tentious, eyeing him strangely.

"I don't believe it!" the old man screamed, aghast. "I won't believe it. You're lying to me, you jade! You're lying—"

"I am not," she broke in coldly. "I am telling you the plain truth . . . They followed us all morning in that red racer, firing at us all the while. Finally they caught up with us here, about noon—came up this road shooting over the windshield. It was our lives or theirs. We turned the hydraulic stream on them and washed the car over the cliff. If you don't believe me, get somebody to show you their faces."

She indicated with a gesture two forms that lay at a little distance back from the roadside, motionless beneath a sheet of canvas—the bodies of Trine's creatures, recovered by the mining gang and brought up for a Christian burial.

But Trine required no more confirmation of Judith's word. The light flickered and died in his evil old eyes; his stricken countenance assumed a hue of pallor even more intense than was normal with it; a broken curse issued from his trembling, thin, old lips; and his chin sagged to his chest, heavy-weighted with despair that followed realization of the fact that he no longer owned even one friend or creature upon whose conscienceless loyalty he might depend.

The last bitter drop that brimmed his cup of misery was added when Alan Law himself appeared, leaving the miners' cabin in company with his betrothed—Rose now soothed and comforted, smiling through the traces of her recent tears as she clung to her lover, nestling in the hollow of his arm.

To Alan, on the other hand, this rencontre seemed to afford nothing but the pleasantest surprise imaginable.

"Well!" he cried, releasing Rose and running down to the car. "Here's luck! And at the very moment when I was calling my lucky star hard names! How can I ever reward your thoughtfulness, Mr. Trine? It beats me how you do keep track of me this way—happening along like this every time I need a car the worst way in the world!"

"Drive on!" Trine screamed to the chauffeur. "Drive on, do you hear?"

But Judith had stepped up on the running board and was eyeing the driver coldly, with one hand significantly resting on the butt of the weapon at her side. The car remained at a standstill.

Sulphurous profanity followed, a pungent stream of vituperation that was checked only by Judith's interruption: "We've had to gag you once before, you know. If you want another taste of that—keep on!"

"But where's Barcus?" Judith demanded when, after helping Rose into the car and running off to thank their hosts, Alan returned alone to the car.

"Goodness only knows," the young man answered cheerfully. "He would insist on rambling off down the canyon in search of an alleged town where we could hire a motor car—somewhere down there. I tried to make him understand that we had plenty of time, but he was mulish as he generally is when he gets a foolish notion into his head. So I daresay we'll meet him on his way back—or else asleep somewhere by the roadside!"

Taking the seat next to the chauffeur, he gave the word to drive on; and they slipped away from the location of the mining camp, saluted by cheers from the miners.

The road dipped sharply down the mountainside to the bed of the canyon. The car moved smoothly and swiftly, coasting, only now and then was it necessary to call upon the engine for power with which to negotiate an upgrade or some uncommonly long stretch of level road.

Half an hour passed without a word spoken by any member of the party. Rose was deep in his or her own special preoccupation: Alan brooding over plans for an early wedding; Rose tugging at the contentment regained through her lover's protestations; Judith lost in profoundest melancholy; Trine nursing his rage, working himself up into a silent fury whose consequences were to be more far-reaching than even he dreamed in his wildest moments.

Its first development, for all that, was desperate enough.

The aged monomaniac occupied the sight-hand corner of the rear seat. Thus his one able hand was next to Judith, in close juxtaposition to the revolver in the holster on her hip.

Without the least warning his left hand closed upon the weapon, withdrew it and leveled it at the back of Alan's head.

As he pulled the trigger Judith flung herself bodily upon the arm.

Even so, the bullet found a goal, though in another than the intended victim. The muscular forearm of the chauffeur received it.

With a shriek of pain the man released the wheel and grasped his arm.

Before Alan could move to prevent the disaster the car, running without a guiding hand, caromed off a low embankment to the left and shot full-tilt into a shallow ditch on the right, shelling its passengers like peas from a broken pod.

Alan catapulted a good twenty feet through the air and alighted with such force that he lay stunned for several moments.

When he came to, he found Barcus helping him to his feet; a heavy seven-passenger touring car halted in the roadway indicated the manner in which his friend had arrived on the scene of the accident.

When damages were assessed it was found that none of the party had suffered seriously but the chauffeur and Seneca Trine himself. The former had only his wound to show however, while Trine lay still and senseless at a very considerable distance from the wrecked automobile.

Nothing but a barely perceptible respiration and intermittently fluttering pulse persuaded them that the flame of life was not extinct in that poor, old, pain-racked body.

## CHAPTER LIII.

### The Last Trump.

Toward the evening of the third day following the motor spill, Judith sat in the deeply recessed window of a bedchamber on the second floor of a hotel situated in the heart of California's orange-growing lands.

Behind her Seneca Trine sat, apparently asleep, in a wheeled invalid chair.

There was no occupant of the room. Though he had lain nearly two days in coma, her father's subsequent

Lightning Kills Trine and Strikes Down Alan and Rose.

progress toward recovery of his normal state had been rapid. Now, according to a council of surgeons and physicians who had been summoned to deliberate on his case, he was in a fair way to round out the average span of a sound man's lifetime. He had apparently suffered nothing in consequence of his accident more serious than prolonged unconsciousness. For the last twenty-four hours he had been in full possession of his faculties and (for some reason impossible to Judith to fathom) uncommonly cheerful.

From this circumstance she drew a certain sense of mystified anxiety. Twice in the course of the morning she had caught his eye following her with a gleam of sardonic exultancy, as though he nursed some secret of extraordinary potentialities.

And yet (she argued) it was quite impossible that he should have some fresh scheme brewing for the assassination of Alan. Not a soul had had any sort of communication with him since his recovery but the attending surgeon, a man of unimpeachable character, a meek-mannered trained nurse, and herself, Judith. Under such circumstances he simply could not have set a new conspiracy afoot.

And yet . . . She was oppressed by a great uneasiness.

Perhaps (she reasoned) the weather was responsible for this feeling, in some measure at least. The day had been unconscionably hot, a day without a breath of air. Now, as it drew to its close, its heat seemed to become more and more oppressive even as its light was darkened by a portentous phenomenon—a vast pall of inky cloud shouldering up over the mountains to the music of distant rumblings.

Nor was this all; a considerable degree of restlessness was surely perceptible in one who, from her window, watched a carriage-drive populous with vehicles (for the most part motor cars) bringing to the hotel gayly dressed men and women, the guests invited to the wedding of Rose Trine and Alan Law.

Within another ten minutes the man Judith loved with all her body and soul would be the husband of her sister.

She had told herself she was resigned; but she was not, and she would never be. Her heart was breaking in her bosom as she sat there, watching, waiting, listening to the ever heavier detonations of the approaching thunderstorm and to the jubilant pealing of a great organ down below.

The had told herself that, though resigned, she could not bear to witness the ceremony. Now as the moment drew near when the marriage would be a thing finished, fixed, irretrievable, she found herself unable to endure the strain alone.

Slowly, against her will, she rose and stole across the floor to her father's chair.

His breathing was slow and regular; beyond doubt he slept; unquestionably there was no reason why she should not leave him for ten minutes; even though he waked it could not harm him to await her return at the end of that scant period.

Like a guilty thing on feet as noiseless as any sneak thief's, she crept from the room, closed the door silently, ran down the hall and descended by a back way, a little-used staircase, to the lower hall, approaching the scene of the marriage.

Constructed in imitation of an old Spanish mission chapel, it contained one of the finest organs in the world; at this close range its deep-throated tones vied with the warnings of the storm. Judith, lurking in a passageway whose open door revealed the altar steps and chancel, was shaken to the very marrow of her being by the majestic reverberations of the music.

Since they had regained contact with civilization in a section of the country where the Law estate had vast holdings of land, the chapel was thronged with men and women who had known Alan's father and wished to honor his son.

Above stairs, in the room Judith had quitted, Seneca Trine opened both eyes wide and laughed a silent laugh of savage triumph when the door closed behind his daughter.

At last he was left to his own devices—and at a time the most fitting imaginable for what he had in mind.

With a grin, Seneca Trine raised both arms and stretched them wide apart.

Then, grasping the arms of his chair, he lifted himself from it and stood trembling upon his own feet for the first time in almost twenty years.

Grasping the back of the wheeled chair, he used it as a crutch to guide his feeble and uncertain movements. But these became momentarily stronger and more confident.

This, then, was the secret he had hugged to his embittered bosom, a secret unsuspected even by the attending surgeon; that through the motor accident three days ago he had regained the use of limbs that had been stricken motionless—strangely enough, by a motor car—nearly two decades since.

Slowly but surely moving to the bureau in the room, he opened one of its drawers and took out something he had, without her knowledge, seen Judith put away there while she thought he slept.

Then, with this hidden in the pocket of his dressing gown he steered a straight if very deliberate course to the door, let himself out, and like a materialized specter of the man he once had been navigated the corridor to the head of the broad central staircase and step by step, clinging with both hands, negotiated the descent.

The lobby of the hotel was deserted. As the ceremony approached its end every guest and servant in the house was crowding the doorway to the chapel. None opposed the progress of this ghastly vision in dressing gown and slipped feet, chuckling insanely to himself as he tottered through the empty halls and corridors, finding an almost supernatural strength to sustain him till he found himself face to face with his chosen enemy and victim.

The first that blocked his way into the chapel, a bellboy of the hotel, looked round at the first touch of the claw-like hand upon his shoulder and shrank back with a cry of terror—a cry that was echoed from half a dozen throats within another instant.

As if from the path of some grisly visitant from the world beyond the grave, the throng pressed back and cleared a way for Seneca Trine, father of the bride.

And as the way opened and he looked up toward the altar and saw Alan standing hand in hand with Rose while the minister invoked a blessing upon the union that had been but that instant consented, added strength, the strength of the insane, was given to Seneca Trine.

When Alan, alarmed by the disturbance in the body of the chapel, looked round, it was to see the aged madman standing within a dozen feet of him; and as he looked and cried out in wonder, Trine whipped a revolver from the pocket of his dressing gown and swung it steadily to bear upon Alan's heart.

At that instant the storm broke with infernal fury upon the land.

A crash of thunder so heavy and prolonged that it seemed to rock the very building where the ceremony accompanied the shattering of a dozen stained-glass windows.

A bolt of bluish flame of dazzling brilliance slashed through the window like a jagged sword and smote the pistol in the hand of Seneca Trine, discharging the weapon even as it struck him dead.

As he fell the bolt swerved and struck two others down—Alan Law and the woman who had just been made his wife.

## CHAPTER LIV.

### The Wife.

Again three days elapsed; and Judith, returning from the double funeral of her father and sister, doffed her mourning for a gown less somber and more suited to the atmosphere of a sickroom, then relieved the nurse in charge of Alan.

He remained as he had been ever since the falling of the thunderbolt—in absolute coma.

But he lived, and—or the physicians lied—must soon regain consciousness.

Kneeling beside his bedside Judith prayed long and earnestly.

When she arose it was to answer a tap upon the door. She admitted Tom Barcus and suffered him to lead her into the recess of the window, where they conversed in guarded tones in spite of the fact that the subject of their communications could not possibly have heard them.

"I've come to tell you something," Barcus announced with characteristic awkwardness. "I've known it for three days—ever since the wedding. In fact—and kept it to myself, not knowing whether I ought to tell you yet or not."

He paused, eyeing her uncertainly, unhappily.

"I am prepared," Judith assured him calmly.

"You're nothing of the sort," he countered, argumentative. "You couldn't be. It's the most amazing thing imaginable. . . . See here . . ."

"Well?"

"You understand, don't you, that Alan must never know that Rose was killed by that lightning stroke?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," the man floundered miserably, "you see, he loved her so—I thought—I'm sure it would be best—if you can bring yourself to it—to let him go on believing it wasn't Rose who was killed but Judith. And that's skating so close to the truth that it makes no difference: the Judith Alan knew and the Judith I know in the beginning is gone as completely as though she and not Rose had been killed."

After a long pause, the girl asked him quietly: "I understand. But is it possible you don't understand that, if I were to consent to this proposition, lend myself to a deception which I must maintain through all my life to come—Alan would consider me his wife?"

"Well, but—you see—you are his wife. . . . Oh, don't think I'm off my hat. I'm telling you the plain, unvarnished truth. You are Alan's wife. . . . No, listen to me. You remember that day in New York when you substituted for Rose, when Alan tried to elope with her, and you went with him to Jersey City, and stood up to be married by a preacher-guy named Wright—and Marrophat broke in just at the critical moment and busted up the party?"

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

Barcus produced a folded yellow paper from his coat pocket and proffered it.

"Read that. It was handed to me as best man, just before the ceremony. Seeing it was addressed to Alan and knowing he was in no frame of mind to be bothered by telegrams, I slipped it into my pocket and forgot all about it temporarily. When I came to find it, I took the liberty of reading it. But read it for yourself."

The typewritten lines of the long message blurred and ran together almost indecipherably in Judith's vision. None the less, she contrived to grasp the substance of its meaning.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU WIRE ME SOONER," it ran: "MARRIAGE TO ROSE IMPOSSIBLE. REV. MR. WRIGHT INFORMED ME YOUR MARRIAGE TO JUDITH LAST WEEK. HAD GONE TOO FAR WHEN MARROPHAT INTERRUPTED. JUDITH LEGALLY YOUR WIFE. WOULD HAVE ADVISED YOU SOONER HAD YOU LET ME KNOW WHERE TO ADDRESS YOU. HOPE TO HEAVEN THIS GETS TO YOU BEFORE TOO LATE."

The message was signed with the name of Alan's confidential man of business in New York.

When Judith looked up she was alone in the room, but for the silent patient on his couch.

Slowly, almost fearfully, she crept to his bedside and stood looking down into the face of her husband.

And while she looked the lashes fluttered, his respiration quickened, a faint color crept into his pallid cheeks—and his eyes opened wide and looked into hers.

His lips moved and breathed a word of recognition:

"Judith!"

With a low cry of tenderness, the girl sank to her knees and encircled his head with her arms.

"Judith," she whispered, hiding her face in his bosom, "Judith is no more . . ."

A pause; and then the feeble voice:

"Then, if I was mistaken, if you aren't Judith, you must be Rose—my wife!"

She said (steadily) "I am your wife."

His hands fumbled with her face, closed upon her cheeks, lifted her head until her eyes met his. Gazing into his.

And for incalculable minutes he held her so, looking deep into the soul of the woman.

He (regretfully) said: "I know . . ."

THE END.