

SISTERS THREE.

By Mrs. HENRY MANSERGH, Author of "A Rose-coloured Thread," etc.



CHAPTER V.

ON Saturday afternoon Mrs. Freer drove up to the door in an old-fashioned carriage. She was a thin, little woman, not at all like her big son, whom she evidently adored as the most wonderful specimen of his sex, and she was full of gratitude for the kindness which had been shown to him. Rex's letter had evidently been of a descriptive nature, for his mother recognised each of the three girls, addressed them by name, and referred to their special interests.

"How do you do, Miss Hilary?" I hope my son's illness has not interfered with the arrangements for your journey. How do you do, Miss Lettice? How do you do, Norah? Rex has told me of your wonderful playing. I hope you will let me hear something before I go."

Norah was never loath to play, and on this occasion she was anxious to make a good impression, so that Mrs. Freer might gain her father's consent to the proposed music lessons. At the earliest opportunity, therefore, she produced her violin, played her favourite selections, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Mrs. Freer was unmistakably impressed.

The little head in the large black bonnet approached Mr. Bertrand's in confidential fashion. Norah watched the smile of pleasure on her father's face, followed by the usual pucker of the brows with which he was wont to receive a difficult question. Mrs. Freer was evidently approaching the subject of the professor from Lancaster, and presently, oh, joy! the frown passed away, he was leaning forward, clasping his hands round his knees, and listening with an air of pleased attention.

"Mr. Freer is quite willing to allow Edna to take lessons, even if they should be rather expensive, for the poor child frets at being separated from her friends, and she is not strong enough to remain at school. She could not come here to have her lesson, I am afraid, for she is only allowed to go out when the weather is mild and sunny; but if you would allow Norah to come to us for the day once a fortnight—(fortnightly lessons would be quite enough, don't you think so?)—it would be a pleasure to have her. She would have to stay for the night, of course; it is too far to come and go in one day. Edna would be charmed! It would really be a charity to the poor child!"

"You are very good. It sounds feasible. If you will be kind enough to make inquiries, I shall be most happy to fall in with your arrangements. And now let me give you some tea."

Half-an-hour later the carriage was brought round again, for the nights grew dark so soon that it was necessary to make an early start on the ten-mile drive. Rex hobbled down the hall on his sticks, escorted by the entire Bertrand family, for the week of his visit had seemed to place him on the standing of an old and familiar friend, and the Mouse shed tears when he kissed her in the porch, while Lettice looked the picture of woe. Norah was the most cheerful of all, for Rex whispered in her ear, "I'll keep them up to the mark about the lessons. We will have some good times together when you come over, and—I say! I impressed upon your father that you were awfully clever; you'll have to do as much for me, and convince mine that I am too stupid to do any good at college!"

"Oh, I will!" said Norah emphatically. "I will! Good-bye. I'm most fearfully obliged!" She stood on the path waving her hand and nodding farewells so long as the carriage remained in sight. It seemed as if her wish were to be fulfilled indeed, and the thought of the new friends and the fortnightly visits to Brantmere filled her with delighted expectation.

For the next few days Hilary was as busy as a bee preparing for her visit to London. She gathered together all her nicest things, and, not content with her own, cast a covetous eye on the possessions of her sisters. Half-a-dozen times in the course of the morning the door of the room in which the two youngest sisters sat would burst open, and Hilary's sleek little head appear round the corner to make some new request.

"Lettice! you might lend me your new muff!"

"Oh, Hilary! I only got it at Christmas, and I need it myself in this cold weather."

"Don't be so selfish. I'll leave you my old one. It doesn't matter what sort of a muff you wear here, and you know quite well mine is too shabby for London. It's only for a fortnight."

"Oh, well, I suppose you must have it. It's very hard though, for I do like nice things, even if I am in the country."

"Oh, thanks awfully. I'll take mine to your room." Then the door would bang and Hilary's footsteps be heard flying up the staircase, but in less than ten minutes she would be down again with another request. "You don't mind, I suppose, if I take your silver brushes?"

"My silver brushes! I should think I do mind, indeed. What next!"

"But you never use them. You might just as well lend them to me as leave them lying in their case upstairs."

"I am keeping them until I go away visiting. If I don't even use them myself, it's not likely I am going to lend them to anyone else."

"Lettice, how mean! What harm could I do to the brushes in a fortnight?

You know what a grand house Miss Carr's is, and it would be horrid for me to go with a common wooden brush. I do think you might lend them to me!"

"Oh, very well; you can have them if you like, but you are not afraid of asking, I must say. Is there anything else?"

"Not from you; at least I don't think so just now. But, Norah, I want your bangle—the gold one, you know! Lend it to me, like a dear, won't you?"

"If you lose it, will you buy me a new one?"

"I won't lose it. I'll only wear it in the evening, and I'll be most awfully careful."

"You have a bangle of your own. Why can't you be content with that?"

"I want two, one for each arm; they look so nice with short sleeves. Thank you, awfully. I'll put it in my jewel-box."

"I haven't said I would lend it to you yet."

But Hilary ran away laughing, and gathered brushes and bangles together in triumph.

It was on the evening preceding the journey to London that Mr. Bertrand came upon his second daughter standing alone in the long upstairs corridor, which ran the whole length of the house, pressing her forehead against the panes of the windows. Lettice had been unusually quiet during the last few days, and her father was glad to have the opportunity of a quiet talk.

"All alone, dear?" he asked, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her towards him. "I was thinking about you only a few minutes ago. I said on New Year's Day, you remember, that I wanted to give each of you three girls some special little present. Well, Hilary is having this trip with me, and Norah seems in a fair way of getting her wish in the matter of lessons; but what about you? I'll take you with me next time I go away, but in the meantime, is there any little thing you fancy that I could bring back from London town?"

"No, thank you, father. I don't want anything."

"Quite sure? Or—or—anything I can do for you here before I go?"

"No, thank you, father. Nothing at all."

The tone was dull and listless, and Mr. Bertrand looked down at the fair face nestled against his shoulder with anxious eyes.

"What is it, dear? What is the matter, my pretty one?"

He was almost startled by the transformation which passed over the girl's face as he spoke the last few words. The colour rushed into the cheeks, the lips trembled, and the beautiful eyes gazed meltingly into his. Lettice put up her arm and flung it impetuously round his neck.

"Do you love me, father? Do you love me?"