

A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION!

FROM BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

CHAPTER XXXIV.—Continued.

"Don't you see, Stoney," said Gilbert in a low voice, "that there is a difference? My poor fellow,"—and he went up and put a hand upon the speaker's shoulder,— "my poor fellow, you—and I—are one. Hartland is not with us. He—"

"Yes?"
"We have no hope," said Gilbert, calmly. "He has . . . You are a good man," proceeded he, after a long silence. "I believe in religion of this sort. It is, of course, rather strange and confusing to me to find another on the ground, and I must, as you say, allow you have never in any way given rise to suspicion of your feelings; but—well—I will try to think the same of Lord Hartland. I wish him no ill. Nay, since I must, I will endeavor to feel that I have no just cause to bear him a grudge; but I must say this,—I hope—I do hope that, for his own sake, he will not marry Rosamund."

Nothing had been gained by the visit. The next point to be considered was, should Hartland know of it or not? His friend decided that unless point-blank questions were put to him, he would say nothing of the matter; and as it was most unlikely that he should be cross-examined, the step having been an improbable one, he had not much fear of being unable to keep it to himself.

As luck would have it, however, while yet little more than half-way home, the pedestrian was overtaken by one of the light dog-carts belonging to the Abbey, driven by Hartland's own particular groom,—and the man, recognising the rector of the parish, at once drew rein. The night was dark and misty; Jack was tired and chilled. He reflected that whether or no he should accept the offer of a lift, the man's master would probably hear that it had been made, and where he had been met; and hunger and fatigue clamouring this view of the case into his ears, up he got, begging to be set down at a roadside cottage hard by the rectory gate—he did not care to run the risk of finding Lord Hartland sitting with his sister within his own four walls.

Diplomacy thrown away. He was in the act of dismounting, when he was hailed for the second time that day unexpectedly by Hartland's own voice.

Hartland was standing by a wayside pool, while his dog was dabbling among the weeds.

"I vacate to you," said Jack, as lightly as he could, and springing down almost before the eager horse could be brought to a standstill. "You'll get in, will you not? You are rather late for Lady Julia's dinner as it is?"

"Is it dinner-time?" said Hartland, dreamily.

It was long past, but neither was aware of it.

"I came down here for a walk," continued the speaker, in the same tone. "I have not had much of a walk to-day. There's nowhere to go. 'No, I shan't get in.' To the groom—'Go on home. I'll follow directly. I suppose I must,' he sighed, under his breath.

"Come in with me," said his friend. "My dinner, such as it is, is no doubt waiting, and— Stop a moment, Cobert"—as the dog-cart was moving off—"if you will stop with us, just send word, Hartland, won't you?" he added, judging Lady Julia's feelings by his own.

"Oh, I'll stop, of course," replied Hartland, in the same dreary accents. "I'm thankful to stop anywhere. Tell him so; and I say, come along in out of this beastly cold wind," shivering. "Take me in with you, Stoney; and I say, tell them to send a close carriage for me when they send. I hate this cold, night air," he murmured, plaintively.

There was no wind, and to Stoney the night did not appear more chilly than usual; but he understood. "Yes, let us get indoors sharp," he said.

He was now glad he had got his friend safe under his eye. Since his first appearance had provoked no comment, he feared nothing, and trusted to food and warmth and resolute cheerfulness while Clementina was by, and the unrestrained affectionate intercourse subsequently, to doing what could be done in the way of soothing and cheering.

"You must take what you find," he said, stepping inside. "This may be mutton-chop day—and if so, you are lucky. Yesterday was mince day. I don't look upon mince day with equal favour, I confess. To-morrow is Sunday's beef—hot on Saturday, cold on Sunday, demolished on Sunday night. If we did not send it well round among the sick folks, we should not see the end of that beef till the middle of the week, so I hit upon the dodge—oh, here is my sister."

"How soon you are back!" cried she, running out into the hall at the sound of his voice. "Have you really been in and out of Longminster in the time—"

"Never mind, never mind. Here is

something much more important. Here is Lord Hartland come to dinner. What have you got for dinner?"

"Only mutton-chops," said Clementina, with a somewhat rueful visage. "I did not know exactly when you would be back from Longminster—"

"Longminster?" echoed Hartland, as though struck by the second repetition of the name. "Longminster?" And he looked from one to the other.

"Yes, I have just been in on—on business. It did not take me long—"

"But you did not say you were going when you were with me. Did you mean then to go? We could have sent you over; we were sending anyway."

"Thanks. The walk was nothing."

"I would have walked with you—but no, I wouldn't. Longminster," repeated the speaker, suddenly. "What were you doing in Longminster to-day? What did you go for? Whom did you see?"

"I said—I—well, Hartland, I said I went on business, you know."

Vain effort. Hartland was now upon the scent, close and keen as a bloodhound, and his burning eye and twitching lip held out no hope of quitting it.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "What is the use of saying that? Business? Your business was with—"

"Yes—you are right—it was. Wait one moment, till we are alone," whispered his friend. "One moment, dear Hartland. Come in here," opening the door of the little sitting-room, which was, as it happened, deep in shadow though not shuttered in for the night. "What! no lights, no fire—?"

"You can have both directly, brother, but we are to dine in the study, and it is all bright and comfortable in there. I had said we should not want the drawing-room to-night," began the attentive little sister, but she was cut short ere she could explain domestic arrangements further.

"Never mind—it will do well enough," said Jack.

"But do come in to the study," pursued Clementina, opening the door, from which instantly streamed forth brightness and warmth,— "see how comfortable it looks! Do, Lord Hartland, come in here. Here, Jack," as no one moved to obey.

For the light was, truth to tell, undesired by either, and Hartland, to whom it was even an annoyance, now made so peremptory and involuntary an advance into the less tempting chamber, that it was plain nothing could be done for him in way of creature-comfort. "Just like a man," murmured little Clemmy to herself; "when they are ill or unhappy, they always will be uncomfortable too. Jack is just the same—" and she had to respond to Jack's significant glance over his shoulder and nod in answer to it, and trot off to the kitchen to delay the cooking of the chops, and feel all the while that if she had been at the helm, and had had the management of Lord Hartland's affairs she would have contrived infinitely better,—she would have seen to it that he had first of all a good dinner (though it were a plain one), a good dinner, and a glass of good wine, and then his chair wheeled round to the fire, and some nice coffee or tea brought to him, over which he could confide his troubles comfortably,—instead of allowing him to turn in to that dismal drawing-room, with the blinds still up, and there all tired and fasting as he was plunge into an anxious interview. For she could see with half an eye what the interview was likely to be, and "Men are so stupid," concluded the little soul, shaking her head over them both.

But perhaps Jack was sometimes as wise as she.

He had heard that in his friend's voice, and seen that in his face, which told him that delay might be as dangerous as evasion was hopeless, and felt that all which now remained for him to do was to be as brief and as satisfactory as possible. Alas! no real satisfaction was possible.

"Hartland," he began, however, "you are right, quite right, in what I perceive to be your conjecture. You suppose I went to see Gilbert? I did. And I saw him. He is on the eve of his departure from Longminster. He goes to-morrow, and—"

"Get on—get on. There is something more than this. You went—?"

"I went because of what you told me just now. Forgive me if I should not have done so, but—"

"Oh, it's all right. I am glad, on the whole, you did. Do you know, I am glad you did. What did you say? What did he say? Did you—did he— What does he think of me? But why need I ask?" he suddenly wheeled round.

"What can he think? You need not be

afraid to say. Speak out plainly. Oh, it will not hurt me; and what if it does? It is only what I ought to expect; of course he will abuse me—"

"He did not abuse you. On the contrary, he—"

"Well?"

"He was very moderate and calm. I never thought to have felt myself so constrained to admire—"

"Ah! we know all that. That's the old thing over again. We are all constrained to admire,—and then—some of us break down. Now look here, Stoney, I must know, and I will know exactly, what passed between you and Gilbert this afternoon. You cannot refuse to tell me, and until I hear—"

his haggard, expectant gaze supplied the rest.

"I will tell you all, Hartland."

"You fancied that Gilbert took it that he owed his dismissal to you," proceeded the speaker after a moment's pause, "and that in consequence he doubted your integrity—"

"Oh, doubted my integrity! My good fellow, say he thought me a blackguard. We want plain words now."

"I was able to give him my solemn assurance you were not."

"He did think it then?" quickly.

"He had not known what to think. Evidently the idea had been presented to him, and had been dismissed. He had been twice told that there was nothing between you and your cousin—"

"Who told him?"

"Lady Julia and Miss Liscard herself."

"Had they? Had they? But how then—"

his face fell heavily. "It is only on that understanding, is it, that I am to be exonerated? You had to assure them that there was nothing, and never would be anything, between us? Oh Rosamund had she done so too? Oh, I daresay he will forgive me if he has her word for that? He—"

"I don't think he had her word for that. Indeed, from what he let fall, I gathered that he had had no one's word for anything of the kind. To tell the truth, Hartland, I fancy that he still fears still looks upon you as a rival, and as a probably successful one in the future."

"Oh," there was a perceptible alteration of tone.

"In this case you can hardly wonder if he is a little difficult to convince just at present."

"He was difficult, was he?"

"Yes."

"Well? Go on."

"Gilbert has been accustomed to think for himself, and judge for himself; and though after a time he was willing to acknowledge in a form of words that he had no just cause to bear you a grudge, I own that I felt his heart scarcely went with his lips. He did not seem to understand, and perhaps he could hardly be expected to understand, how you could feel as you do without having direct cause for doing so. I had told him of your grief and—"

"And shame," said Hartland, emphatically. "I am ashamed—ashamed; and I care not who knows it. I feel as if we had all bitten the dust before this man. He is above us all, and may look down upon us all. It is that which cuts, Stoney. If only we had played him fair—"

"Do you not see, Hartland, that you are taking on your shoulders a burden which—forgive my saying so—only belongs to another?"

"If you mean Rosamund," said Hartland, quickly, "I—I—not a word against Rosamund. The poor girl is punished enough. You would not have her—you would not talk of her—I—I mean—let her alone."

"So I will; but as you have identified yourself with—with her, and suffer accordingly, you cannot wonder that Gilbert thinks your share in the wrong done him—"

"I told you I had no share. Stoney, I told you, before heaven, I was guiltless. You ought to have assured Gilbert of this. Why, good heavens!—did you allow him to think—"

Stoney strove to be patient.

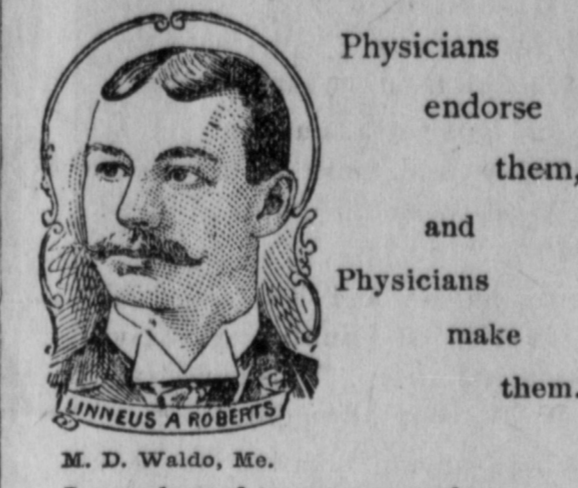
"No, Hartland, I allowed him to think nothing that was not true. But you had yourself made the task so difficult, that I was obliged to be content without accomplishing my chief end. I was forced to leave Gilbert to reconcile as best he might your feelings of a criminal, with your protestations of being an innocent man. After all, what matter? He will do this some day. Some day, in time, when the first shock has passed away, he will be able to see more clearly, and to do you justice. My assurances will recur to his mind. He will remember those of others likewise, and his nobler nature will assert itself; the time will surely come when you will be as clear in his eyes as you are in those of all others."

"If I am not," said Hartland, bitterly, "I will never, so help me Heaven—"

"Hartland, not another word. Rash vows are easily made, and hang like mill-stones round the neck thereafter. Say nothing—do nothing—for the present. Remember that one week ago you would have given the world to have had matters as they are now. Then be thankful; be patient; and wait."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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