

# The Judgment of Stan Wellcroft

by Olen Henry Rambow

“GO TO HELL!” Stan shouted, pressing “end” on his cell phone. His fingers ached for an old-fashioned receiver to slam; hanging up in rage just wasn’t what it used to be.

“Everything okay, Mr. Wellcroft?” called his secretary.

“Yes! Everything is *fine!*” he yelled.

DAMN *Time Magazine!* What the *hell* good was being the richest man in the world if they wouldn’t listen to him? Didn’t they know he could crush them? He could write a check for their whole company without batting an eye!

No time for them now, though. He had a meeting to go to.

“My car had better be ready!” he shouted, swiveling his chair around and stepping into the elevator that waited open behind his desk to take him down to his limo, which *should* be waiting as well. Then to the airstrip, where his jet waited. . . .

Leaning back in the Jacuzzi on his 747, Stan’s mood was improved. His peace was disturbed only by the article in *Time*; but his people would work overtime tonight and get it cut.

***BOOM!!!***

The plane jerked violently, and the girls on either side of him screamed. Stan cursed as water sloshed out onto the tiger skin floor. “Just a minute,” he said, slipping his arms out from behind the girls’ backs.

There came another jolt as he reached for his towel, and the plane began trembling furiously. Forgetting his clothes, he stormed the cockpit. He would have the pilot’s skin—even if it turned out the man was having a heart attack.

But when he burst naked through the cockpit door, his tirade died on the tip of his tongue. The cockpit was flooded with impossible light, as if they were flying through the sun.

“What the hell is this?!” Stan demanded.

“I don’t know,” the pilot said through gritted teeth as he worked the controls frantically.

Stan’s mind raced. Someone wanted him dead. *But who?* The possibilities were endless. “DAMN IT! WHY NOW?” he roared, as though an attempt on his life would have been more welcome at another time.

The pilot gasped suddenly, and Stan cursed as the plane veered, throwing him against the side of the cockpit. He had seen it too, though. As he clutched the wall, the image hung frozen before his eyes, and he could think of nothing else: Had there actually been somebody *walking* in the clouds?

There was a sharp crack, maybe a window breaking, and then a boom, followed by a loud rush of wind. Stan felt the wall pressing against him so hard that however he tried he couldn’t push himself away.

But suddenly none of that mattered. A soul-piercing trumpet sounded, shattering the elements, and reality evaporated. . . .

Next thing Stan knew, he was standing in a place he’d never been before but recognized immediately. It was a vast hall that seemed to go on forever to either side and behind, packed with a multitude of people. Its ceiling reached above the sky. Yet somehow it still had the feel of an enclosed room.

The hall’s vastness wasn’t its most remarkable characteristic, though. At the front stood a great throne, resplendent white and as big as infinity, yet strangely ordinary. On either side, facing it, were countless white-clad people who appeared to be waiting.

Stan stared in awe. The throne eclipsed everything else. Even with the crowd around him, he felt as though he were standing alone before it.

Lightning flashed, and there was a man on the throne. Stan realized it was the person he had seen in the clouds. He shone like the sun, but somehow Stan could still see him clearly. His hair and robes flowed like rivers of snow, and he exuded both wisdom of age and vigor of youth. Out of his mouth extended a shining sword with an edge that would cut death. This, of course, could only be God.

“Ha!” Stan barked, and the multitude jumped. With a sardonic smile, he shook his head. “The ‘born again’ fools told me this would happen.”

Laughter rippled through the multitude. God, however, didn’t look amused. Stan went on, though, emboldened by the laughter.

“I’ll tell you what I told them.” He pointed a finger straight at God’s face, sneering. “Where the hell have you been?”

The multitude surged in agreement with his question.

Stan gestured around him. “Where were you when they needed you? I don’t even *know* the worst that happened—slavery, the holocaust . . .” He counted on his fingers the atrocities he could recall. “And these are just the tip of the iceberg, I’m sure.”

He surveyed the multitude. Every soul that had ever lived was there. “It looks like . . . *everybody* . . . is here. And we have time, don’t we? Let’s get the story straight once and for all.”

As he looked about, he suddenly realized that he knew every face in the crowd. He hadn’t known them in life, but he knew them now. All they’d been through. Women raped and slaughtered in war. Children dead of starvation. Birth defects, cancers. Much more and much worse than he ever could have imagined.

In a single moment Stan witnessed an eternity of suffering, and he was staggered. He felt, for the first time ever, lucky. And also for the first time, he found himself speaking with sincerity on behalf of others. Case by case, Stan presented the grievances of every soul before God.

“Where were you, God?” he demanded at last. “You were right here, weren’t you—sitting on this throne, watching it all. You did nothing! And you dare—you *dare!*—judge *us*. *You*, who *gave* us the power to do evil! Who *gave* us our capacity to suffer! You had the power to intervene at *any* time but never lifted a finger! No, God. It is not *you* who should judge *us*. *We* will judge *you*! Yes, Judgment Day has come. And we—find—you—GUILTY!”

The multitude erupted. Blasphemies were hurled at the Throne, and the hall was filled with cries for justice. Stan held up his hands for silence, and the mob obeyed as if he were God.

“As for sentencing . . . Your own devices will suffice. A lake of fire. Smoke rising forever. *You* suffer what you planned for the souls not included in your Book!”

More shouts broke out. But then God spoke.

“Stan . . .” Silence blanketed the multitude as God’s voice filled their souls. “I understand your grievances.”

The crowd exhaled collectively, relieved that God didn’t seem more upset.

“Here’s what I’ll do.”

The multitude leaned forward anxiously.

“To all who agree with Stan’s judgment I shall hand over this kingdom. And I shall take no more part in it. You will be free from me forever.”

There it was. God had spoken.

The people hesitated on the brink of jubilation. Some were looking for a catch, and others were trying to work their minds around it all to determine whether it was a good thing. Had Stan not spoken at that moment, their resolve might have faltered.

“Agreed,” he said simply. And the multitude celebrated, their faith now resting solidly on Stan. . . .

Once God had left, it seemed natural for Stan to take the throne. His experience as a CEO had prepared him well, and he was as content ruling the kingdom of heaven as he’d ever been in life. Had he known things would turn out this way, he might have gone through life with a hair more grace.

But soon the headaches piled up, just as they had at his old company. People couldn’t get along. Work didn’t get done. And *everyone* bothered him about *everything*.

Just a week later, Stan found himself hiking through wilderness, desperate to escape it all. He trudged on for endless miles, and finally came upon a great stone wall that stretched on forever. Though he couldn’t see what lay on the other side, he longed to get there. But the wall proved impervious to everything he could think of. He followed it for days, searching for an end, and eventually reached an enormous barred gate through which he could see the land beyond.

“Is anyone there?” he yelled, rattling the handle.

After a moment, a gatekeeper appeared on the other side. “Sorry. We’re closed. Nobody’s permitted to enter anymore.” He examined the handle to be sure Stan hadn’t damaged it.

“What is this place?” Stan asked.

“You can’t be serious! Why, everyone knows—” the gatekeeper made a sweeping gesture that took in all the land on his side of the fence. “This is heaven!”

“But—but—” Stan spluttered.

“Wait, I know you.” Recognition lit the gatekeeper’s eyes. “You’re Stan Wellcroft—‘The King of Hell!’ Oh, there’s *definitely* no place for *you* here!”

With that, the gatekeeper turned and walked away, and Stan was left standing alone outside the gate, gnashing his teeth.