

The TREY O' HEARTS

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

The photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Trey O' Hearts" may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By this unique arrangement with the Universal Film Mfg. Co. it is therefore not only possible to read "The Trey O' Hearts" in this paper, but also to see each installment of it at the moving picture theaters.

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15th Installment. THE LAST TRUMP

SYNOPSIS—The 15th of Hearts is the "death-sign" employed by Seneca Trine, an aged and crippled monomaniac, in the private war of vengeance which he wages against Alan Law, son of the man (now dead) who was innocently responsible for the accident which rendered Trine a helpless invalid for life. Alan falls in love with Rose, Trine's daughter, and his love is returned. Judith, Rose's twin and double, but a woman of violent passions and erratic temper, promises her father to compass Alan's death; but under dramatic circumstances Alan saves her life and so, unwillingly, wins her love. Judith then turns against her father and successfully opposes his efforts to cause Alan to be assassinated by his aides and mercenaries. After many adventures Alan, Rose, Judith and Barcus, Alan's best friend, escape to the mountain country of Southern California and there leave Trine helpless and friendless through causing the death (in self-defense) of his two first lieutenants.

I—THE NEW JUDITH.

From sleep as from drugged stupor Judith Trine awakened, struggling back to consciousness like some exhausted diver from the black depths to the star-smitten surface of a nightbound pool. And for a little she lay unstriving, her half-numb wits fumbling with their business of renewing acquaintance with the world.

At first she could by no means recognize her surroundings. This rude chamber of rough plank walls and primitive furnishings; this wide, hard couch she shared with her still slumbering sister, Rose; the view revealed by an open window at the bedside; a fair perspective of tree-clad mountains through which a wide-bosomed canyon rolled down to an emerald plain, conveyed nothing to her intelligence.

A formless sense of some epochal change in the habits and mental processes of a young lifetime, added to her confusion.

Who was she herself, this strange creature who rested here so calmly by the side of Rose? If she were Judith Trine, how came she to be there? Irreconcilable opposites in every phase of character, the sisters had sedulously avoided association with each other ever since childhood; they had not shared the shelter of four walls overnight since time beyond the bounds of Judith's memory. What, then, had so changed them both that they should be found in such close company? Where was the Judith of yesterday—high-spirited, fearless, proud to arrogance, the puppet of fiery passions, the woman who had been able to contemplate without a qualm committing with her own hand a murder that her father's mind might be eased, his last days soothed with the sense of a wrong repaid in brimming measure?

What, indeed, had become of that wild thing, Judith Trine of yesterday? Surely she had little enough in common with this Judith of today, in whose heart was no more room for envy, hatred, malice or any uncharitableness, so full was it of love which, though . . . was focused upon the person of one man, none the less embraced all the world—even her sister and successful rival in that one man's affection.

And this was the work of Love! She sighed, but sighed softly, that she might not disturb her sister; and in this very act of consideration emphasized the vastness of the change that had come over her. For a week ago to have roused Rose needlessly would have afforded Judith malicious delight; while today Judith was not only thoughtful of her sister's minor comforts, but stood prepared to sacrifice herself, to break her own heart with her own two hands, that Rose's happiness might be assured.

Now the chain of memories was quite complete, no link lacking in its continuity. She recalled clearly every incident that had marked the slow growth of this great love she had for Alan Law, from that first day, not yet a month old, when he had escaped the fiery deathtrap she had set for him and repaid her only by risking his life anew to save her from destruction, down to this very morning when the stream from a hydraulic nozzle had swept over the brink of a three hundred-foot precipice a crimson racing automobile containing two desperate men bent upon compassing the death of her beloved.

By that act of sheer self-defense the world was richer for the loss of two black-hearted blackguards, and Alan Law might now be considered safe from further persecution—since there now remained not one soul loyal enough to Seneca Trine to prosecute his private war of vengeance against Alan. And though that aged monomaniac had means whereby he might purchase other assassins and corrupt them to his hideous purposes, Judith was determined that he should never again have any opportunity so to do. Though Alan, she knew, would never lift his hand to hinder her father's freedom of action, she, Judith, meant to take such steps as his persecution called for. If there were any justice in the land—if there were any alienists capable of discriminating between Trine's apparent sanity and his deep-rooted mania—then surely not many days more should pass into history without witnessing his consignment to an institution for the criminally insane.

She, Judith, would see to that, and then . . . The woman sighed once more.

Then Rose and Alan would marry and live happily ever afterward.

But what of Judith?

She made a small gesture of resignation to her destiny. What became of her no longer mattered, so that Alan were made happy in such happiness as he coveted.

And now the thought stirred her sharply that what was to be done must be done quickly, if at all.

And the almost level rays of the declining sun, striking in through the open window, counseled haste if Judith were to accomplish her intention of leaving this place and finding her father again before daylight.

With the utmost care she rose from the bed, crept to the door of the room (now recognized as the quarters of the foreman of the hydraulic mining outfit) and out into the room adjoining.

And there, pulling the door to gently behind her, she paused and for many minutes stood in tense contemplation of the man she loved—Alan Law, asleep in a chair beside a table, his head pillowed on his folded arms.

This was leave-taking between them—and he would never know.

Far better so: Judith felt she could not trust herself to say farewell to him without breaking down and confessing the utter wretchedness that threatened to overwhelm her each time she forced herself to face the thought that this parting must be final.

Like a thief she stole across the creaking floor to Alan's side, hesitated, bent her head to his and touched her lips to his cheek—a caress so light that he slept on in ignorance of it.

Then, as she lifted her head and stood erect, bosom convulsed with silent sobs, she looked squarely into the face of Rose.

II—THE OLD ADAM.

A long minute elapsed before either woman moved or spoke.

Transfixed beside Alan's chair, steadying herself with a hand upon its back, Judith stared at the figure in the doorway, in a temper at once discomfited and defiant. With this she suffered a phase of incredulity, was scarce able to persuade herself that this was truly Rose who confronted her—Rose whose sweet and gentle nature had ever served as the butt of Judith's supreme contempt and ruthless ridicule.

Here was revolution with a vengeance, when Rose threatened and Judith shrunk!

It was as if the women had exchanged natures while they slept.

The countenance that Rose showed her sister was a thundercloud rent by the lurid lightning of her angry eyes. Her pose was tense and alert, like the pose of an animal set to spring. In her hand hung a revolver.

And slowly, toward the end of that long, mute minute, the girl's grasp tightened upon the grip of the weapon and its muzzle lifted.

Remembering this, a flash of her one-time temper quickened Judith. Of a sudden, with a start, she crossed the floor in a single, noiseless stride, and threw herself before her sister.

"What are you waiting for? Nobody's stopping you: why don't you shoot?"

The upward movement of the hand was checked; the weapon hung level to Judith's breast—as level and unequivocal as the glance that probed her eyes and the tone of Rose's voice as she demanded:

"What were you doing there?"

"If you must know from me what you already know on the evidence of your eyes—I was bidding good-by to the man I love—kissing him without his knowledge or consent before leaving him to you for good and all!"

"What do you mean?"

"That I'm going away—that I can't stand this situation any longer. Marrophat and Jimmy are dead, my father's helpless—and I mean to see that he remains so. Nothing, then, stands in the way of your marrying Alan but me. And such being the case—and because he's as dear to me as he is to you—I'm going to take myself off and keep out of the way."

"For fear lest he find out that you love him?"

Judith's lip curled. "Do you think him so witless he doesn't know that already?"

"And so you leave him to me out of your charity! Is that it?"

"Any way you like. But if it's so intolerable to you to think that I dare love him and confess it to you—if you begrudge me the humiliation of stooping to kiss a man who doesn't want my kisses—if you are so afraid of losing him while I live and love him—very well, then!"

With a passionate gesture Judith tore open the bosom of her waist, offering her flesh to the muzzle of the revolver.

A cry broke from the lips of Rose that was like the cry of a forlorn child punished with cruelty that passes its understanding. She fell back against the wall. The revolver swept up through the air—but its mark was her own head rather than Judith's bosom.

But before her finger found strength to pull the trigger the man at the table, startled from his sleep by the sound of angry voices, leaped from his chair with a violence that sent it clattering to the floor, and buried himself headlong across the room, imprisoning the wrist of his betrothed with one hand while the other wrested the weapon away and passed it to Judith.

"Rose!" he cried thickly, "what does this mean? Are you mad? Judith—"

Dragging the bosom of her waist together, Judith thrust the weapon into its holster and turned away.

"Be kind to her, Alan," she said in an uncertain voice. "She didn't understand and—and I guided her beyond endurance, I'm afraid. Forgive me—but be kind to her always!"

Somehow, blindly, she stumbled out of the cabin into the open, possessed by a thought whose temptation was stronger than her powers of resistance. What Rose had failed to accomplish might now serve to resolve Judith's problem . . . None, she told herself bitterly, would seek to hinder her. But she meant so to arrange the matter that none should see or suspect and be moved to interfere.

Late though the afternoon hour was, the business of hydraulic mining still engaged the undivided attention of every man in the camp. None noticed the girl as she sped up the road toward the cliff—at least, if any one did, it was without remarking the symptoms of the hysteria which was at the bottom of this mad impulse toward self-destruction.

And yet, such is the inconsistency of the human animal, the instinct for self-preservation was stronger than her purpose; when a touring car swung round the mountain and shot toward her, she checked hastily and jumped aside in ample time to escape being run down.

The next instant the machine was lurching to a halt and the sonorous accents of Seneca Trine were saluting her:

"Judith! You here! What the devil! Where've you been? Where are Marrophat and Jimmy?"

"Dead!" the girl replied, sententious, eyeing him strangely.

"Dead!" he echoed. "Who's dead? A gleam of infernal joy lighted up his grim and lowering countenance. "You don't mean to tell me Alan Law—"

"No," she cut him short again. "I mean to tell you that Marrophat and Jimmy are dead."

"I don't believe it!" the old man screamed, aghast. "I won't believe it. You're trying to me, you jade! You're lying!"

She indicated with a gesture two forms that lay at a little distance back from the roadside, motionless beneath a sheet of canvas—the bodies of Trine's creatures, recovered by the mining gang and brought up for a Christian burial.

This, then, was the cruel fruition of his merciless hounding of Alan Law from the woods of northern Maine to the hills of southern California!

The last bitter drop that brimmed his cup of misery was added when Alan Law himself appeared, leaving the miners' cabin in company with his betrothed—Rose now soothed and comforted, smiling through the traces of her recent tears as she clung to her lover, nestling in the hollow of his arm.

To Alan, on the other hand, this rencontre seemed to afford nothing but the pleasantest surprise imaginable.

"Well!" he cried, releasing Rose and running down to the car. "Here's luck! And at the very moment when I was calling my lucky star hard names! How can I ever reward your thoughtfulness, Mr. Trine? It beats me how you do keep track of me this way—happening along like this every time I need a car the worst way in the world!"

"Drive on!" Trine screamed to the chauffeur. "Drive on, do you hear?"

But Judith had stepped up on the running board and was eyeing the driver coldly, with one hand significantly resting on the butt of the weapon at her side. The car remained at a standstill.

"But where's Barcus?" Judith demanded when, after helping Rose into the car and running off

There was no other occupant of the room.

Though he had lain nearly two days in coma, her father's subsequent progress toward recovery of his normal state had been rapid. For the last twenty-four hours he had been in full possession of his faculties and (for some reason impossible for Judith to fathom) uncommonly cheerful.

From this circumstance she drew a certain sense of mystified anxiety. Twice in the course of the morning she had caught his eye following her with a gleam of sardonic exultancy, as though he nursed some secret of extraordinary potentialities.

And yet (she argued) it was quite impossible that he should have some fresh scheme brewing for the assassination of Alan.

And yet . . . she was oppressed by a great uneasiness.

A considerable degree of restlessness was surely pardonable in one who, from her window, watched a carriage-drive populous with vehicles (for the most part motor cars) bringing to the hotel gayly dressed men and women, the guests invited to the wedding of Rose Trine and Alan Law.

Within another ten minutes the man Judith loved with all her body and soul would be the husband of his sister.

Slowly, against her will, she rose and stole across the floor to her father's chair.

His breathing was slow and regular; beyond doubt he slept; unquestionably there was no rea-

from half a dozen throats within another instant.

As if from the path of some grizzly visitant from the world beyond the grave, the throng pressed back and cleared a way for Seneca Trine, father of the bride.

And as the way opened and he looked up toward the altar and saw Alan standing hand in hand with Rose while the minister invoked a blessing upon the union, added strength, the strength of the insane, was given to Seneca Trine.

When Alan, annoyed by the disturbance in the body of the chapel, looked round, it was to see the aged maniac standing within a dozen feet of him; and as he looked and cried out in wonder, Trine whipped a revolver from the pocket of his dressing gown and swung it steadily to bear upon Alan's head.

At that instant the storm broke with infernal fury upon the land.

A crash of thunder so heavy and prolonged that it seemed to rock the very building upon its foundations, accompanied the shattering of a huge stained-glass window.

A bolt of bluish flame of dazzling brilliance slashed through the window like a flaming sword and smote the pistol in the hand of Seneca Trine, discharging the weapon even as it struck him dead.

As he fell, the bolt swerved and struck two others down—Alan Law and the woman who had just been made his wife.

IV—THE WIFE.

Again three days elapsed; and Judith, returning from the double funeral of her father and sister, doffed her mourning for a gown less somber and more suited to the atmosphere of a sickroom, then relieved the nurse in charge of Alan.

He remained as he had been ever since the falling of the thunderbolt—in absolute coma.

But he lived, and—or the physicians lied—must soon regain consciousness.

Kneeling beside his bedside Judith prayed long and earnestly.

When she arose it was to answer a tap upon the door. She admitted Tom Barcus and suffered him to lead her into the recess of the window, where they conversed in guarded tones in spite of the fact that the subject of their communications could not possibly have heard them.

"I've come to tell you something," Barcus announced with characteristic awkwardness. "I've known it for three days—ever since the wedding, in fact—and kept it to myself, not knowing whether I ought to tell you or not."

He paused, eyeing her uncertainly, unhappily. "I am prepared," Judith assured him calmly. "You're nothing of the sort," he countered, argumentative. "You couldn't be. It's the most amazing thing imaginable. . . . See here . . ."

"Well?"

"You understand, don't you, that Alan must never know that Rose was killed by that lightning stroke?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," the man floundered miserably, "you see, he loved her so—I thought—I'm sure it would be best—if you can bring yourself to it—to let him go on believing it wasn't Rose who was killed, but Judith. And that's skating so close to the truth that it makes no difference: the Judith Alan knew and the Judith I knew in the beginning is gone as completely as though she and not Rose had been killed."

After a long pause, the girl asked him quietly: "I understand. But is it possible you don't understand that, if I were to consent to this proposition, lend myself to a deception which I must maintain through all my life to come—Alan would consider me his wife?"

"Well, but—you see—you are his wife. . . . Oh, don't think I'm off my bat: I'm telling you the plain, unvarnished truth. You are Alan's wife. . . . No, listen to me. You remember that day in New York when you substituted for Rose, when Alan tried to elope with her, and you went with him to Jersey City, and stood up to be married by a preacher-guy named Wright—and Marrophat broke in just at the critical moment and busted up the party?"

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

Barcus produced a folded yellow paper from his coat pocket and proffered it.

"Read that. It was handed to me as best man, just before the ceremony. Seeing it was addressed to Alan and knowing he was in no frame of mind to be bothered by telegrams, I slipped it into my pocket and forgot all about it temporarily. When I came to find it, I took the liberty of reading it. But read it for yourself!"

The typewritten lines of the long message blurred and ran together almost indecipherably in Judith's vision. None the less, she contrived to grasp the substance of its meaning:

"WHY DIDN'T YOU WIRE ME SOONER?" it ran: "MARRIAGE TO ROSE IMPOSSIBLE. REV. MR. WRIGHT INFORMED ME YOUR MARRIAGE TO JUDITH LAST WEEK HAD GONE TOO FAR WHEN MARROPHAT INTERRUPTED. JUDITH LEGALLY YOUR WIFE. WOULD HAVE ADVISED YOU SOONER HAD YOU LET ME KNOW WHERE TO ADDRESS YOU. HOPE TO HEAVEN THIS GETS TO YOU BEFORE TOO LATE."

The message was signed with the name of Alan's confidential man of business in New York. . . . When Judith looked up she was alone in the room, but for the silent patient on his couch.

Slowly, almost fearfully, she crept to his bedside and stood looking down into the face of her husband.

And while she looked Alan's lashes fluttered, his respiration quickened, a faint color crept into his pallid cheeks—and his eyes opened wide and looked into hers.

His lips moved and breathed a word of recognition: "Judith!"

With a low cry of tenderness, the girl sank to her knees and encircled his head with her arms. "Judith," she whispered, hiding her face in his bosom, "Judith is no more . . ."

A pause; and then the feeble voice: "Then, if I was mistaken, if you aren't Judith, you must be Rose—my wife!"

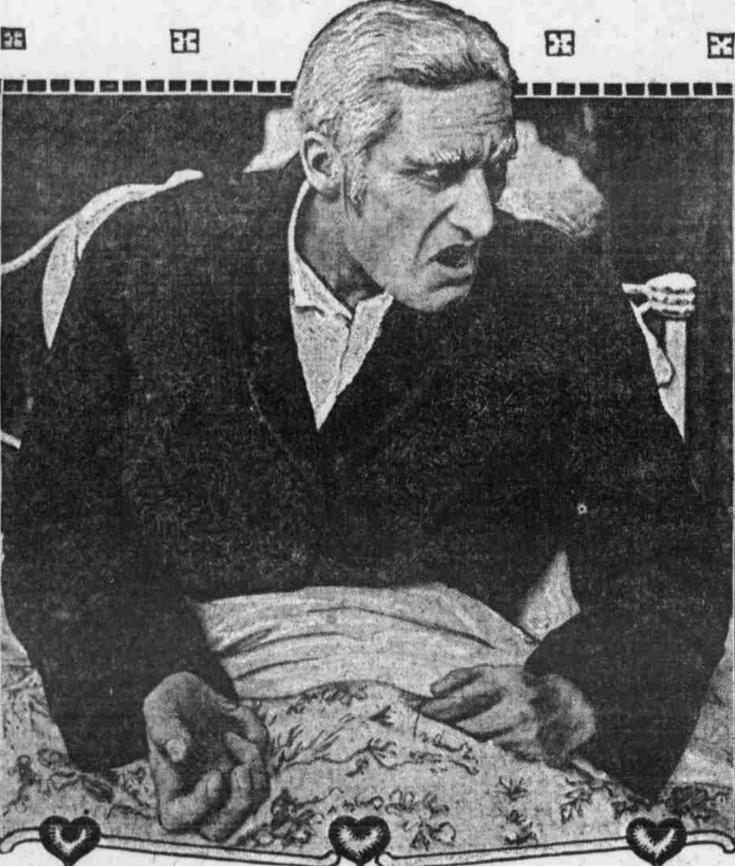
She said steadily: "I am your wife."

His hands fumbled with her face, closed upon her cheeks, lifted her head until her eyes must look into his.

And for many minutes he held her so, looking deep into the soul of the woman.

Then quietly he said: "I know . . ."

END OF THE TREY O' HEARTS.



to thank their hosts, Alan returned alone to the car.

"Goodness only knows," the young man answered cheerfully. "He would insist on rambling off down the canyon in search of an alleged town where we could hire a motor car—somewhere down there."

Taking the seat next the chauffeur, he gave the word to drive on; and they slipped away from the location of the mining camp, saluted by cheers from the miners.

Half an hour passed without a word spoken by any member of the party. Each was deep in his or her own especial preoccupation.

The aged monomaniac occupied the right-hand corner of the rear seat. Thus his one able hand was next to Judith, in close juxtaposition to the revolver in the holster on her hip.

Without the least warning his left hand closed upon the weapon, withdrew it and leveled it at the back of Alan's head.

As he pulled the trigger Judith flung herself bodily upon the arm.

Even so, the bullet found a goal, though in another than the intended victim. The muscular forearm of the chauffeur received it.

With a shriek of pain the man released the wheel and grasped his arm.

Before Alan could move to prevent the disaster the car, running without a guiding hand, cannoned off a low embankment to the left and shot full tilt into a shallow ditch on the right, shelling its passengers like peas from a broken pod.

Alan catapulted a good twenty feet through the air and alighted with such force that he lay stunned for several moments.

When he came to, he found Barcus helping him to his feet; a heavy seven-passenger touring car halted in the roadway indicated the manner in which his friend had arrived on the scene of the accident.

When damages were assessed it was found that none of the party had suffered seriously but the chauffeur and Seneca Trine himself. The former had only his wound to show, however; while Trine lay still and senseless at a very considerable distance from the wrecked automobile.

III—THE LAST TRUMP.

Toward the evening of the third day following the motor spill, Judith sat in the deeply recessed window of a bedchamber on the second floor of a hotel situated in the heart of California's orange-growing lands.

Behind her Seneca Trine sat, apparently asleep, in a wheeled invalid chair.