

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER I.—THE CRAMPTON LIGHT INFANTRY AND THE CHALK PLANETARIUM.

Dr. Theophilus Gilbert was in a hurry. He had been in a hurry all night. He had been in a hurry all the morning. While the village of Crampton was asleep, he had anticipated the limb of a young man ten miles distant, attenuated a child in convulsions on his way home, and assisted in introducing into existence an infant at the house of his next door neighbour—how sad an existence—how terrible a life—neither he nor the poor mother, widowed but a month, could imagine.

Dr. Gilbert had taken an early breakfast, and still the black Canadian pony, with his bushy head down, the long hair over his eyes, and his shaggy fetlocks splashed with mud, flew around the village of Crampton, bearing the doctor in his gig, and stopping here and there at the houses of his patients without the straightening of a rein, as if the pony knew quite as well as the doctor where the sick people were, and had a private interest in the business.

It was a familiar vision—this of the doctor and his pony and his gig. They had been intimately associated for many years, and formed what the good people of Crampton called "an institution." If the doctor had died, the pony and gig would have been useless. If the gig had broken down, the doctor and the pony would not have known what to do. If the pony had cast himself in his stable (he knew too much for that) and died of suffocation, the doctor and the gig could never have got along at all. The gig was very small—a little, low-backed, open chair—and how the doctor, who was a large, burly man, ever sat down in it, was a mystery to all the wondering boys of the village. But he did sit down in it a great many times in a day; and the stout Springs bore him lightly, while the wheels plunged into the ruts, or encountered the stones of the street, communicating to the rider a gently rising and falling motion as he sat leaning forward, eager to get on, and ready to jump off, like the figure-head of a ship riding an easy-going swell.

Still Dr. Gilbert, borne by the pony and the gig, hurried about the village. He plunged from the street into the house of a patient, and then plunged from the house into the street, and repeated the process so many times in the course of the morning that, had his limbs been less muscular, he would have dropped with fatigue. He paused but a moment at each bedside, and when he came forth from it, with his case of medicines under his arm, and a doubtful, aromatic atmosphere enveloping him, his strong eyes and firmly compressed lips expressed haste and determination, as if they said: "This work must be done at once—all done—done so that there may be no more to do during the day."

The doctor's business on this particular morning was not, it must be confessed, wholly in the line of his profession. In truth, it had not been for a week. He had patients, certainly, but they did not monopolize his interest and attention. The young man whose limb he had abbreviated the previous night was told by the doctor, in his most sympathetic tones, that he would lose a great privilege in not being able to attend the exhibition. The little girl who had convulsions was threatened, soon after recovering consciousness, with being kept away from the exhibition if she did not take her medicines promptly. Poor Mrs. Blague, with her baby on her arm—fatherless before it was born—was commiserated on the interference of the cent of its birth with her enjoyment of the exhibition, and assured that if Mr. Blague were alive, such an exhibition would do his heart good. Every family he visited was adjured not to fail of attending the exhibition; and the doctor greeted those whom he met in the street with "You are all coming to the exhibition, of course."

Of course, everybody was going to the exhibition: for the doctor was a driving man, and when he undertook an enterprise, everybody understood that it would go through. He was wilful, opinionated, industrious, indefatigable. The duties of his profession expended not more than a moiety of his vital supplies, and the surplus sought investment on every hand. He was a stirring man in the parish, in the church, and in all the affairs of the town. He was a stirring man in the public schools, and was, in fact, the leading spirit in them all. He made speeches at all the conventions of his town and county, with little apparent discrimination of their objects. In order to be always employed, he had studied a little law, obtained an appointment as Justice of the Peace, and, by degrees, had become a sort of general administrator of the estates of his more unfortunate patients.

The morning wore on, and the doctor at length turned in at his own gate, and turned out the little black pony. Country waggons, well loaded with women and children, began to enter the village. Several ministers from the neighbouring towns drove in, and alighted at the door of the Crampton parsonage. First came Rev. Dr. Bloomer, a very large man with a very large shirt-collar and a very small wife, in a lopsided waggon, weak in the springs. Then came the Rev. Jonas Sliter, with Mrs. Rev. Jonas Sliter, whose generous physical proportions produced a visible depression of the waggon-spring over which she sat, the Rev. Jonas Sliter meanwhile sitting very erect and looking very severe behind his white cravat and gold bow-spectacles, as if he were dangerous, and had been lashed by the form to the back of his seat, and the latter had been put over his eyes for shutters. Following these came the Rev. J. Desilver Newman, a young sprig of divinity in brown gloves and a smart black neck-tie, without any wife, although, judging by his rather dashing toilet, not altogether unwilling to take in weight sufficient to balance his waggon.

Barfoot boys from distant farms gathered upon the steps of the old church, or assembled in the porch to watch the sexton while he rang the bell. A smiling old man with a bass-viol under his arm, and a grave young man with a flute in his pocket, passed up the steps, entered the door, and were soon heard tuning their instruments, and performing

certain very uncertain flourishes, in which the flute flew very high and the bass-viol sank very low.

The bustle was increasing every moment. Little children, mysteriously bundled up, were deposited at the door of a school-house across the common by men and women who handled them carefully, as if they were glass, or porcelain. Then Dr. Gilbert was seen to issue from his house and to enter the house of his pastor, Rev. Mr. Wilton. Then he was seen to come out with Rev. J. Desilver Newman, followed by Rev. Dr. Bloomer and wife, Rev. Jonas Sliter and wife, and Rev. Mr. Wilton and wife, the last of whom closed and locked the door. These dignitaries, instead of making their way to the church, crossed the common to the school house, and disappeared within.

The church filled rapidly, in front of a stage temporarily erected, and covered with a carpet of green baize. The only occupants of the stage were the two musicians, the older one of whom relieved his embarrassment by drawing his bow forward and backward upon a piece of rosin, while the younger continually took his flute to pieces to wet the joints, and then put it together again, and squinted along its length to see if the holes were in range. There was a mysterious diagram upon the carpet, in French chalk, that taxed the curiosity of every eye, and provoked unlimited comment.

At length the bell began to toll, and the assembly momentarily augmenting, and momentarily becoming excited with expectation, looked forth from the old church windows, toward the school house. The door of the school house was opened as the bell closed its lazy surmings, and the curiosity of Crampton was on tiptoe. First appeared Dr. Gilbert alone as grand marshal; and he was followed by all the clergymen as aids. Then came little boys dressed in extravagant little dresses—crosses between trousers and petticoats—the stoutest of whom, a little red-headed fellow of five summers, bore a banner inscribed with the words:

"The Crampton Light Infantry."

The Crampton Light Infantry did not march very well, it must be confessed. It was all that mothers and the wives of the pastors could do to keep them in line. One little boy insisted that his mother should carry him, and ultimately carried his point. Some looked down upon their clothes. Some looked up and around to see who might be looking at their clothes. Others, with a grave thoughtfulness sadly beyond their years, seemed impressed with the proprieties of the occasion, and, among these, the little boy with golden curls, fair skin and large, dark eyes, who brought up the rear of the male portion of the procession, and who bore a second banner with this inscription:

"There shall be no more thence an infant of days—for the child shall die an hundred years old."

Following this banner, came the little girls in pairs, their eyes bright and their cheeks flushed with excitement, looking like so many blossoms of silk and muslin. Last of all—driving her flock before her—came Miss Fanny Gilbert, a tall, slender girl of sixteen—queenly, self-possessed and triumphant.

It was thirty years ago that this very sweet and simple pageant moved across the Crampton common, under a bright, August sun; and nothing more beautiful has been seen upon that common since. It was during the Infant School Epidemic of the period that Dr. Gilbert, going from town to town, had taken the infection, and communicated it to all Crampton; and he had selected his daughter Fanny as the best instrument upon which he could lay his hand to effect his purposes. He planned, and she executed; and this, the great day of exhibition, had been looked forward to by the doctor with intense interest for many weeks. He should now demonstrate his own foresight, and the capacity of the youngest minds to receive and retain instruction. He should inaugurate a new epoch in the history of education. There should be no more an infant of days—of years, at most—in Crampton.

The procession now reached the church and moved up the broad aisle. There was brisk cheering through the house, and waving of handkerchiefs, and fluttering of fans, as the little creatures mounded the stage—a place to which they had become accustomed by several visits for rehearsal. The limited orchestra (already alluded to) had intended to receive the procession with appropriate musical demonstrations, but the confusion quite confounded them, and they shrank from the attempt.

Order was at last secured. Some of the little boys had been set down very hard, as if it were difficult to make them sit still unless they were flattened. Others were pulled out from among the girls, and made to exchange seats with girls who had inadvertently strayed off with the boys. All were perched upon benches too high for them, and the row of pantalets in front looked very much as if they were hung upon a clothes-line.

Then Dr. Gilbert came forward, and, rapping upon the stage three times with his cane, called the assembly to order. They had gathered, he said, to witness one of the distinguishing characteristics and proudest triumphs of modern civilization. It had been supposed that the time of children less than five years old must necessarily be wasted in play that the golden moments of infancy must be forever lost. That time was past. As the result of modern improvement, and among the achievements of modern progress, it had appeared that even the youngest minds were capable of receiving ideas, and that education may actually be begun at the maternal breast, pursued in the cradle and forwarded in the nursery to a point beyond the power of imagination at present to conceive. It was in these first years of life that there had been a great waste of time. He saw children before him, in the audience, older than any upon the stage, who had no knowledge of arithmetic or geography—children, the most of whom had never heard the word astronomy pronounced. While these precious little ones had been improving their time, there were those before him whom he had seen engaged in fishing, others in playing at ball, and others still, little girls, doing nothing but amusing themselves with their dolls! He had but a word to add. There were others who would address them before the close of the exercises. He offered the exhibition as a demonstra-

tion of the feasibility of infant instruction. He trusted he offered it in an humble spirit; but he felt that he was justified in pointing to it as an effectual condemnation of those parents who had denied to their infants the privilege of attending the school.

Administering this delicate rap upon the knuckles of such parents as had chosen to take charge of their own "infants," the doctor turned to Rev. Mr. Wilton and invited him to lead the audience in prayer. Like many prayers offered to the Omnipotent, on occasions like this, the prayer of Mr. Wilton conveyed a great deal of information pertinent to the occasion, to the being whom he addressed, and, incidentally, of course, to the congregation.

It was now Miss Gilbert's office to engage the audience; and her little troop of infantry was put through its evolutions and exercises to the astonishment and delight of all beholders. They sang songs; they repeated long passages of poetry in concert; they went through the multiplication table to the tune of Yankee Doodle; they answered, with the shrill sing-song voice of parrots, all sorts of questions in geography; they recited passages of Scripture; they gave an account of the creation of the world and of the American Revolution; they told the story of the birth of Christ and spelled words of six syllables; they added, they multiplied, they subtracted, they divided; they told what hemisphere, what continent, what country, what state, what county, what town, they lived in; they repeated the names of the Presidents of the United States and the Governors of the Commonwealth; they acted a little drama of Moses in the bulrushes; and they did many other things, till, all through the audience, astonishment grew into delight, and delight grew into rapture.

"Most astonishing!" exclaimed Rev. Dr. Bloomer.

"Very remarkable!" responded Rev. Jonas Sliter.

"Perfectly! ah—beats everything I ever saw!" said Rev. J. Desilver Newman, very flush of enthusiasm and very short of adverbs.

Dr. Gilbert calmly surveyed his triumph, or turned from one to another of the pastors upon the stage, as some new and surprising development of juvenile acquisition was exhibited, with a nod of the head and a smile which indicated that he was indeed a little surprised himself. He had never been so proud of his daughter as then. Rev. J. Desilver Newman was also receiving powerful impressions with regard to the same young woman. In fact, he had gone so far as to wonder how much money Dr. Gilbert might be worth; but then he had gone as far as this with a hundred other young women and come back safe.

The musicians, who had been kept pretty closely at work accompanying the children in their songs, moved back their chairs at a hint from Miss Gilbert, and took a position behind the pulpit. There was a general moving of benches and making ready for the closing scene and the crowning glory of the exhibition—a representation of the solar system on green baize, by bodies that revolved on two legs.

The mystery of the chalk planetarium was solved. Out of a chaos of frocks and juvenile breeches, Miss Gilbert proceeded to evoke the order of a sidereal system.

"The Sun will take his place," said Miss Gilbert, and immediately the red-headed boy, who bore the banner of "The Crampton Light Infantry," stepped to the centre of the planetarium, with a huge ball in his hand mounted upon the end of a tall stick. Taking his stand upon the chalk sun, and elevating the sphere above a head that would have answered the purpose of a sun quite as well, he set it whirling on its axis; and thus came the centre of the system into location and into office.

"Mercury!" said Miss Gilbert; and out came a smart little chap with a smaller ball in his hand, and began walking obediently around the chalk circle next the sun.

"Venus!" and sweet little Venus rose out of the waves of muslin tossing on the side of the stage, and took the next circle.

"Earth and her Satellite!" called forth a boy and a girl, the latter playing moon to the boy's earth, revolving around him, as he revolved around the sun, and with great astronomical propriety making faces at him.

Mars was called for, and it must be acknowledged that the red planet was very pale and very weary looking.

"Jupiter and his Satellites!" and the boy Jupiter walked upon the charmed circle with a charming circle of little girls revolving around him.

So Saturn with its seven moons, and Georgium Sidus, otherwise Herschel, otherwise Uranus, with its six attendant orbs, took their places on the verge of the system, and slowly, very slowly, moved around the common centre. But there was one orbit still unfilled, and that was a very eccentric one. It was not all described upon the green baize carpet, but left it, and retired behind the pulpit and was lost.

The system was in motion, and, watching every revolving body in it, stood the system's queue, indicating by her finger that Uranus should go slower, or Mercury faster, and striving to keep order among the subjects of her realm. The music meantime grew dreamy and soft in an attempt to suggest what is called "the music of the spheres," if any reader happens to know what kind of music that is. Heavenly little bodies indeed they were, and it is not wonderful that many eyes moistened with sensibility as they mingled so gracefully and so harmoniously upon the plane of vision.

Still the eccentric orbit was without an occupant, and no name was called. At last, a pair of large dark eyes appeared from behind the pulpit, and behind the eyes a head of golden hair, and behind the head a wreath of floating golden curls. This was the unbidden comet, advancing slowly toward the Sun, almost creeping at first, then gradually increasing his velocity, intent on coming into collision with no other orb, smiling not, seeing nothing of the audience before him, and yet absorbing the attention of every eye in the house. The doctor's eyes beam with unwonted interest. Miss Gilbert forgets Mars and Venus, and looks only at the comet. At last the comet darts around its perihelion, and the golden curls are turned to the audience in full retreat toward the unknown region of space behind the pulpit from whence it had proceeded.