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

SYNOPSIS.

The 3 of Hearts is the "death-sign" used by Seneca Trine in the private war of vengeance, 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 him, whom she loves. Under dramatic circumstances Alan saves Judith's life and so wins her love; but failure to shake his constancy to Rose fixes Judith in her purpose.

CHAPTER IX.

Forewarned.

The thing was managed with an ingenuity that Alan termed devilish—it was indisputably Machiavellian.

The lovers had come down from the North in hot haste and the shadow of death. Two days of steady traveling by canoe, by woods trail, by lake steamer—forty-eight hours of fatigue and strain eased by not one instant's relaxation from the high tension of vigilance upon which their very lives depended—wore to a culmination through this tedious afternoon on the train from Moosehead—a trap of physical torment only made possible by Alan's luck in securing, through sheer accident, two parlor-car reservations turned back at the last moment before leaving Kineo station.

No matter—the longest afternoon must have its evening.

As if in answer to this thought, the train slowed down with whistling brakes to the last hill-station, and as the trucks groaned and moved anew, a lout of a boy came galloping down the aisle, brandishing two yellow envelopes and blatting like a stray calf:

"Mista Lawr! Mista Lawr! Tel'grams for Mista Lawr!"

Alan had been expecting at every station a prepaid reply to his wire for reservations on the night express from Portland to New York.

But why two envelopes superscribed "Mr. A. Law, Kineo train southbound, Oakland Sta.?"

He tore one open, unfolded the inclosure, and grunted disgust with its curt advice, opened the other and caught his breath sharply as he withdrew—part way only—a playing card, a trey of hearts.

Thrusting it back quickly, he clapped both envelopes together, tore them into a hundred fragments, and scattered them from the window. But the fiendish wind whisked one small scrap back—and only one!—into the lap of the woman he loved.

He Could Have Ground His Teeth in Exasperation.

Vainly he prayed that she might be asleep. The silken lashes trembled on her cheeks and lifted slightly, disclosing the dark glimmer of questioning eyes. And as she slipped the scrap of cardboard between thumb and forefinger he bent forward and silently took it from her—one corner of the trey of hearts, but inevitably a corner bearing the figure "3" above a heart.

"The Pullman agent at Portland [illegible] no reservations available on any New York train in the next thirty-six hours," he said with lowered voice.

"Couldn't we possibly catch the New York boat tonight?"

He shook a glum head. "No—I looked that up first. It leaves before we get in."

She said, "Too bad," abstractedly, reclosed her eyes, and apparently lapsed anew into semi-somnolence—but without deceiving him who could well guess what poignant anxiety cankered at her heart.

He could have ground his teeth in exasperation.

To think that this was America, this the twentieth century, the apex of the highest form of civilization the world had ever known—and still a man could be hunted from pillar to post, [illegible] with [illegible] harried [illegible] in a hundred [illegible]—and that by a slip of a girl with the cunning of a madwoman, the heart of a thug, the face of a charming child—the face of the woman that sat beside him, duplicating its every perfect feature so nearly that even he who loved the one could scarcely distinguish her from the other but by instinct, intuition, blind guesswork. . . .

He nodded heavy-hearted confirmation of a surmise slowly settling into conviction in his mind, that such cunning, such purpose and pertinacity could not possibly spring from a mind well balanced, that the woman, Judith Trine, sister to the Rose he loved so well, was as mad as that monomaniac, her father, who sat helpless in his cell of silence and shadows in New York, day after day, eating his heart out with impatience for the word that his vengeance had been consummated by the daughter whom he had inspired to execute it.

An hour late, in dusk of evening, the train lumbered into Portland station; and, heart in mouth, Alan helped Rose from the steps, shouldered a way for her through the crowd, and almost lifted her into a taxicab.

"Best hotel in town," he demanded. "And be quick about it—for a double tip."

He communicated his one desperate scheme to the girl en route, receiving her indorsement of it. So, having registered for her and seen her safely to the door of the best available room in the house within ready call of the public lobby and office, he washed up, gulped a hasty meal—which Rose had declined to share, pleading fatigue—and hurried away into the night with only the negro driver of a public hack, picked up haphazard at some distance from the hotel, for his guide.

CHAPTER X.

Fortuity.

He wasted the better part of an hour in fruitless and perhaps ill-advised inquiries; then his luck, such as it was, led him on suspicion down a poorly lighted wharf, at the extreme end of which he discovered a lonely young man perched atop a pile, hands in pockets, gaze turned to a tide whereon, now black night had fallen, pallid wraiths of yachts swung just visibly beneath uneasy riding-lights.

"Pardon me," Alan ventured, "but perhaps you can help me out—"

"You've come to the wrong shop, my friend," the young man interposed with morose civility; "I couldn't help anybody out of anything—the way I am now."

"I'm sorry," said Alan, "but I thought possibly you might know where I could find a seaworthy boat to charter."

The young man slipped smartly down from his perch. "If you don't look sharp," he said ominously, "you'll charter the Seaventure." He waved his hand toward a vessel moored alongside the wharf: "There she is, and a better boat you won't find anywhere—schooner-rigged, fifty feet over all, twenty-five horsepower, motor auxiliary, two staterooms—all ready for as long a coastwise cruise as you care to take. Come aboard."

He led briskly across the wharf, down a gangplank, then aft along the deck to a companionway, by which the two men gained a comfortable and roomy cabin, bright with fresh white enamel.

"Name, Barcus," the young man introduced himself cheerfully; "christened Thomas. Nativity, American. State of life, flat broke. That's the rub," he laughed, and shrugged, shamefaced. "I found myself hard up this spring with this boat on my hands, sunk every cent I had—and then some—fitting out on an oral charter with a moneyed blighter in New York, who was to have met me here a fortnight since. He didn't—and here I am, in pawn to the ship chandler, desperate enough for anything."

"How much do you owe?"

"Upwards of a hundred."

"Say I advanced that amount—when can we sail?"

The young man reflected briefly. "There's something so engagingly idiotic about this proceeding," he observed wistfully. "I've got the strangest kind of a hunch it's going to go through. Pay my bills, and we can be off inside an hour. That is—"

He checked with an exclamation of dismay, chapfallen. "I may have some trouble scaring up a crew at short notice. I had two men engaged, but last week they got tired doing nothing for nothing and left me flat."

"Then that's settled," Alan said. "I know boats; I'll be your crew—and the better satisfied to have nobody else aboard."

The eyes of Mr. Barcus clouded. "See here, my headlong friend, what's your little game, anyway? I don't mind playing the fool on the high seas, but I'll be no party to a kidnaping or—"

"It's an elopement," Alan interrupted on inspiration. "We've simply got to get clear of Portland by midnight."

"Suits me," Barcus agreed [illegible] "and only heaven knows why I believe you, but I do—and here's my hand!"

CHAPTER XI.

Blue Water.

Anxiety ate like an acid at Alan's heart. If this shift to the sea might be thought a desperate venture, he was a weathered salt-water man and undismayed.

But when he re-entered the hotel one surprising thing happened that gave him new heart—momentarily it seemed almost as if his luck had turned. For, as he paused by the desk of the cashier to demand his bill, the elevator gate opened and Rose came out eagerly to meet him with an eager air of hope that masked measurably the signs of fatigue.

"I worried so I couldn't rest," she told him guardedly as he drew her aside; "so I arose and got ready, and watched from the window till I saw you drive up."

He acquainted her briefly with his fortune.

But she seemed unable to echo his confidence or even to overcome the heaviness of her spirits when their cab, without misadventure, set them down at the wharf.

Here, Alan had feared, was the crucial point of danger—if the influence of the trey of hearts was to bring disaster upon them it would be here, in the hush and darkness of this deserted water front. And he bore himself most warily as he helped the girl from the car and to the gangplank of the Seaventure. But nothing happened; while Mr. Barcus was as good as his word. Alan had barely set foot on deck, following the girl, when the gangplank came aboard with a clatter, and the Seaventure swung away from the wharf.

Until the distance was too great for even a flying leap Alan lingered watchfully on deck.

At length, satisfied that all was well, he returned to the cabin.

"All right," he nodded; "we're clear of that lot, apparently; nobody but the three of us aboard. Now you'd best turn in. This is evidently to be your stateroom, this one to port, and you'll have a long night's sleep to make up for what you've gone through—dearest."

He drew nearer, dropping his voice tenderly. And of a sudden, with a little low cry, the girl came into his arms and clung pasionately to him.

"But you?" she murmured. "You need rest as much as I! What about you?"

"Oh, no I don't" he contended. "Besides I'll have plenty of time to rest up once we're fairly at sea. Barcus and I stand watch and watch, of course. There's nothing for you to do but be completely at your ease. But—you must let me go."

By midnight the Seaventure was spinning swiftly south-southeast, close reefed to a snoring sou'west wind—the fixed white eye of Portland head light fast failing astern.

She Whips Out a Gun as Big as a Cannon.

CHAPTER XII.

Down the Capes.

At four o'clock, or shortly after, Alan was awakened by boot-heels pounding imperatively overhead, and went on deck again, to stand both dog-watches—saw the sun lift up smiling over a world of tumbled blue water, crossed the wake of a Cunard liner inbound for Boston, raised and overhauled a graceful but businesslike fisherman (from Gloucester, Barcus opined when called to stand his trick at eight) and saw it a mile or two astern when—still aching with fatigue—he was free to return to his berth for another four-hour rest.

This time misguided consideration induced Barcus to let his crew sleep through the first afternoon watch. Six bells were ringing when, in drowsy apprehension that something had gone suddenly and radically wrong, Alan waked.

He was on deck again almost before he rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes, emerging abruptly from the half-light of the cabin to a dazzle of sunlight that filled the cup of day with ravished gold, even as he passed from conviction of security to [illegible] [illegible] peril.

His first glance discovered the wheel deserted, the woman with back to him standing at the taffrail, Barcus—nowhere to be seen. The second confirmed his surmise that the Seaventure had come up into the wind, and now was yawing off wildly into the trough of a stiff if not heavy sea. A third showed him, to his amazement, the Gloucester fisherman — overhauled with such ease that morning and now, by rights, well down the northern horizon—not two miles distant, and standing squarely for the smaller vessel.

Bewildered, he darted to the girl's side, with a shout, demanding to know what was the matter. She turned to him a face he hardly recognised—but still he didn't understand. The inevitable inference seemed a thing unthinkable; his brain faltered when asked to credit it. Only when he saw her tearing frantically at the painter, striving to cast it off and with it the dory towing a hundred feet or so astern, and when another wondering glance had discovered the head and shoulders of Mr. Barcus rising over the stern of the dory as he strove to lift himself out of the water—only then did Alan begin to appreciate what had happened.

Even so, it was with the feeling that all the world and himself as well had gone stark, raving mad, that he seized the girl and, despite her struggles, tore her away from the rail before she had succeeded in unknotting the painter.

"Rose!" he cried stupidly. "Rose! What's the matter with you? Don't you see what you're doing?"

Defiance inflamed her countenance and accents. "Can't you ever say anything but 'Rose! Rose! Rose!' Is there no other name that means anything to you? Can't you understand how intolerable it is to me? I love you no less than she—better than she ever dreamed of loving you—because I hate you, too! What is love that is no more than love? Can't you understand?"

"Judith!" he cried in a voice of stupefaction. "But—Good Lord!—how did you get aboard? Where's Rose?"

"Where you'll not find her easily again," the woman angrily retorted. "Trust me for that!"

"What do you mean?" Illumination came in a blinding flash. "Do you mean it was you—you whom I brought aboard last night?"

"Who else?"

"You waylaid her there in the hotel, substituted yourself for her, deceived me into thinking you—!"

"Of course," she said simply. "Why not? When I saw her sleeping there—the mirror of myself, completely at my mercy—what else should I think of than to take her place with the man I loved? I knew you'd never know the difference—at least I was fool enough for the moment to believe I could stand being loved by you in her name! It was only today, when I'd had time to think, that I realized how impossible that was!"

A sudden slap of the mainsail boom athwartships and a simultaneous cry from over the stern roused Alan from his consternation to fresh appreciation of the emergency. With scant consideration he hustled the woman to the companionway and below, slammed its doors and closed her in with the sliding hatch—all in a breath—then sprang to the taffrail, just in time to lend a helping hand sorely wanted by Mr. Barcus in his efforts to climb aboard, after he had pulled the dory up under the stern by its painter.

He came over the rail in a towering temper.

"I hope you'll pardon the apparent impertinence," he suggested acidly, as soon as able to articulate coherently—"but may I inquire if that bloody-minded vixen is your blushing bride-to-be?"

Alan shook a helpless head. The thing defied reasonable explanation. He made a feeble stagger at it without much satisfaction either to himself or to the outraged Barcus.

"No—it's all a damnable mistake! She's her sister—I mean, the right girl's sister—and her precise double—fooled me—not quite right in the head, I'm afraid."

"You may well be afraid, you poor fish!" Mr. Barcus snapped. "D'you know what she did? Threw me over-board! Fact! Came on deck [illegible] ago, sweet as peaches—and all of a sudden whips out a gun as big as a cannon, points it at my head and orders me to luff into the wind. Before I could make sure I wasn't dreaming, she had fired twice—in the air—a signal to that blessed fisherman astern—at least, they answered with two toots of a power whistle and changed course to run up to us. Look how she's gained already!"

"But how did she happen to throw you overboard?"

"Happen nothing!" Barcus snapped, getting to his feet. "She did it a-purpose—flew at me like a wildcat, and before I knew what was up—I was slammed backwards over the rail."

Lingered Watchfully on Deck.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," Alan responded gravely. "There's more to tell—but one thing to be done first."

"And that?" Mr. Barcus inquired suspiciously.

"To get rid of the lady," Alan announced firmly. "Make that fisherman a present of the woman in the case. You don't mind parting with the dory in a good cause—if I pay for it?"

"Take it for nothing," Barcus grumbled. "Cheap at the price!"

He took Alan's place, watching him with a sardonic eye as he drew the tender in under the leeward quarter, made it fast, and reopened the companionway.

As the girl came on deck without other invitation, in a sullen rage that only heightened her wonderful loveliness, Alan noted that her first look was for him, of untempered malignity.

"Friends of yours, I infer?" Alan inquired civilly.

Judith nodded.

"Then it would save us some trouble—yourself included—if you'll be good enough to step into the dory without a struggle."

Without a word, Judith stepped to the rail and, as Barcus luffed, swung herself overside into the dory.

Immediately Alan cast off, and as the little boat sheered off, Barcus, with a sigh of relief, brought the Seaventure once more back upon her course.

For some few minutes there was silence between the two men, while the tender dropped swiftly astern, the woman plying a brisk pair of oars.

Then, suddenly elevating his nose, Barcus sniffed audibly. "Here," he said sharply, "relieve me for a minute, will you? I want to go forward and have a look at that motor."

When Barcus reappeared it was with a grave face.

"The devil and the deep She," he observed obscurely, coming aft, "from all their works, good Lord deliver us!"

"What's the trouble now?"

"Nothing much—only your playful little friend has been up to another of her light-hearted tricks. . . . If you should happen to want a smoke or anything to eat when you go below, just find a mirror and kiss yourself good-by before striking the match. The drain-cocks of both fuel tanks have been opened, and there are upwards of a hundred and fifty gallons of highly explosive gasoline sloshing around in the bilge!"

CHAPTER XIII.

No Quarter.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Barcus indulgently, breaking a long silence. "Very interesting. Very interesting, indeed. I've seldom listened to a more entertaining life-history, my poor young friend. But I tell you candidly, as man to man, I don't believe one word of it. It's all d—n foolishness!"

His voice took on a plaintive accent. "Particularly this!" he expostulated, and waved an indignant hand, compassing their plight.

"The rest of your adventures are reasonable enough," he said, "they won my credulity—and I'm a native of Missouri. But this last chapter is impossible. And that's flat. It couldn't happen—and has. And there, in a manner of speaking, we are!"

The wind had gone down with the sun, leaving the Seaventure becalmed—her motor long since inert for want of fuel—in shoal water a mile or so off the desolate and barren coast that Barcus, out of his abounding knowledge of those waters, named Nauset Beach.

Still another mile further off shore the so-called Gloucester fisherman rode, without motion, waters as still and glassy. Through the gloaming, with the aid of glasses, figures might be seen moving about her decks; and as it grew still more dark she lowered a small boat that theretofore had swung in davits. A little later a faint humming noise drifted across the tide.

"Power tender," the owner of the Seaventure interpreted. "Coming to call, I presume. Sociable lot. What I can't make out is why they seem to think it necessary to tow our dory back. Uneasy conscience, maybe—what?"

He lowered the binoculars and glanced inquiringly at his employer, who grunted his disgust, and said no more.

"Don't take it so hard, old top," Barcus advised with a change of note from irony to sympathy. Then he rose and dived down the companionway, presently to reappear with a megaphone and a double-barreled shotgun.

"No cutting-out parties in this outfit," he explained, grinning amiably. "None of that old stuff, revised to suit your infatuated female friend—once aboard the lugger and the man is mine!"

Stationing himself at the seaward rail, where his figure would show in sharp silhouette against the glowing sunset sky, he brandished the shotgun at arm's length above his head, and bellowed stertorously through the megaphone:

"Keep off! Keep off! This means you! Come within gunshot and I'll blow your fool heads off!"

Putting aside the megaphone, he sat down again. "Not that I'd dare fire this blunderbuss," he confided, "with this reek of gasoline; but just for moral effect. Phew-w! I'd give a dollar for a breath of clean air; I've inhaled so much gas in the last few hours I'm dry-cleaned down to my silly old toes!"

For thirty minutes nothing happened, other than that the sound of the fisherman's launch was stilled. It rested moveless in the waters, two figures mysteriously busy in the cockpit, the Seaventure's dory trailing behind it on a long painter.

Gradually these details became blurred, and were blotted out by the closing shadows. The afterglow in the west grew cool and faint. The crimson waters darkened, to mauve, to violet, to a translucent green, to blackness. Far up the coast two white eyes, peering over the horizon, stared steadfastly through the dark. "Chatham lights," Barcus said they were.

Abruptly he dropped the glasses and jumped up. "Hear that!" he cried.

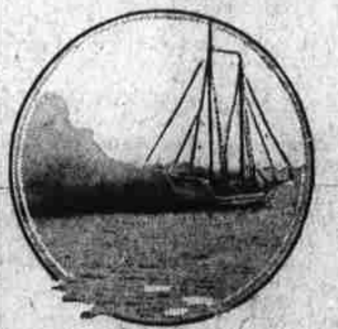
Now the humming of the motor was again audible and growing louder with every instant; and Alan, getting to his feet in turn, infected with the excitement of Barcus, could just make out at some distance a dark shadow beneath the dim, spluttering glimmer of light, that moved swiftly and steadily toward the Seaventure.

"What the devil!" he demanded, puzzled.

"You uttered a mouthful when you said 'devil'!" Barcus commented, grasping his arm and hurrying him to the landward side of the vessel. "Quick—kick off your shoes—get set for a mile-long swim! Devil's work, all right!" he panted, hastily divesting himself of shoes and outer garments. "I couldn't make out what they were up to till I saw them lash the wheel, light the fuse, start the motor, and take to the dory. They've made one grand little torpedo boat out of that tender—"

He sprang upon the rail, steadying himself with a stay. "Ready?" he asked. "Look sharp!"

By way of answer, Alan joined him; the two had dived as one, entering the water with a single splash, and coming to the surface a good ten yards from the Seaventure. For the next several seconds they were swimming frantically, and not until three hundred feet or more separated them from the schooner did either dare pause for breath or a backward glance.



Flames Licked Out All Over the Schooner.

Then the impact of the launch against the Seaventure's side rang out across the waters, and with a husky roar the launch blew up, spewing skywards a widespread fan of flame. Over the Seaventure, as this flamed and died, pale fire seemed to hover like a tremendous pall of phosphorescence, a weird and ghastly glare that suddenly descended to the decks. There followed a crackling noise, a sound as of the labored breathing of a giant; and bright flames, orange, crimson, violet and gold, licked out all over the schooner, from stem to stern, from deck to topmasts.

It seemed several minutes that she burned in this wise—it was probably not so long—before her decks blew up and the flames swept roaring to the sky.

By the time Alan and Barcus, swimming steadily, had gained a shoal which permitted them footing in waist-deep water, the Seaventure had burned to the water's edge.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)