

# A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION!

FROM BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

CHAPTER XXXII.—Continued.

"What are we now to do, Frederick?" inquired the elder at last; "shall we—"

"Yes, you must get yourselves ready, and as quickly as you can. But wait—just a moment first," he stopped, then began again, and was again unable to proceed.

"Look here," he said at last, in a strained, husky undertone; "it is of no use, I can't do it. I meant to tell you all, but I find I can't—et. You must not mind. You must do as I bid you without knowing why, for the present. I think you would—will, when you know what I—what we all have to bear."

"Yes, brother." And they came close to him at once.

He looked at one, and then at the other; but they knew that he hardly saw their faces—that he was lost in something different.

"This is what you have to do," he said presently. "I know it is hard on you, but try not to mind. Go up-stairs and put on your things for a journey. You are going home to-day. You are going by the three o'clock train."

Both uttered an ejaculation.

"You would not yourselves wish to stay, if you did not know," muttered Gilbert.

"Now listen. You are going straight home, as I said. You will tell our father and mother that I am writing to explain why. I will write by this evening's post."

"But, Frederick—"

"Well?"

"Our luggage. Our trunks cannot be packed in the time."

"They must be sent after you. Leave word. Drop a pencil line to Catharine."

"But what are we to say? What reason are we to give?" The two doleful voices roused a sense of irritation in their listener, to whom it seemed as if they could have nothing to grieve for, and might have spared him.

"You have nothing to do with reasons," he replied, sharply. "I will myself see Mr. Liscard, and give him the true one. But stay," he added, after a second's reflection; "for the look of the thing, tell Catherine that you were called home suddenly, and had no time to say 'Good-bye.' By the way, where is she to-day?" suddenly missing her.

"Miss Penrose has a sort of examination, and gives prizes for the half-year, and I believe Catharine hoped to get one. She did not wish to miss it."

"Well, well, never mind. It was lucky it happened so, that's all. Now, be quick, and—here he once more looked fixedly at each,—"and be silent. Do not be overheard talking and co-jecturing. Walls have ears." And he flung himself into a new attitude, as though stung by a sudden recollection.

They took their departure.

"Emily, Emily, what is it? What can it be? Oh, Em, I am so sorry; it is so horrible. To be packed off like this, just when we were so happy, and were having such a delightful, delightful time! And Frederick seemed as pleased as we, only last night, and laughed at you about—you know whom. It is too bad. . . . I shall travel in my best hat—I shan't go away a dowdy from a place like this. . . . Oh dear, oh dear, to be going away at all!"

"It will make Mr. Liscard very angry," said Emily, sitting gloomily down to lace her boots. "I should not in the least wonder if he was to send after us, and bring us back. If only he had not been away from home to-day!"

"Do you really mean that?" cried Etta, brightening with the idea. "Why, then, we need not hurry about the luggage. Em, let us say nothing about it. Forget it, you know. Then we could just slip quietly back again, as if nothing had happened."

"We must just mention it. Frederick is sure to ask if we have, or not. Frederick never overlooks anything, and we must do what he says, Etta, whether we like it or not. But I can say,"—scribbling as fast as she could,—"I can say that it does not signify about sending it for a day or two, as we have plenty of things at home, and do not want to trouble any one. There, that will give us a little more time. And if it be as I suppose, that Rosamund is in for a long illness, and that people have been disagreeable, and telling Frederick that it is of no use to stay on here, and have made him declare in a huff that we shall go home, why, if he had only not been in such a hurry, we could soon have put things straight. Mr. Liscard would not have heard of our going. He needs us all the more if Rosamund is going to be ill, and stop on at the Abbey. And now that we have got Catharine, and have made all proper—"

"Only listen to that dear old sheep-bell!" cried Etta, running to the window and opening it. "Oh, to think that we are never perhaps to hear it again! And

I do love this view of the lovely park, with its great trees, and the deer, and the beautiful, broad avenue. I had got to feel quite at home here, hadn't you? And I am sure I had never thought I should. And I don't mind the men-servants a bit, now that I am used to them, nor all the grandeur. Oh, how happy we were only an hour ago, planning out every day this week, and—oh, Em, the Waterfields—what are we to do about the Waterfields?"

"We must leave cards to be sent," said Em, profoundly. "Mr. Liscard will see to it, I am sure."

"You always think first of Mr. Liscard," observed her sister, with a smile. "I declare, Em, I wonder whether our going like this can possibly have anything to do with Mr. Liscard."

"Nonsense!" said Emily, who had already been wondering the same thing. "But I am very sure he will be vexed about it," she added, "and I do think he ought to have been told. There—that's my brooch pin gone! I knew it was loose yesterday. And where are a pair of gloves? All our things are in such a muddle. I had meant to tidy them up only to-day. We never seem to have a moment when we come in to put things by and I do think Rosamund's maid might have helped us more than she has."

The truth being that Rosamund's maid had not helped at all. The pampered domestics of King's Common, accustomed to judge of every one by the standard of their late mistress, had speedily left the Miss Gilberts to shift for themselves, as soon as they found that their first formal tenders of assistance had been rejected. Young ladies who brought no maid, and dressed their own hair, could do anything.

"I daresay half our things won't come," quoth Henrietta now; "I don't at all like leaving them."

Emily felt as if she hardly cared whether they came or not; and the first stroke on the gong, telling of the carriage being round, struck on her ear as the knell of doom. They hurried down, and found their brother in the hall. "Have you left any money?" he said, aside.

They had not thought of it.

"Here,"—he took some gold pieces from his purse. "Give these to you know best how. Look sharp."

"Brother! Sovereigns!"

"Give them, I say. No, stop, there is no time to lose. Give them to Badeley here, and ask him to see they go to the right persons."

She did so, and returned. Henrietta was already in the carriage.

"Get in, quick," said her brother, impatiently, and was by her side on the instant, Etta having humbly taken the back seat.

"To the Abbey, sir?"

"To the station."

The sisters glanced at him. He bit his nether lip as he spoke. He was looking straight in front. His arms were folded. There was something so stern, so hopeless in his air, a resolution so immovable in his countenance, that involuntarily they shrank and quailed before it.

He sat, an iron figure, with front of adamant, and eyes deep-set and burning beneath lowered brows, as one who neither sees nor hears aught of the passing scene;—and beholding him thus, they themselves scarce durst move or breathe,—realising more and more that they were in a presence all unknown before—the presence of an awful sorrow.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

HARTLAND UNLIKE HIMSELF.

Within four and twenty hours after the events recorded in the last chapter had taken place, every busy tongue in and about the two great houses of the neighbourhood was wringing with its own version of them.

Some facts were beyond dispute. Rosamund Liscard was lying dangerously ill at the Abbey, and Major Gilbert's sisters had departed from King's Common in a mighty hurry; but what was the connection between these, or whether there were any connection at all, was enough of a mystery to be delightful and provoking.

It was all very well for the young ladies to give out that they had been summoned home unexpectedly. Mr. Liscard's household could testify that no summons had come through any other medium than that of their brother the major (and the major had certainly been the person to spirit off the two), but neither he nor they had dropped a hint of bad news, sudden illness, accident, or any one of the usual cases of a hasty exit.

Of course the family might have chosen to keep their own counsel. There might have been ill tidings after all; and if it had been so, and if, on hearing these, Miss Liscard had been taken worse, and her future sisters-in-law obliged to flee, nothing more could be said. But the gossips shook their heads, and knew better.

N. B.; more than that lay beneath the

surface. And the first idea that naturally presented itself was that Rosamund's papa had been brought to book for his late high misdemeanours. The old gentleman had been enjoying himself far too much, and the young lady had got wind of it. Probably, then, she had taxed her lover with his sister's indiscretions, and he in wrath had swept them off to satisfy her.

His gloomy brow, the severity of his manner towards them, and their frightened cowering obedience under it, were all attested to; and the major who was as popular as his sisters were the reverse, was allowed to have done the right thing—no second mistress being desired at King's Common.

The major, then, they concluded, did not choose to have his family talked about; and as the members of it now under discussion had not known how to behave themselves, it had been "to the right about face" with them.

And to be sure, said one and all, it served the misses right, and the old gentleman too. Say he did intend to have another wife one of these days, no one would have gainsaid him, if only he had waited a reasonable time and chosen a reasonable lady.

Lady Caroline had not been beloved, and it would have seemed only a righteous retribution, had a successor to her been found at the expiration of a twelvemonth; but the indecent haste with which the widower had suffered himself to be beguiled from his seclusion was one offence, and his having found a siren in Miss Emily Gilbert was another.

Miss Rosamund's lover was all very well; he was major of his regiment and for the time being in command of it; and the regiment was stationed hard by. Every now and then he might be seen riding out with his men, a gallant, handsome fellow, with a fine authoritative air. He cut a dash in his tandem dog-cart, kept a couple of smart grooms, and spent his money like a gentleman. To crown all, he had saved Billy Barley's life at the risk of his own.

Altogether he had been regarded with complacency as a suitor even for Lady Caroline's daughter, and her ladyship had been stigmatised as haughty and arrogant, and quite beyond bearing with her airs and her pride, because she had not lent herself to the general sentiment.

But Major Gilbert was one person; and his younger sister was another.

For her was no accompaniment of military grandeur and beat of drum; for her no red-coated orderly would dash over with important despatch, or telegram; nor could she handle dexterously a pair of risking thorough-breds. To be sure, a French abigail and a silver-mounted dressing-case might have done something towards retrieving Emily's credit; but the sisters had been brought up plainly, and, wealthy as the family was, did not know what feminine luxury meant. It was their code that Frederick must have this and that—that great, gilt monograms on his toilet accoutrements, and handsome fittings to his travelling-bag; but none of the girls whom they knew indulged in anything better than they had themselves, and they were content to be on the same level. Accordingly, although their outfit for the much-talked-of visit had been selected with care, and contained many new and expensive articles of dress, it was deficient in those trifling accompaniments which are the delight of ladies' maids and housemaids. Neither embossed silver nor ivory, neither satin sachet nor embroidered shoe-bag was there to be seen. "Not a bit of lace nowhere," whispered one saucy minx to another behind backs, "and only the meanest of edging! La! they ain't nothing."

All of this was told down-stairs, and down-stairs told outside, and outside spread itself to right and to left, and the outcome of it all was that Mr. Liscard was felt to be lowering the standard of the whole establishment, by paying court to a lady who brushed her hair with a bone-handled brush.

To have had the popular voice with him he should have selected the daughter of a noble house—or at least of an old county family—and have gone gradually and soberly to work. But instead, he had jumped up all of a sudden, like a jack-in-the-box, banged the proprieties about their ears, and gone for the first pretty, simpering pair of lips that said a civil word to him. Shame upon him, the nasty old man!

There could be no doubt as to his vexation over the hasty finish put to his felicity.

He had come home from Longminster, apparently aware of what had happened; indeed the groom attested to his having had a meeting with Major Gilbert in the town—and he had clearly been very much put out, indeed quite nonplussed, by it. Miss Catherine's company at dinner had been declined; and she had been further informed, in terms that had admitted of no discussion, that her presence for the rest of the evening could also be dispensed with. He had not himself gone into the drawing-room. He had retreated, as he had been wont to do of old when worsted in a fight, to his library and his books, and coffee had been served to him there.

Presently the village doctor had joined him; and the increased illness of Lady Julia's charge had been announced to Mrs. Osory, and Mrs. Osory had been requested to attend to divers directions, and had



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