

# The Trey O'Hearts

By Louis Joseph Vance

SCHOOL STANDARD IS SET BY STATE REQUIREMENTS APPROVED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RECEIVED CERTIFICATE GIVEN FOR HIGH SCORE

### CHAPTER V.

#### The Hunted Man.

That day was hot and windless with an unclouded sky—a day of brass and burning.

Long before any sound audible to human ears disturbed the noonday hush, a bobcat sunning on a log in a glade to which no trail led, pricked ears, rose, glanced over shoulder with a snarl and—of a sudden was no more there.

Perhaps two minutes later a succession of remote crashings began to be heard, a cumulative volume of sounds made by some heavy body forcing by main strength through the underbrush, and ceased only when a man broke into the clearing, pulled up, stood for an instant swaying, then reeled to a seat on the log, pillow his head on arms folded across his knees and shuddering uncontrollably in all his limbs.

He was a young man who had been and would again be very personable. Just now he wore the look of one bounded by furia. His face was crimson with congested blood and streaked with sweat and grime; bluish veins throbbled in high relief upon his temples; his lips were cracked and swollen, his eyes haggard, his hands torn and bleeding. His shirt and trousers and "crusers" were wrecks, the latter scorched, charred, and broken in a dozen places. Woods equipment he



It Was a Rose.

had none beyond a hunting knife belted at the small of his back. All else had been either consumed in the forest fire or stolen by his Indian guide—who had subsequently died while attempting to murder his employer.

Since that event, the man had succeeded in losing himself completely. In seeking shelter from the thunderstorm, he had lost touch with his only known and none too clearly located landmarks. Then, after a night passed without a fire in the lee of a ragged bluff, he had waked to discover the sun rising in the west and the rest of the universe sympathetically upside-down; and aimlessly ever since he had stumbled and blundered in the maze of those grimly reticent fastnesses, for the last few hours haunted by a fear of falling reason—possessed by a notion that he was dogged by furtive enemies—and within the last hour the puppet of blind, witless panic.

But even as he strove to calm himself and rest, the feeling that something was peering at him from behind a mask of undergrowth grew intolerably acute.

At length he jumped up, glared wildly at the spot where that something no longer was, flung himself frantically through the brush in pursuit of it, and—found nothing.

With a great effort he pulled himself together, clamped his teeth upon the promise not again to give way to hallucinations, and turned back to the clearing.

There, upon the log on which he had rested, he saw—a playing card, a Trey of hearts, face up in the sunlight.

With a gesture of horror, Alan Law fled the place.

While the sounds of his flight were still loud, a grinning half-breed guide stole like a shadow to the log, laughed derisively after the fugitive, picked up and pocketed the card, and set out in tireless, cat-footed pursuit.

An hour later, topping a ridge of rising ground, Alan caught from the hollow on its farther side the music of clashing waters. Tortured by thirst, he began at once to descend in reckless haste.

What was at first a gentle slope covered with waist-deep brush and carpeted with leaf-mold, grew swiftly more declivities, a mossy hillside, as steep as a roof, bare of underbrush, and sparsely sown with small cedars through whose ranks cool blue water twinkled far below.

The shelving moss-beds afforded treacherous footing; Alan was glad now and then of the support of a cedar, but these grew ever smaller, and more widely spaced and were not always convenient to his hand. He came abruptly and at headlong pace within sight of the caves of a cliff—and precisely then the hillside seemed to slip from under him.

His heels flourished in the air, his back thumped a bed of pebbles thickly overgrown with moss. The stones gave, the moss-skin broke, he began to slide—grasped at random a youngish cedar which stayed him imperceptibly, coming away with all its puny roots—caught at another, no more substantial—and amid a shower of loose stones shot out over the edge and down a drop of more than thirty feet.

He was instantaneously aware of

the sun, a molten ball wheeling madly in the cup of the turquoise sky. Then dark waters closed over him.

He came up struggling and gasping, and struck out for something dark that rode the waters near at hand—something vaguely resembling a canoe.

But his strength was largely spent, his breath had been driven out of him by the force of the fall, and he had swallowed much water—while the field of his consciousness was stricken with confusion.

Within a stroke of an outstretched paddle, he flung up a hand and went down again.

Instantly one occupant of the canoe, a young and very beautiful woman in a man's hunting clothes, spoke a sharp word of command and, as her guide steadied the vessel with his paddle, rose in her place so surely that she scarcely disturbed the nice balance of the little craft, and curved her lithe body over the bow, head foremost into the pool.

Mr. Law had, in point of fact, endured more than he knew; more than even a weathered woodsman could have borne without suffering. Forty-eight hours of such heavy woods-walking as he had put in to escape the forest fire, would have served to prostrate almost any man; add to this (ignoring a dozen other mental, nervous and physical strains) merely the fact that he had been half-drowned.

He experienced a little fever, a little delirium, then blank slumbers of exhaustion.

He awoke in dark of night, wholly unaware that thirty-six hours had passed since his fall. This last, however, and events that had gone before, he recalled with tolerable clearness—allowing for the sluggishness of a drowsy mind. Other memories, more vague, of gentle ministrations, of a face by turns an angel's, a flower's, a fawn's, and a dear woman's, troubled him even less materially. He was already sane enough to allow he had probably been a bit out of his head, and since it seemed he had been saved and cared for, he found no reason to quarrel with present circumstances.

Still, he would have been grateful for some explanation of certain phenomena which still haunted him—such as a faint, elusive scent of roses with a vague but impetuous sense of a woman's presence in that darkened room—things manifestly absurd.

With some difficulty, from a dry throat, he spoke, or rather whispered: "Water!"

In response he heard someone move over a creaking floor. A sulphur match spluttered infamously. A candle caught fire, elbowing—illusion of counsel—the figure of a woman in hunting shirt and skirt. Water splashed noisily. Alan became aware of someone who stood at his side, one hand offering a glass to his lips, the other gently raising his head that he might drink with ease.

Draining the glass, he breathed his thanks and sank back, retaining his grasp on the wrist of that unreal hand. It suffered him without resistance. The hallucination even went so far as to say, in a woman's soft accents:

"You are better, Alan?"

He sighed incredulously. "Rose!" The voice responded: "Yes!" Then the perfume of roses grew still more strong, seeming to fan his cheek like a woman's warm breath. And a miracle came to pass; for Mr. Law, who realized poignantly that all this was sheer, downright nonsense, distinctly felt lips like velvet caress his forehead.

He closed his eyes, tightened his grasp on that hand of phantasy, and muttered rather inarticulately:

The voice asked: "What is it, dear?"

He responded: "Delirium . . . But I like it . . . Let me rave!"

Then again he slept.

### CHAPTER VI.

#### Disclosures.

In a little corner office, soberly furnished, on the topmost floor of one of lower Manhattan's loftiest office-towers, a little mouse-brown man sat over a big mahogany desk; a little man of big affairs, sole steward of one of America's most formidable fortunes.

Precisely at eleven minutes past noon (or at the identical instant chosen by Alan Law to catapult over the edge of a cliff in northern Maine) the muted signal of the little man's desk telephone clicked and, eagerly lifting receiver to ear, he nodded with a smile and said in accents of some relief:

"Ask her to come in at once, please."

Jumping up, he placed a chair in intimate juxtaposition with his own; and the door opened, and a young woman entered.

The mouse-brown man bowed. "Miss Rose Trine?" he murmured with a great deal of deference.

The young woman returned his bow with a show of perplexity. "Mr. Digby?"

"You are kind to come in response to my—ah—unconventional invitation," said the little man. "Won't you—ah—sit down?"

She said, "Thank you," gravely, and took the chair he indicated. And Mr. Digby, with an admiration he made no effort to conceal, examined the fair face turned so candidly to him.

"It is quite comprehensible," he said diffidently—"if you will permit me to say so—now that one sees you, Miss Trine, it is quite comprehensible why my employer—ah—feels toward you as he does."

The girl flushed. "Mr. Law has told you?"

"I have the honor to be his nearest

friend, this side the water, as well as his man of business."

He paused with an embarrassed gesture. "So I have ventured to request this—ah—surprised appointment in order to—ah—take the further liberty of asking whether you have recently sent Alan a message?"

Her look of surprise was answer enough, but she confirmed it with vigorous denial: "I have not communicated with Mr. Law in more than a year!"

"Precisely as I thought," Mr. Digby nodded. "None the less, Mr. Law not long since received what purported to be a message from you; in fact—a rose." And as Miss Trine sat forward with a start of dismay, he added:

"I have visited the man Mr. Digby, a letter received ten days ago—from Quebec."

"Alan in America!" the girl cried in undigested distress.

"He came in response to—ah—the message of the rose."

"But I did not send it!"

"I felt sure of that, because," said Mr. Digby, watching her narrowly—"because of something that accompanied the rose, a symbol of another significance altogether—a playing card, a Trey of hearts."

Her eyes were blank. He pursued with openly sincere reluctance: "I must tell you, I see, that a Trey of hearts invariably foretold an attempt by your father on the life of Alan's father."

With a stricken cry the girl crouched back in the chair and covered her face with her hands.

"That is why I sent for you," Mr. Digby pursued hastily, as if in hope of getting quickly over a most unhappy business. "Alan's letter, written and posted on the steamer, reached me within twenty-four hours of his arrival in Quebec, and detailed his scheme to enter the United States secretly—as he puts it, 'by the back door,' by way of northern Maine—and promised advice by telegraph as soon as he reached Moosehead Lake. He should have wired me ere this, I am told by those who know the country he was to cross. Frankly, I am anxious about the boy!"

"And I!" the girl exclaimed pitifully. "To think that he should be brought into such peril through me!"

"You can tell me nothing?"

"Nothing—as yet. I did not dream of this—much less that the message of the rose was known to any but Alan and myself. I cannot understand!"

"Then I may tell you this much more, that your father maintains a very efficient corps of secret agents."

"You think he spied upon me?" the girl flamed with indignation.

"I know he did," Mr. Digby permitted himself a quiet smile. "It has seemed my business, in the service of my employer, to employ agents of my own. There is no doubt that your father sent you to Europe for the sole purpose of having you meet Alan."

"Oh!" she protested. "But what earthly motive?"

"That Alan might be won back to America through you—and so."

There was no need to finish out his sentence. The girl was silent, pale and staring with wide eyes, visibly mustering her wits to cope with this emergency.

"I may depend on you," Mr. Digby suggested, "to advise me if you find out anything?"

"For even more." The girl rose and extended a hand whose grasp was firm

and vital on his fingers. A fine spirit of resolve set her countenance aglow: "You may count on me for action on my own part, if I find circumstances warrant it. I promised not to marry Alan because of the feud between our fathers—but not to stand by and see him sacrificed. Tell me how I may communicate secretly with you—and let me go as soon as possible!"

CHAPTER VII.

#### The Mutineer.

Within the hour Rose Trine stood before her father in that somber room wherein he wore out his crippled days, in that place of silence and shadows whose sinister color-scheme of crimson and black was the true livery of his monomania—his passion for vengeance that alone kept warm the em-

bers of life in that wasted and moveless frame.

An implacable glimmered in his sunken eyes as he kept her waiting upon his pleasure. And when at length he decided to speak, it was with a ring of hateful irony in that strangely sonorous voice of his.

"Rose," he said slowly—"my daughter!—I am told you have today been guilty of an act of disloyalty to me."

She said coolly: "You had me spied upon."

"Naturally, with every reason to question your loyalty, I had you watched."

She waited a significant moment, then dropped an impassive monosyllable into the silence: "Well?"

"You have visited the man Mr. Digby, servant and friend of the man I hate—and you love."

She said, without expression: "Yes."

"Repeat what passed between you?"

"I shall not, but on one condition."

"And that is?"

"Tell me first whether it was you who sent the rose to Alan Law—and more, where Judith has been during the last fortnight?"

"I shall tell you nothing, my child. Repeat—the resonant voice rang with inflexible purpose—repeat what the man Digby told you!"

The girl was silent. He endured her stare for a long minute, a spark of rage kindling to flame the evil old eyes. Then his one living member that had power to serve his iron will, a hand like the claw of a bird of prey, moved toward a row of buttons sunk in the writing-bed of his desk.

"I warn you I have ways to make you speak—"

With a quick movement the girl bent over and grasped the boy's wrist in her strong fingers. With her other hand, at the same time, she whipped open an upper drawer of the desk and took from it a revolver which she placed at a safe distance.

"To the contrary," she said quietly, "you will remember that the time has passed when you could have me punished for disobedience. You will call nobody; if interrupted, I shall hesitate to defend myself. And now—laying hold of the back of his chair, she moved it some distance from the desk—"

"you may as well be quiet while I find for myself what I wish to know."

For a moment he watched in silence as she bent over the desk, rummaging its drawers. Then with an infuriated gesture of his left hand, he began to curse her.

She shuddered a little as the black oaths blistered his thin old lips, dedicating her and all she loved to sin, infamy and sorrow; but nothing could stay her in her purpose. He was breathless and exhausted when she straightened up with an exclamation of satisfaction, studied intently for a moment a sheaf of papers, and thrust them hastily into her hand-bag, together with the revolver.

Then touching the push-button which released a secret and little-used door, without a backward glance she slipped from the room and, closing the door securely, within another minute had made her way unseen from the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

#### The Incredible Thing.

Broad daylight, the top of a morning as rare as ever broke upon the north country: Alan Law opening bewildered eyes to realize the substance of a dream come true.

True it proved itself, at least, in part. He lay between blankets upon a couch of balsam furs, in a corner of somebody's camp—a log structure, weather-proof, rudely but adequately furnished. His clothing, rough-dried but neatly mended, lay upon a chair at his side.

He rose and dressed in haste, at once exulting in his sense of complete rest and renewed well-being, a prey to hints of an extraordinary appetite, and provoked by signs that seemed to bear out the weirdest flights of his delirious fancies.

There were apparently indisputable evidences of a woman's recent presence in the camp; blankets neatly folded upon a second bed of aromatic balsam in the farther corner; an effect of orderliness not common with guides; a pair of dainty buckskin gauntlets depending from a nail in the wall; and—he stood staring wilelessly at it for more than a minute—in an old preserve jar on the table, a single rose, warm and red, dew upon its petals!

There was also fire in the cook stove, with a plentiful display of things to cook; but despite his hunger Alan didn't stop for that, but rushed to the door and threw it open and himself out into the sunshine, only to pause, dashed, chagrined, mystified.

There was no other living thing in sight but a loon that sported far up the river and saluted him with a shriek of mocking laughter.

The place was a cleft in the hills, a table of level land some few acres in area, bounded on one hand, beneath the cliff from which he had dropped, by a rushing river fat with recent rains; on the other by a second cliff of equal height. Upstream the water curved round the shoulder of a towering hill, downstream the cliffs closed upon it until it roared through a narrow gorge.

Near the camp, upon a strip of shelving beach that bordered the river where it widened into a deep, dark pool, two canoes were drawn up, bottoms to the sun. Dense thickets of pines, oaks, and balsams hedged in the clearing.

He was, it seemed, to be left severely to himself, that day; when he had cooked and made way with an enormous breakfast, Alan found nothing better to do till time for lunch

than to explore this pocket domain.

He feasted famously again at noon; whiled away several hours vainly whipping the pools with rod and tackle found in the camp, for trout that he really didn't hope would rise beneath that blazing sun; and toward three o'clock lounged back to his aromatic couch for a nap.

The westerling sun had thrown a deep, cool shadow across the cove when he was awakened by importunate hands and a voice of magic.

Rose Trine was kneeling beside him, clutching his shoulders, calling on him by name—distracted by an inexplicable anxiety.

He wasted no time discriminating between dream and reality, but gathered both into his arms. And for a moment she rested there unresisting, sobbing quietly.

"What is it? What is it, dearest?" he questioned, kissing her tears away.

"To find you all right. . . . I was so afraid!" she cried brokenly.

"Of what? Wasn't I all right when you left me here this morning?"

She disengaged with an effort, rose, and looked down strangely at him.

"I did not leave you here this morning, Alan. I wasn't here—"

That brought him to his own feet in a jiffy. "You were not!" he exclaimed. "Then who—?"

"Judith," she stated with conviction. "Impossible! You don't understand."

The girl shook her head. "Yet I know: Judith was here until this

morning. I tell you I know—I saw her only a few hours ago. She passed us in a canoe with one of her guides, while we watched in hiding on the banks. Not that alone, but another of her guides told me she was here with you. She had sent him to South Portage for quinine. He stopped there to get drunk—and that's how my guide managed to worm the information from him."

Alan passed a hand across his eyes. "I don't understand," he said dully. "It doesn't seem possible she could—"

A shot interrupted him, the report of a rifle from a considerable distance upstream, echoed and re-echoed by the cliffs. And at this, clutching frantically at his arm, the girl drew him through the door and down toward the river.

"Oh, come, come!" she cried wildly. "There's no time!"

"But, why? What was that?"

"Judith is returning. I left my guide up the trail to signal us. Don't you know what it means if we don't manage to escape before she gets here?"

"But how?"

"According to the guide the river's the only way other than the trail."

"The current is too strong. They could follow—pot us at leisure from the banks."

"But downstream—the current with us—"

"Those rapids?"

"We must shoot them!"

"Can it be done?"

"It must be!"

Two more shots put a period to his doubts and drove it home. He offered no further objection, but turned at once to launch one of the canoes.

As soon as it was in the water, Rose took her place in the bow, paddle in hand, and Alan was about to step in astern when a fourth shot sounded and a bullet kicked up turf within a dozen feet. A glance discovered two figures debouching into the clearing. He dropped into place and, planting paddle in shallows, sent the canoe well out with a vigorous thrust.

Two strokes took it to the middle of the pool where immediately the current caught the little craft in its urgent grasp and sped it smoothly through more narrow and higher banks. A moment more and the mouth of the gorge was yawning for them.

With the clean balance of an experienced canoeist, Alan rose to his feet for an instantaneous reconnaissance both forward and astern. He looked back first, and groaned in his heart to see the sharp prow of the second canoe glide out from the banks. He looked ahead and groaned aloud. The rapids were a wilderness of shouting waters, white and green, worse than anything he had anticipated or ever dreamed of.

But there was now no escaping that ordeal. The canoe was already spinning between walls where the water ran deep and fast with a glassy surface.

The next instant it was in the jaws, and the man settled down to work with grim determination, pitting courage and strength and experience against the ravaging waters that tore at the canoe on every hand, whose mad clamor beat back and forth between the walls of the gorge like vast howlings of infernal wrath.

He fought like one possessed. There was never an instant's grace for judgment or execution; the one must be synchronous with the other, both instantaneous, or else—destruction.

The canoe wove this way and that like an insane shuttle threading some satanic loom. Now it heaved, surging a gigantic boulder over which the water wove a pale green and glistening hood, now in the space of a heartbeat it shot forward twice its length through a sea of creaming waves, now plunged wildly toward what promised instant annihilation and cheated that only by the timely plunge of a paddle, guided by luck or instinct or both.

The one ray of hope in Alan's mind, when he surveyed before committing himself and the woman he loved to that hideous gauntlet, sprang from the fact that, however rough, the rapids were short. Now, when he had been in their grasp a minute, he seemed to have been there hours.

His labors were tremendous, unbelievable, inspired. In the end they were all but successful. The goal of safety was within thirty seconds more of quick hand work, when Alan's paddle broke and the canoe swung broadside to a boulder, turned turtle and precipitated both heading into that savage welter.

As the next few minutes passed he was fighting like a mad thing against overwhelming odds. Then, of a sudden, he found himself rejected, spewed forth from the cataract and swimming mechanically in the smooth water of a wide pool beyond the lowermost eddy, the canoe floating bottom up near by, and Rose supporting herself with one hand on it.

Her eyes met his, clear with the sanity of her adorable courage.

He floundered to her side, painted instructions to transfer her hand to his shoulder, and struck out for the nearer shore.

Both found footing at the same time and waded out, to collapse, exhausted, against the bank.

Then, with a sickening qualm, Alan remembered the pursuit. He rose and looked up the rapid swift in time to view the last swift quarter of the canoe's descent. Judith in the bow, motionless, a rifle across her knees, in the stern an Indian guide kneeling and fighting the waters with scarcely perceptible effort in contrast with Alan's supreme struggles.

Like a living thing the canoe seemed to gather itself together, to poise, to leap with all its strength; it hurdled the eddy in a bound, took the still water with a mighty splash, and shot downstream at diminished speed, the Indian furiously backing water.

As though that had been the one moment she had lived for, Judith lifted her rifle and brought it to bear—upon her sister.

With a cry of horror, Alan flung himself before Rose, a living shield, anticipating nothing but immediate death. This was not accorded him. For a breathless instant the woman in

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