

THE LITTLE SINS

By

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PHILLIPS

*A quiet little story
with a sly surprise
punch that comes just
in time to be included
in the story at all*



HELEN sat on the edge of the bed swinging her feet. The landlady had just brought up the morning's mail—two letters from home and a haberdasher's advertisement.

"How much money have you—we got?" she asked, lifting a pair of curious eyes to where her husband stood at the window.

"How much?" Ned unfastened a safety pin and dug into an inner pocket of his vest. "I'm not exactly aware of my—our financial circumstances myself," he admitted, bringing out the roll of bills.

He smoothed out each wrinkled note, placing them one upon another. There were four ones and three twos. "Ten dollars," he announced quickly. Helen looked at the pile and then at the man.

"Not very much, is it?"

"Well, no, not a staggering sum," he argued, "but there's no use in worrying. I'm certain to hear from Summerville any day now, and that'll mean a good job. His show must begin rehearsals pretty soon. He's fond of me and promised me one of the best parts, too."

"We've been waiting for his letter ever since we came to New York," Helen objected, "and we're getting down rather low." She surveyed the four dingy walls of the little room. "How much do we owe on this—this luxurious suite, Ned?"

"Four dollars!"

"That leaves us six." She got up from the bed and came over to where he was staring out of the window. "You won't be angry with me if I tell you something I have done, will you, Ned?"

"You know I'm never angry with what you do, Honey," he remonstrated, "What is it—a new suit or a hat, or—?"

"Oh, it isn't anything like that, Ned," she faltered. "It is something to help you! I—I've got a position!"

"A what?"

"A—a position," she repeated. "Now don't look at me like that! Please hear me through. I saw an ad. in yesterday's paper and I answered it—personally. An elderly lady wanted a companion. I suited, so she engaged me. And—and, Ned, it's ten dollars a week!"

"But—Helen," he protested wildly, "I can't never think of you working! It's—it's absurd. Great heavens, if I'm not capable of supporting you I'd better go out—"

"But it isn't real work, Ned," she interrupted, her eyes misting. "This lady lives in a beautiful apartment on Central Park West, and all I have to do is to walk out with her, or ride, or shop and keep her company in the evenings."

"Yes," he choked, "but the very idea of you working. We're not down and out yet, Honey! And if the worst comes—why, I can easily pick up any number of stock engagements!"

"Oh, but you don't understand, Silly," she persisted. "It isn't work at all. It's more of an outing. Besides, I'll have all my meals—and that'll mean a whole lot to us—right now. It'll only be for a little while. . . And what do we care?" she added, lowly, putting both her arms about his neck. "What do we care, Ned! We've got each other and that's about all there is in this world. No one will ever know a thing about it—and just as soon as Summerville engages you, why I'll quit."

He brushed back the hair from her forehead and kissed her cheek tenderly. "That'll be any day now, Honey. He isn't the kind of man to go back on his word. Now you put that crazy idea of working right out of your head. I'm the bread-winner of this family, and if his job doesn't materialize in due time, why—why, I'll find something else in short order."

The mist in Helen's eyes formed into tears and instantly they began to trickle down her cheeks. Half an hour later Ned gave up the argument and bowed to the inevitable.

So the following day the girl took up her duties as a companion. The high little room on Forty-Fourth Street became very empty and cheerless during the long evenings, but Ned never complained, for fear of dampening the girl's enthusiasm. He waited patiently for her return and listened eagerly to her recount of the day's adventures.

Sometimes it was a long drive in the limousine that she told him of, or a pleasant afternoon in the park. Sometimes a matinee, or a shopping tour of all the great stores, or a dainty luncheon at one of the big hotels.

Yet, in spite of the manner in which Helen seemed to enjoy herself, Ned brooded over the situation and chafed at the unseemly delay in getting back into harness. For the previous three years he had been fortunate enough to accept good positions in the early Fall, and each production, while not playing New York, had always lasted well into the Spring. This year things seemed to be running at cross-purposes.

DURING a Summer season he had met Summerville, a manager for one of the big Eastern producers, who had liked his type and his work, and while no contract had been entered into, yet a verbal agreement passed between them to the effect that Ned should play second business in one of the firm's new openings. A Broadway appearance was a much-to-be desired goal, and a thing not easily gained; therefore Ned patiently awaited Summerville's convenience and frowned upon lesser engagements.

But such things have a habit of dragging slowly, and nothing materialized except constant and alluring promises. The money saved from the Summer's work went dollar by dollar, until but ten remained out of the hundred and fifty. The days of enforced idleness began to have a serious effect upon Ned's state of mind. Every fibre of his being protested, and, to crown all, the fact that Helen, his wife but one year, a girl who had been raised in comfort, if not in luxury, should hire herself out as a companion in order that his room rent could be met, has meals paid and his laundryman satisfied, seemed to be the last straw on the proverbial camel's back.

One morning, with his mind firmly made up not to stand the suspense a day longer, he began the weary rounds of the agencies. Here the first shock was met with. It was so well along in the season that all of the stock companies had been completed, and most of the lesser road companies were already opening. A week of this brought him to the bitter realization that even these ordinary positions were to be denied him.

He attempted to be cheerful in front of Helen, but despite it all, his heart sank lower and lower and a fear came into his brain. It could not go along this

way much longer. Helen was not to work while he loafed, depending upon vague promises.

The next afternoon he walked boldly into a cheap vaudeville exchange. The outer room was crowded with the usual mediocre gathering of singers, jugglers, magicians and acrobats. When a side door opened he looked up with the others, and was surprised to see a pompous looking personage beckon in his direction. He walked across the floor and went into the private office.

"What's your line?" the manager asked, bluntly.

Ned began a wearisome explanation, and finished by saying he possessed a fair voice.

"Let's hear it."

He walked over to the piano and sang through a popular ballad that was open on the rack. The manager listened and nodded.

"Pretty fair," he admitted, when it was done. "I think I can place you. Of course, you understand, I can't offer you what you've been getting in your regular line. But, anyhow, a New York engagement calls for less money."

Ned held his breath. Did the man really mean he could place him in a local production, and that he would remain in New York all the Winter?

"I've been drawing seventy-five a week for the past three seasons," he finally managed to stammer. "But, of course, for a New York engagement I'd consider less money."

"Sure thing," the other cut in. "You're sensible. This is a bad show year, and the man with a steady job will consider himself lucky. Never knew the outlook to be so bad, and I've been in the business the past twelve years. There's a moving picture house over on Eighth Avenue that's after an illustrated song man. Four shows a day, and \$20 a week. Do you want it?"

Ned's heart stopped. "A—a what?" he gasped. "Moving picture show? Singing illustrated songs at twenty a week?"

"Them's my words," the manager returned. "What did you think I'd be offering you, eh? A season at the Metropolitan?"

"Thank you!" The blood began to mount in Ned's veins, and his very throat quivered. "I'm not that far down yet. When I want to sing ballads in a dirty Eighth Avenue picture house I'll let you know."

He got up from his chair and started across the floor. At the door he paused. Did he say he was not that far down? Not down far enough to accept twenty a week when Helen was working for half that amount and was happy to do so! He set his teeth into his trembling lips and turned.

"I'll—I'll take the job," he said, simply, trying to control his voice. "When do I start?"

"To-morrow at eleven! Come up here first and I'll send a note over to the owner of the house. My commission is \$2—in advance, please!"

Two of Helen's dollars changed hands.

That night when Helen came home he met her at the door with a glad cry.

"No more work for you, Honey," he hurried, kissing her again and again. "No more work. I got a letter from Summerville, and I'm to start rehearsals to-morrow. Isn't that bully?"

She clung to him tight. "Oh, I'm so glad, Ned," she answered, her voice quivering. "But I'll have to work just a little while longer—until your first week's salary comes in."

"Not that long, Honey," he put in quickly. "I'll draw twenty from the management next Monday night. I'm sure Summerville will advance me that much."

And thus, almost before he was aware of it, the lie was given birth. Nor did it die with the passing of the days. Helen's absence in the evenings only made it easier for him to keep up appearances, and he always managed to arrive home before she did.

Down at the moving picture house he continued to sing his four songs daily, timing himself so as to get upon the darkened stage only a moment or two before his appearance. He never went around to the front of the house, nor did he give the manager his right name.

Evenings at home he eagerly explained to Helen the events of the day's rehearsals, the people he met and the way the work was progressing. She always listened with bated breath and radiant eyes, and so interested did he himself become in the tale of his own spinning that the remembrance of the stuffy picture house and the common songs and the gaudy slides sort of melted into oblivion.

After he had finished Helen would relate the little happenings of her day's adventure; what she had to eat, the long rides and some bits of conversation that passed between her and the old lady.

"Mrs. Willmington is so kind and considerate to me," she would repeat time and time again, as if to impress it upon Ned's mind. "It almost seems I'm

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