



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER VII

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. But she 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, and encourages Josefa Ramirez in her liking for Lee.

She would leave a note saying that she wanted to see him about —oh, about the time for driving the cattle into the valley range. She wrote swiftly and looked about for a place to put it and stopped short.

Her eye had been caught by a bright bit of color lying on the floor behind the half opened door. She went over and picked it up, and her nose wrinkled fastidiously as the odor of cheap perfume came to her. It was a woman's scarf, defiantly gay and frankly soiled. It had evidently been hung on the back of the door, in full and flaunting view when the door was closed, but discreetly hidden when it stood open.

So that was all that his kisses meant. From her—to this! The impulsive note lay on the table where she had left it. Virginia tore it up slowly, bit by bit, and went out into clear fresh air again clutching the fragments in her hand.

When she had gone Josefa, who had come here day after day to watch for a vanished Lee, crept out from her hiding place behind a rock and shook a passionate fist after the vanishing figure.

"Ah, you touch it like a snake, because it belong to me! I feex you! I think you come thees way wance more, you proud one, and never again, no more."

Joey was still up and smoking a lonely pipe in the doorway of his cabin when a familiar whistled call came to him. A few moments later Lee swung off his horse in front of him.

"Hell, Joey, I have some news for you."

"Well, it's time yo're back, ye irresponsible young nuisance!"

All Joey's anxious loneliness showed in those scolding words. A strong brown hand came down on his shoulder in an affectionate grip.

"You're a good scout, Joey. Don't you get any notion that I'd sneak off without you. We're partners, and we're going to stick together. I've found out something. The company that bought in the Rancho Ceballos is merely a holding company for Milt Bradish. He bought it under cover of another name and he's holding it that way, probably until he gets the Circle V. Now you see why Matt's grazing privileges on the Rancho Ceballos were withdrawn."

"Milt Bradish own' the Ran-

cho Ceballos!" Joey commented wonderingly. "It's enough to make old Don Luis set up in his grave."

"Do you suppose Bradish really did cheat him, Joey?" Lee asked?

"Well, not accordin' to law, Lee. All Bradish did was to sell him his part of the Bonanza — they was two separate claims, ye know—and Don Luis didn't have no better judgment than to buy it offhand. Matt fell in with Bradish when Bradish was down on his luck, an' Matt took him in an' divided his grubstake with him. They drifted down here and staked claims out there in the gulch. They was separate claims, side by side, but they agreed to help each other work 'em, the first man to strike pay rock was to share even with the other."

"They shore worked. They gophered inta that hill for about two months, with nary sign of color an' both of 'em plumb disgusted an' ready to quit. An' then Matt druv his pick into something soft an' yelled for Bradish to come."

"Well, ye know what happened. It looked like a vein of pretty near virgin gold, but it was only a pocket, although they worked like crazy men for weeks, humpin' for the other end of a faulted lode. But the pocket asayed high, an' they divided fifty thousand between 'em. By that time the news had leaked out an' the gulch was full of men diggin' an' blastin' an' sweatin' for gold, but nobody ever found anything else that was worth minin'."

"I reckon Bradish was the first man to wake up. He was smart. He sold out his claim to Don Luis, who was all excited over the rush an' thought this was his big chance to wipe out the old mortgages and bring the Rancho Ceballos back to what it used to be. So he clapped on another mortgage an' had a grand time with the money. He dug an' blasted an' tunneled an' cross-tunneled, bustin' clean through inta Matt's claim a couple o' times, until one day a blast that went off too soon caught him there, an' when they pulled him out they found he'd never walk again. By that time he knowed that there wasn't any gold on that claim. They say he never mentioned Bradish's name agin, but for the rest of his life he set there in the rollin' chair Matt give him, in the patio of that crumblin' old house an' sometimes at the busted gate, with the gun across his knees. Waitin', folks said, for Bradish to come back."

"But Bradish never come. Matt was prosperous then, an' he got Don Luis to sell back Bradish's claim to him. He said it bottled up his land, or some such foolishness."

Lee was leaning back against the cabin, meditative and quiet. He had purposely started the flow of Joey's reminiscence and had listened. Slanty Gano had boasted drunkenly that a certain big man would give him anything he wanted, because Slanty had something on him. Bradish, a man who could command the best service that money would buy, had put this quarrelsome loafer in charge of a ranch that he had acquired in the name of a holding company.

Where had Slanty met this man of financial importance, and when? What did he know or think he knew about Milton Bradish? . . . If it was Milton Bradish.

He moved a few steps out and stood again, quiet and contemplative.

Joey looked up suddenly. There was a curious stillness about Lee. It was a waiting stillness, with a hint of tensing muscles and senses sharply alert.

"Put 'em up!" Lee shot forward like a released spring. There was a scrambling crash in the darkness back of the cabin, a thud and a smothered curse, the sound of grunts and writhing bodies.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't, Lawler!" A knife described a darkly gleaming arc through the air. Joey dodged it as he hurried anxiously back to see Lee kneeling on something dark and struggling.

"What's the matter, Lee? Did he knife ye? I'll—"

"No, Joey, just tried to . . . I'll take that gun, Lawler. I know you'd hate to lose your head. Now

be nice, or I'll shut off your wind again . . . Listen!"

From some distance away there came another scrambling sound, as if a stealthily moving body had missed its footing and slid for several feet.

"So Slanty got away and left you to face the music?" Lee inquired pleasantly. "That sounds like him." He paused for a reminiscent grin. "There's a lot of manzanita on that slope," he added thoughtfully. "Pretty thorny scrub, Lawler. I shouldn't wonder if he'll have some nice long scratches to identify him tomorrow—only we don't need to . . . Get up, you polecat."

Lawler swayed groggily to his feet. "I wasn't doin' nothin'," he muttered sullenly.

"I've watched your double game, Lawler, taking your wages from a woman and using your job in twenty different ways to make her so discouraged with the place that she will be glad to sell. But you're through. You're leaving tonight."

"Say, ye think yo're the big boss around here, don't ye?" Lawler blustered, stung to a fresh rage. "You ain't nobody around here at all, and everybody knows it but you."

"Counting on that, Lawler?" The voice was dangerously gentle. "Maybe I haven't a technical right to fire you, but I can run you off this place like a scared jackrabbit, and I'm doing it now. Move!"

Lawler gulped and glowered. His knife was gone, his gun was gone. Sullenly, he withdrew.

Hoofbeats were approaching, a cheerful voice hailed.

"Hey, Joey, everything all right?"

Joey answered the hail, and a moment later Curly clattered up to them.

"Just saw Slanty Gano ridin' away in an all-fired hurry," he volunteered, "and I wondered if he'd been up to any devilment here. Didn't I see somebody breakin' for cover?"

"Lawler," Lee answered for Joey, who confirmed it with a vigorous nod. Joey was still glowing with the joy of Lee's fight. "The two of them were hanging around in the dark with their ears open. Slanty didn't stay to be sociable. Lawler did. By the way, Curly, he's leaving the Circle V tonight. How about having one of the boys see him to his train?"

Curly loosed a joyous whoop. "Shore, Lee, I'll do 't. Take him or chase him, whichever you say. Much obliged for handin' me the job."

The next morning Virginia heard from Curly that Lawler had abruptly left her employment during the night.

"But why did he leave so suddenly? Did anything happen?"

"We-e-e-ll—" Curly hesitated. "I reckon mebbe he did have a kind of disagreement."

"With whom?"

"Well now, he didn't say."

"Thank you, Curly." She had mercy on him, but two bright spots burned in her cheeks. "And I'd like you to take his place, please."

"Why—I reckon I'd be pleased to." Curly ducked his head in embarrassed thanks. "I'll shore do all I can for you, Miss Virginia," he added earnestly. "I'll get on the job right now."

He was off, grinning and happy, but glad to escape. Another step was approaching, and Virginia did not need to be told that this was Lee.

There was a quick warming of Lee's eyes as he saw her, but her own flashed angrily.

"So you have taken the liberty of discharging my manager—or terrorizing him out of my employ?"

The warmth vanished.

"If you want to put it that way," he said briefly, "Lawler was dishonest and deliberately worked against your interests, and he was drunk half the time. If you had been on the job yourself you'd have known it."

"I am glad that you at least recognize that it is my job, and not yours," she replied coldly. "I have appreciated your good intentions, but I don't care for your methods. Do I make myself clear?"

"Absolutely." He smiled wryly. "But perhaps—"

"You have taken my affairs out of my hands." She swept on without heeding him, and he checked himself with unusual patience. "You've belittled and humiliated me before my own men and my friends. I hate you!"

Her voice choked a little. The warm look came back to his eyes as he looked down at her standing by Matt's old desk, so small and lovely, so bitterly angry at him.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Not about Lawler. That had to come. But we always seem to hit things off the wrong way. I came up to tell you about it, but I don't believe you want to hear it now. Goodbye—Virginia."

He went out without further ado. Virginia sat there for some minutes longer, flushed and stormy. She was still angry, but there was a hurt in it.

How could he, and why had she said what she did? The most exasperating thing of all was her enormous relief that Lawler had gone.

(Continued Next Week)

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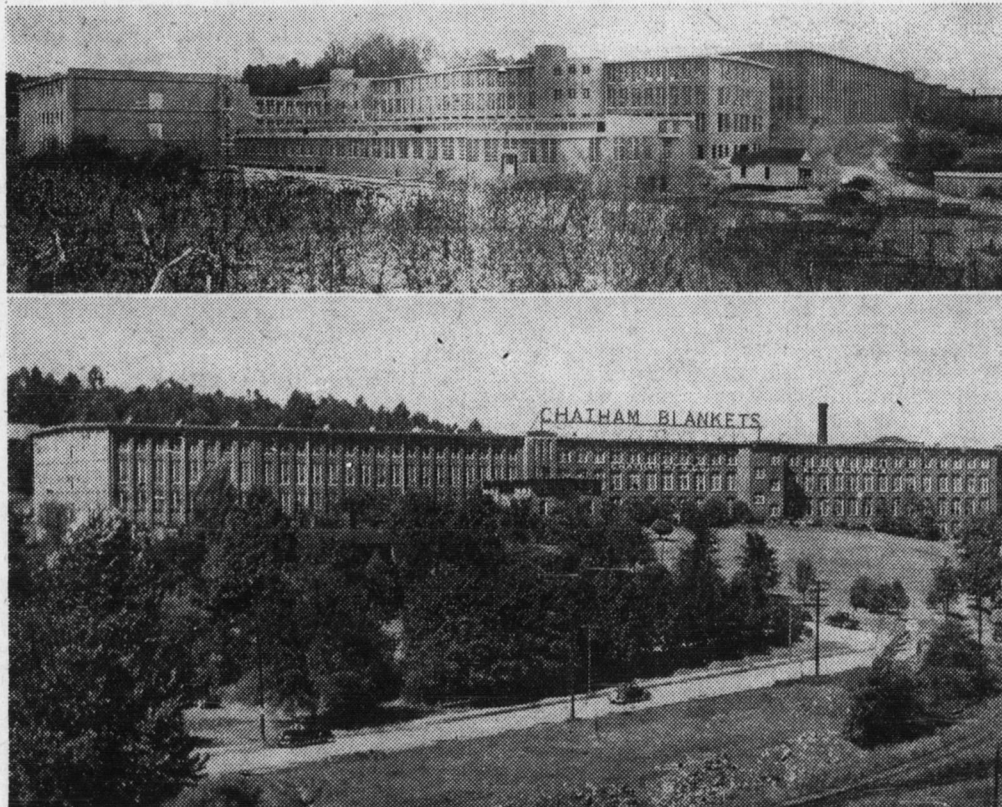
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