

SAVED FROM MYSELF

Just for One Night Lula Wanted to Live—to be Free. All Her Life She Had Been Misunderstood, Mistreated, a Victim of Circumstance. With Cool Deliberation She Decided to Reap the Benefits of Her Reputation. Here is the Warm, Frank Confession of a Girl Who Was Driven From Respectability by an Unsympathetic Environment.

I WAS born in Slabtown. There were two other children, boys, younger than I. We lived with our mother in a sort of lopsided, two-room shed. I never knew my father. I attended the nearest public school in a fairly spasmodic manner for six years. Then, when I was twelve my mother died.

The city buried her in the potter's field. The two boys were sent to an orphanage. All this happened twelve years ago.

Through the influence of the truant officer who had been largely responsible for my six years of inadequate schooling, I was introduced into the home of old Mrs. Stone.

Old Mrs. Stone was kind to me in her way. My life at her home was at least decent.

Nell Parks, a notorious older "friend" of mine, was a creature whose showy mulatto beauty, under Slabtown conditions was an almost certain indication of her profession.

I know that Nell Parks had a genuine liking for me. She had always had it. When I was a small, hungry, dirty, little outcast, she used to share her crusts with me and try to warm my hands between her own icy little claws as we used to race to school. The memory of these things were hidden deep in my heart and kept me always from snubbing her. Yet—I didn't like to have her hail me with a familiar "Hello, kid," run her hand through my arm and walk down the street with me.

Misunderstanding.

It was such a public association as this that led to the general frowning of parents upon friendships between me and their daughters. I understood and didn't blame them, but, oh, how I suffered. It seemed to me that they ought to see that I was not like Nell Parks and I really do think they knew but what could any of us do? Small town customs are hard to break and I was born in Nell's class. I knew—and I determined to climb and climb till I was far above the slime of my beginnings. So though I flinched from her, I was kind to Nell in the only way I could be—my treatment of her.

My kindness to Nell bore fruit. She secured my first job down at the lamp factory when old lady Stone died and left me no hope of employment. I met Nell the first night I engaged a cheap room at a hotel. Nell looked troubled.

"What's the matter Nell?"

I said, "is there anything I can do for you?"

"It ain't me, Kid, it's you I'm thinkin' about. These hotels aint no place for kids like you, Lula. How'd you like to go to a sure enough home and live?" She looked at me and I looked at her wondering.

"A home?" my voice had an unbelieving tone.

"Yes," she said, and there was relief in her tones. "I can see by your face you like the idea, kid, and—I'm glad. I didn't know just what you had fixed up. When you told me you was staying at the hotel here, I wondered if—but I mighta knowed you would stay—straight—I'm glad—Kid." If I hadn't known how hard Nell could be I'd have sworn there were tears in her eyes as she turned them away from me.

Nell delivered me to the care of the Lees, who were very kind souls.

One girl, alone, of all the workers at the factory, treated me with intimacy. Arlie Mack, a rabbit-faced, brown girl with crinkly reddish hair, whose flimsy dresses were always gaudily colored and trimmed.

The Mack home was in the next block from the Lees. Consequently Arlie and I were frequently together.

One evening on our way home Arlie slyly asked questions about the sordid side of life that was supposed to exist among the inhabitants of Slabtown. At the very first question, I became uncomfortable. I had welcomed her friendship so eagerly as the first step upward from slime, but she was now asking me to delve into this for her entertainment. For—although I had lived surrounded by filth until I was twelve years old, it had never touched my innocent childhood.

Finding herself making such poor headway in this manner she boldly took me into her confidence. She related some of the most repulsive accounts of personal escapades, always with the understanding that I would be equally frank with her.

Of my own experiences I had nothing to match the things she told me of herself but I told many stories of others with a little embellishing here and there. My well known friendship with Nell Parks was a strong point in my favor.

This attitude of Arlie's told me how impossible it was in my birthplace to ever win my name free of stain in the estimation of my townsmen.

I was young and starved for pleasure. Youth dreams of love. I was ripe for the

plan that Arlie laid before me.

Temptation.

"It's all in the way you go about it, Lula," Arlie said to me. "Y'see I go after the swells, n' they're as keen as I am to keep quiet a'count their women folks. I mean to marry one of them swells some o' these days anyhow, an' y' ruin your chances if you let things get out on you, see?"

If Arlie Mack could do things that she was doing and still enjoy respectability, why should I be so particular? I, who had no respectability to lose might as well snatch at any fleeting pleasure life might offer me.

Arlie's favorite method of enjoying her secret affairs was to leave home at six or seven o'clock in the evening seemingly to go to the movies. Then instead of going there, she would wait in the shadows until Clyde Ross, son of the Lamp Shade factory owner, or Billy Summers, the wild son of the wealthiest banker in town, met her with a high powered roadster.

Then she would climb into the bright scarlet Lincoln or the screaming yellow Packard as the case might be, to be whirled away in a mad burst of speed to forbidden places. She was very successful and cunning in her excuses. With a confederate she reasoned her opportunities would be very widely extended. So she sought me out.

"We will let on to the folks that we are doing extra work at the factory, Lula," she confided to me. "Then we will pretend that we have saved enough money for a little trip to the city when the work slacks down week after next. It'll be a cinch. Clyde said if I could get you to go on a bat, him an' Billy would stand the cost and give us enough to make it worth our while besides. Billy likes your looks. He said so. He always was sweet on you but he thinks you are a wet blanket. I told him he was all wet; that you just didn't know the ropes then."

As Arlie talked I felt ashamed. I understood Billy Summers perfectly. Oh, yes, I knew well his intentions.

My Venture.

We did not go to the city with the boys. That would have been a dead give away. We went in one Sunday morning on the interurban. After boarding the car I sat beside a clean limbed, frank faced brown skinned lad a few years older than myself. A small particle of dust blew into my eye. I gave a little

gasping cry of pain. Instantly the young man beside me turned all sympathetic helpfulness and apology for keeping the window open. With the utmost gentleness he removed the bit of dust from my eye.

"Gee," he said when I smilingly thanked him, "I'm glad I got it out. I got a cinder in my eye on the way out to the foundry yesterday and I know how anything like that can hurt."

"Do you work at the foundry?" I asked, at a loss for something to say. I liked the clean look of strength about John Rogan the minute I saw him.

"Yeah, I been working out there a year now an' I'm going in to the city to celebrate the raise they gave me yesterday. Do you live in the city?" he asked rather bashfully I thought.

"I?" I laughed happily—"do I look like a city girl?"

"You are pretty enough to belong anywhere," he countered, eyeing me admiringly. I blushed, but a happy little thrill ran up and down my spine.

"Well, I don't live in the city but I'm going to be there for a week"—I paused. Suddenly the thought struck me of how I intended to spend that week and the blood drained back into my heart in a pouring flood of shame. But John Rogan only looked at me with that worshipful glow of admiration in his honest eyes. I turned my face away and looked out of the window.

"Say," his voice was eager, "when you come back to town can't I come in and see you sometime? Do you live in town or out?"

"I live out at the Foundry," he said simply, "board with the Smiths." The train pulled into the city terminal. I was sorry to see the broad-shouldered boy I had just met disappear. He looked back as Arlie and I stepped into the taxi that the boys were to meet had sent for us. I felt my hands go cold and my heart felt as heavy as lead as Arlie chattered away about the good times in store for us and how easily we had fooled the folks at home.

She was still chattering when we reached the fourth-rate hotel where reservations had been made for us.

Through Arlie, the dissipated youths had supplied us with ample funds till they should arrive.

We did not know the city so we started out haphazardly to see what we could. As we stood waiting for the traffic to pass on a congested corner, near the hotel, I noticed a big copper-colored policeman in uniform swinging across the street ahead of us. A shrill childish cry almost directly in front of me caused him to swing around as though he were turned about by a spring. I did not have time to sense the danger till it was over. The child darted past us from the curb directly in the path of a high powered, speeding car. On the turn of a breath I darted after her, just the two steps forward that gave me a firm grip on Maggie Wallace's flying gingham dress. Jim Wallace had us both in his arms almost before I had risen from the dust where the sudden effort had thrown me. This was how I met the Wallace family.

It was a tear-eyed mother, Maggie, that darned the stocking torn by the sudden effort put forth to save Maggie, Jr.

Arlie sat impatiently but the peace and calm of that home gave me a restful feeling of cleanliness.

Somehow I hated to leave that calm little home of respectability for the things I knew awaited me. But at last Arlie's impatience won. We left.

The Arrival

It was about ten o'clock that night when Clyde and Billy got to the hotel.

About an hour later with tongues loosed and passion unleashed by liquor I began to see them in a different light from the light-hearted and innocent society boys who were going to give us a good time. The new light in which I saw them frightened me. I began to regret that I had shared this venture with Arlie.

Before my mind, there flitted pictures of girls who began similarly and had ended in social disgrace.

I knew the cross roads at which I stood, and somewhere deep down in my soul was a little unuttered prayer.

Billy's circling arms closed around me and his passionate lips sought mine. I felt the youth within me melting to the touch of youth and very deliberately, even desperately, I set my feet upon the gay path that leads down to life's bottom-most pits.

Clyde and Arlie had already disappeared in the other room. We could hear the sound of smothered kisses and giggles. At length, drowsy with love and desire, we entered the other room and shut the world out. But scarcely had we entered when suddenly we heard a great commotion outside in the corridor. The place was raided.

"Come on outs there and make it snappy," the harsh voice of the big blue clad policeman frightened us.

Arlie and I spent the night at the police station. All of us gave fictitious names. The boys offered cash bonds for us but with sneering and embarrassing jokes the officers told us we would have to face the music in morning court.

Each of us was fined. The boys peeled off the amount of the fines and we were at liberty again.

We felt more than ever at their disposal now that they had spent so much money on us. I was looking up the street when a big uniformed figure stopped beside me. I turned and looked up into the face of Jim Wallace. Beside him was—Nell Parks.

Shame

It was she who spoke first. "Yeah, these is them, Jim," she said, and her remark was addressed to the big copper-colored cop.

Nell cut in. "Say, Arlie Mack," she said, and her voice, was sharp and hard, "you may be better'n Slabtowners at home and I ain't got no call and no business telling any of the things I know on you back there. They'll tell themselves sooner or later. But this kid's been clean all along. She musta been born that way, I guess. God knows she ain't never had no example from any of the rest of us down there. Anyhow if you and Bill and Clyde and any of the rest of that bunch try any more of yore come-hither work with her there's goin' 't be somethin' bust." She stopped and her eyes were harder than ever as she shot a long level glance at Arlie.

To think of Nell Parks trying to help keep me pure. And I had been proud to go with Arlie and ashamed to show kindness to Nell. What a puzzle life is anyway!

"Thank you, Nell," I said, and that was all; my heart was too full for more. Her "goodbye" was curt and clipped as though she checked something and held it in her heart.

Respectability Triumphs

With a new hope dawning in my heart, I followed Jim Wallace.

"Here she is, Maggie." The words and look of infinite tenderness and compassion in the eyes of Maggie Wallace when we entered the quiet little flat (the three older children were at school and the baby asleep) told me that she knew the story and that at last I had found a real haven. Only God knew the thankfulness in my awakened soul for the warmth of the folding arms when she pressed me to her breast without a word.

You can imagine the joy in my heart when that same week I discovered that John Rogan, my acquaintance of the dust mote, was Mrs. Wallace's brother. John and I afterwards became sweethearts. Six months later we were united in the marriage which happily has still lasted. We have our differences as every married couple. But the memory of our meeting and little John, Jr., serve to keep our lives rich with abiding love. And Nell Parks, God bless her, beyond the pale of respectability as she is, was the divine instrument that made possible my fine husband and baby, by saving me from myself.

THE END