

"What, the new Lady Tristram? Well, George, romance has taken possession of you to-day!"

"Not at all," he protested indignantly. "It's the obviously sensible way out."

"Then they can do it without a viscounty."

"Oh no, not without something. There's the past, you see."

"And a sponge is wanted? And the bigger the sponge the better? And I'm to get my nose bitten off by asking Robert Disney for it? And if by a miracle he said yes, for all I know somebody else might say no!"

This dark reference to the Highest Quarters caused Southend to nod thoughtfully: they discussed the probable attitude—a theme too exalted to be more than mentioned here. "Anyhow, the first thing is to sound Disney," continued Southend.

"I'll think about it after I've seen the young man," Lady Evenswood promised. "Have you any reason to suppose he likes his cousin?"

"None at all—except, of course, the way he's cleared out for her."

"Yielding gracefully to necessity, I suppose?"

"Really I doubt the necessity; and anyhow the gracefulness needs some explanation in a case like this. Still I always fancied he was going to marry another girl, a daughter of a friend of mine—Iver—you know who I mean?"

"Oh yes. Bring Harry Tristram to see me," said she. "Good-bye, George. You're looking very well."

"And you're looking very young."

"Oh, I finished getting old before you were forty."

A thought struck Southend. "You might suggest the viscounty as contingent on the marriage."

"I shan't suggest anything till I've seen the boy—and I won't promise to then."

Later in the afternoon Southend dropped in at the Imperium, where to his surprise and pleasure he found Iver in the smoking-room. Asked how he came to be in town, Iver explained;