

at Mrs. Hatchett's to take Mabel to the hotel, she stepped into it, almost angry with herself at the apprehensive dread she felt. When the fly drew up at the door of the hotel, there stood Clement Charlewood waiting to receive her, and in another minute she had run up-stairs and was clasped in her mother's arms, with Dooley clinging round her.

"Dearest mamma! Darling Dooley! Why, what foolish people we are, all of us," exclaimed Mabel. "Any one would suppose we were quite sorry to see each other! For the tears were standing in her own eyes, and Mrs. Saxelby was wiping hers away. By-and-by, when the first flush had died from Mabel's cheek, her mother noticed that she was pale and hollow-eyed, and that she had grown very thin.

Then Mrs. Saxelby explained that Mr. Charlewood had said he would go and attend to the business which had called him to Eastfield, and would leave her free to speak with her daughter.

"Oh, he is here on business?" said Mabel.

"Well, yes, partly. But it is business that I dare say will all be done in half an hour, he wished to invite Dooley to dinner, and took this opportunity of having us all together."

"Then this is Mr. Julian Saxelby's dinner, is it?" said Mabel, kissing her little brother's curly head.

"Es," replied Dooley, "but it ain't all for me. 'Oo, an' mamma, and Mr. Tarlewood is to have dinner too. I love 'oo, Tibby," added the child, pressing his fair forehead against his sister's breast, and clasping her waist with his arms.

"My own little Dooley! And I love you so, so much. Now sit still there, darling, whilst I talk to mamma."

Dooley was very willing to sit still with Mabel's arms around him, and his head on her breast, and he nestled close up to her.

"Dearest mamma, you did not answer the main point in my letter. I suppose you meant to reply to it by word of mouth?"

Mrs. Saxelby held one of Mabel's hands in her own, and was clasping and unclasping her fingers round it nervously.

"Dear Mabel," she said, "I do hope you'll think better of it. I think it is an altogether mistaken idea. And mind, Mabel! I do not speak on my own unaided judgment."

"On whose, then, mamma?" asked Mabel with a flushed cheek.

"Ah, there, there, there. If you get angry, Mabel, I cannot speak. I shall lose myself directly."

"Not angry, mamma—not angry, but sorry. Why should you not trust your own unaided judgment? And who is there in the world whose opinion I am bound to prefer to yours?"

"Mabel, you know that I cannot rely on my own unaided judgment—I never could. And this, besides, is a matter that requires knowledge of the world and experience."

"Knowledge of what world? The world that I wish to enter, you and I have already some knowledge of. In this matter advisers would probably be more ignorant and inexperienced than we are. Mamma, are we to set aside what we know—what we have proved—in deference to the vague prejudices of other people? Is it reasonable, is it honest?"

Mabel pushed her hair back from her brow with one hand as she spoke, and looked at her mother with kindling eyes. The action had been an habitual one with Mabel's father, and for the moment Mrs. Saxelby seemed to see her first husband's face before her.

"Mabel," she said, with an effort, "listen to me. Don't suppose that I am insensible to the dreariness of your present life. You remember that I never wished you to accept this engagement. The pay seemed to me too miserable, and the work too trying. But it does not follow that you should be tied to this drudgery for life." Mrs. Saxelby recalled Clement's words, and quoted them as accurately as she could.

"To this drudgery, or to another drudgery like to this. It matters very little," answered Mabel. "It's not all for myself, mamma—not even chiefly for myself—that I want to embrace

another career. But, after all, I am I. I cannot be another person. This life is misery to me."

Poor Mrs. Saxelby was terribly puzzled. Her recipe had failed. She had taken advice, and had administered the prescribed remedy to the patient. But the patient tossed it on one side, and would not be persuaded of its virtues. Mrs. Saxelby began to feel rather angry with Clement Charlewood. What was his advice worth? She had followed it, and it had produced no effect.

"My dearest mother, you say you have been taking counsel with some one. With whom?"

"Well, Mabel, Mr. Clement Charlewood has been speaking about your prospects, and—"

"Mr. Clement Charlewood! Surely you have not been taking counsel with him on this matter!"

"Now, Mabel, Mabel, if you are violent it is all over. Yes, I have been taking counsel—in a measure—with Clement Charlewood. Why should I not? He is very clever and very kind."

"Mamma, I am very sorry that you thought fit to speak to him as to my future. However, as it is done, it cannot be undone. But how should Mr. Clement Charlewood be a more competent judge than yourself of the course I propose to follow? You cannot assert that you have any real conviction that a theatrical career implies a vile or a wicked life!"

"Oh, Mabel!"

"I know, dear mother, that such words must sound horribly false in your ears. But yet, that and no other is the plain unvarnished meaning of the people who would dissuade you from allowing me to try it."

"No, no, no, Mabel, not necessarily that. But there are risks, temptations—"

"Temptations! There may be temptations anywhere, everywhere. Here is Eastfield, in Mrs. Hatchett's house, do you know what temptations assail me? No; happily you do not; I would not harass you, and humiliate myself, by writing them. But there is no kind of petty meanness, of small miserable cheater, which is not practised by Mrs. Hatchett. There are temptations held out to me to be false in fifty ways. To connive at over-charges in her accounts, to lie, to cheat."

Mabel walked up and down the room with her hands pressed tightly on her burning temples, and the salt tears trembling in her eyes.

Mrs. Saxelby remained rocking herself to and fro on the sofa, in a state of doubt and bewilderment. With her, the latest speaker was almost always right. And her daughter's influence was fast obliterating the memory of Clement's words of counsel. Suddenly Mabel stopped.

"Do you forbid me," said she, "to write to my aunt?"

Mrs. Saxelby felt relieved. Here was at least a concession that she felt herself at liberty to make. Here was a respite—a putting off of any final decision.

"Certainly you may write to your aunt, Mabel. I never intended to forbid your doing that. I am sure no one can have a higher regard and respect for your aunt than I have. You will see what she says. I believe she will try to dissuade you from your scheme."

"Thanks, mamma. I will write to her. You are not angry with me, my own mother?"

Mrs. Saxelby clasped her daughter in her arms, and kissed her broad open brow again and again.

"I wish I could see you happy, my child," said the poor mother, wistfully.

"I shall be happy—we shall all be happy—as long as we continue to love one another. Only let no one come between us. Let no one come between us. Let us take our own path, and cling together."

CHAPTER VI. MRS. SAXELBY DOZES.

When Clement returned to the hotel at five o'clock, to dinner, he found the mother and daughter listening smilingly to Dooley's elaborate account of all the interesting personages in Hazlehurst. He had already related how the kind old clergyman always spoke to him, and called him a good boy; had sketched vividly several thrilling adventures, in which his

"pussy kitten" and a big dog, belonging to one of the neighbours, played the chief part, and was now deep in the private memoirs of the pig. So they all sat down to dinner in a merrier mood than might have been anticipated.

Clement did not venture to put any questions as to the result of Mrs. Saxelby's interview with her daughter. Mabel's manner to him was still reserved, but kinder than when they had parted. She felt his goodness to her mother, and Dooley's evident fondness for "Mr. Tarlewood," inclined her heart towards him. Mabel had always liked Clement Charlewood, and felt that he was to be relied upon. But her over-sensitive pride had received a wound from Penelope's sharp tongue, that made her still wince when she thought of it, and caused her to guard herself carefully from anything like softness of manner towards Clement.

After dinner, Dooley's health was drunk with all solemnity. Dooley himself standing up in his chair to do honour to the toast, and quaffing a brimming beaker of very weak sherry-and-water—say, water-and-sherry.

There was a cheerful fire on the hearth; the curtains were drawn, the lamp was shaded, and the room looked snug and home-like. Mrs. Saxelby was installed in a large easy-chair, with her feet on a cushion, and Dooley, beginning to show symptoms of sleepiness, curled himself up on the hearth-rug at Mabel's feet, and hid his face in the folds of her dress.

"At what hour does our train start?" asked Mrs. Saxelby.

"I purpose returning by the 8.20 train, if you have no objection," answered Clement. "The next after that, is at midnight, and would be too late."

"Ah! And then we can set down Mabel on our way to the station. There is more than an hour before we need start. How delicious the warmth of the fire is! It makes one quite drowsy."

In fact, after a few desultory attempts at polite conversation, Mrs. Saxelby leaned back in her chair, and slumbered peacefully. Mabel held a slight screen in her hand, to shield her eyes from the glare of the fire, so that her face was partly in shadow, and Clement, sitting on the opposite side of the table, watched her furtively, and admired the delicate turn of the throat, the round graceful head, and the shining gloss of the dark hair lighted up fitfully by red gleams of firelight. But he, too, had noticed that Mabel had grown thin and pale, and that there were dark hollows under her eyes, betokening suffering and weariness.

His heart yearned within him to take the slight girlish creature in his arms, and bid her lay down her load of care and trouble on his breast.

"You see I was right in saying au revoir when we parted, Miss Earnshaw," he said, in a subdued tone.

"Oh, I did not mean by my adieu that I should never see you again, Mr. Charlewood. I simply meant to express that thenceforward our paths in life would be so very different. In that sense our parting was a final one."

"If I believed that, it would be very painful to me. But you would not care?"

Mabel was silent.

"You will perhaps be angry with me, but I cannot help saying how grieved I am to learn from Mrs. Saxelby that you are not happy, here at Eastfield."

"Thank you. I did not expect to be happy here."

"You think, perhaps, that I have no right to enter into such topics with you; but Mrs. Saxelby has thought it well to confide in me. I did not seek her confidence, but I appreciate and respect it. I have not been meddlesome or importunate, believe me, Miss Earnshaw."

"I acquit you of anything of the kind," said Mabel, earnestly. "I am incapable of doing you so much injustice as to suspect you of being meddlesome, Mr. Charlewood."

"Miss Earnshaw!" There was something in his voice, subdued as it was almost to a whisper that startled Mabel, and made her cheek flush deeply. "Miss Earnshaw, I—I wish—I am