

“The Angel and the World’s Dominion”

There was a time when the Will of the Lord, Whose hand has the power to create and destroy all things, unleashed an endless torrent of pain and sickness over the earth. The air grew heavy with the moisture of tears, and a dim exhalation of sighs clouded it over. Even the legions that surrounded God’s throne were not immune to the hovering sadness. One angel, in fact, was so deeply moved by the sufferings he saw below, that his soul grew quite restless. When he lifted his voice in song with the others, a note of perplexity sounded among the strains of pure faith; his thoughts rebelled and contended with the Lord. He could no longer understand why death and deprivation need serve as connecting links in the great Chain of Events. Then one day, he felt to his horror that the eye of All-Being was piercing his own eye and uncovering the confusion in his heart. Pulling himself together, he came before the Lord, but when he tried to talk, his throat dried up. Nevertheless, the Lord called him by name and gently touched his lips. Then the angel began to speak. He begged God to place the administration of the earth in his hands for a year’s time, that he might lead it to an era of well-being. The angelic bands trembled at this audacity. But at that same moment Heaven grew bright with the radiance of God’s smile. He looked at the suppliant with great love, as He announced His agreement. When the angel stood up again, he too was shining.

And so a year of joy and sweetness visited the earth. The shining angel poured the great profusion of his merciful heart over the most anguished of her children, on those who were benumbed and terrified by want. The groans of the sick and dying were no longer heard in the land. The angel’s companion in the steely armor, who only a short time before had been rushing and roaring through the air, stepped aside now, waiting peevishly with lowered sword, relieved of his official duties. The earth floated through a fecund sky that left her with the burden of new vegetation. When summer was at its height, people moved singing through the full, yellow fields; never had such abundance existed in living memory. At harvest time, it seemed likely that the walls would burst or the roofs fly off, if they were going to find room to store their crops.

Proud and contented, the shining angel basked in his own glory. For by the time the first snow of winter covered the valleys, and dominion over the earth reverted into God’s hands, he had parcelled out such an enormous bounty that the people of earth would surely be enjoying his gifts for many years to come.

But one cold day, late in the year, a multitude of voices rose heavenwards in a great cry of anguish. Frightened by the sound, the angel journeyed down to earth and, dressed as a pilgrim, entered the first house along the way. The people there, having threshed the grain and ground it into flour, had then started baking bread—but, alas, when they took the bread out of the oven it fell to pieces and the pieces were unpalatable; they filled the mouth with a disgusting taste, like clay. And this was precisely what the angel found in the second house and in the third and everywhere he set foot. People were lying on the floor, tearing their hair and cursing the Lord of the World, who had deceived their miserable hearts with His false blessing.

The angel flew away and collapsed at God’s feet. Lord, he cried, help me to understand where my power and judgment were lacking.

Then God raised his voice and spoke: Behold a truth which is known to me from the beginning of time, a truth too deep and dreadful for your delicate, generous hands, my sweet apprentice—it is this, that the earth must be nourished with decay and covered with shadows that its seeds may bring forth—and it is this, that souls must be made fertile with flood and sorrow, that through them the Great Work may be born.²