

HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST



CHAPTER VIII

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, and encourages Josefa Ramirez in her liking for Lee.

There was a somber look in Lee's eyes as he sat in the gathering dusk by his cabin door. Something of friendly youth had gone from his face, something hard and dangerous had come. Few would have guessed from the signs, that Lee was close to the rock bottom of discouragement.

From time to time he looked down at something in his hand. It was the little, triangular, sharp-edged scrap of thin metal that he had salvaged from the flotsam in the drawer of Matt's old desk.

Much good it had done him thus far!

And Virginia, wilful and petted, loved and spoiled, was still as remote as the stars. He stiffened into attention at a slight sound.

For some time a gay bit of color, like a brightly plumaged bird, had been flitting along the southeast trail just out of his immediate view. It moved with less care now and hurrying feet dislodged a bit of rock. Lee turned swiftly, recognized the girl and raised a hand in easy greeting.

"Hello, Josefa, you're a long way from home." He spoke with a casual friendliness. "And all tricked out in fiesta clothes. What's up?"

"Nothings up. I come to see you. You not come to see me no more, you bad one!"

Eyes of limpid midnight rolled reproachfully at him; a lip of poppy scarlet pouted. A flicker of amusement came into his eyes.

"I've been away," he explained politely. "Does that make it all right?"

"You not tell me you goin' away," she reproached. "You not come for so long I theenk you seek, I theenk you hurt, I theenk you mad at me. That make me sad. Anyways I come. You glad to see me, Lee?"

"Sure I am." He bowed extravagantly. "Senorita, my unworthy home is at your service."

"Ah, that is better! Now sit here by me."

There was a low, flat boulder a little to one side of the clearing in front of the cabin. Josefa went lightly toward it and indicated the place she had chosen for him. He crossed over and took it, and she settled beside him with a little nestling movement. Lee looked down at her, still amused, but thoughtful, also.

Josefa sighed. "I like bein' weeth you, Lee."

Amusement was gone now, and a certain grimness came. He was tired and gloomy; it would be easy tonight to forget a big-

brotherly liking and make a little harmless love to Josefa. . . . Too easy.

He moved slightly. "That's good, Josefa. We're old friends. But see here—"

"Oh, now you talk wise, like ol' woman. I not let you talk. I come all thees way to see you, an' we mus' be gay, joyful! Come. I dance for you, frozen one! You never see me dance, hey? I show you someheng."

Taunting, beguiling, she danced away from him to the open space beyond. Smooth rock was Josefa's dancing floor, the hills her amphitheatre, one silently watching man her audience.

The dark face watched her broodingly. He was stirred, thinking moodily of another woman. Of Virginia, shining and around Josefa's eyes had scarcely left his face. Once they drifted swiftly beyond him, but he did not see.

"Now you catch me, Lee!"

With a final whirl she flung herself backwards, throwing her lithe young body out of balance.

"You reckless little devil!"

He swung out an arm and caught her, only to find the whole weight of her body against him, her arms slipping around his neck like golden snakes, her hands caressing his face, his hair.

"I make you love me! I make you! You shall not treat me like those child any more!"

"Why, Josefa—" he hesitated, touched and uncomfortable. "See here, kid—"

He stopped. Josefa had looked fleetingly beyond him again, a furtive glance over his shoulder, and this time he caught it. He jerked his head around quickly.

Over the ridge which marked the trail to the Circle V were two figures on horseback. One of them was Stanley Bradish. The other was Virginia.

Virginia's profile, even from this distance, was chiseled in ice. Young Bradish was saying something to her, laughing in his irritating way.

Lee watched them go. The flat shock of what this ridiculous scene meant for him jarred him like a blow. Anger ran through him; his face stilled and hardened.

Josefa, frozen quiet by that look, was as watchful as a little scared animal. He reached up deliberately and drew her arms down.

"Sit down," he said briefly. "I want to talk to you."

"Now you goin' to scold me," she pouted. "I not do nothings. Jus' dance for you, Jus'—"

"Josefa, you saw those people comin'."

"Ah, you are 'shamed of me." She flamed into tigerish rage. "You are 'shamed to have the reech girl see you weeth me—see you hold me in your arms. I hate her!"

Lee looked away, frowning and uncomfortable. Then he looked back at the sobbing figure, and with grim patience went over and stood by her.

"So you wanted them to see, Josefa? Liked me so much that you double-crossed me?"

"I love you," she said sweepingly, and apparently considered it a sufficient answer to all question and all reproach.

Lee made no answer. "I go home," she said sullenly. "I'm taking you. Brimstone can carry double."

A new alarm leaped into her face. "You not goin' to tell my father, Lee? You wouldn't do that?"

She had reason for fear. Francisco, vehement in his friendships and primitively direct in his methods, would not hold his hand if he discovered the trick she had played on a man who had befriended him. Lee knew it as well as she.

"You needn't be afraid. I shan't tell—anybody."

The ride from the ridge to the ranch house took less than half an hour, but it was the longest half hour that Virginia could remember. She didn't want Stanley looking at her, she didn't want anybody to see how blazingly angry she was, and how ridiculously that scene back there had shaken her.

Stanley had tactfully, and wisely, refrained from comment. That had been decent of him, but of course he had seen it. Virginia had caught the turn of his head, the cynical grin, politely suppressed.

Hurt pride stung like an angry burn. She turned toward Stanley with an indifferent shrug, dismissing something which really didn't matter, and began to talk of something else. Virginia was unusually nice to Stanley all the way home.

When they arrived she went straight to her room, locked the door, and dropped on the bed with a strangled sound in her throat.

One dry sob came, but no more. She lay there with her face hidden in her arm, her shining hair tumbled and one fist clenched.

Minutes ticked by unheeded. When she sat up there were tear stains on her face, but the line of her lips had hardened. She could punish Lee Hollister almost as cruelly as he had hurt her. There was one door that she could close in his face forever, and then she need never see him again—or his dingy loves.

She went to her desk, pulled paper toward her and began to write.

That night Stanley again asked her to marry him. She listened restlessly.

"Come on, Vee!" His voice was gay and caressing, with a reckless note of adventure. "We'll catch the first train out and let the cows go hang. We'll be married in Saunders, or Yuma, or New York, get the parental blessing and be off on a glorious honeymoon."

"It sounds—exciting." She laughed a little, but the laugh died quickly. She added slowly: "And after that, Stan?"

"After that?" Stanley looked surprised and puzzled. She felt his suddenly gripping hands, and slipped away from them with a shiver.

"No—please . . . I thought I could, but I can't. It might be all right for a while, just to play around and amuse ourselves, but there's more to it than that. Maybe I'm just old-fashioned, but when I marry I don't want to just experiment. I want it to stick. It's no use, Stan. I can't do it."

His face darkened. For a moment all his debonair good looks vanished in sullen resentment, a swift, revealing glimpse of what Stanley might be if he let himself go.

"Well, that's definite." His laugh was brief and brittle. Stanley recovered himself quickly. "I'll give up everything but hope," he added, caught up her hand in a quick squeeze and was gone.

Loitering glumly outside, his under lip took on a sullen thrust.

So he was thrown over for a flannel-shirted cowhand! That was a pleasant thought. Why hadn't he worked something stronger?

The next day found Stanley in Saunders. The young paying teller of the First National shot an interested look from the check to the bored looking young man on the other side of the window, and then went back to the vault.

The young man on a bank clerk's salary watched the son of unlimited wealth go out to his car and then edged over to the cashier, confiding something of interest.

"You might have thought we handled those plasters in carload lots," he finished. "Wonder what he wants it for?"

"He's probably going to grease somebody."

now stone-cluttered beds of dried mud, seamed and cracking in the sun.

One morning Virginia awoke with an acrid smell in her nostrils. She dressed and went outside, to find Stanley already out and Joey regarding him with frosty hostility.

"Oh, Joey, isn't there a fire somewhere?"

"Shore they's a fire, Honey, but it's thirty mile north and it ain't headin' this way." Joey's tone was soothing, but he was plainly concerned. "Lee just come in, an' he says it's wiped out four, five ranches already, an' three mile of standin' timber in the hills. He's been doin' fire patrol duty 'round here for the past week, eighteen hours a day."

"Oh—is there that much danger, Joey?"

Virginia's anxious question brought a reassuring answer. "I jes' told ye they wasn't any danger," said Joey obstinately. "I jes' thought I'd come up an' tell ye about the fire, that's all."

He stomped off, grumbling to himself and cross to the depths of his loyal soul because Lee wouldn't let him tell Virginia from whom the reassuring message had come.

But Virginia knew. In favor of disgrace, Lee was watching and guarding her.

As the day wore on the acrid odor of smoke was less noticeable—or perhaps they were more accustomed to it—but there was a saffron haze in the air.

Night brought darkness, but little sleep. A little after midnight Virginia slipped out to saddle Black Lightning.

(Continued Next Week)

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