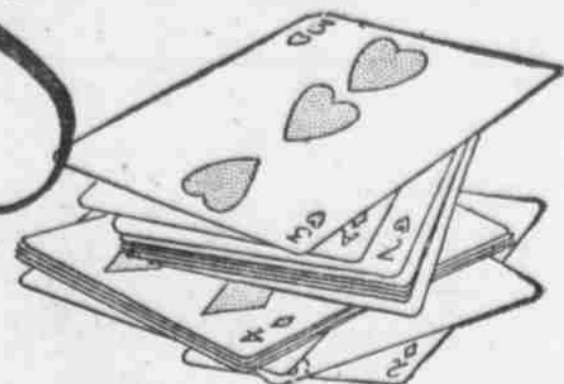


The TREY O' HEARTS

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

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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STALEMATE

SYNOPSIS—The 3 of Hearts is the "death sign" employed by Seneca Trine in the private war of vengeance which, through the agency of his daughter Judith, a woman of violent passions like his own, he wages against Alan Law, son of the man (now dead) whom Trine held responsible for the accident which rendered him a helpless cripple. Alan is in love with Rose, Judith's twin and double, but in all else her opposite. Judith vows to compass Alan's death, but under dramatic circumstances he saves her life and so, unwittingly and unwillingly, wins her love. Thereafter Judith is by turns worked upon by the old hatred, the new love, and jealousy of her sister Rose.

I—THE HOUSE DIVIDED.

Alone in that strange place of silence and shadows—that den of the devil's livery, crimson and black—chained to the invalid chair wherein, day in, day out, for years on end, he had suffered the Promethean torments of the life that would not die out of his wretched, wrecked carcass, though without ceasing sharp-beaked envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness pecked insatiably at his vitals, Seneca Trine sat waiting, with the impassivity of a graven figure waiting on his imminent hour of ultimate vengeance for the wrong that had made him what he was.

"Another hour! . . . In sixty minutes more they will be here, Judith and Marrophat and Rose—poor fool!—and him! . . . In sixty minutes more they will put him down before me, bound and helpless, if not dead . . ."

A slight pause prefaced words that were a whimpered prayer: "God send that he be not dead! Have I lingered here in anguish all these weary years for the fulfillment of my revenge only to be cheated at the end by Death? God grant that Alan Law may be laid down still living here at my feet! . . . Then . . ."

A bitter smile twisted his tortured features: "Then shall my will be done to him! And then, when I have seen him die as his father died—then—Ah, God!—then at last I too may die!"

There was a long silence, then a groan of exasperated protest: "Why do they not come? Why does Judith delay, when she knows how I suffer? Why have I been put off from day to day with her telegrams that begged for more time and promised everything—but told nothing!—until yesterday . . . Where are those messages she sent me yesterday?"

His one sound hand groped out like a claw and sought a mass of papers on the desk beside him, sorting out from among them two yellow forms. Painfully he blinked over these and slowly his pain-bent lips coned their wording:

"Alan and Rose safe with me—will bring both home tomorrow night without fail," he read the first aloud; and then the second: "Have motor-car waiting for me tomorrow morning from three o'clock till called for New Bedford waterfront—Judith."

"No!" he affirmed with the fervor of one persuaded by his own desires: "I must not doubt the girl! She has promised, she has performed." So still was he, indeed, that he seemed to sleep; but so deceptive was that semblance that he was alert for the least sound. The girl entered softly, as if fearful of disturbing his slumbers; but she found him with head erect and eyes a-blaze.

"Judith!" he cried, his great voice vibrating like a brazen bell. "At last! Where is he? You have brought him? Where is he?"

With no more answer than a sigh, the girl drooped her head and let her hands hang limply with palms exposed.

After an instant of incredulous disappointment the man shot a single, frigid question at her: "You have failed?"

"I have failed," she confessed. "Why?"

She shrugged slightly. "Who knows why one fails? I did my best: he was too much for me, outwitted me at every turn. Time and again I thought I had him, but always he escaped, either by his own wit and courage or with another's aid. Only yesterday night they were all three in the hollow of my hands—but now I bring you only Rose."

She faltered, awed by the glare of his infuriated eyes. "Let me explain," she begged.

He snapped her short: "You cannot explain. The thing is impossible, that you should have failed. There is something beneath this, something you will not tell me."

His hand sought the row of buttons on the desk and pressed one long.

Almost instantly a servant glided noiselessly into the room.

"My daughter Rose—have her brought here to me at once!"

In another moment the replica of his daughter Judith was ushered into his presence.

Upon this one he loosed the lightning of his wrath without ruth.

Rose suffered him in silence. His most galling recrimination elicited no retort from this one.

In a lull in Trine's tirade, Judith chose to interject: "Don't be so hard on the silly fool: she's not responsible; she's sick with love for that good-looking simpleton!"

"And you?" Rose turned on her passionately—"what about you? If I love Alan Law, at least I love him openly. I'm not ashamed to own it—and I don't pretend to be a wicked family feud, and then spare him every time I meet him, to lead him to believe I haven't the heart to injure him—as you do, hoping so to work upon his sympathies and earn a kindly word and a pat on the head from his hand!"

Fiercely she leveled a denunciatory arm at her sister. "There!" she cried to her father—"if you need to know—there stands the daughter who has betrayed your faith—as I have not, who have never even pretended to approve your villainy!"

"I think," Trine announced in a voice of ice—"I have learned now what I needed to know." His fingers sought the row of buttons; and when a servant responded, he inquired: "Mr. Marrophat has returned?"

with the daughter who had been estranged from him since birth by every instinct of her nature, essayed in vain to break down her mutinous silence.

At last Trine summoned two of his creatures and had her led weeping from the room to be held prisoner in her bedchamber on the topmost floor of the house.

II—A SPORTING OFFER.

Some two hours later, that same evening, Mr. Alan Law, very much alive and in spite of a complete new outfit of ready-made clothing, looking much more like himself than he had in a fortnight, issued forth from the Grand Central station, hailed a taxicab, and had himself conveyed to the Hotel Monolith.

But if he looked his proper self once more, it speedily was demonstrated that his wish was otherwise, for after tearing from the room-clerk of the Monolith that a suite was being held in the name of Arthur Lawrence, that was the name Mr. Law inscribed on the register.

On the other hand, it was his true name that he gave to the person whom he called upon by the telephone immediately after being shown to his rooms.



Alan's Appearance at the Hotel Monolith Created a Stir.

But then he was speaking to his old friend and man of business, Mr. Digby.

Within another ten minutes this last was in conference with his employer.

"I think you must be out of your head," Digby insisted nervously, once their first greetings were over. "You might just as sensibly throw yourself from the top of the Metropolitan tower as come to New York while Trine lives and knows you're this side the water."

"Nonsense!" Alan laughed. "Remember this is New York—not the backwoods of Maine!" Alan paused and smote his palm with a remorseful fist. "By the Eternal, I'm forgetting Barcus!"

"Barcus?"

"Chap whose boat I chartered in Portland—sheer luck on my part: he's one of the salt of the earth. First, something must be done for the boy. You've got influence of some sort in New Bedford, surely?"

Digby reflected: "Some. There's George Blaine, Justice of the peace—"

"The very man. Telegraph him in Barcus' interests immediately. And telegraph Barcus as well—send him a hundred for expenses and tell him to join me here in New York as quick as he can!"

"Your friend's address?" Digby inquired, mildly ironic as he sat down at the desk and fumbled with the supply of stationery.

"New Bedford jail, of course!" Alan chuckled—but cut his laugh in two as something fluttered from the pack of envelopes which Digby had disturbed and fell to the floor between the two men.

Face up, it grinned sardonic mockery of Alan's confidence: it was a Trey of Hearts.

With an ashen face and a trembling hand, Digby stooped to pick the damned thing up; but Alan was beforehand with him, and got his fingers first upon the card.

"Now will you believe?" Digby demanded huskily. "In what? A simple coincidence?" Alan flouted.

"Not I! Who knows I'm in New York—or that the Arthur Lawrence for whom your agent engaged these rooms was Alan Law. No, my friend: it's a bit too thick for me. Take my word for it, this is nothing more nor less than a souvenir of a poker-party held by yesterday's tenant of this suite."

"Perhaps—perhaps!" Digby assented, stroking tremulous lips. "But I'm afraid for you, my boy. Who knows that Trine's spies were not watching my man when he made this reservation? Who knows but that 'Arthur Lawrence' was too thin a disguise for Alan Law? I tell you, I'm frightened to the marrow of my old bones! Do me this favor at least, my boy: now that you've been warned, whether by accident or design—we won't argue that—do leave town—go incognito to some quiet place near by and wait there for the sailing of the next transatlantic steamer. Oh, surely you can't deny me this one wish of my fond old heart, my boy!"

With a gesture of unfeigned affection Alan dropped a hand on Digby's shoulder.

"There's nothing on earth I would not do for you," he said. "You've been a father and a mother to me ever since I can remember, even if we were separated, most of the time, by three thousand miles of salt water. But this thing—I can't do it, even for you. I can't do it even for myself. Rose Trine is here in New York, in the hands and at the mercy of her father and sister: and you may judge what their mercy will be when you learn all that she has done for me. I won't go and I can't go until I find her and take her with me. And that is final!"

"Then," Digby struck in, grasping wildly at a straw of hope, "I have your word you'll go, providing I find and restore Rose to you?"

"You have my word to that, unquestionably. Bring Rose to me, and I'll gladly shake the dust of New York from my shoes, and never return till Trine is put away comfortably in his grave."

"It shall be done," Digby promised. "It must!" "You believe that?"

"In twelve hours Rose shall be restored to you." "Will you make a book on it? I'll bet you something handsome—and hope I lose into the bargain. If you believe you can carry out your promise, wire the White Star line to reserve the best available suite on the Oceanic, sailing tomorrow morning at ten—and make arrangements for a marriage before the boat sails!"

"I'll go you," Digby agreed: "and if I fail, I forfeit the cost of the reservation. But about this marriage—"

He hesitated.

"You'll have to have a license in this state—and can't get one except by applying in person with your bride-to-be. There won't be time—"

"Then we'll marry in Jersey!" Alan insisted. "Dig up some clergyman over there, if you don't know one yourself—"

"Oh, I'm well acquainted with the very man!"

III—THE TIME 'O NIGHT.

Not ill-pleased to be left to his own devices (whose proposed character Digby would never have approved had he so much as suspected them) Alan



Judith Disclosed a Bottle Labeled Poison.



none the less deferred action until after midnight. And espionage was all he feared—save and except always, of course, failure to find his Rose.

It was about one in the morning when he arrived inconspicuously (but not so much so as to seem deserving of police surveillance) in the neighborhood of the Riverside drive home of his mortal enemy, a grim white house that towered, stark and tall, upon a corner.

His preliminary reconnaissance provided little more than comfortless exercise. Huge, still, it wall bathed in the milk and ink of moonlight and shadow, all its windows dark but one—and that one, in the topmost tier, showed only a feeble glimmer, so slight that Alan almost overlooked it.

But once discovered, it focused upon itself his thoughts with a power little less than hypnotic.

He believel with small doubt that Rose was a prisoner within those walls; that Judith must have conveyed her there with all speed.

And, this being the presumptive case, that small, high window of the light might well be hers.

Directly across the street from the Trine residence, on the opposite corner, a colossal apartment structure stood half-finished, stonework to its second story, gaunt iron skeleton rearing above.

To his infinite disgust, Alan found the guardian very wide awake, very much on the job: no chance here to steal unseen into the building.

This in itself might have been deemed a suspicious circumstance: not for nothing does an honest night watchman so deny the laws of nature and the tenets of his craft. But Alan merely praised the man while cursing the very fact of his existence; and, accosting, overcame with bank-notes what seemed an uncommonly stubborn reluctance, and got his way.

He could not know that another skulked behind a barrier of lime barrels and overheard all that passed and, when Alan had ducked smartly into the unfinished building, rose and stole after him with footsteps as noiseless as a cat's and a face that had the savagery of a tiger's when it was transiently relieved in a shaft of moonlight.

At length Alan gained the gridiron of girders on a plane with the lighted window across the way, and crept along one of these, gingerly on his hands and knees, until he came to its end and night, if he cared to, look down a hundred feet to the sidewalks.

That view, however, did not tempt; he kept his eyes level; and was rewarded with a bare glimpse of a prettily-papered wall, framed in the lace of half-drawn curtains.

And of sudden—whether through fortuity, or instinct, or the psychological attraction of his steadfast concentration—the tenant of the room came to the window and stood there for a little, looking pensively out, altogether unconscious of the watcher in his aerial coil.

Again a horrible uncertainty harassed him. Was

the woman Rose or Judith? That she was one of these he could plainly see. But which? Dared he assume his hopes fulfilled?

With difficulty he detached his hungry vision from her, and drawing from his pocket a small notebook, tore out a blank page, placed this flat on the girder, found a pencil, and with the assistance of a ray or two of moonlight scrawled a message of almost stenographic brevity.

When he looked up from this task, she had vanished.

Sitting up, astride the girder, he took his watch—a cheap affair he had picked up when reclothing himself in the garments of civilized society, at Providence, that morning—opened the back of the case, and closed it upon the folded message.

Then drawing back his arm, he breathed a silent prayer to the god of all true lovers, and cast it from him with all his might—with such force that it almost unseated him at the end of the swing. But nothing less would have served to bridge that yawning chasm.

And the watch flew straight and true, squarely through the lighted window and to the further wall.

In that very instant of his exultation over an obstacle overcome, he heard a sound behind him of heavy breathing.

The assassin had come that close upon his prey when Alan turned and discovered his peril.

The same moonbeam which had aided Alan in the composition of his message struck across the other's face, and showed it like a hideous Chinese mask of deadly hatred, with its eyeballs glaring and its lips drawn back from the naked blade gripped between its teeth—stiletto nothing short of a foot in length.

With a sharp, startled movement, Alan swung himself bodily about, so that, seated again astride the girder, he faced the assassin, who sat up, straddling the girder, his feet hooked beneath it, and the stiletto poised in a lifted hand.

But even now Alan was in little or no better case than before. If he faced the thug, he faced him

of doubt and perplexity, rose and bathed and dressed herself in negligee.

In the adjoining room she could hear small, stealthy noises—the sounds made by her sister moving about and preparing against the unguessable moment when her rescue would be attempted, according to the information conveyed in that midnight message.

For chance had conspired with her insomnia to station Judith in the recess of her darkened window, idly viewing the gaunt framework of the unfinished building from an angle which, when Alan edged out along the girder, showed him plainly in silhouette against the sky.

In Judith's eyes his identity was unmistakable. She had seen him throw the watch and had heard the double thump of its impact with the wall and floor of Rose's bedchamber.

And she had witnessed with wildly beating heart that duel in the air—able to surmise its outcome only from the fact that the victor spared the life of the vanquished.

The clock was striking six as she left her room: across the street-workmen were streaming into the building to begin the labors of the day.

Brushing unceremoniously past the drowsy and indifferent guard in the corridor outside the door to Rose's room, Judith turned the key that remained in the lock on the outside, removed it, entered, and locked the door behind her.

Without any surprise she found her sister already dressed to the point of donning her outer garments.

Rendered half-frantic by this unexpected interruption, threatening as it did the perilous scheme that Alan had proposed, Rose greeted her sister with a countenance at once aghast and wrathful.

"I insist that you leave this room at once!" "Insist by all means—and be damned! I may leave this room—and I may not, dear little sister. But one of us will never leave it alive."

With a start of terror, Rose shrank back from this strange, wild thing that wore the very shape and semblance of herself.

"What do you mean? You cannot mean to murder me in cold blood, Judith?" "Not I!" Judith laughed harshly. "But, since it has pleased Destiny to decree that we must both love one man—let Destiny decide between us and bear the blame of murder!"

"Judith!"

"One moment!" Crossing to a side table, Judith took up a glass from a tray that held a silver water-pitcher, and returned with it to the table that occupied the middle of the floor. At the same time she opened a hand till then fast clenched and disclosed a small blue bottle with a red label shrieking the warning "POISON!"

"Strychnine," she explained composedly, "in solution." And emptied the bottle into the glass.

A measure of courage returned to Rose. "Do you expect to be able to make me drink that?" she demanded contemptuously.

"Not I—but Destiny, if it will! See here." From a pocket of her dressing-gown Judith produced a sealed deck of playing cards. "Let these declare the will of Destiny toward us. I will break the seal, shuffle the cards, and deal," she explained, suiting action to word. "The one who gets the Trey of Hearts will drain that glass. Is it a bargain?"

"Never! Oh, now I know that you are altogether mad!"

Whipping a small revolver from another pocket of her dressing-gown, Judith placed it on the table, ready to her hand.

"You will shoot me if I do not consent?" "Not you—but him. If you refuse, little sister, I will shoot Alan Law dead when he comes to keep his appointment with you."

With a shudder Rose bowed her head.

"Deal," she muttered fearfully, "and may God judge between us!"

One by one she stripped the cards from the top of the deck, dealing first to Rose, then to herself. The Trey of Hearts fell to Judith.

There was an instant of silent dread, ended by Rose, as Judith's hand moved steadily toward the glass.

"Judith!" she implored. "Don't—I beg of you—I didn't mean it—I take back my consent—" "Too late!" said Judith, lifting the glass and eyeing its contents with a strange smile.

"Judith! you cannot mean to drink it!" "Can't I, though?" the other laughed mirthlessly. "Just watch me!"

With a strangled cry Rose covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight, stood momentarily swaying, and dropped to the floor in a complete faint.

Delaying only to recognize this phenomena with a pitying smile for the weakness of spirit that caused it, her glance darted through the window and saw that which caused her to stay her hand an instant longer.

On the topmost tier of girders of the building opposite, Alan Law stood amid a little knot of amused and animated laborers, one foot in the great steel hook of the hoisting tackle, both hands clasping the chain that linked it to the gigantic block.

And as Judith stared, he smiled at something said by one of those about him, looked back, and waved a hand to some person invisible.

Immediately the arm began to lift, the tackle to move slowly through the blocks. Very gently he was swung up and outward.

With a cry Judith flung the poison heedlessly from her, leaped across the room, and snatched up the street garments Rose had dropped at her sister's entrance.

In another moment she was struggling madly into them.

Before the shadow of Alan, clinging to the hook and chain, fell athwart the window, she was dressed and clambered out upon the sill.

"Sweetheart! My bravest little woman!" By way of answer Judith breathed only a word of tenderness.

The hook hung steady within six inches of the window-ledge. Alan extended his arm. "Nothing to fear, except lest I hold you too tight, dear one!"

IV—CHANGELING.

In the vague, chill gray of that dull and desolate dawn, Judith stirred abruptly on the couch of a sleepless night, and with the rapidity of one who has arrived at a settled purpose after a long period

(To be continued.)