



# I Remember Fiorello

by Ernest Cuneo

*In 1931 while he worked as a reporter by day, and studied law at night, Ernest Cuneo met Fiorello LaGuardia and the two men started a lifelong friendship. Cuneo was decorated for OSS service in World War II. He still practices law and is also President of the North American Newspaper Alliance.*

**W**HEN I STARTED WORKING for Fiorello LaGuardia, I was a law student awaiting admission to the Bar. Fiorello held an enviable position at the time: He controlled the balance of power in the 77th Congress. His bewildering footwork was beyond the comprehension of President Hoover—and some of his pronouncements were equally a mystery to me.

Money meant absolutely nothing to him. “Do you know who the wealthiest man in the world is?” he asked me once. “Gandhi. The only thing he owns is a sheet. And nobody would think of depriving him of it.”

Fiorello had very little use for bookmakers because they battered on a human weakness. He had a scheme for ruining bookmaking once and for all: Everybody should bet. Those who won would insist on being paid off, and those who lost would refuse to pay up.

“That’d fix ’em,” he said.



*LaGuardia*

**Baseball crowds loved to watch him mug.**

LaGuardia sometimes patronized a modest upstairs speak-easy after a particularly hard day's work. He was a violent opponent of Prohibition and made no bones about it.

When he first invited me to accompany him, his words on entering were, "I'll have a license up on that mirror again in a year." This grumbled promise seemed to ease a slight twinge of conscience.

Before ordering, he said, "Ernest, what do you drink when you drink with your father?"

"My father doesn't drink."

"That settles it," he said. And to the bartender: "Give this boy a ginger ale, and me an Old Fashioned."

Though I very seldom drank, I told Fiorello heatedly that I often had a drink, and an Old Fashioned at that, and if it was all the same to him I'd have one right now.

He looked at me quizzically for a moment and apparently something in my rebellious face made him change his mind. He gave the bartender the slightest nod of acquiescence.

The drinks arrived. We drank in silence and I felt pretty good about things until he turned to me and said sternly, "Now, I'm going to have another one and you're *not*."

When we left, Fiorello said, "Good night, Ernest. And behave yourself, or I'll tell your father."

We laughed and parted.



## *LaGuardia*

In his public life, Fiorello never lost the common touch. As 1932 groaned in, with bread lines multiplying daily, many people came to his office for help. One cold winter night a big man in blue overalls appeared. He had walked down from Harlem to see Mr. LaGuardia, he said, because his kids were freezing, the gas had been turned off and he needed a quarter.

At the mention of the cold kids, Fiorello's hand was on his wallet. But, abruptly, he started to give the man hell. He said that even if the kids were warm they would still be hungry. It was a strange performance. I think Fiorello had been torn inside by the story, and got mad so he would not cry.

He handed the man some bills and told him to get home fast. Then he suddenly asked if the gas company had given him any notice.

The man said no, none.

Fiorello took down his name and address and curtly motioned him out.

As soon as the man was gone, disregarding the lateness of the hour, Fiorello called the Public Service Commissioner in Albany. Miles of insulation must have peeled off the telephone wires from the blast that went over them.

Within an hour, an emergency crew turned on the man's gas and he telephoned to express in a heavy, inarticulate way, his gratitude.

Fiorello listened impatiently for a moment, then snapped: "Now make sure those kids get fed. If you can't . . . come and see me again." And he slammed down the receiver.

One afternoon a young man asked to see Congressman LaGuardia, refusing to state his business or name or to speak with anyone else. He was still there, waiting, when the office closed.

As we went out the door, he dropped into step beside us. "Mr. LaGuardia," he said solemnly as we walked, "a dog bit me."

"He did?" said Fiorello incredulously. "Did you get his name?"

"No," said the young man, "I didn't."





**Even smoking was a theatrical gesture.**

“Well,” said Fiorello, “how can I do anything for you if you don’t know the dog’s name?”

“I guess you’re right,” the young man said soberly. “I should have gotten his name.”

LaGuardia nodded vigorously and the young man walked away deep in thought.

LaGuardia’s lifetime devotion to aviation began when he was counsel for an airplane company. Within a couple of years he had learned to fly. When World War I came he was appointed Commanding Officer of the U. S. Air Branch on the Italian-Austrian front.

After the war, he heatedly supported Billy Mitchell’s thesis that the air age was not only here to stay but that air power was the country’s chief military weapon of offense and defense.

In 1925, he somehow contrived to appear before Mitchell’s court-martialing board to deliver a fiery tirade. A senior general questioned the propriety of statements Fiorello had made to the press. “Are you



## *LaGuardia*

quoted correctly in the newspapers, sir," he growled, "in calling me nothing but a be-ribboned dog robber?"

"No, sir," snapped Fiorello, glaring back. "I was not aware you had any ribbons."

At exactly midnight on January 1, 1934, Fiorello H. LaGuardia took the oath of office as Mayor of New York City. At exactly one minute after midnight, he ordered the arrest of the most notorious gangster in town—Lucky Luciano. This jet-propelled momentum never let up during the next 12 years.

Girl laundry workers went on strike because they were badly underpaid and their working conditions were very poor. Fiorello became their vigorous champion. Under the guise of keeping order, he practically blockaded the laundries with squads of police.

The laundry owners came to City Hall to protest that he was interfering in a labor dispute, and that the city was supposed to be neutral. Fiorello heartily agreed. The labor-union leader tried to say something, but Fiorello told him to shut up.

The laundry owners then produced a written request that the city withdraw all support from either side. Almost instantly, Fiorello announced that the application was granted; the city henceforth would be absolutely neutral. Thereupon he picked up the telephone and blandly ordered the Water Commissioner to turn off the water in all laundries, since the city was neutral in the fight.

The laundry owners gave up on the spot.

**A**S MAYOR, LaGuardia insisted on City Hall support for honest cops. Early in his administration, a physician who was a casual personal acquaintance got a ticket for illegal parking. The doctor forcefully told the young patrolman that the ticket was unacceptable, whereupon the boy arrested him and brought him to the station house.

The physician reported this grievous act to Fiorello who called



*LaGuardia*

the station house and asked to speak to the young patrolman. The captain of the precinct came on, all apologies, instead. He explained that the rookie just hadn't known any better.

Fiorello hit the ceiling. "He's a better cop than you are," he stormed, "and I called up to tell him I am sending him a box of cigars. He's the kind of cop I want—and you're not!"

The rookie got his cigars, delivered significantly by the Mayor's car, and Fiorello very nearly broke the captain.

The Mayor's office gave LaGuardia plenty of opportunity to indulge his fondness for the spotlight. Conducting the combined Police and Sanitation departments' bands to a capacity Carnegie Hall audience was meat and drink to him.

Before this stupendous spectacle got under way, the stage manager asked Fiorello how he wanted the spotlights used. "Shall I play them on you as you come down the aisle, and follow you right up to the podium, Mr. Mayor?"

"Hell no!" said Fiorello. "Just treat me like Toscanini!"

Colonel David "Mickey" Marcus, who served as Fiorello's Commissioner of Correction, discovered when World War II came along that he couldn't really get away from LaGuardia anywhere. Mark Clark had just taken over Naples and Marcus was made military governor. He received a cablegram from Fiorello reading: "Reliably informed 150,000 women and children without shoes Naples area. Demand explanation."

Mickey cabled back: "We took over this city only 24 hours ago and we sure as hell didn't steal them."

He received this tart reply: "I want a good explanation, not a poor excuse."

As head of UNRRA, LaGuardia's slapdash ebullience saved precious weeks and miles of red tape. In a critical channel was too slow a needed—a very substantial quantity of it. Peru, he was told, had cotton for sale.

Negotiations through the usual



## LaGuardia

channels was too slow a procedure for Fiorello; he wanted the cotton at once. He got it, too—horse trading via long distance with the President of Peru, Manuel Pradoy Ugarteche. He threw diplomatic protocol out the window by beginning the conversation: “Hello, Manny. Listen—”

The last time I saw Fiorello was in Paris in the summer of 1946—a little over a year before he died. When I walked into his characteristically plain office at UNRRA, I didn’t like the way he looked. I had often seen him tired, but some of the old resilience seemed to have gone.

On the surface, though, nothing had changed. He had heard how I had come to Paris, and before I could say hello he wanted to know where I got off grabbing an Army plane for myself, and who did I think I was, anyway?

We talked about his work with UNRRA, and the political scene back home. When I stood up to go, he paused at the door and said, “Do you know where you are?”

“Well sure,” I said, completely at sea.

“I’ll tell you where you are. You are in Paris. In *Paris*,” he growled, gripping my arm. “So you behave yourself, Ernest. Or I’ll tell your father!”



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