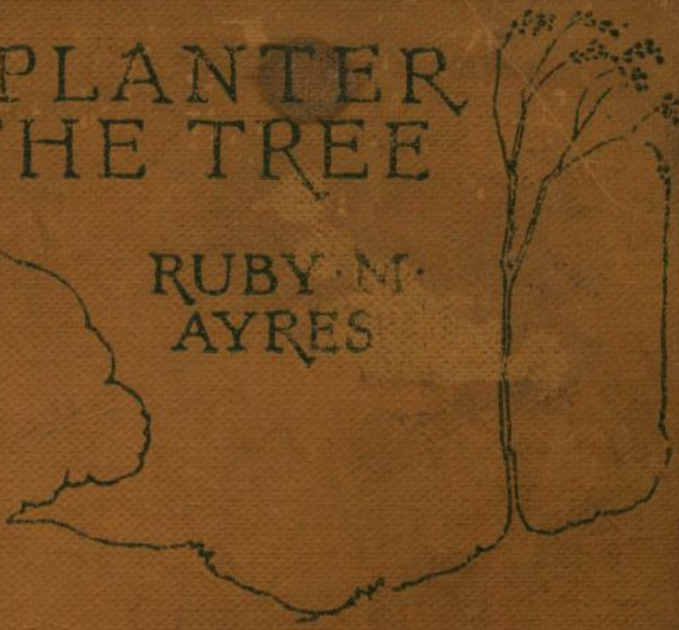
# THE PLANTER OF THE TREE



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By RUBY M. AYRES

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*Candle Light*
*The Man Without a Heart*
*The Romance of a Rogue*
*The Matherson Marriage*

NEW YORK:
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

# THE PLANTER OF THE TREE

By

RUBY M. AYRES

*"The fruit does not always fall to the Planter of the Tree."*

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THE PLANTER OF THE TREE
—Q—
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# The Planter of the Tree

## Chapter I

When Philip Sanderson knocked Sally Lingfield down and ran over her as he was turning out of Piccadilly in the early hours of a grey February morning, the gods must have laughed, for Sally Lingfield was the one woman in the world for whom Sanderson had any feeling whatever, and it was an extraordinary coincidence that she should have been crossing the road just as he raced down from Shaftesbury Avenue and across to the Haymarket.

Sanderson was drunk at the time, but then that was nothing unusual, for Sanderson was generally drunk after six o'clock in the evening, and the inspector at Vine Street Police Station evinced no surprise at seeing him, and did not even inquire his name and address.

But Sanderson had never run over anyone before, and the shock of recognising the girl huddled in the wet road, her evening cloak all mud-stained, and her yellow hair torn ruthlessly down, sobered him more quickly than all the pick-me-ups in the world could have done. Sanderson was a waster.

He would have told you so himself had you asked him, and would have seemed rather proud of the admission.

He was the sort of man about whom people really knew very little but about whom they imagined a great deal.

He lived in a small bachelor flat somewhere behind Manchester Square, and he belonged to half a dozen more or less disreputable clubs, owned a racing car with a red devil mascot carrying a pitchfork, and the only creature in the world for whom he was known to possess any real affection was a queer-looking mongrel dog whom he called "Sometimes."

Sometimes was with him the night he ran over Sally Lingfield, and when she had been taken away to the hospital Sometimes went along with his master to the Vine Street Police Station, pausing unbidden at the entrance and wagging his long, whip-like tail knowingly, as much as to say, "This is the place, isn't it? We've both been here before many a time."

He wagged his tail again when a friendly constable patted his head and produced a biscuit for him, and after consuming it he curled up contentedly enough in front of the fire and patiently waited for the proceedings to conclude.

Sanderson and Sometimes made an interesting pair, and they were almost as well known in the West End as the Prince of Wales or the statue of Eros, for Sanderson stood six feet four in his socks, and generally wore a black slouch hat pulled down over his eyes, a tie with untidy flowing ends, and the gaudiest of socks.

Nobody quite knew his age, but he might have been anything between thirty-five and fifty, and in a dissipated way he was a good-looking man with grizzled hair and rather deep-set eyes.

Lately he had begun to look slightly coarse, and to walk with a hunch in his broad shoulders as if he were indifferent to his appearance, or as if he found the burden of life too heavy.

Sometimes was a cross between a bull terrier and a sheepdog. He had long thin legs and a long thin tail like the thong of a whip, which he banged against everything that came in his way, for Sometimes was eternally pleased with Life, and wore a perpetual smile on his extraordinary face.

Round his neck he proudly carried a red, white and blue patent-leather collar, and attached to it was a metal disc which was engraved with the legend, “I belong to Philip Sanderson. My name is Sometimes,” and underneath was the address of the bachelor flat behind Manchester Square.

It was commonly supposed that Philip Sanderson had money, for he never borrowed from his friends or acquaintances, and he always paid his way, but even to those who knew him best he was something of a mystery.

He never spoke of his past life, or of his relations, if indeed he had any, but there was a story told of him that he had once been in the Guards, and had been kicked out of them for drunkenness and insubordination.

Sanderson was not responsible for the story, neither admitting nor contradicting it, and its origin probably arose from the fact that when he was very much the worse for drink and in a fighting mood he would wave his long arms and defy the whole world by shouting at the top of his great voice, “Come on, boys! The Guards never retire.”

His other chief characteristics were his indifference to most women, and his hatred of Josh Akers.

Josh Akers was also a waster, only of a different type, and the two men loathed one another as it is said only birds of a feather can loathe one another.

It was common knowledge that on more than one occasion Akers had partaken of the hospitality of a prison, that he had twice been caught cheating at cards, and had once been thrashed within an inch of his life by Philip Sanderson.

Lately they had entered into rivalry for the favours of Sally Lingfield, a dancer in a cabaret show at the Faun Night Club, of which both men were members, and so far the general opinion was that the betting was "odds on" in favour of Sanderson.

Sally Lingfield was about twenty-three, with the body of a child and the slender supple limbs of a fairy. She was as light as thistledown when she danced, and she had the innocent look of an angel, which was sadly belied by her sharp tongue and shrewd worldliness.

She was supposed to be the daughter of a once well-known actress who had fallen upon evil days and died in miserable poverty, but all her immediate associates knew of her was that she shared a flat with another dancer several years her senior, and that she openly stated that she intended to marry a title.

Sanderson had no title, but he had money, and although he was a great deal older than Sally, she attracted him by her youthful grace and impudence as no other woman had ever attracted him.

In spite of what the onlookers—and they were many—said of him, his intentions towards Sally were honourable. He was willing and ready to marry her.

"And that"—as he told her brutally one night when he drove her home after the Faun Club had closed—"is more than Akers will do."

Sally laughed, not very mirthfully perhaps, and snuggled down closer beside him in the well seat of his racing car.

"I don't know that I want to get married," she said. "And anyway, you're too old."

"I'm forty-five next June," Sanderson told her.

He was a strangely self-controlled man where his affections were concerned; so controlled that even Sally herself was never sure of him, and there was a puzzled sort of look in her eyes as she peered sideways up at

him from under her golden hair, which the night breeze was blowing into soft little curls.

Sally's chief beauty was her hair. Unbound it reached below her knees, and sometimes when she danced she let it fall around her like a mantle, covering her far more efficiently than did the scanty little frocks she wore.

"Do you really like me?" she asked doubtfully.

Sanderson kept his eyes steadily before him.

"Well enough to marry you," he answered uncompromisingly.

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

"You've never once tried to kiss me."

Sanderson's foot suddenly pressed the accelerator, shooting the car forward at great speed.

"I don't care about kissing women who don't belong to me," he answered briefly.

"Oh!" She seemed rather nonplussed. No man had ever before expressed such a sentiment to her, and she was not quite sure whether to take it as a compliment or not.

When they reached her flat Sanderson stopped the car, but remained at the wheel for a moment.

"Well, will you have me?" he asked brusquely.

Sally laughed.

"Lord! I haven't thought about it yet."

"If it wants thinking about as much as all that, I shouldn't trouble," Sanderson said grimly. He opened the door and got out, turning to give her his hand.

"Well, good-night."

She peered up at him again with that puzzled look still in her eyes.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked. "Poppy will be there."

"No."

She shrugged her shoulders, and her loose wrap slipped from them, showing their baby whiteness in the moonlight.

"Aren't you a polite little gentleman!" she twitted him.

Sanderson made no answer; he just looked at her as a giant out of a fairy story might have looked at a fairy who had dared to flick him with her wings, hesitating as to whether he should crush her or not, then he turned back to the car.

"Well, good-night——"

She did not reply, but she stood on the path in the moonlight till he had swung at a tremendous rate round the bend at the end of the street, then she sighed impatiently and searched in her vanity bag for her latchkey.

It was just a week later that Sanderson knocked her down as he was turning out of Piccadilly in the early hours of the morning. She was quite alone, and as she lay in the wet, muddy road she looked like an angel whom a ruthless hand had shot down while in flight. Her cloak—a gaudy thing lined with silver tissue—was spread out around her like wings, and she looked so small and frail that even the ambulance men from the hospital handled her more gently than was their wont as they carried her away.

Philip Sanderson stood silently by, his hat in his hand, his face stiff and inscrutable, with Sometimes close at his heels wagging his long, whip-like tail.

When—an hour later—they came out of Vine Street Police Station, the first grey streak of dawn showed in the sky.

Sanderson had had to leave his car at the spot where he had knocked Sally down, for as he jammed on the brakes it had skidded round and buckled a front wheel against a lamp-post.

He and Sometimes passed it as they crossed Piccadilly—deserted and ghostlike it looked—and Sanderson shivered and buttoned the big collar of his coat more closely round his throat.

Was Sally dead? The ambulance men had hinted vaguely at internal injuries. Sally was only one case amongst many to them; they did not faintly guess how Sanderson's heart was torn as he stood there so impassively, watching them carry her away.

With Sometimes at his heels he walked to the hospital through the silent streets, his jaw set in hard lines.

He so dreaded hearing the doctor's verdict that there seemed to be leaden weights on his feet retarding him; he so longed to hear that his heart was racing so that he could hardly breathe, urging him forward.

And after all it was nothing so terribly serious—a broken leg—compound fracture, they were afraid—and an injured hip.

Sanderson's first emotion was one of almost agonising relief.

"Thank God!" And then hard on its heels came bitter realisation of what this would mean to Sally.

No more dancing! Weeks certainly—perhaps even months—before she could go back to the Faun Club.

Sanderson set his teeth. Well, she need never go back; he would marry her and look after her for the rest of her life—if she would have him!

Somehow he no longer seriously doubted that she would.

She would be glad of his care and attention—of his love! Almost shyly now he admitted to himself how much he loved her, though why—God alone knew!

She was not a lady—she was nothing which he had been brought up to believe a woman should be—and yet she had twined herself about his heart, refusing to let him go.

He knew he would be taking a risk by marrying her, but he was willing to take it. He looked years younger and happier as he asked a last question of the rather bored house surgeon whom he had insisted upon seeing.

"You are sure you have told me the worst? There are no internal injuries?"

"Quite sure. If you come back later on—when the fracture has been set—you will be able to see her."

"Thank you."

Sometimes came forward, waving his tail, and the house surgeon stooped to pat him.

"Queer-looking beggar!" he said in the friendly tone which everybody adopted towards Sometimes.

Sanderson smiled.

"Yes, my best friend."

He took up his hat and turned to the door.

"By the way——" The surgeon followed him. "Miss Lingfield gave me this letter and asked me to be sure and see that it was delivered

immediately." He hesitated, drawing an envelope from his pocket. "Possibly it is you to whom it is addressed," he added tentatively.

Sanderson took it and glanced at the name written in Sally's sprawly hand.

There was the least silence, then he spoke.

"Thank you—yes. It is for me."

He put the letter into his pocket and walked away from the hospital with Sometimes capering joyfully round him. Sometimes did not like visiting new places; he was like his master, he preferred old haunts; he was glad to leave the unaccustomed scent of the hospital behind him.

Philip Sanderson was back in his flat before he took Sally's letter from his pocket.

He shut the door behind him and switched on the light in the sitting-room, standing beneath it to read again the scrawled name on the envelope.

*Josh Akers, Esq. . . .*

It was written in pencil, and there were signs of agitation in the hurriedly formed letters, which were blurred as if tears had fallen upon them.

There was no emotion in Sanderson's face as he looked at them, and his action was deliberate when after a moment he tore open the sealed flap and drew out the contents.

A half-sheet of paper, probably torn from another letter, and bearing a few uneven lines.

*I came as I said I should, and I have waited for you since half-past eleven. It is now nearly four and I am afraid to wait any longer. Oh, Josh, don't be cruel to me. Don't you love me any more? I am willing to give up everything for you, you know that. Write to me or come to me. I shall be in all day until it is time to go to the Faun. I shall be in waiting for you—longing for you. I don't mind what happens, if only you still love me.—Your miserable Sally.*

Sanderson read the poor little letter through twice, then he folded it back into its envelope.

Somehow he was hardly surprised. Akers had always been a skunk. Somehow it was no more than he had half suspected, and yet . . . He clenched his hands as he realised all that must have led up to this last appeal —an appeal so unlike Sally, with her bright defiance of Fate and proud independence, which had always seemed so much at variance with her childish appearance.

So it had been Akers all along.

Sanderson crossed the room and tried to stir the dying fire into a flame, but it had sunk too low, and he shivered in the coldness of the slowly breaking dawn.

Sometimes had taken possession of his own rug in a corner and was already curled up and snoring peacefully, unconscious of the rising storm of hatred in his master's heart.

No doubt Sally had been to Akers's rooms that night. By her own admission she must have been there waiting humiliatingly till she had given up all hope and had fled back home in the early hours of the morning, only to meet with a second tragic happening beneath the wheels of a car driven by the hands of the drunken man who loved her.

Beast that he was. As great a beast in his besotted way as Akers, who had won her love and then thrown it in her face.

Sanderson felt sick with shame and bitterest jealousy as he stood staring down at the ashes in the grate.

Neither of them was fit to touch her, and yet at this very moment she was lying in a bare, ugly hospital ward, her heart broken by one of them, and her little body by the other.

Weeks, perhaps months, before she could even walk again, and in the meantime what was to become of her?

The people at the Faun Café would soon forget her and fill her place— London was full of dancers only too eager and anxious to seize every opportunity which came their way. In a short while the very name of Sally Lingfield would be forgotten, and then what would become of her?

Like hundreds of other such girls she would drift down and down, losing ground at every step, until . . . Sanderson could not bear to think what her ending might be.

Of course, if she would marry him . . . but now he had no real hope of that. Experience had taught him that the Sally Lingfields of life can be

obstinately faithful even to their own undoing; besides—she had never loved him!

He paced up and down his room till broad daylight came and later the woman who looked after him and brought his meals.

She made no comment when she saw that he had not been to bed—she was used to his irregular mode of life—and she proceeded to rake out the dead fire and relay and light it, as if Sanderson had not been present.

He stood and watched her for a moment in silence, then he asked abruptly:

"What's your opinion of men, Mrs. Kiff?"

She glanced up at him, and wiped a smut from her chin with the corner of her apron.

"Not much, sir," she answered briefly.

Sanderson laughed.

"A rotten lot, eh?"

Mrs. Kiff rose stiffly from her rheumaticky knees.

"Well, you said it and not me," she said defensively.

Sanderson stretched his long arms above his head and yawned.

"You ought to know; you're a married woman," he said cynically.

Mrs. Kiff looked at him with contempt.

"Me a married woman!" she echoed. "Not me, thank God. I'm a widow." She gathered up her dustpan and brushes.

"Can you fancy any breakfast this morning?" she asked with sarcasm.

Sanderson was out in the little hall, going towards the bathroom, but he turned to answer her.

"I'll eat anything you like! I've got some work to do to-day, and I need fortifying."

"Work!" Mrs. Kiff was sceptical. "That's a bit of a change," she submitted. "What sort of work may I ask, sir?"

Sanderson doubled his fists.

"I'm going to kill a man," he said with mock melodrama.

Mrs. Kiff remained unmoved.

"Well, maybe you're right," she agreed placidly. "Perhaps I'd better fry you two eggs with your bacon, so as you can do the job properly."

But she smiled to herself after Sanderson had disappeared into the bathroom. Although she entirely disapproved of him and of all his ways, yet deep down in her sorely-tried heart she had a queer sort of affection for him.

She argued that he could not be so bad, or the dog would not be so devoted to him.

"Dogs is the nearest to humans that there is," so she argued with the other woman who helped her in the flats. "And as they don't talk, they probably knows more than we do. You take it from me that that dog of Mr. Sanderson's ain't no fool. You take it from me that that dog knows that there's many a man who drinks too much as 'as got a 'eart of gold 'id somewhere about 'im."

So she fried two eggs with a couple of rashers and filled the toast-rack, noting with satisfaction that there was none of it left when later she went to remove the tray. It never occurred to her that Sometimes had eaten his share, and Sometimes was too crafty a dog to put forward the suggestion himself.

About twelve o'clock Philip Sanderson was at the hospital again. In the waiting room he met Poppy Sladen the girl who shared Sally's flat with her.

She was a tired-looking creature with raven black hair greatly assisted by artificial means, and too-crimson lips.

She greeted Sanderson rather rudely, and her chief concern seemed to be as to who was to pay Sally's share of the rent while she was laid up.

"She's got nothing saved," she told him frankly. "Never knew such a spendthrift in my life; and it's not likely they'll do anything for her at the Faun. There's too many of us at the game. Dare say they're queueing up after her job already." She looked at him sideways with her calculating eyes. "It's your fault, you know," she told him meaningly. "I suppose you'd had too much to drink as usual."

Sanderson met her gaze squarely.

"Right, as usual," he said coolly. "You've got a wonderful brain, you know, Poppy."

Poppy shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, as long as Sally's half of the rent doesn't fall on me, all right," she said. "I guess I'll be off." And she left him to wait impatiently till he could be taken up to see Sally.

She did not look so very ill. That was his first relieved thought as he tiptoed across the polished boards of the ward to her bedside. She had come out of the chloroform and was lying on her back, her blue, child's eyes staring up at the whitewashed ceiling with a little far-away expression of pain in them.

There was a cage over her injured leg which made a hump under the bedclothes, and her wonderful hair lay spread out on each side of her in two heavy plaits.

"Sally!"

Her eyes wandered down to the level of his set face and hardened as they recognised him.

"What have you come for?" she asked resentfully.

Sanderson tried to take her hand but she jerked it away from him.

"To see how you are; to tell you how sorry I am——"

Her pretty mouth curled into a faintly cynical smile.

"It wouldn't have happened if you'd been sober," she said curtly.

Sanderson made no answer. He wanted to say that he would give ten years of his life to undo what he had done; he wanted to say that his heart was wrung with pity and sorrow for her, but such words were difficult to him.

Presently she asked a question:

"How long have I got to be here?"

"I don't know; not long, I hope."

Sally laughed bitterly and closed her blue eyes.

"No harm in hoping," she said. "I asked the doctor and he said it might be weeks. . . ." Tears welled from beneath her lids. "What do you think is to become of me?" she asked.

"*I* shall look after you, of course," Sanderson answered quickly. "Anything you want. . . ."

She interrupted bluntly.

"Well, I don't want *you* for a start."

Sanderson winced.

"What do you want, Sally?" he asked gently.

She turned her head away.

"Nothing you can give me," she muttered.

He knew well enough of whom she was thinking, and his jealousy and hatred of Josh Akers stirred like a live thing in his heart.

After a moment he said awkwardly:

"I've sent you some grapes and some flowers. I've told them that you are to have anything you want. If there's a private ward, Sally. . . ."

She interrupted fiercely.

"Yes, I can see myself moping to death in a private ward. Thank you, I like a bit of life about me even if you have done your best to kill me."

"I can't make you understand how sorry . . . terribly sorry I am." The words sounded stilted and almost unfeeling, and yet they came from Sanderson's very heart.

He would have given anything he possessed to have taken her in his arms and comforted her with his love, but he knew it was not what she wanted.

After a moment he asked awkwardly if she would like him to go.

Sally did not even open her eyes, but the tears lay wet on her cheeks like little dewdrops.

"I don't care what you do," she said resentfully.

Sanderson tiptoed away, followed down the long room by many pairs of interested eyes, for every bed in the ward was full.

Outside the door the Ward Sister came to him.

Perhaps her kind eyes saw the strain in his, for she said cheerfully:

"There is no danger. Of course she is in pain, but in a day or two she will feel better and be pleased to see you."

Sanderson did not think so; he knew well enough there was only one man in the world whom Sally would be pleased to see, and that man would probably refuse to come even if he was sent for.

*Refuse to come!*

Sanderson saw the world red as he walked out into the sunshine. He stood on the path for a moment looking up and down the street, then he hailed a taxicab.

"Where to, sir?"

Sanderson hesitated yet again, then he gave the address of Akers's flat. He would make the fellow come to Sally; if he had to drag him through the streets by the scruff of his neck he would make him come. The thought of an encounter with Akers exhilarated him.

"The Guards never retire," he told himself as he got into the cab and slammed the door.

# Chapter II

Philip Sanderson dismissed his taxi, ignored the lift boy's invitation, and walked up the three flights of stone stairs to Akers's flat. He was a man to whom actions came first and reflection afterwards. He never troubled to think what he would say to Akers when they met, or what arguments he would use. Sanderson's arguments were in his fists, and they were usually unanswerable.

When he reached the third floor, Akers was just leaving his flat. He carried a suit-case, and an overcoat was slung over his arm. When he saw Philip he stood still, an ugly expression in his eyes.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded.

Sanderson barred his way.

"Come back to the flat and I'll tell you," he answered.

Akers blustered.

"I'm going away. I've got a train to catch. Some other time——"

"No," said Sanderson.

He was the bigger man of the two, and at that moment there was something about him that defied resistance.

Akers looked at him silently for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, but be damned to you all the same." They went back together into the flat and Sanderson shut the door behind them.

Akers flung his coat down and dropped his suit-case.

"Well, what is it? I'm in a hurry, but as you don't often honour me with the pleasure of your company——" he said with a sneer.

Sanderson remained immovable.

"I'm only here now to see that you pay a debt," he answered uncompromisingly. "Or should I say *one* of your debts."

Akers flushed dully.

He was a handsome man of rather an ordinary type, with dark eyes and dark hair with an effeminate wave in it, a sallow complexion and a slight, dark moustache.

"I don't owe you a farthing," he broke out furiously. "I don't owe——"

"Not to me—to Miss Lingfield," Sanderson said.

"Sally Lingfield!" Akers laughed unpleasantly. "Well, if she's sent you here to take up the cudgels on her behalf you can get out as soon as you like," he said with returning confidence. "For the past week I've spent my time dodging her. I've had enough of that girl. I——"

"If you say another disrespectful word of Miss Lingfield, I will knock you down," Sanderson said.

There was a poignant silence, then Akers shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, if she's such a friend of yours!" he submitted hatefully.

Sanderson's hands were clenched, but he kept his self-control.

"At the present moment, she is lying in hospital with a compound fracture, and an injured hip," he said quietly.

"Good Lord!" The least little flicker of concern crossed the younger man's face, then he laughed.

"Well, she'll be kept out of mischief for a bit, anyway," he said brutally. "How did it happen?"

"I knocked her down last night crossing the Haymarket!"

"You did! by Jove! that's about cooked your goose with Sally, eh?"

"Yes. I've been nearly as much of a swine to her as you have—but not quite." Sanderson came a step nearer. "When she was picked up she gave the hospital doctor a letter for you—and he handed it to me." Sanderson put a hand in his coat pocket and drew the letter out. "Here it is," he said coolly. "I opened it and read it."

"You opened it!" Akers snatched the letter from him. "You opened it and read it! What the hell——"

He broke off, his eyes hurriedly scanning Sally's pathetic appeal, then he looked up defiantly.

"Well, that's that," he said.

"Yes," Sanderson agreed quietly. "That's that, and what are you going to do about it?"

"Going to do? Why, nothing. What do you expect me to do? I've always treated Sally fairly enough. We were capital friends till she started this idea of getting married. *You* put that into her head. She was always saying that if she was good enough for you to marry, she was good enough for me to marry." He laughed. Sanderson's composure deceived him, and he began to recover his jauntiness. "Sally's right enough," he went on, "but not for anything permanent. Besides, I'm not a marrying man. I'm sorry she's hurt, of course, but it rather strikes me that that's your pigeon, eh?"

"It may be months—it will certainly be weeks before she can walk," Sanderson said in a dangerously quiet voice.

"I know. I once broke a leg myself," Akers agreed airily. "I was nearly a year before I was right again. Rotten luck, isn't it? Give her my love and say. . . ."

Sanderson came yet another step nearer, and now his eyes were ugly and his lips white.

"What are you going to do about it?" he said again.

"My dear fellow." Akers backed away from him. "What can I do? I've no money, you know that well enough, and even if I had, she's got no claim on me. You knocked her down, you say—well, the responsibility is yours. Won't the people at the Faun do anything for her?"

"You know damned well they won't."

Akers shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what do other people do if they've got no money?" he asked uncomfortably. "What are hospitals for? She'll be well looked after."

"She has not asked you for money, and neither have I."

"My dear fellow——"

Sanderson broke in with a roar like an enraged bull.

"What are you going to do about it? How are you going to answer that letter? Are you going to the hospital to see her?"

"I certainly am not." Akers glanced round the room uneasily. It was not the first time he and Sanderson had tried conclusions, and he still had an unpleasant recollection of the last occasion.

"Look here, Sanderson," he began conciliatingly, "I've done with Sally, and I've told her so. She's like all her class, she feeds a chap up in the end. You like her, apparently, and that's your lookout! but in the circumstances I really can't see what you expect me to do."

"I expect you to behave like a decent human being and go and see her, at least."

"I'll be damned if I do. I loathe hospitals and illness, and I know Sally. She'll only cry and make a scene—" He made a gesture of repugnance. "I tell you I've done with her."

"And I tell you that you haven't," Sanderson said in a voice of flint.

The two men eyed one another silently, then Akers laughed.

"Didn't know you were such a saint," he said aggressively. "I shouldn't care much myself for another man's discarded goods, and I never knew that you were the sort——"

"Well, you know now," Sanderson said, and knocked him down.

Akers crashed heavily against the table, knocking over a glass vase standing in the centre, and scattering its flowers and water all over the floor. He struck his head a nasty blow, but was up again in a second, swearing horribly, his face livid, and blood streaming from a cut lip. He made a bull-like rush at Sanderson only to meet with another blow between the eyes which sent him down again, and this time he made no attempt to rise.

Sanderson waited a moment, then he crossed the room and bent over him.

Akers lay in a huddled position, his head bent sideways almost as if his neck were broken, the blood from his cut lip running across his cheek and down into his hair.

Sanderson made a brief examination, dragged him into a more comfortable position, fetched some water from the sideboard and threw it over his face, then without another glance at him he picked up his hat and walked out of the flat, slamming the door behind him.

Out in the street he was surprised to find how shaken he felt. He walked along, carrying his hat in his hand, glad of the fresh air on his face.

How he loathed Akers! how he loathed the very sight of him, and every word he had spoken. There had been very little satisfaction in hitting him; it was like crushing a loathly reptile, and being conscious of the sensation

under one's foot for hours afterwards. But at least he knew the worst with regard to Sally; knew that she had nothing to hope for in that direction, and he wondered how she would take it when he told her.

What, in Heaven's name, could she see in the man, with his sneering tongue and too bold eyes? What was there about him that inspired so much love in her that she could stoop to write such a passionate appeal?

*. . . I shall be waiting for you . . . longing for you . . . I don't mind what happens if only you still love me. . . .*

She had written those words to Akers—written them with her heart's blood, only to be laughed at.

"The low hound! the dirty dog!" Sanderson ground the words from between his teeth as he strode along, then caught them back again remorsefully.

He would not insult Sometimes by calling Akers a dog. He hurried his steps as he thought of Sometimes. It was always good to get home and receive the loyal greeting of the creature who loved him best in all the world.

Mrs. Kiff was just putting on her bonnet and leaving when Sanderson put his key in the door, and she looked at him with an oddly whimsical expression in her faded eyes.

"You've soon got back, sir," she said drily.

"Yes," Sanderson was gently repulsing the frantic advances of Sometimes.

Mrs. Kiff lips moved as if she would have asked another question, but a glance at Sanderson's face checked her. Mrs. Kiff might not have much opinion of men but she certainly understood them, and she could see that this one was in no mood to talk.

"Upset about a woman," she told herself as she creaked out of the flat. "Women and drink. They're the only two things that ever really upsets a man."

# Chapter III

When Sanderson called at the hospital the following day he was told that the doctor would like to speak to him.

"The doctor!" his face changed. "Is anything the matter?" he asked quickly.

The nurse who had given him the message did not know; she showed him into a small empty waiting room and left him there for what seemed an eternity. Footsteps passed and re-passed, echoing hollowly through the bare corridors. Outside in the street the buses rumbled by and a shrill-voiced newsboy cried the winners.

Even the waiting room, bare and ugly as it was, seemed fraught with death and tragedy, with the faint, indefinable odour of drugs and chloroform which always seems to pervade every hospital, hanging heavily on the air.

Once he heard a woman crying as she passed the door; once he thought he heard a cry of pain, and he began to pace up and down, his nerves tingling, his throat dry.

Supposing Sally was worse? Supposing they had discovered some fresh injury, and wanted to tell him that she was going to die?

Sometimes, lying with his nose between his clumsy paws, watched his master with bright, anxious eyes.

Something was wrong with his beloved King of men, he knew, and when at last the doctor came, strolling into the room as casually as if broken limbs and disease and death were of no more import than a grazed knuckle, he rose to his feet growling threateningly.

Sanderson kicked him into silence with a gentle foot.

"Lie down, you fool."

For once he was irritated with Sometimes; for once there was something that concerned him more nearly and keenly than his dog.

"Well, what is it?" he asked bluntly. "What's the matter?"

The doctor looked at him in surprise. He was a very equitable young man to whom the sight of blood was no more than a bottle of overturned ink would have been, and who revelled in his profession.

"Oh, there's nothing to matter," he said calmly. "Nothing, at least, that need seriously alarm you. I would not have troubled you in the matter at all only Miss Lingfield's friend—I forget her name—she was here yesterday—I understood from her that you were Miss Lingfield's nearest relative . . . is that so?" he paused politely for a reply.

"Yes," said Sanderson shortly.

The young doctor looked relieved.

"Well, that being so," he went on more easily, "I think I ought to tell you that although at first we hoped differently, I am afraid it is going to be a long time before the patient will be able to get about and walk properly——"

"Well, I expected that," Sanderson said bluntly. "If there's nothing fresh to tell me. . . ."

The young man fidgeted. He did not find Sanderson easy to deal with. As a rule friends and relations of his patients were humbly grateful to him and most amenable to all his suggestions, but this man was different. For one thing his great height gave him such an advantage, and for another there was something in his direct look and blunt speech that made the usual platitudes which he was forced by time-honoured custom to deliver, seem stupid and banal.

"There's nothing fresh," he answered reluctantly. "Except that when we set the fracture yesterday there was some little difficulty about it. It is impossible to say exactly what may happen—but if the bone does not knit as it should do, another operation may be necessary."

"Is that a usual occurrence?" Sanderson asked bluntly.

The young doctor coloured.

"Fortunately, no," he answered. "But I understood you to say that Miss Lingfield is a dancer—or did she tell me herself? And of course that being so, if she is to dance again, every possible care must be taken."

Sanderson broke in almost rudely:

"I told you, and I told the ward sister that I wished everything possible to be done. I said that no expense was to be spared. I am willing to pay anything . . . no matter what it is."

"Quite! quite!" The doctor fidgeted with his tie. "There is no cause for alarm yet. Everything may turn out excellently and be quite plain sailing, but

I thought it my duty to tell you—as Miss Lingfield's nearest relative—that there are such possibilities."

Sanderson looked down at him with hard eyes. There were so many things he wanted to say, to ask, but somehow he felt stiff and awkward. "Well, I suppose I can see her," he broke out at last.

"Oh, certainly, certainly. You know your way. . . ."

"Yes, I know my way," Sanderson said heavily. "I suppose the dog may stay here," He turned to Sometimes and threw his hat down on the floor beside him.

"On guard. The Guards never retire," he said, and followed the doctor from the room.

As he entered the ward he saw that Sally was lying with her face turned towards the door, eagerly expectant.

There was more colour in her face to-day, and her eyes were bright, too bright, so a keen observer might have thought, but to Sanderson they only meant that she was better.

But his own eagerness died as he saw the sudden shadow which fell over her face when she recognised him; a sort of weary bitterness, and she turned her head away, her cheek close pressed into the pillow. Sanderson sat down on a chair beside the bed. He felt clumsy and ill at ease. Akers would have done it all so much more effectively he told himself savagely; no doubt Akers would have taken one of Sally's thin little hands and gracefully kissed it, or have held it between both his own without feeling a fool, or even looking one.

But outward demonstration was impossible to Sanderson; he had to keep his eloquence locked in his heart because he was incapable of giving expression to it; he just sat there stupidly staring at her till at last she herself was driven to exasperated speech.

"Well, what have *you* come for again?"

"To see how you are, and to ask if there is anything I can do for you."

"I told you yesterday there wasn't."

Her voice was harsh and snappy, like the voice of a woman who is on the verge of broken-hearted tears and dare not give way to them.

"Does the leg hurt?" Sanderson asked. He knew the question was stupid and banal, but one had to say something, and much as he longed to say "I

love you. I'd give my life for you. Why, in God's name, can't you care for me instead of for that swine?" he felt as if an iron hand barred his lips, forbidding their utterance.

Sally flashed a glance of ironical mirth into his set face.

"Oh no, it doesn't hurt!" she said shrilly. "In fact there's nothing to hurt. I'm quite well. I ought to get up and dance. I ought to go back to the Faun to-night, only they won't let me. Did you ever hear of a broken leg and a smashed thigh that *did* hurt?"

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm stupid," Sanderson said helplessly. Big tears fell from Sally's eyes.

"I don't know what you come for," she uttered brokenly.

It would have been so much easier if he could have answered as he longed to answer, "I come because I'm wretched when I'm not with you. I come because I can't keep away. I come because I want to be with you all the time—all my life——" but instead all he said was:

"Well, if I didn't come I suppose that wouldn't suit you."

"It would suit me a darned sight better," Sally answered, but there was a sob catching her voice that robbed her words of their bitterness.

And there followed another silence, which Sanderson broke stiltedly. "Did you get the grapes and flowers I sent?"

"Yes. Can't you see for yourself?"

She indicated the locker beside the bed upon which the flowers stood in a cheap vase, the big bunch of luscious purple grapes on a plate beside them.

"You don't seem to have eaten any," Sanderson said, and she answered shortly:

"I haven't. I hate grapes."

He bit his lip. He had thought himself immune to all her snappy little ways and unkindnesses, and yet they hurt so much more now she was ill and weak, than they had done when, as the life and soul of the Faun Café, she had danced her way into his heart. He was conscious of many pairs of interested eyes fixed upon him from the other beds in the long ward, and they all added to his awkward nervousness.

"If there's anything else you would prefer, you have only to tell me," he said bluntly.

Sally pushed the yellow hair back from her forehead.

"Thank you. I'm not a beggar," she said sullenly.

Sanderson sat staring at her, his brows frowning, his lips set in a hard line.

"Sometimes is downstairs," he submitted after a moment.

"Ugly brute!" Sally muttered.

That was the final blow. Sanderson rose to his feet. "I shan't come again till you send for me," he said.

"You won't ever come again, then," was her retort, but when he had moved a step away from the bed she turned over as well as she could and spoke his name sharply:

"Philip!"

It was not often that she called him by his Christian name, and his heart thumped absurdly.

"Well?" He stood looking back at her.

Sally smiled—a—tremulous ghost of a smile—and half held out her hand.

"You'd be as big a pig as me if you'd got the pain I have," she said.

"I'm so sorry, Sally."

The words were expressionless, and yet his heart was aching with pity for her. His love for her was a burning furnace, locked in his breast and with no way of escape.

"Come and sit down again," she whispered. "I want to talk to you." He obeyed dumbly, but she was silent for some moments before she said again: "No one but you and Poppy has been to see me. Don't the others know?"

"They all know at the Faun."

A flicker of pain crossed her face.

"A nice lot of friends they are, then," she said with weary mirth. "Not a letter or a bunch of violets from one of them."

"I'll send you all the violets you want," Sanderson said, but he knew she wanted no flowers from him—nothing from him.

She shut her eyes, and her mouth folded into lines of pain. He watched her silently, knowing what she wanted to ask him, what she was trying to ask him.

Presently it came.

"Have you seen Josh Akers?"

"Yes."

The blue eyes snapped open.

"When?"

"Yesterday. I took your letter to him—the letter you gave the doctor."

"Oh!" It was a little cry of pain. "Yesterday! and he hasn't been to see me, nor written to me."

"He won't," Sanderson said grimly.

"What do you mean?"

Sanderson was no tactician.

"Because I gave him a black eye which will keep him indoors for a fortnight at least," he said with grim satisfaction.

Sally screamed. She tried to raise herself on her elbow, then fell back with a cry of pain, tears of rage raining down her cheeks.

"You brute! you brute! you brute!" she said shrilly.

A nurse came quickly across the ward.

"What is the matter? You mustn't scream like that," she said reprovingly.

Sally was sobbing hysterically.

"He's a brute. Send him away. I won't have him here. I hate him. Send him away."

"I'm just going," Sanderson said. He rose to his feet. "I'm sorry, Sally."

She beat the coverlet with her clenched hands.

"I hate you. I hate you. Go away."

"Yes, please go," said the nurse, but there was a sympathetic gleam in her eyes as she looked at Sanderson.

"And never come back, never come back!" Sally sobbed after him.

Sanderson went out of the ward and downstairs to where Sometimes was still faithfully keeping guard over his hat.

He knew he had behaved like a clumsy fool, and he cursed himself for it. Why was it that when he was with Sally he always seemed to do and say the wrong thing, he asked himself bitterly.

No wonder she hated him. Well, he would take her at her word, he would not go back unless she sent for him. Perhaps then she would be sorry—perhaps then. . . .

"Not she!" he said aloud as he strode away down the street with the dog capering around him. "Not she! She wouldn't care a damn if she never set eyes on me again."

But for a week he kept away from the hospital, although every morning he rang up to inquire how Sally was.

The news he received was never very satisfactory, and he always had the uncomfortable conviction that the message across the 'phone was just an ordinary formula handed out to all inquirers, but for once in his life pride stood between him and Sally.

She had said that she hated him and did not wish to see him again—well, he would take her at her word.

And then on the eighth day Poppy called to see him.

She came quite early in the morning—which was unusual for her, because as a rule she stayed in bed until lunch-time unless there was some very exciting reason for getting up earlier—and he heard her excited voice arguing with Mrs. Kiff in the doorway before she was admitted. Sanderson was in his shirt-sleeves, shaving, but as instinct told him that Poppy's visit must have something to do with Sally Lingfield, he only waited to wash the lather from his chin and snatch up a dressing-gown before he went to join her in the sitting-room.

The fire had just been laid, and its sticks were crackling sulkily in the grate, and outside in the street the world looked grey and depressing. Poppy was wrapped in a pretentious coat of cheap fur, and her lips were more scarlet than usual.

"You're a nice one!" was her sarcastic greeting.

"What do you mean?"

Sanderson stooped to throw a lump of coal on to the fire, thereby almost entirely extinguishing it.

"What I say," she answered rudely. "I thought you were going to look after Sally and see she had all she wanted. Isn't it your fault she's where she is now?"

"Well?"

"Well! you haven't been near her for a week; nobody has—not even that . . . Josh!" She called Akers a foul word. "She might die for all any of you pigs care. It's all right when a girl's well and about, but when she's down on her luck . . ."

Sanderson turned round.

"You can cut that out," he said bluntly. "If you've come here to abuse me you can clear off. If there's anything the matter with Sally——"

"Matter with Sally!" she almost screamed at him. "Everything's the matter with her! Here have they been ringing me up and writing to me from that bally hospital every day and all day, and you ask if there is anything the matter with her! A fine lot *you* care, don't you? What's going to become of her, I should like to know? Who's going to keep her for the rest of her life? Not *me*, I tell you!"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. There's a fine to-do! Talk about your doctors and hospitals! Nice mess they've made of Sally." She broke suddenly into hysterical tears, wringing her hands.

"Never be able to dance again, they said last night! Never be able to dance again! Oh, poor kid, poor kid! And all through you, you selfish swine!" Her dark eyes blazed fury into Sanderson's pale face. "If you hadn't been drunk it would never have happened," she accused him furiously.

Sanderson caught her by the wrist with an ungentle hand.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded hoarsely.

She tried to twist away from him but he held her fast.

"What I say!" she shouted. "Sally's done for! that's what it is! She'll never be able to dance again as long as she lives. They say that she'll be a cripple all her life."

# Chapter IV

Perhaps Poppy Sladen had the remnants of a heart hidden away somewhere beneath her cheap finery, for her face softened as she saw the pallor of Sanderson's.

For a moment he seemed to be bereft of speech; he just stared at her helplessly, his eyes dark with shock and his hard jaw fallen, but his cruel grip of her thin wrists did not relax even when she said again, almost gently for her:

"Here! don't take it too badly. I'm only telling you what the doctors said, and most of 'em are fools—that's my experience. Go round and find out for yourself. Sally's half crazed—swears she'll commit suicide."

With an effort Sanderson pulled himself together.

"If you're just trying to scare me——" he said roughly.

She shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Lord love your soul, what do I want to scare you for?" she demanded bluntly. "I'm sorry for you, that's all. It's your fault Sally's where she is, and it will be your fault if she stays on her back for the rest of her life. All I want to know is, who's going to keep her? Not Akers, if I know anything about men of his kidney, the low, dirty——"

Sanderson cut short her stream of abuse.

"Shut up!" he ordered. "It won't help matters to call that swine names. And as for—Sally—" He stumbled a little over the name that had seemed to grow infinitely more dear during the last few moments. "She'll be my care of course."

Poppy calmed down a little. She freed her wrists from his grasp, and settled her hat.

"Well, as long as someone does the straight thing—" she murmured. She sat down in a chair. "Give me a drink, there's a dear," she coaxed. "I've got to tramp my feet off all day. I tell you it takes me all my time to keep myself in bread and scrape, without being bothered with other people's affairs—not but what I wouldn't help Sally if I could——"

Sanderson hardly listened; he had gone back to his room and was taking off his dressing-gown.

“Help yourself to what you want,” he said abruptly. “You know where the brandy is. Wait five minutes for me and I’ll come along with you.”

Poppy rose with alacrity and helped herself to a stiff dose of brandy. She was more disturbed on Sally’s account than she chose to admit; she kept thinking with a sort of horror that it might have been she herself lying there in the bare hospital ward, without anyone of her own to care for her—not even a Josh Akers or a Philip Sanderson.

“Not that any men are worth a curse,” she told herself viciously as she drained the glass and mixed a second drink.

Sometimes had risen from his cushion in a corner of the room, and was watching her with interested eyes, his long, whip-like tail waving to and fro.

Poppy looked at him nervously; she was afraid of all animals; she was fond of declaring that in her last time on earth she was sure she had been a hunted deer or a “poor mangy rabbit” as she expressed it.

She called out now to Sanderson.

“Here, is this ugly brute of yours going to bite me? I don’t like the look of him.”

“He won’t touch you unless you try to set about me,” Sanderson answered grimly.

He was trying to fasten his tie, but his hands shook badly and made him bungle it, and he swore aloud.

Poppy heard him from the next room and laughed.

“Don’t you swear in front of a lady!” she admonished him. The brandy had put her in a better temper.

Sanderson came back into the room; he looked at the empty glass on the table beside her.

“How you can drink that filthy stuff at this time of the morning beats me,” he said gruffly. “You ought to drink coffee, a girl of your age.”

“You don’t know what my age is,” she answered. She looked up at him coyly from beneath her blackened lashes. “Now, how old do you think I am?” she inquired interestedly. “Bet you you can’t guess.”

“I’m not going to try,” he answered uncompromisingly. “And I’m ready when you are.”

“Ready—for what?”

“To go to the hospital, of course.”

Poppy laughed and drew her chair closer to the fire.

“No use going there yet,” she said. “They’ve got proper visitin’ hours. Can’t go till two this afternoon.”

Sanderson swore.

“Of all the damnable red tape—Supposing she was dying?”

“She isn’t,” Poppy answered calmly. “If she was, they’d let you in at any old time, I suppose, and you’d find a screen round the bed and all sorts! I know! I’ve been in a hospital myself.” She made a grimace and drew her shoulders together in a shiver.

“No use thinking of going there yet,” she said again practically. “Far better wait till the proper time.” She stooped and poked the smoky fire into a small blaze. “Here, don’t you ever have any breakfast nowadays?” she asked.

“If you mean can you have some, you can’t,” Sanderson answered uncompromisingly. “Women aren’t supposed to come to these flats at all, you know that.”

She laughed provokingly.

“I know a lot, I do! Anyway I’m here!”

Sanderson took up his hat.

“If you want breakfast we’ll get some out. No nonsense, now,” he added sharply as she seemed about to defy him.

Poppy stared at him for a moment with resentful eyes, then she rose to her feet with a long-suffering sigh.

“You’re a hard nut to crack,” she said bitterly. “No wonder Sally won’t have any truck with you. Do you ever say anything nice to anyone, I wonder?”

“That’s my own business,” Sanderson answered.

He opened the door for her to pass out and whistled the dog.

“Going to bring that ugly brute?” Poppy asked.

“I am. Come on, old man.”

Sometimes needed no second invitation. He had been watching his master with growing anxiety, which vanished instantly as he followed

closely at his heels as they left the flat and went down the long stone staircase.

"What do you call him by such a silly name for?" Poppy asked scornfully.

Sanderson laughed.

"Because like me he likes to be made a fuss of 'sometimes,' " he said flippantly.

The girl stared at him disbelievingly, then she giggled.

"Go on! *you* like being made a fuss of! You won't get over me with that stuff."

"I don't want to get over you with that stuff or any other stuff," Sanderson answered.

He disliked Poppy, and only ever tolerated her for Sally's sake. Out in the street he set off at a great rate so that she had almost to run to keep pace with him. After a few moments she stopped breathlessly.

"What the Godfrey Daniels are you in such a hurry for?" she demanded angrily.

Sanderson slackened his speed.

"I'm sorry. I always walk quickly when I'm alone."

"Well, you're not alone now," she retorted.

They went to a small restaurant, and Sanderson passed Poppy the menu.

"Order what you like," he said briefly.

Poppy's eyes glowed. As a rule her breakfast consisted of a cup of stewed tea and a slice of unappetising bread and scrape. Even when she was in a position to afford a better meal she never troubled; by nature she was bone lazy. The dream of her life was to marry a rich man and keep a maid of her own.

"And I won't half make her fetch and carry," she once confided to Sally. "I'll lie in bed all day and ring the bell every ten minutes and make her answer it."

"She wouldn't stay long," Sally answered wisely. "And you'd soon get sick of lying in bed."

Poppy remembered Sally's words now as she pored greedily over the menu. How awful to *have* to lie in bed, and be alone as Sally was now! For a moment her interest in food waned and she looked across at Sanderson with tragic eyes.

"Here!" she said bluntly. "What do you suppose will become of me when I'm too old to work?"

It was always a nightmare thought to her, and one which cropped up at the oddest moments.

Sanderson shrugged his shoulders; his troubled thoughts were far enough away.

"You'll have found someone to keep you long before then, Poppy," he answered, not unkindly.

She laughed, rather sadly.

"To keep me, or marry me do you mean?" she asked with weary mirth.

Sanderson frowned.

"You'd better order what you want," he said.

Poppy sighed and turned again to the question of food.

"You're right," she agreed. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, eh? Well, I'll have porridge to start with and then eggs and bacon. What are you going to have?"

"I only want some coffee."

She looked disappointed; it was never so much fun eating alone.

"Well, if you don't mind watching the lions feed!" she said with an attempt at levity.

"We've got to kill time till we can go to the hospital," Philip Sanderson answered.

But as he watched her at her meal his grim dislike of her was oddly tempered with pity.

He knew a great deal of the ultimate ending of such girls as Poppy and Sally Lingfield, and he fully realised the tragedy of it.

Poppy seemed vaguely to follow the trend of his thoughts, for she broke out suddenly:

"See the old girl at the desk over there?"

Sanderson glanced across the restaurant to where a woman of uncertain age, with a screw of unattractive grey hair and dark beady eyes, was closely watching them above a pile of account books.

"Well, what about her?" he asked casually. "She probably owns the place, or is the wife of the man who does."

Poppy smiled complacently.

"She's envying me like the devil," she said almost cheerfully; she liked to feel she was making another woman envious. "I'll bet she'd be surprised if I got up and went over to her and said 'look here, old sport, I'll change places with you if you like'—wouldn't she?"

"I dare say, and any way you wouldn't change places with her."

Poppy put down her porridge spoon. "Well then, I would!" she said suddenly earnest. "At any rate she's got a certain job and a wedding ring."

There was a note of genuine emotion in her voice that touched Philip Sanderson surprisingly.

"You poor little devil," he said.

Poppy winked away an unbidden tear.

"I'm sloppy," she informed him. "It's your brandy. It's gone to my head. Pour out the coffee, there's a dear."

Sanderson obeyed abstractedly. His thoughts were all with Sally. What in the world was to become of her? As far as money went, he was in a position to see that she wanted for nothing; but money was not everything. Where was she to live? and what was she to do? Who would look after her and be kind to her? He moved restlessly in his seat.

"What are you thinking about?" Poppy asked.

He told her unhesitatingly.

"About Sally, and what's to become of her. She'll have to live somewhere and with someone."

Poppy's dark eyes grew shrewish.

"Are you trying to back out of your responsibilities, too?" she asked.

Sanderson's face flamed.

"You know damn well I'm not," he said savagely. "As far as money goes, she'll never need to worry. But money alone won't make her happy."

Poppy smiled slyly.

"You're not still thinking of marrying her then?" she asked.

"If I were, she wouldn't have me," he answered curtly. "She's no time for me, and you know it." A sudden idea flashed into his mind. "Look here, what about you?" he asked eagerly. "I'd make it worth your while. I'd buy a place—somewhere in the country, and make it comfortable for you both. You're her friend—she'd be happy with you. What do you say?"

Poppy stared at him, her mouth and eyes wide open, and a lump of fat bacon dripping from the end of her fork.

"What! *me?*" she almost screamed at him. "Live in the country? With *Sally*? Leave London? Never dance any more? . . . not if you were to pay me a thousand a year. No, thank you."

Sanderson's face grew grim.

"I'm not likely to pay you a thousand a year, or even a quarter of it, which is more than you'll ever earn," he answered brutally. "Well, we won't argue any more."

"I should say not!" Poppy agreed. She went on with her bacon, eyeing him resentfully from time to time. "Live in the country, indeed!" she murmured again under her breath.

"Oh shut up!" Sanderson retorted irritably.

They relapsed into silence until the last scrap of bacon was consumed and the marmalade dish scraped clean, when Poppy sat back in her chair with a sigh.

"Well, I guess I can do without lunch to-day," she murmured happily. She smiled at Sanderson's moody face. "You're not such a bad sort you know, Philip."

"Thanks very much."

"If only you wouldn't wear that awful hat," she went on, getting more friendly. "And if you'd buy a decent tie."

He cut in rudely.

"I dress to please myself, not to please you, and if you're ready we'll be going."

"You're always in such a hurry," she complained. "We've got all day before us. What are you going to do now?"

“Go to the hospital.”

“They won’t let you in.”

“I think they will.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, *I’m* not coming,” she said flatly.

Sanderson called for the bill and took his hat down from the rack.

“That won’t break my heart,” he said calmly.

They went out again into the street.

“Well, I’ll love you and leave you,” Poppy said. “Thank you for my good breakfast. Amen,” she added mockingly.

Sanderson turned on his heel without answering.

He looked a forlorn, almost tragic figure as he slouched away down the street, with Sometimes walking so close to him that it was all he could do to keep from kicking the dog.

He was more miserable than he had ever been in his life. It was useless to try and take an optimistic view of the situation and hope that Poppy had exaggerated. In his heart he knew that she had not; in his heart he knew that Sally’s butterfly life was at an end, and that there remained for her . . . . what? Nothing! just *nothing*!

His way led him past Akers’ flat and with sudden impulse he turned aside and climbed the stairs to his door.

But no hammering or ringing of the bell brought forth any answer, though after a few moments the owner of the flat opposite came out to see what the noise was about and to volunteer the information that Akers was away.

“Gone abroad, and not coming back for months,” he told Sanderson.

“Has he left any address?”

The owner of the opposite flat shook his ill-kempt head. He was a seedy-looking individual who badly wanted shaving and a clean collar.

“Not as far as I know,” he answered.

Sanderson went downstairs again.

He had been sure there was nothing to hope for from that direction, and yet for Sally's sake he had felt bound to try.

He went along to the hospital and bribed the porter to let him in, but the house surgeon whom he had seen before was engaged and could not be disturbed.

"If you'll come again during visiting hours, sir——"

"I'll see the ward sister, then," Sanderson said stonily.

The porter was in despair.

"It'll cost me my place, sir. . . ."

"If it does, I'll get you another," Sanderson answered stoically.

Five minutes later he was talking to the ward sister.

It was quite true, she told him, quite true what Poppy had said—for once in her life apparently Poppy had not exaggerated. Unless a miracle happened, Sally Lingfield would never be able to dance again. It would be wonderful if she was ever able to walk properly. She saw the strain in Sanderson's face, and she added kindly:

"I'm so terribly sorry. If you can wait you can see the house surgeon. He is engaged just now, but later. . . ."

Sanderson made an impatient gesture.

"I don't want to see him. He'll only use Latin names that I shan't understand. Of course there will be no objection to my having another opinion. The highest possible. . . ."

"No objection whatever—anyone you like to call in——"

Sanderson broke in bluntly.

"If it's a question of money, no expense need be spared."

The Ward Sister smiled. She felt almost motherly towards this unhappy giant, who seemed to think that money was the golden key that could unlock the door of all troubles.

"It is against the rules," she said deprecatingly. "But if you would like to see Miss Lingfield before you go, I will arrange it. We have moved her into a private ward now——"

Sanderson's face changed.

"You have! she declared to me that she would not go."

“She did not want to, I assure you, but she was so . . . well, so very troublesome.” She smiled apologetically. “Naturally she takes everything very much to heart.”

“Naturally.”

“Well, if you will wait a moment I will tell her you are here.” She went away and Sanderson walked over to the window that looked out on to a grey courtyard. It looked like a prison yard to his overstrained fancy, and he had the terrible feeling that this place was a prison, a house of eternal punishment in which by his own action Sally was shut up for life.

Never to walk again! God, it was not fair!

His should have been the punishment if anyone’s; he who was so much better able to bear it.

Sometimes whined through sheer boredom; and pawed at his master’s feet.

“Let’s get out of this place,” his eloquent eyes seemed to plead.

Sanderson stooped and absently patted him.

“Good boy! good old son!”

The Ward Sister came back.

“I am sorry—I am so very sorry—but Miss Lingfield will not see you. She threw herself into such a state of excitement when I told her you were here that I am afraid it will only do her harm if you insist.” Her kind eyes were sympathetic. “Pardon me, but are you a relation?” she asked.

“No, only a friend—almost her only friend.”

“I see. There is a girl who has been here several times—also a dancer, I think.”

“Poppy Sladen.”

“Yes, that was the name.”

The Ward Sister looked as if she would like to have said more, but she kept silent, and Sanderson turned to go.

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said bluntly. “I will write to Miss Lingfield. In the meantime—” He laid his card on the table. “That address will find me if anything is wanted, and please remember that no expense is to be spared . . . anything she wants—*anything!*” He looked at her

helplessly, powerless to express all that was in his aching heart, utterly at a loss to know what to do for the best. Out in the street the sun was shining; its warmth fell upon his face, and he thought suddenly of the country—the green fields, and the spring flowers that would soon be lifting their faces to the sunshine. If only Sally had cared for him! He could have made her life so happy in spite of the tragedy that had befallen her; but as it was—if she had been indifferent to him before, she must hate him now.

He wandered back to his flat where he found Mrs. Kiff in the midst of a vigorous "turn out" of his sitting-room.

She stared when he walked in, it was seldom that Sanderson put in an appearance during the day.

"I hope as that you've not come in for lunch, sir," she said severely. "It's my turning out day, and you can see for yourself what a mess the place is in."

Sanderson stood in the doorway regarding her helplessly.

"I don't know what I've come in for," he said grimly. "Anyway I can go out again."

"It's a nice day for a walk," Mrs. Kiff said uncompromisingly. "A nice day for a breath of the country fields."

Sanderson hesitated, looking at her.

"Do you like the country, Mrs. Kiff?"

"*Like* it!" Mrs. Kiff sniffed inelegantly. "It's the only thing in life that I *do* like," she told him. "Bricks and mortar are all right in their way, and my bread and butter's here, but some day—if I can ever save enough, good-bye to London for me. A cottage in the country, and a few chickens, and a patch of garden where you can grow a cabbage. . . ." She stopped her eloquence abruptly, looking a trifle ashamed. "Well, we all has our private dreams," she added, bridling a little.

Sanderson shut the open door and came a step further into the room.

"How would you like a job in the country, Mrs. Kiff?" he asked.

She stared at him suspiciously.

"What sort of a job?" she inquired.

Sanderson shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well—looking after a cottage, and waiting on a . . . well, on someone who is not very strong—with me down for week-ends perhaps."

She stopped her vigorous polishing of his table and rubbed the tip of her nose with a stubby forefinger.

"What part of the country?" she demanded.

"Oh, anywhere! I haven't thought about it yet. It's just an idea of mine. There you are! I make you the offer. Twenty-five shillings a week and everything found. You can have the chickens and the cabbage patch too, if you like, as long as you don't expect me to look after them."

Mrs. Kiff's keen eyes suddenly misted over as if with tears.

"You're making fun of me, sir," she said, and her voice was quite changed, it sounded somehow young, almost like a girl's.

"No, on my honour," Sanderson answered.

But she was still suspicious.

"And the—lady who is not very strong?" she inquired. "I suppose, leastways, that it *will* be a lady, sir?"

Mrs. Kiff was well versed in her world.

Sanderson attempted no denial.

"Yes, a young lady who has met with a bad accident and may never walk again."

Mrs. Kiff fixed him with solemn eyes in which one could almost see the shuttle of thought passing to and fro as she weighed up the pros and cons of this amazing offer.

Then suddenly she picked up her duster which had fallen to the ground and resumed her vigorous polishing.

"You find the cottage, sir," she said practically. "Find the cottage first, and then we'll come down to hard tacks."

Sanderson took her work-roughened hand in his.

"You're a brick, Mrs. Kiff," he said gruffly.

She stared down at the hand holding hers for a moment, then very gently she drew it away.

"Oh, well," she said calmly, "that's as may be. Anyway, I've always said as that you're not so black as you're painted, and maybe I wasn't so far

wrong. I always said as that you've got an 'eart 'idden about you somewhere."

Sanderson laughed.

"And that's where you're entirely wrong," he told her lightly. "I haven't got a heart hidden about me anywhere. I gave it away long enough ago."

# Chapter V

The day following her interview with Philip Sanderson, Poppy Sladen called to see Sally.

As she had heard nothing more, she was confident that things had been satisfactorily fixed up, and that her responsibility with regard to her friend was at an end.

It was always easy for Poppy to believe the thing she wanted to believe. She felt almost happy as she walked through the streets to the hospital. The sun was shining, and she was wearing a new hat, the result of careful pinching and saving over the matter of food, and last night she had met a new admirer at the Café where she was engaged to exploit the boldness of her eyes and the slenderness of her legs.

Certainly he was elderly, red-faced, and not at all attractive, but he had not minded paying for Cliquot, and at parting he had expressed the earnest desire to see her again.

So Poppy felt that her star was in the ascendant until she reached the small private ward wherein Sally lay at the end of the highly polished passage and met her friend's antagonistic gaze.

"Hullo!" said Poppy, not very happily.

She knew Sally well enough to know that the sullen look in her eyes boded no good, and she felt uncomfortably aware of her new hat.

"So you've managed to find your way here at last, have you?" was Sally's greeting. "I wonder how you'd like it, to be left all day by yourself. Not a soul to speak to except a pie-faced nurse who comes and rams filthy medicine down your throat every half-hour, or a fool of a doctor who pinches and pummels you till you could scream."

Poppy stood at the foot of the bed twisting her vanity bag.

"Hasn't Philip Sanderson been?" she asked.

"He came, but I wouldn't see him," Sally answered. "If you think I want that lanky, miserable creature hanging round me, you're mistaken."

Poppy flushed.

"What *do* you want, then?" she asked bluntly.

Sally shut her eyes, perhaps to hide the tears of weak unhappiness that sprang to them unbidden.

"I want to die," she said tersely.

There was a tragic silence, then Poppy dragged up a chair and sat down.

"Look here, my girl," she said in her most businesslike manner, "It's time you stopped fooling and listened to common sense. I'm sorry all this has happened, you know that; but it's not my fault, and I can't help it, can I? The thing you've got to do is to be sensible and make those who *can* help it pay for the damage."

"What do you mean?" Sally's blue eyes opened—all wet they were and sorrowful. She looked like a helpless child at that moment instead of the shrewd woman of the world Poppy Sladen knew her to be.

"I mean Philip Sanderson," Poppy said firmly. "Now it's no use squealing. You've got to swallow this medicine, no matter if it does choke you. Sanderson's got money, and you and I haven't got a brass farthing except what we're lucky enough to earn. They say you'll never be able to dance again, don't they? Oh, I know it hurts, but you've got to face facts ——"

"Rub it in!" Sally said in a stifled voice.

"I'm not rubbing it in. I'm trying to help you do what's best," Poppy maintained sensibly. "Philip's keen on you—always has been. Well, you're lucky he is. He's more than willing to see you're all right. Don't be a little fool and chuck such a chance away. He'll buy you a place in the country—he told me he would—and get someone to live with you."

"He's not dying to live with me himself any longer," Sally interrupted with dreary sarcasm.

Poppy went on unheeding.

"He's a decent sort is Sanderson. A bit mad, but what man isn't, I should like to know. You be decent to him, and he'll never let you down."

"I don't want him. I hate him."

"If you gild a pill over it's not so bad," Poppy declared sententiously. "Besides, if you send him about his business what are you going to do when you come out of here? I can't keep you, can I?"

"I don't want anyone to keep me. I want to die."

“Then you’re a fool,” Poppy said bluntly. “We do know the worst of this world, but we don’t know what rotten old muck is coming to us in the next.” She rose to her feet. “Well, you think it over.”

“You’re not going already?” Sally asked hurriedly. “Oh, don’t go yet. I shall have to lie here for hours and hours by myself—for all the rest of the day. Don’t go yet, Poppy, there’s a dear.”

Poppy hesitated. Much as she loathed sickness and hospitals, she was sufficiently kind-hearted to spend the rest of the day with Sally, but she was shrewd enough to see that loneliness and fear of the future was probably the only thing to drive her to make friends with Philip Sanderson, so she kept her face averted as she carefully powdered her already flour-white cheeks, and answered:

“Can’t waste any more time now, my chicken. I’ve got to look after Number One. I’ll come again to-morrow.” She gave Sally’s slender hand a remorseful squeeze as it lay on the cotton quilt.

“Don’t you be a damned little idiot,” she counselled kindly, and was gone.

Sally lay still, listening to her departing steps, the tears trickling slowly from her closed lids. There was a very frenzy of despair in her heart. She had faced trouble of all sorts before, but never any so great as this. She had danced her way through life on bread and cheese and slept on a hard bed, but at any rate she had always danced! and now her one pleasure was taken from her, and she was left high and dry on the shore of despair—helpless as a felled tree cast up by an ebb tide. There was nobody to whom she could turn. Josh Akers, for whom she hungered with all her heart, had not been near her, and she knew that now he would never come again. Poppy was too full of her own concerns to be seriously bothered with her; there remained then, only Philip Sanderson.

“And I don’t want him. I don’t want him one little bit,” Sally told herself in anguish.

When she was well she had enjoyed his company up to a point; she had enjoyed riding in his car, and she had enjoyed the knowledge that apart from herself he disregarded all women, but now such small satisfactions were swallowed up and thrown aside. She wanted someone to love her and care for her—someone whom she could love in return. What was the use of resting her tired head on a shoulder which gave her no thrill? What was the use of taking money from a man who was no more to her than the iron end

of her narrow bedstead, or the empty wooden chair beside her upon which Poppy had just sat and talked in her level, sensible voice. And yet, when she left the hospital—and she knew it would not be so very long now before they wanted her bed for someone else—what was to become of her? Sally had met other girls in just such a position as her own. One—a girl named Jessie Wayley, who had danced in the chorus at a West End Theatre, and developed consumption, had drifted from one hospital to another, and from one sanitorium to another, friendless, and hopeless, until at last she had died.

"And I shan't even die," Sally told herself in panic. "People who are crippled like I shall be never die young! They just go on until they're old and hideous to look at, and then they die in the workhouse." She shivered from head to foot at the thought. And she had been so ambitious! had hoped for so much. Another girl she had known—not nearly so pretty as she was, or such a dainty dancer—had married the younger son of a title, and now bought all her clothes in Hanover Square and drove her own car. Sally had been ambitious, but not so ambitious as that. All she had wanted of life was to be the wife of Josh Akers. It had not seemed a great deal to ask, but he had thought it too much. The aching pain in her heart was very near to hatred as she remembered their last meeting. She had cried, and he had sworn at her. It had been a mistake to cry—she could see that now. Men hated tears and scenes. If you wanted to keep a man in love with you, you had to be always laughing and cheerful. If you wanted to keep a man faithful you must never show him how greatly you cared. Sally beat her thin little hands on the cotton quilt. If only she could have things over again; just six months—just three! but now it was too late, and the future of which she had hoped such great things was like a black, bottomless pit into which she knew she must fall unless some strong, kind hand stretched out and saved her. Only that morning the nurse, who meant to be kind, but who was always so terribly busy and businesslike, had said to her:

"Let me cut your hair off. You'll be so much more comfortable with short hair."

Sally had almost killed her.

"Don't you dare to touch my hair!" she raved. Her chief beauty! To think that anyone had dared to make such a cold-blooded suggestion. Philip Sanderson loved her hair, she knew; he was not a man who said a great deal, but she knew that he loved her hair. There was something silently kind about him in spite of his blunt speech and queer personality. She was vaguely sure that he would not have laughed at her as Josh Akers had done.

It made her cheeks burn to remember the stinging things Josh had said to her. And yet she had gone back to him! gone back like a dog that has been whipped, ready to forgive and kiss the hand that mastered her. Well, that part of her life was ended; she had got to carve out some new and strange path for herself now; some *lonely* path!

Sally dreaded loneliness! her greatest horror had always been that some day she would find herself friendless as Jessie Wayley had done—that some day she would have to die alone.

Panic seized upon her.

Anything would be better than that! even Philip Sanderson would be better—a thousand times better.

A house in the country! ugh! how she loathed the country! and someone to look after her, so Poppy had said, holding out as a great inducement these things which she herself would have loathed.

Someone to look after her! some paid, disagreeable woman, who would bully her and treat her as a half-wit.

Sally tried to raise herself on her elbow, but the pain in her side hurt her and forced her back on to the pillow again.

Horrible, horrible! this utter helplessness. She who had been as light as thistledown on her tiny feet.

She remembered once going with Poppy to a Christian Science meeting. She did not know why they had gone—just out of curiosity, she supposed, but the speaker had impressed upon the audience the wonderful effect of will-power!

"Never give way! By will-power one can conquer most weaknesses. Hold fast to the thought of health and strength, and health and strength will be yours."

"All tommy-rot," so Poppy had whispered to her at the time, but now, weak and defeated as she felt herself to be, it seemed to Sally that perhaps after all there might be a glimmer of truth in what they had heard.

"Never give way! Hold fast to the thought of health and strength, and health and strength will be yours."

She lay very still for a moment, her eyes closed; then slowly and with infinite difficulty she tried once more to raise herself in bed. The perspiration poured down her white face with the pain and the supreme

effort, but still she persevered, until she had forced herself to the edge of the narrow bed. If only she could get on her feet once more, she was sure she would find these last nightmare weeks only a dream.

She was so young! how could one be crippled for life when one was so young! God could never be so cruel. Sally had never thought of the name of God except as a swear-word, but it came to her lips now more like a prayer. She did not know if He existed, but in her extremis she was willing to believe anything, to try any source that might help her.

"Oh God, oh God!" she said over and over again in a trembling whisper, her eyes closed, and every nerve of her body strained in her supreme effort to raise herself.

Someone opened the door——

"Whatever are you trying to do!" the cool, practical voice of the nurse demanded. She crossed the room swiftly and with firm, capable hands made Sally lie down again.

For a moment Sally fought with all the poor little remnants of her strength.

"Leave me alone. I want to get up. I know I can if you leave me alone. I won't lie here any more. Let me get up."

But her defiance was short-lived, and ended in a passion of weeping that left her weak and prostrate.

"You're a naughty, foolish little girl," the nurse reprimanded her. "You may have done yourself untold harm. Whatever madness possessed you?"

Sally did not know, and whatever madness it had been, it had gone now. She was beaten—beaten to the ground. She had no more hope—she did not believe in Will-Power, or God, or that there was anyone in Heaven or earth who would help her except perhaps Philip Sanderson.

She did not want him, but he was the last rock to which she clung. Later in the day when she was calmer and had slept a little she asked for paper and pencil and wrote him a note in her weak, ill-formed writing.

*Dear Phillip,*

*Please come and see me.*

*Sally.*

She spelt “Philip” with two l’s, as she spelt her own name.

“I suppose if I’d got any sense I’d send my love,” she thought when she had sealed it into its envelope. “But I don’t love him, and I don’t want him to love me. I only want him to keep me from being alone all the rest of my hateful life.”

Philip Sanderson came early the following day. Sally recognised his step along the bare passage long before it reached her door, but she lay very still with closed eyes, and did not move until she knew he was standing beside her bed. Then suddenly she looked up at him.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” she said tremulously.

“You knew I should come,” Sanderson answered.

“Well, sit down—” Already she was feeling irritable with him; already she was asking herself desperately why it could not have been Josh Akers who was willing and ready to stand by her. What a difference it would have made to everything! A cottage in the country with Josh! to know that it was his money paying for her, his love caring for her.

“Sit down,” she said again sharply. “You’re so tall—you give me the shudders.”

Sanderson dragged up the only chair in the room and sat down.

“You know what they’ve done to me,” Sally said in a hard little voice.

“I know what *I’ve* done to you,” he answered harshly.

She winced at that, the ready tears brimming to her eyes.

“I’ll never be able to dance again,” she whispered.

His face twitched as if with pain.

“That’s what they say here,” he said gently—so gently that she hardly recognised his voice. “But there are other doctors in the world, Sally, and when you are stronger and better able to bear things——”

She cut in sharply.

“I’m not going to be mauled about any more. They’ve hurt me enough. I’ll just have to put up with it.”

She bit her lip till it bled to keep back suffocating sobs that choked her, but in the end they came—terrible, heart-broken sobs that seemed to rend her frail body.

“Sally—oh, for God’s sake . . .!” Sanderson sought in agony for words that would comfort her, but his own heart was nearly breaking. He just took her hand in both his, and held it hard, touching it once with his lips as if it were something most precious.

When she was quieter, and lay with closed eyes, little sobbing breaths shaking her now and then, he found his voice.

“Don’t quarrel with me, Sally. Let me stay with you always. My life is yours, and everything I have. I need not tell you—you must know. I’ll get a place in the country if you like—or London—but I think the country would be best. There’ll be a garden—and you can have a pony trap, or a little car. . . . I’ll fill the place with flowers, and you can have any friends you want. I’ll do anything—you’ve only got to say what you want. . . . You’re fond of flowers and sunshine . . . you’ll get to love the country. . . . Oh, my dear, I’m such a clumsy fool, I can’t say half what’s in my heart—half what I want to do for you. . . . Just believe in me, Sally, that’s all . . . I’ll stand by you—I’ll never fail you. . . . Sally—say you believe me.”

Her face was turned away from him; hardly less white it was than the pillow on which she lay.

“You’re just . . . sorry for me,” she whispered.

Even in her weakness and distress her vanity wanted to hear him say that he loved her, even though she cared nothing for him, and the touch of his hand and the tenderness of his lips had given her no pleasure.

“You’re just sorry for me . . . just paying your liabilities,” she said again.

And then, almost for the first time in his queer life, eloquence came to Philip Sanderson.

“I love you with all my heart and soul,” he said. “I’d give my life to undo what I have done to you, Sally.”

She would have been less than human not to have recognised the deep sincerity of his voice, not to have responded to it a little.

She looked at him, and smiled.

“You’ll get to hate me when you find out how horrid I can be,” she said.

“I found that out long ago,” he answered whimsically.

She was not sure whether she ought to be offended, but there was an expression in Sanderson’s eyes that took any sting from his words.

“How much longer must I stay here?” she asked instead.

“I don’t know. I’ll see the doctor.”

She clung to his hand.

“Take me away soon, Philip.”

“You shall not stay a moment longer than is absolutely necessary,” he promised her.

He was almost happy when, after seeing the doctor, he went away. He told himself that perhaps, after all, out of this tragedy he might yet find some happiness. He walked bare-headed through the streets, letting the cool air blow upon his forehead.

At any rate, Sally belonged to him now, and not to Akers or any other man. She was entirely dependent on him—she would owe everything to him—and he found a great happiness in the knowledge.

At the back of his mind he knew that Sally had only made the best bargain with him she could make in the circumstances; perhaps he fully realised that it was only of herself she had thought all the time, and never once of him.

But he was more than content.

When he got back to his flat he wrote a note to Mrs. Kiff, and left it for her to find when she came in the morning.

> *I have gone to look for that cottage in the country, so make up your mind to come along soon and find the chickens and the cabbage patch.*

Then he brushed Sometimes, rubbed up the dog’s red, white and blue collar, packed a handbag, and looked up a train into Surrey.

# Chapter VI

"I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!
I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er! . . ."

Mrs. Kiff broke off discordantly on a high note, wiped the suds from her arms, and went to answer the sharp rat-tat on the cottage door. It was a bright April morning—one of those wonderfully fresh mornings when it is good to be alive, and there seems no discordant note in the music of the world.

A small apple tree in the tiny front garden was laden with blossom, some petals of which had fallen to the grass below in a fairy shower; away in a tree a blackbird was singing to the sun till its throat seemed likely to burst, and there were rows of daffodils and narcissi in the long narrow bed edged with white stones which stretched from the cottage to the green-painted gate.

A bicycle leaned drunkenly against the gate this morning, and a cheeky-looking telegraph boy with his cap at the back of his head was lolling against the front door as Mrs. Kiff opened it with an energetic hand.

"Name of Lingfield," he said in a bored voice, offering the yellow envelope for acceptance.

Mrs. Kiff snatched it. She hated telegrams on principle; from her point of view they never brought anything but bad news, and for a moment her happiness in the glorious morning and in her new-found life was marred, and she held the envelope at arm's length as if afraid it would bite her as she carried it along the little passage to Sally's room.

Sally was still in bed, and although the room was tiny, in its own way it was a little palace wherein Sally was an enthroned queen amongst her lace-trimmed pillows, her golden hair spread out around her like wings.

"A telegram," said Mrs. Kiff uncompromisingly. "But if you don't want to open it, I'll tell him to take it back."

Sally smiled. She and Mrs. Kiff had lived together now for two months and had—after many sharp words and tussles of wills—begun to understand one another.

"I expect it's from Philip," she said without much interest. "Give it to me and don't be silly."

She opened the envelope and read the brief message:

*Can't come down till to-morrow. Sorry.—Philip.*

Sally frowned.

"He's not coming till to-morrow," she said. "There's no answer."

Mrs. Kiff departed to dismiss the boy and returned.

"Now, I suppose, you're disappointed," she submitted sympathetically.

Sally shook her head.

"Not very, only you needn't have been in such a hurry to put up clean curtains after all, need you?"

Mrs. Kiff sniffed.

"If I hadn't he'd have come and found 'em dirty," she said defensively. "I know men. They always turn up when it's h'inconvenient."

"He'd never have noticed if they'd been as black as the grate," Sally said indifferently.

Mrs. Kiff opened her lips to argue, then closed them again with a snap. From the first she had been fond of Sally, although she entirely disapproved of her.

She thought Sally both selfish and ungrateful, and during the first few weeks after they came to the cottage she never lost an opportunity to rub in the fact that it was the will of God that Sally should have to lie on her back, and that the will of God was a thing to which all poor mortals had to bow the neck.

Lately she had not been quite so insistent; lately she had sympathised more with the terrible monotony of being helpless; lately she had grown more than ordinarily fond of Sally—she had grown to love her.

"Though swear!" so she told Sanderson in a shocked voice. "My word, where did a bit of a thing like her pick up them awful words?"

"It doesn't mean anything more than if you or I said 'bother,'" Sanderson assured her. "And if you don't take any notice she'll soon leave off using them, you'll see."

So now Mrs. Kiff closed her mouth like a steel trap and went back to her washing, and a moment later her shrill, unlovely voice was once more

rending the spring morning with the same refrain which the telegraph boy had temporarily interrupted:

"I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!
I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er! . . ."

Sally smiled and frowned as she listened.

Mrs. Kiff had learned that song from a gramophone record which Philip Sanderson had brought from Town with a dozen others, and although at first Sally had liked it, she was growing weary of the sentimental refrain as interpreted by Mrs. Kiff's unlovely soprano:

"As long as my ha-hart—shall beat! . . ."

Sally closed her eyes and turned her face against the cool linen of her pillow.

To her restless, rebellious heart the last two months had been an eternity.

Sometimes she thought it must have been in another lifetime that Philip had brought her down from Town in the finest car he could hire, with a glorious bunch of crimson roses lying beside her, and the most wonderful downy cushions and softest rugs to enfold her, to this cottage.

"It's yours—you very own for life," he told her as he carried her in his arms from the car, pausing for a moment at the gate and watching her with eager eyes to see what effect the little house had upon her.

Perhaps it was unfortunate that it had been a grey, gloomy day, unfortunate that the trees were dripping with recent rain, and that the sitting-room chimney had smoked while they were having tea, for at any rate Sally had seen nothing beautiful in the home which he had prepared for her with such care and thought, and the tears had run down her cheeks and her lips had trembled as he put her gently down on a wonderful invalid couch by the fire, just touching her hair with his lips as he said rather wistfully, "I do hope you will be happy here." Sally was a little ashamed to remember that she had answered ungraciously that she never expected to be happy anywhere again; after all, he had been wonderfully good to her—there were not many men in the world, so her bitter experience told her, who would have been so generous and faithful.

The cottage was a tiny one—three bedrooms, one sitting-room, and a good-sized kitchen at the back with a long, low roofed wash-house leading out of it into the garden.

Philip had had the whole place decorated and furnished to Sally's own taste, with the result that it was rather a curious mixture. For one thing, she had chosen satinwood for her bedroom, and blue draperies to the bed and the windows of a rich damask silk which was far too heavy for such a little room; and in the sitting-room there were too many pink cushions and pink lampshades, and there was a horrible humpty stool on the floor in front of the fire-place covered in gold brocade with a green dragon sprawling all over it.

Mrs. Kiff hated that green dragon and always declared that some day it would come to life and spit fire at them.

"If you'd had a nice bird instead, now!" she would say every time she brushed it. "A nice bird with a long tail, or something 'uman!"

Sally invariably silenced her with the remark, "It's my house. I shall have what I like. Besides, you haven't got any taste."

"If green dragons is taste, thank the Lord I 'aven't," Mrs. Kiff declared piously.

Apart from such small details, Mrs. Kiff was entirely happy. She cleaned and scrubbed and polished from morning till night to her heart's content, thanking heaven a hundred times a day that down in the country there were no smuts to dirty her curtains, and no fog to turn her brass and silver rust-red.

She kept the cottage like a new pin, and she kept Sally like a little princess.

Every week-end Sanderson and Sometimes came down to stay from Saturday to Monday, and then Philip took Sally out in a long spinal chair, or in a car, and Sometimes ran on ahead like an outrider, returning every few moments to see that everything was in order.

The cottage was in the heart of the Surrey hills, and nearly two miles from the nearest village.

At first Sally grumbled at its isolation.

"Nothing but fields and trees," she wailed. "I shall die if I can't have more life. If only a motor-bus would go by!"

But when the weather improved her spirits improved also. A great many motor cars passed near the little cottage, and sometimes as she lay in her long chair in the small front garden, people would stop and speak to her.

One day the vicar from the village rode over on his bicycle and had tea.

"A nosey Parker, that's what he is," Mrs. Kiff declared after he had taken his departure. "Sich impidence! He asked me what relation you was to Mr. Sanderson."

Sally smiled and her blue eyes sparkled with unusual interest.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I told him you was none!" Mrs. Kiff said emphatically. "I told him you was just friends, and then I as good as told him that it weren't any business of his, anyway."

Sally laughed.

"There'll be a scandal," she said, and was pleased.

When Sanderson came down at the week-end she told him.

"We've had the vicar to tea. He was a nice vicar with big shoulders and grey hair. He asked Mrs. Kiff what relation I was to you."

"He can mind his own damned business," Sanderson said sullenly. "I hate all parsons."

"I don't expect he'll come again," Sally answered. "I think he was shocked."

But the parson did come again, several times. He was a very human parson, and he told Sally that he was a lonely man and that he lived in a big rambling vicarage, the half of which had been shut up since his wife died six years before.

"Do you live all alone?" Sally asked.

"Yes. I have a son, but he is abroad."

"A black sheep, I expect," Sally suggested. She had a vague idea that all parsons' sons were black sheep.

The vicar laughed, but he did not look at all offended.

"Well, he's a wanderer, certainly," he admitted. "He found life too dull here, so he went abroad. I don't blame him. I dare say if I could have done as I wanted to do when I was his age, I should not have been the vicar of Ash Hill now."

"It can't be much of a job," Sally agreed.

She liked the parson; he had kind eyes and a deep voice, and his name was Nairn—a name of which, as she told him, she entirely approved. “It sounds upper-tennish!” she explained.

“It’s a good old Scotch name,” the parson told her.

One day Sally asked him how old he was.

“How old do you think?” he inquired with a twinkle.

She hazarded a guess.

“About sixty?”

“No, I’m only fifty-three. My son is twenty-eight.”

“What’s his name?”

“Garry!”

“What a funny name.”

“It was his mother’s maiden name.”

“Oh!”

It was strange how interested Sally became in all these little things. Three months ago it would have bored her unspeakably to talk to such a man as Robert Nairn; it would have bored her unspeakably to take tea with him, but now she quite enjoyed his visits and looked forward to them.

In return for his little confidences she told him about herself and how she used to dance at the Faun Café.

Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed with excitement at the memory of those days that now seemed so far, so very far away.

She described the frocks she used to wear, and the admiration she got from the men, and the suppers she used to be taken to, and the flowers that were given to her.

“Have you ever been to the Faun?” she asked.

The parson shook his head.

“No; but I am sure it must be a very amusing place,” he said kindly.

“It was! It was just—heaven!” Sally breathed, and the tears ran down her cheeks.

She looked away from him to the open window and the garden outside, where the trees were budding, and the daffodils were peeping up above their

bed of green leaves, and she saw instead the blue and gold upholstery of the Faun Café, with its dozens of small tables, each one lit with a golden lamp, the many flushed, excited faces, and the gleam of the polish floor upon which her tiny feet had so often danced.

"It was just—heaven!" she breathed again.

The parson smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"We all have such different ideas of heaven," he said. "Now what do you think mine is?"

Sally wiped the tears from her eyes to answer scornfully.

"Golden stairs, I suppose, and harps and angels."

He shook his head.

"No. It's a spring morning like this—sunshine and flowers and birds, and perhaps an apple tree in blossom like that one in your garden. There could be no greater heaven."

Sally stared at him.

"You *are* funny," she said.

But again he was not at all offended; he just laughed and said that it was a good thing everyone had not the same opinions.

Then Sally told him about her accident.

"It was Philip's fault," she said in a hard, ugly voice. "He was drunk and he knocked me down with his car. He always *is* drunk after six o'clock in the evening," she added angrily.

"And who is Philip?" Mr. Nairn asked.

"Philip Sanderson. He gave me this cottage, and he pays for Mrs. Kiff, and for me, too. He comes down every week-end. I expect you'll see him some day. He's very tall—like a chimney-stack, and he wears awful clothes, and he's got a hideous dog called 'Sometimes,' who goes everywhere with him. You'd laugh if you saw them, I expect."

"And it was he who knocked you down?"

"Yes, the——" Sally bit back a bad word just in time. Somehow, by instinct, she never used bad words before Mr. Nairn.

"Poor man!"

She stared at him.

“It’s me who’s the poor one,” she said offendedly.

“I am more sorry for him,” Mr. Nairn insisted gently. “Think what his remorse must be.”

Sally considered.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said reluctantly. “He’s a queer one! You never know where you are with Philip.”

“He seems to have been very kind to you.”

“No more than he ought to have been,” she answered sharply. “I’m finished for life, and I haven’t got a halfpenny. He’s only done what he ought to do.”

“And that is a great deal more than most of us can say,” Mr. Nairn answered.

Sally lost her temper.

“Here, I don’t want to be preached at!” she shrilled. “If that’s what you’ve come for, you needn’t come again.”

But the next moment she was apologising. Somehow Mr. Nairn was not a man to whom you could be rude without immediately apologising humbly.

And he took it so well; he told her that he just wanted to be friends with her and help her, and before he went away he promised to come again quite soon.

“Garry will be home in a month or two,” he said. “I shall bring him to tea if I may.”

“I’m thankful to see anyone,” Sally told him ungraciously. “It’s frightful lying in this place alone, with only Mrs. Kiff to talk to.”

“I like Mrs. Kiff,” the vicar said cheerfully.

Sally relented immediately.

“So do I. She’s a dear old stick,” she agreed.

Sally was thinking of Mr. Nairn and of their many talks together as she lay in bed this wonderful spring morning with Philip Sanderson’s wire on the quilt beside her.

It was queer, she thought, how she had been forced into such a different world; sometimes it gave her a pleasant little thrill to believe that she was turning into what, at the back of her mind, she designated as “a real lady.”

In a vague way she always associated clergymen with “real ladies”; she wondered what Poppy would say when she knew that she had made friends with a vicar!

Poppy had only been down to the cottage once, and that time Philip had brought her in his two-seater car. After the first half-hour Sally had quarrelled with Poppy, for somehow Poppy had seemed out of place in the little cottage with its wide open windows and clean freshness.

Poppy’s face had been more deadly white, and her eyes more coal-black than usual, or so they had seemed, and her clothes had been more bizarre and her voice louder and more rasping than Sally had remembered.

“I don’t know why you brought her,” Sally said to Philip afterwards resentfully. “I didn’t ask you to.”

“I thought you’d be pleased to see her,” he answered.

“Well, then, I wasn’t,” Sally answered flatly. “Supposing the vicar had called. What do you think he would have thought of her?”

Sanderson only laughed.

“You’re getting quite a snob,” he declared.

Sally was not sure what a “snob” really meant, but it pleased her to be called one; she had once heard it said that a certain Countess of Railie was the biggest snob in London, and it tickled her fancy to share something in common with a real live countess.

Although Sally was unaware of the fact, she was slowly but surely changing. Her ideas were changing and so was her outlook on life. She had begun to listen for the song of the birds in the early morning, and to watch the flowers unfolding in the garden, whereas three months ago she would only have thought the birds a nuisance for waking her up so early, and she would have infinitely preferred a forced, weakly-looking rose that had cost half a crown from a Bond Street shop to the dainty spring flowers that were now pushing their way through the brown earth on all sides in the cottage garden.

She was proud of the cottage too, whereas once she had thought it dull and too small. Often as she lay in bed her mind was full of plans for its beautifying and rearranging.

“If only I could get up!” she thought passionately.

She knew there were so many things she could do about the little house of which Mrs. Kiff's clumsy hands were quite incapable. To be able to pick the flowers and tender green leaves and arrange them herself would be a delight—even to be strong enough to have a washing day out in the back garden as Mrs. Kiff did seemed an entirely desirable thing!

Would she ever be able to walk again?

Once or twice Philip Sanderson had tried to bring the subject round to doctors and further opinions, but Sally always shied away from it, dreading more pain and perhaps disappointment.

It was only when she was alone with her thoughts that she felt able to face anything—anything—if only some day she could walk about again as other people did.

She had almost made up her mind to speak about it to Philip, and now this wire had come saying she need not expect him till the next day. Sally began to feel angry as she lay there with the sunshine streaming in upon her. What was he doing that he could not come as he had promised? Perhaps he was getting tired of her—getting tired of a bed-ridden girl who could not go for long walks with him over the fields and down the lanes, and who must always be pushed in a hateful invalid-chair, and carried from her bed.

Philip carried her so easily; his arms were so strong and gentle. Once, knowing full well how light she was, she had asked him if he found her at all heavy.

"Heavy!" he scoffed at the suggestion. "Why, I'm like a giant in a fairy story, carrying a butterfly."

"A butterfly with broken wings," Sally said, and then was sorry for her words, seeing the sharp look of pain in his eyes.

In spite of what she had told the vicar, Sally knew how wonderfully good Sanderson had been and would always be to her, and yet, in a queer way, it made her resentful.

Although the pain of her parting from Josh Akers was slowly fading from her heart, now and again it would return with a swift pang.

"If only it had been Josh!"

The thought would rise unbidden into her mind whenever Philip showed her some little extra kindness, or brought her some unexpected gift. If it had been Josh, there would have been nothing in the world left for her to wish

for. If Josh had loved her as she was sure Philip Sanderson loved her, Sally would have been in heaven.

But Josh had gone out of her life and was never likely to return. Once she ventured to ask Philip for news of him.

"I don't know anything about him, and don't want to," Philip told her uncompromisingly. "If he's wise, he'll keep clear of me."

"You're a bully," Sally declared, but her heart was warm because she knew that in Philip she had a champion.

But, in spite of everything, she was very seldom kind to him. Often, after week-ends during which he had done his utmost to please her and make her happy, she would send him away without a good-bye, or a smile.

Once she had put him into a towering rage by hitting Sometimes with a stick which was always kept beside her bed to knock on the floor with if she wanted anything; there were no bells in the cottage.

Sally was conscious of a little cold shiver whenever she recalled that day.

It had been one of her bad days—she had had considerable pain, and it had rained and she had not been able to go out.

And Philip had seemed so cheerful and strong; all day he had been whistling about the cottage, busy and apparently quite happy. He had chopped wood for Mrs. Kiff, and drawn water from the little well at the end of the garden; he had put up a new archway for some rambler roses he had brought with him from town, and had hammered away most of the afternoon till the sound got on Sally's nerves and made her want to scream; and then, to cap everything, Sometimes had raced in from the garden, waving his long, whip-like tail, and had jumped on to the bed with his muddy feet. That had been the last straw of Sally's endurance, so she caught up the stick and hit him.

Sometimes—although not very badly hurt—yelped loudly—he was not used to such treatment—and rushed out to his master with one paw held pathetically in the air.

Sanderson came into the cottage with a face like a thundercloud.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Who hurt him?"

"I did," Sally said defiantly. "Look what he's done, the dirty beast! I hit him with my stick, and I'll hit him again if he doesn't behave!"

"*Will* you?" For a moment Sanderson seemed to forget Sally's utter helplessness, and took a threatening stride towards her as she lay on the bed. Then suddenly he stopped, his lean face flushing crimson, for Sally, really frightened, had cowed away from him.

"Don't hurt me, Philip—don't hurt me," she whimpered.

"Hurt you!"

For a moment he stood looking down at her, almost beside himself with shame at his loss of self-control, then, without a word, he turned and strode out of the room and out of the cottage.

It was late when he came home—quite dark—and Mrs. Kiff and Sally had both been listening for hours with strained attention for the sound of his returning step.

Finally Mrs. Kiff ventured to ask Sally what was the matter.

"I heard him go off and bang the door," she said anxiously. "I knew he must be in a tearing rage. But what for, I'd like to know, and him with the temper of an angel."

Sally, who had spent the evening in sullen silence, suddenly burst into tears and confessed.

"I hit Sometimes. . . . I hurt him. . . . It was horrid of me. . . ."

Mrs. Kiff stroked her hair with a gentle hand.

"There, there now! Don't take on!" she begged.

"But supposing Philip never comes back?" Sally sobbed.

Mrs. Kiff smiled, a wise smile.

"Now, you know what Mr. Sanderson always says when he's had a drop too much to drink," she reminded Sally. "You know what he always says about them guards never retiring! Well, I reckon they ain't retired yet, you see."

And Mrs. Kiff was right, for at ten o'clock Philip walked in, tired out and wet through.

" 'Ave you 'ad supper, sir?" Mrs. Kiff asked cheerily.

"Don't want any," Philip growled. "I'm going to bed."

"Well, you might just say good-night to Miss Sally first, sir," Mrs. Kiff told him, determinedly cheerful. "She's been lying awake listening for you

ever since it got dark."

Sanderson stared down at her from his great height; he was so tall that his head almost touched the ceiling of the sitting-room.

"Are you lying, Mrs. Kiff?" he asked sternly.

Mrs. Kiff spread her fat hands.

"Go and see for yourself, sir," she counselled.

Philip went to Sally's room. There was a lamp burning, and its yellow rays shone on Sally's pale face and wonderful hair. Sanderson strode up to the bedside, with Sometimes hanging back a little.

Sally held out her had to the dog.

"Come here . . . good boy . . . Sally's sorry."

Sometimes crept slowly forward and licked her hand.

There was a little silence, then Philip Sanderson said:

"I'm sorry, too, Sally."

Sally smiled—she had a wonderful smile.

"Stoop down," she said.

Half bashfully, half afraid, he obeyed, and she put her arms round his neck and touched his cheek with her soft lips.

It was the first time she had ever kissed him unasked, and Philip Sanderson never forgot it.

# Chapter VII

Philip Sanderson arrived at the cottage about eleven o'clock the following morning.

From her bedroom, where Mrs. Kiff had energetically dusted and polished and refilled the vases with fresh flowers, Sally heard his car turn the bend of the road and stop at the gate, and she promptly closed her eyes and feigned sleep.

During the last two months much petting and waiting upon had done a great deal to spoil Sally, even although in some ways she had also wonderfully improved.

But as far as Sanderson went she was as exacting as any queen to a paid lackey. Although she had very little affection for him, she was furiously jealous if she imagined he was less attentive to her, or not so eager to be with her.

In her wilful heart she always stifled any stirrings of conscience with the thought, "Well, it's his fault I am here—let him pay."

She did not realise how dearly he was paying. She believed, as most of his world believed, that he was in reality a very rich man, who chose to disguise the fact by his eccentric mode of living; she would not have credited it had she been told that, in order to gratify her many wants and whims, he often went without himself.

As she heard his footstep on the tiny garden path she was saying to herself vixenishly: "I'll pay him out for not coming yesterday. I won't be even civil."

She did not notice the unusual slowness of his step, and she did not turn her head when, after a few words with Mrs. Kiff in the passage, he came to her room.

She kept her eyes shut, and her head turned away from him on the pillow, although she knew quite well that he was standing beside the bed looking down at her.

After a moment he spoke her name gently, as if fearing to wake her should she really be asleep.

"Sally."

Sally did not move, and she felt the light touch of his hand on her hair.

There was a moment of silence, then he half sighed and turned away. Sally opened her eyes promptly.

"I'm not asleep," she said in a snappy little voice.

"Oh! I was afraid you might be." He went to the foot of the bed, leaning on it and looking gravely at her. "How are you? Better?"

"I shall never be better, you know that."

He made no reply. He was looking deathly tired, and even in the midst of her own small annoyance with him Sally was quick enough to see the lines beneath his eyes and his fagged appearance.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" she demanded, and then without waiting for him to reply she went on: "I suppose you were larking about in London. Out with some girl or other, eh?"

"No."

"Drinking at the club, then. I suppose I can die here for all you care. You think far more of that mongrel of yours than you do of me. If he'd been run over and half killed you'd sit up with him all night and never leave him for a moment."

Sanderson's face twitched as if with pain.

"If it will give you any pleasure to know it Sometimes *has* been run over," he said, a note of hoarseness in his voice. "And if you cared half as much for me as he does, I'd never leave you for a moment."

Sally gasped, and her blue eyes grew soft.

"Not—dead?" she gasped.

"No—not yet."

"And yet you left him?" She was really amazed now.

Sanderson's eyes were hard as they met hers.

"I left him because I knew if I stayed away another day you would give me hell when I did come," he said uncompromisingly.

"Oh!" That angered her. "Well, I hope he dies," she said viciously. Sanderson moved towards the door.

"Thanks. I knew you'd say that," he answered, and walked out of the room.

Sally's lips moved to recall him, but she closed them again firmly.

Well, let him go if he preferred a half-breed dog to her; let him go!

She lay still for a long time, her eyes closed. She tried to forget everything except her anger with Sanderson for having disappointed her yesterday; she argued that if he understood how long and wearisome all the days were to her, he would have come at any cost. After all, who in their senses would put a dog before a human being?

She refused her lunch when Mrs. Kiff brought it, daintily served on a little tray.

Mrs. Kiff scowled, although her eyes were kind.

"What's the matter with the pair of you?" she scolded. "Here's Mr. Sanderson refused his, too, and after all the trouble I've taken and all! It's a thankless task looking after two such ungrateful bears with sore heads."

She banged the tray down on a table. "I shall leave it, and perhaps you'll come to your senses' presently," she declared.

She got as far as the door, then came back.

"What's the matter with Mr. Sanderson?" she demanded, her curiosity and anxiety getting the better of her dignity.

Sally answered with closed eyes.

"Sometimes has been run over."

Mrs. Kiff exclaimed aloud:

"Run over! well, no wonder the poor, dear man don't want 'is lunch. I shan't 'ave no appetite for mine now, neither." There was real grief and compassion in her voice. "Did you ever! if that ain't cruel luck!" she wailed. "And Sometimes the only friend the poor dear's got."

Sally laughed, an unkind little laugh.

"A friend! that mongrel!" she scoffed.

Mrs. Kiff bent over the bed.

"I wish you was well so that I could shake you," she said, really angry now. "What's the matter with you, I'd like to know. Ain't you got no 'eart? . . . After all that's been done for you. Here's Mr. Sanderson treated you like a queen, and put up with your tempers and sulks like the angel he is, and

now you call his dog a mongrel! Said so to his face, too, now didn't you? I'll be bound you did."

"I told him I hoped the dog would die," Sally admitted in bravado.

Mrs. Kiff flushed dully, and her lips quivered with anger.

"Then may you be forgiven, that's all I've got to say," she said, and marched out of the room.

Sally lay very still, her heart beating fast.

"Hateful, hateful old woman," she told herself passionately. "If only I could get up and be free of them all. If only I could walk."

Bitter tears crept from beneath her closed lids and trickled down her cheeks, but in her heart she knew they were not tears of self-pity this time, but tears of awakening remorse.

She had behaved horribly to Sanderson, and he was in trouble. Mrs. Kiff had spoken truly when she said that Sometimes was his only friend—dear old Sometimes who had even forgiven her after she had hit him, and come back with eager eyes and hopefully waving tail, to lick her hand. Supposing he died? The thought squeezed her heart.

Never to hear the pad of his feet about the little cottage again; never again to hear his sharp, joyous bark, or the thud of his whip-like tail against the doors and furniture as he scrambled round after Philip.

And suddenly the vixenish little thoughts in Sally's mind changed, and she found herself saying over and over again in a feverish whisper:

"Oh, I hope he doesn't die. Oh, I hope he gets well. Poor, poor old Sometimes."

Presently she groped beside the bed for her stick and banged on the floor, and after a moment Mrs. Kiff came reluctantly to see what she wanted.

"How slow you are!" Sally was crying unashamedly. "Didn't you hear me knocking? I must nearly have knocked a hole in the floor."

"I 'eard you all right," Mrs. Kiff said stonily. "And what is it you want?"

"I want Mr. Sanderson."

"Well, you can't have him—he's gone out, and he said he didn't know when he'd be back."

Sally's eyes grew big with alarm.

“He didn’t take the car?” she gasped.

“No, nor his hat neither. The car’s at the gate, and his ’at’s on the ’all peg.”

Sally gave a deep sigh.

“Oh, well, then he’ll have to come back,” she breathed in relief. Mrs. Kiff snorted inelegantly.

“A lot you’d care if he never came again,” she declared.

“Get out of the room,” Sally commanded.

“And glad enough to get out,” was the only reply she got. But it was late before Philip Sanderson returned. The afternoon dragged away, and the shadows closed down about the little cottage, and still he did not come.

“There ought to be a light on that there car of his,” Mrs. Kiff said anxiously when she brought tea. “But I’ve ’ad a look all over it and I can’t see no tap to turn a light on by.”

“It’s safe enough where it is,” Sally answered. “And, anyway, Philip will be in directly.”

“Don’t you be too sure,” Mrs. Kiff threatened. “I know something about men, and even a worm will turn if it’s trodden on for long enough.”

But Philip came at last, and Sally’s heart thumped as she heard him open the door, and shut it carefully behind him. She was so sure that he would come straight to her room and apologise in his clumsy way for having left her alone all day, that it gave her a shock when he passed her door and went straight into the sitting-room, where Mrs. Kiff had lit the fire and drawn the curtains cosily against the grey evening.

Sally waited incredulously—she waited for quite a long time, then she thumped on the floor with “John” as Sanderson had nicknamed her stick. But, contrary to her expectations, Mrs. Kiff came in reply; as a rule, if Sanderson was in the cottage he was with her as quickly as his long legs could bring him.

Sally flushed with anger.

“It’s not you I want,” she said shrilly. “I want Mr. Sanderson.”

“Well, he’s asleep,” Mrs. Kiff answered bluntly. “Leastways, he looks as if he is, but perhaps he’s pretending like you do sometimes.”

Sally’s lips quivered.

“You’re very unkind,” she whimpered. “My back hurts me, and I want to go to sleep.”

Mrs. Kiff proceeded in silence to take off the dainty silk negligee which Sally was wearing in honour of Sanderson’s presence, then she shook up the bed, and generally prepared the girl for the night.

“And take the lamp away,” Sally ordered petulantly. “I want to go to sleep.”

But she knew she would not be able to sleep a wink until she had seen Philip Sanderson and healed the breach which she herself had made between them.

When Mrs. Kiff had retired to her kitchen a great silence seemed to fall on the little cottage, broken only by the crackle of the fire from the sitting-room where Philip slept or pretended to sleep, and the sleepy twitter of birds in the dusky garden outside. Sally did her best to go to sleep; she counted sheep coming through a hedge, and said the alphabet through nine times, but she only seemed wider awake than ever, till at last she could bear it no longer. She turned over as well as she could and, with the help of John, she dragged open the door, which was half closed. Then she called softly:

“Philip!”

No reply, and she raised her voice a little.

“Phil-ip!”

She thought she heard him stir, and she waited breathlessly, but still he did not come, and she tried again, more loudly.

“Philip. I want you, Philip.”

Sally knew just how to get the right note of pathos into her voice, only perhaps this time there was a certain sincerity about it, for after a moment she heard him move, push back his chair and cross the narrow passage.

By the light of the lamp outside she could see the silhouette of his tall figure in her doorway, and she spoke his name again appealingly:

“Philip.”

“Can I get anything for you? I thought you were asleep.”

Sally stretched out her hand; for once the cold unfriendliness of his voice did not anger or irritate her.

“Come here,” she said.

After the slightest hesitation he obeyed, but still he kept too far away for her to touch him, and Sally said again more gently than he had ever heard her speak:

"Give me your hand, Philip."

She heard him catch his breath with a little rough sound, and then he asked bluntly:

"What do you want with my hand?"

"Give it to me, and I'll tell you."

For an instant longer he did not move, then he came a step nearer and put his hand in hers.

"Well, what do you want?"

For answer Sally carried it to her lips and gently kissed it.

"Sally!"

He would have drawn it away but she held it fast.

"Oh, please don't go! I'm sorry I was such a little beast." She was talking quickly and incoherently, and crying softly. "I don't know what made me say that about Sometimes. I didn't mean it. I love him, too. I couldn't bear it if he died. Oh, Philip, dear. . . ."

He dragged his hand away from her and turned away.

"It's all right," he told her in a stifled voice. "And I'm tired of being made a fool of anyway. It doesn't matter a curse what you said about the dog. I've forgotten it anyway."

"But you haven't; you couldn't have done," she insisted, sobbing. "It would serve me right if you never forgave me, and if you turned me out in the streets. But I *am* sorry—I'd bite my tongue out to take those words back if I could. Oh, Philip, do believe me. I know I've been a little devil to you, and you've been an angel to me——"

He laughed harshly.

"A pretty black sort of angel."

She tried to reach him again.

"Give me your hand."

"No."

"Philip, you're being rotten to *me* now."

"I don't flatter myself that you care how rotten I am to you."

"But, I do . . . oh, you must believe me . . ."

Sally was surprised at her own sincerity; she was almost angry, because at the moment there was nothing she wanted so much as to be friends with him, to feel the old kind grasp of his hand that had helped her through so many hours of pain and to hear the surprising tenderness once more in his rough voice.

Then suddenly Sanderson said almost savagely:

"You're only making a fool of me, I know. For some purpose of your own, I suppose. I haven't shed a tear for God knows how many years, but if you don't let me go, Sally, I shall be crying like a damned kid in a minute."

Then as if he had reached the end of his tether and could bear no more, he sat down in the armchair beside her bed and hid his face in his hands.

Sally lay motionless, but her own face was wet with tears, and presently she said in a choked voice:

"Philip, please put your arms round me and let us cry together, if we've got to cry at all."

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm not. Come here and see for yourself——"

Then suddenly he broke down. He put his arms gently round her helpless little body, lifting her till she lay against his shoulder, then he hid his face against the bright wings of her hair.

"I'm so unhappy, Sally."

He was like a boy; she had never dreamed that he could be so young or so pathetic, but the stifled appeal woke all that was best in her, and she raised her arms and put them round his neck, holding him fast.

"Don't be unhappy; Sometimes will get well, I'm sure he will. Tell me all about it. Please tell me all about it."

"It was my fault . . . all my fault *again*, you see, just as it was with you. I took him to the Club . . . I suppose I had more to drink than I should have done, and coming out—for the first time in my life I forgot him . . . I suppose he was asleep . . . never heard me go . . ." It seemed so hard for him to tell the story. "I was halfway down the street before I missed him . . . I

went back . . . he was in the middle of the road, looking for me . . . Like a damned fool I whistled . . . and you know his way . . . He dashed across the street to get to me, and a car . . . not the driver's fault . . . just caught him and knocked him down . . . went over his hind quarters . . ."

He broke off, for a moment unable to control his voice, then he went on again with an effort:

"I picked him up—he didn't seem in much pain—and I took him home in a taxi . . . I got a vet to come and look at him . . . He's got internal injuries . . . I suppose I'm a fool—I know you think I am . . . I know the dog's only a mongrel, but . . . damn it all—when a chap's got nothing else . . . damn it all . . . you must care about something."

"You've got me," Sally whispered, her cheek against his.

She was unconscious of speaking the words till they were out.

"You!" Sanderson would have put her away from him, but she resisted.

"Yes, me," she insisted tremulously. "I know I'm hateful . . . common and selfish—not a bit the sort of girl you ought to know. . . ."

"Rubbish! Don't say such things."

"It's true. You're a gentleman, and I . . . well! I'd kill anyone for saying I'm not a lady, but I know I'm not. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear—" she added with bitter cynicism. "But I'll try to be better—nicer to you. More grateful, Philip. After all—" she was crying again now, her face turned against his shoulder. "I've got nobody, but you, have I?"

"You've got me always . . . for ever. If you could just love me a little, Sally . . ."

"I do in a way—but not the way you want, perhaps. But I'll try—I'll be ever so nice to you. I *have* improved just a little since we came here, don't you think?" she questioned eagerly. "And perhaps if the vicar comes to tea more often—he will if I ask him."

Sanderson laughed gruffly.

"You silly kid!"

"He's kind. He's the sort of man who understands things," Sally insisted with unusual wisdom. "He'll help me to improve, I know."

"I don't want his interference. I can look after you myself," Sanderson broke in jealously.

Sally laughed contentedly.

"As long as you don't get fed-up!" she submitted half in fun, half seriously. It was surprising how happy she felt. The clasp of Sanderson's arms was so strong and yet so tender; they were like a sure shield between her and life.

"And where is Sometimes now, then?" she asked after a moment.

"I had to leave him at the vet's. I stayed with him all night." Philip's voice held a note of pain again, and he turned his face away.

"You left him for me?" Sally asked slowly.

"I'm glad now that I did," he answered.

Sally tried to draw away from him.

"Why don't you bring him down here?" she asked eagerly. "He'd be much happier here with you, and the country would do him good." She laughed like a child. "He could ride beside me in the chair when you take me out. Oh, Philip, please, please bring him here."

"We'll see to-morrow."

But she would not have that.

"No, to-night—go at once," she insisted. "I shall be quite all right. You drive so fast. You'll be back in London in less than two hours, and then to-morrow you can come back again and bring him with you."

Philip hesitated.

"If he's alive," he said with an effort.

"Oh, but is he so ill?" Sally cried in dismay. "Then if he is, the sooner you go back to him the better—" She tried to push him from her. "Go at once," she commanded. "How can you waste the time. Go at once, Philip."

"Are you so anxious to be rid of me?" he demanded.

"Of course I am." Sally was quite enjoying herself. She had discovered that the best way to keep a man with you was to tell him to go before he wished to go.

"You be off at once," she ordered. "I'm the mistress of this house."

Philip laughed, but there was a note of relief in his voice.

"Well, if I must obey . . . Sally, will you kiss me?"

“If you want me to.”

“If I want you to!”

“Stoop down then!”

Sanderson bent his head, and their lips met in the first real kiss Sally had ever given him.

“There, now! are you happier?” she whispered.

“Much, much happier.”

“And I shall expect you early to-morrow.”

“If Sometimes is alive . . . or fit to bring.”

“He *will* be fit to bring,” Sally insisted.

It was a change for her to be the one to inspire hope and courage; hitherto she had spent her life demanding it from others. She felt happier than she had felt for months when Sanderson had gone, and presently she heard him starting up the car at the garden gate. A moment later, and he was speeding away down the road just as Mrs. Kiff came bustling in, full of anxiety and importance.

“Has Mr. Sanderson gone?” she demanded.

“Yes,” said Sally in a muffled voice from her pillows.

“There now, what did I say!” Mrs. Kiff demanded excitedly. “I knew as you’d try ’is patience once too often. Gone! And he’ll never come back no more from what I know of men.” She bent over Sally through the darkness, and shook her work-roughened fist in the girl’s face.

“Oh, you little fool, you!” she said.

Sally giggled.

“The Guards never retire!” was her only retort.

# Chapter VIII

When Mrs. Kiff went in the following morning to draw Sally's curtains and take her a cup of tea, she found the girl already wide awake.

As a rule Sally was a sleepy-head in the morning and resented being roused, so Mrs. Kiff stared in open-eyed astonishment.

"Guilty conscience, I'll be bound," was her first triumphant thought. She was sure that Sally and Sanderson had quarrelled badly the night before, therefore it was rather disquieting to meet Sally's bright eyes and happy smile.

"Couldn't you sleep?" Mrs. Kiff demanded tartly.

"Never slept better in my life," Sally answered serenely. "For the first time for weeks you didn't wake me with your snoring."

"Snoring, indeed!" Mrs. Kiff jerked back the curtains with an irate hand, letting in a burst of spring sunshine. "I've never been known to snore in all my life," she declared indignantly.

She opened the window, and leaned out with a sniff of delight.

"The garden smells like the Garden of Eden, that it does," she said with one of her unusual outbursts of eloquence.

Sally giggled. "How do *you* know?" she asked with sarcasm. "You never told me before that your name was Eve."

Mrs. Kiff drew her head in quickly.

"Well, at all events I wasn't the serpent," she said flatly. "And what's the matter with you, anyway, that you're so bright and early this morning."

She stood with her arms akimbo staring at the girl with disapproval that struggled with affection. "I ain't seen you look so well for weeks," she admitted reluctantly.

Sally flushed faintly without knowing why.

It was true that she had not had such a good night for years; true also that she was feeling happier than she had done ever since Philip brought her to Ash Hill.

She had slept soundly and dreamlessly, and had awakened feeling rested and good tempered.

"The Lord alone knows why," she thought blankly. She never connected her change of feeling with anything Philip had said or done; she would have ridiculed it had anyone suggested that her peaceful state of mind was owing to the new pact of friendship made between them.

"And you've got to get a move on you," she told Mrs. Kiff severely. "We're going to have early visitors."

"Oh, h'are we!" When Mrs. Kiff was unusually perturbed she was always generous with her aspirates.

"If it's that vicar—" she threatened.

"Well, it isn't," Sally interrupted. "It's Mr. Sanderson and Sometimes—at least, I hope it will be Sometimes as well—" she added wistfully. "Philip went back last night to fetch him, and we're going to nurse him down here, and take him out in the chair with me."

Mrs. Kiff stared. She wanted to be sarcastic and disagreeable, and say that it all only meant extra work for her, but there was something so happy and contented about Sally's face that her heart failed her. She cynically suggested that the cottage should at once be turned into a nursing home, and went off to get breakfast. But she also "got a move on," as Sally had warned her, and by half-past nine Sally was dressed and installed in her long chair in the little front garden, and there was a special bone cooked and set aside to cool for Sometimes, and fresh flowers had been put in the sitting-room, and in Philip's bedroom.

Sally superintended everything herself from the garden.

"I'm mistress here, and don't you forget it," she said, when once Mrs. Kiff raised her voice in protest, then she settled her golden head comfortably into the pillows and prepared to watch the white road for the first sign of Philip's car.

He came before ten o'clock, driving more slowly than usual, and for a moment Sally's heart almost stood still as she tried to make up her mind that the worst must have happened, but as Sanderson drew nearer she saw that he was smiling, and when he waved his hand to her she gave a great sigh of relief.

Sometimes could not be dead or Sanderson would never have smiled; Sometimes must be a little better or she was sure that Sanderson would not

have come at all.

When he reached the gate and stopped the engine he called to her:

"I've got him. He's better."

Sudden tears welled to Sally's eyes.

"Oh, I *am* glad!" she breathed fervently.

She really was glad; since last night she had understood what a very real tragedy the death of the dog would have been to Sanderson. She watched with glistening eyes while he lifted Sometimes gently from the seat beside him; a poor, broken-looking Sometimes tenderly wrapped in an old coat of his master's, a pathetic-looking Sometimes who yet managed to feebly wag a whip-like tail when he saw Sally and heard her voice.

"Sometimes! dear old Sometimes!"

Sanderson put the dog gently down beside her.

"I think he's better. I really think he's better," he said anxiously.

In the same light of morning he was almost afraid of Sally and of last night's memories.

Was she thinking what a fool he had been? Was she once more ready to jeer at him? He looked at her with scared eyes.

But Sally was smiling through undoubted tears, as with one hand gently caressing the dog's head, she looked up at his master.

"Last night you kissed me," she said shyly.

Sanderson flushed crimson.

"I thought, perhaps . . . last night was different," he said awkwardly.

Sally shook her head and pursed up her lips.

"Try?" she whispered, so Sanderson bent his tall head and kissed her, much to the mingled chagrin and delight of Mrs. Kiff who arrived at the door that moment with the bone for Sometimes in her rough hand.

It was a very happy day.

"I've never known such sunshine," Sally said at least half a dozen times while Sanderson pushed her invalid-chair down the leafy lanes and over rough footpaths where only a strong and skilful hand could have manipulated the ruts and the narrow turnings without causing unnecessary pain to the two invalids.

Sometimes was perfectly happy also. Now and again he turned a languid head and licked Sally's hand, glancing up apologetically afterwards at his master, towering above him, as if to say, "I'd lick you, too, if I were stronger, and you weren't so far away."

They found primroses at the mossy foot of some trees in the woods, and delicate white anemones, and a few spiky bluebells just pushing their way out into the world.

Sally was as excited as a child over the primroses.

"I've never seen them growing wild before," she told Sanderson delightedly. "I've only seen them in bunches in the Piccadilly flower girl's baskets. Oh, don't they smell just—wonderful!"

"They are wonderful," Sanderson said in his gruff voice, but his eyes were upon Sally and Sometimes—the two creatures he loved best in the world—the *only* two whom he loved.

They went back to late lunch, and afterwards, because the sun was still warm, Mrs. Kiff allowed them to have tea in the garden.

"But only just this once, mind you!" she threatened. "And you'll go to bed directly afterwards, mind," she added, shaking a warning finger at Sally.

But Sally rebelled.

"I won't—I needn't, need I, Philip?"

It was the first time she had ever appealed to him in just that sort of way and the blood beat up into his dark face, and his heart seemed to miss a beat for sheer happiness.

"If you're very good, you may stay up an hour later to-night," he said whimsically.

He was almost afraid to speak, almost afraid to move for fear he should wake up and find he had only dreamed this happy day.

He was ashamed because he distrusted Sally; try as he would he could not rid himself of the feeling that perhaps she was just being kind to him for some reason of her own which would presently transpire and spoil everything. He kept looking at her from beneath his heavy brows with pitiful suspicion. How long was he to be kept waiting? How soon would she shatter his dream?

When at last the sunshine faded and he carried her back into the house he told himself savagely, "Now I shall hear it. Now it will come," and he set

his teeth.

But Sally said nothing; she only gave a little contented sigh as he laid her gently down on her bed and murmured drowsily. “Hasn’t it been a happy day?”

“Has it, Sally?”

He hung over her like a timid giant, his big hands clenched, not daring to hope, not daring to believe that she meant what she said.

“Don’t *you* think so, too?” she asked. She put out her hand and just touched his. “Philip, I think the vicar was right—what he said about Heaven.”

“What did he say, Sally?”

“He said his idea of Heaven was a garden, and sunshine and flowers, and perhaps an apple tree in blossom, and birds singing.”

“But that’s not your idea, is it, Sally?”

Sally hesitated, her eyes full of growing wonderment.

“It never used to be,” she admitted at last slowly. “But just lately, Philip”—she turned her head on the pillow, the better able to look up at him —“Philip, do you think I’m any nicer than I used to be?”

“Yes.”

He supposed immediately he had spoken that he ought to have made some graceful speech about such a thing being impossible, but Sanderson was not given to graceful speeches; he thought Sally really was nicer, and therefore he said so.

She smiled, well content.

“I’m glad you said that. You know, Philip, you’re a very *honest* person.”

“I try to be honest, at any rate with you.”

Her blue eyes misted over as she looked up at him.

“And I’ve been such a pig to you.”

“No more than I deserved.”

Mrs. Kiff appeared in the doorway. Mrs. Kiff could generally be relied upon to appear when she was least required.

“Now then sir, *if* you please!”

Philip scowled at her over his shoulder.

"Damn you, Mrs. Kiff!" he said.

But he was the happiest of men as he went out into the little garden and lit his pipe. It was an old pipe, a foul old pipe, with a much-gnawed stem, and what Mrs. Kiff inelegantly described as a "stink," but Philip loved it; but, then, to-day he loved everything; he only wished as he walked slowly up and down the tiny pathway, that seemed so much too narrow and confined to contain his happiness, that he could put back the hands of the clock and live it all over again. He comforted himself with the thought that there was still to-morrow, and all the to-morrows; and then he wondered how soon he would dare to approach the subject to Sally of further surgical advice, and even while his tender heart shrank from the contemplation of fresh pain for her, it leapt at the thought that perhaps some day she might be able to walk again.

What happiness it would be! What real joy for them both.

And then came the reaction.

Perhaps if she grew well again he would lose her; perhaps it was only in her weakness and helplessness that she turned to him. He felt torn between his desire to keep her to himself and his longing to give her back the thing he had taken from her.

Sometimes whined wearily from his cushions in the little porch, and Sanderson went hastily to him.

"What's up, old boy? Pain worse?"

But Sometimes had only wanted a little attention from his adored master. Sometimes was just a little bit jealous of Sally and of his master's happy abstraction.

Sanderson sat down on the little doorstep, his long legs curled up inelegantly beneath him and one thin hand absently stroking the dog's head. Such a happy day! that was his only thought as he sat looking out at the gathering darkness and puffing clouds of smoke from his "Stinker," as Mrs. Kiff called it.

Sanderson's gratitude was out of all proportion because he had known so little happiness. There was not one day in the forty odd years of his life that he ever wished to have over again. All his eggs were in one basket; this little basket-like cottage contained all his world—Sally, and Sometimes, and a garden.

“Philip!” It was Sally’s voice calling to him now, and he scrambled up, and with a little word of apology to Sometimes went back into the cottage.

Mrs. Kiff met him in the narrow passage.

“Just to say good-night to her, and no more now, sir,” she said emphatically. “She’s been that well to-day that if we’re not careful, we’ll have her extra bad to-morrow to make up, and then we shall know what’s what!”

Sanderson went into Sally’s room and knelt down beside the bed. Sally’s hair was freshly brushed and spread out over the white pillows, and there was a faint scent of lavender in the cool room—oddly enough Sally’s favorite perfume.

Even in her days at the Faun Café with its heat and unnatural lighting and popping of champagne corks, she had never used any perfume but lavender. In Sanderson’s heart it had added to her childishness and sweetness, and had helped to keep her fresh and untouched in his thoughts, even when she had been most worldly and harsh towards him.

“Tired?” he asked gently.

“Tired? Oh, no.” Sally laughed a little. “Philip, do you know what I was thinking when you came in?”

His heart gave a little twinge. Here it was, the explanation of all her sweetness to him, involuntarily he drew back a little.

“No, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking,” Sally said dreamily. “How lovely it would be to sleep out in those woods one night.” She hesitated, as if afraid he would laugh at her. “Of course I know I can’t, but—well, wouldn’t it be wonderful?”

“You can if you want to. I’ll rig up some sort of a tent—” His voice was broken by his eagerness, thankful for yet another respite from the thing he had dreaded all day.

Sally pretended to shiver.

“But I should be frightened!” she protested.

Sanderson laughed.

“What, with me there! I’d sleep close by like the Giant in the Fairy story, guarding the little princess.”

Sally groped for his hand and held it.

“Dear Giant,” she said softly.

For a moment he could not find his voice, then he said hoarsely:

“Sally, you’ve been so sweet to me to-day. Is it just . . . nonsense—or is it going to last? . . . I’m grateful for what I’ve had . . . you know I’m grateful, but if it could last . . . by any absurd stretch of anyone’s imagination . . .” He broke off, choking.

“I’ll try to make it last,” Sally said in a soft little voice. Mrs. Kiff in the passage again.

“It’s past nine. Time you was asleep, Miss Sally.”

Sanderson scrambled guiltily to his feet.

“Mrs. Kiff’s right. I’m a selfish brute keeping you talking.” He bent down and kissed her hair and then her forehead, and last of all her lips.

“Sally . . . may I ask you just one thing?”

“Yes?”

“Would you . . . couldn’t you . . . some day soon let me bring another doctor to see you? I want to do everything in my power for you. . . .”

“No, no—” she struck his hand away from her, and cowed down in the bed as if he had hurt her physically. “I don’t want any more doctors. They’ll only hurt me. Oh, you might let me alone—just when I was so happy, too. Why can’t you let me alone.” She was sobbing from sheer nervousness and the memory of all she had suffered before.

Sanderson was terribly distressed.

“Forget it, Sally—I was a fool to speak of it. I never will again. It was only for your sake . . .”

“I thought perhaps it was for yours,” she broke in, with a return of her old sullenness. “I thought perhaps you were tired of seeing me lying here, and of having to wait on me.”

“Sally, I swear before God, that such a thought has never once crossed my mind.”

Her sobs lessened a little till at last she lay still once more.

“I’m tired, go away,” she whispered.

Sanderson stood in the dimly lit room, his hands clenched, his face white. What a fool he had been, what a fool. Perhaps those few tactless

words had undone all the happiness of the day, and set him back miles on the road up which he had struggled unavailingly for so long. He found his voice hoarsely.

"You're not angry with me, Sally?"

"No."

"And we're just as good friends."

"Yes."

But her lips were unresponsive when he kissed them again, and he felt the tears wet on her cheeks.

And he could make no further amends. It was not possible to him to take her into his arms and say tender, passionate things that might have healed the tiny breach between them; the more eloquent was the voice of his heart, the more silent his lips became.

He sat up half the night smoking his Stinker and straining his ears for Sally's voice, hoping she was asleep, yet hoping that she might want something and call to him, and at last he dozed off sitting by the dead sitting-room fire, with Sometimes snoring uneasily on his cushions beside him.

But in the morning the sun shone again and the garden was fresh and lovely, and Sally smiled when Sanderson went to say good morning to her.

"I had such a funny dream," she said as he carried her from her bed to the chair in the garden. "I thought it was about you, but it wasn't."

"What do you mean."

She laughed a little and nestled her head more comfortably into the curve of his strong arm.

"I dreamt that you were carrying me like you are now—at least I thought it was you, as nobody else ever does carry me—but it wasn't, after all."

"Who was it, then?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't see his face—he kept it turned away, but I saw the back of his head, and he had a reddish sort of hair with a funny crinkle in it . . ." She laughed. "It was such a real dream, Philip! I believe I should know the back of that head if I ever saw it in real life."

“Nonsense.” Philip laughed, but he was conscious of a throb of jealousy. “I’m quite capable of carrying you myself,” he said gruffly. “We don’t want any strange young men hanging round here with red crinkly hair.”

“No, we don’t,” Sally agreed. “And I don’t like red hair anyway. I like hair like yours.” And she put up her hand and gently stroked the back of his head. Sanderson turned his face sharply away, ashamed for her to see the sudden emotion which her touch brought into his eyes. “Grey hair! Grey as an old badger, Sally,” he said with forced lightness.

But Sally answered contentedly.

“Never mind, I like it.”

“That being so,” Sanderson said mildly, “I shall not use the bottle of black dye which I had brought down with me yesterday.”

“Philip! you didn’t! You’re pulling my leg.”

They laughed together like children.

“And where do we go to-day?” Philip enquired presently. “And don’t you think we might be rash and get Mrs. Kiff to make us up some sandwiches or something, so we can stay out to lunch.”

Sally’s eyes glowed.

“Oh, how lovely! Lunch in the woods.”

Sanderson tucked the rugs carefully round her little body. “I’ll go and beard the lioness in her kitchen,” he said.

Sally was left alone. There was a blackbird singing in the apple tree, and the sun was warm upon her face.

Incongruously she thought of the Faun Café—it seemed now as if it must have been in another world that she had ever danced there. How hot it had been, and how stifling! how had she ever managed to exist there, or—more strangely still—how had she ever believed her happiness had lain there.

She thought of the ugly bed-sitting room which she had shared with Poppy, and it made her shiver.

Its window had looked out over a mews, and they had had to stuff its chimney up with newspaper because of the draught.

Poor Poppy! for the first time Sally thought of her friend with pity instead of with envy.

Poor Poppy! how dreadful to have to live in a back bed-sitting room when the sun was shining as it shone now. Poor Poppy! she would get Philip to bring her down to the cottage again, and they would take her out in the woods and show her the primroses at the gnarled roots of the trees, and the spiky bluebells pushing their way out into the world.

There was a step along the road and men's voices. Sally turned her head and Sometimes roused her sore body a little and growled faintly.

"I hoped we should find you in," said the cheery voice of Sally's vicar. He opened the little garden gate and came in, followed after a moment by a tall, broad-shouldered young man, who looked at Sally with a sort of amused resignation in his eyes.

"I've brought my son to see you," Robert Nairn went on proudly. "He turned up unexpectedly the day before yesterday, and as we had to pass your cottage this morning I thought we'd just drop in and see how you are."

"Thank you, I'm very well," Sally said in her most refined voice. She gave her hand to the Vicar, and looked shyly at his son. A tall young man with a sunburnt face that made his eyes more vividly blue; a tall young man who—as Sally smiled up at him—raised his rather shabby soft slouch hat and revealed a head of closely cropped reddish hair with a funny crinkle in it.

Sally caught her breath and almost cried out. She very nearly said, "Why you're the man who carried me in my dream. Turn round, please turn round and show me the back of your head."

But for some reason or other she was afraid, for some reason or other her pulses were jerking unevenly as if someone had just booed out at her from behind a door. And then as she was hesitating, searching for something ordinary and commonplace to say, Philip Sanderson came out from the cottage and Robert Nairn introduced himself, and then he introduced his son —"My boy Garry. . . ."

Sally looked swiftly at Philip. He was scowling a little, and she remembered that he had said he hated parsons, but he was quite affable and friendly, and he did not seem to notice that Garry Nairn's hair was reddish with a funny crinkle in it.

"Of course he wouldn't," Sally told herself with a vague sense of relief. "Philip never notices anything."

# Chapter IX

Philip Sanderson's "to-morrow" did not come. While he was trying to be patient and polite to Robert Nairn and his son in the little garden the sunshine suddenly clouded over and heavy raindrops began to fall.

There was a hurried scramble indoors with Sally, and the cushions and Sometimes, and soon after the Nairns took their departure.

"Why the devil they couldn't have gone half an hour ago beats me," Sanderson grumbled as he stood at the window of the little sitting-room watching the big drops of rain lashing the window pane.

"Don't you like them?" Sally asked. "I think they are rather nice."

"Oh, they're all right," Philip admitted grudgingly. He was silent for a moment, then went on in the same growing way, "They've got a saying at sea that it's unlucky to sail with a Sky Pilot on board. It seems to me it's just as unlucky to be with them on land."

"What do you mean?"

"That the old fool brought the rain with him."

Sally laughed. "It would have rained anyway, and really we're rather lucky he came, or we might have started off and got wet through." She looked at Philip's uncompromising back with amused eyes.

"After all, we've got to-morrow," she added, "unless you're tired of the country and want to go back to Town."

"You know I'm not."

"Well, then, we've got to-morrow," Sally said again comfortably. "And it will very likely clear up this afternoon."

But it did not clear up. The blue April sky drew an unbroken canopy of clouds about its face and the rain fell steadily. Sally dozed by the fire with Sometimes curled up beside her, Mrs. Kiff sang from the kitchen in her shrillest treble—"I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!" and Sanderson wandered restlessly from the sitting-room to the porch and back again, an unlit "stinker" between his lips and bitterness in his heart.

With tea-time came yet another telegram. The same boy from Ash Hill Post Office who had so aroused Mrs. Kiff's ire two days previously tumbled

off his bicycle at the gate and sauntered up the path through the rain with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Name of Lingfield."

Sanderson read the message before he took it in to Sally. She was awake and had heard the boy at the door.

"Is it for me?" she asked.

"Yes—from someone named Jenks." He read the message aloud. "*Poppy very ill. Can you come or send anyone. Jenks.*"

"Such a fool message!" Sanderson growled. "Jenks must know damn well you can't go, whoever she is."

"She's the landlady and she always was a fool," Sally said. Her voice was a little tremulous, she was visualising Poppy alone and ill in that awful back bed-sitting room that overlooked a mews and had a newspaper stuffed up its chimney to keep out the draught.

"What shall I answer?" Sanderson asked. He saw the troubled look in Sally's eyes, and his own hardened. "Why the deuce do they want to bother you about it?" he asked irritably.

"I'm the only friend she's got," Sally said. "I'd go to her if I could. I know what she'll be getting from Jenks. People don't want you in rooms when you're ill. Poor old Poppy!"

"Well, you can't go to her," Sanderson said.

"I know—" Sally's eyes brightened with a sudden thought. "But *you* can go, Philip?"

"*I!*"

He turned round and stared at her blankly. "Good lord, what next will you suggest?" he demanded.

"I only mean that you could go and see if there is anything you can do for her," Sally explained.

The picture of Poppy in that back bed-sitting room was growing clearer with every passing moment. Sally remembered how she herself had felt in the hospital with nurses to wait on her, and Philip to call and see her, but Poppy had nobody except dirty Mrs. Jenks to grudgingly climb the dark staircase with over-strong cups of tea, and an unceasing flow of asthmatical grumblings.

Sanderson laughed shortly.

"I seem to be developing into a sort of errand boy," he said. He was feeling sore; sore with the vicar, sore with the rain, and most sore of all with Sally for seeming so eager and ready to get rid of him.

"Oh, well, if you don't want to go," Sally said. She was silent for a moment, then she said plaintively. "Please move Sometimes, he's giving me the cramp."

Philip obeyed without speaking, but his eyes were gloomy as he put the dog carefully down on the rug by the fire—which had been lit as the afternoon had grown chilly.

Sally closed her eyes and waited. She was angry with Sanderson for not immediately falling in with her expressed wish, and yet there was something in her heart that would have liked him to flatly refuse to be ordered about, something that would have been delighted had he said bluntly, "I'm damned if I'll go. I'm staying with you."

When presently he walked out of the room, every nerve in her body seemed at strained attention, following his every movement. She heard him go out of the front door, down the wet path, and round the cottage to the little shed where he kept his car.

Moments passed, then she heard him starting up the engine—heard him call out something to Mrs. Kiff, heard him returning.

He wore his big rough overcoat—he carried his hat in his hand.

"Do I take the dog?" he asked bluntly.

Sally's eyes dilated.

"Take Sometimes? Through this rain! Oh no! I want him."

"Oh! you want him, but you can dispense with me, is that it?"

"You're unkind," said Sally.

"No," he answered, "I'm only disappointed."

"Oh, why!"

"Because it's raining, and because that damned vicar cheated us out of the woods."

"Philip, we couldn't have gone, it would have rained anyway."

Sanderson declared obstinately that it would have kept fine if Robert Nairn had not called.

"I hate parsons. I told you. They always bring me bad luck."

"Silly man."

He stood looking at her.

"Well—good-bye," he said at last abruptly.

Something in Sally's heart gave her a twinge of pain. Now he was ready and willing to go, she wanted him to stay, but she was afraid to say so.

"Give my love to Poppy," she said flippantly. "And, Philip—if she's well enough, she might come down here for a few days, don't you think so?"

His queer face twisted into a wry smile.

"That means turning me out of my room—is that what you want?"

"Mrs. Kiff could make up a bed for you in here—or one for Poppy if it comes to that."

"Hadn't we better start a hospital, Sally, and have done with it?"

"You're cross with me, Philip."

"My dear, don't you know that I'm never cross with you."

"Never?"

Sanderson shook his head.

From the kitchen came the scream of Mrs. Kiff's high notes:

"I shall love you the sa-ame for e-ever!
I shall love you the sa-ame for e-ever!"

Sally moved restlessly beneath the steady gaze of Sanderson's sombre eyes.

"If only she would sing something different," she complained.

"I'll bring down some fresh records," Philip promised.

Her face brightened.

"Yes do, and Philip—you won't stay away long."

"I'll be back to-morrow."

"And—Philip!"

"Well?"

Her eyes faltered for a moment and her colour rose.

"Don't go to the Club."

"Why not?"

"Because you always drink too much when you go there."

The sudden flashing hope in his eyes was pathetic.

"Does it matter to you if I drink too much?"

She nodded.

"I'd never touch another drop if I really thought it mattered to you, Sally," Sanderson said.

Sally hardly knew if she was glad or sorry when he had gone, but at least Sometimes had no doubts on the subject at all.

He tried to drag himself on to his injured legs, he tried hard to drag himself to the door to follow Philip.

Sally vainly coaxed him to come back to her, but he refused. He crouched on his stomach, whining pitifully until Mrs. Kiff had to come to the rescue.

She picked up the dog bodily and sat down, nursing him in her arms. Sometimes was a big, heavy fellow, but Mrs. Kiff held him as carefully as if he were a sick, hurt child, speaking to him more gently than she had ever spoken to Sally, till at last he dozed off contentedly, his blunt nose resting confidently on her fat arm.

"It never rains but it pours," she said sententiously when she heard about Poppy. "I shall be the next one to be ill, or else Mr. Sanderson."

"Philip is never ill," Sally said quickly; somehow she disliked hearing illness mentioned in the same breath with Sanderson.

In the morning she got a scribbled letter from him. There was no formal beginning to it, and it was written on a half-sheet of paper.

> *Poppy is really ill, I am sorry to say. It's pneumonia. She hadn't had a doctor, but I sent one in. She seemed pleased to see me, and I told her when she was well enough we'd have her down at the Cottage. I'm going to stay till to-morrow, if you don't mind. I will explain why when I see you. Take care of yourself, Sally,*

*because I love you. Be kind to Sometimes; but I know I don't have to ask you that.*

Sally read the bit about Poppy to Mrs. Kiff.

"Pneumonia is what she nearly died of once before," she said anxiously.

Mrs. Kiff snorted.

"That comes from not wearing enough clothes," she declared unsympathetically. . . . "All on top, and nothing underneath, that's the way with girls like Miss Sladen."

"If you can't afford both, you have to have the one that shows the most," Sally said snappily. She was worried about Poppy; she wished she had not quarrelled with her that time she came to Ash Hill.

She wrote Sanderson a little letter in her unformed hand.

*Dear Phillip*,—(still two l's).

*Thank you for your letter, and for being kind to Poppy. Give her my love, and don't let the doctor mess her up. Sometimes is better. He slept on my bed all night, and Mrs. Kiff is just cooking some meat for him. Come back as soon as you can. I love you, too. —Sally.*

She added the last sentence with a grateful thought of all his kindness. She did love him in the only way she knew how to love. The rain cleared off the next day and the sun shone again with watery apology.

"I wish Philip were here," Sally sighed. "It must be lovely in the woods."

"Well, I couldn't push that heavy chair if I'd got the time," Mrs. Kiff said flatly. "And there's the washing to do—I daren't leave the washing in case it rains again. Mr. Sanderson'll be back to-morrow."

But Sally wanted him to-day; at least she wanted all he could do for her. She thought of the woods—they would smell fresh and lovely after the rain —she wanted to see the tender green of the trees overhead, and hear the birds singing. The little cottage seemed very breathless and cramping.

Presently the garden gate creaked and a man's step came up the path, followed by a cautious knock at the door.

Mrs. Kiff was away out in the wash-house, and after waiting a moment Sally called out, “Please come in, whoever you are.”

“Oh, may I!” a cheery voice answered, and a moment later the big figure of Garry Nairn stood in the doorway of the sitting-room. Sally was conscious of quick pleasure. Here was someone to talk to at last, she held out her hand with welcoming eagerness.

“Oh, how nice. I was just feeling lonely. Please come in.”

He carried his hat in his hand, showing that cropped crinkly hair of his, and he looked a little embarrassed as he came forward and took her hand.

“The Guv’nor asked me to call, he sent a book you wanted.” He produced it from a bulging pocket of his rough coat.

“Oh, thank you.” Sally took it with a great show of gratitude. It was a book she did not want to read in the least, but she had said she did in order to please the vicar.

Garry Nairn glanced towards the window; Sally thought he was impatient to be off, and she said quickly:

“It must be lovely out this morning.”

“It’s very fresh after the rain.”

“I should have gone in the woods if Philip had been here.”

“Isn’t he here?”

“No, he went back to London last night. A friend is ill and he had to go, and Mrs. Kiff can’t push me out to-day because she’s got to do the washing.”

“I see.” He looked at her with a twinkle in his blue eyes. He would have been more than dense to have missed the very obvious point of her words. “Do you want to go out very much?” he asked.

Sally nodded. “The time seems so long if I have to lie here all day,” she said.

Garry fidgeted from one foot to the other; it seemed to help him to say what he wanted to say if he fidgeted. Presently out it came.

“I’ll take you out if you like.”

“You!”

Sally gave a little squeal of delight. Although she had been fishing for some such offer she had not really imagined it would ever come, and her eyes shone like stars.

"Oh, but the chair's so heavy!" she protested. Garry Nairn laughed.

"Do I look such a weakling?"

"No, but . . . you'll have to carry me out to it."

"I dare say I'm quite as capable as Sanderson."

He was more capable, or was it that to be held in his strong young arms was more of a novelty? At any rate Sally wished that the distance between her couch and the garden had been twice as long. Mrs. Kiff was not sure that she approved.

"I don't know what Mr. Sanderson would say," she told Sally as she got her ready. "If anything was to happen——"

"Nothing will happen," Sally said happily.

And nothing did happen except that they spent a very interesting morning. Garry Nairn, it appeared, knew the countryside far better than Philip Sanderson knew it. He took her off the beaten tracks and showed her a thrush's nest in a hedge with two little eggs in it. He took her down to an old mill stream, and waded out into it to pull lovely yellow marsh marigolds from its bed. "Water-guzzles, my old nurse used to call them," he added. "That's because they lap up the water so thirstily."

He took her along to Ash Hill village and showed her his father's church, and a little grave on a sunny bank where his mother was buried.

"Were you fond of her?" Sally asked with painful memories of her own mother, who had been common, and often the worse for drink, and nearly always unkind.

"I loved her," Garry Nairn answered.

They went on silently after that till they came to a long, sloping hill that rolled away down to wide open fields.

"We used to toboggan down here when I was a kid," Garry explained. "There used to be snow then—we never get any now, at least so I'm told. I haven't spent a winter in England for five years."

"What fun it must have been!" Sally said.

“Yes, it was. I’ll take you some—” He broke off, flushing awkwardly. For the moment he had forgotten that Sally was a cripple.

“I’m so frightfully sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right.” Sally winked away a tear. “I’m getting used to it. There’s nothing else to do.”

“You’re very brave.”

“I’m not a bit brave really. I often think that if I was, I’d do as Philip wants me to, and let another surgeon examine me. Philip is sure that something more could be done to make me walk again, but I’m so afraid.”

“Afraid of being disappointed?”

“No, of the pain.”

There was a moment of silence, then he asked, “Don’t you think it would be worth it? Worth a little pain, I mean, to be able to walk again.”

“I suppose it would,” Sally said slowly. “But it might mean a long time—it might mean years.”

Garry Nairn came round to the side of the chair and looked down at her. His eyes were very blue in the sunlight, and very interested.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“I’m nearly twenty-four,” she told him.

“Well, if you had to lie on your back for another five years you would still be young at the end of that time,” Garry said cheerily. “You would still have all your life before you. Don’t you think it would be *well* worth while?”

Sally closed her eyes, but against her lids she could still see the long sloping hill before her that rolled away down to the wide fields, and in imagination she seemed also to see herself running down there through the sunshine, or perhaps even through the snow, with Garry Nairn. . . .

What heaven it would be! to be young and strong once more.

“I should think it well over if I were you,” Garry said in his kind, sensible voice.

Sally opened her eyes and met the blueness of his.

“Yes, I think I will,” she whispered.

# Chapter X

In the morning there was yet another letter from Philip.

Poppy, it appeared, was worse.

> *I am afraid she is really very ill*,—he wrote in his large, sprawling hand. *She is all alone here and too ill to be moved to a hospital. I am staying on for a little while as there seems nobody else to do anything for her, and I thought you would like me to do the best I can. If, however, you want me to come back, get Mrs. Kiff to send a wire to my flat. The woman Jenks is a callous brute, as I dare say you, know. I hope you are keeping well. Pat Sometimes for me. In haste, Philip.*

"Mark my words, that Miss Sladen will die," Mrs. Kiff prophesied. Like most of her class she rather relished a death.

"Of *course* she won't die," Sally snapped. "Not with Philip there she won't! He's not the sort of man to let anyone die."

"Not one man in a thousand would stay to bother 'is 'ead about a stranger," Mrs. Kiff declared.

"Poppy isn't a stranger," Sally answered. "And he's doing it because she is my friend."

"He's doing it because he's an angel," Mrs. Kiff contradicted. "A queer angel, maybe, in 'is funny 'at and with 'is funny ways, but an angel, nevertheless, so be it."

There was something reverent in her last few words, although they were more or less nonsense. In her inmost thoughts Mrs. Kiff had a little shrine which she kept sacred to Philip Sanderson.

"He says if I want him I'm to send a wire and he'll come back," Sally said with a touch of pride in this man whom Mrs. Kiff so insistently designated as an angel.

"Well, are you goin' to send it?" Mrs. Kiff demanded.

Sally looked away from the old woman's searching gaze.

"Not yet," she said, "Poppy wants him."

"And you *don't*, I suppose," Mrs. Kiff said flatly. "If you did, that wire would go."

She was more or less correct there. In spite of her softened mood, unselfishness was not a virtue of Sally's.

"It's a pity you won't be able to get out to-day," Mrs. Kiff said again with subtle meaning. "And it so fine and all."

"Mr. Nairn may come round," Sally said with overdone indifference. Mrs. Kiff looked her scorn.

"And how do you imagine an old gentleman like 'im is going to push that 'eavy chair of yours?" she demanded.

"I didn't mean the old gentleman, I meant the young one," Sally said.

"Ho!" said Mrs. Kiff.

For a moment there was an eloquent silence, during which Sally kept her eyes tightly shut, and finding there was nothing more to be got out of her, Mrs. Kiff retired.

Garry Nairn came in the afternoon.

"Just to see if you wanted anything," he explained casually. "Isn't Sanderson back yet?"

"No, my friend is not so well, so he's staying in London for a bit longer."

"He seems a decent sort," Garry said.

"The very best," Sally answered.

She really meant what she said. She knew that very few men would have troubled after Poppy as Philip had done, especially as she also knew that Sanderson disliked Poppy exceedingly.

Garry took her out in the afternoon, this time up to the Vicarage for tea, which the Vicar had with them in his book-lined study where a wood fire burned, and they had hot home-made scones.

Sally was very excited. She wished all her old friends of the Faun days could see her lying on a couch that belonged to a real live Vicar, in the real live vicar's study, being waited on by his son, and made much of.

When it was time to go home she said frankly that she was sorry.

"I should love to come again," she told them.

The vicar laughed.

“Come whenever you like. After all, we are not so very far away.”

“I think your father is just a dear,” Sally told Garry as he trundled her homewards. “He’s not a bit like what I thought vicars were.”

Garry laughed.

“What does that mean?” he enquired.

Sally explained with slow difficulty.

“Well, he doesn’t preach at me, or talk about my soul.”

“I dare say he would if he thought you would like him to.”

Sally grimaced.

“Ugh! I should hate it.”

They went a little way in silence.

“Are you going to stay at home for always?” Sally asked presently.

He hesitated.

“I thought I’d stay for most of the summer. The Guv’nor wants me to, but I shall go back in the end.”

“Go back where?”

“To where I came from—South America.”

“Do you like it better than this?”

“No, but it likes me better. I can make money there—I can’t over here.”

Sally sighed.

“I shall be sorry when you go.”

“I shall be sorry too,” he answered.

They were facing a glorious sunset as they walked up the road to the cottage; a riot of purple and gold and rosy pink splashed all over the sky as if some one had tried to melt a rainbow.

“There’s a car at your gate,” Garry Nairn said suddenly.

“A car!” Sally tried to raise herself to look. “It must be Philip come back then,” she said, and there was a little flat note in her voice.

“What sort of a car?” she asked after a moment.

“It’s a two-seater—a Fiat, I think.”

"It's Philip's."

She did not speak again till they were almost level with the cottage, then she said in a quick breathless little way:

"Mr. Nairn."

"Yes."

"You will come and see me again, won't you?"

"Of course. Why not."

"I only thought—I was afraid—perhaps now Philip is home you might not want to."

"I will come if you want me to come."

"Yes, please."

There was no time for more, they were at the cottage and Philip was striding down the path towards them.

"How old he looks," Sally thought, and was immediately ashamed of the thought. How could she think such an unkind thing.

Garry Nairn opened the gate and prepared to wheel the long chair in, but Philip stopped him. He stooped over Sally, drawing the covering rugs aside, and lifted her in his arms.

He had taken no notice of Garry, and Sally was too anxious to hear news of Poppy to see that the slight was intentional.

"How is she, better?" she asked eagerly. "I suppose she is much better as you have come back."

Sanderson did not answer until he had carried her into the cottage and put her down on the soft couch by the fire.

"How is she?" Sally asked again, tugging at his hand when he would have turned away. "Philip! how funny you are. Why don't you answer me? How is Poppy?"

He spoke then, in a harsh voice which was not harsh on account of any emotion he felt on Poppy's account—he had never even liked Poppy, poor Poppy!

"She died this morning," he said. He could not break the news gently or soften the blow much as he wished to do so. He was a man who believed in

meeting a shock squarely, face to face, he believed that to hit once and to hit hard was infinitely the best way.

"I did all I could—but it was too late. I'm sorry, Sally——"

"Oh! oh!" Sally broke into hysterical weeping. Poppy had been so vitally alive, Sally could not think of her as dead—she could not believe that the world would go on, was still going on, with no Poppy moving in it, laughing in it, trying gallantly to make the best of things.

"Oh, oh!" Sally sobbed broken-heartedly. She put out a groping, shaking hand as if for comfort, and Sanderson took it in his, but it was across the room, to where Garry Nairn stood, his brown face all sad and sorry, that Sally looked with her tear-drowned eyes.

# Chapter XI

Philip Sanderson had not only been detained in London on Poppy's account, although once he had seen her and her comfortless circumstances, sheer pity prompted him to do everything he could to make her happier. She had been pathetically glad to see him; tears had rolled down her cheeks as she stretched a feverish hand to him.

"God! you're an angel, Philip," she said in a choking voice. "I never knew how lonely I was till I saw your ugly face at the door." Her voice was weak, and her words came a few at a time in little gasps.

Philip took her hand awkwardly, held it for a moment, then gently laid it down on the cotton coverlet.

"Sorry to see you so ill," he said. "Sally got your wire, but of course she couldn't come, so she sent me."

"You'd have come on your own anyway I expect," she answered with difficulty. "You're one in a thousand, Philip. . . ." She had to rest a moment in order to get her breath, and Sanderson said, "Don't try to talk—you'll make yourself worse. I'll do the talking."

She laughed faintly at that.

"You do the talking! You never open your lips to me unless I give you a lead, and it'll do me good to speak. Not a soul to talk to all this time and I've been ill nearly a week, and Jenks hating me like the very devil—dirty old . . . cat!"

The tears came faster, but she brushed them away and tried to smile.

"I read somewhere once in a paper that the best definition of a friend was 'The first person who comes in when all the world has gone out'. . . . All my world had gone out, Philip, till you came. Bless you for ever."

He was touched by her gratitude, he fidgeted awkwardly.

"Nonsense! Sally just thought I might help. Have you had a doctor?"

"No. It's only a chill. I got hot, dancing one night, and then walked home along the Embankment with only a thin shawl. It serves me right."

Sanderson knew that in all probability the thin shawl had been the only wrap Poppy possessed.

“I’ll bring a doctor in,” he said practically. “No good getting worse if they can give you something to make you better. What have you had to eat?”

She tried to answer jokingly.

“Oh, tea, and then tea again—and then tea.”

Sanderson scowled.

“If the doctor says it’ll be all right, I’ll have you moved from this place.”

She cried out in protest.

“Not to a hospital! I hate ’em! Seen too much of ’em! Philip, not to a hospital, promise me. I’ll die if I go there.”

“We’ll see what the doctor says.”

“If I’ve got to die, I’d rather die at home,” Poppy said feebly. That hurt Sanderson. To think that anyone should call this wretched room “home.”

For the first time he felt curiosity with regard to Poppy. Where did she come from, he wondered? Whom did she belong to? It made him shudder to think that but for him, Sally might have been in an even worse position.

He went out and ordered in fruit and champagne, blissfully unconscious of what was the right thing to give her, and only remembering what she had always liked. Then he took a taxi cab to Fortnum and Mason’s, bought chicken broth and turtle soup, and half a dozen extravagances which he thought might tempt her to eat, stopped at a florist’s for flowers, picked up the only doctor he could find at home and went back. On the way he explained things as well as he could.

“She’s a friend of mine. I want to do all I can, but don’t send her to a hospital if you can help it—she’s afraid of hospitals, poor soul.”

“I see.” The doctor was a busy man who did his duty according to the time at his command. He suspected that Poppy was a great deal more than just a friend to this queer-looking giant in the funny hat and clothes, but it was none of his business, and anyway his first brief examination of Poppy told him the worst.

Outside on the landing he broke the news to Sanderson. “There’s no need to move her.”

Sanderson did not understand, and he looked relieved.

“I’m glad of that; she’ll be glad too. If there is anything she wants just tell me.”

"I'm afraid she won't want anything for long," the doctor said diffidently. "I'm afraid it's too late for me to help her much, she's dying."

"*Dying!*"

Philip Sanderson had never dreamed of such a thing, and it gave him a bad shock. Dying! alone in that comfortless room which she called "home.

"Someone must stay with her," the doctor went on. "If you can get a nurse. . . ."

But it had not been possible to get a nurse, though Sanderson drove from hospital to hospital in a vain attempt. When he told Mrs. Jenks how bad Poppy was, he was met by a volley of abuse.

"Well, she can't die here! I've trouble enough without a death in the house. She owes a month's rent, too."

"I'll pay it. I'll pay everything. Good God, woman, haven't you got a heart or any decent feeling?"

She looked taken aback.

"You can't afford a heart at my job," she answered bitterly. "I've got my work cut out to keep my body going, without bothering about a heart."

But she did what she could when she found it was to be made worth her while, and she stayed with Poppy while Sanderson went out and wired to Sally that he would not be returning that night. Then he called in at the flat behind Manchester Square to see if there were any letters. There were two bills and a businesslike looking document which he thrust into his pocket unopened, only remembering it during the long hours of the night when he sat by the smoky fire in Poppy's room listening to her laboured breathing, and occasionally getting up to replace the thin blankets which she persistently flung off. He knew without a doubt now that she was dying, and he remembered what she had said to him that morning they breakfasted together——

"What do you suppose will become of me when I'm too old to work?" Well, she was spared the fulfilment of that dread at all events. A tin-pot clock somewhere about the house struck two and Sanderson mechanically groped in a pocket for his watch in order to compare the time. It was then that he came across the unopened letter, and more for something with which to occupy his thoughts than from any real interest, he opened and read it. It was from a firm of lawyers of whom he had never heard, requesting him to go and see them at his convenience. The matter, it appeared, was in regard to

some money which fell to him, owing to the death of one Abel Sanderson, his half-brother.

Philip's face grew grim in the dim light. How he had detested Abel. They had not met for nearly twenty years, and he had always hoped that they would never meet again. Abel must have died intestate, or he would never have allowed his money to come to him, he knew.

Well, it would mean more for Sally, that was a good thing; and then his thoughts fled down to the cottage at Ash Hill and to the girl he loved with all the strength of his queer nature. What was she doing, he wondered? Lying awake, perhaps—perhaps even thinking of him. The audacity of that thought amused him. Sally had been very kind—so kind that even now it seemed like a dream—but she would most surely not keep awake for one moment in order to give him a thought, even though it was for her sake that he was spending the long night here watching Poppy Sladen die.

Poor Poppy! He glanced towards the bed with compassionate eyes. He was glad he had come; her gratitude had repaid him for his trouble, and afterwards, when it was all over, it would be something to remember that she had not been left to die alone.

He sat back in the hard, straight-backed chair which was the only one in the room, and closed his eyes.

How the hours dragged. . . . Presently the clock struck three; it would soon be morning. Sanderson knew that people very often died in the early hours of morning. He turned his head again towards Poppy. She was lying so still now, that for a moment he thought she had just gone out quietly, after all, without any struggle.

Then he felt that her eyes were open and fixed upon him, and after a moment she spoke his name very feebly.

"Philip."

"Yes." He got up at once and went to her. "Don't talk. Try to go to sleep."

She ignored his words.

"Why are you still here?" she asked.

"I thought you would like me to stay. It's rotten being alone when you're ill. I couldn't get a nurse."

"How you must hate it," she whispered with a flash of her old cynicism.

“I don’t hate it.”

“You wouldn’t if I were Sally,” she said rather sadly.

“I don’t as it is,” he told her quietly.

She closed her eyes, and there was a little silence.

“Are you going to stay all night?” she asked presently.

“Yes.”

Her heavy lids opened.

“Sally’s a damned little fool,” she said with weary scorn. “If it ’ud only been me you wanted instead of her, now!”

He tried to fall in with her mood.

“Go on! You wouldn’t have looked at me.”

“Perhaps not when I was well,” she admitted painfully. “But now—now I know what sort of a chap you really are. . . . I suppose you’ve kept your wings folded under that awful coat of yours all this time.”

“Don’t talk. Go to sleep.”

“All right. Don’t go away, then. Sit where I can see you if I look.”

“Righto!”

The night dragged away somehow, but in the morning Poppy was still there, although she was much weaker, and hardly conscious save in painful little flashes.

The doctor came again, looked at her, felt her pulse, sounded her heart and shook his head.

Philip followed him outside the door. The landing was dark, and smelt of stale food and a gas leakage.

“Look here, doctor,” he said bluntly. “If Poppy lived in Park Lane and had twenty thousand a year, what would you suggest doing to try and keep her alive?”

“Nothing now—it’s too late.”

“Because if there is anything——”

“I know. I’m sorry. Get another opinion if you like. I can do no more.”

But she lingered all that day and halfway through the next night before the fight was ended.

Sanderson hardly left her.

"Haunts the house like an evil spirit," Mrs. Jenks complained downstairs to her husband, a lazy lout of a man who spent his life in his shirt-sleeves, drinking beer, and bullying lodgers who could not pay their rent.

But there was nothing evil in Philip Sanderson's face when at the last he sat beside Poppy's bed. She had asked him to hold her hand.

"I shan't feel so lonely," she whispered. The fever and delirium seemed to have abated; she was just intensely weak.

"Am I going to die?" she asked once.

"We've all got to die some day," Sanderson answered. She laughed a little at that.

"So we have! Seems queer, doesn't it, that some day the jolly old world'll be going merrily on, and we shan't be here."

"Well, it will," Philip answered.

"I know. . . ." She was so short of breath. "Well, wherever I go—if I go first, I hope . . . some day . . . you'll come along, Philip. Don't suppose you will, though . . . you'll be in a better place than me. . . ."

"Rubbish! I dare say we'll be given a stoking job together," he told her, trying to speak lightly.

That made her smile, and then for some time she lay still not speaking at all, hardly seeming to breathe, until quite suddenly she tugged at his hand with surprising strength.

"Philip."

"Yes?"

"Do you think Sally 'ud mind if you kissed me?"

Sanderson winced. It was so unlike Poppy to ask such a thing; he felt as if, when she tugged at his hand like that, she had tugged at his heartstrings as well.

"I think she would be glad if she knew you wanted me to," he said awkwardly.

"Well, then!" Poppy whispered.

Sanderson bent over the bed and kissed her cheek, thankful that there was nobody in the room.

"Now go to sleep like a good girl," he said.

"Righto!" Poppy whispered. "And . . . Philip . . . thank you for everything. I hope some day you'll be very happy . . ."

They were the last words she spoke, and just as the sun was struggling to show itself in the cheerless little room, she died, so quietly and peacefully that Sanderson sat holding her hand for some time longer before he realised she was no longer there. Then he stood up, and for a moment looked down at her quiet face with a surprising mistiness before his eyes.

"You're luckier than some of them, Poppy, at any rate," he said gruffly, and folded her hands across her cold breast. Before he left the house he saw Mrs. Jenks, paid her everything that was owing, and promised to make the necessary arrangements. Then he went out. He felt he would give his soul for a stiff drink, but his promise to Sally restrained him. He would not break his word to Sally.

He had some lunch and called on Abel Sanderson's solicitors. The money was considerable, they told him—roughly perhaps thirty thousand pounds, but naturally it would take some time to settle everything.

"I suppose Abel left no will," Philip submitted.

They admitted he had not.

Sanderson grinned. "I knew that, or he would have taken damn' good care I didn't get a halfpenny," he said. "He hated me as much as I hated him, which is saying a good deal."

Then he gave them the address of his flat, fetched his car and made for Ash Hill.

He felt like an eager schoolboy going home for the holidays as he sped away from London. It seemed an interminable time since he left Sally; his one thought was of her welcome. Would she be glad to see him? Had she missed him?

It was like a douche of cold water to be told by Mrs. Kiff that Sally was out with Nairn.

"I told her as 'ow I thought you'd be angry, sir," Mrs. Kiff protested, seeing the thundercloud on Sanderson's brow. "But go she would! She must

see them woods, so she declared, and as she was all right with the gentleman yesterday, I——"

"Did Nairn take her out yesterday as well?"

"Yes, sir."

Sanderson walked into the cottage without answering. Sally had been out in the sunshine with another man while he sat and waited for Poppy to die. Although in a way he knew it to be unjust, he felt hurt and miserably jealous. Why could not Sally have been content to stay in just for once? After all, it was for her sake that he had gone to London. Then he pulled himself together and tried to dismiss the thought. It was mere selfishness to grudge her the woods and the sunshine; he ought to be glad that Nairn had been so decent as to offer to take her. After all, the chair was no light thing to push and the vicar was not a young man.

It was strange that it never entered his head that Mrs. Kiff had been speaking of the son, and not the father, and he felt as if someone had struck him over the heart when, half an hour later, hearing voices coming up the road, he went eagerly to the door and saw Garry.

The vicar's son was lounging along, one hand on the invalid's chair, pushing it easily enough, laughing and talking.

"Damn him!" said Sanderson under his breath, and strode down the garden path with fury in his eyes.

Afterwards, when Nairn had gone, and Sally had stopped crying, and lay by the fire, her long lashes wet with tears, and her thoughts far away with the days when she and Poppy Sladen had been the greatest of friends, Philip said abruptly.

"Who asked that fellow round here?"

She turned her head, her eyes bewildered.

"What fellow?"

"That parson's son."

"Oh! you mean Garry. He brought me a book from his father, and offered to take me out when he heard you were not here."

"Like his damned cheek."

Sally flushed.

“I thought it was kind of him. He took me out twice, and once we had tea with his father at the Vicarage.”

Sanderson’s face grew ugly with a bitter sneer.

“Are they out trying to save your soul?”

“They didn’t mention it,” Sally said sharply.

She was unhappy and tired, and in the shock of hearing about Poppy she had forgotten how tired Sanderson must be, and forgotten also to thank him for all he had done for her friend.

Tea was a silent meal.

“We ought to have asked Garry to stay,” Sally said.

Sanderson’s jealous eyes searched her face suspiciously.

“Did you want him to stay?” he asked roughly.

“He would have been more cheerful than you are,” she answered sharply. “You’ve hardly said a word since you came in.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been up all night——”

Her blue eyes opened wide.

“Up all night? Whatever for? You promised me you wouldn’t go to the club.”

“I kept my promise.”

She looked sceptical.

“Then I don’t see why you were up all night,” she said unkindly. Sanderson told her.

“I stayed with Poppy till she died,” and then he got up without waiting for her to reply, and strode out of the room. He was as near the end of his tether as such a man can be. In his overtired state everything seemed distorted and out of its true proportion. He had not got the welcome from Sally for which he had longed, and he had found his place—his treasured place—usurped by another man—a younger man!

That was where the chief sting lay, that Garry Nairn should be so near to Sally’s own age. Sanderson knew that he himself was old enough to be her father, but it made no difference to his love for her. He loved her with all the ardour of a boy even though he was often tongue-tied and stupid when he most wished to express himself.

There are some men to whom only youth appeals; there are some men who can see no charm in a woman of their own age, and Sanderson was one of those men. It was Sally's youth he loved, and her helplessness; they were the only two things he saw.

Her commonness and rudeness passed him by, or rather, he forgave them. He was a man who wanted someone to be entirely dependent upon him, and Sally was entirely dependent. He would have made an ideal father for daughters—spoiling them atrociously, but loving them with all his heart. More than thirty years ago he had given love of some such quality to a little stepsister. He had been a boy of seventeen, and she a tiny toddler with flaxen hair and an ingratiating smile.

Philip had adored her; he would have given his life for her without a second's hesitation. But when she was only three years old she died, and his stepbrother Abel had been the cause. Abel was a rough, clumsy churl of a fellow, and one day when they were ragging together in a stable loft, with Betty looking on admiringly, Abel had caught his foot in a rope, stumbled, and finding himself falling towards the open trapdoor that led down to the yard below, he had caught at the nearest object in order to save himself—his little sister!

They had gone down together on to the cobblestones below, and she had died.

Abel and he had hated one another ever since, and now, by the irony of Fate, Abel was dead and Philip was to have his money. Money which he would spend on Sally—that was the irony of Fate, too, for in Philip's mind Sally always seemed a vague echo of the little sister who had died—the little sister grown up and dependent upon him still.

Sometimes, a little stronger on his injured legs, had dragged after his master from the room, and drew painful attention to himself by whining and pawing Sanderson's feet.

"Hullo, old boy! Forgotten you, had I?"

He picked the dog up and took him out into the garden.

It was quite dusk now, and the air was fresh and scented with flowers. Philip thought of the room where Poppy had died, and of the blunt words she had spoken to him from her grateful heart: "If it 'ud only been me you wanted instead of Sally, now!"

In the bitterness of his heart Sanderson wished it had been.

It would have been something to have known love, even if he could not have given it in return.

Mrs. Kiff hailed him from the doorway.

"Are you there, sir, please? Miss Sally wants you."

"Coming." But his voice was dispirited, and his steps dragged as he went back to the sitting-room with Sometimes still in his arms.

"What do you want to go away like that for?" Sally asked, but she spoke more gently. "And put Sometimes down; I want to tell you something—something that will please you."

"What is it?"

He put the dog down on the rug and sat on the end of Sally's couch.

She held out her hand.

"Please!" she said.

Sanderson took it reluctantly; somehow, the feel of it did not seem sincere after the tug of Poppy's thin hand last night.

"Well, what is it?" he asked again.

"You know what you've often said . . ." Sally began slowly. "About doctors, and further advice . . . and all the rest of it."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm willing—if you really want me to."

Sanderson's heart gave a quick leap. Was she doing this for his sake? Did it mean that at last she had some deeper feeling for him that was urging her to do all she could to please him?

But he was cautious.

"I thought you dreaded it so, my dear," he said gently. "I thought you could not bear to think of it. What has made you change your mind so suddenly?"

Sally turned her head away.

"I've been thinking," she said slowly. "I suppose it is silly not to do all I can . . . After all, it would be rather lovely to be able to walk—even just a little, and if it does hurt at first—it won't for always perhaps—and, as Garry says, I'll still be young at the end of five years even if it takes all that time to mend me."

There was a stiff little silence, then Sanderson spoke.

“So Garry has been talking about it to you, has he?”

“Yes. Not much, only just a little, but I think he’s right—I think I ought to do everything I can, don’t you?”

Sanderson did not answer; he was conscious of a cold feeling round his heart. So it was not for his sake at all that she was willing to risk the thing she so dreaded, but for the sake of this other man.

# Chapter XII

Youth calls to youth!

Lying awake at night, Philip Sanderson realised the poetic justice of Garry Nairn's attraction for Sally, even while he fiercely rebelled against it.

Was he to have no happiness in his own life? It seemed as if a few careless crumbs of gratitude were all that he need ever look to receive.

Sally had relented before he said good-night to her. She had cried and thanked him sobbingly for his goodness to Poppy Sladen; she had kissed him with quivering lips and declared that no other man in the world was as good or unselfish as he, but somehow the words had not comforted him or healed his sore heart.

Sanderson knew that women do not love a man because he is good or unselfish; he knew that more often than not an utter blackguard has the power to attract and hold the deepest affection.

Sally had reiterated her intention of seeking further advice for her injuries.

"That is, if you want me to," she told him. "You'll have to pay, Philip, and if, after all, you don't want to . . ."

There had only been one answer possible to such a question. He had said that his chief desire was to see her well and strong, and he had promised at once to find out the best surgeon to whom to take her for advice.

But lying awake alone with the silence of the country all around him, Sanderson was conscious of deep misgiving.

Supposing she died? He was haunted by Poppy's death. In his overstrung state of mind it had almost seemed to be a warning. Supposing Sally died? Well, if she did, his own life would also be at an end; he would not live without her.

On the other hand, what if she made a complete recovery?

Her need of him would then be gone, and she might turn elsewhere for love and affection even as she had done during the past two days. At the back of Sanderson's thought was a haunting certainty that Garry Nairn had come into Sally's life to stay. He saw in the vicar's cheery son a far more formidable rival than he had ever seen in Josh Akers, though why he was at

a loss to explain to himself. The two men were such utterly different types. Akers belonged to Sally's past, a past to which he did not believe she would ever return even supposing she completely recovered. He was fully aware of the change in her, and until to-day he had rejoiced in it. He knew that she no longer considered Ash Hill and the country a place of boredom and exile; he knew that she had grown to love the cottage and the little garden. He knew how she felt about the woods, the woods to which he had first taken her for that one happy day.

"And now it's all over!"

That thought was in his mind and would not be dismissed; he had had the only run for his money he was likely to get; Sally had passed beyond him. He felt as if ever since their first meeting he and she had been fellow-travellers on a high road, and that sometimes she had overtaken him, sometimes he had overtaken her. Once he had been sure that their lives had definitely joined and would never again be divided—that had been when he brought her away from the hospital, helpless and friendless save for himself, but now in spite of her crippled state, in the last two days she seemed to have eluded him once again, to have so far outstripped him in the race that it was useless to pursue her farther.

Nairn was a young, strong man, and even supposing as yet there was nothing between them of which one could definitely state, "This is so," Sanderson's fourth sense told him that a third traveller had joined them on the road and he could not deafen himself to the sound of the intruder's footstep.

At the foot of his bed Sometimes stirred and whined uneasily, his injured legs cramped and stiff, and Sanderson got up and lit a candle and moved the dog into a more comfortable position.

He had never felt more wide awake in his life, and instead of going back to bed he put on a dressing-gown—a shabby, ugly affair of black and red check—and sat down by the wide-open window.

Already there was a first pale streak of dawn-light in the sky; already a sleepy bird was rousing and twittering from its nest in the ivy, and Sanderson remembered that it had been at just such an hour more than thirty years ago his little sister had died.

He had loathed the dawn ever since. The most vivid memory of his life was when, as a broken-hearted boy in his teens, he had crouched shivering

on the landing in terror as to what was happening on the other side of the closed nursery door.

Then, after interminable hours, it had opened and his stepmother had come out, half led, half carried, her face grey and her eyes closed. Philip had swayed forward and clutched at her arm——

"Betty?"

But there had been no need to answer him, and out in the world, beyond the uncurtained landing window, there had been just such a grey streak of dawn-light in the sky.

How he had loathed the dawn-light ever since, and yet here he sat, watching it once again, conscious in his heart that this time it was his every hope of happiness that was dying, and that soon he would be quite an old man, old and friendless.

He thought of Garry Nairn and tried to hate him, finding it impossible. Nobody could hate a youth with such a frank, open face, such a cheery smile. Sanderson felt ashamed as he remembered how he had snubbed him —how deliberately rude he had been.

Perhaps, after all, he was making a mountain out of a mole-hill; perhaps, after all, Fate would step in and remove this intruder from his pathway and Sally's; perhaps it was just his jealous imagination that had magnified the incident to such great importance.

A little chill breeze stirred suddenly in the sleeping garden below and blew in at the open window.

Sanderson shivered and rose to his feet. The light of the flickering candle threw his huge, grotesque shadow on the low sloping ceiling of the little room, and Sanderson smiled grimly as he saw it.

"The Guards never retire," he told himself obstinately, and climbed back into bed.

# Chapter XIII

At the end of the week Sanderson went back to London for two reasons —first to follow Poppy Sladen's lonely coffin to an obscure corner of an ugly London cemetery, and secondly to make arrangements for Sally to come to town for further advice.

Sally had cried when she said good-bye to him.

"Do you think they'll hurt me?" she asked fearfully.

"Not if I can help it," was his grim reply. "And they shan't lay a finger on you even now, unless it's what you really wish."

"I do really wish it," she told him. "It's only that I'm such an awful coward."

Garry Nairn had not been to the cottage again, but the day following Sanderson's departure he called.

Sally was delighted to see him, and said so frankly. It was raining, so he sat beside her in the little parlour and they talked.

Sally told him that she had made up her mind to be examined by another doctor if Philip could arrange it for her, and she was surprised because he did not look pleased.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked.

Garry scowled at the floor.

"I hope Sanderson will go to the top man," he said.

"Oh, he will," Sally assured him fervently. "Philip always has the best of everything for me."

"And it means that you will leave here and go back to London?"

"I suppose so; just for a little while, anyway."

She looked at his brown young face with puzzled eyes, then suddenly she smiled.

"Shall you miss me?" she asked.

"Of course."

Sally laughed.

“When we’ve only known one another such a little while?”

He turned his honest eyes upon her.

“There are some people you seem to have known all your life when you’ve only seen them once,” he explained not very lucidly.

“And am I one of them?” Sally asked.

Garry Nairn nodded; he was rather red about the ears.

“You’re so little and helpless,” he said boyishly.

“And you’re so big and strong,” Sally answered with a sigh of envy.

There was a little silence, and from the kitchen came the unlovely treble of Mrs. Kiff:

“I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!”

“She always sings the same song,” Sally complained.

“It’s rather a nice song,” Nairn answered. “It was one my mother used to sing.”

“Oh!”

They looked at one another with sympathetic eyes, and then suddenly Nairn asked an irrelevant question:

“Is Sanderson any relation to you?”

She shook her head.

“No.”

“Haven’t you got any relations?”

“No. At least, if I have I don’t know them, and I don’t want to.”

“I see.” He fidgeted with an unlit pipe and Sally said kindly:

“Do light it, if you want to. Philips always smokes a pipe.”

“Thanks.”

She watched interestedly while he unfolded his pouch, filled his pipe and rammed the tobacco down into the bowl. She had seen Philip do exactly the same thing dozens of times but it had never interested her in the very least. Philip had such long, lean hands—“spider hands” Sally had always called them—but Garry Nairn’s were square and sunburnt, with freckles on them—the sort of hands, Sally thought wistfully, into which it would be such a

comfort to slip one's own and feel them held in a hard, firm clasp. She almost ached to put the thought into action, and as if he guessed something of what was in her mind, Nairn asked abruptly:

"What are you thinking about?"

"You might be shocked if I told you."

"Try me and see."

Sally flushed. "Well, I was just thinking that I should like to take hold of your hand."

"Well—why not?"

And then suddenly her hand was in his, and she was conscious of such infinite content and happiness that she closed her eyes.

"Well?" Garry Nairn said rather hoarsely. "I've got a big, leg-of-mutton fist, haven't I?"

"I like it," Sally whispered.

They sat for some moments without speaking. Nairn's pouch had fallen to the floor, and his pipe was unlit; then he said suddenly:

"When you are strong and well again . . ."

Sally's blue eyes snapped open. "Oh, do you think I ever shall be?"

"Yes, I do think so."

Tears welled up and flowed over on to her cheeks.

"Well enough to walk—to walk through the woods—and pick the flowers, and perhaps climb over a stile without anyone to help me?"

"Yes."

"It's too good to be true. It makes me afraid."

The silence fell again, which Sally broke with a little laugh.

"What are you thinking now?" he asked.

"That it's funny—how I've changed," she explained. "Once upon a time all I thought about was dancing, and night clubs, and men to take me about. I used to lie here and long to get well so that I might go back to all that sort of thing; but now . . ." she broke off.

"And now?" he prompted.

“I must have changed an awful lot,” Sally said slowly. “Because now all I want is to get well enough to be able to walk about these lanes, and look after the cottage and the garden . . .”

“With no men about?” he queried.

The colour rose slowly to Sally’s pale face.

“I shouldn’t mind . . . you,” she whispered.

Nairn flushed dully.

“You don’t mean that,” he declared. “I’m not the sort of fellow you’d want hanging about. I’m too slow . . . too clumsy——”

“And I’m quite . . . useless,” Sally answered. “Perhaps I always shall be.”

They looked at one another with tragic eyes, then suddenly Garry Nairn bent and kissed the hand he held.

“Don’t say such things. You’re not to say them,” he told her almost angrily. “It makes no difference if you—like anyone—if they are ill or not. It makes no difference to me.”

“But it would in time,” Sally said, suddenly wise. “Just at first, perhaps, it seems rather pathetic to you to see me like I am, but you’d get sick of it—oh, how sick!—and then . . .”

“And then . . .”

“Then you’d look round for a girl who could race you down hill, and go for walks with you.”

He was silent, but he still held her hand. Although nothing definite had been said between them, they seemed to understand one another perfectly.

It was such happiness to be together—Sally had always known that from the very first moment they met—and she knew now that there was not, and never would be, anyone in all the world who could give her such a sense of completeness and serenity as this broad-shoulderd man with the red, quaintly crinkled hair.

Impulsively she told him of her dreams.

“It was you I dreamt about. The back of the man’s head was just like yours. I knew you at once—I knew you directly you walked into the garden with the vicar.”

Nairn laughed a little self-consciously.

"I felt as if I'd met you before, too. There was something in the way you looked at me . . ." He tried awkwardly to explain. "It was almost as if I'd been looking for you for years and suddenly found you. I believe I expected you to say 'Here I am!' as if you knew I'd been hunting for you."

Sally squeezed his hand.

"I suppose that is really being in love?" she asked in a tiny voice. "Do you think it is?"

He nodded, and then——

"Sanderson's in love with you," he challenged her.

"Yes." Sally had no intention of denying it; she was proud of the fact, proud too that Nairn should see he was not the only man who liked her.

"He's always been in love with me," she said.

"He's rich, I suppose?"

Sally considered the point.

"I suppose he is," she agreed at last. "He always seems to have plenty of money, but I've never asked him about it."

"*I* haven't any money, Sally."

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, but it does," he said earnestly. "Especially if you . . ." He did not go on, and presently Sally asked:

"Supposing I don't get well after all?"

"You will."

"But if I *don't*?"

"We won't talk about it."

He glanced towards the window. "It's stopped raining, Sally. Would you like to go out?"

"Oh, yes."

Everything gave her such great happiness. To be carried in his arms, to see the reproof in Mrs. Kiff's eyes—to be tucked up by his brown, clumsy hands—to be asked: "Sure you're warm enough?" in his deep voice. Philip had done all these things for her scores of times, but she had never

experienced a thrill, never felt so happy that she even wanted to sing with Mrs. Kiff, “I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!”

They went slowly down the wet, narrow lane to the main road. A watery sun was shining, and the raindrops were falling from the trees with a little melodious tinkle. They splashed on to the rug which covered Sally, and on to her face.

“You’re getting wet,” Garry said, and he stopped and came round and wiped the little drops away with his handkerchief.

“Happy?” he asked, meeting her smiling eyes.

Sally nodded. “Never been so happy in all my life.”

“But lots of men must have been in love with you,” he said presently.

“Oh, yes!” She was glad to be able to admit it.

“But you’ve never been in love with anyone?” he asked a little uncertainly.

Sally frowned, and her colour rose.

“I was once,” she admitted reluctantly. “Or I thought I was.” The memory of Josh Akers seemed so faint and far away; it made her cheeks burn to remember how she had cried to him, and pleaded, and implored.

“But I was only very young then,” she added hurriedly.

“Are you so old now?” he asked.

“I feel hundreds of years old,” she sighed. She looked up and saw the shadow on his face. “I’ll tell you about him if you like,” she said quickly.

“No, oh, no—I don’t want to hear. I might want to go and kill him if you said that he treated you badly.”

“I’m glad now that he did treat me badly,” Sally answered.

When they were in the heart of the wet, sweet-smelling woods, Nairn stopped and sat down beside her on a fallen tree.

“Are you going to tell Sanderson?” he asked.

“Tell him . . . tell him what?”

She knew well enough what he meant, but she wanted to hear him say it.

“Tell him what we have been talking about.”

She turned her face away.

“What have we been talking about?” she questioned teasingly.

He leaned over and took her hand.

“Just things that you and I understand,” he answered.

She liked the way he put that, and her eyes glowed.

“Do you want me to tell him?” she asked.

He hesitated. “Perhaps not yet. Let’s keep it to ourselves for a little while, shall we?”

“But you won’t stay away from me? You will come every day?”

“I’ll come as often as I can, but, you know, Sanderson doesn’t like me.”

“Poor Philip!”

Garry’s eyes were bent on the wet moss at his feet.

“Yes. Poor devil!” he said.

On the way home Sally said suddenly: “Garry—you know I’m not what you would call a lady.”

He laughed. “Aren’t you?”

“No. I swear horribly when I’m angry.”

“So do I.”

“That’s different. Philip says a man can swear but a woman ought not to.”

He would not take her seriously.

“Well, as long as you don’t drink——”

“No, I don’t do that. It makes my head ache.” She wanted him to be serious; she wanted to tell him everything about herself; her newly awakened love for him made her feel that she must strip her poor little soul bare before him, showing him all its weaknesses and frailty from the beginning; she felt that she could not endure it if some day, when she could no longer do without him, he grew disillusioned and disappointed. She tried again from another angle.

“I don’t even know who my father was.”

“I can’t say I’m particularly anxious to know.”

“And my mother—you wouldn’t have liked her.”

Nairn drew the long chair to a standstill.

“Look here, Sally—why are you worrying yourself like this.”

Sally burst into tears.

“Because I know I’m not nice enough for you, not good enough. Your father is a clergyman, and I’m nobody at all. Perhaps some day you’ll be sorry you ever liked me—I know men are often sorry.” She thought bitterly of Josh Akers.

“When I am sorry, I’ll tell you,” Garry promised. “I’m not afraid to tell anyone I’ve changed my mind.” He took out his handkerchief and pressed it into her hand. “Don’t cry, Sally. It hurts to see you cry.”

She mopped her eyes obediently.

“I wish I was n-nicer, for your sake,” she said. “I wish I was well and strong, and able to race you down hill. I wish I was clever and well educated, and oh—everything some girls are.”

She had never been more sincere in her life, and yet Garry Nairn had done nothing for her but speak kindly, and look at her with his honest blue eyes, and hold her hand in his firm young grasp, whereas for Philip Sanderson, who had given her everything, and would have given her all he had, there was nothing in return!

And it hurt Sally unspeakably, when after she was in bed that night, all freshly washed and powdered, lying with closed eyes and happily smiling lips, her heart and thoughts away with Garry Nairn, Sometimes, whom Sanderson had left with her at the cottage, limped into her room dragging something with him which he laid down beside the bed.

Sally tried to see what it was, but she could not raise herself sufficiently from the pillows, so she called to Mrs. Kiff.

“Sometimes has brought something into the room. I do hope it’s not a rat. Please look. I hate rats.”

Mrs. Kiff hated rats herself, so she hurriedly gathered her skirts around her and fetched a second candle, before, with laborious breathing, she stooped and discovered what it was.

“Rat indeed, it’s just Mr. Sanderson’s old dressing-gown what he left behind. Did you ever now!” She gathered it up with reverent hands—Mrs. Kiff secretly adored Philip Sanderson and anything that belonged to him.

“There’s a dog for you,” she exclaimed with pride. She looked at Sally and then at Sometimes.

“*You* wasn’t goin’ to ’ave your master forgotten now, was yer?” she admonished the dog meaningly. “And I don’t blame yer neither. Dogs is more faithful than ’umans are, and that’s a fact.”

She went away with the gown clutched to her bosom.

Sally lay very still, tears smarting in her eyes. Forgotten! that’s what had already happened to Philip, to dear Philip Sanderson who had done so much for her.

Truly the fruit does not always fall to the planter of the tree.

# Chapter XIV

Events moved quickly. Philip Sanderson was not a man to allow the grass to grow under his feet once he had made up his mind to a thing, and three days after Poppy Sladen was buried he took Sally back to London to a nursing home recommended by the specialist whom he had been advised to consult.

There were painful moments before Sally left the cottage, although she tried to be brave.

Mrs. Kiff lamented long and loudly. She had no belief in what she called the new fandangle ways of doctors. She considered that it was one's duty to bow the head to the will of God. Somebody, according to her way of argument, had got to bear the crosses of life, and she declared to Sanderson that it was only tempting Providence to make Sally's cross all the bigger because of their efforts to discard it altogether. Sanderson let her talk, listening silently, his face grim.

He had been quite content to go on as they had been going during the past few months even though he knew it was for Sally's good not to give up hope of at any rate a partial recovery; but since the girl herself had expressed her willingness to seek further advice, he had considered it his duty to help her in every possible way. He knew that during his absence in London Garry Nairn had been a frequent visitor at the cottage, but Sally never mentioned his name until the night before she was to return to London.

She had been low-spirited and tearful, and had resisted all attempts to rouse her.

It was a glorious evening, sunny and warm, and they had stayed late in the garden. A long narrow bed of Darwen tulips was on the point of bursting out into flower, and Sally said suddenly after a long silence:

"I don't suppose I shall see them after all, shall I?"

Sanderson started from a reverie.

"See what, Sally?"

"The tulips."

"You'll see them next year even if you are away when they bloom this time," he answered gently.

Big tears ran down her cheeks.

"If they haven't killed me," she said.

Sanderson's teeth bit into the stem of his pipe, but he made no reply.

"It 'ud be a good thing for you if I did die," she said again after a moment. She turned her head and looked at him.

"Why don't you say something?" she demanded fretfully.

"I don't know what to say," Sanderson said heavily.

He was more unhappy than he had been for a long time. He knew without being told that he had been pushed out of the place in Sally's regard to which he had climbed with such infinite labour, and the knowledge made him more taciturn and silent than ever.

Whichever way he looked into the future there seemed to be nothing for him. The unacknowledged presence of Nairn was always there, dogging his footsteps and clouding his sunshine. A cloud as yet no bigger than a man's hand, but which he knew would grow day by day until at last his sun was totally eclipsed.

He glanced at Sally with hard eyes, but she was no longer attending to him. Her head was turned towards the gate and she was listening eagerly to steps far down the road which were drawing nearer. Sanderson listened, too, but it was only a farmer's lad going home through the sunset singing gruffly to himself; a farmer's lad who stared with friendly interest over the low garden gate, then went on and out of sight and hearing.

Sanderson broke the silence.

"Whom did you think it was, Sally?"

"I thought it might be Mr. Nairn. I thought he might come to say good-bye to me."

Sally tried hard to speak indifferently, but there was a certain quality in her voice which was unmistakable.

Sanderson said nothing. He sat staring down at the ground, a grim smile on his lips till Sally spoke again.

"I'm cold. Please take me in."

He obeyed without a word, giving her into Mrs. Kiff's care.

Then he whistled to Sometimes, who was well enough now to amble lamely along in lop-sided fashion, and together they went down the road. Sanderson had never been to the Vicarage, but he knew where it was, and he had reached the gate when he saw Garry coming across the garden towards him.

"Hullo!" Sanderson was quick to hear the sharp note in the younger man's voice. "Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"Nothing." Sanderson did not offer his hand and Garry did not seem to expect it. "I only came along to tell you I am taking Sally to London to-morrow—to see Brodman. I thought perhaps you might walk back with me and wish her luck."

"That's decent of you. I shall be delighted."

The veil of pretence between them was of the filmiest, but it served. They were both glad to use it, and to draw its transparency over the nakedness of their hearts.

"Will you come in and see the guv'nor?" Garry asked awkwardly.

"Not to-night, thanks. We ought to be getting back."

They turned out into the road together, with Sometimes ambling behind.

"The dog's better," Garry said.

"Yes."

"It would have been rotten if he'd pegged out," Garry said boyishly. "Had a dog of my own killed just before I came home. You'd laugh if I told you how it hurt."

"No, I shouldn't."

There was a more friendly note in Sanderson's voice. He could never be in Garry's company for more than a few minutes without reluctantly realising how impossible it was to hate this boy as he wished to hate him.

They spoke very little till they reached the cottage, then Sanderson led the way into the sitting-room.

A small fire burned in the grate, but the windows were wide open to the gathering dusk. There was a bowl of bluebells on a side table, and an elaborate pink shawl of Sally's lying across her couch. Both men were painfully conscious of that shawl, it seemed somehow such a very intimate part of her.

“Help yourself to a drink,” Sanderson said. “And there’s baccy on the shelf, or cigarettes. I’ll tell Sally you’re here.”

He went away, closing the door, but Garry stood where he was left, his hands hanging limply at his sides, his honest eyes full of trouble.

He was sufficiently sensitive to feel himself an interloper; he knew that Sanderson loved Sally, and hoped to marry her, but he knew also how vain that hope now was.

Sometimes, when he was away from Sally, Garry Nairn told himself that the best and most honourable thing he could do would be to go right away out of their lives. He tried to persuade himself that Sally would soon forget him; he tried to believe that her helplessness was her only attraction for him, and that he would soon weary of it, but his heart gave him the lie.

He loved her for better or worse, for good or evil, in spite of what she pathetically called her “commonness,” in spite of his own better judgment.

He knew he could not marry her unless a miracle happened and she was made strong and well once more, and yet all that was best in him longed to take her just as she was, and to love her to the end of her life.

Sanderson came back.

“Sally will be pleased to see you. Do you mind going to her bedroom?”

“Of course not.”

Garry passed Sanderson with averted eyes and went to Sally’s room. A lighted lamp stood beside the bed, its soft light falling on her beautiful hair, and on the slender hand which she held out to him in welcome.

“I thought you were not coming to say good-bye to me,” she said.

“I wanted to come. You know that, only . . . you see . . .” He was embarrassed, and could only stammer.

“Only—what?” Sally asked.

He made a hopeless gesture.

“There’s Sanderson. He’s done everything . . . and I know—of course I know, that I’m the interloper.”

She drew her hand away from his.

“You didn’t *have* to come,” she said sharply.

“Sally, don’t be unkind.”

“It’s you who are unkind. You know I am going away to-morrow, and you haven’t been here for two days.”

They were talking in whispers.

Nairn answered desperately.

“It’s not that I haven’t wanted to come . . . but Sanderson . . .”

“You put him before me?”

“No, no—you know I don’t, but he’s such a decent chap. He walked over and asked me to come back here with him——”

“Oh!” There was a little hurt note in her voice. “You would not have come if he hadn’t done that then?”

She lost sight of Sanderson’s generosity, seeing only what she thought was Nairn’s unwillingness, and when he did not answer she said brokenly:

“Oh, I hope I never get any better. I hope I die.”

“Sally!”

“Well, you wouldn’t care!”

That was more than he could bear; he went down on his knees beside the bed and took her in his arms.

“I love you, Sally. You know I love you.”

“And you always will, whatever happens?”

“Always.”

“And afterwards, if I don’t get better?”

“It will make no difference.”

At that moment he really believed it would not.

Presently when he went back to Sanderson he found him sitting almost in the darkness, for the sunset had faded and the fire had burned low.

“Pleased to see you?” Sanderson asked.

“Yes, I think so.” There was a little silence. “I say, do you think it will be all right?—to-morrow, I mean?”

“I’ve every hope that she will be able to walk again, if that is what you mean.”

“Yes, that’s what I meant . . . Sanderson, you’re a damned decent sort.”

“Thanks.” Sanderson laughed grimly and rose to his feet, Garry could feel his keen eyes upon him through the greyness of the little room.

“I say—” he broke out awkwardly. “Look here, I want to tell you . . . you see, don’t you know . . .” It was so difficult to explain, so impossible.

“There’s an old saying,” Sanderson interrupted coolly. “You may have heard it. ‘Let the best man win’ . . . Ever heard it?”

“Yes, of course . . . I——”

“Well, let him!” Sanderson said. “And we’ll play fair, so I invite you to come up to Town to-morrow with Sally and me. There’ll be lots of room in the car. I’ve hired the one she came down in. Well, will you come?”

“Will I? . . . Well, of course. Sanderson, you’re a damned decent sort.”

# Chapter XV

Mr. Brodman's nursing home was the last word in luxury and comfort. Sally, who had looked upon it with dread as another hospital, sighed with infinite relief when she was installed in her room which overlooked a quiet London square where leafy trees waved their branches to the sky, and sparrows chirped and chattered.

The room was filled with flowers and books, and everything the heart could desire, and her own particular nurse was young and pretty, and full of hope and cheeriness.

"Get well? Why of course you will," she said in reply to Sally's frightened questioning. "If you don't it will be a lasting disgrace to all of us, and base ingratitude to Mr. Sanderson."

"Philip is an angel," Sally said absently, but her thoughts were with Garry Nairn. It was for his sake that she wished to be well and strong again. The mere thought of being able to walk with him, and race down hill with him sent her into an ecstasy. She longed to speak of him to this nurse with the sympathetic eyes, but somehow she could not. Garry was the only conquest Sally had ever made of whom she felt it impossible to boast. Their love for each other was too precious and sacred to share with a third person.

It was for Garry's sake that she so patiently bore all the hurtful examination and handling and consultation.

The little nurse was full of praise.

"You're a brave little thing," she said. "I wish all our patients had your pluck."

Tears rolled down Sally's cheeks.

"I'm not really brave," she said. "I'm the most awful coward."

She told the little nurse all about Mrs. Kiff, and Sometimes, and the cottage at Ash Hill.

She described the rooms, and the gardens, and the woods and the smell of the country.

"You must come and stay with me when I go back," she said eagerly. "Perhaps you won't mind pushing my chair when Philip isn't there."

“Perhaps there won’t be a chair to push,” the little nurse answered cheerily. “Perhaps you’ll be on Shank’s pony.”

Sally flushed and her eyes shone like stars.

“If only I *could*!” she breathed. “I’ll do anything the doctors tell me to do. I’ll put up with anything.”

She was pathetically happy when Dr. Brodman told her they had decided to operate.

Brodman was a big Scotchman with sandy hair and hands as fine and delicate as a woman’s. He treated Sally as if she had been a child and insisted upon calling her “Golden Locks.”

“I think he rather likes me,” Sally confided to the little nurse with a touch of coquetry, and the little nurse answered simply:

“He likes everyone. He’s a wonderful man.”

Sally looked ashamed; she felt as if for a moment she had dropped back into the past when she had judged every man by the way in which he looked at her, and the amount of money he was willing to spend.

The operation was fixed for a Wednesday morning.

Sally made a little grimace when she heard that.

“Wednesday is my unlucky day,” she told the nurse. “It was on a Wednesday morning that Philip ran over me.”

“Well, I shouldn’t remind him of that if I were you,” was the only answer she got, for the little nurse liked Philip Sanderson, and understood him. She liked Garry Nairn, too, but she knew enough of life and had seen trouble enough to wish that happiness might in this instance be given where it was best deserved. In her quiet unobtrusive way she never lost an opportunity to sing Philip’s praises to Sally and though Sally would always smile and agree, it was entirely in an impartial way, for Sally had given her heart for “keeps” this time, as she expressed it to herself to the man with the queer crinkly hair and big freckled hands, who had not done and never could do, half as much for her as Sanderson.

But that is the way of life, and love cannot be controlled.

And then the Wednesday morning came.

Both men had been to see Sally the night before, but it was she who was by far the most cheerful of the three.

She would not say good-bye to either of them, she insisted on behaving exactly as if nothing unusual was about to occur.

She teased Sanderson about his white face and declared she would send out and buy him some rouge if he did not show her a better colour next time he came. She avoided saying good-bye to Garry by a trick. She sent him out to buy flowers for her, and then told the nurse not to allow him to come back.

"But give him my love—" she whispered. "All my love, and say he is not to worry."

She did not realise what torturous hours both men must spend; she only looked forward, beyond them, to a future of wonderful recovery. It was typical of Sanderson that as soon as he left the nursing home he went back to his bachelor flat and filled himself up with whiskey. It took a great deal to make Sanderson drunk, but that morning it seemed to be an utter impossibility. The more he drank, the more sober he felt. He would have given anything had he been able to fall asleep and only awaken when Sally's operation was over, but sleep was denied him. He had not even got Sometimes for company and comfort, for Mrs. Kiff had insisted upon keeping the dog at the cottage with her.

"It'll be best for him, and best for me, sir," she said firmly.

So Sometimes stayed in the country and Sanderson sat alone in his flat and tried in vain to get drunk.

He had avoided Garry Nairn for the past few days, only going to the nursing home when he was sure that Garry would not be there but after his fifth whiskey he remembered him and rang up the hotel where Garry had been staying.

Mr. Nairn was out they told him, and had not left word as to what time he should be returning.

It was nearly twelve o'clock then, and the operation was to be at half-past eleven. Sanderson followed his five whiskies with a dose of brandy and fell into a heavy sleep, from which he did not rouse, when Garry, finding his own company intolerable, climbed the stairs to his flat and knocked at the door.

Receiving no reply he went away again and walked aimlessly about the streets. He was hurt with Sally for not saying good-bye to him the night before; he tortured himself with the thought that she might never recover from the operation. He had been told not to call at the nursing home until the

afternoon, so driven by the sheer longing for companionship he turned into one of the more or less disreputable clubs to which Sanderson had introduced him, and ordered a drink.

The lounge was deserted save for one other man lolling in an armchair, and in order to get away from his own harassed thoughts, Garry struck up a conversation with him.

They talked for some moments in desultory fashion, of the weather, of a recent race meeting, and of the latest musical comedy, till the other man asked abruptly:

"New member, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Know anyone here?"

"Only a man named Sanderson, who put me up."

"Oh, Sanderson!" There was a sneer on the other man's face. "What's he doing these days? Haven't seen him for months."

"He's been living in the country. Got a cottage there."

"A cottage! *Sanderson!* Not alone, then, I'll bet."

Nairn frowned, but made no answer, and the other man went on:

"By the way, did he ever tell you what became of that little girl Sally Lingfield?"

Garry's heart gave an uncomfortable leap.

"Why, do you know her?" he asked quietly.

"*Know* her!" The words were followed by an unpleasant laugh. "I knew her a damned sight better than I ever wanted to know her. The girl got a confounded nuisance. Fortunately Sanderson settled it for me by running over her when he was the worse for drink, and crippling her for life. I did hear that he was looking after her, but I don't know how true it is. He was always a fool, anyway."

"Rather decent of him to be looking after her, don't you think?"

Garry spoke steadily, but his pulses were racing.

Josh Akers shrugged his shoulders.

"Quixotism, that's all. The girl was anybody's property. Common little thing. Sanderson and I went shares for her favours for months. He's quite

welcome to what's left if it's true that he's taken her."

There was a dramatic silence, then Garry rose to his feet, his glass still in his hand.

"Are you a friend of Sanderson's?" he asked quietly.

Akers laughed.

"Ask him, if you want to know. He'll probably tell you that I'm all sorts of a blackguard . . ."

"As you certainly are," Garry Nairn said hoarsely. "A damned dirty, lying blackguard . . . and you can take that from me to go on with"—and he flung the contents of his glass in Akers's face.

# Chapter XVI

Philip Sanderson struggled out of his heavy sleep late in the evening to the sound of heavy and incessant knocking on the door.

For some moments he lay limply back in his chair listening apathetically. Then slowly he dragged himself to his feet.

His head felt as heavy as lead and his mind was dull and confused. It was so long since he had taken spirits in any quantity that he found the reaction decidedly unpleasant, and he swore to himself as he blundered aimlessly against the furniture on his way to the door.

It was getting dark and the room felt stuffy, and down below in the street someone was playing Mrs. Kiff's favourite melody on a very harsh cornet.

"I shall love you the sa-ame for ev-er!"

Sanderson paused to listen, rocking gently on his feet. The sentimental air was knocking insistently at the door of his fuddled brain, bringing with it returning memories of the country and of the pure fresh air in the little garden of the cottage, and the sleepy song of the birds through the twilight.

Sally! In a flash he remembered the events of the morning, and his own great dread which had once again driven him to make a beast of himself.

God, how ashamed he was! Was he such a weakling that at the first hint of trouble he must fly for comfort to his old enemy?

The knocking on the door became more insistent, followed by an impatient voice—"Sanderson! are you there? Why the devil can't you answer?"

Sanderson unlocked the door and flung it open.

"What is it?—Sally?" He could hardly speak—fear was clutching at his heart. There was a moment's silence. Then Garry Nairn said shortly, "I thought you might be ill. That's all. I've been here three times to-day. Sorry I disturbed you."

There was contempt in his voice and in his eyes as he turned to go, but Sanderson caught him by the arm.

"Don't be a damned fool. Come in." His eyes fell before the younger man's direct gaze, and he laughed harshly, shrugging his shoulders.

"I've been on the binge—I couldn't have got through the day without. Come in, for God's sake, and don't stand there like an infernal parson bursting to preach a sermon." He turned on his heel and went back to the room, and after a moment's hesitation Garry followed him.

He stood looking round him with antagonistic eyes while Sanderson flung open the windows and picked up a tumbler which he had overturned on to the floor.

"What's the time?" he asked gruffly.

"Half-past eight," Garry answered.

Sanderson turned sharply round. "Half-past eight? Why the devil didn't you knock me up before?"

"I've been here three times to-day, and I could get no answer. I nearly broke the door down."

The two men looked at one another silently, then Sanderson said again, "Sally?"

"I've been to the nursing home twice. The first time she wasn't out of the chloroform, but the second time she was conscious."

"And you saw her?"

"No, they wouldn't let me."

"What did they say? Did they tell you anything?"

"Only that everything had gone as well as could be expected."

"Thank God for that," said Philip Sanderson. He turned to the table and poured out a neat brandy, which he tossed off.

"Help yourself," he said.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, all right." Sanderson laughed and shrugged his shoulders. He was conscious of a new and constrained atmosphere between himself and Garry, but his brain was still too dull and confused to attempt to account for it. After a moment he said:

"If you'll wait while I have a wash, I'll come along to the nursing home with you."

"They asked me not to call again to-night. They said if there was any need they would ring up."

"I'm not on the 'phone," Sanderson said sharply.

"I know. I gave the number of the hotel where I am staying. If they ring, of course I'll come along for you."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," Sanderson said, with a bitter sneer.

He lounged across to his bedroom, and after a moment Garry heard the splashing of water.

He went over to the window and stood looking out, but it was too dark to distinguish anything but the vague outlines of roofs and chimney-pots. To Garry Nairn the day had seemed endless, and crowded with torturous emotions. First the horror of leaving Sally to God alone knew what fate, and then the encounter in the club with Josh Akers.

He clenched his hands and the moisture broke out on his forehead as he recalled that moment. The brute's sneering allusions to Sally, and then the dragging in of Sanderson's name—"Sanderson and I went shares for her favours for months—" A lie, a damned lie! The furious denial had sprung at once to his lips, and yet now he was not so sure. In spite of his love and loyalty, the poison had entered into Garry Nairn's soul with that first abominable shaft.

Supposing it were true?

Garry knew his own sex, and he knew the sort of life to which Sally had been accustomed before her accident. She came from a world who held lightly the middle-class standard of morality. By her own confession she was "not a lady"—and she had never tried to hide the fact that Philip Sanderson was paying for the upkeep of the cottage and for everything she possessed.

Supposing it was true that once he and Akers had shared her favours?

The very thought turned him sick even while his honest heart told him he should be ashamed of permitting it to enter his mind.

Akers had refused to fight—he had accepted Garry's volume of abuse with a cynical smile, and when the club officials had come to interfere, attracted by the sound of angry voices, Akers had passed the whole thing off imperturbably.

"A little difference of opinion, that is all. No need to get excited. My friend here——"

Garry had broken in furiously:

"Damn it all, I'm no friend of yours," and had lunged at him again, only to be held back by the hefty arms of the officials. Akers had seized the opportunity to slip away, and had not returned.

For the rest of the day Garry Nairn had walked the streets, three times returning to Sanderson's flat in the vain hope of seeing him. One moment he felt that he could never rest until he had told him of Akers's foul accusation, and the next moment he shuddered at the mere thought of broaching the subject at all. It was horrible with Sally lying at death's door—horrible to allow himself to entertain such a vile suspicion. He did his honest best to push the thought aside as unworthy and disloyal, but it came back again and again like a mean little shadow following closely upon his heels.

Supposing it were true? It would mean an end of everything between himself and Sally. Garry Nairn was no better and no worse than any ordinary man, but the shock of his sudden encounter with Akers had shown him more clearly than anything else could have done, how deep and sincere his love for her really was. Even the danger to her life caused by this operation had not been so illuminating, and he knew as he stood and stared at the vague outline of roofs and chimneys from Sanderson's window that he would rather have Sally dead than the unspeakable thing which Akers had called her.

His whole desire had been to find Sanderson and demand the truth of him, and yet as soon as they came face to face he realised its utter hopelessness and futility.

How could he go to him and ask:

"Are you the blackguard this man declares you to be? Did Sally and you ____"

Impossible! utterly impossible and preposterous.

Sanderson came out of his bedroom. He had changed his clothes and looked spruce and clean, but his eyes avoided Nairn's.

"Let's go out and get some food."

"All right, but I'm not hungry."

"It will kill time."

Sanderson took up his hat and looked round by force of habit for Sometimes, then he laughed apologetically.

"I forgot he was down in the country."

They went down the stairs together and out into the street.

“May as well go to Wheeler’s,” Sanderson said.

“No,” Garry said sharply.

“Why not?” There was a note of surprise in Sanderson’s voice.

“I was there this afternoon—had enough of it. Let’s go somewhere else.”

“Anywhere you like.”

They turned into a small restaurant in Soho, and Sanderson ordered a couple of steaks and a double brandy. “What’ll you drink?” he asked.

“Nothing, thanks.”

Sanderson’s eyes grew ugly.

“Been saved?” he asked with a sneer.

Garry kept his temper admirably, though his nerves were on edge. “No, merely not thirsty.”

“A happy state of mind unknown to me,” Sanderson answered. He drank the brandy with an almost boyish air of bravado, but only played with his food when it was brought.

Both men were unusually silent, and the thoughts of both of them were far away.

Suddenly Sanderson said grimly:

“It’s like a night in the condemned cell, eh?”

Garry Nairn nodded.

“Without the hope of a reprieve,” Sanderson said again. He called to the waiter and ordered another brandy. Garry spoke then, with the irritation of racked nerves:

“For God’s sake leave the damned stuff alone.”

Sanderson flushed.

“Mind your own infernal business,” he retorted. When the brandy was brought he drank it off in a gulp. “That’s the stuff to give the troops,” he said with forced levity. He thumped himself on the chest. “The Guards never retire!” he declaimed in a loud voice.

Garry pushed back his chair.

"Well, I'll be off," he said shortly.

Sanderson caught his arm.

"Nonsense! It's early yet. What the hell is there to do, anyway, except walk about the streets and think, think, till it drives a poor devil mad!"

A flicker of pity crossed the younger man's face. "Things might have been worse," he said almost gently. "We might have lost her."

"I *have* lost her," said Philip Sanderson.

There was an eloquent silence, then Nairn asked with apparent irrelevance:

"Do you know a man named Akers—John Akers, or some such name?"

He was watching Philip closely as he spoke, and his strained eyes were quick to notice the sudden change of expression and the dull blood that rose slowly to Sanderson's thin face.

"Know him?" he repeated. "Yes, I know him. Why do you ask?"

"I met him this afternoon in the smoking-room at Wheeler's Club."

Philip sat staring across the room, then he laughed shortly. "So he's turned up again, has he?"

"I got into conversation with him by chance."

"Did he try and borrow anything off you? I hear he's broke again."

"No."

"Did he mention me?"

There was the chance. Garry Nairn caught his breath with a hard little sound and clenched his hands. He tried with all his might to say, "Yes, he did, and that's what I want to speak to you about." But the words stuck in his throat.

He could not, he simply could not bring himself to repeat the foul thing he had heard or to speak Sally's name.

And Philip Sanderson asked again with a sharp note of inquiry in his voice that struck a thousand additional sparks from the smouldering jealousy and suspicion in Nairn's heart:

"Did he mention me?"

Nairn shook his head; he could not trust himself to look up. “No,” he said stiffly.

Sanderson leaned back in his chair with a sharp sigh.

“The last time we met I pretty nearly killed him,” he said with grim satisfaction.

Garry Nairn clenched his hands.

“If I meet him again I *will* kill him,” Philip Sanderson said again.

It was all adding fuel to fire, all heaping certainty on to smouldering uncertainty.

It was twelve o’clock before they left the restaurant. Sanderson was quarrelsome and very much the worse for drink, and he obstinately refused to go back to his rooms and insisted on returning with Garry to his hotel.

“And find out if that damned nursing home has rung up,” he commanded.

But there had been no message. Sanderson laughed stupidly.

“Never thought there would be,” he declared. “Nurses and doctors are a pack of old women—just delighted to put the wind up a fellow.”

He dragged Nairn out into the street again.

“Take you to a place where we can get a drink,” he said confidentially. “Rotten place, London! A man can’t call his thirst his own now. Come along with me, my boy—I’ll get you a drink.”

He linked his arm in Garry’s, and began to sing at the top of his voice:

> “Kind friends, kind friends, do you think it right,
> That all the public houses should be closed at nine at night?
> If I were a member of Parliament, I’d save the lives of men,
> I’d close all the pubs at nine o’clock, and open ’em all at ten!”

Garry dragged his arm free.

“For heaven’s sake shut up! You’ll have the police after you.”

Sanderson laughed loudly.

“Not for the first time,” he boasted. “Well known to the police is Philip Sanderson. You ask the inspector at Vine Street what he knows of me and Sometimes! Dare say they’ve missed us lately—I’ve been such a good lad

for the past months. Not even a drunk registered against me—" and he began to sing again, waving his long arms wildly in the air.

Garry stood still.

"If you're going to make a fool of yourself I'm off," he said angrily.

Sanderson swept his broad-brimmed ridiculous hat from his head in a mock bow.

"And God go with you," he said piously.

Garry turned sharply and struck off across the road. He had never been so wretched in all his life. He felt that he hated the whole world—he could have strangled Philip Sanderson with pleasure—he was dangerously near hating even Sally as he turned the corner of the road, pursued by Sanderson's raucous, defiant voice:

> ". . . If I were a member of Parliament, I'd save the lives of men,
> I'd close all the pubs at nine o'clock, and open 'em all at ten."

# Chapter XVII

In the morning Sanderson was at the hotel before nine o'clock, and found Garry Nairn shaving. He made no apology for his early appearance, and without greeting of any sort inquired after Sally.

"Has there been any news of her?"

"None."

"She must be all right, then."

"Yes."

Garry's voice was curt, and he went on with his shaving imperturbably. Sanderson watched him silently for a moment. Then he said in a hard voice:

"I suppose I made a hog of myself last night?"

Garry made no reply.

"Don't tell Sally," Philip said.

"Of course not."

Philip drew up a chair and sat down. He looked old and jaded in the morning light, and there was a bitter line round his mouth.

"It's a hell of a life," he said sententiously.

Garry wiped the lather from his chin. "We can call at the nursing home any time after ten," he volunteered. "Have you had any breakfast?"

"Never eat it."

"You do down in the country."

"Oh, down in the country!" Philip echoed mirthlessly.

He closed his eyes and visualised the dew on the flowers in Sally's garden, and in imagination he seemed to hear Mrs. Kiff's heavy steps moving about the kitchen and passage, and the half-indignant, half-friendly bark of Sometimes as he limped awkwardly down the garden path to greet the milkboy from a neighbouring farm or the postman who drove in from the village in the old-fashioned yellow trap.

They all seemed like pictures out of a sweet, almost forgotten past, and yet less than a week ago they had been the very real background of the only

happiness he had ever known. He rose to his feet and began restlessly pacing the room. There was a small snapshot of Sally in a narrow folding case on the table beside Garry's bed, an amateur snap of her lying in her chair in the cottage garden, with Mrs. Kiff, proud and smiling, standing beside her. Philip had not seen it before and for some minutes lie stood staring down at it from beneath his frowning brows.

Garry followed his gaze, and flushed nervously.

"I took that," he volunteered awkwardly.

"Might enlarge well," Philip answered.

Both men felt strained and unnatural, and both were trying their hardest to conquer the feeling they were jealous rivals, and yet they had a great respect and a most unwilling regard for each other.

Garry got into his coat.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

"Yes."

They went down to the dining-room and had strong coffee, and by ten o'clock were at the nursing home. They were shown into a room with green blinds drawn against the bright sunshine, and Philip walked over to the window and nervously pulled one up by its cord.

"Like a damned funeral," he growled.

Garry Nairn said nothing. His face was very pale and his eyes were tragic, as if he were exercising great self-control. He felt like a man in a dream, and his heart seemed to be throbbing up in his throat, choking him. He was torn between his love for Sally and his jealous doubts, which had grown a thousandfold during the long, wakeful hours of the night.

"Never smoke without fire." The axiom haunted him. He had deliberately tortured himself by remembering every trivial thing Sally had told him of her past life. The men who had loved her—the one man whom she herself admitted having loved in return. Was that man Akers or Philip Sanderson? Or was she a woman who could love many men?

Garry had admired Philip's dogged devotion to Sally, seeing in its expression nothing but unselfish service, but now his vision was distorted. He remembered that when he had remarked on it to Sally she had answered sharply that Philip was doing no more than he ought to do. What had she

meant by that? It was as if Garry looked back on every happy moment he had spent with her, and saw it all through a merciless magnifying-glass.

He stood with his back to the mantelpiece in the darkened waiting room. In a moment that door would open and someone would come in to tell them —what?

He dared not speculate. He looked at Philip Sanderson, pacing up and down the room like a restless giraffe in a cage, and suddenly he smiled, struck by the incongruity of the situation. Two men who both loved Sally, outwardly friends, but inwardly, God alone knew what deadly enemies, awaiting the verdict on her life.

"They seem to enjoy keeping people on the rack," Philip said grimly, as if he could read his companion's thoughts.

"Yes."

The silence fell again, to be broken presently by a woman's step in the hall outside and by the opening of the door. Sally's little nurse stood there. She was smiling happily as she looked from one man to the other, but her eyes were kindest as they rested on Philip Sanderson.

"Miss Lingfield is even better than we had hoped," she said cheerily. "And one of you may come up for a few moments to see her."

She paused, her eyes still on Philip.

"I am sorry, but it must be only *one* of you," she said again.

The two men exchanged glances, then Garry Nairn spoke hurriedly, almost pleadingly, it seemed.

"*You* go, Sanderson. Of course you must go."

"Nonsense. I——"

"*You* go," Garry said again. "Perhaps later in the day, I——"

The nurse shook her head. "I am sorry, but the doctor will only allow one visitor to-day. To-morrow, perhaps."

"I can wait till to-morrow," Garry said hurriedly. He felt as if he had been given an unexpected respite in which to clear the chaos in his brain and sift his emotions to a solid foundation.

He gave a deep sigh of relief when without another word Philip Sanderson followed the little nurse from the room, and yet directly the door closed upon them he made an involuntary movement as if to follow them.

His jealous imagination went with them up to Sally's room, and stood with them beside her bed.

Which of them would Sally have expected to see? Garry Nairn clenched his teeth. He had so often seen Sanderson with Sally in his arms, carrying her with careful tenderness, and he had been ashamed of his own jealous emotions, but they had been as nothing in comparison with the storm of passionate hatred and resentment which seemed to be growing now in his heart with every passing moment.

He knew that if the thing which Akers had said of Sally was true, he could never marry her. It was not that his code of morals forbade him—Garry Nairn was not the man to judge any woman—it was just that the blow to his ideal of her would be too crushing and complete ever to be forgotten or healed.

He felt like a man who has been given a beautiful plant and who finds before he has actually possessed it that another has owned it before him and cut away the blossom.

His unwilling respect and admiration for Philip Sanderson seemed to be dying in a fire of hatred and loathing which he tried in vain to check. Sanderson was a man of the world with more than his share of experience, and the fact that he and Akers had once been friends went heavily into the balance against him. Garry took up his hat and tiptoed to the door, opening it softly. The hall was deserted, and a boy in buttons was busily polishing the letter-box.

Before he was actually conscious of it, Nairn had passed him and was walking rapidly away down the road, carrying his hat in his hand. He felt like a man escaping from a great danger—a man to whom a respite had been brought at the eleventh hour.

And upstairs in Dr. Brodman's Nursing Home Philip Sanderson stood in a cool, darkened room beside Sally's bed and looked down at her.

There was the faint, haunting odour of chloroform still in the air, mingling with the scent of the flowers which he and Garry had brought in last night. Only last night? It seemed a lifetime ago.

Sally was lying very still, in a curiously contracted position as if a giant hand had pulled and racked her slender body into some strange, grotesque shape, but she opened her eyes when the nurse spoke to her and smiled faintly when she saw Philip, although he was quick to notice how her gaze instantly travelled past him as if she had expected to see someone else.

The little nurse saw it too, and said gently: “Only one visitor to-day, dear, so of course Mr. Sanderson came.”

“Of course,” Sally whispered.

She moved her hand a little towards him, and the nurse turned to the door, whispering to Sanderson as she went: “Only five minutes.”

“Yes.”

He stood stiffly erect until she had gone, like a giant in a fairy story guarding a captive princess, then he bent and took Sally’s hand in his thin fingers.

“How do you feel, Sally?”

Tears quivered up into her blue eyes. “It hurts,” she whispered.

Sanderson went down clumsily on his knees beside her. “I wish I could bear it for you, Sally.” He felt the slight pressure of her hand in his. The tears lay wet on her cheeks, and he wiped them awkwardly away with his handkerchief.

“What did the doctor say?” Sally asked.

“That everything is better than he had dared to hope,” Sanderson answered.

“I’m glad.”

Although she had not mentioned Garry Nairn, his presence seemed to be between them, not to be denied or ignored, and after a moment Sanderson said with an effort: “Garry sent his love. He’s downstairs. They would not let us both up. I wanted him to come, but he insisted that I should.”

“Of course.”

“He will come to-morrow,” Sanderson said.

She made no answer to that—she just lay still, her eyes closed.

Presently the footstep of the little nurse sounded outside, and Sanderson hurriedly bent and kissed Sally’s hand and then her cheek.

“I wish I could bear it for you,” he said again hoarsely. “I would so gladly.”

“I know——”

A moment later he was downstairs again, and the boy in buttons was telling him that Garry had gone.

“Without leaving a message?” Sanderson asked.

“He never said anything, sir. Just went away as if he was in a great hurry.”

“Oh, very well.”

It was jealousy, of course, Sanderson told himself grimly, jealousy for which one could not blame him. But Garry Nairn’s turn would come to-morrow, and he would be given a far greater welcome.

Sanderson went to a post office and wired to Mrs. Kiff that all was as well as could be expected. Then he went along to the club and ordered a meal. He did not go back to his rooms till late in the evening, and when he did he found a letter from Garry Nairn lying on the mat.

> *I’ve been sent for to go home—the Guv’nor’s ill. Will you tell Sally and explain? I will write as soon as I can.*

Sanderson’s face was inscrutable as he read the scribbled lines, and he stood for some moments staring down at them before he shut the door behind him and turned on the light in his sitting-room.

“I’ve been sent for to go home—the Guv’nor’s ill——”

The words went through and through his brain mechanically, and suddenly he spoke aloud into the silence. “That’s a damned lie,” said Philip Sanderson.

# Chapter XVIII

But there had been a shade of truth in the note which Garry Nairn left behind for Sanderson before he hurriedly packed his bag and went back to Ash Hill.

He had received a letter from his father in which the old man complained of not feeling very well, a thing which was most unusual for the cheery vicar.

"I'm getting old, my boy," so, in a moment of depression, he wrote to his son. "And I seem to miss you very much. I miss that little girl from the cottage, too, and hope she is progressing favourably. I shall be glad to hear from you or to see you if you can run down for a day."

Garry felt like a drowning man to whom a lifeline has unexpectedly been flung. It would give him a few hours' breathing space at all events if he seized this excuse to get away from London and from Sally. He was conscious of nothing but overwhelming relief as he scribbled his note to Sanderson and packed his bag. It was only when he was walking up from the little country station that a realisation of his own selfishness came back to him.

Philip Sanderson would never have done such a thing, he knew, and hated to know it. Sanderson would have set his grim jaws more grimly still and gone through with the whole business unflinchingly.

Garry remembered how he had stood by Poppy Sladen till she died. Sally had told him all about it with a sort of angry pride in Philip's goodness.

"He's a marvel, that man." Her blunt words came back to Garry as he walked slowly up the country road along which he had so many times pushed Sally in her long chair. "He never liked Poppy, and she was nothing to him, and yet he stayed with her all night till she died. Would *you* have done it?" she had demanded, suddenly turning her blue eyes upon him.

Garry had answered evasively that he did not know, that it would have all depended, but in his heart he knew that he would not have been so nobly unselfish.

With all his faults there was a quality in Philip Sanderson which many a better-living man would have envied him; a certain obstinacy that in

surprising circumstances drove him along the path which he knew to be the right one.

Garry Nairn had lived a clean life. In his mind there was a definite barrier between the type of woman to which his mother had belonged and the type of woman to whom Poppy Sladen had belonged—the type to which he now dreaded Sally also belonged. He had never judged any woman; some, perhaps, he had pitied, but now Josh Akers's brutal condemnation of Sally had filled him with something that was combined anger and jealousy and a sort of rage against life which he could not control.

He believed what Akers had said, and yet he did not believe it; he liked Sanderson, and yet he loathed him; his heart and brain were two pendulums swinging backwards and forwards, never resting or letting him rest.

At the bend in the road which led up to Sally's cottage he stopped. From where he stood he could see the hedge surrounding her garden, and a grey streak of smoke rising slowly in the summer air from one of the chimneys. It all seemed so peaceful and fresh after the noise and bustle of London. He could not believe that if he walked on and opened the garden gate he would not see Sally lying there in her chair, smiling a welcome; it filled him with fresh horror to remember that she was somewhere in a darkened room in a nursing home, suffering he knew not what tortures.

In almost boyish panic he turned away, and as he did so something snuffled gently at his feet, and looking down he saw Sometimes standing there gazing up at him with hopeful recognition, waving his whip-like tail from side to side.

"Hullo, old boy!"

Garry stooped to pat the dog's head, and the next moment Mrs. Kiff's amazed voice greeted him.

"Well I never now! I was just that minute thinking about you all, sir, and here you are! Dropped from the skies, so to speak."

She came up to him, breathless and flushed, a great anxiety in her eyes.

"I was just taking Sometimes for a walk," she explained. "I haven't left the cottage not more than ten minutes. I'm that sorry, sir, I'm sure, if you couldn't get in."

"I didn't try. I haven't been to the cottage." Garry made his explanation haltingly. Something in the woman's honest eyes made him feel small and

ashamed. “I’m on my way home,” he went on hurriedly. “My father’s not well. I——” he broke off.

“And Miss Sally?”

Garry looked away from her.

“Everything is going as well as could be expected. Didn’t Mr. Sanderson wire to you? He said he would. Everything is going quite as well as can be expected.”

“And Mr. Sanderson himself, sir?”

“Oh, all right—quite all right.”

Garry’s voice was jerky, and he frowned as he thought of last night and of Sanderson’s drunken noisiness.

There was a little silence, then Mrs. Kiff said anxiously:

“And you’ll be going back again—when, sir?”

“I don’t know. It depends on my father.”

The flush in Mrs. Kiff’s honest face deepened as she said bluntly:

“Mr. Nairn was all right this morning, sir. I met him in the village when I went down for some butter.”

“Oh!”

They looked at each other silently, then Garry shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I’ll be getting along,” he said awkwardly.

Mrs. Kiff let him go a few steps, then she hastily followed.

“If you’ll kindly let me know when you’ll be going back to London, sir, there’s a few eggs and some flowers I should like to send. Flowers from Miss Sally’s own garden.”

“Yes, yes, all right. I’ll let you know.”

He quickened his steps to get away from her, and this time she let him go.

“Confound the woman! Confound the woman!” Garry said over and over again to himself. He tried to feel angry, but he felt more like sobbing. He had behaved like a coward, and he knew that Mrs. Kiff partially understood and despised him; he had deserted in the face of the enemy without an attempt to defend either himself or Sally.

"The Guards never retire!"

From some corner of his memory Sanderson's war cry mocked him. He had often been irritated by its reiteration, but this morning there seemed to be something inspiring and noble in the sentiment which he had only heard Sanderson use as an empty boast.

From a store of youthful memories came a nursery story which he had been told as a small boy; a story of the Guards at Waterloo who had faced death to the last man with never a thought of retreat. How fine he had thought it! How eagerly he had taken in every word! How wistfully he had hoped that another war would come soon so that he could show the world that the indomitable spirit of the Guards still existed; and now at the first rumour of trouble he had put his tail between his legs and run away, scared by a cowardly shot from such a man as Josh Akers!

He walked on up to the Vicarage, and met his father at the hall door. For a moment they looked at one another silently, then the elder man said sharply:

"That little girl?"

Sally! they all thought first of Sally, Garry told himself bitterly, even while he answered that she was all right—going on as well as could be expected.

He avoided his father's eyes, knowing well enough the question he would read in them.

"I got your letter," he explained clumsily. "I thought I'd run down for the day and see how you are."

The vicar glanced at his son's suit-case, but made no comment, and they went to the study together.

"So she's going on as well as can be expected. I've thought of her so much; she's a brave little thing, Garry."

"Yes."

"And the doctors say—what do they say?"

"That she's going on as well as can be expected."

Stupid! but no other words would come to Garry's lips. He only wanted to be let alone, not to be questioned.

There was a little silence, then his father said sympathetically:

“It must have been a great strain for you, my boy.”

“For me? . . . yes! . . . oh, yes, of course.” Garry laughed rather foolishly. “Sanderson got blind drunk last night. Not a bad idea either, now I come to think of it.”

“Sanderson is a very fine man,” said Garry’s father.

Garry turned and stared at him.

“A man for whom I have the greatest admiration and respect,” the vicar said again firmly.

The housekeeper came to the door; she had heard Garry’s voice.

“Have you had any lunch, sir?”

“Yes, thanks; yes, I’ve had lunch.”

She came forward to take Garry’s suit-case, but the vicar stopped her.

“Mr. Garry will be returning to London this evening,” he said quietly.

Garry said nothing, and the housekeeper went away murmuring something about clean shirts and collars.

After she had gone there was an eloquent silence, then Garry broke out angrily:

“I’m *not* going back.”

Mr. Nairn showed no surprise; he had sat down at his writing table and was turning over some papers.

“Oh, very well,” he said evenly. “I shall be glad to have your company.”

Garry turned to the door, hesitated, then came back.

“Look here!” he said almost rudely. “You’re a parson; you ought to know . . . what would you do if a woman . . . a woman you thought a lot of —in the past before you knew her . . . You’re a parson . . . oh, hang it all, you ought to know——”

He was stumbling, incoherent.

Mr. Nairn looked up from his papers, and his eyes were infinitely kind and understanding.

“It depends just how much I thought of her,” he said gently.

Garry laughed roughly.

“That’s an easy way out . . . non-committal! . . . It’s so easy on paper—when you’re not personally concerned; but when it comes dead home to you ____”

“Are you sure it’s true, Garry? . . . Come back and sit down and tell me all about it.”

But Garry would not sit down; he wandered about the room, aimlessly picking up things and staring at them, and then throwing them down again as he told his story in disconnected words.

“A man at the club—we got into conversation. I didn’t care for the look of the chap, but it was someone to talk to . . . to pass the time. Knew Sanderson . . . and he asked after . . . after . . .” He could not force himself to speak Sally’s name.

“Go on,” said his father gently.

“Well, well—he told me . . . swinish things . . . It was damnable——”

“What did you do?”

“I hit him.”

“You hit him . . . to show you did not believe his story.”

“I suppose so . . . yes . . . it was my first impulse, anyway.”

“I believe in those first impulses, Garry.”

“I know, but afterwards—when I’d had time to think it over—when I’d seen Sanderson——”

“You told him about it?”

“No. How could I? He’d have lied, anyway . . . for her sake. What was the use?”

“And so you ran away.”

Garry flushed hotly.

“I got your letter. I came down.”

“Without a word to . . . your friends?”

“I left Sanderson a note.”

“I see.”

Garry paced the length of the room again.

“Well? Well?” he demanded. “What do you think? If you were me, what would you have done?”

“It would depend how much I thought of that poor little girl.”

“If I had thought less of her it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“If you had thought more of her it would have mattered less,” his father answered.

There was a bitter sneer on Garry’s face.

“It’s the parson speaking, not the man,” he said hotly. “I was a fool to tell you—you’re not in a position to judge. You don’t understand what it means . . . a man like Sanderson . . . a degenerate . . . a drunkard . . .”

The vicar looked up, and for the first time there was a spark of anger in his eyes.

“Degenerate and drunkard both, if you like,” he said steadily. “But still a far greater man than you, Garry.”

He rose to his feet and came across to his son, laying a hand on his arm.

“That little girl loves you”—he said.

“Yes; at least . . . I suppose so . . .”

“She is going through all this for you?”

Garry nodded.

“Yes; at least . . .”

“Go back to her then, my boy! If you don’t you may be sorry all your life.”

Garry tried to speak, but no words would come. He looked at his father and then out of the open window to the garden beyond, peacefully basking in the sunlight, but he thought of the close atmosphere of Sanderson’s disreputable club, and of Josh Akers’s leering face and insinuating voice . . .

“. . . We went shares for her favours for months . . .”

He broke away from his father’s detaining hand.

“I can’t go back . . . I can’t,” he said desperately.

# Chapter XIX

Late that night Sanderson was sent for to go to the nursing home. Sally had had a relapse, and for long hours he sat by her bedside, his eyes on her face, his heart in torment.

"Is she going to die?" he had asked the nurse who met him outside the door, and when she had hesitated he said sharply:

"Please don't lie to me. I can stand anything but lies."

"It's impossible to say. Her heart is very weak; that was the great danger all along."

Sally had not opened her eyes once, and she seemed unconscious of or indifferent to Sanderson's presence. They had plaited her beautiful hair to keep it out of the way, and it lay in shining coils on either side of her white face, tied pathetically with blue ribbons which the little nurse had brought from her own room.

Sanderson never stirred. Only once when the doctor came he raised his eyes, but nothing was said, and he went back to his old position once more.

"You can stay all night if you wish," the little nurse told him presently, and Sanderson nodded in acknowledgment. He would have stayed, anyway; nobody would have been able to turn him out.

The room was dark save for a shaded light behind a screen, and silent—horribly silent.

They had taken away all the flowers, too.

Sanderson thought of the night Poppy Sladen died, and of her hoarse, frightened question, "Am I going to die?"

He had answered, "We've all got to die some day," and she had laughed. It had seemed easy philosophy with which to comfort her and himself, but this was different.

If Sally died there would be nothing left in all the world—if Sally died he would go out with her, or follow her as soon as he could find a way.

Philip Sanderson buried his face in his hands and tried to remember a prayer, but it was so long since he had heard one.

“God . . . God . . . O! God . . .” were the only words that would come to his lips.

The hours wore by. The little nurse tiptoed to him with a cup of tea.

“It will do you good,” she urged when he shook his head, and then when he again refused, “Don’t be selfish . . . drink it,” she said sharply.

He obeyed silently then, conscious of the kindness of her eyes.

“It’s getting light,” she said.

Sanderson glanced towards the window, where the first grey streaks of dawn showed on either side of the blind.

Dawn! and people so often died in the early morning.

He looked at Sally with agonised eyes.

If she would only speak to him, smile at him . . . and then quite suddenly, as if in answer to his passionate pain, she opened her eyes.

“Philip . . .”

It was only a whisper, but the most exquisite music to his ears.

“My beloved.”

She moved her hand closer to him—and Sanderson took it in his.

“Don’t talk, Sally. Try to sleep.”

But she would talk.

“I’ve been dreaming . . . about Garry . . .” She drew a little hard breath as if in pain before she said again, “He’s gone, hasn’t he? gone away from me, I mean?”

“His father is ill; he had to go.”

She seemed not to hear his loyal excuses.

“I know,” she said, and there was a note of strange understanding in her voice. “I know. I saw him in my dream, walking up the road towards the cottage—but he didn’t go in . . . he went by . . .”

Then she closed her eyes again and lay still.

Sanderson did not move; he felt that the throbbing of his heart would break it.

Dawn! and people so often died in the early morning.

“Sally!” he said hoarsely.

She opened her eyes dreamily.

“Don’t go away,” she whispered, just as Poppy Sladen had done. “I shan’t feel so lonely if you stay.”

It seemed an eternity before the little nurse came softly into the room again. She glanced at Sanderson, and then she bent hurriedly over Sally.

For a moment all life seemed suspended in the silent room, and Sanderson’s face was as grey as the dawn which was knocking at the window.

Then suddenly the little nurse smiled, well pleased.

“She’s sleeping beautifully,” she said.

# Chapter XX

It was the end of August before Sally went back to the cottage. For six weeks she had lain on her back in plaster of Paris, and for another six weeks she had been learning to walk again, taught like a child painfully to put one step before the other.

They had been strange weeks to Sanderson. Looking back upon them, they seemed like a great unreality during which he had moved and slept and had his being, and had yet been outside the panorama of hope and suffering through which he had so gallantly helped Sally to pass.

She had so often been raised to the highest peak of delirious hope only to be dashed again into the depths of despair. One moment she had cried out to him, "I can't bear any more, Philip, I can't—" and the next, when he had answered passionately, "You shan't. I won't allow them to let you suffer for another hour—" she had answered him angrily, accusing him of not wishing her to get well.

Garry Nairn had not come back again, and the only time when Philip had mentioned his name to Sally she had closed her blue eyes as if to hide the pain in them as she answered:

"He wrote. It's all right. I quite understand. It doesn't matter. We won't talk about it any more. He's just not coming again, that's all. He's not to blame. He's quite right."

To Sanderson he had not written after that first note. But once, when Sally had suffered more than usual and had cried Garry's name in her painful slumber, Sanderson went down to Ash Hill, only to be told that Garry had gone abroad again—unexpectedly.

Garry's father attempted no excuses for his son; he just stood and looked at Philip Sanderson with his kind eyes full of understanding, and when Philip broke out: "Why the hell . . . I beg your pardon—but the whole thing's inexplicable . . ." he answered: "I know. I wish I could explain, but I cannot."

It was several days before Philip found sufficient courage to tell Sally what had become of Garry, and then, when at last he had, she just said, "I asked you not to speak of him any more," and changed the subject. Didn't she care any longer? Philip longed to ask her, but dared not. Whenever he

looked at her he thought of Garry Nairn, and whenever he thought of Garry Nairn his big hands clenched themselves into fists, and he wanted to hit someone—*hard!*

The day before Sally was to go home Sanderson went down to the cottage to see that every thing was in order. Mrs. Kiff wept when she saw him, and Sometimes would not leave him for a second. He walked so close to him that he was trodden on dozens of times during the day, but he never uttered one yelp of complaint; he just wagged his whip-like tail and laughed at everything in sheer delight.

"And Miss Sally can really, really walk?" Mrs. Kiff asked for the hundredth time, and Sanderson answered patiently, "Yes, but only very slowly and with two sticks; but every day she gets a little better, every day she walks a little more steadily."

Mrs. Kiff burst into fresh emotional tears.

"And they say that the day of miracles ain't no more!" she sobbed.

"Sally has wrought the miracle herself," Sanderson answered. "Her pluck and patience have been marvellous."

Already he had forgotten the terrible scenes through which he and the little nurse had together struggled with her; he loved Sally sufficiently well to remember only the days when she had managed to smile through tears of sheer pain and weakness, days when she had held his hand hard and whispered, "Don't leave go of me. Stay with me, Philip, even if I'm a beast to you."

But Mrs. Kiff had to voice her own opinion.

"I'll lay that the most marvellous thing all along has been your own pluck and patience, sir, or my name's not Sarah Kiff!"

Sanderson laughed brusquely.

"Nonsense. I never had any patience," He stooped to pick Sometimes up in his arms. "Hardly limps at all now, does he?" he said delightedly. "We have got two miraculous cures, Mrs. Kiff."

He went all over the cottage with her, admiring the clean curtains and the shining brass, and the bowls of flowers which she had picked and arranged with such care.

"It's all just as it was when she left it," she told him delightedly, staring fixedly at the gold and green dragon on Sally's favourite humpty cushion.

"Nothing altered, nothing that she'll miss. I've seen to that."

Sanderson did not answer. There was going to be something Sally would miss, he told himself—or rather *someone*!

Whenever he looked out into the garden or leaned over the low, green-painted gate he thought of Garry Nairn, and was irritated because he thought of him.

Why on earth could he not put the fellow out of his mind as Sally had seemed to do? What was it to him if Nairn had behaved like a cad and walked away from the woman who loved him, without a word of farewell? Philip had so often cudgelled his brains for an explanation of it all, and had found none.

The whole thing seemed so sudden and pointless. Perhaps had Sanderson been less a man of the world he might have guessed the truth, but the thing which had been a mountain to Garry Nairn would have been too small a mole-hill in Sanderson's life even to merit notice.

But the whole affair rankled. He wanted to be sure—to understand! Had Sally ever loved Nairn? or had it just been a passing fancy? Had Nairn ever loved her? . . . Who was to blame? What was the answer to the riddle.

While he was at the cottage the vicar rode over on his bicycle. He brought a large bunch of roses from his garden—"For the little lady," so he told Sanderson. "I thought she was coming home to-day," he explained.

"No, to-morrow!" Sanderson answered curtly. Against his will he was always curt with Garry's father; it seemed impossible to be otherwise.

"You must both be very thankful at the success of the operation, Mr. Sanderson," the vicar said.

"We have to thank the surgeon," Sanderson answered.

He was quite prepared for a sermon on the subject; he waited grimly for eloquent allusion to the goodness of God Almighty, but he waited in vain. The vicar was a wise man, and he never forced his wares into a market unless he was sure they would be acceptable.

"Well, I won't stay," he said cheerily. "Give little Miss Sally my love, and tell her I will come to tea any day I am invited."

"I'll tell her," Philip said stoically.

They went together to the gate, where the bicycle leaned drunkenly against a post.

“Well, good-night, Mr. Sanderson,” the vicar said cheerily. He turned and held out his hand. “You’re a fine man, and I’m proud to know you.”

Philip Sanderson flushed scarlet. He tried to look angry, but only succeeded in looking distressed. He tried to speak, but could find no words, but Mr. Nairn did not seem to expect a reply; he mounted his machine and rode away down the road without a backward glance.

Philip looked after him with scowling brows.

“Damned old fool,” he muttered as he went back to the cottage, but the words sounded more like a benediction than a curse.

And the following day Sally came home. It was all, as Mrs. Kiff had said, just the same as it had been before.

She rode in the same luxurious car, only this time instead of lying flat on her back she was able to sit up, propped with many cushions, and admire the summer glory of the country as they passed.

She was wearing a new coat and hat. Philip had had a number sent to the nursing home from one of the best West End shops for her to choose from. Perhaps some instinct born of his great love for her had told him that to a sick woman there is no tonic so healing as the tonic of new clothes. So Sally was resplendent in a blue hat that matched her eyes, and a little fawn coat lined with the same blue.

There was a faint flush on her cheeks and subdued excitement in her eyes, and yet every time he looked at her Philip thought: “She is changed, quite changed. It’s not the same Sally I’m bringing home.” And his heart ached through all his happiness. He found himself longing for the little spitfire whom he had first known and loved, for the Sally with her hot temper, and coquetry, and flow of bad language. Only that morning, as if guessing his trend of thought, she had asked him playfully, “Am I more of a lady than I used to be, Philip?” Any other man would have made some flattering, insincere reply, but Philip had answered at once, “Yes, much more, Sally.”

“And do you like me better this way?” she had urged anxiously, and again he had answered truthfully:

“I can’t make up my mind yet. I believe I still miss the way you used to fly at me,” and then, half jokingly, “Why don’t you fly at me still, Sally?”

She did not answer for a moment, and then she said in a tired little voice, “Somehow because I don’t want to.”

“Because you like me better?” he had asked awkwardly, with leaping pulses, and Sally had shaken her head.

“No, but it seems too much bother now to get cross or upset about anything.”

That explained it so well, Philip thought. Everything was too much bother. Sally had lost her interest in things, lost her great zest for life and for having a good time.

He recalled that little conversation as they drove the last three miles to the cottage, and for the hundredth time he wondered how much the change in her could be accounted for by Garry Nairn, and how much was the natural result of all she had suffered.

As they reached the bend in the road which turned up to the cottage, he saw Sally slowly raise herself and look round with wistful eyes, and suddenly the words she had spoken to him one night in the nursing home months ago came back to his mind:

“. . . I’ve been dreaming—about Garry! He’s gone, hasn’t he—gone away from me, I mean? . . . I saw him in my dream walking up the road towards the cottage, but he didn’t go in . . . he went by. . . .”

Was this the part of the road of which she had dreamed? the part where Garry had paused for a moment before he deliberately walked out of her life?

He bent over and touched her hand.

“Penny for your thoughts, Sally?”

She roused herself with an effort to smile.

“Not worth a penny, Philip. Nothing at all interesting.” He knew it was not the truth, and he felt as if she had raised yet another barrier between them which he could not break down.

And then they were at the cottage, and Mrs. Kiff and Sometimes were at the gate, and everyone seemed to be crying and kissing, and all was confusion and excitement till Sanderson picked Sally up in his arms and carried her into the sitting-room just as he had done months before when he first brought her there.

There were tears on Sally’s cheeks, and she looked round her with eyes full of happiness and affection.

“It’s just the same, only prettier than I remembered,” she said, half sobbing. “Everything’s just the same, nothing’s altered, nothing at all.”

But, looking into her eyes, Philip Sanderson told himself that everything was altered, that nothing would ever be quite the same again—ever!

# Chapter XXI

There followed days of almost complete happiness.

The villagers round about grew accustomed to the sight of tall Philip Sanderson carefully guiding the steps of the little girl whom everyone had said would never walk again, about the lanes and meadows, with Sometimes frolicking rather clumsily around them (he had never fully recovered from his accident, and if ever he got into disgrace with either his master or Mrs. Kiff he would immediately adopt a pathetic limp which at once restored him to lost favour).

The weather was kind, too, and the sun seemed to shine all day long and the nights were mild and warm.

And every day Sally improved a little and leaned less heavily on Philip's arm, until one never-to-be-forgotten afternoon she walked the whole length of the little garden unaided and without her crutches. Philip and Mrs. Kiff watched from the porch with bated breath.

"Stop where you are. You're not to touch me," Sally commanded excitedly. "Don't dare to move a step, Philip, or I'll never speak to you again."

It was as much as Philip could do to obey. His face was crimson with excitement and there was a suspicious moisture in his eyes, and when she reached the little green-painted gate and turned to look back at him, flushed and victorious, he could bear it no longer. He was beside her in half a dozen strides and had picked her up in his arms.

"Thank God, Sally! Thank God!"

"Thank God and Mr. Sanderson, *I* says," Mrs. Kiff interjected loudly, then she burst into noisy sobbing and fled into the kitchen, from which, a moment later, issued the strains of her favourite song in a high, shaky treble:

"I shall lo-huv you the sa-hame for ev-er!"

Sally and Philip Sanderson were back in the little sitting-room then, and Sally was crying for sheer joy and excitement.

"I walked all alone, didn't I? Nobody helped me, not a step!"

"You did indeed, my dear."

“And to-morrow I shall be able to walk farther still, shan’t I? Oh, Philip, I know you think I’m silly, but if you’d been on your back as long as I have you’d be silly too——”

“I don’t think you’re silly. I’m as proud and excited as you are. I’m as proud as if it had been myself.”

“And some day I shall be able to run, shan’t I?” she went on, unheeding his words. “Run down hill like other girls, and perhaps dance, and then—” she broke off.

“And then—what?” Sanderson asked slowly. “And then I suppose you’ll want to leave me, eh?” His voice was harsh with pain.

Sally sat very still, her slender hands, which had grown so white and what she loved to call “refined-looking” during the past weeks, tearing at her handkerchief. For some moments she did not speak. Her blue eyes were fixed on the little garden outside, where the setting sun was making long shadows across the tiny lawn and flower-borders, and though she looked at the roses she saw only a broad-shouldered man with crinkling red hair and a boyish smile who came no more, and for a moment her face looked old and pinched with the pain of memory, then with a mighty effort she forced the thought of Garry Nairn from her and turned to Philip.

“I shall never leave you, never! Unless you want me to,” she said earnestly.

“Sally!”

He was down on his knees beside her, a clumsy giant in the tiny room, his arms around her, his face hidden against her shoulder.

“Don’t leave me, Sally. You’re everything in my world. Stay with me, my dear. Let me look after you always. I love you so.”

She raised one hand and touched his hair—the dark hair that had lately turned so much more grey.

“Poor Philip!” she whispered, and then again with a little sigh, “Poor Philip!” Then suddenly she laughed with a ring of her old elfish chuckle. “Won’t there be a scandal now I can walk, if I go on living here with you?”

Philip looked up.

“As my wife, Sally,” he said.

“Your wife!” She drew away from him with a little shiver, and then, quick to read the mortification in his eyes, she took his hand between both

hers, and squeezed it hard.

"Do you still really want to marry me?"

"You know I do."

"I shall be horrid to you sometimes."

He smiled grimly.

"Worse than you have ever been?"

She sighed. "I used to be awful, didn't I?"

"Pretty fierce."

She laughed a little and then grew grave again.

"I shall never be quite like that any more, I think. You see—" She knit her brows as if in perplexity at herself. "I've changed so much, Philip."

"Have you, my dear?"

Sally nodded. "Yes—in my inside, I mean. I don't get wildly excited about things any more, and I don't hate people tremendously, or love people tremendously." She made rather a pathetic little gesture with her slim hands. "It's almost as if . . . as if pain and . . . all I've gone through have knocked it out of me—the power to feel anything very much, I mean."

Sanderson raised her hand awkwardly to his lips.

"Do you love me at all, Sally?" he asked humbly.

She seemed to consider that point, then she said evasively:

"If I don't love you, then there is no one in all the world that I love."

Sanderson said nothing, and she went on: "If I don't love you I ought to be strangled. Look what you've done for me!—why just *everything*!"

"People don't always love those who do the most for them, Sally."

"Don't they?" But Sally knew that well enough. Often when she lay awake at night thinking of Garry Nairn and trying hard *not* to think of him, she wondered why he meant so much to her. What had he done for her except smile at her, and take her hand in his firm clasp? What had he done for her except make her love him, and then at the first hint of trouble turned away and left her?

His letter had explained so little. In halting words he had just said that he found he did not care well enough—that he thought it more honest to tell her

—that he despised himself, “Oh, more than you can ever despise me . . .!”

There had been four pages of it, and when Sally had read them she had gleaned nothing except that she had lost him. She only knew that her dream was at an end, that no matter how well and strong she grew it would mean nothing to him; that he would never race her down hill—never be interested in what happened to her at all.

“What are you thinking about, Sally?” Philip Sanderson asked jealously, and she turned to him and put her arms round his neck as she answered with a wild little note in her voice:

“Be kind to me, Philip. I’ve only got you in all the world. Be kind to me always, Philip dear.”

“Sally, you know I love you. You know I’d give my life for you.”

“You’re an angel, Philip.”

He shook his head.

“A black angel, my dear.”

“A dear angel,” said Sally tenderly, and meant it.

“And you will marry me, when?” he asked presently.

Sally answered hurriedly that she must wait till she was quite well and strong.

“You’ve always had me as an invalid and a trouble,” she said. “I shan’t marry you till I can walk to the registrar’s office just like any ordinary bride.” She tried to speak brightly, but her voice was rather constrained.

Philip clasped and unclasped his big hand about hers.

“Sally . . . I wondered . . . there’s a little church in the village, you know . . . I hate registrar offices . . . gloomy! nothing happy about them, and old Nairn’s little church——”

“No,” said Sally sharply.

That little church was so full of memories of Garry; she felt that she could never walk up its aisle to marry Philip Sanderson no matter how strong and well she grew.

“What does it matter where we are married?” she insisted. “Isn’t one place as good as another? You always used to say you hated churches and parsons.”

“Perhaps I’ve changed.” He put her gently from him and rose to his feet, his head nearly touching the sloping ceiling. Instinct told him what was the cause of her objection to the little church, and it was as if someone had wiped the happiness from his heart.

Sally looked at him silently for a moment, then she held out her hand.

“Come here, Philip.”

“Well?”

“Come here, and don’t scowl.”

“I am here.”

“You’re not near enough. I want to touch you.”

He moved a little closer and she clasped her hand around his wrist.

“Have the Guards retired, Philip?” she asked laughingly.

Then Philip laughed, too. He drew himself stiffly to attention and saluted.

“The Guards never retire,” he said solemnly.

# Chapter XXII

Following his conversation with Sally, Philip Sanderson seemed to quietly take it for granted that she would marry him as soon as matters could be arranged.

He was a man to whom eloquence was always difficult, but the few words he had spoken had meant so much to him that he was sure they must have conveyed as much to Sally.

He was fully aware that she did not love him as he loved her, but he was obstinately convinced that once she was his wife he could break down any barriers between them and show here that there were no limits to what he could become for her sake.

All his life he had been more or less forced back upon himself, and unable to give full expression to his feelings, and he longed more than he knew for somebody of his own with whom he could be perfectly frank and free from restraint.

Perhaps he had always placed Sally upon too high a pedestal; perhaps he had overrated her intellect and also her capacity for loving, but he would not have believed it had anyone told him so; in his eyes, even her faults were virtues.

When he believed that matters were settled between them he told her of the money which he had inherited from his half-brother.

“I shall settle it all on you, Sally, of course. I’m much older than you, and I dare say I shall be pushing up the daisies long before you have grown tired of pretty frocks and fripperies. Besides, my wife must be properly provided for.”

Sally smiled with her lips, though her eyes were sad.

“You’re very good to me, Philip,” she said, but there was a lack of interest in her voice. Money no longer seemed the infallible god she had always believed it to be; she had begun to realise that there were only twenty shillings in every pound, and nothing left over with which one might buy happiness.

“You’re all I have in the world,” Sanderson said, as he had said often before.

He told Mrs. Kiff all about it the following morning as he was chopping wood for her copper fire.

"Do you like weddings, Mrs. Kiff?" he inquired.

Mrs. Kiff sniffed.

"I've never been to any except my own," she said cynically, "and that wasn't much fun from what I can remember of it, and I can't remember much, thank the Lord."

"Well, would you like to go to another?" Sanderson asked.

Mrs. Kiff put down the dish she was drying, and eyed him suspiciously.

"And whose might it be, may I ask?" she inquired with deadly calm.

Sanderson straightened his long back and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"Now whose do you think?" he asked whimsically.

He was thoroughly enjoying himself; he was so happy in the wonderful secret he had to impart that like a child he hugged it to himself for the longest possible moment.

Mrs. Kiff flapped at a fly with her wet dishcloth.

"If it's that Mr. Garry Nairn's come back—" she said sharply. "It's not at *his* wedding I'm wishful of wearing my shoes out, and that's flat. I've never spoken of it to you before, sir, hoping that I know my place, seeing that I'm only a servant, but what I've thought about the way he went off is something worth hearing, so if it's that he's coming back to marry Miss Sally . . ."

"It's not," said Sanderson.

He felt as if someone had reached up into the blue sky of his happiness and eclipsed the sun.

For a moment he stood staring down at the half-chopped wood before him, then he laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Supposing Miss Sally is going to marry me?" he said.

Mrs. Kiff laughed, a fat, comfortable sort of laugh.

"I suppose you will have your little joke," she said cheerily. "But all the same . . ."

"It's not a joke," Sanderson interrupted sharply. "It's the truth. Miss Sally and I are going to be married as soon as she is well enough."

He was not looking at Mrs. Kiff, but the minutes that passed before she spoke felt like a lifetime.

Then at last she found her voice, helplessly, it seemed.

"Well, I never! It just shows! Well, I never! I never was so flummoxed!"

"Many thanks for your hearty congratulations," Sanderson said dryly.

He threw down his chopper and turned back to the house, but Mrs. Kiff followed, her face red with distress.

"I'm sure I never thought, sir. You took me all by surprise. Of course, I've always known it was what *you* wanted—but after Mr. Garry came——"

"Oh, hell!" said Sanderson.

He turned on his heel, struck across the little garden and went off down the road at a tremendous pace.

He had walked a couple of miles bare-headed before he came to himself and stood still, laughing grimly.

What a fool to get so upset over a blundering woman's still more blundering tongue!

As if it mattered a damn what she said or thought. Nothing could alter the blessed fact that Sally was to be his wife.

He went back to the cottage feeling sheepish and ashamed, wondering what explanation of his absence he could give to Sally.

But Sally had not missed him; she had been asleep, she said, asleep and dreaming such lovely dreams.

"Of me, I suppose!" Sanderson submitted grimly.

Sally looked at him with grave eyes. The unhappiness of her own heart that gave her no peace night nor day had given her a new and wider understanding.

Sometimes it seemed to her that she stood behind Sanderson's hard eyes and looked through them at life, seeing it as he saw it, seeing all his disappointments and bitterness, and realising the grim stoicism with which he tried to cover his wounds.

So she said now very gently:

"What's the matter, Philip?"

"Nothing."

Much as he longed to tell her, Sanderson felt it to be an impossibility. She would only laugh and call him jealous, and Sanderson loathed being laughed at, even by Sally.

And Sally was too tactful to press the question, save from a different point of vantage.

"I've been thinking," she said half shyly, half in a businesslike way, "that if we're to be married, and if I'm supposed to be engaged to you now, I ought to have a ring."

"A ring!" Sanderson stared down at her from beneath his frowning brows, then he laughed and the shadows cleared as he sat down beside her on the couch where she had been resting and took her hand in his.

"What sort of a ring, Sally?"

"Any sort. *You* choose."

That pleased him.

"I'll go to London to-morrow and bring some down," he said.

"No. You choose. It will be much more fun if you choose," she insisted gently.

She was not really interested in a ring, but she was interested in seeing Sanderson happy. As each day passed she seemed to realise more vividly how much he had done for her, how great was her debt to him. "If I can't be happy myself, at least I can try to make him happy," was the way she argued it out to her conscience.

That was a great step forward for Sally. In the past it had been only of herself that she thought; she had used everyone as steps whereby she might further her own advancement.

"I'll choose the prettiest ring in London," Sanderson promised recklessly.

"Yes, do," said Sally.

She lay back against the cushions, her hand still in his, her eyes on the garden outside the window where the little sapling tree which Philip had planted in the early spring was bending its branches beneath the small weight of red summer apples.

"It's lived all right, you see," she said with seeming irrelevance.

Philip followed the direction of her gaze.

“What has lived all right?” he asked.

Sally explained.

“The baby apple tree. Don’t you remember how weakly it was at first? You thought it would die.”

“Oh, yes, but it’s all right now.”

“It’s like me, Philip, that tree.”

“What do you mean, Sally?”

“That I was just as weak and frail when you brought me here, and that if it hadn’t been for the way you looked after me, I should have died.”

He laughed to hide his emotion.

“Are you trying to turn poet, Sally?”

She tugged at his hand.

“I know you hate gratitude, but I *am* grateful! I lie awake at night, often, and wonder what would have become of me but for you.” She shivered with retrospection. “I’d have been dead—or worse—long ago.”

“Well, there’s no need to think about it,” Philip said gruffly.

“But there is,” she insisted gently. “When I think how hateful I used to be to you, and what an angel you were to me——”

Philip tried to jerk his hand free.

“Are you going to borrow something from me?” he demanded jokingly.

But Sally would not laugh.

“And whenever I look at that tree,” she went on seriously, “I think how like me it is. You planted us both here, and looked after us both, Philip.”

Philip rose to his feet. Although he loved to hear her talk so seriously, it embarrassed him.

“But the fruit does not always fall to the planter of the tree,” he said lightly, then broke off, frowning.

What on earth had made him say that? It almost sounded like an evil omen. He was the planter of the tree and the fruit *had* fallen to him. Sally was to be his wife.

In the morning he went up to town.

“I may as well buy the other ring at the same time, eh?” he submitted as he kissed Sally good-bye.

There had been the tremendous business of measuring her finger.

“The jeweller chap will think I’m buying a ring for a baby,” he teased her as with careful hands he cut a circle in a piece of cardboard and trimmed it down a little at a time until it exactly fitted her finger.

“I always had small hands and feet,” Sally said with pride. “I only take a two in shoes.”

Philip’s face softened into wonderful tenderness.

“Do you, my dear?”

She nodded.

“It was a good thing in the old days,” she told him, “because at the sales you could always get the small sizes so very cheap.”

Sanderson came back a step.

“In future I shall buy all your shoes, Sally—all your clothes.”

Sally smiled.

“That’s nothing new. You’ve bought them for months.”

“But in future I shall be buying them for my wife,” Sanderson said almost reverently, then he went hurriedly away with a last caress to Sometimes.

At the garden gate he looked back. Sally had come to the sitting-room window and was standing there with Sometimes beside her, his heavy paws planted on the narrow window-ledge as with anxious eyes he followed his master.

Sanderson waved his broad-brimmed hat.

He was perfectly happy—they were both his, those two waifs whom he had rescued from God alone knew what fate; he felt himself to be king of the earth as he strode along to the station.

It was wonderful how small a thing put Philip Sanderson into conceit with himself; a smile, or a kind word of appreciation, and all the birds of happiness sang in his heart.

As a rule he hated railway travelling, much preferring his own car, but to-day nothing could disturb his serenity; even the last ugly miles into

London were vested with a new glamour. His head was full of plans for the future. When Sally was strong enough he would show her the world. The Bay of Naples, moonlight on the Lido, the fairy-like glory of the South of France, and the rugged hills of Scotland. He knew them all well, and would glory in showing them to her. It pleased him to know that as yet she had been nowhere, and seen nothing; he would find his happiness in watching her wonder and delight.

The train glided to a standstill and he got out, blissfully unconscious of the many interested and amused glances cast after him by passers-by. He knew that he cut a strange, uncouth figure, and was content to know it. He told himself that very soon people would not have a glance to spare for him because they would all be so busy looking at Sally walking beside him—Sally, who would play fairy princess to his ugly giant.

He walked out of the Station and almost into the arms of Garry Nairn. The recognition was mutual and the smothered apology, then Philip would have passed on, but the younger man stopped him.

"Are you in such a hurry?"

"I am."

"I'll walk along with you, then."

Philip did not move.

"I don't want your company," he said uncompromisingly. "And I thought you were the other side of the world." His tone suggested that he had sincerely hoped so.

"I've been to America, that's all. I only stayed a month, and then something drove me back. The Guv'nor doesn't know. Let me walk along with you, Sanderson."

Philip shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, but I'm in a hurry. If you've got anything to say, be quick and say it."

"Sally?"

"Very well, and quite happy."

He felt rather than saw that Garry winced.

"The operation? . . . Did it—is she . . ."

"She'll walk as well as most women before long."

"Thank God."

"You make me laugh," Philip said cynically.

Garry Nairn flushed to the roots of his red hair.

"You've every right to say that. I behaved like a rotten cad. I must have been out of my mind. Sanderson for God's sake—are you trying to win a Marathon?"

Philip reluctantly slackened his pace.

"I don't want your company," he said again rudely.

"I know you don't, but I want yours. I want to ask you a hundred questions—tell you things."

"You can't tell me anything that will interest me."

"Give me ten minutes. Good God, man, it's not much to ask!"

"Perhaps not, but it's too much."

Sanderson struck across the road reckless of traffic and Nairn followed hard at his heels.

"I'm not going to leave you till you've heard what I've got to say," he said obstinately.

Sanderson stood still. His face was white and his eyes hard as he looked down at Garry, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"All right. There's a pub farther along. You can buy yourself a drink."

They went into a musty bar with sawdust on the floor and wooden tables, and sat down at one of them.

"Whisky and soda?" Nairn asked.

"No, nothing. I'm on the water wagon."

"All right. Well, I'll have a beer."

Sanderson sat with his long legs stuck out in front of him and his queer hat tilted over his eyes. It was just his cursed luck, he told himself, that today of all happy days he should run into this fellow.

"Say what you've got to say and be done with it," he said brusquely after a moment.

"Tell me what Sally said . . . I wrote to her, but she never answered. Tell me what she said."

“Nothing, except that she never wished to speak of you again.”

A shade of bitter mortification crossed Garry Nairn’s face.

“It serves me right. And now? . . . I suppose she’s quite forgotten me.”

“I hope so.”

“And she can really walk?”

“Yes. She improves every day.”

There was a little silence, then Nairn said hoarsely:

“It was that fellow Akers. I thought you’d have guessed.”

Sanderson stared at him with unblinking eyes.

“Akers?” he echoed.

“Yes. I told you we met at the club—the day after the operation. I told you that we talked.”

“Well?”

Garry’s eyes fell.

“He told me . . . hellish things . . . about himself—about you and . . .”

“Go on.”

“And about . . . Sally.” Nairn’s voice dropped to a shamed whisper.

Sanderson did not move, but the long thin hand lying on the table slowly clenched itself into a cruel fist.

“About . . . Sally?” he said slowly.

“Yes, and I believed it. . . . I was half mad . . . I believed it. Not that I’m fit to judge any woman, but she . . . you see, I . . . I thought so much of her. . . .”

Philip laughed mockingly.

“My God, you must have done,” he said with a bitter sneer.

“Well—I did,” Garry insisted brokenly. “I’m not like you. You’d have taken it differently, I know, but you see . . .” He struck the table with his clenched hand. “It was just as if someone had poisoned my mind. I tried not to believe it—I called him a liar——”

“Some hero!” Philip broke in insultingly, but the younger man went on, unheeding the interruption.

“It was while I was waiting downstairs in that nursing home for you that I knew I could never face it. It came over me like a horrible nightmare from which I wanted to run . . .”

“So you ran, eh?”

“Yes.”

Philip raised himself.

“It’s all very interesting, no doubt, but not to me. I’m in a hurry. If you’ve nothing more to say . . .”

“But I have . . . I have!” Garry was boyishly incoherent in all his earnestness. “I want to apologise to you. . . . I want to kill that man Akers. . . . I want to tell Sally—to explain everything—to ask her pardon ____”

“Sally will not be interested.”

Garry grew white.

“You mean . . . she couldn’t forgive me—doesn’t care enough . . . never did . . . Is that it? . . .”

Sanderson took off his queer hat, looked at it thoughtfully, and replaced it on his head.

“I mean that she’s going to marry me,” he said with deliberation.

# Chapter XXIII

As soon as Philip had left the cottage Mrs. Kiff took Sally out into the garden and "settled her," as she called it, in the hammock under the trees which Philip had hung for her with such care.

"And get a nice sleep now," she admonished her. "And be nice and fresh when Mr. Sanderson comes back."

"When did he say he was coming?" Sally inquired languidly.

Mrs. Kiff smiled knowingly.

"He *said* about six," she answered. "But it wouldn't kill me with shock to see him walk in soon after lunch. He won't stay away a minute longer than he has to, you bet your sweet life."

Sally smiled dreamily. She had not yet conquered her vanity where men were concerned, and she liked to feel that Philip was never really happy when he was away from her.

"I'll try to sleep," she said submissively. "But I'm not a bit tired."

Mrs. Kiff lingered.

"And when you're married," she said after a moment explosively, "I suppose it'll be an end of me? *I* shan't be wanted any more, eh?"

Sally raised herself from her cushions with such a jerk that Mrs. Kiff cried out in alarm.

"You'll hurt yourself. Did you ever see sich a thing now? And doctor's orders that you was to be slow and sure all the time!"

"I shan't hurt myself," Sally answered crossly. "And if I do it's your fault for talking such nonsense. Why won't you be wanted? What am I going to do without you, I should like to know?"

Mrs. Kiff spread her fat hands.

"Married ladies has their own ways of doing things," she said tentatively. "Maybe Mr. Sanderson will wish to travel—and me such a bad sailor as was sick all the way from London to Margate."

"*Travel!*" said Sally, scornfully.

She stared at Mrs. Kiff's perturbed face for a moment, then lay back amongst her cushions. "Well, if he wants to travel he'll leave me behind," she said flatly. "I've never been out of England and I don't want to go. This is good enough for me." She waved her slim hand towards the garden. "It's all I want," she said again. "A little house and a garden, and to know that fields are out there beyond, and woods . . . woods . . ." She repeated the last word in a whisper.

Mrs. Kiff's brow cleared.

"Well, so long as I know where I am," she said prosaically.

"Of course you know where you are," Sally answered sharply. "And where you'll *stay*, so don't talk any more rubbish."

But when Mrs. Kiff turned to go, Sally called to her, "Come here!" and when she came Sally looked up with her most enticing smile.

"You don't *want* to leave me, do you?" she asked.

Tears welled into Mrs. Kiff's eyes.

"It's not so much what *I* wants . . ." she demurred.

"No, thank goodness, it's what *I* want," Sally broke in. "So kiss me, and don't be silly."

Mrs. Kiff kissed her heartily enough.

"And if you ain't good to Mr. Sanderson—" she threatened.

Sally sighed and closed her eyes.

"I'll be good to him," she promised.

Mrs. Kiff went away, but Sally lay very still listening to the sounds of summer in the garden all around her. The hum of a bee in a rose close by—the sleepy twitter of birds in the noonday heat, and somewhere across fields the barking of a dog.

It was all so peaceful, so restful!

"I ought to be happy," Sally told herself severely. "I've got everything I want, and yet . . ."

The thought snapped of itself. Not everything she wanted! Not a man with a cheery smile and a firm handclasp—not the one person in all the world whom she loved and for whom she craved.

Sally's attitude of mind towards Garry Nairn was a strange one. It had never occurred to her to ask him for explanations; she had not even passionately rebelled because he had left her, she had just accepted it as something cutting off a relationship which had all along been too beautiful to last.

Compared with her love for Josh Akers, her love for Garry Nairn was clean and young and like a lovely flower.

She just accepted him with all his faults, all his boyishness, all his shortcomings. He had done nothing for her except make her feel completely happy, and so she loved him.

At first when he left her she hoped she would die. She had almost prayed that she might never get any better; in the nursing home she had lain awake night after night with her hands clenched under the coverlet trying to keep back the sobbing that would rise to her throat.

Garry had gone; gone; what was there left for her in life? Why need she make an effort to get well? If ever she could walk again what was the use of it to her? There would be no Garry to walk with. And then one night when her bodily and mental pain together were more than she could bear, she spoke her thought aloud:

"I want to *die*."

And she had heard someone sobbing beside her, dry, ugly sobbing, and knew it was Philip. With infinite difficulty she turned her head on the pillow to look at him. There was only a subdued light in the room, but she could see the dark outline of his head and his hunched shoulders, and infinite pity and compassion had driven all other thought from her heart. No matter how badly Garry Nairn had hurt her, she owed something to Sanderson—more than she could ever repay—and yet in her ingratitude she was wishing that she could die and leave him behind, unthanked and uncomforted. That night had been the turning point in Sally's life. From that moment she had tried honestly to put Sanderson first, to keep him always before her eyes so that she would never forget her great debt to him.

It was only when she was alone with her thoughts that she let them slip back to Garry, only when there was nobody to see that in an aching imagination she let herself remember the strong feel of his arm about her, and the rough tweed of his coat beneath her cheek. Love is a strange thing, given strangely and often most unwisely. Only that morning, when Sanderson had said to Sally:

“What sort of a ring would you like? Diamonds?” passionate words had risen to her lips and she had only with difficulty repressed them.

“Diamonds! I hate diamonds! There is only one thing I want in all the world—the man I love. Give him back to me! please! please!”

But Garry had gone; he had walked out of her life with a four-page letter explaining that he did not love her well enough, and that was all.

“I was never good enough for him,” Sally told herself humbly. “I was never enough of a lady for him.”

But the tears rose to her eyes and pushed their way out from beneath her closed lids. What was the use of trying to pretend that she did not care? What was the use of trying to forget?

She had been passionately hurt and angry when Josh Akers left her, but this was something quite different; a wound that went deeper, a wound which, even if it did not bleed much for a critical world to see, would take longer to heal—perhaps would never heal.

The garden gate creaked, and Sally hurriedly brushed the tears from her eyes as she opened them and saw Garry’s father coming towards her.

“Asleep?” he asked, and then: “I have waited so long for an invitation to call, that I grew bold and came uninvited. Well, my dear, and how are you? I am very glad to see you home again.”

Sally raised herself eagerly.

“I’m almost well. No, let me show you, *please*!” as he would have restrained her. “Don’t try to help me. I can manage for myself quite well. Look!”

With childish pride she put first one foot, then the other, over the side of the hammock and gently down on to the soft grass below, then with a little effort she stood upright, looking at him with proud eyes.

“Isn’t it wonderful? You never believed it would come true, did you? Nobody did—not even Philip.”

“It’s wonderful,” Garry’s father said. “Wonderful! The fairies have indeed been at work. And now you must go back again amongst the cushions or I shall run away. Please!”

He waited till she was comfortably settled, then he brought a chair and sat down beside her.

"And where is Mr. Sanderson?" he asked.

"He's gone to London." Sally hesitated, then added with a touch of defiance in her voice, "He's gone to buy a ring—at least, he's gone to buy *two* rings! We are going to be married."

The vicar held out his hand. If he was surprised he did not show it; he only said, "I'm glad, very glad! Philip is a fine fellow."

"Yes—the best in the world." But Sally looked away from him as she spoke. Sitting there he reminded her so forcibly of Garry—there was something in the turn of his head and in his smile that was almost more than she could bear.

"Shall I always feel like this?" she was asking herself wildly. "Will a day ever come when the sound of his name—or a smile like his, or anything that reminds me of him, doesn't hurt?"

"And when is the wedding to be?" Mr. Nairn asked.

Sally shook her head.

"I'm not sure yet. When I'm stronger, Philip says. He wanted it to be in your church, but . . ." she broke off.

"You'd rather be married in London somewhere without any fuss, is that it?" Mr. Nairn asked sympathetically.

"Yes."

"And very sensible," he agreed heartily. "You're not strong enough yet to stand a great deal, and the villagers here, with all respects to them, do love a wedding! You'd have the entire population standing round the church door."

He laughed, but his eyes were kind. He was an understanding soul, and he knew why Sally shrank from being married in his church. There had been no actual exchange of confidences between himself and his son, but the vicar knew well enough that Garry had loved this little girl, and that she, at any rate for a time, had loved him.

"I hope you'll be very happy, Sally," he said gently, and Sally answered: "I hope Philip will. I'm going to try to make him."

They sat silent for a little while after that, but to both of them it seemed as if a broad-shouldered man with a cheery smile and crinkling red hair was there between them, waiting—perhaps for recognition, till suddenly Sally broke out:

“Isn’t it a funny world, Mr. Nairn? Nobody ever seems to be really *quite* happy, do they?”

“It depends what you mean by happiness, my dear. Some of us are only allowed to find it by giving it to others, just as some of us are only allowed to find it by taking it from others.”

Sally sighed.

“Philip deserves to be happy,” she said.

“He does, indeed.”

She looked at him with mournful eyes.

“Do you like him?”

“Yes; and what is more, I admire and honour him.”

“I shouldn’t have thought you would. He drinks and swears,” Sally said thoughtfully. “Though he’s certainly been much better lately,” she added hurriedly. “And when we are . . . well—married”—she slurred the word over—“I expect I shall be able to do as I like with him, and then he won’t drink at all.”

“He loves you very dearly,” Mr. Nairn said.

“Yes.” Sally was indifferent. “It’s funny that the wrong people always love you best,” she said unthinkingly. “It always seems to me that when you love someone so much that it *hurts*, that they ought to *have* to love you in return. But they don’t.”

It was not possible to misunderstand her.

“Such things are difficult to explain,” Mr. Nairn said.

“Yes.” But she sighed again as if there were some burden weighing upon her of which she could not rid herself. “I wonder who invented memory,” she said suddenly.

“Whoever did, it was a wonderful invention,” Mr. Nairn said smilingly. He did not like to see her so sad.

“A hateful thing,” Sally answered passionately. “I wish I could cut mine out and throw it away. I should be happy then.” She stopped suddenly with a little apologetic laugh. “I’m sorry. I seem to say such silly things sometimes.”

“You’ve not said anything silly.”

Mrs. Kiff came down the garden.

"It's lunch-time, Miss Sally. Will you have it out here, or will you come indoors? . . . Oh, I beg your pardon, sir," she added hurriedly.

The vicar rose to his feet.

"Not at all. I was just going. This is only a fleeting visit. Miss Sally is going to invite me to tea formally soon."

"Come the day after to-morrow," Sally said eagerly.

"I shall be delighted."

"And I'll have lunch out here, please, Mrs. Kiff," Sally said. "The sunshine is so lovely."

Mrs. Kiff went back to the cottage and the vicar took Sally's hand.

"It's *au revoir* till the day after to-morrow, then," he said. "And—may I just give you one little sermon?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry your head too much about things you can't help or explain. In the end everything works out for the best; you'll find that, Sally."

"Does it?"

"I'm sure of it."

She let him get as far as the gate, then she called him back.

"Mr. Nairn?"

"Well?"

Sally's face was pale and constrained.

"I hope you have good news of . . . your son," she said formally. It was a sentence which she had recently read in a book, and she thought, poor child, that it would hide her passionate anxiety for news of Garry and merely sound polite and formal.

Mr. Nairn came back.

"As a matter of fact, I have not heard from him at all for some weeks," he said very gently. "I have only had one letter from New York since he went away, but that is like Garry. . . . He is a bad correspondent."

"Yes," said Sally faintly.

He had been a good correspondent the only time he wrote to her, she thought with a stab. Four pages in which to say: “I don’t love you well enough”; four pages with which to break her heart when her body was already broken.

# Chapter XXIV

Philip Sanderson came back from London with a wedding ring, a half-circle of diamonds and a watch-bracelet in his pocket.

"Thought I might as well do the thing properly," he explained bashfully when Sally cried out at his extravagance. "Do you like them, Sally?"

"Oh, they're lovely, lovely!"

Mrs. Kiff, who had found some excuse to be in the room, came forward, her face all red with excitement and curiosity as Philip snapped the watch-bracelet on to Sally's slender wrist.

"Now you'll always know the time," he said whimsically. "And if I'm ever a minute later than I said I would be, I shall expect a good wigging."

"It's lovely—much too good for me," Sally said, almost in tears.

"Nothing's too good for you," Sanderson insisted. He slipped both rings on to her third finger, and Mrs. Kiff gave a loud cry of protest.

"That's the worst of bad luck, sir! Trying on a wedding ring before the day. As bad as trying on a wedding veil. Why, a friend of mine—at least, she wasn't a friend, she was my sister—before her wedding day——"

"I don't believe in bad luck any longer," Philip interrupted, cutting short her volubility. "And isn't it nearly supper-time? I'm dying of starvation."

He shut the door upon her retreating figure and came back to Sally.

"I don't want supper," he said gruffly. "I only wanted to get rid of her so that I could kiss you." He sat down on the arm of Sally's chair. "Have you missed me to-day?"

"Of course I have." But there was not much enthusiasm in her voice, though she turned and rubbed her soft cheek against his coat sleeve.

"Been lonely?" he asked.

"No. The vicar looked in this morning."

"Oh!"

"But he didn't stay—at least, only a little while."

"Anyone else?"

"No. I slept all the afternoon."

"Good child; and, Sally . . ."

"Yes."

"We're going to be married a week to-morrow. I've arranged it all."

Sally's pale face turned crimson.

"A week! Why . . . why . . ." With an effort she controlled herself, but her lips shook. "Isn't it very soon, Philip?"

"What is there to wait for?" he demanded bluntly.

"Nothing, only . . ."

"There's nothing to wait for," he reiterated. He rose and began pacing about the little room like a caged lion.

His meeting with Garry Nairn had decided him. He was taking no risks on the verge of his happiness.

"There's nothing to wait for," he said again. He came to a standstill beside her and looked down at her quivering face.

"Are you afraid of me, Sally?" he demanded.

"No, no."

"I swear I'll be good to you."

"You've never been anything else, Philip."

"Why don't you look pleased, then?"

"Don't I? I'm sorry . . . I . . . of course I am pleased."

Sanderson laughed bitterly.

"Delighted, I should think, by the look of you." Then his mood suddenly changed. "Don't take any notice of what I say. I'm a rough brute. I'm sorry if I startled you, but to-morrow week is as good as any other day. I've fixed it all up. We'll be married in London. I've got a special licence——"

"Didn't it cost a lot?" Sally asked tremulously, with a sudden exciting recollection of a girl friend who had danced at the Faun Café and been married by special licence to the young son of a nobleman.

Sanderson did not answer. He could not shake off his feeling of disappointment at the way in which Sally had received his news.

“All my fault, I suppose,” he thought. “I’m a blundering ox. Any other fellow would have done it a thousand times better.”

But presently Sally was smiling and quite herself again, admiring her new watch and the diamond ring.

“I’ve never had such lovely presents in my life,” she said. She called to Sometimes to come and see her new treasures, and pretended to be highly indignant when Sometimes disrespectfully licked the face of the watch.

“How dare you, sir! How dare you!”

Sometimes whacked the chair with his whip-like tail.

“How would you like to go abroad when . . . afterwards—” Philip inquired suddenly. “You’ve never seen anything of the world, and I want to show you. We could go by easy stages——”

In his great eagerness he lost sight of the fact that Sally was still very weak and that it must of necessity be months, perhaps even years, before she was able to live a normal life again.

She looked up at him with startled eyes.

“Go abroad? Now? Oh, I couldn’t. Let us come back here, Philip. Just till I’m quite well and strong. I’ll be much happier here with Mrs. Kiff and Sometimes. . . .”

“Just as you like, of course. I don’t want to hurry you. I want you to do as you like, always.”

“You spoil me.”

He stood looking at her with a frown.

She was changed! yes, she was utterly changed, he knew, and the knowledge did not cease to hurt him. He would have been almost glad to see her toss her head again and tell him to go to the devil.

But Sally seemed quite happy and smiling for the rest of the evening. She listened to all his plans for altering and improving the cottage; she was interested in his suggestion for buying an extra plot of land and adding to the garden.

“It will give me something to do,” he explained. “And it will stop anyone building next door. What do you think, Sally?”

Sally agreed to everything, and once again Sanderson was conscious of the wish that she would not. If only she had argued with him, even

quarrelled with him. He hated her gentle acquiescence.

Presently she asked: “Did you see anyone you knew in London, Philip?”

“No.” It was the first lie Sanderson had ever told her, and he got up hurriedly when the word had passed his lips and went over to the window so that she could not see his face.

“It will be fun to see the shops again,” Sally said. “To be able to *walk* about and see them, I mean.”

She was desperately anxious to make him happy; she, too, was conscious of the constraint between them.

When she said good-night she put her arms round his neck unasked and kissed him.

“I do love you for all you’ve done for me, Philip.”

But it was not saying that she loved him! and though Sanderson kissed her many times in return and tried to persuade himself that the little cloud between them had passed away, he knew that it was still there, and that it was the size and shape of a man’s hand.

And in the early hours of the morning he awoke from restless sleep to the sound of stifled sobbing from Sally’s room, and when, with his heart in his mouth, he got up and, slipping on his dressing-gown, stole across the narrow passage to her door, a ladder of moonlight through the window showed him Sally sitting up in her bed with its gaudy pink coverlet, with her face hidden in her hands, rocking to and fro as if in grief unbearable, and he heard her saying in a stifled little voice that sounded almost like a prayer in its desolation:

“Oh, come back to me! Come back to me. . . .”

Sanderson stood there for a long time, not moving, hardly breathing. He knew well enough of whom she was thinking, and to whom that prayer was addressed. He knew well enough that he was living in a fool’s paradise and that he must face the awakening some day in the future if not now, before it was too late.

He knew that the only way to secure real happiness for Sally was to give her up—to give her up to a man who was not worthy of her, and yet whom she loved as she would never love him.

To give her up after all he had done for her, after all he had suffered for her.

Sanderson crept back to his room, the floor boards of the little cottage creaking beneath his weight at every step.

Sometimes, roused from a delightful dream of rabbits down in the wood, yawned in his master's face and lashed the floor with his tail.

Outside in the silent garden, the first grey shadow of dawn was smudging the darkness.

"Give her up!" said a voice in Sanderson's brain. "She is not for you. The fruit does not always fall to the planter of the tree."

But Sanderson would not listen; the time had not yet come when he was forced to admit that the Guards must retire.

# Chapter XXV

Garry Nairn and Sanderson had parted abruptly after their meeting in London, with Sanderson bluntly expressing the hope that they might never cross one another's paths again.

He would have boasted that he was no longer afraid of Nairn as a rival, but all the same he determined to hurry on his marriage and to take Sally out of England, if she would consent.

It did not occur to him that Garry would go down to Ash Hill. Sanderson had not much opinion of Garry; his chief feeling towards him was one of contempt because at the first hint of anything to Sally's discredit he had walked out of her life. He argued that it would be unlikely that such a man would attempt to walk back again, but there he was mistaken.

His chance meeting with Sanderson had aroused Nairn's undoubted love for Sally to fever heat. He walked about London for hours remembering everything she had ever said to him, and the many things which he had only read in her eyes.

She had loved him, he was sure, and that being so why should her love have died as his had not?

He was full of the hope of youth. He knew that he had great advantages over Sanderson, even while he recognised that the elder man had done far more to deserve the happiness which they both coveted.

After hours of irresolute arguing with himself he caught the last train down to Ash Hill and arrived at the Vicarage just as his father was going to bed.

The vicar showed no surprise; it was not the first time his son had turned up at strange and unexpected hours, so he merely asked how he was and if he had eaten.

"Yes, thanks." Garry looked at his father rather nervously. "I've been back from America a couple of days," he added.

"Is that so? Well, I'm glad to see you."

"Thanks." There was a little pause, then Garry asked jerkily: "How's everyone?"

"Very well."

Garry stuck his foot up on a chair and began to unlace one of his boots.

"Seen anyone up at the cottage?"

"I was there this morning."

Garry kicked his boot across the room; obviously he was not to be assisted in his inquiries. He turned round, his face hot and embarrassed.

"How's Sally?" he asked gruffly.

"Wonderful. She can walk. It's the most miraculous thing I've ever known." The vicar waited a moment, then added quietly: "She is to marry Philip Sanderson."

"Is she?" There was a note of hard defiance in Garry's voice, and his father's face changed.

"Garry, you're not here to make any further trouble, are you, my boy?" he asked earnestly. "That little girl has suffered enough——"

"I'm not going to make her suffer."

"Then you will give me your word of honour to keep away from the cottage."

"No."

Garry began to tear at the lace of his other boot.

"I've as much right to go there as Sanderson or any other man," he said rapidly. "I behaved like a damned fool, I know, but that's no reason why I'm to go *on* behaving like a damned fool——"

"Better a fool than a knave, Garry."

"What do you mean?"

"That it will be a dastardly thing to rob Sanderson of the happiness he so richly deserves—or even try to rob him of it."

Garry's face flushed.

"All's fair in love and war," he protested.

Mr. Nairn shrugged his shoulders.

"But there is such a thing as a clean fight," he said. "And don't forget that you once played the coward and ran away."

He did not wait for a reply; he walked out of the room, leaving his son alone with his thoughts.

In the morning, when the two men met at breakfast, Garry said without raising his eyes from his eggs and bacon which he was making a fine pretence of enjoying:

"I'm going back to America, Guv'nor."

There was a silence, then the vicar said quietly:

"I'm sorry, and I'm glad. I shall miss you, but I think you are right to go."

"I thought . . . if I went up to town to-day, perhaps you'd come with me. We might have some lunch and perhaps do a show——"

The vicar smiled. Garry had such a boyish way of trying to show penitence.

"I shall be very pleased," he said readily. "But I can't go till about twelve—there are several things I must see to first."

"All right. There's a twelve nine that will get us up in plenty of time."

So that was that!

"The boy's right," Garry's father told himself with pride. "He threw his chance away, and he can't expect another."

"The Guv'nor's right," Garry told himself, and tried hard to believe it. "I've messed up my own life, and it's not playing the game to mess up Sanderson's as well, or even try to."

It was a fine, sunny morning and he wandered out hatless into the lanes, wishing the time would pass and he could find himself in the train well on his way out of temptation.

A sharp little walk would bring him to the cottage—his unhappy eyes visualised the low, green-painted gate and the little garden which Sanderson tended with such care, and Sally in her long chair under the apple tree—no, God bless her, there was no longer the need for that chair!

What happiness it would have given him to see her walk; to have helped her with the strength of his arm, to have encouraged her with the hope that some day she might race him down that grassy slope of which she had spoken so wistfully months ago when he pushed her out in the long chair.

All these things might have been, and he had thrown them wilfully away. He was not deserving of pity; he had only himself to blame.

In his preoccupation he had wandered farther than he dreamed, and it gave him something of a shock to realise that he was but a few yards from Sally's cottage.

If the tree foliage had not been so thick he could have seen the smoke from her chimneys; if Sometimes had been playing around in the garden he could have heard him barking.

Garry stood for a long time at the bend in the road looking in the direction where he knew his happiness lay, and suffering all the pangs of remorse.

It seemed incredible now that he had ever behaved in such a way; incredible that at the first hint of anything discreditable, spoken by such a man as Josh Akers, he had at once believed it and not even given Sally the benefit of the doubt.

What madness had possessed him that he had taken Akers's word unquestioned? And yet—no, not quite unquestioned. Garry liked to remember that he had wanted to fight him and had been prevented only by overwhelming force.

Well, it was all too late now . . . in a couple of hours' time he would be racing away towards London and Sally would never know that he had come back, longing with all his heart and soul to ask her pardon and hear her say she forgave him.

But the Guv'nor was right; there was nothing left for him to do but to go away.

Slow footsteps sounded along the road, and, afraid of meeting someone who knew him, Garry turned hurriedly to go back to the Vicarage, when someone spoke his name in a choking little voice:

"Garry!"

Garry swung slowly round. It was a dream, he told himself wildly, a dream from which he would awaken in a moment to keener pain; a dream that Sally herself stood there leaning on her crutches, staring at him with wide, incredulous blue eyes, her face as white as the frock she wore.

Then she said again, "Garry!" and she began to cry like a child, the tears running down her cheeks, her whole body shaken with sobbing.

And all Garry Nairn's fine resolutions went to the winds, and he just stepped forward and took her in his arms, crutches and all.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you,” he said—which, after all, was the only thing she wanted to hear.

And Sally said, “Oh, Garry! Garry!” and nothing else mattered. His arms were round her and her face was pressed to the rough tweed of his coat, and she felt as if the strength of his grasp had taken away all her pain and puzzled wonderment over his desertion, and everything else that had been hard and difficult to understand, and she only knew that the sun was shining, and that, after all, the world was a wonderful place to live in, and that many years of happiness still lay before her.

Then Garry said in alarm:

“You ought not to be standing all this time . . . and what are you doing out alone?”

Sally laughed through her tears.

“They left me in the cottage. Mrs. Kiff had to go down to the village, and Philip has taken Sometimes for a walk. Philip——”

Then she broke off, and she raised her head from his shoulder and looked at the ring on her left hand.

“I know,” Garry said, and he took her hand and raised it to his lips. “He’s a better man than I am, a thousand times,” he said hoarsely. “And if you . . . oh, Sally, which of us do you love best?”

“You, always you!” Sally said.

Then they looked at one another silently, and Sally’s tears came again in bitter remembrance.

“You went away and left me. When I was ill . . . I might have died . . .”

“I know I was a brute. I can’t hope that you will ever forgive me, but some day, if you’ll let me explain everything, perhaps . . .”

“I’ve got you back,” said Sally. “That’s all that matters.”

It was all that mattered, for people in love are admittedly selfish, and in the first flush of her joy she had no thought for anything but that the man she loved was with her again.

And presently they went back to the cottage, slowly and with Garry’s strong arm to guide her faltering steps, and at the gate Sally suddenly remembered Philip Sanderson.

“Philip?” she faltered.

Garry winced. He knew this was going to be the hardest part of all.

"We shall have to tell him the truth," he said. "I'm not afraid."

But he was afraid, not of Sanderson himself, but because he knew that between them he and Sally were going to break Sanderson's heart.

But the cottage was still empty, and they went into the little parlour.

There was a bowl of fresh roses on the window-ledge which Philip had brought in before breakfast that morning. There was a box of chocolates—Sally's favourite kind—on the sofa where she rested. There were new magazines, brought by Philip from London the day before, waiting temptingly on a side table.

The room was full of Philip and of his care for Sally, and yet he stood alone outside the circle of her regard—a sombre giant with tragedy in his eyes.

Garry tried to begin some sort of an explanation, but Sally checked him. "Don't tell me anything—not yet," she pleaded. "Whatever it is, it's all forgiven. You've come back—that's all that matters."

She was pathetic in her happiness; she kept touching his coat with her slender hand as if to assure herself that he was real and not a ghost man of her imagination. Whenever he moved her eyes followed him; once when he was near her she said, "Stoop down, Garry, I want to touch your hair."

Garry laughed with rough emotion as he obeyed.

"My red hair!" he said.

"I love your hair," Sally answered.

She rubbed its crinkling waves up the wrong way, and laughed.

"I'm so happy. I can't believe it's really you."

"And I can't believe it's really you," Garry said shakily. "Sally . . . perhaps some day we'll have that race down the meadow hill together."

"Oh, Garry, won't it be heaven!"

He bent and kissed her.

"We shall be very poor. I'm not a rich man like Sanderson."

"As if I care!"

"We shall have to go abroad—Australia or somewhere. It won't be much of a life for you."

“It will be wonderful wherever it is, with you,” said Sally.

And only last night she had shrunk from the thought of leaving England with Philip Sanderson, even though she would have travelled with every comfort and luxury.

“I was going away to-day,” Garry said presently. “If you had not come along the road, Sally, I should have gone away and we might never have seen one another again.”

“It was just Fate,” Sally said dreamily, her head against his shoulder. “Something—I don’t know what it was, just *made* me go down the road. I’d promised Mrs. Kiff I wouldn’t stir till she came back, but I just *had* to! I think I must really have known you were near.”

She turned her face to his coat and kissed it.

“I do love you so,” she whispered.

Garry put her gently from him and got to his feet.

“I’m not worth it, Sally,” he said almost angrily. “When you know everything—when I’ve told you . . .”

“It will make no difference at all,” Sally said quickly. “Nothing could ever make any difference. If you’d murdered somebody I could forgive you. I could forgive you whatever you’d done.”

It was heaping coals of fire on his head. He felt so unworthy; it made him unutterably ashamed to remember how he had left her at the first mean whisper.

Mrs. Kiff’s cheery voice sounded in the garden outside, and a moment later she was in the doorway.

“I’ve ’urried!” she began. “But with all my ’urry—” then she stopped like a clock that has run down as she saw Garry.

The dull colour mounted slowly to her cheeks, and without a word she turned and went away.

But Mrs. Kiff knew; that one glance from Garry Nairn to Sally had told her all there was to know, and she went into the kitchen and shut the door and sat down heavily on a chair, still grasping her basket of groceries tightly with both hands.

Then suddenly she spoke aloud into the silence.

“Oh, God, it ain’t fair,” she said.

For Mrs. Kiff remembered Philip Sanderson though everyone else seemed to have forgotten him.

Then suddenly through the still summer morning she heard Philip's cheery whistle—the whistle always reserved for Sometimes, and she rose to her feet with a terrible feeling of panic, and she dropped the groceries anyhow and went quickly out of the back door and round the little garden to the road.

Philip was just in sight and he quickened his steps when he saw Mrs. Kiff hurrying towards him.

"What's the matter?" he asked sharply. "Is anything . . ."

"No, sir, nothing. It's only . . . Mr. Garry Nairn is there with Miss Sally, sir, and I thought . . ."

"Nairn!" Philip would have brushed her roughly aside but that she caught his arm and held it fast.

"Don't go just yet, sir," she said, almost sobbing, as she saw the passion in his eyes. "Oh, sir, if I was you I wouldn't go in, not just yet, not until you feel that you can bear to 'ear what they've got to tell you."

The tears ran down her cheeks, but she would not let go of his arm to wipe them away, for Mrs. Kiff loved Philip Sanderson and she felt that her own heart must break with his.

Philip stood like a man of granite, then suddenly he made a rough, passionate movement, as if to break away from her and rush out to fight this enemy who had come once more into his life, this time to shatter it, but her trembling hands held him fast.

"No, sir, oh no, sir . . ." she pleaded. "It's only that they're young, sir . . . young like we was once."

Sanderson's eyes came down to her tear-wet face. For a moment she thought he was going to strike her, then suddenly he laughed—laughed as a man may laugh who has rushed into the thick of the fight confident of victory, and who receives instead a bayonet thrust in his own brave heart.

"Oh, all right," he said thickly. "Oh, all right . . . I won't go in. I won't go in."

Sometimes, standing close to his adored master's feet, looked up at him and whined, his whip-like tail hanging limp and lifeless, and in his faithful eyes was the expression of one who would say:

“I am thy fool, but I shall never make thee smile again——”

# Chapter XXVI

It seemed to Philip Sanderson that he had been lying awake for hours staring into a darkness wherein he would never again see a sign of dawn.

The summer seemed to have gone out so quickly and now it was late October with already the chill breath of winter in the air. Outside the wind was moaning restlessly round the little cottage, blowing down the last remaining leaves of summer. Sanderson knew that in the morning the flower-beds with their last mournful chrysanthemums and the little strip of lawn would both be leaf-strewn again, although only that afternoon he had swept them all up so carefully and burnt them so that everything should be tidy for Sally's wedding day.

Sally's wedding day!

The words had been in his mind all night jeering at him, but still they seemed to convey nothing.

Looking back upon that morning when Mrs. Kiff had met him down the road and prevented him from trying to kill Garry Nairn, it seemed a lifetime ago, and yet it was not more than two months—two months, during which Sally had improved out of all belief or recognition in the sunshine of her happiness.

The crutches had been put away, and though all her life she would walk with a slight limp, there was nothing now to show that she had once been so hopelessly crippled.

And to-morrow she was to be married; and after all in the little church at Ash Hill village, and to Garry Nairn.

Sanderson had passed through deep waters in the last two months. He had played a giant's part as only a giant could play it and had come out victorious.

He knew that now Sally believed he had never really loved her so desperately after all, and that sometimes the belief even piqued her vanity a little.

God alone knew how he had lived through her explanations and Garry's. Looking back upon it, it seemed like a fevered dream through which he had been forced against his will. Sally had cried and clung round his neck. She

loved him, she said, in all ways but the way in which a woman should love the man she is to marry. She had tried her best, but it was in vain. It had always been Garry, and she would never change.

"You've done everything for, me, I know," she sobbed. "And I'm so grateful, Philip darling, that if it would do any good I would be glad to die, but I can't marry you. I can't marry anyone but Garry. Oh, I hate myself. . . . I'm so ashamed—but that's life, isn't it? I can't help loving him, can I?"

Garry had been less emotional, but more manly than Sanderson had ever known him.

"I'm more sorry than I can say. I'm not half good enough for her. . . . You deserve happiness more than I do. . . ." And so on, and so on, till Sanderson could have shouted in his despair:

"What the hell do I care about you? It's only Sally that counts, and I've lost her. For God's sake, shut up and keep out of my way."

Only Mrs. Kiff had known the truth, and Mrs. Kiff could be a giant, too, when it came to the point.

She gloried in the strength and pride with which Sanderson covered his defeat and hid his terrible wound.

"That's a man for you," she would say to herself. "A man in ten millions! And what she can see in that Mr. Garry—" And then she would melt into soft tears as she looked at the radiant happiness in Sally's face.

"Bless her, and after all she's gone through, why shouldn't she be happy?" she defended the girl against herself.

But that was only when Sanderson was out of the way. When he was near Mrs. Kiff could not bear to raise her eyes to the tragedy in his, which she alone seemed to see.

And now Sally was to be married, and after all she had said, she was to be married at the little Ash Hill church, and all the villagers were to be allowed to stand at the gate and stare to their hearts' content.

Philip Sanderson had arranged everything. He had gone up to town and had a long interview with his lawyers, settling everything upon Sally except just enough to keep himself going.

The cottage was to be sold—but only he and Mrs. Kiff knew that—Sally believed that they were still to live there after she and Garry had sailed for Australia.

“I shall be able to think of you,” she told Philip with tears in her eyes. “And I shall think of the garden and the apple tree, and dear old Sometimes playing about——”

“I shall think of you, too,” Sanderson said stoically. “And we shall look forward to your letters, shan’t we, Mrs. Kiff?”

“We shall that,” Mrs. Kiff agreed, but she had to hurry from the room to hide her emotion.

For she knew that the cottage was to be sold and that she was going back to London with Philip to a flat of which he had heard, where she could look after him and keep the London smuts at bay.

It broke the good woman’s heart to think of it, but she manfully hid her pain. After all, she was not the chief sufferer. Garry and Sally were to leave England the day after their wedding.

“Best get right away,” Philip had advised, and the vicar had backed him up.

“Much better go straight away, Garry,” he told his son. “Partings are always harrowing things, and Sally is not too strong, you know.” And yet it had not been of Sally that he thought at all, but of Sanderson.

Every time the vicar looked at Philip he marvelled.

“The man’s a saint,” he thought in bewilderment, and although he loved his son, he wondered humbly at Sally’s choice.

Sally was to be married in bridal dress and veil complete.

“Must do the thing properly,” Sanderson had insisted, and he had stood smilingly by while Sally pored over patterns and pictures of wedding gowns.

And now the last night had come. To-morrow Sally’s bedroom on the other side of the narrow passage would be empty. There would be no slender little figure under the pink satin quilt, no golden hair for the first rays of morning sunshine to play lovingly around, and the cushion with the golden dragon in the sitting-room would know her no more.

A dozen times during the long wakeful hours Sanderson’s iron self-control had almost snapped and driven him across to her, to lay his broken heart at her feet and plead with her not to leave him.

Once he had gone as far as the door, only to whip himself back with thongs of steel.

She was so completely happy. He would be worse than a coward to throw a shadow across her sunshine at the last moment.

Thank God, at last a streak of dawn!

Sanderson got up and drew the blind. Greyness in the garden and everything leaf-strewn as he had known it would be. The branches of the little apple tree were bare and brown and shivered in the autumn wind.

Perhaps the sun would be kind and shine when Sally went into church.

Sanderson looked at his watch. Only just after six. Too early even for Mrs. Kiff to be stirring—too early for anything.

He found his pipe and opened his tobacco box.

Empty!

Sanderson looked at it and laughed.

Empty, like his life—empty like the whole world.

He dressed and sat down on the end of his bed.

He kept telling himself that this was Sally's wedding morning, and that he and she had slept under the same roof for the last time. In a few hours she would have passed out of his life for ever, into the keeping of another man ——

It all sounded the most insane nonsense.

How could Sally manage without him? He had done everything for her for so long.

She did not seem to remember that, or if she remembered it she had no fear of the future in which there was no place for him. She loved Garry Nairn absolutely and completely; he was her world.

Sanderson sat staring down at the floor with grim eyes.

Why couldn't he take a sane view of the thing and put it from him? After all, he would be no worse off when she had gone out of his life than he had been before she came into it. He had still got enough money to live on, and he had still got Sometimes.

He glanced across to the corner where Sometimes lay curled up on his rug. The dog was faithful to him at any rate.

It was getting light rapidly now, and there was a faint rose colour in the grey sky as if the sun was promising to come along presently and shine on

Sally's wedding day.

Sanderson got up and looked at himself in the little square mirror which stood on the chest of drawers.

In the morning light his face looked old and grey. No wonder Sally had found it difficult to love him as a woman should love the man she marries.

Sanderson bitterly contrasted his own appearance with Nairn's robust health and fresh complexion.

Youth to youth! It was the old law of nature. . . .

The wedding was to be early—at nine.

Yesterday Mrs. Kiff had decorated the little church with shaggy chrysanthemums and brown foliage. She had insisted upon doing it all herself.

"She'll like to remember that I did it when she's miles away in that 'eathenish country," she told Sanderson.

"Australia's a very fine country," he had answered disinterestedly. "And Miss Sally will love the sunshine."

For weeks he had felt as if he were moving and speaking in a dream. It was as if the heart and soul of him had died, and only his body was being propelled about by some mechanical contrivance.

He did not know what explanation Garry had given to Sally of the way in which he had left her, and he did not care.

Nothing could alter the ultimate issue. He had lost Sally—it mattered little by what means.

Mrs. Kiff was astir at last.

Sanderson heard her heavy step, then the sounds of a fire being lit, and a kettle being filled with water.

Then the opening of the front door, and the vigorous scouring of the little step.

He roused himself and whistled to Sometimes.

A walk before breakfast would clear his aching head and give him fresh courage with which to face the day.

But Sometimes was lazy and would not stir. Sanderson called to him again impatiently.

"Here! what the devil . . ."

Still Sometimes did not move, and Sanderson was across the room in a stride, down on his knees, his shaking hands groping at the motionless body of his most faithful friend.

"Sometimes . . . oh, my God!"

But Sometimes was miles away, chasing rabbits in the Happy Hunting Fields. . . .

Some little while later Sanderson went out of the room, shutting the door tightly behind him, and into the kitchen where Mrs. Kiff was making her coffee. She looked up smilingly when she heard his step, then her face changed.

"Oh, sir . . ."

Sanderson motioned her into silence.

"Sometimes . . . my dog . . ." Several times he tried to tell her before he could master his voice. "He's gone to the Happy Hunting Ground," he said at last. "Miss Sally mustn't know, of course. . . . You'll see that she doesn't know—help me to keep it from her. Wedding day—mustn't be made sad . . . you know——"

Mrs. Kiff tried to speak, but she could not find her voice, and Sanderson went quickly away.

The entire village turned out to stand at the church gates as the vicar had prophesied, and the sun shone and everyone agreed that Sally was the prettiest bride they had ever seen in Ash Hill.

"And ain't he tall!" they whispered as she went up the aisle on Philip's arm. "Lor', ain't he a real giant now!"

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man? . . ."

Only three people in the little church realised the tragedy of it all as Philip Sanderson stepped forward.

Yes, he was giving her to be married to Garry Nairn—as he had always given her everything he had.

Afterwards they went back to the Vicarage for coffee and cakes——

"Not that I can eat a thing," Sally declared. "I'm so excited, and so happy, Philip, darling!"

"Are you, my dear? I'm glad."

She was Mrs. Garry Nairn then, and it was all over.

She changed her white frock for a little brown travelling suit, and her golden hair was tucked away under a little blue hat that matched her eyes.

Suddenly she looked round.

"Philip, where's Sometimes?"

Not a muscle of Philip's face betrayed him.

"He seemed a bit lame this morning, so I left him on guard at the cottage."

Sally's face fell.

"Oh, but I wanted to say good-bye to him——"

But in a few moments she had forgotten, and was smiling again.

Then presently she and Garry drove away in a car, which Philip had insisted upon hiring from London, but just as it was starting, Sally stood up in her seat and called to Philip—"Come here, I want you." So often in the old days, when she was ill and helpless, she had called to him in just those same words, and Sanderson's face grew white as he went forward to obey.

And then, before them all, she put her arms round his neck, holding him tightly as she kissed him again and again, with all her heart.

"I do love you, Philip, I do. Better than anyone in the world except Garry—and in *every* way except the way I can only love him."

Sanderson made no answer, and the next moment they had gone.

He stood bare-headed in the sunshine, looking dazedly after them. It was as if the end of the world had come.

The vicar touched his arm.

"Stay and have lunch with me, Phil—" It was the first time he had ever used his Christian name, but it seemed quite a natural thing to do.

Sanderson shook his head.

"Thanks, but I'll get home. You see . . . there's Sometimes——"

He and Mrs. Kiff walked back along the country road together. Outside the church there were a few flowers which had fallen from Sally's bouquet.

Sanderson looked at them and quickly away again.

She had gone, and Sometimes had gone—everything had gone.

He was a lonely man in an empty world, with but one aim and object left in life—to find Josh Akers and pay him as he deserved to be paid.

His heart beat fast and his pulses throbbed at the thought of that encounter.

He would thrash him within an inch of his life—he would make him pay a thousand times over for those lying words he had spoken to Garry Nairn.

The only trouble was that he felt tired . . . astoundingly tired. . . . Mrs. Kiff looked up at him with concern.

"Tired, sir?" And with an effort Sanderson pulled himself together and answered:

"No, not at all."

Mrs. Kiff's heart was bursting with sympathy and sorrow, but she dared say nothing.

When they got to the cottage gate she stood aside to let Philip enter, and he stopped in the garden for a moment and pointed to the little bare apple tree under which Sally had so often lain.

"After all, the fruit did not fall to the planter, you see, Mrs. Kiff," he said.

Mrs. Kiff did not understand what he meant, but she answered:

"No, sir; there weren't no apples at all this year—none to speak of, as you might say."

Philip went on into the cottage and to his room.

Then he picked Sometimes up in his arms (all cold and stiff, with his blunt nose resting on a funny paw, and his long, whip-like tail hanging limply down) and sat down on the side of the bed, still holding him.

Everything was finished. The summer of life had gone, and there was only winter.

For a long time Sanderson sat there, with the dog clasped in his arms, then Mrs. Kiff roused him, tapping at the door.

"If you'd just try to eat something, sir . . ."

"All right. I'll come down directly."

And once again the power of self-repression rose in Sanderson's heart.

He had got all the rest of his life in which to grieve; for the moment, although Sally had gone, he still owed some sort of duty to Mrs. Kiff.

He was sure that she had cooked something especially good for him in order to show her sympathy. Not that he wanted food, or sympathy either for that matter; all he wanted was to be left alone.

He was so tired—so annoyingly tired. There seemed to be leaden weights on his feet, but he laid Sometimes gently down on his cushion and dragged himself up, holding to the bedpost, and stood there swaying a little, his eyes closed.

He had been doing too much, that's what it was. He had been living at a greater strain than he had realised, and now that the necessity for pretence was at an end, the reaction was more than he could bear. He had been warned about his heart years before—the doctor had said that his rackety life, and excessive drinking . . . not that he had drunk anything worth mentioning for the past many weeks.

Anyway, they had warned him about his heart . . . that's where the pain was now, like a knife stabbing him.

His heart! Sanderson laughed. How could the pain be in his heart when he had no heart? Doctors were fools—they had to say something because they were paid to say something.

Not that he cared if his heart was wrong—not that he cared about anything. There was nothing to live for any longer—not even the dog! Dear old Sometimes . . . his most faithful friend.

Something like a sob escaped Sanderson's white lips.

Sometimes was away in the Happy Hunting Ground, where all faithful dogs go to await the coming of their masters.

Mrs. Kiff, lingering anxiously outside the door, heard the old familiar whistle with which Sanderson had always summoned the dog to him. It rent the silence of the cottage as clearly and shrilly as if Sometimes was still there to thump his old tail against any available furniture to show his appreciation, as he hurried to his master's side.

Sudden panic seized her, and she called once more pleadingly:

"Mr. Sanderson . . . sir . . ."

Sanderson heard her and tried to answer, but the pain in his side would not let him breathe or find his voice.

Mrs. Kiff broke open the door just as he swayed, like a giant tree struck down in a storm, and fell.

She was on her knees beside him in a second.

“Mr. Sanderson . . . oh, my dear Mr. Sanderson . . .”

His face was grey like parchment, but he tried to smile up into her terrified eyes as he found his voice weakly, for the last time.

“It’s . . . all right . . . the Guards . . . never retire . . .” said Philip Sanderson, and died.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Planter of the Tree* by Ruby Mildred Ayres]