

But I digress, which I find an easy detour when the excursus concerns tobacco; even more so than when I hold forth on the other delight of discerning men. I refer, of course, to women.

I then ventured to turn the conversation toward a personal matter.

“Tell me, Durchlauscht,” said I, “if I may ask; am I scheduled for Hell?”

With a wry smile, Satan replied, “You have occupied most of your life as a journalist, a humorist, and a satirist; could you expect any lesser reward than spending eternity in my well-warmed domain?”

“No, indeed,” said I, “but will I find agreeable company there?”

“The finest,” he assured me. “We are, in fact, richly overstocked with people who followed those professions on Earth; while, were you allowed to make an inspection tour of Heaven, you would encounter nary a journalist, humorist, or satirist there. How deliciously poignant it is to see them in my establishment, attempting to spout witticisms and pungent commentary while being barbecued on a white-hot grill!”

“And,” I asked, with a slight tremor in my voice, “is that to be my fate?”

“Nothing so mundane,” Satan said. “For you, the greatest possible torment is in store: being made to chain-smoke forevermore the American cigars you abominate. And now, I really must be going, for I have an appointment to escort the soul of a prominent churchman to the nether regions within the hour.”

My horror at his words was indescribable, and I resolved straightway to quit smoking, in the hope that he might decide on the grill for me after all, if I had finally eschewed tobacco in this life. I may say, with some justifiable pride in my willpower, that my resolution held firm for a full fifteen minutes after I awoke the next morning.