

The FIFTH WHEEL

By Beatrice Heron-Maxwell and Florence & Eastwick

CHAPTER XXVII.—(Continued.)

"Of course I shall go, too," Sallie decided, and although the old lady grumbled at the additional expense, the girl had her own way as usual. In due time she found herself at Aix with a cargo of new garments, installed in Lady Adeliza's comfortable suite of rooms au premier, with her ladyship's clever French maid to do her hair and otherwise give the finishing touches to the striking beauty which attracted general admiration and comment.

"Mr. Ferdinand Saxon is here," Lady Adeliza announced one day soon after they arrived.

"Yes—who is he?" Sallie, fanning herself by the open window, was serenely uninterested.

"My dear child—who is he? Why, the Mount Ararat magnate. Surely you know who I mean."

"Oh—that oil man. I forgot. Multi-millionaire, isn't he?"

"Wear your yellow chiffon to-night, Sallie. I've asked him to dine at our table."

Sallie looked at her aunt attentively. "Is he old or young—married or single?"

"A widower and seventy." Sallie made a little grimace.

"Don't be a little fool, a man of seventy will worship you, load you up with presents, give you anything on earth your heart may desire. Since you say young Pridham has trailed off, it's as well to make the most of other chances. By the way, did you hear Pridham pere is to get his baronetcy?"

"I suppose that was a foregone conclusion. Well, they can make him a baronet but they'll never make him a gentleman. If I married Laurie, I should soon drop his parents."

Lady Adeliza laughed. "I think you'll wear the yellow chiffon to-night, Sallie!"

"I believe I shall," she answered. And when she entered the table d'hôte room a trifle late, to give due effect to her appearance, she looked a vision of loveliness; the pale yellow of her gown emphasized the dazzling white of her skin, while her eyes flashed in triumph beneath the waved masses of chestnut hair.

Mr. Ferdinand Saxon forgave instantly the iniquity of being kept waiting for his dinner. He bowed low over the dimpled hand extended to him with queenly condescension.

"Lady Adeliza, you were just asking me what sight had most impressed me since I came to Europe—well, here you have my answer. There's nothing so impressive or so truly worthy of admiration on God's earth, as a beautiful young woman—and your niece is quite the most beautiful young woman I've ever seen. I make my homage accordingly!"

A tall, well-set-up man, white-haired, with a smooth, unwrinkled face, Saxon bore his years easily. There was nothing offensive in his open expression of admiration; it was made with a natural frankness and simplicity which, coming from an old man, debarred it from being taken amiss. In any case Sallie would have accepted it with smiling composure, not forgetting that the speaker was a multi-millionaire whose approval carried value.

The spoilt beauty never put herself out to be agreeable, and her attitude of absolute indifference on this occasion was another point in her favour. Ferdinand Saxon had been an object of pursuit ever since he realized a

huge fortune in oil; men and women fawned upon him for the possible benefits they might receive at his hands, for he had great influence in financial circles and wielded it judiciously. His first wife had been of humble station and her impecunious relations had proved a considerable tax upon the successful man's forbearance. He felt sure this haughty girl would be unapproachable by the outside world, a wife to be proud of, beautiful and of noble birth—exactly the sort of woman he would choose to reign as queen-consort in his princely home. Before that evening was over he had made up his mind that, fortune favouring him, he would ask Sarah Mauleverer to be his wife.

He followed up his advantage by taking the two ladies for a long motor expedition the next day. Admiral Webster—an old friend of Lady Adeliza's—was the fourth member of the party, and the worldly dame took good care to monopolize his attention and leave Saxon free to extend his acquaintance with her niece. Sallie began to thaw. The American's wit and independence amused and pleased her, while the deference with which he treated her was very flattering to her self-esteem. She accepted a bouquet of roses from him and, detaching one perfect white bloom, placed it in her bodice with a coquettish glance which provoked and acknowledged some feeling beyond the fleeting acquaintance of a few hours.

HE began to think himself secure, but he was not one to risk failure by premature declaration. After dinner that night, he sat in the hotel garden talking to Lady Adeliza, and was wise enough to take her into his confidence to the extent of saying that a man was lonely without a wife, especially placed as he was, with town and country houses, where he was bound to entertain on a large scale.

"I want a woman to help me—a woman who could direct and rule, versed in the ways of the world, well-born, and who would hold herself above the common herd. I'm an old man—over seventy—but I should be no drag upon a young woman's enjoyment of life. She should please herself as long as I live, and when I quit living she should have every cent I possess. I'd settle it on her, hard and fast, on her wedding-day. Now Lady Adeliza, what's your opinion? Do you think a beautiful girl—such as your niece, Sarah Mauleverer—would throw in her lot with Ferdinand Saxon?"

"I think—in fact, I may say quite positively, she would." On hearing Lady Adeliza's decided reply, the Mount Ararat millionaire shook hands in impressive silence and then walked off in search of Sallie. He found her listening to the band, with Admiral Webster laboriously attempting to dispel the frown which marred her handsome face. The frown disappeared at Saxon's approach, and the sailor, with a muttered excuse, yielded his seat to the newcomer.

"You're tired or worried about something," the American said presently. "Did I take you too far this afternoon in the car?"

"No—no, I enjoyed it. I'm not a scrap tired, but I found a letter here on my return which has vexed me. My brother has gone to America."

"Is that unexpected?" He shrewdly suspected some trouble.

"Quite. My father will be furious, and I'm angry too because there are only we two, Tubby and I, at home.

It will be sickening without him."

"You're fond of your brother, of course, but tell me, if it's not impertinent, was there any particular reason for his leaving so suddenly?"

"Yes, worse luck! He'd lost a pot of money—over cards, I suppose. Anyway, he tells me he had to make a swift retreat from this country and disappear for a time. Oh! isn't it disgusting to have no money?"

"It is. I've known it myself when I was young. But don't you trouble about your brother. I'll cable to one of my agents and tell him to look up Mr. Mauleverer and take care of him. I expect I shall be able to do something to get him on his feet if he's willing to put his shoulder to the wheel."

"You're very kind—but Tubby isn't travelling under his own name. He tells me to address his letters to 'S. Broke, Post Restante, New York.'"

"That's good enough. My man will track him out all right and make him comfortable. Now that's settled, so you're not to vex your pretty head about it any more."

SALLIE beamed upon him. "I think you're quite the nicest man I ever knew."

"Just what I want you to think, Miss Mauleverer. Your good opinion represents to me the sum total of my present ambitions. I see you're still wearing one of my roses. May I take that as an encouragement? You see, I'm a bold man. I don't shirk the fences, though maybe my hardness may bring me a fall."

Sallie drooped her head gracefully over the rose, and it seemed to him she touched it with her lips. "I like courage and ambition; they appeal to me. I'm ambitious myself, and no one would accuse me of being a coward."

"And what might constitute the object of your ambition? Power?"

"Yes."

"Influence?"

"Yes."

"Miss Mauleverer, haven't you got them already, through the Almighty's gift of great personal attractions?"

Sallie shook her head. "A woman in England who's poor and unmarried has very little influence. She is almost a nobody—unless she happens to be on the stage and a popular favourite."

"That's not as it should be, but if that's really the case, there's only one course open to her. She should marry a man who can provide her with everything she wants."

"It's often done—but supposing she does not care for anyone of that sort?"

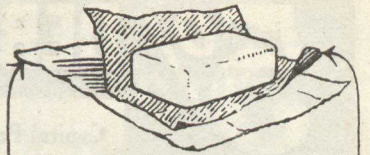
"Any man who is worth his salt can make a woman care. Don't you believe that if he put his whole heart and soul into winning her he might succeed?"

Sallie was silent. The glow from an archway of fairy lights fell full on her face, and he could see the sparkle of her eyes, the anticipation of future success in the curving laughter on her lips. But the man was urgent for a reply. "Tell me, Miss Mauleverer—don't you think he should succeed?"

She turned the dazzling brilliance of her eyes upon him.

"Yes, Mr. Saxon, I believe you're right; such a man as you describe might and would succeed."

He drew a long breath of satisfaction. "Well, it's up to me to prove that what you and I both believe is true. In my opinion the best evidence of faith is its realization. Now, here comes Lady Adeliza to carry you



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