

B. M. BOWER



***STARR,
OF THE DESERT***

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STARR, OF THE DESERT

CHAPTER ONE

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A COMMONPLACE MAN WAS PETER

Daffodils were selling at two bits a dozen in the flower stand beside the New Era Drug Store. Therefore Peter Stevenson knew that winter was over, and that the weather would probably "settle." There would be the spring fogs, of course—and fog did not agree with Helen May since that last spell of grippe. Peter decided that he would stop and see the doctor again, and ask him what he thought of a bungalow out against the hills behind Hollywood; something cheap, of course—and within the five-cent limit on the street cars; something with a sleeping porch that opened upon a pleasanter outlook than your neighbor's back yard. If Helen May would then form the habit of riding to and from town on the open end of the cars, that would help considerably; in fact, the longer the ride the better it would be for Helen May. The air was sweet and clean out there toward the hills. It would be better for Vic, too. It would break up that daily habit of going out to see "the boys" as soon as he had swallowed his dinner.

Peter finished refilling the prescription on which he was working, and went out to see if he were needed in front. He sold a lip-stick to a pert miss who from sheer instinct made

eyes at him, and he wished that Helen May had such plump cheeks—though he thanked God she had not the girl's sophisticated eyes. (Yes, a bungalow out there against the hills ought to do a lot for Helen May.) He glanced up at the great clock and unconsciously compared his cheap watch with it, saw that in ten minutes he would be free for the day, and bethought him to telephone the doctor and make sure of the appointment. He knew that Helen May had seen the doctor at noon, since she had given Peter her word that she would go, and since she never broke a promise. He would find out just what the doctor thought.

When he returned from the 'phone, a fat woman wanted peroxide, and she was quite sure the bottle he offered was smaller than the last two-bit bottle she had bought. Peter very kindly and patiently discussed the matter with her, and smiled and bowed politely when she finally decided to try another place. His kidneys were hurting him again. He wondered if Helen May would remember that he must not eat heavy meats, and would get something else for their dinner.

He glanced again at the clock. He had four minutes yet to serve. He wondered why the doctor had seemed so eager to see him. He had a vague feeling of uneasiness, though the doctor had not spoken more than a dozen words. At six he went behind the mirrored partition and got his topcoat and hat; said good night to such clerks as came in his way, and went out and bought a dozen daffodils from the Greek flower-vendor. All day he had been arguing with himself because of this small extravagance which tempted him, but now that it was settled and the flowers were in his hand, he

was glad that he had bought them. Helen May loved all growing things. He set off briskly in spite of his aching back, thinking how Helen May would hover over the flowers rapturously even while she scolded him for his extravagance.

Half an hour later, when he turned to leave the doctor's office, he left the daffodils lying forgotten on a chair until the doctor called him back and gave them to him with a keen glance that had in it a good deal of sympathy.

"You're almost as bad off yourself, old man," he said bluntly. "I want to watch those kidneys of yours. Come in tomorrow or next day and let me look you over. Or Sunday will do, if you aren't working then. I don't like your color. Here, wait a minute. I'll give you a prescription. You'd better stop and fill it before you go home. Take the first dose before you eat—and come in Sunday. Man, you don't want to neglect yourself. You—"

"Then you don't think Hollywood—?" Peter took the daffodils and began absently crumpling the waxed paper around them. His eyes, when he looked into the doctor's face, were very wistful and very, very tired.

"Hollywood!" The doctor snorted. "One lung's already badly affected, I tell you. What she's got to have is high, dry air—like Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado. And right out in the open—live like an Injun for a year or two. Radical change of climate—change of living. Another year of office work will kill her." He stopped and eyed Peter pityingly. "Predisposition—and then the grippe—her mother went that way, didn't she?"

"Yes," Peter replied, flat-toned and patient. "Yes, she went—that way."

"Well, you know what it means. Get her out of here just as quick as possible, and you'll probably save her. Helen May's a girl worth saving."

"Yes," Peter replied flatly, as before. "Yes—she's worth saving."

"You bet! Well, you do that. And don't put off coming here Sunday. And don't forget to fill that prescription and take it till I see you again."

Peter smiled politely, and went down the hall to the elevator, and laid his finger on the bell, and waited until the steel cage paused to let him in. He walked out and up Third Street and waited on the corner of Hill until the car he wanted stopped on the corner to let a few more passengers squeeze on. Peter found a foothold on the back platform and something to hang to, and adapted himself to the press of people around him, protecting as best he could the daffodils with the fine, green stuff that went with them and that straggled out and away from the paper. Whenever human eyes met his with a light of recognition, Peter would smile and bow, and the eyes would smile back. But he never knew who owned the eyes, or even that he was performing one of the little courtesies of life.

All he knew was that Helen May was going the way her mother had gone, and that the only way to prevent her going that way was to take her to New Mexico or Colorado or Arizona; and she was worth saving—even the doctor had been struck with her worth; and a bungalow out against the hills wouldn't do at all, not even with a sleeping porch and

the open-air ride back and forth every day. Radical change she must have. Arizona or New Mexico or—the moon, which seemed not much more remote or inaccessible.

When his street was called he edged out to the steps and climbed down, wondering how the doctor expected a man with Peter's salary to act upon his advice. "You do that!" said the doctor, and left Peter to discover, if he could, how it was to be done without money; in other words, had blandly required Peter to perform a modern miracle.

Helen May was listlessly setting the table when he arrived. He went up to her for the customary little peck on the cheek which passes for a kiss among relatives, and Helen May waved him off with a half smile that was unlike her customary cheerfulness.

"I've quit kissing," she said. "It's unsanitary."

"What did the doctor tell you, Babe? You went to see him, didn't you?" Peter managed a smile—business policy had made smiling a habit—while he unwound the paper from around the daffodils.

"Dad, I've told you and *told* you not to buy flowers! Oh, golly, aren't they beautiful! But you mustn't. I'm going to get my salary cut, on the first. They say business doesn't warrant my present plutocratic income. Five a week less, Bob said it would be. That'll pull the company back to a profit-sharing basis, of course!"

"Lots of folks are losing their jobs altogether," Peter reminded her apathetically. "What did the doctor say about your cough, Babe?"

"Oh, he told me to quit working. Why is it doctors never have any brains about such things? Charge a person two

dollars or so for telling him to do what's impossible. What does he think I am—a movie queen?"

She turned away from his faded, anxious eyes that hurt her with their realization of his helplessness. There was a red spot on either cheek—the rose of dread which her father had watched heart-sinkingly. "I know what he *thinks* is the matter," she added defiantly. "But that doesn't make it so. It's just the grippe hanging on. I've felt a lot better since the weather cleared up. It's those raw winds—and half the time they haven't had the steam on at all in the mornings, and the office is like an ice-box till the sun warms it."

"Vic home yet?" Peter abandoned the subject for one not much more cheerful. Vic, fifteen and fully absorbed in his own activities, was more and more becoming a sore subject between the two.

"No. I called up Ed's mother just before you came, but he hadn't been there. She thought Ed was over here with Vic. I don't know where else to ask."

"Did you try the gym?"

"No. He won't go there any more. They got after him for something he did—broke a window somehow. There's no use fussing, dad. He'll come when he's hungry enough. He's broke, so he can't eat down town."

Peter sighed and went away to brush his thin, graying hair carefully over his bald spot, while Helen May brewed the tea and made final preparations for dinner. The daffodils she arranged with little caressing pulls and pats in a tall, slim vase of plain glass, and placed the vase in the center of the table, just as Peter knew she would do.

"Oh, but you're sweet!" she said, and stooped with her face close above them. "I wish I could lie down in a whole big patch of you and just look at the sky and at you nodding and perking all around me—and not do a living thing all day but just lie there and soak in blue and gold and sweet smells and silence."

Peter, coming to the open doorway, turned and tiptoed back as though he had intruded upon some secret, and stood irresolutely smoothing his hair down with the flat of his hand until she called him to come and eat. She was cheerful as ever while she served him scrupulously. She smiled at him now and then, tilting her head because the daffodils stood between them. She said no more about the doctor's advice, or the problem of poverty. She did not cough, and the movements of her thin, well-shaped hands were sure and swift. More than once she made a pause while she pulled a daffodil toward her and gazed adoringly into its yellow cup.

Peter might have been reassured, were it not for the telltale flush on her cheeks and the unnatural shine in her eyes. As it was, every fascinating little whimsy of hers stabbed him afresh with the pain of her need and of his helplessness. Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado, the doctor had said; and Peter knew that it must be so. And he with his druggist's salary and his pitiful two hundred dollars in the savings bank! And with the druggist's salary stopping automatically the moment he stopped reporting for duty! Peter was neither an atheist nor a socialist, yet he was close to cursing his God and his country whenever Helen May smiled at him around the dozen daffodils.

"Your insurance is due the tenth, dad," she remarked irrelevantly when they had reached the dessert stage of cream puffs from the delicatessen nearest Helen May's work. "Why don't you cut it down? It's sinful, the amount of money we've paid out for insurance. You need a new suit this spring. And the difference—"

"I don't see what's wrong with this suit," Peter objected, throwing out his scrawny chest and glancing down his front with a prejudiced eye, refusing to see any shabbiness. "A little cleaning and pressing, maybe—"

"A little suit of that new gray everybody's wearing these days, you mean," she amended relentlessly. "Don't argue, dad. You've *got* to have a suit. And that old insurance—"

"Jitneys are getting thicker every day," Peter contended in feeble jest. "A man needs to be well insured in this town. There's Vic—if anything happened, he's got to be educated just the same. And by the endowment plan, in twelve years more I'll have a nice little lump. It's—on account of the endowment, Babe. I don't want to sell drugs all my life."

"Just the same, you're going to have a new suit." Helen May retrenched herself behind the declaration. "And it's going to be gray. And a gray hat with a dove-colored band and the bow in the back. And tan shoes," she added implacably, daintily lifting the roof off her cream puff to see how generous had been the filling.

"Who? Me?" Vic launched himself in among them and slid spinelessly into his chair as only a lanky boy can slide. "Happy thought! Only I'll have bottle green for mine. A fellow stepped on my roof this afternoon, so—"

"You'll wear a cap then—or go bareheaded and claim it's to make your hair grow." Helen May regarded him coldly. "Lots of fellows do. You don't get a single new dud before the fourth, Vic Stevenson."

"Oh, don't I?" Vic drawled with much sarcasm, and pulled two dollars from his trousers pocket, displaying them with lofty triumph. "I get a new hat to-morrow, Miss Stingy."

"Vic, where did you get that money?" Helen May's eyes flamed to the battle. "Have you been staying out of school and hanging around those picture studios?"

"Yup—at two dollars per hang," Vic mouthed, spearing a stuffed green pepper dexterously. "Fifty rehearsals for two one-minute scenes of honorable college gangs honorably hailing the hee-ro. Waugh! Where'd you get these things—or did the cat bring it in? Stuffed with laundry soap, if you ask me. Why don't you try that new place on Spring?"

"Vic Stevenson!" Helen May began in true sisterly disapprobation. "Is that getting you anywhere in your studies? A few more days out of school, and—"

Peter's thoughts turned inward. He did not even hear the half playful, half angry dispute between these two. Vic was a heady youth, much given to rebelling against the authority of Helen May who bullied or wheedled as her mood and the emergency might impel, as sisters do the world over. Peter was thinking of his two hundred dollars saved against disaster; and a third of that to go for life insurance on the tenth, which was just one row down on the calendar; and Helen May going the way her mother had gone—unless she lived out of doors "like an Indian" in Arizona or—Peter's mind refused to name again the remote, inaccessible places

where Helen May might evade the penalty of being the child of her mother and of poverty.

Gray hat for Peter or bottle-green hat for Vic—what did it matter if neither of them ever again owned a hat, if Helen May must stay here in the city and face the doom that had been pronounced upon her? What did anything matter, if Babe died and left him plodding along alone? Vic did not occur to him consolingly. Vic was a responsibility; a comfort he was not. Like many men, Peter could not seem to understand his son half as well as he understood his daughter. He could not see why Vic should frivol away his time; why he should have all those funny little conceits and airs of youth; why he should lord it over Helen May who was every day proving her efficiency and her strength of character anew. If Helen May went the way her mother had gone, Peter felt that he would be alone, and that life would be quite bare and bleak and empty of every incentive toward bearing the little daily burdens of existence.

He got up with his hand going instinctively to his back to ease the ache there, and went out upon the porch and stood looking drearily down upon the asphalted street, where the white paths of speeding automobiles slashed the dusk like runaway sunbeams on a frolic. Then the street lights winked and sputtered and began to glow with white brilliance.

Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado! Peter knew what the doctor had in mind. Vast plains, unpeopled, pure, immutable in their calm; stars that came down at night and hung just over your head, making the darkness alive with their bright presence; a little cottage hunched against a hill, a candle winking cheerily through the window at the stars; the cries

of night birds, the drone of insects, the distant howling of a coyote; far away on the boundary of your possessions, a fence of barbed wire stretching through a hollow and up over a hill; distance and quiet and calm, be it day or night. And Helen May coming through the sunlight, riding a gentle-eyed pony; Helen May with her deep-gold hair tousled in the wind, and with health dancing in her eyes that were the color of a ripe chestnut, odd contrast to her hair; Helen May with the little red spots gone from her cheek bones, and with tanned skin and freckles on her nose and a laugh on her lips, coming up at a gallop with the sun behind her, and something more; with sickness behind her and the drudgery of eight hours in an office, and poverty and unhappiness. And Vic—yes, Vic in overalls and a straw hat, growing up to be the strong man he never would be in the city.

Like many another commonplace man of the towns, for all his colorless ways and his thinning hair and his struggle against poverty, Peter was something of a dreamer. And like all the rest of us who build our dreams out of wishes and hopes and maybes, Peter had not a single fact to use in his foundation. Arizona, New Mexico or Colorado—to Peter they were but symbols of all those dear unattainable things he longed for. And that he longed for them, not for himself but for another who was very dear to him, only made the longing keener and more tragic.

CHAPTER TWO

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IN WHICH PETER DISCOVERS A WAY OUT

We are always exclaiming over the strange way in which events link themselves together in chains; and when the chains bind us to a certain condition or environment, we are in the habit of blandly declaring ourselves victims of the force of circumstances. By that rule, Peter found himself being swept into a certain channel of thought about which events began at once to link themselves into a chain which drew him perforce into a certain path that he must follow. Or it may have been his peculiar single-mindedness that forced him to follow the path; however that may be, circumstances made it easy.

If Helen May worried about her cough and her failing energy, she did not mention the fact again; but that was Helen May's way, and Peter was not comforted by her apparent dismissal of the subject. So far as he could see she was a great deal more inclined to worry over Vic, who refused to stay in school when he could now and then earn a dollar or two acting in "mob scenes" for some photoplay company out in Hollywood. He did not spend the money

wisely; Helen May declared that he was better off with empty pockets.

Ordinarily Peter would have taken Vic's rebellion seriously enough to put a stop to it. He did half promise Helen May that he would notify all the directors he could get hold of not to employ Vic in any capacity; even to "chase him off the studio grounds", as Helen May put it. But he did not, because chance threw him a bit of solid material on which to rebuild his air castle for Helen May.

He was edging his way down the long food counter, collecting his lunch of rice pudding, milk and whole-wheat bread in a cafeteria on Hill Street. He was late, and there was no unoccupied table to be had, so he finally set his tray down where a haggard-featured woman clerk had just eaten hastily her salad and pie. A brown-skinned young fellow with country manners and a range-fostered disposition to talk with any one who tarried within talking distance, was just unloading his tray load of provender on the opposite side of the table. He looked across at Peter's tray, grinned at the meager luncheon, and then looked up into Peter's face with friendliness chasing the amusement from his eyes.

"Golly gee! There's a heap of difference in our appetites, from the looks of our layouts," he began amiably. "I'm hungry as a she-wolf, myself. Hope they don't make me wash the dishes when I'm through; I'm always kinda scared of these grab-it-and-go joints. I always feel like making a sneak when nobody's looking, for fear I'll be called back to clean up."

Peter smiled and handed his tray to a waiter. "I wish I could eat a meal like that," he confessed politely.

"Well, you could if you lived out more in the open. Town kinda gits a person's appetite. Why, first time I come in here and went down the chute past the feed troughs, why it took two trays to pack away the grub I seen and wanted. Lookout lady on the high stool, she give me two tickets—thought there was two of, me, I reckon. But I ain't eatin' the way I was then. Town's kinda gittin' me like it's got the rest of you. Last night I come pretty near makin' up my mind to go back. Little old shack back there in the greasewood didn't look so bad, after all. Only I do hate like sin to bach, and a fellow couldn't take a woman out there in the desert to live, unless he had money to make her comfortable. So I'm going to give up my homestead—if I can find some easy mark to buy out my relinquishment. Don't want to let it slide, yuh see, 'cause the improvements is worth a little something, and the money'd come handy right now, helpin' me into something here. There's a chance to buy into a nice little service station, fellow calls it—where automobiles stop to git pumped up with air and gasoline and stuff. If I can sell my improvements, I'll buy in there. Looks foolish to go back, once I made up my mind to quit."

He ate while he talked, and he talked because he had the simple mind of a child and must think out loud in order to be perfectly at ease. He had that hunger for speech which comes sometimes to men who have lived far from their kind. Peter listened to him vaguely at first; then avidly, with an inner excitement which his mild, expressionless face hid like a mask.

"I was getting kinda discouraged when my horse up 'n died," the eater went on. "And then when some durn

greaser went 'n stole my burro, I jest up 'n sold my saddle and a few head uh sheep I had, and pulled out. New Mexico ranching is all right for them that likes it, but excuse me! I want to live where I can see a movie once in a while, anyhow." He stopped for the simple, primitive reason that he had filled his mouth to overflowing with food, so that speech was for the moment a physical impossibility.

Peter sipped his glass of milk, and his thoughts raced back and forth between the door of opportunity that stood ajar, and the mountain of difficulty which he must somehow move by his mental strength alone before he and his might pass through that door.

"Ah—how much do you value your improvements at?" he asked. His emotion was so great that his voice refused to carry it, and so was flat and as expressionless as his commonplace face.

"Well," gurgled the young man, sluicing down his food with coffee, "it's pretty hard to figure exactly. I've got a good little shack, you see, and there's a spring right close handy by. Springs is sure worth money in that country, water being scarce as it is. There's a plenty for the house and a few head of stock; well, in a good wet year a person could raise a little garden, maybe; few radishes and beans, and things like that. But uh course, that can't hardly be called an improvement, 'cause it was there when I took the place. A greaser, he had the land fenced and was usin' the spring 'n' range like it was his own, and most folks, they was scared to file on it. But she's sure filed on now, and I've got six weeks yet before it can be jumped.

"Well, there's a shed for stock, and a pretty fair brush corral, and I built me a pretty fair road in to the place—about a mile off the main road, it is. I done that odd times the year I was on the place. The sheep I sold; sheep's a good price now. I only had seventeen—coyotes and greasers, they kep' stealin' 'em on me, or I'd 'n' had more. I'd 'a' lost 'em all, I guess, if it hadn't been for Loma—dog I got with me. Them—"

Peter looked at his watch in that furtive way which polite persons employ when time presses and a companion is garrulous. He had finished his rice pudding and his milk, and in five minutes he would be expected to hang up his hat behind the mirrored partition of the New Era Drug Store and walk out smilingly to serve the New Era customers, patrons, the New Era called them. In five minutes he must be on duty, yet Peter felt that his very life depended upon bringing this wordy young man to a point in his monologue.

"If you will come to the New Era Drug Store, at six o'clock," said Peter, "I shall be glad to talk with you further about this homestead of yours. I—ah—have a friend who has an idea of—ah—locating somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico or Colorado—" Peter could name them now without that sick feeling of despair—"—and he might be interested. But," he added hastily, "he could not afford to pay very much for a place. Still, if your price is low enough—"

"Oh, I reckon we can git together on the price," the young man said cheerfully, as Peter rose and picked up his check. "I'll be there at six, sure as shootin' cats in a bag. I know where the New Era's at. I went in there last night and

got something to stop my tooth achin'. Ached like the very devil for a while, but that stuff sure fixed her."

Peter smiled and bowed and went his way hurriedly, his pale lips working nervously with the excitement that filled him. The mountain of difficulty was there, implacably blocking the way. But beyond was the door of opportunity, and the door was ajar. There must, thought Peter, be some way to pass the mountain and reach the door.

Helen May telephoned that she meant to pick out that gray suit for him that evening. Since it was Saturday, the stores would be open, and there was a sale on at Hecheimer's. She had seen some stunning grays in the window, one-third off. And would he....

Peter's voice was almost irritable when he told her that he had a business engagement and could not meet her. And he added the information that he would probably eat down town, as he did not know how long he would be detained. Helen May was positively forbidden to do anything at all about the suit until he had a chance to talk with her. After which unprecedented firmness Peter left the 'phone hurriedly, lest Helen May should laugh at his authority and lay down a law of her own, which she was perfectly capable of doing.

At five minutes to six the young man presented himself at the New Era, and waited for Peter at the soda fountain, with a lemon soda and a pretty girl to smile at his naïve remarks. Peter's heart had given a jump and a flutter when the young man walked in, fearing some one else might snap at the chance to buy a relinquishment of a homestead in New Mexico. And yet, how did Peter expect to buy anything

of the sort? If Peter knew, he kept the knowledge in the back of his mind, telling himself that there would be some way out.

He went with the young man, whose name he learned was Johnny Calvert, and had dinner with him at the cafeteria where they had met at noon. Johnny talked a great deal, ate a great deal, and unconsciously convinced Peter that he was an honest young man who was exactly what he represented himself to be. He had papers which proved his claim upon three hundred and twenty acres of land in Dona Ana County, New Mexico. He also had a map upon which the location of his claim was marked with a pencil. Malpais, he said, was the nearest railroad point; not much of a point, but you could ride there and back in a day, if you got up early enough in the morning.

Peter asked about the climate and the altitude. Johnny was a bit hazy about the latter, but it was close to mountains, he said, and it was as high as El Paso, anyway, maybe higher. The climate was like all the rest of the country, coming in streaks of good and bad. Peter, gaining confidence as Johnny talked, spoke of his daughter and her impending doom, and Johnny, instantly grasping the situation, waxed eloquent. Why, that would be just the place, he declared. Dry as a bone, the weather was most of the year; hot—the lungers liked it hot and dry, he knew. And when it was cold, it was sure bracing, too. Why, the country was alive with health-seekers. At that, most of 'em got well—they that didn't come too late.

That last sentence threw Peter into a panic. What if he dawdled along and kept Helen May waiting until it was too

late? By that time I think Peter had pretty clearly decided how he was to remove the mountain of difficulty. He must have, or he would not have had the courage to drive the bargain to a conclusion in so short a time.

Drive it he did, for at nine o'clock he let himself into the place he called home and startled Helen May with the announcement that he had bought her a claim in New Mexico, where she was to live out of doors like an Indian and get over that cough, and grow strong as any peasant woman; and where Vic was going to keep out of mischief and learn to amount to something. He did not say what the effect would be upon himself; Peter was not accustomed to considering himself except as a provider of comfort for others.

Helen May did not notice the omission. "*Bought* a claim?" she repeated and added grimly: "What with?"

"With two hundred dollars cash," Peter replied, smiling queerly. "It's all settled, Babe, and the claim is to stand in your name. Everything is attended to but the legal signatures before a notary. I was glad my money was in the all-night bank, because I was not compelled to wait until Monday to get it for young Calvert. You will have the relinquishment of his right to the claim, Babe, and a small adobe house with sheds and yards and a good spring of living water. In building up the place into a profitable investment you will be building up your health, which is the first and greatest consideration. I—you must not go the way your mother went. You will not, because you will live in the open and throw off the—ah—incipient—"

"Dad—*Stevenson!*" Helen May was sitting with her arms lying loose in her lap, palms upward. Her lips had been loose and parted a little with the slackness of blank amazement. In those first awful minutes she really believed that her father had suddenly lost his mind; that he was joking never occurred to her. Peter was not gifted with any sense of humor whatsoever, and Helen May knew it as she knew the color of his hair.

"You will no longer be a wage slave, doomed to spend eight hours of every day before a typewriter in that insurance office. You will be independent—a property owner who can see that property grow under your thought and labor. You will see Vic growing up among clean, healthful surroundings. He will be able to bear much of the burden—the brunt of the work. The boy is in a fair way to be ruined if he stays here any longer. There will be six weeks of grace before the claim can be seized—ah—jumped, the young man called it. In that time you must be located upon the place. But you should make all possible haste in any case, on account of your health. Monday morning we will go together with young Calvert and attend to the legal papers, and then I should advise you to devote your time to making preparations—"

"Dad—*Stevenson!*" Helen May's voice ended in an exasperated, frightened kind of wail. "I and Vic! Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. It is sudden, of course. But you will find, when you stop to think it over, that many of the wisest things we ever do are done without dawdling,—suddenly, one may say. No, Babe, I—"

"But two hundred dollars just for the rights to the claim! Dad, look at it calmly! To build up a ranch takes money. I don't know a thing about ranching, and neither do you; but we both know that much. One has to eat, even on a ranch. I wouldn't have my ten a week, remember, and you wouldn't have your salary, unless you mean to stay here and keep on at the New Era. And that wouldn't work, dad. You know it wouldn't work. Your salary would barely keep you, let alone sending money to us. You can't expect to keep yourself and furnish us money; and you've paid out all you had in the bank. The thing's impossible on the face of it!"

"Yes, planning from that basis, it would be impossible." Peter's eyes were wistful. "I tried to plan that way at first; but I saw it wouldn't do. The expense of getting there, even, would be quite an item in itself. No, it couldn't be done that way, Babe."

"Then will you tell me how else it is to be done?" Helen May's voice was tired and exasperated. "You say you have paid the two hundred. That leaves us just the furniture in this flat; and it wouldn't bring enough to take us to the place, let alone having anything to live on when we got there. And my wages would stop, and so would yours. Dad, do you realize what you've done?" She tilted her head forward and stared at him intently through her lashes, which was a trick she had.

"Yes, Babe, I realize perfectly. I'm—not counting on just the furniture. I—think it would pay to ship the stuff on to the claim."

"For heaven's sake, dad! What are you counting on?" Helen May gave a hysterical laugh that set her coughing in