

WHO'S GUILTY?

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NOVELIZED FROM THE SERIES OF PHOTOPLAYS OF THE SAME NAME RELEASED BY PATHE EXCHANGE.

THIRD STORY

The Tangled Web

A long bobbed loaded with laughing, shouting young people sloped down the white, glistening slope like a runaway express train. Mrs. Alden's house party at Tuxedo was enjoying the opportune snowfall.

Fleetwood Blair, flushed from the exertion of helping drag a heavy "bob" back up the hill, spied a couple of boys with a small sled who had stopped on their way home from coasting to watch with solemn curiosity the pranks and antics of the grown-ups.

"Let me have the flyer, kids," Blair sprang toward them. "Here, I'll pay rent for it in advance," tossing over a half dollar. And without waiting for any further negotiations, he caught the rope out of their hands, and hurried to the summit where the group with which he had come trudging up the slope were taking their places on the bobsled for another trip.

"Wait a minute, Ruth!" He singled out from among them a dark, strikingly pretty girl in a scarlet cap and jacket—the daughter of his hostess. "You and I are going to try it alone this time."

Blair swung his small sled around to the track, assisted her to a place forward on it and settled himself at the back to steer.

"I simply had to have a chance to speak alone with you away from that cackling crowd," he was murmuring. "I can't keep it back any longer, and although it's little enough I can offer you now, dear, if you are willing to start on love and a stout heart—"

In the ardor of the moment he quite forgot to steer. They struck a bend in the course, and, swerving off at right angles to the track, dashed headlong into a great piled-up drift.

Like a couple of grotesque figures they emerged.

Fleetwood did not permit the misadventure to baffle him.

"Ruth," he repeated, as he floundered toward her, "will you marry me?"

Such persistence deserved to be rewarded.

While Fleetwood and Ruth Alden, out there in the snowdrifts, innocently and happily "plighted their troth," Mrs. Alden and Batson Kendrick sat together over a game of chess and schemed.

Both Mrs. Alden and Kendrick were "practical persons," and there was little necessity for words between them.

Mrs. Alden was a society mother with a hall-mark position as unquestionable as the "sterling" on silver, but somewhat hard put to it to support it with the essential finances.

Kendrick, on his side, wanted a wife—not a companion or helpmeet fitting to one of his years and settled



"Fleetwood Blair is Not Worthy of Either of Us!"

habits, but merely to serve as an exhibition of his wealth.

After inspecting the season's flock of debutantes he had definitely fixed his choice upon Ruth, and the matter was supposed to be settled.

But at this interesting juncture Fleetwood Blair had chosen to intrude.

Credit must be given Mrs. Alden for shrewdly scenting the danger in the situation as soon as it appeared.

Not once did she raise any objection to Blair, or seem to interfere with the freedom of association between him and Ruth. And Kendrick played up skillfully to her lead.

This snowy afternoon as they sat cozily over the chessboard with all the young people out of the way over on the hillside, they touched cautiously upon the subject uppermost in both their minds and made plain their plans in a series of indirections.

"It was kind of you to invite my

niece Estelle here this week," he observed. "Her father is a visionary fellow, generally hard up and I'm afraid the poor girl has had but few gayeties in her life. Has it struck you that young Blair is a trifle attentive in that direction?" he inquired anxiously.

"Really, I had not noticed it," Mrs. Alden's lips stiffened a trifle disapprovingly.

"Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that something will develop between those two," he urged. "And now," she glanced across at him, "tell me what are your arrangements for your trip to Palm Beach?"

But before Kendrick could comply, the door to her sitting room was flung open and Ruth and Fleetwood Blair appeared hand in hand on the threshold.

"Wish us happiness, mother," the girl cried exuberantly. "Fleetwood and I are engaged."

For once, Mrs. Alden lost her suave poise.

Her eyes were fixed in a glare of despairing rage upon Blair. She lifted her hand and pointed toward the door with a gesture not to be mistaken.

Involuntarily Blair took a step backward, then halted and glanced toward Ruth. Instantly she moved over to his side and thrust her arm in his.

"If there's no place here for him, then there is none for me!" she cried.

Then with her head held high, and her arm linked in that of her lover, she passed out of the room and from the house.

Mrs. Alden tottering to a chair, sank down weakly into it and gave way to tears.

Finally the telephone upon a nearby stand rang. Listlessly Mrs. Alden took it up. But all at once her expression changed, a gleam of animation returned to her eye.

"Listen," she whispered to Kendrick. "They have gone to Peace Alden in New York—Ruth's maiden aunt, you know—and Peace is trying to get me to come there and consent to a reconciliation."

"It's the only thing to do," she decided impulsively. "Otherwise, Peace says, they are planning to rush off to Jersey City or some other impossible place and get married tonight; whereas, by seeming to yield now I can gain time."

In Batson Kendrick's big, luxurious limousine, which he had placed at her disposal with himself as an escort, she outlined the plan of campaign.

When she alighted at Aunt Peace Alden's old red brick house down on Washington square and gave him her hand at parting, there was a light in her eyes as if she already foresaw victory.

Hastily she subdued her manner, however, as she rang the bell and was admitted by the gray-haired old butler.

Mrs. Alden made a most effective entrance. Her expression one of maternal solicitude, she started eagerly toward her sister-in-law; then halted, as if just coming to a realization of the presence of the young people.

For a moment she stiffened, but apparently conquering herself, turned with the semblance of a rush of agitated feeling and clasped her daughter in her arms.

"My little girl," she murmured brokenly.

There was just the right admixture of humility and surrender in her manner as she extended a relenting hand to Blair.

"You will let me have her for just a little while longer, won't you?" she coaxed with a wistful smile. "You'll give me the satisfaction of seeing her married from under my own roof, with a proper trousseau, and a flock of pretty bridesmaids, and a cake and all the rest of it. A girl can only have one wedding, you know—Fleetwood."

"Of course, he will," Aunt Peace insisted, beaming at them from among her pillows over her success as an exponent of her name.

So it was finally arranged, after a discussion in which Mrs. Alden cunningly managed to get Aunt Peace to cast the deciding vote that the marriage should be deferred for six months, or until the young mining engineer had a chance to determine what advantage might lie in certain "prospects" of which he told them.

One day as she was leaving the house for a walk, Ruth stopped for a moment to ask her mother a question. Mrs. Alden was seated at her desk, so absorbed in a note she was writing that she was not conscious of the girl's presence until Ruth stood behind her.

Then she started almost guiltily, and quickly turned the half-written sheet over so as to hide its contents.

"Secrets, eh?" cried Ruth and playfully tried to wrest the note away so as to see to whom it was addressed; but her mother objected so stoutly that after a moment she desisted from her effort.

But there were other and seemingly more momentous things to claim her attention just then. The "prospects" upon which their marriage to a certain extent depended were showing a disconcertingly balky tendency, and Fleetwood, who had been over to Boston in regard to them, had written a rather gloomy letter the day before, telling her that it might be six or eight months before they should materialize.

He was expected back from his trip that night, and in order to save his disappointment and signalize his home coming, she was arranging a little fete just for the two of them.

Meanwhile, her mother having finished the note she was writing, called a messenger boy and dispatched it to the address upon the envelope.

Then she called up Batson Kendrick on the telephone and assuring herself that no one was within hearing, held a long and cryptic conversation with him over the wire.

That evening, Fleetwood Blair, on returning from Boston, found the note she had written lying on the table at his bachelor lodgings and was readily deceived into believing it was from Ruth.

Tearing it open hastily, Blair read:

Fleetwood Dearest: You must not let yourself be disappointed over the Boston matter. I would wait for you until Domesday, if necessary. And, besides, it may be all for the best. Last night Batson Kendrick was playing chess with mamma, and I overheard him say that he needed a man for some important work in Alaska. "If Blair were at liberty, he would be just the man," he said, "and the job would be worth a thousand dollars a month to him, but I will not risk sending any new bridegroom on this affair. The chap who takes it has got to have all his interest in the work."

I rather think, though, that he is going to approach you with an offer, and if he does, I would certainly accept the commission, and agree to remain single during the time you are engaged upon it. You could quit him, of course, the moment the Boston people decide to go ahead, and in the meantime, so long as we have to wait anyhow, you may as well be drawing that salary.

I am sending this to your rooms so that you may be prepared in case he approaches you this evening, as I understand from mamma that he is to be at the house to finish their game. Meantime, I am waiting and longing for you every second. Devotedly, RUTH.

Blair gave vent to a low whistle as he finished.

Little did he dream how carefully baited was the trap into which he was walking with his eyes open.

On arriving at Mrs. Alden's, he was shown into the drawing room, where he found Kendrick and also, somewhat to his surprise, Estelle Abbott.

He greeted the girl pleasantly, but the two had hardly an opportunity to exchange more than a half a dozen words before her uncle seized upon him and drew him to one side with

she uttered her protest against his going away, had seemed to stumble and catch her heel in the rug, and Fleetwood had naturally tried to save her from falling.

But Ruth could not know this. She only saw him holding Estelle in an apparently ardent embrace, and Estelle with her arms wound around him.

Her dark eyes wide, incredulous, she stood staring at the spectacle; then with a low cry of pain, she turned and rushed blindly up the stairs and to her own room.

Blair in his dismay at the sight of her and the evident significance she placed upon his attitude, was for the instant nonplussed, incapable of action; but recovering himself a moment later, flung Estelle almost roughly to one side, and dashed madly in pursuit.

In vain, though, were all his entreaties and attempts at explanation. Finally Mrs. Alden with an air of motherly sympathy persuaded him that it was better to defer until morning his efforts to repair the misunderstanding and so induced him to leave the house.

Hardly was he out of the door, however, before Ruth experienced a revolution of feeling. After all she told herself, it was only fair to hear what he had to say.

In this frame of mind, she was awaiting his arrival the next morning, when a maid brought her word that Estelle Abbott desired to see her.

Ruth hesitated, more than half inclined to refuse; but Estelle, covertly abetted by Mrs. Alden, had taken no chances on being denied, and following almost on the heels of the maid, "Don't turn away from me, Ruth," she pleaded hysterically. "It is better that you should hear what I have to say; for I tell you frankly that Fleetwood Blair is not worthy of you—not worthy of either of us, for that matter. But as between us," her voice broke, and she sadly bowed her head, "mine is the stronger claim upon him."

Something in the tone arrested Ruth's attention, and leaning forward, she caught Estelle by the chin and forced the girl's face up to meet the searching gaze she bent upon it.

Then as she read there the confirmation of what she suspected, she fell back with a sharp exclamation. "Oh!" she cried. "Oh!" and burying her own face in her hands, she turned away, while Estelle satisfied at what she had accomplished, crept from the room.

When Blair called a little later on, he was informed that Miss Alden begged to be excused from seeing him. Needless to say, Mrs. Alden lost no opportunity to widen the breach, and on the evening of Blair's departure,

she came upon Ruth sitting hard, and dry-eyed by an open window, she was thrilling inwardly with triumph. "Ah, my dear, don't grieve for him," she purred. "He was never deserving of you. The older you grow, too, my daughter, the more you will learn that all men are alike. Money is the only thing that counts in this world."

Ruth stirred from the apathy of her pose.

"Is Batson Kendrick here this evening?" she asked irrelevantly. "I thought I heard him announced a bit ago."

Then when Mrs. Alden answered in the affirmative, she arose and with a reckless, bitter smile sauntered down to her mother's sitting room.

"You paid \$12,000 for Fleetwood Blair I believe, Mr. Kendrick. Now what price do you offer for me? You will have to bid higher than \$12,000 though. I tell you that before you begin."

The millionaire glanced at her questioningly appraising as he did so the curl of the lip, the smoldering fire in her eye, the defiant swagger in her manner.

"It's only the result of this upset she's been through," he said to himself. "That and maybe this sudden hot spell we're having. She'll come around all right, once she's settled down and knows just where she stands."

But therein Batson Kendrick made the one great mistake of his life. Ruth did not "come around." She never as his wife allowed him to forget that he had "bought" her, and that she expected him to pay the price. Coldly aloof, contemptuous of herself as she was of him, she piled extravagance upon extravagance until his miserly soul fairly stood aghast.

His only method of revenge, he learned, lay in forcing her into asso-

ciation with Fleetwood Blair, and this he played to the limit.

The mining engineer on his return from Alaska, would, for his own peace of mind, have gladly avoided any encounter with his old sweetheart.

This, however, Kendrick would not allow. Blair had made more than good on the Alaska trip and had shown such a high order of general capability that Kendrick had installed him as his personal advisor and chief lieutenant. Seeking distraction from his domestic troubles, the millionaire had plunged into a gigantic copper speculation which was, in effect, an attempt to corner the market, and in this he leaned heavily upon the clear vision and valuable counsel of the younger man.

Reasoning then that the sight of Blair's success and prestige would be gall and wormwood to Ruth, he had never rested happily until he had brought them into contact, managing one day by a ruse to have them meet in his office.

Both of them withstood the ordeal unflinchingly.

After that he made it a point to have Blair frequently at the house.

So the situation moved on to its inevitable denouement. One evening when Blair was there for dinner Kendrick proved so persistently offensive that Ruth in self-defense finally rose in the middle of some remark he was launching at her and left the room.

Kendrick caught up with her half across one of the big reception rooms on her way to the stairs, and threw himself in front of her to bar her further progress.

"By God you'll understand that you can't flout me in front of one of my employees," he ordered hoarsely. "You go back to the dining room."

She faced him with a reckless defiance and laughing mockingly at his commands, taunted him with his inability to master her.

"You bought me," she jeered, "I'm yours, a slave you bid in on the auction block. And yet you can't manage me. The thousands of dollars I waste for you each year are so much dead loss. How that must wring your soul!"

"Can't manage you, eh?" he snarled, his lip drawing back from his teeth. "Can't? So that's what you think, is it? Well, I'll show you what I can do—I'll show you!"

His fist suddenly clenched, he saw red, and in a spasm of blind fury, he struck at the lovely, taunting face upraised to him.

She swerved, but not enough to avoid the entire force of the blow. It sent her reeling, staggering to the floor.

Kendrick stared a moment at what he had done; then with a muttered oath flung himself out into the hall, and catching up his hat and coat rushed from the house.

Meanwhile Blair at the table had waited in vain for the return of one or the other of them.

Finally he pushed back his chair and started to take his leave.

As he passed through the hall, however, he was arrested by a sound like a stifled sob from the reception room and glancing in through the open doorway, was startled to see his hostess on her hands and knees on the floor.

She tottered weakly and would have fallen if Blair had not been in time to catch her and ease her gently down upon a sofa.

"Mrs. Kendrick! Ruth!" gasped Blair. "What on earth has happened?"

"He—he struck me!" she explained brokenly.

"Struck you?" Blair sprang to his feet.

Ruth caught at his hand. "You cannot do anything now," she said, "he has gone away."

Blair turned at her touch, a flood of old emotions pouring back upon him, and flinging himself down upon his knees beside her caught her in his arms.

"Oh, my darling!" he groaned. "Why—why did you ever marry him?"

There had never been any chance for explanations between these two before; but now that the opportunity had come and their lips unsealed, it did not take them long to piece out the conspiracy which had wrecked their happiness.

As the full import of the wily game which her mother and Kendrick had played broke upon Ruth, she started up, her face grown vengeful and relentless.

"He shall not go unpunished!" she declared passionately.

She clutched Blair's arm. "You know his business secrets, do you not?" she questioned. "You know the weak joints in his armor, how he can be most successfully attacked?"



"If There is No Place Here for Him, There is None for Me!"

The engineer had recoiled. "You mean—?" he gasped.

She nodded.

The three days' battle which Batson Kendrick fought upon the stock exchange single-handed, against the pool of rivals which had been organized against him, ranks in historic interest with some of the old-time Gould-Fiske melees.

Desperately he met the onset of his foes. But now the last stand was made. The floor of the exchange was in a turmoil. No one yet had time to reckon where he stood in the wild swirl of operations. Failures and suspensions of smaller houses were being announced every moment. Then the bell rang sharply. A sudden silence descended on the shouting, speculating throng of brokers. Everybody sensed what was coming. And then the formal notice was read out. The great house of Batson Kendrick & Co. had gone to the wall.

Hatless, coatless, his eyes bloodshot, and his face working convulsively, the man who three days before had been one of the biggest powers on "the street" was up in his office struggling almost insanely with a little group of supporters and clerks who tried in vain to restrain and quiet him. At last he broke loose from them and rushing out the door was lost in the crowds along the streets.

In the same moment in a building not half a block away, Ruth, heavily veiled, stood back from the ticker over which she had been leaning tensely for the last hour.

It was in the private office of the leader of the rival pool, and as she stood back, she turned to him and one or two enthusiastic associates.

"Well," she said, "it's over." She pushed back her veil as she spoke and they wondered to see her so composed.

"Yes," said the leader of the pool, "it is over, Mrs. Kendrick, and the result is largely due to you."

He laid a folded slip of paper on the table before her. "This is a check which I have made out to your order," he said, "and I have left the amount blank. You may fill it in for any sum up to a million."

She nodded carelessly, but made no move to take it up. Then after a few moments of further conversation, she left the office. It was not until after her departure that they discovered that she had left the check still lying on the table.

Out at the entrance to the building, she found Blair waiting for her. He caught her by the arm and guided her swiftly to a limousine which stood beside the curb.

He gave simply the direction "Up-town," to the chauffeur, then stepping in beside Ruth, turned to her eagerly as the car moved forward through the crowded streets. She stayed him with quickly uplifted hand.

"Don't, Fleetwood," she begged, "Don't."

But he was not to be denied. Earnestly he pleaded with her to obtain a divorce and come away with him to a new life. For all the impression that he made though, he might have been talking to a marble statue.

"Oh, can't you understand?" she broke out at length. "When one has been as I have in the grip of great, crushing forces, all this sounds pitifully trifling and insane. Love! Protection! Soft endearments!" her lip curled. "They were all the world to me once but now they don't arouse even a thrill. Do you think that a woman can pull down all the pillars of her temple of life about her and still remain the same? I tell you that I am dead here, and she struck herself on the breast; 'my heart is as cold and hard as a stone.'"

She was silent a moment as he drew back, scarcely knowing how to take her outburst. Then she spoke with a certain note of weary appeal.

"It is useless, Fleetwood," she shook her head, "Absolutely useless. Leave me here, won't you. I want to be alone."

Blair bent a long glance of scrutiny upon the face she turned toward him; and as he gazed, the hopes he had cherished died within him.

She was right. The girl he had known and loved was dead. This was only a hard, bitter, disillusioned woman in whom it would be as difficult to arouse a spark of love as to fan into flame the cold ashes upon a dead altar.

And, noting the change—recalling the vivid, glowing impersonation of youth she once had been, the promise she had given of a splendid womanhood—his lips involuntarily framed the question of his sorrowing heart:

"WHO'S GUILTY?"

(END OF THIRD STORY.)