

## Margot's Steps

(Isabel Stuart Robson, in 'Christian World'.)

The Hotel des Anglais stood on a little terrace overlooking the Mediterranean; down below the green waves broke upon sharp, jagged rocks, and for miles to right and left the sunny coast was fringed with dark, fragrant pines. It was a place little known to tourists, though those who, like Margot Carmichael, discovered it in its fairest aspect of sunny June, loved to linger and to come again and again.

It was not of the beauties of St. Reuna that Margot was thinking this morning, as she sat on the verandah of the hotel, looking out dreamily over the glittering waters. She had a letter in her hand, a letter which must be answered that day, though the answer meant the complete changing of all the conditions of her life.

There were many who envied Miss Carmichael the independence of her position and the comfortable circumstances of her life. Margot herself sometimes felt that this independence from home ties, this ability to go where she pleased and to do exactly as her fancy prompted, had its sting; at six-and-twenty it is hard to feel that one stands alone, not especially dear or necessary to anyone. For the first twenty years of her life it had been so different; she had been her father's constant companion, sharing all his pursuits, and, as time passed, becoming a capable assistant in his literary and scientific work. Then, quite unexpectedly, he had married again, and the whole aspect of the girl's life underwent a change.

Looking back, Margot could not blame herself that things had not gone well. She had been prepared to welcome her stepmother, and to love her warmly. Had Mrs. Carmichael been a wiser woman, the little household might have been a happy one. She was a pretty, delicate girl, scarcely a couple of years older than Margot, whose father had been an old college friend of Professor Carmichael's, and who, when dying, left her to his friend's care. Perhaps her fragile beauty appealed to her guardian; perhaps, in his indolent way, he felt that he most easily solved the difficulties of his undesired responsibility by marriage; whatever his motives for the step, the Professor one day brought his bride back to the old house in the dull riverside town, and Margot found herself deposed from her position of mistress of her old home.

From the first, the new Mrs. Carmichael was grievously jealous of her tall stepdaughter. She resented the Professor's dependence on her, and envied her intellectual powers and her ability to enter into subjects which were quite unintelligible to the young wife. It was not long before Margot came to see that her presence was a discordant note in the music of the house. When she was assured of this fact her pride took fire. She loved her father devotedly, and she felt it bitterly hard that he should be happier without her; yet there was no gainsaying the fact that he would be so. He loved a quiet life, and a quiet life was an impossibility whilst the two who were nearest and dearest to him shared one home. When Margot told him that she had made up her mind to go abroad and travel for a while, he made no

demur, and Mrs. Carmichael was openly triumphant. 'Margot had three hundred a year of her own,' she reminded her husband, 'she would suffer no pecuniary anxieties, and she had always been so strong and self-reliant that she was well able to take care of herself.'

So Margot, with an old governess devoted to her and glad to obtain so pleasant a post, came to St. Reuna, and there they had stayed ever since. Twice a year the Professor came over and spent a week with his daughter, but Margot had never been invited to Frant. Now and then she wrote to her stepmother, for there had been no rupture between them, and, when her father went back, she would send presents to the two little sisters who came to take her place in the old house. It was a strange, quiet life the girl led, and it would have been a dull one if she had not continued her old studies and even made some small success by her own literary work. It was certainly not the life for the bright, handsome girl, Miss Brown often assured the cheerful, kindly landlady, though Miss Carmichael seemed content with it.

The morning's post had brought Margot a letter which was going to break up that content, for though she sat considering her answer, she knew well what it must be. Duty never called to Margot Carmichael without finding her ready to obey the call.

She got up presently and went indoors. Miss Brown was sitting at the window darning a rent in one of Margot's white gowns.

'My dear, I thought you had gone to the pines,' she said, looking up with a smile. 'It's too lovely a day for any but old bodies like me to be indoors. The spring is the sweet o' the year at St. Reuna's.'

Margot nodded. 'Just when you and I have to leave it, Brownie.'

Miss Brown laid down her work and her smile faded. She told herself that she had always known that Margot would tire of the quiet of St. Reuna's, which was so good to her after the bustle and turmoil of a long work-a-day life.

'You want a change, dear?' she asked.

Margot shrugged her shoulders. 'It is not a question of what I want, but of "needs be," Brownie,' she said, quickly. 'I had a letter from Frant this morning. Mrs. Carmichael has been ill and is completely broken down. Father seems to think she will never be more than an invalid. There isn't anyone to look after things, and, from what father says, misrule is the order of the day. He writes quite tragically, and is manifestly frightfully worried and uncomfortable.'

Miss Brown nodded. 'I see; you are asked to go and take the helm of the stranded vessel.'

Margot laughed, and shook her head. 'No, father doesn't even suggest such a course. He seems to take it for granted that it is a step no one in their senses could expect me to take. He simply writes to relieve his feelings, just as he always does.'

'You will go all the same,' nodded Miss Brown.

Margot laughed. 'I suppose I shall, and I want you to come too, Brownie. I simply could not tackle those children without you. You shall take them in hand

and mother them as you once did me, to my lasting good.'

'Of course I will come and gladly,' replied the old governess, wiping her eyes. She saw through the kindly ruse which provided for her own future, and loved Margot the better for it. Margot always made it delightfully easy to accept favors from her.

'Is it necessary for you to go at once, my dear?' she asked, as, after a little further talk, Margot moved away to the writing table.

The girl flushed and looked at her old friend with a certain wistfulness. 'Yes, we must go at once,' she said, taking up her pen.

Miss Brown sighed, but she said no more. Margot knew what was in her mind. Six months ago a visitor had stayed at the little-known Hotel des Anglais, a doctor whose health had broken down and for whom the air of the pines and the sunshine of the south had been ordered. He had remained two months, and during that time the three English visitors had seen a good deal of each other, and Miss Brown confided certain hopes of her own for the two young people to the sympathetic landlady. Suddenly the doctor was called home; there was only time for a hurried word of farewell before the lumbering diligence carried him off to the nearest station. Only when he shook Margot's hand, he said, 'I shall come back. I wonder if I shall find you here?'

Margot answered the tone of his voice and the look in his eyes rather than the commonplace words. 'Yes, I shall be here,' she had said, 'I am not one of those who come and go.'

Ever since she knew she had been waiting for his return, waiting for the next chapter of what had promised to be the sweetest love-story. He would come back to find her gone. If only the friendship had been close enough to permit of her writing to him with an explanation of her absence, but such an explanation would have assumed too much. It was not the first time, she told herself, with smarting eyes, that two lives have drifted apart because the shores of friendship were not close enough for the throwing across of a bridge.

Her pen flew steadily over the paper; she must do 'the next thing' and leave results with One who had shaped her life and called her to take each separate step. Her courage rose with the thought that she could safely leave her future in God's hands.

A week later Margot and Miss Brown were established in the old house down by the Severn. After the peaceful, studious life of the Hotel des Anglais, it was like entering a new world to step into the bustle and turmoil of the Professor's noisy, ill-managed house. It seemed incredible to Miss Brown that so small a household could make so much confusion and noise. Even Margot's courage ebbed lamentably at the close of the first day, so hopeless seemed the task she had undertaken. It was not in her nature, however, to be daunted by obstacles. She boldly seized the helm of affairs, made the incompetent staff of servants feel that they must better their ways or leave her, and gradually chaos was reduced to order. It was