

**NEWSLETTER FROM THE SIERRA MADRE**  
**#7 December 1971**

*Concerning Project Piaxtla, a personal endeavor providing medical and related aid  
to villagers in the mountainous reaches of Sinaloa, Mexico*

**¡Fíjese!**  
**Que no la fijaba nada,**  
**Ni me levantaba los ojos**  
**Y allí estaba, al oscurecer**  
**Sonriendo tranquilamente por abajo**  
**Sin agitarse:**  
**La luna, casi llena.**

**Imagine!**  
**I had not even noticed her,**  
**Had not even looked up**  
**And there she was, at dusk**  
**Smiling quietly down**  
**Unruffled:**  
**The almost-full moon.**

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Sometimes, alone at night at my mountainside clinic, as I sit on the stone bench beneath the huge Royal Pine in the patio and look up through its black silhouette at the vast and muted sky, I, like the moon, find the needed distance and stillness to reflect. I cud such thoughts as daylight has little time for. Sometimes I ask . . .

What is the justification of an endeavor like Project Piaxtla.? What right have we -- intruders from another culture and in some respects from another age -- to descend upon an isolated, tradition-oriented, impoverished but relatively stable society such as inhabits this beautiful and wild Sierra Madre Occidental, and attempt to improve the standard of health and medical care? True, the campesinos express appreciation. But are they ready for such "improvements"? And. are such "improvements" really for the best? What will be the long range consequences of our efforts?

Who can say for sure? . . . Not I. Nor the moon. Nor any of us.

In our defense, it can be argued that disease is no longer as rampant or as crippling as it was before we came, that infant and maternal mortality have dropped to less than half what they were six years ago . . .

And so? . . . So we have saved scores of babies' lives. Saved them for what? Have we really done the babies or mankind any service? . . .

The moon holds her silence.

A baby is born . . . and begins to fail shortly after birth. An urge deep within us, almost as basic as hunger or lust, demands we do our utmost to save that baby's life.

But why? Is such an urge justifiable? Certainly the ecologists, as well as the Hindus, have amply demonstrated that "reverence for life" by itself is not enough, that it can even prove life-impoverishing. Is there, then, any justification whatever for saving that sick baby's life?

The moon, full to overflowing, bursts out:

YES! And a thousand times over, YES! The infant deserves to be saved, not because it is living but because it is loved! Love is the ultimate and the only justification for all life and any life, for any and all action,. There is no other. None.

Silent again and reflective, the moon slips slowly westward, brushing the pine boughs.

It dawns on me that the ultimate value of Project Piaxtla, or any human effort, depends not so much on what we do, as how we feel about doing it. What is done is done, but the spirit in which it is done lives on and can grow and engender,

It is not enough, then, to "set an example" by "doing good"; for unless we do so lovingly, eagerly, joyfully (I might even say selfishly) who would want to follow our example? To do good on a completely rational and objective basis -- guided, perhaps, by some higher moral love, but without the joy and suffering of dynamic personal love -- is like taking a baby from its mother and putting it in a sunless orphanage on the theory that the babe is better cared for. Charity without love can only breed resentment.

We have all been taught the merits of taking an "objective approach". We take pride that medicine -- which once was considered an art -- is becoming, more and more, an "exact science", for controlled methods and instrumental precision have added tremendously to its efficient practice.

Yet there is a danger in becoming too objective.

Human love is, after all, subjective . . . and irrevocably so. It cannot be sterilized, plotted or stored on a shelf. Even in its highest form, it is full of impurities. Like the mythical hoop-snake that takes its tail in its mouth and rolls along, love advances through the circular meeting of paradoxical opposites. It is the hungry embrace where joy and suffering, giving and receiving, selfishness and selflessness, impatience and forbearance, weakness and strength, blindness and the greatest human vision, all converge. And enigmatic and subjective though it be, that passionate convergence has been the point of departure for every memorable step mankind has ever made.

If in our relations with the villagers, we can get across some sense of the personal satisfaction that comes from giving of oneself, of the pleasure in responding to another person's need, of the fulfillment in helping promote harmony, this has more meaning than the many babies we save or children we vaccinate. For surely, in the barrancas as anywhere else on this verdant footstool, the awakening in man of responsible concern for his fellow man is more important to his ultimate welfare than all the wonders of medicine and science put together.

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The difference between giving a handout and giving a hand is that the latter involves a part of oneself.

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With the last newsletter I felt discontented -- as I am sure did many friends -- insofar as it was far too prosaic and businesslike for a venture which was conceived of and still functions on so personal a level.

Project Piaxtla has, indeed, grown and become more organized, a fact for which I frankly have mixed feeling. When a child grows up to become a "responsible adult" much is gained, but also much is lost . . . The services our project now renders are far more consistent and effective than in its early days. Yet at times I feel that something of the freshness and overwhelming sense of wonder has diminished . . . though in truth, it is perhaps not so much the project as its conceiver that is growing up . . . (or old?)

Fortunately, many of our volunteers, and particularly the youthful, "self-made" medics such as Allison Akana, Bill Gonda and Phil Mease, through their deep dedication and endless capacity to marvel at the intricate mesh of beauty and tragedy in village life, have kept our venture young and vital. The bond of trust and respect which our young medics have established with the villagers goes far beyond my furthest hopes.

As for myself, my initial excitement has quieted down. Not everything is new anymore. Yet for all that, there can be no excuse for a newsletter as prosaic as the last. There still occur in the barrancas such events as stagger and awe the senses, such beauty as never grows stale, such friendship as grows and is self-renewing.

This newsletter, which I hope may balance the last, is perhaps more personal and subjective than is appropriate in the report of a village aid program to its friends. Much of what follows was written through the need to "get out" some of my own responses to one of the most disturbing events that has occurred in my six years in the Sierra Madre. There will doubtless be readers who take exception to my conclusions - or lack of conclusions - or who feel that a newsletter is the wrong place to air such personal thoughts. To these friends I apologize and say no more than that I have tried to give my best.

### **Féliz's Visit**

Thin little Féliz hung his head  
And kicked with a torn sandal at the dirt.  
"What is it you want, my boy", I said . . .  
Féliz just stared at the button on his shirt.

Féliz had come for miles that day,  
Féliz with eyes like an orphaned fawn.  
But I was busy. I turned away.

And when I turned back to Féliz. . . he was gone.

This afternoon the orphan boy, Fermín, came from La Tahona. No one had sent him: He did not come for medicines. He did not have much to say. Inclement weather had discouraged most patients from climbing the wet mountainside to the clinic, and when Fermín arrived I was alone at El Zopilote, enjoying fully its homely shelter, the wet garden, and especially the billowing mist which separated me temporarily from the rest of the world. All day the low clouds had blanketed my solitary cabin in a silver drizzling fog-bank, which at times opened enough to unveil the deep valley, tangled and lush at the close of the rainy season, or lifted to allow a glimpse of the jagged cloud-smothered peaks of the high Sierra Madre beyond. I was glad to be alone. But I found I was even gladder to see this fortune-tossed wisp of a boy.

It was evident that Fermín had not hurried up the mountainside; he was not breathing hard when he arrived. Nor was he soaked through. Rather a myriad of tiny mist droplets clung in bright pinpoints to his clothing, cheeks, and long, black lashes. The boy, I knew only too well, had every reason to be distraught, but on his mist-spangled, innocent face I could detect no sign of gloom or bitterness, not even towards God. Yet I knew that inside him was the big hurt. Why else had he come; to me (almost a stranger), alone and in such weather? Still, if he did not bring up last week's tragic event, I was not about to; (I knew everyone else surely had). So we said little, he and I. There was a chill in the wet mountain air, more than usual for September, and I invited him in to dry off by the fire. From a basket of small, bitter apples brought to me by a patient two days away on mule back, high in the mountains of Durango, I selected the largest and least bruised and handed it to Fermín. As he accepted this rare treat, his face lit up like a rainbow . . . "Bless him!" I thought, "His world is still beautiful, for all that has happened. For all that has ever happened, the world of all of us is still beautiful . . . ."

In his ten years of life, Fermín has suffered more than his share of . misfortune. Five years ago his father was killed in a gunfight in La Quebrada. Shortly afterwards, his mother left with another man for parts unknown. As if these unhappy "acts of man" were not enough for the boy to endure, last week's "act of God" topped them off. But for a quirk of fate -- or as the villagers would say, "Gracias a Diós!" -- Fermín would have perished along with the rest of what family he still had left. Up until eight days ago, Fermín and his brother, Gil, lived with their grandmother, aunt, uncle and four cousins in an old but solid adobe house beside the stream in the canyon of La Tahona. The night of the fateful disaster, Fermín happened not to be at home. That afternoon he had been sent on an errand to El Llano, an hour's stiff climb up the mountainside. In El Llano he got to playing, and before he knew it, the afternoon monsoon broke loose. The storm was more violent than usual, even for the rainy season; the water fell in sheets and streamed off the mountainside. Waiting for a lull in the tempest, Fermín dallied until dusk. Then, more fearful of Evil Spirits that awaited along the dark trail than of the whipping that his grandmother might give him for not returning when due, he begged permission to stay overnight.

Next morning at dawn, Fermín hurried homeward, arming himself with an arsenal of such excuses as only a ten year old can dream up. But on arrival, he found it was not he who needed excuses. He blinked hard, unable to believe his eyes. In the deep canyon beside the stream where "home" had been, there remained not a trace of his grandparent's house. Not even the landmarks. A broad, empty bed of boulders and mud spread where only the day before the old adobe house had nestled beside the forested brook. The giant, orchid festooned, wild fig trees, over 200 years old, which last June he and Gil had climbed to pelt each other and fill their bellies with the small gritty fruit, were gone. The citrus orchard, cultivated by the family for three generations, was gone. Irrevocably -- at least in one man's lifetime. Nothing was left. Not even roots.

Dazed and doubtful, Fermín made his way to the closest neighbor's house. (The other five houses in the canyon -- all of them fortunately higher above the stream -- had not been touched.) The boy found the house vacant. He went to the next house. Also vacant. He stood outside in the first rays of the morning sun, staring with wonder at the broad expanse of rocks and mud. Slowly and against his will he began to comprehend what had happened. 'He wondered where his grandmother, his brother and the rest of the family had taken refuge . . . and why the other houses were so empty.

Hearing distant voices, Fermín looked down the wide swath the arroyo had laid waste the night before. A group of villagers, mostly women and children, were making their way upstream, led by a man carrying a bulky gunnysack. From his bow legs, Fermín recognized him as old Camilo from La Quebrada. The boy ran to meet them. As he approached, the group grew strangely hushed, except for a little girl of five, who pointed toward the gunnysack and, announced importantly, "Es to 'mano, Gil!" ("It's your brother, Gil!"). Fermín's bright eyes riveted on the bulging sack, then darted amongst the faces of the villagers. Each gave a reluctant nod of confirmation. The boy felt a soft hand on his shoulder and looked up into the tearful face of his Aunt Juana. Fermín said nothing, and fell into march with the group. His head was spinning. What had been a dim recollection of an event that had happened years before, when he was no bigger than the little girl who had pointed to the gunnysack, suddenly burned again in his memory. He recalled how up this same arroyo (was it really the same arroyo?) he had watched these very villagers carry back the bullet riddled body of his father. How good his father had been to him! He hung his head, but his eyes remained dry. After all, such things happen.

A wave of fear swept over Fermín and he burst out, "And Grandma?"

"Still looking," somebody said, nodding back over his shoulder.

Fermín stopped short, then turned and took off at a run down the bare arroyo, leaping from boulder to boulder with the agility of a goat. His Aunt Juana cried after him, "Fermín! Come back! These things aren't for you! . . . Fermín' . . . But the boy kept running.

When the group of villagers reached the first house, a cot was prepared and the remains of the twelve year old child were carefully laid out. Beeswax candles were lit on each corner of the cot. While the womenfolk gathered and arranged wild flowers

around the small battered body, an old man carefully carved two slender sticks and bound them together to form a cross. This was placed upright in the child's folded hands over his chest.

Meanwhile, and several times over, old Camilo told the story of how, the evening before, they had heard a roar like thunder rapidly approaching from upstream, and how moments later the deluge was upon them: a wall of tumbling water, rocks and trees that reached their doorstep. He told how gaunt Juan Nunez, who was visiting that night, had almost died of fright, had paced the porch as the flood tumbled by, praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe for gentle entry into heaven. Old Camilo also told how shortly before dawn, when the water had receded almost as quickly as it had risen, he and his 13 year old son, Tacho, had set out with pine torches to check the damage to their banana and sugarcane plantings along the streamside alluvials. Like Fermín, they found to their dismay only rocks and mud. Climbing over a tangle of twisted trees and rubble, Tacho had taken hold of what he thought to be a branch, then drawn back in horror at the fleshy texture. Between them, they had extracted the naked, mud-caked and badly torn body from the rubble and carried it to their casa. Old Camilo and his wife -- who have suffered enough losses of their own to be compassionate, had bathed the small body and dressed it in their son's only good clothing; then they had waited quietly for dawn. Juan Nuñez had refused to go near the body, but had prayed fervently throughout.

The next body to be brought in was that of Fermín's grandmother, María Nunez. Fermín did not accompany it; he was not seen again until nightfall. The body, missing a leg, had been found near what had been the water hole in Verano, five miles downstream. By noon, four more bodies had been brought in: those of Fermín's Aunt María and her two children, plus one of two small cousins of Fermín who, like himself and Gil, had been raised by their grandmother. The body of vermin's other cousin, a six year old girl, turned up only yesterday, when vultures and hungry dogs divulged its whereabouts many miles downstream.

Of the eight persons in the house when the flash flood hit, seven of them perished. The only survivor was María Nuñez's son, Victor, father of two of the children killed.

I was 30 miles down river at the Ajoya clinic the night of the tragic flash flood, and in Ajoya it didn't even rain. However, a lively display of flashing and thundering further back over-the mountains revealed that heavy storms struck not far away. Word of the tragedy in La Tahona had still not reached Ajoya when I set off on mule back for El Zopilote three days later,, yet the many oranges, limes and the occasional body of a pig or calf floating by in the swollen river bespoke of misfortune upstream. No sooner had I dismounted at El Zopilote the following morning than Victor's brother, Bartolo, arrived out of breath and begged me to hurry to La Tahona to care for his brother who, he said., was dying. I tossed some medicines and instruments into a bag and, as my mule was a bit saddle sore from the long ride, I set off on foot with Bartolo down the steep trail toward La Tahona. Now, at the close of the rainy season, the whole mountain was aflame with orange-flowering cosmos that grew in a thicket as high as our heads. The sky was a deep blue, the air cool, the sun welcome. Yet we remembered our mission. We almost ran.

Victor, fortunately was still far from moribund, although from the gangrenous stench that rose from his left leg, I guessed that he soon might be. I was amazed he had survived at all. Not a patch of his body was not bruised or torn. His whole face was black and blue, nearly all the skin had been scraped from his back, and his arms and legs had multiple open wounds, some of them down to the bone. The only injury which was now life-threatening, however, was the dime-sized hole on his lower left leg, where a sharp stick had carried mud and debris deep into the flesh. Now the whole leg was badly swollen, and by the putrid gray-green fluid it oozed, I knew that the only chance of saving Victor's leg, and possibly his life, was immediate surgical debridement.

While I gave him pre-medication and had the womenfolk boil the instruments, Victor related once again the events of that tragic night.

Rain had begun to pour down in the late afternoon, a very local storm, with much thunder and lightning. As night came on, it began to rain harder; a deluge! The five children in the house had long since gone to bed, but the grown ups were still up putting pails and urns under new leaks, when they heard a sudden thunderous explosion. It sounded as if the whole perpendicular face of the mountain had given way and crashed into the canyon upstream. (This is precisely what happened.) The echo reverberated for some moments and then, instead of fading away, began to grow louder.

"It's the arroyo!" cried María Nuñez in alarm. "It's coming! Quick! Get the children out to higher ground."

But it happened too fast. The roar grew to a thunder. The children were still climbing out of bed when the seething wall of water, mud, boulders and trees crashed against the stout adobe walls and swept the house downstream. At the instant the water hit, Victor heard his aging mother cry out, "Mis hijitos!" (My children!) followed by a gasped, "Díós!" as the roof beams, tiles and walls crashed down. Victor clutched his seven year old daughter to him and tried to shelter her as best he could as their world fell in on top of them. He felt the crush of adobes and sharp tiles; at the same instant the churning wall of water tumbled and swept them downstream, Victor still clinging to his small daughter. Something in the maelstrom struck him on the forehead. From that moment on he could not remember well . . . except that the nightmare went on and on, and now he was alone. He remembered being hurled against a jagged shore and pulling himself out. He was more that 100 yards downstream from where the house had been. Stripped of his clothing and covered with mud and blood, he managed somehow to drag himself back to the village.

Provisional surgery on Victor's leg proved that the anaerobic infection. under the skin was more extensive even than I had feared. I made an incision from below his knee nearly to his ankle and laid back the skin, still without exposing the limits of the rank infection. With a catheter on a syringe, I irrigated and oxidized the lesion with hydrogen peroxide; before releasing the tourniquet, I cauterized the severed blood vessels with a red-hot wire which Bartolo brought running from the cooking fire,

I explained to Bartolo that while Victor would possibly recover where he was, provided he got extensive care, that if the infection could not be brought under

control, amputation might be life-saving and I recommended we take him to Mazatlán , where the facilities were available should this prove necessary,

Victor's fever had subsided, and he was in good spirits, relatively speaking. He lay in an improvised stretcher which, with the sheet we had rigged as a sunshield, looked for all the world like a covered wagon. As the arroyos were still treacherous after the big flood, for the first part of the long trek we took the ridge trail, which involved several steep climbs and drops of more than 2000 feet, on paths so precarious that even mules sometimes lose their footing and tumble to their deaths. I marveled at the sure-footedness and stamina of these mountain youths that carried the heavy stretcher. (Victor weighed about 170 pounds and the stretcher another 30.) We started with a group of 25 young men, mostly from La Tahona and Verano, but we sent runners ahead to request help from the next villages along the line, so that the number of stretcher bearers grew. We rarely stopped, except just long enough to change bearers. Arriving at the river, we crossed more than 20 fords, some of them chest deep and the current swift. A few men had brought carbide lights, so that when night fell, we kept moving. By the time we reached Ajoya at about 10:00 p.m., more than 70 persons had helped carry the stretcher.

Arriving in Ajoya, Bill Gonda and Phil Mease, who have been doing a superlative job as medics in the Ajoya clinic, helped re-irrigate and dress Victor's leg, which was still rank, but looked better. The following morning we drove Victor to San Ignacio in my Jeep, transported him across the Rio Piaxtla on a raft, transferred him into Bills VW and drove the last 70 miles to Mazatlán . Having little confidence as to the sort of treatment he might get at the Hospital Civil (where more than once I have seen limbs amputated which could have been saved) we took Victor to the *Sanatorio Mazatlán*, which, although expensive, provides first rate care. There, we requested the services of Dr. Miguel Guzmán, a fine person and an excellent physician, who has helped us several times in the past, often donating his own services.

Dr. Guzman examined the leg, and told us that he would be glad to hospitalize the patient, but that he would, for the present perform no further surgery, and would continue with exactly the same treatment of peroxide irrigation that we had already begun. After talking it over, we decided to take Victor back to our Ajoya clinic and treat him there -- this primarily to save on expenses.

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Three weeks have passed since I began, in spare moments, to write this account. The reports that come up to El Zopilote from Ajoya have been encouraging; the infection in Victor's leg is under control and healing has begun. He now moves about on crutches, and is in fine spirits. Amazing!

As for Fermín, I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since that misty day he ate the apple -- and his absence is probably a good sign.

## **Deluge**

Wash! Wash the roof clean; Splendid, Holy Rain  
The deadly drought has ended, and again  
Life stirs, bursts, shouts; transmutes the pain  
Of wet Beginning: Splendid, Holy Rain!

I want you and I need you, Tempest Dread  
Gloom-smiting Bolt that spears alive the dead,  
Slash down the snag, and leave the sprout instead:  
I fear you, yet I love you, Thunder Head.

Kill! Kill the dusty half-truth of the heart  
Prick this sad dream with an unpoisoning dart  
And like the Rain that molds life-form from dirt,  
Weep, that the half-dead get a second start.

## **AFTER THE FLOOD: THE RECKONING**

From where I now sit in my small second story "crows nest" (or should I say "vulture's roost?") at El Zopilote, I look out the open window through the pine boughs at the pinnacles and cliffs of the high sierra, rising perennially beyond the Cañon de la Tahona, two thousand feet below me. The new sun: that glances off the far rocky spires has still not dipped its bright spokes into the sleeping shadow of the canyon, whose blue slumber breathes a hush of tranquility so deep it almost calls. Now is the most beautiful time of year, in late October. The violence of the long rainy season is past, yet its vital gift remains. The streams yet dance and sparkle with abundant clear water. The soil is still laden with moisture. But the clouds have gone.

All green things thrive: drink in the water of the earth, breathe in the fire of the sun, and, through some miracle that men of science and clergy pretend to explain, grow and create new life! The mountainside, so barren during the springtime drought, is today a tangled jungle of manifold vegetation, scrambling and climbing over itself in its urge to reach skyward and bloom. In the barrancas of the Sierra Madre the colors of autumn are not those of dying leaves, but of myriad new blossoms shouting youth and life. And among this maze of foliage and flowers, a million trillion insects leap, creep, gnaw, mate and sing. No wonder the birds come south!

This morning these eyes would tell me the world is all beauty -- and I long to believe. But the mind looks a little farther forward than the eyes . . . and farther back. There lingers in the Cañon de la Tahona a darkness darker than the shadow that slumbers now so peacefully, a forlorn memory that neither sleeps nor lets sleep, but whispers in the hours of stillness, to me and to all who listen.

A natural catastrophe as unmerciful and unexpected as the flash flood in La Tahona last month is enough to make any thinking man stop short and take his bearings.

Something seems to be cosmically off course when forces beyond man's control make victims of innocent beings, for no apparent reason other than that they exist. There is so much Beauty and Order in our Universe that we are tempted to believe that there must also be some ultimate Justice, perhaps even Compassion. But is there? We lull ourselves into believing what we prefer to believe . . . until some flood like the one in La Tahona whisks the feeble foundations of our beliefs out from under us. And suddenly we find ourselves alone in space; small, thinking organisms with no other love to guide us than that which we feel for one another.

In a certain way, I envy those persons who can accept even the most unmerciful natural catastrophe as being "God's Will", who insist that we are not wise enough to question His reasons, and who are, thereby, content to let the matter rest. In my own mind I am unable to accept the tragedy of last month's freak flood as an "act of God", lest my heart demand an accounting for such action. I would prefer to consider it just plain bad luck, that is to say, an "act of fate", and by so doing exonerate God entirely. For surely, misfortune is easier to tolerate than injustice. If this be a denial of Divine Will, so be it. If it must come to such, I would rather deny the Lord outright than lose respect for Him. I would rather refute His Power than His Love. I would rather beat my tom-tom for a less than Omnipotent God than count my beads for One who is Almighty but Unfair.

Enough said for my own meager thoughts. What about those of the villagers. How do these rugged mountain people -- whose ancestors believed in gods of Sun and Rain, but who learned from their conquerors to have faith in a personal, all powerful God of Love who mercifully watches over His flock --account for natural catastrophes such as the flash flood in La Tahona? How do they reckon with the violent sacrifice of those innocent children? How do they regard the suffering of Victor? And how does Victor, himself, regard his ordeal? Certainly his story has a familiar ring:

--- Here was a young man in the prime of life, peaceful, honest, hard working, kind to his aging mother, good to his wife and children. Then one night there fell a Great Rain from the Heavens and stripped him of just about everything a man can be stripped of and survive. It stripped him of his mother, of his wife, of his children. It stripped him of his home, of his livestock, of his poultry, of his orchard. It even stripped him of the clothes on his back and of much of his skin. It left him battered and rank with infection. But it let him live!

--- And in spite of all this, in those agonizing days of treatment which followed, each time his putrid leg was opened and cleaned and the pain was unbearable, he would cry out, "Díós! Ay Díós!" Occasionally, when it was too much he would wail, "Díós, déjame morir!" (God, let me die!) and rarely, "Ay Díós, tan ingrato!" (ingrato translates as ungrateful, cruel or harsh,)

Surely, if the Story of Job had not been recorded in Gods testimony long before, the Story of Victor might do as well. The only -- and perhaps most crucial - element that would at first appear to be missing is the major role of the Forces of Darkness, in other words, the Devil: that most precious angel who chose to sacrifice his own grace by falling from heaven in order to free from blame, the God he loved.

It has been fascinating to note, in the month that has passed since the Great Flood in La Tahona, how the local version of the "forces of darkness" have been gaining popularity in the villagers' accounting for the tragic event.

The local dark forces here in the barrancas are witches and evil spirits, but it is understood that the Devil is behind them; a witch can hex only if she has made a "compromise" with the Devil, i.e. sold him her soul.

In the days immediately following the La Tahona tragedy, there was little talk of witchcraft. The villagers spoke of a cyclone, and shrugging their shoulders a little uncomfortably, supposed it must have been "la voluntad de Dios". No one dared ask why it was God's will -- at least not out loud -- but I suspect that inwardly the question arose; for in spite of the fact that María Nuñez and her family had been well thought of by most of their neighbors, I heard numerous murmurings such as, "That's what happens to troublemakers!" and "They must not have wanted to escape alive." Yet such comments were usually made quizzically rather than righteously, as if the speaker were trying to convince himself.

Then, little by little, the role of witchcraft, and specifically "the old curse" began to gain favor as an explanation of the event. This was perhaps to be expected, as it not only allowed God to be merciful once again, but it provided an avenue of righteous recourse and a potential means to avoid repetition of such natural -- or now, unnatural- catastrophes: destroy witches!

Fortunately for the present day witches in the area -- and several have been named -- the disaster in La Tahona has been securely pinned down to a witch who was already brutally murdered 22 years ago: Chana Cebreros. The evidence is convincing:

Firstly, Chana Cebreros was María Nuñez's closest neighbor; the eroded remains of the hut where she lived so strangely and died so violently still stand, like an omen, above the site where Doña María's house was swept away by the flood.

Secondly, Doña Chana did not get along well with Doña María (which is not surprising insofar as she apparently got along well with almost no one).

Thirdly, Doña Chana was not just a run-of-the-mill witch; she was horrendous. She had reputedly hexed to death over a dozen persons between La Tahona and Verano. Many of her most dreadful feats of black magic would be hard to believe, had there not been so many witnesses. Alberto Meráz of La Quebrada swears to this day that Doña Chana transformed his genitals into those of a woman, and that when he pleaded with her, she changed him back to normal again. Doña Chana's son, Melchór, still relates how several times when he was a teenager and left for a Saturday night dance in Verano against his mother's will, that he had suddenly encountered her, hanging by her long black hair from the branch of a giant fig tree in mid-trail, terrifying him so that he turned around and ran home. There are many rumors that Doña Chana had "harnessed" the Devil and that she often rode him piggy-back to her streamside garden and home again, but I have met no one who will swear that they actually saw this. However, there are more than a dozen witnesses living today who will swear that they saw Doña Chana slowly rise from the cot where she lay in a

trance and "fly" to the top of the cliff face at the head of the canyon (the very cliff face that landslided into the arroyo the night of the fateful flood.)

Fourthly, and most importantly, shortly before Doña Chana was murdered, in one of those strange "attacks" of hers during which she lost consciousness and a "Voice" not her own, but a man's, spoke "from her navel" -- her "Voice" warned that a great curse had been laid on La Tahona, that the village was doomed to perish and that the curse would be lifted only when the last house fell to ruins.

At first the villagers were disturbed, to say the least, by this prophecy of doom, but in the long run they gave it little more heed than Californians who live along the San Andreas Fault give to the prophecies of the geologists or than we Christians (who charitably stockpile the means of total destruction by fire) give to the Book of Revelations.

Who can say whether Doña Chana's "curse of doom" be valid or not? However, the village of La Tahona has dwindled from 28 occupied *casas* at the time of her death, to five which are left standing today. I do not know the stories behind the end of each of those houses and their families, but certainly an uncanny number involved some incidence of violence, whether on the part of man or nature.

Ironically, the first household to perish -- and only a few months after Doña Chana's Voice prophesied doom -- was that of Doña Chana, and for reasons which had nothing to do with her directly (unless, of course, the devil set the stage). It so happened that Doña Chana's son, Pedro, and another young man named Pascual, son of Doña Cecilia, also reputed to be a witch, fell in love with the same girl while in Ajoya... The not-so-friendly rivalry ended by Pedro's killing Pascual. For some reason (possibly because she is not that kind of witch) Cecilia did not resort to black magic to avenge her son's death, but called on the help of her cousin, "El Güerito" (The Paleface). El Güerito is a professional killer who resides in La Noria, north of Mazatlán and (thanks to a few neat jobs endorsed by public funds) has unofficial government protection. To date he has more than 100 assassinations to his credit. When El Güerito arrived in Ajoya, Pedro was naturally nowhere to be found. Reluctant to disappoint Doña Cecilia, El Güerito and his band of gunmen rode to La Tahona and descended on Pedro's family in the night. In cold blood they murdered his father, his mother (Doña Chana), four of his brothers and his 12 year old niece, a total of seven. The only survivor was Doña Chana's son, Melchor, a young man about Victor's age. Although badly wounded by a bullet in the leg, Melchor managed to break past the killers and escape into the night. El Güerito's men pursued him up the mountainside with torches, tracking by the blood spilled from his leg.. Disabled by the wound and weak from loss of blood, Melchor struggled to keep ahead of his pursuers; he dragged himself through thorn thickets and let himself tumble and slide down almost vertical slopes. Returning to the arroyo, he hobbled downstream some distance, then hid in a deep pool until El Güerito's men passed, combing the banks for traces of bloody tracks. When they went by, Melchor, his whole body torn and battered from his wild flight through the night, dragged himself from the water and bound his leg with a tourniquet to check the bleeding. He then limped to a hiding place some distance above the arroyo, where he collapsed and remained for the next two days.

Though probably coincidence, the circumstances of the two "massacres" in La Tahona have sufficient parallels to give room for puzzlement. Two houses, side by side; seven persons innocent of the cause, were inhumanely killed in each house at night. One son from each household was severely injured in the leg, was pursued unmercifully through the night but escaped to tell the tale and to suffer the loss of the rest. Combine all this with Doña Chana's -- or her Voice's -- curse of doom, and it is not too surprising that the villagers should equate a demonic link between the two events.

And so, with a sigh of great relief, it is now decided: El Diablo and Doña Chana are to blame for the recent tragedy in La Tahona. It was not "la voluntad de Diós" after all; peace between heaven and earth can be graciously restored, and the villagers can sleep peacefully once again. However, no man, woman or child would be caught alive or dead along the arroyo at night:

As for myself, I still sleep poorly. I hope that God is not too hard on Doña Chana. Frankly, I don't see how He would have explained things without her.

But then, who asked Him to? . . . I guess I did.

\* \* \*

### Two Little Girls

Two little girls as the sun was dropping  
Came from the first hut, a mile away;  
They left me their gifts and without stopping  
Hurried for home in the last flame of day.

The one brought tortillas wrapped in a tatter  
Of kerchief as weathered and orange as the sky,  
The other a cluster of cosmos and madder  
Picked from the meadow the trail goes by.

In one hand for the body, two for the heart,  
I stand on the edge of my stout wall of stone  
Watching two little girls who swiftly depart  
In the distance and darkness . . . until I'm alone.

\* \* \*

### JUAN

Juan is different. So many of the campesinos in the barrancas go through life with the blinders of their culture strapped firmly to their mind's eye, and their thoughts, like slow work mules, plow and replot the same ground year after year. They wonder *what* the weather will be. They do not wonder *why*.

Juan is different. So many of the campesinos, when they ask each other "Qué hay de nuevo?" (what's new?) reply, without giving thought to their answer, "Nada . . . Todo

muy triste." (Nothing . . . Everything is sad.) But for Juan there is little sadness and everything is new; each dawn, each day, each hour. Juan has a freshness that sparkles. I cannot imagine him ever having, been or ever being bored. I have seen him unhappy -- rarely, as when his four year old daughter died this autumn -- but I have never seen him feel sorry for himself. It is beyond him.

What made Juan different is hard to say. He was one of ten children. His brothers and sisters, as many of them as I have come to know, are all good people, moderately honest, hard working, nothing exceptional. None of his siblings nor his parents are literate. None of them, nor Juan, ever went to school. They live in a remote settlement called Oso de Arriba, where there never has been and probably never will be any school. But Juan can read and write. He has read everything he could get his hands on, which up until I started a diminutive lending library at El Zopilote, wasn't much. One day I asked Juan how he ever managed to learn how to read and write.

Juan grinned shyly and told me that when he was a boy his father had bought a new "molino" (corn grinder), and that it had come in a box with bright red letters. The letters fascinated and were a mystery to him. No one in his village knew what they said. Then one day a visitor arrived who knew how to read, and Juan pumped his mind until he had learned all the letters and words on the box. There his literacy stopped for some time, as there were no more written words in the neighborhood. Later, however, in a nearby village Juan came upon a discarded, battered, leather-bound copy of *La Historia de Carlo Magno*. Little by little, with occasional help of those who could read, he picked his way through the book. He read it and reread it and reread it. The vocabulary was far beyond that of the campesinos, but nevertheless Juan learned the book by heart, from cover to cover. He became the regional expert on Charlemagne. For the most part he kept his knowledge to himself; no one else in the barrancas had ever heard of Charlemagne, or cared to.

Juan and I hit it off from the start. Here in the barrancas I have to a great extent learned to keep my deeper thoughts and appreciations to myself. I talk to the villagers about their ailments, the weather (what it will be, not why), the planting and the harvest, the catastrophes, the dances. I do not talk about the sunsets; the villagers do not have a word for sunset in their vocabulary. I do not talk about the birds; most of the most beautiful species -- unless they happen to be edible, magical, medicinal or destructive -- don't even have a name. All birds are birds of prey; the prey of small boys with slingshots. I began to forget I ever discussed literature, poetry, art, drama, science, silence, philosophy or religion with anyone. I learned, to a large extent, to keep my mouth shut and listen to the fascinating folk lore of the people. I have come to take as much pleasure in the villagers daily gossip as once I took in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* . . . but I am the audience and the seats beside me are empty.

And then came Juan; quiet, shy, at peace with the world and himself, but eager to know, to explore, to appreciate, to touch with his heart: everything: What a man!

With Juan I can talk, and do talk of many things. Juan listens and asks questions. He wants to know the reasons for the seasons, for the weather, for the phases of the moon. He wants to borrow and read every book on the shelf. (The first he picked was *Las Grandes Religiones del Mundo*, the next was *Evolución*.) He sometimes comes when I am painting a bird or stitching a wound, and watches each move with

spellbound fascination, saying nothing. He picks my brain about other lands and languages. And he laughs aloud. with delight at every strange new discovery.

In our meeting of minds, I have usually been the teacher, Juan, the student. Yet of what really matters in this world of ours, I feel Juan has taught me far more of value than I can ever teach him with all my complicated thoughts.

I have not mentioned what Juan looks like, or even how old he is -- probably-because these factors don't really matter. Juan, like myself, is in his mid-thirties. He is short, stocky, but all muscle. His head is large, his face square, his hair curly. There is a child-like quality in his wide eyes, his laughter, and his stance. His features are not so much handsome, as refreshing . . . but perhaps that is because I know him.

When, three years ago, I was about to undertake the construction of El Zopilote, everyone recommended I get Juan to help with the building. I sent a message to El Oso and the next day Juan came. I showed him a sketch I had made of the prospective clinic, partly of pine logs, partly of adobe, and with a small upper story room which was to be built of hand sawn lumber. Juan said he had never seen a house like that, much less built one, but that if I wanted his help he would do his best.

Juan's best was superlative. I have never before in my life seen anyone work with such stamina, such persistence, such skill, such speed and such pleasure. Juan, who had taught himself how to read and write, against all odds and with very little help, had also somehow mastered the craft of house building, Mexican country style. He knew how to chisel the stones for the foundation, how to make and lay the adobes, how to hew and pin the beams, how to mold and fire the roof tiles. His craftsmanship is supreme; there is not a better builder in the whole of the barrancas.

Juan had only the barest essentials of hand tools of his own, and many he had skillfully constructed himself. He had one 3/4" bit, but no brace, and to use the bit, very carefully carved a small, tapering square hole in a piece of heartwood of *tepeguaje*, a very hard local wood. The bit fit perpendicularly into the hole, and by turning the stick in propeller fashion, Juan managed to drill. Juan had used the same very hard wood, plus an old bolt and a carefully filed piece of car spring, to fashion a very serviceable carpenter's plane.

To watch Juan work with an axe or aspe is like watching a skilled sculptor or dancer; every motion is controlled and precise, an expression of total concentration and joy; nothing is wasted. And what an eye! For extremely accurate work, Juan uses a chalk-line, using for chalk the carbon inside old flashlight batteries, and with careful, full swings of the axe, hues right down to the line. One time when I was making a desk for my upstairs study, I found that the hand-sawn planks-I intended to use had warped considerably in the drying. Laboriously, I set about planing the warp out of them, a task which I reluctantly realized would take me all day. Juan offered to help, and I gladly let him. With an axe, he proceeded to hew the boards straight again, and so smoothly that all that was needed was a few strokes with the plane to make them perfectly flat. Within less than an hour he presented the boards to me, as smooth and free from warp as if they had been run through an electric planer. When I expressed my delight, Juan grinned shyly and said nothing. That is Juan.

Without Juan's help, the construction of El Zopilote would have taken twice as long, and the craftsmanship would have been only half as good. Juan took on the enterprise of the new clinic with all the boundless enthusiasm of a child who builds a secret hideout. In the early stages of construction, I and the young Americans who had come to help me (first Michael Bock, later John Grunewald and Mark Silber ) ate and slept at the nearest house, about a kilometer away. To make the most of the daylight hours, we were always up and had finished breakfast by dawn, and left for the building site at the first hint of daylight. Invariably we would find Juan already there and waiting for us, even though, in the 5 kilometer hike from El Oso in the dark, he had had to climb one mountain ridge, drop all the way down into the canyon of La Tahona, and ascend more than 2000 feet again to reach El Zopilote. Such a strenuous hike -- which in itself would have been a good day's work for the average man -- didn't even phase Juan. He would always greet us with a cheerful "Gut mor-r-rneen:", as we puffed up the last ascent; and if, as occasionally happened, we were 10 or 15 minutes later than usual (but still long before sunrise) he would greet us playfully, "Gut ahfter-r-rnoon:" Juan would work tirelessly all day, with only a short break for lunch, which he always brought with him and which usually consisted of a stack of corn tortillas and a small piece of goat's cheese. Whatever the job at hand, from digging the building site out of the hard, rocky slope, to peeling the bark off the pine logs for the log cabin, Juan managed, in the same time, to accomplish three times as much as any of the other workers. But he never made a point of his accomplishment, and none of the others held it against him. Whether with pick or axe or crosscut saw, he worked rhythmically, deftly, always getting the most out of each motion for the energy expended. He had the stocky grace of a mountain lion. He. was never careless, always cheerful but intent. With whatever tool and at whatever awkward angle, I never saw him fail in his aim. Many of the other workers occasionally mashed, bruised or cut themselves, and several times I had to suture lacerations. But Juan never so much as scratched himself. It was a delight to watch him work . . . and to work with him.

Somewhere Juan had acquired a small English-Spanish dictionary, which he would occasionally, and secretively, slip from his breast pocket and hunt the meaning of a word he had heard repeated several times in English and didn't understand. For some reason he was embarrassed about looking up such words, and the first time I asked him what the little book was he kept referring to, he turned bright red and grinned sheepishly as he took it from his pocket to show it to me. From then on we undertook to teach Juan English names of all the tools and materials, and many other expressions. He had much trouble with pronunciation, but practiced the new words over and over again as he worked. When we were building the walls of the room that is now the dispensary and he was laying the adobe bricks, with a big grin he would call down, "Moan-r-r mahdt!", and when one of the high school students helping at the time would hand up a bucketful of mud, he would laugh with pleasure at having succeeded in communicating in our foreign tongue. With Juan around, work was always fun.

Often, at around. five o'clock in the afternoon, when we had worked a good 10 or 11 hours and most of the other workers had headed for home, I would say, "Juan, why don't you take off now; it's been a long day."

"And are you going to stop work now?" Juan would ask.

"There are a few things I want to finish up," I would reply, "But I don't have so far to go. If you don't leave now you won't make it home before dark."

"There's a good moon," Juan would reply, and keep on working until it was too dark to see what we were doing, and we had to stop. "Hasta mañana!" we would say. And the next morning there would be Juan, leaning against the big pine in the patio, waiting for us.

"Gudt ahfter-r-rnoon!"

But Juan did a lot more for me than teach me how to enjoy hard work. His openness, his candor, his eagerness, and his boundless curiosity to see and understand any and everything new to him, have been a constant inspiration to me. He has become my friend, and also I have become very close to his wife and three small-children. I share the bounty of the gifts my patients bring me with his family, and (now that they have moved closer) his wife often brings me a hot meal and his older son and daughter (9 and 11 years) help in the garden. Juan, although he is a little younger than I and retains all the sparkle and vitality of a child, is in many respects far wiser than I, and often assumes an almost fatherly concern for me. He never, it seems, loses his temper or sense of perspective. Sometimes when I have lost my temper and been tempted to do something brash (usually as a result of a theft at El Zopilote or wanton damage to some of the nearby pine trees) Juan has helped me to stop and think that here -- where the only reliable enforcement of justice is usually through personal violence -- often it makes more sense to meet an offender with good will and patience than with a righteous accusation.

Juan is, for all his lack of formal education, within himself complete, or as near to complete as any man I have known. Sometimes I stop and think what he could have been if . . . But then, I ask myself, why should he be any other than he is? Sometimes I am tempted to take him with me and show him "the big world" beyond. (Only once has he been as far as Mazatlán ) . . . But then I stop and think, Good Lord! The world he now lives in, the world of the barrancas, so limiting and narrow for many, for Juan is infinite in its wonders and revelations and delights. Juan would be thrilled with the wonders of any corner of this earth he found himself in, that is for certain. But if there was ever anyone who has no need to go somewhere else than where he is, it is Juan.

\* \* \*

### **They Don't Sting When They're Wet**

"I wonder how she stands him!" was my thought  
The first time that I saw them: she so quick  
In every way and wit, and he . . . so . . . slow.  
She so slight, so full of charm, so prim,  
He so toad-like, taciturn, an oaf;  
She all sparkle, like a babbling stream,  
He unkempt and fetid, like a swamp.

I know some people claim that looks don't matter,

That only fools can judge by first impressions,  
But honestly, you can often pretty well tag  
A person's density or clarity of wit  
At first glance by the way he looks and acts.

This guy *looked* dull. And *act* -- he almost didn't.  
She, by contrast, was all looks and action.  
A stimulating piece, if I must say.

They arrived or, foot (I watched them from the wall)  
She striding sprite-like up the path, alert;  
He plodding after at some distance, slouched.  
She seemed to move as fast as he did slow,  
Yet he kept up. The clod! As they arrived  
She was all out of breath. He scarcely breathed.  
She grasped my hand and greeted me profusely,  
He simply nodded, his face expressionless,  
His big sombrero bending his big ears.  
She told me, blushing, that they were man and wife,  
Parried two years and still no children . . . but then  
At least he farmed. "And- well!" she added sweetly.  
She apologized for his not saying much.  
(He had said nothing) "It's not that he's unfriendly,  
He's just shy. And a little . . . well, you know . . ."

She smiled gently, willing to allow  
For human weakness, even in a husband.  
Then she added, so as not to slight him,  
"But he works hard. Plows well." The hulking oaf  
Didn't so much as blink before such praise.

Tactfully she thought to change the subject:  
"Let's talk about something pleasant.  
Goodness me, What a beautiful place you have here," arid  
"Oh my, I just now noticed the roses.  
Simply lovely! But don't you get bored. living here alone?"  
"No," I said, "Quite to the contrary, I . . ."  
She interrupted (perhaps it was as well):  
"Just one thing bothers me: aren't you afraid  
This big old pine so close beside the cabin  
Will blow over on top of you?"  
I was going to say It leaned the other way -- but she went on:  
"Just look how it drops its needles on the roof!  
My, what a nuisance! It looks nice and all that,  
But one mustn't go by looks. I'd cut it down.  
Wouldn't you, boy?" The query was to her husband.

He didn't hear . . . or perhaps he didn't want to.  
He apparently had his mind on one small wasp

That had fallen somehow into the water trough  
And was paddling as best it could with oarless legs  
But getting nowhere. The big man stooped  
And stuck a heavy finger in the water;

He held it there until the half-drowned bug  
Caught hold of it and hauled itself to rescue.  
"Ooooh!" cried his wife as the big man raised his finger.  
"Get rid of it, boy! Do you know what it is?  
It is a wasp!" she gasped. "They sting, you know!"  
"His skin's so tough I doubt it can get through it,"  
I said to calm her down.

He looked at us  
And smiling harmlessly he slowly said:  
"They don't sting when they're wet." (These were the first  
And last words that I ever heard him speak.)

"You'll have to forgive him," said his wife,  
Embarrassed. "He's still just a boy at heart.  
But he works hard!" At this she turned on him  
With a good-natured joke: "I hope it stings you!  
It would serve you right! I wish it would!"  
The "boy" didn't hear. Instead he raised  
His heavy finger toward the sun, and stood there  
Watching the wet wasp preen its soggy wings,  
A look of care upon his big dull face.  
I marveled at his power of affection  
For anything so small-. "I think," I said,  
"He may be right: They can't sting when they're wet."

"You can't tell by appearances," she chimed.  
"Let me tell you about the time my Uncle Baldo –  
Who thinks himself the world's best weather profit –  
Said, one night when there wasn't a cloud in the sky  
That because the cuckoo cried 'coo-coo' at dusk  
That it was going to rain. He was *so* sure! . . .  
But do you think it rained?" "No," I answered,  
"Or you wouldn't have remembered." "Wrong!" she whooped.  
"It rained so hard and long that all the corn  
Rotted on its stalks. That goes to show  
How little you can tell . . ." And she went on . . .  
And on and on and on. The lucky wasp  
By now had dried its wings and flown away.

We watched it go, the "boy" and I, perhaps  
With some small envy; who can say?  
He wasn't such a bad chap, after all;  
A little slow, perhaps, but does that matter?  
(The sun moves slowly, doesn't it? Or does it?)

I guess one shouldn't judge by first impressions,  
Even if . . . well, sometimes ... let it be.)

For all, I didn't weep to see them go.  
I watched them down the trail. She led the way,  
She with her pert, swift pace, he with his trudge.  
Yet he kept up. I watched them out of sight,  
Shaking my head to remember my first thought:  
"I wonder how he stands her!" Was that it?

The school in Ajoya, due to confusion as to whether it was to be State or Federally operated, did not open this year until early November. For awhile it seemed doubtful that it would open at all, and as Allison and I had planned a trip to Mexico City to pick up donated medical supplies, we decided to take a group of the schoolless children with us. We took mainly those youngsters who have helped us most in our clinics; five from Ajoya and two from Jocuixtita (near El Zopilote). And in spite of what I had already written about Juan, we took him, too.

In all honesty, it is hard to say how much the children got out of their trip. Juan, of course, didn't miss a thing. And ten year old Irma's big eyes forever danced with wonder and delight. The children relished most the race to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, and they laughed so hard watching the monkeys in the zoo that most of the other spectators looked at them instead. The vastness of the city, the incredible marvel of the Museo de Antropología, the grandeur of the Zócalo and the awesome spectacle of the Cathedral all made relatively little impression on them, being too fantastic perhaps, for their sense of reality.

For little Luís from Jocuixtita, the whole experience was at times too much, and he would switch off his sensory responses altogether. For Luis, the most important part of the trip to Mexico City, perhaps, was that somebody cared enough for him to take him. Luís was brought up by his grandfather, Anselmo, his mother having abandoned him as an infant and his father having subsequently remarried. Even when, last year, his grandfather was killed accidentally by a "vivo" (joy shot) fired at a dance, his father refused to reclaim the boy, who was then taken in by an uncle. Since that time, Luís began to show up now and again at El Zopilote, usually in rags or clothing far too big or small for him. I gave him clothing, a blanket and always' something to eat, and he in turn, would work in the garden, feed the birds, and bring water from the spring. He is shy and quiet, and I think not very bright, though it .is hard to judge. In the last five years he has spent a total of a dozen days in school.

When we had made the rounds of the Zócalo and stopped in front of the monstrous Cathedral in Mexico City, Luís was unimpressed. It rose before us, perhaps not beautiful, but colossal and elaborate beyond belief. With its thousands upon thousands of busily sculptured figures, one on top of the other, anting its massive wall, it surged skyward like a great stony reflection of downtown Mexico City in the rush hour.

Most of the group made a bee line to see the inside of the Cathedral. I reluctantly stayed with the car, as we had parked in a tow away zone. Luis, for lack of interest,

stayed with me, his hands in his pockets and the look on his face of a thirsting man with a view of nothing but desert in front of him.

And then, all of a sudden, Luís came to life. He pointed eagerly at the figured walls of the Cathedral, and cried ecstatically, "¡Mire, David! ¡Mire!  
¡Qué bonitos! ¡Que son?" ("Look David! Look! How lovely! What are they?")  
"What are what?" I asked, overcome by his sudden enthusiasm. "Los animalitos!", he cried exuberantly. "¡Ay qué bonitos!" I told him they were pigeons. "¡Ay, qué bonitos!"

And to think! There they were tile whole time, each one of them a greater miracle, a more intricate and harmonious masterpiece than the Cathedral itself. And I had looked right at them without even seeing them! . . . You taught me something, my boy. Dear Luis!

For Project Piaxtla, our trip to Mexico City proved fruitful in many ways, principally due to contacts set up for us by our host, Charles Vickery, leader of the Asociación Unitaria Mexicana. From the president of one of Mexico's leading drug companies, we received many thousands of pesos worth of critically needed medicines. We reconfirmed our relationships with the two family planning programs in Mexico City (*Pro-Salud* and *La Fundación para Estudios de la Población*), and were given birth control supplies by each. Most importantly for the future of our project, we had lunch with Dr. Arturo Scarpita, the supervisor of all government operated and affiliated hospitals and health centers in the country. Dr. Scarpita, who himself grew up in a village of 2000 people in Durango, not far from our area, completely affirmed the need of projects such as ours, and offered to do whatever he could to help us. He feels certain that he can pull strings to regain permission for American doctors to perform surgery in our area. He was aware of the inadequacy of the Centro de Salud in San Ignacio, and has promised to supply the Centro with a conscientious doctor who will cooperate with us; and on learning that I have been trying for two years to get B.C.G. (tuberculosis) vaccine from the San Ignacio in Centro de Salud, he gave us, on the spot, 300 B.C.G. vaccines. And he may be able to help us with other medications. Above all else, knowing that we have as big a name in Mexican medicine as Dr. Scarpita on our side, gives Project Piaxtla much more security in what was formerly, on political grounds at least, a very tenuous position.

The Ajoya clinic has come up in the world, at least in the world of the barrancas. All the volunteer doctors and dentists who in our previous location shared our cramped quarters with chickens, dogs, cockroaches and fleas, will be pleased to know that we have rented a (comparatively) magnificent old building, with ample rooms, a spacious patio and (in part at least) cement floors. The villagers helped clean it up and whitewash the walls, and it is now far more pleasant to work in than the old place. We have an orderly dispensary, a laboratory and a dark room now, as well as some dental and general X-ray equipment. Miguel Angel Manjarrez did a beautiful job of setting up the dental area, where he takes charge when he returns from high school in San Ignacio on weekends.

This announcement of our new clinic is made in hopes of luring doctors and dentists who have been here before to make return visits, and enticing other doctors, dentists and medical and dental students to come and volunteer their help. In the near future

we will be temporarily losing part of our most valuable staff. Allison Akana, a former student of mine from Pacific High School, who has spent the last two years with us, and who set up and headed our third clinic in the village of Chillar, will be returning to continue her schooling on the long road to becoming a doctor. She plans to return to México during vacations. Bill Gonda, who spent the better part of half a year with us, will also be continuing his medical studies in the States, as will Phil Mease, provided we find someone to take his place. All three of these young people, though each very different from the other, are very rare individuals who have given of themselves with an eagerness and an integrity that gives one new faith in the human potential.

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In the past months I have been working diligently preparing a handbook to be entitled, La Práctica de MEDICINA SIN MEDICINAS: Una Guia para los Campesinos Retirados de Recursos Médicos. This field-guide to The Practice of Medicine without Medicines is an attempt to answer the enormous need, among villagers who live far from sources of medical assistance, for a simplified manual which explains what they should and should not do when sick and injured. It is written in the village idiom and has many self-explanatory drawings. It not only indicates what to do, with minimal medicine, to avoid or combat certain ailments, but describes how to recognize those maladies for which every effort should be made to reach medical aid as quickly as possible. It outlines the importance of diet and hygiene to avoid certain illnesses, and emphasizes the protection afforded by vaccinations. The Guia also explains which folk cures are beneficial, which may be harmful, and why. It tells which local herbs have genuine medicinal value. It discusses the use and popular misuse of the various medications available in village stores, and finally, it indicates the emergencies which justify that a person without experience give injections, explains how to give them, and stresses the precautions and the risks.

My original intention when I began to prepare this handbook, was to make it available principally to the villagers in our area. However, I feel that the book, if prepared with sufficient care, has the potential for making a significant difference in the health of villagers throughout all remote areas of México and perhaps other parts of Latin America.