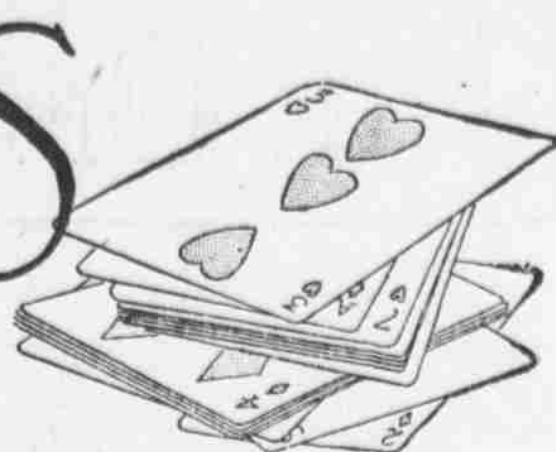
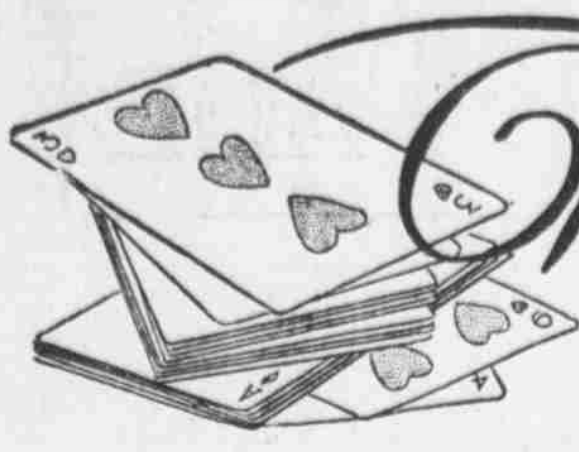


# The TREY O' HEARTS

## BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



### 14th 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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### THE FIRST LAW

**SYNOPSIS**—The 3 of Hearts is the "death-sig" employed by Seneca Trine in the private war of vengeance which he wages against Alan Law, one of the men (now dead) who was innocently responsible for the accident which rendered Trine a helpless cripple for life. Alan loves and is loved by Trine's daughter Rose. Judith, Rose's twin and double, but a woman of violent and uncertain temper, promises her father to compass Alan's death; but under dramatic circumstances Alan saves her life and so, unwillingly, wins her love as well as Rose's. In spite of her jealousy, Judith refuses to serve out the vow she made her father, and at the time this story opens is actively assisting Alan and Rose and their friend Tom Barcus to escape the persecution of Trine and his aides led by his confidential man, one Marrophat.

### I—THE LAST WARNING.

In the chill, violet-shadowed dusk of that clear evening, a chap-fallen motor car crept sluggishly into the little mountain town of Mesquite at the heels of two muttonous mules, driven by a chauffeur who steered with one hand while the other flourished a crackling whip-lash over the backs of its sole motive power.

Its one passenger, a cripple as helpless as the car itself, huddled in a corner of the rear seat, saluted Mesquite with a snarl. Though he was in sore need of such rude comforts as the town stood prepared to afford him, his demeanor toward it was that of one who suffers an indignity rather than begs accommodation.

And now, as the car crawled to a pause before the Mountain house—Mesquite's one caravansary—and Mesquite itself, to the last flea-bitten hound, gathered round to view this wonder, Mr. Trine's indignation and chagrin distilled words of poisonous import.

Far from resenting this, Mesquite, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets, admired and applauded, and rather resented the change that befell when two other strangers (whose earlier appearance in town had helped make that one day memorable beyond all others in Mesquite's history) charged out of the Mountain house and interrupted the elder devil with cries of greeting and jubilation.

The leader of these answered to the name of Marrophat; his companion was a person named Jimmy. One guarded word from Marrophat was all that was required to change the old man's oaths to phrases of honeyed appreciation.

What passed between the trio after they disappeared behind that bedchamber door Mesquite could by no means guess. But that a celebration of some sort was in progress was evidenced by the frequency with which Marrophat and Jimmy called on the bar for more liquid refreshment as well as by bursts of laughter long and loud and somehow strangely cynical of accent.

And toward midnight one belated Mesquite paused in the street outside the Mountain house for one last curious stare at the lighted windows of Mr. Trine's quarters, and so witnessed an incident which puzzled him by fits and starts throughout the balance of his days.

He saw, clearly silhouetted against the glowing oblong of the window, the Mephistophelean profile of Seneca Trine, distorted with a grimace of the cruellest joy that ever heart of man conceived. He saw Marrophat approach his master with a drunken swagger and a speech which, though indistinguishable to the unseen auditor, unquestionably afforded both of the other men ample excuse for ecstatic glee. Toward its conclusion Mr. Marrophat apparently capped the peak of jubilation by fumbling in his coat pocket and bringing forth something which strongly resembled a single playing card.

Now when he had contrived to master his mirth, the cripple made a gesture which eloquently abolished this card, a gesture which said quite plainly: "All that is finished. The thing has served its purpose! To hell with it!"

Whereupon, with a smart jerk of his wrist, Mr. Marrophat sent the card spinning and sailing out through the open window to lose itself in the night.

The watcher didn't see it fall, and though he spent an unconscionable time searching for it in the deep dust of the roadway, he went his way in the end with curiosity unsated: Fate had reserved that card for a higher purpose.

Undisturbed, it lay where it had fallen, face upward, not a dozen feet from the front door of the Mountain house, until another day dawned on Mesquite.

Then, in the clear light of that dawn, four more strangers straggled into town—two weary and haggard men, two footsore and bedraggled women. One of these last was dressed in a suit of man's clothing, much the worse for wear. The other members of the party one and all wore the look of people who have escaped the jaws of death by the narrowest of imaginable squeaks.

At sight of the Mountain house the party betrayed slight symptoms of a more cheerful spirit: rejoicing in its promise of food and drinks and beds withal wherein to sleep, the four quickened their steps.

But of a sudden one of the women—she who wore the garments of her sex—paused, uttered a low cry, a thrill with terror, and clutching the arm of the man nearest her, pointed down to the card that stared up from the dust at her feet.

### II—FULL FLIGHT.

"Oh, what can it mean?" Rose whispered brokenly, clinging to her lover's arm. "Surely you don't think . . . Surely it must be accidental . . . Surely it can't mean—"

"I'm afraid it does," Alan Law responded gravely, eyeing the front of the Mountain house. "Our luck holds consistently—that's all. It wouldn't be us if we didn't pick out the one place where Marrophat and Jimmy chose to stop over night. Fortunately, it's early: I doubt they're up. With half a show we ought to be able to find some way of putting a good distance between us and this town before they waken . . . Tom!"

But Mr. Barcus was already at his elbow, in thorough sympathy with Alan's interpretation of the significance to be attached to the card that trembled in Rose's hand.

"Sharp's the word!" he agreed. "And there's a

motor car over there, in front of the blacksmith's. Probably we can hire her—"

"Trine's car!" Alan ejaculated, swinging round and recognizing the automobile at a glance. "Then he's here, as well!"

"Looks like it," Barcus admitted. "But so much the better. We'll just naturally take the darn' thing off his hands, and I'll bet a dollar there isn't another car within a radius of fifty miles!"

But his confidence was demonstrated to be premature by the discovery, which rewarded the first cursory examination, that the car was very thoroughly out of commission.

Two minutes later, however, their earnest inquiries elicited the fact that, although Barcus was justified in his surmise that the neighboring country was poverty-stricken in respect of motor cars, Mesquite itself boasted two motorcycles whose owners were not indifferent to a chance to sell them second-hand at a considerable advance on the retail list price of the machines, when now.

And thus it was that, within ten minutes from Rose's discovery of that chance-fung warning in the dust, the party was again in rapid motion.

His beauty sleep disturbed by the departure of the machine bearing Barcus and Judith, Seneca Trine roused on an elbow and looked out of the window just in time to see the second motorcycle gathering momentum, Alan steering, Rose in the seat behind.

Sixty seconds later a flaunting banner of dust was all that remained to remind Mesquite that Romance had passed that way—that, and a series of passionate screams emanating from the bedcham-

ber of Seneca Trine, where the cripple lay possessed by seven devils of insensate rage.

His screams brought attendance; but it was a matter of many precious minutes before his demands could be met and Marrophat and Jimmy roused from their capricious slumbers in adjoining chambers; and half an hour elapsed before the chauffeur, roused from his own well-earned rest, succeeded in convincing the pair that pursuit with the motor car was out of the question until he had spent at least half the day overhauling the motor and mending the mischief that had developed in it.

But the devil takes care of his own: within another half hour what seemed to be sheer, bull-headed, dumb luck brought a casual automobile to Mesquite—a two-seated, high-power racing machine of the latest and speediest pattern, driven by two irresponsible wayfarers who proved only too susceptible to Marrophat's offer of double the cost of the car—f. o. b. Detroit—for its immediate surrender.

The two piled out promptly enough: Marrophat and Jimmy jumped in; Trine from his bedroom window sped them on their murderous mission.

It must have been an hour later when Alan, checking his motorcycle as it surmounted the summit of a long upgrade, looked back and discovered, several miles distant on the far-fung windings of the mountain road, a small crimson shape that ran like a mad thing tirelessly pursued by a cloud of tawny dust like a golden ghost.

A motor car, beyond all question, and one of uncommon road-devouring quality: it might or might not contain Marrophat and Jimmy, once more in pursuit. Whether or not, bitter experience had long since educated Alan in the gentle art of taking no chances.

Barcus and Judith must be overtaken and warned—no easy matter, since the machine which bore them was, if anything, faster than Alan's, just as the racing automobile was faster than either.

Alan kept his gaze steadfast to the road before them, daring not once to look up and round or back, but constrained ever to watch their way; for at such frightful speed as they were now making the slightest obstruction was fraught with direst peril; one little sideling swerve from that narrow and tortuous path, and death would be their portion.

So stuporous and meandering was its course, indeed, that Alan seldom could see a hundred yards of it ahead, but must peep on in panic flight, hoping for the best—that Judith and Barcus would soon show up in front, that something might hap-

pen to hinder the pursuit—never knowing whether the latter lost or gained.

And thus catastrophe befell . . . Round the swelling bosom of a wooded mountainside the motorcycle swept like a hunted hare, and without the least warning came upon Barcus and Judith, dismounted, Barcus bending over his cycle and tinkering with its motor.

For one horriplating instant collision seemed unavoidable.

And it was impossible to stop the cycle—so brief was all his warning. In desperation Alan chose the outside of the road; and for the space of a single heartbeat thought that he might possibly make it, but with the next realized that he would not—seeing the front wheel swing off over the lip of the slope.

At this he acted sharply and upon sheer instinct. As the cycle left the road altogether he risked a broken knee by releasing his grasp of the handlebars and straightening out his leg and driving it down forcibly against the roadbed. The effect of this was to lift him bodily from the saddle; the machine shot from beneath him like some strange projectile hurled from the bore of a great gun; and Rose crashed against him in the same fraction of a second.

Headlong they plunged as one down the hillside, struck its shelving surface a good twenty feet from the brink of the road, and flying apart, tumbled their separate ways down the remainder of the drop and into the friendly shelter of the underbrush.

Something nearly miraculous saved them whole. Beyond a few scratches and bruises and a severe

about a quarter of a mile over yonder. If it's all the same to you people, we might stroll round that way and see what its natural attractions may be—if any. But it's sure a mighty poor sort of a canyon that doesn't lead anywhere.

"Sufficient!" Mr. Law interrupted with a bleak smile.

Cracking a deferential arm, Barcus offered it to Judith.

"Everything is lovely in the formal garden," he insisted—"so sweetly romantic. Are you game for an idle saunter, just to while the idle hours away?"

The woman found spirit enough for a wan smile as she tucked her hand gratefully beneath his arm. "You're the cheerfulest soul I ever met," she said demurely. "What I'm going to do without you when—if ever—we get out of this awful business, goodness only knows."

"Let's talk of something else," he suggested hastily.

"Unless, of course," she pursued with unbroken gravity, "I marry you . . ."

"Heaven!" the young man prayed fervently, "for-fend!"

"That is hardly gallant—"

"I mean—heaven forfend that you should throw yourself away!"

"Humph!" she mused. "Perhaps you're right." Their banter was not without a subtle object, namely to reassure the girl who followed, supported by her lover's arm.

In the course of the last twenty-four hours Rose's jealousy of her sister's new-found friendliness with Alan had become acutely evident. The least courtesy which circumstances now and again demanded

the easiest climbing, when Alan stole back to Judith and reported that, on the evidence of observation and belief, he was convinced that the pursuit had turned back—perhaps for want of ammunition, perhaps to execute some less hazardous attempt upon the lives of the fugitives.

Without delay, then, he made the free end of the rope fast round his own waist and, following the way Barcus had chosen, began the ascent.

Two-thirds of the climb had been accomplished, and Rose and Barcus had arrived in safety at the top, before the temptation to look down proved irresistible.

Alan shuddered and swallowed hard before resuming the ascent.

Another twenty feet, however, brought him to a ledge quite six feet wide, offering a broad and easy path to the summit. He gained this with a prayer of heartfelt relief and was on the point of rising to his feet when a cry of horror from Barcus and a scream of terror from Rose, watching over the upper edge, warned him barely in time to enable him to snatch at and grasp a knob of rock before Judith's weight suddenly tautened the rope between them and jerked Alan's legs from under him.

His feet and legs kicking the empty air beyond the lip of the ledge, he lay face downward, clutching desperately the knob of rock, praying that it might not come away in his grasp.

The fall of twenty feet to the shale roof was nothing. What would follow would, however, spell death. The impact of her body would set the shale in motion, like an avalanche—and beyond the eaves was only emptiness and the bowlder-strewn bed of the chasm, a hundred feet below!

The sweat poured from his face like rain. His eyes started in their sockets. The blood drummed in his ears with a roar resembling distant thunder. His fingers grew numb, his throat dry . . .

He felt that he could not hold on another instant when, abruptly, that torture was no more. The rope had been relieved of its burden. He heard a scream from below echoed by one from above, then the thump of Judith's body falling on the shale, then the slithering rumble of the landslides gathering momentum . . .

Barcus, at length arrived, assisted him to a place of security. Spent and faint and sick with horror, he lay prone, shuddering.

Only the assurance of Barcus that Judith had somehow escaped being precipitated over the eaves of the shale roof roused him and gave him nerve enough to resume the climb.

It was true, when he found courage to look and see for himself: she lay within three yards of the brink, supine, her face upturned to the sun, unstriving—she dared not stir; a single movement was calculated to set the shale bed again in motion.

Painfully he realized that if, as Barcus asserted, she had deliberately cut the rope herself, Judith had offered up her life to spare his own.

### IV—RETRIBUTION.

And yet the very consciousness of the girl's danger was all the stimulant that Alan needed to recall him to himself.

Once arrived with Barcus at the top of the cliff, he lost no time in setting about preparations to effect her rescue.

In this business, Fortune smiled upon him, as it were, by predisposition.

A broad roadway ran along the top of the precipice, turning off, at a little distance to the right, to descend the mountainside. And just beyond this turning Providence had chosen to locate the camp of a hydraulic mining outfit.

Alan's appearance at the top, in fact, was coincident with the arrival at that point of half a dozen excited miners; and he had no more than voiced his demands than three of their number were hastening back to the camp to procure rope and more hands.

Within five minutes Alan, against the protests of Rose and Barcus, was being lowered over the edge and down to the shale roof, on which he landed at a spot far to one side of Judith to escape all danger of sending a second landslide down upon her.

Picking his way carefully down to the very brink, Alan edged along this, more than once saved a fall to death only by the rope, until he stood immediately below Judith.

Then pausing, he instructed her carefully, tossed the end of the rope into her hands, and when she had wound it twice round her arms, crept up to her side and helped her make it fast about her body.

His signal to the miners that all was well elicited prompt response. There was a giddy interval in which the two swung perilously between heaven and earth. Then they stood once more in safety.

Supported by sympathetic hands, the quartet staggered into camp, their story, as condensed by Barcus and breathlessly confirmed by Alan, already winning them enthusiastic champions.

And this was very well for them. For they had no more than seated themselves and begun to appreciate what perils they had just escaped, when the rumble of a motor car sounded beyond the shoulder of the hill.

Startled by this alarm once more into full command of his flagging faculties, Alan rose and stumbled out into the roadway, taking quick cognizance of such facilities for defense as the camp afforded and issuing instructions with a voice vibrant with fear, not for his own safety, but for the safety of those whom he loved.

Not far from the point where the road swung from the cliff to thread the camp the hydraulic nozzle was in action, its terrific force of water mauling the mountainside away ton by ton.

Toward this Barcus ran at top speed, gaining the man in charge of the nozzle just as the car swung round the bend.

Pausing only long enough to make certain that there could be no mistake—and having this certainty made doubly sure by Jimmy's action in rising from his seat and firing over the windmill pointblank at Alan as this last stood waiting in the roadway—Barcus and the miner swung the nozzle round until it bore directly on the car.

The power of its stream was such that the car was checked instantly in its tracks; and before the water could have been shut off or the stream diverted, the machine was driven back to the very lip of the cliff and over it completely, taking with it those twin upon whose efforts all the hopes of Seneca Trine of late had been centered.

A death that was merciful, in that it was instantaneous, awaited them at the foot of the cliff.

(To be continued.)



Furnished in His Coat Pocket and Brought Forth a Playing Card.

ber of Seneca Trine, where the cripple lay possessed by seven devils of insensate rage.

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shaking up, they escaped unharmed. And they were picking themselves up and regaining their breath and recollecting their scattered wits when, with impetus no less terrific than their own had been, the pursuing motor car swung round the bend and hurled itself directly at the two who remained upon the road above.

### III—SACRIFICE.

But Tom Barcus hadn't failed to profit by the warning implicit in Alan's accident.

He was therefore on the alert, quick to see the racing automobile when it came hurtling round the bend, and in the very nick of time grasped Judith's arm and swung her bodily with him back out of harm's way, amid the trees that bordered the inside of the road.

Of necessity his motorcycle suffered. Abandoned in the middle of the road, it was struck by the buffers of the motor car and flung aside as if it had been nothing more ponderable than a truss of straw—landing half-way down the embankment, a hopeless tangle of shattered tubing and twisted wire.

At first blush the circumstance seemed surprising, that the car did not stop. But then Barcus reminded himself that Marrophat and Jimmy could not possibly have witnessed the accident involving Alan and Rose, who, together with the wreck of their machine, remained well-cloaked by the underbrush at the bottom of the canyon. In all probability, then, the assassins had assumed that Alan had hurried on; and since their own first business was concerned exclusively with them, they had done likewise.

As for Rose and Alan—heaven alone knew what had happened to them. So Barcus set himself to find out whatever Providence knew without more delay.

To find them not only alive but practically unscathed affected that loyal soul almost to tears.

But when congratulations had been mutually exchanged, there fell an awkward pause. The eyes of the four sought one another's ruefully, each pair quick with the unuttered but inexorable inquiry: "What next?"

In the outcome, it was Mr. Barcus who advanced the suggestion which was adopted—though this was its reception more through lack of a better than for any actual appeal intrinsic in the proposition.

"When we broke down, up there," he ventured, with a backward jerk of his thumb to indicate the road, "I saw a canyon branching off from this one

that he show Judith or seem a boor, was enough to cloud the countenance of Alan's betrothed.

Slowly and painfully these four toiled along an obscure trail that followed the windings of the little river, until a branch struck into the main stream and so discovered to them yet another trail leading into the westward canyon.

Then again slowly and painfully they plodded on, following blindly another trail blazed by Fates as blind as they.

Above them, on the road they had abandoned, the crimson racer doubled back to the point where it had passed Judith and Barcus; its occupants descended, explored, and came presently upon the trail of the fugitives.

Bloodhounds could not have settled down upon a scent with more good-will and eagerness than Mr. Marrophat and his faithful aide.

The sun was high and blazing above the canyon when the pursuit came within rifle shot of the chasm.

The spiteful crack roused the quartet from a pause of lethargic dismay due to tardy appreciation of the fact that they had penetrated witlessly almost to the end of a blind alley.

A hasty council of war armed Alan with Judith's revolver and posted him behind a bowlder commanding the approaches to the chasm. The weapon, a powerful .45, had a range sufficient to numb the impetuosity of the assassins and keep them under cover and out of sight of the desperate essays the fugitives were making to compass an escape.

For in the shed behind an abandoned log cabin—souvenir, no doubt, of some forgotten prospector—Barcus had unearthed a length of stout hempen rope.

With the aid of a rusty shovel he had hacked this into two equal lengths. One of these lengths he proceeded to make fast round his own waist, then round Rose's. The other he left to be similarly employed by Alan and Judith. For it was agreed that they must climb, and while the cliff offered no problem to daunt a mountain-climber of any pretensions, it was considered best that the fugitives should be hitched up in pairs against any possibility of a slip. The pairing had been determined by the fact that Barcus boasted some slight experience in mountaineering, while Rose was plainly the most exhausted of the two women, the least able to help herself in an emergency.

He had worked his cautious way, with the girl in tow, to a point about midway up the face of the cliff, following a long diagonal that provided