TRISTRAM OF BLENT

BY ANTHONY HOPE

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Lady Adelaide, of Blent, Baroness in her own right and wife of Sir Robert Edge, Baronet, eloped with Captain Fitzhubert, formerly of the Scots' Guards. Sir Robert died in Russia, presumably in time for Lady Adelaide and Fitzhubert to marry and make their son, Harry, the legitimate heir to his mother's estates, they descending to heirs general. The couple learn later, however, that the date of Sir Robert's death has been given incorrectly, and that Harry is not the rightful heir. They keep the matter secret, and eventually Harry, after the death of his father, comes to reside with his mother at Blent Hall. Unknown to Lady Adelaide, a Madame Zabriska and Mr. Jenkinson Neeld are also in possession of the secret. Subsequently Madame Zabriska, with her uncle, Major Duplay, comes to reside at Merrion Lodge, near Blent Hall. Harry learns from his mother that he is not the rightful heir to Blent, but they determine to hold the title for him at any cost. To further his cause, he decides to marry Janie Ivers, heiress of Fairholme, but he finds two rivals in Bob Broadley and Major Duplay. The latter learns of Harry's unfortunate birth from Madame Zabriska. He informs Harry that he intends to inform Mr. Iver, the father of Janie, of the facts, and they have a quarrel and tussle, in which Harry comes off victor. Neeld becomes the guest of Iver at Fairholme. Mina meets Neeld, and they form a compact to protect Harry's interests and maintain secrecy. Cecily and her father come to Blent, and Harry fails to receive them. Later he comes suddenly upon Cecily, in the garden, and realizes that she is a Tristram, the image of his mother. The engagement of Harry Tristram and Janie Ivers is announced, and Duplay declares his intention to expose the false position of Harry to Janie's father. Harry falls in love with Cecily, and, without acknowledging it to her, informs her of the true situation, and that she is Lady Tristram of Blent. Then he steals away from Blent at daylight, stopping on his way to the station to inform Bob Broadley of the situation, and to advise him to woo and win Janie Iver, who loves him. He goes to London, where political friends of his mother interest themselves in his case. Cecily, unhappy in her new possessions, follows him to beg him to take back Blent. Harry joins Sloyd in a real estate deal, and becomes a competitor of Iver. Cecily asks Harry to marry her so that he may return to Blent. He refuses, and then suddenly realizes that he loves her. Harry outmaneuvers Iver in a business deal. Meanwhile political friends plan to have him give a viscounty. He scorns the idea, and Cecily returns to Blent, determined to begin life over and forget Harry. Harry is offered a foreign secretaryship, and is informed by Colonel Wilmot Edge that, through the scheming of a woman, the real date of Sir Robert Edge's death had been suppressed, and that Lady Tristram and Harry's father were married in time to legalize his birth. Harry demands the right to inform Cecily of the change in their fortunes, in his own way, and hurries to Blent, where he woos Cecily, in impetuous fashion.

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CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

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 tonight. 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 them, and how better coud 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 strength 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 to 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 tonight? 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, laughing 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, tomorrow 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 as 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 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.

"There's a train from Fillingford at 8 in the morning. I'm going back there tonight. 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 here? We'll go up to town and be married as soon as we can—the day after tomorrow, 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 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.

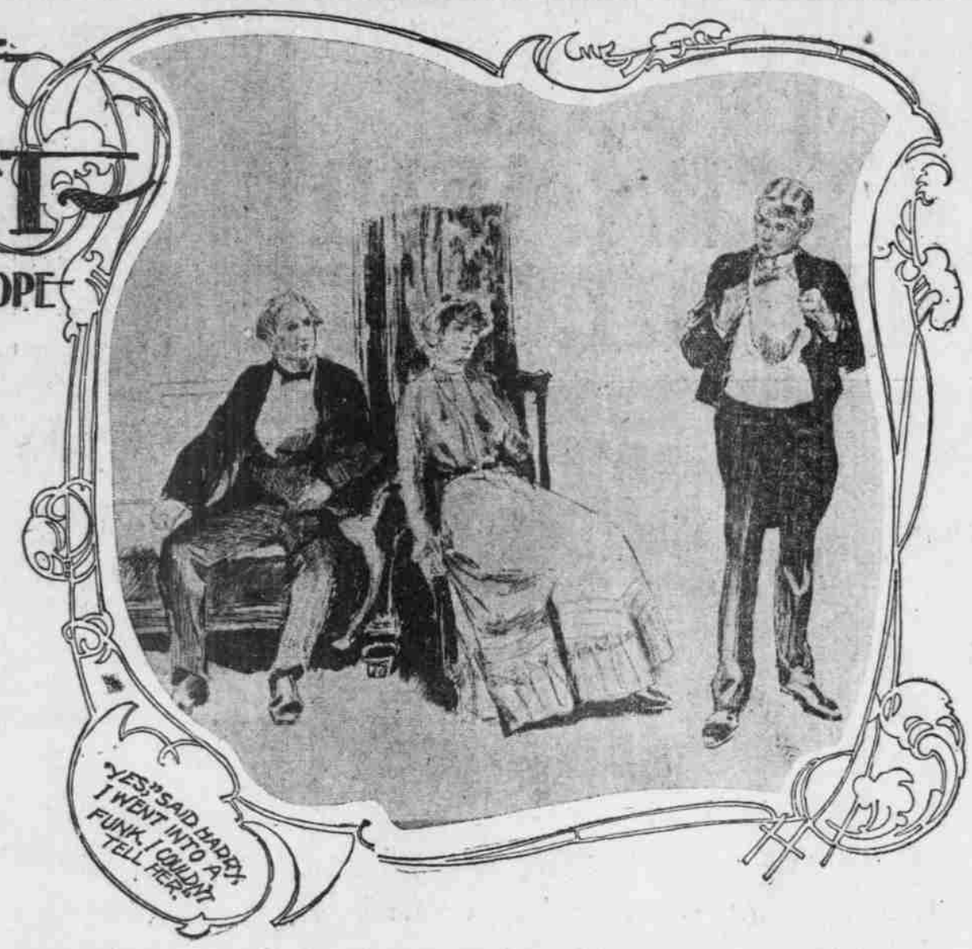
"All right. An elopement made respectable by Mina!" He had a touch of scorn for mitigated respectability.

"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 H[illegible] Mina."



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

"But we must be calm and businesslike 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, too!"

She almost danced in gayety. "Let me call Mina! Do!"

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

"O 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 leave me on the platform and go away."

"Shout for Mina—now—without another 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."

Hhe 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 enshrined.

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 the pair a benevolent glance 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!"

"No?" cried Mina. "Oh, how splendid! 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 tomorrow, 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 tomorrow?" He grew indignant.

"It's past 12 now; it is tomorrow," said Cecily.

"Quite so. As you suggested, Cecily, we could be married today but for these absurd restrictions. There's a train at 8 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," added Cecily.

"O, you're both mad."

"Not at all. You're judging us by the standard of your other rengaged couple tonight."

"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?"

"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 ealy train for Mr. Gainsborough," Harry suggested laying down his napkin.

"O, why don't you tell me something about it?" cried Mina despairingly. "But it's true? The great thing's true, anyhow, isnt' 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 at Harry.

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

"It looks as if it were true, though," admitted Harry. "Really I must go," he added. "I can't keep that fly all night. I shall see you in the morning, Mme. 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 Lary Tristram of Blent."

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

"Yes!" cried Cecily. "All a delicious, delicious joke. But we're going to be married."

After a moment's hesitation Mina came across to Harry, holding out her hands. "I'm glad—I'm so glad," she murmured, with a little catch in her voice.

He took her hands and pressed them. He looked at her very kindly, though he smiled still.

"Yes; it undoes all the mistakes, does not it?" he said. "At least, I hope it will," he added the next moment, with a laugh.

"It's really the only way to be married," declared Cecily.

"Well, for you people—for you extraordinary Tristrams—I daresay it is," said Mina.

"You'll come?" Cecily implored.

"She couldn't keep away," mocked Harry. "She's got to see the end of us."

"Yes, and our new beginning. Oh, what Blent's going to be, Mina! If you don't come with us now we won't let you stay at Merrion."

"I'm coming," said Mina. Indeed, she would not have stayed away. If she had needed further inducements the next moment supplied it.

"You're to be our only confidant," said Harry.

"Yes. Till it's all over, nobody's to know nobody else tonight. Till the morning, dearest—and you won't fail?"

"No, I won't fail. Should I fail to greet my first morning?"

He pushed her hair a little back from her forehead, and kissed her brow.

"God do so unto me, and more also, if my love ever fails you," said he. "Kiss me as I kissed you. And so good-night."

She obeyed and let him go. Once and twice he looked back at her as he took his way, and she stood still on the road. She heard his voice speaking to the flyman, the flyman's exhortation to his horse, the sounds of the wheels receding along the road. Then slowly she went back.

When Cecily went into her the Imp was packing; with critical care she stowed her smartest frock in the trunk.

"I must be up early and see about the carriage," she remarked. "I dare say Mason—But you are not listening, Cecily."

"No, I wasn't listening," said Cecily, scorning apology or excuse.

"You people in love are very silly. That's the plain English of it," observed Mina loftily.

Cecily looked at her a minute, then stretched her arms and sighed in luxurious weariness. "I dare say that's the plain English of it," she admitted. "But Oh, how different it sounds before translation, dear!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Mr. Gainsborough lost his head. He might have endured the note that had been left for him—it said only that his daughter had gone to town for a couple of days with Mme. Zabriska; besides he had had notes left for him before. But there was Mason's account of the evening and of the morning—of Harry's arrival, of the conference in the long gallery, of the sandwiches and the old brown, of the departure of the ladies at 7 o'clock. Mason was convinced that something was up; knowing Mr. Harry as he did, and her late ladyship as he had, he really would not like to hazard an opinion what. Mr. Gainborough, however, could see for himself that candles had been left to burn themselves out and that china had been broken in the long gallery. Gainsborough rushed off to the long gallery. There lay his bit of Chelsea on the floor—upset, smashed, not picked up! There must have been a convulsion indeed, he declared, as ruefully and tenderly he gathered the fragments.

Quite off his balance, and forgetful of perils, he ordered the pony chaise and had himself driven into Blentmouth. He felt that he must tell somebody, and borrow some conclusions. He was not equal to making any of his own. He must carry the news.

He deceived himself, and did gross injustice to the neighborhood. Fillingford is but 12 miles from Blentmouth, and there are three hours between 8 and 11. He was making for Fairholme. While yet half a mile off he overtook Miss Swinkerton, heading in the same direction, ostentatiously laden with savings bank books. With much decision she requested a lift, got in, and told him all about how Harry had escorted Cecily and Mme. Zabriska from Fillingsford that morning. The milkman told the butcher, the butcher had told the postman, the postman had told her, and well, she mentioned it to Mrs. Trumbler. Mrs. Trumbler was at Fairholme now.

"Mr. Tristram had been staying with you, of course? How nice to think there's no feeling of soreness," observed Miss S.

In Gainsborough, at least, there was no feeling save of bewilderment.

"Staying with us? No; I haven't so much as seen him," he stammered out.

Immediately Miss S. was upon him, and had by the time they reached Fairholme left him with no more than a few rags of untold details. Then, with unrivaled effrontery, she declared that she had forgotten to call at the grocer's, and marched off. In an hour the new and complete version of the affair was all over the town.

"And Mina Zabriska, my dear."

Gossip raged, and old Mr. Neeld sat in the middle of the conflagration. How his record of evasion, nay, of downright falsehood, mounted up! False facts and fictitious reasons flowed from his lips. There was pathos in the valor with which he maintained his position. He was hard pressed, but he did not fail. There was a joy, too, in the fight. For he alone of all Blentmouth knew the great secret, and guessed that what was happening had to do with the secret. Harry had asked silence for a week; before two days of it were gone came this news.

"If they do mean to be married," said Janie, "why couldn't they do it decently?" She meant with the respectable deliberations of her own alliance.

"Tristram's a queer fellow," pondered Bob Broadley.

"I only hope he isn't rushing her into it—on purpose. What do you think, Mr. Neeld?"

"My dear Janie—"

"He may not want to give her time to think. It's not a good match for her, now is it?"

"I—I can't think Harry Tristram would—"

"Well, Neeld," said Iver, judicially "I'm not so sure. Master Harry can play a deep game when he likes. I know that very well—and to my cost, too."

What Janie hinted and Iver did not discard was a view which found some supporters, and where it was entertained poor Mina Zabriska's character was gone. Miss S. herself was all but caught by the idea, and went so far as to say that she never thought highly of Mme. Zabriska, while the Major was known to be impecunious. There was a nefariousness about the new suggestion that proved very attractive in Blentmouth.

Late in the day came fresh tidings, new fuel for the flames. Mr. Gainsborough had driven again into Blentmouth and taken the train for London. Two portmanteaus and a wicker crate, plausibly conjectured to contain between them all all his worldly possessions, had accompanied him on the journey. He was leaving Blent then, if not forever, at least for a long while. He had evaded notice in his usual fashion, and nearly driven over Miss S. when she tried to get in the way. Miss S. was partly consoled by a bit of luck that followed. She met Mina's cook, come down from Merrion to buy household stores; her mistress was to return to her own house on the morrow. There seemed no need to search for inferences. They leapt to light. Either Blent was to be shut up, or it was to receive a wedded pair. On this alternative the factions split, and the battle was furious.

The next morning Mr. Neeld gained the reward of virtue, and became a hero in spite of his discretion. At breakfast he received a telegram. Times were critical, and all eyes were on him as he read and reread, and frowned perplexedly. Then he turned to Iver.

"Can you let me have a trap this afternoon, Iver?"

"Of course, of course. But you're not going to leave us, I hope?"

"Only just for the evening. I—in fact, I have to go to Blent."

There was a moment's silence. Glances were exchanged while Neeld made half-hearted efforts to grapple with an egg. Then Bob Broadley broke out with a laugh!

"Oh, hang it all, out with it, Mr. Neeld!"

"Well, I'm not told to be silent, and it must become known immediately. Mme. Zabriska telegraphs to me that they are to be married early this morning, and will come to Blent by the 1:30 train. She herself leaves by the 11 o'clock, will be there at 5, and wishes me to join her."

"By Jove, he's done it then!" exclaimed Iver.

Everybody looked very solemn except Neeld, who was sadly confused.

"Dear, dear!" murmured Mrs. Iver.

"She must be very much in love with him," remarked Janie.

"It's his conduct more than hers which needs explanation," Iver observed drily. "And what do they want you for, Neeld?"

"O—er—why—why, no doubt it's—it's only a fancy of Mina Zabriska's."

"A very queer fancy," said Janie Iver coldly. It was really a little annoying that old Mr. Neeld should be the person wanted at Blent.

"I'll drive you over," Bob kindly volunteered.

"Er—thank you, Broadley, but she asks me to come alone."

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Bob who had seen a chance of being in at the death.

They were coming straight down to Blent. That fact assumed an important place in Neeld's review of the situation. And his presence was requested. He put these two things together. They must mean that the secret was to be told that evening at Blent, and that he was to be vouched as evidence if by chance Cecily asked for it. On the very day of the wedding the truth was to be revealed. In ignorance, perhaps in her own despite, she had been made in reality what she had conceived herself to be; today she was Lady Tristram in law. Now she was to be told. Neeld saw the choice that would be laid before her, and, at the same time, the use that had been made of his silence. He fell into a sore puzzle. Yes, Harry could play a deep game when he chose.

"Do you think Disney will repeat his offer—will give him a chance of reconsidering now?" asked Iver, who had heard of that affair from Lord Southend.

"I'm sure he wouldn't accept anything," Neeld answered with remarkable promptitude and conviction. It was a luxury to find an opportuity of speaking the truth.

"The least he could do would be to leave that to her."

"She'd say just the same," Neeld assured him. "I'm convinced there'll be no question of anything of the kind."

"Then it's very awkward," Iver grumbled crossly.

In all his varied experience of the Imp—which included, it may be remembered, a good deal of plain speaking and one embrace—Neeld had never found her in such a state as governed her this evening. Mason gave him tea while she walked restlessly about; he gathered that Mason was dying to talk, but had been sore wounded in an encounter with Mina already, and was now perforce holding his tongue.

"They'll be here by 7, and you and I are to dine with them," she told him. "Quite informally."

"Dear me, I—I don't think I want—" he began.

"Hush!" she interrupted. "Are you going to be all day with those things, Mason?"

"I hope I haven't been slower than usual, ma'am," said Mason, very stiffly.

At last he went. In an instant Mina darted across to Neeld and caught him by the arm. "What have you to tell me?" she cried.

"To tell you? I? O, dear, no, Mme. Zabriska. I assure you—"

"O, there's no need for that. Harry said you were to tell me before they arrived. That's why I sent for you, now."

"He said I was to tell you—"

"Yes, yes. Something you knew and I didn't. Something that would explain it all."

She stood before him with clasped hands. "It's quite true. He did say so," she pleaded. "It's all to be so delightful, and yet so strange. And he told me to be ready either to stay here or go home tonight! Tell me, tell me, Mr. Neeld."

"Why didn't he tell you himself?"

"I only saw him for an instant after the wedding, and before it he didn't say a word about there being anything to tell. There's a secret. What is it?"

He was glad to tell it. He had carried his burden long enough.

"We've all made a great blunder. Harry is Lord Tristram after all."

Mina stood silent for a moment. "O!" she gasped. "And he's married Cecily without telling her?"

"That's what he has done, I regret to say. And I take it that he means to tell her tonight."

Mina sank into a chair. "What will she do?" she murmured. "What will she do?"

"There was a mistake, or, rather a fraud about the date of Sir Randolph Edge's death. His brother knew it. I'll tell you the details if you like. But that's the end and the sum of it. As to why he didn't tell—er—his wife sooner, perhaps you know better than I."

"Yes. I know that," she said. And then—it was most inconsiderate, most painful to Mr. Neeld—she began to cry. Unable to bear this climax of excitement coming on top of her two days' emotion, she sobbed hysterically. "They'll be here at 7," she moaned. "What will happen! O, Mr. Neeld! And I know he'll expect me to be calm and—and to carry it off—and be composed. How can I be?"

"Perhaps a glass of sherry?" was Mr. Neeld's not unreasonable suggestion.

No, the old brown would not serve here. But without its aid a sudden change came over Mina. She sprang to her feet and left the tears to roll down her cheeks untended as she cried:

"What a splendid thing to do! O, how like Harry! And it's to be settled tonight! What can we do to make it go right?"

"I intend to take no responsibility at all," protested Neeld. "I'm here to speak to the facts if I'm wanted, but—"

"O, bother the facts! What are we to do to make her take it properly?" She gave another sob. "O, I'm an idiot!" she cried. "Haven't you anything to suggest, Mr. Neeld?"

He shrugged his shoulders peevishly. Her spirits fell again.

"I see. Yes, if she—if she doesn't take it properly he'll go away again, and I'm to be ready to stay here."

Another change in the barometer came in a flash. "But she can't help being Lady Tristram now!"

"It's all a most unjustifiable proceeding. He tricks the girl—"

"Yes, he had to. That was the only chance. If he'd told her before—"

"But, isn't she in love with him?"

"O, you don't know the Tristrams! O, what are we to do?" Save running through every kind and degree of emotion, Mina seemed to find nothing to do.

"And I'm bound to say that I consider our position most embarrassing," Mr. Neeld spoke with some warmth, with some excuse, too, perhaps. To welcome a newly married couple home may be thought always to require some tact; when it is a toss-up whether they will not part again forever under your very eyes the situation is not improved.

"We must treat it as a mere trifle," the Imp announced, fixing on the thing which above all others she could not achieve. Yet her manner was so confident that Neeld gasped.

"And if that doesn't do, we must tell her that the happiness of her whole life depends on what she does tonight." Variety of treatment was evidently not to be lacking.

"I intend to take no responsibility of any kind. He's got himself into a scrape. Let him get out of it," persisted Neeld.

"I thought you were his friend."

"I may be excused if I consider the lady a little, too."

"I suppose I don't care for Cecily? Do you mean that, Mr. Neeld?"

"My dear friend, need we quarrel, too?"

"Don't be stupid. Whose quarreling? I never know anybody so useless as you are. Can't you do anything but sit there and talk about responsibilities?" She was ranging about again, a diminutive tiger of unusually active habits.

She had wandered round the room again. She burst out, "O, but it's something to see the end of it."

That was his feeling, too, however he might rebuke himself for it. Human life at first hand had not been too plentiful with him. The Imp's excitement infected him. "And he's back here after all!" she cried. "At least—heavens, they'll be here directly, Mr. Neeld."

"Yes, it's past 7," said he.

"Come into the garden. We'll wait for them on the bridge." She turned to him as they passed through the hall. "Wouldn't you like something of this sort to happen to you?" she asked.

No. He was perturbed enough as a spectator. He would not have been himself engaged in the play.

"Why isn't everybody here?" she demanded, with a laugh that was again nervous and almost hysterical. "Why isn't Addie Tristram here? Ah, and your old Chelderton?"

"Hark. I hear wheels on the road," said Mr. Neeld.

Mina looked hard at him. "She shall do right," she said, "and Harry shall not go."

"Surely they'll make the best of a—"

"I can't bear it," whispered Mina.

"He'll expect you to be calm and composed," Neeld reminded her.

"Then give me a cigarette," she implored, despairingly.

"I am not a smoker," said Mr. Neeld.

"O, you really are the very last man! Well, come on the bridge," groaned Mina.

They waited on the bridge, and the wheels drew near. They spoke no more. They had found nothing to do. They could only wait. A fly came down the road.

There they sat, side by side. Cecily was leaning forward, her eyes were eager, and there was a bright touch of color on her cheeks; Harry leaned back, looking at her, not at Blent. He wore a quiet smile, his air was very calm. He saw Mina and Neeld, and waved his hand to them. The fly stopped opposite the bridge. He jumped out and assisted Cecily to alight. In a moment she was in Mina's arms. The next she recognized Neeld's presence with a little cry of surprise. At a loss to account for himself, the old man stood there in embarrassed wretchedness.

"I want you to wait," said Harry to the driver. "Put up in the stables, and they'll give you something to eat. You must wait until I send you word."

"Wait? Why is he to wait, Harry?" asked Cecily. Her tone was gay; she was overflowing with joy and merriment. "Who's going away? O, is it you, Mr. Neeld?"

"I—I have a trap from Mr. Ivers," he stammered.

"I may want to send a message," Harry explained. "Kind of you to come, Mr. Neeld."

"I—I must wish you joy," said Mr. Neeld, taking refuge in conventionality.

"We've had a capital journey down, haven't we, Cecily? And I'm awfully hungry. What time is it?"

Mason was rubbing his hands in the doorway.

"Dinner's ordered at 8, sir," said he.

"And it's half past 7 now." Just time to wash our hands. No dress tonight, you know."

"I'll go to my room," said Cecily. "Will you come with me, Mina?"

A glance from Harry made the Imp excuse herself. "I'll keep Mr. Neeld company," she said.

Cecily turned to her husband. She smiled and blushed a little.

"I'll take you as far as your room," said he.

"Will you come to the garden with me after dinner?" asked Harry, as Cecily and he went upstairs.

"Of course—when they're gone."

"No, directly. I want to say a word to you."

"We must escape them," she laughed. "O, well, they'll expect that, I suppose." Her delight in her love bubbled over in her laugh.

They came to the door of her room, and she stopped.

"Here?" asked Harry. "Yes, it was my mother's room. You reign now in my mother's stead."

His voice had a ring of triumph in it. He kissed her hand. "Dinner as soon as you're ready," said he.

She laughed again and blushed as she opened the door and stood holding the handle.

"Won't you come in—just for a minute, Harry? I—I haven't changed this room at all."

"All is yours to change or to keep unchanged," said he.

"Oh, I have no reason for changing anything now. Everything is to be put back in the long gallery." She paused, and then said again: "Won't you come in for just a minute, Harry?"

"I must go back to our friends downstairs," he answered.

The pretext was threadbare. What did the guests matter? They would do well enough. It had cost her something to ask—a little effort—since the request still seemed so strange, since its pleasure had a fear in it. And now she was refused.

"I ask you," she said, with a sudden haughtiness.

He stood looking at her a moment. There was a brisk step along the corridor.

"Oh, I beg your ladyship's pardon. I didn't know your ladyship had come upstairs." It was Cecily's maid.

"In about 20 minutes," said Harry, with a nod. Slowly Cecily followed the maid inside.

After he had washed his hands Harry rejoined his friends. They were still sitting in the hall with an air of expectancy.

"You've told her?" cried Mina. "Oh, yes; Mr. Neeld has told me everything."

"Well, I've mentioned the bare fact—" Neeld began.

"Yes, yes; that's the only thing that matters. You've told her, Harry?" The last two days had made him "Harry" and her "Mina."

(To be continued.)

FOURTH OF JULY.