

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER XVI.—ARTHUR'S DREAMS, AND HUCKLEBURY RUN AND ITS PROPRIETOR, COME TO DISSOLUTION.

With a start of forty-eight hours, it will readily be seen that Dan Buck had all the advantage over his pursuer that he could desire. Familiar with travel, and familiar not only with New York, but with its blindest retreats, he had abundant time to dispose of his money and of himself before Mr. Ruggles drove away from his own door. It is therefore needless to give the particulars of the pursuit. Mr. Ruggles found traces of the guilty pair, who had registered themselves by assumed names as man and wife, at different points along the route. He even learned of their passage on the same boat which bore him from Hartford. After arriving in New York, however, every track appeared to be covered. He secured the offices of the police, but they could not aid him. None of Dan's old friends had seen him. His former haunts were visited in vain. The most probable theory was that the villain had arrived in the night, and immediately taken some one of the outgoing lines of travel, and sought for other and more distant hiding-places. This supposition rose into a strong probability, when it was learned that a pair closely corresponding with their description had crossed to Jersey City, and taken passage in the Philadelphia coach.

Still the fugitives were forty-eight hours ahead of their pursuer—nay, more, for considerable time had been wasted in New York. Mr. Ruggles knew too much to be deceived with regard to the relations that existed between his daughter and the man who had enticed her from home; and in the hours of quiet into which his weakness compelled him, the whole subject was measured in all its bearings. Doubtless, at that moment, all Crampton was talking about the flight of his daughter and the robbery. The proprietor asked himself what Leonora could ever be to him, even should he secure her return. Could he have pride in her again? Would not the presence of the girl be a perpetual curse to him? Would it be any satisfaction to have a daughter of whom he would be ashamed—a daughter to hide from all pure eyes?

It could not be expected of a man like Mr. Ruggles that he should be actuated by any higher views than these. He had for her no love that prompted him, for her sake, to save her from a life of infamy. When he saw that in Crampton, where all his interests lay—where his active life had been and would continue to be—she could never again be what she had been—could never again be the object of his pride and the source of his pleasure—his zeal for the pursuit of the guilty pair was extinguished. It is true that he thought how desolate his home would be without her, and how little there was left for him to live and labour for; but as there were comfort and consolation for him in no direction, there was but little choice.

Poor lord of Hucklebury Run! Hundreds had had hard fare at his hands, but few of them all would have withheld their pity from him, could they have looked into his heart during those sad hours.

Immediately on the departure of Mr. Ruggles from home, Arthur, by coming more into contact with the operatives than he had done for several months, found an element of insubordination and mischief among them, to which the mill, under the direct rule of the proprietor, had been always a stranger. He knew that Dan Buck had insulted many of the men and women, especially the older and more sedate; but it was not with these that the disorder seemed to lie. It was with half a dozen young fellows, who had been intense admirers of the fast New Yorker, who had aped him in his dress, learned and practised his slang, grown profane by his example, laughed at his vulgar drollery, and been participants in those carousals which he had delighted to call "conference meetings."

They took particular delight in abusing Arthur. They gathered in the mill, and had long conversations. It was not difficult to see that they sympathized thoroughly with the robber, and that they were anxious that he should escape from the clutches of the old man. Openly they would not justify him in the robbery of his employer, but they professed themselves to be quite satisfied with the fact that the latter had been "bled" a little. They admired the boldness of the fellow in stealing the proprietor's daughter from under his nose, and hoped he would get off with her. The moment factory hours were over, they either went away from the mill, to confer with other cronies of the robber; or went to some private room to consult with one another. In what direction all this was tending, Arthur could not judge. He had not been accustomed to regard the set as a very brave or dangerous one. It was one that Dan Buck could lead into any mischief, but not one, he thought, that would be apt to act very boldly on its own account. Cheek delighted in being Arthur's right-hand man, and brought to him reports of such movements of these young fellows as he became acquainted with. Cheek was very much their superior in natural shrewdness, and they had few meetings that he did not know of. In fact, by conversations with them separately, he had learned that if Dan Buck should be brought back a prisoner, they should "rescue him, or die."

Arthur and Cheek had, of course, a good laugh over this. It was a harmless kind of braggadocio, that would do nobody harm, and would help to amuse the valiant young men who indulged in it. They, on the other hand, evidently attached great importance to it. They were mysterious. They conversed with each other by signs. Had the destinies of the world been upon their shoulders, they could not have felt the responsibility more keenly than they did that of being the champions of the honour, and defenders of the person, of their old leader, Mr. Dan Buck.

Cheek had seen and heard so much of this, that, at the end of a week after Mr. Ruggles left the Run for New York, he determined to play a joke upon the doughty young gentlemen. Arthur had sent him to a neighbouring village

on an errand, and returning in the evening, just as the hands were dismissed from the mill, he came driving down the hill at a furious rate, and pulled up before the door of the boarding-house. Calling Arthur to him, he mysteriously whispered, sufficiently loud for all around to hear: "He's got him." At the same time, he gave Arthur a wink, which the company did not see, or seeing, did not understand. Arthur understood it perfectly, and walked off to his room at the house of big Joslyn.

The moment Arthur disappeared, Cheek was taken bodily by half a dozen fellows, and led to the trunk room of the lodging hall, and after the key was turned, was told to reveal all he knew of the matter, or they would "get it out of his hide,"—an alternative which the set kept constantly on hand for all occasions. Cheek did not dare to tell them—they would do something, he was afraid, that they would be sorry for. After receiving from them a very comprehensive variety of threats, curses and promises, he, with great apparent reluctance, divulged the rumour that he had heard, namely, that the old man had been seen at the stage house, with Dan Buck in irons, and Leonora in tears, and that all hands would be at the Run that night.

The group of conspirators was evidently very much excited by this intelligence; and though the idea of bringing Dan Buck back to Hucklebury Run in irons was ridiculous enough to make them suspicious of the character of the rumour, they were in no mood to reason on the subject. It seemed very probable to them that old Ruggles, whom every one believed to be capable of anything when roused, would not only succeed in arresting the robber, but would delight in showing him up among his old acquaintances. The great wonder was that Dan Buck should have allowed himself to be taken alive. They questioned and cross-questioned their saucy informant, who found himself obliged to invent more lies than he had originally calculated for, but he was equal to the occasion. They at last dismissed him, threatening vengeance if he should ever report the interview.

Cheek was glad to be released. His joke somehow looked serious to him. He did not like the appearance of the fellows at all. A bottle was passed around in his presence, and he noticed that they drank deeply; and, even before he left them, betrayed the first effects of their potation. Cheek did not know but they might give Arthur trouble, so he sought for him, and related to him the events of the trunk room. Arthur was not alarmed, and retired to bed.

Cheek did not dream that Mr. Ruggles was really at the stage house, as he had said; but that was the fact. He had given up his pursuit of the fugitives after two or three days spent in New York, and, feeling very ill and miserable, had committed the matter to the police and started on his way home. Arriving at the stage-house, where he had left his horse, he lay down a few hours for rest, preferring to reach his home in the evening. He could not bear to meet the inquiring gaze and words of neighbours. He shrank from the hundred eyes that would peer out upon him from his mill, and witness his disgrace and defeat. The light distressed him. Darkness alone accorded with his depression—his helpless degradation.

As the sun went down, he called for his horse, and started for the Run. The animal was fresh with his week of rest and careful grooming, and went off briskly on his way home. The old man, haunted by his great trial, and feebly cursing his hard fate, wished that he were a horse—anything but the man he was. He was going back, he knew not why. The charm of life was gone. In his weak-minded and vulgar wife he had no refuge. In the love and sympathy of others, he knew he had no right and no place. His life had been selfish and greedy. For many years his heart had gone out in affection toward only one object, and that one was not only taken away from him, but it was for ever ruined.

The distance rapidly diminished that divided him from a home that had no attractions for him and no meaning—from duties that had lost their significance and their charm. At length he arrived upon a hill some five miles distant from the Run, from which, in the daytime, he could see the tall chimney of the mill. He pulled up his horse for a moment's rest, and for such calm reflection as the motion of the waggon denied him. There was no star to be seen. The sky was all obscured by low, dark clouds. As he sat with his eyes in the direction of his home, whither his thoughts had gone, he saw a faint light, as if, through the clouds, he caught reflection of a rising moon. As he gazed, the light grew brighter, then died away, then grew again. It was a strange light—not diffused over a large space—not soft and steady, but fitful—sometimes red, sometimes yellow. He watched it like a man entranced, and wondered, questioning in fact, whether it were not the figment of his own disordered brain. He wiped his eyes, and gazed again; and dimly, but certainly, he caught sight of a tall shaft, and other familiar objects near by.

The pause and the trance were over. He struck his horse a heavy blow, and started down the long hill at a break-neck pace. He relinquished all thought of guiding the animal. The reins hung loosely in his hands, but the whip was grasped firmly, and used freely.

The horse was left to find his own way, while the eye of the driver was fastened upon the distant light that every minute grew broader and brighter. The low clouds before him had all changed to a deep, bloody red. Then little tongues of flames leaped and faded. Then a broad shaft of flame rose, quivered and fell. Then a great spire of fire shot up, and swayed for a moment, and burst in myriad stars of fire, that were swept away, and fell in a crimson rain.

The long declivity was passed, yet the proprietor knew not how. His horse was running fiercely, and breathing heavily, with a short, quick snort at every straining leap. The waggon reeled from side to side of the road, but the rider, with every muscle rigid, seemed to have grown to it, and unconsciously to manage to keep it from overthrow. Soon he began to hear outcries from the farm houses, and to pass men running toward the light, that flamed more and still more intensely. He passed dim faces that stopped and stood still with horror as he rushed wildly past them through

the darkness, and rained, with constantly increasing madness, his blows upon the infuriated horse. Bridges, hills, rocks—all were alike unminded in that terrible ride.

One mile only remained to be passed over, and then the whole country around was alight. Chimneys sprang out of the darkness like ghosts in the reflection of the flames. Trees glowed like gold upon one side, and were wrapped in pitchy darkness on the other. The air was wild with yell, and full of falling cinders, swept off upon the wind. As the proprietor rushed on, growing still more intensely excited, half-a-dozen men leaped from the bushes before him, with the intention to stop his horse. Riding toward the light, both the animal and his driver were seen as distinctly as though the sun had been shining. The men caught a glimpse of the flying animal and the single ghostly passenger, and leaped back into the cover, just in time to save themselves from the resistless wheels, and the vehicle rushed on.

As the proprietor came to the summit of the hill that overlooked the mill, he saw that structure, which he had worn out a life to build, enveloped in flames in every part. The horse, as he rushed down the hill, caught early attention from the mass of men and women that crowded the road, and with frenzied shouts they rushed in every direction to escape him. The hill was descended with the same furious speed that had been maintained from the time the first burst of light was discovered.

Blinded by the blaze, and frightened by the heat, the horse came opposite to the burning mass, and stopped so suddenly as almost to throw the crazed proprietor from his seat. Then he stood a moment, trembling and smoking, in the fiery heat, then staggered, and fell heavily upon the road, stone-dead.

The moment the horse fell, his driver rose to his feet in the waggon, and faced the fire. The tumult all around him ceased. Every eye was turned to where he stood in the blinding glare, his pale face lit up by the roaring flames, and his garments smoking in the heat. Every tongue was silent. The proprietor's sudden and almost miraculous appearance, his wild ride down the hill, the fall of the over-driven animal, and the statue-like, unblinking gaze of those eyes into the glowing furnace, tended to impress them with almost a superstitious terror. His rigid attitude made them rigid; his silence hushed them. They expected to see him fall dead like his horse, or that some chimney would reel over and crush him.

At length one man broke the spell which rested upon the crowd, and ran down the road, shielding his face from the heat with his cap. As he came up to the waggon, he shouted to the proprietor to run for his life. The old man, startled into action, leaped directly for the flames, evidently bent on self-destruction. Arthur Blague—for it was he—leaped after him, and grasping him around the body, dragged him away to where he could gather a single breath, and then lifted him to his feet, and led him like a child to his dwelling. Mrs. Ruggles was at the door weeping and praying, but the proprietor did not recognize her. He allowed himself to be led to his room, and laid upon the bed. His face already was a mass of blisters, and he moaned piteously. Arthur then left him for an hour in the care of his almost helpless wife, and ran off to do what he could to save the property in the vicinity of the mill. In that brief hour, that massive structure, with all its wealth of cunning machinery, dissolved into air, and nothing was left but a heap of red and smoking ruins, and the tall chimney, standing stark against the wall of darkness that moved in as the flames went down, and surrounded the ghastly desolation.

Groups of bare-headed girls were gathered here and there without shelter. Men, whose bread was taken from them by the calamity, stood bitterly apart, and thought of the future. Careless young fellows jested and laughed, or went up to the ruins and lit their pipes with a brand.

Having arranged for a watch, Arthur returned to the house of the proprietor, and found him in a raving delirium. Soon afterwards, Dr. Gilbert, who had been off upon one of his night trips, came in, and administered a powerful opiate. The poor proprietor raved about Arthur as the cause of all his trials and reverses, and then talked wildly of his daughter and her betrayer. At length the dose took effect, and he slept. Arthur, utterly exhausted by the excitement and labours of the evening, dropped upon a sofa in the room, and in a moment was locked in slumber.

How long he slept he did not know, but before his eyes, in all his troubled dreams, the conflagration still raged on. The voices of a great multitude were ringing in his ears. At last, in the centre of the flames which rose and roared so wildly before his dream, there swelled a grand column of fire, following an explosion that seemed to shake the very ground, and to stun his ears to deafness. He was awake in an instant, but the room was perfectly dark. For a moment he did not know where he was. There was a strange sound in his ears—a gurgling, difficult breathing, like that of a man stricken by an incubus. He rose to his feet and groped his way to an adjoining room, where he found a light burning, and where were gathered a dozen young women who had come in for shelter. They had heard a noise and were frightened into speechlessness. He took the lamp in his hand, and quickly retracing his steps, found the proprietor lying upon the floor, a sheet of blood covering his face, and a pistol lying at his side. He had waked, had drunk in one draught the cup of woe which the events of the week had mixed for him, and, maddened by the mixture, had deliberately risen, and with the weapon which his fears had for years kept at his bedside, had blown out his brains. He was quite unconscious, and a few long-drawn, stertorous respirations finished the life of the proprietor of Hucklebury Run.

It is needless to enter into a detail of the events immediately following the tragic end of this series of calamities—to tell of the coroner's jury, which found that Mr. Ruggles died by his own hand, while temporarily insane; of the arrest of the young conspirators on a charge of incendiarism, their discharge for lack of sufficient evidence to hold them; of the funeral, which called together a crowd from twenty miles around—a funeral with but one mourner, and she not comfortless; of the scattering of the operatives in