Serial Story.

TRISTRAM OF BLENT.

By ANTHONY HOPE.

An Episode in the Story of an Ancient House.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VERY SAME DAY.

"Shall I wait up, my lord? Miss Gainsborough has gone to her room. I've turned out the lights and shut up the house.

Harry looked at the clock in the study. It was one o'clock.

"I thought you'd gone to bed long ago, Mason." He rose and stretched himself. "I'm going to town early in the morning. I shan't want any breakfast and I shan't take anybody with me. Tell Fisher to pack my portmanteau—things for a few days—and send it to Paddington. I'll have it fetched from there. Tell him to be ready to follow me, if I send for him."

"Yes, my lord."

"Give that letter to Miss Gainsborough in the morning." He handed Mason a thick letter. Two others lay on the table. After a moment's apparent hesitation Harry put them in his pocket. "I'll post them myself," he said. "When did Miss Gainsborough go to her room?"

"About an hour back, my lord."

"Did she stay in the Long Gallery till then?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I may be away a little while, Mason. I hope Miss Gainsborough—and Mr Gainsborough too—will be staying on some time. Make them comfortable."

Not a sign of curiosity or surprise escaped Mason. His "Yes, my lord," was just the same as though Harry had ordered an egg for breakfast. Sudden comings and goings had always been the fashion of the house.

"All right. Good-night, Mason."

"Good-night, my lord." Mason looked round for something to carry off—the force of habit—found nothing, and retired noiselessly.

"One o'clock!" sighed Harry. "Ah, I'm tired. I won't go to bed though, I couldn't sleep."

He moved restlessly about the room. His flood of feeling had gone by; for the time the power of thought too seemed to have deserted him. He had told Cecily everything; he had told Janie enough; he had yielded to an impulse to write a line to Mina Zabriska—because she had been so mixed up in it all. The documents that were to have proved his claim made a little heap of ashes in the grate.

All this had been two hours' hard work. But after all two hours is not long to spend in getting rid of an old life and entering on a new. He found himself rather surprised at the simplicity of the process. What was there left to do? He had only to go to London and see his lawyer, an interview easy enough for him, though startling no doubt to the lawyer. Cecily would be put into possession of her own. There was nothing sensational. He would travel a bit perhaps, or just stay in town. He had money enough to live on quietly or to use in making more; for his mother's savings were indubitably his, left to him by a will in which he, the real Harry, was so expressly designated by his full name—even more than that—as "Harry Austen Fitzhubert Tristram, otherwise Henry Austen Fitzhubert, my son by the late Captain Austen Fitzhubert"—that no question of his right could arise. That money would not go with the title. Only Blent and all the realty passed with that; the money was not affected by the date of his birth; that must be explained to Cecily by his lawyer or perhaps she would expect to get it. For the moment there was nothing to do but to go to London—and then perhaps travel a bit. He smiled for an instant; it certainly struck him as rather an anticlimax. He threw himself on a sofa and, in spite of his conviction that he could not sleep, dozed off almost directly.

It was three when he awoke; he went up to his room, had a bath, shaved, and put on a tweed suit. Coming down to the study again, he opened the shutters and looked out. It would be light soon, and he could go away. He was fretfully impatient of staying. He drank some whisky and soda-water, and smoked a cigar as he walked up and down. Yes, there were signs of dawn now; the darkness lifted over the hill on which Merrion stood.

Merrion! Yes, Merrion. And the Major? Well, Duplay had not frightened him, Duplay had not turned him out. He was going of his own will—of his own act anyhow, for he could not feel so sure about the will. But for the first time it struck him that his abdication might accrue to the Major's benefit, that he had won for Duplay the prize which he was sure the gallant officer could not have achieved for himself. "I'll be hanged if I do that," he muttered. "Yes, I know what I'll do," he added, smiling.

He got his hat and stick and went out into the garden. The windows of the Long Gallery were all dark. Harry smiled again and shook his fist at them. There was no light in Cecily's window. He was glad to think that the girl slept; if he were tired she must be terribly tired too. He was quite alone—alone with the old place for the last time. He walked to where he had sat with Cecily, where his mother used to sit. He was easy in his mind about his mother. When she had wanted him to keep the house and the name, she had no idea of the true state of the case. And in fact she herself had done it all by requesting him to invite the Gainsboroughs to her funeral. That was proof enough that he had not wronged her: in the mood he was in it seemed quite proof enough. Realities were still a little dim to him, and fancies rather real. His outward calmness of manner had returned, but his mind was not in a normal state. Still he was awake enough to the every-day world and to his ordinary feelings to remain very eager that his sacrifice should not turn to the Major's good.

He started at a brisk walk to the little bridge, reached the middle of it, and stopped short. The talk he had had with Mina Zabriska at this very spot came back to his mind. "The blood not the law!" he had said. Well, it was to the blood he had bowed, and not to the law. He was strong about not having been frightened by the law. Nor had he been dispossessed, he insisted on that, too. He had given: he had chosen to give. He made a movement as though to walk on, but for a moment he could not. When it came to going, for an instant he could not go. The parting was difficult. He had no discontent with what he had done; on the whole it seemed far easier than he could ever have imagined. But it was hard to go, to leave Blent just as the slowly growing day brought into sight every outline that he knew so well, and began to warm the gardens into life. "I should rather like to stay a day," was his thought, as he lingered still. But the next moment he was across the bridge, slamming the gate behind him and beginning to mount the road up the valley. He had heard a shutter thrown open and a window raised: the sound came from the wing where Cecily slept. He did not want to see her now; he did not wish her to see him. She was to awake to undivided possession, free from any reminder of him. That was his fancy, his idea of making his gift to her of what was hers more splendid and more complete. But she did see him; she watched him from her window as he walked away up the valley. He did not know; true to his fancy, he never turned his head.

Bob Broadley was an early riser, as his business in life demanded. At six o'clock he was breakfasting in a bright little room opening on his garden. He was in the middle of his rasher when a shadow fell across his plate. Looking up, he started to see Harry Tristram at the doorway.

"Lord Tristram!" he exclaimed.

"You've called me Tristram all your life. I should think you might still," observed Harry.

"Oh, all right. But what brings you here? These aren't generally your hours, are they?"

"Perhaps not. May I have some breakfast?"

The maid was summoned, and brought him what he asked. She nearly dropped the cup and saucer when she realised that the Great Man was there—at six in the morning!

"I'm on my way to London," said Harry. "Going to take the train at Fillingford instead of Blentmouth, because I wanted to drop in on you. I've something to say."

"I expect I've heard. It's very kind of you to come, but I saw Janie Iver in Blentmouth yesterday."

"I daresay; but she didn't tell you what I'm going to say.'

Harry, having made but a pretence of breakfasting, pushed away his plate. "I'll smoke if you don't mind. You go on eating," he said. "Do you remember a little talk we had about our friend Duplay? We agreed that we should both like to put a spoke in his wheel."

"And you've done it," said Bob, reaching for his pipe from the mantelpiece.

"I did do it. I can't do it any more. You know there were certain reasons which made a marriage between Janie Iver and me seem desirable. I'm saying nothing against her, and I don't intend to say a word against myself. Well, those reasons no longer exist. I have written to her to say so. She'll get that letter this afternoon."

"You've written to break off the engagement?" Bob spoke slowly and thoughtfully, but with no great surprise.

"Yes. She accepted me under a serious misapprehension. When I asked her I was in a position to which I had no ——" He interrupted himself, frowning a little. Not even now was he ready to say that. "In a position which I no longer occupy," he amended, recovering his placidity. "All the world will know that very soon. I am no longer owner of Blent."

"What?" cried Bob, jumping up and looking hard at Harry. The surprise came now.

"And I am no longer what you called me just now—Lord Tristram. You know the law about succeeding to peerages and entailed lands? Very well. My birth has been discovered (he smiled for an instant) not to satisfy that law—the merits of which, Bob, we wont discuss. Consequently not I, but Miss Gainsborough succeeds my mother in the title and the property. I have informed Miss Gainsborough—I ought to say Lady Tristram—of these facts, and I'm on my way to London to see the lawyers and get everything done in proper order."

"Good God, do you mean what you say?"

"Oh, of course I do. Do you take me for an idiot, to come up here at six in the morning to talk balderdash?" Harry was obviously irritated. "Everybody will know soon. I came to tell you because I fancy you've some concern in it, and, as I say, I still want that spoke put in the Major's wheel."

Bob sat down and was silent for many moments smoking hard.

"But Janie won't do that," he broke out at last. "She's too straight, too loyal. If she's accepted you ——"

"A beautiful idea, Bob, if she was in love with me. But she isn't. Can you tell me you think she is?"

Bob grunted inarticulately—an obvious, though not a skilful evasion of the question.

"And, anyhow," Harry pursued, "the thing's at an end. I sha'n't marry her. Now, if that suggests any action on your part I—well, I shall be glad I came to breakfast." He got up and went to the window, looking out on the neat little garden and to the paddock beyond.

In a moment Bob Broadley's hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned and faced him.

"What a thing for you! You—you lose it all?"

"I have given it all up."

"I can't realise it, you know. The change ——"

"Perhaps I can't either. I don't know that I want to, Bob."

"Who made the discovery? How did it come out? Nobody ever had any suspicion of it!"

Harry looked at him long and thoughtfully. But in the end he only shook his head, saying, "Well, it's true, anyhow."

"It beats me. I see what you mean about myself and— Still, I give you my word I hate its happening. Who's this girl? Why is she to come here? Who knows anything about her?

"You don't, of course," Harry conceded with a smile. "No more did I a week ago."

"Couldn't you have made a fight for it?"

"Yes, a deuced good fight. But I chose to let it go. Now don't go on looking as if you didn't understand the thing. It's simple enough."

"But Lady Tristram—your mother—must have known——"

"The question didn't arise as long as my mother lived," said Harry