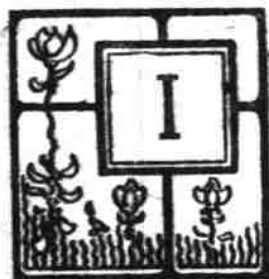


THE LURE OF FAR HORIZONS

By Arthur James Hayes

Illustrated by Florence McAnelly



INDIVIDUAL tastes determine harbingers of spring. Some people get their first real thrill out of the appearance of the earliest robin. Others go in for verse about the vernal showers or wait till the kids pre-empt the corner lots for baseball.

Boats are mine. Down on the dusty, sun-flooded, long deserted docks the crews assemble. They paint the superstructure, pump out the bilge, oil the wheezing machinery into the suppleness of life. Smoke plumes rise again from the long dormant funnels, and the smell of cheap soap lifts itself out of the lower decks. Up on the promenade decks the head steward routs out his brass-polishing minions, that the stateroom door-knobs may again gleam resplendent for the first newly-weds.

The lazy afternoon sunlight of April threw the shadows of the wait-aided Sericana athwart the freight dock, when I chaffed to rub elbows with the Man from the Far Horizon. Every one else was intent upon labor. He and I were the only two in the isolation of idleness. He stared at me. I reciprocated.

"Sail?" he asked, sidling over.

"No," I responded regretfully. "Do you?"

He nodded. My glance dropped to his hands. They were long and white and delicate. He flushed, thrusting them hurriedly into the pockets of his coat.

"Ashore now," he admitted. "That's why they've gone soft as putty. I'll be ashore a while, too, I guess. But I can't get it out of my blood."

"Water?"

"Salt water. It's hell to be ashore inland, lookin' on while fresh water crews swab out a duck-bellied old boiler like this. But it's a boat. Not a ship, you wouldn't say exactly, but a boat. And even this frog pond's got a horizon!"

"A horizon?"

He took my arm and led me down the slip a ways. "See," he said. On either side of the strip of yellow water freight warehouses confined the view.

Dead ahead, Lake Michigan stretched into dim distance. "Not close by," he cautioned impatiently. "Way out—out where the scene gets vague and blue and misty. That's it! The far horizon. I like to come down and look at it and think what's beyond it all. It sort o' stirs a fellow, in little strange, quick thrills."

I looked into his eager gray eyes and hated to dissipate the dream. But in the interests of accuracy it had to be. "I know what's beyond," I explained regretfully. "The distant dimness of the skyline hovers over nothing more awe-inspiring than a Michigan farmer planting potatoes. I, for my part, can't get strange, quick thrills out of potatoes—except when I get the bill for the French fried in a Clark street beanery."

He tried again.

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"It's just the perspective I'm after," he said. "No one can get excited over Lake Michigan as such. Not with the Chicago river breaking into the scheme of things two blocks away. But I imagine that it's salt water, you know. When you look across salt water the whole world's before you. Away beyond the far horizon are the dreamy tropic ports, with the soft-eyed mestizas, and the band playin' evenings in the plaza, and the music coming out, mellowlike in the tropic dusk, to where you stand leanin' over the taffrail. 'La Paloma' or 'La Golandrina,' an' the like."

His soft voice, vibrant with something that the average man isn't gifted to understand, drawled on.

"You've shipped out, sometime or other, haven't you?" he asked.

I shook my head mutely.

A remarkable story of dreamy tropic ports, with a terrific climax. One of the best the magazine has ever printed. You'll like it!

"Well," he said tolerantly, "of course you won't understand. But out there in the dimness I can see things that aren't there, of course, but are hidden somewhere in a fellow's soul. I can see the shadowy blue eyes of Senorita Therese Mendez out there where everything is vague and uncertain. I can see her white dress, sharplike, against the green hills of La Conista. I can see the cream-colored houses on the drive, and the hills piling up on each other, until old Monte del Inferno blends with the clear blue tropic skies."

"You said something about blue eyes," I said in quick suspicion. "I always thought that—"

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HER mother's name was Shannon," he interrupted tersely. "A blue-eyed colleen from Killarney, they say, when Ramon Mendez took a fancy to her. She was still pink cheeked and youthful looking the morning when Estralos came in to shoot her man for his failure to betray a trust. I saw her there, in front of the firing squad, with the spirit of the Old Sod aflame in her eyes, inciting mutiny under the eyes of the gold-braided officers. But Therese didn't have the same nature."

"She was round and dark haired and cream colored, with the prettiest dusky blue eyes that ever made a sailor stay ashore, hidden under parana rolls on the wharf, after the give-way blast had ripped out of the whistle of a rusty tramp. I'll never forget the first time I saw her. Over in the west end of the bay, just off the little white customs office— You've been in La Conista, haven't you?"

"Well, I thought probably you'd gotten down that way. Anyway, I was going to say that they don't berth 'em over there any more. It's a good stiff row from the Buenaventura quarantine now, and if things had been the same then I'd never have acted the part of the avenger of Estralos' oath. But I was leaning over the rail with MacMurry—chief engineer, and Scotch as the Clyde. He'd a wife and kids in Leith and said it was positively 'irreelegious' for a man to go ashore, married thataway, an' flirt with the cream tinted girls who'd mislaid their duennas en route to the public square."

"We were the only two aboard, having taken on teak and asphalt casks for Havre, and the crew an' old man havin' their respective reasons for being ashore. The crew's reason was the cream tinted girls aforementioned and the water front grogshops. The captain's reason, after the time honored practice, was the crew. MacMurry was talking about the weather, and the bairns, and then he stopped suddenly."

"Up from the stern came the tinkling music of a guitar. A small boat shot into view. It was propelled by an elderly man and contained two other persons. In the stern, fat and squat and wrinkled, was an old woman with a black mantilla over her graying hair. She didn't interest me. But the guitar player in the bow did. She was very young and bright eyed. Over her bare shoulders was a creamy mantle, not nearly as smooth and soft as her own skin. Her hair was uncovered, and in the curling black mass were two or three big roses. They do it in this country, and it looks foolish."

The Man from the Far Horizon ceased speaking. His gray eyes had taken on the faraway look, and I knew that his

thoughts had sped unheeding over the head of the Muskegon potato planter right out to the broad, surging billows of the Atlantic.

"They do it down there," he resumed, "and in the sunset the effect is not to be mistaken for any other beauty-inducing device on earth. Spanish women are like flowers, quick-blooming and radiant and quick fading into the sere and ugly. But Therese Mendez was blooming and radiant. Her cheeks matched the vivid, dewy freshness of the rose. Her eyes were a dusky blue and her curly hair was a blue-black. Her dress—it was the Irish touch—was white."

"And as she played she glanced up at us through the dusk, with eyes that laughed and lips that curved invitingly. In the dim light her smooth skin was like mother-of-pearl, and her rounded bosom, half revealed in the cut of her dress, rose and fell with the stumorous respiration of somnolent passion. In a moment the deserted after-deck seemed frightfully sordid and unutterably lonesome. MacMurry, because of the wife and kids in Leith, glanced away and resumed in gruff monologue."

"But I was gone. I had run down stairs and was groping in my dunnage bag for a clean collar, and hoping that I could borrow Lanley's suit before he returned. I found the collar, and shaved. Then, freshly appareled in the second officer's best uniform, I jumped into the dory we trailed aft and made for shore."

"I saw some of the boys whooping it up in Santos Espinal's hell hole on the quay, but I didn't stop. I was looking for a girl with the sinuous curves of tropic maturity, whose smooth shoulders shone like mother-of-pearl and whose blue eyes lured a fellow's soul almost out of his body. I wanted to touch her smooth little hand and watch her fingers flit over the vibrating strings of the little guitar. I wanted to listen to her voice and tell her that I was going to stay in La Conista forever and ever, listening to her voice, looking into her eyes, worshipping at the shrine of the one perfect woman."

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IT SOUNDS foolish now, no doubt. But I was young, and the quick equatorial night had fallen, and the band played 'La Paloma' in the Plaza, and over the green hills, studded with the red and yellow and pink houses, the twinkling lights were beginning to dance like will-o'-the-wisps in a Florida swamp. And somewhere in that drowsy yet sensuously throbbing town was the one girl!

"Ahead of me, under a sputtering arc light, I glimpsed them. The old family retainer who had rowed, walked ahead. Behind came the old duenna, talking to the girl in a raspy, querulous voice. I didn't know how I was going to arrange things. I couldn't accost the girl there. I thought of walking along beside her in the darkness and trying to make her understand, on the assumption that the old duenna was too deaf and near-sighted to be aware of my design."

"But the arc light diffused too much illumination, and the old fellow in front glanced back at intervals. It was a quiet spot. Along either side, in the denser shadows, I thought I saw men stirring, creeping along, watching furtively in the shroud of darkness. But I wasn't sure. I slipped my hand into the coat pocket. Lanley's stubby blue automatic was there. It pleased me to think that I was prepared for emergency. A fellow's fists

are not much good south of Texas in a brawl in the dark. The Latinos have an independent set of ethics in the matter."

"I was glad that I had not been mistaken. On my left side I caught a single glimpse of a stubby soldier in the ragged regimental uniform of the presidente's guard. He had his bayonet fixed. I was behind him, and his signal to some one on the other side set things going. Two or three others broke cover and bore down on the old family servant. I think there were half a dozen bayonets in him at once."

The girl screamed, and high and shrill above the shouts and curses I heard the old woman shriek 'Madre de Dios!' I drew Lanley's gun on a pryer, wondering if it was loaded. I pointed it at the little group in front. That little 'gat' certainly did itself proud. There was a spark-scattering blur at the muzzle, and you could hear it scream across town as it spilled its ten shots into the bunch."

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LITTLE ragged, coffee-colored soldiers were falling and sprawling all over the place, shrieking and twitching, with their bloody bayonets glittering patchily in the light from the street lamp. I ran ahead and booted the last two or three for a goal. Then the girl was beside me, sobbing over the hacked-up body of the old servant. The duenna had fled. I was glad even then that we were alone. But the girl thought it wouldn't last.

"This way, queeck!" she gasped in plausible English. "Those were Estralos' men."

"She grabbed my arm, and you may imagine that I didn't offer much resistance. I didn't know where we were going, but after a run of a minute or two we passed into a high walled garden, crammed with sickeningly sweet-smelling flowers. We passed on into a house, where the fright crazed old woman was still screaming and pattering aves in falsetto accents."

"Manuel," said the girl breathlessly, "is dead! It was Estralos, of course."

"A tall old fellow with Castilian features and a Van Dyke beard nodded. I thought the color had receded from his face. Then the girl's mother, brown haired and fresh cheeked and blue eyed, clasped her sobbing daughter in her arms, patting her blue-black hair."

"Never mind, darling," she said in good English. "Thank God, you're safe!"

"She looked over her daughter's head, miles into my soul. Her face was getting pale as the whole aspect of the situation presented itself. But her lips were firm, and in her face was the spirit that has made the Irish good losers under a hundred standards on a thousand hard fought fields."

"And you?" she asked.

"I—I happened along," I stammered. "When the soldiers—"

"He saved Marie and myself," said the girl, flashing me a look of quick gratitude. "He killed—oh—numbers of the hateful assassins. And so—I heard footsteps—I knew they would investigate the shots—I brought him here."

"Ramon Mendez gripped my hand, and in his quaint, courtly fashion told me how honored he was by my presence. I got to know the old man pretty well in the next two or three days. He told me some of the inner inwardness of national politics. Estralos, Vincente Estralos, he denominated the cause of the whole thing. They had been as father and son for years. And then they embarked in politics. I am not sure that the young soldier's lot of fortune was entirely to blame. Politics is politics the world over. But South American politics are also arson, conspiracy, mayhem, malice aforethought and intent to kill."

"They had united to save the country from the ravages of the Urua clique. Then they had divided to divide the spoils of the most successful of revolutions. Estralos had found it convenient