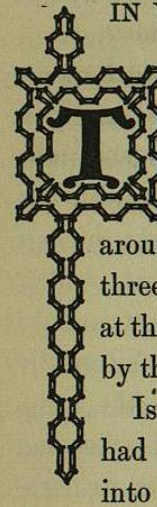


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brought the flying braves to check. They went more collectedly, realized the falling off of pursuit, took time to help the wounded, came and offered themselves to Mascado, now as much ashamed of his faintness as of dishonor. They got him on Marta's horse; Jacinta gave hers to a man with a gunshot wound in his knee. The party drew together in better shape, and still hurrying, but without panic, began to move toward the camp at Hidden Waters.

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HE keepers of the camp lay supine in the late yellow light, on beds of skins or heaped brown needles of the pines, following the shade around. The women, of whom there were three or four with the renegades, stooped at their interminable puttering housewifery by the cold ashes of their careless hearths.

Isidro lay apart from the camp. He had his back to the Indians, and stared into the hot sunshine lying heavily on the fern beginning to curl brownly at the edges. Fading torches of castilleia stood up here and there, and tall yellow lilies running fast to seed. The air above the meadow was weighted with the scent of the sun-steeped fern; small broken winds wafted it to him, palpable, like wisps of blown hair. It recalled a day when a gust of warm sweet rain had sent him and the lad to shelter under a ma-

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droño on the hill above Monterey. They had to run for it, crowding against the tree bole shoulder to shoulder, with the boy's hair blown across his cheek. He was conscious of a thrill that flew to his heart at the recollection and settled there.

Arnaldo lay on the earth the full width of the camp from Escobar. He seemed asleep, and now drew up a limb and now thrust it out in the abandon of drowsing indolence. Every move carried him an inch or two nearer the edge of the rose thickets and deep fern. Arnaldo was, in fact, widest awake of any at Hidden Waters, bent upon a series of experiments to discover how far and by what means he could get away from the camp without exciting suspicion. For the tracker had made up his mind to escape. Devotion to Escobar, in whose service he held himself to be, had kept him faithful to his bonds, but now the virtue was gone out of patience. He understood better than Escobar how the campaign went against the renegades, and in the event of Urbano's absence at any critical moment of defeat, doubted if Mascado would have the ability or the wish to save his prisoners. Besides, the tracker was greatly

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bored by the company of the renegades; the food was poor, and Isidro had no more cigarettes, and though he managed to win all the young man's coin at cards one day, Escobar as regularly won it back the next. The escape must be made good in broad day, when the prisoners had the freedom of the camp, being bound at night and placed between watchers. Therefore he lay awake and experimented while the camp dozed. Being so alert, he caught the first motion of approach, and guessed what it augured by the manner of it. The noise of battle had not penetrated so far in the thick wood; the panic of flight, sobered by distance, brought the refugees up at nearly their normal discretion. They came noiselessly enough, dropping from the trackless stony rim of the hollow, or by secret trails through the manzanita. They cast down their arms as they came, and trod upon them with moccasined feet; they dropped to earth by the unlit hearths and turned their backs upon their kind. One who had broken his bow across his knee stood up and made a song of it, treading upon the fragments as he sang.

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This is the bow — the war-weapon,
The heart of a juniper tree.
False, false is the heart,
For it answered not to the cord,
For it spake not truly the will of the bowman.

"*Ai, ai, ai!*" rose the wail of the women ;
they beat upon their breasts and cast ashes on
their unbound hair.

"*Ai, ai!* — false is the bow," they chanted.

The voice of the singer rose bleak and bitter,
and this was the sense of his broken words, sighs,
gesticulations, and wild intoning : —

It is the arrow — slender reed of the river,
The feathered reed, the swift-flier,
The reed that stings like a snake,
That speaks of death to the foeman,
Like a snake it is false to the bowstring,
Like the snake of two tongues it speaks falsely.

Mascado came haltingly into the isle of pines,
and held up his hand ; the song and the wailing
ceased.

"Faugh!" he said ; "ye sing and ye weep,
but ye will not fight, frightened at the sound of
guns as children at thunder, beaten upon your
own ground ! Weep, then, for ye cannot fight!"

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The men took the whips of his scorn in silence,
but Marta's motherliness was proof against the
occasions. "Neither will you fight any more,
my son, if you lie not down and let me tend
your wound." He turned from her and dropped
sullenly upon the ground.

Isidro had drawn in toward the group of
wounded with the natural motion of curiosity and
concern. The prolonged dribble of fugitives over
the rim of the hollow, the distress of their hurts,
the noiseless effect of hurry and disaster, involved
him in the sense of defeat. Being so fine as to
feel that, he was too fine not to be conscious of
the isolation made for him, as a party of the
enemy, by the indrawing of their thoughts upon
their own concerns. The best help he could offer
was the turning of his back upon their shameful
hour.

The sun, sloping far to seaward, parted the
shadows of the pines in slender files by long
paths of light that led the eye away from the
prone and sullen fighting men toward the lonely
wood. Isidro let his gaze rove down the yellow
lane, walked toward the outskirts of the camp,

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leaned his back against a tree, looking into the shadowy hollow of Hidden Waters, thinking homesickly of El Zarzo, and turning presently, obedient to the instinct which warns of approaching presence, saw her there. She stood beyond him in the shadow, where the sunbeams filtering through the boughs of pines spread a vapor thin and blue, — the erect young figure and the level, unfrightened gaze. He could have touched her where she stood, but made no motion; his pulse leaped toward her with the tug of his startled spirit.

“Lad, lad,” he whispered.

“Señor,” she breathed.

A long flight of time went over them while they stood in the shadow and each grew aware, without so much as daring to look, what absence and circumstance had wrought upon the other. A keen and sudden whistling shocked their spirits back to the sense of things, as the naked blade of a knife flashed between them and sunk to the hilt in the earth at their feet. Back in the camp Mascado had half raised himself from his bed to throw it, and now leaned upon his elbow

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watching them with keen darts of hate. They saw the weary and sullen braves turn toward him with momentary amazement, and Marta running to ease him to the ground with a steady flow of talk, presenting her broad back as a screen between the pair and him. The knife handle still quivered in the sod.

“Now if he were not already a fallen man I could kill him for that,” said Isidro.

“Let him be,” said the girl; “Marta has much to say to him.”

“And I to you, Lady Wife; I left you safe at San Antonio; how comes it that you are here?”

It was a long story, and the best telling of it would have left something wanting to a full understanding. Jacinta lifted up her eyes and laid it bare. Isidro could not escape the conviction that this detached young spirit loved him, and for a man who meant to make a priest of himself took it light-heartedly.

“I did wrong,” he said, “to leave you so; wrong, again, not to go straight to you from Peter Lebecque’s. Will you sit? There is much to tell.”

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They sat down on the strong roots of the redwood. Mascado's knife stuck in the ground between them. They told their story in concert, capping each other's adventures with coincidences of time and occasion, with now and then a shy hint of explanation of motive or impulse, not clear but wonderfully satisfactory. They thrilled together over the fact of their nearness on the night of the raid at Soledad, and discovered in themselves on that occasion presentiments that should have warned each of the other's proximity. They touched lightly on the reasons for Jacinta's flight toward Hidden Waters. She was afraid, she said, lest Mascado should do him harm, and only Marta could persuade Mascado; this did not quite account for Jacinta, but they let it go at that.

The light failed out of the hollow, and little fires began to glow among the dead leaves. An Indian woman brought them food heaped on a piece of bark. Pungent odors of night-blooming plants came out of the meadow, and the wind creaked the drowsy redwoods. Jacinta told of her night's sally from Monterey, the long strain

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of riding, the shock of the battle and retreat. Isidro's hand crept out along the gnarly roots; another hand fluttered toward it and lay softly in its grasp.

"Oh, my Briar, Wild Rose of the Mountain, was it worth while to endure so long, to risk so much?"

"It was worth," she whispered.

An Indian came up and plucked Isidro silently from the earth and led him to his bonds. The girl crept away to Marta. Mascado's knife stuck still in the ground.

The first thing Isidro did in the morning, when he had his freedom, was to pull up the blade and carry it to Mascado. The renegade's face was set in its usual lines of severity, but the rage and sweat of battle, the drain of his wound, more than all, the fever of his night's musing on Marta's news, had not left him without traces. He sat with his back to a tree, and his eyes were dull; he dropped the knife in its sheath, and turned away. Marta and Escobar exchanged glances.

"He knows?" questioned one. "Knows all," answered the other.

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The young man turned back to Mascado. "My wife, Señora Escobar," he said, "the Comandante's daughter, comes to no harm?" It was put as a question, but appeared a threat.

Mascado, who was at the ebb of spirit and strength, made a motion of negative.

"I am surety for that," said Marta. Urbano's lieutenant roused; he was not yet at the point of letting a woman speak for him.

"She needs no surety," he said. He rose up stiffly, hesitated, and turned. "Even now we hold a council; it will be as well she remains a boy in the eyes of the camp, and is not seen too much with the prisoners."

"You know best," said Escobar with no trace of raillery. It was the first word that had passed between them concerning the girl, since Las Chimineas. Once spoken it bound them together for her protection, and they began to grow in each other's esteem.

Maybe Mascado's wound had drained a little of the graceless savage out of him. As the affair stood it was too big for him. He believed Jacinta to be a wife in fact and Castro's daughter.

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Escobar had beaten him, and so had the Comandante. He felt the girl immeasurably removed from him; if it came to that, in her dispassionate contempt she had beaten him worst of all. What he might have thought had he been whole and his men undaunted is another matter, — one does not often think unharnessed by conditions.

Isidro saw the force of Mascado's warning in the sour looks he had from the defeated renegades drawing in to council. It threatened open hostility at the discovery that Arnaldo the tracker was missing. It was surmised that in the confusion he had slipped away to bring Castro down upon them. Isidro was genuinely put out by the breach of faith.

"A graceless dog," he said to Mascado. "He knew I had passed my word, and as my servant should have been bound by it."

"It is not much matter; Castro would find us in a few days at most," said Mascado dully; "but the men believe you concerned in it; I have ordered that you be bound."

Bound he was with the most ungentle handling. So much of an explanation was almost an

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apology. It irked Mascado exceedingly to seem at that time to push his advantage against Escobar. Dumbly he was trying to pull himself up to the other man's standard of magnanimous behavior.

Scouts were out to try to intercept Arnaldo and to keep watch of Castro's men. The council proceeded heavily; men spoke at long intervals with dragging speech; gusty flares of passion broke out and fell away as the smoke of the camp-fire dropped back to earth in the heavy air. One of the wounded had died in the night, and his kin sat around him with pitch smeared on their faces, raising the death song in a hushed, mutilated cry. The pine wood, the over-ripe grasses, the fruiting shrubs, looked skimp and dingy in the hot, straight beams of the sun.

Isidro had only a few words with Jacinta as she strayed near him in Marta's company, and those went contrarily, for mindful of the mestizo's hint, he avoided her pointedly. "Keep away," he warned, "otherwise you may draw their wrath upon you."

"You did wrong," she said, "to give back

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Mascado's knife; you should have kept it against need."

"Mascado himself will use it better in your defense," said Escobar. "Are you armed?"

"I have a pistol that I brought from my father's house."

"If the worst comes," said Isidro, strained with anxiety, "stay close by Marta, turn your back, and make no motion to be of my party. You will be safest so."

"I will not twice bestow my company where it is not wanted," said the girl stiffly.

"Eh, my Briar," said Isidro, "will you still prick?" But the girl had turned away.

The tension of strained nerves increased with the day. The air was close; it quivered above the meadow, and breathed like cotton wool. Toward mid-morning they heard the long-drawn, dolorous whine of a coyote, singular and terrifying for that time of day. Hearing it, one of the naked savages shivered in the sun. One laughed, and in a twinkling knives were out.

"Down, fools!" roared Mascado.

They sat down, sheepish and sullen. Flocks