

A BARREN TITLE.

(Continued.)

"I remember on one occasion when I was at Ringwood," he said, "and I could not have been more than eight or nine years old at the time, what a scrape Cousin Charley and I got in through bird-nesting in the woods when we ought to have been learning our lessons. We were stealing in through the back entrance, as black as two sweeps, when your ladyship caught us. What a setting down you gave us, to be sure! Charley being Earl of Loughton—he came into the title, you know, when he was seven years old—was simply scolded and forgiven, while I, being merely cousin to the Earl of Loughton, and nobody in particular, was not only scolded but sent with your ladyship's compliments to Mr. Pembroke, the tutor, and would he please come me enough for two. The sight of you again, madam, brought this little reminiscence quite freshly to my mind."

Snarling till she showed the whole of her false teeth, and shaking a withered finger at Mr. Fildew, the countess said, "I repeat, sir, that you are nothing but a chortlan. Don't for one moment imagine that you can bamboozle me with any made-up tales about Ringwood, and what happened there thirty or forty years ago. Any fool could work up evidence of that kind."

"There used to be a good deal of company at the old place in those days," resumed Mr. Fildew, without heeding her ladyship's outburst in the least. "Where are the old faces by this time, I wonder? Scattered to the four quarters of the globe, I suppose, such of them as are still alive. Does your ladyship remember Captain Bristow? I wonder whether he is still among the living."

It was strange to see the hot color mount to her ladyship's forehead. She blushed like any girl of eighteen. Then she took up her fan. "Mr. Flicker," she said, "will you oblige me by opening that window a couple of inches? I feel a little faint. Thank you. And now, sir," turning to Mr. Fildew, "Pray what do you know about Captain Bristow?"

"I have some very pleasant reminiscences in connection with the handsome Captain. For one thing, he always tipped me liberally when he came to Ringwood. One day I happened to be the unseen witness of a little comedietta in which your ladyship and the captain enacted the chief—indeed I may say, the only characters. I had been to the library to fetch a book for Mr. Pembroke, when, happening to hear voices in the blue boudoir, which, as you may remember, madam, is the room next the library, and perceiving that the door was ajar, I peeped in and saw—now, what does your ladyship think that I saw?"

The countess coughed, and Mr. Flicker, in obedience to an almost imperceptible sign, rose softly from his chair and walked away to the furthest window, humming under his breath.

"I saw," resumed Mr. Fildew, with hardly a break, "the captain on his knees before your ladyship—the earl had been dead at that time about two years—I saw him kiss your hand, and I saw that you, madam, did not repulse him. I was not near enough to hear the words which passed between you, but presently I saw the captain take a ring out of his waistcoat pocket and slip it on your ladyship's finger. Then there came a knock at the other door, and the captain had barely time to rise before in came a servant with a letter for him. It was a message to say that his father was dying. He left Ringwood that night, and never, so far as I know, entered its doors again. But I notice that your ladyship still wears the ring which Captain Bristow slipped on your finger that sunny afternoon. That is the one on the third finger of your right hand."

Lady Loughton sunk back in her easy-chair, and turned as white as she had been red before. "Water," she said, faintly, pointing to a carafe that stood upon a side-table. Mr. Flicker was by her side in a moment. When she had drunk a little water, he said, "Shall I ring the bell for your maid?"

"No. I shall be better presently. I hate having a fuss made about trifles." Then, after a moment or two of silent thought, she said, suddenly "Flicker, that man"—pointing to Mr. Fildew with her fan—"is either John Marmaduke Lorrimore or Beelzebub!"

Mr. Flicker rubbed his chilly hands together and bowed low—very low. Whether the bow was intended for the Earl of Loughton or the Prince of Darkness was best known to himself.

"I am sorry, my lord," he said, "that with a recent melancholy tragedy still fresh in my memory, I cannot congratulate your lordship as I should like to have done on your accession to so distinguished a title."

"You are not a bit like a Lorrimore," broke in her ladyship, in the abrupt way which was habitual with her.

"And yet you used to say that I had more of a Lorrimore look than even your own son had."

"It seems impossible that you can ever have been that long-haired, fair-skinned boy whom I used to nurse and spoil."

"And box and scold—don't forget that, madam. I have fought with wild beasts at Ephesus since those days, and there's little left of me but a wreck."

"What are your means of living?"

"I have a private income of one pound per week."

"And you exist on that?"

"On that I exist."

This statement, if not strictly in accordance with fact, was still sufficiently near the truth. The countess and Mr. Flicker exchanged looks.

"And now, sir, if you are prepared to state categorically to Mr. Flicker and myself what it is that you think we ought to do for you, we will listen

to what you have to say." The dowager was careful not to address him by his title, although she had virtually acknowledged his right to it.

"What I think you ought to do is this," said the earl, with quiet deliberation. "In the first place, to pay my debts, amounting with interest, to a trifle over six thousand pounds; and, in the second place, to allow me twelve hundred a year for life, to be paid quarterly in advance."

"Tut-tut tut!" said the countess. "The man must be mad—crazy. Six thousand pounds down and twelve hundred a year for life! Where do you imagine, sir, that any such outrageous sums are to be obtained from?"

"When Charles came of age I remember that his income was set down as being a clear eighteen thousand a year, and I don't suppose the estate has depreciated in value since that time."

"My life interest in the estate, let me tell you, sir, is only to the extent of three thousand per annum."

"Of that, madam, I am quite aware. But there are other people interested in this question besides yourself. Your niece, Miss Collumpton, for instance, and Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, who hopes to be Earl of Loughton whenever Providence may be pleased to snuff me out of existence."

"And pray what are the special advantages that might be supposed to accrue to the family in general, supposing, for the sake of argument, merely, that they were disposed to entertain your ridiculous proposition?"

"The advantages are self-evident. The family surely do not wish to see an honorable and ancient title dragged through the mire at the heels of a pauper, and what am I but a pauper? Then, again, I am not a marrying man, I don't want to marry! Miss Collumpton and Mr. Boscombe may become man and wife with the blissful certainty that the title will be theirs in a man or a dozen years at the most—it may be in ten or a dozen months."

"Suppose, on the other hand, that we decline *in toto* to have anything to say to your proposition?"

"In that case, madam, my course lies clear before me. I can not, as an earl, be expected to exist on a pound a week; that would be too absurd. I have the honor to rent an apartment over a milk-shop in one of the most populous suburbs. My landlady has one daughter—a buxom, apple-cheeked red-armed young woman of five-and-twenty, who serves in the shop. I should make this estimable young person Countess of Loughton. For I am growing old, madam, and feel the need of the comforts of a home, and what is twenty shillings a week for a nobleman to live on? I have reason to believe that the milk business is a lucrative one, and, with an earl at the head of it, it would become ten times more lucrative than it is now. Of course, I should have my name in full over the door: 'John Marmaduke Lorrimore, Earl of Loughton.' And the same on our business cards, with the family escutcheon underneath, and the family motto *Je puis*. Then would follow the usual announcements: 'New milk twice a day. Pure Aylesbury butter. Our eggs, eight a shilling, are guaranteed by the countess. References kindly permitted to the dowager Lady Loughton, No. 287 Harley Street, and to Mr. Flicker, of the eminent firm of Flicker & Tapp. The earl will be on view in the shop any day from ten to eleven A.M., engaged in the perusal of the 'Morning Post.' I should send out circulars and cards to every name enshrined in Debrett. Twelve hundred a year, madam, would not cover the profits of such a concern. And, by and by, I should hope to have a son and heir to inherit his father's title and his mother's business."

His lordship, for so we must henceforth call him, stared gravely across the table at Lady Loughton. For a little time no sound was heard save the obtrusive ticking of Mr. Flicker's watch.

"Do you think, sir, you are altogether in your right senses?" asked the countess at length, turning on him in her quick way.

"Well, really, Aunt Barbara"—she winced at the appellation—"I have sometimes asked myself the same question. I have a theory that we are more or less mad on some point or other, and probably I am neither better nor worse than the majority of my fellows."

"You can go now, sir," said the countess, presently. "I have seen enough of you for one day—more than enough. Should I care to see you again I will send for you."

"Flicker knows where a letter will always find me," said the earl, with easy condescension, as he pushed back his chair and possessed himself of his dilapidated hat. "You will think over what I have said, Aunt Barbara, will you not? As I remarked before, I am not a marrying man, and really to go into the milk trade would be rather below the dignity of an earl, wouldn't it?" He was rubbing his hat tenderly with the sleeve of his head-dress coat as he spoke.

"Go! go!" was all the countess could say, as she pointed with a stinging finger to the door.

"I have the honor, madam, to wish you a very good-morning," said the earl, bowing low over his hat. "Flicker, I shall, doubtless, see you again before long."

Lord Loughton walked slowly down the broad stair-case, under the feet of the two tall footmen in the hall. But scarcely had he reached the lower stair before Mr. Flicker called over the balusters in the most dulcet tones. "My lord—my lord—you have left your pocket-handkerchief behind you. Had some one fired off a gun close by the heads of the two footmen it could not have been more startled."

"Did you not hear, sir?" said the earl, sharply, to one of them. "Fetch me my pocket-handkerchief, and be quick about it."

The man had never climbed those stairs so quickly before. A moment had hardly elapsed before he came down again, carrying a silver salver on which lay his lordship's well-worn green-and-red bandana. The earl took his handkerchief off the salver with the gravest air in the world, replaced it in his pocket. Then the massive door was flung wide open, and he marched slowly forth into the street. Stopping at the first tavern that came to, and pushing open the swing-doors, he went in and called for a pennyworth of brandy-and-water and a mild cheroot.