

The Itching Parrot, the Priest, and the Subdelegate

José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi

One of the most unforgettable characters of late colonial Mexico is the fictional Pedro Sarmiento, whose name was corrupted by his schoolmates to "Périco Sarmiento," or "Itching Parrot." The protagonist of The Itching Parrot embodies many of the characteristics of the Mexican pelado, described earlier in this volume by Roger Bartra, although he also has many traits of the pícaro, the wandering rogue of the Spanish picaresque tradition. Although born to a fairly reputable family, he proves too lazy to train for the "respectable" professions such as law and theology. He likewise disdains honorable trades, hoping instead to live by his wits, which consistently prove inadequate. He inhabits a colorful and corrupt world of gamblers, rascals, confidence men, charlatans, beggars, and thieves. His adventures pointedly satirize the society of late colonial Mexico, where pompous claims and highfalutin phrases substitute for both competence and compassion (among the colorful figures that populate the book, for instance, we find one Doctor Purgante, who spouts random terms in Latin but whose only remedy consists of prescribing laxatives).

Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827) was born into a creole family of modest means. By the time the movement for Mexico's independence broke out in 1810, he had begun to write for and to publish political newspapers. While he was late to fully embrace the cause of independence, his writings—which came to comprise fiction, poetry, and numerous essays—were consistently critical of the Spanish colonial system. Fernández de Lizardi took special aim at the suffocating fiscal and administrative bureaucracy that marked the enlightened despotism of the Spanish Bourbon kings who had succeeded Hapsburg rule in the early eighteenth century. He espoused many of the reforms that would come to be identified with the Liberal cause: he decried corruption and incompetence in government, the Church, and the professions; he denounced slavery and racial oppression; and he favored the impartial and impersonal rule of law. His 1816 book, from which the following chapter is taken, is widely regarded as the first genuine Spanish-American novel. In the following excerpt, we get a glimpse of corruption in both petty officialdom and the priesthood in late colonial Mexico.

If when the boys in school named me the Itching Parrot, they had called me Jumping Jack, I could say now they foresaw my adventures, so quickly did I hop from one occupation to another, out of bad luck into good: first sacristan, then beggar; and now scrivener to the Subdelegate at Tixtla, with whom I got along so well from the first day that he began to show real fondness for me; and, to crown my felicity, after a little while he quarreled with his clerk, who left the village.

My master was of the mercenary kind of subdelegate and he was trying, he told me, not only to reimburse himself for the expense he had incurred in obtaining his appointment, but to make a small fortune out of the district during his five years there. With such honest, straightforward intentions, he did not omit even the most wicked and illegal means of fattening his pockets. He was a merchant and owned parcels of land; he sold his goods on credit at a good price to the farmers, and made them pay in grain at less than the harvest-time value; he collected his own bills punctually and exactly, but he gave no quarter where other creditors were concerned, and these poor men, when they were forced to ask his aid, always gave up a good share of their collections to him. Although it was no longer the custom for subdelegates to collect a silver mark by way of fine from persons denounced for incontinence, my master paid no attention and kept spies, who informed him fully as to the private life and miracles of all his neighbors; and not only did he collect the silver mark from the accused but he also imposed exorbitant fines in proportion to their means; always warning them to be careful about repetition of the offence, because they would pay double for it. In a few days he would fall upon them suddenly and get more money out of them. There was one poor farmer among them whose abundant harvest for a year all went in fines; another lost his little farm for the same reason; a shopkeeper went bankrupt; the very poor were without a shirt.

In the villages there are always some shameless toadies who comb the beard of the Subdelegate for all they are worth, and who stoop to any filth in their efforts to gain his good will. The Subdelegate gave money, through me, to one of these men to set up a monte game. This scoundrel took the money, gathered in as many players as he could, and sent us word as to where he could be found. We made up the round, fell upon them, shut them all up in jail, and emptied their pockets by means of fines. Counter to all the royal orders protecting the Indians, we abused these unhappy people at our pleasure, making them work for us as much as we liked without paying them a centavo. We issued proclamations on any pretext and pitilessly exacted the penalties imposed for infractions. What proclamations they were! We proclaimed that donkeys, pigs, and chickens should not be permitted to run loose

outside the corrals, that shopkeepers must keep cats, that no one might go to Mass barefoot, and other things as strange.

The priest rivalled us in exploiting the wretched villagers. I should like to pass over the deeds of this churchman, but I must say something about them because of the part he played in my leaving that village. He was well instructed, a doctor of canons, not scandalous in his private life, and almost too courtly in his manners. He was energetic in the pulpit, punctual in his ministry, sweet and affable in his conversation, considerate to his household, modest in the street, and would have been an excellent pastor, if such a thing as money were not known in this world; but he was ruled by avarice and covetousness. He had plenty of charm to make himself loved, but where money was concerned, he could not dissemble and was inexorable; the miseries of the unfortunate did not move him, the tears of the widow and orphan did not soften his heart.

But so you may see there is something of everything in this world, I must relate an episode which I witnessed. Our priest invited the priest from Chilapa, don Benigno, a virtuous man without hypocrisy, to visit Tixtla during the festival. One afternoon while they were amusing themselves playing manille until dinner time, a poor woman entered, clothed in rags, crying bitterly, with one little creature at her breast, and another about three years old holding her hand.

"What do you want, daughter?" the priest of Tixtla asked her.

The poor woman, drinking her own tears, responded, "Father, my husband died night before last. He has left me nothing except these children. I have nothing to sell and I can buy neither shroud nor candles for him. I have gathered by begging alms these twelve reals I bring your grace; and neither I nor this little girl have eaten today. I beg you, Father, by the life of your mother, in God's name, do me the kindness of burying my husband, for I will work my spinning wheel and pay you two reals on account every week."

"Daughter," said the priest, "what was your husband?"

"A Spaniard, sir."

"Then," said the priest, "according to the regulations you lack six pesos to complete paying the fees. Here, read this," and he put the list of fees in her hands.

The unhappy widow, weeping, said, "Oh, Father! I don't know how to read. What I beg of you is that in God's name you bury my husband."

"Daughter," said the priest with great elegance, "I cannot do such favors. I have to maintain myself and pay the vicar. Go see don Blas, don Agustín, or any of the rich gentlemen, and beg them to let you have the money, which you may pay back later in work; and then I will order the body buried."

"Father," said the poor woman, "I have seen all those gentlemen already and they will not help."

"Then go into service," said the priest.

"Who would take me, sir, with these babies?"

"Well, go along, see what you can do, and don't annoy me," said the priest, angrily. "This curacy was not given me to run on trust. The merchant and the butcher do not trust me."

"Sir," the unhappy woman insisted, "the corpse is beginning to spoil and it cannot remain much longer in the neighborhood."

"Then eat it, for if you don't bring me exactly seven pesos and a half, don't think I'll bury it for the plague itself! You shameless swindlers are all alike! You have money for fandangos and dinner parties, you can wear shoes and petticoats every day, while your husbands live; but you can never afford to pay the poor priest his fees. Get out, curse you; and don't bother me any more."

The unhappy woman went, confused, tormented, and shamed by the harsh treatment of her priest, whose lack of charity scandalized everyone present. But in a little while the widow entered again hurriedly and putting seven and half pesos on the table said to the priest, "Here is your money, sir. Do me the favor of sending the vicar to bury my husband."

"What do you think of this, brother?" said the priest to don Benigno. "You see how this little cheat brought her money with her all prepared in case I should not yield, and pretended to be in misery so I would bury her husband for nothing? Another priest with less experience than I have might have let her deceive him with those whines and tears."

Don Benigno lowered his eyes, was mute, and changed color from time to time, as if the prelate were rebuking him; then he looked at the widow earnestly, as if he wished to speak to her. We were all hanging on this scene, mystified at don Benigno's disturbed countenance, but the Tixtla priest dropped the money into his pocket and faced the woman severely, "You shameless creature. Your husband will be buried, but not until tomorrow, to punish you for your deceit."

"I did not deceive you, Father," said the widow humbly. "I am really in distress. The money was given me just now as alms."

"Just now? That's another lie," said the priest. "Who gave it to you?"

The woman, letting loose of the little girl's hand and holding on one arm the child at her breast, threw herself at the feet of don Benigno, embraced his knees, leaned her head upon them, and melted in weeping, unable to speak. The child who could walk cried also on seeing her mother cry. Our priest was astonished. The priest from Chilapa bent over, tears rolling from his eyes, and raised the woman up. We were all silent at such a spectacle. Finally, the

woman calmed herself a little and turning to us, she said, "Gentlemen, this Father, who is not only a priest but an angel from Heaven, called to me as I was alone in the hallway, gave me twelve pesos, and said, 'Go now, little daughter. Pay for the burial and do not tell who has helped you.' But I would be the most ungrateful woman in the world if I did not cry out the name of him who has done me such great charity!"

Both priests were scarlet and confused, not daring to look at each other. The vicar, with great prudence, took the woman away with him, saying he would attend to the burial at once; and the Subdelegate, hoping to divert the minds of the guests from this episode, invited them to resume the card game.

The Subdelegate and the priest being so well matched in greed, there was little peace between the two. They were always at it tooth and claw, for two cats cannot be kept peaceably in one sack. Both of them worked with all possible speed to squeeze the village for his own benefit; competition developed, and quarrels resulted. The priest, without its pertaining to his duties, persecuted such incontinent persons as were unmarried, trying to force them to marry and pay him the fees; the Subdelegate did the same thing to get fines. When the priest caught victims, the secular arm claimed them; the churchman refused to give them up, and a conflict of jurisdictions arose. The poor were always the losers, and they paid either with imprisonment or silver; the miserable Indians were the main objects of both traffickers. With the exception of the few spoiled rich men who could afford to buy immunity, everyone hated the priest and the Subdelegate. Some had already complained against them in Mexico [City], but their accusations were easily refuted, as witnesses could always be found to discredit the accusers and make them appear as slanderers.

But crime cannot go forever without punishment. The principal Indians and the Governor went to the capital, in bitter rebellion against the rule of the judges, the priest and the Subdelegate. Without troubling to name the priest this time, they formally accused the Subdelegate, presenting in the Royal Audiencia a terrible declaration, containing many damning clauses: The Subdelegate engaged in commerce and owned lands. He obliged the natives of the village to buy on credit and exacted payment from them in grain at a lower price than that current on the market. He forced them to work at his labors for whatever wage he wished and whoever refused to work for him was lashed and jailed. He permitted those who could afford to bribe him to lead unchaste lives, but he fined and imprisoned the poor for the same offence. For five hundred pesos he had protected and freed a murderer. Through a third party, he set up games and then fined the men caught playing. He forced the Indians to work as house servants, without pay. He used the Indian women as he

pleased, taking three of them to his house each week, and did not exempt from this service even the daughters of the [Indian] Governor. He exacted from the Indians the same fees he collected from the Spaniards. On market days he was the first haggler to seize the scarcest goods, hoarding them to sell to the poor at raised prices. Lastly, he speculated with the royal tribute monies. The Indians concluded their charges by asking that the Subdelegate be recalled to answer in the capital; that a commissioner be sent to Tixtla to investigate these charges; and that, if the accusations were proved, the Subdelegate be removed from his office, and obliged to make retribution for the private damages he had inflicted on the villagers. The Royal Audiencia appointed and despatched a commissioner at once.

All this tempest was brewing in Mexico [City] without our knowledge. The Indians' absence did not arouse any suspicion in us, for they told us they were going to order an image made. A notification from the Commissioner took my master by surprise one afternoon when he was airing himself on the balcony of the royal house. It was a simple statement to the effect that his functions were to cease from that moment, he was to name a lieutenant in his place, leave the village within three days, and within eight present himself in the capital to answer charges against him. My master was struck cold at this order, but since there was no help for it, he obeyed, leaving his affairs in my hands.

When I found myself alone, with all the authority of the Subdelegate at my back I ran wild at my own pleasure. I first banished from the village a pretty girl because she lived in incontinence. So I said, but it was really because she refused my ad-interim protection. Afterwards, thanks to a gift of three hundred pesos from the lover in the case, I incriminated a poor man whose only offence was to have a pretty but dishonorable wife; and I cleverly arranged to despatch him to prison, leaving his wife free to live with her paramour. Next, I summoned and threatened all those whom I suspected of incontinence; and they, afraid I would banish their mistresses also if I took the notion, paid me the fines I demanded and sent gifts so I would not put them through the mill too often. I annulled the most formal legal documents, revised testaments, and destroyed public records. In the month that I lasted as vice-subdelegate, I was a more devilish nuisance than the Subdelegate had been, and I ended by making myself hated thoroughly.

To crown my labors, I began to gamble publicly in the royal house, and on the evening that luck turned against me, I went out with the patrol and persecuted the private gamblers by way of revenge; so that on some nights my fellow gamblers left my house at twelve and at one numbers of poor fellows caught playing in other houses went to jail; and I replaced the greater part

of my losses by the fines I extracted from them. One night my guests gave me such a plucking that, not having a real of my own, I unlocked the public moneyboxes and lost all there was in them. I did this with so little discretion that the other players noticed and tattled to the priest and the Governor of the Indians, who, being responsible for the money and knowing I could not replace it, immediately sent a report of my doings to the capital, backed by individual declarations that they collected not only from the honorable residents of the village, but from the Commissioner himself. All this was done with such secrecy that no smell of it came to my nostrils.

The priest was the principal agent of my ruin, and this not because of his love for the village nor his jealousy for its well-being, but because he had hoped to get the great part of that money for himself, under pretext of repairing the church. He had already proposed this to the Indians, and they, it seems, had almost agreed. When he learned how I had forestalled him, he exploded and determined to get rid of me. To add to my griefs, the Subdelegate, being unable to answer the charges against him, resorted to the excuse of fools and declared it was news to him that those things were crimes: He was a layman, had never been a subdelegate before and knew nothing at all about the duties of that office; I had suggested all these expedients to him, he told them, and so I should be held responsible, for he had trusted me completely. These excuses, prepared by the pen of a clever lawyer, influenced the final judgment of the Audiencia, not enough to convince them of the Subdelegate's innocence, but enough to lessen the blame placed upon him, especially since at this very time they received the priest's report, which proved to them that I had committed more atrocities than the Subdelegate himself. Then they bore down upon me with all the rigor of the law that formerly had threatened my master; they excused his misdeeds; decided he was a fool and unfit to be a judge; deposed him from his employ, and exacted from his guarantors replacement of the royal monies, leaving private citizens' rights open for them to repeat charges against the Subdelegate when his fortunes bettered, because in this case he proved himself insolvent; and they sent seven soldiers to Tixtla to conduct me to Mexico [City].

So far was I from dreaming of disaster that I was playing country manille with the priest and the Commissioner at a real a point the afternoon the soldiers came for me. I was thinking only how to make up for four tricks they had won in succession; just when I had played a solo and was inflated with pride, the soldiers entered the room. Such people know nothing about the proprieties; they asked for the lieutenant; when I was pointed out, they informed me I was under arrest, and, without allowing me even to play out my hand, got me up from the table and handed the priest a letter. The letter, I

suppose, must have contained the instructions of the Royal Audiencia as to who should govern the village. I was conducted to jail and the prisoners there made a great deal of fun at my expense and revenged themselves on me in short order for all the troubles I had caused them in a short month.

The next day, before breakfast, they clothed me heavily in irons, mounted me on a mule, and conducted me to Mexico [City], where they lodged me in the Court jail. When I entered this gloomy place, I remembered the cursed shower of urine with which other prisoners had bathed me the first time I had the honor of entering there; the ferocious treatment of the trusty; my friend don Antonio, the Eaglet, and all the sorry events of my life in that place. I consoled myself that this time it might not go so badly with me, for I had six pesos in my pocket. . . . But the six pesos were soon spent and I passed through all the kinds of discomfort poverty can inflict, especially in such places. Meanwhile, my case ran the usual course; I had no defense; I confessed, was convicted, and sentenced to join the King's troops for eight years in Manila, which arm of the service was at that time flying a recruiting flag in Mexico.