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BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER XXV.—CONTINUED

All eyes were turned in speechless inquiry from Madge to Mary and vice versa; but Madge only shook her head, smiled, and looked perfectly perplexed. Mary stood with lips compressed and a defiant expression upon her face, as though she would like to hear who durst gainsay her statement.

"Do you mean to infer that some wealthy relation has died and left Miss Fitzallen a fortune?" inquired the Countess, greatly interested.

"I do, ma'am, and no small one neither."

"How can you know this, Mary?" asked Madge incredulously.

"Because I've been told it by your late Uncle James's lawyer, who has come all the way from Australia in search of you, miss, and it seems to me easier to trace than you, so he lit on me first. But here he is to speak for himself, no doubt. Anyhow, I laid him a wager I'd be here before him, and I've won it. Now let me sit down beside you, Miss Madge, until we hear all he has to say."

Whilst she was speaking, a second carriage drew up to the door, and it was not long ere another visitor was ushered into the room, Simpson calling, in a slow, distinct voice, the name of "Mr. Howard, of Melbourne." He was a small man, bronzed, and rather shrewdly in appearance, but with a pleasant face and clear dark eyes. Rubbing his hands briskly together, he stepped forward, and with a low comprehensive bow saluted the company in general. Then by the kind persuasion of the Countess he seated himself, and, in a concise, business-like manner, unfolded to their astonished ears the object of his visit.

He told them of the long journey he had taken at the request of his late client, Mr. James Fitzallen, and of the difficulty he had experienced in discovering the whereabouts of that gentleman's niece; also the great pleasure it afforded him in informing her, and her friends present, that her late uncle had left her his sole heiress, and had requested him, as his friend and lawyer, to undertake the whole business himself, and deliver into the hands of his niece a letter which he himself had written, and which would explain matters to her. Rising, therefore, the little man walked instinctively toward Madge, and handing her a letter in a blue envelope, said, "I presume I am right in concluding that you are Miss Margaret Fitzallen, daughter of the late Duncan Fitzallen?"

"Thank you, I am," said the astonished girl.

During the previous recital Mary had appeared to drink in every word the lawyer was saying, and emphasized every important point by a deliberate and emphatic nod of her head; but Louis and Madge were gazing at each other in absolute and blank astonishment. What did not all this mean to them? Several times the little hands of Lady Beatrice met together in a joyful clasp of suppressed delight, and Marie's kind features quite gleamed with heartfelt pleasure.

Madge glanced at the letter, but handing it to Louis, besought him to read it for her, as she felt too bewildered and confused to do so herself.

"Yes, read it aloud, if the young lady does not object," suggested the lawyer. "I know pretty well its contents." So Louis read:

"My Dear Niece,—Quite inadvertently I have just learned the sad news of my brother Duncan's death, and, worse still, of his long life of misfortune. Would to Heaven I had known of all this sooner. But probably my friends in Scotland had lost my address, and my careless habit of not keeping them well posted as to my whereabouts may account for much of the mistake. Little did I dream or guess of the troubles in store for poor Margaret Gordon when I bade her my last farewell some twenty-five years ago. I knew but one thing, that my elder brother, Duncan, loved her, and that she returned his love. So, to hide my own grief and try to forget her, I left the old country and home, and have rarely been heard of since. Yet I have been very fortunate in other ways and money has come easily to me, for without very great risks or exertion I have amassed a nice fortune, which, on my death, had, brings me more real gratification and pleasure than ever it did during my life, in the knowledge and feeling that by it I can aid and bring joy and happiness to poor Margaret's child. For you, my little niece, shall inherit eighty thousand pounds, if not more, and will, I feel sure, often think with love and gratitude of your unknown but faithful Uncle James. Mr. Howard will give you all further particulars, for, alas! here this reaches you I shall be no more."

"I feel that had I but known you, child, I should have loved you dearly, for you must in some way resemble your dear mother, for whose dear sake I have remembered you.—Your loving uncle, JAMES FITZALLAN."

Everyone appeared more or less moved as Louis ceased reading and refolded the letter, but no one so much as Madge. Overpowered by

the excitement of her feelings, and quite unable to realize the sudden good fortune, she hid her face upon her old servant's shoulder and sobbed aloud. "Poor uncle, how good and kind he must have been! Oh, how I regret not having known him!"

The lawyer looked with pleasure upon the girl, and promised to tell her all about him later. At present he must inform her that her uncle's will was in his possession, and by it she was now the lawful owner of eighty thousand pounds, doubtless more when his estates were sold and all matters finally settled; at which announcement Mary nodded her head more vigorously than ever.

Mary's coming had now entirely dispersed the gloomy cloud that for the first part of the evening had hung over the spirits of the young people; and her own heart feeling unusually light and buoyant, she regarded them all, in her quiet fashion, with talos and a scene that kept them in incessant laughter.

The lawyer was congratulating Louis on the double prize he had won in his intended wife, and remarked that "he supposed Miss Fitzallen would soon now change her name to that of Mrs. Blake?"

"No, for a certainty she will not," said the young man, rather proudly, "and never had I any intention that she should bear that name. Many of my friends may have forgotten or overlooked the fact, that when I inherited the estates in a direct line from my grandfather on my mother's side, Lord O'Hagan, I also inherited the title, though so far I have never cared much to use it; but from henceforth I shall take it up, and my dear little wife will be known by the name of Lady O'Hagan." He drew Madge proudly to him and continued, "Perhaps a title is, after all, but an empty thing, my love, but such as it is, being mine, you will accept it, will you not?"

More congratulations now poured upon the heads of the happy couple, whilst Mary sat and smiled her joy until her hard face became almost soft and beautiful.

"Surely," thought Madge, "the clouds have dispersed at last, and the sun could scarcely shine more brightly than it does at present. Oh, how I long to tell all this to dear Lady Abbess! Poor mother, could you only have foreseen all this; but you are at rest now, Mary? there is no reason why you should ever leave me, whilst I may smile so kindly."

"Oh, but isn't there?" exclaimed the woman, relapsing suddenly into her old self again. "Ay, but there is!"

"What can it be?" inquired several voices.

"You see," she hesitated, "maybe my husband might miss me!"

"You are never married, surely?" cried Madge, in utter astonishment.

She nodded assent, then said, "Billy swore he wouldn't wait no longer."

"You never mentioned a word of it in your letters?"

"I scarcely do. Most likely I didn't think it worth while mentioning."

"But when did this take place?" inquired the Earl, greatly amused.

"About a month ago."

"And you are still a bride?" exclaimed Lady Beatrice, drawing off Mary's glove and exposing to all appearances a new wedding ring.

"Oh, how funny you are! Do you mean to say," asked Louis, "that your husband gave you permission to leave him so soon after your wedding?"

"I never asked him, me lord," she replied, "and you should be the last to blame me for coming. Wasn't it for dear Madge's sake I left me poor old Billy so soon after we was married?"

More laughter. Mary thought the young people were bereft of their senses, they appeared so full of fun and merriment. "Let them laugh," she thought; "me own heart is every bit as light as theirs since Miss Madge has got her own."

How merrily the evening sped; happy faces sat around the hospitable board, and earnest and heartfelt were the kind wishes and congratulations heaped upon Madge and Louis.

"Bonnie Scotland for ever! Long life and happiness to Lord O'Hagan and his lady!" cried the Earl heartily, as he rose and pledged them in a brimming glass; and may it be a double wedding," he continued; "and before many hours were over Madge was obliged to give in and say that it should be."

What a chattering of girlish voices took place that night in the pretty boudoir, as the three old friends sat around the low fire talking long into the early hours of morning, talking of the past, and then planning joyful meetings and prospects for the future. They could not desert from repeatedly expressing their wonder and astonishment in discovering how totally different were their destinies; in what extremely opposite positions and spheres they were cast to what at one time they had looked forward to and expected them to be.

"As for me," spoke Madge, "I am yet almost bewildered at the quick succession of events that have occurred lately in my regard. Here am I suddenly and powerfully raised from a position of positive lowliness and obscurity to one of affluence, happiness, and prosperity. Really I cannot realize how it has all come about, nor yet that it can be true. Lady Abbess's words alone foretold such things possible, yet when she spoke them I was unable to rightly comprehend their meaning."

"Oh, neither was I," chimed in Beatrice, "for she prophesied regarding my destiny also; and I can tell you I neither relished her words nor desired to understand their meaning at the time. And yet," she smiled, "they have come perfectly true. She told me that God had given me much, and that a time would come when He would demand much from me in return."

"That was yourself, dear," replied Madge quickly. "How generously and nobly you have responded to the call!"

"If you know all, kind Madge, you would not say so. Believe me, I deserve no praise," was the quiet rejoinder.

"She does—indeed she does deserve every praise," cried Marie warmly. "I know all she has endured and suffered. She is the best and the very noblest girl I ever knew. Would that I were half as good."

"Or I!" joined in Madge. "No, Bertie darling! Mary and I are very, very happy, but you have chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from you. In whatever corner of the world you may be placed, dearest Bertie, the loving eyes of your old Scotch and Irish friends will follow you, and their hearts will be with you whichever ever you go."

"I feel sure they will, dear Madge, and it gives me great joy to think so," responded Beatrice.

"Surely Lady Abbess said something to you rather disheartening, Marie, for you looked so woe-begone and miserable after you bade her farewell. I have often been curious to know what she told you?" inquired Madge.

"Oh!" laughed the girl shyly. "I remember I wept, and made myself very unhappy, because she tried to hint that perhaps my life in the horrid wicked world, and it sounded so appalling then. I could not bear to think of anything so dreadful; and yet, my goodness! here I am, and am unable to account how it has all come about. Madge, do let us both be married on the same day. It will ease my mind to feel that I have a companion in guilt."

"I have already promised Louis that it should be so," she replied.

"But think, Marie, we have but a few weeks of freedom remaining to us now; and how about our trousseau?"

"And must I be the little bride's maid?" inquired Bertie.

"Never! never!" cried both girls in the same breath. "The Bride of Heaven shall be no maid for us; we would rather be without one altogether than that you should attend upon us."

"Go to bed, children!" said the voice of the Countess, who, from her stern tone, must have been awake up and present with a gala appearance, festooning its streets with bright flags and triumphal arches of fresh evergreens? Wherefore had the people donned their holiday attire, and wreathed their joyous faces in cheerful and pleasant smiles?"

"Sure and isn't it our lord's wedding day, and that of his purty little sister's also? More's the pity though—God bless her!—that she should be leaving us, even though they do tell us that another as good as her is to fill her place. Well, well it may be so; and our warmest welcome shall greet the new lady. But our hearts will often long for the sight of her who has been with us in most of our troubles, and long and faithfully will her memory be cherished amongst us." Such were the outspoken feelings of the people.

There were great preparations at Brecken Park. The time for renovating and ornamenting had been limited, but nevertheless hands had been employed and marvellous were the effects produced. The grand old hall looked quite picturesque and imposing now in all its new paint and glory. The ancient and stately trees had caught the first glows of the gorgeous autumnal tints, and, lit up by a bright sun, they bent gently to the soft breeze, and proudly raised their heads to the pale blue vault above. Large tents were erected upon the soft green grass, for Lord O'Hagan had issued orders that all his tenants and their numerous friends should be right hospitably entertained. Long tables almost bent beneath the weight of the varied substantial provisions resting upon them; and it would have been difficult to discover a sad or sorry heart amongst the people that morning—certainly not one who did not wish their young lord and his beloved sister the choicest and best of Heaven's blessings; ay, and those also with whom they were going to unite their lives and fates for ever.

Long before the appointed hour for the ceremony the church was thronged with rich and poor, so that it was with the greatest difficulty space in front could be reserved for the wedding guests. Panticularly the minute the carriages began to arrive. First and foremost came the Countess de Woodville, gorgeously dressed in rose-coloured satin, feathers, and diamonds. She saluted the aisle with a proud and regal step. At her side walked Beatrice, dressed in spotless white, looking like a fair and slender lily, her only ornament being a pure white flower of that nature, which rested artfully and sweetly on her gentle bosom.

But eyes glistened, and faces and hearts warmed, as she passed them, for they recognized the beautiful lady who had already done so much during her short stay amongst them to aid and comfort them, and she smiled sweetly and bowed gracefully to many of the healthy sunburnt faces as she passed by. Dear auntie looked charming in a pretty mauve she adorned with a profusion of her favourite rich lace. Many relations and friends were present, and altogether they formed a gay and pleasant picture, not easily to be forgotten.

A low murmur of subdued joy and excitement was heard as the two brides entered the church. First came Marie, looking so blooming and sweet in her lovely bridal dress; the rich white lace of her veil toning down the deep crimson blushes on her cheeks. Her arm was resting in that of kind Mr. Barry, who was got up in a style worthy of the occasion. His filled shirt and silk stockings were exquisite and spotless, whilst the rest of his dress was of the finest possible texture. He looked a very unique and quaint picture of olden times. Close behind them walked Madge, leaning gracefully upon the arm of a fine old Scotch laird; one who, in days gone by, had been much attached to her late Uncle James, but who, to do him justice, had known but little of poor Mrs. Fitzallen's troubles. Madge, her slender figure draped like Marie's in the richest of white satin, walked with her head a little bent, and an expression of sweet seriousness on her refined features. The dresses of both brides varied as to style, but each wore the orthodox orange-blossom, whilst their beautiful veils were secured by sprays and ornaments of valuable and sparkling diamonds. Conspicuous around the white throat of the bride of De Woodville was the circlet of famous and precious pearls.

Two pretty little pages dressed in the most elaborate of Scotch and Irish costumes followed cheerfully and proudly in attendance upon their respective ladies.

As the happy brides neared the altar, naturally their eyes searched swiftly and rapidly for their old companion. She had been so kind and unselfish towards them that, at this supreme moment of their lives, she appeared nearer to them than any other person. Like a poor and spotted lily, she was kneeling a little apart from the rest of the company under a statue of the Madonna, her face buried in her hands, her heart and mind absorbed in deep and fervent prayer. Alas! she had much to ask, much to petition for. Great strength and courage would be needed to carry out the plan which unfolded itself before her as the only feasible way out of her difficulties. A letter from Percy lay concealed under the lily she was near and spotted lily, she was kneeling a little apart from the rest of the company under a statue of the Madonna, her face buried in her hands, her heart and mind absorbed in deep and fervent prayer. Alas! she had much to ask, much to petition for. 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