

THE TREY O' HEARTS," 12 Part, at Gem Theatre.

CHAPTER XL

The Man in the Shadow.

Two hundred feet, if one, Hopi Jim fell from the lip of the cliff. Then suddenly the thing that had been Hopi 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 landslide 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 compassed 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 awakened 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; a 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 tersely, 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

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

With an indignant grunt, but considerate 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 hoofbeats 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 its anguished smile 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 until the shadow of the eastern rampart had crept slowly down the canyon's western wall, telescoped upon itself and vanished, letting in the sun to make the place a pit of torment and of burning.

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-cloaked.

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 plains-bred broncho, ventura-terra.

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

Between the moment when discovery of the men on the ridge trail interrupted their simple and hurried breakfast and that which found 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 made better time upon the broad lower level than those who followed the ridge trail. By 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 that sunbitten waste—bleached earth patterned in almost orderly arrangement by sagebrush and gnarled caeli. At the distance of half a mile all blended into one vast plain of glaring 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 chiding hand, he discerned nothing that moved upon the surface of the desert but its myriad best-devils jiggling monotonously their infernal danse 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 raised 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 indisputable indication that the fright 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, reeling 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 awam thwarted the field of the glasses; something that seemed to move like a weedy horse with a human figure bound to its back.

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

His first appreciated 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 mighty gust of wind swept athwart the waste, hot as 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, unspeakably 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 his hoofs deep in the sand, stiffened his 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

Alan had fallen in his dizzy blindness. She found him insensible, 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, beneath her coarse flannel shirt, 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 its 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.

And 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-

Behind them 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 this they 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 her, took a step apart 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 clear of dust. Her hand went next to the holster on Alan's hip. From this she extracted his Colt's .45, treating it as she had the other. Then she crouched low above the man she loved, as if thinking perhaps to escape notice from the occupants of the motorcar.

If that were her thought, it was bred of an idle hope. Alan had chosen to fall in the middle of a wide space so arid that not even sagebrush had ventured to take root there. When the glare of the headlights fell upon them it was inevitable that discovery should follow. The motor car stopped within twenty feet. Three men jumped out and ran 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 daughter's temper 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!" she required.

They humored her unanimously.

Darting forward, she picked up and pocketed the three weapons, then with one of her own singled out the men she named.

"Now, Marrophat—and you, Hicks—pick Mr. Law up and carry him into the car. And treat him gently, mind! If one of you lifts a finger to harm him, that one shall answer to me."

Still none ventured to dispute her. The two men designated, without a sign of disinclination, stepped forward. One lifted Alan Law by the shoulders; the other took the legs. Between them they bore him with every care toward the motor car.

But now a second will manifested itself. The man in the rear seat lifted up a weirdly sonorous voice:

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop this nonsense! Drop that man! Judith, I command you—"

"Be silent!" the girl cut in sharply. "I command here—if it's necessary to tell you."

There was a pause of astonishment. Then the old man broke out in exasperation that threatened to wax into fury: "Judith! What do you mean by this? Has it indeed come to this that my own daughter defies me to my face?"

"Apparently!" she shot back, with a short laugh. "Judge for yourself!"

"Have you forgotten your vow to me?"

"No. But I take it back and cancel it: that is my privilege, I believe. . . Silence!" she stormed as he strove to gainsay her. "Silence—do you hear?—or it will be the worse for you!"

As well command the sea to still its voice: her father raged like a madman that he was, for the time being divested of his habitual mask of frigid heartlessness.

And seeing that there was no other way of quieting him, the girl turned to the third man.

"Now Jimmy!" she said crisply. "Into that car—and be quick about it—and gag him!"

"If you do," her father foamed, "I'll have your life—"

A flourish of her weapons gained instant obedience.

She stepped up on the running board and shot a quick, searching glance at the face of the chauffeur.

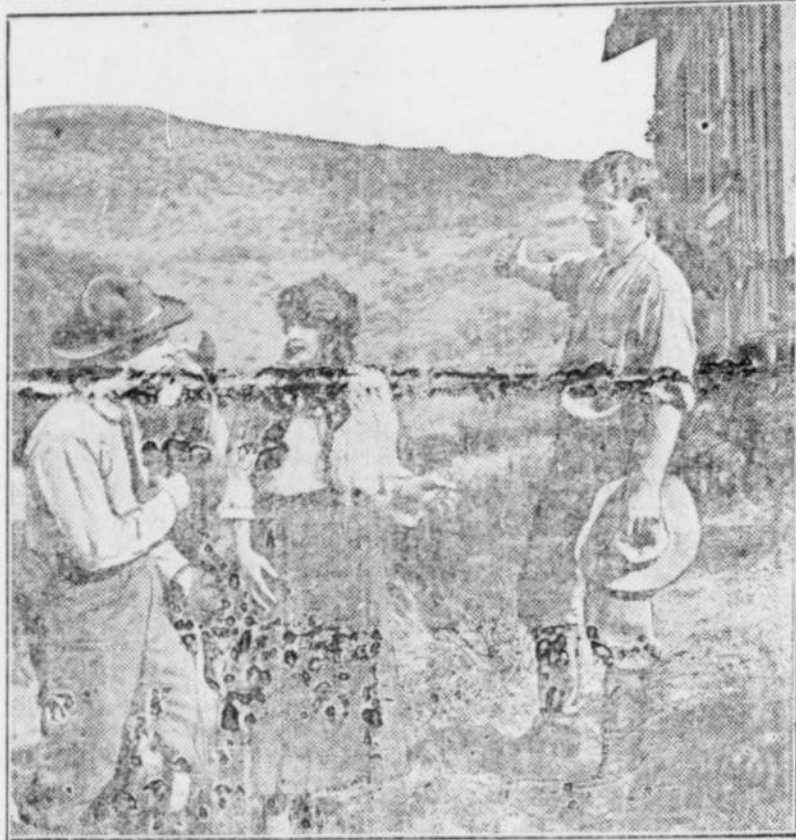
"Straight ahead, my man!" she said. "Make for the nearest pass through those hills yonder, and don't delay unless you are anxious for trouble. Off you go!"

The car began to move. She swept the three men in the desert a mocking bow, jumped into the body of the car and slammed the door.

They made no effort to plead their cause and secure passage even as far as the edge of the desert; doubtless they knew too well the futility of that, she thought, as she settled back in a seat, chuckling with the memory of those three masks of dismay unmitigated.

It was not until five minutes later, when she straightened up from making Alan comfortable that she realized what had made them so content to abide by her will.

Then she heard their voices lifted together in a long, shrill howl that was



"Rose—Miss Trine—Reason With the Madman—"

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-
turned. . . .

Head banded and shoulders rounded, he began to forge a way into the teeth of the sandstorm.

How long he fought on, pitting his strength against the elements, cannot be reckoned.

In the end he stumbled blindly down a slight decline and was abruptly conscious that he had in some way found shelter from the full force of the wind.

He staggered on another yard or two, breathing more freely, and blundered into a rough-ribbed wall of rock—some sporadic outcrop, he understood, whose bulk stood between him and the storm.

He thought to rest for a time, until the storm had spent its greatest strength; but as he laid his shoulder gratefully against the rock and scrubbed 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, reeled away from the woman and the shelter of the rock and delivered himself anew to the mercy of the dust-storm.

CHAPTER XLIII

Open Mutiny.

Though she had been schooled to hold the very name of Law in leathing unspeakable and to think of Alan as a mortal enemy and as one whose death alone could properly requite the cruel injury that had been done her father; and though the man himself had laughed to scorn her first involuntary confession of that love for him which now consumed her being with its insatiable fires, she swallowed her chagrin and followed him with the selfitude of one whose love can recognize no wrong in its object. Through all the remainder of that day of terror she was never far from his side.

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 fail him and he would need her; till then she was content to bide 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 darkness. Deep, tall, evidently,

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

Wary with the weight of its double burden, it went slowly and passed so near to Judith that she was able to recognize the features of her sister and Tom Barcus.

Be sure she made never a sign to catch their attention.

Within the next succeeding hour the coppery light lost something of its hot brilliance, took on a darker shade, and then one darker still. Twilight stole athwart the desert, turning its heat to chill, its light to violet.

Growing more intense, the cold eventually roused the sleeping man.

And hardly had his eyes unclosed 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—or, rather, staggered—with the gesture of exorcism.

Uncomplaining, hugging her newborn humility to her with the ecstasy of the anchorite his horse-hair shirt, Judith followed him patiently, at a little distance.

Not far from where he had rested there was a break in the overhanging wall of the arroyo. Through this he scrambled painfully, reaching the level of the desert only after cruel effort, the unheeded woman at his heels.

A brief pause there afforded both time to regain their breath and survey the desert for signs of assistance: it offered none, other than what they might accomplish through their own exertions. For leagues in any quarter it stretched without a break other than the black cleft of the arroyo, gleaming a bleached and deathly white in the moonshine—like the face of a frozen world.

With tacit consent both turned that way, Alan leading, Judith his pertinacious 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, weaving 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 his shoulder; for she had made no sound whatever.

He turned and came directly back to her, knelt beside her, lifted her head, pillowed it gently on his arm and plied her in turn with the dregs 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.

quickly answered by fainter yells from a distant quarter of the desert, then by pistol popping and flashing some two miles away, then by a growing rumble of galloping hoofs.

The night glasses in the car afforded her flashes of a body of several horsemen—some six or seven, she judged—making at top speed toward the spot where Marrophat, Hicks and Jimmy waited beside a beacon which they had built and lighted.

Half a dozen sentences exchanged with the chauffeur advised her that these were horsemen from the town of Mesa who had charged themselves with the duty of avenging the death of Hopi Jim Slade.

A sardonic chuckle from within Trine's gag goaded the girl into a sudden fury.

Exacting his utmost speed from the chauffeur, under penalty of her displeasure, she set herself to revive Alan.

With the aid of such stores of food and drink as the car carried, this was quickly enough accomplished.

Strangling with an overdose of brandy, too little diluted with water, Alan sat up, grasped the conditions in a flash, and gained further information as he devoured sandwiches and emptied a canteen.

The mountain pass was now, he judged, a mile distant. The light on the hillside, according to the chauffeur, was that of a prospector who had camped there temporarily. There was nothing, then, to be feared from that quarter, but solely from the rear—where the horsemen, having picked up Marrophat and his companions, had instituted hot pursuit, and were now strung out in a long, straggling line, three horses carrying double the farthest—perhaps a mile and a half away—one with a single rider the nearest, well within three-quarters of a mile.

Nobly mounted, this last came on like the wind, gaining on the motor car with every stride; for his horse was trained to such going, whereas the car at best could only labor heavily in dust and sand.

None the less, it had won to a point within a quarter of a mile from the pass before the horseman got within what he esteemed the proper range, and opened fire.

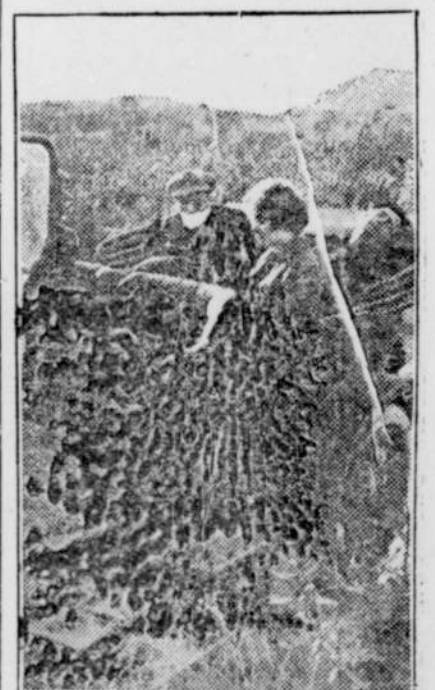
He fired thrice. His first shot winged wide, his second by ill-chance ripped through a rear tire of the car, thus placing upon it an additional handicap, while his third sought the zenith as his hands flew up and he dropped from the saddle, drilled through the body by Alan's only shot.

A long-range pistol duel was in progress before the car had covered half the remaining distance to the pass.

By the time it entered this last, which proved to be a narrow ravine with towering side of crumbly earth and shale and broken rock, the pursuit was not a hundred yards behind, while the firing was well-nigh continuous.

Two hundred feet above the trail two men were working with desperate haste at some mysterious business—though none noticed them.

Only the chauffeur was aware of a woman running down the hillside at an angle, to intercept the car several



"Straight Ahead, My Man!" She Said.

hundred yards from the mouth of the pass.

As it drew near the spot where she paused, waving both hands frantically, the head of the pursuing party swept into the mouth of the ravine.

At the same time the chauffeur noticed that the two men on the hillside were following the woman pell-mell, throwing themselves down the slope with gigantic leaps and bounds.

And then a great explosion rent the peaceful hush of night—that till then had been profaned by the pattering cracks of the revolver fusillade.

As the roar of dynamite subsided the entire side of the hill shifted and slid ponderously down, choking the ravine with debris to the depth of some thirty or forty feet, burying the leaders of the pursuit beyond hope of rescue.

Only a instant later the motor car jolted to a halt and Alan pulled himself together to find that Rose and Barcus were standing beside the door and jabbering joyful greetings, mixed with more or less incoherent explanations of the manner in which they had come to seek shelter for the night in the prospector's shack and, roused by the noise of firing and recognizing Alan in the car by the aid of spy-glasses, had with the prospector's aid hit upon this scheme of shooting a landslide in between the pursuit and its devoted quarry.



Moistened His Parched Lips and Throat.

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 the stirrup. "Who warned us yesterday in time to prevent our being crushed by that rock? Judith! Why was she separated from Marrophat and the others—alone up there when that beast sneaked up behind her—O, I saw him—I saw it all—and grabbed her and roped her to that broncho—if it wasn't because she had broken with them for good and all and started to fight on our side?"

"You're raving," Barcus commented in a hopeless tone. He looked to the girl. "Rose—Miss Trine—reason with this madman—"

Snatching the glasses, the girl came confidently to her lover's side.

"I told him," she said, "for the benefit of the law-gathered

Rose to

to

to

to

to

to