

THE TREY O'HEARTS

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 farther—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 crah, 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, unless you've got some kick comin' and 'ud ruther stop hyeh permanent!"

He turned off and busted 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; he had turned away and was just then standing by the running-board of the motor car—and civilly explaining to Miss Judith Trine the purpose of the chauffeur'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

substantially in seeming, with another rope, breast-high, to serve as a hand-rail.

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.

"Be silent!" he heard her say. "Be silent, do you hear? Don't ever speak to me again unless you want me to replace that gag. I say, don't speak to me! . . . I am finished with you once and for all time; never again shall you pervert my nature to your damnable purposes—never again shall word or wish of yours drive me to lift my hand against a man who has never done you the least harm, though your persecution of him would have acquitted him of a charge of manslaughter in any court—on grounds of self-defense! . . . Understand me!" she raged. "I'm through. Henceforth I go my way, and you yours . . ."

Her voice broke. She clenched her hands into two tight fists with the effort at self-control, and lifted a written face to the moonlight.

"God help us both!" she cried.

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 some question—Rose insistent, Alan reluctant.

The last gave way in the end, shrugged, returned to the car.

"I'm going back up the trail," he announced, and hesitated oddly.

"Feeling the need of some little exercise, no doubt," Barcus suggested.

"Rose thinks it's dangerous to stop here," Alan began to explain, 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 insistence 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 inadvertently 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

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

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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

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 Barcus 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 black-guard 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—"

To Be Continued Monday



Gnashing His Teeth In Impotent Rage.



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 fiancée 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. Eying her narrowly though furtively, Mr. Barcus saw her handsome face darken ominously.

And her father was as quick to recognize these portents of trouble and to seek to advantage himself of them.

His head craned out horribly on his long, wasted neck as he pitched a

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 be-

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