

High Silver

A Novel in Six Instalments — VI

ANTHONY RICHARDSON

SATURDAY afternoon was generally a time to be anticipated with gladness; for Tristram was free from Arguad's. But to-day Claire was out lunching, and he was at a loose end, moreover disturbed by the motive of her absence. It was four years since the day Mr. Bond had married them, three since John Arguad had received him in the frowsy little office in Museum Street. Tristram sat by the fire now, inert, and with his mind blunted. There had been a scene in the morning of a sort only too frequent. Once he had thought the familiarity of repetition would bring not contempt but a sort of dull acceptance. Now he knew that always a wound could bleed. Claire had told him at breakfast, "I'll be out to lunch."

"Very well," he'd said. And then, merely in order to appear at least civil, he'd asked: "An important show?"

She had frowned and tapped her teeth with her thumbnail in that irritating way she had, and it was not without a certain degree of malice that she'd said: "I suppose I'd better tell you. You'll only nose it out in the end. I'm lunching with mother."

"Claire," he said evenly, "I think that's too bad, I really do."

She turned on him. "And why shouldn't I? You're harsh on mother just as you were on Colonel Rivington. And she is my mother, even if she has her faults. You can't stop me from seeing my own mother!"

"You were glad enough to leave her once, Claire. This isn't fair on me."

Years before she would have burst into tears but now she was too sure of her ground to exercise her arts unnecessarily. "You can do what you like," she said, "but you can't stop me." And he had let her go.

The drumming of the rain irritated him with its melancholy and incessant rhythm. He said to himself as he often did these days with great bitterness, "Oh, God, to be quit of all this." Galahad of Mostyn

Haven could go as far as to admit that desire, but ideals of duty yet held strongly. Claire was beyond rebuke now, and on his part he could but endure. Sometimes like the half-forgotten scent of a flower or the lilt of an old song, the memory of Pauline Loftus came to him and he saw her, tall and slender in her brown suit standing in Barn Park with the chicken in her hands; sometimes she sat by his side as they drove to Clovelly with the sea-breeze in their faces and a strange deep comfort in his heart.

Often Tristram thought to himself: it will all come right in the end as long as I'm true to myself. And now he opened the window because the room was stifling. The rain blew into his face, a soiled London rain, yet none the less refreshing. He thought of the hills above Taw and of how the Devon mist crawled over the wooded heights, a gray sombre veil settling down on the flats along the river. He felt the rain moist against his lips, and was almost walking over Quarry Field or crossing the Old Moor; and then Libsters which overlooked and guarded the valleys and terraced orchards and patch-work field. Libsters —

And as he remembered that Libsters now was no more, that it was a barren wilderness and ruined trees, he shut the window with a bang.

When Claire returned she jerked her hat from her head and took off her black coat. "It's too filthy for words," she said. "I'm soaked."

"I say, that's too bad," and Tristram took her hat and coat and placed them over a chair by the fire.

She fluffed up her hair with her fingers, sat down and kicked her shoes free from her feet, felt her stockings.

"You'd better change," he told her, his guardian spirit awake.

She obeyed without a murmur, and all the time she was in the bed-room she said nothing. He wondered to what her silence and absorption were preliminary. When at

length she joined him, her face was serious like a puzzled child's. She sat down on the floor beside him, lit a cigarette. He was still wondering, when she said in a low and rather stifled voice: "I had a beastly lunch."

"I'm awfully sorry, Claire."

She leaned against his knee. "I'm worried to death about mother," she said. He drew in his breath sharply but said nothing.

"She's been awfully ill, Tristram, and she's dreadfully poor. She asked me to lend her some money and what could I do?"

"Quite," he said.

"And Tristram, she won't get better because she won't let herself. She's so poor she can't — can't get *it*. It's driving her mad."

A great sense of horror and shame filled him. He could even then have jumped up and run from Claire who'd been so near the horror. It seemed to him that the net of catastrophe was all about him, he was caught, dragged into contact with all that he considered most vile, bereft of all that was lovely, all he'd hoped and striven for. If he'd never snatched Claire away that night four years ago, this would never have come about. He would be free, master of himself, somewhere miles away from this sordid house and wretched life. And yet he told himself: I did what was right, I could have done nothing else with honor.

He asked Claire desperately, "What's to be done?"

"It means we shall have to pay for the cure, if there is one. There's nobody else to help her."

He saw at once the situation. He had grown accustomed to variations on fate's theme. He stroked Claire's cheek. "We'll do our best," he said. "We'll pull her round somehow — if it's possible."

And if there was no outburst of gratitude from his wife he overlooked the disappointment because he knew she was worried and at her wit's end. She on her part had known what he would do and with anticipation and anxiety absent from her thoughts she forgot to say more than "We must try and find a cure at once."

But he could not help wondering if it was possible for some people to know each other too well.

"Oh, I forgot." Claire stretched an arm

out and took a letter from her discarded coat. "This is for you. It was on the tray downstairs."

And a minute later Tristram said: "It's from Pauline Loftus. They're back in town."

"Oh," said Claire.

Flo Swinton lived in a boarding house in Gower Street. There is a dismal hopelessness about Gower Street, a forlorn aspect of self-condemnation. Tristram had come "to have it out with her", for Claire had said it was the better way. The first thing he heard as he entered was Mrs. Swinton's laughter, a full throaty noise, coming from a room on the left of the narrow passage. He perceived that he must announce himself and went in. Four people were seated at a table, playing cards. Suddenly Tristram found himself face to face with Mrs. Swinton. Her black hair was drawn tight over her head like a Dutch doll's, her ample bosom was laced into a black silk bodice. Her white strong neck rose out of the low collar like a pillar.

"Why, it's Tristram Lauderdale," she said, and rose from her seat. She seized him by the arm. "Now everybody. Allow me to introduce Captain Lauderdale. Tristram, left to right, Mr. Mortimer, Miss Ballantyne, Mr. Charlie Penn."

Confused and crimson Tristram bowed. Mr. Mortimer, a small and very Jewish gentleman, waved a hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said, and busied himself with the pack. Miss Ballantyne lifted her nose and looked down it. Charlie nodded and looked away.

"Now would you mind if we finished the rubber?" Mrs. Swinton asked.

"I'd much prefer it," said Tristram.

The game dragged on. He wondered how long he would have to sit in this frowsy room, consumed with irritation and every moment regretting more and more the object of his mission. At the end of a quarter of an hour Mr. Penn rose.

"Our rubber!" piped Miss Ballantyne.

"Well, I'm off," said Charlie Penn. "Goo'bye, Flo. I'll drop in and see you later."

Mortimer who still sat at the table lifted an eye and asked: "It's Bolty?"

Penn nodded vigorously. "Ye'ah." He screwed his fat lips together in a knowing way. "Ye'ah, he's been back a week. I'm seeing him at the Beagle."

"I'll join you, then," said Mr. Mortimer. And they went out together.

Miss Ballantyne yawned in a genteel manner. "And I must get along. Bye-bye, Flo."

And with that Tristram and Mrs. Swinton were alone.

Tristram asked immediately: "Did — er — the gentleman who sat there — did he mention someone called Bolty?"

Mrs. Swinton smiled in a prim and lady-like fashion. "Oh, Bolty Loftus. Why, do you know him?"

"I was at school with him."

"Really, how interesting. The world's very small . . ." she babbled on. She was talking against time. Tristram for his part was only waiting for a momentary lifting of her conversational smoke-screen to thrust home. At last he got his chance.

"Mrs. Swinton, I've come here to try to help you. Claire and I want to do all we can."

She asked in a husky voice: "What have I done? What do you want me to do?"

"We want you to get well and there's only one way. Have you seen a doctor?"

She nodded. And then: "It's no use going into all this." Her voice rose. "I don't want to be helped. Why don't you go? Why?" She was beating her hands together, her mouth open, her eyes wild with panic.

"Because Claire has asked me to come and I've found out how to put you right. If you'll only do what I tell you."

The spirit that had flared up in her for a moment drooped, ebbed away, leaving her limp and inert. Tristram drew forth a plain white cardboard box, opening it exposed a row of packages like seidlitz powders.

"You see?" He gave her instructions. "And you'll do it?"

Her teeth were chattering. "Oh, you're a good boy, Tristram. I'll do it — yes — Oh, my Christ! You don't know — I hate the taste of the stuff but it gives you life. You don't know —" The perspiration was shining on her large white neck, dead white like a deep root buried, unknown to light.

Before Tristram called again at Gower Street he renewed his acquaintance with Pauline Loftus. He had suggested to Claire that perhaps they should ask Bolty Loftus and his wife to dine.

"Where?" Claire had asked.

"Well — here."

"Oh, don't be upset," she'd said, "but they wouldn't want to come to this pig-sty." Nor apparently had she minded when he set off to Kinnerton Street alone. He found Pauline at home and for the first seconds of recognition was astonished. She was in a short green dress, and very smart. When he entered she was putting a picture straight on the wall, one knee on a chair, the other leg long and slender in its gray stocking, bare of her scanty frock. Her arms were high above her head. She tilted her small head round at him.

"This rotten thing's slipped," she greeted him. "Will you do it, please, while I stand back and see if it's straight?"

Once again came that feeling of complete and reciprocal friendship.

"Bolty's out," she said. "And you'd like some tea? Or would you rather wait and have a drink?"

"Oh, tea for me," said Tristram.

After the flat in Westbourne Square this little house with its crooked staircase and small neat rooms was very restful. It had an impish look about it. He stretched out his legs soothed and at peace with the refinement and delicacy of the place.

She asked him about his work and he told her of Argaud's. "And you like this better than chickens?"

"It's a better sort of job."

"And it's a great success?"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't say that, but it — well, it leads to things."

She sat like a schoolgirl on a pouffe, her hands clasped round her knees. She glanced away from him. "I wonder. It's a tag, that 'it leads to things'. It infers to me an attitude of waiting, waiting for things to evolve, instead of taking direction of one's own accord."

He laughed at her frank criticism. "You mean you can quicken up the processes? 'I am captain of my soul'?"

But she was serious. "I do think one can shift one's mental furniture as easily as one can spring clean a room — if one wants to."

"Unless one's born without that capacity."

"Of spring cleaning?"

"Yes. Or rather the desire to spring clean."

"But that's cowardice," said she quite definitely.

"Is it?" he asked her. "Is it cowardice or is it because if one's discovered one's mental furniture to be cheap imitation instead of what old Argaud calls genuine antique—and there's fear of finding one's house empty and bare when you thought it cosy and full? Perhaps—perhaps there'd be nothing left, don't you see?"

"You could buy new."

"At a very high price."

"That's true," she said. "It's the price that matters. Very likely one wouldn't get a good return for one's money. Perhaps there isn't even a spiritual Whiteley's in the Kingdom of Heaven—" she broke off suddenly.

"My dear man," she said, "I've forgotten tea."

They left that dangerous ground over which they had wandered, both impelled by the same urgency of awakening disillusionment. It seemed to Tristram that she had pointed the way to him, urging him to go forward still more courageously, prepared to lose all for a grain of truth. To scrap old weapons for new. But alone the task was too formidable and terrifying. If only she could explore with him, if together—

To stop that truant thought he asked "Is Bolty well?" realizing that the question was a courtesy hitherto neglected.

"Oh, he's busy," she answered evasively.

"I met a man who knew him the other day. A Mr. Charlie Penn."

Fear, then anger touched her face. She attempted to speak casually: "Oh, Penn." And then, "Do you know him well?"

"I've only seen him once. If you'll forgive me, once is enough."

"Yes." Her eyes were level and steady with his. "Yes. He's a horrid man."

But before Tristram could swing their conversation back into its former direction, Bolty Loftus came in. He was extremely immaculate in a lavender-gray suit, shirt and collar to match, with a fine check tie. He looked more handsome than ever, a little tanned by the southern sun, his skin clear and his fair hair brushed flat and close to his head.

"Of all people! Galahad! I'm delighted."

He nodded to his wife. "I'm sorry to be late."

"Yes, I'm glad to get back," Loftus replied in response to Tristram's questions. "There's lots to do and I'm on a good thing. You're in business too, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Tristram, and described Argaud's.

"H'm. Better come in with me."

"What's your line?"

"Lord knows! Commission agent, I suppose. Hard up one day, rich the next. Drop in and see me sometime. We might do something together if you're selling for Argaud's."

"That's very good of you," said Tristram, and glancing in Pauline's direction tried to catch her eye. But she was bending down tugging at a strap of her shoe. "Now I must go," he said. Shaking hands with her he could discern nothing of her thoughts though her silence in regard to Bolty's proposal implied that she did not approve.

When Tristram had gone Pauline said at once to her husband: "When did you see Charlie Penn?"

He jerked his head up. "Charlie? Day before yesterday."

"I asked you not to," she said softly. "And you promised."

"It's a matter of business."

"He got you into trouble last time. I don't like it." He tapped a cigarette on a gold case. "I know my Charlie. I know you, Pauline."

"You don't," she said, "you don't, my poor Bolty. And moreover, keep Captain Lauderdale out of all this sort of thing. He's perfectly happy as he is and once you get hold of him—"

"He seemed happy enough here," Loftus said. "A homely little fellow, our Tristram."

"Bolty," replied Pauline, "even if we don't like one another do let's try to be civil. I'm not going to leave you yet."

"Well, let me know when you want to,"—he blew the cigarette smoke through his nostrils. "I may have something to say about it, don't you know?" And he left her, whistling as he went a disjointed bar or two of "My Sweetie's gone away, She didn't say why, She didn't say where. . . ."

But Tristram on the top of a bus had

little thought of Bolty and his offer. His mind still glowed with the thought of Pauline. Up to a point her philosophy was that of Stuart Rivington; and yet it was different. She too had had ideals, yet had somehow managed a compromise without dishonor and self-deception. Tristram was sick with doubt. All my life, he thought, I have tried and tried to be kind and generous. That cannot be wrong. It's the world that is so cruel, and more cruel to me because I hate its cruelty. What he made of his life was no concern of others. It lay between him and his conscience. And conscience cried: How could you have done otherwise? You are the ultimate judge of yourself. Do you condemn? Then like demons come to torment him phrases of the Colonel's scorn returned. "You deserve what you have got . . . you're just the last person the world needs . . . you're a weak young fool."

At Argaud's one nine o'clock the following week Tristram found a letter from Mr. Bond. "Most of us are unhappy because we build up our lives on bad foundations," the vicar wrote. And then, further on — "Miss Rivington is very well and wishes me to tell you she will write to you herself within a few days. She has been very busy, and I regret to say Colonel Rivington is not what he was in health. He is living in the past and the other night Miss Rivington, hearing sounds of talking from his room went in to find him calling softly for Constance who was your mother. He is obsessed with the idea that Constance is in some sort of trouble and he cannot go to her. Whether he would like to see you, I do not know, and certainly it would be rash to ask him. But after death reconciliation cannot be made. Perhaps if you see fit, you might turn up here accidentally."

In the light of subsequent events the letter stirred Tristram deeply. He leaned over his desk, his mind afire with pictures. He saw himself that first afternoon at Mostyn Haven, sitting on the form near the window and behind the blackboard, felt again the shame of his bare knees, desired once more knickers that buckled below the knee, and with that came the smile of Bolty Loftus, that treacherous one smile of charm for all occasions. In its turn came memory of Claire at Egham, in the punt on the river: the sombre lounge

of the Matadore Hotel; then, Brinton meeting him at the station on his return, Emily all smiles in the doorway of High Silver: Pauline amidst the chickens, elfin Pauline with the brown hands: then Loftus once more. Yet always the ghosts most dominant, Stuart Rivington and Pauline Loftus. It seemed to Tristram that life was approaching a climax. He had a presentiment that something was about to happen, as if all these years he had been preparing for this something: all roads of his life were leading to a place of meeting, all pointed the same direction.

He was attending a sale for Mr. Argaud. In the train to Farnham he wrote again to Mr. Bond. "If I can get away," his letter concluded, "I'll try and come down for a week-end. But it depends."

As Tristram made his way down the Harrow Road, taking the first alley after the bridge before Royal Oak, he saw before him, just out of the circle of light from a street lamp, a figure vaguely familiar. Fifty yards from his flat in Westbourne Square he recognized Mrs. Swinton. She came to meet him, walking swiftly, her collar high about her neck. She greeted him in breathless fashion, saying, "I've been waiting since five. I thought you'd be home by half-past."

"Come into the flat," he said, wondering why she was here and what it was she wanted.

"No!" she shook her head vehemently. "No, I won't if you don't mind. It's private. I wanted to see you."

"Oh, very well," he said, none too graciously, "I'll walk to the station with you."

She shuffled along at his side, keeping pace with him. "I've done all you told me," she said ingratiatingly, "I've finished the first box."

"And the other has arrived?"

"Yes, it came this afternoon. You are a good boy, Tristram."

"It's done you good?"

She nodded, her eyes bright over the collar of her coat. He could not see the cunning in her look, nor the strange eagerness and the sly queer way she peered up at him. She said at once: "I haven't touched a drop."

"I'm very glad," he replied, and shuddered. Her very phrase was grotesque and horrible.

Mrs. Swinton would not come to the point until she was certain of his attitude. She appeared nervous, moistening her lips, making half hearted attempts at laughter, breaking off suddenly and for no reason.

"Now what is it you want, Mrs. Swinton?" Tristram asked abruptly.

She had edged close up to him and her fingers were twitching at his sleeve. He could see the reflection of his eyes in the dark, blind upstaring eyes, moist with despair and misery. Her breath caught in her throat as she asked him almost in a whisper: "I promise I'll never ask again. Only this time. Five pounds! Can you let me have five pounds?"

He started away from her and she made as if to clutch him. "Mrs. Swinton, confound it all. I'm sorry but I haven't got it."

She became violently agitated. "It's a dreadful thing to confess, but you'll understand, Tristram, I know you will. You're a good boy. It's rent."

He frowned with suspicion. "But why this so suddenly? You've money of your own."

"I'm in debt. I've been such a fool. If it wasn't for you, Tristram, I don't know where I should be." Her voice quavered with self-pity. "How could I go to little Claire, to my little daughter and tell her what I'm telling you? It would break her heart."

"Oh, my God," was all he could say. And then, after a moment: "But I can't possibly keep you, go on helping you."

"No, no! I shall be getting some more money next month. I've no one in all the world to go to. If you can't help me I shall have to end it."

"This is ridiculous. Don't talk like that. Then if I let you have five pounds you can manage?"

"Easily, indeed I can."

"All right then."

She raised her hands as if to embrace him. The wild exultation in her face almost frightened him, so grotesquely glad she seemed, so overpoweringly glad.

"I'll send a cheque," he said.

"God bless you!" and she wrung his hand.

"Goodbye," he said and was gone.

She watched him cross the road and walk briskly toward Royal Oak Bridge.

She was unduly excited, feverish. Within two minutes she was in the sitting room of one of those innumerable private hotels of doubtful reputation which form Eastbourne Terrace.

Mr. Charles Penn, a cigar in his mouth, was reading the Evening News. His eyes narrowed at sight of her. "Had your interview?" he asked.

"Yes, Charlie."

"Well," he glanced at his watch. "We'll be off and get a bit of food. This is a rotten place to wait in."

"Charlie," she pleaded. "Won't you let me have some money? Need you wait till the last lot arrives?"

"My dear Flo," he answered, "you agreed to wait and it's a bargain." As they left he asked: "Who'd you see? What's it about?"

"A little secret, Charlie, with a handsome young man."

"Piff!" he said, and hailed a taxi.

He said nothing to Claire of his meeting with her mother. He argued with himself proving silence best. Nevertheless he experienced a twinge of conscience as he wrote out a cheque. He had forgotten that for him also it was the end of the month and there were bills to be met. He decided to ask Argaud for a raise. There could have been no time less propitious but Tristram was desperate. When he did ask he blundered, and John Argaud shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been noticing lately," he said, "that you're not so keen as you were. I'm not trying to quarrel with you, Mr. Lauderdale, when I suggest that if you like I'll buy you out."

This sudden thrust took Tristram unawares. But it was true enough that he was tired of Museum Street; tired of the sombre shop and warehouse, tired, too, of the continual round of routine, the strain of appearing bright and intelligent when he was on edge and weary of life, of himself. But crossing the park and taking the path that runs along the Serpentine, he shook such thoughts from him. His misery was a dark prison and there was no way out. He was caught within four lofty walls whose stones he had himself placed one upon another. I've buried myself alive, he thought, and now only remains the long wait for death.

There are four trees in Kensington

Gardens that stand a little apart from their fellows. They enclose a ten foot square of deepgrass. At such a time as this, with a hint of evening in four o'clock sky, and the park emptying, this small space is like a little castle. A keen wind was springing up out of the east, hurrying the low clouds across the sky, piling up rain in the west. Tristram turned up his coat collar, raised his head and saw in the ten foot square of tree-guarded ground, a girl. She was reaching up, holding a morsel of bread to a squirrel, and the posture was familiar. He stopped in his stride, and then ran forward.

"Pauline!"

She gave a little cry of alarm, retreated, and then, "Good Lord, you scared me! Whatever are you doing here?"

Tristram suddenly felt as if he'd known she'd be here all the time and that he had come to meet her. He stood and gazed at her, because she was so like some woodland creature; he stood and gazed because the shrine held an image and he knew the time for worship was nigh.

"You shouldn't be here, Pauline. Will you go? Will you go?"

And because she understood so well, had known it all in her queer and lovely way, because she too had plumbed the depths and yet knew no fear, she said: "My poor Tristram. And you've been so hurt!"

Her words, her very compassion stilled him.

"I can go on no longer," he said simply. "It's not fair to ask me to go on any longer. I think it's the end," he said calmly.

She laughed softly. "Oh, but there's never an end. Tell me about it."

"I'm going to leave Argad's."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to leave everything."

"You're talking nonsense," she said. "Be sensible."

"I've made life a dream," he continued. "And it's turned out a nightmare. Only you are real, Pauline."

She shook her head at him. "Am I? What do you know about me? It is another idea, Tristram. I'm no paragon of virtue. I'm Bolty's wife. Even if I disapprove of some of his methods, I don't take the final step of — leaving him. As far as he goes he suits me. Isn't that a chip off the idol?"

"I don't care about idols any more."

"No? Well, they're hard come by. It's a folly to lose them."

"What a long time it takes to prove oneself a fool! There used to be two pictures at High Silver — I shall go back and break them!"

"You're beside yourself," she said. "My poor Tristram!"

"See, Pauline. . . ." He told her, standing in the chilly breeze with the evening roaming across the park; he told her of Erica, of Claire, of Flo Swinton. Chiefly of Flo Swinton.

He held out trembling hands to her. "I want nothing now but you, Pauline. I don't care who, what, or why Bolty is. I don't care what you think. Pauline, it's you I want."

"And you think it's as easy as all that?" Her mouth drooped a little at the corners, so hard she fought for control. "My dear," she said, and each word was a touch of icy death to his hopes. "How could that work? Is it so easy to renounce? I don't think it should be. What should we do, you and I? You just don't *know* enough, Tristram. To leave your wife? To take your hand from the plough? No, no, my dear, a thousand times no."

He gazed at her in an agony of despair. "I'd better go away — no — I'm sorry. I thought —"

"You poor blessed fool," she whispered. "You know I do. But there's no peace that way."

"But you do care?"

"Oh, yes, assuredly."

"But must I go?"

"Isn't it better? It's all too late now. Don't let's spoil it all because it is too late." Bravely she fought to keep this flood from drowning them both. She raised her hand to her forehead. "This isn't fair," she said piteously. Tristram took her in his arms beneath the trees while darkness crept around them and the lights sprang out distantly, one by one.

A minute later she was free of him. "When and if ever a time comes . . . till then I trust you."

"Oh, I'll come," Tristram answered. "To the end of the earth, Pauline. But till then I'll try again. But oh, my dear, my dear, why should it be like this?"

Then she went, slipping between the tree trunks, running swiftly across the

grass, running away from him till he lost sight of the blurred outline of her figure and heard no more the patter of her foot-steps on the grass.

Tristram reached home at half-past six. Claire was not in. The bed-room was disordered, the drawers of the wardrobe half open, shoes scattered on the floor. In the kitchen were no signs of preparation for dinner. By seven o'clock he began to worry. She must have been delayed somewhere. On the dressing table he found his cheque book and wondered what she had wanted with it. He sat down to wait, glad of an opportunity to regain his composure. I know nothing but this, he thought: that in Pauline only is salvation and that I by my very readiness to sacrifice myself have offered up both her and myself on the altar of my wretched idealism. Nor dare I face her again, and there remain only these ten minutes in the Park, the dozen words, the emptiness of it all, the utter emptiness. Then his mind swung to the practical: I must put it right with Claire, he said, I must do my best to prevent bad from becoming worse. It's not too late, — our house must be house-cleaned!

And even as he thought that, she came into the room.

She was dressed in her outdoor things; panting from her ascent of the stairs, and she blinked in the strong light. Then she stepped into the room and said with extraordinary bitterness: "Oh, it's *you*!"

He was astonished at her appearance, by the venom and hatred in her eyes. She faced him like a wild-cat, white with passion, filled with a fury he would never have believed she could contain. For a moment he thought that she had followed him into the Park, had seen him with Pauline, and that they were both being swept into the grotesque tangles of melodrama.

"I've got you to thank for this," she said. "You fool, Tristram, you blind fool."

He backed away from her, aghast at her vehemence, its vulgarity and force.

"What in the world —?"

She brushed past him, into the bedroom, seized the cheque book, and tossed it on the table. "Why didn't you tell me you'd given mother five pounds?"

"Because —" and he stopped. How

could he tell her it was the last concession, indeed now, by Heaven, most utterly the last. "She asked for it," he said in a dull voice, filled with dread and a horrible fear.

"What have you done?" she cried. "Do you know what you have done?" She was beyond self-control, worked up into a fury of fear and shame and illogical hatred. "I suppose she told you it was for rent, or something?"

He nodded because he could not speak.

"And that cure! She never took it. She sold it."

"Sold it?"

"Yes. Oh, I got it all out of them. She took the first lot and then agreed to sell the rest to a man called Charlie Penn. He was going to give her ten pounds for it when the last lot arrived. He'd sell it again. He's a brute. And mother — mother was crazy with drink. She'd got to have it. So she came round to you and fooled you. It was easy. Why didn't you tell me?"

"But — now —?"

"Now? God knows! She was run over by a taxi in Russell Square, thanks to your five pounds and the drink it got her this afternoon. Her leg's broken and there's a foot crushed. But she's raving. When she came to see you, she was drunk then. What a fool you are!"

Claire was in the bed-room, packing a portmanteau. "What are you going to do?" he asked her.

Her back toward him, bending over the bed, she made no reply, sweeping past him to collect some things from the sitting-room. He caught at her arm as she passed, but she jerked herself free.

"I'm going to look after my mother."

"Now?"

"Yes. Please give me some money."

He wrote out a cheque. "That leaves me twenty pounds," he said, and he handed it to her. The action calmed him, a dull fury taking the place of his bewilderment. He was now quite cool and collected. He took the portmanteau and followed her downstairs.

"Do you want a taxi?"

"I don't care."

"I think you'd better. It's a long way. I can do nothing?"

"*You!*"

They waited at the gate in silence. He glanced down at her once but her shoulder

was turned towards him. Her attitude was aggressive and vulgar. He wondered how he'd ever loved her and if indeed he ever had. He waved to a passing cab and it slowed up, wheeled round, and drew alongside.

As he held the door open for her he said, "If you want me, Claire, I will contrive to be there if possible."

"Want you? I don't want you."

"Goodbye, Claire."

She leaned out the far window. "Gower Street," she told the driver.

Tristram watched the cab drive across Westbourne Square, turn the corner into the Harrow Road. He stood for a long time by the gate, and then gazed up at the house behind him with a great loathing. It was dark and silent, as if it should never be inhabited again.

Nor did he spend the night in Westbourne Square. It reminded him too forcefully of a prison from which release now seemed certain. Whatever Claire would do, she would not return of her own free-will nor would he seek her out. He marvelled at himself for past tolerance, could laugh at it, seeing now how right Stuart Rivington had always been. Claire had left him of her own accord, deliberately, and without regard to his position. Her first duty was to him and she had renounced it. This time she should pay fully. His scorn for himself drowned sentiment and any apprehension of what might come. Overwhelming was this sudden discovery of truth — Grandfather was right!

Tristram packed a suitcase, counted the change in his pocket. Before he left he wrote to John Argaud. "I am taking a short holiday," he announced. "Following our talk of the morning I feel it would perhaps be best for us to part company —" He gave the name of his solicitors, and sealed the envelope with a fearful satisfaction. As the gate slammed behind him he felt a thrill of excitement. There remained but one thing — Pauline.

He could go to her now honorably and with a clear conscience. Bolty Loftus could go hang. Nothing would stop him now in this new knowledge from taking what he desired. I have done my best for others, he told himself, and a sorry business I've made of it. Now my first duty is to myself.

All the way to Kinnerton Street Tris-

tram rehearsed what was to come. If Bolty Loftus was in, there would be trouble. But what could Bolty do? It was his turn now and there were old scores to be paid off. Kinnerton Street was quiet, the cobbles glowed beneath the single lamp like beaten gold, the buildings of Wilton Place tall and ghostly against the deep blue of the sky. Footsteps echoed down the pavement and a policeman passed, a huge shadow reeling before him. Tristram leaned against the stone wall of the arch, counting the doors along the street till he picked up the stone steps with the iron railings which was Pauline's house. A thread of light half way up betrayed her presence in the drawing-room. She must be sitting there, reading or perhaps fallen asleep, waiting for Bolty's return. He could see her, her hands idle in her lap, her eyes half-closed, her head against a cushion. She would be breathing quietly, tired out after the afternoon's distress. Or was she perhaps aware of his presence, and was she there by that very window longing for escape from her prison, longing for him to come instead of Bolty?

He left the arches and walked quickly to the door of her house. The slit of light was still above him, though the rest of the place was in darkness. He pressed the bell with determination, and waited. He thought for a moment that the blind moved, the thread of gold became a bar, a suggestion of a shadow flickered past. This was no time to be kept waiting, so he rang again. The door creaked, flew open. Over the white shield of a dress shirt, Tristram saw the sweet disarming smile of Bolty Loftus.

"Hullo," said Bolty, "*you*, Galahad? Well, I never. Come in."

There was nothing else to do but follow him into the tiny hall. Tristram, irresolute, taken by surprise, noticed at once Bolty's hard shrewd regard of him over the back of his hand as it held a cigarette to his lips.

"Oh, stick your hat up anywhere," the smile was still there. It was only the upper part of the face that signalled danger. Awkwardly enough Tristram placed his hat on a peg, fumbled, let it slip. Somehow the situation was becoming exceedingly difficult. Not every evening did one walk into an acquaintance's house to demand his wife. If only he could see Pauline first!

"Nice of you to trot around. Come upstairs and have a drink," Bolty said.

A fire was crackling in the grate cheerfully, a silver tray with siphon and decanter rested on the table, the illumination of the room was amber. The sofa was pulled up close to the hearth, a book turned down open on the arm of a chair. Tristram went in quickly, stopped short. Except for himself and Bolty the room was empty. In his impetuosity he had not reckoned on this. In response to Bolty's invitation he sat down in a deep arm-chair sick at heart.

"Well, my worthy champion, and is life well with you?" Again Tristram became aware of the other's superiority and sophistication. Now as years before at Mostyn Haven, it was Bolty's acceptance of the situation which paralyzed him.

He moistened his lips. "I hope you won't think it — well — abrupt of me coming around —"

"Not at all. Friend of the — er — family and all that."

"The fact of the matter is —"

"I know." Bolty held the glass of whisky high against the light. "I know."

Very charming that smile now. But this was better. If Bolty knew, then . . .

"I know. Often at loose end in the evenings myself. Pity you don't come round more often. We'd like to see you. Remember the little party at Hunter's Inn? I thought that great fun. Pauline enjoyed it and so did I. She's keen on the country, Pauline is. Now I myself —"

He expounded his views; and all the time Tristram sat in his chair, listening, listening for the click of the lock downstairs when Pauline should return. He found difficulty in following Bolty's conversation. Suddenly the room, the crackling fire, the mellow comfortable light, the deep cushions, became hateful. Tristram rose to his feet, buttoned his coat and standing by the mantelpiece said: "Look here, Loftus, let's stop fooling. I don't want to be rude —" And Bolty Loftus stood too, fingering his black tie, standing very immaculate and debonair with one hand in his pocket. So they faced one another for a second, frankly hostile, each filled with contempt for the other.

"Oh, by the bye!" and the smile crept back to Bolty's face. "You must excuse Pauline's absence. She took it into her

head — she has her little idiosyncrasies, you know — to leave for France by to-night's boat-train." His hand left the side pocket of his coat, held out an envelope. I expect she's just written to apologize for not being here in case — well, in case you came around."

Tristram took the letter, and as his passion and bitterness swept in a flood to his lips, as he drew back white as death itself, Bolty Loftus pushed him gently to the door, saying, "Well, good night. I expect you're tired."

Then he was in the street once more, walking blindly towards the arch with its guttering light. Beneath that darting tongue of flame he read: ". . . because I could not even trust myself, a new thing for me, my dear. And because, Tristram, you just don't *know* enough. It isn't that I'm not proud of it all, but how can you change so quickly? They're hard come by, the old gods, and you've no right to sacrifice them for me, for yourself. It's not a question of right or wrong. It goes further. There must be only one vice and one virtue: weakness and strength — and they're only the Devil and God. You *must* see for yourself, Tristram. So I've gone back to the South again because in that way only can I be any good to you. Perhaps sometime you'll see. . . . Dear, it isn't a bit easy."

There the policeman found him, hatless beneath the lamp in Kinnerton Street arches, and being a kindly man, a family man, with an eye ever open for troubles of all sorts, and seeing how the young fellow was put about, stopped, and with his hand in his belt said: "Now then, sir, you oughtn't to hang about here."

The strange young man before him tore up in little pieces a sheet of paper, and said: "I oughtn't to hang about anywhere, Constable." And laughed, saying, "I'm a much worse character than even that. I'm hardly even a character. But don't you trouble, Constable, I'm taking myself in charge. I'm going back to prison. This is the end of my ticket of leave. I'm going down to see the judge who lives in a place called High Silver. You'd like High Silver, Constable, as I used to. I shall do what the judge tells me. He's called Stuart Rivington and he's a good judge. Don't you bother, Constable."

"Now come along, sir — you go 'ome."

But for a long time after Tristram had gone the policeman stood scratching the short hair over his ear, because he was a family man and didn't like to see young fellows in trouble of a sort beyond his comprehension.

High Silver was bright with the afternoon sun, bright with suspense. The last hours were more terrible than all the other years of waiting put together. Emily went about her work on tip-toe. Erica sat just outside the Colonel's door, knitting mechanically, making a winter waistcoat for Mr. Bond, who was downstairs waiting as well. Now he appeared at the top of the stairs, his arms folded and his face very grave. "How is he?"

"Much the same, Cyril. I went in just now and he's wandering a little. He was talking about a gun and I remember he nearly quarreled with Major Scaife over it at least twenty-five years ago. It would be much better if he'd rest but he will go on writing."

"It's the only thing that's real to him now." He pulled out his watch. "We ought to hear from the boy."

"You wired to Westbourne Square?"

"Yes, the old address."

He paced the landing silently, up and down, up and down. The knitting needles clicked and flashed and downstairs three o'clock struck. A minute later the front door bell rang violently in the silent house.

Erica put down her knitting and ran downstairs. Tristram was in the hall and she noted at once the dark rings beneath his eyes and how ill he looked. "Dear boy," she took his arm, "Dear boy! So long since I've seen you and now it's this."

Because she spoke in whispers, Tristram followed suit. "Why—?"

"You got our wire, dear? It's good of you to come so quickly. I hope it's not disorganized your work. But I'm afraid, very much afraid—" She blinked back her tears. There was no doubt of her meaning. Grandfather was dying. They'd wired for him: they expected him and here he was. In a sense that was all that mattered. This was no time to discuss his troubles. But he must see Grandfather. Grandfather was right and his advice would be good and would moreover be taken this time. He must see him at once. Could he?

"Yes, dear boy, of course. But be patient with him, he's writing."

"It's the third Friday? I'd forgotten."

They went upstairs and joined Mr. Bond.

"You're well, Tristram?"

"Well enough, Mr. Bond. This is a sad meeting."

But Mr. Bond said nothing more because he was an honest man.

When Tristram entered his grandfather's room the Colonel lifted a shaking hand. His blue eyes were wide open and unseeing. "How do you do," he said, and Tristram realized he was unrecognized.

"It's Tristram, Grandfather. I've come to see you." The necessity of the statement, the distant courtesy of the old man came as a severe shock. The flame was burning low and already in his presence was that eternal transparency of approaching death. And yet behind the lustreless eyes still gleamed a spark of that old invincible vitality. "It's Tristram," he said again.

Death stood aside at the bidding of the old man's will, struggling with memory: "H'er? Come back to see if I'm done for?" This was Stuart Rivington again, dragging back from the shadows to have a last quip.

"No. I've come back, Grandfather, to apologize for what happened long ago. And to tell you you were right and to ask you what to do."

A smile touched the sunken lips. "What's happened?"

Tristram touched the thin arm, "Can you listen?"

The Colonel gazed at him vacantly, then like a light behind a mask consciousness flared up: "Of course I can. What is it, boy? I'm sorry if you're down in your luck."

Very nearly this first admission of kindness broke down Tristram's control. He saw before him not this emptying husk of a man, but one who would always have been his friend. If he had only listened, these many years!

"I must tell you, Grandfather, because you're always right. Claire left me. . . ." He knelt by the bed for half an hour. He made no excuses for himself. He told the details of all his pain, with no exaggeration or bias. And as he talked the Colonel nodded his head now and again and once said: "No one man's opinion is right, you

know." The minutes slipped by and the afternoon sun shone more golden with the silver of noon draining away. Yet toward the end of the recital a chilliness crept into the arm beneath Tristram's fingers, a vacancy took the place of the vital embers burning in those pale blue eyes. Outside Erica waited with Mr. Bond and Emily whispered to Brinton in the kitchen. High Silver was full of whispers, the curtains swayed with the movement of a passing breath, the house was crystal bright with sunshine, seemingly neater, cleaner, and more in order. Four o'clock struck as Tristram finished.

"What had I better do, Grandfather?" he asked.

The Colonel's fingers fumbled at his lips, a film of perspiration gleamed on his ivory forehead. His shoulders twitched and the eyes turned to Tristram were filled with a sudden dread. "What's the time?" he asked.

"Four, Grandfather."

A terrible agitation strained the old man. He raised his hands to his forehead, the pajama sleeves flapping back to his elbows. He fought for memory, beat back the fantasies crowding his brain. And then Erica came in, beckoning Tristram aside, and bending over Stuart Rivington she said: "Do you want anything, Father?"

"My letter, Erica, I haven't finished my letter."

"Better lie still, Father, you're tired."

A tinge of color stained his cheeks. "The devil!" he snapped. "You've fussed me all my life. Can't I die as I want to? Give me my letter."

And since there was nothing else to do she gave it to him. But Tristram stayed in the room. No one had the right to deny him this last service. He pulled up a chair close to the bed, and guided the trembling pen. Slowly and painfully the straggling words filled the page. There could never be an answer to Tristram's question now. He sat there hardly seeing, certainly not comprehending the tottering sentences, only realizing that second by ominous second his last refuge was becoming inevitably beyond his reach; watching with agonized fascination the final struggle of Stuart Rivington against life. In lucid moments the Colonel ground out his sentences, and once when the darkness descended upon him and as he struggled

forth again, he said: "I must finish. I won't be beaten."

This was the final round, the least and yet the greatest of all his contests. It held for Tristram a terrible excitement. It was impossible for Grandfather to fail. It must be impossible. If at the end he should be beaten, he who had stood steadfast for so long, who above all others was indomitable, what then? He felt that in this last victory he too would share something of that granite strength of purpose. And thinking that he wondered if this only were the solution of the puzzle. "There is only one virtue and one vice," Pauline had said: strength and weakness. Beyond all questions of right or wrong, above love and hate, greater than malice, fiercer than shame, the very Hell and Heaven of existence: weakness and strength.

In the light of this, his arm aching with constant strain, cramped and numb, Tristram saw like an unholy pageant the lost days, the ruined years. One by one they came, pictures on the sunlit wall of the room. He was allowing Aunt Erica to kiss him on the steps of the pavilion. He saw again the bowler's arm swung high, heard the click of his fallen wicket. He was in the study downstairs, Aunt Erica was crying in the hall; he was being beaten for attacking his grandfather. Claire was walking ahead of him down Deepy Lane, they were going to Hunter's Inn. His eggs had been cold for breakfast. He was leaning over the back of the trap, straining to catch a last look at Libsters. Already he could hear the buzz of saws, the thud of axes. These and a hundred other phantoms passed by. He had taken the gold of the world's beauty and had wasted it. And yet —

"Three words more, three words more."

"Yes, Grandfather. Take it easy."

Half-past four struck. "What shall I say?"

"Yes, yes. We'll tell him that. Is the blind up? Your aunt's a fool. If Constance was here — Did Scaife write to me last or I to him? It doesn't matter. If Bath is going up-country, tell him to take my ponies with him. Where's Constance? She's always running away from me. Where's Constance?"

"Your letter, Grandfather —"

"Yes, yes. We're going to tell him —?"

"That I've come back."

Erica in the room again, Mr. Bond at

her side, at the foot of the bed the nurse. Somebody wheeling something into the room. Another flash of reality: "Why the devil can't you leave me alone! It's Friday."

The pen scratching, digging into the paper. A downward steady stroke, an even cross-stroke. "That's the t, Grandfather."

"Yes, I can see. Don't fuss."

The doctor talking aside to Aunt Erica, scratching his chin, shaking his head.

"You've got 'Tristram has come', Grandfather."

"Don't cry, Erica. Don't be an affected fool. Where's the pen, boy?"

And then above the quick short breathing, a deep sigh, a click of the indrawn breath. Stuart Rivington sat up in bed, his mouth open, his eyelids high over his indignant eyes. Then slowly he rocked

over on his side, the letter fluttering to the floor.

As the clock struck five, Tristram saw Aunt Erica turn to Mr. Bond. He went quickly from the room and ran downstairs. The front door was still ajar. He passed out and stood alone in the drive. Beyond the gates of High Silver the postman was whistling as he collected the letters. Over the tops of the trees, receding like a tide across gaunt Emeries, draining the gold from the green of Barn Park, and leaving the scarred hill of what was Libsters bleak and gray, afternoon was drooping into evening.

Somewhere beyond the fairy country, leagues from Taw's steadfast waters, were lands more meet for exploration. He raised his eyes to the splendid zenith of the sky and turning saw already in the West a hint of red.

THE END





The editors will be glad to publish brief letters from readers relating to topics discussed by contributors, or to any view expressed in these FORUM columns

Anne and Regina

Miss Anne Temple and Miss Regina Malone, two young American college students, neither of whom is more than twenty-two, discuss the question, "Is Youth Deteriorating?" in the July number of THE FORUM:

Two ladies, whose united ages
Pan out at less than forty-five,
Have canvassed in THE FORUM's pages
A subject that is much alive:
Is youth in morals, mien, and dress
Worse than the youth of long ago?
Miss Temple (Anne) pronounces "Yes",
But Miss Malone (Regina) "No".

Revolt, as neither of them doubts,
Is deeply rooted in the young,
Who cast aside like winter's clouts
The creed to which their parents clung;
To Anne, however, they appeal
Like ostriches but lately plucked.
While brave Regina by their zeal
For Freedom is immensely bucked.

The arguments, the *pros* and *cons*,
Are posed with admirable skill
Worthy of dialectic dons
Who ply the philosophic quill;
Anne dwells upon the wild stampede
Of youth without a guide or goal;
Regina bids us rather heed
Its high unconquerable soul.

The disputants are wondrous frank;
They've got the latest jargon pat
(We, like America, have to thank
Freud and his votaries for that):

But, as their names and views I scan,
I wonder, while I watch the fray,
What would poor old Regina Anne
Think of the damsels of to-day!
From "Punch" (London)
July 21, 1926

A gentleman who admits to three score years and ten, who "early learned to keep his eyes and ears open and correctly to interpret the messages conveyed to his mind by those antennae", writes:

Editor of THE FORUM:

I am just cynic enough, and skeptic enough, to hold the opinion that many a girl who has danced a brief time along the primrose path of dalliance has grown to be quite as respectable a member of society as her more puritanical although less romantic and less daring sisters who never have "hopped the traces", if I may use such an unconventional, although, perhaps, rather Victorian, newspaper quip of the latter eighteen hundreds, in so dignified a situation as the pages of THE FORUM.

Of course, it is true that we always have had the Fairy with us. It always has been true that more than one young woman in each community of more than a few hundred has deserved the reputation of being "kind to the boys". But I doubt if it ever has been true before, since the degenerate days of Rome, that those who were so spoken of were in the *great majority*, and those who were "unkind", in the sense intended, were in the pitiable minority, as they most undoubtedly are at this