

Literature, &c.

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From Hogg's Instructor.

LIMNINGS OF SOCIAL LIFE.

MATTHEW MUNN; OR THE MILK OF
HUMAN KINDNESS.

[Continued from our last.]

Meanwhile, at home, Mrs. Munn, whom we left in a fit of hysterics, real or assumed, had duly recovered and resumed her daily duties, nursing her wrath to keep it warm, for the return of her husband, and breaking out in occasional tornados upon Betty. The threat of Matthew to separate had taken hold of her mind, and although she had no immediate wish or intention of having it fulfilled, she resolved 'to let him hear of it before she was done with him.' Evil thoughts are seldom without counsellors, and wicked designs can always find encouragement. As Mrs. M. was thus revolving projects of revenge in her own heart, who should fortunately make her appearance but her dear friend Mrs. Maw, on a forenoon call.

'My dear Mrs. Maw, I'm so delighted to see you; how well you look,' said Mrs. Munn, kissing and shaking hands with her visitor. 'There, take off your bonnet and shawl, and give me all the news; that's a good creature, do.'

Mrs. Maw was one of those pleasant talkative people recognised by old authors as busybodies. A wholesale collector and retailer of all the gossip, scandal, and abuse of the neighbourhood, 'going about from house to house', and dispensing in the one what she heard in the other; a stirrer up of strife, and the cause of endless heart-burnings and mischief to her neighbours. There are many Mrs. Maws in Society.

'Sit down now,' pursued Mrs. Munn, 'take a glass of wine and a biscuit. What can you have been doing with yourself this long time?'

'Oh, I was on a visit to Sir Charles Barnet! You've seen his lady. She invited me last winter to spend a week with them, so I thought I'd go over in spring. And, most unfortunately, during my stay, the poor lady's *accouchement* happened. I never thought of that, or I wouldn't have gone, I'm sure. As it was, everybody was so busy, and so much to do, that lady Barnet asked me to stay a month with them and superintended matters, which she was sure would go all wrong during her illness. I just staid to oblige her; but such a house you never saw. It was really high life below stairs. The servants cared no more for authority than they did for the man in the moon, and Sir Charles never interfered with them. Once I spoke to him, just to let him know their doings, and, would you think it, he got quite angry, and had the audacity to ask what business I had with the servants. I told him smartly, however, that my business was none of his; and was it not for poor Lady Barnet's sake I should not stay in the house with him, since he didn't even know how to speak to a lady. The ungrateful wretch just laughed in my face, and said Lady Barnet was certainly much obliged to me.'

'Oh the wicked creature,' exclaimed Mrs. Munn, lifting up her hands in astonishment. 'Who'd have thought it?'

'That's excellent Sherry, just a thimbleful then, since you will insist. By-the-by speaking of that, did you hear anything of the young Mrs. Shillet at the foot of the row?'

'No; did you say?—'

'Something about—um—found yesterday morning, lying with a bottle of brandy on the room floor. Not a word about it for your life now.'

'Impossible—oh shameless creature she must be!' exclaimed Mrs. Munn, virtuously indignant.

'Its just rumoured you know. Time will clear all up.'

'Really I hope it's not true. Poor Shillet, just six months married! I do pity him.'

'Indeed you ought to be very thankful, my dear, that you have got a good husband yourself—attentive and kind to you.'

Mrs. Maw knew very well of the domestic tiffs, between your Matthew and his spouse. She practised a slight ruse to extract a little information regarding present movements.

'Ah! sighed Mrs. Munn 'I wish such really was the case.'

'You don't tell me so. I'm quite surprised. Has he been—'

'An odious tyrant,' murmured Mrs. Munn.

'Surely not. What has he been doing? Unbosom yourself to your dear friend. I felt sure there was something preying on your mind, you are such a picture of suffering. Confide in me, I never breathe such matters to living flesh,' said the toady, coaxingly.

Mrs. Munn forthwith did unbosom herself of all Matthew's real or supposed acts of cruelty, and wound up the whole with his threat of a separation that morning, during which her comforter drank in the words with delightful avidity, making such occasional interjectional comments as the text required.

'I do think, said she, as Mrs. Munn had finished, 'you have been shamefully treated, love. Were Mr. Munn my husband he would have another story to tell, I rather think. I should let him see that he should not tyrannise over me as he pleased.'

'How could you do that?'

'Oh, you have a great deal in your power,

if you choose to exercise it, to teach him what your position is as well as his own! Suppose for instance, Mr. Munn likes some particular dinner best—most husbands do—don't give it him; give him what you know he hates. If he likes strong tea make it weak. Let his slippers be forgotten and not warmed. Ask him always to serve you or assist you in the presence of your servants; he can't refuse. Give him no account of any money you get. Insist on his coming home at particular hours, and on your going out with him wherever he goes at night. And always when he gets angry and scolds, just laugh at him. In fact there are a thousand ways of bringing him to his position when one just thinks of them.'

'But I fear I would drive him from the house altogether.'

'No fear of him, Mrs. Munn; you know you can yield a little now and then to please him when you want anything; but always let him know that he is obliged to you.'

'Really I must do something of that kind to care him,' sighed Mrs. Munn, 'and when I think of it your advice seems a very good one. But are you going already my dear? Such a short stay you've made.'

In fact now, that Mrs. Maw had coaxed out the secret of her sweet friend's sorrows, she longed to carry the tidings confidentially—the real object of her visit. Her tongue itched with desire to retail the news; a longer stay would have been downright punishment, therefore perpetrating a host of excuses, apologies, and promises of a speedy return, she departed.

When Matthew returned home to dinner that day he was considerable later than usual; nor were his footsteps in any measure expedited, by the prospect of a pleasant reception. On entering the house he found his spouse hard at work on a piece of embroidery. Mrs. Munn was always diligent at needlework when inclined to the disagreeable. She never turned her eyes from the seam; or noticed her husband's arrival, but continued stitching away, as if for bare subsistence bound to toil.

'Well, my dear,' said Matthew, after sitting a short time, 'shall I ring for dinner?'

'As you please, sir,' retorted she without lifting her eyes.

Matthew did please, and forthwith the table was covered.

'Take a seat, my love,' said he helping her to a chair.

This was rather unusual. She looked up at this time.

If there ~~was~~ was any thing Matthew disliked it was salt fish. He had a sort of mortal antipathy to them ever since, when on a business trip to Newfoundland, he had been obliged to subsist eight days, owing to the vessel running short of provisions, on little else save that article with stagnant water as the accompanying beverage or sauce. That day he was doomed to dine off salted cod. More than once he felt his choler rising, but magnanimously repressed the inclination to rebel.

'These are fish,' said he, complacently, 'where did you purchase them, my dear?'

She looked at him again. Was he in earnest? Sulkily she answered the inquiry, and was told to order some more of them.

After dinner Matthew took a paper from his pocket, and drawing his seat in towards the fire, like a man bent on comfort, inquired, 'Will you read the news, Mrs. M., or shall I read them?'

The goodwife had resumed her embroidery. She snappishly replied, 'Don't bother me with your nasty papers, you see I'm busy.'

'Very well, Mary, I won't interrupt you.'

'And keep your feet off that fender; you're never done spoiling the furniture. I wonder who gets the blame of it.'

Tea-time came and passed quietly over. Matthew was attentive. Mrs. Munn spent an hour or two afterwards enforcing the practice of domestic obedience on Betty. But no interference occurred from her husband. At supper he helped her to everything he knew she liked best. Mrs. Munn wondered but her ill nature increased as her ends seemed frustrated. She scolded once or twice, Matthew humbly apologised. She pouted, Matthew became cheerful. She sulked, he hummed a tune.

'Stop that odious singing, can't you, you brute! You don't know what a headache I've got,' said his pleasant friend.

Matthew resumed his paper, merely observing he was sorry, and hoped she would feel better soon.

Bed time arrived. Both retired: the good-woman reflecting—'Well, I've failed to day; but my time's coming Matthew.' The scheme has not prospered much yet, but I'll try a little longer.'

Morning came smiling and happy; not refusing its brightness because there were wicked hearts and bad tempers in the world, nor unwilling to stream, like love, into the darkest and dreariest corners; but seeking an entrance and a home where man had almost built him out, that their poor hearts might feel his gladdening influences. But all its glowing beaming beauty did not inspire a smile of happiness on the face of Mrs. Munn. She had been thwarted overnight, and a woman can ill brook failure, whether in love or war. In her morning wrapper, she hastened down stairs to relieve her mind on Betty. Through the house, up from the area to the garret, her voice resounded. You heard it at times in a far off corner, silent again for a little, then breaking forth unexpectedly almost close at hand, and progressive away to some other quarter. Matthew came down to breakfast.

Mrs. Munn had finished hers half an hour earlier than usual, but still she presided at the table. 'It's a pretty thing you can't come down in time—keeping people waiting till everything is cold by your laziness. I declare I never get my meals in season.'

Matthew didn't get his in season that morning. He drank a cup of cold coffee, eat a musty egg, and said he hoped to return so that Mrs. M. would not have reason to complain at dinner. He rather prided himself on his personal appearance; Matthew's organ of order was largely developed; he could not endure untidiness; any thing *deregle* made him unhappy. That morning he got a shirt minus two buttons and his boots not brushed. With a sigh, he pulled the latter on and departed.

Mrs. Munn fumed and fretted away the hours intervening betwixt her husband's departure and dinner-time. She felt miserable enough in all conscience—a misery arising not from any direct cause, but merely from ungratified spleen. She had resolved on being dissatisfied to everything around her, and, if possible, on imitating to everything a measure of her own feelings, but, having failed in this her own unhappiness was only enlarged. How often do we find people discontented because they cannot make others miserable! She sincerely wished her dear friend Mrs. Maw, would again call and tender her advice; for having failed in her first attempt at bringing Matthew to his senses, she felt puzzled what tactics next to pursue. That day, however, the salted cod was again prepared for dinner.

Bland and cheerful, Matthew appeared a little before the usual hour. He carried a brown paper parcel beneath his arm, which he carefully depositing on the side board, he observed—'I trust my dear you won't complain of being kept waiting to day: I have tried to be in time.'

Mrs. Munn said nothing. She looked up from her seam to the parcel, and speculated on its contents.

The dinner was soon over, for little as Matthew liked the viands, equally little did his wife care for them. She punished herself to punish him. They had resumed their seats again.

'Will you hand me over that parcel, Mary if you please said the husband.'

'Help yourself sir,' replied the wife, though she was within arm's reach of it, and with feminine curiosity longed to know its contents.

Matthew hesitated, but arose, and cutting the strings on the paper, unfolded to view a beautiful Parisian shawl. 'I've often heard you admire this pattern,' said he, 'and wish for one of them. Passing by Blonde's shop to day, this one caught my fancy, and if I am not mistaken you alluded to it a few days ago as a very beautiful article; so I brought it with me. Is it not a splendid shawl? and how well you look in it,' added he throwing it around his wife's shoulders.

Gratified and angry—but her anger was that of shame—felt Mrs. Munn. She could have torn the shawl to pieces, out of pure vexation, or cried, for relief to her feelings. Merely glancing at it, she observed it was very pretty indeed.

'I'm so glad you're pleased with it' observed her spouse.

All that evening and night the woman felt, we can hardly describe how, but her whole anger was turned against herself. She experienced a sort of burning remorseless shame. As Matthew went to bed he thought—'No medicine can work an instantaneous cure, we must persevere and hope.'

Next day, remembering the efficacy of yesterday's present, Matthew bethought him of a similar ruse, a beautiful silk scarf was the purchase. On bringing it home he duly exhibited to Mary after dinner, which was not of salt cod that day. 'Now, what do you think of it my dear?' said he, holding the article up to the light. 'Will it not suit admirably with your peach blossom gown?'

Inwardly Mrs. Munn thought it a love of a scarf, but chagrin led her to curl her brow and mutter—'I think a lady should be allowed to choose her own wardrobe, and not be compelled to wear every odious thing her husband may consider proper.'

'I'm very sorry that it does not please you, Mary, but it's not worth disputing about. There, that will put it out of the way, and we'll hear no more of it,' said he, rolling it up and laying it across the fire.

This he did so calmly, and firmly withal, that Mrs. Munn could only gaze in silent astonishment. She felt the reproof the act conveyed, and could not answer. Matthew saw a tear glisten in her eye. He hailed it gladly, as the harbinger of something better. This was the most valuable practical lesson which he had yet taught of firmness and gentleness—his own position maintained and Mrs. Munn reprov'd. It prevented Matthew from being henpecked probably, and taught his wife to respect him.

It were needless to detail all the proceedings of Matthew—who now saw the charm in operation—adopted. Gradually his spouse, awakened to a consciousness of her own untidiness; her own temper became her own tormentor, she felt ashamed of herself, as a knowledge of her ingratitude and errors dawned upon her vision. Each new act of kindness from her husband conveyed a sting to her heart; the coals of fire heaped on her head now burned within her. Doubtless she was still unhappy, but it unhappiness arising from conscious merit; and this is one of the best feelings of our nature. Nor was Matthew yet aware to what extent his spouse was

reformed, for though less noisy, she seemed to him still equally gloomy.

An adventuresome adventure occurred soon after—an unexpected one and a disagreeable one, but the crowning one of Matthew's scheme. It happened thus. Mrs. Munn one day had been making some purchases in a draper's shop; where she was not in the habit of dealing. While engaged in it, she could not help observing that the young man who served her eyed her often askance, and assisted her with a degree of embarrassed impertinence unusual in such places. The others also seemed to regard her with curious significant glances; and one lad left the shop immediately on her arrival. After turning over unnecessarily, as ladies are wont to do, a large quantity of articles which she did not require, she at length fixed on what she did require, and purchased accordingly. The assistant required with a slightly supercilious sneer, if he should send the things home to her address. She preferred to take them with her, she said, and they were made up into a parcel. While turning round to depart, the corner fringe of her shawl caught a piece of lace and swept it off the counter. Accidentally she noticed it, and turning round; hesitating whether to lift and replace it, but was quite astonished at the universal grin pervading the countenances of the shopmen now. She wondered if there were anything odd about her they were laughing at, and feeling insulted, hastened out of the place. Past the door she had not gone a few paces, when a Bow street runner, in company with the lad who had left the shop on her entrance, arrested her—'I'm werry sorry ma'am—disagreeable dooty—I hope it'll turn out a mistake; but you must come with me ma'am.'

'What do you mean sir?' Said Mrs. Munn, thoroughly alarmed.

'Oh you don't know I 'poso—so werry green, ha! Come that's all gammon. Better be quiet, or I'll put on the Darbies,' added he as the lady was violently pushing past him.

'You must be under some mistake. I'm not the person you seek. Allow me to go home,' persisted she.

'That ere chaff vont catch you know; I'm too old. You had better come along quietly.' Mrs. Munn was ready to faint for shame. A crowd was already beginning to collect from unknown sources, and indulging in their heartless banter crowds are apt to enjoy at any unfortunate's expense. Still convinced of a mistake, she pled to know on what grounds she had thus been arrested, and submitted to insult on the street.

Never fear. You will learn in good time my precious von,' was the oracular response.

'Better call a cab,' said the youth accompanying the officer, beginning to feel some compunction for the situation of the lady.

One was immediately at their side, and Mrs. M. was handed in by No. 304 and such comments from the lively crowd, as—'She's a spanker Jem; ' Knows a trick or two, I warrant; and, No better than she should be,' from the more charitable female onlookers. They drove off to the nearest station house, and she was carried in, almost fainting, to the presence of the magistrate. Here the draper stated that twice formerly she had visited his shop, and after her departure articles of considerable value had been missed. The last time she thus honoured him she had managed to evade a constable who was sent after her. It seemed she was an experienced hand at the trade, for in the *Times* a description had been published of her by another sufferer, cautioning shopkeepers against dealing with her. This description the policeman read, and it fitted Mrs. M. pretty correctly on the whole. Then other shepherds were called in, who deposed to the truth of her former visits, and to her apparent design of carrying off the lace to-day. During this she had sat perfectly paralysed with terror and astonishment, unable to utter a word, but gazing at her accusers.

'What have you got to say to this, woman?' inquired the magistrate, turning towards her.

She looked at him a moment; then a consciousness of her mind. She burst into a flood of tears, and, wringing her hands, exclaimed—'It's all a lie—a mistake, your honour. I'm not what they take me for; I never was in that man's shop before to-day.'

'Give an account of yourself. Who are you?'

Mrs. M. muttered her husband's name and profession. A smile of incredulity gathered on the faces around her, for most present knew Matthew by reputation, if not by sight. She added, 'Oh! sir! send for him if you doubt me.'

Two messengers were despatched immediately, who in a few minutes returned, bringing the husband along with them in a high state of perturbation.

'Is this your wife, Mr. Munn?' inquired the magistrate.

'She is, my lord, said Matthew. 'I cannot understand why she should occupy such a position. Pray, allow me to hear the charge against her.'

The draper came forward and said it was evident some mistake must have occurred. He did not wish to prosecute the case farther, and begged to apologise to the lady for the annoyance she had sustained.

'The case must be prosecuted through,' said the magistrate; you cannot quit it thus. I insist in justice to the laws of the country, as well as to the present parties, it be proceeded with. Can you swear to the identity of this lady, as being the party who entered