

A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

Clement, when he came in, was almost as much surprised, but he showed it in a different way. The change in his father was so thorough and so striking that he could hardly believe him to be the same man who had left them only a few weeks previously, and that evening he felt a degree of respect for him such as he had never experienced before. He had heard his mother insist a thousand times on the fact of his father being a gentleman bred and born, but for the first time in Clement's experience he looked the character. The earl dilated in a hazy but grandiose sort of way about his new prospects and his new mode of life. It was not to be expected that he should condescend to particulars, and as both his wife and son knew that he had a horror of being questioned they listened to all he had to say and troubled him with no inconvenient queries. Clement was well content that matters should remain as they were, but Mrs. Fildew, in addition to the grief she felt at her husband's absence, was somewhat fearful in her mind lest her "dear John" should have compromised his dignity by engaging in work that was derogatory to his status as a gentleman.

Mr. Fildew's stay in London was only from the dusk of one afternoon till the evening of the next. His avocations were of such a pressing and important nature, he said, that it was impossible for him to make a longer stay just then. In the state of his wife's health—a subject respecting which he was anxious for more reasons than one—there was little apparent change since he left London. She was certainly no better, but neither did there seem any perceptible alteration for the worse. He longed to go and spend an evening with his old cronies at the Brown Bear, but after mature consideration he deemed it better not to do so. He looked and felt so changed that his old friends would hardly welcome him as being any longer one of themselves. Besides, for anything he knew to the contrary, some of them might some day find themselves at Brimley and encounter him there, but if they were not made acquainted with the alteration in his appearance, he flattered himself that, even so, they would hardly recognize him. It was decidedly to his interest to give the Brown Bear as wide a berth as possible.

Great, therefore, was the earl's surprise and chagrin when, as he was walking down the platform in search of a smoking-carriage on his return journey, he nearly stumbled over Mr. Cutts, the landlord of the Brown Bear. "I really beg your pardon," exclaimed the earl, before he had time to recognize the man. At the sound of the familiar voice Cutts stared, and then the earl saw that it was too late to retreat. Grasping the landlord by the hand, and making believe that he was delighted to see him, he hurried him off to the refreshment bar. In order to keep Cutts from questioning him, which might have been inconvenient, he kept on questioning Cutts. Everybody, it appeared, with one exception, was quite well, and going on much as usual. "Of course you remember Pilcher?" said Cutts. "Ah, well, he's come to grief, poor devil, and quite suddenly too. It seems that a scamp of a brother persuaded him to accept a bill for a big amount. The brother bolted, Pilcher couldn't meet the bill, some other creditors came down on him, and his stock was seized. Meanwhile his wife died, and the result of the blooming business was that poor Pilcher was turned adrift on the world without a penny to bless himself with, and with three young 'uns, all under eight, to call him father."

"Poor Pilcher, indeed! But, of course, you did something for him at the Brown Bear?"

"Yes—what we could. Couldn't do much, you know. Sent the hat round and got about six pounds—enough to bury his wife, I dare say. He shouldn't have been such a fool. I'd sooner trust a stranger than a relation any day."

"And where's Pilcher now?"

"Can't say. Somewhere about the old quarter, no doubt."

"Ah, well, I am sorry for him, poor devil. Good-night. Shall see you again before long." And with that the earl made a rush for his carriage.

Next day he wrote to Clement, asking him to hunt up Pilcher's address. A week later "poor Pilcher" received by post a twenty pound note simply indorsed, "From a friend."

CHAPTER XIV.

"TWELVE IT IS."

We must now go back a little space in our history.

When Lord Loughton, on the occasion of his first dinner at Bourbon House, was introduced to Miss Tebbuts, the aunt of Mr. Larkins, he did not forget what he had been told respecting that lady. "Wellclose said she was thirty six, but she looks at least half a dozen years older than that," muttered the earl to himself. "But twenty thousand pounds can gild with youth and beauty a demoiselle of even that mature age." And his lordship became at once very attentive to Miss Tebbuts.

Hannah Tebbuts was sister to Orlando's mother. In conjunction with another sister, also unmarried, she had for several years kept a select seminary for young ladies in a little town in one of the midland counties. When her sister married Mr. Larkins that gentleman had not risen to fame and fortune. He was still brooding over the Pill that was ultimately to make his name known to the ends of the earth. Even then Hannah Tebbuts saw but little of her married sister, and she saw still less of her when Mrs. Larkins went to live in a big mansion on the outskirts of London.

By and by Mrs. Larkins died, and after that a dozen years passed away without Miss Hannah catching even a passing glimpse of her rich relations in London. But at the end of that time there came a message for her to go up to town with the least possible delay. Her famous brother-in-law was dangerously ill, and he had asked that she might be sent for to go and nurse him. Miss Hannah was less loath to go because she had lately lost the sister with whom she had lived for so many years, and had, in consequence, given up her school. Once in London, there she remained till Mr. Larkins died. His illness was a long and tedious one, but through it all Miss Hannah nursed her brother-in-law with the most devoted care and attention. As a reward for her services, and a token of the high esteem in which he held her, the sick man, by a codicil added to his will only a few days before his death, bequeathed to her the very handsome legacy of twenty thousand pounds.

Never was a simple minded woman more puzzled what to do with a legacy. Her tastes were so inexpensive, and her mode of life so quiet and sedate, that she could find no use for the money. All she could do was to place the amount in the hands of her nephew, begging him to allow her a hundred a year out of it, and invest the remainder for her in any way he might think best.

Miss Tebbuts had never been handsome, but no one who studied her face could doubt her amiability and good temper. There was nothing fashionable, nothing mopish, about her. Her gown was after a style that had been in vogue some dozen years previously. She wore elaborate caps, and little sausage-like curls, now beginning to turn gray. She was of a retiring disposition, and her greatest trouble was having to fill the position of hostess at Bourbon House to the numerous strangers her nephew took there. Mr. Wellclose was wrong when he surmised that she might possibly be the victim of some early disappointment. Miss Tebbuts had never had an offer in her life, and if she had ever entertained any hopes in that direction she had trampled them under foot long ago, so that nothing was now left of them save a faint, sweet memory, like the sweetness of crushed flowers exhaled from a *pot pourri*. And this was the lady to whom John Marmaduke Lorrimore began to pay very marked attention.

He sat next her at the dinner-table, he made his way to her side in the drawing room, and he favored her with more of his conversation than any one else. After a little while he began to call two or three times a week and take her for drives in the basket-carriage, with little Mabel Larkins to play propriety. He was seen with her at the Brimley spring flower-show, and at the garden party, of which mention has already been made, his attentions to her were the theme of public comment. In short, people began to talk in all directions, and before long everybody knew for a fact, or thought they did, that the earl and Miss Tebbuts were going to make a match of it. This notoriety was just what the earl wanted. On one point he was particularly careful. He never spoke a word of love to Miss Tebbuts, nor gave utterance to any sentiments that could possibly be construed into the faintest shadow of a declaration.

One day Orlando said, smilingly, "If you play your cards properly, aunt, you may yet be Countess of Loughton."

Miss Tebbuts colored up. "But I don't want to be Countess of Loughton," she said, "and you don't know what you are talking about. Make your mind easy on one point: Lord Loughton and I will never be more than friends."

"Such attentions as his can have but one meaning."

"You talk like a very young man, Orlando. According to your theory, no gentleman can pay a lady a few simple attentions without having certain designs imputed to him."

"A few simple attentions, aunt! Pardon me, but they seem to me most marked attentions."

"Well, whatever they may seem, they won't end in matrimony, on that point you may make yourself quite sure."

Orlando was terribly disappointed, but did not dare to show it. What a splendid thing it would have been to have an aunt who was a countess and an uncle who was an earl! Such a dream was almost too blissful to contemplate. And yet he firmly believed it might become a glorious reality if only his aunt were not so foolishly weak-minded. If she did not care greatly for such a marriage on her own account, she ought to remember what was due to her nephew and nieces. Never could they hope that such an opportunity would offer itself again.

One day the earl was surprised by a visit from the dowager countess, or, rather, he was not surprised. He had quite expected to see her before long. Certain rumors had reached her ears, and she had driven over from Ringwood to satisfy herself as to their truth or falsity. Mr. Flicker was with her, as monumentally severe as ever.

The countess had not seen Lord Loughton since his transformation. She remembered him as a shabby, buttoned-up, individual, with long straggling hair, and patched boots, and a generally moldy and decayed appearance, who was known to the world as "Mr. Fildew." She saw before her a good-looking, well preserved, elderly gentleman, clean shaved and carefully dressed, and of a spruce and military aspect. This personage called himself Lord Loughton, and the countess recognized at once the likeness to certain traditional types of the Lorrimore family. So far she was gratified. It was evident that the new earl was not likely to prove such a discredit to his connections as had at one time seemed but too probable.

"Welcome to Laurel Cottage, aunt," said the earl, as he assisted the ladyship to alight. "I thought I should have had the pleasure of seeing you here long ago."

The countess vouchsafed no word in reply, but glanced round at the house and the grounds, and then, turning to Flicker, she said, "Quite a little paradise."