

The Saturday Reader.

VOL. IV.—No. 101.

FOR WEEK ENDING AUGUST 10, 1867.

4D OR SEVEN CENTS.

MABEL'S PROGRESS.

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

From "All the Year Round,"

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

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BOOK III.

CHAPTER III. KILCLARE.

Kilclare is, or was a. the time of my story, one of the prettiest and pleasantest towns in the south of Ireland. The river Clare flows past it, and falls into the sea a few miles below the town. But though so near the end of its course, it has none of that dreary and wide-spread desolation which often attends the last few miles of a river's journey to the great deep. It runs through a wide channel between high rocky banks, at a short distance before reaching Kilclare; and these rocks are mottled with patches of bright green turf, and decked with a luxuriant variety of creeping plants, with here and there a tall tree of some hardy species clasping its roots into the crevices of the stone, and bending down towards the water's edge like some wild creature stretching its graceful neck to drink. A mile or so above the town the river is spanned by a long wooden bridge approached at each end by a sharp declivity. On a sudden hill—little more, in fact, than a high knoll—on the opposite side of the Clare to the town, stands the ruin of a feudal castle, with its tall solitary round tower relieved against the sky, like some lone sentinel who has climbed to that vantage ground to keep watch and ward over the city.

Beautiful river Clare! I know few scenes more lovely than that which is beheld by one standing on your old wooden bridge and gazing up-stream at your winding course. Most beautiful it is, on a fine summer evening, when the daylight, flushed with slumber, shuts its eyes in the west, and the first star comes out into the pale green sky, and trembles with its pure lustre upon the hoary brow of the old ruined tower. The water washes with a sleepy inarticulate babble against the pebbly beach; the bats begin their rapid elfin flight, and brush so near that one can see their weird faces and bead-like eyes as they wheel past; and the fragrant breath of a turf fire curls slowly upward into the still twilight heavens.

Beautiful river Clare! My benison be upon thee in thy dark green depths and in thy sparkling shallows; whether thy waters flow all molten gold beneath the noonday sun, or tremble onward in the moonlight, like a silver banner, barred with sable shadows; or lie dreaming in some still pool with one beloved star upon their glassy bosom. My benison be upon thee, lovely Clare, for all the glad abundance of thy beauty, and for the images of those dear days that, with the eyes of fond remembrance, I see reflected in thy tranquil face!

Although Mabel Earnshaw had no such recollections to endear the scene to her, she nevertheless perceived it to be very fair when she first caught a glimpse of it on approaching Kilclare. The mail coach from Ballyhacket—at which point, in those days, the line of railway from Dublin terminated—came spinning down the steep hill, swung round the sharp corner at the base of the old castle, and rattled over the long wooden bridge at a reckless pace, that made the crazy planks start and clatter under the horses' hoofs. Then came about two miles of level road, leading past some scattered country houses of rather dilapidated aspect, and one lodge gate through which a fine avenue might be seen; then, a few cottages of the humbler sort; then,

little straggling shops, then, one or two good dwelling-houses, more shops, and at last at a point where the street suddenly narrowed very much, the driver pulled up his smoking team before the door of a large inn, and they were at their journey's end.

Mabel and her aunt alighted from the interior of the coach, and Jack scrambled down from the outside. "Here we are, Mabel!" said he, gaily. "Rather a closeish shave coming round that corner before the bridge, wasn't it? I hope you were not very much frightened. Give me your shawl and bag, mother. That's it. Hallo! There's Biddy, bless her old heart. How are you, Biddy? Here's my mother and the young lady."

A clean apple-faced old woman in a great mob cap came up to Mrs. Walton with abundance of smiles and curseys, and bade her heartily welcome to the "ould town" again. "I've got everything ready for yez," said she; "ye'd better step across at oncet, ma'am, and Teddy and one of the boys 'ull whip over the boxes. Don't be standing here in the street, ma'am dear, and both of yez tired and hungry. Sure the things 'ull be all right enough. This way, miss, 'tis just across the street there." The old woman took Mabel's travelling bag from her arm, in spite of the latter's remonstrances, and trotted on before them with wonderful briskness.

"That is our landlady," Aunt Mary explained to Mabel, "Mrs. Bridget Bonny, the best old soul in the world. I've lodged in her house three seasons. That is the place, over the shoemaker's shop, and that cheerful bow-window belongs to our sitting-room. It isn't grand, Mabel, but it's very comfortable, and exquisitely clean."

Mrs. Bonny entered the house by a narrow door at the side of the shop, which she always proudly spoke of as the "private entrance," though, as it was exceedingly straight and inconvenient, visitors after one or two trials usually abandoned that mode of ingress, and walked humbly and comfortably through the shop. Mabel and Mrs. Walton followed her up-stairs into the front sitting-room with the bow-window. It was a very cheerful room, looking into the main street of the town; its furniture was covered with a gay-patterned chintz, and the carpet, if not very rich in quality, was adorned with a lavish variety of colours. Everything was bright, neat, and admirably clean. At one end of the table, covered with a snowy cloth, tea-things were set forth.

"I thought, maybe, ye'd loike a cup of tay as well as anything, after yer journey," said Biddy. "An I've got a roast fowl for yez, and a rasher of bacon. It'll be all ready in half a jiffy, ma'am. Sit down on the sophy and rest. Sure it's half dead they must be, the craythurs!"

Although by no means in so exhausted a state as old Biddy appeared to suppose, the travellers were yet sufficiently fatigued and hungry to enjoy sitting comfortably in a less cramped posture than had been possible in the coach, and to be prepared to do justice to the excellent meal which was presently set before them.

"What a dear old creature Mrs. Bonny is!" said Mabel, when they were all seated at table.

"Mrs. who?" cried Jack, looking up from the plateful of broiled bacon which he was discussing with infinite relish.

"Mrs. Bonny, the landlady!"

"Oh, Biddy! I never heard any human being call her by her husband's name before. And I got a confused idea in my mind that old Bonny must suddenly have committed bigamy!"

"Jack," said his mother, "you're a gander. But Mabel's quite right. Biddy is a pearl of price. I don't know a better, honest, harder-working woman than Biddy Bonny."

Then Aunt Mary went on to explain something of Biddy's history and family.

Old Joe Bonny was her second husband. Her first husband had been a widower with one son when she married him. This son, Teddy Mulloy, was a shoemaker by trade, and rented the shop in which he worked, of his step-mother; himself and his young wife inhabiting a separate dwelling-house. Joe Bonny was an Englishman, and though an old man nearer to eighty than to seventy years of age, had only given up his work during the last five years.

"And a nice time Biddy has of it with him," observed Jack. "He is the crustiest old fella! He was a navigator. Not Captain Cook, you know, but a 'pickaxe and a spade—a spade,' and that kind of thing. I believe that he hasn't two consecutive inches of unbroken bone in his body. He has factured both his arms, both his legs, all his ribs, and cracked his skull and collar-bone in several places. And as to his hand! Well, as well as I can remember, he has at the present moment only two fingers and half a thumb in working order."

"Oh, Jack?"

"Upon my word I am stating very nearly the literal fact. He was been broken and mended again, in every possible and impossible place; but he don't seem much the worse for it as regards his general constitution. Only, he finds time hang heavy on his hands, so he sits and smokes in the chimney-corner and consoles himself by growling at Biddy, and abusing the Irish."

"What a dreadful old man!" cried Mabel, laughing in spite of herself.

"Well, he has his good points too, has old Joe. He is thoroughly honest, and has a kind of bull-dog fidelity about him. But I must be off to the theatre, and see what's going on there. They open on Monday, and I dare say there will be lots of things to touch up in the scenery. Any commands, mother?"

"Give my kind remembrances to Mr. Moffat if you see him, and ask what the Call is for Saturday, and see that some arrangement is made for Mabel to dress in the same room with me, and come back time enough to post a letter that I'm going to write to father before the evening mail is made up. That's all, Jack."

"I'll not fail, mother. And Mabel, if you want assistance in unloading or unpacking, or any matter in which a fair amount of brute force is desirable, unadulterated by any intellectual element, I shall be happy to put myself at your service."

"Thank you, Jack; but I am in no need of a Caliban, and I think that's about what you have made yourself out to be."

So Jack, making the house ring with a peal of boyish laughter, ran down-stairs and betook himself to the theatre.

Mrs. Walton's first care was to write a few lines to her husband, which would be read to him by Janet; and then she and Mabel proceeded to busy themselves in unpacking and laying out their stage dresses, chatting all the time. For, as Mabel was to occupy a small room opening out of her aunt's bedchamber, by leaving the door of communication open, they were able to talk together uninterruptedly.

The wardrobes of Mrs. Walton and her niece were neither extensive nor splendid; but allowing for the necessary amount of paste and tinsel—for these stage queens wear a good deal of mock jewellery: unlike the real reigning queens of society, who never by any chance wear anything false, and who are well known to abhor shams in every department—they were good and picturesque, and made with exquisite neatness. Jack's artistic aid was often