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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 367.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER VII. NEWS FROM HAMMERHAM.

RETURNING from the theatre, they passed the open door of the kitchen on their way into the house, and Mrs. Walton looked in to say good evening to old Joe, who was sitting by the turf fire in a great chair covered with patchwork, and smoking a long pipe.

"Good evening, Mr. Bonny, how are you tonight?"

"Wa-all, Missus Walton" responded the old man in a slow growl, "I don't know as there's much the matter with me, 'ceptin' as I've growed old. My old carcase ain't good for nothin' now, but to set still from mornin' till night in this here darned old cheer."

Joe Bonny never regarded the individual whom he was addressing, nor even turned his head, but habitually uttered his remarks in the manner of a soliloquy, and was so slow, so gruff, and so inarticulate, as to be nearly unintelligible to strangers.

"Ah, sure, Joe," said Biddy, bustling cheerfully about the kitchen, "don't be afther rejoinin' now! Ye've done yer share of work in this world; can't ye be aisy and rest comfortable in the evenin' of yer days?"

"Yah!" snarled Joe. "Rest! There niver wasn't a Paddy yet as I ever heerd on, as wasn't up to takin' any amount o' that there. They thinks a Englishman just lunatic for wantin' to do anything else in the 'arsal world but rest!"

A significant commentary on Joe's speech was supplied by old Bridget's busy activity. The sweet-tempered old soul applied herself to the preparation of her lodgers' supper, now and then stopping to alter the position of the cushion behind her husband's back, or to put his tobacco-box within more convenient reach of his hand, or to pile a few fresh turfs on the hearth.

"Don't you find it warm enough, to do without fire here in the evening?" said Mrs. Walton, turning to leave the kitchen.

"I do, ma'am," answered Biddy; "but Joe likes the bit of foire, the craythur. Sure he can't move about to set his blood cirkylatin', and it does be company for him when I'm obliged to leave him alone."

During supper Biddy lingered in the sitting-room, on one excuse or the other, to express her delight at the performance, and to retail all the favorable criticisms which Teddy Molloy had brought home.

"Don't sit up for us any longer, Biddy," said Mrs. Walton. "I am sure you must be very tired."

"Oh, sorra a bit, ma'am," responded the old woman, cheerfully. "But I'll wish yez all good night, an' pleasant dhraems, an'—Arrah, see there now!" she exclaimed suddenly, "what a baste I am to be forgettin' the letter, and me havin' it in my pocket all the time!"

"A letter, Biddy?"

"A letter, no less, ma'am, and 'tis for the young lady, God bless her. Sure it came not more than foire minutes afther ye was gone to the theatre, an, I tuk it from Dennis the postman

my own self, and put it in my pocket, and sure I give no more thought to it from that moment to this so I didn't! There it is, miss." Biddy handed to Mabel a thick letter with the Hammerham postmark.

"No bad news, dear, I hope?" said Aunt Mary with a searching glance at Mabel's face as she read her letter.

"Oh no, aunt, thank you. Mamma and Dooley are well. And mamma tells me that—a friend of mine is going to be married."

"Hallow, Mabel!" cried Jack, in his random way, saying what came uppermost. "I hope it isn't a case of 'she never told her love,' and lettin' what's his name, like the thim-gummy, cat up the damask roses, eh? You look quite tragic. Is he false, Mabel, fickle, faithless?"

"How silly you are, Jack!" said Mabel, flushing crimson. "The friend who is going to be married, is a lady, an old school-follower of mine, Miss Augusta Charlewood."

"Any relation to the gentleman of whose kindness little Corda speaks so much?" asked Mrs. Walton.

"His sister."

There was a little shade over Mabel.

"You are tired, dear child," said her aunt.

"Go to bed."

Mabel rose, shook hands with Jack, and kissed her aunt in silence.

"Shut your door, Mabel, so that I may not disturb you when I come into my room. I am not going to bed for an hour yet. I have to recover a part for to-morrow night. Good night, dear. I don't know how it is," continued Mrs. Walton, when Mabel had left the room, "but it always seems to me that a letter from Hazlehurst puts her out of spirits. And yet she is very eager to get them, poor child."

"I think Aunt Earnshaw bothers her with complaints; she was always selfish," said Jack: who had never quite forgiven what he called Mrs. Philip's bad behaviour to his mother.

Mabel went into her own little chamber, and shut the door of communication between it and her aunt's room. The night was warm and soft, and Mabel opened the little old-fashioned lattice window that looked across a small flagged yard into some gardens beyond, where a couple of tall elms stood up dark against the sky. She unbound and brushed out her hair, and prepared herself for bed, glancing every now and then at her letter. She had laid it on the little table beside the looking-glass: but she did not open it again, or read it, until she had finished her toilet for the night. It seemed as though she desired to devote herself very quietly to its perusal; for when she was ready to step into bed she wrapped a dressing-gown about her, and seating herself at the table, took up the letter. But even then she did not open it at once, but sat stroking her forehead with the cover in a musing irresolute way. At last, with a decided movement, she took it out of its envelope, and, beginning at the first page, read it through steadily, once more.

Mrs. Saxelby, as the reader knows by this time, was not one of those people who can "sniffer and be strong." It was her nature and her habit to cry out, when she was hurt in either mind or body: not with any passionate or unbecoming violence, but with a soft plaintive lady-like bemoaning of her fate, and demand for sympathy. And it was very difficult for Mrs. Saxelby to believe that people who *didn't* cry out, suffered at all.

After the drive in Miss Charlewood's pony-carriage, she had sat down to relieve her mind

by pouring out some portion of her own melancholy and low spirits on Mabel. Not that this was what she told herself she meant to do. "Of course Mabel will like to hear the Hammerham news, I must tell her of Augusta's engagement. Oh dear me, dear me! No one knows what an effort it is for me to write sometimes!" That is what Mrs. Saxelby said to herself.

So Mabel read her mother's letter steadily through. The first part related small particulars of her own health and Dooley's, of their daily life, and of the garden and orchard, and dumb creatures—not forgetting the famous pig. Then came the kernel, the real bitter almond for whose envelopment all the husk of the letter had been constructed. "On Tuesday, Penelope Charlewood called in the forenoon, and brought the pony-carriage, in which she asked us to take a drive. I was a little unwilling at first to go. But it was a fine day, and I knew dear Julian would enjoy it and Miss Charlewood was very friendly and urgent, so at last I consented. I had not seen any of the family from Bramley Manor for three weeks, and Miss Charlewood excused and accounted for their long absence by giving me a piece of news. Augusta is going to be married very shortly. Her fiancé is a clergyman named Dawson, belonging to an Irish family. But Penelope said the young couple would live close to Eastfield, which is (for rich people who do not care what they spend in travelling) quite like being in Hammerham. When my daughter was in Eastfield it seemed a long way off. But Mr. Charlewood is one of the fortunate ones of this world. Mrs. Dawson—the mother of the bridegroom elect—is staying at the Manor on a visit. And also his cousin, a Miss O'Brien, an Irish girl. Very handsome and dashing and clever. She and Clement Charlewood take long rides together. She is a splendid horsewoman. And, from what Penelope said, I can see very plainly that she is making violent love to Clement. In fact, I infer that the whole thing is as good as settled. I must say I felt very downcast and wretched when I returned home after the drive. It did seem as if everything and everybody that I cared for were drifting, drifting away from me. After all that has passed I did think that Clement would not have consoled himself so very soon. How fickle and selfish men are! But I don't believe he can care for this Miss O'Brien one quarter as much as he did for you. He is just dazzled and flattered, that is all. O Mabel, Mabel! how I wish sometimes that—but of course it is no use wishing; I know that very well; and you, who have new scenes, new faces, and new occupations, can scarcely imagine how bitter my regrets are sometimes. One thing is quite certain: marry whom you will I shall never, never be able to feel for him as I could have done for Clement Charlewood. It is scarcely fairly incomprehensible to me how you could help loving him. But I suppose there is no accounting for these things, and it is useless to try."

The letter rambled on in this strain for some page and a half longer; but contained nothing more which it imports the reader to know for the understanding of my story, except the few following words, added as a postscript.

"Walter joined his regiment a fortnight ago. They say he will be sent to Dublin. I wonder if you will chance to see him! He is to be at the wedding, of course, if he can get leave, which they do not doubt."

Mabel re-folded the letter elaborately; taking especial care to keep the paper in its original creases, and pressing and smoothing them