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BILLY STORMFIELD'S VISIT TO HELL

A Short Novel in the Style of Mark Twain

Stan Rice

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Summary of Billy Stormfield's Visit to Hell

Billy Stormfield, descendant of Captain Stormfield in Mark Twain's book, wakes up in Hell. He meets Mark Twain, who takes him on a tour. All the interesting people are in Hell: Moses, Karl Marx (who is funny only when he quotes Groucho), Joe the Cherokee, the Apostle Andrew, and Pope Francis, because they were all what the fundamentalists called communists; Noah, because he was an environmentalist; General Douglas McArthur, because he forgave the Japanese rather than slaughtering them as the Old Testament commanded; and of course Charles Darwin. Thomas Jefferson, united at last with Sally Hemings, tells them how biologically stupid racism and oppression are. The only people in Heaven are the white supremacists and the jihadists, who spend all their time killing each other over and over forever. The young white supremacist Stonewall escapes to Hell, where he meets and loves the Black history teacher Philomena.

Between Heaven and Hell, Jesus eternally suffers the way Job did, dogs licking his wounds. With His friend the Prophet Mo, He watched His mother Mary helping people sneak into Heaven. Together with the crew from Hell, and led by the school girl Malala, Jesus and Mo storm the assembly in Heaven, kicking Henry VIII and Donald Trump (who look almost alike) down to Earth. Stonewall and Philomena celebrate their wedding feast.

Chapter 1

The constant ringing in my ears suddenly stopped. That was how I knew I must be dead. When I sat up and looked around, I was surrounded by beautiful silent mists. And I mean silent.

From out of these mists, a man emerged and walked toward me. He wore what looked like a nineteenth-century coat. His gray hair was crazy and his gray moustache looked like it could strain all the clam chowder in Nantucket. I knew I had seen him somewhere, but couldn't put my finger on it.

"Welcome, young Stormfield," he said, with a hidden arch smile.

"How did you know my name?" I exclaimed.

"We have been expecting you," the man said. "You are the lineal descendent of the famous Captain Stormfield, who visited Heaven."

"Yes, I am," I said. "Where am I and how did I get here?"

"You were listening to the news and hearing all about some gasbag named Donald Trump. And then you got really angry. You popped an artery in your brain. But you see, Mr. Stormfield, getting angry won't change anything. So you might as well have had fun. So now you have joined Us Who Have Gone Before."

Nietzsche! That's who he is! No, that's not it, I thought.

"So I am in Heaven, like my ancestor," I said.

Einstein! No, that's not it, either.

"No," the man answered.

"So," I said, "I'm in Hell?"

"Seems you are not much smarter than the elder Stormfield," said the man. "Where in blazes do you think you are?"

"This is Hell?" I asked. "I was expecting Hell to be a place where every second of every minute of every hour of every day is exquisite, unimaginable pain and torture in hot flames forever and ever."

Karl Marx. That must be it. But I was wrong.

"Oh, you've been listening to those TV and radio evangelists?" the man asked.

"Why, yes. Aren't they supposed to be the ones who know what Hell is like?"

The man looked almost sorrowful at my ignorance, as if he had spent a lifetime documenting human stupidity. "No. They just made all that stuff up. It's easy enough for them to say stuff like that, to scare the crap out of people so that they will give them money. It's a natural selection process, see."

"You mean, like Darwin?"

That's it! That's who he must be! Wrong again.

"Yeah, you got it," the man said. "Any evangelist who made Hell seem *more* painful, or hotter, would get *more* money from frightened parishioners than the other evangelists whose visions of Hell were just a little bit *less* extreme. It was a race to the bottom, my friend. But those stories are just a pack of lies. Oh, by the way, some of the early Christian theologians were even worse. St. Jerome, I think 'twas, said that in Heaven there was a special balcony where the saved ones could stand and look down into Hell forever and watch the suffering of the damned. Even their own parents or children. That was *his* idea of Heavenly bliss!

"See, it's like this," he continued. "The theologians and evangelists say God is going to inflict infinite torture on souls forever. But then it's the demons who have to actually put it into action. And even demons get tired of seeing people suffer, after the first ten million years or so."

"Okay," I said. "I give up. Who are you?"

"I was the one to whom Captain Stormfield sent his correspondence."

"I'm still drawing a blank here," I said.

"I will introduce you to Huckleberry Finn. He got sent here because the preachers told him he was supposed to hate Jim because he was black, but he didn't, so…"

"You're Mark Twain?"

He bowed to me, then said, "Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the greatest cynic in the history of the world, or at least the funniest. Qoheleth, the author of the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, was more cynical, but not nearly as funny. I died in 1910. And whom do you have on Earth today? The best you've got is Lewis Black. He's pretty funny but he, as he himself admitted, cannot hold a candle to me."

"I am honored, and I think I am going to have a very interesting time here," I said.

"Hold your judgment until later," Twain warned me.

"So, how did I end up in Hell?" I asked. "I wasn't such a bad guy."

Twain looked me sharply in the eye. "But you were a Democrat."

"What's that got to do with…"

"To go to heaven, you have to be a Republican. Or else a jihadist. They get to go also."

"But I thought Hell was for souls who had not repented of their sins."

"See, it's like this," he sighed as he explained it to me. "If you are a Republican, you can download a special app in your brain that will automatically keep you repenting of your sins. You don't have to think about it. Sort of like those automatic virus scanners on your computer. They keep zapping viruses you don't know you have. Well, the Republican app sends in a forgiveness request every 10 picoseconds, and God is *obligated* to forgive any Republican sin upon request. This way, the Republicans can keep on sinning—having wild sex, screwing the poor, destroying the Earth—and they are almost instantly forgiven."

"And Democrats can't do this?"

"Sorry, pal. Republicans have the patent on it. It is an app called CheapGrace. It's named after a concept invented by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship.* Bonhoeffer was executed for resisting the Nazis. He said that simply reciting some

words is not really repentance. Grace and forgiveness have to be costly enough to make you actually change the way you live."

"But Democrats can repent too!" I almost whined.

"I feel kind of sorry for you Democrats. Sure, you can repent, but the very next picosecond you are a Democrat again and as guilty as Hell. So, get used to it, pal. You're going to be here a long, long time."

Chapter 2

In Hell, you never have to eat, since you do not have a physical body. This would also go a long ways to explain why there is no torture in Hell: with no physical body, you have no pain receptors. I suppose that is the price to pay for not having torture: without a physical body, you can never again enjoy gustatory pleasures, like eggnog, or Guinness stout, or steak, or mushrooms, or fresh baked bread, or…don't get me started. It also means you cannot have any sexual pleasures. I'll try not to think about this.

All I have left is my mind, so I have to find some way to stimulate that, I guess. Back when I was alive I was a scientist and I spent countless hours investigating the natural world and learning the mysteries of the universe. I suspect that this might be one of the reasons I ended up here. Those evangelists always told me that believing in evolution would get me sent here. I guess they were right.

"And so, we miss out on the pleasures of Heaven?" I asked Sam, my guide.

Sam gave me a wry smile. "I want to show you something."

He stood up and led me up a stairway. At the top was a telescope. Not one of those big suckers like on Palomar, but, well, it looked like the one Galileo used.

Sam read my thoughts. "Yes, this is Galileo's telescope. It opened up the mysteries of the physical heavens to one of the earliest scientists. That sure as Hell got him into trouble. Now, with this telescope, we can see into the Spiritual Heaven. Please, take a look."

It was not at all what I expected. "I thought Heaven would be people with wings walking around on clouds and playing harps."

"That's what your ancestor the Captain thought, too, until he got there," said Sam.

In fact, there were one or two spirits doing this very thing. But most of the beings I saw drove around in Jeeps. The cloudscape looked like a barren landscape, which looked a little bit like the Middle East or Afghanistan. I was soon to discover that there was a very good reason for this.

At first I could not quite understand what I was seeing. It was, indeed, a whole bunch of Jeeps, and it had the souls of men in it. They wore combat fatigues and carried AK47s. They drove around in random circles—there is no place to actually go in Heaven—but they were obviously waiting for someone. And they were whooping in ecstasy. They took sharp turns that threw up clods of cloud.

Then I saw another bunch of Jeeps approaching them. It also had men in it with AK47s, but these men had head scarves and long beards.

A man from the first group held up what appeared to be a Bible, waved it in the air, and screamed out, *Praise Sweet Jesus!* Someone from the second group of men held up what appeared to be a Koran, waved it in the air, and screamed out, *Praise Allah!*

Then both groups dropped their books, got out their guns, and started shooting at each other. This went on for a long time. There was a sun in the sky—not the source of light, but a sort of timekeeper—and one of the Bible guys held out his arm toward it and commanded it to stop so that, just as in the days of Joshua, they could have a longer day for slaughtering their enemies.

Finally, they had fired enough rounds that several of the men were literally pulverized into little puddles of spirit. Others ran from their group toward the other and started fighting at close range, until one of the jihadists blew them all up. What was left was a big, quivering, bloody pile of spiritual protoplasm. The jeeps were smoking hulks.

As I was watching, a Bible slipped off the edge of the cloud and fell down into Hell close enough to me that I could run and grab it. The other group apparently lost a Koran in the same way. This Bible was covered with blood and gore (no mud; it was from Heaven) but, as I started turning the pages, many of them uncut, I saw no evidence that it had ever been read.

Sam urged me to go back and look in the telescope again. The giant amoeba that had once been two armies of men started separating into two globs and moving apart from one another. Slowly, they formed back into the men who had slaughtered one another. But this time the two groups ignored one another. The men who did not notice the loss of their Bible sat on lawn chairs and joked with one another—I could not hear what they said—as women with coiffures and lipstick brought them bottles of cold beer.

Meanwhile, the men who did not notice the loss of their Koran sat on rugs as women in robes—twenty-four virgins for each man—ran to them and started feeding them dates. It didn't take long before each group was swirling in an orgy of food and sex, followed by naps.

"That doesn't look very much like Heaven for the women," I said.

"They aren't really women," said Sam. "They are spiritual robots. But the men, of course, don't notice any difference."

I looked at a name carved on a pedestal. It said Stepford. Ah, so this is where the Stepford Wives came after they died!

"You mean," I continued, "that these men can live off of beer and dates forever?"

"They're spirits, remember," he said. "No actual nutrition is necessary."

Then both groups of men started doing the whole thing over again. I asked Sam what was going to happen next.

"They do the same thing over and over again, forever," said Sam. "This is heaven to them: to slaughter heretics and infidels. Sometimes they use bayonets and scimitars, just for a little variety."

Then I saw a woman, eternally old, sitting off to the side, weeping. I could not tell from her clothing which side she was on. I asked Sam who she was.

"She is a mother who has lost her son," Sam said. "Oh, her son is right there, she can see him, but every day she has to watch him being killed and then, when he comes back to life, he doesn't ever think of her."

Chapter 3

I certainly was not expecting the man to address me in English, but this is Hell, so why not. He looked like Charleton Heston dressed up as Moses. So when I saw him, I exclaimed without thinking, "Moses!"

"Yes, what do you want?"

"Sorry, man," I said. "You just look a lot like Moses in the movie."

"Well, I *am* Moses, as a matter of fact." He stopped hobbling along with his rod (the one, I assume, that he threw down in front of Yul Brynner I mean Pharaoh and which became a snake) and looked at me. Sam stood behind me.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Moses, in Hell?"

"I wasn't expecting it either," Moses said.

"But…"

"Everybody asks me. Here's how it happened. You see, it appears that I am a communist."

"A what?"

"That's what *I* said," answered Moses. "There was no such thing when I was on the Earth. But it seems that millennia after I died a certain philosophical and political movement called communism started, led largely by a man named Karl Marx."

At that moment who should come along but Karl Marx. Now that I got a good look at his face, I could see he didn't look anything at all like Sam.

"Greetings, Comrade Moses!" said Marx. "Good to see you! I'm happy that you are down here in Hell with me. Not Heaven. Heaven! An exclusive club! I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me as a member."

"Wrong Marx," I said. "That's a Groucho line."

"I don't want to talk to you," Moses said to Marx.

"What makes you a communist?" I asked Moses.

Marx decided to answer the question. "A little review," he said. "Capitalism is all about the unlimited and intergenerational accumulation of land and wealth. It leads inevitably to a wealthy upper class of people, generation after generation, who have outlandish political power, as well as economic power. This was the whole idea behind aristocracy, monarchy, and capitalism. I thought that everyone pretty much believed in this system until I came along. But boy, was I wrong!

"Moses, here," continued Karl Marx, "commanded the people of Israel to observe a celebration every fiftieth year, which he called the Jubilee. For forty-nine years, people could buy and sell, and make capitalistic profit from, land. But—now get this—every fiftieth year the land would revert to the original owner's family! It's right there, in the Law of God, in Leviticus chapter 25! A built-in pressure-escape valve to prevent excessive capitalism! And get this: every Jubilee year, the slaves would be freed! Can you imagine what a catastrophe this law would be

for the modern world economy? It would force everybody to care about each other and… Say, Moses, how did it work out, anyway?"

Moses cleared his throat and said weakly, "Actually, we never put it into practice. Nobody ever has. Just like the Sabbath of the Fields."

"Ah," I said. "I know what that is. It is another law…now, let's see, where was it…"

"Leviticus 25, the same place as the Jubilee law," said Marx.

"Right," I said. "All farmland could be cultivated for six years but had to lie fallow the seventh. This would give the land a chance to recover from ecological damage."

"It was mainly intended to put the brakes on unlimited wealth," said Moses.

"And so that means that Moses was a communist, which the Conservatives in Heaven equate with all kinds of evil. Say, Moses, how about grabbing some lunch?" Marx smiled.

"But I don't like you, you godless Communist, I mean…"

"Get used to it, my friend," said Marx. "We are going to be down here together for a long time." Marx put his arm around Moses' robed shoulder and they walked away.

Chapter 4

While I watched the two communists, Marx and Moses, walking away, I next saw a beast with ten horns and four heads and…no, wait, that was a hallucination that was written down in the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse. In that book, the beasts were truly frightening but they were all praising The Lamb on His Throne around the glassy sea. The writer was named John of Patmos. What was that guy smoking? He must've gotten some bad hash from Damascus.

No, what I saw instead was strange, but not terrifying. I saw a Native American man dressed up in a Hollywood Indian costume. Mark Twain and I approached him to ask him more about Hell.

"I see by your outfit that you are an Indian," Sam sang to the tune of *Streets of Laredo*.

"So, who are you?" I asked.

"My name is Singing Snake Windbreaker. Well, that's not my real name. That's just what I tell people who ask. When I was alive on Earth, we didn't dress up like this. We Native Americans were sort of ordinary people. What's your name?"

"He's Billy Stormfield," Sam answered.

Then I asked, "So, what are you down here for?"

"And here I thought you must be one smart guy," the Native American said. "Who were you just talking with?"

"Marx and Moses…Wait, you're not telling me you were a communist too?"

"Seems so," he said. "We Native Americans were communists thousands of years before the word was invented. See, in our tribes and villages—and sometimes in our large cities: Cahokia, near the Mississippi River, was one of the largest cities in the world about your year 1100—we owned the land and the resources in common. We each built our own houses, and we owned those houses, but we did not own the land itself. We owned our personal items, which were few and simple, but we did not pass them on to our children. There was no private real estate or inheritance of wealth. That made us communists, I guess."

Then Sam said, "And communal land ownership continued long after the Native Americans started adopting white technologies."

"I'm a Cherokee," said the Native man. "Right, I know, Cherokees didn't wear costumes like this, as I already said. But long after we were forcibly relocated by the United States Army from our Appalachian homeland to what is now Oklahoma, after we started building white-man houses, and raising white-man cattle, we still kept our communal ownership of land. We did so right up until the Dawes Treaty of 1887. By 1904 all Cherokees (except a few hiding in the hills) were enrolled on the list and our communal land was divided up into individual allotments. It was easier for white people to steal our land a little bit at a time than all at once, see. A white banker swindled me out of my land about 1922. So, you could say, we were communists right up until about 1904.

"But that's not the only reason I'm down here," he continued.

"What other reason?" I asked.

"I thought you were one smart guy," he said. "Well, look at me."

"Your face is all painted, like a Hollywood Indian…wait…your paint is all the colors of the rainbow. That's odd. When I was alive, that was a symbol of the gay and lesbian community. You mean, you are gay?"

"I am more properly referred to as Two Spirit," he said. "Many Native American tribes recognized three genders."

"Three?"

"Yes. Male, female, and two-spirit. The old French word for it was *berdache*. We two-spirits did not fit into either male or female category. We dressed like women, sometimes. We didn't get a lot of respect, but the other people let us be what we were. But your American evangelists declared—and God was obligated to obey them—that anyone who wasn't heterosexual had to go to Hell. Didn't make much difference to me; I was already a communist."

"Well," I said, "Imagine, learning things in Hell!"

"That's more than you can say for Heaven," Sam said. Then his face brightened. "There comes my friend Andrew."

A man in a Biblical robe walked up.

"Is he two-spirit too?" I asked.

"No. He was one of the Apostles who lived in the Upper Room in Jerusalem after Jesus was crucified. No, he was as straight as they come. But that doesn't mean we can't be friends. Say, Andrew!"

"Hey, Joe," said Andrew.

"This man here wants you to explain how you were a communist."

"That's easy enough," said Andrew to me. "All of us apostles lived together—no, we weren't gay, if that's what you were thinking—in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, and, as recorded in Acts chapter two, we held all of our possessions in common. We were communists, I guess, though we didn't know it. But that didn't last long. It wasn't long before a church hierarchy formed, and the church started attracting rich people, and pretty soon we were just like everyone else has been through all of history, except Joe and his folks and other tribal peoples. But, while it lasted, the Upper Room Commune was a brief shining moment of goodness. Time for lunch. Got some pemmican, Joe?"

"I hate that stuff," said Joe. "Let's go get a nice salad." And that's what we did, not for the food value—we were spirits—but for the pleasure of being together.

Chapter 5

As Joe, Andrew, and I came back from lunch, Sam and Karl Marx met us. Then I looked where they pointed. I saw the spirit of a young woman sitting on a rock, looking very despondent. I started to ask my companions why she was sad, but Andrew said, "You'd best go talk to her yourself." They left me alone.

I walked up to the young woman and introduced myself. She looked up and gave me a little smile, then resumed her somber, pensive stare at nothing. I could tell that while she was alive she was attractive in a petite, small-faced sort of way. Maybe it was her big eyes, but I had the impression that she did a lot of thinking and reflecting back before she was in Hell, too.

"So," I said, "I'm new here, so you pretty much know what I'm going to ask you."

"I was a history teacher," she said.

"Why should a history teacher be in Hell?"

"I was a history teacher in Oklahoma," she said. "Does that help?"

"Not really," I said.

"I taught AP history," she added.

"As in, advanced placement?"

"Yeah. High school kids could take AP courses and get college credit. It helped to reduce college expenses and also it helped them get into the better schools. I didn't get paid very much. Teachers in Oklahoma barely get paid enough to survive on."

"But, it sounds like you were doing a valuable service to your students," I said. "I still don't understand. How could the conservatives—the ones who get to determine who goes to Hell or not—possibly object to that?"

"It was the content of the course," she said. "That's why the state legislature outlawed it. I stopped teaching it when it was outlawed, but I was still guilty of having taught it."

"You put some stuff into your course that the conservatives didn't approve of?"

"Actually, it is a nationally standardized course. I only taught what the course required. Oh, did I mention that I didn't get paid much?"

"So, let me get this straight," I said. "The conservatives in Oklahoma sent you to Hell for teaching a nationally-standardized history course. So, what was in this course that they could have objected to so strongly?"

"They said that high school history teachers should just teach good things about what white Americans have done, and none of the bad things. So, during the course, I taught that Europeans introduced diseases such as smallpox that killed up to 90 percent of the Native Americans. I taught about the genocide—I didn't use that term at the time; I do now, because it doesn't make any difference anymore—of Native Americans at the hands and bullets of the white Europeans and, later, white Americans. And I taught about slavery. And I didn't get paid much. Did I say that already?"

"But, those things all happened, didn't they? Slavery and all?"

"And more, but I could barely scratch the surface of the evils that white oppressors inflicted upon non-whites."

"Well, if you were to not teach those things, what exactly *were* you supposed to teach?"

"Watch your head," she said.

"That's impossible. Nobody can watch his or her head. Your eyes are inside of your head, and you can't see your own head…Ouch!" A large object hit me on the head that I was not watching. It knocked me to the ground. Of course, being a spirit, I could not die. I looked at the object. It was a large, leather-bound book. I heard loud laughter from above me, coming from Heaven. I looked up and saw the spirit of a fat white man pointing at me and laughing more.

Then I looked at the book. It was engraved, *Oklahoma Version of American History*. I went over to pick it up. I opened it randomly in the middle. It was a pop-up book. Up popped a cardboard cartoon version of a Pilgrim man with musket and white collar and black hat. There was also a cardboard cartoon of an Indian, with feathers, begging him for mercy. I read the accompanying text. "The Pilgrims brought Christianity to the Injuns, and if they had only humbly accepted it, this glorious gift from the Conqueror God, then it would not have been necessary to kill them."

I opened to another page. Up popped the cardboard simulacrum of an Indian with sores covering his skin. The text read, "God sent smallpox and other diseases as punishings against the Injuns for not accepting His Holy Word."

Another page showed a well-dressed, clean black slave smiling as he picked cotton. "Most slaves had a lot better life on the plantation than they did back in Aferca." Right then, from inside the spine, a Confederate flag on a penile pole popped up just as straight as you please.

Another page showed Native Americans being herded into forts by white soldiers.

"This must be the Cherokee Trail of Tears," I said.

"Each tribe, all five hundred of them, had its own Trails of Tears," said the teacher.

The text said, "While in forts and later on reservations, the Injuns lived on welfare handouts from the white government. The government gave them flour, salt, oil, and baking soda. They should have been thankful that we encouraged them to invent frybread."

On another page, a big penile oil derrick popped up. The woman gagged just a little when she saw it. "That was my least favorite part," she said.

The text read, "The Injuns in Oklahoma had land with oil under it that they could not use, so the white Americans had to take it away from them."

I was getting tired of this. As if she read my mind, the woman asked, "Are you getting tired of this?"

"This is what they wanted you to teach?"

The voice from Heaven laughed loudly again.

I hurried to the end. The last page said, "All true history comes from the Holy Bible. Throughout the six thousand years of human existence, white people have been God's people,

starting with Adam and Eve…" Who were, of course, standing right there as book pop-ups, in the altogether but tastefully hidden by leaves and fruits and snakes and mushrooms and beavers.

I slammed the book shut. At that moment, I noticed a little filament connecting the book to Heaven. The filament yanked the book right back up to the fat man, who threw it back down. This time it landed on the woman and squished her. She was a pile of guts, but slowly she reformed into a woman—even her spirit-clothes were clean again—and the book flew back up to heaven.

"Advanced placement classes help students get into good colleges, and help them afford college, any college. Oklahoma legislators were willing to close that door of opportunity for their own students?" I asked, puzzled.

"They considered it a small price to pay for proving to everyone that they were God's chosen people on Earth," she said. "They under-funded education, refused to raise the minimum wage, refused to allow unions, gave the oil companies anything they wanted—they basically insured that Oklahoma would be a source of cheap labor and raw materials for the rest of the nation and the rest of the world."

I said to her, "Join us. Mark Twain, Andrew, Joe, Karl Marx, and the others. We'll form a little discussion group and go around looking at things. We would greatly appreciate the pleasure of your company."

"That is the nicest thing anybody ever said to me…"

"I'm Billy," I said, extending my spirit-hand to her.

"Philomena," she said, taking my hand in hers. I think she had been black back when she was on Earth, but she had blanched so much from depression that it was hard to tell.

Chapter 6

Sam took us all over to Galileo's telescope again.

"I don't think I want to see this again," I said.

But Sam swerved the telescope around to see a different part of Heaven.

"I should have known there was more than one part of Heaven," I said.

I looked into the telescope. I saw a bunch of old white-haired men sitting around with beatific and empty looks on their faces. Now, I tried to figure out what group of people could consist exclusively of old white men…

"Popes!" I said.

"You got it," said Sam. "There is a special Heaven for popes. Nothing much happens there. They just sit around and watch white smoke coming from the Vatican chimney."

"Are they all there?"

"No," said a voice from behind me. "I didn't-a make it to Heaven."

Here was a Pope I actually recognized. Pope Francis from Argentina!

"What are you doing down here?" I exclaimed.

"I had a master's degree in chemistry and-a told everybody about the global warming and how it would hurt the poor people of the world," he said.

"That can't be the only reason," I said.

"No," he said. "I also asked-a for forgiveness for the Church."

"You mean, from the Church."

"No, I said-a, *for* the Church."

"For what?"

Francis looked at Philomena. "Did-a this guy get his history education in Oklahoma?"

"Okay," I said. "Let me guess. Those Catholic conquistadores killed a lot of Native Americans. So Your Holiness…"

"Don't-a call me that."

"So you asked the Native Americans to forgive the Church for that. And, let me think. Oh, yeah. Catholics killed a lot of Protestants. Especially in France in the late middle ages. The French Catholics killed a lot of…who were they? Huge Nuts?"

"Huguenots," said Andrew.

"St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and all that," I said.

"So, you do-a know."

"When did you ask Protestants for forgiveness?"

"The January of-a 2016."

"Did the Church-a, I mean the Church, get forgiven?"

"The fundamentalists wouldn't hear of it, and they're-a pretty much in charge here."

"And so here you are," I said. "It must be quite a shock."

"It's-a not so bad here," said Francis. "A lot of people here have issues to work through, and I enjoy helping them, just-a like I did back on Earth. Say, Philomena, we can have a little talk if you like."

"I would be happy to," said the history teacher.

"So, I'm-a doing about the same thing I did on Earth. I was happy then, and am-a happy now. So…" He drew himself up to full height, cleared his throat, and started to sing to the tune from *Evita*, "Don't cry for me Argentina…"

Chapter 7

"HUT, two, three, four, HUT, two, three, four…" The man, wearing what appeared to be a World War Two American Army uniform, marched along. As he drew closer, I saw that his simple uniform bore a lot of insignia. He turned and saluted us and kept marching.

Curious, I called out to the man. He stopped, at attention, then turned in military style toward me. "At ease," he commanded himself. Then he slouched a little and sauntered over to us. He sat down.

"You wouldn't mind telling me who you are, would you?" I asked.

"McArthur, Douglas, General, serial number 3-point-1416."

"A nice round number," Sam whispered to me.

"If captured, we can only tell the enemy our name, rank, and serial number, which they can read off of our dog tags," said General McArthur.

"I would say I was surprised to see you here, General, but I just finished speaking with the pope. You were one of the most famous men in American history."

"Right."

"Well, sir, might you tell me why you are down here in Hell?"

"I served at the command of a socialist president, for one thing," the general said.

"Ah, yes. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, author of Social Security, the New Deal, and lots of social services. I assume he must be down here someplace."

"He's at a Woody Guthrie concert," said the General. "Woody Guthrie, another socialist."

"Roosevelt," I continued. "Socialist though he was, he was so popular that he had to die to get out of office, and Americans had to add an amendment to the constitution to keep any other president from having four terms. You said, for one thing. What other reason?"

"I was the Supreme Allied Commander in Asia," he said. "Eisenhower's Asian counterpart."

"Yes. Go on."

"In August of 1945, the Empire of Japan surrendered unconditionally."

"Yes, they did. Soon afterwards, the Japanese people heard the voice of an Emperor, for the first time in history, telling them they had to accept this defeat. Go on."

"Unconditionally," said the General.

"Your point?"

"That means that our troops could have run all over the place raping and pillaging to their hearts' content."

"But," I said, "they didn't. Two reasons. First, the soldiers were for the most part humane, and they did not want to act like madmen. Second, you commanded them not to. At first, some of the American soldiers consorted with Japanese women, but not, as I understand, by force. But then even that stopped. But what I don't get is how that landed you in Hell."

"Well, I disobeyed the Bible," said the general. "In Deuteronomy seven verse two, God commanded the Israelites to show no mercy to the inhabitants of the conquered land, to utterly slaughter them, and to make no treaties with them. I disobeyed all of those commands. We showed mercy to the Japanese, and even helped them start their economy back up. We made treaties with them and even wrote their constitution for them. This constitution included a provision that they would not have an army capable of fighting outside of Japan itself, a provision that persisted until January 2016."

"But, sir!" exclaimed I. "That was a brilliant move! Japan grew rapidly and became one of America's best allies, which was important for our security and for world peace! Why, sir! They loved you! When you said you wanted to run for President of the United States, some of the Japanese put up campaign banners for you!"

"Great idea or not, what I did was a direct violation of God's command," said the general.

"In the Old Testament, not the New," I said.

"The fundamentalists use Old Testament rules whenever it is convenient for them," the general reminded me.

Chapter 8

As we sat in Hell with General McArthur, we saw a man in a robe coming along. His robe was all the colors of the rainbow. And with him was a flock of the cutest animals you ever saw. Kitty cats with big eyes, puppies with big eyes, hamsters with big eyes. Animals that would have torn each other to pieces in the wild but here in the Afterlife they played with one another in peace. The lion and the lamb, as described in two places in the Old Testament, followed. Then along came lobsters and octupuses and levitating fishes. I was puzzled, because this was supposed to be Hell.

The man drew closer and wished us an effusively good day.

"Good sir!" I called out. "I think I know why your robe is all the colors of the rainbow."

"You do?" he said in a piping voice. "What do you think the reason is?"

"You are or were a member of the LGBTQ community."

"The what? Never heard of it," he said.

"Okay, let me guess again," I said. "You are Joseph with the Amazing Dreamcolor Coat right out of Genesis 37."

"Wrong again," he said. "I am Noah, and the rainbow was associated with me a long time before Joseph or the BLTs."

"You should have guessed it, with the animals," Sam whispered to me.

"Please explain, Mr. Noah, why you are in Hell."

"I built an Ark—actually, I contracted the work out—and saved two of every kind of animal from dying in the Great Flood."

"So how did you get them to all come into the Ark?"

"It was a miracle," said Noah.

"Two of each species of insect?"

"It was a miracle."

"Two of each species of spider?"

"It will always be the same answer. It was a miracle. I still don't know how it happened, or how we found places to stash all of them, or how we kept the spiders from eating the insects."

"Very well. But how did that get you sent to Hell? Oh, wait, I know. It's when you got drunk afterwards."

"No, that wasn't it. As I said, I saved two of every species of animal."

"Am I missing something?" I asked.

"You most certainly are," Noah said. "Every species. Not just the ones that humans found useful, but even the rattlesnakes and the mosquitoes and the spiders. They each had their place in nature, regardless of their utility to humans. Why, you may ask."

"Why?"

"Partly because no one could know which species might be useful later," said Noah. "We had to look all over the place to find the flatworm *Caenorhabditis elegans,* and we never knew why. But nowadays it is one of the favorite animals that scientists use in genetic research. Same thing with that fruit fly *Drosophila melanogaster*. But also, it is just because the old God had this idea that, if He made it, it was good."

"The old God?" I asked.

"You'll find out later," Sam told me.

"I still don't see what was so bad about saving all the species," I said.

"Do I have to explain everything to him?" asked Noah.

"Yes," said Sam.

"Well, it's like this. The fundamentalists who decide who goes to Hell believe that most species are useless, and that it is not worth the trouble or the cost to save them. You saw how much the conservatives despise the Endangered Species Act in the United States! But, before the Flood, God did not ask me if I could *afford* to save all of them, or even if I *wanted* to. But you just let an American environmentalist say that we need to save the Lesser Prairie Chicken, for example, and the conservatives start howling like extinct dire wolves—*Canis dirus*—and calling them godless communist atheists. See, they believe that God wanted me to save all the species so that American conservatives can let them go extinct in the twenty-first century. I, sir, was the original bleeding-heart environmentalist. And so, here I am in Hell."

"Well," said Sam, "being as you know all the different kinds of animals, can you recommend what kind of meat we can have for lunch?"

Chapter 9

As my friends and I continued wandering about in Hell, I saw one ordinary man—this was no Noah or General McArthur—who was sitting with a dazed look on his face. A woman sat beside him. I just had to go ask them for their story.

"I was a computer software designer," the man said, with a mild and gentle accent. "But that's not what got me sent to Hell. I got sent to Hell because I was a negligent parent."

"*Moi aussi*," said the woman who had obviously been his wife.

"Now, *that*," I said, drawing myself up into dudgeonly pride, "is a legitimate thing to be condemned for! Anyone who abuses, or even neglects, a little child…"

"Whoa," said Sam. "You might want to hear their story."

"Well, then, please continue, Mr…" I tried to cover my embarrassment.

"I am Monsieur Royal," said the engineer. "And Madame Royal. Among the Americans, the French are famous for being liberals. You know, not too many of us go to church, and the ones who do are unlikely to be fundamentalists who attack other people's beliefs. And this goes for the way we raise our children also. We considered ourselves to be typical French parents, though of course many French families are dysfunctional, as in any society. When I was raising my daughter…"

"Just one child?" asked Karl. "That explains part of it. You were not fruitful, did not multiply and fill the Earth. You did not have your quiver full of sons and daughters." He referred to the Quiverfull Movement of Christian fundamentalists.

"According to those fundamentalists," said Mme. Royal, "I am supposed to just say, *I love my husband,* and then let him insert his organ into me as many times as he can."

"I love my cigar, but I take it out of my mouth once in a while," said Karl.

"Wrong Marx," I said. "That's a Groucho line. But, please, Madame, continue."

"Failure to be prodigiously fecund was not the charge leveled against us when we were sent here," said M. Royal. "It was, as I said, negligence. We raised our daughter with discipline, but it was a spiritual kind of discipline. Not religious, but spiritual. When she did something wrong, as every child does, we let her know we were ashamed of what she did—not of her, but of what she did—and then we would explain to her the reason or reasons why what she did was wrong. Mostly having to do with love and respect for other people. I don't think we had to physically punish her. Is this correct, *mon aimée?"*

"*Oui*," Mme. Royal said.

"Oh," I said. "So you did raise her with self-discipline. Very well. What was the problem?"

"Well, it says in the Proverbs, chapter 17 verse 24, he *who loves his child will not spare the rod*."

"Right," I said. "Discipline shows love. I still don't get it."

"Do I have to explain everything to him?" asked M. Royal.

"Yes," said Sam.

"We never used the rod on our daughter," M. Royal said.

"But, that phrase is figurative! Oh," I said, suddenly realizing my error. "Fundamentalists don't believe anything in the Bible is figurative, only literal. So, the fundamentalists will not allow any parents into heaven who have not beat their children physically with a rod or other blunt instrument?"

"You only need to do it once," said Mme. Royal. "That is enough to get you into heaven on a technicality. Unless there is something else the fundamentalists do not like about you."

"Like being a French liberal," said the General.

"Well," I said, "It's not so bad down here. Tell me. How did your daughter turn out?"

"Oh, Ségolène? She's doing fine. A little wild sometimes, definitely offbeat, as you *Americains* say. She was the environmental minister of France for a while."

"Well," said Noah, "that does it. She will be down here before too long. Please remember to invite all of us to the reunion party when she gets here."

Chapter 10

"PSST!" I heard from somewhere off in the mists.

We were all surprised. I was no longer the only one who seemed clueless about what was going on. We all looked around to try to locate the source of the sound.

"Over here," came a loud whisper.

Philomena had returned from her conversation with Pope Francis. She had very acute hearing and located the person who had made the sound.

"Why, look what the cat dragged in!" she said, as she pulled a spirit person out of the mists and into our circle of camaraderie. It was a man whose clothing had been made from a Confederate flag. "You must have done something really bad, to be a Confederate who ended up in Hell," she said.

The man introduced himself. "I am Stonewall Beauregard," he said. "And, I will let you know right away, please keep me hidden. I have been condemned to Heaven, and I'm not supposed to be down here. But, I just needed to talk to someone who actually thinks about things. Say, Ma'am. What's your name?"

"They called me Philomena, and I was of African descent back on Earth."

Stonewall smiled broadly. "I am so glad to meet you." He knelt down. "Please forgive me for siding with the Confederates. And all of the rest of you: Please forgive me."

"I forgive-a you," said Pope Francis.

"Me too," said Philomena. "My ancestors were still in Africa during the Confederacy, so my forgiveness doesn't mean much. I was born in Benin. I suffered a lot of prejudice when I moved to America, but not from Confederates."

"Ah, there's where you err," said Stonewall. "I did not live during the Confederacy of 1861-1865. I lived in Oklahoma in the twenty-first century. I was one of those Confederate sympathizers. I drove a big truck around with Confederate flags flapping from it. Then I had a little too much to drink and ran my truck into a ditch. Soon as I woke up, there was a welcoming committee for me in Heaven. The Confederate sympathizers who had gone before me were playing *Dixie* in a big band. I should have been happy but, you see, I felt guilty when the welcoming committee greeted me. I did not *feel* forgiven for the way I had lived, until this very moment. What joy you bring me, Philomena, and—who did you say you were, sir?"

"Call him His Holiness," said Karl.

"Don't-a call me that," said the Pope.

"I'm so ashamed of the way I behaved on Earth," continued Stonewall. "And I'm even more ashamed of the way the other guys behave up in Heaven. You know what they do all day?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm going to have to get back before they miss me. Back on Earth, I used to slip into the bushes to read inspirational books by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King Jr. I told everyone I needed to go see a man about a dog, but there I was reading

them books. But up here, we don't have bladders so I can't make that excuse any more. But I am *so glad* I found all-y'all."

"Please feel free to come by for a visit when you can," said Andrew.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it for a whole pot of crawdads," said Stonewall. "And especially meeting you, Miss, or Ms., or whatever…I forgot your name…"

"Philomena," she smiled.

Stonewall pronounced her name like it was a delicious piece of chocolate spread all over his spiritual teeth. He and Philomena held hands a little longer than was necessary before he shot back up to Heaven.



Confederate flags for sale in Oklahoma.

Chapter 11

"Let me show you something," Sam said to me. "It is a Bible."

I took the book from his hand. It was a little thinner than I remember Bibles being back when I was on Earth. Matter of fact, back on Earth I studied the Bible pretty closely, hoping to maybe get some better insight into the world. Some parts of the Bible were more useful in this regard than others. I found the book of Ecclesiastes very enlightening—in fact, one of the best pieces of literature I had ever read. I opened the Bible Andrew handed to me, and was surprised not only that Ecclesiastes was missing, but the books that remained there were quite different from what I remembered. I glanced over passages I thought I knew well—especially the parts of Amos and Isaiah in which the prophets cried out against the way the rich people oppressed the poor. Getting a little alarmed, I turned to the book of Exodus and found that the commandments for the Year of Jubilee and the Sabbath of the Fields were missing.

I looked up at Moses. He nodded at me, fully aware of what I had just discovered. My alarm reached its fullness when I turned to the book of Matthew and discovered that some of Jesus' most beautiful words were missing: "Consider the lilies of the field…Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these."

"What," I said, even more dudgeonly than I had spoken previously, "is *this*?"

"It is the official Heavenly version of the Bible," said Sam.

"You mean, the fundamentalists rewrote the Bible?" I exclaimed.

"They wouldn't dare do it on Earth. Even the brainwashed Sheeple in their churches would not have put up with that. But up here, they finally had their chance," quoth Sam.

"What did they change?" I asked.

"First," said Sam, "turn to the Book of Abrasions."

"I don't remember that one…Oh, here it is." It was right after Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. I glanced through it. "The whole book seems to be about how evil Muslims are."

"That is one of the foundational beliefs in Christian fundamentalism," explained Sam. "Of course, the original Bible (original, that is, after it reached its final form about 367 CE) did not mention Islam, since Islam did not even exist until the eighth century. But without scripture telling them to hate Muslims, the fundamentalists felt sort of lost. Now, turn to the Book of Contusions."

I did. It was a long prophecy, written by a man named Johnny who was in the spirit, or perhaps high on THC, on the Isle of Patmos. In his vision, Johnny predicted the discovery of a large continent on the other side of the vasty ocean to the west, a continent inhabited by dusky people, and which the Chosen People of God would conquer and create a Light unto the World.

"This sounds like Johnny was predicting the United States of America," I said. "This is ridiculous. The original Bible did not have any prophecies that could remotely refer to the United States."

"Well," said Sam, "even here in this Bible the United States of America is not referred to by name. That would be too much even for *them*. America was named after an Italian explorer named Amerigo Vespucci. Which means," he added, "that there was a fifty-fifty chance that our country might have ended up being named the United States of Vespucci."

"And you will notice," said Andrew, "that everything about love has been left out. On Earth, they gave lip service to love, but when the fundamentalists got to Heaven, they could quit pretending. Turn now to the book of Concussions."

I did. It was all about how glorious it is to shed one's blood for the fatherland, and how true Believers were not to show any mercy to the enemies of The Nation.

"I was not a great admirer of the Bible while I was alive," said Karl Marx. "But compared to this swill, the original Bible was a real gem."

Everybody said *Amen*.

"But," continued Karl, "at least the original Bible was a *book*. I like to sit and read books. You know, outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

"Wrong Marx!" we all yelled at yet another of Karl's expropriations of a Groucho line.

Chapter 12

"Let me show you something," Sam said to me. "Bear but a touch of my hand," he said, like the Ghost of Christmas Past. Soon I was whirling at a great height, looking over a vastness of miserable humans, or former humans, in Hell—not suffering from flames or torture, but suffering from the same thing they did on Earth. They were miserably poor people, huddling in rags. On Earth, if you are poor enough long enough, you starve to death; but in Hell, you can stay poor and hungry forever.

"This is unbearable," I said, covering my eyes. "They suffered on Earth; can they not get some relief after they have left the vale of tears?"

"Poverty is a great burden," said Karl. "More so for women than men. For them, it is a veil of tears."

"Stick to your Groucho jokes," I told him.

"But as I said in my Manifesto," continued Karl, "poverty is the inevitable result of capitalism…"

"It is the inevitable result of practically any economic system except living in small tribes," said Andrew, "or living in communes the way we Christians did in the early first century."

"None of that matters," I thundered. "They deserve some relief after death."

"That is where the Powers that Be would say you are wrong," said Andrew. "They would say that poverty is the fault of the poor people themselves."

"It is, sometimes," said young Stonewall. "My rural hick friends and relatives were pretty damn lazy, just drove around in their trucks with Confederate flags all the time. Odd jobs, but not enough to have an economically secure life. It was our fault we were poor."

"But," said Andrew, "the Powers that Be would say it is *always* the fault of the poor. The poor are always lazy. They would say that there has *never* existed a poor person—not a single one—who was not lazy, or stupid, or evil."

"That's quite a statement," I said. "I'm almost certain that it is wrong."

"But it is Biblical," said Andrew. "Look it up in the thirty-seventh Psalm. Verse 25."

Philomena grabbed an old Bible and read the verse. "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging bread."

"Pretty clear, if you take it literally," said Andrew. "No righteous people are poor, therefore no poor people are righteous."

"Most poor people do not like begging for bread," said Philomena. "They do not want a handout. They want justice. They want opportunity. What they want is for bankers to not charge huge interest rates—usury used to be illegal, even in the Bible—which trap them in poverty. They want to work their way out of poverty. They want jobs, not handouts. You know," she said,

"it is bad enough being poor, but the worst part of it is to have rich people sneer at you and tell you to get your lazy ass up and do some work, even when there is no employment available. The rich hated minimum wages and loved investing in robots…" She started to become very emotional until Stonewall touched her shoulder, and she slumped into his arms.

Chapter 13

"And now," Sam told me, "prepare to be amazed!" And he pointed over to a man and a woman sitting in a little rose bower and looking very pleased with one another. "Here is one of the most important people in American history, and the companion he could not have in life."

It was Thomas Jefferson and the woman who had been his lover, and slave, Sally Hemings.

Stonewall, who had rejoined us, ran up to them. "You, there! Can't you stop? In life, Sally was your slave, and she could hardly say no to your amorous advances. Can't you at least give her some dignity now that you are dead?"

It was Sally who spoke. "Oh, you've got it wrong," she said. "Tom and I were friends, and had a lot of respect for each other, and not just in bed."

"Friends? Then why didn't he give you your freedom?"

"Well," continued Sally, "that would not have been quite as easy as you make it sound. Slave owners could not just release their slaves. They had to prove that the slaves had good job prospects, or an endowment. Tom was always short of cash, and couldn't afford to free me."

"But, don't you have any dignity?" continued Stonewall.

"Young man, you should realize that things can be a little complicated," said Sally. "Tom tried to get slavery outlawed back even when he was writing the Declaration of Independence, but the southern landholders would not support him. He had to compromise, and then, behind the scenes, try to make slavery more humane."

"All I could do," said Thomas, "was to proclaim the universal rights of mankind, and hope that someday all humans would be able to share those rights. It took a while for slavery to be *officially* outlawed around the world, but we all know that slavery continues in the world, even though it is not called that. For example, American agricultural workers are trapped into poverty that is little better than slavery. The work of liberation continues."

Sam put his hand on Stonewall's shoulder. "As the author of *Huckleberry Finn,* I know a thing or two about the complex tangle of slavery. I think Mr. Jefferson is right." Then he turned to Tom. "Stonewall here was, until recently, a member of that racist group up in Heaven. He has the zeal of a new convert for the equality of black people. And more." He glanced over at Philomena, who smiled quietly.

"When I proclaimed the rights of mankind," continued Tom, "I made the argument that every man—and now every woman—has the right to rise to the top based on their own merits. It was a philosophical and political argument. This much is well documented in history. But fewer people know about my other defense of democracy, one that you would today call biological."

"Biological?" I exclaimed. "Mr. Jefferson, when I was alive, I was a scientist. And every scientist knows of your reputation as an intellectual and a proponent of science. Why, one time, President John F. Kennedy—he was president about 135 years after you died—hosted some of the top scientists and other intellectuals in the world at a White House dinner. And he said that

there had never before been such a concentration of intellectual power in that building—except, he said, when Thomas Jefferson dined there alone. But I am really interested in hearing your scientific, your biological, argument for democracy."

Jefferson smiled and relaxed. "Well, that's easy. You've heard that the cream rises to the top. But the scum rises to the top also. When I was the Ambassador to France, and later Secretary of State, I spent a lot of time in Europe, rubbing shoulders with kings and nobility. You must be jealous that I was personally acquainted with such great people. But let me tell you what those people were really like.

"My claim is simply this: that civilization, without the bracing wind of democracy, has caused our human race to breed itself into barnyard animals. I mean this literally. Take any race of animals, confine them in idleness and inactivity, whether in a sty, a stable, or a state-room; pamper them with high diet, gratify all their sexual appetites, immerse them in sensualities, and banish whatever might lead them to use their minds, and in a few generations they become all body and no mind. This occurs by the very law by which we breed livestock animals for our own purposes. If this process worked to transform the mighty auroch into the stupid cow, then it has also transformed noble and wild humans into creatures who can do no more than eat, procreate, and defecate. Humans and animals are no different in this respect. This is the very manner in which, over centuries, the great civilizations of Europe have bred their kings and their nobility.

"A corollary to this proposal is that democracy is necessary for the mental and even physical health of a nation. Nobles breed with ladies, kings breed with queens, thus concentrating their weaknesses and stupidity as an infernal brandy might be distilled from an indifferent wine. It is necessary to allow every man to rise as far as he can by his own merit and hard work, a selection process as it were, or else the government of a nation will be a slimy scum rather than a competent and able class.

"First, the much-revered Sun King of France, Louis the Sixteenth, was a fool.

"Second, the King of Spain was a fool.

"Third, the King of Naples was a fool.

"Fourth, so was the King of Sardinia. Not only were all four of them part of the kingly class bred by generations of stupidity, but they were all members of the same Bourbon family.

"Fifth, the Queen of Portugal, of the Braganza family (as prominent in Portugal as the Bourbons were in France, the Italian cities, and Spain) not only acted like a fool but was born an idiot.

"Sixth, the same was true of the King of Denmark.

"Seventh, the King of Prussia, successor to the great Frederick, was a mere hog in body as well as in mind.

"Eighth, Gustavus Adolphus, the great hero of Sweden, was really crazy.

"Ninth, so was Franz Josef of Austria.

"Tenth and finally, we cannot forget the king who lost the American colonies, George, the third of that name, king of England. He was so crazy his own caretakers had to keep him in a strait waistcoat and monitor the color of his urine. If his urine was purple, it was going to be a bad day.

"As you consider these ten examples," said Thomas, looking around at us, "remember that these are just the ones that I knew personally. Historical records will easily show that the kings, queens, and nobles of the past were no better. The best example is probably King Harry, the eighth of that name, who was as close to a hog as any man, rich or poor, you could ever hope to find. He knew nothing about how to walk among men; he charged his way through them, exactly like an unfettered hog. When the Pope would not grant his divorce, he started a new church. Whenever anything did not work out as he expected, he beheaded one of his wives. He would eat, I heard, twenty-seven capons at a single meal. I imagine he needed a whole army just to haul away his privy box. King Harry was so fat that Dr. Newton, although he lived a century later, should have taken his mass into account to calculate the orbit of the Earth…but I digress. The point of my argument is simply this, that these royal animals had become mindless and impotent, and so will every hereditary monarchy be after a few generations.

"And so endeth the book of Kings, from all of whom the Lord deliver us."

We all clapped for Jefferson. Then Sam said, "You make democracy sound like a kind of selective process for eliminating stupid people. I'm afraid it hasn't turned out that way, as I will show you if you care to join us. But first, let me introduce my young friend Billy to a man who knew a thing or two about natural selection."

Chapter 14

We all walked with Sam to a little room where a white man, with a white beard, sat at a table and looked into a microscope. He was dressed in nineteenth-century garb and his microscope looked pretty old. We approached him.

"Oh, yes!" the man said in a weak voice and British accent. "Oh, look at that, will you!" He looked up at us as if he actually expected us to look. So we did.

"Yuk," I said as I looked through the microscope. "What is that?" It was a little bit of flesh in a small depression slide. It looked like a miniature version of a chicken gizzard that got bile fluid spilled on it by a careless butcher.

"That, sir, is a barnacle. And it is my favorite barnacle! What's *your* favorite barnacle?"

Since the old man actually expected me to answer, I said, "Barnacle Bill."

"I haven't met him," said the man. "But this one! This barnacle shocked the living daylights out of my fellow Victorians, and I don't mean maybe. This is a female barnacle—you can see the little jointed legs—but the male barnacle has degenerated into a little parasitic lump on her side. He has degenerated so much that there is almost nothing left of him except the penis. It sounds sort of like my brother Erasmus. He just wanted to have fun with the women all the time."

"So, sir," I said, "Who are you?"

"I was the first man to bring an orderly classification system to the Cirripedia—that is, to the barnacles!" He smiled. "An evolutionary classification system," he added.

"Tell him what else you did," said Sam.

"I also wrote the *Origin of Species*," said the quiet old man.

"You're Charles Darwin!" I exclaimed. "Guess I'm not surprised to see you here. You shot God right out of the sky with your theory of evolution!"

"Yes, well," said Darwin. "I wasn't trying to come here. I wasn't *trying* to shoot God out of the sky. I wasn't trying to upset anybody, particularly not my quiet and pious wife Emma. But, man, I couldn't help it!" He stood up from the table. "In the *Origin of Species*, I explained how natural selection works. It is not my fault that natural selection occurs everywhere, all the time, with everything, not just organisms. Natural selection occurs even in languages, ideas, and technology. You can't stop it! The best organisms, ideas, and technology always come to dominate the resource space.

"I very much regret that this upset so many people," Darwin continued. He said quietly, "Especially Emma." Then he spoke loudly, or what passed for loudly in his weak voice. "But they were even more upset when I explained that a lot of evolution was due not to natural selection but to *sexual* selection. Male birds have colorful feathers because female birds choose them, and all that. Many of my fellow Victorians didn't even want to *hear* the word sexual. I didn't mean to upset them. I would much rather sit around the mansion—and I had a pretty good one—studying orchids and pigeons."

"And barnacles," I said. "The religious conservatives depicted you as some kind of monster. But I can see you are one of the nicest, and gentlest, people I have ever met."

"Except for Philomena," said Stonewall, who had approached us, arm in arm with the former history teacher.

"Some people," explained Sam, "used Darwin's theories to justify slavery. I knew some of them." He looked into the eyes of Philomena.

"We used creationism to justify slavery," said Stonewall.

"Well, racists will use whatever they can, such as either creation *or* evolution, to justify oppression," said Sam.

"And that," said Darwin, "is what makes me angrier than anything I ever experienced. While I was on Earth, I was an outspoken critic of slavery. My whole family—and Emma's—denounced slavery."

"Would you join us?" Sam asked him. "We are making a little tour of Heaven and Hell. Almost every stop on this tour, and a few more people join us. Sort of like the *Canterbury Tales.*"

Chapter 15

"I have something more to show you," Sam said to me as the others stopped for a little rest. He led me back to the telescope.

"Not that again!" I said.

"Sorry. We have to do this."

He pointed the telescope in yet a different direction, not at the war between the fundamentalist Christians and the fundamentalist Muslims, and not at the enclave of popes. When I looked in the eyepiece, I almost missed what he wanted me to see.

"There's a woman sitting there crying," I said. "Will she sit there and cry forever?"

"We are trying to think of something to do about it," said Sam. "We would like to get a message to her somehow. She is Emma Darwin, and she spent most of her life being afraid that she would not be able to spend eternity with the man she called her "dear Charley" because he would not be in heaven with her. But I think she would be happier down here, with him."

"Happiness in Hell?" I asked.

Pope Francis came up behind us. "There-a was a man named Mivart," he said. "St. George Jackson Mivart. He was not a saint; his-a first name was St. George. Go figure-a. But he was-a Catholic. He was a critic of Darwinism. But as he got older, he began-a to rethink everything, including Catholic theology. He wrote a book called *Happiness in Hell*. He got excommunicated. I'd-a like to meet him."

"I'll bet he would be thrilled to meet you," I said. "You know, if forever is infinite, and we keep walking around, pretty soon we will inevitably meet everyone. I think."

"Yes," said Sam. "We might be able to arrange a meeting of Emma and Charley. But some problems are not so easily solved." He moved the telescope a little and refocused. Of course, I saw another woman crying.

"What is she crying about?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"Let me tell you her story," said Sam. "Actually, your ancestor, Captain Stormfield, met her, and I included her story in my book. When she was alive, she was a farm worker in New England. The only thing she knew how to do was to pick cranberries. She had no formal education; she couldn't read or write. Nor could her husband, who drove the mulecarts filled with cranberries to market. They had a baby. A beautiful girl. But she died before her second birthday.

"She went to heaven. All her life, the mother's sorrow was assuaged only by the thought that she would see her little baby again. And eventually the woman died and went to heaven too.

"Meanwhile, the little baby grew up in heaven. There weren't very many intelligent people in heaven, but the few who were there she found. She became an expert in the philosophies of all those great thinkers who are now in Hell. And that's all she wanted to talk about. She eventually became almost nothing but pure thought. She was the only person who ever lived who could with complete honesty say *Cogito ergo sum*.

"When her mother found her, they had nothing to talk about. Nothing at all. And so the mother still wanders about, in heaven, weeping for her lost little baby."

"There must be something we can do!" I said.

"Well," said Joe the Cherokee, who had joined us, "you cannot much expect the former baby to unlearn things. I guess you could expect the mother to learn things. But to do that, she would have to come down here. You see, in heaven, they think they know everything there was, is, or ever will be to know. But maybe we can get her to come down here. Just an idea."

We all, even the pope, agreed it might be worth a try.

Chapter 16

"Well," said Sam Clemens. "It's time our guest should make the pilgrimage to the Great Assembly at the Throne of God. No more telescopes for you, my friend." And he bid all the others to join us.

"How does one get there?" I asked.

"First, you enter the gate," said Sam.

"But, they won't let anyone from Hell get into Heaven, will they?"

"The gates of Heaven are presided over by Peter, who happens to be my brother," said Andrew. "My brother will let me in anytime, for a visit, and whoever I bring with me."

We all went off to visit Heaven, Andrew and I in the lead. We approached a large gate. A steady stream of people, all of them apparently Christian fundamentalists, walked on a yellow brick road that led directly to it. Dozens of them, but nothing compared to the many thousands of people who died each day around the world. Standing at the gate was a man with a big book.

"The book is just for show," said Andrew. "Peter actually uses an iPhone app to keep track of the souls who are entering into bliss."

"That's Peter?" I exclaimed.

"Why, yes," Andrew answered. "He has his fishing hat on." He did, complete with big hooks piercing the brim. "Who else could he be? We were fishermen when Jesus came along and invited us to follow him. He said, *I will make you fishers of men*. He didn't mean it literally, since people catch fish by tricking them with lures or kidnapping them with nets, that is, catching them against their will."

"Some churches are like that," I said.

"True enough. But Jesus wanted people to follow him of their own free will. Jesus just said 'fishers of men' to be friendly to us. Ah, that was a long time ago."

Then one of the people on the yellow brick road started yelling. "I specifically asked for a condo with an ocean view," he screamed.

"All we have is the little hut in the nature preserve," Peter told him. "But I assure you that you will like it there. Lots of birds and flowers. And a pond. And, this being heaven and all, no mosquitoes. And a little creek with clear water. You can go fly-fishing." Peter looked dreamily upward, as if he wanted to be at that little hut right now.

"I don't like fly-fishing, I like deep-sea fishing," yelled the man. "I'm gonna sue!"

"Where you going to find a lawyer?" asked Peter. The man had no response to that.

Then Peter glanced over and saw us. "Andy!" he said. He put up a sign that said *Gone to Lunch* and closed the gate. People on the yellow brick road started shouting, but Peter told them, "You all can wait. You got all the time in the world."

When Peter got to us, he said, "So, who have we here?"

"Young man named Billy Stormfield," said Peter's brother. "And a few friends. They'll just stay outside and watch, but I want Billy to go inside and see God."

"And, so, you want to see God?" asked Peter. "Well, first you have to see his private chamberlain. But that can be arranged. Oh," said Peter, looking inside the gate. "She's at it again."

"Who's at what?" I asked.

"The Virgin Mary," said Peter. "She's always helping people sneak in."

As I watched, I saw a woman wearing a blue robe (ah, so the Catholics were right about that!) letting a rope down over the wall and helping people—usually people who had had some kind of physical deformity when down on Earth—over the wall.

"She thinks they suffered enough down on Earth, and deserve Heaven," continued Peter.

"They don't stay very long," said Andrew. "Once they see what is inside, they come running out. But Mary just keeps fishing them in. Sorry, that phrase just kind of slipped out."

"Why has nobody on Earth ever heard of this?" I asked.

Andrew answered, "Actually, one of your lesser-known authors, a certain Frank Harris, wrote a short story in 1924 in a collection called *Undreamed of Shores*, in which he described this very phenomenon. I was in it, and so was Peter. Jesus was in it too, and he expressed frustration at what his Mom was doing. The story was called *St. Peter's Difficulty*."

"Yes, I liked that story," said Peter. "Now, Billy, you just follow that road and you can't miss the Chamberlain's house. You going with him, Andy?"

"I am, Pete," said Andrew. And we went on and left Peter to return to his work. We waved to our friends still at the gate.

Chapter 17

It was easy for us to find the Chamberlain's house. It said Chamberlain on the entablature in flashing neon. All the houses looked like the wood frame houses from a medieval village, all crowded together.

The man who answered the door must have been an impressive piece of work when he was alive. He was tall, fat, and had red hair. He wore gold and silver and silk and jewels and silk and silver and gold. He had a crown on his head. He yelled at Andrew. "Andy, if you weren't Pete's brother, I'd have your head struck from your neck. Not that it would do any good, of course, us being immortals and all. And who is this miserable commoner?"

"His name is Billy Stormfield," said Andrew.

"And why should I let this person in to see God?" Then, to me, he said, "Kneel down before me, you loser. Grovel! Don't you recognize me?"

"And if I don't grovel?" I asked.

"Look, Harry, do I have to remind you each time? I don't tattle on you when you come down to visit the whorehouse, so you let my guests in for a visit. That's the deal. Grovel or no grovel."

"And no, I don't recognize you," I said. "But you look like a king of some kind."

"Took him long enough to figure that one out," said the Chamberlain.

"And you have a British accent. Harry. Wait! You can't be…"

"Oh, yes, he can," said Andrew.

I was standing in the presence of King Henry VIII.

"Isn't it kind of a step down from king to chamberlain?" I asked him.

"I'll brook no disrespect, no disrespect!" He was fuming and out of control. "One word from me and you will…oh, I guess you will not," Harry said, calming back down. "A step down? Not really. I am second only to God, in Heaven as I was on Earth back when I not only was the head of the Church of England but when I *started* it."

"Second to God?" I asked. "Aren't we forgetting someone?"

"I'll explain it when we get back," Andy said.

"So, you want to see God?" asked Harry. "Well, he is a lot like me. He yells a lot, always angry; he has reddish hair; he demands deference from everyone who approaches him; and he has had lots of wives. Like me in all four ways."

"Gee," I said. "I wonder who God could be? Someone who is angry, demands deference, has reddish hair, and lots of wives? And, of course, thinks he's God."

Chapter 18

"Frankenstein, come hither posthaste!" yelled Henry VIII.

A man with dark hair and dark framed glasses came running. "Yes, your majesty."

"Another peon who wants to see inside of God's Assembly," the King-turned-Chamberlain said.

"I'll see to it right away, Your Majesty," said the man, bowing deeply. Andrew chose to stay behind. The man led me through a dark hallway.

"Are you, I mean, the real Frankenstein?" I was frightened in the darkness. "The monster?"

"Actually," the man said, "Frankenstein was the scientist who made the monster. The monster who wasn't really a monster until the fundamentalist villagers started shouting out for his blood, or whatever he had, to be shed. And my name isn't Frankenstein. It's Franken. Al Franken."

"Name rings a bell," I said.

"Don't tell Fatso who I really am. I was a comedian back in the United States. Then I got elected to the Senate from Minnesota. And, much to my regret," he said, stopping to speak to me directly, "I stopped being funny. I regret that. The Senate was so screwed up that they really needed a comedian. Once the Republicans took over, the Senate was so dysfunctional that it would have been a comedy in itself if it weren't so pathetic. But wait till you see this!" He continued leading me.

He opened a little panel so that we could see The Assembly of God without being seen. About a hundred souls who had been white men were assembled in an amphitheatre. Communion was being served. Barbecue instead of bread, sauce instead of wine.

"I thought all these jokers were out shooting and being shot by Jihadists," I said.

"They take turns. They come here every seventh day, or what would be every seventh day if we had days up here. Oh, here He comes."

And my eyes beheld God.

A man who looked a lot like Henry VIII stood on a dais. His hair looked like he had held the blow-dryer in the wrong hand. He wore a New York suit.

"I love you all!" God yelled. He men cheered loudly. "But I'll tell you whom I do *not* love. All of those bleeding-heart liberals!" The men cheered more. "When I first came up here and assumed the role of God, to which I was elected by a landslide victory, a landslide I tell you, a lot of bleeding-hearts were getting in, right through the gate! Can you believe it!" Some of the men shouted yes, some shouted no. "But we got that straightened out. We built a big wall to keep them out, and made St. Peter obey new orders, ones issued from me! Now the only problem is that Virgin Mary. She keeps trying to sneak people in. Just like those women who sneaked people into America from Mexico. Come to think of it, Mary looks sort of Mexican or whatever. She must be hysterical. And she must be bleeding out of her whatever." The men cheered.

"We have a special guest," said God. "May I introduce to you Vladimir Putin." The men cheered as the leader of Russia stepped forth. "Now, here is a real leader! He knows how to stand up and get his way! You do what he says, or it's polonium for you! He endorsed my presidential bid, you all remember. And red-blooded Americans, such as you all were, appreciated the endorsement of Comrade Putin!" More cheering. Putin gave a lippy smile, waved, and sat back down.

"And now, for entertainment, we have the one and only graduate of My University. Let's hear it for Supply-Side Jesus!"

A man dressed in a jester's costume jumped up on the dais.

"There's Jesus!" I said. "I thought Harry said he was second to God."

"This isn't really Jesus," said Al. "This is just a comedian. And not a good one. I could do better."

"Greetings, everyone! I just flew in from Jerusalem and my arms are tired!" said the faux Jesus. The men cheered. "And, being Jesus, even though I flew, my robe was not the least bit sullied or ruffled. And what a robe! I paid handsomely for it! Because of the money I paid for this robe, ten craftsmen were able to feed their families! And because of my money, I was able to hire a pedicurist too." He stuck out his sandaled foot. "Wouldn't you like to kiss these little piggies? The pedicurist used to be a prostitute, but now she is living up to her full potential as a woman!"

"Outrageous," I said. "But he's kind of funny."

"Well, he should be," said Al. "Most of what he is saying he plagiarized from one of my books."

Supply Side Jesus continued. "Back when bleeding hearts used to get in here, one of them asked me whether I should feed the lepers. But that would just make them lazy! And maybe I should heal the lepers? But no! If I just healed them, there would be no incentive to avoid leprosy!"

"I think I've seen enough," I told Al.

"No, you haven't," he answered.

Just as Supply Side Jesus was saying that wealth was a sign of God's favor, I said, "Oh, but I have. I'm about to…can people vomit in Heaven?"

"Maybe you have seen enough here," said Al, closing the panel. "But there is someone you should meet." He led me back down the hall. Just as we were leaving the crowd behind, I heard God say, "I love you because you first loved me." We turned into a dungeon corridor.

Chapter 19

The man whom Al Franken showed me in the dungeon scarcely looked like a person, or even an animal. He huddled in a little ball. He had boils all over his skin. The man scraped pus from them with potsherds, and dogs licked his wounds. The man looked up at us piteously. He had long hair and a beard.

He spoke in a whisper. "Don't tell anyone about the dogs. They are my only comfort. You know, dog saliva has antibiotic properties."

"You told me last time," said Al.

"How's Mom?" he asked.

"She's still active," said Al. "Still fishing people in. Let me introduce you to Billy Stormfield."

"Pleased to meet you. Any friend of Al's is a friend of mine."

I didn't need to ask Who He was. With a Mom who was fishing people into Heaven? Who Else could He be? I couldn't speak.

He told me, "I am so sorry for what my supposed followers are doing," He said. "They are trying to do everything the opposite of what I taught and the way I lived. I am, as you can guess, the Original Bleeding Heart of Them All. Oh, we have another visitor."

"Hi, Mo," Al said to the turbaned and robed man who entered.

"Greetings, all. Hey, Jesus, you were saying how ashamed you were about the way your supposed followers are acting? Well, same here, buddy. If I walked into their midst right now, they would probably treat me about the way your followers are treating you."

"Somebody should get Him some help," I said.

"Well," said Jesus, "I am performing one of the functions for which I was begotten. I am suffering eternally in place of the sins of humankind. There, little buddy," he said to one of the dogs who stuck his muzzle in a little too deep.

"You been there, done that," said Mo. "Enough already. You've suffered enough. We both gotta get out of here. Down to Hell with Moses and Noah and all the other great figures who were the founders of your religion and of mine. And that is just what I came here to do. We finally have a chance to escape."

"Can I bring the dogs?" Jesus smiled.

"I have brought a heroine who will lead us forth in victory," said Mo. Mo turned around as a girl in a robe and hijab approached. "As soon as you have finished your math homework, Malala, we can get started." Mo looked at me. "Despite what you may have heard, I actually approve of women's education."

It was Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani school girl who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. "I confess, O Prophet, that I didn't finish problem number three," said Malala. "That double integral is a killer."

"Well, time is running out. You can finish later. I feel that we should get this done before God finishes his rant. Say, where did you Americans find this guy? We have some blowhards down in the Arabic countries too. Why not one of them? Well, no matter. Once we are finished here, there won't be any need for any of them. Well, Malala, it's your show now."

"Hehya!" Malala cried, and jumped up in the air. "Bear but a touch of my hand," she said to Jesus, who didn't have to even grasp her hand in order to suddenly rise, healthy and whole. We all ran down the dungeon hall. The only one huffing and puffing was Al, who told me he had eaten too much crow in the Senate Cafeteria.

When Henry VIII saw Malala, he didn't even have time to say anything. She yelled, "Begone, Piggly Wiggly!" He shriveled up into a little waif who struggled to get out from under the weight of gold and silver and silk and jewels and silk and silver and gold of his clothes. As a little waif, maybe he could start his life over again and get it right this time, I thought.

We were outside in the Heavenly City, and we ran down the street. We came to the Great Wall that God had built. Malala jumped up and gave the wall a horizontal kick. It fell down like a line of dominoes. All of the white men in the Assembly turned and looked at her. A fire came out of her mouth and evaporated the cloud the men were sitting on and they fell down and splatted on the glassy sea. So did all the Christian and Muslim fundamentalists who had been shooting each other. God hid behind a curtain. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" he yelled. But Malala tore down the curtain and wrapped God in it and marked the package "Return to Sender" and put American postage on it.

"You go, girl!" said Mo as we all ran after Malala.

Then Malala found the cranberry woman and stopped in front of her. "I can't give you a brain but I can give you the next best thing!" she said, and handed the woman a diploma. And we all kept running, the cranberry woman bringing up the rear.

Stirred up by the cheers of my new friends at the gate, the assembly of souls down in Hell all gathered for the celebration. They clapped for Malala, who smiled so big that you could hardly see her face. Mo stayed out of sight and just enjoyed everything. There were special chairs for Moses and Andrew and Peter and all the others, but they chose to sit on the ground in a lotus position. Everyone cheered as Jesus got up on the big platform that had once held seven billion poor people.

Jesus officiated over the reunion of Charles and Emma, and over the marriage of Philomena and Stonewall. And then it was reefers for everybody! And afterwards, everyone was very hungry.

Author's notes on Billy Stormfield's Visit to Hell

1. This story will only make sense if you have read Mark Twain's *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven,* which showed that Heaven was universally huge and everybody, or almost everybody, went there, from every galaxy. In this story, I assume that fundamentalist Christians and Muslims were correct that everybody except them went to Hell.
2. *The Cost of Discipleship* is a book by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis.
3. Joshua's long day is an Old Testament story from, of course, the book of Joshua. God made the sun stand still so that the Israelites, under Joshua, would have more time to slaughter their enemies. This is a story left over from before people understood that the Earth, not the sun, moved.
4. *The Ten Commandments* is a 1956 Cecil B. DeMille movie starring Charleton Heston as Moses.
5. Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote the musical *Evita* which includes the famous song, Don't Cry for Me Argentina, sung by Madonna as Eva Peron.
6. Ségolène Royal was a leading politician in the left-leaning government of François Hollande in France.
7. The words about the stupidity of European kings was an actual Jefferson quote, from an 1810 letter.
8. Darwin denounced slavery: *Darwin's Sacred Cause,* a 2009 book by Adrian Desmond and James Moore.
9. The plagiarized material, *The Gospel of Supply Side Jesus,* was from the 2003 book by Al Franken, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them.*
10. The sick man was modeled after the Old Testament Job.
11. United States of Vespucci: from the 2010 Jon Stewart book *Earth: The Book.*
12. Malala is modeled after the Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Yousafzai.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.