

THE TREY O'HEARTS

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CHAPTER XLVII.

The Last Warning.

In the chill, violet-shadowed dusk of that clear evening, a chap-fatted motor car crept sluggishly into the little mountain town of Mesquite at the heels of two mottled mules, driven by a chauffeur who steered with one hand while the other flourished a crackling whip-lash over the backs of its sole motive power.

Its one passenger, a cripple as helpless as the car itself, huddled in a corner of the rear seat, saluted Mesquite with a snarl. Though he was in sore need of such rude comforts as the town stood prepared to afford him, his demeanor toward it was that of one who suffers an indignity rather than begs accommodation.

And now, as the car crawled to a pause before the Mountain House—Mesquite's one caravanserai—and Mesquite itself, to the last flea-bitten board, gathered round to view this wondrous, Mr. Trine's indignation and chagrin distilled words of poisonous import.

Far from resenting this, Mesquite, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets, admired and applauded, and rather resented the change that befell when two other strangers (whose earlier appearance in town had helped make that one day memorable beyond all others in Mesquite's history) charged out of the Mountain house and interrupted the elder deil with cries of greeting and jubilation.

The leader of these answered to the name of Marrophat; his companion was a person named Jimmy. Mesquite acquired this information through paying close attention to the substance of their communications with the cripple. More than this, however, it learned little. Something seemed to have been accomplished by the two, something that was highly gratifying to Seneca Trine: for he was chuckling almost mirthfully when lifted from the car and carried into the hotel.

What passed between the trio after they disappeared behind that bedchamber door Mesquite could by no means guess. But that a celebration of some sort was in progress was evidenced by the frequency with which Marrophat and Jimmy called on the bar for more liquid refreshment.

And toward midnight one belated Mesquite pined in the street outside the Mountain House for one last curious stare at the lighted windows of Mr. Trine's quarters.

He saw clearly silhouetted against the glowing opening of the window, the Mephistophelean profile of Seneca Trine, distorted with a grimace of the cruelest joy that ever heart of man conceived. He saw Marrophat approach his master with a drunken swagger and a speech which, though indistinguishable to the unseen auditor, unquestionably afforded both of the other men ample excuse for ecstatic glee. Toward its conclusion Mr. Marrophat apparently capped the peak of jubilation by fumbling in his coat pocket and bringing forth something which strongly resembled a single playing card.

Now when he had contrived to master his mirth, the cripple made a gesture which eloquently abolished this card, a gesture which said quite plainly: "All that is finished. The thing has served its purpose! To hell with it!"

Whereupon, with a smart jerk of his wrist, Mr. Marrophat sent the card spinning and sailing out through the open window to lose itself in the night. The watcher didn't see it fall, and though he spent an unconscionable time searching for it in the deep dust



It was a Trey of Hearts.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Full Flight.

"Oh, what can it mean?" Rose whispered brokenly, clinging to her lover's arm. "Surely you don't think—"

"Surely, it must be accidental—"

"Surely it can't mean—"

"It afraid it does," Alan Law responded gravely, eyeing the front of the Mountain house. "Our luck holds consistently—that's all. It wouldn't be us if we didn't pick out the one place where Marrophat and Jimmy chose to stop over night. Fortunately, it's early; I doubt they're up. With half a show we ought to be able to find some way of putting a good distance between us and this town before they waken—"

Tom!

But Mr. Barcus was already at his elbow, in thorough sympathy with Alan's interpretation of the significance to be attached to the card that trembled in Rose's hand.

"Sharp's the word!" he agreed. "And there's a motor car over there, in front of the blacksmith's. Probably we can hire her—"

"Trine's car!" Alan ejaculated, swinging round and recognizing the automobile at a glance. "Then he's here, as well!"

"Looks like it," Barcus admitted. "But so much the better. We'll just naturally take the darn thing off his hands, and I'll bet a dollar there isn't another car within a radius of fifty miles! We'll be well out of these giddy mountains long before he finds anything to chafe us with."

But his confidence was demonstrated to be premature by the discovery, which rewarded the first cursory examination, that the car was very thoroughly out of commission.

Two minutes later, however, their earnest inquiries elicited the fact that, although Barcus was justified in his surmise that the neighboring country was poverty-stricken in respect of motor cars, Mesquite itself boasted two motorcycles whose owners were not indifferent to a chance to sell them second-hand at a considerable advance on the retail list price of the machines, when new.

And thus it was that, within ten minutes from Rose's discovery of that chance-fung warning in the dust, the party was again in rapid motion.

His beauty sleep disturbed by the departure of the machine bearing Barcus and Judith, Seneca Trine roused on an elbow and looked out of the window just in time to see the second motorcycle gathering momentum, Alan steering, Rose in the seat behind.

Sixty seconds later a flaunting banner of dust was all that remained to remind Mesquite that romance had passed that way—that, and a series of passionate screams emanating from the bedchamber of Seneca Trine, where the cripple lay possessed by seven devils of insane rage.

His screams brought attendance; but it was a matter of many precious minutes before his demands could be met and Marrophat and Jimmy roused from their capricious slumbers in adjoining chambers; and half an hour elapsed before the chauffeur, roused from his own well-earned rest, succeeded in convincing the pair that pursuit with the motor car was out of the question.

But the devil takes care of his own; within another half hour what seemed to be a sheer, bull-headed, dumb luck brought a casual automobile to Mesquite—a two-seated, high-power racing machine of the latest and speediest pattern, driven by two irresponsible wayfarers who proved only too susceptible to Marrophat's offer of double the cost of the car—i. e., \$1000.

The two piled out promptly enough; Marrophat and Jimmy jumped in; Trine from his bedroom window sped them on their murderous mission with a blast of blasphemy.

It must have been a few minutes when Alan, checking his motorcycle as it surmounted the summit of a long upgrade, looked back and discovered, several miles distant on the far-flung windings of the mountain road, a small crimson shape that ran like a mad thing tirelessly pursued by a cloud of tawny dust like a golden ghost.

A motor car, beyond all question, and one of uncommon road-devouring quality: it might or might not contain Marrophat and Jimmy, once more in pursuit. Whether or not, bitter experience had long since educated Alan in the gentle art of taking no chances.

Though it was his life that they sought so pertinaciously, no later than yesterday (and then by no means for the first time), they had proved that if Rose were with Alan they would include her ruthlessly in whatsoever scheme they might contemplate for his personal extermination.

Nor would Tom Barcus be exempt. If they were caught in company—though Judith might be, in view of Marrophat's infatuation for the girl.

These two were far ahead, out of sight, indeed; and must somehow be overtaken and warned—no easy matter, since the machine which bore them was, if anything, faster than Alan's, just as the racing automobile was faster than either.

Alan kept his gaze steadfast to the road before him, daring not once to look up and round or back.

So anxious and maddening was its course, indeed, that Alan seldom could see a hundred yards of it ahead, but must peep on in panic flight, hoping for the best—that Judith and Barcus would soon show up in front, that something might happen to hinder the pursuit—never knowing whether the latter lost or gained.

And thus catastrophe befell—

nd mountainside the motorcycle swept like a hunted hare, and without the least warning came upon Barcus and Judith, dismounted, Barcus bounding over his cycle and tinkering with its motor.

For one horriplating instant collision seemed unavoidable. Barcus and Judith and the motorcycle occupied most of the width of the road; there was little room between them and the declivity, less between them and the forest. To try to pass them on the latter side would be only to dash his brains out against the trees; while to make the attempt on the outside would be to risk leaving the road altogether and dashing off into space—

And it was impossible to stop the cycle—so brief was all his warning. In desperation Alan chose the outside of the road; and for the space of a single heartbeat thought that he might possibly make it, but with the next realized that he would not—seeing the front wheel swing off over the lip of the slope.

At this he acted sharply and upon sheer instinct. As the cycle left the road altogether he risked a broken knee by releasing his grasp of the handlebars and straightening out his leg, and driving it down forcibly against the roadbed. The effect of this was to lift him bodily from the saddle; the machine shot from beneath him like some strange projectile buried from the bore of a great gun; and Rose crashed against him in the same fraction of a second.

Headlong they plunged as one down the hillside, struck its shelving surface a good twenty feet from the brink



Trine Was Lifted From the Car and Carried Into the Hotel.

of the road, and flying apart tumbled their separate ways down the remaining of the drop and into the friendly shelter of the underbrush.

Something nearly miraculous saved them whole. Beyond a few scratches and bruises and a severe shaking up, they escaped unharmed. And they were picking themselves up and regaining their breath and re-collecting their scattered wits when, with impetus no less terrific than their own had been, the pursuing motor car swung round the bend and hurled itself directly at the two who remained upon the road above.

delay. The racing car was barely out of sight when he sprang from the sheltering trees and, Judith at his heels, pelted headlong down the slope to the spot where the others had vanished.

To find them not only alive but practically unscathed affected that loyal soul almost to tears.

But when congratulations had been mutually exchanged, there fell an awkward pause. The eyes of the four sought one another's ruefully, each quick with the unnumbered but inextinguishable inquiry: What next?

In the outcome, it was Mr. Barcus who advanced, though this was its reception more through lack of a better than for any actual appeal intrinsic in the proposition.

"When we broke down, I saw," he ventured, with a backward jerk of his thumb to indicate the road, "a canyon branching off from this one about a quarter of a mile over yonder. If it's all the same to you people, we might stroll round that way and see what its natural attractions may be—if any. But it's sure a mighty poor sort of a canyon that doesn't lead anywhere—and nothing could possibly be more fatiguing to our mercurial and restless tempers than to squat down here and fold our hands in our laps and wait for something to turn up—and anyway we can't be worse off than we are—"

"Sufficient!" Mr. Law interrupted with a bleak smile.

Hooking a deferential arm, Barcus offered it to Judith.

"Everything is lovely in the formal

be accorded her, and quickly, and that the sacrifice it should demand would be complete.

Now prayers are sometimes answered when the boon craved is good for the soul.

Slowly and painfully these four toiled along an obscure trail that followed the windings of the little river, until a branch struck into the main stream and so discovered to them yet another trail leading into the westward canyon.

Then again slowly and painfully they plodded on following blindly another trail blazed by Fates as blind as they.

Above them, on the road they had abandoned, the crimson racer doubled back to the point where it had passed Judith and Barcus; its occupants descended, explored, and came presently upon the trail of the fugitives.

Bloodhounds could not have settled down upon a scent with more good will and eagerness than Mr. Marrophat and his faithful aide.

The sun was high and blazing above the canyon when the pursuit came within rifle shot of the chase.

A spiteful shot roused the quartet from a pause of lethargic dismay due to tardy appreciation of the fact that they had penetrated wittily almost to the end of a blind alley.

A hasty council of war armed Alan with Judith's revolver and posted him behind a boulder commanding the approaches to the chasm. The weapon, a powerful .45, had a range sufficient to numb the impetuosity of the assassins and keep them under cover and out of sight of the desperate escapee the fugitives were making to compass an escape.

For in the shed behind an abandoned log cabin—anywhere, no doubt, of some forgotten prospect—Barcus had unearthed a length of stout hempen rope.

With the aid of a rusty shovel he had hacked this into two equal lengths. One of these lengths he proceeded to make fast around his own waist, then around Rose's. The other he left to be similarly employed by Alan and Judith. For it was agreed that they must climb, and while the cliff offered no problem to daunt a mountain climber of any pretensions, it was considered best that the fugitives should be hitched up in pairs against any possibility of a slip. The pairing had been determined by the fact that Barcus boasted some slight experience in mountaineering, while Rose was plainly the most exhausted of the two women, the least able to help herself in an emergency.

He had worked his cautious way with the girl in tow, to a point midway up the face of the cliff, following a long diagonal that provided the easiest climbing, when Alan stole back to Judith and reported that, on the evidence of observation and belief, he was convinced that the pursuit had turned back—perhaps for want of ammunition, perhaps to execute some less hazardous attempt upon the lives of the fugitives.

Without delay, then, he made the free end of the rope fast around his own waist, and, following the way Barcus had chosen, began the ascent.

Two-thirds of the climb had been accomplished, and Rose and Barcus had arrived in safety at the top, before the temptation to look down proved irresistible.

Immediately beneath his heels the face of the cliff was deeply hollowed out, leaving a drop of 50 feet to a shelving ledge of shale as steep as a roof, whose eaves—perhaps another fifty feet below—jutted out over another fall of a hundred feet.

Alan shuddered and swallowed hard before resuming the ascent.

Another 25 feet brought him to a ledge quite six feet wide, offering a broad and easy path to the summit. He gained this with a prayer of heartfelt relief and was on the point of turning to face the downward trail when a cry of horror from Barcus and a scream of terror from Rose, watching over the upper edge, warned him hastily in time to enable him to snatch at and grasp a knob of rock before Judith's weight tattered the rope between them and jerked Alan's legs from under him.

His feet and legs kicked the empty air beyond the lip of the ledge, he lay face downward, clutching desperately the knob of rock, praying that it might not come away in his grasp, that his grip might hold, that Barcus might arrive in time to save them both. The rope was cutting into his waist like a dull knife. The drag of Judith's body was frightful. He could feel her swinging like a pendulum at the end of its 30 feet, and could imagine but too vividly what would happen if the rope should prove faulty.

The fall of 25 feet to the shale roof was nothing. What would follow would, however, spell death. The impact of her body would set the shale in motion, like an avalanche—and beyond the caves was only emptiness and the howler-strewn bed of the chasm, a hundred feet below!

The sweat poured from his face like rain. His eyes started in their sockets, the blood drummed in his ears with a roar resembling distant thunder. His fingers grew numb, his throat dry.

He felt that he could not hold on another instant when, abruptly, that torture was no more. The rope had been relieved of its burden. He heard a scream from below echoed by one from above, then the thump of Judith's body falling on the shale, then the sithering rumble of the landslide gathering momentum.

Barcus, at length arrived, assisted him to a place of security. Spent and faint and sick with horror, he lay prone and shivering.

"Only the assurance of Barcus that

Judith had somehow escaped being precipitated over the caves of the shale roof roused him and gave him nerve enough to resume the climb.

It was true, when he found courage to look and see for himself; she lay within three yards of the brink supreme, her face uplifted to the sun, unstirring; she dared not stir; a single movement was calculated to set the shale bed again in motion.

Painfully he realized that if, as Barcus asserted, she had deliberately cut the rope herself, Judith had offered up her life to spare his own.



His Screams Brought Attendance.

CHAPTER L.

Retribution.

And yet the very consciousness of the girl's danger was all the stimulant that Alan needed to recall him to himself.

Once arrived with Barcus at the top of the cliff, he lost no time in setting about preparations to effect her rescue.

In this business Fortune smiled upon him, as it were, by predisposition.

A broad roadway ran along the top of the precipice, turning off at a little distance to the right, to descend the mountainside. And just beyond this turning Providence had chosen to locate the camp of a hydraulic mining outfit.

Alan's appearance at the top, in fact, was coincident with the arrival at that point of half a dozen excited miners; and he had no more than voiced his demands than three of their number were hastening back to the camp to procure rope and more hands.

Within five minutes Alan, against the protests of Rose and Barcus, was being lowered over the edge and down to the shale roof on which he landed at a spot far to one side of Judith, to escape all danger of sending a second landslide down upon her.

Picking his way carefully down to the very brink, Alan edged along this more than once saved a fall to death only by the rope, until he stood immediately below Judith.

Then pausing, he instructed her carefully, tossed the end of the rope into her hands, and when she had wound it twice round her arm, crept up to her side and helped her make it fast about her body.

His signal to the miners that all was well elicited prompt response. There was a giddy interval in which the two swung perilously between heaven and earth. Then they stood once more in safety.

Supported by sympathetic hands, the cripple glided into their story, as conjectured by Alan, and breathlessly confirmed by him, already winning their enthusiastic champions.

And this was very well for them. For they had no more than seated themselves and begun to appreciate what perils they had escaped, when the rumble of a motor car sounded beyond the shoulder of the hill.

Started by this alarm once more into full command of his sagging faculties, Alan rose and stumbled out into the roadway, taking cognizance of such facilities for defense as the camp afforded and issuing instructions with a voice vibrant with fear, not for his own safety, but for the safety of those whom he loved.

Not far from the point where the road swung from the cliff to thread the camp the hydraulic nozzle was in action, its terrific force of water melting the mountainside away ton by ton. Toward this Barcus ran at top speed, gaining the man in charge of the nozzle just as the car swung round the bend.

Pausing only long enough to make certain that there could be no mistake—and having this certainly made—doubly sure by Jimmy's action in rising from his seat and firing over the windshield plank at Alan as his last stand waiting in the roadway—Barcus and the miner swung the nozzle round until it bore directly on the car.

The power of its check was such that the car was struck instantly in its tracks; and before the water could have been shut off or the stream diverted, the machine was driven back to the very lip of the cliff and over it completely, taking with it those twin upon whose efforts all the hopes of Seneca Trine of late had been centered.

A death that was merciful, in that it was instantaneous, awaited them at the foot of the cliff.

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