

incense of praise, and the triumphant music of applause. She was but seventeen, and in spite of all her practical sense and severe repression of too sanguine hopes, there were moments when her youth asserted its rich privilege of building fairy castles in the air. But the castles, however stately, were always peopled by those she loved.

As the last days of the holidays drew nigh, Mabel studied hard, making the most of the few precious hours of freedom that remained to her, before the weary round of school-life should recommence. She had studied herself nearly perfect in Juliet, and was in the habit of reciting long passages from the play aloud at night, until, in her enthusiasm, she would be startled by the sound of her own voice raised in passionate entreaty or vehement grief, and ringing through the desolate house.

One night—the last before the girls came back—she began, while undressing, to repeat the long soliloquy that precedes Juliet's drinking of the sleeping potion. As she spoke the thrilling words in which the love-sick girl breathes out the terrors that crowd upon her fancy, she seemed to see the lofty antique chamber into which darted one blue streak of bright Italian moonlight, the dark shadow-haunted recesses of the spacious room, the dagger with rich handle and sharp blade, the little phial on whose mysterious aid her fate depended. And then she conjured up the appalling picture of the silent stone-cold sepulchre,

The horrible conceit of death and night,
Together with the terror of the place.

and all the ghastly remnants of mortality. The unquiet spirit of the murdered Tybalt glided by, seeking Romeo, with an awful frown upon its death-pale face, and with a stifled shriek she raised the potion to her lips, and dashing herself down, fell—not on Juliet's couch, but, from the enchanted realms of poetry, down to Mrs. Hatchett's establishment for young ladies at Eastfield. With a heart yet beating fast, and nerves all quivering with emotion, Juliet transformed crept shivering into bed.

CHAPTER III. MRS SAXELBY TAKES COUNSEL.

The receipt of Mabel's letter threw Mrs. Saxelby into a state of considerable agitation. It did not come upon her with the shock of a surprise. She had known, from the tone of the very first letters from Eastfield, that her child was unhappy in Mrs. Hatchett's house, and that the school could not be of such a class as to give any credentials worth having, to a teacher coming out of it. Mrs. Saxelby was weak and selfish, but she had her share of maternal love—of that love which is inseparable from self-sacrifice in some shape. Had it been merely her desire set against Mabel's, she might have yielded without a struggle. But she was a woman whose opinions (if not her tastes) were absolutely the echo of the opinions of those around her. During the past five years she had relied on Benjamin Saxelby's judgment, and had adopted his views. And how unhesitatingly he would have condemned such a scheme as Mabel's, she well knew.

Oh for some one to advise her! By this, Mrs. Saxelby meant, some one to say "I command you to do this thing," or, "I tell you to abstain from doing that." She read and re-read her daughter's letter. "How nice it would be," she thought, "if dear Mabel could be rich and happy and prosperous. Dear me, I've been told that some actresses hold quite a position in society. But, of course, if the thing be wrong in itself, that ought not to weigh with me. Yet, I can't feel sure that it is so very wicked. Philip did not think so, and Mary Walton made his brother an excellent wife. But, then Benjamin thought it most dangerous and improper for Mabel to remain in her home; not that I believe she ever learned anything but good there. Oh dear, oh dear! I wish I knew what to do. I suppose I cannot forbid her writing to her aunt in any case. And perhaps after all, something may happen to prevent her attempting this scheme."

It is no disparagement to Mrs. Saxelby to admit that she certainly did feel the chance of

a comfortable home for herself, and education for Dooley, twatching at her, as a strong temptation. Her life at Hazelhurst was utterly dull and colourless, and she missed Mabel every hour.

The one day in the week that brought her a glimpse of cheerfulness was Sunday. When the weather did not make it absolutely impossible, there was the morning walk to church with Dooley (who had become quite a regular attendant there, and had made the personal acquaintance of the mild old clergyman in the silver-rimmed spectacles). Then, on Sunday afternoons, Clement Charlewood was a frequent visitor. He walked or rode over to Hazelhurst nearly every week, and Dooley never failed to find in a certain outside pocket of his coat a packet of sweetmeats, the discovery of which occasioned ever new delight and surprise. Did Mrs. Saxelby ever entertain any idea that Clement's frequent visits were not made quite disinterestedly? She used to maintain, afterwards, that she had always suspected that he came as much to hear of Mabel as to see herself. But I am inclined to think that she was mistaken there.

On the Sunday afternoon after the receipt of Mabel's letter enclosing little Corda's note, the hoofs of Clement's horse were heard clattering sharply on the hard frosty road. Dooley, stationed at the parlour window with a big illustrated Bible, the pictures in which formed his Sunday diversion, announced that "Mr. Tarlewood was tummin'," and ran to the door to meet him.

"I am riding on to leave Duchess at the inn, Mrs. Saxelby," called Clement, lifting his hat as he saw her at the window. "May I take Dooley so far with me? I undertake to bring him back safely."

Dooley, having received permission to go, rushed into the house again, and had his hat stuck on his head all askew by Betty, whose eyes were occupied in staring at Mr. Charlewood and his steed; then she wrapped the child in a warm shawl of his mother's and lifted him on to the saddle before Clement. Dooley's little pink legs protruded from his bundle of wraps, and stuck out horizontally on either side of the horse. As his hat was all awry, so his flaxen curls were dishevelled and waving. But he looked supremely happy as he grasped the bridle with little frost-reddened fingers, and incited Duchess to put forth her mettle by many imperious gees and shouts of "Tum up! Do along, Dutsess!" and several strenuous though unsuccessful efforts to make a clicking noise with his tongue.

As Mrs. Saxelby watched this from the window, and marked the kind smile on Clement's face as he held the little fellow in his protecting arm, a sudden impulse came into her heart to take counsel with Clement touching Mabel's letter. "He is a very clever man of business, and he is fond of Mabel and of all of us, and he will be able to advise me," thought the poor weak little woman.

When Clement and Dooley returned on foot, having left Duchess in a warm stable at the inn, Mrs. Saxelby received them in the little parlour. She had a bright fire in the grate, and the aspect of the room was pleasant and cozy. Clement wondered to himself, as he sat down beside the clean hearthstone, what it was that gave to that poor meanly furnished little room an atmosphere of peace and comfort such as he never found in any of the rich rooms at Bramley Manor. The cottage at Hazelhurst he felt to be a home, whereas Bramley Manor was only a very handsome house. The difference, though undefinably subtle, was quite appreciable.

"And how is Miss Earnshaw?" said Clement, stroking Dooley's curls. "I hope you continue to have good news of her?"

"Thank you, she is not ill."

There was a tremor in Mrs. Saxelby's voice, and a stress on the last word, that caused Clement to look up quickly.

"You have heard nothing disagreeable, I trust?"

"N—no; that is to say—I wonder if you would mind my reposing a great confidence in

you, Mr. Charlewood? I have no right to ask it, but I should be so grateful for your advice."

"A great confidence implies a great responsibility," returned Clement, gravely. "It was his character to be earnest and to take things seriously; and the bound his heart gave at Mrs. Saxelby's words—suggestive of some revelation regarding Mabel—made him change colour for the moment.

"I repeat, I have no right to burden you with any responsibility," said Mrs. Saxelby, meekly. "But I—I—feel towards you almost as to a son."

Clement flushed, and pressed Dooley's curly head so hard that the child winced.

"Dooley my boy, I beg your pardon. Did I hurt you?" asked Clement, somewhat confused.

"Oo did hurt me, but 'oo is very sorry," returned Dooley, endeavouring to combine candour with courtesy.

"Dear Mrs. Saxelby," said Clement, earnestly, "pray do not suppose that I have any selfish dread of responsibility. I am very sensible of your kindness and confidence. Only I doubted whether you might not have found a more competent counsellor. One who has a higher regard for you and yours, I do not think you would find easily. Was it something concerning Miss Earnshaw that you wished to say to me?"

"Yes. I received a letter from her on Friday morning. I am afraid she is very far from contented in Eastfield."

"I dot a letter from Tibby, too!" said Dooley, triumphantly.

"Yes, my darling. Go and tell Betty to wash your hands and face and brush your hair, and then you may bring your letter to show to Mr. Charlewood. I don't like," added Mrs. Saxelby, as the child left the room, "to speak before him. He is very quick, and his attachment to his sister is so strong, that I really believe, baby though he is, it would break his heart to think she was unhappy."

"But I hope, Mrs. Saxelby, that there is nothing serious."

"Ah, but there is, though. Something very serious. There! Read that letter, and tell me your opinion."

Mrs. Saxelby experienced a little trepidation as she gave Mabel's letter into the young man's hand, and felt that she had taken an irrevocable step. Clement read the letter steadily through, and the long sigh of relief that he drew at its close, came upon him almost as a revelation. The news was very annoying, very distressing, but—it was not hopeless, not irremediable. What revelation regarding Mabel had he feared, which would have seemed to him so much harder to bear? He did not answer the question even to himself, but he knew in the moment when he laid the letter down, that he loved her with all the strength of his heart, and that he would henceforth bend the powers of his will and energy to the endeavour of winning her to be his wife.

"You don't speak, Mr. Charlewood."

"I am not sure that I thoroughly understand the contents of this letter. But I suppose I have guessed their meaning pretty accurately. I presume that the career to which Miss Earnshaw alludes as having been her dream for so long, is—is—the stage?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Saxelby. "Now the truth is out. The Aunt Mary she speaks of in her letter, is an actress. We never mentioned that part of the family during Mr. Saxelby's lifetime, for he had a very strong objection to—" Mrs. Saxelby finished the sentence in her pocket-handkerchief.

"Not an unreasonable objection, I think," said Clement, almost sternly.

"You think so? You really think so? But you ought to understand, Mr. Charlewood, that my sister-in-law has been an excellent wife and mother. Quite exemplary, and"—Mrs. Saxelby blushed a little—"and she was very kind and good to me, and to my fatherless little girl. Mabel was almost brought up in her uncle's family."

"Do I understand," said Clement, "that you are asking my advice as to your answer to Miss Earnshaw's letter?"