

Mark Twain's
Visit to Heaven
And Other Short Stories

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DIVINE DECEPTION

Samuel Beck was a quiet man who abhorred distress and disorder of any kind. He could not tolerate hard rock music to be played in his vicinity and went to such great lengths to avoid it that he had once moved out of his house when his only child, a teenage daughter named Ruth, had become fascinated with Led Zeppelin. She had quickly relented.

His wife Elizabeth enjoyed Sam's quiet stability. She had picked him out and pursued him on that account during their senior year of high school, and had succeeded in acquiring a wedding ring after six years of steady but uninspired dating because by then it had become too difficult for Sam to upset what had already been set in motion.

For the last 23 years Sam had been the accountant for a five-store chain of convenience food stores in Flagstaff, Arizona named *Come 'N Get It*, and, although not even a part owner, he was proud of its modest success. Expansion to a sixth store had been planned for three years, but the local economy had never been prosperous enough to execute the plan.

Samuel Beck had lived his whole life in Flagstaff. He had once traveled as far as the Grand Canyon as a teenager, but only after unrestrained peer pressure had been applied. He had not been impressed, had found the trip tiresome and had lost three of the few friends he had as a result. He had never once set foot outside Arizona.

It was with great dismay, then, that Elizabeth received Sam's announcement that he intended to travel to India for one week—alone. His daughter Ruth looked forward to the respite from stability, but even she was confused. Sam calmly stated that he had

always wanted to see the Taj Mahal before he died and that the time had come to put that plan in motion.

Elizabeth protested quietly that she had not once heard of this plan, but secretly worried that Sam had contracted cancer, was about to die and did not want to upset her by telling her. This upset her tremendously.

She called their doctor and was assured by him that Sam was in excellent health. Sam had been restless lately, and a trifle worried, that was true, Dr. Wagner had said, but his blood pressure had remained just slightly above normal and the five checkups he had done for Sam in the last year had all produced the same result of absolutely no health problems.

Elizabeth watched Sam's preparations for the trip helplessly. He had cut a dozen or more pictures of the Taj Mahal out of magazines, and these he kept taped up around their bedroom, studying that exquisite shrine to a lost spouse as if he were contemplating constructing its twin in Flagstaff. But he said no more about the trip, other than that his departure date was January 4th and that he would be back on the 13th.

As January 4th approached, Elizabeth noticed Sam's apprehensions grow. Although she had not been aware of the five checkups Sam had had in the last year, she had been aware that he had become restless. Something indefinable had shifted deep within his core and Elizabeth felt certain that some fatal disease must be the source.

She called Dr. Wagner again on January 2nd. He remained firm in his analysis. Sam was in excellent health for a five-foot-seven, 48-year-old man, other than being a mere 15 pounds over his ideal weight.

Elizabeth also asked Dr. Wagner when Sam's anxieties had begun. Dr. Wagner looked up the date in his records. Almost exactly a year earlier, on January 7th, was his answer. Elizabeth never came any closer to understanding Sam's affliction.

Sam, of course, had never told anyone about the dream. He had first had the dream on January 5th, so unsettling yet absurd

in its way. He had had the dream again on February 5th. Then again on March 5th and April 5th. Every month after that he became anxious on the 4th. And every month he dreamt the dream on the 5th. By August he was contriving methods of staying awake all day and all night on the 5th of every month, but invariably he would doze off for a few minutes and dream the dream. On December 6th he gave in and made his plans to go to India.

Since he had never flown before, Sam took the bus to Los Angeles, delaying the inevitable. But once on the bus, Sam relaxed. His plan to nearly eliminate January 5th from his life by crossing the international dateline pleased him. He boarded an evening flight from Los Angeles to New Delhi on January 4th. He remained alert and confident until the dateline had been crossed. Successful, he soon fell asleep, 30,000 feet higher than he had ever been before. He did not dream the dream.

When Sam landed in New Delhi late on January 6th he stayed at a hotel near the airport. In the morning he went directly to the train station, where he bought a round-trip, first-class ticket to Gwalior, with a stop in Agra. He felt foolish doing this, but was elated after he had the ticket in his pocket. So elated that the near total confusion of the New Delhi train station did not dismay him.

Sam had arranged to stay three nights at the Sheraton in Agra, as part of his trip, but from the moment he got off the train he felt uncomfortable. His discomfort continued to increase after he had checked into his room. So he took his camera out, and an extra roll of film, and walked the two kilometers to the Taj Mahal to ease his anxieties.

As he walked, Sam started to notice his surroundings, the dirt, the poverty, the unbelievable living conditions of thousands of emaciated, pleasant-looking people. He ignored the many pleas of unhired bicycle rickshaw drivers, who continued to trail behind him as he walked, and wondered in disgust why they were never shown in pictures of the Taj Mahal. He could not possibly have felt more uncomfortable.

Relief came momentarily when he walked into the gardens outside the entrance to the Taj Mahal, but soon he was accosted by sellers of ridiculous trinkets. Sam hurried past everyone and onto the grounds, but the Taj Mahal failed to capture his attention. He was distracted by every sign of disorder and decay. His disgust was even aroused by the fact that the river behind the Taj Mahal had almost dried-up.

Sam quickly shot picture after picture, using up both rolls of film, and then hired a cab to take him back to the hotel. He had stayed at the white marble tomb, inlaid with precious stones, less than 15 minutes.

Sam insisted that the cab driver wait for him as he picked up his bags. He checked out of the Sheraton, leaving behind full payment for two of the three nights he had reserved in a settlement quickly worked out with the manager, and then returned to the Agra train station. In an hour he was on a train to Gwalior, two hours south of Agra, thoroughly agitated by the living conditions he had seen.

Sam had entered a foreign world unprepared for its reality. His previous failures to visit even nearby Arizona reservations had left him helpless in the face of such widespread misery. But, surprisingly, the suddenness of the extremes, while distasteful to Sam, had actually served to bolster his resolve to continue his probably crazy quest.

As he checked into his Gwalior hotel, which was previously a maharajah's palace, Sam started to ask the clerk a question. But he stopped in mid-sentence. The clerk protested that he understood English very well and would be obliged to help with any question Sam might have.

So Sam finally asked the question he had come to India to ask. He asked the clerk whether he had ever heard of a man named Hanumananda.

The clerk smiled. "No. Not likely. Mother not so nice to name boy that," he said pleasantly. "Means the bliss of Hanuman, sort of," he added.

"Then it is a name, a real name?" Sam asked.

"Certainly could be, I suppose. But other children would laugh. Means monkey-faced god's happiness."

"Monkey-faced god?"

"Yes. Hanuman. Great hero. Slayed vicious demons."

"But you don't know anyone named Hanumananda?"

"No. No one."

"And no one famous from Gwalior is named Hanumananda?"

"No one."

"No politician? Or actor? No one?"

"Not with that name."

"Thanks. Thanks very much," Sam said, and went up to his room and slept for 16 hours. He did not dream the dream.

Sam woke up again in the early afternoon of January 8th. He walked around for an hour or two, not speaking to anyone, wondering how, and whether, to proceed, and then returned to the hotel to eat dinner. A wave of exhaustion swept through his body as he ate. An hour later he was fast asleep again.

In the morning he decided firmly that, based on his conversation with the hotel clerk, his question was not completely absurd. So he began to talk to anyone who would stop on the street and listen to his question. Inevitably there would soon be a small crowd of people around him, often more than a dozen and occasionally over 30, everyone trying to be helpful.

Sam found to his surprise that he never felt uncomfortable or threatened being the center of attention in these small crowds. The people were friendly and were obviously trying to help, but his attempts to converse sometimes failed because Sam only spoke English. Still he would patiently state and restate his question: do you know or have you heard of a man from Gwalior named Hanumananda? And he studied every face in every crowd.

Quite often someone who spoke enough English to translate Sam's question would join the group, and then the discussions commenced anew. Curious name. Silly name. Brave name. Strong name. Sam heard many translated comments about the name. But no one had ever heard of a man named Hanumananda.

Sam tirelessly asked his question. At the end of three full days he calculated that he had probably succeeded in asking his question of over 2,000 people each day, and had left thousands more perplexed because no translator had ever appeared. He also figured that people would mention over dinner the story of a foreigner searching for a man from Gwalior named Hanumananda. And he was right.

When Sam woke up on January 12th he felt very relaxed, very happy. His fears had subsided and his sense of duty had been assuaged. There was no man from Gwalior named Hanumananda. It had all been absurd. But he felt much better.

That day he set aside his quest and decided to visit the Gwalior Fort perched above the city before leaving on the evening train for New Delhi. His conversations with thousands of Indians had dispelled all his disgust. He had been charmed by these people and wanted to see their ancient treasures.

The clerk at his hotel suggested that Sam approach the Gwalior Fort by the back route so that he wouldn't miss the gigantic Jain statues of the naked saint, Mahavira, which had been carved in the side of the mountain. The taxi driver said simply "old, very old" as they passed them by while driving very slowly uphill.

The Gwalior Fort itself was old, a medieval structure of thick stone walls, a fortification from a time when walls still provided protection. Sam liked the sense of definition and order those walls must have given to Gwalior. The sprawl of the modern city, spreading out from the Fort in all directions without any appearance of organization or order, was not nearly as appealing.

Sam wandered over the grounds of the Fort, past the relatively new Sikh temple, where people still came to pray with unshod feet and turbaned heads, and on to the ancient Hindu temples to Shiva and Vishnu.

Sam thought those massive piles of stone, with jagged, fantastic carvings, lacked the clean lines and symmetry of the Taj Mahal, which he realized now he had greatly admired. So, in a belated attempt at cultural fairness, he sat down on a large stone outside

the temple to Shiva to give its peculiar charm time to persuade him. He blinked his eyes in the bright light of the late morning and then closed them for a minute of rest. While his eyes were closed the dream came again. But this time Sam remained awake.

In the dream Sam was always seated on a high, white judicial throne. To his right, in a carved, dark wooden enclosure, stood five men: Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung and Hanumananda of Gwalior. A deep voice coming from his left, the source of which he could never see, asked Sam, "who among these men is the greatest demon of the 20th century? Whose desire for destruction, and enormous capacity to stir other men's hatreds, exceed anything seen before?" And Sam had always answered, without hesitation, "Hanumananda of Gwalior."

In the dream Hanumananda was always a short man, with a round dark face, peculiarly arched in the area around his nose and mouth, which Sam could now see made Hanumananda look somewhat monkey-like. An unforgettable thick and ugly scar ran down the whole left side of his face, from his forehead above his left eye to his chinbone. The intense, fiery hatred in his eyes was startling every time.

In the dream those eyes drew Sam inside Hanumananda's thoughts, where he could see flaming villages, mosques and temples, destroyed cities and deaths numbering more than a hundred million. Sam's fear of that disorder and destruction was nearly as intense as Hanumananda's hatred.

And in the dream the ending was always the same. The deep voice, now located somewhere within Sam, whispered, "you are our hope, our only hope."

But in those restful moments in front of Shiva's ancient temple, Sam's dream did not reach its end. In the middle of the visions of destruction Sam opened his eyes and laughed. What a ridiculous thing to dream about this friendly land, he thought.

Feeling light and cheerful, happy that he had put an end to the slight madness his recurring dream had induced, Sam walked through the Gwalior Fort's front gates and along the ancient steep

stone street leading back down to the city. He noticed the small details of how the ancient Fort had yielded to simpler lives: the small museum built into one wall along the side of the ancient road was closed for lunch, the arched military gateway leading to the Fort was decorated with drying laundry, and the open square just in front of the gateway was filled with a fresh fruit market bustling with activity.

Sam walked up to one of the carts and surveyed the bananas, oranges and apples piled on it. A young boy, not more than seven years old, smiled at him and pointed to the bananas. Sam nodded yes and held up three fingers. The boy picked up an old knife to cut the bananas off a larger bunch.

The rickety wooden carts, dozens of sellers, child labor law violations and inefficiencies of scale and distribution which had bothered his accountant's mind in Agra had given way to a joy in the similarities between this market and the *Come 'N Get It* convenience stores in Flagstaff. The oranges and apples were nearly identical, the bananas only slightly smaller.

Sam reached in his pocket for 10 rupees, fished them out and handed them to the boy. As he began to walk away with his three bananas he noticed the boy had run to his father, who was seated nearby on the dirty sidewalk in the ineffective shade of a scraggly tree. The boy's father was a short man, with a round dark face, peculiarly arched in the area around his nose and mouth. Sam was startled, but immediately noticed that the man did not have a scar on his face. Then the man looked up and saw Sam staring at him, and smiled pleasantly.

"Hanumananda?" Sam had to ask, his voice quivering.

The man nodded his head unmistakably.

Sam had trouble remembering the next few seconds. When his vision cleared he had the old fruit knife in his right hand, slashing away in every direction. A boy and a young woman clung to his arms and legs, trying to stop his madness. In front of him lay Hanumananda, his face bleeding from an ugly cut which ran down the whole left side of his face, from his forehead above his

left eye to his chinbone. Sam heard his own voice shouting, "I must kill him. I must kill him."

When he had finally been pinned down by the other fruit sellers, Sam's struggles ended. He could lift his head just enough to see that Hanumananda was sitting on the ground, crying uncontrollably, rubbing dirt into the wound on his face with his left hand and holding the body of the boy who had sold the bananas with his right. Next to Hanumananda lay a young woman, bleeding profusely from more than 20 wounds.

Sam did not remember much of the rest of the day, the arrival of the police, the dirty jail or the confused conversation in English with an Indian lawyer. He preferred to dream, but dreams would not come.

The next day he was arraigned in an old courthouse, once beautiful, but for centuries decrepit, decayed and disorderly. As he left the courthouse, escorted by the police, hundreds of people quickly surrounded them on the steps, pushing ever closer, jostling, touching, begging to see the foreigner, the murderer.

And from the top step, speaking to thousands, was a short man with a round dark face. An ugly wound ran down the whole left side of his face, from his forehead above his left eye to his chinbone. His name, Hanumananda, was on everyone's lips.

As the crowd pushed in on Sam in yet another surge of anger, he crossed his arms over his chest in a vain attempt to prevent his breath from being squeezed out of him. He looked around desperately, seeking help, but instead caught one last glimpse, over the shoulder of an unconscious woman being crushed up against him, of a speaker igniting ancient fears. The intense, fiery hatred in his eyes was startling.