

lord. Yet a single garden party in the year would represent pretty accurately their personal stake in the matter. If you live on crumbs, a good big crumb is not to be despised.

Harry Tristram was sorry that his mother must die and that he must lose her; the confederates had become close friends, and nobody who knew her intimately could help feeling that his life and even the world would be poorer by the loss of a real, if not striking, individuality. But neither he nor she thought of her death as the main thing; it no more than ushered in the great event for which they had spent years preparing. And he was downright glad that she could see no visitors; that fact saved him added anxieties, and spared her the need of being told about Mina Zabriska and warned to bear herself warily towards the daughter of Madame de Kries. Harry did not ask his mother whether she remembered the name—the question was unnecessary; nor did he tell his mother that one who had borne the name was at Merion Lodge. He waited, vaguely expecting that trouble would come from Merion, but entirely confident in his ability to fight and worst the tricky little woman whom he had not feared to snub; and in his heart he thought well of her, and believed she had as little inclination to hurt him as she seemed to have power. His only active step was to pursue his attentions to Janie Iver.

Yet he was not happy about his intentions. He meant to marry the girl, and thought she would marry him. He did not believe that she was inclined to fall in love with him. He had no right to expect it, since he was not falling in love with her. But it hurt that terrible pride of his; he was in a way disgusted with the part he had chosen, and humiliated to think that he might not be accepted for himself. A refusal would have hurt him incalculably; such an assent as he counted upon would wound him somewhat too. He had keen eyes, and he had formed his own opinion about Iobh Broadley. None the less, he held straight on his course; and the spinster ladies were a little shocked to observe that Lady Tristram's illness did not interfere at all with her son's courtship; people in that position of life were certainly curious.

A new vexation had come upon him, the work of his pet aversions, the Gainsboroughs. He had seen Mr Gainsborough once, and retained a picture of a small, ineffectual man with a ragged tawny-brown beard and a big soft-felt hat, who had an air of being very timid, rather pressed for money, and endowed with a kind heart. Now, it seemed Mr Gainsborough was again overflowing with family affection (a disposition not always welcomed by its objects), and wanted to shake poor Lady Tristram's hand, and wanted poor Lady Tristram to kiss his daughter—wanted, in fact, a thorough-going burying of hatchets and a touching reconciliation. With that justice of judgment of which neither youth nor prejudice quite deprived him, Harry liked the letter; but he was certain that the writer would be immensely tiresome. And again—in the end as in the beginning—he did not want the Gainsboroughs at Blent; above all not just at the time when Blent was about to pass into his hands. It looked, however, as though it would be extremely difficult to keep them away. Mr Gainsborough was obviously a man who would not waste his chance of a funeral; he might be fenced with till then, but it would need startling measures to keep him from a funeral.

"I hate hearsay people," grumbled Harry, as he threw the letter down. But the Gainsboroughs were soon to be driven out of his head by something more immediate and threatening.

Blent Pool is a round basin, some 50ft or 60ft in diameter; the banks are steep and the depth great; on the Blent Hall side there is no approach to it, except through a thick wood overhanging the water; on the other side the road up the valley runs close by, leaving a few yards of

turf between itself and the brink. The scene is gloomy except in sunshine, and the place little frequented. It was a favourite haunt of Harry Tristram's, and he lay on the grass one evening, smoking and looking down on the black water; for the clouds were heavy above and rain threatened. His own mood was in harmony, gloomy and dark, in rebellion against the burden he carried, yet with no thought of laying it down. He did not notice a man who came up the road and took his stand just behind him, waiting there for a moment in silence and apparent irresolution.

"Mr Tristram."

Harry turned his head and saw Major Duplay; the Major was grave, almost solemn, as he raised his hat a trifle in formal salute.

"Do I interrupt you?"

"You couldn't have found a man more at leisure." Harry did not rise, but gathered his knees up, clasping his hands round them and looking up in Duplay's face. "You want to speak to me?"

"Yes, on a difficult matter." A visible embarrassment hung about the Major; he seemed to have little liking for his task. "I'm aware," he went on, "that I may lay myself open to some understanding in what I'm about to say. I shall beg you to remember that I am in a difficult position, and that I am a gentleman and a soldier."

Harry said nothing; he waited with unmoved face and no sign of perturbation.

"It's best to be plain," Duplay proceeded. "It's best to be open with you. I have taken the liberty of following you here for that purpose." He came a step nearer, and stood over Harry. "Certain facts have come to my knowledge which concern you very intimately."

A polite curiosity and a slight scepticism were expressed in Harry's "Indeed!"

"And not you only, or—I need hardly say—I shouldn't feel it necessary to occupy myself with the matter. A word about my own position you will perhaps forgive."

Harry frowned a little; certainly Duplay was inclined to prolixity; he seemed to be rolling the situation round his tongue and making the most of its favour.

"Since we came here we have made many acquaintances, your own among the number; we are in a sense your guests."

"Not in a sense that puts you under any obligation," observed Harry.

"I'm sincerely glad to hear you say that; it relieves my position to some extent. But we have made friends, too. In one house I myself (I may leave my niece out of the question) have been received with a hearty, cordial, warm friendship that seems already an old friendship. Now that does put one under an obligation, Mr Tristram."

"You refer to our friends the Ivers? Yes?"

"In my view, under a heavy obligation. I am, I say, in my judgment bound to serve them in all ways in my power, and to deal with them as I should wish and expect them to deal with me in a similar case."

Harry nodded a careless assent, and turned his eyes away towards the Pool; even already he seemed to know what was coming, or something of it.

"Facts have come to my knowledge of which it might be—indeed I must say of which it is—of vital importance that Mr Iver should be informed."

"I thought the facts concerned me?" asked Harry, with brows a little raised.

"Yes, and as matters now stand they concern him too for that very reason." Duplay had gathered confidence; his tone was calm and assured as he came step by step near his mark, as he established position after position in his attack.

"You are paying attentions to Miss Iver—with a view to marriage, I presume."

Harry made no sign. Duplay proceeded slowly and with careful deliberation.

"Those attentions are offered and received as from Mr Tristram—as from the future Lord Tristram of Blent. I can't believe that you're ignorant of what I'm about to say. If you are, I must beg forgiveness for the pain I shall inflict on you. You, sir, are not the future Lord Tristram of Blent."

A silence followed; a slight drizzle

had begun to fall, speckling the waters of the Pool, neither man heeded it.

"It would be impertinent in me," the Major resumed, "to offer you any sympathy on the score of that misfortune; believe me, however, that my knowledge—my full knowledge—of the circumstances can incline me to nothing but a deep regret. But facts are facts, however hardly they may bear on individuals." He paused. "I have asserted what I know. You are entitled to ask me for proofs, Mr Tristram."

Harry was silent a moment, thinking very hard. Many modes of defence came into his busy brain and were rejected. Should he be tempestuous? No. Should he be amazed? Again no. Even on his own theory of the story, Duplay's assertion hardly entitled him to be amazed.

"As regards my part in this matter," he said at last, "I have only this to say. The circumstances of my birth—with which I am, as you rightly suppose, quite familiar—were such as to render the sort of notion you have got hold of plausible enough. I don't want what you call proofs—though you'll want them badly if you mean to pursue your present line. I have my own proofs—perfectly in order, perfectly satisfactory. That's all I have to say about my part of the matter. About your part in it I can, I think, be almost equally brief. Are you merely Mr Iver's friend, or are you also, as you put it, paying attention to Miss Iver?"

"That, sir, has nothing to do with it."

Harry Tristram looked up at him. For the first time he broke into a smile as he studied Duplay's face. "I shouldn't in the least wonder," he said almost chaffingly, "if you believed that to be true. You get hold of a cock-and-bull story about my being illegitimate. (Oh, I've no objection to plainness either in its proper place); you come to me and tell me almost in so many words that if I don't give up the lady you'll go to her father and show him your precious proofs. Everybody knows that you're after Miss Iver yourself, and yet you say that it has nothing to do with it! That's the sort of thing a man may manage to believe about himself; it's not the sort of thing that other people believe about him, Major Duplay." He rose slowly to his feet, and the men stood face to face on the edge of the Pool. The rain fell more heavily. Duplay turned up his collar. Harry took no notice of the downpour.

"I'm perfectly satisfied as to the honesty of my own motives," said Duplay.

"That's not true, and you know it. You may try to shut your eyes, but you can't succeed."

Duplay was shaken. His enemy put into words what his own conscience had said to him. His position was hard; he was doing what honestly seemed to him the right thing to do; he could not seem to do it because it was right. He would be wronging the Ivers if he did not do it, yet how ugly it could be made to look! He was not above suspicion even to himself, though he clung eagerly to his plea of honesty.

"You fail to put yourself in my place"—he began.

"Absolutely, I assure you," Henry interrupted, with quiet insolence.

"And I can't put myself in yours, sir. But I can tell you what I mean to do. It is my most earnest wish to take no steps in this matter at all; but that rests with you, not with me. At least I desire to take none during Lady Tristram's illness, or during her life should she unhappily not recover."

"My mother will not recover," said Harry. "It's a matter of a few weeks at most."

Duplay nodded. "At least wait till then," he urged. "Do nothing more in regard to the matter we have spoken of while your mother lives." He spoke with genuine feeling. Harry Tristram marked it and took account of it. It was a point in the game to him.

"In turn I'll tell you what I mean to do," he said. "I mean to proceed exactly as if you had never come to Merion Lodge, had never got your proofs from God knows where, and had never given me the pleasure of this very peculiar interview. My mother would ask no consideration from you, and I ask none for her any

more than for myself. To be plain for the last time, sir, you're making a fool of yourself at the best, and at the worst a blackguard into the bargain." He paused and broke into a laugh. "Well, then, where are the proofs? Show them me. Or send them down to Blent. Or I'll come up to Merion. We'll have a look at them—for your sake not for mine."

"I may have spoken inexactly, Mr. Tristram. I know the facts; I could get, but have not yet got, the proof of them."

"Then don't waste your money, Major Duplay." He waited an instant before he gave a deeper thrust. "Or Iver's—because I don't think your purse is long enough to furnish the resources of war. You'd get the money from him? I'm beginning to wonder more and more at the views people contrive to take of their own actions."

Harry had fought his fight well, but now perhaps he went wrong, even as he had gone wrong with Mina Zabriska at Fairholme. He was not content to defeat or repel; he must triumph, he must taunt. The insolence of his speech and air drove Duplay to fury. If it told him he was beaten now, it made him determined not to give up the contest; it made him wish, too, that he was in a country where duelling was not considered absurd. At any rate he was minded to rebuke Harry.

"You're a young man—" he began.

"Tell me that when I'm beaten. It may console me," interrupted Harry.

"You'll be beaten, sir, sooner than you think," said Duplay gravely. "But though you refuse my offer, I shall consider Lady Tristram. I will not move while she lives, unless you force me to it."

"By marrying the heiress you want?" sneered Harry.

"By carrying out your swindling plans," Duplay's temper began to fail him. "Listen. As soon as your engagement is announced—if it ever is—I go to Mr. Iver with what I know. If you abandon the idea of that marriage you are safe from me. I have no other friends here; the rest must look after themselves. But you shall not delude my friends with false pretences."

"And I shall not spoil your game with Miss Iver?"

Duplay's temper quite failed him. He had not meant this to happen; he had pictured himself calm, Harry wild and unrestrained—either in fury or in supplication. The young man had himself in hand, firmly in hand; the elder lost his self-control.

"If you insult me again, sir, I'll throw you in the river!"

Harry's slow smile broke across his face. With all his wariness and calculation he measured the major's figure. The attitude of mind was not heroic; it was Harry's. Who, having ten thousand men, will go against him that has twenty thousand? A fool or a hero, Harry would have said, and he claimed neither name. But in the end he reckoned that he was a match for the major. He smiled more broadly and raised his brows, asking of sky and earth as he glanced round:

"Since when have blackmailers grown so sensitive?"

In an instant Duplay closed with him in a struggle on which hung not death indeed, but an unpleasant and humiliating ducking. The rain fell on both; the water waited for one. The major was taller and heavier; Harry was younger and in better trim. Harry was cooler, too. It was rude hugging, nothing more; neither of them had skill or knew more tricks than the common, dimly-remembered devices of urchinhood. The fight was most unpicturesque, most unheroic. But it was tolerably grim for all that. The grass grew slippery under the rain and the slithering feet; luck had its share. And just behind them ran the Queen's highway. They did not think of the Queen's highway. To this pass a determination to be calm, whatever else they were, had brought them.

(To be Continued.)

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