Tristram of Blent.

Being An Episode in a Story of An Ancient House.

BY ANTHONY HOPE.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Lady Adelaide, wife of Sir Robert Edge of Blent Hall, eloped with Captain Fitzhubert, Sir Robert died in Russia, presumably in time for Lady Adelaide and Fitzhubert to marry and so make their son Harry the legitimate heir to Sir Robert's estates. They learn later, however, that the date of Sir Robert's death has been given incorrectly and Harry is not the rightful heir. They keep the matter secret, and eventually Harry comes into possession of the estates and resides with his mother at Blent Hall. Unknown to Lady Adelaide, a Madam Zabriska, and Mr. Jenkinson Neeld, are also in possession of the secret and Madam Zabriska with her uncle, Major Duplay, comes to reside at Merrion Lodge near Blent Hall. Harry learns from his mother that he is not 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 finds two rivals in Bob Broadley and Major Duplay. The latter learns of his unfortunate birth from Mina Zabriska. He informs him that he intends to tell Ivers, and they quarrel, Harry winning in a brisk tussle. Neeld becomes the guest of Iver at Fairholme.

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By the Blent the drama seemed very considerately to be waiting for him. It says much for Major Duplay that his utter and humiliating defeat by the Pool had not driven him into any hasty action or shaken him in his original purpose. If he could by any means avoid it he was determined not to move while Lady Tristram lived. Harry might force him to act sooner; that rested with Harry, not with him. Meanwhile he declined to explain even to Mina what had occurred by the Pool, and treated her open incredulousness as to Harry's explanation with silence or a snub. The major was not happy at this time; yet his unhappiness was nothing to the deep woe and, indeed, terror, which had settled on Mina Zabriska. She had guessed enough to see that for the moment, at least, Harry had succeeded in handling Duplay so roughly as to delay, if not to thwart, his operations; what would he not do to her, whom he must know to be the original cause of the trouble? She used to stand on the terrace at Merrion and wonder about this; and she dared not go to Fairholme lest she should encounter Harry. She made many good resolutions for the future, but there was no comfort in the present days.

The resolutions went for nothing, even in the moment in which they were made. She had suffered for meddling; that was bad; it was worse to the Imp not to meddle; inactivity was the one thing unendurable. She, too, like old Mr. Neeld in London town, was drawn by the interest of the position, by the need of seeing how Harry Tristram fought his fight. For four days she resisted; on the evening of the fifth, after dinner, while the major dozed, she came out on the terrace in a cloak and looked down the hill. It was rather dark, and Blent hall loomed dimly in the valley below. She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and began to descend the hill; she had no special purpose; she wanted a nearer look at Blent, and it was a fine night for a stroll. She came to the road, crossed it after a momentary hesitation, and stood by the gate of the little footbridge, which, in days before enmity arose, Harry Tristram had told her was never locked. Mina advanced to the middle of the bridge and leaned on the parapet, her eyes set on Blent hall. There were lights in the lower windows; one window on the upper floor was lighted, too. There, doubtless, Lady Tristram lay slowly dying; somewhere else in the house Harry was keeping his guard and perfecting his defenses. The absolute peace and rest of the outward view, the sleepless vigilance and unceasing battle within, a battle that death made keener and could not full to rest—this contrast came upon Mina with a strange painfulness; her eyes filled with tears as she stood looking.

A man came out into the garden and lit a cigar; she knew it was Harry; she did not move. He sauntered toward the bridge; she held her ground; though he should strike her, she would have speech with him tonight. He was by the bridge and had his hand on the gate at the Blent end of it before he saw her. He stood still a moment, then came to her side and leaned as she was leaning, over the parapet. He was bareheaded; she saw his thick hair and his peaked forehead; he smoked steadily; he showed no surprise at seeing her, and he did not speak to her for a long time. At last, still without looking at her, he begun. She could just make out his smile, or thought she could; at any rate she was sure it was there.

"Well, Mina de Kries," said he. She started a little. "Oh, I don't believe in the late Zabriska. I don't believe you're grown up; I think you're about 15—a beastly age." He put his cigar back in his mouth.

"You see that window?" he resumed in a moment. "And you know what's happening behind it. Well, how's the major? Has he got that trick in better order yet?"

She found her tongue with difficulty.

"Does Lady Tristram know about—about me?" she stammered.

"I sometimes lie to my mother," said Harry, flicking his ash into the river. "Why do you lie to your uncle, though?"

"I didn't lie. You know I didn't lie."

He shrugged his shoulders wearily and relapsed into silence. Silence there was till, a minute or two later, it was broken by a little sob from Mina Zabriska. He turned his head toward her; then he took hold of her arm and made her face around to him. The tears were running down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to, and I did it! And now—now I can't stop it. You needn't believe me if you don't like, but I'm—I'm miserable and—and frightened."

He flung his cigar into the water and put his hands in his pockets. So he stood watching her, his body swaying a little to and fro; his eyes were suspicious of her, yet they seemed amused also, and they were not cruel; it was not such a look as he had given her when they parted by the pool.

"If it were true?" she asked. "I mean, couldn't Lady Tristram somehow—"

"If what were true? O, the nonsense you told Duplay?" He laughed. "If it was true I should be a nobody and nobody's son. I suppose that would amuse you very much, wouldn't it? You wouldn't have come to Merrion for nothing then! But as it isn't true, what's the use of talking?"

He won no belief from her when he said that it was not true. She drew her cloak around her and shivered.

"Cold?" he asked.

"No. Wretched, wretched."

"Would you like to see my mother?"

"You wouldn't let her see me?"

"She's asleep and the nurse is at supper—not that she'd matter. Come along."

He turned and began to walk quickly toward the house; Mina followed him as though in a dream. They entered a large hall. It was dark, save for one candle, and she could see nothing of its furniture. He led her straight up a broad oak staircase that rose from the middle of it and then along a corridor. The polished oak gleamed here and there as they passed a candle in brackets on the wall and was slippery under her unaccumtomed feet. The whole house was very still—still, cool and very peaceful.

Cautiously he opened a door and beckoned her to follow him. Lights were burning in the room. Lady Tristram lay sleeping; her hair, still fair and golden, spread over the pillow; her face was calm and unlined; she seemed a young and beautiful girl wasted by a fever. But the fever was the fever of life as well as of disease. Thus Mina saw again the lady she had seen at Heidelberg.

"She won't wake; she had her sleeping draft," he said, and Mina took it to mean that she might linger a moment more. She cast her eyes round the room. Over the fireplace, facing the bed, was a full-length portrait of a girl. She was dressed all in red; the glory of her white neck, her brilliant hair and blue eyes rose out of the scarlet setting. This was Addie Tristram in her prime, as she was when she fled with Randolph Edge; as she was when she cried in the little room at Heidelberg: "Think of the difference it makes, the enormous difference!"

"My mother likes to have that picture there," Harry explained.

The sleeping woman stirred faintly. In obedience to a look from Harry Mina followed him from the room and they passed down stairs and through the hall together in silence. He came with her as far as the bridge. There he paused. The scene they had left had apparently stirred no new emotion in him; it had left Mina Zabriska trembling and moved to the heart.

"Now you've seen her, and before that you'd seen me. And perhaps now you'll understand that we're the Tristrams of Blent and that we live and die that." His voice grew a little louder. "And your nonsense?" he exclaimed. "It's all a lie. But if it was true? It's the blood, isn't it, not the law, that matters? It's her blood and my blood. That's my real title to Blent."

In the midst of his lying he spoke truth there, and Mina knew it. By right of blood he claimed to stand master of Blent, and so he meant to stand.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, yes; God help you to it." She turned and left him and ran up the hill, catching her breath in sobs again.

Harry Tristram stood and watched her as long as he could see her retreating figure.

"The major must play his hand alone now," he said. "He'll get no more help from her." He paused a moment. "It's a funny thing, though. That's not really why I took her up."

He shook his head in puzzle. Perhaps he could hardly be expected to recognize that it was that pride of his—pride in his mother, his race, himself—which had made him bid Mina Zabriska look upon Lady Tristram as she slept.

CHAPTER VII.

The Moment Draws Near.

Janie Iver had been brought up to know her own mind; it was the eleventh commandment in the Iver household. Iver entertained the intellectual, his wife the moral, objection to shilly-shallying; their daughter's training, while conducted with all kindness, had been eminently sensible, and early days had offered few temptations to stray from the path of the obviously desirable. The case was different now; riches brought a change; the world revealed its resources; life was spreading out its divers wares. Janie was much puzzled as to what she ought to do, more as to what she wanted to do, most of all as to what she would in the end do—unless, indeed, the fact that she was puzzled continued to rank as the greatest puzzle of all.

Naturally the puzzles were personified, or the persons made into puzzles. Men became lives to her, as well as individuals—the Tristram, the Duplay, the Broadley life; her opinion of the life complicated her feeling toward the person. The Tristram life attracted her strongly, the life of the great lady; Harry had his fascination, too; yet she did not think that she and Harry would be very happy together, woman and man. The Duplay life promised another sort of joy; the major's experience was world-wide, his knowledge various, his conversation full of hints of the unexplored; she would be broadening her life if she identified it with his. Lastly, there was that quiet Broadley life, to be transformed in some degree doubtless by her wealth, yet likely to remain in essentials the peaceful, homely existence which she knew very well.

She found herself thinking, in terms superficially repugnant to conversation, that she would like to pay long visits to the other men, but have Bob to come home to when she was inclined for rest and tranquility. Her perplexity was not strange in itself; but it was strange and new to her; and, imbued with the parental views about shilly-shallying, she was angry with herself and inclined to be ashamed.

Judged from the outside, she was not open to blame in her attitude towards Harry; he was not in love with her and hardly pretended to be.

Nor had Duplay any cause of complaint in being kept waiting; he would be held exceedingly lucky not to be sent to the right-about instantly. But with Bob Broadley the matter was different. On the subtle question of what exactly constitutes "encouragement" (it is the technical term) in these cases it is not perhaps necessary to enter; but false hopes might, no doubt, arise from her visits to Mingham, from her habit of riding up the road by the river about the time when Bob would be likely to be riding down it, or of sauntering by the pool on the days when he drove his gig into Blentmouth on business—all this being beyond and outside legitimate meetings at Fairholme itself. Unless she meant to marry him she might indeed raise hopes that were false.

Yes, but it did not seem as though she did. Bob was humble. She had tyrannized over him even before the Ivers grew so very rich.

"Send the gig home and stay and talk," she commanded, and he stopped by her on the road; he was returning from Blentmouth to Mingham and found her strolling by the pool. "I want to speak with you."

He had his bailiff with him—they had been selling a cow and left him to take the gig home. He shook hands with frank cordiality.

"That's awfully nice of you," he said. "What about?"

"Nothing in particular," said she. "Mayn't I want it just generally?"

"O, well, I thought you meant there was something special. I've sold the cow well, Miss Janie."

"Bother the cow! Why haven't you been to Fairholme?"

"Well, in fact, I'm not sure that Mr. Iver is death on seeing me there too often. But I shall turn up all right soon."

"Have you been going about anywhere?"

"No. Been up at Mingham most of the time."

"Isn't that rather lonely?"

"Lonely? Good heavens, no. I've got too much to do."

Janie glanced at him. What was to be done with a man who treated provocative suggestions as though they were sincere questions? If he had not cared for her now? But she knew he did.

"Well, I've been very dull, anyhow. One never sees anybody fresh at Fairholme now. It's always either Mr. Tristram or Major Duplay."

"Well, I shouldn't be very fresh, either, should I?" The names she mentioned drew no sign from him.

"I don't count you a visitor at all. And they are visitors—I suppose." She seemed a little in doubt, yet both the gentlemen, anyhow, were not presumably received as members of the family.

"I'll tell you what I've been thinking about," said Bob, speaking slowly, and apparently approaching an important announcement.

"Yes?" she said, turning to him with interest, and watching his handsome, open face; it was not a very clever face, but it was a very pleasant one; she enjoyed looking at it.

"I've been thinking that I'll sell the black horse, but I can't make up my mind whether to do it now or keep him through the summer and sell him when hunting begins. I don't know which would pay me best."

"That certainly is a very important question," remarked Janie, with a wealth of sarcasm.

"Well, it gives me a lot of trouble, Miss Janie."

"Does it? And it doesn't interest me in the very—yes, it does, Bob, very much. I'm sorry. Of course it does. Only—"

"Anything the matter with you?" Bob inquired with friendly solicitude.

"No—not just now. There never is, somehow, when I'm with you. And let's talk about the black horse—it'll be soothing. Is the price of oats a factor?"

Bob laughed a little, but did not proceed with the discussion. They sauntered on in silence for a few minutes, Bob taking out his tobacco.

"Worried, aren't you?" he asked, lighting his pipe.

"Yes," she answered, shortly.

"Was that what you wanted to say to me?"

"No, of course not. As if I should talk to you about it!"

"Don't suppose you would, no. Still, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Do you feel friendly to me?"

"Friendly! Well!" He laughed. "What do you think about it yourself?" he asked. "Look here, I don't bother you; but I'm here when you want me."

"When I want you?"

"I mean, if I can do anything for you, or—or advise you. I don't think I'm a fool, you know."

"I'm really glad to hear you've got as far as that," she remarked rather tartly. "Your fault, Bob, is not thinking nearly enough of yourself."

"You'll soon change that if you say much more." His pleasure in her implied praise was obvious, but he did not read a single word more into her speech than the words she uttered.

"And you are friendly to me—still?"

"It doesn't make any difference to me whether I see you or not—"

"What?" she cried. The next moment she was laughing. "Thanks, Bob, but—but you've a funny way of putting things sometimes." She laid her hand on his arm for a moment, sighing "Dear old Bob!"

"Oh, you know what I mean," he said, puffing away. His healthy skin had flushed a trifle, but that was his only reply to her little caress.

"If—if I came to you some day and said I'd been a fool, or been made a fool of, and was very unhappy, and—and wanted comforting, would you still be nice to me?"

His answer came after a puff and a pause.

"Well, if you ever get like that I should recommend you just to try me for what I'm worth," he said. Her eyes were fixed on his face, but he did not look at her. Some men would have seen in her appeal an opportunity of trying to win from her more than she was giving. The case did not present itself in that light to Bob Broadley. He did not press his own advantage, he hardly believed it; and he had besides a vague idea that he would spoil for her the feeling she had if he greeted it with too much enthusiasm. What she wanted was a friend—a solid, possibly rather stolid, friend; with that commodity he was prepared to provide her. The humblest of men have moments of pride; it must be confessed that Bob thought he was behaving not only with proper feeling, but also with considerable tact—a tact that was based on knowledge of women.

Interviews such as these—and they were not infrequent—formed a rather incongruous background, but also an undeniable relief to the life Janie was leading at Fairholme. That seemed to have little concern with Bob Broadley and to be engrossed in the struggle between Harry and Duplay. Both men pressed on. Harry had not been scared away. Duplay would win without using his secret weapon, if he could. Each had his manner, Harry's constrained, yet direct, the major's more florid, more expressed in glances, compliments and attentions. But neither had yet risked the decisive word. Janie was playing for delay. The major seemed inclined to grant it her. But Harry grew impatient, was imperious in his calls on her time and might face her with the demand for an answer any day. She could not explain how it was, but somehow his conduct seemed to be conditioned by the progress of Lady Tristram's illness.

About Harry Tristram, anyhow, she was right. He was using to its full value his rival's chivalrous desire to make no movement during Lady Tristram's lifetime; he reckoned on it and meant to profit by it. A look of brutality would be given to any action of his while Lady Tristram lay dying; Harry hoped this aspect of his conduct would frighten him. At least, it was worth risking. The doctors talked of two months more; Harry Tristram meant to be engaged before one of them was out. Could he be married before the second ran its course? Mrs. Iver would have scoffed at the idea and Janie shrunk from it. But a dying mother's appeal would count with almost irresistible strength in such a case and Harry was sure of being furnished with this aid.

He came to Fairholme a day or two after Janie had talked with Bob Broadley. She was on the lawn, with her Mina Zabriska and a small, neat, elderly man, who was introduced to him as Mr. Jenkinson Neeld. Harry paid little attention to this insignificant person and gave Mina no more than a careless shake of the hand and a good-humored, amused nod; he was not afraid of her any longer. He claimed Janie and contrived to lead her to some chairs on the other side of the lawn.

"And that is Mr. Harry Tristram?" said Neeld, looking at him intently through his spectacles.

"Yes," said the Imp, briefly; she was at the moment rather bored by Mr. Neeld.

"An interesting looking young man."

"Yes, he's interesting." And she added a moment later, "you're having a good look at him, Mr. Neeld."

"Dear me, was I staring? I hope not. But—well, we've all heard of his mother, you know."

"I'm afraid the next thing we hear about her will be the last." What she had seen at Blent hall was in her mind and she spoke sadly. "Mr. Tristram will succeed to his throne soon now."

Neeld looked at her as if he were about to speak, but he said nothing and his eyes wandered back to Harry again.

"They're friends—Miss Iver and he?" he asked at last.

"Oh, it's no secret that he wants to marry her."

"And does she—"

Mina laughed, not very naturally. "It's something to be Lady Tristram of Blent."

Harry wanted to marry Janie Iver! With a sudden revulsion of feeling, Neeld wished himself far from Blentmouth. However, it was his duty to talk to this sharp little foreign woman, and he meant to try. A few polite questions brought him to the point of inquiring her nationality.

"Oh, we're Swiss, French Swiss. But I was born at Heidelberg. My mother lived there after my father died. My uncle, who lives with me, Major Duplay, is her brother; he was in the Swiss service."

"A pleasant society at Heidelberg, I dare say?"

"Rather dull," said Mina. It seemed much the same at Blentmouth at the moment.

"Iver strolled out from his study on to the lawn. He cast a glance toward his daughter and Harry, frowned slightly, and sat down on Mina's other side. He had a newspaper in his hand, and he held it up as he spoke to Neeld across Mina.

"Your book's promised for the 15th, I see, Neeld."

"Yes, it's to be out then."

Mina was delighted at being presented with a topic. Sometimes it is the most precious of gifts.

"Oh, Mr. Neeld, have you written a book. How interesting! What is it? A novel?"

"My dear Mme. Zabriska!" murmured Neeld, feeling as if he were being made fun of. "And it's not really my book. I've only edited it."

"But that's just as good," Mina insisted amiably. "Do tell me what it is."

"Here you are, Mina. There's a full title and description for you. There's nothing else in the paper." Iver handed it to her with a stifled yawn. She read it and turned to Neeld with a quick jerk of her head.

"Journal and Correspondence of Josiah Cholderton," she repeated. "O, but—O—but—well, that is curious! Why, we used to know Mr. Cholderton!"

"You knew Mr. Cholderton?" said Mr. Neeld in mild surprise. Then, with a recollection, he added, "O, at Heidelberg. I dare say? But you must have been a child?"

"Yes, I was. Does he talk about Heidelberg?"

"He mentions it once or twice." In spite of himself Neeld began to feel that he was within measurable distance of getting on difficult ground.

"What fun if he mentioned me! O, but of course he wouldn't say anything about a child of 5."

The slightest start ran through Neeld's figure; it passed unnoticed; he looked sharply at Mina Zabriska.

"He knew my mother quite well, he used to come and see us. Does he mention her—Mme. de Kries?"

There was a perceptible pause; then Neeld answered primly:

"I'm afraid you won't find your mother's name mentioned in Mr. Cholderton's journal, Mme. Zabriska."

"How horrid!" remarked Mina, greatly disappointed; she regarded Mr. Neeld with a new interest all the same.

They were both struck with this strange coincidence as it seemed to them, though in fact it was not properly a coincidence at all, that they should meet at Blentmouth.

"You're sure he says nothing about us?" she urged.

"You'll not find a word," he replied, sticking to the form of assertion that salved his conscience. He looked across the lawn again, but Janie and Harry had disappeared among the bushes.

"You're sort of old acquaintances at second hand, then," said Iver, smiling. "Cholderton's the connecting link."

"He didn't like me," remarked Mina. "He used to call me the Imp."

"Yes, yes," said Neeld, in absent-minded acquiescence. "Yes, the Imp."

"You don't seem much surprised," cried Mina in mock indignation.

"Surprised!" He started more violently. "Oh, yes—I—I—of course, I'm—" A laugh from his host spared him the effort of further apologies. But he was a good deal shaken; he had very nearly betrayed his knowledge of the Imp. Indeed he could not rid himself of the idea that there was a very inquisitive look in Mme. Zabriska's large eyes.

Mina risked one more question, put very carelessly.

"I think he must have met Lady Tristram there once or twice. Does he say anything about her?"

"Not a word," said Neeld, grasping the nettle firmly this time.

Mina took another look at him, but he blinked resolutely behind his glasses.

"Well, it's just like Mr. Cholderton to leave out all the interesting things," she observed, resignedly. "Only I wonder why you edit his book if it's like that, you know."

"Hullo, what's that?" exclaimed Iver, suddenly sitting up in his chair.

They heard the sound of a horse's galloping on the road outside. The noise of the hoofs stopped suddenly; they sat listening. In a minute or two the butler led a groom in the Tristram livery on to the lawn. He came quickly across to Iver, touching his hat.

"Beg pardon, sir, but could I see Mr. Tristram? I've an important message for him."

At the same moment Janie and Harry Tristram came out on to the grass. Harry saw the groom, and was with them in a moment, Janie following.

"Well, Sam, what is it? You were riding hard."

"Her ladyship has had a relapse, sir, and Dr. Fryer ordered me to ride over and tell you at once. No time to lose, he said, sir."

"Did you bring a horse for me?"

"No, sir. But I'm riding Quilldriver."

"I'll go back on him. You can walk." He turned to the rest. "I must go at once," he said. "I don't know what this may mean."

"Not so bad as it sounds, I hope," said Iver. "But you'd best be off at once."

Harry included Mina and Mr. Neeld in one light nod and walked briskly toward the gate, Iver and Janie accompanying him. Mina and Neeld were left together and sat in silence some moments.

"It sounds as if she was dying," said Mina at last in a low voice.

"Yes, poor woman."

"I saw her once lately. She was very beautiful, Mr. Neeld."

"Yes, yes—to her own great trouble, poor thing."

"You knew about—"

"Oh, everybody knew, Mme. Zabriska."

"Yes, and now she's dying!" She turned to him, looking him fairly in the face. "And Harry'll be Tristram of Blent," she said.

"Yes," said Neeld. "He'll be Tristram of Blent."

MINA CAME AND STOOD OVER HIM. "YOU KNOW IT WAS IN THE JOURNAL, I'M SURE YOU KNOW," SAID SHE.

Both fell into silence again, looking absently at the sunshine playing among the trees. They were not to share their secret just yet. A link was missing between them still.

Harry came to where the horse was and stood there for a moment while the groom altered the stirrups to suit him.

"It's the beginning of the end, if not the end itself," he said.

"Our earnest good wishes to her."

"My love," said Janie. Her father glanced quickly at her.

Harry jumped into the saddle, waved his hand to them and started at a gallop for Blent. The groom, with another touch of his hat, trudged off in his master's track. Janie Iver stood looking as long as Harry was in sight.

"He won't spare the horse," said Iver.

"Well, he can't this time—and, anyhow, he wouldn't, if he wanted to get there." She took her father's arm and pressed it. "Father, Harry Tristram has just asked me to marry him. He said Lady Tristram wanted it settled before—before she died, or he wouldn't have spoken so soon."

"Well, Janie, dear?"

"When the groom came I had just told him that I would give him an answer in a week. But now—" She made a gesture with her free hand which seemed to mean bewilderment. She could not tell what would happen now.

CHAPTER VIII.

Duty and Mr. Neeld.

When Mina Zabriska brought back the news from Fairholme and announced it with an intensity of significance which the sudden aggravation of an illness long known to be mortal hardly accounted for, Major Duplay grew very solemn. The moment for action approached and the nearer it came the less was the major satisfied with his position and resources. The scene by the pool had taught him that he would have a stiff fight. He had been hard hit by Harry's shrewd suggestion that he must ask Iver himself for the means of proving what he meant to tell Iver. The only alternative, however, was to procure money for the necessary investigations from his niece and his niece, though comfortably well off, was not rich. Nor was she longer zealous in the cause. The Imp was sulky and sullen with him, sorry she had ever touched the affair at all, ready, he suspected, to grasp at any excuse for letting it drop. This temper of her's foreboded a refusal to open her purse. It was serious in another way. Of himself Duplay knew nothing. Mina was his only witness; her evidence, though really second-hand, was undoubtedly weighty; it would, at least, make inquiries necessary. But would she give it? Duplay was conscious that she was capable of turning round on him and declaring that she had made a blunder. If she did that, what would happen?

Harry's attitude would be simple. He would at the proper time produce his certificates, testifying to the death of Sir Randolph, the marriage of his parents, his own birth. The copies were in perfect order and, duly authenticated, they were evidence in themselves; the originals could be had and would bear out the copies. All this had been well looked after and Duplay did not doubt it. What had he to set up against it? Only that the third certificate was false and that somewhere, neither he nor even Mina knew where, bearing some dates, neither he nor Mina knew what, there must be two other certificates, one fatal to Harry's case as fixing his birth at an earlier date, the other throwing at least grave suspicion on it by recording a second ceremony of marriage. But where were these certificates? Conceivably they had been destroyed—that was not likely, but was possible. At any rate to find them would need much time and some money. On reflection the major could not blame Harry for defying him by the pool.

It will be seen that the information which Mina gleaned from her mother and filled in from her own childish recollection was not so minute in the matter of date as that which Madam de Kries had given at the time of the events to Mr. Cholderton and which was now locked away in the drawer at Mr. Jenkinson Neeld's chambers. The major would have been materially assisted by a sight of that document; it would have narrowed the necessary area of inquiry and given a definiteness to his assertions, which must have carried weight with Mr. Iver.

Mina, being sulky, would not talk to her uncle; she could not talk to Janie Iver; she did not see Harry and would not have dared to talk to him if she had. But it need hardly be said that she was dying to talk to somebody. With such matters on hand she struggled against silence like soda water against the cork. Merely to stare down at Blent and wonder what was happening there whetted a curiosity it could not satisfy. She felt out of the game and the feeling was intolerable. As a last resort, in a last effort to keep in touch with it, although she had been warned that she would find nothing of interest to her in the volume, she telegraphed to a library bookseller in London to send her Mr. Cholderton's Journal. It came the day after it was published, four days after she had made Mr. Neeld's acquaintance, and while Lady Tristram, contrary to expectation, still held death at arm's length and lay looking at her own picture. The next morning Neeld received a pressing invitation to go to tea at Merrion lodge. Without a moment's hesitation he went; with him, too, all resolutions to know and to care nothing further about the matter vanished before the first chance of seeing more of it. And Mina had been Mlle. de Kries.

She received him in the library. The Journal lay on the table. Something had restored animation to her manner and malice to her eyes. She began by flattering her visitor outrageously, and indulging in a number of false statements regarding her delight with the Journal, and the amusement and instruction she had gained from it. She even professed to have mastered the hygroxeric method, observing that a note by the editor put the whole thing in a nutshell. Much pleased, yet vaguely disappointed, Mr. Neeld concluded that she had no more to say about the visit to Heidelberg.

The Imp turned over the pages leisurely while Neeld sipped his tea.

"I see you put little asterisk things where you leave out anything," she observed. "That's convenient, isn't it?"

"I think it's usual," said he.

"And another thing you do—Oh, you really are a splendid editor—you put the date at the top of every page, even where Mr. Cholderton's entry runs over ever so many pages. He is rather long sometimes, isn't he?"

"I've always found the date at the top of the page a convenience in reading myself," said Mr. Neeld.

"Yes, it tells you just where you are—and where Mr. Cholderton was." She laughed a little. "Yes, look here; page 365, May, 1875; he's at Berlin! Then there are some asterisks—"

Mr. Neeld looked up from his tea.

"And you turn over the page" (the Imp turned over with the air of a discoverer) "and you find him at Interlaken in—why, in August, Mr. Neeld!" An amiable surprise appeared on her face. "Where was he in between?" she asked.

"I—I suppose he stayed in Berlin."

"Oh, perhaps. No—look here. He says: 'I had not previously met Sir Silas Minting, as I left Berlin before he arrived in the beginning of June.'" The Imp laid down the Journal, leaned back in her chair and regarded Neeld steadily. "You told me right," she added. "I don't find any mention of my mother, nor of Heidelberg. It's funny that he doesn't mention Heidelberg." She poured out a second cup of tea and waited. The first part of her work was done. She had made Neeld very uncomfortable. "Because," she added, after she had given her previous remarks time to soak in, "between May and August, 1875, is just about the time I remember him at Heidelberg—the time when he met Mrs. Fitzhubert, you know." Mina was keenly excited now. Had the Journal told Neeld anything? Was that the meaning of his asterisks?

"There was something about his visit to Heidelberg, but it contained nothing of public interest, Mme. Zabriska, and in my discretion I omitted it."

"Why didn't you tell me that the other day? You gave me to understand that he only mentioned Heidelberg casually."

"I may have expressed myself—"

"And did he mention us?"

Neeld rose to his feet and took a turn up and down the room.

"In my discretion I left the passage out. I can answer no questions about it. Please don't press me, Mme. Zabriska."

"I will know," she said, excitedly, almost angrily.

Neeld came to stand opposite her, deep perplexity expressing itself in his look and manner. "Did he talk about us? Did he talk about Lady Tristram?"

"I am speaking to you, and to you only, Mme. Zabriska!"

"Yes, yes—to me only."

"He did not mention you, and he did speak of Lady Tristram."

"That's why you weren't surprised when I told you he called me the Imp!" She smiled a moment and Neeld smiled, too. But in an instant she was eager again. "And about Lady Tristram?"

"It was no use reprinting poor Lady Tristram's story." There was a long pause; Mina arose, took the Journal, put it in the cupboard and turned the key on it. She came back and stood over him.

"You know," she said, "it was in the Journal? I'm sure you know."

"Know what?" Mr. Neeld was fighting in the last ditch.

"But I don't want to tell you unless you know. No, I'm sure you know!"

"And do you know?"

"Yes, I know. My mother told me."

They understood one another now. Neeld made no further pretense.

"You mean about Harry Tristram?" he asked simply, but in a low voice.

"Yes. At first I didn't know what it meant to him. But I know now."

Neeld made no reply and there was another moment of silence.

"And you know what it would mean to him?" she asked.

Neeld nodded; of course he knew that. "What are you going to do?" He raised his hands and let them drop again in a confession that he did not know. "I knew and I told," she said. He started a little. "Yes, I told because I was spiteful. I was the Imp! I've never been happy since I told. Mr. Tristram knows I've told, though he denies there's anything in it. But he knows I've told. And still he's been kind to me." Her voice shook.

"You told; whom did you tell?"

"Never mind—or guess if you can. I shan't tell him any more. I shan't help him any more. I'm for Mr. Tristram. Thick and thin, I'm for Mr. Tristram now." She came a step nearer to him. "The man I told may try, but I don't think he can do much without us. Why should we tell? Is it our business? You suppressed it in the Journal. Can't you suppress it now?"

"The Ivers?" he stammered.

"The Ivers! What's it to the Ivers compared to what it is to him? It'll never come out. If it did—Oh, but it won't! It's life and death to him. And isn't it right; isn't it justice? He's her son. This thing's just a horrible accident. Oh, if you'd heard him speak of Blent!" She paused a moment, rubbing her hand across her eyes. Then she threw herself back into her chair, asking again, "What are you going to do?"

(To Be Continued.)

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