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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 379.

CHAPTER V. MABEL "JOINS."

It will have been surmised that Mr. Trescotts cogitations, recorded in the preceding chapter, related partly to Mabel Earnshaw. She had seen him that morning near Jessamine Cottage, on his way to give a lesson in the neighbourhood—for Mr. Trescott eked out his scanty salary by teaching the violin, whenever he could find a pupil—and had accosted him to ask after his little girl. Mabel had learned from Clement Charlewood that the child was motherless, and more than ever had she set her heart on visiting the little creature, to whose patient sweetness and bright intelligence Clement bore warm testimony.

Mabel had a very strong will of her own, and rarely set her heart on any object without compassing its attainment. Nevertheless, for a young lady of sixteen to walk to New Bridge street unattended, and without the consent of her parents, was not to be thought of. But chance came to her aid from an unexpected quarter.

Mr. Saxelby was a strong adherent and devout admirer of a certain evangelical clergyman, whose preaching (of a very hot and strong quality) was popular with a large section of the Hammerham public. Three times every Sunday, wet or dry, did Mr. Saxelby, his wife and step-daughter, trudge down to the church of St. Philip-in-the-Fields, there to be edified by the eloquent discourses of the Reverend Decimus Fluke. As St. Philip's lay at least a mile and a half from Jessamine Cottage, and in a low squalid part of 't town, the walk thither was exceedingly disagreeable, and even laborious. But Mr. Saxelby would have considered himself a backslider, indeed, if anything short of serious illness had availed to keep him or his family away from one of the three Sunday services. Equally, he would have thought himself disgraced had he been induced by inclement weather to avail himself of the shelter of a vehicle on these occasions. "Shall I not do so much for my Master?" he would exclaim, when any unconverted friend suggested that cabs were to be had in Hammerham. And Mr. Saxelby really considered that in splashing to church, under his dripping glistening umbrella, he was doing a good deal for his Master; and his manner seemed to express a hope that the sacrifice would be duly appreciated, and entered to his credit in the celestial registers.

Now the Reverend Decimus Fluke, incumbent of St. Philip-in-the-Fields, was an energetic man. A very energetic man was the Reverend Decimus Fluke. So energetic that irreverent persons had been known to say that it required a constitution of exceptional vigour to support existence within the sphere of his activity, and that three mild curates had successively succumbed to nervous exhaustion, and given up their positions in his church, owing to the incessant harrying—the word is not mine; I merely quote the irreverent persons aforesaid—to which they were subjected by the reverend gentleman's energetic surveillance in the discharge of their parish duties. Mr. Fluke was a widower, with seven daughters, whose ages ranged from two-and-thirty to sixteen, all unmarried, and all inheriting more or less their father's unflagging vigour of constitution. These young ladies threw themselves into the business of doctoring the souls and bodies of their father's

parishioners, with characteristic and unwearying activity. Miss Fluke, the eldest, was especially indefatigable in her attention to Sunday schools, class meetings, Bible readings, the practice of congregational psalmody—of so severe a character, that the most censorious worldling could not accuse Miss Fluke of getting up her bi-weekly singing class for the vain purpose of giving pleasure to any created being—and last, and most important of all, district visiting. This was an occupation dear to Miss Fluke's heart; and as the parish of St. Philip-in-the-Fields was large, poor, and populous, she had an extended sphere for the labour which she performed entirely *con amore*. Her curiosity about the affairs of the parishioners (dictated, no doubt, by interest in their spiritual welfare) was insatiable. The stoutest Hammerham housewives—and Hammerham housewives are not remarkable, as a class, for sensitiveness or over-refinement—sometimes found themselves no match for the well-directed unflinching fire of questions with which Miss Fluke plied them, in the course of her evangelical investigations. You could not shame Miss Fluke out of anything; and in this superiority to the weaknesses of her unconverted fellow-creatures lay, perhaps, at once her weapon and her shield.

Mr. Saxelby having been known for many years previous to his marriage as a constant and attentive member of the congregation of St. Philip's it was natural that he should be held in high favour by the Flukes, and that the ladies of that family should have endeavoured to cultivate the acquaintance of Mrs. Saxelby and Mabel. They had not prospered very well in this endeavour; finding Mrs. Saxelby far below their standard of zeal;—"lukewarm," Miss Fluke pronounced briefly;—and Mabel, given to disconcerting repartee and argument when pushed too hard on points of low-church doctrine of practice. Disconcerting, that is to say, to one or two of the younger girls. Miss Fluke was never disconcerted by anything or anybody. Mr. Saxelby, however, strongly encouraged an intimacy between his family and the Misses Fluke; and his wife, in her usual spirit of conformity endeavoured to make herself as agreeable to those ladies as the imperfect state of her spiritual development would permit.

On the day following the evening spoken of in the last chapter, Miss Fluke and her third sister, Jane, made an afternoon visit to the inmates of Jessamine Cottage. Afternoon visits were not much in Miss Fluke's way generally; she looked on such formalities as vanity and waste of time; saying in her trenchant manner, "That she had no leisure for such observances, but that all Christians friends who had, would find her at home on Friday afternoons with her sewing-basket, when they could listen to her conversation, and satisfy themselves of her perfect health, without taking up valuable hours which should be devoted to the 'Lord's work.'" The work which Miss Fluke thus designated, was, on Fridays, the construction of very coarse and very scanty garments—chiefly of flannel—for the poor. But on this especial afternoon Miss Fluke and Miss Jane Fluke did make a call at Jessamine Cottage, and finding the Saxelbys at their early dinner, sat down very willingly to partake of it with them.

"The labourer," said Miss Fluke, holding her plate for another slice of beef, "is worthy of his hire."

"True, indeed," returned Mr. Saxelby, "and you, my dear Miss Fluke, are indefatigable in the vineyard. Mabel, help Miss Fluke to potatoes."

Mr. Saxelby was a short spare man, so upright as to give the idea that his back was supported by artificial means, and he walked, and moved, and spoke, with a sort of metallic snap.

"It's a stubborn soil, Mr. Saxelby," said Miss Fluke, "and requires the ploughshare to go deep, deep, deep."

Miss Jane sighed, and murmured, "deep, deep, deep." She had a way of repeating her sister's last word; this being, indeed, her only chance of joining in the conversation at all, when Miss Fluke was fairly launched on one of her favorite parish topics.

"Now, this very day," resumed the latter, "I've been district visiting for Eliza. Her beat is quite separate from mine, and really I have not time to take any extra duty. Only, Eliza is laid up with a cold, and the other girls' lists are all full. So, of course, I would not withdraw my neck from the yoke, nor turn back from the narrow path, however thorny."

"Thorny," said Miss Jane, pouring some cream over her fruit tart.

"Now Mrs. Saxelby," said Miss Fluke, turning on her hostess with such suddenness as to make that lady drop her fork with a clash, "why don't you come back to us? We want recruits. You had half a district with Loui last summer. Why abandon the good work? Remember, you will have to give an account of your talent, even though you bury it in a napkin."

Miss Fluke shook her head so emphatically that the jet flowers in her bonnet quivered again. She usually wore black. No one quite knew why. Possibly because it had a good lugubrious effect by a sick-bed, and attuned the patient's mind to thoughts of a becomingly gloomy nature. Or, she may have worn black as mourning for the sins of her neighbours.

"My dear Miss Fluke," said Mrs. Saxelby, smiling faintly, and looking helplessly at her husband, "I assure you I have no talent—"

"We all have talents in the Scripture sense, Mrs. Saxelby," interrupted Miss Fluke.

"Yes, of course. But I mean that I really am not fit for the work. My health is not strong; and then I have no influence whatsoever over the people. They frighten me."

"I think," said Mr. Saxelby, "I do think, that my wife is not quite adapted for district visiting. It requires stamina."

The Misses Fluke looked at each other with a significant smile, and nodded their heads. It had been found, indeed, on several occasions, that considerable stamina was required on the part of the visited, as well as the visitors: Miss Fluke's religious exercises being of a fatiguing, not to say exhausting kind.

"Be it so," said Miss Fluke, with the air of making a great concession, and scorning to take any credit for it. "But there are other branches, Dorcas meetings, Bible class, catechism class, hymn class, missionary collections, clothing committees, tract distribution. Come, Mrs. Saxelby, you cannot plead incompetency for all."

"Really, I—I don't know," stammered the poor little woman, colouring painfully, and feeling very much inclined to cry. "I'm so afraid to interfere with people, and have so little confidence in my own power to comfort them, or do any good."

"Comfort them!" cried Miss Fluke.

"Comfort them!" echoed her sister.

"You—must—awake—them—to—a—sense—of—sin. That's the one thing needful, Mrs. Saxelby. Comfort's of no use to them until they've got a sense of sin. It's a snare and a delusion—a folding of hands to slumber."

Mabel, who had been sitting silently attentive, turned upon Miss Fluke, who was quite red in the face from the strength of her emphasis, and was about to make some rejoinder; but she caught her mother's imploring glance, and refrained. Miss Fluke, however, had perceived the movement of Mabel's head, and took the opportunity of addressing her, to ask why she