

Fiction by Jack Fritscher.
Coded as a Catholic parable of
Veronica and her veil,
the death of Christ with his mother as witness,
and the traitor Judas,
this rather interesting Hemingwayesque and closeted S&M *noir* story,
was written when Jack Fritscher was a boy-seminarian
at the Pontifical College Josephinum,
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The Untimely Death of J. Cristobal

by Jack Fritscher writing as John J. Fritscher

“You did not read about it in the North American papers, *señor*. What is such a man in such a little country that you should read about him? To you it is all the same. And to us. But this time to me it was different, *señor. Si, my diferente.*”

In the Rio bar, the dark little man with the rheumy eyes sat across from me, elbows and eager arms on the table, gesturing, never resting. His gabardine shirt was wrinkled from the heat and beads of sweat diffracted the hotel light across his low forehead. He did not quite fill the slack folds of his dirty Panama suit.

“It was in the Spring of last year the revolution failed. He had not wanted to lead us, but his father had the promise of him. That was his first mistake—that he did not have it to heart in him. But we did not know it then. And many do not know it even now.

“When we took and gave him the republic and the former *Presidente*, he accepted the one and exiled the other. His second mistake. He should have had him lawfully tried and shot him then, even as a year later the evil one returned and killed him. But he could kill nothing needlessly. He had not really the *cojones* even for the bull ring.

“In that year life was good but everyone wanted it better. How much can a man do in a few months? He was a *General* not a god.” His shoulders shrugged in disbelief at what he was to say and the wine glass trembled before his lips. “And then, one night the *Presidente* came back across the frontier and down the mountains to the Capital. Before dawn the main regiments were his and the fighting and rioting was over by lunch. In the evening they danced in the streets. Their feet paid no more mind to what had come to pass than did their heads. Who is the strongest, he should rule them. Until his strength begins to pinch their feet.

“The next day, *señor*, there was a grand trial in the sports arena and there he was condemned to die as befitting a traitor who was part-Indian from the hills. While the fiesta went on above, he was delivered to the common soldiers’ quarters in the locker rooms below. And they did not treat him kindly. After he was dead I saw close up the marks on his body. But he was not so fortunate as to die from their beating.

“I am not so sure what happened to him the rest of the day. I think, perhaps, he was

interrogated much the same as we all were.”

I filled his glass again, looking the while into those dark eyes that pleaded for me to see their secrets without his telling me. But I wanted to hear him out, even at the late hour. He sighed and sank back into his chair. For a long while he did not speak.

“The next day was declared another fiesta and early in the morning a bull was let loose in the streets. The brave young men tried to hand their ladies’ scarves on his horns. Three of them were gored and one the devil crushed to death against a wall. Nothing was low-key that day and blood-lust ran high.

“The bull was killed, *senor*, torn apart by the mob, in front of the police garrison. And the timing was perfect. Before they could even think on what they had done, the *prisoner* was dragged into the street with two of his cabinet ministers. The one did not look half-alive even then. They were hitched like stupid oxen to the former *General*’s official car and made to drag it through the jammed streets.

“There were words on the car that should have made the women turn away in shame. But they did not. Wherever they passed, on their descent to the plain outside the city there was music and laughter and young men spitting and shouting *General! General!* And when the procession had gone, they turned back to their women. It was not every day such a greedy one meets the peoples’ justice they said.

But one there was one who did not spit at him. She stood behind the mob lining the streets. The *General* did not see her, but I heard she was there. It was from her that he drew his Indian blood that excused all this. She was alone because, like I said, the *General*’s father had been killed by the *Presidente* and the *General* himself had never married. He did not even keep a woman. And many held even this against him.

“Halfway to the edge of the Capital, the cabinet minister, the one I thought to be dying, fell into the street. Lying there, he was missing, anyone could see, the fingers from his left hand. He must have died while they kicked him because they threw his body into the car...I can tell no more.”

He stood up to leave and his chair fell backwards to the floor. “I am sorry,” he said. “I should tell you this not at all. *Por favor*, excuse me.”

“Please,” I asked, “I must know the rest.”

“No, *senor*.”

“You can’t expect to lead me on for a whole evening, then tell me nothing.”

“I promised you nothing, *amigo*, but to share your bottle of wine. The wine is gone and it is late.”

“You mean you made the story up?”

“*Ojala!* That do I wish.” He held his hand to his head.

“Let me drive you to your place. My car’s outside.”

“*Si, senor amigo.* You take me home.” He started out the door taking a bottle from the counter. I dropped a bill and followed him. Outside he had propped his knees up against the car’s dash and was nursing the bottle like a playing child who already had his fill. I got in.

“You want to know quickly what happened next, *senor*? Finally, they killed him you know, but not without the sideshow. Every circus must have its sideshow. Three blocks from where they killed his friend and left the Indian lady standing, a crazy woman with a camera stood out in the crowd, not four feet from him and took his dirty little picture. The *policia* could not catch her in the crowd and she got away in the side streets. She’ll have a pretty time of it, I think,

looking. She can put it on her bureau and dream dreams of him at nights—if she likes bruises and blood and the rope burning around his neck and shoulders. The crowd, they laughed at her, but mostly at the stupid running police.

“But then, not laughing, out on the plain below the city, while it was still morning, they shot the other cabinet minister and threw his body down from the cliff. But the *General* was not to be so lucky.

“Out there on the plain in our summertime, nothing grows because of the wind and the burning sun. It grows so hot the very stones dry and crack into dust. To this place had they made them drag the car. And it was here they tied the *General* to the black Packard roof, with his arms outstretched to the side windows.

“No one but the police came close to the execution because of the heat. And even they left long before the man was dead.”

“It is not a good story,” I said.

“It is not finished,” he answered. “That evening the *policia* returned and found him dead as they had planned. The car was set afire and plunged over the gorge. They hoped to destroy completely all trace of him. But in the fall, his body was wrenched loose and thrown clear of the car. Later some of his people found it and buried him. They say there was not so much as a drop of blood left in his body, the sun had dried it so horribly.

I was driving slowly now through the wreckage of the Rio slums.

“I will walk from here,” he said

I pulled over. “It must have been terrible for you, his friend,” I said.

He got out, closed the door, and bent back through the window. “It is terrible, *señor*, but I was not his friend.”

“How do you mean?”

“The *General* spent much on ‘his people’ as he called them. The Minister of the Treasury could not watch money wasted like so many melons at a fiesta. *Por favor*, I am quite drunk.”

He started away from the car.

“You said about the Minister of the Treasury?” I asked through the window.

“*Si!*” he called back. “You must know by now, *señor*. It was I, I who told the *Presidente* what night to cross back down the mountains.”

The swinging glass bottle glistened, moving away, catching small flashes of the lights of the tumbled down world. And I sat there till long after he disappeared through the twisted alleys of darkness. © 1963, 1964, 2003 Jack Fritscher