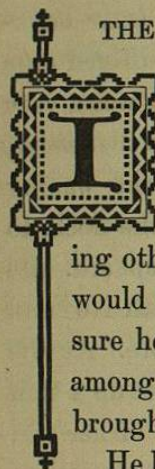


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things, — a meal and company, at least. The wood was scattered more, and marked by an absence of underbrush. Between the boles of oak were grassy plats, in one of which he looked to find the sheep camp. By the rising of the ground whereon the wood stood, and the dipping of the trail, he could not see very far into it, but the sound lay still ahead of him; so, with no other warning, when the ridge of westward hills began to make a twilight gloom in the gully, he came suddenly upon the flock, Noé, and Reina Maria.

## III

### THE HUT OF THE GRAPEVINE



SIDRO was an owner of sheep, one bred to an open life, and no fool. He made sure on the instant that there was no shepherd about. Wanting other witness, the behavior of the dogs would have told him that. To make doubly sure he raised a shout that rang and rang among the tree boles and the rocks, and brought no answer.

He looked the flock over and found them sleek; the brand he thought he had seen, but could not be sure. Then he came to the dogs; here was evidence. They looked gaunt and wolfish-eyed; they had wounds, — Noé was caked with blood about the throat. Isidro thought they bore the marks of wolf's teeth or coyote's. They fawned upon him with short, gulping barks and throaty whines, glad and wishful at once in an intolerable speechlessness. Properly



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they should have stood off from him and left parleying to the shepherd. The absence of such reserve was the best evidence that they understood the fact, if not the reason, of their desertion. Something of what they had suffered they told Isidro in their dumb way, which was a very good way, since it touched him. His first move, done quickly to take advantage of the waning day, was to cast a wide circle about the flock, to pick up the trail of the vanished shepherd. He found the way the sheep had come with Noé and Reina Maria, but found nothing more. At the first motion of riding away Noé had set up a thin howl, but Reina Maria had the faith of her sex. She waited the event.

"So," said Isidro, "it seems there is no company where I looked to find it, and no fire, though a fire would be a comfort, and no food, but great need of feeding." It was quite dusk in the wood, where the earth was all a litter of rotten leaves. The ripples of the stream, which at this point ran shallowly in a rocky bed, began to climb above the hushed noises of the day; the air had a feel of dampness. Isidro made his

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horse comfortable by the stream border, where there was a cropping of fresh grass, and lit a fire of twigs. He thought of supper and then of the dogs, for they looked to have suffered much. He killed a lamb for them bunglingly, as not being used to such work, spattering his ruffles with blood, and was pleased to see them feed. They were in a fair way to get a taste for new mutton.

"My faith!" said he, watching their ravening, "is it so long as that?"

Isidro set to work to piece out the circumstance. Whatever had befallen the shepherd it could not be Indians, since these would hardly have spared the flock; nor wild beasts, though the wounds of Noé hinted at that. It was not possible that a beast which could carry off a man would let the dogs go free. Besides, the sheep were too sleek, too little uneasy; they had had no fright, as would have shown in the case of an attack by wolves or bears. The only thing that was clear was the devotion of Noé and Reina Maria.

"Good dogs," said Isidro, and praised them to their fill, though in an unfamiliar speech.



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The bells of the sheep made a friendly tinkle; the flock drowsed; the dogs dressed their wounds by the fire. Isidro heaped him a bed of dried fern and slept deep.

He awoke in the morning twilight; all the wood was astir with wild pigeons, — soft, slaty blue like the sky. The flock was out and feeding up the stream; Noé and Reina Maria stood for orders. Here was a bother. There was no mistaking the attitude of the dogs, — they had shifted their responsibility.

Caramba! Was an Escobar to turn herder, and go straggling into the Presidio of Monterey with a flock not his own at his heels? It was a pity, of course, but clearly not a case for his intervention. So Isidro; not so Noé and Reina Maria. When the man put his horse to the ford they brought up the flock that, also reassured by the man's presence, began to get over in a silly fashion. Directly they had a hint of a new desertion. It went hard with the dogs at first in the shock to a free-given faith. They were checked, bewildered. Noé yelped dismally, and then frankly deserted the flock for the man.

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But Reina Maria ran to and fro between him and her charge, back and forth with tongue wagging out and red, wearied eyes, harrying the flock and fawning on the man, not daunted, but persisting until she had won his understanding and rested the case upon the facts. She was fit to burst with running and eagerness. A hundred rods or so of this, and Isidro wheeled back in a kind of comical dismay.

"Your way, my lady!" he cried. "Jesus! but I will make poor work of being a priest if I refuse such begging. Thou art a faithful beast."

"A priest is a shepherd in some sort," he said later, moving with the flock slowly in the morning freshness, "but I doubt the herder has the easier time of it." The difficulties of the work came home to him presently. Thus far he had followed the trail, which grew steep and stony in a great tangle of brush. The light lay level with the hills and too warm. The sheep scattered in the brush, and the dogs were plainly fagged.

To keep the trail grew nearly impossible; besides, it seemed little likely to afford pasture.

"My friends," said Isidro, "it is clear we



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shall get nowhere at this rate, and seeing I am new to the business and likely to make a mess of it, do you be so kind as to lead the way."

No doubt communication between man and beast is helped by speech, but it is not indispensable. Noé and Reina Maria knew only Portuguese and a little French, Isidro only Castilian, but somehow there passed from each to each some assurance, sense of understanding. Gradually the dogs assumed the responsibility of the flocks, growing assured as they felt themselves free and Isidro following. They passed out of the thickets, turned north along an open ridge, and by noon made a little grassy swale, through which the rill of a spring ran unseen, though you heard it talking in the grass. Beyond that was rolling country, nearly treeless, lush with wild oats, bordered with poppies, holding little lakes of white forget-me-nots in coves of the hills.

The grass grew up tall, and muffled the bells of the sheep. Then began trees again,—buckeyes bursting into bloom, water oaks strung with long, pendulous vines misty with bloom. Deer stood up in the open places; a band of antelope

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flashed by them, three coyotes behind them in full chase; they came upon two tawny cats at their mating in the clear warm space before a rocky wall. They saw no man, neither shepherd nor Indian, nor any trace of one. Those were the days when men shifted for themselves without finiken. So long as the flock lasted and he had the means of a fire—it was still the time of flint and tinder—they would not lack food, and for shelter Isidro had his cloak. But by the time the light had got a yellow tinge from shining slantwise on the poppy fires, they came upon a better shift. Under an oak, mocking the jays with as shrill a voice, sat a slim, dark lad, pillowed on a great sheaf of plucked bloom.

For excuse of his being, a small flock, lacking a brand, fed thereabout, minded by a mongrel cur that looked more for killing than herding, but nevertheless came and went obediently at the lad's word. So much Isidro perceived at the first onset; for the rest, since he had come upon him suddenly, Isidro found himself enough to do to turn aside his own sheep so that the two bands might not mix,—a matter in which the



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lad spent no pains. He stood up, though, and seeing him not likely to begin, Isidro fetched a very courteous bow.

"Señor," he said, "will you do me the favor to tell me whose sheep I have, and whither they would go?"

"That," said the lad, "you should know better than I. Keep back your sheep, sir; if they mix, the parting out will be no sport."

"Your pardon, señor; so I should judge, but I am newly come into the business, and the dogs do not understand Castilian."

The herd-boy spoke some words of diverse tongues, mongrel speech of the mixed peoples that come together in a new land, and lighted upon those that the dogs understood, for they went at their work with quickened apprehension. The lad got his own band behind him, and started them moving.

"As for the flock, señor," he said, "whose should they be if not yours, unless you have stolen them?"

"My faith, you have a tongue!" cried Isidro; "but as for stealing, it appears that they have

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stolen me, since they have taken me out of my way so that I know not how I shall come at it, nor what to do with them."

"You speak riddles, señor."

"Then I will speak more to the point;" whereupon he told him straightly how he came upon the flock and what followed.

"The brand is Mariano's," said the boy, "and the dogs I think I have seen. Noé?" he questioned, and the dog fawned upon him. "They are Mariano's sheep, and the dogs belonged to Juan Ruiz. They passed a fortnight since. Strange work."

"I know none stranger," said Isidro with much gravity; "and since you know their owner, who is no doubt much distressed on their account, will you do me the favor to restore them? I will give you two reals for your trouble, and the Portuguese will scarcely do less."

The boy knit his brows with quick darting scorn. "The señor does not understand these things. Juan Ruiz has doubtless come to some hurt. Suppose the Portuguese comes upon me unawares with his dogs and his sheep. Will he



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believe me if I say I had them from a fine gentleman in the woods?"

"As well your story as mine," said Isidro, beginning to be vastly amused. He rolled a cigarette and leaned against his horse, waiting. The boy frowned, and thought. When he spoke again it was with a curious apathy, as if he had somehow come free of the whole affair.

"If the señor will but come with me," he said.

"As well with you as anywhere," cried Isidro with the greatest cheerfulness. Seeing the boy moving before him with the flock, Isidro took thought of him. He was slightly built for his age, which looked to be fifteen, and was clothed for the most part in very good woven stuff, cut after no fashion but convenience, wore moccasins, and about his calves strips of buckskin wrapped many times, Indian fashion. He had black hair cropped at the shoulders, and falling so as to leave visible only a thin disk of face, dark and ruddy-colored. He stood straightly, and had the fine, level-looking eyes of an Indian, though no Indian, as was plain to see. About his brows he wore a rag of red silk, in which were tucked vine

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leaves for coolness; under this penthouse his eyes were alert and unfrightened as a bird's.

They went sidelong on a ridge, avoiding a deep cañon, and came clear of trees. Presently they reached the head of a long, winding shallow that should have held a stream, but flowed only a river of grass and bloom. Down this the sheep poured steadily as if it had been a lane, and Isidro found space for conversation.

"Your sheep?" said he.

"Peter Lebecque's."

"And who may Peter Lebecque be? I have not heard of him, and I thought to know these hills."

"And who may you be that should know such humble folk?" quoth the shepherd lad.

"My faith," thought Isidro, "but this is a sharp one!" Nevertheless, he took off his hat with a very low sweep, being now beside his companion. "Isidro Rodrigo Escobar, your servant, señor."

The boy eyed him a moment through narrowing lids, and then, as if appeased, replied in kind, —

"Peter Lebecque is a trapper; he lives by the



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Grapevine where the water of that creek comes out of the Gap."

"And where may that be?"

"It is near by, señor."

"And you, what are you called?"

"El Zarzo."<sup>1</sup>

"El Zarzo? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else, señor."

"But that is no name for a Christian. Had you never another?"

"El Zarzo I am called, señor, or Zarzito."

"Well, well, a good name enough; one might guess how you came by it."

The way began to narrow and wind down; presently they heard the barking of dogs. The gully widened abruptly to a little meadow fronting a cañon wall, looking from above to have a close green thicket in its midst. Isidro, when they had come down to the level, perceived it to be a group of tree trunks overgrown by wild vines that had come up by the help of the trees and afterward strangled them. The twisted stems rose up like pillars, and overhead ran stringers of

<sup>1</sup> The Briar.

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vine thatched with leaves. Alcoves and galleries of shade lay between the tree boles under thick rainproof roofs. The outer walls were cunningly pieced out by willow withes, to which the vines had taken kindly; a rod away it looked to be all nature. It was as safe and dark as a lair; the floor of stamped earth had a musty dampness; it smelt like a fox's earth. Bearskins drying in the sun stank very vilely, and dogs lolled hunting fleas on the floor.

Peter Lebecque, who was shaping a trap, stood up as they came, but found no words; all manner of threats, questionings, resentments, played across his eyes. El Zarzo slid away from Isidro and stood in low-toned foreign talk a long time with the trapper, with many a quick-flung look and dropped inflection. They need not, however, have concerned themselves so much; an Escobar had the manners not to hear what was not intended for his ears. Isidro stood by his horse and smoked cigarettes until the sun was quite down.

By that the old rascal, for so he looked, came forward to take his horse. "Will you eat, señor?" he said.



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"With the best will in the world," said Isidro.

The old trapper took a pot of very savory stew from the fire, added bread and wine and a dish of beans. They three sat upon stools about a table contrived of hewn slabs, and dipped in the dish, every man with his own knife and his fingers. The day went out in a flare of crimson clouds trumpeted by a sea wind; there was promise of rain.

It appeared that Peter Lebecque knew something of fine manners, though Isidro confessed to himself that he could not get to like the look of him. There was a great deal of polite indirection before they came to the pith of their business.

The sheep, it was agreed, were Mariano's; further agreed that Isidro and the lad should deliver them to-morrow to the shepherds of Mariano, who might be met with about the place called Pasteria. This, you can imagine, was no comfortable news for Isidro, since it took him still further out of his course; but, in fact, there was no help for it.

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"It would go hard," said the trapper, "if the flock were found with us. An Escobar is above suspicion, but we, señor, are poor folk." He leered wickedly with beady eyes. Isidro had washed his hands before meat, and the old villain had noted blood upon his wrists.

"As you will," said Isidro, wishing to be rid of the matter, "and then you will tell me how I shall come by the trail to the Presidio of Monterey again."

"Ah, Monterey; it is a very fine town, I have heard."

"I have never been there."

"Nor I, but I have heard, a gay town, and many gay ladies, eh, señor?"

"Oh, as to that I cannot say; I go to Padre Saavedra at Carmelo." Isidro let a prodigious yawn; he was tired of the day's work, and tired of the company. When he had got to bed at last on a heap of skins he had his saddle for pillow, and his pistols ready to hand. "I am not a priest yet," he said, "and the old fellow looks to be the devil or of his brood."

By this the rain had begun, and drummed