

Nason Frank Lewis

The Vision of Elijah Berl



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PRELUDE

Eight hundred and fifty miles of winding coast line bend in and out. So far as the eye can reach over the wrinkling sheet of the Pacific, to where its giant swells beat against bare, brown cliffs and break in smothers of hissing foam, not a sail is seen, not a sign of life, save flocks of white-winged gulls and sea-mews, or herds of barking seals that swarm on rocky islets. Mountains spring from the sea and climb, mount on mount, three miles into the air, or sloping sea-washed sands stretch dry and barren and forbidding, to rise at length in verdure-clad hills and snow-capped mountains. In the mountains are savage beasts and more savage men. On the plains a few straggling herds of cattle, with uncouth vaqueros, cluster around a seeping spring of bitter water. Here and there white-washed adobe mission houses, all but hidden in a clamber of vines and trees, mark a feeble stream that trickles from the distant mountains. Olive-skinned señores and olive-skinned señoritas round out the circle of their lives and there lie down and die, unknowing and unknown; they and their fellows, undreamed of, the land of their abode a hazy myth.

As by the wave of a magic wand, all is changed. The ocean now is dotted with sails from the uttermost parts of the earth. They choke the Golden Gate with their numbers. From their crowded decks, swarms of men, ministers of God and ministers of the devil – learned, ignorant, murderers, thieves – women, traitors to their kind, pour forth and swarm over the land. Mad with the lust of Gold, they burrow in the beds of streams, tear and claw at mountain-gulch and slope. Tented towns rise like night-grown fungi, and wither away, to spring again into existence, lawless, in a land where law is not, in a land that no man owns. Through days that are full of sweating toil and nights that cover vigils of lust and death, the ferment of hell grows in the blood of human beings who have left their God with their country.

Another wave of the wand and God reclaims his own. The courthouse and the gibbet, without mercy but full of stern justice, have taken the place of the murderer's greed that sharpened the murderer's knife.

From a thousand hills, a thousand streams have quickened the arid acres of drifting sand into fruitful life. League on league are fields of waving grain. League on league are green vineyards with their clustered fruit blushing and sweetening in the sun. League on league happy homes are all but hidden by dark-leaved trees, with fruit yellow as the golden apples of the Hesperides.

And this is California! For unknown ages more desolate and terrible than Dante's wildest dream of the Inferno, in fifty years surpassing his picture of Paradise. Barred from the world on one side by ten thousand miles of stormy seas, on the other by tier on tier of mountains and miles on miles of dreary desert, were the whole United States to fade as did the cities of Nineveh and Babylon, California would still live in song and story, more golden than the mines of Ophir, more beautiful than the storied plains of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

CHAPTER ONE

"But I know what I need. I need you."

There was a dogged tone in Elijah Berl's voice that was almost sullenly insistent.

"I have given you all that I have to give, Elijah. You don't need me. What you need is money, and that's what I haven't got."

"And I say again that I have thought of this for five years. Ever since I left New England. I have not been alone, I have been guided. Step by step I have gone over my ground up to this point. I have studied men as carefully as I have my work. You are the man I have selected, and you are the man I want."

Ralph Winston looked thoughtfully into the glowing eyes bent full upon him. The impulse was strong within him to do as the man before him wished – almost compelled – him to do; but because of this subtle power which moved him so strongly, he hesitated. To what further lengths might it not impel him when the first step had been taken? Clear-eyed, clear-headed, never so cautious as when his desires called most loudly to him, he hesitated to take the first step in the path which Elijah Berl had so insistently opened before him. Therefore he spoke deliberately, almost coldly.

"Don't misunderstand me, Elijah. I have faith in you and I have more faith in your idea. For this very reason I hesitate to accept your offer. You and I are so different. I – "

Elijah interrupted impatiently.

"I have thought of all that. I have prayed over it. 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,' and as the voice from heaven came to Paul, even so it came to me – 'What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.'"

A smile flickered for a moment on the lips of the young engineer as he turned to a pretty little woman who, with her light sewing in her hands, was rocking gently on the wide verandah.

"What do you think about it, Amy?"

Amy Berl drew her needle the full length of the thread and held it poised for a moment as she made reply.

"Elijah knows what is best, Ralph." Then, with a swift glance at her husband, she again bent over her work.

"Of course he knows some things – "

"He knows every thing." Amy did not raise her eyes from her work this time.

With a sigh of impatience, Elijah threw himself into a chair near his wife. The needle dropped from the hand which she timidly rested upon his, while her eyes sought his face. Absorbed in himself, not a quiver responded to the touch of Amy's hand, not a glance answered the caress of her eyes.

It was a pretty picture in a grandly beautiful setting. A wide verandah, covered with climbing roses in full bloom, opened upon a scene almost tropical in its beauty. Down the redwood steps the eyes wandered across a luxuriant flower garden, still lower they rested upon a great square of dark, shining green; below this, in sharp contrast, and surrounding the shining green, tawny sand pricked in with tufts and clumps of dusty, green sage, rolling hills in descending cadence, till, in the far distance, a grayer, wimpling gray, the great Pacific marked the limits of the desert.

To the left, the eyes leaped the rock-strewn bed of the Rio Sangre de Cristo, climbed rock-ribbed, wooded slopes, up and up to the dizzy snow-clad peaks of the San Bernardinos that rested purple and white against the constant azure of a California sky. Within the limits of the cottage, the flower garden, and the irrigated orange grove, the sun seemed to hold its fierceness in awesome leash only to let loose its fervid power upon the glowing sands and their tortured growths.

The characters were in harmony with their setting. The blue-eyed little woman, delicate, with tawny hair, a sweet-scented mountain gentian ready to shrink and fold upon itself at a shadow that could not harm, but could only feebly threaten; the young engineer, with close-cropped hair, a face

chiselled with strong, undoubting strokes, a mouth half hidden by a mustache that gave a glimpse of lips too thick to be merciless, too thin to be sensuous. There was an air of alertness about the man, a suggested tireless energy that renewed its strength on the food of humor gathered even from the most monotonous commonplaces. Ralph Winston was not a rare type of man, but he was a saving one. With him was an air of inflexibility of purpose, softened with mercy; a rugged honesty that made no compromise with evil-doers, an honesty that, with laughing eyes, left the uncovered sinner ashamed and repentant, instead of defiant and revengeful in his defeat.

A tyro, looking at the smooth-shaven, boyish face of Elijah Berl, would fail to note the hardly defined lines that ran from mouth to eyes; lines broad, undulating through the whole gamut of enthusiasm, but lines that grew hard and merciless as they converged to eyes narrowed before opposition and lightened with fanatical zeal.

Winston's footing with the Berls was intimate, though upon short acquaintance. This was not strange in California. Twenty miles from the Berl ranch was a booming town that had attracted Winston. Here was a good opening for an engineer, with large and sure pay. Winston made light of the town and its promoters, and among these he had no intimates. On a hunting trip he had discovered the Berl ranch and had found it worthy of the more intimate acquaintance to which he was cordially invited. Little by little he had drawn from Elijah the story of his life in California. It had been an isolated life, full of hardship, but devoted to a single idea, that of reclaiming the vast extent of country which now lay barren and unfruitful.

The young engineer's eyes grew deep and thoughtful. This offer of an equal partnership meant even more to him than Elijah realized. Why not accept it? It was what he had hoped for, had sought for – a life work in which he could enlist his strength and his sense of honor. It was worth while, grandly worth while. His heart beat high at the thought of it. The building of a great storage dam in the mountains, the laying out of canals that should lead the stored waters to the sun-parched deserts; this was an engineer's work, and he was an engineer. In imagination he could see, as Elijah saw, the bare brown hillsides clothed in verdure and teeming with prosperity. Why did he hesitate? Was it lack of money? That would come. Yet he hesitated. Why? Clearer than ever before came the thought of Elijah, and Winston knew that his question was answered. Elijah was his answer. Elijah himself was the obstacle in the way of his acceptance. There was no doubt of the worth of Elijah's idea, no doubt of his enthusiasm, no doubt of his patient, tireless energy. Of his integrity? There was the doubtful point.

If he accepted Elijah's offer, he could foresee the struggle that would follow. His own sense of right pitted against Elijah's fanatical zeal that recognized no right except its own desires. When the fully expanded idea of redeeming the desert hillsides should open before Elijah, before the eyes of men, when wealth and power should beckon, just a little at first, from the path of stern uncompromising honor, Elijah would not restrain himself. Would he be able to control him? Winston's lips set firmly. He knew that he would conquer in the end.

Elijah was pacing restlessly up and down the verandah, now and then casting an impatient look upon the young engineer who sat motionless, his eyes on the hillsides below them. At length he paused abruptly before Winston.

"Well?" he exclaimed explosively, "you haven't given me an answer yet."

Winston's words were measured.

"No; I haven't. If you insist upon an answer today, it will be no."

"You want time to think it over?" Elijah's voice was sarcastic.

"That's just it. I do want time. I know that if I accept your offer, you and I are going to come into collision. You have one way of looking at things, I have another. Not once, but many times, you and I are going to look at the same thing at the same time and in different ways. When these times come, one of us will have to give way." Winston waved aside Elijah's attempt to interrupt. "When

these times come, I may be the one to give up, but if I am, it will be because your way appeals to my reason as being better than my own."

Winston's meaning was clear to Elijah. The "word" that he revered, the voice to which he listened and which he followed, meant not the weight of a feather to the man before him. Elijah moistened his nervous lips with his tongue. He had been guided to seek Winston – Winston he must have. Impatiently he put Winston's words aside.

"All this is not to the point."

"What is?" Winston asked curtly.

"This. Will you accept my offer?"

"An equal partnership with yourself?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you realize that if I accept, the management is no longer yours alone, but yours and mine?"

"Yes."

"And that it is my right to put forth every effort to compel you to my way of thinking?" Winston deliberately used the word compel, instead of persuade.

"Yes, yes!"

"Then I will think it over, Elijah, and will give you my final answer the next time you are in Ysleta."

"Suppose I come tomorrow?" Elijah's voice was assured.

"My answer will be ready."

CHAPTER TWO

"I am so happy!" This had been the unbroken song of Amy Berl for the five years of her married life. Maternity had not altered a line of her girlish figure, neither had it crowned her with the rounded, satisfying glory of womanhood. The ceaseless, parching winds had not dimmed the lustre of her clear blue eyes, nor deadened the gloss of her soft flaxen hair. Even the hot, dry air, so trying to most, only heightened the beauty of her complexion, as the peach reveals the rich glow of its color by diffusion through the meshes of its downy veil. Delicate in face and figure, there was no suggestion of frailty, neither was there a suggestion of strength. There was the glow of perfect health. In the eyes that looked fearlessly and frankly into the eyes of others, there was unmistakably a capacity for infinite happiness and infinite suffering. This was all. The eyes were frank because they had nothing to conceal; nor did they dream that other eyes differed from themselves. They were fearless because they knew no sin in themselves or in others. There was not strength of mind or of intellect to compel the fruition of her desire for love. It must come to her without her volition or not at all. As the flowers of the field unfold in beauty under sun and shower, even so she grew and blossomed and was fair to look upon. As the flowers of the field wither away in parching drought, even so would the beauty of happiness fall from her shrinking soul. She was of a religious nature, not because of a consciousness of its necessity to the human soul, but because, to her, God was love and his works beautiful to look upon. God to her was impersonal, because in her was not strength of intellect to construct an entity from its manifestations. When Elijah Berl came to her, she received him as a god. Her love was not selective; it was responsive. Henceforth her daily prayers on her bended knees were to her husband, not to the Divine Giver of every good and perfect gift. Even when her first-born lay in her arms, the light that shone in her eyes was not the giving of maternal love, but the thrill of assurance that the helpless mite was but another bond that bound her happiness to her soul and made it more her own. She gave with the unconscious selfishness of a perfect mirror that which she received, no more, no less.

Elijah Berl had not yet realized what his wife was, because he was selfish in another way. He saw himself in his wife. For the present, this sufficed. Five years of struggle in the land of golden promise had not lessened his faith in himself, had not wearied his restless energy, nor dulled his faith in his God. From New England's granite hills, he believed God's hand had led him to this distant field. Since the day of his birth, the firm, unwavering, fanatical belief that the Bible was God's direct, unchangeable revelation to man, made him, as it had made his father, impregnable to the assaults of reason. The figurative, semi-scriptural language of his father and of his father's father had been as the breath of his nostrils. It had become a part of him as it was of his father. It was neither cant nor hypocrisy. "As it was written," was an unanswerable dictum. The very things that had shaken and are shaking to its foundation the faith in the Bible as an infallible guide, only rooted Elijah the more firmly in his belief. In California as in New England, he felt that in good time God's hand would point out the work which He had planned for him to do. He was marking time with restless steps, ready to swing into action when God should give the word. Only one part of his work had he forecast in his mind. A son of the soil, in the soil was his work to be. This was his unshaken belief. From San Benito, under the shadow of abrupt mountains, over to San Quentin where ragged chaparral grew as it might on the blood-red hills, and where cottonwoods and willows thrived rank on the moisture of hidden streams, he had pitched his tent for the night and had folded it in the morning. What mattered it to him that the scattered ranchers looked approvingly upon his fair-haired wife, and, moved with pity for her, cursed him as a heartless idiot; or that uncouth vaqueros shrugged their shoulders and softly named him a locoed gringo?

The few dollars which he had brought with him from the East, had long since been spent in his wanderings. The goodly sum which had come to him on the death of his father, was no longer what it had been; yet he had no thought of despair. The limit of his wanderings was narrowing in

concentric circles, and at length its centre was fixed. With almost his last dollar, he had bought a wide ranch from a dreamy Mexican who had then gone his way. Already the land around his was heaving and swelling in undulating rolls that warn the mariner of a coming storm. Bearded ranchers laughed in scorn, and mild-eyed Mexicans spoke even more softly. What were a few seeping springs on the hillsides? What were the hillsides themselves beside the rolling plains at their feet, where herds of cattle fed and drank and mired themselves in green-fringed cienagas? Elijah was disturbed no more than was Noah when he closed the doors of his ark against the gibes of the unbelievers. His mission was being disclosed, point by point and line by line, to his waiting eye.

Elijah deepened his springs and hoarded the water they gave. Between rows of dark-green leaves, shrubs that faded not in summer's drouth nor in winter's rains, he guided trickling streams, apportioning to each its proper share. Through the day he toiled with increasing energy. Towards each night, with Amy by his side, he rested by the door of his cottage and looked below, over reddening hills, across the rolling plains, beyond where the half-buried disc of the sun spread wide the golden mantle of its light upon the wrinkling waters of the Pacific. Behind the cottage, from the rock-strewn wash of the Rio Sangre de Cristo, the lowest foot-hills rose to wooded slopes, grew to timbered mountains, up and up till the forests gave way to the snow-capped peaks of the San Bernardinos. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills whence cometh my help." In mid-day's toil when Elijah paused to rest his strained back, or to wipe the perspiration from his streaming face, in the silence of the night, when the moon lay white and still upon the slumbering landscape, his eyes sought out the solemn mountains which were shaping his dreams. He listened to the roar of the torrents that came faint with distance, when the mountains wrung dry the clouds that shrouded their peaks, or when the fierce sun swept away their winter's mantle of white. He watched the surging flood that rolled breast-high in receding waves through the Sangre de Cristo, tossing boulders like feathers in their boisterous strength; watched it rush through torrid plains and finally sink from sight beneath the sands. He watched the parched lips held to the Tantalean cup, saw the few drops of stolen moisture quicken into verdant life, saw, when the flood had passed by and the mountains had ceased to give forth their murmurs, the mocking sun crackle the up-sprung life to choking dust, and once more the shimmering heat-waves rise in trembling agony from the tortured sands. Then the voice that was calling him grew more distinct, the guiding hand more clearly outlined. As the blood of Christ quickened into life the soul dead in sin, so should the stream that bore His name quicken into blooming fields the dead, dry sands of the desert. His lips moved reverently with his unuttered words, a prayer for guidance, a chant of faith, as his eyes swept from crest to crest of the blood-red hills that held the river of the blood of Christ against the mountains of its birth.

In spite of his words to the contrary, Elijah was disturbed by Winston's attitude. What was the flaw in his scheme that held Winston aloof? Elijah was in an agony of doubt. Up and down the flower-scented paths, through groves of orange, yellow with golden fruit, he paced with restless steps. With all his soul he strained to catch an opening in the clouds that held the future from his eyes. Little by little the sense of depression yielded to his efforts, little by little the vision that had kept him constant, returned to him in the full glory of perfection. He had been watching the hills as they glowed in the light of the setting sun. As the gray night, settling over all, blotted out the details of the landscape, leaving the mountains a purple blur against the faint blue of the sky, Elijah felt a strong reaction. He feared, yet longed for the coming light; feared, lest it should prove that the plan which had been revealed to him might be but the figment of a frenzied dream.

Amy was sitting beside him as usual, her hand in his. Her eyes dreamily watched the shifting shadows as the sinking sun moved them to and fro in a stately march. As the shadows deepened to darkness, her eyes closed and her head sank upon Elijah's shoulder. Elijah could no longer endure the strain of questioning doubt that the shadows were pouring over his soul.

"Amy! Amy!" he called.

"What is it, Elijah?"

"I can't see, Amy. I saw it all, and now it's gone."

"What is gone, Elijah?" The voice was heavy with sleep.

"I can't sit still any longer. Let's walk. The moon will be up soon and then I can see if I was wrong. Come."

Amy was again sleeping. He shook her gently as he rose to his feet.

"Come."

"I am so tired, Elijah." She rose and turned toward the open door. "Let's wait until tomorrow."

"I can't wait. It's now, now!"

Amy was conscious of nothing save her overpowering drowsiness.

"Come in with me, Elijah."

"No, no! I can't." Elijah was irritated; not at Amy, but at the tingle of opposition that played upon his strained nerves.

"Goodnight, Elijah." She put up her dreamy lips for his goodnight kiss; but Elijah had left her and was again striding up and down, his eyes fixed on the purple blur. Without further word, she entered the cottage and lay down to the rest for which her eyes so longed.

One by one the stars pricked through the arching sky, filling the space above the earth with a light that only intensified the darkness below. Hour after hour passed by. At length a silver halo fringed the mountain summits, a band of light softly parting the blue of the sky from the purple of the mountains. A silver disc, barred with dense black lines, moved grandly into the waiting sky, and twinkling stars veiled their faces before their coming queen. Far out on the plain a banded line of light moved against the retreating darkness. Against the hills it swept, charging their steep slopes, creeping up their darkened gulches, glowing on their conquered crests; on and on it swept, until the retreating shadows sank from the earth before the hosts of light. As the outlines of the hills came sharply into sight, Elijah's dream took substance that would never wane again.

Amy arose, bright and fresh for the day. Upon Elijah the strained vigil of the night had left its mark. There was no longer ecstasy. The settled lines of his face were almost sullen in their intensity. The sparkle died from Amy's eyes and a look of anxious questioning took its place. With the strange unconscious conceit confined to narrow minds, she never dreamed that her husband's preoccupation was a thing entirely apart from herself. Wholly self-centred, her husband's smiling attention meant approbation; preoccupation meant disapproval or resentment. Her sun was her husband's love. In its full warm rays she basked with the happy abandon of a well-fed animal. Preoccupation was the eclipsing shadow that chilled her to the marrow, with no sustaining faith that it was only obscuration, not destruction for all time. When the shadow fell, there was no other suggestion than to beat her sounding soul with a heathen's ardor, in order to frighten from its prey the devouring dragon that would forever destroy her source of life and light. Now her anxiety grew to pain; her lips were tremulous.

"What have I done to offend you, Elijah?"

"Nothing," he answered abruptly. "I'm not offended. Can't you see that I'm absorbed in my work? I can't spend all my time in telling you that I love you just the same as ever. Why can't you take something for granted?"

Elijah's words were sharp-cut, almost explosive. It was not resentment at Amy; it was the irritation of a dog who is having a bone taken from his jaws.

Amy was cut to the depths of her sensitive soul. Her words were not a reproach, but a hopeless wail.

"It's these miserable orange trees! I wish oranges had never grown in this country. I was so happy before. Now you never think of me. You look at the mountains and the springs and the orange trees, but never at me." Her tears were flowing freely, her lips were tremulous.

Elijah was moved, but without understanding.

"Why! Haven't I always enjoyed showing them to you and talking to you about them? You know that I always tell you every thing that I am doing."

"Yes, I know; but you get just as enthusiastic over them to Ralph Winston and he looks cold all the time and keeps criticising and contradicting you. It's just the same with the other men who come to look at your work. They don't care one single thing about you, and I do, and I tell you so, but you won't believe me."

Amy's tears had ceased, her voice was steadier; but there was a suggestion of the eager heart hunger that looked from her eyes.

"Winston isn't my wife, Amy – "

"And he doesn't care for you. He says things to you I would not think of saying."

Elijah made an impatient gesture, resuming his interrupted words.

"I have a great idea, a great work. I have only shown what can be done. To actually do it, I must have money. I know these men don't care anything about me; I don't care anything about them, only to get them interested and convinced. If I can only do this, it means fame and fortune to me and, just think of what it all means! Just think! When these great, barren, red hillsides are all covered with orchards; with beautiful houses and thousands of happy, prosperous people; when the snows and rains of the San Bernardinos, instead of running to waste, will flow through tunnels and canals and make the desert blossom as the rose; then they will all say that this is the work of one man, of me, Elijah Berl!" Elijah's eyes kindled anew with the thought which he had elaborated.

Amy saw and was terrified. Her soul shrank and shivered before the vision which he had conjured up. She could not have stated to herself the reason of her fear. Only one thought was keenly present to her, that henceforth she would be no longer the sole centre of her husband's life.

"I don't want you to be great, Elijah. I want you, just as you are."

Elijah saw the expression of his wife, not the principle which gave it birth. He caught a fleeting glimpse, a faint suggestion of the impelling principle that stimulates all men to the heights of achievement; the pride and glory of laying at the feet of love the laurels of their triumphs, the testimonials of worth wrung from a grudging world; the proud conviction that love is made secure by the assurance that its object is not unworthy. He failed to see that the principles which control a narrow though amiable mind, may be in hopeless antagonism with the broader views of higher mental endowment. He failed to see that each life has its limitations, that when it has given all, it can give no more. The time had not yet come for this knowledge. Therefore it was hidden from his eyes, that when it should come, a hopeless sorrow should come with it. He turned again to Amy.

"I am not always going to be just what I am. I am going to do great things and you will be proud that I am your husband."

"Don't, Elijah! Don't!" Amy clutched Elijah as if already she felt him slipping from her grasp. "I loved you as you were. I love you as you are. You can never be more dear to me. I don't know, Elijah; I am afraid." She buried her head on his shoulder. "I am afraid I shall not always be everything to you. I am so happy with you now. If I should ever be less happy, it would kill me."

"Nonsense. Don't make pictures to get scared at." He drew his watch from his pocket. "I must go now. You know I promised to see Ralph at Ysleta this morning. Goodbye, and don't scare yourself any more."

Elijah began to unclasp her arms. They were reluctant rather than resisting. He kissed her with a show of affection which was not absent, only obscured by other things; then he saddled his horse and rode away.

Amy stood watching him with hard, dry eyes; with the unconscious superstition of the maiden who with trembling fingers plucks one by one the petals from a prophetic flower. "He loves me, he loves me not." She stood watching for a motion, a gesture which should assure her that her husband's thoughts were of her, even as hers were of him, making herself the wretched plaything of senseless Fate, instead of resting tranquil in the surety that she was its master.

Elijah was absorbed in himself. He grew but a speck on the trail to Amy's watching eyes. There was not a motion which she could distort into a recognition of her existence. The last petal had fallen. "He loves me not."

CHAPTER THREE

Ysleta was booming and was being boomed. Avenues of graded sand, cleared of their desert growth, stretched in prim right angles far out into the horizon. White posts with staring, black numerals heralded city lots and bounded patches of cactus and chaparral which were thus protected from further molestation, and gave asylum to gophers and prairie dogs who had not lost their wits in the booming hubbub for the sole reason that nature had given them none to lose. Straining teams dragged great ploughs that tore through matted roots and turned furrows which slid back behind the parting share. Other sweating horses pulled scrapers of sand from dusty hummocks and plumped their loads in dustier hollows. Rows of bedraggled palms trailed out behind gangs of burrowing men or gathered in quincunx clumps where a glaring signboard proclaimed a city park. Thumping hammers and clinking trowels were raising uncouth buildings around the central plaza, adding other grotesque monstrosities to those which had already attained perfection in every detail that rebelled against a sense of beauty. Throngs of men and women trailed ankle deep through the new-turned sand and broke up into knots of animated discussion, or paused before a map of Ysleta to listen to a perspiring real estate agent repeating with tireless enthusiasm "the beauties of eternal sunshine in a land where burning heat and blasting cold never entered; a land where perennial spring went hand in hand with perennial autumn, where seed time and harvest trailed side by side, where dividing lines between summer and winter solstice were but meaningless numerals in the cycles of succeeding years; a land that for untold ages had slumbered and waxed fat with accumulated richness and where the sun had stored its genial warmth against the day when suffering humanity should wake to the knowledge of what California was and hasten to enjoy her stored up treasures."

Blaring trumpets and booming drums accompanied aligned men, gorgeous with purple and gold; beribboned four-in-hands with varnished carriages trailed along behind, and a brazen-throated herald proclaimed a bounteous repast free to all who would honor his master by partaking.

"Fall in! Fall in!" and knots of men balanced to the swing of the band and wheeled into line, choked with dust, blinded with dust, and covered with dust which the tearing ploughshares had softened up, and which eager feet were beating into the air.

Into this bustle and blare, Elijah Berl rode as he had ridden many times of late. Unmoved, save for a contemptuous pity, he looked down upon the hurrying crowd, crazed by the lust of wealth, who bought today to sell tomorrow, each knowing that some would be caught in the reaction that was sure to come, but each steadfast in the confidence that his own good sense would protect him from the general ruin. He looked down to where the Sangre de Cristo, no longer an impetuous torrent, seeped lazily through its bed of shining sand; at the mass of tangled shrubs and clinging vines quickened by its waters into a riotous growth that blossomed and fruited in the sensuous sun. Over his shoulder, he looked at the distant slopes from which he had come. At the open door of a redwood cottage he dismounted and entered.

"Hello, Ralph!"

At the salutation, Winston's compact athletic figure straightened from his drawing-board.

"Oh, hello, Elijah! You're just the man I wanted to see."

"Have you decided yet?" Elijah's voice was eager.

"Do you still want me?"

"Yes. It's tomorrow now. If this is too soon, tomorrow and tomorrow are yet to come."

"Well, Elijah, if it's all right, my answer is yes."

Elijah took Winston's hand in both of his own; his eyes spoke the words his tongue could not utter.

"It's going to be uphill work, Elijah, but I guess we'll manage it."

"Of course we will." Elijah was striding up and down the little office. He paused and looked thoughtfully out of the window.

"This hasn't got into your blood yet, eh?" he jerked his thumb toward the hustling street.

"Not much! It would be fun to watch this racket if a fellow hadn't a conscience. Do you know, I'm getting to believe that men and things are built on the same lines. The sweeter the wine, the sharper the vinegar, and you may pound my head for a drum if the smartest man doesn't make the biggest kind of a fool."

"I guess that's so, if he lets himself go. I'm not going to let go."

Winston looked at Elijah with an expression that might be interpreted as jocular or serious.

"Hold tight. I've seen men as sharp as you, crowding another fellow out and blowing hot air into his balloon."

"Are you getting scared on my account?" Elijah smiled, looking at Winston with confident half-closed eyes.

"No. If your bearings begin to smoke, I'm going to cool you off. It isn't going to be all lavender and roses, Elijah. You'll find me a pretty trying party at times, I give you fair warning."

Elijah turned from the window, looking straight at Winston.

"I'm going to begin right now. I've been at work all night. Now cool off and let's get to work."

Winston sat down before the drawing-board.

"Here's the map of the canal line. It isn't inked in yet, but you can see how it's going to come out. There must be two long tunnels; but that's no great matter. It's one of three things. Tunnels, aqueducts, or inverted siphons. It's a toss-up between tunnels and aqueducts, so far as cost is concerned. Siphons will cost about half, but you know what a choke or a break means, so out go siphons."

"You favor tunnels?"

"By all means. The ditch line is shortened by them, anyway. You'll save there."

Elijah gazed long and lovingly at the map, then looked up with a relieved sigh.

"Just a little dam will turn the whole stream into the canal."

"Yes. Just a little dam. That's easy." Winston drew a dust cloth over the map and weighted it down. "I wish I could get reliable data on the size of the dam it will take to turn some of this fool-money into a channel of common sense. What I am afraid of is, that when this boom breaks, the fools who have not been ruined, will be too badly scared to put money into government bonds, let alone an irrigation plant, and before they recover their wits, they'll either forget that there is such a place as California, or use it to slug themselves with when they feel another fool attack coming on."

"You leave that to me. I've got something more to show than a sand-flat pegged full of white stakes. Oranges will do better than that. Dry hillsides at nothing a square mile are going to be a thousand an acre when we get water on them."

"Let up, Elijah. Keep your chips off from that spot. That's a safer proposition than Ysleta lots with hot-air values, but it's the same kind of a wheel after all. If you once get the hum of it in your ears you'll go to pieces like all the rest."

"Are your estimates completed?"

"Yes; ready to be typed. You think they'd better be typed first, don't you?"

"Yes. We can have them printed afterward. I don't want anything gorgeous. Just plain, conservative figures. I have my statement of what has been done in the three years on my ranch. There is just one thing I have left out. It would be a telling thing to put in, but I think we can use it to better advantage by keeping it to ourselves."

"What's that?"

Elijah drew a neatly folded sheet from his pocket. It was filled with columns of figures.

"It's an idea of my own. What do you think of it?"

Winston looked rapidly over the sheet, then gave a low, meditative whistle.

"Are you sure of this?"

"Dead sure. I've been making observations with self-registering thermometers. That's the result." Elijah pointed to the sheet.

"A frostless belt!" Winston snatched the sheet from his drawing-board and bent over the map, one finger on the sheet, the other eagerly tracing lines on the surface of the map. "That's the greatest thing yet! There is a big fortune for all of us in that alone."

Elijah half closed his eyes, his teeth bared with a smile suggestive of malice.

"May I offer you some of your advice to me?"

"Certainly, and I'll take it too, when I need it. But say, Elijah, what in the name of the immortals do you want to leave this out for? It's the most telling thing we've got."

Elijah's eyes narrowed closely.

"I haven't got control of the whole belt yet. That's one thing. Another is, that when orange lands get under way, there's going to be a demand that the frostless belt isn't going to supply."

Winston's face set.

"You don't mean that you are going to sell lands for orange ranches that you know won't grow oranges?"

"I don't know that they won't grow oranges," Elijah answered doggedly. "I only know what will."

"You are going to let people find that out at their own expense?"

"Why not? That's the way I got my information."

There was a contemptuous look on Winston's face.

"Well, I'll be hanged. God does move in a mysterious way, if you are a fair sample of his stamping ground."

Elijah's face set with resentment. He straightened his lips for an angry retort, but restrained himself. He answered sullenly.

"I tell you, I don't know that the land won't grow oranges. I only know what will. I'm going to get control of this frostless belt. I found it and there's nothing wrong in taking advantage of it. Why not tell the Mexicans who own it now and are glad to sell for a dollar an acre, that their land will grow oranges and that it's worth a thousand?" There was a triumphant note in his last words.

Winston was ready to dismiss this phase of the question.

"Don't ask me. You settle that between you. I notice that the Almighty isn't a hard one to manage when you take him in your lap and reason with him. He usually comes around to your way of thinking."

Elijah's puritanism blinded his eyes to Winston's sarcasm. He saw only the apparently sacrilegious blasphemy of his words. He stood aghast as a superstitious heathen before his smitten idol. His five years of struggle in the West had changed him in no essential point. It had only given room for the full development of the motive that had lain dormant in his former cramped surroundings. Side by side, yet wholly independent the one of the other, his faith in Divine guidance, his reverence for God, his New England land-hunger, his greed for wealth, his lust for power, had grown and were growing with every new opportunity. He had learned to keep in the background, to some extent, the expression of his fanatical beliefs, not because his personal faith had waned, but in reality because he saw that Divine guidance had less convincing weight with others than the logic of hard, common sense. He learned only that which he wished to learn, believed only that which he wished to believe, did only that which he wished to do; not because of conscious hypocrisy, but because his very faith in God's guidance had blinded his eyes to its recognition and forbidden him to question his own desires.

Elijah thought quickly. Even Winston was hardly aware of the pause that ensued after his last words.

"We're drifting from our point. The water question comes first. The other can come up later."

"A good deal later, I hope," Winston replied drily. "Let's get over to Miss Lonsdale's office. She's doing my clerical work now."

Winston was not slow in noting signs and he had seen a good many in his relations with Elijah which had disquieted him. He went steadily on his way, however, confident in his own strength. He gathered a few papers in his hand and with Elijah went out into the street. They entered another redwood cottage that bore a sign, announcing, "Helen Lonsdale, Stenographer, Typewriter and Notary Public."

"Miss Lonsdale, my friend, Mr. Berl. We want some work done right away. Can you attend to it?"

Miss Lonsdale acknowledged the introduction, swept aside a litter of papers, stripped a half-written page from her machine, drew forth a note-book, and, after pushing her cuffs from her wrists, assumed a waiting attitude.

Winston addressed Elijah.

"I guess you're fixed now. You go on with Helen and I'll get back to my work. If you need me, I'll come in." Then he left the office.

Elijah had all but forgotten his business in the contemplation of the girl before him. It was with an almost unconscious feeling of resentment that he heard Winston call her familiarly "Helen."

"I am afraid, Miss Lonsdale," he began, when he was interrupted.

"You can call me Helen. Every one does. It saves time. Time is money, pretty fast too, just now." The words were spoken with a light ripple.

It faintly occurred to Elijah that he had heard something like her laughter before. There was a suggestion of fresh, crisp air, the opening of spring, of young green plants pushing through the black soil beside New England brooks. There was a further suggestion that very hard stones in the brook caused the soft ripples. One look in the great, liquid, black eyes that absorbed everything and gave back nothing, took away the disagreeable impression and replaced it with one more agreeable. There was no perceptible pause, for while Elijah's thoughts were busy with Helen Lonsdale, his hands were assorting his papers. He turned to Helen.

"I was going to say, that I am afraid this work will be rather dry."

Helen vouchsafed no reply, but, with eyes now bent upon her note-book and pencil ready poised for action, waited for Elijah. He began rather slowly and awkwardly. He was unaccustomed to dictation, and besides he was conscious of Helen Lonsdale's beauty; but more and more rapidly he went on, as he forgot all else in the absorbing interest of his subject. He sorted paper from paper, went from point to point, clearly and logically, down to the last figure that Winston had given him. He hardly noted the flying fingers and moving hand that drew lines, and hooks, and dots, and dashes with the graceful ease and regularity of an inanimate machine. At length he paused, folding his papers.

Helen threw down her pencil and straightened her cramped fingers.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "You have given me the time of my life! I was on the point of calling you off once or twice; but I didn't. I'll read it over to you now and see if I have made any mistakes."

Elijah's face was eager, partly from Helen's indirect praise, but more from the enthusiasm of his subject.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked.

"Tired!" she repeated. "This doesn't make me tired. It's more fun than a toboggan slide. It's these everlasting drones who make me tired. Fellows who haven't anything to say and who don't know how to get at it." She took her note-book and began reading rapidly. Elijah listened, watching her through his narrowed eyes. She laid her note-book down.

"How is it?"

"Perfect. You've got everything."

"That's a great piece of work you've got blocked out." Helen's voice was approving.

"The work is not mine."

"No?" Helen's eyes were opened wide.

"No." Elijah's face drooped in reverent lines. "It has been given me to do."

"A-a-h!" Helen dared to commit herself no farther. She could not trust her eyes even. Her lids veiled them and her face assumed a look of non-committal interest. Elijah was a new species. She had no pigeonhole, even in the wide experience of her limited years, ready made into which she could thrust him.

Elijah felt impelled to go farther. He wanted to look again into the great, black eyes. He steered boldly into a sea where many a time before no less confident mariners had as boldly entered and had come to grief.

He told of his coming to California, of his life after reaching his goal, and how, little by little, the great work he was engaged upon had been revealed to him. He did not speak freely at first, only when he saw recognition and appreciation in Helen's face. If she was surprised at the freedom with which Elijah spoke to her, she was too wise to show it. Though not heralding the fact, she never tried to conceal that she was not in business for her health or from purely philanthropic motives. She was no innocent fledgeling, nor was her knowledge purchased with sacrifice. Individuality was the atmosphere which surrounded her; an atmosphere where everyone was somebody or nobody. She was simply determined to be somebody. She was beautiful. She knew that. She had a clear, alert mind, a quick grasp, a ready tact, a capacity for throwing herself heart and soul into any work that came to her hands to do. She valued these as effective tools with which to shape her ambition, to individualize herself, to get on in the world. She had a heart; but of this she was not conscious. She had innate honesty and she was a woman. It had never occurred to her that a woman's heart and a woman's sense of honor were liable to become paradoxes with the certain death of one. She looked frankly at Elijah, not concealing her interest.

"Your work is the kind of thing that's going to save this part of California." Helen spoke with conviction.

"You don't approve of all this?" Elijah glanced toward the bustling street.

"No. You've been giving me figures, now I'll give you some. This city, two miles wide, is laid out in streets three miles long. Sixty blocks long and forty wide; two thousand four hundred blocks. At one hundred dollars a front foot (that was the price, a few minutes ago), Ysleta is selling at the rate of two hundred and fifty-three million, four hundred and forty thousand dollars, unimproved."

Elijah looked at her in surprise. She too had been thinking in figures for herself.

"Who gave you these figures?"

Helen laughed. She had noted Elijah's surprise and had divined its cause.

"Wait. That isn't all. Before there can be any solid returns in this investment, it will have to be trebled at least, for sewers, pavements, sidewalks, and buildings. We will leave out odd hundred thousands, only millions count now." She smiled. "Seven hundred and fifty million dollars at least. Let's see about the population. At five hundred and twenty to the block, Ysleta should have a population of one million, two hundred and forty thousand. Quite a neat little town for a new country!"

Elijah's surprise grew. Helen was not even consulting notes.

"The total population of California isn't a million today. Most of these are miners, the next greater part live in towns. Hardly half are engaged in agriculture. How would Ysleta be fed, where would it get money to pay?"

Elijah's face showed still greater surprise.

"What put these figures into your head?"

Helen laughed sarcastically.

"I was advised to invest in building lots, so I looked the matter up. I am giving you these figures so you can see that I know how to appreciate what your work means." Her face sobered. She screwed paper and carbons into her machine and opened her note-book. She did not raise her eyes from her work.

"Don't wait, Mr. Berl. I'll have the work done in three hours."

Elijah left the office half dazed. Every word of Helen Lonsdale smote hard and deep. Not alone because of their surprising nature, but because his own work had never before appeared so worth while. Heretofore it had only appeared great in itself. Now it stood out gigantic by contrast. He was pleasantly conscious of another element that was entering his life for the first time; the sympathetic interest of an intelligent woman.

Punctually at the appointed time, Elijah returned. Helen was still busily at work.

"Am I too soon?" he asked.

She handed him a neatly enclosed package.

"That's all right, I think. Do you want to open an account, or will this be all?"

Elijah spoke very deliberately.

"I will open an account. I shall have more work."

"Very well. I send out monthly statements to my regular customers." Her eyes were again following her note-book, her fingers working at the rattling keys.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was well that the work which Helen was doing when Elijah left the office was mechanical, else it might have lacked the finish which made her in demand above all others. She could not keep her thoughts from this man and his work. With a frown, she glanced at her watch. Returning it to her belt, she drew her finished work from her machine and began to put the office in order. She stood absently before a mirror as she pinned her hat in place, turning with perfunctory pats here and there, touching a stray lock into order and smoothing down her gown. She passed out into the street, locking the door behind her, and turned to Winston's office. Her light footsteps as she entered, did not arouse his attention. For a moment she stood, looking at him as he bent over his work.

"You are cordial, I must confess."

Ralph looked up.

"Ah! What's the matter?" he concluded, noting her sober face.

"What is the matter?"

"Why, you're as solemn as an owl."

"Do you object to my sitting down for a moment?"

"Not for two moments. I'm glad to see you." Winston rose hastily and swung a chair into position.

"That's better," she approved.

"Good! Now if you'll get better, I shall know where I'm at."

"I've come here to find out where I'm at."

"If you are lost, it's the first time, I'm thinking, and I'm not so sure that I can set you straight."

"I'll take my chances. Who is Elijah Berl?"

Winston laughed.

"Oh, he's gotten hold of you, has he?"

"No, he hasn't; but I want to get hold of him to the extent of five thousand dollars. That is the limit of my cash money."

Winston smiled tolerantly.

"Elijah has certainly missed his calling. If he can work you up five thousand dollars' worth in an hour or so, I'll play him the limit against Wall street."

"No you won't. You don't know Elijah Berl."

"Then what are you asking me about him for?"

"Oh! that was just a starter. I had to begin somewhere."

"Isn't five thousand dollars a pretty heavy starter for you, Helen?" Winston asked the question soberly, for he saw that Helen was in earnest.

"No. I've kept out of Ysleta because it wasn't worth while. I want to get into Las Cruces because it is."

"It may be, Helen. It is full of promise, but it may not mature. I know the proposition pretty thoroughly and I know Elijah Berl. The elements of this may not be so solid as they appear."

"The watershed is all right, isn't it?"

"Without a question."

"The water can be brought from the reservoir to the lands?"

"No question about that, either."

"And the land is fertile and suited to oranges?"

"That's true too, but it needs money."

"You'll get that all right."

"I expect to, without doubt."

Helen had spoken with growing animation.

"Then the whole doubt in your mind centres in Elijah Berl?"

"You've hit it exactly."

"And yet you are a friend of Elijah's?" There was a touch of contempt in her voice.

"Yes."

"Then I must say that I don't value your friendship quite so highly as I did." Helen made no attempt to conceal her disapproval.

Winston spoke deliberately, weighing every word.

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Helen. Your friendship means a great deal to me. Just remember that in a way you have come to me for advice. If not advice exactly, you really ask for the approval of what I cannot approve without reserve. I have counted you as my friend. If I have seemed to be a traitor to Elijah, it is only that I might be true to you. I would not say to any one else what I have said to you."

Helen's resentment died away before Winston's words.

"You haven't answered my first question yet. You seem able, if you only will."

"In a way, yes. Elijah Berl and I are partners."

"Partners!" Helen did not try to conceal her surprise.

"Yes. The agreement was signed today. Elijah was more than generous in his terms."

"And yet you could say what you did of him!"

"Yes. I gave him fair warning. I didn't tell him in so many words that I distrusted him; I simply said that our different views of things might in the future bring us into conflict. If he couldn't understand that, it was useless to say more."

"And yet, distrusting him, you have tied yourself to him. It doesn't seem quite harmonious to me and not a bit like you."

"It isn't harmonious. Nothing is, for that matter, unless you make it so."

"Then the success of the whole business depends upon your ability to manage Elijah Berl?"

"That's about the gist of it."

"Yours must be a comfortable state of mind." There was sarcasm in the voice.

"I am speaking as freely to you, Helen, as I do to myself. I thought our standing would allow that."

Helen made no reply. She sat gazing absently into the street. She was in an uncomfortable frame of mind. Twice that day she had been swept hither and thither under influences outside herself. It was unusual for her and it was discomposing. The Las Cruces Irrigation Company had looked so safe as a permanent and a big paying investment, and Elijah Berl himself had stirred her as she had never before been stirred. And now Ralph Winston had told her in so many words that she did not know what she was about. She resented this hotly. She resented it the more strongly, because she recognized the injustice she was doing Ralph. It was long before she had herself under control. At length she turned from the street and looked at Winston.

"I had a letter from home today."

Winston responded eagerly to her changed mood.

"How are they all?"

"Just as well as ever. Mother says that father bobbed up from under that anti-debris decision like a cork in salt water. He says he is going to put up a dam that the debris commission can't look over in a week's climbing. Jimmie is his ablest assistant."

"Little rascal! Say, Helen, you ought to take him in hand and make him go to college. You're the only one who can manage him. He has the making of one of the biggest engineers in the country."

"Why don't you try your hand, Ralph? Mother says that you are his god yet. When he gets cornered, he insists that his way is just what Mr. Winston would do, and there he sticks. Father and mother both ask when you are coming back."

Winston shook his head almost regretfully. "I sometimes wish I had never left, but that's too late now. When I get a little despondent, the roar of the monitors eating into the gravel, the swish of the water and the clatter of boulders in the sluices get into my ears till I'm nearly wild."

"That is all over now. When I came away there were only a few discouraged miners digging in the banks and listening for the officers to come around and stop even that."

Winston went on even more regretfully.

"And I remember when you and I went barefoot, wading around with gold pans and scrapping as to which had the biggest pan – "

Helen rose to go. Her intuition told her that they were on dangerous ground.

"Old things and times are gone. We have put away childish things and gold pans, for something new."

Winston took her hand. A momentary pressure on her part and she withdrew it. She could not look into his eyes.

"Be careful about the new, Helen. There's fool's gold in these diggings too."

"Which reminds me, our last scrap as children was over that very thing."

Then the door closed behind her and Winston was alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

A country that has yielded a billion and a half of gold is, perforce, well and favorably known to the uttermost parts of the earth. Though the stream of yellow wealth diminishes, or even ceases to flow, yet the channel is carved through which the thoughts of men longingly roll. Upon such a land no limit of impossibility is placed. Upon what has been, the faith of man lays the foundations of nobler structures yet to be. The structures may rise and fall, but the foundation yet remains. It matters not to the builders of golden castles that, between the gold fields of California and the line that marked another nation, the whole of New England could lie, like an island in a sea of desert sand; California was yet California, and the Pactolean sands of the Cascades and the Sierras spread their yellow sheen over the whole vast expanse of mountain, and valley, and desert.

Winston was right. The gold that had flowed to the Eastward was now returning in heavy waves. From the pockets of idle tourists, it was scattered with lavish hand. From the pockets of gamblers, it came also; gamblers who, with trembling fingers, placed their gold on checkered town-lots, and waited for the spinning wheel to return it with usury, and went out white and haggard when the croupier declared against them. It came in the pockets of shrewd-eyed men who parted with it for a proper consideration, or not at all.

Into this stream of wealth, Winston was planning to build his dam. His efforts were rewarded more abundantly and sooner than either he or the more sanguine Elijah had expected.

Elijah had suggested a movement on the speculators in Ysleta lots, but against this Winston had set his hand.

"We don't want floaters; we want stayers. I met a man in the crowd yesterday who's a stayer all right. I think he'll come in. If he does, it will make me feel good in more ways than one. He's got money and he's got a head that tells him where there's more."

"What's his name?"

"Seymour. He'll be in, in a day or two, to look the matter up. That young orange grove of yours took his hard head by storm. He didn't do a thing yesterday but roll those navels that Amy gave him, in his fist, all the way down. He would have rubbed them under his nose if he hadn't been afraid to trust his teeth. As it was, he kept smelling of his fingers. Didn't say a word!" Winston laughed. "It makes us feel good, doesn't it, Elijah?"

A few days later, they were again in Winston's office, awaiting the coming of Seymour.

Winston turned to Elijah.

"You remember Helen Lonsdale?"

"Yes, what about her?" Elijah looked up questioningly.

"What did you make out of her?"

"She appeared to be a very able young woman."

"You don't think she would get stampeded very easily, do you?"

"I hardly think so." Elijah smiled. "She gave me some very telling reasons for keeping out of Ysleta lots."

"And you gave her some pretty convincing reasons for thinking that orange trees on a hillside would grow better crops than corner stakes on a sand dune."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you hadn't been gone an hour before she was in here and wanted to know if she could get into this building on the ground floor. She said she had a few thousands that she wanted to put in a good thing."

"You told her 'yes,' didn't you?" Elijah's voice was eager.

"I told her 'no.'"

"You ought to have taken her up."

"I don't know about that. This business is a sure thing one way, but in another, it isn't. It's a big thing. If we can swing it, it's all right. If we can't, it's going to go hard with the small fry. I may want to look into those big black eyes of hers again sometime."

"Why haven't you introduced me to Helen Lonsdale before?"

Winston was surprised, more at the manner of Elijah's question than at the question itself. He shifted the onus of the surprise to Elijah's shoulders.

"Why should I?" he asked bluntly.

"That's a Yankee trick, not a Californian's," retorted Elijah.

"I'm not too old to learn."

Elijah laughed consciously.

"It doesn't matter. We're acquainted now."

"It's up to you to make it worth her while to keep it up. She's rather particular about her friends."

Elijah was irritated, and not for the first time in his relations with Winston. Winston seemed to him to be contradictory. At times he was deferential to the point of enthusiasm; at times reserved, if not cynical. Elijah was not a close reasoner and he failed to understand that Winston's principles were a kind of moral straight-edge which he applied impartially. Winston had no hesitancy in calling attention to discrepancies.

"Helen Lonsdale is a mighty bright girl. She may be of use to us," hazarded Elijah.

Winston's momentary glance was searching.

"I expect she will be," he answered curtly.

After a short pause, Elijah resumed the broken conversation.

"You're going for Seymour?"

"Oh, yes. That's all right. A few hundred thousand wouldn't hurt Seymour. Five thousand would break Helen Lonsdale. Beside, if Seymour takes hold of it, it's going."

Elijah changed the point bluntly.

"Well, who's going to do the talking? You've done all the work and made out the estimates; you'd better. We don't want to make any mistakes."

"That's all right Elijah, but it isn't always the folks who make the cartridges that shoot the straightest. I'll stand by to furnish ammunition if you run short, but you work the trigger." Winston laughed. "I loaded him with estimates and facts. They're good so far as they go; but you know that champagne is pretty flat without the fizz. Here he comes now."

A man of medium height entered the office. There was more than a suggestion of iron about him. Iron-gray hair and mustache; steely, quick moving eyes, but not restless; hard lines that blocked out close-set lips; a firm decided step. Withal, a not unpleasant man; but one who suggested that the pleasure of acquiring money and the pleasure of spending it, had appropriate and distinct seasons. He acknowledged Winston's introduction with a quick look at Elijah.

"From what Mr. Winston said, I expected to meet an older man, Mr. Berl."

"That's all right, Mr. Seymour," Winston put in. "We don't put new wine in old bottles out here. This is a new country. Elijah is a new man, and he's chuck full of new ideas."

"I'm getting near enough to the age limit to make your figure rather doubtful, so far as I am concerned." Seymour's features relaxed in a grim smile as he pointed to his gray hair.

"We don't count a horse old, so long as he can kick the top rail off a fence."

Seymour looked closely at Winston, but made no reply. He began to talk with Elijah. At first, Elijah was conscious of the momentous importance of the interview; but this did not prevent him from grasping the import of Seymour's questions and answering clearly and to the point. Gradually he lost himself in his subject and poured forth fact after fact, estimate on estimate, with such rapidity that Seymour felt compelled at times to interrupt him.

"This is new business to me, Mr. Berl. I can't keep up with you." He spoke sharply, almost impatiently, but his manner showed that he was deeply impressed, both with the proposition and with Elijah himself.

"That is a strong presentation of your proposition, Mr. Berl. Now I want a few definite answers to definite questions. As I understand you, you propose to do something entirely new. What warrant have you for believing that oranges can be successfully grown in this district? Oranges are a tropical fruit."

"People are used to thinking that oranges are a tropical fruit. They aren't. Look at Spain, and France, and Italy. They are famous for this very fruit. Here," Elijah swept his hands around, "those conditions are reproduced. Here are the San Bernadinos, there the Pacific, between are desert hills. Bring water to this sunshine and soil, and California will become the garden of the New World."

Seymour smiled at Elijah's enthusiasm. His words were fervid, but Seymour realized their truth.

"That's all right for Spain, and Italy and the rest; but those countries are only a few hours by water from three hundred millions of people, while California is six days by rail from sixty millions, and high rate express at that."

Elijah's face lost none of its assurance; but his eyes half closed as he grasped Seymour's import. He answered with less fire but no less conviction.

"I'll take your estimate of sixty millions and six days express. Suppose that each of those sixty millions ate only two oranges a year, that calls for one hundred and twenty millions. If these oranges sold at five cents, there are six million dollars in a year. That's worth while, isn't it?"

Seymour nodded assent and Elijah resumed. He pointed out the cost of the land, of water, the care of the orchards, express rates and other charges.

"Taking all this into account, your net yield on your investment will be at least fifteen percent."

Seymour again smiled.

"That's all right too; but it hasn't been proved that California will produce one hundred and twenty million oranges."

Elijah was nettled. It irritated him to be questioned too closely. He was too thoroughly convinced, too thoroughly in earnest.

"No one believed in the Western hemisphere till Columbus found it."

Seymour paid no attention to Elijah's impatience. He had a concentrated look on his face. He spoke again sharply and decidedly.

"You believe in this thing. So do I. If suitable terms can be arranged, I am prepared to back my belief with cash."

"To what extent?" Elijah asked briefly.

"A hundred thousand or so. Think over what you will do and I will be in again, in an hour. If your terms are all right, I'll get the money for you at once." He left the office.

Elijah turned jubilantly to Winston.

"We're all right now."

"For a starter." Winston was sober.

"What do you mean?" Elijah spoke sharply.

"We've got a hundred thousand dollars. That's one thing. Now it's up to us to make it pay. That's another." Winston did not lack confidence or faith. He was realizing his responsibilities.

They began arranging terms for the transfer of an interest. Elijah, full of the enthusiasm of success, could hardly pin himself down to details. His years of dreams were being realized. He was looking upon a step as taken. With his foot as yet hardly lifted, already he was looking toward other paths. Winston held him down to the present.

At the appointed hour, Seymour reappeared. The terms offered were satisfactory.

"I must get back East and attend to my other business. I shall have to trust this to you."

Perhaps it was a mistake; but Winston had the feeling that Seymour's eyes rested upon him with his last words, that it was to him that the work was entrusted, that upon him was the responsibility, that he would be the one called to account. This did not oppress him; it sobered him. As Seymour finally left the office, Winston turned to Elijah.

"It's up to us now to show what there is in us."

CHAPTER SIX

It did not follow because Seymour had promised to back the Las Cruces Water Company to the extent of one hundred thousand dollars, that he intended to put in that amount of his own money; nor because he had promised a certain sum, that that sum was the limit. He had become thoroughly convinced that the enterprise was well conceived and that with proper management it was bound to succeed and to "succeed big." He wisely concluded that those who had conceived the project and had figured out so minutely the cost and detail, were the proper ones to trust with its execution. He was too cold blooded to be figurative, but Winston's figure to Elijah exactly expressed his attitude of mind. Elijah furnished the fizz of enthusiasm, while Winston supplied the necessary body to the wine, with his well-balanced, matter-of-fact mind. There was nothing in his contract to prevent his disposing at par of one half of the two hundred thousand shares which he had acquired at fifty, and this was the step which he proposed to take and which he did take. He too regarded the laborer as worthy of his hire.

Mr. Seymour was a business man. He was shrewd and he was very successful. It did not necessarily follow that he was unscrupulous. In fact, from a purely business standpoint, he was not; but he had no Quixotic limitations to the end that he was his brother's keeper. The world was full of disastrous mistakes; he took it as he found it. He did not count as a sin of his own, the omission to do good unto others when opportunity offered; but he regarded the opportunity as an indication of sin or at least of poor judgment in his fellow. He was a church communicant in good and regular standing; but religion was one thing, business another. He did not search the scriptures either for approbation or for defense. He acted upon the principle that offenses must be and that woe was the lot of the one through whom they came. The woe that was visited upon the offender was in reality no less a reward of merit than the benefit which accrued to the one who was wise enough to take advantage of the offense. He never pointed to the decalogue with the smug assertion that this had been kept from his youth up. If his business record did not show this, words would be useless. He wasted no love on his neighbor, for love was a dissipater of energy. Love engendered pity, pity sacrifice, and sacrifice precluded success. Every tub must stand on its own bottom. If his neighbor's tub leaked, it was his neighbor's fault for not keeping it calked. His neighbor had no ground for complaint if the liquor which he spilled, was gathered by a more fitting vessel.

Mr. Seymour's one hundred thousand shares of Las Cruces had cost him nothing, save a little energy. If he did no better, he would have so much clear. That was worth while. If Winston and Berl made a mess of the affair, that was no concern of his. One man's extremity was to him another man's opportunity. He intended to be the other man. Elijah was an enthusiast, Winston a professional man. Enthusiasm would inflate iridescent bubbles, professional pride would be an absorbing end in itself. Both were essential, neither would necessarily supply the third element of success, business acumen. At the proper time he would supply this himself and at his own price. In any event, he would be perfectly safe.

The orderly bustle which succeeded Seymour's departure, argued well for the success of the new company. Experienced Ysleta boomers saw in "Las Cruces" a new kind of boom, and beyond offering to put their experience and methods at the service of the new company, did nothing further. The idea of taking up land on a venture near Elijah's ranch, was discussed, but the conclusion was reached that this land was too far from Ysleta to be advantageous and that attention distracted from their own kettle of fish would result in the deadening of the fires that were keeping their own pot boiling.

The division of the entailed labor fell naturally. The engineering work demanded Winston's presence in the field. The office duties fell to Elijah. It was Winston who suggested to Elijah the necessity of a bookkeeper and that there was no one better fitted in every way than Helen

Lonsdale. Winston had no doubts of Elijah's intentional integrity and he had great confidence in Helen Lonsdale's ability both in business and in looking out for herself. So she was installed as an essential feature of the company. She felt herself in a position of great and growing responsibility.

Days slipped into weeks and weeks into months with the easy motion of well-organized work. Helen hardly surpassed Winston's expectations, but as he darted in and out of the office, full of his work, he felt no more than a passing sense of satisfaction at the readiness with which everything that he wanted came to his hands. Helen might have a personal pride in never being caught unprepared, but she never displayed the emotion. It was Winston himself who was first caught off his guard. He rushed into the office one afternoon with a look of annoyance, almost of disgust on his face.

"I've made a mess, Helen. I want you to help me out."

"Short of powder at No. 1?" Helen hardly looked up from her work.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I ordered two tons from the magazine. It's on its way there now."

"Good! But how did you know that I was short?"

"From the reports. I thought you wouldn't be in, so I ordered it."

"You are a jewel, Helen. I haven't had time to tell you so before, but I've known it all along."

"Jewels are ornamental, not useful."

"You are both."

Helen glanced at the clock.

"Office hours aren't over yet and the company isn't paying me to trade sugar plums."

"All right. I'll see you off shift sometime."

Elijah's work kept him much in the office and he was held to business quite as closely as was Winston. Helen showed her appreciation of his work by saying nothing, but doing everything that came to her hands. He longed to drink of the sparkling waters of his dreams, and with all that was in her, Helen was trying to convert these iridescent dreams into material facts. Elijah longed also to see Helen's eyes kindle, to hear her words of commendation; but she never spoke now of his idea. Thus it happened that one phase of his nature was hungered, the other fully satisfied.

Poor Amy was the only party to the new order of things who was unhappy. She had accepted the necessity of Elijah's absence at the Ysleta office, not with resignation, but with unprotesting grief. She regarded this as the dregs of her cup of bitterness; but when she learned of Elijah's assistant, she discovered her mistake. She mourned over his absence, yet utterly refused to consider the idea of moving to Ysleta. He must come to her at her bidding; she could not bring herself to go to him at his. This was her touchstone of love and devotion. It was failing her, and in sackcloth and ashes she was mourning it. She made a brave attempt at cheerfulness when Elijah broached the subject, but she could neither keep the color in her cheeks nor her lips steady when she made reply.

"Don't ask me, Elijah. I can't bear it."

"Why?" he asked in surprise.

"Because," she paused for a moment. "We have been here almost four years, just you, and I and the children. Every spot of it is a part of you. It would be like death to leave it. While you are away, I shall look forward to your coming back. If I should go to Ysleta, you wouldn't be coming back."

"Of course not. I'd be there all the time. You'd have lots of company. I could run in to lunch and bring my friends." Elijah lifted his head and squared his shoulders. He caught not the slightest glimpse of Amy's real feeling. His words and gestures showed that only too plainly even to her.

Amy smiled wanly.

"I wouldn't have you all to myself there. I would rather have you all to myself part of the time, than part of you all the time." It was a tremendous thought for Amy. She almost stood in awe of herself over its utterance.

"You are a silly goose." Elijah caught her in his arms and swung her to and fro as if she were a child. "You have me all the time, wherever I am."

Amy lay in his arms with closed eyes. The color came back to her face. It was only a dream; a dream of what had been. She knew it was only a dream and she tried to close her mental eyes to this knowledge. She was aroused when Elijah set her on her feet.

"I have lots to do at the office now."

Amy's face showed a sudden gleam of inspiration.

"Couldn't I be in the office with you?"

"Of course not, goose. You'd be in the way."

"Is the bookkeeper in the way?" The words were almost gasped.

"Of course not. She'd be in the way if she wasn't there."

"Why?" The word was spoken perforce and with fear.

"Because I couldn't get along without her. She's no end of help to me in my work."

"Couldn't I help you? I would try hard."

Elijah laughed long and loud. Not brutally, at least he had no intention of brutality; but the thought of Amy's doing Helen Lonsdale's work incited his thoughtless mirth. It was inconsiderate rather than thoughtless, for he had not personified Amy's words. Her white face brought the truth home. He grew sober.

"Not the way you mean, Amy. You will have to help me in your way, and Miss Lonsdale in another. Goodbye, dear. Don't scare yourself with pictures, as I said before."

Amy watched him as on a former occasion; then she had thought her lot hard. She would now be glad to exchange forever and to ask no more. Then, she feared. Now she knew that there were others, beside herself, upon whom Elijah depended. Farther, she could not go, for she could not see her own limitations.

At his office in Ysleta, Elijah found Helen Lonsdale bent over a map and oblivious to her surroundings. A pad and pencil were at her elbow. She was tracing the map with one finger which occasionally recurred to one point, while with the other hand she was apparently recording memoranda. Finally the maps were pushed aside and pad and pencil absorbed her entire attention. There were pauses during which she looked at the map, ran over her figures and then her pencil flew over the pad more rapidly than before. At length she sat up straight, spread the slips of paper before her, and, rolling her pencil meditatively between her fingers, appeared absorbed in thought.

"You seem to be deeply interested." Elijah was standing at the door of the inner office.

Helen turned her head sharply.

"You're just in time to sign these letters before the mail closes."

Elijah seated himself at his desk and signed the letters, as one by one, she placed them before him.

"Do you want to look them over?" she asked.

"No, you never make mistakes."

She began reading and folding the letters.

"I think they are all right. You stamp them." She glanced at the clock. "You'll have to hurry."

Elijah stamped the letters as she tossed them to him. As the last stamp was affixed, she shuffled them together, and, with a glance over her shoulder at the clock, started through the door.

"Have the boy take them over." Elijah called out.

"Boy and hurry aren't on intimate terms." She was already on the threshold of the outer door. In a few moments she returned. "If I had sent the boy, the letters would have lain over until tomorrow, I was just in time." She drew a handkerchief over her flushed face. The handkerchief was not purely ornamental, neither did it suggest unrefined utilitarianism. It lacked lace, but not delicacy. The motion that swept it over her face was decided, but not harsh. Her movements, as she seated herself at her desk and turned her face full toward Elijah, were quick, yet rhythmic and graceful. There was masculine alertness and concentration; yet both were softened by a femininity, unobtrusive but not to be ignored.

For over six months, she had been "Helen" to him as he was "Elijah" to her. Yet the barrier between man and woman that seemed so frail, had effectively obstructed the path that led to intimacy.

Elijah was half-conscious of a longing which he could not express, half-conscious that every attempt to gratify it was repulsed by an intangible atmosphere which seemed transparent and unresisting, yet was dense and impenetrable. Had he been able to state his position to himself at this time, he would have shrunk from the picture. He was not analytical, therefore he did not know that the greater part of the sins of the world are the result not of deliberate premeditation and decision, but of the almost unconscious, initial yielding to apparently innocent impulses which should be recognized for what they are, for what they may be, and crushed out of existence at once.

Elijah was strong in his vision of possibilities, strong in his purpose to wrest success from the teeth of defeat, strong in the enthusiasm that made him tingle with restless impatience to be doing, strong in his power to kindle others with the fire of his own purpose; yet he was weak. Weak because of an unconscious, yet all-pervading selfishness. Imperative as were his visions, even so were his desires, and unconsciously both centred in himself. As in the rock-ribbed, narrow confines of his New England home, so in the desolate, sun-burned deserts of California, unchecked by contact with his fellow men, his thoughts ran riot in the channels of his glowing soul. He had longed for sympathetic companionship; but his solitary, isolated life forbade it. This longing had found gratification in what he grew to believe was fellowship with God. His youth fostered the idea, his growing, solitary years developed it into a fanatical belief. If he was in doubt, he took refuge in prayer, not for guidance, firmly as he may have believed it, but for confirmation. From his youth up, he had had a fanatical belief in the guidance of Divinity, and had placed the Bible as a lamp to his feet. Elijah prayed to God for guidance in paths which he should have chosen for himself, blindly putting aside the fact that in the very seeking for guidance, he was longing to be confirmed in a course which in the depths of his soul he knew to be wrong. Fortified by his belief, armed by God's sanction, he followed his desires mercilessly and without shame.

Helen Lonsdale was not analytical, she was not fanatical, nor was she deeply religious. Her surroundings had precluded that. She had strong common sense. When for lack of experience this failed her, she had intuition. She moved among men fearlessly, because in the field of their movements, sex was not thought of, – only things to be done. The two men with whom, in her present relations, her lot was so intimately cast, stood respectively on an entirely different footing. In their childhood days, she and Ralph Winston had been playmates. Later, they had been parted only to be thrown into closer relations by a strange turn of Fortune's wheel. She had welcomed Ralph with the unreserve of the days of their childhood. She was, perhaps, on this very account, unconscious that his memories were the more faithful of the two.

Elijah had come into her life, full-fledged, with no childish memories to blur the outlines of the image. However strong Winston was in the eyes of others, there were yet in her eyes the clinging shreds of the memory of other days. She was attracted by Elijah's enthusiasm, the strength of his ideas, of his purpose to succeed. With a woman's intuition she saw the barren stretch of his unsympathetic surroundings, and, with no idea of injustice, the sight prompted her to give in full that which had hitherto been denied him. Her sympathy was aroused, her enthusiasm kindled by his work; but it was apparently impersonal. She was surrounded by an atmosphere of womanliness as delicate as an electric field, which warned off and repelled any disturbing element. Yet her atmosphere was polar; it would respond to the proper element. The element was existent, but as yet unrecognized.

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