

A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

He began by apologizing for the liberty he had taken in asking me to meet him; 'but as you are here,' he added, 'I may, perhaps, hope that I have not transgressed beyond forgiveness; although, indeed,' he went on, 'I knew of no other mode of obtaining an opportunity for saying all that I want to say.'

Still I was tongue-tied, still the words refused to come. The next ten minutes were the most memorable of my life. How my heart beat! how his words thrilled me from head to foot! What he said you can perhaps faintly imagine; if you can not, I cannot tell you.

He pressed me for an answer. Then my tongue was loosened. It would not be worth while to put down here what I said, even if I could do so, which I very much doubt. The result was that I promised to meet him the following Friday evening at the same time and place, and give him an answer of some kind.

What that answer would be was a foregone conclusion from the first. I might just as well have said 'Yes' then and there, but that I would not have him think I was to be quite so easily won. He pressed my hand to his lips at parting. I left him at the corner at which I had met him, and ran nearly all the way home. Of course, dear, you may be sure that the first thing I did when I found myself alone was to have a good cry. But what happy tears they were! From all which you will understand that your poor Cecilia's case is a desperate one indeed.

How the time passed till Friday came round I hardly know. I wanted it to come and yet I didn't, if you can understand such a paradox. I longed and yet I trembled, and when Friday evening was really here I wished it were only Thursday. However, I met him as agreed, and was again taken possession of. 'I am afraid you are cold,' he said. 'You ought to have wrapped yourself up more warmly.' I was trembling a little, but not with cold. We walked slowly along, and for some minutes Clement said very little. I think he saw that I was put out, and he was giving me time to recover myself. At length my hand ceased to tremble, and then he spoke, asking me whether I had thought over his words—whether I felt that I could accept his love and give him mine in return? A church clock was beginning to strike eight as he finished speaking. Not till the last stroke had ceased to reverberate did I make any reply. Then for answer I laid one of my hands softly on one of his. 'God bless you, dear one!' he said. 'May you may never regret the gift you have given me to-night.' Then, before I knew what had happened, a strong arm was passed round my waist and Clement's lips were pressed to mine. A lamp was no great distance off and a policeman was passing at the moment. The man turned his head and coughed discreetly behind his hand. I turned hot all over, but Clement only laughed, and said it would not have mattered if all the world had been there to see.

After that we had a long delicious walk through quiet streets and squares where there were only a few passers-by. There was a sweet, new feeling at my heart of belonging to some one and of some one belonging to me. Clement asked whether he should write to or see my father. Then I told him that I was an orphan and my own mistress. 'In that case our marriage need not be long delayed,' he said. This frightened me. I had never contemplated such a contingency, except as something very remote and far off indeed. After that he began to talk to me about his position and prospects. He was far from rich at present, he said, and could not give me such a home as he would have liked; but he hoped to be better off by and by. He was getting higher prices for his pictures, and people were beginning to seek him out. If only his Academy picture found a purchaser there was no reason why we should not be married before midsummer. Knowing what I did, I could have clapped my hands for glee as I listened to him. I said I was afraid that I could not make arrangements to be married before Christmas at the very soonest. I could see that he was disappointed. 'I shall certainly hold you to midsummer,' he said, 'unless you can give some good and valid reason for delay.'

'You must come and see my mother before you are many days older,' he said, presently. 'I have spoken to her about you already.' Would you believe it, Mora, a little jealous pang shot through my heart when he said this? I felt as if I did not want even a mother to come between him and me. But next moment I put away the thought as utterly unworthy, and said how pleased I should be to see and know Mrs. Fildew.

Then he told me that his mother had been an invalid for years, and that there was no hope of her ever being any better. He told me, too, how cheerful she was—how bravely she bore up against the insidious disease that was slowly but surely eating away her life. I hated myself for allowing even a moment's jealous feeling to find room in my heart. I would try to love her as much as Clement loved her; but what if she should turn against me and say that her son's choice was a foolish one?

This evening Clement would insist on walking with me nearly to the door. I was in mortal fear lest my aunt should chance to be passing and should recognize me. But nothing happened except that, when the moment came for saying good-night, Clement repeated the process which had frightened me so much before. But I don't think that even a policeman saw us this time; still I must admit that it was very dreadful. All that night I hardly slept a wink. I felt that I had taken the great, irrevocable step of my life. Did I regret it? you will perhaps ask. No, a thousand times no!

It was arranged that at our next meeting I should accompany Clement to his mother's to tea. Mrs. Fildew's hour for tea is six o'clock, from which you will at once infer that she belongs to the old school, and having grown

up when people took their meals at more rational hours than they do now, she still keeps up the traditions of other days. I had hitherto had no difficulty in stealing out for an hour without my aunt knowing anything about it, but to leave home at half-past five, and not get back till ten or eleven o'clock, without saying where I was going, or ordering a brougham to take me, was a matter that required a little diplomacy. I hit on a plan at last which I need not detail here, and that without having to tell my aunt any absolute fib about it. It is sufficient to say that I met Clement at the appointed time and place, and that three minutes later I found myself with him in a hansom cab, and being whirled along Piccadilly at a tremendous pace. It was not nearly dark yet, and we passed several people whom I had seen only an hour previously in the Row. What their thoughts would have been had they seen Miss Collumpton flashing past them in a hansom, I leave you to imagine.

I am quite aware, Mora, that confessing to all this I am shocking some of your most cherished prejudices. But where is the use of having prejudices unless you can have them pleasantly shocked now and again? Does not the process put you in mind of an electrical machine, and of the brass rods we used to touch so tremblingly when we were girls at school?

It is almost worth while being poor for the sake of riding about in a hansom. A ride in a brougham or a victoria is the tamest of tame affairs in comparison. I had never been in a hansom before that evening when I went to see Mrs. Fildew, but I have been in one several times since—of course with Clement to keep me company. How 'jolly' it is when you happen to have a good horse and a skillful driver! (The adjective may sound objectionable, dear Mora, but I can't hit on another just now that expresses my meaning half so clearly.) How quickly you get over the ground! How you dash in and out among carriages, carts, and 'busses, leaving them behind one after another! Everybody and everything seem to get out of your way. The wind blows in cheerily—perhaps a few drops of rain dash against your face now and then, but you don't mind them in the least. You experience a sense of freedom, of brisk, open-air enjoyment, such as no other mode of conveyance that I know of can give you. And then how cozy inside! Just room for two, and none to spare. But that doesn't matter in the least if your companion is some one you like to sit close to. I wonder whether it would be wrong, Mora, for you and me to be driven out in a hansom some afternoon by our two selves. But you are such a slave to Mrs. Grundy that I almost despair of being able to persuade you to join me in such an expedition.

Here I am at the end of my paper and I have not introduced you to Mrs. Fildew. I must consequently defer that pleasure till I write to you again, which will be not later than the day after to-morrow. I have much to tell you yet. Pray let me hear from you by return, if only a word to say how your mother is progressing. I cannot tell you how lonely I feel while you are away.

Your affectionate friend,

CECILIA COLLUMPTON."

CHAPTER XII.

CECILIA AND THE COUNTESS.

Second letter from Miss COLLUMPTON in London to Miss BROWNE in the country.

'MY DEAREST MORA,— . . . The close of my last letter led Clement and me in a hansom cab in the act of being driven to the lodgings of Mrs. Fildew. Clement told me that his mother had lately moved into fresh apartments no great distance from his studio. I cannot tell you how nervous I became at the moment of my introduction to Mrs. Fildew's door. What if I should read in her eyes that she thought her son had chosen unwisely? It would not have mattered so much if Clement had not set such store by her opinion—if his love had been of that lukewarm kind which many grown up sons have for their mother. But in this case it was different, and unless I were loved and liked by Clement's mother I should feel as if I possessed only half of Clement's heart.

At length the cab stopped, and my pulses beat faster than ever. Ten minutes later I found myself in Mrs. Fildew's presence—found myself with my knees by her side, while her hands, that trembled a little, rested for a few moments on my hair, and her eyes gazed anxiously and inquiringly at mine. Then she bent forward a little and pressed her lips to my forehead.

'My boy has told me how much he loves you,' she said. 'But welcome you here, not for his sake only, but for your own also. I have used to wish that Heaven had given me a daughter. At last my prayer has been answered.' Then she kissed me again, and after that I sat down next beside her, but she still kept possession of one of my hands, and caressed it softly with hers.

Mrs. Fildew is a pale and delicate-looking elderly lady, with a thin, sweet face and a profusion of snow-white hair. When young she must have been very beautiful! I think I told you in my last letter that she has been confirmed invalid for years. She cannot walk more than a few yards without great pain and difficulty. From the time she rises till the time she goes to bed she sits in a large easy-chair that runs on noiseless wheels, which Clement has had especially made for her. She can work the wheels with her hands, and so propel herself to any part of the room at will. She keeps one servant, a strong, middle-aged woman, who has been with her several years. Sometimes, on sunny afternoons, Mrs. Fildew and her maid are carried down-stairs, and Martha takes her mistress for an airing up and down some of the streets where there is not much traffic, or as far as certain florist's where they have fresh flowers in the window every morning. Once a week Clement comes with an open carriage and takes his mother