

EL FENIX

by William J. Bonville

In a shabby room on the outskirts of the tiny seaside town of Pereza, Richard Ryle slipped out of bed and began dressing himself by the faint light of dawn. He glanced back to where the girl still slept, her brown body a deeper shadow against the sheets, then tiptoed on bare feet across the hard dirt floor to the window at the rear. Pushing aside the flimsy curtain, he hoped to see dark, boiling clouds promising torrents of rain. Instead, Ryle glumly eyed a brightening, cloudless sky against which the mountains stood in sharp silhouette, rising aloofly above the darkness that obscured the jungle plain and tidal swamps.

The rainy season was weeks away. There was no escape from the coming day.

Buttoning his shirt, Ryle took one last look at the dawn and returned to lie on the bed with his back propped against his pillow. He wanted to think but his brain was numbed by the absence of alternatives. Nearly a year's work was done, sounding the earth beneath the jungle. The charts were analyzed. The first drill rig had proven the charts. For him it was time to move on. The home office wanted him working in the Middle East. Yesterday.

The girl turned to nestle against him in her sleep. She awoke at the feel of his clothes, then snuggled closer, eyes still shut against the grayness of morning before the sun. The night had been full. And good.

"So soon, Ricardo?"

"In a while," he said, the trouble lines on his face softening as he dropped a hand to her shoulder. His fingers played a gentle caress across the smoothness of her skin. In reply, she raised her lips to meet his kiss and then sat up to survey the room, letting the sheet fall to her middle. She did not see the dinginess, and not only because of the dim light of the dawn. Everything was clean and tidy, and it was hers.

The plank walls were neatly whitewashed and adorned with a small picture of the Christ Child and Madonna over the old iron bed. Two woodland scenes from an American calendar were tacked on the facing wall. A rickety chest of drawers and a mirror stood against one wall. Some packing cases and an old wood stove served as pantry and kitchen in one corner, along with a small wood table and a pair of chairs.

"The sun isn't even here," she said. "Must you go so soon?"

Ryle frowned and decided to tell her.

"I'm flying back to the states this morning, Coco."

Her eyes darted to his and he looked away, his courage fading.

“You should have told me,” she said. “You always tell me when you go away.”

Ryle lit a cigarette, an excuse to say nothing.

Seeing that he was not going to answer, Coco got out of bed and wrapped her body in a silk negligee. Going to the window, she pushed the curtain aside and watched the breaking day as she brushed out her hair. The stroke of the brush told of her thoughts. He should have told her.

“I didn’t want to upset you,” he said.

“Why should I be upset?”

How do you say goodbye to someone you love? If a kiss could only speak of everything that needed to be said, how easy it would be. Now it was too late for anything but words he was unable to speak.

Coco set aside the brush and went to open the front door to the morning. Now the sky was filling with slivers of gold. A freshening breeze whispered in off the ocean, stirring tiny eddies in the soft dust of the street. Coco held the negligee close and breathed deeply of the sea-scented air. It had the sweetness of life. The day felt good and the night had been full of love. Who cares about Ricardo telling her or not of his travels? The Americans were a strange people anyhow. Who could understand them?

Brightly now, she turned to the man who sat on the edge of the bed after tying his shoes. She ran to sit on his lap and tumbled him backward onto the bed, laughing.

“It’s so wonderful to love, Ricardo. So wonderful to love and to live in the morning, fresh and clean, like the wind.”

Ryle gently held her and kissed her cheek as she lay with him.

“The wind must be sorry to leave the sea,” Coco mused wistfully. “In just a little ways, it takes on the stink of the swamps.”

Ryle smiled thinly and lifted the girl to her feet to stand before him. He stroked her hair back from her face and kissed her again, this time on the lips, for a long time. Then he held her, smiling over her shoulder at the old bed with its familiar squeaks.

He had decided finally. He would not tell her. He could not, and despised himself for his weakness.

“Need anything?” he asked as they moved to the door.

“Only Ricardo,” Coco answered with a smile.

Ryle turned away to the open door, there to gaze again at the sky seen above the houses across the street. They were tired little shacks little different from Coco’s. He always found them depressing as he strode down the street in the morning, going back to his world. He fished a bit of paper out of his pocket and pressed it into Coco’s hand.

“Something for luck,” he lied.

Coco smoothed it against his chest, then stuffed it back into his shirt pocket.

“I don’t need your money,” she said, puzzled. “Why do you give it to me now? And so much?”

“Because I want to,” Ryle resounded quietly, retrieving the bill, which he wadded up and tossed onto the bed. He kissed Coco again to still the flow of her protests, then held her at arm’s length for a last look before starting down the street. He hesitated, still wanting to tell her the truth. A dog pawing in the dust looked up at him suspiciously, then ran off as an old crone in a soiled smock shuffled past on the way to the pump, a dented tin bucket creaking in each hand.

“I do love you,” he said.

“I know, Ricardo. Your love is good.”

More words failed to come, so Ryle turned and trudged off down the street. At the corner, where he turned in the direction of the company compound, he paused. Then, with a wave of his hand, he was gone.

Coco stared at his footprints in the tawny-colored dust. Already they were formless as the dry sand trickled down around the edges. Across the street, a door opened. A barefoot woman in a faded print dress emerged with a pan of water. She made a wry face when she saw Coco.

“Gone again, eh?”

“*Si, tia* Carmen. He has gone.”

With a grunt of disdain, Carmen sloshed the water into the street.

“No good will come of him.”

Coco hugged the silk against her breasts and ignored the woman. The silk, Ricardo’s silk, was argument enough.

“It’s time you had a husband, I think,” her aunt nodded emphatically. “Not a gringo,” she added, then spat into the dust. “That’s the worth of a gringo, and even less when he’s gone for good.”

The girl offered no reply, staring down at the sand trickling down into Ricardo’s footprints.

“Oh, you’ll find another one to buy you nice things, eh?” Carmen went on, eyeing the negligee.

“If Ricardo gives me presents, it is because he loves me, you old pot of grease!”

“And what do you love? Gringo money? Eh?”

The memory of the scrap of paper on the bed showed on Coco’s face.

“Ah, you’ll be in El Fenix yet, sleeping with any man who pays the price,” the elder woman grimaced.

Coco fled inside, slamming the door behind her. She flung herself on the bed, clutching Ricardo’s pillow against her sobs, imagining the warmth she felt was

his. In a while, she wiped the tears from her cheeks and reached beneath the corner of the mattress for the cigarettes they kept there. She lit the cigarette and resentfully studied the lighter. A moment later, she sent it flying across the room, followed by the crumpled wad of paper that Ricardo had left behind.

On the street, Carmen still gazed thoughtfully at her niece's door. She looked away as Corporal Pablo Berceo ambled sleepily along the street, yawning and blinking in the morning sun.

"*Buenas dias, senora,*" he greeted her, "but one might surely doubt it from the look on your face."

Carmen glowered even more and went indoors, giving a sharp pat to her buttocks as they turned in Pablo's direction. The policeman chuckled amiably at the insult, brushed a speck of breakfast off his light brown uniform of the Policia Nacional, and continued down the street. The day was well begun, he thought.

Bill Werther nodded an owlish good morning when Coco appeared at the company warehouse shortly before eight.

"You were drunk last night, I think," Coco twitted her boss as she slid behind her desk where she kept records for the materials and tools inventory that Werther managed.

"Plastered is the word," the man responded sourly as he plunked down a stack of papers on her desk. "How goes it with you?"

Werther didn't wait for an answer. He took his headache back to his office. Later, he emerged for a cup of coffee which he sipped cautiously as he walked over to Coco.

"Fifth one this morning," he grumbled.

"Feeling better?"

"Not much. I'm going to swear off," he vowed glumly.

"Until tonight," Coco laughed.

"Yeah, tonight," Werther scowled. This his face brightened. "There's a good movie on satellite TV tonight. Why don't you come see it with me and we'll console each other."

"No, I must visit my aunt this evening," Coco smiled. "She is angry with me, I think."

"Just thought I'd ask," the man shrugged. "Dick was worried about you, but I'm glad to see you are being sensible about his transfer. There's not much anyone can do about such things. His work was done here."

"Transfer?"

Werther stared blankly at the girl.

"Well, I'll be damned. He didn't tell you."

Coco's eyes brimmed with tears.

“Dear Ricardo. He can’t stand to see me cry.”

Pablo Berceo sat with his lean old shanks stretched out across the tiles of the sidewalk, a soft pad beneath his behind and his back lodged comfortably against the wall outside the magistrate’s office. Across his thighs rested an ancient but business-like carbine. Pablo polished its barrel with a bit of oily rag while he gazed sleepily toward the plaza. Two gringo sailors from the docks ambled through the churchyard, taking a short cut from the tiny harbor. They crossed the street near Pablo, speaking as they sauntered past.

“Going to shoot somebody? Good day for it!” they grinned.

Pablo lifted a hand in silent response while his eyes followed them into the plaza where they plunked themselves down at old Rosita’s refreshment stand. Her youngest daughter served table while the shrewd old woman looked on approvingly. The girl was good business, just budding into womanhood with the husky shapeliness only Latinos have. Old Rosita knew that buds invited nipping and garnered gringo dollars on the invitation.

The policeman heard the girl’s giggling squeal of protest when one of the sailors pinched her aft quarters. Pablo yawned and balanced the carbine on his knees so he could commence rubbing the stock with the bit of oily rag. He wrinkled up his nose, his leathery face taking on even deeper creases, as the magistrate’s clerk waddled out of the office. The clerk, full of fat and importance, glowered down at Pablo.

“I have work for you, loafer!”

“The magistrate has work for me, little clown, not you.”

The clerk fumed at the old policeman’s insolence. If he were magistrate, the clerk would dispense with the old fool in a moment, regardless of those in the capitol who still remembered the name of Pablo Berceo. He may have made revolutions as a youth, but now he was a ridiculous old meddler too much in the way. The clerk flung an envelope into Pablo’s lap. It lay ignored.

“Well, read it, idiot!”

“In a while. Now I am tending to my gun,” Pablo said, caressing his weapon with the bit of cloth.

“It is an order for an arrest,” the clerk protested.

“Then I surely must look after my gun,” Pablo replied disinterestedly.

The clerk grabbed the envelope and took out the paper for the policeman to read, holding it in front of Pablo’s nose.

“The girl from Esperanza?” Pablo’s brows lifted questioningly.

“Many girls come down to Pereza from Esperanza. They like the gringo dollar bills.”

“It is our disease,” Pablo commented thoughtfully, inserting the paper into its envelope. “We are very sick of it.”

“Now that the oil field is ready for development, there will be a need for a lot more of these girls at El Fenix.” The clerk chuckled. “This will teach her to sleep with gringos.”

“Only one,” Pablo corrected. “And he is an important one. He will make trouble.”

“No trouble,” the clerk responded knowingly. “He went away. Three days ago.”

“The magistrate wastes no time,” Pablo observed dryly.

“Only loafers like you waste time. Important people get things done,” the clerk grinned. “There is an empty bed at El Fenix. Now. Not next week,” the clerk laughed, his belly shaking dangerously from the effort. “I think I will try her myself,” he said, laughing again as he crossed the street for a cool drink at Rosita’s stand.

Pablo stared thoughtfully at the envelope, wishing Coco were but another face or even that she belonged in El Fenix. He had read other names on similar papers inside identical brown envelopes. For those he felt no remorse as he enforced the law. It was a good law that insured that women would not accost men on the streets or in the plaza, there in front of wives and children. These women must practice their profession only in El Fenix, where the men could go in their own time, discreetly, and the government could share the profit.

Coco would plead it was love. The magistrate would say it was money and would quote the law. There would be witnesses, for Coco made no secret of her American. Someone would certainly swear there were others, as that would please the magistrate. Then the magistrate would put on his most solemn face to decree that she must practice her profession in El Fenix according to custom. There would also be a fine she could not pay and she would be confined to El Fenix until it was earned, without freedom to come and go with the other girls. And why not? In the end the girls went home with a proud dowry and married well.

The clerk puffed back across the street, sweating in the open sun. In the shade again, he paused to sip his drink and frown down on Pablo.

“What is troubling you now, loafer?”

“Poor Coco will not like El Fenix,” Pablo murmured, remembering her family, his mind’s eye seeing Coco as the naked niña sitting at her father’s door holding the little wooden doll Pablo had carved for her. “You waste your time with her. She will be a dead fish and good for no one.”

“Alvarado knows how to handle his girls at El Fenix,” the clerk nodded wisely. “He will know what to do with her. A good beating, maybe.”

“I’ll kill him if he does,” said Pablo quietly.

Coco found the policeman seated on the board stoop in front of her door when she returned from the compound. He was polishing his weapon and the barrel glistened in the afternoon sun. The envelope lay beside him.

“Very soon there will be nothing left but the hole in the middle,” the girl said in greeting. “How are you, Pablo.”

“As usual.”

Coco sat beside him, removing her shoes to wiggle her toes in the powdery dirt.

“It has been warm—very warm, today,” she sighed.

“Yes,” Pablo agreed, taking a swipe at an imaginary streak of dirt on the gun barrel. “And the dust is worse than ever. I will be glad to see the rain. These days aren’t fit for a man to work.”

“As if you ever work,” the girl teased.

“I am working now.”

“Polishing your gun. That’s work?”

“This is work,” the man said, indicating the envelope with a nod of his head. “You may read it and see.”

Coco scanned his stolid features for a moment before she picked up the envelope. She paled as she read.

“This isn’t true, Pablo,” she said huskily.

“Who knows?”

“Pablo, you have known me all my life. You know I am not what they say.”

“Ricardo was here with you. One man or many, it is the same to them, little one.”

“Not to me,” Coco argued. “I love Ricardo.”

“Who can tell of love other than those who love?”

“They can prove nothing.”

“Proof?” Pablo chuckled sardonically. “Proof is what they choose to believe.”

“Do you believe it?”

“What I believe matters little any more,” he said. “I am not the magistrate.”

Impulsively, Coco sprang toward her door and the myth of safety behind it. Pablo tripped her with the gun butt. As she recovered, he was at the door, barring her way. After a moment of hesitation, he stepped aside and allowed her to pass.

Coco sat on the bed, despondent. She knew as well as he what the words on the paper really meant. El Fenix. Pablo closed the door and leaned back against it. Her pain was open to his eyes. There was no hurry.

“I am not what they say,” Coco murmured, shaking her head. “They may not listen, but I am not what they say.”

Pablo remained silent, watching. He fished in a pocket for the makings of a cigarette. Coco noticed, absently, and brought out a package of an American brand. She offered one to Pablo and lit one for herself. The activity stirred other currents in her thoughts.

“I will run away,” she announced, challenging him.

“No, Coco.”

“Please, Pablo? As my friend?”

The policeman shook his head.

“You are no friend, then,” the girl spoke bitterly, rising and turning away from him. “If you were, you would care that old Alvarado will rent me out, like a horse.” Then, pleading, “Pablo, please let me go.”

The policeman dragged on his cigarette and stared at the floor, slowly shaking his head.

“The land is small between the mountains and the sea, little one. Go into the jungle or the swamps and you will die before morning. Yes, and the road and the ships will be watched. Besides, there is my duty. Whether it pleases me or not, this is what I must do.”

Coco turned and stared morosely out of the window. Behind a leaden haze the mountains seemed even further away on the far side of the jungle swamps. Pablo was right. There was only death in the swamps where even the road was a narrow ribbon that quaked underfoot. Yet for her El Fenix was another kind of death. It was not her life. She had known a man and become a woman. She was Ricardo’s woman. In that knowledge she found her life and her strength.

The girl turned to face Pablo and the gun he cradled casually in one arm. There was her death, a little round hole that opened into eternity, clean and quick. She saw it without fear or hope. There was simply the beginning of a sickness in the pit of her stomach.

Coco made her way to the chest and squashed out her cigarette in the ash tray. She pulled out a drawer and lifted out a heavy, long-bladed knife. Weighing it in her hand, she turned to Pablo. His face was expressionless as he drew the bolt and pushed a cartridge into the breech.

“I cannot go with you, Pablo.”

“There is no other way, little one.”

“You are wrong, Pablo,” she said, her voice dull and flat. Her tongue answered while her brain followed her eyes and brooded on the barrel of the weapon in his hands. She hefted the knife gripped in her fingers. The feel of it was old but familiar, leaving no doubt in the skill she had learned from Pablo himself. He had taught her brothers and she had kept after him until he had taught her too. Coco could choose the pocket on his shirt and strike at twice the distance. He must know that, no matter that his eyes were unafraid. Coco understood. So close, he

would not aim or even bring his weapon to his shoulder, yet the bullet would find its target.

A bullet is quicker and surer than a blade. So the choice was his. He would save himself, but what else?

“One of us must die.”

“Perhaps,” Pablo answered inscrutably.

“I will not be what they say.”

“Is a name so bad?”

“Death has a better sound. I am Ricardo’s woman. Nothing else.”

Coco looked sadly to the Madonna and then to the bed, now as empty as her heart. She heard the evening breeze from the sea whispering in the eaves. Around her, the walls and furnishings might have belonged to someone else. They were dilapidated and unattractive, not what they were when Ricardo was present.

“We are pigs, Pablo. We may dream of something else, but we are pigs. Ricardo was my dream. What was yours, Pablo? Your revolution so long ago? Such dreams are dead, old man. There is no Ricardo and your revolution changed nothing but the faces of pigs. Another magistrate. Another president. But still pigs.”

“I know nothing of those things,” Pablo replied softly.

“Well, I know. I know there should be something better, and I will not be what they say. Do you understand, Pablo? I will kill you first.”

The policeman watched her fingers take a firmed grip on the knife. He slowly removed the safety on his weapon, no longer doubting her determination.

“Pablo? Do you understand?”

“*Si.*”

“Mother of God, have mercy on us.”

“*En el nombre del Cristo,*” the man replied in a whisper.

The policeman watched the movement of Coco’s hand to the point where he could no longer delay his decision. The blast of the cartridge was loud inside the bare wooden walls, followed by a stunning silence. Then a wild squawking began behind the house. A chicken flapped helplessly on the ground, one leg mangled by the steel-jacketed slug. A splintered hole stared brightly out of the white-washed wall and the pungent smell of burned powder was joined by that of blood seeping into the dirt floor. The squawking subsided and left only the whisper of the breeze coming in off the sea.

Tia Carmen let herself into the room, softly closing the door behind her. Alarmed voices sounded behind her in the street. She stared down at Coco, stony faced and dry eyed for a while. Then her features softened and her shoulders drooped within her shapeless dress. She sank down beside the girl, tears

streaming down her face as her fingers caressed Coco's hair into place and closed her eyes.

“Is it better than El Fenix?”

Pablo attempted no reply. He removed his cap and lowered himself to his knees, leaning on his weapon. His voice was soft, yet strong with conviction as he began:

“Padre nuestro, quien estas in los cielos, sontificado sea tu nombre....”

With Carmen kneeling beside him, they continued together.

“Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven”

In the while a distant drone swelled up and surged into the room, finally becoming a reverberating roar as a helicopter swept low over the housetops before settling down to roost at the company compound.

Ricardo had arrived that way. So had he left.

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