

NOBODY'S GIRL

BY ANNE AUSTIN author of the PENNY PRINCESS

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THIS HAS HAPPENED

SALLY FORD is "famed out" to CLEM CARSON, prosperous farmer, the summer she is 16, and leaves the State orphanage, the only home she has known since she was four. At the farm, she finds a friend in DAVID NASH, student and athlete. DAVID prefers Sally to Clem's bad-tempered daughter, PEARL, and this angers the farmer.

When Carson makes insulting remarks about Sally, David sends him crashing to the ground with one terrific blow. David and Sally flee. They tramp until morning when they come to the carnival train. In the carnival troupe Sally plays EDDIE COBB, former inmate of the Orphan's Home. He begs WINFIELD BYBEE, manager of the carnival, to make a place for these two and accordingly David is sent to the cook's kitchen and Sally becomes the "Follies" girl.

Sally makes friends with the "Follies" girls, but she is not to be won over by NITA, the flapper dancer, who has her eye on David.

That night in the dress tent Nita comes in. When Sally speaks to her, she cuts her short and tells her she knows who she is well enough. Bending menacingly over Sally she demands: "Do you want me to tip off the police? Well, then, if you don't listen—and get it said, all right!"

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XVIII

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 burnt 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 "flapper" dancer, and the girl they knew as "Princess Lalla."

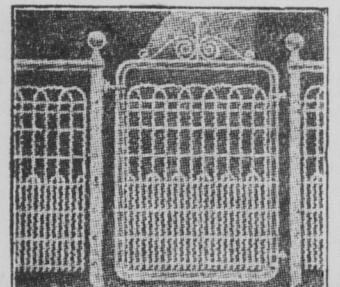
Sally's frightened eyes fluttered from one to another of that bedraggled, pathetic quartet, but she might as well have appealed to the gaudily painted banners that fluttered over the deserted booths outside.

"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, thrown 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 "Follies" girls, 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,"



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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 her 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—would you 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 stained point, 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 "Follies" girl'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 "Follies" girl.

"I may be a runt," the "Follies" girl'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 jolly 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. 'Nn 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 whispering, 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 un assembled 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 "Follies 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—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 twenty years before, leaving behind her only a meager record—"Mrs. Nora Ford, aged 28."

So little in those words with which to conjure up a mother! She would be 40 now, if—if she were still alive! Suddenly all her twelve years of orphanhood, or 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 "Follies" girl 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 of remorse that she was to go on

the next day, deceiving the public, as "Princess Lalla, favorite crystal-gazer of the Sultan of Turkey."

(To Be Continued)

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