

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

"I love coffee, but I don't love slops," responded the young woman, pettishly.

"Now, dear, don't speak so," said mamma, deprecatingly; "this is what we get for sending you to boarding school. Oh! girls are brought up so different from what they was when I was young. Now, dear, you know that we never settle our coffee with eggs after they get to be over a shilling a dozen. Father and me has always been obliged to be economical, and to look after odds and ends, and if you have got extravagant notions into your head, you didn't get them to home. You know it, dear, just as well as I do."

Leonora breathed a little gust of irritation through her nostrils, as if a fly were upon her lip.

Arthur was sufficiently amused with the mother, but he was honestly concerned for the father, and he wondered how the face he met at the door could so suddenly lose its longitude. He ventured to change the direction of the conversation by inquiring into Mr. Ruggles' condition.

The fat face gathered incalculable solemnity on the instant. "Father has took sights of laudlum—sights of laudlum!" Mrs. Ruggles shook her head, as if the "laudlum" were the big end of the calamity.

"I hope it has quieted him," said Arthur.

"Yes, he's asleep now, and Joslyn is setting up with him. Joslyn is a very still man, you know, for one that's so heavy as he is. I s'pose he's got used to going tiptoe by always having a baby to home. It would be an awful stroke to Joslyn if father should be took away." Mrs. Ruggles' own woe seemed to be entirely submerged by her sympathy for Joslyn.

"But we all hope he will live," said Arthur, cordially, "and I know Dr. Gilbert hasn't given him up."

"Oh! such a sight—such a sight!" exclaimed the wife, as the sound of the doctor's name recalled the painful scenes of the night, "every rag of clothes torn off of him, and his leg broke, and his body no better than so much jelly! It's the greatest wonder that he's alive now. It seemed to me as if I never should live through it; and it wouldn't be strange if he should be took away, after all. But it isn't our doings, and we must be resigned to the stroke, if it comes."

The last portion of these remarks was accompanied by appropriate sighs; but it somehow seemed to Arthur as if resignation would not be such a difficult duty, after all.

The small, cunning eyes of the woman read as much as this in the young man's face, and she continued: "It's a duty to be thankful for our comforts, whatever comes. If he should be took away, I shouldn't be like them that have no hope."

"Is Mr. Ruggles a religious man?" inquired Arthur.

"It depends on what people calls religion," replied Mrs. Ruggles. "Some think it's one thing, and some think it's another. Some is professors, you know, and some is possessors. Father and me never made so much fuss about our religion as some folks do. He always give something for supporting the Gospel. I've seen him give twenty-five dollars to once, and he was for ever taking down a codfish or something to Mr. Wilton. Father and me has always been economical; but we never stole the Gospel, never. Then Father has always provided for his own family, which is more religion than some folks have. Folks that don't provide for their own families are infidels, the Bible says."

During all this conversation, Leonora had sat in perfect silence, expressing only by her lazy features the contempt she felt for her mother, and for the meal before her. Her eyes gave no evidence of tears, past or present. She was annoyed, to be sure, but she was always annoyed. With a father and a mother wholly absorbed by worldliness, she had grown up in indolence—the insipid, ungrateful recipient of every loving ministry of which her parents were capable. Arthur turned his eyes upon her in astonishment, wondering that the nature of any woman could be so apathetic.

Mrs. Ruggles noticed Arthur's observation of her daughter, and continued: "As I was saying, father has looked out for his own family, and Leonora is provided for. There isn't any girl in Crampton that is any better educated than she is, and there isn't one that will have such a setting-out. Of course, she will have all we have got, at last, when we are both took away, but I mean she shall always hold it in her own right. I don't think it's right for folks to tug and tug all their lives to get money together to spoil their children's hands with. When I married father—you know I married him out of the mill—I had my own bank stock that I had earned myself, and I've always held it in my own right. I think it's such a comfort for a woman to have bank stock if her husband's took away."

Even Leonora could not withstand this. "Mother," said she, "Mr. Blague thinks you are a fool; I'm sure I do."

"Don't speak so, dear," responded the mother, tenderly. "You are not yourself this morning."

"That's a blessing; then I'm not your daughter;" and without asking to be released from the table, Leonora rose, and lounged out of the room.

Arthur thought it time for business. "I am to nurse Mr. Ruggles, Dr. Gilbert tells me," said he, recalling Mrs. Ruggles from the admiring contemplation of her daughter's retiring figure.

"I know it," she replied, "and I should have spoke of it before, but I knew father was asleep, and that Joslyn would call us if anything happened. I s'pose (and Mrs. Ruggles sighed) that because I talk, and eat my victuals, you and Leonora think I don't feel this stroke, but little do you know! I have to talk, for my mind's distracted; and I think of everything; and I have to eat to support nature and bear up. Arthur, I forgot to inquire about your mother. How is she?"

Arthur's eyes filled with tears in an instant. "She can neither talk, nor eat, nor bear up, as you say," he replied.

"She was always kind o' weakly," said Mrs. Ruggles, musing. "Dear me! how well I remember her when she felt too big to speak to me! She was mighty crank when she married the storekeeper; but some goes up and some goes down; and isn't it strange, now, that her boy should come here and wait upon father!" Mrs. Ruggles said this without the remotest suspicion that her remarks were utterly offensive.

"My mother is a lady, Mrs. Ruggles, and never treated you in any other than a ladylike way. I beg you never to mention her again."

"Well, of course, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," replied the woman, wondering at Arthur's impudence. "I'm very sorry, of course, for your mother. I really hope she's got something in her own right, and that she'll chirp up, and git along comfortable."

Arthur bit his lip, vexed at the woman's stolid pertinacity, and amused in spite of himself with her lack of sense and sensibility. He rose, and said: "Will you call Joslyn, Mrs. Ruggles?"

The floor creaked and shook as the large woman went on her errand; and soon afterward Joslyn appeared—a white, tallowy-looking, middle-aged man, with a large flat face, faded eyes, and a bald spot on the top of his head over which the hair was braided.

"How is Mr. Ruggles?" inquired Arthur.

"I don't know," replied Joslyn, in a whisper.

"Does he suffer?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Did Dr. Gilbert set his broken leg?"

"I don't know. He did something to it."

"Are you to stay here?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"What are you doing for him?"

"I don't know. Dr. Gilbert told me to set by him, and give him his drops once in two hours if he was awake. If he wasn't, I wasn't to wake him up."

"Well," said Arthur, "tell me about the drops, and then go home and go to bed. I will look after Mr. Ruggles."

"Just as you say, of course," said Joslyn.

Then Joslyn explained the doctor's directions, and hoped Arthur would stand between him and all harm, if the master should wake and be offended because he had left him. "I feel particular about keeping in with him," said Joslyn, in explanation, "for I have a good many to look after." Having said this, the humble and fearful man spread a spotted bandanna handkerchief over his head, and went off through the storm toward his little tenement on tiptoe, as if the street were lined with babies in profound slumber.

Arthur entered the room where the proprietor lay. Pale and haggard—the more so in seeming for the blackness of his beard—he lay moaning in a narcotic dream. Arthur took a seat by his side, and, in doing so, made a noise with his chair. The eyes of the sleeper were instantaneously wide open. Wild, glassy and apprehensive, he gazed into Arthur's face with an expression that sent a shudder through his frame. It was an expression of hate, astonishment and inquiry. The master tried to rise, but his muscles refused to lift him an inch.

"What am I here for? What are you here for?" whispered the man.

"You have met with an accident," said Arthur, stooping over him. "You are very badly hurt, and must be quiet."

"Who says I'm hurt? Who hurt me? Why ain't you to work?" Old Ruggles gasped with the exertion which the words cost him.

Then Arthur told him all about his injury, and what had been done for him, and furthermore informed him that he must obey all directions, or he could not live. As the meaning of Arthur's words sank slowly into his benumbed consciousness, the fierce look faded out of the master's eyes, and gave place to an expression of fear and anxiety.

"Don't let me die," said he, with a pitiful whine. "Don't let me die. I can't die."

"We shall do all we can for you, but you must not talk," said Arthur.

"I didn't mean you any harm," whimpered the master, evidently recalling his treatment of Arthur, and afraid that the young man would revenge himself upon him in some way. "I didn't mean you any harm. Don't lay up anything agin me." And the cowardly man cried like a helpless baby.

Arthur reassured him, and then without further parley commanded him to be silent. So the proprietor of Hucklebury Run, subdued by fear and helplessness, put himself into the hands of his new apprentice. Arthur watched him through the long morning, and as the reaction from the terrible nervous shock came on, he hung over him, and fanned him as faithfully as if he had been his own father. With the reaction came insanity. The master was in his mill, scolding his hands, and raving about Arthur. He accused one of wasting, and another of idling, and threatened another.

At noon, Dr. Gilbert's little pony came pounding over the bridge that crossed the Run, and the gig reeled up to the door, the doctor touching the ground before the vehicle had fairly stopped. He found his patient quite as well as he expected to find him; and giving Arthur full directions as to his management, he told him that he had provided company for his mother, and that she would not expect him home until it should be proper for him to leave his charge.

Convalescence, with the proprietor, was very slow in its progress, and frequently interrupted by relapses. It was for many weeks a matter of doubt whether he would ever permanently recover. In the meantime, Aunt Catharine had taken it upon herself to see that Mrs. Blague was not left alone, and that she needed no essential service which Arthur's absence deprived her of. Business at the mill went on entirely through the medium of Arthur Blague. He was nurse, accountant, confidential clerk, salesman at the store, factotum. He was the only man competent to do the business correspondence for his employer; and as the latter was clear-headed after the first few days of fever, he made the young man his right arm in every department of his affairs.

It had been one of the pet boasts of old Ruggles that he

had never been sick a day in his life, and had never paid a doctor's bill. All his business he had done himself. There was not a man at the Run in his employ who had a particle of his confidence, or who had ever known anything of his business affairs. He never expected to be sick. It had never entered into his thought as among the possibilities of life that he should be disabled and dependent. To suppose that such a man should take such restraint and such dependence patiently would be to expect miracles. To Arthur he was exacting to the last degree of forbearance—giving him hardly time for sleep, and allowing him only a moment occasionally to drop in upon his mother and little Jamie, on the way to the post office.

There was one shrewd pair of eyes that watched all these proceedings with great speculative curiosity. Mrs. Ruggles, relieved by Arthur from a serious burden of care, was aware of his importance to her husband, not only as nurse, but as business executive. Arthur's quiet assumption of entire social equality, and his actual personal superiority, had impressed the woman very decidedly; and when she saw how well he took hold of affairs, how much her husband depended upon him, and how necessary he would be to the business in the event of a fatal termination of the master's injuries, she had come to the conclusion that a permanent partnership between him and dear Leonora would be a very profitable and a very desirable thing. The business at the Run could go along without difficulty. Arthur would come there to live, and the Widow Ruggles, not without her comforts, would pass her days in prosperity equal to her previous lot, and in peace quite superior.

Conveniently without the slightest sensibility, she had no difficulty in approaching the subject which occupied her thoughts in her interviews with Arthur; and it must be confessed that, foolish as the girl thought her mother to be, she lent herself to her schemes. Bred to feel that money was the grand requisite for social position and personal power, she believed that she was mistress of her own matrimonial destiny. She had but to indicate her willingness to link her fortunes with those of any poor young man to secure that young man's everlasting gratitude. It had been drummed into her ears by the repetitious tongue of her mother, even from young girlhood, that the ultimate mistress of Hucklebury Run, and heir presumptive of Madam Ruggles' bank stock, held in her own right, could marry whomsoever in Crampton, or in the towns thereunto adjacent, she might choose.

Whether eggs had gone down materially soon after Arthur's advent into the family, the young man did not know, but he noticed a very decided improvement in the quality of the coffee. Leonora, too, grew from day to day more careful in her dress, and was always, at certain times, to be found sitting in Arthur's way. Wholly preoccupied, the honest-hearted, unsuspicious fellow did not notice these things at all. The possibility of a wife and daughter setting themselves seriously at work to entice a young man into a matrimonial alliance, at a moment when the husband and father lay in an adjoining room, trembling between life and death, was something alike beyond his suspicion and his comprehension.

One morning, Arthur was detained from his breakfast some minutes after it was announced to be ready. On entering the room, he found the mother and daughter waiting. Arthur took his accustomed seat at the head of the table, with Leonora at his right hand, and bed in a very comely morning wrapper, and a mingled atmosphere of sassafras-soap and sour hair.

Mrs. Ruggles looked radiantly across the table at Arthur, as if she were sighting a cannon, the top of the coffee-pot serving as the initial point in the range. "Leonora and me has been talking about you," said the lady. "You see, we couldn't get along without you at all, and I don't know but we should have starved to death if you hadn't come. It seems just as natural to have you at the head of the table somehow, as it does to have father, and that was what Leonora and me was saying. Leonora, says she, how well Mr. Blague looks at the head of the table, setting up so tall and handsome!"

"Mother Ruggles!" Leonora simpered, shocked purely as a matter of conventional propriety.

Mrs. Ruggles giggled. "Look at her, Arthur, and see how she blushes," said the fond mother, pointing to the impassive face of her daughter. "You needn't blush so, for it's just what I've said myself. But we don't make ourselves; it's nothing to be lifted up about." The lady drew on a pious look, as if she were the last person who would be guilty of feeding Arthur's vanity, and the first decently to remind him of the great Author of all beauty. "No, we don't make ourselves," continued Mrs. Ruggles, "but we know that some looks well to the head of the table, and some don't. Some seems calculated to be the head of a family, and some seems ridiculous when we think of it. If there's anything that I hate, it is to see a little man to the head of the table, particular if his wife is a sizable woman, and he isn't big enough to say: Why do ye so? I was saying to Leonora, only a day or two ago, says I, Dear, when you get married—and I hope you don't think of such a thing for the present—do you look out for a husband not an inch shorter than Arthur Blague, for I've seen you together, and there's just the right difference between you. That's just what I said to her—wasn't it, dear?"

"You say a great many foolish things, mother," said Leonora, lazily.

"Now, dear, don't say so. Young folks always thinks old folks is fools, but when I see your father lying dangerous, and the only child I have to my back in a way of being left alone without any pectorator, it's natural for mothers to think of the future, and to calculate on what they'd like to see brung about. Don't you think so, Arthur?"

Arthur, thus appealed to, responded as the lady apparently desired.

"S'posing everything suits, and everything should be brung about just as it might be, and no damage done to nobody," pursued the woman, mysteriously, "what is your notion about a woman's holding her property in her own right? I mean after she gets married, of course."

Arthur replied coolly, that he trusted all married women who desired to hold property in their own right, would do