

was hardly more than a shadow on the gray. The willows were vivid light green, and the orange groves dark and glossy like laurel. The billowy hills on either side the valley were covered with verdure and bloom—myriads of low blossoming plants, so close to the earth that their tints lapped and overlapped on each other, and on the green of the grass, as feathers in fine plumage overlap each other and blend into a changeful colour.

The countless curves, hollows, and crests of the coast-hills in Southern California heighten these chameleon effects of the spring verdure; they are like nothing in nature except the glitter of a brilliant lizard in the sun or the iridescent sheen of a peacock's neck.

Father Salvierderra paused many times to gaze at the beautiful picture. Flowers were always dear to the Franciscans. Saint Francis himself permitted all decorations which could be made of flowers. He classed them with his brothers and sisters, the sun, moon, and stars—all members of the sacred choir praising God.

It was melancholy to see how, after each one of these pauses, each fresh drinking in of the beauty of the landscape and the balmy air, the old man resumed his slow pace, with a long sigh and his eyes cast down. The fairer this beautiful land, the sadder to know it lost to the Church—alien hands reaping its fulness, establishing new customs, new laws. All the way down the coast from Santa Barbara he had seen, at every stopping place, new tokens of the settling up of the country—farms opening, towns growing; the Americans pouring in, at all points, to reap the advantages of their new possessions. It was this which had made his journey heavy-hearted, and made him feel, in approaching the Senora Moreno's, as if he were coming to one of the last sure strongholds of the Catholic faith left in the country.

When he was within two miles of the house he struck off from the highway into a narrow path that he recollected led by a short cut through the hills, and saved nearly a third of the distance. It was more than a year since he had trod this path, and as he found it growing fainter and fainter, and more and more overgrown with the wild mustard, he said to himself, "I think no one can have passed through here this year."

As he proceeded he found the mustard thicker and thicker. The wild mustard in Southern California is like that spoken of in the New Testament, in the branches of which the birds of the air may rest. Coming up out of the earth, so slender a stem that dozens can find starting-point in an inch, it darts up, a slender straight shoot, five, ten, twenty feet, with hundreds of fine feathery branches locking and interlocking with all the other hundreds around it, till it is an inextricable network like lace. Then it bursts into yellow bloom, still finer, more feathery and lacelike. The stems are so infinitesimally small, and of so dark a green, that at a short distance they do not show, and the cloud of blossom seems floating in the air; at times it looks like golden dust. With a clear blue sky behind it, as it is often seen, it looks like a golden snow storm. The plant is a tyrant and a nuisance—the terror of the farmer; it takes a riotous possession of a whole field in a season; once in, never out; for one plant this year, a million the next; but it is impossible to wish that the land were freed from it. Its gold is as distinct a value to the eye as the nugget gold is in the pocket.

Father Salvierderra found himself in a veritable thicket of these delicate branches, high above his head, and so interlaced that he could make headway only by slowly and patiently disentangling them, as one would disentangle a skein of silk. It was a fantastic sort of dilemma, and not unpleasant. Except that the Father was in haste to reach

his journey's end, he would have enjoyed threading his way through the golden meshes. Suddenly he heard faint notes of singing. He paused—listened. It was the voice of a woman. It was slowly drawing nearer, apparently from the direction in which he was going. At intervals it ceased abruptly, then began again; as if by a sudden but brief interruption, like that made by question and answer. Then, peering ahead through the mustard blossoms, he saw them waving and bending, and heard sounds as if they were being broken. Evidently some one entering on the path from the opposite end had been caught in the fragrant thicket as he was. The notes grew clearer, though still low and sweet as the twilight notes of the thrush; the mustard branches waved more and more violently; light steps were now to be heard. Father Salvierderra stood still as one in a dream, his eyes straining forward into the golden mist of blossoms. In a moment more came, distinct and clear to his ear, the beautiful words of the second stanza of Saint Francis's inimitable lyric, "The Canticle of the Sun."

"Praise be to thee, O Lord, for all thy creatures, and especially for our brother the Sun—who illuminates the day, and by his beauty and splendour shadows forth unto us thine."

"Ramona!" exclaimed the Father, his thin cheeks flushing with pleasure. "The blessed child!" And as he spoke her face came into sight, set in a swaying frame of the blossoms, as she parted them lightly to right and left with her hands, and half crept, half danced through the loophole openings thus made. Father Salvierderra was past eighty, but his blood was not too old to move quicker at the sight of this picture. A man must be dead not to thrill at it. Ramona's beauty was of the sort to be best enhanced by the waving gold which now framed her face. She had just enough of olive tint in her complexion to underlie and enrich her skin without making it swarthy. Her hair was like her Indian mother's, heavy and black, but her eyes were like her father's, steel-blue. Only those who came very near to Ramona knew, however, that her eyes were blue, for the heavy black eyebrows and long black lashes so shaded and shadowed them that they looked black as night. At the same instant that Father Salvierderra first caught sight of her face Ramona also saw him, and crying out joyfully, "Ah, Father, I knew you would come by this path, and something told me you were near!" she sprang forward, and sank on her knees before him, bowing her head for his blessing. In silence he laid his hands on her brow. It would not have been easy for him to speak to her at that first moment. She had looked to the devout old monk, as she sprang through the cloud of golden flowers, the sun falling on her bared head, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining, more like an apparition of an angel or saint than like the flesh and blood maiden whom he had carried in his arms when she was a babe.

"We have been waiting, waiting oh, so long for you, Father!" she said, rising. "We began to fear that you might be ill. The bearers have been sent for, and will be here to-night, and that was the reason I felt so sure you would come. I knew the Virgin would bring you in time for mass in the chapel on the first morning."

The monk smiled half sadly. "Would there were more of such faith as yours, daughter," he said. "Are all well on the place?"

"Yes, Father, all well," she answered. "Felipe has been ill with a fever; but he is out now, these ten days, and frothing for—your coming."

Ramona had like to have said the literal truth—"fretting for the sheep-shearing"—but recollected herself in time.

"And the Senora?" said the Father.

"She is well," answered Ramona gently, but with a slight change of tone—so slight as to be almost imperceptible; but an acute observer would have always detected it in the girl's tone whenever she spoke of the Senora Moreno. "And you—are you well yourself, Father?" she said affectionately, noting with her quick loving eye how feebly the old man walked, and that he carried what she had never before seen in his hand—a stout staff to steady his steps. "You must be very tired with the long journey on foot." (TO BE CONTINUED)



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