

HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER VI

Synopsis
Lee Hollister, returning unexpectedly from a trip abroad to the Circle V ranch, his home from childhood, is troubled by signs of neglect. Joey, an old prospector friend of Matt Blair, Lee's foster father and owner of the ranch, tells Lee that Matt has killed himself, probably discouraged by hard times. The ranch is going to ruin and Virginia, Matt's daughter, is visiting the Archers, her aunt and uncle, in New York. Her uncle wants her to sell the place to Milton Bradish, old associate of Matt's. Lee persuades Virginia to return to the ranch. Mrs. Archer follows her, accompanied by Stanley, son of Milton Bradish. Stanley thinks he may be able to discredit Lee in Virginia's eyes.

The recollection of the intended slur made her kinder to Lee than she had meant to be. She danced three more times with him. Toward the end of their last dance Virginia turned her head and laughed softly.

"Look, Lee! Just outside the door. I'm going to bring her in." His eyes followed hers. Beyond them was an open door, its shaft of light cutting into the outer shadows and, caught in the edge of the light, they saw a gay little figure, with a dark, vivid face, black eyes that burned with excitement, and a scarlet mouth. The slim body swayed slightly to the music, with a rippling animal grace.

As Lee looked at her she slid hastily out of sight with an impudent lift of her chin. He laughed.

"The little devil! She's Josefa Ramirez, and her father is Francisco Ramirez who used to be a sheep herder and has now risen to the dignity of his own ranchito. Matt helped him to get it. You can count on Francisco. His father was a servant to Don Luis Ceballos."



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it isn't
your house!

HUGH ROYALL
ALL FORMS OF
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PHONE 111

"Very interesting," said Virginia sweetly. "But not much of it seems to be about the girl. You're holding out on me, Lee."

"Nothing to hold," Lee was a little curt about it. Someone else claimed her and she left him, her smile cool and sweet. Lee hesitated, a trifle ruffled by the uncertain ways of women, and then went out by the door where the girl Josefa had stood.

There was no sign of her. Lee leaned comfortably against the side of the house and rolled a cigarette.

Voices drifted to him, a man's, low and laughing, a girl's in smothered remonstrance, more coquettish than angry. Lee flicked out his match and strode lightly around the corner of the house.

He thought he saw a flitting shadow, but it vanished and he could not be sure. A cigarette made a point of light in the darkness about ten feet away. Stanley Bradish strolled toward him.

"Hello, Hollister," he said indifferently. "That you? I thought I heard voices out here."

"Did you?" Lee was noncommittal, but his eyes searched the darkness back of the house.

"I was probably mistaken. Coming in?" Stanley tossed his lighted cigarette aside and started on.

Lee's eyes were on the half-smoked cigarette where it had landed, still glowing.

"When you've been in this part of the country a little longer," he said evenly, "you'll use better judgment than that. A fire, like some other things, is easy to start, but not so easy to put out."

Stanley's annoyed stare followed him as he strode off.

"Now what the devil," he mused thoughtfully, did the cow hand mean by that?"

The next day Stanley made a trip to Saunders alone and found his way to the office of Gideon Morse, Counselor-at-Law.

"I'm Stanley Bradish," he said casually. "I'm staying at the Circle V ranch. That little matter of the other woman—suppose you leave it to me."

Gideon blinked, but forebore comment. He had a letter from the elder Bradish, as definite as a letter could be, considering how much of it lay between the lines.

"My son is spending a few weeks at the Blair place. He is not yet associated with me in business and is not acquainted with the details of the proposed purchase."

It looked like a bad leak somewhere.

At fifteen Josefa Ramirez was a beauty, with glowing black eyes, a dusky flush under an olive skin, and a slim, gay, dancing body. Young Mexicans arrayed themselves in holiday best and rode miles out of their way to spend an hour or so at Francisco's ranchito and knives flashed more than once for her favor.

Only when Lee Hollister stopped at the sheep ranch was there something noticeably different about her, like the sultry stillness before a storm. He had known Francisco for years; the entire household exploded into hospitality at his approach and poured its joys and troubles into his ears. Josefa was merely Francisco's pretty kid to him.

Josefa pouted and sulked, and consoled herself with the others. Therefore she was flattered, but not particularly surprised when

an agreeable young man caught her hands and said teasingly pretty things to her when she was fleeing discovery on the night of the dance, nor even when a swift grey car, a long, fascinating monster that was a haughty rich relation of all the cars Josefa had ever seen, appeared out of shimmering distance a few days later. It stopped before the straggling adobe buildings where a pretty girl leaned against the plastered wall. The young man apparently had no other errand than to ask his way, but he lingered, talking to the vulnerable Maria, and left presently with a quick, oblique glance at the girl.

A day or two later the car passed that way again, and yet again. Once someone was with the agreeable driver—that girl, favored among mortals, with the shining hair and rose-leaf skin, the girl with riches in her hands and Lee Hollister at her feet.

Josefa let the car pass with a sulky stare, but the next day it came again, and this time Stanley was alone. They were conveniently out of sight of the ranch house, and he stopped and invited her for a ride. She went, thrilled with luxuriousness and arrogant speed.

After that there were other meetings, boxes of sweets, small gifts which Josefa prudently hid. He was amusing and gay, an ardent young man, with a facile tongue for compliment and a taste for kisses. He teased Josefa, not very delicately.

"I'm jealous of that fellow Hollister; you like him better than you do me. He was coming to the Circle V this morning when I left. He's there a good deal, isn't he? You're no Spanish girl, Josefa, or you'd never let another girl walk off with your man like that."

"How you know I worry my head with Lee Hollister? I got plenty fella—ten, twenty, hundred! Eef I love, I fight for my man—fight any woman!"

"That's because you're Spanish," he said persuasively. "But eastern girls are different. They're cold, Josefa. They'd throw over the best kind of a chap if they caught him making a little harmless love to another girl. Why I know a case."

Amusing for Stanley, and not without the flavor of adventure; dangerous enough for Josefa, storm swept by jealousy of a girl from another world.

If Mrs. Archer was firmly convinced, and Stanley Bradish cynically sure, that Lee Hollister was working to establish himself comfortably at the Circle V, either by marrying Virginia or otherwise making himself indispensable to her, certainly his actions did not go far to dispel their suspicions. He seemed to be merely hanging around, with no apparent affairs of his own that demanded attention nor any disposition to acquire them. He had established himself in an abandoned miner's cabin just beyond Turkey Creek, making it weather-tight and sufficiently ship-shape for simple needs, and came and went at will.

There were no bolts nor bars, and in his absence the curious could inspect as they pleased. Slanty Gano did it. So did Lawler, nursing a grievance and only too anxious to find something to satisfy it. So, quite privately, had Stanley Bradish, critically surveying the ground for reasons of his own. None of them found evidences of dark motives or hidden activities, unless, perhaps, the large rough chunk of quartz lying in full view on a shelf might be so classified. On it was pasted a bit of paper with this simple legend:

Matt Blair

A Man
Died October 15, 1933
Slanty Gano knew what that sample was. He had watched Lee Hollister swinging a pick to get it. It had come from the spot where Matt Blair's will-o'-the-wisp samples had been dug.

Slanty stood glowering at it for some minutes before he slid out, cautiously, with no wish to meet a man he both hated and feared.

If Slanty Gano was curious enough to pry into Lee Hollister's affairs, Lee was equally observant of Slanty's. He did not like Slanty and he did not trust him. He did not care for Lawler, either. Therefore, when he caught a glimpse of Slanty and Lawler slipping behind the shelter of a cedar thicket one day, he picked his horse a safe distance away and followed. Moving lightly, with an eye for betraying stones underfoot, Lee swung down to a shelf just above the point where they had disappeared, dropped flat on it and wormed cautiously out to the edge.

Voices came to him. He could just see the two men about thirty feet below. Both men were half drunk, Lawler morose, Slanty argumentative and boastful. Lee heard Slanty's taunting voice.

"Takin' orders from Lee Hollister yet? Ye've been keepin' yourself so scarce I thought he must have fired ye."

"I ain't takin' anybody's orders. I'm boss around there. I take notice that you keep tolerable scarce yourself when that hombre is around."

"Don't worry about me!" Slanty warned him belligerently.

"I'm goin' to be rich some day, you see if I ain't. And I ain't aimin' to work like a dog for it, neither. I'm going to use my brains. I know a man that's going to hand me anything I say. I got him just where I want him. I got—"

He checked himself abruptly, as if realizing that he was talking too much.

"I got a big idea," Slanty finished craftily. "That's what brings the money in. Come on. Let's be movin'."

He yawned and stretched, the sobered man of the two. The watchful face above drew back just in time, as Slanty looked up and around.

When the two men went on down the slope the rock shelf was empty.

For nearly a week Lee's cabin had been empty. Virginia began to wonder why she had no dally glimpses of a tall figure riding her range as if he owned it, or going calmly past her door to visit old friends in the bunk house. She rode over to see Joey and dropped a diplomatic question or two, but Joey had not seen Lee for days. Odd that he had not said anything to Joey about his plans. Perhaps he was ill up there in his cabin, and alone. Some one ought to go . . .

She turned Black Lightning's head and touched him into quick action.

The little cabin looked lonely

and deserted as she neared it. Inside were orderliness and simplicity. The bunk on the other side of the room was nearly made and a Navajo blanket lay across it.

She went around slowly, looking at this thing and that. Before the shelf where the lump of quartz lay she paused with a startled exclamation. She knew how Lee cherished her father's memory, but still that was an odd thing to do, to put her father's name and the date of his death on that piece of quartz, like an epitaph—or a grim reminder.

(Continued Next Week)

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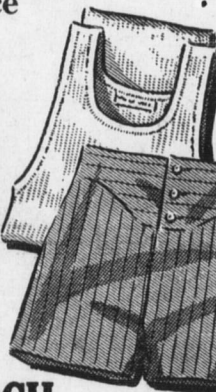
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