CHAPTER VI

FIRST AID FOR FILLMORE

I

IT was not till the following Friday that Sally was able to start for Detroit. She arrived on the Saturday morning and drove to the Hotel Statler. Having ascertained that Gerald was stopping in the hotel and having 'phoned up to his room to tell him to join her, she went into the dining-room and ordered breakfast.

She felt low-spirited as she waited for the food to arrive. The nursing of Mr. Faucitt had left her tired, and she had not slept well on the train. But the real cause of her depression was the fact that there had been a lack of enthusiasm in Gerald's greeting over the telephone just now. He had spoken listlessly, as though the fact of her returning after all these weeks was a matter of no account, and she felt hurt and perplexed.

A cup of tea had a stimulating effect. Men, of course, were always like this in the early morning. It would, no doubt, be a very different Gerald who would presently bound into the dining-room, quickened and restored by a cold shower-bath. In the meantime, here was food, and she needed it.

She was pouring out her second cup of coffee when

a stout young man, of whom she had caught a glimpse as he moved about that section of the hotel lobby which was visible through the open door of the dining-room, came in and stood peering about as though in search of someone. The momentary sight she had had of this young man had interested Sally She had thought how extraordinarily like he was to her brother Fillmore. Now she perceived that it was Fillmore himself.

Sally was puzzled. What could Fillmore be doing so far west? She had supposed him to be a permanent resident of New York. But, of course, your man of affairs and vast interests flits about all over the place. At any rate, here he was, and she called him. And, after he had stood in the doorway looking in every direction except the right one for another minute, he saw her and came over to her table.

"Why, Sally?" His manner, she thought, was nervous—one might almost have said embarrassed. She attributed this to a guilty conscience. Presently he would have to break to her the news that he had become engaged to be married without her sisterly sanction, and no doubt he was wondering how to begin. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in Europe."

"I got back a week ago, but I've been nursing poor old Mr. Faucitt ever since then. He's been ill, poor old dear. I've come here to see Mr. Foster's play, 'The Primrose Way,' you know. Is it a success?"

"It hasn't opened yet."

"Don't be silly, Fill. Do pull yourself together. It opened last Monday."

"No, it didn't. Haven't you heard? They've

closed all the theatres because of this infernal Spanish influenza. Nothing has been playing this week. You must have seen it in the papers."

"I haven't had time to read the papers. Oh, Fill, what an awful shame!"

"Yes, it's pretty tough. Makes the company all on edge. I've had the darndest time, I can tell you."

"Why, what have you got to do with it?"

Fillmore coughed.

"I—er—oh, I didn't tell you that. I'm sort of—er—mixed up in the show. Cracknell—you remember he was at college with me—suggested that I should come down and look at it. Shouldn't wonder if he wants me to put money into it and so on."

"I thought he had all the money in the world."

"Yes, he has a lot, but these fellows like to let a pal in on a good thing."

"Is it a good thing?"

"The play's fine."

"That's what Mr. Faucitt said. But Mabel Hobson . . ."

Fillmore's ample face registered emotion.

"She's an awful woman, Sally! She can't act, and she throws her weight about all the time. The other day there was a fuss about a paper-knife. . . ."

"How do you mean, a fuss about a paper-knife?"

"One of the props, you know. It got mislaid. I'm certain it wasn't my fault. . . ."

"How could it have been your fault?" asked Sally wonderingly. Love seemed to have the worst effects on Fillmore's mentality.

"Well—er—you know how it is. Angry woman

. . . blames the first person she sees. . . . This paper-knife . . ."

Fillmore's voice trailed off into pained silence.

"Mr. Faucitt said Elsa Doland was good."

"Oh, she's all right," said Fillmore indifferently. "But——" His face brightened and animation crept into his voice. "But the girl you want to watch is Miss Winch. Gladys Winch. She plays the maid. She's only in the first act, and hasn't much to say, except 'Did you ring, madam?' and things like that. But it's the way she says 'em! Sally, that girl's a genius! The greatest character actress in a dozen years! You mark my words, in a darned little while you'll see her name up on Broadway in electric light. Personality? Ask me! Charm? She wrote the words and music! Looks? . . ."

"All right! All right! I know all about it, Fill. And will you kindly inform me how you dared to get engaged without consulting me?"

Fillmore blushed richly.

"Oh, do you know?"

"Yes. Mr. Faucitt told me."

"Well . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, I'm only human," argued Fillmore.

"I call that a very handsome admission. You've got quite modest, Fill."

He had certainly changed for the better since their last meeting.

It was as if someone had punctured him and let out all the pomposity. If this was due, as Mr. Faucitt had suggested, to the influence of Miss Winch, Sally felt that she could not but approve of the romance.

"I'll introduce you sometime," said Fillmore.

"I want to meet her very much."

"I'll have to be going now. I've got to see Bunbury. I thought he might be in here."

"Who's Bunbury?"

"The producer. I suppose he is breakfasting in his room. I'd better go up."

"You *are* busy, aren't you. Little marvel! It's lucky they've got you to look after them."

Fillmore retired and Sally settled down to wait for Gerald, no longer hurt by his manner over the telephone. Poor Gerald! No wonder he had seemed upset.

A few minutes later he came in.

"Oh, Jerry darling," said Sally, as he reached the table, "I'm so sorry. I've just been hearing about it."

Gerald sat down. His appearance fulfilled the promise of his voice over the telephone. A sort of nervous dullness wrapped him about like a garment.

"It's just my luck," he said gloomily. "It's the kind of thing that couldn't happen to anyone but me. Damned fools! Where's the sense in shutting the theatres, even if there is influenza about? They let people jam against one another all day in the stores. If that doesn't hurt them why should it hurt them to go to theatres? Besides, it's all infernal nonsense about this thing. I don't believe there is such a thing as 'Spanish influenza. People get colds in their heads and think they're dying. It's all a fake scare."

"I don't think it's that," said Sally. "Poor Mr. Faucitt had it quite badly. That's why I couldn't come earlier."

Gerald did not seem interested either by the news

of Mr. Faucitt's illness or by the fact that Sally, after delay, had at last arrived. He dug a spoon sombrely into his grape-fruit.

"We've been hanging about here day after day, getting bored to death all the time. . . . The company's going all to pieces. They're sick of rehearsing and rehearsing when nobody knows if we'll ever open. They were all keyed up a week ago, and they've been sagging ever since. It will ruin the play, of course. My first chance! Just chucked away."

Sally was listening with a growing feeling of desolation. She tried to be fair, to remember that he had had a terrible disappointment and was under a great strain. And yet . . . it was unfortunate that self-pity was a thing she particularly disliked in a man. Her vanity, too, was hurt. It was obvious that her arrival, so far from acting as a magic restorative, had effected nothing. She could not help remembering, though it made her feel disloyal, what Mr. Faucitt had said about Gerald. She had never noticed before that he was remarkably self-centred, but he was thrusting the fact upon her attention now.

"That Hobson woman is beginning to make trouble," went on Gerald, prodding in a despairing sort of way at scrambled eggs. "She ought never to have had the part, never. She can't handle it. Elsa Doland could play it a thousand times better. I wrote Elsa in a few lines the other day, and the Hobson woman went right up in the air. You don't know what a star is till you've seen one of these promoted clothes-props from the Follies trying to be one. It took me an hour to talk her round and keep her from throwing up her part"

"Why not let her throw up her part?"

"For heaven's sake talk sense," said Gerald querulously. "Do you suppose that man Cracknell would keep the play on if she wasn't in it? He would close the show in a second, and where would I be then? You don't seem to realize that this is a big chance for me. I'd look a fool throwing it away."

"I see," said Sally, shortly. She had never felt so wretched in her life. Foreign travel, she decided, was a mistake. It might be pleasant and broadening to the mind, but it seemed to put you so out of touch with people when you got back. She analysed her sensations, and arrived at the conclusion that what she was resenting was the fact that Gerald was trying to get the advantages of two attitudes simultaneously. A man in trouble may either be the captain of his soul and superior to pity, or he may be a broken thing for a woman to pet and comfort. Gerald, it seemed to her, was advertising himself as an object for her commiseration, and at the same time raising a barrier against it. He appeared to demand her sympathy while holding himself aloof from it. She had the uncomfortable sensation of feeling herself shut out and useless.

"By the way," said Gerald, "there's one thing. I have to keep her jollying along all the time, so for goodness' sake don't go letting it out that we're engaged."

Sally's chin went up with a jerk. This was too much.

"If you find it a handicap being engaged to me . . ."

"Don't be silly." Gerald took refuge in pathos.

"Good God! It's tough! Here I am, worried to death, and you . . ."

Before he could finish the sentence, Sally's mood had undergone one of those swift changes which sometimes made her feel that she must be lacking in character. A simple, comforting thought had come to her, altering her entire outlook. She had come off the train tired and gritty, and what seemed the general out-of-jointness of the world was entirely due, she decided, to the fact that she had not had a bath and that her hair was all anyhow. She felt suddenly tranquil. If it was merely her grubby and dishevelled condition that made Gerald seem to her so different, all was well. She put her hand on his with a quick gesture of penitence.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I've been a brute, but I do sympathize, really."

"I've had an awful time," mumbled Gerald.

"I know, I know. But you never told me you were glad to see me."

"Of course I'm glad to see you."

"Why didn't you say so, then, you poor fish? And why didn't you ask me if I had enjoyed myself in Europe?"

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, except that I missed you so much. There! Now we can consider my lecture on foreign travel finished, and you can go on telling me your troubles."

Gerald accepted the invitation. He spoke at considerable length, though with little variety. It appeared definitely established in his mind that Providence had invented Spanish influenza purely with a view to wrecking his future. But now he seemed less aloof, more open to sympathy. The brief thunder-

storm had cleared the air. Sally lost that sense of detachment and exclusion which had weighed upon her.

"Well," said Gerald, at length, looking at his watch, "I suppose I had better be off."

"Rehearsal?"

"Yes, confound it. It's the only way of getting through the day. Are you coming along?"

"I'll come directly I've unpacked and tidied myself up."

"See you at the theatre, then."

Sally went out and rang for the lift to take her up to her room.

II

The rehearsal had started when she reached the theatre. As she entered the dark auditorium, voices came to her with that thin and reedy effect which is produced by people talking in an empty building. She sat down at the back of the house, and, as her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, was able to see Gerald sitting in the front row beside a man with a bald head fringed with orange hair whom she took correctly to be Mr. Bunbury, the producer. Dotted about the house in ones and twos were members of the company whose presence was not required in the first act. On the stage, Elsa Doland, looking very attractive, was playing a scene with a man in a bowler hat. She was speaking a line as Sally came in.

"Why, what do you mean, father?"

"Tiddly-omty-om," was the bowler-hatted one's surprising reply. "Tiddly-omty-om . . . long speech ending in 'find me in the library.' *And exit,*" said the man in the bowler hat, starting to do so.

For the first time Sally became aware of the atmo-

sphere of nerves. Mr. Bunbury, who seemed to be a man of temperament, picked up his walking-stick, which was leaning against the next seat, and flung it with some violence across the house.

"For God's sake!" said Mr. Bunbury.

"Now what?" inquired the bowler hat, interested, pausing halfway across the stage.

"Do speak the lines, Teddy," exclaimed Gerald. "Don't skip them in that sloppy fashion."

"You don't want me to go over the whole thing?" asked the bowler hat, amazed.

"Yes!"

"Not the whole damn thing?" queried the bowler hat, fighting with incredulity.

"This is a rehearsal," snapped Mr. Bunbury. "If we are not going to do it properly, what's the use of doing it at all?"

This seemed to strike the erring Teddy, if not as reasonable, at any rate as one way of looking at it. He delivered the speech in an injured tone and shuffled off. The atmosphere of tenseness was unmistakable now. Sally could feel it. The world of the theatre is simply a large nursery and its inhabitants children who readily become fretful if anything goes wrong. The waiting and the uncertainty, the loafing about in strange hotels in a strange city, the dreary rehearsing of lines which had been polished to the last syllable more than a week ago—these things had sapped the nerve of the Primrose Way company and demoralization had set in. It would require only a trifle to produce an explosion.

Elsa Doland now moved to the door, pressed a bell, and, taking a magazine from the table, sat down in a chair near the footlights. A moment later, in answer

to the ring, a young woman entered, to be greeted instantly by an impassioned bellow from Mr. Bunbury.

"Miss Winch!"

The new arrival stopped and looked out over the footlights, not in the pained manner of the man in the bowler hat, but with the sort of genial indulgence of one who has come to a juvenile party to amuse the children. She was a square, wholesome, good-humoured looking girl with a serious face, the gravity of which was contradicted by the faint smile that seemed to lurk about the corner of her mouth. She was certainly not pretty, and Sally, watching her with keen interest, was surprised that Fillmore had had the sense to disregard surface homeliness and recognize her charm. Deep down in Fillmore, Sally decided, there must lurk an unsuspected vein of intelligence.

"Hello?" said Miss Winch, amiably.

Mr. Bunbury seemed profoundly moved.

"Miss Winch, did I or did I not ask you to refrain from chewing gum during rehearsal?"

"That's right, so you did," admitted Miss Winch, chummily.

"Then why are you doing it?"

Fillmore's fiancée revolved the criticized refreshment about her tongue for a moment before replying.

"Bit o' business," she announced, at length.

"What do you mean, a bit of business?"

"Character stuff," explained Miss Winch in her pleasant, drawling voice. "Thought it out myself. Maids chew gum, you know."

Mr. Bunbury ruffled his orange hair in an overwrought manner with the palm of his right hand.

"Have you ever seen a maid?" he asked, despairingly.

"Yes, *sir*. And they chew gum."

"I mean a parlour-maid in a smart house," moaned Mr. Bunbury. "Do you imagine for a moment that in a house such as this is supposed to be the parlour-maid would be allowed to come into the drawing-room champing that disgusting, beastly stuff?"

Miss Winch considered the point.

"Maybe you're right." She brightened. "Listen! Great idea! Mr. Foster can write in a line for Elsa, calling me down, and another giving me a good come-back, and then another for Elsa saying something else, and then something really funny for me, and so on. We can work it up into a big comic scene. Five or six minutes, all laughs."

This ingenious suggestion had the effect of depriving the producer momentarily of speech, and while he was struggling for utterance, there dashed out from the wings a gorgeous being in blue velvet and a hat of such unimpeachable smartness that Sally ached at the sight of it with a spasm of pure envy.

"Say!"

Miss Mabel Hobson had practically every personal advantage which nature can bestow with the exception of a musical voice. Her figure was perfect, her face beautiful, and her hair a mass of spun gold; but her voice in moments of emotion was the voice of a peacock.

"Say, listen to me for just one moment."

Mr. Bunbury recovered from his trance.

"Miss Hobson! Please!"

"Yes, that's all very well . . ."

"You are interrupting the rehearsal."

"You bet your sorrowful existence I'm interrupting the rehearsal," agreed Miss Hobson, with emphasis. "And, if you want to make a little easy money, you go and bet somebody ten seeds that I'm going to interrupt it again every time there's any talk of writing up any darned part in the show except mine. Write up other people's parts? Not while I have my strength!"

A young man with butter-coloured hair, who had entered from the wings in close attendance on the injured lady, attempted to calm the storm.

"Now, sweetie!"

"Oh, can it, Reggie!" said Miss Hobson, curtly.

Mr. Cracknell obediently canned it. He was not one of your brutal cave-men. He subsided into the recesses of a high collar and began to chew the knob of his stick.

"I'm the star," resumed Miss Hobson, vehemently, "and, if you think anybody else's part's going to be written up . . . well, pardon me while I choke with laughter! If so much as a syllable is written into anybody's part, I walk straight out on my two feet. You won't see me go, I'll be so quick."

Mr. Bunbury sprang to his feet and waved his hands.

"For heaven's sake! Are we rehearsing, or is this a debating society? Miss Hobson, nothing is going to be written into anybody's part. Now are you satisfied?"

"She said . . ."

"Oh, never mind," observed Miss Winch, equably. "It was only a random thought. Working for the good of the show all the time. That's me."

"Now, sweetie!" pleaded Mr. Cracknell, emerging from the collar like a tortoise.

Miss Hobson reluctantly allowed herself to be reassured.

"Oh, well, that's all right, then. But don't forget I know how to look after myself," she said, stating a fact which was abundantly obvious to all who had had the privilege of listening to her. "Any raw work, and out I walk so quick it'll make you giddy."

She retired, followed by Mr. Cracknell and the wings swallowed her up.

"Shall I say my big speech now?" inquired Miss Winch, over the footlights.

"Yes, yes! Get on with the rehearsal. We've wasted half the morning."

"Did you ring, madam?" said Miss Winch to Elsa, who had been reading her magazine placidly through the late scene.

The rehearsal proceeded, and Sally watched it with a sinking heart. It was all wrong. Novice as she was in things theatrical, she could see that. There was no doubt that Miss Hobson was superbly beautiful and would have shed lustre on any part which involved the minimum of words and the maximum of clothes: but in the pivotal rôle of a serious play, her very physical attributes only served to emphasize and point her hopeless incapacity. Sally remembered Mr. Faucitt's story of the lady who got the bird at Wigan. She did not see how history could fail to repeat itself. The theatrical public of America will endure much from youth and beauty, but there is a limit.

A shrill, passionate cry from the front row, and Mr. Bunbury was on his feet again. Sally could not help wondering whether things were going particu-

larly wrong to-day, or whether this was one of Mr. Bunbury's ordinary mornings.

"Miss Hobson!"

The action of the drama had just brought that emotional lady on left centre and had taken her across to the desk which stood on the other side of the stage. The desk was an important feature of the play, for it symbolized the absorption in business which, exhibited by her husband, was rapidly breaking Miss Hobson's heart. He loved his desk better than his young wife, that was what it amounted to, and no wife can stand that sort of thing.

"Oh, gee!" said Miss Hobson, ceasing to be the distressed wife and becoming the offended star. "What's it this time?"

"I suggested at the last rehearsal and at the rehearsal before and the rehearsal before that, that, on that line, you should pick up the paper-knife and toy negligently with it. You did it yesterday, and to-day you've forgotten it again."

"My God!" cried Miss Hobson, wounded to the quick. "If this don't beat everything! How the heck can I toy negligently with a paper-knife when there's no paper-knife for me to toy negligently with?"

"The paper-knife is on the desk."

"It's not on the desk."

"No paper-knife?"

"No paper-knife. And it's no good picking on me. I'm the star, not the assistant stage manager. If you're going to pick on anybody, pick on him."

The advice appeared to strike Mr. Bunbury as good. He threw back his head and bayed like a bloodhound.

There was a momentary pause, and then from the wings on the prompt side there shambled out a stout and shrinking figure, in whose hand was a script of the play and on whose face, lit up by the footlights, there shone a look of apprehension. It was Fillmore, the Man of Destiny.

III

Alas, poor Fillmore! He stood in the middle of the stage with the lightning of Mr. Bunbury's wrath playing about his defenceless head, and Sally, recovering from her first astonishment, sent a wave of sisterly commiseration floating across the theatre to him. She did not often pity Fillmore. His was a nature which in the sunshine of prosperity had a tendency to grow a trifle lush; and such of the minor ills of life as had afflicted him during the past three years, had, she considered, been wholesome and educative and a matter not for concern but for congratulation. Unmoved, she had watched him through that lean period lunching on coffee and buckwheat cakes, and curbing from motives of economy a somewhat florid taste in dress. But this was different. This was tragedy. Somehow or other, blasting disaster must have smitten the Fillmore bank-roll, and he was back where he had started. His presence here this morning could mean nothing else.

She recalled his words at the breakfast-table about financing the play. How like Fillmore to try to save his face for the moment with an outrageous bluff, though well aware that he would have to reveal the truth sooner or later. She realized how he must have felt when he had seen her at the hotel. Yes, she was sorry for Fillmore.

And, as she listened to the fervent eloquence of Mr. Bunbury, she perceived that she had every reason to be. Fillmore was having a bad time. One of the chief articles of faith in the creed of all theatrical producers is that if anything goes wrong it must be the fault of the assistant stage manager; and Mr. Bunbury was evidently orthodox in his views. He was showing oratorical gifts of no mean order. The paper-knife seemed to inspire him. Gradually, Sally began to get the feeling that this harmless, necessary stage-property was the source from which sprang most, if not all, of the trouble in the world. It had disappeared before. Now it had disappeared again. Could Mr. Bunbury go on struggling in a universe where this sort of thing happened? He seemed to doubt it. Being a red-blooded, one-hundred-per-cent. American man, he would try hard, but it was a hundred to one shot that he would get through. He had asked for a paper-knife. There was no paper-knife. Why was there no paper-knife? Where *was* the paper-knife anyway?

"I assure you, Mr. Bunbury," bleated the unhappy Fillmore, obsequiously, "I placed it with the rest of the properties after the last rehearsal."

"You couldn't have done."

"I assure you I did."

"And it walked away, I suppose," said Miss Hobson with cold scorn, pausing in the operation of brightening up her lower lip with a lip-stick.

A calm, clear voice spoke.

"It was taken away," said the calm, clear voice.

Miss Winch had added herself to the symposium. She stood beside Fillmore, chewing placidly. It took

more than raised voices and gesticulating hands to disturb Miss Winch.

"Miss Hobson took it," she went on in her cosy, drawling voice. "I saw her."

Sensation in court. The prisoner, who seemed to feel his position deeply, cast a pop-eyed glance full of gratitude at his advocate. Mr. Bunbury, in his capacity of prosecuting attorney, ran his fingers through his hair in some embarrassment, for he was regretting now that he had made such a fuss. Miss Hobson, thus assailed by an underling, spun round and dropped the lip-stick, which was neatly retrieved by the assiduous Mr. Cracknell. Mr. Cracknell had his limitations, but he was rather good at picking up lip-sticks.

"What's that? *I* took it? I never did anything of the sort."

"Miss Hobson took it after the rehearsal yesterday," drawled Gladys Winch, addressing the world in general, "and threw it negligently at the theatre cat."

Miss Hobson seemed taken aback. Her composure was not restored by Mr. Bunbury's next remark. The producer, like his company, had been feeling the strain of the past few days, and, though as a rule he avoided anything in the nature of a clash with the temperamental star, this matter of the missing paper-knife had bitten so deeply into his soul that he felt compelled to speak his mind.

"In future, Miss Hobson, I should be glad if, when you wish to throw anything at the cat, you would not select a missile from the property box. Good heavens!" he cried, stung by the way fate was maltreating him, "I have never experienced anything

like this before. I have been producing plays all my life, and this is the first time this has happened. I have produced Nazimova. Nazimova never threw paper-knives at cats."

"Well, I hate cats," said Miss Hobson, as though that settled it.

"I," murmured Miss Winch, "love little pussy, her fur is so warm, and if I don't hurt her she'll do me no . . ."

"Oh, my heavens!" shouted Gerald Foster, bounding from his seat and for the first time taking a share in the debate. "Are we going to spend the whole day arguing about cats and paper-knives? For goodness' sake, clear the stage and stop wasting time."

Miss Hobson chose to regard this intervention as an affront.

"Don't shout at me, Mr. Foster!"

"I wasn't shouting at you."

"If you have anything to say to me, lower your voice."

"He can't," observed Miss Winch. "He's a tenor."

"Nazimova never . . ." began Mr. Bunbury.

Miss Hobson was not to be diverted from her theme by reminiscences of Nazimova. She had not finished dealing with Gerald.

"In the shows I've been in," she said, mordantly, "the author wasn't allowed to go about the place getting fresh with the leading lady. In the shows I've been in the author sat at the back and spoke when he was spoken to. In the shows I've been in . . ."

Sally was tingling all over. This reminded her of the dog-fight on the Roville sands. She wanted to be in it, and only the recognition that it was a private

fight and that she would be intruding kept her silent. The lure of the fray, however, was too strong for her wholly to resist it. Almost unconsciously, she had risen from her place and drifted down the aisle so as to be nearer the white-hot centre of things. She was now standing in the lighted space by the orchestra-pit, and her presence attracted the roving attention of Miss Hobson, who, having concluded her remarks on authors and their legitimate sphere of activity, was looking about for some other object of attack.

"Who the devil," inquired Miss Hobson, "is *that?*"

Sally found herself an object of universal scrutiny, and wished that she had remained in the obscurity of the back rows.

"I am Mr. Nicholas' sister," was the best method of identification that she could find.

"Who's Mr. Nicholas?"

Fillmore timidly admitted that he was Mr. Nicholas. He did it in the manner of one in the dock pleading guilty to a major charge, and at least half of those present seemed surprised. To them, till now, Fillmore had been a nameless thing, answering to the shout of "Hi!"

Miss Hobson received the information with a laugh of such exceeding bitterness that strong men blanched and Mr. Cracknell started so convulsively that he nearly jerked his collar off its stud.

"Now, sweetie!" urged Mr. Cracknell.

Miss Hobson said that Mr. Cracknell gave her a pain in the gizzard. She recommended his fading away, and he did so—into his collar. He seemed to feel that once well inside his collar he was "home" and safe from attack.

"I'm through!" announced Miss Hobson. It appeared that Sally's presence had in some mysterious fashion fulfilled the function of the last straw. "This is the by-Goddest show I was ever in! I can stand for a whole lot, but when it comes to the assistant stage manager being allowed to fill the theatre with his sisters and his cousins and his aunts it's time to quit."

"But, sweetie!" pleaded Mr. Cracknell, coming to the surface.

"Oh, go and choke yourself!" said Miss Hobson, crisply. And, swinging round like a blue panther, she strode off. A door banged, and the sound of it seemed to restore Mr. Cracknell's power of movement. He, too, shot up stage and disappeared.

"Hello, Sally," said Elsa Doland, looking up from her magazine. The battle, raging all round her, had failed to disturb her detachment. "When did you get back?"

Sally trotted up the steps which had been propped against the stage to form a bridge over the orchestra pit.

"Hello, Elsa."

The late debaters had split into groups. Mr. Bunbury and Gerald were pacing up and down the central aisle, talking earnestly. Fillmore had subsided into a chair.

"Do you know Gladys Winch?" asked Elsa.

Sally shook hands with the placid lodestar of her brother's affections. Miss Winch, on closer inspection, proved to have deep grey eyes and freckles. Sally's liking for her increased.

"Thank you for saving Fillmore from the wolves,"

she said. "They would have torn him in pieces but for you."

"Oh, I don't know," said Miss Winch.

"It was noble."

"Oh, well!"

"I think," said Sally, "I'll go and have a talk with Fillmore. He looks as though he wanted consoling."

She made her way to that picturesque ruin.

IV

Fillmore had the air of a man who thought it wasn't loaded. A wild, startled expression had settled itself upon his face and he was breathing heavily.

"Cheer up!" said Sally. Fillmore jumped like a stricken jelly. "Tell me all," said Sally, sitting down beside him. "I leave you a gentleman of large and independent means, and I come back and find you one of the wage-slaves again. How did it all happen?"

"Sally," said Fillmore, "I will be frank with you. Can you lend me ten dollars?"

"I don't see how you make that out an answer to my question, but here you are."

"Thanks." Fillmore pocketed the bill. "I'll let you have it back next week. I want to take Miss Winch out to lunch."

"If that's what you want it for, don't look on it as a loan, take it as a gift with my blessing thrown in." She looked over her shoulder at Miss Winch, who, the cares of rehearsal being temporarily suspended, was practising golf-shots with an umbrella at the other side of the stage. "However did you have the sense to fall in love with her, Fill?"

"Do you like her?" asked Fillmore, brightening.

"I love her."

"I knew you would. She's just the right girl for me, isn't she?"

"She certainly is."

"So sympathetic."

"Yes."

"So kind."

"Yes. And she's got brains enough for two, which is the exact quantity the girl who marries you will need."

Fillmore drew himself up with as much hauteur as a stout man sitting in a low chair can achieve.

"Some day I will make you believe in me, Sally."

"Less of the Merchant Prince, my lad," said Sally, firmly. "You just confine yourself to explaining how you got this way, instead of taking up my valuable time telling me what you mean to do in the future. You've lost all your money?"

"I have suffered certain reverses," said Fillmore, with dignity, "which have left me temporarily . . . Yes, every bean," he concluded simply.

"How?"

"Well . . ." Fillmore hesitated. "I've had bad luck, you know. First I bought Consolidated Rails for the rise, and they fell. So that went wrong."

"Yes?"

"And then I bought Russian Roubles for the fall, and they rose. So that went wrong."

"Good gracious! Why, I've heard all this before."

"Who told you?"

"No, I remember now. It's just that you remind me of a man I met at Roville. He was telling me the

story of his life, and how he had made a hash of everything. Well, that took all you had, I suppose?"

"Not quite. I had a few thousand left, and I went into a deal that really did look cast-iron."

"And that went wrong!"

"It wasn't my fault," said Fillmore querulously. "It was just my poisonous luck. A man I knew got me to join a syndicate which had bought up a lot of whisky. The idea was to ship it into Chicago in herring-barrels. We should have cleaned up big, only a mutt of a detective took it into his darned head to go fooling about with a crowbar. Officious ass! It wasn't as if the barrels weren't labelled 'Herrings' as plainly as they could be," said Fillmore with honest indignation. He shuddered. "I nearly got arrested."

"But that went wrong? Well, that's something to be thankful for. Stripes wouldn't suit your figure." Sally gave his arm a squeeze. She was very fond of Fillmore, though for the good of his soul she generally concealed her affection beneath a manner which he had once compared, not without some reason, to that of a governess who had afflicted their mutual childhood. "Never mind, you poor ill-used martyr. Things are sure to come right. We shall see you a millionaire some day. And, oh heavens, brother Fillmore, what a bore you'll be when you are! I can just see you being interviewed and giving hints to young men on how to make good. 'Mr. Nicholas attributes his success to sheer hard work. He can lay his hand on his bulging waistcoat and say that he has never once indulged in those rash get-rich-quick speculations, where you buy for the rise and watch things fall and then rush out and buy for the

fall and watch 'em rise.' Fill . . . I'll tell you what I'll do. They all say it's the first bit of money that counts in building a vast fortune. I'll lend you some of mine."

"You will? Sally, I always said you were an ace"

"I never heard you. You oughtn't to mumble so."

"Will you lend me twenty thousand dollars?"

Sally patted his hand soothingly.

"Come slowly down to earth," she said. "Two hundred was the sum I had in mind."

"I want twenty thousand."

"You'd better rob a bank. Any policeman will direct you to a good bank."

"I'll tell you *why* I want twenty thousand."

"You might just mention it."

"If I had twenty thousand, I'd buy this production from Cracknell. He'll be back in a few minutes to tell us that the Hobson woman has quit: and, if she really has, you take it from me that he will close the show. And, even if he manages to jolly her along this time and she comes back, it's going to happen sooner or later. It's a shame to let a show like this close. I believe in it, Sally. It's a darn good play. With Elsa Doland in the big part, it couldn't fail."

Sally started. Her money was too recent for her to have grown fully accustomed to it, and she had never realized that she was in a position to wave a wand and make things happen on any big scale. The financing of a theatrical production had always been to her something mysterious and out of the reach of ordinary persons like herself. Fillmore, that spacious thinker, had brought it into the sphere of the possible.

"He'd sell for less than that, of course, but one would need a bit in hand. You have to face a loss on the road before coming into New York. I'd give you ten per cent. on your money, Sally."

Sally found herself wavering. The prudent side of her nature, which hitherto had steered her safely through most of life's rapids, seemed oddly dormant. Sub-consciously she was aware that on past performances Fillmore was decidedly not the man to be allowed control of anybody's little fortune, but somehow the thought did not seem to grip her. He had touched her imagination.

"It's a gold-mine!"

Sally's prudent side stirred in its sleep. Fillmore had chosen an unfortunate expression. To the novice in finance the word gold-mine had repellent associations. If there was one thing in which Sally had proposed not to invest her legacy, it was a gold-mine; what she had had in view, as a matter of fact, had been one of those little fancy shops which are called Ye Blue Bird or Ye Corner Shoppe, or something like that, where you sell exotic bric-à-brac to the wealthy at extortionate prices. She knew two girls who were doing splendidly in that line. As Fillmore spoke those words, Ye Corner Shoppe suddenly looked very good to her.

At this moment, however, two things happened. Gerald and Mr. Bunbury, in the course of their perambulations, came into the glow of the footlights, and she was able to see Gerald's face: and at the same time Mr. Reginald Cracknell hurried on to the stage, his whole demeanour that of the bearer of evil tidings.

The sight of Gerald's face annihilated Sally's pru-

dence at a single stroke. Ye Corner Shoppe, which a moment before had been shining brightly before her mental eye, flickered and melted out. The whole issue became clear and simple. Gerald was miserable and she had it in her power to make him happy. He was sullenly awaiting disaster and she with a word could avert it. She wondered that she had ever hesitated.

"All right," she said simply.

Fillmore quivered from head to foot. A powerful electric shock could not have produced a stronger convulsion. He knew Sally of old as cautious and clear-headed, by no means to be stampeded by a brother's eloquence; and he had never looked on this thing as anything better than a hundred to one shot.

"You'll do it?" he whispered, and held his breath. After all he might not have heard correctly.

"Yes."

All the complex emotion in Fillmore's soul found expression in one vast whoop. It rang through the empty theatre like the last trump, beating against the back wall and rising in hollow echoes to the very gallery. Mr. Bunbury, conversing in low undertones with Mr. Cracknell across the footlights, shied like a startled mule. There was reproach and menace in the look he cast at Fillmore, and a minute earlier it would have reduced that financial magnate to apologetic pulp. But Fillmore was not to be intimidated now by a look. He strode down to the group at the footlights.

"Crackrell," he said importantly, "one moment. I should like a word with you."