

Do you happen to know if she was engaged, sir?"

Mr. Pridham's mouth had gone suddenly dry, and it was with some slight difficulty that he replied: "So far as I am aware—no. But I was not acquainted with Miss Leach's private affairs."

"No, sir. Might I see Miss Leach, and have a little conversation with her, sir?"

Mr. Pridham rang the bell, and when the butler came, said: "Ask your mistress to come here."

"My dear," he said, as his wife came in, "I think you had better hear what the inspector came for."

HER eyes fell on the hat, and the hardness in her gaze broke up suddenly. She snatched it and looked inside, where the initials confirmed her recognition. Speechless, she gazed at her husband.

Her agitation had a calming effect on him, and he said, with careful composure: "The hat was found on the Woking road."

"With this photograph close by," added the inspector, and gave it to her.

It seemed as if every drop of blood in Mrs. Pridham's body must have rushed to her face and neck as she read the inscription on the back, and her husband took the photograph from her with a brief frown of admonition.

"I am certain," said Mrs. Pridham, "that Miss Leach has some discreditable secret. She has left the house, although I told her she was not to do so. I think your best plan would be to devote yourself to tracking her."

Furious anger throbbed in every accent, an uncontrollable vindictiveness suddenly roused the suspicion hitherto undreamt of, that her agony of mind about her son was due in some vague maddening way to this girl—this upstart girl, as she labelled her mentally. The inspector listened stolidly, but Mr. Pridham felt that he could read the thoughts passing through the man's mind and follow the inevitable deduction from his wife's unguarded words.

"If the young lady is not in, it is of no use for me to trouble you further for the moment," said the inspector. "I had better, as you say, madam, take steps to find her. Do I understand you that Mr. Laurence Pridham is with his regiment?"

"Where he is at this moment," Mr. Pridham said quickly, "I am unable to tell you. He left home last night to return to town; that is all we know about him."

"Not, I suppose," the inspector said carefully, "wearing that hat?"

"Not—obviously—wearing that hat," repeated Mr. Pridham in a toneless voice.

Mrs. Pridham, glancing from one to the other, held her tongue with difficulty. Usually inclined to weigh her words, she was so over-excited as to be eager to blurt out the whole story to the inspector—in spite of her husband's decision to keep it quiet as long as possible—simply because the idea of Fenella being in direct association with Laurie was intolerable to her.

The inspector took up the hat and the photograph and saluted in silence.

"Had you not better leave those here?" said Mrs. Pridham imperiously.

"I think not, madam. They were found by one of our men, and I do not feel at liberty to part with them—at the moment."

He opened the door, through which a sound of voices and steps had just begun to make itself perceptible.

As he did so, an exclamation from Theo reached them all.

"Oh, Laurie—Laurie, darling! Fen, what is it?"

The dismayed tones rang through the hall, and Mr. and Mrs. Pridham were on the threshold at the same instant that the inspector crossed it.

The little group of three was visible to them all. Laurie, passing a nervous hand across his troubled forehead while he stared round in a vain effort to recall what was lost in his memory; Fenella holding his arm while she tried to lead him to a chair; Theo, with her hand on his

shoulder, looking pleadingly into his face, while the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Mr. Laurence Pridham, I think," said the inspector, without any change of tone.

CHAPTER IX.

It is a big wonder indeed that lasts more than nine days.

THE sound of his name—"Laurence Pridham"—pronounced in the inspector's official voice, seemed to strike some chord of response in Laurie's mind, for he shook off both the girls, pulled himself up, and saluted.

"Present, sir!" he said.

By this time, Mrs. Pridham was at his side, and was realizing that the blue eyes which were the light of her life looked upon her as those of a stranger might, and that while Laurie in the flesh stood there, Laurie in the spirit was far away from them all.

"My boy!" she cried in anguish, "What is it? What has happened to you? Don't you know me—your mother?"

"My mother?" echoed Laurie automatically. "Yes, of course; I'm always glad to see you, mother; but it's this parade business that's worrying me."

The inspector showed himself at this moment a man of resource, for he took Laurie's arm gently but firmly.

"Parade is over, sir," he said. "I think some breakfast is what you want," and impelled him towards the dining-room.

Laurie went a few steps obediently, then stopped and frowned. "Fenella," he said in a troubled way, "she probably hasn't had any breakfast either. And I promised her I would go with her—no, write to her; that's it! I was to write to her. Fenella, where are you?"

She was at his side instantly, but as she reached it, Mrs. Pridham struck them apart.

"How dare you?" she said, in low but furious tones. "What right have you to interfere? My son needs no assistance from you." And she took Fenella's place by his side.

The cloud of unreason seemed to descend again on Laurie while he halted, perplexed, listening, and then he stumbled forward again, leaning more heavily on the inspector, until, when they reached the dining-room, he almost fell into a chair, and put his head down on his arm.

Mr. Pridham was at the sideboard in a moment, pouring some brandy, with shaking hand, into a glass, while Mrs. Pridham bent over her son with soothing words, but the inspector put up his hand with a warning gesture.

"I shouldn't advise it, sir," he said, looking at the brandy. "If you could get him to bed—I am passing the doctor's on my way: could I give him a call for you?"

"We'll telephone for him, thanks," Mr. Pridham said, going to the door.

Out in the hall, Fenella had sunk down into a chair, and Theo was kneeling beside her.

The inspector looked at them significantly. "Have I your parole, sir, that the young lady and Mr. Laurence Pridham will not leave this house again to-day?"

"Yes—yes. I'll see that they are here if you want them, inspector."

"Thank you sir; then I'll wish you good-day."

By the time Dr. Fraser came, Laurie was in bed, and had fallen into a torpor.

Agnes, sedate and calm, had installed herself at once as nurse, and Mrs. Pridham, who, after a wild fit of weeping, had regained some of her normal self-control, was sitting at the bedside.

"Don't let that girl come near us," she had said, when Agnes mentioned Fenella once, and Theo had taken Fenella away to her room where she was listening to her account of the finding of Laurie.

(To be continued.)

Man—In Epitome.—Man starts out by wanting the earth, and ends by having to be content with a two by six strip of it.



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