## XII

### THE PLACE OF WOLVES

BETWEEN the hills and the Tulares is a treeless space, rolling, shrubby, — herding-place of deer what time they run together. Transversely across it frothy winter floods gouge out furrows, sharp and deep near the cañon mouths, running out shallowly valleywards at the limit of waters. Here run turbid streams in wet weather, two or three months of the year; for the rest, they lie void, bone-dry water-scars, and wild beasts dig their lairs in the banks of them. Hereabouts is the Place of Wolves, *El Poso de los Lobos*. Here are stinking holes where the lean-flanked mothers with heavy dugs go in and out to the whimpering cubs; here are foxes' covers and stale old lairs of the dogs of the wilderness, sunken caves, weathered niches all a-litter of old bones; earthy hollows where a hunted man might safely





lie. It was a place known to trappers, guides, wanderers for any profit of the hills or for no profit at all, and to Juan Ruiz.

The reminder of the lair is strong in a stricken man, — to draw to cover, lie close, keep dark; to have the sense and nearness of the earth. Juan Ruiz, knowing the place of old, lame, a-hungered, feverish, hugging his gold, crooning over it to comfort himself for his pains, steered his course for the broken lairs of the *Poso de los Lobos*. In his mind he designed to shelter there and recover from the sickness of terror and fatigue, but the shuddering soul of him purposed more than that. Unawares, it drove him with the last instinct of the burrowing beast, the while he thought himself following a clever plan. A man who commits a crime without first taking his own measure is likely to find himself in such a case as this. He must be brute enough to have it lie wholly without his sensibilities, or his determination must be greater than all these; otherwise the thin wall of reason cracks. In the fifth night of his flight from Mesa Buena Vista, Ruiz slept under a thicket of buckthorn on a forward

sloping hill. The night was soft, dark, warm, and sweet; no coyote howled nor bird awoke; the tormented soul departed into the borderland between death and sleep and found an interval of rest. About the mid-hour he started up, warned by the wolf sense of pursuit. It seemed such a sense watched in him while he slept. Often keeping the flock of Mariano he had roused at night before the unease of the dogs made him aware of danger; now he trusted that sense as he had been wont to do, and, in fact, the warning was true. Father Saavedra and Saco camped on his trail not a day behind him. Ruiz got up and shook off the stiffness of his limbs; huddling as the air began to chill toward morning, stooping as the weight of his treasure told on his shaken frame, dragging his swollen foot, he worked his way down the hill front. He followed a dry wash as long as it served him, then struck across a clear space of knee-high, shrubby herbs and grass. He had no light but star-shine and the candle at the back of his brain, that burned brighter as his vital force waned in him. So he forged northward, and the day widened and shut him in like





the hollow of a bell. Back on his trail followed Padro Vicente, pitiful and prayerful, and Saco, the hair of his neck pricking like a dog's as the trail freshened.

By mid-morning Ruiz was out on the plain beyond the limit of small waters. Rain had fallen scantily on the eastern slopes that year, and few streams ran beyond the foothills. So, as the day advanced, he began to add to the fever of his flight the fever of thirst, the more severe because of his oblivion of delirium. It would come over him while he rested in the short shade of the scrub, and ease him of his pains and terrors until the brute warning of pursuit urged him forward. He made as straight a course as the land and his fuddled wit permitted for the *Poso de los Lobos*, to hide his gold and himself. Saco and Saavedra had sighted him, a moving speck in the haze, about the second hour of afternoon, and though they lost him again in the rolling land, expected confidently to come up with him before night.

By this time Ruiz had forgotten about the priest and Mariano. He was hardly conscious of much beside the bag of gold which he huddled

in his bosom; in his disorder he conceived that some one followed on his trail for the sake of it. Therefore, as he neared the *Poso de los Lobos* he began to go very cunningly, trod as much as possible upon the stones to leave no trail, and went back and forth upon his tracks. Stooping from the top of the bank, he fixed upon a bob-cat's lair, high up above the possible reach of waters. Leaning above it he kissed his treasure, half in tears to put it from him, half laughing with the pleasure of his cunning, made a long arm, and dropped it out of sight. Then, wallowing in the loose soil of the bank to leave no trace of hands or feet, he contrived to push down a quantity of gravel and loose stones until he had blotted out the mouth of the lair. That was the last flicker of the cunning mind. He had hidden Mariano's money from those walking on his trail, and hidden it so securely that come another day he would not be able to find it himself.

There was a niche in the north bank of the wash that must have been left there first by the falling away of a great boulder the size of a wine cask; behind it the earth was a little damp from





some blind water source that in a rainy country might have been a spring, and the coyotes had scented it in a dry season, pawing deeply into the bank. Now and then in hot weather they returned, drawn by the water smell to dig for it and cool their hairy flanks in the cool dampness. The opening had thus grown larger than any lair, and smelled of beasts. The displaced boulder lay not far from the mouth of it, and loose soil from above had piled about it, making a barrier that screened it from the unaccustomed eye. Here Juan Ruiz hid himself, clean gone out of his natural mind, lacking food and drink, but glad of the darkness and the cool damp of the clay, to which he bared his aching foot, and in his gladness of relief and the sense of the solid earth about him, babbled foolishly as a child. Here, when the sun was not quite down, Saco found him singing in a feeble, merry voice the old nursery rhyme which begins: —

Señora Santa Ana,
Why does the baby cry?

Saco, starting out from San Carlos, knew nothing whatever of the Ruiz affair except that he

was a man the Padre wished to find, and his trail was to be picked up somewhere about the Mesa Buena Vista. There, having found and followed it to this conclusion, although he was as pleased with his skill as a hound that has brought the fox to earth, his Indian breeding forbade him any expression of it. He squatted on his haunches by the lair, rolled a cigarette, and appeared to dismiss the whole matter from his mind. He looked now for Padre Saavedra to take up the turn, and the Padre had forgotten for the moment that he followed Ruiz for any other purpose than the man's own relief. If he had remembered it at this juncture it must have been a sharp jog to his faith to find Ruiz brought to a pass so little likely to serve his purpose.

The Padres had always the means by them for bodily relief as well as for spiritual remedy. They were never lacking simples nor the materials for the sacrament, christening, marriage, and burial. Saavedra sent the Indian up the wash with the horses for water, and himself turned nurse. By the light of a brushwood fire and a few hours of the moon he bound up the shepherd's foot and





covered him from the night chill with his own blankets. As often as the Padre came near him to handle and relieve him, Ruiz remembered Mariano and the tortures of his soul; when they let him lie, his mind wandered off foolishly on the trail of the nursery song.

Señora Santa Ana,
Porque llora el niño ?

he sang as he lay stark on the earth, and then, as the Padre lifted him, "Ha, hell litter, you will leave me, will you? Take that! and that!" — and then failed for weakness, and feeling the comfort of the blankets began again presently piping and thin: —

Por una manzana ?

"Rest, rest, my son," said the Padre tenderly, and the raucous voice of the shepherd answered him with curses intolerably obscene. It fell off in obscure mutterings that clarified after an interval to the gentle air, —

Que se le ha perdido
Venga V. a me casa
Yo le daré dos,
Una par el niño y otro para vos.

So it went on, mournful and sweet in the

shadows, until the clink of horses' feet on the boulders, as Saco returned with the water, roused him to present memories.

"Cursed be the wood of which it is made, thrice cursed the iron that binds it! Will it never come open?" cried Ruiz, rising up in his place. "Faugh, what a filthy house for a rich man to live in! Ah, the pretty pieces, ah, so round, so bright! all mine, *mine*, MINE!" His voice rose to a scream, the Padre's hand was on his breast pressing him back upon the blankets.

"Drink, my son," said Saavedra, holding water to his lips.

"Ay, drink, Mariano," said Ruiz. "Good wine, excellent wine, and a pretty price, eh? Another bottle;" then as the water cooled him he was minded to sing again: —

Señora Santa Ana
Porque llora el niño?

"In nomine Patris, — per Christum Dominum," breathed the Padre above him.

"Beast — Devil's spawn!" gurgled Ruiz from the Padre's bed.

So it wore on for the greater part of the night,





but about the ebb of dark, when there was a smell of morning in the air, he woke out of his delirium tolerably sane. The presence of the Padre seemed not to surprise him; he was stricken with death, and knew it as the earth-born know, as the coyotes that dug this lair might have known before him.

He had come out of his stupor clear of the fear of men, knowing his end near; but the sight of Saavedra signing the cross put him in a greater terror of hell fire. He clutched a fold of the Padre's gown and fell to whimpering, but was too far spent for tears. This was the Padre's hour; tenderly and by all priestly contrivances, he lifted the poor soul through his agony, and for the ease of his conscience, to the point of open confession. The Padre wrote it out for him by the flare of the brushwood fire he had called Saco out of deep sleep to light, and held it carefully, for the fidging hand to mark with a cross over the name he had written. Saavedra had signed it Juan Ruiz. The dying man gave back the quill, speaking more at ease, as the troubled will after open confession.

"I'm not sure that it is right," he said; "Ruiz is not my name. It is the name of a man my mother married at the pueblo San José. I am not sure what my father's name might have been; my mother was not married to him. She died years ago; she was Maria Lopez."

"What!" cried the Padre, "Was she, indeed, Maria Lopez, daughter of Manuel Lopez of San José? And are you her son born out of wedlock? May God be merciful to you a sinner! Your father was Mariano the Portuguese."

That was a time when the consideration of the pangs of hell was potent to drive souls to salvation, and men were keen to pronounce judgment. What deeper pit was there than that reserved for the parricide? The groan which was forced out of the Padre at the sudden revelation, his starting back, the horror of his countenance, smote upon the poor shaking soul like the judgment of God. With a great broken cry Ruiz threw himself upon the Padre's breast, clawed him, clung to him, wrestled with him as a man might on the edge of the pit to win back out of it, with hoarse bestial breathings, a wide mouth of





terror, and staring eyes. Saavedra, wrenched free, forced him back upon the bed, and trembling laid the blessed wafer between stretched lips from which the soul shuddered in departing.

They buried Juan Ruiz in the place where he lay, in a beast's lair, after the Father President had blessed the ground. Saco rolled stones across the mouth of it and made a little cross of withes. All his life after Saavedra had moments of self-accusing, in that he supposed he might, by the better control of his countenance in that crisis, have given the poor soul a larger assurance of the mercy of God.

They spent a day looking for the gold of Mariano, but got nothing for their pains; Juan Ruiz had not been very clear in his account of how he had hidden it. There, no doubt, it lies to this day, high up in the bank of the wash in the bobcat's lair in the *Poso de los Lobos*.

Then, with the confession under his belt, the good Father President of Missions set back by the shortest route to the Presidio of Monterey. He had been gone just a week.

## XIII

### DELFINA

THERE was a woman in Monterey of a mischievous and biting humor, but not wanting in generous impulses, curious above all, a great lover of gossip and affairs. This Delfina had wit and traces of beauty, and, along with great formality of outward behavior, considerable reputation for impropriety. She had come into the country ten years since with the family of the, at that time, governor of Alta California, as a sort of companion or upper servant, on a footing of friendly intimacy, which she maintained, by report, with the governor at the expense of the governor's lady. At any rate she had found it convenient to break off that connection and establish herself in a little house just beyond the plaza in company with an elderly woman who was called by courtesy Tia Juana. The house had a high wall





of adobe about it, and a heap of wild vines riding the rooftree and spreading down to the outer wall, affording, so she was accustomed to say, great sense of security to her solitary way of life.

It was not possible in so small a community as Monterey quite to overlook a lady of such conspicuous claims to consideration as Delfina, for that she possessed them there was no one heard to deny; and, indeed, she was not lacking friends willing to affirm that she was most infamously put upon, and possessed of as many virtues as accomplishments. She was the repository of all possible patterns and combinations for the drawn-thread work which occupied the leisure of that time; she was a competent seamstress; invaluable at weddings, christenings, and *bailes*, in the way of decorations and confections, and an industrious and impartial purveyor of news. Among the most judicious and surely the most disinterested of her supporters was Fray Demetrio Fages, who visited her frequently in the interest of her Christian salvation, as he was heard to affirm; and was made the vehicle of liberal donations to the Church, which she was accustomed to bestow

out of an ostensibly slender income. Since he was so often at her house it is to be supposed that he found no company there not to his liking, and no behavior not suited to so godly a churchman; but even upon this there were those disposed to wink the eye.

In one way, however, the friendliness of Fray Demetrio gave Delfina better countenance among the matrons of the town, as it gave greater weight to any news of hers which related to the affairs of the Missions, since none so likely to know the facts as the Father President's secretary, and none more apt in the distribution than the secretary's friend. If Delfina had been kindly received before, judge how it was in the month which brought Valentin Delgado and the younger son of the Escobars to the Presidio of Monterey. Both these events, in the bearing they had upon the Church, gave a new fillip to the absorbing topic of the imminent secularization of the Missions, the probable distribution of the great wealth of herds and silver which they had, and the greater wealth with which report credited them, and the possible effect upon the settlements of





removing from the authority of the Padres some thousands of Indians who required very little scratching to show the native savage under the mission gilding. Then there was the old story of Ysabel and Jesús Castro revived with new and fascinating particulars, for there were several people in Monterey who held a remembrance of the beautiful and unhappy woman. Along with this was the arrival of two pretty gentlemen of excellent manners and good blood, — one from the capital in search of a wife and a fortune, the other from Las Plumas, ready to renounce all these in favor of the priesthood. You will perceive that Delgado had let some hints of his purpose be known; and, indeed, so obvious a conclusion as marrying the heiress when he had found her would have been tacked on to any account of his proceedings whether he had declared it or not. And to crown all this, when gossip was at its best, came the arrest of Isidro on a double charge of murder and robbery, and the departure of the Father President on some mysterious errand of justification or disproval.

Delfina, who had seen Don Valentin and en-

tertained him in her house behind the wall, had the most to say of the first affair ; but of Isidro, who had not cared, or had been too much under the supervision of the Father President, to make her acquaintance, — Delfina herself inclined to the latter opinion, — she knew only what Fages could tell her, and that, beyond a shrewd guess or two and some malice, was very little. Both her vanity and curiosity, therefore, were set upon the trail of the mystery behind the bare fact of the arrest. She began to cast about for some plausible ground for invention or explanation, and this led her in the course of a week to the servant of Escobar, who was still in Carmelo in the house of Marta. From Fages Delfina had learned, almost by accident, that the boy had not accompanied Isidro from Las Plumas, but had been picked up by the way. This seemed a very pregnant piece of news ; to point to an accomplice or at least an accessory after the fact. Delfina set herself to fall in with the lad and have it out of him by cajolery or whatever means. It happened that her instincts led her soon into the proper juxtaposition for that very business.





Since Isidro's arrest she had been in the habit of taking her evening walk in the neighborhood of the calabozo, as, indeed, how could any lady of sensibility help being drawn in that direction by the pitiful case of this handsome youth cast into prison on so heinous a charge, which must, no doubt, prove unfounded, or at least justifiable. And being so employed she observed, on more than one occasion, the lad called the Briar lurking about with a great air of disconsolateness, and the assumption of having no particular business. It was her instant conclusion that he walked there for the purpose of some secret communication with his master, and it wanted but the right moment of quiet and the absence of other observers ; and Delfina concluded she might bring about a conjunction which would serve her ends.

In fact, the lad had no such purpose as the woman credited him with, having reached that point where he would have sold himself to the devil without parley to have quieted his hunger for a sight of Escobar, sound of him, print of his foot in the earth, or any indubitable sign of

his living presence. And that he might have had if he had known enough to apply through Padre Salazar to the proper authorities. As the servant of Escobar he might have had free access to his person, but he was too little used to the ways of men to have known that, and, perhaps, too shy to have used it if he had known; so he hung frequently about the walls that inclosed Isidro, fevered with desire, but maintaining a tolerable appearance of having no interest there. This was that wild lad called the Briar who had come up to Monterey with Señor Escobar, charged with a packet from Peter Lebecque, having instructions to deliver it and himself into the hands of the Father President. He had parted from the trapper with little compunction, for, though the old man stood in the place of a father to him, he showed little of fatherliness, accepted him as a member of his household, neither to be greatly considered nor denied. Since the death of the Indian woman Zarzito had called mother, the lad had known loneliness and the desire to mix with his own kind which stirs in the blood of the young, and had ridden this





adventure with Escobar by instinct, as a bird of passage attempts its initial flight. For the first time he had tasted companionship, faring forth in the royal spring, young blood timing to young blood, and the world all singing and awake. But the lad was most a creature of the wood. He had, one might say, the wit and the will to be tame, but kept the native caution of wild things. Therefore, had no other reason arisen, he would have gone slowly about the business of resigning himself to the disposal of the grave President of Missions. But another obstacle had arisen: love, forsooth. The love of young lads for older, the love of the companionable for gay companions, love of the dawn soul for the soul of morning, — love, in short, — but of this you shall presently be better instructed. It was no great wonder that the hill-grown lad should love Escobar, so wise and merry and cool, and of such adorable and exasperating gentleness that it irked him to see thieves whipped and wild eagles get their food. It seemed to Zarzito that he could devise no better way of life than to serve Escobar, and follow him even into the cloister,

of which you may be sure he had no very clear idea. But in the mean time the packet troubled him, for Lebecque's instructions had been plain upon the point that it should be turned over to Saavedra, and his intimation that the Padre would thereupon put him in the way of good fortune. It appeared that El Zarzo desired no better fortune than following Escobar. But the real point of his difficulty was this, — he did not in the least know what the packet contained. The lad had not known much of priests or men, but he had learned rapidly, — from the Indian woman Marta, from walks and talks with Escobar, from mere seeing; he had sucked up information as the young sage of the mesa sucks up rain, filling out and erecting visibly. So he knew there was one fact hid from the Father President which, if it became known, would put an end to following his heart's desire. The question was, did the packet give notice of it?

On a day when Isidro had been about a week in prison, the day before the Father President returned from the quest of Juan Ruiz, El Zarzo sat a long time under an oak and considered the





matter, turning the packet over and over. It was long and thin, wrapped in a black silk kerchief, wound about many times with thread, and sealed up with gum. It showed no sign nor superscription, — apparently nothing to connect it with Peter Lebecque's lad or the servant of Escobar. Zarzito concluded that if it could be placed in the Father President's hands without his agency he would be quit of his obligation at the least possible risk. Accordingly, in an unwatched moment he dropped it in the alms-box at the door of the church. It was part of his newly gained information that whatever went in at that opening found its way eventually to the priests.

It was close upon dark when El Zarzo came that evening with the light foot of his Indian training around the corner of the calabozo of Monterey. A bank of fog-built mountain hid the meeting of the sea and sky; a kind of whiteness, reflected from the near-by water and the level beaches, lightened the air. Across the plaza came the thrum of guitars, and the voice of singing mixed with children's laughter, and the cheerful bark of dogs.

On the side of the prison away from the town was a window high up in the wall; between the bars fanned out the pale yellow ray of a candle. The wall was all of adobe, plastered smoothly up, and whitewashed. Below the window two or three cracks, which could be widened out with a toe or the fingers, afforded slight and crumbling holds. Within the wall all was still; no sound or motion from the prisoner or the guard. The candle rayed out steadily toward the sea that broke whisperingly along the beaches. El Zarzo's heart beat loudly in his bosom, stirred by the nearness of the well beloved. He reached up the wall for a finger hold, put one toe in a crack and raised himself a foot or two nearer, clinging and climbing like a worm on an orchard wall. Delfina at that moment came mincingly around the corner on her errand of curiosity, and caught him there. The lady, who was as quick in execution as in design, made no outcry to have aroused the guard, but went and plucked him swiftly from behind, and dropped her arms about his body as he came tumbling from the wall. The lad was but a slender armful for one of her build, and though





he writhed and wrung himself, he could neither get at her to do her hurt nor to set himself free.

"Be still," said the lady; "I want but a word with you." But the lad struggled the more.

"Be still, you brat," she said again; "do you want to bring the guard upon us?" But though El Zarzo had his own reasons for not wishing it, he did not or would not understand, and while she struggled and fretted with him Delfina made a discovery.

"What, what!" she cried, and her note was changed to one of amazement and smothered laughter; "so the rabbit has jumped out of the bag! — What, what, my lady," she said again, continuing her investigations with chucklings of mischievous delight; "and he a priest! And you his body servant! Fie, oh fie!" Her voice quavered with the burden of offensive mirth. "Be still, you little" — But the word will not bear repeating. El Zarzo grew sick to feel her hands fumbling about him, and limp and quiet more at the insult of her tones than at any word.

Behind them they heard the sudden stir of the guard.

"Come away," cried the Briar, panting and shaking. Delfina wished nothing so much as to get to the bottom of this affair uninterrupted. Holding fast by the lad's shoulder she ran her prisoner down the open road toward the bay, and out where their running left a wet trail on the sand. The tide was low and quiet. Few lights showed on the seaward side of the town. Nothing moved in sight but the shape of a solitary horseman on the road above the beaches. It seemed a safe and silent hour for all confidences.

"Confess; you are a woman," said Delfina.

"I am a maid," said the other in a dry whisper.

"Oh, yes now, a maid," said the older woman, mischief beginning to stir in her; "no doubt a maid, and he a priest."

"I will hear nothing evil of him," flashed the Briar.

"Why, to be sure," bubbled Delfina; "and he, I dare say, will accredit you with all the virtues of Santa Cecilia. All priests are alike. I also could tell you" — But it was plain the girl did not hear; she had begun to twist and wring





her hands, with a kind of breathy moan, as one in great distress and unaccustomed to the use of tears.

"You will never betray me, señora," she begged, "you will not?"

"Why, as to that," began Delfina, moved greatly by curiosity and a little by the girl's evident distress, "that remains to be determined. Let us hear your story."

But the girl continued to wring her hands and cry brokenly without tears.

"I will tell you," she said, "yes, I will tell you," but made no beginning. The horseman on the upper road had passed on behind them; they did not see him wheel his horse and return upon the sand.

"Oh, I meant no harm, señora, and no harm must come to Señor Escobar because of me, — ah, yes, I will tell you," began the girl again, moving her lips dryly. Delfina shook her to quiet her own impatience and the other's quaking sobs. At once there came a hiss and hurtling through the air, a wind of whirling flight, a tang of tightening cord. The girl gave a gasp