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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 304.

CHAPTER X.

"Mamma, mamma," said Mabel, after having read the foregoing letter to Mrs. Saxelby on the first evening of her return to Hazlehurst, "do you believe there is such another lovable, generous creature in all the world as Aunt Mary?"

Poor Mrs. Saxelby could not be as enthusiastic as her daughter. Every word of the letter made plain to her mind that another and a longer separation from her child was impending. And there was a passing pang of jealousy in her heart at the thought of those years in which she had been nothing to Mabel, and Mary Earnshaw had been everything. She smiled faintly, and answered, "Your aunt is very kind."

"Very kind, mamma? She is an angel. See how she puts herself in the background. 'Your uncle says this; your uncle sends you this money.' Yes; but I know that it is all her doing. Dear Uncle John is very good, but he would not have the power to help me that she has."

It was evident that nothing less than her mother's authoritative prohibition would prevent Mabel from embracing the chance thus held out to her. And Mrs. Saxelby knew herself well enough to be aware that she would be quite unable to give a stern refusal to any prayer of Mabel's. But Mabel knew instinctively that what she had next to tell would cause her mother a still more bitter disappointment. Nevertheless, it must be told.

"Mamma, she said, 'let me sit at your feet, and lean my head on your knees, as I used to do when I was a little girl. There, so.'"

Mrs. Saxelby stroked her soft hair in silence. The caressing mother's touch suddenly broke up the fountain of tears that had been frozen for many days in the girl's breast by her proud undemonstrative self-repression, and she sobbed with her face hidden in her mother's lap; and told her all.

"Oh, Mabel!" cried Mrs. Saxelby, almost in a wail; "oh, Mabel!"

"I knew you would be grieved, mamma dear. And that makes my grief the greater."

"He is so good, Mabel. So true, so highly principled, so kind-hearted. He has been like a son to me, and I feel as if he were almost as dear to me as a son. You couldn't help loving him if you did not purposely steel your heart against him."

"It is over, mamma. He will be sorry for a while, but then he will find some one who will value and love him as he deserves, and whom his family will be glad to welcome and make much of."

They sat talking far into the night, until Mrs. Saxelby was startled by the striking of the hour from the belfry of the village church, and hurriedly bade Mabel go to her bed, and seek the rest she was so much in need of. But, before they separated, Mabel had received her mother's reluctant consent to accept her aunt's offer.

"But yet—but yet—but yet, my darling," said Mrs. Saxelby, holding her daughter to her breast, "how I wish you could make up your mind to think favourably of Clement's suit! Good Heavens, to think of the girls who would give the world for such an offer!"

"Mamma, I will tell you something that may help to reconcile you to my refusal. Besides the injustice I should do Clement Charlewood

were I to marry him without really loving him enough, I have reason to believe that I should also be injuring his worldly prospects. From some words that Penelope once said to me—and Penelope speaking on such a subject would weigh her words, you and I know—I feel sure that a marriage between his son and a penniless girl like myself, would so anger and disappoint Mr. Charlewood, as to make a serious difference in Clement's circumstances. Perhaps Mr. Charlewood might even disinherit him."

"I don't believe it, Mabel; and, besides, I was not thinking of the money only."

But, nevertheless, as Mabel had said, the suggestion did help to reconcile Mrs. Saxelby somewhat to her daughter's decision.

CHAPTER XI. DOOLEY EXECUTES A TERRIBLE THREAT.

Mabel allowed no time to be lost before replying to her aunt's letter. She decided to start for Ireland at the end of April, which was now only ten days distant, and had calculated that she should thus have six weeks with her aunt in Dublin, to make preparation for her first attempt at Killeclare. When once the letter was written and despatched, Mrs. Saxelby appeared to become more reconciled to the idea of Mabel's going. "Though what," she said, with a sudden qualm of remembrance, "Though what, my dear, will Miss Fluke say about it?"

The mother and daughter were sitting at work, engaged in some ingenious contrivance for making "auld claes look amais as weel's the new;" and Dooley, perched on the window-sill with the kitten in his lap, was studying a picture alphabet with a thoughtful brow. At the mention of Miss Fluke, he looked up quickly. "Miss Fook's very naughty," said Dooley; "she made mamma cry. I shall mack Miss Fook!"

"Dooley!" urged his sister, in feigned amazement, though she had much ado to keep a grave countenance, so irresistibly absurd was the notion of Dooley engaged in inflicting condign chastisement on Miss Fluke. "Dooley, what shocking things are you saying? Come here to me, sir. Why, I declare I don't know you. Is this my own good little brother, this angry, frowning boy?"

The child's face was crimson, and he had clenched his small fist in his wrath.

"I shall mack Miss Fook if she makes mamma cry," he repeated, with great determination.

"Don't say any more just now, Mabel," whispered Mrs. Saxelby. "Go back to the window, Julian, and learn your lesson. I shall expect you to know F and G when I call you. The fact is," she continued, when the child had obeyed her and was deep in his book again, "the fact is I want him to forget all about the scene. I never saw him so excited as he was after Miss Fluke went away the other day."

"I think I should have been inclined to be excited too," said Mabel, with flashing eyes. "Do you really mean to say that that woman made you shed tears, mamma?"

"Hush. Yes. You know, my nerves are not strong; and I was worried and lonely; and she took me by surprise; and she was so loud, and so vehement! Oh, Mabel it was terrible, I assure you. You don't know how dreadful she can be. It is quite impossible to cope with her."

"I should not think of trying," replied Mabel, with a disdainful lip; "I should simply withdraw my attention, and let her rave unnoticed."

"Good gracious, Mabel! Withdraw your attention? Short of putting cotton wool in your ears, there is no possibility of withdrawing your attention from Miss Fluke when once she begins in earnest. Besides, I don't like to be openly

rude to her, for I can't help feeling that she means it all for my good."

"It's a very amiable feeling, mamma. But I take the liberty of doubting whether Miss Fluke is a better judge of what is good for you than you are yourself."

"I say, missus!" exclaimed Betty, opening the parlour door and putting her head inside the room mysteriously, "here be Miss Fluke a-comin'! I were a carryin' some pig-wash out to the sty, when I seed her three fields off, a-comin' along the path. She do stump along at a rate. I thought mayhap you'd like to have a warnin'," added Betty, ingeniously. "I allus do lock my workbox up from her now. She bates all for curiosity, does Miss Fluke."

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Mrs. Saxelby, absolutely turning pale, "what shall we do?"

"Dear mamma, don't distress yourself. If you dread seeing her so much, go to your own room, and let me speak with her. I will say you are not equal to seeing her to-day; and that will be true enough."

Mrs. Saxelby could not repress a sigh of relief at this proposition.

"But," she said, hesitating, "it seems so cowardly to leave you to face her alone."

Mabel laughed with almost childish enjoyment. "Oh, don't mind me, mamma," she said, with the irrepressible high spirits of youth dancing in her eyes. "I am not a bit afraid."

"Ain't you indeed, my dear?" said Mrs. Saxelby, regarding her daughter with a kind of wistful admiration. "Ain't you indeed?" And then she stole quietly up-stairs, and Mabel heard the door of her bedroom softly shut, and the bolt drawn.

Betty's irreverent phrase expressed Miss Fluke's method of locomotion very graphically. She did "stump along at a rate." And many seconds had not elapsed after Mrs. Saxelby's retirement to her own room, when Miss Fluke's martial tread was heard resounding on the flagged stone passage, and that lady, eschewing any preliminary ceremony of knocking at the door, burst into the little parlour with all her own peculiar vigour.

For a minute or so she stood stock still, and stared around her. Mabel was stitching away placidly, and Dooley remained curled up in the window-sill, half hidden behind his broad picture-book.

"How d'ye do, Miss Fluke?" said Mabel, looking up. "Pray sit down."

"Why, goodness me, Mabel," cried Miss Fluke, with a gasp occasioned partly by surprise and partly by the breathlessness consequent upon the rapid pace she had come at, "is that you?"

"Yes," said Mabel, rising to bring forward a chair for Miss Fluke, and then resuming her own. "Yes, it is I. Won't you sit down?"

Among Miss Fluke's many admirable qualities, that of a quick and accurate perceptive faculty could not be counted. She did not comprehend the situation with the rapid intuition which would have enabled some women to see their way at a glance, but continued to stare about her with an air of bewilderment. "Where's your mother?" she said at last, abruptly.

"Mamma is in her own room."

"In her own room? But she must have been here this minute, for there's her work with the needle half stuck in it." Miss Fluke held up a long strip of muslin triumphantly, and looked at Mabel as though she had just detected her in some attempt to deceive. Miss Fluke was very prone to suppose that people uttered deliberate untruths, and to rejoice openly in their fancied detection.