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THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER XXVI.—CONTINUED

A sumptuous and splendid breakfast awaited the guests; for Ireland can be right royal in her hospitality, and is never lacking when mirth and fun are to the fore. So the brides and their merry lords were flattered and rejoiced, and all went as merrily as the wedding-bells.

"I shall see that a good report of our day doing here finds its way into the London papers," said busy Mr. Howard. "If only my late lamented client had but been an eyewitness of the pretty and happy spectacle we have this day witnessed, it would have caused him inexpressible joy. How proud he would have been of his niece too! She is to my mind a most remarkably fine young lady. It has been one of the most pleasant duties of my life to be the means of bringing and bestowing upon her her uncle's handsome fortune."

"I never was so glad of anything in my life," assented old Mr. Barry; "and what a most fortunate thing for her husband! She told me that she should insist upon his taking her once every year to visit her bonnie Scotch hills. No doubt she will find plenty of people now who will claim relationship and old acquaintances with her family."

"Oh! doubtless," jerked out the little man impatiently, "those who would have passed her by unheeded before, will feel honored if she but bows to them now. It is always so. Money will buy one no end of relations and friends."

Nevertheless there was one who, as she sat in her comfortable morning room, almost gnashed her teeth with vexation and despair as she coned the account of the gay and fashionable wedding at Brackley Park, and heard of the good fortune and praise bestowed so lavishly upon Lady O'Hagan. It was the bitterest pill Lady Lansdale had ever had to swallow.

It was soon time for the brides to exchange their wedding-roses for more suitable travelling-garments; for, like the tide, boats and trains will wait for no man. This important duty accomplished, the "United Kingdom" met once more on one of the landings. Each feared lest it might be young—if ever—are they met again as now. Still in her white shining dress, Beatrice led the brides—

one on each side of her—into the silent little oratory, and bidding them kneel on the altar steps beside her, whispered "It is here, my oldest and best friends, I would wish you farewell. I feel that it is best so."

"I will never bid you farewell, dearest Bertie!" exclaimed Madge; "for wherever you are I will search for you and find you."

The pretty, bright eyes looked pleased as Bertie smiled her thanks. She knew the Scotch bride would be true to her word.

"O Bertie, my darling Bertie!" half sobbed poor Marie, "when shall we meet again?"

"Nay, no tears this day, my Marie, or Regie would never forgive me. Come, dear, be cheerful; let no thought of leaving me mar this happy day. Are we not solemnly bound to meet again? Remember our girlish vow signed and sealed at dear St. Benedict's. I shall yet call upon you both to fulfill it ere many months are over. In the meantime let us be faithful in our hearts and prayers for each other, and do not fail me when I summon you."

"Not if God grants us life and strength to fulfill our solemn promise," answered the two brides, in one voice.

"Then until that day farewell, and may God's choicest blessings ever attend you both," said Lady Beatrice tenderly.

"I beg your pardon, Countess de Woodville, but the Earl awaits you," said the merry voice of Nora.

"And you also, my lady; I heard your lord inquiring for you."

Both girls started and smiled; it seemed so odd and strange to be called by those names so soon. They knew the servants were taking great delight in this accosting them. They kissed the kneeling white figure ten times reverently, and desiring to remain longer lest they should break down, they hurried away.

Fearing lest dear auntie might feel the strain of two separate partings to be too much for her, both married couples left at the same time. The children whom she had reared clung fondly around her; but auntie, unselfish as ever, allowed no tear to dim her eyes. Why should she weep when her little girl was so happy, and her boy had won the richest and best of girls for his bride?

"God bless you all, my precious ones!" she cried cheerfully; "and do not tarry too long away."

Then amidst countless hearty shakes of the hand, and good and merry wishes expressed and understood, and many a heartfelt and lusty cheer, the carriages departed, conveying for the second time two of our convent girls into the great world, there to commence anew, under such totally different auspices, fresh lives, to take up fresh interests and duties so diametrically opposite to any they had ever planned or imagined.

held it. Similar signals readily floated from each open carriage until the declining road hid them from view.

"My God, I thank Thee for their happiness," said Beatrice, withdrawing her tender arms from the rough caresses. "Now that they have gone, what does earth hold dear to me but Thee! A few more hours yet must I play my part; then I live and act for Thee alone."

CHAPTER XXVII.

Evening arrived, and the unwearied guests sought the fine old ball-room; there to whirl away the remaining hours in merry dances until midnight. Those who affected fatigue after the long day of excitement retired to their rooms for rest; amongst this number were auntie and Beatrice.

"My child," said the old lady kindly, as they stood near the window, looking out into the darkening night, "my heart grieves for you having to carry out such a project; and yet I fail to see how else you can act, since your mother declares she will never give her consent to your becoming a nun."

"That, dear auntie—for I know and love you best by that name—that is not the worst part of it. Now that Regie has gone, and I have no brother to protect me, she has vowed to leave no stone unturned in order to break me from my selfish and childish desire, as she calls it, Louise, her maid, informs me privately that she has made all the necessary arrangements to carry me off abroad with her for two years, and will from henceforth keep the strictest guard and watch upon me and my actions. So, to save all this unnecessary worry and sorrow, I am going to leave you all secretly tonight. Mother will never miss me until, perhaps, tomorrow at noon, and then, please God, I shall be far upon my way."

"Your own maid, Phoeby, and Mary Northgreaves, who is returning to Yorkshire for a few weeks, will accompany you, sweet child, and God's blessing and my prayers will never desert you. Fear not for your mother, my brave one; it is her pride that is more wounded than her spirit else. God will send an angel if need be to heal that, as He will send a special one to protect His own on her travels this night."

"Take my part, dear auntie," said Bertie, kissing her tenderly; "and should mother really appear out up at my loss, try to console her by reminding her of the dear little daughter she has won in Marie."

"I will, I will, Beatrice!" exclaimed the old lady, as the young girl threw her arms around her neck. "But time flies, sweet child. Peter awaits you with a carriage in the courtyard; but, to avoid suspicion or detection, you must leave by a side door and descend a back flight of stairs. Alas! that I should have to bid you tarry no longer, love."

"Adieu, kind auntie, then!" exclaimed the girl, "and remember I go in cheerful response to the call of Heaven, which is for ever rescuing in my ear, and bidding me leave all things to follow and serve Him whom alone I have learned to love more than parents, friends, or aught else on earth. Then kiss me once more, and pray for me, you who understand and can sympathize with my trouble."

"That I can. Once more God speed and bless you, brave child," and auntie turned away her head, for she felt she was old, and might never look upon that fair face and form again.

And so the favorite of Heaven, wrapped in dark cloak, glided out of the apart ment, out into the silent starlit night, with no one for her companion nor one to rest upon, but a lowly maid; and for her visible body guard, a poor but faithful old Yorkshire woman.

She did not pause as the sound of gay music and revelry fell upon her ear, nor did she linger to bid farewell to auntie who was leaving for ever behind her. True, she thought of her beautiful and luxurious home, which she would probably never see again; of the dear friends from whom she had but lately parted; yet not even such thoughts as these made her falter an instant. In her heart burned a living holy flame, and by its light all peevish things appeared but dross. In fact, did she not rejoice all the more that she had a sacrifice to make? Would it not be better to go to Him thus, than empty handed? But one treasure she kept, and clung to, and pressed tightly to her, as though the feeling of the rough paper gave her courage. It was her brother's letter, and contained words of burning encouragement, love, and hope regarding her. Almost thoughtlessly she had tossed her jewels aside; but the boy-monk's words she caught up with pride, and treasured more dearly than all her gems.

So in due time, though unknown to her friends, the Irish boat conveyed the English girl safely over the moonlit waters of the Channel, and landed her once more on her native Isle. Here Mary bid her an affectionate but reluctant farewell, adding: "Should you ever visit France again, my lady, and come across her as they call the Abbess, give her my very best respects, please, for she's a wonderful fine woman of her sort—she is indeed!"

"I'll tell her just what you say, dear old Mary; and thanks so much for your kind care," replied the girl, giving her a farewell kiss—an honor Mary never forgot.

The two travellers arrived safely at Dover and from thence, towards the end of the second day, tired and

worn out, Beatrice came once more to the gates of St. Benedict's.

Little had she guessed, when last she passed their portals in all her girlish pride and eager anticipation, of the almost stealthily, lowly manner in which she would return.

No words can express the deep but unexpected joy of Lady Abbess and the whole community when they discovered who the little wanderer was that knocked for help and protection at the Convent gates.

"My dainty little Beatrice, my merry one!" cried Lady Abbess, folding the slender girl in her arms. "Welcome, brave child—ay, a thousand welcomes! Ah! truly I guessed Heaven could not pass you by unnoticed, unnoted. You fill our hearts with joy to see you again, even though it may be but for a few hours. The sacrifice must have been great, my child, though I am glad to see that the tears have not dimmed the lustre of those merry eyes; they are as full of fun and frolic as ever."

"O Mother—dear since I made my sacrifice I have recovered. Before that, they were almost dim to blindness, I do assure you."

"Poor child, it is often thus; such tears but enhance the value of the gift. Now tell us all about our other dear children?"

"Yes indeed," laughed Mother Agatha kindly, "what of our little would be novice, Marie?"

"Oh! she has served quite another novitiate, and very aptly and prettily she conformed to its rules. I do assure you; she does manage Regie so well, and will make the very sweetest little Countess," said her old friend warmly.

"I am delighted to hear it. But what of my poor Madge? She told me how very happy she was, and how dearly her intended husband loves her. Does he really value her as she should do?"

"Really and truly he does, dear Mother! He is thoroughly worthy and genuine. I quite like him, and look upon him as a brother. But he—has never loved or thought of any girl save your little Madge, and he is devoted to her."

"Thank God for that! She was well worthy of the best of husbands," replied Lady Abbess proudly.

So many questions to ask, so much to tell, made the time fly rapidly.

"And so, like a good, affectionate child," said an aged Sister, "you came to bid us all farewell. It was like you to be so thoughtful."

"I knew you could not come to me, and I knew also where to find encouragement and counsel, besides, I longed to see you all once more. There is also another here to whom I owe a debt of everlasting gratitude. He will, I know, rejoice to see me."

"You mean Father Egbert, my child? His health is failing, but his mental faculties are as keen as ever, and constantly he speaks of his old favourite—his little Beatrice, as she calls you."

"May I visit him now, Mother? time is speeding quickly, and I may not linger here long."

"Go now, my child, but tarry your presence gently to him; he is weak, and the sudden sight of you might startle him. Neither do you stay too long away, dear. Many are yet longing to see you, and we have so much to talk about."

Once more she trod the silent corridor leading to Father Egbert's private rooms. Her heart beat with excitement joy. She felt certain that when she had told him all, he would look upon her and bless her as he had never done before. A timid knock brought forth a gentle command to enter, and crossing the room, the girl perceived by the dim lamp-light the form of the old priest seated in his chair, reading his breviary. Her step fell so lightly, that until she knelt at his feet and placed one little hand on his, he never noticed her. Then looking up suddenly—his kind eyes beaming with pleasure, as though he had just been thinking of her, and was even then expecting her—he laid his hand upon the old brown head, and said, "My child, my little Beatrice, hast thou come at last?"

"Yes, Father; I could not come sooner."

"And"—glancing at her plain dark dress—"thou hast left all things—thy mother, thy friends, thy wealth, thy home—all!—everything thou hast relinquished in answer to the call of God, until thou hast naught left to offer but thyself?"

"Even so, dear Father; and small and worthless though the offering be, yet my heart expands and feels large in its desire to love and do great things to serve my God."

"Said I not so long ago?" said the old man, raising his hand and eyes to heaven. "Oh, how I have prayed for this hour! Thou art too generous to tell me all that this has cost thee, child," he continued, looking down tenderly upon her. "But I, who know well thy proud young heart, and have witnessed its violent struggles, feel that thou hast not attained to this victory and peace without much strife and suffering. What of thy father, now, little one?"

ment. Therefore I go tomorrow to Paris to enter the Convent of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul. The life of a Sister of Charity would suit me well; for, though you may secretly believe it, dear Father," she laughed, "I have developed a wonderful power and tact with the poor and the sick. Restless babies crouch peacefully and calmly to sleep in my arms, and fireless, irascible old men obey me like the veriest infants," she said merrily.

"Nay, I could credit anything good of thee, my child, and will prophesy regarding thee if thou dost wish it."

"No, Father; I came for your help and encouragement, to hear from your lips that I had done well, and to ask your blessing on my future life."

"Thou hast ever had that last, little Beatrice; and in return, I plead, as a great favour, that, when my last sickness comes upon me, thou wilt ask for permission to visit and nurse thy old Father and friend, and let me experience some of thy gentle, soothing influence, so that when my last illness arrives I may be aided by thy blessing and prayers."

"When that sad time comes, dear Father," said the girl slowly and solemnly, "you shall command my presence, and it shall not be my fault if I do not obey. In the meantime the precious moments are fast fleeting by, and I have so much to tell you."

Then she recounted to him in her own bright and vivid manner how happy and beautiful the two brides looked; how very funny it was to see Marie so absolutely devoted to her husband after all she had said, and the dreadful horror she formerly expressed against the world and its wicked allurements, etc.; of how everyone rejoiced that poor Madge's hours of poverty and suffering were over, and what a splendid wife she would make. The gay little chatterer entertained and amused the old man so much that they almost forgot to note how the time was flying. She told him of the noble way in which De Mowbray had behaved, and it was with a start that she at last recollected Lady Abbess's injunctions "to return soon." So once more the old priest blessed her as she bade him good night and promised to pray for her.

She did not tarry long the next day. She felt it would be neither wise nor prudent to do so, in case her mother sent a messenger for her. As the novice came to greet her, she was surprised that one should come forward and ask timidly for her forgiveness. It was Isabel Johnson; but, oh, how altered! Her face, though still plain, wore now an habitual sweet expression, and there was something very touching in the humility with which she approached her old companion. For answer, Beatrice gazed at her in admiration for a few moments, and then throwing her arms around her, exclaimed, "Forget for ever all our girlish quarrels, and pray for me, dear Isabel."

Before the sun was very high in the heavens that day, Lady Beatrice de Woodville was once more on her travels, and ere night came on, except for deeds of charity and love, the convent gates closed for ever on the steps of our little Bertie.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

And now how can I adequately describe the beauty of this last, but not least, important scene in the history of our convent girls? For the fifth time April has come round once more, and has nearly expired. Already the early may and black-thorn are in flower; the fruit trees are laden with their dainty pink and white blossoms, as they were five years ago, when first we discovered the three girls in the old garden at St. Benedict's. The birds are singing as gaily in the woods and green fields as they sang then; and the note of the little lark is as clear as he warbles his hymn 'neath the cloudless blue sky; and nature seems as teeming with joy and gladness as it did when Beatrice craved so to be free, Marie pinned for her convent walls, and poor Madge stood dazed, not daring to peer too far into the future.

There is great joy, too, this day in a certain Convent in Paris. The heart of a beautiful young nun stands high with hope and joy, for it is the anniversary day of the one upon which she wrote that memorable document, and which binds her friends to come and visit her. By it will the "United Kingdom" be recalled together once more, and upon that day it is agreed she shall receive the holy habit of a Sister of St. Vincent de Paul. Her pretty eyes are filled with a holy, eager look; her heart is as happy, her step as light, as the blessing of heavenly joy can make them. She loves the life and its arduous duties, and is dearly prized and loved by all around her. She is, as her novice mistress calls her, "at once the light and star of the novitiate, so full of life and spirit, and yet so humble." Ah, many—ay, countless and untold, save by the recording angel—will be the deeds and works of charity and zeal accomplished by that young heart.

In the beautiful Convent church there is gathered together a select and influential concourse of people. Upon his throne is seated the imposing form of the Archbishop of Paris; at his side as assistants are two, who, from contrast alone, claim and rivet the attention. One is an aged and venerable-looking old priest, whose hair is as white as the driven snow, and whose limbs appear frail almost to tottering, but in whose dark eyes there is still life and animation as they keenly pierce the

faces of the kneeling visitors as though in search of some well-remembered ones. The other is a young monk, with a singularly innocent yet grave expression of countenance; his wavy tanned hair is bright from the kneeling-rail in front of a striking look upon his face which reminds one forcibly of Beatrice.

Kneeling conspicuously in the front seats amongst the visitors are two young and beautiful ladies and their husbands. The little one, whose face is flushed, and whose eyes are so frequently hidden in her handkerchief is the young Countess de Woodville. All through the ceremony she seems greatly moved and often the hand of her husband sniels away from the kneeling-rail in front in search of one of his wife's tiny hands, to press it with tenderness and loving sympathy. The tall, serious-faced young lady, whose clear, steady eyes gaze with undimmed pride and admiration at the pretty and touching scene before her, is Lady O'Hagan. She and her husband heard nothing, see nothing, but the beautiful picture before them.

There is yet another sweet veiled face sitting quite alone, yet who is drinking in to her very soul every word and action of the ceremony, and this is Lady Edith de Mowbray. Her one sole desire is to follow the example of her beloved friend, Lady Beatrice, and this very day is she going to plead for permission to enter, and join her.

It was a solemn and beautiful sight when the young and lovely bride of Heaven, her hands folded in prayer was led up to the altar. Was it the magnificence and richness of her white satin dress with its long train so easily and skillfully managed, or was it the perfect features with their chaste and heavenly expression, or the faultless contour of her graceful form, that seemed to fascinate and rivet every eye upon her? I know not; but people held their breath and gazed enraptured as the beautiful picture broke upon them. There she stood all unconscious of her startling beauty; the diamond tiara shining brilliantly amidst the orange blossom on her veiled head; diamonds encircling for the last time her fair throat and arms. Who could fail to be moved when they realised that this beautiful young creature was relinquishing for ever all her friends and wealth; casting aside as worthless the splendid apparel and gems she possessed so well; choosing rather a life of poverty and seclusion, where she could better serve God in the members of His poor, attired in the simple habit of a Sister of Charity. Slanting rays of golden light fell from the stained glass windows, and played and danced in her hair and on her arms. Who could fail to be moved when they realised that this beautiful young creature was relinquishing for ever all her friends and wealth; casting aside as worthless the splendid apparel and gems she possessed so well; choosing rather a life of poverty and seclusion, where she could better serve God in the members of His poor, attired in the simple habit of a Sister of Charity. Slanting rays of golden light fell from the stained glass windows, and played and danced in her hair and on her arms. 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