

## A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

As the result, Mr. Larkins, senior, amassed a very comfortable fortune, which he more than doubled by certain lucky speculations. Having done this, there was nothing left him to do but to die; so die he did, and Orlando reigned in his stead. "He's a good-natured, sappy sort o' young gentleman—but somehow the swell people about here don't seem to take to him, and even the lads shout after him, 'How are you, young Pillbox?' when he goes riding into the town."

"Very rich and very good natured, and not received into society," said the earl to himself. "It might, perhaps, answer my purpose to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr. Orlando Larkins."

## CHAPTER X.

## INFATUATION.

At a quarter past eleven on the morning of the Thursday following Clement Fildew's visit to Cadogan Place, Mrs. Percival's brougham stopped at the corner of Elm Street, Soho, and from it alighted Miss Collumpton and Miss Brown. They were not long in finding No. 19, and when, in answer to their ring, the door opened apparently of its own accord, they might have been puzzled what to do next had not Clement come rushing down-stairs and piloted them the way they were to go.

Tony Macer had gone out in deep dudgeon. He was disgusted with Clem for having engaged himself to paint a couple of portraits when he ought to be devoting the whole of his attention to putting the finishing touches to his Academy picture. Indeed, Tony, who had a great opinion of Clem's abilities, did not like the idea of his friend taking to portrait-painting at all. "You will only spoil yourself for better work," he kept repeating. "Why should you fritter away your time in painting the commonplace features of a couple of nobodies? You had better set up as a photographer at once."

"Only these two," Clem had pleaded. "When I have finished these I won't try my hand at another portrait for a whole year."

Mr. Macer having ascertained at what hour the ladies were expected to arrive, set off growling for Hampstead in company with his sketch-book and his pipe.

"And this is a studio!" exclaimed Cecilia, as she halted for a moment on the threshold and looked round. "What a very strange place!"

"I hope you did not expect to find any halls of dazzling light," said Clem, with a laugh. "If so, it is a pity that you should be disenchanted. A poor painter's workshop is necessarily a poor sort of place."

"I think it quite delightful, and I like it immensely. So thoroughly unconventional, is it not?" she added, turning to Miss Browne. "For my part I am tired of drawing-rooms and fine furniture. One can breathe here."

Clem had nailed down a square of green baize on one part of the floor and had hired a couple of chairs and a few "properties" from Wardour Street. Miss Browne walked across the floor in her slow, stately way, and seated herself on one of the chairs. To her the studio was nothing but a dingy, commonplace room. How to arrange her draperies most effectively for the forthcoming sitting was the subject of paramount importance in her thoughts just now. She wore a pearl-gray satin robe this morning. She hoped that Mr. Fildew was clever at painting satin.

"Are both these pictures yours, Mr. Fildew?" asked Cecilia, pointing to two covered-up canvases standing on easels in the middle of the room.

"No. That one is my friend Macer's; this one is mine."

"If I am very good and promise not to make a noise or ask too many questions, may I see them, Mr. Fildew—both of them?"

"Certainly you may see them, Miss Browne, and that without making a promise of any kind. But I must warn you that neither of them is finished, and must therefore deprecate any severe criticism."

"I don't want to criticise them, but simply to see them," said Cecilia, as Clem flung back the coverings.

She looked at Tony's picture first. After contemplating it in silence for a little while, she said softly, and more as if talking to herself than to Clem, "I think that I should like to know Mr. Macer." Then she passed on to Clem's picture. But she had not looked at it more than half a minute before she discovered that one of the two faces depicted in it was an exact reproduction of her own. Sly Master Clem had painted her portrait from memory, and had stuck it into his picture. The warm color mounted to Cecilia's face, her eyes dropped, and she turned away without a word.

Clem readjusted the coverings, and when he turned Cecilia was sitting in the chair next to Miss Browne's, apparently immersed in the pages of "Punch."

Clem got his colors, brushes, and palette, with the view of immediately setting to work. He had already planted his easel on the spot where he intended it to stand. The cause of Cecilia's blush had been patent to him in a moment, and, while sorry to think that his audacity might have possibly annoyed her, yet he could not help being flattered by the fact of her having so quickly recognized her own likeness. "I have scared her a little," he said to himself. So for the present he addressed himself exclusively to Miss Browne, of course under the mistaken belief that she was Miss Collumpton, posing her and arranging her so as to suit best his ideas of artistic effect.

Three quarters of an hour passed quickly, and then Miss Browne declared that she was tired. All this time Cecilia had scarcely spoken. "Now, Mora, dear, it's your turn," said Miss Browne to Cecilia.

"I am ready at any time." Then it was her turn to be posed and arranged. For a little while no one spoke. Then Cecilia said, "Are both those pictures destined for the academy, Mr. Fildew?"

"That is their destination if the hanging committee will deign to find room for them."

"Then, of course, they are intended for sale?"

"But whether they will find purchasers is another matter," answered Clement, with a shrug.

Cecilia said no more, and Mora, seeing that she was disinclined for talking, exerted herself for once, and kept up a desultory conversation with Clem till the sitting came to an end. Then the ladies went. There was no sign of lingering vexation or annoyance in Cecilia's way of bidding Clem good morning, but she took care not to lift her eyes to his while she did so. The next sitting was fixed for the following Monday.

One, two, three sittings followed in rapid succession. Cecilia's brightness and gayety did not long desert her. She chattered with Clem as easily and as lightly as at first, only she never alluded to the Academy pictures. When the third sitting was over, just as Cecilia was leaving the room, Clem slipped a brief note into her hand. Her fingers closed over it instinctively. She and Mora were to have called at several other places before going home, but Cecilia pleaded a headache, and they drove back direct to Cadogan Place.

After two hours spent in her own room, Cecilia went down-stairs. But she was restless and uneasy, and seemed unable to settle to anything for many minutes at a time. Sketching, reading, needle-work were each tried in turn, and each in turn discarded. Several times Mora looked at her with inquiring eyes, but said nothing. Twice her aunt said, "Cecilia, I do wish you wouldn't fidget so; you are as bad as any child of six."

The ladies dined early when they had no company. After dinner Mrs. Percival went out. The two girls sat by themselves in the drawing-room. By and by Mora went to the piano and began to play. Cecilia sat and looked into the fire and listened, or, without listening, felt, half unconsciously, the sweet influence of the music steal into her senses. Then the twilight deepened, and Binks came in and lighted the lamps. But still Mora went on playing, and still Cecilia sat and gazed dreamily into the fire.

By and by Mora looked round and saw that she was alone. Cecilia had slipped through the curtains that shrouded one end of the room from the conservatory beyond. There was just enough light in the conservatory to enable Mora to see Cecilia as she sat among the orange-trees at the foot of a statue of Silence, that loomed white and ghost-like above her. Mora knelt by her friend and took one of Cecilia's hands in hers and pressed it to her lips. "What is it, darling?" she whispered. "Tell me what it is that is troubling you?" Cold and calculating in many ways as Mon Browne might be, there was at least one sweet, unselfish impulse in her heart, and that was her love for Cecilia Collumpton.

Cecilia responded to her friend's question by stooping and kissing her. Then she whispered—but it was a whisper so faint that if the statue bending over her with its white finger on its white lips had been endowed with life it could not have overheard what she said—"He has written to me and told me that he loves me!"

Mora started, but Cecilia's arms held her fast and would not let her go. "Who has written to you? Not Mr. Fildew?"

"Yes—Mr. Fildew."

"How sorry I am to hear this!"

"I am not sorry."

"You don't mean to say that—"

"Yes, I do. Why not?" Then Cecilia's arms were loosened, and Mora rose to her feet.

"Oh, Cecilia, I cannot tell you how grieved I am that I ever was party to this deception?"

"Why should you be grieved Mora?"

"Because if Mr. Fildew had been told from the first who you were, this terrible business would never have happened."

"I am not so sure of that. Men are sometimes very audacious. But it is no such terrible business, after all."

"To me it certainly seems so, and I shall never forgive myself for helping to bring it about."

"And I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for the share you have had in it."

"This is infatuation, Cecilia. But don't, pray don't, tell me that you have any thought of encouraging Mr. Fildew's attentions."

"Encouraging his attentions! What phrases are those, Mora? Did not tell you just now that—that Mr. Fildew has told me that he loves me and did I not give you to understand that I care for him in return?"

"How wretched you make me feel! But you have not told him that you return his love?"

"Not one syllable has he heard from my lips."

"Then it is not too late to undo all this."

"I don't understand you, dear."

"You have never spoken to him—you have given him no encouragement—he knows nothing of your infatuation. Such being the case, he never knew. We will go to his studio no more. Some other artist will paint your portrait. Mr. Fildew shall be quietly dropped, and in a few weeks you will have forgotten that any such person had an existence in your thoughts."

Cecilia laughed, but there was a ring of bitterness in her mirth. "I might be listening to the maxims of Lady Loughton or my aunt Percival," she said. "But you have never loved, therefore I cannot expect you to sympathize with me."

"But you certainly would not marry this man, Cecilia?"

"I have never thought of marrying either 'this man,' as you call him."