

The Fifth Wheel

By Beatrice Heron-Maxwell and Florence & Eastwick

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

SHE hurried to Fenella's rescue. "I suggest, Fen, that you should ask Mr. Mauleverer to come and have tea with us in our garret—that's to say, if he doesn't mind climbing a few stairs. I don't know how both of you feel, but I'm thirsty!"

Fenella was obliged to echo the invitation, but she did it half-heartedly, hoping Tubby would refuse. For might he not give away the secret of her hiding-place when he returned home? She decided swiftly that if he accepted, she would beg of him not to mention their meeting to anyone except Theo Pridham.

Tubby's thoughts, at that same moment, had turned towards his particular little pal, Theo. He wanted to send her a message, yet scarcely knew how to frame it, on the impulse of the moment, standing there facing the two girls. Janet's invitation offered a more convenient opportunity for confiding in Fenella, whom he believed to be Theo's greatest friend.

"I should like to come immensely, if I may," he said with a celerity that daunted Fenella.

Janet's eyes began to twinkle mischievously. "There's nothing to prevent you—we're close there. Follow on!"

With a sharp right flank turn, she led the way up a narrow street and under an archway to the entrance. A man strolling aimlessly past the archway, watched them enter the building, and followed them quietly to the foot of the staircase. He could hear them toiling breathlessly up the winding stairs, Janet's clear voice ringing out a mirthful word of encouragement to the other two, from time to time.

A smile of satisfaction broadened on the man's cherubic countenance. He nodded his head, as if confirming an opinion, then hurried away down the narrow turning and sought out the nearest telephone office. He had a message of great importance to impart, and the number he rang up was identical with that of Frank Merry—Enquiry Agent.

Meanwhile, Janet Speer and her two friends had reached the studio.

"Jove! it's hot!" Tubby exclaimed, wiping the moisture from his brow, then, going to the wide open window, "You've a rippin' view here of the river." It looked different there from when he viewed it on the Embankment. Already his versatile, happy-go-lucky temperament was reasserting itself.

"Rather! I pay my rent with birds-eye sketches." Janet was bustling about lighting the gas stove and putting on the kettle. "Fen! you know where the tea things are to be found; you shall lay the table, while Mr. Mauleverer cuts the bread and butter!"

"Delighted!" said Tubby, coming back from the window.

"Not too thin—and be aisy with the butter. We're expecting a few visitors who aren't blessed with delicate appetites," Janet explained, placing the loaf before Tubby and deftly sliding a fresh half-pound of butter out of its paper wrapper on to a plate.

Tubby set to work manfully, receiving commendation and instruction from Janet, as she went to and fro, bringing dishes from what she termed "the larder"—a large currant cake, of the plain description generally provided at schoolroom teas—buns, and a pot of jam.

"You don't get on very fast with

your buttering. I think I'd better take on your job and turn you on to the toasting-fork," she announced presently, then, judiciously considering Tubby's heated countenance, added: "Perhaps you'd better take your coat off, if you're going to roast yourself over the stove."

"You are kind, Miss—er—er. I don't think Miss Leach properly introduced us, for I never heard your name."

"Speer—and, so far, no one's asked me to change it," was Janet's cool reply.

Tubby caught Fenella's eye; she was smiling. Janet's irresponsible absurdities appealed to her sense of humour. Janet possessed the happy gift of dispelling what she called the megrims, and her two companions were succumbing to her light-hearted influence.

Tubby, coatless and very red in the face, was expatiating on his own peculiar aptitude for toasting bread to perfection when a fusillade of bangs and knocks on the door was followed by an inrush of half a dozen people—four of them young women with dresses and headgear of an exaggerated type, which announced their artistic leanings, and two were men with clean-shaven faces and bow ties, evidently members of the profession.

JANET introduced Tubby to one and all. He got a little mixed over the Lotties and Totties, but it did not seem to matter in the least who was who. A hub-bub ensued. Screams of laughter, the flinging of big hats into far corners, offers of assistance to get the tea ready.

"Sit down all of you and hold your tongues," Janet commanded without effect—rather, the noise increased. Two rickety arm-chairs were seized on by the youngest of the maidens, whose possession was disputed with vigor by their companions. The young men dragged forth boxes draped to represent divans. When a further inrush of four young men joined the crowd, they were bidden to take the boards—and be thankful! So the tea progressed with great hilarity and, under cover of the general babel of tongues, Fenella was able to make her request to Tubby that he would be silent as to their meeting.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing, so we're quits. The fact is, Miss Leach, I'm in a fearful fix—let myself in for an appalling mess. I've been had—no one to blame but myself. I want you to tell Theo that it wasn't exactly my fault that I didn't see her to say good-bye before I left home. I came away unexpectedly, and now I don't know when I shall go back again. She and I are something more than ordinary friends, you know. I expect she's told you something about it!"

Fenella admitted that Theo had confided in her, and Tubby went on hurriedly: "Some day I hope to be able to meet her again, with a clean slate. Just now it's best to be silent and disappear."

"Disappear!" Fenella repeated with increased mystification. "But why should you want to disappear, Mr. Mauleverer?"

"It's necessary, I assure you. Will you ask Theo not to forget me or cease to believe in me—no matter what she may be told against me. At all events, in my love for her, I'm straight enough!"

Then an interruption came from

Janet, with an order to "clear the boards and prepare for action."

In a few minutes, tables, chairs, boxes and all impediments were swept back into corners and wedged through a doorway into the bedroom which the two girls now shared.

One of the young men called: "Act one, scene one—the Floral Dance. Girls ready?" and Tubby whispered to Fenella "What's it all about?"

"It means we all belong to Mr. Harry Suitor's Blue Company of 'The Princess and the Taxi,' which leaves London for New York the day after tomorrow. This is a sort of impromptu rehearsal for my particular benefit—because I've only just joined on."

"Gone on the stage?" Tubby queried in surprise.

"Yes; I'm Francie Lorrimer now. I've given up my own name, so please forget it."

"Gad! not a bad idea. Shouldn't mind dropping mine either. D'you think Mr. Harry Suitor would take me on, too?"

"Quite possible if he knew you were Lord Brismain's son—Americans love a title." Fenella's answer was cut short by the call for her and Janet to come on. They had not much to do or say, but as ladies-in-waiting "to the Princess" were bound to join in the Floral Dance and quaint chant that accompanied it.

The Princess happened to be an art student friend of Janet's, who had developed sufficient musical and dramatic talent to be engaged as "first lady" and, by using her influence, gained both Janet and Fenella a place in the company.

Tubby sat against the wall of the long, gaunt room and watched the players with considerable amusement and also with some envy, for they all seemed on such good terms with themselves and each other.

Presently there was a muddle, followed by a pause. "Somebody seems to be missing. How many are there?" a long, lank man demanded. He danced with amazing agility and zest, and answered to the name of "Mussels."

Janet began counting: "One, two, three, four—"

There were fresh shrieks and yells when she reached thirteen. "Deuced bad luck!" said Mussels, who took the lead throughout. "It's that rotten Lancaster who's failed us."

"Beastly old Lancaster. We'll be drowned dead as dead, in the Atlantic, sure as nails is nails," a fluffy-haired girl declared, and one of her friends suggested: "Can't that Johnnie stand in and represent him for the time being, to avert the omen?"

"YES, come on, dear boy!" Tubby was dragged forward, protesting he never had done and never would do any acting.

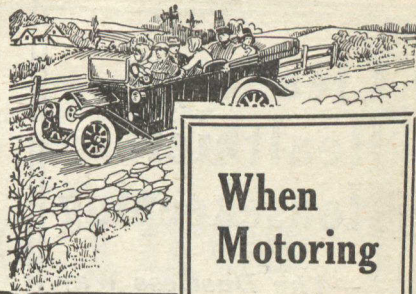
"Never know till you've tried. Just keep on saying 'Um-ti-tum,' to fill in the gap."

So Tubby was pushed into place and jostled with good-humored horse-play from corner to corner, until a pause for breathing space was permitted.

"A jolly good fourteenth, too," commented Mussels. "'Pon my word, you'd better come along with us as under-study for Lancaster. Ten to one he'll fall out before we reach the States."

"I'll sign on with pleasure."

"What name?" asked Mussels, and



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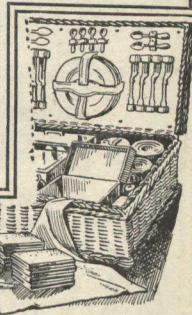
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