"TRISTRAM OF BLENT"

BY ANTHONY HOPE

CHAPTER XXVI.—(Continued).

"She'll have a husband, dear," his wife reminded him.

"I wonder if Bob'll get there before we do," said Janie, with the air of starting a subject of real interest in lieu of continuing idle talk.

The evening was hot and the hall-door of Blent stood open. Cecily was sitting in the hall, and came out to greet them. She seemed to Neeld to complete the picture as she stood there in her young fairness, graciously welcoming her guests. She was pale, but wore a gay air and did the honors with natural dignity. No sign of strangeness to the place, and no embarrassment were visible.

"Oh, my dear, how you remind me of Lady Tristram!" good Mrs. Iver broke out.

Neeld pressed the girl's hand with a grip that she noticed; she looked at him in a sort of question and for a moment flushed a little.

"It's very kind of you to come," she said to him softly.

"How are you, Mr. Neeld?" The Imp had suddenly darted out from somewhere and was offering her hand. "I'm staying here, you know." And in a whisper she added, "That young man of Janie's has been here a quarter of an hour, and Cecily wasn't dressed, and I've had to talk to him. Oh, dear!" She had her hand on his arm and drew him apart. "Any news of Harry Tristram?" she whispered.

"Er—no—none."

Her quick eyes looked at him in suspicion; he had hesitated a little.

"You've seen him?" she asked.

"Just casually, Madame Zabriska."

She turned away with a peevish little pout. "Then you're not very interesting," she seemed to say. But Neeld forgave her; she had asked him about Harry. He could forgive more easily because he had deluded her.

Addie Tristram's picture was at one end of the dining-room now, and Cecily's place was under it.

"My first dinner-party! Although it's a small one," she said to Iver as she sat down.

"Your first at Blent?"

"The first anywhere—actually!" she laughed, and then grew thoughtful for a moment, glancing out in to the dark and listening to the flap of a bat's wing against the window.

"You'll have plenty now," said he, as he watched her admiringly. He forgot, man that he was, that girls do not find permanent happiness in dinner-parties.

It was evident that Neeld ought never to have come to Blent that evening. For the talk was of futures, and, out of deference to the young hostess, even more of hers than of the engaged couple's. Theirs indeed was not provocative of discussion; if satisfactory, it was also obvious. Cecily's opened more topics, and she herself was willing and seemed even eager to discuss it. She fell in with Mr. Iver's suggestion that she ought to be a centre of good works in the district, and in pursuance of this idea should accept the position of Patron to Miss Swinkerton's complicated scheme of benevolence. She agreed with Iver that the affairs of the estate probably wanted overhauling, and that a capable man should be engaged for the task, even at some expense. She professed herself ready to co-operate with Bob in protecting the fishing of the Blent. She was, in a word, very much the proprietor. It was difficult for Neeld to sit and hear all this. And opposite to him sat Mina Zabriska, rather silent and demure, but losing no chance of reminding him by a stealthy glance that this ordinary talk covered a remarkable situation—as indeed it did, but not of the precise nature that Mina supposed. Neeld felt as though he were behind the scenes of fate's theatre, and he did not find the place comfortable. He saw the next tableau in preparation and had to ask himself what its effect would be on an unsuspecting audience. He came to the conclusion that foreknowledge was an attribute not likely to make human beings happy; it could not easily make terms with sympathy.

When dessert was on the table, Iver, true to his habits and traditions, felt that it was the occasion of a few friendly informal words; the birthday and the majority of young Lady Tristram demanded so much recognition. Admirably concise and simple in ordinary conversation, he became, like so many of his countrymen, rather heavy and pompous when he got on his legs. Yet he made what everybody except Mina Zabriska considered a very appropriate speech. Gainsborough grew quite enthusiastic over it; and Neeld thought it was wonderfully good (if it had not happened, of course, to be by force of circumstances an absurdity from beginning to end). Cecily was content to say, "Thank you," but her father could not refuse himself the privilege of reply; the reply was on her behalf, but it was mainly about himself—also a not uncommon characteristic of after-dinner oratory. However, he agreed with Iver that everything was for the best, and that they were entitled to congratulate their hostess and themselves on things at large. Then Neeld had a turn over the engagement (a subject dull but safe!) and the proceedings were stopped only by Bob Broadley's headlong flight when the question of his response arose.

"Thank goodness, that's over!" said Mina snappishly, as she stepped out into the garden, followed by Mr. Neeld. The rest went off to see the treasures of the Long Gallery. Mina turned to him with a quick question: "You saw very good spirits. I never saw him better in my life."

Mina was silent for a moment. Then she spoke out: "I call it disgusting. He's in good spirits, and she's in good spirits, and—and there's an end of it, I suppose! The next thing will be——" Mr. Tristram, how is he?"

"Harry Tristram is quite well and in very good spirits, and she's in good spirits, and—and there's an end of it, I suppose! The next thing will be——"

"It's not the end if there's a next thing," Neeld suggested timidly.

"Oh, don't be tiresome. The next thing'll be some stupid girl for him and some idiot of a man for her. How I wish I'd never come to Merrion!"

"Don't despair; things may turn out better than you think."

"They can't," she declared fretfully. "I shall go away."

"What a pity! Miss Gainsborough—Lady Tristram, I mean—will miss you so much."

"Let her!" said the Imp ungraciously. "I've put myself out enough about the Tristrams."

Neeld forebore to remind her of the entirely voluntary nature of her sacrifices; after all he was not the man to throw stones on that account.

"Wait a few days anyhow," he urged her. "In a few days something will happen.

"A few days? Oh, yes!" As a matter of fact she meant to stay all the winter. "She's started," she went on, with an irritated jerk of her head toward the Long Gallery, "putting all the things in different places and rearranging everything."

"I should imagine that Mr. Gainsborough's enjoying himself, then?"

"She doesn't let him touch a thing," replied Mina with a fleeting smile. "He just stands about with a duster. That contents him well enough, though. Oh, yes, I shall go. The Broadleys won't care about me, and Cecily won't want me long."

Neeld could give real comfort only at the price of indiscretion. Moreover he was not at all sure that a disclosure of the truth would bring any comfort, for Mina wanted to be on both sides and to harmonize devotion to Cecily with zeal for Harry. Neeld did not quite see how this was to be done, since it was understood that as Harry would take nothing from Cecily, so Cecily would receive anything from Harry.

"We must wait and see how it all turns out," said he.

"I hate people who say that," grumbled Mina disconsolately. "And I do think that the Ivers have grown extraordinarily stupid—caught it from Bob Broadley, I suppose."

When injustice springs not from judgment but from temper, it is not worth arguing against. Neeld held his tongue and they sat silent on the seat by the river, looking across to Merrion and hearing the voices of their friends through the open windows of Long Gallery.

Presently there came to them through the stillness of the night the sound of wheels, not on the Blentmouth side, but up the valley, on the Mingham and Fillingford road. The sound ceased without the appearance of any vehicle, but it had reminded Neeld of the progress of time.

"It must be getting late," he said, rising. "I'll go and see if they think of starting home. Did you hear wheels on the road—toward the Pool?"

"Bob Broadley's cart coming for him, I suppose."

"No. I don't think so. He's going back to Fairholme with us. I heard him say so."

Mina was languidly indifferent, and Mr. Neeld trotted off into the house. Mina sat on, frowning at the idea that in a few minutes she would have to go in and say good-by; for the voices came no more from the Long Gallery and she heard the guests laughing and chattering in the hall, as they prepared for departure. Suddenly she discerned the figure of a man coming into sight across the river. He walked slowly, as it seemed stealthily, till he came to the end of the footbridge. Then he halted and looked up at the house. It was gayly lighted. After waiting a moment the man turned back and disappeared up the road in the direction of Mingham. Mina rose and strolled to the bridge. She crossed it and looked up the road. She could make out dimly the stranger's retreating form.

She heard Cecily calling to her, and ran back to the house. A wonderful idea had come into her head, born of a vaguely familiar aspect that the bearing of the man had for her. But she laughed at it, telling herself that it was all nonsense; and as she joined in the talk and farewells it grew faint and was almost forgotten. Yet she whispered to old Neeld with a laugh: "I saw a man on the road just now who looked rather like Harry. I couldn't see him properly, you know."

Neeld started and looked at her with obvious excitement. She repaid his stare with one of equal intensity.

"Why—you don't think——?" she began in amazement.

"Come, Neeld, we're waiting for you," cried Iver form the wagonette, while Bob in irrepressible spirits burst into song as he gathered up the reins. He had deposed the coachman and had Janie with him on the box.

They drove off, waving their hands and shouting good-night. Mina ran a little way after them and saw Neeld turning his head this way and that, as though he thought there might be something to be seen. When she returned she found Gainsborough saying good-night to his daughter; at the same moment the lights in the Long Gallery were put out. Cecily slipped her arm through hers and they walked out again into the garden. After three or four minutes the wagonette, having made the circuit necessary to reach the carriage bridge, drove by on the road across the river, with more waving of hands and shouts of good-night. An absolute stillness came as the noise of its wheels died away.

"I've got through that all right," said Cecily with a laugh, drawing her friend with her toward the bridge. "I suppose I shall be quite accustomed to it soon."

They went on to the bridge and halted in the middle of it, by a common impulse as it seemed.

"The sound of a river always says to me that it all doesn't matter very much," Cecily went on, leaning on the parapet, "I believe that's been expressed more poetically!"

"It's great nonsense, however it's expressed," observed Mina scornfully.

"I sometimes feel as if it were true." Probably Cecily thought that nobody—no girl—no girl in love—had ever had the feeling before. A delusive appearance of novelty is one of the most dangerous weapons of Cupid. But Mina was an experienced woman—had been married too!

"Don't talk stuff, my dear," she cried crossly. "And why are we standing on this horrid little bridge?"

She turned around; Cecily still gazed in melancholy abstraction into the stream. Cecily, then, faced down the valley, Mina looked up it; and at the moment the moon showed a quarter of her face and illuminated a streak of the Fillingford road.

The man was there. He was there again. The moonlight fell on his face. He smiled at Mina, pointed a hand toward Blentmouth, and smiled again. He seemed to mock the ignorance of the vanished wagonette. Mina made no sign. He laid his finger on his lips, and nodded slightly towards Cecily. The clouds covered the moon again, and there was no more on the Fillingford road; even this vanished a moment after. And still Cecily gazed down into the Blent.

Presently she turned round. "I suppose we must go in," she said grudgingly. "It's getting rather chilly." They were, both in low-cut frocks, and had come out without any wraps. With the intuition of a born schemer Mina seized on the chance.

"Oh, it's so lovely!" she cried, with an apparently overwhelming enthusiasm for nature. "Too perfectly lovely! I'll run in and get some cloaks. Wait here till I come back, Cecily."

"Well, don't be long," said Cecily, crossing her bare arms with a little shiver.

Off the Imp ran, and vanished into the house. But she made no search for wraps. After a moment's hesitation in the hall, the deceitful creature ran into the library. All was dark there; a window was open and showed the bridge, with Cecily's figure on it making a white blur in the darkness. Mina crouched on the window-sill and waited. The absolute unpardonableness of her conduct occurred to her; with a smile she dismissed the consideration. He—and she—who desires the end must needs put up with the means; it is all the easier when the means happen to be uncommonly thrilling.

Harry was humbled! That was the conclusion which shot through her mind. What else could his coming mean? If it meant less than that, it was mere cruelty. If it meant that—A keen pang of disappointment shot through her. It was the only way to what she desired, but it was not the way which she would have preferred him to tread. Yet because it was the only way, she wished it—with the reservation that it would have been much better if it could have happened in some other fashion. But anyhow the position, not to say her position, had every element of excitement. "Poor old Mr. Neeld!" she mummured once. It was hard on him to miss this. At the moment Neeld was smiling over the ignorance in which he had been bound to keep her. It is never safe to suppose, however pleasant it may be to believe, that nobody is pitying us; either of his knowledge or of his ignorance someone is always at it.

She started violently and turned round. The butler was there, candle in hand.

"Is her Ladyship still out, ma'am?" he asked, advancing. "I was going to lock up." He was hardly surprised to find her—they knew she was odd—and would not have shown it, if she had been.

"Oh, go to bed," she cried in a low voice. "We'll lock up. We don't want anything, anything at all."

"Very good. Good-night, ma'am."

What an escape! Suppose Cecily had seen her at the window!

But Cecily was not looking at the window. She moved to the far end of the bridge and stood gazing up toward Merrion, where one light twinkled in an upper room. Mina saw her stretch out her arms for a moment toward the sky. What had happened? It was impossible that he had gone away! Mina craned her head out of window, looking and listening. Happen what might, be the end of it what it might, this situation was deliciously strong of the Tristrams. They were redeeming their characters; they had not settled down into the ordinary or been gulfed in the slough of the commonplace. Unexpected appearances and midnight interviews or sentimental moments were still to be hoped for from them. There was not yet an end of all.

He came! Mina saw his figure on the road, at first dimly, then with a sudden distinctness as a gleam of moonlight shone out. He stood a little way up the road to Cecily's right. She did not see him yet, for she looked up to Merrion. He took a step forward, his step sounding loud on the road. There was a sudden turn of Cecily's head. A moment's silence followed. He came up to her, holding out his hand. She drew back, shrinking from it. Laying her hands on the gate of the bridge, she seemed to set it as a fence between them. Her voice reached Mina's ars, low, yet as distinct as though she had been by her side, and full of a terrified alarm and a bitter reproach.

"You here! Oh, you promised, you promised!"

With a bound Mina's conscience awoke. She heard what no ears save his had any right to hear. What if she were found? The conscience was not above asking that, but it was not below feeling that it suggested as her punishment. Blushing red there in the dark, she slipped from the window-seat and groped her way to a chair. Here she flung herself down with a sob of excitement and emotion. He had promised. And the promise was broken in his coming.

Now she heard their steps on the path outside; they were walking toward the house. Telling herself that it was impossible for her to move now, for fear she should encounter them, she sank lower in her arm-chair.

"Well, where shall we go?" she heard Cecily ask in cold, stiff tones.

"To the Long Gallery," said Harry.

The next moment old Mason the butler was in the room again, this time in great excitement.

"There's someone in the garden with her Ladyship, ma'am," he cried. "I think—I think it's my Lord!"

"Who?" asked Mina, sitting up, feigning to be calm and sleepy.

"Mr. Harry, I mean, ma'am."

"Oh! Well then, go and see."

The old man turned and went out into the hall.

"How are you, Mason?" she heard Harry say. "Her Ladyship and I have some business to talk about. May I have a sandwich afterward?"

There he was, spoiling the drama, in Mina's humble opinion! Who should think of sandwiches now?

"Do what Mr. Tristram says, Mason," said Cecily.

She heard them begin to mount the stairs. Jumping up, she ran softly to the door and out into the hall. Mason stood there with his candle, staring up after Cecily and Harry. He turned to Mina with a quizzled smile wrinkling his good-natured face.

"You'd think it a funny time for business, wouldn't you, ma'am?" he asked. He paused a moment, stroking his chin. "Unless you'd happened to be in service twenty years with her late Ladyship. Well, I'm gald to see him again anyhow."

"What shall we do?" whispered Mina. "Are you going to bed, Mason?"

"Not me, ma'am. Why, I don't know what mayn't happen before the morning!" He shook his head in humorous commentary on those he had served. "But there's no call for you to sit up, ma'am."

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, Mason," said the Imp indignantly. "It would be most—most improper if I didn't sit up. Why, it's nearly midnight!"

"They won't think of that up there," said he.

The sound of a door slammed came from upstairs. Mina's eyes met Mason's for a moment by an involuntary impulse, then hastily turned away. It is an excellent thing to be out of the reach of temptation. The door was shut!

"Give me a candle here in the library," said Mina with all her dignity. And there, in the library, she sat down to wonder and wait.

Mason went off after the sandwiches, smiling still. There was really nothing odd in it, when once you were accustomed to the family ways.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Before Translation.

Harry Tristram had come back to Blent in the mood which belonged to the place as of old—the mood that claimed as its right what had become his by love, knew no scruples if only he could gain and keep it, was ready to play a bold game and take a great chance. He did not argue about what he was going to do. He did not justify it, and perhaps could not. Yet to him what he purposed was so clearly the best thing that Cecily must be forced into it. She could not be forced by force; if he told her the truth, he would meet at the outset a resistance which he could not quell. He might encounter that after all, later on, in spite of a present success. That was the great risk he was determined to run. At the worst there would be something gained; if she were and would be nothing else, she should and must at least be mistress of Blent. His imagination had set her in that place; his pride, no less than his love, demanded it for her. He had gone away once that she might have it. If need be, again he would go away. That stood for decision later.

She walked slowly to the end of the Long Gallery and sat down in the great arm-chair; it held its old position in spite of the changes which Harry noted with quick eyes and a suppressed smile as he followed her and set his candle on a table near. He lit two more from it and then turned to her. She was pale and defiant.

"Well," she said, "why are you here?"

She asked and he gave no excuse for the untimely hour of his visit and no explanation of it. It seemed a small, perhaps indeed a natural, thing to both of them.

"I'm here because I couldn't keep away," he answered gravely, standing before her.

"You promised to keep away. Can't you keep promises?"

"No, not such promises as that."

"And so you make my life miserable! You see this room, you see how I've changed it? I've been changing everything I could. Why? To forget you, to blot you out, to be rid of you. I've been bringing myself to take my place. To-night I seemed at last to be winning my way to it. Now you come. You gave me all this; why do you make it impossible to me?" A bright color came on her cheeks now as she grew vehement in her reproaches, and her voice was intense, though low.

A luxury of joy swept over him as he listened. Every taunt witnessed to his power, every approach to her love. He played a trick indeed and a part, but there was no trick and no acting in so far as he was her lover. If that truth could not redeem his deception, it stifled all sense of guilt.

"And you were forgetting? You were getting rid of me?" he asked, smiling and fixing his eyes on her.

"Perhaps. And now——!" She made a gesture of despair. "Tell me—why have you come?" Her tone changed to entreaty.

"I've come because I must be where you are, because I was mad to send you away before, mad not to come to you before, to think I could live without you, not to see that we must be together; because you're everythig to me." He had come nearer to her now and stood by her. "Ever since I went away I have seen you in this room, in that chair. I think it was your ghost only that came to town." He laughed a moment. "I wouldn't have the ghost. I didn't know why. Now I know. I read you—as you had been on the night I went away. So I've come back to you. We're ourselves here, Cecily. We Tristrams are ourselves at Blent."

She had listened silently, her eyes on his. She seemed bewildered by the sudden rush of his passion and the enchantured eagerness of his words that made her own vehemence sound to her poor and thin. Pride had its share in her protest. Love was the sole spring of his intensity. Yet she was puzzled by the victorious light in his eyes. What he said, what he came to do, was such a surrender as she had never hoped from him; and he was triumphant in surrendering!

The thought flashed through her mind, troubling her and for the time hindering her joy in his confession. She did not trust him yet.

"I've had an offer made to me," he resumed, regaining his composure. "A sort of political post. If I accept it I shall have to leave England for a considerable time, almost immediately. That brought the thing to a point." Again he laughed. "It's important to you too; because if you say no to me to-night you'll be rid of me for ever so long. Your life won't be made impossible. I shouldn't come to Blent again."

"A post that would take you away?" she murmured.

"Yes. You'd be left here in peace. I've not come to blackmail you into loving me, Cecily. Yes, you shall be left in peace to move the furniture about." Glancing toward the table, he saw Mr. Gainsborough's birthday gift. He took it up, looked at it for a moment, and then replaced it. His manner was involuntarily expressive. Even if she brought that sort of thing to Blent——! He turned back at the sound of a little laugh from Cecily and found her eyes sparkling.

"Father's birthday present, Harry" said she.

Delighted with her mirth, he came to her, holding out his hands. She shook her head and leant back, looking at him.

"Sit as my mother did. You know. Yes, like that!" he cried.

She had obeyed him with a smile. Not to be denied now, he seized the hand that lay in her lap.

"A birthday! Yes, of course, you're twenty-one! Really mistress of it all now! And you don't know what to do with it, except spoil the arrangement of the furniture?"

She laughed low and luxuriously. "What am I to do with it?" she asked.

"Well, won't you give it all to me?" As he spoke he laughed and kissed her hand. "I've come to ask you for it. Here I am. I've come fortune-hunting to-night."

"It's all mine now, you say? Harry, take it without me."

"If I did, I'd burn it to the ground that it mightn't remind me of you."

"Yes, yes! That's what I've wanted to do!" she exclaimed, drawing her hand out of his and raising her arms a moment in the air. Addie Tristram's pose was gone, but Harry did not miss it now.

"Take it without you indeed! It's all for you and because of you."

"Really, really?" She grew grave. "Harry, dear, for pity's sake tell me if you love me!"

"Haven't I told you?" he cried gayly. "Where are the poets? Oh, for some good quotations! I'm infernally unpoetical, I know. Is this it—that you're always before my eyes, always in my head, that you're terribly in the way, that when I've got anything worth thinking I think it to you, anything worth doing I do it for you, anything good to say I say it to you? Is this it, that I curse myself and curse you? Is this it, that I know myself only as your lover and that if I'm not that, then I seem nothing at all? I've never been in love before, but all that sounds rather like it."

"And you'll take Blent from me?"

"Yes, as the climax of all, I'll take Blent from you."

To her it seemed the climax, the thing she found hardest to believe, the best evidence for the truth of those extravagant words which sounded so sweet in her ears. Harry saw this, but he held on his way. Nay, now he himself forgot his trick, and could still have gone on had there been none, had he in truth been accepting Blent from her hands. Even at the price of pride he would have had her now.

She rose suddenly, and began to walk to and fro across the end of the room, while he stood by the table watching her.

"Well, isn't it time you said something to me?" he suggested with a smile.

"Give me time, Harry, give me time. The world's all changed to-night. You—yes, you came suddenly out of the darkness of the night"—she waved her hand toward the window—"and changed the world for me. How am I to believe it? And if I can believe it, what can I say? Let me alone for a minute, Harry dear."

He was well content to wait and watch. All time seemed before him, and how better could he fill it? He seemed himself to suffer in this hour a joyful transformation; to know better why men lived and loved to live, to reach out to the full length and the full function of his being. The world changed for him as he changed it for her.

Twice and thrice she had paced the gallery before she came and stood opposite to him. She put her hands up to her throat, saying, "I'm stifled—stifled with happiness, Harry."

For answer he sprang forward and caught her in his arms. In the movement he brushed roughly against the table; there was a little crash, and poor Mr. Gainsborough's birthday gift lay smashed to bits on the floor. For the second time their love bore hard on Mr. Gainsborough's crockery. Startled they turned to look, and then they both broke into merry laughter. The trumpery thing had seemed a sign for them, and now the sign was broken. Their first kiss was mirthful over its destruction.

With a sigh of joy she disengaged herself from him.

"That's settled then," said Harry. He paused a moment. "You had Janie and Bob Broadley here to-night? I saw them as I lay hidden by the road. Does that kind of engagement attract you, Cecily?"

"Ours won't be like that," she said triumphantly.

"Don't let's have one at all," he suggested, coming near to her again. "Let's have no engagement. Just a wedding."

"What?" she cried.

"It must be a beastly time," he went on, "and all the talk there's been about us will make it more beastly still. Fancy Miss S. and all the rest of them! And—do you particularly want to wait? What I want is to be settled down, here with you."

Her eyes sparkled as she listened; she was in the mood, she was of the stuff, for any adventure.

"I should like to run off with you now," said he. "I don't want to leave you at all, you see."

"Run off now?" She gave a joyful little laugh. "That's just what I should like!"

"Then we'll do it," he declared. "Well, to-morrow morning, anyhow."

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

"Do you say no to it?"

She drew herself up with pride. "I say no to nothing that you ask of me." Their hands met again and she declared her love and trust. "You've really come to me?" he heard her murmur. "Back to Blent and back to me."

"Yes," he answered, smiling. She had brought into his mind again the truth she did not know. He had no time to think of it, for she offered him her lips again. The moment when he might have told her thus went by. It was but an impulse; for he still loved what he was doing, and took delight in the risks of it. And he could not bear so to impair her joy. Soon she must know, but she should not yet be robbed of her joy that it was she who could bring him back to Blent. For him in his knowledge, for her in her ignorance, there was an added richness of pleasure that he would not throw away, even although now he believed that were the truth known she would come to him still. Must not that be, since now he, even he, would come to her, though the truth had been otherwise?

"There's a train from Fillingford at eight in the morning. I'm going back there to-night. I've got a fly waiting by the Pool—if the man hasn't gone to sleep and the horse run away. Will you meet me there? We'll go up to town and be married as soon as we can—the day after to-morrow, I suppose."

"And then——?"

"Oh, then just come back here. We can go nowhere but here, Cecily."

"Just come back and——?"

"And let them find it out, and talk, and talk, and talk!" he laughed.

"It would be delightful!" she cried.

"Nobody to know till it's done!"

"Yes, yes, I like it like that. Not father even, though?"

"You'll be gone before he's up. Leave a line for him."

"But I—I can't go alone with you."

"Why not?" asked Harry, seeming a trifle vexed.

"I'll tell you!" she cried. "Let's take Mina with us, Harry!"

He laughed; the Imp was the one person whose presence he was ready to endure. Indeed there would perhaps be a piquancy in that.

"All right. An elopement made respectable by Mina!" He had a touch of scorn even for mitigated respectability.

"Shall we call her and tell her now?"

"Well, are you tired of this interview?"

"I don't know whether I want it to go on, or whether I must go and tell somebody about it."

"I shouldn't hesitate," smiled Harry.

"You? No. But I—Oh, Harry dear, I want to whisper my triumph."

"But we must be calm and business-like about it now."

"Yes!" She entered eagerly into the fun. "That'll puzzle Mina even more."

"We're not doing anything unusual," he insisted with affected gravity.

"No—not for our family at least."

"It's just the obvious thing to do."

"Oh, it's just the delicious thing too!" She almost danced in gayety. "Let me call Mina. Do!"

"Not for a moment, as you love me! Give me a moment more."

"Oh, Harry, there'll be no end to that!"

"I don't know why there should be."

"We should miss the train at Fillingford!"

"Ah, if it means that!"

"Or I shall come sleepy and ugly to it; and you'd leave me on the platform and go away!"

"Shout for Mina—now—without any word!"

"Oh, just one more," she pleaded, laughing.

"I can't promise to be moderate."

"Come, we'll go and find her. Give me your hand." She caught his hand in hers, and snatched the candle from the table. She held it high above her head, looking round the room and back to his eyes again. "My home now because my love is here," she said. "Mine and yours, and yours and mine—and both the same thing, Harry now."

He listened smiling. Yes, it would be the same thing now.

There they stood together for a moment, and together they sighed as they turned away. To them the room was sacred now, as it had always been beautiful, in it their love seemed to lie unshrined.

They went downstairs together full of merriment, the surface expression of their joy. "Look grave," he whispered, setting his face in a comical exaggeration of seriousness. Cecily tried to obey and tumbled into a gurgle of delight.

"I will directly," she gasped as they came to the hall. Mason stood there waiting.

"I've put the sandwiches here, and the old brown, my lord."

Harry alone noticed the slip in his address—and Harry took no notice of it.

"I shall be glad to meet the old brown again," he said, smiling. Mason gave a pair of benevolent glances and withdrew to his quarters.

Mina strolled out of the library with an accidental air. Harry had sat down to his sandwiches and old brown. Cecily ran across to Mina and kissed her.

"We're going to be married!" she whispered. She had told it all in a sentence; yet she added: "Oh, I've such a heap of things to tell you, Mina!" Was not all that scene in the Long Gallery to be reproduced—doubtless only a faint adumbration of its real glory, yet with a sense of recovering it and living it again?

"No?" cried Mina. "Oh, how spendid! Soon?"

Harry threw a quick glance at Cecily. She responded by assuming a demure calmness of demeanor.

"Not as soon as we could wish," said Harry, munching and sipping. "In fact, not before the day after to-morrow, I'm afraid, Madame Zabriska."

"The day after——?"

"What I have always hated is Government interference. Why can't I be married when I like? Why have I to get a license and all that nonsense? Why must I wait till the day after to-morrow?" He grew indignant.

"It's past twelve now; it is to-morrow," said Cecily.

"Quite so. As you suggest, Cecily, we could be married to-day but for these absurd restrictions. There's a train at eight from Fillingford——"

"You're going—both of you—by that?" Mina cried.

"I hope it suits you, because we want you to come with us, if you'll be so kind," said Harry.

"You see it would look just a little unusual if we went alone," added Cecily.

"And it's not going to look unusual anyhow? Are you mad? Or—or do you mean it?"

"Don't you think both may be true?" asked Harry. Cecily's gravity broke down. She kissed Mina again, laughing in an abandonment of exultation.

"Oh, you're both mad!"

"Not at all. You're judging us by the standard of your other engaged couple to-night."

"Did Mr. Neeld know anything about your coming?" Mina demanded, with a sudden recollection.

"Nothing at all. Did he say anything to you?" For a moment the glass of old brown halted on its way to his lips, and he glanced at Mina sharply.

"No. But when I asked him if he had seen you he looked—well, just rather funny."

The old brown resumed its progress. Harry was content.

"There's no better meal than fresh sandwiches and old brown," he observed. "You'll come with us, won't you, and keep Cecily company at the little house till we fix it up?"

Mina looked from one to the other in new amazement, with all her old excited pleasure in the Tristram ways. They did a thing—and they did not spoil it by explanations.

"And Mr. Gainsborough?" she asked.

"We're going to leave a note for father," smiled Cecily.

"You're always doing that," objected Mina.

"It seems rather an early train for Mr. Gainsborough," Harry suggested laying down his napkin.

"Oh, why don't you tell me something about it?" cried Mina despairingly. "But it's true? The great thing's true anyway, isn't it?"

"Well, what do you think I came down from town for?" inquired Harry.

"And why have we been so long in the gallery, Mina?"

"You've given in then?" exclaimed the Imp, pointing a finger of triumph at Harry.

"Mina, how can you say a thing like that?"

"It looks as if it were true enough," admitted Harry. "Really I must go," he added. "I can't keep that fly all night. I shall see you in the morning, Madame Zabriska. Eight o'clock at Fillingford!"

"I'm really to go with you?" she gasped.

"Yes, yes, I thought all that was settled," said he, rather impatiently. "Bring a pretty frock. I want my wedding to be done handsomely—in a style that suits the wedding of——" He looked at Cecily—"of Lady Tristram of Blent."

"Cecily, it's not all a joke?"

(To Be Continued).

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