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What Some Men Worshipped A LEGEND OF THE BLACK HILLS

By MAUDE MCFIE BLOOM

IN the Black Hills of New Mexico, the ruins of an old fortress stand on the crest of a rocky slope scarred by prospector's pick and the rotting framework of abandoned mine shafts. Legends have grown about the oldest of these tunnelings, some of which are the work of the first European settlers in New Mexico, the Spanish conquistadores. The story of Elena, the first woman with hair of gold in the Black Range, is one of these. They of that region will tell you that still, at intervals—and always as a portent of coming disaster in some of their mines,—Elena comes again, riding a white stallion at mad-pace across the high horizon . . . “Quin, my Quin . . . pray for my soul. . .”

Don Joaquín had not intended to bring the peerless Doña Elena on his expedition into the beckoning, unknown northland of Nueva España, now just beginning to be called El Nuevo Mejico. She had followed him. And easily he might have read the sign if he had been more alert, less enraptured by her charms and by his possession of her. What should he have expected of a granddaughter of a conquistador? Of a fearless, venturesome girl-child of that generation—of a woman who should have been born a man. But, love sees only its own sweet self!

Custom alone would have deterred the average wife whose lot was one of seclusion, almost of widowhood, when her husband fared forth on a campaign of no matter what duration, since he, by the laws of Spanish wedlock, was her lord and master for all time. Yet Elena, vital and magnificent, was lord of her husband although neither was conscious of it.

Campaigns were still the order of the times in the 1660's, surges to push back frontiers against protesting

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Indian tribes all along the cordilleras; expeditions for greed and gain, called conquest in the name of Carlos Segundo, Spain's king, and of the Church, jornadas which lured the young bloods of valor and ambition. When to conquest and missionary zeal was added the lure of gold, in which private gain might find no limits, the impulses to enterprise became almost irresistible. Doña Elena's husband was one of those so drawn.

Yet conquest of peoples as such—of the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, or the Incas of Peru, for example—made no appeal to Joaquín de Mirades, a grandee in rank of Zacatecas province whose family had been mine owners for generations. Arrogance was his attitude toward all that another had already found! A virgin enterprise alone struck fire from his flint. Therefore, instead of treasure, Don Joaquín must find the mine for the joy of it; he himself must strike the glittering, maiden ledge; he must be the first to wash the placer sands none before had glimpsed. This and this alone, had power to draw Don Joaquín from the bosom of his worshipped bride, the Doña Elena.

It had taken time to persuade Elena to consent to his adventuring, for her heart beat as high as his. But because she understood how custom forbade her accompanying him, Elena gave her consent—making, of course, her mental reservation.

Don Joaquín's frenzy to find the rumored mineral bonanzas of the wild Black Range of the new kingdom of Nuevo Mejico soon communicated itself to a score of his dependents, and they flung themselves into excited preliminaries.

Doña Elena, meantime pretending to sulk, made her secret preparations. Who could blame her since she had found that being a woman was an irksome circumstance? Child of a noble family hopelessly impoverished by the continued and costly exploits of their men until the only hope to retrieve their fortune was by money-marriage, the young Elena had found it a curse to be a daughter,—particularly

one with that most admired of Castilian perfections, a flaming mark of royal descent—her red-gold hair! It was a pride, of course, yet it was a charm that had attracted many lovers who, tempting her parents, had caused her tortures of suspense and dread. But then finally the gallant, wealthy Joaquín had settled it to everybody's delight. Her "Quin" loved her so; and now he would forgive! Everybody would, reasoned the headstrong, gorgeous Elena.

Visitors who came to condole with Doña Elena did not fail to catch a gleam in her wide gray eyes that belied her declarations of self-pity. More than one whispered significantly: "Does the lovely bride find the going of Don Joaquín a too grievous burden, think you?"

Joaquín, however, saw nothing amiss in his beloved, and at last the great day came when all was in readiness for the two-year expedition. The young husband's tenderness touched all hearts and the young wife's role had convinced both her husband's clan and her own, gathered for the final leave-taking.

Don Joaquín bent down from his *caballo* for the last sweet kiss from Doña Elena's rich lips,—to receive, instead, a mischievous grin and a tweak of his noble nose! So, that valiant caballero rode away on his pilgrimage with an unexpected ache in his heart that his angel Elena need maintain quite so brave a front to the very last. Ah, she ought to realize that it was so hard to leave!

Off rode Joaquín leading his packed mules, his oxen-drawn *carretas* loaded with equipage for the mining of metals, and his score of eager, trained dependents. Yet so near his undoing was Elena's gay tweak, that until he fell into a restless sleep that night he battled the temptation to stay sedately at home in their palace at Zacatecas. What was gold compared to her red-gold beauty? What was ambition when she turned her warm soft palm upward in his? However, Don Joaquín covered six leagues of the

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three hundred before him ere the *mozos* made camp that night. Such was the tempo of the 1660's.

At daybreak a clatter of arriving caballos startled him. Joaquín threw open his embroidered tent-curtain—and into his arms fell the lovely Elena, gayer, fresher than he for all his hours of rest. Her headlong ride since night had hidden her secret flight. There was a look, too, in her brave eyes that gave him pause.

"My Elena!"

"My Quin! You shall not go alone! Only death shall part us!"

"Why do you say 'death'? It shall not come near you," he cried, straining her to him to mitigate a startling sense of fatality that she should come to him with such a word on her lips.

Elena's gray eyes dilated—for omens, premonitions move. She had said the words in a passion of love-hunger, to convince him from the first of her sincerity. Now in a flash she knew that they should both go—and both should stay. She had no fear; and she had no answer. The sun's first rays gave to her hair the sheen of a golden halo.

All day they reasoned or made pretense, deadened to all but each other's sweetness. He did not yet know the depths of her spirit. He did not know till then that a woman could match a man's courage and his fire. That night they were a single blended figure; if Elena moved he cried out; if Joaquín sighed, she woke him.

Morning came. Ho! for the trail! Adventure lay just ahead! Their strong young spirits soared and their urged caravan covered eight leagues that second day.

Many weary weeks later at the Mission of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del passo del Rio de Norte (now called Juárez), the Mirades party drew attention by its questions about the Black Hill wilderness. It was seen to turn northwest off the Chihuahua Trail after crossing the river and, traversing the pass, to disappear on the nameless barren

western flats. The region whither they went was known only by the two rivers that sprang from the fastnesses comprehensively called the Black Range country. But it was known to be peopled by two fierce Apache tribes named for the rivers it claimed as hunting ground—the Mimbrenos and the Gileños.

Don Joaquín's inherited instinct for metals led him unerringly. Soon his men were tunneling, cutting beams, and setting joists. Almost immediately Joaquín discovered copper, silver, gold and cinnabar. All seemed well. Joaquín and Elena built a stout stone house, a fortress-like place on a hilltop somewhere in the vicinity; this because a never failing crystal spring flowed from under the great rocky hill; and the slope dominated so vast a sweep of territory. The spring was below and just out of sight—else they would have known certain things sooner.

Elena was radiantly happy. Every conceivable thing was done by her followers, who brought her strange flowers, herbs, pets, curiosities of every description. They staged contests, vied for her interest. When she lost a monogrammed, gold-braided spur, they begged a holiday that all might share in the search. She was a queen, they her devout worshippers. Her personal safety Don Joaquín entrusted to the two seasoned servitors whom she had chosen to bring with her from home, and he also rarely left her side. She was never alone and Joaquín felt that his idol was safe.

Tools were lost by the eager workers. Beaten copper buckets of Zacatecas manufacture fell into deep places. Things were done in royal fashion as befitted the Mirades', and enough could not be done to show their love for their fair-skinned, gold-haired goddess.

At first a few Indians were seen at a distance, whom the Spaniards took to be the little known Gileños because none came near. As time passed, more were sighted but they came no closer. Silent, bronze figures on surrounding

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eminences watched the white men toil for gold, watched them wait upon the white-skinned woman with the hair of gold whom they all worshipped. Presently Indians came by scores, brought, as the news spread from camp to camp, to see for themselves that which the palefaces worshipped.

Joaquín grew apprehensive. "With the full moon we shall go back to Guadalupe."

"Because of those Indians, Quin?" the wife asked. "Why, they are shyer than birds, Quin! The other day I ran down to the spring for that medicinal herb, and surprised both myself and two crazy-looking old men who were gesticulating over our spring. You should have seen them run. How they screeched, Quin! I had to laugh."

"Mi alma—soul of me! Never go there again! They could poison our water!"

"Don't be alarmed, my Quin. Set the day to go back if you like; but we have been here a long time and have they ever come near even? You are so wonderful—the men too." She laughed lightly. "I suppose I like being worshipped."

"Too many of them are coming," muttered Don Joaquín, kissing her bright hair.

As was the custom, their horses were kept under a guard of half the party in the barricaded mine tunnel at night. A guard of three was stationed on the roof of the stone stronghold. But their last night saw all the men, except the usual three, sent to the mine, so valuable were the mounts.

At dawn when Don Joaquín climbed to the mine, horses and men were gone! The Apaches had struck—and were gone again. As well talk to the clouds, or the winging birds.

"When they come, Quin, parley with them. They must want something we have. We'll give it to them and start out. We are five—and I am as strong as you men at walking!"

No Indians were sighted that day. Joaquín shuddered. Under cover of darkness one of the guards stole down the bluff for water—and did not come again. Another long day they endured athirst; and still no enemy was in sight.

Desperate now, Joaquín armed the two men, one to guard the other, and at the very edge of the night sent them off to the spring. The inaction was breeding in them a madness. Neither returned.

Joaquín was half demented. But,—they should not lay hands on his Elena! He himself would release her soul at the last. They—the two Mirades—waited, ready.

Two old Indian men appeared on the slope. Closing the heavy door behind him, Joaquín walked down a few paces to meet them. But the wife, dreading to lose sight of him, opened the portal and stood watching.

“I will give you—everything,” Joaquín spoke in proud accents. “What will you?”

The old priests pointed to—Elena!

“Never alive,” vowed the husband, wheeling to regain her side—too late! Elena was surrounded by other old Indian priests. Joaquín also was overpowered as if by Indians sprung from the ground. The whole space was alive with Gileños who showed no shyness now.

“Pray for my soul, Quin, my Quin,” called his Elena. “I pray for yours, my Quin!” Many times she called to him: not once could he answer. Still she called on—

They say the golden-haired woman was tied on the back of a pale-coated stallion which had not before borne the weight of human being. And that her tresses of red-gold hair hung to the ground and streamed back like a banner of sundrenched cloud, snatched to earth from an evening sky. They say that fleetest warriors drove the white stallion until it died—she of the golden hair having, days before, breathed her last murmur to her loved one, and dropped, member by member, back to mother earth.

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Not until then did the Gileños halt their wierd chanting, which, being interpreted, asked their gods to remove forever from their country this palefaced, redhaired, female devil that white men worshipped.

They say, too, that at times Elena rides again at mad pace across the horizon in the region of the old stone fortress on the hill where the welling water has not flowed in the memory of whiteman. And that faintly there comes the moaning cry: "Quin, my Quin!"