

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 4 | Issue 3

Article 11

1934

The Eclipse

Edna Bouldin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Bouldin, Edna. "The Eclipse." *New Mexico Quarterly* 4, 3 (1934). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol4/iss3/11>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

The Eclipse

By EDNA BOULDIN

MANUEL was worried. So were the other fifty inhabitants of Yerbani, but as the leading citizen of Yerbani it fell upon Manuel to worry the most. The cause of his anxiety was very real. The rains upon which the villagers depended to grow their crops had stopped. They had commenced in June but the first of July had come without enough moisture's having fallen to bring up the corn, and beans, and chile which would be needed for the winter's rations. The pastures also were brown and dry and the burros and cows of the village were poorer even than usual.

In former years when the rains had been delayed it had been a comparatively simple matter to bring them. The only thing necessary was for the women to go to the church in the afternoon, remove the blessed virgin from her niche in the wall and carry her out to see the sad spectacle of the dried fields. When this had been repeated several times the rains always came. But this year even that did not work. Each afternoon the wife of Manuel led the procession out, singing and praying, but for some reason the virgin was blind to the sight of the parched earth and deaf to all pleas and entreaties. At length the people began to mutter that it must be the foreigners whose tents were pitched outside the village that were to blame.

At first they had thought it a very fine thing to have them there. Did they not pay twice the usual sum for chickens and eggs? Hadn't they given most of the men of the village work helping to set up the tents and build the queer tower which reached toward heaven? But of late the peones had begun to wonder. They did not understand what these Americanos wanted anyway. They were not miners, for they had no picks or spades. They did not seem interested in ranches, and apparently they had nothing to

sell. As far as the peones could see they did nothing at all but sit and put figures on pieces of white paper. Only once a day could they be counted upon to emerge and that was at noon. Then one of them would come out with a three legged stand on top of which was a small rod. This they would set up with the rod pointed toward heaven. In a few moments they would take the stand back inside the tent again.

One day Manuel, who served in the double capacity of alcalde and postmaster, had a thought. He remembered that it was after the foreigners arrived that the rains had stopped. Before their coming the clouds which gathered each morning over the Sierra Madre to the west had moved on to drop their moisture over the village in the afternoon. Now, though they could be seen and though often the rumbling of distant thunder could be heard, the clouds never left the mountain tops and what rain they contained fell on the wooded slope of the Sierra.

"Was it possible," Manuel asked himself and the villagers, "that these foreigners with their three legged instrument could stop the rains?"

Next day when Don Carlos, the Americano who owned the nearby ranch, came after his mail, Manuel decided to consult him about it. Now Don Carlos, whose friends called him Charley, was a great "kidder," and though Manuel could laugh loud and long at the clowns in the Matachines he did not recognize a foreign clown when he saw one. The chance to have a little fun at Manuel's expense was too much for Charley! His love of a joke overcame his discretion.

"These senores," said he in his fluent but bad Spanish, "are what is known in my country as astronomers. They wish to learn to work the sun and moon just as I work my automobile. The reason that they are here is that other places would not allow them to stop the rains. Yerbanis is a small village. There are few cornfields nearby. The pres-

idente thought it would not hurt for them to come here. But keeping off the rains," he said, warming to his subject, "is not the worst. In September they plan to put out the sun. They have promised to turn it on again but *quien sabe*—they may not be able."

With which cheering information he threw the mail pouch in his car and departed. He left consternation among the peones and trouble for the astronomers, but of this he was blissfully unconscious.

All next day the village buzzed with gossip: Whenever two or three men met they talked of nothing but the astronomers, and their wickedness. Finally two things were decided upon. A man should be sent to the neighboring village of Cuencame to beg the loan of a virgin conceded to be more powerful than that of Yerbanis, and Manuel was to go to the foreigners' camp and ask them to leave. The messenger for Cuencame set off immediately, but Manuel waited until next day to pay his visit of ceremony. Then, dressed in tight blue trousers and a pink shirt with his biggest sombrero on his head he walked across to the tents.

It happened that the day was Sunday, and all the astronomers except Professor Witherspoon, head of the expedition, had decided to leave their figuring and take a hike to the top of a neighboring hill. The professor, who was addicted to mental rather than physical exercise, elected to remain at home and help Sam, the Chinese cook, guard the camp from hungry dogs and curious goats. Left alone he wrote a letter to his wife and then by way of relaxation fell to working out the angle of the inclination of the lunar orbital plane to the ecliptic. He was aroused from his absorbing work by the uncomfortable feeling that someone was looking at him. He glanced up and found Manuel bowing in the doorway. Professor Witherspoon, Ph.D. of Harvard, Fellow of Oxford and Cambridge, and national authority on eclipses, wondered what he should do. He spoke Copernican and Einsteinian fluently, but his Spanish

had been learned from a phrase book and a six weeks' conversational course. For a moment he could recall none of that. Then it began to come to him. "Page one of the book, 'Someone knocks at the door, one calls out, "quien es?"' "

But there was no door. Manuel could not knock, and the professor did not need to ask who it was. "What came next? 'Pase, señor, y sientase.'" Here was something he could use. He invited Manuel to come in and be seated. Manuel replied in rapid Spanish and remained where he was. Then the professor remembered Sam who was fluent in Spanish of a kind and pidgin English. The Chinese came wiping his hands on his apron. He grasped the situation immediately.

"He say he no speak English."

The professor blinked, grateful that none of his colleagues were about. "You talk to him. Find out what he wants."

It was evidently a plenty, for it took Manuel five minutes and much gesticulating of arms and shoulders to get it said. When he finally ran out of breath Sam translated, "He say it no rain; beans, chile, corn, no grow."

"Well, it took him a deucedly long time to say it. Why does he come tell me about it? What can I do?"

Once more Manuel waxed eloquent. Once more the hands waved and the Spanish poured forth in what seemed a never ending flood. Finally it did stop.

"He say," announced the interpreter, "since you come it no rain. No rain, no corn, no frijol, no chile. He say it your fault. Every day you run clouds away and pretty soon you put out the sun. He say people of Yerbanis want you to go away."

"Nonsense! Tell him we are scientists here to study an eclipse of the sun, a natural phenomena of nature caused by the conjunction of the sun and," but here Sam, whose Spanish was of the kitchen rather than the astronomical variety, fled back to his pots and pans.

Manuel retreated also, going to join the crowd which was waiting for him in front of the adobe building which served the village for a saloon or cantina.

"What luck, amigo?" someone called as he approached.

"Nada. These señores are not only wicked but crazy as well. Unless the blessed virgin from Cuencame helps us they will ruin us with their machines of the diablo."

The crowd muttered angrily and fell to discussing the matter hotly. The young men were in favor of wrecking the camp immediately and one of them even proposed shooting the foreigners, but Manuel, who had a wholesome respect for everything American, restrained them. However, such weighty deliberations called for a lot of drinking and as the afternoon wore away the crowd became an angry mob. When the rest of the scientists passed by on their way to the camp they were pelted with stones and insults.

It was lucky for the astronomers that Don Carlos grew restless that afternoon and decided to drive in for a visit with his countrymen. He was surprised to find them closeted in one of the tents peering out uneasily. Sam was called in to give an account of the morning's visitation. Conscience stricken, Charley went out to try and settle the difficulty. He had a hard job of it and might have failed if it had not been for the two good arguments he always wore tied down on his hips. As it was he spent the night in the camp and sent Sam on his horse to bring two of his men to guard the scientists.

The guard proved to be unnecessary, however, for early next morning the man who had been sent to Cuencame returned with the borrowed virgin. That afternoon every woman in the village turned out to help carry her in procession to the cornfields. It was noticed that they had hardly left the church when the clouds gathered over the sierra became very dark. Soon thunder was heard and then the rain began to fall in sheets. The women turned and ran but their black dresses and the rebosas over their heads were

soaked before they could regain the shelter of the church. From then on it rained regularly every afternoon in spite of the fact that the Americanos built a new tower to try to stop it. It rained every afternoon in August and far into September. On the fifteenth, the astronomers packed up their tents and departed.

The next day Don Carlos rode in after his mail. The roads were too muddy and the arroyos too deep to permit his driving the automobile.

"Well, Manuel," he remarked as he waited for his mail to be sorted, "the foreigners did not succeed in keeping off all the rain."

"No, señor. They did not. Nor did they put out the sun. On the day in which the 'eclipse' was to come, if you remember, it began to rain very early and it rained all day. Not one minute did the clouds leave the blessed sun exposed. And listen, señor. Never since the days of my grandfather will the bodegas of Yerbanis have held so much of corn and beans and chile. We will be until Christmas harvesting the crop, so great it is. Let me tell you, señor," he added, closing the mailbag, "the Americans are powerful but they cannot hope to confound the blessed virgin."