

## A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

"May I presume that your lordship has never been married?" asked the lawyer, in his most insinuating tones. He was looking down and fumbling with some papers on the table before him.

The countess turned her head quickly.

"Never, Flicker, never," replied the earl, impressively; "on that word of honor which her ladyship believes would fetch so little if put up for sale. I have been very near it, though, once or twice—very near it indeed—but Providence has always intervened."

Her ladyship turned away in a huff.

There was an interval of silence. Mr. Flicker was engaged in tying up his documents, and the earl was watching him.

"May I ask whether you have formed any plans for the future?" asked the dowager, presently.

"No plans in particular. I think that I shall go and live at Brimley, at least for some time to come."

"At Brimley! Why, that is only sixteen miles from Ringwood."

"Precisely so. We shall be neighbors. A dozen miles, more or less, are not of much consequence in the country."

The countess did not look overwell pleased. "What is your object in choosing Brimley for a residence?" she asked.

"I lived near there with my father when a lad, and I still retain some pleasant recollections of it, so that the place will not seem altogether strange to me. In addition to which, I see from an advertisement in to-day's 'Times' that 'Laurel Cottage' there is to be let on lease—the very place to suit an elderly bachelor of limited means and unambitious tastes. I shall run down there to-morrow and see about it."

"Well, sir, I hope that when next I see you I shall find some improvement in your toilet and general appearance."

"Possibly, madam, possibly. I admit that there is some slight room for alteration, perhaps for improvement. I have not followed the fashions very attentively of late. The state of my finances did not allow of my doing so."

"Mr. Flicker will send you a check to-morrow."

"I shall be greatly obliged to Mr. Flicker."

"What a pity it is that you threw your chances to the dogs in the way you did when a young man."

"What a pity it is that my cousin Charles, your good son, madam, could not see his way to advance me the three thousand pounds which was all I needed at that time to save me from destruction. But he buttoned his breeches pocket—saving your ladyship's presence—and allowed me to go headlong to the deuce."

"You forget, sir, that you had five hundred pounds from him only six months previously."

"I forget nothing. Three thousand pounds would have been my salvation. I did not have three thousand pounds, nor three thousand pence, and you see the result before you to-day."

"Charles was building and planting at the time, as I well remember, and the sum was a much larger one than he could spare."

"So the building and the planting went on, and Cousin Jack was obliged to fly like a thief in the night. It was the young fool's own fault, and it was only right that he should suffer. So ridiculous of him, wasn't it, to think that because he and Charley had been school-fellows and like brothers for years, he could now ask Charley to pull him through his troubles? I've often laughed since to think what a young greenhorn he must have been. I'll warrant you he knows better by this time."

The countess' head was beginning to shake worse than ever. Flicker made a sign to the earl, and the latter rose. "Good-morning, Aunt Barbara," he said; "shake hands with me for my mother's sake, if you won't for my own."

She stared very hard at him for about half a minute, and then she extended two claw-like fingers. "Get a decent coat to your back before you let me see you again. And—I don't want to see those gloves any more."

Next day "Mr. Fildew" received from Mr. Flicker a check for one hundred and fifty pounds, being the first quarterly instalment of his allowance at the rate of six hundred pounds a year.

"Greedy old hag!" muttered the earl to himself as he pocketed the check. "She might just as easily have made it twelve hundred as six. I'll be even with her for this before I've done with her."

## CHAPTER VI.

MILD LUNACY.

"This must be the house, No. 105 Cadogan Place," said Clement Fildew to himself, as he stopped in front of an imposing-looking mansion. Taking the steps two at a time, he gave a loud rat-tat-tat at the door. "Is Miss Collumpton at home?" he asked of the man who answered his knock.

Miss Collumpton was at home.

"Will you give her this card, and say that I have called at the request of Sir Percy Jones?"

He was shown into a morning-room while the man took his message. After three or four minutes the door opened, and a young lady entered, dressed very plainly in black. As their eyes met they both started, and then, as if moved by a common impulse, they drew a step or two nearer each other, while Clem colored up to the roots of his hair. The young lady, who was by far the more self-possessed of the two, was the first to

speak. "Unless I am much mistaken," she said, "you are the gentleman to whose kindness I was so greatly indebted when coming up to town the other day."

"And you are the lady to whom I had the good fortune to be of some slight service."

"A slight service, do you call it? It seemed to me a very great service at the time. I missed you in the confusion at the terminus, so that my aunt was not able to thank you, as she would very much liked to have done."

"I certainly can't see that any thanks were needed. But, putting that aside, I am very pleased to have met you again." And as he said this there was a fire and earnestness in his eyes that in its turn brought a vivid blush to the young lady's cheeks. "I came here at the request of Sir Percy Jones," he added, "to see Miss Collumpton respecting a portrait. I never expected to have the pleasure of finding you under the same roof."

"I have been living here for some time," she said. Then to herself she added, "I wonder whom he takes me for—a nursery governess or a companion, or what?"

"I hope Miss Collumpton is not a very exacting young lady. If she is I am afraid that I shall scarcely be able to please her. I have painted very few portraits as yet, but Sir Percy was so pleased with the one I did of him that he declared he must have one of his goddaughter to take with him when he goes abroad."

"I don't think that you will find Miss Collumpton very exacting."

"I am glad to hear that. I wish it was your portrait I was going to paint instead of hers."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, "Why do you wish that?" but, happening to glance at his face, she saw the same look in his eyes that had troubled her before. She dropped her lids and looked another way. There was a moment's awkward silence. Then she said, "I think I had better go and fetch Miss Collumpton. She promised to follow me at once," and with that she got out of the room.

Left alone, Clem went back at once to his examination of the prints and sketches on the walls. But he saw them without seeing them, and could remember nothing of them afterward. He had caught Love's fever, and the symptoms were declaring themselves already. He was standing before a little sketch by Stanfield and smiling fatuously, as though there was something comical about it, which there certainly was not. When the patient takes to smiling in this purposeless way it is looked upon by those learned in such matters as a very bad sign.

About a week previously, as he was coming up to town, a young lady—the young lady who had just left the room—got into the same carriage, a second-class one, at Tring, in which he was already seated. He was not aware that she had been driven to take refuge in the second-class on account of the first-class seats being all occupied. They were presently joined by a cad of a fellow, who was evidently half-drunk, and just as evidently determined to talk to the pretty girl on the opposite seat, whether she liked it or not. At length the annoyance reached such a pitch, and the lady became so plainly distressed, that Clem, whose blood had been simmering for some time, felt called upon to interfere. Thereupon the cad turned on our friend like a young bear, and growled out something about wise people minding their own business, adding a certain epithet which had better have been left unspoken. The result was that before he knew what had happened he found himself lying in a heap in a corner of the carriage, with a discolored eye and a bruised nose, and a feeling as if a fifth of November cracker had exploded in his head. The train was slackening speed at the time, and as soon as it stopped the wounded knight scrambled out of the carriage, holding his handkerchief to his nose and muttering something about fetching the police. But he was seen no more. The rest of the journey came to an end far too soon for Clem. When he alighted at Euston the young lady was at once taken possession of by an elderly lady, while Clem rushed off in search of his portmanteau. But Clem had not forgotten the sweet face of his travelling companion. Being an artist, what more natural than that he should attempt to sketch it from memory as soon as he reached home, and not once but twenty times.

"What do you mean by neglecting your Academy picture in this way?" Tony Macer had fiercely demanded three days later. "And what do you mean, sir, by drawing the same simpering face from morn till d— and grinning to yourself all the time like a jackass in a fit? You've been idiot enough to go and fall in love, have you? By Apelles! I thought you had; I would take you *vi et armis*, and hold you under the back-kitchen tap for half an hour, and see whether that wouldn't cool your foolish brain!"

This threat of Tony must be taken *cum grano*, seeing that he was only about four feet eight inches high and had the arms of a girl of sixteen, whereas his friend Clem could easily have lifted him up with one hand and hurled him across the room. But Tony's objurgations did Clem good, and he was fast regaining his interest in mutton-chops, bitter-beer, and the progress of his picture, when the deplorable meeting we have just recorded took place, and all hopes of his convalescence were at once scattered to the winds.

The siren who was the cause of all this commotion in our young painter's heart, having shut the door behind her, ran quickly upstairs and burst into a tiny boudoir, where another young lady, also dressed in black, was sitting calmly at work.

"Mora! Mora! what do you think? This Mr. Clement Fildew, whose godpapa has sent here to paint my portrait, turns out to be the same gentleman who took my part in the train the other day when that man insulted me so dreadfully. Is it not strange that we should meet again in this way, and so soon afterward?"

"Very strange, indeed. But such coincidences happen oftener in real life than many people imagine."