

## The Island of Annoyed Souls

There are a lot of pleasant ways to see the world—but footslogging through the Amazon jungle without a compass ain't one of them. After being gently asked at gunpoint to leave San Palmero I'd been three days and three nights without seeing nothing but an endless parade of mosquitoes and other six-legged critters with a few eight-legged ones tossed in for good measure, and I'd pretty much reached the point where I'd have welcomed the presence of a headhunter or two just to have a little company.

Of course, that was before I ran smack dab into one. I heard him before I could see him, and he was making such a racket as would have woke such dead as weren't otherwise occupied at the moment. He kept crashing through the underbrush, of which there was an awful lot, and suddenly out he burst, maybe ten feet from me. He was carrying a bow and a bunch of little arrows, but he was in such a hurry that he seemed to have plumb forgot about them. He bumped into me, let out a scream, and stared at me kind of like a cow stares at a butcher.

"Howdy, Brother," I greeted him. "The Right Reverend Lucifer Jones at your service. What's the quickest route back to civilization?"

He jabbered something I couldn't understand, and kept looking back the way he had come, so I figured he was telling me he'd just been to the big city and hadn't found it all that congenial to a guy who was inclined to wander around stark naked and had a tendency to shrink the local citizenry's heads. I thanked him for pointing it out to me and started marching off, but he grabbed my arm and began jabbering again, more urgently this time.

"I can appreciate your distaste for the vices of city life," I said. "But if I'm going to save folks from the wages of sin, I got to go to where all the sinning gets itself done."

He began screaming and pointing to where he'd been and pulling me in the direction he was going.

"I'm touched by your concern, Brother," I told him. "But there ain't no need for you to worry. The Lord is my shepherd. Him and me'll get along fine, once we get out of this here jungle."

He just stared at me for a minute, and then took off like a bat out of hell, and it belatedly occurred to me that probably he and one of the local young ladies and maybe her parents had totally different notions of what constituted a bonafide proposal of marriage.

I started walking, dead certain that I'd be stumbling across a city any minute, but not much happened except that I finally caught sight of the Amazon, or at least one of its tributaries. I tried to remember if sharks hung out in rivers, but in the end I was so thirsty I didn't much care, so I wandered over to the water's edge, knelt down, and took a long swallow, and except for some waterbugs and a couple of tadpoles and a minnow or two it didn't taste all that bad.

Then I looked up, and strike me dead if I didn't see a city after all. It wasn't much of a city, just ten or twelve buildings on an island in the middle of the river about half a mile downstream, but after all that time in the bush it was city enough for me, and I moseyed over until I was standing on the bank just opposite it. I was about to swim across to it when I saw an alligator with a lean and hungry look cruising the surface between me and the island, and decided to just keep on walking until I came to a city, or even a suburb, on my side of the river, but then I saw an old beat-up boat tied on the shore, so I borrowed it and rowed across to the island.

As I was pulling the boat out of the water I heard a noise behind me, and when I turned to see what had caused it I found a great big dog watching me curiously. He looked friendly enough, so I reached out to pet him.

## The Island of Annoyed Souls

There are a lot of pleasant ways to see the world—but footslogging through the Amazon jungle without a compass ain't one of them. After being gently asked at gunpoint to leave San Palmero I'd been three days and three nights without seeing nothing but an endless parade of mosquitoes and other six-legged critters with a few eight-legged ones tossed in for good measure, and I'd pretty much reached the point where I'd have welcomed the presence of a headhunter or two just to have a little company. Of course, that was before I ran smack dab into one. I heard him before I could see him, and he was making such a racket as would have

woke such dead as weren't otherwise occupied at the moment. He kept crashing through the underbrush, of which there was an awful lot, and suddenly out he burst, maybe ten feet from me. He was carrying a bow and a bunch of little arrows, but he was in such a hurry that he seemed to have plumb forgot about them. He bumped into me, let out a scream, and stared at me kind of like a cow stares at a butcher.

"Howdy, Brother," I greeted him. "The Right Reverend Lucifer Jones at your service. What's the quickest route back to civilization?"

He jabbered something I couldn't understand, and kept looking back the way he had come, so I figured he was

telling me he'd just been to the big city and hadn't found it all that congenial to a guy who was inclined to wander around stark naked and had a tendency to shrink the local citizenry's heads. I thanked him for pointing it out to me and started marching off, but he grabbed my arm and began jabbering again, more urgently this time.

"I can appreciate your distaste for the vices of city life," I said. "But if I'm going to save folks from the wages of sin, I got to go to where all the sinning gets itself done." He began screaming and pointing to where he'd been and pulling me in the direction he was going.

"I'm touched by your concern, Brother," I told him. "But there ain't no

need for you to worry. The Lord is my shepherd. Him and me'll get along fine, once we get out of this here jungle." He just stared at me for a minute, and then took off like a bat out of hell, and it belatedly occurred to me that probably he and one of the local young ladies and maybe her parents had totally different notions of what constituted a bonafide proposal of marriage.

I started walking, dead certain that I'd be stumbling across a city any minute, but not much happened except that I finally caught sight of the Amazon, or at least one of its tributaries. I tried to remember if sharks hung out in rivers, but in the end I was so thirsty I didn't much care, so I wandered over to the

water's edge, knelt down, and took a long swallow, and except for some waterbugs and a couple of tadpoles and a minnow or two it didn't taste all that bad.

Then I looked up, and strike me dead if I didn't see a city after all. It wasn't much of a city, just ten or twelve buildings on an island in the middle of the river about half a mile downstream, but after all that time in the bush it was city enough for me, and I moseyed over until I was standing on the bank just opposite it. I was about to swim across to it when I saw an alligator with a lean and hungry look cruising the surface between me and the island, and decided to just keep on walking until I came to a

city, or even a suburb, on my side of the river, but then I saw an old beat-up boat tied on the shore, so I borrowed it and rowed across to the island.

As I was pulling the boat out of the water I heard a noise behind me, and when I turned to see what had caused it I found a great big dog watching me curiously. He looked friendly enough, so I reached out to pet him.

"You touch me, Gringo, and I'll bite your hand off," he said. I jumped back real sudden-like.

"What are you staring at?" he continued. "Haven't you ever seen a dog before?"

"Man and boy, I seen a lot of dogs," I told him, "but up until this minute I ain't

never had a conversation with one." I looked around. "Are there a lot of you?"

The dog kind of frowned. "How many of me do you see?"

"I mean, are there a lot of talking dogs in these here parts?"

"I hardly see that that's any of your business," said the dog.

"What are you doing on this island?"

"Right at the moment I'm wondering what my chances are of getting back off it real quick," I said truthfully. "I don't want to upset you none, but I find that talking dogs put me off my feed."

"You're not going anywhere," said the dog. "I think I'd better take you to the doctor."

"I don't need no doctor," I said. "I feel



as fit as a bull moose."

"I resent that," said a low voice behind me, and when I turned to see who'd said it, sure enough I was facing a moose with beady little eyes and a huge spread of antlers. "Now go along with Ramon before I lose my temper."

"You're Ramon?" I asked the dog.

"Have you got a problem with that?" said the dog, baring his teeth.

"Not a bit," I said quickly. "Ramon is my very favorite name."

"Come along with us, Miguel," said Ramon to the moose. "Just in case he tries to escape."

"Miguel is my favorite name too," I said as the moose joined us.

"What do you think of Felicity?" said

a feminine voice that seemed to have a little more timber to it than most.

I looked off to my left and found myself facing about five tons worth of elephant.

"You're Felicity?" I asked.

"I am," replied the elephant.

"I think it's a name of rare gossamer gaiety," I said. "I've fallen eternally in love with maybe thirty women in my life, and five or six of 'em was named Felicity." Then a thought occurred to me, and I said, "Just what kind of animal is this here doctor you're taking me to?"

"He's a man, the same as you," said Felicity.

"He's a man, anyway," muttered Ramon.

"Before we go any farther," said Felicity, "you must promise not to harm him."

"He must be a nice man to have such loving, devoted pets," I remarked.

"He is a fiend!" growled Ramon.

"A monster!" said Felicity.

"And we are not his pets," added Miguel bitterly.

"Well, he must at least be one hell of an animal trainer," I said. "After all, he taught you to speak."

"He most certainly did not!" said Felicity.

"You all just learned spontaneously?" I asked.

"I'm sure the doctor will explain it to you," said Miguel. "Just keep out of his

laboratory," said Felicity.

"I take it he don't like visitors messing with his equipment?" I said.

"I have no idea," said Felicity. "Just keep out of it — and don't accept any food or drink from him unless he partakes of it first."

"And remember," said Miguel, "he is not to be harmed."

"I'm a little confused here," I admitted. "You say this doctor is a fiend and a monster and I shouldn't eat or drink nothing he offers, and at the same time you seem dead set against anyone hurting him."

"That's right," said Ramon.

"And you don't see no inconsistency in that position?" I asked.

"After you talk to him everything will become clear."

We walked for a few minutes and began approaching one of the buildings. A couple of chimpanzees wandered over and introduced themselves, and overhead a bald eagle swooped down and told me that if I so much as touched the doctor he'd peck my eyes out, and then one of the chimps warned me not to drink anything, and I began thinking that if the next thing I saw was a white rabbit checking his watch I'd feel mighty relieved and start trying to wake up, but I didn't see no more animals and pretty soon we were at the door. One of the chimps knocked on it, and then they all stood back and waited for it to open, and

when it did I found myself facing a small, pudgy man with thinning white hair, steel-rimmed spectacles, and three or four chins, depending on which way he held his head. He looked me up and down and finally kind of grimaced. "You're not at all what I was expecting," he said at last.

"I hear that a lot, though usually from disgruntled women,"

I said.

"You simply don't look like the killer of twenty-eight men, women and children," he continued, staring at me. "Still, appearances can be deceiving, which is our guiding motto here."

"I don't want to put a damper on your enthusiasm," I said, "but I ain't never

killed anyone."

"You're not Juan Pedro Vasquez?" he said.

"I'm the Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones," I told him.

"What are you doing on my island?"

"Well, for the past hour or so I've mostly been concentrating on being lost," I admitted.

"Then you shall be an honored visitor," he said. "Come right in." He kind of pulled me in by the arm and shut the door behind me before I could decide whether or not to make a dash for the river.

"May I offer you a drink?" he asked, leading me to the living room, which had a dozen diplomas on the wall instead of

the usual animal heads and tasteful paintings of naked ladies striking friendly poses.

"That's right generous of you," I said, "but I ain't thirsty just now."

"You've been listening to the animals," he said knowingly. "Don't worry, Doctor Jones. The drink is perfectly safe. You must not pay attention to a bunch of felons."

"I ain't been talking to no felons, present company possibly excepted," I said. "Just a bunch of the strangest animals I've ever run into."

He walked to a cabinet, pulled out a bottle, and poured two glasses. He took a swallow from one and then handed it to me. "Will that assuage your fears?" he



said.

"Well, under these circumstances, I suppose I can overcome my natural aversion to liquid," I allowed, downing the rest of the glass and holding it out for a refill. As he poured it, I asked him if he had any serious intention of telling me just what felons he thought I'd been talking to.

"Ramon and Felicity and the others," he said.

"I don't want to seem to ignorant," I said, "but just what kind of felony can an elephant commit on an island in the middle of the jungle?"

"I shall be happy to explain it all to you, Doctor Jones," he said, sitting down on a big leather chair. "Let me begin by

asking if you are acquainted with the work of Doctor Septimus Mirbeau, who is unquestionably the world's most brilliant doctor and scientist?"

"Sounds like an interesting guy," I said. "I'd sure like to run into him someday."

"You're talking to him," he said. "Can it be that you've really never heard of me?"

"Not unless you played third base for the St. Louis Browns about fifteen years ago," I replied. His face fell. "That's the price of genius. I have to work in obscurity until I can announce my findings to the world."

"Well, you can't get much more obscure than a nameless island in the

middle of the Amazon," I said.

"It has a name," replied Doctor Mirbeau. "I call it the Island of Lost Souls."

"As far as I can tell, the only soul what's lost around here is me," I said.

"The name is a poetic metaphor," he said, lighting up a big cigar. "If I was being literal, I would call it the Island of Lost Bodies."

"It strikes me as a pretty small island to misplace a whole graveyard," I said. He smiled. I'm sure he meant it to be a tolerant, fatherly smile, but it came across as something out of one of them movies what got people called Bela and Boris and a lot of other names beginning with a B acting in 'em.

"The bodies are still here, Doctor Jones," he assured me. "You just forgot where?"

"You have just been in their company."

"That's funny," I said. "I didn't notice nothing except a bunch of animals with an unlikely way of expressing themselves."

"That was them."

"I know the vertical rays of the tropical sun can have a funny effect on some folk," I allowed, "but I'm pretty sure those were animals and not men."

"They are animals who used to be men!" he said triumphantly.

"Now why in the world would a normal woman want to turn into a lady

elephant?" I said. "Unless of course you're the only man on the island, and there are a mess of good-looking male elephants out there that I ain't encountered yet."

"I have learned how to surgically transform men and women into animals," he said. "Didn't you think it was peculiar that a moose and an elephant could converse with you?"

"Not as peculiar as a doctor who claims they used to be a man and a woman called Miguel and Felicity," I said.

"But they were!" he insisted. "This has been my life's work! I am only a few years from going public with it. There won't be enough Nobel Prizes to honor

me. They'll have to create a newer, more prestigious award."

"Just how private can it be even now?" I said. "Some hospital or college must know about your work, or you couldn't have gotten funding for all this."

"My funding comes from my patients, who pay me to transform them," said Doctor Mirbeau.

"I don't want to seem unduly skeptical," I said, "but why inarnation would a bunch of perfectly normal human beings pay good money to be turned into animals?"

"Because every last one of them is a wanted criminal," he answered. "What better way to avoid detection than to become an animal?"

Well, I could think of a lot of better ways, or at least less painful ones, but I didn't want to argue with my host, especially since I had a feeling anyone who lost an argument with him was likely to be turned into a koala bear or an iguana or some such thing.

"That's mighty interesting, Brother Mirbeau," I said at last, "and I sure wish you the best of luck with all your Nobel Prizes, but now that we've had a friendly visit and I've drunk my fill, I think it's time I was on my way, if you'll just point me toward the nearest city."

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave the island, Doctor Jones," he said.

"Why not?" I said.

"You might reveal what I'm doing

here before I'm ready to tell the world."

"I give you my solemn word as a man of the cloth who ain't never told a lie in his whole blameless life that I wouldn't even think of doing such a thing," I said. "Besides, if I did, they'd probably just lock me up in the drunk tank."

"I can't take the chance," he said. "You may have free run of the island until I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" I asked.

"You'll find out," he said with a strange smile.

Suddenly it started raining, which it does a lot of in the rain forest, and pretty soon we could hardly hear ourselves over the thunder.

"You ain't going to make a fellow



white man sleep outside in this weather, are you?" I said, looking out the window.

"That was never my intention," said Doctor Mirbeau. "I'll have a bed prepared for you next door in the House of Agony."

"The House of Agony?"

"That's right," he said.

"You know, I think the rain's lightening up already," I said quickly as it continued to pour. "Maybe I'll just spend the night on the beach."

"I won't hear of it," he said. "You can't be too careful with your health." Those were my sentiments exactly, but no matter how much I protested, he insisted that I accept his hospitality.

Finally he got up, put an arm around my shoulders, and walked me over to the front door.

"Your boat has been moved to a safe place," he said. "You really don't want to leave the island without it, as the water is infested with alligators."

I couldn't see that a river being infested with alligators was all that much worse than an island being infested with a mad scientist, but I kept my opinion to myself.

"Dinner is at eight o'clock," he said as he opened the door for me. "Promptness is appreciated." He stared at me. "I don't suppose you brought a dinner jacket?"

"I could go back to San Palmero right now and get one," I suggested hopefully.

"No," he said. "We'll simply have to rough it."

"What's on the menu?" I asked as I remembered that I hadn't had nothing to eat all day and decided that I might as well make the best of my situation.

"Raoul," he said.

Suddenly a handful of nuts and berries started looking mighty good to me. I walked out the door, and found Ramon, Miguel and Felicity waiting for me out there in the rain.

"I'm surprised to see you," said Felicity. "Most men who enter the doctor's house never come out."

"At least, not as men," added Ramon.

"Do you guys mind if we walk while we're talking?" I said, heading off into

the jungle.

"What's your rush?" asked Miguel. "It's raining at the far end of the island too."

"Yeah, but that's a lot farther from the House of Agony than we are now," I pointed out.

"True," he agreed. "On the other hand, it's a lot closer to the House of Pain." I came to a stop. "Has Doctor Mirbeau got any other houses I should know about?"

"No," said Felicity. "But he has five others you probably shouldn't know about."

"If I ever get off this here island," I vowed to nobody in particular, "the very first thing I'm going to do is never think about it again."

"You will never leave the island," said Ramon. "I am surprised he didn't tell you that."

"Well, he did kind of hint at it," I allowed. "But I was hoping he said it with a kindly twinkle in his eye."

"That was a cataract, and there's nothing kindly about it," said Miguel. "You're stuck here."

"I've run through thirty-four countries looking for the right spot to build the Tabernacle of Saint Luke," I said. "Who'd have thunk I'd wind up having to build it here, with nothing in my flock except a bunch of godless animals?"

"I resent that!" said Felicity.

"The godless part or the animal part?" I asked.

"Both!"

"Then I apologize," I said. "I sure don't want no god-fearing five-ton lady mad at me."

"Leave my weight out of this!" she snapped.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, ma'am," I told her. "I ain't never seen a ten-thousand-pounder, human or otherwise, what was so feminine and delicate-looking and light on her feet." She made a sound that was a cross between a tuba hitting M over high C and a trolley car skidding downhill on some rusty tracks.

"Now see what you've done?" said Miguel. "She's crying!" Her body was wracked by sobs, which made it pretty

hazardous for anyone standing in her immediately vicinity, like especially me, so I spoke up and said, "I don't want to be presumptuous, Miss Felicity, ma'am, but if you're that unhappy about being an elephant, why not just have Doctor Mirbeau change you back into the charming lady bank-robber or mad bomber you were to begin with?" Felicity began crying even harder and louder.

"You simply do not understand our situation," said Ramon.

"Sure I do," I said. "You're a bunch of worthless lawbreaking scum, meaning no offense, what probably committed a passel of crimes against the laws of Man and God, and came here to avoid the just

and righteous punishment of an outraged citizenry." Ramon snarled, and Miguel glared at me and began pawing the damp ground, but I held up a hand. "This is your lucky day," I said. "Your troubles are solved. I just happen to be in the salvation business. And as an introductory offer, I'll forgive any five heinous sins for the price of four."

"Our biggest sin is stupidity," sniffled Felicity.

"I absolve you!" I said. "That'll be \$1.83 in cash."

"Do you see pockets on any of us?" said Miguel.

"Okay, we'll put it on the cuff," I said. "Just be sure you pay me before you leave the island or I may have to tell



God to strike you dead, and He's such a busy critter that I really hate to bother Him unless it's absolutely necessary."

"We're never leaving the island again," muttered Ramon unhappily.

"Why not?" I asked. "I mean, you've got your ready-made disguises, so why ain't you and Miss Felicity out in polite canine and pachyderm society?"

"We were," said Miguel. "Well, some of us were."

"And some of us have never left the island," said Felicity. "You'd be surprised how few places in South America an elephant can go without drawing undue attention."

"Yeah, I can see where it's difficult to hide out in a crowd if there ain't no

crowd on hand," I said.

"Maybe you should have hitched a ride to Africa."

"I don't want to go to Africa!" she wailed. "I just want to be a woman again."

"Our transformations were completed a decade ago," said Ramon. "The police are no longer hunting for us. Our case files are closed. We have returned to the island to be changed back into human beings."

"Well, that seems reasonable," I allowed.

"It's reasonable," said Ramon. "It's just not likely."

"Oh?" I said. "Why not?"

"Because that foul fiend has raised his

prices!" growled Ramon.

"It's extortion!" chimed in Miguel. "Where is a moose going to get fifty thousand dollars — especially in these difficult economic times?"

"And there's no sense threatening him," added Felicity. "He knows that we don't dare risk hurting the one man who can turn us back into men and women."

"So you figure you're going to be a full-time long-term elephant?" I asked her. She began crying again. "I used to be so beautiful! I never wanted to be an elephant! I wanted to be something sleek and feline. And thin. Do you know what it's like for someone who counted calories all her life to eat five hundred pounds of grass and shrubs a day on a

minimum maintenance diet?"

"There there," said Miguel, trying to comfort her. "There there."

"And the worse part of it is Cedric!" she continued. "Cedric? Who's Cedric?" I asked.

"My partner," said Felicity. "Doctor Mirbeau turned him into a mouse, and now I'm scared to death of him!"

"What did you two do before you came here?" I asked.

"Hardly anything at all," said Felicity. "We didn't kill anywhere near as many of my husbands as they claimed. Just nine or ten." She paused. "Maybe twelve at the outside."

"You don't know how many husbands you killed?"

"Some of them died from natural causes," she said defensively. I didn't see no sense in arguing with her, because it was certainly natural for a heart to stop beating after someone had pumped half a dozen bullets into it.

"At least Cedric is alive and wandering around the island somewhere," said Ramon. "Not like poor Omar."

"Omar was your partner?"

"Yes."

"What happened to him?" I asked. "Did he die on Doctor Mirbeau's operating table?"

"No," said Ramon. "Doctor Mirbeau turned him into a rabbit." A tear came to his eye. "I ate him."

"You ate your own partner?"

"It was instinct," said Ramon. "He shouldn't have run. Ever since the operation I have this compulsion to chase things."

"How about you?" I said, turning to Miguel. "You got a partner too?"

"No," said Miguel. Then: "Well, not anymore, anyway."

"But you did have one?"

"I had four," he said. "A father, two sisters, and a brother. It was a family business."

"And are they wandering around the island too?" I asked. "No," said Miguel. "I turned them all in for the reward years ago."

"So here we are on the Island of Lost

Souls," said Ramon, "just a few hundred yards from the man who could transform us back into human beings but refuses to do so."

"Sometimes I get so frustrated I could just sit on him," said Felicity.

"I know you're having dinner with him tonight, Doctor Jones," said Miguel. "Could you intercede with him on our behalf?"

"Well, actually, I was kind of planning to intercede with him on my behalf," I replied. They begged and cajoled and Ramon started growling and I was afraid Felicity was going to start crying again, so finally I gave in and promised to speak to him at dinnertime.

"Thank you, Doctor Jones," said

Miguel, who I decided wasn't a bad guy for a moose. "Our prayers go with you."

Suddenly Felicity trumpeted in terror and raced off screaming into the jungle, knocking down trees right and left as she went.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"She probably saw Cedric again," said Ramon in a bored voice. "It happens all the time."

"Poor baby," said Miguel. "What a comedown."

"Was she really that pretty before the operation?" I asked. "Compared to what?" said Ramon.

"She was much prettier then than she is now," said Miguel. He stopped and mulled on it for a minute.



"Well, a bit prettier, anyway." He think a little more. "If not prettier, at least smaller."

"And she smelled better," added Ramon.

"Well, this has been a fascinating conversation," I said, "but I think it's probably time for me to head back over to Doctor Mirbeau's house for dinner."

"Good luck, Doctor Jones," said Ramon.

I started tramping back through the jungle, and after awhile the rain let up and pretty soon I found myself at the front door. I was going to open it when something big and shaggy opened it from the inside.

"You are expected," he said, stepping

back to let me pass. "You sure ain't," I said, staring at him.

"Have you got something against gorillas?" he asked me.

"Not a thing," I said quickly. "Some of my best friends are gorillas, or so close to 'em as makes no difference. I just ain't never encountered one working as a doorman before."

"I hope you don't think I enjoy being a house servant," said the gorilla.

"It ain't never occurred to me to seriously consider whether a gorilla would be happy as a butler," I admitted. "But if you don't like it, what are you doing here?"

"I'm hiding from the police."

"Back up a minute here," I said. "I

think you got turned into a gorilla so you wouldn't have to hide no more."

"I should have saved my money and taken my chances," he said bitterly.

"But you look exactly like a gorilla."

"I used to be a professional wrestler," he said. "The police saw through the surgery instantly."

"You looked like this when you rassled?" I asked.

He opened a cabinet and produced two photographs. "Before and after," he said, and sure enough I couldn't tell one from the other.

He led me into the dining room, where Doctor Mirbeau, dressed in a sweat-stained white tropical suit and a dirty tie, was already sitting at one end of the

table, and the gorilla motioned that I was to sit at the other end.

"What do you think of my island now that you've had a little time to explore it?" asked Doctor Mirbeau.

"I suppose it's one of the nicer islands I've ever encountered," I said. His face brightened. "So you like it?"

"Except for the heat, and the bugs, and the mud, and the rain, and the talking animals, and the fact that you won't let me leave," I answered.

"I can't control the other things, but I'll order the animals to leave you alone."

"Actually, they asked me to speak to you on their behalf," I said. He made a face. "I thought as much."

"Mighty few animals can lay their

hands, or whatever passes for their hands, on fifty thousand dollars," I said. "Why don't you turn 'em back into men and woman and let 'em pay you afterward?"

"I can't," he said.

"Why not?" I asked. "Ain't a delayed payment better than no payment at all?"

"It's out of the question," he said.

"That don't make no sense," I protested. "You need money to continue your work. These animals ain't got two cents to rub together. If you don't operate on 'em, they won't never have no money, but if you do operate then maybe they'll be able to get some."

"Forget it."

"Why are you being so stubborn?" I

said.

"Because I don't know how to turn then back!" he bellowed. "That's what I need the money for — to pay my expenses until I learn how!"

There was an angry trumpeting outside the building, and Doctor Mirbeau suddenly turned even whiter than his suit. "What was that?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"If I was a betting man," I said, "I'd lay plenty of eight-to-five that Felicity heard every word you just said with them oversized ears of hers, and that she is more than a little bit displeased with you."

"Oh my God!" he whispered.

"I got a feeling God's otherwise

occupied at the moment," I answered as a couple of lions began roaring,

"but I'll be sure to tell Him you called."

Pretty soon some monkeys began screaming, and then a few eagles and leopards chimed in, and Ramon began howling, and it was pretty clear that it wasn't so much an island of lost souls as deeply annoyed and exceptionally noisy ones.

"Save me, Doctor Jones!" he cried.

"I thought I was your prisoner," I said.

"Don't quibble over technicalities," he said. "Save me and everything I have is yours!"

"As far as I can tell, everything you have is an island a trillion miles from

anywhere and a bunch of angry animals that want your scalp," I said. "Somehow it don't seem like much of an inducement." He held up his right hand. "See this ring? That's a six-carat diamond! Save me and it's yours!"

"It's a mighty pretty bauble," I said. "But I could just sit back and pick it up when they finish dismembering you."

"What kind of Christian are you?" he demanded.

"A live one," I said as a jaguar leaped onto the roof and began pacing back and forth. "I'll ask you the same question thirty minutes from now."

"All right," he said. "There's five thousand dollars in my safe. You can have half."



"Half?"

"Surely you don't insist on all of it?" he said.

"I don't insist on any of it," I told him. "I think I'll just watch them hunt you down and rip you to shreds like a naked mole rat, except for the mole rat part."

"All right!" he said. "It's all yours! Just save me!"

"It's a deal," I said. "Though officially and for tax purposes you're giving the money to the Lord; I'm just holding it for Him until Him and me can build our Tabernacle. Now go hunt up the money while I run a couple of plans past Him and see which one He prefers."

As soon as he left the room the gorilla walked up to me. "Are you really going

to save him?" he asked.

"It's the only way to make sure all you animals get turned back into people," I said.

"I'm not going under the knife again!" he said. "Why suffer the pain when I wouldn't look one bit different when it was all over?"

I looked at the gorilla, and thunk about what he said, and then my Silent Partner smacked me right betwixt the eyes with one of His heavenly revelations.

"You've got a strange and inscrutable expression on your face, Doctor Jones," said the gorilla.

"You got a name?" I asked him suddenly.

"Horace," he said. It was the first time

I ever saw a gorilla look embarrassed.

"What city are you wanted in, Horace?" I said.

"It's not so much a city as a country," he said. "Things are different here than in the States."

"Okay," I said. "What country can't you show your face in?"

"Brazil," he said.

"All right," I said. "That's no problem."

"Peru," he continued. "Uruguay. Paraguay. Argentina. Chile."

"You been a busy boy, Horace," I said.

"And Iceland."

"Iceland?" I said.

"I have relatives in Iceland," he

explained. "I visited them."

"That must be a mighty strict country," I said. "Most places don't usually issue arrest warrants for visiting relatives."

"It was a very pleasant visit," said Horace. "We spent a lot of time together, they showed me the sights, we ate at some wonderful restaurants." He paused. "Robbing those seven banks was just an afterthought. I didn't even need the money from the last five. It's just that once you start, it's . . . well . . . habit-forming."

"It's a tragic and touching story, but let's get back to the subject at hand and see if I got this straight," I said. "There ain't no warrants out for you in Venezuela or Columbia or Ecuador,

right?"

"And Bolivia," he said as Doctor Mirbeau came back with the cash. "Don't forget Bolivia." I took the money and the ring and then walked to the front door and opened it. Damned near every animal on the island was lined up there facing it, except for the jaguar that was looking down from the roof. Doctor Mirbeau kind of cowered behind me.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've called you all here," I said.

"Cut the crap and give us Mirbeau!" said Ramon.

"What'll you do with him?" I asked.

"We haven't decided yet," said Miguel. "But it'll be grotesque."

"I got a better idea," I said. "How'd

you all like to be turned back into men and women again?"

"He doesn't know how!" said Felicity. "I heard him admit it to you!"

"He doesn't know how yet," I said. "He needs some more time and money to work on it."

"Where's he going to get money?" said Miguel. "You can't bleed a turnip, or pick the pocket of a bunch of animals who aren't wearing any pants."

"You're going to earn it," I said, "and it'll be credited to your accounts against the day when he can actually change you back."

"Earn it?" repeated Ramon. "How?"

"Felicity," I said. "Tell me again why you stay here on the island."

"Because I'm the only elephant for thousands of miles around," she said. "I'd draw attention wherever I go."

"I agree," I said.

"So she stands out in a crowd," said Ramon. "What's your point?"

"It seems to me that as long as elephants and lions and talking animals are going to draw all that attention, there ain't no reason why they should draw it for free," I said. "You got a whole continent full of people what'll pay good money to see what you been hiding instead of flaunting. You can turn this island into the most popular zoo and tourist destination in South America."

"That's an interesting notion," said Ramon. "But how will we get word out

to the public?"

"You'll start with word of mouth in Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador and Bolivia, and work up from there," I said. "You just happen to have a spokesman and travel agent in your midst—at least as long as he sticks to rasslin' arenas and maybe soccer stadiums what feature riots during halftime." Doctor Mirbeau stepped forward and promised to stay if they agreed to the plan, since all he wanted was the money and privacy he needed to finish his research. The animals took a vote, and it passed unanimously, and that's how the island became The Mirbeau 5-Star Spa, Resort, Menagerie, Circus and Petting Zoo.

As for me, I had five thousand dollars



and a diamond ring tucked away in my pocket, so I bade them all a fond farewell and headed to the river. Once I got there I remembered that Doctor Mirbeau had taken my boat away, and I was about to go hunting for it when a big alligator glided up to the shore. I took a couple of steps back, ready to run if it came after me.

"Don't be afraid, Doctor Jones," it said. "My name is Victor Montez. I'll ride shotgun for you while you swim across."

"Since you're one of Doctor Mirbeau's critters, how come you didn't say nothing to me when I got here earlier today?"

"I wasn't myself this morning," said Victor.

"Mighty few folks around here are," I agreed.

"You misunderstand," he said. "Something I ate last night disagreed with me." I resisted the urge to ask whether that was before or after he ate it, and just started swimming. A minute later there was a splash, followed by a loud crunching noise.

"Piranha," explained Victor.

"Gesundheit," I said.

"I hope it wasn't anyone I know," he added.

I made it to the far shore, climbed up onto dry land, thanked Victor for his help, took one last look at the island, and headed off to find some congenial spot where the sinners and scarlet women all

congregated and I could finally settle down to the serious business of building my Tabernacle.