it all along. Oh, I don't say so; some did."

Harry began to laugh. "It doesn't matter, does it, if I did the straight thing in the end?"

"I'm sure as I shouldn't blame you if you had been a bit tempted. I know what that is! Well, sir, I'll say good-evening."

"Good-evening, Miss, and thank you very much," said Harry, rising as she rose. His manner had its old touch of lordliness. His friends criticized that sometimes; this young lady evidently approved.

"You've no cause to thank me," said she, with an admiring look.

"Yes, I have. As it happened, I believe I wanted somebody to remind me that I had done the straight thing in the end, and I'm much obliged to you for doing it."

"Well, I shall have something to tell the girls!" she said again in wondering tones, as she nodded to him and turned slowly away.

Harry was comforted. The stress of his pain was past. He sat on over his simple meal in a leisurely comfortable fashion. He was happy in the fact that his enemy had at least nothing with which she could reproach him, that he had no reason for not holding his head erect before her. And the girl's philosophy had been good. He had a job, and that was the great thing in this world. He felt confident that the struggle was won now, and that it would never have to be fought again in so severe a fashion. His self-respect was intact; if he had been beaten, he would never have forgiven himself.

He regained his rooms. A letter lay waiting for him on the table. He opened it and found that it was from Mina Zabriska.

"We are back here," she wrote. "I am staying at Blent till my uncle comes down. I must write and say good-by to you. I dare say we shall never meet again, or merely by chance: I am very unhappy about it all, but with two people like Cecily and you nothing else could have happened. I see that now, and I'm not going to try to interfere any more. I shan't ask you to forgive me for interfering, because you've made the result quite enough punishment for anything I did wrong. And now Cecily goes about looking just like you—hard and proud and grim; and she's begun to move things about and alter arrangements at Blent. That's what brings it home to me most of all. ('And to me,' interposed Harry as he read.) If I was the sort of woman you think me, I should go on writing to you. But I shan't write again. I am going to stay at Merrion through the winter, and since you won't come here, this is the last of me for a long time anyhow. Oh, you Tristrams! Good-by.

"Mina Zabriska."

"Poor little Imp!" said Harry. "She's a very good sort; and she seems about right. It's the end of everything." He paused and looked round. "Except of these rooms—and my work—and, well, life at large, you know!" He laughed in the sudden realization of how much was left after there was an end of all—life to be lived, work to be done, enjoyments to be won. He could project his mind forward to a future appreciation of what he could not at the moment relish; and he saw that life would be full and rich with him, even although there were an end of all. "But I don't believe," he said to himself, slowly smiling, "that I should ever have come to understand that or to—to fulfill it unless I had—what did the girl say?—done the straight thing in the end, and come out of Blent. Well, old Blent, good-by!" He crumpled up Mina's letter, and flung it into the grate.

The maid-servant opened the door. "Two gentlemen to see you, sir," she said.

"Oh, say I'm busy——" he began.

"We must see you, please," insisted Mr. Jenkinson Neeld, with unusual firmness. He turned to the man with him, saying: "Here is Mr. Tristram, Colonel Edge."

CHAPTER XXV.

There was nothing very remarkable about Colonel Wilmot Edge. He was a slightly built, trim man, but his trimness was not distinctively military. He might have been anything, save that just now the tan on his face witnessed to an out-of-door life. His manner was cold, his measure of speech leisurely and methodical. At first sight Harry saw nothing in him to modify the belief in which he had grown up—that the Edges were an unattractive race, unable to appreciate Tristrams, much less worthy to mate with them. He gave the Colonel a chair rather graudgingly, and turned to old Mr. Neeld for an explanation of the visit.

Neeld had fussed himself into a seat already, and had drawn some sheets of paper covered with type-writing from his pocket. He spread them out, smoothed them out, cleared his throat, and answered Harry's look by a glance at Edge. Mr. Neeld was in a fidget, a fidget of importance and expectancy.

"You will know," said Edge gravely, "that no ordinary matter has led me to call on you, Mr. Tristram. However little we may be responsible for the past, we have to recognize it. I should not, under ordinary circumstances, have sought your acquaintance. You must consider this interview purely as one of a business kind. I have just returned to England. For two months I have been out of the way of receiving letters or newspapers. I went to the Imperium Club to-night—I arrived only this morning—and dined in Neeld's company. As it chanced, we spoke of you, and I learnt what has happened since I left England. I have lost no time in calling on you."

Neeld was listening and fidgeting with his sheets of paper. The Colonel's preamble excited little interest in Harry. The reaction of his struggle was on him; he was courteously but not keenly attentive.

"It is not agreeable to speak of my brother to you, Mr. Tristram. Doubtless we should differ if we discussed his character and conduct. It is not necessary."

"Is Sir Randolph Edge concerned in what you have to say to me?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I am sorry to say he is. Another person is concerned also."

"One moment. You are, of course, aware that I no longer represent my family? Legally, I'm not even a member of it. It is possible that you ought to address yourself to Lady Tristram—my cousin—or to her lawyers."

"I have to speak to you. Is the name of the Comtesse d'Albreville known to you, Mr. Tristram?"

"Yes, I've heard my mother speak of meeting her in Paris."

"That would be when Lady Tristram was residing with my brother?"

"My mother was never in Paris after that, I believe. It would be at that time, Colonel Edge."

"You are aware that later—after he parted from Lady Tristram—my brother went to Russia, where he had business interests?"

"I have very good reasons to know that." Harry smiled at Mr. Neeld, who had apparently got all he could out of his papers, and was sitting quiet and upright in an eager attention.

"What I am about to say is known, I believe, to myself alone—and to Neeld here, to whom I told it to-night. While my brother was in Russia, he was joined by the Comtesse. She paid him a visit—secretly, I need hardly add. She passed under the name of Madame Valfier, and she resided in the house adjoining Randolph's. Lady Tristram was not, of course, aware of the relations between her and my brother. I will come now to the time of my brother's death. When he fell ill, he had just completed the sale of one of his Russian properties. Lady Tristram did not, I dare say, speak of the Comtesse's character to you?"

"I never remember hearing my mother speak of anybody's character," said Harry with a smile.

"She was a brilliant woman—she died, by the way, two or three years ago—but extravagant and fond of money. She prevailed upon my brother to promise her the price of this property as a gift. The sum was considerable—about seven thousand pounds."

Harry nodded. Here seemed to be some possible light on the reasons for the interview.

"This money was to be paid—in gold—on a certain day. I speak now from information imparted to me subsequently by the Comtesse herself. It was given under a promise of secrecy which I have kept hitherto, but now find myself compelled in honesty to break."

"There can be no question of what is your duty, Edge," Mr. Neeld put in.

"I think none. My brother during his illness discussed the matter with the Comtesse. The money was payable in Petersburg. He could not hope to be well enough to go there. At her suggestion he signed a paper authorizing payment to be made to her or to an agent appointed by her. The money being destined for her ultimately, this naturally seemed the best arrangement. She could go and receive the money, or send for it—as a fact she went in person when the time came—and all would be settled."

"Quite so. And the transaction would not appear on the face of Sir Randolph's acounts or bank-book," Harry suggested.

"It's possible that weight was given to that consideration too, but it is not very material. The Camtesse, then was in possession of this authority. My brother's illness took a turn for the worse. To be brief, he died before the day came on which the money was to be paid."

"And she presented the authority all the same?" asked Harry. "And got the money, did she?"

"That is precisely the course she adopted," assented Colonel Edge.

Harry took a walk up and down the room and returned to the hearthrug.

"I'm very sensible of your kindness in coming here to-day," he said, "and your conduct is that of a man of honor. But at this point I'll stop you, please. I'm aware that prima facie the law would pronounce me to be Sir Randolph's son. That has always been disclaimed on our side and could easily be disproved on yours. I have nothing to do with Sir Randolph Edge or his property."

The Colonel listened unmoved.

"In any case you would have nothing to do with my brother's property," he remarked. "He left a will by which I was constituted sole legatee."

"Then if she robbed anybody she robbed you?"

"Certainly; and three years later she came and told me so."

"Then how in the world does it concern me?" cried Harry impatiently.

"You put your finger on the spot, Mr. Tristram, but you took it off again. You said she represented the authority all the same."

"Yes. The authority would be revoked by his death. At least I suppose there's no question of that? Did she get at them before they heard of the death?"

"This money was payable on the 22nd June—the 10th as it's reckoned in Russia—but we needn't trouble about that. As you and Neeld are both aware, on the 18th my brother fell into a collapse which was mistaken for death."

"Yes, the 18th," murmured Neeld, referring to the paper before him, and reading Josiah Cholderton's account of what Madame de Kries had told him at Heidelberg.

"From that attack he rallied temporarily, but not until his death had been reported."

"I am not the man to forget that circumstance," said Harry.

"The report of his death was, of course, contradicted immediately. The doctor attending him saw to that."

"Naturally; and I suppose the Comtesse would see to it too."

"And the only importance that the occurrence of the 18th has for us at present is that, according to the Comtesse's story, it suggested to to the doctor the course which she, on his prompting, as she declared, and certainly with his connivance, afterward adopted. My brother, having rallied from his first collapse, kept up the fight a little while longer. It was, however, plain to the doctor that he could live but a short time. The Comtese knew this. My brother was not in a condition to transact business and was incapable of securing to her any benefit by testamentary disposition even if he had wished to do so. Her only chance was the money for the property. This she saw her way to securing with the doctor's help, even although my brother should die before it fell due and the authority she held should thereby lose its legal validity."

"You mean that they determined to carry out a fraud if necessary?"

"Precisely. I must remind you that my brother knew nothing of this. He was altogether past understanding anything about it. I may be very brief now, but I am still anxious that you should fully understand. All that I'm saying to you is beyond question and can be proved at any time by taking evidence on the spot; it is easily available."

Harry had sat down by now and was listening intently.

"On the morning of the 22nd," Edge pursued in his level methodical way, "the Comtesse went to the station escorted by Dr. Migratz; that was his name—rather that is his name; he is still alive. On the way they met the British Vice-Consul, and in reply to inquiries from him said that my brother had had another attack but had rallied again. Dr. Migratz expressed the opinion that he would live another two days, while Madame Valfier (the Vice-Consul knew her by that name) was sanguine enough to talk of the possibility of a recovery. She impressed him very much by her courage and hopefulness; she was, I may remark, a handsome and attractive woman. Leaving the Vice-Consul, they reached the station and there parted. Migratz returned immediately to my brother's house and remained there, the case being declared to be so critical as to require unremitting attention. Madame Valfier—the Comtesse—took the train to Petersburg, reached it that evening, presented the authority early next morning, and was back about midnight—that being the 23rd. The next day my brother's death was announced, certified by Migratz, and duly registered as the law of the place required." He drew a paper from his pocket. "This is a copy of the entry, showing death on the 24th."

"That document is very familiar to me, Colonel Edge. It gives both styles, doesn't it?"

"Yes, both styles, but—Well, you see for yourself. My story is done. With Migratz's connivance—a woman who acted as nurse was squared too, and her evidence is available—the actual date of death was concealed, and the Comtesse d'Albreville had time to present her authority and receive the money. After paying her accomplices their price, she left Russia with the bulk of it immediately."

Harry glanced at Neeld; the old man's face was full of excitement and his hand trembled as it lay on the leaves of Josiah Cholderton's Journal.

"My mother was married to my father on the 23rd," said Harry slowly.

"My brother died on the 22nd," said Wilmot Edge. "He was dead before the Comtesse started for Petersburg."

Harry made no comment. He sat still and thoughtful.

"Of course I was put on the track of the affair," Edge pursued, "by the disappearance of the money. I had little difficulty in guessing that there had been something queer, but what it was did not cross my mind for a long while. Even after I had a clue, I found Migratz a tough customer, and for a long time I totally failed to identify Madame Valfier. When, thanks to a series of chances, I did so, it was a shock to me. She was the wife of a man of high position and high reputation. She had contrived—she was a remarkable woman—to carry out this expedition of hers without rousing any auspicion; she had returned to her husband and children. Finding herself in danger, she took the bold course of throwing herself on my mercy, and sent for me to Paris. It was not my desire to rake up the story, to injure my brother's memory, or to break up the woman's home. I pocketed the loss as far as I was concerned. As for you, I didn't know you were concerned. I had never gone into the details; I accepted the view which your own conduct, and Lady Tristram's suggested. I promised silence, guarding myself by a provisio that I must speak if the interests of third persons were ever affected. Your interests are affected now, and I have spoken, Mr. Tristram—or Lord Tristram, as I undoubtedly ought to say."

Harry turned to Mr. Neeld with a smile and pointed at the leaves of the Journal.

"There was something Cholderton didn't know after all," he said. "A third date—neither the 18th nor the 24th! Twenty-four hours! Well, I suppose it's enough!"

"It's enough to make all the difference to you," said Neeld. "It makes the action you took in giving up your position unnecessary and wrong. It restores the state of things which existed——"

"Before you and Mina came to Blent—and brought Mr. Cholderton?" He sat smiling a moment. "Forgive me; I'm very inhospitable," he said, and offered them cigarettes and whiskey.

Neeld refused; the Colonel took both.

"You may imagine with what feelings I heard your story," Edge resumed, "and found that the Comtesse's fraud was really the entire basis of your action. If I had been in England the thing would never have happened."

"It has happened," said Harry, "and—and I don't quite know where we are." For the world was all altered again, just when the struggle of the evening had seemed to settle it. The memory of the girl in the restaurant flashed across his mind. What would she—what would she say to this?

Colonel Edge was evidently rather a talkative man. He began again, rather as though he were delivering a little set speech.

"It's perhaps hardly to be expected," he said, "that any degree of intimacy should exist between your family and mine, Lord Tristram, but I venture to hope that the part which it has been my privilege to play to-day may do something to obliterate the memories of the past. We don't perhaps know all the rights of it. I am loyal to my brother, but I knew the late Lady Tristram, and I can appreciate all that her friends valued and prized in her."

"Very good, Edge, very good," murmured emotional old Mr. Neeld. "Very proper, most proper."

"And I hope that old quarrels need not be eternal?"

"I'm very much in your debt, and I'm sincerely grateful, Colonel Edge. As for the past—There are graves; let it lie in them."

"Thank you, Lord Tristram, thank you," and the Colonel gave Harry his hand.

"Excellent, excellent!" muttered Mr. Neeld as he folded up the leaves of Josiah Cholderton's diary.

"You can call on me for proofs whenever you wish to proceed. After what has occurred, I presume they will be necessary."

"Yes, yes—for his seat," assented Neeld.

"And to satisfy public opinion," added Edge.

There was a pause. Neeld broke it by saying timidly:

"And—er—there is, of course, the lady. The lady who now holds the title and estates."

"Of course!" agreed Edge, with a nod that apologized for forgetfulness.

Of course there was! Harry smiled. He had been wondering how long they would take to think of the lady who now held the title and estates. Well, they had come to her at last—after providing for the requirements of the House of Lords and the demands of public opinion—after satisfying the girl in the restaurant, in fact. Yes, of course, there was the lady too.

Though he smiled, he was vexed and suffering a vague disapointment. It is to be wished that things would happen in a manner harmonious with their true nature—the tragic tragically, the comic so that laughter roars out, the melodramatic with the proper limelight effects. To do the Tristram's justice, this was generally achieved where they were concerned; Harry could have relied on his mother and on Cecily; he could rely on himself if he were given a suitable environment, one that appealed to him and afforded responsive feelings. The family was not in the habit of wasting its opportunits for emotion. But who could be emotional now—in face of these two elderly gentlemen? Neeld's example made such a thing ridiculous. Colonel Edge would obviously consider it unsoldier-like. The chance had been frittered away; life was at its old game of neglecting its own possibilities. There was nothing but to acquiesce; fine melodrama had been degraded into a business interview with two elderly and conscientious gentlemen. The scene in the Long Gallery had at least been different from this! Harry bowed his head; he must be thankful for small blessings; it was something that they had remembered the lady at last.

At a glance from Edge, Neeld rose to go.

"Pray wait—wait a minute or two," begged Harry. "I want to think for a minute."

Neeld sat down again. It is very likely they were as surprised at him as he was childlessly vexed with them. For he exhibited perfect calm. Yet perhaps Colonel Edge, who had given so colorless on account of the Comtesse's wild appeal to him, was well suited.

"I'm going down to Iver's to-morrow," said old Neeld, tucking the extract from the Journal into his pocket.

"To Iver's?" After a moment's silence Harry fairly laughed. Edge was surprised, not understanding what a difference the Comtesse's manoeuvre had made there too. He could not be expected to know all the difference it had made to Harry's life, even to the man himself. Two irresponsible ladies—say Addie and—well, Madame Valfier—may indeed bake differences.

"Yes, to Fairholme," continued old Neeld. "We—we may see you there now?"

Edge looked up with an interested glance. It had occurred to him that he was turning somebody out as well as putting somebody in.

"You'll have, of course, to communicate what I have said to—to——?"

"Oh, we'll say Lady Tristram still," Harry interrupted.

Edge gave a little bow. "I shall be ready to meet her or her advisers at any time," he remarked. "She will, I hope, recognize that no other course was open to me. She must not think that there is any room for doubt."

Harry's brain was at work now; he saw himself going to Blent, going to tell Cecily.

"Possibly," Mr. Neeld suggested, "it would be better to intrust a third person with the task of giving her this news? One of her own sex perhaps?" He seemed to contemplate a possible fainting fit, and remembering his novels, the necessity of cutting staylaces, a task better left to women.

"You're thinking of Mina? Of Mina Zabriska?" asked Harry, laughing. There again, what a loss! Why had not Mina heard it at first hand? She would have known how to treat the thing.

"She's always taken a great interest in the matter, and—and I understand is very friendly with—with Miss Gainsborough," said Neeld.

"We shall have to make up our minds what to call ourselves soon," sighed Harry.

"There can be no doubt at all." Edge put in; "and if I may venture to suggest, I should say that the sooner the necessity is faced the better."

"Certainly, certainly," Harry assented absently. Even the girl in the restaurant must know about it soon; there must be another pow-wowing in all the papers soon. But what would Cecily say? "If ever the time comes——" He had laughed at that; it had sounded so unlikely, so unreal, so theatrical. "If ever the time comes, I shall remember." That was a strange thing to look back to now. But it was all strange—the affair of the beastly new viscounty, Blinkhampton and its buildings, the arbitration and the confidence of Mr. Disney. Madame Valfier— Comtesse d'Albreville—with a little help from Addie Tristram had brought all these things about. The result of Harry's review of them was English enough to satisfy Wilmot Edge himself.

"The whole thing makes me look rather an ass, I think," said he.

"No doubt you acted impulsively," Edge allowed. It was fully equivalent to an assent.

"Good heavens, I'd been brought up to it! It had always been the fact of my life." He made no pretences about the matter now. "It never occurred to me to think of any mistake. That certificate"—it lay on the table still—"was the sword of Damocles." He laughed as he spoke the hackneyed old phrase. "And Damocles knew the sword was there, or there'd have been no point in it."

The two rather lost track of his mood. They looked at one another again.

"You've a lot to think of. We'll leave you," said the Colonel.

"But—but what am I to do?" Old Neeld's voice was almost a bleat in his despair. "Am I to tell people at Blentmouth?"

"The communication should come from an authoritative quarter," Edge advised.

"It's bound to be a blow to her," said Neeld. "Suddenly lifted up, suddenly thrown down! Poor girl!"

"Justice is the first thing," declared Wilmot Edge. Now he might have been on a court-martial.

They knew nothing whatever of the truth of the true position.

"We may rely on—on Lord Tristram—to treat the matter with every delicacy, Edge."

"I'm sure of it, Neeld, I'm sure of it."

"He has been through what is practically the same experience himself."

"A very remarkable case, very remarkable. The state of the law which makes such a thing possible——"

"Ah, there I don't agree, Edge. There may be hardships on individuals, but in the interests of morality——"

"You must occasionally put up with damned absurdity," Harry interrupted rather roughly. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Neeld. I—I'm a bit worried over this."

They sat silent then, watching him for a few moments. He stood leaning his arm on the mantel-piece, his brows knit but a smile lingering on his lips. He was seeing the scene again, the scene in which he was to tell Cecily. He knew what the end of it would be. They were strangers now. The scene would leave them strangers still. Still Mina Zabriska would be left to cry, "You Tristrams!" Given that they were Tristrams, no other result was possible. They had been through what Mr. Neeld called practically the same experience already; in that very room it had happened.

Suddenly the two men saw a light born in Harry's eyes; his brow grew smooth, the smile on his lips wider. He gave a moment's more consideration to the new thing. Then he raised his head and spoke to Wilmot Edge.

"There are a good many complications in this matter, Colonel Edge. I've had my life upset once before, and I assure you it's rather troublesome work. It wants a little time and a little thinking. You get rather confused — always changing your train, you know. I have work on hand—plans and so forth. And, as you say, of course there's the lady too." He laughed as he ended by borrowing Neeld's phrase.

"I can understand all that, Lord Tristram."

"Do you mind saying Mr. Tristram? Saying Mr. Tristram to me and to everybody for the present? It won't be long; a week perhaps."

"You mean, keep the change in the position a secret?" Edge seemed rather startled.

"You've kept the secret for many years, Colonel. Shall we say a week more? And you too, Mr. Neeld? Nothing at all to the people at Blentmouth? Shall we keep Miss S. in the dark for a week more?" The thought of Miss Swinkerton carried obvious amusement with it.

"You mean to choose your opportunity with—with your cousin?" Neeld asked.

"Yes, exactly — to choose my opportunity. You see the difficult character of the situation? I ask your absolute silence for a week."

"Really I——" Old Neeld hesitated a little. "The concealments lead to such complications," he complained. He was thinking, no doubt, of the Iver engagement and the predicament in which it had landed him.

"I don't ask it on my own account. There's my cousin."

"Yes, yes, Neeld, there's the lady, too."

"Well, Edge, if you're satisfied, I can't stand out. For a week then—silence."

"Absolute!" said Harry. "Without a look or a word?"

"You have my promise," said Wilmot Edge.

"And mine. But—but I shall feel very awkward," sighed poor Mr. Neeld. He might have added that he did feel a sudden and poignant pang of disappointment. Lived there the man who would not have liked to carry that bit of news in his portmanteau when he went out of town? At least that man was not Mr. Jenkinson Neeld.

"I'll choose my time, and I won't keep you long," said Harry.

With that they left him. But they had a word together before Edge caught his 'bus in Piccadilly.

"Cool young chap!" said he. "Took it quietly enough."

"Yes, considering the enormous difference it makes," agreed Neeld. His use of that particular phrase was perhaps an unconscious reminiscence of the world in the Journal, the words that Addie used when she burst into Madame de Kries' room at Heidelberg.

Edge chuckled a little. "Not much put out about the girl either, eh?"

"Now you say so——" Neeld shook his head. "I hope he'll do it tactfully," he sighed.

Edge did not seem to consider that likely. He in his turn shook his head.

"I said no more than I thought about Addie Tristram," he remarked. "But the fact is, they're a rum lot, and there is no getting over it, Neeld."

"They—er—have their peculiarities, no doubt," admitted Mr. Neeld.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A Business Call.

"My dear, isn't there something odd about Mr. Neeld?" Mrs. Iver put the question, her anxious charity struggling with a natural inquisitiveness.

"About Neeld? I don't know. Is there?" He did not so much as look up from his paper. "He's coming with us to Blent to-night, I suppose?"

"Yes. And he seems quite excited about that. And he was positively rude to Miss Swinkerton at lunch when she told him that Lady Tristram meant to give a ball next winter. I expect his nerves are out of order."

Small wonder if they were, surely! Let us suppose Guy Fawkes's scheme not prematurely discovered, and one member of a full House privy to it and awaiting the result. That member's position would be very like Mr. Neeld's. Would he listen to the debate with attention? Could he answer questions with sedulous courtesy?

From the moment of his arrival Mr. Neeld had been plunged into the Tristram affair, and surrounded by people who were connected with it. But it must be admitted that he had it on his brain and saw it everywhere. For today it was not the leading topic of the neighborhood, and Miss S.'s observation had been only by the way. The engagement was the topic, and only Neeld (or perhaps Mina Zabriska too, at Blent), insisted on digging up a hypothetical past and repeating, in retrospective rumination, that Harry Tristram might have been the lucky man. As for such an idea—well, Miss S. happened to know that there had never been anything in it; Janie Iver herself had told her so, she said. The question between Janie and Miss S., which this assertion raises, may be passed by without discussion.

He had met Gainsborough essaying a furtive entry into Blentmouth and heading toward the curiosity shop — with a good excuse this time. It was Cecily's birthday, and the occasion, which was to be celebrated by a dinner-party, must be marked by a present also. Neeld went with the little gentleman, and they bought a bit of old Chelsea (which looked very young for its age). Coming out, Gainsborough sighted Mrs. Trumbler coming up High street and Miss S. coming down it. She doubled up a side street to the churchyard, Neeld pursuing him at a more leisurely pace.

"It's positively worthy of a place at Blent—in the Long Gallery," panted Gainsborough, hugging his brown-paper-covered prize. "You'll be interested to see the changes we're making, Mr. Neeld. Cecily has begun to take an enormous interest in the house, and I —I'm settling down."

"You don't regret London, eve?"

"I shall run up now and then. My duty is to my daughter. Of course her life is changed." He sighed as he added, "We're getting quite used to that."

"She has come to love the place, I dare say?"

"Yes, yes. She's in very good spirits and quite happy in her position now, I think." He glanced over his shoulder. Miss S. was in sight. "Good-by. So glad we shall see you to-night." He made his escape at a run. Neeld, having been interrogated at lunch already, was allowed to pass by with a lift of his hat.

Janie was very happy. She at least thought no more of that bygone episode. She asked no questions about Harry Tristram. He had droped out of her life. He seemed to have dropped out of the life of the countryside too. That was strange anyhow, when it was remembered how large a local figure the young man had cut when Neeld came first to Fairholme; it was stranger still in view of what must soon be. The announcement of the engagement seemed to assume to write Finis to Harry as a factor in Blentmouth society. In that point of view the moment chosen for it was full of an unconscious irony. Janie would not have gone back to him now, and Neeld did not suspect her of any feeling which could have made that possible. It was merely odd that she should be putting an appropriate finish to a thing which in the meantime had been suddenly, absolutely, and radically undone. Neeld was loyal to his word; but none may know the terrible temptation he suffered; a nod, a wink, a hint, an ambiguity—anything would have given him some relief.

Harry was mentioned only once—in connection with his letter to Iver about the arbitration. Iver was not inclined to let him go.

"He has great business ability. It's a pity to waste his time. He can make money, Neeld."

"Disney's a good friend to have," Neeld suggested.

"If he stays in, yes. But this thing won't be popular."

Neeld could maintain no interest in the conversation. It had to proceed alone along on a baseless presumption, to deal with a state of things which did not exist. What might be wise for Harry—Harry Nothing-at-all — might be unwise for Tristram of Blent, and conversely.

"I must leave it to him," Iver concluded. "But I shall tell him that I hope he won't go. He's got his way in the world to make first. He can try politics later on, if he likes."

"No doubt you're right," murmured old Neeld, both uneasy and uninterested. He was feeling something of what he had experienced once before; he knew the truth and he had to keep his friend in the dark. In those earlier days he had one confident, one accomplice, in Mina Zabriska. The heavy secret was all his own to carry now.

As a consequence of his preoccupation Janie Iver found him rather unsympathetic, and with her usual candor she told him so.

"You don't really appreciate Bob," she said. "Nobody quite knows him except me. I didn't use to, but now I know what a strong character he has."

Unwontedly cynical thoughts rose in old Mr. Neeld. Had he come down to Fairholm to listen to the platitudes of virtuous love? Indeed he had come for no such thing. All young men have strong characters while they are engaged.

"And it's such a comfort to have a man one can lean upon," Janie pursued, looking, however, admirably capable of standing without extraneous support.

There it was again! She'd be calling him her "master" next—as the heroine does in the third act, to unfailing applause. What was all this to ears that listened for a whisper of Harry Tristram?

"The most delightful thing is," Janie pursued, "that our marriage is to make no change at all in his way of life. We're going to live at Mingham just as he has lived all his life—a real country life on a farm!" There was no hint that other ideals of existence had ever possessed an alluring charm; the high life with Harry, the broad and cosmopolitan life with the Major — where were they? "I've insisted on it, the one thing I've had my own way in."

Bob was being transmogrified into a Man of Iron, if not of Blood. Vainly Mr. Neeld consulted his memories.

"And Mingham's so bound up with it all. I used to go there with Mina Zabriska." She smiled in retrospect; it would have been pardonable if Neeld had smiled too. "I haven't seen her for ever so long," Janie added, "but she'll be at Blent to-night."

Ah, if he might give just the barest hint to Mina now!

"Bob isn't particularly fond of her, you see, so we don't meet much now. He thinks she's rather spiteful."

"Not at all," said Neeld, almost sharply. "She's a very intelligent woman."

"Oh yes, intelligent!" She said no more. If people did not agree with Bob—well, there it was.

Bob bore his idealization very well. It was easy to forsee a happy and a remarkably equable married life. But the whole thing had no flavor for Mr. Neeld's palate, spoiled by the spices of Tristram vagaries. A decent show of friendliness was all he could muster. It was all that Iver himself seemed to expect; he was resigned but by no means exultant.

"The girl's very happy, and that's the thing. For myself—well, I've got most of the things I started to get, and if this isn't quite what I looked forward to—Well, you remember how things fell out?"

Neeld nodded. He remembered that very well.

"And, as I say, it's all very satisfactory." He shrugged his shoulders and relighted his cigar. He was decidedly a reasonable man, thought Neeld.

The evening came—Neeld had been impatient for it—and they drove over to Blent, where Bob was to meet them.

"It's a fine place for a girl to have," said Iver, stirred to a sudden sense of the beauty of the old house as it came into view.

They were all silent for a moment. Such a place to have, such a place to lose! Neeld heard Mrs. Iver sighing in her good-natured motherly fashion. But still Harry was not mentioned.

"And if they had a business man—with his head on his shoulders—to manage the estate, it'd be worth half as much again." This time it was Iver who sighed; the idea of anything not having all the money made out of it that could be made offended his instincts.

(To be Continued.)

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