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Twain's witty vision of what heaven "is really like" is told from the point of view of the recently deceased Captain Stormfield. In a folksy narration peppered with sailor's jargon, the amiable, altogether down-to-earth merchant marine describes a series of amusingly disconcerting revelations about the next world.

Sitting on a cloud strumming a harp all day turns out to be insufferably boring; being eternally youthful also has its drawbacks when the captain finds himself not mixing well with a crowd of insipid teenagers; and Native Americans so outnumber whites in the North American district of Paradise that the average white Anglo-Saxon male has trouble finding someone to talk to. In fact the outlandish dimensions and characteristics of heaven utterly explode every human conception.

This funny, satirical spoof on human pretensions about the importance of our species in the grand scheme of things was the last published work by Mark Twain. The main character and plot were inspired by the dream of an actual sea captain whom Twain had known. Published at the beginning of the 20th century, when astronomy had just begun to reveal the huge expanse of outer space and traditional religious concepts of our place in the universe had become inadequate, Twain's humorous vision of the afterlife seems to reflect the new scientific awareness of the awesome cosmos that confronts us and the feelings of insignificance that this discovery produced.

Two years after publication of this "extract," originally planned as a six-chapter book, Twain himself shipped off to follow in Captain Stormfield's wake.

Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven Details

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From Reader Review Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven for online ebook

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

Mark Twain takes our ideas about heaven and turns them upside down...I think his point is that we concentrate on our heavenly reward based on our vision of heaven - right or wrong.

David says

In this hilarious, vaguely science-fictional satire on Christianity's traditional (and parochial) views of Heaven, Twain considers the ramifications of such preconceptions of the afterlife.

Twain's lofty imagination soars with the archangels (and a newly inducted nameless barkeep from Jersey City!) but the effect is a refreshing, complete deflation of our self-significance with respect to the cosmos.

Free to read at Project Gutenberg

Jordan says

I always imagined Mark Twain as an eccentric older gentleman, sitting in a rocking chair in Connecticut, smoking pipes, talking about steamboats, and *taking weird selfies* because his autobiography is full of them.

That's all true, of course, but the WTF-truth is that he was also contemplating death, the afterlife, and how it's all bullshit. And he wrote about it occasionally for forty years. And grudgingly published this EXTRACT from it as a Christmas cozy because he was broke and needed money.

Let's all say it together: WTF.

But, the results are amazing. Twain envisions a deceased steamboat Captain Stormfield riding a motorized comet to Heaven. Only he overshoots, and lands in the wrong Heaven. In Alien Heaven, humans are now the aliens, and treated as real weirdos who ask for things like halos and wings. The "aliens" (non-earthlings) don't even know where Earth is, and have to look it up in an intergalactic atlas. The LOL moment: inside the atlas, they find that Earth is labeled as "Wart."

But, eventually, Stormfield makes it to the right Heaven, with all the hosannas and choruses and Praise Jeebus stuff... and he finds it very boring. And tiring. And he has all sorts of questions for some old-people friends he makes in Heaven.

The book is a riot. Twain is always so flippant with the Holy Ghost, and it's great to see it shining through, and unexpectedly in a Science-Fiction-y sort of way. I admire his bravery, his candor, and above all, his humor.

Buy this title from Powell's Books.

Erik Graff says

My grandmother introduced me to Twain. She didn't do it directly by shoving his books at me, but indirectly, simply by having them around her cottage in Michigan. What I started with weren't the common Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer things. They came, but only later, in high school. What she had on offer were his later, darker works.

It's been quite a while since I read Stormfield, but I still remember the satisfaction Twain's ridiculing of Christian notions of heaven and the afterlife gave me. I'd never really believed in the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus or the Christian God, but I'd been hesitant to admit it publicly. The rabbit, fairy and Xmas stuff were for kids, stupid ones at that, but the God thing was something grownups sometimes talked about, something which many families went out to listen to stories about every Sunday. It, God, was different, a taboo, albeit highly suspect, topic. Twain, however, being famous, made skepticism respectable, even quite fun.

Anthony McElroy says

'You see happiness ain't a thing in itself-it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant. That's all it is'

A marvelous ride through the afterlife, on Twain's comet of celestial exploration. I found this to be close to my favourite of Twain's short works and a brilliant first read if one has the inclination to turn their ear to his more miniscule works. There is a lot going on in this tale and plenty to keep to the pages turning. Beautiful!

wally says

Another from Twain. This one looks to be a fanciful tale...even the title should tell the reader that. Begins:

"Well, when I had been dead about thirty years I begun to get a little anxious. Mind you, had been whizzing through space all that time, like a comet. *Like* a comet! Why, Peters, I laid over the lot of them! Of course there warn't any of them going my way, as a steady thing, you know, because they travel in a long circle like the loop of a lasso, whereas I was pointed as a dart for the Hereafter; but I happened on one every now and then that was going my way for an hour or so, and then we had a bit of a brush together."

He gets in a race with another comet, the captain of that one, yes, captain (and crew) throwing over some...brimstone was it?...to lighten the load, pick up speed? Heh! So, he gets to the bright lights only his course had strayed a bit and so he's entering by way of another door or gate.

Started this one last night and I'm about 21% complete.

update

completed, finished, Saturday morning, 31 MAR 12, 9:39 a.m. e.s.t.

An entertaining take on heaven through Twain's eyes, short and sweet, no surprises other than one early on, one of those passing through the customs, some Star Wars-like creature...maybe it had four heads and six legs, along those lines. But then the good Captain is redirected toward the Wart's (earth is known as Wart in heaven) gate.

The story is initially told through the eyes of Captain Eli Stormfield, addressing someone by the name of Peters....and then as he is redirected toward the correct heaven, the story is told as a back-and-forth between Stormfield and an old bald-headed angel by the name of Sandy McWilliams, from somewhere in New Jersey.

Seems everyone is in attendance, Napoleon, Mahomet, Shakespeare and Sir Richard Duffer, Baronet, a nobleman from Hoboken. The greatest military genius our world (Wart) ever produced was a brick-layer from somewhere back of Boston--died during the Revolution--by the name of Absalom Jones. Shakespeare and the rest have to walk behind a common tailor from Tennessee, by the name of Billings...

Heh! This is from Twain, so it is a hoot. Light, entertaining read. And since all are present, how'd it be possible for someone to be knocked off their feed?....unless they're of the mindset that they and their kind are to be the only ones present?

Illiterate says

Short successful sacrilegious satire.

Ca says

This is a very funny book but with a bite. If you are expecting Tom Finn, get ready for a must-be-taller-than-this ride. I consider myself Christian, but I don't understand peoples ideas of heaven. Do they really think it through? What do they expect to do with their time? Twain's take on heaven is satirically humorous. Challenge your preconceptions and join Captain Stormfield on his voyage.

Makomai says

Ovviamente il paradiso di Twain e' la terra. Lungi dal dare una sua visione dell'aldila' (in cui probabilmente non credeva neanche, almeno a giudicare dall'ironia - a volte feroce - riservata ai concetti tradizionali del paradiso cristiano), Twain fornisce - attraverso la descrizione di un paradiso molto terreno - i soliti pistolotti da vecchio saggio, per una ricetta di vita essenzialmente basata sugli adagi "sii contento di cio' che hai" e "cerca di guardare alla vita con po' di umilta', realismo, sale in zucca ed obiettivita". Non mancano metafore pregnanti, (soprattutto per l'epoca) battute ironiche e vere perle, come non mancano momenti di ossimorica commozione divertita. Manca invece un po' dell'arguzia e dell'umorismo che contraddistingue il miglior Twain (che risuonano unicamente - nella forma del sarcasmo - nella breve, spassosa parte finale della "lettera dell'angelo del protocollo"). Resta comunque uno sguardo lucido (ed un po' naif) sulla vita,

accompagnato da un'ironica presa in giro delle credenze ultraterrene.

Karla says

Second half is funnier than the first, but the whole thing is worth a read. Twain's satire of puny mortals' image of Heaven contrasted with how it really is was hilarious. Highlights were the failed attempt to use the angel wings for flying (they're more for decorative purposes), the mistaken belief that everyone's equal up there (hah, as if!), and the fact that there are billions of souls with nothing else to do so some new arrivals get a huge welcoming committee.

This was referenced in *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, that Twain wrote it during the Civil War when Heaven became a sort of comforting Victorian parlor, and cloying sentimentality drove that evolution. But it wasn't published until 1908 or so, at the end of Twain's life.

Mick Natco says

Believe it or not this and *Eve's Diary* are the first Mark Twain I've read. Both brilliant. In this book, Captain Stormfield discovers the true meaning of eternal peace.

Alex Sarll says

The early 20th century's dawning realisation of mankind's insignificance in the great scheme of things would inspire HP Lovecraft's cosmic horror, but in Twain's hands it instead becomes a comedy of manners. So one puny Earthling reaches the afterlife only to learn that nobody considers our planet of much account, and that even within the human ghetto of Heaven the once-mighty and the white are rather less esteemed than he'd anticipated. And as for the heavenly choir, and the wings...well, strictly rookie errors. It's a curious mix of metaphysical explanations for why you're better off sticking with what you know, and reminders of how limited human perspectives can be. But for all that, and being incomplete, it's still a lot better, a lot more alive and questioning, than many great writers' final works.

Marts (Thinker) says

This was the last story that Twain published during his lifetime. It's quite interesting, its a bit of a satirical look at heaven in comparison to the religious view that most of us are taught.

The protagonist Captain Stormfield is really disappointed when he finally gets to heaven I guess, after all they're not just singing or playing harps all day, or flying around with their grand wings, nor just sitting around chatting with the patriarchs and being all awestruck. And some of those you least expect to be there are most present such as Buddha and Mohammed...

This reminds me of the book *The Autobiography of Methuselah* by John Kendrick Bangs which I read early last year...

I think this short story is most enjoyable and I'll recommend it to any and everyone :)

Deb says

Twain uses his character, Capt. Stormfield, to skewer the traditional Christian iconography around heaven. In Twain's heaven carrying a palm leaf gets tiresome, so people tend to hand theirs off to the newly arrived, singing in the heavenly chorus lasts maybe a couple of hours before it loses its charm, and other surprises await poor Stormfield.

Maria says

Everything is relative, even heaven. Twain has a marvelous time letting us know that not only are we, as individuals, going to be small fry in heaven, but our whole universe is a speck on heaven's map. He points out that one cannot have happiness without sorrow (again one exists only relative to the other) and that what we have been told about heaven is not well thought out. Just look at how one would select how old one might wish to appear there. Thought provoking as usual, Twain brings up many issues. I think my favorite is that of Edward J. Billings and his inability to get published on Earth while in heaven Shakespeare and Homer wait on him like servants. Twain has a way of skewing one's perspective that is delightful.

Liz says

What an interesting and entertaining short story! I haven't read any Mark Twain in years, and I have a feeling I've really been missing out.

Teresa Lafferty says

This is one of the many books that got Mark Twain branded a heretic. But he was no heretic! He was right... who wants to sit around heaven all day doing nothing but flying on cherub's wings and playing harps. This again is great humor. Twain points out what our heart already knows to be true: heaven cannot be based on millenia of boredom. I love this story!

Eva says

This is my favorite work of Mar Twain's. I cried page after page and it made me feel really good about my faith and my convictions.

Muthuvel says

"I begin to see that a man's got to be in his own Heaven to be happy."

"Perfectly correct," says he. "Did you imagine the same heaven would suit all sorts of men?"

I came to know about this work of Samuel Clemens (which also happened to be his last work) from Kurt Vonnegut. I remember reading Vonnegut somewhere he mentioned a tailor from Tennessee named Billings who became a superior prophet to Shakespeare and Homer in the heaven after he died of hunger. He was able to write poems that powerful but his neighbors were too dumb to realise it. He never published anything in his entire life but the innate ability of his had got the reward it deserved, at least, from the author's sanctimonious take on our tales of the heaven and related ideas. People from other worlds, the relativeness of heavenly routines and more secluded, misunderstood people like Billings are packed into this short satirical tale. I wonder if they were really people like Billings used to live here. As Vonnegut used to say, he's up in heaven now. Pity them or pity us?

Cansu says

3.5/5
