



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER III

Synopsis

Lee Hollister, returning unexpectedly from a trip abroad to the Circle V ranch, his home from childhood, is troubled by signs of neglect. He is upset, too, when he meets Slanty Gano, a trouble maker whom Matt Blair, owner of the ranch, had run off the land in times past. Slanty is now manager for the old Ceballos place. Joey, prospector befriended by Matt, breaks the news that Matt is dead; he had killed himself. Joey says the ranch is going to ruin under Lawler, manager appointed by Virginia, Matt's daughter, who is living in New York with her aunt and uncle. Lee goes east to get her.

All day long she had been rushing from one thing to another, riding, swimming, aquaplaning, lunching with a crowd at the beach club, off to the country club to watch the tennis tryouts, dancing, meeting new men, off to somebody's house, and more dancing, and everybody drinking too much. In a little while she would be dressing again for dinner and a moonlight cruise on Mr. Bradish's new yacht.

She tossed her hat on a chair, kicked off her pumps, slid out of her dress and left it in a heap on the floor, and for the first time relaxed with a long sigh of relief. What was the sense of tearing around all day, meeting a lot of people you only half liked, and never having a minute to yourself? She stared moodily at the floor.

Although no one outside would have guessed it, this was one of the grey days, when everything was flat and futile and there was a sickening emptiness where one part of her life had been.

On the table beside her bed lay a little pile of papers. There was a scrawled report from Lawler, the new manager, there were bewildering columns of figures which represented Matt Blair's confused affairs; there was a letter urgently advising her to sell before the deterioration of a once prosperous property became too evident. Beside them was a memorandum of Milton Bradish's offer, the whim of a rich man to lavish money on a show ranch in the place where he had once been poor.

There was a tap at the door.

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She said "Come!" and Anna appeared, visibly flustered.

"There's a gentleman downstairs, Miss Virginia."

"But I said that I wouldn't see anybody."

"Yes, Miss Virginia, but—" Anna hesitated and looked worried. Callers at the Archer home politely accepted the dictum delivered at the door, but this one, in spite of the fact that he had come on foot instead of in the latest model roadster, and wore a good but undeniably ready-made suit of clothes, had somehow an air of taking it for granted that his wishes would be complied with.

"He said he hoped you would be home pretty soon, because he had come a long way to see you. He said to tell you it was Lee Hollister."

"Oh—Lee!" Virginia sat up suddenly. "Why didn't you tell me before? Tell him—no, help me, Anna. I'm in a frightful hurry."

Downstairs Lee looked critically around the room into which the maid had reluctantly shown him. Everything spoke eloquently of well served ease and expensive idleness. Not at home! He was certain she was and he meant to stay until he saw her. He stationed himself at a window looking out on the semi-circular drive.

"Making sure that I don't run away?"

He swung about quickly. "I wasn't taking chances," he drawled. Outlined against the dull blue hangings he saw a slim and lovely figure, a girl with hair of burnished copper, dark-lashed eyes of clearest grey and a vivid mouth.

She met him with both hands out, impulsively.

"I had just come in," she explained confidentially, "and told Anna that I wouldn't see anybody." He mouth-dropped suddenly. "Oh, Lee, I haven't seen you since—since it happened."

"I didn't know anything about it, or I'd have come before this. I've come to take you home, Virginia."

"Oh, no!" She looked faintly startled and drew back.

"Why not?" he asked bluntly. "It doesn't need me!" She shook her head vehemently. "It needs father, and he's gone. What do I know of ranches and cattle?"

"You'll learn, and you'll have friends to help you. I can tell you some things about the Circle V right now. I don't think you can possibly know about them, or you'd never let them go on."

There was a shade of annoyance in the lift of Virginia's delicate brows.

"You're just the same Lee, aren't you? All right, let's sit down and get it over. What am I to be scolded about?"

The light tone warned him that Virginia didn't mean to be scolded at all, and he grinned back at her. Virginia hadn't changed much. He leaned forward and began to tell her of the conditions that he had found at the Circle V.

"I know it needs your father," he finished, "but Matt is gone, and it's your responsibility now. The Circle V needs somebody with a real interest, and not a shiftless loafer who either can't or won't see that he is running it into the ground."

"Really!" Virginia was angry and hurt. "I employed Mr. Lawler on the advice of my friends and see no reason to question either their motives or his. However, it scarcely matters. I have a good offer for the place and I expect to sell. I suppose that you will at least concede my right to dispose of my own property?"

"Absolutely. But I have a right as Matt's friend to tell you that your loyalty to him can't amount to much if in a few months you can throw aside the work of his lifetime, the land he labored and fought for, and loved better than anything on earth—except you!"

He heard her quick gasp. "And you're going to sell him out for a little pocket money—for this!" His brief gesture contemptuously indicated the room, the house, all of her life here. "That's the best you can do for him, after all that he sacrificed for you."

"Oh, you're intolerable!" Her eyes blazed; she spoke in a breathless, unnatural way. "Whatever I may have done, or failed to do, is between my father and myself."

"All right," he said laconically. "I see I was mistaken. Mistaken in you. But before I go I want to give you one question to ask yourself. Why is it that the Circle V, one of the best ranches in the state, should be going to pieces now, just when somebody else wants to get possession of it? I'm going back to find the answer, if you won't. Good-bye."

He turned with a brief nod, not even waiting for a reply, and went out.

As the outer door closed after him he paused with a deep, releasing breath and a frown for his own hot-headedness. A car flashed into the drive and a young man stepped out. The new-comer looked with casual interest at the man who had just come out, at the straight figure, the ready-made suit, the bronzed face—weather bronzed, not sunbath tan—small things

wanted her to go out on the yacht with him before the other guests arrived.

"Oh! Tell him I'm sorry, but I can't go."

Mrs. Archer was coming down the hall. She interposed quickly.

"Surely you can get ready, darling. It's only a little early; I'll send Marie to you right away."

"No, thanks, Aunt Adele. Just tell him I'm sorry, Anna, but I can't come at all. I'll write him and explain."

"Virginia, what can you be thinking of!"

Virginia's hands clenched at her sides. The tears still shone on her lashes. "I'm going west tomorrow. I've got to. Please don't ask me to talk about it."

The days and nights on a transcontinental train were monotonous, but they gave Virginia time for thought. Her first anger at Lee dwindled and receded as a clear little brook returns to its banks after a freshet. She was coming back, not to obey Lee Hollister's high-handed commands, but to show him that he was wrong. After that she would do as she pleased with her own property.

At Saunders Lawler was there to meet her, so was Curly, sunburned and grinning, waiting to take her checks and help pack her hand baggage into the old car that had been good enough for Matt while Virginia was away.

Only once did Lawler, a lank, big-boned man with pale eyes and a straggling mustache, proffer a remark of any moment.

They were jolting over a peculiarly atrocious bit of road.

"Bad goin'," he jerked. "I hope the millionaire that's buyin' your place will fix up this road."

"I haven't sold yet," she replied coldly.

"Oh, I thought you was goin' to." A glaze seemed to have come over Lawler's pale eyes.

She did not reply, and they rattled and lurched on. The foot hills were opening up before them; they dived suddenly from prismatic brilliance into shadow, then climbed again, through a narrow defile to a suddenly widening sweep, into the Valley of the Sun. Up there was the old ranch house and, on the porch, hobbling excitedly on rheumatic feet, a little, wizened old man.

"I knowed ye'd come back, Honey! I knowed it! There, there!" For a proud young head that bowed for no one had dropped suddenly against Joey's deplorable flannel shirt. "There, there," Joey crooned. "You'll be glad ye've come. It's been awful lonesome without ye. If that ornery young nuisance of a Lee Hollister hadn't come pesterin' around again, I'd have gone plumb out of my head."

The moment of abandon was brief. She raised her head.

"Oh, is Lee here?"

"Well, he ain't exactly here, but he drops in on me now and then."

Joey shot a shrewd glance at her, but Virginia made no comment. Lawler, for the moment disregarded, had come up with her bags and was evidently wait-

ing to go in with her. She dismissed him carelessly. "Thanks, Lawler. You may leave the bags here; Ling will look after them."

She left him, glowering and discomfited, while she greeted Ling. Joey followed the manager with malicious glee.

"Pretty fine to have the boss back, ain't it?" he asked slyly.

The afternoon had been long. Virginia had worked energetically, setting herself to unaccustomed tasks. In the midst of unpacking there had been an interminable hour of going over dreary details and bewildering accounts with Lawler. The Circle V was not making enough to cover operating expenses and the interest on a burden of debt.

This was the story again, leaving Virginia depressed and dis-

spirited, and glad to see Lawler leave. She called back to Ling that she was going to see Joey, and walked slowly toward the horse corral.

(Continued Next Week)

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