

NOBODY'S GIRL

By ANNE AUSTIN author of the PENNY PRINCESS

THIS HAS HAPPENED

The summer she is 16, SALLY FORD is "famed out" to CLEM CARSON and leaves the State orphanage, the only home she has known, from the time she was four. When Carson makes insulting remarks about their innocent friendship, David hits him a terrific blow. David and Sally run away and join a carnival. David as cook's helper and Sally in a side-show disguised as "Princess Lilla," a dancer, becomes infatuated with David and threatens to turn Sally over to the police for the Carson affair if she doesn't keep "hands off" David.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XXVI

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 Lilla," 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 overflowing. 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 had not shaved for three days.

Clara and Thelma were mothering, 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 disclaiming 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 always 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 shook 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 became aware of her, turned slightly, so that "Princess Lilla," 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 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, carmine 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 gloriously 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 rum-

pled 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

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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. (To Be Continued)

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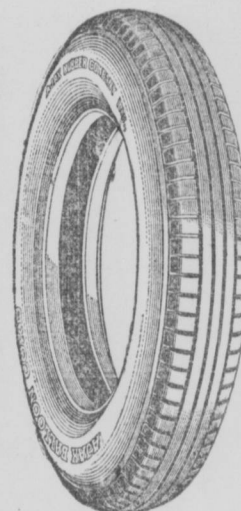
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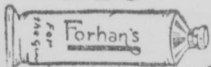
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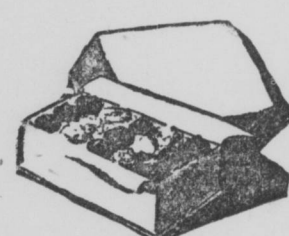
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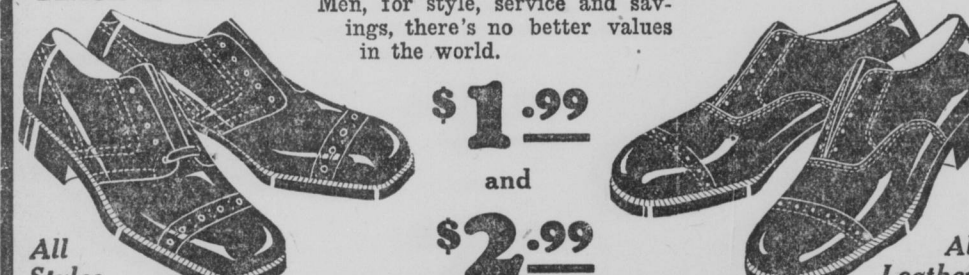
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