

Published by permission of Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London, England. THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES BROWN

CHAPTER IV.

Early the following morning the Countess de Woodville's French maid, Louise, arrived at the Abbey. She was to accompany the three young ladies and take charge of them as far as London. The house was now as though upon wings whilst our three young friends arm-in-arm paid loving visits to every nook and corner of the old home that had fostered and cherished them for at least six years of their lives. A soft light shone in Marie's eyes, and as they left each room, dear to them by many a tender memory, Beatrice would exclaim, with a wayward toss of her pretty head: "Good-bye, old spot; would that I did not love you as I do!" But a voice in Marie's head would respond: "Au revoir, dear home, I am not taking a little flight; like the dove, I shall soon return!"

Bravely but sadly Madge allowed her eyes to wander and rest upon each familiar scene. Sorrow falls heavily upon the young; few, very few, perhaps only those who have been nurtured in the lap of want and poverty, can even bear to look in the face, much less allow it a peaceful entrance into their homes and lives.

Poor little Madge! her memory flew back to the happy days of her early childhood—days that to her now appeared so long ago. She pictured to herself her grandfather's stately home amongst the Scottish hills, where she and her brother had been born, and where, until she went to school, all her life had been spent. The dearly loved face of Sir William Gordon, her grandfather, rose before her; she almost seemed to feel his kisses upon her cheek, the tight clasp of his warm large hand in hers—for she had always been his little darling and favourite, and he could deny her nothing. Stern he often appeared to others; never so to his beloved daughter and her two little ones. Madge remembered well how she and her lost brother were wont to chase each other merrily through the long, low picture galleries, and hide in the uncanny turret towers, so crumbling and overgrown with ivy. The little rough Scotch ponies upon which they would scamper over the hills covered with bright purple and white heather; even the grave visage of the old groom who accompanied them on the wild expeditions—all these could Madge distinctly recall to her memory. But ah! better than anything could she remember that long, dark winter, when she was about eight years old, and the dear old grandfather lay sick unto death in his bed-chamber. How still and miserable was everything! Her mother never left the sick-room day or night; the servants moved about like ghosts, so noiseless were their tread; and the two poor children, fasting, neglected and forgotten, clung to each other and wept silently.

Many times she was discovered lying on the mat outside her grandfather's door, where she had crept in the vain hope that he would call for her, but where, poor child, she had sobbed herself to sleep instead; until at last the doctor, finding that the old man chafed at his being denied the presence of his little granddaughter, with a bad grace yielded and allowed the little girl to enter the sick-room. There for hours she would sit upon the bed beside him, with one little hand fast locked in his, afraid almost to move for fear of disturbing him. Then came that cold winter's evening when in this position they both fell asleep; the old man never to wake again; the child to realize upon awakening that never again would she see or kiss the dear old man whom she almost worshipped with adoration. Madge being of a highly-wrought and sensitive nature, these sorrows made a deep impression upon her young heart, and it required all the gentle love and care of her mother and the merry humour of her brother to recall the roses to her cheeks, and persuade her that without her dear old grandfather she could ever be happy again. But time wore on, and the child was herself once more, yet was the memory of her grandfather as dear to her now as ever.

Often Madge shuddered now as she thought of the change that gradually year by year came upon that once happy home. The number of servants was diminished; many of the fine old rooms were closed, locked up. The sweet, calm face of her mother wore an anxious, troubled expression which deepened perceptibly each time her father absented himself from home. Her brother and playmate was sent to a school in England, whilst her mother, yielding to the earnest entreaties of Mère de Valois, had resigned Madge to the care of that early friend and left herself childless. More than six happy years had Madge spent at "Sancta Benedicta," and it is now almost three years since she had been at home, during which time her brother had died suddenly of fever, and it had been decided to allow her to remain at the Convent until her education was completed.

Little wonder then that of late, as the poor girl sat silently apart from the rest of her companions, allowing

her memory to dwell upon the cherished scenes of her childhood, contrasting them with the mysterious troubles upon which she was entering—little wonder, I say, if often the hot tears forced themselves through her long slender fingers as she hid her face in her hands and shrank with timid dread from the unknown.

But a good wise friend was at hand. Lady Abbess knew the world, and also understood the little hearts she had to deal with, feeling sure her little Madge was not the one to flinch from any task—no matter how difficult—if once undertaken. So day by day of late she had drawn the girl apart, talking to her gently but firmly, not endeavouring to hide or lessen the sorrows before her, but urging her to accept it as from the hands of God, to forget herself for others, and wait with loving confidence for the hour when God should remove the heavy trial, and grant the many graces and blessings He would shower upon her soul in return for her faith and constancy. Thus by degrees the girl's tears were dried. The sacrifice of herself into the hands of God to suffer and endure whatsoever He willed was made, and already her spirit feels brave and strong. Once more the dimples press her rounded cheeks, and a look of resolute endurance lights up the blue grey eyes as she whispers to herself, "I will be both son and daughter to my mother, and God, I feel, will help and bless me."

So the three friends clung more than ever together this last day at their girlhood's home; their hearts filled with mutual love for one another, and sorrow at parting from all the friends they loved so well. Yet hidden in the depths of two of their hearts at least lay secrets they scarcely cared to discuss together—to wit, Marie's longing to return, and Madge's dread of the trials in store for her.

As the shades of evening lengthened and the rooms were beginning to darken, a loud and solemn bell was heard to ring. It never sounded except to announce the presence of the Lady Abbess whenever she wished to see or speak seriously to any of the young ladies.

Three hearts were set fluttering, and three pairs of eyes looked excited, as our little friends vainly endeavored to smooth their ruffled appearances; for well they knew the meaning of that bell.

It had always been the custom in this, as in many other convents, for the Abbess to call each child separately to her and speak her last words of warning or advice ere she left her care for ever; and so many times had her words and warnings proved true, that what she said at such times was almost looked upon as prophetic.

Marie, being the eldest, was the first to be called. She walked with a fast-beating heart to the first classroom, where, seated in state, sat the Lady Abbess. Her fine face wore a firm and solemn expression, until noticing Marie's somewhat nervous manner, she smiled kindly, and stretching out her hand, said gently, "Come near to me, my child, and do not be afraid!"

"Marie, in true school fashion, knelt down at her side, whilst Lady Abbess, taking one of the girl's hands in hers, with the other stroked back the glossy curls from the marble brow, saying—

"And what am I to say to my little Marie, so good, so obedient, so loving, you who have never caused me or my Sisters one moment's trouble or anxiety? Only this, my child: go on as you have begun. Would that there were more like you in the world; the face of nature would wear a different aspect, and sin and misery would not run rife as they do at present."

"But, Mother," interrupted the girl eagerly, "I do not love the world, neither do I care to live in it; it has no attractions for me."

"I believe you, child; and for that very reason will you be safer in it than many another. For some, its pleasures are too bright, too dazzling; they cannot stand its glare, and fascinated by its false brightness, they lose their souls. But to you God has given a great discretion; you know Him and you love Him above all things; and, as a magnet, you will naturally turn to Him in every incident of life. As a clear, bright light must your simple faith and virtues shine before men, that seeing you, they must be encouraged to turn to their God with trust and confidence. If you will allow them, tried and weary hearts will unburden themselves to you. You must be a good little Samaritan; comfort the sorrowful, encourage the faint-hearted, and prevent sin if you can. God wants little souls like you to help Him, Marie!"

did your childhood. Take care that the home fireside is so bright and cheerful, that your brother, attracted by its genial warmth and glow, will not care to seek for pleasure from other sources. Visit the poor and the sick in their homes, and rest assured that God in His own good time will call you to Himself, if it be His holy will."

Marie's sobs had ceased now. A few more kind and loving words of encouragement did the Lady Abbess speak; then stooping, she kissed the fair brow, and continued—

"Now go! and God bless you, child. Write to me in all your troubles, and I will try and help you. Above all things, pray unceasingly for the grace to do God's holy will, and never forget that you belong to Him. Tell Beatrice to come."

The door had scarcely closed on Marie, ere it opened quickly to admit the bright face and graceful figure of Beatrice. She anticipated a little excitement and pleasure in this last little tête-à-tête.

Sliding in an easy kneeling position by the side of the Abbess, she took one of her hands in hers, and looking up saucily, inquired, "Please, Mother, with what armour am I to clothe myself, in order to be impervious to the attractions of the wicked world?"

"Be serious, Beatrice, if you can for a few moments," spoke Lady Abbess firmly; "it may be the last time I shall ever speak to you alone!"

In an instant the merry wilful eyes were serious. "Dear Mother, you know I was only joking!"

"I know it well child; still there is something I would say to you ere you leave my care for ever—something I would wish you to remember. You have a beautiful home, my child; friends who love you tenderly and well; every luxury that money can produce will doubtless be yours. The world to you promises to be bright and fair; God has given much, very much to you. A time will come when He will demand something in return, and you, Beatrice, must not refuse Him what He asks, let the sacrifice cost you what it may!"

"Oh, no, no! I mean to be very good and generous to the poor! I will even go and visit them in their own homes, with mother's permission."

"That will not cost you much, my child; He may ask more from you than that." The Abbess paused, and for some moments there was silence. Beatrice raised her eyes.

The lamp on the table shed an uncertain, flickering light; shadows caused by the drapery of the Abbess's veil were cast upon her calm, still countenance; her eyes, always so large and expressive, seemed to catch and reflect back the rays from the lamp, and shone with more than their usual brightness, whilst they were fixed with a steady look as if gazing into futurity. Somewhat of an artist by nature, Beatrice looked in admiration at the face above her. She little knew how much of grace and beauty she added to the picture herself, kneeling as she did with her fair face upturned and her slender form so gracefully bent.

Slowly Lady Abbess released her hand from that of the girl's and placing it gently and firmly on the shapely head beside her, continued—

"Beatrice, note my words. I do not wish to damp your spirits, but do not give your whole heart to the world, dear child. It is not so true or so bright as it appears to be; it will demand much from you, but little, will it give you of worth in return! If the time should come that God would demand much from you, O child, give freely then, for He will return it to you a hundred-fold!"

The answer came in a puzzled tone. "I will try to do as you say, Mother, but fail to understand clearly what you mean."

"Perhaps not now, dear, but when the time arrives you will remember my words, and know then what I mean, and how to act. By the way, I must not forget to tell you that Father's highest expressed a wish not to say adieu. Poor man, he feels the parting with you all very keenly. Write to him, Beatrice, he will be most pleased to hear from you; he is getting old, and likes to feel that his child is on his mind sometimes."

side, what poor mother can suffer I surely can endure!"

"A gentle, patient sufferer has your mother been for many years, but the love and care of her little daughter will be a ray of comfort from heaven itself to her. And now tell me candidly, dear child, what are your feelings regarding your father?"

"They are difficult to define, knowing so little of him now. You see he often left home for long periods at a time, and on his return would be apparently cross and weary, so that he seemed to care that mother only should be near him, and shut him self up in his studio. Of course, that sanctum was children were never allowed to enter. So the time went on until my school life began, and now when I think of him, it is almost as of a stranger."

"Well, child, you will doubtless see a great deal of him now, but whatever happens, remember that he is your father, and you must respect and honor him in that light at least."

A curious expression passed over the girl's face, but she answered simply, "I will not forget your advice, Mother."

"And now, child," continued the Abbess, with both the girl's hands clasped tenderly in hers, "it is no use trying to hide from you that your prospects in life are not what they once were; but face it bravely, dear, because God wills it, and never lose sight of the fact that you are still a lady, and that as such, peace and rest will be yours once more, and others will never of itself lower you one iota from that dignity. Look at the little family of Nazareth; where, before or since, was there ever such a combination of dignity and poverty combined? You are only asked to share a little in their lowliness. O child, I feel that you will be blessed in return; not always will these dark clouds hang over your path. God is very merciful, and He will not try you beyond your strength. When you least expect it, peace and rest will be yours once more, and my dear little Madge's heart will be purer and better for having passed through the fiery furnaces of sorrow. Now," added the kind Abbess, "I am going to impose a little task upon you, and it is this: write to me as often as you possibly can, and as a favor I ask that you will not hide your troubles from me. There is a chance that I may be able to assist you; at least, whilst you are struggling, dear, we can pray for you, and well you know that both you and your mother are very dear to us!"

"Not dearer," said the girl fervently, "than you are to us. You are the one true earthly friend to whom we can turn, no matter in what disgrace or trouble life may plunge us."

"Prove your words, dear child; and if ever a time should come when your mother feels free and able to travel, bring her to see her old friends here. I feel certain it would do her good!"

"I promise faithfully to do so," replied Madge.

"And now," resumed the Abbess, with something of a tremor in her own voice, whilst her hand stroked kindly the heavy chestnut tresses, "take care of your own health, child, for I do not consider you at all robust. Nay, do not look so incredulous, but mark my words. Without very great care your strength will give way; your generous spirit will urge you further than your bodily strength can follow, and, unless you keep it in check, an utter collapse will be the result. So, for the sake of your mother, if for no other reason, be careful of your health!"

For answer Madge smiled one of her rare sweet smiles, one that revealed so much of the noble spirit within.

"May God bless you, dear child, with His choicest graces and blessings; may He guard and keep you, and the Queen of Heaven watch over you now and always," so saying, for the third time that night, the kind Abbess stooped and kissed tenderly the young girl beside her, then remarking that it was getting late, they both rose and walked towards the window.

Immense masses of clouds had by this time collected together, and looked black and threatening against the light background of sky, lit by the setting sun.

"O dear!" said Lady Abbess, as she gazed at the darkening clouds, "we surely shall have a storm, and that speedily. I trust it will not be a wretched day, your journey tomorrow. How anxious we shall be about you, poor children! But it is late now, and I must go." Just at that moment the bell for night prayers rang.

"Come, Madge dear, that is a call for you. God bless you once more!" Lady Abbess smiled; she guessed the girl's intentions, yet hesitated on this last night to check her wilfulness. Then followed a quiet little talk regarding the girl's duties at home, and after kissing and blessing her, Beatrice was dismissed, with the injunction to send Madge in.

BACK TO GOD

The hotel was not the usual scene of gaiety, for the invalid was dying. The boarders stayed quietly in their rooms and the maids passed noiselessly through the halls, sometimes stopping at the door of the sick room to peep through, so as to ascertain the condition of the dying man.

The invalid's room was indeed the scene of death. On the spotless bed lay a man of middle age. His skeleton form and wasted cheeks, besides the difficulty with which he breathed, showed that consumption was claiming its own.

A child of perhaps five summers knelt by the bed with her little face nestled in the dying man's arms. On the other side of it stood the priest who had just administered the last rites of the Church, and by him was the doctor who knew the condition of the sick man was beyond his skill.

The only noise was the loud ticking of the great hotel clock, which, to the watchers at the bedside, sounded like the death summons. At last the dying man opened his eyes, smiled tenderly at the child in his arms and tried to rise and speak, but fell back and all was over.

Slowly and tenderly the coffin was lowered. With a startled cry the child sprang from the doctor's arms, her pale face making a striking contrast to the little black dress which she wore. When she reached the grave and saw the coffin gradually sinking, with another piercing cry of "papa" she fell forward and would have struck the casket had not the doctor caught her in his arms.

That night when all at the hotel had retired to rest and the bustle and noise in the town had ceased, little Ruth, who had been put to bed in a little room on the third story, finding sleep impossible, stole quietly to the door, which she found locked.

Then going to the open window she looked out into the night. Had Ruth been older she would have thought herself in luck, for a fire escape could be easily reached from the window. Stepping fearlessly out she looked cautiously about her and slowly descended. About five feet from the ground the steps ended, and Ruth, with all a child's fearlessness, bravely jumped.

Finding herself safely on the ground, with breathless haste she made her way to the graveyard, and with little difficulty found the newly-made mound. Then she threw herself with heart-rending sobs on the beautiful flowers which decked the grave.

The tired horse which came slowly down the hill bore two weary travellers in the uniform of the North. Their merry talking had ceased and they rode in silence. It was with joy they entered the town of C—, for there they would rest.

"I say, Clayton," said the younger of the two men, "we are nearing the graveyard. Do you remember," he added, "when we were youngsters we were afraid to pass it for fear of seeing ghosts?"

His companion laughed but made no answer. They had not gone much further when Clayton suddenly stopped his horse and merely whispered to his friend, "Look! The moon, which was high in the sky, lighted up the graveyard with a dazzling splendor, reflecting light on the many tombstones. A little figure in white appeared from behind the old church and ran wildly into the city of the dead."

The two men looked at one another in wonder. Then Clayton burst into a laugh and exclaimed: "I say, Connor, I think you haven't yet overcome your boyish fears of the dead."

These words brought Connor back to his senses, and he again started his horse, making his way toward the graveyard.

"Say, old fellow, are you mad?" Clayton asked, looking in surprise at his friend.

"Not quite," Connor answered, laughing. "But I am going to investigate."

prayers she so faithfully taught him.

When Ruth ceased crying her new friend took off his duster and quietly wrapped it around her.

Clayton was rather provoked that Connor should bother himself so much about the child and was more than amused at what his friend had said to her.

That night Ruth slept peacefully in the arms of the young officer. The next morning, after he had made inquiries about the child he decided to take her to his home as his little charge.

Mrs. Connor, the young officer's mother, received the little girl with open arms. Happy were the days that followed, for Connor was father, brother and playmate to little Ruth.

But what a gloom was cast over the family when the young officer was called to war! When he was saying good-bye to his little charge, Ruth unfastened her locket and placed it round his neck. Then Connor, taking her in his arms, almost smothered her with kisses. As he went by in the ranks he saw Ruth standing in the doorway smiling and waving her little hand in farewell. Ah! was it to be the last?

Long and bloody was the war. One evening when Mrs. Connor was reading the paper, with little Ruth sitting at her feet, she suddenly gave a piercing cry and fainted. The servants rushed in and after taking the sick lady to her room, picked up the paper to see what had shocked her. General Connor's name was on the list of the slain. His mother never recovered from the shock and sometime afterwards died, leaving Ruth again an orphan.

Mrs. Fioden, the housekeeper, was left in charge. She was a staunch hater of Catholics, and now that her mistress had died, she ridiculed the little orphan's religion, hiding her Rosary and burning the house of all religious articles and pictures. Ruth often cried bitterly to herself and when she was at last forbidden to go to church her life was that of a martyr.

One night when the housekeeper had been more cruel than usual Ruth decided to run away. Picking several necessary articles in a small bundle she slipped out of the house and walked—she knew not where.

Having proceeded some distance she came to the railroad track and decided to follow it. Suddenly she heard the whistle of a train and stepping off the track she hid in the high grass to wait until the cars should pass. But what was her surprise when the train slackened and stopped very near to where she hid.

Venturing to look up, she saw that something had gone wrong and noting that the attention of the people was directed to the place from which the trouble came, she stole noiselessly up and climbed into the baggage car. In a little while the train started and little Ruth was carried away on the midnight train. It stopped at C—.

Ten years passed. A bloody war had broke out and C— was the scene of bloodshed. Ruth, now grown into a beautiful young woman, went with a band of females to care for the wounded and the dying. She in her nurse's uniform and cap was called "The Angel of Mercy." Her sweet face and golden curls which escaped from under her cap were like a sunbeam entering the room.

One day she was attending a dying soldier when she observed a gold chain round his neck; looking closer she saw that a small locket was attached to the chain.

With a cry of surprise she quietly knelt over the sleeping man and opened the locket. A childish face was what she saw and immediately she recognized it.

The soldier then awoke and looked in surprise at what Ruth was doing. "Where did you get my locket?" she asked anxiously.

The man was very weak, but he gazed searchingly at her and said: "Are you Ruth Lennox?" "Yes," she answered, banding over him to catch his dying words. "Ah!" he said, taking her hand and pressing it tenderly, "you do not know me, but I remember you, my angel of mercy. To leave you no longer in doubt," he added after a pause, "I am Clayton, the once bosom friend of your brother, Connor. Eleven years ago in the battle in which I last saw him, he came to me and said: 'I am going to carry the warning to General Fioden. It is a risky business, Clayton, my dear fellow, and I may never see you again.' 'He then took off this locket and put it around my neck and said, 'If ever you see the owner of this give it to her and tell her I died the death of a hero and a Christian. Tell her it was her sweet face and innocent self that brought me back to God. And Clayton, dear old boy, wear this locket until you see her, and may God grant that the face which it contains may bring you to Him as it has me.' Here the dying man paused and pressed the little hand which he held.

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