

Collier's

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BORDER PATROL

By Walter Davenport



Family of aliens caught crossing the border is escorted to Border Patrol headquarters where they will be questioned

You've got to be young—and healthy. You may be bored or you may be shot. You'll freeze and fry. It won't make a man of you because you're that if you get in. So, meet the U. S. Border Patrol

ALL night we watched the blue-black sky. Through the glasses the darkness was heavier. Like Old John said in the Sabinas saloon that morning, in that part of Texas you could see farther and see less than anywhere else in the world and, he said, at night it only got farther and farther and less and less.

Anyway, it was a swell night to look for fugitive airplanes. There wasn't a star. There wasn't a cloud. It was just a clear, chill Rio Grande night. The silence, the solitude, the immense distances made us solemn. Hard peering at the sky made us drowsy. The Border Patrol inspectors told us that we shouldn't be afraid of missing the plane if it came because in that vast silence we'd hear its croon for miles and in that black-out we'd see her lights at ten thousand feet and more. Usually she flew high, taking no chances of identification. Anyway, she covered her letters and numbers.

So there we lay in the Texas waste, west of the Pecos River, not far from the ghost cow town of Langtry, now a museum piece. Ten minutes south and we'd be on the poverty-stricken edge of the gulch that holds the shallow Rio Grande. The river was mocking its name, a forlorn ramble of jaundiced water. The plane we watched for belonged in that setting—sinister, mysterious, outlaw. She had flown north two nights before. Where she had gone the Border Patrol didn't know. If she held to habit she'd be coming south tonight.

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Everything Strictly Undercover

Officers of the U. S. Border Patrol ride the fence on the international boundary near El Paso, Texas. Smuggling by land is a near-hopeless job despite the 2,200 miles of border that must be watched constantly



Who owned her, who operated her, we didn't know. The Border Patrol has no planes and couldn't scout her. What she carried into the United States we didn't know—maybe aliens, maybe narcotics, maybe both. What she carried into Mexico, well, that was more mystery—maybe arms, maybe fugitives. It's been going on for months.

The Mexico Border Patrol knew pretty well where one of her Mexican bases was—a well-engineered landing field some fifteen or twenty miles south of the river, on a high-level mesa southwest of Villa Acuna in the state of Coahuila. They had airplane photos of that one and were very reticent about how they'd got them. All they'd say was that "it has been managed." Mexico doesn't want you flying around shooting pictures of her. And the Patrol was certain that there were other bases although their undercover men—Mexicans—had never got to them, saying that it was worth a man's life. They said, too, that to get to the known landing field while the plane was there was suicide. The Patrol had asked the United States Army to pick up the mysterious one, but the Army apparently hadn't gotten around to it.

So we still looked for the fugitive plane, letting our imagination ride wild and wondering whether it was Secretary Hull's Good Neighbor Policy or just Washington's absorption in what was happening in Europe that caused the Army Intelligence or the State Department to ignore her. Well, that was none of our business. Nobody of any consequence was creeping into the United States from Mexico by land. The earth-bound Border Patrol was seeing to that. But the arms of the wingless Patrol were not long enough to reach into the skies. So we just waited and talked.

Two German ranch owners in the Sierras de los Burros in Mexico had but recently made contact with the plane, or one of the planes, and one of them had given the pilot a letter in code to be mailed in the United States to the German's son in Del Rio, Texas. It was simple code. The Patrol had it although they wouldn't say how they'd got it. And nobody seemed to care. They told us that sometimes it doesn't do to ask questions. Here was the note and the decoders made short work of it. It meant so little, anyway, that you wondered why it was sent in code.

"Johnny," it read, "tell my friend that it is pretty hard up here but I am going behind the coyote but I cannot go fast. Write me with care."

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A course in jujitsu helps to prepare the rookie patman for the rough stuff he is likely to encounter

But the mystery of the plane remained the same. The Border Patrol knew who Johnny was. They know why everybody is on the Border. But Johnny had been warned and when they had gone after him he had fled. It was likely that he'd lammed out to Mexico because, as we'll show you presently, sifting in and out of Mexico by night is childishly simple. At least to wade or paddle across the Rio Grande to Mexico after dark is easy. Coming north is another matter. You're pretty sure to be caught unless, of course, you're smuggled in by plane.

So there we lay in the vast black-out of the Mexican Border waiting for that hot southbound plane. Even if she carried nothing but the pilot between her great silver wings she was a lawbreaker. The law says that any plane crossing the international boundary must report to that Immigration station nearest to the spot where she crosses. This plane was paying no attention to that. She knew what she was doing and she knew when to do it. Months ago, two Coast Guard planes came west from the Gulf and lay in wait for her. They were camouflaged and waited at different places, avoiding the Army's emergency landing field at Dryden because anybody could see them there. But while they were on the scene the mystery planes didn't fly. And just to show you that they knew what they were doing, the hot ships took to the air again the night after the Coast Guard pilots went back to the Gulf, disgusted.

While we waited the Border Patrol's own transmitters cut in on our radio with the news that Jesus Argueta Pereyra of Las Minas, Mexico, and Sanderson, Texas, had been apprehended as he emerged from the Rio Grande on the Texas side and that the United States government proposed to do something of a guinea-pig nature about him.

The Sad Case of Señor Pereyra

The news demoted the plane we were looking for to minor importance. For a person of so little moment in the great world, Jesus Argueta Pereyra had stepped smack into the middle of international trouble. All by himself, Señor Pereyra was the makings of an international incident. It just happened to be Señor Pereyra. His citizenship status and moral estate is precisely that of thousands of Mex-Americans living precariously on and off the north bank of

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the Rio Grande. Anyway, he was in for plenty of trouble.

To begin with, he was one of the Border Patrol's foremost nuisances—shrewd as a hungry crow. In addition he was concededly an American citizen, having a claim to having been born in The States. Moreover, he was a Mexican citizen, being the son of Mexican nationals. Mexico considers all Mexicans born of Mexican parents her citizens forever, whether they be born outside Mexico or whether they become naturalized abroad. When the United States had decreed that all aliens living within her borders be registered, Señor Pereyra produced a birth certificate purporting to sustain his claim to having been born in Texas. When it came time for all Americans between the ages of 21 and 35 to register for Army service, Señor Pereyra fled to Mexico, saying with the poetry of his ancestors that he'd be the son of a thousand ungraceful harlots if he'd bear arms against his fellow men. But Señor Pereyra, no hand at reading the papers nor heeding spoken tidings, had not heard that Mexico, too, had adopted conscription. He did not hear it until he ran into a Mexican *rurale*, a sort of straw-hat militiaman, in Piedras Negras across the river from Eagle Pass. And then there was trouble.

Somehow, and quickly, Señor Pereyra collected a handful of pesos. With these he ransomed himself and his captor was properly appreciative. And now Señor Pereyra was back in The States again. His return to Texas was swift but not thoughtless. He had accepted the lesser of two evils. If he became a soldier of Mexico he would receive, with more or less regularity, about six cents a day plus a can of beans and a bale of frijoles. In the United States the soldier would get a dollar a day and, unlike the Mexican soldier's rations, the gringo ate heavy and often. In Mexico the likelihood of meeting a soldier's glorious but inconvenient fate would not be remote. General Juan Andreu Almazan, the defeated candidate for the presidency, had sworn that he'd been robbed of the honor and proposed to establish justice with fire. In the United States the soldier stood an excellent chance of living indefinitely. And if it came to the worst, if he were convicted of failing to register for the gringo draft—ah, well, one does not do badly in the American jails.

Pity for the Poor Aliens

All of the Border Patrol inspectors in our party knew Jesus Argueta Pereyra and all of them had definite ideas what should be done with him. We won't go into that because the Patrol inspectors have had it dinned into their ears that they owe as much devotion to the alien illegally entering as they do to the citizen. Last June the Patrol was lifted out of the Labor Department into the Department of Justice, and in the heart of the Patrol there is the hope that soon they may be permitted wider discretion in handling chronic illegal-entry cases. No rough stuff, mind you, just a little firmness.

There was, for example, the case of the Mexican blind beggar who had smuggled himself into the United States six times to be wept over by the Labor Department's social workers. And, finally, he had become one of the Department's many Hardship Cases. There was no question that these cases were in the country illegally, almost all of them

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Mexicans; but, ruled the department, it would be a hardship to send them back to Mexico. So they became Hardship Cases and could thumb their noses at the Immigration people and the Border Patrol. And they could go on relief, vouched for by little Mexican-American (Amex) politicians to whom mayors, governors and members of Congress were beholden for Amex votes.

You'll find them in almost every Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California town, from the Gulf to the Pacific. We have time to look at one of these, Eagle Pass, a snug, hospitable Texas town on the banks of the Rio Grande. At relief headquarters there'll be a thick queue of Mexicans waiting to be provisioned, the men thin, ragged, patient; the women fat, better mended but just as emotionless. They have bags, baskets, buckets and children on their backs, in their arms, on their heads. They wait for hours. Time is nothing. Those inside loll against the wall of the building. Those outside lean against the lollers. You may walk the line of them and the officers will call them off as you watch and listen—the aliens, the Hardship Cases, the nonresidents. More than seventy-five per cent of them will be aliens, or in America illegally, or Hardship Cases whom the United States cannot bear to deport.

And, presently, five or six trucks rumble past, bound for the onion and spinach fields, crammed with Mexicans who live south of the river but who have work cards permitting them to commute to and from Old Mexico daily. The relief line comes to life. It straightens up and shouts obscene encouragement at the truck. The onion and spinach harvesters get seventy-five cents or a dollar a day and it wasn't so long ago that many of the reddish-brown men and women in the relief line rode in these trucks. But they learned. They learned first that the money they got in the spinach and onion fields could be pure velvet; that on their way back to Old Mexico in the evening they could stop at the gringo relief and stock up and carry free gringo groceries back to Mexico where they could eat some and peddle some.

And they learned that after the onions and spinach were harvested they could drop out in Mexican colonies on the American side of the river, living on relief, until caught by the Patrol. The chances would be good then that if the border authorities ordered them deported they could appeal to Washington and a review board would brood over their case. Sometimes the board would brood for months. Sometimes it took years.

And then there were chances that the review board would make them Hardship Cases. Or if they had to go

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back they'd renew their worker-commuter cards if they could. If the Immigration officers demurred, American shopkeepers on the United States side of the river raised a row, writing to their congressmen, to Washington. The tradesmen wanted the money the Mexicans spent on the American side, and you can't blame them for that. Why let the Mexicans spend American wages in Mexico when they would rather spend it here?

There's Safety in the Air

That was the talk we had before the plane came—that and the hard lives the border offered to the Northern wives of rookie Patrol inspectors. We heard it before we saw it—a lonely drone, clear and tuneful, off to the northwest. At first we weren't sure. It might be one of the big transcontinental commercials off her course, although the starless night was too fine for a pilot to lose his way. But we were sure when the song of the motor swelled and we saw her lights. She was headed for Mexico and would cross the border above the parched, gaping mouth of Lozier Canyon where it yawned into the river gulch. The blackness was too deep for guessing her altitude. We thought she was flying rather low because it wasn't hard to see her beautiful silhouette silvered against the sky. It doesn't matter, but she certainly told us how small and helpless we were. We watched and listened for ten minutes and then she was gone, maybe to land on the high runway south of Shumla or perhaps to go on to another field in the state of Nuevo Leon, nearer to the Pan-American Highway, the only all-paved road from the Rio Grande to Mexico City.

Your guess is as good as anyone's. If you'll believe all you hear it's as simple as an apple to buy forged birth certificates in Mexico, and temporary visiting papers or even passports. If you try to get by with the latter on the international bridges or in American side border towns you'll be out of luck. But far inland it is not so difficult, particularly if you are set down by plane at some isolated spot, met by friends, whisked off to a city. If you try it by motorcar from the border, the Patrol's back-up stations will get you, the back-up stations being located on all main roads; fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty miles inland. But only the impoverished Mexicans, who can't afford air travel and must depend upon the noisy jaloppies of their friends for travel, are caught on the roads or sneaking along the right of way of the high-tension power lines across the pasture lands and through the wilderness.

Well, the plane was gone. She was a lawbreaker, whatever her mission. She hadn't reported to anybody, had no permission to cross the border. She could get that only after inspection at an Immigration station. She'd be back in a couple of nights with her license numbers shrouded, ignoring the American customs and carrying what she was carrying.

Mexico's Ungrateful Guests

Down at Santa Clara in Chihuahua, at one of the colonies set up by the Mexican government for the refugees from Republican Spain, there was nothing resembling peace and concord. Even the Mexican officials across the river would

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tell you that, raising their shoulders and saying that Spaniards were ever bad for Mexico. The gringo, the English, the Germans were bad enough with their pockets bulging with gold and the way they corrupted the Mexican officials and despised the Mexican peon. But the Spaniard out of Spain had never realized that Mexico was not a Spanish colony; that they were in Mexico as guests of the new, liberal Mexico that had afforded them refuge from the Falangist terror. The Spaniard was not content with asylum; he was not satisfied with safety from Franco's firing squads. No, the Spaniard refugee, the Reds among them, were sneering at Mexico's liberal constitution of 1917 and at President Lazaro Cardenas' gentle radicalism. And señor, it is the truth on the Cross that they would take over the government if they could and, with the madness of their kind, carry their Communism into the United States. Like mad dogs, señor, that have no plan but the knife, the pistol and the bomb. Mexico would assure you that it would be well if all of them (and there are thousands of these in Mexico) were in the United States where they would be wept over and where, believe us, señor, they would stay. Mexico is determined that once across the border into The States these Reds may not return to Mexico. And the United States cannot deport them to Spain nor any other place in Europe because they have no country and the diplomatic representatives of Europe will not give them visas.

In the Santa Clara colony a Mexican official from Mexico City had just been murdered by a Spaniard because the official would not give him money from the colony's treasury. He was clear about why he wanted money—to buy his way into the United States. In the Santa Clara colony there were noisy battles between the industrialists and the agrarians, between the Reds and the Republicans. They told us that the Reds had won and were driving the Republicans off the land, although the Reds, who are almost all industrialists from the industrial cities of Spain, cannot farm the colony's land and have no stomach for learning. How many refugee Spaniards there are now in Mexico is subject for much debate; more to the point here is the money that Republican Spain transferred to Mexico and who is getting it. The most conservative estimate is \$5,000,000. The Mexican government is its custodian and administrator. The Spanish agrarians are content to invest it in Mexican farms and farm equipment. The industrialists want it divided equally, that each refugee may do what he chooses with his share. The industrialist yearns for life in the United States. The industrialists, overwhelmingly radicals, make no secret of their desire to devote their share of the bank roll to smuggling themselves into American cities. Air travel is the safest as long as the Border Patrol has no wings and while the Army Air Corps will not co-operate.

All we know is what we saw and heard as we rode the 2,200 miles of Mexican border, touching in at the fifty-six Border Patrol stations from which 1,600 apparently tireless men cruise the ugly, eroded bank of the Rio Grande and the desert country to the west. Their duties sound simple—to prevent smuggling of men and merchandise into the United States. It's not as soft as it sounds. They watch the river from towers, they

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ride the border on horses and in cars that roar along at eighty and ninety miles an hour, they trudge up and down the trackless wastes where cars are impotent and horses can't be maintained. More than ninety per cent of the aliens they catch these days are Mexicans. Europeans are either isolated in Europe or watched too closely in Mexico to make their break across the border—unless, of course, some are being flown north. And the Border Patrol can only gaze at that.

They Come to Stay

If an alien is caught in the act of smuggling himself in, it's up to him to prove he has the right to come. He seldom wins. But once in and apprehended, the burden of proof that he's here illegally is on the Patrol. And that complicates matters. The apprehended one knows that he may appeal to Washington for a review of his case and, although the Patrol knows that his papers are false, although they know all about him, he may be released until Washington decides. In the meantime he may wander off, may never be caught for deportation. How many of these are at liberty no one seems to know.

The life sounds romantic, and it is—in the movies. Actually it is one of the toughest existences in all of the government service. The government does its best to tell the applicant that patrolling the border—the Mexican and the Canadian—is no life for the dreamer.

"Border patrolmen," reads the government's chart of qualification, "must make numerous arrests, sometimes of dangerous criminals. Shooting affrays are not infrequent. The duties are arduous, the hours irregular and long. There is much night work. The officers are subject to call twenty-four hours a day. Numerous Border Patrol stations are located, of necessity, in small, isolated communities, many of which are regarded as undesirable places in which to live. They make extended camping details in desert or woods during which they must rely entirely upon their own ability and resourcefulness for sustenance and shelter. They may make patrols of up to eighty miles on snowshoes. . . ."

The written and physical examinations are tough. To pass the first you must have at least a high-school education and the examiners would prefer a couple of years of college, if not four. If you pass the physical tests you have a right to boast that you're a perfect physical specimen or at least as close to it as life these days will let you come. And when you've passed, you've got to sit before a group of tough old-timers and answer what sound like idle questions. But out of your answers they fish character, resourcefulness and mental agility that no pen can put on paper. And even if you've passed the old-timers you may never don the uniform. In the meantime your life has been ransacked back to your short-pants days. And don't get the idea that you can deceive the investigators; those lads have been trained on aliens, particularly Mexicans and Asiatics. And if they, artists at dissembling, at deception and artful dodging in general, can't delude these lads, you can't.

For being as wise and faultless as all this the border patrolman (officially called inspector) gets \$2,000 a year out of which he houses himself and his fam-

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ily, clothes and feeds himself, maintains his own lines of information and at all times must be ready to pass a personal inspection that a rookie-hating Army sergeant couldn't beat.

And yet no law-enforcing branch of the United States service is attracting a finer class of applicants. We looked them over at the Border Patrol School at El Paso. There under the supervision of Mr. Grover Cleveland Wilmoth, Supervisor of the El Paso District (the largest and perhaps toughest on the Mexican border), the rookies or probationers who had survived the tests were taking the month of training that is preliminary to actual Patrol work. About forty per cent of them have college degrees. Seventy per cent have had some college work. In one month they must do three months of cramming because the school is small and the service is being built up fast against the day when, it is expected, Europe will try to ship what she regards as undesirables to the Western Hemisphere. And it is the opinion of the government that most of these will try to smuggle or buy their way into the United States.

In one month these rookies must try to absorb a three months' course in French and Spanish, immigration law, criminal law, naturalization, citizenship and expatriation law, fingerprinting, criminal investigation, first aid, firearms and the laws of the open country through which refugees are tracked down in the desert and forest. They call the latter signcutting. Look them over at random. You find sheriffs, farmers, schoolteachers, engineers, chemists, journalists, salesmen, sailors, soldiers, lawyers, bank clerks, ironworkers, post-office clerks, doctors, policemen, forest rangers and professional athletes. A football coach would think he was in heaven.

No Place for City Girls

But that gives you an idea of what the government demands of aspirants for the Border Patrol—what it demands and gets. When they've finished the school, they are distributed for the fire test. They're sent to the McAllen, Laredo and Del Rio subdistrict headquarters to be apprenticed to old-timers under observation by such as Chief Patrol Inspectors Rawles, Brady and Hudson. Or they're kept in the El Paso district to learn their trade from C.P.I. Eddie Adcock. And maybe they'll be sent west to a prettier land, the Los Angeles sector, under District Supervisor William A. Carmichael. They're on probation for a year.

Sometimes half of them fail to survive the year of probation. Some can't stand the disillusionment. It isn't what they had read in books nor seen in the movies. Some can't stand the stifling quiet of the long nights. Some haven't that extra sense that guides the true patrolman unerringly through the dimness of the Big Bend country. Others break under the isolation. And then there are the women. For the most part it's no place for a city girl. Too often the rookie's young wife reaches the stage, before her husband is out of his probation, that he has to choose between his job and her. Usually he quits and takes her back to the life she's been used to—bridge, the movies, her family, her social world. And if she is a mother it's so much the worse. She has been asked to

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follow her husband into wilderness settlements far from schools, doctors, churches and plumbing.

On the night we lay in the border black-out waiting for that plane to mock us, two of the old-timers talked to a rookie who, suddenly, had lost his early promise. He was a whale of a lad, two years out of a big university back East, a year married. They talked to him with gentle roughness. They knew what was wrong but they wouldn't mention his wife. He took it silently, understandingly. It was too dark to see his face. Finally he talked.

"I don't want to quit this. I like this. Listen," he asked suddenly. "Listen, I'm doing okay, ain't I?"

"Sure, kid, okay," they said. "You'll make one of the best."

"I like this," he said. "But I don't know. Seems as if you can't study and—well, take care of everything. I sure don't want to quit."

Later they told us that his wife had been crying for a week. The vast, arid land of cactus, mesquite, greasewood and rattlers had got her. That and the loneliness, the interminable nights, the absence of people who understood. Besides, she was going to have a baby. Of course, he might send her north for a few months, but there was always that question of money. You don't have much left out of forty a week.

When we left, the boy was being transferred to the El Paso sector, not because he was needed there but because he was good material and they wanted to save him. In El Paso the baby could be born. For a while he'll have a busier but easier job, prowling the cotton lands for illegal labor, refugees from justice, for aliens with no credentials. Maybe he'll happen upon variety—peonage, for example. In addition to all their other chores, the Border Patrol are ever on the lookout for labor skulduggery.

The Inspector Learns

A couple of years ago, one of the inspectors made a Saturday-night call at one of the largest cotton plantations in the El Paso sector. Naturally he made for the huts where the pickers lived—hovels without sanitation, without water, without windows. They had roofs, not that it made much difference in the rain. The inspector, a veteran, had gone in thinking that he'd seen about everything. He changed his mind. In almost all these huts, the biggest of them two-room affairs large enough for three or four persons each, he found as many as twenty-five Mexicans, from babies to grandparents. Almost all of the men and some of the women were drunk. Those who hadn't passed out were still drinking *sotol*, the cheapest form of mescal. If you've ever had mescal, you'll appreciate this all the more. Several of the children were dead. So were a few of their elders. The inspector called headquarters and the Border Patrol went to work.

Before they were through they had found that the operators of the plantation—Americans—had been importing labor from Mexico, paying smugglers (Amexes) a dollar a head for delivering the workers. They offered the Mexicans seventy-five cents a hundred pounds for picked cotton but managed to get a hundred and twenty-five pounds because their scales were fixed. The Mexicans, all of them wet, worked

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twelve hours a day and were required to live in the company's labor shacks, twenty to twenty-five in a room. For such housing the workers were charged twenty-five cents a day apiece. They had to buy their supplies at the company commissary where prices were from fifty to seventy-five per cent higher than outside stores. Those who had spirit enough to protest were told to shut up or be turned over to the Immigration officials and forever barred from returning to Texas. The owners of the plantation didn't quite dare place guards over the workers at nights and on Sunday to keep them on the place. But on Saturday night *sotol* was sold at fifty cents a bottle to all who had the half dollar. Thus Saturday night and Sunday found the Mexicans much too drunk to wander off. And the company profited again. Even the *sotol* came from the company's commissary. At the end of the season, almost all the Mexicans owed the company money.

But that broke up an old Rio Grande custom. As far as the Border Patrol knows, there is none of that going on in this enlightened year.

Smuggling Works Two Ways

As we say, that rookie might run into something like that. And if nothing that exciting happens he might sit on the riverbank when things calm down and watch the Mexicans smuggle things into their own country. They do it from high noon to midnight and on around the clock. It's none of the Border Patrol's business. It's Mexico's affair and, as long as they don't make fools of themselves and try to smuggle merchandise straight across the international bridge, the Mexican officials don't care. On the contrary, the shakedown adds quite a neat sum to the Mexican customs officials who are lucky enough to be in on it.

They'll smuggle flour, sugar and meat into Mexico by the truckload. They'll unload the trucks on the American side of the river and pole it across on rafts. Lacking rafts or small boats, they'll drag it across in waterproof bags. Northern Mexico needs food. The weather was unkind to last fall's grain crops. Moreover, the big farms that once grew great crops have been split up into small tracts and given to the peons. The peons lack the work habit; thousands of them don't seem able to raise enough food for their own consumption, not even corn for tortillas. And Mexico's government has not come to their rescue with alms and food relief.

Anyway, you can watch the more enterprising of them smuggle flour and corn meal in. Once they have it across the river it is transferred to small bags, pounds and half pounds. And it is then peddled from door to door at a profit of two and three hundred per cent. Sugar is sold in tiny quantities at an even greater profit. And the carcass of an ancient cow is the owner's fortune, to say nothing of what they get for a cut of a battle-toughened billy goat.

It was fun watching that. But we were still thinking of those hot airplanes that fly back and forth across the border at the eastern end of the Big Bend country.

"What is your own opinion of what those planes or that plane is carrying

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into The States?" we asked one of the Patrol inspectors. We were starting back to El Paso, the Mexicans having just dragged three truckloads of corn meal across the Rio Grande.

"Personally," said he, "I'd say it ain't corn meal."



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