

SOULS for SALE

By RUPERT HUGHES.

(Continued From Yesterday)

She felt sure that no woman wrote Ned Ling love letters or set him up as an icon on a bureau. Ned Ling's pictures were not sitting around the globe, setting forth girls aglow, for Ned Ling's published portraits were always grotesque. He was photographed with a caricatured face of white chalk and a charcoal primrose, with a noncommittal hat and collar becoming almost as familiar now as Charlie Chaplin's neat slovenliness, his mustaches, and his splay-foot shoes.

Surely Ned Ling was free from the atrocious bombardment of anonymous love letters. A woman might stand a chance of keeping his heart for her very self, and it would be cheerful to have one's own comedian on the brain.

Thinking these things, Mem said: "I'd be jealous of your public, Tom. It is a big one and you've got to be true to it. I suppose it's because I've got none of my own. I've hardly had a letter yet."

"That's because your first picture is only being released now. Just wait! You'll be snowed under."

"And would you like it if I read

disappointing about a love that is willing to share its prey with anyone else—even if it is with everyone else.

Perhaps to punish this sickly saintliness she told him flatly now that she was going to be Ned Ling's leading lady.

"This hurt him as much as she hoped.

"It's a comedown for you," he said. "It's a setback. You'd have been the next big star in the emotional field. Now you'll be swallowed up in a comic two-reeler. Ling never gives anybody else any credit in his pictures. All you'll do will be to stand round and feed him."

"Feed him?"

"Yes, do things and say things that will give him a fancy comeback."

"This was a trifle dampening. If he had held to that line of argument he might have turned her aside. But, as always, he had to say too much.

"Besides, as I told you, Ned Ling always makes love to his leading lady. He quarreled with the last one, Miss Gave, because she wanted more publicity. She wanted to get a laugh or two herself and a line or two in the advertisements."

This stirred in Mem a double emotion of curiosity, one of self-conceit. She had had Ned Ling clinging to her fingers like a baby. She could wrap him round one of them, no doubt. Because Miss Gave failed, that did not prove that a wiser woman would.

Holly did not quite persuade her to refuse the opportunity with Ling,

but he sent her to it with misgivings. He put a fly in the ointment.

There are always flies in ointment. A few days later a way was felt into her apartment. She received one of the first of numerous letters that were to swarm about her path.

CHAPTER LI.

Time in southern California flew on wings that seemed never to change their plumage. At home in Calverly the birds put on their apricot splendor, lost it, and flew away. The trees feathered out in leaves and in courtship glory of blossoms, then lost all. The flower bushes ran the same scale from shabbiness to brief beauty and back again. The very ground was brown, was green, was bald, was white with snow that went and came again.

But Los Angeles was always green. In December, March—always there were great roses glowing, often high up in some tree they had climbed.

Sometimes Mem grew angry at the monotony of grey. She read of blizzards in the east, and north and longed for a froebite or the nipped cheeks of a Calverly winter. There was music in her memory of the frozen snow that rang like muffled cymbals under her aching little feet as she ran to school pretending she was a locomotive and her breath the steam.

But this was only the fretfulness of the unquarrelable human discontent. She had hated winter when it tortured her, and now the California paradise tortured her because it was winterless. Even in heaven the angels grew weary of golden and Jasper architecture and harp music and tried to change their government.

Discontent with the weather was only one of Mem's unhappinesses. Her attention was ruthless and her critical faculty rebuked her. She prayed for opportunities for bigger roles and blushed at her chicanery. Yet when she saw her finished scenes she suffered direfully because she had done them so ill. When her colleagues applauded her she thought her true thought when she answered: "It could have been done so much better. If only we could retake it!"

As with every other artist in the world's history, her personality, her preferences, her very face and form, offended many people. Nobody ever pleased everybody. She overheard harsh criticisms of her work brought to her one way or another. They hurt her cruelly, and the more cruelly since it was her nature to believe them justified, and even a little less than harsh enough.

Some happier natures than hers could always protect themselves by saying that the critic had a personal spite, or was a failure venting the critic's own disappointment, or was too shallow to appreciate, or had been bribed.

But Mem could never wrap her wounded soul in such bandages. She

felt that the truth was worse than the worst she heard. She could at least find some fault in her achievements. She had been shot over again, and she could correct some fault, she always found another one, or more, to replace it.

Obturacy was a further anguish. She suffered because so few people had seen her pictures, and the hard times that diminished the audience looked like a personal injury to her in her artistic vanity.

And then she had a stab of another sort. She learned the curse of success. One of her pictures was shown at the California theatre in Los Angeles, and she sat in a vast throng and saw with pride that people strange to her were leaning forward with interest and devouring her with their eyes. She saw a fat woman snifle and thought it a beautiful tribute. She saw a bald-headed man sneeze a handkerchief out and, pretending to blow his nose, dash his shameful tears away. And that was beautiful to her with a wonderful beauty. She played a minor role, but she heard people speak of her as the mob went out to lounge the inebriated mob-crowding to the next showing.

The papers the next day in their criticisms gave her special mention. She loved Florence Lawrence's and Guy Price, Grace Lindsey, Edwin Schallert, Monroe Lathrop—all of those who tossed her a word and put her name in print. A marvelous thing to see one's name in print and with a bouquet tied to it.

She had but a little while to revel in this perfect reward, for in a few days a letter came to her, forwarded from the studio.

The writing on the envelope was strange to her. When she opened it there was no signature. There was a savagery about the very writing. Her heart plunged with terror as she read.

"I've seen your picture last night and it was a beautiful thing, and sweet in the picture and you look like butter would melt in your mouth but I know better for the guy held you up in Tomany's canyon, and you was there with that other guy and took your wedin ring off you I didn't

know who you was then and I don't know who he is yet but I'm wise to you and all I got to say is I've got my eye on you and you better behave or else quit playin these innasent parts you movie people make me sick you're only a gang of hippies so behave!"

Mem felt odious to herself, with all the revolting nausea of evil revealed. There is remorse enough for a struggling soul that knows its own defects and backslidings, but it is nothing to the remorse that follows a published fault.

This letter was more hideous than headlines in a paper. It was more

dreadful than such a pilloried public shame as Hester Prynne's. It meant that somewhere there was a man in an invisible cloak of namelessness and facelessness who despised her and peered at her subtilities of purity. Her highest ambitions were doomed to sneering mockery.

She was thrown back into the dark ages when girls were told that guardian devils flouted about them as well as guardian angels—all manner of leering enemies, incubi, succubi, witches, fairies. She could hear such hellish laughter as Faust's Gretchen heard.

She longed to find this man and inspire his mercy. But how could she discover him? He was a thief and could only disclose himself by betraying his own crime. Yet he felt himself less wicked than she.

She saw before her a long life of such attacks. She resolved to do two things—lead therefore a blameless life and play therefore only such characters as made no pretense of perfection.

(To Be Continued Monday)

Lost anything? Telephone your "Want" Ad to AT lantic 1000.

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