

From *The Dream King*

### Coup D'état

For months there had been rumours of grumbling at police headquarters, complaints that the government was doing little to stop the training of malcontents in the hills, that the Americans were unhappy. Rumours of unauthorized purchases by the army – even some helicopters, which someone claimed to have seen in crates at the harbour. We discounted the rumours. They were the subject of less discussion in the office than the Deputy Minister's hobbies, particularly those involving his executive assistant, a ripe young person who, it was said, had been runner-up to Miss Philadelphia during her days as a student in the United States. Now there was something you could believe.

As to the rebels in the hills, my wife and I had come across them once. It was a Saturday. We were out for a picnic. So were the rebels – as far as we could tell. The leader

was a slight man of about nineteen, one of the cab drivers who worked out of the Saint George. I had often seen him lounging against his van in the plaza, smoking and talking with the other drivers. He lent me a bottle-opener and gave me a mango to share with Maria.

"Thank you," I said. "Long live the Revolution."

He was armed with a stick – a stout, sharpened stick, to be sure, but a stick all the same. It was hard to believe that the army could be concerned.

"Perhaps," said Rinaldo, my colleague at the office, "but, from small beginnings – remember Che."

I did not need to be reminded: as well as working together, Rinaldo and I were co-members of an economics discussion group. The idea was to read and talk about the latest books and articles from the U.S and England. It was a way of keeping up, despite the palm trees. Rinaldo was always trying to push the discussion towards politics. He even went so far as to occasionally wear a bandanna around his head. I believed that such behaviour could do nothing but harm to his career, although I never actually mentioned it to him.

"Che lived in a dictatorship," I said. "I thought the current government is exactly what you and your friends wanted. What next – a Peoples' Democratic Republic?"

Rinaldo said nothing. He had been strongly in favour of the Coalition. In fact, there had at first been much enthusiasm for the new government, but that was dissipated. Now there was bickering amongst the members of the cabinet. A lot of clucking by the Americans. Exports rotting at the harbour in clouds of fruit flies. Worst of all, no tourists. Rinaldo could see as well as I could that the thing wasn't working. We both had our careers to think of, and under the Coalition the Ministry was in a mess.

"Where's that report?" I asked, rather sharply. "Fishboy wants to see it."

A report on the development of an air freight service, an attempt by the government to breathe life back into our foreign trade. Fishboy's chapter had been finished for weeks, and he

and I were now waiting for Rinaldo. We were all in the running for Section Head, an appointment about which there was much speculation throughout the Ministry.

"Fishboy will get the job," said Rinaldo. "He sucks up the best. Always running upstairs to see the Deputy, memos to the minister. Plus *the Englishman* likes him." Rinaldo almost spat as he said this. Like most nationalists, he was xenophobic.

The Englishman (Harbottle was his name) had originally come to the country to sell Fizzies, a kind of tablet which when dropped into a glass of water produced an effervescent orange drink unpleasantly reminiscent of fruit salts. The product had not been a success. All the same, Harbottle had been able to gull the government into believing he was an expert on trade matters. He was our boss.

"No one in the Ministry except Harbottle likes Fishboy," I said. "Carolina does the best work."

"A woman?" said Rinaldo. "They will never give Section Head to a woman."

Rinaldo had a point. The Coalition may have been left-wing, but they were also Latin -- very macho. Both my wife and I secretly believed that this strengthened my own chances of getting the job. But I said to Rinaldo:

"You think we're living in the age of chivalry? The Coalition wants to *help* women, Rinaldo. You ought to know that. They want to liberate women. They want to liberate everyone."

"But that particular woman is a fascist. If it comes to politics, I ought to get the job," he said.

"Unfortunately, it will not come to politics. Your position on U.S. imperialism and the International Monetary Fund will not matter to the interview board."

"At least I *have* a position," said Rinaldo, with a sneer. "Not like you. The perfect bureaucrat."

Rinaldo could be rather shrill at times. I believed his political stance could only work against him; the government, after all, was trying to project an image of moderation. I did not mention this to Rinaldo. Instead, I reminded him of the deadline for the report on the air freight service.

The change of government occurred at two o'clock the following Tuesday. The Cabinet was lunching in the banquet room of the Saint George Hotel on the occasion of the anniversary of their first year in office when General Diaz arrived and announced that henceforth they would be relieved of their duties. He graciously offered to arrange transportation to the airport for those who wanted it, and suggested that those who chose to remain in the country – and, of course, they would be welcome – should stay in their homes for the next few days, where, for their own safety, they would be guarded by men with sub-machine guns until things returned to a state of normalcy.

Some guards at the Palace, surprised when soldiers arrived in armoured vehicles, had panicked and drawn their revolvers. One man was critically wounded. (It was this which attracted the attention of the international press corps, before they were escorted out of the country.) People were advised to stay off the streets, to keep to their houses. There was sporadic shooting throughout the afternoon, most of it in joyous celebration.

"These are difficult days," said General Diaz, "when what is needed is a firm hand, resolve, a sense of national purpose and reconciliation. Together, we can look forward to a time of peace, of prosperity, above all, of order. The hour of our destiny is at hand!"

We heard this on the radio in Carolina's office, late in the afternoon. The broadcasting facilities had been seized immediately.

"The hour of our destiny? A bit much, don't you think?" I said.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven!" said Rinaldo. "What about the men in the hills? What will happen now? They are finished."

"Just the opposite," I said. "At last they have an enemy. The best possible thing that could have happened to them."

The national anthem was played. Carolina's eyes glistened.

Fishboy came into the room, rustling papers which he held in his hand. His glasses glittered under the fluorescent lights. Speaking loudly to make himself heard above the stirring music on the radio, he asked about the report.

At five o'clock, two army helicopters flew over the plaza. Jeeps and a tank rumbled on the pavement below, and soldiers with rifles slung from their shoulders patrolled beneath the arcades of the capital.

It was soon announced that, as a result of the excesses and inefficiencies of the previous regime, economic renewal would be the highest priority of the new government. The nation would re-enter the world of international trade. General Diaz himself, in addition to his presidential duties, would assume responsibility for Trade and Development. A great honour for the Ministry. Our Section would be particularly affected: certainly this was my wife's view, based both on my daily reports to her of what was happening at the Ministry and on her own sources of information at the tennis club. We were responsible for exports and special import licences. Within a week there had been orders for Mercedes Benz's for the new cabinet, but so far nothing else.

A question frequently asked was, "Are the Americans coming back?" Yes, they were. They would buy our produce. They would sell us small computers and software. Also automatic rifles, the first of which were said to be already on the way. This was something

about which the Americans wished to remain discreet. Selling weapons to a military coup to put down popular insurrection: it would not be difficult for the enemies of the regime to cast the policy in an unfavourable light.

There was even talk of going ahead with the air freight scheme -- bad news for Rinaldo, for he had never finished his part of the report and it had come to light. Things were not going well for Rinaldo. General Diaz had terminated the Peoples' Education Office, through which the Ministry had proselytised in the countryside about the need for self-sufficiency. The new government didn't believe in that sort of thing. It was a project in which Rinaldo had taken a special interest.

Also, there would be no more gatherings of our little discussion group. Regis Debray had been scheduled for the next meeting. We thought it just as well to dispense with that.

"Is that all?" my wife asked when I reported all this to her. "No promotions?"

A devout Catholic and the reason for my coming to this country, Maria is not spiritual when it comes to those elements of the material world which fall within her immediate ken. She had been expecting much from the upheavals in the capital.

"They left the Englishman in charge?" she said. "That means Fishboy will get Section Head. And you, with all your bloody degrees."

It was true: they had left Harbottle in as ADM. Very few officials had as yet been ousted. But the structures which Harbottle had so carefully put in place, the titles and positions -- Section Head, Director, Assistant Deputy Minister -- all seemed somehow not to matter as much as before. The government had placed a certain Captain Gonzales in the Ministry. He was present whenever the Minister -- a white-haired former ambassador to the U.S. who had been brought out of retirement -- held a meeting, signed a memo, or spoke on the telephone. The Liaison Officer. That was Captain Gonzales' title.

"The same Captain Gonzales who plays tennis?" asked my wife, brightening. She leaned forward in her chaise, indicating that I might mix her another drink. "He comes from a very old family." She seemed to think it was a good sign. Maria has an instinct for these things.

One morning Fishboy came to my cubicle with a message from the switchboard. He was excited. He did not, as a rule, bring me my telephone messages.

"The Liaison Officer wants to see you, Mortimer. Immediately. Chop, chop."

Captain Gonzales was on the seventh floor, the highest in the building, where the Minister and the Deputy Minister had their offices. I saw that the Minister was not in when I reported to the officer at the reception area. This was not surprising because the Minister usually came to work for only two or three hours a day. But the Deputy's office was empty. The room had been cleared out.

Captain Gonzales rose and came around from behind his desk to introduce himself when I was ushered in. Very charming. Very polished. Like the Sam Browne belt he wore.

"Mr. Mortimer. I am so glad you were able to come and see me. You are busy?" His manners were what Harbottle referred to as "continental."

"Things are picking up," I said.

"A very important job, you have. A very important ministry. There is much opportunity for a man like you. Especially now."

He offered me a little cigar from a silver case on his desk. Cuban. The man was broad-minded.

"You know, we are hoping for more exports in the future. Not only our traditional products, but industrial exports as well. Manufactured goods."

I nodded. I was in agreement with whatever the new government had in mind. It was a matter of principle with me.

"For these new products, we will need new factories. New machines. We will need investment from abroad. We do not have money enough in this country to finance our own development. Forgive me, Mr. Mortimer, I don't suppose any of this is new to someone with an education from – where was it?"

"The London School of Economics," I said.

"The LSE, yes. My brother was there. Perhaps you knew him? No, I think not. He is older, with our central bank. As I was saying, investors in our country want some assurances. They are not going to be happy if we have riots in the plaza, like we had last summer. Or rebels in the countryside. Investors are like old women – very nervous people."

I nodded. We both chuckled.

"And we will be buying more from the Americans," Captain Gonzales continued.

"Materials vital to the well-being of the nation. We will need aid. But the Americans will be reluctant to help if there are bandits in the hills. I think you have encountered some of these people. You were on a picnic?"

"You mean the fellows from the hotel?" I was taken aback. Did he also know about the economics discussion group? The office had grown suddenly warm. "That was nothing," I said, "boys with sticks."

"The hotel?" He took up his pen and noted something down. He was poised to write more. "Which hotel?"

"I thought I had seen one of them before at one of the tourist hotels. I don't remember which one exactly."

"Perhaps it will come to you later," said Captain Gonzales.

"Perhaps."

"Also, there is a man in your unit, Rinaldo. What can you tell me of him?"

"Nothing." I said, perhaps a little too quickly. I shrugged and added, "a good worker."



Captain Gonzales' gaze remain fixed. "Keep an eye out, will you, Mr. Mortimer? Tell me anything you hear of that might -- how shall I put it -- discourage investment in our country."

He stood up to show me out. He was smiling again.

"By the way," I said, "where is the Deputy-Minister?"

"He has left the country," said Captain Gonzales, "with his executive assistant."

"Where did they go?"

"Philadelphia. My kindest regards to your wife." He closed the door.

I was back in my cubicle only a moment when the large head of Harbottle appeared above the frosted glass of the partition. It was unusual for him to visit; normally, we were summoned.

"Good morning." He crossed the small space in front of my desk and stood gazing out the window, his hands behind his back. He was upset. Captain Gonzales had reached straight down to me. A break in the chain of command. The whole system was starting to crumble.

"So," he said, "you have met our Captain Gonzales."

"Yes."

"What's he like?"

"Oh, you know -- foreign."

One of our little jokes. Harbottle laughed without amusement. "And what did you two chat about?"

"Oh, nothing really," I said. "This and that. You know. Tennis."

"Tennis?"

"It appears that he plays at the same club as my wife."

"Ah. Yes." He turned again to the window. "You know, Mortimer, governments come and go. But we -- the professionals, the civil service -- we remain."

"Do you think this government will go?" I asked.

He didn't answer that one. Instead he said, "I have been here many years, and I can tell you it is not a good idea to become identified with a particular regime." He turned at the door as he was leaving. "Could be bad for one's career."

"I see. A tricky situation," said Maria. We were drinking our evening cooler on the garden terrace. The air was filled with the rich scent of the white star jasmine. "The Deputy is gone. Captain Gonzales is running the Ministry. It is good that he likes you. But the Englishman is still in charge – he will pick Section Head. There is no getting away from that."

"Right, my dear, as always. On the other hand, if Captain Gonzales were to become annoyed with me, well..."

"But you can't go telling him things about Rinaldo, *spying*," said Maria. "At the convent, we were always taught that sort of thing is simply not done."

"Quite right, my angel. But as of this afternoon, there will be nothing to tell about Rinaldo." And I told her the news that I had learned just before leaving the office: "Rinaldo has resigned. The man has his principles."

"One down," said my wife. "What about the woman, Carolina?"

"She has the right politics. But they have a very conventional view towards the place of women, the army. Fishboy remains the obstacle."

Maria placed her empty glass on the arm of her chair where I would notice it. She considered it bad manners for a lady to ask for – or indeed have anything to do with – the business of drinks. I rose and mixed her a fresh one at the glass table by the wall.

"With a big slice of lime, just the way you like it," I said, handing her the glass. Unlike most people, Maria has never lost her taste for Cuba libre. "By the way, my darling, did you by

any chance happen to mention to any of your friends at the tennis club about that time in the hills?"

"Time in the hills? What are you talking about?"

"The picnic last summer, when we come across those fellows training, as they called it, armed to the teeth with sticks."

"I do not remember."

I will say this about Maria: she is a very ambitious woman. She gives me the confidence to do what must be done.

Two weeks later I received a message from Rinaldo asking if we could meet. I left the office a little early and strolled around to the Saint George. Rinaldo and I had frequently drunk there; the meetings of the economics discussion group used to be held in the downstairs bar. They made a particularly good frozen daiquiri. When I arrived, Rinaldo had already ordered his. He seemed rather intense, even for him. He did not bandy his words.

"What about the automatic rifles? From the Americans."

"Rifles? I don't know anything about any rifles," I said.

"We know for a fact the weapons are coming," Rinaldo said. "From Miami. We know that the Ministry is handling it. All I need to know from you is when. The date and the hour."

"From me?" I glanced around the downstairs bar of the Saint George Hotel – at the limp artificial palms in their immense pots, at the high barred windows. I was struck by what a sinister looking place it really was.

"Is this a good spot to be discussing this sort of thing?" I asked. "They have been asking about you. I hope we haven't been seen. I am still hoping to get Section Head."

An unpleasant expression crossed Rinaldo's face. "I came in through the kitchen. You do not have to worry. We are safe in the Saint George Hotel. We will be warned if anyone is coming."

This was worse than I had expected. Anyone capable of warning Rinaldo that the police were coming would also be capable of telling the shadowy officials in the basement of the Ministry of Justice that I had met with him.

"I know nothing about the rifles," I told him.

"Perhaps you can find out. The man who sells cold drinks from the cart in front of the Ministry. Tell him. He will get the message to me."

Rinaldo turned and left through the kitchen doors. I ordered another daiquiri, then a third. Then I returned to the Ministry, now empty. I ascended to the sixth floor, where Harbottle's office was located. I took the precaution of using the fire stairs rather than the elevator.

There was no oily charm the second time I was called into Captain Gonzales' office. I remained standing while he addressed me from behind his desk.

"You know that we have been expecting guns." I gaped in a way that I hoped conveyed puzzlement. "At the insistence of the Americans, the transaction was being handled by a civilian agency. I am speaking, of course, of the Ministry."

"The Ministry?" I rasped. "Guns?"

"They arrived last night. At the small airstrip north of the city. I am sure you know the place. It is no longer much used. That is why it was selected. But nobody was there to meet the airplane. No one from the Ministry. No one from the army. No one from the police. No one. It appears we had the wrong night." Captain Gonzales glared at me. "The pilot waited.

He noticed men approaching in the darkness but was unable to take-off in time. The men disappeared into the trees with the cargo. By now the weapons are doubtless in the hands of rebels throughout the country."

"I suppose the thieves had been watching the airstrip," I suggested.

"You don't think someone could have tipped them off?"

"I very much doubt it."

As to the actual arrangements for the shipment, making certain that the plane was met when it landed and so on, well, I told him, I really couldn't say. That wasn't my responsibility.

"Just a foul-up, I'm afraid. There have been mistakes before. Very unfortunate."

"Who was in charge of this operation?"

"I'm not really sure," I said. "I think Mr. Harbottle may be able to help you there."

I arrived home early with a chilled bottle of champagne. Maria was in the garden reading a paperback novel by Graham Greene.

"Good news," I said, "I have been promoted."

She rose from the chaise lounge. "Section Head at last," she said.

"Not Section Head."

"What, you mean Director?"

"Try again."

"You mean – ADM!"

"In an acting capacity only, but still."

"My darling! But what happened to the Englishman?"

"Gone. Not clear where. England I think. Fishboy will be leaving too."

"You sit down," said Maria. "This time I will get the drinks!"

General Diaz has drawn up a new constitution with a promise of free democratic elections three years hence. I expect that at that time I will vote Social Democrat, or perhaps even for the Front. I would expect a thorough shake-up of the administration, during which I might be confirmed as an ADM. Of course, if the Front comes to power, Rinaldo will certainly be a senior member of the Cabinet, and I would hope to make Deputy. In the meantime, I've assured Captain Gonzales there will be no more foul-ups with the air freight service.