

# The Hell You Did Not Say

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**E**UPHEMISMS FOR HELL are commonly considered antiquated. The blunt word in its own right has such frequency today that we need a new term to emphasize the hot wish. An older and more cautious generation found substitutes for the nether regions, at least in polite society and in the presence of ladies. Daring authors in the nineteenth century might write h--l, but, commonly, their characters uttered less direct imprecations:<sup>1</sup> *Go to blazes! What the blazes!* (Mathews, I, 131); *Go to the deuce (dickens)!* for devil or hell (Oxford); *Go to grass!* (Mathews, I, 734); *To come like a bat out of heaven*; that is, instead of hell (Whiting, 9. 222); *What the heck!* (Raine, *Run of the Brush*, 1936); *By heckelum!* (Hills, p. 260); *Oh hen!* (Hills, p. 260), or similar mild expletives. Although such creations are interesting enough evasions in themselves, another kind of pattern makes use of names of either places or persons which are equivalents for hell. The following examples derive chiefly from a twentieth-century author, William MacLeod Raine, who might be called the most prolific progenitor of western stories (more than eighty). His good men and bad use a language which is surprisingly mild, when we consider the roughness of their deeds and the nature of their background. They never swear in a forthright fashion before ladies, and they rarely use unadorned expletives, even among themselves.<sup>2</sup> They follow the code of earlier times:

*Guinea*: (pronounced *gin-ny*, with hard g): Now the kid's telling Soapy to go to Guinea (*Crooked Trails and Straight*, 1913, p. 99). See

<sup>1</sup> Sources are as follows: E. C. Hills, "Exclamations in American English," *Dialect Notes*, 5, pt. vii (1924), pp. 253-284; Mitford M. Mathews, *A Dictionary of Americanisms*, 2 vols, Chicago, 1951; *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, 1937; William MacLeod Raine. See separate titles. B. J. Whiting, "The Devil and Hell in Current English Literary Idiom," *Harvard Studies and Notes*, 20, 201-247.

<sup>2</sup> I noted: hell's bells (*Bonanza*, 1926, p. 170; *The Fighting Tenderfoot*, 1929, p. 174; and *Sons of the Saddle*, 1938, p. 91); hell's hinges (*Bonanza*, 1926, p. 4; and *Colorado*, 1927, p. 58). The substitutes for damn, God and Jesus are too numerous to list here.

*Gehenna*: the place of future torment; hell; hell-fire. *2 Kings*, xxiii, 10 and numerous other allusions. See also *Hills*, p. 259.

*Hades*: I don't give a hoot in Hades (*Whiting*, p. 224; also p. 221) Still heard orally.

*Hail Columbia*: To give someone Hail Columbia (*Mathews*, I, 763 in a range from 1854—1946).

*Helen*: *Helen and Maria* or *Hell and Maria* (*Hills*, p. 260); *Go to Helen B. Happy!* (oral); *Go to Helen Hunter* (J. R. Caldwell, 1958); *Go to Helena Montana* (oral, 1958).<sup>3</sup>

*Halifax*: You go to Halifax! (*Bucky O'Connor*, 1907, p. 107; *Wyoming*, 1907, p. 246; *Mavericks*, 1911, p. 131). See also *Hills*, p. 260.

*Holy Ned*: He raised Holy Ned (*Whiting*, p. 246, 1932).

*Mexico*: Who in Mexico wants to accept Haight's offer? (*Troubled Waters*, 1918, p. 192); Who in Mexico are you? (*Texas Man*, 1928, p. 189); Why in Mexico do you ride around in them clothes? (*The Fighting Tenderfoot*, 1929, p. 3); Oh, go to Mexico! (*The Black Tolts*, 1932, p. 18); What in Mexico is this all about? (*Border Breed*, 1935, p. 63); To Mexico with handcuffs (*On the Dodge*, 1938, p. 130); How in Mexico did you get away with that? (*Sons of the Saddle*, 1938, p. 175).

*Nell's Bells*: For Nell's bells (*Hills*, p. 274. *Mathews*, I, 793).

*Sam Hill*: What in Sam Hill about? (*On the Dodge*, 1938, p. 113). See *Mathews*, II, 1451 (1839) and *Hills*, p. 276.

*Tophet*: It's hot as tophet (*Whiting*, 1931, p. 247). See *2 Kings*, xxiii, 10, also William Smith, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, III, 1563 for a long account. Still current.

*Tunket*: See *Mathews*, II, 1779 (1871). Possibly variant of tophet.

*Yuma*: She used to say that there was just one thin sheet of sandpaper between Yuma and hell (*Whiting*, 1935, p. 229). The hell analogy of this city is at least a century old. One hears of the native of Yuma who needed blankets in hell. *The Fighting Tenderfoot*, p. 92: Tom will last as long as a snowball in Yuma on July Fourth.

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Bjarne Ulvestad, a former colleague, now at the University of Bergen, Norway, called my attention to similar allusions in Scandinavia and Germany: Gå til Helgeland; Gå til Helgeland; and Gå til Helsinke (Helsinki).