

WHOS GUILTY?

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"SALLY SALT," "THE BLACK PEARL," ETC.
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NINTH STORY

The Weaker Strain

When Tom Price asked Laura Belden to marry him, he set forth to her the following account of his fortune:

"In two things," he said, "I am a multimillionaire—in love and hope. As far as actual cash goes, I've nearly seven hundred dollars. As for prospects—a fairly efficient young architect ought to be able to pick up a living, even in a small up-state town like this. All I ask is a chance. And, some day or other, that chance is bound to come."

Perhaps a more mercenary girl than Laura would have hesitated a long time before linking her life to a man of such meager prospects. But Laura Belden was anything but mercenary.

So they were married. They set up light housekeeping in a tiny house that Laura made very pretty and homelike. And Tom spent eight hours a day (in his cheap little office with its glaringly new sign) waiting for the big orders that were to make him rich and famous.

Meantime, Laura went on with the study of music which she had taken up long before her marriage. She had a really unusual lyric soprano voice. And Professor Sargent, her teacher, prophesied a great career for her.

At last came Tom's longed-for "chance." A small office building was going up at the corner of Temple and Maple streets. And, among fifteen architects' bids for the job, Tom Price's was chosen.

One morning as the dishes sat at the breakfast table, Laura said, rather wistfully:

"You aren't the only member of this family who has a 'chance,' Tom. Only you can take advantage of yours. And I have to reject mine."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, looking up, curiously, from some notes he was scribbling on the back of an envelope.

"Yesterday, when I went to Professor Sargent for my lesson," said Laura, "he made me a splendid offer. He wants me to go on a concert tour."

"Concert tour?" echoed Tom, frowning. "Nonsense!"

"I was afraid you'd say so," she sighed. "I told him you wouldn't allow me to. He was ever so disappointed. He said it was one opportunity in a thousand. You know Paul Legrand, the composer?"

"No," snapped Tom, "and I don't want to. He has the name of making love to every woman under fifty and over fifteen. I've no use for lady-killers."

"I mean," she corrected, "you know his work. You like his songs, too. Professor Sargent has given me dozens of them to learn. He says they fit my voice better than any others and that I sing them better than any other soprano."

"You sing everything better than anyone else can, little girl," put in Tom. "And—"

"And yesterday," continued Laura, "Mr. Legrand happened to be at the Sargent studio when I was taking my lesson. Professor Sargent made me sing several of his songs. And Mr. Legrand went wild over the way I sang them."

"The puppy!" grunted Tom. "Of course, he'd—"

"Then he called Professor Sargent aside," went on Laura, "and they whispered together for a long time. Then Professor Sargent came back to me and said that Mr. Legrand is planning to finance a concert tour to push the sale of his own songs and that he has been looking everywhere for the right soprano to sing them. As soon as he heard me, he decided no one can do justice to the songs as I can. And he wants me to make the tour. He's to play the accompaniments himself. The tour starts in two months. Oh, Tom," she finished, in childlike appeal, "can't I go? I want to so much!"

Tom Price came around to his wife's side by the table. She had risen. He put his arms tenderly around her, as he made answer:

"Sweetheart, I feel like a brute, to refuse you anything in the world. And if it were really for your happiness, I wouldn't stand in your way for one moment. But it isn't, dear. The truly happy woman is the woman with a home and a husband of her own. Not the woman who must knock around the country on stuffy trains and sleep in cheap hotels, picking up a living as a singer or an actress."

"Just as you say, Tom," she agreed, meekly.

He kissed her good-by and hurried off for his morning inspection of the new building.

Laura looked from the window, watching until he was out of sight. Then she turned back to her household duties. She carried a heavy heart all morning, as she realized the hope she must throw away.

She carried a far heavier heart, during the weeks that followed. For, at noon, Tom Price was brought home to her on a stretcher—senseless, inert, terribly injured. The ambulance surgeon, who escorted the stricken man, told Laura the story of the accident.

Tom had been standing on an upper-

floor framework, watching the unloading of an elevatorful of brick and mortar when the elevator rope broke.

A workman who was still in the elevator had leaped for the scaffolding, to save himself from a fall. Tom had sprung forward to catch him. The workman's convulsively outflung hands had dragged Tom from his precarious balance at the edge of the elevator shaft. Together, the two men had fallen to the ground floor.

Both had been picked up unconscious. Tom had recovered his senses long enough to whisper a demand that he be taken home instead of to the hospital.

The surgeon reported that Price's right leg had dislocated under him in the fall, sustaining a compound fracture in two places. Also that he was a mass of contusions and abrasions and might perhaps be injured internally, as well.

Laura installed herself as assistant to the two trained nurses the family doctor brought. Specialists were called in to determine the extent of the internal hurts. And the dreary routine of sickroom life began.

The little nest egg in the savings bank melted as if it had been a snowball on a hot stove.

Two months had passed since the accident. Tom, fully dressed at last (but with his bandaged leg stuck straight before him on a bench and his crutches at his side), sat in the little living room of the flat. It was his first day outside his own room. And he glanced about him in perplexity.

"This room seems, somehow, changed, since I was out here before," he said to Laura. "It's different and—"

She hesitated an instant, then said, very quietly:

"It's the absence of my piano that makes the room look queer."

"Your piano?" he repeated. "That's so. Where is it?"

"I sold it. Last week."

"Sold it? Are you joking?"

"It isn't much of a joke," she replied, "at least, not to me."

"But why did you do such a thing?" he demanded. "Why did you sell it? You were so fond of it. And you needed it so, in your practicing."

"There won't be any more practicing, just now," she told him. "I have stopped my music lessons."

"But I don't understand," he stammered. "They meant so much to you. They and your piano."

"Dear," she said, softly, "they meant nothing to me—nothing at all—compared to your precious self. Our money ran out. You had to have the right food, the right medicines, the right nursing. There was only one thing left to do. So I gave up my expensive music lessons. And I sold my expensive piano. When the piano money is gone I will try to figure out some new way to meet expenses until you are strong enough to work again."

A mist of tears arose in the eyes of the illness-weakened man.

"You sacrificed your beloved piano for me!" he muttered, brokenly. "Oh, darling, how can I ever make up to you for that?"

"I don't think about it any longer," she said, "and I don't get it well again as soon as you can. The doctor says you will be able to walk in another month or two. Isn't that splendid?"

"In a month or two," he supplemented, "I shall have to go limping around in search of work. For, Doctor Sprague tells me, the Stayton Construction company went, last week, into the hands of a receiver, and the Lord alone knows when I'll get any money on what they owe me for designing that miserable building for them."

A ring at the doorbell interrupted her. She answered the summons, admitting two men.

Tom recognized the older of the two visitors as Professor Sargent, his wife's singing teacher. The younger was a strikingly handsome man, scarcely thirty years old; and with a graceful, self-assured manner which jarred on Price.

Laura welcomed the newcomers cordially. Professor Sargent was warmly sympathetic in his greetings of the invalid. Laura introduced the stranger to Tom, as "Mr. Paul Legrand."

Professor Sargent came at once to the object of the visit.

"Mrs. Price," he began, "this is probably no sort of time to come here talking business. But Legrand badgered me until I consented to. His tour starts in a week. He still declares that no soprano but yourself can do justice to those songs of his. And he seems to think I have enough influence over you to make you change your mind. He also authorizes me to add twenty-five per cent to the terms he offered you, before, and to promise you, as a bonus, a percentage on the receipts."

"I'm afraid it's no use, professor," said Laura, her sweet voice vibrant with a regret that did not escape Tom. "My husband does not—"

"Mr. Price!" broke in Legrand, impulsively, "perhaps you don't realize what this means to your wife. As a mere business man, you may not know that I am just now one of the most popular music composers in America. The concert tour is to exploit my songs; sung as I intended

from to be sung. I, myself, shall be at the piano. That, by itself, insures the success of the tour. I am offering your wife an opportunity for which many lyric sopranos of established reputation would be humbly grateful. I am conferring a high honor on your wife by asking—"

"The highest honor a man can confer on another man's wife," interposed Tom, "is to let her alone. At least, I may be hopelessly old-fashioned. But—"

"You are," Legrand assured him, quite untouched by the snub, "and, let me tell you, if she sings in these concerts of mine and if she scores a success in them, her fortune is made. She will be besieged by offers from managers. She—"

"That is true, Mr. Price," said Professor Sargent, "it is stated rather less modestly than you may care to hear it. But it is entirely true. Mrs. Price will not only receive far higher terms for the tour than ever I have known an untried singer to get, but she will also have a chance to make a name for herself. A name that she can coin into money. With a voice like hers—"

"She has already made a name for herself, sir," retorted Tom, "she made it at the altar. The name of 'Price.' Not an exalted name, perhaps. But I believe and hope she is quite ready to give her. But you can't give her anything. Stand me, answered Legrand, "I meant to say—"

But Legrand cut him short, by interrupting:

"Look here, Mr. Price, I'll speak plainly. I've made inquiries about you. I learn that you're flat broke, that you've got nothing laid by—in short that you're up against it, and with no hope of going out to make a living for some months to come. I—"

"That is my affair!" snapped Tom. "It isn't," contradicted Legrand, "it's your wife's. It's she who suffers by it, a long shot worse than about. All this smug old-fashioned talk about a wife's place being in the home may be correct enough, as long as her husband has a fairly comfortable home to give her. But you can't give her anything. Sargent says she has even had to sell her piano to keep you from starving. If you were a musician you'd understand what that means to her. It's like giving 'up her right hand. You can't give her anything. She'll starve to death with you. Yet you refuse her a chance to make a living and a reputation."

"You are mistaken," said Tom, coldly, "I am giving her a chance to get her reputation. As for my not being able to provide for her, that is no concern of yours."

"Tom!" protested Laura, troubled at her husband's rudeness to their guest.

Price's eye met hers. He saw, in her face, the sharp disappointment involved by his refusal. He recalled all she had done for him—all she had suffered and sacrificed on his account—all that this "chance" meant to her.

"How long is the tour?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Ten weeks," replied Legrand, with sudden eagerness. "We open next Monday night in Galveston. We close in New York just ten weeks later."

"Tom!" cried Laura, joyous incredulity bringing a flush to her cheeks and a new light to her eyes, as she read Price's expression. "Tom! Do you mean you are really going to let me go?"

Tom nodded, in silent wretchedness.

"Good for you, old man!" applauded Sargent.

Three days later Laura Price set forth from home to join the Legrand Concert company at Galveston.

Tom could hobble painfully around the flat by this time. The funds from the piano's sale would provide for him, for the present, and for the wages of an elderly woman who had been hired to keep house for him in his wife's absence.

Before the ready money should be gone the family checkbook would be re-enforced by such sums as Laura could forward to him from her salary.

Laura was jubilant. Her life-dream had at last come true.

"It's for Tom! It's all for him! It will be his success as well as mine."

As for Tom, once having made up his mind, he said not a word to indicate the heartbreak that was his.

From the outset the concert tour scored a genuine success. And the success piled up as the tour continued and as its fame preceded it from city to city.

The bulk of the honors went to the hitherto unknown young lyric soprano, Laura Price.

Before the tour was half ended, she was overwhelmed by offers from managers and agents. Her name and fame and fortune were made.

Owing to her personal success the tour's receipts swelled beyond Legrand's most airy hopes. Laura's percentage of the profits assumed a size that dwarfed the memory of all the money she and Tom had ever possessed.

Throughout she did not let victory go to her brain or make her other than the charmingly girlish and simple woman she had always been. Her daily home letters to Tom were full of innocently vain accounts of her triumphs, but they were also full of the almost maternal love she bore the invalid and of her longing to be with him once more.

One cloud alone—apart from absence from Tom—marred the sunshine of the trip. From the outset Legrand had assumed toward her an air of half-protective tenderness, that was so subtle as to render it difficult to prevent and still more difficult to resent.

Legrand's manner toward her was wholly deferential, but it was proprietary, too. Laura felt that the other singers and the manager must certainly draw erroneous conclusions from it. Yet she could do or say nothing to deter her admirer.

Legrand was a shrewd student of womankind, and a pastmaster in the art of love-making.

He said nothing—he did nothing—that could give her cause for anger or for reproach. Yet always he wove about her a subtle web of attentions that was daily becoming stronger and less easy to escape from.

Vaguely she felt this. But she could do nothing until some overt word or deed should bring the man within reach of her scorn.

As for writing a word of all this to Tom she was far too sensible to do such a fatal thing. She knew his jealousy and that a mere hint was enough to fan it into murderous flame. So sorely puzzled as to what she ought to do, she kept her own counsel—and waited.

"It's that chuckle-headed husband of hers who keeps us apart," Legrand once told his chum, the manager, "if I could get him to give her up she'd marry me in a minute. I know she would. I don't believe she loves him."

The tour was nearing an end. The morning after the first concert in Boston, Legrand sent for Laura and the contralto to come to his suite of rooms in the hotel at which the company was staying. He wished, he said, to go over new songs with each of them.

"Did you see the papers?" he asked them as they came into his sitting room. "They've given us the best notices we've had yet. At this rate we'll carry New York by storm. As usual, Mrs. Price, the critics are crazy over your singing. And by the way, would you care to glance over these press notices for the New York engagement while Mrs. McDonald and I run over this encore song of hers?"

In remarkably short time the contralto had sung the encore song to the composer-accompanist's satisfaction. Pleading a shopping appointment she went out, leaving Legrand and Laura together.

As soon as the contralto had gone Legrand arranged a sheet of manuscript music on the piano.

"It's a formal, melodramatic thing," he told her. "I call it the 'Dagger Song.' I picked up a queer old dirk at a curio shop the other day. And it suddenly occurred to me that, though there are dozens of 'Sword Songs,' no one ever wrote a 'Dagger Song.' So I wrote this. Here," picking up an antique knife from the table, "is the dagger that inspired it."

He handed her the weapon. She looked shudderingly at its rusty blade.

"I like to think those dark stains on the hilt are of blood!" he said.

"Tight!" she shivered, dropping the dagger on the piano top and rubbing her fingers with her handkerchief.

She tossed the handkerchief down on the piano, and bent over to read the music, as Legrand began to play the prelude.

After a time she departed to her own rooms, taking the song with her. She had not been gone two minutes when the outer door of Legrand's sitting room was flung violently open.

Tom Price stood on the threshold.

"Where is my wife?" he demanded, without other form of greeting, his angry eyes searching the sitting room.

"At the office desk they said she wasn't in her rooms. I met your manager in the lobby. He told me I would probably find her in your suite."

"She just stepped out," answered Legrand, a sudden idea flashing into his mind. "But if you care to wait, she'll be back again in a few minutes."

"You seem pretty sure of it," said Tom, pugnaciously.

"Why shouldn't I be?" was the careless rejoinder. "I ought to be by this time."

A false note in the elaborate carelessness caught Tom's attention, though he only in part translated it.

"I don't believe you," he declared, "I mist believe my wife comes to your suite at all. I believe you're lying. I—"

"When I talk to a drunkard or a crazy man," scoffed Legrand, "I don't resent things he says. But, if you want my proof," his insolent gaze roved over the room, "that's a handkerchief of hers lying on the piano top."

Tom swooped down upon the handkerchief, shaking it out and holding it to the light. In one corner it bore Laura's familiar monogram. The husband let it flutter to the floor. His head sank on his breast. All at once the youth and hope and energy seemed to be stricken from him.

"What are you doing here anyway?" asked Legrand, well pleased with the impression he had created. "She told me you were still too lame to walk."

"The doctor told me my leg was sound again three days ago," said Tom. "I didn't write her about it. I ran on here instead to surprise her. She—"

"It'll surprise her," assented Legrand with a sneering grin, "though maybe not quite in the way you're fool enough to hope. She counted on your being tied by the leg in your own little rube town for another two weeks at the very least. She said she was counting on that much more vacation anyhow."

"She did not say that," said Tom lifting his head and staring dazedly at his tormentor. "You lie."

"I told you I pay no attention to lunatics' ravings," returned Legrand. "But now you're here there is something I do want to say to you, if you have sense enough to understand me. I want to hear nothing from you. I—"

"But you'll have to hear it just the same," resumed Legrand. "It concerns your wife. I love her. She loves me. We want to marry. You stand in our way. In the way of her happiness. Have you manhood enough to set her free so she can be happy?"

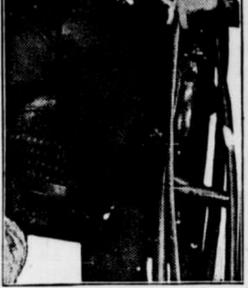
Tom gaped dully at him, scarce comprehending Legrand, raising his voice a little, as though addressing a deaf man, continued impatiently:

"Will you set me free? Or are you cur enough to go on for life, living on her earnings? We are willing to pension you if you insist on such blackmail. But—"

He got no further. With a wordless yell of fury Tom Price leaped forward. His left fist caught Legrand

squarely on the point of the jaw. The composer crashed to the floor like a felled ox, and lay quivering and senseless at Price's feet.

With scarcely a glance at his foe, Tom strode from the suite. Along the corridor he reeled, his brain afire.



"I Have Stopped My Music Lessons."

Around a corner he went blindly, aimlessly, then around another. Presently he found himself at a stair-head. Without waiting for the elevator, he lurched down the two flights of stairs to the lobby. There he sank into a chair and tried to think clearly.

It was a long time before his brain could be forced into normal reasoning.

None of Price's memories of Laura bore out Legrand's vile hints. She loved her husband. She had solemnly promised to be true. She would not break her pledged word. For some purpose of his own, Legrand had tried to blacken her in Tom's eyes.

"That man needs a good deal worse thrashing than I gave him," muttered Price at last, getting to his feet. "And I'm going back to give it to him. I'll hammer him into confessing the truth about Laura, even if I go to jail for it."

He retraced his steps toward Legrand's third-floor suite.

The composer in the meantime had gradually recovered from the knock-out blow.

A tap at the door aroused him, and cleared his muddled brain. For he recognized Laura's voice, calling for admittance.

"Come in," he answered.

"Where is he?" queried Laura, eagerly looking about her.

"Where is—who?" he evaded.

"Where is Tom? I met the manager in the hall just now. He says Tom is here and that he came to your suite to find me."

Without answering Legrand caught her in his arms and held her there despite her struggles.

Her outflung hand fell by chance upon the hilt of the dagger that lay on the piano. Her fingers closed convulsively about it.

Scarcely realizing what she did, and thinking only to fend off the hateful face that pressed so fiercely toward her own, the frantic woman struck out wildly at the man who had seized her.

Legrand's grip relaxed. He gave a coughing gasp, then collapsed in a lifeless heap at her feet.

Laura still holding the dagger whose keen edge had severed Legrand's carotid artery looked down blankly at the dying man. Seeing the blood on the blade she shrieked—again and again, until the whole corridor re-echoed with her cries.

Tom Price, nearing the suite door, was first of fifty running people to reach the spot. As he entered the room Laura dropped the dagger and ran toward him with arms outstretched.

"Tom!" she wailed hysterically, "Oh, Tom! I have come back to you at last. You were right when you said this was no life for me. Take me home!"

"Here!" rasped the house detective, rushing into the room at the head of a dozen guests and servants, "what's the trouble?"

He caught sight of Legrand and of the dagger at his side.

"Who did this?" he demanded, whirling about to face Tom. "Was it you?"

"Yes," answered Tom evenly, "I did it. I'm ready to pay. It was worth—"

"He did not!" screamed Laura, "It was I! I killed him."

"Come along, both of you," ordered the house detective, pulling handcuffs from his pocket. "It's up to the court to decide which of you is going to the chair. All I've got to do is to turn you over to the cops. Come along!"

(END OF NINTH STORY.)

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