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Fray Angelico Chavez

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*Fray Angelico Chavez*

## A ROMEO AND JULIET STORY IN EARLY NEW MEXICO

**S**ANTA FE in 1733 was a very old town already, a small cluster of low adobe houses around a plaza and the much taller church; but the great mountain behind it lent it considerable impressiveness both winter and summer. Albuquerque was but a quarter of a century old, hence much smaller as to the number of dwellings and the size of the church; in summer it was almost lost among the cottonwoods on the flat riverbank, but the sharp outline of the high range to the east was near enough as to give it character also. Traffic between the two settlements was of the barest, due chiefly to primitive modes of travel over difficult winding trails. Yet both came close together in that year to provide the scenes for a real-life drama having the more pleasant features of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—and some of the heart tragedy, too, even if there were no deaths or carnage to mar or prevent a happy ending.

It was the old story of a boy and a girl in love hounded by parental disapproval, the plot found in folklore and written classics all over the world. We owe the New Mexico version, however, not to some professional or amateur purveyor of romances who wished to regale posterity with a delectable scandal, but to a court clerk down in Mexico City who sandwiched the incident, as a case in point, between dry and drawn-out legal



proceedings regarding ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Other ancient archives from Sevilla, Mexico City, and Santa Fe, help us in identifying the chief persons of the play.

Manuel Armijo and Francisca Baca were the lovers. Their romance was as tender as that of the Veronese young couple, and they were just as handsome and sweet in each other's eyes, no matter how they might have actually looked. The dun adobe walls and rough vigas of Santa Fe and Albuquerque were a far cry from southern Europe's bright-tiled roofs and graceful colonnades, but the great Sangre de Cristo and Sandia ranges made marvelous backdrops nevertheless. The elder Bacas and Armijos, with knives stuck in their sashes under homespun capes, and leering at each other from under low-crowned wide sombreros, were the silken-hosed, sword-wielding gentry of other times and other lands.

Why Francisca Baca's family objected to the match is easy to see and important to know. The girl's parents are singled out first because the Armijos are not recorded as having interfered. It was a matter of family pride among the Bacas who claimed direct descent from a First Conquistador; for Don Antonio Baca, a captain in the local militia, prided himself in being a great-great-grandson of the original Baca, Don Cristóval Baca, who had come to New Mexico in 1600. He furthermore believed himself to be, though mistakenly, a descendant of the already legendary Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. Antonio's wife, Doña María de Aragón, was relatively a newcomer who had arrived with her parents in 1693 at the time of the Reconquest of New Mexico by Don Diego de Vargas; this lent luster to her own family of the Aragón and Ortiz clan, over and above the important fact that, like the Baca, it passed for pure Spanish, although previously established in the Valley of Mexico for some generations.

The Armijos, on the other hand, were not only late-comers, having arrived fully six months after the glorious retaking of

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Santa Fe from the Indians by Governor de Vargas, but they very casually admitted that they were mestizos from Zacatecas. Of the four grown sons who had come with their parents, Antonio Durán de Armijo was the only surgeon in "*El Reyno de la Nueva México*" at the time and for many years to come, and was very dexterous with the pen as well as with the scalpel, quite an envious distinction in a crude little world of cattlemen and of part-time militiamen who could not sign their names for the most part. But at the time of this story neither Antonio Armijo nor his brothers José and Marcos had any son of marriageable age by the name of Manuel. At least there is none on record. The fourth brother, however, Vicente Durán de Armijo, had not only one but three sons with the same name: Manuel *el Primero*, Manuel *el Segundo*, and Manuel *el Tercero*. So the odds are three to nothing that Vicente was the father of our hero. The first Manuel had been sent as a boy to Guadalupe del Paso in order to learn a trade as a tailor's apprentice, and there, it appears, he married and established himself. The second Manuel married a Lucero de Godoy girl in Santa Fe (a year after our story), and later moved down to Albuquerque to fill that lower part of the Río Grande valley with Armijos. Then it must be Manuel III who was stirring up the coals of trouble in the exclusive Baca hearth.

But if Don Antonio Baca objected to Armijos in general, he had greater reason for refusing to have Manuel Armijo for his son-in-law. The boy's mother was a María de Apodaca who had been born in a pueblo of an unknown Tewa father and a Spanish or part-Spanish girl who had been captured by the Indians in the Great Rebellion of 1680. Moreover, María's unfortunate mother, after she had been rescued with her child by the conquering De Vargas forces twelve long years after, later married the Governor's Negro drummer. The fact that Manuel Armijo's mother was a Negro's step-child did not better his chances at all. But now to Manuel and Francisca.

In early Spanish civil and church law, when a youth and a maiden fell in love but the latter's family refused to give her hand in marriage, the boy could appeal to the courts and have the girl deposited in a neutral home for some time, where she was supposed to make up her own mind without the interference of relatives on either side. Any such interference brought on the penalty of excommunication on those breaking the law. Manuel Armijo knew his law, at least in this regard, and better than his foes had bargained for. When he appeared before the Lord Vicar and Ecclesiastical Judge to plead his case, he took along two witnesses, an itinerant shoemaker and a farm laborer from the Río Abajo district who happened to be in town. These "friends to Romeo" were to prove invaluable aids in overcoming the many obstacles thrown in Manuel's path by the very court which ought to have been an unbiased arbiter.

Don José de Bustamante y Tagle was the Vicar at this time. As the legal person of the Bishop of Durango twelve hundred miles away, and as a member of the late Governor's family, his sway in Santa Fe was considerable. This priest was an intimate friend of Don Antonio Baca. What is more, two of Don Antonio's brothers had married into the Bustamante social group, and a first cousin of his was the wife of the prominent Captain and merchant, Don Nicolás Ortiz, whose aunt was Don Antonio's mother-in-law. All in all, it was a welter of affinities and consanguinities in higher circles that formed a formidable bastion between poor Manuel Armijo and Francisca Baca. Of necessity an integral part of this barrier, the Vicar could not approve of such a marriage. But here he was confronted by the young swain himself and his two witnesses in due legal form. It may be that he tried to dissuade Armijo from his purpose, or offered him a bribe to leave the north country and join his elder brother at Guadalupe del Paso. That sort of thing has been tried before, and ever shall be. At any rate, Armijo remained resolute, and the

Vicar had no other choice than to carry out the law, although with some reservations that were already ticking in his mind.

First, he interviewed Francisca Baca privately, but she proved just as headstrong as her lover. This vain attempt over, he had her solemnly conducted to the home of a certain Don José Reaño y Tagle. There she was to think seriously upon the matter and, after weighing the disadvantages following a marriage with Armijo, return a negative answer. But her reply was still most affirmative when she was questioned some time later. Then the anger of Santa Fe's society broke loose upon her little head. Her uncles and cousins, not to mention her local aunts, came secretly to the house, despite the threat of excommunication, and tried to dissuade her from marrying Armijo. Her own father threatened to kill her with his own sword. Young blades among her relations were ready to do away with Armijo himself. Even the Vicar, avoiding the church penalty by appearing personally, sent her a message. Even if she were pregnant, it said, everything would be taken care of nicely and quietly. Now was the time for sorely beset Francisca, had she ever read Shakespeare, to lean out of the window and cry:

"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name."

Crazed finally by these incessant visits and threats which gave her no rest, or, what is more likely, to gain some respite for her tired mind, Francisca bowed at last to her kinsfolk's wishes; only then was she taken home from the Reaño residence which to her had become a madhouse. Really, it had not been a "neutral home." Don José Reaño was also a Bustamante on his mother's side. His wife was a Roybal, another family of that closely-knit society; her brother Mateo was already engaged to Francisca's sister Gregoria; she was, moreover, a sister of the Vicar who had preceded Bustamante and who was to succeed

him when all this trouble was over. Both Reaño and his wife had given Francisca no rest in the intervals left her by her more immediate relatives. In the end, it all had turned out into a pitched battle between the Spanish-born Bustamantes of the mountains of Santander and a lone youth from the hills of Santa Fe with more Indian than Spanish blood in his lovelorn heart. And Spain had won, apparently, forgetting for the nonce that all her songs and tales give true love the victory in the end.



Back in her father's house, Francisca recanted, to her credit and our admiration. Don Antonio Baca began fuming anew, and this time resorted to a different strategy. He put his daughter on one of his best horses and sent her under armed escort to Albuquerque "twenty-four leagues away," a tremendous distance in those days of travel by horse or ox-drawn *carreta*. She was to be deposited in the home of her aunt, Doña Josefa Baca, who owned a prosperous hacienda at Pajarito.

How often did not Francisca look back during that first day's journey, as the horses trudged down the dusty road towards La Ciénaga under a bright July sun, especially when her father's house, and her lover's home, blended in the distance with the

ochre earth of which they were made. The last to fade away was the great adobe Parroquia of St. Francis which she had always imagined as the biggest building on earth; she had not been baptized in it since it was not finished until five years after her birth, and she had not been born in Santa Fe anyway, but she had often dreamed of kneeling at its high altar blazing with candles, and her Manuel at her side placing the ring on her finger and pouring the *arras* into her open palms. Only the great blue and green mountain, called the Sierra Madre in those days, remained in sight all day long, seeming to raise herself even higher the further away she rode, as if telling her like a fond mother that she would not forget. But as the horses began picking their painful way down the black volcanic boulders of La Bajada, the Sierra Madre regretfully turned away and out of sight, and the Jémez range appeared in front, all purple in the glory of the crimson sunset behind it; but to Francisca that hue and the rough contour of the ridges were more like the sad purple cloth thrown over the images of saints from Passion Week until Good Friday. It was dark when they reached the pueblo of Santo Domingo; there the party spent the night in the houses of the Alcalde Mayor, the only Spanish home in the entire district. Next morning they started out again along the lush groves of the Río del Norte, a monotonous but easier trip now that familiar landmarks were well out of sight. At noon they stopped to rest at the post of Bernalillo, her parents' hometown where she herself had been born almost twenty-one years before, but she did not remember the place nor many of the vast Baca relationship which came to greet her. The Sandía Mountain, shaped like a mammoth watermelon when viewed from the north, now kept her interest as they rode along its precipitous western flank all afternoon, her eyes scaling each succeeding sky-scratching cliff all the way down the broadening valley, until nightfall found them approaching the ranch of Doña Josefa Baca.



Although Don Antonio Baca knew his sister Josefa well, he had not reckoned with her strong-willed nature, much less with her own views on love problems such as the one he was thrusting upon her. Alone and unmarried, she had developed her inheritance into a prosperous hacienda and had borne and reared six healthy children besides. One can take it for granted that Aunt Josefa quickly won her niece's confidence. She most certainly got a different version of the Santa Fe maneuvers, not only from the girl's lips, but from the Albuquerque men who had gone with Manuel Armijo before the Vicar. What Aunt Josefa did to solve the problem in true playwright fashion may be detected in an unforgettable (yet long-forgotten) incident that took place in the Albuquerque church sometime later.

It was the tenth day of August, in the year 1733, the Feast of the martyr St. Lawrence. This feast day was celebrated by the Spanish population all over New Mexico in memory of those many Franciscans who had been massacred by the Indians on this very day in 1680. While the Bacas and Bustamantes and the rest of the Santa Fe folk were putting on their finery and repairing to the great Parroquia for Mass, the people of the lower valley were flocking to the nearest Mission, those around Albuquerque to the smaller church of San Francisco Xavier (today San Felipe) which faced the Sandía from the plaza by the river.

Doña Josefa Baca came with her children from Pajarito accompanied by her niece who drew all eyes to herself—and also whispered comments among the bystanders—for her frustrated romance had become well known by now despite the difficult means of communication. Francisca and her aunt looked particularly devout that morning as both took their places far up in front near the altar. Had the congregation seen their faces during the chanting of the Mass, they might have caught a nervous twitch of apprehension now and then, or a faint smile of anticipation. No sooner was the Mass over than the people

began milling and pushing their way out the front door, to watch the play of Moors and Christians and the horse races that were to follow. They had not noticed that the priest had remained at the altar instead of repairing to the sacristy as usual.

Doña Josefa nudged her niece and they both arose and walked close together towards the open sunlit door. As they reached the front, a young man stepped out from behind the door, grasped the young lady by the arm, and swiftly marched her up to the altar where the Padre was waiting. Soon the church filled up again when word got outside that Manuel Armijo and Francisca Baca were being married. The ceremony went on without interruption, either because everybody was so completely taken by surprise, or because there were no men present of that impious stamp who would dare to profane the holy place with violence.

Fray Pedro Montaña, the Franciscan pastor of Albuquerque who ended this true drama happily without the aid of fatal herbs and potions, later wrote up the case for his Superior so that the latter might present it to the Viceregal Court in the City of Mexico as an illustration of the secular Vicar's abuse of authority. In doing so, the friar makes it appear as though the incident in church was entirely spontaneous and unrehearsed; that, confronted by this unexpected action of the groom, and having questioned the parties concerning the whole matter, he had married them then and there "to avoid greater inconveniences." But through it all shines forth the genius of Doña Josefa, who had previously contacted the friar, the groom, the various witnesses, and who very likely concocted the plot that ended in such a successful coup.

As noted in the beginning, the more pleasant features of *Romeo and Juliet* are here present. That nameless Nurse, whom Shakespeare purposely created in rough contrast to the gentle-spoken protagonists and their highborn families, who minced no words when speaking or spoken to, and who was a most ef-

ficient go-between in the lovers' trysts and in arranging for the wedding with wise old Friar Lawrence, was admirably played by Doña Josefa Baca. Fray Pedro Montañó resembles Shakespeare's famous Franciscan in his human understanding if not in his outlandish way of concluding the affair. *Romeo and Juliet* ends with a churchyard scene strewn with fresh corpses after a bit of sword-play. Although there were no killings after the wedding of Manuel and Francisca, a duel did flare up as the people poured out a second time onto the walled *campo santo* in front of the church. Two individuals by the name of Antonio de Chávez and Antonio Montoya, who had begun disputing as to whether the friar did the right thing or not, suddenly drew out knives from their sashes and began taking each other's measure. The crowd promptly disarmed them, however. Nor do we know who it was that took whose part, for Montoya was married to Francisca's sister Ynés, and Chávez was the husband of her cousin Antonia Baca.

That the Bacas in Santa Fe did not immediately approve of the marriage is shown by the fact that Manuel and Francisca did not have their *velación* (or solemn nuptial blessing with ring, coins, and candle) until two years later, when Francisca's dream came true as she knelt with her one true love before the high altar of the Santa Fe Parroquia. But in the last will and testament which Don Antonio Baca made in 1755, there appears the name of Manuel Armijo among his six sons-in-law. Doña Josefa Baca, too, drew up a will in 1746, in which she asked God's mercy for having been such a great sinner by having, though unwed, the six children who inherited her property in the order named.