

God and Charlie Smithers

Charlie had not had a good day. In fact nothing had gone right for him since he got up. He'd slept in, fallen over the cat (which then bit him), dropped the milk, burnt the toast and missed the bus, so that he'd arrived late at work.

Charlie was a simple soul. He didn't ask much of life: a few pints with his mates at the local; an occasional night out (or, better still, night in!) with his girlfriend and a win now and then on the horses. He wasn't a heavy drinker or gambler; he just liked a pint or two and the occasional flutter.

That was something else that had gone wrong; he'd slipped out to the local bookies to put a bet on (he had a mate who knew someone who worked at the stables where the horse was trained and said it was a dead cert) and the boss had caught him and given him a right telling-off, for the second time that day. What was worse, the race was at 3:15pm and as far as he knew, the nag was still running when he left work at 5:30pm!

He was in a foul mood by the time he got home, but a bite of tea and the prospect of an evening at the local helped him to brighten up. He set off to walk to the pub, but as soon as he stuck his nose outside the door, it started to rain. When he was halfway there, a car went straight through a puddle right next to him, so he arrived at the pub soaked to the skin and feeling thoroughly miserable.

"Good evenin', Charlie," said the landlord, who believed in making his customers feel welcome, "Usual, is it?" "Aye, I'll have my usual, but what's good about it?" growled Charlie.

The landlord had been in the trade long enough to recognise a possible source of trouble when he saw one, but Charlie was a regular and a

good, paying customer, so for the moment, he bit his tongue, pulled Charlie a pint and said nothing more.

As the evening wore on, Charlie had had a few pints and decided to have a game of darts with his mates, but for some reason, his aim was all to pot. The climax came when, at the start of the second game, Charlie needed a double to start, but missed the board completely. One of his mates shouted, "What's the matter with you, Charlie? You couldn't hit the side of a barn if you were standing in it!"

That was it; Charlie wasn't going to stand for any more. He swung out wildly towards his mate, who managed to dodge easily enough, but the force of the intended blow made Charlie spin round, lose his balance, and fall into the waiting arms of the landlord, who firmly but gently escorted him from the premises, with the suggestion that he "Go home and sleep it off."

Charlie had sufficient of his wits about him to leave, but with an ill grace, and not before telling the landlord, in words of one syllable (and mostly four letters) exactly what he thought of him. The landlord was well used to the utterances brought on by alcoholic indignation. He just shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and went back to his other, more amenable, customers, leaving Charlie to stagger home and upstairs, where he fell onto the bed and was soon fast asleep, still fully clothed.

It seemed to Charlie that he hadn't been asleep long when he was rudely awakened by a loud blast on a trumpet. Not surprisingly, his first reaction was to ask, "Who the ----'s playing the trumpet at this hour?", but then it seemed like his body was getting up of its own accord and he was floating, then he blacked out.

When he came to, he was standing in a big, echoing sort of place, all marble pillars and gold leaf. He started to look around and, to his

amazement, saw lots and lots; thousands, maybe millions of people around him. What was even stranger, he saw old Mrs Brown, who used to run the corner shop. So what was strange about that? She'd been dead for fifteen years!

Then he started recognising other faces, through a sort of haze, but the trouble was, they were all dead! So he started thinking, at least as well as the man using a pneumatic drill inside his head would let him, and finally came to the conclusion that if they were all dead, and he was with them, then he must be dead as well.

As this realisation slowly dawned upon him, he noticed that the light was getting brighter and brighter, until he couldn't see anyone else and suddenly he felt very lonely and isolated.

That was when he heard, or rather felt, the voice, deep and booming, as though it came from a long way away, and yet as though it was right inside his head. "Charlie," said the voice.

"My God," said Charlie, who by now had to keep his eyes closed because he couldn't bear the light. "Well," said God, "that's a start, I suppose. When you were alive, you wouldn't even admit that I existed." He sounded stern, and yet, Charlie couldn't help thinking he was sort of laughing; not laughing at him, just gently teasing.

This made Charlie feel much braver, so he asked, "Are you really real, or am I just dreaming all this?" "Charlie," said God, a hint of exasperation in his voice, "I'm real. What does it take to make you believe?" "Alright," said Charlie, hastily, "Just checking, that's all. After all," he added, "if you were me and I was God, you'd want to be sure, wouldn't you?"

"Point taken," said God, "but that's enough of the small talk. Let's get down to business. You've been a bit of a bad lad, haven't you Charlie? Drink, women, gambling; shall I go on?" "Just a minute," said

Charlie, “do we have to do this with all the others listening?” “There are no others listening,” said God. “It’s just you and me, Charlie. We’re all alone together.” “Well, where are they all then?” “I’m all alone with each of them, too,” said God. “What, all those millions of people?” thought Charlie, “Nice trick if you can do it!”

“No trick, said God, “All part of the job. It’s in the job description; paragraph 1, ‘Omnipresent’.” “Here, how did you know what I was thinking?” asked Charlie. “Oh, don’t bother; I know, paragraph 2, ‘Omniscient’.” “Right,” said God. “Now, shall we get on?”

He started reading from a huge book all that Charlie had done since the day he was born. (Charlie didn’t know how he could tell that God was reading, as he still had his eyes closed, but somehow, he just knew.) I won’t bore you with the details, but it didn’t make pretty reading!

Charlie was feeling very uncomfortable and at first he tried to make excuses, but gradually, as the list of his misdeeds grew longer and longer, he shut up and just listened in embarrassed silence. The list seemed to go on and on for ages, then suddenly God finished and closed the book with a ‘snap!’.

“Is that it?” asked Charlie. “Can I get into heaven now?” But God spoke, very slowly and sadly now, “No, I’m sorry, Charlie, but you can’t. I’m very forgiving and although you did lots of things you shouldn’t have done, I could forgive you all of them, but you made it impossible, because you didn’t believe in me. If I don’t exist for you, then I can’t forgive you, and you can’t be admitted to heaven, because that doesn’t exist for you either. I’m really very sorry, Charlie, but you know what that means.”

As God was finishing speaking, the light grew less and less bright, and God’s voice seemed to come from further and further away, until in

the end Charlie could hardly hear him. As God finished, Charlie found himself all alone, in pitch dark and sinking, as though in a lift going down, and it was becoming warmer.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, getting hotter and hotter all the time, until he landed with a thud and woke up, in a cold sweat, against the radiator in his bedroom. As the mists of sleep cleared from his brain, Charlie heard a rattle and a muffled thud as his daily paper was pushed through the letterbox and landed on the mat.

Rubbing his eyes, Charlie picked himself up and went to collect the paper, but was startled to realise that it was the Sunday paper. He'd slept the clock round, and then some.

As he picked it up, he saw a flyer on his mat, with a muddy footprint on it from his drunken return. He found that it was an invitation to a new kind of church service starting that day in the local community hall just up the road.

He could hear, in his imagination, the sound of his mates' laughter, "You? Going to church? You must be going soft!" But the dream bothered him more than he would have liked to admit. "What have I got to lose?" he thought, as he washed, dressed and had some breakfast, then made his way to the hall.

Just as he was approaching the door, his worst fears seemed about to come true, as he saw two of his mates coming round the corner. He was just about to walk past, when to his amazement, they said, "Hello there, Charlie. Coming to join us?"

"What, you're going in there," he asked, incredulously. "Going in?" they said, "We're helping to run the service!" "But, but, you like a drink and all that," said Charlie. "So? Being a Christian doesn't mean that you have to be a killjoy, you know," was the reply.

When they went in, Charlie was surprised to find that people looked happy. They actually seemed to enjoy being there and they made him very welcome. His mates were up at the front, leading the service and some songs, which had a good modern feel and he actually quite enjoyed. After a few prayers, Tommy started talking about what Jesus had done for him and how his life had changed since he'd become a Christian.

As Charlie listened, a lot of what Tommy was saying went home to him and he began to want some of what Tommy had. He spoke so warmly about this Jesus that Charlie began to feel that he wanted to know him. As he finished speaking, Tommy said, "So, if there's anyone here this morning who God has spoken to, and who wants to know Jesus as their friend and Saviour, we'd like them just quietly to come up to the front at the end of the service and speak with either Harry or me."

They sang a few more songs, then Tommy repeated his invitation and closed the service with a blessing. As the people started to get up and leave, Charlie found himself wandering, a bit sheepishly, up to the front.

Tommy and Harry sat down with him, talked with him and prayed with him, explaining that he had first to acknowledge that God existed and to confess his sins to him as the first steps on the road to salvation.

"We don't want to know what you've done, Charlie. That's between you and God, but by confessing your sins to him you can take down the barrier between you and God that you've built up over the years, and build a bridge instead.

So, in silence, Charlie handed over to God all the wrong things he'd done in his life, and as he did so, he felt an amazing sense of relief; of peace and calm.

Afterwards, as he set off to walk home, he stepped out from a bus to cross the road – and was hit by a car coming the other way. As he lay on the road, Charlie heard the trumpet sound again, but this time louder, clearer, and through a mist he saw God waiting for him with open arms, saying, “Welcome home, Charlie.”

As a small crowd gathered round Charlie’s body, he muttered something barely audible, coughed and died. One of the bystanders whispered, “What did he say?” “I’m not sure,” came the reply, “it sounds a bit daft, but I think he said, “Thank you, God.”