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## MABEL'S PROGRESS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "AUNT MARGARET'S TROUBLE."

From "All the Year Round,"

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

### BOOK I.

#### CHAPTER I. A DRIVE IN HAMMERHAM.

A BRIGHT September sun was shinin' over the great midland town of Hammerham. Every dingy brick and grey flagstone reflected back an oven-like heat. The shining brass plates on the shop-fronts and office-doors dazzled the spectator's eyes like so many burning-glasses, and polished bell-handles and brazen knockers were hot enough to scorch any ungloved fingers that might be applied to them. Notwithstanding the heat and the glare, however, the streets of Hammerham had been thronged from an early hour in the morning by the people of all ranks and classes; and the pavement of the principal thoroughfares was polished by the tread of innumerable feet.

Hammerham was (and is) a great working town. Its tall chimneys puffed forth their clouds of smoke into the upper air as usual; the clang and whirr of wheels had not ceased, and the long rows of factory windows (conventionally called there "shop" windows) still trembled and vibrated to the metallic pulse of machinery. But a stranger, who should have stood at the central point of the town, where several principal streets converge towards the spot on which stands some of its chief public buildings, might have fancied that the busy hives of labour had been emptied of their occupants, and that men, women, and children had unanimously taken holiday and abandoned their toils for the day. Though it was now late in the afternoon, crowds still lingered, with the inexplicable patience that belongs to an assemblage of idle people, outside the wooden barriers erected opposite to the principal entrance of a large building, from the open windows of which rich waves of sound rolled forth into the still autumn air. It was the last day of the great Music Meeting at Hammerham, and the concluding chorus of Handel's Messiah was being sung in presence of a densely packed audience, which filled the spacious hall from floor to ceiling. In their appointed sequence the various instruments and voices took up the noble theme of the final fugue, succeeding each other with an irresistible force and majesty that left an impression on the mind of power and vastness, such as is made by an Atlantic tide rolling grandly in upon some western shore. Peal after peal of harmony shook the air. Higher and higher rose the soaring voices. Fuller and fuller swelled the tones of the instruments until they all met and blended in the massive final chords with an overwhelming volume of sound, through which the mighty pulse of the great organ throbbled tumultuously. There was a moment's silence, then a long-continued hurricane of applause, and the Music Meeting was over. And now the long line of carriages in waiting began to move, and the policemen on duty in the roadway waved their white-gloved hands to bewildered coachmen, and shouted hoarse injunctions to them to "move on," or to "pull up there," or to "keep the line." Behind the barriers erected to prevent the pressure of the crowd from obstructing the approaches to the hall, a sudden movement took place also. The closely packed multitude, who had been standing there for several hours without any symptom of impatience, all at once appeared to be possessed with an overpowering sense of the value of time, and

an unanimous desire to get away from the spot without losing an instant. They consequently hustled, pushed, and struggled, the stronger making their way through the throng by dint of ruthless elbowing and foot-crushing, while the weaker or more timid (a category which in a Hammerham crowd by no means includes a majority of women) were driven hither and thither wavering and staggering, and uttering loud remonstrances against the roughness of their neighbours, but all equally intent on getting away with the greatest possible speed.

A sudden check to the movement of the front ranks of the crowd forced those behind back upon the barriers, at the moment when a lame man, holding by the hand a little girl of some nine or ten years old, made a dart across the roadway from the hall, and endeavoured to dive under the horizontal timbers. He had succeeded in getting just within the paling, dragging the little girl after him, when he was met by the receding wave of crowd, and the child, forcibly separated from him by the pressure, was pushed back into the road, and fell under the wheels of a handsome carriage drawn by two spirited horses.

A cry of horror rose from all who saw the little creature drop. The coachman pulled up with all the force he could, nearly throwing the horses on their haunches, but unable to stop them before one of the front wheels had passed over the child, who lay motionless, close to the hoofs of the plunging and frightened beasts.

A young gentleman instantly sprang down from the box, but before he could reach the child, she had been lifted up in the strong arms of a stalwart policeman, who held her with great gentleness, though in a sort of cool official manner, devoid of any excitement whatsoever.

"Good God!" exclaimed the young gentleman, making his way through the throng, "I hope it's nothing serious. She's—she's not killed, is she?"

For the child's face was still as marble, and almost as white. It was a pretty little face, with delicate features and a mass of thick gold-brown curls falling back from the forehead, as she lay with her head drooping over the policeman's shoulder.

"No, no, sir," rejoined the man who held her "Not killed certainly. She has fainted away. She'd best be took to the hospital at once. A doctor 'ud soon say whether there's any bones broke or not."

Meanwhile the lame man, who had been separated from the child in the crowd, and had been vainly seeking for her, perceived nothing of the accident until he heard the piteous exclamations of the bystanders, and saw the little white face raised up above the crowd. He turned and made for the spot where the child was, with frantic haste, limping along at a surprising speed, and making his way through the thickest of the throng, which opened for him to pass, as though informed by some mysterious means that the child who had been run over belonged to him. He arrived in time to hear the policeman's recommendation. "No!" he panted speaking in a thick voice, and labouring painfully for breath. "No, never! Take her home. Give her to me. She shall not go to the hospital. Corda, Corda, my pretty one! My poor darling!"

Then turning to the late occupant of the carriage, the lame man shook his fist in his face with a frightful oath, and cried frantically that he had murdered the child, and should be brought to justice. And then he fell to moaning and whimpering over the impassive little face that lay still and piteous on the policeman's dark-blue breast.

"Come," said the constable, sternly, "none o' that. The accident's nobody's fault but yours, for leaving a little child like that in such a

crowd. I seen the 'ole affair. If the coachman hadn't pulled up when he did, she'd have been cut in two by the wheels. If you won't let her go to the hospital, you'd better take her home at once and send for a doctor, instead of blubbering and blustering here."

"I am deeply distressed," said the young gentleman, whom the lame man had assailed with such fury, "I am deeply distressed that the accident should have happened; though I cannot think my man to blame. He was not driving carelessly, and the poor little thing was thrown almost under the wheels. But if you will tell me your address, I will put her into the carriage and have her driven home quickly and smoothly."

"Oh yes, yes; let me get out, pray, and put the child in my place," said a sweet trembling voice. The young girl to whom the voice belonged leaned eagerly forward, and made as though she would have opened the carriage door. Two other ladies sat within the vehicle, one, a hard featured, richly dressed young woman, sat very quiet and observant of the scene, the other had thrown herself back in her seat, and put up a pair of daintily gloved hands so as to conceal her face.

The lame man looked from one to another in a helpless way, seeming to be divided between anger against the occupants of the carriage, and apprehension for his daughter. But the policeman, with a muttered expression of his opinion that enough time had been wasted in "jaw" settled the matter by lifting the still insensible child into the carriage, and laying her on the cushions, with her head resting on the lap of the young girl who had spoken. "Now," said he with a highly disapproving glance at the child's father, "look sharp and tell the gentleman's coachman where to drive, and move on there, will you? You're stopping all the line." With these words the guardian of public security resumed his post amidst plunging horses and rolling wheels, directing the confusion with imperturbable self-possession.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the lady who had hidden her face, revealing, as she removed her hands, a countenance of striking beauty; "good Heavens, Penny, what are they doing? Jackson is positively driving off. And this unfortunate but dreadful child! Suppose she should die here! Oh, it's too terrible. Where is Clement? What shall we do?"

"Don't be a fool," rejoined the elder lady, dryly. "Of course Jackson must drive off. We couldn't stay here all day. I suppose they have told him where the child's house is. Some back slum, no doubt. I don't understand why they could not have put her into a cab. But it's one of Clem's ideas."

She spoke with a hard repulsive manner, and her small steel-bright eyes and projecting chin were not pleasant to look upon. Nevertheless, she bent forward and spread her handkerchief over the little curly head that lay bare to the scorching sunshine.

The young girl on whose knees the child rested looked up with eyes full of tears. She was a very young girl, not more, apparently, than sixteen years of age, and she was trembling and pale. "Oh, poor little dear," she said, softly. "Is she not a sweet-looking little creature, Miss Charlewood? Look at her poor pretty curls all soiled with dust. Oh, I do hope she is not seriously hurt."

The carriage had now got clear of the crush of other vehicles, and the coachman was urging his horses on at a smart pace. Suddenly the beautiful young lady stood up in the carriage, balancing herself with difficulty, and exclaimed imperiously, "Jackson. Stop! stop! Do you hear me? Where are you taking us to? Penny,