Through Santa Clara Wheat

By FRANCIS BRET HARTE.

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CHAPTER I.

He took all this with such freedom.

It was an enormous wheat field in the Santa Clara valley, stretching to the horizon line unbroken. The meridian sun shone upon it without glint or shadow, but at times when a stronger gust of the trade winds passed over it there was a quick, slanting depression of the whole surface that was, however, as quickly billow as it self was undone again. Even when a light breeze played down its long level the agitation was superficial, and seemed only to momentarily lift a veil of greenish mist that hung above its immovable depths. Occasional puffs of dust silently rose and fell along an invisible line across the field, as if a current of air were passing through it, but were rather visible than audible.

Suddenly a faint shout, apparently somewhere in the vicinity of the line, brought out a perfectly clear response, followed by the audible murmur of voices, which it was impossible to localize. Yet the whole field was so devoid of any suggestion of human life or motion that it seemed rather as if the vast expanse itself had become suddenly articulate and intelligible.

"What say?"

"Wheel's off."

"Where?"

"'N the road?"

One of the voices here indicated itself in the direction of the line of dust and said, "Comin'," and a man stepped out from the wheat into a broad and dusty avenue.

With his presence these things became apparent. First, that the puffs of dust had indicated the existence of an invisible avenue through the undivided and undivided field of grain; second, that the stalks, at whose on either side it were as tall as to actually hide a passing vehicle, and yet that a vehicle had just passed, leaving a wheel and been dragged partly into the grain by its frightened horse, which a hasty man was trying to restrain and pacify.

The horse, given up to equine hysterics, and evidently convinced that the ordinary buggy behind him had been changed into some dangerous and appalling creation, still plunged and kicked violently to rid himself of it. The man who had stepped out of the depths of the wheat quickly crossed the road, unhitched the traces, drew back the vehicle, and glancing at the travelers' dusty and disordered clothes said with curt sympathy:

"Shaki, take—but not hurt—eh?"

"No, neither of us. I went over with the buggy when the wheel cramped, but she jumped clear."

He had made a gesture indicating the presence of another. The man turned quickly. There was a second figure—a young girl standing beside the grain from which he had emerged, embracing a few stalks of wheat with one arm and a hand in which she still held her parasol, while she grasped her gathered skirts with the other, and trying to find a secure foothold for her two neat, narrow slippers on a crumbling cake of adobe above the fathomless dust of the roadway. Her face, although annoyed and discontented, was pretty and her light dress and slim figure were suggestive of a certain superior condition.

The man's manner at once softened with western courtesy. He swung his broad brimmed hat from his head and bent his body with the ceremoniousness of the country ball room. "I reckon the lady had better come up to the shanty, out o' the dust and sun, till we kin help you get these things fixed," he said to the driver. "I'll send round by the road for your hoss, and have one of mine fetch up your wagon."

"Is it far?" asked the girl, slightly acknowledging his salutation, without waiting for her companion to reply.

"Only a step this way," he answered, motioning to the field of wheat beside her.

"What! In there? I never could go in there," she said decidedly.

"It's a heap shorter than by the road and not so dusty. I'll go with you and pilot you."

The young girl cast a vexed look at her companion as the probable cause of all this trouble and shook her head. But at the same moment one little foot slipped from the adobe into the dust again. She instantly clambered back with a little feminine shriek, ejaculated, "Well, of all things!" and then fixing her annoyed blue eyes on the stranger asked impatiently: "Why couldn't I go there by the road in the wagon? I could manage to hold on and keep in."

"Because I reckon you'd find it too powerful hot waitin' here till we got round to ye."

There was no doubt it was very hot, the radiation from the baking roadway beating up under her parasol and pricking her cheek bones and eyeballs like needles. She gave a fastidious little shudder, furled her parasol, gathered her skirts still tighter, faced about and said, "Go on then." The man slipped backward into the ranks of stalks, parting them with one hand and holding out the other as if to lead her. But she evaded the invitation by holding her tightly drawn skirt with both hands and bending her head forward as if she had not noticed it. The next moment the road, and even the whole outer world, disappeared behind them, and they seemed floating in a choking, green, translucent mist.

But the effect was only momentary. A few steps further she found that she could walk with little difficulty between the ranks of stalks, which were regularly spaced, and the resemblance now changed to that of a long pillared conservatory of greenish glass that touched all objects with its pervading hue. She also found that the close air above her head was continually freshened by the interchange of current of lower temperature from below, as if the whole vast field had a circulation of its own, and that the adobe beneath her feet was gratefully cool to her tread. There was no dust, as he had said; what had at first half suffocated her seemed to be some stimulating aroma of creation that filled the narrow green aisles, and now imparted a strange vigor and excitement to her as she walked along. Meantime her guide was not conversationally idle. Now, no doubt she had never seen anything like this before? It was the ordinary wheat, only it was grown on adobe soil—the richest in the valley. These stalks, she could see herself, were ten and twelve feet high. That was the trouble, they all ran too much to stalk, though the grain yield was "euthen pow'ful." She could tell that to her friends, for he reckoned she was the only young lady that had ever walked under such a growth. Perhaps she was new to California? He thought so from the start. Well, this was California, and this was not the least of the ways it could "lay over" every other country on God's yearth. Many folks thought it was the gold and the climate; but she could see for herself what it could do with wheat. He wondered if her brother had ever told her of it. Nay? The stranger wasn't her brother—not cousin—nor company—no, only the hired driver from a San Jose hotel, who was takin' her over to Maj. Randolph's. Yes, he knew the old major; the ranch was a pretty place, nigh onto three miles further on. Now that he knew the driver was no relation of hers, he didn't mind telling her that the buggy was a "rather old concern" and the driver didn't know his business. Yes, it might be good up so as to take her over to the major's. There was one of their own men—a young fellow—who could do anything that could be done with wood and iron—a regular genius—and he'd fix it. It might take an hour, but she'd find it quite cool waiting in the shanty. It was a rough place, for they only camped out there during the season to look after the crop, and lived at their own homes the rest of the time. Was she minded to stay under the roof? He noticed she had not brought her trunk with her. Had she known the major's wife long? He hoped she intended of settling in the parlor's colonies.

All this naive, good humored questioning her as often cruelly monosyllabic as it was unique enough, but as often the courteous instinct of a simple, unaffected people to compensate the stranger by inviting him to talk of what concerns himself rather than idle curiosities—was never, I fear, met only by monosyllables from the young lady, or an impatient question in return. She scarcely raised her eyes to the broad, jean shirted back that preceded her through the grain until the man abruptly ceased talking, and his manner, without losing its half paternal courtesy, became stronger. She was beginning to be conscious of her incivility, and was half trying to think of something to say, when he exclaimed, with a slight air of relief, "Leastways we are," and the shanty suddenly appeared before them.

It certainly was very rough—a mere shell of unpainted boards that scarcely rose above the level of the surrounding grain, and a few yards distant was invisible. Its slightly sloping roof, already warped and shrunken into long fissures that permitted glimpses of the steel blue sky above, was evidently intended only as a shelter from the sleepless sun in these two months of rainless days and cloudless nights when it was inhabited. Through the open doors and windows she could see a row of "bunks," or rude sleeping berths, against the walls, furnished with coarse mattresses and blankets. As the young girl halted, the man, with an instinct of delicacy, hurried forward, entered the shanty, and dragging a rude bench to the doorway, placed it so that she could sit beneath the shade of the roof, yet with her back to these domestic revelations. Two or three men who had been apparently lounging there rose quickly and unobtrusively withdrew. Her guide brought her a tin cup of deliciously cool water, exchanged a few hurried words with his companions, and then disappeared with them, leaving her alone.

Her first sense of relief from their company was, I fear, stronger than any other feeling. After a hurried glance around the deserted apartment, she arose, shook out her dress and mantle, and then going into the darkest corner supported herself with one hand against the wall, while with the other she drew off one by one her slippers from her slim striped stockinged feet, shook and blew out the dust that had penetrated within and put them on again. Then perceiving a triangular fragment of looking glass nailed against the wall, she settled the strings of her bonnet by the aid of its reflection, patted the fringe of brown hair on her forehead with her separated five fingers, as if playing an imaginary tune on her brow, and came back with musical abstraction to the doorway.

Everything was quiet, and her seclusion seemed unbroken. A smile played for an instant in the soft shadows of her eyes and mouth as she recalled the abrupt withdrawal of the men. Then her mouth straightened and her brows slightly knit. It was certainly very unmannerly in them to go off in that way. "Good heavens! couldn't they have stayed around—without talking? Surely it didn't require four men to go and bring up that wagon." She picked up her parasol from the bench with an impatient little jerk. Then she held out her ungloved hand into the hot sunshine beyond the door with the gesture she would have used had it been raining, and withdrew it as quickly—her hand quite scorched in the burning rays. Nevertheless, after another impatient pause she desperately put up her parasol and stepped from the shanty.

Presently she was conscious of a faint sound of hammering not far away. Perhaps there was another shed, but hidden like everything else in this monotonous, ridiculous grain. Some stalks, however, were trodden down and broken around the shanty; she could move more easily and see where she was going. To her delight, a few steps further brought her into a current of the trade wind and a cooler atmosphere. And a short distance beyond there certainly was the shed from which the hammering proceeded. She approached it boldly.

It was simply a roof upheld by rude uprights and cross beams and open to the breeze that swept through it. At one end was a small blacksmith's forge, some machinery and what appeared to be part of a small steam engine. Midway of the shed was a closet or cupboard fastened with a large padlock. Occupying its whole length on the other side was a work bench, and at the further end stood the workman she had heard.

He was apparently only a year or two older than herself, and clad in blue jean overalls, blackened and smeared with oil and coal dust. Even his youthful face, which he turned toward her, had a black smudge running across it, and almost obliterating a small auburn mustache. The look of surprise that he gave her, however, quickly passed. He remained patiently and in a half preoccupied way holding his hammer in his hand as she advanced. This was evidently the young fellow who could "do anything that could be done with wood and iron."

She was very sorry to disturb him, but could he tell her how long it would be before the wagon could be brought up and mended? He could not say that until he himself saw what was to be done. If it was only a matter of a wheel, he could fix it up in a few moments; if, as he had been told, it was a case of twisted or bent axle it would take longer, but it would be here very soon. And then—would he let her wait here, as she was very anxious to know at once—and it was much cooler than in that other shed? Certainly; he would go over and bring her a bench. But here she begged he wouldn't trouble himself; she could sit anywhere comfortably.

The lower end of the workbench was covered with clean and odorous shavings. She lightly brushed them aside, and with a youthful movement swung herself to a seat upon it, supporting herself on one hand as she leaned toward him. She could then see that his eyes were of a light yellowish brown, like clarified honey, with a singular look of clear concentration in them, which, however, was the same whether turned upon his work, the surrounding grain or upon her. This, and his sublime unconsciousness of the smudge across his face and his blackened hands, made her wonder if the man who could do everything with wood and iron was above doing anything with water. She had half a mind to tell him of it, particularly as she noticed also that his throat below the line of sunburn disclosed by his open collar was quite white and his grimy hands well made. She was wondering whether he would be affronted if she said in her politest way "I beg your pardon, but do you know you have quite accidentally got something on your face?" and offer her handkerchief, which of course he would decline, when her eye fell on the steam engine.

"How odd! Do you use that on the farm?"

No—he smiled here, the smudge accenting it, and seating off his white teeth in a Christy minstrel fashion that exasperated her—no. Although it could be used and had been. But it was his first effort, made two years ago, when he was younger and more inexperienced. It was a rather rough thing, she could see, but he had to make it at odd times with what iron he could pick up or pay for, and at different forges where he worked.

She begged his pardon—where?——

Where he worked.

Ah, then he was the machinist or engineer here?

No, he worked here just like the others, only he was allowed to put up a forge while the grain was green, and have his bench, in consideration of the odd jobs he could do in the way of mending tools, etc. There was a heap of mending and welding to do—she had no idea how quickly agricultural machines got out of order. He had done much of his work on the steam engine on moonlit nights. Yes, she had no idea how perfectly clear and bright it was here in the valley on such nights, although of course the shadows were very dark, and when he dropped a screw or a nut it was difficult to find. He had worked there because it saved time and because it didn't cost anything, and he had nobody to look on or interfere with him. No; it was not lonely; the coyotes and wild cats sometimes came very near, but were always more surprised and frightened than he was, and once a horseman who had strayed off the distant road yonder mistook him for an animal and shot at him twice.

He told all this with such freedom from embarrassment and with such apparent unconsciousness of the blue eyes that were following him and the light, graceful figure—which was so near his own that in some of his gestures his grimy hands almost touched its delicate garments—that, accustomed as she was to a certain masculine aberration in her presence, she was greatly amused by his naive acceptance of her as an equal. Suddenly looking frankly in her face he said:

"I'll show you a secret if you care to see it."

Nothing would please her more.

He glanced hurriedly around, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock that secured the closet she had noticed. Then reaching within with infinite care he brought out a small mechanical model.

"There's an invention of my own. A reaper and thresher combined. I'm going to have it patented and have a big one made from this model. This will work, as you see."

He then explained to her with great precision how as it moved over the field the double operation was performed by the same motive power. That it would be a saving of a certain amount of labor and time which she could not remember. She did not understand a word of his explanations; she saw only a clean and pretty, but complicated, toy that, under the manipulation of his grimy fingers, rattled a number of frail like staves and worked a number of wheels and drums, yet there was no indication of her ignorance in her sparkling eyes and smiling, breathless attitude. Perhaps she was interested in his own absorption, the revelation of his preoccupation with this model struck her as if he had made her a confidant of some boyish passion for one of her own sex, and she regarded him with the same sympathizing superiority.

"You will make a fortune out of it," she said pleasantly.

Well, he might make enough to be able to go on with some other inventions he had in his mind. They cost money and time, no matter how careful one was.

This was another interesting revelation to the young girl. He not only did not seem to care for the profit his devotion brought him, but even his one beloved ideal might be displaced by another. So like a man after all.

Her reflections were broken upon by the sound of voices. The young man carefully replaced the model in its closet with a parting glance, as if he was closing a shrine, and said, "There comes the wagon." The young girl turned to meet the men, who were dragging it from the road with the half complacent air of having been victorious over their late rude abandonment, but they did not seem to notice it or to be surprised at her companion, who quickly stepped forward and examined the broken vehicle with workmanlike deliberation.

"I hope you will be able to do something with it," she said sweetly, appealing directly to him. "I should thank you so much." He did not reply. Presently he looked up to the man who had brought her to the shanty, and said: "The axle's strained, but its safe for five or six miles more of this road. I'll put the wheel on easily." He paused and, without glancing at her, continued:

"You might send her on by the cart."

"Pray don't trouble yourselves," interrupted the young girl with a pink uprising in her cheeks, "I shall be quite satisfied with the buggy as it stands." Send "her" on in the cart! Indeed! Really they were a rude set—all of them.

Without taking the slightest notice of her remark the man replied gravely to the young mechanic, "Yes, but we'll be wanting the cart before it can get back from taking her."

"Her" again! "I assure you the buggy will serve perfectly well—if this—gentleman—will only be kind enough to put on the wheel again," she returned hotly.

The young mechanic at once set to work. The young girl walked apart silently until the wheel was restored to its axle. But to her surprise a different horse was led forward to be harnessed.

"We thought your horse wagn't safe in case of another accident," said the first man, with the same smileless consideration. "This one wouldn't cut up if he was harnessed to an earthquake or a worse driver than you've got."

It occurred to her instantly that the more obvious remedy of sending another driver had been already discussed and rejected by them. Yet when her own driver appeared a moment afterward she ascended to her seat with some dignity and a slight increase of color.

"I am very much obliged to you all," she said, without glancing at the young inventor.

"Don't mention it, miss."

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon." They all took off their hats with the same formal gravity as the horse moved forward, but turned back to their work again before she was out of the field.

CHAPTER II.

He was instantly followed by his wife.

The rancho of Maj. Randolph lay on a rich fulda of the coast range and overlooked the great wheat plains that the young girl had just left. A house of wood and adobe, buried to its first story in rose trees and passion vines, it was large and commodious. Yet it contained only the major, his wife, her son and daughter and the few occasional visitors from San Francisco whom he entertained and she tolerated.

For the major's household was not entirely harmonious. While a young infantry subaltern at a gulf station he had been attracted by the piquant foreign accent and dramatic gestures of a French creole widow, and—believing them in the first flush of his youthful passion more than an offset to the encumbrance of her two children, who with the memory of various marital infidelities were all her late husband had left her—had proposed, been accepted and promptly married to her. Before he had obtained his captaincy she had partly lost her accent, and those dramatic gestures which had accented the passion of their brief courtship began to intensify domestic altercation and the bursts of idle jealousy to which she was subject. Whether she was revenging herself on her second husband for the faults of the first is not known, but it was certain that she brought an unhallowed knowledge of the weaknesses, cheap cynicism and vanity of a foreign predecessor to sit in judgment upon the simple minded and chivalrous American soldier who had succeeded him, and who was in fact the most loyal of husbands. The natural result of her skepticism was an espionage and criticism of the wives of the major's brother officers that compelled a frequent change of quarters. When to this was finally added a racial difference and antipathy, the public disparagement of the customs and education of her female colleagues, and the sudden insistence of a French and foreign dominance in her household beyond any ordinary creole justification, Randolph, presumably to avoid later international complications, resigned while he was yet a major. Luckily his latest banishment to an extreme western outpost had placed him in California during a flood of a speculation epoch. He purchased a valuable Spanish grant to three leagues of land for little over three months' pay. Following that yearning which compels retired ship captains and rovers of all degree to buy a farm in their old days, the major, professionally and socially inured to border strife, sought surcease and Arcadian repose in ranching.

It was here that Mrs. Randolph, late relict of the late Scipion L'Hommadieu, devoted herself to bringing up her children after the extremest of French methods, and in resurrecting a "de" from her own family to give a distinct and aristocratic character to their name. The "De Fontages L'Hommadieus" were, however, only known to their neighbors, after the western fashion, by their stepfather's name, when they were known at all, which was seldom. For the boy was unpleasantly conceited as a precocious worldling, and the girl as unpleasantly complacent in her role of ingenue. The household was completely dominated by Mrs. Randolph. A punctilious Catholic, she attended all the functions of the adjacent mission, and the shadow of a black soutane at twilight gliding through the wild oat fields behind the rancho had often been mistaken for a coyote. The peace loving major did not object to a piety which, while it left his own conscience free, imparted a respectable religious air to his household, and kept him from the equally distasteful approaches of the Puritanism of his neighbors, and was blissfully unconscious that he was strengthening the antagonistic foreign element in his family with an alien church.

Meantime, as the repaired buggy was slowly making its way toward his house, Maj. Randolph entered his wife's boudoir with a letter which the San Francisco post had just brought him. A look of embarrassment on his good humored face straightened the hard lines of hers, and she felt some momentary weakness of her natural enemy and prepared to give battle.

"I'm afraid here's something of a muddle, Josephine," he began with a deprecating smile; "Mallory, who was coming down here with his daughter, you know"——

"This is the first intimation I have had that anything has been settled upon," interrupted the lady with appalling deliberation.

"However, my dear, you know I told you last week that he thought of bringing her here while he went south on business. You know, being a widower, he has no one to leave her with."

"And I suppose it is the American fashion to intrust one's daughters to any old boon companion?"

"Mallory is an old friend," interrupted the major impatiently. "He knows I'm married, and although he has never seen you he is quite willing to leave his daughter here."

"Thank you!"

"Come, you know what I mean. The man naturally believes that my wife will be a proper chaperon for his daughter. But that is not the present question. He intended to call here; I expected to take you over to San Jose to see her and all that, you know, but the fact of it is—that is—it seems from this letter that—he's been called away sooner than he expected, and that—well—hang it! The girl is actually on her way here now."

"Alone?"

"I suppose so. You know one thinks nothing of that here."

"Or any other propriety, for that matter."

"For heaven's sake, Josephine, don't be ridiculous! Of course it's stupid her coming in this way, and Mallory ought to have brought her, but she's coming and we must receive her. By Jove! Here she is now!" he added, starting up after a hurried glance through the window. "But what kind of a d—d turn out is that, anyhow?"

It certainly was an odd looking conveyance that had entered the gates and was now slowly coming up the drive toward the house. A large draft horse harnessed to a dust covered buggy, whose strained forearle, bent by the last mile of heavy road, had slanted the tops of the forewheels toward each other at an alarming angle. The light, graceful dress and elegant parasol of the young girl who occupied half of its single seat looked ludicrously pronounced by the side of the slouching figure and grimy duster of the driver, who occupied the other half.

Mrs. Randolph gave a gritty laugh. "I thought you said she was alone? Is that an escort she has picked up, American fashion, on the road?"

"That's her hired driver, no doubt. Hang it! she can't drive here by herself," retorted the major, impatiently, hurrying to the door and down the staircase. But he was instantly followed by his wife. She had no idea of permitting a possible understanding to be exchanged in their first greeting. The late M. L'Hommadieu had been able to impart a whole plan of intrigue in a single word and glance.

Happily Rose Mallory, already in the hall, in a few words detailed the accident that had befallen her to the honest sympathy of the major and the coldly polite concern of Mrs. Randolph, who in deliberately chosen sentences managed to convey to the young girl the conviction that accidents of any kind to young ladies were to be regarded as only a shade removed from indiscretions. Rose was impressed and even flattered by the fastidiousness of this foreign appearing woman, and after the fashion of youthful natures accorded to her the respect due to recognized authority. When to this authority, which was evident, she added a depreciation of the major, I fear that some common instinct of feminine tyranny responded in Rose's heart, and that on the very threshold of the honest soldier's home she tacitly agreed with the wife to look down upon him. Mrs. Randolph departed to inform her son and daughter of the guest's arrival.

As a matter of fact, however, they had already observed her approach to the house through the slits of their drawn window blinds and these even narrower prejudices and limited comprehensions which their education had fostered. The girl Adele had only grasped the fact that Rose had come to their house in fine clothes, alone with a man in a broken down vehicle, and was moved to easy mirth and righteous wonder. The young man Emile had agreed with her, with the mental reservation that the guest was pretty and must eventually fall in love with him. They both, however, welcomed her with a trained politeness and a superficial attention that, while the indifference of her own countrymen in the wheat field was still fresh in her recollection, struck her with grateful contrast. The major's quiet and unobtrusive kindliness naturally made less impression or was accepted as a matter of course.

"Well," said the major, cheerfully but tentatively, to his wife when they were alone again, "she seems a nice girl after all. And a good deal of pluck and character, by Jove! to push on in that broken buggy rather than linger or come in a farm cart, eh?"

"She was alone in that wheat field," said Mrs. Randolph with grim deliberation, "for half an hour—she confesses it herself—talking with a young man."

"Yes, but the others had gone for the buggy. And, in the name of heaven, what would you have her do? Hide herself in the grain?" said the major, desperately. "Besides," he added, with a recklessness he afterward regretted, "that mechanical chap they've got there is really intelligent and worth talking to."

"I have no doubt she thought so," said Mrs. Randolph, with a mirthless smile, "in fact I observe that the American freedom generally means doing what you want to do. Indeed I wonder she didn't bring him with her! Only I beg, major, that you will not again in the presence of my daughter—and I may even say of my son—talk lightly of the solitary meetings of young ladies with mechanics, even though their faces were smutty and their clothes covered with oil."

The major here muttered something about there being less danger in a young lady listening to the intelligence of a coarsely dressed laborer than to the compliments of a rose scented fop, but Mrs. Randolph walked out of the room before he finished the evident platitude.

That night Rose Mallory retired to her room in a state of self satisfaction that she even felt was to a certain extent a virtue. She was delighted with her reception and with her hostess and family. It was strange her father had not spoken more of Mrs. Randolph, who was clearly the superior of his old friend. What fine manners they all had, so different from other people she had known. There was quite an Old World civilization about them; really it was like going abroad! She would make the most of her opportunity and profit by her visit. She would begin by improving her French—they spoke it perfectly and with such a pure accent. She would correct certain errors she was conscious of in her own manners, and copy Mrs. Randolph as much as possible. Certainly there was a great deal to be said of Mrs. Randolph's way of looking at things. Now she thought of it calmly, there was too much informality and freedom in American ways! There was not enough respect due to position and circumstances! Take those men in the wheat field, for example—yet here she found it difficult to formulate an indictment against them for "freedom." She would like to go there some day with the Randolphs and let them see what company manners were!

She was thoroughly convinced now that her father had done wrong in sending her alone; it certainly was most disrespectful to them and careless of him (she had quite forgotten that she had herself proposed to her father to go alone rather than wait at the hotel), and she must have looked very ridiculous in her fine clothes and the broken down buggy. When her trunk came by express to-morrow she would look out something more sober. She must remember that she was in a Catholic and religious household now. Ah, yes! how very fine it was to see that priest at dinner in his soutane, sitting down like one of the family and making them all seem like a picture of some historical and aristocratic romance! And then they were actually "de Fontages L'Hommadieu." How different he was from that shabby Methodist minister who used to come and see her father in a black cravat with a hideous bow. Really there was something to say for a religion that contained so much picturesque refinement—and for her part—but that will do. I beg to say that I am not writing of any particular snob nor feminine monstrosity, but of a very charming creature who was quite able to say her prayers afterward like a good girl, and lay her pretty cheek upon her pillow without a blush.

She opened her window and looked out. The moon, a great silver dome, was uplifting itself from a bluish gray level which she knew was the distant plain of wheat. Somewhere in its midst appeared a dull star, at times brightening as if blown upon or drawn upward in a comet like trail. By some odd instinct she felt that it was the solitary forge of the young inventor, and pictured him standing before it with his abstracted hazel eyes and a face more begrimed in the moonlight than ever. When did he wash himself? Perhaps not until Sunday. How lonely it must be out there! She slightly shivered and turned from the window. As she did so it seemed to her that something knocked against her door from without. Opening it quickly she was almost certain that the sound of a rustling skirt retreated along the passage. It was very late—perhaps she had disturbed the house by shutting her window. No doubt it was the motherly interest of Mrs. Randolph that impelled her to softly come and look after her. And for once her simple surmises were correct. For not only the inspecting eyes of her hostess, but the amatory glances of the youthful Emile had been fastened upon her window until the light disappeared, and even the Holy Mission Church of San Jose had uncurled itself of the dear child's safety with a large and supple ear at her keyhole.

The next morning Maj. Randolph took her with Adele in a light carriole over the ranch. Although his domain was nearly as large as the adjoining wheat plain, it was not like that monopolized by one enormous characteristic yield, but embraced a more diversified product. There were acres and acres of potatoes, in rows of endless and varying succession. There were miles of wild oats and barley, which overtopped them as they drove in narrow lanes of dry and dusty machinery. There were orchards of pears, apricots, peaches and nectarines, and vineyards of grapes so comparatively dwarfed in height that they scarcely reached to the level of their eyes, yet laden and breaking beneath the weight of their indiscriminately disproportionate fruit. What seemed to be a vast green plateau covered with tiny patches, that headed the northern edge of the prospect, was an enormous bed of strawberry plants. But everywhere, crossing the track, bounding the fields, orchards and vineyards, intersecting the paths of the whole domain, were narrow irrigating ditches and channels of running water.

"These," said the major pointedly, "are the veins and arteries of the ranch. Come with me now and I'll show you its pulsating heart." Descending from the wagon into pedestrian prose again he led Rose a hundred yards further to a shed that covered a wonderful artesian well. In the center of a basin a column of water rose regularly with the even flow and volume of a brook. "It is one of the largest in the state," said the major, "and is the life of all that grows here during six months of the year."

Pleased as the young girl was with this evidence of the prosperity and position of her host, she was strange, however, with the fact that the farm laborers, vine growers, nursery men and all hoeing hands scattered on the estate were apparently of the same independent, unpoetic and unpassionate character as the men of the wheat field. There were no cottages or farm buildings that she could see, nor any apparent come then between the household and the estate. Far from suggesting tenantry or retainers, the men who were working in the field glanced at them as they passed with the indifference of strangers, or replied to the major's good humored questionings with a monosyllabic manner or even unmistakable reserve and caution. Her host explained that the ranch was worked by a company "on shares," that those laborers were in fact the bulk of the company, and that he, the major, only furnished the land, the seed and the implements. "That man who was driving the long roller, and with whom you were indignant because he wouldn't get out of our way, is the president of the company."

"That needn't make him so uncivil," said Rose pointedly, "for I'd guess to find you're the landlord," she added triumphantly.

"No," said the major good humoredly, "I am simply the man driving the lighter and more easily managed team for pleasure, and he's the man driving the heavier and more difficult machine for work. It's for me to get out of his way. And looked at in the light of my being the landlord it is still worse, for he is working on shares! I am interrupting his work and reducing his profits merely because I choose to use his road."

I need not say that these strenuously leveling sentiments were received by the young ladies with that feminine scorn which is only qualified by misconception. Rose, who under the influence of her hostess' national charm was impressed that they sounded something like the French revolution, and that Adele must feel like the Princess Elizabeth, rushed to her relief like a good girl. "But, major, now you're a gentleman, and if you had been driving that roller you know you would have turned out for us."

"I don't know about that," said the major mischievously, "but if I had I should have known that the other fellow who accepted it wasn't a gentleman."

But Rose having sufficiently shown her partisanship in the discussion, after the feminine fashion, did not care particularly for the logical result. After a moment's silence she resumed, "And the wheat ranch below—is that carried on in the same way?"

"Yes; but their landlord is a bank, who advances not only the land, but the money to work it, and doesn't ride around in a buggy with a couple of charmingly distracting young ladies."

"And do they all share alike?" continued Rose, ignoring the pleasantry, "big and little—that young inventor with the rest?"

She stopped. She felt the ingenue's usually complacent eyes suddenly fixed upon her with an unhallowed precocity and as quickly withdrawn. Without knowing why, she felt embarrassed and changed the subject.

The next day they drove to the Convent of Santa Clara and the mission college of San Jose. Their welcome at both places seemed to Rose to be a mingling of caste greeting and spiritual zeal, and the austere seclusion and reserve of those cloisters repeated that suggestion of an old world civilization that had already fascinated the