

The Saturday Reader.

VOL. IV.—No. 104.

FOR WEEK ENDING AUGUST 31, 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 383.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER IX.

Soft you now;

The fair Ophelia.

Amongst the notabilities of the gentry in the neighbourhood of Kilkclare was a certain Lady Popham, a wealthy and eccentric widow, who owned a fine estate, one of the park gates of which opened into the high road that led from Ballyhack to Kilkclare. Lady Popham had resided many years abroad, chiefly in Italy, with her husband, a languid, invalid, fine gentleman, who found, or fancied, that a southern climate was necessary to his existence. Her ladyship had consequently been an absentee for a very long period. On Sir Bernard Popham's death, however, his widow returned rich and childless to Ireland, and announced her intention of residing permanently on her Kilkclare estate. At first her advent occasioned a great deal of talk and excitement amongst her country neighbours. Lady Popham's peculiarities were the theme of conversation at most dinner-tables around Kilkclare for some weeks. Some were shocked, some angry, some amused by her oddities; but, by degrees, as the genuine goodness and warm-heartedness of her character became known, and as people became accustomed to her eccentricities, all that was odd, outré, or unusual, was set down simply to "foreign manners," and excused accordingly. And at the date of my story there was no more popular or respected individual in the county than old Lady Popham of Cloncoolin.

Lady Popham was known far and wide as a liberal, if not very intelligent encourager of art and artists, and was a staunch patroness of the drama. She had already been twice to the theatre in Kilkclare during the present season, and had on each occasion graciously signified to Mr. Moffatt her high satisfaction with the performances, all which was profitable and pleasant to the manager, and would have been quite perfect but for one unfortunate circumstance, which dashed his cup of content with bitterness. It had been observed that when Miss Moffatt was singing that popular and touching ballad of the modern domestic school, entitled, "Johnny left me in the lane," Lady Popham, after listening for a second or so, unfurled a very large green fan, behind whose ample shade she retired completely during the song, nor issued forth into the gaslight again until "Johnny" had finally left off leaving Miss Moffatt in the lane, when her ladyship emerged from obscurity with a cheerful countenance. This was certainly not pleasant; and poor Mr. Moffatt had to bear the brunt of his daughter's ill humour and mortification. However, Lady Popham was too valuable a friend and supporter of the theatre for the manager to be able to afford to show any resentment of this slight to Miss Annette's vocal abilities; and he consoled the latter by saying that "nobody minded what old Lady Popham said or did," and that she was generally supposed to be "a little touched in the upper story."

Touched or not, however, it was very well known that the sight of the Cloncoolin liveries at the box-office in the morning was sufficient to fill the house at night; and Mr. Wilfred J. Percival had sent a sort of circular to her lady-

ship setting forth that his benefit was fixed to take place on the following Friday evening, and begging Lady Popham to honour him by her presence and support on the occasion. This she had promised to do, and moreover to bring with her a party of friends that were staying at Cloncoolin, and great was the excitement amongst the company as the evening approached, and rose-coloured were the visions of cash and credit to be won, in the minds of manager Moffatt and the *bénéficiaire*.

At Biddy Bonny's too, the whole household was much interested in the forthcoming performance of Hamlet, and especially in the new Ophelia. Teddy Molloy, as he sat in the workshop tapping away at the sole of a "brogue," held forth to his apprentice on the merits of the various Hamlets he had seen when he himself was a pretence in Dublin, and expressed his opinion that Miss Bell would be "the purtiest and ilhgautest Ophaylia" that had ever appeared on the boards of the Kilkclare theatre. And the two apprentices related how they'd heard that Lady Popham and "heaps of the quality" were to grace the boxes with their presence. Even old Joe Bonny seemed to catch a faint reflex of the prevailing glow of excitement, and growled out sundry reminiscences of how he had "seed'd amlet acted nigh upon a matter of fifty year ago in England." He was sure it must have been Hamlet, because he remembered there "were a ghost in it, with a kind of a tin-pot on his head." But, on being pressed with interrogations by Biddy, it turned out that this striking evidence of the play having been Hamlet was not so conclusive as old Joe supposed, for the performance had taken place at Bartholomew fair, where ghosts—even ghosts with tin-pots on their heads—are known to have been numerous.

The rehearsals of the tragedy had gone off very satisfactorily. Mabel had indeed been a little surprised at the complicated and minute instructions given to her by Mr. Percival as to the exact spot on which she must stand during the scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia, when she must turn her head towards him, and when she must look away, how many steps she must take in this direction, and how many in the other; and so forth. But she endeavoured to remember and comply with his injunctions.

"Percival's business in Hamlet is capital," said Mr. Snell, the low comedian. "All his own too. I don't know another Hamlet on the stage with such business in the play scene."

"Sir," remarked Mrs. Darling, with much stateliness, "I do not admire it. I may be in error, but I deem that over-elaboration is a fault. I have seen John Kemble, in my youth, and Edmund Kean in his best days, and I do not think that they depended for their success on their business."

"Oh, hang it!" returned Mr. Snell (who was without any veneration for the traditions of the old school, and who professed his belief that half the famous actors of the past generation "would be jolly well hissed, if they came bow-wowing on to the boards of the London stage now-a-days"), "Oh, hang it, Mrs. Darling, one must have something new, you know. Can't keep on in the old grooves for ever."

"What do they mean by Mr. Percival's capital business in Hamlet, aunt?" asked Mabel that day, after rehearsal.

Before his mother could reply, Jack began:

"Why, they mean that kind of Scotch reel he dances with everybody, Mabel. In and out, backwards and forwards, up the middle and down again. He crosses the stage nineteen times in that scene with you. I counted them."

"The business of a poet, Mabel," said Aunt

Mary, "is, properly speaking, its dumb show, its pantomime. You know every one has his own ideas as to his movement and position with regard to the other characters."

"Pantomime with a vengeance!" exclaimed Jack, who was inveterate against the eminent tragedian "from the principal theatres, &c. &c." "He does everything but tumble head over heels; and I shouldn't be surprised to see him do that before the evening's over. A somersault over Ophelia's grave would be striking, and *new*. That's his great notion."

"Don't be severe, Jack; I don't like to hear it," said gentle, good-natured Aunt Mary.

But Mabel, in her heart, was inclined to agree with her cousin.

At length arrived the eventful Friday evening. The play was to begin at seven o'clock, and long before that hour the pit and gallery were filled with an expectant crowd. The boxes, too, began to show a sprinkling of visitors; and the gap of empty crimson benches in the centre of the semicircle attracted great attention; for it was known that those seats were reserved for Lady Popham and her party. About two minutes before seven the box doors were thrown open with a mighty clatter, and the plunging of hoofs and rolling of wheels was heard coming up from the outside of the theatres. A gay party of ladies and gentlemen entered and took their seats, and in the very centre—for Sir Bernard Popham's widow had no idea of hiding her light under a bushel—sat the lady of Cloncoolin, looking about the theatre with a heavy gold eye-glass, and uttering her remarks upon everything and everybody in a shrill, penetrating little voice. Lady Popham was a very small fragile old woman of nearly seventy years of age; upright as a dart, bright-eyed, nimble-tongued, active. She wore a double range of false teeth which seemed a little too large for her month, and made her lip in her speech, and a jet black wig with stiff curls that framed her small wizened face on each side. She had the tiniest hands and feet in the world, and was always dressed in the richest stuffs and brightest colours that she could find. On the present occasion she wore an amber brocaded silk gown and a white cashmere cloak on her shoulders; a wreath of artificial roses was perched on the top of her wig, and trembled at every movement of her restless little head. A grotesque figure enough, one would say; and yet it is a fact that Lady Popham, however ridiculous she might appear, possessed that indefinable air of good breeding which stamped her as a gentlewoman, and she could, moreover, assume when she chose a dignified, lofty bearing that was quite imposing.

On the evening of Mr. Percival's benefit, however, she was neither lofty nor dignified; but very good humored and talkative, turning her big eye-glass hither and thither, and nodding right and left to her friends and neighbours as they took their seats around her.

Punctually at seven o'clock the orchestra began the overture. It was, of course, a selection of Irish airs, but newly chosen, and arranged by Mr. Trescott, who possessed, from long practice and experience, some skill in such patchwork.

"Jerry the Buck" figured in it as a matter of course, and the stamping of feet keeping time to it in the gallery overhead, made the theatre quiver until it seemed quite within the bounds of possibility that the flooring would give way, and a pair of corduroy-clad legs be seen hovering over Lady Popham's floral headgear! However, no such disaster took place, and "Jerry the Buck" came to an end in due course, giving place to an old pathetic melody with a walling burden to it in a minor key. Scarcely had