

A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

At nine p. m. such of the company as might be present voted one of their number into the chair, a post which it was not considered etiquette to vacate till the clock struck twelve. At ten o'clock they were generally joined by the landlord, who, on such occasions, ordered and paid for what he drank like an ordinary customer. The last proceeding of each evening was for the chairman to treat such of the company as might be left to "goes" of grog at his own expense; one can not expect to have the honors of this world thrust upon one without having to pay for them.

It is quite possible that some of the frequenters of the Brown Bear were drawn thither by the love of hearing themselves talk, and of having others to listen to them, rather than by any more convivial motives. As a consequence, the affairs of the nation were discussed and settled, and the proceedings of the party in power impugned or approved of, as the case might be, to the satisfaction of everybody concerned; while such minor topics as the weather, the crops, the last murder, or the latest scandal in high life, did not fail to come in for their due share of attention. Some old fogies there were who scarcely opened their lips except to order their grog, or to interject an "exactly" or a "just so" at the proper moment, whenever any particular proposition was pointedly aimed at them, but who otherwise puffed placidly at their pipes in stolid silence. These non-talkers were by no means among the least popular of the company, for how can a man who feels called upon to enlighten his fellow-citizens do so with any satisfaction to himself unless he has appreciative listeners? That those others choose to be listeners rather than talkers was by no means put down to any obtuseness of intellect on their part, for are we not taught that a still tongue is a sign of a wise head? and a man may be brimful of wisdom, and yet be at pains to conceal that fact from his fellows.

Among such a company as this it might almost have seemed as if a man like Mr. Fildew would hardly have felt himself at home, but such was by no means the case. The truth is, that the majority of the frequenters of the Brown Bear, that is to say, the small tradesmen portion of them, looked up to our friend, and yet looked down upon him. They looked down upon him because they had a suspicion, which, in their case, was next to a certainty, that he was always in a chronic state of impecuniosity; because they themselves had their snug little investments in one form or other, and could have bought him up, root and branch, a hundred times over; and, finally, because it is one of the blessed privileges of those who have money to look down on those who have none. They looked up to Fildew because there was something about the man which told them he had at one time belonged to a sphere from which they were forever debarred. Through all his poverty and shabbiness, a faint aroma of fashion and high life seemed still to cling to him. The popular notion at the Brown Bear was that he had at one time been an officer in some crack regiment, who had ruined himself by gambling, and been discarded by his friends. If he spoke of the aristocracy, which, to give him credit, was but rarely, he spoke as though he was one to the manor born. He seemed to know Eton and Oxford as well as he knew Tottenham-court Road, and to be familiar with most of the West End clubs. A nobleman's name could hardly be mentioned without his being able to tell something about him that the frequenters of the Brown Bear had never heard before. In his very way of talking, in his mode of accentuating his words there was an indefinable something which marked him out at once from the ordinary frequenters of the coffee-room of the B. B. They knew, these petty tradesmen, that "His Grace" looked down upon them from the height of some, to them, invisible pedestal; and they, in turn, looked down upon him from the serene height of their money-bags; and yet, as they argued among themselves when he was not by, he must, to a certain extent, have liked their company, else why did he seek it so persistently, night after night, the year round?

It was about half past eight this evening when John Fildew walked into the bar of the Brown Bear. He nodded to the landlord, and that worthy at once touched a spring inside the bar which communicated with the door of the coffee room, after which the door opened to Fildew's hand, and he entered. With one man in the room he shook hands, to the rest of the company he vouchsafed a general and comprehensive nod. Then he took a vacant chair, and having called for a "go" of brandy cold, he proceeded to select a church-warden pipe from a heap on the table before him, and to charge it with tobacco.

"How's the weather by this time, your grace?" asked Mr. Nutt, the shoe-maker. "It was just wetting a bit when I came in."

"The stars are out again," said Fildew, answering to the title as a matter of course. "Not much likelihood of any rain to-night."

It was not often that he joined in the discussions political or otherwise, that were pretty sure to crop up before the evening was at an end. He generally sat a silent if not an amused listener. If appealed to directly he would give his opinion, but not otherwise. That curious, sneering smile of his would now and then light up his features at the enunciation by one or other of his friends of some more wildly outrageous statement than common, but for the most part he and his pipe held silent session together and troubled no one with what they thought.

It was quite understood in the room why Mr. Fildew should shake hands with Mr. Denzil and no one else. Mr. Fildew was a man who rarely shook hands with any one. His reasons for making an exception in favor of the young law-writer may be told in a few words. One evening, about a year anterior to the particular evening to which we have now come, Mr. Denzil had made his appearance at the Brown Bear considerably the worse for liquor. At the moment of his entrance Mr. Fildew was explaining to

the company the ceremonial in connection with a royal levee at St. James's. "What can a shabby dog like you know about the interior of a palace?" hiccupped Denzil, "If you have ever been inside St. James's it must have been when you were sent to sweep the chimneys."

"Silence, you drunken fool," said Mr. Fildew, in quietly contemptuous tones.

But Denzil was not in a mood to be silenced, and would probably have insulted the company all round had not three or four of his more intimate friends removed him as quietly as possible. After that evening he and Mr. Fildew spoke to each other no more.

Six or seven months had passed away when one evening somebody inquired what had become of Denzil, upward of a week having gone by since his last appearance at the B. B.

"My potman told me to day that he had heard he was queer," remarked the landlord.

"What's the matter with him? Not d. t. again, eh?"

"Some sort of fever, I'm afraid. 'Catching, too, I hear."

"Poor Denzil! Let up hope he'll not want for good nursing."

"How can he have good nursing," said another, "when, as I happen to know, he hasn't a single relation within a hundred miles of London? He rents a back bedroom on a third floor, and gets his meals out. That's the sort of home Denzil has."

"Poor devil! They ought to have taken him to the hospital. He'd have been properly cared for there."

"They say he's too ill to be moved," remarked the landlord, as he placidly puffed at his pipe. Had the health of his favorite terrier been in question, some show of feeling might naturally have been expected from him.

Then Mr. Fildew spoke. "Gentlemen," he said, my opinion is that a deputation of the present company ought without delay to inquire into the circumstances attended on Mr. Denzil's illness, and make such arrangements as may be necessary for having him properly cared for."

There was a dead silence in the room. Everybody puffed away with increased energy at their pipes.

Mr. Pycroft, the small-ware dealer, a thin man with a squeaky voice was the first to speak. "Did you say the fever was a catching one, Mr. Landlord?"

"So my potman was given to understand. A bad kind of fever—ver-

"Humph! Well, I for one, as a family man, must say," resumed Pycroft, "that much as I respect our friend, Denzil, and sincerely as I hope he'll soon be among us again as jovial as ever, I don't see my way to go and inquire personally after his health. My duty to my wife and children tells me that I ought to take the greatest possible care of my own health, for their sakes, if not for my own."

"Hear, hear, my sentiments exactly," resounded from three or four parts of the room. "Number Two is all very well when Number One has been properly cared for."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Scoop, the tailor, with a doleful shake of the head, "I am afraid that this is one of those unfortunate cases in which friendship finds itself with its hands tied. I don't really see that we can do anything. James, another go of Scotch with an extra squeeze of lemon this time."

Mr. Fildew rose to his feet and put his hat on.

"Surely your grace is not going already?" said Mr. Nutt.

"Why, the evening's quite a baby yet," remarked jovial-faced little Tobins, the undertaker. "But perhaps there's a lady in the case, eh? Ah, a dog, sly dog!" and he gave a comprehensive wink for the benefit of the company at large.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Fildew, gravely, "I am going to the lodgings of Mr. Denzil. If any one here chooses to accompany me, so much the better. If not, I shall go alone."

He waited a moment, but no one spoke or moved.

Then he turned on his heel and walked slowly out.

He found Denzil in a raging fever, with no one to attend to him but a poor lad who slept in the next room. For ten days and as many nights and this lad took it in turns to nurse the sick man, until the fever left him and he was on the high-road to recovery. Then an old aunt was telegraphed for out of Devonshire, and Mr. Fildew went his way. And that is the reason why over afterwards he and Denzil shook hands when they met at the B. B.

To-night the coffee-room was more lively than usual, for Mr. Wint, the funny man of the company, had advanced the humorous proposition that the moment a prime-minister failed to secure a majority in the House he ought to be decapitated, and was putting it to his friends generally, of them would like to take office under such circumstances. Lamb's witticisms and time honored-jokes were being bandied about; a joke was hardly looked upon as a joke at the B. B. till it had done duty some half-dozen times, and came to be recognized as an old friend. But John Fildew sat as grave as a judge, behind his pipe, and took no part in the merriment around him.

By and by in came Mr. Nipper, the auctioneer, with the evening paper in his hand. He sat down next Mr. Fildew, rubbed up his hair, and smoked a pipe. "Any news this evening worth reading?" asked Fildew, not for the sake of saying something, than because he cared to know what there might be.

"No, everything seems very stale just now," said the auctioneer, and blew down the stem of his pipe, and twisted his little finger appreciatively round the bowl. "There is an account of a fatal accident to one of the young swells; but the country could spare a lot like him without being the worse off," added Nipper, who prided himself on his democratic principles.