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Audit in Mexico

BY GEORGE R. MERCADER

ONE hour past the break of dawn, Jimmy Egan dozed uncomfortably in his seat in the large Douglas mainliner, bravely ignoring the pangs of an upset stomach. In the seat opposite, I gazed with dull eyes at the shroud-like fog which had enveloped the plane soon after its departure from Los Angeles, wondering vaguely whether it would be better to try to ward off the attack of an incipient cold or simply ignore it and let an apparently inevitable doom settle things once and for all.

It all started when the directors of the X Mining Company decided that twenty years was a long time to be without a profit-and-loss statement, and that a balance-sheet of recent date would, at the very least, reveal all kinds of surprises. Because a knowledge of Spanish was essential, Egan and I drew the plum, and after two weeks of preliminary work we made arrangements to enter Mexico.

The plane to Mazatlan was scheduled to leave the Glendale terminal at three-thirty in the morning, and we decided to stay up and do our sleeping en route. After consuming enough coffee during the evening to wipe out Brazil's surplus we arrived at the airport promptly at three, rather bedraggled, but still under our own power.

Weather conditions were bad and fog was on the ground, so our departure was postponed an hour. At four o'clock we were informed we would probably leave around five. In order to keep warm we walked around the large waiting

NOTE.—The situations and localities described in this article should not be construed as being representative of Mexico. They apply exclusively to a part of the country into which comparatively few white men, including natives of Mexico, have ventured, and whose inhabitants are chiefly of Indian descent.

room, hoping we would soon be off. By six o'clock our pacing had become mechanical, and when the porter announced that the plane was ready to leave, it took us several minutes to come out of our stupor. We tightened our safety belts as the powerful engines raced the big ship across the field, and we gradually relaxed as the plane gently pushed the earth away.

During the first leg of the flight the fog was always present, so that we would have been unable to enjoy the scenery even had we been in physical condition to do so. We crossed the border with disappointing uneventfulness, although at Hermosillo our baggage was thoroughly overhauled and our papers inspected, and we were given to understand, in a nice, friendly way, that the phrase in our passports, "without guarantee of repatriation," meant just that.

By Western Union, October 15, 1938
MRS. GEORGE R. MERCADER,
GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
ARRIVED MAZATLAN TWO THIRTY P.M.
LEAVING FOR MINE MONDAY MORNING
STOP NO OUTGOING MAIL FOR A WEEK SO
DONT WORRY IF YOU DONT HEAR FROM
ME

SIGNED

GEORGE.

Mazatlan, October 16, 1938
Dear Elizabeth:

The trip so far has been very pleasant, but it promises plenty of adventure and I am anxious to get started.

Mazatlan is quite a little city—one of its wonders is where it puts its thirty thousand inhabitants. Located on the coast, it looks like a page from history, and has that standard of living that Americans are wont to call charming

but which they never quite adopt for themselves. Its narrow streets, though dingy in appearance, are well maintained, and the cement and stucco houses, joined one to the other as if from a protective instinct, evoke in the newcomer a feeling of intrigue, which is further enhanced by the iron bars on the windows that make of each house a miniature prison.

We were received at the hotel as cordially as a pay check. It had been closed for three weeks on account of strikes. This explained why, as I went to take a shower, I received instead of the anticipated bath a delegation of tiny cockroaches that hurriedly scampered away in all directions.

The pilot whom our insurance stipulates is to fly us to the mine is not in town, and we have to fly with another pilot—which means we are not insured. Jimmy is writing the office now to have the policies canceled.

The place where the plane lands is situated in a canyon, directly beyond a rather sharp bend and, like the canyon itself, is just about wide enough for the plane. The pilot said he always feels his way before entering the gorge, and if the wind is too strong he turns back rather than risk being plastered against a cliff. He seems to have a good reputation.

We have already met the mine superintendent, who happened to be in Mazatlan, and he is a friendly sort of chap. According to him, most of the trouble out here hinges around the labor situation. He told us that a few days ago one of the laborers placed a bomb under the assistant manager's house, causing some damage. A sense of humor is going to be a big help down here.

Will write often, but from now on the mail service may be very uncertain. Love to you and dad.

GEORGE.

When we arrived at the landing field early next morning, and the so-called

airplane was wheeled out, we gave ourselves up for dead. It was a ten-year-old model, with open cockpits, the passengers and the baggage being shoved into the front one, the pilot sitting in the rear. The safety belt was not long enough to encircle both Egan and me, but that made no difference to us since in our own eyes we had ceased to exist anyway.

Much to our surprise, the crate actually took off and we were soon skimming over raw, jagged peaks that seemed to reach out like rocky tentacles in watchful anticipation of a long-desired morsel. At that early morning hour the pallid flames of the sun, shining on the peaks, created light, frolicsome shadows, which darted into the ravines and disappeared, only to reappear again in ever-changing patterns and hues. The sheer beauty of this spectacle of nature was adequate compensation for our previous fears and, as the plane plunged into the canyon and our view was cut off by the walls of rock that rose on either side, our only regret was that we might not return to tell the wonders of that flight.

October 20, 1938

Dear Liz:

Am only half sure that the above is the correct date—time plays such queer tricks down here. By counting back, though, I believe I have hit the right number.

We arrived Monday morning after a very pleasant flight. The landing field is nothing but a shaved-off ledge on the side of a mountain. It was on our left as we approached, and the pilot maneuvered his entry by flying just past it, then making a sharp turn to the right that skimmed the wall of the canyon, at the same time losing altitude so that at the completion of his circle the wheels were on the edge of the field. Very skilful flying.

Two sturdy little mules were waiting to carry us to the mine, and we cut quite

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a dashing figure on the trail. We went downhill all the way, the mine being located on the river bed, and we made it in two hours.

Our house is not bad, chiefly because I had expected a thatched hut. Its front part is supported by iron pipes driven into the rock, and even though it wobbles like a suspension bridge, it is quite comfortable. It is a sort of hotel; two of the engineers and some of the office men live here.

But this place! It's even worse than I had imagined, simply because one can't imagine a place like this. To appreciate it you have to clamber down the rocky paths wrested from the mountain side, down into this crater where the sky is but a hole above, and hear the unceasing labor of the mill going day and night, day and night, and see the sweaty, reeking devils coming out of the mine like rats out of a hole.

Our auditing is proceeding very slowly, for obvious reasons, but we are doing the best we can.

We don't venture out after dark very often, as we have no flashlight yet, and if the power plant fails (which it does at irregular intervals), all one can do is sit down on the nearest rock and wait for daybreak, as one false step in the dark and they'd never find the corpus. Besides, these barbarians spend half the night shooting their pop-guns up and down the canyon. Their ammunition seems inexhaustible. We feel we are living on borrowed time anyhow, and there's no use borrowing any more than we have to.

I wish now I had brought my movie camera, although I would have to be very careful in using it because of the sensitivity of the people. So far, we have made friends with the engineers, the doctor, etc., that stay here—and they are very amiable—but we ventured out into the colony a couple of days ago and we were stabbed with looks which were too painful, so we decided not to return lest they become solid.

Write often and keep me posted on the news. Jimmy's regards and my love to you and dad.

GEORGE.

It took us only three meals at the "hotel" to realize that if we did not suffer an accidental demise the food certainly would perform the trick. Partly because of the inbred addiction of the natives to a starchy diet, and partly because of the lack of fresh vegetables, our fare consisted chiefly of tortillas and beans. The very thought of having to stuff ourselves with that for a month or more was enough to make one wilt, but fortunately we discovered a small adobe store perched higher up in the canyon that sold canned fruit—at a price. We stored a supply in our room, and every day thereafter we fortified ourselves before each meal with a generous helping of peaches or apricots, which spoiled our appetites and enabled us to carry on without corn. For water, which was unfit to drink unless boiled, we substituted beer, which could be obtained—also at a price.

Once our helpful intentions were firmly implanted in the minds of the accounting force, Egan left for Mexico City via the mule-plane route, leaving me the audit while he transacted other business.

October 27, 1938

Dear Elizabeth:

Your air mail of the seventeenth just arrived, which was quite a surprise because the plane was not expected to make a trip today.

Since Jimmy left, the days differ from one another only in that each seems longer than the preceding one. The weather here is magnificent—the balmiest air I have ever breathed. Some nights the wind becomes a miniature gale, and I have to tuck the bedsheets well in to keep them from blowing off.

Am not using a blanket, although it is rather cool—the friction of the air rushing past must generate a certain amount of heat!

Had a mild shock the other night when I went to the bathroom. I heard a noise at the window and, looking up, saw a prodigious rat with its front legs propped up against the screen. Don't know who was more surprised, the rat or me. They grow large out here and have succeeded in chasing most of the cats away, so that now they have free access to the storerooms. If I thought one of them had a piece of cheese cached somewhere I'd be tempted to follow him.

I took time off for a brief ascent into the colony yesterday. Some of these poor natives seem only one step removed from beasts, and live in their hovels more or less like wild animals. I suppose they can talk, but the sounds they utter are more like grunts. A good many are drunk most of the time, and the hospital is always full of victims who bring in their parts to be sewed up; I think they should hire a few seamstresses and put the hospital on a mass-production basis. For instance, yesterday afternoon a laborer came into the office to borrow a few pesos on his wages. Last night at nine he was taken to the hospital with his stomach slit from hip to hip. The fellow who did it was sent off to jail, from where, in traditional form, he will probably be released in about two months.

The wind just blew my lamp off the dresser and onto the bed. Some fun!

The incessant grinding of that accursed mill has penetrated my senses to such an extent that when the power fails for a few minutes, and the mill stops, I feel as though I were in a vacuum. Its weird noises somehow suggest the bowels of hell, with devils dancing and mingling their discordant shrieks with the groaning of the damned.

What news is there in the outside world? The one night I got near a radio

(the manager's) the power went off and stayed off all night, and I did not get to hear the news. Is Roosevelt still president?

As soon as Egan gets back we'll button up the job and perhaps we can get away by the middle of next month. Christmas at home will be a welcome gift indeed!

Love to all,

GEORGE.

October 30, 1938

Dear Elizabeth:

From the sound of your letter you must not have received any of mine; this makes either the fourth or fifth. Can't imagine where they are if you haven't gotten them.

Jimmy, I hope, will return tomorrow; if he doesn't, he is in for a long mule ride, as I am told it is going to be the plane's last trip before overhauling. I don't see how it has flown this long.

I took a little exploration jaunt into the mine today. Unlike the mines one sees in movies this one has no elevators or trains crowded with men going in and out. Your two feet take you everywhere. The main haulage level is almost two miles in length, then there are staggered cuts straight up through the heart of the mountain for about five hundred feet. From the way I feel I must have covered every inch of ground. It took four and a half hours.

The climb to the higher levels was by means of ladders—some wooden, others made of cable and ropes—braced to the footwall, and, in places, the cuts were just wide enough for one person to squeeze through. In the narrowest parts the cockroaches seemed to be the thickest, and clung to the ladders, and at each rung we mashed a handful. The heat at times was almost unbearable, and most of the miners worked stripped to the waist, their sweat pouring out in streams. It was particularly hard on me, being a neophyte.

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Out of sheer boredom I went to the local "cine" last night to see "Santa," a Mexican picture made in 1930. The show consists of one obsolete projector set between two silos, the screen a tattered canvas stretched on a wooden frame, with the sky and the stars for a roof. The picture was touching, especially as the film broke twenty-three times, and in addition, an intermission was necessary at the end of each reel. During these intervals a raucous horn behind the screen screeched out Mexican hill-billy music, which at times they failed to turn off when the picture started again. This didn't matter much, however, since the dialogue was so unintelligible that almost all the lines had to be explained by written titles. Tonight, I understand, they are showing "Dirigible," which I saw in Puerto Rico in 1930. I won't miss it if I can.

If you feel like sending me anything I wish you'd rush me a carton of Chesterfields—before I have to start smoking corn.

Hoping to be home soon,

GEORGE.

November 2, 1938

Dear Elizabeth:

Our plane made its last trip a couple of days ago, in more ways than one, as its motor went dead and it crashed before it could reach the field. When I heard the news my blood froze, since I was expecting Jimmy; but he was detained in the city, and the plane was bringing only freight. The nearest plane now is one that serves another mining town located about six hours away by mule—perhaps Jimmy will arrive on it today, but as all the telegraph lines have been down for about a week, we have been completely cut off.

Mail day around here is like Christmas. Every one hovers around the mail pouch until the last letter is distributed, and the sad faces of those left out would be funny to watch if it were not for the

fact that mine is, as often as not, one of them.

In this place one forgets there is a sky. I was almost surprised today when I looked up and saw it. It's the shiniest blue I have ever seen, at times a brilliant emerald hue, then when it storms it closes up and becomes the threatening gray of the river. Most of the time, though, I see only the vertical cliffs that surround us like prison walls, and make us feel as though we were in a huge dungeon with a skylight, beyond which lies freedom and sunshine and laughter.

Am working a little overtime to get the job finished soon—hope my next letter will have a definite date of departure.

Lovingly,

GEORGE.

P.S. You might tell dad to attach the lawn mower to the running board of the car, so that he can cut the grass on the edge of the driveway when he backs the car out in his erratic manner.

November 7, 1938

Dearest Elizabeth:

Our wedding anniversary was very dull for me, the only thing that relieved the monotony being a first-class stomach ache, brought on undoubtedly by the beer I have had to substitute for water.

Jimmy finally got back, and you should have seen him when he arrived, after his all-day jaunt on a mule! He looked like an accident with a suit of clothes, and had to take to bed for a while.

This is just a note to ask you not to write after you receive this letter; we expect to leave next week, if we can find some way of getting out of here, so I have no way of knowing where I'll be when, or why. Just expect me when you see me.

Always,

GEORGE.

On the twelfth of November we said adios to our newly acquired friends, and started our trek over the mountains, leaving early in the morning in order to arrive at the other mining town the same day. The little caravan included, besides ourselves, a native guide and four mules.

We followed the river bottom, crisscrossing the stream about thirty times in the wake of our guide, who seemed impatient with our slow progress. Huge boulders of solid rock thrust their domes out of the murky water and made our way a difficult and treacherous one. At times, dips and hollows scarcely discernible caused the mules to stumble and snort, making us forget for the moment our physical discomforts.

For what seemed like miles on end we rode thus, the slow, patient clop, clop of the mules accentuating with rhythmic staccato the rustling murmur of the stream; then, unexpectedly, the canyon opened on a panorama of yellow, rolling hills, flooded in warm sunshine.

We rested a few minutes, then started the slow ascent. The hills grew into mountains, and the trail narrowed down to a three-foot width. Higher and higher we went, winding our way through perilous embankments that dropped vertically down to the river four hundred feet below. We rode with our left legs constantly dangling over the edge of the abyss, our backs hunched, our heads bent to one side to avoid the jutting fragments of rock through which the trail had been hacked.

A packtrain of donkeys coming from the opposite direction almost ended Egan's trip. The heavily laden animals had to be led past us one by one, their eyes shielded so they would not catch sight of our mules, which we herded close against the wall. One of the donkeys managed to catch a glimpse of Egan's mount after having passed mine safely, and without warning sank its teeth into the mule's rump; whereupon the mule turned, stood square across the

trail, braced its head against the cliff, and kicked. It missed the donkey, but almost toppled backward over the side.

The descent was uneventful, and a few hours later, grimy and stiff, we entered the village. We obtained lodgings in the hotel—an old, rambling, one-story structure, with all the rooms opening on the street. There was no running water, but we were given a pitcher and a bowl and instructed to throw the water out the door when we were through.

In order to enjoy a semblance of privacy we propped chairs against the two doors of our room, one of which led out to the street and the other into the patio. The chairs were the only things available that would keep the doors from falling in on us, as neither door had a lock, and the one facing the street did not even have hinges.

Our first intention had been to rest there over Sunday, and take the plane to Mazatlan Monday morning; but when we saw the dinner table, where the flies outnumbered the guests four to one, and we were served the inevitable tortillas, we decided to look for a way out. It was purely our good luck (and about time, too) that on Sunday the plane was going to make a special trip to carry a load of zinc back to Mazatlan, so we hastened to make reservations on it; something that was utterly unnecessary, as we discovered later, since the plane was a freighter, and the passengers simply picked out a sack of corn or a bundle of wire to sit on, propping their feet against anything they could find, usually the back of another passenger.

Sleep was slow in coming that night, as our cots were none too soft and our bones were all too tender; to make matters worse, the weekly public dance was in full swing in the plaza across the street. Along about midnight, however, we were beginning to doze off when we were disturbed by the sound, or rather, the feeling, of someone trying to push open the door which led to the patio.

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We heard the chair begin to give way, and then Jimmy called out demanding to know who it was. A man's voice answered us, saying he was bringing us our nightcups. We lay there for a few seconds trying to figure out what the man could mean by nightcups! Then I remembered seeing in the outhouse that afternoon, piled about twelve-high, a stack of nightcups!

Early the next morning we were taken in a truck, like cattle to a county fair, to the small plateau that served as a landing field. Compared to the one where we had first landed, this one looked like a first-class airport. At least,

it was level. They made short work of us there, made a guess or two as to our weight and that of our baggage, then herded us, bag and baggage, into the plane, where we found comfortable seats on two large zinc boxes, which we thus kept from sliding around during the flight.

Although we were not quite sure the plane would be able to lift its huge cargo before it reached the end of the runway, we felt content for the first time in a month; and when the ship finally left the ground, I leaned over to Jimmy's zinc box to catch these words: "Some fun, eh kid?"