



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER IV

Synopsis
Lee Hollister, returning unexpectedly to the Circle V ranch, his home from childhood, is troubled by signs of neglect. Fresh from a trip abroad, he is worried, too, when he meets Slanty Gano, a trouble maker. Slanty had been run off the land previously by Matt Blair, Lee's foster father and owner of the ranch. Slanty is now manager of the old Cebalos place. Joey, prospector befriended by Matt, tells Lee that Matt has killed himself, probably discouraged by hard times. The ranch is going to ruin under Lawler, manager appointed by Matt's daughter, Virginia, who is living with her aunt and uncle in New York—the Archers. Lee goes east and persuades Virginia to return to the ranch to save it.

There were no cattle in the home pastures now, but in the distance as she rode she could see the scar of the timber slash that Lee had censured.

Down there was Joey's claim, and in front of the little grey cabin a conspicuously tall young man was just rising from the domestic task of filling a coffee pot with water at the creek. Already he had seen her, and Joey from the doorway had raised his thin halloo.

"Here's Lee, Honey! Jes' turned up, doggone his ornery hide. You're comin' to supper, ain't ye?" "Glad to see you, Virginia," Lee held out his hand as a matter of course and gave her a grip that was somehow reassuring.

"If you don't stay to supper," Lee was remarking conversationally, "Joey won't be fit to live with for a week, and I'd counted on burking with him for a night or two."

"Oh, are you staying with Joey?" She hesitated. As far back as she could remember, the ranch house had been Lee's home. Her father had treated him like a son. "You know,

Father would always want you to feel—"

"Thanks, but I'm afraid that wouldn't do. I'm not a part of the Circle V outfit now. I'll probably camp somewhere in the hills while I'm—looking around."

She watched Joey as he bustled about, in contrast to Lee's easier motions. Soon the pleasant smell of cedar smoke was in the air, the aroma of coffee, the hissing of trout broiling over live coals. "Supper's ready," Lee called cheerfully.

She had forgotten that it was possible to eat with such appetite. And she drank coffee from a large tin cup with a businesslike handle and wondered, as Lee Hollister neatly placed a flat stone for a saucer, what her aunt would say if she could see her now, side by side in the dusk with the wizened old prospector and the young man who had been one of her father's "hands."

Lee was quiet, his clean profile showing darkly against the fire. Joey chattered contentedly. "Lee was sayin'," Joey prattled on, "that ye oughta have some woman to come help with the work."

"I'll think about it, Joey—but I must go now. It's almost dark." She jumped up with a quick shiver. Night was coming on with a keen tang in the air, and her silk shirt was thin. Lee arose also and disappeared into the cabin. A moment later a man's coat was laid around her shoulders.

"Reckon you forget that this climate is half a mile up in the air and gets cold awful sudden," he drawled. "I'll ride back with you, Virginia."

She was glad to have him as they left the friendly circle of the fire and plunged into a deepening dusk. Soon they could see the ranch with its lamp-lit windows.

"That means 'welcome home,' Virginia. And I suppose Curly is rounding up the whole outfit to meet the boss."

"Oh—am I a boss?" she laughed. "Somehow it gave her a plea-

sant sense of ownership that she had not felt before.

They rode on in a star-glimmering darkness, talking little. For two people who had quarreled so bitterly, they were strangely content.

Early the next morning Lee rode out of Joey's ravine just in time to receive a sour glance from Lawler and a grinning hail from Curly and Darrell, all on their way to the upper range, and turned up the valley again to the ranch house. He went around back to find Ling putting with unusual care among his pots and pans. Ling usually clattered.

"Missy sleep," he confided amiably. "Breakfas, Lee?"

"Had it, thanks. I'll go in the office and hang around."

It was the opportunity that Lee had been waiting for. He closed the office door behind him. Leaning against the door, he absently lit a cigarette and looked slowly around. There was a familiar armchair, sagging somewhat from long years of accommodating Matt's ample frame; there was the old oak desk in the middle of the room, on whose surface a boy named Lee Hollister had burned the Circle V brand one day.

The chair in which he had died had been moved from its usual place. Lee crossed the room soundlessly and put it back again. He stood beside it, looking toward the closed door; he went over to a window and looked out; looked back again with thoughtful intenses; returned to the desk and stood looking down at that, puzzling for the answer that would not come.

Lee pulled out the second drawer of the desk, slid his hand beneath the obstinate upper drawer and gave it a pressure of strong finger tips which brought it sliding out obediently. An old tobacco tin was still there, a few cartridges, some odds and ends of paper. "Nothing very valuable."

He bent lower, peering intently, pulled the drawer out, moving the haphazard contents lightly, pushing them aside and back again. Something caught his eye—a tiny gleam half lost in the crack. He took out his knife and coaxed it into clearer view.

It was a trifling thing when he had it, a thin, triangular scrap of metal with little enough meaning in a place where odds and ends had been dropped for years. The broken off tip of somebody's knife. He laid it on the palm of his hand.

"I'd give a lot," he reflected soberly, "I'd give everything I own to know just how long you've been there."

He found an old envelope, wrapped the bit of metal in it, stowed it in his pocket and closed

the drawer. Then he looked up. There was a light scrawbling of bony fingers on the door panel. Ling stood on the other side. "Missy comin'," he said softly. "You stay breakfas, Lee?"

Mr. T. Ellison Archer entered his wife's room more abruptly than was his habit. The real estate market had receded and left him high and dry. Just now he was said to be "connected" in some way with the Bradish interests, and at this precise moment was pricking with unpleasant apprehension lest he should be abruptly disconnected.

"Have you heard from Virginia yet, my dear?"

"Only the telegram saying that she had arrived safely. Why? Has anything happened?"

"Well, not exactly." Mr. Archer looked uneasy. "But I have just seen Mr. Bradish. In fact, he sent for me, and he was quite annoyed. He put it up to me rather bluntly as if Virginia's going were my fault."

"But I don't see how we could have prevented it! We have done everything to make Virginia happy here."

"Mr. Bradish feels—" her husband returned nervously to the subject uppermost in his mind—"that young Hollister is trying to influence Virginia to keep the ranch."

Before his wife's inquiring eye Mr. Archer seemed to feel that further explanations were necessary.

"Mr. Bradish said that he had felt so certain that the place would belong to him in a short time that he had asked the manager to keep him in touch with matters there."

He paused and cleared his throat nervously. "It will be very unfortunate if this Hollister does anything to interfere with the sale."

"I never liked Lee Hollister," said Mrs. Archer positively. "I never could understand Matthew's action in bringing a child like that—no better than a foundling—right into his own home. But there's only one thing to do now, and that is to get out there and bring Virginia back if I can."

Mr. Archer nodded a relieved assent, secretly envying a power of decision that he had never possessed. His wife went over to her desk and drew a telephone from its decorative hiding place.

"I think," she said thoughtfully, "that I'd better telephone Stanley about our plans. He has been really disconsolate since Virginia left."

Stanley Bradish, since the evening when Virginia had left him flat, had been in a bad humor and distinctly sulky.

Mrs. Archer's telephone call found him at home and in a state of bored restlessness. He listened warily, but presently with a livelier interest. Why not? Everything was fearfully stale here.

"Awfully good of you to ask me, Mrs. Archer. Are you sure Virginia won't think I'm a nuisance trailing along? . . . That's fine; I'll take the same train if you don't mind . . . Count on me."

He hung up the receiver with a knowing smile. He went downstairs better pleased with life than he had been for some days, to be informed that his father was closeted with a caller. Stanley strolled outside.

Voices came to him. He caught the word Blair. He moved nearer to the window through which those subdued sounds drifted. He waited, listening.

Milton Bradish always knew what he wanted and went after it with about as much regard for obstacles as an army tank. It was his capacity for ruthlessness which had brought Bradish where he was. Incidentally it had brought Gideon Morse, the lawyer, where he was at this moment, traveling twenty-five hundred miles for a few brief comments which might not prove altogether discreet on paper.

"The only obstacle," he said in his curiously mild voice, "is this man Hollister."

"Get rid of him," "Not so easy," said Morse mildly. "And dangerous."

"I'm not suggesting homicide," retorted his chief brusquely. "There are more ways of getting rid of a man than knocking him over the head. How about bringing him in?"

"Wouldn't come," said Morse laconically. "He's like a hound pup with his nose to a trail. Probably thinks he has a mission to reclaim the Circle V. You see, he and Matt were pretty close. You might say that he was brought up on the Circle V. Matt picked him up years ago in some dingy hole and brought him home because he was a likely youngster and hadn't any folks of his own. You know Matt always had a lot of pensioners around. Anybody could go to him with a hard luck story and get a grubstake or a job."

Milton Bradish could remember a man with whom Matt Blair had shared his own grubstake many years before. There are some things of which it is not pleasant to be reminded.

"About this young Hollister. How is it that he turns up now?" "He's been away. He and the girl are together a great deal. Rides—scenery—moonlight—romantic stuff. Good looking chap, too. And no fool."

The man who meant to have the Circle V pushed back his chair.

"Break it up," he said shortly. "Get something on him. There can always be the other woman." Principal and agent looked at each other steadily. Morse nodded.

Outside, Stanley moved away from the window. "That old dump must be worth a lot," he reflected shrewd-

ly. "I wonder what's up? The other woman! Whew!" He grinned. "This is beginning to look like a pleasant little visit." (Continued Next Week)

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NOTICE

Tax Payers of Surry County

AGAIN I WANT TO REMIND YOU TO **Pay Your 1939 Tax**

Under the Present Law These Taxes Must Be Paid Before March 1st

ON THAT DATE, LAND—IF THERE BE ANY LAND TAXES LEFT ON BOOKS—WILL BE ADVERTISED FOR SALE APRIL 1st.

However, during the months of February and March we will have to enforce collection by making tax out of Personal Property and Wages Due. We cannot any longer depend on selling land to get taxes. Notwithstanding, a deed will be made to purchaser at Tax Sale not later than January 1, 1941.

It is unpleasant to enforce collection of taxes, but I know of no honorable way to get around it.

PLEASE SEE AND PAY THE GENERAL TOWNSHIP COLLECTOR

B. F. FOLGER,
Tax Collector for Surry County.