CHAPTER XVI

AT THE FLOWER GARDEN

I

"AND after all I've done for her," said Mr. Reginald Cracknell, his voice tremulous with self-pity and his eyes moist with the combined effects of anguish and over-indulgence in his celebrated private stock, "after all I've done for her she throws me down."

Sally did not reply. The orchestra of the Flower Garden was of a calibre that discouraged vocal competition; and she was having, moreover, too much difficulty in adjusting her feet to Mr. Cracknell's erratic dance-steps to employ her attention elsewhere. They manœuvred jerkily past the table where Miss Mabel Hobson, the Flower Garden's newest "hostess," sat watching the revels with a distant hauteur. Miss Hobson was looking her most regal in old gold and black, and a sorrowful gulp escaped the stricken Mr. Cracknell as he shambled beneath her eye.

"If I told you," he moaned in Sally's ear, "what . . . was that your ankle? Sorry! Don't know what I'm doing to-night . . . If I told you what I had spent on that woman, you wouldn't believe it. And then she throws me down. And all because I said I didn't like her in that hat. She hasn't spoken

to me for a week, and won't answer when I call up on the 'phone. And I was right, too. It was a rotten hat. Didn't suit her a bit. But that," said Mr. Cracknell, morosely, "is a woman all over!"

Sally uttered a stifled exclamation as his wandering foot descended on hers before she could get it out of the way. Mr. Cracknell interpreted the ejaculation as a protest against the sweeping harshness of his last remark, and gallantly tried to make amends.

"I don't mean you're like that," he said. "You're different. I could see that directly I saw you. You have a sympathetic nature. That's why I'm telling you all this. You're a sensible and broad-minded girl and can understand. I've done everything for that woman. I got her this job as hostess here—you wouldn't believe what they pay her. I starred her in a show once. Did you see those pearls she was wearing? I gave her those. And she won't speak to me. Just because I didn't like her hat. I wish you could have seen that hat. You would agree with me, I know, because you're a sensible, broad-minded girl and understand hats. I don't know what to do. I come here every night." Sally was aware of this. She had seen him often, but this was the first time that Lee Schoenstein, the gentlemanly master of ceremonies, had inflicted him on her. "I come here every night and dance past her table, but she won't look at me. What," asked Mr. Cracknell, tears welling in his pale eyes, "would you do about it?"

"I don't know," said Sally, frankly.

"Nor do I. I thought you wouldn't, because you're a sensible, broad-minded . . . I mean, nor do I. I'm having one last try to-night, if you can keep a secret. You won't tell anyone, will you?" pleaded

Mr. Cracknell, urgently. "But I know you won't because you're a sensible . . . I'm giving her a little present. Having it brought here to-night, Little present. That ought to soften her, don't you think?"

"A big one would do it better."

Mr. Cracknell kicked her on the shin in a dismayed sort of way.

"I never thought of that. Perhaps you're right, But it's too late now. Still, it might. Or wouldn't it? Which do you think?"

"Yes," said Sally.

"I thought as much," said Mr. Cracknell.

The orchestra stopped with a thump and a bang, leaving Mr Cracknell clapping feebly in the middle of the floor. Sally slipped back to her table. Her late partner, after an uncertain glance about him, as if he had mislaid something but could not remember what, zigzagged off, in search of his own seat. The noise of many conversations, drowned by the music, broke out with renewed vigour. The hot, close air was full of voices; and Sally, pressing her hands on her closed eyes, was reminded once more that she had a headache.

Nearly a month had passed since her return to Mr. Abrahams' employment. It had been a dull, leaden month, a monotonous succession of lifeless days during which life had become a bad dream. In some strange nightmare fashion, she seemed nowadays to be cut off from her kind. It was weeks since she had seen a familiar face. None of the companions of her old boarding-house days had crossed her path. Fillmore, no doubt from uneasiness of conscience, had not sought her out, and Ginger was

working out his destiny on the south shore of Long Island.

She lowered her hands and opened her eyes and looked at the room. It was crowded, as always. The Flower Garden was one of the many establishments of the same kind which had swum to popularity on the rising flood of New York's dancing craze; and doubtless because, as its proprietor had claimed, it was a nice place and run nice, it had continued, unlike many of its rivals, to enjoy unvarying prosperity. In its advertisement, it described itself as "a supper-club for after-theatre dining and dancing," adding that "large and spacious, and sumptuously appointed," it was "one of the town's wonder-places, with its incomparable dance-floor, enchanting music, cuisine, and service de luxe." From which it may be gathered, even without his personal statements to that effect, that Isadore Abrahams thought well of the place.

There had been a time when Sally had liked it, too. In her first period of employment there she had found it diverting, stimulating and full of entertainment. But in those days she had never had headaches or, what was worse, this dreadful listless depression which weighed her down and made her nightly work a burden.

"Miss Nicholas."

The orchestra, never silent for long at the Flower Garden, had started again, and Lee Schoenstein, the master of ceremonies, was presenting a new partner. She got up mechanically.

"This is the first time I have been in this place," said the man, as they bumped over the crowded floor. He was big and clumsy, of course. To-night it

seemed to Sally that the whole world was big and clumsy. "It's a swell place. I come from up-state myself. We got nothing like this where I come from." He cleared a space before him, using Sally as a battering-ram, and Sally, though she had not enjoyed her recent excursion with Mr. Cracknell, now began to look back to it almost with wistfulness. This man was undoubtedly the worst dancer in America.

"Give me li'l old New York," said the man from up-state, unpatriotically. "It's good enough for me. I been to some swell shows since I got to town. You seen this year's 'Follies'?"

"No."

"You go," said the man earnestly. "You *go!* Take it from me, it's a swell show. You seen 'Myrtle takes a Turkish Bath'?"

"I don't go to many theatres."

"You go! It's a scream. I been to a show every night since I got here. Every night regular. Swell shows all of 'em, except this last one. I cert'nly picked a lemon to-night all right. I was taking a chance, y'see, because it was an opening. Thought it would be something to say, when I got home, that I'd been to a New York opening. Set me back two-seventy-five, including tax, and I wish I'd got it in my kick right now. 'The Wild Rose,' they called it," he said satirically, as if exposing a low subterfuge on the part of the management. "'The Wild Rose!' It sure made me wild all right. Two dollars seventy-five tossed away, just like that."

Something stirred in Sally's memory. Why did that title seem so familiar? Then, with a shock, she remembered. It was Gerald's new play. For some

time after her return to New York, she had been haunted by the fear lest, coming out of her apartment, she might meet him coming out of his; and then she had seen a paragraph in her morning paper which had relieved her of this apprehension. Gerald was out on the road with a new play, and "The Wild Rose," she was almost sure, was the name of it.

"Is that Gerald Foster's play?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know who wrote it," said her partner, "but let me tell you he's one lucky guy to get away alive. There's fellows breaking stones on the Ossining Road that's done a lot less to deserve a sentence. Wild Rose! I'll tell the world it made me go good and wild," said the man from up-state, an economical soul who disliked waste and was accustomed to spread out his humorous efforts so as to give them every chance. "Why, before the second act was over, the people were beating it for the exits, and if it hadn't been for someone shouting 'Women and children first' there'd have been a panic."

Sally found herself back at her table without knowing clearly how she had got there.

"Miss Nicholas."

She started to rise, and was aware suddenly that this was not the voice of duty calling her once more through the gold teeth of Mr. Schoenstein. The man who had spoken her name had seated himself beside her, and was talking in precise, clipped accents, oddly familiar. The mist cleared from her eyes and she recognized Bruce Carmyle.

II

"I called at your place," Mr. Carmyle was saying, "and the hall porter told me that you were here, so

I ventured to follow you. I hope you do not mind? May I smoke?"

He lit a cigarette with something of an air. His fingers trembled as he raised the match, but he flattered himself that there was nothing else in his demeanour to indicate that he was violently excited. Bruce Carmyle's ideal was the strong man who can rise superior to his emotions. He was alive to the fact that this was an embarrassing moment, but he was determined not to show that he appreciated it. He cast a sideways glance at Sally, and thought that never, not even in the garden at Monk's Crofton on a certain momentous occasion, had he seen her looking prettier Her face was flushed and her eyes aflame. The stout wraith of Uncle Donald, which had accompanied Mr. Carmyle on this expedition of his, faded into nothingness as he gazed.

There was a pause. Mr. Carmyle, having lighted his cigarette, puffed vigorously.

"When did you land?" asked Sally, feeling the need of saying something. Her mind was confused. She could not have said whether she was glad or sorry that he was there. Glad, she thought, on the whole. There was something in his dark cool, stiff English aspect that gave her a curious feeling of relief. He was so unlike Mr. Cracknell and the man from upstate and so calmly remote from the feverish atmosphere in which she lived her nights that it was restful to look at him.

"I landed to-night," said Bruce Carmyle, turning and facing her squarely.

"To-night!"

"We docked at ten."

He turned away again. He had made his effect, and was content to leave her to think it over.

Sally was silent. The significance of his words had not escaped her. She realized that his presence there was a challenge which she must answer. And yet it hardly stirred her. She had been fighting so long, and she felt utterly inert. She was like a swimmer who can battle no longer and prepares to yield to the numbness of exhaustion. The heat of the room pressed down on her like a smothering blanket. Her tired nerves cried out under the blare of music and the clatter of voices.

"Shall we dance this?" he asked.

The orchestra had started to play again, a sensuous, creamy melody which was making the most of its brief reign as Broadway's leading song-hit, overfamiliar to her from a hundred repetitions.

"If you like."

Efficiency was Bruce Carmyle's gospel. He was one of those men who do not attempt anything which they cannot accomplish to perfection. Dancing, he had decided early in his life, was a part of a gentleman's education, and he had seen to it that he was educated thoroughly. Sally, who, as they swept out on to the floor, had braced herself automatically for a repetition of the usual bumping struggle which dancing at the Flower Garden had come to mean for her, found herself in the arms of a masterful expert, a man who danced better than she did, and suddenly there came to her a feeling that was almost gratitude, a miraculous slackening of her taut nerves, a delicious peace. Soothed and contented, she yielded herself with eyes half closed to the rhythm of the melody, finding it now robbed in some mysterious manner of

all its stale cheapness, and in that moment her whole attitude towards Bruce Carmyle underwent a complete change.

She had never troubled to examine with any minuteness her feelings towards him: but one thing she had known clearly since their first meeting—that he was physically distasteful to her. For all his good looks, and in his rather sinister way he was a handsome man, she had shrunk from him. Now, spirited away by the magic of the dance, that repugnance had left her. It was as if some barrier had been broken down between them.

"Sally!"

She felt his arm tighten about her, the muscles quivering. She caught sight of his face. His dark eyes suddenly blazed into hers and she stumbled with an odd feeling of helplessness; realizing with a shock that brought her with a jerk out of the half-dream into which she had been lulled that this dance had not postponed the moment of decision, as she had looked to it to do. In a hot whisper, the words swept away on the flood of the music which had suddenly become raucous and blaring once more, he was repeating what he had said under the trees at Monk's Crofton on that far-off morning in the English springtime. Dizzily she knew that she was resenting the unfairness of the attack at such a moment, but her mind seemed numbed.

The music stopped abruptly. Insistent clapping started it again, but Sally moved away to her table, and he followed her like a shadow. Neither spoke. Bruce Carmyle had said his say, and Sally was sitting staring before her, trying to think. She was tired, tired. Her eyes were burning. She tried to force

herself to face the situation squarely. Was it worth struggling? Was anything in the world worth a struggle? She only knew that she was tired, desperately tired, tired to the very depths of her soul.

The music stopped. There was more clapping, but this time the orchestra did not respond. Gradually the floor emptied. The shuffling of feet ceased. The Flower Garden was as quiet as it was ever able to be. Even the voices of the babblers seemed strangely hushed. Sally closed her eyes, and as she did so from somewhere up near the roof there came the song of a bird.

Isadore Abrahams was a man of his word. He advertised a Flower Garden, and he had tried to give the public something as closely resembling a flower-garden as it was possible for an overcrowded, overheated, overnoisy Broadway dancing-resort to achieve. Paper roses festooned the walls; genuine tulips bloomed in tubs by every pillar; and from the roof hung cages with birds in them. One of these, stirred by the sudden cessation of the tumult below, had begun to sing.

Sally had often pitied these birds, and more than once had pleaded in vain with Abrahams for a remission of their sentence, but somehow at this moment it did not occur to her that this one was merely praying in its own language, as she often had prayed in her thoughts, to be taken out of this place. To her, sitting there wrestling with Fate, the song seemed cheerful. It soothed her. It healed her to listen to it. And suddenly before her eyes there rose a vision of Monk's Crofton, cool, green, and peaceful under the mild English sun, luring her as an oasis seen in the distance lures the desert traveller . . .

She became aware that the master of Monk's Crofton had placed his hand on hers and was holding it in a tightening grip. She looked down and gave a little shiver. She had always disliked Bruce Carmyle's hands. They were strong and bony and black hair grew on the back of them. One of the earliest feelings regarding him had been that she would hate to have those hands touching her. But she did not move. Again that vision of the old garden had flickered across her mind . . . a haven where she could rest . . .

He was leaning towards her, whispering in her ear. The room was hotter than it had ever been, noisier than it had ever been, fuller than it had ever been. The bird on the roof was singing again and now she understood what it said. "Take me out of this!" Did anything matter except that? What did it matter how one was taken, or where, or by whom, so that one was taken

Monk's Crofton was looking cool and green and peaceful . . .

"Very well," said Sally.

III

Bruce Carmyle, in the capacity of accepted suitor, found himself at something of a loss. He had a dissatisfied feeling. It was not the manner of Sally's acceptance that caused this. It would, of course, have pleased him better if she had shown more warmth, but he was prepared to wait for warmth. What did trouble him was the fact that his correct mind perceived now for the first time that he had chosen an unsuitable moment and place for his outburst of

emotion. He belonged to the orthodox school of thought which looks on moonlight and solitude as the proper setting for a proposal of marriage; and the surroundings of the Flower Garden, for all its niceness and the nice manner in which it was conducted, jarred upon him profoundly.

Music had begun again, but it was not the soft music such as a lover demands if he is to give of his best. It was a brassy, clashy rendering of a ribald one-step, enough to choke the eloquence of the most ardent. Couples were dipping and swaying and bumping into one another as far as the eye could reach; while just behind him two waiters had halted in order to thrash out one of those voluble arguments in which waiters love to indulge. To continue the scene at the proper emotional level was impossible, and Bruce Carmyle began his career as an engaged man by dropping into small-talk.

"Deuce of a lot of noise," he said querulously.

"Yes," agreed Sally.

"Is it always like this?"

"Oh, yes."

"Infernal racket!"

"Yes."

The romantic side of Mr. Carmyle's nature could have cried aloud at the hideous unworthiness of these banalities. In the visions which he had had of himself as a successful wooer, it had always been in the moments immediately succeeding the all-important question and its whispered reply that he had come out particularly strong. He had been accustomed to picture himself bending with a proud tenderness over his partner in the scene and murmuring some notably good things to her bowed head. How could any

man murmur in a pandemonium like this. From tenderness Bruce Carmyle descended with a sharp swoop to irritability.

"Do you often come here?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To dance."

Mr. Carmyle chafed helplessly. The scene, which should been so romantic, had suddenly reminded him of the occasion when, at the age of twenty, he had attended his first ball and had sat in a corner behind a potted palm perspiring shyly and endeavouring to make conversation to a formidable nymph in pink. It was one of the few occasions in his life at which he had ever been at a complete disadvantage. He could still remember the clammy discomfort of his too high collar as it melted on him. Most certainly it was not a scene which he enjoyed recalling; and that he should be forced to recall it now, at what ought to have been the supreme moment of his life, annoyed him intensely. Almost angrily he endeavoured to jerk the conversation to a higher level.

"Darling," he murmured, for by moving his chair two feet to the right and bending sideways he found that he was in a position to murmur, "you have made me so . . ."

"*Batti, batti! I presto ravioli hollandaise,*" cried one of the disputing waiters at his back—or to Bruce Carmyle's prejudiced hearing it sounded like that.

"*La Donna e mobile spaghetti napoli Tettrazina,*" rejoined the second waiter with spirit.

". . . you have made me so . . ."

"*Infanta Isabella lope de Vegas mulligatawny*

Toronto," said the first waiter, weak but coming back pluckily.

"... so happy ..."

"*Funiculi funicula Vincente y Blasco Ibanez vermicelli sul campo della gloria risotto!*" said the second waiter clinchingly, and scored a technical knockout.

Bruce Carmyle gave it up, and lit a moody cigarette. He was oppressed by that feeling which so many of us have felt in our time, that it was all wrong.

The music stopped. The two leading citizens of Little Italy vanished and went their way, probably to start a vendetta. There followed comparative calm. But Bruce Carmyle's emotions, like sweet bells jangled, were out of tune, and he could not recapture the first fine careless rapture. He found nothing within him but small-talk.

"What has become of your party?" he asked.

"My party?"

"The people you are with," said Mr. Carmyle. Even in the stress of his emotion his problem had been exercising him. In his correctly ordered world girls did not go to restaurants alone.

"I'm not with anybody."

"You came here by yourself?" exclaimed Bruce Carmyle, frankly aghast. And, as he spoke, the wraith of Uncle Donald, banished till now, returned as large as ever, puffing disapproval through a walrus moustache.

"I am employed here," said Sally.

Mr. Carmyle started violently.

"Employed here?"

"As a dancer, you know. I ..."

Sally broke off, her attention abruptly diverted to something which had just caught her eye at a table on the other side of the room. That something was a red-headed young man of sturdy build who had just appeared beside the chair in which Mr. Reginald Cracknell was sitting in huddled gloom. In one hand he carried a basket, and from this basket, rising above the din of conversation, there came a sudden sharp yapping. Mr. Cracknell roused himself from his stupor, took the basket, raised the lid. The yapping increased in volume.

Mr. Cracknell rose, the basket in his arms. With uncertain steps and a look on his face like that of those who lead forlorn hopes he crossed the floor to where Miss Mabel Hobson sat, proud and aloof. The next moment that haughty lady, the centre of an admiring and curious crowd, was hugging to her bosom a protesting Pekingese puppy, and Mr. Cracknell, seizing his opportunity like a good general, had deposited himself in a chair at her side. The course of true love was running smooth again.

The red-headed young man was gazing fixedly at Sally.

"As a dancer!" ejaculated Mr. Carmyle. Of all those within sight of the moving drama which had just taken place, he alone had paid no attention to it. Replete as it was with human interest, sex-appeal, the punch, and all the other qualities which a drama should possess, it had failed to grip him. His thoughts had been elsewhere. The accusing figure of Uncle Donald refused to vanish from his mental eye. The stern voice of Uncle Donald seemed still to ring in his ear.

A dancer! A professional dancer at a Broadway restaurant! Hideous doubts began to creep like snakes into Bruce Carmyle's mind. What, he asked himself, did he really know of this girl on whom he had bestowed the priceless boon of his society for life? How did he know what she was—he could not find the exact adjective to express his meaning, but he knew what he meant. Was she worthy of the boon? That was what it amounted to. All his life he had had a prim shrinking from the section of the feminine world which is connected with the light-life of large cities. Club acquaintances of his in London had from time to time married into the Gaiety Chorus, and Mr. Carmyle, though he had no objection to the Gaiety Chorus in its proper place—on the other side of the footlights—had always looked on these young men after as social outcasts. The fine dashing frenzy which had brought him all the way from South Audley Street to win Sally was ebbing fast.

Sally, hearing him speak, had turned. And there was a candid honesty in her gaze which for a moment sent all those creeping doubts scuttling away into the darkness whence they had come. He had not made a fool of himself, he protested to the lowering phantom of Uncle Donald. Who, he demanded, could look at Sally and think for an instant that she was not all that was perfect and lovable? A warm revulsion of feeling swept over Bruce Carmyle like a returning tide.

"You see, I lost my money and had to do something," said Sally.

"I see, I see," murmured Mr. Carmyle; and if only Fate had left him alone who knows to what heights of tenderness he might not have soared? But

at this moment Fate, being no respecter of persons, sent into his life the disturbing personality of George Washington Williams.

George Washington Williams was the talented coloured gentleman who had been extracted from small-time vaudeville by Mr. Abrahams to do a nightly speciality at the Flower Garden. He was, in fact, a trap-drummer: and it was his amiable practice, after he had done a few minutes trap-drumming, to rise from his seat and make a circular tour of the tables on the edge of the dancing-floor, whimsically pretending to clip the locks of the male patrons with a pair of drumsticks held scissor-wise. And so it came about that, just as Mr. Carmyle was bending towards Sally in an access of manly sentiment, and was on the very verge of pouring out his soul in a series of well-phrased remarks, he was surprised and annoyed to find an Ethiopian to whom he had never been introduced leaning over him and taking quite unpardonable liberties with his back hair.

One says that Mr. Carmyle was annoyed. The word is weak. The interruption coming at such a moment jarred every ganglion in his body. The clicking noise of the drumsticks maddened him. And the gleaming whiteness of Mr. Williams' friendly and benignant smile was the last straw. His dignity writhed beneath this abominable infliction. People at other tables were laughing. At him. A loathing for the Flower Garden flowed over Bruce Carmyle, and with it a feeling of suspicion and disapproval of everyone connected with the establishment. He sprang to his feet.

"I think I will be going," he said.

Sally did not reply. She was watching Ginger,

who still stood beside the table recently vacated by Reginald Cracknell.

"Good night," said Mr. Carmyle between his teeth.

"Oh, are you going?" said Sally with a start. She felt embarrassed. Try as she would, she was unable to find words of any intimacy. She tried to realize that she had promised to marry this man, but never before had he seemed so much a stranger to her, so little a part of her life. It came to her with a sensation of the incredible that she had done this thing, taken this irrevocable step.

The sudden sight of Ginger had shaken her. It was as though in the last half-hour she had forgotten him and only now realized what marriage with Bruce Carmyle would mean to their comradeship. From now on he was dead to her. If anything in this world was certain that was. Sally Nicholas was Ginger's pal, but Mrs. Carmyle, she realized, would never be allowed to see him again. A devastating feeling of loss smote her like a blow.

"Yes, I've had enough of this place," Bruce Carmyle was saying.

"Good night," said Sally. She hesitated. "When shall I see you?" she asked awkwardly.

It occurred to Bruce Carmyle that he was not showing himself at his best. He had, he perceived, allowed his nerves to run away with him.

"You don't mind if I go?" he said more amiably. "The fact is, I can't stand this place any longer. I'll tell you one thing, I'm going to take you out of here quick."

"I'm afraid I can't leave at a moment's notice," said Sally, loyal to her obligations.

"We'll talk over that to-morrow. I'll call for you in the morning and take you for a drive somewhere in a car. You want some fresh air after this." Mr. Carmyle looked about him in stiff disgust, and expressed his unalterable sentiments concerning the Flower Garden, that apple of Isadore Abraham's eye, in a snort of loathing. "My God! What a place!"

He walked quickly away and disappeared. And Ginger, beaming happily, swooped on Sally's table like a homing pigeon.

IV

"Good Lord, I say, what ho,!" cried Ginger. "Fancy meeting you here. What a bit of luck!" He glanced over his shoulder warily. "Has that blighter pipped?"

"Pipped?"

"Popped," explained Ginger. "I mean to say, he isn't coming back or any rot like that, is he?"

"Mr. Carmyle? No, he has gone."

"Sound egg!" said Ginger with satisfaction. "For a moment, when I saw you yarning away together,. I thought he might be with your party. What on earth is he doing over here at all, confound him? He's got all Europe to play about in, why should he come infesting New York? I say, it really is ripping, seeing you again. It seems years . . . Of course, one get's a certain amount of satisfaction writing letters, but it's not the same. Besides, I write such rotten letters. I say, this really is rather priceless. Can't I get you something? A cup of coffee, I mean, or an egg or something? By jove! this really is top-hole."

His homely, honest face glowed with pleasure, and

it seemed to Sally as though she had come out of a winter's night into a warm friendly room. Her mercurial spirits soared.

"Oh, Ginger! If you knew what it's like seeing you!"

"No, really? Do you mean, honestly, you're braced?"

"I should say I am braced."

"Well, isn't that fine! I was afraid you might have forgotten me."

"Forgotten you!"

With something of the effect of a revelation it suddenly struck Sally how far she had been from forgetting him, how large was the place he had occupied in her thoughts.

"I've missed you dreadfully," she said, and felt the words inadequate as she uttered them.

"What ho!" said Ginger, also internally condemning the poverty of speech as a vehicle for conveying thought.

There was a brief silence. The first exhilaration of the reunion over, Sally deep down in her heart was aware of a troubled feeling as though the world were out of joint. She forced herself to ignore it, but it would not be ignored. It grew. Dimly she was beginning to realize what Ginger meant to her, and she fought to keep herself from realizing it. Strange things were happening to her to-night, strange emotions stirring her. Ginger seemed somehow different, as if she were really seeing him for the first time.

"You're looking wonderfully well," she said trying to keep the conversation on a pedestrian level.

"I *am* well," said Ginger. "Never felt fitter in

my life. Been out in the open all day long . . . simple life and all that . . . working like blazes. I say, business is booming. Did you see me just now, handing over Percy the Pup to what's-his-name? Five hundred dollars on that one deal. Got the cheque in my pocket. But what an extraordinarily rummy thing that I should have come to this place to deliver the goods just when you happened to be here. I couldn't believe my eyes at first. I say, I hope the people you're with won't think I'm butting in. You'll have to explain that we're old pals and that you started me in business and all that sort of thing. Look here," he said lowering his voice, "I know how you hate being thanked, but I simply must say how terrifically decent . . ."

"Miss Nicholas."

Lee Schoenstein was standing at the table, and by his side an expectant youth with a small moustache and pince-nez. Sally got up, and the next moment Ginger was alone, gaping perplexedly after her as she vanished and reappeared in the jogging throng on the dancing floor. It was the nearest thing Ginger had seen to a conjuring trick, and at that moment he was ill-attuned to conjuring tricks. He brooded, fuming, at what seemed to him the supremest exhibition of pure cheek, of monumental nerve, and of undiluted crust that had ever come within his notice. To come and charge into a private conversation like that and whisk her away without a word . . .

"Who *was* that blighter?" he demanded with heat, when the music ceased and Sally limped back.

"That was Mr. Schoenstein."

"And who was the other?"

"The one I danced with? I don't know."

"You don't *know*?"

Sally perceived that the conversation had arrived at an embarrassing point. There was nothing for it but candour.

"Ginger," she said, "you remember my telling you when we first met that I used to dance in a Broadway place? This is the place. I'm working again."

Complete unintelligence showed itself on Ginger's every feature.

"I don't understand," he said—unnecessarily, for his face revealed the fact.

"I've got my old job back."

"But why?"

"Well, I had to do something." She went on rapidly. Already a light dimly resembling the light of understanding was beginning to appear in Ginger's eyes. "Fillmore went smash, you know—it wasn't his fault, poor dear. He had the worst kind of luck—and most of my money was tied up in his business, so you see . . ."

She broke off confused by the look in his eyes, conscious of an absurd feeling of guilt. There was amazement in that look and a sort of incredulous horror.

"Do you mean to say . . ." Ginger gulped and started again. "Do you mean to tell me that you let me have . . . all that money . . . for the dog-business . . . when you were broke? Do you mean to say . . ."

Sally stole a glance at his crimson face and looked away again quickly. There was an electric silence.

"Look here," exploded Ginger with sudden violence, "you've got to marry me. You've jolly well

got to marry me! I don't mean that," he added quickly.. "I mean to say I know you're going to marry whoever you please . . . but *won't* you marry me? Sally, for God's sake have a dash at it! I've been keeping it in all this time because it seemed rather rotten to bother you about it, but now . . . Oh, dammit, I wish I could put it into words. I always was rotten at talking. But . . . well, look here, what I mean is, I know I'm not much of a chap, but it seems to me you must care for me a bit to do a thing like that for a fellow . . . and . . . I've loved you like the dickens ever since I met you . . . I do wish you'd have a stab at it, Sally. At least I could look after you, you know, and all that . . . I mean to say, work like the deuce and try to give you a good time . . . I'm not such an ass as to think a girl like you could ever really . . . er . . . *love* a blighter like me, but . . .

Sally laid her hand on his.

"Ginger, dear," she said, "I do love you. I ought to have known it all along, but I seem to be understanding myself to-night for the first time." She got up and bent over him for a swift moment, whispering in his ear, "I shall never love anyone but you, Ginger. Will you try to remember that."

She was moving away, but he caught at her arm and stopped her.

"Sally . . ."

She pulled her arm away, her face working as she fought against the tears that would not keep back.

"I've made a fool of myself," she said. "Ginger, your cousin . . . Mr. Carmyle . . . just now he asked me to marry him, and I said I would."

She was gone, flitting among the tables like some

wild creature running to its home: and Ginger, motionless, watched her go.

The telephone bell in Sally's little sitting-room was ringing jerkily as she let herself in at the front door. She guessed who it was at the other end of the wire, and the noise of the bell sounded to her like the voice of a friend in distress crying for help. Without stopping to close the door, she ran to the table and unhooked the receiver. Muffled, plaintive sounds were coming over the wire.

"Hullo . . . Hullo . . . I say . . . Hullo . . ."

"Hullo, Ginger," said Sally quietly.

An ejaculation that was half a shout and half gurgle answered her.

"Sally! Is that you?"

"Yes, here I am, Ginger."

"I've been trying to get you for ages."

"I've only just come in. I walked home."

There was a pause.

"Hullo."

"Yes?"

"Well, I mean . . ." Ginger seemed to be finding his usual difficulty in expressing himself. "About that, you know. What you said."

"Yes?" said Sally, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"You said . . ." Again Ginger's vocabulary failed him. "You said you loved me."

"Yes," said Sally simply.

Another odd sound floated over the wire, and there

was a moment of silence before Ginger found himself able to resume.

"I . . . I . . . Well, we can talk about that when we meet. I mean, it's no good trying to say what I think over the 'phone, I'm sort of knocked out. I never dreamed . . . But, I say, what did you mean about Bruce?"

"I told you, I told you." Sally's face was twisted and the receiver shook in her hand. "I've made a fool of myself. I never realized . . . And now it's too late."

"Good God!" Ginger's voice rose in a sharp wail. "You can't mean you really . . . You don't seriously intend to marry the man?"

"I must. I've promised."

"But, good heavens . . ."

"It's no good. I must."

"But the man's a blighter!"

"I can't break my word."

"I never heard such rot," said Ginger vehemently. "Of course you can. A girl isn't expected . . ."

"I can't, Ginger dear, I really can't."

"But look here . . ."

"It's really no good talking about it any more, really it isn't . . . Where are you staying to-night?"

"Staying? Me? At the Plaza. But look here . . ."

Sally found herself laughing weakly.

"At the Plaza! Oh, Ginger, you really do want somebody to look after you. Squandering your pennies like that . . . Well, don't talk any more now. It's so late and I'm so tired. I'll come and see you to-morrow. Good-night."

She hung up the receiver quickly, to cut short a fresh outburst of protest. And as she turned away a voice spoke behind her.

"Sally!"

Gerald Foster was standing in the doorway.