

"I—I was afraid of being considered an intruder. The difference in our social status and all that, my lord."

"Pooh, pooh, my dear sir, I trust the age we live in is too enlightened to retain many antiquated prejudices of that kind. A gentleman is a gentleman all the world over, whether he be duke or plowman."

"I assure you, my lord, that I have been snubbed and slighted in many quarters, simply because my father was—well, simply because he made his money in business."

"Can it be possible! Thank Heaven, there is no nonsense of that kind about me. If I like a man, I like him, and I never stop to ask him who was his grandfather."

"Ah, my lord, if all the aristocracy were only like you!"

"Oh, I don't want to set myself up as a pattern, but those are my sentiments. I think that you and I, being such near neighbors, ought to be good friends. What do you say to dropping in to-morrow morning about eleven, and having a bit of breakfast with me? I don't give dinner-parties, because I'm too poor. But I like to have somebody to breakfast with me."

Mr. Larkins was overwhelmed by the earl's condescension. At last the golden portals were about to open to his touch. Would the Viponds and the Cossingtons dare to snub him in future when they found him hand-and-glove with an earl? Mr. Larkins's trap was waiting at the station. It was one of the happiest half hours of that young man's life when he was seen by the good people of Brimley driving Lord Loughton home to Laurel Cottage.

Mr. Larkins did not fail to put in an appearance next morning at the earl's breakfast table. On the following day his lordship dined *en famille* at Bourbon House, on which occasion Orlando's sisters were introduced to him. They were two really pretty and well-mannered girls of seventeen and nineteen. There was a vein of simplicity and effusive good-nature running through the young man's character that the earl was not slow to note, and appraise at its proper value. From that time forward the pill-maker's son and Lord Loughton were very frequently to be seen in each other's company. They drove out together, they rode together (in Orlando's carriages and on Orlando's horses), they played billiards together, they dined together, and they smoked together. Hardly a week passed without a hamper of wine or a box of cigars finding its way to Laurel Cottage. Fruit was sent nearly every day. A saddle-horse and a brougham were specially retained for the earl's own use. The quidnuncs of Brimley found much food for gossip among these proceedings; but as the earl was notoriously poor and Mr. Larkins as notoriously rich, they rather admired the arrangement than otherwise. It was, of course, patent to everybody why the earl so persistently patronized the pill-maker's son, but none the less on that account were several doors thrown open to Orlando which had heretofore been inexorably shut in his face. People began to discover virtues and good qualities in the young man, the existence of which they had never suspected before. The Honorable Mrs. Templemore and Lady Wildman, neither of whom were rich and both of them had several unmarried daughters, began to angle for him openly. When, a little later on, and at the earl's suggestion, he ventured to send out invitations for a garden-party, to be followed by a carpet-dance, nearly everybody who was asked came, and it was universally admitted to have been one of the most successful things of the season. From that time forward Larkins was accepted without question as "one of us."

All this suited well with the earl's grim and mordant humor. He laughed at Larkins, and he laughed at those who, having first tabooed him, were now willing to welcome him with open arms. He generally spent a solitary hour in his little smoking-room before going to bed, musing over the events of the day and planning the morrow's campaign. At such times, his servants being all in bed, he indulged himself in a long clay pipe and a couple of glasses of hot brandy-and-water. The brandy and the pipe, together with a supply of the strong tobacco which he used to smoke during his evenings at the Brown Bear, were all kept under lock and key, in company with the worn and shabby pouch which had done him such good service in days gone by. It amused him at such times to think how people must talk about him, and he acknowledged to himself that he liked being talked about. His coming had caused quite a commotion among the stagnant circles of Brimley and its neighborhood. His sayings and doings, his habits and mode of life, supplied an unending topic of conversation at a hundred dinner-tables and twice as many tea-tables. He was already acquiring a reputation for eccentricity. It was a reputation that suited him, and he determined to cultivate it.

It was not till the lapse of two months after his arrival at Brimley that he went up to London to see his wife and son. He dressed himself for the occasion in a suit of sober tweed, and left behind him the gold watch and chain which a Brimley tradesman had only been too happy to press upon him, and the diamond ring that Larkins had made him a present of. From the moment he got out of the train at King's Cross till the moment he got into it on his return he was to be plain John Fildew again. He quite enjoyed the masquerade and chuckled to himself several times in the cab before he was set down at the corner of Oxford Street. Clem had apprised him of the change in Mrs. Fildew's lodgings. When he walked into his wife's sitting-room without knocking, that lady stared at him for a moment in utter surprise, and then said, "Have you not mistaken the room, sir?"

"Why, Kitty, dear, don't you know me," he asked, and then he crossed the room and kissed his astonished wife.

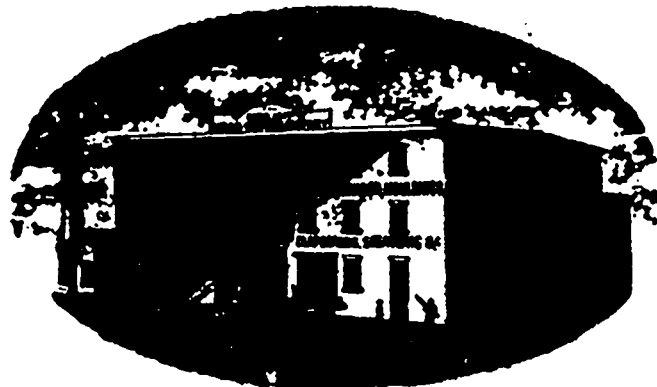
"How was it likely I should know you, John? You are not a bit like your dear old self," and with that she began to cry.

(To be continued.)

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