

WHO'S GUILTY?

by MRS. WILSON WOODROW

AUTHOR OF "THE SILVER BUTTERFLY,"
"SALLY SALT," "THE BLACK PEARL," ETC.
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FIFTH STORY.

Sold Out.

Lella Austin, during her 22 sheltered years as a well-to-do man's only daughter, had never known an ungratified wish. "Poverty" and "struggle" were mere words to her—words that carried no real meaning.

Perhaps that was why she refused Halsey Brent and accepted Tom Carter. Brent was rich and was growing richer day by day. Carter was a mining engineer, boundlessly rich in energy and hope—and all but bankrupt in everything else.

Mrs. Austin spent long and profitless hours in pointing out to Lella the advantages of marrying Brent and the hardships she must face as the wife of a man who still had his way to make.

Lella listened patiently—and married Tom Carter.

Her father's wedding gift to Lella was a check for \$10,000, more money than Tom Carter had saved in all his hard-working life. She indorsed it over to her husband and, with it, Tom bought the controlling interest in an Oregon gold mine.

This investment was not as rash as Lella's parents and Brent thought. The mine was one which Tom himself had helped to develop and in which he had boundless faith.

"It's a gamble, dear," he told Lella. "But then, so is everything in life. I know the region and know the mine. There's a lot of pay ore under those gray rocks and it's only a question of time when someone will strike it. Here, then, was the end of the golden dream! Sudden anger flared up within her. "I won't stand it!" she raged. "I won't stand it!"

"Hush, dear!" he soothed her. "Don't take it like that. We have each other. And—"

"And nothing else!" she interrupted, beside herself with fury. "You've cheated me! You've robbed me! You've stolen my youth, my prospects, my happiness! And you've stolen my money!"

"Your—what?" he said, unbelievingly.

"My money!" she cried, shrilly. "The \$10,000 my father gave me. It was my own money. You calmed me into putting it into your worthless mine! Where is my \$10,000, Tom Carter? Give it back to me!"

Her husband was staring at her, aghast, his jaw drooping, his eyes a bulge. He did not recognize his brave and loyal little wife in this tempestuous tempered visage.

He rose and went hurriedly toward his wife, his arms outstretched. But she recoiled from him, crying hysterically:

"Don't touch me! Give me back the \$10,000 I put into your empty mine!"

Now, Tom Carter knew pitifully little about women. Had he been more experienced he would have understood that Lella needed only a good cry and perhaps a day or so of absolute rest or change of scene.

Without a word he went over to a wall cupboard, rummaged in it and returned to the sobbing girl with a sheaf of papers.

"Here are the stock certificates for the mine," he said, forcing himself to an outward semblance of calm. "They are made out in your name, all of them. Every share is yours. And the mine is yours. I didn't tell you, because I wanted you to be a surprise to you when the 'Lella A' made our fortunes."

"Tom!"

"If we had struck it rich the whole thing would have been yours," he went on unheeding. "All my work, all my hopes were for you, not for myself. The mine was bought with your cash. And it is yours by rights."

"Tom!" she wailed, all her babyish resentment dying down. "Tom! I'm so sorry, darling! Please forgive me! I was just upset and nervous. Won't you try to forget it, please? And I didn't mean what I said. I want you to keep the certificates. I—"

For papers, he took up the sheaf of papers, crossed to her dresser and put them into its top drawer.

"They are yours, Lella," he said. "You must take them. I've put them in there for you. I'm only sorry you think I have been dishonest toward you."

"Dishonest?" she wept, her arms about his neck. "Why, Tom, you are the most honest, most honorable man in the whole world! Oh, won't you please forgive me!"

He could not resist the caress, nor the tear-stained, appealing face.

So engrossed were they in their reconciliation that they did not hear a backboard rattle up to the gate. Only a draft of outer air told them the cabin door had been opened. They turned to see Lella's father and mother standing on the threshold.

With a cry of welcome, Lella ran forward to greet the newcomers.

In the pleasure and excitement of the reunion she did not notice her mother's very violent repulsion at her surroundings. Not until Tom had carried Mr. Austin off to look at the mine did the older woman speak her mind.

"Lella," she began, "if I had dreamed this was the way you had to live I'd never have had a peaceful night's rest."

"I have everything I need," declared her daughter, shyly.

"You have a hundred times less than any longshoreman's wife," positively denied Mrs. Austin.

"If I can bear it," returned Lella, with forced gaiety, "you ought to be able to."

"But you can't! You're coming back home with us. This very day!"

To fight back the craving to cry out, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" the girl turned to the tub and began her neglected week's washing.

Tom Carter, with Mr. Austin, came in from their visit to the mine. Mrs. Austin ran to her husband.

"I want Lella to come back with us," she exclaimed. "Help me persuade her."

"My place is here," faltered Lella. "Your place will be in bed with a dangerous illness," returned her mother, "if this sort of thing goes on. Tom, can't you see how worn out and miserable she is? You'll let her go back with us for a visit, won't you? It will do her worlds of good."

"She can go," vouchsafed Tom, after a moment's unhappy reflection. "She can go. But only for a visit. Let that be understood. As soon as I get on my feet she is to come back to me."

"Yes, indeed!" promised the delighted Lella. "I'll always come back to you."

The letter's contents seemed to sear themselves into poor Tom Carter's brain in words of fire. He tore the paper into a score of fragments in his first outburst of indignation. Then his eye fell once more upon the postscript Nellie Collins had written.

And at once he saw the impulsive behind Mrs. Austin's cruel letter. Among them these smug relatives of Lella's were trying to make her forget him and to marry her to a richer man.

He flung a few clothes into a battered suitcase, ran to the mine to give final instructions and swung aboard an eastbound train three hours later.

Tom Carter's guess as to the state of affairs was amazingly near to the truth.

Lella's homecoming had been as the return of a loved one who has narrowly escaped a torturing death in some accident. Her parents and her



ma who can give her the safe and the luxuries she craves? If you truly love her—if her best welfare means anything at all to you—there can be but one reply to these questions. You will give her up and allow her to retrieve her one miserable mistake, by marrying as her interest and (I think) her heart dictate. Think this over, very carefully, and let your better nature guide you."

He checked himself, for Lella's light footfall sounded in the hallway outside.

After a few minutes of general talk, Mrs. Austin left the two young people alone together. Scarcely had she gone from the room, when Lella turned impetuously to Brent and said:

"I'm so glad you came today. Because I want to ask a favor of you. A big favor! I've been thinking it over for two or three days. You are a Wall street man. Do you suppose you could sell my shares in the 'Lella A' for \$10,000? That's the favor I wanted to ask you. I'll give the money to Tom and he can put it in something that will earn a living for us."

"Thank you, ten thousand times!" exclaimed Brent, clasping her hand gratefully. "I am—"

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friends had showered her with attentions and had sought in a thousand ways to make up to her for what she had undergone.

One of Lella's first and most frequent callers, at her father's home, was Halsey Brent.

Lella had never loved Halsey Brent. She did not love him now. And she was not even inclined to flirt with him. But she found it mildly pleasant to be singled out for attentions by this young Napoleon of finance for whom a score of girls were angling.

Wherefore she allowed him to call whenever he cared to—which was very often.

Mrs. Austin, more worldly-wise than her daughter, was not minded to give people cause for gossip about Lella. So one day, when Brent called, she contrived to snatch a few words with him in private, before Lella came into the living room.

"Mr. Brent," she began abruptly, as she greeted the caller. "You are coming here rather frequently of late. As a man of the world you must understand that my daughter cannot afford to be put in a false position in the eyes of our friends."

"Mrs. Austin, I have always loved your daughter. You know that, I love her more now than ever. Don't misunderstand me. I've spoken no word of this to her. And I shall not until she is legally and morally free to listen to me."

"You would have my approval and her father's," replied Mrs. Austin with effusive heartiness. "I will write today to Tom Carter and plead with him to get her free for her own sake."

"Thank you, ten thousand times!" exclaimed Brent, clasping her hand gratefully. "I am—"

discovery of past ten years. You will make no mistake in paying anything up to \$2,000,000 for it as it stands. Carter has left for New York."

Carefully putting the telegram in his inner coat pocket, Brent set out for the Austin house.

While he waited for Lella in the living room at the top of the front staircase he pulled out his checkbook from his inner pocket.

The checkbook's corner stuck in the lining of the pocket. He pulled it out with so sharp a jerk that three envelopes tumbled out with it. Two of these fell on the table and he picked them up in nervous haste. The third—a yellow envelope—fluttered unnoticed to the floor beneath a table.

Sitting at the table Brent filled in a check for \$10,000 to the order of "Lella Austin Carter." He was blotting it as Lella herself came into the room.

"Good news!" he hailed her. "I've sold your stock!"

"Good! Good!" she exclaimed. "Thanks, a hundred times."

He left her an hour later, the certificates in his pocket—a thrill of delight surging through him at thought of the easily acquired wealth that had just come to him. He stopped at a florist's and sent Lella a great armful of American Beauty roses.

The flowers were delivered at the Austin house within a few minutes. Lella buried her face in their fragrant mass of petals, then handed them to a servant to arrange in a vase.

The servant carried the vase of flowers into the living room and set it on the table there. As he did so one of the tophavvy roses was jostled out of place and fell to the floor. The servant stooped to pick it up. His eye fell on a yellow envelope, half hidden under one of the big carved feet of the table.

Curiously made him draw the message from the envelope. Before he could read it Lella came in—she told herself, fiercely, "And then I'll never let him speak to me again. And Tom! Her angry eyes softening, "Tom was right after all! Darling old Tom! Our dream is coming true—our golden dream—his and mine!"

It seemed to Lella an unbelievably long time before Halsey Brent's name was announced.

He mounted the flight of hall stairs and with a tender smile hurried into the living room where Lella awaited him.

But at sight of the girl's set face and flashing eyes his smile faded into a look of puzzled wonder.

"What is it?" he stammered. "What is the matter? You look ill. Are—"

"Here is your ten-thousand-dollar check!" she interposed harshly. "Take it and give me back my stock certificates."

"The—the stock certificates?" he faltered, dumfounded. "But—"

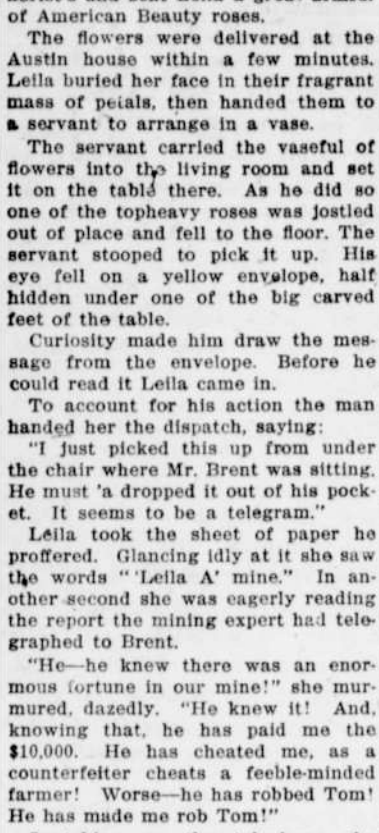
"The stock you swindled me out of!" she raged, losing her self-control.

"The stock you stole from us. Give it back! Give it back, I say!"

"But Lella, I—"

"Here is the telegram you dropped," she hurried on, "that will save you the trouble of falsehood. I know the whole vile trick. And I want back my stock."

Her voice had risen as she reiterated her wrathful demands. Its sound



"I'll gladly give you back the stock, little girl," he said, pleasantly, as he drew the sheaf of certificates from his pocket. "But—first, you've got to earn them."

"Earn them?" she echoed, perplexed.

"Yes. You must promise to make me gloriously happy by marrying me, just as soon as we get rid of Carter for you. Do that and the stock is yours for the asking."

He drew near to her as he spoke. Before the horrified girl could guess his intent, he had caught her in his arms.

"Just one kiss, to seal the promise," he begged, "and—"

"Let me go! You brute! Let me go!" cried Lella, struggling in vain to free herself.

"Not till I get the kiss!" laughed Brent. "Then I—"

His clasped arms fell from about her shrinking body and he reeled back—under the thud of a smashing blow in the mouth.

Tom Carter, his tanned face distorted with fury, had leaped into the room and without a word had attacked his wife's insulter.

Lella screamed at sight of the raged, possessed man. But before she could intervene Carter and Brent were close-locked in a death grapple.

By a series of savagely-dealt short arm blows Tom at last drove his foe before him toward the hallway door. Brent strove in vain to hold his own against the husband's terrific onslaught and to block or dodge the blows that were showered upon his face and body.

But even in his extremity Brent's wily brain was at work. He remembered that the steep flight of stairs from the front hall ended almost at



the living room floor.

So, even as he waged the unequal battle against the stronger man, Brent contrived to back directly toward the door and thence out into the upper hall, close pressed by the victorious Tom.

Once on the landing Brent changed his tactics. Wheeling he so maneuvered as to bring Tom's back to the stairway just behind him. Then, gathering all his falling powers, he ceased to retreat and charged his antagonist. A single backward step would now bring Tom's feet over the edge of the flight.

Lella, keeping as close to them as the reeling bodies and falling arms would permit, saw her husband's sudden peril.

"Tom!" she shrieked, springing to his side. "Look out! The stairs are just behind you."

Carter heard, instinctively, on the very edge of the stair-top, he sidestepped, eluding Brent's rush.

But Lella was not so fortunate. Before she could spring aside the full force of Brent's forward-flung body struck her.

Lifted clean off her feet by the impact she was hurled backward.

Down the steep stairs rolled the helpless white figure, striking heavily against the newel-post at the bottom of the flight, and then lying strangely still in a huddled heap on the polished floor of the hallway.

"She—she is stunned!" muttered Brent, incoherently.

But Tom Carter knew better. He had looked on death before now. Kneeling beside the pitifully inert form and gazing down into the lifeless face, he groaned in dull horror:

"No. She is dead!"

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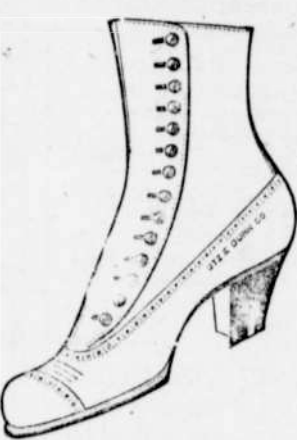
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