

The Lost Continent of Moo: A Lucifer Jones Story by Mike Resnick

Part I

You know, there's one thing I ain't never figured out, and man and boy it's been bothering me most of my blameless life, and even now as a old man I haven't come up with an answer, and I've had a lot of time to think about it since it was always happening to me, even back in 1935 which is when the tale I'm telling you took place, and though I've wandered the face of five continents (or maybe seven, if you count them two little ones down south) I still don't know why it takes me such a short time to get lost and such a long time to get found again.

In fact, that was my very thought as I left Cornelius MacNamarra's chartreuse mansions behind me and mosied alongside the Amazon, waiting for civilization to raise its head so I could get together with it and finally get around to the serious business of building the Tabernacle of Saint Luke. But the closest I came to civilization in the next week was a couple of little fellers who were wearing paint on their faces and not much else. They didn't speak no known language, which is something they had in common with the French, and they kept staring at me as if they were wondering how my head would look in their trophy case, so I finally took my leave of them.

I wish I could have took my leave of everything else, because I kept getting et by mosquitos and hissed at by snakes and growled at by jaguars and giggled at by monkeys, and after I'd footslogged maybe another hundred miles and still hadn't seen no shining cities filled to overflowing with sinners who in desperate need of a man of the cloth like myself, I figured maybe the cities had all migrated to the south when no one was looking, so I took a left turn and put the Amazon River behind me.

Now, I knew South America had a bunch of cities even back then, places like Rio and Buenos Aires and Caracas and Saigon, but it was like they'd seen me coming and had all tiptoed away before I could lay eyes on any of 'em. I picked up a female companion named Petunia along the way. She was a real good listener, but she didn't say nothing and she smelled just terrible, especially after a rainstorm (of which we had an awful lot), and after a few days I finally had to admit that I just didn't have much in common with lady tapirs, and we parted ways.

I kept trudging along, keeping my spirits up by reading my well-worn copy of the Good Book, and finally, after another couple of weeks, the forest started retreating, the mosquitos found other things to do, the animals took umbrage when I kept reciting the Eighth and Fourteenth Commandments at 'em, and even the rain decided it had urgent business elsewhere. The land flattened out, the sun came out of hiding, and suddenly I was in this pasture that must have been a couple of hundred miles long, give or take a few inches.

And as I looked over my surroundings, I began to realize that this wasn't like no part of South America I had ever seen, and I'd seen an awful lot of it, starting with San Palmero and working my way through the Island of Annoyed Souls and this big wet area everyone called the Amazon Basin though I didn't see nary a single wash basin, with or without no love-starved amazons, the whole time I was walking through it.

I kept looking around and thinking that maybe I'd fallen asleep and sleptwalked to some new country. I was still mulling on it when I realized I'd been walking forever and a day, and I decided to lay down right on the grass, and if there'd been a desk clerk I'd have told him not to wake me til maybe half past Tuesday, and then I was snoring to beat the band.

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"I'm sleeping," I said.

It nudged me kind of gently.

"Go away," I said, scrunching up my eyes. "It's a holiday somewhere in the world. I'll get a job tomorrow."

Then whatever it was pressed right up against my ear and said

"Moo!"

“What in tarnation was that?” I bellowed, jumping to my feet. Suddenly I heard a dozen more moos, and I looked around, and damned if I wasn’t surrounded by some of the fattest cows I’d ever seen. There were hundreds of ‘em, maybe thousands, and they’d all snuck on me my while I was sleeping.

And then I thought, well, maybe they didn’t exactly sneak up. Maybe they live here.

“Moo!” said a few dozen of ‘em, staring at me with big brown cows’ eyes, as if they were begging me to come on over and choose a steak for dinner.

And then, being a educated man, I remembered my history books, or at least some stories I’d heard in Red

Charlie's Waterfront Bar in Macao, which comes to almost the same thing, and I realized that somehow or other I had stumbled onto a new land what no one else had ever seen before, and it didn't take but forty or fifty more cows joining the chorus to for me to figger out that I was probably the first white man ever to set foot on the Lost Continent of Moo what had been writ up in fable, song and story. I looked off into the distance, hoping to see a shining city filled with Moovians or whatever they called themselves, where I could build my tabernacle and set up shop, but there wasn't nothing out there but cows. Now, I knew there had to be people somewhere, because in all my

experience I ain't never come across a cow that could sing songs or tell stories about lost continents. And while we're speaking of lost continents, them of you what's read Encounters, the story of my attempt to bring the word of the Lord to the sinful nations of Europe, will know right off the bat that this here wasn't the first lost continent I discovered. In fact, it seems that one of the things I'm really good at, other than helping poor sinners (and especially fallen women) see the light and the glory, is finding lost continents. It ain't generally known—and in fact if you didn't read my book it probably ain't known at all—but not only did I find the lost continent of Atlantis, I actually bought it. Of course, it was

buried under a few fathoms of water, but I'd be there still if the Greek government hadn't objected to my placing a bunch of ads in the local paper offering to sell lots with a Mediterranean view. But that's another story, and one what's already been told with grace and elegance.

Anyway, after I'd wandered a couple of miles, stepping in all kinds of things that a gentleman would never discuss with you except to say they were vile and foul-smelling and mostly plentiful, I heard a shout off to my left. I turned and saw a guy riding up on a horse. He was kind of dressed like a cowboy, except for the chaps and the belt and the shirt and the hat, and he galloped up to me,

and then just when I was sure he'd escaped from some hospital for the pixilated and thunk I was a polo ball or whatever it is that they hit with them sticks, he pulled his horse to a stop and said something to me in some alien tongue.

“I don't understand a word you're saying, Brother,” I replied, “but allow me to introduce myself. I'm the Right Reverend Doctor Lucifer Jones, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance.”

He jabbered something else I couldn't follow.

“Before we resort to sign language, Brother,” I said, “perhaps you could tell me if I've indeed stumbled onto the lost continent of ancient legend.”

As I said it, I indicated the land with a wave of my hand, and cocked an eyebrow so he'd know I was asking a question.

It worked, because he shot me a friendly smile and said, "Pampas", which I figured was how they said Moo in Mooish.

"Thanks, Brother," I said. "And now I wonder if you can tell me where I can find the king of Moo?"

He just stared at me, puzzled, and then I realized I'd made a simple mistake.

"Strike that, Brother," I said. "Where can I find the king of Pampas?"

He kind of frowned, and I began thinking that my initial appraisal was right, except maybe for the polo part.

“Well, thanks anyway,” I said, “but I can’t waste no more time here. I got to scout up the people and start bringing the Word to any godless sinners I find among ‘em, so I guess I’ll be going now.” I gave his horse’s neck a friendly pat, and noticed some weird kind of trinket he had with a ball attached to each end.

He saw me staring at it, and said “Bolas.”

“Thanks, Brother,” I said. Then, remembering my manners, I added “And bolas to you too.”

I headed off to my right, but he immediately urged his horse forward and blocked my way. Then he started jabbering at me and pointing to my left. I

looked where he was pointing, and all I could see was maybe twenty thousand cows, give or take a couple.

“That’s mighty considerate of you, Brother, but I’m looking for sinners of the two-legged kind,” I told him. “Besides, mighty few cows contribute to the poor box, and that’s a serious consideration when you’re figuring out where to build your tabernacle.”

I walked around his horse and began heading off again, and again he blocked my way.

“Just what seems to be your problem, Brother?” I said, starting to get a bit riled. He began talking a blue streak, but I didn’t hear no familiar words like “pampas” or “bolas”, and finally I held

up my hand for silence.

“I appreciate your concern,” I said, “and as near as I can figger it, either you think I’m here to convert your cattle, or I look so hungry you want me to take a couple of hundred cows home with me, or—and now that I come to think of it, them first two don’t hold a candle to the next reason, which is that you got all your womenfolk stashed in the direction I’m going.” I gave him a reassuring smile. “You don’t have to worry none, Brother. The way I smell after walking through your pasture, I doubt that any woman of quality would let me get near her—and if she would, that just means she’s been stepping in all this stuff too, and I ain’t wildly interested in getting

much closer than fifty feet to her, or maybe a hundred, depending on which way the wind's blowing."

I began walking yet again, and this time he just sighed and frowned and shook his head, and finally he dug his spurs into his horse and headed off toward all the cattle he'd been trying to introduce me to. It took me a whole day and a night to get out of that cow pasture, but finally I came to what was either a large rocky hill or a small rocky mountain, and I followed a footpath up it, and pretty soon I became aware that I was being watched by unseen eyes, which in my broad experience are just about the worst kind of eyes to be watched by, and finally the footpath

widened a bit, and suddenly I was facing a mighty impressive stone building which sure didn't resemble no other building I'd ever seen. Of course, the
200

naked warriors, each of 'em with a spear and an expression that would have meant their shorts were too tight if any of 'em had been wearing shorts, might have had a little something to do with it. Finally they stood aside, and a kind of short, pudgy white man mosied out of the building while they all bowed down as he passed by. He was wearing a loincloth, which meant he was dressed a lot better than any of his friends and neighbors, and he had a half-smoked cigar in his mouth. He was kind of bald,

and a little bit cock-eyed, and he had such a thick unkempt beard that it instantly said to all and sundry that he wasn't on speaking terms with his barber, and his bare feet were pretty caked with all the stuff I'd been doing my best to avoid, but outside all that I suppose he was as presentable as most people, and certainly more presentable than some I'd run into lately.

He walked up to me, stopped about four feet away, put his hands on his hips, jutted out his chin, and said "Who the hell are you?"

"You speak English," I said, surprised.

"I speak English a hell of a lot better than you answer questions," he said.

“Now, who are you?”

“The Right Reverend Honorable Doctor Lucifer Jones at your service,” I said. “Weddings and baptisms done cheap, with a group rate for funerals. And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Rakovekin, Lord of the Outer Realm, Messenger of the Almighty, Spokesman for the Elder Deities, and Commander of the Legions of the Dead.”

“That’s quite a mouthful, Brother,” I noted.

“Yeah, it can get tedious,” he admitted. “Especially at parties when I have to meet a lot of new people. You can call me Henry.”

“Forgive me for pointing it out, but

Henry don't sound like no South American name."

"And the other one I gave you did?" he asked.

"Now as I come to think on it, no, I suppose it didn't neither," I answered.

"Henry's what they used to call me before I stumbled onto this place."

"I could tell right off you weren't no native," I said.

"Only place I'm native to is Hackensack, New Jersey," said Henry.

"What's a Hackensack boy doing thousands of miles from home on this here lost continent?" I asked.

"Being a god," he said.

"Pleasant work?" I asked.

"Most of the time," he said.

“Maybe I’ll take a stab at it and join you, since I spend so much time consulting with the Lord anyway,” I offered. “What’s the job pay?”

“We only got room for one god around here, and I’m it,” he said. “Now, you’re welcome to stick around a day or two until you’re rested up, and you can even grab some grub to take with you on your long and arduous journey to anywhere else in the world, but you can’t stay here on no permanent basis.”

“How did you find this here lost continent, Brother Henry?” I asked him.

“Didn’t know it was no continent, and it sure as hell ain’t as lost as it used to be,” he grumbled. “You’re the fourth white man to wander in here in less than

ten years.”

“What happened to the other three?”

“I sent two of ‘em packing.”

“And the third,” I said. “Is he still here?”

“Parts of him are.”

Which made me think that there were maybe worse ideas than sticking around just a day or two and then hitting the road.

“But to answer your question, Reverend Jones,” he continued, “I came down to this part of the world to hunt elephants.”

“I don’t want to put no damper on your enthusiasm, Brother Henry,” I said, “but there ain’t no elephants within a couple of thousand miles of here, except

them what's on display at zoos.”

“Well, if push had come to shove I'd have settled for 'em,” said Henry. “They don't run so fast nor so far when they're in a cage, and they sure can't find much natural cover there.”

I could see right off that he was a natural-born sportsman who was put off his feed at the thought of littering the landscape with escaped animals what had been gutshot or worse, and I figgered if I could befriend him over the next couple of days I could maybe send him off to a zoo in Argentina or Brazil and try my hand at the god business myself.

“Anyway,” said Henry, “I was wandering the landscape looking for

elephants without no success when I stumbled onto this place. I couldn't see no one around, so I just followed the path right up to the temple, and I was so danged tired that I walked into it to get out of the sun and kind of catch my wind, and that stone altar in the middle of the place looked so inviting that I doffed most of my duds and lay down on it to take a little nap." He shook his head in wonderment. "Next thing I knew there were twenty naked men kneeling down in front of me. At first I thought they were shooting craps, which is what's usually going on when a bunch of Hackensack men get down on their knees, but then they saw I was awake and they began bowing and chanting.

After awhile I asked one of ‘em what it all meant, and he told me that I was clearly the god of prophecy that had been sent down to lead them to their former glory, and he started giving me my name and my titles. I know you thought I’d giv you a tongue twister when I introduced myself, but actually I got 38 more titles to go with the ones you heard. At first I thought reciting ‘em all would charm the ladies, but the truth of the matter is that most of ‘em fall asleep before I hit Number 20.”

“Speaking of the womenfolk, Brother Henry, just where are they all hiding?” I asked him.

“Oh, they’re off tilling fields and fetching water and toting firewood and

other womanly duties like that,”

he said. “All except for the priestesses, anyway.”

“And what about the men?”

“Mostly they’re worshipping me in private, and getting ready to go to war.”

“War?” I repeated. “You planning to attack two hundred thousand head of cattle?”

“No, we’re after the gauchos that herd the cattle,” he said. “Then I figure once we’ve won that little skirmish, we’ll drive the cattle all the way to Buenos Aires so we’ll have a little something to nibble on while we’re carrying out our war of conquest.”

“I like a man who thinks ahead,” I said. “I can tell we’re going to be great

friends, Brother Henry.”

“Well, as long as you’re here, Reverend,” he said, his expression softening a bit, “I might as well show you around my earthly kingdom.” He lowered his voice confidentially. “Truth of the matter is that I ain’t yet figured out where they’re hiding my heavenly kingdom.”

He headed off to the interior of the building, leaving all the menfolk behind, and I fell into step behind him.

“This here’s the Great Temple of Rakovekin,” he said. “I keep trying to get ‘em to call it the Great Temple of Henry, but they’re a stubborn lot.”

I saw a bunch of half-naked women puttering around lighting candles and

such, and I shot the closest of

‘em a great big smile. “Them’s my Heavenly Handmaidens,” said Henry. “Each and every one of ‘em a virgin.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Well, except for them what ain’t,” he replied with a shrug.

I kind of winked at another of ‘em, and she giggled and blushed, and I pretty much decided then and there that since food grew on trees and bushes and Heavenly Handmaidens only seemed to grow in Moo, I’d take a couple of ‘em with me when I left and trust to the Lord that I could find food along the way.

“Over here,” said Henry, pointing to a big stone slab, “is the altar I fell asleep on that first day.”

I looked closer. It had a lot of bloodstains on it.

“I see you don’t believe in sacrificing turnips,” I noted, and he threw back his head and laughed.

“Rev,” he said, “I had a feeling the second I saw you that we was going to become friends.” He patted the stains lovingly. “No, these come from men who thought they could lay hands on the High Priestess.”

“You got a High Priest, too?”

“We did,” he said. He pointed to one of the stains. “I believe that’s what’s left of him.”

“She’s inviolate, huh?” I said.

“No,” he answered. “Last time I saw her she was in gold, such minimal duds

as she was wearing. Mostly a crown, a couple of armbands, and some sandals, as I recall.”

“Sounds like she was dressed for mighty warm weather,” I said, “which I must admit we got a lot of in this here neck of the woods.”

“Just between you and me, it’s more like an armpit of the woods,” said Henry confidentially, “which is why I plan to pillage and plunder my way to Bahia.”

“I think you were making war on Buenos Aires,” I said.

“As long as it begins with a B and it’s got electricity and running water, makes no difference to me,”

answered Henry.

“Getting back to your High Priestess,

has she got a name?”

“Of course she has a name,” he said. “Why?”

“Truth to tell, Brother Henry, I got an affinity for gorgeous half-naked High Priestesses,” I said. “Some people like Ford roadsters, some people like fine Waterford crystal, me, I like—”

“I get the point,” he said. “I may introduce you to her, but you have to understand up front that she belongs to me. If you touch her or make a play for her, it’ll bring all my heavenly wrath down on your head. That altar’s always got room for another bloodstain.”

“I don’t rightly hold with one human being owning another, Brother Henry,” I said severely. Personally, I figured

taking out a short-term lease on the High Priestess was a different matter altogether, but I decided not to discuss the finer points of it with him at that particular moment.

“I fully agree, Reverend Jones,” he said.

“You do?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “No human being should ever own another.” Then he smiled and added, “Damned lucky for me that I’m a god and not a human being, ain’t it?”

I had to admit that I didn’t have no logical answer to that. In fact, I was just about to change the subject and maybe get him talking about the Brooklyn Dodgers or Equipoise or some other

subject that was near and dear to folks what grew up near Hackensack, when my attention and my breath was both took by the most beautiful High Priestess anyone ever laid eyes on, and one look was enough to convince any red-blooded man or god that eyes were the very least of all the things he wanted to lay on her.

“Close your mouth, Reverend,” said Henry. “You never know what’ll fly into it in these here parts.”

She kept approaching me until she was just a couple of feet away, than stopped and smiled at me.

“Hello,” she said, extending a delicate hand. “My name is Valeria.”

“Miss Valeria, ma’am,” I said, “I just want to state for the record that in a

lifetime of admiring half-naked High Priestesses and other delicate morsels of femininity, I ain't never seen nothing to compare to your beauty, and if you're ever in the need of a little nocturnal spiritual comfort, all you got to do is say the word and I'll be there with bells on."

She giggled. "Why would you wear bells?"

"You prefer feathers, just say the word," I told her.

"That's enough, Reverend," said Henry. "Let's not forget who's the god and who's the mortal here."

"So you ain't told her?" I said.

"Told her what?" he demanded.

"That any mortal what sleeps with a god will die of a hideously disfiguring

disease,” I said as Valeria kind of gasped and took a couple of quick steps backward. “I think everyone knew that.”

“Valeria, honey, he’s just making that up!” said Henry.

I pulled my bible out of my pocket. “It’s all right here in the Book of Salome, Chapter 7, Verse 3.”

(Actually, the Book of Salome ain’t got no Chapter 7 or Verse 3, but I had a soft spot for them because those were the numbers of the last Daily Double I hit at Saratoga just before I was gently requested to leave the country by a handful of gendarmes and politicians and other select authorities that didn’t have no sense of humor or proportion.)

“Let me see that!” said Henry,

reaching for my bible.

I pulled it back, and shot Valeria a triumphant smile. “Think about it,” I said. “Would a real god have to look at the bible to remind himself of what it said?”

“But it didn’t say that at all!” shouted Henry.

“And now I suppose you’re gonna deny that you ever touched the last 200 women what died in these here parts,” I said.

“Valeria, baby, you ain’t going to listen to this intruder, are you?” said Henry, reaching out to her. She jumped back out of reach. “Don’t touch me!” she cried.

“But Valeria, sweetie!” he said.

Probably he was going to say more, but she turned and ran away before he could get the words out.

“You’re going to feel the brunt of my godly wrath for that, Lucifer Jones!” he vowed.

“Come on, Brother Henry,” I said. “I got you by two or three inches, maybe 20 pounds, and at least ten years. Let’s bury the hatchet, admit we both stumbled onto a happy situation here, and split the spoils. You can have everything to the left of the path that led up here, I’ll take everything to the right, you can have Valeria on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (if you can convince her that she’ll survive being touched by you), I’ll take her to my side of the path on

Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and we'll toss a coin for Sundays, provided you got any coins hidden in your loincloth."

"I got a better idea," he said.

"Yeah," I replied. "What is it?"

"I think I'll kill you and keep everything just the way it was."

"You don't scare me one bit," I said. "You're taking this god business a little too seriously, Brother Henry. You're all alone in a strange land, wearing naught but a loincloth. Even Jesus had twelve disciples to do his bidding."

"Conspicuous consumption," he said. "I only need six disciples, and I got 'em all right here." He reached into his loincloth and pulled out a snub-nosed

revolver.

“You know, Brother Henry,” I said, “now that I come to mull on it, Valeria ain’t close to the most beautiful woman I ever seen. Her nose is too big, and her eyes are kind of crossed, and when she smiles I can see she’s missing a molar or two, and—”

“Shut up!” he screamed. “You’re talking about the woman I love!”

“Well, upon reconsideration, missing that molar makes her an exotic creature of mystery, and anyone who can look in two directions at once has got to be a definite value when you’re out hunting or maybe running for your lives from a bunch of outraged infidels, and—”

“Enough!” he said. He aimed the gun

at me. “You got any last words?”

“Like I was saying, from the neck down, she’s just about perfect.”

“Stop talking about her!” he snapped. “You got any other last words?”

“Well, now that I come to think of it, I do have a question,” I said.

“Just one.”

“You got any dangerous snakes in these here parts?”

“All right,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. “I done my best, but you’re just not taking this seriously. Prepare to meet the Lord.”

“Not to be argumentative,” I said as he cocked the pistol, “but weren’t you claiming that you was God?”

“He’s my brother,” said Henry. “He’s

minding the store while I'm busy here.”

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Part II

I kind of scrunched my eyes up so I wouldn't see the bullet coming. The strange thing was that I didn't hear it nor feel it neither.

"Shit!" screamed Henry. "Get this thing off'n me!"

I opened my eyes and saw that Henry, who'd been wearing naught but a loincloth a few seconds earlier, was now wearing a wraparound anaconda what was maybe 25 feet long.

"Don't just stare at me!" he yelled. "Help me!"

"I don't mean no impertinence, Brother Henry," I said, "but wasn't you just preparing to shoot me before this

here snake came to my rescue?"

"That was then!" he said kind of desperately. "This is now!"

"You're still holding the gun," I noted.

"He done paralyzed me with his fiendish venom! I can't move my fingers!"

"Anacondas ain't got no venom," I said. "You're thinking of rattlesnakes."

"I'm thinking of being crushed to death!" cried Henry. "Help me!"

"Or maybe cobras," I said. "I seem to remember that King Cobras are loaded with venom." I stopped and scratched my head. "You know, now as I come to think on it, I don't recollect that I ever saw a Queen Cobra. I wouldn't know how to tell 'em apart anyway; I don't

imagine they can be much curvier.”

“I’m dying and you’re lecturing me on herpetology!”

“I ain’t so much lecturing as discussing,” I pointed out.

Suddenly the gun fell from his hand.

“Okay, I’m unarmed!” he said. “Now will you get this blasted critter off me?”

“Well,” I said, “it’d be an act of Christian charity, there ain’t no denying that.”

“Then do it!”

“On the other hand, it might well be an act of Christian suicide,” I said. “I got to think this over.”

“Don’t take more than about 20 seconds,” he groaned, “because I’m gonna be all out of air in less than half a

minute!”

“What’s going on here?” said a feminine voice. For a moment I think maybe the snake’s wife was getting jealous, but then I saw it was Valeria, who’d come back when she heard Henry screaming.

“Get your damned pet off me!” wheezed Henry.

“I’ve warned you not to tease him!” she said harshly. Then she turned to me. “Was he abusing my snake?”

“Just the opposite, as near as I can tell,” I said.

Henry tried to agree with me, but though he moved his lips nothing came out.

“I certainly don’t want to take sides in

this little dispute, ma'am," I said, "especially since he was about to shoot me for saying how much I admired your rare and ethereal beauty, but he's turning purple."

"Oh, all right," she said. "Bubbles, sit!"

The snake released Henry and coiled itself on the ground.

"Down!" she said, and suddenly he lay down belly to the ground, which was an awful lot of belly to hit the ground all at once.

"That dagnabbed snake is always sneaking up on me!" muttered Henry, trying to catch his breath. I stepped over and picked up the gun before he got back enough strength to reach for it.

“That’s a mighty well-trained snake, Miss Valeria, ma’am,” I said.

“I’ve had him since he was a puppy,” she said.

“Well, you learn something new every day,” I said. “I didn’t know snakes was ever puppies.”

“They aren’t,” she answered. “But I don’t know what to call a baby snake.”

“How about Godless Spawn of Satan?” wheezed Henry, finally dragging himself to his feet.

“Shut up!” snapped Valeria.

“Priestesses can say ‘Shut up’ to a god?” I asked.

“When they look like him, they can say a lot worse,” she said. “Why was he trying to kill you?”

“He was afraid I was going to horn in on the god business, and also he didn’t want me declaring my undying love for you.”

“What is it with you gods?” she said wearily. “Can’t you keep your passions, or at least your hands, to yourselves?”

“Now, Valeria, honey...” began Henry, but Bubbles starting hissing and he decided that silence was the better part of valor.

“I don’t want to put no damper on your religious beliefs, Miss Valeria, ma’am,” I said, “but someone’s got to be the one to let you know that Henry here ain’t no god.”

“That’s a fine time to tell us,” she said angrily, “after we’ve been worshipping

him for fifteen years and giving him a steady supply of virgins.”

“You got that many young women around here?” I said. “I sure didn’t see ‘em on the way in.”

“When we ran out of girls we gave him cows,” she answered. “He was usually so drunk he didn’t know the difference.”

“I know they didn’t jabber all night,” said Henry sullenly.

“Before I let Bubbles keep him, how do you know he’s not a god?” she asked.

“Can he bring rain?” I said. “Can he make seven passes in a row at the craps table? Can he turn water into Napoleon brandy? How many winners can he pick if the track comes up muddy?”

“Those are all godly qualifications?” she asked.

“The bringing rain one’s just a trick, but the others are all legitimate,” I said. “Hell, even minor league gods like Zeus and Jupiter can do most of them things.”

“I see,” she said, glaring at Henry. “My people have been a victim of false doctrine.”

“Well, then it’s only just and fitting that I was guided to this here lost continent to bring you the Word,” I said, “me being the Lord’s business agent, so to speak.”

“What will we do with him?” she asked, indicating Henry, who was starting to shiver even though it was shorts and sandals weather.

“You’re not going to listen to this charlatan, are you?” demanded Henry. “I am a god, goddamn it! I’m Rakovekin, Lord of the Outer Realm, Messenger of the Almighty, Spokesman for the Elder Deities, Commander of the Legions of the Dead, Defender of...”

“You’re not going to list all 38 titles, are you?” she asked in bored tones.

“I got an idea, ma’am,” I said. “Let him rattle Bubbles two out of three falls. If he’s a god he shouldn’t have no trouble winning.”

She looked like she was considering it, and finally nodded her approval. “I see no reason why not.”

“Well I see one,” complained Henry. “How can I pin something what ain’t got

no shoulders? I can't give him no full nelson or stepover toe-hold, because he ain't got no arms nor legs neither."

She turned to me. "Lucifer, have you an answer?"

"Since Bubbles ain't got no arms, he can't put no Mongolian death grip on you," I said to Henry. "And he ain't likely to trip you or kick you when you're down. As I see it, that makes it a fair fight."

"If it's a fair fight, you can book my bet," said Henry. "I want to put fifty dollars on the snake."

"I'm happy to book it," I said, "long as you understand that I'm giving seven thousand to one on Bubbles. If you win, I'll owe you a little less than a penny."

“See?” he said to Valeria. “That proves it ain’t a fair fight!”

“Miss Valeria,” I said, “I put it to you: couldn’t a real god beat them odds?”

“I think you have a point, Lucifer,” she replied.

“And if he comes his hair just right maybe no one’ll notice it,” said Henry bitterly.

“Come on now, Henry,” I said, “there ain’t no cause to get riled just because you lost fair and square.”

“I ain’t lost nothing yet!” he yelled.

“That’s because you ain’t rassled Bubbles yet,” I said. “But you already lost the love and respect of the delicate frail flower what won my heart the

second I seen her.”

“She’s mine!” he roared.

“She’s already giv you everything she’s got except her crown and a couple of armbands,” I said. “Ain’t that enough?”

“To hell with the snake!” he said. “I’ll rassle you for her!”

I turned to Valeria. “You gonna let him insult your snake like that, ma’am?”

She frowned. “He did insult Bubbles, didn’t he?”

“It was a slip of the tongue!” said Henry, backing away. “I didn’t mean nothing by it. I think Bubbles is the nicest, pleasantest, friendliest, most beautiful representative of all the hellborn man-eating critters I ever met!”

“That’s it!” snapped Valeria.
“Bubbles?”

Bubbles kind of snapped to attention, as much as a 25-foot-long killer snake can anyway, and waited for her orders.

“He’s all yours.”

Henry didn’t waste no breath screaming or cursing. He just turned and lit out like Jesse Owens, and Bubbles took off after him like Man o’ War but without the legs and the jockey. Henry was still leading by a couple of lengths as they swung around a stand of trees and was lost to sight.

“I thank you for all your help, Lucifer,” said Valeria, “but now we are without a god.”

“I think we can fix that without no

undue effort, Miss Valeria, ma'am," I said.

"How?" she asked with a eager little tremor of excitement.

Well, let me tell you, when you're built like Valeria and you ain't wearing naught but a crown and some gold armbands, and a tremor sweeps over you, even a eager little one, it just naturally is going to have a positive effect on any nearby menfolk. It's positive effect on me was that I was positive I wanted to spend the rest of my life within arm's reach of that gorgeous body, except when answering calls of nature or playing cards with the boys once I taught 'em the intricacies of poker and figured out what a bunch of naked

savages had to bet.

“Easy,” I answered. “I ran old Henry out of here, with a little help from your snake, so I figger that makes me an even greater god than he was.”

“But he wasn’t a god at all,” she said. “You proved it.”

“Then no matter what kind of god I am, I’m a greater one than he was,” I said with impeccable logic.

“Now, I figger if you and me get hitched, that’ll elevate you to the status of apprentice goddess, so the people’ll be twice as happy with twice as many gods to worship, and it’ll give ‘em a purpose in life, which’ll be to gather food and drink and firewood for us while we’re getting to know each other

better.”

“It’s tempting,” she said with a little flutter of emotion, and let me tell you her flutters put her tremors in the shade. “But we have been fooled once already. We must be sure you are truly a god before I agree to become your consort.”

I was about to tell her that I didn’t want her to become my consort and would settle for her becoming my ladyfriend, but she looked like she had her mind made up, so I asked her what kind of godly test she had in mind for me, adding that I didn’t do no heavy lifting because I’d pulled a muscle or two tossing the moon into orbit, and also that I didn’t speak Sumarian, Aramaic, French, or no other nonsense languages.

“We must devise a proper test for your divinity,” said Valeria. She lowered her head in thought for a moment, then looked up. “I suppose if you can swim across a piranha-filled river and live through it, that would prove you were an immortal.”

“I’m allergic to water,” I said. “How about a spelling bee?”

“Or perhaps if each man were to hurl his spear at you, point-blank, and they all bounced off...”

“Ping-pong,” I suggested. “I’ll take on all comers at ping-pong.”

“Or we could cover you with marabunta.”

“What’s marabunta, ma’am?” I asked. “Something like peanut butter?”

“Army ants.”

I never knew that a beautiful naked High Priestess could be so bloodthirsty and single-minded all at the same time.

“I wish I could accommodate you, Miss Valeria, ma’am,” I said, “but you got to understand that no two gods are alike. We’re as different as baseball players and pole vaulters and shoe salesmen.”

“And what makes you a god?” she asked.

“Well,” I said after some thought, “I play a mighty mean game of tiddly winks.”

“Tiddly winks?” she repeated. “I have never heard of it.”

“Darn,” I said. “I guess that means I

can't prove my godliness to you. I suppose you'll just have to take my word for it and move in with me. If you want to bring a couple of them lesser priestesses to act as cooks and housemaids, that'll be okay too."

"I really feel we must end all controversy before it begins, Lucifer," she said.

"You're looking at this all wrong," I explained. "Let 'em controverse for a few years and get it out of their systems. In the long run it'll do 'em a world of good."

"It will?"

"Sure," I said. "Now instead of falling asleep right after a few hours of connubial bliss, we'll make it a law that

they have to spend an hour a night discussing whether or not I'm a god. That's probably a lot more than most husbands and wives ever spend talking to each other after they tie the knot."

She stared at me kind of funny-like. "I can believe all gods are different. You sound nothing like Henry."

"Well," I said condescendingly, "you know them New Jersey gods."

"I shall have to think about this," she said.

"Fine," I said. "We can talk about it right after you and me consummate our godly relationship. In fact, now that I think about it, I just remembered that I ain't got no apartment here, so I reckon I'll move into yours."

She shook her head. “No, I think it best that you keep your distance until this matter is resolved.”

“But Miss Valeria, ma’am, this is one of the best ways I know to prove my godliness.”

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

I leaned over and whispered what I was talking about into her ear, then stood back with a triumphant smile. “Now be honest,” I said as her face turned a bright red, “could any mortal man do that?”

I saw the slap coming, but I couldn’t duck it.

“In answer to your question,” she said with as much dignity as a naked High Priestess could muster on the spur of the

moment, “no mortal man would ever be allowed to do that or even suggest it.”

“So that solves it and now I don’t have to prove I ain’t a mortal man?” I asked, rubbing my jaw where she’d loosened a tooth or two.

“Now you have to prove that you’re not a demon from the pits of hell,” she answered. She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled, and suddenly the temple was filled with all them men what had been busy worshipping Henry when I arrived, and I found myself facing the business ends of a bunch of spears.

“You’re going about this all wrong, Miss Valeria,” I said. “If I’m a demon I’m gonna kill all your spear-toting

friends and relations here, and if I'm not they're going to kill me and you're going to feel just awful about having made such a mistake."

She stared at me. "If I'm wrong I don't believe I'll lose a minute of sleep over it."

"Being a compassionate god or demon, I just can't countenance such bloodshed," I said. "I'll tell you what: I'll rattle one of 'em. If I win, everyone admits I'm a god, or at least a demon what's a hell of a good rattler, you move in with me, and they all agree to worship me."

"And if you lose?"

"Then I'll take your solid gold armbands as a romantic remembrance

and be on my lonely and heartbroken way.”

Whilst we'd been talking, the whole population of Moo had shown up and kind of gathered around us in a big circle, and a guy who must have been seven feet tall and almost as wide stepped forward. “Let me be the one to fight him, High Priestess!” he shouted.

Pretty soon half a dozen other guys, who all looked like the first one's bigger, stronger, nastier older brothers were begging for the chance to face me in hand-to-hand combat.

“You are all splendid example of our race,” said Valeria. “I find it difficult to make a choice.” She turned to me. “Lucifer, I will allow you to choose

your opponent.”

“You’re sure?” I said. “I mean, once I choose, you promise you won’t go back on your word?”

“The word of the High Priestess is absolute law,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “I choose you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me,” I said. “You told me I could choose my opponent in this here rasslin’ match. I choose you.”

“But I meant...”

“And you told me in front of everyone that the word of the High Priestess was in purple.”

“Inviolate,” she corrected me. Then she turned to the assembled warriors and priestesses and lesser beings. “I gave my

word.” She took her crown off and handed it another gorgeous naked lady who I guessed was her Vice High Priestess.

The crowd formed kind of a circle around us. I’d have took off my shirt, but I’d been wearing it so long it was kind of stuck to me, so I just spit on my hands, rubbed ‘em together, and got ready for the referee to ring the bell.

It was when Valeria punched me in the stomach that I realized that we didn’t have no referee nor no bell, and when she sunk her teeth into my ear I figured out that we didn’t have no rules neither. I pulled back, leaving some ear in her mouth, and we started circling around each other. Then she reached out to grab

me, and I reached out to grab her, and a second later she slapped my face again.

“Don’t do that!” she snapped.

I didn’t know whether to apologize or tell her to protect herself in the clinches, so I settled for circling around her again and grabbing a little lower this time, which just got me another slap in the face.

“Damn it, Lucifer, are you wrestling me or molesting me?”

Before I could answer she launched herself through the air at me, and I fell over backward with her on top of me. After that things happened real fast for the next few seconds, and then she slapped me yet again.

“No kissing!” she yelled.

I grabbed ahold of her left wrist with my right hand and her right wrist with my left hand. She wrapped her legs around my waist and started squeezing the air out of me, and while she was doing that she wrapped her other legs around my ankles so's I couldn't move, which surprised me because up until that very moment I'd think she only had two legs.

Then she wrapped some more legs around my thighs, and then I heard her legs starting to hiss, and I realized that Bubbles had decided his mistress was in trouble and had come on over to protect her.

“Foul!” I yelled.

“What are you talking about?” she

grated. "I haven't done anything to you yet."

"You get that snake off'n me or I'm gonna bring my godly wrath down on both your heads!" I said. She twisted around to see what I was talking about.

"Bubbles!" she cried. "Go back to your dog house!"

Bubbles looked plaintively at her.

"Now!"

Bubbles gave my legs one final squeeze for good measure and crawled off. Valeria watched him slither off, and since her attention was took elsewhere, I gave her a delicate little pinch in a delicate little place to see if I could encourage her to get off me, and all I can tell you is that if basketball players

could jump like that they'd have to give serious consideration to raising the hoop to maybe twelve or fifteen feet.

As for me, I figured if I got up she'd just knock me down again, and if I actually put any hold on her, she'd either slap my face (depending on where the hold was) or Bubbles would come hissing and sliding to her rescue again, so I reasoned that the best thing was to stay right on the ground where I was.

"Get up, Lucifer!" she snarled. "I'm going to tear you to pieces!"

"I can't," I said. "Your snake done busted up my legs."

"I didn't hear anything break," she said.

"Muscles don't make as loud a

snapping sound as bones do,” I said. “But if you wanted this to be a fair fight in front of your people, we’re gonna have to postpone it until I got my legs back under me.”

“All right,” she said reluctantly. “But if you’re lying...”

“Gods ain’t capable of lying,” I said, crossing my heart.

“I’d have sworn there were a lot of things gods weren’t capable of before I got in the ring with you,” she said bitterly.

“I suppose that means you don’t want to kiss and make up?”

She just glared at me and then ordered a couple of the bigger guys who had wanted to rattle me to carry me over to

the altar, where I'd have room to lie down and stretch my feet out. One of them pulled his knife out and turned to her.

"As long as he's here anyway, Priestess," he said, "it seems a shame to waste the opportunity."

"No, I must keep my word," said Valeria. "We will continue our battle when his legs have healed."

"You know," I said, "as long as we're postponing it, we could pass the word to neighboring continents and sell tickets."

"What's a ticket?" asked Valeria.

"What's a neighboring continent?" asked the guy with the knife. Well, I could see that they were just a bunch of ignorant peasants, half of 'em beautiful

and half of ‘em ugly, and all of them badly in need of a god what could teach ‘em the ways of civilized societies. But before I could tell them why they were in serious need of me, Valeria ordered them all out, except for two nubile lesser priestesses what wasn’t wearing no more clothes than she herself was.

“On the off chance that you really are a god, you will stay here in the temple until you can walk again,”

said Valeria. “I am leaving these two handmaidens to bring you food and tend to your wounds.”

“You ain’t staying your own self?” I asked.

I thunk she was gonna slap me again, but instead she just glared at me for a

moment, then turned to the two girls.

“You know your duties,” she said. “But be very careful whenever you get within arm’s reach of him.”

“But isn’t he a god, High Priestess?” asked one of them.

“Possibly,” said Valeria. “But if so, then he is a dirty old god. You have been warned.”

Then she was gone.

I sat up and slung my feet over the side of the altar. “Well, ladies,” I said, “what’s for dinner?”

“Henry, if they catch him before sundown,” said the one on the left.

“Are you really a god?” asked the other one.

“Cross my heart and swear to myself I

am,” I answered.

“What’s heaven like?”

“Funny you should ask,” I said. “I think we might just experience a little bit of it before we eat.”

“You can actually transport us to heaven?” she asked, all kind of wide-eyed and trusting.

“Sure can.”

“How?”

“Come on over here and I’ll show you,” I said.

About three seconds later she slapped my face.

“Don’t they teach you anything in priestess school besides sunbathing and face-slapping?” I asked, rubbing my cheek.

“Don’t they teach you gods anything besides pinching and grabbing?” she shot back.

“I was just practicing my rasslin’ holds,” I said.

“I know what you were practicing,” she said.

“Actually, it looked like fun,” said the other one. “And, well, if he really is a god, it’d be a shame to miss an opportunity to learn what lies ahead of us in heaven.”

“You know,” said the first one, “I never looked at it that way.”

“Sure,” said the other one. “And if he’s as clumsy as Henry, then we’ll know he’s a mortal and we’ll feed him to Bubbles.”

“No,” said the first. “The High Priestess says Bubbles is gaining too much weight. We’ll just chop him up into little pieces and feed him to the piranhas.”

“I don’t know,” said the other one. “Then they’ll want to be fed every day, and it won’t be safe to go swimming.” She paused for a moment, considering their options. “We could tie him up and put a bunch of hungry scorpions on his belly.”

The first one made a face. “I don’t like scorpions.”

“Rats, then,” suggested the other. Then she shook her head. “No, that won’t work. Bubbles has eaten most of the rats. I suppose we could make him swallow a

bunch of marabunta and let them eat their way out.”

“Remember that Chinaman who wandered in here, delirious from fever, and kept raving about the Death of a Thousand Cuts?” said the first.

Well, the two of ‘em kept discussing the penalties for my potential failure in their delicate ladylike way for the next ten minutes, and got so wrapped up in it that they didn’t even notice that I’d climbed down off the altar and had made my way to a side door.

“All right,” announced one of ‘em at last. “We’re ready to be transported to heaven on a sea of sexual bliss.”

“Or else,” said the other ominously.

They may have said some more things,

but by then I was running back down the hill I'd climbed when I first found the lost continent of Moo, and I didn't slow down nor miss a step until I'd put quite a distance betwixt me and it.

I was mentally patting myself on the back for making good my escape when I felt a thumping somewhere between my shoulder blades. This struck me as kind of unusual. I knew I had a right powerful brain, but I didn't know it was strong enough to translate mental pats into real ones, so I turned around and who should I find myself facing but Henry, who was covered by dirt and a bunch of cuts where he'd brushed by thorny bushes on his way out of Moo.

"I hate you!" he said. "You ruined the

god business for both of us!”

“Maybe not,” I said. “There’s a couple of heavenly handmaidens in the temple that are just waiting to be transported on a wave of bliss, or maybe it was a sea of passion. Anyway, it was something wet, I’m pretty sure of that. Just go back up there after dark and they’ll think it’s me.”

“What the hell good will that do?” demanded Henry. “I see they ran you off too.”

“No, I run off on my own,” I said. “Believe me, there’s two beautiful naked priestess just dying for a little male companionship.”

“Really?” he said, his face brightening under the dirt and the beard.

“I give you my godly word on it,” I said. “Just make sure it’s dark when you get there, and it probably wouldn’t hurt none to lose your beard first, or at least convince ‘em it’s fast-growing since I didn’t have none when I took my leave of them a few hours ago.”

He stuck out his hand. As first I thunk he was looking for money, but then I realized it wasn’t palm up so I took it and we shook in friendship.

“I guess you ain’t all that bad a guy, as lying, backstabbing, claim-jumping bastards go,” said Henry.

“And you’re certainly better than the average greedy, uncouth, foul-smelling fiend from New Jersey,” I said.

So we parted friends after all, and I

figured it was time to continue my quest for the perfect spot to build my tabernacle. I wandered across that huge cow pasture for almost a week, and finally I came to a little outpost made all of logs except for the parts that weren't, and I walked in and made a beeline for the bar.

“What'll it be, stranger?” said the bartender.

“Gimme a shot of your best whiskey and a chaser,” I told him.

“What kind of chaser?”

“Another whiskey,” I said.

“You're new around here, ain't you?” he said. “Where do you hail from?”

“I just arrived from the lost continent of Moo.”

He stared at me for a moment. “Funny,” he said. “You don’t look Mooish.”

“Tell me something, Brother,” I said. “Where’s the nearest civilized city what’s got an abundance of sinners, especially of the female persuasion, that’s in serious need of saving?”

“Well, you for a lot of choices,” he answered. “It’s getting close to carnival time in Rio off to the east, they say they just discovered emeralds up north in Equador, I hear tell they found some lost Inca city filled with gold and other trinkets off to the west in Peru, and the gauchos are having their annual round-up just south of here and there figures to be a lot of money at the other end of it,

ready to buy a few million tons of beef, and where there's money there's almost always sinners."

"True, true," I agreed. "Thanks for your help, Brother." I downed my drinks, had a few more, got my face slapped yet again when I thunk one of the ladies at the bar was looking lonely and lovelorn, and finally I wandered outside to watch the sunset.

I'd been guv a lot information about where to go next. Too much, you might say. So I did the only reasonable thing. I waited until the breeze died down, turned my left hand palm up, spat in it, then slapped my right hand down right hard, and decided that whichever the way the spit flew was the direction in

which a passel of sinners would soon find themselves saved. As my next narrative will show, it wasn't near as easy as it figgered to be.