

Serial Story.

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# TRISTRAM OF BLENT.

By ANTHONY HOPE.

AN EPISODE IN THE STORY OF AN ANCIENT HOUSE.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## A DECREE OF BANISHMENT.

The larp cried—absolutely cried for vexation—when a curt and sour note from Sutherland told her the issue. The blow struck down her excitement and her exultation. Away went all joy in her encounter with Mr Disney, all pride in the skill with which she had negotiated with the Prime Minister. The ending was pitiful—disgusting and pitiful. She pounded on her heart's bitterness to Major Duplay, who had come to visit her.

"I'm tired of the whole thing, and I hate the Tristrams!" she declared.

"It always comes to that in time, Mina, when you mix yourself up in people's affairs."

"Wasn't it through you that I began to do it?"

"The major declined to argue the question—of some complexity, perhaps."

"Well, I've got plenty to do in London. Let's give up Merrion and take rooms here."

"Give up Merrion!" She was startled. But the reasons she assigned were prudential. "I've taken it till October, and I can't afford to. Besides, what's the use of being here in August?"

"You won't drop it yet, you see." The reasons did not deceive Duplay.

"I don't think I ought to desert Cecily. I suppose she'll go back to Blent. Oh, what an exasperating man he is!"

"Doesn't look as if the match would come off now, does it?"

"It's just desperate. The last chance is gone. I don't know what to do."

"Marry him yourself," advised the Major. Though it was an old idea of his, he was not very serious.

"I'd sooner poison him," said Mina decisively. "What must Mr Disney think of me?"

"I shouldn't trouble about that. Do you suppose he thinks much at all, Mina?" (That is the sort of remark which relatives sometimes regard as consoling.)

"I think Harry Tristram as much of a fool as you do," Duplay added. "If he'd taken it, he could have made a good match anyhow, even if he didn't get Lady Tristram."

"Cecily's just as bad. She's retired into her shell. You don't know that way of hers—of theirs, I suppose it is, bother them! She's treating everybody and everything as if they didn't exist."

"She'll go back to Blent, I suppose."

"Well, she must. Somebody must have it."

"If it's going begging, call on me," said the Major equably. He was in a better humour with the world than he had been for a long while; his connection with Iver promised well. But Mina sniffed scornfully; she was in no mood for idle jests.

Cecily had been told about the scheme and its lamentable end. Her attitude was one of entire unconcern. What was it to her if Harry were made a viscount, a duke, or the Pope? What was anything to her? She was going back to her father at Blent. The only animation she displayed was in resenting the remainder, and indeed denying the fact, that she had ever been other than absolutely happy and contented at Blent. Mina pressed the point, and Cecily then declared that now at any rate her conscience was at rest. She had tried to do what was right—at what sacrifice Mina knew; the reception of her offer Mina knew. Now perhaps

Mina could sympathise with her, and could understand the sort of way in which Cousin Harry received attempts to help him. On this point they drew together again.

"You must come back to Merrion, dear," urged Cecily.

Mina, who never meant to do anything else, embraced her friend and affectionately consented. It is always pleasant to do an entree what we might be driven to do unasked.

Good-bye had to be said to Lady Evenswood. That lady was very cheerful about Harry; she was, hardly with any disguise, an admirer of his conduct, and said that undoubtedly he had made a very favourable impression on Robert. She seemed to make little of the desperate condition of affairs as regarded Cecily. She was thinking of Harry's career, and that seemed to her very promising.

"Whatever he tries I think he'll succeed in," she said. That was not enough for Mina; he must try Mina's things—those she had set her heart on—before she could be content.

"But you never brought Cecily to see me," Lady Evenswood complained.

"And I'm just going away now."

That was it, Mina decided. Lady Evenswood had not seen Cecily. She had approached the Tristram puzzle from one side only, and had perceived but one aspect of it. She did not understand that it was complex and double headed; it was neither Harry nor Cecily, but Harry and Cecily. Mina had been in that state of mind before Cecily came on the scene; it was natural now in Lady Evenswood. But it rendered her really useless. It was a shock to find that, all along, in Lady Evenswood's mind Cecily had been a step towards the peerage rather than the peerage the first step towards Cecily. Mina wondered loftily (but silently) how woman could take so slighting a view of woman.

"And Flora Disney has quite taken him up," Lady Evenswood pursued. "George tells me he's been to lunch there twice. George is a terrible gossip."

"What does Lady Flora Disney want with him?"

"Well, my dear, are you going to turn round and say you don't understand why he interests women?"

"I don't see why he should interest Lady Flora." Mina had already made up her mind that she hated that sort of woman. It was bad enough to have captured Mr Disney; must the insatiable creature draw into her net Harry Tristram also?

"And of course he's flattered. Any young man would be."

"I don't think he's improved since he left Blent."

"Country folks always say that about their young men when they come to town," smiled Lady Evenswood. "He's learning his world, my dear. And he seems very sensible. He hasn't inherited poor Addie's wildness."

"Yes, he has. But it only comes out now and then. When it does—"

"It won't come out with Flora," Lady Evenswood interrupted reassuringly. "And, at any rate, as you may suppose, I'm going to leave him to his own devices. Oh, I think he's quite right, but I don't want to be wrong myself again, that's all."

But another thing was to happen before Mina went back to the valley of the Blent; a fearful, delightful thing. An astonishing mischievous

card inviting her to dine with Mr. and Lady Flora Disney. She gasped as she read it. Had Lady Flora ever indulged in the same expression of feeling, it would have been when she was asked to send it. Gasping still, Mina telegraphed for her best frock and all the jewelled tokens of affection which survived to testify to Adolf Zabriska's love. It was in itself an infinitely great occasion, destined always to loom large in memory; but it proved to have a bearing on the Tristram problem too.

For Harry was there. He sat on the hostess' left, on her other side was handsome Lord Hove, very resplendent in full dress, starred and ribbed. Several of the men were like that; there was some function later on, Mina learnt from an easy-mannered youth who sat by her and seemed bored with the party.

Disney came in late, in his usual indifferently fitting morning clothes, snatching an hour from the House, in the strongest contrast to the fair sumptuousness of his wife. He took a vacant chair two places from Mina and nodded at her in a friendly way. They were at a round table, and there were only a dozen there. The easy-mannered youth told her all about them, including several things which it is to be hoped were not true; he seemed to view them from an altitude of good-humoured contempt. Mina discovered afterwards that he was a cousin of Lady Flora's, and occupied a position in Messrs. Cotts' Bank. He chuckled once, remarking:

"Flora's talkin' to Tristram all the time, instead of bein' pleasant to Tommy Hove. Fact is, she hates Tommy, and she'd be glad if the Chief would give him the boot. But the Chief doesn't want to, because Tommy's well in at Court, and the Chief isn't."

"Why does Lady Flora hate Lord Hove? He's very handsome."

"Think so? Well, I see so many fellows like that, that I'm beginnin' to hate 'em. Like the sweet girl, don't you know? I hear the Chief thinks Tristram'll train on."

"Do what?" asked Mina absently, looking across at Harry. Harry was quite lively, and deep in conversation with his hostess.

"Well, they might put him in the House, and so on, you know. See that woman next but three? That's Gertrude Melrose; spends more on clothes than any woman in London, and she's only got nine hundred a year. Queer?" He smiled as he consumed an almond.

"She must get into debt," said Mina, gazing at the clothes of inexplicable origin.

"Gettin' in isn't the mystery," remarked the youth. "It's the gettin' out, Madame—er—Zabriska." He had taken a swift glance at Mina's card.

Mina looked round. "Is it in this room they have the Councils?" she asked.

"Cabinets? Don't know. Downstairs somewhere, I believe, anyhow." He smothered a yawn. "Queer thing, that about Tristram, you know. If everything was known, you know, I shouldn't wonder if a lot of other fellows found themselves—"

He was interrupted, fortunately, perhaps, in these speculations by a question from his other neighbour. Mina was left alone for some minutes, and set to work to observe the scene. She was tolerably at ease now; a man was on each side of her, and in the end it was the women of whom she was afraid. There would be a terrible time in the drawing-room, but she determined not to think of that. Harry saw her sitting silent and smiled across at her while he listened to Lady Flora. The smile seemed to come from a great way off. The longer she sat there the more that impression grew; he seemed so much and so naturally a part of the scene and one of the company. She was so emphatically not one of them, save by the merest accident and for an evening's span. The sense of difference and distance troubled her. She thought of Cecily alone at home, and grew more troubled still. She felt absurd, too, because she had been trying to help Harry. If that had to be done, she supposed Lady Flora would do it now. The idea was bitter. Where difference of class comes in, women seem more hostile to one another than men are to men; perhaps this should be considered in relation to the Franchise Question.

Through the talk of the rest she listened to Harry and Lady Flora. That Harry should hold his own did not surprise her; it was rather unexpected that he should do it so lightly and so urbanely. Lord Hove tried to intervene once or twice, with no success; capricious waves of sympathy undulated across to him from Mina. She turned her head by chance, and found Mr Disney silent too, and looking at her. The next moment he spoke to the easy-mannered youth.

"Well, Theo, what's the world saying and doing?"

"Same as last year, Cousin Robert" answered Theo, cheerfully. "Government's a year older, of course."

In an instant Mina was pleased, she detected an unexpected but pleasant friendship between Mr Disney and the youth. She credited Disney with more humanity—the humour necessary she knew he had—and liked him even better.

"The drawing-rooms have kicked us out already, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, rather. But the Bank's not sure."

"Good! That's something. Banks against drawing-rooms for me, Madame Zabriska." He brought her into the conversation almost with tact; he must have had a strong wish to make her comfortable.

"That's right," announced Theo. "I should say you're all right in the country, too. Crops pretty good, you know, and the rain's comin' down just nicely."

"Well, I ordered it," said Mr Disney. "Takin' all the credit you can get," observed Theo. "Like the man who carved his name on the knife before he stabbed his mother-in-law."

"What did he do that for?" cried Mina. A guffaw from Disney quite amazed her.

Harry looked across with a surprised air; he seemed to wonder that she should be enjoying herself. Mina was annoyed, and set herself to be merry; a glance from Lady Flora converted vexation into rage. She turned back to Theo; somehow Mr Disney had taught her how to like him—often a valuable lesson, if people would keep their eyes open for it.

"Everybody else I've met has been

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