. Munbridge he would preach that sermon specially for her.)

12.

And as it was with Mr. Parchester and Brompton and Mrs. Munbridge, and the taxi-driver and the policeman and the little old lady and the automobile mechanics and Mr. Parchester's secretary and the Bishop, so it was with all the rest of the world. If a thing is sufficiently strange and great no one will perceive it. Men will go on in their own ways though, one rose from the dead to tell them that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, though the Kingdom itself and all its glory became visible, blinding their eyes. They and their ways are one. Men will go on in their ways as rabbits will go on feeding in their hutches within a hundred yards of a battery of artillery. For rabbits are rabbits, and made to eat and breed, and men are human beings and creatures of habit and custom and prejudice; and what has made them, what will judge them, what will destroy them—they may turn their eyes to it at times as rabbits will glance at the concussion of the guns, but it will never draw them away from eating their lettuce and sniffing after their does...

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