

TWO

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THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER III.

How quickly the days passed after this event. Even to Beatrice they appeared to fly, and the place had suddenly become dear to her. She worked hard at her studies, determined to be successful in them at least; that, she knew, would give pleasure to the dear ones at home. Poor old Mrs. Theresa seldom found fault with her now; and lately when the girl, as of old, tried in her willful way to make jokes and amuse the old Sister, instead of receiving the usual rebuke, Beatrice would see a tear dimming the kind old eyes, and this affected her more than she cared to own to others.

Marie's sweet face was calm and tranquil as the surface of a clear and beautiful lake. True, the days of her happy girlhood was fast fading by, and a new life was opening before her; but lately there had often when she heard the thought of all the poverty and misery she had witnessed amongst the poor at home, and she felt quite glad to think of the help and comfort she could soon be to them. And then she was not going to say goodbye to dear St. Benedict's Abbey! Oh no! She had her sweet little sister to console her. She was really more troubled about Madge than about herself just at present. Marie watched her closely, happy judged correctly that some cloud overshadowed the spirit of her friend; for the usually easy-going girl, always so equal-tempered and merry, had lately shown a great desire for solitude, and paced rapidly the most secluded walks, engaged to all appearances in deep and anxious reflection, and often she was seen kneeling on the little prie-dieu in front of the sweet picture of the Mother of Sorrows. The fact was frequent of late, and through them all Madge thought she could detect a vein of silent suffering, and little by little the girl felt she was being prepared to find a great and sad change in all that once had constituted her home. As a child she had never troubled herself much about anything, content that others should will and think for her; but now the thought of her delicate, gentle mother suffering—for well she remembered how dearly her mother loved every day of her old home—roused the feelings of Madge, and brought the unselfish side of her nature uppermost. "I will shield her from sorrow, if possible," she said to herself; "she shall find her little Madge much stronger than she ever dreamt of, and what she loses in others she shall gain in me." A look of quiet determination and energy settled upon her face, and gave new light to her eyes and character to her features.

One day towards the end of June, as Marie was walking alone in the garden, she came suddenly upon Beatrice, who, seated upon a low bench, was staring into vacancy, whilst an open letter lay neglected on her knee. On hearing footsteps approach, she looked up suddenly and called, "O Marie, is that you! Do come here a moment and read this."

"From whom is it?" said Marie, seating herself. "Suppose you read it to me, Bertie."

"It is from my dear brother Percy; he has left college, and is now at home," and taking up the letter, Beatrice read as follows:

"Dear old Bertie,—Here I am back again at the old place, and write to wish my little sister many happy returns of her birthday. Do write soon, and tell me the exact date upon which sweet seventeen is really coming home. It is so dull without you. Reginald is not expected back from India until the first week of July, and there is no one to tease or torment. Daddie does not look as he should do. I cannot quite make out what is wrong with him; but he is not allowed to go out in the night air, and mother talks seriously about his catching cold so easily, and yet he seems in good spirits, and eats well. She looks first-rate, as handsome as ever. I was actually sorry to leave college when the time came, and the Prior has written a glowing account of my many virtues to daddie. Not a word of truth in the whole list of them; for if ever there was a fun or mischief on the go, you bet I was the leader of it; but a fellow would mould without a stir of some sort, and they'll miss me at the old place if it's only for the noise I make."

"By the way, 'Lightbound' is too fat, wants exercise, so I gave him a good gallop round the park yesterday, but he does not go so freely as he used to do; but father has bought you a beautiful horse, bay, with black stockings and mane, quite young, and goes like the wind. I long to see you try him, but fear he will beat my homie 'Black Bear.' Do ask the nurse to hurry up and finish the old studies, so that you can come home. I am longing to have fun with you again. Leo is well, and saved one of the tenant's children from drowning the other day. Brave old dog! So he is to be presented with a grand silver collar, and your name is to be engraved upon it. I have so many things to show you, dear Bertie, and am fixing your room up so beautifully for you. Bottles of beetles and other insects and animals in different stages of decomposition,

I have placed so prettily on your shelves. Juno has some lovely puppies, but I ordered Jerry not to destroy any of them until you had decided which you liked the best. Have you grown much? I have. I am five feet ten and a half. It is delightful to think you are not going back to France again. You can have messers at home, and I can teach my little sister myself; she has much to learn yet. Hope your pious little friend Marie is well. I hear that she and another companion are to travel with you as far as London. I shall be there to meet you. Fine fun to see these demure convent-girls together. Suppose you will be praying all the way home. Goodbye, and bless you, my child. Write soon to your loving brother,

PERCY DE WOODVILLE.

"P. S.—If there is no one to meet your friends in London, I will gladly escort them to Liverpool. You can tell them I am an old married uncle of yours, but young looking for my years."

"Saucy boy!" said Marie, laughing. "Many thanks to this aged uncle of yours, but Louis is to meet me in London, and my old servant of Mr. Fitzroy's is to meet Madge, and we are to travel to Liverpool together the next day, so we shall be all right, I trust."

"Really it will be delightful to be at home again," resumed Beatrice; "but what does all this mean about dear father? He who was always so strong, dear old daddie! It would break my heart to think that there was anything really serious the matter with him. Why, Marie, you cannot think how dearly he loves me! I believe we understand each other perfectly, and we have exactly the same nature! Reginald, my eldest brother, is two-and-twenty; he is more like my mother, very handsome, very just, and so dignified. As for Percy, he is a darling; full of fun and mischief; but so very kind and tender-hearted. I can persuade him to do anything for me. He and I were almost inseparable before we went to school. Oh, the scrapes he led me into! and father would not allow me to be scolded for them; he always endeavored to shield me from mother's wrath who did not approve of her daughter making such exhibitions of herself!" and Beatrice laughed at the memory of some awful tragedies in which she had played a very prominent part.

But the laugh quickly died from her lips, and an expression of almost fierce anxiety haunted her eyes, as she seized Marie's hand she exclaimed quickly, "What—oh tell me what you think all this can mean about my father's health! Do you think he can be really ill, Marie? Surely, surely not!" she almost gasped.

"Oh no, dear, not seriously ill. Don't get so excited, Bertie; you have turned quite pale. Boys never know how to express themselves properly in a letter. No doubt he has a very bad cold. Read your letter once again and you will see that he sets well and is in good spirits, so he cannot be very bad."

Bertie's little hands trembled as she re-read her brother's letter; a sickening feeling of dread, and fear lest her father's health should be failing, overpowered her, and finding herself unable to endure it, she sprang quickly from her seat, and, crushing the letter in her hand, exclaimed, "Of course you are right, Marie. Percy has explained himself badly. My father is not ill; he must not, he shall not be ill. I cannot endure the thought."

There was a willful and reckless tone and expression in the girl's voice and manner which caused her companion to look at her sorrowfully and earnestly; then she too rose, and putting her arm gently through that of Bertie, she said in a low, kind voice: "You should not speak quite in that way, should you, dear? Try and be brave, and school yourself to endure even a thing like this, for sooner or later your father, like every one else, is certain to be ill. Why get into such a state of excitement about it now, when I feel sure there are no grounds for fear or alarm."

"I cannot account for the feeling that overcame me, Marie; and you who have never known a parent's love and care, can surely never comprehend it! But, O Marie, I love my father so dearly," she said, clasping his hands tightly together, "that if anything happened to him I feel—as if nothing that I should resent it."

Beatrice found herself trembling with excitement; her papers had been sent in, but with what result she as yet knew not.

It was whispered amongst the children that "the wreath" was won this year; and it did not require much skill to guess who would be the happy possessor of it.

Now, the conditions requisite to gain this wreath were so difficult that for any girl to obtain it was a most unusual event. In the first place she must have won the prize for conduct five years in succession. In no single year must her marks have exceeded twenty in number; of course, she must be a Child of Mary, and the ballot in her favor from her companions must be unanimous. This much-prized wreath consisted of a filigree silver crown interwoven with delicately traced ivy leaves. It was a beautiful work of art, and was always prized dearly by the happy winner of it. The first prize for music and also that for singing were particularly elaborate this year. Lady Abbess had herself ordered them; perhaps she guessed into whose hands they would fall, and thought they might be useful in after years. They consisted of a numerous and beautiful selection of Beethoven's best sonatas, choicely bound in thick morocco and gilt, and a similar collection of the best melodies and songs in a corresponding binding. There was a pretty easel, with all its requisites, as a first prize for drawing; and for languages, the reward consisted of a large and beautiful musical box in rosewood. Many and numerous were the other prizes, and well worth the winning, for Lady Abbess was proud of her children, and loved to encourage them when they had striven to do their best.

All too rapidly for some of our little friends the 6th of July arrived. The handsome old classroom presented almost an imposing appearance, decked as it was with lovely ferns and plants. At the farthest end of it there was a raised platform, canopied with red and gold-colored curtains caught and looped up gracefully with cord and tassels to match; the floor and steps of it were covered by a crimson carpet; altogether it formed a pretty little stage, but had never been used as such, only recitations or such simple things being allowed at St. Benedict's. The spaces at either side of the platform were roomy and pretty, having the advantage of large windows, which opened on the garden beyond. In these recesses were placed reserved seats as it were—the one on the right for the special use of Father Egbert and his friends; that upon the left for Lady Abbess, Mother Agatha, and those members of the Community who took the most prominent parts in the education of the young ladies. One handsomely carved oak chair, carefully decked by loving hands—each child having added a flower to the garlands with which it was festooned—stood conspicuously in the recess on the right, and strangers only wondered for whom it could be intended. Across the body of the room were the benches placed, leaving only a small space in the centre, down which the audience could pass. The many large windows were thrown open at the top, whilst a delicious scent of roses and mignonette pervaded the room. At 2 o'clock precisely in trooped the merry girls, their faces aglow with bright smiles, in their simple uniform, so neatly made, and set off by the white lace collar and cuffs, looked quite picturesque as they took their allotted seats and nodded or whispered gaily to each other. Following them closely came the visitors—the parents and friends of the children, about thirty in number. They looked happy and pleased, for to many of the ladies St. Benedict's Abbey had been their own home once, and its very walls were dear to them. With bright smiles on their faces the white-veiled novices tripped lightly in; and after them came the elder nuns, to many of whom it seemed but a few years since they had occupied the places now filled by the little girls in front—so swiftly does time fly as we get into years.

Father Egbert and about nine priests from the neighboring parishes walked in through the open French windows on the right of the platform. Pausing for a moment, the old priest smiled as he gazed upon the seat almost resembling an arched doorway prepared for him. "Poor children," he murmured, "what have they been doing?" then cheerfully seating himself, he was greeted by the joyful sound of girlish laughter accompanied by much clapping of hands. The Lady Abbess and her Sisters then took their places, and the cheering was once more renewed until a call for order from Mother Agatha restored peace instantly. It was arranged that before the distribution of prizes should take place, one or two girls out of each class should recite, play, or sing, or exhibit some superior work of art which was considered worthy of praise, and with which the parents and guests were sure to be delighted.

The name of Beatrice de Woodville was the first to be called, and all eyes were turned upon the girl as she stepped from her place, her bright face flushed with excitement. Treading lightly up the crimson-carpeted steps to the platform, she turned and curtsied with an easy old-world grace, first to Father Egbert and his friends, then to Lady Abbess and her Sisters, and lastly to the audience. Then slowly and

impressively she recited in French prose the sorrowful story of the death of Mary Queen of Scots. The old priest strained his ears to catch every word, and his eyes followed each movement of his little favorite, as now her voice rose in just indignation, and then fell in heartfelt pity, as she related in tragic detail every incident of the death of the gentle, suffering queen.

When the strong young voice ceased, there was silence for a moment, then Beatrice bowed once more and resumed her seat amidst the applause of all.

Towards one side of the platform a piano was placed, and the next called upon to perform were Madge and a pretty little Italian girl. The latter took her seat at the piano, and played with great feeling and taste the accompaniment to a song which Madge sang with a soul in accord with her theme. Not only one, but every stranger present listened in utter astonishment to the clear full notes of Madge as her sweet voice rose in pathetic strains, then seemed to fade and die in the dim distance.

"Encore! encore!" called out the delighted audience, for never out of the concert room had they heard such a voice; and once more she sang her song, the melody resumed her seat. Many were the inquiries that passed from month to month as to who the quiet-looking English girl could be that appeared so unassuming, and yet who sang like an angel.

Lady Abbess caught the girl's eye, and Madge thought she looked proud and pleased with her. She was indeed both; and dearly the kind Abbess wished that her old friend Margaret could have known the pleasure every one received in listening to her little daughter Madge.

Thus the first part of the afternoon passed, for many and varied were the accomplishments of the young ladies, and very much the kind audience seemed to appreciate them. Marie exhibited some magnificent pieces of lace, which had cost the little maker many an hour's patience and perseverance. They were really beautiful, and were to be presented to the poor little mission at home.

Once more was Beatrice called forward this time to present a large painting, which she had most skillfully executed, of St. Benedict's Abbey and grounds, not forgetting to place in the foreground the well-known figure of Father Egbert as he stood evidently reprimanding one of three girlish figures standing in front of him.

When the first part of the programme was concluded, to the complete satisfaction of every one, Lady Abbess beckoned to some of the girls and bade them to carry Father Egbert's chair on to the platform. The "United Kingdom" rose and cheerfully lifted the gorgeous arbour. Well the old priest knew what he was required to do, for many years now he had distributed the prizes to his children, and he enjoyed the task. Lady Abbess next uncovered the table which held the precious treasures, and when she did so a loud murmur of admiration ran through the room; then she took the stand by the side of Father Egbert and read out in turn the names of the fortunate prize-winners. The heart of Marie beat loud and fast as she heard the name of "Marie Blake" called upon to receive the well-earned and much-coveted wreath for good conduct. Her pretty face was suffused with blushes as she walked with timid steps, and knelt at the old priest's feet, whilst he kindly and gently pressed the pretty crown upon her fluffy silky hair.

"God bless thee, my child!" he said. "It seems to me but yesterday since I saw thy young mother kneel as thou art kneeling now, and receive from the hands of our late Archbishop a wreath similar to the one I now give to thee. Take care of it and value it, my child, and as in after years thine eyes may fall upon it, let it remind thee to continue cheerfully in the practice of those virtues which have so strongly marked thy life at school. God bless thee always, dear child, and do thou also pray for me."

"I will indeed, Father," said the half weeping girl, who faltered as she rose, seemingly unable to turn her face to her applauding companions. So enthusiastically did they cheer and praise her, that Mother Agatha, noticing her embarrassment, kindly came to her assistance, and taking the trembling girl's hand in here, led her gently to a reserved seat in the bay-window, where she hid her pretty head and wept behind the convenient habits of the Sisters.

When Beatrice received the handsome easel as a reward for her picture of "Santa Benedict," Father Egbert jokingly told her he would sign it for her portrait whenever she had time to execute it.

You have already done so, Father," answered the girl merrily. "I have painted a large picture of St. Joseph, and have substituted your face for his; you have no idea how holy and venerable you look." The old priest laughed, as he shook his head and muttered the word "incomprehensible."

At this Florence burst out crying fresh, and lung herself at the Superior's feet.

THE ATONEMENT OF FLORENCE

By Clara Hampton, in St. Anthony Messenger

Mother Frances laid down her blue lead pencil beside the neat pile of bills she had been checking over, adjusted her glasses, and said: "Come in."

Enter Sister Innocentia, with stern face, pushing before her a pretty shame-faced girl of fifteen, whose rebellious chestnut curls were like her fun-loving nature, constantly escaping from the austere rules of comb and confining ribbon.

"In trouble" again?" queried Mother Frances, looking inquiringly from one to the other.

"Yes, and I must say this is going too far," answered Sister Innocentia indignantly, displaying three black spots on her otherwise snowy wimple.

"Well, what have you done this time?" Mother Superior asked of the girl. Sister Innocentia answered for her.

It seemed that the part of the corridor, on which the refectory door opened, was rather dark, and on the door frame hung a small iron holy-water font. The girls, sliding into the refectory, brushed their fingers into the font and blessed themselves, as was their wont. Likewise the nuns, whose duties carried them there.

It developed that Sister Innocentia reproved one of the girls for having a black spot on her forehead, when it was discovered that all had black spots, even Sister Innocentia herself—and not only on her head, but on her wimple. So also had the other Sisters. The girls having black freckles of course, nothing showed on their faces. But an investigation followed, with the result that the holy-water font was found to contain ink instead of the blessed water, and then the indignation of Sister Innocentia knew no bounds.

"To think that anyone should be depraved enough to do so wicked a thing!" she said to her girls. Much questioning brought forth no solution of the mystery, until the other Sisters being likewise questioned, it further developed that Sister Angela, who was just coming up the stairs from the kitchen, saw a girl doing something at the refectory door, then darted away and disappeared. Now Sister Angela, whose domain was in the kitchen, did not know the girls by their names, but thought she could identify the guilty one if brought face to face.

So that afternoon the girls were lined up for inspection, amid an awed hush, and Sister Angela had promptly pointed to Florence Murray as the culprit.

"I am very, very sorry for your conduct. A sweet little child was she, with her large wondering eyes and their far away look. She bade fair to follow in the footsteps of, and even rival in goodness, our little Marie, whom she looked up to as the personification of all that was good and beautiful. But ere two more summer suns had shone on her own fair Italy, all that remained of the happy, bright-faced child was the sweet memory of her noble example and virtue, which lingered long in the hearts of all who had known her, and a small but beautiful grave, kept always fresh and green by the hand and love of tender parents. It surely was better so, for she knelt to receive her simple wreath of white roses Marie thought she looked more fit to be the companion of angels than of men; and yet had she foreseen the future she would have sobbed sorely, for she loved the child dearly, and knew her to be the last descendant of an old and illustrious family."

TO BE CONTINUED

Saying which, she took up her pencil again, and turned to her former task. Florence knew it was final, and useless to beg any further, so wiping her eyes with her scented handkerchief, she turned and went out, leaving the two nuns conversing in low tones together.

At the door of the locker-room, she ran plump into Elizabeth Walls, her loyal chum, who had been waiting there for some time, anxious to know the outcome of the interview.

"Well, what are they going to do to you?" she asked. For answer, Florence again burst into tears, and was promptly enfolded in Elizabeth's arms, and allowed to sob on her loyal shoulder.

"Aw, shucks!" she exclaimed, forgetting the rule against slang, "Sister Innocentia can't see a joke—never could see one. I always did say she was born an old maid, and no mistake. If I was as crusty as her, I'd—I'd crawl in a bag and—"

"Sh!" said Florence, "you'll be heard."

"I don't care! If I'd a been you last week, I'd have put that frog in her sleeve or something instead of her desk drawer. She—"

"Somebody's coming!" whispered Florence, disengaging herself from her friend's encircling arms. Sure enough, the door opened, and in walked the object of Elizabeth's censure.

"Elizabeth, it's time for your music lesson. Don't keep Sister Monica waiting."

When the girl had left the room, not without an uncomplimentary side-glance at the tall figure of the nun, Sister Innocentia continued: "You may be excused from class and study hour, and get your trunk packed. Until the supper bell rings, you will remain here."

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