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THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER XXIII.—CONTINUED.

The Earl led his bride-elect straight to where auntie sat. The girl, all blue and half tears, knelt humbly upon the stool, and throwing her arms around the old lady's neck, cried—

"O auntie! what will you say? I have tried so hard not to love him, even to forget him, and I could not do so. And he loves me so dearly; indeed he does."

No need to assure auntie of that fact; she saw it in the burning look of generous devotion in the proud eyes, and noted with pleasure the gentle, respectful manner in which he treated her niece. She felt he was sincere, and that she could trust him. Much moved by the girl's bashful excitement, and the young man's earnest bearing, she answered kindly—

"And so you have come to tell poor old auntie that you have at last discovered you love each other so dearly that you cannot bear to live apart?"

"Much more than that, dear auntie—for you must permit me to call you so," replied the Earl earnestly. "I wish to hear from your lips that you trust me, and can give this dear little one confidently into my keeping, and that soon, for I have waited already far too long, and she knows it," he continued, slipping his arm boldly around her waist and dropping upon one knee beside her. "Also, we have one more request, and that is for your blessing. It is as a mother's to both of us, and we should feel happier did we possess it."

"God bless you, then, dear children," said the old lady, greatly touched by the young man's humble appeal, while she tenderly disengaged the girl's hands from her neck, and placed them firmly in those of her intended husband. "With all my heart I bless you, dear, and may you both be good and worthy members of society, and fulfill your duties faithfully in that high position in which God has placed you. As for you," she continued, resting her hand gently on the young man's shoulder, "the son of such a father could be but brave, and generous; and fully, freely, and with joy even, do I entrust my niece to your love and care. And, my little Marie, well pleased am I that you have found your vocation at last. It is one which you will well fill, nay, may even adore; for I do not think you will ever be entirely carried away by worldlyness or luxury, and thus will shine in your own gentle way, and give a noble example of virtue to all around."

"It is like you, dear auntie, to say these kind things. But, oh! what will Lady Abbess and the dear nuns say?"

"They will laugh, dear, and be as delighted as we are. Why, Lady Abbess never thought you would be a nun. Girls are constantly making the same mistake as you did, Marie, and mistaking an enthusiastic love for a certain convent and nuns, thinking it means a vocation, when all the while God has often very different designs for them, would they but listen to Him, and lay aside their own wishes and desires."

"Well, it is very strange," said Marie, resting her head on Reginald's shoulder. "I cannot account for it at all."

How was Beatrice occupied whilst her friends were pouring out their love rhapsodies? Ah! the angels of God's poor and afflicted ones hovered near and around her. In a poverty-stricken hovel, seated by the bedside of a sick man, in his arms a little wretched child of humanity, whose weary cries she had hushed into gentle slumber, sat Beatrice, her fair face bent kindly towards the sufferer, her beautiful eyes beaming with sympathetic sorrow and tenderness, as she listened to the sad recital of that oft-told tale of misfortune, sin, and remorse.

Father Gallagher watched the girl, and marvelled within himself how one so nobly born and gently reared could with such wonderful skill and cleverness, adapt herself to the needs of the poor and the sick. "Was she purely heaven-taught? or had the power of suffering made her what she was?"

This poor wreck of better days, once a gentleman, now a wretched pauper, clung with the persistency of the dying to the sweet girl at his side as to a very angel from heaven; and listening to her, he became calm, even joyful, content to leave his children orphans, and accept death willingly as a just punishment for his useless and miserably spent life.

Father Gallagher and Beatrice remained with the poor sufferer, until his humble and patient spirit was freed, and had winged its way to the judgment-seat; then leaving the orphans in the charge of kind neighbours, they both walked towards the hall, where different scenes and joyful faces awaited them. No words can describe the joy with which Beatrice clasped her little sister to her heart, and assured her how she and all her family had longed for this happy event to come to pass.

"It was the yearning desire of poor father," she exclaimed; "and my mother will find in you, dear Marie, a daughter who will bear with her patiently, and be much more to her than I ever could have been."

Father Gallagher laughed heartily, and shaking the young people warmly by the hand, warned Marie seriously that she must never so far jeopardise her soul as to clothe herself in purple or fine linen, but stick to the more spiritual cottons and homespuns, for which she had once so great a respect.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The busy London season should have been over, for it was August, and the city was close, hot, and dusty. But Parliament sat late that year; moreover, there was much sickness on the Continent, so that a large portion of England's upper ten were fain to content themselves with a trip and rest in their own isles by way of a holiday. Amongst them was Earl de Woodville and his family; he and his promised bride were being feted and made much of by those who, like themselves, still lingered in the great Metropolis. There were signs and rumors of a marriage in that quarter ere long. People liked the pretty retiring girl, whose beauty and sweetness of disposition were frequently commented upon by the papers, and whose picture graced the pages of many of the leading journals.

In a high house standing in one of the most expensive and fashionable squares of London, up in the top rooms thereof, resided poor Margaret FitzAlan. She is governess to the three fretful and delicate children of Lady Linsdale, whose whole life is given up to frivolities of every description, and whose sole ambition and craving appears to be to outdo her neighbors, and be the first in every ridiculous and fashionable extravagance.

No one knew, nor could they guess, why the tall fair governess scanned so eagerly every day the columns of fashionable news; nor yet why she invariably took her little charges to one of the large parks for their daily walk, and gazed with such a hungry, yearning look on the faces of the ladies and occupants of the open carriages. Sometimes the children spoke to her and she did not seem to hear them, so absorbed was she in her task. Once they declared that she fairly started, and almost shouted, as an elegant carriage, containing a very handsome gentleman and a sweetly pretty lady, dashed past them; but the horses shied at the moment, and Marie was whirled away, never noticing the sweet eager-faced girl who stood upon the pavement, her hands outstretched as though to stay her. Again the children wondered why she seized so greedily upon every picture of the future Countess de Woodville, and cutting them out, carefully stowed them away in her treasure-box.

Sometimes when no one was near she would draw these treasures forth and talk to them. "Dear little Marie," she would say, "how very beautiful and sweet you look! I wonder how you like being (ited so, and dressed, in all these precious jewels? How well that archlet of pearls becomes you! I have read of their immense value, and also that but the bride or wife of a De Woodville may ever wear them. The beautiful and gifted Lady Beatrice too, and your kind brother Louis—yes, I read of you all. I long—O God! how I yearn to meet them—land yet I dare not write, for I tremble to make myself known. The Countess—many people might object if I did so, for I am so poor, and only a governess. Oh that I could meet them somewhere alone! Perhaps, after all, they would not know me. Alas, how times are changed! and the scolding tears rushed to her eyes. She brushed them away quickly, for a maid servant entered, telling her that Lady Linsdale desired to speak to her at once.

Madge replaced her treasures, and with a heavy sigh she locked them up. "Each day," she thought, "I rise with the fond hope that I may meet them; each night I lie down sorry and disappointed. But I must not keep her ladyship waiting," and she descended hurriedly the long flights of stairs to the beautifully furnished morning-room, where resting upon an easy-chair, Lady Linsdale awaited her.

"I beg to tell you, Miss FitzAlan, that on the evening of Thursday next I shall require your services. I shall give an entertainment on a large scale. Many very distinguished people will be here, and I shall desire you to sing during the evening, and I trust that you will be situated suitably—in something simple—yet fashionable enough to pass muster, for it would not be pleasant to hear," and a palpable sneer curled her lips, "that any of my dependents were undressed."

Subdued as poor Madge was, she drew her tall figure to its full height, and there was that in her eyes and form which recalled in Lady Linsdale's jealous mind the fact she could never quite forget, namely, that the girl before her was every inch a handsome "Gordon," and far more highly gifted and nobler born than she was herself.

"Have you a wish for any particular song, may I ask?" demanded Madge, in as calm a tone as she could command.

"No," returned her ladyship, in a hesitating tone; "only let it be something good, something that is sure to attract the notice of first class musicians, for several of great note and reputation will be here, likewise one or two of our most famous artists and poets."

"It will be altogether an artistic gathering, then?" said Madge, her face paling, and a sinking feeling

of disappointment taking possession of her.

"Not at all," was the rather impatient rejoinder. "There will be Prince Henry of H—, the Duke and Duchess of Coventry, Earl de Woodville and all his party, including his pretty little fiancée; Lord and Lady—, but what is the matter with you, Miss FitzAlan; are you ill?"

"No, thank you," came faintly from Madge's white lips as she grasped the back of a chair for support. "I felt a little giddy, that is all."

But the good news had been almost too much for her, coming, as it did, just when she felt so dull and spiritless, and she longed to be alone where she could think it all over to herself. They were coming at last! She would have to sing to them once more. Oh yes, she felt she would be able to do that. But how live quietly until Thursday evening? Could it be possible that once more she would be under the same roof with them?

"Perhaps you had better take the children for a walk; the fresh air may revive you," said her ladyship coldly, as she watched with envious eyes the varying and changeable lights and shades flit like sunshine and shadow over the sweet expressive countenance.

"Thank you," was the meek yet dignified answer of the poor governess, who bowing gracefully, left the room.

Lady Linsdale would have given half of her fortune could she but have acquired that peculiar air of birth and refinement which clung so easily and naturally to Madge, and which no circumstance of poverty or position could ever conceal or hide. Herself a widow, short of stature, stout in figure, harsh of voice and coarseness of skin, she could not but envy the tall, handsome figure, and clear transparent complexion of the young governess, whom strangers never failed to notice, and even to admire.

Madge thought Thursday would never arrive, but it came at last. Fearing to appear in anything very young and pretty, lest Lady Linsdale should object, Madge, for once in her life, had been extravagant, and had spent much of her small savings upon a handsome black silk dress, trimmed with shining jet trimming. Her snowy tresses and arms were bare, though partly hidden by some lovely lace, which fell softly and gracefully around them. She wore upon her hair the richest and most richly arranged; her hair combs were fluted with a bright hectic tinge; whilst her large clear eyes shone with a nervous, almost expectant light, which grew more intense as the hours passed.

It was growing late. The grand reception-rooms were thrown open, carriages began to roll up, and guests to arrive. They were to be met with some slight refreshment, whilst the great ball-room would stand open, and musicians be in readiness to accommodate as many of the young people as cared to dance. Others could amuse themselves as they desired in the various rooms or terraces, discussing art, politics, or what not, during which times rare and beautiful music would be performed wherever to enchant and delight their ears. From the hall arose a large, almost circular staircase, rising higher and higher, even to the children's apartments, and rooted in by a handsome glass dome. Across this hall must the guests walk to the various rooms of entertainment. On the upper portion of one of the landings, Madge, her hands sometimes clasped tightly together as though in speechless agony, sometimes crossed upon her breast as though in mute appeal to Heaven for patience. Every now and again, when her anxious ear caught the sound of a fresh guest's voice, she leant over the banisters, her long delicate fingers clutching the rail for support, her anxious eyes scanning with intense eagerness for the sight of some old and long-loved face. At last came the echo of a low musical laugh, and surely the sound of familiar voices. Her heart seemed to stand still, she forgot all results and decency, she leant still lower, and listened and watched.

"O my God!" she gasped, "is it them at last? Yes, there was no mistaking the fine form and proud carriage of the Countess de Woodville; no, nor that of her eldest son, whilst at his side, her little arm through his, walked Marie Blake. Close behind them, walking side by side, came Louis and Beatrice, from whose parted lips still issued the low rippling laugh. A dull, stifled cry burst from the lips of the poor girl watching above, and in an instant the quick ears of Beatrice caught the sound, and her eyes were raised with a rapid, searching glance to the range of the vast staircase. As she did so, she paused in her walk, and the laugh suddenly died upon her lips, for, as she raised her eyes, the bright light below reflected for an instant only upon features which, more in their intensity of expression than in anything else recalled to her mind the face of one whom years ago she had known and loved. But like a flash it disappeared, and was lost to view in the dark background.

"What is it?" inquired her companion. "What startled you so?"

"Nay, it was but a momentary vision," answered Beatrice, with a puzzled expression. "But did I believe in second sight I should declare that these walls contain a ghost, for there flashed from the staircase above the agonised face

of one long loved and well remembered."

"Who was it?" asked Louis, bending eagerly towards her.

"I cannot assure you to speak as indifferently as possible. Ask me an hour or two hence and I will tell you then." Another minute and they were surrounded by friends and lost in the crowd; but about them both hovered and shadowed a mysterious, unaccountable, and undefined feeling, such as sometimes affects us with a strange disquietude and uneasiness when, unconsciously to ourselves, we are in close proximity to one towards whom we are greatly attracted or for whom we feel an intense aversion.

Some little time elapsed ere the summons to sing reached Madge. The servant discovered the poor young governess in her room upon her knees, her face upturned in earnest prayer before her favourite crucifix and picture of the Mother of Dolours.

"My God, Thou wilt aid me!" she said aloud, as the messenger retired, and once more, though My Mother, wilt intercede for me, and obtain for me courage and strength to act my part. The result I leave to thee." She rose from her knees, gathered her flowing train in her trembling hands, and, with a brave heart but unsteady steps, she descended the long flights of stairs to the waiting scene of gaiety below.

She was aware in which room the grand piano stood, upon which she was expected to perform, and like one in a dream, she glided stealthily through the noisy and numerous guests and quietly took her seat on the music stool, awaiting with a fast-trembling heart the signal to commence. She raised her eyes timidly and cast a rapid glance at the faces around her. "No they were not there. Where, then, were they? Probably in the ball-room. Oh, would they hear her? Heaven had befriended her before when, nervous and well-nigh hopeless, she had felt that a parent's life almost hung upon her song. It would not desert her now when, to her lively imagination, it seemed that her own life's weal or woe depended upon the amount of strength and pathos she could command and throw into her voice.

Soon there was a lull in the merry dance music. Madge breathed a short burning prayer for help; and whilst the young people were enjoying less and other dainty and light refreshments, or cooling themselves amidst the tall palms and ferns, or even in the small terraced garden, or in a wild, impassioned manner, struck the first chords of her song—the very one she had sung nearly five years ago in the London Hotel, on the last occasion when the "United Kingdom" had met beneath the same roof—"The Captive Greek Girl." Her long white fingers pressed with consummate skill the ivory notes, and they rang forth as responsive to her call; her pretty eyes were raised in pleading earnestness, and, oblivious so all around, yet with an almost bursting heart, Madge sang her song. She had scarcely sung a line or two every voice in the room was silent, and, like an electric shock, stillness fell upon every great within hearing.

There was a wildness of note and a tenderness of expression in the inflections of the powerful young voice, and in the expression of her face, which drew forth transports of wonder and enthusiasm from the astonished listeners.

Apparently unconscious of the guests walk to the various rooms of entertainment. On the upper portion of one of the landings, Madge, her hands sometimes clasped tightly together as though in speechless agony, sometimes crossed upon her breast as though in mute appeal to Heaven for patience. Every now and again, when her anxious ear caught the sound of a fresh guest's voice, she leant over the banisters, her long delicate fingers clutching the rail for support, her anxious eyes scanning with intense eagerness for the sight of some old and long-loved face. At last came the echo of a low musical laugh, and surely the sound of familiar voices. Her heart seemed to stand still, she forgot all results and decency, she leant still lower, and listened and watched.

corner, was enjoying a deep flirtation with a rich but lately widowed marquise.

"Pardon!" exclaimed the girl apologetically. "But, Lady Linsdale, when is the voice of the singer?"

"Oh, pray don't excite yourself, Lady Beatrice!" was the cold, languid reply. "I do assure you it is only my children's governess who sings at present—rather a nice voice, has she not?"

"Rather, indeed!" said Beatrice, tossing her head and moving on.

"Her name?" inquired Louis anxiously.

"Only Miss FitzAlan, a most quiet and ordinary kind of person. Please don't trouble yourself about her."

But they did not even stay to hear her out. They had gone. Arm-in-arm they crossed the pretty boudoir which they guessed rightly would lead into the very room where the beautiful singer sat.

"Louis!" cried Beatrice, arresting him suddenly, "we must not startle her. She knows we are here, and is singing that song in the fond hope that we shall hear and recognize it. So, everyone is listening; all sound has ceased. We will not spoil her song and rob her of the well-merited praise and renown it is certain to earn for her. Let us enter the room by yonder door; thus we shall be able to stand behind her unperceived and watch for the moment when her song is finished, and then I will clasp her in my arms once more. Louis, I know now whose face it was that I saw as we crossed the hall; it was hers, but I did not dare to raise your hopes until I was more certain of it."

He pressed her hand warmly, and they moved quietly to the other door. A catching sight of Reginald and Marie, they beckoned them towards them, and soon they all stood a few yards behind the pretty singer.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE HOPE OF THE DE VAUCOULEURS

Madame de Vaucouleurs fitted joyously from one big room to another, carefully placing the best cushions where they hid the most badly worn places in the French velvet upholstery of the rosewood chairs, moving a table that it might cover one spot where the carpet was worn through, and making a stool cover a second drawing the pink-lace curtains into closer folds, the beautiful darts in them might be less conspicuous and adjusting the shades so that they prevented the sun's garish fingers from pointing out the shabbiness of the once palatial rooms. Afterwards she went to the little garden before the house—the only part of her spacious grounds that did not look neglected—and gathered an arbut of pink and white roses. 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