

The Fifth Wheel

By Beatrice Heron-Maxwell and Florence & Eastwick

OUR NEW SERIAL STORY

SYNOPSIS.

Horatio Pridham is a nouveau-riche, with a son Laurie, and two daughters, Agnes, quiet and reserved, and Theodora, more or less a tomboy. Mrs. Pridham makes plans to get them all well married. A former school friend of Theo goes to stay with the Pridhams, supposedly as a governess for Theo. She and Laurie are in love. The household is startled by the rumour of the murder of Lisbeth Bainton. Fenella—during the night—has seen her sweetheart in the hall. In his hand was an antique dagger which was a curio. Fenella is suspected, and runs away, rather than give her lover away.

CHAPTER VI.

The sixth sense is that which makes us susceptible to the nearness of someone or something material or tangible, whose presence affects us, though not through the senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling or feeling.

SOMEONE tapped lightly on the open door and Mrs. Bainton found she had another visitor, and this time the fresh girlhood which entered her cottage brought a smile of welcome to the withered old face.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Bainton. Will you be pleased to take a seat, Miss, and excuse my not rising, as I've lost the power in my limbs."

Fenella looked round the little room. "You are quite alone here. I thought—I felt sure that someone I know was with you!"

"Ah, it's my Liz you expected to see. She's had an accident, Miss, and they've taken her to the hospital. I don't quite know the rights of it, but I fancy it's nothing serious. She would be sorry to be away when you came."

The sympathy deepened in Fenella's eyes, with the knowledge that the old woman had yet to learn of her bereavement.

"No, I did not come to see poor Liz." She scarcely knew how to frame the question which was foremost in her mind. "I was looking for a friend who is in trouble. I had a feeling I should find him here."

"Ah! no doubt you're meaning the young gentleman who came in not ten minutes ago. He sat there and drank some milk and ate a crust. He should not be left wandering about so ill as he is, and I hope you'll take him back to his own home before anything worse should happen to him."

"Anything worse!" Fenella echoed, and moved away towards the door again. "Can you tell me which way he went, Mrs. Bainton?"

"Straight across the wilderness, Miss. I watched him till I lost sight of him amongst the trees. Perhaps you're the lady he left the message for."

"What did he say?"

"If you see Fenella," he said—"and I remember the name because it was strange to me and very pretty I thought, although uncommon—"

"Yes, yes—if you see Fenella?" the girl broke in.

"If you see Fenella, tell her Duty comes first and before all things."

Fenella's face was illumined by an expression of joy and sorrow blended.

"Laurie, Laurie!" she whispered to herself, catching her breath in a sob. It seemed as if a great burden had been lifted from her heart; a terror of something unknown which she had refused to acknowledge to herself, had nevertheless been ever present

through these last hours of misery. The Laurie, whose watchword was "Duty first," was the man in whom she had implicit faith. His message revealed him unchanged, one to whom honour was more precious than anything else on earth and to whom death would be preferable to disgrace.

With a mute gesture of farewell to the old woman—words would not come, though Fenella would fain have spoken something in kindness and consolation—she sped on again, across the rough land, and pursued a track amongst the trees, only perceptible by the trampled undergrowth here and there, or a broken low-growing branch.

She found herself surrounded by the pines, on all sides the great stems towering upwards. The silence of the place and the monotony of the scene might have been oppressive and bewildering to any other wanderer amongst them. Not so to Fenella on her present quest. She never hesitated, but pressed on with unerring intuition, drawn by a beckoning invisible hand, her eyes bright with the excitement of her pursuit, her lips parted with quick, panting breaths. And ever and anon she whispered low, "Laurie, Laurie!" and in the quivering summer air, in the music of the forest solitude, she heard his call, "Fenella, I want you."

Suddenly she stood still. He was there, only a few yards away from her, moving with uncertain steps, sometimes stretching out his hands to steady himself against a tree-trunk, and the slanting rays of sunlight showed his stricken, altered face.

"LAURIE, Laurie!" This time the words rang out clear, love and tenderness in their appeal, and he turned towards her at once saying, "Fenella, I want you."

It was like the fulfilment of an oft-repeated dream. She slipped her hand through his arm and drew him with her, while retracing her way through the trees. Sub-consciously she had fixed on her mind certain landmarks, such as a huge ant-heap or a cluster of monstrous fungi, by which she could regain the open road, and as they went together slowly, Laurie clasped tightly the hand which led him on, as if he feared to lose it. Fenella's eyes grew wide with undefined alarm as they rested on his blood-stained shirt cuff. Her lips trembled, but with marvellous self-control she conquered the inclination to cry out or burst into a tempest of tears. What could have happened to Laurie, the gay, light-hearted lover of only a day earlier? Through what awful stress and strain had he passed to be changed, in a few hours, to this pitiful semblance of himself?

"Dear, you have hurt yourself?" she said very gently, and he let her loosen the shirt-cuff and turn it back. A handkerchief had been bound unskillfully over a jagged cut in his arm. The bandage had slipped; its stiffened edges only served now to irritate the wound, which had opened afresh. Very deftly Fenella bound her own fine handkerchief round the place. "I must get on quickly," Laurie told her. "I'm late already for parade. You mustn't keep me, Fen."

"No, dear, we're going straight there now, but surely you'll come home first and make yourself fit to

appear. Your clothes are torn and so muddy."

"Are they?" he queried unconcernedly.

"What happened to you, Laurie? Did you have an accident?"

"I can't remember—but, Fen, are you sure you're going the right way. This road doesn't seem to me like Hounslow."

"It's the main road which leads home to Spinney Chase," she told him and then regretted her words, for his face became suffused with excitement.

"Fen, you're trying to deceive me. I'm going on parade; nothing shall prevent me." With that he broke from her and ran towards the woods. Fenella sprang after him and clung to him. "Laurie, I implore you to come with me. I'll take you safely there—indeed, indeed I will."

HE tried to shake off her detaining hands, muttering still, "I must go on—duty first—"

And while Fenella strove to turn him from his resolution to re-enter the wood, a girl who had been cycling along the road and had watched Laurie break from his companion, who pursued him, rode up to them and alighted.

"Mr. Pridham? I can scarcely believe my eyes," the newcomer exclaimed, as she recognized the hatless man. Her gaze travelled in cold and rather insolent inquiry to Fenella, who had again taken hold of Laurie's arm.

"Mr. Pridham has had a bad fall and hurt his arm," Fenella explained in level tones which suggested that delay on questioning would be inexpedient. Sallie Mauleverer's easily-aroused jealousy forced her to ignore Fenella's hint and she announced with additional coolness, "He looks as if he had done more than hurt his arm. Shall I ride on and send someone to help him?"

"No, thank you." Fenella's resolute air surprised and daunted Sallie, who thought of the other girl only vaguely as Theo Pridham's little companion, from whom she—Sallie Mauleverer—expected a certain show of deference. "It is no distance from here. Laurie and I will be there in a few minutes now!"

"Laurie and I!" Sallie stared at the words, mentally annihilating this self-possessed young woman who, without further discussion, began to walk on towards the Chase, her hand still linked through Laurie's arm. The momentary excitement had passed, and now he seemed to recognize his own weakness and fatigue, for he changed the position of her hand, so as to lean upon her for support, murmuring, "I've lost my bearings somehow, Fen, darling, and must trust to you. You will lead me straight I know and get me there in time."

"Laurie and I indeed!" Sallie repeated aloud, adding mentally, "The impertinence of that girl—pushing forward, little nobody. I shall certainly warn Mrs. Pridham about her. I should uncommonly like to know what she's doing out here alone with Laurie Pridham—instead of looking after Theo as she's paid to do."

Considerably incensed and mystified by this peculiar meeting in the road, Sallie cycled homewards while

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