

## ISIDRO

of quail began to go by in numbers; their alarm calls sounded thickly in the wood. Touching the rim of the meadow they broke into whirring flight, running and flying alternately as they struck the farther side. A bear pushed eastward, snorting heavily with haste; squirrels began to move in the same direction with flying leaps. From the forest sounded short throaty howls of coyotes going by. Several of the Indians stood up, nosing the air like hounds.

It was about noon of the sun. There began to be a faint smell of smoke. Isidro thought it came from the camp-fire, but one of the renegades went and stamped it out. There was distinctly an acrid smell as of green wood burning. Suddenly one of the scouts broke running from the lower edge of the meadow passing through the camp.

"Fire!" he said. "Forest fire!" and went on running.

Fretting to get back to his daughter at Monterey, and finding any other method of driving the renegades from their stronghold too tedious and costly of men, Castro had fired the wood.

## XXVI

### FOREST FIRE

**A**T the first shock of the scout's warning cry the camp at Hidden Waters stiffened into instant attention, and instantly afterward, as if from the twang of a bowstring, several of the braves set off running in the same direction as the wild creatures had gone all that day. There were others who ran about crazily, picking up belongings and dropping them, recollecting themselves, and going on over the edge of the hollow with the flights of quail. The wounded cried out upon the others for help; all were running and in commotion, dizzily, as men run in dreams. The wife of the dead man began to run, came back, and lifted him by the shoulders, dragging him a pace or two on the slippery needles, then dropping him, ran on into the deep fern.

Isidro had hardly grasped the words of the warning, but he understood the smell of burning,



## ISIDRO

the hurry of the camp, and the crash of deer like gray darts through the underbrush. He looked once at his bonds, and then around for Jacinta. He saw her running with her arms outspread, and observed that Mascado came toward him hastily with his knife out, and the girl made as if to intercept him. Mascado avoided her, and put his keen blade to the rawhide thongs that held Escobar hand and foot. He drew him up from the earth, and shook him as if to relieve the cramping of his limbs. Thought seemed to translate itself into action without sound. Escobar and the mestizo took the girl between them and set off in the wake of the flying camp, Marta laboring alongside them. She was middle-aged and fat; she could offer Mascado no help, nor could he on account of his wound do anything for her. Jacinta ran lightly between the two men.

"Not so fast," said Mascado; "there is worse yet."

After that no one spoke.

The forest of Hidden Waters was perhaps ten miles in extent, from the point where the Ar-

## FOREST FIRE

royo Seco cut the open swale diagonally to its thinning out on the crest of the range. Castro had started the fire at the lowest point of the triangle, and at several places along the open side, favored by the light wind which blew diagonally up the slope. On the farther side Hidden Waters was divided from the the rest of the wooded region, which went on sparsely after that by the stony wash of the Arroyo Seco. The path of the intermittent river lay dry at this season for more than half its length. Nearer its source a brownish stream spread thinly over a rocky bottom, and filled into boulder-rimmed pools that purled over gently to lower levels when the stream pinched out at last in sandy shoals. The wash of the river was steep and choked with water-smoothed stones, widened at intervals to several hundred yards, or narrowing to a stone's throw between points of boulder-anchored pines. It was usually just at the entrance of one of these defiles that the pools occurred. A chain of them, threaded on the slender rill, lay about five miles from the camp of the renegades, but higher up and barred from it by more than one terrace



## ISIDRO

wall, nearly perpendicular, and smothered in gooseberry, buckthorn, and manzanita.

The fire had been started toward the arroyo, and the natural configuration of the forest carried it up the slope. Toward the pools and the open stony spaces bobcat, coyote, and deer ran steadily, with the unteachable instinct for safety, and the Indians followed them.

Mascado and his party were almost the last to leave the camp. Beyond the meadow the wood grew more openly and the rise of the ground was slight. They could see the renegades spread out among the trees, running. A brown bear went between them, trotting heavily like a pig, with an impatient woof! — woof! as he crossed paths with the Indians. A coyote pack went by with dropped heads and now and then a mutilated whine. Squirrels hopped in the branches with long flying bounds, all traveling east by north. At the first barrier they caught up with several of the warriors who had not found their second wind, with the wounded and the women. There was no trail here, but heaps of angular stones, piled logs, and a nearly straight ascent of

## FOREST FIRE

a hundred feet. They worked up over this, every man for himself; nobody spoke or cried. They pushed up, crowding with the beasts. The smell of burning increased; Marta began to pant. From the top of this wall they could see, over the lower terraces, smoke rising; the fire had not yet reached the thickest wood, but rolled up by puffs from single trees lit like torches, and came from four or five points at once.

The second terrace sloped more steeply and offered a check to the running. The wood was still overhead; all the birds had gone on; the squirrels dropped to the ground, eating up the distance by incredible bounds. The only sound was the thudding of feet on the soft litter of the trees. The open places were full of small hurrying things. Two porcupines trailed beside Isidro, and seemed to find comfort in his company. He passed them. A fox vixen and her young snaked through the brush at his side and passed him. The fox mother snarled at him as she went.

Presently a sound rose in the wood and gripped them all with terror. It was the fresh-



## ISIDRO

ening of the afternoon wind which was to be looked for at that season, following on the heated noons. It blew on the tempered needles till the pleasant hum shrilled to the singing of flames, and hurried the pounding feet to the pace of increasing fear.

Jacinta and Escobar were still going with tolerable ease. In the strips of calico bound about Mascado's body across his wound a red spot showed that spread visibly. Marta had mixed with the renegades and the other women, perhaps to hide from her friends the distress of her laboring sides.

At the next barrier they could see the fires rolled together as one and the smoke of it glowing ruddily underneath. It spread toward them above the trees; particles of ashes floated in the air. Here they had half an hour of hard climbing, while the fire gained visibly. The man with the wounded knee, whose friends had abandoned him, climbed on doggedly beside them; he made no plea or outcry, but dug his fingers into the earth and climbed. The muscles of his chest seemed fit to burst with his incredible la-

## FOREST FIRE

bors. Isidro lent him a hand over the edge and ran on. Only once an Indian uttered an exclamation. The fire traveled more rapidly along the edge of the open draw south of them, and nearing a narrow passage of the river, it had blown over and caught in the redwoods on the farther side. Now the wind drove it toward the Indians from the middle of the wood, in two crescent arms like the horns of a bull. After that there was only the business of running. Jacinta and Isidro went touching; Mascado held both his hands to his side. The air was suffocating with smoke that blew over the fire and struck and rolled against the higher ground.

The wall of the third terrace had a smooth stony front rooted in a strong thicket of mountain shrubs. From the foot of it men and beasts turned northward toward the river. Above the hurry of running they heard the high shrieking of the flame and the deep crescendo of it as it climbed the slope behind them. One of the hurt Indians, arrived at the limit of his strength, sat by a tree with his head hanging on his breast. They ran on and left him.



## ISIDRO

Jacinta began to faint. Mascado held her up on his side, but his knees trembled under him. A sharper crash broke at their back; Isidro thought it was the fire, and for an instant the use of his limbs forsook him. He saw Mascado's mouth open, a ring of blackness in the brown pallor of his face, but he could hear nothing; only the sense of the words reached him.

"The deer, the deer!" cried Mascado.

A great herd of them, starting far south of their camp, had turned at the foot of the terrace and run into the midst of the flying Indians. The rush of their coming seemed to shake the stifling air. A great buck plunging in the thickets brushed between the two men; they felt the breath of his panting. Mascado, who had the girl on his side, heaved her up out of the path; Isidro caught her arm across the buck's shoulder; she swung there. The herd tore trampling through the thicket. Mascado's wound burst as he lifted the girl and he went down under the cutting hooves. The deer went on toward the river, Isidro and the girl with them. The buck checked and blundered with his double burden;

## FOREST FIRE

his tongue hung out of his mouth; the stiff thickets tore them as he ran. Isidro was able to help himself a little. Jacinta lay white and flaccid; her body swayed with the running, and the wind of the fire blew forward her hot, soft hair. Fragments of burning bark sailed past them, and lit the patches of ripe grass. The buck cleared them and ran on. Their skin crawled with the heat; the roar of the fire blotting out all thought; the boulders of the river were in sight. The buck reached a pool, plunged into it belly deep; Isidro blessed God. The wind, moving the free tips of the flames forward, lighted the tops of all the trees; roseate spires streamed up from them toward a low black heaven of smoky cloud. Between the boles he saw small creatures and Indians running. Now and then fires lit by falling brands flared up and obscured them, but they broke through; they shouldered together into the pool. Marta panted among the boulders and saw Escobar.

"Mascado?" she cried.

Isidro pointed; it seemed no time for considerate lying. The woman turned instantly. The



## ISIDRO

wind lifted the smoke and showed long aisles of yet unlighted boles roofed with flame. Marta took something from her bosom; it was the blessed candle that had burned for Mascado before San Antonio and the Child. The Indians thought her crazed with fear. She stooped and lit it at a glowing brand and ran back toward Mascado. They saw her holding the candle aloft in the lighted aisle for a moment, and the curtain of smoke and flame swept down and obscured her. It seemed as if great lapses of time occurred between these incidents, but it was a very little while.

Several of the Indians were crowded in a lower pool, and they seemed to call, but the roaring of the wood shut out all. The air trembled with heat; lighted brands fell in the water and steamed there. Men and beasts crouched to bring themselves as much as possible into the pool. Three deer, two bobcats, and a coyote rubbed shoulders with the renegades; two foxes, one of them with a burned quarter, whimpered at the edge of the water.

In the shelter of the boulders, and along the

## FOREST FIRE

shallow rill that slipped between the stones, there were small cowering things, — rabbits and badgers, wood rats and porcupines. When the last border of the redwoods was lit, and the fire roared at them from the opposite side of the gully, little dead bodies floated down into the pool. Presently there was no stream left to float them, cut off by the heat that scorched out its source. The pool grew almost intolerably hot, and shrunk at the edges. There was no other noise could live in the rip of the flames; the smoke billowed down upon them, and they had no knowledge when the day passed into night.

Isidro sprinkled water on the girl's face, still holding her against the buck's shoulder. After a little she revived and began to ask for Marta.

"I think she must be in the lower pool," said Escobar. "I saw her come out of the woods soon after us." Jacinta slipped from the buck's shoulders and found her feet under her. The water came to her armpits. Isidro took the kerchief from her head and wet it for her to breathe through and cover up her eyes. They clasped hands under the buck's white throat. The fierce



## ISIDRO

incandescence of the forest faded, and the pitchy smoke obscured them more and more. They edged together and Isidro took her in his arms.

"Where is Mascado?" at length she whispered.

"His wound burst; he went down under the deer."

She shivered in spite of the heat. "He lifted me up," she said; "I remember that; was it then?" Isidro pressed her softly against his breast.

"He saved my life," she said, "he saved my life, and I had never so much as a kind word for him."

"Think no more of it," said Escobar.

The girl was quiet for a long time; her mind still ran on Mascado.

"He was very brave," she said. "I remember, as much as six years ago, there was a place near Peter Lebecque's where none of the Indians would go, — a tall, strange rock in a lonely cañon. There had been witchcraft there which made them afraid. Juana, my mother, would cross herself if so much as a wind blew from it, and I being both wild and bad thought to frighten her by going

## FOREST FIRE

there. She was nearly frantic; Lebecque was from home, so she sent Mascado to fetch me. He was young, then, and quite as much frightened as any, but he came; he was quite pale with fright, and I laughed at him, but he came. He was a brave man."

"He died as a brave man would wish to die. Think no more of it, my Briar," said Escobar.

Billows of hot smoke beat upon them, the water hissed on the stones; she hid her face on his bosom. Presently she asked, —

"Do you see Marta?"

"I see nothing but thick smoke."

"Do you think we shall come safely through?"

"I am sure of that."

They were silent a longer time.

"What is that which stirs by me in the water?" asked the girl.

"It is a doe that pants with the running. It is better so, to screen you from the heat."

His lips were very near her face. They struggled in the smother of heat and smoke for breath.

"What is that I hear?" she whispered.