Trinity Sunday inaugurated San Oriel’s spring rites. Traditionally the Holy Ghost Parade should have been held a week before, on the Feast of the Pentecost, but that was the day the city of Hayward had its parade. So few were the important feast days and so limited San Oriel’s diversions, it seemed a waste for two towns so closely allied to hold their biggest celebration of the year on the same day, and it was not long before some enterprising soul had the happy notion of postponing San Oriel’s parade for a week so that its citizens might partake of both celebrations. So successful was the compromise that the other Portuguese communities of the Bay Area were quick to follow, and one could for weeks celebrate the descent of the Holy Ghost simply by getting into a car or wagon and moving on to the next town, to San Lorenzo or Niles or Newark, or even as far away as Pescadero on the coast. Not only were there more parades, but each parade, enlarged, by the visiting queens and their courts, was that much grander.

The parade began in the morning with an assembly in front of the Irmandade do Divino Espírito Santo Hall, known to all simply as the I.D.E.S. Hall. Long before sunrise crowds of somber men and gesticulating women gathered, their faces etched as faintly as the last imprint of a worn plate with the stamp of a diverse lineage, the fruit of Prince Henry’s dreams. The shrewd Semite, the sensual African, the fair Teuton, and the cautious Oriental—all grafted onto a Latin stock—formed the face of Portugal in its latest outpost.

Young boys, slender as reeds and sullen as the wind, stood immaculate in white shirts, white trousers, and white silk sashes. Impatient to have done with fussing, they grumbled protestations as they submitted
to the last-minute ministrations of meticulous mothers striving to stabilize unruly cowlicks with doses of wave-set carried in purses for just such emergencies. As stiff as storybook dolls freshly removed from Christmas boxes, their hair fastidiously curled, beribboned, and capped with communion veils and tiaras of wax orange blossoms, the girls waited primly and coolly in the shade of an adjacent magnolia tree.

As the order of procession was arranged, noisy, sometimes angry arguments ensued, for each position was ranked, and if Irene Gómez was to be a flower girl, then certainly Stella Cardoza had every right to be one as well, a prospect which was sure to leave Mamie Sousa fearful for her position. The enmities of competing mothers jealously guarding family prerogatives were numerous. Because her daughter had once been slighted as queen, Lena Perry had not spoken to a single member of the selection committee for the last twenty-three years, and her case was unique only for the length and unrivalled bitterness of her resentment.

The highest honor given a boy was to carry the silver, dove-topped crown and scepter of Saint Queen Isabel. The flag-bearers were ranked below the banner-bearers and the simple marchers lowest of all. The queen, of course, ruled, and her mother, as dowager, assumed the role of mistress of ceremonies.

Not everyone joined in the festivities with equal enthusiasm. There were those such as Vince and Clara Woods who found the custom too quaintly Old Country for their tastes. To avoid the crowds of once-a-year Catholics with their cheap perfumes and wretched pomades, Clara took her brood to the early mass to sit in splendor in the nearly empty church, crowded with more flowers than parishioners, with banks of St. Joseph lilies and white roses and callas and snowballs and bridal veil and angel’s breath. The sermon then was always blessedly short so that the building could be vacated in time to set up the coronation prie dieus. Religion, Clara felt, was a private affair, and she resented the public infliction of her faith upon her non-Catholic friends, most of whom could not themselves have been driven from their front porch rockers until the last marcher was long out of view. They and their guests formed a kind of reviewing stand, measuring this year’s extravaganza against last year’s, sure that the present queen couldn’t hold a candle to her predecessor, though the new band certainly revealed a good deal more pluck with its Sousa marches than the old. The Woods chil-
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dren did not march, but nothing, not their father’s laughter nor their mother’s scorn, could have prevented them from taking their position at their front gate well before the parade was to arrive.

The parade began with the hired band playing martial hymns more redolent of cavalry than Calvary. Directly behind the band came the members of various lodges, each introduced by a youth with a banner identifying the lodge, its patron saint, and its town of origin. Two boys holding silk streamers flanked each banner and were in turn flanked by two more young men, one of whom carried the flag of Portugal and the other the Stars and Stripes. Under their ornate gilt sashes the marching men wore ill-fitting dark suits that reeked of history and camphor, their serge seats polished to a high gloss. Every brown, sunburnt neck was pinched by a high paper collar rigidly unyielding and noosed with a sometimes spotted and always clumsily knotted silk tie. The youngsters were mostly clean shaven, but the weathered, foreign-born faces of their elders were invariably plumbed with some hirsute adornment, a sloppy soup strainer or a neatly trimmed Dapper Dan waxed to perfection. There was even an occasional beard, usually white, to dignify the oldest of the old-timers.

The ladies of the S.P.R.S.I., preceded by a smart drill team led by Mae Serpa and her girls, were dressed in white gabardine and so tightly corseted it was sometimes difficult to tell where busts ended and chins began. Only the splendor of their white shoes was marred by the dust of the gravel road. They in turn were followed by a huge American flag borne recumbent by eight young boys also in white. It had first been introduced five years before as a patriotic expression of America’s independence from what everyone hoped would remain Europe’s war and was now proudly borne as an outsized declaration of America’s victory in that same war, a glory all agreed no other country had any right to share. The bearers’ slow progress was interrupted every few steps by solicitous mothers intent upon arranging a ruffle, a collar, or a sash or snapping yet another picture with their black box cameras.

Next came the musical honor guard of the first visiting queen, a trio composed of two saxophones and an accordion playing the traditional Alba Pomba, White Dove. The melody was pleasantly innocuous, but played over and over again with scarcely a pause to mark the point at which one rendition finished and another began, it soon became hyp-
notic. The visiting queen was flanked by two attendant ladies in waiting, her splendor somewhat diminished by the absence of train bearers, which were allowed only on the day of her own coronation, so that she had to carry the train of her cape thrown over one arm. She was, some were cruel enough to note, chewing gum, but the parade was long, the pauses were frequent, and few found it in their hearts to censure her.

The local queen came last of all, her arrival heralded by flower girls, some bearing wicker baskets of St. Joseph lilies, others scattering rose petals. Their number was limited only by the fecundity of the townsfolk in any given season or by an individual family’s ability to finance a costume worthy to compete in splendor and workmanship with all the others. Most would willingly have suffered malnutrition rather than their little Lydia be forced to march in a dress less gorgeous than Geraldine Freitas’s—which was gorgeous indeed, with so many ruffles the envious matrons could only estimate the yards of stuff poor Mr. Freitas had had to pay for, to say nothing of the hours his wife had had to spend putting it all so marvelously together.

The queen herself shimmered in satin beaded with a thousand artificial pearls, her plump figure rather daringly uncorseted so that highlights flickered from every glossy bulge. Her hairy forearms were hidden under elbow-length gloves and her cape, the collar of which rose above her head, was edged with a rabbit fur so luxuriously thick and soft it might easily have been mistaken for ermine. Her crown was borne in the gloved hands of a sober-faced boy in white whose hair, oiled to a midnight blue, out glossed the satin of his queen. The train-bearers, a boy and a girl just out of their cradles, were apt at any moment to desert their post to turn to familiar faces on the sidelines, and when coaxed to return, let the precious yardage drag carelessly in the dust so that the fur lip was soon more gray than white. As the musicians of the hired band clustered on the front stairs of St. Anthony’s to smoke, to joke, or to nap in the spring sun, the overflow crowd strained to push its way through the jammed front porch to see the young maiden crowned at high mass by a grim-faced Father Moriarity, who looked upon the spectacle with ill-disguised distaste as a pagan rite that must somehow be tolerated for the Greater Good.

After the final benediction the reassembled parade returned by a different route to the I.D.E.S. Hall. Here, in the tiny chapel separated
from the main building by the refreshment stand and festooned with green and red bunting, the queen placed the crown and scepter on the flower-decked altar for the worship of the multitudes. Throughout the day they made their way in pairs to kneel before it with considerably more devotion than that bestowed on the tabernacle itself. A white dove was loosed from its cage, but instead of flying through the open doors of the chapel, it settled on the rafters and had to be shooed to its freedom with a broom, its delayed flight greeted by the cheers of the assembled throng.

In front of the chapel the auction tables were already set up. Here the women displayed their handicraft and the men their produce. Embroidered linens mixed with caged pigeons and chained goats, and crocheted doilies starched as stiff as cardboard served as lace collars to pyramids of loquats and cherries.