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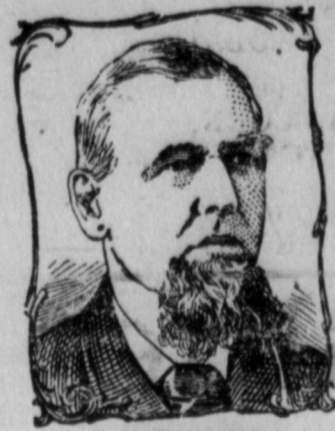
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GENERATION!

FROM BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

CHAPTER XXX.—Continued.

"It is as well that you proposed this for me, my dear," she cried at once. "Rosamund has given up the idea of coming into the boudoir to-day; she thinks she will not venture. I told her I thought of going to King's Common, and she was quite pleased—anxious, indeed, that I should. Poor dear, she has not yet confided in me, though every day I hope she will. But we must first get all these Gilberts out of the way—"

"If we can."
 "Dear me, Hartland, how gloomy you look. You were much brighter a little while ago, but you have clouded over again since I came down. What is the matter? Nothing new? Nothing more?"
 "Nothing, ma'am," shortly.
 "You were not thinking of going with me, I suppose?"
 "You will get along better without me, Aunt Julia."
 "That I shall not; but, however, there is no occasion for your being dragged over. It is not an agreeable visit—"

"And there is no need to make it too complimentary."
 "Certainly not. And were you to go, it would be decidedly too complimentary. You are quite right, as usual. I shall set off by myself, then, and you will stop here to mount guard."
 ("A thankless guard," muttered he, to himself. "And when all had turned out so luckily! I shall never again be able to manage as well. Next time, things may take their chance, for me.")

The embassy returned in part baffled—but in part enlightened. Lady Julia had seen nobody, but she had learned a good deal. The whole party, consisting of Mr. Liscard, his daughter Catharine, and Emily and Henrietta Gilbert, were over at Longminister, lunching at the barracks, and spending the afternoon in viewing the various objects of interest in the town, according to Badeley, who had added that they were not expected home till dinner-time, and Major Gilbert was, he believed, to return with them.

The whole neighbourhood was agog about the past week's doings at King's Common. How two handsome young ladies in the smartest of blue and red cloaks had been each day trotted through the village in Mr. Liscard's own particular mail-phaeton, the widower himself handling the ribbons, and one or other of the gay visitors on the box beside him. How they had been seen going and returning, and had evidently been long distances. People had remembered that Mr. Liscard had never driven Lady Caroline. He had either been alone, or accompanied by some elderly male friend, when he had had the phaeton out in former times. The change had been taken note of instantly, and servants' gossip had supplied all that was required for further predictions.

"I said I did think that a great deal more had been made of it than need have been." Lady Julia had done what she could for the family credit, and thus reported her efforts. "After hearing all, I told Beatrice Waterfield that although I could not defend my brother-in-law from the charge of thoughtlessness and want of respect to poor Caroline's memory, yet that it should be remembered that he had lived so entirely his own life, and been so much out of the way of hearing public opinion, that he probably never gave appearances a thought in the matter. What the outside world thought never did have any weight at King's Common. Indeed, my poor sister was a little, if anything, too unconscious of it. It often distressed me, I know, to hear her talking away of doing this and that, as if it were quite the right thing, and in the most complete ignorance of its having any other aspect, when it had perhaps come round to my ears that the poor dear had given dire offence by the self-same act! Oh, one may be quite too independent, I really do think—"

"Very true, Aunt Julia, but that you will never be. You love to consider every one. Now then, about Mrs. Waterfield. What did she say? How did she look upon your line of defence? Did she go in with you, or the village folks? Did she—had she—I suppose she had drunk it all in, and was ready for more? Every one will be glad of a fling at King's Common now, Mrs. Waterfield at their head," he added, bitterly.

"My dear, I do not think you should quite say that. Beatrice was poor Caroline's friend, and naturally she was shocked and grieved. I own I did think that perhaps she entered on the subject rather eagerly, and rather perhaps dwelt upon it more than she need have done; but—"
 "Ha! ha! ha!" burst out Hartland. "I thought our kind friend would not be far behind the rest. So she 'dwelt upon it,' did she? Fully and lengthily? Missing out nothing? Not she,—oh dear, no. It is a rare piece of fun for them all. Oh, but King's Common will afford them better sport yet. They are not half done with us yet."

"Hartland!"
 She looked at him in amazement. One moment all kindness and gentleness, the next all mockery and derision. It even seemed at times as though he absolutely gloated over the havoc of all the old customs and traditions, in the wreck of what once had been.

But the laugh had been unreal, and its unmirrored tones jarred painfully upon her ear. She could not, she would not blame him for it. If only she could understand him!

And he? He felt that he had let her understand too much, and the mask fell on the instant.
 "Seriously, my dear aunt, we must consider what is to be done. To-day's jaunt will not do much towards silencing the talkers, and to-morrow being Sunday, there will be a good attendance at church, I should say. The good souls will flock thither to see what is to be seen in the King's Common pew. What do you propose to do, ma'am? Shall you be there? Shall you go in the morning, as usual, or—with a happy thought—"shall I represent you while you stay at home with Rosamund, and I can relieve you in the afternoon?"

"When she could come up into the boudoir, instead of to-day," assented Lady Julia, in her own little easy way. "Yes, my dear, that would do nicely; that would be by far the best way. She would like to see you, I know; and no one else need know anything about it."
 "She will not come down to-night?" he ventured.

"Oh, my dear, no; you have no idea how much she dreads a change of any sort. And you can understand that were she once to appear down-stairs, we could not make her out to be unfit for more—I mean,—we could not quite put the same face upon her illness,—and really, a little management—I would not be untruthful for the world, but in a case of illness, you know, management and firmness are absolutely necessary. She shall not see those Gilberts,—and Rosamund's plump little guardian angel looked as red and determined as she had ever been seen in her life, and drew up her small round-about person until it positively grew in height before Hartland's eyes.
 He felt he could safely trust her when in this mood.

With infinite pains she now planned the next day's campaign, decided who was to be in and out at church and chapel, interviewed the clumsy Joseph, a new-comer, whose first Sunday at the Abbey it was, and who was to be porter for the afternoon (an office as often as not a sinecure, but which on this particular Sunday had risen to importance), and at the appointed hour on the morrow, betook herself off down the avenue, prayer-book and hymn-book in hand,—but her bodily presence, it is to be feared, ever getting farther and farther away from the spirit which had been left behind.

Ah, if those had been but two lovers she had left there! Even as matters stood, there was enough of doubt and uncertainty about them to afford a gleam of hope, and even a gleam in those dark days was something. She now knew for certain that Rosamund had ceased to care for Gilbert, and she knew—at least she thought she knew—that this fact had a strange interest for another.

Wisely she wished to know no more. Time must work out its own problem.
 Still it was delightful to think of her own two sitting together in the cosy boudoir, and of Joseph's strict orders to exclude all others; and feeling that such a state of things could not be improved upon, the service, even with a christening in addition, seemed all too short, and the rector and his sisters were favoured with her ladyship's company for a good half-hour after its conclusion.

So long indeed did she linger, that the swift approaching darkness rendering an escort advisable, obliged Mr. Stoneby to offer his own. He was not sorry, thinking he should see Hartland; but Hartland was nowhere about, and though Lady Julia made sure of finding him with his cousin, she was told he had been gone from the boudoir some time previously. Rosamund looked fatigued and pale, and her aunt felt sure she had been in tears, and that more had passed than she was to hear of. This was a little, just a little, hard to bear, and almost any one else, even the kindest and tenderest of nurses, would have pressed for a confidence, or, at any rate have sought to beguile one.

Not so Lady Julia. With a loving tact which only the purest unselfishness could have prompted, she seemed to see and observe nothing, while she ran cheerfully on about the weather, the sermon, the collection, and the congregation, as if these alone occupied her mind.
 Next she went down to dismiss her escort, and see him off the premises with a faintest that he was not wanted at this

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