

Carnival Knowledge: a Lucifer Jones Story

by

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I wandered north and east until I finally came to Los Blancos, which had two hotels, three restaurants, a whorehouse, and five bars, none of which felt inclined to extend credit to a man of the cloth. I finally got a grubstake together when I taught some of the locals a little game what had to do with statistical probabilities and the number 21. It was when they became more interested in the number 54, which was how many cards there were in the deck once you counted the two aces that slipped out of my shirtsleeve at a most inopportune time that I felt a need to take my leave of that fair metropolis, and the sooner the better.

I'd won just enough money to buy passage with an itinerant bush pilot, whose profession was sadly misnamed as there wasn't a single bush aboard his little three-seater. I figured I might as well go to Buenos Aires, since I was in Argentina anyway, but he explained that this was carnival week in Rio, and that's where people from all over South America was headed, and I figured if they were going to Rio probably their money was going along with them, and I just might get my hands on enough contributions, freely given and otherwise, to finally get around to building the Tabernacle of Saint Luke—and even if not, there had to be a passel of fallen women in serious need of salvation, and taking the sins of fallen women unto myself was one of the things I did best, me being one of God's personal representatives.

"Tell me about this here carnival," I said after I agreed to let him take me there. "Got a lot of sideshow games of chance in it?"

"No, Senior," he replied.

"Elephants and lions and other trained critters like that?"

"Certainly not, Senior."

"Well," I said, "we can play guessing games all the way to Rio, or you can tell me what makes carnival week different from any other time of year."

"Everyone dresses up in costumes, and they march through the streets, and everywhere there are bands and dancing. The whole city is filled with revelers."

It sounded a lot more like a costume party than a carnival, but I didn't want to disagree with him, especially not at 7,000 feet of altitude and no parachute, so I just sat back and started making plans. I figured I'd go dressed as a preacher what had been stuck in the South American outback for a couple of months, which would at least save me the cost of a costume, and with people coming from all over the continent, there figured to be enough sinners for me to get right down to the business of saving souls, since if you're going to save sinners you just naturally got to go to where they all congregate, and when the pilot started describing some of the ladies' costumes, which sure as shooting sounded a lot more like the ladies' lack of costumes, I knew that I'd somehow lucked out and was going to the very best place to find a bunch of blackened souls what was in serious need of some spiritual soap and water.

"Not only is it Carnival," he continued as this great big city came into view, "but if you are lucky you will have the opportunity to see the Pebbles of God."

"I speak to God every day," I said, "and He ain't never mentioned no pebbles to me. You make 'em sound like they're mighty special, at least as pebbles go."

“That is merely the name for them, Senor,” said the pilot. “They are actually a matched set of perfect blue-white diamonds.”

“You don’t say? Worth a lot, are they?”

“A king’s ransom,” he answered. “Maybe an emperor’s.”

“And they’re going to be on display during this here costume party?” I asked.

“They won’t be out on the street with the revelers, of course,” he explained. “But they have been moved to the Presidential Palace under heavy guard where certain select dignitaries will be allowed to view them.”

“How do these here dignitaries get themselves selected?” I said.

He shrugged, which damned near sent the plane into a tailspin. “Who knows, Senor?” And then he added, kind of suspiciously, “Why do you ask?”

“Well, Brother,” I said, “as a man of the cloth, I figger I might be offended by all the drinking and scanty costumes and the like. I kind of yearn for something more sedate, like admiring works of art.”

“There is an excellent art museum on San Paulo Street,” he offered.

I shook my head. “Probably filled to overflowing with paintings of shameless naked women,” I said. “No, I think I’d better stick to admiring God’s marbles.”

“The Pebbles of God,” he corrected me.

“Whatever,” I said with a shrug.

Then he got busy landing the plane, and the conversation kind of lay there like a dead groundhog, and finally we bumped down—I was going to say that we touched down, but I wouldn’t want my Silent Partner to strike me dead for lying to you—and I got out of the plane and wandered over to the Customs and Immigration shed, which was composed of rotting wood and a leaky roof, and lit by a gas lantern.

“Welcome to Rio,” said a uniformed man with a bushy mustache and a toothy smile.

“Glad to be here, Brother,” I said. “Which way to the diamonds?”

“It is the wrong time of year,” he said apologetically. “We do not play baseball during Carnival.”

“Okay, then,” I said. “Just point out the Presidential Palace and I’ll be on my way.”

“I am afraid no one is allowed in or out of the palace since the robbery, Senor,” he told me.

“What robbery are you referring to?” I asked, hoping that it was something trivial, like maybe someone stealing Mrs. President.

“The Pebbles of God, Senor,” he said. “You have heard of them?”

“Once or twice,” I said. “What happened?”

“I do not know, Senor,” he replied. “I have been at my station all day. But we received word about an hour ago that an incredibly brazen thief somehow got past all our security and stole the Pebbles. They are searching the city for him even as we speak, but with Carnival going on...” He shrugged. “Ah, well. We

have the finest police force in the world. I'm sure that eventually they will apprehend the thief and recover the diamonds. Now then, Senor, have you anything to declare?"

"Just that I'm as outraged as you are, and that Satan's probably warming up a seat in hell for him even as you and I shoot the breeze," I said.

"I mean, have you anything to declare for Customs?"

"No," I answered. "Us men of the cloth travel light." I showed him my wallet, which was empty, since I'd put what little money I had left inside my shoe.

"Thank you, Senor," he said, looking at it and handing it back to me. "By the way, your driver's license expired nineteen years ago."

"Yeah?" I said, taking a look. "You know, I could have sworn it was only seventeen years out of date. Thanks for pointing it out to me."

Before he could answer I was heading through the airport and out into the street, where I caught a double-decker bus and headed off toward the center of town. I figured since the Pebbles of God were no longer available, the least I could do was join the party that seemed to be going on all around me, and maybe share a little carnival knowledge with an obliging lady of quality.

Everywhere I looked people were wearing costumes (or in the case of some of the young ladies, not quite wearing them), and they all were smiling and laughing and dancing the samba, which for them of you what ain't never seen it is a kind of rhythmic form of palsy where you take a ton of steps but don't get nowhere.

The bus was slowing down for a corner when my eyes fell on the prettiest morsel of femininity I ever did see. She had long black hair flowing down to her waist, and the kind of figure that made you think she had room for an extra set of lungs, and her hips were vibrating like unto a rattlesnake about to strike. I couldn't quite figure out her costume, but mostly it looked like a naked lady covered with gold and silver glitter and maybe a set of false eyelashes and not a hell of a lot more.

I hopped off the bus and made my way through the dancers right up to her side.

"Howdy, ma'am," I said. "I hope you don't mind this intrusion, but I got to tell you that your beauty done dazzled me from afar, so I think I'd come on over and let it dazzle me from close up."

She flashed me a smile that would have made me bay at the moon if I could have spotted it amidst all the balloons and confetti.

"You are rich Americano, no?" she said in the most beautiful feminine voice.

"Yeah, that's me," I said, because I figured hitting .500 already put me ahead of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb.

"I am Conchita," she said. "You put me in movies, maybe?"

"Sure, I'll be happy to," I said, making a mental note to buy a little eight-millimeter camera the next morning, and maybe purchase some film in a month or two, after all the tourists went back home and the prices began dropping.

Well, we got to talking, and one thing led to another, and before long Conchita had samba'd her way to a little hotel on a side street, and then she samba'd up the stairs, and then she samba'd into the big

double bed, and sometime during the night while I was snoring peacefully she samba'd back out and about an hour before sunrise she samba'd in back and brung her six brothers with her. One of 'em looked like Primo Carnera, only meaner, and he was the runt of the litter. She introduced us and asked me to name the date, and I told her I couldn't rightly remember but I think we were in June, or maybe April, or possibly October, and she laughed musically and said that she didn't mean today's date, she meant the date for our nuptials.

The whole family seemed mildly upset when I explained that offering to buy a cheap camera didn't constitute a bonafide proposal of marriage back where I came from. Then she started crying, and her brothers began ripping the room apart and looking like they was about to leave the room alone and start in on me, so I kind of rushed out the doorway and down the stairs. By the time I hit the main floor I realized I didn't know how to get in touch with Conchita in case she wanted to go out on another date at some point in the future when everyone had calmed down, but them brothers were thundering down the stairs so fast that I figured that it was better to have loved and lost than to have loved and been dismembered, so I took off down the street and tried to lose myself in the crowd, which was still there and still dancing, even though the sun was thinking of coming up.

"There he is!" yelled a voice, and I saw that one of Conchita's brothers—the one with steel teeth and hobnailed boots—had spotted me. I raced down an alley, turned onto the next street, damned near bumped into the brother who carried a hand axe for comfort, spun around, and headed off in a new direction. Before long all six of 'em was hot on my tail, and the only thing that saved me was that the crowd was getting thicker and thicker, and none of us could make much headway.

Finally I spotted a big building where a bunch of gents in sparkling white suits and ladies in sparkling pink skins were gathering, and I made a bee-line for the door. I don't think Conchita's brothers saw me, because they were no more than fifteen seconds behind me, and no one entered the place for the next half minute. I looked around, and saw that I was in a warehouse, and that this was where a bunch of men were getting into their costumes and a bunch of ladies were getting out of them, so to speak. I figgered the best way to become incognizant was to put on some of the duds the men were wearing, but they seem to have brung their own, because big as the place was I couldn't find no spare costumes hanging on the walls.

Finally I walked up to one of the men and offered him five dollars for his sequined tuxedo.

"Ten," he said.

"Okay, ten."

"And a date with Jean Harlow," he added.

"I don't know Jean Harlow," I admitted.

"Then the deal's off," he said.

"Hang on a minute," I said. "I know a right friendly local girl named Conchita."

"Conchita with all the brothers?" he said. "You and 500 others." He crossed himself. "Those brothers made short work of at least 490 of them."

"That's why I need a disguise."

"You need a priest."

"I am a priest," I said desperately. I held up my well-worn copy of the good book.

“Really?”

“Well, a minister,” I said. “The Right Reverend Doctor Lucifer Jones. Same position, different league.”

“If you’re a minister, what were you doing with Conchita?” he asked me.

“Showing her what sins to avoid if she wants to move to the head of the line at the Pearly Gates.”

“I think I may convert,” he said with a great big grin. “Will you bless me, Father?”

He still had the wrong religion, but I didn’t have no time to argue.

“Domino nabisco, my son,” I said. “Now help me find some duds before them brothers of hers bust the building down.”

Suddenly a trumpet blared and everyone began rushing to the door.

“I am sorry,” he said apologetically. “My group is beginning our march through the city now. We must continue our discussion later.” As he reached the door he turned and yelled back, “If I see Conchita, I’ll give her your regards.”

Then he was gone, and I was all alone in the building. At least I thought I was when I heard a very cultured, very familiar voice say, “I see Fate has brought us together once again, Doctor Jones.”

I kept my eyes on the door, because I didn’t want to turn around and find out for sure that the voice belonged to who I think it belonged to.

“Have you no word of greeting for an old friend?” it said.

“Show me an old friend and I’ll let you know,” I said.

“But it’s me, Erich von Horst,” he said, walking into my line of vision, looking as trim and elegant as ever, kind of like a headwaiter without a hair out of place.

“So it is,” I said, walking around him and heading to the door. “And it’s sure been nice seeing you again, but I got urgent business elsewhere.”

“I overheard what you were saying,” he replied. “If you go outside, you’ll run into the girl’s brothers.”

“The worst they can do is bust my arms and legs and maybe break my back and gouge out my eyeballs,” I said, still walking away from him. “That makes it an easy choice.”

He grabbed my arm. “I believe the heat has gotten to you,” he said. “You really should start wearing a hat. You know what the vertical rays of the sun do to Englishmen.”

“I’m from Moline, Illinois.”

“Same thing,” he said, kind of pulling me over to a chair and sitting me down. “You look well, Doctor Jones. How has life been treating you?”

“Just fine until about two minutes ago,” I muttered.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Good old Doctor Jones!” he said. “Always Johnny on the spot with a witty remark.”

“I hope you didn’t come here all the way from England just to bamboozle me again,” I said. “Because if

you did, I got to tell you on the front end that I ain't got no money."

"When did I ever try to relieve you of your money, my good friend?" he asked innocently.

"Tanganyika," I said. "Morocco. Mozambique. Greece. England."

"You may have emerged the poorer party, but you were not the innocent one."

"We ain't neither of us innocent of much," I said bitterly, "but every time we hook up I wind up un-innocent and broke and you wind up un-innocent and rich."

"Then perhaps you'll let me make it up to you," said von Horst.

"I don't want to hear this," I said.

"There are millions involved."

I got up. "I'm going out into the street and challenge Conchita's brothers. I'll be safer."

"The Pebbles of God," he said softly.

I sat back down.

He grinned. "I thought that would interest you."

"Only because I'm a religious man, and I won't have you robbing my Silent Partner."

"Oh?"

"Well, not alone, anyway."

"What if I told you that I know who stole them?"

"If I'd known you were in the country, I could have given 500-to-1 odds that I knew too."

"So...are we partners?" said von Horst.

"You already got 'em," I said suspiciously. "What do you need a partner for?"

"The police are watching my every move," he explained. "If I try to leave the city, they'll stop me and search me."

"No," I said.

"No, what?" he asked.

"No, I ain't gonna try to smuggle them out of the city for you," I said. "I'm a foreigner too. They'll search me, find the diamonds, and I'll rot in some Brazilian jail while you go free as a bird."

He shook his head. "Oh, ye of little faith."

"I got faith, and to spare," I shot back. "What I ain't got is a death wish."

"Everything has been arranged," he said. "You will be able to leave the city right under the nose of the police."

"And they'll ignore me, huh?" I said sarcastically.

“No, my dear friend,” he replied. “They’ll applaud you.”

“What in tarnation are you talking about?” I demanded.

“It is Carnival!” he said. “And you are in a costume warehouse!”

“The most valuable diamonds in the country have been stolen, and you think that anyone wearing a costume can dance right out of town?” I said. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He shook his head. “No, they’ll search you top to bottom,” he said. “But they’ll never find the Pebbles of God.”

“If they’re that well hid,” I said, “why don’t you take ‘em out yourself? What do you need me for?”

“While you’re taking them to our appointed meeting place, I’m going to be convincing the police that I still have them,” he explained. “I have been hiding since I stole them, but once you’re on your way, I plan to show myself and lead them a merry chase in the opposite direction, which will take most of their attention away from you, and result in at best a cursory examination. Possibly the police will catch me, possibly they won’t—but even if they do, they will eventually have to let me go since I won’t have the diamonds.” He looked sharply at me. “Your fee will be one-third of the take.”

“Seems to me that the guy what’s carrying the diamonds is taking most of the risks,” I said, “and ought to be making most of the money.”

“All right,” he said. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Sixty-thirty,” I said.

He frowned. “That’s only ninety.”

“God gets ten percent. As His spokesman on Earth, I’ll hold it in escrow for Him.”

He considered it for a moment, then shook his head. “Fifty-fifty or it’s no deal.”

“What about God?” I demanded.

“You can split your half with Him any way you want,” he said. “Now, are you in or out?”

“First show me how you think I’m gonna waltz right by the police and then I’ll tell you.”

“Here,” he said, pulling a glittery toga and a pair of gold sandals out of a pocket. “Put these on.”

He began walking off.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“Just get dressed,” he answered, opening a side door I didn’t even know was there. “I’ll be right back.”

I doffed my duds and clambered into the toga, which truth to tell felt a little drafty down at the south end of it, and then strapped on the sandals. I’d just finished when I heard a snort that sure didn’t sound like von Horst. I looked up, and there he was, leading in a smart-looking chestnut horse what was attached to a gold chariot.

I took a deep breath and wrinkled my nose.

“What’s the matter?” he said.

“Your horse smells of fish,” I told him.

He smiled. “That’s not the horse. It’s part of your costume.” He reached into the chariot and pulled out a trident with a pair of fish on it. “You’re Neptune, King of the Ocean.”

“Couldn’t I lose the fish and be King of the Desert?” I said.

He shook his head. “Look at all the fish designs on your chariot. You’ve got to be Neptune. We don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention to you.”

“I’m a gringo riding a chariot, wearing a skirt, and carrying a bunch of dead fish,” I said. “Don’t you think that will draw attention?”

“Not in the middle of Carnival,” he said, pulling a phony beard out of his pocket. “Put this on.”

“No one’s ever seen the King of the Ocean,” I said. “How do you know he wears a beard?”

“Maybe he doesn’t,” agreed von Horst. “I suppose it all depends on whether you want every policeman in town to know exactly what you look like.”

Which is how I wound up wearing a beard.

“You seem awfully well-prepared for this,” I said suspiciously. “Why do I get the feeling that you were waiting for me to come along?”

“Because you have a suspicious nature,” he replied easily. “I was waiting for someone to come along that I could trust. It was just serendipity that it was you.”

“Okay,” I said. “I look like an idiot and smell like a fish. What has all this got to do with God’s Testicles?”

“The Pebbles of God,” he corrected me. He reached into the chariot one more time and withdrew a glittering gold crown encrusted with diamonds. “Here they are,” he said triumphantly. “You’ll wear them right out of town under the noses of the police. There must be five thousand crowns in the parade, all covered with cut glass. There will be no reason for anyone to suspect that this is what the entire city is searching for.”

I took the crown from him and studied it. “What do you think they’re worth?” I said.

He shrugged. “Three million, four million, who can say?”

“The fence you’re going to sell them to can say.”

“Why guess?” he said. “You’ll be standing right beside me when we make the deal.”

“Where are we gonna meet?” I asked.

“There’s a tavern named Carlita’s two miles south of the city limit,” he said. “Meet me there two hours after sunset.”

“Carlita’s,” I said. “Got it.”

“And don’t forget to feed and water the horse,” added von Horst. “If he dies on you, they’ll probably arrest you for animal abuse, and if you’re in jail for a few days, even these unimaginative minions of the law will figure out that your crown is more than it appears to be.”

“Right. Feed and water the horse, follow the parade south out of town, and meet you at Carlita’s after dark.”

“Two hours after dark,” he said. “If you are late I will assume you have betrayed my trust, and I will report you to the police and claim ten percent of the Pebbles as my finder’s fee. We will both be a lot wealthier if you simply do as we have planned.”

“I am shocked that you could think such un-Christian thoughts about me, Brother von Horst,” I said. “Just see to it that you get to Carlita’s on schedule. If you’re more than a few minutes late, I’m going to assume that the police have picked you up and I’m on my own.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed.

I climbed into the chariot and grabbed the reins. “Has this nag got a name?” I asked.

“Dobbin,” said von Horst.

“How about that?” I said. “We used to have a horse called Dobbin back on the farm in Moline, Illinois.”

“A family pet?”

“Until my father got drunk and mistook him for a moose, or maybe a tax collector.”

I clucked to Dobbin, and he trotted out of the building, and a minute later we were in the thick of things, surrounded by dancers and singers and drummers and a lot of ladies what was dressed for extremely warm weather. I stayed with them for almost a mile, until I was sure van Horst wasn’t following me, and then I turned Dobbin into a side street, pulled him to a stop, and clambered out of the chariot.

If there was one thing I knew, it was that Erich von Horst didn’t hand an honest bone in his body. This was the guy who salted the Elephant’s Graveyard in Tanganyika, stole the Crown jewels in London, and otherwise flim-flammed his way around the world, usually taking unfair advantage of innocent trusting souls like myself. But I was onto him this time. I knew if he told me the diamonds were in the crown, that was the one place they weren’t. They looked like cut class because they were cut glass.

Still, he wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble if he had the diamonds on his person, so they had to be here somewhere. I knelt down and pulled the hubcaps off each wheel, but there wasn’t nothing to be found. I went over the chariot with a fine-toothed comb, but I couldn’t find no diamonds. Then I think of checking Dobbin. I went over every inch of his bridle and harness, checked his teeth for shiny fillings, even pried off his shoes in case von Horst had hid the diamonds there, but I kept coming up empty.

I’d wasted an hour and still hadn’t found the diamonds. The sun was getting a little higher in the sky, the day was warming up, and the smell of the fish was making me sick. I figured as long as Neptune had a trident he didn’t need no fish on it, and I was about to pull ‘em off and toss ‘em to a couple of stray cats that had mosied over to admire ‘em close up.

And then it hit me. What was the one place von Horst was sure I wouldn’t look for the diamonds? Inside the fish, which were getting so high and off-putting that he figgered I wouldn’t want to have nothing to do with them, but I was just a little too smart for him.

I pulled one of the fish off the trident. The cats started meowing up a storm, figgering I was about to toss it to them, but instead I manipulated the trident and cut the fish’s belly open with one of the tines, and sure enough, out fell half a dozen perfect blue-white diamonds. I tossed the empty fish to the cats, cut open the other one, picked up another six diamonds, and gave what was left over to the cats.

I knew I couldn't bring the diamonds out of town with me, because von Horst would be waiting at Carlita's. I looked around and realized I was standing next to a lamppost. I moved Dobbin right up against to it, climbed up onto his back, removed the top of the lamp, and put the diamonds there, where they couldn't be seen from the street. The guys who lit the lamps at night did it with these long-handled candles, so none of them ever climbed up there or got a close look, and I knew the diamonds would be safe until I got the opportunity to come back and collect them.

I got back down on the ground, hopped into the chariot, and turned Dobbin back in the direction of the parade. When we passed a fish market a little farther down the street, I stopped, bought a pair of fish that smelled almost as bad as the two I'd left behind, and stuck 'em on the trident.

Then it was just a matter of joining the revelers, who never seemed to run out of energy, as they danced their way through the streets of Rio. I even saw a couple of Conchita's brothers, but of course they never thought to look at Neptune, so we didn't have no unpleasant or deadly encounters. In midafternoon I struck up a conversation with a mildly-naked young lady what was dressed as a harlequin from the neck up and the ankles down. I invited her to join me in my chariot so's we could get to know each other a little better, and for a minute there I think she was going to oblige, but then she wrinkled her nose and said that she was happy to share the chariot and other things with me, but not with the fish. It was a tough decision, but I couldn't be sure I'd pass another fishmonger before we left the city, so I reluctantly bid her farewell. I never saw a gorgeous underdressed lady look so surprised in all my born days, and I've had some pretty surprising encounters with a passel of 'em.

In late afternoon I let Dobbin graze on a pair of fruit stands what's owner were off dancing. Pretty soon it started getting dark, and I realized that first, I was about three miles from Carlita's, and second, I was getting powerful sick of samba music, so I turned Dobbin south onto the exit road. I let him stop and munch on some grass and flowers and the like, and we pulled up to Carlita's almost exactly two hours after sunset. I didn't want von Horst examining the fish too closely while I was still around, so I laid 'em down on the floor of the chariot, hopped out, tied Dobbin to a hitching post, and walked into the tavern.

There was so much cigar smoke that I almost didn't see the sultry girl doing kind of a slow dance in the corner. She was barefoot, she had a cigarette dangling from her mouth, and she was kind of doing a solo rhumba in slow motion. The bartender was maybe 400 pounds and drenched in sweat, but just the same he never rolled up his sleeves, unbuttoned his shirt, or loosened his bowtie. There were half a dozen tables, most of 'em filled by people who looked like they either didn't know it was carnival week or didn't much care.

I sat down at an empty table. A couple of friendly young ladies wandered over from the bar, but before they could reach me von Horst entered the place, carrying a brown paper bag, and walked right over to me, waving them away kind of disdainful-like.

"Any trouble?" he asked.

"Only with the fish," I said, just to see his reaction.

His face got all tense. "What about the fish?"

"They smelled so bad that I couldn't get any young ladies of quality to ride with me," I said.

"But you still have them?" he said kind of urgently.

"Yeah, they're out there in the chariot."

He suddenly relaxed. "I'm glad to see everything went off without a hitch."

“I don’t suppose you brung my clothes with you?” I said. “I don’t like the way a couple of these guys are staring at my legs.”

“As a matter of fact I did,” said von Horst. He handed me the bag. “Maybe you should go change in the men’s room.”

And that was when I saw how I’d make my getaway.

“Thanks, von Horst,” I said. I put a hand to my stomach. “I was about to head off there anyway. I been feeling a mite queasy all day. I think it was the smell of them damned fish.”

“Take your time,” he said. “My fence isn’t due here for another half hour.”

And then, because I didn’t want him coming looking for me, I had another stroke of brilliance. I took the crown off and guv it to him.

“Here,” I said. “You hang onto this.”

He just looked kind of surprised, and a bit curious.

“What’s past is past,” I said, “and I just want you to know that there ain’t no hard feelings. I trust you not to run off with the Pebbles while I’m in the john.”

“I appreciate that, Doctor Jones,” he said.

I picked up the bag and walked to the bathroom. I’d call it the men’s room, but from the looks of it it served men, women, children, and the occasional mule what wandered in to get out of the weather. I took off the toga and sandals, got into my clothes, and then climbed out through the narrow window.

When I was about a block away I took a peek back. Dobbin was still tied to the post, and von Horst either hadn’t come out to check on the fish, or had maybe got as far as the front door, took a deep breath, and satisfied himself that they were still there.

I hitched a ride into Rio in the back of a truck what was delivering a few hundred live chickens to market, which certainly got the smell of fish out of my nose. I hopped off when we were a block away from the lamppost where I’d left the Pebbles of God, then waited a few minutes until I was sure no one was out on the street where they might see me.

I climbed up the lamppost, reached in, and found to my relief that the Pebbles were still there. I pulled ‘em out, stuffed ‘em into my pocket, clambered down to the ground, and headed off in search of a place to spend the night, preferably one what wasn’t frequented by none of Conchita’s friends and relations.

I passed a bunch of Brazilian hotels, and finally come to an American one, and the reason I knew that was that it had a small tasteful sign, written all in American, what said: Bed and Broad, \$7.

“Howdy,” I said, walking into the lobby, which was about the size of a closet, only maybe a little better-lit. “You got any rooms for rent?”

“Nah, we just rent airplanes and gorillas here,” said the clerk, which was the kind of answer what convinced me beyond any doubt that he was American.

“You need a better sign painter,” I said.

“That’s as big a sign as we could afford,” he said.

“I wasn’t talking about the size of it,” I replied. “But it says Bed and Broad.”

“I know what it says,” he told me.

“And you got no problem with it?” I asked.

“None,” he said.

“In that case I just may stay here a month,” I said, pulling off my shoe and reaching for my folded-up bill, which I shoved across the counter to him.

“What’s this?” he said, frowning.

“My last ten dollars,” I said. “But don’t worry; I’ll have more tomorrow.”

“If it’s like this, I won’t take it tomorrow neither,” he said, shoving it back to me.

I picked it up and realized that it wasn’t no bill at all, but instead a folded-up letter. It was too dark to read in there, so I took it out and stood under a street light.

My dear Doctor Jones:

If there are three certainties in the world, they are death, taxes, and the nature of Lucifer Jones. If my reading of your character is correct, and thus far it always has been, you instantly assumed that the crown contained nothing but cut glass. It would have taken you less than an hour to examine your costume, your chariot, and Dobbin’s harness, come up empty, and finally realized that I must have had an ulterior motive for insisting that the fish be part of your costume. You of course would have cut them open, found the faux “diamonds”, and secreted them away before meeting me at Carlita’s. (You are welcome to keep them as a memento of our partnership.) I knew you would want to take your leave of the place before I could examine the fish, so I brought your clothes along, giving you the perfect opportunity to escape, which of course you took.

It may interest you to know that you were indeed in possession of the Pebbles of God all day long. They were precisely where I told you they were—embedded in Neptune’s crown—but I knew that a man of your deceitful nature would never trust a man of honor and integrity like myself to tell you the truth. I feel your behavior in this endeavor clearly disqualifies you from your share of the profits.

And profits there will be. The diamonds are only part of this little enterprise. The creature you know as Dobbin is actually the champion racehorse Phar Cry, whom I borrowed for a few days and am now returning for almost as much money as I will realize for the Pebbles of God. All in all, a good day’s work, thanks in no small part to you.

Your obedient servant,

Erich von Horst

A trio of amiable young men wandered up and asked me if I’d like to join them in a samba.

I kicked each of them in the shins.