CHAPTER 1
SQUATTER DARRELL REVIEWS THE PAST

“T
o be guided by good advice is to profit by the wisdom of others; to be guided by experience is to profit by wisdom of our own,” said Mrs. Darrell to her husband, in her own sweet way. They were alone in the sitting room of their Alameda farmhouse. She was sewing Mr. Darrell’s stockings and the buttons on his shirts. Their children, so called even though they were all grown up, had gone to bed. Mr. and Mrs. Darrell always enjoyed staying up later and talking. Tonight, the conversation was an important one, as he would leave the next day for Southern California, intending to locate a **homestead claim** on good land.

“This time let us be guided by our own past history, our experience. Let us be wise, my husband,” said Mrs. Darrell.

---

**homestead claim:** land taken under a nineteenth-century U.S. law that gave unsettled or unclaimed land in the West to people willing to live and work on it
“In other words, Be wise, husband, is what you really mean,” he said. “Because as far as we are concerned, had I been guided by your advice we would be much better off today.”

“That is not what I mean, William.”

“Had I followed your wisdom, we would be much better off today,” Mr. Darrell stated. Mr. Darrell was a family man, concerned about his past decisions. He had managed to provide his family with a place to live, but he believed that this was not an actual home. “No use in crying over spilt milk, eh?” he said, trying to lighten the conversation.

“If by ‘milk’ it is meant all or any earthly good whatever, it is the spilt milk that we should lament. There is no reason to cry for the milk that has not been wasted, the good that is not lost. So let us cry for the spilt milk by all means, husband,” Mrs. Darrell continued, “if by doing so we learn how to avoid spilling anymore.”

“I understand, Mary, but I fear that my streak of foolishness has only brought fatality upon us.

**lament:** to express grief or sorrow
Please, forgive my past wickedness.”

“You have acted wrongly at times, but you are not wicked!”

“I firmly believed that, with my fine stock, my good bank account, and broad government lands, I was going to give you and our children a nice home . . . But see how we are now.”

“Together, that’s how we are,” said Mrs. Darrell.

“Poor, that’s where we are! All I earned is the name of squatter. A name which I hate because you despise it,” he exclaimed.

“We are not poor. Also, I do not despise the name of squatter. I disapprove of acts done by men because they are squatters, or to become squatters. They have caused much trouble to people who never harmed them.”

“Well, the poor squatters have suffered as much distress as they have caused. Don’t forget that,” replied Mr. Darrell.

“True,” said Mrs. Darrell, “but I am afraid I will never understand the necessity of being a squatter in this country of plentiful acres, which

**squatter:** a person who unlawfully occupies an uninhabited building or unused land
The Squatter and the Don

a most generous government gives away for the asking.”

“See? In the end we are not squatters. We are settlers.”

“When ever you take up government land, yes, you are settlers. But when you claim land that belongs to anyone else, then, I am sorry to tell you, you are a squatter.”

Mr. Darrell set his teeth tightly. Mrs. Darrell went on as if she had not observed her husband’s flash of irritation.

“So, before you locate any homestead claim in Southern California, first inform yourself whether anyone has a previous claim. Do not go on a Mexican grant unless you buy the land from the owner.”

“And how am I to know who is the owner of a rancho that has been rejected, for instance?”

“If the rancho is still in litigation, don’t buy land in it. Or, if you do, buy the title from the

---

**Mexican grant:** a land grant from the Spanish and Mexican governments to Mexican citizens

**rancho:** a large grazing farm where horses and cattle are raised

**litigation:** the process of taking legal action
original grantees on fair conditions and clear understanding.”

“I don’t know if that can be done in the Alamar rancho.”

“Is that the one you will be seeing?”

“Yes, and I know it has been rejected.”

“Be careful, don’t forget about . . .”

“Believe me, wife, I will not forget Napa and Sonoma valleys.” Mr. Darrell was referring to the time when he and his family had to abandon their home in one place. They lost the earnings of years and years of hard work.

“That is precisely what I ask. We cannot afford to throw away another twenty years of our life. If you go into a Mexican grant again, I will not follow you there willingly. Promise me that you will do things well and not believe what those men have been telling you about the Alamar rancho having been rejected. Make sure of it yourself. John Gasbang never speaks the truth, and years have not made him more reliable. You know that.”

“I see through all that. But I also see that San

grantee: the recipient of a land grant
Diego is sure to have a railroad direct to the eastern states and lands will increase in value immediately. So, I better get a good lot of land in the Alamar grant as soon as I arrive.”

“Are you sure it is finally rejected?”

“I saw the book where the fact is recorded.”

It was time, Mr. Darrell knew. It was time to provide what his family deserved—a home.