

THE TREY O' HEARTS OF LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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THE PAINTED HILLS

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) who was unintentionally responsible for the accident which rendered Trine a helpless cripple. Alan is in love with and is in turn loved by Rose, Judith's twin and double, but in all else her opposite. Judith vows to compass Alan's death, but under dramatic circumstances she saves her life and so, unwillingly wins her love. Thereafter Judith is by turns actuated by the old hatred, the new love, and jealousy of her sister, Rose. She causes her father's distrust of his beheld by him when he journeys West, taking Rose with him, in which Alan pursues, Judith accompanying him against his wish, and succeeds in rescuing Rose from Trine's special train.

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I.—DETAIL.
Across the plain purple shadows were sweeping, close-ranked, like some vast dark army invading the land, pouring on over the rampart of mountains in the east.

Within the rim of hills that ringed the plain like the chipped and broken flange of a titanic saucer, silence brooded and solitude held away—dwarfing the town of Detail that occupied the approximate middle of the sagebrush waste, to proportions even less significant than might be inferred from the candor of its christening.

A platform, a siding, a water tank, a Wells-Fargo office and a telegraph and ticket office, backed by three rough frame buildings, that is Detail, itemized completely.

Shortly after night fall a freight train passed at Detail. Its crew aligned and engaged in animated argument. Detail gathered that the excitement was due to the unaccountable disappearance of the caboose, a note seemed to have any notion as to how it could have broken loose, yet it conspicuously was.

In the pause that followed, while the report was telegraphed to headquarters and instructions returned to proceed without delay, one of the trainees spied a boyish figure lurking in the open door of an empty box car. Cautiously boarding this car from the opposite side, the trainman caught the skulker in the doorway and hoisted him victoriously into the night.

As the figure alighted and took its heels, losing itself in the darkness, it uttered a cry of pained surprise and protest which drew a wrinkle of astonishment between the brows of the trainman.

"Sounded like a woman's voice," he mused; then dismissed the suggestion as obviously absurd.

Shortly after the freight train had gone on its way, before the faint glimmer of its rear lights had been lost among the western hills—a second headlight appeared in the east, swept swiftly across the plain and in turn stopped at Detail.

The second bird-of-passage proved to be a locomotive drawing a single car—a Pullman.

Hardly had it run past the switch, however, when the trainman dropped down, ran quickly back to the switch, threw it open and dropped the Pullman on a siding.

By the time that the Pullman had come to a full stop on the siding, the locomotive was swinging westward like a scared jackrabbit—though no such milk-and-water characterization of the traitor passed the lips of any one of the three men who presently appeared on the Pullman's platform and shook important facts in the direction taken by the fugitive engine.

When the last of these had run temporarily out of breath and blasphemy, a brief silence fell, punctuated by the sound of a voice calling from the interior of the car—a voice as strangely sonorous of tone as it was emphatic in its enunciation.

The three men immediately ran back into the car and presented themselves with conspicuous eagerness apologetic, to one who occupied a corner of the drawing room, a man wrapped in a steamer rug and a cloud of fury.

Now when he had drained the muddy froth of profanity from his temper it left a clear and effective wall of violent hatred; the wrath of the valetudinarian began to vent itself upon the hapless heads of the trio who stood before him.

"Amen to that!" the boyish person ejaculated with candid fervor, lounging gracelessly in the doorway. "There's many a true word spoken in wrath. Mr. Marrophat. Father forget only one thing—your mastery way with a revolver. From what I've seen of that, this day, I'll go bail that the only safe place for a man you pull a gun on is right in front of the muzzle. There's something downright uncanny in the way you can hit anything but what you aim at!"

"Judith!" exclaimed the invalid. "Where did you drop from?"

"From that freight," Judith explained carelessly, neglecting to elucidate the exact fashion of her drop. "I judged you'd be along presently, and thought I'd like to learn the news. Well—what is it?"

Her father shrugged with his one movable shoulder. Mr. Marrophat grunted indignantly.

"None?" Judith interrupted. "You don't mean to tell me that after I had taken all that trouble—cast the caboose loose in the middle of that treacherous risk of my life—you didn't have the nerve to go through with the business?"

"We went through with it all right," replied Marrophat defensively, "but as usual, they were too quick for us. They jumped out and dropped off the treacherous before our engine hit the caboose."

The girl started to speak, but merely dropped limp hands at her sides and rolled her eyes helplessly.

"We do our best," observed Marrophat. "We can't be blamed if some-

wish." Trine interrupted quickly. "Do me the service I wish—and name your price: whatever it is, you shall have it!"

"Nothing could be fairer than that!" the two-gun man admitted suspiciously. "But what's the number of this here service—like you call it?"

"Listen to me." Trine bent his head forward and jabbed the air with an emphatic forefinger. "What's the life of a man in this neck of the woods?"

"I'll pay you ten thousand dollars for the life of the man I will name." The eyes of the bandit narrowed. "Hold on, my friend: is that what you call my naming my own price?"

"Name it, then, said Seneca Trine tersely.

"Give me a thousand on account," said the other, "and a paper saying you'll pay me nineteen thousand more in exchange for it and one dead man, properly identified as the one you want—signed by you and your man's as good as dead this minute, providing he's in riding distance of this here car."

Trine waved his hand at his secretary. "Jimmy, find a thousand dollars for this gentleman. Make out the paper in ink for the balance, and I'll sign it."

"Ain't you powerful, Trine? Mr. Trine? How do you know I'll do anything more'n pocket that thousand and fade delicately away?"

"My daughter and this gentleman, Mr. Marrophat, will accompany you." "O, that's the way of it is it?" "Name!" interrupted the secretary,

quietly into the town of Mesa.

It was to be termed a town only in courtesy, this Mesa; a straggling street of shacks, ramshackle relics of what had once been a promising community.

Midway in this string of edifices the hotel stood—a rough, unpainted, wooden edifice, mainly veranda and bar-room as to its lower floor.

Jealously Judith watched the windows of the second floor; and she alone of the four detected the face that showed for one brief instant well back in the shadows beyond one of the bedroom windows.

Her eyes alone, could have recognized the features of Alan Law in that fugitive glimpse.

Two sentences exchanged between Hopi Jim and a blue-eyed fellow whom he roused from sudden slumbers behind the bar sealed their confidence with conviction the three fugitives were in fact guests of the house.

In the rush that followed up the narrow railway, Judith led with such spirit that not even Marrophat suspected her revolver was poised against his own revolver the instant he leveled it at a human target.

Closed and locked doors confronted them; and their summons educed no response; while the first door, when broken in by a whole-souled kick, discovered nothing more satisfying than an empty room, its bed bearing the imprint of a woman's body, but that woman was gone.

So it seemed that the three must

the pommel, wobbled weakly in his saddle for a moment, then losing the stirrup pitched forward to the ground, while Hopi Jim's horse stopped short, precipitating his rider overhead, and dropped dead.

III—THE UPPER TRAIL

In the ten minutes' delay necessitated by this reverse, a number of more or less innocent bystanders picked up the man Texas and carried him off to breathe his last beneath a roof; Hopi Jim picked himself up, brushed his person tolerably clear of clouds of dust and profanity, and departed in search of a mount.

Incidentally the fugitives disappeared round a bend in the road that led directly into the wild and barred heart of the Painted Hills.

In the brief interval that elapsed before his return with Hopi Jim, Marrophat contrived to persuade the bandit that Judith had been, at least indirectly, responsible for the catastrophe, with the upshot that, temporarily blinded by her fascinations by the glitter of nineteen thousand dollars in the near distance, Mr. Slade maintained his distance and a deaf ear to her blandishments. The only information as to their purpose that she was able to extract from either man, when the pursuing party turned aside from the main trail, some distance from Mesa, was that Hopi Jim knew a short cut through the range, via what he termed the upper trail, by which they hoped to be able to head the fugitives off before they could gain the desert on the far side of the hills.

Immediately exorcised when Hopi Jim stepped back and uttered a few words of which only two—"dynamite" and "fuse"—reached her ears.

Kneeling beside the boulder he dug busily for an instant, then lodged the stick to his satisfaction and attached the fuse.

But while he was so engaged and Marrophat aided him, all eager interest, Judith was taking advantage of their disregard of her.

Hurriedly unbuttoning her jacket, she whipped a playing card from her pocket, a Trey of Hearts, and with the stub of a pencil scribbled three words on its face—"Danger! Go back!"

Then finding a small, flatish bit of rock, she bound the card to it with a bit of string; and with one more backward glance to make sure she was not watched, approached the brink.

In the canyon below the three were within two minutes of the danger point.

It was no trick at all to drop the stone so that it fell within a dozen feet of the leading horseman.

She saw him rein in suddenly, dismount, cast a look aloft, then dismount and pick up the warning.

At the same time Hopi Jim and Marrophat jumped up and ran back, each seizing and hold his horse by nose and bridle.

Constrained to do likewise lest she lose her mount, Judith waited with a lightened heart.

The explosion smote dull echoes from the flanks of the Painted hills; all drowsing in the noon-day hush; the boulder teetered reluctantly on the brink, then disappeared with a tearing sound, followed by a rush of earth and gravel; a wide gap appeared in the brink of the trail.

Leaving Marrophat to hold the two frightened horses while the girl soothed her own, the bandit rushed to the edge, threw himself flat and swore bitterly, with an accent of grievance, as he rose.

From the canyon below a dull rumble of rattling hoofs advertised too plainly the failure of their attempt, right treatment. I soon began to improve, and since taking a few bottles of them my digestion is fine." For sale by all dealers.

And Hopi Jim turned back only to find Judith, mounted, reining her horse in between him and Marrophat, and prepared to give emphasis to what she had to say with an automatic pistol that nestled snugly in her palm.

"One moment, Mr. Slade," she suggested evenly; "just a moment before you break the sad news to Mr. Marrophat, I've something to say that needs your attention—likewise, your respect. It is this: I am parting company with you and Mr. Marrophat. I am riding on toward the west, by this trail. If either of you care to follow me—the automatic flashed ominously in the air glare—"It will be with full knowledge of the consequences, Mr. Marrophat will enlighten you if you have any doubt of my ability to take care of myself in such affairs as this. If you are well advised, you will turn back and report failure to my father."

She nodded curtly and swung her horse round.

"And what shall I tell your father about you?" Marrophat demanded sharply.

"What you please," the girl replied, flashing an impish smile over-shoulder. "But since when I part company with you, I part with him as well—for all of me, you may tell him to go to the devil!"

"Well," Mr. Marrophat admitted confidentially to Mr. Slade, "I'm damned!"

"And that ain't all," Mr. Slade confided in Mr. Marrophat, whipping out his own revolver; you're being held up, too. I'll take those guns of yours, friend, and what else you've got about you that's of value, including your horse—and when you get back to Old Man Trine you can just tell him, with my best compliments, that I've quit the job and if out after that daughter of his. She's a heap sht more attractive than sixteen thousand dollars, and not half so hard to earn!"

IV—BURNED FINGERS

Once she had lost touch with her father's creatures, the girl drew rein and went on move slowly and cautiously.

Below her, in the valley, the lower trail wound its facile way. From time to time should could discern upon some naked stretch of its length a cloud of dust, or perhaps three mounted figures, scurrying madly on with fear of death snapping at their heels.

It was within an hour of mid-night, a night bell-clear and little scold on the heights, and bright with moonlight, when Alan's party made its last pause and camped to rest against the dawn, unconscious of the fact that a quarter of a mile above them, on the upper trail, a lonely woman was moving on the edge of a sharp declivity.

The level slabs of the rising sun awakened her eyes, rubbed her stiff with the hardness of sleeping on unyielding, sun-baked earth—and of a sudden started up, surprised by the grating of footsteps on the earth behind her.

Before she could turn, however, she was caught and wrapped in the arms of Hopi Jim.

She mastered all her strength and his add, will for one last struggle—and in a frenzied moment managed to break his hold a trifle, enough to enable her to snatch at the pistol hanging from her belt and present it at his head.

But it exploded harmlessly, spending its bullets in the blue of the morning sky.

And now all hint of mercy left his eyes; remained only the glare of rage. He put forth all his strength in turn, and Judith was as a child in his hands. In half a minute he had her helpless, in as much time more her back was breaking across his knee, while he bound her with loop after loop of his rawhide lariat.

Then, leaving her momentarily supine on the ground, Hopi Jim caught and unhobbed her horse, and without troubling to saddle it, lifted the girl to its back and placed her there.

She panted a prayer for mercy. He laughed in her face, bent and kissed her brutally, and stepped back, still laughing, to admire his handiwork.

Thus he stood for an instant between the horse and the edge of the declivity, a fair mark, stark against the sky, for one who stood in the valley below, folding his rifle with eager fingers, waiting just such opportunity with the impudence that he had waited it ever since the noise of debris kicked over the edge by the struggling man and woman had drawn his attention to what was going on above.

As Alan pressed the trigger and the shot sounded clear in the morning stillness, Judith saw a look of agrieved amazement cross the face of Hopi Jim Slade.

Then he threw his hands out, claved blindly at the air, staggered, reeled against the horse's flank so heavily that it shied in fright, and—abruptly—shot from sight over the edge of the bluff.

(To be continued.)

Despondency Due to Indigestion.

It is not at all surprising that persons who have indigestion become discouraged and despondent. Here are a few words of hope and cheer for them by Mrs. Blanche Bowers, Indiana, Pa. "For years my digestion was so poor that I could only eat the lightest foods. I tried every thing that I heard of to get relief, but not until about a year ago when I saw Chamberlain's Tablets advertised and got a bottle of them, did I find the right treatment. I soon began to improve, and since taking a few bottles of them my digestion is fine." For sale by all dealers.



"Excuse me friends, but I got to ask you to hold up your hands."

thing—somehow—always happens to tip the others off."

The girl swung to face him with blazing eyes. "Just what does that mean?" she demanded in a dangerous voice.

Marrophat lifted his shoulders. "Nothing—much," he allowed. "I am only thinking how strange it is that Mr. Law can't be caught by any sort of stratagem—when you are on the job, Miss Judith!"

The girl's hands were clenched in fists, white knuckles showing through the web. "You contemptible puppy!" she snapped.

But on this her voice failed; for her eyes traveled past the person of Mr. Marrophat to the doorway of the drawing room and found it framing a stranger.

"Excuse me friends," he offered in a lax drawl. "It pains me considerably to butt in on this happy family gathering, but business is business, same as usual, and I got to ask you to please put up your hands!"

"What do you want?" Trine demanded.

"Why," drawled the bandit, "nothing in particular—only your cash. Shell out, if you please—cents all and the lady too." He ran an appreciative glance down the figure which Judith's disguise revealed rather than concealed. "If you'll pardon my remark," he amended. "Perhaps I wouldn't be the last of your cash."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, my man!" Judith counseled without any show of fear.

"At the same time her father brought her to her senses.

"Judith! Be quiet. Let me deal with this gentleman. I am sure we can come to some arrangement."

"You bet your life," agreed the gentleman as the girl mutinously stepped back. "I know what I want, and you all know, you got it; as the name of the said arrangement is 'shell out.'"

"One minute," the invalid interposed. "Don't misunderstand me; I guarantee you shall be amply satisfied. I give you my word of Seneca Trine."

The eyes of the bandit widened. "Not is that so? Seneca Trine, the railroad man? Here's your horse—your horse!"

"Well, you see, more handsomely than you dream of it you'll do as I

writing busily with the top of his attaché case for a desk.

"Slade," said the bandit, "James Slade, commonly known as Hopi Jim. That's me."

Then attend closely, Mr. Slade. Again Trine punctured the atmosphere with his index finger. "The man whose life I want is named Alan Law. He is running away with my daughter, Rose, accompanied by a person named Bercus, disguised as a Pullman porter."

"The three of them having recently escaped from a train wreck up yonder on the trestle!" Hopi Jim interposed.

"You've met them?" Judith demanded.

"About an hour ago, or maybe an hour and a half," Hopi Jim replied, "a good ways down the road. They stopped and asked where they could get put up for the night. I kindly directed them on to Mesa, down in the Painted Hills yonder."

Contented with the promise of a thousand dollars advance on his contract, proving he returned with horses within a stipulated time, Mr. Hopi James Slade drifted away into the desert night.

It was Marrophat, and not his daughter, whom Trine designated to lead the expedition, cunningly counting on Judith's desire to work upon her passions and excite her to one last mad, blind attempt that should prove successful.

Smiling his secret smile, Trine announced his decision at the last moment, while Hopi Jim, waited with his horse and an assistant—one Texas—for whose utter innocence of scruple Mr. Slade unhesitatingly vouch-

Sullenly submissive, at least in outward seeming, Judith bowed to this decision, marched out of the car, and suffered Marrophat to help her mount her horse.

Now, deliberately, as the little crowd rode through the moonlit desert night, the girl unconsciously turned her head to the side of Hopi Jim.

An deliberately she set herself to work upon the bandit's susceptibility to her charms.

Within an hour she had him ready to do anything to win her smile.

In that first rush of golden day she turned the land, the party came

had had warning of their arrival after all; and presumably were now herded together in the adjoining room, which looked out over the veranda roof, waiting in fear and trembling for the assault that must soon come and in fact immediately did.

But it was met with more stubborn resistance than had been anticipated. The door had been barricaded from within—re-inforced by furniture placed against it. Four minutes and the united efforts of four men (including the bleary looker of the barroom) were required to overcome its inert resistance. But even when it was down, the room was found to be empty as the first.

Only the fingers of two hands gripping the edge of the veranda roof showed the way the fugitives had flown and these vanished instantly as the room was invaded.

Followed a swift rush of hoofs down the dusty street, and a chorus of blasphemy in the hotel hallway; for Judith had headed the concerted rush for the staircase and contrived to block it for a full half minute by pretending to stumble and twist her ankle.

In spite of that alleged injury she never flinched, and wasn't a yard behind the first who broke from the hotel to the open, nor yet especially behind him in vaulting to the middle of the road.

Well up the road a cloud of rocky dust had obscured the shapes of three who rode for their very lives.

The pursuit was on in a twinkling and well busshed—Marrophat's mount leading by a nose, Judith second, Hopi Jim and Texas but little in the rear. And in the first rush they seemed to gain, moment by moment drew up on the flying cloud of dust.

Judith heard as each muttered beside her and saw Marrophat jerking a revolver from its holster. The weapon swept up and to a level; but as the hammer fell, Judith's horse carried heavily against the other, swaying it half a dozen feet aside, and deflecting the bullet helplessly.

Simultaneously, as if taking the shot as the signal for a full-on, Judith saw Alan back over his horse's rump and open fire.

An instant later his companion, Bercus, imitated his example.

In immediate consequence, Texas dropped reins, slumped forward over

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