

A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

"You need not have done that, sir," interposed Clem. "My mother should not have wanted for anything during your absence."

"I am quite sure of that, my boy. But in making this little arrangement I feel that I am simply doing my duty—and what a luxury for one's conscience that is!" His lordship's conscience had not been used to such luxuries for a long time, and probably appreciated them all the more by reason of their rarity.

"In addition to my allowance of five guineas per month," continued the earl, "your mother will have her own private income of fifty pounds a year, and will no longer have me for an incumbrance; so that, all things considered, she ought to be, and doubtless will be, tolerably comfortable. There is one thing, however, Clem, that she wishes you to do after I am gone. She would like you to go back and sleep in your old room. She is rather timorous, poor thing, at the thought of being left alone."

"Of course I shall do that, sir," said Clem.

"Then I need not detain you longer. If you have half an hour to spare this evening before your mother's bedtime, look in and we will talk these matters over more in extenso." And extending a couple of fingers to his son and nodding a good-morning, the earl went, leaving Clem at a loss whether to be more pleased or sorry at what he had just heard.

The private income of fifty pounds a year to which Lord Loughton had referred when speaking of his wife, was all that was now left of the fortune he had received with her on her wedding-day. It would hardly be too much to say that it was on account of that fortune he had married her. She was an orphan, the daughter of English parents who had emigrated to America. Her father had been originally a poor man, but had made a fortune during the last three or four years of his life. She fell in love with the handsome English scapegrace at a boarding-house where they happened to meet, and being her own mistress and well-to-do, and divining that he was poor—how poor she did not know till afterward—she was not long in letting him see the preference which she felt for him. He, on his side, when once satisfied that her fortune was not a myth, was an ardent lover enough, and at the end of a few weeks they were married. Not till the wedding morn did the bride know that her husband's name was not John Fildew, but John Marmaduke Lorrimer, and that same evening she was made to take a solemn oath never to divulge to living soul the secret of her husband's real name. So faithfully had the promise then given been kept that not even her own son had the remotest suspicion that the name he called himself by was not his own. As years slipped away Mrs. Fildew's fortune also slipped away, till nothing of it was left save the aforesaid fifty pounds per year, the principal of which neither she nor her husband could touch. With the struggling, poverty-stricken years that followed when the bulk of the fortune was gone we have nothing here to do.

It was owing to Clem's persuasions that his father and mother had at length agreed to remove all the way from Long Island to London. The lad had developed a remarkable talent for painting, but had got the idea into his head that he could have better instruction and make more rapid progress in London than elsewhere. But, in addition to that, Mr. Fildew, senior, was heartily sick of the States. So to London they had come, and there they had lived ever since. Clem, what with painting and what with drawing on wood for the magazines, was slowly but surely making his way, and was not only able to keep himself—in very modest style, it is true—but could also spare his father a pound a week for pocket-money. What he did in the way of helping his mother at odd times was known to no one but him and her. He had lived at home till home was no longer comfortable for him; and even his mother had at length urged him to go into lodgings on his own account. That mother, whom he loved so well, was slowly but surely dying of an incurable complaint. She had been ill for years, and might be ill for years longer, before the end came; but that it was surely coming both she and those about her knew full well. And this knowledge it was that made the one great trouble of Clem's life.

The earl felt that he had much to do before his departure from London. After again seeing his son in the evening, but without giving him many more details as to his future proceedings than he had given him in the morning, he set out for the Brown Bear. This would be his last evening at the old haunt for a long time to come, if not forever; and when he called to mind the many pleasant hours he had spent in the coffee-room, he felt quite sentimental—far more sentimental than he had felt at the thought of parting from his wife and son.

There was an extraordinary muster at the Brown Bear this evening, it having got noised about that it was Mr. Fildew's farewell visit. As a consequence, Mr. Fildew had to enter into particulars, which he detested doing, as to the why and the wherefore of his going away. He told them the same story that he had told to his son, with certain variations, the gist of it being that a very old friend of his had come into a large fortune, and needed his, Mr. Fildew's, services as guide, philosopher, and friend.

Mr. Nutt was unanimously voted into the chair, and a very pleasant and convivial evening followed. Mr. Fildew's health was drunk with musical honors, to which "His Grace" responded in a few well-chosen sentences, and wound up by ordering the landlord to bring in his biggest punch-bowl filled to the brim. On the heels of the first bowl came another; and when twelve o'clock struck several of the gentlemen present were hardly in a condition to find their way unaided to their homes, so that, as several of them afterward averred, it was one of the pleasantest evenings they ever remembered to have spent.

At dusk, next afternoon, Lord Loughton bade farewell to his humble

lodgings. His last words to his wife were to the effect that she might expect to see him again in three weeks or a month. Clem's offer to accompany him to the station was firmly negatived. However, Clem saw him into the cab, and heard him give instructions to be driven to King's Cross. Then there was a last wave of the hand and he was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

TRANSFORMATION.

When the Earl of Loughton left home in a four-wheeled cab it was by no means his intention to drive direct to the railway. His first stopping place, as soon as he got clear of the neighborhood where he was known, was a French hair-dresser's. When he came out of the shop, half an hour later, the cabman did not recognize him till he spoke. He had gone into the shop with a wild tangle of hair, beard, and mustache about his face, neck, and throat. He came out with his hair cropped after the military style, and with his face close shaved except for an imperial, and a thick, drooping mustache with carefully waxed tips, both of which had been artistically dyed. From the hair dresser's he drove to a certain well-known out-fitting emporium, and here the transformation previously begun was consummated. Again the cabman opened his eyes, this time very wide indeed. His exceedingly shabby fare, respecting whose ability to pay him his legal charge he might well have had some reasonable doubts, was transformed into a military-looking, middle-aged gentleman (most people would have taken him for an officer in mufti), in a suit of well-fitting dark tweed, and an ulster. The frayed black satin stock and the patched boots had disappeared with the rest, and when his fare with delicately gloved hand drew forth a snowy handkerchief, and a celestial odor of Frangipanni was wafted to his nostrils, the man could only touch his hat and say, in a sort of awed whisper, "Where to next, colonel?" Had he been bidden to drive to Hades he could hardly have wondered more.

The earl slept that night at the Great Northern Hotel, and went down to Brimley next morning after a late breakfast. He took up his quarters for the time being at the Duke's Head, the only really good hotel in the little town. Everybody was anxious to see the new Lord Loughton, concerning whose early life and long disappearance from the world many romantic tales were afloat, and he was just as willing to let himself be seen. For the first week or two he derived an almost child-like pleasure from hearing himself addressed as "my lord" and "your lordship," and from being the recipient of that adulation, mingled with a mild sort of awe, with which a nobleman is almost always regarded in small provincial towns. Twenty times a day he would gaze admiringly at the reflection of himself in the cheval-glass in his bedroom. He could hardly believe it was John Fildew of Hayfield Street, that shabby, bepatched individual, who smiled back at him from the glass. "And yet I am just the same that I was before," he said to himself with a sneer. "The only change in me is that which the barber and the tailor have effected."

He had several suits of clothes sent down after him, and he took a boyish pleasure in frequently changing them. He always dressed for dinner, although there was no one to dine with him. When a young man he had been noted for his white hands, and he was determined that they should be white again, to which end he smeared them every night with some sort of unguent and slept in kid gloves. Every morning he measured himself carefully round the waist, and when at the end of a fortnight he found that his convexity in that region was less by three quarters of an inch, he felt as if he could go out into the street and play leap-frog with the boys. He had made up his mind from the first to go in for popularity. With the change in his fortunes he had in a great measure dropped that curt, sneering, cynical manner which had not contributed to render him popular in days gone by. There was now an easy condescension, a sort of genial affability, about him which charmed every one with whom he came in contact; but then, how little is needed to make us feel charmed with a lord! Everybody knew that he was poor—how poor they did not know—but everybody knew also that he was an earl, and as earls, even when their antecedents are somewhat shady, are no more plentiful than green peas in December, we are bound to make much of such as we have.

The news of Lord Loughton's sojourn at Brimley spread far and wide through the country, and he need never have lacked company had he been so minded. Nearly all the best families in the neighborhood left their cards, and he might have had a dozen visitors a day, had he not given out that he did not intend to see any one till he was safely housed in his new home.

Laurel Cottage was not much of a place for a peer to take up his abode in, but even peers must live according to their means. It was a little white, two-storied house, containing only eight or nine rooms in all. Its front windows looked on to a circular grass-plot and a tiny carriage-drive that opened from the main road. From its back windows could be seen a lawn, bordered by a terrace, and interspersed with clumps of flowers, was a meadow after meadow beyond. Stable and coach-house were hidden away behind a shrubbery to the left.

Such as it was it was quite big enough for the needs of Lord Loughton, and he at once secured it. There was one stipulation connected with the letting of it which posed him for a moment, but for a moment only. It was a *sine qua non* that the substantial, old-fashioned furniture should be taken at a valuation by the incoming tenant. The valuation was fixed at a hundred pounds. To this the earl, when he had walked slowly through the rooms, made no demur. The same evening he wrote as under to his dowager countess:

"MY DEAR AUNT,—I have taken Laurel Cottage, near this place, for term of years, as I told you that I should do. It contains nine rooms."