Stagolee

Stagolee was, undoubtedly and without question, the baddest nigger that ever lived. Stagolee was so bad that the flies wouldn't even fly around his head in the summertime, and snow wouldn't fall on his house in the winter. He was bad, jim.

Stagolee grew up on a plantation in Georgia, and by the time he was two, he'd decided that he wasn't going to spend his life picking cotton and working for white folks. Uh-uh. And when he
was five, he left. Took off down the road, his guitar on his back, a deck of cards in one pocket and a .44 in the other. He figured that he didn't need nothing else. When the women heard him whup the blues on the guitar he could have whichever one he laid his mind on. Whenever he needed money, he could play cards. And whenever somebody tried to mess with him, he had his .44. So he was ready. A man didn't need more than that to get along with in the world.

By the time Stack was grown, his reputation had spread around the country. It got started one night in one of them honky-tonks down there in Alabama, and Stagolee caught some dude trying to deal from the bottom of the deck. Ol' Stack pulled out his .44 and killed him dead, right there on the spot. Then he moved the dead guy over to the center of the room and used the body as a card table. Another time, something similar happened, and Stack pulled the body over next to him, so a buddy of his, who was kinda short, would have something to sit on. Didn't take long for the word to get around that this was one bad dude! Even white folks didn't mess with Stagolee.

Well, this one time, Stagolee was playing cards with a dude they called Billy Lyons. Billy Lyons was one of them folk who acted like they
were a little better than anybody else. He'd had a little education, and that stuff can really mess your mind up. Billy Lyons had what he called a "scientific method" of cardplaying. Stagolee had the "nigger method." So they got to playing, and, naturally, Stagolee was just taking all of Billy Lyons's money, and Billy got mad. He got so mad that he reached over and knocked Stagolee's Stetson hat off his head and spit in it.

What'd he do that for? He could've done almost anything else in the world, but not that. Stack pulled his .44, and Billy started copping his plea. "Now, listen here, Mr. Stagolee. I didn't mean no harm. I just lost my head for a minute. I was wrong, and I apologize." He reached down on the ground, picked up Stack's Stetson, brushed it off, and put it back on his head. "I didn't mean no harm. See, the hat's all right. I put it back on your head." Billy was tomming like a champ, but Stack wasn't smiling. "Don't shoot me. Please, Mr. Stagolee! I got two children and a wife to support. You understand?"

Stack said, "Well, that's all right. The Lawd'll take care of your children. I'll take care of your wife." And, with that, Stagolee blew Billy Lyons away. Stagolee looked at the body for a minute and then went off to Billy Lyons's house and told Mrs. Billy that her husband was dead and he was moving in. And that's just what he did, too. Moved in.

Now there was this new sheriff in town, and he had gotten the word about Stagolee, but this sheriff was a sho' nuf cracker. He just couldn't stand the idea of Stagolee walking around like he was free—not working, not buying war bonds, cussing out white folks. He just couldn't put up with it, so, when he heard that Stagolee had shot Billy Lyons, he figured that this was his chance.

Sheriff told his deputies, said, "All right, men. Stagolee killed a man tonight. We got to get him."

The deputies looked at him. "Well, sheriff. Ain't nothing wrong with killing a man every now and then," said one.

"It's good for a man's health," added another.

"Well," said the sheriff, "that's all right for a white man, but this is a nigger."

"Now, sheriff, you got to watch how you talk about Stagolee. He's one of the leaders of the community here. You just can't come in here and start talking about one of our better citizens like that."

The sheriff looked at them. "I believe you men are afraid. Afraid of a nigger!"

Deputies thought it over for half a second. "Sheriff. Let's put it this way. We have a healthy respect for Stagolee. A long time ago, we struck
a bargain with him. We promised him that if he let us alone, we'd let him alone. And everything has worked out just fine."

"Well, we're going to arrest Stagolee," the sheriff said. "Get your guns, and let's go."

The deputies stood up, took their guns, and laid 'em on the shelf. "Sheriff, if you want Stago-lee, well, you can arrest him by yourself." And they went on out the door and over to the undertaker's parlor and told him to start making a coffin for the sheriff.

When all the other white folks heard what the sheriff was going to do, they ran over to talk to him. "Sheriff, you can't go around disturbing the peace." But couldn't nobody talk no sense into him.

Now Stagolee heard that the sheriff was looking for him, and, being a gentleman, Stagolee got out of bed, told Mrs. Billy he'd be back in a little while, and went on down to the bar. He'd barely gotten the first drink down when the sheriff came stepping through the door.

He walked over to the bartender. "Barkeep? Who's that man down at the other end of the bar? You know there's a law in this town against drinking after midnight. Who is that?"

Bartender leaned over the counter and whis-pered in his ear, "Don't talk so loud. That's Stagolee. He drinks when he gets thirsty and he's generally thirsty after midnight."

Sheriff walked over to Stagolee. Stagolee didn't even look around. Sheriff pulled out his gun. Stack still didn't look around. Sheriff fired a couple of shots in the air. Stagolee poured himself another drink and threw it down. Finally, the sheriff said, "Stagolee, I'm the sheriff, and I'm white. Ain't you afraid?"

Stagolee turned around slowly. "You may be the sheriff, and you may be white, but you ain't Stagolee. Now deal with that."

The sheriff couldn't even begin to figure it out, no less deal with it, so he fell back in his familiar bag. "I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Billy Lyons."

"You and what army? And it bet' not be the United States Army, 'cause I whipped them already."

"Me and this army," the sheriff growled, jab-bing the pistol in Stack's ribs.

Before the sheriff could take another breath, Stagolee hit him upside the head and sent him flying across the room. Stagolee pulled out his gun, put three bullets in him, put his gun away, had
another drink, and was on his way out the door before the body hit the floor.

The next day, Stagolee went to both of the funerals to pay his last respects to the sheriff and Billy Lyons, and then he settled down to living with Mrs. Billy. She really didn’t mind too much. All the women knew how good-looking Stack was. And he was always respectful to women, always had plenty of money, and, generally, he made a good husband, as husbands go. Stagolee had one fault, though. Sometimes he drank too much. About once a month, Stagolee would buy up all the available liquor and moonshine in the county and proceed to get wasted, and when Stagolee got wasted, he got totally wasted.

The new sheriff waited until one of those nights when Stagolee was so drunk he was staggering in his sleep, and he was lying flat in the bed. If Judgment Day had come, the Lord would have had to postpone it until Stagolee had sobered up. Otherwise, the Lord might’ve ended up getting Gabriel shot and his trumpet wrapped around his head. When the sheriff saw Stagolee that drunk, he went and got together the Ku Klux Klan Alumni Association, which was every white man in four counties. After the sheriff had assured them that Stagolee was so drunk he couldn’t wake up, they broke in the house just as bad as you please. They had the lynching rope all ready, and they dropped it around his neck. The minute that rope touched Stack’s neck, he was wide awake and stone cold sober. When white folks saw that, they were falling over each other getting out of there. But Stack was cool. He should’ve been. He invented it.

“Y’all come to hang me?”

The sheriff said that that was so. Stagolee stood up, stretched, yawned, and scratched himself a couple of times. “Well, since I can’t seem to get no sleep, let’s go and get this thing over with so I can get on back to bed.”

They took him on out behind the jail where the gallows was built. Stagolee got up on the scaffold, and the sheriff dropped the rope around his neck and tightened it. Then the hangman opened up on the trap door, and there was Stack, swinging ten feet in the air, laughing as loud as you ever heard anybody laugh. They let him hang there for a half-hour, and Stagolee was still laughing.

“Hey, man! This rope is ticklish.”

The white folks looked at each other and realized that Stack’s neck just wouldn’t crack. So they cut him down, and Stagolee went back home and went back to bed.
Black Folktales

After that, the new sheriff left Stagolee in peace, like he should’ve done to begin with.

Stagolee lived on and on, and that was his big mistake. 'Cause Stagolee lived so long, he started attracting attention up in Heaven. One day, St. Peter was looking down on the earth, and he happened to notice Stack sitting on the porch picking on the guitar. “Ain’t that Stagolee?” St. Peter said to himself. He took a closer look. “That’s him. That’s him. Why, that nigger should’ve been dead a long time ago.” So St. Peter went and looked it up in the record book, and, sure enough, Stagolee was supposed to have died thirty years before.

St. Peter went to see the Lord.
“What’s going on, St. Peter?”

“Oh, ain’t nothing shaking, Lord. Well, that’s not totally true. I was just checking out earth, and there’s a nigger down there named Stagolee who is way overdue for a visit from Death.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s the truth, Lord.”

“Well, we have to do something about that.”

The Lord cleared his throat a couple of times and hollered out, “HEY DEATH! HEEEY, DEATH!”

Now Death was laying up down in the barn catching up on some sleep, ’cause he was tired.

Stagolee

Having to make so many trips to Vietnam was wearing him out, not to mention everywhere else in the world. He just couldn’t understand why dying couldn’t be systematized. He’d tried his best to convince God either to get a system to dying or get him some assistants. He’d proposed that, say, on Mondays, the only dying that would be done would be, say, in France, Germany, and a few other countries. Tuesday it’d be some other countries, and on like that. That way, he wouldn’t have to be running all over the world twenty-four hours a day. But the Lord had vetoed the idea. Said it sounded to him like Death just wanted an excuse to eventually computerize the whole operation. Death had to admit that the thought had occurred to him. He didn’t know when he was going to catch up on all the paperwork he had to do. A computer would solve everything. And now, just when he was getting to sleep, here come the Lord waking him up.

So Death got on his pale white horse. He was so tired of riding a horse he didn’t know what to do. He’d talked to God a few months ago about letting him get a helicopter or something. But the Lord just didn’t seem to understand. Death rode on off down through the streets of Heaven, and when folks heard him coming, they closed their
doors, 'cause even in Heaven, folks were afraid of Death. And that was the other thing. Death was mighty lonely. Didn't nobody talk to him, and he was getting a little tired of it. He wished the Lord would at least let him wear a suit and tie and look respectable. Maybe then he could meet some nice young angel and raise a family. The Lord had vetoed that idea, too.

"What took you so long, Death?"

"Aw, Lord. I was trying to get some sleep. You just don't realize how fast folks are dying these days."

"Don't tell me you gon' start complaining again."

"I'm sorry, Lord, but I'd like to see you handle the job as well as I do with no help, no sleep, no wife, no nothing."

"Well, I got a special job for you today."

"Can't wait until tomorrow?"

"No, it can't wait, Death! Now hush up. There's a man down in Fatback, Georgia, named Stagolee. You should've picked him up thirty years ago, and I want you to send me a memo on why you didn't."

"Well, I got such a backlog of work piled up."

"I don't want to have to be doing your job for you. You get the lists every day from the Record Bureau. How come you missed this one? If he's escaped for thirty years, who knows who else has been living way past their time. Speaking of folks living past their time, St. Peter, have the librarian bring me all the files on white folks. Seems to me that white folks sho' done outlived their time. Anyway, Death, go on down there and get Stagolee."

Death headed on down to earth. A long time ago, he used to enjoy the ride, but not anymore. There were so many satellites and other pieces of junk flying around through the air that it was like going through a junkyard barefooted. So he didn't waste any time getting on down to Fatback, Georgia.

Now on this particular day, Stagolee was sitting on the porch, picking the blues on the guitar, and drinking. All of a sudden, he looked up and saw this pale-looking white cat in this white sheet come riding up to his house on a white horse. "We ain't never had no Klan in the daytime before," Stagolee said.

Death got off his horse, pulled out his address book, and said, "I'm looking for Stagolee Booker T. Washington Nicodemus Shadrack Nat Turner Jones."
“Hey, baby! You got it down pat! I’d forgotten a couple of them names myself.”
“Are you Stagolee Booker T. Wash—”
“You ain’t got to go through the thing again. I’m the dude. What’s going on?”
“I’m Death. Come with me.”
Stagolee started laughing. “You who?”
“I’m Death. Come on, man. I ain’t got all day.”
“Be serious.”
Death looked at Stagolee. No one had ever accused him of joking before. “I am serious. It’s your time to die. Now come on here!”
“Man, you ain’t bad enough to mess with me.”
Death blinked his eyes. He’d never run up on a situation like this before. Sometimes folks struggled a little bit, but they didn’t refuse. “Stagolee, let’s go!” Death said in his baddest voice.
“Man, you must want to get shot.”
Death thought that one over for a minute. Now he didn’t know how to handle this situation, so he reached in his saddlebags and pulled out his Death Manual. He looked up resistance and read what it said, but wasn’t a thing in there about what to do when somebody threatens you. Then he looked up guns, but that wasn’t listed. He looked under everything he could think of, but nothing
was of any help. So he went back to the porch.
"You coming or not, Stagleee?"

Stagleee let one of them .44 bullets whistle past ol' Death's ear, and Death got hat. Death didn't waste no time getting away from there. Before he was sitting in the saddle good, he had made it back to Heaven.

"Lord! You must be trying to get me killed."
"Do what? Get you killed? Since when could you die?"

"Don't matter, but that man Stagleee you just sent me after took a shot at me. Now listen here, Lord, if you want that man dead, you got to get him yourself. I am not going back after him. I knew there was some reason I let him live thirty years too long. I'd heard about him on the grapevine and, for all I care, he can live three hundred more years. I am not going back—"

"O.K. O.K. You made your point. Go on back to sleep." After Death had gone, God turned to St. Peter and asked, "We haven't had any new applications for that job recently?"

"You must be joking."

"Well, I was just checking." The Lord lit a cigar. "Pete, looks like I'm going to have to use one of my giant death thunderbolts to get that Stagleee."

"Looks that way. You want me to tell the work crew?"

The Lord nodded, and St. Peter left. It took 3,412 angels 14 days, 11 hours, and 32 minutes to carry the giant death thunderbolt to the Lord, but he just reached down and picked it up like it was a toothpick.

"Uh, St. Peter? How you spell Stagleee?"

"Lord, you know everything. You're omnipotent, omiscient, omni—"

"You better shut up and tell me how to spell Stagleee."

St. Peter spelled it out for him, and the Lord wrote it on the thunderbolt. Then he blew away a few clouds and put his keen eye down on the earth. "Hey, St. Peter. Will you look at all that killing down there? I ain't never seen nothing like it."

"Lord, that ain't Georgia. That's Vietnam."

The Lord put his great eye across the world. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Look at all that sin down there. Women wearing hardly no clothes at all. Check that one out with the black hair, St. Peter. Look at her! Disgraceful! Them legs!"

"LORD!"

And the Lord put his eye on the earth and
went on across the United States—Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri—

"Turn right at the Mississippi River, Lord!"

The Lord turned right and went on down into Tennessee.

"Make a left at Memphis, Lord!"

The Lord turned left at Memphis and went on up through Nashville and on down to Chattanooga into Georgia. Atlanta, Georgia. Valdosta. Rolling Stone, Georgia, until he got way back out in the woods to Fatback. He let his eye go up and down the country roads until he saw Stagolee sitting on the porch.

"That's him, Lord! That's him!"

And the Great God Almighty, the God of Nat Turner and Rap Brown, the God of Muddy Waters and B.B. King, the God of Aretha Franklin and The Impressions, this great God Almighty Everlasting, et in terra pax hominibus, and all them other good things, drew back his mighty arm—

"Watch your aim now, Lord."

And unloosed the giant thunderbolt. boom!

That was the end of Stagolee. You can't mess with the Lord.

Well, when the people found out Stagolee was dead, you ain't never heard such hollering

and crying in all your life. The women were beside themselves with grief, 'cause Stagolee was nothing but a sweet man.

Come the day of the funeral, and Stagolee was laid out in a $10,000 casket. Had on a silk mohair suit and his Stetson hat was in his hand. In his right coat pocket was a brand new deck of cards. In his left coat pocket was a brand new .44 with some extra rounds of ammunition and a can of mace. And by his side was his guitar. Folks came from all over the country to Stack's funeral, and all of 'em put little notes in Stagolee's other pockets, which were messages they wanted Stagolee to give to their kinfolk when he got to Hell.

The funeral lasted for three days and three nights. All the guitar pickers and blues singers had to come sing one last song for Stagolee. All the backsliders had to come backslide one more time for Stagolee. All the gamblers had to come touch Stack's casket for a little taste of good luck. And all the women had to come shed a tear as they looked at him for the last time. Those that had known him were crying about what they weren't going to have any more. And those that hadn't known him were crying over what they had missed. Even the little bitty ones was shedding tears.
After all the singing and crying and shouting was over, they took Stagolee on out and buried him. They didn’t bury him in the cemetery. Uh-uh. Stagolee had to have a cemetery all his own. They dug his grave with a silver spade and lowered him down with a golden chain. And they went on back to their homes, not quite ready to believe that Stack was dead and gone.

But you know, it’s mighty hard to keep a good man down, and, long about the third day, Stagolee decided to get on up out of the grave and go check out Heaven. Stack just couldn’t see himself waiting for Judgment Day. The thought of that white man blowing the trumpet on Judgment Day made him sick to his stomach, and Stagolee figured he was supposed to have his own Judgment Day, anyhow.

He started on off for Heaven. Of course it took him a long time to get there, ’cause he had to stop on all the clouds and teach the little angels how to play Pitty-Pat and Coon-Can and all like that, but, eventually, he got near to Heaven. Now as he got close, he started hearing all this harp music and hymn singing. Stagolee couldn’t believe his ears. He listened some more, and then he shrugged his shoulders. “I’m approaching Heaven from the wrong side. This can’t be the black part of Heaven, not with all that hymn singing and harp music I hear.”

So Stack headed on around to the other side of Heaven, and when he got there, it was stone deserted. I mean, wasn’t nobody there. Streets was as empty as the President’s mind. So Stack cut on back around to the other side of Heaven. When he got there, St. Peter was playing bridge with Abraham, Jonah, and Mrs. God. When they looked up and saw who it was, though, they split, leaving St. Peter there by himself.

“You ain’t getting in here!” St. Peter yelled.

“Don’t want to, either. Hey, man. Where all the colored folks at?”

“We had to send ’em all to Hell. We used to have quite a few, but they got to rocking the church service, you know. Just couldn’t even sing a hymn without it coming out and sounding like the blues. So we had to get rid of ’em. We got a few nice colored folks left. And they nice, respectable people.”

Stagolee laughed. “Hey, man. You messed up.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, man. This ain’t Heaven. This is Hell. Bye.”

And Stagolee took off straight for Hell. He
was about 2,000 miles away, and he could smell
the barbecue cooking and hear the jukeboxes play-
ing, and he started running. He got there, and
there was a big black power sign on the gate. He
rung on the bell, and the dude who come to an-
swer it recognized him immediately. "Hey, every-
body! Stagolee's here!"

And the folks came running from every-
where to greet him.

"Hey, baby!"

"What's going down!"

"What took you so long to get here?"

Stagolee walked in, and the brothers and sis-
ters had put down wall-to-wall carpeting, indirect
lighting, and, best of all, they'd installed air-
conditioning. Stagolee walked around, checking it
all out. "Yeah. Y'all got it together. Got it upt-
tight!"

After he'd finished checking it out, he asked,
"Any white folks down here?"

"Just the hip ones, and ain't too many of
them. But they all right. They know where it's at."

"Solid." Stagolee noticed an old man sitting
over in a corner with his hands over his ears.
"What's his problem?"

"Aw, that's the Devil. He just can't get him-
self together. He ain't learned how to deal with
niggers yet."

Stagolee walked over to him. "Hey, man. Get
your pitchfork, and let's have some fun. I got my
.44. C'mon. Let's go one round."

The Devil just looked at Stagolee real sad-
like, but didn't say a word.

Stagolee took the pitchfork and laid it on the
shelf. "Well, that's hip. I didn't want no stuff out
of you nohow. I'm gon' rule Hell by myself!"

And that's just what he did, too.