

The Saturday Reader.

VOL. IV.—No. 100.

FOR WEEK ENDING AUGUST 3, 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.

Continued from page 319.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.—MABEL "JOINS" WITH A DIFFERENCE

MABEL, after the first few minutes, found herself as much at home with all the family, as though she had never quitted her uncle's roof. In Uncle John and Aunt Mary she found no change at all, except that they were dearer and kinder than ever. And though her cousins had grown out of recognition at first, yet as they recalled together sundry childish adventures, the well-remembered expression returned to each face, and Mabel could see them again as they used to be: Jack, a wild harum-scarum hobbledchoy, for ever falling into scrapes and marvellously scrambling out of them, but under all circumstances the hero and idol of the two little girls; and Janet, a grave silent sober little body, devoted to her father even from her baby days, and invariably peace-maker in any of the rare disensions that arose among them.

Janet was now a young woman of nineteen, and—her mother's opinion to the contrary notwithstanding—was certainly not pretty, though hers was a face that few people would forget, and fewer, having once seen it, would not like to see again. She was very pale, with a complexion of a thick creamy white, and hair of too light a flaxen hue to be flattered by the appellation of golden. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were fortunately of a darker shade of brown, and her grey eyes were set very deep beneath a broad overhanging forehead. Her mouth, though wide, was singularly sweet in expression, and her jaw somewhat too massive, but well curved, and with a charming dimple in the chin. Her figure, rather above the middle height, was spare and ungraceful, and she had a slight stoop in the shoulders, occasioned by years of weak health.

"I'm sorry Polly couldn't be here to meet you, dear," said Aunt Mary: "she is looking forward to seeing you with such pleasure. Her husband is very busy to-day, and the little one is ailing slightly, so she could not well leave home, but she will come to-morrow."

"What is Polly's new name, Aunt Mary? You told me that her husband was a teacher of music, but did not tell me his name."

"Oh, his name is Bensa, Carlo Bensa; and Polly is called Madame Bensa. Think of Polly being Madame anybody!"

"An Italian?"

"An Italian, and a very clever singing-master. But what is more important, he is the best creature in the world, and he perfectly worships Polly."

Mrs. Walton—by that name she was always addressed, and by that name I shall call her in these pages—would not suffer the evening sitting to be prolonged as far into the night as the younger people would have had it.

"Mabel is tired," she said. "The parliament is dissolved. I am only in the farce to-night, so I need not be at the theatre before half past nine. But I must positively know that Mabel is comfortably in bed before Jack and I set off. We have put you a little bed in Janet's room, my dear. You won't mind sharing her chamber? It is an airy room, and the largest in the house, though, to be sure, that isn't saying much for its dimensions." With that, Mrs. Walton led the way upstairs, and saw Mabel peacefully compo-

sed for her night's rest before she betook herself to the theatre.

The next day, Saturday, was a busy one for Mrs. Walton. She was occupied at rehearsal all the morning, and had to play in two pieces at night. So Mabel had no opportunity for the quiet talk with her which she was very anxious to have. When she said something respecting her wish to talk over her own prospects, Aunt Mary (who was trimming a muslin apron with blue ribbon to be worn that evening as part of the costume of a smart soubrette) kissed her, and bade her wait patiently until the morrow, when she and Uncle John and Mabel would hold a Cabinet Council.

"Now Mabel, my child," said Aunt Mary, when she and her husband and niece were quietly seated in the little sitting-room in her own home: "now, Mabel, let us hear what you wish, and what you propose, and what you expect? And then Uncle John and I will give you the best help and advice we can."

"Dear Aunt Mary, what I wish is to be a good actress, what I propose is to set about beginning to learn my profession practically as soon as may be; what I expect is—" Mabel paused a moment doubtfully, and then resumed: "Well, what I expect is that, with youth and strength, and a determination to work hard, and a good motive to spur me on to exertion, and your help, dear aunt and uncle, I shall be able to earn my own living, and even to do something to help mamma and educate dear little Julian."

"Well answered, Mabel," said her uncle, passing his hand lightly over the girl's head, as he spoke: "well answered, little woman. How her voice reminds me of Philip's, to be sure! Just as I can remember the sound of it, when we were little lads together." And the blind man sighed softly.

His wife instantly pressed closer to him, and took one of his hands between hers.

"Bless thee, Mary," said her husband. "Don't think I'm fretting, my own one. No, no; the sound of the child's voice carried me back to the days of lang syne for a moment. But there was no Mary in those days; no Mary and no bairns. I wouldn't loose you and change back again, wife; not even to see the blessed sunshine again. But come, come! We're a pretty cabinet council, wasting our time on anything but the matter in hand:—though perhaps that has been known to happen in more august assemblies. Well now, Mabel, I need not ask if you have my sister-in-law's consent to making this attempt, because I'm sure you wouldn't go against her wishes."

Mamma disliked the idea very much at first, Uncle John. The people about her are full of the strongest prejudices against everything connected with the theatre. But she yielded to my strong wish at last."

"Good! Still, another thing must be thought of, Mabel. You were unfortunate in your first experiment at governing. But we are not to conclude from that, that all schools are like the school at Eastfield, or that all school-mistresses are like Mrs. Hatchett. The good we can get out of the prejudices of other people is to learn to try to overcome our own. Have you quite made up your mind that such a position, even under favourable circumstances, would be distasteful to you?"

"Quite, Uncle John."

"You know, Mabel, if you go on the stage, you will have many rubs to encounter. It isn't all smooth sailing, even for the lucky ones. You must make up your mind to work hard, to be patient, and to hold a steady course undauntedly. You know the Arabian story which tells

how the princess had to climb a rugged mountain to reach the magic bird, the singing tree, and the golden water. The mountain was strewn with black stones, the petrified remains of those who had striven in vain to reach the summit. The sole condition of success was to turn a deaf ear to the clamour of taunting voices that filled the air, and tempted one to look back. The princess wisely distrusted her own strength, so she filled her ears with cotton, and having thus rendered them impervious to the mocking voices, made her way victoriously up the hill, and seized the prize she had come for. Now, Mabel, you certainly cannot stuff your ears with cotton, but you must fill your mind and occupy your attention with thoughts that shall serve to deaden very considerably the idle babble that might otherwise distract you from the goal."

"Dear uncle, I will try. I don't fear work, and I am most willing to learn. It must be a steep hill that shall turn me, Uncle John."

"Well, my child, God prosper you! You're my dear brother's own daughter, every inch of you. Tell Phil a thing was difficult, and you might be sworn he would try to master it. I've done my preaching, Mabel. I have plenary absolution to talk as much as I like. I can do so little—so very little—beside. When it comes to real practical business, I must hand you over to Aunt Mary."

"I'm sure, John," said his wife, indignantly, "you're very practical. Now, dear Mabel, since you are resolved, I must tell you what plan we had talked over among ourselves. We go, as I told you, to Kilclare every summer. The manager is an old acquaintance of mine, and, as the place is small, and everything on a diminutive scale, and he can't afford a large company, I dare say he would be very glad to give you a trial. Only I fear, Mabel, you mustn't expect any salary at first; but if you do well, it will not be long before you will be able to earn a salary, never fear. The first thing to be done is to write to Moffatt—he is the manager of the Kilclare circuit—and hear what he says. I have not the least doubt as to his answer. Then you must get up in a few stock pieces. The leading lady won't let you have much business."

"Much business, Aunt Mary?"

"Many good parts, child. But I shall stipulate for one or two of the lightest of the juvenile lead, to give you practice, and then you must take walking ladies, or utility, or whatever comes uppermost."

"Oh, of course, aunt." (Mabel guessed at the meaning of these terms.)

"And then we must see about dresses for you. Fortunately, Polly is on a larger scale than you are, so the chief alterations needed will be to take in, and that's always easy. There are a good many of her costumes lying by. We will see about all that to-morrow. You'll take Polly's old place with me. Janet's always busy with her father, you know. The first time I went to Kilclare without Polly, I felt quite lost. It will be the greatest comfort in the world to me to have you, but here are Polly, and Jack, and Janet, and Charles, and baby, all coming across the square. Now, Mabel, prepare to like my son-in-law very much, and to fall over head and ears in love with baby."

CHAPTER II.—MESOPOTAMIA AND THE VIOLIN.

Madame Bensa ran into the sitting room with outstretched arms, and catching Mabel in them, hugged her heartily.

"You dear little thing!" she cried "How pretty you're grown; and you're taller than you promised to be. But I should have known you anywhere. The same eyes, the same smile. Goodness, what a booby you must be, Jack, not