Girl Alone

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By the Same Author

THE AVENGING PARROT
THE BLACK PIGEON
MURDER BACKSTAIRS
THE PENNY PRINCESS
SAINT AND SINNER
DAUGHTERS OF MIDAS
RIVAL WIVES

GIRL ALONE

By ANNE AUSTIN

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CHAPTER I

The long, bare room had never been graced by a picture or a curtain. Its only furniture was twenty narrow iron cots. Four girls were scrubbing the warped, wide-planked floor, three of them pitifully young for the hard work, the baby

of them being only six, the oldest nine. The fourth, who directed their labors, rising from her knees sometimes to help one of her small crew, was just turned sixteen, but she looked in her short, skimpy dress of faded blue and white checked gingham, not more than twelve or thirteen.

"Sal-lee," the six-year-old called out in a coaxing whine, as she sloshed a dirty rag up and down in a pail of soapy water, "play-act for us, won't you, Sal-lee? 'Tend like you're a queen and I'm your little girl. I'd be a princess, wouldn't I, Sal-lee?"

The child sat back on her thin little haunches, one small hand plucking at the skimpy skirt of her own faded blue and white gingham, an exact replica, except for size, of the frocks worn by the three other scrubbers. "I'll 'tend like I've got on a white satin dress, Sal-lee—"

Sally Ford lifted a strand of fine black hair that had escaped from the tight, thick braid that hung down her narrow back, tucked it behind a well-shaped ear, and smiled fondly upon the tiny pleader. It was a miracle-working smile. Before the miracle, that small, pale face had looked like that of a serious little old woman, the brows knotted, the mouth tight in a frown of concentration.

But when she smiled she became a pretty girl. Her blue eyes, that had looked almost as faded as her dress, darkened and gleamed like a pair of perfectly matched sapphires. Delicate, wing-like eyebrows, even blacker than her hair, lost their sullenness, assumed a lovely, provocative arch. Her white cheeks gleamed. Her little pale mouth, unpuckered of its frown, bloomed suddenly, like a tea rose opening. Even, pointed, narrow teeth, to fit the narrowness of her delicate, childish jaw, flashed into that smile, completely destroying the picture of a rather sad little old woman which she might have posed for before.

"All right, Betsy!" Sally cried, jumping to her feet. "But all of you will have to work twice as hard after I've play-acted for you, or Stone-Face will skin us alive."

Her smile was reflected in the three oldish little faces of the children squatting on the floor. The rags with which they had been wiping up surplus water after Sally's vigorous scrubbing were abandoned, and the three of them, moving in unison like mindless sheep, clustered close to Sally, following her with adoring eyes as she switched a sheet off one of the cots.

"This is my ermine robe," she declared. "Thelma, run and shut the door.... Now, this is my royal crown," she added, seizing her long, thick braid of black hair. Her nimble, thin fingers searched for and found three crimped wire hairpins which she secreted in the meshes of the plait. In a trice her small head was crowned with its own magnificent glory, the braid wound coronet-fashion over her ears and low upon her broad, white forehead.

"Say, 'A royal queen am I,'" six-year-old Betsy shrilled, clasping her hands

in ecstasy. "And don't forget to make up a verse about me, Sal-lee! I'm a princess! I've got on white satin and little red shoes, ain't I, Sal-lee?"

Sally was marching grandly up and down the barrack-like dormitory, holding Betsy's hand, the train of her "ermine robe" upheld by the two other little girls in faded gingham, and her dramatically deepened voice was chanting "verses" which she had composed on other such occasions and to which she was now adding, when the door was thrown open and a booming voice rang out:

"Sally Ford! What in the world does this mean? On a *Saturday* morning!"

The two little "pages" dropped the "ermine robe"; the little "princess" shrank closer against the "queen," and all four, Sally's voice leading the chorus, chanted in a monotonous sing-song: "Good morning, Mrs. Stone. We hope you are well." It was the good morning salutation which, at the matron's orders, invariably greeted her as she made her morning rounds of the state orphanage.

"Good morning, children," Mrs. Stone, the head matron of the asylum answered severely but automatically. She never spoke except severely, unless it happened that a trustee or a visitor was accompanying her.

"As a punishment for playing at your work you will spend an hour of your Saturday afternoon playtime in the weaving room. And Betsy, if I find your weaving all snarled up like it was last Saturday I'll lock you in the dark room without any supper. You're a great big girl, nearly six and a half years old, and you have to learn to work to earn your board and keep. As for you, Sally—well I'm surprised at you! I thought I could depend on you better than this. Sixteen years old and still acting like a child and getting the younger children into trouble. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Sally Ford?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stone," Sally answered meekly, her face that of a little old woman again; but her hands trembled as she gathered up the sheet which for a magic ten minutes had been an ermine robe.

"Now, Sally," continued the matron, moving down the long line of iron cots and inspecting them with a sharp eye, "don't let this happen again. I depend on you big girls to help me discipline the little ones. And by the way Sally, there's a new girl. She just came this morning, and I'm having Miss Pond send her up to you. You have an empty bed in this dormitory, I believe."

"Yes, Mrs. Stone," Sally nodded. "Christine's bed." There was nothing in her voice to indicate that she had loved Christine more than any child she had ever had charge of.

"I suppose this new child will be snapped up soon," Mrs. Stone continued, her severe voice striving to be pleasant and conversational, for she was fond of Sally, in her own way. "She has yellow curls, though I suspect her mother, who has just died and who was a stock company actress, used peroxide on it. But still it's yellow and it's curly, and we have at least a hundred applications on file for

little girls with golden curly hair.

"Thelma," she whirled severely upon the eight-year-old child, "what's this in your bed?" Her broad, heavy palm, sweeping expertly down the sheet-covered iron cot, had encountered something, a piece of broken blue bottle.

"It—it's mine," Thelma quivered, her tongue licking upward to catch the first salty tear. "I traded my broken doll for it. I look through it and it makes everything look pretty and blue," she explained desperately, in the institutional whine. "Oh, please let me keep it, Mrs. Stone!"

But the matron had tossed the bit of blue glass through the nearest window. "You'd cut yourself on it, Thelma," she justified herself in her stern voice. "I'll see if I can find another doll for you in the next box of presents that comes in. Now, don't cry like a baby. You're a great big girl. It was just a piece of broken old bottle. Well, Sally, you take charge of the new little girl. Make her feel at home. Give her a bath with that insect soap, and make a bundle of her clothes and take them down to Miss Pond."

She lifted her long, starched skirt as she stepped over one of the scrubber's puddles of water, then moved majestically through the door.

Clara, the nine-year-old orphan, stuck out her tongue as the white skirt swished through the door, then turned upon Sally, her little face sharp and ugly with hatred.

"Mean old thing! Always buttin' in! Can't let us have no fun at all! Some other kid'll find Thelma's sapphire and keep it offen her—"

"It isn't a sapphire," Sally said dully, her brush beginning to describe new semi-circles on the pine floor. "It's like she said—just a piece of broken old bottle. And she said she'd try to find you a doll, Thelma."

"You *said* it was a sapphire, Sally. You said it was worth millions and millions of dollars. It *was* a sapphire, long as you said it was, Sally!" Thelma sobbed, as grieved for the loss of illusion as for the loss of her treasure.

"I reckon I'm plumb foolish to go on play-acting all the time," Sally Ford said dully.

The three little girls and the 16-year-old "mother" of them scrubbed in silence for several minutes, doggedly hurrying to make up for lost time. Then Thelma, who could never nurse grief or anger, spoke cheerfully:

"Reckon the new kid's gettin' her phys'cal zamination. When *I* come into the 'sylum you had to nearly boil me alive. 'N Mrs. Stone cut off all my hair clean to the skin. 'N 'en nobody wouldn't 'dopt me 'cause I looked like sich a scarecrow. But I got lotsa hair now, ain't I, Sal-lee?"

"Oh, somebody'll be adopting you first thing you know, and then I won't have any Thelma," Sally smiled at her.

"Say, Sal-lee" Clara wheedled, "why didn't nobody ever 'dopt you? *I* think

you're awful pretty. Sometimes it makes me feel all funny and cry-ey inside, you look so awful pretty. When you're play-actin'," she amended honestly. Sally Ford moved the big brush with angry vigor, while her pale face colored a dull red. "I ain't—I mean, I'm not pretty at all, Clara. But thank you just the same. I used to want to be adopted, but now I don't. I want to hurry up and get to be eighteen so's I can leave the asylum and make my own living. I want—" but she stopped herself in time. Not to these open-mouthed, wide-eared children could she tell her dream of dreams.

"But why *wasn't* you adopted, Sal-lee?" Betsy, the baby of the group, insisted. "You been here forever and ever, ain't you?"

"Since I was four years old," Sally admitted from between lips held tight to keep them from trembling. "When I was little as you, Betsy, one of the big girls told me I was sickly and awf'ly tiny and scrawny when I was brought in, so nobody wanted to adopt me. They don't like sickly babies," she added bitterly. "They just want fat little babies with curly hair. Seems to me like the Lord oughta made all orphans pretty, with golden curly hair."

"I know why Sally wasn't 'dopted," Thelma clamored for attention. "I heard Miss Pond say it was a sin and a shame the way old Stone-Face has kept Sally here, year in and year out, jist 'cause she's so good to us little kids. Miss Pond said Sally is better'n any trained nurse when us kids get sick and that she does more work than any 'big girl' they ever had here. That's why you ain't been 'dopted, Sally."

"I know it," Sally confessed in a low voice. "But I couldn't be mean to the babies, just so they'd want to get rid of me and let somebody adopt me. Besides," she added, "I'm scared of people—outside. I'm scared of all grown-up people, especially of adopters," she blurted miserably. "I can't sashay up and down before 'em and act cute and laugh and pretend like I've got a sweet disposition and like I'm crazy about 'em. I don't look pretty a bit when the adopters send for me. I can't play-act then."

"You're bashful, Sal-lee," Clara told her shrewdly. "I'm not bashful—much, except when visitors come and we have to show off our company manners. I hate visitors! They whisper about us, call us 'poor little things,' and think they're better'n us."

The floor of the big room had been completely scrubbed, and was giving out a moist odor of yellow soap when Miss Pond, who worked in the office on the first floor of the big main building, arrived leading a reluctant little girl by the hand.

To the four orphans in faded blue and white gingham the newcomer looked unbelievably splendid, more like the "princess" that Betsy had been impersonating than like a mortal child. Her golden hair hung in precisely arranged curls to

her shoulders. Her dress was of pink crepe de chine, trimmed with many yards of cream-colored lace. There were pink silk socks and little white kid slippers. And her pretty face, though it was streaked with tears, had been artfully coated with white powder and tinted, on cheeks and lips, with carmine rouge.

"This is Eloise Durant, girls," said Miss Pond, who was incurably sentimental and kind to orphans. "She's feeling a little homesick now and I know you will all try to make her happy. You'll take charge of her, won't you, Sally dear?"

"Yes, Miss Pond," Sally answered automatically, but her arms were already yearning to gather the little bundle of elegance and tears and homesickness.

"And Sally," Miss Pond said nervously, lowering her voice in the false hope that the weeping child might not hear her, "Mrs. Stone says her hair must be washed and then braided, like the other children's. Eloise tells us it isn't naturally curly, that her mother did it up on kid curlers every night. Her aunt's been doing it for her since her mother—died."

"I don't want to be an orphan," the newcomer protested passionately, a white-slippered foot flying out suddenly and kicking Miss Pond on the shin.

It was then that Sally took charge. She knelt, regardless of frantic, kicking little feet, and put her arms about Eloise Durant. She began to whisper to the terror-stricken child, and Miss Pond scurried away, her kind eyes brimming with tears, her kind heart swelling with impractical plans for finding luxurious homes and incredibly kind foster parents for all the orphans in the asylum—but especially for those with golden curly hair and blue eyes. For Miss Pond was a born "adopter," with all the typical adopter's prejudices and preferences.

When scarcely two minutes after the noon dinner bell had clanged deafeningly, hundreds of little girls and big girls in faded blue and white gingham came tumbling from every direction, to halt and form a decorous procession just outside the dining hall doors, Sally and her new little charge were among them. But only the sharp eyes of the other orphans could have detected that the child who clung forlornly to Sally's hand was a newcomer. The golden curls had disappeared, and in their place were two short yellow braids, the ends tied with bits of old shoe-string. The small face, scrubbed clean of its powder and rouge, was as pale as Sally's. And instead of lace-trimmed pink crepe de chine, silk socks and white kid slippers, Eloise was clad, like every other orphan, in a skimpy gingham frock, coarse black stockings and heavy black shoes.

And when the marching procession of orphans had distributed itself before long, backless benches, drawn up to long, narrow pine tables covered with torn, much-scrubbed white oilcloth, Eloise, coached in that ritual as well as in many others sacred in the institution, piped up with all the others, her voice as monotonous as theirs:

"Our heavenly Father, we thank Thee for this food and for all the other

blessings Thou giveth us."

Sally Ford, keeping a watchful, pitying eye on her new charge, who was only nibbling at the unappetizing food, found herself looking upon the familiar scene with the eyes of the frightened little new orphan. It was a game that Sally Ford often played—imagining herself someone else, seeing familiar things through eyes which had never beheld them before.

Because Eloise was a "new girl," Sally was permitted to keep her at her side after the noon dinner. It was Sally who showed her all the buildings of the big orphanage, pointed out the boys' dormitories, separated from the girls' quarters by the big kitchen garden; showed her the bare schoolrooms, in which Sally herself had just completed the third year of high school. It was Sally who pridefully showed her the meagerly equipped gymnasium, the gift of a miraculously philanthropic session of the state legislature; it was Sally who conducted her through the many rooms devoted to hand crafts suited to girls—showing off a bit as she expertly manipulated a hand loom.

Eloise's hot little hand clung tightly to Sally's on the long trip of inspection of her new "home." But her cry, hopeless and monotonous now, even taking on a little of the institutional whine, was still the same heartbroken protest she had uttered upon her arrival in the dormitory: "I don't want to be an orphan! I don't want to be an orphan, Sal-lee!"

"It ain't—I mean, isn't—so bad," Sally comforted her. "Sometimes we have lots of fun. And Christmas is awf'ly nice. Every girl gets an orange and a little sack of candy and a present. And we have turkey for dinner, and ice cream."

"My mama gave me candy every day," Eloise whimpered. "Her men friends brung it to her—boxes and boxes of it, and flowers, too. God was mean to let her die, and make an orphan outa me!"

And because Sally herself had frequently been guilty of the same sinful thought, she hurried Eloise, without rebuking her, to the front lawn which always made visitors exclaim, "Why, how pretty! And so homelike! Aren't the poor things fortunate to have such a beautiful home?"

For the front lawn, upon which no orphan was allowed to set foot except in company with a lawnmower or a clipping shears, *was* beautiful. Now, in early June, it lay in the sun like an immense carpet, studded with round or star-shaped beds of bright flowers. From the front, the building looked stately and grand, too, with its clean red bricks and its big, fluted white pillars. They were the only two orphans in sight, except a pair of overalled boys, their tow heads bare to the hot sun, their lean arms, bare to the shoulders in their ragged shirts, pushing steadily against whirring lawnmowers.

"Oh, nasturtiums!" Eloise crowed, the first happy sound she had made since entering the orphanage.

She broke from Sally's grasp, sped down the cement walk, then plunged into the lush greenness of that vast velvet carpet, entirely unconscious that she was committing one of the major crimes of the institution. Sally, after a stunned moment, sped after her, calling out breathlessly:

"Don't dast to touch the flowers, Eloise! We ain't allowed to touch the flowers! They'd skin us alive!"

But Eloise had already broken the stem of a flaming orange and red nasturtium and was cuddling it against her cheek.

"Put it back, honey," Sally begged, herself committing the unpardonable sin of walking on the grass. "There isn't any place at all you could hide it, and if you carried it in your hand you'd get a licking sure. But don't you cry, Eloise. Sally'll tell you a fairy story in play hour this afternoon."

The two, Sally's heart already swelling with the sweet pain of having found a new child to mother, Eloise's tear-reddened eyes sparkling with anticipation, were hurrying up the path that led around the main building to the weaving rooms in which Sally was to work an extra hour as punishment for her morning's "play-acting," when Clara Hodges came shrieking from behind the building:

"Sal-lee! Sal-lee Ford! Mrs. Stone wants you. In the office!" she added, her voice dropping slightly on a note of horror.

"What for?" Sally pretended grown up unconcern, but her face, which had been pretty and glowing a moment before, was dull and institutional and sullen again.

"They's a man—a farmer man—talking to Stone-Face," Clara whispered, her eyes furtive and mean as they darted about to see if she were overheard. "Oh, Sal-lee, don't let 'em 'dopt you! We wouldn't have nobody to play-act for us and tell us stories! Please, Sal-lee! Make faces at him when Stone-Face ain't lookin' so's he won't like you!"

"I'm too big to be adopted," Sally reassured her. "Nobody wants to adopt a 16-year-old girl. Here, you take Eloise to the weaving room with you."

Her voice was that of a managing, efficient, albeit loving mother, but when she turned toward the front steps of the main building her feet began to drag heavily, weighted with a fear which was reflected in her darkling blue eyes, and in the deepened pallor of her cheeks. But, oh, maybe it wasn't that! Why did she always have to worry about that—now that she was sixteen? Why couldn't she expect something perfectly lovely—like—like a father coming to claim his long-lost daughter? Maybe there'd be a mother, too—

The vision Sally Ford had conjured up fastened wings to her feet. She was breathless, glowing, when she arrived at the closed door of the dread "office."

When Sally Ford opened the door of the office of the orphan asylum, radiance was wiped instantly from her delicate face, as if she had been stricken with

sudden illness. For her worst fear was realized—the fear that had kept her awake many nights on her narrow cot, since her sixteenth birthday had passed. She cowered against the door, clinging to the knob as if she were trying to screw up her courage to flee from the disaster which fate, in bringing about her sixteenth birthday, had pitilessly planned for her, instead of the boon of long-lost relatives for which she had never entirely ceased to hope.

"Sally!" Mrs. Stone, seated at the big roll-top desk, called sharply. "Say 'How do you do?' to the gentleman.... The girls are taught the finest of manners here, Mr. Carson, but they are always a little shy with strangers."

"Howdy-do, Mr. Carson," Sally gasped in a whisper.

"I believe this is the girl you asked for, Mr. Carson," Mrs. Stone went on briskly, in her pleasant "company voice," which every orphan could imitate with bitter accuracy.

The man, a tall, gaunt, middle-aged farmer, nodded, struggled to speak, then hastily bent over a brass cuspidor and spat. That necessary act performed, he eyed Sally with a keen, speculative gaze. His lean face was tanned to the color and texture of brown leather, against which a coating of talcum powder, applied after a close shave of his black beard, showed ludicrously.

"Yes, mum, that's the girl, all right. Seen her when I was here last June. Wouldn't let me have her then, mum, you may recollect."

Mrs. Stone smiled graciously. "Yes, I remember, Mr. Carson, and I was very sorry to disappoint you, but we have an unbreakable rule here not to board out one of our dear little girls until she is sixteen years old. Sally was sixteen last week, and now that school is out, I see no reason why she shouldn't make her home with your family for the summer—or longer if you like. The law doesn't compel us to send the girls to school after they are sixteen, you know."

"Yes'm, I've looked into the law," the farmer admitted. Then he turned his shrewd, screwed-up black eyes upon Sally again. "Strong, healthy girl, I reckon? No sickness, no bad faults, willing to work for her board and keep?"

He rose, lifting his great length in sections, and slouched over to the girl who still cowered against the door. His big-knuckled brown hands fastened on her forearms, and when she shrank from his touch he nodded with satisfaction. "Good big muscles, even if she is a skinny little runt. I always say these skinny, wiry little women can beat the fat ones all hollow."

"Sally is strong and she's marvelous with children. We've never had a better worker than Sally, and since she's been raised in the Home, she's used to work, Mr. Carson, although no one could say we are not good to our girls. I'm sure you'll find her a willing helper on the farm. Did your wife come into town with you this afternoon?"

"Her? In berry-picking time?" Mr. Carson was plainly amazed. "No, mum,

I come in alone. My daughter's laid up today with a summer cold, or she'd be in with me, nagging me for money for her finery. But you know how girls are, mum. Now, seeing as how my wife's near crazy with work, what with the field hands to feed and all, and my daughter laid up with a cold, I'd like to take this girl here along with me. You know me, mum. Reckon I don't have to wait to be investigated no more."

Mrs. Stone was already reaching for a pen. "Perfectly all right, Mr. Carson. Though it does put me in rather a tight place. Sally has been taking care of a dormitory of nineteen of the small girls, and it is going to upset things a bit, for tonight anyway. But I understand how it is with you. You're going to be in town attending to business for an hour or so, I suppose, Mr. Carson? Sally will have to get her things together. You could call for her about five, I suppose?"

"Yes, mum, five it is!" The farmer spat again, rubbed his hand on his trousers, then offered it to Mrs. Stone. "And thank you, mum, I'll take good care of the young-un. But I guess she thinks she's a young lady now, eh, miss?" And he tweaked Sally's ear, his fingers feeling like sand-paper against her delicate skin.

"Tell Mr. Carson, Sally, that you'll appreciate having a nice home for the summer—a nice country home," Mrs. Stone prompted, her eye stern and commanding.

And Sally, taught all her life to conceal her feelings from those in authority and to obey implicitly, gulped against the lump in her throat so that she could utter the lie in the language which Mrs. Stone had chosen.

The matron closed the door upon herself and the farmer, leaving Sally a quivering, sobbing little thing, huddled against the wall, her nails digging into the flesh of her palms. If anyone had asked her: "Sally, why is your heart broken? Why do you cry like that?" she could not have answered intelligently. She would have groped for words to express that quality within her that burned a steady flame all these years, unquenchable, even under the soul-stifling, damp blanket of charity. She knew dimly that it was pride—a fierce, arrogant pride, that told her that Sally Ford, by birth, was entitled to the best that life had to offer.

And now—her body quivered with an agony which had no name and which was the more terrible for its namelessness—she was to be thrust out into the world, or that part of the world represented by Clem Carson and his family. To eat the bitter bread of charity, to slave for the food she put into her stomach, which craved delicacies she had never tasted; to be treated as a servant, to have the shame of being an orphan, a child nobody wanted, continuously held up before her shrinking, hunted eyes—that was the fate which being sixteen had brought upon Sally Ford.

Every June they came—farmers like Clem Carson, seeking "hired girls"

whom they would not have to pay. Carson himself had taken three girls from the orphanage.

Rena Cooper, who had gone to the Carson farm when Sally was thirteen, had come back to the Home in September, a broken, dispirited thing—Rena, who had been so gay and bright and saucy. Annie Springer had been his choice the next year, and Annie had never come back. The story that drifted into the orphanage by some mysterious grapevine had it that Annie had found a "fellow" on the farm, a hired man, with whom she had wandered away without the formality of a marriage ceremony.

The third summer, when he could not have Sally, he had taken Ruby Presser, pretty, sweet little Ruby, who had been in love with Eddie Cobb, one of the orphaned boys, since she was thirteen or fourteen years old. Eddie had run away from the Home, after promising Ruby to come back for her and marry her when he was grown-up and making enough money for two to live on.

Ruby had gotten into mysterious trouble on the Carson farm—the "grapevine" never supplied concrete details—and Ruby had run away from the farm, only to be caught by the police and sent to the reformatory, the particular hell with which every orphan was threatened if she dared disobey even a minor rule of the Home. Delicate, sweet little Ruby in the reformatory—that evil place where "incorrigibles" poisoned the minds of good girls like Ruby Presser, made criminals of them, too.

Sally, remembering, as she cowered against the door of the orphanage office, was suddenly fiercely glad that Ruby had thrown herself from a fifth-floor window of the reformatory. Ruby, dead, was safe now from charity and evil and from queer, warped, ugly girls who whispered terrible things as they huddled on the cots of their cells.

"Oh, Sally, dear, what is the matter?" A soft, sighing voice broke in on Sally's grief and fear, a bony hand was laid comfortingly on Sally's dark head.

"Mr. Carson, that farmer who takes a girl every summer, is going to take me home with him tonight," Sally gulped.

"But that will be nice, Sally!" Miss Pond gushed. "You will have a real home, with plenty to eat and maybe some nice little dresses to wear, and make new friends—"

"Yes, Miss Pond," Sally nodded, held thrall by twelve years of enforced acquiescence. "But, oh, Miss Pond, I'd been hoping it was—my father—or my mother, or somebody I belong to—"

"Why, Sally, you haven't a father, dear, and your mother—But, mercy me, I mustn't be running on like this," Miss Pond caught herself up hastily, a fearful eye on the closed door.

"Miss Pond," Sally pleaded, "won't you please, please tell me something

about myself before I go away? I know you're not allowed to, but oh, Miss Pond, please! It's so cruel not to know anything! Please, Miss Pond! You've always been so sweet to me—"

The little touch of flattery did it, or maybe it was the pathos in those wide, blue eyes.

"It's against the rules," Miss Pond wavered. "But—I know how you feel, Sally dear. I was raised in the Home myself, not knowing—. I can't get your card out of the files now; Mrs. Stone might come and catch me. But I'll make some excuse to come up to the locker room when you're getting your things together. Oh—" she broke off. "I was just telling Sally how nice it will be for her to have a real home, Mrs. Stone."

Mrs. Stone closed the door firmly, her eyes stern upon Sally. "Of course it will be nice. And Sally must be properly appreciative. I did not at all like your manner to Mr. Carson, Sally. But run along now and pack. You may take your Sunday dress and shoes, and one of your every-day ginghams. Mr. Carson will provide your clothes. His daughter is about your age, and he says her last year's dresses will be nicer than anything you've ever had."

"Yes, Mrs. Stone," Sally ducked her head and sidled out of the door, but before it closed she exchanged a fleet, meaningful look with Miss Pond.

"I'm going to *know*!" Sally whispered to herself, as she ran down the long, narrow corridor. "I'm going to know! About my mother!" And color swept over her face, performing the miracle that changed her from a colorless little orphan into a near-beauty.

Because she was leaving the orphanage for a temporary new home on the Carson farm, Sally was permitted to take her regular Saturday night bath that afternoon. In spite of her terror of the future, the girl who had never known any home but a state orphan asylum felt a thrill of adventure as she splashed in a painted tin tub, gloriously alone, unhurried by clamorous girls waiting just outside.

The cold water—there was no hot water for bathing from April first to October first—made her skin glow and tingle. As she dried herself on a ragged wisp of grayish-white Turkish toweling, Sally surveyed her slim, white body with shy pride. Shorn of the orphanage uniform she might have been any pretty young girl budding into womanhood, so slim and rounded and pinky-white she was.

"I guess I'm kinda pretty," Sally whispered to herself, as she thrust her face close to the small, wavery mirror that could not quite succeed in destroying her virginal loveliness. "Sweet sixteen and—never been kissed," she smiled to herself, then bent forward and gravely laid her pink, deliciously curved lips against the mirrored ones.

Then, in a panic lest she be too late to see kind Miss Pond, she jerked on

the rest of her clothing.

"Dear Sally, how sweet you look!" Miss Pond clasped her hands in admiration as Sally slipped, breathless, into the locker-room that contained the clothes of all the girls of her dormitory.

"Did you bring the card that tells all about me—and my mother?" Sally brushed the compliment aside and demanded in an eager whisper.

"No, dearie, I was afraid Mrs. Stone might want it to make an entry about Mr. Carson's taking you for the summer, but I copied the data. You go ahead with your packing while I tell you what I found out," Miss Pond answered nervously, but her pale gray eyes were sparkling with pleasure in her mild little escapade.

Sally unlocked her own particular locker with the key that always hung on a string about her neck, but almost immediately she whirled upon Miss Pond, her eyes imploring. "It won't take me a minute to pack, Miss Pond. Please go right on and tell me!"

"Well, Sally, I'm afraid there isn't much to tell." Miss Pond smoothed a folded bit of paper apologetically. "The record says you were brought here May 9, 1912, just twelve years ago, by a woman who said you were her daughter. She gave your birthday as June 2, 1908, and her name as Mrs. Nora Ford, a widow, aged 28—"

"Oh, she's young!" Sally breathed ecstatically. Then her face clouded, as her nimble brain did a quick sum in mental arithmetic. "But she'd be forty now, wouldn't she? Forty seems awfully old—"

"Forty is comparatively young, Sally!" Miss Pond, who was looking regretfully back upon forty herself, said rather tartly. "But let me hurry on. She gave poverty and illness as her reasons for asking the state to take care of you. She said your father was dead."

"Oh, poor mother!" A shadow flitted across Sally's delicate face; quick tears for the dead father and the ill, poverty-stricken mother filmed her blue eyes.

"The state accepted you provisionally, and shortly afterward sent an investigator to check up on her story," Miss Pond went on. "The investigator found that the woman, Mrs. Ford, had left the city—it was Stanton, thirty miles from here—and that no one knew where she had gone. From that day to this we have had no word from the woman who brought you here. She was a mystery in Stanton, and has remained a mystery until now. I'm sorry, Sally, that I can't tell you more."

"Oh!" Sally's sharp cry was charged with such pain and disappointment that Miss Pond took one of the little clenched fists between her own thin hands, not noticing that the slip of paper fluttered to the floor. "She didn't write to know how I was, didn't care whether I lived or died! I wish I hadn't asked! I thought maybe there was somebody, someone who loved me—"

"Remember she was sick and poor, Sally. Maybe she went to a hospital suddenly and—and died. But there was no report in any papers of the state of her death," Miss Pond added conscientiously. "You mustn't grieve, Sally. You're nearly grown up. You'll be leaving us when you're eighteen, unless you want to stay on as an assistant matron or as a teacher—"

"Oh, no, no!" Sally cried. "I—I'll pack now, Miss Pond. And thank you a million times for telling me, even if it did hurt."

In her distress Miss Pond trotted out of the locker-room without a thought for the bit of paper on which she had scribbled the memorandum of Sally's pitifully meager life history. But Sally had not forgotten it. She snatched it from the floor and pinned it to her "body waist," a vague resolution forming in her troubled heart.

When five o'clock came Sally Ford was waiting in the office for Clem Carson, her downcast eyes fixed steadily upon the small brown paper parcel in her lap, color staining her neck and cheeks and brow, for Mrs. Stone, stiffly, awkwardly but conscientiously, was doing her institutional best to arm the state's charge for her first foray into the outside world.

"And so, Sally, I want you to remember to—to keep your body pure and your mind clean," Mrs. Stone summed up, her strong, heavy face almost as red as Sally's own. "You're too young to go out with young men, but you'll be meeting the hired hands on the farm. You—you mustn't let them take liberties of any kind with you. We try to give you girls in the Home a sound religious and moral training, and if—if you're led astray it will be due to the evils in your own nature and not to lack of proper Christian training. You understand me, Sally?" she added severely.

"Yes, Mrs. Stone," Sally answered in a smothered voice.

Sally's hunted eyes glanced wildly about for a chance of escape and lighted upon the turning knob of the door. In a moment Clem Carson was edging in, his face slightly flushed, a tell-tale odor of whisky and cloves on his breath.

"Little lady all ready to go?" he inquired with a suspiciously jovial laugh, which made Sally crouch lower in her chair. "Looking pretty as a picture, too! With two pretty girls in my house this summer, reckon I'll have to stand guard with a shotgun to keep the boys away."

Word had gone round that Sally Ford was leaving the Home for the summer, and as Clem Carson and his new unpaid hired girl walked together down the long cement walk to where his car was parked at the curb, nearly three hundred little girls, packed like a herd of sheep in the wire-fenced playground adjoining the front lawn, sang out goodbys and good wishes.

"Goodby Sal-lee! Hope you have a good time!"

"Goodby, Sal-lee! Write me a letter, Sal-lee!" "Goodby, goodby!"

Sally, waving her Sunday handkerchief, craned her neck for a last sight of those blue-and-white-ginghamed little girls, the only playmates and friends she had in the world. There were tears in her eyes, and, queerly, for she thought she hated the Home, a stab of homesickness shooting through her heart. How safe they were, there in the playground pen! How simple and sheltered life was in the Home, after all! Suddenly she knew, somehow, that it was the last time she would ever see it, or the children.

Without a thought for the iron-clad "Keep off the grass" rule, Sally turned and ran, fleetly, her little figure as graceful as a fawn's, over the thick velvet carpet of the lawn. When she reached the high fence that separated her from the other orphans, she spread her arms, as if she would take them all into her embrace.

"Don't forget me, kids!" she panted, her voice thick with tears. "I—I want to tell you I love you all, and I'm sorry for every mean thing I ever did to any of you, and I hope you all get adopted by rich papas and mamas and have ice cream every day! Goodby, kids! Goodby!"

"Kiss me goodby, Sal-lee!" a little whining voice pleaded.

Sally stooped and pressed her lips, through the fence opening, against the babyish mouth of little Eloise Durant, the newest and most forlorn orphan of them all.

"Me, too, Sal-lee! Me, too! We won't have nobody to play-act for us now!" Betsy wailed, pressing her tear-stained face against the wire.

CHAPTER II

A little later, when Sally was seated primly beside Clem Carson, jolting rapidly down the road that led past the orphanage toward the business district of the city, the farmer nudged her in the ribs and chuckled:

"You're quite a kissing-bug, ain't you, Sally? How about a little kiss for your new boss?"

Sally had shrunk as far away from Clem Carson as the seat of the "flivver" permitted, phrases from Mrs. Stone's embarrassed, vague, terrifying warnings boiling and churning in her mind: "Keep your body pure"—"mustn't let men take

any liberties with you"—"you're a big girl now, things you ought to know"—"if you're led astray, it will be due to evils in your own nature"—

She suddenly loathed herself, her budding, curving young body that she had taken such innocent delight in as she bathed for her journey. She wanted to shrink and shrink and shrink, until she was a little girl again, too young to know "the facts of life," as Mrs. Stone, blushing and embarrassed, had called the half-truths she had told Sally. She wanted to climb over the door of the car, drop into the hot dust of the road, and run like a dog-chased rabbit back into the safety of the Home. There were no men there—no queer, different male beings who would want to "take liberties"—

"My land! Scared of me?" Clem Carson chuckled. "You poor little chicken! Don't mind me, Sally. I don't mean no harm, teasing you for a kiss. Land alive! I got a girl of my own, ain't I? Darned proud of her, too, and I'd cut the heart outa any man that tried to take advantage of her. Ain't got no call to be scared of me, Sally."

She smiled waveringly, shyness making her lips stiff, but she relaxed a little, though she kept as far away from the man as ever. In spite of her dread of the future and her bitter disappointment over Miss Pond's disclosures as to her mother, she was finding the trip to the farm an adventure. In the twelve years of her life in the State Orphans' Asylum she had never before left the orphanage unaccompanied by droves of other sheep-like, timid little girls, and unchaperoned by sharp-voiced, eagle-eyed matrons.

She felt queer, detached, incomplete, like an arm or a leg dissevered from a giant body; she even had the panicky feeling that, like such a dismembered limb, she would wither and die away from that big body of which she had been a part for so long. But it was pleasant to bump swiftly along the hot, dusty white road, fringed with odorous, flowering weeds. Houses became less and less frequent; few children ran barefoot along the road, scurrying out of the path of the automobile. Occasionally a woman, with a baby sprawling on her hip, appeared in the doorway of a roadside shack and shaded her eyes with her hand as she squinted at the car.

As the miles sped away Carson seemed to feel the need of impressing upon her the fact that her summer was not to be one of unalloyed pleasure. He sketched the life of the farm, her own work upon it, as if to prepare her for the worst. "My wife's got the reputation of being a hard woman," he told her confidentially. "But she's a good woman, good clean through. She works her fingers to the bone, and she can't abide a lazy, trifling girl around the place. You work hard, Sally, and speak nice and respectful-like, and you two'll get on, I warrant."

"Yes, sir," Sally stammered.

"Well, Sally," he told her at last, "here's your new home. This lane leads

past the orchards—I got ten acres in fruit trees, all of 'em bearing—and the gardens, then right up to the house. Pretty fine place, if I do say so myself. I got two hundred acres in all, quite a sizeable farm for the middle west. Don't them orchards look pretty?"

Sally came out of her frightened reverie, forced her eyes to focus on the beautiful picture spread out on a giant canvas before her. Then she gave an involuntary exclamation of pleasure. Row after row of fruit trees, evenly spaced and trimmed to perfection, stretched before her on the right. The child in her wanted to spring from the seat of the car, run ecstatically from tree to tree, to snatch sun-ripened fruit.

"You have a good fruit crop," she said primly.

"There's the house." The farmer pointed to the left. "Six rooms and a garret. My daughter, Pearl, dogged the life out of me until I had electric lights put in, and a fancy bathtub. She even made me get a radio, but it comes in right handy in the evenings, specially in winter. My daughter, Pearl, can think of more ways for me to spend money than I can to earn it," he added with a chuckle, so that Sally knew he was proud of Pearl, proud of her urban tastes.

The car swept up to the front of the house; Clem Carson's hand on the horn summoned his women folks.

The house, which seemed small to Sally, accustomed to the big buildings of the orphanage, was further dwarfed by the huge red barns that towered at the rear. The house itself was white, not so recently painted as the lordly barns, but it was pleasant and homelike, the sort of house which Sally's chums at the orphanage had pictured as an ideal home, when they had let their imaginations run away with them.

Sally herself, born with a different picture of home in her mind, had romanced about a house which would have made this one look like servants' quarters, but now that it was before her she felt a thrill of pleasure. At least it was a home, not an institution.

A woman, big, heavy-bosomed, sternly corseted beneath her snugly fitting, starched blue chambray house dress, appeared upon the front porch and stood shading her eyes against the western sun, which revealed the thinness of her iron-gray hair and the deep wrinkles in her tanned face.

"Why didn't you drive around to the back?" she called harshly. "This young-up ain't company, to be traipsin' through my front room. Did you bring them rubber rings for my fruit jars?"

"You betcha!" Clem Carson refused to be daunted in Sally's presence. "How's Pearl, Ma? Cold any better? I brought her some salve for her throat and some candy."

"She's all right," Mrs. Carson shouted, as if the car were a hundred yards

away. "And why you want to be throwin' your money away on patent medicine salves is more'n I can see! I can make a better salve any day outa kerosene and lard and turpentine. Reckon you didn't get any car'mels for me! Pearl's all you think of."

"Got you half a pound of car'mels," Carson shouted, laughing. "I'll drive the new girl around back.

"Ma's got a sharp tongue, but she don't mean no harm," Carson chuckled, as he swung the car around the house.

When it shivered to a stop between the barns and the house, the farmer lifted out a few bundles which had crowded Sally's feet, then threw up the cover of the hatch in the rear of the car, revealing more bundles. Carson was loading her arms with parcels when he saw a miracle wrought on her pale, timid face.

"Lord! You look pretty enough to eat!" Clem Carson ejaculated, but he saw then that she was not even aware that he was speaking to her.

In one of the few books allowed for Sunday reading in the orphanage—a beautiful, thick book with color-plate illustrations, its name, "Stories from the Bible," lettered in glittering gold on a back of heavenly blue—Sally had found and secretly worshiped the portrait of her ideal hero. It was a vividly colored picture of David, forever fixed in strong, beautiful grace, as he was about to hurl the stone from his slingshot to slay the giant, Goliath. She had dreamed away many hours of her adolescence and early young girlhood, the big book open on her knee at the portrait of the Biblical hero, and it had not seemed like sacrilege to adopt that sun-drenched, strong-limbed but slender boy as the personification of her hopes for romance.

And now he was striding toward her—the very David of "Stories from the Bible." True, the sheepskin raiment of the picture was exchanged for a blue shirt, open at the throat, and for a pair of cheap, earth-soiled "jeans" trousers; but the boy-man was the same, the same! As he strode lightly, with the ease of an athlete or the light-footedness of a god, the sun flamed in his curling, golden-brown hair. He was tall, but not so tall as Clem Carson, and there were power and ease and youth in every motion of his beautiful body.

"Did you get the plowshare sharpened, Mr. Carson? I've been waiting for it, but in the meantime I've been tinkering with that little hand cider press. We ought to do a good business with it if we set up a cider stand on the state road, at the foot of the lane."

Joy deepened the sapphire of Sally's eyes, quivered along the curves of her soft little mouth. For his voice was as she had dreamed it would be—vibrant, clear, strong, with a thrill of music in it.

"Sure I got it sharpened, Dave," Carson answered curtly. "You oughta get in another good hour with the cultivator before dark. You run along in the back

door there, Sally. Mrs. Carson will be needing you to help her with supper."

The change in Carson's voice startled her, made her wince. Why was he angry with her—and with David, whose gold-flecked hazel eyes were smiling at her, shyly, as if he were a little ashamed of Carson for not having introduced them? But, oh, his name was David! David! It had had to be David.

In the big kitchen, dominated by an immense coal-and-wood cook stove, Sally found Mrs. Carson busy with supper preparations. Her daughter, Pearl, drifted about the kitchen, coughing at intervals to remind her mother that she was ill.

Pearl Carson, in that first moment after Sally had bumped into her at the door, had seemed to the orphaned girl to be much older than she, for her plump body was voluptuously developed and overdecked with finery. The farmer's daughter wore her light red hair deeply marcelled. The natural color in her broad, plump cheeks was heightened by rouge, applied lavishly over a heavy coating of white powder.

Her lavender silk crepe dress was made very full and short of skirt, so that her thick-ankled legs were displayed almost to the knee. It was before the day of knee dresses for women and Sally, standing there awkwardly with her own bundle and the parcels which Carson had thrust into her arms, blushed for the extravagant display of unlovely flesh.

But Pearl Carson, if not exactly pretty, was not homely, Sally was forced to admit to herself. She looked more like one of her father's healthy, sorrel-colored heifers than anything else, except that the heifer's eyes would have been mild and kind and slightly melancholy, while Pearl Carson's china-blue eyes were wide and cold, in an insolent, contemptuous stare.

"I suppose you're the new girl from the Orphans' Home," she said at last. "What's your name?"

"Sa-Sally Ford," Sally stammered, institutional shyness blotting out her radiance, leaving her pale and meek.

"Pearl, you take Sally up to her room and show her where to put her things. Did you bring a work dress?" Mrs. Carson turned from inspecting a great iron kettle of cooking food on the stove.

"Yes'm," Sally gulped. "But I only brought two dresses—my every-day dress and this one. Mrs. Stone said you'd—you'd give me some of P-Pearl's."

She flushed painfully, in humiliation at having to accept charity and in doubt as to whether she was to address the daughter of the house by her Christian name, without a "handle."

Pearl, switching her short, lavender silk skirts insolently, led the way up a steep flight of narrow stairs leading directly off the kitchen to the garret. The roof, shaped to fit the gables of the house, was so low that Sally's head bumped

itself twice on their passage of the dusty, dark corridor to the room she was to be allowed to call her own.

"No, not that door!" Pearl halted her sharply. "That's where David Nash, one of the hired men, sleeps."

Sally wanted to stop and lay her hand softly against the door which his hand had touched, but she did not dare. "I—I saw him," she faltered.

"Oh, you did, did you?" Pearl demanded sharply. "Well, let me tell you, young lady, you let David Nash alone. He's mine—see? He's not just an ordinary hired hand. He's working his way through State A. & M. He's a star, on the football team and everything. But don't you go trying any funny business on David, or I'll make you wish you hadn't!"

"I—I didn't even speak to him," Sally hastened to reassure Pearl, then hated herself for her humbleness.

"Here's your room. It's small, and it gets pretty hot in here in the summer, but I guess it's better'n you're used to, at that," Pearl Carson, a little mollified, swung open a flimsy pine door.

Sally looked about her timidly, her eyes taking in the low, sagging cot bed, the upturned pine box that served as washstand, the broken rocking chair, the rusty nails intended to take the place of a clothes closet; the faded, dirty rag rug on the warped boards of the floor; the tiny window, whose single sash swung inward and was fastened by a hook on the wall.

"I'll bring you some of my old dresses," Pearl told her. "But you'd better hurry and change into your orphanage dress, so's you can help Mama with the supper. She's been putting up raspberries all day and she's dead tired. I guess Papa told you you'd have to hustle this summer. This ain't a summer vacation—for you. It is for me. I go to school in the city in the winter. I'm second year high, and I'm only sixteen," she added proudly. "What are you?"

Sally, who had been nervously untying her brown paper parcel, bent her head lower so that she should not see the flare of hate in those pale blue eyes which she knew would follow upon her own answer. "I'm—I'm third year high." She did not have the courage to explain that she had just finished her third year, that she would graduate from the orphanage's high school next year.

"Third year?" Pearl was incredulous. "Oh, of course, the orphanage school! *My* school is at least two years higher than yours. We prepare for college."

Sally nodded; what use to say that the orphanage school was a regular public school, too, that it also prepared for college? And that Sally herself had dreamed of working her way through college, even as David Nash was doing?

Eight o'clock was the supper hour on the farm in the summertime, when every hour of daylight had to be spent in the orchards and fields. When the long dining table, covered with red-and-brown-checked oilcloth, was finally set, down

to the last iron-handled knife, Sally was faint with hunger, for supper was at six at the orphanage.

Sally had peeled a huge dishpan of potatoes, had shredded a giant head of pale green cabbage for coleslaw, had watched the pots of cooking string beans, turnips and carrots; had rolled in flour and then fried great slabs of round steak—all under the critical eye of Mrs. Carson, who had found herself free to pick over the day's harvest of blackberries for canning.

"I suppose we'll have to let Sally eat at the table with us," Pearl grumbled to her mother, heedless of the fact that Sally overheard. "In the city a family wouldn't dream of sitting down to table with the servants. I'm sick of living on a farm and treating the hired help like members of the family."

"I thought you liked having David Nash sit at table with us," Mrs. Carson reminded her.

"Well, David's different. He's a university student and a football hero," Pearl defended herself. "But the other hired men and the Orphans' Home girl—"

Clem Carson appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Supper ready?"

"Yes, Papa. Thanks for the candy, but I do wish you'd get it in a box, not in a paper sack," Pearl pouted. "I'll ring the bell. Hurry up and wash before the others come in."

While Clem Carson was pumping water into a tin wash basin, just inside the kitchen door, Pearl swung the big copper dinner bell, standing on the narrow back porch, her lavender silk skirt fluttering about her thick legs.

Sally fled to the dining room then, ashamed to have David Nash see her in the betraying uniform of the orphanage.

She had obediently set nine places at the long table, not knowing who all of those nine would be, but she found out before many minutes passed. Clem Carson sat at one end of the table, Mrs. Carson at the other. And before David and the other hired men appeared, a tiny, bent little old lady, with kind, vague brown eyes and trembling hands, came shuffling in from somewhere to seat herself at her farmer son's right hand. Sally learned later that everyone called her Grandma, and that she was Clem Carson's widowed mother. Immediately behind the little old lady came a big, hulking, loose-jointed man of middle age, with a slack, grinning mouth, a stubble of gray beard on his receding chin, a vacant, idiotic smile in his pale eyes.

At sight of Sally, shrinking timidly against the chair which was to be hers, the half-wit lunged toward her like a playful, overgrown puppy. One of his clammy hands, pale because they could not be trusted with farm work, reached out and patted her cheek.

"Pur-ty girl, pur-ty sister," he articulated slowly, a light of pleasure gleaming in the pale vacancy of his eyes.

"Now, now, Benny, be good, or Ma'll send you to bed without your supper," the little old lady spoke as if he were a naughty child of three. "You mustn't mind him, Sally. He won't hurt you. I hope you'll like it here on the farm. It's real pretty in the summertime."

The two nondescript hired men had taken their places, slipping into their chairs silently and apologetically. David Nash had changed his blue work shirt and "jeans" trousers for a white shirt, dark blue polka-dotted tie, and a well-fitting but inexpensive suit of brown homespun. Sally, squeezed between the vague little old grandmother and the vacant-eyed half-wit, beyond whom the two hired men sat, found herself directly across from David Nash, beside whom Pearl Carson sat, her chair drawn more closely than necessary.

"My, you look grand, Davie!" Pearl confided in a low, artificially sweet voice. "My cold's lots better. Papa'll let us drive in to the city to the movies if you ask him real nice."

It was then that Sally Ford, who had experienced so many new emotions that day, felt a pang that made every other heartache seem mild by comparison. And two girls, one a girl alone in the world, the other pampered and adored by her family, held their breath as they awaited David Nash's reply.

"Sorry, but I can't tonight," David Nash answered Pearl Carson's invitation courteously but firmly. "It would be 'way after nine when we got to town, and we wouldn't get back until nearly midnight—no hours for a farm hand to be keeping. Besides, I've got to study, long as I can keep awake."

"You're always studying when I want you to take me somewhere," Pearl pouted. "I don't see why you can't forget college during your summer vacation. Go get some more hot biscuits, Sally," she added sharply.

Except for Pearl's chatter and David's brief, courteous replies, the meal was eaten in silence, the hungry farmer and his hired men hunching over their food, wolfing it, disposing of such vast quantities of fried steak, vegetables, hot biscuits, home-made pickles, preserves, pie and coffee that Sally was kept running between kitchen and dining room to replenish bowls and plates from the food kept warming on the stove. In spite of her own hunger she ate little, restrained by timidity, but after her twelve years of orphanage diet the meal seemed like a banquet to her.

No one spoke to her, except Mrs. Carson and Pearl, to send her on trips to the kitchen, but it did not occur to her to feel slighted. It was less embarrassing to be ignored than to be plied with questions. Sometimes she raised her fluttering eyelids to steal a quick glance at David Nash, and every glance deepened her joy that he was there, that he sat at the same table with her, ate the same food, some of which she had cooked. His superiority to the others at that table was so strikingly evident that he seemed god-like to her. His pride, his poise, his golden,

masculine beauty, his strength, his evident breeding, his ambition, formed such a contrast to the qualities of the orphaned boys she had known that it did not occur to her to hope that he would notice her. But once when her blue eyes stole a fleeting glimpse of his face she was startled to see that his eyes were regarding her soberly, sympathetically.

He smiled—a brief flash of light in his eyes, an upward curl to his well-cut lips. She was so covered with a happy confusion that she did not hear Mrs. Carson's harsh nasal voice commanding her to bring more butter from the cellar until the farmer's wife uttered her order a second time.

In spite of the prodigious amount of food eaten, the meal was quickly over. It was not half-past eight when Clem Carson scraped back his chair, wiping his mouth on his shirtsleeve.

"Now, Sally, I'll leave you to clear the table and wash up," Mrs. Carson said briskly. "I've got to measure and sugar my blackberries for tomorrow's jam-making. A farmer's wife can't take Sunday off this time o' year, and have fruit spoil on her hands."

While Sally was stacking the soiled supper plates on the dining table, the telephone rang three short and one long ring, and Pearl, who had been almost forcibly holding David Nash in conversation, sprang to answer it. The instrument was fastened to the dining room wall. Pearl stood lolling against it, a delighted smile on her face, her fingers picking at the torn wallpaper.

"Un-hunh!... Sure!... Oh, that'll be swell, Ross! I was just wishing for some excitement!... How many's coming? Five?... Oh, you hush! Sure, we'll dance! We got a grand radio, you know—get Chicago and.... All right, hurry up! And, oh, say, Ross, you might pick up another girl. Sadie Pratt, or somebody. I got a sweetie of my own. Un-hunh! David Nash, a junior from A. & M., is staying with us this summer. Didn't you know?... Am I? I'll tell the world! You just wait till you see him, and then *you'll* want to jump in the river!... Aw, quit your kidding!... Well, hurry! 'Bye!"

Before the one-sided conversation was concluded, David Nash had quietly left the room by way of the kitchen door. When Sally staggered in with her armload of soiled dishes she found David at the big iron sink, pouring hot water from a heavy black teakettle into a granite dishpan.

"Thought I'd help," he said in a low voice, to keep Pearl from overhearing. "You must be tired and bewildered, and washing up for nine people is no joke. Give me the glasses first," he added casually as he reached for the wire soap shaker that hung on a nail above the sink.

"Oh, please," Sally gasped in consternation. "I can do them. It won't take me any time. Why, at the Home, six of us girls would wash dishes for three hundred. They wouldn't like it," she added in a terrified whisper, her eyes fluttering first

toward the dining room door, then toward the big pantry where Mrs. Carson was picking over her blackberries.

"I like to wash dishes," David said firmly, and that settled it, at least so far as he was concerned.

Sally was trotting happily between table and cupboard when Pearl came in, stormy-eyed, sullen-mouthed.

"Well, I must say, you're a quick worker—and I don't mean on dishes!" she snapped at Sally. "So this is the way you have to study, Mr. David Nash! But I suppose she pulled a sob story on you and just roped you in. You'd better find out right now, Miss Sally Ford, that you can't shirk your work on his farm. That's not what Papa got you for—"

"I insisted on helping with the dishes, Pearl," David interrupted the bitter tirade in his firm, quiet way. "Want to get a dish cloth and help dry them?" There was a twinkle in his eyes and he winked ever so slightly at Sally.

"I've got to dress. Five or six of the bunch are coming over to dance to the radio music. Did you hear what I said about you?" Pearl answered, her shallow blue eyes coquetting with David.

"About me?" David pretended surprise. "Is that all, Sally? Well, I'll go on up to my room and study awhile, if I can stay awake."

"You're going to dance with me—with us," Pearl wailed, her flat voice harsh with disappointment. "I told Ross Willis to bring another partner for himself, because I was counting on you—"

"Awfully sorry, but I've got to study. I thought I told you at supper that I had to study," David reminded her mildly, but there was the steel of determination in his casual voice.

Pearl flung out of the room then, her face twisted with the first grimaces of crying.

"We'd better wash out and rinse these dish cloths," David said imperturbably, but his gold-flecked eyes and his strong, characterful mouth smiled at Sally. "My mother taught me that—and a good many other things."

A little later, under cover of the swishing of water in the granite dish pan, David spoke in a low voice to the girl who worked so happily at his side:

"Take it as easy as you can. They'll work you to death if you let them. And—if you need any help, *day or night*," he emphasized the words significantly, so that once again a pulse of fear throbbed in Sally's throat, "just call on me. Remember, I'm an orphan myself. But it's easier for a boy. The world can be mighty hard on a girl alone."

"Thank you," Sally trembled, her voice scarcely a whisper, for Mrs. Carson was moving heavily in the pantry nearby.

Fifteen minutes later, as Sally was sweeping the big kitchen, shouts of

laughter and loud, gay words told her that the party of farm girls and boys had arrived. With David gone to his garret room to study, Sally suddenly felt very small and forlorn, very much what he had called her—a girl alone.

The sounds of boisterous gayety penetrated to every corner of the small house, but they echoed most loudly in Sally's heart. For she was sixteen with all the desires and dreams of any other girl of sixteen. And she loved parties, although she had never been to a small, intimate one in a private home in all her life.

She leaned on her broom, trembling, desire to have a good time fighting with her institution-bred timidity. Then she looked down at her dress—the blue-and-white-checked gingham, faded, dull, that she had worn for months at the orphanage. If they should come into the kitchen—any of those laughing, gay girls and boys—and find her in the uniform of state charity they would despise her, never dream of asking her to come in, to dance—

Her hands suddenly gripped her broom fiercely. Within a minute she had finished her last task of the evening, had brushed the crumbs and dust into the black tin dust pan, emptied it into the kitchen range. Then, breathless with haste, afraid that timidity would overtake her, she ran up the back stairs to the garret.

Her cold little hands trembled with eagerness as she jerked her work dress over her head and arrayed her slight body in the lace-trimmed white lawn "Sunday dress" which she had worn earlier in the day on her trip from the orphanage. Excitedly, she slapped her pale, faintly flushed cheeks to make them more red, then bit her lips hard in lieu of lipstick.

When she tiptoed down the dark hall of the garret she found David Nash's door ajar, caught a glimpse of the university student-farmhand bent over a pine table crowded with books.

She crept on to the head of the narrow, steep stairs, and there her courage failed her. The dance music, coming in full and strong over the radio, had just begun, and she could hear the shuffle of feet on the bare floor of the living room. How had she thought for one minute that she could brave those alien eyes, intrude, uninvited, upon Pearl's party? Hadn't Pearl made it cruelly clear that she despised her, resented her, because of David's interest in her?

"Want to dance?"

She had been leaning over the narrow pine banister, but she straightened then, a hand going to her heart, for it was David standing near her in the dark, and his voice was very kind.

CHAPTER III

At 11 o'clock that Saturday night Sally Ford blew out the flame in the small kerosene lamp—the electric light wires had not been brought to the garret—and then knelt beside the low cot bed to pray, as she had been taught to do in the orphanage.

After she had raced mechanically through her childish "Now-I-lay-me," she lifted her small face, that gleamed pearly-white in the faint moonlight, and, clasping her thin little hands tightly, spoke in a low, passionate voice directly to God, whom she imagined bending His majestic head to listen:

"Oh, thank you, God, for making David like me, and for letting me dance with him. And if dancing is a sin, please forgive me, God, for I didn't mean any harm. And please make Pearl not hate me so much just because David is sweet to me. She has so many friends and a father and mother and a grandmother and a nice home and so many pretty clothes, while I haven't anything. Make her feel kinder toward me, dear God, and I'll work so hard and be so good! And please, God, keep my heart and body pure, like Mrs. Stone says."

Lying in bed, covered only with the scant nightgown she had brought from the orphanage, Sally did not feel the oppressive heat nor the hardness and lumpiness of her cornshuck mattress. For she was reliving the hour she had spent in the Carson living room, sponsored by a stern-faced David who seemed determined to force Pearl and her giggling, chattering friends to accept the timid little orphan as an equal.

She felt again the pain in her heart at their veiled insults, their deliberate snubs, the concentrated fury that gleamed at her from Pearl's pale blue eyes. But again, as during that hour, the hurt was healed by the blessed fact of David's championship. She lay very still to recapture the bliss of David's arm about her waist, as he whirled her lightly in a fox trot, the music for which came so mysteriously from a little box with dials and a horn like a phonograph. She heard again his precious compliment, spoken loudly enough for Pearl to hear: "You're the best dancer I ever danced with, Sally. I'm going to ask you to the Junior Prom next year."

Of course he had danced with Pearl, too, and the other girls, who had made eyes at him and angled for compliments on their own dancing. When he danced with Pearl, her husky young body pressed closely against his, her fingertips audaciously brushed the golden crispness of his hair. She had even tried to dance cheek-to-cheek with David, but he had held her back stiffly.

The other boys—Ross Willis and Purdy Bates—had not asked Sally to dance with them, after Pearl had whispered half-audible, fierce commands; but their rudeness had no power to still the little song of thanksgiving that trilled in her heart, for always David came back to her, looking glad and relieved, and it was with her that David sat between dances, talking steadily and entertainingly, to hide her shy silences.

She sighed in memory, a quivering sigh of pure pleasure, when she lived again the minutes in the kitchen when she and David had washed glasses and plates, while the others danced in the parlor. They had not returned, but together had slipped up the back stairs to the garret, David bidding her a cheerful good-night as he turned into his own room to study for an hour before going to bed.

She had learned, during those talks with David, that he was twenty years old, that he had completed two years' work in the State Agricultural and Mechanical College; that he was working summers on farms as much for the practical experience as for the money earned, for his ambition was to be a scientific farmer, so that he might make the most of the farm which he would some day inherit from his grandfather. His grandfather's place adjoined the Carson farm, but it was being worked "on shares" by a large family of brothers, who had no need for David's labor in the summer. She knew, too, from his modest replies to questions asked by Ross Willis and Purdy Bates, that David was a star athlete, that he had already won his letter in football and that he had been boxing champion of the sophomore class.

"But he likes *me*," Sally exulted. "He likes me better than Pearl or Bessie Coates or Sue Mullins. I suppose," she added honestly, "he's sorry for me because I'm an orphan and Pearl has it 'in' for me, but I don't care why he's nice to me, just so he is."

The radio music stopped at half-past eleven. Soon afterward Sally heard the shouted good-nights of Pearl's guests: "We had a swell time, Pearl!" "Don't forget, Pearl! Our house tomorrow night!" "See you at Sunday School, Pearl, and bring David with you! Some sheik! Oh, Mama! But watch out for that baby-faced orphan, Pearl! She's got her cap set for him and she'll beat your time, if you don't look out!"

Sally felt her face flame with shame and anger. Why did girls and boys have to be so nasty-minded, she asked herself on a sob. Why couldn't they let her and David be friends without thinking things like that? Why, David was

so—so wonderful! He wouldn't "look" at a frightened little girl from an orphans' home! No girl was good enough for David Nash, she told herself fiercely.

The next morning Pearl failed to entice David into going to church and Sunday School with her, and Sally was left alone to prepare the big Sunday dinner—Mrs. Carson having gone to church in spite of her Saturday determination not to. David came smiling into the kitchen, immaculate in a white shirt and well-fitting gray flannel trousers, a book in his hand, a pipe in his mouth.

"Mind if I study out here on the kitchen-porch?" he asked Sally, his hazel eyes brimming with friendliness. "I like company and my garret room's hot as an inferno."

"I'd love to have you," Sally told him shyly. "I'll try not to make any noise with the cooking utensils."

"Oh, I don't mind noise," he laughed. "Fact is, I wish you'd sing. I'll bet you can sing like a bird. Your voice sings even when you're talking. And any woman—" a delicate compliment that—"can work better when she's singing."

And so Sally sang. She sang Sunday School songs, because it was Sunday.

It was sweet to be alone in the kitchen, with David so near, his crisp, golden-brown head bent over his book, smoke spiraling lazily from his pipe. The old grandmother, looking very tiny and old-fashioned in rustling black taffeta, had gone to church, too, leading her middle-aged half-wit son by the hand. Benny had strained at his mother's hand, trying to get loose so that he could kiss Sally and show her his bright red necktie, at which the fingers of his free hand plucked excitedly. As she remembered those vacant, grinning eyes, that slack, grinning mouth, Sally's song changed to a heart-felt paean of thanksgiving:

"Count your blessings!
Name them one by one.
Count your many blessings—
See what God hath done!"

Oh, she *was* blessed! She had a good mind; sometimes she was pretty; she could dance and sing; children liked her—and David, David! Poor half-wit Benny, whose only blessings were a dim little old mother and a new red necktie! But wasn't a mother—even an old, old mother, whose own eyes were vague, such a big blessing that she made up for nearly everything else that God could give?

But she resolutely banished the ache in her heart—an ache that contracted it sharply every time she thought of the mother she had never known—and began to sing again:

"I think when I read that sweet story of old,

When Jesus was here among men,
How He called little children as lambs to His fold—"

The opening and closing of the door startled her. David was there, smiling at her.

"Won't you sing 'Always' for me, Sally? It's a new song, just out. It goes something like this—" And he began to hum, breaking into words now and then: "I'll be loving you—always! Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not—"

"So this is why you wouldn't go to church with me!" a shrill voice, passionate with anger, broke into the singing lesson.

They had not heard her, in their absorption in the song and in each other, but Pearl had come into the house through the front door, and was confronting them now in the doorway between dining room and kitchen.

"I thought you two were up to something!" she cried. "It's a good thing I came home when I did, or I reckon there wouldn't be any Sunday dinner. Do you know why I came home, Sally Ford?" she demanded, advancing into the kitchen, her hands on her hips, her fingers digging spasmodically into the flesh that bulged under the silk.

"No," Sally gasped, retreating until she was halted by the kitchen table. "I'm cooking dinner, Pearl. It'll be ready on time—"

"Don't you 'Pearl' me!" the infuriated girl screamed. "You mealy-mouthed little hypocrite! I'll tell you why I came home! I couldn't find my diamond bar-pin that Papa gave me for a Christmas present last year, and I remembered when I was in Sunday School that I saw you stoop and pick up something in the parlor last night. You little thief! Give it back to me or I'll phone for the sheriff!"

Sally stared at Pearl, color draining out of her cheeks and out of her sapphire eyes, until she was a pale shadow of the girl who had been glowing and sparkling under the sun of David's affectionate interest.

"I haven't seen your diamond bar-pin, Pearl," she said at last. "Honest, I haven't!"

"You're lying! I saw you stoop and pick something up in front of the sofa last night. I was crazy not to think of my bar-pin then, but I remembered all right this morning, when it was gone off this dress, the same dress I was wearing last night. See, David!" she appealed shrilly to the boy, who was looking at her with narrowed eyes. "It was pinned right here! You can see where it was stuck in! Look!"

David said nothing, but a slow, odd smile curled his lips without reaching those level, narrowed eyes of his.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Pearl screamed. "I won't *have* you looking at me like that! Stop it!"

Slowly, his eyes not leaving Pearl's face for a moment, David thrust his right hand into his pocket. When he withdrew it, something lay on his palm—a narrow bar of filigreed white gold, set with a small, square-cut diamond. Still without speaking, he extended his hand slowly toward Pearl, but she drew back, her eyes popping with surprise and—yes, Sally was sure of it—fear.

"Where did you get that?" she gasped.

"Do you really want me to tell you?" David spoke at last, his voice queer and hard.

"No!" Pearl shuddered. "No! Does she—does *she* know?"

"No, she was telling the truth when she said that she hadn't seen the pin," David answered, flipping the pin contemptuously to the kitchen table. "But next time I think you'd better put it away in your own room. And Pearl, you really must try to overcome this absentmindedness of yours. It may get you into trouble sometime."

Pearl shivered, seemed to shrink visibly under her fussy pink georgette dress.

"Oh!" she wailed suddenly, her face crumpling up in a spasm of weeping. "You'll hate me now! And you used to like me, before *she* came! You—oh, I hate you! Quit looking at me like that!"

"Hadn't you better go back to church?" David suggested mildly. "Tell your mother you found your pin just where you'd left it," that contemptuous smile deepening on his lips.

"You won't tell Papa, will you?" Pearl whimpered, as she turned toward the door. "And you won't tell *her*?" She could not bear to utter Sally's name.

"No, I won't tell," David assured her. "But I'm sure you'll make up to Sally for having been mistaken about the pin."

"She's all you think of!" Pearl cried, then, sobbing wildly, she ran out the kitchen door.

"Guess I'd better not bother you any longer, or they'll be blaming me if dinner is late," David said casually, but he paused long enough to pat the little hand that was clenching the table.

Sally was so puzzled by the strangeness of the scene she had witnessed, so tormented by brief glimpses of something near the truth, so weak from reaction, so stirred by gratitude to David, that she was making poor headway with dinner when Clem Carson, who had not gone to church, came in from the barns, dressed in overalls in defiance of the day.

"Got a sick yearlin' out there," he grumbled. "A blue-ribbon heifer calf that Dave's grandpa persuaded me to buy. I don't believe in this blue-ribbon stock. Always delicate—got to be nursed like a baby. I give her a whopping dose of castor oil and she slobbered all over me."

He took the big black iron teakettle from the stove and filled the granite wash basin half full of the steaming water. As he lathered his hands until festoons of soap bubbles hung from them, he cocked an appraising eye at Sally, who was busily rolling pie crust on a yellow pine board.

"Dave been hanging around the kitchen this morning, ain't he?"

Sally's hands tightened on the rolling pin and her eyes fluttered guiltily as she answered, "Yes, sir."

"Better not encourage him, if you know which side your bread's buttered on," the farmer advised laconically. "I reckon you know by this time that Pearl's picked him out and that things is just about settled between 'em. Fine match, too. He'll own his granddad's place some day—next farm to this one, and the young folks will be mighty well fixed. I reckon Dave's pretty much like any other young whippersnapper—ready to cock an eye at any pretty girl that comes along, before he settles down, but it don't mean anything. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Sally murmured.

"I reckon any fool could see that Pearl's mighty near the apple of my eye," Carson went on, as he dried his hands vigorously on the Sunday-fresh roller towel. "And if she took a notion that maybe some other girl from the orphanage would suit us better, why I don't know as I could do anything else but take you back. And I'd hate that. You're a nice, pretty little thing, real handy in the kitchen, but, yes sir, I'd have to tell the matron that you just didn't suit.... Well, I got to get back to that yearlin'."

Somehow Sally managed to finish cooking the big Sunday dinner before the family returned from church. Out of deference for the day she decided to change from her faded gingham to her white dress before serving dinner. Surely she had a right to look decent! Clem Carson couldn't construe her humble "dressing up" as a bid for David's attention.

In her little garret room she scrubbed her face and hands, pinned the heavy braid of soft black hair about her head, and then reached under her low cot bed for her small bundle of clothes, in which was rolled her only pair of fine-ribbed white lisle stockings. As she drew out the bundle she discovered immediately that other hands than her own had touched it; the stockings had been unrolled and then rerolled clumsily, not at all in her own neat fashion. Then suddenly full comprehension came to her. The pieces of the puzzle settled miraculously into shape. It was here, in this bundle, that David had found the bar-pin. Somehow he had seen Pearl slip into the room that morning, had guessed that her secret visit boded no good for Sally; had spied on her, and then later had retrieved the bar-pin from the bundle in which Pearl had hidden it.

If David had not seen—But she could not go on with the thought. Trembling so that her teeth chattered she dressed herself as decently as her orphanage

wardrobe permitted, and then went downstairs to "dish up" the dinner she had prepared.

Immediately after dinner David went across fields to call on his grandfather, a grouchy, sick old man who almost hated the boy because he would soon own the lands which he himself had loved so passionately. He did not return for supper, and at breakfast on Monday there was not time for more than a smile and a cheerful "Good morning," which Sally, with Clem Carson's eyes upon her, hardly dared return.

Sally wondered if David had been warned, too, for as the days passed she seldom saw him alone for as much a minute. Perhaps he was being careful for her sake, suspecting Carson's antagonism, or perhaps, in spite of the shameful trick in which he had caught her, he really cared for Pearl. Evenings he sat for a short time in the living room or on the front porch, Pearl beside him, chattering animatedly; but he was always in his room studying by ten o'clock, a blessed fact which made her own isolation in her little garret room more easy to bear.

On Thursday morning at ten o'clock David appeared at the kitchen door, an axe in his hands.

"Will you turn the grindstone for me while I sharpen this axe blade, Sally?" he asked casually, but his eyes gave her a deep, significant look that made her heart flutter.

Mrs. Carson, standing over her bubbling preserving kettles, grumbled an assent, and Sally flew out of the kitchen to join him.

The grindstone, a huge, heavy stone wheel turned by a pedal arrangement, was set up near the first of the great red barns. While Sally poured water at intervals upon the stone, David held the blade against it, and under cover of the whirring, grating noise he talked to her in a low voice.

"Everything all right, Sally?"

"Fine!" she faltered. "I get awful tired, but there's lots to eat—such good things to eat—and Pearl's given me some dresses that are nicer than any I ever had before, except they're too big for me—"

"Isn't she fat?" David grinned at her, and she was reminded again how young he was, although he seemed so very grown-up to her. "She wouldn't be so fat if she worked a tenth as hard as you do."

"I don't mind," Sally protested, her eyes misting with tears at his thoughtfulness for her. "I've got to earn my board and keep. Besides, there's such an awful lot to be done, with the preserving and the canning and the cooking and everything. Mrs. Carson works even harder than I do."

David's eyes flashed with indignation and a suspicion of contempt for the meek little girl opposite him. "You're earning five times as much as your board and room and a few old clothes that Pearl doesn't want is worth. It makes me so

mad—"

"Sal-lee! Ain't that axe ground yet? Time to start dinner! I can't leave this piccalilli I'm making," Mrs. Carson shouted from the kitchen door.

"Wait, Sally," David commanded. "Wouldn't you like to take a walk with me after supper tonight? I'll help you with the dishes. You never get out of the house, except to the garden. You haven't even seen the fields yet. I'd like to show you around. The moon's full tonight—"

"Oh, I can't!" Sally gasped with the pain of refusal. "Pearl—Mr. Carson—"

"I want you to come," David said steadily, his eyes commanding her.

"All right," Sally promised recklessly, her cheeks pink with excitement, her eyes soft and velvety, like dark blue pansies.

Sally was eager as a child, when she joined David Nash in that part of the lane that skirted the orchard. Although it was nearly nine o'clock it was not yet dark; the sweet, throbbing peace of a June twilight, disturbed only by a faint breeze that whispered through the leaves of the fruit trees, brooded over the farm.

"I hurried—as fast—as I could!" she gasped. "Grandma Carson ripped up this dress for me this afternoon and while you and I were washing dishes Mrs. Carson stitched up the seams. Wasn't that sweet of her? Do you like it, David? It was awful dirty and I washed it in gasoline this afternoon, while I was doing Pearl's things."

She backed away from him, took the full skirt of the made-over dress between the thumb and forefinger of each hand, and made him a curtsey.

"You look like a picture in it," David told her gravely. "When I saw Pearl busting out of it I had no idea it was such a pretty dress."

"I couldn't have kept it on tonight if Pearl hadn't already left for the party at Willis's. Was she terribly mad at you because you wouldn't go?"

David shrugged his broad shoulders, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. "Let's talk about something pleasant. Want a peach, Sally?"

And Sally ate the peach he gave her, though she had peeled so many for canning those last few days that she had thought she never wanted to see another peach. But this was a special peach, for David had chosen it for her, had touched it with his own hands.

They walked slowly down the fruit-scented lane together, Sally's shoulder sometimes touching David's coatsleeve, her short legs striving to keep step with his long ones.

She listened, or appeared to listen, drugged with content, her fatigue and the smarting of her gasoline-reddened hands completely forgotten.

"We got a good stand of winter wheat and oats. There's the wheat. See how it ripples in the breeze? Look! You can see where it's turning yellow. Pretty soon its jade-green dress will be as yellow as gold, and along in August I'll cut it.

That's oats, over there"; and he pointed to a distant field of foot-high grain.

"It's so pretty—all of it," Sally sighed blissfully. "You wouldn't think, just to look at a farm, that it makes people mean and cross and stingy and ugly, would you? Looks like growing things for people to eat ought to make us happy."

"Farmers don't see the pretty side; they're too busy. And too worried," David told her gravely. "I'm different. I live in the city in the winter and I can hardly wait to get to the farm in the summer. But it's not my worry if the summer is wet and the wheat rusts. I'll be happy to own a piece of land some day, though, even if I own all the worries, too. I'm going to be a scientific farmer, you know."

"I'd love to live on a farm," Sally agreed, with entire innocence. "But every evening at twilight I'd go out and look at my growing things and see how pretty a picture they made, and try to forget all the back-breaking work I'd put in to make it so pretty."

They were walking single file now, in the soft, mealy loam of a field, David leading the way. She loved the way his tall, compact body moved—as gracefully and surely as a woman's. She had the feeling that they were two children, who had slipped away from their elders. She had never known anyone like David, but she felt as if she had known him all her life, as if she could say anything to him and he would understand. Oh, it was delicious to have a friend!

"There's the cornfield where I've been plowing," David called back to her. "A fine crop. I've given it its last plowing this week. It's what farmers call 'laid by.' Nothing to do now but to let nature take her course."

It was so dark now that the corn looked like glistening black swords, curved by invisible hands for a phantom combat. And the breeze rustled through them, bringing to the beauty-drunk little girl a cargo of mingled odors of earth, ripe fruit and greenness thrusting up from the moist embrace of the ground to the kiss of the sun.

"Let's sit here on the ground and watch the moon come up," David suggested, his voice hushed with the wonder of the night and of the beauty that lay about them. "The earth is soft, and dry from the sun. It won't soil your pretty dress."

Sally obeyed, locking her slender knees with her hands and resting her chin upon them.

"Tired, Sally? They work you too hard," David said softly, as he seated himself at a little distance from her. "I suppose you'll be glad to get back to the—Home in the fall."

Sally's dream-filled eyes, barely discernible in the dark, turned toward him, and her voice, hushed but determined, spoke the words that had been throbbing in her brain for four days:

"I'm not going back to the Home—ever. I'm going to run away."

"Good for you!" David applauded. Then, with sudden seriousness: "But what will you do? A girl alone, like you? And won't they try to bring you back? Isn't there a law that will let them hunt you like a criminal?"

"Oh, yes. The state's my legal guardian until I'm eighteen, and I'm only sixteen. In some states it's twenty-one," Sally answered, fright creeping back into her voice. "But I'm going to do it anyway. I'd rather die than go back to the orphanage for two more years. You don't know what it's like," she added with sudden vehemence, and a sob-catch in her throat.

"Tell me, Sally," David urged gently.

And Sally told him—in short, gasping sentences, roughened sometimes by tears—of the life of orphaned girls.

"We have enough to eat to keep from starving and they give us four new dresses a year," Sally went on recklessly, her long-dammed-up emotion released by his sympathy and understanding, though he said so little. "And they don't actually beat us, unless we've done something pretty bad; but oh, it's the knowing that we're orphans and that the state takes care of us and that nobody cares whether we live or die that makes it so hard to bear! From the time we enter the orphanage we are made to feel that everyone else is better than we are, and it's not right for children, who will be men and women some day, with their livings to make, to feel that way!"

"Yes, an inferiority complex is a pretty bad handicap," David interrupted gently.

"I know about inferiority complexes," Sally took him up eagerly. "I've read a lot and studied a lot. We have a branch of the public library in the orphanage, but we're only allowed to take out one book a week. I'll graduate from high school next June—if I go back! But I won't go back!"

"But Sally, Sally, what could you do?" David persisted. "You haven't any money—"

"No," Sally acknowledged passionately. "I've never had more than a nickel at one time to call my own! Think of it, David! A girl of sixteen, who has never had more than a nickel of her own in her life! And only a nickel given to me by some soft-hearted, sentimental visitor! But I can work, and if I can't find anything to do, I'd rather starve than go back."

David's hand, concealed by the darkness, was upon hers before she knew that it was coming.

"Poor Sally! Brave, high-hearted little Sally!" David said so gently that his words were like a caress. "Charity hasn't broken your spirit yet, child. Just try to be patient for a while longer. Promise me you won't do anything without telling me first. I might be able to help you—somehow."

"I—I can't promise, David," she confessed in a strangled voice. "I might

have to go away—suddenly—from here—"

"What do you mean, Sally?" David's hand closed in a hurting grip over hers. "Has Pearl—Mr. Carson—? Tell me what you mean!"

"When I promised to come walking with you tonight I knew that Mr. Carson would try to take me back to the orphanage, if he found out. But—I—I wanted to come. And I'm not sorry."

"Do you mean that he threatened you?" David asked slowly, amazement dragging at his words. "Because of Pearl—and me?"

"Yes," she whispered, hanging her head with shame. "I didn't want you to know, ever, that you'd been in any way responsible. He—he says it's practically settled between you and—and Pearl, and that—that I—oh, don't make me say any more!"

David groaned. She could see the muscles spring out like cords along his jaw. "Listen, Sally," he said at last, very gently, "I want you to believe me when I say that I have never had the slightest intention of marrying Pearl Carson. I have not made love to her. I'm too young to get married. I've got two years of college ahead of me yet, but even if I were older and had a farm of my own, I wouldn't marry Pearl—"

CHAPTER IV

"Come out of that corn!" A loud, harsh voice cut across David's low-spoken speech, made them spring guiltily apart. "I ain't going to stand for no such goings-on on my farm!"

Clem Carson had prowled like an angry, frustrated animal, through the fields until he had spied them out.

David and Sally had been sitting at the end of the corn field, in plain sight of anyone who cared to spy upon them. When Clem Carson's harsh bellow startled them out of their innocent confidences David jumped to his feet, offering a hand to Sally, who was trembling so that she could scarcely stand.

"We're not in the corn, Mr. Carson," David called, his voice vibrating with indignation. "I'll have to ask you to apologize for what you said, sir. There's no harm in two young people watching the moon rise at ten o'clock."

Carson came striding out of the corn. David, feet planted rather far apart, looked as if he were braced for attack, and the farmer, after an involuntary shrinking toward the shelter of the corn, advanced again, an apologetic smile on his brown face.

"Reckon I spoke hasty," he conceded, "but Jim said he seen you two younguns sneaking off into the corn and it got my dander up. I'm responsible to the orphanage for Sally, and I don't aim to have her going back in disgrace. Better get back to the house, Sally, and go to bed, seeing as how you've got to be up at half-past four in the morning. You stay back a minute, Dave. I want to have a little talk with you."

"I'm taking Sally to the house, Mr. Carson," David said grimly.

On the walk back to the house there was no opportunity for David to reassure the frightened, trembling girl, for Carson plowed doggedly along behind them as they walked single file between the rows of corn. When they reached the kitchen, where Mrs. Carson was setting great pans of yeast bread to rise on the back of the range, Sally ran to the stairs, not pausing for a good-night.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, while she was sitting on the edge of her cot-bed, she heard David's firm step on the back stairs, and knew that he had cut short the farmer's "little talk" with him. Reckless of consequences she slipped out of her door, which she had left ajar, and crept along the dark hall to David's door.

He did not see her at first, for she was only a faint blur in the dark, but at her whispered "David!" he paused, his hands groping for hers.

"It's all right, honey," he whispered. "I told him point-blank if he sent you back to the Home I'd leave, too. And that will hold him, because he can't do without me at this busy season. He couldn't get another hand right now for love or money, and he knows it. Go to sleep now, and don't worry."

The next morning at breakfast it was plainly evident that David had said one or two other things to Clem Carson, and that he in turn had passed them on to Pearl. For Pearl's eyes bore traces of tears shed during the night, and the high color of anger burned in her plump cheeks. Carson's anger and chagrin at losing all his hopes of David as a son-in-law and of acquiring, through his marriage to Pearl, the neighboring farm for his daughter, expressed itself in heavy "joshing," each word tipped with venom:

"Well, well, how's our Sally this morning? What do you know about this, Ma?—our little 'Orphunt Annie' is stepping out! Yes, sir, she ain't letting no grass grow under her feet! Caught herself a feller, she has!"

"Eat your breakfast, Clem, and let Sally alone," Mrs. Carson commanded impatiently. "She's old enough to have a feller if she wants one."

Tears of gratitude to the woman she had thought so stern gushed into

Sally's eyes, so that she could not see to butter the hot biscuit she held in her shaking hands.

"She's cut you out, Pearl, beat your time all hollow! And looking as meek and mild as a Jersey heifer all the time! I tell you, Ma, it takes these buttery-mouthed little angels to put over the high-jinks!"

"I'm sure I wouldn't have looked at a hired man," Pearl cried angrily, tossing her head. "Sally's welcome to him. But I can't say I admire *his* taste."

Sally's eyes, drowned in tears, fluttered toward David.

"Don't you think you're going pretty far, Mr. Carson?" David asked abruptly.

"No offense, no offense," Carson protested hastily, with a chuckle that he meant to sound conciliatory. "I'm a man that likes his joke, and it does strike me as funny that a fine, upstanding college man like you, due to come into property some day, should cotton to a scared little rabbit of an orphan like Sally here—"

"That'll do, Clem!" Mrs. Carson interrupted sharply. "Get ahead with your breakfast and clear out, all of you! Sally and me have got a big day's work ahead of us. Pearl, I want you to drive to Capital City for some more Mason jars for me. I'm all out."

Later, when Sally was washing dishes, Pearl bounced into the kitchen, dressed for her trip to the city, her arms full of soiled white shoes, stockings and silk underwear.

"Sally," she said, her voice like a whip-lash, "I want you to clean these shoes for me today and wash out these stockings and underwear. See that you do a good job, or you'll have to do it over."

Sally, raking the suds from the dishpan off her arms and hands, accepted the pile of garments dumbly, but resentment gushed hotly in her throat.

"I've got enough work laid out for Sally to keep her busy every minute today," Mrs. Carson rebuked Pearl sharply. "Why can't you do your own cleaning, Pearl?"

"Because I've got a luncheon date and a matinee in town today, and I need these things for tonight. I'm going to a party at the Mullins' Goodby, Mom. Two dozen jars enough?"

When Sally was again bent over the dishpan she heard the little old grandmother's uncertain, quavering voice:

"It ain't fair, Debbie, the way you let Pearl run over Sally. She's a nice, polite-spoken little girl, the best worker I ever see."

"I know, Ma," Mrs. Carson answered in so kind a voice that fresh tears swam in Sally's eyes. "Pearl's been spoiled. But I'm too busy now to take it out of her. I wonder, Ma, if you couldn't rip up them other two dresses that Pearl gave Sally? The child really ain't got a thing to wear. If you'll just rip the seams,

I'll stitch 'em myself at night, if I ain't too tired."

Sally whirled from the dishpan, stooped swiftly and laid her lips for an instant upon Mrs. Carson's hand. Then, flushing vividly, she ran back to the kitchen sink, seized the big flour-sack dish towel and began to polish a glass with intense energy.

Although Mrs. Carson made no comment on Sally's shy caress, the girl felt that from that moment the farmer's wife was her friend, undeclared but staunch.

Knowing that any day might prove to be her last on the farm, for Carson never let slip an opportunity to threaten her by innuendo with the disgrace of being sent back to the Home, Sally found a ray of comfort in the fact that Grandma Carson, probably because she felt sorry for Sally, constantly hectored as she was by the jealous, vicious-tongued Pearl, was slowly but surely completing the necessary alterations upon the other two dresses that Pearl had given her.

The vague-eyed, kindly little old woman finished the alterations on Saturday morning, and Sally sped to her garret room with them, there to try them on and gloat over them. Then, her eyes darting now and then to the closed door, she hastily made a bundle of the three new dresses and hid it under the cornshuck mattress of her bed. Maybe it would be stealing to take the dresses if she had to run away, but she couldn't hope to escape in the orphanage uniform—

Early Saturday afternoon Mrs. Carson announced that she had to go into the city to do some shopping. The farmer suggested that Pearl drive her in, since he himself was to be busy setting up the cider mill in a shack he had built at the foot of the lane, where it ran into the state highway.

"And you might as well take the Dodge and let Ma and Benny go in with you. They haven't seen a picture show for a month," Carson suggested.

The thought of seeing a movie overcame Sally's timidity. "Would there be room for me, Mrs. Carson? I could help you with your shopping, help carry things—"

"I don't see why not," Mrs. Carson answered. "I got a lot of trotting around to do and it's mighty hot—"

"Mama, if she goes, I won't go a step," Pearl burst out shrilly. "I won't have her tagging after us all afternoon, making eyes at every man that speaks to me!"

"Pearl, Pearl, I'm afraid you're spoiled rotten!" Mrs. Carson shook her head sadly. "I'll bring you a pair of them fiber silk stockings, Sally, to wear to church tomorrow night with your flowered taffeta," she offered brusquely, by way of consolation.

When the car had swept down the lane and Sally was left alone in the house, she busied herself furiously in an effort to dissipate her loneliness and disappointment, and a fear that grew upon her with the realization that Carson had not accompanied his family to town. The two hired men had left the farm

for Capital City, immediately after the noon meal, wages in their pockets, bent on an afternoon and evening of city pleasures. On the entire farm there was no one but herself, Carson and David. And where was David? If she needed him terribly, would he fail her?

As the afternoon wore on, and still Carson did not appear, Sally's gratitude for Mrs. Carson's inarticulate kindness sent her on a flying trip to the orchard to gather enough hard, sour apples to make pies for supper. Carson, she began to hope, was so busy setting up the cider mill that he would have no time to take her back to the orphanage, even if he wanted to. Maybe she was safe for a while; she would not run away just yet, for if she ran away she would never see David again—

It was fun to have the whole big kitchen to herself. Humming under her breath, she cut chilled lard into well-sifted flour, using the full amount that Mrs. Carson's pie crust called for. At the orphanage the pie crust was tough and leathery, because the matron would not permit the cook to use enough lard. What joy it was to cook on a prosperous farm, where there was an abundance of every good thing to eat! If only she could stay the whole summer through! She could stand the hard work....

As she piled the sliced apples thickly into the crimped pie crust, she thought wistfully of Mrs. Carson, who was kind to her although she was a hard taskmistress.

"Maybe," Sally reflected sadly, dusting around nutmeg over the thickly sugared apples, "if I could stay on here, Mrs. Carson would want to adopt me. But of course Pearl and Mr. Carson wouldn't let her. They hate me because David likes me and won't marry Pearl. And I like David better than anybody in the world," she confessed to herself, as the pink in her cheeks deepened. "But I would love to have a mother, even if it was only a ready-made mother. I wonder why some girls have everything, and others nothing? Why should Pearl have a mother who just spoils her past all enduring? Pearl isn't good—she isn't even good to her mother."

When her three big apple pies were in the oven, she washed the bread bowl in which she had mixed her pie crust; washed and dried vigorously the big yellow pine board and rolling pin, and restored them to their proper places. Then, feeling very useful and virtuous, she set the table for supper, singing little scraps of popular songs which she had heard over the radio during her week on the farm.

By that time her pies were baked to a deep, golden brown, with little glazed blisters across their top crusts.

"If I do say it myself," she said, in her little old-woman way, her head cocked sideways as she surveyed her handiwork, "those are real pies. I hope Mrs. Carson will be surprised and pleased."

Then, because she was very tired and the late afternoon sun was making an inferno of the kitchen, Sally climbed the steep back stairs to the garret, intending to take a cooling sponge bath and a short nap before the family returned, hungry for supper. She was about to pass David's door when his voice halted her:

"That you, Sally? I've been enjoying your singing, even if I did spend more time listening than studying."

She went involuntarily toward him. "I didn't know you were up here, David," she told him. "I'm sorry I interrupted your studying. I wouldn't have sung if I'd known you were up here."

The boy was seated at a small pine table, covered with books and papers, but as she advanced hesitatingly into the room he rose.

"Come on in," he invited hospitably. "Wouldn't you like to see my books? Some of them are fascinating—full of pictures of prize stock and model chicken farms and champion egg-laying hens and things like that. Look," he commanded snatching up a book as if eager to detain her. "Here's a picture of a cow that my grandfather owns. She holds the state record for butter-fat production. Her name's Beauty Bess—look!"

Sally, without a thought as to the impropriety of being in a man's bedroom, slipped into the chair he was holding for her and bent her little braid-crowning head gravely over her book.

"I'm going to stock the farm with nothing but pedigreed animals when it's mine," David told her, enthusiastically. "Look, here's the kind—" And he bent low over her, so that his arm was about her shoulder as he riffled the pages of the book, seeking the picture he wanted her to see.

A sudden gust of wind, presaging a summer shower, slammed the door shut, but the two were so absorbed they did not hear the faint click of the lock. Nor did they hear, a little later, the sound of the stealthy, futile turning of the knob, the retreat of carefully muted footsteps.

David was bending low over Sally, his cheek almost touching hers, excitedly expounding the merits of crop rotation, and pointing out text-book confirmation of his theories, when sudden, evil words shocked their attention from the fascinations of the agricultural text-book:

"Caught you at last! Thought you was mighty slick, didn't you?—locking the door! I've a good mind to whip you every step of the way back to the orphan asylum, you lying, nasty little—" Carson's voice, hoarse with anger and exultation over his coming revenge upon the girl who had dared jeopardize his daughter's happiness, stopped with a gasp upon the evil word he had spat out, for his shoulders, as he tried to wriggle into the room from the small window, were stuck in the too-narrow frame.

If the wind had not been roaring about the house, banging branches of

shade trees against the sloping roof upon which David's window looked, they would necessarily have heard his approach, but as it was they were totally unprepared for the sight of his head and shoulders and breast, framed in the window, his glittering black eyes fixed upon them with evil exultation.

Sally struggled to her feet as David leaped toward the window. She had a fleeting glimpse of his rage-distorted young face, his lips snarled back from his teeth.

"David! Don't, David!" she cried, her voice a high, thin wail of terror—terror for David, not for Carson.

"You're not fit to live, Carson," David's young voice broke in its rage, but there was no faltering in the power behind the blow which crashed into the farmer's face.

Sally, sinking to her knees in her terror, heard the rending sound of flimsy timber giving way, then the more awful noise of a big body sliding rapidly down the roof. She half fainted then, so that when David tried to lift her to her feet she swayed dizzily against him, her eyes dazed, her ashen lips hanging slackly.

"Can you hear me, Sally?" David's voice, a little tremulous with awe at that which he had done, came like a series of loud claps in her ears.

She clung to him weakly, her eyes glancing fearfully from the window to his set, pale young face. Then she nodded slowly, like a child awakening from a nightmare.

"I think I've killed him, Sally. He hasn't made a sound since he crashed to the ground." David's hazel eyes were as wide as hers, and almost as frightened.

"You did—that—for me?" Sally whispered. "Oh, David, what are we going to do?" She began to cry then, in little, frightened whimpers, but her blue eyes, swimming in tears, never left his face.

The boy squared his shoulders as if to prepare them for a great burden, and in that instant he seemed to grow older. Color came slowly back to his bronzed cheeks, but his lips shook a little as he answered:

"We've got to run away, Sally, before the family comes home. I hate to leave him—down there—if he's only hurt. But I'll be damned if I stay here and get us both sent to jail just to ease a pain that that beast, if he isn't dead, may be having! Oh, God, I hope I didn't kill him! I just went crazy when he called you that name—Will you come, Sally, or do you want to stay and face them with me? Whatever's best for you—"

Sally Ford did not hesitate for a moment. Her blue eyes were full of trust and adoration as she answered: "I'll go with you, David. I knew I'd have to run away. I'm all packed."

"All right." David spoke rapidly. "I'll fix up a small bundle, too. You get your things and leave the house as quickly as possible. Cut across the orchard to

the cornfield and wait for me where we were sitting the other night. I'll join you almost by the time you get there. But I want you to leave first, just in case they come back before I can get away. Now, run!"

Sally obeyed, somehow forcing her muscles to carry out David's commands, but the tears were coming so fast that she bumped unseeingly into apple and peach trees as she ran through the orchard, the brown paper parcel of clothes clutched tightly to her bosom. Twice she dashed the tears from her eyes, glanced fearfully about, and listened, but she saw and heard nothing. The sun was getting low in the west, slanting in golden, dust-laden beams through the rows of apple trees.

When she reached the shelter of the corn stalks she went more slowly, for her heart was pounding sickeningly. Just before she reached the end of the field she paused, opened her bundle with shaking hands, drew out the dark blue linen dress and put it on over the blue-and-white gingham uniform of the orphanage. She was re-tying her bundle when she caught the faint sound of footsteps running toward her between rows of corn.

David was hatless. His eyes were wide, unsmiling, but his lips managed an upturning of the corners to reassure her.

"Sorry—to be—so long," he panted. "But I telephoned a doctor that Carson had been—hurt—and asked him to come over. I didn't answer when he asked who was calling. Told him Carson had slipped from the roof."

"I'm awfully glad you did, David. It was like you. Shall we go now?"

David looked down at her in wonder, and his eyes and lips were very tender. "What a brave kid you are, Sally! What a darn *nice* little thing you are! But I've been thinking hard, honey. We can't run away together—far, that is. I'll have to take you back to the Home."

"No, David, no, no! I can't go back to the orphanage! I'd rather die!" Sally gasped.

David dropped his bundle, took her hands and held them tightly. "I can't run away from this thing I've done, Sally. I'm sorry. I thought I could. I'm going to give myself up, after I've seen you safely back to the Home. I'll explain to your Mrs. Stone, make her believe—"

"Oh!" Sally breathed in a gust of despair. Then, stooping swiftly, she snatched up her bundle and began to run down a corn row. She ran with the fleetness of a terror-stricken animal, and David watched her for a long moment, his eyes dark with pity and uncertainty. Then he gave chase, his long legs clearing the distance between them with miraculous speed. He caught up with her just as she was at the edge of the cornfield, recklessly about to plunge into the lane that led to the Carson house.

"Wait, Sally!" he panted, grasping her shoulder. "You can't run away alone

like this—Oh Lord!" he groaned suddenly. "There they come! Don't you hear the car turning in from the road? Come back, Sally!"

He did not wait for her to obey, but lifted her into his arms, for she had gone limp with terror, and ran, crouching low so that the cornstalks would hide them.

"Lie flat on the ground," David said sternly, as he set her gently upon her feet. "We can't leave here now. The place will be swarming with people. But when it's dark we'll slip away, across fields. Thank God, there'll be no moon."

He flattened his own body upon the soft earth, close against the thick, sturdy cornstalks. They did not talk much for they were listening, listening for faint sounds coming from the farmhouse which would indicate that the dreadful discovery had been made.

Long minutes passed and nothing had happened. Then the muffled roar of another motor, turning into the lane from the state highway, told them that the doctor to whom David had telephoned was arriving. It seemed hours before a scream floated from the house to the cornfield.

"Pearl!" Sally whispered, shivering. "They hadn't found him. The doctor told them. Oh, David!"

His hand tightened so hard upon hers that she winced. A little later they heard Mrs. Carson's harsh voice calling, calling—"Sally! Sal-lee! Sally Ford!"

Sally bowed her head upon David's hand then, and wept a little, shuddering. "She was—good to me. She—she liked me, David. Oh, I hope she'll know I didn't mean her any harm, ever!"

The next hour, during which the sun set and twilight settled like a soft gray dust upon the cornfield, passed somehow. Several cars arrived; men's voices shouted unintelligible words. Twice Pearl screamed—

But no one came down the corn rows looking for them. "They won't dream we're still so near the house," David assured her in his low, comforting voice.

When it was quite dark, David spoke again: "We'll make a break for it now, Sally. I know this part of the country well. My grandfather's farm adjoins this one, with only a fence between the two hay meadows. We can cut across his farm, giving the house and barns a wide berth. Then we'll strike a bit of timberland that belongs to old man Cosgrove. That will bring us out on a little-traveled road that leads to Stanton, twenty-two miles away. Think you can make it, Sally?"

She hugged her bundle tight to her breast and reached for his hand, which he had withdrawn as he rose to his feet. "Of course," she answered simply. "I'm not afraid, David."

"You're a plucky kid," David said gruffly. "I'll lead the way. Let me know if I set too fast a pace."

Buoyed up by his praise, Sally trotted almost happily at his heels. She re-

fused to let her mind dwell on the horrors of the day, or to reach out into the future. Indeed, her imagination was incapable of picturing a future for a Sally Ford whose life was not regulated by orphanage routine. She held only the present fast in her mind, passionately grateful for the strong, swiftly striding figure before her, unwilling for this strange night-time adventure to end.

"Thirsty, Sally?" David's voice called out of the darkness.

Suddenly she knew that she was both thirsty and hungry, for she had not eaten since the twelve o'clock dinner. A cool breeze was rustling the leaves of the trees, and under that whispering rustle came the cool, sweet murmur of a brook. She crouched beside David on the bank of the tiny stream and thirstily drank from his cupped hands. Then he dipped his handkerchief in the water and gently swabbed her face, his hands as tender as Sally had fancied a mother's must be.

The going was more dogged, less mysteriously thrilling when they had at last reached the dirt road that was eventually to lead them to Stanton, a town of four or five thousand inhabitants, the town in which the woman who had brought her twelve years ago to the orphanage had lived. Days before Sally had memorized the address before destroying the bit of paper on which Miss Pond, out of the kindness of her heart, had copied Sally's record from the orphanage files.

Half a dozen times during the apparently interminable trudge toward Stanton David abruptly called a halt, drawing Sally off the road and over reeling, drunken-looking fences into meadows or fields for a terribly needed rest. Once, with his head in her lap, her fingers smoothing his crisp chestnut curls from his sweat-moistened brow, he went to sleep, and she knew that she would not have awakened him even to save herself from the orphanage.

Dawn was bedecking the east with tattered pink banners when the boy and girl, staggering with weariness and faint with hunger, caught their first glimpse of Stanton, a pretty little town snugly asleep in the hush that belongs peculiarly to early Sunday morning. Only the dutiful crowing of backyard roosters and the occasional baying of a hound broke the stillness.

"We've got to have food," David said abruptly, as they hesitated forlornly on the outskirts of the little town. "And yet I suppose the alarm has been given and the constables are on the lookout for us. We might stop at a house that has no telephone—they wouldn't be likely to have heard about Carson—but I don't like to arouse anyone this early on Sunday morning. There's an eating house next to the station that stays open all night, to serve train crews and passengers, but more than likely the station agent has been told to keep a lookout for us."

As he spoke a train whistled shrilly. The two wayfarers stood not a hundred yards from the railroad tracks where they crossed the dirt road. Sally instinctively turned to flee, but David restrained her.

"We can't hide from everyone, Sally," he said gently. "I think our best bet is to act as if we had had nothing to hide. Remember, we've done no wrong. If Carson is dead, he brought his death upon himself. He deserved what he got."

Trustingly, Sally gave him her hand, stood very small and erect beside him as the big engine thundered down the tracks toward them. Her face was drawn with fatigue but her eyes managed a smile for David. His did not reflect that brave smile, for they were fixed upon the oncoming train.

"By George, Sally, it's a carnival train! Look! 'Bybee's Bigger and Better Show.' I'd forgotten the carnival was coming. Look over there! There's one of their signs!"

An enormous poster, pasted upon a billboard, showed a nine-foot giant and a 30-inch dwarf, the little man smoking a huge cigar, seated cockily in the palm of the giant's vast hand. Big red type below the picture announced: "Bybee's Bigger and Better Show—Stanton, June 9 and 10. One hundred performers, largest menagerie in any carnival on the road today."

"I suppose they're going to spend Sunday here," David remarked. Then he turned toward Sally, beheld the miracle of her transformed face. "Why, child, you want to go to the carnival, don't you? Poor little Sally!"

His voice was so tender, so whimsical, so sympathetic, that tears filmed over the brilliance of her sapphire eyes. "I went to a circus once," she said with the eager breathlessness of a child. "The governor—he was running for office again—sent tickets for all the orphans. And, oh it was wonderful, David! We all planned to run away from the orphanage and join the circus. We talked about it for weeks, but—we didn't run away. The girls didn't, I mean, but one of the big boys at the orphanage did and Ruby Presser, the girl he was sweet on, got a postcard from him from New York when the circus was in winter quarters. His name was Eddie Cobb and—oh, the train's stopping, David! Look!"

"Yes." David shaded his eyes and squinted down the railroad track. "This is a spur of the main road, a siding, they call it. I suppose the carnival cars will stay here today—"

But for once Sally was not listening to him. She was running toward the cars, from which the engine had been uncoupled, and as she ran she called shrilly, joyously, to a young man who had dropped catlike from the top of a car to the ground:

"Eddie! Eddie Cobb! Eddie!"

CHAPTER V

To Sally it was all like a dream, a fantastic, lovely dream—except that in dreams you are never permitted to eat the feast that your hunger makes so real. And not even in a dream could she have imagined anything so good as the thick, furry, dark-brown buckwheat cakes, plastered with golden butter and swimming in maple syrup.

And Eddie Cobb's voice seemed real enough, although the things he was telling her and David in the hastily erected cook tent certainly had dream-like qualities. And David, sighing with satisfaction over his third plateful of hot cakes, was gloriously real. So was the long, rough-pine counter at which they ate, and behind which the big negro cook sang songs as he worked before a huge smoky oil stove. Tables scattered throughout the tent and covered with worn oilcloth reminded her of the refectory of the orphanage which now seemed so far away in the past of her childhood. She drew her wondering eyes from their exploration of the cook tent, focussed them on Eddie Cobb's freckled, good-natured face, listened to what he was telling them:

"This is a pretty good outfit. We carry our own show train, even for the short jumps, and the star performers and the big boss and the barkers—when they're flush—eat in the dining car. Got a special cook for the big bugs, waiters and everything. 'Course sometimes we can't get show grounds clost enough to the railroad to use the cars much, but in this burg we're lucky enough to get a lot pretty clost to a siding. The performers will sleep in their berths, less'n it gets too hot and they want their tents pitched on the lot."

"What do you do in the carnival, Eddie?" Sally asked respectfully.

"Oh, I'm helpin' Lucky Looey on the wheels. Gamblin' concessions, you know," he enlarged grandly. "Looey's got three kewpie dolls booths and I'm in charge of one of 'em. Old Bybee—Winfield Bybee—owns the show and travels with it—not like most owners. He owns the concessions and lets concessionaires operate 'em on percentage. He owns the freaks and the girlie show and the high-diver and all the ridin' rackets—ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds, whips 'n everything. He'll be showin' up any minute now and I'll give you a knockdown

to him."

"You're so good to us, Eddie," Sally glowed at him. "David and I hadn't an idea what we should do, and we were so hungry we could have eaten field corn off the stalks."

"You looked all in," Eddie grinned at her. "So you run away, too, Sally. Couldn't stand the racket any longer, eh? Is David here a buddy you picked up on the road? Gosh! To think of little Sally Ford hoboing?"

"I'm afraid I've taken advantage of your friendship for Sally, Cobb," David said. "The truth is, Cobb—"

"Aw, make it Eddie. We're all buddies, ain't we?"

"Well, the truth is, Eddie, that I'm afraid I'm a fugitive from justice. I wanted to take Sally back to the orphanage and give myself up for murder—"

"Gawd!" Eddie ejaculated, paling. Then something like admiration glittered in his little black eyes. "Put the soft pedal on, Dave. Don't let nobody hear you—"

"It wasn't murder, Eddie," Sally interrupted eagerly, her hand going out to close on David's reassuringly. "It was—an accident, in a way. Tell him, David. Eddie will understand."

The cook tent was filling up, so David lowered his voice to a murmur as he told Eddie Cobb, briefly but accurately, the story of his probably fatal attack upon Clem Carson.

"Jees!" Eddie breathed, when the recital was finished. "I hope you finished for him! If the old buzzard ain't dead—and I'll bet he ain't—I'd like to take a crack at him myself. You two kids stick with us. I'll tip off Bybee and I'm a son-of-a-gun if he don't give you both jobs. The concessions are always short of help—"

"Oh, Eddie, if he only would!" Sally gasped. Then sudden doubt clouded her bright face. "But Eddie, we'd be so conspicuous with the carnival. The police would lay hands on us as soon as we showed our faces—"

"Not if the Big Boss took you under his wing," Eddie reassured her. "In the carnival the Big Boss is the law. I'll speak to him myself."

The carnival roustabouts—big, rough-looking, powerful negroes in undershirts and soiled, nondescript trousers—eyed the trio curiously as they passed from one tent to another, Eddie gesticulating like a Cook's Tour conductor.

"Jees, Sally, I never expected to see any of you kids again," Eddie interrupted his monologue, which was like Greek to his guests.

"Have you ever been sorry you ran away, Eddie?" Sally asked, wistfully desiring reassurance, for it was still impossible for her to picture life independent of state charity.

Eddie snorted. "I've been seeing life, I have. New York and Chi and San Looey and all the big towns. But I reckon it's easier for a boy. I never did want

to go back, but I've thought many a time I'd like to see some of the kids." He blushed crimson under his big freckles. "How—how's Ruby, Sally? You know—Ruby Presser? She still there? She must be seventeen now. She was two years younger'n me. I sorta figger on marryin' Ruby one of these days—say, what's the matter?" he broke off abruptly.

"Ruby—Ruby's dead, Eddie. Didn't you read about it in the papers?"

"Ruby—dead? You—you ain't kiddin' me, Sally? Ruby—dead!"

Sally's distressed blue eyes fluttered to David's face as if for help.

"Ruby—fell—out of a fifth story window, Eddie—last September," Sally admitted in a choked voice.

"After she had spent the summer on the Carson farm, Eddie," David broke in quietly, significantly.

Sally closed her eyes so as not to see the conflict of rage and grief in Eddie Cobb's boyish face.

"I hope to God you did kill him, David!" Eddie burst out at last. "If you didn't, I'll finish him!"

"What's all this, Eddie?" a great bellow brought them all to startled attention. "Old home week? Get to your work! Lucky's howling for you. Who the hell do you think's going to set out the dolls?"

Eddie's importance was suddenly shattered. The big man, who seemed to Sally to be as tall as the giant whom he advertised as a star attraction, came striding across the stubby, dusty lot. His enormous head, topped with a wide-brimmed black felt hat in defiance of the torrid June weather, showed a fringe of long-curling white hair which reached almost to the shoulders of his Prince Albert coat.

"I'd like to speak to you a minute, sir," Eddie urged.

After another frowning, considering up-and-down glance at David and Sally, but particularly at Sally, the big man strode away with Eddie, out of earshot.

"If the big man does take us, you won't be sorry, will you, David?" Sally whispered, clinging to David's hand.

"Dear little Sally!" David drew her close against him for a moment. They stood close to each other, Sally not caring if the interview between Bybee and Eddie prolonged itself interminably, for David was there, thinking—she could feel his thoughts—"Dear little Sally"—

But after only a few minutes Winfield Bybee and Eddie came across the stubble toward them. Bybee spoke, gruffly:

"Eddie here has been telling me that you two kids have got yourselves into a peck of trouble, and want to hide out a bit. Well, I reckon a traveling carnival is about the best place in God's world to hide. Anybody that wants to bother you will have to deal with Winfield Bybee, and I ain't yet turned any of my family

over to a village constable. Now, Dave—that your name?—if you want to keep out of sight, reckon I'd better let you help Buck, the cook on the privilege car.

"Sometimes Buck gets too chummy with a bootlegger and his K. P. has to rustle the chow alone, but otherwise the boy's all right. And you, Sally—" His keen eyes narrowed speculatively, took in the little flushed face, the big eyes sparkling. Then one of his big hands reached out and lifted the heavy braid of black hair that hung to her waist, weighed it, studied it thoughtfully.

————

"Right this way, la-dees and gen-tle-men! Step right up and see Boffo, the ostrich man, eat glass, nails, toothpicks, lead pipe, or what have you! He chews 'em up and swallows 'em like a kid eats candy! Boffo digests anything and everything from horseshoes to jack-knives! Any gentlemen present got a jack-knife for Boffo's dinner? Come on, folks! Don't be bashful! Don't let Boffo go hungry!"

The spieler's voice went on and on, challenging, commanding, exhorting, bullying the gaping crowd of country people who surged after him like sheep. Admission to "The Palace of Wonders," a tent which housed a score of freaks and fakers, was 25 cents. It still seemed wonderful to Sally that she was there without having paid admission, that she—she, Sally Ford, runaway ward of the state!—was one of the many attractions which the farmers and villagers had paid their hard-earned money to see.

Dimly through the crowd came the voice of the barker and ticket seller in his tall, red, scarred box outside the tent: "All right, all right! Here you are! Only a quarter—25 cents—two bits—to see the big show! Performance just started! Step right up! All right, boys, this way! Don't let your girls call you a piker! Two bits pays for it all! See the half-man half-woman! See the girl nobody can lift! Try and lift her, boys! Little and pretty as a picture, but heavy as lead! All right, step right in! Don't crowd! Room for everybody! See Princess Lalla, the Harem Crystal Gazer! Sees all, knows all! See Pitty Sing, the smallest woman in the world—"

Incredible! On Saturday, just two days ago, she had been peeling apples to make pies for the Carson family. Today she was a member of a carnival troupe, under the protection of Winfield Bybee, owner of all these weird creatures about whom the spieler was chanting. It was too unreal to be true.

There had been twelve solid hours of sleep. Then had come a marvelously satisfying supper in the dining car, or "privilege" car, with Bybee himself introducing her to those astonishing people whom the spieler was now exhibiting to the curious country people. The giant, a Hollander named Jan something-or-other, had bent from vast heights to take her hand; the tiny male midget, a

Hawaiian billed merely as Noko, had gravely asked her, in a tiny, piping voice, if she would sew a button on his miniature coat for him; the bearded "lady" was a man, after all, a man with a naturally falsetto voice and tiny hands and feet. Boffo, the human ostrich, had disappointed her by being satisfied with a very ordinary diet of corned beef and cabbage. The fat girl, who had confided to Sally that she only weighed 380 pounds, though she was billed as "tipping the scales" at 620, had patiently drunk glass after glass of milk, until a gallon had been consumed—all in the interest of keeping her weight up and adding to it.

Then Bybee had taken her to his wife, a thin, hatchet-faced shrew of a woman who seemed to suspect everything in petticoats of having designs on her husband, and who in turn, seemed to feel equally sure that every man must envy him the possession of such a wonderful woman as his wife. His deference toward her touched Sally even as it amused her.

Mrs. Bybee was too good a business woman, however, to let jealousy interfere with her judgment where the show was concerned. She had demurred a little, then had abruptly agreed to Bybee's plans for Sally. Hours of sharp-tongued instruction from Mrs. Bybee had resulted in Sally's being on the platform now, nervously awaiting her turn.

The crowd surged nearer to Sally's platform. The spieler was introducing the giant now, and Jan was rising slowly from his enormous chair, unfolding his incredible length, standing erect at last, so that his head touched and slightly raised the sloping canvas roof of the tent.

She wondered, as she gazed pityingly and a little fearfully at Jan, how it felt to be three feet taller than even the tallest of ordinary men, and as she wondered she gazed upward into Jan's face and caught something of an answer to her question. For Jan's great, hollow eyes, set in a skeleton of a face, were the saddest she had ever seen, but patiently sad, as if the little-boy soul that hid somewhere in that terribly abnormal body of his had resigned itself to eternal sorrow and loneliness.

At the request of the spieler Jan stalked, like a seven-league-boots creature of a fairy tale, up and down the little platform, then, still sad-faced, patient, he folded up his amazing legs and relaxed in his great chair with a sigh. He was silently and indifferently offering postcard pictures of himself for sale when the barker turned toward Sally, cajoling the crowd away from the giant:

"And here, la-dees and gen-tle-men, we have the most beautiful girl that ever escaped from a Turkish harem—the Princess Lalla. Right here, folks! Here's a real treat for you! They may come bigger but they don't come prettier! I've saved the Princess Lalla for the last because she's the best. I know all you sheiks will agree with me—" Embarrassed snorts of laughter interrupted him. "That's right, boys. And if the Princess Lalla don't show up tonight I'll know that some

good-looking Stanton boy has eloped with her.

"Stand up, Princess Lalla, and let these boys see what a Turkish princess looks like! Don't crowd now, boys!"

Sally slipped from her chair and advanced a pace or two toward the edge of the platform, her knees trembling so she could scarcely walk.

It did not seem possible to her that the glamorous, beautiful figure to whom the spieler had made a deep and ironic salaam was Sally Ford. She wondered if all those people staring at her with wide, curious eyes or with envy really believed she was the Princess Lalla, an escaped member of the harem of the Sultan of Turkey. She made herself see herself as they saw her—a slim, rounded, young-girl figure in fantastic purple satin trousers, wrapped close about her legs from knee to ankle with ropes of imitation pearls; a green satin tunic-blouse, sleeveless and embroidered with sequins and edged with gold fringe, half-revealing and half-concealing her delicate young curves; a provocative lace veil dimming and making mysterious the brilliance of her wide, childish eyes.

She wondered if any of the more skeptical would mutter that the golden-olive tint of her face, neck and bare arms had come out of a can of burnt-sienna powder, applied thickly and evenly over a film of cold cream. The mock-jewel-wrapped ropes of her blue-black hair, however, were real, and she felt their beauty as they lay against her slowly rising and falling breast.

To her gravely expressed doubts of the authenticity of her Turkish costume Mrs. Bybee had replied curtly, contemptuously: "My Gawd! Who knows or cares whether Turkish dames dress like this? It's pretty, ain't it? Them women may wear turbans and what-nots for all I know, but that black hair of yours ain't going to be covered up with no towel around your head."

And so, circling her brow and holding the scrap of black lace nose veil in place, was a crudely fashioned but gaudily pretty crown studded with imitation rubies and emeralds and diamonds as big as bird's eggs. Her feet felt very tiny and strange in red sandals, whose pointed toes turned sharply upward and ended roguishly in fluffy silk pompoms.

"I declare, you make a lot better Princess Lalla than Minnie Brooks did," Mrs. Bybee had commented after out-fitting Sally. "She took down with appendicitis in Sioux City and we ain't had a crystal gazer since—one of the big hits of the show, too."

But the spieler was going on and on, giving her a fearful and wonderful history, endowing her with weird gifts—"... Yes, sir, folks, the Princess Lalla sees all, knows all—sees all in this magic crystal of hers. She sees past, present and future, and will reveal all to anyone who cares to step up on this platform and be convinced. Just 25 cents, folks, one lonely little quarter, and you'll have past, present and future revealed to you by the Turkish seeress, favorite fortune-teller

of the Sultan of Turkey. Who'll be first, boys and girls? Step right up."

As he exhorted and harangued, the spieler, whom Sally had heard called Gus, was busy arranging the little pine table, covered with black velvet embroidered in gold thread with the signs of the Zodiac. On the table stood a crystal ball, mounted on a tarnished gilt pedestal, and covered over with a black square. Gus whisked off the square and revealed the "magic crystal" to the gaping crowd. Then, with another deep salaam, he conducted the "Princess Lalla" to her throne-like chair. She seated herself and cupped her brown-painted hands with their gilded nails over the large glass bowl.

A young man vaulted lightly upon the platform, followed by giggles and slangy words of encouragement. Sally's eyes, mercifully shielded by the black lace veil, widened with terror. Her hands trembled so as they hovered over the crystal that she had an almost irresistible impulse to cover her face with them. Then she remembered that the black lace veil and the brown powder did that.

For the first to demand an exhibition of her powers as a seeress was Ross Willis, Pearl Carson's "boy friend," Ross Willis who had not asked her to dance because she was the Carsons' "hired girl" from the orphanage.

While Ross Willis, awkward and embarrassed, shuffled to the canvas chair which Gus, the spieler, whisked forward, Sally reflected that there was no need for her to remember any of the multitudinous instructions which Mrs. Bybee had primed her for her job of "seeress."

She curved her small, brown painted, gilded-nailed hands over the crystal and bent her veiled face low. In a seductive, sing-song voice she began to chant, bringing some of the words out hesitantly, as if English had been recently learned and came hard to her "Turkish" lips:

"I zee ze beeg fields—wheat fields, corn fields—ees it not zo?" She raised her shaded eyes coyly to the face of the young farmer. The crowd pressed close, breathing hard, the odors of their perspiration coming up on hot waves of summer air to the gayly dressed little figure on the platform. "Yes'm, I mean, sure, Princess," Ross Willis stuttered, and the crowd laughed, pressed closer still. Two or three women waved quarters to attract the attention of Gus, the spieler, who stood behind her, to aid her if necessary.

"You are—what you call it?—a farmer," Sally went on in her seductively deepened voice. Oh, it was fun to "play-act" and to be paid for it! "You va-ry reach young man. Va-ry beeg farm. You have mother, father, li'l seester." Thank heaven, her ears had been keen that night of Pearl's party, even if she had been inarticulate with shyness! "You ar-re in love. I zee a gir-rl, a beeg, pretty gir-rl with red hair an' blue eyes. Ees it not zo?" Her little low laugh was a gurgle, which started a shout of laughter in the crowd.

"Yeah, I reckon so," Ross Willis admitted, blushing more violently than ever.

"Oh, you Pearl!" a girl's voice shrilled from the crowd.

"You mar-ry with thees gir-rl, have three va-ry nize childs," Sally went on delightedly. After all, why shouldn't Pearl marry Ross Willis, since she could not have David? "Zo! That ees all I zee," she concluded with sweet gravity. "Zee creestal she go dark now."

Ross Willis thanked "Princess Lalla" awkwardly and dropped from the platform to the grass-stubbled ground, entirely unaware that the marvelous seeress was little Sally Ford.

Confidence and mirth welled up in Sally. She began to believe in herself as "Princess Lalla," just as she had always more than half-believed that she was the queen or the actress whom she had impersonated in the old days so recently ended forever, when she had "play-acted" for the other orphans.

The next seeker after knowledge of "past, present and future" was not so easy, but not very hard either, for the applicant was a girl, a pretty, very urban-looking girl, who wore a tiny solitaire ring on her engagement finger and who had been clinging to the arm of an obviously adoring young man. For the pretty girl Sally obligingly foretold a happy marriage with a "dark, tall young man, va-ry handsome"; a long journey, and two children. The girl sparkled with pleasure, utterly unconscious of the fact that "Princess Lalla" had told her nothing of the past and very little of the present.

Quarters were thrust upon her thick and fast. Because of the brisk demand for her services, Sally gave only the briefest of "readings," and only a few muttered angrily that it was a swindle. To a middle-aged farmer she gave a bumper wheat crop, a new eight-cylinder car, a prospective son-in-law for the girl whom Sally had unerringly picked out as his unmarried daughter, and the promise of many splendid grandchildren. To a freckled, open-faced, engaging youngster of ten, thrust upon the platform by his adoring mother, she grandly promised nothing less than the presidency of the United States, as well as riches and a beautiful wife.

Some of her prophecies, such as twin babies for the newly married couple, brought shouts of laughter from the crowd, and some of her vague guesses as to the past went very wide of the mark, as the applicants did not hesitate to tell her—the old maid, for instance, who looked so motherly that Sally lavishly endowed her with a husband and three children; but nearly everyone who paid a quarter for what "Princess Lalla" could see in the magic crystal went away wondering and thrilled and satisfied.

During the first lull between performances, Sally slipped out of the "Palace of Wonders" and daringly mingled with the crowds outside. It was all beautiful and wonderful to Sally, who had been to a circus only once in her life and never to a carnival before.

Before the tent which housed the big glass tank into which "bathing beauties" dived and in which they ate bananas and drank soda-pop under water, she encountered Winfield Bybee, enormous, majestic, benign, for it was a good crowd and a fine day, and money was pouring into his pockets.

"Well, well," he grinned down at her, "I hear from Gus that you're knocking 'em cold. Better run along in now, and you might see how many of the rubes you can make follow you into the Palace of Wonders. We don't want to give 'em too much of a free show. And remember, girlie, for every quarter Princess Lalla earns as a fortune-teller, little Sally Ford gets a nickel for herself. Don't take many nickels to make a dollar."

"Oh, Mr. Bybee, I'm so happy I'm about to burst," Sally confided to him in a rush of gratitude. "But—do you think it's very wrong of me to pretend to be a crystal gazer when really I can't see a thing in it to save my life?"

Bybee bellowed with laughter, so that the crowd veered suddenly toward them. He stooped to whisper closer to her little brown-stained ear: "Don't you worry, sister. As old P. T. Barnum used to say, 'There's a sucker born every minute,' and old Winfield Bybee knows that they like to be fooled. You just kid 'em along and send 'em away happy and I reckon the good Lord ain't going to waste any black ink on your record tonight. It's worth a quarter to be told a lot of nice things about yourself, ain't it?"

As she tripped swiftly across the dusty lot toward the Palace of Wonders, the crowd following her grew larger and larger. Becoming bolder because she felt that she was really "Princess Lalla" and not timid little Sally Ford, she deliberately flirted with the men who pressed close upon her, even waved a little brown hand invitingly toward the big tent.

When she reached the tent door, the barker leaned down from his booth, behind which was set a small platform, and beckoned her to mount the narrow steps. Smilingly she did so, and the barker introduced her:

"Here she is, boys—the Princess Lalla of Con-stan-ti-no-ple, the prettiest girl that ever escaped from the Sultan's harem! Princess Lalla, favorite crystal-gazer to the Sultan of Turkey before she escaped from his harem, will tell your fortunes, la-dees and gen-tle-men! Princess Lalla sees all, knows all! Just one of the scores of attractions in the Palace of Wonders! Admission 25 cents, one quarter of a dollar, two bits!"

Sally bowed, her little brown hands spreading in an enchanting gesture; then she skipped down the steps, the great ropes of black hair, wound with strands of imitation pearls, flapping against the vivid green satin tunic.

She was very tired when the supper hour came, but the thought that she would soon see David again lent wings to her sandaled feet. She was about to hurry out of the Palace of Wonders, released at last by the apparently indefatiga-

ble spieler, Gus, when a tiny, treble voice called to her:

"Princess Lalla! Princess Lalla! Would you mind carrying me to the cars?"

Sally, startled, looked everywhere about the tent that was almost emptied of spectators before it dawned on her that the tiny voice had come from "Pitty Sing," "the smallest woman in the world," sitting in a child's little red rocking chair on the platform.

All of Sally's passionate love for little things—especially small children—surged up in her heart. She skipped down the steps of her own particular little platform and ran, with outstretched hands, to the midget. "Pitty Sing" was indeed a pretty thing, a very doll of a woman, the flaxen hair on her small head marcelled meticulously, her little plump cheeks and pouting, babyish lips tinted with rouge. In her miniature hands she was holding a newspaper, which was so big in comparison with her midget size that it served as a complete screen.

"Of course I'll carry you. I'm so glad you'll let me," Sally glowed and dimpled. "You little darling, you!"

"Please don't baby me!" Pitty Sing admonished her in a severe little voice. "I'm old enough to be your mother, even if I'm not big enough." And the tiny, plump hands began to fold the newspapers with great definiteness.

Sally's eyes, abashed, fluttered from the disapproving little face to the paper. Odd that so tiny a thing could read—but of course she was grown up, even if she was only 29 inches tall—

"Oh, please!" Sally gasped, going very pale under the brown powder. "May I see your paper for just a minute?"

For her eyes had caught sight of a name which had been burned into her memory, forever indelible—the name of Carson.

When Sally had carefully deposited the dignified little midget, "Pitty Sing," in the infant-sided high-chair drawn up to a corner table in the dining car, she hurried to the box of a kitchen which took up the other end of the car, the newspaper trembling in her hand. She found David alone in the kitchen, slicing onions into a great pan of frying Swiss steak. Onion-induced tears streamed down his cheeks, but at the sound of Sally's urgent voice, he turned.

"Oh, David, he wasn't killed!" she cried, taking care to keep her voice low. "It's in the paper—look! But he says the most terrible things about us, and the police are looking for us—"

"Hey, there, honey! Steady!" David commanded gently, as he groped for a handkerchief to wipe his streaming eyes. "Now, let's see the paper. Thank God I didn't commit murder—what the devil!" he interrupted himself, as his eyes traveled hurriedly down the front page. "By heaven, I almost wish I had killed him! The dirty, lying skunk!"

"FARMER ACCUSES HIRED MAN OF ASSAULT TO KILL" was the

streamer head-line across the entire page. Below, two streamer lines of heavy italic type informed the reader: "CLEM CARSON SUFFERS BROKEN LEG FOR ATTEMPTING TO PROTECT ORPHANED GIRL FROM UNIVERSITY STUDENT WORKING ON FARM."

The "story," in small type, followed: "Clem Carson, prosperous farmer, living eighteen miles from the capital city, is suffering from a broken leg, a broken nose and numerous cuts and bruises, sustained late Saturday afternoon when, Carson alleges, he broke into the garret bedroom of Miss Sally Ford, sixteen-year-old girl from the state orphanage, who was working on the Carson farm for her board during the summer vacation. According to Carson's story, told to reporters Sunday night after a warrant for the arrest of Sally Ford and David Nash had been issued by the sheriff's office, the farmer had been suspicious for several days that one of his hired men, David Nash, A. & M. student during the school year, was paying too marked attention to the young girl, for whose safety Carson had pledged himself to the state.

"On Saturday afternoon early the members of Mr. Carson's family, including his wife, brother, mother and daughter, had come to town for shopping, leaving Miss Ford alone in the house. The two other hired men had also gone to the city, leaving Carson and young Nash at work on the farm. Carson alleges that he saw Nash enter the house late Saturday afternoon and that when the young man did not return to his work in the barn within a reasonable time, Carson left his own work to investigate, fearing for the safety of the girl under his protection.

"After unsuccessfully searching the main floor of the house, Carson alleges, he went to the garret, heard voices coming from Miss Ford's room, tried the door and found it locked. He knocked, was refused admittance, according to the story told the sheriff, then, determined to save the girl from the man, he climbed to the roof of the porch and made his way to the small window of the great room, from which he saw Miss Ford and the Nash boy in a compromising position. When he tried to enter the room through the window Carson alleges that he was brutally assaulted by young Nash, who, by the way, was boxing champion of the sophomore class at the A. & M. A smashing blow from young Nash's fist sent the farmer crashing through the window, and down the sloping roof to the ground.

"In the fall, Carson's left leg was broken above the knee. He was still unconscious when Dr. John E. Salter, a physician living ten miles from the Carson farm on the road to the capital, arrived at the deserted farm, summoned by a mysterious male voice by telephone. The sheriff's theory, as well as the doctor's, is that young Nash, fearful that he had seriously injured the farmer, summoned medical help before leaving with the girl.

"A warrant for the arrest of David Nash has been issued by the sheriff, charging the young student with assault with intent to kill and with contributing

to the delinquency of a minor. The warrant for Miss Ford's arrest charges moral delinquency. Since she is a ward of the state until her eighteenth birthday, she is also liable to arrest on the simple charge of running away from the farm on which the state orphanage authorities had placed her for the summer."

Sally, trembling so that her teeth chattered, watched David as he read the entire story. His young face became more and more grim as he read. When he had finished the shameful, hideously untrue account of what had really been a piece of superb gallantry on his part, he crumpled the paper slowly between the fingers of his big hand as if that hand were crushing out the life of the man who had lied so monstrously. Then, lifting a lid of the big coal range, he thrust the crumpled mass of paper into the flames.

"But—what are we going to do, David?" Sally whispered, her eyes searching his grim face piteously. "They'll send me to the reformatory if they catch me, and you—you—oh, David! They'll send you to prison for years and years! I wish you'd never laid eyes on me! I'd rather die than have you come to harm through me."

She sagged against the narrow shelf which served as a kitchen table, weeping forlornly.

"Don't cry, Sally," David pleaded gently. "It's not your fault. I'd do it all over again if anyone else dared insult you. Oh, the devil! These onions are burning up! Skip along now and don't worry. I'm cook tonight. Buck's on a spree. Keep a stiff upper lip, honey. In all that brown paint and that rig, you could walk into the sheriff's office and he'd do nothing worse than ask you to read his palm."

"But you, David, you!" she protested, trying to choke off her sobs. "You're not disguised—"

"I'll stick to the kitchen. Nobody'll think of looking for me here." He grinned at her cheerfully. "Remember, Pop Bybee's on our side. He took us in when he thought I'd killed a man. I don't suppose he'll turn on us now, particularly since you're such a riot as Princess Lalla. I've been hearing how big you're going over in the Palace of Wonders."

"Honestly, David?" she brightened. "Do you like me dressed up like this?" and she made him a little curtsey.

"You sweet, sweet kid!" he laughed at her tenderly. "Like you like that? You're adorable! But I like your own wild-rose complexion better. Now scoot or I'll be put in irons for spoiling the supper."

Sally fled, but not before she had blown him an audacious kiss from the tips of her gilded-nailed fingers.

Winfield Bybee had entered the dining car during her talk with David and was seated at his own table, his thin, hatchet-faced wife opposite him. When he saw his new "Princess Lalla" almost skipping down the aisle, her eyes sparkling

with joy at David's unexpected praise and tenderness, he muttered something to Mrs. Bybee, then beckoned the fantastically clad little figure to his table.

"Would her royal highness honor me and Mrs. Bybee with her presence at dinner this evening?" he boomed, his blue eyes twinkling.

When she had seated herself, after a little flurry of thanks, Bybee leaned toward her and spoke in a confidential undertone: "Me and the wife have seen that piece in the papers about you and Dave, Sally. What about it? Who's lying? You and the boy—or Carson?"

Sally had turned the little black lace veil back upon the jeweled-gilt crown, so that her big eyes showed like two round, polished sapphires set in bronze. Bybee, searching them with his keen, pale blue eyes, could find in them no guile, no cloud of guilt.

"David and I told you the truth, Mr. Bybee," she said steadily, but her lips trembled childishly. "You believe us, don't you? David is good, good!"

"All right," Bybee nodded his acceptance of her truthfulness. "Now what was that you was telling me and the wife about your mother?"

Sally's heart leaped with hope. "She—my mother—lived here in Stanton, Mr. Bybee. I have her address, the one she gave the orphanage twelve years ago when she put me there. But Miss Pond, who works in the office at the Home, said they had investigated and found she had moved away right after she put me in the orphanage. But I thought—I hoped—I could find out something while I'm here. But I suppose it would be too dangerous—I might get caught—and they'd send me to the reformatory—"

"Haven't I told you I'm not going to let 'em bother you?" Bybee chided her, beetling his brows in a terrific frown. "Now, my idea is this—"

"*My* idea, Winfield Bybee!" his wife interrupted tartly. "Always taking credit! That's you all over! *My* idea, Sally, is for *me* to scout around the neighborhood where your mother used to live and see if I can pick up any information for you. Land knows a girl alone like you needs some folks of her own to look after her. Wouldn't do for you to go around asking questions, but I'll make out like I'm trying to find out where my long-lost sister, Mrs. Ford, is. What was her first name? Got that, too?"

"Her name was Nora," Sally said softly. "Mrs. Nora Ford, aged twenty-eight then—twelve years ago. Oh, Mrs. Bybee, you're both so good to me! Why are you so good to me?" she added ingenuously.

"Maybe," Mrs. Bybee answered brusquely, "it's because you're a sweet kid, without any dirty nonsense about you. That is," she added severely, her sharp grey eyes flicking from Sally's eager face to Bybee's, "you'd better not let me catch you making eyes at this old Tom Cat of mine!"

"Now, Ma," Bybee flushed and squirmed, "don't tease the poor kid. Can't

you see she's clear gone on this Dave chap of her's? She wouldn't even know I was a man if I didn't wear pants. Don't mind her, Sally. She's your friend, too, and she'll try to get on your ma's tracks tomorrow morning before show time."

CHAPTER VI

Hours more of "crystal-gazing," of giving lavish promises of "long journeys," success, wealth, sweethearts, husbands, wives, bumper corn and wheat crops, babies—until eleven o'clock and the merciful dwindling of the carnival crowds permitted a weary little "Princess Lalla" to slip out of the "Palace of Wonders" tent, Pitty Sing, the midget woman, cradled in her arms like a baby. For Pitty Sing had promptly adopted Sally as her human sedan chair, uncompromisingly dismissing black-eyed Nita, the "Hula-Hula" dancer, who had previously performed that service for her.

"I don't like Nita a bit," the tiny treble voice informed Sally with great definiteness. "I do like you, and I shall compensate you generously for your services. Nita has no proper respect for me, though I command—and I say it without boasting, I hope—twice the salary that that indecent muscle-dancer does. And she always joggled me."

"Poor Pitty Sing!" Sally soothed her, as she picked her way carefully over the grass stubble to the big dress tent which also served as sleeping quarters for the women performers of the "Palace of Wonders." "Haven't you anyone to look after you? Anyone belonging to you, I mean?"

"Why should I have?" the indignant little piping voice demanded from Sally's shoulder. "I'm a woman grown, as I've reminded you before. I've been paying Nita five dollars a week to carry me to and from the show tent for each performance. Of course there are a few other little things she does for me, but if you'd like to have the position I think we would get along very nicely."

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" Sally exalted, laying her cheek for an instant against the flaxen, marcelled little head. "Thank you, Pitty Sing, thank you with all my heart!"

"Please don't call me 'Pitty Sing'," the little voice commanded tartly. "The name does very well for exhibition purposes, but my name is Miss Tanner—

Elizabeth Matilda Tanner."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Sally protested, hurt and abashed. "I didn't mean—I—"

"But you may call me Betty." The treble was suddenly sweet and sleepy like a child's. One of the miniature hands fluttered out inadequately to help Sally part the flaps of the dress tent, which was deserted except for the fat girl, already asleep and snoring stertorously.

Sally knelt to enable the midget to stand on the beaten down stubble which served as the only carpet of Sally's new "dormitory."

"Thank you, Sally," the midget piped, her eyes lifted toward Sally out of a network of wrinkles which testified that she was indeed a "woman grown." "You're a very nice little girl, and your David is one of the handsomest men I ever saw."

"*Your David!*" Sally's heart repeated the words, sang them, crooned over them, but she did not answer, except with one of her rare, sudden, sweet smiles.

"Nita evidently thinks so, too," the weak little treble went on, as "Pitty Sing" trotted toward her cot, looking like an animated doll. "I might as well warn you right now, Sally, that I don't trust that Nita person as far as I can throw a bull by the horns."

She flung her dire pronouncement over a tiny, pink-silk shoulder as she knelt before a small metal trunk and reached into her bosom for a key suspended around her neck on a chain. Sally's desire to laugh at the preposterous picture of the midget throwing a bull by the horns was throttled by a new and particularly horrid fear.

"What—do you mean, Betty?" she gasped. "Has Nita—"

"—been vamping your David?" tiny Miss Elizabeth Matilda Tanner finished her sentence for her. "It would not be Nita if she overlooked a prospect like your David. It is entirely obvious that he is a person of breeding and family, even if he is helping Buck in the 'privilege' car kitchen. Nita is always so broke that she has to eat her meals in the cook tent, but she borrowed or stole the money today to eat in the privilege car, and she found it necessary to confer with your David on a purely fictitious dietetic problem, and then went boldly into the kitchen to time the eggs he was boiling for her. That Nita!" the tiny voice snorted contemptuously. "She's as strong as a horse and has about as much need for a special diet as an elephant has for galoshes. Oh, she's up to her tricks, not a doubt about that. I just thought I'd warn you in time. Nita's a man-eating tigress and once she's smelled blood—"

"Thank you, Betty," Sally interrupted gently, as she knelt beside the midget to help her with the lid of the trunk. "But David isn't *my* David, you know. He's—he's just a friend who helped me out when I was in terrible trouble. If Nita likes David, and—he—likes her—"

"Don't be absurd!" the midget scolded her, seating herself on a tiny stool

to take off her baby-size shoes and stockings. "Of course you're in love with him, and he's crazy about you—a blind person could see that. Will you untie this shoe-lace, please? My nightgown is in the tray of the trunk, and you'll find a nightcap there, too. I wear it," she explained severely, on the defensive against ridicule, "to protect my marcel. Heaven knows it's hard enough to get a good curl in these hick towns, with the rubes gaping at me wherever I go. Then please get my Ibsen—a little green leather book. I'm reading 'Hedda Gabler' now. Have you read it?"

"Oh, yes!" Sally cried, delightedly. "Do you like to read? Could I borrow it to read between shows? I'll take awfully good care of it—"

"Certainly I read!" Miss Tanner informed her severely, climbing, with Sally's help, into her low cot-bed. "My father, who had these little books made especially for me, was a university professor. I have completed the college course, under his tutelage. If he had not died I should not be here," and her little eyes were suddenly bitter with loneliness and resentment against the whimsy of a Providence that elected to make her so different from other women.

Sally found the miniature book, small enough to fit the midget's hand, and gave it to her, then stooped and kissed the little faded, wrinkled cheek and set about the difficult and unaccustomed task of removing her make-up. Beside her cot bed she found a small tin steamer trunk, stencilled in red paint with the magic name, "Princess Lalla." She stared at it incredulously for a long minute, then untwisted the wire holding duplicate keys.

When she threw back the lid she found a shiny black tin make-up box, containing the burnt-sienna powder Mrs. Bybee had used in making her up for the first day's performances; a big can of theatrical cold cream; squares of soft cheesecloth for removing make-up; two new towels; mascara, lip rouge, white face powder, a utilitarian black comb and brush; tooth paste and tooth brush.

"Oh, these kind people!" she whispered to herself, and bent her head upon the make-up box and wept grateful tears. Then, smiling at herself and humming a little tune below her breath, she lifted the tray and found—not the tell-tale dresses which Pearl Carson had given her and which had been minutely described by the police in the newspaper account of the near-tragedy on the Carson farm—but two new dresses, cheap but pretty, the little paper ticket stitched into the neck of each showing the size to be correct—fourteen.

She was still kneeling before her trunk, blinded with tears of gratitude, when a coarse, nasal voice slashed across the dress tent:

"Well, strike me dumb, if it ain't the Princess Lalla in person, not a movie! Don't tell me you're gonna bunk with us, your highness! I thought you'd be sawing wood in Pop Bybee's stateroom by this time! What's the matter he ain't rocking you to sleep and giving you your nice little bottle?"

Sally rose slowly, the new dresses slithering to the floor in stiff folds. She batted the tears from her eyes with quick flutters of her eyelids and then stared at the girl who stood at the tent flap, taunting her.

She saw a thin, tall girl, naked to the waist except for breastplates made of tarnished metal studded with imitation jewels. About her lean hips and to her knees hung a skirt of dried grass, the regulation "hula dancer" skirt.

"You're—Nita, aren't you?" Sally's voice was small, placating. "I'm—"

"Oh, I know who *you* are! You're the orphan hussy the police are lookin' for!" the harsh voice ripped out, as Nita swung into the tent, her grass skirts swishing like the hiss of snakes. "Furthermore, you're Pop Bybee's blue-eyed baby girl! And—you're the baby-faced little she-devil that stole my graft with that little midget! Well, Princess Lalla, I guess we've been introduced proper now, and we can skip formalities and get down to business. Hunh?" And she bent menacingly over Sally, evil black eyes glittering into wide, frightened blue ones, her mouth an ugly, twisting, red loop of hatred.

Sally backed away, instinctively, from the snake-tongues of venom in those black eyes. "I'm sorry I've offended you, Miss—Nita.—"

"If you're not you will be! Want me to tip off the police? Well, then, if you don't, listen, because I want you to get this—and get it good, all of it!"

Four girls, two of them thin to emaciation, one over-fat, the fourth as beautifully shaped as a Greek statue, trailed dispiritedly into the dress tent, their hands groping to unfasten the snaps of their soiled silk chorus-girl costumes.

Their heavily rouged and powdered faces were drawn with fatigue; their eyes like burned holes in once-gay blankets. Sally had watched them dance, enviously, between her own performances, had heard the barker ballyhooing them as: "Bybee's Follies Girls, straight from Broadway and on their way back to join their pals in Ziegfeld's Follies."

Now, weary unto death after eighteen performances, the "Follies" girls shuffled on aching feet to their cots and seated themselves with groans and dispirited curses, paying not the faintest attention to the tense tableau presented by Nita, the "Hula" dancer, and the girl they knew as "Princess Lalla."

Sally's frightened eyes fluttered from one to another of that bedraggled, pathetic quartet, but she might as well have appealed to the gaudily painted banners that fluttered over the deserted booths outside.

"What do you want, Nita?" she whispered, moistening her dry lips and twisting her little brown-painted hands together.

"I'll tell you fast enough!" Nita snarled, thrusting her face close to Sally's. "I want you to give that sheik of yours the gate—get me? Ditch him, shake him, and I don't mean maybe!"

For the third time that day Sally was having David Nash, the only friend

she had ever made outside the orphanage, flung into her face as a sweetheart or worse. Winfield Bybee's casual words to his wife—"Can't you see she's clear gone on that Dave chap of hers?"—had made her heart beat fast with a queer, suffocating kind of pleasure, a pleasure she had never before experienced in her life. Those words had somehow initiated her into young ladyhood, fraught with strange, lovely, privileges, among them the right to be "clear gone" on a man—a man like David! The midget's "your David" and "Of course you're in love with him, and he's crazy about you—a blind person could see that," had sent her heart soaring to heaven, like a toy balloon accidentally released from a child's clutch.

But Nita's "that sheik of yours," Nita's venomously spat command, "give him the gate, ditch him, shake him," aroused in her a sudden blind fury, a fury as intense as Nita's.

"I'll do no such thing! David's mine, as long as he wants to be! You have no right to dictate to me!"

"Is that so?" Nita straightened, hands digging into her hips, a toss of her ragged, badly curled blond head emphasizing her sarcasm. "Is that so? Maybe you'll think I had some right when the cops tap you on the shoulder tomorrow! Too bad you and your David can't share a suite in the county jail together!"

"You'd—you'd do that—to David, too?" Sally whispered over cold lips.

"I thought that'd get under your skin," Nita laughed harshly. Then, as though the interview was successfully concluded, from her standpoint, the red-painted nails of her claw-like hands began to pick at the fastening of her grass skirt.

Sally was turning away blindly, feeling like a small, trapped animal, when a tiny, shrill voice came from the midget's cot:

"I heard every word you said, Nita! I think you must have gone crazy. The heat affects some like this, but I never saw it strike a carnival trouper quite so bad—"

"You shut up, you little double-crossing runt!" Nita whirled toward the midget's bed.

"I may be a runt," the midget's voice shrilled, "but I'm in full possession of my faculties. And when I tell Winfield Bybee the threats you've made against this poor child, you'll find yourself stranded in Stanton without even a grass skirt to earn a living with. And if the carnival grapevine is still working, you'll find that no other show in the country will take you on. It will be back to the hash joints for you, Nita, and I for one think the carnival will be a neater, sweeter place without you. Get your make-up off and get into bed, Sally. And don't worry. Nita wouldn't have dared try to bluff a real trouper like that."

"For Gawd's sake, are you all going to jaw all night?" a weary voice, with a flat, southern drawl demanded indignantly. "I've got some important sleeping

to do, if I'm going to show tomorrow. Gawd, I'm so tired my bones are cracking wide open."

"Shut up yourself!" Nita snarled, slouching down upon the camp stool beside her trunk, to remove her make-up. "You hoofers don't know what tired means. If you had to jelly all day like I do! Oh, Gawd! What a life! What a life! You're right, Midge! It sure gets you—eighteen shows a day and this hell-fired heat."

It was Nita's surrender, or at least her pretended surrender, to the law of the carnival—live and let live; ask no questions and answer none.

In the thick silence that followed Sally tremblingly seated herself before her trunk and smeared her neck, face, arms and hands with theatrical cold cream. She was conscious that other weary girls drifted in—"the girl nobody can lift," the albino girl, whose pink eyes were shaded with big blue goggles; the two diving girls, looking as if their diet of soda pop and bananas eaten under water did not agree with them. But she was aware of them, rather than saw them. Stray bits of their conversation forced through her own conflicting thoughts and emotions—

"Where's my rabbit foot? Gawd, I've lost my rabbit foot! That means a run of bad luck, sure—"

"—'n I says, 'Blow, you crazy rube. Whaddye take me for?'"

"Good pickings! If this keeps up I'll be able to grab my cakes in the privilege car—sold fifty-eight postcards today—"

"Whaddye know? Gus the barker's fell something fierce for the new kid. 'N they say Pop Bybee's got her on percentage, as well as twelve bucks per and cakes. Some guys has all the luck—"

"Who's the sheik in the privilege car? Don't look like no K. P. to me. Boy howdy! Hear you already staked your claim, Nita. Who is he? Millionaire's son gettin' an eyeful of life in raw?"

She knew that Nita did not answer, at least not in words. Gradually talk died down; weary bodies stretched their aching length upon hard, sagging cots. Someone turned out the sputtering gas jet that had ineffectually illuminated the dress tent. Groans subsided into snores or whistling, adenoidal breathing. A sudden breeze tugged at the loose sides of the tent, slapping the canvas loudly against the wooden stakes that held it down.

Although she was so tired that her muscles quivered and jerked spasmodically, Sally found that she could not sleep. As if her mind were a motion-picture screen, the events of the day marched past, in very bad sequence, like an unassembled film. She saw her own small figure flitting across the screen fantastically clad in purple satin trousers and green jacket, her face and arms brown as an Indian's, her eyes shielded by a little black lace veil. Crowds of farmers, their wives, their children; small-town business men, their wives and giggling

daughters and goggle-eyed sons, avid for a glimpse of the naughtiness which the barker promised behind the tent flap of the "girlie show," pressed in upon her, receded, pressed again, thrust out quarters, demanded magic visions of her—

David, his eyes streaming with onion tears, smiling at her. David reading that dreadful newspaper story—David of yesterday, saying, "Dear little Sally!" pressing her against him for a blessed minute—

And Nita, her eyes rabid with sudden, ugly passion—passion for David—Nita threatening her, threatening David—

David, David! The movie stopped with a jerk, then resolved itself into an enormous "close-up" of David Nash, his eyes smiling into hers with infinite gentleness and tenderness.

"Does he think I'm just a little girl, too young to—to be in love or to be loved?" she asked herself, audacious in the dark. "If—if he was at all in love with me—but oh, he couldn't be!—would he be so friendly and easy with me? Wouldn't he be embarrassed, and blush, and—and things like that? Oh, I'm just being silly! He doesn't think of me at all except as a little girl who's in trouble. A girl alone, as he calls me."

Then a new memory banished even the "close-up" of David on the screen of her mind—a memory called up by those words—"girl alone." She felt that she ought to weep with shame and contrition because she had so long half-forgotten Mrs. Bybee's promise to make inquiries about her mother—the mother who had given her to the orphanage twelve years before, leaving behind her only a meager record—"Mrs. Nora Ford, aged twenty-eight."

So little in those words with which to conjure up a mother! She would be forty now, if—if she were still alive! Suddenly all her twelve years of orphanhood, of longing for a mother, even for a mother who would desert her child and go away without a word, rushed over Sally like an avalanche of bruising stones. Every hurt she had sustained during all those twelve motherless years throbbed with fresh violence; drew hard tears that dripped upon the lumpy cotton pillow beneath her tossing head.

When the paroxysm of weeping had somewhat subsided she crept out of her cot and knelt beside it and prayed.

Then she crept back into bed, unconscious that the midget was still awake and had seen her dimly in the darkness. Strangely free of her burdens, Sally lay for a long time before sleep claimed her, trying to remember all the instructions about crystal-gazing that Mrs. Bybee had heaped upon her. And in her childish conscience there was no twinge or remorse that she was to go on the next day, deceiving the public, as "Princess Lalla, favorite crystal-gazer of the Sultan of Turkey."

The next morning—the carnival's second and last day in Stanton—Sally

overslept. She did not awaken until a tiny hand tugged impatiently at her hair. Her dark blue eyes flew wide in startled surprise, then recognition of her surroundings and of "Pitty Sing," the midget, dawned in them slowly.

"You looked so pretty asleep that I hated to awaken you," the midget told her. "But it's getting late, and I want my breakfast. I'm dressed."

The little woman wore a comically mature-looking dress of blue linen, made doll-size, by a pattern which would have suited a woman of forty. Sally impulsively took the tiny face between her hands and laid her lips for an instant against the softly wrinkled cheek. Then she sprang out of bed, careful not to "joggle" the midget, who had been so emphatic about her distaste for being joggled.

"There's a bucket of water and a tin basin," Miss Tanner told her brusquely, to hide the pleasure which Sally's caress had given her. "All the other girls have gone to the cook tent, so you can dress in peace."

"I didn't thank you properly last night for taking my part against Nita," Sally said shyly, as she hastily drew on her stockings. "But I do thank you, Betty, with all my heart. I was so frightened—for David—"

"What I said to Nita will hold her for a while." Betty Tanner nodded with satisfaction. "But I don't trust her. She'll do something underhand if she thinks she can get away with it. But don't worry. Once the carnival gets out of this state, you and your David will be pretty safe. I don't think the police will bother about extradition, even if Nita should tip them off. In the meantime, I'll break the first law of carnival and try to learn something of Nita's past. I've seen her turn pale more than once when a detective or a policeman loomed up unexpectedly and seemed to be giving her the once-over. Oh, dear, I'm getting to be as slangy as any of the girls," she mourned.

After Sally had splashed in the tin basin and had combed and braided her hair, she hesitated for a long minute over the two new dresses that had mysteriously found their way into the equally mysterious new tin trunk. She caught herself up at the thought. Of course they were not mysterious. "Pop" and Mrs. Bybee had provided them, out of the infinite kindness of their hearts. Were they always so kind to the carnival's new recruits? Gratitude welled up in her impressionable young heart; overflowed her lips in song, as she dressed herself in the little white voile, splashed with tiny blue and yellow wild flowers.

Last night's breeze had brought with it a light, cooling shower, and still lingered under the hot caress of the June sun. Sally sang, at Betty's request, as she sped across vacant lots to the show train resting engineless on a spur track. At the sound of her fresh, young voice, caroling an old song of summertime and love, David Nash thrust his head out of the little high window in the box of a kitchen at the end of the dining car, and waved an egg-beater at her, lips and

teeth and eyes flashing gay greetings to her.

"Better tell your David how Nita's been carrying on," the midget piped from Sally's shoulder.

Song fled from Sally's throat and heart. "No," she shook her head. She couldn't be a tattle-tale. If the orphanage had taught her nothing else it had taught her not to be a tale-bearer. Besides, to talk of Nita and her threats would make it necessary to tell David all that Nita had said, and at the thought Sally's cheeks went scarlet. It might kill his friendship for her to let him know that others—apparently all the carnival folk—had labeled that friendship "love." Why couldn't they let her and David alone? Why snatch up this beautiful thing, this precious friendship, and maul it about, sticking labels all over it until it was ruined?

She had placed the midget in her own little high chair at her own particular table in the privilege car and was hurrying down the car bound for the cook tent and her own breakfast when Winfield Bybee and his wife entered. Mrs. Bybee was dressed as if for a journey of importance.

Winfield Bybee boomed out a greeting to Sally, tilting his head to peer into her smiling blue eyes.

"All dolled up and looking pretty enough to eat," he chuckled. "Ain't that a new dress?"

"Oh, yes, and it fits perfectly," Sally glowed. "Thanks so very much for the trunk and the dresses, Mrs. Bybee," she added, tactfully addressing the showman's wife. "I—I'll pay you back out of my salary as I make it—"

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Bybee demanded sternly, her eyes flashing from Sally's flushed face to her husband's. "I never bought you any dresses or a trunk. Now, you looka here, Winfield Bybee! I'm a woman of few words, and of a long-suffering disposition, but even a saint knows when she's got a stomachful! I swallowed your mealy-mouthed palaverin' about this poor little orphan, but if you're sneaking around and buying her presents behind my back, I'll turn her right over to the state and not lose a wink of sleep, and let me tell you this, Winfield Bybee—" Her words were a rushing torrent, heated to the boiling point by jealousy and suspicion.

Sally tried to speak, to interrupt her, but she might as well have tried to stop the Niagara. Under the force of the torrent Sally at last bowed her head, shrinking against the wall of the car, the very picture of detected guilt. The carnival owner gasped and waved his arms helplessly, tried to pat his wife's hands and had his own slapped viciously for his pains. When at last Mrs. Bybee paused for breath, and to mop her perspiring face with her handkerchief, Bybee managed to get in his defense, doggedly, his bluster wilted under his wife's tongue lashing:

"You're crazy, Emma! I didn't buy her any presents. I never saw that dress

before in my life. I don't know what you or she's talking about. I didn't buy her anything! I—oh, good Lord!" He tried to put his arms about his wife, his face so strutted with blood that Sally felt a faint wonder, through her misery, that apoplexy did not strike him down.

"What's the matter, Sally?" David came striding out of the kitchen, a butcher knife in one hand and a slab of breakfast bacon in the other.

"I don't know, David," she whispered forlornly. "I—I was just thanking Mrs. Bybee for this dress and another one and a trunk I found in the dress tent with my name on it—'Princess Lalla'—" she stammered over the name—"and Mrs. Bybee says she didn't give them to me."

"He thought he'd put something over on me, and me all dressed up like a missionary to go look for her precious mother. I guess her mother wasn't any better than she should have been and this little soft-soap artist takes after her," Mrs. Bybee broke in stridingly, but her angry eyes lost something of their conviction under David's level gaze.

"I bought the things for Sally, Mrs. Bybee," he said quietly. "I should have told her, or put my card in. Unfortunately I didn't have one with me," he added with a boyish grin.

"Oh!" Anger spurted out of Mrs. Bybee's jealous heart like air let out of a balloon. "Reckon I'm just an old fool! God knows I don't see why I should care what this old woman-chaser of a husband of mine does, but—I do! If you're ever in love, Sally, you'll understand a foolish old woman a little better. Now, young man, you take that murderous looking knife and that bacon back into the kitchen and scramble a couple of eggs for me. And I guess you can give Pop a rasher of that bacon, even if it is against the doctor's orders."

And the showman, beaming again and throwing "Good mornings" right and left, marched down the aisle, his arm triumphantly about his repentant wife's shoulders.

Sally watched them for a moment, a lovely light of tenderness and understanding playing over her sensitive face. Then she turned to David, who had not yet obeyed Mrs. Bybee's command. They smiled into each other's eyes, shyly, and the flush that made Sally's face rosy was reflected in the boy's tanned cheeks.

"I'm sorry, David, I didn't dream it was—you. Thank you, David." She could not keep from repeating his name, dropping it like a caress at the end of almost every sentence she addressed to him, as if her lips kissed the two slow, sweet syllables.

"I should have told you," David confessed in a low voice, slightly shaken with embarrassment and some other emotion which flickered behind the smile in his gold-flecked hazel eyes. "I—I thought you'd know. You needed the things and I knew you didn't have any money. I've got to get back into the kitchen,"

he added hastily, awkwardly. She had never seen him awkward in her presence before, and she was daughter of Eve enough to rejoice. And in her shy joy her face blossomed with sudden rich beauty that made Nita, the Hula dancer, who appeared in the doorway at that moment, look old and tawdry and bedraggled, like the last ragged sunflower withering against a kitchen fence.

But not even Nita's flash of hatred and veiled warning could blight that sudden sweet blooming of Sally's beauty. She waved goodby to David, carrying away with her as she sped to the cook tent the heart-filling sweetness and tenderness of his answering smile. She took out the memory of that smile and of his boyish flush and awkwardness a hundred times during the morning, to look at in fresh wonder, as a child repeatedly unearths a bit of buried treasure to be sure that it is still there.

When she bent her little head gravely over the crystal, after the carnival had opened for the day, she saw in it not other people's "fortunes" but David's flushed face, David's shy, tender eyes, David's lips curled upward in a smile. And because she was so happy she lavished happiness upon all those who thrust quarters upon Gus, the barker, for "Princess Lalla's" mystic reading of "past, present and future."

She had almost forgotten, in her preoccupation with the miracle which had happened to her—for she knew now that she loved David, not as a child loves, but as a woman loves—that Mrs. Bybee was undoubtedly keeping her promise to make inquiries about the woman who had given her name as Mrs. Nora Ford when she had committed Sally Ford to the care of the state twelve years before. But she was sharply reminded and filled with remorse for her forgetfulness when Gus, the barker, leaned close over her at the end of a performance to whisper:

"The boss' ball-and-chain wants to see you in the boss' private car, kid. Better beat it over there before you put on the nose bag. Next show at one-fifteen, if we can bally-hoo a crowd by then. You can tell her that Gus says you're going great!"

As Sally ran across lots to the side-tracked carnival train, she buried her precious new memory of David under layers of anxiety and questions. It would still be there when her question had been answered by Mrs. Bybee, to comfort her if the showman's wife had been unsuccessful, to add to her joy if some trace of her mother had been found.

"Maybe—maybe I'll have a mother and a sweetheart, too," she marveled, as she climbed breathless, into the coach which had been pointed out to her as the showman's private car.

It was not really a private car, for Bybee and his wife occupied only one of the drawing rooms of the ancient Pullman car, long since retired from the official service of that company. The berths were occupied on long jumps by a number of the stars of the carnival and by some of the most affluent of the concessionaires

and barkers, a few of the latter being part owners of such attractions as the "girlie show" and the "diving beauties." When the carnival showed in a town for more than a day, however, the performers usually preferred to sleep in tents, rather than in the stuffy, hot berths.

Since the carnival was in full swing at that hour of the day, Sally found the sleeping car deserted except for Mrs. Bybee, who called to her from the open door of drawing room A.

The carnival owner's wife was seated at a card table, which was covered with stacks of coins and bills of all denominations. Her lean fingers pushed the stacks about, counted them, jotted the totals on a sheet of lined paper.

"I'm treasurer and paymaster for the outfit," she told Sally, satisfaction glinting in her keen gray eyes. "Me and Bill," and she lifted a big, blue-barreled revolver from the faded green plush of the seat and twirled it unconcernedly on her thumb.

"Is business good?" Sally asked politely, as she edged fearfully into the small room.

"Might be worse," Mrs. Bybee conceded grudgingly. "Sit down, child, I'm not going to shoot you. Well, I went calling this morning," she added briskly, as she began to rake the stacks of coins into a large canvas bag.

"Oh!" Sally breathed, clasping her hands tightly in her lap. "Did you—find anything?"

Mrs. Bybee knotted a stout string around the gathered-up mouth of the bag, rose from her seat, lifted the green plush cushion, revealing a small safe beneath the seat. When she had stowed the bag away and twirled the combination lock, she rearranged the cushion and took her seat again, all without answering Sally's anxious question.

"Reckon I'm a fool to let anyone see where I keep the coin," she ridiculed herself. "But after making a blamed fool of myself this morning over them dresses your David give you, I guess I'd better try to do something to show you I trust you. You just keep your mouth shut about this safe, and there won't be any harm done."

"Of course I won't tell," Sally assured her earnestly. "But, please, did you find out anything?" She felt that she could not bear the suspense a minute longer.

"You let me tell this my own way, child," Mrs. Bybee reproved her. "Well, you saw that missionary rig I had on this morning? It turned the trick all right. Lucky for you, this ain't the fastest growing town in the state, even if that billboard across from the station does say so. I found the address you gave me, all right. Same number, same house. Four-or-five-room dump, that may have been a pretty good imitation of a California bungalow twelve years ago. All run-down now, with a swarm of kids tumbling in and out and sticking out their tongues at

me when their ma's back was turned. She said she'd lived there two years; moved here from Wisconsin. Didn't know a soul in Stanton when she moved here, and hadn't had time to get acquainted with a new baby every fourteen months."

"Poor thing!" Sally murmured, finding pity in her heart for the bedraggled drudge Mrs. Bybee's words pictured so vividly. But those too-numerous babies had a mother. What she wanted to know was—did she, Sally Ford, have a mother?

Then a memory, so long submerged that she did not realize that it existed in her subconscious mind, pushed up, spilled out surprisingly: "There was a big oak tree in the corner of the yard. I used to swing. Someone pushed the swing—someone—" she fumbled for more, but the memory failed.

"It's still there, and there's still a swing," Mrs. Bybee admitted. "One of those dirty-faced little brats was climbing up and down the ropes like a monkey. Well, I reckon that's where you used to live, right enough. I asked this woman—name of Hickson—if any of her neighbors had lived there many years, and she pointed to the house next door and said 'Old Lady Bangs' owned the house and had lived there for more'n twenty years. This old Mrs. Bangs—"

"Bangs!" Sally cried. "Bangs! It was Gramma Bangs who swung me! I remember now! Gramma Bangs. She made me a rag doll with shoe-button eyes and I cried every night for a long time after I went to the orphanage because mama hadn't brought my doll. Did you see Gramma Bangs? Oh, Mrs. Bybee, if I could go to see her again!"

Mrs. Bybee's stern, long, hatchet-shaped face had softened marvelously, but at Sally's eager request she shook her head emphatically.

"Not with the police looking for you and Dave. Yes, I saw her. She's all crippled up with rheumatism and was tickled to death to see Nora Ford's sister. That's who I said I was, you know. But it pretty near got me into trouble. The old lady took it for granted I knew a lot of things about you that I didn't know, and wouldn't have told me just what I'd come to find out if I hadn't used my bean in stringing her along. I had to go mighty easy asking her about you, since it was my 'sister' I was supposed to be so het up over finding, but lucky for you she'd been reading the papers and knew that you were in trouble."

"Oh!" Sally moaned, covering her hot face with her little brown-painted hands. "Then Gramma Bangs thinks I'm a bad girl—oh! Did you tell her I'm not?"

"What do you take me for—a blamed fool?" Mrs. Bybee demanded heatedly. "I didn't let on I'd ever seen you in my life. But it was something she let spill when she was talking about you and this story in the papers that give me the low-down on the whole thing."

"Oh, what?" Sally implored, almost frantic with impatience.

"Well, she said, 'You can't blame Nora for putting Sally in the orphanage

when the money stopped coming, seeing as how she was sick and needing an operation and everything. But it pret' near broke her heart'—that's what the old dame said—"

"But—I don't understand," Sally protested, her sapphire eyes clouding with bewilderment. "The money? Did she mean my—father?"

"I thought that at first, too." Mrs. Bybee nodded her bobbed gray head with satisfaction. "But lucky I didn't say so, or I'd have give the whole show away. I just 'yes, indeeded' her, and she went on. Reckon she thought I might be taking exceptions to the way she'd been running on about how pitiful it was for 'that dear little child' to be put in an orphans' home, so she tried to show me that my 'sister' had done the only thing she could do under the circumstances.

"Pretty soon it all come out. 'Nora,' she said, 'told me not to breathe a word to a soul, but seeing as how you're her sister and probably know all about it, I reckon it won't do no harm after all these years.' Then she told me that Nora Ford had no more idea'n a jack rabbit whose baby you was—"

"Then she wasn't my mother!" Sally cried out in such a heartbroken voice that Mrs. Bybee reached across the card table and patted her hands, dirty diamonds twinkling on her withered fingers.

"No, she wasn't your mother," the showman's wife conceded with brusque sympathy. "But I can't see as how it leaves you any worse off than you was before. One thing ought to comfort you—you know it wasn't your own mother that turned you over to an orphanage and then beat it, leaving no address. Seems like," she went on briskly, "from what old lady Bangs told me, that Nora Ford had been hired to take you when she was a maid in a swell home in New York, and she had to beat it—that was part of the agreement—so there never would be any scandal on your real mother. She didn't know whose kid you was—so the old lady says—and when the money orders stopped coming suddenly she didn't have the least idea how to trace your people. She supposed they was dead—and I do, too. So it looks like you'd better make up your mind to being an orphan—"

"But, oh, Mrs. Bybee!" Sally cried piteously, her eyes wide blue pools of misery and shame. "My real mother must have been—bad, or she wouldn't have been ashamed of having me! Oh, I wish I hadn't found out!" And she laid her head down on her arms on the card table and burst into tears.

"Don't be a little fool!" Mrs. Bybee admonished her severely. "Reckon it ain't up to you, Sally Ford, to set yourself up in judgment on your mother, whoever she was."

"But she sent me away," Sally sobbed brokenly. "She was ashamed of me, and then forgot all about me. Oh, I wish I'd never been born!"

"I reckon every kid's said that a hundred times before she's old enough to have good sense," Mrs. Bybee scoffed. "Now, dry up and scoot to the dress tent to

put some more make-up on your face. The show goes on. And take it from me, child, you're better off than a lot of girls that join up with the carnival. You're young and pretty and you've got a boy friend that'd commit murder for you and pret' near did it, and you've got a job that gives you a bed and cakes, and enough loose change to buy yourself some glad rags by the time we hit the Big Town—"

"The Big Town?" Sally raised her head, interest dawning unwillingly in her grieving blue eyes. "You mean—New York?"

"Sure I mean New York. We go into winter quarters there in November, and if you stick to the show I may be able to land you a job in the chorus. God knows you are pretty enough—just the type to make every six-footer want to fight any other man that looks at you."

"Oh, you're good to me!" Sally blinked away the last of her tears, which had streaked her brown make-up. "I'll stick, if the police don't get me—and David. And," she paused at the door, her eyes shy and sweet, "thank you so very much for trying to help me find my—my mother."

As she sped down the aisle of the car in her noiseless little red sandals she was startled to see what looked like a sheaf of yellow, dried grass whisked through the closing door of the women's dressing room. Then comprehension dawned. "I wonder," she took time from the contemplation of her desolating disappointment to muse, "what Nita is doing here. I wonder if she followed me—if she heard anything I wouldn't want Nita to know about my mother. But I'll tell David. Will he despise me because my mother was—bad?"

CHAPTER VII

It was a sad, listless little "Princess Lalla" who cupped tiny brown hands about a crystal ball and pretended to read "past, present and future" in its mysterious depths as the afternoon crowd of the carnival's last day in Stanton milled about the attractions in the Palace of Wonders. There was the crack of an unsuspected whip in the voice of Gus, the barker, as he bent over her after his oft-repeated spiel:

"Snap into it, kid! These rubes is lousy with coin and we've got to get our share. You're crabbin' the act somethin' fierce's afternoon. Step on it!"

Sally made a valiant effort to obey, but her crystal-gazing that afternoon was not a riotous success. She made one or two bad blunders, the worst of which caused a near-panic.

For she was so absorbed in her own disappointment and in contemplating the effect of her news upon David, when she should tell him that she was an illegitimate child of a woman who had abandoned her, that her eyes and intuition were not so keen as they had been.

Although there had been a sharp-faced shrew of a wife clinging to his arm before he vaulted upon the platform for a "reading," she mechanically told a meek little middle-aged man that he was in love with a "zo beau-ti-ful girl wiz golden hair" and that he would "marry wiz her."

After the poor husband had been snatched from the platform by his furiously jealous wife and given a most undignified paddling with her hastily removed shoe—an "added attraction" which proved vastly entertaining to the carnival crowd but which caused a good many quarters to find their hasty way back into handbags and trouser pockets—Sally felt her failure so keenly that she leaned backward in an effort to be cautious.

"For God's sake, kid, snap out of it before the next show!" Gus pleaded, mopping his dripping brow with a huge purple-bordered white silk handkerchief. "I'm part owner of this tent, you know, and you're hittin' me where I live. Come on, 'at's a good girl! Forget it—whatever's eatin' on you! This ain't a half-bad world—not a-tall! What if that sheik of yours is trailin' Nita around? Reckon he's just after her grouch bag—"

"Her—grouch bag?" Sally seized upon the unfamiliar phrase in order to put off as long as possible full realization of the heart-stopping news he was giving her so casually.

"That's right. You're still a rube, ain't you? A grouch bag is a show business way of sayin' a performer's got a wad salted down to blow with or buy a chicken farm or, if it's a hard-on-the-eyes dame like Nita, to catch a man with. Nita's got a roll big enough to choke a boa constrictor. I seen her countin' it one night when she thought she was safe. She was, too. I wouldn't warm up to that Jane if she was the last broad in the world. Now, listen, kid, you have a good, hard cry in the dress tent before the next show and you'll feel like a new woman. That's me all over! Never tell a wren to turn off the faucet! Nothin' like a good cry. I ain't been married four times for nothin'."

Sally waited to hear no more. She rushed out of the Palace of Wonders, a frantic, fantastic little figure in purple satin trousers and gold-braided green jacket, her red-sandled feet spurning the grass-stubbled turf that divided the show tent from the dress tent. And because she was almost blinded with the tears which Gus, the barker, had sagely recommended, she collided with another

figure in the "alley."

"Look where you're going, you little charity brat, you ——" And Nita's harsh, metallic voice added a word which Sally Ford had sometimes seen scrawled in chalk on the high board fence that divided the boys' playground from the girls' at the orphanage.

So Nita had listened! She had been eavesdropping when Mrs. Bybee had told Sally the shameful things she had learned from Gramma Bangs about Sally's birth.

"You can't call me that!" Sally gasped, rage flaming over her, transforming her suddenly from a timid, brow-beaten child of charity into a wildcat.

Before Nita, the Hula dancer, could lift a hand to defend herself, a small purple-and-green clad fury flung itself upon her breast; gilded nails on brown-painted fingers flashed out, were about to rip down those painted, sallow cheeks like the claws of the wildcat she had become when powerful hands seized her by the shoulders and dragged her back.

"What t'ell's going on here?" Gus, the barker, panted as Sally struggled furiously, still insane with rage at the insult Nita had flung at her.

"Better keep this she-devil out of my sight, Gus, or I'll cut her heart out!" Nita panted, adjusting the grass skirt, which Sally's furious onslaught had torn from the dancer's hips, exposing the narrow red satin tights which ended far above her thin, unlovely knees.

"I'm surprised at you, Sally," Gus said severely, but his small eyes twinkled at her. "Next time you're having a friendly argument with this grass-skirt artist, for Gawd's sake settle it by pulling her hair. The show's gotta go on and some of these rubes like her map. Don't ask me why. I ain't good at puzzles."

Sally smiled feebly, the passing of her rage having left her feeling rather sick and foolish. Gus's arm was still about her shoulders, in a paternal sort of fondness, as Nita switched away, her grass skirt hissing angrily.

"Kinda foolish of you, Sally, to pick a fight with that dame. She could-a ruint this pretty face of yours. She's a bad mama, honey, and you'd better make yourself scarce when she's around. And say, kid—take a tip from old Gus: no sheik ain't worth fightin' for. I been fought over myself considerable in my time, and believe me, while two frails was fightin' for me I was lookin' for another one."

Sally felt shriveled with shame. "I wasn't fighting her because of—of David," she muttered, digging the toe of one little red sandal into the dusty grass of the show lot. "Nita called me a—a nasty name. You'd have fought, too!"

"Sure! but not with a dame like Nita, if I was you! You ain't no match for her. Now, you trot along to the dress tent and rest or cry or say your prayers or anything you want to—except fight!—till show time again. And for God's sake,

don't turn your back when Nita's around!"

Sally did not see the Hula dancer again that afternoon, for Nita belonged to the "girlie show," which had a tent all its own. To encourage her in her confidence as a crystal-gazer, or rather to bolster up the faith of the skeptical audience, which had somehow become wise to the fact that "Princess Lalla" had "pulled some bones," Gus, the barker, arranged for four or five "schillers"—employes of the carnival, both men and women, dressed to look like members of the audience—to have their fortunes told.

Sally, tipped off by a code signal of Gus's, let her imagination run riot as she read the magic crystal for the "schillers," and to everything she told them they nodded their heads or slapped their thighs in high appreciation, loudly proclaiming that "Princess Lalla" was a wow, a witch, the grandest little fortune-teller in the world. Business picked up amazingly; quarters were thrust upon Gus with such speed that he had to form a line of applicants for "past, present and future" upon Sally's platform.

She did not see David at supper, while she ate in the cook tent after having carried "Pitty Sing," the midget, to the privilege car. Buck, the negro chef of the privilege car grinned at her, but David was nowhere to be seen. Was he "trailin' Nita," as Gus, the barker, had called it? Jealousy laid a hand of pain about her heart, such a sort of pain that she wanted, childishly, to stop and examine it. It claimed instant fellowship in her heart with that other so-new emotion—love. She wanted all afternoon, until Gus had stopped her heart for a beat or two with his casual reference to David and Nita, to fly to David for comfort, to pour out her news to him. She had heard, in anticipation, his softly spoken, tender "Dear little Sally! Don't mind too much. We have each other." So far had her imagination run away with her!

It was the last evening of the carnival in Stanton, and money rolled into the pockets of the concessionaires and the showmen.

"Last chance to see the tallest man on earth and the littlest woman! Last chance, folks!"

It was already a little old to Sally—the spieler's ballyhoo. She could have repeated it herself. Glamor was fading from the carnival. The dancing girls were not young and beautiful, as they had seemed at first; they had never danced on Broadway in Ziegfeld's Follies; they never would. They were oldish-young women who sneered at the "rubes" and had calluses on the bottoms of their aching feet from dancing on rough board platforms.

Just before the last show Sally wandered out into the midway from the Palace of Wonders, money in her hand which Pop Bybee had advanced to her. But it was lonely "playing the wheels" all by herself, and although Eddie Cobb fixed it so that she won a big Kewpie doll with pink maline skirts and saucy, marcelled

red hair, there was little thrill in its possession. When a forlornly weeping little girl stopped her tears to gape covetously at the treasure, Sally gave it up without a pang, and wandered on to the salt water taffy stand, where one of her precious nickels went for a small bag of the tooth-resisting sweet.

She no longer minded or noticed the crowd that collected and followed her—wherever she went; she had become used to it already. The crowd did not interest her, for it did not hold David, who was forced to hide ignominiously in the show train, for fear the heavy hand of a local constable would close menacingly over his shoulder. At the thought Sally shuddered and flung away her taffy. They would be leaving Stanton tonight, leaving danger behind them. It had not occurred to her to ask where the show train was going. But it was going away, away. David could come out of hiding. Bybee had said the authorities in other states wouldn't be interested in a couple of minors who had done nothing worse than "bust a farmer's leg and beat it—"

"What kinda burg is the capital?" she was startled to hear a hot-dog concessionaire call to the ticket-seller for the ferris wheel.

"Pretty good pickin's," the ticket-seller answered. "We run into a spell of bad weather there last year and it was a Jonah town, but it looks good this season. The Kidder says he has to plank down half a grand for the lot—the dirty bums—them city councillors."

"We're going to the capital next?" Sally leaned over the counter to ask the hot-dog man.

"Sure, kid. Didn't you know? I heard you come from that burg. Old home week for Eddie, too. You and him going out to give the old homestead the once-over?"

Sally did not wait to answer. Although it was almost time for the last show the little red sandals flew toward the side-tracked show train—and David. Her jealousy, even her just-realized love for him, were forgotten. There was only fear—fear of iron bars and shameful uniforms, iron bars which would cage David's superb young body and break his spirit; fear of the reformatory, in which she would again become a dull-eyed unit in a hopeless army, but branded now with a shameful scarlet letter which she did not deserve.

They couldn't go to the capital city where they were both known; they would have to run away again, walk all night through the dark, fugitives from "justice."

———

"Poor kid!" David consoled her after her first almost hysterical outburst. "I can't talk to you now, and you shouldn't be here. You've got to go back for your last

performance. The show has to go on. They've been decent to us, and we can't throw them over without warning."

"But David, we've got to run away again!" Sally whimpered, clinging to both his arms, bare to the shoulders in anticipation of his work in helping to load the carnival for its thirty-mile drag to the capital. "We can't go back to Capital City! We'll be caught! Listen, David—"

"Go back to your show tent," David commanded her sternly. "I'll be working pretty late helping to load up, but I'll whistle a bar from 'Always' under your Pullman window. We all sleep on the train tonight, and pull out for Capital City some time before morning. We pick up the engine at three o'clock, I believe. Plenty of time then to decide what to do." He shook her a little to make her stop shivering and whimpering with fear. "Buck up, honey! I'm not going to let the police get you; neither is Pop Bybee. Dear little Sally!" and he stooped from his great height to brush the tip of her short, brown-powdered nose with his lips.

During the last performance in the Palace of Wonders a village constable, his star shining importantly from the lapel of his Palm Beach suit, sauntered leisurely through the tent, eyeing the freaks with skeptical amusement and asking all the Smart-Aleck questions which the more timid members of the carnival crowd longed to ask and did not dare.

"Bet you wouldn't let me put any of that glass you're eatin' in my coffee," he guffawed to the ostrich man whom Gus, the barker, was ballyhooing at the moment. "I'm on to all you guys. Rock candy, ain't it?"

"Sure, officer," Gus interrupted his spiel to answer deferentially. "Won't you have a little snack with the human ostrich? I particularly recommend these nails. Boffo eats only the choicest sixpenny nails; will accept no substitutes. And if a nail's rusty, out with it! Sort of an epicure, Boffo is! Have a handful of glass and nails with Boffo, officer! Bighearted, that Boffo!"

The constable refused hastily and the crowd roared with delight. The discomfited officer of the law ambled over to make his disparaging inspection of Jan, the giant from Holland.

"Pull up your pants legs and let me see your stilts," the constable ordered authoritatively. "I ain't the sucker you guys think I am. I'm on to your tricks—been going to carnivals man and boy for fifty years."

With his eyes as remote and sad and patient as if he had not heard or understood a word of the constable's insult, Jan obeyed, rolling his trousers to the knees. When the Doubting Thomas representative of the law had pinched the pale, putty-colored flesh of Jan's pitifully thin calves and found them to be flesh-and-blood indeed, he passed on, red of face, furious at the snorts of laughter which filled the tent.

"What if he takes a notion to wash my face?" Sally shivered, bending low,

in an attitude of mystic concentration, over the crystal which she was pretending to read for a farmer's wife who had no interest in Boffo, the human ostrich, but who did have perfect faith in the powers of "Princess Lalla." "What if he is just pretending to be interested in the other freaks and is really looking for me? Has Nita dared to tip him off that Sally Ford is here?"

But her little sing-song voice droned on, predicting prosperity and happiness and "a journey by land and sea" for the credulous farmer's wife.

"What's your real name, sister?" the constable demanded loudly, officiously, stamping up the steps that led to the little platform.

"Please," Sally pleaded prettily, making her eyes wide and cloudy with mystic visions, "do not een-terr-upt! The veesion she will go away!"

"You let her alone, Sam Pelton!" the farmer's wife commanded tartly. "Go on, Princess Lalla. I think you're just wonderful—knowing about my mother being dead and even her name and all."

And Sally continued the reading with Constable Pelton breathing audibly upon her neck as she bent her small head gravely over the crystal. When she could think of nothing else to tell the highly pleased woman, she was desperate. It seemed to her that everyone in the tent was looking at her, reading panic in her trembling fingers, in her fluttering eyelids.

"Gimme a knockdown to my past, present and future, Sister," the constable suggested with heavy sarcasm and jocularity. "Reckon an officer of the law don't have to pay. And you'd better make it a good one, or I'll run you in for obtaining money under false pretenses. Come on, now! Miz Holtzman has already give you a good tip-off, and I guess my star speaks for itself. Knowing my name and my business, you oughta be able to fake a pretty good line for me, but if you don't tell me my wife's name, how many kids I got, where I come from, and anything else I'm a-mind to ask you, I'll make you a present of free board and lodging at the county's expense."

Unknown to Sally, whose eyes were fixed, blind with fear, upon the crystal tightly cupped in her ice-cold palms, Gus, the barker, had drawn near enough to hear the constable's threats and demands.

"Sure, officer!" he boomed heartily, to Sally's amazement, "just ask the little lady anything you like. She sees all, knows all. Step right up, folks, and hear Princess Lalla, favorite crystal-gazer to the Sultan of Turkey before she escaped from his harem, tell your fellow-townsman, Constable Sam Pelton, the truth, the whole truth and something besides the truth—a few things that are going to happen to him that Officer Sam don't yet dream of! Step right up, folks! Don't be bashful! Step up and get an earful about your esteemed fellow-townsman and officer of the law—"

Sally felt the ice melting slowly in her veins. Dear Gus! He was stalling,

gaining time, subtly frightening the constable, whose face had gone redder and redder, whose eyes glanced with furtive unease from the crystal to the grinning faces of his "fellow-townsmen," who apparently had no great love for Constable Sam Pelton.

Then that which Gus had arranged by means of a code signal took place. Two "schillers," hastily summoned by a carnival employe, suddenly broke into loud curses and sharp, slapping blows which echoed in the instantly quiet tent.

"Pick my pocket, would you?" the raucous voice of a "schiller" demanded between slaps and punches. "I seen you—sneakin' your hand in my pocket!"

Constable Pelton, glad to be able to assert his authority, glad also, possibly, to escape a too intimate revelation of his past, bounded from the platform, collared the fighting "schillers," and dragged them triumphantly away.

When the last stragglers of the carnival crowd had been ushered rather unceremoniously from the tent, Sally rose from her chair and pattered swiftly to where Gus, the barker, stood talking with Pop Bybee, owner and manager of Bybee's Bigger and Better Carnival.

"Thank you, Gus! I was scared nearly to death! It was wonderful the way you stalled along till those two rubes—" she was already becoming familiar with carnival lingo—"got into a fight. Wasn't it lucky for me they did?" she added naively.

"Hell, kid!" Gus grinned at her and tilted his derby more rakishly over his left eye. "It was a frame-up. Them's our boys. The guy that pretended to have his pocket picked will swear he made a mistake, and the worst old Sam can do is to have 'em fined for disorderly conduct. I'll square it with 'em, and they'll be in Capital City by show-time tomorrow."

Pop Bybee chuckled richly, his bright, pale-blue eyes gleaming in the lobster-red expanse of his old face. "Didn't I tell you, child, that the law couldn't touch you long as you stuck with the carnival? Dave tells me you're babbling about running away again because we're hitting the trail for your home town tonight. You stick, Sally. Pop Bybee and Gus and the rest of us will take care of you."

Sally's lips parted to tell him of Nita's threat if she did not relinquish her claim upon David's love and friendship, but before the first word tumbled out, the old inhibition against tattling, taught her in the stern school of life in an orphanage, restrained her.

"You're all so good to me," she choked, then turned abruptly away to where "Pitty Sing," the midget, was impatiently awaiting her human sedan-chair.

"I don't want to influence you unduly," the midget piped in her prim, high little voice, "but Mr. Bybee and Gus are right. You are safer with the carnival than anywhere else in the state, and if you ran away I should be very sorry. I like

you, Sally. I like you very much."

The dress tent was taken down by the "white hopes" almost before the women performers had had time to change from show clothes to nightgowns and kimonos. By twelve o'clock the lot was as bare of tents and booths and ferris wheels and motordromes and "whips" and merry-go-rounds as if those mechanical symbols of joy and fun had never existed.

And Sally lay on the lumpy, smelly mattress of her upper berth in the ancient Pullman car, waiting for her David's whistled signal—a bar of "Always." She was fully dressed.

Her heart sang the words—"I'll be loving you—always! Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but—always!"

She could have sent word to David by Gus or Pop Bybee that she had given up her frantic plan to run away; that he need not meet her in the darkness of the pulsing, hot June night. But—she had not—

It came then—clear and true, the whistled notes of the song which her heart sang to David—"I'll be loving you—always!"

She edged over the side of the berth, the toe of her slipper groping until it found the edge of the lower berth in which the midget was sleeping. When she was safe in the aisle she cast a fearful glance up and down the car, and noted with uneasy surprise that Nita's berth, directly opposite the midget's, was still unoccupied, the green curtains spread wide so that the grayish-white blur of the sheet and pillow was plainly discernible in the faint light from the one electric globe over the door.

But she had no time now to worry about Nita or Nita's threats. David was awaiting her—with the song still humming its sweet, extravagant promise in his heart. Or—was it? Had he chosen the song idly? Had he meant anything by that teasing kiss on the tip of her nose, by his "Dear little Sally!"

"Being in love hurts something terrible," Sally shook her head at her own turbulent emotions, unconsciously employing the homely language of the orphanage. "But even if he doesn't love me I'm glad I love him. David, David!"

CHAPTER VIII

The night was eerie with voices from unseen bodies, or bodies half-revealed in the flare of gasoline torches, as the business of loading the carnival proceeded. Soft, rich voices from black men's throats blended with the velvety softness of the late-June night:

"Oh, if Ah had wings like an angel,
Over these prison walls Ah would fly!
Ah would fly to the ahms of my poah dahlin',
An' theah Ah'd be willin' to die."

A lonesome, heart-breaking plaint. Sally shivered. Except for David and Pop Bybee and Dan, the barker, she and David might have been behind prison bars tonight, learning the shame and misery that had created that song.

A white roustabout said something evil to her out of the corner of his mouth as she brushed past him on her way to join David. But she scarcely noticed, for there was David, his shoulders looming immensely broad in the dark coat he had donned in her honor. Her hands were out to him before he had reached her, and when he took them both and laid them softly against his breast, so that her leaping blood caught the rhythm of his strongly beating heart, she could scarcely restrain herself from raising her small body on tip-toe and lifting her face for his kiss.

They were shy at first, as they drifted away from the show train across the vacant lot where the carnival had so recently vended trickery and truth, freaks and fakes, color and light and noise and music. They walked softly, slowly, Sally having the absurd feeling that if the grass stubble were tender, tiny flowers, her joy-light feet would not have crushed them. Her fingers were intertwined with David's, and the electric thrill of that contact seemed to be the motor force which propelled her body. Without a word as to direction, they drifted, completely in accord, toward a clump of trees which would some day, when Stanton had become beauty-conscious, form the nucleus of a park.

Sally felt that she was in a spell woven of the beauty and breathlessness of the night and of her inarticulate joy as, still without speaking, David took off his coat and spread it upon the ground that sloped gently from the sturdy trunk of an oak tree. As he was stooping to spread the coat her hand hovered over his head, aching to touch the dear, waving crispness of his hair, yet not daring—quite. But when he straightened more suddenly than she had expected, his head fitted into the cup of her hovering hand before she could snatch it away.

He whirled upon her, sweeping her slight body to his breast with such fierceness and suddenness that her head swam.

"Sally! Sally!" Just that hoarse cry, muted, exultant.

Her hands crept slowly up his breast, so loving every inch of the dear body whose warmth came through the cloth of his shirt that they abandoned it reluctantly. When her hands were on his shoulders, clinging there, she threw her head back upon the curve of his right arm, and smiled up into his face. Her lips parting slowly to let out a little gasping sigh of joy.

In the silvery sheen with which the moon joyously and approvingly bathed them their eyes, wide, dark, luminous, clung for an aeon of time, reckoned in the history of love. Then David, knowing that his unasked question had been gloriously answered, bent his head until his lips touched hers.

He must have felt the slight stiffening of her body, the ardor in her small hands as they clung more fiercely to his shoulders. For he flung up his head, then turned it sharply away for a moment, as if ashamed for her to see the passion in his eyes. She took a drunken, uncertain step away from him, and his arms fell laxly from her body.

"What is it, David?" she asked in a small, quavering voice, scarcely more than a whisper.

"I shouldn't have done that!" David reproached himself with boyish bitterness.

"But David," Sally pleaded, in that small quaver, "don't you—don't you love me—at all? I thought—I—" Her hands fluttered toward him, then dropped hopelessly as he still stood sharply turned away from her.

"Yes, I love you. That's the devil of it," David groaned from the shelter of his arm. "I love you so much I can't think of anything else, not even of our danger."

She crept closer to him, stroked timidly the clenched fist which hung at his side. "Then—why, David? I—I love you, too. You—must—have known. I love you with all my heart." She stooped swiftly and laid her lips against his knuckles, which shone white as marble in the moonlight.

"Don't!" he cried sharply. He lowered the arm that had sheltered his shamed, passionate eyes and looked at her humbly, his whole body drooping. "Don't you see, darling—no, I mustn't call you that!—don't you see, Sally, that your—caring—only makes it worse? I wish I were the only one that has to suffer. But you're so young—oh, God!" he cried in sudden anguish. "You're so pitifully young! Sixteen! I ought to be horsewhipped!"

She laughed shakily. "I'm getting older every day, David. Is it such a crime to be young? You're young, too, David—darling!" The word was dropped shyly, on a tremulous whisper.

"That's it!" David cried wildly, fiercely under his breath. "We're both young! I'm just half through college, and I haven't a cent to my name except what I earned those two weeks on Carson's farm. And I won't have any money except barely enough to live on—I work my way through college—until I've fin-

ished school. And then it will be a long, hard struggle to get a start, unless my grandfather dies by then and leaves me his farm. He's a miserly old man, darling. He thinks I'm a fool to study scientific farming, won't give me a cent. I haven't wanted it—till now."

"And now, David?" she prompted softly, her fingers closing caressingly about the clenched hand which she must not kiss.

"I want to marry you, of course!" David flung the confession at her sternly. "I love you so much it's torture to think of your going on to New York with the carnival. Oh, it's all so hopeless! We're in such a nasty jam, Sally, darling!" He groaned, snatched up her hands, kissed them hungrily, passionately, then dropped them as if the soft, sweet flesh stung his lips. "Don't let me kiss you, Sally! For God's sake! I can't stand it! And it's not fair to you to learn what love means, when—when we can't go through with it."

"But why can't we, David?" she persisted, her love giving her amazing boldness. "I'll never love anyone else. I'll wait for you, for years and years. Until I'm eighteen and you're twenty-three. You're almost twenty-one, aren't you, David?"

"Yes," he acknowledged. "But I'm just a kid. Why, I'm a minor yet!" he reminded her with youth's bitter shame. "And so are you. We couldn't even get married legally. And we're both—wanted—by the police. I can't even figure out how I'm going to get back into A. & M. and finish my course. I couldn't let you marry a man wanted for attempted murder, even if I could support you. Oh, I guess I could make a bare living for us, but I don't want that! Not for you! I want you to have everything lovely in the world. You've had so little, so little! I want you to have silk and velvet to make you forget blue-and-white-checked gingham. I want—" he was going on passionately when Sally interrupted with her soft delicious little laugh.

"I want David," she said simply.

"All right!" he cried, flinging his arms wide in a gesture of utter abandonment. "We'll run away tonight. We'll keep going until we get out of the state. We'll lie about our ages. We'll find someone somewhere to marry us, and we'll—have each other if we have nothing else in the world, Sally!"

His exultant young voice and his arms demanded her, but she held back strangely, while her face went ghastly white and old in the moonlight.

"I—I forgot to tell you my news," she said dully, tonelessly, her hands flattened against her breast. "Mrs. Bybee found out something about—about my mother, about me."

Ecstasy was wiped from David's face, leaving it hurt and bewildered. "So you're going to find her? Go back to her? I—I suppose I'm glad."

"No," she shook her head drearily. "I can't marry you or—anyone, David.

My mother was not Mrs. Nora Ford. I don't know who she was! I don't even know what my name really is—if I have a name! Whoever my mother was she was ashamed I'd been born, she paid Mrs. Ford to take me away when I was an infant, away from New York, so—so I wouldn't disgrace her. I'm the ugly name Nita called me today. I'm—I'm—"

"You're my Sally," David said gently, his arms gathering her in, holding her comfortingly against his breast, in a passionless embrace of utter tenderness. "Do you think I would let that make any difference at all? If anything could, it would make me love you more. But I love you now with every bit of me. And we'll be married, Sally. What do I care about being a scientific farmer?" But there was a note of bravado, of regret in his voice that did not escape her love attuned ears.

"No, David," she whispered, her hands straying over his face as if memorizing every dear line of it. "We'll wait. I can wait. I've waited twelve years to find my mother, and I didn't give up hope until today. I would wait twice twelve years for you. I'll stick with the carnival if Pop Bybee will let me, and if the police don't find us. Then when you're through college—?"

"But I'm damned if I can see how I'm to get back!" David burst out. "We are both trapped in this second-rate carnival—and a first rate one would be bad enough!"

"We won't have to stay after we get to New York," Sally interrupted reasonably. "We can start life again. This trouble will blow over. You might even learn some other profession in the east—"

"I don't want to learn anything else, live anywhere else but in the middle west. It's my land. I love it. I want to serve it. But, oh, Sally, let's not torture ourselves any more. I know I mustn't marry you under this cloud, but let's be happy for a few minutes before we go back to the show train. No, don't, darling!" as she lifted her arms. "Just sit there on my coat and let me look at you. You're the most beautiful thing in the world. Lovely Sally!"

They sat side by side, hands not touching but hearts reaching toward each other, and the minutes slipped silently away as David drank in her moon-silvered young beauty, and she fed her love-hunger upon his Viking-like handsomeness and strength. They were silently agreeing to go when a sharp, metallic voice materialized suddenly out of the hush of the darkness.

"No monkey-business now, Steve! I'm warning you! If you double-cross me I'll cut your heart out! Fifty-fifty and—"

The rest was lost as the couple passed on, walking swiftly, two shadows that seemed like one. The voice was Nita's.

CHAPTER IX

When Sally was awakened soon after dawn the next morning—Wednesday—by the shouts and songs of the "white hopes" unloading the carnival on the outskirts of the Capital City, the question which had insisted on worming its way through the heavenly joy of knowing that David loved her sprang instantly to the foreground of her mind; who was "Steve" with whom Nita had quarreled and bargained in the dark last night?

Sally and David had met or had had pointed out to them nearly every member of the show troupe, and there was no Steve among them. Of course Steve might be one of the roughneck white roustabouts. But a star performer, such as Nita considered herself, would hardly consort with such a man. The two classes—simply did not mix, except in rare instances. David of course was different. Everyone connected with the carnival knew that he was a university student, working in the kitchen with Buck only because he was hiding from the police.

Then the thought of David dismissed Nita and her threats and her Steve. She crawled out of her berth, scurried to the women's dressing room and hastily applied her show make-up. Pop Bybee had summoned her to the privilege car on her return from her momentous walk with David the night before to caution her not to appear in Capital City, even in the dress or cook tent, without her "Princess Lalla" complexion, which she was to apply with exceeding care so that the disguise might be impenetrable.

Because the carnival lot selected by "the Kidder," Pop Bybee's advance man and "fixer," was in the heart of the city, and the railroad spur allotted to the show train on the outskirts of it, the cars would be abandoned by the carnival performers and employes, only Pop and Mrs. Bybee continuing to occupy their drawing room in one of the Pullmans. Sally, being told the arrangements, suspected that they stayed with the train to guard the safe under the green plush seat, the existence of which was known only to Sally. Mrs. Bybee took little interest in the carnival itself, caring only for the heaviness of the canvas money bags, which were brought to her at the end of each day's business.

It was still not seven o'clock when Sally joined the straggling procession of performers headed for the cook tent and dress tent, a quarter of a mile from the show train. She knew very little of the city itself, since the orphanage was situated on its own farm in a thinly settled suburb.

There was no glow of pride, no sense of home-coming as she trudged through the almost deserted streets, but every time she passed a policeman idly swinging his "billie" on a street corner she thanked Pop Bybee in her heart that he had cautioned her to don her disguise. For beyond a casually interested glance at her brown face and hands and her long swinging braids of fine, lustrous black hair, the law did not seem to find her worthy of attention.

If only David could pass that cordon successfully! Probably he had gone to the carnival grounds. But Pop Bybee, true to his promise to protect the boy, had decreed that he should become private chef and waiter to himself and Mrs. Bybee, remaining cooped up all day in the privilege car of the show train.

Poor David! Dear David! Her heart ached passionately for his loneliness, for his magnificent body caged in a hot box of a kitchen, when it had been so gloriously free in fragrant, sun-kissed fields before she had met him.

Why, he might almost as well be in jail! And he had done nothing but protect a girl alone in the world from the cruel revenge of a man who had promised the state to treat her as his own daughter.

But even though her heart throbbed with pain for David she could not be wholly sad, for he loved her, wanted to marry her, would even now be married to her if she had let him give up his ambitions for her.

By the time she had finished breakfast in the cook tent the carnival was nearly ready for business. Even the Ferris wheel's glittering immensity was flung toward the sky, the basket seats hanging motionless in the still, hot air. Banners advertising real and spurious wonders were being tacked upon scarred booths, endowing them with glamor: "Bybee's Follies Girls—a dazzlingly beautiful chorus straight from Ziegfeld's Follies in New York—Six reasons why men leave home"; "Beautiful Babe, the Fattest Girl in the World! 620 pounds of rosy, cuddly girl flesh"; "The Palace of Wonders—Greatest Aggregation of Freaks in the World; also Princess Lalla, from Constantinople, crystal-gazer, escaped member of the Sultan's Harem; Sees all, knows all—Past, Present and Future!"

Sally wandered along the midway, waving a small brown hand to Eddie Cobb, who was setting up his gambling wheel and gaudily dressed Kewpie dolls; exchanged predictions as to the day's business with two or three good-natured concessionaires; won a gold-toothed smile from the henna-haired girl who sold tickets for the tin rabbit races.

But she soon discovered that she was restless and lonely. The carnival had no glamor in these early hours. Without the crowds there was no glamor; the

crowds themselves, though they did not suspect it, furnished the glamor with their naive credulity, their laughter, their free and easy spending, their susceptibility as a relief from the monotony of their lives, to the very spirit of carnival for which this draggled old hoyden of a show was named.

"The kids would love it," Sally remembered suddenly, seeing in a painfully bright flash of memory the oldish, wistful little faces of Betsy and Thelma and Clara and all the other orphans who had until so recently—though it seemed years ago—been her only friends and playmates.

"I wonder if Eloise Durant is terribly unhappy, or if she has found some other 'big girl' to pet her. I wonder if Betsy and Thelma and Clara miss my play-acting."

She smiled at the picture of herself draped in a sheet and crowned with her own braids:—an ermine cloak and a crown of gold adorning a queen! "If they could see me now! Play-acting all the time, all dressed up in purple satin trousers and a green satin jacket all glittery with gold braid! I wish I had lots of money, so I could send them all tickets to come to the carnival," her thoughts ran on, as homesickness for the place she had hoped never to see again rose up, treacherous and unwelcome, to dim her joy in the glorious miracle of David's love.

"I suppose," she confessed forlornly, "that Mrs. Stone is the only mother I'll ever know. I wish I'd always been good, so she wouldn't believe the awful things Clem Carson said about me. She thinks I'm bad now—like my mother. I wonder," she was startled, her face flushing hotly under the brown powder, "if I am bad! They say it's in the blood. I'm crazy to have David kiss me, and—and he had to ask me not to. Maybe David is afraid I'm bad, too."

The thought was unbearable. She wanted to fly to David, to search his gold-flecked hazel eyes again, to see if he had lost any of his "respect" for her. But she wouldn't kiss him! She'd bite her tongue out first! She was going to be good, good, prove to herself and David and all the world that "it" wasn't in her blood.

But all day, as the crowds gathered and money clinked merrily as it fell into cash boxes, she longed for David; lived over every kiss he had given her, from the brushing of his lips against the tip of her nose to that dizzying wedding of lips when their love had been confessed in the moonlight.

And because she was bemused with romance, thrilling with her own awakening to love, she made an almost riotous success of her crystal-gazing that first day of the carnival in Capital City. Girls laughed shyly and cuddled against their sweethearts provocatively as they left the Palace of Wonders, determined to make "Princess Lalla's" enchanting prophecies come true.

And she was so seductively beautiful herself, asparkle with love as she was, that three or four unaccompanied young men, seeking knowledge of the present,

past and future, suggested that she fulfil her own prophecies of a "zo beautiful brunette," until, embarrassed though flattered, she took refuge in assuming that all gentlemen prefer blondes.

She did not see David that night after the carnival had shut up shop, for he could not leave the show train and only male performers, barkers and concessionaires were permitted to hang around the train. Sally understood from the midget, "Pitty Sing," that a nightly poker game attracted the men to the privilege car and that fist-fighting and even gun-play was no uncommon break in the monotony. Pop Bybee, genial until he heard the rattle of poker chips, was the heaviest winner as a rule, many a performer's salary finding its way back into the stateroom safe within a few hours after Mrs. Bybee had reluctantly handed it over.

By Thursday afternoon Sally's confidence in the efficacy of her disguise had mounted perilously high. The policemen who strolled grandly through the tents, proud of not having to pay for their fun, accorded her admiration or good-natured skepticism but no suspicion.

The city papers had apparently lost interest in the hunt for David Nash, university student and farm hand, wanted for assault with intent to kill and for moral delinquency, and in Sally Ford, runaway ward of the state and juvenile paramour of the youthful would-be murderer, as the papers had previously described them.

At least there were no references to the case in either Wednesday's or Thursday's papers, and Sally's heart was light with gratitude to David and Pop Bybee for having persuaded her to stick with the carnival. It was rather fun to be on exhibition, reading the fortunes of the very policemen who had been given her description and orders to "get" her—much more fun than fleeing along state roads at night and hiding in cornfields by day, hungry, exhausted, afraid of her shadow and of the more menacing shadow of the state reformatory.

"Hel-lo! Hel-lo! Bless my soul! What have we here? A real live Turkish harem beauty, as I live!"

Sally aroused herself from her apparently absorbing gazing into the "magic crystal" and looked with wide, startled eyes at the man who had addressed her in an accent which at once marked him as an easterner of culture. She had seen pictures of men dressed like that, but had never quite believed in their authenticity.

But her eyes did not linger long on his slim, elegant, immaculate figure, leaning lightly on a cane. His laughing, wise, cynical eyes challenged her and invited her to share his amusement with him. But in their bold black depths was something else....

————

"Quite delicious, really!" the man with the cultured, eastern accent drawled, leaning more nonchalantly on his cane and twinkling his too wise, too bold black eyes at "Princess Lalla."

"But really now, I wouldn't say you're a freak, your highness. In fact, you're quite the most delicious little morsel I've seen since I left New York. If I were a Ziegfeld scout I assure you I'd be burbling your praises in a ruinously verbose telegram, and the devil take the expense. Would you mind lifting that scrap of black lace that is tantalizing me most provokingly? I am tormented with the hope that your big eyes are really the purple pansies they appear to be through your veil.

"No?" He shook his head with humorous resignation as Sally shook her head in violent negation. "Well, well! One can't have everything, and really your arms and your adorable little hands and your Tanagra figurine body should be quite enough—as an appetizer. You don't happen to 'spell' the Hula dancer—the ancient but still hopeful lady who has just been exercising her hips for my benefit—do you? But I suppose that is too much to ask of Providence. Life is full of these bitter disappointments, these nagging, unsatisfied desires—"

"Please!" Sally gasped, forgetting her carefully acquired accent which had been bequeathed her, by way of Mrs. Bybee, by the erstwhile "Princess Lalla," now in the hospital, minus her appendix, but still too weak to jeopardize Sally's job. "I—I'm not permitted to talk to the audience—"

"Child, child!" the New Yorker protested, raising a beautifully kept hand admonishingly. "Spare me! I'm always being met with signs like that in New York—in elevators, busses, what-nots—But since I am intrigued with the music of your voice—a very young and un-Turkish voice, if I may be permitted to say so—I shall be delighted to cross your little brown palm with silver, provided you will guarantee that your make-up does not rub off. I'm deplorably finicky."

Sally, overwhelmed by his gift for monologue, uttered in a teasing, bantering, intimate voice of beautiful cadences, looked desperately about her for help. But she was temporarily deserted by both audience and barker. Gus was at the moment ballyhooing Jan, the Holland giant, the chief attraction of the Palace of Wonders. His recital of the vast quantities of food which the nine-foot-nine giant consumed daily never failed to hold the crowd enthralled.

"You'll have to wait till Gus, the barker, starts my performance," she told him nervously, making no effort to deceive the blase New Yorker by a tardy resumption of her "Turkish" accent. "But—oh, please go away! Don't tease me! You'll spoil the show if you make Smart-Aleck remarks on everything I say and do."

"Smart-Aleck?" The easterner raised his silky black brows, while his humorous but cruel mouth, beneath a small, exact black mustache, twitched with a rather rueful smile. "Child, that is the unkindest cut of all! If I had been reared west of Fifth Avenue or a little farther downtown I would undoubtedly phrase it as a nasty crack! But we'll let it pass."

He walked nonchalantly up the steps leading to her platform and stood before her, only the small, black-velvet-draped table with the crystal between them.

When he spoke again, in his humorous drawl, with his bold black eyes twinkling and challenging her, his words could not have been heard by anyone ten feet away: "Will you permit me, your highness, to read the crystal for you? I'm really rather a wizard at it—a wow, as they say on Broadway, though I assure you, your highness, that I'm not a man to succumb to the insidiousness of slang. You must be rather tired of gazing, gazing, gazing into this intriguing but slightly flawed ball of glass—" and he touched it with a long, delicate finger, with a humorous contemptuousness that suggested an intimate bond between the professional and the amateur—himself and herself.

"Please go away!" Sally pleaded breathlessly. "Why do you want to make fun of me? I have to earn my living somehow—"

"Do you?" he smiled, his brows going higher, while deep laugh wrinkles appeared suddenly in the clear olive of his lean cheeks. "Now I'm sure you should let me read the crystal for you, for it is obvious that you have not looked into the future at all!"

He cupped his slim, beautiful hands about the crystal, his back bending in an arch as graceful as the arch of a cat's back. The posture brought his face very near to hers, so that she saw the fine grain of his skin, caught a faint, indefinable but enchanting odor from his sleek dark hair, almost as dark as her own.

He had dropped his hat upon the edge of the little table, and it too fascinated and repelled her, for its dove-gray richness insolently suggested that its owner possessed boundless money and almost wickedly sure taste.

But every item of his dress told the same story, so she really should not have picked on the hat particularly. But she did; she wanted to brush it off the table, to see his flash of anger at its being soiled with the dust from "rubes'" feet—

"Marvelous!" His voice became mockingly hushed and mysterious, as he pretended to gaze into the very heart of the crystal. "I see your whole past boiling away in this magic crystal—slightly flawed, though it is!"

"My past!" she shivered, forgetting that he was faking just as she did.

"You've run away from home, from poverty," he went on in that mocking, too beautiful voice, his black eyes shifting from the crystal to play their insolent, confident fire upon her wide-eyed face. "And you've run away from—a man! Of

course," he added lightly, "you'll always be running away from a man—men—every man that looks at you. You're absolutely irresistible, you know, child! But ah, at last you will find him—the man from whom you will not run away! Now, shall I read the future for you?"

"Please, go away. Gus is coming!" Sally pleaded through childishly quivering lips that would have showed ashen-pale if they had not been thickly overlaid with carmine.

"Dear old Gus! I look forward to being pals with Gus, when I give him the password. Now, the future—ah, my dear, what a future! Broadway! Bright lights! Music! And Princess Lalla in the chorus first, the most adorable little 'pony' of them all! I shall sit in the bald-headed row and toss roses to you, child, and whisper to the eggs next me that 'I knew her when'—when she was a delicious little fake Turkish princess, escaped from the Sultan's harem. And I see a man—let me look closely—a tall, dark man, rather handsome—" and he laughed insolently into her eyes.

"La-dees and gen-tle-men! Right this way, please! I want you all to meet Princess Lalla, from Con-stan-ti-no-ple—"

Gus, the barker, was approaching with long, swift strides, the crowd milling behind him, like sheep following a bellwether.

"I'll finish your future in our next seance." The New Yorker straightened, smiled into her eyes unhurriedly, bowed mockingly, lifted his hat, placed it on his sleek head, retrieved his cane which had been leaning against the crystal stand, and vaulted lightly to the ground.

Gus eyed him menacingly, suspiciously, but beamed when the easterner pressed a bill into his hands and withdrew to the outskirts of the crowd, where he evidently intended to listen to the spieler's introduction of Princess Lalla.

Sally got through her performance somehow, burningly conscious of bold black eyes regarding her admiringly. When she pattered down the steps and along the flattened stubble of the earth floor of the tent on her way to the dress tent to rest between shows, a slim, immaculate figure detached itself from the crowd that was wandering reluctantly toward the exit.

"Cook tent fare must grow rather monotonous," his low, drawling voice stopped her. "I suggest relief—supper with me after the last performance tonight. I am stopping at the governor's mansion, and have the use of one of the official limousines. Credentials enough?" He raised his eyebrows whimsically but his detaining grasp of her arm was not nearly so gentle as his voice.

"No, no!" Sally cried. "I—I'm not that kind of girl! Please let me go—"

"Oh, spirit of H. L. Mencken, hear me!" the New Yorker prayed. "Do girls in the middle west really say that still? I wouldn't have believed it! 'I'm not that kind of girl!'" he repeated, laughing delightedly. "Of course you aren't, darling!

No girl ever is! And heaven forbid that I should be the sort of man—fellow, you say out here?—that you evidently believe I am! Now that we understand each other, I again suggest supper, a long, cooling drive in the governor's choicest limousine—the old boy does himself rather well in cars, at the expense of the state—and a continuation of my extremely accurate reading of your future."

"No!" Sally flared, her timidity submerged in anger. "Let me go this minute! I don't like you! I hate you! If you don't turn loose my arm, I'll—I'll scream 'Hey rube'—"

"What a dire threat!" the New Yorker laughed with genuine amusement. "Am I the rube? Is that your idea of a taunt so crushing that—"

"It means," Sally said with cold fury, "that every man connected with the carnival will rush into this tent and—and simply tear you to pieces! It's the S O S signal of the circus and carnival, and it always works! Now—will you let me go? I swear I'll scream 'Hey, rube!' if you don't—"

"And I had planned such a delicious supper," the New Yorker mourned mockingly as he slowly released her arm, as if reluctant to forego the pleasure that rounded slimness and smoothness gave his highly educated fingers.

Sally cried a little in the dress tent, but she was too angry to give way utterly to tears. The thought which stung her pride most hurtingly was that the New Yorker had seen something bad in her eyes, something of the mother of whose shame she was a living witness.

"But—I guess I showed him!" she told herself fiercely as she dabbed fresh brown powder on her tear-streaked face. "He won't dare bother me again."

But he did dare. He was a nonchalant, smiling, insolent figure, leaning on his cane, as she went through the next performance. She pretended not to see him, but never for a moment, as she well knew, did his cold black eyes waver from their ironic but admiring contemplation of her enchanting little figure in purple satin trousers and green jacket.

And at the late afternoon performance—four o'clock—he was there again, his fine, cruel, humorous mouth smiling at his own folly. She thought of appealing to Gus, the barker, to forbid him admission to the tent, but she knew Gus was too good a business man to heed such a wasteful request. Besides, the barker seemed to like him, or at least to like immensely the bill which invariably passed hands when the showman and the glorified "rube" met.

Then suddenly, at ten minutes after four, the New Yorker ceased to have any significance at all to her, at least for the moment. He was wiped out completely in the flood of terror and joy that swept over her brain, making her so dizzy that she leaned against the crystal stand for support.

For tumbling into the tent of the Palace of Wonders came a horde of children, boys and girls, the girls dressed exactly alike in skimpy little white lawn

dresses trimmed with five-cent lace, the boys in ugly suits of stiff "jeans."

Her playmates from the orphanage had come to see "Princess Lalla," lately Sally Ford, ward of the state and now fugitive from "justice."

CHAPTER X

Sally's first impulse, when she saw the children of the orphanage come tumbling into the Palace of Wonders tent, was to flee. She was so conscious of being Sally Ford, whose rightful place was with those staring, shy little girls in white lawn "Sunday" dresses, that she completely forgot for one moment of pure terror that to them she would merely be "Princess Lalla," favorite crystal-gazer to the Sultan of Turkey before she escaped from his harem.

Cowering low in her high-backed gilded chair, in an effort to make herself as small and inconspicuous as possible—a useless effort really, since she was by far the prettiest and most romantic figure in the tent, dressed as she was in Oriental trappings—she watched the children, whom she knew so well, with a pang of homesickness.

Not that she would want to be back with them! But they were her people, the only chums she had ever known. How well she knew how they felt, liberated for one blessed afternoon from the bleak corridors of the orphanage, catapulted by someone's generosity into fairyland. For to them the carnival was fairyland. These romance-and-beauty-starved orphans saw only glamor and wonder, believed with all their hearts every extravagant word that Gus, the barker, uttered in his stentorian bawl.

Suddenly love and compassion filled her heart to over-flowing. She wanted to run down the steps that led to her little platform and gather Clara and Thelma and Betsy to her breast. She felt so much older and wiser than she had been two weeks ago, when she had "play-acted" for them as they scrubbed the floor of the dormitory. How awed and admiring they would be if, when their thin little bodies were pressed tight in her arms, she should whisper, "It's me—Sally—play-acting! It's me, kids!" But of course she couldn't do it; she would be betraying not only herself but David, and she would rather die than that David should be caught and punished for defending her against Clem Carson.

As the children milled excitedly in the tent, huddling together in groups like sheep, holding each other's hands, giggling and whispering together as their awed eyes roamed from one "freak" to another, Sally searched their faces hungrily, jealously.

Thelma had cut a deep gash in her cheek; it would leave a scar. Six-year-old Betsy had a summer cold and no handkerchief; her cheeks were painted poppy-red with fever, or perhaps it was only excitement.

There was a new little girl whom Sally had never seen before, such a homely little runt of a girl, with enormous, hunted eyes and big freckles on her putty-colored cheeks. Her snuff-colored hair had been clipped close to her scalp, so that her poor little round head looked like the jaw of a man who has not shaved for three days.

Clara and Thelma were mothering her, importantly, each holding one of her little claw-hands, and shrilling explanations and information at her.

But where was Mrs. Stone—"old Stone-Face"—herself? Sally knew very well that the children had not come alone.

While Gus was discoursing grandiloquently upon the talents of Boffo, the human ostrich, Sally sat very prim and apparently composed, her watchful eyes veiled by the scrap of black lace that reached to the tip of her adorable little nose. Undoubtedly the philanthropist was a man—it was nearly aways a politician courting favor who won it cheaply and impressively by "treating" the orphans to a day at the circus or carnival or to a movie. But if he were present, as the philanthropic politician invariably was, Sally could not find him. That was odd, too, for he was usually the most prominent person at such an affair, taking great pains that no reporters who might happen to be present should overlook him and his great kindness of heart.

Then little old-maidish Miss Pond, sentimental little Miss Pond, who had befriended Sally by telling her all she knew of the child's parentage, came hurrying nervously into the tent. She had undoubtedly been detained at the ticket booth and was sure, judging from her anxious, nervous manner, that the children had gotten into mischief during her brief absence.

Three or four of the little girls ran to cling to her hands, abjectly courting notice as Sally had known they would. But with a few absent-minded pats she shooed them away and bustled anxiously toward a woman whom Sally had not noticed before, so complete had been her absorption in the children.

The woman stood aloof near the platform of "the girl nobody can lift," listening to Gus, the barker, with a slight, charming smile of amusement on her beautiful mouth. When Miss Pond joined her timidly, deferentially, the "lady," as Sally instinctively thought of her from the first moment that she become aware of her, turned slightly, so that "Princess Lalla," whose platform was quite near,

got a complete and breath-taking view of her beauty.

"Oh!" Sally breathed ecstatically, her little brown-painted hands clasping each other tightly in her lap. "Oh, you're beautiful! You are like a real princess, or a queen." But she did not say the words aloud. Behind the little black lace veil her sapphire eyes widened and glowed; her breath came quickly over her parted, carmined lips.

The woman, who seemed scarcely older than a girl but who, by her poise and a certain maturity in her face, gave Sally the impression that she was a queen rather than a princess, had taken her hat off, as if the heat oppressed her. It was a smart, trim little thing of silvery-green felt, that had cupped her small head like the green cup that holds a flower. And her face was the flower, a flower bursting into bloom with the removal of the hat.

Sally had never in all her life seen hair like that—shimmering waves of pure gold, slightly rumpled by the removal of the hat, so that single threads of it caught the light from the gas jet that burned day and night in the rather dark tent. Her skin, pale with the heat of the day, was creamy-white, lineless, smooth and rich, so that Sally's fingers longed to touch it reverently. Surely it could not feel like other flesh; it was made of something finer and rarer than cells and blood, dermis and epidermis.

Her small lovely mouth, soft and full-lipped as a child's, was tender and amused and proud, the mouth of a woman who has always been adored for her beauty but whom adoration has not cheated of very human emotions. Sally wished that she could see the eyes more closely, for even while they were wide and laughing, sending out little sparkles of color and light, she thought there was a hint of sadness in them, of restlessness, as if only a part of her attention was given to the carnival and to the children.

She was very small and slight, shorter even than little Miss Pond, who had to look down as she talked to her. But for all her adorable smallness she carried herself with a certain arrogance. Every movement she made as she and Miss Pond talked together and then joined the children was proud and graceful.

She was wearing a summer sports suit of silvery-green knitted silk, which showed to the best advantage the miniature, Venus proportions of her body. As she swung toward the children, nodding acquiescence to Miss Pond's eager suggestions, little Eloise Durant, the child who had been the "new girl" of Sally's last day in the orphanage, catapulted herself from the huddling mass of children and impulsively seized her hand. The swift, cordial smile with which she greeted the child and released her hand as quickly as possible kept Sally from resenting the action. But Eloise, still hypersensitive, knew that she had been delicately snubbed and hung back as Gus, the barker, herded the orphans toward Jan the giant's platform.

Sally saw the tell-tale tremble of Eloise's babyish mouth, and her heart ached with desire to comfort the child. Outwardly Eloise had become exactly like all the other little girls—shy, bleating when the other little sheep bleated, obediently excited when they were excited, silent when they were silent—but underneath she was still bewildered and unreconciled to the death of her mother, the cheap little stock-company actress who had evidently adored her child and been adored in return.

But someone else had seen Eloise's hurt, so unconsciously inflicted by the lovely and arrogant lady. Betsy, the six-year-old, ran from the herd to take Eloise's hand, with an absurd and touching little gesture of motherliness.

"Come on, Eloise," Sally heard Betsy cry in her shrill little voice. "Let's just you and me look at the funny people. We can see the giant when the crowd moves on. I want to see 'Princess Lalla' more'n anything. I want my fortune told. I want to ask her where Sally is—you remember—Sally Ford. That man says she 'sees all, knows all,' so he ought to know where Sally is."

"The big girls say she run away," Eloise answered, her eyes round with awe. "They say she did something awful bad and run away with a man—"

"Sally didn't do nothing bad," Betsy retorted indignantly. "She couldn't. She was the best 'big girl' in the Home. She play-acted for us little kids and—oh!" She stopped with a gasp, her eyes popping as she took in the fantastic splendor of "Princess Lalla." "Listen, Princess Lalla," she mustered up courage to whisper coaxingly, "does it cost a lot to get your fortune told? I've only got a nickel that the New York lady gave me—she give every one of us a dime, but I spent a nickel for some salt water taffy—"

Sally could hardly restrain herself from crying out: "Oh, Betsy, it's me! Sally Ford! You don't have to spend your poor little nickel to find me! I'm here!" But she knotted her little brown hands more tightly and managed to smile with a princess-like indifference and weariness as she cooed in her "Turkish" accent:

"Eeet costs noth-ing to get ze fortune told. Womens and mens must pay 25 cents to learn past, pres-ent and future, but for you—noth-ing! Come up here by my side. I weel read the crystal."

Betsy's eyes grew rounder and rounder; her little mouth fell open in astonishment. Then with a wild shout of joy she stumbled up the stairs and flung her arms about Sally crying and laughing:

"You're not Princess Lalla! You're Sally Ford, play-acting! Oh, Sally, I'm so glad I found you! Hey, kids! Kids! It's Sally Ford, play-acting!"

For a terrible moment, long enough for Gus, the barker, to jump from Jan's platform and come toward her on a run, Sally sat frozen with terror. She felt that Betsy's keen eyes had stripped her of her brown make-up, of her fantastic clothes, of the protecting black veil, so that anyone who looked at her could see

that she was indeed "just Sally Ford, play-acting."

She wanted to rise from her gilded chair and run for her life—and David's—but she had lost all control of her muscles. Betsy was still clinging to her, her babyish hands shaking the slender shoulders under the green satin jacket, when Gus bounded upon the platform and took the almost hysterical child into his arms.

"Hello, Tiddlywinks!" he sang out jovially. "Having a good time at the carnival? Listen, kiddie! I'm going to give you a real treat! Yessir! You know what you're going to do? Just guess!"

Sally felt the blood begin to thaw in her frozen veins. Gus was standing by. Dear Gus! But Gus was too wise to give the child in his arms a chance to reply. He hurried on, his voice loud and cajoling:

"I'm going to let you stand right up on the platform with the little lady midget—her name's 'Pitty Sing'—and show all the other kids how much bigger you are than a grown-up lady. Yessir, she's a grown-up lady and she's not nearly as big as you. Now what do you think of that?"

Betsy was torn between her love for Sally, whom she was convinced she had found, and her pride in being chosen to stand beside the midget. She looked doubtfully from Sally, whose eyes beneath the black lace veil were lowered to her tightly locked hands, to the platform opposite, where "Pitty Sing," the midget, was stretching out a tiny hand invitingly. The midget won, for the moment at least.

"I'm six, going on seven, and I'm a big girl," she confided to the barker on whose shoulder she was riding in delightful conspicuousness.

The children, true to the herd instinct which had been so highly developed in the orphanage, trooped after Gus and Betsy, even more easily diverted than she from their pop-eyed inspection of "Princess Lalla."

Sally heard Thelma answer another child derisively: "Aw, Betsy's off her nut! Sure that ain't Sally! That's a Turkish princess from Con-stan-ti-no-ple. The man said so. 'Sides, Sally's white, and the princess is brown—"

"All right, children, right this way!" Gus was ballyhooing loudly. "Permit me to introduce 'Pitty Sing,' the smallest and prettiest little woman in the world. Just 29 inches tall, 29 years old and 29 pounds heavy. Did I say 'heavy'? Excuse me, Pitty Sing! I meant 29 pounds light! Look at her, little ladies and gents! Ain't she cute? Her parents were just as big as your papas and mamas—"

He remembered just too late that he was talking to orphans, and his jolly face went dark red. But he recovered quickly, glanced about his audience, saw that Miss Pond was straying nervously toward Sally's platform, as if halfway convinced that Betsy's childish intuition had been correct.

"Oh, Miss Pond!" he sang out ingratiatingly. "I wonder if you'd do me the favor to step up on the platform. I believe Betsy is scared. Yessir, I believe she's

scared half out of her skin!" He laughed, stooped to chuck Betsy under the chin, then, with a courtly gesture, offered Miss Pond his hand.

Sally looked on, her throat tight with fear and with tears of gratitude toward Gus, as the barker, with a rapid fire of talk and joking, kept his audience completely hypnotized. He jollied shy little Betsy into taking the midget into her arms, like a baby or a big doll, and only Sally, of all those who looked on, could guess how keenly the artificially smiling little atom of humanity was resenting this insult to her dignity.

He coaxed and flattered and flustered Miss Pond into standing beside "Pitty Sing," so that the children could see what a vast difference there was in their height. And somehow he had attracted the attention of a carnival employe, for before he had exhausted the possibilities of the midget as a diversion, Winfield Bybee himself came striding into the Palace of Wonders, mounted the midget's platform and, after a moment's whispered conference with Gus, made an announcement:

"Children, I'm old Pop Bybee; Winfield Bybee is the way it's wrote down in the Bible. I own this carnival and I want to tell you children that I'm proud to have you as my guests. I love children, always did! Now, boys and girls, the Ferris wheel and the whip and the merry-go-rounds are waiting for you."

He was interrupted by a whoop of joy from the boys, in which the girls joined more timidly. "It won't cost you a cent. If your chaperon—" and he turned to Miss Pond with a courtly bow—"will do me the honor to accept these tickets, you'll all have a ride on the Ferris wheel, the whip and the merry-go-round absolutely free. Don't crowd now, children, but gather at the door of the tent. I thank you."

When he sprang, rather stiffly, from the platform, he offered Miss Pond his hand, then, with her arm pressed to his side, he escorted her with pompous courtesy to the door of the tent, where the children were already milling about, wild with excitement.

In her terror Sally had forgotten the golden-haired woman in the green silk sports suit. Now that the danger was passing, miraculously averted by Gus and Pop Bybee, she started to draw a deep, trembling sigh of relief, but it was choked in her throat by the discovery that she was being regarded intently by the beautiful woman, who was standing beside the midget's platform.

"Oh!" Sally thought in a new flutter of terror. "She heard Betsy call me Sally Ford. She's going to question me. I wonder who she is. Maybe she's a trustee's wife—oh, she's coming! She's going to talk to me—"

She rose from her high-backed, gilded chair, trying to do so without haste. Since the performance was ended she had every right to leave the tent, and she would do so, but she mustn't run. She mustn't give herself away—

"Hel-lo, Enid! I couldn't believe my eyes! What in the world are you doing so far from Park Avenue?"

Sally, forcing herself to walk with sedate leisureliness down the little wooden steps of the platform, saw the New Yorker who had been paying her half-mocking, half admiring attention all afternoon, stride swiftly and gracefully across the tent toward the golden-haired woman. So he too had witnessed Betsy's hysterical identification! She had forgotten that he was in the tent, watching her, smiling mockingly, biding his chance to ask her again to go to supper with him after the last show that night.

The golden-haired woman halted, and Sally, out of the corner of her veil-protected eyes, saw an expression of startled surprise and then of annoyance sweep over the beautiful little face. Odd that these two who had so strangely crossed her path in one hectic day should know each other, should meet a thousand miles away from home, in the freak show tent of a third-rate carnival!

"Oh, hello, Van! I might ask what you're doing so far from Park Avenue, but I suppose you're visiting your cousin, the governor. Court's here on business and I'm amusing myself taking the orphans to the carnival. A new role for me, isn't it—Lady Bountiful! Poor little devils! If only they didn't want to paw me!"

Now that she was safe from being questioned Sally wanted to make her passage to the "alley" door of the tent take as long as possible, so that not a note of the music of that extraordinary voice should be lost to her. She had expected the golden-haired lady's voice to be a sweet, tinkling soprano, to match her in size, but the voice which thrilled her with its perfection of modulation was a rich, throaty contralto, a little arrogant, even as the speaker was, but so effortless and so golden that Sally would have been content to listen to it, no matter what words it might have said.

Sally paused at the door of the tent, and cast a swift glance backward over her green-satin shoulder. "Van" was holding one of "Enid's" hands in both of his, laughing down at her, mockingly but fondly, as if they were the best of friends.

"Well," she said to herself, as she ran toward the dress tent, "now that he's found *her*, he won't bother me. I wonder who 'Court' is. Her husband? I hate rich women who play 'Lady Bountiful,'" she thought with fierce resentment. "But—I can't hate *her*. She's too beautiful. Like a little gold-and-green bird—a singing bird—a bird that sings contralto."

She was resting between shows, lying on her cot in the dress tent, when Pop Bybee came striding in.

"It's all right, honey. Don't be scared to go on with the show. That Pond dame came cackling to me, all het up, half believing what this Betsy baby said about you being Sally Ford, but I give her a grand song and dance about you being the same Princess Lalla who joined the show in New York in April. She

wanted to talk to you, but I steered her off, told her you couldn't hardly speak English and she'd just upset you. Just stick to your lingo, child, and don't act scared. Ain't a chance in the world the Pond dame will make another squawk."

He must have spoken to Gus, also, for the barker cut her late afternoon and evening performances as short as possible, although by doing so he lost many a quarter. She smiled upon him gratefully, was pleased to the point of tears by his whispered: "Good kid! You've sure got sand!" after the ten o'clock show when she had apparently regained her confidence and her intuition to know "past, present and future."

As the evening wore on the heat grew more and more oppressive. The wilted audience passed languidly from freak to freak, mopping their red faces and tugging at tight collars. Children cried fretfully, monotonously; women reproved them with high, heat-maddened voices; Jan, the giant, fainted while Gus was ballyhooing him, and it took six "white hopes" to carry him to his tent. At eleven o'clock, when Gus had just started his last "spiel" of the evening, a terrified black man, with eyes rolling and sweat pouring down his face, staggered into the tent, bawling:

"Awful storm's blowin' up, folks! Look lak a cyclone! Run for yo' lives! Tents ain't safe! Oh, mah Gawd!"

The storm broke with such sudden and devastating fury that the performers in the Palace of Wonders tent had little time to obey the "white hope's" frantic bellow of warning.

The terrified audience milled like stampeded cattle, choking up both exits of the tent, that leading out into the midway, and the flap at the back of the tent through which performers passed in and out between shows. At each exit the fear-crazed carnival visitors were assaulted by a dazing impact of wind and hail and rain, driven back into the tent.

Sally was fighting her way toward the "alley" exit, her frail, small body hurling itself futilely against men who had lost all thought of chivalry, knew only that death threatened.

The region was notorious for its cyclones, and the horror of such a calamity was stamped on every pallid face. Children screamed; women shrilled for help, called frantically for their offspring separated from them in that mad rush for the exits.

Sally had almost won to the alley exit when she remembered "Pitty Sing," the midget, tiny, helpless Miss Tanner, who was paying her to carry her to and from the tent, who must even now be cowering in her baby-chair, unable even to reach the ground without assistance.

It was not quite so hard to push her way back into the center of the tent; crazed men and women offered little resistance to anyone who was so foolish as

to tempt death under a collapsed tent.

She had almost reached the midget's platform when she suddenly felt herself lifted into a pair of strong arms, swung high above the heads of the last of the crowd that was battling its way to the exits. Her cry was instinctive, unreasoning, direct from her heart: "David! Oh, David!"

A mocking laugh answered her and she squirmed in the man's arms so that she could see his face. It was not David at all, but the man whom "Enid" had called "Van." His face was laughing, gay, mocking, untouched by the shameful pallor of fear; exultant, rather, in the excitement of the storm. His dark eyes were wide, shining even through the fitful darkness made by the flickering of the crazily swinging gas jets.

"Isn't it glorious?" he challenged her, above the uproar of wind, rain, hail and the frightened animal sounds of human beings in fear of death.

"I've got to find the midget—Pitty Sing!" she shouted, struggling frantically to release herself.

"The charming barker has rescued her," Van shouted. "I was afraid some officious ass had cheated me of the pleasure of rescuing you. I've waited all day—"

But his sentence was broken in two by the long-threatened collapse of the tent. A center-pole struck him a glancing blow, knocking him flat, and Sally with him.

For what seemed like hours of nightmare she struggled to release herself from the steel-like clasp of his arms and the smothering embrace of the rain-sodden canvas. To add to the horror, rain fell heavily upon the canvas that held them pinned helplessly to the earth; hail pelted her flesh bitingly even through the dubious protection of the canvas; and every moment they were in mortal danger of being trampled to death by the feet of fleeing carnival visitors, who had been clear of the tent when it had collapsed.

"Don't—struggle," came that mocking voice, panting a little with the effort of speaking under the smothering caul of canvas. "Lie—still. I'll hold up—the canvas—so you—can breathe. Shield your face—with your—arms. Sorry—I muffed—the role—of rescuer—of damsels—in distress."

"Oh, hush!" Sally cried angrily, but doing her best to obey him. She crooked an arm over her face, so that the hail no longer punished it. And she relaxed as much as possible, her head on Van's shoulder, her feet pushing futilely at the sodden mass of canvas that weighted them down.

"Better?" he asked casually, no fear at all in his voice, and only a mocking sort of anxiety. "We'll be safe enough here until the tent is raised, unless someone steps on us. And by this time your charming employer, the redoubtable Pop Bybee, has of course assembled his roustabouts to raise the tent in the expectation of finding buried treasure—ostrich men, midgets, and Turkish harem girls who

read crystals."

"Aren't you ever serious? Aren't you frightened?" Sally gasped.

"Serious? Well, hardly ever!" the man chuckled. "Frightened? Frequently! But I am so appreciative of this opportunity to be alone with you that I could hardly quibble with fate to the extent of being frightened at the means which accomplished it."

"Oh, I wonder what's happened to—to everybody!" Sally began to shiver with sobs.

"To—David?" Van's mocking voice came strangely out of the darkness. "Lucky David, wherever he is now, that your first thought should go to him. David and Sally! How do you like 'play-acting,' Sally Ford?"

CHAPTER XI

The terror which the menace of violent death had held for her now seemed a pallid, weak thing, beside the heart-stopping emotion which the New Yorker's mocking, amused voice uttering her real name called into being. Her head jerked instinctively from the comfort of his arm. Squirming away from him, under the sodden blanket of canvas, she curled into a tight little ball of agony, her face cupped in her hands. "So that's why you bothered me so!" she cried, her voice muffled by her fingers. "You're a detective! You knew all the time! You were going to take me to jail! Oh, you—Oh! David, David!"

"Listen, you little idiot!" Van's voice came sharply, bereft of its mocking note for once. "I'm not a detective! Good heavens! Do I look like one? I've always understood that they have enormous feet and wear derbies and talk out of the corner of their mouths." Mockery was creeping back. "Did you think that a poor little tyke like you was worth sending to New York for a detective to bay at your heels like a bloodhound? I merely overheard the little Betsy's keen penetration of your disguise. And I took the trouble to inquire casually of the governor this evening just who—if anybody—Sally Ford might be—"

"Then you gave me away—David and me!" she accused him, shuddering with sobs.

"Not at all. How it does pain me for you to persist in misunderstanding

me! I gave nothing away—absolutely nothing! I merely found out that David Nash and Sally Ford are fugitives from justice, wanted on rather serious charges. After making the acquaintance of 'Princess Lalla,' I might add that I don't believe a word of the silly story. Besides, I have your own word for it—" and he laughed—"that you are 'not that kind of a girl.' As a matter-of-fact—oh! We're about to be rescued, Sally Ford! I hear the 'heave-ho' of stalwart black boys. And the storm is over except for a gentle, lady-like rain."

It was not till he mentioned the blessed fact that Sally realized that the storm was indeed over. The only sound, besides the shouts of the "white hopes" engaging in raising the collapsed tent, was the patter of rain upon the canvas which still weighted down her small cold body, as wet as if she had been swimming.

Struggling to a sitting position under the already moving mass of canvas, the New Yorker cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted: "Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!" In an aside to Sally he chuckled: "What does one shout under the circumstances—or rather, under the canvas of a collapsed tent?"

Sally managed a weak little laugh. "One shouts, 'Hey, rube!'" she told him.

And his stentorian "Hey, rube!" struggled up through layers of dripping canvas, bringing speedy relief for the submerged "rube" and performer. When at last the tent was raised, Sally walked out, Van's arm still about her shivering, soaked body, to find apparently the entire carnival force huddled in the rain to welcome her, drawn by that fateful cry of "Hey, rube!"

Jan, the giant, was there, sad-eyed but smiling, "Pitty Sing" perched on one of his shoulders, Noko, the male midget, on the other. "The girl nobody can lift" was there, too, her right arm in splints; a deep gash down her pale cheek; Eddie Cobb, who, they told her as they chorused their welcome, had been crying like a baby as he searched for her through the wreck of the carnival, was clasping a drenched Kewpie doll to his breast, apparently the sole survivor of his gambling wheel stock.

Pop and Mrs. Bybee were there, Mrs. Bybee clad only in a black sateen petticoat and a red sweater. And in spite of his heavy loss from the fury of the storm Pop was smiling, his bright blue eyes twinkling a welcome. But—but—Sally's eyes roved from face to face, confidently at first, grateful for their friendliness, then widening with alarm. For David was not there.

"Where's David?" she cried, then, her voice growing shrill and frantic, she screamed at them: "Where's David? Tell me! He's hurt—dead? Tell me!" She broke away from Van, ran to Pop Bybee and tugged with her little blue-white hands washed free of their brown make-up, at his wet coat.

"Reckon he's safe and sound in the privilege car," Bybee reassured her, but his blue eyes avoided hers, pityingly, she thought.

"Was anyone killed in the storm? Tell me!" she insisted, her bluish lips twisting into a piteous loop of pain.

"We can't find Nita nowhere," Babe, the fat girl, blurted out, her eyes wide with childish love of excitement. "We thought she was buried under a tent but they've got all the tents up now and she ain't nowhere."

Nita—and David. Nita—David—missing. For she did not believe for an instant that Pop Bybee was telling her the truth.

"It seems to me," Van interrupted nonchalantly, "that dry clothes are indicated for Princess Lalla. May I escort you to your tent?" and he bowed with mocking ceremony before her.

"He saved my life," Sally acknowledged suddenly, half-angrily, for she resented with childish unreasonableness the fact that it had been this mocking, insolent stranger, this "rube" from New York, not David, who had saved her.

An hour later when she was uneasily asleep in her berth in the show train, whose sleeping cars had been pressed into service in lieu of the soaked cots in the dress tent, a sudden uproar—hoarse voices shouting and cursing—shocked her into consciousness. Broken sentences flung out by angry men, Pop Bybee's voice easily distinguished among them, told her what had happened:

"Every damn cent gone!—Pay roll gone!—Safe cracked!—Told you you was a fool to take in them two hoboes that was already wanted by the police. That Dave guy's beat it—made a clean-up—"

"Everybody tumble out! Pop Bybee wants us all in the privilege car," a carnival employe shouted, running down the sleeping car and pausing only to thrust a hand into each berth, like a Pullman porter awakening its passengers.

But Sally was already dressing, getting her dress on backward and sobbing with futile rage at the time lost in reversing it. When she was scrambling out of her upper berth, a tiny hand reached out of the lower and tugged at her foot.

"Don't forget me, Sally," the midget commanded sharply. "And for heaven's sake, don't take on so! You'll make yourself sick, crying like that. Of course your David didn't rob the safe. I'm all dressed."

Sally parted the green curtains and stretched out her arms for the midget, who was so short that she could stand upright upon her bed without her head touching the rounded support of the upper berth. Little Miss Tanner ran into Sally's arms and clambered to her shoulder.

"It's that Nita." She nodded her miniature head emphatically. "I always did have my suspicions about her. Always turning white as a sheet when a policeman hove into sight."

"But David's missing, too," Sally sobbed, as she hurried down the aisle which was becoming choked with frowsy-headed women in all stages of dress and undress. "Of course he didn't do it—"

"Hurry up, everybody! Don't take time to primp, girls!" a man bawled at them from the door.

They found most of the men employes and performers of the carnival already assembled with the Bybees in the privilege car. Pop Bybee's usually lobster-colored face was as white as putty, but his arm was gallantly about his wife's shoulder. Mrs. Bybee still wore the black sateen petticoat and red sweater in which she had hurried from the show train to the carnival immediately after the storm. Her reddened eyes showed that she had been crying bitterly, but as the carnival family crowded into the privilege car she searched each face with fury and suspicion.

"Come here to me, Sally Ford!" she shrilled, when Sally entered the car with "Pitty Sing" riding on her shoulder.

"Now, honey, go easy!" Pop Bybee cautioned her futilely. "Better let me do the talking—"

"You shut up!" his wife commanded angrily. "Sally, you knew where I kept the money! You saw the safe! Oh, I was a fool, all right, but I wanted to show that I trusted you! Huh! Thought I'd wronged you by accusing you of taking presents from my husband! Tell him you saw the safe! Tell him!" And she seized Sally's wrist and shook her so that the midget had to cling tightly to the girl's neck to keep from being catapulted to the floor.

"Yes, Mrs. Bybee," Sally answered, her voice almost dying in her throat with fright. "I saw the safe. But I didn't tell anybody—"

"You're a liar!" Mrs. Bybee screamed. "You told that David boy that very night! Sneaked off and went walking with him and cooked up this robbery so you two could make your get-away. Thought it was a grand way to get out of the state so the cops couldn't pinch you, didn't you?" she repeated, beside herself with anger, her fingers clamped like a vise on Sally's wrist.

"Oh, please!" Sally moaned, writhing with a pain of which she was scarcely conscious, so great was her fear and bewilderment at this unexpected charge.

"Sally certainly didn't go with him," Pop Bybee interposed reasonably.

"Sure she didn't!" his wife shrilled with angry triumph. "She couldn't! She couldn't! She was buried under the tent! If it hadn't been for the storm she wouldn't be here now, working on your sympathies with them dying-calf eyes of hers—"

"Better let me handle this, honey," Pop Bybee interrupted again, this time more firmly. "Turn the child loose. Ain't a bit of use breaking her arm. Now, folks, I might as well tell you all just what happened, and then try to get to the bottom of this matter. When the worst of the storm was over Mrs. Bybee left the show train to look for me, to see if I was hurt or if she could do anything for anyone who was. She hadn't been out of the stateroom all evening till then—

not since she'd put some money into the safe right after supper. She found the boy Dave starting out to look for Sally, and she ordered him to stay on the train to keep an eye on it, in case tramps or crooks tried to board it. There wasn't anybody else on the train. That right, Mother?"

He turned to Mrs. Bybee, who nodded angrily.

"She told him she'd look after Sally, but he'd have to stand guard on the train. She didn't say anything to him about the safe—just told him to patrol the train while she was gone. The safe is under a seat in our stateroom, and far as we knew, nobody knew where it was, except Sally here, who happened to come into the stateroom when my wife was counting a day's receipts."

"Please, Mr. Bybee," Sally interrupted, memory struggling with the panic in her brain. "Someone else did know! Nita knew! When I left the stateroom that last day in Stanton I saw Nita disappearing into the women's dressing room, and I thought she'd been listening. She—"

"Hold on a minute!" Bybee cut in sternly. "How do you know she'd been listening? Any proof?"

"Yes, sir!" Sally cried eagerly. "Mrs. Bybee had been telling me that she'd found out that Ford isn't my real name, that the woman I always thought was my mother wasn't really my mother at all. She said she guessed I—that my mother was ashamed I'd ever been born. And that same day Nita called me a—a bad name that means—" She could not go on. Sobs began to shake her small body again and her face was scarlet with shame.

"That's right!" Gus, the barker, edged toward Bybee through the crowd. "I found Sally lighting into Nita for calling her that name. And Nita didn't deny she'd done it. Reckon that proves she was eavesdropping, all right. And if she was listening in, too, she was probably peeping in, too, or heard Mrs. Bybee talking about the safe. Was the door open, ma'am?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Bybee snapped. "Yes, it may have been. It was awful hot. And I didn't know anybody was on the train."

"It was open a little way," Sally cried. "I remember distinctly. Because I worried about whether Nita had overheard what Mrs. Bybee had been telling me. And there's something else—something that happened that night, when David and I were walking." Memory of that blessed hour in the moonlight brought tears to her eyes, but she dashed them away with the wrist which bore the marks of Mrs. Bybee's rage.

"What was it, Sally?" Pop Bybee asked gently. "All we want is to get at the truth of this thing. Don't be afraid to speak up."

"I hate being a tattle-tale," Sally whimpered. "I never told on anyone in all my life! But David and I were sitting under a tree, not talking, when we suddenly heard Nita's voice. She couldn't see us for the tree, but we peeped around the

trunk of it and we saw Nita and a man walking awfully close together, and Nita was talking. We just heard a few words. She said: 'No monkey business now, Steve. If you double-cross me I'll cut your heart out! Fifty-fifty or nothing—'"

Unconsciously her voice had mimicked Nita's, so that to the startled carnival family it seemed that Nita, the Hula dancer, had appeared suddenly in the car.

"Sounds like Nita, all right." Gus, the barker, nodded with satisfaction. "'Steve,' huh? Who the devil is this Steve?"

"What did he look like, Sally?" Bybee asked.

"I don't know," she answered, her big blue eyes imploring him to believe her. "We couldn't see their faces. We just recognized Nita's voice and her yellow hair that looked almost white in the moonlight. He wasn't tall, not any taller than Nita, and I guess he wasn't very big either, because they were so close together that they looked almost like one person. We didn't hear the man say a word. Nita was doing all the talking—"

"Nita would!" a voice from the crowd growled. "Reckon I can tell you something about this, Pop. I was just ready to ballyhoo the last performance of the 'girlie' show when Nita come slouching up to me, pulling a long face and a song-and-dance about being knocked out with the heat. Bessie had fainted at the last show and I thought Nita might really be all in, so I told her she could cut the last performance and go to the dress tent. I never seen hair nor hide of her again, and—" he paused significantly, "I don't reckon I ever will."

"No, I reckon you won't, not unless the cops nab her," Mrs. Bybee cut in bitterly. "I always said she was a snake in the grass! And that David, too! Them goody-goody kind ain't ever worth the powder and lead it'd take to blow out their brains! I told you, Winfield Bybee, that there was something phony about that hussy and Dave! 'Tain't like a star performer like Nita thought she was to trail around after a cook's helper, like she done with Dave. They didn't pull the wool over my eyes, even if they did double-cross the kid here—if they *did* double-cross her! Mind you, Bybee, I ain't saying I believe a word she's been saying! She knew where the safe was, and she tipped off the boy.

"I ain't forgot they was both wanted by the police when they joined up with us! As I said before, if it hadn't been that she was buried under the freak tent, she'd have skipped with Nita and Dave. You roped Nita in on your little scheme, didn't you, because she'd had more experience cracking safes than you or the boy? That's right, ain't it?" the old lady demanded fiercely of Sally.

Sally shrank from her in horror, but the midget, still perched on her shoulder, patted her cheeks reassuringly. "No, no! I didn't even tell David where the safe was! I didn't! David didn't do it! He couldn't! David's good! He's the best man in the world!"

"Then where is he?" Mrs. Bybee screamed. "Why did he blow? I left him to guard the train, didn't I? And he ain't here, is he? He wasn't here when we got back from the carnival lot after the tents was raised. If he's so damned good, why did he blow with Nita and this Steve you've made up out of your head?"

"Now, now, Mother," Pop Bybee soothed her, but his eyes were troubled and suspicious. "Reckon we'd better notify the police, folks. I hate to call in the law. I've always said I was the law of this outfit, but I suppose if I've been harboring thieves I'll have to get the help of the law to track 'em down. Ben, you and Chuck beat it down the tracks to the police station and give 'em a description of Nita and Dave and this Steve person, as much as Sally's been able to tell us anyway—"

"Please, Mr. Bybee!" Sally ran to the showman and seized both his hands in hers. "Please don't set the police on David! I know he's innocent! There's some reason why he isn't here—a good reason! But he didn't have anything to do with the robbery. I know that! But if you tell the police he's been with the carnival they'll find him somehow and put him in jail on those other charges—and me, too! It doesn't matter about me, but I couldn't live if David was put in jail on my account! Oh, please! You've been so good to us!" And she went suddenly on her knees to him, her face upraised in an agony of appeal.

Pop Bybee looked down upon Sally's agonized face with troubled indecision in his bright blue eyes. He tried to lift her to her feet, but her arms were locked about his knees. The midget had scrambled from Sally's shoulder to the floor of the car and as Bybee hesitated, her tiny fists beat upon his right leg for attention.

"You're not going to break your promise to Sally, are you, Mr. Bybee?" the tiny voice piped shrilly. "You told her and the boy you'd protect them. She's told you the truth. Don't you know truth when you hear it? I always knew Nita was a crook. She never saw a policeman or a constable or a sheriff without turning white as a ghost. She joined up with the carnival just to learn the lay of the land and tip off her accomplice—this Steve person—where to find the money. That's why she was spying on Mrs. Bybee that day in Stanton. Listen to me!"

"I'm listening, Miss Tanner," Pop Bybee acknowledged wearily. "And I swear I don't know what to say or do. If they get clear away with that money the show'll be stranded. Every cent I had in the world was in that safe. Reckon I was a fool to carry it with me, but I never trusted a bank, and it was more convenient, having it right with me. Tomorrow's payday, too, and all of you are in the same boat with me."

"Listen, boss, let's take a vote on it." Gus, the barker, spoke up suddenly and loudly. "Now me—I believe the kid here is telling the truth. No college boy could crack a safe like that. It was a professional job, or I'm a liar! Of course Nita may have tolled the boy off with her and this Steve, since she was so crazy about

him, but we ain't got no proof she did, and as Sally says, if you sick the cops on the boy, the jig will be up with her as well as the boy. Another thing, Dave may be laying in the bushes somewhere with a bullet—"

"Oh!" Sally screamed, as the full significance of Gus' words burst upon her. She fainted then, her little body slumping into a heap at Bybee's feet, her head striking one of his big shoes and resting there.

When she regained consciousness she was lying in the lower berth which had belonged to Nita, and the midget was kneeling on the pillow beside her head, dabbing her face with a handkerchief soaked in aromatic spirits of ammonia. Mazie and Sue, two of the dancers in the "girlie" show, sat on the edge of the berth, their cold-creamed faces almost beautiful with anxiety and sympathy.

"What's the matter? Is it time to get up?" Sally asked dazedly. "What are you doing, Betty?"

The midget answered in her tiny, brisk voice: "I'm bathing your face with ammonia which Mrs. Bybee sent. It should be cologne, and this ammonia will probably dry your skin something dreadful, but it was the only thing we could get. You fainted, you know."

"Oh, I remember!" Sally moaned, her head beginning to thresh from side to side on the pillow. "Have they found David? I know he's been hurt!"

"They're looking for him," the midget assured her briskly. "Mr. Bybee took a vote on whether he was to notify the police about David's being gone, as well as Nita, and the vote was 'No!' That ought to make you feel happier!"

"Oh, it does!" Sally began to cry softly. "You have all been so kind, so kind! You said Mrs. Bybee sent the ammonia?" she asked wistfully.

"She certainly did, and she's in the kitchen of the privilege car right now, making you some hot tea. She won't say she's sorry, probably, but she'll try to make it up to you. She's like that—always flying off the handle and suspicious of everybody, but she's got a heart as big as Babe, the fat girl."

"And so have you!" Sally told her brokenly, taking both of the tiny hands into one of hers and laying them softly against her lips.

"Ain't love grand?" Mazie sighed deeply. "If it had been my sweetie, I'd a-fell for that line of Ma Bybee's about him running off with Nita, but you sure stuck by him! I was in love like that once, when I was a kid. I married him, too, and he run off with the albino girl and took my grouch bag with him. Every damn cent I had! But it sure was sweet before we was married and he was nuts about me."

"Aw, let the kid alone!" Sue slipped from the edge of the berth and yawned widely. "Gawd, I'm sleepy! If the cops don't catch that Hula hussy I'm going out looking for her myself, and when I get through with her she'll never shake another grass skirt! C'mon, Mazie. It's three o'clock in the morning, and we've

got eighteen shows ahead of us."

"Maybe!" Mazie yawned. "If Pop wasn't stringing us, we'll be stranded in this burg. G'night, Sally. G'night, Midge. And say, Sally, even if this Dave boy has blowed and left you flat, you won't have no trouble copping off another sweetie. Gus was telling us about that New York rube that's trailing you. Hook up with him and you'll wear diamonds. Believe me, kid, they ain't none of 'em worth losing sleep over when you've got eighteen shows a day ahead of you. G'night."

When they had gone the midget yanked the green curtains together with comical fierceness, then crawled under the top of the sheet that covered Sally.

"I'm going to sleep here with you, Sally," she said. "I don't take up much room."

And the woman who was old enough to be Sally's mother curled her 29-inch body in the curve of Sally's right arm and laid her tiny cheek, as soft and wrinkled as a worn kid glove, in the hollow of Sally's firm young neck.

But long after the midget was asleep, Sally lay wide-eyed and tense in the dark, her mind a welter of fears and love and doubt. She had pleaded passionately with Pop Bybee for David, fiercely shoving to the dark depths of her mind even the memory of the jealousy which Nita had fiendishly aroused in her heart. But now that she had saved him temporarily by convincing Bybee that the boy could not have taken part in the robbery, doubt began to insinuate its ugly body upward from those dark depths where she had buried it.

Did he really love her—a pathetic, immature girl from an orphanage, a girl who had been nothing but a responsibility and a source of dire trouble to him since he had first met and championed her on the Carson farm?

Her old feeling of inferiority rose like nausea in her throat. Life in an orphanage is not calculated to give a girl faith in her own beauty and charm. No one, until David's teasing eyes had rested on her, had thought her beautiful.

Had he been only sorry for her, glad of an opportunity to "blow," to get out of the state where he was wanted on two serious charges? Was he dismayed, too, by the fact that moonlight had tricked him into telling her that he loved her, thus adding the responsibility of her future to the burden of protecting her in this hectic present?

Then a sweeter, saner memory clamored for attention. She heard again his fond, husky voice caressing her, his "Dear little Sally!" And involuntarily her mouth pursed in memory of his kiss, that kiss that had left her giddy with delight.

How unfailingly kind and sweet he had been since that first day, when he had strode into her life, with the sun on his chestnut hair and the glory of the sun in his eyes. He had not failed her once, but she was failing him now, by doubting him, by picturing him as a fugitive in the dark, fleeing with a pair of criminals

who had robbed the man whose kindness had protected him from the law.

Why, she must be crazy to think for a moment that David could do a thing like that! No one in the world was as good and kind and honorable as David.

But where was he? Mrs. Bybee had left him to guard the train. Not for a moment could she believe that he had failed in his trust. Painfully, Sally tried to visualize the dreadful thing that had happened. David alone, patrolling the train, his eyes sharp for intruders. Then—the sudden appearance of Nita and the man, Steve, weighted down with the contents of the safe they had robbed. For Sally knew that the robbery must have taken place before David caught his first glimpse of the crooks. Otherwise the safe would be intact now, even if David's dead body had been found as silent witness that he had fulfilled his trust.

Her mind shuddered away from that imagined picture, went back to the painful reconstruction of what must have taken place. David had seen them, had given chase. Of course! Otherwise he would be here now. Was he still pursuing them, or was he lying somewhere near the road, wounded, his splendid young body ignominiously flung into a cornfield?

She could bear no more, could no longer lie safe in her berth while David needed her somewhere. Very carefully, for all her haste, she lifted the tiny body that nestled against her side and laid it tenderly upon the pillow, which was big enough to serve as a mattress for the midget. Then, sobbing soundlessly, she groped for her shoes in the little green hammock swung across the windows; found them, put them on, slipped to the edge of the berth. She was profoundly thankful that the girls had not undressed her after she had fainted.

When she reached the car in which Mr. and Mrs. Bybee occupied a stateroom she saw the showman and his wife through the open door, talking to two strangers whom she guessed to be plainclothes policemen from police headquarters of Capital City. The two men were evidently about to leave, nodding impatiently that they understood, when Sally appeared, like a frightened, pale little ghost in green-and-white striped gingham.

She forgot that she was without make-up, that the police were looking for her as well as for the criminals who had robbed the safe. But Pop Bybee had not forgotten. Still talking with the plainclothes detectives, he motioned to her violently behind his back. She turned and forced herself to walk slowly and sedately toward the other end of the car as the detectives made their farewells and their brusque promises of "quick action."

When the men had left the car Bybee's voice summoned her in a husky stage whisper, calling her "Lalla," so that the detectives, if they were listening, should not identify her with the girl who had run away from the orphanage in the company of a man wanted on a charge of assault with the intent to kill.

"Are you crazy?" Bybee demanded hoarsely when she had come running to

the stateroom. "Them was dicks! Policemen, understand? They mighta nabbed you. What are you doing up? Get back to bed and try to sleep."

"Have you found David?" she quavered, brushing aside his anxiety for her.

"Not a sign of him." Bybee shook his head. "But I didn't spill the beans to the dicks. I'd given you my word, and Winfield Bybee's word is as good as his bond."

"I'm going to look for David," she announced simply, but her blazing eyes dared him to try to prevent her. "He's hurt somewhere—or killed. I'm going to find him."

And before the astonished man or his wife could stretch out a hand to detain her she was gone. When she dropped from the platform of the car she heard the retreating roar of the police car. Instinct turned her in the opposite direction, away from the city, down the railroad tracks leading into the open country.

She did not know and would not have cared that Mr. and Mrs. Bybee were following her, Mrs. Bybee muttering disgustedly but refusing to let Sally search alone for the boy in whom she had such implicit faith.

Dawn was breaking, pale and wan, in a sky that was shamelessly cloudless and serene after the violence of last night's storm, when, over a slight hill, a man's figure loomed suddenly, then seemed to drag with unbearable weariness as it plodded toward the show train.

"David!" Sally shrieked. "David!"

She began to run, her ankles turning against clots of cinders, but her arms outstretched, a glory greater than that of the dawn in her face.

Before she reached him Sally almost fainted with horror, for in the pale light of the dawn she saw that David's shirt about his left shoulder was soaked with blood. But his uninjured right arm was stretched out in urgent invitation, and his voice was hailing her gaily, in spite of his terrible weakness and fatigue.

"Dear little Sally!" he cried huskily, as his right arm swept her against his breast. "Why aren't you in bed, darling? But I'm glad you're not! I've been able to keep plodding on in the hope of seeing you. Did you think I'd run away and left you? Poor little Sally!" he crooned over her, for she was crying, her frantic hands playing over his face, her eyes devouring him through her tears.

"But you're hurt, David!" she moaned. "I knew you were hurt! I told them so! I was looking for you. I knew you hadn't run away."

"And she made us believe you hadn't, too," Pop Bybee panted, having reached them on a run, dragging his wife behind him. "What happened, Dave boy? Had a mix-up with the dirty crooks, did you?"

"Winfield Bybee, you *are* a fool!" Mrs. Bybee gasped, breathless from running. "Let the poor boy get his breath first. Here! Put your arm about him and let him lean on you. Sally, you run back to the train and get help. This boy's

all done up and he's going to have that shoulder dressed before he's pestered to death with questions."

"I can walk," David panted, his breath whistling across his ashen lips. "I don't want Sally out of my sight. I—would—give up—then. Nothing much—the matter. Just a—bullet—in my shoulder. Be all right—in a—day or two."

"Please don't try to talk, darling," Sally begged, rubbing her cheek against his right hand and wetting it with tears.

"Lean on me and take it easy," Pop Bybee urged, his voice husky with unashamed emotion. "And don't talk any more till we get you into a berth. God! But I'm glad to see you, Dave boy! I'd made up my mind I'd never trust another man if you'd thrown me down. But Sally didn't doubt you a minute. Kept me from telling the police that you had disappeared with the crooks."

"Thanks," David gasped, leaning heavily on the showman. "I was scared sick—the police—had found—Sally. Knew there was—bound to be—an awful row."

He fainted then, his splendid young body crumpling suddenly to the cinders of the railroad track. Somehow the three of them managed to get him to the show train and into the Bybees' stateroom, where Gus, the barker, who had graduated from a medical school before the germ of wanderlust had infected him, dressed the wounded shoulder.

"The bullet went clear through the fleshy part of the arm at the shoulder," Gus told them, as he washed his hands in the stateroom's basin. "No bones touched at all. Just a flesh wound. Of course he's lost a lot of blood and he'll be pretty shaky for a few days, but no real harm done. You can turn off the faucet, Sally. Save them tears for a big tragedy—like ground glass in your cold cream, or something like that. Want a real doctor to give that shoulder the once-over, Pop?" he asked, turning to Bybee, who had not left David's side.

It was David, opening his eyes dazedly just then, who answered: "No other doctor, please. I'm a fugitive from justice, remember. If I could have some coffee now I think I could tell you what happened, Mr. Bybee."

A dozen eager voices outside the stateroom door offered to get the coffee from the privilege car, and within a few minutes Sally was kneeling before David, holding a cup of steaming black coffee to his lips.

As many of the carnival family as could crowd into the small space of the car aisle pressed against the open door of the stateroom to hear his story. Jan the Holland giant, who was too tall to stand upright in the car, was invited into the stateroom, where he sat between Pop Bybee and Mrs. Bybee, "Pitty Sing" in the crook of one of his arms, Noko, the Hawaiian midget, in the other. Sally still knelt beside David, holding his right hand tightly in both of hers and laying her lips upon it when his story moved her unbearably.

"I suppose Mrs. Bybee has told you that I was leaving the show train to

go to the carnival grounds to see if anything had happened to Sally. I'd have gone sooner, but the storm was so violent that I knew I'd not have a chance to get there. Mrs. Bybee said she was going to the lot and would look after Sally for me, but she wanted me to stay on the train, or near it, to patrol it. She didn't tell me there was a lot of money in her stateroom, or I'd have stationed myself in there."

"You see," Sally interrupted eagerly. "I told you I hadn't said a word to him about the safe."

"Safe?" David glanced down at her, puzzled. "So this Steve crook cracked a safe to get the money, did he? I didn't know—didn't have time to find out."

"And I told you it was a man named Steve!" Sally reminded them joyously, raising David's cold hand to her lips. "They thought I was making it all up, Dave, but they believed me after a while."

"I suppose Sally has told you that we saw Nita and some man walking in the moonlight that last night we were in Stanton," David addressed Pop Bybee. "We heard her call him Steve, and say something about what she'd do to him if he double-crossed her. I should have told you then, Mr. Bybee, but I didn't have an idea Nita was planning to rob the outfit, and anyway—" he blushed, his eyes twinkling fondly at Sally—"by morning I'd forgotten all about it. I couldn't think of anything but—but Sally. You see we'd just told each other that night that—that—well, sir, that we loved each other and—"

"Anybody else in the whole outfit could have told you that," Bybee chuckled. "It's all right, Dave. Carnival folks usually mind their own business and spend damn little time toting tales."

"I'm glad you're not blaming me," David said gratefully. "Well, sir, I was walking up and down the tracks, just wild to get away and see if anything had happened to Sally, when suddenly I heard a soft thud, like somebody jumping to the ground on the other side of the train. I crossed over as quick as I could, but by that time they were running down the side of the train pretty far ahead of me. It was Nita and a man. They must have been hidden on the train, waiting their chance, when the storm broke—were there when Mrs. Bybee left.

"I suppose they hadn't counted on any such luck; had probably intended to overpower her before you got back, sir, and the storm saved them the trouble."

"I'd have give them a run for the money," Mrs. Bybee retorted grimly, her skinny old hand knotting into a menacing fist.

"That's just what I did," David grinned rather whitely at her. "I yelled at them to stop, because I had an idea they'd been up to something, since they'd jumped off this car, and I knew Nita had no business on the train, since all you people were sleeping on the lot.

"They were carrying a couple of suitcases that looked suspiciously heavy

to me. It flashed over me that Mrs. Bybee, being treasurer of the outfit, must have left a lot of money in her stateroom, and that Nita and this Steve chap had been planning to rob her when Sally and I heard them talking the other night. I started after them, still yelling for them to stop, and Steve turned and fired at me. He missed me, lucky for me, and I kept right on.

"About a hundred yards beyond the end of the train they climbed into a car that was parked on the road that runs alongside the tracks and after telling me goodby with another bullet that missed me, too, Steve had the car started. I was about to give up and start toward Capital City to notify the police when I noticed there was a handcar on the tracks, just where this spur joins the main line.

"I threw the switch and in a minute I had the handcar on the main line and was pumping along after them. The state road parallels the railroad track for about five or six miles, you know, and I could make nearly as good time in my handcar as they could in their flivver, for it's a down grade nearly all the way." He paused, his eyes closing wearily as if every muscle in his body ached with the memory of that terrible ride in the dead of night.

"Better rest awhile, Dave," Pop Bybee suggested gently, bending over the boy to wipe the cold drops of sweat from his forehead.

"No, I'll get it over with," David protested weakly. "There's not much more to tell. They couldn't see me—had no idea I was trailing them in the handcar. But I could keep them in sight because of their headlights. I guess they'd have got away, though, if a freight train hadn't come along just then and blocked the road. They were just reaching the grade crossing where the state road cuts the railroad tracks when this freight came charging down on us—"

"But you, David!" Sally shuddered, bowing her head on his hand, the fingers of which curled upward weakly to cup her face. "You were on the track. Did the train hit you? Oh!"

"Of course not!" David grinned at her. "I'm here, and I wouldn't have been if the engine had hit the handcar when I was on it. But I'm afraid the railroad company is minus one handcar this morning. The cowcatcher of the freight engine scooped it up and tossed it aside as if it had been a baby's go-cart, but I'd already jumped and was tumbling down the bank into a nice bed of wildflowers.

"Pretty wet after the storm, so I didn't go to sleep. I'd jumped to the other side of the tracks and was hidden from Steve's car while the freight train rolled on. They didn't stop to hold a post-mortem over the handcar. Probably figured a tramp had been bumming a free ride on it and had got his, and good enough for him.

"When the train had passed I was waiting by the road for Steve's car. I guess he was pretty badly surprised when I hopped upon the running board and

grabbed the steering wheel and swerved the car into a ditch, nearly turning it over. I don't remember much of what happened then, what with Nita screeching and Steve swearing and popping his gun at me. But somehow I managed to get his revolver—didn't know I'd been shot at first—and dragged him out of the car.

"It must have been a pretty good fight, for Nita decided to beat it before it was finished. She started off with one of the suitcases but it was too heavy and she dropped it in the road and lit out. If Nita could dance as well as she can run," David interrupted himself to grin at Bybee, "she'd be a real loss to the outfit."

"Well, Dave, even if Steve did get away with the money, my hat's off to you, boy," and he reached for the hand which Sally was still cuddling jealously.

"Who's telling this?" David demanded, with just a touch of boyish bravado, which made Sally love him better than ever. "He didn't get away. I'm afraid he won't be good for much for a long time. Nita should have stayed to look."

"The money, Dave!" Mrs. Bybee screamed. "You didn't save the money, did you, Dave? Where are you, Winfield Bybee? I'm giving you fair warning! If he saved that money, I'm going to faint dead away!"

"Then I reckon I'd better not tell you that I did save the money," David grinned at her. "I surely hate to see you faint, ma'am. It isn't so pleasant."

"Dave, you answer me this minute!" the old lady commanded, shaking a skinny finger in his face. "Do you know the outfit'll be stranded if those two crooks did get away with the money? Every cent we had in the world was in that safe! You oughta be ashamed of yourself, teasing an old woman!"

"I did save the money, if that's what they had in the suitcases, Mrs. Bybee," David answered more seriously.

"Then where is it? What have you done with it? Left it lying in the road?" the showman's wife screeched, her eyes wild in her gray, wrinkled face.

"Now, now, Mother," Bybee soothed her. "If he did, he shan't be blamed. How could you expect him to walk six or seven miles with two heavy suitcases and his shoulder shot through?"

Sally lifted her face from David's caressing hand and glared at Mrs. Bybee. "Of course he didn't leave it lying in the road! After risking his life to save it for you? David is the cleverest and bravest man in the world! Don't you know that yet?"

Her eyes dropped then to David's face, softened and glowed with such a divine light of love that the boy's head jerked impulsively upward from the pillow. "Where did you hide it, David darling?"

"Dear little Sally!" he murmured, as he fell back, overcome with dizziness. "She guessed it, sir," he said drowsily, turning his head with an effort to face Bybee. "I knew I couldn't carry it far, so I hid it. The Steve chap was knocked out cold—I suppose they'll have another charge of 'assault with intent to kill' against

me now—so I knew he couldn't see what I was doing.

"I took the two suitcases across the road, holding them in one hand, because by that time my shoulder was bleeding so I was afraid to strain it. There's a farm right at the end of the road. I struck a match and read the name on the mail box nailed to a post on the road. The name's Randall—C. J. Randall, R. F. D. 2. You oughtn't to have any trouble finding the place.

"There wasn't any moon, but the stars were so bright after the storm that I could just make out a barn about a hundred yards from the road. I cut across the cornfield and managed to reach the barn. There wasn't a sound, not even a dog barking, lucky for me, for if I'd been caught with the suitcases I'd have had a fine time explaining how I happened to get them and what I was doing with them. But I had to take that chance."

"Even if the police had caught you with them, I'd never have believed that you robbed Pop Bybee," Sally assured him, tears slurring her voice, but her eyes shining with pride.

"If you'd seen me robbing the safe, you wouldn't have believed it," David said softly, his free arm drawing her down to the berth so that he could kiss her.

There was a rustle of whispering, a giggle or two from the audience crammed into the corridor outside the door. But David and Sally did not mind. The kiss was none the shorter or sweeter because it was witnessed by the carnival family.

"Well, sir," David went on after that unashamed kiss, which had left Sally trembling and radiant, "I got the suitcases into the barn and up a ladder to the hayloft. You'll find them buried under the hay, unless the Randall horses have made a meal off them by this time."

"Glory be to the Lord!" Mrs. Bybee screamed, pounding her husband on the back. "The show'll go on, Winfield! And what are you standing there for? Hustle right out after them suitcases or I'll go myself! You've got to go yourself, or that farmer Randall will take a pot shot at anybody that goes meddling around his barn."

"All right, Mother, all right!" Bybee protested. "I'll handle it. Don't worry. But I want to thank Dave here for what he's done for the outfit. Dave—" he began, lifting his voice as if he intended to make an oration.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Bybee," David blushed vividly. "We'll just call it square. You didn't turn me over to the police last night, and you've taken Sally and me in and given us work and protected us—"

"I'm going to do more than that, by golly!" Bybee shouted. "I'm going to the district attorney of this burg and tell him the whole yarn! I'll get them charges against you and Sally quashed in less time than it takes to say it! You're a hero, boy, and by golly, I feel like charging admission for the rubes to look at

you! The biggest and bravest hero in captivity! Yes, sir! How's that for a spiel, Gus?" he shouted to the barker.

"Dave don't seem to think it's so grand!" Gus chuckled. "Look at him! A body'd thing he'd been socked in the eye instead of slapped on the back!"

It was true. David was looking so white and sick and his eyes were so filled with embarrassment and distress that Sally was in tears again.

"What's the matter, Dave?" Bybee asked in bewilderment. "I thought you and the kid would be tickled to death to get a clean bill of health from the cops. What's wrong?"

David struggled upon the elbow of his right arm, his white face twitching with a spasm of pain. "I'd be glad to be free of those charges, Mr. Bybee, but I guess we'd better let them stand for a while. I might get off all right, but—it's Sally. You see, sir, she's not of age, and the state would make her go back to the orphanage. The law in this state makes her answerable to the orphanage till she's eighteen, and it would kill her to go back. I couldn't bear it, either, Mr. Bybee. Sally and I belong together, and we're going to be married when this trouble blows over." Although he was blushing furiously, his voice was strong and clear, his eyes unwavering as they met the bright, frowning blue eyes of Pop Bybee.

"But man alive," Pop protested, and it was noticeable to both Sally and David that he did not call him "boy" after David's declaration of his intentions toward Sally. "We can't simply hush this whole thing up! You did follow the crooks and take the money away from them! I've got to notify the police that the swag has been recovered."

"Can't you tell them it was all a mistake and call off the case?" David pleaded earnestly.

"And let that Hula-hussy get off Scot-free?" Bybee hooted. "No, siree! She ain't a member of this family no more, and she'll have to pay for double-crossing me! I was good to that girl! Staked her to cakes and clothes when she joined up, whining she didn't have a cent to her name! Stringing me all along! Just joined up to learn the lay of the land!

"Besides, we've already put the case in the hands of the police and they've seen the safe for themselves. The sergeant said it was a professional job, all right, as neat a safe-cracking trick as he'd ever seen turned. I couldn't hush it up if I wanted to."

"I'll do what I can for Sally, lie like a gentleman for her, say she never joined up with us, we don't know where she is—anything you like, but I'm afraid you're bound to be the hero of Capital City before you're twenty-four hours older. Too bad, son, but I don't see how it can be helped," he twinkled.

"I don't care a rap about being a hero," David snapped. "The only thing in God's world I care about is Sally Ford. Listen, Mr. Bybee, tell the police that one

of the other boys chased the crooks and took the money away from them. Let Eddie Cobb be the hero! Eddie'd like that, wouldn't you, Eddie?" he sang out to the freckle-faced youngster who was looking on, goggle-eyed, among the crowd that jammed the door of the stateroom.

"Aw, Dave!" Eddie protested, flushing brightly under his freckles.

"Sure you would like it!" David laughed feebly, sinking back to his pillows. "Listen, Mr. Bybee: this is Eddie Cobb's home town. He was raised in the orphanage, like Sally. He'd get a great kick out of being a hero to the kids at the Home. He can go with you to get the suitcases, after you've sent for the police to go along with you.

"I'll lie low, Eddie can tell the story I've told you, and the cops will never be the wiser. I can give him a pretty good description of Steve. I had plenty of chances to study his face after I'd knocked him out. I imagine he's beat it in his car by this time, if he was able to drive; otherwise you'll find him in the road just as I told you. Of course he'd know it wasn't Eddie that fought with him, but the police wouldn't have any reason to doubt Eddie's word."

"But Nita may have told him about you and me!" Sally cried. "Oh, David, don't bother about me! Take your chance while you have it to be cleared of those terrible charges! I—I'll go back to the Home and—and wait for you. I could stand it—somehow—if I knew you were back in college, a—a hero, and working for both of us. Please, David! Think of yourself, not me!"

"No." David shook his head stubbornly. "This little thing I've done wouldn't get you out of trouble. They might clap you into the reformatory, as a juvenile delinquent. We can't take a chance on that! Besides, you've had enough of the orphanage. We stick together, darling, and that's that! May I have another cup of coffee, if it isn't too much trouble?"

"You're both a pair of fools, so crazy in love with each other that you can't see straight!" Mrs. Bybee scolded, as she blew her nose violently. "But I'd like to see Winfield Bybee try to do anything you don't want him to! Far as I'm concerned, you can have anything I've got and welcome to it!"

Of course there was nothing then for Pop Bybee to do but to adopt David's plan. The boy was transferred to a lower berth, where he was safely hidden until after the detectives had arrived and departed with Pop Bybee, Eddie and Gus, the barker.

Eddie, in his zeal for playing his part well, had torn his shirt, bruised his knuckles, scraped dirt on his arms, rolled in mud, and done everything else to make up for the part.

For the rest of the day Eddie strutted about in the limelight of publicity. Newspaper photographers and reporters arrived within a few minutes after the detectives had phoned headquarters that the suitcases filled with silver and bills

had been found in the hayloft; and when Eddie returned with the showman and the barker, he was prevailed upon to pose bashfully for his pictures.

The newspaper reporters commented admirably on the "boy hero's" admirable modesty and diffidence in the big front-page stories that they wrote about the carnival robbery, and Eddie's freckled face, grinning bashfully from the center of the pages, confirmed every word written about him.

His kewpie doll booth at the carnival that afternoon and evening was mobbed by his admirers, and before the day was ended Eddie almost believed that he *had* routed two famous criminals and saved a small fortune for his employer.

Sally was permitted to stay with David during the afternoon, but Bybee apologetically asked her to go on for the evening performances, since a record-breaking crowd had turned out, drawn partly by the fine weather that followed the storm, but largely by the front page publicity which the robbery had won for the show.

CHAPTER XII

It was just before the ten o'clock show that Sally, slipping into the throne-like chair before the crystal, heard a familiar, mocking voice:

"It's not fair! You look as fresh as a daisy! And I've been frantic with anxiety all day, expecting to hear that Princess Lalla had sickened with pneumonia. I've come to collect thanks, your highness, for saving your life!"

————

Sally's sapphire eyes blazed at the man she knew only as "Van," but since they were veiled with a new scrap of black lace to replace the one lost in the storm, the nonchalant New Yorker did not appear to be at all devastated by their fire.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said stiffly, but the man's mocking, admiring attention was fixed upon the deliciously young, sweet curves of her mouth, rather than upon the tone of her voice.

"I wonder if you know," he began confidentially, leaning lightly upon his inevitable cane, "that you have the most adorable mouth I have ever seen? Of

course there are other adorable details in the picture of complete loveliness that you present, but really, your lips, like three rose petals—"

"Oh, stop!" Sally cried with childish anger, her small, red-sandaled foot stamping the platform. "Why are you always mocking me, making fun of me? I've begged you to let me alone—"

"Such ingratitude!" the man sighed, but his narrowed eyes smiled at her delightedly. "If you weren't even more delicious when you're angry, I should not be able to forgive you. But really, Sally Ford—" his voice dropped caressingly on the name, as if to remind her that he shared her secret with her—"the way you persist in misunderstanding me is very distressing.

"I'm not mocking *you*, my dear child! I'm mocking myself—if anyone. It recurs to me continually that this is an amazing adventure that Arthur Van Horne, of New York, Long Island and Newport is so sedulously engaged upon! To paraphrase your own delightful defense, I'm really 'not that kind of man.' I assure you I'm not in the habit of making love to show girls, no matter how adorable their mouths may be!" And he smiled at her out of his narrowed eyes and with his quirked, quizzical mouth, as if he expected her to share his amusement and amazement at himself.

"Then why don't you let me alone?" Sally cried, striking her little brown-painted hands together in futile rage.

"I wonder!" he mused. "I make up my mind that I'm a blighter and an ass and that I shan't come near the carnival. I accept invitations enough to take up every minute of my last days in Capital City, and then—without in the least intending to do so—I find myself back in the Palace of Wonders, humbling myself before a pair of little red-sandaled feet that would like nothing better than to kick me for my impudence. Do you suppose, Sally Ford, that I'm falling in love with you? There's something about you, you know—"

"Please go away," Sally implored him. "It's almost time for my performance. Gus is ballyhooing Jan now and I come next."

"As I was saying, when you interrupted me," Van Horne reproved her mockingly, "there's something about you, you know. Last night when I had the honor of saving your life and seeing your adorable little face washed clean of the brown paint, I was surprised at myself. I really was, I give you my word!

"Do you know what I wanted to do? I wanted to swing you up into my arms, you amazingly tiny thing, and run away with you. If you hadn't looked so young and—pure, I believe the favorite word is—I'd have yielded to the impulse. I suppress so few of my unholy desires that I suppose this discipline is good for my soul—Now, what the devil are you looking at, instead of listening to the confessions of a young man?" he broke off with a genuine note of irritation in his charming voice.

"Who is that beautiful woman?" Sally asked in a low voice, her eyes still fixed upon the golden-haired woman whom Van Horne had called "Enid," and who had just entered the tent alone, her small body, clad in the green knitted silk sports suit, moving through the crowd with proud disdain.

"Again I am forced to forgive you," Van Horne sighed humorously. "I seem always to be forgiving you, Sally Ford! You are merely asking a question which is inevitably asked when Enid Barr first bursts upon a startled public.

"She is probably the most beautiful blond in New York society. Those industrious cold cream advertisers would pay her a fortune for the use of her picture and endorsement, but it happens that she has two or three large fortunes of her own, as well as a disgustingly rich husband. Yes, unfortunately for her adorers, she is married, Courtney Barr—even out here you must have heard of Courtney Barr—being the lucky man."

"I wonder what she's doing here," Sally whispered, fright widening her eyes behind the black lace.

"Oh, I think Courtney's here on political business. The Barrs have always rather fancied themselves as leaders among the Wall Street makers of presidents. He's hobnobbing with my cousin, the governor, and Enid is probably amusing herself by collecting Americana."

"She must be awfully good," Sally whispered, adoration making her voice lovely and wistful. "She brought all the orphanage children to the carnival yesterday, you know."

"Yes," Van Horne shrugged, arching his brows quizzically. "I confess I was rather stunned, for Enid doesn't go in for personal charity. Huge checks and all that sort of thing—she's endowed some sort of institution for 'fallen girls,' by the way—but it has never seemed to amuse her to play Lady Bountiful in person. Of course she may be nursing a secret passion for children, and took this means to gratify it where her crowd could not rag her about it."

"Hasn't she any children of her own?" Sally asked. "But I suppose she's too young—"

"Not at all," Van Horne laughed. "She's past thirty, certainly, though she would never forgive me for saying so. She's never had any children; been married about thirteen years, I think."

"Oh, that's too bad!" Sally's voice was tender and wistful. "She'd make such a lovely mother—"

Van Horne interrupted with his throaty, musical laugh, and was in turn interrupted by Gus the barker's stentorian roar:

"Right this way, la-dees and gen-tle-men! I want to introduce you to Princess Lalla, who sees all, knows all! Princess Lalla, world famous crystal-gazer, favorite—"

Sally straightened in her throne-like chair, her little brown hands cupping obediently about the "magic crystal" on the velvet-draped stand before her. Van Horne, with a last ironic chuckle, melted into the crowd, which had surged toward Sally's platform.

When Gus's spiel was finished, the rush began. At least a dozen hands shot upward, waving quarters and demanding the first opportunity to learn "past, present and future" from "Princess Lalla."

She worked hard, conscientiously and cautiously, for she was vividly conscious that both Van Horne and Enid Barr were somewhere in the tent, listening perhaps, whispering about her.

Most of her fear of Enid Barr, which had resulted from the connection of the golden-haired woman with the orphanage children the day before, had evaporated. It was absurd to think that a woman of such wealth and beauty, whose philanthropy had undoubtedly been a gesture of boredom, was seriously interested in one lone little girl who had run away from charity.

It did not even seem odd to Sally that Enid Barr should have paid a second visit to the carnival. Probably Capital City afforded scant amusement for a woman of her sophistication, and the carnival, crude and tawdry though it was, was better than nothing.

Since "Princess Lalla" was not a side-show all by herself, but only one of many attractions in the Palace of Wonders, Gus never made any attempt to cajole reluctant "rubes" into surrendering their quarters for a glimpse of "past, present and future," but always hustled his crowd on to the next platform—"Pitty Sing's"—as soon as the first flurry of interest had died down and the crowd had become restive.

By this method, those who were faintly or belligerently dissatisfied with Sally's crystal-gazing, at which she was becoming more adept with each performance, were quickly placated by the sight of new wonders, for which no extra charge was made.

Sally was straightening the black velvet drapery which covered the crystal stand, preparatory to returning to the dress tent for a rest between shows when a lovely, lilting voice, with a ripple of amusement in it, made her gasp with surprise and consternation.

"Am I too late to have my fortune told?" Enid Barr, gazing up at Sally with her golden head tilted provocatively to one side, was immediately below the startled crystal-gazer, one of her exquisite small hands swinging the silvery-green felt hat which Sally had so much admired the day before.

"Oh, no!" Sally fluttered, both delighted and frightened at this opportunity to talk with the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. Just in time she remembered her accent: "Weel you do me ze honor to ascend the steps?"

Laughing at herself, and looking over her shoulder to see that she was not observed by anyone who knew her, Enid Barr ran lightly up the steps and slipped into the little camp chair opposite Sally. Her small white hands, with their exquisite nails glistening in the light from the center gas jet, hovered over the crystal, touching it tentatively.

Sally leaned forward, her own hands cupped about the crystal, her eyes brooding upon it behind the little black lace veil, her mouth pursed with sweet seriousness.

"You are—what you call it?—psychic," Sally chanted in the quaint, mincing voice with which she had been taught to make her revelations. "Ze creeystal, she is va-ry clear for you. I see so-o-o much!" She hesitated, wondering just how much of Van Horne's confidences about this beautiful woman she dared appropriate. Would Van Horne give her away? Then, as if drawn by a powerful magnet, she raised her eyes suddenly and met those of Van Horne, who was leaning nonchalantly against the center-pole of the tent. He nodded, smiled his curious, quizzical smile and slowly winked his right eye. She had his permission—

"Please hurry!" Enid Barr commanded arrogantly. "I'm just dying to know what you see about me in that crystal!"

"I see a beeg, beeg city," Sally intoned dreamily, her eyes again fixed upon the crystal. "I see you there, in beeg, beeg house. Much moneys. And behind you I see a man—your husband, no?"

"Yes, I am married," Enid Barr laughed. "Since you see so much, suppose you tell me my name."

"I see—" Sally frowned, but her heart was pounding at her audacity, "ze letter E and ze letter R—no, B! I see a beeg place—not your house—with ma-ny girls holding out zeir arms to you. You help zem. You are va-ry, va-ry good."

"Rot!" Enid Barr laughed, but a bright flush of pleasure spread over her fair face. "One has to do something with 'much moneys,' doesn't one? Listen, Princess Lalla, if that is really your name: prove to me you are a real crystal-gazer! Tell me something I'd give almost anything to know—" She leaned forward tensely, her violet-blue eyes darkening with excitement and appeal until they were almost the color of Sally's.

"And what's that, Enid?" a mocking, amused voice inquired. "Do you want to know whether I really love you? How can you ask! Of course I do!"

Enid Barr sprang to her feet so hastily that the camp stool on which she had been sitting overturned, anger and something like fear blazing in her eyes.

Enid Barr and Arthur Van Horne moved away from "Princess Lalla's" platform together, Enid's golden head held high, her lovely voice staccato with anger; but Sally, although she was guilty of trying to do so, could not distinguish a word that was being said.

Near the front exit of the tent Van Horne was greeted boisterously by a party of Capital City society men and women, laden with trophies from the gambling concessions on the midway. He was swept into the party, which Enid Barr refused to join, shaking her little golden head stubbornly and pretending a great interest in the midget, "Pitty Sing," whose platform was nearest the exit.

Although Sally was at liberty to leave the tent until the final performance at eleven o'clock, she sat on in her throne-like chair, hoping and yet fearing that the beautiful woman would return and ask her the question which Van Horne's unwelcome interruption had left unspoken.

Enid spoke to "Pitty Sing" in her proud, offhand manner, paid a dollar for one of the midget's cheap little postcard pictures of herself, refused to take the change and was turning toward Sally's platform again when Winfield Bybee entered the tent with Gus, the barker.

Sally, watching Enid, saw the woman's involuntary start of recognition as Bybee crossed her path, saw her hesitate, then turn toward him, determination stamped on her lovely, sensitive face.

When Bybee had bared his head deferentially and was bending over the small woman to hear her low spoken words, Sally was seized with fright. She knew instinctively that Enid Barr's questions concerned her, but whether they concerned Sally Ford, runaway from the state orphanage, or "Princess Lalla," fake crystal-gazer, she had no way of knowing. All she knew for certain was that Enid had overheard Betsy's shriek: "That's not Princess Lalla! That's Sally Ford—play-acting!" And she fled, feeling Enid's eyes upon her but not daring to look back.

There was less than half an hour before the next and final show was to start. She spent the time in the dress tent, wishing with all her heart that she was through work for the day and that she could go to David. Poor David! lying wounded in a stuffy, hot berth, tormented with worries as to the future and possibly with regrets for the past, while Eddie Cobb strutted on the midway as the hero of the safe robbery.

It would be better for David, infinitely better, if she could screw up her courage to the point of going back to the orphanage and taking her punishment. It would be so simple! She had only to seek out Enid Barr and say to her: "I *am* Sally Ford! Send for Mrs. Stone." And perhaps Enid would intercede for her, for she seemed so very kind.

"Wake up, Sally," Bess, one of the dancers of the "girlie show," called to her, as she came shuffling into the tent on tortured feet. "Gus is ballyhooing your show."

Yes, her mind was made up. She would tell Enid Barr, beg her to intercede with the orphanage for her, and with the police for David. But there was no Enid Barr among the audience at the last show of the evening, and even Van Horne was

absent. In spite of her good resolutions Sally felt an immense relief. Reprieve! She certainly could not give herself up if there was no one to give up to!

"Going to the show train to see David?" Gus whispered, when the last show was finished and the audience was straggling toward the exits.

"Of course!" Sally cried. "Is he worse? Don't hide anything from me, Gus—"

"Worse!" Gus laughed. "Bybee says he's yelling for food and threatens to get up and cook it himself if they don't give him something besides mush and milk. Come along! I'll walk you over to the show train. You're too pretty to be allowed to go alone. Some village dude would be trying to kidnap you."

They found David sitting up in his berth, working crossword puzzles, Mrs. Bybee sitting on the edge of his bed to jot down the words as he gave them to her.

"Reckon you won't need the old lady now that the young 'un's come to hold your hand and make a fuss over you," Mrs. Bybee grumbled jealously.

"What's that? What's that?" Winfield Bybee, who had come over from the carnival grounds in a service car, demanded from the doorway. "Been flirting with my wife, young man? Reckon I'll have to put the gloves on with you when that crippled wing of yours is O. K. Well, Sally, old Pop has done you another good turn."

Sally paled and reached instinctively for David's left hand. "Oh! You mean—Mrs. Barr, the lady who was talking to you?"

"Nothing else but!" Bybee nodded, smiling at her. "She tried to make me admit you was Sally Ford and I acted innocent as a new-born lamb. Told her you'd been with us since we left New York."

"Why is she so interested in Sally, Mr. Bybee?" David asked quietly.

"She 'lowed a carnival wasn't no place for a pure young girl," Bybee chuckled. "She said they was anxious over at the orphanage to get Sally back, away from her life of sin, and that pers'n'ly she took a powerful interest in unfortunate girls and was determined to see Sally safe back in the Home if 'Princess Lalla' *was* Sally Ford. I lied like a gentleman for you, child. Told her she was a nice little dame and all that, but clear off her base in this instance. Reckon I put it across all right, for she shut up and beat it pretty soon."

"I think she's wonderful," Sally surprised them all by speaking up almost sharply. "She's just trying to be kind. She doesn't know how awful an orphans' home can be."

"Come along, Mother. Let's give these two kids a chance. But you mustn't stay long, Sally. Tomorrow's Saturday, and you oughta be enough of a trouper by now to know what that means. We head South Saturday night, riding all day Sunday."

"Out of the state?" Sally and David cried in unison.

"Yep. Out of the state. You kids'll be safe then. The police ain't going to bother about extradition for a couple of juvenile delinquents. So long, Dave boy. Don't let this little Jane keep you awake too late."

"I'll leave in fifteen minutes," Sally promised joyfully.

And she kept her promise. Her lips were smiling tenderly, secretly, at the memory of David's good-night kiss, when she left the car and began to look about for someone to walk back to the carnival grounds with her, for she was to sleep in the dress tent that night, the storm-soaked mattresses having dried in the sun all day.

Gus had told her he would be waiting for her, but she could not find him. She went the length of the train to the privilege car, pushing open the door sufficiently to peep within. At least a score of men of the carnival family were seated at three or four tables, their heads almost unrecognizable through the thick layers of cigar and cigaret smoke. There was little conversation except an occasional oath, but the steady clacking of poker chips upon the bare tables came to her distinctly.

She closed the door noiselessly and jumped from the platform of the coach to the ground. It would be mean to disturb Gus, she reflected, for he loved poker better than anything except ballyhoo, and there was no real reason why she should not walk to the carnival grounds alone.

Of course she would be conspicuous on the streets in her "Princess Lalla" costume and make-up, but if she paid no attention to anyone who tried to accost her, there was certainly not much danger. She began to run, leaving the train swiftly behind her, but she slowed to a sedate walk when she reached the business streets through which she had to pass to reach the carnival grounds.

She was crossing Capital Avenue, at the end of which sat the great white stone structure which gave the street its name, when a limousine skidded to a sudden stop and an all-too-familiar voice sang out:

"Princess Lalla! What in the world are you doing out alone at this time of night?"

Sally contemplated flight, but the limousine blocked her path. Before she could turn back the way she had come Van Horne stepped out of the tonneau of the car.

"Let me drive you to the carnival grounds, Sally," he urged in a low voice, completely devoid of mockery for once. "It's really not safe for you to be out alone dressed like that. Come along! Don't be prudish, child! I'm not going to harm you. Remember, 'I'm not that kind of a man!'" And he laughed as he almost lifted her into the car.

She sank back upon the cushions, feeling their depth and softness with

a childish awe. The chauffeur started the car, and Van Horne dropped a hand lightly over hers as he leaned back and regarded her quizzically.

"I'm glad I ran into you," he told her. "I suppose you've been told that Enid—Mrs. Barr—is hot on your trail?"

"Yes," Sally nodded, her lips too stiff with sudden fright to form the word.

"She's almost convinced that you're really Sally Ford," he told her lightly. "And if she makes up her mind, there's nothing in heaven or hell that can stop Enid Barr. A damnably persistent little wretch! I've never been able to understand Enid's passion for succoring 'fallen girls.' She appears to be such a normal little pagan otherwise."

Sally said nothing because she could not. But her sapphire eyes were enormous and her mouth was twitching piteously.

"Listen, Sally," Van Horne leaned toward her suddenly, crushing her little brown-painted hands between his own immaculate white ones. "Let me get you out of this mess! I've been thinking a lot about you—too damned much for my peace of mind! And this is what I want to do—"

"Please!" Sally gasped, shrinking far into the corner of the seat, but unable to tear her hands from his.

"Wait till you've heard what I have to say, before you begin acting like a pure and innocent maid in the clutches of a movie villain!" Van Horne commanded her scornfully.

"I want to send you to New York, give you a year in a dancing academy that trains girls for the stage and a year in dramatic school—both at the same time, if possible. You've got the figure and the looks and the personality for a musical comedy star, or Arthur Van Horne is the 'rube' that you carnival people call him. What do you say, Sally? Think of it. A year or two with nothing to worry about except your studies and your dancing and then—Broadway! I'll put you over if I have to buy a show for you! Come, Sally! Say 'Thank you, Van. I'll be ready to leave tomorrow.'"

As long as she lived, Sally Ford would remember with shame that for one moment she was tempted by Arthur Van Horne's offer to prepare her for a stage career in New York. She had "play-acted" all her life; her heart's desire before she had met David had been to become an actress, and in that one moment when she knew that realization of her ambition lay within her grasp she wanted to stretch out her hands and seize opportunity.

Her eyes glistened; she gasped involuntarily with delight. If Van Horne had not been hasty, if he had not snatched her to him with a strangled cry of triumph as his black eyes—mocking no longer, but wide and brilliant with desire—read the effect of his words, she might have committed herself, have promised him anything. But he did touch her, and her flesh instinctively recoiled, for every

nerve in her body was still athrill with David's good-night kiss.

"No, No! Don't touch me!" she shuddered. "I won't go! You know I love David!" she wailed, covering her face with her hands. "Why won't you let me alone?"

Van laughed, settled back in his seat and crossed his arms upon his breast. "I can wait until you have your little tummy full of carnival life and of hiding from the police," he told her in his old, nonchalant way. "Incidentally I have always bemoaned the fact that conquest is so damnably easy. It is a new experience to me—this being refused, and I suspect that I'm enjoying it. Now—shall I say good-night, since we've reached the carnival lot? It's not goodby, you know, Sally. I assure you I'm admirably persistent. And remember, if Enid tries to make a nuisance of herself, you can always fly to Van. Good night, Sally, you adorable, ungrateful little wretch! No kiss? Perhaps it is better so. I'm afraid I should not care for the brand of lipstick that Princess Lalla uses."

Sally did not tell David of Van Horne's offer, for on Saturday, the last day of the carnival in Capital City, the boy developed a temperature which caused Gus, who had acted as volunteer surgeon, to exclude all visitors, even Sally.

Apparently Enid Barr had been convinced of Bybee's gallant lies that little orphaned Betsy had been mistaken and that "Princess Lalla" was not "Sally Ford, play-acting," but it was not until the show train was rolling out of the state in the small hours of Sunday morning that the girl dared breathe easily.

CHAPTER XIII

Sunday, on the show train, was a happy day, the happiest that Sally had ever known in her life. Freaks and dancers, barkers and concessionaires, all the members of that weirdly assorted family, the carnival, mingled in a joyous freedom from work and worry, singing together, reminiscing, gambling, gossiping.

The last week, except for the storm, had been an excellent one; money was free, spirits high. Even Mrs. Bybee, hovering like a mother hen over David, was good-natured, inclined to reminisce and give advice. Sally, whose talent for exquisite darning had been discovered by the women and girls, sat on the edge of David's berth, her lap full of flesh and beige and gun metal silk stockings, her

needle flying busily, her lips curved with a smile of pure delight, as she listened to the surge of laughter and song and talk. The midget, "Pitty Sing," perched on the window ledge of David's berth, a comical pair of spectacles across her infinitesimal nose, was reading aloud to David from one of her own tiny books, and David was listening, but his eyes were fixed worshipfully upon Sally, and now and again his left hand reached out and patted her busy fingers or twirled the hanging braid of her hair.

Oh, it was a happy day, and Sally was sorry to have it end. But the show had to go on. The train wheels could not click forever over the rails. Monday, with its bustle and confusion and ballyhoo and inevitable performances, lay ahead. But they were far out of the state which held Clem Carson, the orphanage, Enid Barr, Arthur Van Horne and all other menaces to freedom when the train did stop at last, on the outskirts of a town of 10,000 inhabitants.

Carnival routine had already become an old story to Sally; she no longer minded the curious stares of villagers, the crude advances of dressed-up young male "rubes." The glamor had worn off, but in its place had come a deep contentment and a sympathetic understanding, born on that happy Sunday when the relaxed carnival family had shown her its heart and hopes. She was glad to be one of them, to be earning her living by giving entertainment and happiness—fake though her crystal-gazing was—to thousands of people whose lives were blighted with monotony.

During their first week in the new territory business was even better than the Bybees had dared hope. Positively the only calamity that befell the carnival was the discovery that Babe, the fat girl, had lost five pounds, due to her loudly confessed but unrequited passion for the carnival's hero, David Nash.

On Wednesday, David was permitted to get up, and that afternoon for the first time he witnessed Sally's performance as "Princess Lalla." She had become so proficient in her intuitions regarding those who sought knowledge of "past, present and future" that his smiling, amused attentiveness to her "readings" did not embarrass her.

When the show was over, she joined him proudly, her little brown-painted hands clinging to his arm, her face uplifted adoringly to his, as she pattered at his side on a tour of the midway. It was then that her dreams came true. At last she was "doing the carnival" with a "boy friend," like other girls. And David played up magnificently, buying her hot dogs, salt water taffy, red lemonade—the two of them drinking out of twin straws from the same glass.

On Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning before show time the two wandered about the village to which the carnival had journeyed the night before. It was heavenly to be able to walk the streets unafraid. David walked with head high, shoulders squared, unafraid to look any man in the face, and Sally could

have cried with joy that he was free again, for Bybee had assured them that there was not the slightest chance of extradition on the charges which still stood against the two in their native state.

Some day, somehow, the cloud against them would be lifted, and David could walk the streets of Capital City as proudly as he walked these village streets.

With money in their pockets, they could afford to buy all the necessities and little luxuries which their enforced flight from the Carson farm had deprived them of. Sally, her little face enchantingly grave and wise, chose ties and socks and shirts for David, and almost forgot to bother about her own needs. And David, in another part of the village "general store," bought, blushingly but undauntingly, little pink silk brassieres and silk jersey knickers and silk stockings for the girl he loved. When she saw them she burst into tears, hugging them to her breast as if they were living, feeling things.

"Why, David, darling!" she sobbed and laughed, "I've never before in all my life had any silk underwear or a pair of silk stockings! I—I'm afraid to wear them for fear I'll spoil them when I have to wash them. Oh, the dear things! The lovely, precious things!"

"And here's something else," David said to her that Saturday morning.

They were in the still-deserted Palace of Wonders, their purchases spread out on Sally's platform.

"Give me your hand and shut your eyes," David commanded gently, with a throb of excitement in his voice.

She obeyed, but when she felt a ring being slipped upon the third finger of her left hand her eyes flew open and found a sapphire to match them. For the ring that David had bought for her was a plain loop of white gold, with a deep-blue sapphire in an old-fashioned Tiffany mounting, such as tradition has made sacred to engagement rings.

"Oh, David!" She laid her hand against her cheek, pressing the stone so hard that it left its many-faceted imprint upon her flesh. Then she had to kiss it and David had to kiss it—and her.

"I wish it could have been a diamond," David deprecated. "I suppose all girls prefer diamond engagement rings. But—"

"Oh, David, is it an engagement ring?" she breathed, then flung herself upon his breast, her hands clinging to his shoulders.

"Of course it is, precious idiot!" he laughed. Very gently but insistently he forced her face upward, so that their eyes met and clung. His were boyishly ardent but solemn, hers were misted over with tears, but brighter and bluer than the stone upon her finger. "I don't know when we can be married, Sally, but—I wanted you to have a ring and to know that I'll always be thinking and planning and—oh, I can't talk! You want to be engaged, don't you, Sally? You love me—

enough?"

"I adore you. I love you so that I feel I am not even half a person when you're not with me. I couldn't live without you, David," she said solemnly.

They were still sitting there, talking, planning, making love shyly but ardently, when Gus, the barker, mounted the box outside the tent and began to ballyhoo for the first show of the morning.

"Eleven o'clock and I'm not in make-up yet, and you've got to run the wheel for Eddie today," Sally cried in dismay, jumping to her feet and gathering up her scattered purchases and presents.

As the day wore on, with show after show drawing record crowds for a village of its size, "Princess Lalla" gazed more often into the shining blue depths of a small sapphire than into the magic depths of her crystal. But perhaps the sapphire had a magic of its own, for never had her audiences been better pleased, never had quarters been thrust so thick and fast upon her.

At half-past nine that night, Gus, the barker, had not quite finished his "spiel" about the Princess Lalla when the girl, whose eyes had been fixed trance-like upon her ring, saw a woman suddenly begin to ascend the steps to the platform. Before her startled eyes had traveled upward to the woman's face Sally knew who it was. For twelve years that big, stiffly corseted, severely dressed body had been as familiar to her as her own. Instinctively, though her blood had turned instantly to ice water in her veins, Sally's right hand closed over her left, to conceal the sapphire. Thelma had not been permitted to keep even a bit of blue glass—

Sally felt as if her flesh were shriveling upon her bones. An actual numbness spread from her shoulders to her fingertips, in anticipation of the shock of feeling the Orphans' Home matron's grip upon them. How many, many times in her twelve years in the orphanage had she been roughly jerked to her feet by those broad, heavy hands, when she had been caught in some minor infringement of Mrs. Stone's stern rules!

Her hands, instinctively clasped so that her precious engagement ring might be hidden from those gimlet-like gray eyes, were so rigid that Sally wondered irrelevantly if they would ever come to life again, to curve their fingers about the magic crystal. But of course she would never "read" the crystal again. She was caught, caught!

"Are you deaf?" Mrs. Stone's harsh voice pierced her numbed hearing as if from a great distance. "I want my fortune told. I've paid my quarter and I don't intend to dilly-dally around here all day."

The relief was so terrific that the girl's body began to tremble all over, but the rigidity of terror had mercifully relaxed, so that she could lift her shaking hands.

Gus, the barker, who always remained upon the platform during her "readings," had long ago arranged a code signal of distress, and now she gave it. Her hands went up to the ridiculous crown of fake jewels that banded her long black hair and adjusted it, tipping it first to the right and then to the left, as if to ease the pressure of its weight upon her forehead.

That very natural gesture told Gus more plainly than words that "Princess Lalla" was in danger and asked him to use his ingenuity to rescue her. There was no need for her to lift her eyes to him. Jerkily her hands came down, hovered over the crystal, and before Mrs. Stone could voice another harsh complaint, the sing-song voice which "Princess Lalla" used was requesting "ze ladee" to sit down in the chair opposite.

But what should she tell Mrs. Stone, with whose personality and history she had been familiar for twelve years? If she dared to read "past, present and future" with any degree of accuracy, the matron would be startled into observing the "seeress" with those gimlet eyes of hers. If she went too wide of the mark in generalities, Mrs. Stone was entirely capable of raising a disturbance which would ruin business for the rest of the day.

"Well, what do you see—if anything?" Mrs. Stone demanded angrily.

That gave Sally her cue. Bending low over the crystal, so that her face was within a few inches of that of the woman who sat opposite her, with only the crystal stand between them, she pretended to peer into the depths of the glass ball. Then slowly she began to shake her head regretfully.

"Princess Lalla is so-o-o sor-ree"—the small, sing-song voice was raised a bit, so that Gus, who had strolled leisurely across the platform to take his stand behind Sally's chair, might hear perfectly—"but ze creeystal she ees dark. She tell me nossing about ze nice-tall la-dee. Sometimes it ees so. Ze gen-tle-man weel give ze money back."

The thin little shoulders under the green satin jacket shrugged eloquently, the little brown hands spread themselves with a gesture of helplessness and regret.

"Glad to refund your money, lady!" Gus sang out loudly. "Here you are! Better luck next time! Princess Lalla is the gen-u-ine article! If she don't see nothing in the crystal for you, she don't string you along—right here, lady! Here's your money back—"

Sally leaned back in her chair, weak with relief, her eyes closed, as Gus tried to urge her nemesis from the platform. In a moment the danger would be over—

Then, so quickly was it done that Sally had not the slightest chance to shield her eyes, a hand had snatched the little black lace veil from her face. Terror-widened sapphire eyes stared, with betraying recognition, into narrowed, angry gray ones. Mrs. Stone nodded with grim satisfaction.

"So Betsy was right! If that idiotic Amelia Pond had told me while the carnival was still in Capital City, I'd have been saved this trip. Get up from there, Sal—"

A shriek from the throat of a woman in the audience, which was packed densely about the platform, interrupted the matron, successfully diverting the attention of the curious from the puzzling drama upon the platform.

"I've been robbed! Help! Police!" Again the siren of a woman's scream made the air hideous. "It was her! She was standing right by me! Police! Police!"

Even Mrs. Stone was diverted for the moment. Gus, the barker, sprang to the edge of the platform as a red-faced, disheveled woman fought her way through the crowd to the platform.

"What seems to be the trouble, madam?" Gus demanded loudly. "Who took your purse?" He reached a helping hand to the woman who was struggling to get to the steps leading to the platform.

"It was *her*!" The "country woman," whom Sally had recognized instantly as a "schiller," an employe of the circus, extremely useful in just such emergencies, shook an angry forefinger in Mrs. Stone's astounded face. "She's got it right there in her hands! The gall of her! Standing right by me, she was, before she come up here to get her fortune told. Stole my purse, she did, right outa my hands—"

"This is *my* purse!" Mrs. Stone shrilled, her face suddenly strutted with blood. "I never heard of anything so brazen in my life! It's my purse and I can prove it is." She turned menacingly toward Gus, who was looking from one angry woman to another as if greatly embarrassed and perplexed.

"Reckon I'd better call the constable and let him settle this thing," he said apologetically.

"I'm a deppity sheriff," a man called loudly from the audience. "Make way for the law!"

The awe-stricken and happily thrilled crowd parted obediently to let a fat man with a silver star on his coat lapel pass majestically toward the platform. Sally knew him, too, as a "schiller" whose principal job with the carnival was to impersonate an officer of the law when trouble rose between the "rubes" and any member of the carnival's big family.

"Come along quiet, ladies!" the fat man admonished the two women briskly. "We'll settle this little spat outside, all nice and peaceable, I *hope*." The last word was spoken to Mrs. Stone with significant emphasis.

"This is an outrage!" the orphanage matron raged, but the "deppity sheriff" gave her no opportunity to say more, either in her own defense or to Sally.

Gus, the barker, bent over the trembling girl while the crowd was still enthralled over the spectacle of two apparently respectable middle-aged women being dragged out of the tent under arrest.

"Better beat it, kid. The dame's hep to you. Reckon she's the Orphans' Home matron, you been telling us about. Here, take this—" and he thrust a few crumpled bills into her hand—"and don't ever let on to Pop Bybee that I helped you get away. Goodby, honey. Good luck. You're a great kid.... All right, folks! Excitement's all over! It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you the smallest and prettiest little lady in the world. We call her 'Pitty Sing,' and I don't reckon I have to tell you why—"

Five minutes later Sally was cowering against the rear wall of Eddie Cobb's gambling-wheel concession, pouring out her story to David, to whom she had fled as soon as Gus had tolled the crowd away from her platform.

"And she recognized me, David!" the girl sobbed, the palms of her trembling hands pressed against her face. "I was so startled when she tore my veil off that I couldn't pretend any longer. As soon as she gets away from the 'schillers' she'll set the real constable on my trail. Gus told me to beat it—oh, David! What's going to become of me—and you? Oh!" And she choked on the sobs that were tearing at her throat.

"Why, darling child, we're going to 'beat it,' as Gus advises. Of course! We've 'beat it' together before. Listen, honey! Stop crying and listen. Go to the dress tent, get your make-up off, change your clothes and make a small bundle of things you'll need, and I'll join you there, just outside the door flaps, in not more than ten minutes. I've got to get my money from Pop Bybee—"

"He'll stop you!" Sally wailed despairingly. "He'll make us both stay—"

"Nothing can stop me," he promised her grimly. "And he'll give me my money, too, if I have to take it away from him. But it'll be all right. Now run, and for heaven's sake, darling, don't let these 'rubes' see you crying. Smile for David," he coaxed, tilting her chin with a forefinger. When her lips wavered uncertainly, he bent swiftly and kissed her. "Poor little sweetheart! There's nothing to be afraid of. Gus will see that the 'schillers' give us plenty of time, even if he has to call in a real cop and have Mrs. Stone arrested on a fake charge. Now, walk to the dress tent, and I'll be there before you're ready."

When Sally reached the dress tent she found "Pitty Sing" perched on her bed, her tiny fingers busy counting a sheaf of bills that was almost as large as her miniature head.

"Gus brought me," she piped in her matter-of-fact, precise little voice. "Get to your packing, Sally, while I'm talking. But you might kiss me first, if you don't mind. I don't usually like for people to kiss me. No, wait until you get your make-up off," she changed her mind as she saw tears well in Sally's hunted blue eyes. "This money is for you and David. He's going with you, of course?"

"Yes," Sally acknowledged proudly, as her fingers dug deep into a can of theatrical cold cream. "But we won't need the money, Betty. Please—"

"Don't be silly!" little Miss Tanner admonished her severely. "Gus sent the word around the tent and everybody chipped in. Jan cleaned the boys at poker last night and he contributed $20. I think there's nearly a hundred altogether. Gus gave $20, and Boffo—"

"Oh, I can't take it!" Sally protested. "It's sweet of you all, but I'd feel awful—"

"Shut up and get busy!" "Pitty Sing" commanded tersely. "I'd wear that dark-blue taffeta if I were you, and the blue felt you bought in Williamstown. It won't show up at all in the dark. Lucky for you it's night, isn't it? It will be nice to be married in, too—"

"Married?" Sally whirled from her open trunk, her cold, cream-cleansed face blank with astonishment.

From outside the tent came a whistled bar of music—"I'll be loving you always!"

"That's David!" Sally gasped, a blush running swiftly from her throat to the roots of her soft black hair. "I'll have to hurry. I—I think I *will* wear the blue taffeta!"

"Pitty Sing" chuckled softly, but there were tears in the old, wise little blue eyes set so incongruously in a tiny, wizened face no bigger than a baby's.

"Oh, let's say goodby to the carnival!" Sally cried, homesickness for the dearest "family" she had ever known already tightening her throat with tears.

And so they paused, hand in hand, on the crest of the little hill which rose at the end of Main Street, on which Winfield Bybee's Bigger and Better Carnival was selling temporary joy and excitement to villagers and farmers weary of the insular monotony of their lives.

There it all lay just below them—big tents and little tents with gay, lying banners; the merry-go-round with its music-box grinding out "Sweet Rosie O'Grady"; the ferris wheel a gigantic loop of lights. The composite voice of the carnival came up to these two children of carnival who were deserting it, and the roar, muted slightly by distance, was like the music of a heavenly choir in their ears.

CHAPTER XIV

"Listen!" Sally whispered, her fingers closing tensely over David's arm. "Gus, ballyhooing The Palace of Wonders. I wonder if he'll remember not to spiel about 'Princess Lalla.'"

They could see him, a small figure from that distance, looking like a Jack-in-the-box as he waved his arms and thundered the dear, familiar phrases which Sally would never forget if she lived to be a hundred.

She was about to run back down the hill, but David strode after her and put his arms about her comfortingly. "Sally, honey, we haven't time! Throw them a kiss from here, and then we've got to hurry away."

She broke from his embrace and flung her arms out in a passionate gesture of love and farewell. "Goodby, Carnival. Thank you for sheltering David and me! Goodby, Pop Bybee and Mrs. Bybee! Goodby, Gus! Goodby, Jan. Goodby, Noko! Goodby, Boffo! And Babe! Goodby, dancing girls! I hope you all land on Broadway with Ziegfeld! Oh, goodby, Pitty Sing, dear little Betty! Goodby, goodby!" Then she flung herself upon David's breast and held him tight with all the strength in her thin young arms. "I've only got you now, David! Oh, David, what is going to become of us? Do you really love me, darling?"

She strained away from him, to search his beloved face as well as the darkness of the night would permit. Faintly she could see the tremble of his tender, deeply carved lips, so dearly boyish. His eyes looked big and black in the night, but there was a gleam of such divine light in them that her fingers crept up his face tremblingly and closed his eyelids, for she suddenly felt abashed, unworthy of his love.

"I love you with every cell in my body, every thought in my mind and every beat of my heart," David answered huskily. "And now let's travel, honey. I don't know where we're going, but we've got to put as much distance as possible between us and this town before morning."

But before they set off again he kissed her, not one of the long ardent kisses that made her dizzy and frightened even as they exalted her, but a shy, sweet touching of his lips to her forehead. It was as if he were telling her, wordlessly, that she would be utterly safe with him through the long, dark hours ahead of them.

They did not talk much as they walked steadily along the dirt roads, choosing them in preference to the frequented paved highway, for David cautioned her to save her breath for the all-important task of covering many miles before daybreak. Neither of them had any idea of the geography of this state to which the carnival had brought them, but they felt that it mattered little. David, country-bred, had an instinct for direction. He had chosen to turn toward the east, and Sally trotted along by his side, supremely confident that he would lead her out of danger.

"One o'clock, darling," he announced at last, when Sally was so tired that she could hardly put one foot before the other. "We'll rest awhile and then plod along. There's a farmhouse near. See the cows lined up by the fence? We'll find a well and have a drink."

A three-quarters moon rode high in the sky but its light was intermittently obscured by ragged, scuddling clouds. When they had had their drink of ice-cold cistern water David made a pillow of his coat which he had been carrying over his arm, and forced Sally to lie down for awhile in the soft loam of a recently ploughed field.

He sat at a little distance from her, not touching her, his knees drawn up and clasped by his strong, tanned hands, but his head was thrown back and his eyes brooded upon the cloud-disturbed beauty of the night sky.

"Does your shoulder hurt, darling?" Sally asked anxiously.

"No," he answered, without looking at her. "It's all healed. Just a flesh wound, you know."

The tone of his voice silenced her. She knew he was brooding over their future, puzzling his young head as to what he was to do with her, and she lay very still, humble before his masculinity.

"I've been thinking, Sally," he said at last, gently. "First, we'll get married in the morning, or as soon as we find a county seat, and then—"

"But David." Sally sat up, her heart pounding with joy but her mind unexpectedly clear and logical, "we mustn't, darling. You've got to finish college, somehow, somewhere—I can't bear to be a burden upon you! You're so young, so young!"

"I'm going to take care of you," David answered steadily. "We love each other and I think we always will. My father married when he was nineteen, and I'm nearly twenty-one—and big for my age," he added, grinning at her. "We can't go on like this, honey. Mrs. Stone would have a right to think the worst of us—of you—if we were not married when she catches up with us. She would be justified in thinking that Clem Carson told the truth to the police when he charged us with—with immorality. Don't you see, darling, that we just *must* be married now?"

"Then I'll run away by myself!" Sally flashed at him, springing to her feet. "I'm not going to have you forced into marriage when you're not old enough and not really ready for it. You'd hate me for being a drag on you—"

"Sally!" David was on his feet now and his stern voice checked her before she had run a dozen steps away from him. "Come here!"

She crept into his arms, and laid her head against his chest, so that his heart beat strongly and steadily just beneath her ear.

"Listen, Sally, beloved," he urged softly. "I want to marry you more than

anything in the world. It might have been better if we had met and fallen in love when we were both older, but fate took care of that for us, and I'm only proud and happy to be able to ask you now to marry me. I'll not make much money at first, maybe, but neither of us has been used to a great deal, and I promise you now that I'll not fail you in love and loyalty. I've never cared for any other girl and I never will. Let's not try to look too far ahead. We're young and strong and in love. Isn't that enough, sweet?"

"Yes," she agreed, nodding her head against his breast.

"Then let's travel," he laughed jubilantly. "This is our wedding day, Sally! Think of it, sweet! Our wedding day!"

As they plodded hand in hand through the long hours before dawn Sally thought of nothing else. She was glad that walking made talking a waste of energy, for she wanted to think and feel and search her heart and soul for treasure to lavish upon the boy-man she was to marry.

Marriage! The word made her feel shivery and solemn and more than a little frightened, but when a shudder of fear made her hand twitch in David's, the firm, warm pressure of his fingers reassured her. She resolutely forced her mind away from the mysteries that lay ahead of her, mysteries at which Mrs. Stone had hinted in that last, embarrassing lecture she had delivered to a cowering, shamefaced Sally the day Clem Carson had taken her to the farm. Whatever lay before her, David would be with her, gentle, sweet, infinitely tender—

"I'll be Mrs. David Nash," she told herself childishly. "I'll be David's wife. I'll have David for my family, and maybe—some day—there'll be a baby David, with hair like gold in the sun—"

"You'll have to tell a fib about your age, honey," David interrupted her thoughts, his voice grave and, it seemed to her, a little embarrassed. Maybe David, too, was frightened a bit, just as she was! That made it easier. She was suddenly jubilantly glad that he was not wise and sophisticated and very much older than she, like Arthur Van Horne, for instance.

"I'll have to say I'm eighteen, won't I?" she laughed. "Do I look eighteen, David? Now that most girls have bobbed hair, my long hair, ought to make me look very old and dignified. I *do* look eighteen, don't I, David?"

"Oh, Sally!" David stopped abruptly and held her close to him, pityingly. "You look the adorable baby that you are! I pray to God that marrying me won't make you old before your time! Why, honey-child, you haven't had any girlhood at all, or childhood either! You should have dozens of sweethearts before you marry—go to theaters and parties and dances for years and years yet, before you settle down."

"Then I shan't settle down," Sally laughed shakily. "I'll be a giddy flapper, if you'd rather! Ah, no, David! I want to be a good wife to you! But we won't get

old and serious. We'll work together and play together and study together and hobo all over the country together when we feel like it. I think we make good hoboes, don't you?"

"Not at this rate," David laughed, relieved. "I'm not going to kiss you a single other time before dawn, or we'll never get anywhere. And don't you try to vamp me, you little witch!"

He did not quite keep his promise, for when Sally became so tired about four o'clock in the morning that she could walk no further, he picked her up in his big-muscled young arms, and strode proudly into the dawn with her, and of course the best antidote for fatigue and sleepiness was an occasional kiss on her drooping eyelids or upon her babyishly lax, pink little mouth.

When the sun came up they were a little shy with each other, inclined to talk rapidly about trivial things.

"Canfield—two miles," David read from a sign post at a cross-roads. "I'm going to ask that truck driver the name of the nearest county seat, and how to get there."

Sally watched him proudly as he ran swiftly, apparently not at all fatigued after seven hours of hiking, to hail a dairy truck approaching along the state highway. The sun was in his tousled chestnut hair, turning it into gold, and the bigness and splendid beauty of his body thrilled her to sudden tears of joy that he was hers—hers. Her heart offered up a prayer: "Please God, don't let anything happen so that we can't be married today! Please!"

"Canfield is a county seat," David shouted exultantly before his long strides had brought him back to Sally. "The driver of the milk truck guessed why I wanted to know," he added in a lower voice, as he came abreast of her and took her hands to swing them triumphantly. "He says we crossed the state line about ten miles back and that the marriage laws are very easy on elopers here. In some states you have to establish a legal residence before you can be married, but there'll be no trouble like that here. Elopers from two or three bordering states come here to get married, he says. We're in luck, sweetheart."

"You didn't tell him our names?" Sally asked anxiously. "Mrs. Stone will have sent out a warning—"

"I'm not quite such an idiot," David laughed, "even if I am crazy in love. Now the next problem is breakfast. I suppose a farmhouse will be the best bet. It wouldn't be safe for us to hang around Canfield for three or four hours, waiting for the marriage license bureau to open. We're going to be married, darling, before the law has a chance to lay its hands on us."

They trudged along the state highway, miraculously revived by hope that all their troubles would soon be over, their eyes searching eagerly for a farmhouse. And just over the rise of a low hill they found it—a tenant farmer's un-

painted shack, from whose chimney rose a straight column of blue smoke.

They found the family at breakfast—the wife a slim, pretty, discontented-looking girl only a few years older than Sally; the husband, thick, short, dark and dour, at least a dozen years older than his wife; and a tow-headed baby boy of three.

The kitchen was an unpainted and unpapered lean-to of rough, weather-darkened pine. But Sally and David had eyes only for the tall stack of buckwheat cakes, the platter of roughly cut, badly fried "side meat," the huge graniteware coffee pot set on a chipped plate in the center of the table. "Breakfast?" the dour tenant-farmer grunted, in answer to David's question. "Reckon so, if you can eat what we got. It'll cost you 50 cents a piece. I don't work from sun-up to sun-down to feed tramps."

"Oh, Jim!" the wife protested, flushing. "Cakes and coffee ain't worth 50 cents. I might run down to the big house and get some eggs and cream—" she added uncertainly, her distressed brown eyes flickering from Sally and David in the doorway to her scowling husband.

"We'll be delighted with the buckwheat cakes and bacon and coffee, and not think a dollar too much for our breakfast," David cut in, smiling placatingly upon the farmer. "We're farmers ourselves, and we're used to farm ways. How are crops around here, sir?"

"My name's Buckner," the dour farmer answered grudgingly. "I'll bring in a couple of chairs. Millie, you'd better fill up this here syrup pitcher and you might open a jar of them damson preserves."

"And I'll beat up some more hot cake batter," Millie Buckner fluttered happily. "It won't take me a minute."

Sally and David washed their hands and faces at the pump outside the kitchen door, drying them on a fresh roller towel that Jim Buckner brought them.

"Run away to get married, have you?" the farmer asked in an almost pleasant voice, as he led the way to the newly set table.

"Yes," David answered simply. "We walked all night and we're rather tired, but we thought there was no use in going in to Canfield until pretty near nine o'clock."

"I guess Millie can fix up a bed so the little lady can snatch a nap 'tween now and then," Buckner offered. "Pitch in, folks! it ain't much, but you're welcome. Farmer, eh?" and his narrow eyes measured David's splendid young body thoughtfully. "Aim to locate around here? Old man Webster, the man I rent this patch of ground from, is needing hands bad. He's got a shack over the hill that he'd likely fix up for you if you ain't got anything better in mind. Not quite as nice as this house—we got three rooms, counting this lean-to, and the shack I'm referrin' to is only one room and a lean-to, but the little lady could fix it up real

pretty if she's got a knack that way, like Millie here has."

Sally almost choked on her mouthful of buckwheat cake. Were all her dreams of a home to come to this—or worse than this? One room and a lean-to! She felt suddenly ill and was swaying in her chair when David's firm, big hand closed over hers that lay laxly on the table.

"Thanks, Mr. Buckner," she heard David's voice faintly as from a great distance. "That's mighty nice of you, but Sally and I have other plans."

Other plans? Sally smiled at him tremulously, adoringly, knowing full well that he had no plans at all beyond the all-important marriage ceremony. But after breakfast she lay down on the bed that Millie Buckner hastily "straightened" and drifted off to sleep, as happy as if her future were blue-printed and insured against poverty. For no matter what might be in store for her, there would always be David—

They left the tenant farmer's shack at half past eight o'clock, Millie and Jim Buckner and the baby waving them goodby. Buckner, ashamed of his ungraciousness, had refused to take the dollar, but David had wrapped the baby's small sticky fingers about the folded bill.

"Shall we go up the hill and see 'Old Man' Webster?" David asked gravely when they were in the lane leading to the highway.

"Let's" agreed Sally valiantly.

"You'd really be willing to live—like that?" David marveled, his head jerking toward the dreary little shack they were leaving behind them.

"If—if you were with me, it wouldn't matter," Sally answered seriously.

"You'll never have to!" David exulted, sweeping her to his breast and kissing her regardless of the fact that the Buckners were still watching them. "I promise you it will never be as bad as that, honey. But maybe Jim Buckner promised Millie the same thing," he added in a troubled, uncertain voice.

"I'll never be sorry," Sally promised huskily.

They reached Canfield a few minutes after nine and had no difficulty in finding the county court house, for its grounds formed the "square" which was the hub of the small town. An old man pottering about the tobacco-stained halls with a mop and pail directed them to the marriage license bureau, without waiting for David to frame his embarrassed question.

The clerk, a pale, very thin young man, whose weak eyes were enlarged by thick-lensed glasses, thrust a printed form through the wicket of his cage, and went on with his work upon a big ledger, having apparently not the slightest interest in foolish young couples who wanted to commit matrimony.

"Answer all the questions," the clerk mumbled, without looking up. "Table in the corner over there. Pen and ink."

Sally and David were laughing helplessly by the time they had taken seats

at the pine table in the corner. "Proving you're never as important as you think you are," David chuckled. "Let's see. 'Place of residence?' I suppose we'll have to put Capital City. But that chap certainly doesn't give a continental who we are or where we're from. We're all in the day's work with him, thank heaven. Don't forget to put your age at eighteen, darling."

When they presented their filled-in and signed application for a marriage license, the clerk accepted it with supreme indifference, glancing at it and drew a stack of marriage license blanks toward him. As he began to write in the names, however, he frowned thoughtfully, then peered through the bars of his cage at the blushing, frightened couple.

"Your names sound awfully familiar to me," he puzzled. "Where you from? Capital City? Say, you're the kids that got into a row with a farmer and busted his leg, ain't you?"

Sally pressed close to David, her hands locking tightly over his arm, but David, as if he did not understand her signal, answered the clerk in a steady voice: "Yes, we are."

"I read all about you in the papers," the clerk went on in a strangely friendly voice. "I reckon your story made a deep impression on me because I was raised in an orphans' home myself and ran away when I was fourteen. I hoped at the time that you kids would make a clean get-away. I see the young lady's had a couple of birthdays in the last month," he grinned and winked. "Eighteen now, eh?"

"Yes," Sally quavered and then laughed, the lid of her right eye fluttering slowly down until the two fringes of black lashes met and entangled.

The clerk's pen scratched busily. "All right, youngsters. Here you are. Justice of the peace wedding?"

"We'd rather be married by a minister," David answered as he laid a $20 bill under the wicket and reached for the marriage license.

"That's easy," the clerk assured him heartily. "Like every county seat, Canfield's got her 'marrying parson.' Name of Greer. He's building a new church out of the fees that the eloping couples pay him. Lives on Chestnut street. White church and parsonage. Five blocks up Main street and turn to your right, then walk a block and a half. You can't miss it. And good luck, kids. You'll need lots of it."

David thrust a hand beneath the wicket and the two young men shook hands, David flushed and embarrassed but smiling, the clerk grinning good-naturedly.

"Hey, don't forget your change," their new friend called as David and Sally were turning away. "Marriage licenses in this state cost only $1.50. If you've got any spare change, give it to Parson Greer."

"Oh, he was sweet!" Sally cried, between laughter and tears, as they walked out of the courthouse. "I thought I would faint when he asked us that awful question. But everything's all right now."

"We're as good as married," David assured her triumphantly, slapping his breast pocket and cocking his head to listen to the crackling of the marriage license. "Five blocks up Main street. Up must mean north—"

Within five minutes they were awaiting an answer to their ring at the door of the little white parsonage half hidden behind the rather shabby white frame building of the church.

A stout, rosy-cheeked, white-haired old lady opened the door and beamed upon them. "You're looking for the 'marrying parson,' aren't you?" she chuckled. "Well, now, it's a shame, children, but you'll have to wait quite a spell for him. He's conducting a funeral at the home of one of our parishioners, and won't be back until about half past eleven. I'm Mrs. Greer. Won't you come in and wait?"

Sally and David consulted each other with troubled, disappointed eyes. Sally wanted to cry out to David that she was afraid to wait two hours, afraid to wait even half an hour, but with Mrs. Greer beaming expectantly upon them she did not dare.

"Thank you, Mrs. Greer," David answered, his hand tightening warningly upon Sally's. "We'll wait."

As they followed Mrs. Greer into the stuffy, over-furnished little parlor, he managed to whisper reassuringly in Sally's ear: "Just two hours, darling. Nothing can happen."

But Sally was shaking with fright—

CHAPTER XV

During the two hours that they waited for the Reverend Mr. Greer, "the marrying parson," David and Sally sat stiffly side by side on a horsehair sofa, only their fingers touching shyly, listening to countless romances of eloping couples with which old Mrs. Greer regaled them in a kindly effort to help them pass the tedious time of waiting. Her daughter-in-law, widowed by the death of the only son of the family, trailed weakly in and out of the living room, her big, mournful black

eyes devouring David's magnificent youth and vigor.

"You remind her of Sonny Bob," Mrs. Greer leaned forward in her arm chair to whisper to David. "Killed in the war he was, and Cora just can't become reconciled. Seems like the only pleasure she gets out of life now is acting as witness for weddings. And I must say she cries as beautiful and sweet as any bride's mother could. Some of the eloping brides appreciate it and some don't, but Cora means well. Once, I recollect, she spoiled a wedding. It seems that the girl's mother was dead set against this boy, and when Cora started to cry, just like a mother—"

The story went on and on, but Sally heard little of it, for her heart was suddenly desolate with need of her own mother. Lucky girls who had mothers to cry for them at their weddings! Her cold fingers gripped David's comforting, warm hand spasmodically. Somewhere in the world there was a woman who was her mother, a woman who had not waited for the marriage ceremony before succumbing to just such love as that woman's unwanted daughter now felt for David.

Understanding and pity for that harassed, shame-stricken girl that her mother must have been just sixteen years ago gushed suddenly into Sally's heart. If David had not been so fine, so tender, so good—she shivered and clung more tightly to his hand. In a few minutes she would be his wife and safe, safe from Mrs. Stone, the orphans' home, the reformatory.

"I hear Mr. Greer coming in," Mrs. Greer beamed upon them and bustled from the room. She returned immediately, a plump hand resting affectionately on the shoulder of a tall, thin, stooped old man, whose sweet, bloodless, wrinkled face glowed with a faint radiance of kindliness and benediction.

"This is little Miss Sally Ford and David Nash, Papa," Mrs. Greer told him. "They've been waiting patiently for two hours to get married. I've been entertaining them the best I could with some of our very own romances. I often tell Papa we ought to write stories for the magazines—"

"Well, well!" The "marrying parson" rubbed his beautiful, thin hands together and smiled upon Sally and David. "You're pretty young, aren't you? But Mama and I believe in youthful marriages. I was nineteen and she was seventeen when we took the big step, and we've never regretted it. You have your license, I presume?"

David's hand shook noticeably as he drew the precious document from his breast pocket and offered it to the minister. Through old fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles the minister studied the paper briefly, his lips twitching slightly with a smile.

"Well, well, Mama," he glanced over his spectacles at his beaming wife, "everything seems to be in order. Where is Cora? She's going to enjoy this wedding

enormously. The more she enjoys it, the more she weeps," he explained twinkling at Sally and David. When Mrs. Greer had left the room, the old minister bent his eyes gravely upon David. "Do you know of any real reason why you two children should not be married, my boy?"

David flushed but his eyes and voice were steady as he answered: "No reason at all, sir. We are both orphans, and we love each other."

Mrs. Greer and her daughter-in-law entered before the old preacher could ask any further questions, but he seemed to be quite satisfied. Taking a much-worn, limp leather black book from his pocket, he summoned the pair to stand before him. Sally tremblingly adjusted the little dark blue felt hat that fitted closely over the masses of her fine black hair, and smoothed the crisp folds of her new blue taffeta dress.

"Join right hands," the minister directed.

As Sally placed her icy, trembling little hand in David's the first of the younger Mrs. Greer's promised sobs startled her so that she swayed against David, almost fainting. The boy's left arm went about her shoulders, held her close, as the opening words of the marriage ceremony fell slowly and impressively from the marrying parson's lips:

"Dearly beloved—"

Peace fell suddenly upon the girl's heart and nerves. All fear left her; there was nothing in the world but beautiful words which were like a magic incantation, endowing an orphaned girl with respectability, happiness, family, an honored place in society as the wife of David Nash—

A bell shrilled loudly, shattering the beauty and the solemnity of the greatest moment in Sally's life. Behind her, on the sofa, she heard the faint rustle of Mrs. Greer's stiff silk skirt, whispers as the two witnesses conferred. The preacher's voice, which had faltered, went on, more hurried, flustered:

"Do you, David, take this woman—"

Again the bell clamored, a long, shrill, angry demand. The preacher's voice faltered again, the momentous question left half asked. He looked at his wife over the tap of his spectacles and nodded slightly. Mrs. Greer's skirts rustled apologetically as she hurried out of the room. Sally forced her eyes to travel upward to David's stern, set young face; their eyes locked for a moment, Sally's piteous with fright, then David answered that half-asked question loudly, emphatically, as if with the words he would defeat fate:

"I do!"

A clamor of voices suddenly filled the little entrance hall beyond the parsonage parlor. Sally, recognizing both of the voices, was galvanized to swift, un-Sallylike initiative. Stepping swiftly out of the circle of David's arm, but still clinging to his hand, she sprang toward the preacher, her eyes blazing, her face

pinched with fear and drained of all color.

"Please go on!" she gasped. "Please, Mr. Greer. Don't let them stop us now! Ask me—'Do you take this man—? Please, I do, I do!"

"Sally, darling—" David was trying to restrain her, his voice heavy with pity.

"I'm sorry, children," the old preacher shook his head. "I shall have to investigate this disturbance, but I promise you to continue with the ceremony if there is no legal impediment to your marriage. Just stand where you are—"

The door was flung open and Mrs. Stone, matron of the orphanage, strode into the room, panting, her heavy face red with anger and exertion. She was followed by a flustered, weeping Mrs. Greer and by a small, smartly dressed little figure that halted in the doorway. Even in that first dreadful moment when Sally knew that she was trapped, that the half-performed wedding ceremony would not be completed, she was conscious of that shock of amazement and delight which had always tingled along her nerves whenever she had seen Enid Barr. But why had Enid Barr joined in the cruel pursuit of a luckless orphan whose worst sin had been running away from charity? If David's arms had not been so tightly about her, she would have tried to run away again—

"Are we too late?" Mrs. Stone demanded in the loud, harsh voice that had been a whip-lash upon Sally Ford's sensitive nerves for twelve years. "Are they married?"

"I was reading the service when you interrupted, madam," the Reverend Mr. Greer said with surprising severity. "And I shall continue it if you cannot show just cause why these two young people should not be married. May I ask who you are, madam?"

"Certainly! I am Mrs. Miranda Stone, matron of the State Orphans' Asylum of Capital City, and Sally Ford is one of my charges, a minor, a ward of the state until her eighteenth birthday. She is only sixteen years old and cannot be married without the permission of her guardians, the trustees of the orphanage. Is it clear that you cannot go on with the ceremony?" she concluded in her hard, brisk voice.

"Is this true, Sally?" the old man asked Sally gently.

"Yes," she nodded, then laid her head wearily and hopelessly upon David's shoulder.

"Mrs. Stone," David began to plead with passionate intensity, one of his hands trembling upon Sally's bowed head, "for God's sake let us go on with this marriage! I love Sally and she loves me. I have never harmed her and I never will. It's not right for you to drag her back to the asylum, to spend two more years of dependence upon charity. I can support her, I'm strong, I love her—"

"Will all of you kindly leave the room and let me talk with Sally?" Mrs.

Stone cut across his appeal ruthlessly. "I may as well tell you, Mr. Greer, that my friend here, Mrs. Barr, a very rich woman, intends to adopt this girl and provide her with all the advantages that wealth makes possible.

"She has been hunting for Sally for weeks, and it is only through her persistence and the power which her wealth commands that we have been able to prevent this ridiculous marriage today."

"We shall be glad to let you talk privately with the young couple," the old minister answered with punctilious politeness. "Come, Mama, Cora!"

"Will you please leave the room also, Mr. Nash?" Mrs. Stone went on ruthlessly, without taking time to acknowledge the old man's courtesy.

Sally's arms clung more tightly to David. "He's going to stay, Mrs. Stone," she gasped, amazed at her own temerity. "If you don't let me marry David now, I shall marry him when I am eighteen. I don't want to be adopted. I only want David—"

"I think the boy had better stay," Enid Barr's lovely voice, strangely not at all arrogant now, called from the doorway.

When the minister and his wife and daughter-in-law had left the room, Enid Barr softly closed the door against which she had been leaning, as if she had little interest in the drama taking place, and walked slowly toward David and Sally, who were still in each other's arms. Gone from her small, exquisite face was the look of aloof indifference, and in its place were embarrassment, wistful appeal, tenderness and to Sally's bewilderment, the most profound humility.

"Oh, Sally, Sally!" The beautiful contralto voice was husky with tears. "Can't you guess why I want you, why I've hunted you down like this? I'm your mother, Sally."

"My mother?" Sally echoed blankly. Then incredulous joy floated her pale little face with a rosy glow. "My mother? David—Mrs. Stone—oh, I can't think!"

David's arms had dropped slowly from about her shoulders and she stood swaying slightly. "But—you can't be my mother!" she gasped, shaking her head in childish negation. "You're not old enough. I'm sixteen—"

"And I'm thirty-three," Enid Barr said gently. "There's no mistake, Sally, my darling. I'm really your mother, and I'd like, more than anything in the world, for you to let me kiss you now and to hear you call me 'Mother'." She had advanced the few steps that separated them and was holding out her delicate, useless-looking little hands with such humility and timidity as no one who knew Enid Barr would have believed her capable of.

Sally's hands went out involuntarily, but before their fingers could intertwine, Enid flung her arms about the girl and held her smotheringly close for a moment. Then she raised her small, slight body on tiptoes and pressed her quivering lips softly against Sally's cheek. At the caress, twelve years of loneliness

and mother-need rushed across the girl's mind like a frantically unwinding spool of film.

"Oh, I've wanted a mother so terribly! Twelve years in the orphanage—Oh, why did you put me there?" she cried brokenly. "It's awful—not having anyone of your own—no family—and now, when I have David to be my family, and I don't need you—so much—you come—Why didn't you come before? Why? Why did you put me there?"

Her words were incoherent, and at the bitter reproach in them Enid tried to hold her more closely, but Sally, scarcely knowing what she did, struck the small, clinging arms from her shoulders and whirled upon David, her mouth twisting, tears running down her cheeks. "I don't want anyone but you now, David. Don't let them separate us, David. We're half married already! Make the preacher come back and finish marrying us, David—"

Enid Barr, looked wonderingly upon her arms, as if expecting to see upon them the marks of her daughter's blows. A gust of anger swept over her, leaving her beautiful face quite white and darkening her eyes until they were almost as deep a blue as Sally's.

"You cannot marry the boy, Sally! I'm sorry that almost my first words to you should be a reminder of my authority over you as your mother. Come here, Sally!" But almost in the moment of its returning the arrogance for which she was noted dropped from her, and humility and grief took its place. "Please forgive me, Sally. It's just that I'm jealous of your love for this boy and grieved that you want to leave me for him. But—oh, why *should* you love me? God knows I've done nothing yet to make you love me! I can't blame you for hating and reproaching me—"

"Oh!" Sally turned from the shelter of David's arms and took an uncertain step toward her mother, pity fighting with rebellion and bitterness in her overcharged heart. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Barr—Mother—"

"I think you'd better tell her your story as you told it to me, Mrs. Barr." Mrs. Stone could keep silent no longer. "Now, Sally, I want you to listen to every word your mother says and bear in mind that she is your mother and that she has been hunting for you for weeks, her heart full of love for you because you were her child."

For twelve years Sally had obeyed every command uttered in that harsh, emphatic voice and she obeyed now, allowing herself to be led by Mrs. Stone to the sofa. Enid Barr took her seat on one side of the girl and David without asking permission of either of the two older women who watched him with hostile, jealous eyes, took his place on the other side, his hand closing tightly over Sally's.

Jealously, Enid Barr reached for the girl's other hand and held it against her cheek for a moment before she began her story, her contralto voice low and con-

trolled at first. Mrs. Stone sat rigidly erect in an old-fashioned morris chair, her lips folded with an expression of grim patience, as if she regretted the necessity of once more hearing a story which affronted her Puritanical principles.

"I was just your age, Sally," Enid began quietly, "just sixteen, when I met the man who became your father. I was Enid Halsted then. He was fifteen years older than I. I thought I—loved him—very much. He was—very handsome."

Her eyes flickered toward the soft tendrils of black hair that showed under the brim of Sally's little blue felt hat. "My father, a proud man as well as a very rich one, forbade me to see the man, discharged him, but—it was too late."

She interrupted herself suddenly, leaning across Sally to challenge David with eyes which were again arrogant. "I'm permitting you to hear all this, Mr. Nash, because I know that Sally would not listen if I sent you from the room. But I must ask your promise never to tell anyone what you hear today—"

"It concerns Sally, Mrs. Barr, and anything that concerns her, either her past, present or future—" his eyes flicked a tiny smile at Sally as he repeated the familiar phrase from Gus, the barker's ballyhoo—"is sacred to me."

"Thank you," Enid said coldly, and was immediately punished by Sally's attempt to withdraw her hand. "I am sure I can trust you, David," Enid added, swallowing her pride, so that Sally's fingers would twine about her own again. "My mother was dead, had been dead for more than five years. I had to tell my father. There's no use in my going into all that happened then," she shivered, her free hand covering her eyes for a moment. "He—saw me through it, because he loved me more than I deserved. No one knew, for he arranged for me to go to a private sanitarium, where no one but the doctor knew my real name. After my baby was born my father told me it had been born dead, and I—I was glad at first. But afterwards I could hardly bear to look at a baby—I mustn't try to make you sorry for me," she cried brokenly, flicking her handkerchief at a tear that was sliding down her cheek.

Enid Barr drew a deep, quivering breath and cuddled Sally's hand against her cheek. "Father took me to Europe for a year and when we returned, I made my debut, as if nothing had happened. I was eighteen then, and thought I never wanted to be married, but when I met Courtney Barr my second season I changed my mind; when I was twenty I married him. I've been married thirteen years and—there's never been another baby. There couldn't be—because of the first one—you, Sally—though I didn't know, didn't dream you were alive."

"Poor Mother!" Sally whispered, tears slipping unnoticed down her own cheeks. It was all right—all right! Her mother hadn't meant to abandon her, even if she had been ashamed of bearing her—

"My father died when I was twenty-one, just four years after you were born, Sally. He died suddenly, and the lawyers couldn't find a will. He'd hidden it too

well. Everything came to me, of course, all that he had meant you to have as well as my own share—"

"He—my grandfather—sent Mrs. Ford money." Sally cried suddenly. "Gramma Bangs told me she used to get money orders and that when the money stopped coming, Mrs. Ford had to put me in the orphanage, because she was sick—I understand now!"

"Yes, he sent her a liberal allowance for you, on condition that she never tell who you were and that she should never bring you to New York. She did not herself know who you were, who the man was who sent the money, who your mother was," Enid Barr went on, her voice more controlled now that she had passed over the telling of her own shame.

"It was not until May of this year that I found out all these things. A connoisseur of antiques was looking at my father's desk and accidentally discovered a secret drawer, containing his will and a painstaking record of the whole affair. I told no one but Court—my husband—and he agreed with me that I must try to find you at once. He was—wonderful—about it all. Of course I had told him, or rather, my father had told him the truth about me before I married him, but Court thought, as I did, that the baby had died. It was a great shock to him, but he's been wonderful."

Her voice had the same quality in it as she spoke of Courtney Barr that enriched Sally's voice whenever she spoke David's name, and the girl could not help wondering why her mother, who had suffered and loved, could not understand the depth of her love for David. Maybe she would—in time—

"I found Mrs. Nora Ford's address among the papers, of course, and I went to Stanton immediately, but as I had feared, I found that she had left there years before, and that no one in the neighborhood had the least idea where she had gone. One old lady—Mrs. Bangs—said that Nora had had a daughter, Sally, and I knew that she meant my daughter. I spent weeks and a great deal of money searching for some trace of Nora Ford and Sally Ford, but it was useless. I had almost lost hope of finding either of you when I read that terrible story in the papers about Sally Ford and David Nash—"

"Carson lied," David interrupted quietly. "His story was false from beginning to end. There was absolutely nothing between Sally and me but friendship. I knocked him through the window because he called her vile names and was threatening to send her back to the orphanage in disgrace, when she had done nothing wrong except work herself almost to death on his farm."

"Thank you, David. I'm glad to hear the truth. I was sure of it the first time I looked into my daughter's eyes. But if it had not been for that story in the paper I would not be here today, so I'm almost grateful to Carson for his vileness. I went to the orphanage, interviewed Mrs. Stone and after I had satisfied myself

that Sally was really my daughter, I told her all that I'm telling you now and asked her to help me find her. That afternoon I took the children to the carnival, because it was the only way I could do anything for you, my darling."

"And Betsy recognized me!" Sally cried. "If Gus hadn't been trying so hard to protect David and me from the police—"

"Exactly!" Enid smiled at her through tears. "You've been running away from your mother ever since, not from the police! And what a chase you've led us, darling! That enormous old man, Winfield Bybee, had convinced us that we were on the wrong track, that Betsy had been mistaken, and the carnival had left town when Mrs. Stone got a letter from a woman who said she'd been with the carnival—"

"Nita!" Sally and David exclaimed together. So she had kept her promise to avenge herself, Sally reflected. A queer revenge—restoring an orphaned girl to her mother who was a rich woman. Sally smiled. But—wasn't she avenged after all? Wouldn't Nita congratulate herself on having separated David and Sally, no matter what good luck she had inadvertently brought upon Sally by doing so?

At the sudden realization of what this story meant to herself and David, Sally withdrew her arm from about her mother's shoulders and flung herself upon David's breast.

————

Very gently David unclasped Sally's hands, that locked convulsively about his neck. His eyes were dark with pain as Sally, hurt and resentful, shrank from him.

"You're glad to get out of it!" she accused him. "You were only marrying me because you were sorry for me. You won't fight for me now, because you're glad to be free—"

"Sally! You don't know what you're saying! You know I love you, that I've thought of nothing but you since we met on Carson's farm. Of course I want to marry you, and will be proud and happy to do so, if your mother will consent."

Sally's face bloomed again. She seized her mother's hands and held them hard against her breast as she pleaded: "You see, Mother? Oh, please let us go on with our marriage! David and I will love you always, be so grateful to you—Listen, Mother! You'll have a son as well as a daughter—"

"Don't be absurd, Sally!" Enid commanded brusquely. "When you were indeed a girl alone, with no family, no prospects, nothing, a marriage with David would undoubtedly have been the best thing for you. But now—it's ridiculous! This boy has nothing. You would be a burden upon him, a yoke about his young neck that should not be bowed down by responsibility for several years. You're both under a cloud. I understand that he cannot return to college or go back to

his grandfather until this trouble is cleared up. What did you two children expect to do, once you were married?"

"I expected to work at anything I could get to do," David answered with hurt young dignity. "I have brains, two years of college education, a strong body, and I love Sally."

Enid Barr leaned across Sally and touched David's clenched fist with the caressing tips of her fingers. "You're a good boy, David and Sally, the orphan, the girl alone, would have been lucky to marry you. But you understand, don't you? She's my daughter, will be the legally adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Courtney Barr. Anyone in New York could tell you what that means. She will have every advantage that money can offer her—finishing school or college, if she wants to go to college; travel, exquisite clothes, a place in society, a mother and father who will adore her, a girlhood rich with all the pleasures that every normal girl craves. Help me to give her these things, David, things you would give her if you could!"

"This is all nonsense!" Mrs. Stone spoke up sharply. "You know perfectly well, Mrs. Barr, that these two foolish children can't get married without your consent. I, for one think you're wasting your time. Simply put your foot down and take your daughter home with you."

Sally flushed angrily and struggled to rise, but David held her back. "You'll have to go with her, darling. Remember how you've always wanted a mother? You have one now, and she wants you with her, wants to make up to you for all you've missed."

As only mute rebellion answered him, he wisely changed his tactics: "Do you think you could ever be really happy, darling, knowing that you had hurt your mother, cheated her of the child for whom she has grieved all these years? She'll never have another child, Sally, and she needs you as much as you need her."

When Sally's mouth began to quiver with new tears, Enid Barr took the girl in her arms. At last Sally raised her head and searched her mother's face with piteous intensity. "Do you really need me?" she cried. "You'll love me—be a real mother to me? You don't just want me because it's your duty?"

Tears clouded the clear blue of Enid's eyes as she answered softly: "I'll be a mother to you, Sally, not because it's my duty, but because I already love you and will love you more and more. If I had searched the whole world over for the girl I would have liked to have as my daughter, I could not have found one who is as sweet and pretty and dear as you are. I'm proud of my daughter, and I shall hope to make her proud of me."

"Then—I'll go with you," Sally capitulated, but she added quickly, "If David will promise not to love any other girl until I'm old enough to marry him."

Over Sally's head, cradled against her mother's breast, Enid Barr and David Nash exchanged a long look, as if measuring each other's strength. David knew then, and Enid meant him to know, that Sally's mother had far different plans for her daughter than any that could possibly include David Nash.

"I'll always love you, Sally," David said gravely, as he rose from the sofa.

Sally struggled out of her mother's clasp and sprang to the boy's side just as he was reaching to the little center table for his hat. "Where are you going, David? Don't leave me yet! Oh, David, I can't bear to let you go! How can I write you—where? Tell me, David! Oh, I love you so I feel like I'll die if you leave me!"

Defiant of the tight-lipped disapproval of Mrs. Stone and of the anxious signal which Enid's blue eyes were flashing him, David put his arms about Sally and held her close, while he bent his head to kiss her.

"You can write me here, general delivery. I'll stay here for a while, I think, until I can make plans—"

"My husband is in Capital City now, David," Enid interrupted eagerly. "I am going to have him intercede with the authorities for you. You can return to Capital City as soon as you like. There'll be no trouble, I promise you. It is the only thing we can do to repay you for your great kindness toward—our daughter."

"Then you can go back to college, David," Sally rejoiced, her eyes shining through tears. "And when you've graduated and—and gotten your start, we can be married, can't we?"

"If you still want me, Sally darling," David answered gravely. "Thank you, Mrs. Barr. You'll—you'll try to make Sally happy, won't you?"

"I promise you she'll be happy, David," Enid answered, giving him her hand. "May I speak with you alone a moment?" she added impulsively, and linking her arm in his drew him toward the door that opened into the little foyer hall.

"David! You're not going? Without telling me goodby?" Sally cried, stumbling blindly after them.

"Goodby, my darling." He put his arm about her shoulders and laid his cheek against her hair as he murmured in a low, shaken voice: "I'll be loving you—always!"

When the door had closed upon her mother and her almost-husband, Sally did a surprising thing: she went stumbling toward Mrs. Stone, and dropped upon her knees before that majestic, rigid figure which she had feared for twelve years.

When Enid Barr returned a few minutes later, two round spots of color burning in her cheeks, she found her daughter in the orphanage matron's lap, cuddled there like a small child, trustfully sobbing out her grief.

CHAPTER XVI

Enid Barr left with her daughter for Kansas City that night, after wiring her husband, Courtney Barr, who was still awaiting word from her in Capital City. For two days Sally and Enid shopped for a suitable wardrobe for Sally, went to shows together, explored the city, and spent many hours talking. Whenever the question of Sally's future arose, Enid spoke only in generalities, evading all direct questions, but about Sally's childhood and young girlhood in the orphanage and on the Carson farm, and about her experiences with the carnival, Enid was insatiably curious and invariably sympathetic. Sally sensed that her mother was anxiously awaiting Courtney Barr's arrival before making any definite plans, and gradually the girl grew to dread the ordeal of meeting her mother's husband, the man who would become her father by adoption.

And when at last he came she knew that her troubled intuition had been correct. However "wonderful" he had been to Enid when she had discovered that her child had not been born dead but was alive somewhere in the world, Sally felt instantly that his kindness and generosity toward Enid would not extend to herself.

Courtney Barr was a meticulously groomed, meticulously courteous man who had, in slipping into middle-age, lost all traces of the boy and youth he must have been. To Sally's terrified eyes, this rather heavy, ponderous man, on whom dignity rested like a royal cloak, looked as if he had been born old and wise and cold. She wondered how her exquisite, arrogant little mother could love him so devotedly.

Almost immediately after the awkward introduction—"This is our Sally, Court!"—the three of them had had dinner together, a silent meal, so far as Sally was concerned. She had felt that the Enid with whom she had talked and laughed and wept these two days had slipped away, leaving this sophisticated, strange woman in her place, a woman who was in nowise related to her, a woman who was merely Mrs. Courtney Barr.

They left her alone for an hour after dinner, an hour which she spent in her own room in writing a long, frightened, appealing letter to David. At nine

o'clock Enid knocked on her door and invited her to join them in the parlor of the luxurious suite which had been such a delight to orphanage-bred Sally.

She found Courtney Barr seated in a large arm chair, her mother perched on the arm of it, one tiny foot in a silver slipper swinging with nervous rapidity. The man smiled bleakly, a smile that did not reach his cold gray eyes, as Sally took the nearby chair that he indicated.

"Mrs. Barr and I have been discussing your immediate future, Sally," he began ponderously, in tones that he evidently thought were kind.

Institutional timidity closed down upon Sally; under those cold eyes she lost that ephemeral beauty of hers which depended so largely upon her emotions. It was her institutional voice—meekness hiding fear and rebellion—which answered: "Yes, sir."

"Oh, let me talk to her, Court!" Enid begged. "You're scaring my baby to death. He fancies himself as an old ogre, Sally darling, but he's really a dear inside. You see, Sally, I was so eager to find my baby that I made no plans at all."

Courtney Barr said, "I think I'd better do the talking after all, my dear. Your sentimentality—natural, of course, under the circumstances—would make it impossible for you to state the case clearly and convincingly."

Sally's cold hands clasped each other tightly in her lap as she stared with wide, frightened eyes at the man who was about to arrange her whole future for her.

"I have made Mrs. Barr understand how impossible it will be for us to take you into our home at once, as our adopted daughter," Courtney Barr went on in his heavy, judicial voice.

Sally sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing in her white face. "I didn't ask to be found, to be adopted!" she cried. "If you don't want me, say so, and let me go back to David!"

It was the loving distress on Enid Barr's quivering face that quickly brought Sally to bewildered, humiliated submission, rather than the cold anger and ill-concealed hatred in Courtney Barr's pale gray eyes. Enid had left the arm of her husband's chair and had drawn Sally to a little rose-up-holstered settee, and it was with her mother's hand cuddling hers compassionately that Sally listened as the man's heavy, judicial voice went on and on:

"I am sure, Sally, that when you have had time for reflection you will see my viewpoint. Naturally, your mother's happiness means more to me than does yours, and I believe I know my wife well enough to state positively that a newspaper scandal or even gossip among our own circle would cause her the most acute distress. It shall be our task, Sally, to see that she is spared such distress.

"I'm sorry to appear brutal," Barr said stiffly. "But it is better for us to face the facts, for if our friends ever know them they will not mince words. If

you should come into our home now, as you are, gossips would immediately set themselves to dig up the facts. Too many people already know that Sally Ford has been sought by the police as a—delinquent. My wife and I could not possibly hope to explain our extraordinary interest in a runaway orphan. Do you agree with me, Sally?" He tried to make his voice kind, but his eyes were as cold and hard as steel.

"Yes, sir," Sally agreed in her meek, institutional voice. But she felt so sick with shame and anger that her only desire then was to run and run and run until she found a haven in David's arms. At the thought, some of the spiritedness which her few weeks of independence had fostered in her asserted itself. "But, Mr. Barr, if I would disgrace my mother, why don't you let me go? I can marry David and no one will ever know that I have a mother—"

"That is very sensible, Sally," Courtney Barr nodded, a gleam of kindliness in his cold eyes, "and I have tried to make your mother believe that your happiness would be best assured by your sticking to your own class—"

"It isn't her class, if you mean that she's suited only to poverty and hard work!" Enid Barr interrupted passionately. "Look at her, Court! She's a born lady! She's fine and delicate clear through—"

"And so is David!" Sally cried indignantly. "He may be middle-class, but he's the finest, most honorable man in the world!"

"We shall not quarrel about class," Courtney Barr cut in with heavy dignity. "The important thing is that your mother is determined to have you, to fit you for the station to which she belongs. I believe she is making a mistake, both from your standpoint and from hers, but I am willing to agree to a sensible arrangement. Our plan now, Sally, is to put you into a conservative, rather obscure girls' finishing school in the South. I have several relatives—'poor relations,' I suppose you would call them—in the South, and it is my suggestion that you enter school as my ward—mine, you understand, not your mother's, so that any suspicion as to your real parentage will rest upon me, rather than upon her." He arched his eyebrows at Sally, looking rather consciously noble, and she nodded miserably. "During the two years that you will be in school—"

"Two years!" Sally echoed blankly. Two years more of loneliness, of not belonging, of being an orphan!

"Two years will pass very quickly," Courtney Barr assured her. "Enid, please control yourself! I am infinitely sorry to distress you in this manner, but it is the only sensible thing to do."

"Yes, Court," Enid choked and buried her exquisite face in her small, useless-looking white hands.

Sally put her arms about her mother, and leaned her glossy black head against the golden one. "I'll try to be contented and happy, Mr. Barr. Of course I

want to protect Mother—"

"That is another thing, Sally," Courtney Barr interrupted in an almost gentle voice. "You must try to remember not to refer to Mrs. Barr as your mother in the hearing of anyone—anyone! If we are going to protect her, we must begin now."

"Yes, sir," Sally bowed her head lower so he might not see her tears.

"Both Mrs. Barr and I will drop casual remarks about my pretty young ward in school down South, until our friends have become accustomed to the idea. You will be registered as Sally Barr, a distant relative of my own, and my ward. It is even probable that it would not be unwise to have you with us for a short time next summer. We have an estate on Long Island, you know.

"As my ward and as my distant relative, you would not be particularly conspicuous, but our friends would meet you casually and be the less surprised when it became known that Mrs. Barr and I had decided to adopt you as our daughter. All our friends and acquaintances know that it has been a great grief to us that we have no children, and I believe our action in this matter would occasion no great surprise. The adoption itself will take place before your eighteenth birthday, while you are still in school. If there is any newspaper publicity, it will be of an innocuous kind, I hope.

"Naturally I shall take care that any newspaper investigation will not be able to go back of the story I shall prepare very carefully, and if there is any hint of scandal at all, it will inevitably reflect on me and not on your mother, as I have already pointed out. After your adoption and your graduation from the finishing school, you will, of course, take your place in our home as our daughter, will make your debut in society that fall, and, I hope, be very happy with us and in your new life."

Sally sat very still, her eyes wide and blank, while her bewildered, unhappy mind tried to picture the future which Courtney Barr was outlining for her. At last she shook her head, as if to clear away the mists of doubt and bewilderment. Her mother had taken Sally's little lax, cold hands and was cuddling them against her cheeks, bringing a fingertip to her lips occasionally.

"Poor baby! And—poor mother!" Enid whispered brokenly, and the spell was broken. The hard lump of unhappiness and resentment that had been aching in Sally's throat since Courtney Barr had begun to speak melted in tears. They wept in each other's arms, while Enid's husband walked impatiently up and down the room.

When the storm had spent itself, Sally remembered David again, and pain and fear contracted her heart sharply.

"Did you see David, Mr. Barr?" She sat up and dabbed at her wet cheeks with one of the exquisite sheer linen handkerchiefs which Enid had given her.

"Oh, yes, yes!" Barr answered quickly. "I managed his affairs very neatly.

Rand, the district attorney, personally attended to the quashing of the charges against him, and it cost only a thousand dollars to get Carson to issue a statement to the press that he had really seen nothing compromising between young Nash and yourself. He also admitted that the boy's anger had been in a measure justified, that the assault had been provoked by his own mistaken charges against you and Nash. The boy's reputation is cleared now and he can go back to college this fall. I also saw his grandfather and persuaded him that the boy had been a hero rather than a blackguard. Young Nash is at home on his grandfather's farm again, so that incident is successfully closed."

Gratitude brought Sally to her feet. "Thank you, Mr. Barr! You've been wonderful! It won't be so hard for me to be away at school if I know that David is in school, too. I wrote him tonight, but I'll tear it up and write a new letter, telling him all about everything and how happy I am that he's free of those awful charges—"

"No, Sally," Barr interrupted, frowning. "Your mother and I are agreed that you must not write to young Nash, that there must be no thought of an engagement—"

"Not write to David?" Sally, echoed blankly. "I love David, Mr. Barr, and I always will. It's not fair to ask me to promise not to write to him."

"I already have his promise not to write to you," Barr told her implacably. "He understands the situation, agrees with your mother and me that your past must be forgotten as quickly as possible. You are entering upon a new life tomorrow when you leave for Virginia with me, a life that will be totally different from David Nash's. You will—though you don't seem to realize it—be an heiress to great wealth some day—"

"You told him that!" Sally accused him hotly. "You told him he'd be a fortune-hunter if he tried to marry me when I'm of age! Oh, you're not fair! You have no right to turn David against me, when I love him as I do—"

"You're only sixteen, Sally!" Barr cut in sternly, "You don't know the meaning of the word love—"

"Please, Court," Enid begged, her own face white and drawn with pity for Sally. "Please let me handle this myself. Sally is overwrought now, nervously exhausted. Come along to bed now, darling," she coaxed, her little hands upon Sally's shoulders. "Let Mother tuck you up and sing you a lullaby. I'm not going to be cheated of that experience even if my baby is bigger than I am."

Fresh tears gushed into Sally's eyes, and she allowed herself to be led away. At the door she paused:

"Good night, Mr. Barr. I—I don't want you to think I don't appreciate what you've done for me—and David—and what you're going to do for me. I do think you're good and that you want to be kind to me, but I know you're making a

mistake about David and me. I am young, but I know I love David and that I'll never want to marry anyone else."

Courtney Barr flushed and looked embarrassed. "Thank you, Sally. I'm sure we'll be friends. I want to be. I expect to take my duty as your father very seriously, to try to make you happy. As for David, time has a way of settling things if we only give it a chance. By the way, my dear," he added hastily as Sally was about to pass on into her bedroom with her mother, "I think it will be wiser if your mother does not accompany us to Virginia. I will arrange for you to board with my relatives in Virginia until school opens this fall. They will be glad, for a consideration, to do and say anything I wish them to in regard to you, and we must begin immediately to take every precaution to protect your mother."

"Yes, sir," Sally answered faintly, her eyes appealing to Enid for consolation.

When Sally was in bed, having been flutteringly and lovingly assisted in her preparation by her mother, Enid bent over her to whisper:

"Darling, darling, don't look so forlorn! Two years will pass so swiftly and if you're very good, we'll let you ask David to your coming-out party."

CHAPTER XVII

It was a desolately unhappy Sally who began what she considered the unbearable task of living those two years which Courtney Barr had decreed should separate the orphan, Sally Ford, from the society debutante, Sally Barr. A dozen times, at least, during those first few weeks she would have run away, straight to David Nash, if she had not given her word of honor both to her mother and to her mother's husband.

But, almost insensibly, she began to enjoy life again. It was a soul-satisfying experience to have an apparently unlimited supply of spending money and the most beautiful wardrobe of any girl in the little Virginia city to which Courtney Barr had taken her. For many days almost every mail brought her a package from New York, addressed in Enid Barr's surprisingly big handwriting. She and her mother wrote each other twice a week, and Enid early formed the habit of sending her a weekly budget of clippings from the papers about the social set in which the Barrs moved so brilliantly—"so you will become acquainted with the

names of those who will be your friends," as Enid wrote her daughter.

Gradually the unreality of her new position and of her future expectations wore off and Sally came to regard herself as really the daughter of the Courtney Barrs.

She lived for the rest of the summer with Courtney Barr's third cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Barr, who were glad of both the money and the companionship which Sally brought them. To their friends the Charles Barrs explained that Sally was an orphaned cousin, and the story apparently was never questioned. She was accepted cordially by the carefree young people of the small city's best social set, and was sometimes ashamed of the pleasure she had in being a popular, well-dressed, pretty young girl.

She reproached herself for not mourning constantly for David, but she knew that not for an instant were her loyalty and love for him threatened by her strange new experiences. And, although she had given her promise not to write to David, she composed long, intimate letters to him every week, putting them away in her trunk in the confident belief that he would some day read them and love them, because she had written them.

She told him everything in these letters she could not send—told him of the two or three nice boys who declared their puppy love for her; confessed, with tears that blistered the pages, that she had let one of them kiss her, because he seemed so hurt at her first refusal; described her new clothes with child-like enthusiasm; tucked snapshots of herself in the enchanting new dresses between the folded pages; in fact, poured out her heart to him far more unaffectedly than would have been possible if she had been mailing the letters.

Not feeling at all that she was breaking her promise, she subscribed to The Capital City Press and to the college newspaper, avidly searching them for any news of David and jealously hoarding the clippings with which her diligence was rewarded.

In this way she learned that he was elected president of the junior class; that he "made" the football eleven as halfback; that—and she almost fainted with terror—that he was slightly injured during the Thanksgiving game, when A. & M. beat the State University team in a bitterly fought contest.

By that time she was in the finishing school which Courtney Barr had chosen for her, and was herself becoming prominent in school activities through her talent for dramatics. When David's college paper printed a two-column picture of her sweetheart she cut it out and framed it. The greatest joy she had that first year of her new life was to hear the other girls rave about his good looks and his athletic record, of which she bragged swaggeringly.

During the spring term she was chosen by the dramatic director to take the lead in the school's last play of the year, "The Clinging Vine." Sally Ford, or Sally

Barr, as she was known at the school, was again happy "play-acting." Enid and Courtney Barr came down from New York for the play and for commencement exercises, though Sally would not graduate for another year. It was the first time she had seen her mother since they had parted in the little mid-western town where Enid had found Sally being married to David Nash.

"But how adorably pretty you are!" Enid exclaimed wonderingly, when she had the girl safe in the privacy of her own suite in a nearby hotel. "I wanted to nudge every fond mama sitting near me and exult, 'That's my daughter! Isn't she beautiful? Isn't she a wonderful little actress?' Are you happy, darling?"

Sally, her cheeks poppy-red with excitement and pleasure in her success in the school play, twirled lightly on the toe of her silver slipper, so that her pink chiffon skirt belled out like a ballet dancer's.

"Happy? I'm thrilled and excited right now, and happy that you're here, but sometimes I'm lonely, in spite of my new friends—Oh, Mother," she cried, catching Enid's hands impulsively, "won't you let me go back with you and Mr. Barr now? I want to be with someone I belong to! I don't fit in here, really. I—I guess I'm still Orphan Sally Ford inside. I'm always expecting them to snub me, or to taunt me."

Enid's eyes filmed over with tears, but she shook her head. "We must try to be patient, darling. I want you to be at home with girls like these—girls who have always had money and social position and—and culture. It's a loathsome word, but I don't know any better one for what I mean. Don't you see, sweetheart? Mother wants you to be ready for New York when you come, so that you will be happy, but not timid and ill-at-ease. Court was really very wise. I've come to see that now. Please try to be patient, darling."

"And this summer?" Sally quivered. "He said I could be with you at your Long Island home—"

But Enid was shaking her head again, her eyes infinitely fond and pitying. "I'm going abroad, dear. I haven't been very well this winter—just tired from too much gayety, I think. The doctors advise a rest cure in southern France. I want you to go to a girls' camp in New Hampshire. It's really a part of your education, social and physical. I want you to ride and swim and hike all summer, with the sort of girls whom you'll be meeting when you do join us in New York.

"You're to learn to play golf, perfect your game of tennis. By the way, I want you to go to as many house parties on your holidays as you can. Learn to flirt with the college youngsters you'll meet; be gay, don't be—"

"Institutional," Sally interrupted in a low voice as she turned sharply away from her mother.

It was almost a relief to the girl when Enid was gone. Her mother's exquisite, fragile beauty, her unconscious arrogance, her sophistication, her

sometimes caustic wit, formed a barrier between them, in spite of the almost worshipful love that Sally felt for her.

Enid, when she was with her, somehow made the 17-year-old-girl feel gawky, underdone, awkward, shy. Those cornflower blue eyes, when they were not misted with tears of affection for this daughter whom she had so recently discovered, seemed to Sally to be a powerful microscope trained upon all her deficiencies, enlarging them to frightening proportions. She knew that in these moments of critical survey her mother was looking upon her, not as a beloved daughter miraculously restored to her, but as a future debutante, bearer of the proud name of Barr, and as a pawn in the marriage game as it is played in the most exclusive circles in New York Society.

And Sally squirmed miserably, pitifully afraid that she would never measure up to the standard which her mother and Courtney Barr had set for her, knowing, too, deep in her heart, that she did not want to. For her heart had been given to a golden young god of a man, whose kingdom was the soil, and whose wife needed none of the qualities which Enid Barr was bent upon cultivating in her daughter.

But twelve years of implicit obedience to the authorities at the orphanage had left their indelible mark upon Sally Ford, who was now Sally Barr. She would do her best to become the radiant, cultured, charming, beautiful young creature whom Enid Barr wanted as a daughter. And since she had Enid's letters to help her, the task was not so impossible as it had seemed to her. For in the letters Enid was more real as a mother than she could yet be in actual contact. The fat weekly envelopes were crammed with love, maternal advice, encouragement, tenderness.

Sally sometimes had the feeling that through these letters of her mother's she knew Enid Barr better than anyone had ever known her. And she loved her with a passionate devotion, which sometimes frightened her with its intensity. Gazing at David's picture, clipped from the college newspaper, she wondered, with a cruel pain banding her heart, if this almost idolatrous love for her mother would ultimately force her to give up David. If it should ever come to a choice between those two well-beloved, what should she do?

Sometimes she agonized over the fear that David might have ceased to love her, might have found another girl, might even be married. Sometimes her hands shook so as they spread out the flat-folded sheets of the college newspaper and of the Capital City *Press* that she had to clasp them tightly until the spasm of fear subsided. And each time the relief was so great that she sang and laughed and danced like a joy-crazy person.

The other girls jeered at her good-naturedly because she was always singing, "I'll be loving you—always!" But she did not care. It was her song—

and David's.

She followed, with that obedience so deeply implanted in her, every phase of the program which Enid and Courtney Barr had mapped out for her. She went to the girls' camp in New Hampshire and returned to school in Virginia that fall strong and tanned and boyish-looking, and was able to report to Enid that she could swim beautifully if not swiftly, could ride gracefully, could hold her own decently in a hard game of tennis, could play golf well enough not to be conspicuous on the links.

During her last term at the finishing school she obediently paid a great deal of attention to her dancing, to drawing room deportment, and to her own beautiful young body, learning to groom it expertly. And during the Christmas and Easter vacations she netted three proposals of marriage, from brothers of classmates in whose homes she visited. She learned, somehow, to say "no" so tactfully that her suitors were almost as flattered by her refusals as they would have been if she had accepted them.

Enid and Courtney Barr came down from New York to see her graduate, and with them they brought the news of her legal adoption.

"A surprise, too!" Enid chanted, swinging her daughter's hands excitedly. "Court and I are going to take you to Europe with us this summer, and keep you away from New York until almost time for you to make your debut."

"Europe!" Sally was dazed. Her first thought was that Europe was so far away from Capital City and David. He was getting his diploma now, just as she was getting hers—"Oh, Mother, you haven't forgotten your promise, have you?"

Enid frowned slightly, abashed by Sally's lack of enthusiasm. "Promise, darling?"

"That I could invite David to my coming-out party? Mother, I've lived for two years on that promise!" she cried desperately, as the frown of annoyance and anger deepened on her mother's exquisite, proud little face.

Periodically, during the four months that the Barrs spent in wandering over Europe, Enid's evasive reply to Sally's urgent question thrust itself frighteningly through the new joys she was experiencing.

Enid had shrugged and said: "Remind me when we're making up the invitation list this fall, Sally." She knew now that her mother had counted on her forgetting David, that Enid had told herself until she believed it, because she wanted to believe, that the transformed Sally, the Sally whom she had remade into the kind of girl who could take her place in society as the daughter of Enid and Courtney Barr, would be a little ashamed of her 16-year-old infatuation for a penniless young farmer.

But Sally's heart had not changed, no matter how radically Enid's money, the finishing school and Europe had altered her, mentally and physically.

One morning in November Sally knocked at the door of the small, pleasant room known to the Barr household as "Miss Rice's office." Linda Rice held the difficult, exacting but always exciting position of Enid Barr's social secretary. Sally liked Linda, envied her her independence, her tactful, firm handling of her sometimes unreasonable employer. As she knocked now, fear of her mother fluttered in the heart that was so full of love and admiration for her. For she knew that Enid and Linda were making up the invitation list for the long-discussed coming-out party.

"Come in," Enid's contralto voice called impatiently. "Oh, it's you, darling. How cunning you look! Turn around so I can see how that new bob looks from the back. Oh, charming! Max is a robber, but he does know the art of cutting hair. Isn't she precious, Linda?"

Sally, dressed in a deceptively simple little frock of dark blue French crepe which half revealed her slender knees, whirled obediently. The heavy, silken masses of her black hair had long since been ruthlessly sacrificed to the shears, and now with the new Parisian cut, later to be the rage in America and known as the "wind-blown bob," she looked like an impudent little gamin, amazingly pretty and pert.

Her clear white skin contradicted the effect of the impish hair-cut, however, and persisted in making her look appealingly feminine.

"To think she can eat anything she wants and still keep that figure!" Enid exclaimed with humorous envy. "I'd give my soul to be able to eat bread and candy again." But she looked at her own tiny body, no bigger than an ethereal 12-year-old girl's and smiled with satisfaction. "What did you want, darling? Linda and I are awfully busy.—Oh, by the way, you mustn't forget Claire's tea this afternoon. You're going to Bobby Proctor's luncheon at the Ritz, too, aren't you? Like the social whirl, sweet?"

"It still frightens me a little," Sally confessed with a slight shiver. "Mother," she began with a desperate attempt at casualness, "you're sending David an invitation, aren't you? You promised, you know—"

Enid frowned and pretended to consult the copy of the long list which she had been checking when Sally interrupted. "Is David Nash's name on the list, Linda? Never mind. I'll look for it. And Linda, will you please run down and tell Randall that Mrs. Barrington will be here for luncheon today? He'll have to have gluten bread for her. Thank you, dear. I don't know what I should do without you, Linda, you priceless thing!"

When the secretary had left the room, Enid turned to Sally, who was standing beside the desk, twisting her hands nervously. "Darling, I've counted so on your not holding me to that foolish promise I made two years ago. You *must* realize that David—dear and sweet and good as he undoubtedly is—belongs to your

past, a past which I want you to forget as completely as if it had never existed."

Sally opened her lips to speak, but the futility of the retort she was about to make overwhelmed her. How could she forget those twelve lonely, miserable years in a state orphanage? And how could her mother possibly expect her to forget David, who had been her only friend, her "perfect knight" when such dreadful trouble as Enid, in her sheltered life, could hardly imagine, had made her a hunted, terror-stricken fugitive from "justice"? David to whom she was "half married," David whom she would always love, even if she never saw him again? But she *would* see him!

"Please don't get that sulky, stubborn look on your face, Sally!" Enid spoke almost sharply. "I am thinking of David, too. Do you really think it would be fair to him to ask him to come to New York merely for a party, to see the girl he cannot hope to marry make her debut in a society to which he could never belong? Don't be utterly selfish, darling! Think of me a little, too! David knows—the truth. You must know it would be painful for me to see him, after the story I told you in his presence. I want to forget, Sally, and just be happy, now that I have my daughter with me—" The lovely voice trembled with threatened tears, and the cornflower-blue eyes pleaded almost humbly with implacable sapphire ones.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Sally answered steadily. "But—you promised. I've done everything you asked me to do for more than two years. I kept *my* promise not to write to David, because all the time I was counting on you to keep yours."

Enid Barr flushed and tapped angrily with her pen against the edge of the desk. "Of course, if you put it that way, I have no choice! How shall Linda address the invitation?"

"Thank you, Mother," Sally cried, stooping swiftly to lay her lips against her mother's golden hair. "You've made me awfully happy." Her voice shook a little with awed delight as she gave her mother the only address she knew—David's grandfather's name and the R. F. D. route on which his farm lay.

"I suppose I'm having all this bother for nothing," Enid brightened. "The boy would be an idiot to spend the money on the trip—even if he has it to spend!"

A beautiful light glowed in Sally's wide, dreaming eyes. "David will come," she said softly. "He will come if he has to walk."

"A hiking costume would be so appropriate at a society girl's debut," Enid pointed out, a little maliciously, but she smiled then, a little secret, satisfied smile, as if she hoped he would look a rube among the sleek young men who would be asked to view her daughter when she was officially put "on the market."

But Sally was too happy to notice. "May I write him, too, Mother? It would look so queer, just sending him an invitation, without a word—"

"Absolutely not!" Enid was stern. "The invitation is more than sufficient.

Now run along, darling, and dress for Bobby's luncheon. It seems to me there were never so many sub-deb parties as there are this year, but you simply must go to all of them, if your first season is to be a success. The list is going to be miles long," she worried. "Perhaps it would have been wiser to have your party at the Ritz, as Mrs. Proctor and most of the others are doing, but there seems to be little reason to keep up an enormous establishment like this if you can't entertain in it."

"'Coming out' seems so silly," Sally protested with sudden, unusual spirit. "Of course with me it's different. The crowd doesn't know me very well yet, but nearly all of the debs have been really 'out' for two or three years. They've been prom-trotting and going to the opera and the theater alone with me, even to night clubs—I can't see what real difference it will make to most of them—"

"Of course you can't," Enid said with unintentional cruelty. "You haven't been reared to this sort of thing. But you'll learn. Run along now, and look your prettiest. And by the way, if you have a minute, won't you stop by the photographers to choose the poses to be released for publication? The society editors are calling up frantically. All they've had are snapshots of you, and I want them to print a picture that will do you justice. You're really the loveliest thing on the deb list this year, you know. But do run along! I shan't get a blessed thing done if you stay here gossiping with me."

Sally laughed, kissed her mother and ran from the room, bumping into Linda Rice, who was discreetly waiting outside the office until the interview between mother and daughter should be finished.

"Linda," she whispered, her face rosy with sweet embarrassment, "I gave Mother the name of a very special friend of mine, to put on the invitation list. You'll be a darling and mail it out today, won't you? You see, he lives in the Middle West and I want him to have plenty of time to plan to come. David Nash is the name." Her voice caressed the three beloved syllables more tenderly than she realized, and Linda Rice nodded her a knowing smile.

"Of course, Sally. And I hope he comes. I'll mail it this very afternoon."

Sally ran up the broad, circular staircase to the third floor, scorning to use the "lift" which Courtney Barr had had installed in the Fifth Avenue mansion a few years before.

She never entered her own suite of rooms—sitting room, bedroom, dressing room and bath—without first an uneasy feeling that she was trespassing and then a shock of delight that it was hers indeed. Now she passed slowly through the rooms, trying to see them with David's eyes, or even with the eyes of the forlorn little Sally Ford who had slaved sixteen hours a day on the Carson farm for her "board and keep."

Suddenly a picture flashed across her mind—the two-rooms-and-lean-to

shack in which she and David had eaten what was to have been their wedding breakfast. A great nostalgia swept over her—not only for David, but for plain people working together to make a home and to support their children.

All her life in the orphanage she had dreamed of delicate foods, skin-caressing, lovely fabrics, spacious, gracious rooms. And now she had them—and she was frightened to nausea, because they were a barrier between her and David and all the realities of life and love which she had so nearly grasped when she was slaving on the farm, working as "Princess Lalla" in the carnival, fleeing from the pursuit of the law with only David to protect her.

She dressed listlessly for the sub-deb luncheon at the Ritz, chatted and laughed and pretended to be as frivolous and "wild" as any of her new friends; went to Claire Bainbridge's tea that afternoon; went to the theater with her mother and adopted father that night, went, went, went during the next few days, but her heart was concerned with only one question: would David come? She had been so sure, so arrogantly, proudly sure that he would come even if he had to walk—

On the fifth day after the invitation was despatched his telegram came.

Color—all colors swirling together in a mad kaleidoscope of incredible beauty; the muted, insistent throbbing of a violin played by an unseen artist; the rosy glow of light which apparently had no source; the rustling whisper of silks; the polite, subdued buzz of middle-aged conversation; the shrill but musical clamor of very young voices; the subtle, faint odor of French perfumes; the stronger, more sickening odor of too many hothouse flowers—

Sally Barr, who had been Sally Ford, was "play-acting" again. She was playing the role of a society debutante. She was "playing-acting" and enjoying it, with a sort of surface enjoyment that made her look the perfect picture of the popular and beautiful debutante.

She knew that her cheeks were like tea roses, her sapphire eyes as brilliant as the jewel whose color they had imitated so perfectly. She knew that her wind-blown bob of gleaming, silky-soft black hair was ravishing, that her "period costume" of sea-shell pink taffeta and silver lace, made sinfully expensive by its intricate embroidery of seed pearls, was the most beautiful dress worn by any debutante of the season so far.

She knew all these things because the enviously ecstatic compliments of the other girls had told her so, because Enid Barr, her mother, who all these people thought was only her adopted mother, was luminous with pride and joy in her, because even Courtney Barr, with whom she still felt ill-at-ease, looked like a pouter-pigeon in his possessive satisfaction.

But Sally Barr was play-acting and the Sally Ford she had been looked on, in a skimpy little white lawn dress edged with five-cent lace, and watched the

performance with critical eyes, or, rather, watched as often as those hungry, desperate eyes turned away from the door, unable to bear the sight of newcomers because none of them was David.

The Sally Ford in the skimpy little white lawn dress which the orphanage provide for Sundays and for rare dress-up occasions wondered how these strange, glamorous people could not see her beneath the sea-shell pink taffeta with its silver lace and precious seed-pearl embroidery. And this Sally Ford whom they could not see kept telling herself over and over that her dreams had come true: she had a mother who was rich and beautiful and tender and wise—nearly always wise, except about David; she was living in a mansion more magnificent than the orphaned "play-actress" had ever been able to conjure; she was beautiful and popular; these strange people who were "in society" were here because Sally Ford—no, Sally Barr!—was making her debut, was being accepted as one of them.

She told herself these things and her eyes again darted to the door, hungry for the sign of a penniless, 23-year-old farmer boy who would be as much out of place in this ballroom among these strange, glamorous people as Sally Ford in her skimpy little white lawn dress.

Three words hammered their staccato message ceaselessly on her listening, watching nerves: "Coming. Thanks. David." Three words which had broken the silence of two and a half years. Coming—thanks—David—Coming—thanks—David—

"Darling, this is Mrs. Allenby, a very old and dear friend of mine—"

Sally Barr smiled her shy, sweet, little-girl smile and Sally Ford noted the success of it critically as the frumpy, dyed-haired little old lady passed on down the receiving line. Coming—thanks—David—But, oh, was he coming?

She stole a glance at the tiny watch set in the circle of diamonds that banded her bare arm just below the elbow. Half past eleven. Dancing would begin at twelve. She had been smiling and twittering and looking sweet and demure or provocative and gay since eight o'clock, when the dinner for the debutantes had begun.

How much longer could she keep it up? It was really absurd for them to suppose that she could go on like this until three or four o'clock in the morning, when her heart was broken—

CHAPTER XVIII

"Mr. David Nash!"

Nothing, no one could have held her. The words had scarcely lift the butler's lips when Sally reached David's side, her full skirt, lengthened to the tips of her slippers by the frosty silver lace, billowing like sails at the mooring of the snug little bodice.

She seized his gloved hands, her joy-widened eyes blazing over his face, his adored, so well-remembered face.

"Oh, David! David! I thought you weren't coming! I'd have died if you hadn't come!" She stepped back a pace, her small hands swinging his as if she were a joyous child and there were no one else in the ballroom at all. "You look older, David! You haven't been sick? You worked too hard to finish college? Oh, David—"

His eyes laughed at her through a barrier of embarrassment, and his startlingly grim young face softened. It was true that he looked much older; boyishness had left him, and Sally could have screamed out her pain that this was so. He was thinner, or appeared to be, in his perfectly fitting evening clothes. Odd to see him dressed like that, she thought, near to tears.

She had seen him in overalls and cheap "jeans" and in decent but inexpensive tweeds. She had seen his big-muscled arms bare, the summer sun gilding the fine hairs upon them; she had seen him sweating over the cook stove in the privilege car of Bybee's Bigger and Better Carnival Shows, stripped to a thin cotton undershirt.

But she had never before seen him like this—immaculate, correct, of a pattern, apparently, with all other well-dressed young college men. And she was illogically hurt, felt as if the correctly stiff bosom of his shirt was a veritable wall between the old David and the old Sally—

"They've cut off your beautiful hair," were his first words.

She stood still, her hands slowly releasing his, feeling his eyes rove over her, as hers had swept over him, and she did not need to look into his eyes to find that he was withdrawing from her, alienated, bewildered, saddened.

She wanted to cry out to him, to beat his breast with her hands: "It's Sally, David! Sally Ford underneath, Sally who loves you better than anything in the world." But she did not say it, for Enid Barr was at her elbow, and it was her mother's coldest most polite voice that was welcoming David.

"We're so glad you could come, Mr. Nash. Did you have a pleasant journey? I'm glad. Sally, you *must* come back into the receiving line, darling. I'll introduce Mr. Nash."

The next hour was an almost unbearable eternity to Sally. But she "playacted" through it—gave the tips of her fingers to late comers, smiled, murmured appropriate phrases which Enid had painstakingly taught her; opened the ball;

danced, in rapid succession with the most importunate of her male guests, for Enid, reluctantly acceding to the new informality, had not insisted upon dance cards.

But all the time her eyes were darting about on their quest for David. She spotted him at last, near the door of the ballroom, moodily listening to whatever it was that Courtney Barr was saying in his most unctuous, weighty manner.

"Please—I'll be back soon!" Sally gasped to her amazed partner, and broke from his grasp.

She did not in the least care that curious glances and uplifted brows followed her fleet progress across the crowded ballroom floor. Her whole attention was given to David, David who looked ill-at-ease and wretched—

"Aren't you going to dance with me?" she cried as soon as she reached him and her adopted father. "You mustn't let Father monopolize you. Come, before the music stops."

Unsmiling, David took her into his arms, gingerly, as if he were afraid of crushing the precious dress.

"Do you remember the other time we danced together, David?" she whispered, her voice tender with memories. "In the Carsons' parlor. No one else would dance with me and Pearl could have slain me because you did. Remember?"

David nodded, held her just a trifle closer, but his face was as grim and unhappy as ever. She tucked her head against his broad breast and closed her eyes so that he could not see her tears. When the music stopped abruptly, she seized his hand, drew him urgently.

"We've got to go somewhere to talk, David. I can't stand—this."

He let her lead him down three flights of the magnificent circular marble staircase, and because he was so silent she thought miserably that it might be hurting him that she was so much at home in this vast, splendid house.

"Miss Rice's office!" she cried, after he had darted about in an unsuccessful effort to find a secluded nook not already occupied by truant couples.

When the door had closed upon them, she faced him, her breath catching on a little gasp of anticipation. But his arms stayed rigidly at his side.

"It was in this very room, David," she began eagerly, "that I fought the battle with Mother and won. I made her keep her promise to me to invite you to my coming-out ball. She promised me two and a half years ago, promised so I would promise her not to write to you. But I wrote you every week, sometimes oftener, and I'm still writing every week, though I can't mail the letters. Now I can! Now I can! Do you realize I'm of age, David? I'm eighteen and a half, and I'm 'out.' Isn't that funny? I'm officially 'out' now, and I can do as I please."

Her voice dragged a little at the end, for he was looking at her as if she were

a stranger, or as if he were trying to make her feel like a stranger to him. With a moan, she lifted her arms and crept so close to him that she could lay her head against his breast. "Aren't you—going to kiss me, David? I've waited so long, so long—"

She felt him stiffen, then his hands came up slowly and fastened upon hers. But it was only to remove her hands from his shoulders—

"You must forget me, Sally, or remember me only when you remember Sally Ford and Pitty Sing and Jan and Pop Bybee. We all belong together in your memory, and none of us belongs in Sally Barr's life." His voice was level, heavy, not the young, tender, musical voice that had made love to her during the carnival days.

She took a backward step, a little drunkenly, and the face she lifted bravely for whatever blow he was going to deal her was pinched and white, the eyes blue-black with pain. "Don't you love me any more, David?"

"I'm a poor man and I'm not a fortune-hunter," David answered grimly. "I—don't know Sally Barr."

She shrank from him then, backward, step by step, so stricken, so white-faced, that the boy clenched his hands in agony.

They were still staring at each other when the door opened, and an almost forgotten but now shockingly familiar voice sang out nonchalantly:

"Bobby Proctor told me I'd find you here, Sally."

It was Arthur Van Horne, whom she had not seen since the last day of the carnival in Capital City.

"Please don't go, David!" Sally implored, but he mistook her distress, occasioned by Arthur Van Home's entirely unexpected appearance, for a plea for a longer interview which he knew would only cause them both pain.

He shook his head dumbly and strode to the door. He paused there a moment to bow jerkily first toward Sally, then toward Van Horne, who was watching the scene with amused, cynical eyes.

Pride mercifully came to Sally's aid then; she closed her lips firmly over the question she had been about to fling at David with desperate urgency. She even managed to wave her hand with what she hoped was airy indifference as David opened the door.

"So!" Van Horne chuckled when the door had closed softly. "It's still Sally and David, isn't it? I'm glad I was vouchsafed a glimpse of this paragon. Astonishingly good-looking in a Norse Viking sort of way, but rather a bull in a China shop here, isn't he? But I presume that is why Enid fondly hoped when she allowed him to come. I gather that she did invite him? A very clever woman, Enid. I've always said so."

Sally's teeth closed hurtingly over her lower lip, but she said nothing. The

pain and horror of David's uncompromising rebuff were still too great to permit room in her heart for fear of Van Horne. Of course he had recognized her at once, had undoubtedly recognized her from her pictures in the papers, but what did it matter now? David was gone—gone—He had not even kissed her—

"Still afraid of me, Sally?" Van Horne laughed, as her eyes remained fixed on his face in a blind, unseeing stare.

"Afraid of you?" Sally echoed, her voice struggling strangely through pain. "Oh, you mean—?" She tried to collect her wits, to push aside the incredible fact of David's desertion, so that she could concentrate on Van Horne and the frightening significance of his presence here coupled with his knowledge of her past.

"Dear little Sally!" Van Horne said tenderly, and Sally clenched her fist to strike him for using the words which had been heavenly sweet when David had uttered them so long ago. "I told you the last time I saw you that you had not seen the last of Arthur Van Horne. I meant it, but I give you my word I hardly expected to find you *here*! I spent the deuce of a lot of time and money trying to trace you after you left the carnival. Old Bybee finally told me that you'd run away and had probably married your David. So I took my broken heart to China, Japan, Egypt and God knows where. And now like the chap who sought for the Holy Grail, I find you at home waiting for me."

"I wasn't waiting for you," Sally contradicted him indignantly. "I was waiting for David and he's just told me that he doesn't want me. I hoped I'd never see you again!"

"Why, Sally, Sally!" Van Horne chided her, his black eyes full of mocking humor. "Don't you realize that I'm the oldest friend you have in this new life of yours? I really haven't got used to the idea yet of your being Enid Barr's daughter. Of course I knew there was something mysterious about her overweening interest in 'Princess Lalla,' but this thick old bean of mine wasn't functioning very well in those days. My heart was too full of that same lovely little crystal-gazer. But when I read the rather masterly bit of fiction in the papers, the story which good old asinine Courtney Barr gave out as to your parentage and his wardship which he had supplanted by a legal adoption, the old bean began to click again, and I can assure you I got a great deal of quiet enjoyment out of the thing. Fancy the impeccable Enid Barr's having—"

"Oh, stop" Sally commanded him, flaming with anger. "Don't dare say a word against my mother—I mean, against Enid—"

"Against your mother," Van Horne corrected her serenely. "Of course I haven't told anyone, Sally, and I don't really see why I should, if—Listen, child: don't you think we ought to have a long, comfortable talk about—old times? We're likely to be interrupted here any minute by a chaperon—or by your mother

or by a couple of young idiots seeking a quiet place to 'neck' in. Slip out of the house when the show's over—the servants' entrance will be better—and we'll go for a drive through the park."

"I shall do no such thing," Sally repudiated the suggestion hotly. "I'm going back to the ballroom now. Please don't come with me."

When she arrived, breathless, at the door of the ballroom, she bumped into Enid, whose face was white and anxious and suddenly almost old.

"Darling, *where* have you been?" her mother whispered fiercely. "I've had Courtney and Randall and two of the footmen looking for you. This is *your* party, you know. You have other guests besides David Nash. I knew it was a mistake to ask him—"

"Where is he, Mother?" Sally interrupted rudely. "I've been with someone else most of the time." She could not bring herself yet to mention Van Horne's name to her mother, for fear Enid would notice that something was sadly amiss.

"I haven't seen him," Enid protested. "But run along now and dance. It's the last dance before supper. Remember that Grant Proctor is taking you down. Do be sweet to him, Sally."

"She would like for me to marry Grant Proctor," Sally reflected dully, as she obediently let herself be drawn into the dance by an ardent-eyed young man whose name she could not remember. "She wants me to marry Grant Proctor, when I'm already half-married to David. But David doesn't want me! Oh, David!"

Just before supper was announced she slipped away to her own rooms, to cry the hot tears that were pressing against her eyeballs. And on her dressing table she found a note, undoubtedly placed there by her own maid. Her cold, shaking fingers had difficulty in opening it, for she knew at once that it was from David.

"Dear little Sally," she read, and the tears gushed then. "Forgive me for bolting like this, but I couldn't stand it any longer. You know I love you, that 'I'll be loving you always,' but you must also know that Sally Barr cannot marry David Nash, and that anything less would be too terrible for both of us. You must be wondering why I came. I wanted to see for myself that you are happy, that your mother is good to you. And, of course, I wanted to see you again, wanted to see if there was anything of my Sally in this beautiful Sally Barr that the papers are making so much of.

"I think it has made it harder for me to find that underneath the new surface you are still Sally Ford. But they'll change the core of you almost as rapidly as they have remade the surface of you into a society beauty. And after you're changed all through you'll be glad I went away. I'll carry my own Sally in my heart always, and the new Sally Barr will fall in love with the splendid young son of some old family, marry him and make her mother very happy. She would

never forgive us, Sally, if I took you away and made you live on what I can earn as a farmer, and she would be right not to forgive. I would not forgive myself, and after awhile you'd be unhappy, too, remembering all that you had lost, including a mother who adores you. Goodby, Sally. David."

She was so quiet, so white at supper that Grant Proctor, who was already in love with her, begged her to let him give her a drink from his pocket flask, but she refused, scarcely knowing what he had said to her. Once she caught her mother's eyes, and shivered at the anxiety and reproach in them.

Suddenly a fierce resentment against Enid Barr rose and beat sickeningly in her blood. If she had not interfered, she and David would have been married long ago. They would have been happy in poverty, would have struggled side by side to banish poverty, might even have had a tiny David and Sally of their own by this time. And now David was irrevocably gone, so that Enid Barr might keep her daughter. Sally wanted to nurse her anger against her mother, but it was impossible to do so, for she loved her.

When the jazz orchestra was hilariously summoning the debutantes to the dance floor again Arthur Van Horne claimed Sally over the protests of the half dozen younger men who were good-naturedly wrangling for the honor.

"You're going to meet me after this foolish, delightful show is over, aren't you? Of course you are!" he smiled down upon her as he led her out upon the floor.

Sally looked up at him wearily and saw that there was more than amusement and gallantry in his narrowed, smiling black eyes. There was menace, which he did not try to conceal, wanted her to see—

"You do love your mother, don't you?" he smiled significantly. "Maybe you'll learn to love Van a little, too. It would be—very wise."

It was half past four o'clock when the tireless debutantes were willing to call it a night. Sally braved the thing out, but her face was wan as she listened to the last compliments on the success of the party which had officially launched her into the circles of society to which her mother belonged by the divine right of inheritance and immense wealth.

"We'll talk it all over tomorrow, sweetheart," Enid said pityingly. "You run along to bed now. I've got to give a few instructions to Randall. And you'd better stay in bed all day, or until tea time anyway. You were marvelous tonight, darling. So beautiful, so sweet. These wild young flappers—but run along, daughter beloved. You look as if you might faint with fatigue. Have Ernestine bring you some hot milk."

It was ridiculously easy for Sally to slip out of the house, using the servants' entrance, as Van Horne had suggested. She found him waiting for her and submitted wearily to being led to where his car was parked, a block away.

"What do you want, Van?" she asked abruptly, when the car turned into Central Park from Fifth Avenue at Eighty-fourth street, the wheels crunching the glazed crust of new snow.

"To talk with you and hold your hand and possibly kiss you—oh, very possibly!" Van Horne laughed at her, reaching for her hand.

"What did you mean when you said it would be 'very wise' for me to love you a little?" she persisted, too tired to be diplomatic. But of course she knew. He held her mother's security and happiness in the hollow of his hand. That he could destroy her own social career if he wished did not occur to her, for she had not yet learned to care about it, to prize it. But Enid must be protected at all costs.

"I think you know," Van Horne shrugged. "But why put it into words? Some things are much nicer unsaid, if they are distinctly understood. Now—will you kiss me, Sally? I've waited a long time, sweet child, and I'm naturally not a patient man."

"Not tonight," Sally said in a low, flat voice, shrinking into her own corner of the seat. "Please turn at One Hundred and Tenth street and take me back home, Van. I'm utterly tired."

Van obeyed cheerfully, exultant over her indirect promise. Sally was creeping exhaustedly up the stairs to her room, her mother, still dressed in her formal ball gown, came hurrying frantically down to meet her.

"Darling, where have you been? I've been crazy with worry! How *could* you go out and meet that Nash boy so brazenly? Tonight of all nights!"

"It wasn't David, Mother," Sally said in a dead-tired voice. "It was Arthur Van Horne. He—knows—all about me. He's known all along."

Five weeks later—it was in early January, just before the annual scurrying of self-coddling society folk from the rigors of a New York winter to the sunshine of Palm Beach and Nassau—Sally Barr, "one of the season's most beautiful debutantes," as the society editors called her, sat at a table for six in one of New York's most exclusive night clubs.

She was thankful for the fact that an inhumanly flexible male dancer was doing his most incredible tricks for the amusement of the club's patrons, for watching him gave her an opportunity to think, an excuse for not chattering brightly as debutantes were expected to do.

Grant Proctor, whom Enid had hoped she would marry, sat opposite her, Arthur Van Horne on her right. Beside Grant, twittering and giggling, was Claire Bainbridge, whose engagement to the heir of the Proctor millions would be announced from Palm Beach.

And yet Sally was conscious that Grant's nice, leaf-brown eyes followed her with a frustrated, doglike devotion whenever she was near him. He had told her that he loved her, and Sally, terribly anxious to please her mother and to

secure Enid Barr's safety from scandal, had been ready to listen to his proposal of marriage. Since David was lost to her, it did not much matter whom she married.

"But if he asks me to marry him, Mother, I'll have to tell him the truth about my birth," Sally had told Enid.

Now, with her wistful eyes apparently watching the agile dancer, she remembered Enid's horrified protest. "You can't tell him, Sally! He wouldn't marry you if he knew. His parents wouldn't let him. Promise me you won't tell, darling!"

And so Sally had not told him, but when he did ask her to marry him she refused him. His as yet unannounced engagement to Claire Bainbridge had followed swiftly, but his eyes were still pathetically true to Sally.

She shifted her position a trifle, so that she could observe Arthur Van Horne out of the corner of her eye. Not that she wanted to see him! She had been forced to see so much of him since the night of her debut party that the very sound of his mocking, drawling voice was obnoxious to her. She would never forget her mother's terror, her abject pleading and tears.

"Don't antagonize him, darling!" Enid had begged. "He can ruin us, ruin us! Be nice to him, Sally! If—if he was in love with you during those awful carnival days, maybe—" She had hesitated, ashamed to put her hope into words. "Van is really a rather wonderful man, you know, darling. One of the most eligible bachelors in New York society. Old family, no mother or father to dictate to him, a tremendous fortune. Of course, he's cynical and blase, and rather more experienced than I'd like, but—just be nice to him, darling. Maybe—"

That shamefaced "maybe" of Enid's had kept thrusting itself upon Sally's rebellious attention ever since. Enid, more frightened of Van's power over her than she would admit, even to Sally, threw the two together on every possible occasion. After Grant Proctor had retreated from the field, smarting under his refusal by Sally, Enid had almost feverishly concentrated on Van Horne. Sally had stubbornly insisted to her mother that she would not marry any man whom she could not tell the truth about her illegitimacy, and Enid had just as stubbornly refused to consider the possibility of Sally's telling.

"If Van really knows," she had told Sally in desperation, "that is one too many. You could not possibly harm any man by marrying him without telling. You're *our* daughter now—the legally adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Courtney Barr. That is all that matters."

"What matters to me," Sally had insisted wearily, "is that no man that you would like for me to marry would have me if he knew. I can't cheat. Of course I don't have to marry."

"Of course not," Enid had agreed with assumed gayety. "But since Van does know—Of course, since he already knows, if you married him it would be as much

to his interest to forget it and protect me—us—as it is ours. But I want you to be happy, darling."

Sally, her little round chin supported on her laced fingers, her eyes brooding upon the dancer whom she did not see, reflected with an unchildlike bitterness that there was no question now of her being happy. Happiness lay behind her; she had almost grasped it, had been "half-married" to a man she loved. David! His name flashed through her heart like the thrust of a red-hot lancet.

"Dance, Sally? Or do you prefer to go on dreaming?" Van Horne's low, teasing voice interrupted her bitter reverie.

She made a sudden resolution, rose with sprightly vivacity from her chair, flung a sparkling glance to her mother whose beautiful face was a little pinched with the strain under which she had lived these last few weeks. "Dance, of course. Van!" she cried, wrinkling her nose at him with a provocative moue. "I was dreaming about you! Aren't you flattered?"

She saw her mother's pinched face flush and bloom with hope, caught an austere but approving smile from Courtney Barr, with whom she had not yet reached the intimacy that should exist between a father and a daughter, even an adopted daughter. If she could make them so happy by marrying Arthur Van Horne, why let her own feelings prevent? If she couldn't have David, what difference did it make whom she married? And if she married Van Horne the only menace to her mother's reputation would be removed.

"You adorable little thing!" Van Horne whispered, as he swept her out upon the crowded dance floor. "So you were dreaming about me? Pleasant dreams, little Princess Lalla?" His ardent, dark face was bending close, his black eyes free of mockery but lit by a fire that repelled her.

"Did you really fall in love with 'Princess Lalla'?" Sally forced herself to ask coquettishly, fluttering her long lashes in the demure fashion which had proved so effective during her short career as a debutante.

"Absurd question!" Van Horne jeered softly. "Didn't I convince you at the time? Listen, Sally, I almost never see you alone. Enid seems to have an antiquated leaning toward chaperonage."

"Chaperons are 'coming in' again," Sally laughed at him, hiding her distaste. "Mother adores being a leader of fashion, you know."

"You're so adorable tonight that I want to run away with you," Van told her boldly. "But I'll try to be content if you'll promise me to come to my apartment alone for tea tomorrow. Do, Sally! I've something to tell you. Can you guess?"

She stiffened, every nerve on the defensive against him. But she remembered her resolution, and nodded slowly, her head tucked on one side, her eyes granting him a swift, shy upward glance.

"If you look at me like that again, I'll kiss you right here on the dance floor!"

Van threatened exultantly, as his arms tightened about her.

Enid's pathetic gratitude to her for being "nice" to Van Horne strengthened the girl's resolution to carry it through. She dressed with especial care for her tea date with Van the next afternoon, pinning the corsage of Parma violets which he had sent her on the full shawl collar of her Russian squirrel coat.

But before she left her room she took the ring David had given her from the box in which she had hidden it because the sight of it hurt her so intolerably, and kissed the shallow, flawed little sapphire with passionate grief.

"Goodby, David," she whispered to the ring, but inconsistently she thrust it into her dark-blue and gray leather handbag. No matter what sort of ring Van gave her, it could never be so precious to her as this cheap little ring that David had given her to mark their betrothal.

She had visited Van Horne's apartment once before with Enid, but as she gave the floor number to the elevator operator—it was one of the most exclusive and expensive of the new Park Avenue apartment houses—she thought she saw a gleam of amusement in the man's eyes.

Almost as soon as her finger had pressed the bell the door was opened by Van himself, Van in a black and maroon silk dressing gown over impeccable trousers and shirt. She was drawing back instinctively when he laughed his low, mocking laugh and, seizing her hands, pulled her resisting body into the room.

"I think one reason I am so mad about you, Sally my darling, is that you are always fluttering out of my reach like a frightened bird. You are superb in a Lillian Gish role, but even Lillian Gish is captured and tamed before the end of the film. Like this!" And he laughed exultingly as his arms encircled her quivering, fluttering little body, held it crushingly against his breast.

Only her head was free to weave from side to side as his flushed, laughing face came closer and closer. "The best kissing technique advocates the closing of the eyes, darling," he gibed with tender mockery. "And there is a point at which maidenly coyness ceases to be charming. Now!"

She submitted to his kiss then, but her lips were lax, unresponsive. When he released her, an angry glint in his eyes, she backed away, touching her lips involuntarily with her handkerchief. "Please don't—kiss me again—like that, Van," she quavered. "Not yet. I'll marry you, but you'll have to give me time to get used to—you."

The blank amazement in his eyes made her voice falter lamely. Then he laughed, a short bark that was utterly unlike the tenderly mocking laughter which she had always inspired in him.

"You'll *marry* me?" His voice was staccato with contempt. "By heaven, your naivete is magnificent! You should be enshrined in a museum! Thanks for your kind offer, Miss Barr, but I must confess, if your innocence will stand the

strain, that my intentions in regard to you did not include marriage. They were strictly dishonorable. When a Van Horne allows himself to be led to the altar, the successful huntress is a woman who is at least socially worthy to be the mother of future Van Hornes. There is as yet no bar sinister on our coat of arms....

"No, walk, not run, to the nearest exit." He barked his new, ugly laugh at her as Sally was backing hurriedly toward the door, her body hunched as if his words had been actual blows, her face ghastly white. "You are entirely free to go, with my blessing! I am rather a connoisseur at kissing and I have just suffered a grievous disappointment. At the risk of appearing ungallant, I am forced to admit that you would have bored me intolerably if you had consented to 'trust me and give me all' in exchange for my silence in regard to your birth. Goodby, Sally—and good luck."

CHAPTER XIX

Somehow she made her way home, crept painfully, like a mortally wounded animal, up the circular staircase to her room. Bracing her shaking hands on her dressing table, she stared at her reflection in the mirror as if she had never seen that white-faced, enormous-eyed, stricken girl before.

Then horror and loathing of herself swept over her with such force that her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor. As she fell her hand knocked from the dressing table a copy of The Capital City Press, for which she was still subscribing, over her mother's protest, to glean sparse news of David.

She shuddered as the roll bounced from her knees but in another moment her sick eyes flamed with new life, for half-revealed by the folding of the sheets was an unmistakable picture of the boy she still loved.

Her trembling fingers gouged at the wrapper. Why was *his* picture on the front page? Was he in trouble? Hurt? Or—married?

Sally, crouching on the floor of her room, spread the crackling sheets of The Capital City Press, her eyes devouring the two-column picture of David Nash. Two lines of type above the photograph leaped out at her:

"Honor graduate of A. & M. inherits grandfather's farm."

He hadn't been injured or killed in an accident, he wasn't married! In a

frenzy of relief and gratitude to the God she had just been accusing of deserting her, Sally Barr, who had been Sally Ford, bent her head until her lips rested on the lips of the photograph. And it was rather a pity that Arthur Van Horne, "connoisseur of kissing," was not there to see the passionate fervor of the kisses which the girl whom he had dismissed contemptuously was raining upon an unresponsive newspaper picture.

When at last she was calmer she read the short item through. It was the last paragraph that brought her to her feet, her slight body electric with sudden determination:

"Young Nash is living alone in the fine old farmhouse, and apparently is as capable in the kitchen as on the seat of a cultivator. He says his whole heart is in scientific farming, and that his only sweetheart is 'Sally,' a blue-ribbon heifer which he is grooming to break the world's butter-fat production record."

"David! Darling David!" she was laughing and crying at the same time. "He hasn't changed! He hasn't forgotten that we're half-married!"

Jerking open a drawer of her dressing table she caught sight of her face in the mirror, and her eyes widened with delighted surprise. Gone was the pinched, white, shame-stricken face, and in its place was beauty such as she had never dreamed she possessed. She turned away from the mirror, tremulous and abashed, for what she had to do would not be easy. Her eyes tried to avoid the exquisite photograph of her mother that stood in its blue leather frame on the dressing table, but at last she snatched it up and carried it against her breast as she ran to her desk.

She felt that she was talking to Enid as she wrote, pleading for understanding and forgiveness from those dreaming, misty, cornflower-blue eyes:

"Mother, darling: I'm running away, to go to David. Please don't try to stop me or bring me back, for I'll have to run away again if you do. I'm going to marry David because I love him with all my heart and because he is the only man I could ever marry without causing you shame. He already knows the truth, and it made no difference in his love for me. You know how it was with Grant Proctor. You said yourself that if I told him, he would not want to marry me. And I could never marry a man without first telling him the truth. Arthur Van Horne knew and wanted me to be his mistress. He told me today. He did not think I was good enough to be his wife. It would always be the same. And so I am going to David, who knows and loves me anyway.

"Oh, Mother, forgive me for hurting you like this! But don't you see that I would hurt you more by staying? After a while you would be ashamed of me because I could not marry. I would humiliate you in the eyes of your friends. And I could not be happy ever, away from David. I wanted to die after Arthur Van Horne told me today what he really wanted of me, but now I know I want

to live—with David. Please, Mother, don't think my love for you—"

She could write no more just then. Laying her hot cheek against the cold glass of the framed photograph of her mother she sobbed so loudly, so heartbrokenly that she did not hear a knock upon the door, did not know her grief was being witnessed until she felt a hand upon her shoulder.

"Sally, darling! What in the world is the matter?" It was Enid Barr's tender, throaty contralto.

Sally sprang to her feet, her eyes wild with fear, her mother's picture still tightly clutched in her hands. "I—I was writing you a letter!" she gasped. "I—I—"

"Perhaps I'd better read it now," Enid said in an odd voice, and reached for the scattered sheets of pale gray notepaper on the desk.

Sally wavered to a chair and slumped into it, too dazed with despair to think coherently. She could not bear to look at her mother, for she knew now how cowardly she had been, how abysmally selfish.

Her flaming face was hidden by her hands when, after what seemed many long minutes, she heard her mother's voice again:

"Poor Sally! You couldn't trust me? You'd have run away—like that? Without giving me a chance to prove my love for you?"

Sally dropped her hands and stared stupidly at her mother. Enid was coming toward her, the newspaper with David's picture in it rustling against the crisp taffeta of her bouffant skirt. And on Enid's face was an expression of such sorrowful but loving reproach that Sally burst into wild weeping.

"Poor little darling!" Enid dropped to her knees beside Sally's chair and took the girl's cold, shaking hands in hers. "We all make mistakes, Sally. I've made more than my share. Maybe I'm getting old enough now to have a little wisdom. And I want to keep you from making a mistake that would cause both of us—and Court—untold sorrow."

"But I love David and I shan't love anyone else," Sally sobbed, though she knew her resistance was broken.

"I'm forced to believe that now, darling," Enid said gently. "And I shall not stand in the way of your happiness with him. That is not the mistake I meant."

"You mean that you'll let me marry him?" Sally cried incredulously. "Oh, Mother! I love you so!"

"And I love you, Sally." Enid's voice broke and she cuddled Sally's cold hands against the velvety warmth of her own throat. "Your mistake would have been to run away to marry David. You have a mother and father now, Sally. You're no longer a girl alone, as David called you. You have a place in society as our daughter, whether you want it or not. If David wants to marry you, he must come here to do so, must marry you with our consent and blessing."

"But—" Sally's joy suddenly turned to despair again. "He wouldn't marry

a girl with a fortune. He told me so when he was here."

"That was when he was penniless himself," Enid pointed out. "I've just read this newspaper story about his inheriting his grandfather's farm. It's a small fortune in itself, and since there's no immediate danger of your inheriting either my money or Court's, I don't believe he will let your prospective wealth stand in the way—if he loves you."

"Oh, he does!" Sally laughed through her tears. "Look!" She snatched the newspaper from the floor and pointed to the last paragraph of the story about David. "He named his prize heifer after me! It says here his only sweetheart is 'Sally'! Oh, Mother, I didn't know anyone could live through such misery and such happiness as I felt today! I wanted to kill myself after Van—Oh!"

"Tell me just exactly what he said to you!" Enid commanded, her lovely voice sharpened with anger and fear.

When Sally had repeated the contemptuous, sneering speech as accurately as possible, her mother's face, which had been almost ugly with anger, cleared miraculously.

"The man is an unspeakable cad, darling, but I am almost glad it happened, since you escaped unscathed. He won't bother us again. I'm sure of it! He is not quite low enough to gossip about me to my friends. It is evident that he planned all along to use his knowledge as a club to force you to submit to his desires. And now that he doesn't want you any more, he will lose interest in the whole subject. I've known Van nearly all my life and I've never known him to act the cad before. He's probably despising himself, now that his fever has cooled. If you marry David with our consent, he'll probably turn up at your wedding and offer sincere congratulations with a whispered reassurance as to his ability to keep our secret."

"*When* I marry David, not if!" Sally cried exultantly, flinging her arms about her mother's neck. "Oh, I'm so glad I have a mother!"

"Don't strangle me!" Enid laughed. "Leave me strength to write a proposal of marriage to this cocksure young farmer who brags that he is as capable in the kitchen as on the seat of a cultivator!"

"He can't cook half as well as I can!" Sally scoffed. "You ought to taste one of my apple pies! He can play nurse to his blue-ribbon stock all he wants to, but he's got to let me do the cooking! And, Mother, you'll tell him how much I love him, won't you? And—and you might remind him that we only need half a marriage ceremony—the last half. Wouldn't it be fun if we could go back to Canfield and let 'the marrying parson' finish the job?"

"Don't be too confident!" Enid warned her. "He may refuse you!" But at sight of Sally's dismay she relented. "I know he loves you, darling. Don't worry. If I were you I'd get busy immediately on a trousseau."

"One dozen kitchen aprons will top the list," Sally laughed.

Four days later the second telegram that Sally had received from David arrived. "Catching next train East, darling. Happiest man in the world. Can we be married day I arrive? Am wiring your blessed mother also. I'll be loving you always. David."

"Of course you can't be married the day he arrives!" Enid exclaimed indignantly when Sally showed her the telegram. "I'm going to give you a real wedding."

"I think the children are right, Enid." Courtney Barr unexpectedly championed Sally in her protest. "A quiet impromptu wedding, by all means. Our announcement to the papers will indicate that we approve, and since the boy is unknown in New York and Sally has only just been introduced, I think the less fuss the better."

Sally kissed him impulsively, aware, though the knowledge did not hurt her, that he liked her better now that she was to leave his home, than he had ever liked her. David arrived on Monday, and was guest of honor that night at a small party of Enid's and Sally's most intimate friends, at which time announcement of the forthcoming marriage was made. They remembered having seen him briefly at Sally's coming-out party and so handsome he was, so much at ease, now that he was to be married to the girl he loved, that it occurred to none of Enid's guests to question his eligibility. Sally, sitting proudly beside him, looked happily from her mother to David, knew that in gaining a husband she was not losing a mother, as she would have done if Enid had not interrupted the writing of that terrible letter.

On Tuesday Sally and David, accompanied by Enid and Courtney Barr, went to the municipal building for the marriage license, and the afternoon papers carried the news on the front pages, under such headlines as: "Popular Deb to Marry Rich Farmer." But in all the stories there was no hint of scandal, no reportorial prying into the "past" of the adopted daughter of the rich and prominent Courtney Barrs.

The wedding took place on Wednesday, in the drawing-room of the Barrs' Fifth Avenue mansion, and the next morning, in his account of the "very quiet" wedding, a society editor commented: "The ceremony was read by the Reverend Horace Greer, of Canfield, ——, the choice of celebrant being dictated by unexplained sentiment."

What the society editor did not know was that "the marrying parson" of Canfield spoke only the last half of the marriage service, beginning where he had been interrupted nearly three years before.

Sally and David were no longer "half married."

THE END

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Circumstances made this impossible, however, and before she could carry out her resolve, a swift series of thrilling happenings threatened to change the

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Gordon Lillie, as Pawnee Bill, the hero of countless men and boys of this and past generations, stood in the doorway of the restaurant in Caldwell one Saturday afternoon. Before him were cattle thieves, horse thieves, Indians, desperadoes, women with hard eyes and painted cheeks. He stood on the threshold of a career that was to be one of the most colorful and stirring in the annals of the glamorous Southwest.

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Author of "The Blazing Horizon," "The Yellow Stub"

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