"I don’t quite like Alonzo’s condition," Margaret said at last. "He seems nervous. He’s not quite well. I wish that I had stayed longer at Monterey. He was doing very well there."

"Do you think it serious?" said Tom. "He was very merry with me before lunch. I thought he seemed in fine spirits."

"No, it’s never serious. Only he’s discontented. He quarrels even with me—much more with nurse. He’s lonesome here, I suppose."

Tom suggested bringing him oftener into company with some of the neighbors’ children, but Margaret had objections to make. There were very few of them whom she wanted him to know, and they were hard to get at. It was all the consequence of living in this lonesome place, she declared. If it hadn’t grown so dear to her, she would be anxious to change once for all, and go over to San Francisco. For the rest, she was sure that that would be more convenient for Tom, who was getting, she said with a smile, to be more of a truant nowadays than ever. But the older the child grew, the more she felt that it was cruel to bring him up here all alone in the country, where he would never find playmates, nor be contented. He was seldom ill, but she confessed that she worried about him a good deal. In fact, it sometimes came over her that he would be

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grown up before long, and she found it a sad, yes, sometimes a painful thought, she said (with a faint tinge of bitterness in her voice), that he would then always be leaving her, and betaking himself to the city, where one could never know what he did, nor what acquaintances he had, nor what attachments he formed. All mothers, she added, knew beforehand that they must lose their sons some day. It was, however, the special dread of the mother who lived in the country that her boy would be lost by wandering off to some strange city. One who lived in a city had more chance to keep her boy contented near by his home, where she could have some faint idea of his surroundings.

Tom was always much interested in everything she said, and he was really pleased to-day to find her in so serious a mood. If her mocking humor had been upon her, he would have felt great trouble in approaching his present theme. Besides, for her to be troubled, and to tell him so, meant to invite his sympathy, a thing which she very seldom did. Her voice to-day was, moreover, even softer and gentler than usual. She always spoke in her low, musical tone, with the shortest pauses, and a certain pleasant monotony of accent.

"How melancholy you are to-day!" he said. "What shall I do, then, to cheer you? Shall I send for the doctor, for you to consult him about little Alonzo?"

"No, not that to-day. I've set that visit in my mind for Monday. There's no pressing need, of course. I only want general advice."

Margaret said this with the pleasantly prim manner of the country lady who announces her fixed arrangements. "I've set that for such a day," was one of Margaret's commonest expressions. She delighted to predetermine her simple life down to all the smallest details, and it was in vain that you sought to suggest any unnecessary change in the predicted order of her doings. She would in fact have been very unhappy in the city, where there would have been so many more accidents to deal with in her experience. She went on, after a little pause:—

"I suppose I seem to brood a good deal. I do it whenever I'm much alone for a while. I'm glad we're going to have a full house again at the end of next week. By the way, did you know that mother had come back from Santa Cruz? She wrote me last night. I got the letter this morning. She doesn't want me to come to her
now, though, because she has yet to run over to San Rafael until Monday."

"I called to see her last night," said Tom. "I hoped to find her returned, and I wasn't disappointed."

"Dear me, why didn't you tell me at once that you had seen her, you cold-blooded man? Is she looking in better health?"

"Yes, indeed. She isn't so pale. The recent reports have been well founded. She walks more easily, and looks every way better."

"I'm so glad. She has said as much in all her letters, yet I didn't quite believe her. But tell me, Tom; what can there have been between mother and you, that you should be looking her up so carefully before even I myself knew just when she was to return? I didn't expect her to be there until Monday, or else I should have gone over last night to greet her. Have you taken to making secret appointments to conspire with mother about something or other?"

"Odd conspirators mother and I should make, Margaret, shouldn't we? No, to tell the truth, I had only hoped to find her. I knew no more than you. But I was glad of my good luck. Perhaps you'd call what passed between us a conspiracy, after all. If so, then I nevertheless mean to make you a fellow-conspirator. I was waiting until you should be ready to hear me out before I mentioned the fact of my visit. It seemed to be the easiest way to begin."

"Really, Tom, you must be at some most deadly plot. You, indeed, calling on mother in this way, and then waiting until I should be ready to hear you out before you would even mention that you had seen her! The easiest way to begin, to be sure! Come, now, no more airs. Begin at once."

"Have I then succeeded in making you actually curious?" said Tom, a little playfully, taking all possible advantage of his success so far.

"If you don't at once go on, I'll never hear another word from you about the matter, whatever it is," answered Margaret, with half-imagined indignation. "Don't you suppose mother will tell me, if you don't? What do I care for your little mysteries, any way?"

Tom grew serious again at once. "Well," he replied, "I suppose you'll forgive my hesitation when you know the topic. It concerns some old friends of mine, not of yours, and you must also forgive me for bringing it up at all. Yet you'll agree that I had to.
To begin very bluntly, I've just heard fresh and sad news about—Alf Escott.” Tom hesitated. The word had been hard to bring out. He looked down again very hard, so as not to catch her eye. Her frank gaze had been very pleasantly fixed upon him as he began his remark, but now she turned paler than was her wont, and her eyes wandered once more to the window, while her face wore a pained and puzzled expression. There was another pause.

“And you carried this news to—mother?” she said at length.

“Yes, and surely that shows you that I must have good reason to bring it also to you. I won’t pretend to talk of the thing otherwise than plainly. Surely you know that I would be the last to plague you with it save for cause. But you also know that I have wronged him as deeply—as—as—I have wronged you.” Tom’s voice hesitated and he seemed a little choked. It was years since she had heard this tone from him, and, much as she hated whatever had any touch of a scene about it, she pitied him a little now; for, after all, from the first days of their married life he had been very sparing of the emotional in her presence. Then he went on again, after a moment, and once more firmly:

“His new misfortune is of a very crushing sort, at his age and in his circumstances. He was living until three days since in the second story of a house, corner of S— and P— streets, over a plumber’s shop. But the other night the whole block of houses there burned down, in true San Francisco style, and he lost everything. His family barely escaped with their lives. I understand that he had some dramatic manuscripts still in his possession, and that he regarded them as worth something from a pecuniary point of view. I suppose he was right. He also had some ready money that he had drawn from a bank a day or two before, intending to make some new disposition of it,—I can’t say what. At all events the money constituted all his savings, and he lost it. The manuscripts were also destroyed. At present only his family is left to him, save, to be sure, one piece of property that I’ll soon mention. His family consists of his wife and his daughter Emily (both in poor health), and a son, who, I regret to say, although an innocent and well-meaning young man of about twenty-four or twenty-five, is a notorious good-for-nothing, almost a case of arrested development, so to speak, when you consider whose son he is. Escott himself is infirm, and is in constantly failing health. All that, you see, makes
his prospects poor enough. But he has all his old rugged independence. He will accept no direct help, though he die for the lack of it. How long he may yet be able to work I can't tell. He has for a good while lived by writing for the papers, for one or two of the dailies occasionally, and also for the 'Warrior.' His failing health may end all this at any time. Meanwhile, the climate of San Francisco is very bad for him. He ought to be living in the country."

Tom paused a little, and looked up at Margaret to judge the effect of his words. She had grown more interested as he went on. Her look was very kindly, he fancied. Plainly she nourished no such bitterness in her heart as would make her unable to consider the case. Tom already in secret began to cherish a little more warmly the distant hope that he had had in mind since he began his new undertaking. Meanwhile, he must keep himself to the business directly before him.

"But what," she said, "can you then have in your thought to do for the old man? Your account of his 'rugged independence' puts him quite beyond our aid, doesn't it? Yet, to be sure, it seems as if we must find some way?"

"No, not quite beyond our aid," Tom said. "There remains one thing to consider. More than two years ago, when father's suits about the Oakfield Creek property were just beginning, Escott chanced to receive quite a sum as a legacy from some Eastern relative. I think it must have been some ten or twelve thousand dollars. You know enough of his disposition to understand what he thereupon did. He heard of the Oakfield Creek suits. Certain of his friends, in particular certain people who were members of Reverend Mr. Rawley's church, to which his wife belongs, were involved. Escott espoused enthusiastically the settlers' side in the controversy, against my father; he wrote a series of articles for one of the papers about the matter, and then, quite counter to the advice of his friends, he bought up several of the claims at the highest possible figure, and from some of the poorest of the claimants. They were people who had been especially dear to members of his wife's family. Since then he has been in his way a leader in the settlers' opposition to father. His whole property, at this very moment, consists of his interest in those claims. If they were clear titles, he would own a home, and something more. As things stand, he probably owns nothing."
“That is an unpleasant reflection, surely. Are you interested in the Oakfield Creek property, yourself, Tom?” Margaret’s really quick sympathy was now strongly aroused.

“Slightly, very slightly. I’ve always favored a compromise. The case of the settlers, taken in and for itself, has always seemed to me to have a good deal of common sense in its favor, whatever you may say about the law. I think father himself would have so regarded it, if it hadn’t been for the way the opposition came to grow up in the first place. That’s the fashion with father. Everything depends on how such a matter is brought before him. He’s liberality itself at one time, while at another, in case he’s once aroused, he may be as merciless as an old-fashioned conqueror. I’m afraid Escott’s opposition has not tended to weaken his feeling in the matter. Coming as that did, it seemed to father peculiarly unbearable. I’m responsible for that also, I suppose.” Tom sighed, and looked down once more.

“Tell me,” said Margaret, speaking very deliberately now, with the thoughtful pride of a woman who finds herself unexpectedly appealed to by a man concerning a matter of business. “Has your father ever shown any signs of admitting that the settlers are right?”

“He used to admit almost as much, very often. If they alone were concerned, he said, he could actually give up the whole thing. But they weren’t. Yet, even as it was, even with all the other interests to consider that would be affected, he would be willing to yield the settlers a great deal, if they would only show some disposition to compromise. So he used to speak. But later—you know how things are with father. He grew very bitter. I seldom have heard a word from him about compromise since Escott went into the struggle. It’s now all a part of the old-time feud.”

“I can’t see how it all is,” said Margaret, reflectively. “Men are so strange. You call us women mere creatures of feeling. But dear me, the thing seems easy enough to me. Perhaps it’s all my womanly stupidity, but if the poor people have their rights, and you know it, why do you want to turn them out of house and home, just for a mere matter of pride? I think men are the least rational beings on earth. Women wouldn’t have such troubles with settlers, I know.”

“It’s a mixed-up business, of course,” responded Tom. “Perhaps if you knew better what one of these perennial fights is,
you wouldn't be so hard on us. Yet I don't quite justify father. I
know how roughly he has been pressed from some sides, and I
appreciate more or less his position and feelings. But I wish he
could be persuaded to yield, if only ever so little. And now, at any
rate, you'll see what I have in mind about poor Escott. And if you
see, you'll forgive me for plaguing you by the mention of his
name to-day. Won't you, Margaret?"

"Why, certainly," she responded, very simply and kindly. In
mind she wondered, meanwhile, that he had understood her so ill.
Of course Escott's name must pain her. But did he think her a raw
girl, to go off into a pet whenever a painful thing had to be men­
tioned? She flattered herself that she was at least a woman of ex­
perience, and of some sense, both of the inevitable and of the de­
mands of humanity. And he spoke, too, as if she must cherish some
kind of vague resentment at the thought of the Escott family.
That idea of his was, indeed, in a certain way exasperating, be­
cause it showed that he must still be a very vain fellow, who had
not been in the least cured by his long sojourn in the cool shades
of her disfavor. Resentment towards the poor Escotts! What
could be further from her thoughts? Was not their great wrong
her daily regret? Had she ever forgotten that wrong, or indulged
any feeling so absurd and degrading as jealousy? But at all events,
Tom was now plainly anxious to do his duty on this one occasion.
However vain he was, however obviously selfish his purposes
were, she liked his hesitating and humble demeanor, his fear of
her anger, his apparently straightforward appeal to her on a matter
that involved some considerations of pure business, and his whole
assumed tone of earnestness and submission. She felt flattered, and
even to some extent appeased, although she was not for a moment
deceived about him. It was long since they had been so close
together in conversation as this. She experienced a certain pleasurable
excitement, which, however, in no wise disturbed her calm of
manner, or the long cultivated repose of her general feelings to­
wards him. It was amusing, all the while, that, in trying to ap­
pease her, he was playing what he obviously regarded as a deep
game, although his absurd fear lest the very name of Escott should
somehow anger her revealed his shallow vanity, and his real object
in so ostentatiously doing his duty. She was willing to let him go
on, of course, and she was cordially disposed to help him in his
plans for Escott's good. But as for being actually won over by
these devices,—the thought of it was comical! And this man had, among men, a great reputation as a diplomatist, and even as an out-and-out intriguer! She went on, after a moment’s pause:—

“What you have in mind, is to hit upon some plan whereby Escott shall get an undisputed right to his claim at Oakfield Creek.”

“Yes,” he replied, “and you see how delicate an undertaking it is. There might be no insurmountable obstacle, I fancy, to prevent my persuading father, if I wished, to let me buy his own claim as against Escott, and make Escott a present of it. If father objected to that plan, as looking too much like a general surrender from our side, I know friends of Escott who would be overjoyed to buy up father’s rights in their own name, and settle for the land with Escott later. That would avoid any appearance of an offer of compromise from father, since these persons would have no connection with the family. In fact, of course, there would be no difficulty about giving Escott a dozen farms outright, if he’d take ’em. But all that’s out of the question. Escott is a confirmed romancer. What he wants, in this matter, is to sink or swim with his fellow-claimants. The business, in his eyes, is one of eternal justice. No doubt his original enmity to—myself, and, in consequence, to father (with whom, as you know, he was once fully reconciled),”—Tom’s voice was faltering a little again,—“caused him to look into the matter at all. But having once begun, he feels bound to continue the struggle to the end. So then, what does he demand? He demands that father shall give up the fight, and come to terms with the Oakfield Creek claimants. He demands that now, as much as ever he did. And when he’s approached concerning this, his one last piece of property, he says that he knows it’s his property; and intends to have it on the same terms as any other Oakfield Creek claimant. There he stands, and he won’t budge.”

“And what, then, do you still hope to do for him?”

“There’s just the point I’m coming to, though I fear it’s a very long story. I’m heartily weary of these conflicts; above all, of the Oakfield Creek conflict. Father will yet wear his life away in such things, without ever getting time to do his proper work. His life has been a long and hard one. By way of a well-earned reward, he’s been promising himself leisure to spend his last years in endowing and getting into running order one or two great public trusts, such as shall remain to perpetuate his name here in the State, and to do lasting good. You know that wish of his as well
as I do. It's a noble wish, and he's just the man to carry it out. Most of our pioneer millionaires have cherished such desires, and several have tried to accomplish something of the sort. Father is the best fitted of all, I fancy, to do work of the kind without crudity and without vacillation. He has magnificent plans. I want to see them mature during his lifetime. Nobody could really carry them out for him if he died. Well, as I say, with all his obstinate persistence in fighting to the last for whatever he regards as his rights, he not only has made himself many enemies, who still try to injure his name, but he has kept himself in the thick of the struggle, rendering it hopeless that he will ever find his longed-for leisure. I want him to get out of this hurly-burly. And I'm very anxious about that, I assure you." Tom was warming to his subject more and more. His pale and usually so impassive face was growing all the time fuller of life and earnestness. His eyes were sparkling with animation.

"And now," he went on, "as to the Oakfield Creek matter itself. It's to be throughout regretted. Here's the case, in as brief a statement as I can make. The thing is sadly mixed. Father long ago bought a title to the sobrante, or surplus land, surrounding an ill-defined Spanish grant. The original grant was confirmed, as well as the grant of the sobrante, but the survey long remained in dispute, and, pending that, father, of course, had no perfectly clear title, although his right to the sobrante itself, when it should be surveyed, was admitted, and he waited only the survey to find where his property was. The thing dragged on from year to year, and the property, lying as it does in one of those rather inaccessible valleys between Mount Diablo and the Contra Costa hills, remained, owing to the clouded titles, almost worthless. Then father, some ten years ago, conceived his plan (there are many rival plans afoot among our capitalists, you know) to run the long-talked-of narrow-gauge road through the hills into the Mount Diablo region. That would bring the land near to market. But to persuade others to invest capital in his scheme, father took yet another step. He got the holders of the opposing claims to subscribe to shares of the proposed railway company, and to do so upon this agreement: Neither side should yield its land claims to the other, until the survey case should have been decided by the courts. Both should cooperate, however, in getting the railway started, and above all in getting the land into the hands of settlers. For, as father insisted,
both parties had, to a certain extent, undisputed claims, and so
had interests in common, and both could take stock in the pro-
posed railway, and steps to develop the property in question,
without giving up an iota of their respective claims to the portion
of the land which was still actually in dispute. Thus delay in
developing the property would be avoided. Do you follow me,
Margaret?"

"Of course; your statement is clear enough for even poor me."

"Well, forgive me if it's stupid. Father owned a great deal of
other land over there, and this matter was only one among many
kindred enterprises. But such, at all events, was the agreement on
which the projected railway was to be begun. In fact, what with
hard times and long fights, no rail of it has ever yet been laid
beyond the hills. I've no doubt some other company will step in
very soon and capture the prize. But, at all events, the other part
of the plan went on for a time more successfully. Father and his
rivals both began to attract settlers to their land. The soil is fertile,
the railway is sure to come some day, the climate is excellent. The
only trouble at the outset was that the tract in dispute between
father and the others was just the best part of the land thereabouts.
It was, namely, the long strip that borders Oakfield Creek, on both
sides, for miles. Of course, when you talked to a settler about the
region he always said: 'I'm in for that bottomland there, and I
won't look at any other.' Now, however, as you see, neither father,
as owner of the sobrante, nor the other party to the controversy,
could give a settler a clear title within the borders of that tract.
And neither of the litigant parties was ready to compromise in
advance of the decision of the Supreme Court at Washington,
which was as slow as usual in getting to the case of this particular
Spanish grant survey. But father was equal, so he thought, to this
perplexity. He got the other side to join with him in an advertise-
ment to settlers, and, of course, in an agreement upon which this
advertisement could be based. The advertisement opened the dis-
puted land, for settlement, to all comers who in good faith should
take up and improve small tracts along Oakfield Creek. Whenever
the title should be clearly in the hands of one or the other of the
principal disputants, it was declared, according to the terms of
the advertisement, that the land should then be offered by the
successful litigant to the actual settlers, and at very low rates. The
rates, it was agreed, should not be raised meanwhile on account of
any increase in the value of the land through improvements made by the occupants themselves. Both father and his opponents signed this document. A goodly number of settlers, in all perhaps sixty or eighty families, very soon availed themselves of the joint offer. A good many more followed later. They could get a home, you see, without having to think of paying for it until the United States Supreme Court should be done with that survey case. That seemed an eternity to look forward to. They trusted implicitly in the zeal and skill of the wealthy litigants to keep the end a good way off. Whenever the end should come, they were promised the easiest of terms. Meanwhile, father and his opponents both gained a certain direct advantage from the presence of these settlers; for, first, in advance of the railway, a stage and transportation company was set up. That, of course, was in itself a very little thing. But, as a result, the undisputed property of both parties became more salable; while the railway, in view of the increasing population, looked daily more feasible, and more and more outside capital was promised for the enterprise. If it hadn’t been for the sudden and stubborn financial troubles that began in 1875, with the failure of the Bank of California, I’m sure that the railway would have been begun and finished within a very short time. Meanwhile, father began improvements in that region on land to which he had a clear title. He planted thousands of eucalyptus trees, started an irrigation company, and was full of great plans.

“But now, as you see, misunderstandings came instead of further progress. The hard times made everybody unwilling to invest in the proposed enterprises over there, and the excitements of the new constitution period didn’t better the prospects of such speculative undertakings. The occupants of the disputed lands began to get discontented with their homes, which didn’t prove so profitable, in the absence of a railway, as they had expected. Father was ere long equally discontented with the whole venture. He often loses interest in past undertakings that don’t prove successful. This one, you see, had cost him a comparatively moderate sum, after all, but it had proved tedious and unproductive. I’m afraid he even sometimes half forgot about his old dreams concerning that region. At last the survey suit was decided, and in his favor. The disputed Oakfield Creek property was his. To be sure, he had already disposed of part of his interest in it to a new Land and Improvement Company, and that fact tied his hands a little about
the decision of the later disputes. However, he still was substantially in control of the whole thing. But here the settlers interposed. They had been disappointed, they said. Some of them had invested more money in improving the land than the outcome had warranted. All of them had waited patiently for a railroad that never came. It seemed just to them, therefore, that, whatever should be done with the still untouched portions of the tract, the original occupants should get their land at rates still lower than those originally agreed upon. The inducement had been cheap land plus a railway. The railway was still in the cave of dreams. Meanwhile, they said, these original settlers, by their presence and hard labor, had much increased the value of all the surrounding real estate. It was just, therefore, that they should get at least the equivalent of their original inducements. And that, they said, would mean cheaper rates still than the original ones.

"I think they were wrong in this notion. But father had a counter-claim to make. He had invested something in the land himself. His own improvements, he said, had vastly assisted these occupants; while the tracts of undisputed land that he had sold out and out to other settlers, and the improvements that these purchasing settlers had made, formed, he asserted, yet another source of increased value, such as had not been named in the original inducements to the occupants of the disputed tracts. He gave other reasons that I won't go into. And he said, too, that if others had been disappointed, he had been far more so. The long and short of it was that he saw, on the whole, good cause for raising the old demand, instead of lowering it. He had given more than he had promised, he said, not less. He ought to be compensated.

"I think he put forward this statement at the outset in a rather tentative way, to offset the unreasonable demands of the occupants. But perhaps he stated the thing too strongly. He often does. The settlers flared up, some of them, and attacked him in the papers. Then father also grew angry. He and the Land and Improvement Company (the latter was, of course, largely under his control) joined in an assertion that the settlers must justly pay far more for their land than had at first been asked. The price was on the average just about quintupled. So the battle began. The longer it continued the worse it grew. Father at last felt himself so injured that he provisionally sold some of the occupied land to 'jumpers,'
whom he promised to protect, and suits were begun to put these in possession. The occupants, meanwhile, of course, have no actual title, but they claim the letter of the original agreement. They say that they have frequently tendered father the sum agreed upon. Father's lawyers, I'm sorry to say, lay stress on the legal worthlessness of the form of the document upon which the settlers' claims are founded. This document, namely, is in form only an agreement between father and his old opponents, who now, of course, have vanished from the field. I fear very much that the claimants have legally nothing to stand upon. The title is vested in father; a binding and valid agreement to sell at a fixed figure was, legally speaking, never made at all, I fancy, and the claimants will probably have to pay father's price or go. In the course of the controversy he was once so much wrought up that he said he would never settle with the old claimants at any price. They had betrayed him, he declared, and he would eject them, if it cost him half a million. Those were the words of passion. Father is not so bad as that. Only I have feared that he may indeed fight the settlers hard, and that they may have to pay him a very large sum. For the money he doesn't care now, I believe, at all. But the abuse and the hot blood have made him anxious to fight for victory."

"Your account isn't flattering to father, Tom, is it? It's as I said before: a woman simply can't understand such passions. Sixty or eighty families, you said, Tom. And many more since,—think of that! Families, you must remember! It's a great word, that. Ah, what shall we do with father, Tom, if he goes on in this way?"

"Perhaps I'm unjust to him. I grant I was not thinking just now of defending him to you, so much as of letting you understand the other side. You've known father too long, Margaret, you've been first his dread and then his idol too successfully, to need me to defend him. All his weaknesses you know,—as you know all mine too, I'm afraid." Tom sighed once more, and tried timidly to catch her eye, but this time he failed. "Well, for good or for ill this struggle's gone on. Escott's interference, I said, made things worse. You may wonder what, after all, he really bought from the settlers whose claims he took up. He bought, of course, these settlers' improvements; and then he bought what all of them out there regard, of course, as most sacred property, the claim in equity upon father for a delivery of the title to the tracts, on a proper tender of the sum mentioned in the old advertisement. Es-
cott has lived on one of the tracts twice or thrice since he pur-
chased the claim, though always for short periods. Part of the land
he has lent, without rent, to poor families. At other times he has
employed two men to take care of some of it for him. He now
has, of course, no means to pay these. He, who in the city has long
been almost forgotten, is a great character when he goes out to
Oakfield Creek. The settlers actually revere him, and hang on his
words as if he were inspired."

“But what is going to happen, then, Tom? Are the suits never
to end? Is the agony a thing for all time?”

“I ought to have said that the settlers, as a last defense, have in
their despair undertaken to raise again the old issues, by contesting
the validity of father’s title itself. They have pleaded informality
in the survey, fraud on the part of surveyors, collusion between
father and his old opponents to defraud the settlers, and I don’t
know what else, in addition to their own supposed equity, based
upon that original notice of invitation. The ejectment suits are
being contested on all these questions in the United States courts;
and the trial will be finished and the decision reached, I fancy, in
from six to twelve months. I’ve little doubt but the thing will go
against the settlers. Appeal would, I believe, be useless to them.
But I have great fear of trouble, very serious trouble, to follow.”

“What? Do you fear anything like a pitched battle?”

“Precisely so. The settlers may take to using their shot-guns.
Such things have happened often enough before, you know.”

“But Escott, himself,—surely the professor wouldn’t take to a
shot-gun.”

“Why not? The man is reckless, and a genuine hero to boot.
If his friends were in any sort of danger, he would cross all the
seas and lands, if need be, to stand beside them. I never knew a
more faithful nature.”

“Indeed?” Margaret was the least bit malicious in tone; but she
went on at once: “But did he ever get into trouble of just that
sort?”

“Oh, never into a brawl, to be sure. He once fought the Indians
in Washoe, you know, but he’s not the man ordinary fellows
would be apt to want to fight. Once or twice, in the old days, I
think he sent a challenge to somebody or other. And, if report is
correct, the case was settled each time without delay, by an ample
apology from the other side. I doubt if anybody ever challenged
him. He's not the man to give needless offense. He's the gentlest of natures when he isn't aroused."

"You seem to have a singular admiration for Escott, Tom, which I am very glad to observe, let me say. But that," she went on hastily, "is neither here nor there. I still want to know what we are to do for him."

"Ah, how long I am about it! Well, father is just of late in a gentler mood. He has his more peaceable times, also, as you know. He has mentioned the pending suits with even a sort of regret in his tone. He heartily wishes, no doubt, that he hadn't been forced by his high spirits into a place where he appears as oppressor of the poor. And a really magnanimous action he's always glad to do, if he can but see the chance. And so, this has occurred to me. Can't we"—here Tom allowed himself a slightly more confidential tone—"can't we persuade him to take advantage of Escott's misfortune, and to admit to Escott, out and out, that the settlers are more than half right, and then to propose himself that Escott shall accept, and shall persuade the others to accept, a reasonable compromise? Bold this plan of mine looks,—impossible to one who doesn't know father. But consider, Margaret: father has at heart the greatest admiration for Escott's indomitable pluck, and he has never recovered from his feeling that many years since—you remember it well—he did to Escott, as he did to you, a terrible injury. Then there's father's friendship of long ago, in early days, with Escott. They were together, you know, in Washoe. They once fought the Indians together. All that's in father's mind. He never forgets anything of the sort. It has been the sense of the hopelessness of repairing that injury, or of renewing in any way the old friendship, with Escott so stern and repellent, that has made father all the more bitter. A proud man can never live quiet under such a sense. And, as I said, it's Escott's presence in this fight that has rendered father seemingly so irreconcilable towards the settlers. Take Escott out, and father would compromise. Keep Escott in, and father's unutterably miserable. Now here's our chance. Perhaps we can take Escott out, not by any ordinary course of conduct, but by proposing to father a finely magnanimous act in an attractive way. We can say, 'Here's your old friend, and also your old foe, a man whom you're conscious of having deeply injured. Here he is at your feet, helpless. He has no valid legal rights, as against you. He has nothing that will be good enough to
pass muster in the courts. He is old; he is despised or forgotten in
the city; he is infirm. But in one way he still offends you. He
leads the settlers' company out there at Oakfield Creek. Now,
surely,' we can say to father, 'you in no sense confess weakness
by going to this man now, just at this very crisis of his misfortunes,
and holding out your hand. You needn't offer him charity. Just
say that you're willing now to stand up and talk to him like a man,
and that you want to grant to him and his friends their righteous,
yes, even their barely plausible demands, precisely as if nothing
had happened to make hard feeling.' That's what we can say to
father, Margaret. And I believe the very novelty of the idea, if
he's only rightly approached, will charm him. I know father; he
likes to do good, but he wants it to look picturesque. And this
thing may be made to look so, mayn't it?" Tom paused, a little
breathless. Had he not spoken well? To be sure, there was some­
thing lacking about his eloquence, yet might it not move her just
a little?

Margaret was smiling very approvingly, but she looked pro­
vokingly at her finger-tips. "Bravo, Tom! she said, with a soft
laugh. "If you were a youth again I might almost be fool enough
to say, 'Why don't you speak for yourself, John?' But, alas! we're
very old people now, and I'm afraid I can't encourage this boyish­
ness in you." She changed her manner suddenly again, as she spoke
the last of these words, and she grew sober and mildly forbidding
once more, so that he felt a little chilled while she went on, in her
usual tone of cheerful resignation: "But seriously now, Tom, to
come back to real life; why am I so important for this under­
taking? I approve it heartily, though I beg you to see that there's
nothing heroic, no, nor even anything 'picturesque,' about your
proposed action, or your father's. The matter is one of the simplest
possible sort. It's just plain duty. You have both of you wronged
a man bitterly, and he has a just claim, meanwhile, to a bit of land
which you men have somehow been trying to get away from him
for years past. You don't need his land the least in the world.
You've no business with it, so long as he stands ready to pay some­
how what was originally agreed upon. Now, at last, however,
as he's very weak, and poor, and old, it happens to occur to you
that it's a little mean to keep on kicking him while he lies there
helpless, so you (you and your father together, I mean, of course)
are to offer him your manly regrets and a kindly present of his
indisputable rights. That's a very pretty idea. I like it. I want to help you carry it out, of course. Why not? But now what can I do? Tell me, and I'll sit up all night for a week planning my part of the job."

Tom sighed, a little despairingly. That was a withering manner of hers, when she chose to adopt it. He knew it of old. Yet he, too, was learned in resignation, and he showed no further sign of vexation as he went on: "Well, there again I'm slow in making myself clear. Whatever this thing really is, picturesque or not, it's got to seem picturesque to father. And ever since you chose to make a conquest of him (as you do of whomsoever you please to assail, Margaret), there's been nobody your equal for controlling him. I've long been puzzling, you must know, to see what I could do for Escott. I'm a wretch, no doubt, but it isn't to-day or yesterday that my knowledge of that fact may be said to have begun. It's only now that I've seen my way clear to help him. And so I most humbly come to you, Margaret, for help, and you mustn't quite disdain me, or I shall become a lost soul altogether."

"No, Tom," she said, smiling, "you mustn't make me responsible for so grave a thing as that. I'm at your service, of course, in any good cause. And so, how and when am I to display the picturesque sight to father's awe-struck gaze? I'm delighted to be such a show-woman, of course. Think of me: 'Here, dear father, behold this portrayal of an unexampled deed of virtue. See this lovely picture: the good Samaritan disdaining even to pick a certain man's pocket of the last penny the thieves accidentally left him. Noble spectacle! Observe, and do likewise!' How impressive I shall be saying all this! How a woman loves to exert her powers for a great end!" She laughed merrily. "But, seriously, Tom, please don't look disconsolate. I won't bite, if I do snarl so. You're very good, I don't doubt. It's my proudest delight to praise you when you've done a noble action, and, of course, as far as in you lies, you're doubtless planning one now. I never did a noble action myself, and haven't the least idea how it may feel; but it's a woman's commonplace duty to help in these minor affairs. Men have a monopoly of the really noble deeds. I'm overjoyed at this chance to be a spectator of even the least approach to one of them. When shall we have father over here to try the new game on him?"

"Whenever you will, Margaret."

"Sunday?"
“Why not?”

“Alas! Sunday I had set as the day to do, not a noble action, but a decent one. I was going to spend all day in baby’s company.”

“If his health seems to you to need”—

“Oh, nonsense! His health’s not perfect; but as if my staying with him of a Sunday would better it! No, I was only about to begin acquiring a few stray bits of information about the poor boy’s character and habits. He and I have a sort of bowing acquaintance at present. I’m afraid he may cut me dead, by accident, before long, if I don’t beware.”

“How you malign yourself!”

“No, Tom. You mean how I spare myself! But, of course, to-morrow is the time for father. The sooner the better. Noble actions fly fast. We must spread our nets at once. Yet what part had dear mother to play in this great moral show of yours, Tom? Her first appearance can’t be until later, you know.”

“Oh, I went to her for first advice and encouragement. She was less cruel than you are, Margaret, towards my feeble efforts to do right.”

“Cruelty is my only virtue. All the others are dear mother’s. For what would you do without a little cruelty, you spoiled child?” Margaret smiled, certainly in the most cruel possible fashion. “But what then did dear mother counsel?”

“Much what I have done so far, and what you approve for the future. But there is still another aspect of the case. We need, of course, a person through whom we can deal with Escott. The old man himself is, I grant, a trifle hard for us to approach. And if the first approach to Escott were to be a wrong one, well, then, there’d only be a little more lightning than ever, I suppose.”

“You speak of him as if he were a fiery dragon, poor man. I saw, however, all the time, that you had some such person in mind as might serve for a go-between. How otherwise should you know so much about Escott’s condition and prospects, if you hadn’t a go-between already? Who, then, is the Moses that may thus go up into burning mountains?”

“A man whom I have only recently learned to know at all well, —a friend of Williamson’s; one William Harold by name. He’s a man about my age.”

“Harold? Oh, yes. I used to hear of him already years ago. He married Annie Thornton, and she died some four or five years
since. Then he went abroad. Have I heard him mentioned since he came back? I should say so, indeed! A poet, isn't he, or else a naturalist, or an amateur musician, or something of the sort, or perhaps all of them at once? And a confirmed woman-hater, too! Lives alone; keeps an owl, three parrots, seven cats, and a big inlaid chess-board, with great ivory chess-men; smokes all day long; lives in general in a mystical cloud of contemplation; is esteemed a sage, in fact is one, has charming blue-gray eyes, much old china, numerous books on the black art, and an altar with three candles burning before his wife's picture. Isn't all that true? Oh, I know of him very well, you may believe! Louise Parkhurst tells me everything that's going, you know."

"Louise isn't precisely a historian, Margaret, but she's a good chronicler, in her way. If all that isn't precisely so, it's better than the truth, as an account of Harold. Yes, barring a certain inaccuracy in all your facts, he's much that sort of man."

"But, see here, now, Tom. My inspirations are instantaneous. I'm to conduct the picturesque moral show for father's reformation. That's solemn business. And you, personally, can't detract much from the solemnity, try as you will. What's needed to give diversity, and to keep us all from yawning our heads off, is another member of the stock company of this dime museum, a second assistant showman and scene-shifter, a person, too, of some cleverness and originality. I take it, Harold's deeply interested in Escott, isn't he?

"He has Escott staying with him since the fire. All our negotiations are, of course, so far a profound secret from the old man himself."

"Bravo! Perfect! Fetch Harold over here at once, Sunday. That's my inspiration. He and I can arrange it to bring father round straightforward. He'll represent Escott, I'll represent eternal justice. I feel in my bones the sense that he's just the man. Father'll have no chance. You, of course, being in such delicate matters notoriously stupid, though very well meaning, poor boy, shall sit by and look on benevolently at the success of your heroic and self-sacrificing schemes. That's the plan. Can you do it, Tom?"

"Why not? Whatever you will." Her mood fascinated as well as baffled him; but he had every wish to please her. "Perhaps," he went on, "I can't get Harold so soon. I'll try, though. He really is very much interested in Escott's case. He was formerly one of
Escott's faithful band of disciples, I think, when we all were young. We knew little of each other, however. That was natural, too, being the fashion of Escott's friendships.” Tom sighed yet once more, but felt when he did so what a foolish blunder he was committing all the while, as, for that matter, she had just shown him. Why must he be so melancholy in her presence? That wearied her. Yet how could he ever predict what she would take seriously, and what not? He had felt this old ground so dangerous to tread. And she—she merely laughed in his face, now that her first mood of soberness was past.

“As for me,” she said, with the merriest of voices, “you see I'm so much lost in pride at the thought of enticing the unattainable, the icy, the profound Harold into our humble dwelling, that I'm near forgetting the noble task itself. But when he's once here we'll work it out. Now, however, what were you going to do to-day to secure father for Sunday?” Margaret's face wore just now her most beautiful expression.

“I was going back to the city before dinner, and coming out with father Sunday morning. Of him I feel sure, notwithstanding, or perhaps I should say because, he's no idea what awaits him.”

“Excellent! Then hear your orders. You are to invite Harold to come over with you Sunday morning, on this special business of consulting with father and me about the whole affair. He's to come, of course, for Escott's sake. Tell him it's absolutely imperative for the success of the whole enterprise, because, of course, we must act quickly, before father has had time to get used to the new situation, or to get up some new prejudice about it. And mind you, you're to bring over Harold yourself in person, early, and in time for lunch. But you're to see that father himself does not get here until after lunch. Have him come early in the afternoon, say at three o'clock. Tell father we'll dine late, against the usual Sunday custom, for his sake, and that we have some other sort of little fandango running earlier in the day. You needn't say what. The purpose of all this is to give time for me to take Harold into my plots, and to arrange matters with him. Then, when father comes, the show will proceed,—trained elephants, conjurers, and all the rest that may be called moral and picturesque. The effect, as you may leave me to determine, will be all that any one could desire. Both Harold and father are, of course, to stay here all night. Lest as lone lorn woman I should feel too unprotected in the company
of so many of you men, I may take it upon myself to have other company also at dinner. But I'm not sure yet. At any rate, we're to have the great conversion take place before dinner, if possible."

"Well," said Tom submissively, "if this is what I have to arrange for, I must go back to town forthwith, that no time may be lost. I must order up the carriage, I suppose."

A few minutes later Tom reverently and sedately took his leave, feeling, as had happened before after certain of his interviews with Margaret, that his ears must have been somehow softly boxed, he could hardly tell when or by whom. Margaret was just now fairly radiant. She even let him kiss her hand as he left. It seemed to him long since he had seen just such a look in her face. He grew once more hopeful.