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1 Corinthians 15:51–52—The Last Trump

One passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians bequeathed the memorable image of a trumpet blast that will signal the end of time:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Cor. 15:51–52)

In the KJV, the passage is rendered thus:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, **at the last trump:** for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

The highlighted phrase “at the last trump” would prove sufficiently memorable to recur often in English literature. Sometimes it is used in contexts that imply a divine consummation of the ages. At other times it is used in a more general or secular sense to mean “when all is said and done.” Other biblical references to end-of-time trumpet blasts may be found in Matthew 24:31 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

H. G. Wells, the twentieth-century pioneer of science-fiction writing, produced not just one but two short stories featuring “last trump” imagery. Wells was an atheist who delighted in weaving sacrilegious images or themes into his works, openly mocking what he regarded as ridiculous doctrines of Christianity.

“A Vision of Judgment” (1899): This story begins with “the last trump.” The angel Gabriel blows his horn and God proceeds to judge all people, in alphabetical order. But God and Gabriel take delight in laughing at sinners and saints alike. There are no consequences for anything that they have done and every human is mocked for thinking that there would be: the very concept of good and evil turns out to have been ridiculous.

Embarrassed, the human race flees “up the sleeve of God” and, after every human soul has taken shelter there, God shakes them all out of his sleeve and on to a new planet where they are told they will all be given a second chance. “Now that you understand me and each other a little better,” God says, “try again.”

“The Story of the Last Trump” (1915): In this story (actually the concluding chapter to a hodgepodge novel called *Boon*), a clumsy child in heaven tries to play with Gabriel’s trumpet, drops it, and it falls to earth, unbeknownst to the angels. Later, when the Judgment Day is supposed to arrive (around 1000), it must be postponed because the trumpet cannot be found.

Meanwhile, on earth the trumpet has ended up in a curio shop whose owner eventually hooks it up to an air compressor; it gives a brief blast and then vanishes (snatched back to heaven by a now-cognizant angel). The story relates what happened in the brief moment of that blast:

All about the world a sound was heard like the sound of a trumpet instantly cut short . . . in an instant, and for only an instant, the dead lived, and all that were 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.¹

And what would be the lasting consequence of that momentary revelation? Nothing. Though all humanity had experienced the same vision simultaneously, everyone soon forgot the vision and each person returned to his or her own petty, habitual existence. Because

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.²

1. H. G. Wells, "The Story of the Last Trump," in *Boon* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1915). Available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34962/34962-h/34962-h.htm#tenth>.

2. Wells, "The Story of the Last Trump."