

The TREY O' HEARTS by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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SYNOPSIS: The 3 of Hearts is the "death-slug" used by Seneca Trine in a private war of vengeance which, through his daughter Judith, a woman of violent and criminal temper and questionable sanity, he wages against Alan Law, whose father (now dead) Trine held responsible for the accident which made him a helpless cripple. Rose, Judith's twin and double, learning of her sister's campaign, against Alan, leaves her home to aid the man she loves. Under dramatic circumstances Alan saves Judith's life and so wins her love; but failure to shake his constancy to Rose settles Judith in her homicidal purpose; she contrives to turn a schooner in which Alan is making a coastwise cruise to New York, marooning him together with Barcus, owner of the schooner, on an island south of Cape Cod.

Dead Reckoning. On Nauseet Beach, in the slant of a midsummer night, two men sprawled on the sands, some distance back from the water, and listened to the heavy thumping of their overtaxed hearts, and panted.

Now and again one would lift his head and stare out over the black face of the waters at a little line of reddish flames about a mile off shore, all that remained to witness to the fact that, an hour since, these two had been in command of a trim small schooner as ever ventured the coastwise trip from Portland to New York.

An far out again, shone the starboard light of a becalmed schooner whose people had been already responsible for the disaster which had overtaken the smaller vessel.

In the course of time beginning to breathe with more ease, one of the two marooned gentlemen said: "Tell me, Barcus, what's the nearest symptom of civilization?"

"Chatham village," said Mr. Barcus, six miles to the northwards, and cut off by an inlet a mile or so wide at that."

Mr. Law groaned soulfully. "Then there's the lighthouse on Monomoy Point," Mr. Barcus pursued, "three miles to the south."

A silence commented eloquently on this assertion, broken only when Mr. Law voiced a thought bred of long and malignant observation of the schooner's green eye:

"I'd give a deal to know who's aboard that vessel."

"You don't mean you think your regular young woman—?"

"It's possible, Judith kidnaped Rose in Portland. That's not so far from Gloucester; a motor-car could have caught that schooner before she sailed to waylay us, this morning. And what better way to take care of an able-bodied, full-tempered girl you've kidnaped than to ship her somewhere by sea, in the care of trustworthy fellows?"

"Don't ask me. I've done very little kidnaping for one of my years."

"For tuppence," said Mr. Law, "I'd risk a swim off to that boat and see for myself."

"For two million dollars—I would not!" Barcus affirmed with great decision.

A moment or so later the line of little flames went out altogether and unexpectedly; and the owner of the late Seaventure fancied he could hear, even at that distance, the hiss of charred and smoldering timbers sucking under and drowned out.

"Exit," he announced plaintively, "our Seaventure, with heroic gesture. R. L. P. a good little ship!"

"Oh, let up, can't you!" Mr. Law exclaimed peevishly. "I'm sorrier than you are—and after all, it's my loss. I've got to buy you another boat. All you've lost is your temper."

"And my susceptibility to the charms of the well-known sex," Mr. Law corrected. "Nothing can ever restore my lost faith in gentle womanhood's feintness. When you brought that young woman aboard I thought better wouldn't melt in her mouth, and for a while I actually contemplated doing her the kindness of tipping you over into the drink, so's she could lavish her affections on a regular guy, someone able to appreciate her, meaning me, of course. And first thing I knew, she ups and points a gun at my head and tips me overboard, and then makes a pretty bonfire out of my sailboat. And all the excuse you can produce is that she's crazy in the head! Well, who said she wasn't? Any woman who would consent to elope with you is a fit subject for a commission de lunatico inquirendo, all right."

"For a moment the two maintained attentive silence.

A sibilant whisper troubled the silence, a little flutter of sound from across the water. Gradually it gathered volume, became recognizable as the hiss of cautious oars.

"I'm going away from here," Mr. Law said, away rapidly, and gathered his legs under him preparatory to leaping.

"Half a second," Alan Law insisted, raising his arms and grasping the other by his arm. "They've got to land here, haven't they?—and leave the boat while they look for us. Well, then, what's to prevent our hiding in the dense woods?"

In the next breath, "Look out!" he shrieked.

With no warning whatever, and within fifty feet of them, a ghastly glare broke out in full blaze on the surface of the water, revealing the shape of a dory which had drawn in

started figures on the beach. Before they could stir the weird light glimmered on a polished weapon in the bow of the boat, and spiteful tongue of reddish flame spat out, a bullet sang between Messers. Law and Barcus, and with a sad thud of disappointment buried itself in the sands of wave-eaten bluff behind them.

Like twin automatons stirred to action by the report, the two turned and pelted off down the beach, to escape that deadly area of illumination.

Other shots sped after them, but none was so well aimed; and presently, finding a break in the bluff, they swung off into the grateful shelter of the night-wrapped dunes.

Meantime the dory had rounded on the beach, and its several occupants—four or five of them, all men, apparently—jumping out, set off in pursuit of the fugitives, following the tracks in the sand.

The blackness of the night, however, conspired with the savage labyrinth of the dunes to save Alan and the companion.

Within another five minutes—while still the pursuit floundered and blundered at random a round quarter-mile to the south—Mr. Law and Mr. Barcus were noiselessly snatching on their bellies, like two great snakes in the beach-grass, up the lack of a ten-foot bluff. And presently from its brow they looked down on the spot where the dory lay only its bow out of water, its stern afloat, under armed guard.

"Hello in there!" The response was a cry of incredulous delight: "Alan!"

By way of answer Alan hurled himself bodily against the door. At the second impact of shoulders backed by a hundred and eighty pounds of solid flesh and determination, the lock splintered away from its socket, the door flew open with a bang—and Alan into the room with a cry: "Rose!"

His sweetheart met him half-way, her arms uplifted, her countenance transfused.

And Mr. Barcus turned and slowly ascended the companionway, his nose wrinkled with misgivings.

Some ten minutes later a hail from the deck broke the embrace of the lovers:

"Hello there! I say—Law!—wind a coming!"

"Right-o! Half a minute!" But that stipulated delay was several times multiplied before Alan showed up on deck, to find Barcus bending a laborious back to the captain.

"Lend a hand, can't you?" Barcus complained, blowing heavily. "I didn't interrupt your amours just to get an audience. The sooner we get this anchor in—"

Alan checked him with a hand on his arm. "What's that?" he demanded in a tone tense with apprehension.

The muffled rumbling of a heavy duty marine motor drifted down on the wings of the sluggish wind.

"Don't ask me. I'm afraid to guess!"

Very slowly and stealthily Alan got to his feet and swung back over his shoulder a heavy club of driftwood.

A match spluttered beside the dory, and flamed in the still air, relieving with its reddish glow a bronzed and evil visage.

The guard puffed fast and had the tobacco well aglow when the sky took advantage of his trustfulness and fell upon him like an avalanche.

Simultaneously, Alan and Barcus descended the face of the bluff in two miniature land-slides, dug themselves out and by the time the dazed and disarmed guard had sufficiently recovered to cry out for help, the dory was a hundred yards off the beach and making excellent time in the direction of that lonely green light.

The commonest precaution, however, made them pause and rest upon their oars while yet a little way from their goal.

Only an ominous silence rewarded the utmost efforts of their straining senses; no sound was audible other than the gentle whine of an ungreased block; nothing was visible beyond the sinister glare of that almost stationary green lantern.

"What think?" Barcus inquired in a dubious undertone.

"No telling," Alan replied in the same manner. "All a change."

"You've got that gun handy?"—with reference to the rifle of which they had despoiled the victim of the sky's ill faith.

"Here."

"Then—let's go to it! Give way!" A dozen lively strokes brought them alongside the schooner, and as the dory escaped the waist of the larger vessel, the two young men dropped oars, rose, and seizing the low runways, lifted themselves to the deck.

Nothing exposed them; the deck was impervious of other footstep; than their own, the schooner as slight as only a becalmed ship can be.

Without further consultation, Alan leaped quickly aft and down the companionway to the cabin, where a dim light burned—a smoky lamp swinging in a gimbals above a cluttered table.

Of the two stateroom doors, one disclosed an empty cabin, the other was locked.

Trying the handle roughly, Alan fancied he heard a sound within. Pausing, he called, with a thrill of fearful

me to Davy Jones' locker. How does she explain her presence aboard?"

"Much as I surmised," Alan replied. "I fancy they chloroformed her while she slept in that hotel in Portland. Whether or no, Rose woke up in a closed motor-car—bound and gagged, of course—and was brought aboard at Gloucester about midnight."

"Simple when you know how," Parcus commented. "Of course, I always did say that truth was a stranger to fiction. Cuddle down, now, and I'll talk you insensible."

His accents already merging in with the swish of the longable waves, the bubbling of the wake, and the many-toned composite voice of the ship in being, unconsciousness like a cloud descended upon Alan's overworn faculties.

He woke mutinously with a raven and a shiver, in the gray of a tar-nished daybreak, to find that fog pressed heavily upon the face of the waters, a mist so thick that from the stern the waist of the vessel was almost invisible, the bows completely so.

Barcus stood over him, at the wheel, fairly reeling with weariness, his eyes blood-shot, swollen, and half-closed in a face like a mask of fatigue.

"Can't keep up much longer," he apologized thickly; "stood it about as long as I can. Take your trek and give me forty winks."

Grateful solitude brought Alan instantly to his side, though he himself

At irregular intervals, starting from preoccupation, he would manipulate the brass pull on the wheel box, provoking the horn's stuttering blast of protest. But the need for unremitting vigilance and exercise of the fog-signal, failed none the less to reconcile Alan to that blatanant clamor which so widely and so hideously advertised their whereabouts.

If there were anything still to be feared from Judith and her crew—if for instance, as Barcus had suggested they had sought out one of the life-saving stations on Nauseet Beach, appropriated its power-driven life-boat, and renewed the pursuit, it ever they heard that horn there would beyond question be the devil to pay!

The loneliness of his vigil was eventually relieved by the appearance of the deck of the woman Alan loved.

The tabernacle that greeted her visitor as she emerged from the companionway, of the haggard, unshaven wretch at the wheel and the other who lay at his feet, where he had fallen, in stupor of fatigue, instantly wrung from Rose a little cry of solicitude.

And she was quick to do what little she could to alleviate their discomfort. For Barcus she fetched a pillow and blanket from the cabin; and this one suffered her ministrations without once rousing from his slumbers. The hastening forward, she got the galley fire going and prepared a makeshift breakfast for her half-famished lover.

Warm food and hot coffee—such as they were—lending a little tone to Alan's spirits, he was presently able

no better case—jerked to his feet and held captive by two more fishermen. A fifth had taken charge of Rose, clamping her wrists in the vise of one big hand.

The sixth and sole other member of the boarding party, likewise in the rough-and-ready garb of a fisherman, was Judith Trine.

Down the side a heavy life-boat ground its way astern, the loose end of its painter slipping over the rail even as Alan caught sight of it. (So it seemed Barcus had guessed shrewdly!)

Observing this, one of the men in charge of Alan made as if to leave him to the other, addressing Judith for permission to prevent the loss of the life-boat. She stopped him with a peremptory gesture.

"No—let it go. We're better off without it. Hold that man fast till I fetch a rope. We'll make sure of them both, this time!"

Straining forward in the grasp of her guard Rose implored her sister: "Judith, in pity's name, think what you are doing!"

"Hold your tongue!" Judith snapped viciously. "Another whimper out of you, and I'll have you gagged."

The balance of her threat, though accompanied by the exhibition of an automatic pistol, was drowned out by the sudden roar of a steamship fog-signal, so close aboard that it seemed almost to emanate from the forepart of the schooner herself.

As it was answered by shrill and hoarse cries, of terror and of warning, from a dozen throats, Alan found himself released, his captors leaping for their lives to the taffrail.

He caught an instantaneous glimpse of the knife-like bow of a great steamer towering above the two-masted vessel, sweeping toward it at a speed which raised a smart jet of white under the water.

Someone aboard the schooner, with the voice of a stentor, bellowed a strident appeal:

"Stop your engines! Shut off your propeller! Stop your—"

Then, like the wrath of God, the steamship overwhelmed the lesser ship; its bow seemed to slice through the schooner as a knife through cheese. And the two halves were fairly driven under water by the frightful force of the blow.

Thunders deafening him, Alan was hurled bodily through the air fully twenty feet.

When he came up he struck out at random, blindly tormented by the vision of Rose caught in the suck of that gigantic wheel, drawn under, crushed and mangled by the propeller of the vast black hulk whose flank was sliding past, like the face of a cliff, ten yards behind his shoulders.

Aware of several dark objects dotting the surface within a radius of several yards, he swam for the nearest; the head was a woman's, the face averted toward him—the face of Rose.

He gasped wildly: "Keep cool! Don't struggle! Put one hand on my shoulder and—"

What happened then was never quite clear to him; he only knew that he was forced to fight for his very life—that he woman, as soon as he came within reach, flung herself upon him like some maddened animal, clutching his throat, winding her limbs round him, dragging him down and down.

Primitive instinct alone saved him. He remembered later, most vaguely, the culmination of that duel beneath the waters—remembered freeing an arm, drawing it back, delivering a blow from his shoulder with all his strength, finding himself free, struggling back to the air.

Then a boathook caught the back of his shirt and dragged him for some distance, until two strong hands caught him beneath the armpits and held his head above the water.

He looked up witlessly into the face of Barcus, and still bewildered, struggled feebly.

The other's voice brought him back to his senses: "Easy, old top! Take it easy! You're all right now—rest

a minute, then help me get you aboard."

He obeyed, controlling his panic as best he might; and presently, with considerable assistance from Barcus, contrived to scramble in over the gunwales of about which proved to be the stolen life-boat.

Aside from Barcus and himself it held one other person only—the woman he loved, crumpled up and unconscious in the bow.

He strove to rise and go to her, to make sure that still she lived. Barcus restrained and quieted him.

"There! Easy, I say! She's all right—fainted—that's all! She and I took the water in practically the same spot, and luck threw this assed boat my way within half a man's strokes. No trouble at all—in a man's

"But the steamer—"

"Why fret about her? At the pace she was making she couldn't have stopped within half a mile. We'll be all right now—with power to fetch us to land."

"But the others—Judith!" Alan sat up and leaned over the gunwale, searching an oily, leaden expanse spotted only with a few splinters and bits of wreckage. "I left her out there—undone—she'll drown, I tell you!"

"And I'll tell you something!" said Mr. Barcus severely. "You'll lie quiet and shut up or I'll dent your dome with the share of an oar. Let her drown—and a good job, I say! Don't you know the meaning of 'enough'? Merciful heavens, man, you're the most insatiable glutton for punishment ever!"

But Alan wasn't listening. His face was as lightless as the waters that swam beneath his lack-luster gaze. There was a horror in his heart that numbed even the sense of relief, of deliverance, that penetrated his being like a shock of mortal pain.

Dead! Judith dead! Back there, in the fog and the cold * * * dead by his hand!

(To be continued.)

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