

NOBODY'S GIRL

BY ANNE AUSTIN author of the PENNY PRINCESS

"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 given the whole show away. I just, indeed, 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 '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 was—"

"Then she wasn't my mother?" Sally cried out in such a heart-broken 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 pitifully, 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. "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 scot 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 your, near 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, intent, 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 blushed 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?"

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 spell:

"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 intu-

ition 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-beatiful girl wiz golden hair" and that he was "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, it'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 trainin' Nita around? Reckon he's just after her grouch bag—"

"Herr-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 rub, ain't you? A grouch bag is a show business way of sayin' a performer's got a wad salled 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 coun'lin' it one night when she thought she was safe. She was, too. I wouldn't warn up to that Jane if she was the last broad in the world. Now, listen, kid, you have a good, hard ery in the dress tent before the next show and you'll feel like a new woman. That's 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 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, which 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 "trainin' Nita," 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

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 concessionaries 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 speller'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 "tubes" 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 mink 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-sweeting sugar.

Sally felt shrivelled with shame.

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