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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.

It was true, that he did really know a good many particulars about the Charlewood family through Walter. That poor boy's friend, the Honourable Arthur Skidley, was a thoroughly black sheep. He was the younger son of a very worthy nobleman, whose limited means were quite inadequate to supply his extravagances. Already his sister's portion had been pinched to pay his debts, and his father had made some personal sacrifices to the same end. Mr. Arthur Skidley held a commission in a regiment of foot, and was stationed in Hammerham. Walter's weakness for "swells," and "tip-top family," and such-like dreary delusions, had led him to hover round Arthur Skidley as a moth flutters round the flame of a candle. And Walter had singed his wings severely. In fact, he was deeply in debt to his dear friend Arthur, even his very liberal allowance not having nearly sufficed to pay his gambling losses. Instead of having the courage to speak to his father, and face his anger at once, he went on in the hope of retrieving himself, and of course sank deeper and deeper in that slough of despond. Young Trescott, wary as a fox, and keen as a hawk, had read the whole history at a glance. He could present an agreeable exterior when he chose. Then, too, his singular beauty of face and figure prepossessed most people in his favour. Altogether, he was not unpopular at such places as Plumtree's, though Skidley had at first tried to stare him down, but that attempt had proved a signal failure—he might as well have tried to stare down a rattlesnake.

Alfred Trescott had taken a bitter aversion to Clement Charlewood. There was between them antagonism of character almost similar in its nature to the chemical repulsion which certain substances exercise towards each other. With Walter, the case was different. Alfred sneered at him behind his back for his weakness and gullibility, but he rather liked him on the whole, and would, perhaps, have been even capable of doing him a kindness, had such kindness been possible without the least self-sacrifice on his own part.

The Trescotts had got back to the subject of Miss Earnshaw's letter, when Mrs. Hutchins returned from her evening lecture, and entered the kitchen laden with good books, and bringing a gust of freezing outer air with her as she opened the door. The expression of Mrs. Hutchins's face was not such as to counteract the chill of the cold air that accompanied her entrance. She looked solemnly, sternly, at the heap of manuscript music still lying on the table; and, raising her eyes to the ceiling, sighed. Her presence put a stop to the discussion, and soon after her return, Corda was sent to bed. Mr. Trescott carried his music paper to his own room, saying he must sit up to finish some band parts that were wanted for the next evening; and Alfred put the latch-key into his pocket, and betook himself to some congenial society.

"What's up now, I wonder!" mentally ejaculated Mrs. Hutchins, when she was left alone. "We're mighty close all of a sudden. The very minute I come in they was all as mum as anything."

And then Mrs. Hutchins proceeded to make a careful search in every corner of the kitchen, turning over the books that lay on the dresser,

examining every scrap of paper, even peeping into a leathern tobacco-pouch of Mr. Trescott's, which had been left on the chimney-piece. As she put it down again, her eye was caught by an envelope lying singed among the ashes underneath the grate. She pounced on it, and, holding it close to the candle, examined it carefully. It was directed to—Trescott, Esq., 23, New-bridge-street, Hammerham. The postmark was much defaced, that corner of the letter having been scorched a good deal. Nevertheless, Mrs. Hutchins succeeded in reading E, and the final letters, L D.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a cunning smile "Eastfield, eh? It's that there Miss Hershaw I'll lay anything! What can she be writing to Trescott about? I've a good mind to mention it to Miss Fluke, and see if I can't get summat out of her."

Strengthened by this virtuous resolution, Mrs. Hutchins partook, with a good appetite, of a hearty supper of bread and cheese, and went to rest.

CHAPTER V. A DAY AT EASTFIELD.

"ONE, two three, four, five, six, one, two, three, four, five, six. Third finger on C. Two, three, thumb under, four, five, six—six is the octave above, Miss Dobbin."

The wretched, ill-used, jingling old piano-forte was giving forth spasmodic discords under the unskillful fingers of a pale fat little girl, and Mabel sat beside her, with burning head and quivering nerves, engaged in that most wearing of drudgeries, an attempt to convey an idea of tune and rhythm to an utterly dull and obtuse ear.

Surely, of all kinds of teaching, giving music lessons is the most exhausting to the nervous system. The horrible apprehension and anticipation of the wrong note before it is played, and then the more horrible jar when it does come must be torment to a delicate ear. And then, in a school, the distracting monotony of repetition, the grinding out of the same dreary tune, over and over again, by one dull child after another!

"Six is the octave above, Miss Dobbin," said Mabel, wearily. "But that will do. Your half-hour is over."

As Miss Dobbin rolled heavily off the music-stool, the parlour door was thrown open, and the servant-girl held out two letters between her outstretched finger and thumb, which she had carefully covered with her-checked apron.

"Miss Hershaw. Afternoon deliver. This here's from your mother, miss. I dunno 'th' other," said the girl, examining the direction.

"Thank you, Susan," said Mabel, taking the letters quietly.

When she had got them in her hand, her fingers closed tightly over her mother's letter, but she put it into her pocket with the other, and waited with outward patience until all the children had finished their afternoon practice. Then she ran up to her sleeping-room, and opened her mother's letter first. Her mother and Dooley coming to Eastfield next day. What could it mean? As she read on her astonishment increased. Coming to Eastfield with Mr. Clement Charlewood! And no word of reply as to the subject on which she had written to her mother! It was incomprehensible. She read the letter again.

"You will come and dine with us, dearest Mabel. Saturday being a half-holiday, I know you will not be very busy. Ask Mrs. Hatchett, with my best compliments, to spare you. We shall arrive in Eastfield by the 2.15 train from

Hammerham, and will send for you at once. All explanations when we meet. Dooley is mad with delight."

Coming to Eastfield with Mr. Clement Charlewood!

Mrs. Saxelby had mentioned from time to time in her letters that young Mr. Charlewood called frequently; that he was very kind and friendly; that he and Dooley got on capitally together; and so forth. But all this had not conveyed to Mabel the confidential terms on which he now was with her mother. Indeed, if Clement Charlewood could have known how seldom Mabel's thoughts had dwelt on him at all, during the time of her sojourn in Eastfield, he would have been much grieved, and a little mortified. He had thought so much of her.

Mabel sat pondering on the side of her bed, with her mother's letter in her hand, until a patterer footstep on the stairs disturbed her, and a breathless little girl came running up to say that Miss Earnshaw was wanted to read dictation to the French class, and was to please to come directly.

"I will follow you immediately," said Mabel, rising. "Run down and prepare your books."

As soon as the child was gone, Mabel pulled the other letter out of her pocket, and read it hastily. It was a very brief note from Mr. Trescott, written in a cramped thin little hand, and ran thus:

"23, New Bridge-street, Hammerham,
Jan. 12.

"Dear Madam. In reply to your favour of the 7th inst, I beg to say that the last time I heard of Mrs. Walton she was engaged, with her family, in the York circuit. I do not know whether she is still there; but I have little doubt that a letter addressed to her, care of R. Price, Esq., Theatre Royal, York, would find her. Mr. Price is the lessee.

"I am, dear Madam,

"Your obedient Servant,

"J. TRESCOTT.

"P.S. My little girl sends you her best love, and often speaks of your kindness to her.—J. T."

Mabel's day came to an end at last, and at about nine o'clock, when all the pupils were in bed, she tapped at the door of Mrs. Hatchett's sitting-room, and went in to ask permission to accept her mother's invitation. Mrs. Hatchett was sitting near a starved and wretched little fire, and a small table beside her was covered with bills and letters. Mrs. Hatchett was making up her accounts. She was a thin white woman, with a long face. Mabel could never help associating her countenance with that of an old grey pony which drew the baker's cart, and came daily to the door. There was a length of upper lip and a heavy ruminating solidity in Mrs. Hatchett's face, highly suggestive of the comparison.

"Be seated, Miss Earnshaw," said the school-mistress, waving her hand, encased in a black woollen mitten, "I will attend to you immediately."

Mabel sat down, and Mrs. Hatchett's pointed pen scratched audibly over the paper for a few minutes, then she collected her bills and papers, tied them into bundles with miscellaneous scraps of faded ribbon, and signified, by a majestic bend of the head, that she was ready to give audience. Mabel duly presented her mother's compliments, and requested permission to be absent on the following afternoon. Mrs. Hatchett accorded the desired permission, and Mabel went to bed.

When, at three o'clock next day, a fly arrived