

Mexico's Charlie Chaplin



Eight years ago Mario Moreno was a tent-show buffoon getting a dollar a day. Now he's Mexico's "Cantinflas"

A**FTER** a hundred and some-odd years of catch-as-catch-can debate on every known subject, with no holds barred, seventeen million Mexicans are at last in fairly happy agreement. Down to the last barefoot *pelado*, all are enthusiastically convinced that a young harlequin called Cantinflas is the greatest comedian in the whole wide world. Greater even than Charlee Chapleen! The high adore him no less than the low, and wild-eyed radicals actually forgive him his frequent lack of social significance.

What's more, other Spanish-speaking republics support Mexico's fond conviction, for *Neither Blood Nor Sand*, the first important Cantinflas feature film, has been acclaimed uproariously in South and Central America as well as Cuba. It outdrew *The Great Dictator* by three to one, and also ran well ahead of such previous record-holders as *Rebecca* and *Gone With the Wind*. His latest, *The Unknown Cop* (*El Gendarme Desconocido*) smashed even more records, and its mere announcement is known to have postponed an uprising.

Quite a change for Mario Moreno—to give Cantinflas his real name. Only eight years ago a poor little tent-show buffoon playing vaudeville and burlesque, glad to get a dollar a day Mex, now he draws an annual income of \$50,000, and works in a real studio with his own company, high-class cameramen and a stentorian director with horn-rimmed glasses and highly polished puttees. *The Unknown Cop* sold, sight unseen, for large amounts, exhibitors flying from Brazil and the Argentine to buy first showings.

Hollywood big shots have pursued the rising star with tempting offers, confident that he can learn English—Los Angeles English, at least—in a short time. But until recently, Moreno had showed no disposition to leave his native heath. When *Neither Blood Nor Sand* was shown in Hollywood last spring, Chaplin pronounced him the greatest comedian alive. Pare Lorentz, the queer spot's newest and most highbrow director, made him the best offer—double what he dragged down for his last film.

The contract is signed, the picture will deal with a Mexican and an Okie who explore the United States on a good-will tour, a good Cantinflas subject.

Like Chaplin, thirty-one-year-old Mario is a master pantomimist, using eyes, hands and legs with the same exquisite sense of timing. Many of his best scenes are played without a spoken word. Like Charlie, too, he never varies his character, always playing the down-and-out *cargador*, or public porter, who blunders into every variety of incredible complication, only to pull out in the last reel by virtue of gay impudence and a beguiling grin.

An Edge on Chaplin

Here and there, however, the Mexican comic has the edge on Chaplin, for in addition to being a musician of parts, like Chaplin, he is an athlete extraordinary and has a voice with as many stops as an organ. According to his own modest confession, he can crack his vocal cords like a whip.

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Cantinflas is a sentimental fellow. The family album, which he studies here, plays a tune when open

To complete his biography, he is married, has no children, and is probably of Indian descent. He can speak some English and Russian, plays the piano somewhat and the guitar like a wizard. He sings well and dances sublimely; loves baseball and has his own team, made up of actors in his company, is an excellent boxer and bullfighter; used to clown in the bull ring. Favorite authors—Shakespeare and Cervantes. He has made five features and many shorts.

As near as can be gathered, Mario started out as a droll dog and simply stayed that way. All through public school and even at the high school to which his hard-working letter carrier of a father sent him to prepare to become a doctor, the incurable comedian gagged and mimicked to the despair of his teachers. Caricature was his meat, and it is generally conceded that everybody shook hands all around when the youngster decided against a professional life and wandered off to do what he liked to do and did best.



Mario Moreno, temporarily abandoning his "Cantinflas" character, dines with lovely Dolores Del Rio

In Mexico the *carpa* or itinerant theater is still an institution, moving from town to town as was the custom in Spain and Italy centuries ago. In weather-beaten tents, for a few centavos, the poorest can hiss swart villains, sob over the tribulations of fair heroines and scream with laughter at the antics of clowns

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the night before, a middleweight had hit me in the nose with fifty straight lefts, and in spite of my polite requests, stubbornly refused to scatter his blows."

Back under canvas again, Mario developed the costume that has become his trade-mark—dirty undershirt, battered hat and ragged pants dripping insecurely from a point well south of the hips. How he keeps them up is a secret known only to him and a million other sag-tailed *pelados*. The rope tied around his waist is typical of all his costumes, whether garbed as a bullfighter, in evening clothes, or as a tramp.

He got the idea from the Mexican *cargador*, who carries loads of hundreds of pounds on his back, with ropes fastened around his forehead. It's the heaviest and worst-paid work and typifies for Cantinflas the underdog, as Chaplin's tramp does. It is natural for the worst things to happen to this sort of fellow, and his efforts to achieve a better place in life or a bit of happiness arouse a sympathy that is transmitted unconsciously to the actor. In this way, both Chaplin and Cantinflas start with a predisposition to be regarded with kindness, and when they are such geniuses of pantomime or persiflage, their universal appeal is accounted for in large measure.

His talk on both screen and stage is madcap gibberish delivered in a solemn manner and made up of double-talk, innuendoes, unfinished ideas followed by equally incomplete ones, and words nonexistent or mispronounced. His long speeches are usually of this type, ad libbed in the W. C. Fields manner, but his repartee makes sense and is sharp.

He explained how he got the idea for this talk: "Once, when I first joined the tent show, the announcer was sick. I'd been doing memorized bits but they shoved me on to do his stuff. I was scared and started to say something, but they laughed and I got stuck. I began something else, tangled it and finished as in a fever. I ran off and found they were applauding." A keen student of his audience later, he even then realized he had something there and cultivated it, applying it to political problems in the day's news.

Another acquisition at the time was a wife, pretty young Valentina Subareff. The daughter of famous circus performers in Russia, she had reached Mexico by way of Siberia and Japan and counted herself lucky to find work in the tent theater at fifty cents a day.

"As I was getting three dollars," Cantinflas confides soberly, "I still think she married me for my money."

A year or more rolled by and the little company, cheered by provincial success, decided to invade the capital. Not on any *avenida*, of course, but in a dingy backwater where the poor swarmed. At the same time a certain shrewd operator of the shabby Folies-Bergère heard of Cantinflas. He decided to visit the tent and take a look. One was enough. An offer of five dollars a day was also

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enough for Cantinflas.

During the last elections, in 1940, he would call a fellow down from the gallery and invite him to cast his ballot, announcing, "Here we have complete democracy and equality of suffrage. You may go into this booth on the right and vote for Avila, or into this on the left and vote for Camacho." The government candidate was Avila Camacho, the present incumbent. His rival Almazan, one of whose supporters owned the theater, had it closed for the outrage of assuming that he had no chance. When Cantinflas asked him "Would you like me to tell them what really goes on?" it was reopened.

The fame of the comedian spread far and wide, and the very best people fought with day laborers for the privilege of buying seats. The smart entrepreneur paid off his mortgages in no time at all, began eating at Sanborn's and had his cigars made to order.

Señora Cantinflas—for by this time the name of Moreno had become a memory—set up housekeeping and even took the chance of buying furniture on installments. Why not? The photos of her man were in every third home and he figured in editorial columns. When a politician, for example, talked much and said little he was contemptuously dismissed as "cantinflésque!"

At this point, one Santiago Reachi came upon the scene; a go-getter, for he had been trained in the U. S., many important industries sending him over Latin America to introduce their products. Returning at last to head his own advertising agency in Mexico City, he had many American accounts. One in particular, however, proved a headache. He just couldn't popularize the cab-over-engine truck, for they wouldn't have these *chatos* (meaning pugnoses) at any price.

Rolling 'em in the Aisles

Out of painful brooding over this failure came a bright idea. Why not use Cantinflas, idol of every truck driver? Hiring the largest theater, Señor Reachi put on a sound film portraying the overwhelming superiority of the *chato* and engaged Cantinflas as an added attraction. Only truck drivers were admitted on showing their union cards and Cantinflas rolled 'em in the aisles.

Señor Reachi saw that he had something. Thrusting a fountain pen into the hand of the comedian, he signed up Cantinflas for five years and then scurried around for a suitable play. Blood and Sand was being shown at the time, getting many laughs that were not expected, so the brisk impresario had another brilliant idea. If Latin Americans waxed wildly hilarious over the serious acting of Tyrone Power what would they do with a real out-and-out burlesque of the Ibañez drama? Bright young men were put to work at once and Neither Blood Nor Sand was the result.

Called on to play two parts, Cantinflas not only portrayed the lovable bum with his usual finesse but also gave a bril-

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liant characterization of Manolette, the strutting, vainglorious toreador. It is as the *cargador* that he finds himself in the arena at a *ganaderia* where they breed a particularly valorous type of bull. He is called upon to fight the pick of the lot. The scenes that follow, with no sound except the shouts of the crowd and the blare of the brasses, is pantomime at its best. Impudence, panic, terror, despair and finally, when Cantinflas discovers he is still alive, a proud and growing confidence sustained by numerous jolts of tequila. Only at the end, when a lucky stroke has dispatched the bull, does he awaken to the realization of what he has been through and then, looking down at the huge beast, he passes out cold.

The Unknown Cop, Cantiflas' latest film, another eleven-reeler, was even more of a hit. Watching him work in it was an education in pantomime, for only Chaplin and W. C. Fields compare with the Mexican in true humor and perfection of technique. Before the director shouts "Camera!" Cantinflas rehearses the scene tirelessly, improvising dialogue, changing this movement or that expression, rejecting here and adding there. Only when he has satisfied himself that there is not another laugh to be extracted, either by word or wink, does he give the sign to shoot.

At one point when the telephone rings, the exasperated chief of police tells Cantinflas to see if he can answer it intelligently. The script called for a minute of typical cantinflesque, but after trying it out, he shook his head. Five times more he tried different styles and then, eyes lighting up, he grabbed the receiver. Now it was a woman's voice that he heard, not a man's. What purring! What joyous wriggling! And how about a date for the evening? And could she fix it up for his friend the chief? There was a man who knew how to treat a girl! While the chief stood at his side, grinned and chuckled. Suddenly the glib flow ceases, the mouth falls slack, and then, as in a case where the tragedy is so great as to transcend all human emotion, the face goes absolutely blank.

"*Su esposa, jefe!*" Cantinflas says, handing the receiver to the chief. "Your wife!"

Yes, the Mexican comic is good. No doubt about it. So good that even lack of Spanish is no bar to enjoyment of his art. Whether he is another Chaplin, however, remains for the years to tell. Even so, he is off to a running start.

THE END



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