

## CHAPTER XVII

### SALLY LAYS A GHOST

#### I

**T**HE blood flowed slowly back into Sally's face, and her heart, which had leaped madly for an instant at the sound of his voice, resumed its normal beat. The suddenness of the shock over, she was surprised to find herself perfectly calm. Always when she had imagined this meeting, knowing that it would have to take place sooner or later, she had felt something akin to panic: but now that it had actually occurred it hardly seemed to stir her. The events of the night had left her incapable of any violent emotion.

"Hullo, Sally!" said Gerald.

He spoke thickly, and there was a foolish smile on his face as he stood swaying with one hand on the door. He was in his shirt-sleeves, collarless: and it was plain that he had been drinking heavily. His face was white and puffy, and about him there hung like a nimbus a sodden disreputableness.

Sally did not speak. Weighed down before by a numbing exhaustion; she seemed now to have passed into that second phase in which over-tired nerves enter upon a sort of Indian summer of abnormal alertness. She looked at him quietly, coolly and alto-

gether dispassionately, as if he had been a stranger.

"Hullo!" said Gerald again.

"What do you want?" said Sally.

"Heard your voice. Saw the door open. Thought I'd come in."

"What do you want?"

The weak smile which had seemed planned on Gerald's face vanished. A tear rolled down his cheek. His intoxication had reached the maudlin stage.

"Sally . . . S-Sally . . . I'm very miserable." He slurred awkwardly over the difficult syllables. "Heard your voice. Saw the door open. Thought I'd come in."

Something flicked at the back of Sally's mind. She seemed to have been through all this before. Then she remembered. This was simply Mr. Reginald Cracknell over again.

"I think you had better go to bed, Gerald," she said steadily. Nothing about him seemed to touch her now, neither the sight of him nor his shameless misery.

"What's the use? Can't sleep. No good. Couldn't sleep. Sally, you don't know how worried I am. I see what a fool I've been."

Sally made a quick gesture, to check what she supposed was about to develop into a belated expression of regret for his treatment of herself. She did not want to stand there listening to Gerald apologizing with tears for having done his best to wreck her life. But it seemed that it was not this that was weighing upon his soul.

"I was a fool ever to try writing plays," he went on. "Got a winner first time, but can't repeat. It's

no good. Ought to have stuck to newspaper work. I'm good at that. Shall have to go back to it. Had another frost to-night. No good trying any more. Shall have to go back to the old grind, damn it."

He wept softly, full of pity for his hard case.

"Very miserable," he murmured.

He came forward a step into the room, lurched, and retreated to the safe support of the door. For an instant Sally's artificial calm was shot through by a swift stab of contempt. It passed, and she was back again in her armour of indifference.

"Go to bed, Gerald," she said. "You'll feel better in the morning."

Perhaps some inkling of how he was going to feel in the morning worked through to Gerald's muddled intelligence, for he winced, and his manner took on a deeper melancholy.

"May not be alive in the morning," he said solemnly. "Good mind to end it all. End it all!" he repeated with the beginning of a sweeping gesture which was cut off abruptly as he clutched at the friendly door.

Sally was not in the mood for melodrama.

"Oh, go to bed," she said impatiently. The strange frozen indifference which had gripped her was beginning to pass, leaving in its place a growing feeling of resentment—resentment against Gerald for degrading himself like this, against herself for ever having found glamour in the man. It humiliated her to remember how utterly she had once allowed his personality to master hers. And under the sting of this humiliation she felt hard and pitiless. Dimly she was aware that a curious change had come over her to-night. Normally, the sight of any living

thing in distress was enough to stir her quick sympathy: but Gerald mourning over the prospect of having to go back to regular work made no appeal to her—a fact which the sufferer noted and commented upon.

“You’re very unsymp . . . unsympathetic,” he complained.

“I’m sorry,” said Sally. She walked briskly to the door and gave it a push. Gerald, still clinging to his chosen support, moved out into the passage, attached to the handle, with the air of a man the foundations of whose world have suddenly lost their stability. He released the handle and moved uncertainly across the passage. Finding his own door open before him, he staggered over the threshold; and Sally, having watched him safely to his journey’s end, went into her bedroom with the intention of terminating this disturbing night by going to sleep.

Almost immediately she changed her mind. Sleep was out of the question. A fever of restlessness had come upon her. She put on a kimono, and went into the kitchen to ascertain whether her commissariat arrangements would permit of a glass of hot milk.

She had just remembered that she had that morning presented the last of the milk to a sandy cat with a purposeful eye which had dropped in through the window to take breakfast with her, when her regrets for this thriftless hospitality were interrupted by a muffled crash.

She listened intently. The sound had seemed to come from across the passage. She hurried to the door and opened it. As she did so, from behind the door of the apartment opposite there came a perfect

fusillade of crashes, each seeming to her strained hearing louder and more appalling than the last.

There is something about sudden, loud noises in the stillness of the night which shatters the most rigid detachment. A short while before, Gerald, toying with the idea of ending his sorrows by violence, had left Sally unmoved: but now her mind leapt back to what he had said, and apprehension succeeded indifference. There was no disputing the fact that Gerald was in an irresponsible mood, under the influence of which he was capable of doing almost anything. Sally, listening in the doorway, felt a momentary panic.

A brief silence had succeeded the fusillade, but, as she stood there hesitating, the noise broke out again; and this time it was so loud and compelling that Sally hesitated no longer. She ran across the passage and beat on the door.

## II

Whatever devastating happenings had been going on in his home, it was plain a moment later that Gerald had managed to survive them: for there came the sound of a dragging footstep, and the door opened. Gerald stood on the threshold, the weak smile back on his face.

“Hullo, Sally!”

At the sight of him, disreputable and obviously unscathed, Sally’s brief alarm died away, leaving in its place the old feeling of impatient resentment. In addition to her other grievances against him, he had apparently frightened her unnecessarily.

“Whatever was all that noise?” she demanded.

"Noise?" said Gerald, considering the point open-mouthed.

"Yes, noise," snapped Sally.

"I've been cleaning house," said Gerald with the owl-like gravity of a man just conscious that he is not wholly himself.

Sally pushed her way past him. The apartment in which she found herself was almost an exact replica of her own, and it was evident that Elsa Doland had taken pains to make it pretty and comfortable in a niggly feminine way. Amateur interior decoration had always been a hobby of hers. Even in the unpromising surroundings of her bedroom at Mrs. Meecher's boarding-house she had contrived to create a certain daintiness which Sally, who had no ability in that direction herself, had always rather envied. As a decorator Elsa's mind ran in the direction of small, fragile ornaments, and she was not afraid of over-furnishing. Pictures jostled one another on the walls: china of all descriptions stood about on little tables: there was a profusion of lamps with shades of parti-coloured glass: and plates were ranged along a series of shelves.

One says that the plates were ranged and the pictures jostled one another, but it would be more correct to put it they had jostled and had been ranged, for it was only by guess-work that Sally was able to reconstruct the scene as it must have appeared before Gerald had started, as he put it, to clean house. She had walked into the flat briskly enough, but she pulled up short as she crossed the threshold, appalled by the majestic ruin that met her gaze. A shell bursting in the little sitting-room could hardly have created more havoc.

The psychology of a man of weak character under the influence of alcohol and disappointed ambition is not easy to plumb, for his moods follow one another with a rapidity which baffles the observer. Ten minutes before, Gerald Foster had been in the grip of a clammy self-pity, and it seemed from his aspect at the present moment that this phase had returned. But in the interval there had manifestly occurred a brief but adequate spasm of what would appear to have been an almost Berserk fury. What had caused it and why it should have expended itself so abruptly, Sally was not psychologist enough to explain; but that it had existed there was ocular evidence of the most convincing kind. A heavy niblick, flung petulantly—or remorsefully—into a corner, showed by what medium the destruction had been accomplished.

Bleak chaos appeared on every side. The floor was littered with every imaginable shape and size of broken glass and china. Fragments of pictures, looking as if they had been chewed by some prehistoric animal, lay amid heaps of shattered statuettes and vases. As Sally moved slowly into the room after her involuntary pause, china crackled beneath her feet. She surveyed the stripped walls with a wondering eye, and turned to Gerald for an explanation.

Gerald had subsided on to an occasional table, and was weeping softly again. It had come over him once more that he had been very, very badly treated.

“Well!” said Sally with a gasp. “You’ve certainly made a good job of it!”

There was a sharp crack as the occasional table, never designed by its maker to bear heavy weights,

gave way in a splintering flurry of broken legs under the pressure of the master of the house: and Sally's mood underwent an abrupt change. There are few situations in life which do not hold equal potentialities for both tragedy and farce, and it was the ludicrous side of this drama that chanced to appeal to Sally at this moment. Her sense of humour was tickled. It was, if she could have analysed her feelings, at herself that she was mocking—at the feeble sentimental Sally who had once conceived the absurd idea of taking this preposterous man seriously. She felt light-hearted and light-headed, and she sank into a chair with a gurgling laugh.

The shock of his fall appeared to have had the desirable effect of restoring Gerald to something approaching intelligence. He picked himself up from the remains of a set of water-colours, gazing at Sally with growing disapproval.

"No sympathy," he said austerely.

"I can't help it," cried Sally. "It's too funny."

"Not funny," corrected Gerald, his brain beginning to cloud once more.

"What did you do it for?"

Gerald returned for a moment to that mood of honest indignation, which had so strengthened his arm when wielding the niblick. He bethought him once again of his grievance.

"Wasn't going to stand for it any longer," he said heatedly. "A fellow's wife goes and lets him down . . . ruins his show by going off and playing in another show . . . why *shouldn't* I smash her things? Why should I stand for that sort of treatment? Why should I?"

"Well, you haven't," said Sally, "so there's no



need to discuss it. You seem to have acted in a thoroughly manly and independent way."

"That's it. Manly independent." He waggled his finger impressively. "Don't care what she says," he continued. "Don't care if she never comes back. That woman . . ."

Sally was not prepared to embark with him upon a discussion of the absent Elsa. Already the amusing aspect of the affair had begun to fade, and her hilarity was giving way to a tired distaste for the sordidness of the whole business. She had become aware that she could not endure the society of Gerald Foster much longer. She got up and spoke decidedly.

"And now," she said, "I'm going to tidy up."

Gerald had other views.

"No," he said with sudden solemnity. "No! Nothing of the kind. Leave it for her to find. Leave it as it is."

"Don't be silly. All this has got to be cleaned up. I'll do it. You go and sit in my apartment. I'll come and tell you when you can come back."

"No!" said Gerald, wagging his head.

Sally stamped her foot among the crackling ruins. Quite suddenly the sight of him had become intolerable.

"Do as I tell you," she cried.

Gerald wavered for a moment, but his brief militant mood was ebbing fast. After a faint protest he shuffled off, and Sally heard him go into her room. She breathed a deep breath of relief and turned to her task.

A visit to the kitchen revealed a long-handled broom, and, armed with this, Sally was soon busy. She was an efficient little person, and presently out

of chaos there began to emerge a certain order. Nothing short of complete redecoration would ever make the place look habitable again, but at the end of half an hour she had cleared the floor, and the fragments of vases, plates, lamp-shades, pictures and glasses were stacked in tiny heaps against the walls. She returned the broom to the kitchen, and, going back into the sitting-room, flung open the window and stood looking out.

With a sense of unreality she perceived that the night had gone. Over the quiet street below there brooded that strange, metallic light which ushers in the dawn of a fine day. A cold breeze whispered to and fro. Above the house-tops the sky was a faint, level blue.

She left the window and started to cross the room. And suddenly there came over her a feeling of utter weakness. She stumbled to a chair, conscious only of being tired beyond the possibility of a further effort. Her eyes closed, and almost before her head had touched the cushions she was asleep.

### III

Sally woke. Sunshine was streaming through the open window, and with it the myriad noises of a city awake and about its business. Footsteps clattered on the sidewalk, automobile horns were sounding, and she could hear the clank of street cars as they passed over the points. She could only guess at the hour, but it was evident that the morning was well advanced. She got up stiffly. Her head was aching.

She went into the bathroom, bathed her face, and

felt better. The dull oppression which comes of a bad night was leaving her. She leaned out of the window, revelling in the fresh air, then crossed the passage and entered her own apartment. Stertorous breathing greeted her, and she perceived that Gerald Foster had also passed the night in a chair. He was sprawling by the window with his legs stretched out and his head resting on one of the arms, an unlovely spectacle.

Sally stood regarding him for a moment with a return of the distaste which she had felt on the previous night. And yet, mingled with the distaste, there was a certain elation. A black chapter of her life was closed for ever. Whatever the years to come might bring to her, they would be free from any wistful yearnings for the man who had once been woven so inextricably into the fabric of her life. She had thought that his personality had gripped her too strongly ever to be dislodged, but now she could look at him calmly and feel only a faint half-pity, half-contempt. The glamour had departed.

She shook him gently, and he sat up with a start, blinking in the strong light. His mouth was still open. He stared at Sally foolishly, then scrambled awkwardly out of the chair.

"Oh, my God!" said Gerald, pressing both his hands to his forehead and sitting down again. He licked his lips with a dry tongue and moaned. "Oh, I've got a headache!"

Sally might have pointed out to him that he had certainly earned one, but she refrained.

"You'd better go and have a wash," she suggested.

"Yes," said Gerald, heaving himself up again.

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"Don't!" said Gerald faintly, and tottered off to the bathroom.

Sally sat down in the chair he had vacated. She had never felt quite like this before in her life. Everything seemed dreamlike. The splashing of water in the bathroom came faintly to her, and she realized that she had been on the point of falling asleep again. She got up and opened the window, and once more the air acted as a restorative. She watched the activities of the street with a distant interest. They, too, seemed dreamlike and unreal. People were hurrying up and down on mysterious errands. An inscrutable cat picked its way daintily across the road. At the door of the apartment house an open car purred sleepily.

She was roused by a ring at the bell. She went to the door and opened it, and found Bruce Carmyle standing on the threshold. He wore a light motor-coat, and he was plainly endeavouring to soften the severity of his saturnine face with a smile of beaming kindness.

"Well, here I am!" said Bruce Carmyle cheerily.

"Are you ready?"

With the coming of daylight a certain penitence had descended on Mr. Carmyle. Thinking things over while shaving and subsequently in his bath, he had come to the conclusion that his behaviour overnight had not been all that could have been desired. He had not actually been brutal, perhaps, but he had undoubtedly not been winning. There had been an abruptness in the manner of his leaving Sally at the Flower Garden which a perfect lover ought not to have shown. He had allowed his nerves to get the

better of him, and now he desired to make amends. Hence a cheerfulness which he did not usually exhibit so early in the morning.

Sally was staring at him blankly. She had completely forgotten that he had said that he would come and take her for a drive this morning. She searched in her mind for words, and found none. And, as Mr. Carmyle was debating within himself whether to kiss her now or wait for a more suitable moment, embarrassment came upon them both like a fog, and the genial smile faded from his face as if the motive-power behind it had suddenly failed.

“I’ve—er—got the car outside, and . . .”

At this point speech failed Mr. Carmyle, for, even as he began the sentence, the door that led to the bathroom opened and Gerald Foster came out. Mr. Carmyle gaped at Gerald: Gerald gaped at Mr. Carmyle.

The application of cold water to the face and head is an excellent thing on the morning after an imprudent night, but as a tonic it only goes part of the way. In the case of Gerald Foster, which was an extremely serious and aggravated case, it had gone hardly any way at all. The person unknown who had been driving red-hot rivets into the base of Gerald Foster's skull ever since the moment of his awakening was still busily engaged on that task. He gazed at Mr. Carmyle wanly.

Bruce Carmyle drew in his breath with a sharp hiss, and stood rigid. His eyes, burning now with a grim light, flickered over Gerald's person and found nothing in it to entertain them. He saw a slouching figure in shirt-sleeves and the foundations of evening dress, a disgusting,

degraded figure with pink eyes and a white face that needed a shave. And all the doubts that had ever come to vex Mr. Carmyle's mind since his first meeting with Sally became on the instant certainties. So Uncle Donald had been right after all! This was the sort of girl she was!

At his elbow the stout phantom of Uncle Donald puffed with satisfaction.

"I told you so!" it said.

Sally had not moved. The situation was beyond her. Just as if this had really been the dream it seemed, she felt incapable of speech or action.

"Go . . ." said Mr. Carmyle, becoming articulate, and allowed an impressive aposiopesis to take the place of the rest of the speech. A cold fury had gripped him. He pointed at Gerald, began to speak, found that he was stuttering, and gulped back the words. In this supreme moment he was not going to have his dignity impaired by a stutter. He gulped and found a sentence which, while brief enough to insure against this disaster, was sufficiently long to express his meaning.

"Get out!" he said.

Gerald Foster had his dignity, too, and it seemed to him that the time had come to assert it. But he also had a most excruciating headache, and when he drew himself up haughtily to ask Mr. Carmyle what the devil he meant by it, a severe access of pain sent him huddling back immediately to a safer attitude. He clasped his forehead and groaned.

"Get out!"

For a moment Gerald hesitated. Then another sudden shooting spasm convinced him that no profit or pleasure was to be derived from a continuance of

the argument, and he began to shamble slowly across to the door.

Bruce Carmyle watched him go with twitching hands. There was a moment when the human man in him, somewhat atrophied from long disuse, stirred him almost to the point of assault; then dignity whispered more prudent counsel in his ear, and Gerald was past the danger-zone and out in the passage. Mr. Carmyle turned to face Sally, as King Arthur on a similar but less impressive occasion must have turned to deal with Guinevere.

“ So . . . ” he said again.

Sally was eyeing him steadily,—considering the circumstances, Mr. Carmyle thought with not a little indignation, much too steadily.

“ This,” he said ponderously, “ is very amusing.”

He waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

“ I might have expected it,” said Mr. Carmyle with a bitter laugh.

Sally forced herself from the lethargy which was gripping her.

“ Would you like me to explain?” she said.

“ There can be no explanation,” said Mr. Carmyle coldly.

“ Very well,” said Sally.

There was a pause.

“ Good-bye,” said Bruce Carmyle.

“ Good-bye,” said Sally.

Mr. Carmyle walked to the door. There he stopped for an instant and glanced back at her. Sally had walked to the window and was looking out. For one swift instant something about her trim little figure and the gleam of her hair where the sunlight shone on it seemed to catch at Bruce Carmyle's

heart, and he wavered. But the next moment he was strong again, and the door had closed behind him with a resolute bang.

Out in the street, climbing into his car, he looked up involuntarily to see if she was still there, but she had gone. As the car, gathering speed, hummed down the street, Sally was at the telephone listening to the sleepy voice of Ginger Kemp, which, as he became aware who it was that had woken him from his rest and what she had to say to him, magically lost its sleepiness and took on a note of riotous ecstasy.

Five minutes later, Ginger was splashing in his bath, singing discordantly.