

THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER XXIII

Reginald de Woodville had been a guest almost two days at Bracken Park, and never had fortune favored him with an opportunity of catching its pretty little mistress alone.

A soft rain was falling—had been falling all the day—thus debaring all out-door sport and amusement.

For full five minutes Reginald stood in the centre of his room, his strong arms tightly folded across his broad chest, his features set and stern, his mind revolving a bold and sudden attack upon a timid but not altogether unsuspecting fortress.

Turning at last towards a long cheval glass, which stood near the wall, he surveyed himself for a few seconds with apparent satisfaction.

The young Earl opened the door and advanced boldly towards the happy boy. On the sofa reclined auntie, her face lit up by an expression of motherly joy and pride as she listened to the kind words of praise bestowed upon her boy by good old Mr. Barry.

"I have indeed," rejoined Louis, rising and shaking the young Earl warmly by the hand, "and it does not agree with my nature; so I have promised myself a long holiday now, as a well-merited reward."

"And right gladly will I aid you to spend it," said Reginald. "You shall, if you will, be my guest shortly—that is, if you and your sister will honor us with your company; and he shot a quick, meaning glance at Marie."

"Book me as your willing guest at once, Reginald; there is nothing I should enjoy better!"

"Agreed! Then you will return with me to Bacon Court?"

"How soon I know not," was the answer, spoken in a low tone, but not too low for Marie to catch every word; for that tall, pale color deepened visibly on her cheek as she heard them, and she averted her head a little. But Reginald moved towards her and stood close beside her. He looked earnestly at her, and asked in loud clear tones if she would fulfil her promise, and be kind enough to show him the remains of the old tower, and the dilapidated wing of the mansion popularly supposed to conceal the family ghost.

voice, "you surely will not refuse to do the honors to a guest, Marie?"

"But, Bertie, you will accompany us, will you not?" and she cast an imploring glance towards her friend.

But Bertie affected not to observe it, and answered promptly, "No, dear, you must do the honors alone this time. I have engaged with the hero of the day to play a match at tennis, and I shall be at the court, and I vow to take a little pride out of you this day."

"So away flew the young couple, leaving Marie to figure her own battles. She cast an enquiring, despairing look around the room, but the old people appeared not to observe her, and she was compelled to lead the way to the tower. Auntie cast a meaning look over the tops of her spectacles at the young people left the apartment, and remarked "that it was wonderful how many ways and means young folks discovered of amusing themselves, even upon wet days like the present."

"Quite marvellous," replied her old friend.

Marie, her heart throbbing with undue timidity and excitement, she dare scarcely think why, led the way down several old passages, the last one lower and narrower than the rest, which terminated in an old but strong oak door. She turned the rusty, creaking handle, but it required the strongest arms to force it open.

"Now, my little one, I have you at last!" he cried, in a tone so firm, low, and earnest, that it startled her. "Marie, you shall, you must listen to me, for I can endure this suspense no longer. Tell me, dear one, what at last I may speak to you. Let me hear from your own sweet lips what your blushing face and downcast eyes cannot hide from me—that you are not indifferent to me; that you love me a little in return for all the strong, deep love wherewith I have for so long now and so faithfully loved you. Be kind, Marie, and speak to me."

Though the little hands were burning and trembled greatly in his masterful grasp, yet she did not seek to withdraw them as she once had in discovering which room was occupied by the family at that moment, for the sound of merry voices, mingled with gay laughter, issued distinctly from the dark oak parlor.

"You do not spurn me from you now, darling, as once you did. I have waited so patiently. Tell me that you will reward me for it, that you will be mine, that you will help and comfort me as only a true wife can do." He drew her closer to him. The long dark fringes were shy and slowly raised, disclosing two tear-stained but happy eyes.

"Regie," she whispered softly, "I do love you. I have loved you, I believe, ever since that fatal New Year's Eve. Perhaps I loved you then, but I do think it is Heaven's will that it should be so, for, in spite of everything, I have felt and forced drawn towards you. I could not forget you."

In a transport of joy and delight, he drew her to him. "My little angel! My darling! My queen! My wife!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that God has given you to me at last to be my very own?—you whom I have dreamt of only as one so far and high above me as to be almost out of man's reach altogether. God knows," he said passionately, "that but to Him alone would I have yielded you, my Marie."

She smiled sweetly and contentedly up at him and answered, "It was not you, dear Regie, who inspired me with this wish. But I am well content with the part allotted to me," and she hid her happy face upon his shoulder.

He blessed her, he praised her, he called her a thousand sweet names, and together they swore life-long love and devotion; but to share shame he said, they totally forgot the errand upon which they previously lay started, for, so far as they were concerned, O'Hagan's ghost remained snug and undisturbed the rest of that afternoon. Perhaps it was the arch and lofty calling of the octagon room that required so close a scrutiny and claimed their close attention. Truly it was well worthy of it! At any rate, a good hour had passed ere they issued from the room through the old oak door again.

"Regie!" inquired his little companion, "what about the tower and the ghost?"

"How do you know that I have still room left in my heart for another orphan, essay boy, as you were likely to look at her while Margot was by; no one, that is, except her father. The beauty's eyes sparkled."

"Will you, really? But you do not care for these things as you say. It is my only chance, and you will have many others; there will be no lack of suitors for the daughter of the Count of Provence. Once you are gone my uncle will do nothing for me. He does not like me. He puts up with me only on your account."

Marguerite knew this was true. The Count objected to the presence of the interloper who exercised such an influence over his gentle daughter and usurped the position which was hers by right. Being a man he could not help acknowledging Margot's superior attractions, but how ever, she was an orphan, a brother's daughter, and he could not send her away.

The Count of Provence was a great Prince, quite as important as the King of France, though nominally a vassal, and far richer. His court was more splendid and attractive, and much more luxurious. The gay South was considerably in advance of the rugged North, and Paris, a fortified place on the banks of the Seine, built to repel invasion, bore no comparison with beautiful Aix, basking in the sunshine, a center of music and art. Yet an alliance with the French King was not to be despised and Count Raymond had set his heart on the match.

The king arrived with all the pomp and parade which attended such an event in the middle ages. He was met by the count at the gates of the town, and the keys of the city were presented to him on a cushion. Flowers strewed his passage through the streets and beautiful hangings decorated the windows that he passed beneath; arches were erected at different corners; the nobles in all their gorgeous array formed a brilliant escort. King Louis himself was attired with a rich though sober magnificence, and bore himself with all the dignity that belonged to his exalted station. The count riding by his side, bareheaded, did honor to his royal guest.

A banquet was held in the great hall, at which only men were present. The two girls, in a kind of oriental seclusion, watched the proceedings from a gallery above. The Saracens had left tokens of their presence in the customs that still prevailed in the South, and though a knight was devoted to the service of his lady he worshipped her from afar. But when the feast was over the count brought the king into the presence of the ladies. A galaxy of beauty met his eye. The women of Provence are celebrated for their loveliness, and the rich materials into flowing garments that lent dignity to the figure were becoming to all.

"My daughter and my niece," said the count, and both the girls made deep reverences. But the king noticed only one, the one who thrust herself on his attention, decked out in all her borrowed splendor. She monopolized him at once, bringing into play the whole armory of attractions which she had practised from childhood on every one within reach, the down-dropped eyes which showed the long sweep of her silken eyelashes, the coquettish glance which half frowned, though he saw only half the game. He did not perceive the exchange of dress which a woman's eye would have noticed at once—what did he know about girls' clothes?—but he saw Marguerite as usual was eclipsed by her cousin. He would have a few words with Margot on the following day, but he could not speak now before the king.

But though Margot, exultant already in imagination was the crown on her head, things were not quite as she seemed. She exerted her power of pleasing to the utmost; news had been more widely more sparkling. King Louis listened with courtesy, that fine courtesy of the heart which distinguished him, but though he admitted the lady's beauty she was not altogether to his taste. Her glance was too Margot on the following day, but he could not speak now before the king.

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"I am very foolish," said Marguerite, "but I know that if he chose to do anything I could not stop him."

"He will do nothing," promised the king. "And in any case I am here to prevent him."

He remained by her side throughout the morning and she was conscious of a strange elation. On his return to the castle he took counsel with his trusted minister.

"I have made up my mind," he said, "to offer my hand to the count's niece."

"The count's daughter, sire, would be a more suitable match."

"I prefer the looks of her cousin." The minister was not surprised. As far as looks went there certainly was no comparison, but he thought the king superior to such considerations. Even saints had eyes, he thought, and he did not know the mistake into which the king had fallen.

"A virtuous woman," continued the king, "is a crown to her husband."

Report speaks well of the Princess Marguerite, represented the minister. He thought the king was trying to justify his choice in a manner that was not quite worthy of him. If he was taken with Margot's beauty, why not own it? It was not her virtue that attracted him, that was certain. She was neither better nor worse than others.

"Report is not always to be depended upon. I mistrust the lady."

The minister said no more. If the king was bent on the match it was not for him to oppose it. The king and his bride were eloped together for a considerable time one afternoon. The count came away from the interview in a very bad temper. He sent for his daughter. She had never seen him so angry.

"This is the result," he began, "of your hiding yourself in the background and letting your cousin take your place. The king has asked me for her hand."

Marguerite turned very pale. Had it meant nothing, then, this kindness that seemed to read her soul? But her courage rose to the occasion.

"It is not strange, my father, that he should prefer her," she answered. "She is so beautiful!"

"Beautiful! Bah! She is vain, selfish and flighty, a pretty wife for the king of France! She has no dignity, no reserve. What happened to you last night? You looked at nothing and she was magnificent!" Marguerite colored. Her father had not noticed her generous act of folly. He would have been angry, indeed, if he had. But the mischief was done, and she must bear the consequences.

"I have not told her yet," continued the count. "There is time enough. It makes me angry to think of her tripping over you, but it is your own fault."

He spoke more truly than he knew. Marguerite went away and shed a few tears in secret. It was not disappointed ambition; she could have loved the king.

That night when the count was assembled the count, with no sign of the mortification which filled his soul, turned to Margot, who was still seated in her borrowed plumage.

"My niece," he said, "the king of France has done you the honor to ask for your hand."

A murmur of surprise and disappointment ran round the circle. Margot turned pale at the sudden realization of her hopes.

"For mine!" she faltered. Her uncle led her forward, but the king stepped back.

"There is even mistake," he said. "That is not the lady."

The count looked puzzled.

"This is my niece, sire," he said. "I thought she was your daughter, my lord. This is the lady I wish to marry, and, bending low to Marguerite, who, composed on the surface but with anguish in her heart, stood by witnessing the success of her rival, he raised her hand to his lips. The color flamed over her face with joy and surprise, transforming it with absolute beauty. At that moment she could have borne comparison with anyone. She had entered into her kingdom, the sovereignty of the heart, and even Margot paled before her in the light of his radiance that shone from her eyes. How had the error come about? But Margot, who with all her faults was not ungenerous, gave the explanation.

"It is my fault. Marguerite lent me her robes and her jewels. She knew I wanted to look my best and I have so few of my own."

Her splendid dress and assured manner had led the king astray. He looked at Marguerite with tender approval. He had not been mistaken; this was the wife he wanted, a helpmate and a friend, one who would see things as he did and labor with him for the welfare of the people committed to his charge. The count had nothing to say, since everything had turned out as he wished. Indeed he was sorry for Margot, who had taken her disappointment well. She should not lose by it, he resolved. Such a big prize as the king of France was not for her, but there were other chances, and after all it was not every woman who was suited to be the wife of a saint.

So Marguerite turned her back on fair Provence and went up to the northern capital, which was henceforth to be her home, a small place indeed compared with the Paris of modern times, confined almost entirely within the limits of the island of the city, with Notre Dame rising in the midst of it, its glory and its crown. Here again it was her fate to be overdone by the commanding personality of her mother-in-law

TWO MARGUERITES

There was great commotion in Aix, the King of France was coming to visit the Count of Provence. The king was Louis IX., and he was in search of a wife. Whom would he choose? Everyone hoped it would be the Princess Marguerite, the count's eldest daughter, beloved by all for her goodness and her sweetness.

But there was another Marguerite, her cousin, who was far more beautiful, though not nearly so suitable. Man are not apt to see below the surface, and even a saint may be susceptible to looks. The Princess Marguerite was modest and retiring and her cousin had it all, her own way, apparently. She had been proclaimed queen of beauty at the last tournament, and every wandering troubadour who came to the castle celebrated her charms.

The two girls stood by a window in the long gallery overlooking the rushing Rhone. They had been brought up together and were fast friends. They were about the same height, but the beauty was dark with a brilliant complexion and hair black as a raven's wing, while her cousin was pale with a gentle expression. She was pretty, too, but her attraction was rather less than usual, and her cousin's showiness eclipsed her altogether. One was a jewel to set in a king's crown, the other a simple flower to cherish with his heart.

"Of course he will choose you," said the beautiful Marguerite—Margot as they called her so distinguish her from her cousin. "You will be decked out in your best robes and all your jewels. You will be queen of France and I shall be nowhere." The other Marguerite looked rather distressed.

"You know that I do not care for grandeur and riches," she replied. "I shall look nothing beside you whatever I wear, but if you think these things make a difference, I will lend you my robes and jewels while he is here."

She stifled a sigh as she spoke. It cost her more than Margot had to make the offer for King Louis was the hero of gilded dreams. She had heard of his court and the way it was governed; he was reputed a saint and he was manly and wise.

BARRISTERS, SOLICITORS

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