



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER XI

"Just what I say." The tone was still defiant, but the stamp of a small foot was a passionate admission of defeat. "I go to his cabin, I dance for him, and make him catch me in his arms when I know you will be there to see."

"But Josefa! How could you know that I would be there to see you?"

"Oh, that Stanley! Josefa's angry shrug told all the rest. "That peeg! I am one beg simpleton to believe what he say. I am glad he get shoot. He 'ang round me wance too much. Hah, but he get beeg scare! He ron away like silly rabbit!"

Josefa's scornful laugh broke off abruptly. She bent her head slightly; she was listening, taut and intent.

"Josefa, you don't know what you've done for me. I want to thank you for telling me—"

Josefa drew back resentfully. "I not do it for you. I hate you! I do it for Lee."

Again the wary look came. She turned as silently as she had come, and vanished down an almost invisible trail.

Virginia listened also, with shining eyes.

A little later, when Brimstone had scrambled up the last grade, Lee saw her beside the black horse, her face turned toward him and one hand stroking Black Lightning's satin neck.

"Ling told me that you had started up this way. I heard that Bradish was coming today, and I wanted to see you before you did anything about selling the Circle V. I want," he continued, "to make a final proposition to you. I want you to let me take full charge for a year, without pay and without any obligation for you to stay here."

"You would be willing," she asked slowly, "to give a whole year out of your life for this? Perhaps for nothing?"

"It would be the best year I'd ever spent, Virginia. This is more than just land and cattle to me. It's a cause, it's a fight, it's Matt's memory and your inheritance. Bradish is too anxious to get this place; there's something back of it, and the man who turned a sharp corner on old Don Luis wouldn't hesitate to turn one on you. Give me that year, Virginia."

"Don't! I can't stand it!" She turned her face away from him, and he heard a sharp, indrawn breath.

"It's too late." She hurried on desperately. "I want to, Lee; I

wish I could, but I can't. I— I signed the deed this morning."

For the space of about ten seconds he stared at her. Then he turned abruptly and walked a few steps away toward the grey rim rock which looked down on the Circle V. Bradish's Circle V now. Virginia watched him miserably. She found herself explaining in a dead, monotonous voice.

"I went down to meet Mr. Bradish. He came to see Stanley, but he knew I was ready to sell and he had telegraphed ahead for Mr. Morse to have the deed ready. We went direct from the station to Mr. Morse's office. And when it was done," she continued dully, "I was sorry. The thought of leaving the Circle V to strangers—and never coming back—tore me into little shreds. And so I came up here—"

He swung around and came back to her.

"But if you felt that way, why did you do it? Was it money, or something else? I've got to know, Virginia."

Hot color came. It was not easy, but she looked straight at him and made her honest confession.

"I was angry. I believed things about you that weren't true. I think I wanted to hurt you."

He looked puzzled. "That shooting business?"

"No... yes, that was part of it. But I mean the girl—that pretty child. She was just here, Lee. She told me."

"Oh... Josefa." Lee was faintly embarrassed. "She's just a kid," he said apologetically. Then he drew a long breath and came a step nearer.

"And now, Virginia?"

"Oh, Lee, don't you know—by this time?"

A little later she raised her head from a flannel shirted shoulder. They smiled at each other.

"I love you," he declared, "a million times more every minute."

He stopped short at the stricken look on her face.

"Oh, don't be nice to me," she buried her face in his shoulder with a smothered wail. "I hate myself! To think that I've sold it—when you love it so."

"Is that the trouble?" He put a hand under her chin, and for a moment studied her shadowed eyes.

"It looks," he said thoughtfully, "as if we'd better get it back again. Let's get down to cases. Was it a cash transaction? Did he give you a check?"

She nodded, looking perplexed.

"Yes. But Lee—"

"Did you deposit it?"

"No. Somehow I couldn't."

"Good!" He laughed under his breath. "Don't worry, honey. We're going down right now to persuade your Steam Roller Bradish to tear up that deed."

"But I've signed it. I've given my word. You can't do such a thing!"

"You underrate my powers of persuasion." He grinned at her, suddenly gay. He saw her anxious look and laughed again, picking her up for a swift, heady kiss and putting her neatly down.

"Don't be alarmed. I'm just going to convince him that he wants to give it back. Bet you a wedding ring that I can!"

It was the height of confident young folly, but there was something infectious about it. Life was suddenly gay and exciting. Lee could do anything.

Milton Bradish and his son saw them return. The elder Bradish was standing by a window and looking out with pleasant com-

placency at the wide valley that at last was his own.

Stanley also looked out as the two horses came up to the steps. As steps came down the hall he reached for a magazine and idled over to the other side of the room, looking around with a careless nod as Lee Hollister appeared in the door, but not volunteering introductions. Lee ignored the deliberate rudeness.

"You are Mr. Bradish? My name is Hollister."

"How'd you do, Hollister. I've heard of you... Come in."

Virginia tells me that you're thinking of taking over the Circle V."

"The deed passed this morning." Bradish looked sharply at his visitor and became bland again. "I'm a rancher now. You know more of this place than I do." He was the personification of brisk frankness. "I know you have been connected with it for a long time and I know what Blair thought of you. I'm going to make a lot of improvements and have it run right up to the minute. I can't be here myself to boss things, and I need a good man to take charge. The job is yours. Will you take it?"

"Thanks. I'm not looking for a job." The answer came in the mildest of tones. "I came here for something entirely different. I've been talking to Virginia about the sale. She feels that the whole business this morning was pretty hasty, and she regrets it. In fact, she feels very badly about it, and I've persuaded her to let me make a personal appeal to you. Her father was a good friend to you once, and you have your chance now to be a good friend to his daughter."

He was taking a folded slip of paper from his pocket.

"This is the check you gave her this morning. I'm asking you to take it back and destroy the deed she gave you."

From the other side of the room Stanley grinned derisively at this extraordinary request, but Milton Bradish did not smile. He favored his visitor with a contemptuous stare.

"You've got less brains than I thought," he snipped. "Business isn't done that way."

"Then you refuse?"

"Certainly. It was a bona fide transaction, the property is mine and I mean to keep it."

"Then I'm afraid I shall have to tell you that your deed is worthless. Matt Blair had only a half ownership of the Circle V to will to his daughter. I am the other owner, and no deed can pass without my signature."

"Prove it!" Bradish's face was purple.

"I have the deed with me. I always carry it because your friend Slanty Gano has a habit of going through my cabin when he thinks I'm not around. The deed was made out while I was away only a short time before Matt died. He wrote me about it, but the letter missed me and followed me back here. He said that he had done it as a proof of his affection and confidence, and that I was to come back and the two of us were to run the place in full partnership and make a big thing of it. The deed was placed for safe keeping in Judge Harvey's safe, in confidence to be given to nobody but me, or to Matt himself. I've played a watching game to protect Virginia's rights, whether I kept the title to my half or turned it back to her. But as she has promised to marry me, I think that matter will take care of itself."

He looked for a second at Virginia. Her eyes were warm and lovely, her cheeks flushed with an excitement that cheered him on. He handed a folded document to Bradish. Bradish took it, scanned it swiftly and handed it back.

"You win," he said curtly. He would have said more, but Stanley interrupted with an air of bland insolence.

"Very pretty story, all this Damon and Pythias stuff, but people may wonder why Blair was so generous to an outsider at his daughter's expense."

"You damned little pup, what do you mean?"

Stanley rose hastily to his feet as Lee jerked around and strode toward him. "I mean," he said coolly, "that it was a belated act of justice to an unacknowledged son. There is a little village just across the Mexican border where some people have been well paid to conceal the fact that you are the son of a woman Blair brought there years ago."

All the hot temper that Lee had fought for years flamed up now and glittered in his eyes. "That's a lie from start to finish. You rotten little sneak, I ought to quirt the hide off you."

Stanley's lip curled. "Go ahead; I'm a cripple."

"Yes, and I know how you got it. You'd better make the most of it while it lasts and get well as soon as you can, because when I come back I'm going to give you the damndest thrashing you ever had in your life. Now hand out the name of that village."

"Sorry, but I'll have to pay a stiff price to get it. If you're determined to turn this deed bustness into a hold-up, I'll get the rest of the story for hard cash and trade it in for your share of the Circle V."

"Keep it," said Lee grimly. "When I get ready to do business with you, you'll be glad to trade in for a chance to get out of the

state alive... Virginia, I want to see you."

His brief gesture ordered the others out of the room. Lee closed the door after them.

All trace of Lee's anger went with the closing of the door, but a numbing constraint took its place.

"Virginia, it can't be true! Whether I have any right to a father's name or not, it couldn't be true of Matt."

(Continued Next Week)

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