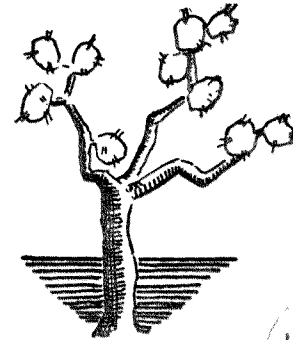


*Books by* LARRY BARRETTO

A CONQUEROR PASSES  
TO BABYLON  
WALLS OF GLASS  
OLD ENCHANTMENT  
HORSES IN THE SKY  
THE INDISCREET YEARS  
CHILDREN OF PLEASURE  
THREE ROADS FROM PARADISE  
BRIGHT MEXICO

BRIGHT  
MEXICO

BY LARRY BARRETTO



(1935)

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what he once owned. The Indians would prevent that.

I cannot vouch personally for the following story, but I am sure the source of it is reliable. The week before I left Mexico a friend of mine met a young man who was in mourning. He happened to be looking for a job. He said that a few days before, his mother and father had motored out to their former hacienda to look the old place over. The visit was as innocent as that.

But the peons, alarmed at this "invasion," attacked the car and shot the man dead. His wife escaped by driving off with the body of her husband slumped across her knees. That is ghastly, but when I think of the Indians' limited knowledge of the world beyond their doors, and recall that for years they were enslaved, beaten, starved, the victims of injustices which it is not pleasant to mention, I cannot blame them too much.

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When you go to Mexico I hope that you will be able to inspect a rural school, for even though there is the widest difference in the management and

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efficiency of them, still even one will give an insight into the problems the teacher, the inspector, the Secretary of Education and finally the Government itself has to solve. I visited a number, but a description of two will be sufficient to present contrasting pictures.

Before we start on our trips to Tejalpa and Oaxtepec it is necessary to return again to the *hacendado*. Article 123 of the Constitution imposed on the owners of agricultural, industrial or mining enterprises the obligation of establishing and sustaining schools for the children of their workers. As the *hacendados*—those who had not been dispossessed—employ by far the greatest number of workers, the obligation rested chiefly on them.

There the article was in the Constitution, written, I suppose, in beautiful monkish script on sheepskin, and there it remained. Nobody came forward to establish a school just because a piece of paper told them to, and the Government had no means of enforcing it. The Government was occupied with other and more pressing matters as well, but a year ago certain legal powers for enforcing Article 123 were obtained and the establishing of these schools began.

The *hacendados*, some of them, resorted to every

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possible means to avoid compliance. It was to their advantage to. The Indians had never been educated and yet they had managed somehow. So argued certain *hacendados*, inveighing at the same time against higher education or any education at all. They were not so naïf as this *laissez-faire* attitude would suppose, for they realized that with the establishment of schools they would be signing their own death warrant. Every Indian educated meant an Indian who could not be cheated by tricky bookkeeping, and every Indian with even a smattering of agricultural education merely meant forwarding the day when the confiscation of land would recommence.

It is said that the captain of a sailing vessel hates a seaman with enough education to know his own rights. "Sea lawyers" they are called, and life is made harder for them. For the same reason the great Mexican landowners have always hated an educated peon. There were not enough of them to cause much distress.

Two methods of evading the hateful school program were devised. The *hacendado* who was paying wages to his peons turned the land over to them to be worked on shares, and then announced that since

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he was not the active owner of the land he could not be held responsible for its school. The second popular method was to forbid the peons to live on the land they worked. Frequently they had to establish themselves several miles away, which meant a long walk at the day's end, simply so that the owner might report:

"Since these men do not live on my land, and are at best only itinerant workers, I am not responsible for their schools."

The Government's task was not an easy one, but in the first year and a half of the law's operation it claimed to have forced the establishment of 1,285 of these schools, and it hopes to establish about a thousand more in the coming year. At that, the Government's figures may be optimistic—Mexican Governments' usually are—but a start has been made under almost impossible conditions. It is hardly more than a start, considering that there are about twelve million people widely scattered and often in almost inaccessible regions to be educated.

I did not see any of these hacienda or industrial schools and so do not know how they are run. The other type of school is that established under direct

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Government supervision or by the natives of free villages. Tejalpa falls under the last heading.

We went in an automobile, but before long I would have preferred a horse or my own feet. The good hard road of crushed stone gave way to a lane muddy from recent rain, and then that too disappeared. We were crossing fields, our path marked only by a few wagon ruts. Clods of ploughed earth clung to the wheels, making them spin, and the puddles through which we drove threw sheets of red water to either side of the car. Tejalpa seemed moderately safe from invading Americans.

The town, when we reached it, was typical of any other Indian village its size—some straggling rows of adobe houses roofed with wattled palm, a few bleak cows grazing near at hand and the usual complement of hens and dogs. The school itself was easily the most important building in the village which it served. Small and humble, it yet had a dignity, a freshness about it which the other buildings lacked.

We were expected. Above the door of the school an arch had been set, an arch of flowers which spelled the word WELCOME in Spanish, made care-

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fully and neatly by many small hands. The flowers were marigolds, and marigolds were scattered on the ground before our feet. This yellow blossom was the symbol of welcome in Aztec days and its use has drifted down through the centuries with other quaint customs. No one had told the children of Tejalpa that marigolds were the appropriate flowers to use. They just knew it.

The school was quiet. No children crowded around the door, noisy and excited. We looked within. They were sitting in rows at little desks, their black heads bent over study books, sometimes two children sharing one book, sometimes one without a book at all, but sitting quietly just the same, as if studying the top of her unpainted desk.

The teacher came forward and was introduced to us. She was a plump young girl—a *mestizo*, I think, that is half Spanish, half Indian, because her skin was fairer than her pupils. Obviously she was nervous, for her hands kept clenching and unclenching at her sides, but she stood erect and did not drop her eyes. I regret that I do not remember her name, but I heard that she had come originally from Guadalajara. That is a big city and far away. Life is gay

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in Guadalajara, there are many diversions for the young, and this girl was pretty enough to enjoy them. I wondered what had induced her to come to this tiny village and what she did there when her work was done. I wondered also where she lived. Did she board out with the natives in turn, as our rural school-teachers often do?

The interpreter asked these questions and she began to laugh. Instantly her nervousness was gone. She had been glad to leave Guadalajara—there were more opportunities for service here. No, she did not live in the village; she did not like the way the natives lived, and they had built her two rooms attached to the school, a bedroom and kitchen. She would show them to us later.

How did she spend her evenings? But when the classes with her little ones ended her work had just begun. There followed such a list of things that I was bewildered. Grown people then came to school, mostly women, whom she taught to read. She also tried to teach the fundamental rules of sanitation. Sometimes the men consulted her on crops; they had the confident, the pathetic belief that having been to school she must know everything. People asked her

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to write letters and sometimes they had letters for her to read. Although unmarried she had had experience with the care of small babies and—here she lowered her eyes—she knew something about childbirth. "Only in an emergency of course, *Señor*."

What did she teach the children? To read and to write—the Government wished that. With the girls she taught them to sew. Naturally this was so they could make their own clothes properly. Fancy sewing would do them no good. I remember now another school in Cholula where the children, Indians of course, who would never be required to sew more than a straight seam, were being taught embroidery—sprays of flowers done in silk on doilies which they would never use and could not sell.

Cooking, she said, they learned from their mothers, but she could augment that by lessons in hygiene. Wash this, wash that, boil the other thing—faces clean, hands clean, bodies clean. . . .

"My work," she said simply, "is never through."

For this she had the privilege of living in two small rooms, never seeing men nor girls of her own class, never seeing a movie, never going to a dance, and she was paid a few hundred pesos a year.

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We praised the school and returned to the street to meet the Mayor of Tejalpa, a middle-aged Indian wearing pajamas and a wide sombrero. Shyly he said that he and the other men of the town had built the school to the last tile and stone. They were justly proud of it.

I asked the interpreter something rather reluctantly.

"But that isn't an insult in a country where sixty per cent of the people are illiterate!" he exclaimed. "I'll find out."

After a moment of Spanish he said:

"No, the Mayor doesn't know how to read, but his son is learning to."

When we drove away the teacher came to the door of her school with the children clustered about her to wave us good-by. She held the smallest baby in her arms so that it might see. If the Revolution ever redeems Mexico it will be the school-teachers who did it.