

A Jaguar Never Changes Its Stripes: A Lucifer Jones story by Mike Resnick

Part One

I'm a city boy at heart. I've heard others sing the praises and charms of living in the wide open spaces, but games of chance and obliging women of quality just ain't in abundance out in the wilderness, and of course my calling—bringing the Word of the Lord to all the unwashed and godless heathen of the world—requires me to go to where the sinners all congregate.

Which is why I find it puzzling that I spent so much of my young manhood being lost in the bush. There are glittering capitols on every land mass I ever been on, just filled to overflowing with works of art, many of which are called Fifi and Bubbles, but it seems that for every hour of heavenly rapture I could snatch with one of 'em I spent days and weeks getting et alive by six-legged critters and sharing my lunch with no-legged ones.

So I probably shouldn't have been too surprised that a couple of days after taking my leave of old Harvey Bunta, his daughter Merry, and a couple of trillion army ants, I decided I was about as thoroughly lost as I'd ever been, and that is mighty thorough.

My sense of direction has stopped me from ever wandering as far as Mars or Venus, but beyond that it ain't been all that much of a help. The only things I'd seen in two days besides them what flies and them what slithers were a pair of lovelorn tapirs what was absolutely shameless and had the kind of stamina you could only wish for in a horse what runs in them super-long six-day races across the desert. I couldn't remember which fruits were good eating and which turned you into wormfood, so I settled for eating grass, which is kind of like eating salad without the tomatoes and the dressing.

Finally I came upon a river. I figgered at least I'd finally have some fish for dinner, but the alligators and anacondas what lived there weren't real keen on sharing. Every time I'd reach into the water to grab a fish, up would come an alligator intent on grabbing a preacher. Finally I found a rope some native had left lying around, and I attached a thorn to serve as a hook, and I stuck a worm on the end of it and tossed it in the water, and sure enough, a twenty-foot anaconda swum by and grabbed it. Well, I pulled on my end and he pulled on his, and long about the time he'd drug me waist deep into the water and a bunch of his friends and relations starting heading our way I figgered that raw anaconda probably didn't taste as good to me as raw person did to him, and since he had the better motivation on his side I let go of the rope and climbed ashore just before his ladyfriend could give me a great big hug.

I sat on the shore for a few hours, trying to figger out how to con one the alligators out of a fish dinner when suddenly a small canoe came around a bend of the river and a little guy wearing nothing but a loincloth and a couple of bones in his hair paddled up to the shore and shot me a friendly smile and signaled me to hop in. I figgered I couldn't be no hungrier and no loster anywhere else than I was here, so I accepted his invite and a minute later we were floating down the middle of the river.

We'd gone a couple of miles, and the river widened out some, and suddenly he stopped paddling and looked over the side of the boat, and then quick as lightning he reached into the water and pulled out a fish, which he tossed onto the floor of the boat. It started flopping around, and he cracked it on the head with his paddle, and then it just lay there, all quiet and peaceful-like.

I waited until he was busy paddling again, and then grabbed the fish and took a few bites, spitting out a couple of bones and swallowing the rest for some much-needed roughage. I didn't forget my new-found benefactor neither, and left him the head, the tail, and one dorsal fin.

I never did learn his name, but we traveled north along the river for three days, and he was so good at

nabbing fish that I didn't feel guilty about gobbling half of them while he was hunting for *his* dinner, and the only problem I had during that whole journey was when he plucked a pirhana out of the water what was even hungrier than I was. We rassed to a draw, and I finally tossed him back after promising to come looking for him again when I was a little better equipped, like with a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Then one day my companion headed for shore. We clambered out, pulled the boat up out of the water, and then he jabbered at me in some foreign tongue, and I blessed him and forguv him for his sins and asked if he had any romantically inclined sisters, and finally he went his way and I went mine.

I was still lost, but at least I was lost on a full stomach, and I began walking north along the river. There was the same fruits and berries that I hadn't eaten a week ago, but I figgered if a bunch of raw fish, scales and all, hadn't killed me, probably nothing growing on a tree could neither, always excepting poisonous centipedes with bad attitudes.

I was munching on something soft and almost tasty, and wondering how many years it would be before I hooked up with civilization again, when civilization manifested itself in the distance with the sound of a gunshot. This was followed by thirty or forty more shots in quick succession, and I realized that I'd stumbled into one of them revolutions what are even more popular in South America than baseball.

Now, I know some people would have run the other direction when they heard all them shots, but I'd *been* in the other direction for close to two weeks and I couldn't find nothing to recommend it, so I began walking toward the sound of the gunfire, ready to sell my services to the first side that would make me a general and promise me three squares a day.

The gunfire became louder and louder, but as near as I could tell it was all coming from one side, and if that meant the enemy was out of ammunition, or better still all dead, then I knew which side I planned to join up with. I got to within maybe two hundred yards of it and was just passing a big shade tree when a voice rang out:

"Duck, Lucifer!"

I figured it was God Himself shouting at me, because none of these here revolutionaries could have known my name, and I took my Silent Partner at His word, diving head-first to the ground.

A couple of seconds later I heard a *thud!* just off to my right.

"What the hell are you doing out here in the Motto Grasso?" said that same voice, and suddenly it sounded mighty familiar and a lot less Godlike, and I lifted my head up and sure enough, there was my old friend Capturin' Clyde Calhoun and maybe eight or nine of his gunbearers.

"Well, howdy, Clyde," I said, getting up and brushing myself off. "Why in tarnation were you shooting at me?"

"Not *you*," he said, walking forward. "Take a look."

He pointed to where I'd heard the thud, and there, sprawled out on the ground where it had fallen from an overhead branch, was a jaguar with a hole right betwixt its eyes.

"Well, that's one you ain't bringin' back alive," I said.

He pulled out a flask, took a swig, and handed it to me. "You still ain't told me what you're doing here," said Clyde.

"Mostly I been concentrating on being lost and starving to death," I admitted.

“For a minute there I think we might be working for the same side,” he said.

“I don’t want to appear unduly ignorant, Clyde,” I said, “but who’s on the jaguar’s side?”

“Come on back to my camp and I’ll tell you all about it,” he said. “Dinner should be just about through cooking by the time we get there.”

“What kind of grub you got? I asked.

“Deer, tapir, alligator, and sloth,” said Clyde.

“You traveling with an ice box?”

“Shot ‘em all this morning,” he replied. “Takes a lot of meat to feed a safari with five trackers, ten gunbearers and twenty skimmers.”

“Twenty skimmers?” I repeated.

“Well, nineteen. One up and run off with a headhunter’s daughter.”

“Should I presume from the fact that you’re traveling with nineteen skimmers and no veterinarians that you ain’t capturing nothing for zoos and circuses on this safari?” I said.

He nodded. “This time I’m after jaguars.”

“I think they’re an endangered species.”

“Pretty much so,” he agreed.

“Ain’t it against the law to hunt endangered species?” I asked.

“They wasn’t endangered when I got here,” he said with more than a little trace of pride.

“So why are you denuding the countryside of jaguars?” I asked. “Have they been killing all the livestock?”

He laughed. “You see any farms around here, Lucifer?”

“Then what leads you to come all the way out here to hell and gone, just to shoot jaguars?”

“It’s political,” he said.

“Jaguars got the vote?” I asked.

“It’s really complicated,” he said. “I’ll tell you while we eat. In the meantime, what have you been doing with yourself? I ain’t seen you since we hunted that Yeti in the Himalayas.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that it wasn’t no Yeti but just a eight-foot-tall basketball player on the lam from the mob for not shaving points, so I told him everything I’d experienced since then, covering such heroic adventures as the Clubfoot of Notre Dame, the Island of Annoyed Souls, my six hours as President of San Palmero, and many other such exploits, which I’ve writ about before and won’t thrill you with again (or at least not right this moment), and Clyde, for his part, told me about the mountain gorillas and pandas and blue whales he brung back—them few what was still alive and feebly kicking—after his veterinarians nursed ‘em back to health, which he assured me was the very safest way to bring ‘em back alive. I told him of the fifteen or twenty times I’d fallen passionately and eternally in love, and he

told me about the eighty-three times he'd fallen passionately and briefly in lust—well, eighty-one if you don't count the gorilla and the orangutan—and when we'd caught each other up on the past few years we went to work on dinner. I don't know what it was, but it didn't have no scales, and that was enough for me. And then, as we shared his flask and lit a couple of cigars, just to keep the insects away, Clyde decided to tell me why he was decimating the jaguar population of the Motto Grasso, which I didn't even know we was in until he mentioned it.

“It happened about two months ago,” he said. “I was back in the States, peaceably blowing away spotted owls and turning the survivors over to some local zoos, when I got a request from down here for three hundred jaguar skins. I made sure that the jaguars didn't still have to be in 'em, we hit upon a price, and I put together a safari and came down here on the double, figgering them what I only winged could be shipped back home to the Capturin' Clyde Calhoun Circus.”

“Why does some guy want three hundred jaguar skins?” I said. “And what's all this got to do with politics?”

“My very questions,” replied Clyde. “Well, after my first question, which was what did the job pay?”

“And what's the answer?”

“Well, it's kind of complex,” said Clyde. “Maybe not for a sophisticated preacher like yourself, but for a simple world-traveling sportsman like me. You ever hear of the Leopard Men?”

I shook my head. “Sounds like a bunch of men what picked up some disease that left 'em covered with spots.”

“Funny,” said Clyde. “That was my first thought, too. But the Leopard Men are a cult back in Africa, and the way you can tell they're Leopard Men is that each of 'em wears a mask and cloak made of leopard skins.”

“What do they do once they get decked out in their leopard skins?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Beats me. Probably engage in a bunch of fun and fascinatin' acts against God and Nature.”

“So you're killing all these jaguars so some local tribe can indulge in some obscene sexual orgy?” I said, and then added: “Can we join in?”

“T'ain't that simple, Lucifer,” said Clyde. “Near as I can tell, this particular tribe of Injuns plans on overthrowing the government and grabbing political power.”

“And they don't want to share it with no jaguars?” I said, trying to follow his line of reasoning.

“They don't want no one to identify 'em, so they're going to wear these here skins as a disguise and call themselves the Jaguar Men.”

“That don't make no sense at all, Clyde,” I said. “If I was the government, I'd just shoot anyone wearing a jaguar skin. I think they'd be better off dressing like any other savage out here.”

“Well, I ain't privy to their plans, except of course for supplying their wardrobes,” he answered, “but I figger the reason they want the skins is so no one can finger 'em in case they got an informer in the group.”

“And how big is this government they plan to overthrow with just three hundred Jaguar Men?” I asked.

“It better not be much more than two hundred,” opined Clyde. “I mean, hell, if they can’t kill their own jaguars, it don’t say much about their ability to kill the enemy, does it?”

“Sounds like you better make sure you get your money before the revolution gets out of the starting gate,” I agreed.

“Yeah, that’s been my thinking on the matter too,” said Clyde. “In fact, payday’s coming up pretty soon.” He turned to one of his trackers. “How many did we bag today?”

“Sixteen,” said the man.

“We’re getting close,” said Clyde. “I figger we’re gonna run out of jaguars just about the time I run out of bullets.” He turned back to me. “You want to see what one of these here Jaguar Men is gonna look like?”

“Why not?” I said.

“Then follow me,” he said, getting up and walking to one of the tents his men had pitched.

We entered it, and there, laid out in neat piles, were a few hundred jaguar skins.

“The heads are still attached,” I said. “Come to think of it, so are the claws.”

“The heads are the masks,” said Clyde. “The claws are just for show, though I imagine you could scratch your back with ‘em.” He picked one of the skins up and handed it to me. “Here, try one on. You’ll see how comfortable it is.”

I picked up a skin, gathered it around my shoulder, slid my arms into the little loops that his skinners had attached, and then I fitted the head over my face.

“Can you see okay?” asked Clyde.

“Plain as day,” I said. “You know, if they decide to cancel the revolution, you could cart these here things to Paris and start a new fashion trend.”

“Or export ‘em to Africa for when they run out of leopards to skin,” added Clyde.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’m beginning to see that there’s no end of things you can do with three hundred jaguar skins—except breed more jaguars.”

Suddenly we heard a commotion from the center of camp, and we left the tent and walked over to see what was going on.

There were a couple of dozen armed natives, who Clyde kept calling Injuns though they didn’t look nothing like the drawings of Geronimo and Crazy Horse I’d seen on dime novels when I was growing up. They were little guys in loincloths who obviously weren’t on speaking terms with the local barber, and they were carrying spears and knives.

“What’s the problem here?” demanded Clyde, signaling five or six of his gunbearers to get some weapons loaded and ready.

“We hear you have gone to work for Mudapa!” said one of the Injuns accusingly.

“Ain’t a word of truth to it,” said Clyde. “I’m working for some half-naked little guy with bad breath and rotten teeth.”

“That *is* Mudapa!” said the Injun. “He is the enemy of our blood.”

Which giv me a new respect for these little fellers. I mean, most of us just choose an enemy and that’s that—but here were these guys saying that their blood chose its own enemies, and that led me to wonder if their kidneys and livers and spleens also took dislikes to certain folk, and if so, what they were inclined to do about it.

“Not to worry,” said Clyde. “He’s just out to overthrow the government, not to make war with ugly little runts like you.”

“We *are* the government!” yelled the Injun.

“You don’t say,” replied Clyde, and I could tell he was surprised. “I didn’t figger you Injuns had evolved enough to develop greed and corruption. Just goes to show you.”

“We are here to destroy the skins,” said the Injun. “Where are they?”

“You leave the skins alone, I’ll leave you alone, and we’ll all be happy,” said Clyde.

“Grab him!” said the Injun, and a bunch of his companions grabbed hold of Clyde before he could reach for one of his guns.

“I haven’t tortured a white man in weeks,” said the head Injun. “This is going to be fun.”

Part Two

Well, I’d been standing in the shadows during all this, but I figured it was time to come to Clyde’s aid, so I stepped out into the light of the campfire.

“Unhand that man!” I said. “I, the king of the Jaguar Men, have spoke!”

Everyone turned to me and just kind of stared for awhile.

“Who are you?” demanded the head Injun.

“I just told you,” I said.

“You must have a name,” he said.

I was thinking of telling him it was Tarzan, or maybe Teddy Roosevelt, but then I realized that I was in South America and I ought to give him a name that would be appreciated down here, so I looked him in the eye and said, “I’m Simon de Bolivar, and that there man you’re about to torture is my friend.”

“Simon de Bolivar?” he repeated.

“No need to be formal,” I said. “You can call me Simon de.”

“This man has made a pact with our enemies,” said the Injun. “Our laws demand that we torture him.”

“I make the laws around here,” I said. “Unhand him.”

“Unhand him?”

“You heard me,” I said.

He shrugged, pulled out a knife, and was about to set to work sawing off Clyde’s left hand when I told

him to stop.

“We got a little communication problem here,” I explained.

“You want the other hand?” he asked. “No problem.”

“I don’t want neither hand,” I said.

“Maybe an ear?” he suggested.

“Set him loose,” I ordered.

“Why should we listen to you?” demanded another Injun. “You’re one of the Jaguar Men.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But you guys ain’t thinking this through. There ain’t no reason why I shouldn’t be one of *your* Jaguar Men.”

The head Injun frowned, like he was struggling with the concept. “I don’t like dealing with people who have no loyalties.”

“I got loyalties, and to spare,” I told him. “They just happen to be for rent.”

“Explain,” he said.

“Can you see my face under this here mask?” I said.

“No,” he answered.

“Then the only reason you know I’m a white man instead of one of you godless brown heathen, meaning no offense, is because I sound so cultured, right?”

“We’ll come back to that,” he said. “Continue.”

“What if my friend Clyde here was to tell the illiterate savages he killed the jaguars for that he’d shot out the area and only came up with a hundred and fifty skins?” I said. “And what if he gave the other hundred and fifty to *your* illiterate savages? How would anyone know that one of your guys wasn’t a real Jaguar Man? Think of the confusion you could cause and the orders you could contradict.”

The head Injun stared at me kind of thoughtfully. “You interest me, white man,” he said at last.

“I don’t blame you, me being the good-looking young buck that I am,” I said, “but I got to warn you that us men of the cloth don’t do nothing degenerate, except on special occasions and then only with partners of the female persuasion.”

“You misunderstand me,” he said.

“Well, *that’s* a relief,” I said. “So what do you say, Tonto. Have we got a deal?”

“What do you want for the skins, and my name isn’t Tonto.”

“Tonto’s a perfectly good Injun name, and it’s probably easier to remember than whatever you call yourself. And now that we’re going to be partners, you can stop calling me Simon de Bolivar and start calling me Kemosabe.”

“What does it mean?” he asked.

“Great white preacher who speaks for God,” I told him.

Tonto made a face. “What do you want for half the skins?”

“First, you got to let my friend go,” I said.

He nodded to his men, and they released their grip on Clyde.

“Second, have you got a high priest or a chief medicine man or anything like that?”

“Yes.”

“He’s fired and I’m the new one.”

He considered it for a minute, then nodded his agreement.

“And third, my friend Clyde here gets a free lifetime hunting license.”

“Lucifer, they ain’t got no hunting licenses in the Matto Grasso,” said Clyde.

“Okay,” I said. “Fire your top general and put Clyde in charge of your army.”

“Has he had any experience?” asked Tonto.

“He’s sent more men and beasts to the Happy Hunting Grounds than any ten warriors you can name,” I said.

“What does that have to do with fighting a war?”

“Same principle,” said Clyde. “Anything what’s moving within rifle range soon finds out that moving ain’t no permanent condition.”

“Have you any more conditions?” asked Tonto.

“I ain’t sure,” I said. “Your temple got any good-looking virgin handmaidens?”

“No.”

“Then I got no more conditions.”

“I agree to your terms,” said Tonto.

“Now that we’re all going to be friends and partners,” said Clyde, “let’s pull out a bottle of fine drinkin’ stuff and seal the deal.”

I could tell Tonto didn’t know quite what Clyde was talking about, and my explaining that it was heap good firewater and much beloved by us palefaces didn’t seem to add much to his understanding, but when Clyde actually produced the bottle he smiled and took a healthy swig.

We drank and shot the breeze for half an hour, and then all the Injuns staggered off to their camp, swearing eternal friendship and promising to come back the next morning to pick up the skins and make plans for putting down the revolution.

“That was quick thinking, Lucifer,” said Clyde after they’d gone. “And don’t think I ain’t grateful. But I can’t meet expenses if I only sell a hundred and fifty of the skins.”

“You ain’t thinking this through, Clyde,” I said.

“Enlighten me.”

“We’re going to war with Mudapa’s tribe, right?” I said. “And we’re the only side what’s got guns. After we win, we’ll keep the spoils of war, which means the skins.”

“I never thought of that,” said Clyde. “I feel much better now. You got a real head on your shoulders, Lucifer.”

It was certainly a better head than Clyde’s, because I’d already figured out that even if we won he was going to be stuck with three hundred skins and no buyers, but I didn’t want to trouble his sleep none, so I decided not to mention it as he was dozing off.

As for me, I wasn’t quite sure about all the angles and intricacies of being the high priest out here in the middle of nowhere, but once I arranged a steady flow of good-looking handmaidens and tributes from all the neighboring tribes, I figured I’d send Clyde off to civilization to sell his skins and while he was gone I’d find some way confiscate all the money that Mudapa’s tribe was going to pay him, which was another thing I was pretty sure Clyde hadn’t think of, as a lifetime of having his ears just inches from the explosions of his rifles had kind of dulled his brain, which in truth didn’t have a lot of sharp edges to begin with.

Well, morning came, and with it came about a hundred little fellers in loincloths. I expected ‘em all to have big toothy grins, since we’d made our deal and they knew all the guns were on their side of the fence, so to speak, but this group looked mighty sour, like something they’d et disagreed with ‘em.

I could hear ‘em mumbling and grumbling to themselves, and I looked around for Tonto to tell me what the problem was, but I couldn’t spot him nowhere, and as I stared at these Injuns it dawned on me that they was wearing different ornaments on their almost-naked little bodies than Tonto’s warriors, and I realized that these had to be Mudapa’s men, and you didn’t have to be no brighter than Clyde to take a look and figger out that at least one of ‘em had had a little pow-wow with at least one of Tonto’s braves, and the cat was out of the bag. Or in this case, three hundred cats, all of ‘em recently deceased and ready to wear.

Clyde burst out of his tent when he heard the commotion, and found himself facing a few dozen spears.

“You have betrayed us!” yelled the leader, who I took to be Mudapa. “You have dealt with the enemy!”

“T ain’t so!” said Clyde. “Do I look like a double-dealing back-stabbing traitor to you?” Then he added, right quickly: “Don’t answer that question. Ain’t important nohow. I got all your skins over in this tent here. You got your money?”

Which was the first time I wondered where they carried their wallets, since no one was wearing any pants.

Mudapa signaled for one of his warriors to step forward, and the feller handed Mudapa a little bag which he help up in front of Clyde.

“Twenty-five flawless emeralds from the mines of Columbia,” announced Mudapa. “Now where are the skins. And if you are lying to me, I will be wearing a Calhoun skin before noon.”

I figured they wouldn’t welcome no distractions at that particular moment, so I just stayed in my tent. I noticed that I still had the jaguar skin I’d wore the night before, but I couldn’t imagine Mudapa would get too riled over Clyde’s total being one short, and besides I think it might come in handy before long, so I

just tucked it under my cot, and I sat down and listened.

There was a lot of excited jabbering in some strange language that was even more incomprehensible than French, and I figured that was Mudapa and his men talking back and forth. Finally I heard Clyde say, "Now how about my emeralds?" and suddenly there was some wild laughter, but one voice drowned it out, and that was Clyde cursing a blue streak.

I heard Mudapa and his men all leave, and I came out of the tent. Clyde looked up, and I don't think I'd ever seen him so mad, even that time back in Africa when his gun jammed right before he could set a record for the most innocent elephants slaughtered in an afternoon.

"That dirty bastard!" he growled.

"Mudapa?" I asked.

He held out his fist and opened it, and I saw he was holding a bunch of stones like you find on the bottoms of rivers, especially when you're walking barefooted. "Do these look like emeralds to you?" he demanded.

"No," I admitted. "But there's a lot I don't know about emeralds. Maybe you should leave 'em out in the sun to ripen."

"Bah!" said Calhoun, tossing the strange-looking emeralds into the bush. "Nobody flim-flams Capturin' Clyde Calhoun! I'm going to war!"

"Before breakfast?" I said.

"What's more important to you?" he demanded. "My emeralds or your stomach?"

"Do you want a frank answer or a friendly one?" I replied.

"All right, all right," he muttered, "we'll put some grub on. I might as well enlist Tonto and his men in our cause."

"Tonto and his men might be just a tad riled that you guv away their half of the skins to Mudapa and *his* men," I noted.

Well, Tonto showed up just when the eggs were frying, and *riled* is an understatement. They had Clyde staked out spread-eagled and naked on the ground inside of a minute, and while I often thought fondly of coming upon Fatima Malone or some other genteel young lady of my acquaintance in just such a position, somehow seeing Clyde stretched out like that killed my appetite, and I didn't even bother pulling the eggs out of the frying pan.

"You have betrayed our trust," said Tonto, "and for that you must die, slowly and painfully."

"If you really want me to die slowly," suggested Clyde, "why not come back next year and strike the first blow then?"

"We are not going to strike you at all," said Tonto.

"That's a comfort," Clyde allowed. "Now how's about letting me up?"

"No," continued Tonto. "We are going to pour honey all over your body and then leave you to the mercy of all the ants and scavengers of the bush."

“I got a better idea,” said Clyde. “How’s about you and me squaring off, *mano a mano*? If I win, I ain’t no traitor and I get to go free; if you win, *then* you can feed me to the beasts of the jungle.”

Tonto looked like he was considering it, but Clyde had him by maybe five inches and seventy pounds, and in the end he didn’t like the odds, so he finally rejected the offer.

“Okay,” said Clyde, undeterred. “I got a better idea...”

“No more talk,” said Tonto. “Time to die.”

I figured if they killed Clyde they might not want to stop at just one foreign devil, so I took the bull by the horns, or the Injun by the loincloth, and stepped out of my tent, wrapped in my jaguar skin.

“Hold your horses, Brother Tonto,” I said. “I got something to say before you torture poor old Clyde to death.”

“It better be *‘don’t!’*” muttered Clyde.

“What are horses?” asked Tonto, looking around.

“Okay, hold your tree sloths,” I amended. “Just hang on a minute and listen to me.”

He shut up and turned to me with an *It better be good* expression on his face.

“I know it appears on the surface that Clyde was dealing with the enemy, but actually that’s all part of our secret plan.”

“Your secret plan to betray us, or your secret plan to grow rich?” he demanded.

“Clyde ain’t made one penny off them skins, and that’s a fact,” I said. “May the Good Lord smite me dead on the spot if I’m lying to you.” The closer Injuns backed away, just in case God decided to exercise His option. “He just guv ‘em to Mudapa to gain his confidence and lower his guard,” I concluded.

“Right!” Clyde chimed in.

“And what was supposed to happen once his guard was down?” asked Tonto suspiciously.

Clyde seemed stuck for an answer. “You tell him, Lucifer,” he said at last.

“It was all your idea, Clyde,” I said, equally stuck, “so you should tell him.”

“But you thunk of a lot of the most important details,” said Clyde desperately, “so you get the honor of laying the plan out for him.”

“No,” I said. “Credit where credit’s due. You tell him, Clyde.”

“I’d like to,” he said, “but I can’t think when I’m staked out like this. Maybe if someone would let me up...?”

“Not until I am convinced you have not betrayed us,” said Tonto.

“All right,” I said, thinking about three words ahead of where I was speaking. “Our plan was to have Clyde disguise himself as a Jaguar Man with this here skin I’m holding, join Mudapa’s army, find out their plans, and then report back to you so you’ll be ready for them when they attack. And the reason we let

all but one skin go was because we figured he'd be harder to spot in the middle of three hundred Jaguar Men than one hundred and fifty of 'em."

Tonto was one surprised Injun. "You know," he said, "it makes sense."

"Good," said Clyde. "Cut me loose and let me get on with being a Master Spy."

"It *sounds* logical," continued Tonto, "but we need a hostage, just in case you were lying to us again." Tonto pointed a finger at me. "*You* will infiltrate the enemy. We will hold your friend here until you return with the information we want."

"At least cover me up enough to make me decent in case any ladies wander by," said Clyde. "I don't want my proud masculine appurtenance to be the object of prying eyes."

"If I were you," said Tonto, "I'd be more worried about it being the object of prying teeth, but then, I never did understand white men."

"Lucifer," said Clyde, "why are you still hanging around here?"

"It ain't been thirty seconds since I told Tonto our plan," I answered.

"Then you been loafing for twenty-eight seconds," said Clyde bitterly. "Being staked out naked in the tropical sun is mighty difficult work. The sooner you come back, the sooner they'll cut me loose and I can pour myself a beer."

"You got any beer here?" I asked.

"Damn it, just go!" he bellowed.

I could see there wasn't no sense arguing with him when he was in that kind of mood, so I took my leave of the camp and started walking north and east, which was the direction I'd seen Mudapa and his men heading when he'd swiped all the skins.

It took about two hours to catch up with 'em, as they wasn't in no hurry, and in fact they was all sitting around swapping jokes and smoking little native cigars when I arrived. I waited until they got up and started walking again, slipped on my Jaguar Man duds, and joined 'em. No one paid me no never-mind until lunchtime, when the chef made the rounds and asked each warrior what he wanted. When he came to me, I told him I'd settle for a sandwich, and he said he hadn't never heard of a sandwich and how many legs did it have, and I figured I'd better start speaking Injun mighty quick or I'd give myself away, so I said, "Ugh. Me heap hungry warrior. Me take-um whatever you got-um."

Well, that's what I *planned* to say, but all I got out was the "Ugh" and he started cussing a blue streak and jumping up and down, and finally Mudapa came by to see what was the matter.

"He insulted my cooking!" said the chef. "He called it 'Ugh'! I will not cook anymore until he apologizes."

Mudapa nudged me with his spear. "You heard him. Apologize."

"Heap sorry," I said. "Me make-um no more trouble."

Mudapa stared at me kind of funny-like. "I've never heard a member of my village speak like that," he said suspiciously.

"I'm from out-of-state, here to visit my cousin," I said.

Suddenly he reached out and ripped the jaguar skin off me. "I knew it!" he said. "A spy in our midst!"

"I ain't no spy," I said. "I'm the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones, here to bring enlightenment and the word of the Lord to you poor ignorant heathen."

"You came here with Calhoun to rob us!" he said, pointing the tip of his spear right at my neck.

"Not so," I said. "I heard all that shooting, and I think it was a Fourth of July celebration, so I mosied over and stumbled onto his camp."

"You are working with him!" accused Mudapa.

"No such a thing!" I said.

"You must prove it to me, or your life is forfeit."

Now, truth to tell, I didn't know what forfeit was, except that it probably came between threefeit and fivefeit, but he looked pretty serious, and his spear looked even more serious, so I knew I had to come up with some way to prove I wasn't Clyde's partner mighty fast, and finally my Silent Partner smote me right betwixt the eyes with one of His heavenly suggestions, and I put it right into action.

"You're all wrong about this," I said to Mudapa with all the sincerity I could muster on the spur of the moment. "Clyde Calhoun ain't my friend. He's a crook and a thief, and I spit on him." And to emphasize it, I spat at the ground—and so help me, it wasn't my fault that a wind come up just then and blew it in Mudapa's face.

"That's it!" he cried. "You're a dead man!"

He came at me with a knife in one hand and a spear in the other, and Lord knows what else he'd have been pointing at me if he'd had a third hand. I started backing away, and then he guv out a war cry what would have woke such dead as weren't otherwise occupied and charged at me, but when he was maybe five feet away he tripped over a root or a rock or something, and he fell down to the ground and guv another scream, a little more pained than angry this time, and he rolled over on his back, and we could see that he'd accidentally driven the knife all the way into his chest.

"I just hate it when things like this happen," he mumbled, and died.

I figgered I was going to have to take all his warriors on at once then, but when I turned to face them they was all kneeling on the ground, looking for all the world like they was getting ready for a hot game of craps, but since they didn't have no dice and they all started bowing in my direction I realized they was worshipping me, or at least waiting for their Chief Justice to inaugurate me as their president.

Finally one of 'em stepped forward, laid his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Lucifer Jones, you have defeated Mudapa in mortal combat. You are now our king and we will follow you into battle whenever and wherever you say."

"Well, I'm sure glad to know you fellers don't hold no grudges," I said. "And for my first official act, I think we'll go rescue Clyde Calhoun, who was in a bad way when last I saw him. And if he's still alive, remember to avert your eyes, as he's kind of sensitive about people staring at the south end of him." Then I got to thinking, and I added, "By the way, do you guys have any of the emeralds you promised him?"

One of 'em nodded. "They are back in our village."

“And if the king wants ‘em, they’re his, and nobody objects?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Well,” I said, “that being the case, I guess saving Clyde moves back to the top of the list.”

And since my word was law, we started walking back to Clyde’s camp. When we’d covered about half the distance, we bumped into Clyde’s trackers and gunbearers and such, who were heading away from camp in a mighty big hurry.

“Why did you desert your boss?” I demanded when they saw us and came to a stop.

“Why did *you*?” one of ‘em shot back.

“I’d be mighty careful if I was you, Brother,” I said. “Us kings don’t tolerate no backtalk. Now, why are you all running hell for leather away from camp?”

“Another tribe showed up and chased Tonto’s warriors away,” said one of the trackers.

“They’re headhunters,” said a second.

“Worse,” said a third. “They’re head *collectors*.”

“Is Clyde still mildly alive and twitching?” I asked.

“He’s still cursing,” said a gunbearer.

“That’s how you tell he’s alive,” I said. “When he stops shooting and he stops cursing, he’s dead.”

“Are we still going to rescue him?” asked one of my loyal worshippers.

“Yeah, I think we’d better,” I said. “If we don’t nip this collecting tendency in the bud, they might turn their attention to us next.”

So we kept walking, and I noticed that the guys what was pulling the wagon that held all the skins was still with us, since they figured if they tried to make it all the way back home alone they stood a fair chance of being robbed, and I decided we might as well give the jaguar heads and skins a field test, so when we were maybe a mile outside of camp I had everyone slip into them. I’d kind of hoped we’d look awesome and imposing, but actually, when you get right down to cases, a bunch of half-naked Injuns dressed up as Jaguar Men look pretty damned silly.

Still, we’d gone to all the trouble to bring the skins back with us, so I figured we might as well wear ‘em and break ‘em in, and a couple of minutes later we marched into camp, which was occupied by all these guys wearing shrunken heads on necklaces and belts. They looked at us, and we looked at them, and suddenly one of them yelled: “It is the ghosts of all the beasts we have slain, come to take their revenge upon us!”

Now, truth to tell, I didn’t know if they were talking about all the jaguars they had killed or all the men they had killed, but it didn’t make no difference, because ten seconds later they’d all cleared out and were high-tailing back to wherever they’d come from.

Clyde was still staked out, and looking a lot more uncomfortable than he had when I’d left him.

“Man, you’re a sight for sore eyes!” he said. “It’s nice to see them skins didn’t go to waste.” He looked around as best he could. “Where’s Mudapa?”

“I’m the new king,” I told him.

“There’s only one way you get to be a king in these here parts,” said Clyde. “How did you manage to kill him?”

“I’m a natural athlete,” I said with becoming modesty.

“Son of a bitch deserved to die!” muttered Clyde. “Serves him right for getting me down here under false pretexts and lying about having a bunch of emeralds.”

“He wasn’t lying, Clyde,” I said. “He just wasn’t much for sharing.”

“So I’m getting my emeralds after all!” said Clyde with a great big smile. “It almost makes being staked out here in the blazing sun worth it. Cut me loose, Lucifer, and let’s go get my loot.”

“That’s something we got to discuss, Clyde,” I said. “It’s *my* loot now.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded. “I honored the contract. Them emeralds is mine!”

“Well, yeah,” I allowed, “I suppose at one time you could have laid claim to all of ‘em. But that was before I pulled off this fearless and daring rescue.”

“What fearless and daring rescue?” he bellowed. “A bunch of superstitious headhunters think the ghosts of all the jaguars they’d killed was coming after ‘em!”

“Well,” I said, taking a couple of steps back, “if that’s the way you feel about it, I can take my army home and call the headhunters back.”

“Hah!” he snorted. “You don’t frighten me none. Them headhunters ain’t gonna slow down til they get back to their village.”

“You got a point,” I admitted. Then I added: “I suppose we can send word to Tonto that the coast is clear.”

“All right!” he grumbled. “Cut me loose and we’ll split the emeralds fifty-fifty.”

I knelt down and pulled out my pocket knife. “One third, one third, and one third,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“One third for you, one third for me, and one third for the Lord,” I said. “I’ll hang onto His third until such time as He shows up to claim it.”

“Never!” screamed Clyde.

A mighty hungry-looking snake suddenly started slithering up his leg.

“Okay, it’s a deal!” he said kind of frantically.

I cut the ropes, and he reached out, grabbed the snake, and flung it into the bush. Then he kind of glared at me in my Jaguar Man duds. “That’s a fitting outfit for you, Lucifer,” he said bitterly. “Them cats always was a vicious and surly race, and just because a human’s borrowed their skins, a jaguar don’t never change its stripes.”

“Aw, come on, Clyde,” I said. “I could have gone off and picked up the emeralds first.” That didn’t seem

to assuage him, so I then pointed out that I could have gone off and picked up the emeralds *only*, and suddenly he allowed that maybe I wasn't quite as selfish as he'd first think, even if I was never going to be in a class with them philathrosaurus that people keep reading about in the papers.

Next morning we headed off to the village where they kept all the emeralds, and where I planned to take my rightful place as king and maybe elevate a dozen of the prettier womenfolk to queenhood after field-testing their potential royalty, so to speak, but when we finally got there the whole place was deserted.

Clyde's trackers got busy reading all the signs, and they reported back that a jaguar with an irritable demeanor and a big appetite had paid the village a visit and dined on a couple of its prominent citizens, and the rest had just hightailed it, emeralds and all, to parts unknown.

"If that don't beat all," said Clyde. "Here I kill three hundred jaguars, and I overlook the only one that counts."

He announced that he was cutting his losses and going on his next assignment, which had something to do with koala bears. As for me, a noble king without no noble country, I figured that if emeralds were growing on trees (or wherever emeralds grew) in Columbia, well, the sinners in Columbia were probably as much in need of saving and spiritual uplifting as any others, and besides green was always one of my six or seven favorite colors, so I headed north to make my fortune and build my tabernacle.

But that's a whole other story, and writing can be mighty thirsty work.