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MABEL'S PROGRESS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "AUNT MARGARET'S TROUBLE."

From "All the Year Round,"

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

Continued from page 379.

CHAPTER III. THE SAXELBYS.

Mabel Earnshaw's mother had married a second time. Her present husband, Mabel's step-father, was a Mr. Saxelby; and by him she had one child, a little boy of three years old. Mr. Saxelby was chief clerk—he said secretary—to the flourishing company which supplied Hammerham with gas. He was a very thoroughly efficient clerk, and had risen to his present position in the company's employ, through various gradations, until he had come to be a very much trusted and influential personage in nearly all their transactions. He earned a good salary, and, some people thought, had saved money; others maintained that he lived fully up to his income. He had met Mrs. Earnshaw—then a very pretty widow—at a Welsh watering-place, some five years before the date of my story. She was living as companion to a very cross and disagreeable old lady, who combined those attributes with remarkably strong and uncompromising low-church views on religion. She tortured poor, meek, weak, pretty Mrs. Earnshaw with her temper, and frightened her with her doctrine. So when Mr. Saxelby—then a staid bachelor of two-and-forty—fell in love with and proposed to her, the poor woman was grateful to him in proportion to the joy she felt at the idea of escaping from her present lot, and accepted him without hesitation. Her little girl was staying with some relatives of her late father. Very little was ever said about these relatives after Mrs. Earnshaw's second marriage; but Mr. Saxelby at once sent for the child, and had her to live in her own house. He behaved well to Mabel on the whole, and was a kind husband to her mother. But between him and his step-daughter much sympathy was impossible. Benjamin Saxelby's character was rigid, his intellect narrow, his education very limited. His was the intolerant ignorance which is so hopeless to deal with, because it can conceive nothing beyond the circumscribed range within its ken, and takes its own horizon for the boundary of the universe. He had a standard of duty, to which—in justice it must be said—he conscientiously endeavoured to adhere. But unfortunately, this included very few qualities that are calculated to call forth strong attachment. And it was beyond Mr. Saxelby's mental possibilities to perceive that when Mabel's moral measurement failed to coincide accurately with his standard, it was occasionally because she was above, and not below, it. His wife's weaker and more plastic nature accommodated itself more easily to his opinions and prejudices. Besides, all the love of which he was capable was given to her and to her boy. And if there exist any natures in which real love does not awaken an answering affection, Mrs. Saxelby's was not one of them. She was very grateful, very gentle, very humble, and a little selfish, with the soft selfishness that springs from weakness and indolence. Mabel was tenderly attached to her mother, towards whom she assumed at times a sort of protecting air; but she cherished a secret worship for her dead father's memory: crediting him with many more high and noble qualities than he had ever possessed, and clinging passionately to those who belonged to his blood. Mabel had been too young to form any real estimate of her father's character, for he died when she was but six years old. But she had thought

of him, and spoken of him, until she persuaded herself that she retained a vivid remembrance of her dead parent.

The Saxelby household was by no means an unhappy one. Mabel had too much sweetness of nature and clearness of mind to grudge her mother the happiness and comfort she derived from her second marriage. And when the baby-brother arrived, she took the little fellow into her warm young heart, and loved him with a rich abundance of sisterly affection. There was one point, and one only, on which Mabel felt any bitterness or resentment towards her step-father, and this point they both tacitly agreed to avoid. The grievance which rankled in Mabel's mind arose from the mode in which she had been withdrawn from the protection of her father's relatives; and the absolute prohibition which Mr. Saxelby commanded his wife to lay on her holding any communication with them, from the time she left their roof for his. Mabel had been a little girl of eleven at the period of her mother's second marriage, and the five years that had since passed had served to obliterate from her mind in a great degree the impressions of the time spent in her aunt's family. Still she preserved an affectionate remembrance of those tabooed relatives, and had made many high, though rather vague, resolves to seek them out, and renew her old loving intercourse with them, at that distant and constantly receding epoch, which I presume we have all of us pictured to ourselves once upon a time, and which Mabel naively characterised as "the time when I shall be able to do as I like."

The Saxelby's social position in Hammerham was immensely inferior to that of the Charlewoods; and yet the two families were on very intimate terms. Benjamin Saxelby and Luke Charlewood had known each other as men of business for years. Mr. Charlewood being, in fact, one of the principal directors of the gas company, whose shareholders had collectively a right to call Mr. Saxelby their servant. But it was not until after his marriage that the latter had crossed the threshold of Bramley Manor. Augusta Charlewood was just completing her education at the school to which Mabel's step-father sent her, when the little girl arrived there as a new pupil. And Augusta Charlewood had taken a fit of romantic affection for her school-fellow. (Augusta Charlewood was rather prone to take fits of romantic affection. But it is only fair to add that they did not last long.) However, an invitation given and accepted for Mabel to pass some holiday weeks at Bramley Manor, led to an acquaintance between the Charlewoods and Mabel's mother and step-father. And the Hammerham millionaires were not long in discovering that, whatever might be said of Mr. Saxelby, his wife bore the unmistakable stamp of gentle breeding; and that the gloss of their spike-and-span gentility ran no risk of being tarnished by her society. Augusta's short-lived enthusiasm for that "dear, sweet, clever Mabel," had cooled very considerably long ago, but the young girl had ingratiated herself thoroughly with all the other members of the family, and was treated almost like a pet child of the house.

"Don't you think Christian charity is a very, very rare thing, Mr. Charlewood? I don't mean charity in giving. That is not uncommon. But charity in speaking and thinking?"

She always felt a little shy with Clement Charlewood, of whose judgment and sense she had formed a very high opinion. And then he was habitually so grave and reserved, that she had never been able to become on the same terms of easy intimacy with him as with the rest of the family. She even had an idea that he did not particularly like her, although he

was invariably kind and courteous. "I know he looks upon me as a silly little schoolgirl," said Mabel to herself.

"Without going further into your definition of charity, Mrs. Earnshaw, would you mind telling me, in plain words, what unkind speaking you so resent?"

She coloured deeply, but answered with firmness, "I think it was uncharitable to say that the little girl's soul was in peril only because her father plays in the orchestra of the theatre. I believe very good people may belong to theatres."

The young man glanced down at the flushed girlish face by his side in undisguised astonishment.

"They may, certainly, I suppose," he said, slowly. "But forgive me for remarking that you are too young and too inexperienced to know much about it."

"Of course I'm young," said Mabel making the damaging admission in all humility, "but, for all that, I do believe—I do know, that there are good people in theatres."

They had arrived at her home as she said the words, and, without waiting for a reply, she pushed open the garden gate and ran lightly up the path to the house.

The Saxelbys lived in what the agent, who let it, called a "cottage horny." It was a square low house built of light yellow bricks, with long French windows opening to the ground; and it had a pretty bright space of flower-garden in front, separated from the road by one of the thick neatly clipped box hedges for which the shrubs of Hammerham are famous. There was a wooden verandah, painted a very bright green, running round the house; and a very beautiful jessamine twined round the slender pillars that supported the verandah, and filled the air with the delicate perfume of its creamy star-shaped flowers. At the back there was a long narrow stretch of velvet grass, enclosed between walls covered with fruit-trees. Altogether, Jessamine Cottage, FitzHenry's road, was a very pleasant peaceful English-looking residence. And Mrs. Saxelby had contrived to give to its interior arrangements an air of elegance which was wanting to the gaudy splendour of Bramley Manor.

Mabel stopped on the threshold of the glass door that gave access to the little entrance hall, and said with her hand on the bell,

"You'll come in and see mamma, Mr. Charlewood?"

He hesitated. But she seemed to take his compliance for granted, for as soon as the neat maid-servant had opened the door, she passed in, saying without turning her head, "This way, please, Mr. Charlewood. Mamma will be in the morning-room, I know."

So Clement followed her, and found himself unannounced in Mrs. Saxelby's presence. That lady was sitting in a small room looking on to the lawn; and the light chintz-patterned muslin dress she wore harmonised perfectly with the freshness and simplicity of her surroundings. The walls of the little sitting-room were covered with a pale brown paper, touched sparingly with gold. The carpet was also light brown; and the window-curtains were of spotless white muslin. There was not an article in the room that could, strictly speaking, be called ornamental, except an abundance of flowers. And yet as Clement Charlewood paused for an instant at the door, and looked at the sober-tinted room, with its green background seen through the open window, and the delicate feminine figure that rose quietly to welcome him, he was struck by the beauty and harmony of the picture, and made an involuntary comparison in his mind between it and his mother's drawing-room