CHAPTER V

SALLY HEARS NEWS

IT had been Sally's intention, on arriving in New York, to take a room at the St. Regis and revel in the gilded luxury to which her wealth entitled her before moving into the small but comfortable apartment which, as soon as she had the time, she intended to find and make her permanent abode. But when the moment came and she was giving directions to the taxi-driver at the dock, there seemed to her something revoltingly Fillmorian about the scheme. It would be time enough to sever herself from the boarding-house which had been her home for three years when she had found the apartment. Meanwhile, the decent thing to do, if she did not want to brand herself in the sight of her conscience as a female Fillmore, was to go back temporarily to Mrs. Meecher's admirable establishment and foregather with her old friends. After all, home is where the heart is, even if there are more prunes there than the gourmet would consider judicious.

Perhaps it was the unavoidable complacency induced by the thought that she was doing the right thing, or possibly it was the tingling expectation of meeting Gerald Foster again after all these weeks of separation, that made the familiar streets seem wonder-

fully bright as she drove through them. It was a perfect, crisp New York morning, all blue sky and amber sunshine, and even the ash-cans had a stimulating look about them. The street cars were full of happy people rollicking off to work: policemen directed the traffic with jaunty affability: and the white-clad street-cleaners went about their poetic tasks with a quiet but none the less noticeable relish. It was improbable that any of these people knew that she was back, but somehow they all seemed to be behaving as though this were a special day.

The first discordant note in this overture of happiness was struck by Mrs. Meecher, who informed Sally, after expressing her gratification at the news that she required her old room, that Gerald Foster had left town that morning.

"Gone to Detroit, he has," said Mrs. Meecher. "Miss Doland, too." She broke off to speak a caustic word to the boarding-house handyman, who, with Sally's trunk as a weapon, was depreciating the value of the wall-paper in the hall. "There's that play of his being tried out there, you know, Monday," resumed Mrs. Meecher, after the handyman had bumped his way up the staircase. "They been rehearsing ever since you left."

Sally was disappointed, but it was such a beautiful morning, and New York was so wonderful after the dull voyage in the liner that she was not going to allow herself to be depressed without good reason. After all, she could go on to Detroit to-morrow. It was nice to have something to which she could look forward.

"Oh, is Elsa in the company?" she said.

"Sure. And very good too, I hear." Mrs.

Meecher kept abreast of theatrical gossip. She was an ex-member of the profession herself, having been in the first production of "Florodora," though, unlike everybody else, not one of the original Sextette. "Mr. Faucitt was down to see a rehearsal, and he said Miss Doland was fine. And he's not easy to please, as you know."

"How is Mr. Faucitt?"

Mrs. Meecher, not unwillingly, for she was a woman who enjoyed the tragedies of life, made her second essay in the direction of lowering Sally's uplifted mood.

"Poor old gentleman, he ain't over and above well. Went to bed early last night with a headache, and this morning I been to see him and he *don't* look well. There's a lot of this Spanish influenza about. It might be that. Lots o' people have been dying of it, if you believe what you see in the papers," said Mrs. Meecher buoyantly.

"Good gracious! You don't think . . .?"

"Well, he ain't turned black," admitted Mrs. Meecher with regret. "They say they turn black. If you believe what you see in the papers, that is. Of course, that may come later," she added with the air of one confident that all will come right in the future. "The doctor'll be in to see him pretty soon. He's quite happy. Toto's sitting with him."

Sally's concern increased. Like everyone who had ever spent any length of time in the house, she had strong views on Toto. This quadruped, who stained the fame of the entire canine race by posing as a dog, was a small woolly animal with a persistent and penetrating yap, hard to bear with equanimity in health and certainly quite outside the range of a sick man.

Her heart bled for Mr. Faucitt. Mrs. Meecher, on the other hand, who held a faith in her little pet's amiability and power to soothe, which seven years' close association had been unable to shake, seemed to feel that, with Toto on the spot, all that could be done had been done as far as pampering the invalid was concerned.

"I must go up and see him," cried Sally. "Poor old dear."

"Sure. You know his room. You can hear Toto talking to him now," said Mrs. Meecher complacently. "He wants a cracker, that's what he wants. Toto likes a cracker after breakfast."

The invalid's eyes, as Sally entered the room, turned wearily to the door. At the sight of Sally they lit up with an incredulous rapture. Almost any intervention would have pleased Mr. Faucitt at that moment, for his little playmate had long outstayed any welcome that might originally have been his: but that the caller should be his beloved Sally seemed to the old man something in the nature of a return of the age of miracles.

"Sally!"

"One moment. Here, Toto!"

Toto, struck momentarily dumb by the sight of food, had jumped off the bed and was standing with his head on one side, peering questioningly at the cracker. He was a suspicious dog, but he allowed himself to be lured into the passage, upon which Sally threw the cracker down and slipped in and shut the door. Toto, after a couple of yaps, which may have been gratitude or baffled fury, trotted off downstairs, and Mr. Faucitt drew a deep breath.

"Sally, you come, as ever, as an angel of mercy.

Our worthy Mrs. Meecher means well, and I yield to no man in my respect for her innate kindness of heart: but she errs in supposing that that thrice-damned whelp of hers is a combination of sick-nurse, soothing medicine, and a week at the seaside. She insisted on bringing him here. He was yapping then, as he was yapping when, with womanly resource which I cannot sufficiently praise, you decoyed him hence. And each yap went through me like hammer-strokes on sheeted tin. Sally, you stand alone among womankind. You shine like a good deed in a naughty world. When did you get back?"

"I've only just arrived in my hired barouche from the pier."

"And you came to see your old friend without delay? I am grateful and flattered, Sally, my dear."

"Of course I came to see you. Do you suppose that, when Mrs. Meecher told me you were sick, I just said 'Is that so?' and went on talking about the weather? Well, what do you mean by it? Frightening everybody. Poor old darling, do you feel very bad?"

"One thousand individual mice are nibbling the base of my spine, and I am conscious of a constant need of cooling refreshment. But what of that? Your presence is a tonic. Tell me, how did our Sally enjoy foreign travel?"

"Our Sally had the time of her life."

"Did you visit England?"

"Only passing through."

"How did it look?" asked Mr. Faucitt eagerly.

"Moist. Very moist."

"It would," said Mr. Faucitt indulgently. "I

confess that, happy as I have been in this country, there are times when I miss those wonderful London days, when a sort of cosy brown mist hangs over the streets and the pavements ooze with a perspiration of mud and water, and you see through the haze the yellow glow of the Bodega lamps shining in the distance like harbour-lights. Not," said Mr. Faucitt, "that I specify the Bodega to the exclusion of other and equally worthy hostelries. I have passed just as pleasant hours in Rule's and Short's. You missed something by not lingering in England, Sally."

"I know I did—pneumonia."

Mr. Faucitt shook his head reproachfully.

"You are prejudiced my dear. You would have enjoyed London if you had had the courage to brave its superficial gloom. Where did you spend your holiday? Paris?"

"Part of the time. And the rest of the while I was down by the sea. It was glorious. I don't think I would ever have come back if I hadn't had to. But, of course, I wanted to see you all again. And I wanted to be at the opening of Mr. Foster's play. Mrs. Meecher tells me you went to one of the rehearsals."

"I attended a dog-fight which I was informed was a rehearsal," said Mr. Faucitt severely. "There is no rehearsing nowadays."

"Oh dear! Was it as bad as all that?"

"The play is good. The play—I will go further—is excellent. It has fat. But the acting . . ."

"Mrs. Meecher said you told her that Elsa was good."

"Our worthy hostess did not misreport me. Miss Doland has great possibilities. She reminds me

somewhat of Matilda Devine, under whose banner I played a season at the Old Royalty in London many years ago. She ha the seeds of greatness in her, but she is wasted in the present case on an insignificant part. There is only one part in the play. I allude to the one murdered by Miss Mabel Hobson."

"Murdered!" Sally's heart sank. She had been afraid of this, and it was no satisfaction to feel that she had warned Gerald. "Is she very terrible?"

"She has the face of an angel and the histrionic ability of that curious suet pudding which our estimable Mrs. Meecher is apt to give us on Fridays. In my professional career I have seen many cases of what I may term the Lady Friend in the rôle of star, but Miss Hobson eclipses them all. I remember in the year '94 a certain scion of the plutocracy took it into his head to present a female for whom he had conceived an admiration in a part which would have taxed the resources of the ablest. I was engaged in her support, and at the first rehearsal I recollect saying to my dear old friend, Arthur Moseby—dead, alas, these many years. An excellent juvenile, but, like so many good fellows, cursed with a tendency to lift the elbow—I recollect saying to him 'Arthur, dear boy, I give it two weeks.' 'Max,' was his reply, 'you are an incurable optimist. One consecutive night, laddie, one consecutive night.' We had, I recall, an even half-crown upon it. He won. We opened at Wigan, our leading lady got the bird, and the show closed next day. I was forcibly reminded of this incident as I watched Miss Hobson rehearsing."

"Oh, poor Ger—poor Mr. Foster!"

"I do not share your commiseration for that young

man," said Mr. Faucitt austerely. "You probably are almost a stranger to him, but he and I have been thrown together a good deal of late. A young man upon whom, mark my words, success, if it ever comes, will have the worst effects. I dislike him, Sally. He is, I think, without exception, the most selfish and self-centred young man of my acquaintance. He reminds me very much of old Billy Fothergill, with whom I toured a good deal in the later 'eighties. Did I ever tell you the story of Billy and the amateur who . . . ."

Sally was in no mood to listen to the adventures of Mr. Fothergill. The old man's innocent criticism of Gerald had stabbed her deeply. A momentary impulse to speak hotly in his defence died away as she saw Mr. Faucitt's pale, worn old face. He had meant no harm, after all. How could he know what Gerald was to her?

She changed the conversation abruptly.

"Have you seen anything of Fillmore while I've been away?"

"Fillmore? Why yes, my dear, curiously enough I happened to run into him on Broadway only a few days ago. He seemed changed—less stiff and aloof than he had been for some time past. I may be wronging him, but there have been times of late when one might almost have fancied him a trifle up-stage. All that was gone at our last encounter. He appeared glad to see me and was most cordial."

Sally found her composure restored. Her lecture on the night of the party had evidently, she thought, not been wasted. Mr. Faucitt, however, advanced another theory to account for the change in the Man of Destiny.

"I rather fancy" he said, "that the softening influence has been the young man's fiancée."

"What? Fillmore's not engaged?"

"Did he not write and tell you? I suppose he was waiting to inform you when you returned. Yes, Fillmore is betrothed. The lady was with him when we met. A Miss Winch. In the profession, I understand. He introduced me. A very charming and sensible young lady, I thought."

Sally shook her head.

"She can't be. Fillmore would never have got engaged to anyone like that. Was her hair crimson?"

"Brown, if I recollect rightly."

"Very loud, I suppose, and overdressed?"

"On the contrary, neat and quiet."

"*You've made a mistake,*" *said Sally decidedly.* "She can't have been like that. I shall have to look into this. It does seem hard that I can't go away for a few weeks without all my friends taking to beds of sickness and all my brothers getting ensnared by vampires."

A knock at the door interrupted her complaint. Mrs. Meecher entered, ushering in a pleasant little man with spectacles and black bag.

"The doctor to see you, Mr. Faucitt." Mrs. Meecher cast an appraising eye at the invalid, as if to detect symptoms of approaching discoloration. "I've been telling him that what *I* think you've gotten is this here new Spanish influenza. Two more deaths there were in the paper this morning, if you can believe what you see . . ."

"I wonder," said the doctor, "if you would mind going and bringing me a small glass of water?"

"Why, sure."

"Not a large glass—a small glass. Just let the tap run for a few moments and take care not to spill any as you come up the stairs. I always ask ladies, like our friend who has just gone," he added, as the door closed, "to bring me a glass of water. It keeps them amused and interested and gets them out of the way, and they think I am going to do a conjuring trick with it. As a matter of fact, I'm going to drink it. Now let's have a look at you."

The examination did not take long. At the end of it the doctor seemed somewhat chagrined.

"Our good friend's diagnosis was correct. I'd give a leg to say it wasn't, but it was. It *is* this here new Spanish influenza. Not a bad attack. You want to stay in bed and keep warm, and I'll write you out a prescription. You ought to be nursed. Is this young lady a nurse?"

"No, no, merely . . ."

"Of course I'm a nurse," said Sally decidedly. "It isn't difficult, is it, doctor? I know nurses smooth pillows. I can do that. Is there anything else?"

"Their principal duty is to sit here and prevent the excellent and garrulous lady who has just left us from getting in. They must also be able to aim straight with a book or an old shoe, if that small woolly dog I met downstairs tries to force an entrance. If you are equal to these tasks, I can leave the case in your hands with every confidence."

"But, Sally, my dear," said Mr. Faucitt, concerned, "you must not waste your time looking after me. You have a thousand things to occupy you."

"There's nothing I want to do more than help you

to get better. I'll just go out and send a wire, and then I'll be right back."

Five minutes later, Sally was in a Western Union office, telegraphing to Gerald that she would be unable to reach Detroit in time for the opening.