

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER XV.—ARTHUR BLAGUE AWAKES FROM A PLEASANT DREAM.—SO DO MR. AND MRS. RUGGLES.

It will be seen that there was a good deal of discipline going on among the better characters engaged in our story during the season. Dr. Gilbert had received a very decided shock, and was taught that a strong will is not omnipotent. The struggle was not so nearly finished as it appeared when he closed his memorable interview with Mary Hammett, but it was covered from observation. He visited her school as usual, insisted on her appearing at his table, met her in the street, and, by dint of dogged determination, wore out his disappointment—compelled himself to bow to the decision that forever placed her beyond his possession. It hurt him, but it humanized him.

Mary Hammett herself was not without trials. It was a trial to meet Dr. Gilbert, and it had become so much a trial to encounter Arthur Blague that she endeavoured to shun him. She would give him no private opportunity to speak to her. She constantly feared the introduction of a subject that could result only in pain to him and to her. Her quiet had been disturbed more than once during the summer by the intrusion of Mr. Dan Buck, who insisted on her paying him more money. He had drawn around him a circle of dissolute companions in the village, with whom he spent whole nights of carousal, and, by threats of an exposure which Mary could not face, succeeded in compelling from her all her hard earnings.

Fanny Gilbert's discipline did not entirely cease with the disappointment consequent upon the failure of her book. When she had decided for the time to relinquish her schemes for the acquisition of fame, and to mingle with the life around her, she did not find that life ready to receive and minister to her. Her old companions had become offended with her protracted exclusiveness, and, conceiving that she felt herself above them, shunned her. Many of them had read her book, and, with the meanness characteristic of their small natures, had ridiculed it—adopted in irony its phrases—talked and laughed about it on every occasion of their meeting. They received the volume as an assertion on the part of the authoress of superiority. They felt that they had no defence but by combining, either to put her down, or to set themselves up, by ignoring her altogether. She was not invited to their social gatherings. Many passed her in the street without seeing her. While she was engaged in her labour, she had voluntarily isolated herself from them; and now that she was ready for their society, and longed for their sympathy, they avoided her as if she were a tainted woman. This was one of the penalties of seeking for public praise which she had not anticipated at all. She had expected to be courted by those who knew her, and was disappointed. Their unreasonable jealousy made her angry, and, alas! hardened her. Many an evening Fanny walked her chamber alone, and revolved her trials. "They shall court me," said Miss Gilbert, stamping her slippers on the floor. "I'll make them. It's in me, and I'll make them. I'm not a bankrupt yet, thank God!"

The life of Arthur Blague, after Mrs. Ruggles' "valuable accusation" to the society of Hucklebury Run made his appearance, was one of hard labour and constant annoyance. The proprietor and his family, and the plausible villain who had obtained a sort of mastery over all of them, lost no opportunity to insult him. Oftentimes he was tempted to angry resentment, but self-control gave him victory as often over them and his own indignant spirit. Had he not been at work for others—had he not subordinated his life to the comfort and support of those whom Providence had placed in his care—he would have fled. For himself, he would have endured nothing; but evermore there rose before his eyes the pale face of his dependent mother, and the helpless little hands of his brother, and he said to himself, "For these, I endure."

Besides, Arthur had one all-absorbing subject of thought. It pervaded, purified and elevated his whole nature. When he opened his eyes in the morning, one sweet face and form seemed hovering over his pillow. When he closed them at night the same angel came to comfort him, and to walk with him into the realm of dreams. In the full possession of one pure spirit his life seemed to himself a charmed one. He felt released from the power of temptation, lifted above all low aims and mean resentments, stimulated to faithful and unremitting toil, softened into sympathy with all the sorrow and trouble around him.

As he became more thoroughly absorbed by his passion for Mary Hammett, did he become more afraid of her. Her presence was almost painful to him. He detected this tendency in himself, and felt urged to almost desperate efforts to counteract it. The more he loved her—the more essential to his life she seemed to him—the more unapproachable did she appear. He could not love her more without plunging himself into absolute despair. At length, he came to feel that it was wrong for him to indulge in a passion that must wreck him for ever, if its object could not be won; and he summoned all the strength of his nature to meet the decision of the great question before it should be too late.

What should he do? He could not go to Mary Hammett, and tell her to her face that he loved her. He could not fall upon his knees and confess that his life and happiness were in her hands. He was deeply conscious that his fate was doubtful, and he could never take denial from her lips. He would write her a letter—resort of timid lovers from time immemorial. Oh! blessed pen, that will not stammer! Oh! brave ink, that will not faint and fade in the critical moment of destiny!

Of the letters Arthur wrote and tore in pieces we present no record. One was too cool and self-contained, and so was sacrificed. One was too warm and demonstrative, and that was destroyed. But, on a certain Monday morning, as he was leaving his home for a week of labour at the Run, he thrust a note into Mary's hand without a word, and left

her. In it he had poured out, like wine upon an altar of sacrifice, his whole heart. He told her how, from the first moment of their meeting, he had begun to love her; how from that time onward she had grown upon his heart, until he felt that life without her would become not only valueless, but miserable; how she had absorbed his thoughts, become an inspiring power in his life, grown to be his purifier; how, for her, he was willing to brave toil and poverty, and even death itself. He deplored his own unworthiness of her, and pledged himself to a whole life—nay, a whole eternity—of effort, to make himself one whom she would not be ashamed to call her lover and her husband.

During the week which followed the delivery of his letter, Arthur walked and worked like one in a dream. Abstracted, he saw and heard nothing that was going on about him. He went mechanically through his labour, ate his meals as if he were a machine, and retired to bed at night and rose in the morning in obedience to blind routine. When Mrs. Joslyn gave her signal, "Sh-h-h-h!" he repeated it, under a vague impression that she was scaring chickens out of the house. When Cheek inquired what time it was, he replied that he was very well indeed—never better, in fact. He surprised the proprietor one morning by shaking his hand, and inquiring with great apparent interest for his health. On being told testily that he was half-dead, Arthur thanked him for the information, and declared further that he was very happy to hear it—hoped he would continue so.

Saturday night came again, and he started as usual for Crampton. He had received no reply to his letter, but he knew that before he should return to the Run, his fate would be decided. He dreaded to enter his home, for he felt that it held, and would soon reveal, the secret of his fate. He looked haggard and pale, as if he had worked and watched for a month. His mother met him with many anxious inquiries—wondered what had wrought such a change in him, and wept to think that her boy was killing himself for her. Miss Hammett was frightened when she read the lines which one long week of anxiety had engraved upon his face. She was calm, sober and reserved. She had a sisterly affection for the young man, such as she felt for no other, and it pained her beyond expression to be deprived of the privilege of sympathizing with him. She felt almost guilty for being the cause of his pain. She would have been glad to throw herself upon her knees before him, and ask him to forgive her for something—she knew not what—to lay her hand upon his forehead, and whisper words of consolation to him.

The Sabbath passed away, and Arthur received no reply to his letter. She hardly spoke to him during the day, but confined herself to her room. His mother was conscious that there was some momentous secret between them, but did not guess its nature. On Monday morning, just as Arthur was opening the door to leave his home for another week, he heard steps upon the stairs, and, turning around, saw Mary Hammett descending. He stood, uttered no word, received from her hand a folded note, and left the house.

Did he open the note the moment he was out of the village? Not at all. He felt that he had a great work to do before it would be proper for him to read one word. As he trod the accustomed walk, there was a voice in his soul that said: "Young man, the decision of your destiny is in the hand of no woman, however angelic. It is in your own. If your life is lost, it will be lost because you are weak."

Straightway, he felt every power within him summoned to a great effort. His head was as clear as the heaven above him; his heart as calm as the early morning landscape. Out before his imagination ran two paths. In one, he saw himself walking alone; thorns were under his feet, clouds were over his head; feeble men and women and children were begging on either side for help; great hills and rocks rose in the distance; but far off the path climbed to the sky and faded into a heavenly light. In the other, he walked with an angel in sweet converse, forgetful, in his bliss, of all the woes beneath the sun. Broad trees stretched their shadows over him, silver brooks murmured in the sunshine, and birds filled all the air with music. But the path was level and by its side sat a feeble woman, with a babe upon her knee, imploring him not to forget her and the little one left to his protection. At the parting of the paths stood two figures with folded hands, waiting to hear the decision which the letter contained, and ready to conduct him—Duty and Inclination—equally eager to be his escort.

All this seemed to Arthur like a heavenly vision. Perhaps it was—perhaps it was no more than the result of a profoundly moved imagination. The task to which he felt summoned had called in the aid of every external spiritual force around him. Shall we doubt that toward an insufficient soul, that, in a great emergency, throws itself wide open to God's spiritual universe, spiritual forces rush as a million miles of conscious atmosphere leap to fill a vacuum?

From whatever source the vision came, it impressed Arthur like a reality. He saw these two paths as distinctly as if they had been presented in very materiality to his vision; and he stopped where they parted from each other. Then he drew forth the letter, broke the seal, kissed it as if there were a soul in it, and read it through, every word. He kissed the name that subscribed the revelation, and two big tears bathed the page while he did it. Then he commenced at one side of the sheet, and slowly tore the whole into ribbons, then tore the ribbons into squares, and sowed them upon the wind. He stood for a moment like one entranced, gazing into vacancy, and then the sound of a distant bell recalled him to consciousness. He turned, as if expecting to see the two paths still, and ready to give his hand to Duty, but only the old familiar path to the Run lay before him—marvellously like the rugged passage of his vision, with the glorious morning sun blazing upon the mountain-top that stood far off against the sky.

He could not account for the strange strength that filled him—the strange joy that thrilled him. Uncertainty, that had brooded with uneasy and harassing wings over his heart, had flown. Doubt, that like a heavy cloud had hung around his head, had been drunk up by the morning light.

Fear, that had haunted him night and day like a ghost, had fled. It was a relief to know that all his precious hopes were blasted. He realized, for the first time, how his blind love had debilitated—almost paralyzed—him; how, forgetful of God and men, and all his youthful purposes and aims, he had allowed his passion to quench the fire of his young manhood. He walked onward to recommence his daily labour, feeling that a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, contented that the question had been decided against him. The possibilities of his life had never seemed so great as now. He had never felt so free. If there was sorrow in his cup, there was exultation also.

One by one the expressions of Mary's letter came up and passed before his mind, and he gained new strength from each. "Arthur Blague, I admire you. Would God I could tell you with how strong a sisterly affection I love you. Be a man. Overcome this passion of your youth. Do not let me be disappointed in you. Do not compel me to sacrifice my admiration and love for you, by any weak repinings over your disappointment. Deal in a manly way with the trials of the present, and the future will not fail to be generous to you." Then there were other words that gave him deeper thought than these, words burnt into his memory, legible then not only, but through all his after life; words, too, into whose full meaning his after life introduced him. "You tell me that I, a poor, imperfect woman, obliged to kneel and beg daily for the pardon of my sins, have become to you a purifier—nay, you use that higher word which you should not use in such an unworthy connection—your sanctifier. You tell me that your love for me has given you freedom from temptation, and compelled you to look with aversion and disgust upon all sordid and sensual things—that it has softened your heart and elevated your life. If this is all true—and I will not doubt you, though what you say sadly humbles me, conscious, as I must be, of my own unworthiness—what would as strong a love for One who is altogether lovely do for you? If I have had this influence upon you, through your love for me, what shall be the influence of Him who has room in His heart for all the hearts that have ever throbbed, or ever shall throb, in the world? I would not obtrude upon you a thought like this in a letter like this, did I not feel that in it lies the cure of greater disappointments, if such there be, than that which this letter will give you. Receive it, Arthur Blague. Think upon it, and God grant that it may lead you into a wealth of blessedness such as earthly love can never bestow!"

Busy with his thoughts, and revolving the words of the wonderful letter he had read, Arthur had nearly reached the hill that overlooked the factory at Hucklebury Run, when a horse's head made its appearance over the brow, and, following it, the familiar travelling establishment of the proprietor. As he met the carriage, he raised his eyes to see who could be setting out so early, and recognized Mr. Dan Buck and the proprietor's daughter, Leonora. From the evening of his parting with Leonora, she had not recognized him as an acquaintance, and he and Dan Buck were on no friendly terms of intercourse. He expected some insult, and was greatly surprised when that young man drew rein, and greeted him with a very polite "good morning."

"I wish you would look round and see to things a little to-day," said Dan Buck. "The old man is under the weather."

"What is the matter with him?" inquired Arthur.

"Well, between you and me, I think he's very ill," replied Dan Buck, nudging Leonora with his elbow, and thereby setting her to giggling.

Arthur did not smile. He was in no mood for it. Neither the man nor his weak and vain companion had ever seemed so contemptible to him before. So, without noticing his reply, he asked him where he was going.

"Oh! we are only going to have a little drive over to Littleton. I've got some business to do there, and Leonora thought she'd take a ride with me. We are going to make a day of it, and if the old man raises a row, you tell him that we shall not be back till late." Then Mr. Buck turned to the horse, hit him a stinging blow with the whip, and yelling, "Let out the links," drove off at a furious rate.

Arthur paused, and looked after the departing pair. There had been something in Dan Buck's manner and in Leonora's appearance that impressed him with peculiar apprehension. Something, he was sure, was not right. He tried to analyze his impressions, but they were too vague for analysis. He was only conscious of a conviction that there was mischief on foot, and that there was a mutual understanding of its nature between Dan Buck and Leonora.

Arriving at the factory, he went about his labour as usual, and nothing occurred until mid-afternoon to recall the meeting of the morning. At that time the wife of the proprietor came sailing into the mill, carrying her usual quantity of canvas and bunting, and, meeting Arthur, inquired with a great deal of dignity whether Dan Buck had returned. On being answered in the negative, she asked if he had informed any one before leaving how long he should be gone. Arthur told her of his meeting Buck and her daughter on the hill, and of the statement of the former, that they should make a day of it.

"Father'll be awful pervoked," said Mrs. Ruggles, with a very solemn look.

"Mr. Ruggles is not well, I believe?" said Arthur, interrogatively.

"No; he's been kind o' down t' the heel for some time—it's a rising of the vitals, I tell him. He was dreadful bad in the night, and Mr. Buck said he'd got some stuff that would settle his stomach for him, but it didn't seem to work the way he wanted to have it, and he can't keep nothin' down at all now."

"You can tell Mr. Ruggles that everything is going on right in the mill," said Arthur; and the ponderous lady set her sails for the voyage homeward. She had proceeded but a short distance when she turned back, to inquire of Arthur if Mr. Buck had informed him where he was going. Arthur replied that he spoke of going to Littleton on business. "What business can he have at Littleton!" exclaimed Mrs. Ruggles, and then she moved off again.

(To be continued.)