



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER IX

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 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. One evening Josefa forces Lee to watch her dance, and throws herself into his arms just as Virginia rides past with Stanley.

At the corral she turned to find Stanley at her heels. "The bunk house is empty," he told her. "I saw a couple of men riding out like blazes as I came out. Something's up."

"Hurry!" she said urgently. "Which way did the boys go?" He indicated it briefly, and hurried. Virginia barely waited for him to mount, and was off. Less than half a mile away they saw a red glow.

"Oh, it's a new one! It's here!" Black Lightning tossed another quarter mile behind him. There

it was, just ahead of her. Leaping, licking tongues of flame throbbing through a murk of smoke—dark patches—red patches—grotesque figures that moved in a pulsating glow, with arms like flails—Stanley somewhere behind her—where was Lee?

Higher up on the slope men were working like methodical demons, with swaying bodies and thrashing arms, beating out flames with brooms of hastily cut scrub, stamping with their feet. One of them was taller than the others. She could see his strong, fast movements through the smoke. She began to tug at a tough little scrub that might answer to beat with, but could not get it loose. Somebody must help those toiling men. Where was Stanley?

A crescendo of hoofbeats brought two more Circle V men tearing along from one direction, and from another two glaring eyes appeared, bobbing and shifting. That was an automobile racing toward them with all the speed it had, lurching insanely over hummock and hollow. It drew up with a gasping rattle, only a battered Ford, but piled to the running boards with men. They swarmed out with a clatter of axes and picks and spades, tools for fire breaks, and raced uphill. She heard Lee's shout.

"Take it easy, Joey, here comes the relief crew. Go keep an eye on the horses, will you?" Joey came stumbling down the slope with uncertain legs. "Why Honey, you here?" "Oh, Joey, can they stop it? How did it happen?" "Them boys? Shore they can stop it. Why, Lee fit it all alone for two hours, before me an' Curly an' Darrell got here." "But how did it happen?" she persisted. "Does Lee know?" "Joey shook a dubious head. "Kinda looks like it was set, Honey. I got an idee he suspicious more'n he lets on, but they ain't no proof."

Minutes dragged by as they watched anxiously. Virginia began hunting for a weapon of her own.

"Wait, Honey!" Joey grasped her arm, pulling her back. Ravels of smoke trailed chokingly against her face, wavered, thinned and came on again.

"Oh, Joey, it's wind!" A triumphant yell came from the fire line beyond, and her own voice joined excitedly in Joey's thin cheer. The wind had turned. Men straightened tired bodies and mopped sweat-streaked faces, grinning in sudden cheerfulness.

They moved here and there, stamping out danger spots. Presently the volunteers returned and piled themselves and their implements into the elastic Ford.

shy of thanks and declining Virginia's invitation for everyone to breakfast at the Circle V.

It was only part of a day's work. Dawn streaks were showing, faint pastel shades, deepening into opalescent light, and Lee was coming toward her. A streaked and ragged tramp of a man, but somehow marked with authority, and carrying heroism and disgrace with equal lightness.

"No cause for alarm now," he said cheerfully. "How did you find out about it? Smell smoke, or did somebody arouse the house?" "I smelled smoke. And then Stanley..." She hesitated, pulled between anger and uncertainty. Where was Stanley, and why had he lagged behind when every man was needed? She saw the ironic glint in Lee's eyes.

"Right here," drawled a careless voice. Stanley was coming up back of her, sauntering along with his usual sang froid. His ordinarily careful toilet was somewhat rumpled, his silk shirt was open at the throat and was streaked and smudged, and another black streak ran across his chin.

"Oh — Stanley! Where were you?" There was sharp relief in her voice.

"Over there." He indicated the direction with a careless movement of the head. "The horse bolted, or I'd have been here sooner than I was."

He smiled with engaging frankness, and held up both hands, grimy with unaccustomed toil. Virginia, laughing, looked from Stanley's grimed palms to Lee's. The laugh broke off suddenly with a sharp intake of breath.

"Oh, Lee, you are hurt! You're burned!" Angry red streaks burned dully on the hands Lee had not troubled to exhibit. She held one, delicately, for fear her touch would hurt him, and anxiously examined the burns.

"Oh, just a scorch or two. Nothing to worry about." His reassuring smile gave no hint that the burns were stinging viciously at that very moment. There seemed nothing more to be said. She looked at Lee; at Joey, having a little mothered tantrum of his own. "You've been splendid—all of you." This time her quick glance included Stanley.

She mounted quickly, with a last glance at the wide, blackened area still hot underfoot and giving off sullen curls of smoke, and at the two men looking after her.

Joey waited only until they were out of hearing. "Did ye hear that?" he exploded irately. "Of all the doggone impudence! Whyn't you say somethin', Lee Hollister, 'stead of standin' there trompin' on my foot till ye dang' near mashed it?" She mounted quickly, with a last glance at the wide, blackened area still hot underfoot and giving off sullen curls of smoke, and at the two men looking after her.

Joey's voice rose to an indignant wail. "He came sneakin' through them junipers back there when the fire was 'most over and began pat-pattin' it, nice and delicate, with a scrub Curly'd throwed away. 'Way out on the edge where the smoke pretty near hid him, takin' doggone good care of hisself an' rubbin' the smears on his dood shirt when he thought nobody was lookin'."

Lee was looking after two disappearing figures. "Joey," he said irrelevantly, "there were tears in her eyes."

Stanley Bradish might be a useless young idler, but he had plenty of natural shrewdness. Several things had aroused his curiosity since he had come here, and chief among them were the activities of Lawler and Slanty Gano.

More than once he had seen a significant glance pass between Virginia's foreman and the ill-favored individual who made a slouching pretense of running the Rancho Coballos for its non-resident owner.

A few days after the fire, he rode from blazing sunshine into the dim seclusion of a little canyon with a breath of relief. There was a little rocky pool about halfway down, fed by a silver thread of waterfall, and here Slanty Gano was just rising from a copious drink.

"How'd you do? Pretty hot out there." Stanley joined the hulking figure at the pool and dismounted, cupping both palms under the silver thread and drinking from them.

"I passed your friend Hollister about a mile back." Stanley volunteered carelessly. "He rides around a good deal, doesn't he? I should think he'd be settling down to a job."

"He's too busy mindin' other people's business," Slanty sneered. Then he grinned knowingly. "Some folks reckon Lee's hangin' around to settle himself for life at the Circle V. Pretty soft job, hey?" The grin was an offensive leer.

"He may be disappointed," Stanley said curtly. "He's working against Miss Blair's interests to promote his own, and it's time somebody took him in hand. He's giving my father a lot of trouble, too."

"Trouble's his middle name," said Slanty sourly. "He eats it." "Then why not feed him more of it?" Stanley suggested. "My father and I will do a lot more

for the men who stand by us than he ever will." "The cards were on the table now. The two men eyed each other steadily.

"If Hollister gets what he wants, he is going to give you a bad time," Stanley taunted softly. "He doesn't like you, Gano."

"Well, why don't you? If you tell it to the right man, it might be worth while." Very deliberately, under Slanty's watching eyes, Stanley drew a wallet from his pocket.

Inspiration had come to Stanley. He had sought a meeting to enlist Slanty Gano's aid in a careful plan to have Lee Hollister and Josefa Ramirez disappear from this part of the country on the same night.

Now the elaborate and perilous plan was thrown aside. Slanty knew something. Stanley's fingers went to the wallet and drew out a thousand dollar bill.

Slanty's eyes glistened greedily. Stanley watched him narrowly. Slanty was moistening avid lips with the tip of his tongue. Covetous fingers stole toward the bill. Slanty leaned forward and whispered, a sly grin showing his discolored teeth.

Stanley did not return directly to the Circle V. Instead he took the trail to that small huddle of adobe buildings, the Ramirez ranchito.

When he arrived there was no sign of life about the house. There was movement, quickly stilled, on the slope back of him, but Stanley did not see it. There was other movement much nearer, and a flash of color as Josefa sat up behind the rock where she had been curled like a kitten.

"Oh — hello, beautiful!" He wheeled and caught sight of her. "Hiding out on me, were you?" Josefa shrugged a disdainful shoulder. "I been here," she said coldly.

His hand slipped inside his coat and came out with a velvet case. Josefa's eyes flashed and then glistened. She had meant to be very angry with Stanley. But the case was beautiful, so richly blue.

On a bed of gleaming luxury a gorgeous bracelet lay, shining with pale gold, glittering with brilliants. "Don't I rate a kiss for that?" "Mebbe so," Josefa sighed happily. "I put it on first."

She reached eagerly for beauty, and suddenly froze. "What's the matter?" Stanley got no further. Josefa's glance had darted beyond him, her eyes dilating. He heard a quick gasp as she tore herself away from him; she started running like a fleet little animal. Before he could even whirl to face danger, the crack of a rifle and a stinging shock came almost simultaneously.

Stanley, green-eyed with fear, clapped a hand to his shoulder and flung himself behind a juniper thicket. Crouching low in its shelter he jerked his head from side to side, peering to see from what point the attack had come, but there was no further sound save those hostile reverberations just dying away.

Walting cracked his nerves. He dodged out and flung himself on his horse with a groaning curse for the twinge it gave him, and a moment later flying hoofs were carrying him away.

(Continued Next Week)

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