

Comida: An Experience in Famine

Frank Norris

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By grace of our guide, our phrase book, and our Salva-Webster Dictionary, we managed to pick up a good deal of Spanish during the Santiago campaign, but the one word our guide did not tell us, the one expression we did not look up in the Diccionario, was the very one we understood most quickly: its meaning was apparent the instant we heard it uttered. We shall never forget comida and all that it stands for.

It means "food;" not breakfast, dinner, or supper, not food in dishes and served by a waiter in the hotel, not a polite knife-and-fork affair in any sense of the word. Comida is downright nourishment, sordid, vulgar nutriment, of the kind that fills empty stomachs after a three days' abstinence, the kind that we ladled out of camp kettles to six thousand starving refugee children at Caney during the second day's truce. This is comida. But to get the full effect of the word you must separate it into syllables, pronouncing the i like double e, and drawing it out into a pitiful, quavering whine. Better still, you must hear the word cried from six thousand shriveled mouths, with appropriate gestures in the direction of the lips and the pit of the stomach.

"Co-mee-dah! Co- mee-e-dah!"

We rode into Caney late in the afternoon, at about what ought to have been supper time. For forty-eight hours the refugees from Santiago had been coming in. The civil governor of the city had told the non-combatants that they would not be out of Santiago more than twenty-four hours, and had forbidden them the use of any vehicles; what they carried they must carry on their backs.

At the end of the first day the refugees had eaten such little food as they took with them on their exodus. The better class had missed three consecutive meals, some of the poorer had not eaten in two days, and for a week previous they had all been slowly starving in the beleaguered city.

The town of Caney is built around the plaza; a grove of trees runs down the middle of this plaza; the church, used as a barracks on the day of the battle, is at one end, the public buildings are at the other. When we rode into this square, we found it a veritable bedlam. American and European crowds are brown. A Cuban crowd is white, and looks larger for that reason. Thousands upon thousands of men in white linen suits, women in white skirts, and children in white loin-cloths when they wore any clothes at all came and went, up and down, back and forth, in and out, weaving a maze, a bewildering, shifting web, where warp and woof alike were white. Each figure seemed to have a particular definite destination, quite distinct from his neighbor's, a destination which it was imperative he should reach at once; and for that reason, he, or more often she, squirmed and pushed and writhed through the press, using elbow and shoulder with all the strength of the emaciated body. But others there were who sat in rows, double and triple rows, on the edge of the square, prone and inert amidst the white bundles of their household effects, exhausted, listless, stunned and stupefied by the terrific clamor.

For, from all these struggling, boiling thousands, from all this seething mass of white, from the strained and shrunken throats of all these starvelings, one word—a cry, a monotonous deafening plaint—rose into the air, knocking at one's ears, assaulting one's attention, persistent, raucous, a piercing wail: "Comida! Comida!"

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In our haversacks we had hard-bread, bacon, and a handful of ground coffee, our rations for two days. I reached for the hard-bread and drew it out. In an instant my horse was literally lifted from his feet, and hands, hands, hands, outstretched, lean, white, black, and brown, small and large, a thicket growth of hands grew instantly from the crowd. I gave till my sack was empty, a hardbread for each hand, now to a white hand and now to a black, so as to keep from repeating as far as possible. The bacon and coffee went even more quickly, and were eaten as they were, raw and uncooked. But it was only baiting the crowd; what were two days' rations!

"Comida! Comida!"

We pushed our horses across the plaza to the church. The red cross had just been established on a terrace adjoining. A negro trooper was on guard, and inside the wall, on the terrace itself, kettles were being set out and bags of corn meal opened. Here, alone, with no one to help him but a couple of utterly inefficient Cubans, we met with an old friend, Dr. Bangs, of the hospital ship State of Texas.

Let us pause to make a note of Dr. Bangs, for he was at last the right man in the right place. He was a stout man, with a very red face and a voice like the exhaust of a locomotive. He wore an absurd pith helmet battered out of all shape, and his beard was a fortnight old. But there was the right stuff in Dr. Bangs. Early and late, hot or cold, rain or shine, the doctor toiled and toiled and toiled; feeding the thousands, building fires, sending this man for wood and that man for water, perspiring, gesticulating, bellowing, but in the end "getting the thing into shape," directing and dividing the stream of supplies till the last refugee was fed. But that was not until afterward. It was a two days' labor, and on that particular evening everybody was still hungry, hungry to starvation point.

At once he impressed us willing enough we were into the service. "Now, fellows," he shouted, he always shouted, did the doctor, "we want to get at the children first! Tell 'em to send up the children first!" With a crowd's instinct, a hungry crowd's instinct, for food, the refugees had divined that the terrace by the church was to be the distributing point. We went back to the edge of the terrace, and with the full strength of our lungs shouted for the space of five minutes (after consulting our phrase book): "Ninos primero! Ninos primero!" "Comida!" shouted the crowd in answer. "Comida! Comida!" deaf to everything but the clamor of empty stomachs. But somehow at last they understood; somehow at last wood was found, three huge fires were built, and camp kettles (borrowed from Mr. Ramsden, the British consul) filled with corn-meal mush set a-cooking. It was six o'clock when we began. The terrace was just high enough to shut out the view of the plaza, but at every fresh suggestion that the distribution was to begin, a waving forest of hands topped the terrace wall, and the lamentable wail broke out afresh, "Comida! Comida!"

By seven o'clock this cry changed in volume. It was no longer deep-toned; it began to be shrill and piping, and there were no more hands above the terrace wall. We did not like to look over the wall; it was not a pleasant sight, and our appearance only awakened false hopes, but we knew that the children were assembling. "Tell 'em," roared the doctor, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of the hand that held the ladle, "tell 'em it's 'most done, tell 'em pretty soon now."

I went to the edge of the terrace, and leaned over. It was yet light enough to see, to see about three thousand children, half of them naked, the other half ragged beyond words. What a mass! Close to the gate the jam was terrific; they were packed as sand is packed, so that they moved, not as individuals, but as groups and masses, swaying forward and back, and from side to side, without knowing why. I could see but a pavement of faces, crushed together cheek to cheek, upturned, pinched and agonized, shrill-voiced with the little rat that nipped and gnawed at their poor starved stomachs. Further on, where the press was not so great, the children reached toward me empty cans, pots, pails, tin cups, vessels of all sizes and descriptions, and they put their hands (not their fingers) to their mouths with always the same cry of unutterable distress, "Comida! Comida!"

"Poco tiempo!" I called to them. "Poquito tiempo!" And at last they understood, and were quiet for nearly a minute. When I went back the doctor took me aside.

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"Now," he shouted, "there's something I want you to look after personally. There's an old woman" he pointed her out, sitting in a pathetic round heap on the chapel steps "who hasn't had anything to eat in three days. When we're ready to distribute, I want you to see to it yourself that she gets something. Understand? She's been waiting her two hours."

I told him that I understood, and we went back to work. Ten minutes later the corn meal was ready. One of us was to stand at each of the kettles with a tin army cup in hand. The children were to be let in in groups of twenty; and of these twenty, five at a time were to come up to the kettles to have us ladle out the meal into their tin pails or cups, or whatever they should bring.

"Now do you catch on to that?" roared the doctor.

"Perfectly. Are we all ready?"

"Yes."

"Where's the old woman?"

She had gone. Tired out with waiting, she had quietly gone away. For nearly three hours she had sat patiently on the chapel steps, waiting, waiting, confused, dazed, and misconstruing the broken Spanish that was spoken to her. Then at last, at the end of hope, she had gone away. I could see her plainly in the imagination, can see her now, her back bent, weak, worn out, going away meekly almost at the very moment that the food was being brought to her. I had that old woman on my conscience for a long time.

The doctor went to the gate and let in twenty children. But twenty more instantly crowded in, then thirty, then fifty, a hundred, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand. The whole rout of starving little wretches invaded the terrace, took it by assault, and huddled in one corner, dazzled by the light of the fires, bewildered, a little frightened, but insistent still, goaded on by their hunger, and muttering under their breath, "Comida! Comida!"

Well, we had to drive them back into their corner, drive them back brutally and by main strength. But even as I pushed and thrust, a little hand ever so little a hand took hold of my wrist. It was that of a tiny girl, almost too weak to stand, but she held a pitiful empty sardine can toward me, and whispered confidentially, with a great attempt at cheerfulness, "Comida, eh? Comida por me?" and put her hand, not to her lips, but to her stomach. We came to know this gesture afterward. So long as they pointed to their mouths we could allow the applicants to wait their turn, but when they pointed to their stomachs we knew that we must be quick and that it was almost time for the restoratives.

We began the distribution. We drew a line in the dust in front of the crowd, and announced that any who crossed that line should have no comida: that kept them in hand fairly well. They came up in groups of five, and we gave to each three quarters of a cupful of corn-meal porridge, and caused each one to pass out through the door of the chapel so soon as his or her measure was full. They were docile enough then, and watched us gravely and quietly as we filled their cups. None of them, so far as I could see, ate any of their corn meal upon the spot.

The worst of it was that the meal gave out before all were fed, and we had to tell some twenty of them that there was "no mas esta noche" (no more tonight), and they were to come back "manana a ocho hora." I do not like to think of this part of the business. To have been so hungry, to have waited so long, to have come so near and seen so many others fed, and then No, one had better pass this over, this and the old woman.

The last child had gone supperless to such bed as he could find, and we were thinking of our own beds, when a girl of perhaps sixteen presented herself. "No more," we told her, "no mas comida; come back manana." But it was not comida that this one wanted.

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"Enfermo," she answered. I wish you could have heard the pitiful quaver of the voice. "Enfermo," a little, a very little more, and it would have been a sob. She was very frail and a nice-looking girl, taking her altogether; sick and absolutely alone amongst all those thousands. "Enfermo," she said again, looking fixedly at the embers of the expiring fires. We had her taken over to Mr. Ramsden's house, with a note giving directions as to what should be done for her. Poor, frail, weak-voiced creature! We never saw her again.

Making our own camp that night was no trivial affair. We had had no supper, but we were far too tired to think of cooking one. The horses had been picketed behind the church, but for their better security we broke in the doors at the rear and led them through the chapel and out upon the terrace. We off-saddled in the chapel itself, and, I am rather ashamed to add, used the communion rail as a saddle rack. But there was little of the sacerdotal left to the chapel at that time. It was extremely and intensely profaned, was that chapel, loopholed for Mausers, with Mauser ammunition pouches and bayonet scabbards, cartridges and empty Spanish haversacks, strewing the floor and littering the altar itself. Three huge, half-empty boxes of clothing from Waltham, Massachusetts, stood about, and there were some Red Cross flour, sugar, and meal sacks. While we were off-saddling, my horse a broncho pony from Southern California elected to become frightened at the torn altar cloth that trailed and flapped in the draught between two loopholes, and for a moment had the whole place by the ears. And all this while, over the altar, Mary the mother of God, in the flaring light of the commissary candles, looked down upon us and the disordered chapel as calmly as ever she had looked upon the kneeling peasants in the light of burning tapers. It was a strange, incongruous scene, the shattered chapel, the bayonet scabbards, the Mauser cartridges clinking underfoot, the prim stiff calicoes and gingham from Waltham, and the cow-puncher's pony shying from an altar cloth woven by fingers that were dust two hundred years ago.

We were tired enough, Heaven knows, and keyed up to the highest tension, so that one of the incidents that closed that eventful day affected us more deeply and keenly than otherwise it might have done. We were all standing by the fire just before turning in, listening to the starving thousands settling themselves to sleep close at hand, when the doctor suddenly exclaimed, in that thunderous trumpet voice of his, "Well, fellows, here's something I do every night that you can't do at all!" and with the words he took out his left eye and polished it on a leg of his trousers. I was faint in an instant, the thing was so unexpected, so positively ghastly. Not even the sight of the division hospital, a week before, had so upset me.

When we woke in the morning, very early, we found that we ourselves had been sleeping under strange conditions. The main body of the church had been used as a hospital. An amputated arm had been buried in the dirt of the terrace close to where we had spread our blankets, half buried, as we were able to judge in the morning. This grisly relic had flanked us on one side all night, two yellow-fever cases occupied another side, a thousand starving refugees were on the third, while the desecrated chapel with all its incongruities confronted us upon the fourth. But this was not all. For fear of the rain we had roofed ourselves in with boards that we had found lying in and about the chapel. In the light of the morning we saw that one of these was the signboard of the church, but also that it was coated thick with a glaze of dull red.

"Comida! Comida!"

Even army bacon, coffee, and hardbread lose their flavor when this cry comes between you and your tin mess kit. We were not long at breakfast, and by the time I had come back from watering the horses the doctor had the kettles going. We promptly ran short of wood, and announced over the parapet of the terrace that all those who should bring us wood for the fires should be fed first. To those who offered themselves for this service we gave tickets, made by breaking pasteboard ammunition boxes into squares, and writing thereon the name of Dr. Bangs. For two hours the crowd around the terrace grew, and grew, and grew, until I veritably believe half of Santiago was there, stretching toward us innumerable empty pots, pans, and tin pails, and with thousands of voices wailing, "Comida! Comida!"

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We let the starvelings into the inclosure of the parapet when the corn meal was ready, and ladled to them by the hour, as we had done to the children the night before. The children who had missed their food in the evening came back now and received double rations; but they fought on the steps of the terrace, men, women, and children, and gashed one another with the sharp edges of their tins, as they struggled for first place in a way that was sickening to see.

Yet in spite of these things it was not always easy to believe that all of these people were in actual need of food, as they indubitably were. You almost perforce associate starvation with rags. It is difficult to imagine a well-dressed person as hungry; you cannot but believe that clean linen and smart gowns cover well-fed bodies. Or even though you know hunger to exist in such a case, you can scarcely bring yourself to take it seriously. You refuse to consider it as anything more terrible than an exaggerated appetite.

There were plenty of such cases at Caney on that day. We met with one of them, and made a mistake which we shall always remember. We had been down in the plaza and around the outskirts of the crowd, taking pictures and snapshots, and were working our way slowly back to the steps of the terrace, when we came upon two very pretty and very neatly dressed girls of perhaps eighteen and nineteen.

"Comida?" they asked, both in a breath.

We told them that we would ourselves get them comida, and at once; they should not wait for the regular distribution. Ah, that was kind, they answered, and they thanked us very prettily. With that the idea of corn-meal porridge vanished entirely from our thick, stupid Anglo-Saxon minds, and we fell a-talking to them. Both would have passed for pretty girls anywhere, and one of them carried a pink silk parasol. Of course we were idiots, but it is hard to reconcile a pink silk parasol with famine; and though we knew that they were hungry, we forgot, and passed it over as the hunger of a girl at an evening dance, forgot, I say, and went on talking to them in our halting, broken-backed Spanish, until one of them gave a little tremulous gasp and broke into tears. We remembered quickly enough then, and it was with the feeling of assassins that we hurried them off through the crowd and around to the back door of the church. We had both of us "got a girl something to eat" before, at teas and functions at home, when we had fought our way through the press, but this was a strange variation on the old theme. Now the stuffed olives and lettuce sandwiches were corn meal porridge and commissary canned beans, and the girls had not eaten in two and a half days.

We stayed at Caney nearly all the next day, helping the doctor, who but for us was entirely alone. As for the relief committees composed of Cubans, the less said of them the better. They were supposed to cooperate with the doctor, and might have been of immense service during those terrible three days of famine. They were there, these committees, for we saw them as they came to offer congratulations and to be presented. But beyond this their activity did not go. They did absolutely nothing, lit never a fire, gathered never a stick of wood, drew never a quart of water.

"I don't want your congratulations!" the harassed, overworked doctor bellowed. "I don't want your presentations! I want wood, I want water, and oh, I want those fifty cases of condensed milk!"

The loss of this condensed milk was a grievance which the doctor could not forget. To the Cubans had been intrusted the duty of transporting fifty cases from Siboney to Caney. The milk never arrived, and I know of one little baby who died in its mother's arms for lack of it. How many more died, unknown and unnoted? Twenty? a dozen? six? Hard to say. That one, at least, was not saved is laid to the account of that Cuban relief committee.

Food and workers were alike insufficient to meet the demands of thirty thousand starving people on those first two days. We stayed and worked as long as we could, and a little after noon we rode away in a drenching rain. But for nearly half a mile down the road, as our steaming horses toiled through mud, fetlock-deep, the vague murmur of the crowd in the plaza came back to us, prolonged, lamentable, pitiful beyond expression, the cry of

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people dying for lack of food.

Comida! Comida!