

Connoisseurs:

A Lucifer Jones story

by Mike Resnick

Some people are connoisseurs of art. Some are connoisseurs of fine wines. More than a few are connoisseurs of exotic women.

Me, I seem to have inadvertently become a connoisseur of jails.

The best grub is in the Cape Town hoosegow. The friendliest jailer was in the Hong Kong lock-up, though there's a lot to be said for the guards at the Sylvania calaboose. The most comfortable bunk was probably in the jail at San Palmero. The hottest and stuffiest is the Nairobi jail, though the one in Beria, over in Mozambique, runs it a close second. Probably the friendliest crowd to share a cell with was back in Moline, Illinois, though you find the best card games in the Cairo jail and there ain't no fairer craps game than the one they play in the Madrid lock-up.

Now, when this here story begins, I'd just been introduced to the jail at Bogota, which was on the shore of the Hackensack River in Colombia, though it wasn't nowhere near the White House and the Congress, which I'm told are also in Colombia, but it must be one of the suburbs because they weren't within a few thousand miles of Bogota, which was kind of hiding up in the Andes.

I'd wandered north from the Matto Grasso after serving a brief term as King of the Jaguar Men (I think it was forty hours, but it might have been forty-two), and having spent an inordinate amount of time lately with jaguars, anacondas, alligators, and safari ants (who are just like army ants, only smarter), I figured it was time to replenish my fortune so's that I could finally get around to building the Tabernacle of Saint Luke, and when I heard that there were emeralds to be found in Colombia, I just naturally migrated up that way.

Truth to tell, I didn't know much about emeralds, except that they're mostly green and womenfolk love 'em, and men what love womenfolk and want to impress 'em will spend tons of money for 'em.

Well, I'd only been in Colombia for a couple of days when I realized that there was more to emerald farming than met the eye. By noon of the first day I knew that they didn't grow wild, and by sundown I'd pretty much determined that they wasn't to be found in no rivers or streams, not even the Hackensack, which must be a mighty long river since I'd crossed it in New Jersey once when I was taking my rather hurried leave of a house of excellent repute in Passaic. Took another day to learn that they didn't grow on trees, and when nightfall came I was pretty sure you weren't likely to trip over 'em in the bush, which is what we adventurous sorts call the wild country, probably because it's covered with bushes.

Anyway, I figured I'd better hie myself to a city and see if someone could shed any light on where all these here emeralds were hiding, and I got to say that Colombians are the greediest folk I ever ran into, because they kept saying "Mine" before I'd even got around to asking them to share.

So I figured, well, greed is one of the eleven deadly sins, so Bogota seemed as good a place to raise a grubstake and build my tabernacle as any, which was when the trouble started. I had just given some of the locals a lesson in statistical probabilities dealing with the number twenty-one when I had a little mishap with the number three, which is how many cards I had tucked away in the sleeve of my go-to-meeting frock coat, and before I had a chance to point out the humor of the situation I'd been carted off to jail, which just goes to show that preaching has got a lot more hazards to it than most people think.

The grub was pretty good if you liked charred rodent with greens, and pretty awful if you didn't. I tried

to interest a couple of guards in a friendly game of chance, but I guess my reputation as a card player of skill and sagacity had preceded me because they just laughed like I'd told 'em the one about the bishop and the dancing girl, and then I was left on my own, except for the fat old guy who snored louder than most locomotives and the young boy who claimed he was really a butterfly and would fly out through the bars as soon as he unloaded his chrysalis, which he kept trying to sell to the guys in the next cell.

I spent three whole days there, and then one of the guards came by and unlocked the door.

"Which one of you is Lucifer Jones?" he asked.

"I'm the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones," I said, getting to my feet.

"Well, come on out, Right Reverend," he said. "Your bail's been made."

"Son of a gun," I said. "I didn't think anybody know I was in town."

"Guy claims to be an old friend of yours," said the guard.

"He did?" I said. "What's his name?"

"Vander-something," he replied. "Maybe Vanderhorst?"

I stood stock-still. "Von Horst, perhaps?"

"Could be."

"Erich von Horst?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

I pushed him out of the cell and slammed the door shut. "I'm happy right where I am," I said.

"But your bail's been paid."

"Give it back to him," I said. "I'm safer here."

"He says you're old friends," said the guard.

"He's got a peculiar notion of friendship," I said. "Leave me alone. Come back in five years."

The guard scratched his balding head. "I don't know what to do. No one's ever refused bail before."

"No one's ever had a choice between Erich von Horst and jail before," I told him. "Tell him I died of a disfiguring social disease and anyone who comes in contact with my body will catch it."

"He seems like a friendly sort," said the guard.

"I'll bet Eve said that about the scorpion."

"Wasn't it a snake?" he asked.

"Only in the King Henry edition," I said. "Now go tell von Horst that Greta Garbo and I both want to be left alone."

He peeked into the darkened corners of the cell. "Is Greta here?" he asked. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

“Get rid of von Horst and I’ll get you a date with her,” I promised him.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “This is too confusing for me.” He unlocked the door. “Come. I’ll take you to the magistrate.”

So he handcuffed me, and led me through a maze of corridors until suddenly we were in a courtroom. The judge was a pudgy, balding man with a bushy mustache, wearing a black robe and keeping a deathgrip on a gavel. There was no one else in the courtroom except for Erich von Horst, natty as ever, sitting in the first row and smiling like a cat what was dining on a slew of canaries.

“Here he is, your honor,” said the guard. “He refuses to be bailed out.”

“This is must unusual,” said the judge. He turned to me. “You understand that Mr. von Horst here has generously agreed to pay your bail?”

“I’m happy where I am,” I said.

“You are?” said the judge, surprised. “I’ve never visited the jail myself, but I am given to understand that it is filthy, foul-smelling, and infested with vermin.”

“I’ve seen worse,” I said. “I’ll just serve out my thirty days or whatever the sentence is, and be on my way.”

“The sentence is ten years,” said the judge.

I glanced over at von Horst, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. “Make it five years,” I said, “and I’ll plead nolo compadre.”

“Come, come, Doctor Jones,” said the judge. “What can you possibly have against this angel of mercy who has offered to save you from durance vile?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Well, then?” he said.

“Judge, this here angel of mercy has flim-flammed his way across the whole wide world,” I said. “And when I said I had nothing against him, it’s because nothing is what I’ve been left with every time I’ve run into him.”

“Unlike someone else in this courtroom, Mr. von Horst has not broken any laws in Colombia,” said the judge. “Now make your decision, Doctor Jones: allow him to pay your bail, or prepare to spend the next ten years in your cell.”

It was a tough decision, but I mulled it over for a couple of minutes, while the judge kept urging me to make up my mind, and I finally figgered that von Horst was the lesser of two admittedly unpalatable alternatives.

“All right,” I said at last. “He can make my bail.”

“I’ve never seen such a lack of gratitude in my life,” muttered the judge as they led me away to pick up my goods, which consisted of three dollars, two decks of cards, a fishhook, a pair of dice, and my well-worn copy of the Good Book. I didn’t see von Horst nowhere, but I knew my luck wouldn’t hold, and sure enough, as I walked out the front door, a free man, he walked up to greet me and I felt a little less free already.

“My dear Doctor Jones,” he said, “how nice to see you once again.”

“Get a good eyeful,” I said, “because I’m on the next train, bus, car or mule out of here.”

“Really?” he said. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere you’re not,” I said.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t dream of stopping you,” he said. “It’s a pity, though. You could have traveled in luxury with fifty thousand dollars in your pocket.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” I said.

“Certainly,” he said. “After all, you have three dollars. That should get you from here all the way to the next block.”

“That three dollars will get me a cross and some garlic,” I said. “If you don’t leave me alone now, you will then.”

“Come, come, Doctor Jones,” he said, “what have I ever done to you?”

“You mean beside robbing me in Dar es Salaam and Casablanca and Greece and Mozambique and London and Rio?”

“Youthful impetuosity,” he said.

“You ain’t been youthful nor impetuous since your permanent teeth grew in,” I said. “Leave me alone.”

“But I wish to make amends, my dear Doctor Jones.”

“Do I look that dumb?” I said. I saw he was seriously considering it, so I added, “Don’t answer that question.”

“As you wish,” he said, sighing deeply.

“What I wish is to see the last of you, and the sooner the better,” I said.

“Too bad,” he said. “The fifty thousand was just a down payment against your share of the emeralds.”

“Emeralds?” I said.

“It’s all right,” said von Horst. “I’ve no wish to offend you further. I’ll just have to find someone else who is more interested in instant wealth.”

“It always starts out being our instant wealth,” I said, “and it always winds up being your instant wealth.”

“If that’s the way you feel, say no more,” answered von Horst. “After all, how hard can it be to find someone who wants half a million dollars’ worth of emeralds? I would have preferred rewarding you for our continued association, but I will simply have to find someone else.”

“Fine,” I said. “Go find someone else.”

“Fine,” he said. “I shall.”

“How many emeralds are there in half a million dollars?” I asked.

“It depends on the size and quality of the emeralds,” he said.

“I don’t want to hear about it,” I said.

“Whatever you say,” he replied.

“How soon could we get our hands of them?” I asked.

“On what?” said von Horst.

“On the emeralds.”

“I thought we weren’t talking about them.”

“We ain’t,” I said. “I just got an epidermal curiosity about them.”

“You mean an academic curiosity,” said von Horst.

“That too,” I said.

“Why don’t you come back with my to my hotel, and I’ll lay the details out for you?”

I shook my head. “Not a chance.”

“My dear fellow, it’s a four-star hotel, which is about as elegant as one gets in Bogota in this day and age.”

“Someplace else,” I insisted. “I want neutral ground.”

“Well,” he said, “I suppose we could always go back to your jail cell.”

Which is how I came to be sitting on a chair in his suite at the Casa Medina.

“These here are mighty nice surroundings you’ve bought yourself with what was supposed to be my money,” was how I opened the conversation.

“You really should try to control your residual bitterness,” he said. “If you hadn’t tried to swindle me on each occasion...”

“But it never worked, so it doesn’t count!” I yelled.

“We’ll let bygones be bygones,” he said. “You’ll feel better when we’re dividing up the emeralds in Medellin.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but ain’t Medellin about a hundred miles from here, give or take?”

“That’s right.”

“Then are you saying the emeralds are in Medellin?”

“No, they’re right here in Bogota.”

I frowned. “Then what in tarnation has Medellin got to go with anything?”

“I see I shall have to put my cards on the table, Doctor Jones,” he said. “Just as well. There should be no secrets between partners.”

I tried to count how many times I'd heard von Horst say that in the past, but I ran out of fingers first.

"Doctor Jones," he continued, "I will be blunt: I am almost in possession of at least a million dollars worth of emeralds."

"Almost," I repeated. "You mean they're in the next room?"

"No."

"The hotel safe, then?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I could play guessing games all night," I said. "Why don't you just tell me?"

"Well, there's the rub," said von Horst with a grimace. "I can't tell you, for the simple reason that I don't know."

"In a long lifetime of hearing whoppers," I said, "I ain't never heard one bigger'n that."

"But it's the truth," he insisted.

"Erich von Horst," I said, "you are a lot of things good and bad, mostly bad, but I ain't never known you to be so careless that you misplaced a million dollars worth of emeralds, or any other kind of gem now as I come to think on it."

"I guess I'd better tell you the whole story," he said.

"I reckon you had," I said. "Or I'm out the door and making a beeline for the nearest border. I've had my fill of this country."

"I thought all you'd seen of it was the jail and my hotel suite," he said.

"One's got vermin and the other's got you," I said. "Just stick to the subject, and tell me about the emeralds."

He lit a cigarette and leaned forward. "Have you ever heard of the Pebbles of Jupiter?"

"Ain't that a resort in the Caribbean?" I said.

He shook his head. "It is the most magnificent emerald necklace ever created. Twenty-six perfect stones, each of them worth a minimum of fifty thousand dollars. Together, who knows?"

"Okay, now I've heard of it," I said. "So what?"

"Every stone came from a Colombian mine, and it is the property of the government of Colombia. It was on display in Bogota until two nights ago."

"Until you stole it," I suggested.

"That is such an ugly word," said von Horst. "We emancipated it."

"That's an even uglier word," I said.

"Emancipated?" he asked.

“No—’we’,” I said. “Who is this ‘we’ what emasculated it?”

“Emancipated,” he said. “The Pebbles were under extremely heavy guard, so I had to enlist some help.”

“How much?”

“There were four of them to begin with.”

“You added more?”

He shook his head. “The police subtracted one. Poor Meloshka.”

“Meloshka?” I repeated. “Is that a man, a woman, or maybe something else?”

“Meloshka Krympjyntoveitchsk,” he replied. “A wonderful man, small, quick, elusive—he would have made a great running back in your American football.”

“Forget my American football and tell me about your Colombian Pebbles,” I said.

“Well, it was impossible to free the Pebbles from captivity without setting off alarms, and since Meloshka was much the shiftiest of us, we gave the Pebbles to him while we led the police on a wild goose chase. Four wild goose chases, in fact.”

“So this Meloshka ran off with your emeralds,” I said.

“Absolutely not, Doctor Jones,” said von Horst. “He was a man of honor. He knew the Pebbles were too hot to handle right now, so he put them in a safety deposit box, then passed the name of the bank and number of the box on to me.” He shook his head. “Poor Meloshka. The police shot and killed him not ten minutes later.”

“So you’ve got the information?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Well, then, you know where the Pebbles of Jupiter are.”

“Generically,” he replied.

“What’s this generically nonsense?” I said. “Either you know or you don’t.”

“I know they’re in Bogota, and I know they’re in a safety deposit box,” he said. “But I don’t know what bank, and I don’t know what box.”

“When did you forget how to read?” I said.

He turned his lounge chair over on its side, reached into a hole he’d slit in the bottom of it, and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here,” he said, handing it to me. “You read it.”

I took a look at it. There were two or three letters I recognized, but I sure as hell couldn’t make no sense out of the rest of them.

“All right,” I said. “You’ve had your joke. Now tell me where the Pebbles of Jupiter are, or I’m leaving.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “This was written in Meloshka’s native tongue—but I don’t know what country he came from or what language he speaks.”

“Why don’t you just take it to the local college?” I said. “They got to have someone who speaks languages what’s got hardly any vowels in ‘em.”

“Because I would rather split the emeralds two ways with you than four ways with my partners,” he said, which certainly seemed in keeping with my own thoughts on the matter. “They know Meloshka was shot near the Casa Medina. They suspect that he saw me before he died, but they don’t know it for a fact, so they are watching my every movement, waiting for me to retrieve the jewels. “

“So you want me to go to the college for you and get this thing translated into something resembling English?” I said.

He shook his head. “At least one of them will follow anyone who leaves my room. If they see you heading to the university they’ll know you have the paper with you, and your life won’t be worth a plugged nickel.”

“Well,” I said, “suppose you tell me how I can get ‘em if I don’t know where they are?”

“They’re perfectly safe wherever they are,” said von Horst. “No one can retrieve them without knowing the bank, the box number, and the name under which the box is registered, and that’s all on this piece of paper and nowhere else.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to follow his line of reasoning. “Your partners don’t know where they are, I don’t know where they are, you don’t know where they are, and you don’t want me to go over to the college. What am I missing here?”

“I have a friend in Medellin, a Professor Jablonovitch, who is an expert in Eastern European languages. We will mail the paper to him, and for a small fee he will translate it for us. Then, at our leisure, perhaps four or five months from now, when the heat is off, we’ll liberate the Pebbles of Jupiter.”

“I’m still missing something,” I said. “You got the paper, and you know this professor. So where do I come in?”

“I’m being watched day and night by my partners,” said von Horst. “The instant I leave the building they will accost and strip-search me.” Suddenly he grimaced. “I hate being strip-searched, especially by Pedro el Flor.”

“Pedro the Flower?” I said.

He nodded. “They searched me on my way to the jail, and they will search me every time I leave this hotel.”

“So you’re stuck here forever,” I said. “Or until they die of old age.”

He shook his head. “I’m leaving for Buenos Aires next week. They will search me one last time, and conclude that I do not have the paper with me. Then, after Professor Jablonovitch receives it and has had time to translate it, I’ll stop by his house in a few months, get the translation, and eventually send you back for the emeralds, since they’ll still be watching for me.” He walked to a desk, pulled out an envelope that was already stamped and addressed to Jablonovitch, put Meloshka’s note in it, and sealed it. “Can I trust you to take this to the post office and mail it for me?”

“Why not just leave it at the hotel desk and let them do it?”

“I can’t be sure my partners haven’t gotten to them. But once it’s mailed, it’s safe. I’ve used a phony return address, so that once it’s mixed in with the other mail they’ll never be able to spot it.” He held the



envelope up for me to see. “One or more of them will follow you when you leave here, but if you don’t head toward a bank or the university, they’ll wait to see what you’re up to. All you have to do is drop this off, and then just go about your daily life, such as it is, until we’re ready to move.”

“And we split fifty-fifty?” I said.

“Of course.”

“Okay,” I said. “Give me the envelope.”

He handed it over. “Take great care with it. It contains our future.”

“I’ll be back to let you know the post office has got it,” I said, walking to the door.

“I’ll be waiting,” promised von Horst.

I shoved the letter into a pocket, walked out the door, and climbed down the stairs to the lobby. There was a couple of disreputable-looking characters sitting on the furniture, staring at me, and off in a corner I saw a beautifully-groomed young man wearing a pair of pink satin pants and a matching shirt, scarf and shoes, and I knew he had to be Pedro el Flor.

I walked out the door and headed off down the street, stopping to window-shop just long enough to see that I was being followed. I didn’t let on that I’d seen him. Instead I stopped at a local bar and had a few beers, and finally the guy who was tailing me must have figured if I was in possession of anything valuable I’d be off doing something about it, so he got up and went back to the hotel. I stuck around another half hour, went into the men’s room (which was lit by candles) long enough to steam open the envelope, then snuck out the back way and headed off to the university.

It took me an hour to wade through all the red tape the secretaries hurled at me, but finally I wound up in the language department, and I was introduced to a little bitty bald-headed specs-wearing guy named Doctor McGillicuddy. I told anyone who would listen that I felt just fine and didn’t need no doctor, and he explained that he wasn’t no more of a doctor than I was, that Doctor McGillicuddy was just easier to pronounce than Expert Translator McGillicuddy.

“Now, where is the cipher?” he said, reaching out his hand.

“I ain’t got no cipher,” I said, pulling out the sheet of paper. “All I got is this here conundrum what nobody seems able to read.”

“Let me see it,” he said.

I handed it over.

“One of the dead Slavic dialects, I suspect,” he said, walking over to his desk, where he plumped himself down and opened up half a dozen big thick books. He looked from one to another, then started scribbling under each word. Finally he looked up at me, frowning.

“Is this some kind of joke?” he demanded.

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” I said. “Why?”

“Because this is what it says:

Roses are red,

Violets are blue,

Sugar is sweet

And so are you.”

“Are you sure there ain’t no address and box number on it?” I said.

“Of course I’m sure!” he snapped. “Now get out of here and stop wasting my time! And take this”—he crumpled up the note and flung it at me—“with you!”

I caught it and left the room. On my way out of the building I was about to toss it in the garbage, but then my prodigious brain kicked into high gear, and I figured that von Horst knew I was bright enough to lose his partners and make my way to the university. And that meant he knew I’d open the envelope and find someone to translate it. And that’s where the old thinking machine ran into a stone wall, because if the letter was a phony, why did he give it to me? After all, unlike his partners, I wasn’t threatening his life and limb. I’d been peacefully minding my own business in a Bogota jail cell. If he paid my way out, he needed me for something. And if it wasn’t getting the letter translated, then what was it?

I mulled on it for another half hour, and all that happened was that my head started hurting, so I decided that the thing to do was go back to the Casa Medina and confront von Horst. When I reached the lobby I didn’t see Pedro nor his two friends, which gave me a very uneasy feeling, but it wasn’t half as uneasy as when I pounded on von Horst’s door and didn’t get no answer.

I went back down to the front desk and asked when he’d be back, and the clerk just shrugged and said he didn’t know, that von Horst had just brought his tab up to date, turned in his key, and walked out the door.

“What about them three guys what was living in the lobby here?” I asked.

“That Pedro was such a cute one,” he said with a wistful smile.

“Did they leave with von Horst?”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“You want to tell me what that means?”

“He walked out the door, and a moment later they began following him,” said the clerk, “but about ten minutes later they came back looking very disgruntled and asked if he had left a forwarding address.”

“Did he?” I asked, not surprised that he’d been able to lose them.

He shook his head. “No, señor.”

I walked to the front door.

“Senor?” he called after me.

“Yeah?” I said.

“If you see el Flor, give him my regards.”

Then I was out in the street, trying to figure out where von Horst would have gone. If he was staying in town, he could just as easily have stayed right at the Casa Medina, so I figured he’d flown the coop. I

couldn't see him doing any work himself, which meant he didn't drive out of town. And there wasn't more than two flights a day from the airport, and it wasn't much worse than even money that at least one of them would land a little early, like against the side of a mountain. That meant the likeliest place to look was the train station, so I mosied on over to it and asked if Erich von Horst had bought a ticket earlier that day.

"Erich von Horst?" said the cashier. "No, I would remember such a foreign name."

"You're sure?" I said.

"Absolutely," he said. "In fact, we've had only one foreign traveler all day. He bought a first class ticket to Medellin."

"You sure he wasn't named von Horst?" I insisted.

"I am certain of it. He had a long name, very difficult to pronounce."

Suddenly I pulled the envelope out of my pocket and held it up for him to read. "This look familiar?" I said.

"Professor Jablonovitch!" he exclaimed. "That was the man!"

I thanked him, then retired to a bar filled with friendly ladies of quality to do a little serious thinking. If I had any doubts before, now I knew there was something about that letter that von Horst needed. I uncrumpled Meloshka's note and held it over a candle to bring out any hidden messages, but there weren't none and all that happened was I accidentally set the cuff of my shirt on fire. Dousing it with tequila just made it blaze all the brighter, but eventually the bartender came over and tossed a bucket of water on me. I was kind of jumping around, wagging my arm like unto a bird preparing for takeoff, but all the time I was thinking, too. Von Horst had to know I'd find someone to translate the note, and he knew I was brilliant enough not to destroy the letter once I'd heard the translation, so as I saw it, this was a chess game between two of the finest intellects on the planet.

I stared at that letter, and stared at it, and then stared at it some more, and for the life of me I couldn't figger out what kind of scam von Horst had in mind. I knew I was holding the secret to the location of the Pebbles of Jupiter, but I kept coming up blank.

Finally I decided to go back to the Casa Medina once more and see if there were any hints in his room. As I walked in, there was a new clerk on duty, and the old one was just heading for the door, resplendent in his tuxedo.

"Got a heavy date?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "I don't think Pedro weighs more than one hundred and forty pounds."

"Well, good luck to you," I said. "Before you leave, tell your pal behind the desk that I left something in von Horst's room and I need to retrieve it."

He told the new clerk to give me a key, and then he was on his way out the door and I started climbing the stairs to von Horst's suite. I let myself in, checked all the surfaces—tables, cabinets, nightstands—and didn't find nothing. All the drawers were empty too. So was the closet. And the medicine cabinet. I was just about to leave when I damned near tripped over a waste basket that was by the front door, and suddenly I saw a crumpled piece of paper in it. I bent over, picked it up, straightened it out, and read it. It was a paid receipt for services rendered, and it came from the Gonzales Brothers Photography Studio over on Avenue La Esperanza.

I stuck it in my pocket, left the suite, walked out the door of the hotel, turned left, and headed on over to the studio. I figured he'd probably gotten a passport photo with a beard or maybe a third eye or something to make him look totally different, and he was only going to stay in the country long enough to pick up the emeralds and then he was high-tailing it out of here.

When I got there I walked up to the counter, and a minute later what I took to be a Gonzales Brother emerged from a room or studio or something else with a door on it and approached me.

"Greetings, senior," he said. "May I help you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Did you take a photo of a gent named Erich von Horst in the last couple of days? Probably for a passport?"

He frowned. "We do not do passport photos, senior."

"Well, no sense my guessing what you did," I said, pulling out his paid receipt. "Can you tell me what this was for?"

He stared at it, frowning. "Just one moment, senior," he said. Then he turned and called out: "Jorge, can you come to the counter for a moment?"

It took about three moments, and then another Gonzales Brother entered, smelling of developing chemicals.

"Jorge," said the first one, "do you remember this?"

Jorge took a look at the bill. For a moment he seemed puzzled. Then he suddenly smiled. "Oh, of course! The micro-dot!"

"Micro-dot?" I repeated.

"Yes, senior," he said. "Senior von Horst had me transfer something to a microdot."

"What was it?"

He shrugged. "I do not remember. Some numbers, I think, and maybe a word or two."

"And where is it?" I asked.

"I do not know. It was delivered to his hotel yesterday. Perhaps you should ask him."

"Thank you, my Brothers," I said with a great big grin on my face. "I think that's checkmate."

"I do not understand," said Jorge.

"And von Horst thought I wouldn't understand," I said triumphantly. "But I do." I looked around. "You got a room where I can work in private for about half an hour? It's worth three dollars American to you."

"Yes, senior," said the one who wasn't Jorge.

"I'll need a knife, and a kettle of boiling water, and some glue, and a sheet of blank paper."

"Easily done, senior."

A couple of minutes later I was alone in the room. I held the envelope over the steam from the kettle for

about five minutes, and finally the stamp came loose. I kind of insinuated the knife under it and lifted it very carefully—and there, beneath where it had been, was a micro-dot! I moved the dot to a safe place on the table, then meticulously glued the stamp back on so no one could ever tell it had been removed in the first place.

Then, since I couldn't resist letting von Horst know I'd finally gotten the better of him, I wrote him a little note:

Von Horst:

It was a clever idea, but this isn't just any fool you're dealing with here. I'm on my way to pick up the Pebbles of Jupiter now. If we ever meet again, and I've going to have some harsh words for the Lord if we do, I'll buy you a drink with your share of the emeralds, because that's the kind of Christian gentleman I am.

Sincerely but no longer yours,

Lucifer Jones

Mighty few letters ever give me so much satisfaction in the writing of them. I folded it, put it in the envelope, and used the paste to seal it. Then I went back into the main room, and asked Jorge if he had some machine that would let me read the micro-dot.

"Certainly, señor," he said. "We can cast it on a large screen for you to see."

He took the dot and led me into a small room where he stuck it in some kind of viewer, and then there it was, big as life, on the screen:

National Bank of Bogota. Box 1187. Registered in the name of Don Miguel Cervantes.

I had to give him credit. If he registered it as von Horst, his partners might stumble upon it, but there wouldn't nobody be looking for a made-up name like Cervantes.

I thanked the brothers once more, took my leave of them, and headed off to the bank, stopping only long enough to stick the letter in the first mailbox I came to. Once I got to the bank, I went to the clerk what was in charge of the safety deposit boxes, signed "Don Miguel Cervantes" next to number 1187, got the key, unlocked the box and pulled it out, and took it to a private room where I opened it up, preparing to spend a little time admiring all twenty-six of them perfect emeralds.

But the only thing in the box was a neatly-folded letter in a familiar script. I got a right queasy feeling as I opened it up and began reading it.

My Dear Doctor Jones:

Once again we have come to the end of a remarkable adventure, one that would have been far more difficult without your participation. By now you know, of course, that I did indeed have three partners. The fourth, Meloshka, I discovered in an exceptionally bad Russian novel, and I will him to you.

I knew, of course, that you would open the letter the moment you were out of my sight, and I knew you would find someone who could translate it. (You've no idea how difficult it was to find that nursery rhyme in an extinct Slavic dialect.) And because I also know your deceitful and suspicious nature, I knew you would return to my suite, where I made sure you would stumble across the receipt from the Gonzales Brothers. From there it would have been a matter of no more than an hour before you found the micro-dot, removed it, gloated triumphantly to me in the envelope I provided you, and you are obviously

now at the bank.

Doubtless you are wondering why you were essential to this operation. The answer is simple enough. My partners and I did not steal any emeralds, as the market for stolen gemstones is currently depressed and the rewards are not commensurate with the risks. No, what we stole was the incredibly rare Fatima one-cent stamp. You see, José María Campo Serrano was the President of Columbia in the 1880s, and they decided to honor his wife by producing a stamp with her likeness. Due to some confusion, the initial engraving was not of Senora Serrano, but of Jose Maria's mistress, Fatima. Only six were printed before the mistake was rectified, but each is worth well over a million dollars in mint condition. That, of course, was the stamp you replaced on the envelope that you sent to me. Admittedly it will lose half its value when postmarked, but I will have lost three of my partners, and all of half a million dollars is preferable to one-fourth of a million. As for defacing such a valuable collector's item, all I can say is that I leave the appreciation of such items to connoisseurs of art; as for myself, I am a connoisseur of money.

Doubtless you are wondering about the Pebbles of Jupiter. They really do exist. As you walk along the Hackensack River on the outskirts of town, you will see row upon row of sharp stones lining the bank. Those are the Pebbles of Jupiter, and I am sure the government of Colombia will be happy to let you take away as many as you can carry.

Until next time, I remain Yr. Obdt. Svt.,

Erich von Horst

“Again!” I screamed. “He did it again!”

“Who did what?” asked a guard, but I wasn't listening. I was screaming bloody murder, all the while wondering how I could be so stupid when I'm so smart.

They threw me out of the bank for causing a commotion, and I decided to take my leave of Bogota, so I headed west out of town. I was in such a rage that I didn't look where I was going, and I damned near broke my neck when I slipped on the Pebbles of Jupiter.

If that was his idea of exterior decorating, I just hope Mrs. Jupiter gave him hell for it and made him sleep on the couch.