

Stowe Harriet Beecher

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"The night is far spent; the day is at hand."

MY soul vibrated for a moment like a harp. Was it true? The night, the long night of the world's groping agony and blind desire? *Is it almost over? Is the day at hand?*

Again: "They shall see the Son of man coming in a cloud, with power and great glory. *And when these things come to pass, look up and rejoice, for your redemption is nigh.*"

Coming! – The Son of man really coming into *this* world again with power and great glory?

Will this really ever happen? Will this solid, commonplace earth see it? Will these skies brighten and flash? and will upturned faces in this city be watching to see Him coming?

So our minister preached in a solemn sermon; and for moments, at times, I felt a thrill of reality in hearing. But as the well-dressed crowd passed down the aisle, my neighbor, Mr. Stockton, whispered to me not to forget the meeting of the bank directors on Monday evening, and Mrs. Goldthwaite poured into my wife's ear a charge not to forget her party on Thursday; and my wife, as she came out, asked me if I had observed the extravagant toilet of Mrs. Rennyman.

"So absurd," she said, "when her income, I know, cannot be

half what ours is! and I *never* think of sending to Paris for my things; I should look on it as morally wrong."

I spoke of the sermon. "Yes," said my wife, "what a sermon! – so solemn. I wonder that all are not drawn to hear our rector. What could be more powerful than such discourses? My dear, by the by, *don't* forget to change Mary's opal ring for a diamond one. Dear me! the Christmas presents were all so on my mind that I was thinking of them every now and then in church; and that was *so* wrong of me!"

"My dear," said I, "sometimes it seems to me as if all our life were unreal. We go to church, and the things that we hear are either true or false. If they are true, what things they are! For instance, these Advent sermons. If we are looking for *that* coming, we ought to feel and live differently from what we do! Do we really believe what we hear in church? or is it a dream?"

"I *do* believe," said my wife earnestly – she is a good woman, my wife – "yes, I *do* believe, but it is just as you say. Oh, dear! I feel as if I am very worldly – I have so many things to think of!" and she sighed.

So do I; for I knew that I, too, was very worldly. After a pause I said: "Suppose Christ should really come this Christmas and it should be authoritatively announced that He would be here tomorrow?"

"I think," said my wife, "there would be some embarrassment on the part of our great men, legislators, and chief councilors, in anticipation of a personal interview. Fancy a meeting of the city

council to arrange a reception for the Lord Jesus Christ!"

"Perhaps," said I, "He would refuse all offers of the rich and great. Perhaps our fashionable churches would plead for His presence in vain. He would not be in palaces."

"Oh!" said my wife earnestly, "if I thought our money separated us from Him, I would give it *all*— yes, *all*— might I only see Him."

She spoke from the bottom of her heart, and for a moment her face was glorified.

"You *will* see Him some day," said I, "and the money we are willing to give up at a word from Him will not keep Him from us."

That evening the thoughts of the waking hours mirrored themselves in a dream.

I seemed to be out walking in the streets, and to be conscious of a strange, vague sense of *something* just declared, of which all were speaking with a suppressed air of mysterious voices.

There was a whispering stillness around. Groups of men stood at the corners of the street, and discussed an impending something with suppressed voices.

I heard one say to another: "*Really* coming! What? to-morrow?" And the others said: "Yes, to-morrow; on Christmas Day He will be here."

It was night. The stars were glittering with a keen and frosty light; the shops glistened in their Christmas array; but the same sense of hushed expectancy pervaded every thing. There seemed

to be nothing doing; and each person looked wistfully upon his neighbor as if to say, Have you heard?

Suddenly, as I walked, an angel-form was with me, gliding softly by my side. The face was solemn, serene, and calm. Above the forehead was a pale, tremulous, phosphorous, radiance of light, purer than any on earth – a light of a quality so different from that of the street-lamps, that my celestial attendant seemed to move in a sphere alone.

Yet, though I felt awe, I felt a sort of confiding love as I said: "Tell me, is it really true? *Is* Christ coming?"

"He is," said the angel. "To-morrow He will be here!"

"What joy!" I cried.

"Is it joy?" said the angel. "Alas, to many in this city it is only terror! Come with me."

In a moment I seemed to be standing with him in a parlor of one of the chief palaces of the city. A stout, florid, bald-headed man was seated at a table covered with papers, which he was sorting over with nervous anxiety, muttering to himself as he did so. On a sofa lay a sad-looking, delicate woman, her emaciated hands clasped over a little book. The room was, in all its appointments, a witness of boundless wealth. Gold and silver, and gems, and foreign furniture, and costly pictures, and articles of *virtu*— everything that money could buy – were heaped together; and yet the man himself seemed to me to have been neither elevated nor refined by the confluence of all these treasures. He seemed nervous and uneasy. He wiped the sweat

from his brow, and spoke:

"I don't know, wife, how *you* feel; but *I* don't like this news. I don't understand it. It puts a stop to everything *I* know anything about."

"Oh, John!" said the woman, turning towards him a face pale and fervent, and clasping her hands, "how can you say so?"

And as she spoke, I could see breaking out above her head a tremulous light, like that above the brow of an angel.

"Well, Mary, it's the truth. I don't care if I say it. I don't want to meet – well I wish He would put it off! What does He want of me? I'd be willing to make over – well, three millions to found an hospital, if He'd be satisfied and let me go on. Yes, I'd give three millions – to buy off from to-morrow."

"Is He not our best friend?"

"Best friend!" said the man, with a look half fright, half anger. "Mary, you don't know what you are talking about! You know I always hated those things. There's no use in it; I can't see into them. In fact, I *hate* them."

She cast on him a look full of pity. "*Cannot* I make you see?" she said.

"No, indeed, you can't. Why, look here," he added, pointing to the papers. "Here is what stands for millions! To-night it's mine; and to-morrow it will be all so much waste paper; and then what have I left? Do you think I can rejoice? I'd give half; I'd give – yes, *the whole*, not to have Him come these hundred years." She stretched out her thin hand towards him; but he pushed it back.

"Do you see?" said the angel to me solemnly. "Between him and her there is a "GREAT GULF *fixed*." They have lived in one house with that gulf between them for years! She cannot go to him; he cannot go to her. To-morrow she will rise to Christ as a dewdrop to the sun; and he will call to the mountains and rocks to fall on him – not because Christ hates *him*, but because *he* hates Christ."

Again the scene was changed. We stood together in a little low attic, lighted by one small lamp – how poor it was! – a broken chair, a rickety table, a bed in the corner where the little ones were cuddling close to one another for warmth. Poor things! the air was so frosty that their breath congealed upon the bedclothes, as they talked in soft, baby voices. "When mother comes, she will bring us some supper," said they. "But I'm so cold!" said the little outsider. "Get in the middle, then," said the other two, "and we'll warm you. Mother promised she would make a fire when she came in, if that man would pay her." "What a bad man he is!" said the oldest boy; "he never pays mother if he can help it."

Just then the door opened, and a pale, thin woman came in, laden with packages.

She laid all down, and came to her children's bed, clasping her hands in rapture.

"Joy, joy, children! Oh, joy, joy! Christ is coming! He will be here to-morrow."

Every little bird in the nest was up, and the little arms around the mother's neck; the children believed at once. They had heard

of the good Jesus. He had been their mother's only friend through many a cold and hungry day, and they doubted not He was coming.

"Oh, mother! will He take us? He will, won't He?"

"Yes, my little ones," she said softly, smiling to herself; "He shall gather the lambs with His arms, and carry them in His bosom."

Suddenly again, as by the slide of a magic lantern, another scene was present.

We stood in a lonely room, where a woman was sitting with her head bowed forward upon her hands. Alone, forsaken, slandered, she was in bitterness of spirit. Hard, cruel tongues had spoken her name with vile assertions, and a thoughtless world had believed. There had been a babble of accusations, a crowd to rejoice in iniquity, and few to pity. She thought herself alone, and she spoke: "Judge me, O Lord! for I have walked in my integrity. I am as a monster unto many; but thou art my strong refuge."

In a moment the angel touched her. "My sister," he said, "be of good cheer. Christ will be here *to-morrow*."

She started up, with her hands clasped, her eyes bright, her whole form dilated, as she seemed to look into the heavens, and said with rapture:

"Come, Lord, and judge me; for Thou knowest me altogether. Come, Son of man; in Thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded. Oh, for the judgment-seat of Christ!"

Again I stood in a brilliant room, full of luxuries. Three or

four fair women were standing pensively talking with each other. Their apartment was bestrewn with jewelry, laces, silks, velvets, and every fanciful elegance of fashion; but they looked troubled.

"This seems to me really awful," said one, with a suppressed sigh. "What troubles me is, I know so little about it."

"Yes," said another, "and it puts a stop to everything! Of what use will all these be to-morrow?"

There was a poor seamstress in the corner of the room, who now spoke. "We shall be ever with the Lord," she said.

"I'm sure I don't know what that can mean," said the first speaker, with a kind of shudder; "it seems rather fearful."

"Well," said the other, "it seems so sudden – when one never dreamed of any such thing – to change all at once from this to that other life."

"It is enough to *be with Him*," said the poor woman. "Oh, I have so longed for it!"

"*The great gulf*," again said the angel.

Then again we stood on the steps of a church. A band of clergymen were together. Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Old School and New School, all stood hand in hand.

"It's no matter now about these old issues," they said. "*He* is coming; He will settle all. Ordinations and ordinances, sacraments, creeds, are but the scaffolding of the edifice. They are the shadow; the substance is Christ!" And hand in hand they turned their faces when the Christmas morning light began

faintly glowing; and I heard them saying together, with one heart and voice:

"Come, Lord Jesus! come quickly!"