

Map, Southern Pacific R.R., 1876 (detail)

Frank Norris

The Epic of the Wheat

THE OCTOPUS

A STORY OF CALIFORNIA

1901 ♦ Excerpts

[from Book I, Ch. 1]

As from a pinnacle, Presley, from where he now stood, dominated the entire country. The sun had begun to set, everything in the range of his vision was overlaid with a sheen of gold.

First, close at hand, it was the Seed ranch, carpeting the little hollow behind the Mission with a spread of greens, some dark, some vivid, some pale almost to yellowness. Beyond that was the Mission itself, its venerable campanile, in whose arches hung the Spanish King's bells, already glowing ruddy in the sunset. Farther on, he could make out Annixter's ranch house, marked by the skeleton-like tower of the artesian well, and, a little farther to the east, the huddled, tiled roofs of Guadalajara. Far to the west and north, he saw Bonneville very plain, and the dome of the courthouse, a purple silhouette against the glare of the sky. Other points detached themselves, swimming in a golden mist, projecting blue shadows far before them; the mammoth live-oak by Hooven's, towering superb and magnificent; the line of eucalyptus trees, behind which he knew was the Los Muertos ranch house — his home; the watering-tank, the great iron-hooped tower of wood that stood at the joining of the Lower Road and the County Road; the long wind-break of poplar

trees and the white walls of Caraher's saloon on the County Road.

But all this seemed to be only foreground, a mere array of accessories — a mass of irrelevant details. Beyond Annixter's, beyond Guadalajara, beyond the Lower Road, beyond Broderson Creek, on to the south and west, infinite, illimitable, stretching out there under the sheen of the sunset forever and forever, flat, vast, unbroken, a huge scroll, unrolling between the horizons, spread the great stretches of the ranch of Los Muertos, bare of crops, shaved close in the recent harvest. Near at hand were hills, but on that far southern horizon only the curve of the great earth itself checked the view. Adjoining Los Muertos, and widening to the west, opened



Stacking hay, San Joaquin Valley ranch, mid 1880s

the Broderson ranch. The Osterman ranch to the northwest carried on the great sweep of landscape; ranch after ranch. Then, as the imagination itself expanded under the stimulus of that measureless range of vision, even those great ranches resolved themselves into mere foreground, mere accessories, irrelevant details. Beyond the fine line of the horizons, over the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth, were other ranches, equally vast, and beyond these, others, and beyond these, still others, the immensities multiplying, lengthening out vaster and vaster. The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, Titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat, quivering and shimmering under the sun's red eye. At long intervals, a faint breath of wind out of the south passed slowly over the levels of the baked and empty earth, accentuating the silence, marking off the stillness. It seemed to exhale from the land itself, a prolonged sigh as of deep fatigue. It was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world.

Ha! there it was, his epic, his inspiration, his West, his thundering progression of hexameters. A sudden uplift, a sense of exhilaration, of physical exaltation appeared abruptly to sweep Presley from his feet. As from a point high above the world, he seemed to dominate a universe, a whole order of things. He was dizzied, stunned, stupefied, his morbid supersensitive mind reeling, drunk with the intoxication of mere immensity. Stupendous ideas for which there were no names drove headlong through his brain. Terrible, formless shapes, vague figures,

gigantic, monstrous, distorted, whirled at a gallop through his imagination.

He started homeward, still in his dream, descending from the hill, emerging from the canyon, and took the short cut straight across the Quien Sabe ranch, leaving Guadalajara far to his left. He tramped steadily on through the wheat stubble, walking fast, his head in a whirl.

Never had he so nearly grasped his inspiration as at that moment on the hill-top. Even now, though the sunset was fading, though the wide reach of valley was shut from sight, it still kept him company. Now the details came thronging back — the component parts of his poem, the signs and symbols of the West. It was there, close at hand, he had been in touch with it all day. It was in the centenarian's vividly coloured reminiscences — De La Cuesta, holding his grant from the Spanish crown, with his power of life and death; the romance of his marriage; the white horse with its pillion of red leather and silver bridle mountings; the bull-fights in the Plaza; the gifts of gold dust, and horses and tallow. It was in Vanamee's strange history, the tragedy of his love; Angéle Varian, with her marvellous loveliness; the Egyptian fulness of her lips, the perplexing upward slant of her violet eyes, bizarre, oriental; her white forehead made three cornered by her plaits of gold hair; the mystery of the Other; her death at the moment of her child's birth. It was in Vanamee's flight into the wilderness; the story of the Long Trail, the sunsets behind the altar-



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Mission San Antonio de Padua, San Joaquin Valley, drawing, 1873

like mesas, the baking desolation of the deserts; the strenuous, fierce life of forgotten towns, down there, far off, lost below the horizons of the southwest; the sonorous music of unfamiliar names — Quijotoa, Uintah, Sonora, Laredo, Uncompahgre. It was in the Mission, with its cracked bells, its decaying walls, its venerable sun dial, its fountain and old garden, and in the Mission Fathers themselves, the priests, the padres, planting the first wheat and oil and wine to produce the elements of the Sacrament — a trinity of great industries, taking their rise in a religious rite.

Abruptly, as if in confirmation, Presley heard the sound of a bell from the direction of the Mission itself. It was the *de Profundis*, a note of the Old World; of the ancient régime, an echo from the hillsides of mediæval Europe, sounding there in this new land, unfamiliar and strange at this end-of-the-century time.

By now, however, it was dark. Presley hurried forward. He came to the line fence of the Quien Sabe ranch. Everything was very still. The stars were all out. There was not a sound other than the *de Profundis*, still sounding from very far away. At long intervals the great earth sighed dreamily in its sleep. All about, the feeling of absolute peace and quiet and security and untroubled happiness and content seemed descending from the stars like a benediction. The beauty of his poem, its idyl, came to him like a caress; that alone had been lacking. It was that, perhaps, which had left it hitherto incomplete. At last he was to grasp his song in all its entity.

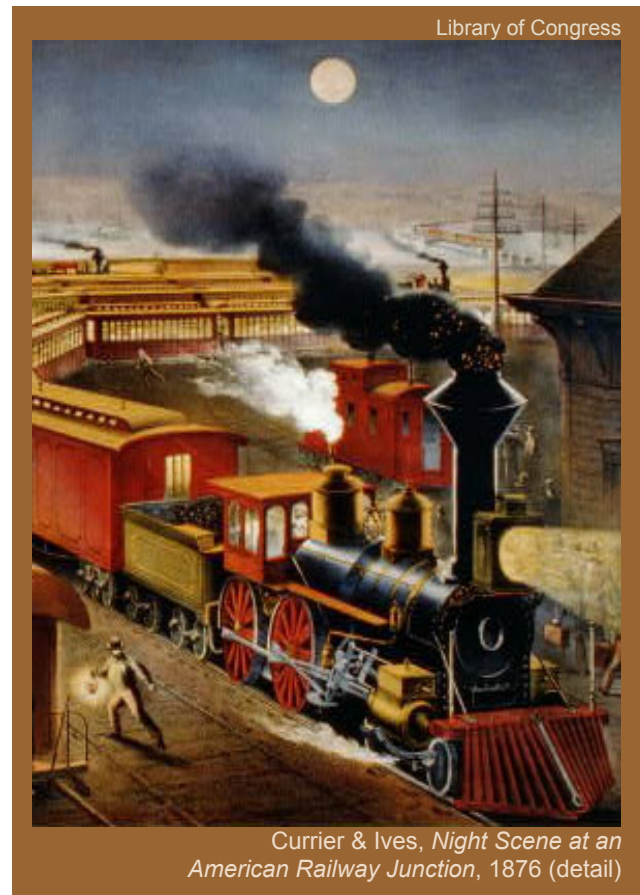
But suddenly there was an interruption. Presley had climbed the fence at the limit of the Quien Sabe ranch. Beyond was Los Muertos, but between the two ran the railroad. He had only time to jump back upon the embankment when, with a quivering of all the earth, a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance, shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamour of its iron hoofs.

Abruptly Presley remembered. This must be the crack passenger engine of which Dyke had

told him, the one delayed by the accident on the Bakersfield division and for whose passage the track had been opened all the way to Fresno.

Before Presley could recover from the shock of the irruption, while the earth was still vibrating, the rails still humming, the engine was far away, flinging the echo of its frantic gallop over all the valley. For a brief instant it roared with a hollow diapason on the Long Trestle over Broderson Creek, then plunged into a cutting farther on, the quivering glare of its fires losing itself in the night, its thunder abruptly diminishing to a subdued and distant humming. All at once this ceased. The engine was gone.

But the moment the noise of the engine



lapsed, Presley — about to start forward again — was conscious of a confusion of lamentable sounds that rose into the night from out the engine's wake. Prolonged cries of agony, sobbing wails of infinite pain, heart-rending, pitiful.

The noises came from a little distance. He ran down the track, crossing the culvert, over the

irrigating ditch, and at the head of the long reach of track — between the culvert and the Long Trestle — paused abruptly, held immovable at the sight of the ground and rails all about him.

In some way, the herd of sheep — Vanamee's herd — had found a breach in the wire fence by the right of way and had wandered out upon the tracks. A band had been crossing just at the moment of the engine's passage. The pathos of it was beyond expression. It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. Under foot it was terrible. The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur.

Presley turned away, horror-struck, sick at heart, overwhelmed with a quick burst of irresistible compassion for this brute agony he could not relieve. The sweetness was gone from the evening, the sense of peace, of security, and placid contentment was stricken from the landscape.

The hideous ruin in the engine's path drove all thought of his poem from his mind. The inspiration vanished like a mist. The *de Profundis* had ceased to ring.

He hurried on across the Los Muertos ranch, almost running, even putting his hands over his

ears till he was out of hearing distance of that all but human distress. Not until he was beyond ear-shot did he pause, looking back, listening. The night had shut down again. For a moment the silence was profound, unbroken.

Then, faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, he heard the engine whistling for Bonneville. Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.



[from Book I, Ch. 2]

The morning was fine; there was no cloud in the sky, but as Harran's buggy drew away from the grove of trees about the ranch house, emerging into the open country on either side of

the Lower Road, he caught himself looking sharply at the sky and the faint line of hills beyond the Quien Sabe ranch. There was a certain indefinite cast to the landscape that to Harran's eye was not to be mistaken. Rain, the first of the season, was not far off.

"That's good," he muttered, touching the bays with the whip, "we can't get our ploughs to hand any too soon."

These ploughs Magnus Derrick had ordered from an Eastern manufacturer some months before, since he was dissatisfied with the results obtained from the ones he had used hitherto, which were of local make. However, there had been exasperating and unexpected delays in their shipment. Magnus and Harran both had counted upon having the ploughs in their implement barns that very week, but a tracer sent after them had only resulted in locating them, still *en route*, somewhere between The Needles and Bakersfield. Now there was likelihood of rain within the week. Ploughing could be undertaken immediately afterward, so soon as the ground

San Francisco papers of the preceding day had arrived on an earlier train. He bought a couple from the station agent and looked them over till a distant and prolonged whistle announced the approach of the down train.

In one of the four passengers that alighted from the train, he recognised his father. He half rose in his seat, whistling shrilly between his teeth, waving his hand, and Magnus Derrick, catching sight of him, came forward quickly.

Magnus — the Governor — was all of six feet tall, and though now well toward his sixtieth year, was as erect as an officer of cavalry. He was broad in proportion, a fine commanding figure, imposing an immediate respect, impressing one with a sense of gravity, of dignity and a certain pride of race. He was smooth-shaven, thin-lipped, with a broad chin, and a prominent hawk-like nose — the characteristic of the family — thin, with a high bridge, such as one sees in the later portraits of the Duke of Wellington. His hair was thick and iron-grey, and had a tendency to curl in a

forward direction just in front of his ears. He wore a top-hat of grey, with a wide brim, and a frock coat, and carried a cane with a yellowed ivory head.

As a young man it had been his ambition to represent his native State — North Carolina — in the United States Senate. Calhoun was his "great man," but in two successive campaigns he had been defeated. His career checked in this direction, he had come to California in the fifties. He had known and had been the intimate friend of such men as Terry, Broderick, General Baker, Lick, Alvarado, Emerich, Larkin, and, above all, of the unfortunate and misunderstood Ralston. Once he

had been put forward as the Democratic candidate for governor, but failed of election. After this Magnus had definitely abandoned politics and had invested all his money in the

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Southern Pacific Railway depot, Anaheim, California, ca. 1895

was softened, but there was a fair chance that the ranch would lie idle for want of proper machinery.

It was ten minutes before train time when Harran reached the depot at Guadalajara. The

Corpus Christi mines. Then he had sold out his interest at a small profit — just in time to miss his chance of becoming a multi-millionaire in the Comstock boom — and was looking for reinvestments in other lines when the news that “wheat had been discovered in California” was passed from mouth to mouth. Practically it amounted to a discovery. Dr. Glenn’s first harvest of wheat in Colusa County, quietly undertaken but suddenly realised with dramatic abruptness, gave a new matter for reflection to the thinking men of the New West. California suddenly leaped unheralded into the world’s market as a competitor in wheat production. In a few years her output of wheat exceeded the value of her output of gold, and when, later on, the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad threw open to settlers the rich lands of Tulare County — conceded to the corporation by the government as a bonus for the construction of the road — Magnus had been quick to seize the opportunity and had taken up the ten thousand acres of Los Muertos. Wherever he had gone, Magnus had taken his family with him. Lyman had been born at Sacramento during the turmoil and excitement of Derrick’s campaign for governor, and Harran at Shingle Springs, in El Dorado County, six years later.

But Magnus was in every sense the “prominent man.” In whatever circle he moved he was the chief figure. Instinctively other men

looked to him as the leader. He himself was proud of this distinction; he assumed the grand manner very easily and carried it well. As a public speaker he was one of the last of the followers of the old school of orators. He even carried the diction and manner of the rostrum into private life. It was said of him that his most colloquial conversation could be taken down in shorthand and read off as an admirable specimen of pure, well-chosen English. He loved to do things upon a grand scale, to preside, to dominate. In his good humour there was something Jovian. When angry, everybody around him trembled. But he had not the genius for detail, was not patient. The certain grandiose lavishness of his disposition occupied itself more with results than with means. He was always ready to take chances, to hazard everything on the hopes of colossal returns. In the mining days at Placerville there was no more redoubtable poker player in the county. He had been as lucky in his mines as in his gambling, sinking shafts and tunnelling in violation of expert theory and finding “pay” in every case. Without knowing it, he allowed himself to work his ranch much as if he was still working his mine. The old-time spirit of ’49, hap-hazard, unscientific, persisted in his mind. Everything was a gamble — who took the greatest chances was most apt to be the greatest winner. The idea of manuring Los Muertos, of husbanding his great resources, he would have scouted as niggardly, Hebraic, ungenerous.

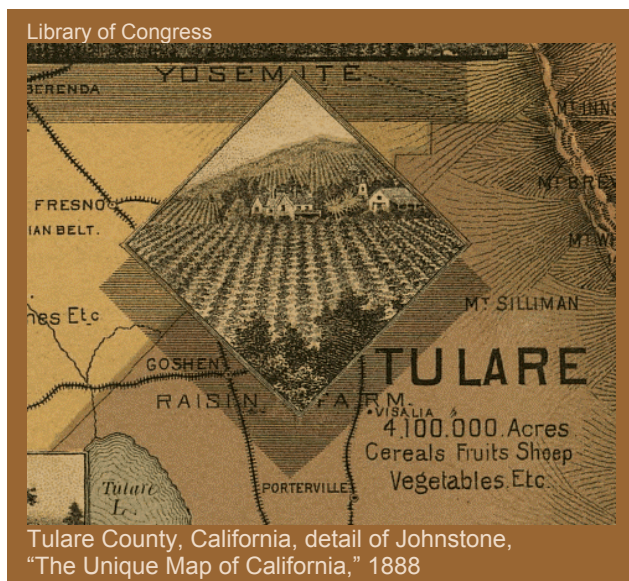
Magnus climbed into the buggy, helping himself with Harran’s outstretched hand which he still held. The two were immensely fond of each other, proud of each other. They were constantly together and Magnus kept no secrets from his favourite son.

“Well, boy.”

“Well, Governor.”

“I am very pleased you came yourself, Harran. I feared that you might be too busy and send Phelps. It was thoughtful.”

Harran was about to reply, but at that moment Magnus caught sight of the three flat cars loaded with bright-painted farming machines which still remained on the siding



above the station. He laid his hands on the reins and Harran checked the team.

“Harran,” observed Magnus, fixing the machinery with a judicial frown, “Harran, those look singularly like our ploughs. Drive over, boy.”

The train had by this time gone on its way and Harran brought the team up to the siding.

“Ah, I was right,” said the Governor. “Magnus Derrick, Los Muertos, Bonneville, from Ditson & Co., Rochester.’ These are ours, boy.”

Harran breathed a sigh of relief.

“At last,” he answered, “and just in time, too. We’ll have rain before the week is out. I think, now that I am here, I will telephone Phelps to send the wagon right down for these. I started blue-stoning to-day.”

Magnus nodded a grave approval.

“That was shrewd, boy. As to the rain, I think you are well informed; we will have an early season. The ploughs have arrived at a happy moment.”

“It means money to us, Governor,” remarked Harran.

But as he turned the horses to allow his father to get into the buggy again, the two were surprised to hear a thick, throaty voice wishing them good-morning, and turning about were aware of S. Behrman, who had come up while they were examining the ploughs. Harran’s eyes flashed on the instant and through his nostrils he drew a sharp, quick breath, while a certain rigour of carriage stiffened the set of Magnus Derrick’s shoulders and back. Magnus had not yet got into the buggy, but stood with the team between him and S. Behrman, eyeing him calmly across the horses’ backs. S. Behrman came around to the other side of the buggy and faced Magnus.

He was a large, fat man, with a great stomach; his cheek and the upper part of his thick neck ran together to form a great tremulous jowl, shaven and blue-grey in colour; a roll of fat, sprinkled with sparse hair, moist with perspiration, protruded over the back of his collar. He wore a heavy black moustache. On his head was a round-topped hat of stiff brown straw, highly varnished. A light-brown linen

vest, stamped with innumerable interlocked horseshoes, covered his protuberant stomach, upon which a heavy watch chain of hollow links rose and fell with his difficult breathing, clinking against the vest buttons of imitation mother-of-pearl.

S. Behrman was the banker of Bonneville. But besides this he was many other things. He was a real estate agent. He bought grain; he dealt



in mortgages. He was one of the local political bosses, but more important than all this, he was the representative of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad in that section of Tulare County. The railroad did little business in that part of the country that S. Behrman did not supervise, from the consignment of a shipment of wheat to the management of a damage suit, or even to the repair and maintenance of the right of way. During the time when the ranchers of the county were fighting the grain-rate case, S. Behrman had been much in evidence in and about the San Francisco court rooms and the lobby of the legislature in Sacramento. He had returned to Bonneville only recently, a decision adverse to the ranchers being foreseen. The position he occupied on the salary list of the Pacific and Southwestern could not readily be defined, for he was neither freight agent, passenger agent, attorney, real-estate broker, nor political servant, though his influence in all these offices was undoubted and enormous. But for all that, the ranchers about Bonneville knew whom

to look to as a source of trouble. There was no denying the fact that for Osterman, Broderson, Annixter and Derrick, S. Behrman was the railroad.

“Mr. Derrick, good-morning,” he cried as he came up. “Good-morning, Harran. Glad to see you back, Mr. Derrick.” He held out a thick hand.

Magnus, head and shoulders above the other, tall, thin, erect, looked down upon S. Behrman, inclining his head, failing to see his extended hand.

“Good-morning, sir,” he observed, and waited for S. Behrman’s further speech.

“Well, Mr. Derrick,” continued S. Behrman, wiping the back of his neck with his handkerchief, “I saw in the city papers yesterday that our case had gone against you.”

Beale Memorial Lib., Bakersfield, CA



Plowing a field, San Joaquin Valley, 1880s

“I guess it wasn’t any great news to *you*,” commented Harran, his face scarlet. “I guess you knew which way Ulsteen was going to jump after your very first interview with him. You don’t like to be surprised in this sort of thing, S. Behrman.”

“Now, you know better than that, Harran,” remonstrated S. Behrman blandly. “I know what you mean to imply, but I ain’t going to let it

make me get mad. I wanted to say to your Governor — I wanted to say to you, Mr. Derrick — as one man to another — letting alone for the minute that we were on opposite sides of the case — that I’m sorry you didn’t win. Your side made a good fight, but it was in a mistaken cause. That’s the whole trouble. Why, you could have figured out before you ever went into the case that such rates are confiscation of property. You must allow us — must allow the railroad — a fair interest on the investment. You don’t want us to go into the receiver’s hands, do you now, Mr. Derrick?”

“The Board of Railroad Commissioners was bought,” remarked Magnus sharply, a keen, brisk flash glinting in his eye.

“It was part of the game,” put in Harran, “for the Railroad Commission to cut rates to a

ridiculous figure, far below a *reasonable* figure, just so that it *would* be confiscation. Whether Ulsteen is a tool of yours or not, he had to put the rates back to what they were originally.”

“If you enforced those rates, Mr. Harran,” returned S. Behrman calmly, “we wouldn’t be able to earn sufficient money to meet operating expenses or fixed charges, to say nothing of a surplus left over to pay dividends —”

“Tell me when the P. and S. W.* ever paid dividends.”

“The lowest rates,” continued S. Behrman, “that the legislature can establish must be such as will secure us a fair interest on our

investment.”

“Well, what’s your standard? Come, let’s hear it. Who is to say what’s a fair rate? The railroad has its own notions of fairness sometimes.”

* Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, Norris’s fictional railway in *The Octopus*.

“The laws of the State,” returned S. Behrman, “fix the rate of interest at seven per cent. That’s a good enough standard for us. There is no reason, Mr. Harran, why a dollar invested in a railroad should not earn as much as a dollar represented by a promissory note — seven per cent. By applying your schedule of rates we would not earn a cent; we would be bankrupt.”

“Interest on your investment!” cried Harran, furious. “It’s fine to talk about fair interest. *I* know and *you* know that the total earnings of the P. and S. W. — their main, branch and leased lines for last year — was between nineteen and twenty millions of dollars. Do you mean to say that twenty million dollars is seven per cent of the original cost of the road?”

S. Behrman spread out his hands, smiling.

“That was the gross, not the net figure — and how can you tell what was the original cost of the road?”

“Ah, that’s just it,” shouted Harran, emphasising each word with a blow of his fist upon his knee, his eyes sparkling, “you take cursed good care that we don’t know anything about the original cost of the road. But we know you are bonded for treble your value; and we know this: that the road *could* have been built for fifty-four thousand dollars per mile and that you

say it cost you eighty-seven thousand. It makes a difference, S. Behrman, on which of these two figures you are basing your seven per cent.”

“That all may show obstinacy, Harran,” observed S. Behrman vaguely, “but it don’t show common sense.”

“We are threshing out old straw, I believe, gentlemen,” remarked Magnus. “The question was thoroughly sifted in the courts.”

“Quite right,” assented S. Behrman. “The best way is that the railroad and the farmer understand each other and get along peaceably. We are both dependent on each other. Your ploughs, I believe, Mr. Derrick.” S. Behrman nodded toward the flat cars.

“They are consigned to me,” admitted Magnus.

“It looks a trifle like rain,” observed S. Behrman, easing his neck and jowl in his limp collar. “I suppose you will want to begin ploughing next week.”

“Possibly,” said Magnus.

“I’ll see that your ploughs are hurried through for you then, Mr. Derrick. We will route them by fast freight for you and it won’t cost you anything extra.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Harran. “The ploughs are here. We have nothing more to do with the railroad. I am going to have my wagons down here this afternoon.”

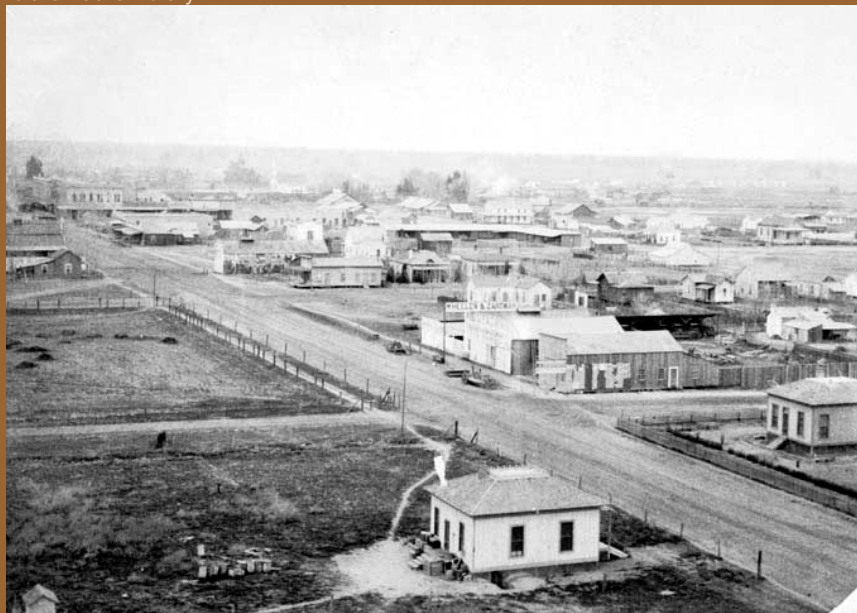
“I am sorry,” answered S. Behrman, “but the cars are going north, not, as you thought, coming *from* the north. They have not been to San Francisco yet.”

Magnus made a slight movement of the head as one who remembers a fact hitherto forgotten. But Harran was as yet unenlightened.

“To San Francisco!” he answered, “we want them here — what are you talking about?”

“Well, you know, of course, the regulations,”

Tulare Public Library



Tulare, California, ca. 1882

answered S. Behrman. "Freight of this kind coming from the Eastern points into the State must go first to one of our common points and be reshipped from there."

Harran did remember now, but never before had the matter so struck home. He leaned back in his seat in dumb amazement for the instant. Even Magnus had turned a little pale. Then, abruptly, Harran broke out violent and raging.

"What next? My God, why don't you break into our houses at night? Why don't you steal the watch out of my pocket, steal the horses out of the harness, hold us up with a shot-gun; yes, 'stand and deliver; your money or your life.' Here we bring our ploughs from the East over your lines, but you're not content with your long-haul rate between Eastern points and Bonneville. You want to get us under your ruinous short-haul rate between Bonneville and San Francisco, *and return*. Think of it! Here's a load of stuff for Bonneville that can't stop at Bonneville, where it is consigned, but has got to go up to San Francisco first *by way of* Bonneville, at forty cents per ton and then be reshipped from San Francisco back to Bonneville again at *fifty-one* cents per ton, the short-haul rate. And we have to pay it all or go without. Here are the ploughs right here, in sight of the land they have got to be used on, the season just ready for them, and we can't touch them. Oh," he exclaimed in deep disgust, "isn't it a pretty mess! Isn't it a farce! the whole dirty business!"

S. Behrman listened to him unmoved, his little eyes blinking under his fat forehead, the gold chain of hollow links clicking against the pearl buttons of his waistcoat as he breathed.

"It don't do any good to let loose like that, Harran," he said at length. "I am willing to do what I can for you. I'll hurry the ploughs through, but I can't change the freight regulation of the road."

"What's your blackmail for this?" vociferated Harran. "How much do you want to let us go? How much have we got to pay you to be *allowed* to use our own ploughs — what's your figure? Come, spit it out."

"I see you are trying to make me angry, Harran," returned S. Behrman, "but you won't

succeed. Better give up trying, my boy. As I said, the best way is to have the railroad and the farmer get along amicably. It is the only way we can do business. Well, s'long, Governor, I must trot along. S'long, Harran." He took himself off.

The Bancroft Library

Central Pacific Railroad broadside, 1876

[from Book I, Ch. 6]

It was a messenger from Bonneville, the uniformed boy that the telephone company employed to carry messages. He had just arrived from town on his bicycle, out of breath and panting.

"Message for you, sir. Will you sign?"

He held the book to Annixter, who signed the receipt, wondering.

The boy departed, leaving a thick envelope of yellow paper in Annixter's hands, the address typewritten, the word "Urgent" written in blue pencil in one corner.

Annixter tore it open. The envelope contained other sealed envelopes, some eight or ten of them, addressed to Magnus Derrick, Osterman, Broderson, Garnett, Keast, Gethings, Chattern, Dabney, and to Annixter himself.

Still puzzled, Annixter distributed the envelopes, muttering to himself:

“What’s up now?”

The incident had attracted attention. A comparative quiet followed, the guests following the letters with their eyes as they were passed around the table. They fancied that Annixter had arranged a surprise.

Magnus Derrick, who sat next to Annixter, was the first to receive his letter. With a word of excuse he opened it.

“Read it, read it, Governor,” shouted a half-dozen voices. “No secrets, you know. Everything above board here to-night.”

Magnus cast a glance at the contents of the letter, then rose to his feet and read:

Magnus Derrick,
Bonnevill, Tulare Co., Cal.

Dear Sir:

By regrade of October 1st, the value of the railroad land you occupy, included in your ranch of Los Muertos, has been fixed at \$27.00 per acre. The land is now for sale at that price to any one.

Yours, etc.,

CYRUS BLAKELEE RUGGLES,
Land Agent, P. and S. W. R. R.
S. BEHRMAN,
Local Agent, P. and S. W. R. R.

In the midst of the profound silence that followed, Osterman was heard to exclaim grimly:

“*That’s a pretty good one. Tell us another.*”

But for a long moment this was the only remark.

The silence widened, broken only by the sound of torn paper as Annixter, Osterman, old

Broderson, Garnett, Keast, Gethings, Chattern, and Dabney opened and read their letters. They were all to the same effect, almost word for word like the Governor’s. Only the figures and the proper names varied. In some cases the price per acre was twenty-two dollars. In Annixter’s case it was thirty.

“And — and the company promised to sell to me, to — to all of us,” gasped old Broderson, “at *two dollars and a half* an acre.”

It was not alone the ranchers immediately around Bonneville who would be plundered by



this move on the part of the Railroad. The “alternate section” system applied throughout all the San Joaquin. By striking at the Bonneville ranchers a terrible precedent was established. Of the crowd of guests in the harness room alone, nearly every man was affected, every man menaced with ruin. All of a million acres was suddenly involved.

Then suddenly the tempest burst. A dozen men were on their feet in an instant, their teeth set, their fists clenched, their faces purple with rage. Oaths, curses, maledictions exploded like the firing of successive mines. Voices quivered with wrath, hands flung upward, the fingers hooked, prehensile, trembled with anger. The sense of wrongs, the injustices, the oppression, extortion, and pillage of twenty years suddenly culminated and found voice in a raucous howl of

execration. For a second there was nothing articulate in that cry of savage exasperation, nothing even intelligent. It was the human animal hounded to its corner, exploited, harried to its last stand, at bay, ferocious, terrible, turning at last with bared teeth and upraised claws to meet the death grapple. It was the hideous squealing of the tormented brute, its back to the wall, defending its lair, its mate and its whelps, ready to bite, to rend, to trample, to batter out the life of The Enemy in a primeval, bestial welter of blood and fury.

The roar subsided to intermittent clamour, in the pauses of which the sounds of music and dancing made themselves audible once more.

“S. Behrman again,” vociferated Harran Derrick.

“Chose his moment well,” muttered Annixter. “Hits his hardest when we’re all rounded up having a good time.”

“Gentlemen, this is ruin.”

“What’s to be done now?”

“*Fight!* My God! do you think we are going to stand this? Do you think we *can*?”



The uproar swelled again. The clearer the assembly of ranchers understood the significance of this move on the part of the Railroad, the more terrible it appeared, the more flagrant, the more intolerable. Was it possible, was it within the bounds of imagination that this tyranny should be contemplated? But they knew — past years had driven home the lesson — the implacable, iron monster with whom they had to

deal, and again and again the sense of outrage and oppression lashed them to their feet, their mouths wide with curses, their fists clenched tight, their throats hoarse with shouting.

“Fight! How fight? What *are* you going to do?”

“If there’s a law in this land ——”

“If there is, it is in Shelgrim’s pocket. Who owns the courts in California? Ain’t it Shelgrim?”

“God damn him.”

“Well, how long are you going to stand it? How long before you’ll settle up accounts with six inches of plugged gas-pipe?”

“And our contracts, the solemn pledges of the corporation to sell to us first of all ——”

“And now the land is for sale to anybody.”

“Why, it is a question of my home. Am I to be turned out? Why, I have put eight thousand dollars into improving this land.”

“And I six thousand, and now that I have, the Railroad grabs it.”

“And the system of irrigating ditches that Derrick and I have been laying out. There’s thousands of dollars in that!”

“I’ll fight this out till I’ve spent every cent of my money.”

“Where? In the courts that the company owns?”

“Think I am going to give in to this? Think I am to get off my land? By God, gentlemen, law or no law, railroad or no railroad, *I — will — not.*”

“Nor I.”

“Nor I.”

“Nor I.”

“This is the last. Legal means first; if those fail — the shotgun.”

“They can kill me. They can shoot me down, but I’ll die — die fighting for my home — before I’ll give in to this.”

At length Annixter made himself heard:

“All out of the room but the ranch owners,” he shouted. “Hooven, Caraher, Dyke, you’ll have to clear out. This is a family affair. Presley, you and your friend can remain.”

Reluctantly the others filed through the door.

There remained in the harness room — besides Vanamee and Presley — Magnus Derrick, Annixter, old Broderson, Harran, Garnett from the Ruby rancho, Keast from the ranch of the same name, Gethings of the San Pablo, Chatterm of the Bonanza, about a score of others, ranchers from various parts of the county, and, last of all, Dabney, ignored, silent, to whom nobody spoke and who, as yet, had not uttered a word.



But the men who had been asked to leave the harness room spread the news throughout the barn. It was repeated from lip to lip. One by one the guests dropped out of the dance. Groups were formed. By swift degrees the gayety lapsed away. The Virginia reel broke up. The musicians ceased playing, and in the place of the noisy, effervescent revelry of the previous half hour, a subdued murmur filled all the barn, a mingling of whispers, lowered voices, the coming and going of light footsteps, the uneasy shifting of positions, while from behind the closed doors of the harness room came a prolonged, sullen hum of anger and strenuous debate. The dance came to an abrupt end. The guests, unwilling to go as yet, stunned, distressed, stood clumsily about, their eyes vague, their hands swinging at their sides, looking stupidly into each others' faces. A sense of impending calamity, oppressive, foreboding, gloomy, passed through the air overhead in the night, a long shiver of anguish and of terror, mysterious, despairing.

In the harness room, however, the excitement continued unchecked. One rancher after another

delivered himself of a torrent of furious words. There was no order, merely the frenzied outcry of blind fury. One spirit alone was common to all — resistance at whatever cost and to whatever lengths.

Suddenly Osterman leaped to his feet, his bald head gleaming in the lamp-light, his red ears distended, a flood of words filling his great, horizontal slit of a mouth, his comic actor's face flaming. Like the hero of a melodrama, he took stage with a great sweeping gesture.

“*Organisation*,” he shouted, “that must be our watchword. The curse of the ranchers is that they fritter away their strength. Now, we must stand together, now, *now*. Here's the crisis, here's the moment. Shall we meet it? *I call for the League*. Not next week, not to-morrow, not in the morning, but now, now, now, this very moment, before we go out of that door. Every one of us here to join it, to form the beginnings of a vast

organisation, banded together to death, if needs be, for the protection of our rights and homes. Are you ready? Is it now or never? I call for the League.”

Instantly there was a shout. With an actor's instinct, Osterman had spoken at the precise psychological moment. He carried the others off their feet, glib, dexterous, voluble. Just what was meant by the League the others did not know, but it was something, a vague engine, a machine with which to fight. Osterman had not done speaking before the room rang with outcries, the crowd of men shouting, for what they did not know.

“The League! The League!”

“Now, to-night, this moment; sign our names before we leave.”

“He's right. *Organisation!* The League!”

“We have a committee at work already,”

Osterman vociferated. “I am a member, and also Mr. Broderson, Mr. Annixter, and Mr. Harran Derrick. What our aims are we will explain to you later. Let this committee be the nucleus of the League — temporarily, at least. Trust us. We are working for you and with you. Let this

committee be merged into the larger committee of the League, and for President of the League” — he paused the fraction of a second — “for President there can be but one name mentioned, one man to whom we all must look as leader — Magnus Derrick.”

The Governor’s name was received with a storm of cheers. The harness room reëchoed with shouts of:

“Derrick! Derrick!”

“Magnus for President!”

“Derrick, our natural leader.”

“Derrick, Derrick, Derrick for President.”

Magnus rose to his feet. He made no gesture. Erect as a cavalry officer, tall, thin, commanding, he dominated the crowd in an instant. There was a moment’s hush.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “if organisation is a good word, moderation is a better one. The matter is too grave for haste. I would suggest that we each and severally return to our respective homes for the night, sleep over what has happened, and convene again to-morrow, when we are calmer and can approach this affair in a more judicious mood. As for the honour with which you would inform me, I must affirm that that, too, is a matter for grave deliberation. This League is but a name as yet. To accept control of an organisation whose principles are not yet

fixed is a heavy responsibility. I shrink from it —”

But he was allowed to proceed no farther. A storm of protest developed. There were shouts of:

“No, no. The League to-night and Derrick for President.”

“We have been moderate too long.”

“The League first, principles afterward.”

“We can’t wait,” declared Osterman. “Many of us cannot attend a meeting to-morrow. Our business affairs would prevent it. Now we are all together. I propose a temporary chairman and secretary be named and a ballot be taken. But first the League. Let us draw up a set of resolutions to stand together, for the defence of our homes, to death, if needs be, and each man present affix his signature thereto.”

He subsided amidst vigorous applause. The next quarter of an hour was a vague confusion, every one talking at once, conversations going on in low tones in various corners of the room. Ink, pens, and a sheaf of foolscap were brought from the ranch house. A set of resolutions was draughted, having the force of a pledge, organising the League of Defence. Annixter was the first to sign. Others followed, only a few holding back, refusing to join till they had thought the matter over. The roll grew; the paper

circulated about the table; each signature was welcomed by a salvo of cheers. At length, it reached Harran Derrick, who signed amid tremendous uproar. He released the pen only to shake a score of hands.

“Now, Magnus Derrick.”

“Gentlemen,” began the Governor, once more rising, “I beg of you to allow me further consideration. Gentlemen —”

He was interrupted by renewed shouting.

“No, no, now or never. Sign, join the League.”

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Threshing crew, Linley Ranch, San Joaquin Valley, 1889

“Don’t leave us. We look to you to help.”

But presently the excited throng that turned their faces towards the Governor were aware of a new face at his elbow. The door of the harness room had been left unbolted and Mrs. Derrick, unable to endure the heart-breaking suspense of waiting outside, had gathered up all her courage and had come into the room. Trembling, she clung to Magnus’s arm, her pretty light-brown hair in disarray, her large young girl’s eyes wide with terror and distrust. What was about to happen she did not understand, but these men were clamouring for Magnus to pledge himself to something, to some terrible course of action, some ruthless, unscrupulous battle to the death with the iron-hearted monster of steel and steam. Nerved with a coward’s intrepidity, she, who so easily obliterated herself, had found her way into the midst of this frantic crowd, into this hot, close room, reeking of alcohol and tobacco smoke, into this atmosphere surcharged with hatred and curses. She seized her husband’s arm imploring, distraught with terror.

“No, no,” she murmured; “no, don’t sign.”

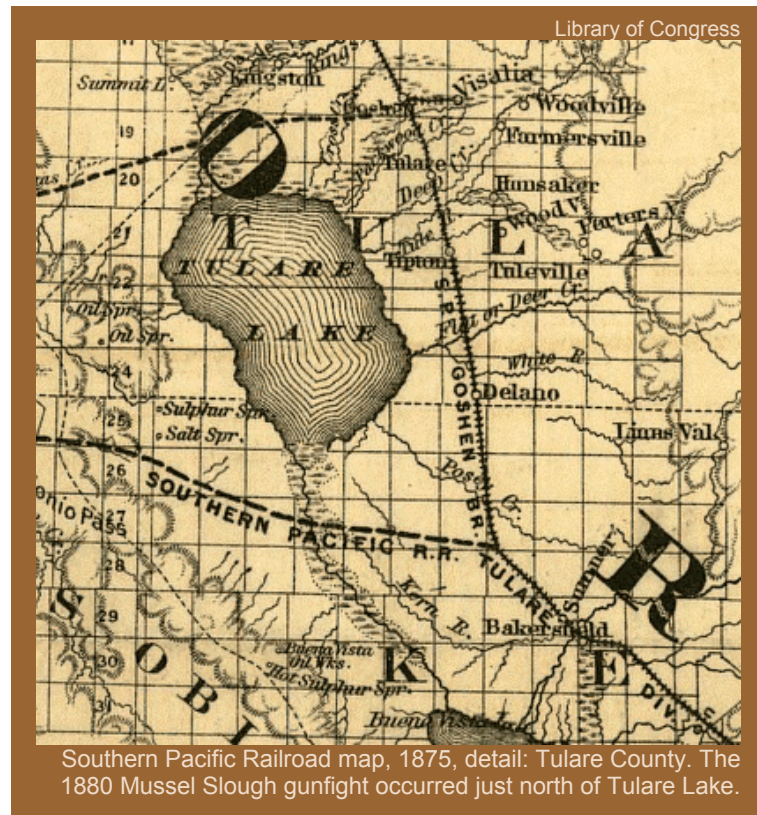
She was the feather caught in the whirlwind. *En masse*, the crowd surged toward the erect figure of the Governor, the pen in one hand, his wife’s fingers in the other, the roll of signatures before him. The clamour was deafening; the excitement culminated brusquely. Half a hundred hands stretched toward him; thirty voices, at top pitch, implored, expostulated, urged, almost commanded. The reverberation of the shouting was as the plunge of a cataract.

It was the uprising of The People; the thunder of the outbreak of revolt; the mob demanding to be led, aroused at last, imperious, resistless, overwhelming. It was the blind fury of insurrection, the brute, many-tongued, red-eyed, bellowing for guidance, baring its teeth, unsheathing its claws, imposing its will with the abrupt, resistless pressure of the relaxed piston, inexorable, knowing no pity.

“No, no,” implored Annie Derrick. “No, Magnus, don’t sign.”

“He *must*,” declared Harran, shouting in her ear to make himself heard, “he must. Don’t you understand?”

Again the crowd surged forward, roaring. Mrs. Derrick was swept back, pushed to one side. Her husband no longer belonged to her. She paid the penalty for being the wife of a great man. The world, like a colossal iron wedge, crushed itself between. She was thrust to the wall. The throng of men, stamping, surrounded Magnus; she could no longer see him, but, terror-struck, she listened. There was a moment’s lull, then a vast thunder of savage jubilation. Magnus had signed.



[from Book II, Ch. 4]

... The Governor had aged suddenly. His former erectness was gone, the broad shoulders stooped a little, the strong lines of his thin-lipped mouth were relaxed, and his hand, as it clasped over the yellowed ivory knob of his cane, had an unwonted tremulousness not hitherto noticeable.

But the change in Magnus was more than physical. At last, in the full tide of power, President of the League, known and talked of in every county of the State, leader in a great struggle, consulted, deferred to as the “Prominent Man,” at length attaining that position, so long and vainly sought for, he yet found no pleasure in his triumph, and little but bitterness in life. His success had come by devious methods, had been reached by obscure means.

He was a briber. He could never forget that. To further his ends, disinterested, public-spirited, even philanthropic as those were, he had connived with knavery, he, the politician of the old school, of such rigorous integrity, who had abandoned a “career” rather than compromise with honesty. At this eleventh hour, involved and entrapped in the fine-spun web of a new order of things, bewildered by Osterman’s dexterity, by his volubility and glibness, goaded and harassed beyond the point of reason by the aggression of the Trust he fought, he had at last failed. He had fallen; he had given a bribe. He had thought that, after all, this would make but little difference with him. The affair was known only to Osterman, Broderson, and Annixter; they would not judge him, being themselves involved. He

could still preserve a bold front; could still hold his head high. As time went on the affair would lose its point.

But this was not so. Some subtle element of his character had forsaken him. He felt it. He knew it. Some certain stiffness that had given him all his rigidity, that had lent force to his authority, weight to his dominance, temper to his fine, inflexible hardness, was diminishing day by day. In the decisions which he, as President of the League, was called upon to make so often, he now hesitated. He could no longer be arrogant, masterful, acting upon his own judgment, independent of opinion. He began to consult his lieutenants, asking their advice, distrusting his own opinions. He made mistakes, blunders, and when those were brought to his notice, took refuge in bluster. He knew it to be bluster — knew that sooner or later his subordinates would recognise it as such. How long could he maintain his position? So only he could keep his grip upon the lever of control till the battle was over, all would be well. If not, he would fall, and, once fallen, he knew that now, briber that he was, he would never rise again.

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Men jailed after the Mussel Slough gunfight between settlers and federal marshals, resulting from the land disputes with the Southern Pacific Railroad; depicted by Norris in Book II, Ch. 6 of *The Octopus*.