ISIDRO

I

IN WHICH ISIDRO SEEKS HIS FORTUNE

IT was the year of our Lord 18—, and the spring coming on lustily, when the younger son of Antonio Escobar rode out to seek his fortune, singing lightly to the jingle of his bit and bridle rein, as if it were no great matter for a man with good Castilian blood in him, and his youth at high tide, to become a priest; rode merrily, in fact, as if he already saw the end of all that coil of mischief and murder and love, as if he saw Padre Saavedra appeased, Mascado dead, and himself happy in his own chimney corner, no priest, but the head of a great house. In truth, Isidro saw none of these things, but it was a day to make a man sing, whatever he saw.

Spring exhaled from the hills, and the valleys were wells of intoxicating balm. Radiant corol-

las lapped the trail and closed smoothly over where the horse trod. A great body of warm air moved fluently about him, nestling to the cheek as he rode. The sun glinted warmly on the lucent green of the wild oats, on the burnt gold of the poppies, on the thick silver-broidered rim of his sombrero, the silver fringe of his cloak, the silver mountings of his pistols, on the silver and jewels of bridle and spurs. In fact, there was more silver a-glitter in his dress and harness than he carried in his purse, for he rode only to Monterey, and who on that road would ask toll of an Escobar?

Baggage he had next to none; a change of linen and such small matters; what should a priest do with fine raiment? What, indeed; but an Escobar, it seemed, might have much. His ruffles were all of very fine needlework, his small-clothes of Genoese velvet, his jacket ropy with precious embroidery, none so fresh as it had been; the black silk kerchief knotted under his sombrero was of the finest; his saddle, of Mexican leather work, cunningly carved. And this fine sprig of an ancient house was to be a priest.

It was a matter practically determined upon before he was born, and, being so settled, Isidro was complaisant. The case was this: Mercedes Venegas, a tender slip of a girl, as wan and lovely as the rim of a new moon, being motherless and left to herself too much, had vowed herself to Holy Church and the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart. But before she had come through her novitiate the eyes of Antonio Ossais Escobar, roving eyes and keen for a maid, had spied her out, and the matter falling in with some worldly plans of her father, she had been drawn back from being the bride of the Church to be bride to the hot-hearted Escobar. Not without a price, though. Don Antonio had been obliged to surrender a good lump of her dowry to Holy Church, with the further promise, not certified to, but spiritually binding, to give back of her issue as much as in herself he had taken away.

So the promise ran, but being long gone by, and himself come to a new country, it is doubtful if the elder Escobar would have remembered it if St. Francis, to whom he vowed, had not mercifully sent him the gout as a hint on that

score. The subject had come up off and on for a dozen years as the malady ran high or low, and found Isidro in no wise unkindly disposed toward it. He liked a red lip, and had an eye for the turn of an ankle; even so he liked the wind in the sage and bloom of the almond; they stirred no deeper ardor than might be satisfied with mere looking. He liked a horse, he liked a cup of wine, and had an ear for a tune. Well-a-day! A priest might look at God's world as well as another, might drink wine for his stomach's sake, and ride of necessity. As for music, it pleased him well, so it were fairly executed, whether it were a rondeau or a hymn.

And, on the other side, there was his father, fond of a merry tune, liking wine very well, a horse better, women more than all three, and so beridden by gout that he could have small enjoyment of any. All said, there were worse things than being a priest. So Isidro Escobar, being turned twenty, rode out to Monterey, singing as he rode a very proper song for a young man, all of love and high emprise, except that he forgot most of the words, and went on making

merry noises in his throat in sheer delight of the trail and the day.

As for Don Antonio, he thought his son very well suited to be a priest, and was vexed with him accordingly. It was a thing that could never have been said of him in his younger days. Other times, when his gout, which he misread for his conscience, troubled him, he felt it a satisfaction to make peace so handsomely with Holy Church. If it had been Pascual now!

Pascual, who had ridden as far as the home inclosure with his brother, and, notwithstanding Isidro's weaknesses, was very fond of him, was at that moment riding back, looking complacently at the tangle of vine and fig tree where the ranch garden sloped down to the trail, and thinking Isidro rather a fool to give it all up so easily, and none so fit as himself to be lord of this good demesne.

As for Isidro, he rode forward, looking not once at the home where he had grown up, nor to the hills that he had known, nor up the slope to the tall white cross raised in memory of Mercedes Venegas Escobar, whose body lay in Zaca-

tecas, and whose soul was no doubt in Paradise; nor thought if he should ever look on these again, nor when, nor how. He was not of the nature that looks back. He looked rather at the wild oats, how they were tasseling; at the blue of the lupines in the swale; at the broods of the burrowing owl blinking a-row in their burrows, and caught up handfuls of over-sweet white forget-me-nots, stooping lightly from the saddle. He answered the pipe of the lark, and the nesting call of the quail, gave good-morrow to the badger who showed him his teeth for courtesy, and to the lean coyote who paid him no heed whatever; and when he came by the wash where old Miguel set his traps, turned out of the trail to see if they had caught anything. He found a fox in one, which he set free, very pitiful of its dangling useless member as it made off limpingly, and finding the others empty, snapped them one by one, laughing softly to himself.

"Priest's work," he said.

That was Isidro all over. Miguel was accustomed to say that the younger Escobar had more thought for dumb beasts than for his own kind,

though the lad protested he would have helped Miguel out of a trap as readily as a coyote. To which the old man would say that that also was Isidro. You could never make him angry however you might try. He was quite as much amused over his inaptness at young men's accomplishments as you were, and he could not be dared to try more than pleased him, but had always an answer for you. There could be no doubt, said the men at his father's hacienda, that Isidro was cut out for a priest.

"Ah, no doubt," said the women, with an accent that made the men understand that they had somehow the worst of it.

For all this they were sorry to see him go; Margarita, who had nursed him, wept copiously in the kitchen; the old Don fretted in the patio, and to hide his fretting swore heartily at Isidro's dog chained in the kennel, and not to be stopped of his grieving, as were the rest of them, by thinking what a fine thing it would be to have a priest in the family.

And all this time Isidro rode singing into the noon of spring, and the high day of adventure.

He crossed the bad land, lifting his horse cautiously from the pitfalls of badger and squirrel holes, scaring the blue heron from his watch, and when he had struck firmly into the foothill trail laid his rein on the horse's neck and fell into a muse concerning the thing he would be. He had sung of love, riding out from Las Plumas in the blaze of morning, but when he came by the place called The Dove in the evening glow, he sang of the Virgin Mary. That, too, was Isidro. His sympathies slipped off the coil of things he had known, and shaped themselves to what would be. He had the fine resonance of an old violin that gives back the perfect tone; you could not strike a discord out of him unawares. That was what made you love him when you had sat an hour in his company, until you had seen him so sitting with your dearest foe, and then you had moments of exasperation with him. You found him always in possession of your point of view; he understood at once what you were driving at. It was only after reflection that you perceived that he was not driven. One felt convinced he would make an excellent con-

fessor. For all his quietness he had his way with women, more even than Pascual, who swaggered prodigiously, and was known to take his affairs to heart. Under this complaisance of mood there was a hint of something not quite grasped, something foreign to an Escobar, like the brown lights in his hair and the touch of Saxon ruddiness that he had from some far-off strain of his mother's.

He had a square chin, a little cleft, a level eye, and a quick, collected demeanor like a wild thing. His lower lip, all of his mouth not hidden by a mustache, had a trick as if it had been caught smiling unawares. He was courteous, — never more so than when least your friend, but seldom anything else. This was that Isidro who rode out from Las Plumas to be a priest, and let his cigarette die out between his fingers while he sang a hymn to the Mother of God.

He rode all that day in the Escobar demesne, having a late start, and slept the first night with the vaqueros branding calves in the meadow of Los Robles. The next day at noon he passed out of the Escobar grant. The trail he took

kept still to the east slope of the coast range, and ran northward through the spurs of the Sierritas, by dip and angle working up toward the summit, whence he would cross into the Salinas. To the left he had always the leopard-colored hills, and eastward the vast dim hollow of the valley spreading softly into the spring haze. As he traveled, the shy wild herds cleared out of the wild oats before him. Jack rabbits ran by droves like small deer in the chaparral. Isidro sang less and smoked more, and fell gradually into the carriage and motion of one who travels far of a set purpose. The light, palpitating from the hollow sky, beat down his eyelids. His thoughts drew inward with his gaze; he swayed lightly to the jogging of his horse. He met Indians — women and children and goods — roving with the spring, for no reason but that their blood prompted them, and gave them the compliments of the road.

He woke once out of a noontide drowse of travel at what promised a touch of adventure. In the glade of a shallow cañon between the oaks he came upon a red deer of those parts, a

buck well antlered and letting blood freely from a wound in the throat, that bore a man to the earth and trampled him. The man — a mother-naked Indian — had the buck by the horns so that they might do him no hurt, but at every move he felt the cutting hooves. The buck put his forehead against the man's chest and pressed hard, lifting and dragging him with no sound but the sobbing of hot breath and drip of his wound. The man looked in the brute's eyes and had a look back again, each thinking of death not his own. Two ravens sat hard by on an oak, expectant but indifferent which might be quarry. Doubtless the struggle must have gone to the man, for he of the two had lost least blood. The Indian's knife lay on the grass within an arm's length, but he dared not loose his hold to reach it. Isidro picked up the blade and found the buck's heart with it. Next moment the Indian rose up, breathing short and drenched with the warm flood.

"Body of Christ! friend," said Isidro, "the next deer you kill, make sure of it before you come up with him."

Red as he was, and covered with bruises, the Indian, who, now that he was up, showed comely in a dark, low-browed sort, and looked to have some foreign blood in him, began to disembowel his kill and make it ready for packing.

"I owe you thanks, señor," he said in good enough Spanish, but with no thankfulness of manner. When he had slung as much as he could carry upon his shoulders, he made up the trail, and Isidro, who felt himself entitled to some entertainment, drew rein beside him.

"Where to, friend?" he said cheerily, since two on the same road go better than one.

"I follow the trail, señor," said the man, and so surlily that Isidro concluded there was nothing to be looked for from that quarter.

"Priest's work again," he said, "to do a good deed and get scant thanks for it. Truly I begin well," and he rode laughing up the trail.

Toward evening he crossed a mesa, open and falling abruptly to the valley, of a mile's breadth or more, very fragrant with sage and gilias opening in the waning light. The sound of bells came faintly up to him with the blether of sheep

from the mesa's edge that marked the progress of a flock. Against the slanting light he made out the forms of shepherds running, it seemed, and in some commotion. They came together, and one ran and the other drew up with him, halting and parting as in flight and pursuit. And across the clear space of evening something reached him like an exhalation, a presage, a sense of evil where no evil should be. He would have turned out of the trail, being used to trust his instinct, but he could not convince himself that this matter was for his minding. How should an Escobar concern himself with two sheep-herders chasing coyotes?

Presently, looking back from a rise of land, he saw the flock spread out across the mesa, and one shepherd moving his accustomed round.

"Now on my life," said Isidro, "I would have sworn there were two," and again some instinct pricked him vaguely.

II

NOÉ AND REINA MARIA

THE sheep which Isidro had seen feeding at evening belonged to Mariano, the Portuguese. His house stood in a little open plain having a pool in the midst, treeless, and very lonely, called The Reed; his sheep fed thence into the free lands as far as might be. The Portuguese was old, he was rich, he was unspeakably dirty, and a man of no blood. The Escobars, who knew him slightly, used him considerately, because manners were becoming to an Escobar, not because the old miser was in any wise worth considering. Mariano was not known to have any one belonging to him; his house was low and mean, thatched with tules, having a floor of stamped earth; his dress and manners what might have been expected. Those who wished to say nothing evil of him could find nothing better

to say than that he was diligent; those who would speak of him only with contempt found nothing worse. He was reputed to have at his bed's head a great box full of gold and silver pieces,— and yet he worked! It was predicted of him that because of his riches he would have a foul ending, and as yet he had not. There you have the time and the people. Mariano was openly a hoarder of gold, and was not robbed; he was diligent without need, and therefore scorned.

His sheep were in three brands, and Mariano kept the tale of them. He had with him, keeping the home flock, one Juan Ruiz, a mongrel as to breed, who spoke Spanish, Portuguese, and French indifferently well, and believed himself a very fine fellow. Mariano used toward him an absence of surliness that amounted to kindliness, therefore it was reported that Ruiz had some claim upon him. The herder in his cups had been known to hint broadly that there was more likeness than liking between them. Whatever the case, Ruiz bore him a deep-seated grudge. Mariano, as I have said, was old, and growing older, and boozy with drink was not a proper

spectacle to be the proprietor of fleeces and gold; and Ruiz, who was a pretty fellow in his own fashion, and loved frippery inordinately, was poor. What more would you have? If ever there was a man fitted to make ducks and drakes of a fortune it was Ruiz, but in this case the fortune lay in a strong box at the head of his master's bed.

On the day that Isidro Escobar came riding across the mesa where Ruiz fed the flock, Mariano, who trusted no one very much, came down to see how they fared, and to bring supplies to his shepherd. Among other things he brought wine; I have said there was the appearance of kindliness on Mariano's side. It was the wine of San Gabriel, heady and cordial to the blood. They pieced out the noon siesta with a bottle, and grew merry. Ruiz clapped Mariano on the shoulder and called him kin; the Portuguese admitted that he had known Ruiz's mother. They sang together, they laughed, finally they wept. That was when they were beginning the second bottle. When they had no more than half done, Ruiz remembered his grievance and brooded over

it darkly, and in the third bottle he killed Mariano,—not all at once as you might say the word, but provoked him, broiled with him, pricked him blunderingly with his knife. Mariano, who was leery with drink half his days, and had no hint of the other's grievance, on which point Ruiz himself was by now not quite clear, was in no case to deal with the affair. At last, sobered a little by blood-letting, he became afraid and ran. This with beasts of the Ruiz order was the worst thing to do. Pursuit whetted him. So they ran and wrestled futilely and struck blindly, for the drink worked in them yet, but Ruiz's knife, because he was heaviest and longest of arm, bit oftenest and to the bone. It was the dust of their running that Isidro saw across the evening glow. Between drink and bleeding they fell headlong into the scrub, panting like spent beasts. But Mariano, having bled most, was most sobered, and began to crawl away, and Ruiz, when he had come to himself a little, began to work after him on his wet trail with the knife between his teeth, leering through a mist of rage and drink. If he had no grievance before, that was enough.

"Ha, you will leave me, hell litter?" he said; and so, voiding curses, he reeled and came up to him, plunging his knife in Mariano's back. The Portuguese fell forward with a wet cough, and the poppies, drowned in blood, shrank all away from him.

Ruiz, for his part, went back to find the dregs of the bottle. He was very merry with himself about Mariano lying out in the sage like a stuck pig. "Ah, ah! but it served him right, setting up for a rich man, who had neither manners nor wit, nor looks, — no, certainly not looks." Then he observed his own wounds, and grew frightened to see them bleed; grew very pitiful of himself, washing and binding them; blubbered over them, thinking new grievances of Mariano, who would so misuse him. So he wept, sitting on a hummock waist deep in bloom, until the day drew into dusk, and the dogs and the flock clamored for their evening care.

"Eh? — Oh, — go to Mariano out there," he said; "he is master," and laughed, thinking it a very fine jest, and afterwards wept again, and so fell into a mindless sleep.

It was in the hope and promise of dawn when he awoke. The sky paled slowly; here and there peaks swam into rosy glow above the cool dark. He felt the stiffness of his wounds, and groaned, remembering — what? — that Mariano lay out there in the scrub. It was a deep sleep he kept out there between the poppies and the sage; he looked not to have stirred all night. It was a joke between them that Mariano would play out to the end. Ruiz went about the morning meal fumblingly. The sky filled and filled; pale slits of light between the rifts began to streak the floor of the plain. By the spring a mourning dove began to call. The dogs shrank uneasily; they looked at the figure of Mariano, and now it seemed to stir, and now did not. Noé put his nose to the air and moaned with a hushed noise in his throat. Ruiz wished to make haste, but seemed intolerably slow. He strayed out toward the still body as the day warmed him and cleared the mists of drink. "Get up, Mariano," he began to say, but fell off into whispering; a patch of sun lit the blackened poppies, and his ear caught the burr-r-r of flies.

Without doubt the habit of a man's work stands him in good stead; whatever had come to Mariano there was still the flock. They were scattering northward, and Noé and Reina Maria had, it appeared, little mind for their work, but they heard the shepherd's voice and answered it. To bring the sheep together in good form took them a flock's length farther from Mariano. It is probable Juan Ruiz had not thought till then what he should do, but now this was the thing, — to get away; to get shut of the sight and nearness of the dead.

He began to push the sheep into the hills, crossed the trail, and struck up over a sharp ridge. His progress grew into hurry, his hurry to a fever of flight. He pressed the sheep unmercifully; bells jangled up the steeps and down into hollows by paths that only sheep could have taken, by places where were no paths, and at last he wearied them beyond going. He was by this time beside himself. They came to an open hillslope above a stream, thick and slippery with new grass. The shepherd instinct told him the sheep must rest and feed, but his mind gave him no

rest. He killed a lamb and fed the dogs, and since he had eaten nothing that day, ate also, and made out to spend the night. He was beyond the country of the burrowing owls; there was no sound other than the eager cropping of the sheep. There came a wind walking across the grasses that made the shadows stir, and in every patch of shadow were dead men trembling to arise, struggling and twisting so they might come at him. So it seemed to Ruiz. He got his back to a rock and shuddered into sleep. He woke after an hour or two and began to think. He was neither clear nor quick in his mind, but by and by he thrashed the matter out somewhat in this fashion.

It was not likely Mariano would be missed, or, if missed, found again; by now the coyotes should be at him. And if found, what then? There was no witness. The dogs? Ah, yes! They had carried themselves strangely toward him that day. All through his sleep he had heard Noé keening the dead master with a mournful howl. The faith a shepherd grows to have in the understanding of his dogs passes

belief. It is equal to his assurance of their ability to make themselves understood. Ruiz was afraid of Noé and Reina Maria. The sheep also had Mariano's mark; but if he got shut of all these, what was there to accuse him? Above all, his desire moved him to get away and away, and to mix with his own kind. There was a very dull sort of cunning in this that did not at first profit him. He had to battle with the shepherd habit to stay by the flock. Unconsciously he had worked all day against it, but the fear of dead men walking in the dark also held him still. With all this he gave no thought to the great box of reals lying unguarded in the hut of Mariano. About the hour the night breeze fell off before dawn he left the flock on the hill, and began to strike along the ridge by ways he knew, to come into Monterey from the north, which he hoped to do in four days. He left the dead and the witnesses, and carried his guilt openly in his face.

What happened to Noé and Reina Maria with the flock is a matter of record. Mascado, the Indian renegade, for purposes of his own tracked them from the day they struck the rancheria of

Peter Lebecque, backward to where he found the body of Mariano, big and overblown by flies. There was nothing to tell from it except that it had been a man. The flock, it seemed, must have stayed upon the hill that day, or near it, forging forward a little by the trail Ruiz had taken. The dogs ate of the lamb that he had killed, and kept the flock close. They went on a little from there doubtfully, but presently, it seemed, they made certain, by what gift God knows, that the shepherd would not return. They headed the flock toward the place of The Reed, where they had been bred. It is not known if they had any food after the first day; they had not been taught killing. The second night brought them — for they made pace slowly — to a very close-grown and woody stretch of country all a-tumble of great boulders among the trees. They found themselves brought up against a crisis. Through the middle of this copse ran a stream full and roaring from the rains. What urgency they used — Reina Maria who was old in the wisdom of herding and Noé who was young — could not be guessed. Suffi-

cient that they got the flock so near the crossing that some two or three were drowned. But they could do no more; they went, perforce, upstream. Here is a matter for wonder, and made talk in sheep camps wherever the dogs of Del Mar — for they were of that breed — were known. The Reed lay nearest as the crow flies going downstream; the only hope of crossing lay upstream, where there might be shallows, and that way they took. Here it seems was a disagreement. They were hungry, no doubt, overwrought, and one of them loved himself more than the flock. It was a question of saving the sheep who did very well, or saving their own skins. Noé would and Reina Maria would not. So they fought, faint and a-hungered, one for himself and the other for the flock, and the silly sheep strayed bleating through the scrub. The battle went to Reina Maria; it was Noé, when succor found them, that showed most wounds. So they worked the flock up the waterside, which here ran parallel to a foot trail, toward the traveled roads. They had been four days from Mariano, two of them without food, and had come twenty miles.

In the mean time Isidro Escobar had hardly come more. From the oak shelter where he had slept the second night of his journey he had set out leisurely to Los Alamos, which he made by noon. That was the day Ruiz was hurrying his flock across country by steeper ways than the accustomed trail. Between the Escobars and the family at Los Alamos there was amnesty and observance. It lay out of the trail somewhat, but not too far for the courtesy of an Escobar. By all the laws of hospitality Isidro should have stayed a month, but contented himself with three days, pleading his appointment with Padre Saavedra, and the urgence of his new calling, which now began to sit becomingly upon him.

He was, therefore, pushing merrily along the trail that rounded a barren hill running like a cape into a lake of woods that gave off a continuous murmuring. He was riding fast, not certain where he should rest, or if, in fact, he would have any shelter but his cloak, and gave no attention to the way. Toward mid-afternoon he heard afar the slow, incessant jangle of bells that bespoke a moving flock. It promised him other