

## A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

"Have my family no more respect for me than, out of an aggregate income of twenty thousand a year, to expect me to live on, and be satisfied with, a paltry six hundred. Are you aware, madam, that the Earl of Loughton's boots let water in, and that he hasn't enough money in his purse to pay for a pair of new ones?"

"So, sir, we are getting at your motives by degrees. You threaten us with this marriage unless we agree to buy you off."

The earl laughed silently. "I threaten you with nothing; I merely put before you a plain statement of facts, and leave you to draw what inference you please. Remember, pray, that it is you who have come to me and not I who have appealed to you. Take back your six hundred a year, madam, if it so please you; I shall not want for bread and cheese, I dare say."

For the first time since the discussion began, Mr. Flicker now spoke. "If I remember rightly, my lord, the amount of income suggested by you at our first meeting was twelve hundred a year—just double the sum you are now in receipt of? If the family, taking into consideration all the circumstances of the case, could see their way to fall in with your first suggestion, is there not a possibility that these disquieting rumors respecting a presumptive matrimonial alliance might prove to be without the slightest foundation in fact?"

"In other words, Flicker, would not a golden bullet bring down this canard at once and forever?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across the lawyer's hard-set face. "My meaning precisely, my lord."

"Well, golden bullets are wonderful things, and really, now I come to think of it, I shouldn't be surprised if, in the present case, one of them, properly aimed, were to have the effect hinted at by you."

The countess glowered at the lawyer as though she could scarcely believe the evidence of her ears. "Mr. Flicker," she said, in her most imperious way, "may I ask by whose authority you have dared even to hint at a course which, if carried out, would be a disgrace to everybody concerned?"

"My lord," said Mr. Flicker, turning to the earl, "may I take the liberty of asking to be permitted to have five minutes' private conversation with her ladyship?"

"Certainly, Flicker. I'll go and have a cigarette in the garden. Touch the bell and send the servant for me when you are ready." And with that the earl strolled leisurely out. As he was shutting the door he heard the countess say with much emphasis, "That man will be the death of me."

At the end of ten minutes a servant came in search of him. He found the lawyer alone. "What has become of her ladyship?" he asked.

"She has gone to her carriage. She is a great age, and the interview has somewhat tried her strength. I have, however, much pleasure in informing your lordship that—that, in fact—"

"That our wild duck is to be shot with a golden bullet after all. Is not that so?"

"It is so, my lord."

"Twelve?"

"Twelve it is, my lord. After this, I presume we need not disquiet ourselves in the least as to any matrimonial intentions on the part of your lordship."

"Not in the least, Flicker. I give you my word of honor on that score. As I said once before, I am not a marrying man, and am in no want of a wife."

Mr. Flicker rose, and pushed back his chair. "We are quite prepared to take your lordship's word in the matter. I shall have the honor of forwarding you a check as soon as I get back to town."

The earl expressed his thanks, and was going with Flicker to the door, when the latter said, "Pardon me, my lord, but I think it would be as well not to let the countess see you again to-day. There is a tendency to irritation of the nervous system, and I am afraid that your presence would hardly act as a sedative."

The earl laughed. "Perhaps you are right," he said. "Anyhow, give my love to her, and tell her that I hope to visit her before long at Ringwood."

Mr. Flicker shook his head, as implying that he knew better than to deliver any such message. Then the earl shook hands with him, and they parted.

## CHAPTER XV.

## CECILIA PHILOSOPHIZES.

The courtship of Cecilia Collumpton and Clement Fildew progressed as such affairs generally do progress. Each of their meetings was looked forward to as an event of immense importance, for the time being quite dwarfing into insignificance all other occupations and engagements. Between times they seemed to think of little or nothing but what they had said to each other at their last meeting, and what might possibly be said at their next. They met twice a week, sometimes for an hour only, sometimes for a whole delicious evening. Oftener than that Cecilia could not have got away from home without exciting her aunt's suspicions. Miss Browne was now back at Cadogan Place. She usually accompanied her friend to the trysting-place, which was the corner of a quiet street leading out of a certain crescent, and then, after walking with the pair of lovers for a short distance, she would leave them and go back home. Clement, of course, still believed that Cecilia was Mora and Mora Cecilia. Miss Browne often

implored her friend to undeceive Mr. Fildew, but Cecilia had gone too far to retreat. "Not till the very day he goes to Doctors' Commons will I tell him," she said; "it is too sweet to me to feel that I am loved for myself, and not for my money, to allow of my undeceiving him till the last moment. He believes that I have not twenty sovereigns in the world, and when I'm with him I try to fancy that I haven't. I make believe to myself that I am as poor as a church-mouse."

"Ah, it may be pleasant to play at being poor, just as children play at being soldiers," said Mora, "but there's nothing pleasant about the reality."

The two portraits were finished by this time, as were also the two Academy pictures—Clem's and Tony Macer's—and the pair of them sent in. Then ensued a period of suspense before it was known what their fate would be.

It was about this time that Lord Loughton's first visit to his wife took place. Clem forbore to say anything to his father about his love affairs, and also begged his mother to keep her own counsel in the matter. He did not want to provoke any opposition from his father, which a knowledge of his engagement probably would have done. Silence was best till the wedding should be close at hand. Meanwhile Cecilia took tea with Mrs. Fildew once a week.

Clem knew nothing about the long talks and discussions that took place in his absence, chiefly concerning house-wifery and the best mode of making a small income go as far as possible. He did not know, and he would have blushed if he had known, how often he himself formed the topic of conversation on such occasions. To both these loving hearts, one young and one old, he was the dearest object on earth; why, then, should they not talk about him? All Clem knew was that they seemed to agree together remarkably well. His mother sometimes told him jokingly that Cecilia was far too good for him, far beyond his deserts, and Cecilia often asseverated that she only tolerated him for the sake of darling Mrs. Fildew.

By and by came pleasant news. Both Mr. Macer's picture and Clem's were accepted at the Academy. As soon as Cecilia heard this she went to a dealer with whom she had had some previous transactions and instructed him to go on the private-view day and buy the two pictures for her in his own name. Clem pressed her to go with him on the opening day, but, knowing that her aunt would almost certainly be there, as well as a number of her acquaintances, she put her lover off till later in the week. Clem resolutely refused to go without her. He heard that his picture was sold for news of that kind soon finds its way to the studios; but thinking to afford Cecilia a pleasant surprise, he said nothing to her about it. On the fourth day they went together. Cecilia, feeling sure there would be several people there whom she knew, was very plainly dressed and wore a veil. She would fain have hurried off to the picture the moment she entered the building, but Clem, catalogue in hand, persisted in going to work in the orthodox way.

When at length they did reach it, they found quite a little crowd of people in front of it. Cecilia pressed her lover's arm. "Whether the critics appreciate your picture or not, it is quite evident that the general public do," she whispered.

"It would be the general public who would appreciate me if I were to grin through a horse-collar at a fair," whispered Clem in return.

"Is not that the truest test of appreciation?" asked Cecilia, pointing with brightened eyes and glowing cheeks to the tiny ticket stuck in the frame. For the first time since entering the building she had now thrown back her veil. Clem thought he had never seen her look so lovely as at that moment.

"You see, dear, there are still a few people in the world with more money than brains," he said, quietly. "What would become of us poor painters if Providence had not kindly arranged matters so?"

"I wonder what your secret admirer would say if he could hear you giving utterance to such heresies."

"Were my secret admirer here, I would thank him for one thing, if for no other."

"May I ask what the one thing is that you would thank him for?"

"For enabling me, by the purchase of my picture, to get married in midsummer. Bless him for a good man!"

As Cecilia said afterward to Mora, "I was struck dumb. All that I could do was to let my veil drop and move on. When I instructed Cheeky to buy the pictures for me, I never dreamed that from a cause so simple an event so dire would spring. Perhaps it is fortunate for us that we can rarely foresee all the consequences of our actions."

"Supposing for a moment," said Mora, slyly, "that the gift of foreknowledge had been yours in this case, would you or would you not have bought the picture?"

Cecilia gazed silently out of the window for a few moments. "I don't know what I should have done," she said at last. "I certainly object to be married at midsummer, but, on the other hand, if Clem's picture had been sold, what a disappointment it would have been to him."

"But what a surprise when he finds out who the purchaser is!"

"That he shall never find out till we are married, not if it's a dozen years first. Well, we went next and looked at Mr. Macer's picture. I verily believe that Clement was far better pleased that his friend's was should have found a purchaser than that his own had. Anyhow, he was such high spirits that when we left the Academy he insisted on our hiring a hansom and going to look at two empty houses that he had seen advertised in one of the newspapers. One of the houses was at Haverstock Hill, the other at Camden Town; suburbs of London, both of them, hitherto known to me only by name. The rent of both houses was the same, sixty pounds a year. I told Clement that I thought we could do with a house at a much less rent than that, and begged of him not to go beyond his means."