Queen of Hearts

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Travis Daley had been looking at the kid all through the game.  Those blond curls were driving him crazy.  He had been too long without a woman.  Way too long.  Travis was starting to imagine his opponent wearing a bonnet.  The boy’s lips seemed way to pink.

“Down to this last draw,” he said.  “One card.  So what will you put in to stay in the game?”

He saw those pretty lips trembling.  Way too pretty for a man.

“I’m in but I have nothing left,” the young man said.  “Will anybody stand me?”  He looked around the table.  Everybody had folded long before.  Now the arms were folded one by one.

They had all seen him arrive in the camp.  Fresh faced and with hands that showed he had never done a hard days work in his life.  This was a mining town.  People come to dig, like Travis.  People come to sell – Travis did a little of that.  A people come to fleece the foolish – like this kid.  Nobody was offering.

He had been doing well until somebody suggested that he roll up his sleeves and that somebody not in the game deal the cards.  Now he was losing.  Everything he had was on the table.  That included his fancy dark brown hat and his derringer pistol.

“Nothing left, eh?  Nothing left except your body and soul,” said Travis leaning back.

Travis was a businessman.  Sure his hands were a miner’s hands, and he still used those and his shoulders in hard work, but he knew that this ground could not be dug by a 100 men digging 100 holes.  It was his idea to divert the river, and build channels to get water from height to build the pressure to sluice the gold bearing material from the banks.

Some might say that everybody worked for him, but not Travis.

This is a cooperative,” he told them, addressing the crowd standing in the gulch the day he turned away the wagon full of whores that he had turned away.  “Everybody works together and everybody will be rich.  Don’t waste your time or your strength or your money.  Devote yourselves to this great endeavor of ours and then you can fuck for the rest of your life.  But for now, give your bodies to all of us, and no one else.”

But even Travis craved a woman.  Why else would he be looking at this pretty young man in the way he was.

Thanks to Travis’s rule with the exception of Matron Hallet at the Boarding House and the wife of the Chinaman, there was not a single female in the town, or for miles around.  Two women and over one hundred men, as frisky as all hell.  Female livestock was worried.

Maybe others were looking at the kid the same way, but he seemed not to see it in any of the faces.  He had his own problem.  To fold now would see him without even the stagecoach fare out of this place.“I’ll stake you,” said Travis.  “It seems to me that you have nothing left but your body, so I will take that and your service to the value of my last bet.”

“That is good of you, Sir,” said the young man.  “I will gladly work for you for a good number of days.”

“Well, it seems to me that you are not built for hard work,” said Travis.  “And it seems to me that giving you the chance to win all this has a high value.  So I will stake you for and indenture of 500 days.”

The number was deliberate.  Travis had decided that this would be his last winter in this place.  After that if the lead had been exhausted or not, he was gone.  He had the greater stake in the cooperative anyway, and he knew than on current grades after only 100 days he would be as rich as he ever imagined he could be.

“Come now Sir, 50 days at the most,” said the young man.

“500 days or you fold and I take everything here,” said Travis.  He was not a man to be toyed with.

“500 days then!”  The kid seemed confident.  “In which case I expect to take all that is on the table.”

He turned over his card.  The Queen of Hearts.  Symbol of love – the heart the inverted buttocks.  A single flower in her hand – hope?  He now had three queens.  The onlookers gasped.

There was a wry smile on the young face, but it drained a little when he looked at Travis.  He too was smiling.  But here was a man who could afford the losses on the table.  Perhaps it meant: “Well played”.

Travis placed the cards from his hand first.  A second king to match the one already face up.  Then he turned his last card over.

The king of spades.  The miners tool, but sharp at the point, matching the sword in the dark king’s hand.  A symbol of manhood.

Travis had three kings.The young man’s head fell forward into his hands, curls flying.  The onlookers gasped even harder.

Travis wanted to reach out and stroke that hair, but he restrained himself.  He would need a bag for the cash and other objects on the table.  The hat he could carry, or perhaps wear.

“Don’t be too concerned,” he said as he set about drawing his winnings towards himself.  “You will want for noting in my service, I can assure you.”

 \*\*\*

“I bought it from the Matron,” he said, as if explaining why it was the right clothing.  “That woman is constantly expanding and growing out of her clothes.  This will do until the items I have ordered for you arrive.”

“I cannot understand why I need to dress as a woman to serve you,” said the youth.

“Because I have need of a female servant and I have you,” said Travis.  “And we have no women here so you will need be one.  I will call you Judith and you will answer to that name.”

“Your purpose is to humiliate me, Sir!”

“My purpose is to recover the debt due,” Travis snapped back.  “Now put on the dress Judith, and the bonnet too.  Hair up at the back but let some of those curls dangle at the sides.  I would not like anybody mistaking you for a man.”

“Am I to suppose that you would also like me to adopt the affections of a woman also?  Perhaps I should speak in high tones like this?”  “Judith” was obviously angry.  It amused Travis, but he did like the voice.

“I am in business so let me offer you this proposition, Judith,” he repeated her name firmly.  “For every day that you do so, I will cancel a day of your indenture.  Judith would be worth twice as much to me as anything you were before she came to me.”

Judith took a moment to consider, but only a brief one. “Very well,” she said.

It took her a moment to get the garments on. They were loose and comfortable, and the bonnet kept the hair that he was so proud of, off his face and tidy. He was to be a house servant. It was demeaning but his choices were few. Fortunately it did not appear that there was much of a house to keep.

Travis had the largest, best located and best presented home in the camp, but like all the others it was temporary. The roof and main walls were canvas, but doubled. The front of the house had a wooden façade with a window and a door. The back of the structure had a stone hearth with an iron stove a chimney, a bench and sink to the left and a large bed to the right, warmed by the fire that was used for cooking. Travis had built a headboard behind the bed and side board on the other side of it, which added to feeling that this might not be a tent, but it was.

Travis was preparing for bed, so Judith asked: “Where do I sleep?”

“Curl up in front of the hearth if you like,” said Travis. “There is room in my bed, but I can understand that you may not know me well enough. But winter will soon be upon us. But be assured that I have no immoral intentions. Your services will not extend to that.”

It almost pained Travis to say the words, but he was a decent man, just yearning for what all men need.

“Rise before dawn and prepare me coffee and beans and biscuit. I like to be down at the workings by first light, or soon after.”

“Yes Master,” said Judith with a smile.

“Don’t be an ass,” Travis scolded.

“Yes, Sir then. Or yes Mr. Daley, isn’t it?”

“You can call me Travis,” he said. “And talk like a lady, like you did before.”

\*\*\*

She made coffee, and there was some dried bacon in the beans, and a little of the Mexican spice that he liked. Travis was up and over by the sink splashing some ice cold water in his face. The snow was falling outside, but not enough to slow the work being done.

She was wearing her night dress, but the fox fur coat that he had bought for her, and the felt boots. After she was gone she would slip back into their bed while it was still warm, a just lie a little longer to make up for being the active well before he was.

Her coffee share of the coffee would keep warm, if there was any left. It used to be that there was never any left for her, but now he made sure there was.

He sat down at his plate and mug and looked up at her. He approved. Some may think it strange, but she seemed beautiful to him, and more beautiful everyday. Her hair was down to her shoulders now, shining like the gold he sought all day in the lamplight. ‘The gold I want is right here’, he thought, but he just spoke it with a smile.

She smiled back. Her ass still tingled from the night before, or was it the look in his eyes that made it feel that way?

“The new corset that I ordered arrived yesterday,” she said. “And a union suit to go over it.” She was excited. She always looked prettier to him when she was excited.

“So you are going out today, Judith?” he said. You are causing quite the stir in camp, which is not exactly what I wanted. I have always said no women, and here I am with you.”

“But I am not a woman, am I, Travis?” she said, as if proud of it. “The men can all pair off if they like, and get the same as we get. Besides, they all worship you, so how could they begrudge you something special.”

She walked over to him to run her fingers through his hair.

“You are special,” he said. “My queen of hearts.”

“My King of spades,” she said. She pushed the table back and straddled him in his chair, her soft flabby chest pushing into his face, her tiny cocklette dangling between his slightly open thighs.

“I have not taken advantage of you, have I?” he asked, with genuine concern.

“Poker is all about taken advantage,” she said, cuddling his head. “But once I discovered the joy of you inside me, I feel the advantage is all mine. So long as you give me what I what … when I want it.”

“Tonight. I promise. But you have had plenty. Seven blizzards this winter. Hopefully today’s snow will be the last.”

“I love blizzards,” she said. She was thinking of a whole day in bed with him. Warm and sticky with sex while the wind and sleet raged outside. Only seven. She felt short-changed.

“Blizzards stop the work, and that means less gold,” he said. “And you know I have set a time limit on this. Before The end of September I want to leave this place.”

“Work then,” she said, climbing off him and kissing him on the lips.

He was gone and she was back in bed, under the covers that smelt of him, looking up at the canvas ceiling. September required some arithmetic. It was only February. But that meant that she had been living in this place for almost 300 days. Five hundred discounted for only a handful of naughty days meant that the indenture was over – it had been for some time.

But she did not want it to be over. And her biggest fear was that if it was, she would be sent on her way. He had no need of her. He could have a real woman. He should have a real woman – a wife. The she Judith could stay on as a servant. Perhaps a char lady cleaning hearths, or a washer woman. She would do it, just so long as every now and again he impaled her as he did, and took her to that high ledge just inches short of heaven.

It was in the cards. It was meant to happen. She was meant to lose, and he was meant to win. It seemed that way for weeks, until she started to wonder if she had really lost at all, because the pleasure of being his seemed a victory. But now as leaving this place became closer, what did the future hold?

When the chips are down your choices are limited. Folding can be right, but not here. It is time to play your card. And what card is that?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| She leapt out of bed and pulled the package from underneath it. The corset would need work to lace tightly herself but she had acquired skills. The special binding in the crotch was also a familiar routine. She took the time to brush her hair. Those natural curls gave it body. The fragrant liquids used to wash it gave it shine. She would not put it up – not today.  The unions suit was new – very warm and comfortable. Then a special dress – he had agreed to buy something in red, but it was not to be worn in the camp. Today it would be.  The dress was on and there was just one thing missing. But she knew where it was. She had seen it the day before. A bloom of winter aconite. The flower that she must hold. | The Evolution of Lingerie - Lingerie and Underwear Trends Through the Years |

She had damper and jam, in a basket. She made fresh coffee and put it in a pot to be warmed on the brazier down at the workings. It was time for the queen of hearts to slide out of the pack that was this tent, and be presented face up.

She wrapped a scarf around her head, but with as much of her hair visible as she could allow, and her big round eyes there to be seen, and her lips when she was ready. The sky was iron grey but the fall or sleet or rain had stopped, so It was easy going with the basket in one hand and the pot in the other.

She let the scarf fall from her face and her head as she drew near to the first man, who let his shovel rest as he watched her walk by looking dead ahead.

She saw Travis on a high spot examining newly exposed material, but she kept walking. His attention was only attracted when he saw the men about him stare down at the woman in their dark valley of gravel. He saw her put the pot on the brazier and the basket on the ground and look up at him.

Travis started to make his way down. His eyes on hers even at that distance.

As he drew nearer one man called out: “Who’s the pretty lady, Boss?”

Travis replied, as loudly as could be heard by the man he passed and by every other man who had put their tools to one side: “That there, is the queen of my heart.”

And he kissed her so that every man could see that it was true, even those who remembered that game of poker and the young man who lost a bet and then disappeared. For clearly this woman was not he. That brash young man was gone.

And when that summer came and went, Travis Daley and his wife to be rode away from the mine, with pounds of gold it is said, but certainly much more than the mine ever yielded after Travis and his Queen of Hearts disappeared over the mountain pass.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2021