

Charlewoods with surprise: though each member of the family received the news in a different manner, according to his or her peculiar character. Mrs. Charlewood, as became a devout Flukeite, expressed much grief and horror; though the real, kind motherly heart of the woman occasionally asserted itself in such exclamations as, "Well, I do 'ope Mabel may think botter of it in time, and find a good 'usband to take care of her!" or, "There! I don't know whether it's wicked, but I can't 'elp wishing her success. 'Eaven forgive me!" Augusta professed languidly that, though of course it was very shocking, she for her part was not so much astonished as the rest, and that she had long been of opinion that such outrageous and improper conduct must be the natural result of strong-mindedness, and the setting up of one's own judgment against that of the people whose legitimate business it was to do all the thinking. Walter shrugged his shoulder at his sister, and lounging out of the room, opined that Miss Earnshaw would make a "stunning actress," and that he would certainly go and see her, if ever he had the opportunity. Whereupon Miss Fluke groaned audibly.

Penelope always found Miss Fluke intensely irritating, and it seemed as if Miss Fluke's presence excited her scornful spirit of contradiction to its highest pitch. Albeit, she remained quite silent during Miss Fluke's very long and elaborate description of her interview with Mrs. Saxelby at Hazlehurst, and her solemn and emphatic announcement of the appalling fact that Mabel "actually had an aunt who was a player, and that she had been brought up amongst those kind of people from childhood!"

"What a shame of Mrs. Saxelby to keep it so quiet! She never used to say a word about her family!" exclaimed Augusta. "I call it getting into people's houses on false pretences."

Penelope turned on her sister with a sudden flash that was like the dart of a panther. "Mrs. Saxelby would probably have had no objection to speak of the position of her family connexions, Augusta, had she not thought it might have seemed like boasting, to us."

"Boasting?"

"Certainly. Mrs. Saxelby was always very nice and good natured; but she knew perfectly well that our revered grandfather had carried a hod."

Augusta coloured high with spite and vexation.

"Really, Penny," she said, flouncing up from her chair, "you are too absurd. Comparing us with—I won't stay to hear such things said!" Miss Augusta's rich silk dress trailed and rustled on the floor.

"Umpl!" said Penelope, contemptively leaning her chin on her hand. "How queer it all is, ain't it? Augusta is haughty enough for a duchess, and handsome enough for two duchesses. I'd back her for beauty and impertinence against Lady Clara Vere de Vere herself. And yet, you know, our grandfather *did* carry a hod, Miss Fluke!"

At dinner that evening none of the family alluded to the news. The cloud had not yet sufficiently cleared from Mr. Charlewood's brow to make his wife and children as much at their ease in his presence as formerly; and what little conversation passed between them was carried on almost in whispers. Clement, too, looked ill and anxious; and Penelope wondered in her own mind, as she observed his pale face and abstracted manner, whether he had heard of Mabel's design and whether his dejection might not possibly be traceable to his knowledge of it. "I can't quite make Clement out," said Miss Charlewood to herself, as she watched her brother across the dinner-table. "At one time I thought it was a mere passing fancy that would die a natural death very comfortably; but now—I don't know—I'm afraid there's something more in it. Poor dear old Clem."

If Penelope Charlewood had what is called a soft place in her heart at all, it was occupied by her brother Clement. Later in the evening, when tea was brought into the drawing-room, and he had seated himself apart from the rest in a secluded corner of the large room, with a book in

his hand, Penelope brought him a cup of tea, and then seating herself beside him, said in a low voice:

"We have heard some odd news to-day, Clem. Perhaps you know it already. Mabel Earnshaw is going on the stage."

Clement looked up, and the colour mounted to his brow, as he asked sharply.

"Who says so?"

"Miss Fluke says so. She came here to-day, fully primed and loaded with the tidings."

"Confound that woman! She is the most intolerable and meddling fool in Hammerham. I wish to God some man would marry her, and take her away!"

"Oh, Clem!" cried his sister. "What an awful wish against some man! But is it true about Mabel?"

"I wish with all my soul, I could say no, Penny. But I by no means tell you that is a certain fact. Will you, to oblige me, refrain from repeating this tattle—at all events, until it is confirmed past doubt."

For once in her life, Penelope checked the sharp speech that rose to the tip of her tongue. Clement's earnest pleading look went to her heart, and called up a remembrance of some childish trouble they had shared and surmounted together. She gave him her hand, and watched him, as he left the room, with eyes that were veiled with unaccustomed moisture.

"Poor Clem! Poor dear old boy! He is the very best fellow in all the world; and if it could make him happy, I almost wish—"

What Miss Charlewood almost wished, she did not distinctly tell herself on that occasion, for she brought her meditations to an abrupt termination with an impatient shake of her head; and, opening the piano, rattled off a brilliant set of variations with a clear metallic touch and a rapid finger.

CHAPTER VIII. CLEMENT COMES FOR HIS ANSWER.

A first declaration of love! Whenever Mabel had indulged in day-dreams, it had always seemed to her that the first utterance of words of love in her ear, must surely fill the whole world with a sort of glamour; that some mysterious and delightful revolution would take place in her being; and that, as the poets sing, the sky would appear bluer, the sun brighter, and all the world more beautiful.

These marvels were to come of course, on the hypothesis that she too would love, and that her maiden affection, lying coyly within her heart of hearts, like a shut lily, would give forth all its hidden sweetness at the warm pleading of the beloved one, even as a bud is wooed by the sunbeams into a perfect flower.

Mabel was only seventeen, and the practical good sense and clear-sightedness of her character were oddly blended with an innocent romance, such has might have belonged to a princess in a fairy tale. Poor Mabel!

When she awoke on the morning after her mother's visit to Eastfield, roused by the toneless clangour of a cracked bell, she found no magic glamour on the earth, no deeper azure in the sky, no added glory in the sunshine. There was the mean bar breakfast room. There was the morning psalm read aloud by Mrs. Hatchett, on a system of punctuation peculiar to herself, which consisted in making a full stop at the end of each verse, whatever its sense might be. There was Miss Dobbin; there was the ugly Swiss governess; there was the same old dreary round to toil through, that there had been yesterday, and that there would be to-morrow.

Stay though! Not quite the same, for to-day was Sunday, and though Mabel had to accompany the children to church in the morning and afternoon, the evening hours would be her own. None but those who have been subjected, perforce, to the close companionship of utterly uncongenial minds, can conceive the sense of positive refreshment that fell upon Mabel when she found herself alone: alone and unmolested, in her bedroom, with two clear hours before her to employ as she would.

"Is it all real?" she said to herself, as she sat down on her bed in the chill garret, with a

shawl wrapped round her. "Is it real? I must think."

Her interview with Clement had been so strange and hurried, his declaration so unexpected, and her own agitation so excessive that at first she had only felt stunned and bewildered, and, as she had told Clement, "very sorry." But by degrees a clear remembrance of what had passed came into her mind. His look, his words, the touch of his hand—she recalled them all vividly.

"He said, 'I love you. I love you with my whole heart!'"

She whispered the words in the silence of the room; but, softly as she breathed them out, their sound made the eloquent blood rise in her cheek, and she put her hands before her face, as though there were a prying witness present.

If she believed Clement's words, she owed it to him to examine her own heart and give him the innermost truth that it contained. But to find that truth! Ah, that was difficult. How different it all was from any love-story she had ever pictured to herself.

Suddenly a thought pierced her heart like a swift sharp knife. What would Mr. Charlewood say? What would Penelope say? They would accuse her of having sought Clement, or laid traps for him, or of stooping to scheme and plot for the honour of an alliance with the Charlewood family. Mabel sprang to her feet, and paced up and down the room.

"I will go to my own people. I will follow my own path. I will show that I can reject vulgar wealth, and despise vulgar pride. There is a world outside their narrow limits—a world of art and poetry and imagination, which they can none of them conceive or comprehend. He is good and kind, but he cannot understand me." The hot tears were streaming unchecked down her face. "I do not love him. I am sure now, that I do not love him. I will work and strive for mamma and Dooley; and, if I fail, they will not love me the less!"

Penelope had been thoroughly right in her judgment, when she counselled her father to rely on Mabel Earnshaw's pride as his surest ally.

Mabel stopped at length in her restless pacing, and, going to her trunk, unlocked it, and drew forth a dingy, battered, precious little Shakespeare.

At first, she could scarcely fix her attention on the words before her. But soon the spell mastered her. She yielded herself up to it with all the enthusiasm of a nature peculiarly susceptible of such influences. And the spirit of poetry bore her up on its strong wings, above the dust and clash and turmoil of this work-a-day world. She came back with a mind refreshed and strengthened, as a healthy intellect must ever be by the legitimate exercise of its imaginative faculties, and with a spirit calmed and braced. She wrote to her aunt Mary, and despatched the letter to the care of the person mentioned by Mr. Trescott, and then waited with that patience she might for the result.

A week, which seemed to Clement the longest he had ever passed in his life, went by before he was able to return to Eastfield. But at length one morning Mabel was summoned from her post beside the jingling superannuated pianoforte, to Mrs. Hatchett's private parlour. She knew perfectly well who had come to speak with her; and though she had been preparing herself for the interview, and had conjured up a hundred times in her own mind the words that she would say, yet she felt as she approached the parlour that her thoughts were scattered, and that her spirits were as much agitated as on that memorable night.

"Come in, Miss Earnshaw, if you please. Here is a gentleman who desires to speak with you."

Mr. Hatchett waved her hand towards Clement Charlewood, who stood beside the fireplace.

Mabel was white, but betrayed no other sign of emotion, and greeted Clement quietly.

"Mr. Charlewood," continued Mrs. Hatchett, referring ostentatiously to a card she held in her hand, "tells me that he is an old friend of your