

Mauleverer has found it convenient to go to London and remain there. He has no wish to be questioned on the matter, in case anything uncomfortable should crop up."

"Very strange, very strange," muttered Mr. Pridham, "but was Mr. Mauleverer ever seen with the girl?"

"She was known to have an admirer who was a gentleman. A boy in the village, who used to go fishing in the canal, watched them meet at night, on the banks. He never saw the man's face distinctly but describes him as tall and well set-up with a peculiar drawling voice which he would recognize anywhere. As you know Mr. Mauleverer well yourself, sir, you can judge whether the description answers at all. I'm given to understand he has a lazy slow sort of way in talking, as if it were almost too great a trouble to say anything."

"Humph!" was the only remark offered by his listener.

"You would oblige me very much, sir, by telling me whether it's correct that Mr. Mauleverer dined here on July 7th."

"Yes, certainly, of course he did, and left early—about ten o'clock—because my son was going back to town that night and had to change from evening to day clothes."

"About ten—not later?"

"No. We offered to send him home in the car, when my son went to the station, but he said he'd rather walk. Chevening Rise isn't a mile from here, so he must have been home long before this miserable tragedy occurred."

Mr. Pridham tapped with the tips of his nails, on the table before him, in a magisterial manner of having settled that question. But the inspector only cleared his throat in a gentle and discreet manner before mentioning, "He ought to have been—but as a matter of fact he was not. I enquired of the footman, when up at Chevening yesterday, and the lad said his young master came in soon after eleven—a matter of an hour between here and Chevening Rise, you see!"

Mr. Pridham eyed the inspector with grave disapproval. It was going too far to question a footman as to the coming and going of Lord Brismain's heir.

"Probably Mr. Mauleverer went for a walk. It was a fine night, and young men are fond of exercise."

"You are quite right, sir; quite right. He must have gone for a walk—by the canal, and close to its edge, for his boots were wet and coated with slime and mud—at least, so the footman stated."

At this moment a further interruption occurred on the part of Hoskins, who announced in a diplomatic murmur, close to his master: "Mr. Frank Merry to see you, sir, on important business."

CHAPTER XVII.

Seventeen. . . "A rosebud set with little wilful thorns and sweet as English air can make her."

MR. PRIDHAM'S face remained immovable. He was startled, but gave no sign of his surprise. Rather, he conveyed to the two other persons present that Mr. Frank Merry was there at his desire. "Ask Mr. Merry to walk this way," he said. Then, turning to the inspector, "I expect you have heard of the Inquiry Agent, Merry. Perhaps you know him!"

Lawson's face lit up with a rare smile. "I know him well; he's worked often in connection with the Yard. In fact he was one of us at the beginning of his career. It's a pleasure to meet a man of such great ability!"

Mr. Frank Merry entered with a light, quick step. He might have been taken for a country gentleman with sporting proclivities. His ruddy, clean-shaven face had nothing distinctive to attract attention, save that the grey eyes—small, and shadowed by heavy brows—were a trifle difficult to interrogate. They saw everything, without themselves being open to observation.

"Sit down, sit down, Mr. Merry,"

said Mr. Pridham, after the preliminaries of greeting had been gone through and the inspector had been requested not to hurry away. "I don't suppose you have anything to say to me which may not be told to Inspector Lawson!"

"I have no objection to offer," responded the agent. "First, I must apologize for coming to your house uninvited. After receiving your instructions respecting the absence of your son, Mr. Laurence Pridham—which I was glad to hear had been fully accounted for, although the circumstances were unfortunate—certain facts came to my knowledge which I think should be communicated to you. I hope the young gentleman is recovering from his accident!"

"I am sorry to say my son is still very ill—but pray continue!"

"After hearing from you, Mr. Pridham, that any further enquiries respecting him were unnecessary, I kept the matter docketed, for future reference, as I always make a point of doing. When I once look into anything of this sort I never entirely drop it. I need scarcely explain to you that such affairs often require fuller elucidation, and people come back to me, months afterwards, when the scent is cold, and expect me to take up the chase exactly where it halted. My attention was particularly directed to the accounts of the 'Canal' murder here, although there seemed nothing whatever to connect your son with the girl, Lisbeth Bainton."

"NOTHING at all; he did not even know her," interposed Mr. Pridham brusquely.

The inspector gave a low cough, and a gleam shot into Frank Merry's small eyes under their penthouse of eyebrow, which his host did not detect.

"It occurred to me that the person who was her assailant might possibly have attacked your son. These deeds of violence in a neighbourhood can frequently be traced to one and the same individual."

"I do not think my son was the victim of any attack. He fell over the barbed wire while taking a short cut to Woking Station."

Merry glanced at the inspector, who nodded his head in confirmation.

"Then that settles the question of Mr. Laurence Pridham's accident. It was reported that the photograph of a young lady living in your house had been found in the road."

Mr. Pridham's face assumed a look of intense annoyance.

"She was a schoolfriend of my daughters, so of course they were on terms of—of—in short, a certain degree of intimacy."

The agent hastened to reassure him. "Yes, yes, I understand; and she was just about to finish her visit here."

Horatio Pridham was a stickler for the truth at all times and at all costs. Mrs. Pridham called it want of tact, and Laurie had been known to say his father was over-scrupulous sometimes.

Now he found it was incumbent upon him to give an explanation which would never have been permitted to him if his wife had been present.

"Miss Leach went away of her own accord and without my permission. She left hurriedly, and I have no knowledge of her present address."

"She went to London," Merry continued pleasantly. "It's my business to know all these little details when dealing with a case. It is on account of this journey of hers that I am here to-day. I have taken for granted that certain bits of gossip which seemed to have touched your son's name would be extremely unpleasant and annoying to you, and as I felt I had not earned the handsome cheque you were kind enough to send me, in connection with your son's disappearance, I determined to thresh out any bits of information which happened to reach me."

"What Mr. Frank Merry undertakes to do, he always does thoroughly," the inspector enunciated with a low chuckle.

(To be continued.)

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