FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Woman of Ill Fame
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Nora Simms isn't a whore with a heart of gold. She's a whore with a head for gold. Determined to avert a life of penurious drudgery in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, the nineteen-year-old flesh merchant arrives in San Francisco harbor on, as she phrases it, "November 3 in the Year of our Gold, 1849." Her final act on the ship that brings her there (a vessel presciently named *The Lady's Peril*) is to trade her favors to a galley mate in return for his lugging her trunk onto the dock and thereby saving her a porter's fee. Nora is nothing if not practical.

A writer on local history and columnist for the *Montclarion* in Oakland, California, Mailman presents a sprawling, loud and muddy city that fairly pulsates with human energy. Nora is ready for it. She marches straight from the ship to a "crib" and rents a space to entertain her customers, feeling neither excitement nor dread. It's simply the first step of doing business. Proud of her good looks and amatory skills, she aspires to move up in—not out of—the world of whoredom. Her ultimate aim is to become a parlor house girl, to work in a fine, elegantly furnished house servicing rich and cultivated gentlemen.

When she discovers that the galley mate has given her the wrong trunk, Nora returns to *The Lady's Peril* and finds the murdered corpse of another prostitute who had accompanied her on the voyage. This event sets the mystery element of the book in motion. Who is slaying the whores of San Francisco?

Two of Nora's first and most endearing customers are Abe, the brawny but mentally limited stable hand, and Professor Hugh Parkson, who amiably indulges her strivings for self-improvement. In Professor (that's his given name), she sees a possible mentor; but in Abe, she recognizes a fellow social outcast who doesn't condemn her. Moreover, he gives her her first orgasm.

Quite apart from the job hazards she faces personally, Nora is constantly colliding with San Francisco's brutality. She witnesses a gory and fatal fight between a bear and a bull, sees a man hanged in public, befriends a frail and frightened woman who's driven to prostitution by her gay husband, and watches another woman die from a botched self-abortion. As the grisly

murders continue, Nora begins to wonder if she might be the next victim.

Fortunately for her—and for the reader—Nora is endowed with bedrock Yankee realism and a fine sense of the absurd. She never laments the life she's chosen, never blames anyone else for leading her into it and never sees herself as immoral. Her spirit and enterprise are both encapsulated in her priceless pickup line: "Come on in …and make me glad I'm a whore."