

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

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Illustrated with Photographs from the Picture Production

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CHAPTER III.

The Trail of Treachery.

But young Mr. Lee was sole agent of his own evanishment; just as he was nobody's fool, least of all his own. The hidden meaning of the tray of hearts perplexed him with such distrust that before leaving London, he dispatched a code cablegram to his confidential agent in New York.

What do you know about the tray of hearts? Answer immediately.

The answer forestalled his arrival in Liverpool:

Trine's death sign for your father. For God's sake, look to yourself and keep away from America.

But Alan had more than once visited America incognito and unknown to Seneca Trine via a secret route of his own selection.

Eight days out of London, a second-class passenger newly landed from one of the C-P steamships, he walked the streets of Quebec—and dropped out of sight between dark and dawn, to turn up presently in the distant Canadian hamlet of Hale St. Paul, apparently a very tenderfooted American woods-traveler chaperoned by a taciturn Indian guide picked up heaven-knows-where.

Crossing the St. Lawrence by night, the two struck off quietly into the hinterland of the Notre Dame range, then crossed the Maine border.

On the second noon thereafter, trail-worn and weary, as lean as their depleted packs, the two paused on a ridge-pole of the wilderness up back of the Allagash country, and made their midday meal in a silence which, if normal in the Indian, was one of deep misgivings on Alan's part.

Continually his gaze questioned the northern skies that lowered portentously, foul with smoke—a country-wide conflagration that threatened all northern Maine, bone-dry with drought.

Only the south offered a fair prospect. And the fires were making southward far faster than man might hope to travel through that grim and stubborn land.

Even as he stared, Alan saw fresh columns of dun-colored smoke spring up in the northwest.

Anxiously he consulted the impassive mask of the Indian, from whom his questions gained Alan little comfort. Jacob recommended forced marches to Spirit lake, where canoes might be found to aid their flight; and withdrew into sullen reserve.

They traveled far and fast by dim forest trails before sundown, then again paused for food and rest. And as Jacob sat deftly about preparing the meal, Alan stumbled off to whip the little trail-side stream for trout.

Perhaps a hundred yards upstream, the back-lash of a careless cast by his weary hand hooked the state of Maine. Too tired even to remember the appropriate words, Alan scrambled ashore, forced through the thick undergrowth that masked the trail, found his fly, set the state of Maine free—and swinging on his heel brought up, nose to a sapling, transfixed by a rectangle of white paste-board fixed to his trunk, a tray of hearts, of which each pip had been neatly punctured by a 22-caliber bullet.

He carried it back to camp, meaning to consult the guide, but on second thought, held his tongue. It was not likely that the Indian had overlooked an object so conspicuous on the trail.

So Alan waited for him to speak—and meantime determined to watch Jacob more narrowly, though no other suspicious circumstance had marked the several days of their association.

The first half of the night was, as the day, devoted to relentless progress southward; thirty minutes of steady jogging, five minutes for rest—and repeat.

No more question as to the need for such urgent haste; overhead the north wind muttered without ceasing. Thin veils of smoke drifted through the forest, hugging the ground, like some weird acid mist; and ever the curtain heavens glared, livid with reflected fires.

By midnight Alan had come to the bounds of endurance; flesh, bone and sinew could no longer stand the strain. Though Jacob declared that Spirit lake was now only six hours distant, as far as concerned Alan he might have said 600. His blanket once unrolled, Alan dropped upon it like one drugged.

The sun was high when he awakened and sat up, rubbing heavy eyes, stretching aching limbs, wondering what had come over the Indian to let him sleep so late.

Of a sudden he was assailed by sickening fears that needed only the briefest investigation to confirm. Jacob had absconded with every valuable item of their equipment.

Nor was his motive far to seek. Overnight the fire had made tremendous gains. And ever and anon the wind would bring down the roar of the holocaust, dulled by distance but not unlike the growling of wild animals feeding on their kill. Alan delayed long enough only to

swallow a few mouthfuls of raw food, gulped water from a spring, and set out at a dog-trot on the trail to Spirit Lake.

For hours he blundered blindly on, holding to the trail mainly by instinct.

At length, panting, gasping, half-blinded, he staggered into a little natural clearing and plunged forward headlong, so bewildered that he could not have said whether he was tripped or thrown; for even as he stumbled a heavy body landed on his back and crushed him savagely to earth.

In less than a minute he was overcome; his wrists hitched together, his ankles bound with heavy cord.

When his vision cleared he found Jacob within a yard, regarding him with a face as immobile as though it had been cast in the bronze it resembled.

Beyond, to one side, a woman in a man's hunting costume stood eyeing the captive as narrowly as the Indian, but unlike him with a countenance that seemed aglow with a fierce exultation over his downfall.

But for that look, he could have believed here the face that had brought him overseas to this mortal pass. Features for feature, even to the line of her ruffled hair, she counterfeited the woman he loved; only those eyes, adama with their look of inhuman ruthlessness, denied that the two were one.

He sought vainly to speak. His breath rustled in his parched throat like wind whispering among dead leaves.

Thrusting the Indian roughly aside, the woman knelt in his place by Alan's head.

"No," she said, and smiling cruelly, shook her head—"no, I am not your Rose. But I am her sister, Judith, her twin, born in the same hour, daughter of—can you guess whose daughter? But see this!" She flashed a card from within her hunting shirt and held it before his eyes. "You know it, eh? The tray of hearts—the symbol of Trine—Trine, your father's enemy, and yours, and—Rose's father and mine! So, now, perhaps you know!"

A gust of wind like a furnace blast swept the glade. The woman sprang up, glanced over-shoulder into the forest, and signed to the Indian.

"In ten minutes," she said, "these woods will be your funeral pyre."

She stepped back. Jacob advanced, picked Alan up, shouldered his body, and strode back into the forest. Ten feet in from the clearing he dropped the helpless man supine upon a bed of dry logs and branches.

Then, with a single movement, he disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

Many Waters.

Overhead, through a rift in the foliage, a sky was visible whose ebon darkness called to mind a thunder-cloud.

The heat was nearly intolerable; the voice of the fire was very loud.

A heavy, broken crashing near by made Alan turn his head, and he saw a brown bear break cover and plunge on into the farther thickets—forerunner of a mad rout of terrified forest folk, deer, porcupines, a fox or two, a wildcat, rabbits, squirrels, partridges—a dozen more.

Two minutes had passed of the ten. Something was digging uncomfortably into Alan's right hip—the automatic pistol in his hip pocket, of which Jacob had neglected to relieve him. Then a sharp, spiteful crackling brought him suddenly to a sitting position, to find that the Indian had thoughtfully touched a match to the pyre before departing. At Alan's feet the twigs were blazing merrily.

It would have been easy enough, acting on instinct, to snatch his limbs away, but he did not move more than to strain his feet as far as their bonds permitted. Conscious of scorching heat even through his hunting boots, he suffered that torture until a tongue of flame licked up, wrapped itself round the thick hempen cord and ate it through.

Immediately Alan kicked his feet free, lifted to a kneeling position, and crawled from the pyre.

As for his hands—Alan's hunting-knife was still in its sheath belted to the small of his back. Tearing at the belt with his hampered fingers, he contrived to shift it round until the sheath knife stuck at the belt-loop over his left hip. Withdrawing and conveying the blade to his mouth, he

lessened perceptibly, thanks to the strong current sucking through the spillway.

His shot flew wide, but almost instinctively his finger closed again upon the trigger, and he saw the paddle snap in twain, its blade falling overboard. And then the Indian fired again, his bullet droning past Alan's ear.

As he fired in response Jacob started, dropped his rifle and crumpled up in the bow of the canoe.

Simultaneously earth and heavens rocked with a terrific clap of thunder.

He turned again and ran swiftly along the dam, toward two heavy timbers that bridged the torrent of the spillway.

Then a glance aside brought him up with a thrill of horror; the suck of the overflow had drawn the canoe within a hundred yards of the spillway. The dead Indian in its bow, the living woman helpless in its stern, it swept swiftly onward to destruction.

His next few actions were wholly unpremeditated. He was conscious only of her white, staring face, her strange likeness to the woman that he loved.



Sawed the Cords Against the Razor-Sharp Blade.

gripped it firmly between his teeth, and sawed the cords round his wrists against the razor-sharp blade.

Before Alan could turn and run he saw a vanguard of flames bridge 50 yards at a bound and start a dead pine blazing like a torch.

And then he was pelting like a mailman across the stank-filled clearing, and in less than two minutes broke from the forest to the pebbly shore of a wide-bosomed lake, and within a few hundred feet of a substantial dam, through whose spillway a heavy volume of water cascaded with a roar rivaling that of the forest-fire itself.

Two quick glances showed Alan two things: that his only way of escape was via the dam; that there was a solitary canoe at mid-lake, bearing swiftly to the farther shore Judith Trine and the Indian—the latter wielding the paddle.

In the act of turning toward the dam he saw Jacob drop the paddle. The next instant a bullet from a Winchester .30 kicked up a spurt of pebbles only a few feet in advance of Alan.

He quickened his pace, but the next bullet fell closer, while the third actually bit the earth beneath his running feet as he gained the dam.

Exasperated, he pulled up, whipped out his pistol and fired without aim. At the same time, he noted that the distance between dam and canoe had



A Tremendous Weight Tore at His Arms.

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He ran out upon the bridge, threw himself down upon the innermost timber, turned, and let his body fall backward, arms extended at length, and swung, braced by his feet beneath the outer timber.

With a swiftness that passed conscious thought, he was aware of the canoe hurtling onward with the speed of wind, its sharp prow apparently aimed directly for his head. Then hands closed round his wrists like clamps; a tremendous weight tore at his arms, and with an effort of inconceivable difficulty he began to lift, to drag the woman up out of the foaming jaws of death.

Somehow that impossible feat was achieved; somehow the woman gained a hold upon his body, shifted it to his side, contrived inexplicably to clamber over him to the timbers; and somehow he in turn pulled himself up to safety, and stek with reaction sprawled prone, lengthwise upon that foot-wide bridge, above the screaming abyss.

Later he became aware that the

woman had crawled to safety on the farther shore, and pulling himself together, imitated her example. Solid earth underfoot, he rose and stood swaying, beset by a great weakness.

Through the gathering darkness—a ghastly twilight in which the flaming forests on the other shore burned with an unearthly glare—he discovered the wan, written face of Judith Trine close to his and he heard her voice, a scream barely audible above the commingled voices of the conflagration and the cascades:

"You fool! Why did you save me? I tell you, I have sworn your death!" The utter grotesqueness of it all broke upon his intelligence like the revelation of some enormous fundamental absurdity in Nature. He laughed a little hysterically.

Darkness followed. A flash of lightning seemed to flame between them like a fiery sword. To its crashing thunder, he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When he roused, it was with a shiv-

er and a shudder. Rain was falling in torrents from a sky the hue of slate. Across the lake dense volumes of steam enveloped the fires that faintly beneath the deluge. A great hissing noise filled the world, muting even the roar of the spillway.

He was alone. But in his hand, tattered and bruised by the downpour, he found—a rose. (Continued in next issue.)

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