

SOULS FOR SALE

By Rupert Hughes

WHAT'S GONE BEFORE

Remember Steddon comes West to avoid revealing the result of an unfortunate love affair to her father.

The Rev. Dr. Steddon, a clergyman of kind heart but narrow mind, who attributes much of the evil of the world to the 'movies' and constantly lover, Elwood Farnaby, having died in inveighs against them. Mem, her an accident, at the advice of Dr. Bretherick, gives her bad cough as an excuse to get to Arizona and from there writes home that she has met and married "Mr. Woodville," a wholly imaginary person. Later she writes again to say that her "husband" has died in the desert. She takes a job as a domestic to avoid being a burden on her parents. A fall prevents her becoming a mother. In Arizona she had met

Tom Holby, a leading man in a motion picture company, and through him gets the opportunity to play a part in a desert drama. With the company is Robina Teele, a star, fond of Holby and

Leva Lemaire, an extra woman. After her accident, Mem becomes friendly with

Mrs. Dack, a poor woman of Palm Springs, Arizona, and takes an interest in her bright little son.

Terry Dack, who has a great gift of mimicry. Inspired by a letter from Leva, Mem plans to go to Los Angeles to take a job in a film laboratory.

She gets a job in a film laboratory, but loses it. She meets a Mrs. Sturgis from her home town, who talks of the evils of the movies and says the stars are forced to sell their souls. Mem then learns her mother is coming to visit her. Mem is worried about her finances.

She sees a casting director, Arthur Tirrey, and abruptly offers herself to him in return for a job in the movies. He tells her the talk about "paying the price" is all rot. Meanwhile the attention of Mr. Bermond, head of the company, is diverted to her and he decides to give her a chance. Soon she finds herself posing with Claymore as her director, obeying his commands in a kind of stupor.

Mem's father reads a publicity story calling her "the prettiest girl in America" and writes a letter of protest to his wife, and daughter, Mem's fame begins to spread, and Claymore, the director, takes an unusual interest in her. He is infatuated with Mem but tries to be aloof and professional to hide the fact from the company.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

He never said anything, however, that he might not have said before a crowd. He never tried to hold her hand or snatch a kiss or filch an embrace. Mem was constantly set quivering with expectancy that he would make some advance, some gesture of endearment, yet always unable to cide just what she would do if he did. But he didn't.

The picture and its final retakes were finished on a Saturday afternoon. There was an evening's idleness ahead. Claymore asked Mem to take a drive in his car, a long farewell flight about the familiar and the unvisited roads. She accepted meekly. Something told her that this drive was important to her fate.

Something was always telling her something. Nine times out of ten it was false, but she forgot the failures and recalled the coincidences.

Nobody had yet asked Mem for her self-respect as an initiation fee or an initiation rite. She was paid a weekly wage based upon her ability, her experience, and her usefulness. She was paid in the coin of the realm.

Her price would rise and fall according to the general market for moving pictures and her specific value. Her emotions and her beauty were commodities, and Steddon stock would be quoted on the Soul Exchange as the demand for it rose and fell, as the bidders for it increased or diminished.

Claymore had been chaperoned by the company and his own reverence for discipline. But now she was outside his authority. Both were outside the Bermond inclosure. And they were as helpless together as any other twain whom nothing restrains or separates in the undertow of passion. They were two emotional people without a barrier.

Among the countless things said about the hows and whys of women's surrenders one motive seems to have been too much ignored, though it must have exerted a cast influence as women go more and more into the worlds of business, of art, and of freedom with only themselves for their guardians.

God sportsmanship, a hatred of smugery, a contempt for too careful self-protection, a disgust for a holier-than-thou self-esteem—these are amiable attitudes of mind that make for popularity. To be a miser of one's graces, a hypochondriacal coddler of one's virtues, is to be unloved and unlovable.

So many a man will gamble, break a law, risk his career, his health, his life, get drunk, steal, slay and play fool rather than face the reproach that he is a mollycoddle, a Puritan, a prig, a Miss Nancy, a coward, a Pharisee.

And many a woman who would not yield for love or luxury must have consented for fear of seeming of be overproud, stingy, cold, prudish, disobeying, superhuman, subnormal, un-sportsmanlike.

Mem had been swept once beyond the moorings by a summer storm of devotion to young Farnaby, her first love. Now she was to feel her anchors cut adrift by the gracious gesture of good fellowship with a colleague.

The Ocean Drive stretched along a forest of palms like huge cocoanuts dark against the gaudy west. The automobiles of every make were so many that they were almost one long automobile, or at least a chain on which they slid as black beads. Their lights were coming out now like early stars pricking a twilight sky. For miles and miles the highway mounted and writhed along the steep slopes of precipices,

hugging the rocks to let pass car after car with lamps flashing in front of blurred passengers.

In almost every "bay" where there was a bit of space a motorist had stopped and drawn close to the cliff-side in the dark, each car a wheeled solitude, a love boat at anchor in a stream of cars ignoring and ignored. There was a strange influence in this recurrent mystery. Everywhere lovers were hiding themselves in conspicuous concealment. Mem felt disgust at the first dozen, amusement or contempt for the next fifty, tolerance for the next and—

Claymore did not speak of them or of anything else. He was too busy twirling the wheel and gauging the little distances between the edge of the cliff and the cars that whizzed past.

Halfway up the canon his headlight ransacked a black cove and found no motor in possession of the estuary of night. And here, to Mem's dumb astonishment, he abruptly checked his car, swung in off the road against the wall of rubble, and stopped short with a sigh of exaggerated fatigue.

"Well," he groaned, "this is a drive! I'll rest a bit if you don't mind. Pretty here, eh?"

From their cavern of gloom they looked across a fathomless ravine to a mountain on which the risen moon poured a silent Niagara. In the dozing radiance a creamy shaft of yucca stood, a candle blown out in a deserted cathedral.

The night air was of a strange gentleness, and the cars that shot past threw no light into their retreat.

There was a long, long silence that filled Mem with a terror she could not quite fail to enjoy. She could not tell whether she heard her own heartbeats or his, but excitement was a throbbing together in the little coach that had brought them so swiftly to this remote seclusion.

Claymore was dumb so long that Mem had time to cease to be afraid of what he would say, and to begin to wish that he would get it said, so that she could know what her answer would be.

She felt a baffling uncertainty of herself. She could not imagine what she might do or say. She had not had much experience of men, but enough to know that before long he would initiate immemorial procedure that starts with an arm adventuring about a waist and a voyage after a kiss.

She told herself that the only right and proper thing to do would be to resist, protest, forbid and prevent at any cost the profanation of her sacred integrity. If necessary, she must fight, scratch, scream, escape, run away, appeal for help to any passer-by, or, as a last resort, leap over the cliff and die for honor's sake.

But who was that She and who was that Herself that told each other so many things?

Herself told She that Mr. Claymore could not be treated as an ordinary ruffian, an insolent, outrageous knave, a fiend. He had treated her with most delicate courtesy from the first, he had given her his admiration, his praise, his devotion, his mute but evident affection.

If he loved her and revealed his love, she could hardly reward his patient chivalry with prompt ingratitude and violence and fear. That would make her the insulter, not him.

She must be very gentle with him and ask him kindly to forbear and not to spoil the pleasant friendship that she had prized.

If Mr. Claymore should propose marriage, that would make his caresses acceptable—according to some canons, though not to all. But he could not marry her and she did not want to marry him. She did not want to marry anybody just now. She was a free woman in a free country.

She was not free, however, from the witchery of this night, this mountainous beauty. She was not free of the disaster of desire, the hunger to be embraced and gissed and whispered to, the need to be kept warm in the cold loneliness of the world.

Her thoughts spun giddily in her mind, all entangled with a skein of romantic threads. She was young and pretty and time was wasting her flowerly graces. Some one bloomed!

While she debated with herself, as doubtless innumerable women have plights, Claymore's own mind was a chaos of equally ancient plattitudes of a man's philisophy.

At length he found the courage or the cruelty to slip his arm about Mem's waist and to draw her close to him. He was almost more alarmed than delighted to find that she hardly resisted at all.

He took her hands in his and whispered, "Your poor little hands are cold!"

Then he kissed them with cold lips that he lifted at once to her's and found them warm and strangely like a rose against his mouth.

He was as much amazed as if hers were the first lips he had ever kissed—as if he had just invented kissing. Then in a frenzy of wonder he closed her in his arms with all his power. He did not know that the wheel bruised her side, and neither did she.

But she forgot to debate her duty or to think of her soul. She thought only of the rapture of this communion, and her arms stole around his neck and she clenched him with all the power of her arms.

Mem, swooning, she knew not whither, was awakened from her mad rapture by a low voice across her shoulder.

"Sorry to interrupt you, folks, but I need your money!"

She turned and found herself blinded by the glare from a motor halter at a little distance. Dazed as she was, she could see the gaunt hand that held before her a black pistol with a glint outlining its ugly muzzle.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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