CHAPTER XI

SALLY RUNS AWAY

IF Ginger Kemp had been asked to enumerate his good qualities, it is not probable that he would have drawn up a very lengthy list. He might have started by claiming for himself the virtue of meaning well, but after that he would have had to chew the pencil in prolonged meditation. And, even if he could eventually have added one or two further items to the catalogue, tact and delicacy of feeling would not have been among them.

Yet, by staying away from Sally during the next few days he showed considerable delicacy. It was not easy to stay away from her; but he forced himself to do so. He argued from his own tastes, and was strongly of opinion that in times of travail, solitude was what the sufferer most desired. In his time he, too, had had what he would have described as nasty jars, and on these occasions all he had asked was to be allowed to sit and think things over and fight his battle out by himself.

By Saturday, however, he had come to the conclusion that some form of action might now be taken. Saturday was rather a good day for picking up the threads again. He had not to go to the office, and,

what was still more to the point, he had just drawn his week's salary. Mrs. Meecher had deftly taken a certain amount of this off him, but enough remained to enable him to attempt consolation on a fairly princely scale. There presented itself to him as a judicious move the idea of hiring a car and taking Sally out to dinner at one of the road-houses he had heard about up the Boston Post Road. He examined the scheme. The more he looked at it, the better it seemed.

He was helped to this decision by the extraordinary perfection of the weather. The weather of late had been a revelation to Ginger. It was his first experience of America's Indian Summer, and it had quite overcome him. As he stood on the roof of Mrs. Meecher's establishment on the Saturday morning, thrilled by the velvet wonder of the sunshine, it seemed to him that the only possible way of passing such a day was to take Sally for a ride in an open car.

The Maison Meecher was a lofty building on one of the side-streets at the lower end of the avenue. From its roof, after you had worked your way through the groves of washing which hung limply from the clothes-lines, you could see many things of interest. To the left lay Washington Square, full of somnolent Italians and roller-skating children; to the right was a spectacle which never failed to intrigue Ginger, the high smoke-stacks of a Cunard liner moving slowly down the river, sticking up over the house-tops as if the boat was travelling down Ninth Avenue.

To-day there were four of these funnels, causing Ginger to deduce the *Mauretania*. As the boat on which he had come over from England, the *Mauretania* had sentimental interest for him. He stood

watching her stately progress till the higher buildings further down the town shut her from his sight; then picked his way through the washing and went down to his room to get his hat. A quarter of an hour later he was in the hall-way of Sally's apartment house, gazing with ill-concealed disgust at the serge-clad back of his cousin Mr. Carmyle, who was engaged in conversation with a gentleman in overalls.

No care-free prospector, singing his way through the Mojave Desert and suddenly finding himself confronted by a rattlesnake, could have experienced so abrupt a change of mood as did Ginger at this revolting spectacle. Even in their native Piccadilly it had been unpleasant to run into Mr. Carmyle. To find him here now was nothing short of nauseating. Only one thing could have brought him to this place. Obviously, he must have come to see Sally; and with a sudden sinking of the heart Ginger remembered the shiny, expensive automobile which he had seen waiting at the door. He, it was clear, was not the only person to whom the idea had occurred of taking Sally for a drive on this golden day.

He was still standing there when Mr. Carmyle swung round with a frown on his dark face which seemed to say that he had not found the janitor's conversation entertaining. The sight of Ginger plainly did nothing to lighten his gloom.

"Hullo!" he said.

"Hullo!" said Ginger.

Uncomfortable silence followed these civilities.

"Have you come to see Miss Nicholas?"

"Why, yes."

"She isn't here," said Mr. Carmyle, and the fact

that he had found someone to share the bad news, seemed to cheer him a little.

"Not here?"

"No. Apparently . . ." Bruce Carmyle's scowl betrayed that resentment which a well-balanced man cannot but feel at the unreasonableness of others. ". . . Apparently, for some extraordinary reason, she has taken it into her head to dash over to England."

Ginger tottered. The unexpectedness of the blow was crushing. He followed his cousin out into the sunshine in a sort of dream. Bruce Carmyle was addressing the driver of the expensive automobile.

"I find I shall not want the car. You can take it back to the garage."

The chauffeur, a moody man, opened one half-closed eye and spat cautiously. It was the way Rockefeller would have spat when approaching the crisis of some delicate financial negotiation.

"You'll have to pay just the same," he observed, opening his other eye to lend emphasis to the words.

"Of course I shall pay," snapped Mr. Carmyle, irritably. "How much is it?"

Money passed. The car rolled off.

"Gone to England?" said Ginger, dizzily.

"Yes, gone to England."

"But why?"

"How the devil do I know why?" Bruce Carmyle would have found his best friend trying at this moment. Gaping Ginger gave him almost a physical pain. "All I know is what the janitor told me, that she sailed on the *Mauretania* this morning."

The tragic irony of this overcame Ginger. That he

should have stood on the roof, calmly watching the boat down the river . . .

He nodded absently to Mr. Carmyle and walked off. He had no further remarks to make. The warmth had gone out of the sunshine and all interest had departed from his life. He felt dull, listless, at a loose end. Not even the thought that his cousin, a careful man with his money, had had to pay a day's hire for a car which he could not use brought him any balm. He loafed aimlessly about the streets. He wandered in the Park and out again. The Park bored him. The streets bored him. The whole city bored him. A city without Sally in it was a drab, futile city, and nothing that the sun could do to brighten it could make it otherwise.

Night came at last, and with it a letter. It was the first even passably pleasant thing that had happened to Ginger in the whole of this dreary and unprofitable day: for the envelope bore the crest of the good ship *Mauretania*. He snatched it covetously from the letter-rack, and carried it upstairs to his room.

Very few of the rooms at Mrs. Meecher's boarding-house struck any note of luxury. Mrs. Meecher was not one of your fashionable interior decorators. She considered that when she had added a Morris chair to the essentials which make up a bedroom, she had gone as far in the direction of pomp as any guest at seven-and-a-half per could expect her to go. As a rule, the severity of his surroundings afflicted Ginger with a touch of gloom when he went to bed; but to-night—such is the magic of a letter from the right person—he was uplifted and almost gay. There are moments when even illuminated texts over the wash-stand cannot wholly quell us.

There was nothing of haste and much of ceremony in Ginger's method of approaching the perusal of his correspondence. He bore himself after the manner of a small boy in the presence of unexpected ice-cream, gloating for awhile before embarking on the treat, anxious to make it last out. His first move was to feel in the breast-pocket of his coat and produce the photograph of Sally which he had feloniously removed from her apartment. At this he looked long and earnestly before propping it up within easy reach against his basin, to be handy, if required, for purposes of reference. He then took off his coat, collar, and shoes, filled and lit a pipe, placed pouch and matches on the arm of the Morris chair, and drew that chair up so that he could sit with his feet on the bed. Having manœuvred himself into a position of ease, he lit his pipe again and took up the letter. He looked at the crest, the handwriting of the address, and the postmark. He weighed it in his hand. It was a bulky letter.

He took Sally's photograph from the wash-stand and scrutinized it once more. Then he lit his pipe again, and, finally, wriggling himself into the depths of the chair, opened the envelope.

" Ginger, dear."

Having read so far, Ginger found it necessary to take up the photograph and study it with an even greater intentness than before. He gazed at it for many minutes, then laid it down and lit his pipe again. Then he went on with the letter.

" Ginger, dear.—I'm afraid this address is going to give you rather a shock, and I'm feeling very guilty. I'm running away, and I haven't even

stopped to say good-bye. I can't help it. I know it's weak and cowardly, but I simply can't help it. I stood it for a day or two, and then I saw that it was no good. (Thank you for leaving me alone and not coming round to see me. Nobody else but you would have done that. But then, nobody ever has been or ever could be so understanding as you.)"

Ginger found himself compelled at this point to look at the photograph again.

"There was too much in New York to remind me. That's the worst of being happy in a place. When things go wrong you find there are too many ghosts about. I just couldn't stand it. I tried, but I couldn't. I'm going away to get cured—if I can. Mr. Faucitt is over in England, and when I went down to Mrs. Meecher for my letters, I found one from him. His brother is dead, you know, and he has inherited, of all things, a fashionable dress-making place in Regent Street. His brother was Laurette et Cie. I suppose he will sell the business later on, but, just at present, the poor old dear is apparently quite bewildered and that doesn't seem to have occurred to him. He kept saying in his letter how much he wished I was with him, to help him, and I was tempted and ran. Anything to get away from the ghosts and have something to do. I don't suppose I shall feel much better in England, but, at least, every street corner won't have associations. Don't ever be happy anywhere, Ginger. It's too big a risk, much too big a risk.

"There was a letter from Elsa Doland, too. Bubbling over with affection. We had always been tremendous friends. Of course, she never knew anything about my being engaged to Gerald. I lent Fillmore

the money to buy that piece, which gave Elsa her first big chance, and so she's very grateful. She says, if ever she gets the opportunity of doing me a good turn . . . Aren't things muddled?

"And there was a letter from Gerald. I was expecting one, of course, but . . . what would you have done, Ginger? Would you have read it? I sat with it in front of me for an hour, I should think, just looking at the envelope, and then . . . You see, what was the use? I could guess exactly the sort of thing that would be in it, and reading it would only have hurt a lot more. The thing was done, so why bother about explanations? What good are explanations, anyway? They don't help. They don't do anything . . . I burned it, Ginger. The last letter I shall ever get from him. I made a bonfire on the bathroom floor, and it smouldered and went brown, and then flared a little, and every now and then I lit another match and kept it burning, and at last it was just black ashes and a stain on the tiles. Just a mess!

"Ginger, burn this letter, too. I'm pouring out all the poison to you, hoping it will make me feel better. You don't mind, do you? But I know you don't. If ever anybody had a real pal . . .

"It's a dreadful thing, fascination, Ginger. It grips you and you are helpless. One can be so sensible and reasonable about other people's love affairs. When I was working at the dance place I told you about there was a girl who fell in love with the most awful little beast. He had a mean mouth and shiny black hair brushed straight back, and anybody would have seen what he was. But this girl wouldn't listen to a word. I talked to her by the hour. It makes me smile now when I think how sensible and level-headed

I was. But she wouldn't listen. In some mysterious way this was the man she wanted, and, of course, everything happened that one knew would happen.

"If one could manage one's own life as well as one can manage other people's! If all this wretched thing of mine had happened to some other girl, how beautifully I could have proved that it was the best thing that could have happened, and that a man who could behave as Gerald has done wasn't worth worrying about. I can just hear myself. But, you see, whatever he has done, Gerald is still Gerald and Sally is still Sally and, however much I argue, I can't get away from that. All I can do is to come howling to my red-headed pal, when I know just as well as he does that a girl of any spirit would be dignified and keep her troubles to herself and be much too proud to let anyone know that she was hurt.

"Proud! That's the real trouble, Ginger. My pride has been battered and chopped up and broken into as many pieces as you broke Mr. Scrymgeour's stick! What pitiful creatures we are. Girls, I mean. At least, I suppose a good many girls are like me. If Gerald had died and I had lost him that way, I know quite well I shouldn't be feeling as I do now. I should have been broken-hearted, but it wouldn't have been the same. It's my pride that is hurt. I have always been a bossy, cocksure little creature, swaggering about the world like an English sparrow; and now I'm paying for it! Oh, Ginger, I'm paying for it! I wonder if running away is going to do me any good at all. Perhaps, if Mr. Faucitt has some real hard work for me to do . . .

"Of course, I know exactly how all this has come

about. Elsa's pretty and attractive. But the point is that she is a success, and as a success she appeals to Gerald's weakest side. He worships success. She is going to have a marvellous career, and she can help Gerald on in his. He can write plays for her to star in. What have I to offer against that? Yes, I know it's grovelling and contemptible of me to say that, Ginger. I ought to be above it, oughtn't I—talking as if I were competing for some prize . . . But I haven't any pride left. Oh, well!'

"There! I've poured it all out and I really do feel a little better just for the moment. It won't last, of course, but even a minute is something. Ginger, dear, I shan't see you for ever so long, even if we ever do meet again, but you'll try to remember that I'm thinking of you a whole lot, won't you? I feel responsible for you. You're my baby. You've got started now and you've only to stick to it. Please, please, *please* don't 'make a hash of it'! Good-bye. I never did find that photograph of me that we were looking for that afternoon in the apartment, or I would send it to you. Then you could have kept it on your mantelpiece, and whenever you felt inclined to make a hash of anything I would have caught your eye sternly and you would have pulled up.

"Good-bye, Ginger. I shall have to stop now. The mail is just closing.

"Always your pal, wherever I am.—SALLY."

Ginger laid the letter down, and a little sound escaped him that was half a sigh, half an oath. He was wondering whether even now some desirable end might not be achieved by going to Chicago and break-

ing Gerald Foster's neck. Abandoning this scheme as impracticable, and not being able to think of anything else to do he re-lit his pipe and started to read the letter again.