

On Judgment Day

Hans Christian Andersen

The most solemn of all the days of our life is the day we die. It is judgment day, the great sacred day of transfiguration. Have you really seriously given a fleeting thought to that grave and mighty last hour we shall spend on earth?

There was once a man, a staunch upholder of truth, as he was called, to whom the word of his God was law, a zealous servant of his zealous God. With a stern but heavenly look, the Angel of Death stood at his bedside.

"The hour has come; you shall follow me!" said Death, and touched the man's feet with ice-cold fingers, and his feet became like ice. Then Death touched his forehead, and lastly his heart, and when it burst, the soul was free to follow the Angel of Death.

But during those brief seconds while the icy touch shivered through feet and head and heart, there passed through the mind of the dying man, like great ocean waves, the recollection of all he had wrought and felt throughout his life. So does one terrified glance into a whirlpool reveal in thought as swift as lightning the whole unfathomable depth of it; so with one fleeting glance at the countless stars of heaven can one conceive the infinite multitude of worlds and spheres in the great universe.

In such a moment the terrified sinner shrinks into himself and has nothing to cling to, and he feels himself shrinking further into infinite emptiness. And at such times the devout soul bows its head to the Almighty and yields itself up to Him in childlike trust, praying, "Thy will be done with me!"

But this dying man had not the mind of a child, nor was he a terrified sinner; his thoughts were of self-praise. He knew that he had abided by religious traditions. Millions, he knew, would have to face judgment. But he believed most confidently that his path would lead straight heavenward, and that mercy, promised to all men, would open the gates to him.

And the soul followed the Angel of Death, casting only one wistful glance back at the bed where, in its white shroud, lay the lifeless image of clay, still bearing the print of the soul's individuality.

Now they hovered through the air, now glided along the ground. Were they passing through a vast, decorated hall, or perchance a forest? It was hard to tell. Nature appeared formally set out for show, as in the stately, artificial, old French gardens, and through its strange, carefully arranged scenes there passed many men and women, all clad as if for a masquerade.

"Such is human life!" spoke the Angel of Death.

It seemed as if the figures tried to disguise themselves; those who flaunted the glories of velvet and gold were not always the noblest and the richest, neither were all those who wore the garb of poverty the most wretched and vulgar. A strange masquerade indeed! And most strange of all was to see how each one carefully concealed under his clothing something he would not have the others discover. Each was determined to learn his neighbor's secret, and they tore at one another until here and there the heads of different animals were bared. One was that of a grinning ape, another the head of a goat, still others a clammy snake and a feeble fish.

In all was some token of the animal which is fast rooted in human nature, and which here was struggling and jumping to burst forth. And however closely a person might hold his garment over it to hide it, the others would never rest until they had torn aside the veil, and all kept crying out, "Look here! See! It is he! It is she! and everyone mockingly laid bare his

fellow's shame.

"Then what was the animal in me?" inquired the soul.

The Angel of Death silently pointed to a haughty form around whose head spread a bright glory of rays, with shining colors, but in whose heart could be seen lurking, half hidden, the feet of a peacock.

The spreading glory above was merely the speckled tail of the peacock.

As they passed on, huge birds shrieked horribly at them from the boughs of trees. In voices harsh but clear, intelligible, and human, they cried, "You who walk with Death, do you remember me?" All the evil thoughts and lusts that had lurked within the man from birth to death now called after him in forbidding tones, "Do you remember me?"

For a moment the soul shuddered, for it recognized the voices; it could not deny knowledge of the evil thoughts and desires that were now rising as witnesses against it.

"In our flesh, in our evil nature, nothing good lives!" said the soul. "But, at least with me, thoughts never turned into action; the world has not seen their evil fruit!"

The soul rushed on to escape the ugly screams, but the huge black birds swept in circles, screaming out their vicious words louder and louder, as though they wished to be heard to the ends of the world. The soul fled like a hunted stag, and at every step stumbled against sharp flint stones, painfully cutting his feet on them. "How came these sharp stones here? They seem like mere withered leaves lying on the ground."

"Each stone is some careless word you have spoken, which wounded your neighbor's heart far more deeply than these sharp flints that now hurt your feet."

"I never thought of that!" cried the soul.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged!" rang through the air.

In a moment the soul recovered from its self-abasement. "We have all sinned. But I have kept the Law and the Gospel. I have done what I could do; I am not like the others."

And then he stood at the gates of heaven itself, and the Angel who guarded the entrance asked, "Who are you? Tell me your faith, and show it to me in your works."

"I have faithfully kept all the Commandments," replied the soul proudly. "I have humbled myself in the eyes of the world. I have hated and persecuted evil and those who practice it, and I would do so still, with fire and sword, had I yet the power."

"Then you are a follower of Mohammed?" said the Angel.

"I? Never!"

" 'He who strikes with the sword shall perish by the sword,' thus spoke the Son. His religion you do not have. Are you then perchance one of the children of Israel, who with Moses said: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth?' "

"I am a Christian."

"I see it neither in your faith nor in your actions! The teaching of Christ is forgiveness, love, and mercy!"

"Mercy!" The echo of this rang through infinite space, the gates of heaven opened, and the soul hovered toward the realms of eternal bliss.

But the flood of light that streamed forth from within was so dazzling, so penetrating, that the soul shrank back as from a double-edged sword. And the sound of music was so soft and touching that no mortal tongue could describe it. The soul trembled and prostrated itself lower and lower, and the celestial light cut through it until it felt, as it had never felt before, the weight of its own pride and cruelty and sin.

"Whatever good I have done in the world, I did because I could not do otherwise; but the evil that I did-that was of myself!"

And more and more the soul was dazzled and overwhelmed by the pure light of heaven; it seemed falling into a bottomless abyss-the abyss of its own nakedness and unworthiness. Shrunken into itself, humbled, cast out, unfit for the Kingdom of Heaven, trembling at the thought of the just and holy God, hardly dared it to gasp, "Mercy!"

And the Angel of Mercy came to him-the mercy he had not expected; and in the infinite space of heaven, God's everlasting love filled the soul.

"Holy, loving, glorious forever shalt thou be, O erring human spirit!" sang the chorus of angels. And as this soul did, so shall we all, on our last day on earth, humbly tremble in the glorious sight of the Kingdom of Heaven. But the infinite love and mercy of our Heavenly Father will carry us through other spheres, so that, purified and strengthened, we may ascend into God's eternal light.