

to abdicate the chair of temporary power in favor of Damiani, Mendez's nominee. Now the hunted and despised Estralos was returning, with armed forces, to wrest the scepter of dominance from Mendez and his tool. There was disaffection within the city. Half the presidente's garrison was openly loyal to Vincente Estralos. They were threatening the new instituted order of things. Dynasties rise and fall in a week.

"Estralos, even then, was expected to attack. I watched the fight next morning from the junglelike gardens of the Mendez mansion. It had been decided that gringo complicity in the defeat of the attempted abduction would make my appearance a peril to myself and the Mendez family. I watched the old Sayretonic sail without me. And later in the day the rattle of infantry fire could be heard in the hills west of town.

"Smoke plumes drifted up lazily from the jungle and rose in wraithlike clouds over the edge of town. The troops, in their gaudy blue and yellow uniforms, trotted out jauntily enough and went into action smiling. But Estralos was the newest revolutionary chief, and his forces gained recruits in the midst of battle. The loyal few ran back through the streets, the wounded tracking blood over the cobblestones and the uninjured staring with wide, frightened eyes at the closed avenue of retreat.

"Whooping and cheering, ragged but triumphant, the Estralos forces swept into town. The last to arrive was Estralos himself, in state. He rode a mangy buckskin pony, and over his head, on four poles, was borne an awning of yellow canvas. I caught a good glimpse of him by lying prone upon the roof of the Mendez home and peering through an opening in the parapet. I saw his lean lips writhing back in a sneering smile as he wafted a kiss, ironically, toward Ramon Mendez, standing proudly erect in front of his home.

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ESTRALOS was young and tall and slender; in his black eyes was the look of a man who regards death without emotion and sensual triumph with wrapt eagerness. A voluptuary, of course, like all who fight for petty power in saddle-colored republics, he differed from the rank and file only in that he feared nothing under the sun. He lost no time in proclaiming himself president and proscribing his political opponents.

"The executions began the next morning. The ragged, barefooted little men of the loyal garrison were led out and shot in droves. They died bravely enough, but looked strangely immature and childishly dazed as they faced the firing squad. After the ragged volley they crumpled up in their ill-fitting uniforms and lay there, sacrificial pawns in the sanguinary game of inside politics.

"The crowds assembled and cheered as each batch went forth to death. Cheering and tears are equally facile modes of expression in La Conista. The firing squads swaggered through town afterward, ogling the girls and being lured on by the same women upon whom other men had spent their meager garrison pay, and who now lay sprawled out below the blood-spattered adobe walls. It was the fortune of war—war made grotesque by the participation of a people who never grew up mentally, who were naively proud of garish colors and military titles and poorly fitting blue and yellow uniforms.

"The other men—the notables, enmeshed in the web of adverse circumstance—were to be the piece de resistance for the holiday crowds. Carlos Damiani was already imprisoned. Soon the swaggering detail, commanded by a loose-lipped half-breed, came for Mendez. The old man saluted primly, bowed, and begged the officer to permit him time to get his hat and cane. The swarthy Indian assented, his beady black eyes sweeping over Therese's figure with a greedy insolence that made my blood boil.

"I saw the little tragic enactment



*The invocation of the Saints invested the scene with a sudden solemnity.*

from behind the farther portieres. There was no use in revealing myself. After Ramon Mendez was gone the brave mother and the helpless girl would need a man about the place. So I alone witnessed their grief, witnessed with hands that clenched in futile fury. How I longed for the lean white lines of the cruiser Narragansett, then in tropic ports somewhere down the coast. One detachment of marines could have sent the revolutionary legions scattering like chaff. But the bay remained serene and empty.

"The arc lights—archaic remnants of German graft in a lighting concession—sputtered into activity like blue fireflies, and the band played again in the plaza, minus the dragging notes of the best trombone player. He lay stark in the darkness against the adobe wall, and 'La Paloma' limped along without him.

"The patrol went by that night and a coarse voice tauntingly invited the beautiful Senorita Therese out to see the festivities on the 3rd, two days hence. Downstairs I heard the girl sobbing, and a blind rage flamed in my heart. I recognized that voice. It was the tongue of the loose-lipped half-breed captain who had come to make the arrest. I went out and crept through the tangle of sweet-smelling tropical plants to the thick garden wall. On top of it I sprawled out

flat and waited. After hours of silence, when staring across the bay at the mountains beyond, with their myriads of low-hanging stars, almost hypnotized me, I heard the patter of the barefooted soldiery again.

"The patrol filed by, laughing, talking, singing snatches of obscene songs, with no semblance of military order or precision. The loose-lipped one came last. He stopped and felt the gate cautiously. It didn't yield, and he stood still in the white moonlight, listening. Then by the scratching sound I knew he was clambering up the wall. The patrol pattered away without him, and the sound of their shuffling footsteps died into silence.

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LIMNED against the sky, as his head appeared, his hawk nose and flabby lips made him look for all the world like a great condor. His hands gripped the spiked tops of the wall, and before he sensed my presence I had thrust my knife home. His head sagged and he gasped hollowly, but before he could fall I had grasped his coat, aglitter with braid and cords. I felt within it for the crackling parchment of his military commission, filched from a plundered church, and inscribed on the obverse side in sickly blue ink.

"This I crumpled into a ball and

thrust into his loose, leering mouth. A savage pleasantry, you'll say! Well, when a man has been frightened, childish little brown men being shot for sport and good girls appraised like horses with the lustful eyes of the world's flotsam, he acquires a sinister sense of humor. It pleased me, I must confess, mightily. Then I hurled him from me with all my strength, and he crashed down in the street.

"There was a brief hue and cry, of course. But the Mendez household was not suspected. I think a brother officer was executed for the crime. It added to my sense of the ludicrous. But for long hours afterward I watched the sputtering lights in the square and the drooping pair of them that diffused their dancing rays over the day's unburied victims. Then I glanced over toward the little bunting-decked stand, a little to one side, where Estralos, revolutionary dictator, watched the executions. Not all of them, of course, but the ones wherein notable opponents and famous political figures were the exhibits.

"Some impulse prompted me to slip over the wall and cross the deserted square. The sentries lay sprawled around, in various stages of intoxication. I stood in the little stand, with the bunting flapping in the night breeze. In front