

HONOUR WITHOUT RENOWN

BY MRS. INNES BROWN

Author of "Three Daughters of the United Kingdom" PREFACE

Having been requested by many friends to give as promised, a "further glimpse" of "The Three Daughters of the United Kingdom," I have endeavored to comply with the request in the following pages. It does us no harm, in these days of turmoil and incessant motion, of selfish hurry for fame and luxury, to pause now and again and realize that many of our fellow creatures of all ages, classes, and nations, have willingly cast aside these very gifts and possessions for which we so vainly strive and yearn, in order to devote their lives, their wealth, and talents to the relief and comfort of the poor and weak ones of the earth. Surely their lives stand out as an object lesson, the study of which acts upon us as a healthy stimulant, encouraging us to greater endurance and fortitude. It causes us also to ponder and search for the motive which prompts them to perform such generous deeds; making them hold as worthless all that we seem to prize so dearly, and to count, as treasure untold, the hidden blessings of the poor and destitute. Again, we may say what we will in praise of the advanced state of society, yet we cannot deny that there still lingers a sweet halo of restful refinement, a tender memory of unselfish motherly love, in our youthful recollections of the woman of the days gone by. And, true to life, I have endeavored to depict the lives and characters of these "Three Daughters of the United Kingdom."

CHAPTER I

The equinoctial gales were at their highest. Loud boisterous winds scoured the peaceful valleys, bent the treetops and whistled through their almost leafless branches, leaving broad visible tracks of ruthless destruction in their course. Then, as if angered at the sturdy resistance offered by the stately oaks and sheltered woods of Baron Court, the storm tore up the hillsides and swept along the lonely moors as though to revenge itself in noisy and exultant glee upon the sparse, tall pine trees which in thin and irregular ranks crowned the highest hills and broke the otherwise monotonous line of the horizon. Yet the force of the gale served but as pastime and sport for those old veteran firs; they merely bowed their dark green heads stiffly to the fury of the storm as it swept madly past, then rose again to their height, seeming to draw in with thirsty pleasure the sheets of pelting rain which dashed and beat with fury against their hard brown stems. "Heaven help the poor sailors this night!" muttered old John Ryder, the coachman, as he tottered and struggled down a slippery lane. "Aye me," he sighed softly to himself, as he paused and drew forth a large red handkerchief wherewith to wipe the dripping raindrops from his fine old roddy face. "Aye me, it was just such a wild and woe-ful night as this when our bonnie Jack was lost at sea. The poor old woman has never looked up rightly since. Well, well! me own time may not be so far off neither, or why should a gale like this fast me so?" He paused once more to regain his breath; but from old custom—grown a habit—strained his eyes and ears to watch and listen, if perchance through the roar of the storm he might detect the sound of post-horn step or voice. It was with feelings of joy, almost of gratitude, that he descried at last the bright glimmer of a light which every now and then shone through the leafless branches and marked the spot where stood the quiet Western Lodge, the very one where some twelve years before dear old Father Egbert had alighted when bound on his mission of love and kindness to the young mistress of the Court. Slowly but surely the welcome light grew nearer and nearer, until at last the weary old man stood upon the gravelled walk and clutched for support the iron rails which enclosed the neat little garden surrounding the lodge.

"This late, I know, but she'll admit me for a wee bit of rest and shelter I doubt not," he thought, "and some how I cannot stand the storm tonight." A louder blast of the tempest than ever interrupted his cogitations, and howling madly around the eaves of the house shook the lattice windows, whilst it pressed the form of the old man roughly against the railings. This decided him; and as soon as the gust had somewhat abated, he opened with difficulty the low iron gate, and trudging up the short pathway, knocked loudly with the butt end of his gun at the door of the lodge. A light step moved within, and as the outer door was opened timidly, as a flood of welcome warmth and light burst upon the waltzorous air—without, however, revealing the figure of the old man as he stood warily and wet outside. "Who knocks? Who is it out on such a night as this?" asked a sweet but timid voice. "Ms. Mrs. MacDermot! me—Ryder. Can you give me shelter for an hour or so from the rain? I do be somewhat fairly done this night."

"No, no, ma'am, neither," he answered cheerfully, still shaking the wet from his coat like a huge mastiff, and meanwhile wiping the clay from the little pug's outside; "but—confidentially—Jameson do be getting ole, ye see, and weather like this tries him sorely; so I volunteered to take his place tonight."

"Oh, yes, I see it all, Ryder: you being so young can afford to risk your health for your friend Jameson. But, seriously, do be more careful of yourself. What would your master say if he knew you were out in weather like this?"

"Nay, nay, ma'am. You at least should not speak like that, for who works so early or so late as you do?"

A deep flash dyed the face of Mrs. MacDermot as she turned away in silence; and a heavy sigh escaped her as she resumed her work of ironing, interrupted by the sudden entrance of her unexpected guest. She was a strange woman, this inhabitant of the Western Lodge; and the villagers loved to talk amongst themselves of her quiet doings and the dark mystery which seemed to envelop her life. The old porter, who had lived there for so many years, was dead, and suddenly as if dropping from the skies—came the new lodge-keeper, recommended, report did say, by Lady O'Hagan. How the village people came to recognize Mrs. MacDermot as a lady, and involuntarily spoke of and addressed her as such, was more than they could explain. Nevertheless they did so; yet was her employment no higher or better than their own. "She only took in washing," they argued. True, it was not the coarse, heavy clothes, such as those found their way to her lodge, but all the lighter, daintier articles from the Court, as well as from the houses of the gentry around: costly laces, altar linen, rich needlework, dainty ladies' garments, and pretty children's clothes—such things as these all found their way to her clever hands. "She gets the pick of everything," ejaculated the spiteful ones; "and if she does not turn her nose up to look almost as fresh and pretty as when first they left the maker's hands, why no doubt, in spite of her airs, she was reared to the trade—and then she's got nothing else to do." True, this was how she earned her money, and a tidy board she must have of it some where; but the question that exercised their minds so terribly was, what did she do with it? They knew her to be in great favor with their Lord and his Lady, the Earl and Countess de Woodville, for both had expressed their desire that Mrs. MacDermot might not be disturbed nor unduly intruded upon in her seclusion; indeed, they had heard more than once, too—that the little Countess Marie, when at home, even looked over and paid the washing bills herself at the Western Lodge; and she, they knew, was not likely to be stingy in her payments. Then followed the tiresome question, upon what did this strange woman spend her earnings? Truly, not upon herself; for her gowns, to their knowledge, were but two in number, and those of a plain black material, and her appearance belied the idea of one who lived or thrived upon dainty fare. Then for what was she saving or hoarding her hard earnings? Ah, the correct and reliable solution to that question would have secured a high premium, had the owner cared to offer it for auction to the highest bidder at Oakhoma. Neither were those wanting spiteful and jealous tongues which hinted broadly that Mrs. MacDermot had seen better days; that, likely enough, she had committed some terrible crime and was in hiding. Certainly, there was some deep, dark mystery which enshrouded and covered with shame her former life; they could tell that by her quiet and downcast look, and the steeomy way in which she frequently sought to evade or avoid altogether their very plain and straightforward questions. Well, well! whatever it was, they could afford to wait and watch; "murder will out," and doubtless the terrible truth would burst upon them some day, rewarding with tenfold interest their long forbearance.

Had they but watched her more closely when bowed in prayer, they could not have failed to observe the look of deep faith, and courageous hope, which lit up the dark brown eyes and gave to her quiet features that expression of brave, almost willing, endurance which surely could not be the companion of guilt. There were many others, however, who, like old Ryder, shook their heads gravely, saying: "Nay, nay! She may be a bit touched in her head with the melancholy, but she has done no wrong."

Of medium height, her figure slight almost to very thinness, her movements slow almost to weariness, Mrs. MacDermot's appearance varied so considerably at times that she had frequently been guessed at anything between four-and-twenty

and thirty-five. Her brown hair was dark, and grew prettily from her forehead, from which it was simply and naturally turned, then twisted in luxuriant coils in the nape of her neck. Two soft large eyes, matching in color the rich brown hair, shone out from the thin delicate face, revealing in their depths a settled look of ever-present sorrow; but the sadness of their expression was in a measure counterbalanced by the signs of reserve and proud endurance that lingered around the delicate lips. A thick gold wedding-ring hung loosely upon the third finger of her left hand; it would never have retained its position there at all but for the aid of a friendly keeper.

The kitchen into which Ryder had intruded was large and airy, and possessed an air of cleanliness and refinement. Across the further end of the ceiling were suspended several rows of deal laths, and upon them hung a various assortment of tiny garments, which in their spotless whiteness and exquisite finish seemed well to repay the laundress for the labor she had expended upon them. A large fire-place—of half iron—stood as a stove for heating iron—shone conspicuously at one end of the apartment, whilst an oil-cloth of a bright, cheerful design covered the floor. One low rocking chair, in which the weary mistress oftentimes rested her aching limbs, the arm-chair in which Ryder sat, and three smaller ones, together with a round centre table and dresser, constituted the chief articles of furniture in the room. The wall on one side and served as a stand whereupon to iron.

Outside, the storm appeared to rage with unabated fury; but the eyes of old Ryder followed the graceful movements of his hostess with admiration. Others might speak of her as cold and reserved; to him she had always been kindness itself. Perhaps she admired unduly the coachman's imposing presence and handsome jovial face set in its frame of silvery hair—for Ryder was no mean specimen of his class, and, taken as a whole, they were a decidedly fine set of men—or it may have been that she admired more the kind and manly heart within him, that, having suffered itself, yet was ever ready to help and cheer a weaker brother. Moving gently, as was her wont, Mrs. MacDermot raised a bright brass kettle which was steaming busily upon the stove; daintily she brewed and mixed a refreshing cup of tea, into which she poured a table-spoonful of brandy. Then she bent kindly towards the old man and bade him drink it.

"Take it now, poor Ryder, and never expose yourself so recklessly to the elements again; more than your good master and mistress would miss your kindly face if you died and left us." Then, as if to herself, "God help the poor wanderer and the homeless this night! and clasp his hands, 'Aye, more than all, may He guard those who are so safely housed that the wind will not reach unheeded above and around their walls this night."

He noted the impassioned action and caught the burning accent of her words, as with a trembling hand he took the proffered cup and prepared to obey her with the simplicity of a child. He had always been a good husband, and respected woman, therefore he could not bear to see them suffer. Mrs. MacDermot watched her guest steadily for some minutes as he sipped his tea at slow intervals, first from the teaspoon and then in larger gulps from the cup itself, then turning away she resumed her work at the side table. Ryder watched her now in his turn. He had seen many real ladies in his day—titled ladies, ladies of quality and position; yet, save for his own dear master's wife and the two that had been linked to her so tenderly in the days gone by, there was not one for whom he had more heartfelt reverence than for the owner of the sweet, patient face before him. The heat from the ironing gulf from the cup itself, then turning away she resumed her work at the side table. 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