

Merry Bunta! A Lucifer Jones Story by Mike Resnick

The first time I heard her name, I think it was some Brazilian holiday and someone was wishing me a merry one of 'em. I was in Rio, having just experienced some of the side effects of Carnival, which they kept spelling Carnaval, proving once and for all that Brazil ain't never gonna present no threat of worldwide domination, and I figured I might as well see if this was the place where I wanted to finally build my tabernacle.

Truth to tell, it had a lot going for it. For one thing, it abounded in evil men and scarlet women, and you can't hardly run a religion without an abundance of sinners to save. For another, it had a real pleasant climate, and a lovely beach where most swimmers of the female persuasion left enough clothes at home that it'd get 'em arrested back in the States or applauded in most other places. And, third, there was a bar with a radio that brought in American baseball games, so I could see how Babe Ruth and Dizzy Dean were faring.

Of course, there were some disadvantages too. For one thing, hardly none of 'em spoke American. For another, the local padres weren't real thrilled with competition, especially the vigorous kind of Christianity I preached. And for a third, I didn't have no money, having been flim-flammed by the villainous Erich von Horst, the details of which I've already writ up and are too painful to go into again.

I still hadn't made up my mind what to do when it was made up for me of a pleasant summer evening, which for reasons I ain't figured out yet came about in mid-November. I was walking down the street to Madame Sarcosa's House of Exceptionally High Repute, just minding my own business and reciting some of the spicier psalms to myself, when I saw the most beautiful blonde lady I ever did see. I knew right off that she wasn't no native to Rio, since blondes were somewhat rarer down there than mosquitos, spiders, land crabs, rats and killer snakes--and blondes like this one was rarer than just about anything.

I must have been standing there staring at her slack-jawed, and the way I know this is a few seconds later I started choking on a pair of flies what had flown into my mouth. I must have made some strangling noises, because she suddenly turned and looked at me. I knew a delicate creature like her would disapprove of my spitting on the sidewalk, so I just chomped down on the flies and swallowed 'em, then guv her my biggest, friendliest smile. She smiled back, and I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that I had fallen eternally and everlastingly in love again.

Then she giggled, and I looked down to make sure my pants wasn't unzipped, and they wasn't, and I couldn't figger out what was amusing her so much, and then I remembered that I was standing right in front of Madame Sarcosa's. I didn't want her thinking poorly of me, so as Ezra Willoughby and Slippery Jim Stevens came out the front door I whipped my copy of the good book out of my coat pocket and began preaching at them to mend their sinful ways.

"Aw, come on, Lucifer," said Ezra. "You're embarrassing us out here in public, and besides it ain't as if you ain't been in there with us the last four nights."

"He just wants us to give the place up so he can have 'em all to himself," added Slippery Jim.

"Shut up, you guys," I said softly. "I'm trying to impress that fair damsel on the other side of the street."

Slippery Jim looked over my shoulder. "I don't see no damsel there."

"What's a damsel?" added Ezra.

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“What did she look like?” asked Slippery Jim.

“Like unto an angel with blonde hair, a tiny delicate waist, and a extra pair of lungs,” I replied.

“Blonde, you say?”

“Like spun gold,” I said.

“Sounds metallic and shiny,” offered Ezra.

“Like spun hay,” I amended.

“Now you’ve got her smelling like a

barnyard,” complained Ezra.

“Like spun silk,” I said angrily. “And don’t make no more comments, because I’ve run out of spuns.”

“She carry a parasol?” asked Slippery Jim.

“No, just a little delicate umbrella,” I said.

“I think I know who she is,” said Jim. “Merry Bunta.”

“Merry Bunta to you,” I said. “Now don’t just stand there while my entire future is on hold. Tell me who she is.”

“You know grizzled old Harvey Bunta?”

“I’m in love and you’re telling me about grizzled old guys!” I complained.

“He’s a trader. Lives a few hundred

miles inland. He comes to town once every eight or nine months to sell whatever he's conned the natives out of."

"What about him?" I asked.

"Sounds to me like you just described his daughter," said Slippery Jim.

"You sure?" I said.

"Pretty blondes and wild elephants in musth are equally rare in Rio," he replied. "That's his daughter, all right. I think her name's Merilee, but Old Man Bunta calls her Merry."

"How do you know all this?" I asked suddenly. "You ain't despoiled the fairest flower in all Brazil, have you?"

"No," he said before Ezra could ask what 'despoiled' meant. "I just heard

him talking to her.”

“That’s a relief,” I said.

He stared at me curiously. “Does she really have to be a virgin for you, Lucifer?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t put no special stock in virgins.”

“Then why did you ask?” he said.

“Because I put even less stock in comparisons,” I told him. “One thing I don’t need to hear from the woman I’m going to spend the rest of my life with is ‘Slippery Jim did it this way’ or ‘Ezra did it that way

‘ ’
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“I did no such thing,” said Ezra. “But if she’s half as purty as you say she is, I wish I had.”

Just then a horse pulling a cart down the street broke into a trot, and ran right through a puddle in front of Madame Sarcosa's place, and I got all splattered with mud, and I knew I didn't want to introduce myself to Merry Bunta looking like this, so I went into Madame Sarcosa's and asked if anyone there did laundry, and she said that yes, I could toss my duds in with the next load of towels and sheets, and while I was wandering around in my skivvies perhaps I'd like to relax in a room down the hall with a young lady of quality, and since I hadn't sworn my eternal fealty to Merry Bunta yet I couldn't see nothing wrong with it, so that was what I did. Matter of fact, it was so relaxing that I

did it all over again, and then once more, and when I finally climbed back into my clothes it was the next afternoon. I left Madame Sarcosa's and headed across street to where I'd seen Merry Bunta standing the day before, and tried to figure out where she could have vanished to so quick, and then I saw that she'd been standing in front of a hotel, so I walked in and asked the desk clerk where the Buntas were.

"Beats me, Senor," he said with a shrug.

"Well, why don't you look in your guest book and give me their room number?" I said. "And make it snappy, this being the first day of the rest of my life."

“They checked out early this morning, Senor,” he said.

“Did they say where they was headed?”

“Inland, Senor, to Senor Bunta’s vast estate.”

“I don’t want to seem picky,” I said, “but the whole of South America is inland from here. You got any more specific address?”

“You don’t like inland?” he said. “How about dense, impenetrable jungle?”

“How does he get his mail?” I asked.

“He comes into town twice a year for it.” The clerk stared at me. “What business do you have with Senor Bunta?”

“None,” I said. “It’s his daughter I’m after.”

He nodded his head knowingly. “A lovely young girl,” he said. “And of course she’s in line to inherit the Bunta fortune.”

“Yeah?” I said. “How much is Old Man Bunta worth?”

“I do not know, Senor. But I know he doesn’t trust banks. He keeps it all in a strongbox on his estate.”

“You don’t say,” I said.

“I just did say.”

“And you ain’t got no idea how I can find him?”

He shrugged. “Just go inland and ask the natives.”

I thanked him for his time and walked

back out into the street. I decided not to bother the desk clerk by checking out of my hotel, so I stopped by the local store, bought a toothbrush and a canteen, filled the canteen with beer, and I was ready to find the woman of my dreams, to say nothing of the family fortune. I faced the west, so the Atlantic Ocean was behind me, and I figured I might as well start marching toward the setting sun, and keep doing it day in and day out until I finally ran into someone who could tell me where Merry Bunta lived.

The first full day was uneventful, and the next ten weren't much different. I never saw a living soul, and truth to tell tapirs ain't much for conversation. I crossed a couple of rivers, which were

filled to overflowing with crocodiles or alligators—I couldn't tell one from the other, but I ain't never encountered one of either persuasion what didn't have a lean and hungry look to him, with an emphasis on the hungry. Anyway, they'd chased all the snakes up onto solid ground, and some of 'em were more than a little bit reluctant to share it with me, so I started zigging and zagging, still heading west, but in a route that more resembled Merry Bunta's outline than a straight course.

After another six days I came upon a village with a bunch of half-dressed little guys and their women. They must have been hunting monkeys, because they had a collection of little monkey heads

that they seemed mighty proud of. They kept jabbering at me about them, but since none of ‘em spoke American and I didn’t speak no Jabber, I never did find out what it was about these here monkey heads that got

‘em so excited. Finally, after an hour or two, as we was sitting around a fire and watching the womenfolk cooking up a big pot of something, I figured I might as well see if any of ‘em could help me on my romantic quest.

“Excuse me, Brother,” I said as one of ‘em was jabbering about the weather, or maybe the snakes that had all kind of gathered around to listen and beg for scraps, “but I happen to be embarked on a search for the woman of my dreams,

and I was wondering if any of you could point me in the right direction?”

They just kind of stared at me, so I kept on speaking.

“I know it ain’t too likely, you being a bunch of godless heathens what don’t speak no civilized language and probably eat your babies, but if anyone can just kind of point me in the direction of my lady love, whose name happens to be Merry Bunta, I’d be much obliged.”

Well, actually, I had planned to say “I’d be much obliged”, but before I could get the words out they’d all jumped to their feet and pointed off to the west.

“Merry Bunta! Merry Bunta!” they kept shouting.

I couldn't believe my luck, that the first village I'd stumbled upon knew the woman what had captured by heart.

“Now, you're sure?” I said.

They seemed pretty sure. They all kept pointing to the same spot and yelling “Merry Bunta!”

“Well, she sure seems to have established a fan following,” I said. “I want to thank you for your help, and now I think I'll head off to find the rarest treasure all Brazil has to offer.”

And I took maybe three steps when two of the bigger ones grabbed my arms.

“Merry Bunta!” they yelled.

“Ain't I going in the right direction?” I asked.

They pointed to the west. “Merry

Bunta!”

“Then why are you holding me back?” I said. “I know these ain’t my Sunday-go-to-meeting duds, but I lost them in a game of chance back in Rio. Besides, once I declare my love, it shouldn’t make much difference to her, and anyway I figure neither of us are gonna stay dressed for long.”

I headed off again, and this time they just looked at me as if I committed some social error, like maybe I hadn’t brung no flowers to their womenfolk, but no one tried to stop me and I soon left the village far behind me.

I traveled west for a few more days. I couldn’t remember what berries was safe to eat, so I settled for cooking up

some eggs I had found, and you wouldn't believe how mad that made the anaconda what laid

'em, even though I'd left her a few hundred. So I figured I'd only eat fish eggs after that, which I seemed to remember was a pretty ritzy food back in the glittering capitols of Europe, but I guessed wrong again, and I found out that an enraged mama alligator can hold a grudge even longer than an angry mama anaconda. I found me a clutch of condor eggs, but as quick as I'd tap on the shell to bust 'em open, a baby condor would tap on his side of the shell, and before I could figure out what code we were conversing in, out he'd pop, and there went my breakfast. Not only that, but

three of ‘em decided I was their mama, and I had to keep feeding ‘em all the insects I kept plucking out of my hair until they found a lady condor that seemed to be in the adoption business and went off with her. I’d been getting myself pretty thoroughly lost, though I kept walking toward the setting sun, and just when I was sure I wasn’t never going to see another human being again, a passel of ‘em burst out of the forest up ahead and started racing toward me, yelling “Merry Bunta!”

“Well, I’ll be hornswoggled!” I said. “How did Merry know to send a greeting party for me?”

Strangely enough, not a one of ‘em stopped to answer me. Instead, they just

ran by me like I wasn't there.

It was puzzling, but I finally decided I'd run into a tribe what was all near-sighted to a fault, and I kept on heading in my true love's direction.

This here near-sightedness must have been catching, because before night fell I'd come across two more tribes what kept yelling Merry Bunta's name and running right past me, and I figured that once I'd found Merry and built my tabernacle, I'd import the best optometrist in Brazil once me and God reimbursed ourselves for expenses.

The next morning I came to one lone little guy, wearing a loincloth and not much else. He ran right up to me like Satan was hot on his heels and began

repeating Merry's name over and over.

“Hold on, Brother,” I said, grabbing his wrist before he could break into a run again. “Can you tell me where I can find Merry Bunta and her father?”

He pointed back the way he'd come. “Merry Bunta! Merry Bunta!” he hollered.

“Fine,” I said. “Lead the way.”

He got kind of panicky and began trying to pull me in the other direction.

“You're confusing the issue,” I said. “I think Merry Bunta was this way,” I added, pointing to where he'd come from.

He nodded his head vigorously. “Merry Bunta!” he said.

“Well, fine, then,” I said. “Let's go.”

He tried to break loose again, and finally it dawned on me. There wasn't nothing wrong with anyone's eyesight. They just all figured that none of 'em had a chance with Merry when matched up against a handsome young buck like myself, and they were just clearing out because they knew after one look that the race to Merry's heart was already won.

“Okay, Brother,” I said. “I understand your motives, and I approve of them. But I ain't met no one what's stuck around more than ten or twelve seconds, and I'm gonna be needing a best man, and failing that a best little feller in a loincloth, so why don't you come along with me, and I promise if you stick around we'll invite you over to dinner of

a Sunday at least twice a year.”

He pulled all the harder to get free of me.

“All right,” I said. “It’d fair break your heart to be in the vicinity of such blonde beauty and know it’s been spoken for. I can sympathize with that. Only one of us can win her delicate ladylike hand and all the good stuff that it’s attached to. Go on your way, little friend, and no hard feelings.”

I let him go. He looked at me like I was crazy, and headed off in the general direction of Madrid and Paris, though of course Rio was in the way.

As I walked I realized that Old Man Bunta must be a pretty good hand with a rifle, because suddenly I couldn’t hear a

single bird singing. In another couple of hours I figured that he had about as big an appetite as I'd ever encountered, because not only wasn't there nothing with wings left in the area, but there wasn't nothing with legs neither, not tapirs, not deer, not sloths, not even monkeys. I decided that I approved, because the sooner he set himself to death the sooner I could share his strongbox with Merry. Then I figured that I didn't want her worrying her pretty blonde head about such weighty matters, and it made more sense for me to just handle whatever was in the box myself. After another five miles I began to realize that most of the money from the strongbox was gonna have to be spent on seed and

fertilizer, because there wasn't nothing growing—not even a blade of grass. The trees was dead, the bushes didn't have no leaves left on them, and I couldn't see nary a flower. I was still puzzling on why Merry and her father would want to live in a place like this when I finally saw a house off in the distance, and I knew I'd reached my destination at last. There was a little stream betwixt me and the house, and I knelt down next to it and doused my head in the water. Then I plucked a fish from where it had latched onto my nose and slicked my hair back with my hands, which was the best I could do since I'd left my comb back at the hotel in Rio. For a minute I think of taking a quick dip, since I'd been

wearing the same duds for months and hadn't had 'em washed since my last friendly visit to Madame Sarcosa's, but I figured if I did that I'd have to wait a couple of hours for 'em to dry, and I was too anxious to take Merry Bunta in my arms, so I just kept running my hands through my hair til they didn't run into no more six-legged intruders, and then I set off to meet the love of my life.

I'd just about reached the house when an old guy with a shotgun opened the door and stared at me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, stepping out onto the porch.

"I'm here to pay court to your daughter, the most beautiful flower in all

of God's South American garden," I said, and then added: "That is, if you're Harvey Bunta, and if you ain't, you might as well start packing your things right now, because nothing's gonna stop me from hooking up with the delectable Merry."

"Are you mad?" he said, kind of wide-eyed and surprised that a rival would footslog this far into the wilderness just to beat his time with Merry.

"Mad with passion," I said. And then, since there was still a possibility that he was her father and not a suitor, I clarified it by saying, "With an all-encompassing and almost-Platonic passion."

“You are a fool!” he snapped. “Didn’t you see all those men heading toward Rio on your way here?”

“You mean all them little guys in their South American skivvies?” I said. “Yeah, I kept running into them.”

“Didn’t you pay any attention to them?”

“Sure did,” I answered. “I kept asking where I could find Merry Bunta, and they kept pointing me in this direction.”

“Idiot!”

“That ain’t no way to talk to your future son-in-law, or maybe your rival, depending on who you are, which you ain’t told me yet.”

“I’m Harvey Bunta, and you are either the dumbest man I’ve ever met or else

you've got yourself a real sweet tooth for punishment.”

“Aw, come on, Harvey—or should I call you Dad?—this ain't no way for us to begin our relationship.”

“Not to worry,” he said grimly. “It'll end in a day or two.”

I looked at his shotgun. “You ain't thinking of trying to run me off, are you?”

“Idiot!” he said again. “You're stuck here. We're all stuck here!”

“I can't imagine what you find so attractive about this here place, Harvey,” I said. “Ain't nothing growing for miles around.”

“This place was greener than you can imagine just two days ago,” he said.

“Why the hell didn’t you listen to those natives?”

“I did,” I told him, getting a little hot under the collar that he wasn’t taking my word for it. “I kept asking

‘em where I could find Merry Bunta, and they kept pointing me in this direction.”

“Didn’t you wonder why they were all racing hell for leather in the opposite direction?”

I didn’t want to give him the real reason, because I didn’t want no prospective father-in-law to think I was stuck on myself when nothing could be farther from the truth, so I just said that I figgered it was payday and they were all racing off to Rio to spend their money.

“They were running away,” he said.

“From sweet little Merry Bunta?” I scoffed.

“From marabunta.”

“That’s what I said,” I told him.

“Marabunta,” he repeated, and spelled it for me. “Not Merry Bunta.”

“There’s a difference?” I asked.

“Merry Bunta is my daughter,” he said. “Marabunta are army ants. We’re surrounded by about six billion of ‘em.”

“Six billion?” I repeated. “I guess that’s too many for you to stomp on ‘em, huh?”

He just glared at me.

“So where are they now?” I asked.

“Their main force is about a mile to the south of us,” he said, “and it’s

headed this way. There's another bunch that's been approaching from the west. They eat everything in their path."

I figured it was too bad Rosie Sanchez wasn't here, because I had long since come to the conclusion that nothing could eat her beans and tortillas and survive.

"Well, Dad Harvey," I said, "if it's a war they want, it's a war they'll get."

"You call me Dad Harvey again, and the first thing they'll get is your buckshot-riddled corpse."

"These here ants are making you kind of tense," I said. "That ain't no way to talk to your future son-in-law."

"I take great comfort in the fact that you and I will both be dead by sunset

tomorrow,” said Harvey. “I’m only sorry that Merry will also die beneath the marabuntas’ onslaught.”

That got my fighting blood up, because I was bound and determined that nothing was gonna crawl all over Merry’s ripe young body before I did, and I decided it was time to start coming up with a plan of action.

“You got any gasoline, Harvey?” I asked.

“Why?”

“I figger we’ll pour it on the marabunta and set fire to it.”

“I got six gallons of gas. There’s seven billion ants out there.”

“I think you said six billion,” I said.

“They multiply fast,” he answered.

“Can they swim?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Harvey. “I’m usually so busy watching out for alligators and anacondas and the like when I’m in my boat that I don’t pay much attention to what kind of insects are frolicking in the water.”

“Well, even if we can’t kill ‘em all,” I said, “at least we can discourage ‘em.”

“Yeah? How?” he asked.

“You say the main body of the enemy is coming from the south, right?” I said. “I’ll just set a fire betwixt us and them, and that ought to discourage them.”

“Just how long do you think three gallons of gasoline will burn?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But even after it goes out, the ground figgers to be

mighty hot on their tender little ant bellies.”

He shrugged. “What the hell. The gas is in cannisters around the side of the house. Go get it.”

I got three gallons of gas and brung it back with me.

“Now, where’s the delectable Merry?” I asked. “I wouldn’t want to trap her on the wrong side of the fire.”

“She’s in the house,” he said.

“Fixing some vittles, I hope?” I said.

“Nah, just sitting there shaking like a leaf. The thought of being et alive by a bunch of godless insects put her off her feed.”

“Well, you can tell her not to worry, now that Lucifer Jones is on the scene.”

“You’re Lucifer Jones?” he said, surprised. “I heard about a Lucifer Jones while I was in Rio, but I guess you can’t be the same one.”

“Why not?”

“You ain’t been lynched yet.”

I figured I’d explain all them misunderstandings later, but the main thing now was to get the war underway, so I walked about half a mile south and parceled out the gasoline, spreading it as far as I could. Then I sat down and waited, and it wasn’t too long before the enemy showed up in force just atop the next rise, so I lit a match and tossed it onto the ground, and two seconds later there was a blaze you could have roasted half a dozen dinosaurs in.

I went back to the house and reported that I'd saved the day, and once Merry realized we were going to live and confessed her love to me, maybe she could rustle up some grub. To celebrate I opened my canteen and took a swig.

“The water around here ain't safe to drink til you boil it,” said Harvey.

“Really?” I said. “I been drinking it since I left Rio and I ain't noticed a thing.”

“I could get you some boiled water from the house.”

“This ain't water,” I said. “It's beer.”

“Where'd you come by beer out here?” he asked.

“I been carrying it for maybe three weeks now. I been saving it for the

proper moment.”

“Ain’t it a little warm and a little flat?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But it’s better than water.”

He couldn’t argue with that, so in my great-heartedness I let him take a couple of swallows. He’d just handed the canteen back to me and was wiping his mouth off with his shirtsleeve when he froze. At first I think the beer was disagreeing with him, but then he pointed off in the distance.

“They’ve split into two groups, and they’re flanking the fire!” he said. Until that moment, I had no idea ants was that smart.

So I figgered if one fire didn’t

discourage the marabunta two certainly would, and I waited until the columns joined again about half a mile from the house and used the rest of the gas to set another one. But while it was burning away, Harvey looked across the battlefield through his binoculars and announced that it was just a feint, that the real attack was coming from the west.

“You got any dams on that stream?” I asked him.

“A couple,” he answered. “Why?”

“Give me a stick of dynamite,” I said. “If I can blow up one of them dams, we can flood the plain between the ants and the house.”

“I only got one stick of dynamite on the whole estate,” he said. “Are you sure

this is going to work?”

“I can’t see no reason why it won’t.”

He went into the house for a few seconds and came out with a stick of dynamite.

“You’re positive, now?” he insisted.

“Trust me, Harvey,” I said, and he tossed the dynamite to me. I caught it and raced off to the first dam I could find, stuck the dynamite into it, lit the fuse, and put my fingers in my ears. It blew about ten seconds later, and tons of water rushed out across the land.

And started sinking in.

And vanished.

“When’s the last time you had any rain?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You’re in the dry

season. Maybe a couple of months, maybe a little more.”

“You might have told me that before I blew up the dam. All the water’s sunk into the ground.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” he said. “You set a fire off to the south, and all the ants did was march around it. Then you set another one, using up the last of our gasoline, and it turned out that the real threat was coming from the west. Then you blew up a dam, not a single ant got wet, and now we’re plumb out of water as well as gas. Does that pretty much sum it up?”

“I have just begun to fight!” I said with fierce masculine pride.

“God help us all,” muttered Harvey.

“I don’t suppose we can send away for any anteaters?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said, still kind of bitter. “You on a first-name basis with any?”

“I meant from a zoo,” I said.

“If you can find a zoo within three hundred miles of here, be my guest,” he replied.

“You ain’t being too all-fired helpful, Dad Harvey,” I said.

“I told you what I’d do the next time you called me that!” he said, picking up his shotgun.

“Come on, Harvey!” I said, backing away from him. I climbed down from the porch onto the ground, and pointed to the ants. “The enemy’s out there!”

“You choose your enemy and I’ll choose mine!” he said, lifting the shotgun to his shoulder.

“You can’t shoot me!” I said. “I’m a preacher!”

“All the more reason,” he growled, lining up his sights.

“Think about it, Harvey,” I said, still backing away. “If you shoot me, who’s going to be left to defeat the ants?”

I couldn’t tell whether that got him laughing or choking, but he did so much of whichever it was that he tripped on the edge of the porch and the gun went off as he tumbled to the ground. I started counting all my limbs, got up to four, and figured he’d missed me. Still, I knew he’d hit something, because I heard this

kind of buzzing sound in my ears. I raised my hands to my head and made sure both my ears were still attached. I couldn't figure out what had happened, but I saw that he was getting to his feet, and I didn't plan to just stand there until he finally shot me, so I turned to the east and prepared to take off like a bat out of someplace that smelled a lot worse than Heaven, when I saw that the sky was black with angry hornets, and I realized that Harvey's buckshot had accidentally blown half a dozen hornets nests off a nearby tree.

The hornets looked around for someone to get mad at, and as it happens, they were closer to the ants than to Harvey and me, so a bunch of

them started dive-bombing the ants while them what was left went around to recruit all their friends and relations.

Harvey was just standing there kind of dumbfounded, and I figured since he wasn't aiming the shotgun no more I was safer on the porch than out here in the middle of the battlefield, so I went back there, and we pulled up a couple of chairs, and spent the next three hours watching the war. For awhile it looked like the ants was going to pull it out, but this was one time that air power prevailed over boots on the ground. Both sides took a ton of casualties, and in the end the ants were in full retreat and the hornets had carried the day.

“Well, I can't say you were any help,”

announced Harvey when the battle was over, “but you didn’t desert us, and that’s worth a little something. Come into the house with me.”

I followed him into the living room, where there was a couch and a couple of chairs and a huge strongbox, which he walked over to and unlocked. I tried not to look too eager to see what I was going to inherit when the old gentleman went the way of all flesh, but I couldn’t help but lean forward and take a peek, and what I saw was a box full of shells.

“I collect them,” he said, handing me something that looked like it had once played house to a clam. “This one’s the treasure of my collection. It’s yours, Lucifer.”

I realized I'd been flim-flammed but good, that there wasn't nothing in his strongbox but a bunch of seashells. Still, he was the father of the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life with, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I just handed it back and explained that I couldn't take such a treasured item, and if he had some gold or diamonds lying around I'd be happy to settle for some of them instead, and he laughed like I was making a joke and slapped my back and allowed that maybe my parents shouldn't have drowned me at birth after all.

And then I heard dainty little footsteps behind me, and I turned and saw Merry Bunta in all her radiant beauty, and I decided that coming all this way out

from Rio was still a worthwhile undertaking, and that Merry without no riches was better than no Merry without no riches.

“Miss Merry Bunta, ma’am,” I said, bowing low, “I’m the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones, here to pledge my heart to you.”

“I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you back in Rio,” she replied, “standing there outside Madame Sarcosa’s den of scarlet women. Once we got back home, I prayed night and day that I might somehow be able to see you again.”

“And here I am,” I said, “the answer to your prayers. Do you want to get hitched here or back in Rio?”

A look of sadness spread over her face. “I watched you this afternoon, Lucifer, and no one can doubt your bravery or your loyalty.”

“Two of my lesser virtues,” I said modestly.

“But the fact remains that if I marry you, you will be the father of my children, and you were outsmarted by a bunch of ants on three different occasions.” She sighed deeply. “I will always love you, Lucifer, but for the sake of my unborn children, I can’t marry you.”

I explained that the ants had all year to plan their campaign and I’d just stumbled into the fray on a moment’s notice, and that I’d be happy to stick

around until the next time they were on the march and have a rematch, but she just kept shaking her head and saying that it just wasn't meant to happen, and it was when I asked her what wasn't meant to happen, the marriage or the rematch, that she just turned and went back to whatever room she'd come out of.

And that was the end of my tragic romance with Merry Bunta. I began walking north, hoping I'd run into a city sometime before I hit the Arctic Circle. But what I ran into was an old friend and a passel of trouble, and I'll tell you about it just as soon as I hunt up a little drinkin' stuff and refresh my artistic sensibilities.