

SOULS FOR SALE

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Continued
And so one morning they crossed the Mississippi and into Calverly.

As they stepped down from their car, both gasped and clutched. The Reverend Doctor Steddon was a few yards away from them, studying the off-getting passengers.

"Let's see if he knows us," snickered Mrs. Steddon, with a relapse to girlishness.

"Let's!" said Mem. They knew him instantly, of course. He wore the same suit they had left him in, and the only change they could descry was a little more white and a little less hair.

But he did not know them at all. It amused them to pass him by and note his casual glance at the smart hat and the polite traveling suit of his wife. He had expected a change in his daughter, but he was probably braced for something loud and gaudy.

So her father passed her by. When Mrs. Steddon turned and hailed him in a voice that was gladdened and more tender than she knew, he whirled with his heart bounding, and they heard his hungry, feasting heart groaning. "I thank Thee, O God! Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace."

But neither the Lord nor his family granted that prayer. His wife had turned time far back. Poor thing! She had never known till this year the rapture of being fashionable; had never dared, never understood how, to look her best.

Hiding under his high chin, Mem begged his forgiveness for all the heartaches she had caused him. She wept on his white bow tie, twisting a button on his coat and pouring out her regret for dragging his wife away from him and causing them to quarrel over her. She said that it was a crime for her to have taken her mother on East and left him alone, but he protested:

"D'you suppose I wanted my little girl traveling in those wicked cities all by herself?"

This gladdened Mem exquisitely. It showed that, for all her wanton career, she was still in her father's eyes an innocent child who must be protected from the world. Of course, it was, rather, the world that needed to be protected from her. But she would not disturb his sweet delusion.

The mayor had come down to give Mem welcome, as soon as he could push through the mob of Steddon children that devoured Mem and their mother.

The manager of the Calverly Capitol, with its capacity of two hundred, brushed the mayor aside and claimed Mrs. Steddon and his prize. He had a car waiting for her, and a room at the hotel in case the parsonage was over-crowded.

Doctor Steddon grew Isaian as he stormed back:

"My daughter stays in her own home!"

This brought Mem snuggling to his elbow.

As their car moved off, with a sudden stab she remembered Elwood Farnaby and the far-off girl that he had loved too madly well in that moonlit embrasure. How little and pitiful that Mem had been! There was a toyish unimportance in her very fall, the debacle of a marionette world. But Elwood Farnaby was great by virtue of his absence and his death. He was a hero now with Romeo and Leander and Abelard and the other geniuses of passion whose shadows had grown gigantically long in the sunset of a tragic punishment for their ardors.

A horrifying thought came to Mem; if he had not died, she would have become his wife and the mother of his premature child. She would have been a laughing-stock, material for

He led her out of his woeful little tin wagon and they went larruping through the streets, out into the cemetery.

Mem's only rite of atonement was a glance of remorseful agony cast toward Elwood's resting place. It showed her that the founder of her fortunes was honored only by a wooden headboard already warped and sidelong.

"One last favor," she numbed to Doctor Bretherick. "Get a decent tombstone for the poor boy and let me pay for it."

"All right, honey," said the doctor. And the ear jangled out of the gates again into the secular road.

And that was that. At the supper table the younger children beset her with questions. Gladys was particularly curious and searching in her inquiries.



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ugly whispers about the village. And she would have been the shabbiest of wives even here. She would never have known fame or ease or wealth.

Aft lunch she found Dr. Bretherick and had him drive her to the cemetery. "And," she said, "I want to give you the installment I forgot, of the conscience money. Please get it to papa as soon as you can. And here's a little extra."

The doctor took the bills with a curious smile. She seemed to feel his sardonic perplexity as she mused aloud along a well-thought path.

"If I hadn't been a 'fallen woman,' I couldn't have saved papa's church from ruin. How do you explain it? What's the right and wrong of it all?"

The old doctor shook his head:

"I'm no longer fool enough, honey, to try to explain anything that happens to us here. According to one line of thinking, your misstep was the divine plan. According to another, good can never come out of evil. Of course we know it does, every day; and evil out of good. So let's be as human as we can, and I guess that's about as divine as we'll ever get Down Here."

Then came the hour of the theater-going. Nobody had dared to ask Doctor Steddon if he would accompany his family. He had not made up his own mind. He dared not.

The family tacitly assumed that his conscience or his pride forbade him to appear in the sink in iniquity he had so often denounced.

The family bade him good-bye and left him, but had hardly reached the gate when he came pounding after. He flung his arms about Mem's shoulders and cast off all his offices except that of a father, chuckling:

"Where my daughter goes is good enough for me!"

He made almost more of a sensation in the theatre than Mem. There was applause and cheering and even a slow and awkward rising to the feet until the whole packed auditorium was erect and clamorous.

Seats of honor were reserved for the great star and the family that reflected her effulgence. As soon as they were seated the young woman who flailed the piano began to batter the keys, and Mem's latest picture began to flow down the screen.

She could feel at her elbow the rigid arm of her father undergoing martyr-

dom. She felt it wince as her first close-up began to glow, her huge eyes pleading to him in a glisten of superhuman tears. The arm relaxed as he surrendered to the wonder of her beauty. It tightened again when danger threatened her, and she could hear his sigh of relief when she escaped one peril, his gasp as she encountered another.

He was like a child playing with his first toy, hearing his first fairy story. He was entranced. She heard him laugh with a boyishness she had never associated with him.

She heard him blow his nose with a blast that might have shaken a wall in Jericho.

A sneaking side glance showed her that his eyes were dripping. And when the applause broke out at the finish of the picture, she heard his great hands making the loudest thwacks of all. This was heartbreaking bliss for her.

The family rode home in state, the children and the mother loud in comment, the father silent.

The old parson had to think it all out. Once at home, he sent the children up to bed and held Mem and her mother with his glittering eye for a long while before he delivered his sermon:

"My beloved wife and daughter, I—ahem, ahum! I want to plead for the forgiveness of you both. I have been wrong headed and stiff necked as so often, but now I am humbled before you in spite of all my pride. It has just come over me that when God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light, he must have had in mind this glorious instrument for portraying the wonders of his handiwork. Our dear Redeemer used the parable for his divine lessons, and it has come to me that if he should walk the earth again today he would use the motion pictures.

"You have builded better than you knew, perhaps, my child—and now I ask you to pardon me for being ashamed of you when I should have been proud. You were using the gifts that Heaven sent you as Heaven meant you to use them. Your art is sacred and you can't, you won't, sully it in your life. God forgive me for my unbelief and send you happiness and goodness and a long usefulness in the path you have elected."

That night Mem knelt again by her old bed and, on knees unaccustomed to prayer, implored strength to keep her gift like a chalice, a grail of holiness. She woke with an early-morning resolve to be the purest woman and the devoutest artist that ever lived.

The next day she left the town with all its blessings, no longer a scapegoat, sin laden, limping into the wilderness, but a missionary God-sped into the farthest lands of the earth.

It seemed that all Calverly was at the station to wring her hand and waft her salutation.

The conductor called, "All aboard!" and hasty farewells were taken in clench of hand and awkward kiss.

Mem ran to the rear platform and waved and waved lengthening signals of love to her dwindling family. She noted the absence of her sister Gladys and wondered, at it as she went to her drawing-room. There she found the girl ensconced in fairy triumph, smiling like a pretty witch.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Mem cried.

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