

THE RETURN OF NIKOLA'S STEP-BROTHER by Rick Lai

In *Farewell, Nikola* (1901), Guy Boothby featured the devious step-brother of his recurring master criminal, Dr. Antonio Nikola. The step-brother had once been the brutal dictator of the fictional South American republic of Equinata. At the novel's end, the deposed despot was still at large to possibly commit further devilry. Boothby did utilize Nikola's step-brother once more in another novel, *The Kidnapped President* (1902).

Before discussing *The Kidnapped President*, it would be best to summarize the events of *Farewell, Nikola*. In Antonio Nikola's youth, his widowed mother made the mistake of marrying the Spanish governor of a Caribbean island (probably Cuba). After being beaten and tortured by the governor and his son, Antonio fled the governor's residence and the island.

His step-brother became a soldier of fortune in Latin America. He participated in the Chilean Civil War of 1891. *Farewell, Nikola* suggested that Nikola's stepbrother fought with the victorious side against the incumbent President Balmaceda. Later Nikola's step-brother rose to the position of President of Equinata. He was overthrown in a revolution. Adopting the false identity of Don Jose de Martinos, Nikola's step-brother hid in Venice. The former dictator was a tall muscular man with a closely clipped beard.

Nikola sought revenge against his step-brother. Imprisoning Martinos in a Venetian villa, Nikola performed a bizarre experiment on his childhood tormentor. Nikola sought to transform his step-brother in some sort of beast-man. However, Nikola had also developed romantic feelings for an Englishwoman, Gertrude Trevor. She convinced him to spare Martinos. Reversing the experiment, Nikola released his step-brother. When we last saw Martinos, he had twenty thousand lira and was hoping to double it.

We never knew the real name of Nikola's step-brother in *Farewell, Nikola*. The main villain of *The Kidnapped President* is Don Guzman de Silvestre. Like Martinos, Silvestre was a former President of Equinata as well as a tall man with a small beard. Although the events of *Farewell, Nikola* are never cited in *The Kidnapped President*, it is obvious that Silvestre is the real name of the man who hid under the alias of Martinos. Silvestre's past fits in very neatly with that of Martinos except for some contradictory remarks about the Chilean Civil War. However, that discrepancy can easily be rectified.

Before becoming ruler of Equinata, Silvestre had many careers. He had been a soldier in French Africa, a shearer in Australia, a miner in South Africa and a stockbroker in New York. He had also served as a mercenary in Mexico, Nicaragua, Brazil and Chile. Only Silvestre's service in Chile was given a proper historical context by Boothby. Silvestre fought in the 1891 Chilean Civil War. Silvestre's Mexican service was most likely connected to the war against the Yaqui Indians during 1885-87. Silvestre also probably participated in the 1889 Brazilian revolution and the 1893 Nicaraguan revolution.

Silvestre befriended another Spanish adventurer, Manuel Fernandez, in Valparaiso, Chile, around 1890. When the Civil War broke out in January 1891, Silvestre and Fernandez found themselves on opposite sides. Silvestre supported President Balmaceda while Fernandez joined the triumphant rebels. This information was somewhat at odds with *Farewell, Nikola*. In the earlier novel, the false Don Jose Martinos let it slip that he had once been in Chile. He claimed to have fought against Balmaceda.

Either Silvestre was lying in his Martinos identity to cover up his past, or Silvestre changed sides at some point in the Chilean Civil War. Possibly he originally opposed Balmaceda, and then decided to support him. The defeat of Balmaceda's forces in September caused Silvestre to leave Chile.

Silvestre probably participated in the 1893 Nicaraguan revolution before making his way to Equinata. There he rose to the position of President. Manuel Fernandez also arrived in Equinata. Despite their differences in Chile, Fernandez was recruited as an assistant by Silvestre. This action would later be regretted by Silvestre. Fernandez successfully ousted him from power. Silvestre fled Equinata, and Fernandez became the new President.

The Kidnapped President concerned Silvestre's revenge on Fernandez. Silvestre recruited an Englishman, Dick Helmsworth, to abduct Fernandez and escort him to a remote Caribbean island, San Diaz. Helmsworth was informed that Fernandez would remain unharmed on the island while Silvestre returned to Equinata in order to regain power. When Helmsworth discovered that Silvestre planned to murder Fernandez, the Englishman switched sides and liberated Fernandez. During a fight on the beach of San Diaz, Silvestre was fatally shot by Fernandez. Returning to Equinata, Fernandez defeated an effort by Silvestre's allies to unseat him. Two years later, Fernandez was assassinated while reviewing his troops.

My biography of Boothby's master criminal, "The Life of Dr., Antonio Nikola (1856-1898?)," assigned the events of *Farewell, Nikola* to 1898. The chronological evidence of *The Kidnapped President* places it in 1899. An American sailor, Brownlow, "took part in the last Cuban expedition and had a bit of fighting afterwards in the Philippines" (chap. 5). This was a reference to the Spanish-American War (1898). Somewhat contradictorily, Dick Helmsworth, the novel's narrator, asserted in the final chapter that five years had passed since his dangerous adventure with Silvestre. He had since married and had two children including a son, three years old. Considering the novel was published in 1902, Helmsworth's comment would suggest that it was set in 1897. Most likely only three years passed, and Helmsworth's son was a younger age. Helmsworth must have made some misleading chronological statements in the conclusion to disguise the identity of the South American country called Equinata.

The Kidnapped President transpired over a period of roughly four months. When Helmsworth returned to England, it was November. The novel must have been set during July to November 1899.

What country really was Equinata? In my previous study of the Nikola series, I put forth the theory that the false Don Jose de Martinos was never really a President of a South American country. Instead, I envisioned him as a military advisor to a President. I also speculated that Equinata was Ecuador.

The depiction of Equinata in *The Kidnapped President* demolished my Ecuador theory. Equinata is clearly accessible from the Caribbean. Ecuador borders the Pacific Ocean. Equinata must be either Venezuela or Colombia. Of those two countries, only Venezuela experienced substantial political unrest in the 1890's. In 1892, Joaquin Crespo, who had previously ruled Venezuela during 1884-1886, led a revolt that established a repressive military dictatorship. Crespo chose Ignacio Andrade as his successor. Andrade assumed the Presidency in February 1898 as the result of an election that was widely viewed as fraudulent. Various factions participated in military revolts

against Andrade during 1898-99. The political strife engulfing Venezuela claimed ex-President Crespo's life in April 1898. On October 20, 1899, Andrade was forced to flee the country by military forces under the leadership of Cipriano Castro. A period of brutal rule was instituted by Castro, who dominated Venezuelan politics until 1908

Don Guzman de Silvestre could have become a military advisor to President Joaquin Crespo in 1894. *Farewell, Nikola* mentioned that the false Don Jose de Martinos had presided over a massacre. Crespo's reign was marked by considerable political unrest. Under Silvestre's orders, a potential rebellion could have been quelled with devastating results. All of the sons of the most influential citizens in a Venezuelan town were executed. Acting under Fernandez's advice, Crespo could have placated public opinion by shifting all of the blame for the atrocity to Silvestre's shoulders. Silvestre was forced to flee a potentially fatal court martial. Silvestre's flight transpired around 1895. Fernandez was then rewarded by Crespo with Silvestre's job. Under Andrade, Crespo's successor, Fernandez maintained his position of influence. When Crespo was killed in April 1899, the wily Fernandez recognized that Andrade's days were numbered. Fernandez made a deal with Cipriano Castro. Fernandez would restrain key portions of the Venezuelan army from opposing the usurper in exchange for continuing his role of military advisor in the new regime. Through spies, Silvestre received news of Fernandez's stratagem. Engineering Fernandez's abduction, Silvestre instructed his partisans to steal the credit for betraying Andrade. Silvestre hoped that a grateful Castro would restore him to his old honors. When Fernandez returned to Venezuela from San Diaz, Castro had successfully ousted Andrade. Fernandez outmaneuvered Silvestre's allies to seize the rewards of Castro's ascension to the reigns of power. However, an assassin would end Fernandez's life in 1901.

All the above events were obfuscated when Boothby wrote *Farewell, Nikola* and *The Kidnapped President*. Venezuela was transformed into Equinata. Silvestre and Fernandez were promoted from military advisors to Presidents. What remained unchanged was that both Silvestre and Fernandez died violent deaths.