

# In Peace and War

## Or, The End of It All

CHAP. XIX.—(Continued).

Trist did not attempt to blind himself as to the difficulties attending his strange undertaking, but he was prepared to face them courageously.

"If," he said to himself, "I can only find him . . . sober . . . I will manage the rest."

He called a hansom, and drove to the club of which the books showed a subscription as due from Captain Huston. In return for this privilege its doors were still thrown open to the disgraced soldier. Careful inquiries at the door elicited the information that Huston had been there.

"He was took . . . he went away with a friend a good half-hour ago, sir," the porter added, with a curious smile.

The smile did not escape the questioner's glance, and in consequence of it, Trist went upstairs to the smoking room. He was not a member of the club, but his name was a power in military circles.

Upon inquiry at the door, Trist made the discovery that the porter had fortunately been asked to give the direction to the driver of the cab in which Huston had been taken away.

In his calm way he suddenly determined to follow Huston. He lighted a cigar at the spirit-lamp affixed to the door-post, and then called a cab.

There was a considerable delay in the Strand, where the traffic was much congested owing to the outpouring theatres. Amidst the confusion, the roar of traffic, the deafening shouts of drivers, policemen, and runners with latest editions of evening papers, Trist sat forward, with his arms upon the closed door of the hansom, and enjoyed his cigar.

At length the driver escaped into a narrow street, and, turning sharply to the right, drew up before a tall narrow house, bearing on a dingy lamp above the door, the legend "No. 32, Private Hotel." A hopeless waiter, with shuffling shoes and a shirt-front of uncertain antecedents, answered the summons of a melancholy bell, which seemed to tinkle under strong protest, and as briefly as possible.

"Captain Huston living here?" inquired Trist.

"Yes, sir. Er you the doctor?" The war correspondent hesitated for a moment. Then he stepped into the narrow hall.

"Yes," he said. "E's got it bad this time, sir," volunteered the waiter, with melancholy effusion.

"What?" "D. T., sir."

Trist nodded his head shortly, and laid aside his hat.

"Take me to his room, please," he said. The waiter shuffled on in front, and the young fellow followed him up the dingy stairs, walking lightly where the polished knots of pine-wood peeped through the clannish oilcloth.

The doctor came, and stayed longer than he could conscientiously spare out of his busy life. It was half-past one o'clock in the morning before he went away, leaving Trist alone with Huston, to whom sleep had come at last. Before leaving he promised, however, to send an experienced nurse.

The war correspondent sat in a deep leather-covered arm-chair before the smoldering fire, contemplating his own shoes. A man of many

resources, he had found himself in many strange situations during his short thirty years. He had made the best of more than one awkward dilemma by going straight ahead in his patient, steady way. He listened to the stertorous breathing of the sick man, and never thought of his own fatigue. There was no suggestion of complaint in his mind that his evening of pleasure should have had such an unpleasant finish.

As he sat and thought, the firelight flickered rosy upon his face, it gleamed in his womanly eyes, glowed upon his broad high forehead. He was quite absorbed in his reflections, and never glanced toward the bed which was within the deep crimson shadow. He judged from the heavy respiration that Huston was asleep; in this, however, he was mistaken. The ex-soldier lay on his back, but his face was turned toward the fire, and his bloodshot eyes were wide open. His lips moved restlessly, but no sound came from them beyond the strong indrawing of the sudden air. His wavering glance wandered from Trist's head to his feet, restless and full of an insatiable hatred. Upon the dirty white coverlet his fingers moved convulsively, as if clutching and losing hold of something by turns.

Presently there was a soft knock at the front door, and Trist rose from his chair. His watch was over; the hospital nurse had arrived, with her soft brave eyes, her quick fearless fingers. As he left the room, Trist turned and glanced toward the bed. Huston lay there with closed eyes, unnaturally still.

Then the war correspondent left the room on tiptoe. No sooner had the door closed than the sick man's eyes opened. There was a peculiar shifty light in the expanded pupils, and the man's horrible lips moved continuously. He sat up in bed.

"Ah!" he mumbled thickly; "I know him. That's the man . . . that's the man who's in love with my wife."

The fire rose and fell with merry crackle—for Trist had drawn the coals together noiselessly before leaving the room—and in the semi-darkness a strange unsteady form moved to and fro.

"I know him," mumbled the horrible voice, "and . . . I'm going to shoot him."

There was a slight sound as if a drawer were being searched in a table or piece of furniture which was not quite firm upon its base, and a moment later the door was opened without noise. In the passage a single jet of gas burnt mournfully, and threw a flood of light through the open doorway.

Upon the threshold stood Huston, quaking and swaying from side to side. In his trembling fingers he held a large Colt's revolver of the cavalry pattern. The tips of the conical bullets peeped from the chambers threateningly. His clumsy hands were fumbling with the hammer, which was still and deeply sunk within the lock; the light was bad. He raised the pistol closer to his swarming eyes, and the barrel, gleaming blue and brown alternately, wavered in the air.

The next instant there was a terrific report through the silent house.

A moment later Trist and the nurse were at the head of the stairs; they had raced up side by side. The woman seized a worn sheepskin mat that lay at the door of an empty bedroom, and, drawing her skirts

aside, knelt down and raised the mutilated face.

"Don't let it run on the floor," she gasped, "it is so horrible!"

They were both old hands and callous enough to be very quick. By the time that the startled household was aroused, the dead man (for the great bullet had passed right through his brain) was laid upon his bed, and Trist had already gone for the doctor.

"No one must go in," said the nurse, standing upon the threshold and barring the way. "He is dead. There is nothing to be done. Wait until the doctor comes."

Presently Trist returned, bringing with him the surgeon and police inspector. They all went into the room together and closed the door. Trist turned up the gas and watched the movements of the surgeon, who was already at the bedside.

"Where is the bullet?" asked the inspector.

"In the woodwork of the door," answered Trist.

The doctor left the bedside and came into the middle of the room, standing upon the hearthrug with his back toward the fire.

"I should be of opinion," he said, "that it was an accident."

The inspector nodded his head, and looked from the nurse to Trist.

"Does anybody," he asked, "know who he is, or anything about him?"

"I know who he is and all about him," answered the war correspondent.

Notebook in hand, the inspector glanced keenly at the speaker.

"And . . . who are . . . you?" he asked, writing.

"Theodore Trist."

"Ah!" murmured the doctor.

The inspector drew himself up and continued writing.

"Do you know, sir, what he was doing with the pistol? Had he any intention of using it upon himself or upon any other?"

Trist looked at his questioner calmly.

"I do not know," he answered.

### CHAPTER XX.

Like one in a dream Theodore Trist passed out into the narrow street somewhat later. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning; the ball was scarcely over, and yet to this unimaginative man it seemed ages since he had spoken with William Hicks, listening in a vague way to the swinging waltz music all the while. When he reached his quiet rooms, he was almost startled at the sight of his own dress-clothes, spotless shirt front, and unobtrusive flower. He had quite forgotten that these garments of pleasure were beneath his overcoat. His night's work had not been in keeping with dress-clothes.

"I will think," he said to himself, "how it is to be broken to everybody to-morrow." And with great serenity he went to bed.

It has not hitherto been mentioned that Mrs. Wylie possessed one or two vice of a comparatively harmless description. The most prominent of these was unpunctuality at the breakfast table. This is a most comfortable vice, and quite in keeping with the placid and easy-going nature of the lady.

Brenda, being of a more active nature, was usually down first, and the fact of having been out to a ball the night before rarely acted as a deterrent. It thus came about that she was alone at the breakfast table when Trist was announced. It was a dainty, womanly little meal set out on the snowy cloth, and as yet untouched. Brenda was in the act of opening the newspaper when Trist entered the room. She did not remember until afterward that, as he shook hands, he took the journal from her and laid it aside. Perhaps she noted the action at the time, but he was never in the habit of acting just like other men, and the peculiarity of this little movement did not strike her sufficiently to remain upon her memory as a distinct incident.

"Ah!" she said gaily; "you think it prudent to strike while the iron is hot—I being the iron. I am not red-hot, but quite warm enough to be unpleasant, and just too hard to be struck. Please explain why you never claimed the three dances you asked me to keep?"

Trist smiled in his gravest way—a mere reflection of her bright gaiety.

"That is what I came to explain," he said. He passed her standing at the table, and went toward the fire. There he drew off his gloves in a peculiarly thoughtful manner.

"Theo," said Brenda, "have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks!"

His manner was habitually misleading, and it was quite impossible for her to see that he had bad news to impart. His strong, purposeful hands were always steady, which is somewhat exceptional; for the fingers betray emotion when the eyes are dumb.

"Rather," she continued lightly, "then break my faith to you, I planted myself, so to speak, among the wall flowers, where I was content to bloom in solitude."

"Through the whole dance?" he asked meaningly.

"Well . . . not quite. When I was satisfied that you were not there, I danced with someone else."

He smiled, and said nothing.

Brenda moved one or two things upon the breakfast table—things which in no way required moving. For the first time in her life she was beginning to feel ill at ease with this man. For the first time she

dreaded vaguely to hear him speak, because she was not sure that he was at ease himself.

At last he began, and there was a strange thrill in his voice, as if it were an effort to open his lips.

"It has been my . . . fate . . . Brenda, to be with you or near you during most of the incidents in your life . . ." here he paused.

"Yes," she murmured unsteadily.

"I have," he continued, "perhaps, been of some small use to you. I have been happy enough at times to tell you good news, and . . . once or twice I have been the messenger of evil . . . Now . . ."

"Now," interrupted Brenda suddenly, as she came toward him, for a light had broken upon her—"now you have bad news, Theo? Surely you are not afraid of telling it to me!"

"I don't exactly know," he answered slowly, laying his hand upon the white fingers resting upon his sleeve, "whether it is good news or bad. Huston is dead!"

She had continued smiling bravely into his eyes until the last words were spoken, then suddenly she turned her face away. He watched the color fade from her cheek, slowly sinking downward until her throat was like marble. Then she withdrew her hand deliberately from his touch, as if there had been evil in it. After a moment she turned again and looked keenly at him with wondering, horror-stricken eyes.

"Then," she murmured monotonously, "Alice is . . . a widow."

It was a strange thing to say, and she had no definite conception of the train of thought prompting the remark. He looked at her in a curious, puzzled way, like a man who is near a truth, but fears to prove his proximity.

"Does she know?" she asked suddenly, rousing herself to the necessity of prompt action.

"No. I have not your aunt's address in Cheltenham."

Brenda looked at the clock upon the mantelpiece, a reliable mechanism, which kept remarkable time considering its feminine environment.

"Mrs. Wylie will be here in a moment; we will then consider about the telegram. In the meantime . . . tell me when it happened, and how?"

"It happened at two o'clock this morning . . . suddenly."

Brenda looked up at the last word, although it was spoken quite gently.

"Suddenly . . . ?"

"Yes. It . . . he shot himself with a revolver . . . by accident!"

The man's gentle, inscrutable eyes fell before Brenda's gaze. He moved uneasily, and turned away, apparently much interested in the ornaments upon the mantelpiece.

"Were you present at the time?"

"No. I was downstairs. He was in his bedroom."

"Tell me," said the girl mechanically, "what was he doing with the revolver?"

Trist turned slowly and faced her. There was no hesitation in his glance now; his eyes looked straight into hers with a deliberate, calm meaning. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows?" he murmured, still watching her face.

When at length Brenda turned away she pressed her lips together as if to moisten them, and there was a convulsive movement in her throat. They understood each other thoroughly.

"There will, of course," said Trist presently, "be an inquest. It is, however, quite clear that, being left for a moment alone, he rose from his bed in a fit of temporary insanity, and having possessed himself of a revolver (possibly for suicidal purposes), he shot himself by accident."

Brenda had crossed the room to the window, where she stood with her back toward her companion.

"Yes!" she murmured absently.

She was swaying a little from side to side, and her face was raised in an unnatural way. Trist stood upon the hearthrug, with his elbow resting on the mantelpiece. He was watching her attentively.

"I have," he said somewhat hastily, as if it were an after-thought, "some influence with the newspapers."

Of this she took absolutely no notice. It would appear that she had not heard his voice. Then Trist moved restlessly. After a moment's hesitation he lifted his arm from the mantelpiece with the apparent intention of going toward her. He even made two or three steps in that direction—steps that were inaudible, for his tread was singularly light. Then the door opened, and Mrs. Wylie came into the room.

"Theo!" said the lady, with rather less surprise than might have been expected.

In a moment she had perceived that there was something wrong. The very atmosphere of the room was tense. These two strong young people had either been quarreling or making love. Of that Mrs. Wylie was certain. Her entrance had perhaps been malapropos; but she could not go back now. Moreover, she was the sort of woman who never errs in retreating. Her method of fighting the world was from a strong position calmly held, or by a steady, sure advance.

"Good-morning! Theo!" she said, with that deliberate cheeriness which is the deepest diplomacy. "This is an early visit. Have you come to discover the laziness of the land?"

"No," answered Theo simply.

Then he turned and looked toward Brenda in a way which plainly said

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that she was expected to come forward into the breach he had effected.

Brenda came. Her face was not so grave as Trist's, but her lips were colorless.

"Theo has come," she said, "with bad news. We must telegraph to Alice at once. Alfred Huston had . . . an accident last night."

"What?" inquired Mrs. Wylie, turning to Trist.

"He is dead—he shot himself by accident," replied the war correspondent.

Mrs. Wylie walked to the fireplace.

"Let me think," she said, "all to herself, 'what must be done.'"

She knew that Trist was watching her, waiting for his instructions in his emotionless, almost indifferent way. Then the widow met his gaze. She made a scarcely perceptible movement toward the door with her eyelids. With a slight nod he signified his comprehension of the signal.

"I must," he said, "go back now to . . . to Huston's rooms. Will you communicate with Alice?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Wylie simply.

Without further explanation he went toward the door, glancing at Brenda as he passed. Mrs. Wylie followed him.

"We are better without you just now," she whispered in the passage. "Write me full particulars, and wait to hear from me before you come back."

(To Be Continued).

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