

THREE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY MRS. INNES BROWN

CHAPTER XVI.

Christmas Eve at last! The greater part of the afternoon and evening people from the neighboring villages had been trooping up in odd numbers...

During the afternoon and evening all had approached the Sacrament of Penance; the last to do so was Lady Beatrice. She withdrew apart from every one, apparently desirous to hide from observation...

The silvery tones of the sacristy clock chimed the midnight hour, and Mass began. Lord Reginald serving as acolyte. Percy took his place at the organ; whilst Beatrice stood at his side...

Well and secretly had they practised the air of it together, hoping that it would prove a pleasant surprise to their little friend...

The services concluded, a good breakfast awaited the villagers, and those who wished to rest at the Court lingered longer over it.

"And have you no good wishes for me tonight, Marie?" he asked, bending his tall figure so as to avoid some wreaths of holly which were festooned along the passage.

"Oh, many," was the hearty reply; "but," smiling sweetly, "it would flatter you too much did I tell you all or half, the beautiful things I prayed for you tonight."

and pleased at the praise she bestowed upon him. "By no means; there is far too much work for you to do in the world."

"I am so glad, for it gives me great joy to know and feel that I have been of the least little service to you."

"You only threaten, I feel convinced, Marie, and would never inflict so severe a punishment for so slight an offence."

"What have I done?" she queried inwardly, whilst a new and undefined sensation crept over her.

Numerous and costly were the presents given and received that happy Christmas day, and Marie was remembered in a substantial manner by all her friends.

Indeed, miss, it's proud and pleased I'll be plain, then you wish that splendid garment; faith—but Lady Beatrice herself—the likes of it won't be seen this night."

"But, Norah," argued her gentle mistress, "I did not need anything so costly or so grand. What would they say at the Convent," she continued, with a look of dismay.

"Possibly," laughed the little lady; "but let us hurry, as I promised to assist Lady Beatrice with her toilet this evening."

Everyone and everything bore an air of festivity. Bright faces met and talked in merry groups along the corridors and passages; sweet music and songs were faintly heard issuing from the inner rooms.

"The heart of Beatrice was in a state of fever and alarm. How will my father's health endure all this excitement, do you think, Marie?"

"Not at the expense of his health, my gentle Marie. Were he well it would be so different. Should this excitement upset him, how I shall regret the very sight of it all."

"Well, such is not my idea, child; and I see no reason why you should not be as well dressed as any other young lady. So I borrowed a bodice of yours as a pattern, and trust that the dress will fit, also that you will like it."

"It is simply lovely," said Marie, to whose bewildered gaze Louise was unfolding the robe, which consisted of a rich white brocade silk.

"Don't you think it will suit her?" inquired her ladyship, turning to her daughter. "She will be the little shining star of the night, mother dear."

"It is not my intention to linger long over a description of the famous ball that took place that night at Baron Court. I will only remark that it was one of the greatest splendours."

"Say, miss?—why, what could they say, save how becoming it was to you. Sure, isn't there many a blessed saint in heaven this very minute who never wore anything even so meagre as this, and yet saved her soul!"

"Possibly," laughed the little lady; "but let us hurry, as I promised to assist Lady Beatrice with her toilet this evening."

"The Lord loves you, miss!" spoke the maid emphatically, "but it's right down proud I am to see you dressed as you should be, and not a make-up about you either. Sure, it's few maids will be able to say that same of their mistresses this night!"

"Come hither, little debutante, and give me the first kiss," cried the Earl, as half-an-hour afterwards the two girls stood before him for inspection in Lady de Woodville's private apartment.

looked from one to the other, and observed with pretended gravity: "If I mistake not, there will be terrible havoc wrought this night."

Beatrice wore a dress of the richest possible pearl white satin; so rich indeed was it, that it needed neither flounce nor frill to enhance its beauty.

Beatrice had but to comfort anyone of the many mirrors which hung around to assure herself that her beauty was almost matchless; but, to do her justice, vanity was not one of her many faults.

"No; I went to New York when I was twenty years old, to teach school. We had rich relatives, living in Madison Avenue, and they took a fancy to me and often invited me to their house, and it was there that I met Mr. Olmstead."

"My sister Marie? Oh, she is dead—she must be. She was always frail, and she would be almost seventy years old," Mrs. Olmstead replied, flushing painfully.

"It was a pretty church, exquisitely kept, and for some minutes we stood at the back, looking about us admiringly; but after a little Mrs. Olmstead whispered, 'My father gave the statue on the Blessed Virgin's altar. He had great devotion to the Blessed Virgin.'"

"Do you know how homelike this church is to me—how full of memories. My sister had care of the altar, and the day I made my First Communion she placed a white votive light at the feet of our statue, that it might plead there for giddy me."

"Do you think—?" she whispered. "At that moment the door of the sanctuary opened and a stiff jointed old man—probably the janitor—crossed the sanctuary and came toward the open window above our heads."

"To me the plan sounded enticing, for I was tired and hot, and I love tea; but to my surprise Mrs. Olmstead objected at once, and proposed that we should take a long walk instead—she who never walks anywhere and is always more than willing to be lazy."

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"I thought you had been rich all your life," I commented, when Mrs. Olmstead passed, feeling annoyed that I could think of nothing better to say.

"Rich! I was almost shabby and almost hungry, and my sister was both many a time. How she made ends meet at all is more than I can imagine. I took everything for granted while I was with her; and since—well, the years have been so full of pleasure that—that I am afraid I had almost forgotten her, I am ashamed, but it is the truth."

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left her pew and passed between the sanctuary gates and was standing at her shoulder.

"Mary! Oh Mary!" she whispered, with her whole heart in the words. "For a moment the old lady looked up at her, startled and almost afraid, before the light of such ecstatic happiness as I have never known flashed over her weary, old face."

"Mary has quite forgiven me," Mrs. Olmstead said. "In fact I had a hard time to make her believe that there was anything to forgive."

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