

Choice Literature.

MISS GILBERT'S CAREER.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Continued.

On Monday morning there was a good deal of excitement in the family circle that gathered around the breakfast table in Dr. Gilbert's dwelling. All were possessed with the feeling that exciting and not altogether pleasant events were before them. Mary Hammett could eat nothing; and even Dr. Gilbert himself made very severe work of pretending to an appetite. It was deemed a matter of prudence to keep little Fred at home as company for his teacher. She would hear his lessons, and the plan delighted him. Fanny feared that she could not control his tongue if the visitor whom she expected should ask any questions about the absent schoolmistress.

At nine o'clock Fanny left the house, dressed to disguise her form and cover her face as much as possible; and soon the wondering children responded to the little school-bell, and vanished from the street to meet their new mistress. Fanny explained to them that it was not convenient for Miss Hammett to be with them, and that she should act as their teacher until their mistress should be ready to resume her duties. Her exercises had not proceeded half an hour, when she caught a glimpse of a figure passing the window. Her heart leaped to her mouth, and she turned instinctively toward the door, expecting at the next moment to hear a rap. Instead of this polite summons, the door was flung wide open, and an elderly gentleman, red in the face—red to the very summit of his bald crown—stood before her. The first expression which Fanny caught upon his face was one of fierce exultation. This passed off, or passed into a look of vexation—a puzzled stare—that showed he was quite disappointed, and somewhat abashed. Fanny uttered not a word, but stood regarding him with well-feigned indignation and wonder.

As soon as the intruder could recover from his surprise, he said: "Excuse me for coming in without warning. I—I—expected to see some one else. This is not Miss Hammett. Is she in?"

"She is not, sir," replied Fanny, with excessive frigidity.

"Are you the mistress of this school?"

"I am, sir."

"Is Miss Hammett your assistant?"

"She is not, sir."

The man looked still more puzzled: "There must be some mistake," said he. "How long have you been in this school?"

"Twenty minutes."

"I do not refer to this morning, particularly. How long have you been mistress of the school?"

"Twenty minutes."

A mingled expression of anger and alarm came upon the old man's face, as he walked rapidly and excitedly forward, shaking his cane in Fanny's face, and saying: "Young woman, you must not deceive me. You must tell me the truth. I am in no mood to be trifled with. Is the woman you call Mary Hammett in this house?"

Fanny did not stir—did not wink—but, looking imperiously in his face, said: "Will you put down your cane, sir!" "There! my cane is down," exclaimed the choleric gentleman, bringing it sharply to the floor. "Now answer my question."

"John," said Fanny to one of the boys, "will you run over, and tell Dr. Gilbert that there is a strange gentleman in the school room, who came in without knocking, and is using profane language before the children?"

"John," said the old man, shaking his cane in his face, "you stir an inch, and I knock your head off." At this the little fellow began to cry, and when he began his little sister began, and one by one the scared children fell into line, and set up a very dismal howl indeed.

"Will you retire, sir?" inquired Fanny, coolly.

"Will you tell me whether Mary Hammett is in this building?"

"I have told you, sir."

The old man looked up and around, apparently taking the gauge of the structure, to see if there could be any hiding-place. He advanced to the door of a little recitation room, opened it, and looked in. Then he looked into a wood-closet, at which some of the children, reassured by the calmness of their new mistress, began to titter. Then he came back to Fanny, who had not stirred, and said in an altered tone: "Will you tell me where Miss Hammett is?"

"I will not, sir."

The man wheeled upon his heel without making any reply, and walked out of the house. Fanny was delighted with the interview. She had thought of such scenes a great many times—of "drawing her queenly form up to its full height," and saying extremely cool and imperious things—of "withering" some impertinent man by her "quiet and determined eye." She had tried the experiment and succeeded. She would like to try it again.

Fanny had not much heart for the school exercises after this. She was in the heroic mood, and did not perceive how her duties could help on her projects. She watched the stout gentleman as he walked off, swinging his cane, and making long reaches with it, as if there were some power in the motion to lengthen out his legs. She saw that he made directly for the house of Mrs. Blague, and thither we will follow him.

Arriving at the door, he hesitated, as if to determine what should be his mode of entrance. Then he tried the knob, and finding the door locked, gave the knocker a strong treble blow. The door was not opened immediately, because Arthur had not completed his instructions to his mother. After she and Jamie had removed themselves to a distant room, Arthur started to answer the summons, just as the caller, in his impatience, had repeated it. Arthur opened the door, and stood coolly fronting the irascible gentleman, who was evidently disturbed by meeting a man. "Will you walk in, sir?" said Arthur, who had waited a moment in vain for the man to make known his errand.

The man walked in, and entered the parlour, but did not take a seat. Arthur stepped up to him with a smile, and taking his hand, inquired: "To whom am I indebted for the honour of this call?"

"My name is—no matter about my name, sir. I called to see a young woman who boards in this family. Her name is—that is, the name by which you know her—is Hammett—Mary Hammett, I believe. Will you be kind enough to say to her that an old acquaintance would like an interview with her? Passing through the town—thought I would call—known her from a baby—very pleasant little village, this, Crampton." The man said this, walking uneasily back and forth, and attempting to be very careless and composed.

"There is no woman of the name in this house, sir. You allude to Miss Hammett, the school teacher, I presume."

The old man bit his lips: but, having assumed a false character, he still affected carelessness. "She formerly boarded here, I think—I was informed so, at least," said he.

"Yes, she formerly boarded here."

"And you say she does not board here now?"

"She does not board here now."

"How long since she left you?"

"Thirty-six hours."

"Where has she gone, sir? Where shall I be likely to find her?"

"I cannot tell, sir."

The bald head grew very red, as its owner, puzzled and baffled, walked up and down the apartment. Then, as if he had forgotten the presence of Arthur, he said: "Twenty minutes out of school—thirty-six hours out of boarding-house—conspiracy!" Then turning to Arthur suddenly, he said: "Young man, do you want money?"

"Any money that I can get honestly," said Arthur, with a smile, "would do me a great deal of good."

"Look you, then!" said the man, coming up to him closely. "Tell me where I can see this Mary Hammett, and I'll give you a sum that will make your heart jump. You see I wish to surprise her."

"I do not answer questions for money," said Arthur, "and as I have no talent for deception, or double-dealing, I may as well tell you, sir, that your relations to Mary Hammett are known to her friends here, and that your presence in Crampton is known to her. She has taken such measures as her friends have thought proper for keeping out of your way, and you will probably be obliged to leave Crampton without seeing her."

All this was said very calmly, but its effect upon the old man was to excite him to uncontrollable anger. He grasped Arthur by the collar, and exclaimed: "Young man, you don't get off from me in this way. Tell me where this runaway girl is, or I'll cane you." Arthur grasped the cane with one hand and wrenched it from his grasp, and with the other, by a violent movement, released himself from the hold upon his collar.

"There is your cane, sir," said Arthur, extending it to him. "You see I am not to be frightened, and that violence will do you no good."

The man looked at him fiercely for a moment, as if he would like to kill him; but he saw that he had to deal with one who was physically more than a match for him. Finally he said: "Young man, I have a right to know where this girl is. I am her natural protector, and I demand that you tell me where she is."

"I would not tell you for all the money you are worth," replied Arthur; "and you may be sure that you have learned everything about her that you can learn in this house."

"Very well! very well!" said the man, stamping his cane upon the floor with such spite as to show that he meant anything but "very well." "I am here for a purpose; and I do not propose to leave till I have accomplished it. I'm no boy—I'm no boy, sir; and if you are one of this girl's friends, you will do her a service by not provoking me too far. I may be obliged to see you, or you may be obliged to see me, again. Now tell me where this committee-man lives—this Dr. Gilbert."

Arthur walked to the window with some hesitation, and pointed out Dr. Gilbert's house to him. "We shall see—we shall see!" said he, as he covered his fiery poll with his hat, and walked off without the courtesy of a formal "good-morning."

All these movements, so far as they were out of doors, had been carefully watched from the windows of Dr. Gilbert's house. Dr. Gilbert had made very early professional calls, and returned, anticipating an interview with the angry New Yorker; and he, with Aunt Catharine and Mary Hammett, had seen him enter and emerge from the school-house, and then call at the house of Mrs. Blague, and retire. When Mary saw him turning his footsteps resolutely in the direction of her refuge she grew sick at heart, and almost fainted. She felt the relations which she sustained toward her father to be most unnatural, and it was quite as much from this consideration as any other that she was so sadly distressed. Nothing but a sense of outrage could ever have placed her in antagonism toward one to whom she owed the duties of a daughter. Nothing but what she deemed to be the forfeiture of his paternal character could have induced her to break away from him, and from her motherless home. From the first she had shielded him. She had never told her story till she felt compelled to do it for her own safety and protection; and, had she been differently situated, her father's sin against her would never have been mentioned to any one but him to whom she had pledged herself.

The doctor saw him approach; and as he came near the dwelling, looking up and around, the former exclaimed: "I've seen that man before."

Down the stairs Dr. Gilbert ran, as nimbly as his sturdy physique would permit, very highly excited with his discovery. He had never doubted that he should see a gentleman bearing the name of Hammett whenever Mary's father should present himself. There flashed upon him the memory of a scene that he had recalled a thousand times; and now that the central figure of that scene was at his door, under such strange circumstances, his excitement was mingled with awe. It seemed as if the hand of Providence had

revealed itself, and that, by ways all unknown and undreamed of, he was to be made instrumental in effecting its designs.

The door-bell rang, and the doctor answered it, throwing the door wide open. The moment the visitor looked in Dr. Gilbert's face, the stern, angry expression which he bore changed to one of bewilderment and wonder.

"This is Dr. Gilbert, I believe," said he, extending his hand to that gentleman, who, in a brief moment, had determined upon changing the tactics arranged for the occasion.

"Mr. Kilgore, how do you do?" said the doctor, heartily shaking his hand. "What could have brought you to Crampton, sir? I had not the remotest thought that you would remember me. Come in, sir; come in. Why, you must have spent the Sabbath in the village, and this is the first time you have come near me. I should have been happy to take you to church. Our hotel is a very small affair, and you must have had a lonely time."

Dr. Gilbert said this with his hand still grasping that of Mr. Kilgore, and leading him slowly into the parlour. Then, still talking rapidly, he took from his hand his hat and his cane, and urged him into a chair, departing for a moment to carry the relinquished articles into the hall.

"I suppose I have met you before, sir," said Mr. Kilgore, of the great firm of Kilgore Brothers. "In fact I knew I have met you, for I never forget faces, but I cannot recall the circumstances of our meeting."

"That is not to be wondered at," replied the doctor, heartily; "but, really, I was flattering myself that you had called for the sake of old acquaintance."

Mr. Kilgore looked vexed. He had not played his cards discreetly; but the trick was lost, and he must look out for the next one. So he said: "Dr. Gilbert, be kind enough to recall our interview. I have certainly conversed with you."

"I called upon you one morning, in New York, to endeavour to get you to publish a novel written by my daughter. Perhaps you will remember that there was an insane man in at the same time, who had a manuscript on the millennium, which he was anxious to get published."

Mr. Kilgore was still in a fog. Matters of this kind were of every-day occurrence in the little counting-room.

"Do you not remember," pursued the doctor, "sending your man Ruddock out of the room, and calling me back to ask me whether my daughter was obedient or not? Do you not remember getting excited about disobedient daughters?"

It was evident from Mr. Kilgore's face that he remembered the scene very well. It was not a pleasant recollection at all. It came to him accompanied by a vague impression that he had not treated Dr. Gilbert with much consideration, and that Dr. Gilbert's present cordiality might not be so genuine as it seemed.

"We all have our ways, doctor," said Mr. Kilgore, by way of apology for whatever the doctor might recall from that interview of an offensive character. "We have all our ways. I suppose I'm a little sharp and hard sometimes, but my business has the tendency to make me so."

"Never mind about what passed on that occasion," said the doctor, laughing heartily. "If everybody who meets you on similar business is as stupid and simple as I was, it would not be strange if it should make you sharp and hard. It is enough that we know each other, and that you are in Crampton. Now what can I do for you? By the way, you are not interested in the Ruggles estate, are you?"

The face grew red again, and the fluid tint rose and enveloped the bald crown. "I was passing through Crampton," said Mr. Kilgore, hesitatingly, and turning from Dr. Gilbert's fixed gaze, "and learning that an old acquaintance of mine was here—a young woman—I thought I would call upon her. I came to you to inquire about her."

"Aha!" exclaimed the doctor, with a very significant smile. "That is the way the wind lies, is it? Upon my word, you New Yorkers hold out against age right gallantly."

Mr. Kilgore tried to smile, but made very sorry work of it. "You misapprehend me entirely," said he. "I—I—"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the doctor, with another burst of laughter. "Sixty—a New Yorker—and modest! Why, it's the most natural thing in the world to love a woman at any age, but it's only the boys that are shy about it. Excuse me, Mr. Kilgore, but it's my way; we all have our ways, you know. Ha! ha! ha!"

Mr. Kilgore thought the doctor had very queer ways, and his opinion was agreed to by Aunt Catharine and Mary, who were listening to the conversation at the head of the stairs. They had never heard him go on so, and they wondered what he was driving at. Mr. Kilgore rose and walked to the window to hide his vexation, and then Dr. Gilbert said: "By the way, Mr. Kilgore, who is this woman?"

Mr. Kilgore returned, and resumed his seat with an air of suffering, but polite and patient, dignity. "Her name is Hammett—Mary Hammett," said he.

"A very excellent person," said the doctor. "I know her well. She has been a teacher here, and if you have any serious designs with relation to her, I have only to say that you may go the world over without finding her superior. Everybody loves her in Crampton. I hope you have no intention of taking her away from us at once. Eh?"

Mr. Kilgore's tongue would not move. His throat was dry, and he tried to swallow something which would not go down.

"By the way," continued the imperturbable doctor, "there is some mystery about this young woman. She carries purity and truth in her face, but we know very little about her. There is a story that her father is very cruel, and will not permit her to marry the man of her choice; but it seems very strange that any man can drive so good a daughter as she must be from home simply because she chooses to marry the man she loves."

Mr. Kilgore's face and head fired up again. He looked Dr. Gilbert almost fiercely in the eye, to see if he was making game of him; but that gentleman's front bore the scrutiny with obstinate unconsciousness.

"That's a lie, sir—a lie! I know her father well," said Mr. Kilgore. "I know all about the matter. She wanted to marry her father's understrapper—a sneaking clerk, who took advantage of his position to cheat her out of her heart."