

TWO

HONOUR WITHOUT RENOWN

BY MRS. INNES BROWN

Author of "Three Daughters of the United Kingdom"

CHAPTER XXVI—CONTINUED

"Why this scowl, Louie dear? We have but had a race!" Her face was flushed, her clear skin shone, her eyes were sweet and true; and Louis stooped and kissed with pride and joy the wife he loved so fondly. Not all the three kingdoms could produce a finer woman than our old friend Madge.

"What is it, Lou?" she asked playfully. "Tis so unlike you to look so grave. Ah!"—and her countenance changed—"you have had a telegram!" "Yes, darling! Here John!"—this to the groom—"take this horse and lead the boys and ponies home."

But here the chestnut, which until then had followed its mistress, now turned towards her and neighed. "Dear Marmaduke! I had almost forgotten you," she said. Then she took a lump of sugar from her pocket and handed it to him; he took it gently and submitted to being led away.

Madge gathered up her habit of dark myrtle green; then, waving to the boys, resumed her place at her husband's side. She took the pink paper from the boy's unresisting hand, and paused to read it. As she did so the colour fled from her cheek; her lips turned white; she trembled and staggered; and a cold perspiration broke over her, but she did not speak.

"Nay, wife, dearest," said O'Hagan anxiously, as he supported her. "Don't take it to heart! She may not be so bad; and if she is, dear soul, she'll surely go to heaven!"

"Yes, Louie," answered his wife, bravely endeavoring to stifle her sorrow and to regain her composure, "but she is in pain; she is suffering! And there is no woman on earth whom I love as much as I do her, nor one whom I admire half as much. I tell you, she has met her accident in self-sacrifice. Oh, yes, she has! Don't shake your head; I know her well."

"Then what are we to do, wife?" "We must catch the midnight boat."

"But Madge dear!" he interrupted quickly, "you are such a dreadful traveller. And at night you will be even more sick and ill than ever!"

"Do you not read," she said firmly, "that she wants me? Could I rest and know that she was perhaps dying, and longing to see me once again? No, no, Louie; I will chance the sickness. I shall not be so ill as she. Ah, I seem to feel that she has sacrificed herself; she has fallen at her post. I will—I must go to her! Come along, dear; there is no time to waste."

Madge had not been reared in soft luxury and ease; she had suffered, and knew how to endure. Hers was a nature that, had stern duty called, could—through her heart were breaking—have buckled on shield and sword to her nearest and dearest, and bidden them go, in God's name, and defend the weak and helpless, or their country's fame. Louis had always felt the power of her spirit, and yielded to her in many things.

As they neared the fine old Hall they espied a woman's figure, erect and tall. Whose is it? Surely we recognize her form, so high and yet so flat and shapeless, crowned by the big black bonnet and spotted frill. 'Tis pleasant to meet old faces in forgotten places; and dear old Yorkshire Mary's is as welcome as ever. It brings a whiff of the past, and bears the aspect of truth and worth in its dear hard lines which it does one good to remember. Yes, there was old Mary, not looking one iota changed, or one day older, striding across the lawn to meet them. A tall, slight girl, of perhaps ten years, clung tightly to her hand, and persistently drew her on.

"Come along, Mary! See how quickly you can run! You need exercise, you know," cried the fresh young voice. "Mother dear, did I not do right? She has been shut up in the house with baby brother all this lovely day, and I have dragged her out!"

"Bring her here, Margaret, love; I want you both." Mary would not have stirred a foot for any one on earth, save for those two, had she not wished, but refuse dainty little Margaret she could not; she almost worshipped the child, with her stately manner and queenly little airs, and yielded to her as she had never done to mortal before. So she was dragged on to where the parents stood, and Mary had to put her apron to her mouth to subdue the gasps she made in the effort to regain her breath.

Madge could not suppress a faint smile as she took her little daughter's hand; but it quickly faded from her pallid cheek. "I have had a message from Father de Woodville," began the lady, but her voice grew tremulous as she continued. "He tells me that our dear Sister Marguerite is very, very ill. She is in Paris, and wishes much to see me."

"Oh, mother!" broke in the little girl, clinging to her hand, "surely she will not die?"

"I hope not indeed, my love; but we must pray very hard for her. Your father and I leave in an hour or so. We are going to her at once."

"Mother, mother, let me go too! I must see her once again before she dies. We have a secret together, and we promised to talk of it when next we met. It is so important! And if you only knew how I long to see her, you would not refuse my request."

"Margaret, my darling, you cannot come tonight," answered her mother firmly. "But I will tell you what shall be done. Should she get better—should she recover sufficiently to see you—you shall go to Paris and join us. Mary, you will take her in your charge, as you did her mother years ago when she was a little child."

"Don't you know I will, me Lady, with all me heart. But, oh, oh, oh, to think of that sweet critter a-lying ill and maybe dying, and none of her kith and kin near by. Ah, believe me," continued Mary, shaking her head sadly, "I never did approve of the life she chose. I knowed she'd come to a bad end! I knowed she would."

"Well, take great care of baby and the children during my absence, Mary, should Billy be able to spare you for so long."

"Oh, Billy's right enough. He's very easy-natured, and who knows but he may be glad to get shut o' me sometimes. Come along, Miss Margaret. Trust Mary, me Lady, to see to you and yours. Come, my pet!"

Little Margaret had not spoken a word since her mother had refused to take her with them; but her pretty eyes were dimmed with unshed tears, and stilled was the merry laugh as she silently obeyed Mary and walked home by her side.

However, my brother, his wife, and Lady O'Hagan will be in Paris in the course of the day, I fancy; and they will do their utmost to ensure that she wants for nothing. And you, dear Ma Soeur, will lavish every care upon her, for I know she is very dear to you!"

"Almost dearer than she should be, Father. I loved her from the first day I saw her; and perhaps it may be some small comfort to you to know that another dear old friend of hers and yours is in the convent at the present moment, and it will be her delight to help nurse our dear little patient; I speak of Sister Frances de Sales; she was a De Mowbray, and was devoted to your sister when they were girls together. The Abbe Marliere has been several times to see Sister Marguerite. He told me she was very cheerful, though quite conscious of her critical condition. The only regret that seemed to trouble her was that she had done so little for our Lord. She is very weak, and so terribly feverish and excitable that I think it more than probable the doctors will absolutely refuse permission for any friends to see her, for a few days at least."

"Surely I may see her?" "Oh, yes; no one can well refuse you that privilege; she is continually asking for you, and Dr. Arno told me it would evidently ease her mind to see and speak to you. Only do not permit her to overtake herself. Go in, Father; she is expecting you; I have but just left her, with the firm promise to send you in the moment you arrived."

He opened the parlor door, and stealing softly across the dimly-lighted apartment, sank cautiously into the low chair at the bedside, but the nervous little brain caught the sound of his stealthy step; and, opening her eyes, she saw him. A look of joy welcomely him—such a look as she alone could give. He heeded no words from her to read her heart.

"Well, little sister mine," he said, taking up tenderly one of the wounded hands. "How I thank God that you are a trifle better today!"

She could not utter a word. But her mouth quivered, and tears of joy sprang into her eyes and rolled slowly down each flushed and burning cheek.

"Nay, my dear; you must not do this, or I shall be forbidden to visit you again."

"I could not help it, Percy"—she liked the old name best—"I am not quite myself yet. I am weak. It is so long since we met, and oh, I am so glad to see you. I have so many things to ask you about. I must know them, for they trouble my brain so dreadfully as I lie here. Do tell me if Mr. Manfred has confessed to you or anyone the history of his life."

"Now listen to me, dearest of all little wilful sisters, and I will make a compact with you. Our time together will be very short. Let us make the most of it. Do you be very quiet and good—neither interrupting me, nor getting too excited—and I will tell you everything that I judge to be good for you to hear, and that will interest you most."

"As you will, wisest and best of all old Fathers," she answered, with a ring of her old humor. "I will try to subdue my curiosity and obey; but do not be very much shocked or surprised should I interrupt you now and again with an odd question or two."

"I am about to begin by asking you one." "Tell me just how you feel. Are you in pain? Do you suffer very much?"

"When I cough or take a long breath the pain is very severe. My head also aches terribly at times, and these poor elegant hands smart not a little."

"You are very patient, poor little sufferer! I am so sorry for you."

"Now tell me about my patients, Percy. Were you not surprised at Manfred's tale?"

"I never was more astonished in my life; in fact, I have not yet recovered from the effects of his history, and all it involved. But, to crowd as much news as I can into a small space of time, I was able to secure the assistance of a kind and clever attorney, and in the presence of both of us Manfred made a full disclosure of the conspiracy. His signed confession is already on its way to the Home Secretary."

"Oh, how good is God. I thank Him with all my heart."

"Remember your promise not to interrupt."

"I must know if Manfred is still sorry for all this—if his sentiments are still good?"

"Rarely have I witnessed more genuine sorrow and regret for a mis-spent life than he evinced, even up to his last moments: for he died last evening."

"Died, Percy! Poor man, is it possible that he is already dead? And he feared death so terribly! Surely someone was there to aid him in his last moments?"

"Yes, he died in my arms. We were alone together for a long time; I never left him until all was over, and I had rendered him every aid possible under the circumstances. All fear of death fled from him; he was glad to go. His last words were a message of thanks to you, of whom he could not speak without weeping. He said that, under God, he owed everything to you; and that we were to tell his brother that it was you alone who obtained

his release, and much, much more, which I may tell you some time when you can better bear to hear it." He observed that her lips were trembling, and judged it better to speak upon a more cheerful topic. "Can you realize," he continued, "that, all being well, poor Sir Edmund Leadbitter will soon be restored to honor and his own again!"

"The very thought of it all sets my pulses thrilling with joy and gratitude. I could almost find strength to leap from my couch when I think of the meeting between him and his faithful wife. I have shared their sorrow so deeply, have worked and prayed so hard for the truth to be brought to light, that I can indeed rejoice for and with them now. You see, I knew the little wife; she had told me all this two years ago."

"Where does she live?" He asked this to see if she would confirm the strange story told by Manfred as to her whereabouts, which he had even now some difficulty in crediting.

"Why, right under your eyes! At the Western Lodge of dear old Baron Court."

"If you say so, it must be true. But Mrs. MacDermot—as we called her—was so quiet, so unassuming, that, though we felt that she was above her station, we never supposed her to be poor Lady Leadbitter. How astonished both Marie and Madge will be when they discover this!"

"She told me her sad story in the strictest confidence, not knowing at the time that I had any connection with the De Woodvilles or Baron Court. So I felt bound to keep her secret. She declared she could not face the world; yet she must earn money against the time of her husband's release, so that he should have a little rest and comfort; and having given her mind to washing and getting up dainty articles of clothing, she soon excelled in her work. Marie and Madge assisted her in every possible way; and Marie told me often that when returning home late at night she had seen a light in the cottage window, and her heart had ached for the silent woman, toiling to earn money, which all knew she never spent upon herself. Dear Percy, does she know of the confession of Manfred? Have you not telegraphed to her?"

"Hush! hush! You are exciting yourself too much. Do leave all this to our judgment, or you will delay your own recovery, and never be able to witness the joy you have so gallantly brought about."

"This hard not to speak of a subject when one's heart is so filled with it," she sighed playfully. "I should have sent her ten telegrams by this! Poor little wife!"

"No doubt you would! In your kind, impulsive manner you would have flung money away right and left, and have set Mrs. MacDermot's heart in such a flutter that she would have been fit for nothing. You see, we want to be more sure of our case before raising hopes in her heart. The uncle's will and some other valuable papers have still to be found before our case is completed. Manfred did tell us where they were; but the story seemed very strange, and he might have been a little delirious, you know, for he suffered great agony from his foot at times."

"No matter how strange or improbable his story may have appeared, you must go and look for those papers just where he told you they were. Poor man! I really believe that had he been well brought up, he would have made a fine character. Perhaps, had he been in his place, we might have turned out no better than he. By the way, have you heard what has become of old Mere Corbette? They assured me that she was saved. How long ago it all seems! Yet you tell me it is scarcely forty-eight hours since all that terrible fighting took place, and the fire. How terrible vivid it all seems!" And she closed her eyes as though to shut out the frightful memory.

"Do not think of it, then, and do not trouble about the old woman; for I can assure you, on good authority that, as far as we can judge, she is better off now than she has been for a long time. He would not excite her sympathetic mind by telling her that she also was dead; she had suffered enough for her patients as it was. He would speak of brighter subjects. "Would you like very much to see Marie and Madge again?" he asked quietly—then instantly regretted the question; for he saw her start, and the hectic flush on her cheek deepened to a vivid crimson, whilst the ready tears sprang to her eyes as she answered almost reproachfully:

"Can you ask it? Do you imagine that as I lie here I do not think of them, and wonder what they, Regie and Louis, will say when they hear that their strong, healthy little sister is laid low at last. Have you told them that I am not well?"

"Yes," he smiled. "I have informed them that you are very ill, dear, and you may expect to hear of or from them ere many hours have elapsed."

"Percy! You do not mean that they may come to Paris—in its present state?" she cried in alarm. "Oh, tell them, warn them of the danger in this terrible city. They must not risk their precious lives for me! No, much as I

should like to see them, they must not be allowed to come!"

"Very well, then," he answered soothingly; "don't trouble any more about them. Paris is quieting down very rapidly. If only you could be made to get well as speedily, then perhaps, when things are calmer and you are stronger, they might be tempted to come and see you." She had entirely forgotten how, when half fainting and unconscious the day before, she had urged and pleaded to see them.

"Dear, dear girls," she said, as if to herself, and a far-off look stole into her eyes; "I wonder if Marie's little face is as sweet as ever, and the look of firm, enduring friendship as clear as ever in Madge's steadfast gaze. And their little ones—Marie's boy!—and my dear little Margaret the Third, as I call her—the sweet child! Heaven has indeed endowed her with rare gifts; she has a destiny before her!"

"Father de Woodville, I am sorry to interrupt you; but you have already overstayed your allotted time, and the doctor's orders were very stringent that Sister Marguerite should not be allowed to talk too much," said Ma Soeur kindly. "Should she be no worse for this tete-a-tete, you will be able to see each other tomorrow again, and resume your conversation."

"Must he really go, Ma Soeur? I am so much better for his visit," pleaded Sister Marguerite.

"Yes; good-bye and God bless you, dear one," he said, placing his hand fondly on her head, and signing her achingly brow with the sign of the Cross. "Take care of yourself, and I may then be permitted to return tomorrow."

"Good-bye, Father and brother in one," she said; "come early tomorrow, and in the meantime pray for me."

He nodded and smiled; then followed Ma Soeur out of the room. "There are two telegrams awaiting you upon the parlor table," announced Ma Soeur in a low voice; "perhaps they may require an answer. Come and see them." He read them both.

"This one," he said, looking up, "is from my brother; he and his wife will arrive in Paris about five o'clock this evening. And this is from Lady O'Hagan and her husband. They hope to be here by eight o'clock."

"Well, they cannot see Sister Marguerite this evening, I fear. You know how weak and feverish she is."

"Oh, yes; she must not even know that they are here. She is fearfully nervous and excitable at present," he answered gravely. "I will meet them on their arrival, and conduct them all to the same hotel. It will comfort them to know that she is better, and not in any immediate danger."

But you will, dear, for Uncle Walter says you are a splendid architect with big prospects."

"I hope so, Betty, for your sake; but unfortunately, we can not live upon anticipations." The girl's eyes filled with tears.

"Jerry, don't let's talk about money," she pleaded. "I hate finances and such things. They caused the death of my parents, you know."

"It is an unpleasant topic," he admitted, "but a very important element in our lives. It is unreasonable for me to insist upon marrying you when I have so little to offer you. Bill Blair made it quite clear to me last night at the club."

"Bill Blair? What has he to do with us?"

"He wants to have everything to do with you, Betty. He thinks he may have a chance if I would release you from our engagement."

"I wouldn't have that fat, over-fed, war-profiteering millionaire," she stormed. "I want you, Jerry, only you."

"And my two hundred per?" he quizzed.

"Oh, how unreasonable men are! Let's take the car out into the country. I don't want to think about it."

"We can't put it off much longer," he insisted. "We are supposed to be making preparations for our wedding. You must either name the day or dismiss me."

In thoughtful silence, they passed through the city to smooth Dixie Highway. Humped over the wheel, Jerry raged inwardly at his inability to earn sufficient money to properly care for the girl he loved; while Betty leaned back among the cushions trying to keep from her mind the ever-recurring picture of another couple, her dear father and mother, who had faced financial difficulties, and gone down beneath them. A sudden stopping of the car broke the painful reverie.

"What is the matter?" she cried as Jerry sprang out. He returned to her in a minute.

"Betty, I am an idiot," he confessed. "We're out of gas."

"Where are we?" she demanded.

"Oh, about a million miles from nowhere," he attempted to answer lightly, as he scanned their surroundings. "What is that over there? Looks like a summer cottage of city campers. They are sure to have a Ford. Let's hike over and borrow some gas."

"No one could live in that," the girl exclaimed as they neared the place. It is no larger than a garage."

"I believe it is a portable garage," Jerry examined the shed-like structure with the eye of a critic. "But it is the first one I have seen with curtains at the window and a screened porch and moon vines." Further criticism was impossible, for the door opened and a girl, about Betty's age, greeted them. When she heard of their mishap, she laughingly answered:

"Of course, we have a Ford and Jack will let you have the gasoline. Here he comes now." After hasty introductions she insisted upon taking Betty within while the men looked after the machine. With much curiosity, Betty entered the cheery little room with its simple furnishings and homey appearance.

"Do you and your husband camp here all summer?" she ventured.

A merry laugh greeted this question: "We live here all year," was the amazing answer. "This doll-house is our solution of the housing difficulty."

But Betty did not laugh with her. She bent forward eagerly, hopefully and begged:

"Won't you tell me how you came to do it! Jerry and I are facing just such a difficulty now. He was the junior member of a firm of architects, doing splendidly and making money when the War came. He enlisted, and now, must start at the beginning and work his way up again. I have nothing. My parents died and I am living upon the bounty of an aunt. Only this afternoon Jerry suggested that I give him up and marry a man who can give me the good things to which I have been accustomed." She shook her little head vigorously. "I won't do that. Tell me how you came to live here."

"Really, there isn't much to tell," Ann Warning replied. "When we were married four years ago, Jack bought a big house, furnished it beautifully and we kept a maid. We had many good friends, entertained considerably, belonged to several clubs—and never saved a cent."

"I imagine most people live just that way," suggested Betty.

"Yes, I know all our friends do. The men are lashed to business, their noses to the grindstone, in an effort to make ends meet, and usually are physical wrecks when they should be in their prime; and the women are no better. Big houses, servants and social duties assist the development of 'nerves.'"

"You have described my parents," Betty admitted. "Father failed in business and the disgrace killed him. Mother soon followed him to the grave. He tried to protect her by keeping her from knowing the real condition of his financial affairs until the crash came. It was a terrible shock. I was fifteen then."

"Jerry, don't let's talk about money," she pleaded. "I hate finances and such things. They caused the death of my parents, you know."

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