

# HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

Curly bent down and cautiously slid a flat packet under the pillow. "It's Lee's. Better tell him about it, Miss Virginia, as soon as he walks up."

Toward morning news came. Slanty Gano, desperate, had taken the desperate way out. "Pretended he was dozing off," the messenger said, "and then busted out like a crazy man. Grabbed adept's gun, handcuffs and all, and went down shootin'."

Dawn found Lee awake, insisting that he was strong enough to get up. They let him sit up in bed first, and there he heard the closely written sheets of the packet that Curly had brought the night before. They had been taken from Slanty Gano.

For some minutes after he had finished, he sat there looking bitter and tired. Then he roused himself and called Curly, hovering just outside the door.

"I'm ready. Get my clothes on me. I've got work to do."

They awaited him in Matt's office, summoned by Curly, one by one. Milton Bradish was there, vigilant and squared for any emergency; Stanley, alertly nervous but noting with relief that his car, commandeered the night before to get the doctor, was now in front of the door; T. Ellison Archer, looking flabby and scared, his vast dignity gone; Virginia was there as a matter of course, and also Joey.

Lee came in, hollow-eyed and bandaged, moving slowly. "I've asked you all to come here because there's something that I want to say to you."

"That's all right, young man, but you're in no shape to do it yet." Bradish was briskly solicitous. "Give yourself a day or two to recover."

"I'm obliged for your consideration, but it comes a little late." Bradish reddened. Steady eyes held him as Lee began.

"Three days ago a man who has been acting as your agent shot me, rifled my pocket of the deed to this ranch and carried me into Number One tunnel of

the Bonanza mine, where he had set a blast to bury me safely until he could levy blackmail on you for a big sum and make his escape. He had you where he wanted you. . . No, you wait until I'm through.

"I came to before he left and heard the last things he said, giving away some matters that you already know and that I needed to. One of them was that he had dropped me down beside Matt Blair's real samples, the stolen ones that never got to the Assay Office. When he had gone I had just sense enough and time enough to crawl away from the blast, taking a chunk of that ore with me."

He held out a rough, pale yellowish lump. "Carnotte," he said briefly. "I don't need to tell you that."

"Yes," Bradish admitted calmly, "I was after the Bonanza, but you're wrong about my knowledge of the methods that Lawler and Gano used. It was purely a business matter. The gold pocket that started the rush years ago was found on Matt's claim, and we divided according to agreement. All that I struck on my claim was a lot of rubble and then a vein of stuff that cropped up all over. But we were looking for gold and it didn't mean anything to us. Years later, looking over some samples of radioactive ores, I remembered those deposits and suspected their value."

Bradish talked crisply and directly now, a man sure of himself and his methods.

"And it never occurred to you to go to Matt Blair and offer to finance him on a partnership basis?"

"Certainly not!" Bradish snapped it back impatiently. "Matt had lived with the thing under his nose for twenty-eight years without waking up to it. It was his property, but my find. I made him an offer for the whole ranch—through an agent, of course—and got the answer that it wasn't for sale. At his death I repeated my offer to his daughter. In the meantime, by way of being on the ground, and because it runs right up to the Circle V line along Turkey Gulch, I bought

in the Rancho Ceballos when the old man died and installed an agent there."

"Why," Lee's voice demanded, "when you put in your manager, did you pick out a crook like Slanty Gano?"

"We took Gano on," said Bradish crisply, "because he knew too much. He found us in Number Three tunnel, using picks and putting samples in our grub sacks. It couldn't be helped, but it was a bad move. Gano was a quarrelsome loafer who turned out to be a scoundrel and a murderer. Nobody regrets that more than I do, but I'm not responsible for his actions."

Lee was looking at Stanley and slowly opening a little sheaf of papers.

"There is one thing more. A few days ago you made accusations which no man can overlook. You got your information from Slanty Gano. There was a thousand dollar bill in his pocket when he was caught and we know where it came from. But there was also something else which Slanty had stolen from Matt Blair's desk the night he killed him."

"He told me of his own accord," said Stanley, angrily, "that you were Blair's son and that he could prove it."

"If you showed him your money first, he'd tell you anything you wanted to hear. I'm not Matt Blair's son. I'm not Virginia's brother, and Slanty knew it. I happen to be—yours. And I'm not proud of it."

A chair rasped. Bradish leaped forward, staring at Lee.

"My mother," said Lee steadily, looking straight at Bradish this time, "was Anita Ceballos, Don Luis' daughter, the girl you married secretly when you were down

"I didn't know," Bradish said heavily. "Sure never told me that there was a child. I give you my word of honor."

"I'd rather you didn't. Honor didn't count when you deserted my mother. You don't have to explain any circumstances. They're all there."

He pointed to the papers under his hand. They lay in a time-yellowed drift on the desk.

Bradish arose. It was the slow, heavy move of a beaten man.

"All right," he said, his voice expressionless. "I suppose I had it coming to me."

Joey's voice cut in: "An' now ye kin go, Milt Bradish, because Lee lets ye go. There's yore car. Get in it quick, for if ye stay here another five minutes I'll throw a gun on ye myself!"

It was a silent going. Stanley reached the car first and slipped hurriedly into the driver's seat. Bradish followed his son—the only son he dared own.

The engine throbbed, the car shot forward.

Silence came, and then the stir of relaxed tension. Lee raised his head, bent moodily as he had watched the fleeting car. Ling stood before him, looking like a benevolent old idol in weathered ivory.

"Bleakfas, Lee?"

"That sounds good to me, Ling. Breakfast for everybody, the best you ever got. Maria will help you."

He waved a friendly hand to the men outside and walked slowly back. Virginia was beside him.

Joey lingered for a moment, with a gulp of emotion, and then he went out on tiptoe.

"It's over," Lee said in a tired voice. "Thank God. We're starting again with a clean slate. . . Honey—come here!"

She came blindly, shaking under the release from days of intolerable strain. . . "Oh my dear, my dear!"

The last whisper of the closing door left them alone.

The End

## Little Pine

Little Pine, April 22—Rev. G. W. Tucker, who has been ill for some time, is slowly improving.

Homer Wilson and Ray Greene made a business trip to Elkin Wednesday.

The Glade Valley free school came to a close last Friday with a picnic.

Mrs. Homer Wilson and children, Doris and Lois, spent the past week with her homefolks.

Mrs. Handy Murphy visited Mrs. Guy Collins Tuesday.

Mr. and Mrs. Vance Blevins, of Sparta, spent Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. Fred Handy.

A Sunday School was opened at Little Pine Sunday, April 21.

Mr. and Mrs. Guy Collins spent Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. Fred Harris.

Robert Harris spent Saturday night with Earl Cheek.

C. C. Tompkins made a business trip to Sparta Monday.

Arrie Maines spent the weekend with home folks.

Mrs. Gord Greene, who has been ill for some time, is improving.

Mrs. Etta Wilson visited her sister, Mrs. Jane Chappell Saturday.

Mrs. Reva Wilson was shopping in Galax Friday.



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