

El Presidente

My first impression of South America back in 1934 wasn't a whole lot different from my strongest memories of North America, Africa, Asia and Europe: a six by-eight-foot room, a canvas cot along one wall, steel bars on the windows, and lousy grub. There are some things that are the same the world over. Most people are friendly and trusting folks, they're approachable even when you don't speak the lingo, and they all love an honest game of chance. They also tend to get ornery as all getout when you trifle with the laws of statistical probability by gently inserting an extra couple of aces into the game, which I did about ten minutes after stepping off the boat from Spain, and they tend to have the same disheartening way of demonstrating their displeasure.

Which is how I wound up in the calaboose in Ferdinand, the capital city of San Palmero. Over the years I had become quite a connoisseur of jails. This one didn't have the quality of cuisine I found in the jails of Europe, but on the other hand it wasn't anywhere near as crowded as the jails in China or as run-down and badly in need of repair as the jails of Mozambique and South Africa. The guards weren't bad sorts, and as they happily confided, they belonged to the one sector of a sluggish economy that had always boasted full employment during the reigns of the last few rulers.

It was on my third morning there, while I was still awaiting a hearing before the local magistrate (which the guards assured me might well take place in something less than five years, especially — and here they kind of reached into their pockets and jingled their coins — if I could find some way to encourage them to bring my situation to his attention), when I suddenly got a roommate.

He was tall and lean and kind of swarthy, with a bushy black moustache, and he looked like he'd been roughly handled along the way.

"Good morning, Señor," he said as the door was locked behind him. "I am sorry to intrude upon your privacy."

"Truth to tell, I could use a bit of company," I replied. "It gets a little lonely in here from time to time with nothing to comfort me except my copy of the Good Book. What's your name, friend?"

"Jose Juan Domingo Garcia de Alvarez," he said.

"That's quite a mouthful," I said. "You got any problem if I just call you Joe?"

"No," he said. "But why not Jose?"

"Because so far, counting poker players and constables and prison guards, I've met thirteen citizens of your fair country and eleven of 'em have been named Jose."

"It is a popular name," he agreed. "Not as popular as Maria, but still . . ."

"You got a lot of guys called Maria, do you?" I asked. "Women, señor. Hardly any men are called Maria."

"Good," I said. "I got enough problems as it is."

"And what is your own name?"

"I'm the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones," I told him, "formerly of Moline, Illinois, and currently a citizen of the world." Which was officially true, and certainly sounded better than saying that I had been banished from 33 separate countries due to our different interpretations of the finer points of the law, and had been forcibly requested to leave the last four continents I'd visited. Truth to tell, I was fast

running out of major land masses that would tolerate my presence, which is why I wasn't in no hurry to walk into the local magistrate's courtroom.

"Of what church are you a minister?" asked Joe.

"The Tabernacle of Saint Luke," I said. "Donations gladly accepted."

"I have never heard of it."

"Well, it ain't quite got itself built yet," I admitted. "I'm still scouting out locations."

"How long have you been looking?" he asked.

"Oh, maybe ten or twelve years," I said. "You can't just rush into these things."

"I don't believe I've ever heard of Saint Luke," he said. "You're talking to him," I said. "You'd be surprised how calling it the Tabernacle of Saint Lucifer puts contributors off their feed."

"Forgive an impertinence," said Joe, "but just what religion is it that you practice?"

"A little something me and the Lord worked out betwixt ourselves of a Sunday afternoon back in Moline," I said. "It ain't got no name yet, though I been toying with calling it Lukeism after myself since I'm the guy who thunk it up."

"So God really had nothing to do with it," he said with a smile.

"Of course He did," I shot back. "But He's got a ton of religions named after Him already, and when all is said and done He's a pretty modest critter."

"I understand completely, Doctor Jones," he said. "How did a man of the cloth come to be put in jail?"

"A simple misunderstanding, nothing more," I said. "You don't seem too distressed about it."

"I view it as an occupational hazard," I answered. "It happens all the time."

"I never realized that preaching was such a dangerous profession," said Joe.

"It all depends on how you go about collecting donations for the poorbox," I explained. "And how about you, Brother Alvarez? What are you in for?"

"I tried to assassinate El Presidente."

"El Presidente?" I repeated. "Ain't that a racehorse?"

"It is Ferdinand Salivar, the President of the Republic of San Palmero."

"Now that's a curious coincidence," I said. "Your president is toting around the same name as the city we're in."

"It's no coincidence at all," answered Joe. "He renamed it Ferdinand when he overthrew the last dictator. It used to be Roberto."

"Is that an old and honored tradition here — naming the capital city after yourself once you get to be the president?"

"Only for the past seven months."

"So it's already been Roberto and Ferdinand in just seven months?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's been Roberto, Ferdinand, Gabriel, Antonio, Luis, and six Joses."

"I can see you practice a swift and vigorous game of politics in San Palmero," I said. "Back where I come from they told us that any boy could grow up to become president, but mighty few of us were encouraged to do so without the benefit of an election."

"You were not faced by a government that suspends all civil rights, taxes the people at an astronomical rate, executes its opposition without benefit of trial, and allows the president to loot the treasury at will."

"Well, it does go a long way toward explaining why so many of your countrymen want to be president," I allowed. "Were you another candidate?"

"Certainly not," said Joe with all the dignity he could muster on the spur of the moment. "All I want to do is rid the country of its current tyrant. I have no desire whatsoever to rule San Palmero. I would remain in power only for a brief transition period, and would hold democratic elections and reinstate the constitution as soon as possible."

"That's right noble of you, Brother Alvarez," I said. "How long do you figure this here brief transition period will last?" I asked.

"No more than twelve or fifteen years," he said thoughtfully. "Perhaps twenty." Then he paused and added, "Thirty at the outside."

Well, I could see right off that I was in with a deep political thinker who planned far ahead and didn't believe in rushing changes. I didn't know exactly where he stood on the political spectrum, but I finally decided that he was a new type of conservative who wanted to conserve just about everything except maybe the president's hide.

In midafternoon we heard a bunch of yelling and shooting outside, and about half an hour later the guards pulled a bunch of us out of our cells and marched us to the prison workshop, where they handed us a bucket of black paint and a bunch of brushes. Then still another guard brought over a pile of wooden boards and laid 'em down on a work table.

"Start painting," he said.

"You want all them boards painted black?" I said.

"No," he said. "I want you to paint 'Welcome to Umberto, Capital of San Palmero' on each of them. Have them done by dinner."

He left, and I turned to Joe. "I guess that's good news, Brother Alvarez," I said. "It looks like they replaced old Ferdinand after all."

"It is bad news, my friend," said Joe. "I know Umberto Morales. He will be an even worse despot."

"Maybe he'll have a change of heart now that he's got the top spot," I said.

Well, maybe he would have had a change of heart and maybe he wouldn't have, but as it happened, Fate didn't give him no time to change more than his clothes. The next morning, right after breakfast, we were taken back to the workshop, where we painted up a few dozen signs announcing that the town was now Jesus, which at least gave the place a nice religious tone. We got to take the night off when it became Jose again, and they pulled out a bunch of old signs from some garage or attic.

By noon of the next day it was Riccardo, and that evening, before poor Riccardo even had time to eat his first meal in office, he was forcibly retired and Joe and I painted a few dozen more signs telling everyone that they were now entering the friendly city of Miguel, and I found myself starting to wonder why San Palmero didn't produce more painters of worldwide renown, given how much free training they were supplied.

"I can see why you guys have given up on elections," I said as Joe and I were chowing down our dinner. "The country could go broke just printing up the ballots."

"I know you are just trying to cheer me up, my friend," he answered, "but the situation is dire."

"Miguel ain't no better than Riccardo and the others, huh?"

"Worse," he said. "I am forced to the conclusion that I am the only man fit to lead San Palmero out of the wilderness, and here I am, locked away in durance vile."

"Try to look at the bright side, Brother Alvarez," I said. "At least your current position ain't such that people are lining up to take it away from you."

"But the situation grows more desperate by the day," he said unhappily. "The people are suffering, the trains are not running, the mines are not producing, and worst of all, the treasury is growing smaller with each passing moment."

"Yeah, I can see where that makes being the president a little less desirable," I said sympathetically.

"True," he agreed. "Yet it is my sacred duty to save my country from this unending string of petty dictators."

"I'm right favorably impressed with you, Brother Alvarez," I said. "Especially given how little might be left in the treasury."

"When Destiny calls, a man of honor must answer," said Joe. "Besides, after the tax rate reaches 100%, I can always confiscate the better farms and factories."

"It's comforting to know that a man of vision will find a way," I said.

"I owe it to my country," he said humbly.

About two hours later we heard more shots, and then still more, and it kept on all night, which made sleeping kind of difficult, and then, just after sunrise, all the shooting stopped and it was suddenly so quiet you could have heard a pin drop if there'd been anyone around to drop one.

Jose — the guard, not my cellmate — came over a few minutes later and unlocked the door.

"More painting?" I said.

"No, Señor," he said. "You are free to go."

"I am?"

He nodded. "The magistrate was killed last night. In fact, the whole government was killed last night. There's no sense keeping you here any longer."

"Well, be sure to thank the new government for me," I said, stepping out of the cell.

"I can't," said Jose.

"You ain't on speaking terms with them?"

"It is difficult to speak to the dead, Señor."

"I thought you told me the old government was dead."

"They are all dead," said Jose.

"Then I am free, too?" said Joe.

"I suppose so," said Jose with a shrug. "My wife is the prison cook. I am taking her to the seashore, so there will be no one left to feed you."

Joe joined me, and we walked out the front door of the jail-house together and out into the street. Suddenly a single shot rang out, and Joe dropped in his tracks like a ton of bricks.

"Death to all tyrants!" cried a pretty young woman, stepping out the shadows with a smoking pistol in her hands.

"He wasn't no tyrant, ma'am," I said. "At least not yet, anyway."

"Well, he would almost certainly have been a tyrant if he'd gotten the chance," she said without much show of regret. Suddenly she began eyeing me suspiciously. "And who are you?"

"I'm the Right Reverend Doctor Lucifer Jones at your service, ma'am," I said. "Weddings done cheap, and given the circumstances in these here parts, I'm willing to make a group rate for funerals. Who have I got the pleasure of speaking to?"

"I am Consuela Fransicsa Diego," she said. "Whose side are you on?"

"From what little I been able to learn, neither side's got a lot to recommend it these days, what with all of them being dead and such," I said reasonably. "You got any other side I can choose?"

"Maria!" she hollered. "Raquel! Did you hear?"

Two more good-looking women stepped out into the street, each carrying a rifle.

"What do you think?" said the one that answered to Maria. "He doesn't carry a weapon," said Raquel. "That's a step in the right direction."

"He looks like a simpleton to me," said Maria.

"I don't know," said Raquel, studying my face. "He's got a sly, shifty look about his eyes, and his weakness of character shines through like a beacon."

"What do you think, Consuela?"

"I am trying to make up my mind," she said. Suddenly she turned to me. "What do you think of San Palmero, Señor Jones?"

"Well, truth to tell, I ain't seen an awful lot of it, except through the jailhouse window," I admitted. "But you seem like pleasant sorts, at least when you ain't blowing each other to Kingdom Come, which is just about all the time now that I come to mull on it."

"But you like the country?"

"I like it just fine, except for all the bullets flying through the air," I said.

"And you would be willing to stay here?"

"Sure," I answered. "Though preferably not the same way Ferdinand and Umberto and Riccardo and all them Josés are staying here."

Well, they put their heads together and started whispering up a storm, and finally they broke up their little pow-wow and Consuela walked up to me.

"Señor Jones," she said, "I have . . . we have a proposition for you."

"All three of you?" I asked. "It's a little out of the ordinary, but I suppose me and the Lord could bend the rules a bit for three such lovely ladies."

"You misunderstand," she said. "We want you to become the president."

"From what I seen, being president ain't a job what comes equipped with much of a future — or even much of a present, when you get right down to it. Why me?"

"You'd be perfect for it," said Raquel.

"We could tell right off that you were a man of distinction," added Maria.

"Besides, you're all that's left," said Consuela. "All the other men are dead or have fled to neighboring countries."

"You are not on either side, so as the people begin returning to the city they will have no reason to distrust you," said Raquel.

I walked over to Joe's body. "This here was one of Nature's noblemen," I said. "By rights he should have been your next president, and I want it understood that if I take the job, it's just as his stand-in. I'll run the country exactly the way he would have run it, and I wouldn't dream of doing nothing as president that he wouldn't have done. Anyone got a problem with that?"

"No, Señor Jones," said Consuela. "Or should we call you Doctor Jones?"

"A simple El Presidente should do the trick," I said. "Where's the presidential palace from here?"

"Three blocks north, Presidente," said Consuela. "We will take you there right now."

We had to step around an awful lot of unsuccessful candidates for the office along the way, and I decided that my very first official act had better be to hire a small army of street cleaners. After about ten minutes we walked up to this stately-looking mansion which probably had four or five less windows than Buckingham Palace and maybe a little shorter driveway than the Taj Mahal.

"Where's the treasury from here?" I asked.

"It's in the east wing," said Consuela.

"You mean it's part of the palace?"

"The last 27 presidents didn't want to let it out of their sight," she said.

"Why don't we mosey over to it and see what all the fuss was about?" I said, and a couple of minutes later we were in this big underground vault that had piles of money everywhere.

I felt an urge to put it in neat orderly stacks and admire it for awhile, but first I figured I'd better spend a few days counting it, just to see how much I could borrow in times of need. But before I could start, Consuela grabbed my arm and began leading me away.

"You can do the bookkeeping later, Presidente," she said. "Right now you have more important tasks awaiting you."

"What's more important than counting money?" I said as I fell into step beside her, and Raquel closed and locked the vault behind us.

"I realize that the money looks impressive today," explained Consuela, "but it won't last. Between inflation and the debt your predecessors ran up, the treasury will be empty in less than two months. We must do something about that."

"Don't forget that we also have to make plans to hold free elections," added Maria.

I think on it for a bit, and suddenly a great big Heavenly revelation hit me smack between the eyes.

"I do believe I got the solution to both problems," I announced.

"Free elections and the treasury?" asked Consuela.

"Who says they have to be free elections?" I said. "We'll make 'em expensive elections and charge anyone who wants to vote a million dollars, or whatever our currency is, and that'll put money in the treasury at the same time we're holding an election."

"And what will become of you, Presidente?" said Maria. "What if some very wealthy men covet your job?"

"I'll just pop into the vault the night before and borrow as much as I need to vote early and often."

"You know," said Raquel, "he's already more resourceful than Ferdinand or Umberto."

"And he's cuter than Riccardo," added Maria.

"Riccardo was a hunchback with a clubfoot and steel teeth," Raquel pointed out.

"You found him attractive enough," said Maria.

"It was the uniform," said Raquel defensively. "It blinded me to his true nature."

While they were arguing about whether Ferdinand was brighter than a potted plant and Riccardo was more attractive than a moldering corpse, we finally reached my office. It was about the size of a football field, with a huge, hand-carved mahogany desk at one end. There was a box of foot-long cigars sitting atop it, and I lit one up, sat down on the chair, and put my feet up on the desk.

"You know, ladies," I said, "I got a feeling that I'm going to like the president business."

"Don't like it too much," warned Consuela. "You're only El Presidente until we can reinstate the constitution and live in freedom and harmony."

"Absolutely," I said. "I ain't looking for no lifetime job. I figure twenty years ought to do it. Thirty at the

outside."

"I don't think you fully understand your situation," she replied.

"What little tidbit am I missing?" I asked.

"It was a lifetime job for the last 35 presidents."

"Yeah, well, when you put it that way, I can see where we might move the schedule up a mite," I said. "In the meantime, I suppose we got to change the name of the town again."

"To Lucifer?"

I was about to agree, but then it occurred to me that calling it Lucifer would tell anyone aspiring to high office just who stood between them and their goal, and suddenly slapping my name on all them signs didn't seem like such a good idea to me.

Which is how the capital of San Palmero came to be called Bubbles La Tour.

"Bubbles La Tour?" repeated Consuela, frowning. "What is a Bubbles La Tour?"

"An entertainer whose skills and artistry I came to admire on Saturday nights back when I was growing up in Moline, Illinois," I said.

"An ecdysiast?" said Raquel.

"Gesundheit," I said. "Now, what's on the presidential agenda for the rest of the day?"

"We haven't had electricity for the past 48 hours," said Consuela. "I think getting the power on again is the first order of business."

"Yes," added Maria. "It is especially bad on the west side of town, where they haven't had any lights for weeks now."

"What's on the west side of town?" I asked.

"The worst and most dangerous slums in all of San Palmero," she answered.

This problem wasn't quite as easy as the last one, but I mulled on it while I was puffing away at my cigar, and in about five minutes the answer came to me.

"Okay," I announced. "I got this here conundrum solved too."

"What are your orders, Presidente?" asked Consuela.

"Set fire to the slums," I said. "We'll get rid of an eyesore and give the people something to read by, all at the same time."

"That will only last for one night," she pointed out.

"One night's all it should take to get the power on again,"

I said.

"I don't understand."

"Find the richest folks what ain't left town yet," I told her, "and tomorrow morning spread the word that people can read their evening papers by the light of their blazing houses if someone don't pony up enough money to get the electricity running again."

"You know," said Maria, "it's not a bad idea at that."

"And it would get rid of the slums," agreed Raquel. Consuela stared long and hard at me. "I'm beginning to know how Baron von Frankenstein felt," she said.

"If he felt anything but hungry, I ain't got much in common with him," I said. "When do they serve dinner around here?"

We mosied over to the dining room, which wasn't much smaller than the office and was set up to accommodate small intimate groups of two hundred or so, and Raquel went off to see if any servants were left or if they'd all high-tailed it to the hills. She came back a few minutes later and announced that the men were all dead or run off, but that we still had a passel of employees of the female persuasion, and she'd told some of 'em to put some grub on the fire.

Well, truth to tell, I don't know which looked more appetizing, the food or the young ladies what brung it out and served it. In fact, there was so much of it that I invited them all to join us, and after dinner I sent a couple of 'em off to the presidential wine cellar to bring back a few gallons of San Palmero's finest drinkin' stuff, and somewhere around midnight it occurred to me that Bubbles La Tour wasn't actually a resident of the country, and that I had an even better notion for naming the city, depending on who I woke up with each morning.

I stood up, waited for silence (which can be a long time coming when you're keeping company with forty or fifty women) and then issued a Presidential Proclamation concerning the daily re-naming of the city.

"But Presidente!" protested a particularly lovely young maiden with long black hair. "We are all married!"

"Just so long as you ain't fanatics about it," I said. "It would be a sin," she said.

"I talk to the Lord all the time," I assured her, "and He tells me that it ain't no mortal sin, but just one of them little venereal ones that He don't pay much attention to."

"We could not consider it."

"Just because you're married?" I said.

"Yes."

"Okay," I said. "That don't pose no lasting problem."

"It doesn't?" said another. "Why not?"

I snapped my fingers. "Presto!" I said. "You're all legally divorced by Presidential Decree."

"You can't do that!" protested Consuela.

"A president's got more powers than the captain of a ship, don't he?" I said. "And if a captain can marry folks, then I don't see why I can't un-marry them."

"It's not in the constitution."

"The constitution's in the repair shop, remember?" I said. Then I looked around the table. "Okay, who's

interested in having a whole city named after her first thing in the morning?"

I could see each of them was giving serious consideration to cementing her place in San Palmero's history. Finally one of them said, "Well, he's not quite as ugly as Riccardo."

A sizeable portion of the assemblage took issue with that remark and began arguing it. I think the two sides was going to come to blows for awhile there, but then suddenly some gunshots rang out and a couple of windows shattered and one of the chandeliers got shot down.

"I thought you told me all the husbands were dead or hiding!" I hollered as I dove under the table.

Raquel and Maria ran to the busted windows and started shooting back, while a number of the young ladies joined me. It struck me as a propitious time to get to know the hired help a bit better, which I was in the process of doing when Consuela finally stuck her head under the table.

"You can come out now, Presidente," she said.

"I'm comfortable right where I am," I answered.

"But it's safe now," said Consuela.

"It's safer down here," I said as one of my new acquaintances proved to be more ticklish than I expected and began giggling, "to say nothing of friendlier."

But then the young ladies started climbing to their feet, and I figured I might as well stand up too, just to set a brave example. I wandered over to the window and looked down on the front lawn, where I saw a bunch of corpses in dresses sprawled across the grass.

"Either we got some women campaigning for the presidency," I announced, "or you ladies are married to the most peculiar batch of husbands I ever did see."

"They are women," said one of the young ladies. "They are sick and tired of the mess men have made of this country and have decided to take it over themselves."

"Can't they think of nothing better to do with their time than storm the presidential palace?" I complained.

"Such as?" she said.

"Cooking. Sewing. Cleaning. Having babies. All the things women are good at."

"So you think women are not good at anything but housework?" said Consuela ominously.

"Now don't you go putting words in my mouth," I said angrily. "I think Bubbles La Tour was one of the most remarkable women I ever met, and I'll lay plenty of eight-to-five that she didn't know one end of a broom from another." Which wasn't exactly true, as I was in the front row of the 5-Star Rialto Burlesque the night they arrested her precisely because she proved she did know one end from the other, but I didn't see no reason to be so nit-picky.

"I have the distinct impression that you don't appreciate the members of my sex," said Consuela.

"That's a lie!" I said hotly. "No matter where I am I visit the local red light district and appreciate the bejabbers out of 'em every time I got a couple of extra dollars in my pocket!"

I noticed a kind of angry murmuring starting to gain steam among the other women.

"This was your doing, Consuela," said one of them accusingly. "Right," said another. "You were the one who chose him."

"What could I do?" said Consuela. "He's all that was left. All the rest of the men have fled."

"Maybe that's not the worst of all possible worlds, given the quality of the male presidents San Palmero has had lately," suggested Maria.

"Now that I see him clearly," added Raquel, "he's really much uglier than Riccardo."

"Now just hold your horses a minute!" I said. "I'm El Presidente, and I don't take kindly to grumbling in the ranks! If I hear any more of it you risk running head-on into my righteous executive wrath."

Suddenly I was staring down the barrel of Consuela's pistol. "And you risk running head-on into a bullet," she said.

I looked around the room, and found to my surprise that I was facing maybe forty or fifty guns and rifles.

"I got another Presidential Decree," I announced. "Anyone who drops her gun and leaves the room gets a ten percent raise in pay, effective a week from next Tuesday."

Nobody moved.

"Tax free," I added.

Still no one moved.

"Okay," I said. "I ain't nothing if not magnanimous. We'll let bygones be bygones. Now, who wants the city to bear her name starting tomorrow morning?"

One young lady tentatively raised her hand, but the one standing next to her slapped her on the wrist and she promptly took it down.

"Well, it's been an interesting and educational evening," I said after another couple of minutes had passed and no one had lowered their guns, "but I think it's time for me to go out and inspect the troops."

"There aren't any troops to inspect," said Consuela. "I'll find some," I said.

"You can go looking for them," said Consuela. "But I strongly advise you not to come back."

"You mean tonight?" I asked.

"I mean ever."

"And here I thought we were all getting along so well," I said.

"You are no better than our own men," said Maria. "Worse," said Raquel.

"Okay," I said. "I know when I ain't wanted. I'll just stop off at the treasury and pick up a little cash to see me through to the next few years, and I'll be on my lonely way."

There was an audible click as Consuela cocked her gun.

"I suppose you wouldn't take an I.O.U. in exchange for it?" I said.

"Get out of here," said Consuela. "I'm giving the orders now."

"Just a minute," said Raquel. "Why you?"

"Because I'm the leader," said Consuela.

"I don't remember voting for you," said Maria.

Consuela turned her pistol on Maria. "I've got six votes right here."

Suddenly one of the young ladies shoved the business end of a shotgun in Consuela's back. "And I've got a point of parliamentary procedure."

"That doesn't compare to my point of personal privilege," said Raquel, aiming her rifle at the pair of them.

Well, pretty soon the room was filled to overflowing with undeclared candidates all making points of order, so I kind of gently stepped out into the hall and had almost made it to the front door when the shooting started in earnest. A minute later I was walking around a bunch of bodies that was spread across the presidential lawn, and preparing to high-tail it out of San Palermo, the only president on record to leave office while still alive.

I heard a couple of weeks later that the town had changed names again, from Consuela to Carmen to Bonita to Rosa, and I think there were a couple of Marias tossed in there somewhere.

It just reinforced my conviction that of all the things in this world I don't understand, most of 'em are women.