

## Chapter 1

# An Original Child

It's a wonderful experience to encounter the children of the mountain villages. These are children who seldom leave their humble communities, and know little of the outside world. It's wonderful to know children who are totally unpretentious, and who are perfectly beautiful and unassuming.

There's a wonderful story about such an original child.

"How full is your pack, Abrams?" I asked, as we picked ripe oranges and loaded our backpacks on the sunny mountainside.

"I've only got room for these few more," said Abrams, "as he stuffed them in his pack and zipped it shut. Should we walk all the way down again, or should we head out cross country?" he asked.

"Do you know the way if we go cross country?" I asked. He responded by nodding and pointing the direction we must head. I checked my compass and said, "Let's go then."

We had been picking oranges and filling our backpacks from an orange grove we had planted years before. Then we set-off on our cross-country journey to visit a small village several hours distance by foot. We would be traveling across some pretty rugged terrain.

"We've been climbing this grade for more than an hour," I said "Are you sure this is the best way?"

"There is loose volcanic gravel on the other side," he said, "We would be in the hot sun there, too. There's a cool stream of water when we get to the bottom of the next ravine."

I trusted Abrams. He was a Mayan Indian, born in these mountains. One day he taught me to know my position in

that rough country by referencing the points of the three nearest volcanoes.

“I can see a tiny village across there,” I said, pointing to a wisp of smoke rising from a tortilla fire probably. “We’ll pass through it in about half an hour don’t you think?” I asked Abrams.

“Yes,” he said, “It’s on the way to the village where we’re headed.”

After several hours of travel, we came to that small village of about sixty houses, all of which were constructed of cane walls with dirt floors.

“Let’s stop and rest under that mango tree there by those houses,” said Abrams, “Getting across to this village was a good workout.” So we took off our backpacks and sat down leaning back against a rickety bamboo building in the shade of that Mango tree.

“The houses are all cane houses with dirt floors,” I said, “And the people must grow corn up on the slopes of that volcano. I don’t suppose they get many visitors,” I added.

Soon curious children approached, innocent of the world of television, cartoons, and swing sets. They were the barefoot children of the cane houses and dirt floors. The bravest ones came near and smiling shook our hands first. “Hello,” we were saying to them, “What is your name?” The others followed when we reached out and offered our hands to them, too.



When twenty or so of them were grouped around us, some sitting and still others standing and saying their names, there seemed to arise an awkward silence. I sensed the

expectation of some entertainment, so I told them the “Big Mouth Frog” story.

It’s a story where the frog speaks to other animals like the fox and tiger, and it’s a simple children’s story with animal animations and strange sounds. The children responded with unusual joy.

“Maybe my story is a hit,” I thought, but then I remembered... “We’ve got the only show in town.”

“These kids have never seen a person with light skin like yours,” Abrams told me, indicating a couple of them who were putting their little brown arms beside mine to see the difference.

“Let’s give them each a half orange!” I suggested, getting out my Swiss army knife and unzipping my backpack.

“OK,” said Abrams, “Then we won’t have to carry these loads any further. Besides I don’t think they have any oranges around here.” I peeled my oranges as Abrams broke them in half and passed them to the children.

Next it was his turn to peel the oranges from his backpack, while I divided and handed half an orange to each of the remaining children. They were seedless, and ripe, and sweet. The children loved their first experience of perfectly ripened oranges.

“That’s enough, they’ve all gotten one,” I said, “How many do you have left?”

“None,” said Abrams, “You’re holding the last half orange.”

Then we saw her, the bashful one, the round-eyed girl of about seven, shy and partly hidden behind a crumbling adobe wall. I offered her the last half orange that remained.

“Thanks,” she said quietly, coming closer and reaching gently for the piece of orange. Then she did something I did not expect...

She took the half orange, broke it into two parts, and gave one part to her little brother beside her. Then she gave

the other part to her little sister who was even more shy and hidden, peeking out from behind that crumbling wall. She thanked us and went off with not even a taste for herself. And we had nothing left to give her.

“I wasn’t like that when I was a child, Abrams,” I confessed, “I had a different way of sharing with my brothers and sisters!” We both just sat there silently watching her walk away with her brother on one side and her sister on the other side, each munching on savory pieces of an orange.

It was a year before I returned to that area. I found myself this time alone with a family where the father was gravely ill. “He has a very high fever,” I said, putting my hand on his forehead. “How long has he been like this?” I asked his wife, whose face revealed her concern.

“It’s been several days,” she answered, “and the fever hasn’t broken, and that’s a bad sign.” She touched his face with the back of her hand, moving her head negatively. He was burning up with an illness, probably pneumonia. He was lying on a mat of woven cornstalks, sometimes mumbling things that were completely unintelligible.

“Lord we ask your blessing on this man. He is ill and we are asking that he become well again.” I had a helpless feeling sitting on the dirt floor of their smoky cornstalk house, praying with this mother and her children, for this man who would probably die. I stayed with the mother and half dozen children and we talked and prayed until the darkness came.

We mostly talked, because after a while we ran out of prayer.

I hadn't noticed anything particular about the child sitting on the floor next to me, but I remember wanting to tell her that she needn't worry because things would get better, but I knew things would not get better.

“The truth was,” I thought, “that things would probably get worse.” I wanted to tell her brothers and sisters that they

would go to school, and their father would live, and there would be plenty to eat...

“I have some food.” I said, suddenly remembering some wheat buns I had in my backpack. “Here is a small bag of six or eight wheat buns,” I said, taking the bag out of my backpack and handing it to the mother. I knew that often these families went with little or no food.

“Here, take this wheat bread,” I said as I gave the last one, which I found loose in my backpack, to the child near me. To my surprise, she did an astonishing thing. .

She took the bread, said, “Thanks,” then she broke it, and gave half to her smaller brother and the other half to her little sister sitting beside me, and, although she had none left for herself, she seemed to expect nothing more.

“Now where had I seen that before?” I asked myself. Then I remembered the crumbling wall, and that last little girl receiving an orange.

That's how I recognized her... in the way she took the bread, said thanks, broke it, and gave it to her brother and sister. “Are you the little girl who got the last half orange...” I began to ask. She was! She assented with a movement of her head.

“I recognized her in the breaking of the bread.”

Later as I reflected on that, it was like hearing a voice asking, “Hey, haven't you learned to recognize me yet?” That's when I discovered the real attraction of working with the poor. I was also assured that I had been led to this place and this work, and that this was to be my assignment.

“Why am I so surprised to recognize His presence in so humble a child?” I thought, “I shouldn't be surprised at all, because that's exactly where He Himself said that we could expect to find Him.”