

Serial Story.

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TRISTRAM OF BLENT.

By ANTHONY HOPE.

AN EPISODE IN THE STORY OF AN ANCIENT HOUSE.

CHAPTER XXV.—(Continued.)

"Of course I was put on the track of the affair," Edge pursued, "by the disappearance of the money. I had little difficulty in guessing that there had been something queer, but what it was did not cross my mind for a long while. Even after I had a clue, I found Migratz a tough customer, and for a long time I totally failed to identify Madame Valfier. When, thanks to a series of chances, I did so, it was a shock to me. She was the wife of a man of high position and high reputation. She had contrived—she was a remarkable woman—to carry out this expedition of hers without rousing any suspicion; she had returned to her husband and children. Finding herself in danger, she took the bold course of throwing herself on my mercy, and sent for me to Paris. It was not my desire to rake up the story, to injure my brother's memory, or to break up the woman's home. I pocketed the loss as far as I was concerned. As for you, I didn't know you were concerned. I had never gone into the details; I accepted the view which your own conduct, and Lady Tristram's, suggested. I promised silence, guarding myself by a proviso that I must speak if the interests of third persons were ever affected. Your interests are affected now, and I have spoken, Mr Tristram—or Lord Tristram, as I undoubtedly ought to say."

Harry turned to Mr Neeld with a smile and pointed at the leaves of the Journal.

"There was something Cholderton didn't know after all," he said. "A third date—neither the 18th nor the 24th! Twenty-four hours! Well, I suppose it's enough!"

"It's enough to make all the difference to you," said Neeld. "It makes the action you took in giving up your position unnecessary and wrong. It restores the state of things which existed—"

"Before you and Mina Zabriska came to Blent—and brought Mr Cholderton?" He sat smiling a moment. "Forgive me; I'm very inhospitable," he said, and offered them cigarettes and whisky.

Neeld refused; the Colonel took both.

"You may imagine with what feelings I heard your story," Edge resumed, "and found that the Comtesse's fraud was really the entire basis of your action. If I had been in England the thing need never have happened."

"It has happened," said Harry, "and—and I don't quite know where we are." For the world was all altered again, just when the struggle of the evening had seemed to settle it. The memory of the girl in the restaurant flashed across his mind. What would she—what would she say to this?

Colonel Edge was evidently rather a talkative man. He began again, rather as though he were delivering a little set speech.

"It's perhaps hardly to be expected," he said, "that any degree of intimacy should exist between your family and mine, Lord Tristram, but I venture to hope that the part which it has been my privilege to play to-day may do something to obliterate the memories of the past. We don't perhaps know all the rights of it. I am loyal to my brother, but I knew the late Lady Tristram, and I can appreciate all that her friends valued and prized in her."

"Very good, Edge, very good," mur-

mured emotional old Mr Neeld. "Very proper, most proper."

"And I hope that old quarrels need not be eternal?"

"I'm very much in your debt, and I'm sincerely grateful, Colonel Edge. As for the past—there are graves; let it lie in them."

"Thank you, Lord Tristram, thank you," and the Colonel gave Harry his hand.

"Excellent, excellent!" muttered Mr Neeld as he folded up the leaves of Josiah Cholderton's diary.

"You can call on me for proofs whenever you wish to proceed. After what has occurred I presume they will be necessary."

"Yes, yes—for his seat," assented Neeld.

"And to satisfy public opinion," added Edge.

There was a pause. Neeld broke it by saying timidly:

"And—er—there is, of course, the—the lady. The lady who now holds the title and estates."

"Of course!" agreed Edge, with a nod that apologised for forgetfulness.

Of course there was! Harry smiled. He had been wondering how long they would take to think of the lady who now held the title and estates. Well, they had come to her at last—after providing for the requirements of the House of Lords and the demands of public opinion—after satisfying the girl in the restaurant, in fact. Yes, of course, there was the lady, too.

Though he smiled, he was vexed and suffered a vague disappointment. It is to be wished that things would happen in a manner harmonious with their true nature—the tragic tragically, the comic so that laughter roars out, the melodramatic with the proper limelight effects. To do the Tristrams justice, this was generally achieved where they were concerned; Harry could have relied on his mother and on Cecily; he could rely on himself if he were given a suitable environment, one that appealed to him and afforded responsive feelings. The family was not in the habit of wasting its opportunities for emotion. But who could be emotional now—in face of these two elderly gentlemen? Neeld's example made such a thing ridiculous. Colonel Edge would obviously consider it un-soldier-like. The chance had been frittered away; life was at its old game of neglecting its own possibilities. There was nothing but to acquiesce; fine melodrama had been degraded into a business interview with two elderly and conscientious gentlemen. The scene in the Long Gallery had at least been different from this! Harry bowed his head; he must be thankful for small blessings; it was something that they had remembered the lady at last.

At a glance from Edge Neeld rose to go.

"Pray wait—wait a minute or two," begged Harry. "I want to think for a minute."

Neeld sat down again. It is very likely they were as surprised at him as he was childishly vexed with them. For he exhibited perfect calm. Yet perhaps Colonel Edge, who had given so colourless an account of the Comtesse's wild appeal to him, was well suited.

"I'm going down to Iver's to-morrow," said old Neeld, tucking the extract from the "Journal" into his pocket.

"To Iver's?" After a moment's silence Harry fairly laughed. Edge was

surprised, not understanding what a difference the Comtesse's manoeuvre had made there too. He could not be expected to know all the difference it had made to Harry's life, even to the man himself. Two irresponsible ladies—say Addie and—well, Madame Valfier—may indeed make differences.

"Yes, to Fairholme," continued old Neeld. "We—we may see you there now?"

Edge looked up with an interested glance. It had occurred to him that he was turning somebody out as well as putting somebody in.

"You'll have, of course, to communicate what I have said to—to—?"

"Oh, well! say Lady Tristram still," Harry interrupted.

Edge gave a little bow. "I shall be ready to meet her or her advisers at any time," he remarked. "She will, I hope, recognise that no other course was open to me. She must not think that there is any room for doubt."

Harry's brain was at work now; he saw himself going to Blent, going to tell Cecily.

"Possibly," Mr. Neeld suggested. "It would be better to entrust a third person with the task of giving her this news? One of her own sex perhaps?" He seemed to contemplate a possible fainting-fit, and, remembering his novels, the necessity of cutting stay-laces, a task better left to women.

"You're thinking of Mina? Of Mina Zabriska?" asked Harry, laughing. There again, what a loss! Why had not Mina heard it at first hand? She would have known how to treat the thing.

"She's always taken a great interest in the matter, and—and I understand is very friendly with—with Miss Gainsborough," said Neeld.

"We shall have to make up our minds what to call ourselves soon," sighed Harry.

"There can be no doubt at all," Edge put in; "and if I may venture to suggest, I should say that the sooner the necessity is faced the better."

"Certainly, certainly," Harry assented absently. Even the girl in the restaurant must know about it soon; there must be another pow-wowing in all the papers soon. But what would Cecily say? "If ever the time comes—." He had laughed at that; it had sounded so unlikely, so unreal, so theatrical. "If ever the time comes, I shall remember." That was a strange thing to look back to now. But it was all strange—the affair of the beastly new viscounty, Blinkhampton and its buildings, the Arbitration and the confidence of Mr Disney. Madame Valfier—Comtesse d'Alberville—with a little help from Addie Tristram, had brought all these things about. The result of Harry's review of them was English enough to satisfy Wilmot Edge himself.

"The whole thing makes me look rather an ass, I think," said he.

"No doubt you acted impulsively," Edge allowed. It was fully equivalent to an assent.

"Good heavens, I'd been brought up to it! It had always been the fact of my life." He made no pretences about the matter now. "It never occurred to me to think of any mistake. That certificate—it lay on the table still—'was the work of Damocles.' He laughed as he spoke the hackneyed old phrase. "And Damocles knew the sword was there, or there'd have been no point in it."

The two had rather lost track of his mood. They looked at one another again.

"You're a lot to think of. We'll leave you," said the Colonel.

"But—but what am I to do?" Old Neeld's voice was almost a bleat in his despair. "Am I to tell people at Blent-mouth?"

"The communication should come from an authoritative quarter," Edge advised.

"It's bound to be a blow to her," said Neeld. "Suddenly lifted up, suddenly thrown down! Poor girl!"

"Justice is the first thing," declared Wilmot Edge. Now he might have been on a court-martial.

They knew nothing whatever of the truth or the true position.

"We may rely on—on Lord Tristram—to treat the matter with every delicacy," Edge said.

"I'm sure of it, Neeld, I'm sure of it." "He has been through what is practically the same experience himself."

"A very remarkable case, very remarkable. The state of the law which makes such a thing possible—"

"Ah, there I don't agree, Edge. There may be hardships on individuals, but in the interests of morality—"

"You must occasionally put up with damned absurdity," Harry interrupted rather roughly. "I beg your pardon, Mr Neeld. I—I'm a bit worried over this."

They sat silent then, watching him for a few moments. He stood leaning his arm on the mantel-piece, his brows knit, but a smile lingering on his lips. He was seeing the scene again, the scene in which he was to tell Cecily. He knew what the end of it would be. They were strangers now. The scene would leave them strangers still. Still Mina Zabriska would be left to cry, "You Tristrams!" Given that they were Tristrams, no other result was possible. They had been through what Mr Neeld called practically the same experience already; in that very room it had happened.

Suddenly the two men saw a light born in Harry's eyes; his brow grew smooth, the smile on his lips wider. He gave a moment's more consideration to the new thing. Then he raised his head and spoke to Wilmot Edge.

"There are a good many implications in this matter, Colonel Edge. I've had my life upset once before, and I assure you it's rather troublesome work. It wants a little time and a little thinking. You get rather confused—always changing your train, you know. I have work on hand—plans and so forth. And, as you say, of course there's the lady too." He laughed as he ended by borrowing Neeld's phrase.

"I can understand all that, Lord Tristram."

"Do you mind saying Mr Tristram? Saying Mr Tristram to me and to everybody for the present? It won't be for long—a week perhaps."

"You mean to keep the change in the position a secret?" Edge seemed rather startled.

"You've kept the secret for many years, Colonel. Shall we say a week more? And you, too, Mr Neeld? Nothing at all to the people at Blent-mouth. Shall we keep Miss S. in the dark for a week more?" The thought of Miss Swinkerton carried obvious amusement with it.

"You mean to choose your oppor-

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