

GUATEMALA

BY WILLIAM MCFEE

“DO NOT,” said my companion, looking at me over his bock of German beer, “Do not eat *frijoles* or *tamales* while you are here, because if you do you will be wanting to come back, always come back to Guatemala.”

“You believe that?” I said, recalling the difficulty and occasional non-success with which I strove to avoid *frijoles* and *tamales*.

“Well, it is not true,” replied the gentlemen behind the beer, “but it happens. It is what you may call a proverb.”

In the course of several conversations with this gentleman, who had lived thirty-six years in Guatemala and may therefore be presumed to know something about it, I discovered that this amusing phrase was often upon his lips. In Guatemala a thing may not be true, yet it happens.

We were drinking beer, drawn from the wood, in the Café Commercial in Guatemala City, an elegant mile-high Latin-American capital with many of the characteristics of the other Spanish cities perched along the Cordillera from Quito clear up to Mexico City. The prevailing arrangement of such capitals consists of inaccessibility on coming from the coast, streets paved with uneven blocks of stone so that every bone in one’s body aches if a car is driven more than four miles an hour, single-story houses on account of earthquakes, roofed with ponderous Spanish tiles which would speedily brain all the inmates should the earth move, and a perfectly incredible number of policemen. Of course, owing to the peculiar location of such cities, with mountains all around them, there is another remarkable feature, which I have not seen mentioned in the

books of travel. There is neither sunrise nor sunset. The morning and evening have a colorless neutrality which may, for all I know, operate in some obscure fashion upon the character and temperament of the inhabitants of high regions. To me there is a quality in a sunset across fair valleys, and still more congenial is the sunrise over the sea. Up in the Andes they do not see the miracle of the dawn. The streets are full of a ghostly clarity, and the dark faces of the native servants, as they stand waiting outside the enormous doors of barricaded houses, have the air of shades brooding before the immovable portals of destiny.

This is an illusion, as I discovered when I went home with my friend. But in the meanwhile, over many beers in the Café Commercial, we discussed Guatemalan affairs and I learned something of the most aggressive and modern of the Central American republics. It must not be supposed that I was friendless in Guatemala City and therefore clung to the coat-tails of a Latin-American newspaper man whom I had met accidentally in a store and who had confessed to a passion for Bavarian beer. On the contrary, I was equipped with an unusual number of agreeable introductions. But I was in the same plight as an English lecturer in a mid-Western city of the United States, whose acquaintance remains confined to the members of the women’s club, the country club and what is known as the socially prominent. One is likely to obtain a distorted view of that mid-Western city.

The danger in my case was different but quite as acute. The foreigner in a Latin-

American capital naturally finds his friends among the resident aliens. The old families of the country either do not live in the capital or are exclusive in their habits. They are religious or they are in New York and Paris. So the foreigner obtains the standardised resident alien slant on every problem. That slant is largely evasion and ignorance. The fact is that the resident alien is a commercial adventurer and his interest in the country is limited to his own business and social consciousness. What he does know he won't tell. A policy of neutrality in local questions is excellent for his business, but it makes him a poor source of information for a person beset by curiosity.

My friend the newspaper man of the *Diario de Guatemala* was of an entirely different species. He uttered the truth with a bland disregard for lofty idealism and republican principles which warmed the cockles of my heart. And always with a sardonic perpendicular creasing of his vigorous Italian features, he would mutter in a parenthetical mumble that "this is not true, but it happens—in Guatemala."

I said, Italian. There is one of the first observations I have put forward as an example of what you do not hear from resident aliens. My friend is not a Guatemalan at all. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the cream of the Central American *intelligentsia* consists of men of alien race. They are Italians, Germans, Austrians, Alsations and Russians. The most remarkable Costa Rican I ever met had an Alsatian father. My friend here in Guatemala was born in Salvador of an Italian father who was one of Garibaldi's Thousand, an implacable republican with an ironic and conservative son married to a Russian lady who still cherishes an autographed portrait of Nicholas II. While we talk in the Café Commercial a short gentleman with a round face and full moustache enters. He comes over. He is introduced in my friend's hoarse and humorous snarl. "My friend here," he remarks, giving him a thump on the back which must have loosened the

teeth in his head, "came from Germany thirty-five years ago. He wanted to go back the next day, but he ate the *frijoles* and *tamales* and he was unable to leave. You see, it is not true, but sometimes, in Guatemala, it happens."

It will be gathered from the description of my friend's political complexion that the word *intelligentsia* has a somewhat broader meaning in Latin America than the one assigned to it in Greenwich Village. There the shell-rimmed gentry are inclined to be incarnadined with multitudinously chaotic radical ideas. But my friend B., chief editorial-writer and political ground-listener for the government organ *El Diario de Guatemala*, is certainly not of their kidney. Some inkling of his authentic *credo* is apparent when I express a very genuine approval of Fascism as an excellent corrective for political anaemia.

I admit that this was a shot in the dark. Señor B. had been explaining to me the significance of the design on the local coins. The standard of currency in Guatemala is the *quetzal*, pronounced with emphasis on the second syllable, and is equal in gold to one United States dollar.

The *quetzal*, said Señor B., is the bird of Guatemala just as the eagle is the bird of the United States. But it has a deeper significance even than the eagle, which as Señor B. remarked almost in absence of mind, was noted for its scream. The *quetzal* is never found in captivity. In fact it is rarely seen at all. It is a bird of unusual beauty, and is symbolically treated in the ancient Maya pottery and carvings found in Guatemala and adjacent regions. It has a crest and a long coppery tail. And it dies, so Señor B. assured me with a lugubrious stare, in captivity. This is the reason why Guatemalans have taken it as their national symbol. They also die in captivity.

And giving me time to allow this tremendous fact to percolate into my Northern brain, Señor B. finished his beer, lit another cigarette, and ordered the glasses to be replenished.

I suppose I should have been impressed,

but the subject was one to which I had given consideration in the past. I said, even before the boy could cross the small café with the fresh beer drawn from a cask in the wall, that in my opinion humanity tends to destroy itself if given complete liberty. That (in my opinion, of course) humanity dies if divested of all captivity. In short, I told Señor B. that to me his allegory was fallacious and that I had hailed the birth of Fascism as a step towards sanity and a reconsideration of our entire political philosophy.

This was strong stuff to offer a Latin American who had just enunciated the doctrine of *Libertad*. But it has seemed to me that if one is to get anywhere in understanding other people, one must enunciate a few fundamentals on which that understanding can rest. Polite acquiescence and a nervous dread of the celebrated Latin-American "sensitiveness" to criticism is of no practical use at all. I took a chance and I was agreeably impressed to hear Señor B. cordially endorsing my approval of Mussolini. It then came out that Señor B. Senior had landed at Spartavento with the other patriots, emigrating later in disgust over the political chicanery which followed Aspromonte, and was wounded on the plains of Uruguay in the Italian Legion.

II

Such careers are common in Central America, where disgruntled patriots and fiery fanatics, obsessed with a purely theoretical conception of liberty, have found sanctuary, and have lived to observe the remarkable fermentation which takes place in the body politic when that theoretical conception is conjoined with an illiterate composite peasantry, a tropical climate and an entire lack of communications.

To say nothing of a considerable lack, in their adopted country, of financial stability. These men are, as I have said, of all nations. They are English, Irish, French, German, Dutch, Russian, Swedish and Austrian, besides Italian. They form a

stabilising element in the eternal flux of Ins and Outs, of Blancos and Neros, of Conservative-Catholics and Liberal-Agnostics. The present generation has been born, like my friend Señor B., in Central America. Their sons and daughters voyage frequently to New York and are often educated in North American universities. The general trend of their minds is of course towards benevolent neutrality. Señor B., after many years in commercial life, has gone into newspaper work, and now dwells in a romantic old house a few blocks from my hotel, a house with a vast patio filled with palms, flowers and grandchildren. He proceeds to explain life in Guatemala in terms suitable to the North American mind.

"Tell me, Mr. B.," I remark, when the subject of Mussolini has been adequately aired, "Tell me, how is one to obtain a just view of a Central American republic when the books evade the real truth? For example, in a standard work on the subject, I read a statement about Guatemala which I find difficult to harmonise with your own existence. I can remember the passage where it says: 'The President rules by military force, and makes the legislative and judicial branches of the government mere tools for the accomplishment of his purposes. An elaborate spy system keeps close watch on all persons suspected of opposition to the government, and it is dangerous to express an opinion on political matters even in private conversation.' Yet you tell me that *La Opinion*, *Nuestro Diario* and *La Idea* are continually attacking the government."

"So does *El Diario de Guatemala* attack the administration, although it is a government newspaper," said Señor B. in a gruff voice. "If the administration proposes something against the public interest."

"Then you admit the government is not a democratically elected institution?" I asked in horror.

"Yes," replied Señor B. with vigor, "because the people are not yet educated for liberty. The government must be strong

to control the ambitions of so many men who want to get the Presidency. But it is part of the government policy to let everyone talk and criticise freely. The opposition papers make a noise, but nobody takes any notice of them."

"Then do I understand that the President has patronage?" I demanded. It seemed to me Señor B. would soon realise that he was making damaging admissions and would become taciturn.

"Of course he has," replied this astonishing citizen of Guatemala. "The same as in the United States and in Europe. He gives the positions in the government to his friends, not to his enemies. What would you expect him to do?"

"Then you think all is quite all right?" I suggested with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Not at all," retorted Señor B. "There is a great deal of bad, but some good. And what good would there be if the government were not strong and the revolutionaries held the power? Some good remains. We are getting roads and railways and there is liberty to talk."

"Then this about a spy system is not strictly true!" I insisted, and Señor B. suggested that talking out loud in a café on the main street of the capital ought to bring the spies out.

This feeling concerning a strong government I discovered to be fairly prevalent. It is certainly a painless kind of tyranny which now rules over the region once inhabited by the exclusive hierarchy of the old Maya Empire. This is not to say that life and property are insecure. On the contrary, an incident which took place two years ago will illustrate the difference between crime in the United States and in Central America.

The Pacific side of Guatemala has a very rapid drop in altitude on leaving the capital. The trip from, let us say Zacapa, which is half way between Guatemala City and the Gulf of Honduras, to San José on the Pacific is like traveling out of Nevada into California. Half way down one passes Lake Amatitlan, the motor road fairly over-

hanging the blue waters a sheer thousand feet in the air. From this lake a river supplies the water power to a hydro-electric plant at San Luis, within sight of the Pacific. I went to see it, and just before arriving we passed a cross set up on a rude stone pile beside the road. On the right a high bluff covered with trees and brush formed an ugly ambushade. The paymaster, arriving on horseback with the money for the men, on passing this place was shot dead from the bluff. The horse, with the saddle bags, galloped into the camp and the bandits got nothing. Within a day or so all four of them were surrounded by soldiers, caught, tried, set up against the bluff and shot.

It was obvious from this story that Guatemala is not a civilised country. It was a shocking tale of brutal tyranny to one living in the United States. There seems to be no scope for trial lawyers in Guatemala. There was no challenging of a jury for days, no bail for the murderers, no bondsmen, and as far as I could gather from conversations with Señor B. and his friend, practically no business is done by parole-boards.

III

Of course, this brought up the question which is an obsession with me in Latin-American capitals—the police. At every cross street stands a policeman, and walking in twos and threes from block to block are other policemen and soldiers. It must be confessed that these functionaries are very mild in their administration. Motorcars let out the inevitable Latin American screech and snarl lasting several seconds and pass the minions of the law with an inch to spare. Contradictory orders are given and argument ensues in which the drivers take precious little notice of the policeman. He is quite probably a relative of one of them.

Señor B. had no illusions about this state of affairs. My hint that an average New England city of one hundred thousand population, which is the size of Guatemala

City, would get along with fewer police, carried no significance to his mind. He said that the country had many bad men thrown out of employment by reason of a strong government making revolutions hopeless, nipping them in the bud in all directions in fact, and police were needed to protect lives and property. The country, he added, is prosperous and the people are disposed to let well alone.

I was to understand, of course, that word of these wondrous doings of the government, upon which Señor B. pours his benedictions, goes to the country people by word of mouth. They are not great readers. In fact, most of them are entirely unaware of the instructions for vaccination posted up in the *commandancias* of the various towns I passed through on a mule ride into Honduras. They are not to be regarded contemptuously on that account. I saw some of them in the Plaza de Armas one day and they struck me as somewhat interesting and even remarkable. They stood out in those busy arcades as an old-time Western cowboy would stand out in Fifth avenue.

They were, I should judge, fairly pure-bred Indians from beyond Chimaltenango. Their faces were dark olive in color, with the straight black hair like wire on their chins, and their black eyes roving with curiosity but without abasement over the strange gringo merchandise behind the great plate-glass windows of the stores. They moved slowly in a compact group, as Asiatics move through the streets of a seaport in England. Now and again one of them would raise a sinewy hand to indicate some unusually notable object. The women crouching by their baskets on the high kerb of the arcade regarded these outlandishly attired visitants with metropolitan amusement. And indeed the clothes of these *llaneros* caught the eye.

Imagine, if you can, a garment resembling in an uncanny way the dress suit of civilization, but fashioned of rough unwashed wool and dyed dull brown, and with the trousers ending at the knees.

Beneath this extraordinary affair, whose coat-tails are short like those of a tuxedo or an Eton jacket, is a spotlessly clean pink cotton suit like pajamas, which reaches to the sandalled feet. A red cotton handkerchief is knotted at the neck and a *jipyjapa* hat covers the long black hair. Over one shoulder is slung a knapsack containing equipment to ride from ocean to ocean, and in the long scarf about the waist is the inevitable *machete* in a leather scabbard.

They are a mild-looking lot and a superficial investigator might regard them as negligible in military operations. Nothing could be further from the truth. They have the qualities of the Boer farmers or the Afghan hill-men in war. They are at home in their almost incredible country. They can exist independent of supply trains and bases. They can ride, run or walk over the precipitous trails of the sierras, and they can go on forever.

IV

One of these peons, a casual muleteer of a village near Chiquimula, attached himself to our party when we were leaving that city for Copán. He walked. Hour after hour, a stick in his hand and a cigar in his mouth, he appeared to be a rather short gentlemen, with a large moustache, out for a stroll. For fourteen hours he kept up with us. Indeed he was often ahead, since there were short cuts of such appalling declivity that even a mule could not take them. Gregorio would vanish and I would have an uneasy feeling that I was brutally leaving him behind. This feeling would be accentuated as I watched my mule carefully picking his way among the harsh volcanic tufa and ashes which forms the crust of the Cordillera del Meréndon. And just as we reached the top and I was minded to mention our inhumanity to my companion, we would turn a corner and there, sitting like a tatterdemalion Saturn, would be Gregorio, patiently waiting for us to catch him up.

Where he went at night remains a mystery to me, even now. Our *mozo* and he

would vanish into an adobe hut. They never seemed to wash, or for that matter to remove their clothing. They certainly declined to bathe in the Copán river, alleging they feared catching a chill. The stranger did on one occasion to my knowledge chew a piece of sugar cane, which is an admirable dentifrice. But of the usual so-called human necessities he revealed an utter ignorance and it occurred to me that the suppression of insurrectionist bands of such men might prove a never-ending task for an army.

It was impossible, I discovered, to obtain from these men any definite conception of distance. Ask how many miles, or kilometers, and they will say one or two or twenty. They will say what they think your worship will tolerate. If, after hearing that the distance to Camotan is a mile, you cover ten more before the church, with its curious life-size statutes, comes into view, Gregorio shrugs and smiles placatingly. But if you say "How many hours?" he will give an approximately correct judgment. What is distance in a country where you can see your objective just after lunch, yet take till sun-down to draw up before the well in the plaza?

It is to be noted that Gregorio was not invited to join us, nor did he receive any salary for his hundred and twenty mile stroll. He merely longed for company, and all his friends being extremely bored with him, he attached himself to my retinue. All he owned he wore on his back—a shirt, a cotton suit, a *jipijapa* hat, a pair of sandals and an old military water-bottle slung over his shoulder by a cord. There are many like Gregorio in the country districts of Guatemala and Honduras. They work a little and wander a little. God takes care of them. The kindly fruits of the earth afford them sustenance. They cannot read or write. Sometimes they are swept away with a band of *insurrectos* which some *commandante*, incensed by the action of the government demanding an accounting of his district, has enrolled in the name of our old friend, *la Libertad*. These gentry do not

last long. They loot a little and murder a little and then when the army begins to move into their part of the country, they melt away. Señor B. reports in his paper that the Departamento has been pacified, and the leader of the revolution has escaped over the border into Honduras, or Salvador, as the case may be. Señor B. is against *insurrectos*. He says the government may be bad. All government is bad in so far as it has to be visible. But it would be worse, he thinks, if the rebels were allowed to gain ground, to amass money and arms—if somebody like Gregorio, for example, became a *commandante* and then a colonel, and perhaps a general. Men like Gregorio have become successful dictators, have slept in their uniforms in presidential palaces, and have held the lives of white men and high-bred girls in the hollow of their unwashed hands.

"Then the children of these people?" I say to Señor B. as I watch the flowers being watered in his patio. "Will they be fit for real representative government?"

Señor B. makes no direct reply to this. I suspect that his passion for representative government is not very strong. Allusion to the *quetzal* once more evokes a flicker of an eyelash.

"Their grandchildren, perhaps," he says.

"But how can you learn to swim without going into the river?" I argue, just to see what he says. This sophism of mine is so transparent that he makes no reply.

"We have a proverb," he tells me with apparent irrelevance. "When there is much water in the river, it makes little noise."

"You have a proverb for everything," I observe, as indeed Cervantes did also, but much earlier. "But you cannot deny that with the spread of education, military dictatorships are doomed. They will die in the free air of democratic discussion."

"We have a proverb for that too," says Señor B. solemnly. "*Cuando el telecote canto, el indio muere*. When the owl sings the Indian dies. This," he adds, resettling his glasses, "is not true, but it happens."

AMERICANA

ARIZONA

INTELLECTUAL activities of the Glendale Rotary Club, as reported by the *Arizona Republican*, of Phoenix:

President John Davis then called on the ladies to tell why they had married. Their spirit of entering into the programme was especially fine, their humor being well timed and chosen. The men were then called on to tell why they disliked their middle names.

ARKANSAS

THE worship of God in Little Rock, as described by the *Arkansas Gazette*:

At the Majestic Theater at 9:30 A. M. tomorrow the Harry G. Knowles Bible Class will observe its second annual Ford Sunday. All Ford dealers will be special guests. Main street, from Seventh to Ninth, will be reserved as parking space for Fords only. A three-pound box of chocolates will be given to the man driving the oldest Ford to the class, and a two-pound box of chocolates will be given to the man who brings the largest number of men to the class in his Ford. Mr. Knowles will teach the class.

CALIFORNIA

EXHILARATING tidings from the grape country:

All records for acreage devoted to the wine varieties will be broken this year. Evidence of the immense gains in acreages brought into bearing since Prohibition is given in the following table:

Year—	Wine Grape Acreages.
1919.....	97,000
1920.....	100,000
1921.....	105,000
1922.....	110,000
1923.....	113,198
1924.....	121,691
1925.....	137,749
1926.....	156,945

PUBLIC worship among the go-getting Christians of the rising town of Yucaipa, as reported by a press dispatch:

A burst of applause greeted the Rev. E. Haley when he concluded the Book of Revelations

in the annual non-stop Bible-reading ceremony here last night. The Methodist Church, where the reading had been held continuously since midnight Thursday, was packed as the Rev. Mr. Haley finished reading at 9.29 last night. The completion of the ceremony bettered the mark of last year by twenty minutes, the total time taken being 69 hours 20 minutes.

THE Hon. James Taber Fitzgerald, before the Masonic Club of Los Angeles:

Business is the art of living beautifully, constructively, helpfully, the material manifestation of right thinking.

DIVORCE news from San Francisco:

One radio is a household necessity, a second one is a luxury, but three of them are cause for divorce, Superior Judge Shortall ruled when he granted a decree to Mrs. Emily P. Gabriel, 250 McAllister street, from Harry A. Gabriel, manager of the savings department of a local bank. Gabriel had market reports coming through one set, bed time stories through another and helpful hints for housewives on the third instrument, all at the same time, and when he tuned in three jazz bands at once in the late hours of the night, his sleepless wife made up her mind to see a lawyer.

MORE from Los Angeles:

Mrs. Laura W. Wood, who testified that her husband, Melvin O. Wood, daily insisted she sit on his knee while he read the Bible, was granted a divorce today. "If I would not sit on his knee when he read he pushed me off on the floor," Mrs. Wood declared.

ANOTHER instalment from San Francisco:

To whom does the warm spot in the bed belong on a cold night—the wife who first climbed between the icy sheets or the husband who comes home later and demands the coveted place as lord of the household? Superior Judge Van Nostrand has the perplexing problem to decide in the divorce suit of Mrs. Anna Weisinger, 1210 Buchanan street, and Jack Weisinger. The testimony was that the police were called to the Weisinger home one night last Winter to quiet a war that started when Weisinger ordered his wife to move over and she insisted on remaining in the spot she had warmed up.