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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 287.

### CHAPTER VII. THE STORMY PETREL OF PRIVATE LIFE.

A day or two subsequent to Mrs. Saxelby's visit to her daughter at Eastfield, the family at Bramley Manor was visited by a domestic storm, which, though leading to no serious immediate result, was the cause of a great deal of pain and anger, and left behind it an amount of heart-burning and soreness, which only a family quarrel can produce.

The Honourable Arthur Skidley's regiment being ordered away from Hammerham, and that gentleman's consequent departure being imminent, it became necessary for Walter Charlewood to reveal to his father the amount of the debt he had incurred, and to prefer a request for a considerable sum of money. Mr. Charlewood was a very wealthy man, and—as may usually be observed of men whose business renders their income more or less elastic—he spent his wealth with a liberal hand. Among the luxuries he desired for himself and his children, was the society of persons superior by birth or rank to themselves. And he had an unexpressed but decided notion that this, like other good things, was to be attained by a judicious expenditure of cash. Still, the magnitude of the sum he was now called on to advance, so far exceeded his estimate of the value received, that he began to discover that the acquaintance of even so dashing and aristocratic a personage as the younger son of Lord Higsworth might be purchased too dearly.

"I won't pay it, sir," he had said in the first moment of his anger and surprise. "I won't advance a farthing."

"It's a debt of honour, father. I shall be disgraced."

"Then be disgraced," Mr. Charlewood had retorted, adding, in the heat of his wrath, a recommendation to his son to be something else also for his folly. But, of course, he knew very well that he must and that he would pay Walter's debts for him. He grumbled to his wife, telling her that Watty's reckless and selfish extravagance was all owing to her weak indulgence. He scolded Augusta into a fit of the sulks, when she ventured to ask some question as to the offence her brother had committed, he even snubbed his favourite Penelope, in the extremity of his ill-humour and vexation. In short, for more than a week, black looks and sharp speeches were very rife in Bramley Manor, and Walter—his jaunty-self confidence utterly subdued for once—sneaked about the house like a whipped schoolboy, avoiding his father's eye, and creeping surreptitiously at unaccustomed hours into his mother's boudoir to be patted and consoled, and to have the ruffled plumes of his self-love gently smoothed by caressing fingers.

It was a peculiarity of Miss Fluke that she invariably appeared among her friends whenever foul weather seemed to be imminent in the domestic sky, scenting the approach of tempest by some fine instinct, and hovering over the angry billows like a stormy petrel.

Miss Fluke came to Bramley Manor, and had not been closeted ten minutes with Mrs. Charlewood before the latter had revealed to her, with many lamentations, and considerable use of her pocket-handkerchief, the story of Walter's troubles, and his father's stern displeasure.

"Charlewood was 'arsh, I consider. Very 'arsh. Of course I know Watty ought to have spoken sooner. But law, there! Who can wonder? Young men will be young men, and Watty has never been accustomed to think anything about money. 'Owver, 'is father 'as paid the debt, and I suppose he'll come round in time. A 'undred or two. Nothing to Charlewood. He'll never miss 'em."

Miss Fluke shook her head with much severity.

"Dear Mrs. Charlewood," she said, "ought we not to look upon this in the light of a judgment?"

"A judgment! Goodness me, Miss Fluke!" "Yes, it shows what comes of worldliness, and pleasure-seeking, and the society of the ungodly. I have a very interesting little tract here which is full of precious experiences. Do you think Walter would read it, if I left it for him?"

"I—don't—know," said Mrs. Charlewood, doubtfully.

"Well, there it is, at all events. I'll put it on your table. The incidents relate to a little boy of five years old (the child of a drunken cobbler), who got conversion and became quite a little saint on earth. It is called *The Little Soul's Punctuation, or A Full-Stop for Small Sinners*. It applies very well indeed to Walter's case, and would do him great good if he'd be persuaded to read it in a proper spirit."

"Thank you, Miss Fluke," said Mrs. Charlewood, with a shade of offence in her manner, "but I think you make rather too much of Watty's little error. He has a lively disposition, has Watty. Quite lively. 'Igh his spirit may be, and 'aughty. But his 'art is right."

To do Miss Fluke justice, she was no respecter of persons, and had no more idea of sparing the rich Mrs. Charlewood than the poorest inhabitant of her father's parish. She therefore at once opened fire, bringing all her big guns to bear on her hostess, and sending such a broadside of texts about her ears, that poor Mrs. Charlewood's round red cheek grew pale as she listened, and she was thankful when Augusta's entrance into the room created a diversion.

"Have you heard," said Miss Fluke, turning to Augusta with a sudden pointing movement, "have you heard about Mabel Earnshaw?" Miss Fluke's eyes were opened to their full extent and she glared ominously, first at Mrs. Charlewood and then at her daughter.

"No," replied Augusta, languidly sticking a needle into some wool-work, and apparently finding it necessary to repose a while before pulling it out again, "I never hear anything about her now."

"What is it about Mabel?" asked Mrs. Charlewood. "No bad news, I 'ope."

"Awful," returned Miss Fluke, concentrating an incredible amount of moral reprobation into her utterance of the word, and performing an elaborate and vigorous shudder: "most awful."

"Lord bless my soul!" exclaimed Mrs. Charlewood.

"Oh, if it's anything horrid, don't tell me, please," said Augusta, putting her jewelled fingers in her ears. "I can't bear hearing horrid things."

"As any accident 'appened?" said Mrs. Charlewood.

"Unless a merciful Providence turns her heart, Mabel Earnshaw is going to perdition headlong," was Miss Fluke's warning reply. To go headlong to perdition did not, however, appear to belong, in Miss Augusta's estimation, to the category of "horrid things." She immediately took her fingers out of her ears, and prepared herself to listen with composure.

"Dear Miss Fluke," said Mrs. Charlewood, with her hand on her side, "I declare you've given me quite a turn. Well, there! I should be awfully sorry if any 'arm 'appened to Mabel Earnshaw. She used to be a great favourite of mine; and I can't bear to drop folks, and turn my back on 'em so coolly as some people."

Augusta faintly raised her handsome eyebrows, and tossed her head, but took no further notice of her mother's implied rebuke.

"Well," said Miss Fluke, "I have to tell you what you'll hardly credit, but what is true. Mabel Earnshaw is going——" here Miss Fluke suddenly changed her tone, and uttered the three last words of her speech very rapidly in a loud distinct whisper, "going—ON THE STAGE."

Then she sat back in her chair, and contemplated her hearers, with her arms folded tightly across her breast.

"No?" exclaimed Mrs. Charlewood. Miss Fluke made no verbal reply, but nodded five or six times with extraordinary vehemence.

"How absurd," said Miss Augusta. "But I don't know that I'm very much surprised. Mabel was getting queerer and queerer lately, and besides, you know, she never was quite like other people."

"Dear me! How I should like to have known her, whoever she was," cried Penelope, appearing at the door, attired for walking, and accompanied by her brother Walter. "How d'ye do, Miss Fluke? Do tell me, Gussy, who was that delightful individual who never was quite like other people." She—I think I heard you say she—must have been a refreshing creature."

"Oh, I dare say you'll think her latest craze all right and charming. Very likely. I was speaking of Mabel Earnshaw, and she is going on the stage, that's all," rejoined Augusta, coolly.

"What! cried Miss Charlewood, fairly startled, for the instant, out of her self-possession (a rare circumstance with her), and dropping into a chair. "Mabel going on the stage! I don't believe it."

"I grieve to assure you that it is too, too, too, too true," said Miss Fluke. "I know it for a fact, on the best authority."

"Oh, that of course," replied Penelope, with very unceremonious brusquerie. "People always know things on the best authority. But who told you?"

"Well, Miss Charlewood, since you ask me, I am bound to tell you that it was—her own mother!" Miss Fluke brought out this last revelation as if it were the crowning horror of the business.

"I wonder why in the world Mrs. Saxelby should have thought of telling you such a thing?" said Penelope.

The speech was not a polite one; but Miss Fluke was quite impervious to its discourtesy.

"The fact is," she replied, looking round with severe gravity upon her auditors, "I asked her."

Miss Fluke had asked Mrs. Saxelby as to her daughter's intention of becoming an actress, and had, moreover, made a pilgrimage to Hazlehurst for the express purpose of so doing. Mrs. Hutchins, by dint of prying and listening to her lodgers' conversation, had arrived at some suspicion of the truth. She had discovered from Corda that Miss Earnshaw had relations on the stage. She had concluded at once that the letter with the Eastfield post-mark, addressed to Mr. Treccott, was from Miss Earnshaw. And partly for the gratification of her own curiosity, and partly to carry favour with Miss Fluke, had ventured to that lady most of what she knew and guessed.

Miss Fluke's account of Mrs. Saxelby's full admission of her daughter's intention, filled the