

## ISIDRO

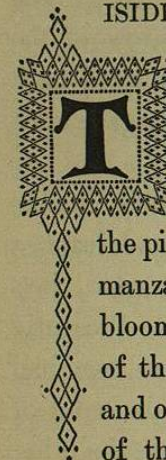
"Not surprising, Padre, but ominous," replied the Comandante, "considering what we know of their habits. At this season they should be spread abroad by clans and families. That you saw none is proof positive that they are gathering together in some other place and for some purpose."

"I trust not of mischief," said Saavedra.

"I hope not, but I do not trust where an Indian is concerned," said the Comandante, smiling a little. "But the detachment which was sent out for your fellow Mascado should be in any hour; they were provisioned only for ten days, and they may be able to tell somewhat. In the mean time I advise, Padre, that you let none of the neophytes pass between the Missions on any errands whatever." The Father President acquiesced. He was not the man for affrays; besides, had Urbano descended upon San Carlos, he would have met him in the fashion of the martyred Luis Jayme, saying, "Love God, my children," and as likely have met the same end. By the time he had finished with the Comandante and come out into the plaza again Isidro had been gone an hour.

## XVI

### ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

HE place from which Isidro and the tracker looked on Las Chimineas was a thinly wooded hill, its coastward slope in the spaces between the pine boles well grown with stiff-stemmed manzanita and lilac now waning in its bloom. It lay directly opposite the head of the gorge, and the track ran around it, and over a low barrier running transversely of the rift that turned it sharply to the east. Beyond the barrier, which was clothed with wide low oaks, the gray chimneys began to rise, clustered thickly together. They parted in files, leaving the meadow space clear, and met in a jumble at the head of the cañon. The hill on which the two men stood butted into the left wall of the cañon, and made easy passage to a point above the crowd of chimneys. The whole trend of the cañon and encompassing hills was



## ISIDRO

south of southeast. The wood marched up to the crest of the west wall, leapt over, and began again midway of the opposite slope, which was higher, went on in an orderly and constant growth far east and south. On the down throw of the bare west wall where the chimneys piled high and disjointed, Arnaldo judged the renegade must be if he were to be found at all.

Las Chimineas lay gray and lonely in the brooding light, squirrels chattered and leapt, a striped snake slid by them in the grass, jays screamed and quarreled in the oaks. Presently Arnaldo held up his hand; the two men had proceeded almost without sound, for the habit of his trade was upon one, and heavily on the other the desire of slaughter. A jay steering a flight across the cañon veered suddenly near a group of tall chimneys; another, watching, wheeled toward the point, and avoided it with a volley of shrill abuse. Rabbits that ran in the meadow halted and pricked up their ears.

"We have him," said the tracker. He dropped from his horse, and began to work back on the trail to put the brow of the hill between them

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

and Las Chimineas. Isidro was no fool to stay the action with question; he took off his spurs, which clinked softly on the stones, and did as he saw the tracker do. In a ring of pines, screened by lilac, they made the horses fast.

"Go back and watch," said Arnaldo; "when you hear three quail calls, low and quick, and in the same key, I have news for you."

He pressed back against the thicket as he spoke; it seemed to spring aside to give him room; there was a little trepidation in the branches, a twig snapped, a bird started, the warm silence of the wood closed in again. Isidro looked at the places where the man might be supposed to be, but saw not so much as the glint of the sun on bare skin. He did not do quite as he had been told; he went back to the hill and over it, and by dint of all the Indian craft he knew, pressed down to the lower barrier and then up to the top of that, until he looked full on the meadow of Las Chimineas. In a secret place where the grass grew tall against the rooted rocks he saw a pinto pony a-graze at the end of a stake rope. This and the smooth spread of



## ISIDRO

open meadow gave him a hint and food for thought that lasted until he judged the tracker might have returned. He took a longer way back to the horses, looking for the tracks by which Mascado had presumably come into the meadow, and heard the signal given twice from the thicket on the hill before he came quite up to it.

"Well?" he said. Arnaldo the tracker was the man for such business; he handed you up the facts without discursiveness, and spared comment until the adventure was achieved.

"Mascado," he said. "He harbors below that one of the chimneys that has a red stain of moss upon it. The boy lies bound to a log of oak. Mascado mends the fire and goes about to cook a rabbit."

"Has he arms?"

"He has a knife about his neck, but neither bow nor spear. The rabbit was caught in a snare; I saw it hanging on a rock."

"Good," said Isidro; "I have seen his horse; the meadow is between it and him. Good again. Look you, Arnaldo, this is my game. Take this," — it was a pistol from his saddle holster, —

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

"and go back to the chimneys and watch until I have called Mascado out to me. If he so much as lays a hand on the lad, kill; but if not, then do as I say. When Mascado has come out to me in the meadow, unbind the boy, and bring him here. If I happen to any mischance, take him safely to the Father President."

"What will you do?"

"Do? Ah, there is much to do. You shall see." Isidro was coiling and recoiling the riata which hung at every saddle-bow in those days of Alta California. He ran it through his hands and rehung it to his satisfaction. The tracker observed him with a dawning grin.

"Mascado knows a trick of a rope," he said.

"I also," said Escobar; "now go."

He waited in the scrub until he judged the Indian close in to Mascado's cover; then, mounting, he drew cautiously around the end of the hill and rode freely into the meadow. He sat lightly in the saddle, and swung the noose of his riata with irrepressible cheerfulness. Escobar was his own man again.

"Oh, ho, Mascado;" he cried, "come out to



## ISIDRO

me!" His voice, high and pleasant, went searchingly through the rocks. The jays heard it, and replied with screaming; the squirrels heard, and stayed in mid motion as gray and quiet as the boulders. El Zarzo heard it, and sat up thanking God for a miracle. She knew the voice and knew at once that in her heart she had always expected he would come.

"Oh-ee! Mascado, come out to me!" Isidro rode up and down in the meadow swinging his rope. Mascado's muscle sprung to attention; he had his knife at the girl's throat; it was to say in its own fashion that Escobar should not have her. She looked up and smiled.

"Do," she breathed, "for after that he will but kill you the quicker."

Arnaldo judged it time for interference. He dropped like a cat from the rocks, his pistol cocked.

"Mascado, you dog," he said, "the Señor Escobar calls you."

The renegade was not without some sparks of manhood or philosophy; he stood up, dropped his knife into its sheath, dropped his arms at his

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

sides, and went out walking straight and softly to Escobar. Isidro looked him over with some amazement, which did not, however, abate his cheerfulness.

"What is that on your breast, Mascado?" he said.

"Scratches, señor."

"Sacramento! but they look to be the marks of deer's hooves, and not a month old at that."

The mestizo looked down at his scars with something of a smile.

"So it would seem, señor."

"It appears, then, that we have met before."

"So it would seem."

"On which occasion I did you a favor and got scant thanks for it."

Mascado had a wintry look. "For which later you did me harm enough, Señor Escobar."

"What harm, you dog?" quoth Escobar.

Mascado's face was bleak, but his eyes glinted. "El Zarzo," he whispered dryly.

"Now by God and His Christ!" said Isidro, "but that word is likely to cost you dear. But I cannot kill a dog standing. Get horse, Mas-



## ISIDRO

cado; I have heard you can throw a rope." Isidro's circling rawhide hummed in the air; he threw it up and kept it there by the whirling force of motion. He ran it out, and bid it follow the mestizo like a questing snake. It was an exercise in which his perfect attune of body and temper made him excellent. It had been said of him at Las Plumas that he won in such contests because he did not particularly care for honors where the eagerness of others shook the hand.

Mascado got his horse. Certainly Escobar had saved his life in the affair of the buck under the oak, but this did not mend his disposition; unquestionably Isidro had exceeded the requirements in permitting him honorable contest of a sort not uncommon in the country, but it did not lessen his hate. However, and it was much more to the purpose, the consciousness which he could hardly escape, that his private meditation did not fit very well with the circumstances, lent him a touch of shame that mitigated his skill. Vengeance burned in him sickeningly. The rogue was for murder if the chance allowed.

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

The mestizo took pains and time with his rope, fretted to see it a little touched by the dampness of the meadow. Isidro kept his swinging to a kind of wordless tune. Arnaldo and the girl had come out of the rocks and watched them from the hill.

"Come on, Mascado, come!" cried Isidro.

Mascado came; riding at full gallop he threw the rope, dipped as he rode and slipped from his horse's back to the belly. Escobar's noose slipped smoothly from his shoulder; in fact neither rope found lodgment. The sod of the meadow was wet and springy; it gave to the horses' feet; not the best ground for trying a duello of riatas, but there was advantage to neither side. They wheeled, recoiled, and rode. At the second cast Isidro's rope went neither far nor wide, but there was threatening in its hum. He bent backward as he threw; to Arnaldo, watching, it seemed that he went clean off his horse to avoid the flying loop that hovered a moment and settled on the horn of his saddle. It appeared that was the moment Isidro waited for; without casting off he stood with his horse at tension, and his rope,



## ISIDRO

which had gone but a noose length from him, shot out from his long right arm, dropped over Mascado, and with a jerk Escobar had him from his saddleless pony. The mestizo had his feet under him in the moment of lighting; if Isidro drew in fast Mascado came faster. One arm was pinioned, but the other was free from the shoulder; he had out his knife. He came in great bounds like a cat, rising from the springy meadow; rage foamed in him like unbridled waters. His own horse, with feet spread and planted, held Escobar at the end of a taut rope. Isidro fumbled at it to cast off, but not before Mascado got in a blow above the shoulder. Isidro set spurs and set them deep with the impact of the knife. The mestizo had a moment of check as the horse sprang away from him, but the tug of the rope brought him sprawling. His body rose in the air, thudded on the sod, rose again; and the knife, struck from his hand, whirled a gleaming flight across the meadow. By this Arnaldo came running from the hill and cried out to Escobar in God's name. The spurt of Isidro's anger, which took him the width of

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

the meadow, lasted no longer than the knife smart, and went out of him as the blood went, leaving him drained and faint. Arnaldo got his rope around Mascado's legs, and so bound and disarmed drew him up to them.

"See to him," said Isidro.

"And not to your wound, señor?"

"It will wait. It may be I have other scores to settle with this rascally half-breed." He turned his horse toward El Zarzo on the hill. On the way to Las Chimineas he had worked himself into a cool distaste for this meeting, but the affair with Mascado, the rage at treachery, the smart and indignity of his wound had the effect of a hiatus. He had a shock, therefore, to come face to face with the Briar looking haggard and large-eyed, with red marks of bonds upon her wrists. The qualm of meeting warned him how dear the lad had been. Isidro trembled as he got down from his horse. They were both pale, and shook, came close and stood by each other, but did not touch.

"Has he hurt you?" cried Escobar; "has he laid hands upon you? If he has wronged you I



## ISIDRO

shall kill him." Ah, ah! they were both red enough now, she in a tide of maiden shame that swept up to the dark crescent of her hair and confessed her what his words implied, he with shame for her shame. Well, at any rate, the mischief was out.

"Has he hurt you, señorita?" Isidro said again more collectedly.

"He did not dare," cried the girl.

"He will never have the chance again," said the young man. "I will deal with him as you wish." But the girl had a more pressing concern.

"You bleed, señor, you are hurt," she trembled.

"A flesh cut merely," he said; "Arnaldo will dress it." He meant nothing more than to reassure her, but to El Zarzo it signified the change in their relations. This month past he would have had no other serve him. She hung her head; there was no blinking the fact of his knowledge, though she did not ask him then, nor until long afterward, how he came by it. She was boyish enough to look at, lithe and slim, with

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

hair, straight as the fine slant wires of rain, falling on either cheek below the round, firm chin. But he knew her for a maid, and found the certainty confusion enough. It was all of an hour, and that for a man of his temper was a long time, before he was cheerful and cool again. Manlike he made her pay for his aberration, — put her miles from him by an exquisite politeness, made her miserable by proffered duty, in short, brought the trappings of good breeding to serve his own wounded susceptibility.

There was no question of going on that night. The horses were fagged, the riders, too, for that matter, and Isidro needed time to consider his affairs. The shadow of the west cañon wall, that had spread in the meadow and up as far as the edge of the wood on the east while Isidro and Mascado wheeled together, had by now reached the ridge and gone on deepening and darkling through the forest. Stars came out above it low and white. A troop of does and fawns running nose to flank came out of the oaks at the end of the barrier and passed on to the lower meadow. Higher up a bobcat mother led out her young



## ISIDRO

and played with them among the rocks; night hawks hurtled across the damp and musky meadow.

They lit a fire among the chimneys; three of them got little sleep. Isidro, nursing his hurt; Mascado, trussed like a fowl for the spit; Jacinta, for so she must be called, too much a maid not to want the relief of tears, too much a boy to know the use of them; Arnaldo, — but there was really no reason why Arnaldo should not sleep, therefore he did; and he being refreshed, the others in need of refreshment, they were up and stirring betimes. Isidro had settled with himself that he could not take the girl back to Carmelo, but must first find her harborage and see Saavedra. Something, also, he purposed toward Peter Lebecque, who was possibly most to blame for the girl's assumption.

"How do we stand toward Carmelo?" he said to the tracker.

"East by south."

"And how toward the other Missions?"

"We might fetch San Antonio by a hard day's riding; there is a trail hereabouts which

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

leads directly into it. All the others are best reached from *el camino real*."

"And this trail, could you find it? Then to San Antonio I will go, but first I must dispose of this gentleman."

"The Father President," said Arnaldo, "would be glad of him."

"No doubt," said Isidro, "but we do not travel toward Carmelo, and, besides, we have but three horses."

"The world," said the tracker, "would wag as well without such cattle." Arnaldo was a free man from the south and had the scorn of the full blood for the admixture; besides, he had pricked up his ears to hear Escobar address the boy as señorita, and surmised how matters stood.

"A true word," said Isidro, "but I am in no mood for killing."

"Leave him to me." Arnaldo tied the mestizo by a great variety of knots to a tree, leaving his hands free; his knife he laid on a rock out of reach. "If he is diligent he may be free of his bonds by this time to-morrow; now we will ride."



## ISIDRO

"Let me not see him again," said Isidro. "Twice I have spared his life; the luck turns on odd numbers." They left him with black looks and stolid; he had not so much as raised his hand to wipe off the blood of yesterday's scratches. Isidro lifted the girl upon Mascado's horse. She could very well have sprung there, but it was part of the punishment he designed by way of alleviation for his hurt esteem; she had claims upon — just what he could not say precisely, but claims which he would satisfy handsomely, though he had no notion of putting her too soon at ease. He grew less assured of his position, seeing how she went staidly and with bent head, except for quietness the very boy that he had brought up from the Grapevine. But she was plainly no Indian; the more he looked at her the more he knew it; hands, feet, and high, straight nose pointed the assurance.

If Escobar were satisfied with the adequacy of his intention toward her, the girl was not, wanting the assurance of it.

"Señor," she said when, after an hour's riding, Arnaldo left them in a pleasant place of

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

flowers while he cast about for the trail, "señor, what will you do with me?"

"I will take you to San Antonio."

"And then?"

"Tell me the truth, — are you an Indian?"

"Señor, I do not know; Peter Lebecque has told me that I am not, but the woman I called mother, she was an Indian."

"What was Mascado to you?"

"Peter Lebecque's friend. At least he came often to our place at the Grapevine. Lebecque hunted and trapped with him, but I cannot think that he liked him. It was after Mascado had been with us that the old man would tell me to remember that I was no Indian."

"Why was that?"

"Señor, I did not know at that time. I think now it was because Mascado wished to have me."

"He knew, then, that you were a maid?"

"He has known it for two years; he says that Lebecque told him, but it must have been when they were at wine, for Lebecque was very angry."



## ISIDRO

"Why is it that you dress in this fashion?"

"Señor, I have known no other. It was my mother's wish, her that I called mother. I think she fancied I was safer so; it was a rough life."

"And you know nothing of your real parents?"

"Nothing. At the time I left the Grapevine Peter Lebecque gave me a packet which he hinted would have placed me rightly."

"What became of it?"

"I left it with the Padres at Carmelo."

"And nothing came of it?"

"Nothing, señor." There was no untruth nor evasion here, but if she had told him how long she kept the packet by her, and how disposed it, she must needs have told him why, and for that she had no words.

Hearing Arnaldo call they rode forward briskly. After that the talk was more at ease, all of the wood and the road and the wild things that crossed their trail.

"It is strange," said Isidro, "that we meet no Indians; I had thought the hills were full of them."

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

Said Arnaldo, "Report has it that they gather to Urbano in the Tulares."

"Think you he means raiding?"

"Against the Mission beeves, — no worse," said the tracker.

Jacinta said little of any sort, but that to the point.

"Señor," she said again when they came to an open grassy valley riding side by side, "when you have me at San Antonio what will you do with me?"

"Marry you," said Isidro with the greatest cheerfulness.

One guesses the marriage of convenience to be the procurement of more than simple living; the earthborn admits no inducement but the drawing of lip to lip and eye to eye, the seeking of each for each in its degree. One must go far from the well of nature to allow other reason; even the mating beasts know better. Jacinta knew nothing of scandal, nothing of caste except as by her love she put Escobar above all others, and, therefore, nothing of social expedients. Marriage was a great mystery, but needing love for its ex-



## ISIDRO

cuse ; that much she knew. Though Isidro spoke of marriage he had not spoken of love, — no, nor looked it ; and against a loveless marriage her maidenhood cried out. She would be hot when he was cold, shaken when he was steady ; as often as he touched her, flooded with shame of her full pulse beating against his still one. How should she endure marriage with such a one, even though he be rated a god or among the Blessed Personages ? It seemed a greater indignity than Mascado would have put upon her, for the first would but have held her body and this one had her soul. Plainly love sickens of desire if it be not the flower of love. All this Jacinta raged over formlessly, without speech. Of the chivalry which prompted the young man's intent she understood nothing ; but seeing him smiling and well pleased with himself, judged that she was of even less account, and sickened, poor girl, even while she beheld him glorious in the young day and the flooding light. She could not dare, though she thought of it a hundred times, slip her horse and run hiding in the hills, trapped by her own weakness and his lordly will.

## ISIDRO COMES TO A CONCLUSION

In such tides the spirit ripens fast, — quicker if it houses in Latin blood. Isidro was like to find little of the lad left by the time they came to the Mission San Antonio de Padua de las Robles. In the mean time he smoked cigarettes and discoursed pleasantly of many things.