

"TRISTRAM OF BLENT"

—BY ANTHONY HOPE

CHAPTER XV.—(Continued.)

"And this—this Lady Tristram of Blent?" Iver's voice was hesitating and conscious as he pronounced the name that was to have become his daughter's.

Again the pink-ribbed Deus made entry on the scene, to give the speaker a more striking answer.

"A lady to see you, ma'am. Miss Gainsborough."

The three men sprang to their feet; with a sudden wrench Mina turned her chair round toward the door. A tall, slim girl in black came in with a quick yet hesitating step.

"Forgive me, Madame Zabriska. But I had to come. Harry said you were his friend. Do you know anything about him? Do you know where he is?" She looked at the men and blushed as she returned their bow with a hurried recognition.

"No, I haven't seen him. I know nothing," said Mina.

"The letter, Mina," Duplay reminded her, and Mina held it out to Cecily.

Cecily came forward, took it and read it. She looked again at the group, evidently puzzled.

"He doesn't say where he's gone," she said.

"You are—?" Iver began.

"I'm Cecily Gainsborough. But I think he means me when he says Lady Tristram of Blent."

"Yes, he must mean you, Miss Gainsborough."

"Yes, because last night he told me—it was so strange, but he wouldn't have done it unless it was true—he told me that he wasn't Lord Tristram really, and that I—"

Her eyes travelled quickly over their faces, and she read the letter. "Do you know anything about it?" she demanded suddenly.

"Tell me, do you know what he means by this letter and whether what he says is true?"

"We know what he means," answered Iver gravely, "and we know that it's true."

"Have you known it long?" she asked.

Iver glanced at Duplay and Need. It was Need who answered gently: "Some of us have been sure of it for some time. But—"

He looked at Mina before he went on. "But we didn't intend to speak."

Cecily stood there, seeming to consider and for a moment meeting Mina's intense gaze which had never left her face.

"Had he known for long?" was her next question. It met with no immediate answer. Duplay rose abruptly and walked to the mantelpiece; he leaned his arm on it and turned half way from the group at the table.

"Had he known it for long?" Cecily repeated.

"Ever so long," answered Mina Zabriska in a low voice, but very confidently. It was plain and simple.

"Ah, he was waiting until Lady Tristram died?"

Iver nodded; he thought what she suggested a very good explanation to accept. It was plain and simple.

It equipped Harry Tristram with a decent excuse for his past silence, and a sound reason for the moment of his disclosure. He looked at Need and found ready acquiescence in the old gentleman's approving nod. But Mina broke out impatiently—

"No, no, that had nothing to do with it. He never meant to speak. A quick remembrance flashed across her. "Were you with him in the Long Gallery last night?" she cried. "With him there for hours?"

"Yes, we were there."

"I saw you from the terrace here. Did he tell you there?"

"He told me there. There was embarrassment as well as wonder in her manner now."

"Well then, you must know why he told you. We don't know," Mina was very peevish.

"Is it any use asking—" Iver began. An unceremoniously impatient and peremptory wave of Mina's arm refused him to silence. Her curiosity left no room for his prudent counsels of reticence.

"What were you doing in the Gallery?" demanded Mina.

"I was looking at all the things there and—and admiring them. He came up presently and—I don't remember that he said very much. He watched me; then he asked me if I loved the things. And—well—then he told me. He told and went straight out of the room. I waited a long while, but he didn't come back, and I haven't spoken to him since." She looked at the men, and turned as though someone might be able to help her with the puzzle.

"Someone who made him do it—?" said Mina Zabriska.

Slightly Cecily's eyes settled on Mina's face; thus she stood silent for a full minute.

"Yes, I think so. I think I must have somehow." Her voice rose as she asked with a sudden access of agitation. "But what are we to do now?"

Mina had no thought for that; it was the thing itself that engrossed her, not the consequences.

"There will, of course, be a good many formalities," said Iver. "Subject to those, I imagine that the—er—question settles itself."

His phrase seemed to give Cecily no enlightenment.

"Settles itself?" she repeated.

"Subject to formalities, I mean, and in the absence of opposition from (he hesitated a second)—from Mr. Tristram, which can't be anticipated now, you will be put into possession of the estates and the title." He pointed to Harry's letter which was still in her hands. "You see what he himself calls you there, Miss Gainsborough?"

She made no answer. With another glance at Need, Iver pushed back his chair and rose. Need followed his example. They felt that the interview had better end. Duplay did not move, and Cecily stood where she was. She seemed to ask what was to be done with her; her desolation was sad, but it had something of the comic in it. She was so obviously lost.

"You might walk down to Blent with Miss Gainsborough, Mina," Iver suggested.

"No," cried the Imp in a passion, leaping up from her chair. "I don't want to have anything to do with her."

Cecily started and her cheeks flushed red as though she had been struck. Iver looked vexed and ashamed.

"It's all her fault that Harry Tristram—"

The Imp's voice was choked; she could get no further.

Old Mr. Need came forward. He took Harry's letter from Cecily and gave it to Mina.

"My Dear, my dear!" he said gently, as he patted her hand. "Read that again."

Mina read, and then scrutinized Cecily keenly.

"Well, I'll walk down with you," she said, grudgingly. She came near to Cecily. "I wonder what you did?" she exclaimed, scanning her face. "I must find out what you did!"

Iver came forward. "I must introduce myself to you, Miss Gainsborough. I live at Blentmouth, and my name is Iver."

"Iver!" She looked at him curiously. At once he felt that she had knowledge of the relation between his daughter and Harry Tristram.

"Yes, and since we shall probably be neighbors—" He held out his hand. She put hers into it, still with a bewildered air. Need contented himself with a bow as he passed her, and Duplay escaped from the room with a rapidity and stillness suggestive of a desire not to be observed. When the men had gone, Cecily sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands for a minute. She looked up to find Mina regarding her, still with mingled indignance and hostility.

"What were you all doing here when I came?" asked Cecily.

They were trying to make me tell you I knew about Harry Tristram. But I wouldn't tell."

"Wouldn't you?" Cecily's eyes sparkled in sudden approval, and she broke into a smile. "I like you for that," she cried. "I wouldn't have told either."

"But now!" The Imp pouted disconsolately. "Well, it's not your fault, I suppose, and—"

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