



HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

CHAPTER XII

"Oh no, it couldn't! It brought a dry sob from her. Her idolized father. And Lee! She knew it could not be true—but Stanley had been so horribly sure.

"Virginia, before I go, I want you to know that I never meant to take any part of the Circle V—not as things stand. I've only held the deed this long because I felt sure there was something behind all this business, and that you were being cheated somehow."

He stopped abruptly. "Goodbye. I'm off."

He held out his hand. Virginia took it, trying hard to act naturally in a situation horribly strained. A new alarm touched with chilly fingers.

"But you—you're coming back, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I think the whole story is a poisonous lie, just an exceptionally dirty brand of the stuff that could be handed out by a paid informer with a grudge. But that's got to be proved, and I'm going away to do it. If I can't, you won't see me again. But if I can—"

He gripped her fingers suddenly. Hope and despair fought in a moment of numbing pressure. Then she felt a light, quick touch on her hair, and Lee was gone.

Lee rode first to Joey's cabin. Joey had known Matt for years, and Matt had loved and trusted the irascible, loyal old man. Joey listened, at first with excitement over the matter of the deed, and then with stupefied amazement.

"Why—why, Lee!" he stammered, and then broke into a fury of denunciation. "It's a lie! I told ye he was no good! I knowed he was layin' for ye!"

"Yes, Joey, but that won't help me prove it isn't true."

Joey's fury died. "I know, Lee," he said shakily. "Jes' believin' things ain't proof, is it? An' I can't help ye. I just came back from a trip one time an' found ye here. He was kinda close-mouthed about ye, Matt was."

Every line of the old man's figure sagged under this new calamity.

"Oh, well, never mind, Joey. I'll run it down."

"Where ye goin', Lee?"

"I'm going to find that Mexican village if I have to work my way from one end of the border to the other. But first I want to locate Lawler and Slanty Gano. Goodbye, Joey. Take care of Virginia."

In the shelter of a distant thicket Slanty Gano, keeping watch over the Valley of the Sun,

saw a distant figure ride away from the ranch house. It disappeared presently in the mouth of Joey's ravine, came out again later and rode on. That was Lee Hollister, heading toward Turkey Gulch.

Slanty crept out from his hiding place and dodged cautiously back to the hollow where his horse was picketed.

Lee rode on, unaware of that stealthy movement. Somewhere above him the crack of a rifle came. His head jerked toward the sound, and down again. He swayed slowly, groping with his hands, and then toppled and slid down.

Minutes passed. There was no further sound of movement, no sign of life but Lee Hollister's patient horse standing by a sprawling, inert body.

Slanty waited a little longer, assured himself that his horse was well screened from observation, hid his rifle in a thicket and went cautiously down to where his victim lay.

Slanty bent down and jerked the fallen man over on his back and felt for a sign of life.

It was there, a faint, tired stir. "Hard to kill, ain't ye? Well, I'm fixin' ye this time. Let's see what's on ye, first."

Something crisp and crackling answered Slanty's marauding paw. There were two letters from Matt Blair—he scowled suspiciously at these—a snapshot of Virginia—he snickered coarsely—and a legal looking paper. A deed. Slanty's eyes bulged.

"I'll make Bradish pay high for this."

He started to put the deed in his pocket and caught sight of something on the folded paper. It was the smeared imprint of a bloody thumb. Slanty scowled and glared at his hand. His irritation at this mishap made him that much rougher as he dragged the unconscious man upward and heaved him over the saddle of the waiting horse.

Midway of the gulch he turned, gliding like a snake, and led Brimstone up toward a ragged black hole, the mouth of Matt Blair's Bonanza mine.

In forty-five seconds there was no sign of Slanty Gano or Lee Hollister, and a riderless horse, with the sting of a lash on his flanks, was trotting swiftly down Turkey Gulch.

Inside the tunnel, Slanty jerked the limp body over his shoulder and headed deeper into the mine. Some distance in, where the way way seemed entirely blocked, he dropped his burden, picked a crowbar from a shelf lost in the darkness near the roof, and pried several tumbled rocks aside. With a grunt of satisfaction he picked up the wounded man again and carried him through the opening, dropping him once more, like a sack of meal.

"He struck a match and held it close to the pallid face. Slanty settled back on his heels, tauntingly conversational.

"Yo're right alongside of Matt Blair's precious samples, the ones that never got to the Assay Office at all. Didn't think Slanty Gano'd be smart enough to switch 'em, did ye? There's goin' to be one more cave-in at the old Bonanza, an' yo're goin' to be under it, or back of it, or thereabouts. When yo're mined, ye'll be bones, an' it'll be old Bradish's job to explain ye."

Slanty arose, chuckling derisively. He seemed to have some convenient cache here, for he found a bit of candle, lit it, stuck it in the neck of a bottle and looked around approvingly. The stage was set for a blast which would send a mass of rock and rubble down to crush a helpless man or imprison him in slow torment until he died. Still Slanty lingered, licking hungry lips over the flavor of revenge.

The wounded man's eyelids flickered and were still. Slanty caught the movement and bent over him with a grin.

"Wakin' up, Lee? Ye—"

The word jerked off in a smothered snarl. Quick hands leaped at his throat. Lee was struggling to his feet, panting and fighting. Slanty, caught unaware, gave way for a step or two. Then battering blows came, beating a wounded man at close range. A smashing blow landed in Lee's face, and he sagged and crumpled.

Retreating steps, the clang of a crowbar, a grinding sound. Floating somewhere in a dim sea of weakness, Lee knew vaguely that Slanty had pried the big rocks back over the opening, shutting him in.

Under his cheek was something lumpy and rough. His fingers groped over it. Rocks in burlap, gritty with earth! These must be Matt's samples, that had never reached their destination. Lee shoved them into his pocket, and with a dogged attempt at haste began to crawl away from the menace of the blast—farther and farther back into the old mine, dizzy from the loss of blood, with a film before his eyes and a white-hot purpose in his brain.

"Oh, God, let me live long enough for this!"

Back of him there was a sputtering fuse. Outside there was quiet, dusk falling, a man running. The man dodged behind rocks and scrub, slipped into a fringe of junipers and crouched to listen. It came a moment later, the dull boom of a blast.

Life had to be faced. Virginia dragged herself back to the realization of that, and went slowly toward the hall. Mrs. Archer, tearful and incoherent, came toward her niece with outstretched hands.

"Oh my dear, I've just heard!"

"Please! I don't want to talk about it," Virginia said tensely. She went on, leaving Mrs. Archer indignant and perturbed, but she had yet to pass Stanley. He stood in her path, urgently pleading.

"Virginia, let me explain. I only did it to save you from a terrible mistake. You don't understand—"

"I do. I understand more than you know and I think you are the foulest, most contemptible thing I have ever seen. Get out of my way!" Without another word Virginia went on to her father's old office and shut the door behind her.

The quiet of the little room closed around her like a protecting arm. It was easier to disbelieve that hideous accusation in this place where her father's presence still lived, genial and kind.

There was only one relief from the turmoil in her mind, and that was in work. Her father's papers, for instance. There was a closet full of them, and there might be something about Lee. She carried armfuls over to the desk.

It was slow work. Some of it was poignant; much of it was dull, as old bills and papers must be. She sighed, sorting them briskly into better order. A pile of old check books caught her eye. She pulled them toward her, scanning dates with a sudden impulse to check up the amounts that he had sent her during lean years when he had been so hard pressed.

"T. Ellison Archer.....\$5,000."
"Adele M. Archer.....\$2,800"

She reached for her pencil. When it was finished she looked wearily down at a sordid little history, check after check made out to her aunt and uncle during the years when she had lived in their home. With damning accuracy they tallied with her recollection of various acts of generosity on their part—the coming out dance that they had given for her, the first trip to Europe, the second, the summer at Narragansett, the time Aunt Adele had taken her to Palm Beach.

Someone tapped at the door, and her aunt came in.

"Virginia dear, I am so dis-

tressed for you. I simply can't keep silent any longer. Of course you can't stay after this horrible scandal."

"Why not? It's my home, and it's Lee's also if he wants to come."

"But Virginia, you couldn't live here alone—with all these rough men! And you know our home is open to you, darling, just as it always has been."

For answer Virginia pushed a sheet of paper toward her. It was closely written with figures and dates and names.

"Not quite as it always was," she said in a bitter voice. "My father isn't here to pay these any more, without even being given the credit for his generosity . . ."

Her aunt started to speak, stopped, hesitated, and then went hurriedly out of the door. Humiliation burned dully in her cheeks, and she stifled a sob.

Virginia did not appear at dinner, but sent her excuses by Ling.

She did not even attempt to sleep that night. Moonlight came, bathing the valley in silver. The silver was beginning to pale before she flung herself across the bed, still dressed, wondering if she could ever sleep again.

She raised her head at the sound of pounding hoof beats.

They were distant, but coming nearer . . . That was racing speed . . . The sound swept past, swerved toward the bunk house and stopped.

(Continued Next Week)

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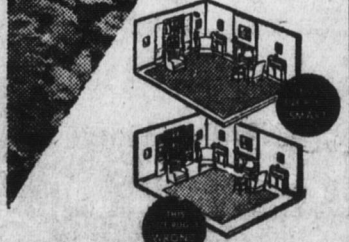
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