

# Conflict of Generations

By EMILY CALVIN BLAKE

Illustrated by Bess Bethell

**M**ADAM RAY, she was called. At the time of which I write she was quite 80, but she looked like a straight, tall, unbending old hickory tree. No storm, it seemed, could more than shake her. She was rated as very rich, and she lived in a great house built in a part of the city almost completely given over to business. The gay life of a magnificent hotel went on about her on the right; and to the left a twenty-story office building reared its white head.

Madam Ray had a fainting spell one day, and the pale daughter-in-law, Mrs. Jesse Ray, who made her home with Madam Ray, called in the family physician. He installed me as nurse for an indefinite period. Not that Madam Ray was confined to her bed, but the doctor felt she must have a constant trained attendant. Ten years, he thought, would see her weakening toward the end. Careful supervision would make those ten years more free from physical mishap.

From the time I first entered Madam Ray's service I quite admired her, perhaps because she was extraordinarily generous. True, she was very much of her class, inclined to patronize those whom she considered beneath her; seeming to have been shielded by means of her wealth from contact with any part of an unsavory world, yet holding unshakable views on any question that might come up for discussion; and ruling all about her with an iron hand.

There must be one exception made to the rule of iron. Madam Ray's granddaughter evaded that rule. Perhaps because she was so much like her grandmother. One could hardly believe Rena to be the daughter of the pale and deprecating Mrs. Jesse Ray, for the girl was high spirited, willful and very beautiful, with brilliant eyes, sea-colored, and a mass of black hair that she arranged to follow smoothly the shape of her regal little head.

Rena at this time was engaged in some business of her own, and Madam Ray was quite aware of this business, and disapproved of it. Rena tried one day to make a statement regarding her interesting affairs, but refrained, stopped by an imploring glance from her mother.

The business of Rena's came out one day when I saw her approaching the house with a tall, blond young man with a swagger in his walk and a worship in the glance he rested on Rena. I recognized him at once, for too often his daredevil doings had made interesting tidbits for Sunday supplement readers. He was Glen Keith, heir of an old and impoverished family. To his intimates he was known as "Fearless Keith," a right good name, since he looked as if he feared nothing on the earth.

But from the first Madam Ray was dead set against young Keith. She passionately worshipped her grandchild, and she thought young Keith not in the least degree, despite his family, good enough for Rena. At any rate she set her face against the match, and pale little Mrs. Ray spent hours begging Rena to yield to her grandmother's wishes, as though that proud girl would brook any interference in her affairs. Besides, it was to be seen that she had given her whole heart to the reprobate.

One afternoon when I was with Madam Ray in her own old-fashioned, high ceilinged room manipulating the soft violet ray ordered by the doctor Rena entered like a whirlwind.

When she saw her grandmother lying back inert on her bed Rena was for hurrying away as precipitously as she had entered. But something in the girl's eyes arrested Madam Ray's attention and peremptorily she bade her return to her side.

"Now, the truth!" she demanded. The girl grew rosier.

"Have I not always told you the truth?" she cried.

"You've been out with Glen Keith?"

"Yes," said Rena, head held high, "and we're going to be married!"

"Without my consent?"

"If necessary," said Rena.

Madam Ray rose up in her bed.

"I forbid you mentioning that scawag's name again!" she cried.

"Very well," said Rena quietly.

"We've both asked your consent to our marriage. Now the consequences are on your own head."

And with no other word she went away, every fiber of her young and vigorous body breathing defiance.

"A spirited girl," said Madam Ray to me; "a spirited girl, but not quite foolhardy enough to disobey me!"

Actually she was rejoicing in Rena's valor, so honestly come by.

But Madam Ray reckoned wrong concerning Rena's foolhardiness. The very next day the papers flaunted the elopement of young Rena Ray, noted heiress, and Glen Keith, wide and unfavorably known as "Fearless Keith."

Mrs. Jesse Ray then promptly took to her bed, but Madam Ray remained undaunted. Only daily she took to watching for the postman. But no letter came from Rena. Only the papers occasionally



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chronicled the young pair's peripatetic movements, and that horrid, scurrilous society sheet, *Subtle Gleanings*, when the marriage was about three months old, carried an innuendo that "Fearless Keith" was as fearless as ever in his pursuit of pleasures that should now be past dead fruits to him.

And after a time many of the more respectable papers took to coupling the initials of a well-known actress with the name of Keith "M. G.," as the world well knew, was Maizie Gresham, the comedienne, and if the world had a sense of humor it knew, too, that Glen Keith was running true to form, using no original material.

All these items I saw old Madam Ray cut out of the papers and carefully preserve. And she had me call up her lawyer, when she gave him vigilant directions to keep a careful and constant eye on young Keith and report all his movements to her. I think she foresaw the inevitable breaking up of the marriage.

Mrs. Jesse Ray, who was terribly apologetic ever since her daughter's misdeed, moved about the old lady, giving unasked her advice in a soft-footed, half-pleading way that sometimes stirred Madam Ray to quick-cutting speech.

"My son must have found your lack of backbone anything but invigorating!" she cried one day.

Mrs. Ray's hands trembled, her face lost its color. She found courage, however, to answer:

"Jesse needed nothing from me, mother."

"He needed a great deal that you never gave him," Madam Ray retorted vigorously. "A strong hand, for one thing."

Mrs. Ray was now on the verge of tears. But she was goaded by the element of criticism in Madam Ray's voice to ask a question.

"Do you blame me for Jesse's being where he is?"

"In the sanitarium? Come, speak out; since the subject is broached; don't mince your words."

Mrs. Ray cast a glance at me. Madam Ray knew its significance.

"You may speak frankly before this young woman. She has been in at a few of our family skeletons as it is. Since the matter has come up, let us have it out. I think a firmer hand over my son might have saved him!"

"Jesse resembled neither his father nor me," Madam Ray went on. "He was weaker in fiber, more pleasure loving. I hoped much from his marriage."

"His weaknesses were his strengths," murmured Mrs. Ray in a broken voice.

"Well, let us leave the matter," said Madam Ray. "At least two weeklings managed to produce a high-spirited creature."

She said this a little proudly, and dramatically at this moment Rena, as though invoked, entered the room.

Madam Ray, after the first shock of the girl's appearance, sat perfectly still, for the first time in her strong old life unable to speak. Her eyes stared from her withered face into that of her grand-

child, and so for a full moment the tableau remained.

At last Rena moved forward, did not stop till she reached her mother's side. She stooped and placed an ardent kiss on her mother's frightened cheek.

"Aren't you glad to see me, mother?" she asked in her rich young voice.

Mrs. Ray nodded a bare assent, casting as she did one of her appealing looks at her mother-in-law. But Madam Ray was still regarding Rena with her old hawklike eyes, never once wavering in their direct glance.

Rena, finding her grandmother did not mean to open the conversation, walked to the high mantel, lifted a small marble figure, examined it as closely as though she had never before seen it, and then put it gently down again. At last, with a quick little turn of her head, she looked at Madam Ray and in a clear tone made her announcement:

"I have left Glen!" she said.

Madam Ray spoke at last in an icy voice:

"I am not modern, my dear young granddaughter. So perhaps you will explain yourself. Do you mean—divorce?"

"I have left Glen; that is all at present," Rena replied.

A flame shot into Madam Ray's eyes.

"I should be glad if you will deign an explanation of this decision? Women of your family do not play fast and loose, however bad a bargain they contracted!"

An answering flame came to Rena's eyes.

"Women of my family have borne more than they should. I shall have all—or nothing—from any man!"

"Knowing your sweet temper, my dear granddaughter," said Madam Ray, "I've no doubt you tried your husband to the limit."

"Possibly I did," said Rena indifferently. "At least he found in me an able antagonist."

"Your scenes must have been very edifying," said Madam Ray. "May I say now that I was a prophet and foreman that two such natures would set one another aspark!"

To this taunt Rena gave no answer. And Madam Ray continued:

"Presumably you are entitled to your own manner of thought. However, why return to me, whose judgment you flouted? Remember, there has been no public disgrace in our family, my young and ardent relative. We women have suffered and borne in silence!"

"But not I!" cried Rena proudly. "I have left the man who has grown abhorrent to me—that is all!"

A flash of triumph passed over Madam Ray's face. She sat a moment in reflective silence, then she spoke slowly and with emphasis:

"You will not return to Glen Keith?"

"Never!" said Rena, and yet her pride was shot through with pain. "I shall never return to him, grandmother."

"Very well," said Madam Ray, full satisfaction in her manner, "is there anything more to be settled?"

Now Rena looked a full moment into Madam Ray's face. A flood of color came and went up to her forehead. When she spoke her tones were low.

"I should like," she said; "I should like your great-grandson to be born in the old blue chamber where my father was born, and where, too, I first saw day!"

For a moment Madam Ray stood. A quiver like the wind passing over waters crossed her face. Then at once she put out her hand and touched a low-hanging tassel on the wall. In a moment a servant appeared.

"See that the blue chamber is made ready at once for my granddaughter," she said. She looked at no one in the room as she gave her order, but returned to her chair and sat down, picking up a large purple bound book and turning its pages in an isolation that cut her off completely.

Glen Keith put in an appearance on the third day of Rena's return to her own home, and I was the one delegated to go down and tell him that Rena would not see him. This after the intimidated butler had twice reported that the young man refused to take his message.

"I have come to say that Mrs. Keith is engaged at present, and therefore—"

He interrupted me unceremoniously.

"I wish to see my wife at once; and if that old vixen of a grandmother is keeping her against her will—"

He stopped, to finish: "I want to explain to Rena."

He was very likable as he stood there, and for the moment I really felt sorry for him. But I answered:

"Madam Ray is not keeping your wife against her will. Mrs. Keith requested me to say that her last words to you were final!"

He stood perfectly still then, and his boyish face lost all its light. I wondered how Rena could find it in her heart to desert him. I suppose that was part of his fascination for women, his dare-deviltry combined with his boyish appeal. Now he said:

"Will you tell Mrs. Keith, please, that I shall not trouble her again!"

There was both menace and threat in his tones, but these I tried not to convey to Rena when I repeated his words. Yet she stood a moment, all the color quenched from her face, and for the first time I saw Madam Ray evince outwardly the great love she had for the girl who had defied her. She put out her hand and touched Rena's shoulder lightly, but she spoke no words.

Only there remained still the triumphant expression on her face, and later I found her conning the damning evidence against Glen Keith, to be used against him in some not very far day.

During this period Rena's father died at last in his sanitarium, and the women went into a sort of monastery of mourning. Now more than ever Rena and her grandmother were thrown together, and the soft webs the old woman wove grew tighter and tighter.

"Your son," said Madam Ray one day out of a clear sky, "otherwise a pauper, shall be my heir, Rena!"

"Thank you, grandmother," she said, and then: "He'll need all you and I can give him."

Rena's son was perfect. At 4 o'clock in the morning, after a night spent by Madam Ray in lying down, sitting up and walking about, despite all I could do, the white-capped, starched nurse brought the little baby in for inspection.

I shall never forget Madam Ray's glad cry as she stood up to receive the infant. Her great-grandson, only male representative now of her line. Her firm lips quivered.

The nurse took the child away again to its mother, and I got Madam Ray back to bed. With her rare recuperative powers she recovered from the long strain of waiting and was about again in a few days.

Up in Rena's room, a purified Rena, with white face and great, dark-ringed eyes, Madam Ray sat as long as she was allowed by the nurse. Whenever she could she held the little child.

"Just we three," she said once in one of her rare manifestations of love; "just we three now!"

And Rena, probably too weary to answer, barely nodded.

Rena was her accustomed self, apparently, in a month. Such wonderful days with her new little son. Madam Ray actually took a new lease of life. She telegraphed her agent in Florida and had a house prepared and ready for the annual fitting. She showered Rena with gifts, bought regal outfits for the baby, even turned a more just face to Mrs. Ray.

And then, bit by bit, perfectly plain to the trained eye, Rena began to fade. The doctor gave her a tonic, advised the hasty removal to Florida, and all preparations were pushed.

One day I found Madam Ray alone in her own room, wide awake after her nap. She spoke directly to me.

"Does Mrs. Keith seem ill to you?" she asked.

"She does not seem to gain as she should," I answered.

"What is the trouble?" she asked.

I hesitated, but her straight gaze compelled a straight answer.

"She's unhappy," I said.

"Why should she not be happy?" she asked with hauteur.

"She's pining for something, some element gone out of her life," I answered.

A week later Madam Ray called for her great-grandson and sat with him on her lap looking down with worshiping eyes into his clear young features. Suddenly she rang for his nurse, called to me, and issued her orders in a definite, crisp voice:

"Be ready at midnight to accompany me on an errand," she said.

She gazed almost fiercely at me, as though to dare my thwarting her inten-

tion, but knowing her well, I merely repeated:

"Very well—at midnight."

During the afternoon she insisted again on being alone, and keeping within short call, I heard her using the telephone, one call after another, till suddenly her activities ceased and she allowed me to prepare her for her nap.

But at midnight she was ready, garbed and strong. At midnight we went out into the dark night. Sounds of merriment came from the gay hotel on one side, the deserted office building rose gaunt and pale on the other, and in between nestled the great old house that had sheltered many generations.

A carriage waited at the curb, and into this we entered after a sharp word of direction to the driver from Madam Ray. She sat in one corner, staring straight before her.

We drove for an hour, then stopped before a building set well back from the road. Lights streamed out here and there, but it looked discreetly secretive.

We left the carriage, and Madam Ray leading the way, we went down a narrow path, up a few steps, and Madam Ray pressed a bell. A uniformed man immediately opened the door and called another uniformed man. In a moment then we were both being ushered up a broad pair of stairs, down a hall, and then the man with no ceremony flung open the door to a room, and a sudden burst of brilliant light came upon us.

For a moment the light was blinding, then the room took shape, with its occupant. It was a large, exquisitely furnished room, with a table set with silver and glass in the center beneath a crystal chandelier. And at the table sat Glen Keith, and opposite him, glittering in green sequins, bare shoulders and many diamonds, the actress, Maizie Gresham. Beside her on a small chair was a tiny monkey, shivering in nervousness beneath its meshed coat of gold, with small, glittering sapphires.

Madam Ray stood in silence. Surely in all her well ordered days she had never been in such a room nor come in such personal contact with a woman of Maizie Gresham's class. And indeed, Miss Gresham might not have existed for all the notice Madam Ray deigned to bestow upon her. With her back superbly straight and turned in almost vocal disdain upon the actress and her monkey, Madam Ray faced Glen Keith.

"Your wife, my granddaughter, wishes to see you," she said.

Glen Keith flushed a deep crimson, and his eyes gazed steadily back at Madam Ray. But even yet he was without words.

"Your son—" Madam Ray began launching her bomb, and at this he started forward, galvanized into sudden life. "My son!" he cried.

"Your son was born six weeks ago today at 4 o'clock in my home," she said, and waited.

"But—" he began; and then stopped to repeat incredulously, "My son!"

"Your son," she said again; "which may explain many things!"

This statement he did not answer, only continued to stare at Madam Ray with wide eyes.

"I have made the child my heir," she went on; "I have given him my guardianship—in one event."

"And that?" he asked.

"That you relinquish all claim to him!" she cried.

"Why, then," he said; "why, then, does my wife wish to see me?"

The gray look that spelled renunciation stole over Madam Ray's face, but she continued calmly enough:

"That you may give your consent in her presence—to make the whole matter legal—and to sign the necessary papers."

He bent his head, but said nothing.

She continued:

"In the event of your signing these papers and so relinquishing all claim upon your wife and son, I have ready for you a check for \$100,000!" She mentioned the sum very distinctly.

There ensued for a moment a dead silence, during whose interval Maizie Gresham looked at young Keith with wide and greedy eyes. But a cloud black as thunder had gathered on his face. At length:

"I suppose I deserve this!" he cried. And then: "I will go now to see my wife, but you may tear up four rotten little checks!"

Madam Ray inclined her head, and with the look of a great lady walked past Maizie Gresham and out of the door. When we had entered the carriage Glen Keith caught up with us, took his place and sat down opposite Madam Ray.

We went into the dark house, up the velvet stairs, and all three paused at Rena's door. A light came softly over the transom, and Madam Ray with steady hand knocked softly, then pushed the door open.

"You will find your wife in there with your son," she said.

She stood a moment when he had disappeared within.

"So," she murmured; "not all black!" Then she recovered herself.

"I am very tired," she said. "I think I will go to bed."

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