

A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION!

FROM BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

CHAPTER XXXVI.—Continued.

It had become all in all in her to nurse and watch, and brighten, and support the feeble life now struggling back to youth and strength again. To mark the transient colour stealing once more over her darling's cheek, as the weeks rolled by; to note the little daily increase of appetite; to hail with delight the lengthened night slumbers; to provide dainties and delicacies, and cater amusement sufficiently simple and unexciting—the while in her heart she built anew her lately shattered castle in the air—all of this afforded such a round of occupation as left neither time nor inclination for much outside the Abbey precincts. Her days were completely filled up, and, in consequence, she scarcely ever went to King's Common, and knew but little of what went on there.

The Gilberts, root and branch, eliminated, love and kindness for humankind once more returned to inhabit the tender-hearted Lady Julia's bosom—animosity and antagonism being foreign bodies in that soil; and overflowing as she was now with a thankful, tearful felicity, she only felt ready to pity all others not so happy as herself.

Catherine in consequence got off cheap. She had but little to do. Her fervent inquiries and congratulations, her ready acquiescence in any little scheme for her sister's comfort, and, above all, her protestations that all was going on well at King's Common, but that, of course, they were very dull, very quiet ("and very respectable, just as they should be," interally commented her auditor)—completely satisfied that good lady's mind: the consequence of which was, that the niece stood higher in her aunt's good graces at this period than she had ever done before—or, perhaps, was ever likely to do again.

The only difference was that Catherine patronised Miss Penrose, which Rosamund had never done.

Rosamund had been sorry for the little governess, but she had not cared to seek her society; and in her rampant heyday, it is to be feared the wilful girl had done little she had not cared to do. Catherine, however, was now hand in glove with her late preceptress, who, in her turn, would not have been human, if she had not enjoyed the turn things had thus taken.

All this time what was Hartland doing? Getting acclimatised to the new order of things; beginning to be a little more cheerful, a little less silent; to take an imperceptible growing interest in the state of the fields, the weather, the progress of the new farm-buildings, the stables, the kennels, the spring meetings, and the prospect of the cricketing season.

He was not quite so keen a cricketer as he had been a year or two before—but still he fancied he should not give up his team. He thought he should get together a few good horses, and go in for hunting the following season—there was a prospect of the hunt being improved, and he ought to encourage it. There was still a little shooting, and as Rosamund's condition continued to improve, shooting men came and went, and made some sort of variety. But still there was more needed.

"He requires an out and out thorough change," said his friend Stoneby, one day. "You should pack Hartland off, Lady Julia. He is moping here."

"My dear Mr. Stoneby, I pack Hartland off! Why, nothing on earth would induce him to go. He will not stir from home; he has not slept a night away from the house since—you know when."

"The very reason he should go now."

"I am quite sure he will not go—until Rosamund is better."

"She is out of danger now, Lady Julia."

"Oh, entirely, dear child; nothing but strength is needed. As soon as she is fit to travel, I propose taking her abroad. Why, to be sure,"—and she stopped, and her whole face beamed—"to be sure, if Hartland would go with us—"

"No, no, not that," said Mr. Stoneby, smiling and shaking his head. "No, Lady Julia, that would not suffice. That would do no good at all," added he frankly, for he was now drawn by a closer tie than ever to the Abbey inmates, and was known as "Hartland's dear, kind, invaluable friend" there. "Do you not understand," proceeded he, "that that sort of change would simply be no change? Hartland would leave behind him every familiar thought, and voice, and face. He ought to breathe a completely new mental atmosphere. He needs this even more than a physical one. For that very reason I have not offered myself—"

"Oh, if you would!"

"It would not answer; it would not serve our end, Lady Julia. Let him shake off for the time every one and everything with which is connected a partial association. Let him go over the sea, right away—say to America, across the Rocky Mountains, camp out in the Far West—you will have him come back another man. Before he knows, he will

find himself disencumbered of all the cobwebs which the last six months have spun around him. He will knock up new acquaintanceships; form new interests; insensibly drop his melancholy and—wonder what has become of his liver. I assure you, Lady Julia, a great deal of the gloom which still overshadows Hartland—though it has lightened much of late—is due to a very prosaic and explicable cause. He is capricious about his food, and neglects his hours. Then, for a long time, he took not a third of his usual exercise. Then he has had no society—"

"Very true indeed," assented poor Lady Julia, as meekly as if she had been to blame for it all; "but Mr. Stoneby, he is so much better than he was."

"He is better; he is getting over it," replied Jack; "and for that very reason he is fit to go off by himself, and to get all the good of so doing. We could not have trusted him alone till now."

"And he was too anxious," and she shot him a glance.

"Yes, of course. To have left you in your anxiety would have been unfeeling."

"Oh, Mr. Stoneby, you know what I mean."

"You mean that he is unhappy on his own account?"

"I am sure, certain, that he cares for her. And I had so hoped that when she was able to be down stairs and about, and when they could see each other quietly every day, and she could get to know him and appreciate him—oh, you know, I think you know, what is my greatest hope and prayer—" and the fond imprudent creature clasped her hands, while the water stood in her eyes.

"My dear lady," said Jack, quietly, "has it ever struck you that perhaps, in the old days, if this event which you so earnestly desire had not been put in motion and prepared for as it were, it might already have come to pass of itself? Believe me, it does not do to try to pull the strings of destiny—"

"We only thought it would be so nice," murmured she.

"Who could proceed with a lecture after that?"

"Certainly you understand Hartland as no one else does," conceded Lady Julia, recovering herself; "and Rosamund is not—of course—poor darling, she is thin, and pale, and fragile-looking; and with all her beautiful hair gone, she cannot look her best. It might be as well that Hartland should not see her just now."

"Quite as well," assented Jack, profoundly.

"She will soon be every bit as pretty—as beautiful as ever," added Lady Julia, jealousy in arms at once. "People are very much mistaken who think she is going to be a poor pale invalid for the rest of her life. Still—for the present, we must be thankful to have her as she is. And if you think Hartland should really go—"

But by degrees the continual droppings which are said to wear out a stone, had their effect. Lady Julia, having been brought to perceive that the tempting vision of her two loved ones billing and cooing under her protecting wing, was not perhaps the most likely one to prove a reality, nor, if it did, to produce lasting happiness—since the one stood in scarcely less need of care than the other—ended by throwing herself heart and soul into Mr. Stoneby's proposition; was convinced because he was convinced, and resolute because he was resolute.

When Hartland was restored to full health and vigour, and Rosamund to her home and position—then would be the time for love-making proper to recommend. Her other scheme would now, she saw, with the usual adaptability of her sweet and pliable nature, be not without its drawbacks.

Accordingly she was full to the brim of assurances, and prognostications: called in Mr. Stoneby to supply arguments, and got hopelessly entangled amidst wild deserts and prairies. The result, however, was all that was desired. Hartland was off, and off without seeing his cousin.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SHE HAD HER LESSON.

At length the truant returned. All alike had grown weary of endless novelty and unlimited idleness, and pined for the familiar sights and sounds, pursuits and pleasures, delights and even the drawbacks of an English home.

The spring and summer had been passed by Lady Julia and her niece in exploring Italian and Swiss resorts, wandering about from one grand old city to another, till the heat drove them northward; remaining there for some months among the snow-peaks and glaciers; and finally settling down at a German spa, until the life there became unendurable.

Lord Hartland had had a wider experience. He had travelled fast and far; had seen many strange and stirring sights; traversed mighty rivers; camped out in lonely wildernesses; made countless friends; learned much, heard much, thrown his heart and sympathies abroad in all directions; and had entered into every adventure and enterprise with a zest which had brought its own reward.

He was now, as predicted, another man. Moody, melancholy introspection was gone for ever. Unreasonable woe had vanished. The spring of life was all in bud afresh.

He still loved his cousin; he still felt grief and shame with a chastened pang, when a wave of recollection would now and again break over his spirit as from some dead storm; but, no longer crushed and overwhelmed, he now stood upright, strong to bear the past, and hopeful even of the future.

He would not shun Rosamund, but neither would he sue her.

He thought he could be sure that so far no thought of him as a lover had ever crossed her mind; and it was for the case, a renewal of the old intercourse could be maintained without danger to either, so long as he kept a watch upon himself.

He did not mean to be too bold. Rosamund, according to her aunt, was now more beautiful, more bewitching than ever and, added to that, the dearest, dearest girl in the world. "You can have no idea of the sensation she creates everywhere," wrote Lady Julia. "People are always getting introduced to her; and then they are so angry with me because she refuses to go to their dances, and will not take any part in the amusements that are always going on. This is a very gay place, and there are plenty of pretty girls about, but none to equal Rosamund. So every one says."

Next it was, "Rosamund and I are at last setting off for England. We shall travel slowly, and probably remain a day or two in London, although no one is there now. But Rosamund wishes to get some autumn things for the children, and to see about a new governess."

Rosamund might have spared her pains. She was informed that the children had all been fitted out before she arrived, and Catherine, armed with her father's authority, had already engaged a French mademoiselle, recommended by some of her new acquaintances.

"We did not know when to expect you," she explained subsequently, "and papa thought it a pity to wait. Lady Belmont assured me it was quite a chance that Mademoiselle Forestier was disengaged; so papa said, write at once."

"Who is Lady Belmont?" demanded the elder sister, with something of an accent on the "who."

"Papa and I met her in Paris. She was so kind to us. We saw a great deal of her there."

"I thought you had only been in Paris for a few days?"

"We saw her on nearly all of them."

"Is she your only reference for this French girl?"

"Certainly," said Catherine, drawing herself up. "Papa and I felt that we did not require any other. We were quite satisfied."

Quite satisfied! Sixteen and three-quarters was quite satisfied! Yet in spite of herself, the cold composure in the speaker's eye made the spirit of the other sink. She had no heart for wars and fighting, she was so longing for peace, and love, and kindness, all round; so anxious to be just and forbearing even to Catherine, who must ever be a trial and perplexity, that it did seem hard to be confronted with so grave an offence on the very threshold of her return.

But little did she guess how far things had gone!

Now, at every turn, she found herself being informed of new habits, new customs, new laws—all, as could plainly be perceived, of one person's making, yet none of which were owned by her. Oh dear, no; it was papa who "liked this"; papa who had "grown accustomed to that"; and papa who "never did" such and such a thing now, or who, contrariwise, "always did" it.

Papa showed Catherine his letters. Papa expected her in the library after breakfast. Papa could not spare her to do any lessons, so they had never been resumed. She had had to be everything to papa for so long, that he could not now do without her. It is to be feared that the very sound of papa's name grew at last obnoxious in poor Rosamund's ears.

By degrees she saw it all. The younger had supplanted the elder, and taken away her birthright—and though it must in fairness be added that the birthright in question was one which the latter would never for its own sake have coveted, still she could not stand by and look on, without something of the old, warm blood boiling within.

She had come home fancying that it would never boil again. She had been feeling so humble, so peaceful, so anxious by meek and gentle ways to show her sense of past folly; and resolutions for future amendment; she had felt as if nothing that might be said of her would be too severe, as if the coldness of friends, the condemnation of the world, and the stares of the village folks would be only her meet punishment,—and had by reflection and prayer strengthened her soul to bear all.

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