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TONAWAMA

THEATRE
Every Wednesday Evening

THE TREY O' HEARTS

CHAPTER XL.

The Man in the Shadow.
Two hundred feet, if one, Hopt Jim fell from the lip of the cliff. Then suddenly the thing that had been Hopt Jim Slade was checked in its headlong descent by the outstanding trunk of a tree, over which it remained, doubled up, limp, horrible.

The miniature landscape that had been caused by his fall went on, settling gradually as the slope became less sheer. Only part of it, a double handful of pebbles, gained the bottom of the canyon.

Its muffled impact on the ground round his feet roused the man who had compared the hand's death from the pose he had unconsciously assumed on the instant of firing.

He stepped back, and snatched up a case containing binoculars. Not before the glasses were adjusted to his vision did he find time to respond absently to the alarmed and insistent inquiries of his two companions—a man of his own age and a girl of some years less, who had been wakened from their sleep by the report of the rifle.

Now the latter plucked his sleeve, momentarily deflecting the glasses from the object which they were following so sedulously as it moved along the heights, wildly running horse with a woman bound helpless upon its back, both sharply in silhouette against the burning blue.

"Alan!" the girl demanded, "what is it? Why did you fire? Why won't you answer me? What is it?"

"Judith," Alan replied, "I'm again picking up with the glasses the runaway horse that fled so madly along the perilous and narrow track of the hill trail.

The name was echoed from two throats as Alan swung sharply and thrust the glasses into the hands of the girl.

"Judith," he affirmed with a look of poignant solicitude. "She's roped to the back of that crazy broncho—helpless! See for yourself, one false step—suppose a stone turns beneath its hoof—she'll be killed!"

While the girl focused her glasses upon that speck that flew against the sky Alan turned to the two horses hobbled near by and seizing a saddle threw it over the back of one.

At this the other man turned to his side and dropping a detaining hand upon his arm asked:

"What are you going to do?"

Alan shook the hand off and went on with his self-appointed task.

"Go after her, Tom, of course," he replied. "What else? That animal is crazy, I tell you—"

"Even so," Tom Barcus argued, "you can't climb that hillside on horseback—and if you could, you'd be too late to catch up, much less prevent an accident—"

"I know it. But suppose it doesn't fall... You know what's beyond these hills—deserts! And the girl is helpless. I tell you, bound hand and foot. Think of her being carried that way—all day, perhaps—face up to this brutal sun! She'll go mad if something isn't done—"

"You've gone mad yourself already," Mr. Barcus contended darkly. "What's it to you if she does? Suppose you do succeed in rescuing her, what then? As soon as she gets on her pins she'll try to stick a knife into you—like as not. What's she been chasing you for, all over this land of the brave—and home of the free, but to take your fool life? And now you want to sacrifice

yourself to her, out of sheer, downright foolishness in the head? I suppose you'll like me to call it chivalry! I'll tell you what I call it—lunacy!"

"Don't be an ass!" Alan responded temperately, gathering the reins together and instinctively lifting a foot to stick a knife into you—like as not. What's she been chasing you for, all over this land of the brave—and home of the free, but to take your fool life? And now you want to sacrifice

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to avert it—no matter what we may have suffered at Judith's hands!"

With an indignant grunt, but considering none the less, Mr. Barcus caught up the glasses and turned his back.

"Go on!" he grumbled, pretending to ignore the hand Alan offered him from the saddle. "I've got no patience with you... But go!" he insisted, of a sudden seizing the hand and pressing it fervently. "And God go with you, my friend!"

Then, hoarse with drumming on the hard-packed earth of the canyon trail struck a hundred echoes from its rugged, rocky walls.

Mr. Barcus showed Rose Trine a face almost ludicrous with his anguished calls that was intended to seem reassuring.

"Let's look sharp and follow him as quick as may be," he urged. "Lightning will never strike us so long as we stick to Mr. Law of the charmed life—but I don't mind telling you, once out of his company, I'm just naturally afraid of the dark!"

CHAPTER XLII.

The Trail of Flying Hoof-Prints.
In the still air of that young day the chill of night lingered stubbornly—and would not lift the shadow of the eastern rampart had crept slowly down the canyon's western wall, telescoping upon itself and washed, letting in the sun to make the place a bit of torment and of being.

Refreshed from rest and exhilarated by this grateful coolness, his horse responded willingly to the first light touch of Alan's spur. In a twinkling the overnight camp dropped from view behind the rounded shoulder of a hillside, mesquite-chaubert.

Then from its first spirited flight the horse settled down to steady going, lengthened its stride, and ran for leagues with the long, apparently effortless and tireless lope of the plain-bred broncho, ventrator.

Alan's departure from camp had anticipated by a round quarter-hour the appearance on the upper trail of friends of the slain band, to the number of four or five, who had both discovered and recovered his body, called his death murder and pledged themselves to an avenger—laying responsibility for the attitude crime at the door of the man and woman to be seen in the canyon, immediately below the scene of Hopt Jim's fall.

Between the moment when discovery of the man on the ridge trail interrupted their simple and hurried breakfast and that which followed Rose and Barcus mounted on the back of their own horse and making the best of their way down the canyon in pursuit of Alan, but little time had elapsed.

And even with its double burden, their horse could not time upon the broad level than those who followed the ridge trail in mid-morning, when they approached the foothills that ran down to the desert, the pursuit was more than a mile in the rear and shut off to boot by a monolithic hill, while Alan was many a weary mile in advance.

He sat upon his horse, just then, at standstill upon the summit of a rounded knoll, the Painted Hills lifting up behind him, the desert before unfolding like a map—but like a map all blurred.

Only in the near foreground was anything definite to be distinguished in the aspect of the sunbitten waste—bleached earth patterned in almost orderly arrangement by sagebrush and gnarled cañon. At the distance of half a mile all blended into one vast plain of glowing gray that stretched over the round of the world to a broken wall of purple hills that reeled drunkenly in the haze-veiled southwest.

Was Judith out there, somewhere, lost, defenseless, forlorn, impotent to lift a hand to shield her face from the blast of that savage sun?

Staring beneath a shading hand, he discerned nothing that moved over the surface of the desert but his myriad head-devils jangling monotonously their infernal dance macabre.

Or—as seemed more probable—was she back there among the Painted Hills, lying still and lifeless, crushed beneath the weight of that fallen horse?

No rest for Alan till he knew... Descending the knoll he reined his lagging mount back into the trail, following its winding course through the foothills and round the base of that monolithic mountain toward the junction with the ridge trail, miles away.

It approached the hour of noon before he gained the point where the two trails joined and struck out across the desert. And here he discovered what he thought indubitable indication that the flight of Judith's horse had persisted.

Abandoning immediately all notion of returning through the hills by the ridge-trail, he turned and swung away at the best pace he could spur from his broncho, delivering himself into the pitiless embrace of that implacable wilderness of sun and sand.

At long intervals he would check the broncho and, resting in his saddle, endeavor to sweep the desert with his binoculars.

And toward the middle of the afternoon he fancied that something rewarded one such effort; something for an instant swam athwart the field of the glasses; something that seemed to move like a weary horse with a human figure bound to its back.

But now the phenomena were discernible which had been more perceptible, would have made him pause and think before he ventured farther from those hills, already beyond reach as they were.

His first apprehended warning came when the surface of the desert seemed

to lift and shake like the top of a canvas tent in a gale. At the same time a night gust of wind swept across the waste, but at a furnace-blast. In a trice dust enveloped man and horse, a stifling cloud of superheated particles that stung the flesh like a myriad needles. And then darkness fell, the twilight of hades, a copper-colored pall. Nothing remained visible beyond arm's length.

Blinded, half suffocated, unexpectably dismayed and bewildered, the broncho swung round, back to the blast, and refused to budge another inch.

Himself more than half-dazed, but still hounded by his nightmare vision of Judith, Alan dismounted to escape being torn bodily from the saddle by that hellish sand-blast, and seizing the bridle sought to draw the horse on with him.

He waded his strength in that endeavor; the animal balked, planted its hoofs deep in the sand, stiffened its legs and resisted with the stubbornness of a rock; then, of a sudden, jerked his head smartly, snapped the bridle from his grasp and flung away, scudding before the storm.

Pursuit was out of the question; indeed, the bridle was barely torn

from his hand before Alan lost sight of the broncho.

For a moment he stood rooted in consternation as in a bog—with an arm upthrown across his face.

Then the thought of Judith re-embodied the dust from his smarting eyes he saw what he at first conceived to be a hallucination: Judith Trine standing within a yard of him, alive, strong, free.

He stared incredulously, saw her recognize him, open her mouth to utter a wondering cry that was inaudible, and come, quickly nearer.

"Alan! You came for me! You followed me, through all this!"

He threw off her hand with a bitter laugh—that was like the croaking of a raven as it issued from his bone-dry throat—and in momentary possession of hysterical madness, reeling away from the woman and the shelter of the rock and delivered himself anew to the mercy of the dust-storm.

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With the meekness of the strong, she made herself his shadow. And she was now the stronger, for she had had more than an hour's rest beside the waterhole which he had missed on the way of that rocky windbreak. Sooner or later his strength must fall and he would need her, all that she was content to hide her hour.

It befell presently in startling fashion; she was not a yard behind him when he vanished abruptly.

But the next moment Judith herself was trembling on the crumbling brink of an arroyo of depth and width indeterminate in the obscurity of the dust-storm. Down this, evidently,

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Alan had fallen in his dizzy dizziness, the four or five minutes lying with an arm bent under him in a pose frightfully suggestive of dislocation. Yet when she turned him on his back and released the arm, he made no sign to indicate that the movement had caused him the slightest pain.

There was a slight cut upon his brow, a bruise about his left temple; she tore linen from her bosom, and with sparing aid from the canteen, washed the cut clean and bandaged it.

Then seeing that the storm held with fury unabated, she rose, reconnoitered and returned to exert all her strength and drag the unconscious man across the dry bed of that ancient water-course and under the lee of a farther bank.

There, sitting, she pillowed his head upon her lap, and bending over him made her body an additional shelter to him from the swirling clouds of dust.

For hours on end Judith nursed him there, scarce daring to move save to minister to his needs, bathing his fevered brow and moistening his parched lips and throat.

In the course of the first hour she was once startled by the spectral vis-

ion through the driving sheets or dust of a horse that plodded up the arroyo, bearing two riders on its back.

Wary with the weight of its double burden, and hardly had his eyes un-closed and looked up into the eyes of Judith bending over him than he started up and out of her embrace, got unsteadily upon his feet and after a moment of pause, watching her rise in turn, strode away—no, rather, staggered—with the gesture of one who is

Uncomplaining, bugging her newborn humility to her with the ecstasy of hysterical madness, reeling away from the woman and the shelter of the rock and delivered himself anew to the mercy of the dust-storm.

With tacit consent both turned that way, Alan leading, Judith his perturbed shadow, with never a word or sign between them to prove that either was aware of the other's company.

But this was a state of affairs that could not long endure. Judith had the price to pay for her own trials, suffering and privation; the strain began to tell sorely upon her, she reeled slightly as she walked, veering a winding trail across and across the straight line of footprints that marked Alan's course through the ordered pattern of the powdered sagebrush.

And of a sudden she collapsed.

Instinct alone made Alan glance over-shoulder; for she had made no sound whatever.

He turned and came directly back to her, knelt beside her, lifted her head, pillow it gently on his arm and piled her in turn with the drops of the canteen.

With a sigh, a stifled moan and a little shiver, she revived.

He helped her gently to regain her feet, passed an arm round her.

In this fashion they struggled on in strange, dumb companionship of misery and wonder.

Thus an hour passed; and for all their desperate struggles neither could see that the light on the mountainside was a yard the nearer.

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Rebeld then other lights appeared, two staring yellow eyes that peered up over the horizon, seemed to pause a time in search of the two, then leaped out directly toward them.

Of the lights were altogether ignorant, and when a deep, droning sound disturbed the desert silence, like the purring of some gigantic cat, both ascribed it to the drumming of their laboring pulses.

The two lights were not a mile behind them when, silently, without a sign to warn the girl, Alan released the reins and stepped forward and dropped as if shot.

Instantly she was kneeling by his side. But in the act of bending over him she drew back and remained for several moments motionless, staring at those twin glaring eyes, sweeping down upon them with all the speed attainable by a six-cylinder touring car negotiating a trackless desert.

When Judith did move it was not to comfort Alan. On the contrary, her first act was to draw from her pocket a heavy, blunt-nosed revolver, break it at the breech and blow its barrel clean toward the pair, leaving two in the car, the chauffeur and one who occupied a corner of the rear seat; an aged man with the face of a damned soul, doomed for a little time to live upon this earth in the certain knowledge of his damnation.

As this happened, Judith Trine leaped to her feet and stood over the body of Alan, a revolver poised in either hand.

"Halt!" she ordered imperatively. "Hands up!"

The three who had alighted obeyed without a moment's hesitation; her father's creatures, they knew the laughter of her far too well to dream of opposing her will.

In the six hands that were silhouetted against the headlights' radiance, three revolvers glimmered; but at her command all three dropped harmlessly to the earth.

Then, sharply, "Stand back two paces!"