

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. Fenella runs away from the house to look for Laurie. She goes to the home of the murdered girl, and from thence through the woods till she meets Laurie. Meanwhile things look black against Laurie. His father engages detectives to look for him, but Laurie and Fenella turn up at the house while the detectives are present. Mr. Pridham speaks to the doctor about Laurie's health. Dr. Fraser tells Mr. Pridham that he saw Laurie on the scene of the murder after it had been committed. Mrs. Pridham has a talk with Fenella and now understands her rightly. Agnes goes to visit a Mrs. Donnithorne.

CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

"HE was standing there, by the smithy, and saw Judd's paper with her portrait, so he says, 'Why, that's the young woman I used to see most evenings down by the canal when I was fishin'—he goes there to amuse himself with a line and a hook, though he doesn't often catch anything—so one of the men pricks up his ears and asks Teddie what the girl came down to the canal for and the boy answers, 'to meet her young man, I expect—regular toff he is, one of your swells dressed up to the nines, all in evening dress with a white shirt and waistcoat and the rest of it!' On hearing that Ben Judd joins in, 'P'raps that's the cove as done the deed—as like as not,' but the smith he was ready with a rumour as a sailor was the real murderer and done it with some terrible foreign knife. On that the men begins to argue about it, and Judd, who's a regular radical and always down on the gentry—of which he ought to be thoroughly well ashamed, considering he works for Lord Brismain—Judd says out that folk are ready enough to credit a poor sailor with a shameful crime when all the time it's one of your black-hearted gentlemen as done her in."

Agnes' golden eyes were no longer calm but full of startled enquiry. She murmured, "People speak at random about serious and solemn matters—not counting the cost of their words."

"Just so, Miss. That's what I said to Donnithorne when he came in with the news that all the people along were full of the rumour that a gentleman had killed Liz Bainton—and our boy, Teddie, had started the gossip. I was just giving the boy a good lecture about it, Miss, when there comes a knock on the door and in walks the Inspector of Police—you could have knocked me down with a feather, you could indeed! I turned hot and cold all over me, wondering what next. He passed the time of day, quite civil-like, then says to Teddie, 'I want a few words with you, my lad. What's this I hear about your seeing Elizabeth Bainton down by the canal with a gentleman?' I tried to put Teddie off answering by saying that the boy didn't know nothing about it, but the Inspector says to me—he was very stern—I must request you don't interrupt or try to baffle the law or you'll find yourself in Queer Street, Mrs. Donnithorne!" On that my husband bids me be silent and the In-

spector went on with his questioning. Teddie had to confess he used to go off, after his tea, to fish in the canal and generally stayed about the banks late, looking after eels and other beasties—boylake, you know, Miss, he loves prowling about in the dark."

"I can understand that," Agnes put in gently, noting the tears of vexation shining in Mrs. Donnithorne's eyes.

"But the worst was to come, Miss. After Teddie had told how the girl used to wait on the bridge most evenings, and then later, particular when it was moonlight, this gentleman, whoever he was, would join her and they walked together or perhaps he'd fetch her in a boat. I thought I must be dreaming when the Inspector says to Teddie, 'Do you happen to know Mr. Laurence Pridham, by sight, who lives at the Chase?' Teddie answers 'Yes.' But when the next question was, 'And this gentleman you saw by the canal—was he at all like Mr. Laurence Pridham?' I burst out then, 'How dare you ask the boy such a question? I forbid you to answer, Teddie, and I'm your mother, so you've got to obey me—Inspector or no Inspector.' The tears overbrimmed and rolled down Mrs. Donnithorne's apple-red cheeks. "The impudence of it—to put such ideas into my boy's head! Anyone could see what the fellow was driving at and I told him straight out that it was a disgrace and a shame, trying to cast a slur on the name of Pridham, in the eyes of people who have had such great kindness from you and yours. No, Miss, I wasn't going to allow that. But anyway Teddie was equal to him, for he answers up sharp, 'Don't you put yourself out about it, mother; that swell chap wasn't one bit like young Mr. Pridham. Why he gave us our dog, Chippie. I know Mr. Laurence Pridham as well as I know father—and it wasn't his voice or his build or nothing—quite a different sort of gentleman altogether, I can tell you.'"

"I'm glad to hear Teddie said that, Mrs. Donnithorne," Agnes told her composedly; then she made the excuse that she was wanted at home to escape from Mrs. Donnithorne's many apologies.

AGNES' cheeks flushed and her eyes filled with a shrinking appreciation when she hastened up the avenue towards the "Chase." The vague horror that had invaded the atmosphere round her was knocking at her gentle heart and her first thought had been to go home and try to shelter her father and mother from encountering the fringe of the tragedy which loomed large before them.

John Hassall, coming from the house, met her under the trees and stopped again to speak to her, his perception, quickened by love, reading aright the trouble on her face.

"I can't stop now, Mr. Hassall. I feel I have been away too long," she said to him in agitated tones. "I may be wanted at home."

He took her hand and held it tightly. "If I can ever serve you or be of the slightest use to you or your people in any way, I am sure you know I would be happy and proud to do anything that lay in my power."

"Yes," she answered, "I know you to be a true, kind friend," but her tone and manner were abstracted. He felt she was remote from him.

"A true, kind friend. That was all he could ever hope to be to Agnes!

CHAPTER XII.

"Twelve struck. That sound which all the years Hear in each hour crept off; and then The ruffled silence spread again like water That a pebble stirs."

AGNES never imagined that while she stood with Mr. Hassall under the lime trees, seeking, without apparent rudeness, to curtail his conversation with her, another pair of eyes watched their meeting impatiently and longed for it to end. Fenella, screened by a clump of rhododendrons, counted the seconds until they separated and only when both were well out of sight did she feel free to emerge from her place of concealment and carry out the plan of action she had in her mind.

After Mrs. Pridham left her that afternoon, she sat quite still for some moments considering what would be best for her to do and weighing the results.

She must leave "Spinney Chase" immediately; that was imperative. Moreover, she must go in such a manner that her movements would be impossible—or, at all events, difficult—to follow. The mist had cleared away by this time and the evening air was fresh and fragrant. She gave a great sigh as she took in the beauty of the garden which she loved for all it had brought her—Laurie's companionship, Laurie's love—now she was bidding farewell to this place of fair, sweet memories.

The idyll of her short summer's wooing was over, finished! She must put it aside now and face the inevitable. With the quickness and decision which were characteristic of all her actions, she packed her belongings into the two trunks she had brought to the "Chase," reserving only a small attache case which she could carry easily, without attracting attention. Then she wrote a note to Theo.

"Good-bye, dearest little friend—I am leaving the 'Chase' because I can see plainly that it is the best and kindest thing to do under the present circumstances. I shall tell no one where I am going, except you, Theo, for I know I can trust you implicitly. You remember Janet Speer, who taught freehand drawing and painting at school? You went with me to her little studio, in Chelsea, one day last winter. If you want to write to me, she will forward the letter on. I shall pine for news. You can guess how my heart will ache. Good-bye, dear Theo. Love me always as I shall love you.—Fen. Be so very kind as to have my boxes sent on to Waterloo, where I will get Janet to call for them. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

Then Fenella pinned the sealed envelope to her pin-cushion and, watching her opportunity, when stairs and passages were deserted, waked out through a conservatory and so reached the thick shrubberies without encountering a single person. She was just congratulating herself on nearing the lodge gate without having been seen, when Agnes entered the avenue—and a man's firm footsteps coming from the opposite direction made Fenella draw back hastily into the shelter of the shrubs again.

It was growing dark when she found herself following an unfrequented right of way across the



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