

THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES-BROWN

CHAPTER XVII.

The new year that had its birth, and had dawned amidst such gay splendour and festivities beneath the strong towers of Baron Court, was warm no longer. The bright warm sun had grown cold and bleak; the earth, trees, and shrubs had borne their beautiful flowers and fruit; and now a cold, keen November wind searched the country in strong and fitful blasts, and sought with relentless force to strip and sweep every lingering leaf and spray from its sweet summer resting place.

With remorseless fury it chased and hunted the faded yellow leaves down the streets and around the squares of the city of Edinburgh, harked and hustled them in every nook and cranny, where they vainly sought for refuge and shelter, till discovered by a louder and stronger blast they were once more roused and sent hurrying recklessly after their weary companions—rushing pell mell to sure and certain destruction.

It was not a day that many would have chosen for a walk of pleasure, least of all would they have willingly faced that fierce wind upon a hill. But what cared Madge for that? "Fewer people would be about," mused the girl; and had she not learnt to strive and struggle against things far harder and more cruel than the elements—ay, and to subdue them too? Her poor heart could answer for that, so could the quick look of brave determination which flashed from the chief characteristics of her features. With firm and hopeful steps she had trodden the hard, rough road of poverty and trial; yet she had not failed to see and pluck the fair flowers that, almost hidden, blossomed by the wayside, and their sweet and fragrant perfume had filled her heart with tranquil joy, peace, and resignation, the certain reward of duty nobly and faithfully accomplished.

She came slowly up the hill, the full skirt of her black dress floating in the wind, whilst both hands were upraised in almost vain endeavor to save her broad black hat from following the course of the gale. Where has vanished the awkward gait and rounded figure of her school-girl days? Not a vestige of it remains. Very tall and slight she has grown in form; so slight, indeed, that it is by a strong effort of her will only she keeps her feet and moves evenly forward.

It is only a little more than two years since she left her convent home, and yet what a change that time has wrought in her. The clear grey eyes are looking straight ahead as of old, nor is their steady light dimmed one iota; but the dimpled cheeks are wan and thin; gone, too, are the healthy brown freckles, but in their place the skin is fair and white, almost transparent; the blue veins so prominent upon her mother's neck and temples are still more noticeable upon her daughter's; whilst the chestnut hair has lost its brightest ring, and toned to the shade of a rich Auburn.

From her mother she has inherited that look of quiet refinement which stamps her every movement; from her grandfather that courageous and indomitable will which has enabled her to endure so much. She wears that badge of mourning—draps—black and white, yet are her throat and wrists encircled as of old by a small lace collar and cuffs. Not a soul was in sight, and the girl struggled bravely on, battling cheerfully with the wind, until she reached a sheltered seat, upon which she sank fairly exhausted.

was he not a living link of the olden life? He stood for almost a minute absorbed in admiration, and endeavoring to decipher the meaning of the rapid changes that flitted over her expressive countenance. Then he spoke. "Let us sit down together, Miss Fitz Allan, and tell me all about yourself. Marie is yearning to see you again, and so are all your old friends."

"How very good and kind of you," replied Madge, with her old winning smile; but the color rose to her cheeks, and her voice faltered as she continued, "I dare not stay long; I shall be missed. Besides, I have been a stranger to joy for so long that I know not how I can endure it now."

"You have lost some relative then?" he said kindly, half forcing her on to the seat, and sitting down beside her. She nodded assent. "My poor father died about ten days ago."

"And your mother?" "She is ill, very ill," said the girl, rising quickly. "The walk home is a long one. I must return, or she will wonder what has happened."

"Then I will accompany you. You will not refuse me that favor?" said Louis earnestly. She cast one quick, almost pleading look at him, as though to assure herself he was to be trusted, and replied firmly, "No, I will not refuse your request, Mr. Louis. May I ask you what has brought you to Edinburgh?" she inquired.

"I came purposely on business for one lawyer, and Marie charged me with some for herself."

"What was it?" "To search everywhere, and leave no stone unturned until I found you, and then to try and see if we could not by some means brighten your life, were it ever so little."

"Dear little Marie, and so she is as kind as ever. I am very grateful to her. Why should I sadden her kind heart by a recital of my troubles? Besides," she continued cheerfully, "I am quite happy, and have, oh, so very much to be thankful for. God has been so good, and has given me courage and strength to endure so much. He will not ask of me more than I can perform," she said, with a sweet, trustful look.

more aversion to him than any one else I ever heard her speak of. Oh, what fun, what fun, if she should marry after all! Oh, she Ireland, said the girl merrily, "I am ashamed of you—you the eldest of us all, and false to your colors; what an example!"

Madge had so many questions to ask, and Louis managed to entertain her so thoroughly, that the long walk appeared all too short for both of them, and ere long they stood in front of No. 50. The girl's heart misgave her as she neared the door. "What would he think of her when he saw the style of house in which they lived?" She could not resist casting one quick furtive glance at his face; but Louis, reading her heart in that glance, appeared to notice nothing, and neither by look nor word expressed the smallest astonishment. His manner was more cordial and courteous than usual as he bade her good-morning, promising to do himself the honor of calling upon her mother that afternoon.

"Not today," she answered gratefully; "she is ill, and I must take her to see our only friend, the doctor, this afternoon. He is at present staying a few miles out of town."

"Stay; tell me if that terrible she-dragon is still with you—the servant who met you in London?" "Poor Mary? Oh yes; but you must not call her by that name. Her heart is true and honest, if her face is hard and plain. Good-bye," replied the girl sadly but bravely. She had so enjoyed her walk; it was so sweet to feel that she was treated by old friends with the same courtesy and respect as before.

At three o'clock that same afternoon Louis stood once more at the door of No. 50, and rather timidly rang the bell. It was duly answered by Mary, whose sharp eyes kindled with surprise as they fell upon the jovial face and strong athletic form of the young man before her; but by no sign did she allow that he was recognized.

"Well, sir, and what may your business be?" she inquired, still holding the door in one hand, and not failing to note the look of hesitation and perplexity upon his countenance. "I—I wanted to see—" "My mistress is not in, sir," she interrupted sharply. "No! but I thought that—" "Neither is the young lady."

"I know that," he said impatiently. "I wish to see you!" "The dickens you do!" exclaimed the woman in surprise. "Why, you'd best come if that's your errand!" She had not heard of the meeting between the young people, and concluded he was bent upon worming out their position and circumstances. "I'll be bound," thought Mary. "Much may he get out of me."

"Well, sir," she said, leading the way to the kitchen, "then as comes to see me most 'en visit me in my own quarters." His errand being a delicate one, Louis took with some timidity the seat offered him, and looked with undisguised dislike upon the woman, who had drawn another chair opposite to him, and now sat with one hand spread out upon each knee, eyeing him silently but curiously. He felt he must speak at once. "You remember my sister?" he began. "I do. She struck me as one likely to have a pretty easy life of it."

"The heart of Louis was warming to this woman now as she waxed quite eloquent on her favorite subject. "Of course I see now that she cannot leave her home."

"Miss Madge will never leave her home, sir, so long as her mother lives; but to my judgment the poor lady is fast breaking up."

"What? another dreadful trial in store for Miss Fitz Allan! Oh! do promise that if we can be of any help—the greater the better—that you will let me know," he implored. "Well, I may do," she said frankly. "I do believe you are honest, and would do your best to aid my young lady; and maybe I'm not altogether so bad as you think me."

"I know it now," he said, walking towards her and offering her his hand. "And you will tell Miss Fitz Allan that I am obliged to leave Edinburgh this evening, but that I hope to bring my sister with me on my next visit; and you—you will not forget your promise, Mary?"

"No, sir, I will not. And think no more of my manner today. I have had much to put me about of late, and did not quite know what you were after."

"He's a true-hearted gentleman, and I like his honest face," thought Mary, as she closed the street door after him, and I'm glad that those two young ladies have not forgotten our poor Miss Madge. Who knows but she may mix with her own set yet?"

"I do, she struck me as one likely to have a pretty easy life of it."

"Not I; but you've come on a good bit since I saw you last."

stranger in the city, whose path would never cross my own again."

"Oh, no, replied Lucy. "We live over yonder. My father is Doctor Dunstan."

"I have heard of him," rejoined the old man. "He is a very good man."

"Indeed, he is," replied Lucy, pleased to hear her dear father praised. "I hope you do not feel hungry today," she continued. "I know a quarter does not go very far, but it will buy some loaves of bread."

"Very small loaves these days," said her friend. "But that quarter has brought me what is better than bread."

Lucy looked a little mystified, but asked no further questions. After a few words more the old man passed on, and the child resumed her play. Almost daily thereafter she would meet him, exchange a few words with him, and then he would leave her.

One day she asked him, "How is it that I never saw you until that day and now I see you so often?" "Well," was the reply, "I used to live in another part of the city, and some time ago I moved here. That is why I walk in this park instead of the one near which I formerly lived."

"Do you like it as well?" inquired Lucy. "Much better. I had no friends before, and now I have a very dear little friend."

"Certainly," replied Doctor Dunstan, and the stranger opened the box. Within was one of faded velvet. Touching a spring the visitor revealed a locket, framed in pearls, with four fine diamonds in the center in the form of a cross. It was attached to a delicate gold chain of the finest workmanship.

Placing and fastening it around Lucy's neck, he said: "My darling child, I give you this as a memento of the dearest thing I ever owned in this world. Keep it, wear it, and treasure it. You are very like my sister—whose nature was akin to yours—gentle, loving, generous and pure. The day I saw you first I was reminded of her, and the long sealed fountain of my crusty old heart once more began to flow. I am a changed man. This child has accomplished a miracle," he continued, turning to Doctor Dunstan.

"Then, putting his arm around Lucy, he drew her to his breast. "My dear, he said, "you have transformed a hardened old man into a real human being. Blessed are the parents that call you their own."

The child nestled closely to her friend, gazing up into his eyes as he spoke, while her delicate fingers clasped the beautiful locket he had fastened about her slender white throat.

"She is a dear child," said the mother, "but we must not make her proud."

"You could not make her proud," replied the old man. "Pride is and will always be a stranger to her soul. And now," he continued, "I will tell you who I am. My name is Cheswynd Ralph, of whom, of course, you have often heard. I am the owner of the dilapidated place quite close to you. From this time forward I intend to live as a human being, not as a cynical recluse."

"My story would not interest you nor would my excuses hold in the minds of any reasonable beings of whom I have not, until now, been one. But in whatever of the future is left to me, I shall try to redeem the past. I have suffered injustice, the treachery of friends, and many other things. I should have risen above them, but I did not. I trust God will forget the past and illumine the future with His blessed joy and peace."

Two years from that night, the Dunstons were once more reassembled in the drawing room of their beautiful home. But the old man was not there. He had died six months before leaving a letter to Lucy which was not to be opened until New Year's night and now the time had come.

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