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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 255.

CHAPTER II. A JULIET UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

Some six weeks after Mabel had left Hazlehurst, her mother received from her the following letter:

"Eastfield, December 30, 18—.

"Dearest Mamma. My last letter told you so much of my life here that I have little more to say on that score. The work is irksome and incessant; but, for the present, I am well, though when I saw my pale face in the glass last night, I thought I looked quite *old*. What I am chiefly writing about now, is a discovery I made yesterday. You know that I lent Corda Trescott my *Robinson Crusoe*. Well, her father, it seems, brought it back himself; but it was in the first moments of our great sorrow, and I did not think of mentioning the circumstance to you, nor did I open the book. I don't know why I put it in my trunk to bring away, but there I found it when I unpacked my clothes. Last night I came upon the book, which had been lying beside my little desk ever since my arrival at this place, and I opened it mechanically. Between the fly-leaf and the title-page I found the enclosed little note from Corda. Now, dear mamma, I mean to write to the Trescotts to ask for Aunt Mary's address, and then I shall send her a letter, which I will first forward for your perusal. I hope, dear mamma, that you will not oppose my doing so. My life here is wretched; that is the truth. I would keep it from you if there were any hope of an improvement in the state of things, but there is none. As to my profiting by the masters' lessons, that is a farce. I am wasting my life; and for your sake and Dooley's, as well as my own, I feel that I must make an effort another direction. I promised you to give this school-plan a six months' trial, and I will keep my promise; but I am convinced that it will never afford a decent livelihood for myself. How, then, can I hope to do anything for Dooley or for you? Let me have your consent to attempt the career that has been my dream for so long. I think—I believe—I could achieve success; at all events, take my most solemn assurance that I cannot be more miserable in mind than I am here. I grieve—oh how I grieve!—to distress you, darling mother, but I know it is right. Love me, and forgive me, dearest mamma, and kiss my own sweet Dooley's soft cheeks for your ever loving

"MABEL."

The following was Corda's little note enclosed in the letter, and written in a large round childish hand.

"Dear Miss Mabel. I am very obliged to you for lending me this book, and I am very glad to find that Miss Walton is your aunt, for she is a very kind lady, like you, and she gave me the fairy stories and she was very kind to me, and papa knew her in Yorkshur, and please accept my best love from your grateful little friend,

"CORDELIA ALICE MARY TRESCOTT"

Mabel had indeed passed a weary time at Eastfield. The school was by no means a first-class one. A kind of odour of poverty exhaled from the house. Every necessary comfort was pinched and pared down to the narrowest possible dimensions. Mrs. Hatchett, the schoolmistress passed her life in that most depressing of human occupations, a struggle to keep up appearances. Gentility was her Moloch, to whom she offered up such little children as came within

her clutches. Perhaps, however, the parents who sent their children to Mrs. Hatchett's school, were more to blame than that lady herself. Second-rate tradespeople in a small way of business chiefly composed her clientele; and these people expected that their daughters should receive a "genteel" education, at a yearly rate of payment which would scarcely have sufficed to board and lodge them in a thoroughly good and wholesome manner. So the little girls were crammed four into one small sleeping room; and had their stomachs filled with heavy suet-pudding instead of eating nourishing food, and breathing pure air. But they learned to torture a pianoforte, and they had a foreign governess who taught them lady's-maids French with a Swiss accent (though this was of less consequence, as none of the girls were ever able to speak a syllable of the language thus imparted), and their parents flattered themselves that they were doing their duty by them, and giving them a "genteel" education.

The contemplation of this state of things was painful to Mabel's clear sense and upright conscience. But she had little leisure to consider the abstract evils of the case, for the pains and penalties inseparable from a system of hollowness and falsehood pressed very closely upon her.

As she had told her mother, the promise that she should have opportunities of profiting by the lessons of the masters was a mere farce. The literal words of her engagement were, that she should be allowed to devote her "leisure hours" to her own studies. She had no leisure hours. Her days were occupied in an incessant round of drudgery of an almost menial kind. Having arrived at Eastfield so late in the year, it was arranged that she should not return to Hazlehurst for the Christmas holidays. They were not of very long duration in Mrs. Hatchett's establishment, and Mabel did not think herself justified in draining her slender purse by a journey to her home and back again for only a short stay. So she made up her mind to wait until Easter for a sight of her mother and Dooley.

Mrs. Hatchett was not cruel, or malicious, or arrogant, unless driven to those vices by the Moloch whom she worshipped, and to whom she sacrificed herself quite as much as others. But she was covetous, and immeasurably dull.

Mabel passed the Christmas holidays in utter dreariness and desolation; and still that phrase can only, strictly speaking, be applied to the first few days of that period. After a little while, though all the outward circumstances of her life remained unaltered, she discovered a new interest and occupation.

Her discovery of the note in her copy of *Robinson Crusoe* had confirmed a vague impression she had previously entertained, that Corda's kind friend and her Aunt Mary might be one and the same person. It had, moreover, opened a possible channel of communication with her uncle's family. The more she tried to peer into the chances of her future life, the stronger grew her desire to attempt the stage as a profession. The daily pressure of her present existence was squeezing all the buoyancy out of her heart, and she feared, would crush her bodily health. The atmosphere of Mrs. Hatchett's house was slow poison to her.

She had a great enjoyment in dramatic expression. She had a large share of that idiosyncrasy which delights in the portrayal of strong emotion, under the sheltering mask of an assumed individuality. Of her own feelings Mabel was reticent. But she thought she could abandon herself freely in the utterance of Imogen's wifely love, Cordelia's sorrows, or the witty witcheries of Beatrice. She knew something of the seamy side of a player's life, and was not dazzled by that seductive brilliancy of

the footlights which has enchanted so many young eyes. She was devotedly fond of her little brother, and ambitious to obtain for him the education of a gentleman. This motive strengthened her resolution. She would lie awake for hours, painfully considering how it would be possible for her to make a beginning as an actress. It was naturally towards her Aunt Mary that her main hopes and expectations turned. But, in her ignorance of Mrs. Walton's present place of abode, she cast about in her mind to find some practical and immediate object on which to expend her energy. She had the very useful habit of doing, first, the duty that lay nearest to her.

All Mrs. Hatchett's pupils went home for the Christmas holidays with the exception of two little South Americans from Rio Janeiro, who remained at the school. These children were entrusted almost entirely to Mabel's care.

Among the two or three books she had put into her trunk on leaving home, was a pocket Shakespeare:—a little old well-worn edition, in terribly small print, that had belonged to her father. During the holidays, when all the sleeping-rooms were not needed for the children, Mabel enjoyed the luxury of a chamber to herself. On many and many a cold winter's night did the lonely girl sit on the side of her little bed, wrapped in a shawl, and straining her eyes over her Shakespeare, by the dim light of a miserable candle. She was studying the principal female characters in Shakespeare's plays.

Poor Mabel! As she committed to memory, line after line of that noble music whose cadence has so special a charm for the ear, and as she declaimed aloud whole speeches of Portia, Imogen, Cordelia, Rosalind, Juliet, the sordid cares, the monotonous drudgery, the un congenial associations of her life, were all forgotten. *The mean room, with its bare scanty furniture, faded away, and Mabel roamed, in doublet and hose, through the sun-flecked forest of Arden, seeing the mottled deer glance by under the great oaks, and hearing the stream that "brawled along the wood" babble a murmurous accompaniment to the deep voice of the melancholy Jaques, or Touchstone's dry satiric laughter. Or, she walked through the quaint mazes of a garden in Messina, and sitting bidden in the*

*pleached bower,
Where honeysuckles ripened by the sun,
Forbid the sun to enter,*

listened with a "fire in her ears" to Ursula and Hero discoursing of the Signior Benedick and her disdainful self.

Or, she paced the stately halls of Belmont; or, stood before the choleric old King, to speak Cordelia's simple truths and lose her dowry. Or, she leaned forth from a balcony amidst the soft beauty of a southern summer night, and drank in the passionate vows of Romeo, as he stood with upturned face whereon the moonlight shone, beneath her window.

O youth, O poetry, O mighty wizards, ruling boundless realms of fancy and of beauty, how at the touch of your enchanted wands this "muddy vesture of decay grows clear and light, and we hear all of the quiring of the spheres!"

She would wake to the realities around her at the closing of her book, as one wakes from a dream. And having no one to whom to confide her hopes and plans, or from whom she could look for sympathy with her wonder at, and admiration of, the genius whose creations were, for her mind, living, breathing, immortal realities, she grew to look forward to the solitary hours spent in her own room as the only hours worth her living for.

With her dreams, too, mingled at times bright prospects. Visions of fancy, and of the sweet