

The Mother of Felipe

Mary Austin

Table of Contents

The Mother of Felipe.....1

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THAT triangular portion of the great Mojave desert lying south of the curve of the Sierra Nevadas, where those mountains unite with the coast hills is known as Antelope Valley. A big, barren, windy country, rising from the level of the desert in long, undulating slopes that face abruptly toward the mountains.

In the open placers rise weird phalanxes of yucca palms, and among the hills little dark pools hide their treacherous margins in unwholesome grasses, and the white leprous crest of alkali. A country to be avoided by the solitary traveler, with its hard, inhospitable soil, and its vast monotony of contour and color. A country sublime in its immensity of light, and soft unvarying tints, fawn, and olive, and pearl, with glistening stretches of white sand, and brown hollows between the hills, out of which the gray and purple shadows creep at night. A country laid visibly under the ban of eternal silence.

Crossing the valley, and forming the third side of the triangle, runs the long road that leads from San Diego and the south to the open country along the Sacramento and the San Joaquin. Coming over the rise of the hill where this road turns away from Elizabeth Lake, rode in the early October morning a little train of horsemen, followed by half a dozen nondescript vehicles from which the faces of women and children peered through a confusion of household goods.

They were of the class commonly styled "Greasers," a mixed origin plainly visible in the dark hue of the skin, the crisp, coarse hair, the high-arched foot and the Madonna-like outlines of the women's heads. The dust of travel lay thick on the wide sombreros of the men and in the creases of their heavy saddles. The horses and women showed the fatigue of a long journey. Still they went forward briskly. There was the vigor of youth in the clear air. The grease of the breakfast shone on the children's faces. There was much animated conversation among the men and gay sallies from the young women; but whenever unusual laughter was provoked it was checked by sighs and shrugs of commiseration, and the women glanced sympathetically at the last wagon in the train.

It was driven by a woman, whose form betrayed the shapeless middle-age common to her class. The strong patience of the hills was in her eyes and mouth. Whenever a smooth bit of road permitted her to take her eyes from the horses she looked back into the wagon, where on a rude bed, under an improvised covering of calico bed-quilts, lay a young man in the delirium of fever. He had been ailing for some time, and three days ago the fever seized him with an intermittent force that sapped his strength visibly, like the shaking of an hour-glass.

The mother had urged the expedition forward with all possible speed. They were still many days distant from a physician to make him well, or a priest if he should die. "Mother of God! if he should die!" A sudden spasm of anxiety contracted her oval, unwrinkled face into the semblance of shrunken old age. Had she not daily prayed to the Virgin that he might live to comfort her, now that his father was dead. Ave Santisima! He was her only son. For what sin would the good God punish her?

There was the heavy gold bracelet the Ingles had given her, and Felipe's father had been so angry. She, she had been a vain, foolish thing, but, Santa Maria, what can you expect when one is young? The bracelet had been given to the priest, and she and her husband had been very happy together. Mother of Christ! how proud he had been when Felipe was born! That was because she had prayed to the Virgin for a son. She had burned a wax candle

The Mother of Felipe

before the Virgin for each month of her pregnancy, and they had burned quite clear and evenly down to the end; not one had flickered or gone out. Ave Maria! and Felipe was such a son, there was never another like him. Now if he would get well, she would give the Virgin the gold beads her husband had bought her. True, she had intended the beads for Felipe's wife, but if he should die, what then? Ay, Jesu Christi! He must not die.

At noon the travelers halted before a brackish spring that oozed stealthily out of the hillside. The horses drank thirstily of the warm, turbid stream that flowed across the road; the men shook their damp, crisp hair, pressed close to the head in a shining crease where the heavy sombrero rested. The women gathered sympathetically around the mother of Felipe, chattering together in their soft dialect, with little nods and shrugs, and pious ejaculations in quick, bird like accents. For only one of these the mother drew back the calico curtain; this was Benita, Felipe's betrothed. The girl rested one round arm on the rim of the wheel, and laid her hand on the young man's forehead. She leaned forward lazily; her dress fell away untidily from her brown throat, revealing the beauty of the warm, young curves within. She remained silently stroking her lover's forehead, while the elder women questioned and suggested volubly.

The halt at noon was short; the expedition hoped to cross the mountains before night, and the ascent was long and difficult.

A dry, warm wind was blowing; the horses strained in their collars, the sick man tossed and moaned continually.

The hills were higher and more desolate, and seemed endowed with some infernal mechanism, shutting in silently behind, and opening out noiselessly before, giving up the road grudgingly, as if the very secret of the earth went with it.

There is always a wind at the summit of the hills. There is full daylight there, too, until the night falls suddenly. It is as if the wind blew against the shadows that would have crept up from the valley, beating them back and back from the high places until night falls.

There is hope, too, at the summit of the hill. Who has not drawn it in with deep breaths of the scentless wind? Felipe forgot his delirious dreams, turned easily on his side and slept, and Benita and the mother comforted each other.

The two women rode down the grade together. Antonio Lesalda, Benita's father, walked beside the wagon, saying, "It is a good country that we come to. There is much food there for the horses, and wood, and a good spring that I know of, coming out of the rocks at the foot of the last grade. It will be better for Felipe if we rest there three days. Besides the hunting is good. My father and Mateo Gonzales killed three bears there in one week. It will not be long now, but it is soon dark in the canon."

The women spoke to each other seldom. It was inexplicable to Benita that her lover should be ill. Luis and Pablo had not so much strength in their whole bodies as was in Felipe's right arm, and she could hear them laughing now with that Gonzales girl. Felipe could not be very sick. How soundly he slept. Her father was right, they would rest for three days, and the men would get him fresh meat to eat, and he would be strong again. "Now, what are they laughing at there, I wonder!"

The elder woman glanced furtively at the girl's face between her mumbled prayers.

"She is so young, how will she bear it if he should die?" she thought. "Jesu! What am I saying! If he sleeps, all will be well, and I will live with them, but the Virgin shall have the gold beads."

At the foot of the mountains the men came to unharness the horses. This they did quietly, for the mother had fallen on her knees, rosary in hand. She could not do this before. It took both her hands to drive. The horses

The Mother of Felipe

wallowed in the rank grass, the children ran about to gather sticks for the fire. "See that you go not too far, or the bears will get you," cried Antonio teasingly. The women busied themselves about the supper. Benita sat beside Felipe and held his hand. He had recognized her, and she felt now more than ever that she loved him. She began to be touched by the fierce anxiety the mother displayed in every tone and movement.

When all had been made safe for the night, the mother of Felipe went a little apart from the camp to pray. After the children were asleep the other women joined her, each for a little while, moving sidewise while they prayed, to rest their knees from the hard stones.

There was no motion in the hills and the moon was shining. The click of the rosary sounded as loud to her as the "shriek, shriek" of the night birds. The mother mumbled on, "The Virgin will surely hear me, she also is a mother, he is my only son, and I will burn my candles."

"Come," said Benita, "you must sleep. See how wet the grass is."

In the morning Felipe was dead.

The travelers had camped in a broad, sandy basin, strewn with boulders, cut across with deep irregular gullies, now concealed by a coarse rank growth of weeds and grass, the dry bed of a mountain torrent.

The mother would not consent that Felipe should be buried here. "How shall I find my son if he be buried here?" she thought.

"It is well," said Antonio to the men. "It is hard to dig here, we will go on."

When they had come to a little rise of ground overlooking Lastac Lake, Antonio drew rein. "Shall it not be here?"

The woman shook her head.

Again in a little while, "Shall it not be here?"

"Not yet. Not yet."

They were now well into the Canon de Los Vinos. Great oaks lined the water-courses, and climbed half way up the hills. There were still green places by the springs, and running water. The cavalcade drew out from the roadside. "It must be here, Senora," said Antonio authoritatively.

The women sobbed vehemently, Benita loudest of all. The mother did not weep. She seemed suddenly to have fallen into that inscrutable old age that overtakes women of her race. She could look no older, and appeared never to have been young.

When it was over, some one cut Felipe's name on the oak under which they buried him.

At high noon the diminished party of wanderers passed slowly and with effort over the barrier that rears itself across the canon's mouth like the outer rim of the world, dropping down into the vast, dim valley of the San Joaquin, hazy with the mists of its marshes, and the floating phantoms of mirage where the quivering light strikes back from the long vistas of its unsheltered sands.

AFTER ten years the mother of Felipe no longer mourned openly for her son, but her face had forgotten any other expression than the look of inscrutable old age she had carried away from his grave. It had become as fixed as the contour of the hills or as the purpose in her heart.

The Mother of Felipe

Mass had been said for her son's soul; his body must not always lie in unblessed ground. After ten years God gave her an opportunity. Her brother's son and one of the men that had buried Felipe had affairs that took them within a few hours' journey of the Canon de Los Vinos. It is not in the hearts of these people to deny a consolation to old age. They had little faith in the success of her undertaking: many trees had been cut down, the old wagon trail was obliterated, and the present stage road had been made on the other side of the canon.

The mother felt no uncertainty. She had marked the place too well for that. A feverish excitement stirred her dull pulses. Yonder, under that blazed oak Felipe was lying, his face was turned a little to one side, the cross was on his breast.

Antonio had marked out the grave by the shadow of the straight, thick trunk, three paces from the foot of the tree. The men stepped off the distance, and began to dig. Presently they perceived that they had made a mistake. Felipe had been buried in the early morning, and it was now noon. They selected a new place more carefully, and began again.

Conversation flagged when they were knee deep; at waist deep, perspiration broke out suddenly. They threw down their shovels, and began to poke in the loosened earth with sticks, never with their hands.

First there was a collar bone, then an arm and a hand. The men threw the bones out upon the grass, shaking their hands free of the earth that clung to them. The mother of Felipe gathered the bones into her apron, stooping painfully. Age overcame her power of quick motion; moreover she was fat. Tears ran from her sunken eyes, and hung in the creases of her withered cheeks. Patches of damp mould clung to the unwholesome relics; these she wiped off upon the grass and on her dress.

The diggers finished their task quickly. She sat down upon the grass hugging the ghastly bundle to her breast, unwilling to allow it to be placed in the box prepared for it. She took up handfuls of the discolored earth and wept over it.

This purpose accomplished she had one other desire. She wished to see Benita. Antonio Lesalda, in pursuance with his nomadic instincts, had drifted back from the north into these very mountains and made his home in one of those innumerable triangular openings between the hills. This much she knew from floating bits of information that had reached her. She knew also that his wife was dead, and that Benita was still with him. The heart of the mother was very tender toward the woman who also mourned for her son. "We will not forget Felipe," the two women had sobbingly protested to each other at parting.

They found Lesalda's place with little difficulty, and Benita was very glad to see them. She put down her baby that she might discharge the duties of hospitality. When the youngster rolled over on the floor and cried she put both hands under his arms and dragged him into a sitting posture, chattering with short-breathed volubility.

"Did she not know she was married? Yes, for five years, and she had three children. Her husband was in Los Angeles with the horses. Such a good man and so handsome, but they would see; he would surely be home in a day or two. What? They must go on tonight!"

Benita was genuinely sorry for this; visitors were rare with her. The old woman had made her decision suddenly. The mother of her son would not stay in a house that had forgotten him. She had never contemplated the possibility of Benita's marriage; the fact came to her with all the shock of a flagrant desertion. She was almost dumb under the fire of Benita's good-natured questioning.

Now, what had she come for? For Felipe? "Ah! poor Felipe! But you should have stayed with me, and my father would have gone with the men. It is not for women to be digging in the graves of the dead."

The Mother of Felipe

An hour later the mother of Felipe, looking back from the last curve of the winding road, saw Benita balancing the baby with her fat hands while the bare, brown legs wavered through the intricacies of three short paces.

The treasured box of grisly relics had not been disturbed. Only in the hearts of mothers lives unconsolable regret.