

Serial Story.

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TRISTRAM OF BLENT.

By ANTHONY HOPE.

AN EPISODE IN THE STORY OF AN ANCIENT HOUSE.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONSPIRATORS AND A CRUX.

Lord Southend was devoted to his wife, a state of feeling natural often, creditable always. Yet the reason people gave for it—and gave with something like an explicit sanction from him—was not a very exalted one. Susanna made him so exceedingly comfortable. She was born to manage an hotel and cause it to pay fifteen per cent. Being a person—not of social importance, nothing could make her that—out of social rank, she was forced to restrict her genius to a couple of private houses. The result was like the light of the lamps in the heroine's boudoir, a soft brilliancy; in whose glamour Susanna's plain face and limited intellectual interests were lost to view. She was also a particularly good woman; but her husband knew better than to talk about that.

Behold him after the most perfect of lunches, his arm chair in exactly the right spot, his papers by him, his cigar to his hand (even these Susanna understood), a sense of peace in his heart, and in his head a mild wonder that anybody was discontented with the world. In this condition he intended to spend at least a couple of hours; after which Susanna would drive him gently once round the Park, take him to the House of Lords, wait twenty minutes, and then land him at the Imperium. He lit a cigar and took up the "Economist"; it was not the moment for anything exciting.

"A lady to see you, my lord—on important business."

Excessive comfort is enervating. After a brief and futile resistance he found **Mina Zabriska in the room, and himself regarding her with mingled consternation and amusement.** Keiles of excitement hung about the Imp, but they were converted to business purposes. She came as an agent. The name of her principal awoke Southend's immediate interest.

"She's come up to London?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, both of us. We're at their old home."

Southend discovered his peace-ness and studied her thin mobile little face. "And what have you come up for?" he asked after a pause.

Mina shrugged her shoulders. "Just to see what's going on," she said. "I daresay you wonder what I've got to do with it?" His manner seemed to assent, and she indicated her position briefly.

"Oh, there it is, is it? You knew the late Lady Tristram. And you knew—"

"Agin he regarded her thoughtfully. "I hope Lady Tristram—the new one's well?"

"Then was the sound of a whispered consultation outside the door; it drew Mina's eyes in that direction.

"That's all right," he smiled. "It's only my wife scolding the butler for having let you in. This is my time for rest."

"Rest?" exclaimed Mina, rather scornfully. "You wrote to Cecily as if you could do something."

"That was rash of me. What do you want done?" he heard about you from her, you know."

"Oh, she has nothing to do with this. It's just between Cecily and Mr. Tristram."

"And you, and me, apparently?"

"What was your idea when you wrote? I made Cecily let me come and see you because it sounded as if you had an idea." If he had no idea, it was clear that contempt awaited him.

"I wanted to be friendly. But as for doing anything—well, that hardly

depends on me."

"But things can't go on as they are, you know," she said brusquely. "Unhappily, as I understand the law—"

"Oh, I understand the law, too—and very silly it is. I suppose it can't be changed?"

"Good gracious, my dear Madame Zabriska! Changed? And on this point, too! 'Nolumus leges Angliæ'—". He just stopped himself from the quotation.

"What are Acts of Parliament for?" Mina demanded.

"Absolutely out of the question," he laughed. "Even if everybody consented, absolutely."

"And Harry Tristram wouldn't consent, you mean?"

"Well, could any man?"

Mina looked round the room with a discontented air; there is such a lamentable gulf between feeling that something must be done and discovering what it is.

"I don't say positively that nothing can be done," he resumed after a moment, dangling his glass and looking at her covertly. "Are you at leisure this afternoon?"

"If you've got anything to suggest," Mina had grown distrustful of his intelligence, and her tone showed it.

"I thought you might like to come and see a friend of mine, who is kind enough to be interested in Harry Tristram." He added, with the consciousness of naming an important person, "I mean Lady Everswood."

"Who's she?" asked the Imp curiously.

To do them justice, Englishmen seldom forget that allowances must be made for foreigners. Lord Southend explained gravely and patiently.

"Well, let's go," said Mina indifferently. "Not that it seems much use," her manner added.

"Excuse me a moment," said he, and he went out to soothe his wife's alarm and assure her that he was not tired.

As they drove, Mina heard more of Lady Everswood—among other things, that she had known Addie Tristram as a child; this fact impressed the Imp beyond all the rest. But Lady Everswood herself made a greater impression still. An unusual timidity assailed and conquered Mina when she found herself with the white-haired old lady, who never seemed to do more than gently suggest, and yet exercised command. Southend watched them together with keen amusement, while Lady Everswood drew out of Mina some account of Cecily's feelings and of the scene at Blent.

"Well, that's Tristram all over," sighed Lady Everswood at the end.

"Yes, isn't it?" cried Mina, emboldened by a sympathy that spoke her own thought. "She hates to feel she's taken everything away from him. But Lord Southend says he can't have it back."

"Oh, no, no, no, my dear. Still—"

She glanced at Southend, doubtful whether to mention their scheme.

He shook his head slightly.

"I daresay Lady Tristram was momentarily excited," he remarked to Mina. "And I think, too, that she exaggerates what Harry feels. As far as I've seen him, he's by no means miserable."

"Well, she is anyhow," said Mina. "And you won't convince her that he isn't." She turned to Lady Everswood. "Is there nothing to be done? You see it's all being wasted."

"All being wasted?"

"Yes, Blent, and all of it. He can't

have it; and as things are now she can't enjoy it."

"Very perverse, very perverse, certainly," murmured Southend, frowning—although he was rather amused, too.

"With an obvious solution," said Lady Everswood, "if only we lived in the realms of romance."

"I have suggested a magician," put in Southend. "Though he doesn't look much like one," he added with a laugh.

Mina did not understand his remark, but she caught Lady Everswood's meaning.

"Yes," she said, "but Harry wouldn't do that either."

"He doesn't like his cousin?"

"Yes, I think so." She smiled as she added, "And even if he didn't that mightn't matter."

The other two exchanged glances as they listened. Mina, inspired by a subject that never failed to rouse her, gained courage.

"Any more than it mattered with Miss Iver," she pursued. "And he might just as likely have given Blent to Cecily in that way as in the way he actually did—if she'd wanted it very much and—and it had been a splendid thing for him to do."

Lady Everswood nodded gently. Southend raised his brows in a sort of protest against this relentless analysis.

"Because that sort of thing would have appealed to him. But he'd never take it from her; he wouldn't even if he was in love with her." She addressed Lady Everswood especially.

"You understand that?" she asked. "He wouldn't be indebted to her. He'd hate her for that."

"Not very amiable," commented Southend.

"Amiable? No!" Amiability seemed at a discount with the Imp.

"You know him very well, my dear?"

"Yes, I—I came to." Mina paused, and suddenly blushed at the remembrance of an idea that had once been suggested to her by Major Duplay.

"And I'm very fond of her," she added.

"In the deadlock," said Southend, "I think you'll have to try my prescription, Lady Everswood."

"You think that would be of use?"

"It would pacify this pride of Master Harry's perhaps."

Mina looked from one to the other. "Do you mean there's anything possible?" she asked.

"My dear, you're a very good friend."

"I'm not very happy. I don't know what in the world Cecily will do. And yet—"

Mina struggled with her rival impulses of kindness and curiosity. "It's all awfully interesting," she concluded, breaking into a smile she could not resist.

"That's the only excuse for all of us, I suppose," sighed Lady Everswood.

"Not that I like the boy particularly," added Southend.

"Is there anything?" asked Mina. The appeal was to the lady, not to Southend. But he answered chaffingly:

"Possibly—just possibly—the resources of the Constitution—"

The bell of the front door sounded audibly in the morning-room in which they were.

"I daresay that's Robert," remarked Lady Everswood. "He said he might call."

"Oh, by Jove!" exclaimed Southend with a laugh that sounded a trifle uneasy.

The door opened, and a man came in unannounced. He was of middle height, with large features, thick coarse hair, and a rather ragged beard; his arms were long and his hands large.

"How are you, Cousin Selvia?" he said, crossing to Lady Everswood, who gave him her hand without rising. "How are you, Southend?" He turned back to Lady Everswood. "I thought you were alone."

He spoke in brusque tones, and he looked at Mina as if he did not know what she might be doing there. His appearance seemed vaguely familiar to her.

"We are holding a little conference, Robert. This young lady is very interested in Harry Tristram and his affair. Come, now, you remember about it? Madame Zabriska, this is Mr. Disney."

"Mr. Disney!" The Imp gasped. "You mean—?"

The other two smiled. Mr. Disney scowled a little. Obviously he had hoped to find his relative alone.

"Madame Zabriska met Addie Tristram years ago at Heidelberg, Robert; and she's been staying down at Blent—at Merriion Lodge, didn't you say, my dear?"

Mr. Disney had sat down. "Well, what's the young fellow like?" he asked.

"Oh, I—I don't know," murmured the Imp in forlorn shyness. This man was—was actually—the Prime Minister! Matters would have been rather better if he had consented to look just a little like it. As it was, her head was in a whirl. Lady Everswood called him "Robert" too!

Nothing about Lady Everswood had impressed her as much as that, not even the early acquaintance with Addie Tristram.

"Well, then, what's the girl like?" asked Disney.

"Robert, don't frighten Madame Zabriska."

"Frighten her? What do you mean?"

"Oh, tell him what I mean, George," laughed Lady Everswood, turning to Southend. Mr. Disney seemed genuinely resentful at the idea that he might frighten anybody.

"Are you a member of the conference, too, Southend?"

"Well, yes, I—I'm interested in the family. He telegraphed a glance of caution to the old lady; he meant to convey that the present was not a happy moment to broach the matter that was in their minds.

"I'm sorry I interrupted. Can you give me five minutes in another room,

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