

NOBODY'S GIRL

STYLANNE AUSTIN author of the PENNY PRINCESS

THIS HAS HAPPENED

The summer she is 16, SALLY FORD, ward of the State orphanage since she was four, is "farmed out" to CLIM CARSON. She meets DAVID NASH, a student at the university, who is working on the Carson farm during his vacation. Because of his insulting remarks about David's friendship for Sally, David strikes Carson a terrific blow. He and Sally run away and join a carnival. David as cook's helper and Sally as "Princess Lilla," a crystal gazer.

In Capital City, location of the orphanage, Sally is recognized by one of a crowd of little orphans who troop into the show, charmed by a beautiful woman. GUS, the Barker, diversions from Sally and she escapes. ARTHUR VAN HORNE, an easterner, who annoys Sally with his attentions, tells her that the beautiful champion is ENID BARR, wealthy New York matron.

One day Sally is terrified to find herself confronted with Mrs. STONE, matron of the orphanage, who has followed Sally. She is making up her mind about to be married when Mrs. Stone and Enid Barr rush and stop the ceremony. Enid confesses she is Sally's mother and that she believed her child to be dead until recently. Enid separates Sally and David and exacts a promise that until they communicate with each other during the next two years while Sally is in the fashionable southern finishing school. Sally continues to love David and when her mother at last makes up her mind to change and tells her she must forget him, she knows that she will never see him again. Van Horne tells her to drive after the party. Sally consents. In her room is a note from David telling her goodbye.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XLVII

FIVE weeks later—it was in early January, just before the annual scurrying of self-coddling society 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, dog-

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like 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, drawing 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. He'll 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 blasé, 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 to 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 gaiety. "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—as it is to 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 the man she loved. David! His name flashed through her heart like the thrust of a red-hot lance.

"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.

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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 mone. "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 provide? 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 forever 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 Lilla?" 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 Lilla'?" 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 exultingly, 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.

"Good-by, David," she whispered to the ring, but inconsistently 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

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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 he had always inspired in him.

"You'll marry me?" His voice was staccato with contempt. "By heaven, your answer 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 I am afraid 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. Good-by, Sally—and good luck."

Somewhat 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.

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