

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER II.—MISS GILBERT VISITS THE SKY, AND LITTLE VENUS TAKES UP HER PERMANENT RESIDENCE THERE.

Where was Fanny Gilbert's mother during the exhibition? What could keep the mother of little Fred away? She was asleep—she was resting. She had been asleep for two years. She had rested quietly in the Crampton graveyard during all this time, "making up lost sleep." She had been hurried through life, and hurried out of life. She had bent every energy to realize to Dr. Gilbert his idea of a woman and a wife. She had ambitiously striven to match him in industry—to keep at his side in all the enterprises he undertook; but her stock of strength failed her in mid-passage, and she had fallen by the way. She had known no rest—no repose. There was not a room nor a piece of furniture in her house that did not give evidence of her tireless care. Her Sabbath was no day of rest to her. She taught, she visited the poor, she managed the village sewing-circle, she circulated subscription papers for charities, she attended all the religious meetings in sunshine and storm; and what with maternal associations, and watchings with the sick, and faithful care of her own family, she wore herself quite away, and faded out from Dr. Gilbert's home, and from the sight of her children.

Everybody mourned when good Mrs. Gilbert died, but everybody drew a long breath of satisfaction, as if it were pleasant, after all, to think that she was resting, and that nobody could wake her.

Her death shocked Dr. Gilbert, but it did not stop him. On the contrary, he seemed to plunge into the work of life with fresh energy. He could not pause for an instant now. New schemes for the employment of his time were devised. The temporary paralysis of grief terrified him. To stand still, to cherish and linger about a sorrow—this he could not bear. He must act—act all the time—or die. People who looked on said that Dr. Gilbert was trying to "work it off." He fancied that there was no way by which he could so appropriately show his grief for her as by following her example.

"Aunt Catharine," sister of the sleeping wife and mother, kept house for Dr. Gilbert, and did what she could for the children. This was very little, for the doctor had his own ideas about their training, which he allowed no one to interfere with.

It was supposed by the gossips of the village that Dr. Gilbert would ultimately marry Aunt Catharine; but it is doubtful whether he ever dreamed of such a thing. She was a woman who, if we may credit her own declaration, "never loved a man, and never feared one." It was pretty certain that she did not love the doctor, and quite as certain that she did not fear him. She held his restlessness in a kind of contemptuous horror, and felt herself irresistibly drawn into antagonism with him. She loved his children, and served them affectionately and devotedly for the mother's sake; but the doctor always aroused her to opposition. If he spoke, she contradicted him, or felt moved to do so. If he acted, she opposed him, or desired to oppose him. She was neither cross-grained nor malicious; but a will that acknowledged no ruler, and that did not recognize her existence any more than if she had been a house-fly, bred an element of perverseness in her character.

Of course, Aunt Catharine was not an admirer of infant schools. She had not attended the exhibition. Possibly she would have liked to see Fanny and Fred, but she would not humour Dr. Gilbert. Accordingly, when he and Fanny walked into the house, after bidding the people of the parsonage good-night, they by no means anticipated a cordial greeting.

Aunt Catharine had very black eyes, set in a sharp, honest, sensible face, and they looked very black that night. Now, there was an infallible index to the condition of Aunt Catharine's mind, which both father and daughter perfectly understood. When she was knitting very slowly, and rocking herself very fast, they knew that a storm was brewing in the domestic sky; when she was rocking very slowly, and knitting very fast, the elements were at peace.

When they entered the parlour, the rocking chair was in furious action, and the knitting-needles were making very indifferent progress.

"Well, I'm glad it's done, and over, and through with," exclaimed Aunt Catharine, decidedly.

"Done, and over, and through with, eh? And finished, and performed, and consummated, I suppose," responded the doctor with a pleasant sarcasm.

"Well, I'm glad it's done, then."

"Done?" said the doctor, with emphasis. "Done? It's only begun."

"You'll find it's only begun, I guess, before the week is out," replied the woman. "Do you suppose the little babies you've been tormenting in church all day will get through the week without being sick? There was poor little Fred, who was so tired that he could not go to sleep, and cried for an hour before he shut his eyes."

"A little natural, childish excitement," said the doctor, a shadow of apprehension coming over his face unbidden. "He will be rested and all right in the morning."

"Dr. Gilbert," said Aunt Catharine, laying aside her knitting, and raising her forefinger excitedly, "I have been longing to speak my mind for a month about this business, and now I am going to speak it, and I want Fanny to hear me."

"Well, be quick about it," said the doctor, impatiently, "for I have a good deal of writing to do to-night, and time is short. Besides, Fanny is tired, I imagine."

"Yes, you always have work to do, and time is always short, and Fanny is always tired. It was always so when your wife was living, and it is about her that I'm going to speak. You had as good a wife, Dr. Gilbert, as a man ever had, if she was my sister; and she might just as well be alive now, and sitting in this room, as to be lying in the graveyard yonder. I don't say you killed her, but I say the life

she led killed her, and the life she led was the life you marked out for her, and encouraged her to lead. Mind you, Dr. Gilbert, I don't say this to taunt you. What's done can't be helped. I can't bring her back, and if it were to recall her to her old restless life of work, work, work, I wouldn't bring her back if I could. She's better where she is. No, sir, I wouldn't lift my finger to call her from the grave, if that would do it. What I say, I say for her children. They are going on in the same way. Fanny is working herself to death. If she had not your constitution, she would be lying by the side of her mother now. Think of a girl of sixteen, with her education finished, and the work of her life begun! It's awful, it's shameful, it's outrageous. And there is your precious little boy, only five years old—his mother's boy. He's just as sure to die before his time as you keep on with him in the way you have begun—heating his brains with arithmetic and geography and history and comets and all sorts of stuff, that children have no more business with than they have with your medicine-case, and showing him up to a churchful of people, and getting him so excited that he can't sleep, and keeping him shut up in a school room all day, when he ought to be at home playing in the dirt."

Aunt Catharine said all this impetuously, with tears that came and went in her eyes without once dropping.

"Is that all?" inquired the doctor, coolly.

"It's God's truth, what there is of it, any way," replied the excited woman.

What he would have said if Fanny had not been present, he did not say; so, with forced calmness, he simply responded: "Well, well, Catharine, we'll not quarrel; but I think I understand these matters better than you, and I propose to manage my children, and conduct their education, as I think best."

Aunt Catharine had "spoken her mind," and, as usual on such occasions, was aware that she had made no impression—produced no effect. But she felt better. The fire was spent, and turning kindly to Fanny, she told her that she was looking very weary, and had better retire. Then, gathering up her knitting, she went upstairs to her own room.

Father and daughter sat a while in silence, the latter waiting for the former to speak; but he turned to his little desk, and was soon busy with his papers.

As Fanny rose and bade him "Good-night," he said, without lifting his head: "You had better look in and see how Fred is."

The fatigues of the day showed themselves plainly in the girl's heavy eyes, pale lips, and languid motions, as she left the room, lamp in hand, and climbed the stairway. The excitement that had held her up for weeks was gone, and the natural reaction, with the warning words her aunt had spoken, and the re-awakened memories of her dead mother, filled her with the most oppressive sadness. Vague dissatisfaction, undefinable unrest, took the place of ambitious aspiration and the delight of strong powers in full exercise.

In accordance with her habit, not less than in obedience to the suggestion of her father, she took her way to her room through the chamber of little Fred. He lay moaning and feverish upon his pillow, his fair cheeks flushed, and his hands tossing restlessly. She was too weary to sit by him, so she unconsciously repeated the words of her father: "A little natural, childish excitement. He will be rested and all right in the morning." Then she kissed the hot lips, and passed into her own chamber.

She was so weary that she could hardly wait to prepare for her bed; but when she lay down, sleep came quickly—a kind of half sleep, half swoon, that went almost as quickly as it came. After a time, which seemed very long, but which was, in fact, very short, she found herself almost instantaneously, painfully wide awake, as if sleep had snatched and strained her to its bosom, and then thrown her hopelessly off.

Then all the scenes and all the triumphs of the day thronged her mind. She was again in the church. Admiring eyes were upon her; she heard the applause again; and again the flush of gratified pride warmed her heart and her cheeks, as she recalled the words of praise that were spoken to her in the presence of her associates. Again the little children were revolving around the chalk planetarium, obedient to her will. Noiselessly, beautifully, they swam around in her waking dream, to the rhythm of ideal harmonies. The little comet went and came, and went and came again, and still her ears rang with the applause of the admiring assembly.

She lay thus, the events of the day re-enacting themselves to her brain, careless of sleep, but locked in a delicious and half-delirious repose. In retiring, she had neglected to extinguish her lamp, and was glad to have it burning. At not infrequent intervals she had heard her little brother moaning and muttering in his sleep. At last the clock struck twelve, and soon afterward she heard the sound of footsteps in the hall—a delicate, measured tread, light as the step of a fairy—jarring nothing, awaking no resonance, but constant—now approaching her door, then receding and fading away till its velvet fall almost escaped her strained and sharpened sense.

Her mother! What wonder that the words her aunt had spoken should call up the well-remembered form? What wonder that her quickened imagination at this midnight hour should conceive the presence of the loving spirit around the beds which her feet, while living, had visited so fondly and so frequently?

Fanny heard the little parlour clock faintly strike the half-hour before she thought of stirring. She was not superstitious. Her father's spirit was in her, and when it was roused, she was calm, self-poised and courageous. She rose from her bed, determined to learn the cause of the footsteps which she still heard. Taking the lamp in her hand, she opened the door into the hall, and holding the light above her head, peered into the passage. At its farther end she saw a small white object approaching her slowly, and knew at once that little Fred was walking in his sleep. She did not dare to speak to him, for he was so near the stairway. As he came nearer to her, she saw that his eyes were open, in an unwinking, somnambulant stare, and further, that he was still enacting the part of the comet in his dream. He came up, gradually increasing his speed, then suddenly he darted around her, and started on another circuit out

into the unknown spaces. Fanny followed him, took him by the hand, and quietly led him to his bed, and lay down by his side, afraid to leave him.

Now she did not dare to fall asleep. She could not risk her little brother again to the danger of walking off the stairs. Now she must think, to keep herself awake. The most exciting thoughts would be the most welcome.

Of all the words spoken to her, or spoken within her hearing, during the day, there was one which had left the deepest impression, and was charged with the most grateful suggestions. There were words of praise that had been appropriated for immediate consumption; this was kept sacredly for future use, as a precious morsel to be devoured in secret. There were words which had settled like a flock of singing birds among her fresh sensibilities; this had wheeled and hovered alone above her, waiting till the others had gone before it would come down and nestle at her heart.

A career! Dr. Bloomer had told her, with abundant emphasis, that she had a career before her. Rev. Jonas Sliter had yoked her name with a woman famous in history, as one to whom a great career was possible—one, indeed, who had already commenced a career. Even Rev. J. Desilver Newman had been compelled, by his sense of justice, to accord to her the power of achieving a great career. She had caught the taste of public applause, and it was sweet—sweeter than anything she had ever known. Her inmost soul had been thrilled by its penetrating flavour, and she became conscious of a new hunger, a new thirst, a new longing. A new motive of life was born within her, and she must have a career that she might win more praise, and drink more deeply at the fountain which the day and its events had opened to her.

Her soul was on fire with a newly kindled ambition. Life grew golden and glorious to her. Projects of achievements rose like fairy palaces in her imagination, and ran out in glittering lines to its farthest verge. She would be an authoress. She would write books. She would reveal her life in poetry, the music of whose numbers should charm the world, and compel the world to give her homage. She would hold the mirror up to life in fiction, and win the plaudits of the nations, like women of whom she had heard. She would become a great painter. She would cross the seas, and gather from the masters their secrets, and then she would return and glorify her name and her nation by works of unequalled art. She would become a visitor of prisons, and a minister of mercy to the abodes of infamy and of misery, and win immortality for a life devoted to works of charity. She would be a missionary, and, on "India's burning sands," plant the standard of the Cross. She would stand before public assemblies, and there assert, not only her own womanhood, but the rights of her sex. She would have a career of some kind.

In one brief hour of dreaming, all the charm of domestic home-life had faded. The thought of marriage, its quiet duties, and its subordination of her life and will to the life and will of another, became repulsive to her. Even Crampton was become too small for her and the praise of the humble country pastors that had so elated her, grew insignificant, almost contemptible. One thing was certain—she could never keep an infant school again.

Gradually the period of wakefulness passed away. Little Fred became more cool and quiet, and slept sweetly. Already she had launched out into the sea of sleep on a vessel under full sail, and was waving her handkerchief to the crowd of friends on shore, whom she had left for an indefinite term of years, for a pilgrimage to the shrines of classic art, when the door-bell was rung violently, and she was startled into consciousness again. She heard her father's prompt step in the hall, and then she listened for the errand of the messenger. The voice was that of a boy, evidently very much out of breath with running.

"Please, Dr. Gilbert, come down to our house just as quick as you can," said the boy.

"Whose house is our house?" inquired the doctor, gruffly, unable to make out the boy in the darkness.

"Why, you've been there forty times. You know Mr. Pelton's, don't you?"

"Oh! yes; who is sick at Mr. Pelton's?"

"Not anybody as I knows of," said the boy, taking a long breath. "It's the next house—Mr. Tinker's."

"Well, who is sick at Mr. Tinker's?" inquired the doctor, impatiently.

"You know Ducky, don't you?"

"Ducky who? Ducky what?"

"Why, don't you know little Ducky Tinker? You've seen her forty times," exclaimed the boy in a tone of indignant astonishment.

"Look here, boy," said Dr. Gilbert, "if you know who is sick, tell me."

"Well, you know little Venus, don't you?" exclaimed the boy, in a tone that said: "If you don't know her, it is beyond my power to go further."

"Little Venus?"

"Yes, little Venus. Of course you know her. You saw her in church forty times to-day."

"Oh! yes; I understand. I'll be down there directly," said the doctor, and slammed the door in the boy's face.

Fanny, amused at the lad's cool oddity, and pained to hear of the sickness of one of her little pets, rose and went to the window to make further inquiries. Putting out her head, she saw him sitting on the doorstep, and overheard him talking to himself.

"Spiteful old customer, any way. Wonder if he thinks I'm going home alone. No, sir—you don't catch me. I'll sit here and blow till he comes round with his old go-cart, and then I'll hang on to the tail of it, and try legs with that little Kanuck of his. Hullo! Who's there? Tell me before I count three, or I'll fire. One—two—"

These last words were addressed to a dark figure that appeared at the gate to interrupt the boy's soliloquy. "I want the doctor," said the figure, just in time to save himself from the boy's fatal "three."

"You can't have him," said the boy promptly.

"Can't have him! Who are you?"

"Don't you know me? You've seen me forty times. I know you like a book."