THE TREY O' HEARTS," Part 8, at Gem Theatre.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Make-Believe.

For upwards of three-quarters of an hour of that golden morning which followed the night of his return to New York, Mr. Law was permitted to esteem himself the happiest of mortals.

And inasmuch as this is not only a longer uninterrupted term of happiness than is humanly common but is more of that emotion than ordinarily leavens the whole of a lifetime, Alan was perhaps to be envied, even though disillusionment when it came was sudden, sharp, and to him unspeakably shocking—a swift, unpressaged plunge from sunlit peaks of supreme content to the black depths of a bleak Avernus of despair.

The beginning of the period was synchronous with the slam of a taxicab door that shut away a superfluous world from the company of two who loved.

The sound spelled safety as well as success in Alan's understanding.

The car slipped smoothly away from the curb, pursued only by a little gust of semi-ironic cheers from the little company of working men who had witnessed as well as measurably participated in the putative elopement from the house of Trine.

Vigilant for any indication that their evasion had had a witness in that strange home of deathless hatred, Alan watched it through the little window in the back of the cab until a corner blotted out the vision of it; then with a sigh of relief sank down by the side of the woman to whom his every thought, impulse and emotion were dedicated.

"Rose!" he whispered, and tentatively touched one of the hands that lay clenched in her lap.

She responded with never a sign to indicate consciousness either of his touch or his whisper.

And reminding himself of the strain imposed upon her by the experience through which they had just passed, Alan excused her unresponsiveness on grounds of reaction, and for the time felt constrained to let his sweetheart rest and regain her normal poise: there was bliss enough for him in the consciousness that he had won her safely away, that nothing now more than a short hour's drive across town and by ferry across the Hudson stood between them and the marriage that should prove the consummation of all their trials . . . Barring accident!

Alan had too often suffered the penalty of disappointment for over-indulgence in this failing of his for deprecating the unforeseen, not to make the mental reservation, "Barring accidents!" with a little shiver of dread.

Had any of Trine's household been cognizant of his daughter's escape, Alan argued, interference must have been instant.

Despite the reassuring aspect, the preoccupation of his companion so wore upon him that he was presently no longer able to refrain from disturbing her.

"Rose!" he begged again, closing a hand tenderly over hers. "Dearest girl, don't worry another instant! Do calm yourself: remember we are safe

She Appeared Anxious to Escape Without Being Seen.

now; we fooled them handily—thanks to your faith and bravery, sweetheart! and everything is going to be well with us from now on. Over in Jersey the minister is waiting now to marry us; and down at the White Star dock the boat is waiting that is to carry us off to England the moment we're married. Think of that—and that I love you. Nothing can possibly break the strength of that combination!"

For another minute she rested as she had ever since sinking into her corner of the taxicab—moveless, taut, unresponsive.

Then a long sigh shook her to her very heart, and of a sudden the small fist in Alan's grasp relaxed and her face turned to his like a flower to the sun, a face transfigured, its lips now soft and yielding, its eyes unclosed and smiling into his a smile all misty with unshed tears.

"Alan," she breathed gently. "It can't be true! I'm trying so hard to believe—but all the while I know it can't be true!"

He converted a skeptic with the mute eloquence of his lips . . .

Head upon his shoulder, the girl clung passionately to him. "Tell me again that you love me!" she prayed. "Promise me you'll never let anything come between us. Promise me, Alan—promise me you'll be kind to me always, dear!"

"Can you doubt I will be kind?" he murmured reproachfully.

"I am afraid . . ." she whispered.

"How could I be anything else, loving you as I do?"

"I am afraid . . ."

"Why should I be unkind to you?"

"It isn't that. . . . I'm just afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of losing you."

"But that can never be!"

"You can't be sure. What if you were to find you'd been mistaken?" She caught her breath and added hastily—"That you didn't really love me, I mean."

"Oh, that's ridiculous!"

"I can't be sure. Nothing in life is permanent. What is love? Illusion of the senses! What is happiness? A will-o'-the-wisp! What is life? A make-believe!"

"Dearest!" He held her more closely still. "You are nervous and overwrought. You don't know what you're saying. You can't mean what you're saying. . . . But say that it's so—that life is all make-believe. Then make-believe you love me—"

"Oh, but I do, I do!"

"And make-believe for a little we've caught the will-o'-the-wisp—only for a little—until you wake up and realize that it's all real and true."

She closed her eyes again: "Yes," she breathed, "you are right. Let's make-believe it's all true for a little longer . . . and forget . . ."

He could by no means account for this strange humor; but he did his best to comfort her, none the less tenderly because of his mystification. And for a long time she let illusion blind her, resting quietly in his arms, making believe . . .

Only on approaching the Twenty-third street ferry they must needs rouse and sit apart constrainedly for fear some one might glance through the window and surprise their secret.

As if one needed the evidence of a caress exchanged to know that they were lovers, who had eyes to see the flushed loveliness of the girl shrinking back in her corner or wit to interpret the radiant happiness that shone in Alan's face as he bent forward and watched warily from the window.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Ring.

Theirs was the last vehicle to swing between the gates before these last were closed.

And this was quite as well; for Alan, rising for one last backward glance through the rear window, started involuntarily and choked upon an exclamation when he descried a powerful touring car tearing madly toward the ferry-house, its one passenger half rising from the front seat, beside the driver, and exhibiting a countenance purple with congested chagrin as he saw his car barred out of the carriage entrance.

Quickly sensitive to his emotion, the girl caught nervously at Alan's hand.

"What is it, dear?"

"Marrophat," he snapped.

She uttered a hushed cry of dismay.

"Don't be alarmed, however," he hastened to comfort her. "He's lost the race: the gates are shut—even the passenger gates—and there must be a company spotter somewhere near by, for the gateman is virtuously refusing to be bribed by a roll of money as thick as my wrist!"

At that instant the taxicab rolled aboard the ferry-boat; the deck gates were closed; a hoarse whistle rent the roaring silence of the city; winches rattled and chains clanked; and the boat wore ponderously out of its slip.

"So much for Mr. Marrophat!" Alan crowed, sitting down. "Foiled again! He can't stop us now!"

"Perhaps . . ."

"Why that perhaps? Why that tone?" he demanded sharply, struck by the foreboding her accents confessed.

"This isn't the only ferry. There's the Pennsylvania and the Lackawanna—and by hard driving he might even manage to catch the boat that connects with this from the Christopher street ferry of the Erie!"

"Impossible! I don't believe it! I won't!"

"Let's not," she agreed. "But, Alan . . ."

"Yes?"

"Promise me—if he should manage to catch up with us—you won't let him talk to you. I mean, don't let him—"

"No fear of that!" he asservated hotly. "If he tries to exchange one word with me—I only wish he would!"

She seemed satisfied with that; but the incident had served appreciably to chill their spirits. They accomplished the remainder of that voyage in a silence that was no less depressed because they sat hand in hand throughout.

Nor was their taxicab three minutes out of the ferry house on the Jersey shore—though the chauffeur, stimulater by Alan's extravagant promises, was doing his best to fracture the speed laws and escape arrest—when the girl's fears were amply justified: a shout from behind drew Alan's head out of the window on one side and the girl's on the other and proved to both that Marrophat had indeed found some way to make the crossing without great delay.

His touring car was within fifty yards when they first were aware of it; and Marrophat, standing on the running-board, was shouting inarticulately and flourishing an imperative hand; while the distance between them was momentarily growing less noticeable.

As Marrophat's car drew abreast Alan nodded and said quietly: "Don't be alarmed; I can attend to this gentleman single-handed."

And this he proceeded to demonstrate with admirable ease, even though called upon to do so far sooner than he had thought to be—thanks to Marrophat's hair-brained precipitancy. For, failing to influence the taxi driver by shouted demands or threats, or to gain the least attention from Alan, Trine's first lieutenant abruptly and surprisingly took his life in his hands and in one wild bound bridged the distance between the two flying cars and landed on the taxi's running-board.

Stop!" he screamed madly. "Stop, I say! You don't know what you're doing! Let me tell you—"

He got that far but no farther. In the same breath Alan had flung wide the door and was at the fellow's throat. There was a struggle of negligible duration; Marrophat was in no way his antagonist's match; within three seconds he threw out both hands, clutched hopelessly at the framework of the cab, and fell heavily to the street.

The taxi sped on without pause, its driver deaf to the hails of innocent if indignant bystanders. Alan pulled himself together and looked back just in time to catch a glimpse of a number of loafers lifting Marrophat to his feet and helping him to the sidewalk

"That Woman Is Judith Trine, You Idiot—Not Rose!"

of an unsavory-looking tenement, before the cab took a corner on two wheels . . ."

"Not seriously injured, I fancy," he told the girl in response to her eager look. "Worse luck!" he added gloomily.

But it seemed that he was to have greater cause than this to complain of his luck, before that ride was ended. Three blocks further on a tire blew out with a report like a cannon-cracker, and the taxi lurched perilously, hesitated, slowed down, and limped dejectedly to the curb.

Alan and the chauffeur piled out in the same instant, the one standing guard—with an eye out as well for another cab—while the other assessed damages.

"Nothing for it but a new tire, sir," this last reported sympathetically. "It must have been a broken bottle or something like that—it sure did rip the usefulness clean out of that shoe."

"Go to it," Alan advised him tersely; "and if you make a quick job of it, I'll stand the cost of the new tire."

"But if another cab comes along while you're at it you'll lose us as quick as a wink. Here's my card, in case we have to desert you in a hurry; you understand this is a matter of life and death, and I'll have no time to settle up with you. But you can call at Mr. Digby's office and he'll fix things up to your satisfaction."

The man took the card and after a glance at the name touched his hat with more noticeable respect.

"All right, Mr. Law," he agreed; "anything you say." And forthwith got to work.

The rapidity with which he completed the change of tires proved him an excellent chauffeur, an adept at his craft; but the delay was one disastrous for all that. It worked together with what Alan pardonably described as the devil's own luck to bring the touring car in sight at the precise moment when the chauffeur was cranking up and Alan on the point of re-entering the cab. And though they were off again before Alan could close the door, the attempt was hopeless from the start.

And yet—whether or not because Alan's distaste for interference had been too convincingly demonstrated—the touring car for the time being contented itself with trailing about fifty feet in the rear, while the taxi fled the tenement purlieus of the Hoboken waterfront and found its way into the broader streets of an unpretentious suburban quarter.

Not until they were well into the suburbs, with few dwellings near and no pedestrians to interfere, did Marrophat's purpose become apparent. Then, however—and it happened while Alan was looking back—the touring car drew in swiftly and easily and Marrophat, rising in his seat, leveled a revolver over the windshield and fired.

The crack of his weapon was practically coincident with a metallic thud beneath the rear seat of the taxicab.

Not for some moments did Alan appreciate the viciousness of the scheme. Surmising that the gasoline tank had been punctured by the bullet, he was inclined to believe that Marrophat hoped to stop the taxicab by depriving it, in course of time, of its fuel. And with this in mind he was presently surprised, as the cab took a corner, to see Marrophat's car stop at that corner and Marrophat himself get down. The brow of a hill intervened, shutting off sight of the blackguard as he knelt and lit a match. It was the girl who gave the alarm, suddenly withdrawing her head from the window to scream at Alan:

"He's fired the gasoline! It's flaming along the street, following the line of the leak—and catching up with us!"

Without pausing to put his hand to the latch, Alan kicked the door open.

"Jump!" he cried. "For your life—jump! As soon as that flame catches up with the tank—"

Simultaneously the chauffeur, overhearing, shut off the power.

The three gained the sidewalk barely in time: the tiny trail of flames, almost imperceptible in the sunlight, was not a yard from the jet that spurted through the bullet hole in the tank. In the flutter of an eyelash the explosion followed. Had the cab been loaded with nitroglycerin its destruction could have been no more absolute.

There was a roar . . . and then a heap of smoking ruins.

Without waiting to admire the spectacle, Alan caught the arm of the girl and hurried her up the street, at the same time calling to the chauffeur to follow. And chance brought them to the next corner as another cab, fareless, hove into view. Promising its driver anything he might ask, in or out of reason, Alan gave him the address, and helped the girl in.

If Marrophat pursued Alan could see no sign of him. The second car made better time than the first. Unhindered, and as far as could be determined, without being followed, it covered the brief remaining distance in a gratefully short lapse of time.

The suburb dropped behind a maze of streets where dwellings stood shoulder to shoulder and dooryards were scant. The car swept up to a corner house of modest and homely aspect. Two minutes more, and Alan was exchanging salutations with and making his bride-to-be known to Digby's good friend, the Reverend Mr. Wright.

Embarrassment worked confusion with the young man's perceptive faculties. As this moment approached when two should be made one who had gone through fire and flood, literally as well as figuratively, for each other's sake, incredulity drew a veil before his vision. He viewed the world as in a glass, darkly.

He was aware of a decently furnished minister's study; of two witnesses in the guise of unassuming womenfolk of the minister's household; of the Rev. Mr. Wright himself as a benevolent voice rolling sonorously forth from a black-clad presence; of the woman of his heart standing opposite him; of questions asked and responses made; of a ring that was magically conjured from some store apparently maintained against precisely similar emergencies; of a hand that took the hand that was to be his wife's and placed it in his; of his clumsy and witless bungling with the task of fitting that ring to the finger of his sweetheart's hand . . .

And then he was aware of a door that banged violently in the hallway; of the sound of a man's voice making some indistinguishable demand; that Rose's hand was suddenly whipped away, before he could fit on the ring; that the study door was flung open and that this animal of a Marrophat had precipitated himself into the room.

He opened his mouth to protest—and Marrophat silenced him with a cry.

"You fool! Drop that ring! Stop this farce! Don't you know whom you're marrying? That woman is Judith Trine, you idiot—not Rose!"

Blankly Alan turned to the girl.

Her flaming face, her sullen eyes, her very pose, from which the manner of Rose had dropped like a cast garment, confessed the truth of Marrophat's assertion. And as if this were not enough, Judith confessed it doubly with a sudden outbreak of such rage as never could have been brewed in Rose's gentle nature.

"You devil!" she cried—and threw herself in front of Marrophat with a spring as lithe as that of a leopardess. "Take warning now from me: keep out of my way forever after this—or take the consequences! God knows," she panted, "why I don't kill you as you stand!"

He was in her way, between her and the open door. She gave him no chance to move aside, but seized him so fiercely by the wrists that he instinctively lifted to protect himself, and she fairly threw him half a dozen feet from her. He brought up with a crash against the wall even as the door slammed behind the girl.

When Alan, the first to recover, gained the sidewalk, she was already in the taxicab. Whatever reward she had promised the man, he whipped his machine away as if from the fear of sudden death.

And darting from the house hard on the minister's heels, Marrophat leaped into his own car and, as if he had not heard her threat or received substantial proof of her earnestness, tore off in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

And the Rose.

Taking the dazed young man by the hand, as though he had been a child, the Reverend Mr. Wright led Alan back to his study and established him in a comfortable armchair beside his desk.

"Sit there and compose yourself, my dear young friend," he insisted in a soothing voice.

At the elbow of the Reverend Mr. Wright a telephone shrilled imperatively. With a gesture of professional patience he turned to the instrument, lifted the receiver to his ear, and spoke in musically modulated accents.

"Yes . . . Yes: this is Mr. Wright. . . . Ah, yes, Mr. Digby. . . . Not coming? But, my dear sir, Mr. Law is already here. I must tell you—"

He checked with a reproving glance for Alan, who was twitching his sleeve insistently.

"If you please," Alan begged, "let me speak to Digby at once. Forgive me—"

Reluctantly the minister surrendered the telephone.

"That you, Digby?"

"Alan! Bless my soul, what are you doing over there? Is Miss Trine with you? But how can that be possible?"

"Rose? No. What about her?" Alan demanded, stammering with anxiety.

"Why—one of my spies has just reported by telephone. He was going on duty this morning when he saw a young woman—either Rose or Judith—wearing a rough coat over boudoir dress—climb out of one of the basement windows of Trine's house. She was apparently in great distress of mind and anxious to escape without being seen from the house; but before my man—whose post of observation is in the third story of one of the houses opposite—could get to the street, she had been caught by several rough-looking customers, who rushed out of Trine's house, seized the girl, and made off with her in a motor-car bearing a New Jersey license number. I am sending men to watch the Jersey ferries. Call me up in an hour—"

Without a word of response, and without a word of apology to the Reverend Mr. Wright, Alan dropped the receiver, snatched up his hat, and fled that house like a man demented.

Rose, escaping from Trine's house, overpowered and made the captive of Trine's lowest creatures—gunmen possibly, of the stamp of that animal whom Trine had charged with the assassination of Alan the night before!

There was neither a motor-car in sight for him to charter nor any time to waste in seeking one. Alan could only hope to find one on his way back toward the ferry. It must have been upwards of an hour before he came into a street which he recognized, by its dinginess and squalor, as that in which he had thrown Marrophat from the running-board of the taxicab.

And then, as he paused, breathless and footsore, to cast about him for the way to the ferry, a touring car turned a corner at top speed and slowed to a stop before that selfsame tenement of the unsavory aspect to whose sidewalk he had seen Marrophat assisted by the loafers of the quarter.

And this touring car was occupied by some half-a-dozen ruffians in whose hands a young girl writhed and struggled when, immediately on the stop, they jumped out and wrestled her out with brutal inconsideration.

Like a shot Alan had crossed the street—but only to bring up nose to the panels of the tenement door, and to find himself seized and thrown roughly aside by a burly denizen when he grasped the knob and made as if to follow in.

"Keep back, young feller!" his assailant warned him viciously. "Keep outa this, now, if you don't want to get into trouble."

To the speaker's side another ranged, eyeing Alan with a formidable scowl. At discretion he stepped back and turned as if persuaded to mind his own business, then swung on his heel, caught the two in the very act of opening the door, and threw himself between them.

An elbow planted heavily in the pit of the stomach of one disposed of him for the time being. A blow from the shoulder sent the other reeling to the gutter. And Alan was in the tenement's lowermost hall—a foul and evil-odored place, dark as a pit the instant the door was closed, its murk relieved only by the flame of a kerosene lamp smoking in a bracket near the foot of the stairs.

Sounds of scuffling of feet were audible on the first landing. Alan addressed himself impetuously to the staircase, gaining its top in half a dozen leaps, and only in time to see a door slammed at the forward end of the hall and hear a key turned in its lock.

A cluster of men blocked the way. He didn't pause to wait for it to be cleared, but threw himself headlong into their midst, and by dint of the surprise had gained the closed door before they recovered and sought to stay him.

Indifferent to them all, he shook the knob and shouted: "Rose! Rose!"

Her cry came back to him, a muffled scream: "Alan! Help! Help!"

Backing away with a mad idea of throwing himself bodily against the door and breaking it down, he was suddenly confronted by a hideous mask of humanity—face of man all misshapen, bruised and swollen and disfigured with smears of dried blood and a dirty bandage round his temples, but none the less vaguely recognizable.

The words that streamed from its distorted lips drove recognition home.

"Gee, fellers, look't who's here! It it ain't th' guy what threw me off'n that girder this mornin'. Stand back and let me kill th'—"

Without the hesitation of a heartbeat Alan swung heavily for the thug's jaw. The blow went solidly home. The man fell like a poled ox.

Pandemonium ensued. Rallying to their comrade, the ruffians attacked Alan with one mind and one intent. Murder would have been done then and there had it not been for a rotten banister-rail, which gave way, precipitating the lot to the ground floor of the hallway.

Simultaneously the lamp on the wall was struck from its bracket and crashed to the floor, its glass well breaking and loosing a flood of kerosene to receive the burning wick. The explosion followed instantly. In a trice the hallway was a lake of burning oil, and hungry flames were licking up the rotting wallpaper and eating into decayed baseboards and stair-treads.

Still fighting like a madman, contesting every foot of the way, Alan was borne down the hall and out of the front door. A scream of "Fire!" greeted him as he reeled out into the open. It was echoed by a dozen throats.

The doorway vomited men and women of the tenement. They choked it for a time, blocking both egress and ingress. By the time they broke out and left the way clear a solid wall of flame stood behind it.

Thrice Alan essayed to pass that barrier of fire, and thrice it threw him back. Then, struggling and kicking to release himself and try again, he was seized by a brace of able-bodied policemen and rushed fifty feet from the house before let go.

Lack of breath checked him momentarily.

He looked up, dashing from his smarting eyes tears drawn by the stifling clouds of smoke, and saw vaguely at the second story window a woman leaning out and shrieking for help.

That it was hopeless to attempt the staircase he well knew. Drawing aside, he endeavored to come to his sober senses, and cast about for some more feasible way to effect the rescue of his Rose.

The tenement occupied one corner of a narrow street. Directly opposite, a storage warehouse stood upon the other corner. Before this last was the common landing stage for truck deliveries, protected by a shed-roof. And, suspended from a timber that peered out over the eaves, a hoisting

Charged With the Assassination of Alan.

tackle dragged the ground with its ropes.

It was the work of a minute to convince a thick-headed policeman that the attempt was feasible and should be permitted. It was the work of less than another minute to rig a loop in the line and fasten round his body beneath the arms. Volunteers did not lack; a couple of husky longshoremen sprang to the ropes at his first call. They heaved with a will. His feet left the ground, he soared, he caught the eaves of the shed-roof, and shouting to cease hauling, drew himself up on this list, backed a little ways down it and calculating his direction nicely, with a running jump launched himself out over the street.

The momentum of his leap carried him well out over the heads of the throng assembled in the street and truly toward that window where Rose was waiting. Then its force slackened. For an awful instant he believed that he had failed. But with the last expiring ounce of impetus, he was brought within grasping distance of the window sill.

Hauling himself up, he gathered her into his arms . . .

A great tongue of tawny flame licked angrily out of the windows as he swung her back to safety.