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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 208.

CHAPTER VII. A FAMILY DINNER AT BRAMLEY MANOR.

Mrs. Charlewood was a member of the Reverend Decimus Fluke's congregation. So was Miss Augusta. The latter, indeed, was very much given to profession of piety of a somewhat melancholy and soul-depressing character. Miss Augusta, though a beauty and an heiress, eschewed the worldly amusements which might have appeared most calculated to tempt a young lady of her age and attractions. She went to balls occasionally, but she never waltzed. She sometimes attended the performance of an oratorio but she seldom went to a secular concert. And as for the play!—Miss Augusta would not have entered the doors of the theatre on any pretext or persuasion whatsoever. Stay, I must record one exception to this rule. When the Misses Charlewood once passed a season in London, Augusta, radiant in a rich and elegant toilet, had been seen several times in a box at the Italian Opera. But then, it was the Italian Opera. And the élite of London society were there to be seen—and to see. And it cost a great deal of money. So Miss Augusta had been to the Italian Opera.

Her sister Penelope, independent in this matter as in most others, declined to attend the Reverend Mr. Fluke's church, but was in the habit of going to a chapel in the neighborhood of Bramley Manor, where very high-church services were performed, with much elaboration, and where the sermon never exceeded fifteen minutes in length. The chapel was a brand-new construction, of a very florid style of architecture, with cast-iron crosses stuck on each of its many pinnacles, and bits of coloured glass inserted in all the windows. Penelope complained that Mr. Fluke's sermons made her bilious. "Sitting still to be bullied three times every Sunday disagrees with my constitution," said she. "When there's any bullying going, I like to do my own share of it," she added, frankly.

However, though the seven Misses Fluke groaned in concert over the Puseyism—in their mouths the word was almost synonymous with perdition—of the eldest Miss Charlewood, they were very willing to go to Bramley Manor when ever they had a chance of doing so. And the Charlewood family were, to use Mr. Fluke's own phrase, "some of the brightest jewels in his congregation." Thus, it came to pass, that from the Misses Fluke the Charlewoods heard of Mabel's visit to Corda Trescott. Clement had learned the fact from Corda herself, but had said nothing about it, feeling possibly some little pique at Mabel's disregard of his advice, and feeling also, in a half unconscious way, very reluctant to canvas the subject at home. But his sisters were not so reticent.

One evening, when the whole family was assembled round the dinner-table, and after the servants had left the room, Augusta opened fire after this fashion:

"What a queer girl Mabel Earnshaw is!"

Her father looked up from his walnuts. He was a very handsome old man, it was from him that Augusta inherited her beauty. He was dressed in a somewhat peculiar fashion, his attire being, in fact, a close imitation of the costume of a well-known nobleman in the neighbouring county, to whom he bore a strong re-

semblance. Mr. Charlewood had occasionally been mistaken for this nobleman by strangers; and had once been addressed by a fellow-traveller in a railway carriage as "my lord"—a circumstance which, strange to say, afforded him very great gratification.

"Queer? Mabel Earnshaw queer?" said he, addressing his daughter Augusta. "Well; hers is a very pleasant kind of queerness, at all events. I thought she was your dearest friend."

"Oh," exclaimed Walter, a good-looking light-haired lad, who was giving himself mighty airs of connoisseurship over his port wine, "don't you know sir, that Miss Earnshaw has been thanked and dismissed the service? Jane Fluke is promoted to the post of dearest friend, vice Mabel Earnshaw, superseded."

"I'm sorry, dear Watty," retorted Augusta, with placid sweetness, "that Jane Fluke is not pretty. For I know you can't be expected to like her merely because she's good."

Walter laughed, and held his peace.

"Well, but what is Mabel's special queerness?" asked Mr. Charlewood.

"Oh, I don't know, papa," replied Augusta; "but she is queer. I think she's—she's strong minded."

"Gussy," remonstrated Mrs. Charlewood looking quite shocked, "don't my dear. You shouldn't say such things of people, my love."

"Never mind, mamma," said Penelope, "thank Heaven, nobody can say of us that we're strong minded. That's a great blessing. But if papa really wants to know what particular oddity Mabel has been guilty of, I think I can tell him what Augusta means. You know the little girl that Jackson managed to drive over on the last day of the festival, papa? We told you all about it. Well, Mabel Earnshaw has taken a craze about the child, and has been to see her."

"Nothing very queer in that; is there?" asked Mr. Charlewood, dipping a walnut into his wine.

"Oh, but the child belongs to such dreadful people," replied Augusta, "and lives in such a low neighbourhood. New Bridge-street, papa!"

"Oh," said Mr. Charlewood, shortly. He had reminiscences of still lower neighbourhoods than New Bridge-street, but he kept them to himself.

"The Flukes told us about it, my dear," said Mrs. Charlewood to her husband. "Mabel has joined them in district visiting for a time, whilst Eliza is ill. But Miss Fluke says she fears—she greatly fears—that Mabel 'asn't yet got real conversion. Well, we can but ope and pray for her. Miss Fluke says she's only joined to have an opportunity of visiting the little girl."

"Miss Fluke is the most intolerable fool," said Clement, breaking silence for the first time, and angrily pushing his plate away from him, "and I wonder at Miss Earnshaw having anything to do with her."

"Dear old Fluke!" cried Walter, with a mischievous glance at his sister Augusta. "I think she's charming. Here's her health, with three times three. By jingo, she's a clipper, is Miss Fluke!"

"Really, Watty," observed Augusta, with dignity, "you take more of that old port than is good for you, my dear boy."

"As to being a fool, Clem," said Penelope, rising to follow Mrs. Charlewood out of the room, and speaking into Clement's ear, as he held the door open for his mother and sisters to pass, "Miss Fluke is a fool, of course. But you can't expect her to be as devoted to Mabel Earnshaw's beaux yeux as some people are."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Clement, shutting the door sharply after the ladies, and walking back to his place.

"What was that Penny said?" asked Mr. Charlewood.

"Only nonsense, sir," rejoined Clement, shortly.

"Penny don't often talk nonsense, either," replied his father.

"How modest you are, Clem!" said Walter. "I declare you're positively blushing! 'Pon my soul you are! I couldn't do that to save my life." Walter contemplated his smooth young face in the bowl of a dessert-spoon with much self-satisfaction.

"Where are you off to, Watty?" asked Mr. Charlewood, as his youngest son lounged towards the door.

"I'm going down to Plumtree's, sir," replied the lad, after an instant's hesitation.

"To Plumtree's? Don't overdo Plumtree's, Watty. I don't like so much billiards. When I was your age, I didn't know one end of a cue from the other."

"All right, sir!"

"No, I don't know that it is all right, sir," returned his father, irritated by Walter's nonchalant tone. "You get through a precious sight of money, as it is, young gentleman, without helping it off by billiards. Do you ever consider what an expense you've been to me? And what a still greater expense you will be if I buy you a commission, as you are always plaguing me to do?"

"I suppose you can afford it, sir," said Walter, sulkily. His manly dignity was giving place to a very naughty-boy air, as he stood with his hand on the fastening of the door, turning it backwards and forwards with a clicking noise.

"I don't suppose so, though. Giving you money is like pouring water into a sieve. I won't have you hanging about Plumtree's. So that's flat."

"It's very hard," muttered Walter, almost whimpering, "to be kept in like a schoolboy. They'll think me a blessed muff, when I'd promised particularly to go there to-night, to see the match between Lord Higworth's son and Tiffin of the Carbineers. There's a whole lot of fellows going from the barracks."

"Lord Higworth's son?" said Mr. Charlewood.

"Yes, young Skidley," said Walter, eagerly pursuing his advantage, as he saw his father's face soften. "And there'll be Captain De Vaux, and Fitzmaurice, and Plowden, and no end of tip-top fellows."

"If you promised, Walter," said Mr. Charlewood, with a moral air, "of course, you are bound to go. I didn't know you had given your word. The Honourable Arthur Skidley, you said?"

"Yes, sir. He and I are as thick as thieves. He's no end of a brick."

"He may be no end of a brick, but he is not even the beginning of a gentleman," said Clement.

Next moment the fragrance of a cigar was blown across the hall, as the boy opened the house door, and set off gaily down the avenue.

"Surprising what high friends Watty makes!" said Mr. Charlewood, when he and his elder son were alone together.

"I don't like Watty's getting into that set, sir," said Clement. "He is a mere boy, and his head is always turned by his newest acquaintances."

"Men of family, Clem," said his father, moving uneasily in his chair. "Men of family and— and—fashion."

"There are blackguards to be found in all classes, unfortunately; and, I assure you, that Arthur Skidley is looked upon very coolly by the best men in his own rank."