

The odd ways of others

BRIBERY is not much admired, except, of course, by those who benefit from it. In the country I made my home 20 years ago when I married a local woman, it is rife, rifer than rife, and long ago I decided to have no opinion on the matter. I am, though, impatient with those pious folk who condemn bribery out-of-hand. We should not confuse the outrageous thievery of those in power with the almost innocent venality of schmucks who have to rely on bribes to make ends meet. If our police and fireman and nurses and teachers were paid a decent wage, they might no longer demand a sweetener to provide the services they are contracted to provide. For those in power, of course, the sweeteners are several million larger than the \$5 or \$10 demanded on the street. And keeping low wages low ensures the street bribery will flourish and divert attention from their colossal greed.

But then I have no opinion on the matter. Why should I? There are enough pious fools abroad compiling their damning indices of corruption without me adding my voice to the outrage. To be frank, I would be a more impressed if those pious fools compiled indices of hypocrisy in their own world and tackled the backhanders paid daily in the nations of southern Europe. I don't even doubt that in the country of my birth, several thousand euros often pass hands, though instances of the street bribery we know here are a thing of the past in uptight, upright Northern Europe.

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I mention this because a few months ago I had the misfortune to deal with one such pious fool. Not only did his stupidity and principles put my job in jeopardy, it also caused problems for me and my wife. And it didn't do him much good, either.

Late on a Friday I was finishing early for the day. Then the captain of police at the international airport rang. He had a German in custody demanding to see 'his consul'. This was inconvenient. My wife and our daughter were expecting me to go final shopping to prepare for our long-planned wedding anniversary party the following night at our beach villa.

'Is it urgent? Can I come tomorrow, first thing say?'

'Señor, I want him out of here as soon as I can.'

The airport is just 40km away, but at this time of day the journey would take at least an hour and an hour back. I rang my wife and told her I couldn't be along. She was not pleased.

At the airport, the captain told me the German had caused a disturbance at the customs' desk and resisted arrest. It did not sound good, but I realised just how much he had resisted arrest when I saw him in the holding cell. His face was badly bruised and he claimed his arm was broken.

I introduced myself and asked him what had happened.

'I was beaten up by two cops.'

'The captain told me you were resisting arrest.'

'Of course I resisted arrest! I knew they meant to hurt me.'

I tried to calm him down by making a tedious deal of getting his details. It didn't work. This was a young German with a grievance who did not want to be calm. He wanted to air his grievance. I gave up.

'So what happened?'

'I'd waited at customs' for hours and when it was my turn, it was obvious the guy expected a bribe. I refused, and he told me to go to the back of the queue.'

'Why didn't you pay the bribe?'

'Please! Are you serious!'

'You do realise where you are? This isn't Germany. Why did you come?'

His brief, moral silence told me a great deal.

'I am studying law and wanted to see for myself the situation in Central America.'

'But why?'

'Why?'

'Yes, why? Why? Why?'

He was lost for an answer. We were getting nowhere.

'Look, I'll speak to the captain and persuade him let you go.'

'I'm not paying a bribe!'

'No, of course you're not.'

I left the cell and gave the captain \$100 to share with his men. I insisted he should not tell the German I'd paid him any money and kick him out in an hour or two.

'Let's keep this as simple as we can.'

That seemed that. It wasn't.

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Just after our guests had arrived on the Saturday night, the ministry of the interior called and summoned me to a meeting.

'This is very, very, very inconvenient, we're just about . . .'

'Please, señor, you must come, it is important.'

'Is it the German?'

'Yes.'

'What's happened?'

'Please, señor, we'll explain when you're here.'

It took me over two hours to drive in. The airport captain of police, the police minister and the deputy interior minister were waiting. The interior minister spoke first.

'Unfortunately, señor, your countrymen is dead.'

'What happened?'

'He fell, señor, and injured his skull.'

'Why did he fall?'

The captain spoke.

'When we went to release him, he found out you had . . .'

'I thought you agreed not to tell him?'

'I didn't, señor, but my deputy did. He didn't know. When the German found out, he got angry and refused to be released. We tried to get him out, but then . . . well, then he fell.'

'How did he fall.'

There was a paused. 'He fell.'

'So what now?'

'That is up to you, señor. Do you want to take it further?'

We all knew I didn't, but I could not see how we could explain the unexpected death of a foreigner in police custody.

'The embassy will want to get involved.'

'Do they have to?'

'I can't see how not.'

'Would you agree to leave the matter to us?'

'What are you suggesting?'

'That you leave it to us. I'm sure we'll think of something.'

And I was sure they would.

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The German's body was discovered on a rubbish dump a week later. The police announced they'd found traces of cocaine and believed he was a drugs' deal victim. They reminded all foreigners visiting their country that consuming or dealing in any kind of drug was a serious offence and they should never consider doing so. The German deputy head of mission called me in to explain what I knew. I told her what I could. I gave here

a full account and stressed that the dead man had been remarkably uncooperative with the police. The only detail I left out was the captain's offer to leave the matter to the police. There was no reason she should know that. One stroke of luck was that her tour of duty was about to end and her mind was elsewhere.

Dealing with my wife was not as easy. Things had been rocky and grew rockier. My absence from our anniversary party upset her a great deal. I insisted I was always obliged to do my job come what may, and such inconveniences would always occur. It took time to win her over, but I did. My wife has her needs in bed, and a smart and expensive bracelet I allowed her to choose one afternoon finally baled me out.