

NOBODY'S GIRL

STYANNE AUSTIN author of the PENNY PRINCESS COPYRIGHT 1928 BY NEA SERVICE

"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's what she did to 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 given the whole show away. I just 'yes, indeeded' her, and she went on. Reckon on 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 orphan's 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 came out," Mrs. Bybee said. "I did 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 of 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. Sems 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 on it ain't up to you, Sally Ford, to set yourself up in judgment on your mother, whoever she may have been."

"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 pre' 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 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 mutter to herself, "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?"

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 crabbins' 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

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tion 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 the meek little middle-aged man that he was in love with a "zo beat-itful 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 handkerchief. "I'm past owner of this tent, you know, and you're hittin' me where I live. Come on, 'at's a good girl! Forget it—what-ever'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 wasd salken 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 real big enough to choke a boa constrictor. I see 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-sandaled feet spurning the grass-stubbed 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 and abandonment!

"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 wild-cat.

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 tell'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 fury

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ous 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 the 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 was still about her shoulders, in a paternal sort of fondness, as Nita switched away, her grass skirts hissing angrily.

"Kinda foolish of you, Sally, to pick a fight with that dame. She could-a ruin't 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' around for another one."

Sally felt shivered because 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! 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—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 "grille show," which had a tent all its own. Nita was a girl, a girl of the type of a girl-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 boners." Gus, the Barker, arranged for four or five "schillers"—employees 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', 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 woe, 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, which she ate in the cook tent after having carried "Pitty Sing," the midiget, 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 new 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

her news to him. She had heard, in anticipation, his softly spoken, tender "Dear little Sally! Don't mind too much. We have had 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 be—

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

"Last chance to see the tallest man on earth and the littiest 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-looking 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 machine skirts and saucy, marcelled red hair, there was little thrill in its possession. When a forlornly weeping little girl stopped her tears to gaze 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 bar of the tooth-resisting sweet.

She now 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 inconspicuously 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. 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?" he was startled to hear a hot-dog concessionaire call to the ticket-seller for the ferry wheel.

"Pretty good pickins," 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 councilors."

"We're going to the capital next?"

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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?"

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come 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."

(To Be Continued)

Being in love hurts sometimes, Sally finds. But she is glad she is in love with David.

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