



SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER XVII.



MISS CARR'S surmise proved correct, for even as she spoke the door opened and Lettice appeared on the threshold. No longer the Lettice of short skirts and flowing locks, but an elegant young lady who swept forward with a rustle of silken skirts, and held up the sweetest pink and white face in the world to receive her father's kiss of greeting. "Lovely Lettice," indeed, lovelier than ever now in the first bloom of womanhood. As her father held her from him at arm's length, the slim figure was almost as tall as his own, and the golden head dropped before the grave, scrutinising glance. Lettice knew that her lover had called during her absence, and Miss Carr's silence, her father's unusual solemnity, added to her natural nervousness. The grey eyes roved from one face to another with a scared, helpless look which they were quick to understand.

"Yes," said Mr. Bertrand, "we know all about it by this time, Lettice. Mr. Newcome has interviewed Miss Carr. She was intensely surprised; I also, but she has had more opportunity of seeing you together, and she tells me that you have shown no special signs of interest in this young fellow. Tell me, my dear, speak frankly, we are only thinking of your happiness—have you allowed yourself to be persuaded against your own judgment? It is a pity if that is the case, but it can be remedied. There is no engagement as yet, and I can easily explain to Mr. Newcome that you have made a mistake."

Lettice had seated herself opposite him and busied herself pulling off her long suede gloves. She avoided her father's glance, but the answer came in a little, breathless gasp—"Oh, no, no, I don't want—"

"No—you say no? Lettice, this is a serious matter. Do you mean to tell me that you love Arthur Newcome, and wish to marry him? Think well, my dear. You know what it means, that you are content to spend your life with this man, to give up everything for him, to say good-bye to friends and relations—"

"Father, Miss Carr is here; you are all coming up for the winter; he lives here. I should not have to leave you!"

"You can't count on that, Lettice. Mr. Newcome's business arrangements might make it necessary for him to leave London at any time, and it would be your duty to follow. Do you care for him enough to make such a sacrifice? If you love him you will not hesitate; but do you love him? That is what I want to hear! Come, Lettice, speak, I am waiting for your answer!"

"I—, father, I do like him! I promised I would; I think he is very kind!"

The two elders exchanged glances of baffled helplessness. There was silence for a few minutes, then Mr. Bertrand seated himself by Lettice's side and took her hand in his.

"My dear little girl, let us understand each other. Of course he is 'kind'; of course you 'like him,' but that is not enough; you must do something more than 'like' the man who is to be your husband. Do you care for him more than for me and Miss Carr, and your sisters and brothers all together? If he were on one side of the scale and we on the other, which would you choose? That is the way to face the question. You must not be satisfied with less. My dear, you are very young yet, I think you had better let me tell Mr. Newcome that he is not to mention this matter again for the next two years, until you are twenty-one. By that time you will know your own mind, and, if you still wished it, if you both wished it, I should have no more to say. You would be willing to leave it in that way, wouldn't you, dear?"

But Lettice did not look at all willing. She drew her hand away from her father's grasp, and turned her shoulder on him with a pettish gesture which was strangely unlike her usual sweet demeanour.

"Why should I wait? There is nothing to wait for! I thought you would be pleased. It's very unkind to spoil it all! Other girls are happy when they are engaged, and people are kind to them. You might let me be happy too—"

Mr. Bertrand sat bolt upright in his seat, staring at his daughter with incredulous eyes. Could it be possible that the girl was in earnest after all, that she was really attached to this most heavy and unattractive young man? He looked appealingly at his old friend, who, so far, had taken no part in the conversation, and she took pity on his embarrassment and came to the rescue. Two years' constant companionship with Lettice had shown her that there was a large amount of obstinacy hidden beneath the sweetness of manner, and

for the girl's sake, as well as her father's, she thought the present interview had better come to an end.

"Suppose you go to the library and have a smoke, Austin, while Lettice and I have a quiet talk together," she said soothingly, and Mr. Bertrand shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of nervous irritation, and strode from the room.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than Lettice produced a little laced handkerchief from her pocket, and began to sob and cry.

"Father is cruel; why won't he believe me? Why may I not get engaged like other girls. I am nineteen. I was so happy—and now I'm miserable!"

"Come here, Lettice, and for pity's sake, child, stop crying, and behave like a reasonable creature. There are one or two questions I want to ask you. How long have you known that Arthur Newcome was in love with you?"

"I don't know. At least, he was always nice. That summer at Windermere, he always walked with me, and brought me flowers, and—"

"That was three years ago, the summer you came to me. So long as that! But, Lettice, whatever your feelings may be now, you have certainly not cared for him up to a very recent period. I don't need to remind you of the manner in which you have spoken about him. When you saw that he was growing attached to you, did you try to show that you did not appreciate his attentions?"

Lettice bent her head and grew crimson over cheek and neck.

"I was obliged to be polite! He was always with Madge, and I did like—"

Miss Carr shut her lips in tight displeasure.

"Yes, my dear, you 'liked' his attentions, and you were too vain and selfish to put an end to them, though you did not care for the man himself. Oh, Lettice, this is what I have feared, this is what I have tried to prevent! My poor, foolish child, what trouble you have brought upon us all! Arthur Newcome will have every reason to consider himself badly treated; his people will take his part; you will have alienated your best friends."

"I am not going to treat him badly. You are unkind; he would not be unkind to me. I wish he were here, I do! He would not let you be so cruel," and Lettice went off into a paroxysm of sobbing, while Miss Carr realised sorrowfully that she had made a false move.