

ISIDRO

vines and smoked cigarettes. The place and the hour gave him a touch of homesickly longing for the spirited, shy lad, mixed with the haunting reminder of pale beauty in a frame of smoke-black hair.

XVIII

A COLD TRAIL



WHEN Valentin Delgado left Monterey he went straight to Santa Barbara, carrying urgent letters from Saavedra and the Comandante. With these he quartered himself at the Mission, and set about providing a daughter for Castro, an heir for the Ramirez fortune, and a wife for himself.

It was a cold trail. The occasion of Doña Ysabel's death was sixteen, nearly seventeen years gone, and had occurred at a time when every man dealt with trouble at his own door, with little attention to spare for the affairs of his neighbors. Doña Ysabel had kept matters close, leaning much on the woman Elisa, who had been her nurse and followed her up from Mexico. Jesús Castro was not at that time Comandante, and his family not so much in the public eye. Of the few matrons then at the Presidio some sur-

ISIDRO

mised that Señora Castro had a child, but believed it to be stillborn, as might easily have been the case, for the poor lady was known to be ailing. It appeared, finally, there were but two people who had personal knowledge of the girl, if girl it was, born to Doña Ysabel: Padre Bonaventura, at that time resident at Santa Barbara, now at San Gabriel, and an Indian woman, Louisa, who with Elisa constituted Doña Ysabel's household. Elisa was dead in the same month and of the same disorder as her mistress; the other woman was, if alive, nobody knew where. Delgado went and looked at the tall cross which Castro had caused to be erected over his wife's grave, but got nothing from that; went and talked with as many as remembered the beautiful and unhappy Ysabel; got plentiful comment on the relations of Castro and his wife, but nothing more; then, by Padre Garcia's advice, went to San Gabriel.

Padre Victorio Garcia, resident at Santa Barbara, was an astute man, and knew his neophytes very well.

"You can do nothing here," he said to Del-

A COLD TRAIL

gado; "this people cannot be made to stand and deliver in a court of inquiry. They are like the quicksands that lie up the coast. You throw a stone and it goes quickly out of sight; the surface is smooth as cream, but underneath the sand it works—works; if you wait long enough it will cast up your stone again. So with my people. Get you to Padre Bonaventura; I will cast a few stones. In time something may be brought to light, but you must leave it to me."

Delgado went south, a brilliant figure trailing along the hard wide path of the King's Highway. He saw Padre Bonaventura, and heard from him what he already knew from Castro, but with more color and detail. How, during the time of the pestilence, there had come a cry in the night—"though, indeed, the nights were like the days for labor," said the Padre—to come to a newborn child that might not live. He found the child at Doña Ysabel's and baptized it, saw it carried out of the room by an Indian woman, and never laid eyes on it again. The mother he found very ill, judged that she had the fever upon her at that time. Some days later he was at her deathbed,

ISIDRO

but her confession was so strange that, believing it mixed with delirium, he gave it insufficient heed, — “for I was much worn with watching, and my people died like sheep,” said the Padre, — and in the midst of confession she died. The nurse Elisa had died the same month without the holy office, as too many died in that pestilent time. Afterward it was discovered that no one knew about the child, not so much as that there had been one.

Delgado felt he had helped himself very little, but he stayed a while and looked about him in the city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels, even at that time shortened to Los Angeles.

That accounts for eight of the nineteen days of his journeying. Returned to Santa Barbara, he found that some of Padre Garcia's castings had come up again. During the time of the pestilence many small parties of neophytes had taken to the hills, hoping to escape it, but, carrying the infection with them, spread it in the wilds. Later the remnant came back again. It was now reported that the woman Louisa had been one of these fugitives.

A COLD TRAIL

“Had she a child?” cried Delgado.

“No,” said the Padre, — “no child, but her sister had.”

“Well —” began the youth.

Padre Garcia held up his hand. “I have examined the records of the Mission, which were regularly kept except for the time that the fever raged highest, and I find that this sister — Juana her name was — had indeed a child of her own, a boy; but I find that about ten days before the death of Señora Castro that child also died at the age of four months.”

“You think, then” — Delgado began.

“I think, my son, we will wait; the stones are not all in.”

Delgado waited and looked about him. It seemed impossible that the child could be alive, or if alive that they could find it again, or if found, it should prove Ysabel's child, — three good chances that he must make another cast at fortune; and while he looked at the Mission stock and fields, speculating what pickings there would be when these were removed from the care of the Franciscans to the civil power, Padre Gar-

ISIDRO

cia brought him news. One of the neophytes, who had been a renegade in the hills three years since, reported having seen the woman Juana with a French trapper in the wooded regions of the Salinas.

"Stale news," said Delgado; "and the child?"

The Indian remembered to have seen none.

"Bad news," said Delgado again; but with it he made an end of Padre Garcia's meddling with the affair, and set out with an Indian packer and a guide to look for a French trapper with an Indian wife northward in the Salinas hills. He meant to find a daughter for Castro in any event. There were not so many people answering to that description that he was likely to go far afield. He left the main road, struck into white, shallow trails, followed them until they ran into springs or melted in wind-shifted sand; went large and wide of any trail, inquired of chance-met Indians, slept one night at the Mission San Luis Obispo, slept seven in the open, struck false trails and followed them to confusion. He saw the young quail come trooping down to springs in the gray morning, saw the young fawns hidden by their

A COLD TRAIL

mothers in long grass, saw a great tawny cougar laid asleep on a limb above a slaughtered deer; he grew saddle-weary and sore, tore his finery in the chaparral, wet it at roaring fords, and came out at last at the hut of the Grapevine and Peter Lebecque. His dress was much the worse; he had lost the air and affectation of the capital; he had a network of fine wrinkles about his eyes from much staring in the sun, all of which helped him with the trapper. Delgado had the wit to deal openly with the old man, told him straightly who he was, what he sought, and all his intent except marriage, upon which he would in no wise commit himself until he had seen the girl. Lebecque heard him, peering shrewdly from the shaggy pent of his brows, but made no offer to open his own budget until they had eaten and had two thirds of a bottle between them.

"It is true," he said, "I am a French trapper, and I had a woman from the Mission Santa Barbara."

"And she had a child, not yours?"

"She had a child."

ISIDRO

"A girl?"

"A girl."

"Where is she now?"

"At Monterey."

"Monterey! Since when, señor?"

"A month since."

Delgado began to fret visibly at the maddening, slow dribble of the old man's talk. "Monterey, a month, impossible! It is not three weeks since I left there, and neither Saavedra nor the Comandante had an inkling of it."

"Listen," said Lebecque; "it is a long story, but if good comes to the girl by it, let it be. Forty years I have trapped and hunted north and east in the country of deep snows. But I grow old, and my bones ache, so I have come to this land where the pelts are not so good but the living easier. Seventeen years ago I found me these hills; then I looked for a woman and a place to build me a house. I took my time for that." The old man spoke slowly, his words dropped from him like the dropping embers of his fire, as if each phrase lit for a moment some picture glowing for him in the ashes of remem-

A COLD TRAIL

brance. The fashion of his speech altered as he talked from past to vivid present and into the past again as the picture faded. "At that time I passed through the hills that rise up behind the Channel Waters. I was two days out from Santa Barbara, meaning to go no nearer, for I had heard a waif word that they had a fever there. The Indians were afraid and ran to the mountains, but the pestilence camped upon their trail. I went still in the wood and kept close, for I had no wish to meet with them. Toward the end of one day I heard afar off a strange mewling cry. Up to that time I have thought to know the cry and the talk of all creatures in the wood, but this is new to me. All that place was thick with flowering scrub, making slow going. I kept on in it, following that cry, for I am a fool and know not the cry of my own kind. It grows dusk, and I come out at last in a cleared place under a madrono, and see something move on the grass which makes that cry. I look and find it is a babe. *Sacre dam!* Well, I look about, and across the open place is a dead woman. One sits beside her that has her head sunken on her

ISIDRO

knees, her hair is fallen forward and has ashes smeared upon it. I am not sure she is not dead also, but I put my hand upon her and she looks up. I think she has the fever upon her, but presently she makes the sign to me for food, and I see that she is starved. I had not the speech of the Channel Indians, but she had a few words of Spanish, and we made out with that. After she had eaten she crawled to the child and put it to her breast, and so told me a little of her condition. She was of the Mission Santa Barbara, she and the dead woman, her sister, and five others who had come away from the plague. They had tried the God of the Padres, but now that the sickness had come on them they knew that it was not good. So they would go back to their own gods, but the Wrath followed them. Her sister had sickened, and the rest of the party had run on in a greater fright. But Juana, my woman, stayed by her sister three days until she died. Now she said she would not go back to the Padres lest the anger of her gods should bring a worse thing upon her. The God of the Padres, she said, was a great God, but He could

A COLD TRAIL

not keep off the fever. It may be so ; myself I have no god. I take my chances with the beasts of the field ; gods are for women and priests. Well, I buried the dead woman, and Juana, when she had eaten again, followed on my trail with the child ravening at her shrunken breast ; for I said, if the fever will not drive her from her sister, will she not be faithful to me ?

“What else ?”

Lebecque left off his story to sit with his hands between his knees ; all that showed of him was the red spark of his cigarette winking in the dark. Outside the moon, nearing her prime, flooded the swale, and made a long bright splash through the door, but no smallest ray pierced the tight roof of leaves. The dogs whined in dreams upon the floor, no shrill night insect rippled the silence, no leaf stirred the surface of the great lake of light that lapped this lonely isle of shade.

Delgado began to move uneasily.

“The child ?” he said.

“Oh, the child !” The old man fell into the drone of reminiscence. “It was a puling brat ;

ISIDRO

I saw soon enough that it was no Indian, but I supposed its father might have been one of the *gente de razon*; but as I have said, the woman and I had not much speech together. I was so much the better suited. I saw that Juana wished not to go near the Mission again, and thought it was for fear of the Padres, but afterward I understood that it was on account of the child. By degrees, when the girl was growing up, she told me about it. Juana's husband was employed at the Presidio, and they did not live in the Mission. They had a child, and a sister of my woman worked at the house of one of the officers. When the fever came on Juana lost her husband and child, and at that time her sister bade her not let the fountain of her breast dry up, as her mistress was about to become a mother, and there was reason to believe she could not nurse her child. Afterwards her sister came in the night, for the child was born untimely, and the mother had the plague. They laid a vow upon her never to tell from whence she had the brat, nor to speak its name. So when they came away to the mountains, for the mother died, her sister put a

A COLD TRAIL

double vow upon her never to tell, never to speak the name; and she never did.

"But did you never think?"

"Think! What should I think? I had my traps to think of. Juana, I know, thought it a love child, whose portion was disgrace. I remember she said the lady's husband was from home. But at the last my woman was troubled in mind in her dying sickness; it was then she told me most; she wished to have a priest, but before an Indian could be found to fetch one she was dead."

"And the child?" insisted Delgado.

"The child. Yes. As she knew her to be baptized, Juana would never give her another name, only such foolish woman's talk as Sweet-water, Bright Bird, Honey-flower; but as she grew and proved to have a pricking tongue we called her the Briar. It was a good name. Well, she grew into a slim maid, and a month since I sent her to Monterey to the Father President."

"The Father President is at Carmelo," said Delgado. "But were there no marks, nothing by which she should be known?"

ISIDRO

"There was a packet, papers, I think, but in the Spanish, which if I make shift to speak I have no skill to read. She is in Monterey by now."

That was as much as Lebecque would say and as much as Delgado wanted. He itched to be on the road. If the girl had gone to Saavedra, she would by him be made known to Castro, and the young man lose that advantage. He must be forward now with his corroborative narrative if he wished to continue in the affair. There must be two or three young men in Monterey ready to pay court in any promising quarter if Delgado were not there with his modish airs to put them out of countenance. He was silent a long time, considering his advantage. As for Lebecque, it had given him a start to learn that the girl had not been heard of in Monterey, particularly that he had gotten out of the young man unawares that Escobar had arrived, and Delgado had met him there. If the girl was Castro's daughter, and, putting the young man's account with his, it looked to be a fact, why had not the papers revealed it? Long practice of

A COLD TRAIL

cunning against suspicious creatures of the wood had made the trapper cunning with his own kind. Escobar had not known when he left the Grapevine that El Zarzo was a maid. But how if he had found it out? Or Saavedra might be keeping the girl in the background for jesuitical purposes of his own. Priests, thought Lebecque, might be caught at such tricks. Again, it might be that the packet had told nothing, or that the girl, who was not without wit, might have reasons of her own for keeping a still tongue. The old trapper had knowledge that the girl would not be helped by Delgado's knowing that she had traveled up to Monterey with Escobar in a boy's disguise, — good enough reason for saying nothing. Better reason, if reason were wanting, in not knowing how matters really stood with the girl. More business was marred by too much talking than by too little. The trapper shrugged his shoulders, and next morning watched Delgado strike out toward the Mission road, and San Antonio de Padua, where he would sleep the second night. Lebecque was glad to see him go. Since El Zarzo had left him the old

ISIDRO

trapper had the minding of the flocks, and found it little suited to a man of his quick and restless habit. His natural grumpiness, startled out of him by Delgado's news of the night before, returned upon him with the light, and prompted him to one rankling shaft which, though it was directed toward establishing the girl's identity, was planted in Delgado's mind.

"Señor," he said, when Delgado was up in saddle, and the flock fretting for the start, "if the girl is not immediately found, inquire of Señor Escobar; he may be able to tell you somewhat."

"Now, what in the saint's name do you mean by that?" cried Delgado; and he was half in mind to stop and force an explanation; but the blether of the sheep rose up and cut off his words.

Escobar, working across the hills by a little-used trail, failed to meet Delgado, and dropped from it into the cañon of the Grapevine the day following, in the early afternoon. Lebecque was out with the flock. Isidro sat in the shadow of

A COLD TRAIL

the hut, and recalled how he had first seen it and in what company. As often as he thought of the Briar his heart warmed toward the lad, — always the lad, — never the cold, still girl by the pomegranate hedge in San Antonio. Toward evening he heard the sheep working up by the creek, — soft bleating and the barking of the dogs, mixed with the noise of the water roaring out of the gap. It served to cover the light, accustomed step of Lebecque as he came around the corner of the hut and stood looking down at him with beady, querulous eyes. The contained, curt speech of trappers and mountaineers, and such folk as live much out of doors, is not always to be accounted for as lack of breeding, but rather the gain of that swift sense that seizes upon realities. Not requiring the accustomed approaches of polite greetings, Lebecque did not use them. His glance took in the handsome, indolent length of the young man, and much more beside. Said he: —

"What have you done with her?"

"Married her," said the youth.

"By the Sacrament?"

ISIDRO

"By the offices of Holy Church," said Isidro. Said Lebecque, "When?"

"Yesterday at Mission San Antonio."

"Where is she, then?" asked the old man.

"There, at San Antonio."

"And you — are here" —

Lebecque looked him up and down. Then he took off his cap, which was of wild skin with the tail hanging down; he made a low bow.

"Señor, permit me," he said; "you are a beautiful fool." With that he turned heel and was off to his flock. Isidro's good humor was proof against this. He smoked cigarettes and waited for the sun to go down. Lebecque came back after a while and raked up the ashes of his fire.

"Since when have you known her a maid?" said he.

"Since Mascado ran away with her."

"What — what! Did he dare? The rascally half-breed, the" — Lebecque's epithets were, no doubt, permissible in his time. He choked and gasped. "Did he harm her? Did he lay hands on her?"

A COLD TRAIL

"I saw to it that he did not."

"Tell me," said Lebecque.

Isidro gave him an account of the affair at Las Chimineas. The old man shook with laughter between fits of rage.

"But you did wrong, señor; you should have killed him," said he.

Isidro let him believe that he had first discovered the boy to be a girl in the meadow of the chimneys. Now that she was his wife he shrank from mentioning the encounter with Delfina.

Lebecque warmed to him so much for his victory over Mascado that he out with Delgado's story and his own, putting them together convincingly. Isidro took it all easily enough, as one accustomed to the favor of gods; no doubt he thought he deserved it. His marriage took on the color of romance, to which his facile mind shaped itself. He began to picture how he should deliver the girl to the Comandante, with what circumstance and what an air. Lebecque, watching him, began to snort with impatience.

"Señor," he said, "permit me again; you are a fool. Here is Don Valentin gone to Monterey