

# A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION!

FROM BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

CHAPTER XXXII.—Continued.

"No, not that. You could not do that, Rosamund. You could not carry it through, even if you were to try. Many a woman could—but not you. See now, you have broken down already, broken down at the very outset, and that so palpably that others have seen it, though I was blind. Do you really think that you could vow in the sight of heaven to love, honour and obey me?"

"But I would, I would do them all."

"You will is strong," he said sadly, "but it has been beaten in the fight already. You do not love me, you could not."

"At least I could honour and obey."

"The words are nothing," said Gilbert, with a momentary impatience, "the spirit would not be there—it is dead already. Do not press me further, Rosamund; I am not a hasty man. You have no cause to fear that I shall ever reconsider this decision, or importune you further. Here we part, and part for ever. There is no ill-will between us." His chest heaved. "I think I shall always care for you," he said.

"Oh, stop! Oh, this is dreadful!"—she caught his hand.

He smiled drearily. "Not so dreadful as it might have been. Be thankful it has not come too late for both of us. You will grow well, and forget, and be happy. If you should marry Hartland—"

"Marry Hartland!" Her surprise was evident and genuine. He looked keenly at her. "It was a mere idea; I ought not to have given it utterance. Still, I am glad I did; glad to know—"

"Good heaven! you did not suspect me—or him—of such a thing?" cried Rosamund, in new agitation. "Yet what right have I"—with a fresh burst of tears—"to feel insulted by any suspicion? But Hartland, what has he done?"

"I will tell you Rosamund. Lady Julia let fall that he had been the first to penetrate the secret of your altered looks, and such quickness—"

"But it was on your account, Frederick, indeed it was. If you had heard how coldly, how harshly he spoke to me, if you had seen how little he seemed to care for my pain! He was kinder afterwards; but even now,"—and her lip trembled afresh—"Yes, I believe he has acted a fair and honourable part by me," said Gilbert, after a pause; "he—"

"He has—he has."

"So be it. Bid him 'farewell' from me, and assure him of my—of every kind feeling. Tell Lady Julia I pray her to forgive anything I may have said unkind or disrespectful just now, when I was hardly master of myself. I shall see your father, and personally acquaint him with the truth. I will save you all I can. And now,"—he took her hand,—"and now my one, my only love—the time is passing—and we may never meet again upon this earth—say one kind word—give me one look—one kiss,"—she sobbed aloud, but there was no moisture in his eye,—"do not let it trouble you; but if you could say it," he murmured, "let me have this one assurance to carry through life, that whatever may be the present state of your heart, you loved me once—you loved me that one happy day?"

She tried to speak, but could not. "Nay, then, I will not press it." He misinterpreted the evident struggle. "I see I was in a fool's paradise—"

"No." The answer came in a hoarse, quivering whisper at last. "No. You were not. Not then. Not at that time."

"Was I not? You did care?" A gleam stole over his brow.

"I did. Believe me. I truly did."

"You did love me—or at least you thought so?"

"Yes; indeed, yes."

"That, then, at least, is still my own. Thank God for that. I may dare to treasure that one remembrance—that broken spar from off the wreck. All the rest is gone—gone." He puts his hands before his eyes for a moment, removed them, gazed long and earnestly upon her face, then turned to go.

"Farewell," he said, "farewell. I shall leave this neighbourhood as soon as possible, and England likewise. You shall not be troubled with me. Farewell, Rosamund,"—he stood still for a moment, then, as if impelled by an irresistible agency, stepped to her side, lifted the moist tresses from her cheek, kissed it once again, raised his eyes, as though praying heaven to bless her as he did so—and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"JILTED! IT'S AN UGLY WORD."

"What has happened? What has been going on here? What have you been doing?" cried Hartland, in burning accents as he burst in upon his aunt a few minutes after. "Something has been done. I met a man going out—a man with a death-

blow written on his face—as I came in just now. Speak! what has Gilbert heard? And who has told him?"

"Oh, my dear, it was not my fault. Do not look at me like that. I have done nothing—or, at least, I did not mean to do anything; but by the strangest, the most extraordinary mischance, he heard—"

"He heard! Heard from whom?"

"I hardly yet know how it was. But it is done—"

"Done? Yes. I should say so. But how? Quick—for heaven's sake, be quick, and tell me how."

"He was in the library, waiting, I suppose, for you. No one had told me he was there, or, indeed, that he had come over at all. I suppose he had not been shown into the drawing-room because the doctor was there. Dr. Makin had just told me plainly that he could do our dear Rosamund no good, unless he were made acquainted with all her secret trouble—"

"What, did he know of Rosamund's secret trouble?"

"A medical eye, Hartland—"

"Confound his medical eye! He has had the chance of hearing and seeing, and has put two and two together. So he informed Gilbert?"

"Indeed, no. It was I who was informing him—"

"Him—Makin?"

"I had no choice. When a doctor insists upon it—"

"And Gilbert overheard you?"

"But—"

"He could not understand such over-hearing. 'I had always thought him the soul of honour,' he muttered."

"It was not Major Gilbert's fault: he could not avoid it. Unluckily—though I can hardly say 'unluckily,' for we must be thankful—"

"Well, ma'am, well? Wait a bit to be thankful. Be thankful at another time," cried Hartland, beside himself with anxiety, and the dread that anything had been done unworthy of their name. "You were in the act of telling Makin about the engagement—no doubt with all your own comments and interpretations. May I ask if you had proceeded far? Had you mentioned names?"

"I had hardly said a dozen words; but unfortunately, or rather—"

"Oh, fortunately or unfortunately—anything. He heard the fact?"

"Yes."

"How? In what words? Can you remember? Pray try to remember."

"I remember only too well, for during all that dreadful silence which followed the disclosure, I kept repeating them over and over in my mind, to make sure what it really was that he had heard—"

"Well, what were they?"

"I told Dr. Makin that he had been right in supposing a trouble was weighing on Rosamund's mind, and that this trouble was her unhappy, unfortunate engagement to Major Gilbert. I had scarcely named his name, when I saw by Dr. Makin's face that something was wrong, and there stood Major Gilbert himself behind me. Just here," pointing to the spot. "I have not left the room since. I have not dared to stir, for fear of meeting him again."

"How had he allowed you to proceed so far?" said Hartland, frowning.

"It was impossible for him to make known his presence sooner. He had to get out from behind the folds of the screen; and probably he had not realized the presence of any one until after I had begun to speak. Even then, he would not suppose there could be anything very private in an opening sentence."

"True," said Hartland, thoughtfully. "No, he was not to blame," proceeded Lady Julia, who could afford to do her vanquished foe such justice. "It took but a few seconds for me to say what I did, and then—there he was."

"I suppose he was terribly shocked and—"

"—and overcome?"

"My dear Hartland, I was so frightened I could not look at him. But his voice—his tone—"

"She shuddered at the remembrance."

"Did he believe in it?—I mean, at once?"

"I think so—at first; and then again he did not. He hardly seemed to know how to take it. He was very quiet—very self-restrained; but every moment he seemed to me to increase in a kind of dreadful power as long as he stood over me, piercing me through and through with those great, hungry, raging eyes—"

"There—that will do!" cried Hartland, with a sickened look; "I know. I can see them. Good God! that a woman should have dared to inflict such anguish!"

And he turned away, his own face working in strong emotion.

"He is gone now," almost whispered Lady Julia.

"Gone—and for ever. I tell you he has left this house—our house—cursing it in

his heart. He had been befooled and betrayed among us. Among us he has been led into a snare that may be his ruin. What do you care? What do you think about the end of all this? You women—you don't know how hard it goes with a man to be held up to pity among his comrades—to pity, and to ridicule; to being talked about, and laughed about, and told there are others, and instructed to forget, and bidden to begin again. Jilted! It's an ugly word. Can a man pardon it? I think, hardly. And he loved her—loved her, and trusted her. His faith in her was so perfect that it undid all her reckless attempts to deceive him. He could not disbelieve. What it must have cost him to disbelieve at last!"

"I am afraid I have not thought enough of that," said poor Lady Julia, her better nature asserting itself. "Certainly I ought to remember how very sad and painful this must be for poor Major Gilbert."

"Sad and painful!" almost shouted Hartland; "I—I—better not speak of it, ma'am: I doubt if you know what pain is. I did, once. I don't like to think of that time. We need not discuss this further, I think: you had better go to Rosamund; and I, to—the devil," he muttered between his teeth, distracted by shame, and a dim and lurking sense of guilt.

Lady Julia, only too thankful to be released from a second interview, little less inferior in its terror to that which had preceded it, flew like the wind—or, to be more exact, panted up the broad stair-case as fast as she could—to the boudoir, and scarcely waiting to have her tap at the door answered—for not to tap at such a time would have seemed ungracious—she entered, and found her niece, not, as she had expected, excited, impatient, tearful, ready to be comforted and caressed, and at heart inexpressibly relieved—but in a state requiring immediate physical attention.

Pale as death, spent with weeping, unable to utter a sound or raise a limb, Rosamund half lay, half crouched among the cushions of the little settee upon which she had sunk when Gilbert left her. A feeble moan, a raising of the heavy eyelids, which fell again instantly, and a nerveless, ineffectual effort to stretch forth a hand which also dropped at once, were the only indications given of her being conscious any one had entered.

She seemed as one in whom all powers of thought and feeling were for the time suspended, leaving only an agonised sense of utter weakness, as one so bruised, and crushed, and numb, that the very life itself was fast ebbing away.

Lady Julia stood still, her own heart turning cold at the sight.

All inquiry had been answered and expression checked by that mute, stricken figure, those swollen eyelids: even now as she looked, a watery thread trickled down the cheek, on to the soft pillow beneath, and was left to dry itself.

"Not even strength to care about that," murmured the beholder. "I am well punished. I little thought that when I gave out she was so ill before, it was so soon to be the simple truth. This has half killed her. Oh, God, spare the child!" and with the cry she fell upon her knees, and prayed as she had never prayed before.

And Rosamund was very ill.

Day and night succeeded each other, and week after week likewise, while she still lay on that bed of sickness, mind and body alike prostrate, knowing nothing, beyond what passed within the four walls around her, the dim workings of her overclouded brain nerve going beyond the little events of the sick-room's daily routine, and all the outer world a blank.

No one ever spoke hardly of Rosamund, even when her tale came to be told. It was felt that, however great might have been the mischief she had wrought, and the wrong she had inflicted, she had nearly expiated all with her life.

Let us now return to others.

Gilbert, on passing out into the raw chilly air of that December morning, with all his dearest hopes blasted and his future in ruins, was too much under the stimulus of strong excitement to give even a passing heed to anything beyond the exigencies of the immediate present. By the aid of this spur, he was enabled, without hesitation, to proceed upon what his clear resolute mind decided must be done on the instant, and allowing himself no time either for doubts or repentance, he strode along towards King's Common at a pace which brought him there before it seemed that he had well started on his way.

Mr. Lisard was out—but the young ladies were at home. They were going in to luncheon.

Luncheon! A faint pang just made itself felt at the word. Luncheon is a cold and awkward meal, contrasting unfavourably with the cosy tea, or the glowing, genial dinner,—but it had suited his military arrangements to come over at that hour, and with it was connected as much or more than with anything else, the dead past.

To go in now as before! To sit in the accustomed spot! To look round the accustomed room, and mark all the old arrangements and habits, and feel that he was seeing these for the last time, and that even now, even while there, it was another than the Frederick Gilbert who had been wont to fill that place, who was present at this time! And he himself—where was he?

Pulling himself together as well as he could, he looked at the footman who had



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