The Trey O' Hearts

A Novelized Version of the Motion Picture Drama of the Same Name Produced by the Universal Film Co.

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Author of "The Fortune Hunter," "The Brass Bowl," "The Black Bag," etc.

Illustrated with Photographs from the Picture Production

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CHAPTER XLIII.

Camp-for-the-Night.

"Well, gents!" the driver observed cheerfully, withdrawing head and hands from long and intimate communion with the stubborn genius beneath the hood. "I reckon you-all may's well make up yore minds to christen this hyeh salubrious spot Camp-for-the-Night. You won't be goin' no fartheh—not just 't present. Pulling this old wagon through them desert sands back yondeh has just naturally broke' the heart of that engine!"

"What, precisely, is the trouble?" Alan Law inquired, rousing from anxious preoccupation.

"Plumb bust' all to hell," the chauffeur explained tersely.

"Nothing could be fairer, more exact and comprehensive than that," Tom Barcus commented.

Law nodded a head too weary to respond to the other's humor. His worried eyes reviewed the scene of the breakdown.

"What's to be done?" Mr. Law wondered aloud.

"Take it calm," the affable chauffeur advised. "Frettin' won't get you-all nothin'. If it was me, I'd call it a day, make a fire, get them cushions out of the cyah, and get some rest. You can't do nothin' till I get back, anyway, and that won't be much before sunup."

"Where are you going?" Barcus demanded.

"Walkin', friend; just walkin'—"

"What for?"

"To fetch help—leastways, onless yo've got some kick comin' and 'ud ruther stop hyeh permanent'—"

He turned off and busied himself with preparations against his journey.

"It's simply things like this make me believe this isn't, after all, nothing more nor less than a long-drawn-out nightmare," Barcus observed pensively.

But Mr. Law was no more attending [illegible] turned away and was [illegible] by the disparagement of car and civilly explaining with Trine the purpose of [illegible]'s expedition.

Discovery of this circumstance worked a deep wrinkle between the brows as well as into the humor of Mr. Barcus.

Here, he promised himself, was a situation to titillate the Comic Muse itself. He pointed out in turn the several component parts: the motor car derelict in the hollow of those awful and silent hills—for all the world like a mouse petrified with fright at finding itself in the midst of a herd of elephants; in the car, that aged monomaniac, Mr. Seneca Trine, author of all their woes and misadventures, gnashing his teeth in impotent rage to find himself in close juxtaposition to and helpless to injure the man for whose life he lusted with an insatiate passion; the latter standing outside the car, in polite conversation with Mr. Trine's mutinous Judith—talking to her in the friendliest fashion imaginable, precisely as if she had not

No Doubt Which Came First in His Esteem.

fallen little short of compassing his death, not once, but half a dozen times; Judith herself poised on the running-board and smiling down at her victim with a warmth patently even more than the warmth of friendship; and at some little distance, Rose, Mr. Law's fiancee and Judith's sister, eating her heart out with jealousy of this new-sprung intimacy between her sister and her lover!

"Bad business, my friend!" Barcus mentally apostrophized the unwitting Alan Law.

He interrupted himself to nod knowingly and with profound conviction: "I knew it. Now it begins again!"

For Rose had abruptly taken a hand in the affair, a gesture of exasperation prefacing her call: "Alan!"

To her Mr. Law turned instantly, with such alacrity that none who watched might doubt which of the two women came first in his esteem.

Nor was this wasted upon the understanding of Judith. Eyeing her narrowly though furtively, Mr. Barcus saw her handsome face darken ominously.

And her father was as quick to [illegible] these portents of trouble [illegible] to advantage himself of

Governor Man[illegible] out horribly on his the joint resolution [illegible] pitched a to April 1st the time [illegible] pay ment of taxes without pena[illegible] After that date a penalty of fiv[illegible] per cent will be attached to un paid taxes.

Increase Pensions

By a vote of 106 to 0 the hous[illegible] passed the Smith bill increasin[illegible] the total [illegible] for state pensions for Confe[illegible] veterans from $250,000 t[illegible]000.

DAVE BURNS,

[illegible] Hot Air Furnaces

Floyd McCullu[illegible] was convicted in Pickens [illegible]EET, by of criminal assault, was [illegible] procuted at the state penit[illegible] iary Saturday morning at 11.30 o'clock. The negro declared he was innocent after being placed in the chair.

will be h[illegible] Wesley Garret[illegible] evening at 3 o'c[illegible]

substantial in seeming, with another rope, breast-high, to serve as a handrail.

Alan tested the bridge cautiously. It bore him. He returned, helped Rose to cross, and with her once safely landed on the other side, took his life in his hands and, aided by a Barcus unaffectedly afflicted with qualms, somehow or other (neither of them knew precisely how) persuaded the burros to cross.

After that, though the way grew more broad and easy and even showed symptoms of a decline, they had not enough strength left to sustain through another hour.

And what they thought good fortune, opportunely at this pass, brought them to a clearing dotted with the buildings of an abandoned copper mine. Not a soul was in evidence there, but the rude structures offered shelter for beast as well as man.

Barely had they made Rose as comfortable as might be upon the rough plank flooring of one of the sheds and tethered the burros out of sight, when Alan collapsed as if drugged, while Barcus, who had elected himself to keep the first watch and purposed doing it in a sitting position, with his back against the door-jamb, felt sleep overcoming him like a dense, dark cloud.

CHAPTER XLIV.

As in a Glass, Darkly.

Thoughtfully Mr. Barcus returned his attention to the lovers.

If the evidence of his senses did not mislead him, he was witnessing their first difference of opinion. It was not an argument acute enough to deserve the name of quarrel; but undoubtedly the two were at odds upon [illegible] tion—Rose insistent, Al[illegible]

The last gave [illegible] shrugged. "[illegible] going [illegible] announced [illegible] Seeing the [illegible] arose [illegible] Barcus suggested.

[illegible] to stop [illegible] Alan began to [illegible]plain, ignoring the interruption.

"Miss Rose is right—eh, Miss Judith?" Barcus interpolated.

Judith nodded darkly.

"So I'm going to see if I can't buy burros from the prospector back there. Rose says he has some—doesn't know how many—"

"Three will be enough," Judith interposed. "I mean, don't get one for me. I'm stopping here."

"But—" Alan started to protest.

She gave him pause with a weary gesture.

"Please! It's no good arguing, Mr. Law: I've made up my mind; I can be most helpful here, by my father's side," she asserted, and nodded at Trine with a significant smile that maddened him. "He needs me—and no harm can come to me; I'm pretty well able to take care of myself!"

At this the innocent bystander breathed an unheard but fervent little prayer of thanksgiving, whose spirit he doubted not was shared by Alan.

For it stuck in the memory of Barcus that their friend, the prospector (whose shack had sheltered Rose and Barcus after their transit of the desert and prior to the man-made avalanche, which had afforded this temporary immunity from pursuit) had mentioned in the hearing of Rose the fact that his string of burros was limited to three.

This, then, must have been the nub of the lovers' quarrel: Rose's insistance that Judith be left behind, Alan's reluctance to consent to this lest he convict himself of the charge of rank ingratitude, remembering the great service his erstwhile antagonist had done him.

If only Judith might not find cause to change her mind!

He set himself sedulously to divert Judith with the magic of his conversational powers—an offering indifferently received. He was still blithely gossiping when Judith flung away to her sister's side.

The ensuing quarrel seemed but the more portentous in view of the restraint imposed upon themselves by both parties thereto.

He believed, however, that a crisis impended when the tinkle of mule-bells sounded down the canyon road; and at this he threw discretion to the winds and ran toward the two with hands upheld in mock horror and a manner of humorous protest.

"Ladies, ladies!" he pleaded. "I beg of you both, let dogs delight to bark and bite—"

He got no farther: Judith's ears were as quick as his own; she, too, had caught the sound of bells behind the base of the hill. And of a sudden, without another word, she turned and flung away into the heavy thickets of undergrowth that masked all the canyon, to either side of the wagon-trail. In a twinkling she had lost herself to view in their labyrinthine shadows.

The remainder of that business was transacted rapidly enough. There were no preparations to be made; once Alan had ridden up with his three burros, nothing remained but to mount and make off without delay.

Before morning they were all riding like so many hypnotized subjects, fatigue bearing so heavily on all their senses that none spoke or cared to speak.

Broad daylight surprised them in this state, still stubbornly traveling; and shortly afterward showed them one place so perilous that it shocked them temporarily awake.

This was simply a spot where the trail came abruptly to an end on one side of a cleft in the hills quite thirty feet wide and several hundred in depth, and was continued on the farther side, the chasm being spanned by a bridge of the simplest character—no more than a footway of boards bound together with ropes none too

CHAPTER XLV.

The Bowels of the Earth.

Awaking befell Mr. Barcus in a fashion sufficiently sharp and startling to render him indifferent to the beneficial effects of some eight hours of dreamless slumber.

He discovered himself lying flat on his face, with somebody's inconsiderate, heavy hand purposely grinding the said face into the aged and splintery planks of the shed flooring. At the

Gnashing His Teeth in Impotent Rage.

same time other hands were busy binding his own together by the wrists and lashing the same to the small of his back by means of a cord passed around his middle, while his natural if somewhat spasmodic efforts to kick were sadly hampered by the fact that his ankles had already been secured by means of half a dozen half-hitches and a square knot.

His hands attended to, his head was released. Promptly he lifted it and essayed to yell; an effort rendered abortive by the gag that was thrust between his teeth the instant his jaws opened.

Then he heard a laugh, a cold, mirthless chuckle.

Now the blood of Thomas Barcus ran cold (or he thought it did; which amounts to much the same thing). For if his senses had played fair, the laugh he had heard was the laugh of Mr. Marrophat, head-devil in the service of Seneca Trine.

He twisted his head to one side and glancing along the floor, saw nothing but the wall. Twisted the other way, at the cost of a splinter in his nose, the effort was repaid by the discovery of Rose Trine in a plight like his own—wrists and ankles bound, gagged into the bargain—the width of the shed between them.

But of Alan Law, no sign. . . .

The heart of Mr. Barcus checked momentarily; he shut his eyes and shivered in an uncontrollable seizure of dread.

Then, tormented beyond endurance by the fears he suffered for the safety of his friend, he began to wriggle and squirm like a crippled snake, painfully inching his way across the floor toward Rose—with what design, heaven alone knows! Dimly his mental vision comprehended the bare possibility of his being able, with his fast-numbing fingers, to work loose the knots at Rose's wrists; but deep in his heart he knew this to be nothing but forlornest hope. . . .

With infinite pains he had contrived to bridge the distance by half, or possibly not quite so much, when a dark body put the sunlight of the open doorway into temporary eclipse. Another followed it. Boots clumped heavily on the flooring. The laugh sounded again, apparently in ironic appreciation of Mr. Barcus' efforts. Two pairs of hands seized him, one beneath the shoulders, the other beneath the knees, and he was lugged laboriously out into the sunlight, carried a considerable distance, and deposited unceremoniously within a few feet of the mouth of the abandoned mine just at the moment when he had satisfied himself that the purpose of his captors was simply to throw him into the black well.

He wasted a look of appeal on the frozen mask of villainy that was Marrophat's (who bore the burden of Barcus' head and shoulders) and got laughed at for all his pains.

Then he was left to himself once more, but only for a few moments; the interval ended when the two appeared again, this time bringing Rose in similar fashion.

Not until she had been put down beside him did he discover that Alan was likewise a captive—trussed to a tree at some distance.

The remaining arrangements of their captors were swiftly and deftly consummated, though their design remained obscure to Mr. Barcus until he, after Rose, was dumped like a bale into a huge bucket, and therein by means of rope and windlass lowered to the bottom of the shaft—a descent, he estimated shrewdly, of something like a hundred feet.

A hideous screeching followed, the protests of rusty and greaseless machinery. Twisting his neck, Barcus saw the dim opening of the shaft slowly closing, as if a curtain were being drawn down over it. Jimmy was closing the bulkhead door, leaving them definitely prisoners, beyond human aid, there in that everlasting black hole. . . .

With a final squeal and thump the bulkhead settled into place. A confusion of remote sounds thereafter indicated that Jimmy (with [illegible]erhaps, Marrophat's assistance) [illegible]aking the bulkhead fast [illegible]ion—wedging and blocking it with timbers.

These ceased—and the silence was broken by Alan's voice.

"Barcus!"

The latter grunted soulfully by way of answer: he could do no more.

"I've worked my gag loose," Alan pursued in a hurried whisper, "but my hands are tied behind my back. Are yours? Grunt once for 'yes'."

Dutifully Bracus grunted a solitary grunt.

"Then roll over on your face and give me a chance to work them free that way, given time . . ."

"Time!" was the mirthless thought of Barcus. "Haven't we got all eternity?"

For all that, he wasted no time whatever in obeying Alan's suggestion—then lay for upward of ten minutes with his face in the mold of the tunnel while Alan chewed and spat and chewed and spat and chewed again at the ropes round the wrists of his friend.

If it were in truth no more than ten minutes it seemed upward of an hour before the bonds grew slack and Barcus with an effort that cost him much of the skin on one wrist worried a hand free, then loosed the other, removed and spat out his gag, and set hastily about freeing his friend. That took but a few instants—little more than was needed to rid Rose of her bonds.

That much accomplished, a pause of profound consternation followed. The darkness was absolute in the tunnel, Jimmy having taken the candle away with him; and its silence was rendered uncanny by the sobs and murmurs of the lovers, that sounded somehow fearfully remote and inhuman to Barcus—who had turned immediately to the bulkhead and was, without the slightest hope, groping about its joints and crevices in search of some way of forcing it. . . .

"Barcus—old man!"

"Yes?"

"Have you any idea—"

"Devil a one!"

A pause . . .

"Did you notice what that blackguard had fixed up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why—at the bottom of the shaft—I got only a glimpse coming in—the door of the powder room was open, and I saw a fuse set to the top of a keg of blasting powder . . ."

"What's the good of that? We're fast enough as it is:"

"Simply to make assurance doubly sure by causing a cave-in . . ."

"I seem to remember hearing or reading, some place, that tunnels have two ends. If that's true, tho far end of this ought to be about the safest place when that explosion happens—if it ever does."

"Something in that!"

"Got any matches?" Barcus inquired, as Alan hurriedly helped Rose to her feet.

"Never one."

"Nor I. We'll have to feel our way along. Let me lead. If I step over the brink of a pit or anything, I'll try to yell and warn you in time."

Alan caught his friend's hand in passing and pressed it warmly—a caress eloquent of his gratitude to Barcus for taking their peril lightly, or pretending to, for the sake of Rose.

A ticklish business, that—groping their way through blackness so opaque that it seemed as palpable as a pool of ink. And haste was indicated; they stumbled on with what caution was possible against pitfalls—a gingerly scramble. Then an elbow in the tunnel—sensed rather than felt or seen—cut them off from direct communication with the bulkhead, and at the same time opened up a shaft of daylight, striking down through that pitchy darkness like a column of fine gold.

Cries of joy, amazement, incredulity choking in their throats, they stumbled forward, gained the spot immediately below the shaft, looked upward, dazzled, to see blue sky like a coin of heaven's minting far above them, at the end of a long and almost perpendicular tunnel, wide enough to permit the passage of a man's body, and lined with wooden ladders.

The end of the lowermost ladder hung within easy reach from the floor of the tunnel.

But even as Alan lifted his hands to grasp the bottom rung the opening at the top of the shaft was temporarily obscured.

Thrilled with apprehension, he hesitated: Marrophat was up there, he little doubted; hardly like that one to overlook the ladder-shaft in preparing the tunnel to be a living tomb.

"What is it?" Rose demanded at his elbow, in a shaken whisper.

"Nothing," he lied instantly, and seizing the bottom rung, swung himself up. "But wait for me till I signal the coast's clear," he warned before committing himself finally to the ascent.

Marrophat or no Marrophat at the top, there was nothing for him to do but to grasp the nettle danger with a steady hand, unflinching. Even though he were shot dead on emerging from the shaft, it were better than to die down there, like a rat in a trap. . . .

He had climbed not more than half a dozen rungs when a voice hailed from above:

"Law—Oh, Mister Law. I say—don't come up—here's a present for you."

Pausing without answer, he looked up. A few drops of water splattered his face, like heavy rain. Almost immediately the blue sky was permanently eclipsed: a heavy cascade of water, almost a solid column, shot down the shaft with terrific force.

Half-drowned and wholly dazed, he felt himself picked up and dragged away from the waterfall.

Then, as his senses cleared, he comprehended the fact that the tunnel was already filling; that where they stood it was already ankle-deep—while the water continued to fall without hint of letup.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Flood and Fire.

Screaming to make himself heard above the roar of the deluge, Barcus yammered in Alan's ear:

"That devil! He's found the reservoir—opened the sluicegates—turned it into that shaft! We're done for!" Alan had no argument with which to gainsay him. Silently getting on his feet, silently he groped for Rose in the darkness, momentarily becoming more dense as the fall of water shut out the light, and drew her away with him, up the slight incline that led back to the bulkhead. . . .

The hour that followed lived ever in his memory as an hour in hell. No ray of hope lightened its impenetrable blackness. He could say nothing to comfort the girl; bravely though she strove to keep up her heart, time and again she shook in his arms like a mad thing, when panic dread caught her by the neck as a terrier catches a rat.

To die there, in the darkness, like so many noxious animals trapped in a well! . . .

The water mounted rapidly. Within five minutes it drove them back to the elbow in the tunnel; within ten it lapped their ankles as they lingered there, doubting which was the greater peril, to advance or to stand fast and let the flooding tide snuff out the fires of life. To return to the neighborhood of the bulkhead was to court the death indicated by the fuse and the keg of blasting powder . . .

Of a sudden the thought crossed Alan's mind that Marrophat had arranged the latter solely to keep them away from the bulkhead. Now that he thought of it, he felt certain that the powder room had been deliberately disclosed to him by Jimmy.

Probably, then, the keg and fuse were but stage properties—or possibly . . .

Whether or no, was death in one form preferable to the other?

He was decidedly of the opinion that it were better to be extinguished once and for all time, in the space of a second, annihilated by an explosion, than to die thus lingeringly.

On this consideration, he drew Rose with him back to the bulkhead.

When they had been some fifteen minutes beside the bulkhead, the water mounted the head of a slight rise perhaps ten feet behind them, and poured down in ever deeper volume to back up against the barrier.

It was waist deep, however, before they retreated to the head of that rise.

Half an hour later it was waist deep there, on the highest spot in the tunnel.

In fifteen minutes more it had reached their chins. And they stood with head against the roof of the tunnel.

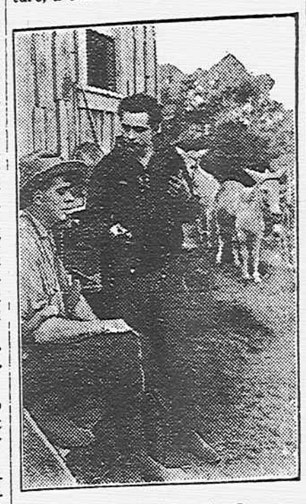
Holding Rose close to him, Alan kissed her lips, that were as cold as death.

Then, fumbling under water, he found the hand of the man at his side.

The water lapped his lips like a blind hand . . .

* * * * * * * *

In the tunnel that branched off from the main shaft, beyond the bulkhead, some thirty minutes before this juncture, a candle had guttered in its stick,



Alan Negotiates for the Burros.

left carelessly thrust into the wall by Marrophat's lieutenant, and guttering, had dropped a flaming wick into a little heap of bone-dry debris. This last flamed, licked hungrily at the timbering that upheld the falls of the tunnel. The timbering caught fire without delay. In a space of time incredibly brief the flames were spreading right and left, the tunnel was a vault of blistering fury.

As Alan said his last mute farewell to Rose and Barcus, the fire spread out in the bottom of the shaft and invaded the powder room.

Alan had guessed aright at Marrophat's design, the keg of blasting powder was less than an eighth full; its explosion could not possibly have effected the cave-in Alan had at first feared.

But what Marrophat had overlooked was the proximity to the keg of some several sticks of dynamite, masked by a film of earth that had fallen from the crumbling walls.

When the blazing fuse dropped sparks into the blasting powder this last exploded right willingly and the dynamite took its cue without the least delay.

The resultant detonation was terrific. The bulkhead was crushed in like an eggshell barrier. Part of the walls fell in, but the tunnels and shaft remained intact. The released flood streamed out and spread swiftly to the farthest recesses of the burning tunnel. Dense clouds of steam filled that place of terror as the fires were extinguished.

Swept with the stream as it poured out of the tunnel, Alan contrived throughout to retain his hold round the waist of Rose. Barcus [illegible] him unseen in the darkness. It was not until Alan had contrived to catch an unburned timber and stay himself and his almost witless burden beneath the mouth of the shaft that he discovered Barcus alive, if almost unrecognizable in his mask of mold and soot, battling back toward the shaft against the kneedeep tide.

Half-blinded and stifled as he was by the reek of steam and powder fumes, Alan struggled with himself until his wits were passably clear.

Immediately before him dangled the hoisting bucket and rope.

Surrendering the care of Rose to Barcus, Alan climbed into the bucket and stared upward, examining the walls of the shaft for a way to the top.

There was none other than the most difficult; gaps too great to be bridged by climbing showed in the wooden ladders.

The one feasible route was via the rope. And there was nobody at the top to work the windlass—and Alan hoped there would be nobody to oppose his essay.

He addressed himself to the task without murmuring—lifted himself upon the rope, wound it round one leg, and began that heartbreaking climb.

How he accomplished it he never knew. That it must be accomplished was his one, all-absorbing thought. And somehow, by some almost superhuman effort, it was eventually accomplished.

He arrived at the top of the shaft far too exhausted to show surprise when, falling in half-fainting condition within two feet of the brink, he saw Judith Trine running like mad across the clearing.

But without her aid he would not within hours have been able to work the windlass and lift Rose and Barcus to the surface.

(Continued Next week)

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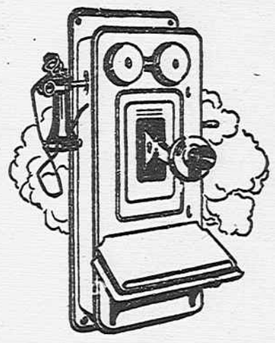

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