

[Back](#) | [Next](#)

[Contents](#)

Chartreuse Mansions

I wandered through the wilderness for a few days after leaving Dr. Mirbeau and his Island of Annoyed Souls. I figured any minute now a great big city would break into view, but you'd be surprised how few of them there are down in South America, and especially in the middle of the jungle. They'd told me that the Amazon Basin was filled with Indians, but I never saw no basin, just a bunch of swamps and rivers. Finally, when I'd been on my own for five days, I ran head-first into a couple of little bitty fellers, maybe an inch or two over five feet, and dressed for exactly the kind of warm humid weather what we was having a lot of, which is to say they wore loincloths and matching headbands, and if they had on a third thing I never saw it.

Well, these wasn't like no Indians I'd ever seen back in the States, before the government give me my walking papers, but I figured what the hell, how different can one Indian be from another, so I held up my hand and said "How!"

The one on the right jumped back, and the one on the left looked like he might faint dead away, so I figured I better keep talking while I still had an audience.

"I have traveled many moons," I said. "Seek city of the palefaces. Especially interested in wampum."

They just looked at me like I was some kind of foreigner who was too stupid to speak Indian, and even when I tapped myself on the chest and explained that I was their Kemosabee they just kind of stood there like a couple of potted plants, and I decided that I'd been the victim of false doctrine and whatever these two was, it wasn't Indians.

After awhile they stopped looking scared and started looking bored, and finally they just kind of wandered off into the jungle. I suppose I could have followed 'em, but I couldn't see no sense winding up in some little village where I was the only one who spoke Indian, so instead I just started walking again, trusting to the good Lord to direct me to some city that was suitable for building my tabernacle.

I walked another day and night, and it occurred to me that being lost was mighty hungry work and I hadn't et a real meal in close to a week now, living on fruits and berries and the like. I'd found a clutch of eggs one morning and figured to make an omelet, but even before I could remember that I didn't have nothing to cook 'em in, they each hatched out a little alligator. Most of 'em took one look at me and high-tailed it the other direction, but there was one who must've thunk I was his mother, because he kept rubbing against me, and when I started walking he fell into step behind me, and I was thinking that if he stuck around for another three or four years and I didn't come on no city by then maybe I could train him to hunt dinner for us each day, but then he saw a boa constrictor and decided that was his mama, and he gave me a look that said I wasn't the only one who'd been betrayed by false doctrine, and then he headed off with the snake and that was the last I saw of him.

I was just trying to figger out whether to keep going in the same direction, or maybe follow one of these hundreds of streams and rivers I kept passing and hope maybe it'd lead me to this Amazon Basin I'd heard about, when the decision was taken out of my hands, because suddenly, standing not two hundred feet ahead of me, was the most beautiful golden-haired lady I ever did see. Her hair hung down almost to her waist, and I could see even from this distance that her eyes were the deepest, prettiest shade of blue. As for the rest of her, there wasn't nobody ever going to mistake her for a boy, even at five hundred yards. She wore a tattered dress what had seen better days, and certainly longer ones.

"Howdy, ma'am!" I yelled, waving my hand at her.

She turned, saw me, gave me the kind of smile that made me wish it was night out so I could bay the moon, and waved back.

"I don't want to intrude on your privacy, ma'am," I said, "but for the past week I mostly been concentrating on being lost, and I was wondering if you could lead me to civilization, or at least point me in the right direction."

She smiled again, showing off the whitest teeth you can imagine, and began walking toward me. I didn't hear no music, but she moved her hips exactly like she was dancing to a slow rhumba, and I knew that I had fallen hopelessly and eternally in love again.

"Ma'am," I said when she reached me, "I got to tell you that in all my experience I ain't never seen a looker like you, and I'm ready here and now to plight my trough." I didn't actually know what plighting a trough meant — on the face of it, it seems kind of like digging a trench in an open field — but it sounded like the kind of thing beautiful young damsels what were seriously underdressed would want to hear from a suitor.

She smiled at me again.

"Can I take this here radiant smile as a sign that you return my affection, ma'am?" I said.

She nodded her head.

"Good!" I said. "For a minute there I was scared that you didn't speak my lingo. A couple of days back I ran into some guys in the forest that didn't speak American or Indian, and I know that back in San Palmero, where I served as President for close to a full day before we had a little misunderstanding, everyone was called Jose and Juanita and didn't speak no known language."

I laughed to show her how relieved I was, and she laughed too.

"And here I am forgetting my manners, ma'am," I continued. "I'm the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones at your service, but since we seem to be planning to spend the rest of our lives together, you can call me Lucifer. And who do I have the honor of falling in love with?"

"Cluck," she said.

"I didn't quite catch that," I said.

"Cluck," she repeated.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," I said, "but it sounds like you said 'cluck' like unto a chicken."

"Cluck cluck cluck," she said.

"So are them other two clucks your middle and last names?" I asked.

"Cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck," she said, and suddenly she didn't look quite as beautiful as she had about forty seconds ago.

"You got something caught in your throat, ma'am?" I asked.

She laughed and slapped me on the shoulder, like I'd just made some kind of joke. "Cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck," she said.

"You live around here, ma'am?" I asked, because I figured I'd better see if anyone in her family spoke any better before I got too all-fired committed to this here relationship.

She nodded her head, reached out and took me by the hand, and began leading me down a winding jungle path.

I asked her about her family, and what country we were in, and how long she'd been her, and maybe a couple of dozen other things, and all she said was "Cluck cluck cluck", and while I enjoyed holding such a beautiful and dainty hand, I got to say that man and boy that was the dullest conversation I ever did have.

Finally we came to a clearing by still another river, and right in the middle of it were two huge chartreuse houses, each with a couple of dozen rooms and a big veranda out front, and sitting in a rocking chair on one of the verandas was a grizzled old gray-haired guy who obviously wasn't on speaking terms with the local barber, because his hair was almost as long as the girl's, and he had it growing out of his chin, too. I noticed that he also had a mighty wicked shotgun laying across his lap.

"Cluck cluck!" said the girl.

"Welcome back, Rama!" said the old guy. "So you finally caught one!"

Good for you, girl!"

"Howdy, neighbor," I said. "I'm the Right Reverend Lucifer Jones, weddings and baptisms done cheap, with a group rate for funerals."

"I'm mighty pleased to meet you, Reverend Jones," said the old guy, coming over and shaking my hand. "My name is Cornelius MacNamarra, and this here's my daughter, Rama. What brings you to my humble domicile?"

"Hunger, thirst, and mostly Rama," I said. "You got any grub I could borrow?"

"I won't hear of your borrowing anything!" announced MacNamarra firmly. "Everything I have is yours."

"Well, I call that mighty Christian of you, Brother MacNamarra," I said.

"Call me Corny," said MacNamarra. "Especially now that you're going to become a member of the family."

"Actually, I been meaning to talk to you about that, Brother Corny," I began.

"No need for talk!" he cried. "She's all yours, with my blessing!"

"Just the same, I got a few questions before I cart her off to the altar," I said.

"Beautiful girl!" he said. "The apple of her father's eye." He frowned. "Or is it the grapefruit? I've been in this damned jungle so long I plumb forgot."

"I don't want to be intrusive, Brother Corny," I continued, trying to get back to the subject at hand, "but when was the last time you sat down and had a chat with Rama?"

"This morning, at breakfast," he said.

"And you didn't notice nothing peculiar about her lingo?"

"Same as always," he assured me.

"I think that's what I meant," I said. "In my travels on five continents, I've met folks with limited vocabularies, but I got to say hers is a little more limited than most."

"You noticed," he said unhappily.

"Kind of hard to miss in the middle of a hour-long conversation like we had on the way over here," I said.

"Damn!" he muttered. "What's the point of being writ up in song and story as Rama the Bird Girl if all you can say is 'cluck'?" I looked at Rama, who somehow wasn't quite as beautiful as she'd been an hour ago, but was still maybe a shade above average. "I don't see no wings or feathers on her," I said. "What makes her the Bird Girl?"

"Mostly the way she talks," admitted MacNamarra. "Even out here in the middle of nowhere she can attract men, but though most of 'em can go for days without saying a word to her, sooner or later every last one of 'em either asks what's her name or where's the bathroom or what's that roaring off in the distance, and then she answers, and another potential son-in-law has flown the coop." He spat on the ground. "Hell, I even built an extra house, just for her and her husband," he added, gesturing toward the chartreuse mansions.

"Looks like you're expecting lots of grandchildren," I noted.

"If you can find a second thing to do in this hellhole, let me know," he said. He kind of squinted at me. "What are you doing in this jungle, anyway?"

"Mostly looking for a way out," I said. "I'm a preacher by trade."

"What religion?" he asked.

"Something me and the Lord worked out betwixt ourselves of a Sunday afternoon back in Moline, Illinois," I said.

"So what are you doing down here in South America?" he asked.

"Well, the truth of the matter is that I was kind of invited to come here," I answered him.

"South America asked you to come here?" he said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Actually, I was invited to come here by 33 other governments due to some minor disagreements over the finer points of the law," I admitted. "Still, I figger as long as I'm here I might as well hunt up the perfect spot to build the Tabernacle of Saint Luke."

"Saint Luke, huh?" he said. "He writ hisself a pretty good gospel. One of the six or seven best, that's for sure."

"This here is a different Saint Luke," I told him.

"I ain't never heard of a second one," he said.

"You're talking to him," I said. "I figger calling it the Tabernacle of Saint Lucifer might put some parishoners off their feed."

"A telling point," he agreed, nodding his head sagely. "You're gonna make a fine addition to the family, Reverend."

"Well, I been mulling on it the last few minutes, Brother Corny," I said, "and I think I may have been a little hasty losing my heart to Rama."

"Nonsense!" he said. "You ain't looking at it the right way. She's mighty easy on the eyes, pleasant as anyone can want, a fine cook, and she ain't never gonna tell the punchline of your joke after you've spent five minutes building up to it."

"I don't know, Brother Corny," I said. "I got to think about it a little more."

"You're right welcome to," said MacNamarra. "Spend the night if you like. Hell, spend the summer."

"Ain't we in summer?" I asked.

"Spend Christmas and New Years and Opening Day," he went on. "Take as long as you want."

"That's right reasonable of you, Brother Corny," I said.

Then he picked up his shotgun and aimed it at me. "Yep," he said. "Take as long as you want, Reverend. Ain't no hurry at all. But you ain't leaving here a bachelor, and that's a fact."

"You'd really kill me?" I asked, kind of startled.

"Naw, wouldn't be Christian," said MacNamarra. "I'd just blow your legs off. Did I mention that my Rama is a hell of a nurse, too?"

"Tell me, Brother Corny," I said, "what was Rama's mother like?"

"Kind of flighty," he said. "Finally run off with a feller from Kentucky what had this idea about building some kind of franchise, whatever that is. Left me stuck down here with two daughters."

"Two?" I said. "What happened to the other one?"

"Nothing," he said. "She's out hunting our dinner." Suddenly a rifle shot rang out.

"Well, she either caught it, or she ran into one of Rama's former suitors."

"Cluck cluck cluck!" laughed Rama.

Either the gunshot or the clucking got me to thinking, and I turned back to MacNamarra. "What does your other daughter look like?" I asked him.

"She's the prettier of the two," he said. "I'm sorry, Rama, but it's the truth."

Rama nodded her head in agreement.

"Well, there's no sense rushing into marriage," I said. "Maybe I should meet your other daughter before I make up my mind."

"I don't know," he said. "I kind of had my heart set on marrying Rama off first. I love her like only a father can, but truth to tell, she ain't half the shot her sister is, and if one of 'em's got to grow up to be a ugly old maid what does nothing but tend to her father's needs, it makes sense for that to be Bella."

"Bella?" I repeated. "That's her name?"

"Yeah," he said. "It was Anabella or Arabella or something-else-Bella when she was born, but I never could remember which — but I always remembered the Bella part." He looked across the clearing at a

vision of feminine loveliness what was just emerging from the jungle with a rifle in one hand and a young tapir slung over her shoulder.

"Oh, we're gonna eat well tonight, Reverend!" he said. "Hey, Bella, come on over here. There's someone I want you to meet!"

Not many women could make Rama look like a boy in comparison, but Bella was one of 'em. I made a mental note to thank my Silent Partner for arranging for me to meet her before I hooked up permanently with her sister.

Bella kind of undulated across the clearing toward me with a big friendly smile on her face. Her hair was kind of sand-colored — that's dry sand, not the way it looks after a monsoon or maybe being trampled by a herd of terrified elephants — and her skin was smoother than any satin I ever seen. And I'd have given odds that there wasn't a straight line anywhere on her.

"Bella," said MacNamarra, "this here is Reverend Lucifer Jones, who's announced his intention of marrying into our family, one way or t'other."

"Howdy, Bella," I said, taking her hand in mine. I was going to kiss it in a courtly manner until I saw it was covered with tapir blood. "I'm mighty pleased to make your acquaintance, and if I can be allowed to say so, you and your sister are the two most beautiful women it's been my pleasure to encounter on this continent."

"Gobble," she said.

"We'll get around to it," I said, "but it ain't dinnertime yet, and besides someone's got to clean and baste the tapir."

"Gobble gobble gobble," said Bella.

"Uh . . . Brother Corny," I said, "would I be correct in assuming that ain't no verb?"

"What can I tell you?" he said. "I got two bird girls. Built a mansion for each of 'em and their husbands." He started fingering his shotgun again. "I'd sure hate for you to disappoint me, Reverend."

I took another look at his gun and decided that if push came to shove, I'd be even more disappointed than him, to say nothing of being more full of holes.

"Brother Corny," I said, "such a thought couldn't be farther from my mind. I'll be mighty glad to stay for dinner and decide which one of your beautiful daughters I plan to pay court to."

"Now that's more like it!" he said enthusiastically. "Hell, I might even break out a bottle of my prime drinkin' stuff!"

I allowed as to how that could ease the pain of kissing my bachelorhood good-bye, and he told the girls to go clean and cook the tapir and got a couple of clucks and a gobble in response, and then he asked me if I'd like to see the insides of the chateaux mansions.

"Ain't no hurry," I told him. "I figger I'll be moving into one of 'em soon enough."

"I like your attitude, Reverend Jones," he said, slapping me on the back and damned near sending me sprawling.

"How'd you ever get in the middle of this here jungle in the first place, Brother Corny?" I asked.

"We was looking for Buenos Aires," he answered. "Saw a bunch of little naked folk off in the distance, and figured we must have hit the place during carnival season. We followed the parade for a few days, and then one morning they was all gone and we were stuck here in the middle of nowhere, so I got to work building Chicky and me a house, and—"

"Chicky?" I interrupted him.

"I always called her my little chickadee," he explained. "Of course, that was before she done produced an ever littler one."

Well, we swapped life stories for the next hour, and he spent another hour asking me about the Clubfoot of Notre Dame and the Insidious Oriental Dentist and some of my other adventures and exploits and encounters, but if you're reading this here account you probably already read them books so there's no sense my repeating it all here. Anyway, I'd just brung him up to the present when Rama and Bella came out and clucked and gobbled at us, and he allowed as to how that meant dinner was ready, and we went inside and sat ourselves down at a table he'd made out of some defenseless tree that probably never did him no harm, and then the girls brought out a slab of meat that tasted as good as it smelled and a lot better than it looked, and we fell to feeding our faces.

When it was over MacNamarra lit up a cigar and told me that I'd brung him up to date about me, but I'd kind of left out the rest of the world, and he was sort of curious about it.

"For example," he said, "did Woodrow Wilson keep us out of that little skirmish over in Europe?"

"For a while," I said.

"Good," he said. "Only problem with all them foreigners is that they speak European and probably don't believe in God and maybe eat their young, but other than that I can't see that they're all that much different from Americans except for being dumber and uglier." He paused for a moment. "How about the fat guy with the girl's name?"

"I ain't quite sure who you're talking about, Brother Corny," I said.

"You know," insisted MacNamarra. "He pitches for the Boston Red Sox. Calls himself Dolly or Honey, something like that."

"You mean Babe Ruth?"

"That's the feller!" he exclaimed. "I sure wouldn't want to find myself alone in the men's room with a guy called Babe. Whatever happened to him?"

"Traded to the Yankees, last I heard," I told him.

"Good," he said. "Ain't no way Boston was ever going to win a pennant with a fat guy named Babe on the team."

"Anything else you got a driving desire to know?" I asked. "Yeah," he said. "You think my Rama and Bella could make it as Floradora girls?"

"Ain't no Floradora girls no more," I told him.

"Oh?" he asked, looking his disappointment. "What happened to 'em?"

"Talking pictures put 'em out of business," I said.

"Talking pictures?" he repeated, kind of frowning.

"Like unto Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, but with talking," I explained.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Talking pictures!" he guffawed. "By God, I'm gonna like having a son-in-law with a sense of humor!"

He began telling me about how he still had a pile of money in some Missouri and Oklahoma banks, except for the part he'd invested in Anaconda Copper, and I decided telling him about 1929 would just depress him, so I never brung it up.

We talked a bit more, and then he led me out to a tiny shed. "Good night, Reverend," he said. "I can't tell you how happy I am to have you joining our little family."

I heard a kind of snorting sound from the shed.

"Uh . . . I don't want to sound unduly alarmed, Brother Corny," I said, "but exactly what is residing in there?"

"Just Sadie, our pet pig," he said. "Don't mind her. She's a right friendly sort, unless you get her mad."

"Maybe I should just sleep in one of the houses," I suggested.

"Rama lives in one and Bella lives in the other," he said. "T'wouldn't be moral, you spending the night under the same roof with one of 'em until after you're married."

Sadie grunted and the shed shook.

"Maybe I'll just sleep on your rocking chair," I suggested.

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug. "If'n you don't mind being et alive by bugs and having snakes crawl all over you, I can't see why it should bother me neither."

"On second thought, Brother Corny," I said hastily, "I can see that Sadie's a beloved member of the family, and I wouldn't want her suffering no pangs of rejection."

"Well, good for you, Reverend!" he said, slapping me on the back, which was starting to get more than a little sore from all these displays of friendship. "I like the way you think. Hell, build your tabernacle on the property here, and I just might join it. Probably get you three or four Indians, too, provided your religion ain't got nothing against nudity or cannibalism or virgin sacrifice or any of them other little local customs."

I thanked him for his concern and his confidence and his pig, and then I went off to spend the night with Sadie, who truth to tell smelled better and hogged the sleeping area less than some women I could name.

Came morning I wandered over for some breakfast, and Rama and Bella were all scrubbed up and looking their prettiest, than which not a lot of things and hardly no women were prettier, and MacNamarra asked me if I'd made my choice yet, and I told him I was still considering which of these lovely damsels I was going to grace with my hand in marriage, and I realized that I was going to have to come up with some kind of answer pretty soon, because while he smiled and allowed that it was a pretty tough decision, I noticed that his shotgun wasn't never out of his reach.

I began reviewing my options. There were probably worse fates than marrying Bella and having an occasional friendly rendezvous with Rama, or vice versa. Hell, MacNamarra was so desperate to marry 'em off I don't think he'd have raised any serious objections to me marrying both of 'em in the same

modest little ceremony on his front porch — but I knew that sooner or later I'd get a little tired of bird talk. Probably in something under three minutes.

I could high-tail it for civilization, but I didn't know where civilization was, and besides I wasn't quite as young as I'd once been and I figured it was mighty unlikely that I could outrun MacNamarra's buckshot.

And then it occurred to me that there might very well be an alternative that didn't involve getting hitched or getting shot. It wasn't no sure thing, but it made a lot more sense than a long lifetime of chirping or a very short lifetime of no chirping.

"Hey, Brother Corny," I said, "as long as I'm gonna spend the rest of my natural life here, how's about me going out hunting with Rama and Bella and kind of getting the lay of the land?"

"Sure," he said. "Whoever you marry, you figger to get her pregnant right away and keep her pregnant for years and years, so you might as well start acquainting yourself with the landscape."

"Fine," I said, standing up. "Ain't no time like the present."

"Girls," said MacNamarra, "go with him so he don't get hisself so lost that he can't find his way back here. And if he tries to run off, fire two or three warning shots into his bow."

"You mean across my bow," I corrected him.

"I know what I mean," he said. "Okay, girls, get a move on."

Rama and Bella headed off toward the jungle, and I didn't seem to have no choice but fall into step behind them. We wandered far and wide, to say nothing of high and low. Every now and then Bella would start gobbling and pointing, and sure enough there's be a jaguar watching us from an overhanging branch, or Rama would begin clucking a blue streak and I'd see an anteater staring at us from behind some bushes.

But I wasn't after jaguars or anteaters, nor any other fish or fowl. I never did find what I was looking for, and at day's end we went back to the chartreuse mansions, and I reacquainted myself with Sadie, but we were off again the next morning, and the morning after that, going farther afield each time — and on the fifth day we finally ran into a couple of well-muscled good-looking young men, each wearing a little dinky loincloth and carrying a bow and arrows, and it was clear that they were just about the right age for getting hitched.

Thank you, Lord, I said silently. Now I owe You one.

"Howdy," I said to them when they became aware of our presence, and I could tell right off that they were smitten by Rama's and Bella's beauty. "I hope we ain't intruding on your hunting grounds, and by the way where's the nearest city?"

"Quack quack quack," said the one on the left.

By God, Lord, I think, You outdone Yourself this time! "Does your friend always talk like that?" I asked the one on the right.

"Squawk squawk squawk squawk squawk," he said.

I took a quick look at the girls, and I could tell they'd already lost their hearts and were preparing to lose a couple of other things as well, and there wasn't no doubt that the young men were hopelessly in love too.

The five of us went back to the chartreuse mansions, and when MacNamarra saw what I had in tow, and especially when he heard what I was bringing back for his girls, he was so happy he forgot all about shooting me. He broke out his drinkin' stuff again, and before dark I presided at the ceremony what joined the bird boys and the bird girls together for all eternity, and then I stood clear just in case Brother Corny had a tractor and was going to let the girls use it to plight their troughs, and after spending one more night in Sadie's company while each girl honeymooned in a chartreuse mansion, I announced that it was my intention to be on my way, because when you're a man of the cloth whose business is saving sinners, you just naturally got to go to where the sinners congregate, and that meant a city.

"I'll come with you," said MacNamarra.

"I'd of thunk you'd be the happiest man in the world," I said.

"I am."

"Then why are you leaving now that you got both of your girls married off?"

"Truth to tell, Reverend," he answered, "that bird talk was driving me crazy, and now suddenly there's going to be twice as much of it as there was. I got to go where they speak some human language."

"Well, it'd be un-Christian to refuse you a favor," I said, "so pack up your gear and let's be going."

"I promise I won't be no bother to you," he said. "I just got to hear a human voice. Yours ain't much, and it don't make sense very often, but it's better than clucking and gobbling."

He kissed the girls good-bye, slung his shotgun over his shoulder, packed a satchel of ammunition and another of drinkin' stuff, and off we went. He wasn't too bad a traveling companion, except that he'd kick me awake two or three times each night and ask me to talk at him.

I think we'd been on the trail a week when we came to a village smack-dab in the middle of the jungle. It wasn't much of a village, just four or five huts, and sitting in front of one of 'em was an almost-naked lady who was about MacNamarra's age and maybe three or four times his weight.

"Good morrow, Madam," he said, bowing low to her. "Has this here village got a name?"

She answered him in the very same language them guys what wasn't Indians had used on me a couple of weeks earlier, and she guv him a great big smile, and I could see that her teeth were busy rotting away, and even from where I stood I could tell that she hadn't bathed in the last ten or twenty years, but none of that bothered MacNamarra.

"Ain't she got the most beautiful voice you ever heard?" he asked me.

"Did you understand a word she said?" I shot back.

"What difference does that make?" he said. "She didn't chirp, and that's all that matters." He reached out and shook my hand.

"It's been nice knowing you, Reverend Jones, and I can never thank you enough for what you done for my daughters, but I'm smitten with this here delicate little frail flower, and I'm going to spend the rest of my natural-born days just listening to her dulcet tones."

"If that's what you want, Brother Corny, I wish you all the luck in the world," I said, though from the way his delicate little three-hundred-pounder was talking a blue streak at him I figured he'd already found all the luck he needed.

I bid him a fond farewell, and headed off toward where I thought civilization was hiding, primed and ready to finally build the Tabernacle of Saint Luke.

[Back](#) | [Next](#)

Framed