

A BARREN TITLE.

CHAPTER I.

SHABBY-GENTEEL.

It was about half past two on a sunny February afternoon when Mr. John Fildew put his nose—aquiline and slightly purple as to its ridge—outside the door of his lodgings for the first time that day, and remarked to himself, with a shiver, that the weather was “beastly cold.” After gazing up the street and down the street, and seeing nothing worth looking at, he shut the door behind him and strolled leisurely away.

Hayfield Street, in which Mr. Fildew's lodgings were situate, was, despite its name, as far removed, both in appearance and associations, from anything suggestive of country or rural life as it well could be. It was of the town, towny. Every house in it—and they were substantial, well-built domiciles, dating back some seventy or more years ago—was let out to three or four families, while in many cases the ground-floors had been converted into shops, in one or other of which anything might be bought, from a second-hand silk dress or sealskin jacket to a pennyworth of fried fish or a succulent cow-heel.

In whatever part of the street you took your stand a couple of taverns were well within view, and, as a matter of course, there was a pawnbroker's emporium “just round the corner.” It is needless to say that the street swarmed with children of all ages and all sizes, and that you might make sure of having the dulcet tones of a barrel-organ within ear-shot every ten minutes throughout the day. It was situate somewhat to the west of Tottenham Court Road, and ran at right angles with one of the main arteries that intersect that well-known thoroughfare.

In this populous locality Mr. Fildew and his wife rented a drawing-room floor, consisting of three rooms and including the use of a kitchen below stairs, and here they had lived for between six and seven years at the time we make Mr. Fildew's acquaintance. As we shall see a great deal of that gentleman before the word *Finis* is written to this history, it may perhaps be as well to introduce him with some particularity to the reader before setting out with him on his afternoon stroll.

John Fildew at this time was about fifty-two years of age, b., looked somewhat older. Thirty years previously he had been accounted a very handsome man, and there were still sufficient traces of by-gone good looks to make credible such a tradition. But the once clear-cut aquiline nose was now growing more bibulous-looking with every year, and the once shapely waist was putting on a degree of convexity that troubled its possessor far more than any other change that time had seen fit to afflict him with. As yet he was by no means bald, and his iron gray hair, however thin it might be at the crown, was still plentiful at the sides and back, and, being seldom operated upon by the tonsorial scissors, its long straggling ends mingled with the tangled growth of his whiskers and lay on the collar of his coat behind. Grizzled, too, were whiskers, beard, and mustache, but all unkempt and apparently uncared for, growing as they listed, and only impatiently snipped at now and again by Mr. Fildew himself when his mustache had grown so long as to be inconvenient at meal-times. His eyes were his best feature. They were dark, piercing, and deep-set, and were overhung by thick bushy brows which showed as yet no signs of age. Their ordinary expression was one of cold, quiet watchfulness; but they were occasionally lighted up by gleams of a grim, sardonic humor, accompanied by a half-contemptuous smile, and at such times it was possible to understand how it happened that many not overobservant people came to regard him as a genial, good-hearted, easy-tempered fellow, when, in truth, there was scarcely one touch of real geniality in his composition.

Unshorn and unkempt as Mr. Fildew might appear as regards his hair and whiskers, shabby-genteel as he might be in point of attire, he still carried himself as one who holds himself superior in some measure to the ordinary run of his fellows. His boots might bear unmistakable traces of having been patched, but they were carefully polished and well-set up at the heels. His trousers might be old, and it is possible that they too might be patched on certain parts not visible to the public eye, but they were well ironed at the knees, and were strapped over his boots *à la militaire*. His frock-coat—always worn tightly buttoned—might be threadbare, inked here and there at the seams, and not after the latest fashion, but it had the merit of being an excellent fit. His hat, too, might be of ancient date, and suspiciously shiny in places, but it was always carefully brushed, and was worn with an air of assurance and *aplomb* that made its defects seem superior to the virtues of many newer head-coverings. Mr. Fildew's linen might be old, possibly darned, but such portion of it as was visible to the world at large was at least spotless white. There was some one at home who took care of that. His attire was completed by a deep, military-looking stock, a pair of faded buckskin gloves, and a substantial Malacca cane with a silk tassel. Being naturally a little near sighted, he always carried an eye-glass, but rarely made use of it in the street.

And yet Mr. Fildew's shabby attire was not altogether a matter of necessity with him. One day his son Clement ventured to say “Father, I wish you would go to my tailor, and let him set you up with some new toggery.”

Clem was brushing the collar of his father's coat at the time, and the remark was made laughingly, but Mr. Fildew turned with a scowl and confronted his son. “Confound your tailor, sir!” he cried. “And you, too,” he added next moment. “Do you think I'm a pauper, that you offer to pay for my clothes? If you are ashamed to be seen out with me, remember, sir, that there are always two sides to a street.” And with that Mr. Fildew turned on his heel in high dudgeon.

Clement and his mother exchanged glances of dismay. “You know how peculiar your father is, dear,” said Mrs. Fildew afterward, “and what little

things sometimes touch his dignity. It was injudicious of you to say what you did.”

Clement shrugged his shoulders. “I have lived with my father all my life, and yet I confess that I only half understand him,” said the young man. “At times he is a complete enigma to me.”

“I have lived with him more years than you have, and I think that I almost understand him—almost, but not quite,” responded Mrs. Fildew, with a smile. “But then a woman does always understand a man better than another man can hope to do.”

Clement Fildew might well say that his father was an enigma to him. Although the latter refused so indignantly to allow his son to be at the expense of refurbishing his wardrobe, he was not to proud to accept from him his weekly supply of pocket money. But then the money in question found its way from Clement's pocket to that of his father after such a delicate and diplomatic fashion that the susceptibilities of Mr. Fildew had never hitherto been wounded in the transaction. Every Friday Clement placed in his mother's hands the sum of one guinea. The sovereign and shilling in question were wrapped up by Mrs. Fildew in a piece of tissue paper, and quietly deposited by her in a certain drawer in her husband's dressing-table. But Saturday morning the tiny packet would have disappeared. No questions were asked; neither Mrs. Fildew nor her husband ever spoke to each other on the matter; but silence has often a meaning of its own, and it had in this case.

Mr. Fildew having shut the door of his lodgings behind him, walked slowly down the street with the preoccupied air of a man who is busily communing with himself. “I must ask Clem to lend me half a sovereign,” he muttered. “The necessity is an unpleasant one, but there's no help for it. I feel certain I could have given that fellow last night a drubbing at a carom game, but he was too many for me at the spot stroke. *Experientia docet*.”

Unfastening a couple of buttons of his frock-coat, Mr. Fildew inserted a thumb and finger into his waistcoat pocket, and drew therefrom a six-pence. “My last coin,” he murmured. “I really must not touch a cue again for another month.”

Mr. Fildew was methodical in many of his habits. There was one tavern at which he made a point of calling within ten minutes of leaving home every afternoon. It had a little dark, private bar with cane-bottomed stools, where the gas was kept half turned on all day long. Here “Punch” and other comic papers were always to be found. Somehow, Mr. Fildew liked the place, but although he had called there daily for years, no one behind the bar knew either his name or anything about him. He now pushed open the swing-doors and went in. In answer to his nod—there was no need for him to speak—the bar-man brought him fourpenny worth of brown brandy and cold water, together with a minute portion of cheese on the point of a knife. Mr. Fildew munched his cheese, glanced at the cartoon in “Punch,” sipped up his brandy-and-water, nodded a second time to the bar-man, and went.

Mr. Fildew walked jauntily along, whistling under his breath. The brandy had imparted a glow to his feelings and a glow to his imagination; the flame would soon drop down again, he knew, but he was philosopher enough to enjoy it while it lasted.

Elderly, shabby-genteel individuals are by no means scarce about the West end of London on sunny afternoons—invetorate *flâneurs* whose “better days” are over forever. But Mr. Fildew was something more than merely shabby-genteel; there was about him a style, a carriage, an air undefinable, but not to be mistaken, of broken-down distinction, which induced many passers-by to turn and glance at him a second as he “took” the pavement with his slow military stride, his eyes fixed straight before him, and his nose held high in air.

In a few minutes he found himself in Oxford Street. Crossing this as soon as there was a break in the string of vehicles, he took his way toward the mazes of Soho. Stopping at a certain door, he gave one loud rap with the knocker followed by two quick ones, and the next moment the door opened, apparently of its own accord, and Mr. Fildew walked in, after which the door shut itself behind him. He had evidently been there before, for without a moment's hesitation he ascended the first flight of stairs, turned to the left down a short passage, and opening a door at the end of it, found himself in a roomy and well-lighted studio.

Its only occupant was a very little bandy-legged man, with a luxuriant crop of curly hair, who was sitting on a low stool in front of a big canvas, palette and brush in hand and a briar root pipe between his teeth. John Fildew looked round with an air of disappointment.

“Clem not at home?” he asked of the little man.

“Oh, Mr. Fildew, is that you?” said the latter, turning quickly. “I thought it was Clem come back. He's gone to see Pudgin, the dealer. Won't be long I dare say.”

“This is the third time I've called and not found him at home.”

“Ah, just your luck, ain't it?” said the other, coolly. It would almost have seemed from the way he spoke as if he held Mr. Fildew in no particular regard.

The latter made no reply, but strode across the room and came to a halt immediately behind the little painter.

“I'm putting the finishing touches to the *poker* of my saint, Mr. Fildew. I wonder whether the holy men of olden times were ever troubled with corns or bunions? I suppose it wouldn't do to paint them with any. Rather too elastic, eh?”

“Intended for the Academy, I suppose?”

“If their high nightinesses will deign to find it hanging-room—which is somewhat problematical.”

Mr. Fildew's cough plainly implied, “I should think it very problematical indeed.”