

LUCK OF 'TÊTE-À-TÊTE'

A Comedy That Found for Its
Author a Sweetheart and a Star

By ZONA GALE

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REEVE tossed the letter on his desk and stared at it. "Heaven be praised!" he said fervently. "Well, Heaven be praised!"

Then he laughed, caught up the letter and walked to the window, without knowing what he did, and stood staring down on the angular street, sodden with spring snow, gray as the dull skies and filled with the half-hearted lumbering activity of the village market-day. Above the street hung Reeve's trim gilt-lettered sign, promising to the town the services of the law. In all that dreary year Reeve had never hated Cobetown as he did whenever he noted his sign nonchalantly swaying its prosperous gilt letters before his bare office. Someway that smug well-fed sign was as out of place in Cobetown as was Reeve himself.

And now! He might smash the sign and the antique-oak desk together, he thought buoyantly, and make a bonfire of them in the middle of the pine floor; for "Tête-à-Tête," the musical comedy of which he had done the book and Caldwell the score, had been positively snapped up by Wyndwynner, would have its New-York production that fall, and at an advance consideration that was to Reeves riches—riches! As for Caldwell, he was abroad in the Auvergne Mountains writing a vaudeville skit and finding fault with the climate, and to that connoisseur in climates the sale would mean merely another smile of Fortune.

But to Reeve it meant freedom—everything. Moreover, Wyndwynner announced in this letter that he intended using the piece to star Miss Elfin—Miss Penelope Elfin who in a minor rôle last season had saved the soul of a non-supporting comedy. Wyndwynner said that for the third act in which the heroine, as a traveling American girl, would impersonate a princess and save a duchy, Miss Elfin was born, and more than born.

"We're going in for cut-glass furniture and diamonds in the footlights and so on," wrote Wyndwynner, "and the little Elfin will blaze. She can do it."

Reeve stood long by the window, lost in the proposition, idiotically mulling over some of the best scenes in his play; then he went feverishly through his desk to hunt out the manuscript. And when an hour later Miss Ada Rogeda tapped at his door to press her claim upon a rival milliner who had copied her one Chicago tobacco-brown model toque, she found Reeve laughing almost tenderly over the scene in the throne-room. He had never appreciated how fine the stuff really was.

"I'm glad you can laugh, Mr. Reeve, I'm sure," said Miss Ada Rogeda dolefully; "but when a person's a milliner I declare it don't seem as if there was much to laugh at. An' when it comes to downright toque-stealing in the profession, I no longer feel respectable, let alone proud!"

Six weeks later, Reeve, having settled upon the damages due the owner of the Chicago toque, and having persuaded old Tivton that he must stop harping upon how his employers had deserved to be robbed and try to put forward some proof that he had not robbed them, turned his office over to willing hands and set his face toward New-York.

There he met the returned Caldwell, who bantered him unmercifully upon never having heard the score of "Tête-à-tête," which was true, partly because Caldwell had composed most of the music abroad and partly because Reeve knew no music and could barely distinguish a catchy chorus from the national hymn. Caldwell played him bits of the lyrics, and Reeve listened with polite attention and showed strong appreciation for his own lines; and the two held conferences with Wyndwynner and had luncheons for the sake of conferences, and vice versa, and mourned that Miss Elfin would not be back in town until after her vacation. And when June came Reeve found to his delight that he could now languidly admit that he needed a change and could hear of the allurements of various summer resorts without becoming a momentary anarchist. To pursue the mere habits of a white man, and not be a miser, was a luxury for which he had long secretly understood himself to be designed.

He chose to spend June at Applegate Farm, selecting it first on account of the name, second because there were trout. Applegate Farm was up

in Westchester County on the broad breast of a hill, with orchards on the uplands and warm fields down the slope and trout-streams in the heart of the wood. Reeve walked to the farm across the meadows in an early twilight and nodded familiarly at the little new moon and beamed upon a great lighted house that looked like a man-of-war out for a walk, and tried to accustom himself to the fact that this was he, Reeve, entering upon a divine vacation safe miles from the baking bricks of Cobetown.

He went up a little avenue of box alders, and was met on the white steps by Mrs. Applegate, who looked much like a fine sound Baldwin, and who whisked him to a cool table by an open window in the empty dining-room. There in a kind of beatific trance he ate baked trout and watched the fireflies. Later he stepped through the window to a covered veranda, and at its farther end heard a woman murmur something and laugh.

Reeve afterward wondered just what it was about that laugh that so unaccountably excited his interest. It was mellow and wandering and genuine; but so was the accompanying laughter of Mrs. Applegate and of some one else. Yet it was not their laughter that drew him toward them, though that fine sound Baldwin of a woman and some one in white were occupying the porch all alone and still laughing, while a turquoise-blue shadow stood below on the driveway in a rectangle of lamplight. To the shadow Mrs. Applegate presented him first, with some phrase of country heartiness, and the shadow answered in a voice that matched the mellow, wandering, genuine laugh that Reeve had heard. He saw her clearly—her slim distinction, her hair that looked sunny even in the dusk; then she vanished in the avenue of box alders, and Mrs. Applegate presented him to the porch chair—or so she might have done, as far as Reeve knew—and turned to hurry indoors as if she perceived the world to be slowing down and she must wind it up.

"I should think Nellie Arnold's folks," she contributed over her shoulder, "'d be wonderin' why she don't come home to supper."

"Yes?" said Reeve idly. "You have neighbors?"

"Her folks is," imparted Mrs. Applegate. "Nellie she works in the city. I do' know what she does," added the fine sound Baldwin, her appetite for wonder getting the better of her duty indoors; "I'm awful afraid, though," she dropped her voice, "it's a church choir."

"A church choir?" echoed Reeve, at a loss. "A church—"

Mrs. Applegate nodded with pursed lips. "One o' them theatric ones," she explained, "with brass bands. Abe Arnold her uncle, he's mighty close-mouthed; but I know Nellie used to hev' some voice, an' the minute she mentioned a fiddle in a choir in the city I put two and two together. Thinks I, that's what makes Abe Arnold so mum—he's ashamed."

Reeve comforted her. "Oh, maybe not, Mrs. Applegate," he said hopefully, and unaccountably remembered the plaint of Miss Ada Rogeda: "Maybe it's only millinery," he added.

"Millinery?" shrilled Mrs. Applegate, aghast. "Well, listen at that! Why, millinery's four times as respectable as a brass band on Sunday. I had a sister that lived and died a milliner."

"Respectable, of course," Reeve hastened deferentially, "providing," he qualified solicitously, "that the hats are good, wouldn't one say?"

At this the porch chair laughed—or so it might



"Wish Us Both Good Luck—'Tête-à-tête' and Me."

have been as far as Reeve had noticed—and Mrs. Applegate vanished.

In the porch chair was Mrs. Theodora Marr, the "summer widow" of Applegate Farm. To-night she was in a mist of muslin, and manifestly she was grateful to Reeve for having arrived. This she demonstrated by giving him an hour of idleness on the veranda, lending him a novel, explaining about the canoe, and next forenoon inviting him prettily to go to Hoen Manor that evening to a ball.

Hoen Manor was the great house that looked like a man-o'-war out for a walk which Reeve had noted as he walked to the farm; and he had an instant vision of stuffy rooms crowded with the white flocks of half the smart country-side, and promptly talked vaguely about having so much work to do that he supposed the world could not contain it unless it was done. Then, in spite of his serious understanding with himself that he was to spend the rest of his life brilliantly supplying the public thirst for drama, it suddenly smote Reeve that it would be pleasant to slip back in his old world—the world of which Cobetown knew no more than of the Seventh Heaven, and he accepted.

"Delicious!" cried the little summer widow, whose conception of both tact and ingratiating were purely exclamatory. "They are to have some divine music—two or three lions and the like."

Reeve suppressed his shrug and foresaw an anxious hour of arias in a close room, with ecstasy required of him. Still, his invitation obediently arriving that afternoon, he acknowledged that it was good to realize that Cobetown was as far away as it seemed when he greeted Mrs. Theodora Marr as she came trailing soft skirts down the stairs at ten that night—good to listen to her pleasant chatter and repartee, good to drive through the sweet warm dusk to the great lighted spectacle of Hoen Manor. And within he waited for her in entire content, reconciled even to hearing music as he looked down upon the oak-paneled hall and the white salon with their pretty gossip groups. The ball was given for the guests on board the Blue Grass, somebody's yacht that was cruising aimlessly about, breeze-hunting in the sound.

Reeve was wont to say that the gods never let him have anything unalloyed. But he was inclined to make an exception when he learned that he had