*‘You can do it!’*

by Veronica Heley

*Sally thought she was rubbish, until . . .*

Sally was in a hurry. She’d promised to serve refreshments for a meeting at church and needed to shop for some milk and biscuits on her way in.

Oh, dear. Something was wrong. A couple walking towards her on the pavement stopped and looked back. A teenage boy on a bicycle – who ought not to have been on the pavement anyway – gave a whoop of laughter and pointed. Passers-by parted to let someone through.

A distraught figure came into sight, clad in what appeared to be an old raincoat over a nightgown. Wild white hair, bedroom slippers.

It was an elderly woman, and she was crying. She reached out to a young mother pushing a baby buggy. ‘Help me?’

The young woman side-stepped. ‘What’s the matter with you! Get off me!’

An older woman walking in the direction said, ‘She’ll be from the old people’s home. They’ll come and get her, I expect.’

Sally thought, Poor creature, she doesn’t seem to know where she is. And then, Well it’s nothing to do with me. I’ve an important errand to run, haven’t I?

‘Please!’ The woman reached out to an elderly man who’d just come out of the greengrocers.

He said, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ And swiped at her.

The woman sank to the pavement, weeping.

Sally froze. She told herself that there was no way she should intervene. She’d be no good at it, anyway. She was a fumbling incompetent, rubbish at anything practical. Her father had always said so, and so had her first husband.

Someone else would help the woman.

No. Everyone drew back, or passed by, ignoring her.

Sally wondered what her new husband Bruce would have done if he’d been around. Surely, he’d have helped. But, although officially retired, Bruce still did the accounts for one or two old customers and he was going to be working all that day.

Bruce made Sally feel that she was loved and of value. Recently she’d got as far as helping to serve tea and coffee at church, though she never spoke at meetings.

What to do about this poor woman? She was obviously in great distress. Sally dithered. She felt so inadequate that she could have wept. She told herself to walk away because, if she didn’t hurry, there would be no milk and biscuits for the meeting at church.

Instead, she knelt down by the woman. ‘What’s your name?’

The wild eyes settled on her. ‘Ellen.’ A trickle of blood was running down her cheek. Her breath rasped. ‘Help me!’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Back . . .’ The woman gestured with her head. ‘Above . . .’

‘What happened?’

‘Rubbish day. Door slammed. Locked out. Help me!’ She slumped down and closed her eyes.

Sally looked around in desperation. One or two passers-by had paused, waiting to see what she would do. One even took a picture on her cell-phone. But no one offered to help.

Sally said, ‘Doesn’t anyone know her?’

Heads were shaken.

Whirr, whirr! The teenager on his bike was back-pedalling. ‘I seen her. Tripped over her feet, she did. Hit her head, like. Better call the ambulance, right?’

And yes, Sally could see that the blood on the woman’s face came from a cut on her cheekbone, and that the skin around it looked puffy, hinting at a nasty bruise to come. Her eyes were closed, her breathing too fast and too loud. Was she unconscious . . . or dead? Sally touched the woman’s hand. It was warm. Sally didn’t even know how to check for a pulse.

She was needed at church.

No one else moved.

Sally got out her phone, pressed keys, and asked for an ambulance. The paramedics said they’d be there soonest. What a relief! Sally told herself she’d still be able to get to the church in time to serve refreshments.

Only, it didn’t work out like that.

The paramedics arrived in a very short time – though it felt like hours to Sally, sitting on the pavement beside a semi-conscious woman whose breathing had become laboured.

Questions were asked: what was Sally’s name and where did she live – which wasn’t exactly relevant, was it? Then the paramedics wanted to know Ellen’s full name, address, next of kin and what medication she was on. None of which Sally knew. The bystanders kept at a distance, shaking their heads when asked if they knew anything to help the paramedics.

Ellen was lifted into a chair and put in the ambulance. Sally struggled up off the pavement, and looked at her watch. She was not going to make it to the church in time to prepare the refreshments, and wouldn’t they be cross with her! But if she ran . . .

Oh, dear. The paramedics called Sally up into the ambulance just as she was about to get away. Ellen had regained some degree of consciousness and was fretting herself into a state.

‘My cat, my little Nutmeg!’ Ellen clutched Sally’s wrist. ‘She’s never been out. You’ll look take him, won’t you? Tell John I told you to.’

Ellen drifted off again. The ambulance men said they needed to get Ellen to hospital soonest and, if Sally didn’t want to go with them . . .? She didn’t. She jumped back down onto the pavement and tried to think what she should do. Apparently, Ellen had a cat. An indoors cat, which had never been let out onto the street? And who was ‘John?’

Sally liked cats. Her first husband had been allergic to them but she’d sometimes wondered recently if she dared ask Bruce if they could have one. If Ellen were kept in hospital, what would happen to her cat? Would it starve to death? Sally couldn’t bear to think of that.

She sent up an arrow prayer. ‘Dear Lord above, tell me what to do!’

The ambulance drove off and normal service was resumed in the street; people shopped, chatted, ran for a bus. A little girl fell of her scooter. Shocked but not really hurt, she yelled her distress. Her mother picked her up, put her back on the scooter and said, ‘You can do it!’

Sally seemed to hear Bruce saying the same thing to her. ‘You can do it!’

So Sally tried to do it. She guessed that Ellen lived at the far end of the street, since she’d been coming from that direction originally. Who would know where Ellen lived? The shop-keepers? Sally didn’t find it easy to talk to strangers. She felt quite weak at the thought of having to bother busy shopkeepers when there was a queue of people waiting to be served.

But, ‘You can do it!’ She went into the greengrocers’ and asked if they knew an elderly lady called Ellen, who lived over a shop nearby. Yes, they knew her by sight. Going a bit odd, wasn’t she? No, they didn’t know exactly where she lived. Try someone else. They didn’t even stop serving to talk to her about it. She tried the butchers’ and the bakery, the café and the charity shop. Ditto.

Sally brought out her phone again. She was no good at this. Surely Bruce wouldn’t mind being interrupted . . . would he? She thought of the way her first husband would have responded if she’d ventured to disturb him at work, and quailed. He used to say that men worked, and wives who knew their place stayed at home and didn’t bother their husbands with trivia. So she didn’t ring Bruce.

She nearly gave up. She wanted to sit down and weep, but she couldn’t do that, not when there was a little cat who might be helplessly ranging up and down Ellen’s flat, searching for her carer, hungry and thirsty and . . . no, Sally couldn’t bear the thought of that.

She sat on a bench and thought about what Bruce might have done in the circumstances. She prayed a little, for Ellen and for John – whoever ‘John’ might be. And finally, she had an idea. There was a pet shop on the other side of the road. Perhaps Ellen might have taken her cat there for micro-chipping?

Sally had been asking about Ellen. Now she would ask about Nutmeg.

Bingo! Yes, the people in the pet shop knew all about Nutmeg, who was a pretty little tabby cat, recently adopted by Ellen. Yes, he had been neutered and chipped and his shots were up to date. Where did the cat live? Over the restaurant at the end of the road. Not on the side on which Sally had been searching, but opposite. The pet shop even had Ellen’s name and address. She was a widow who lived alone. Apparently she often came in for a chat about how Nutmeg was doing, and to buy him a toy to keep him amused.

At last, Sally had an address. The pet shop people said, ‘Ask at the last restaurant on this side of the road, and they’ll show you how to get to her flat.’

By great good fortune, the owners of the restaurant had just arrived when Sally hailed them in the street. Yes, they knew Ellen and were concerned to hear that she’d been taken off in an ambulance. They said, ‘What a shame. She has been getting rather frail, though. We’ve been worried about her. You’ll tell her son, won’t you? He wants her to go to live near him and this might force his hand. We’ll give you the spare key. Go down the back alley and take the cast iron stairs to the top.’

Sally was mindful of people waiting at church for their coffee. She said, ‘Couldn’t you ring her son and look after the cat for her?’

They exchanged rueful glances. ‘So sorry. We don’t have time. We’ve got a big party coming in at noon and we’re behind hand, prepping everything.’ They handed her a key, disappeared into the restaurant and shut the door behind them.

Sally looked at her watch. If she ran, she might make it to church in time, though she’d be a bit late and she hadn’t bought the milk yet. Only, Nutmeg must be getting frantic. He wouldn’t understand why Ellen had disappeared. And Ellen’s son must be informed.

Sally found the alley and shot up the stairs, telling herself that it would only take a moment to feed the cat. Then she would ring Jane, who’d organised the meeting at church, and apologise for being late. Up and up the stairs she toiled till she reached the landing at the top. There sat a black plastic bag of rubbish, which Ellen had been going to dump in the bin down below when the door crashed to behind her and locked her out.

The key was stiff but Sally managed to get the door open, and went in.

She called out, ‘Nutmeg!’ There was no reply. Well, she hadn’t expected Nutmeg to reply with a ‘Good morning, Sally!’ Had she?

She explored, calling the cat’s name.

The flat was surprisingly big. A large sitting room overlooked the shops at the front. A little dusty, a little dishevelled. Dust on the carpet, but not too much. It was a pleasant room, furnished in old-fashioned, solid furniture, but with a brand-new state-of-the-art television . . . provided by Ellen’s son? No cat.

A small bedroom, the bed unmade, clothes drooping from hangers and half in and half out of drawers. A pile of dirty clothing in a large laundry basket. More dust. No cat.

The bathroom . . . there were two black bin bags filled with packaging from ready meals in the bath! And more dust. There was no shower, so how had Ellen been keeping clean?

The kitchen was at the back. Before she remembered it was dustbin day, Ellen had set out some bread and peanut butter for her breakfast and made a pot of tea . . .the tea was now cold. There was a washing machine and a stove, neither of which looked as if they had been used for some time. A brand-new microwave had recently been installed. Discarded packaging from fast food meals were piled onto the table, and there was a smell of . . . milk that had gone off? There was nothing in the fridge but a couple of ready meals and half a carton of milk. The milk had definitely gone off.

Sally got the feeling that Ellen’s son had been helping to maintain her independent existence. She had been just about coping, but that there hadn’t been any margin for the unexpected. And the unexpected in the shape of being locked out of the flat, had landed her in hospital.

‘Nutmeg? Come here, puss.’ Where had the cat gone? Was he so frightened by a stranger coming into the flat that he’d hidden himself away? There was a litter tray in the kitchen. It had been used, alongside empty bowls for the cat’s food and drink. One bowl had contained milk. Sally had a fuzzy idea that you shouldn’t give cats milk any longer; just water. Where did Ellen keep Nutmeg’s food? Sally opened cupboards. There was a lot of china and glass, all of good quality but not really clean. There were a few tins of soup and, at last, a box of cat food sachets.

Sally looked at her watch and bit her lip. People would be streaming out of their meeting at that very moment, looking for refreshments. If she rang Jane now . . .

Sally’s phone rang, and it was Jane. ‘Sally, where are you? You haven’t forgotten that you’re responsible for the refreshments this morning?’

‘No, I . . . I’m so sorry, but—’

‘You do realise that I have twenty people here waiting for their coffee? I know you think a lot of yourself because you arrange the flowers at church, but to let us down like this!’

‘I’m so sorry. I did hope to get to church in time, but a woman needed—’

‘You really must get your priorities straight. Are you a member of the church, or aren’t you?’ The phone clicked off.

Sally sank into the nearest chair. She was not going to cry.

She found a hankie and blew her nose.

Jane was right and she, Sally, was a waste of space. She couldn’t even get to the church in time to make the tea and coffee for people who did lots more for the church than she ever did. Arranging flowers was about her level. She couldn’t speak on missions, or run clubs for the teenagers, or outreach for older people. She made a mess of anything she tried to do. She didn’t know why she got out of bed every morning.

Her phone rang again. She answered it, with caution. ‘Yes . . .?’

‘It’s me, Dora. Are you all right?’

Dora was a good friend. She was very different from Sally, being a loving, practical sort of person who thought nothing of serving up a meal for six or eight. She was married to big Leo, who was one of Bruce’s closest friends, and she would have been one of those attending the meeting at church that morning.

Sally gulped. ‘I’m so sorry, Dora. I didn’t mean to let anyone down like—’

Dora said, ‘Are you all right, Sally? I told Jane you wouldn’t have let us down without good reason. You’re one of the most responsible people I know.’

Dora didn’t think she was a complete waste of time? Sally began to revive. She said, ‘An elderly woman got locked out of her flat and collapsed in the street. No one knew where she lived. No one wanted to help her—’

‘So you did. That’s just like you. Is the woman all right? Do we know her?’

‘I’ve never seen her before. I called an ambulance and they took her off to hospital. She asked me to take care of her cat, and to tell her son what’s happened. I’ve managed to get into her flat, but I can’t find the cat or her son. I mean, I can’t find his details. I’m so sorry about being too late to help at church.’

‘Don’t you worry about that. I got some milk and helped Jane serve refreshments. No problem. You did the right thing, as always.’

‘Jane was cross.’

‘Jane is often cross. She thinks she can arrange people into neat compartments, all doing exactly what she expects of them. But people aren’t like that. I’ll tell her you were acting the part of the Good Samaritan. It might make her rethink her attitude to us ordinary folk.’

Sally allowed herself a grin. ‘Thanks, Dora. See you on Sunday.’ And she rang off.

Something soft nudged at the back of her ankle. She looked down and found herself looking into a kitten’s green eyes.

Sally said, ‘Are you Nutmeg?’

Nutmeg didn’t reply in words, but butted his head against Sally’s ankle again. Sally lifted him up on to her lap. Nutmeg was a mixture of colours, tabby and white and black, with a tail that stuck straight up in the air like a bottle brush. He was wearing a sparkly collar with his name on it.

‘You darling,’ said Sally, cuddling him.

Nutmeg responded by digging tiny claws into her sweater, and climbing up to balance unsteadily on her shoulder. His mouth opened in a silent plea for help.

Sally was a pushover for such a tiny little thing. She fed him, gave him some water to drink, and put clean litter in his tray. Performing these simple tasks cleared her mind about what to do next.

She rang the hospital and was told that Ellen had been admitted. She was confused and running a temperature. She had been asking for her son John but couldn’t remember his telephone number. Would Sally mind contacting him for them?

Once she would have made excuses but, with Nutmeg playing around her feet, Sally got on to it. She found an ancient address book by the landline telephone. Most of the entries had been crossed out, but there were several for a ‘John’, both home and work numbers. Sally rang John, who was indeed Ellen’s son, and who said he’d get on to the hospital straight away. He thanked Sally for helping his mother. He said it was about time Ellen agreed to go into the nice retirement home he’d found for her.

Sally was relieved. ‘What about her cat? Ellen said I should take him, but . . .’

‘Would you? That would be a relief. Thanks. Give me your phone number so that we can keep in touch, right?’

Sally found a cat basket, and summoned a cab to take her, Nutmeg and Nutmeg’s belongings home with her. She wasn’t sure what Bruce would say to the introduction of a cat into his space but she was, almost, prepared to fight for him.

As it happened, the cat decided at first sight that Bruce was a soft touch and, when he’d eaten his way through a couple of sachets of food, went to sleep on his lap.

Sally told Bruce everything that had happened and how she was in Jane’s bad books. He said, ‘You got your priorities right. What would have happened to Ellen if you hadn’t called an ambulance? She was seriously ill. If no one had done anything, she might have died. Jane is devoted to the church and that’s her life, but she’s forgotten that Christianity would not have gone any place if the disciples at Pentecost hadn’t left the safety of a locked room and gone out into the world to tell people about Jesus.’

‘I didn’t actually talk to anyone about Jesus.’

‘By your actions you showed what you are and that is, a Good Samaritan.’

Sally blushed with pleasure. ‘And we can keep Nutmeg? At least till Ellen gets better?’

‘Of course.’ He grinned. ‘I wonder if, when he got home, the Good Samaritan’s wife gave him a piece of her mind for wasting his hard-earned money on strangers?’