

the thought of Mrs. Pridham's change of tone if the reason were suddenly revealed was too humorous.

"It is no laughing matter, Miss Leach," Mrs. Pridham said, noticing the smile. "Young ladies who have clandestine interviews at the dead of night lay themselves open to suspicion of every kind. It will be extremely uncomfortable for us if this local scandal becomes connected with our house. We do not wish to be made notorious in the country in that sort of way."

Fenella smiled no longer. She saw suddenly that she was creating a wider gulf between herself and Laurie, in Mrs. Pridham's eyes, than already existed. To interfere with Mrs. Pridham's social schemes was to be anathema maranatha.

ON the other hand, the scandal from which she was shielding Laurie would be infinitely greater than the one Mrs. Pridham was dreading. There was no question about that.

"Look here, mother," said Theo, suddenly, "Fen's reason for not explaining the whole thing may be an unselfish one. You had much better trust her."

"When I want advice from my youngest daughter," Mrs. Pridham majestically replied, "I will ask for it. You are only a child. Theo, and cannot be expected to understand a matter as serious as this."

Theo held her peace. A warning look from Fenella reminded her of her promise.

At this moment two things happened.

Mr. Pridham returned in the car and simultaneously a telegram was handed in, for him.

He opened it as he entered the room and his florid face changed colour as he read the contents.

"What does this mean?" he said, handing it to Mrs. Pridham.

She read it—to herself first and then aloud, to all of them.

"Lieutenant Laurence Pridham's leave expired last night. He was absent from parade this morning and we have no news of him. Kindly wire if he is with you and reason—James Bray, Lieutenant-Colonel Chiltern Fusiliers, Hounslow Barracks."

In the momentary silence that followed, Fenella and Theo, staring at one another, saw each other's apprehensions written on their faces.

"Horatio!" Mrs. Pridham's voice changed, agitated, appealing, rang across the room, "something has happened to the boy. He left here for the ten-thirty-three up—he was going straight to the Barracks. Where can he be? We must do something at once." She shook her husband's shoulder in her alarm, for Mr. Pridham was standing, mute and paralyzed, with fixed, unseeing eyes that seemed to look on something distant and yet horrible.

He roused himself with an effort and stared into her distracted face. "Of course," he stammered, in a curious way, "something must be done at once. Come into my study, Selina."

They went away together and the study door closed on them.

"Theo," whispered Fenella, "shall I take my chance now and run away?"

"Why? What do you mean, Fen?"

"I mean—they would follow me—and it would take up time—and—oh! don't you see Laurie's danger. Absent without leave and—"

She broke off. It would never do to tell Agnes, because if Agnes knew the truth, and if she was questioned, she would let it out. But Agnes saw enough to realize that this defection of Laurie's at such a time was an untoward coincidence.

"Laurie must have had some very strong reason for outstaying his leave," she said, "but surely, Fen, you don't mean that people could possibly connect him with this dreadful crime?"

"I don't know what to think—it is all so strange and terrible," Fenella said. "Agnes, help me to get away—now at once, before this man comes to torture me with questions."

"But, Fen," urged Agnes, "wouldn't it be better for everyone to know that you and Laurie were engaged and that you went downstairs to get the

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