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# The Fifth Wheel

By

Beatrice Heron-Maxwell and Florence E. Eastwick

### CHAPTER XXXVII.

Everything moves in a circle and to get to the end, you must often go back to the beginning.

AMONGST the flotsam and jetsam on a Cornish beach, a bottle, square of shape and solid of look, owing to its dark contents, lay at its journey's end.

Tightly corked, with some black substance sealing the top, it appeared to be filled with a roll of thin tarpaulin, and the man who found it, carelessly swung it round, by the neck, against a rock, and splintered it. The tarpaulin fell, unwrapped, on the sand, and disclosed a sheet of paper covered with writing in a laborious hand, and a dagger, short, sharp, with a haft of dark metal inlaid with silver, in the centre of which was a flat knob.

The man's interest was aroused. This was an unusual species of dead sea fruit. He sat down and read the letter, pondering it well in his mind, looked at the weapon with its dim, dark stains, and, finally putting both in his pocket, strode up to the Rectory with them.

Two days later, an account of the finding of the bottle, together with the epistle contained in it and a photograph of the dagger, were published in all the London papers. They solved the riddle which had perplexed so many people—of the Canal Tragedy, as it had come to be called; and freed more than one name from the tarnish of a lingering suspicion.

### CONTENTS OF THE OPEN LETTER FOUND IN THE BOTTLE.

"I am a seaman in the merchant service and I am on my last voyage out from England, for I never mean to touch the shores again. The other side of the world is the one for me, now and ever shall be. Amen.

"But there are things I know which may be best made known to people concerned in them, if so be as trouble has followed.

"I was tramping through Hampshire, on my way from Southampton to Bristol, where I hoped to find the girl I had left behind two years before. She and I had never walked out together, but she knew I liked her and she was kindly to me. I made up my mind on the voyage, I would go and ask her if she would have me. I had some money put by and a lot of things to sell, picked up in foreign parts.

"I called at a place called Spinney Chase and sold a knife—one of a couple I had with me—for two-pounden, to the boss. Pridham his name was, and he had a son, a young soldier, who beat me down from the price I asked. I told him there was not another knife like the one he bought off me, in the world, but there was, and I had it in my bundle.

"I started to go on my road when I spied the girl I had come home to find—Liz Bainton. She did not see me, but I knew she was waiting for some other chap, and I watched.

"First I thought it was the young master at Spinney Chase, but I found out my mistake. It was his friend—the son of a lord—who used to play tennis at the Chase and when the game was over go home by the canal bank. Liz used to be there two or three times a week, and they sat and talked together, or strolled along the path towards his home.

"I watched them often, but I took good care no one should see me. I used to sleep in the pinewoods and tramp away miles before I showed myself in any village, because I wanted to be free to do what I liked when the time came.

"I could see she loved him, and that

there was no chance for me. But I grew to think he did not love her; only liked to talk to her because she was handsome and different to other girls of her station.

"After a bit he took to coming less often, and Liz would wait and watch and go home without seeing him. I got near enough once to listen to them talking, and I heard him say he had no money, and that his father wanted him to marry some girl who could make him rich.

"Liz said money was nought without love, but he said paupers like himself could not afford such a luxury as love.

"He used to talk like that to her—mock serious, for he was one of those easy-going gentlemen who take life as if it is a bore or a joke.

"But the look on Liz's face told me often what it all was to her, and I made up my mind that if she wanted him and could not have him, he should pay for having made her care.

"The last time I saw them together, it was late at night on the seventh of July. She came along the canal path about ten o'clock and I was in two minds if I would not speak to her and tell her what I had come home for and give her her chance.

"She looked wonderful pretty in the moonlight and she walked to and fro, between the bridge and a sloping path that led up towards the house where he lived with his father and sister. At last—it must have been going on for eleven—he came down the zig-zag, and he was in evening dress, and a fine, well-set-up young fellow he looked—every inch a lord. She gave a little cry of joy and walked quickly to meet him, but when he saw her, he stopped and made as if to turn back.

"WHY, Liz," he said, "you shouldn't be here as late as this. Let me see you a bit of the way home, over the bridge."

"She said no; she must speak to him.

"It was just under the bridge, where it spanned the path, and they couldn't see me unless they had come right past, and then they would only have found a sailor asleep, with his bundle for a pillow, and his face hidden in it. But I could hear most of what they said.

"He told her that he would always be her friend, but they must not meet and talk any more, for though there was no harm in it, it might get known. She said she did not mind; all the world might know, but she could not forget him. He told her that his father was urging him to marry someone, and he had as good as consented, and it might seem as if he was playing a double game, if people talked about him and Liz.

"I could not hear everything because they spoke very low, but I knew that he was trying to say good-bye to her and that she was pleading with him not to, and when he wanted to persuade her to go up the path to the bridge and home, she refused. She was changed from what she used to be, for I remembered her very gentle and yielding, but she seemed so set on her own way that he could do nothing with her. I hated him for having come into her life at all, in his careless way. What did Liz want with a gentleman, let alone a young fellow like him, with no purpose in life?

"At last he said if she would not come, he must leave her and he begged her to go home quickly and try to forget him. He said he was not worth her troubling over, and that was true enough, only she would not see it.

"He took her two hands in his and



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