

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE CRAMPTON COMET REAPPEARS, PASSES ITS PERIHELION AGAIN, AND FADES OUT.

"Commencement" at old Dartmouth! Day memorable to incoming freshmen and outgoing graduates! Annual epoch in the life of Hanover, on one side or the other of which all events respectfully arrange themselves! Holiday for all the region round about, for which small boys save their money, and on which strings of rustic lovers, in Concord waggon, make pilgrimages to the shrines of learning! Day of the reunion of long separated classmates, who parted with beardless faces and meet with bald heads! Day of black coats, pale faces and white cravats! Day of rosettes, and badges, and blue ribbons, and adolescent oratory, and processions, and imported brass bands! Carnival of hawkers and peddlers! Advent of sweet cider, and funeral of oysters, dead with summer travel! Great day of the State of New Hampshire!

Commencement day came at old Dartmouth, and found Dr. Gilbert and Fanny in the occupation of the best rooms in the old Dartmouth Hotel. Booths and tents had been erected in the village where they were permitted, and early in the morning, before the good people of Hanover had kindled their fires, or the barkeeper of the hotel had swept off his piazza, the throng of peddlers and boys began to pour into the village.

Dr. Gilbert's zeal in educational matters, and Dr. Gilbert's reputed wealth, were appreciated at Dartmouth. He had, a few years before, been appointed to a place upon the board of trustees of that venerable institution, and had annually exhibited his portly form and intelligent old face upon the platform during its anniversaries. He enjoyed the occasion and the distinction always; but he had never visited his alma mater with such anticipations of pleasure as warmed him when he rose on the morning we have introduced, and threw open the shutters to let in the sunlight of a cloudless "Commencement Day." Dr. Gilbert shaved himself very carefully that morning. Then he enveloped himself in a suit of black broadcloth, that had never spent on the Sabbath air its original bloom. Then he brushed his heavy white hair back from his high forehead; and it is possible that he indulged in some justifiable reflections upon the grandeur of his personal appearance.

There were several reasons for the delightful character of Dr. Gilbert's anticipations. The central reason was, of course, the gratification he would have of seeing the son of his love honoured in the presence of a cloud of witnesses. Another was the pleasure of appearing with a daughter who had made herself famous. Another was the expectation of meeting his surviving classmates. To these it would be his pride to appear as a patron and trustee of the college; as a man who had been successful in his profession, and in the accumulation of wealth; and as the father of the valedictorian and a celebrated authoress. In fact, as Dr. Gilbert stood that morning, looking at himself in his mirror, and thinking of what he was and what the day had in store for him, he could not help feeling that it was the great day of his life.

The breakfast bell rang its cheery summons, and the doctor knocked at his daughter's door. She would be ready in a moment. So he paced slowly up and down the hall, swinging his hands, and giving courtly greeting to the rabble that poured by him in their anxiety to get seats at the board. The long stare that some of them gave him he took as a tribute to his venerable and striking appearance, as, in fact, it was. At length Fanny appeared; and taking the stylish woman upon his arm, he descended to the breakfast-room, where fifty men and women were feeding at a long table, at the head of which were two vacant chairs, reserved for Dr. Gilbert and his daughter. In an instant all eyes were upon the distinguished pair. Then neighbouring heads were brought together, and, in whispers, the personal appearance of the authoress was discussed. Old men looked over their spectacles, and young men in white cravats looked through their fingers. Fanny could not but be conscious that she was the object of many eyes, and, holding her own fixed upon her plate, she breakfasted in silence.

She thought the company would never finish her meal. The truth was, they were all waiting to see her retire; and when she and her father rose to leave the table, there was a general shoving back of chairs, and two or three old gentlemen came around to exchange a cordial "good morning" with Dr. Gilbert, and get an introduction to his daughter. Busily engaged in conversation, they naturally took their way to the parlour; and, before Fanny could get away, she found herself holding a levee, with a crowd of persons around, pressing forward to be introduced. A fine old doctor of divinity had assumed the privileges of a friend, and while Dr. Gilbert was with happy volubility pouring into the ear of an old classmate the praises and successes of his son, his daughter was coolly receiving the homage of the assembly. There were a dozen young men who had come back to get their "master's degree." Some of them had their hair stuck up very straight, like bristles, and some of them wore their hair very long, and brushed behind their ears. Some were very carefully dressed, and none more so than those who were seedy. Some were prematurely fat, and others were prematurely lean; but in all this wide variety and contrariety, there were some things in which they were all alike. They had all read "Rhododendron," all admired it, were all happy to meet its author, were all desirous of making an impression, and were all secretly anxious of winning the special favour of Miss Gilbert.

Thus forced into prominence, Fanny exerted herself to converse as became her with those about her; but always, as the smiling gentlemen appeared and retired, she could not resist feeling that they were beneath her—that they were immature—that they wanted age and character. There was an element of insipidity—something unsatisfying—in all they said. Often the figure of Arthur Blague, who had no part in this festival, came before her imagination—

the tall form, the noble presence, the deep dark eye, the rich voice, revealing the rich thought and rich nature—and the chattering, smiling throng seemed dwarfs to her.

At length her brother appeared, and taking his arm, she left the room, and ascended with him to her parlour. The poor boy was pale and trembling with nervous apprehension. A bright, red spot was burning upon either cheek, his dark eye was unnaturally bright, and the exertion of ascending the stairs had quite disturbed his breathing. He had worked up to this point with courage; but now, that he was about to grasp the prize for which he had so faithfully struggled, not only his courage, but his strength, failed him. Fanny was very sadly impressed by the appearance of her brother. Her eyes were full of tears as she put her hand upon his shoulder, and said: "Ah, Fred! If I could only give you some of my strength to-day!"

Then the doctor came in, but there was something before his eyes that blinded him to the real condition of his son. He was brimful of happiness. He had been praised and congratulated, and flattered, until he was as happy as he could be. The young man saw it all; pressed his feverish lips together in determination, and spoke no word to dampen his father's ardour. In that father's heart was the spring of his own ambition. To gratify him—to accomplish that upon which his father had hung many years of fond hopes—he had laboured, night and day, in health and sickness. Now he was determined that the soul within him, upon which the frail body had lived for months, should eke out his strength, and carry him through the trial of the day. Fanny saw it all, pressed his hand, and said: "God help you, Fred!" and the young man went out, to act his part with his associates.

At this time the village was becoming more and more crowded; and word was brought to the doctor that he had better secure a seat for his daughter in the church, in which the exercises of the day were to be held. So Fanny dressed early, and was taken over by a smart boy with a blue ribbon in his buttonhole, while the doctor remained behind to add dignity to the procession.

At ten o'clock there was a sound of martial music in Hanover, and a company of bearded men, in military uniform, preceded by a marshal, and followed by a large company of students, marched to the Dartmouth Hotel, and announced by trumpet and drum their readiness to conduct Dr. Gilbert and his associate dignitaries to the church.

Down the steps, through a crowd of eager boys, and rosy-cheeked country belles and their brown-faced lovers, Dr. Gilbert, arm in arm with an old classmate, made his way, and took his place of honour in the procession. Word was given to march, and the village rang again with the blare of brass, and the boom of drums, and the din of cymbals; and the marshal, and the band of beards, and the corps of students, took a circuit around the common, and, reaching the church at last, where a crushing crowd was assembled upon the steps, the students divided their lines, and the guests and men of honour passed through with uncovered heads, and disappeared within.

In five minutes more every seat and aisle in the church was filled. It was ten minutes before order could be secured. Then music was called for, and the overture to Tancredi was played as a prelude to a prayer not quite so long as the opera; which, in turn, was followed by "Blue-eyed Mary," introducing a lively march, called "Wood Up," which introduced the leader of the band as the performer of a preposterous key-bugle solo.

Then came the "Salutatory" in very transparent Latin, in which everybody was "saluted"—the President of the College, the professors, the trustees and the people. The beautiful women present received special attention from the gallant young gentlemen, and the cordial terms of this portion of the salutation drew forth marked demonstrations of applause. It was noticed, however, that when the trustees were greeted, the young man addressed himself particularly to Dr. Gilbert, who received the address with graceful dignity; and that when feminine beauty came in for its share of attention, the young man's eyes were fastened upon Miss Gilbert, who occupied a seat upon a retiring portion of the stage. It really seemed to the doctor as if all the events of the day took him for a pivot, and revolved around him.

As the exercises progressed, Fanny Gilbert found herself strangely interested. There was nothing of special attraction and brilliancy in the orations; but there was something in the subjects treated, and in the names pronounced, that called back to her a scene of the past, which occupied a position quite at the other end of her career. "The Poetry of the Heavens" brought back to her the chalk planetarium of many years before, on which that poetry was illustrated under her special direction. "Napoleon," and "Cæsar," and "Joan of Arc," all figured upon the Dartmouth stage, and she could not help smiling as Rev. Jonas Slater returned to her memory. So, through all that tedious day, Dartmouth and Crampton were curiously mixed together, as if in fact, no less than in imagination, there were a connection between them. There sat her father before her, as he had sat a dozen years ago—pleased, eager, interested. There was she, occupying the same relative place upon the platform. There was the green baize carpet; there was the throng before it. Again and again rang out the cheers, as they rang on the day of the exhibition of the Crampton Light Infantry. There was she, awaiting, as on that occasion, the appearance of her brother—a comet to come forth from the hidden space behind the curtain, and then to retire.

The vividness with which this old experience was recalled to her imagination by the scenes and events around her, impressed Fanny almost superstitiously. The day and its incidents seemed like one of those passages known to be strange to our observation, yet impressing us with their familiarity—glimpses caught through some rent in the oblivious veil that hides from us a previous existence. The doctor saw nothing of this. It was fitting that there should be this introduction to the performance of his son. Every glory won by those who came upon the stage, and retired, was added to the crown of his boy, for he had distanced all of them. Not a good word was spoken, not a worthy suc-

cess was achieved, that did not minister to the splendour of his son's triumph.

Orations and music were finished at last, and only the Valedictory of Fred Gilbert remained to be pronounced. Around this performance and around him was concentrated the keenest interest of the occasion. His devotion to study, his personal beauty, his excellent character, his well-known gifts, and his achievement of the highest honours of his class, brought to him universal sympathy, and directed to his part in the day's programme the most grateful attention.

His name was pronounced, and the moment he appeared he was greeted with a general outburst of applause. The doctor forgot himself, lost his self-possession, and leaned forward upon his cane with an eager smile. Quick before Fanny came again the old planetarium; but alas! the golden-haired boy was gone, and a pale, fragile young man, with chestnut curls, was in his place. The house was still, and the feeble voice went out upon the congregation like the wail of a sick child. He had evidently summoned all his strength; and as he proceeded, his tones became rounder and more musical; but the whole address seemed more like a farewell to the world than to the college. Tears gathered in all eyes under the spell of his plaintive cadences, and all seemed to hold their breath, that he might expend no more upon them than was necessary.

The last words were said, and then there rang out over the whole assembly cheer upon cheer. Bouquets were thrown upon the stage by fair hands in the galleries, and handkerchiefs were waved at the tips of jewelled fingers. The doctor's eyes are wet with delight, but Fanny sits and watches the young man in alarm. There is a strange, convulsive movement of his chest, as he stoops to gather the bouquets at his feet. He carries his handkerchief to his mouth, and holds it there while he bows his acknowledgments to the galleries. As he retires from the stage, Fanny catches a glimpse of the handkerchief: it is bright with his heart's blood! Ah! the comet has come and gone out into the unknown spaces—sunned itself in public applause for the last time—gone to shine feebler and feebler in the firmament of life, until, in an unknown heaven, it passes from human sight.

This fancy flies swiftly through Fanny's brain—this thought pierces her heart—as she rises to her feet, walks quickly across the stage, and whispers a few words in her father's ear. He looks up into her face with a vague, incredulous stare, and shakes his head. She takes him firmly by the arm, and leads him wondering to the curtain behind which Fred had retired. She parts the hanging folds, and both enter. The movement is little noticed by the assembly, for some have already turned to leave the house, and others are listening to the music, or making their comments to each other upon the address.

As the doctor and Fanny entered the little curtained corner, they saw Fred sitting in a chair, freely spitting blood upon his handkerchief, and surrounded by a little company of frightened associates. Dr. Gilbert, though he had been accustomed through a long professional life to disease and calamity in their most terrible forms, stood before this case as helpless as a child. Beyond the most obvious directions, he could say and do nothing; and an eminent physician of the village, at that moment seated upon the platform, was sent for. By Fanny's order, Fred was removed to the hotel, where she could nurse him; and all the events of the day were forgotten in this new and most unlooked-for trial.

This seemed to be the one event of Dr. Gilbert's life for which he had no preparation. It took from him all his strength and all his self-possession. He stood before it in utter helplessness, offering no opinion, assuming no responsibility, hardly able to perform the simplest office of attendance, taking Fanny's will as law, and relying on the professional skill of others. As the more serious features of the attack passed away, and Fred was allowed to whisper his feelings and desires into the ear of his sister, he expressed a decided wish that his father might be kept from his bedside. The affliction of his father pained him more than his own disease, and he could not bear to look at him.

The composure and happiness of her brother astonished Fanny beyond measure. As he lay upon his bed, day after day, with his pleasant eyes upon her, and her hand in his, he seemed more like a child that had lain down to rest, than like a young man, suddenly snatched from life, enterprise and hope. "Oh! it's so sweet to rest, Fanny," he would say, "so sweet to rest."

The multitude had departed, and the hotel and the street were pervaded by almost a Sabbath stillness. Days passed away. Sympathizing friends called and made inquiries, and offered unaccepted services, and retired. The doctor lounged upon the piazza, or walked listlessly about the halls, or engaged his friends in conversations, of which his poor boy was always the theme. Every word of encouragement given by the professional attendant was repeated by the doctor to every man he met. Once or twice he entered his son's room, and began, in the old way, to talk of what he should next undertake, under a vague impression that a contemplation of possible future triumph would stimulate and encourage him. But the young man turned his face away in distress, and Fanny interfered in his behalf.

Fred Gilbert was not only a child again, but he wished to be one. Manhood's great struggle with the world had come upon him too early. He had been forced away from home—driven to the seclusion of study—stimulated to efforts that necessarily crucified his social sympathies—and now, when he was disabled and the great prize secured, he was only too happy to become helpless, and to give himself up to the care and attention of others. A sick girl could not have been more gentle, affectionate and submissive. He rejoiced in subjection, and was as happy under Fanny's brooding care as a babe upon its mother's bosom.

A fortnight passed away and the young man became able to occupy his chair for the greater portion of the day. September was creeping on, and, though the earth still looked fresh and green, the murmurous hush of autumn was settling upon the landscape. The dreamy, sibilant breath of insect life, unintermittent, but heard rather by the listening soul than the listening sense, pervaded the atmosphere, as if it