

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER II.



HERE was a simultaneous exclamation of dismay as the three girls leapt from their seats, and flew round the room in different directions.

Hilary lighted the tall lamps, Norah drew the curtains across the windows, while Lettice first gave a peal to the bell, and then ran forward to escort

her father to a chair by the fire.

"Tea will be here in a moment, father, come and sit down. It's New Year's Day, you know, and we have been so busy making good resolutions, that we have had no time to do anything practical. Why didn't you come down before? You are a regular old woman about afternoon tea. I believe you would miss it more than any other meal."

"I believe I would. I never get on well with my writing in the first part of the afternoon, and tea seems to give me a fresh start. So you girls have been making good resolutions? That's good hearing. Tell me about them," and Mr. Bertrand leant back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and looking up at his young daughters with a quizzical smile. A photographer would have been happy if he could have taken a portrait at this moment, for Mr. Bertrand was a well-known author, and the books, which were written in the study in Westmoreland, went far and wide over the world, and made his name a household word. He had forgotten his beloved work at this moment, however, at the sight of something dearer still—his three young daughters standing grouped together facing him at the other side of the old-fashioned grate, their faces flushed from the heat of the fire, their eyes dazzled by the sudden light. How tall and womanlike they looked in their dark serge dresses! Lettice's hair framed her face in a halo of mist-like curls; Hilary held up her head in her dignified little fashion. Mischievous Norah smiled in the background. They were dearer to him than all his heroines; but, alas, far less easy to manage, for the heroines did as they were bid, while the three girls were developing strong wills of their own.

"I believe you have been plotting mischief, and that is the beginning and the end of your good resolutions?"

"Indeed, no, father; we were in earnest—but it was a reaction, for before that we had been grumbling about— Wait a moment—here comes tea. We'll tell you later on. Miss Briggs says we should never talk about disagreeable topics at a meal, and tea is the nicest meal of the day, so we can't afford to spoil it. Well, and how is Mr. Robert getting on this afternoon?"

Mr. Bertrand's face twitched in a comical manner. He lived so entirely in the book which he was writing at the time, that he found it impossible to keep silent on the subject; but he could never rid himself of a comical feeling of embarrassment in discussing his novels in the presence of his daughters.

"Robert, eh? What do you know about Robert?"

"We know all about him, of course. He was in trouble on Wednesday, and you came down to tea with your hair all ruffled, and as miserable as you could be. He must be happy again to-day, for your hair is quite smooth. When is he going to marry Lady Mary?"

"He is not going to marry Lady Mary at all. What nonsense! Lady Mary, indeed! You don't know anything about it! Give me another cup of tea, and tell me what you have been grumbling about. It doesn't sound a cheerful topic for New Year's Day; but I would rather have that, than hear such ridiculous remarks! Grumbling! What can you have to grumble about, I should like to know?"

"Oh, father!" The three young faces raised themselves to his in wide-eyed protest. The exclamation was unanimous, but when it was over, there was a moment's silence before Hilary took up the strain.

"We are dull, father. We are tired of ourselves. You are all day long in your study; the boys spend their time out of doors; and we have no friends. In summer-time we don't feel it, for we live in the garden, and it is bright and sunny; but in winter it is dark and cold. No one comes to see us, the days are so long, and every day is like the last."

"My dear, you have the housework, and the other two have their lessons. You are only children as yet, and your school-days are not over. Most children are sent to boarding-schools, and have to work all day long. You have liberty and time to yourselves. I don't see why you should complain."

"Father, I should like to go to school—I long to go—I want to get on with my music, and Miss Briggs can't teach me any more."

"Father, when girls are at boarding-schools they have parties, and theatricals, and go to concerts, and have all sorts of fun. We never have anything like that."

"Father, I am not a child; I am nearly eighteen. Chrystabel Maynard was only seventeen at the beginning of the book!"

Mr. Bertrand stirred uneasily, and brushed the hair from his forehead. Chrystabel Maynard was one of his own heroines, and the allusion brought home the reality of his daughter's age as nothing else could have done. His glance passed by Norah and Lettice and lingered musingly on Hilary's face.

"Ha, what's this? The revolt of the daughters!" he cried. "Well, dears, you are quite right to be honest. If you have any grievances on your little minds, speak out for goodness' sake, and let me hear all about them. I am not an ogre of a father, who does not care what happens to his children, so long as he gets his own way. I want to see you happy. . . . So you are seventeen, Hilary! I never realised it before. You are old enough to hear my reason for keeping you down here, and to judge if I am right. When your mother died, three years ago, I was left in London with seven children on my hands. You were fourteen then, a miserable anæmic creature, with a face like a tallow candle, and lips as white as paper. The boys came home from school and ran wild about the streets. I could not get on with my work for worrying about you all, and a man must work to keep seven children. I saw an advertisement of this house in the papers one day, and took it on the impulse of the moment. It seemed to me that you would all grow strong in this fine, mountain air, and that I could work in peace, knowing that you were out of the way of mischief. So far as the boys and myself are concerned, the plan has worked well. I get on with my work, and they enjoy running wild in their holidays; but the little lasses have pined, have they? Poor little lasses! I am sorry to hear that. Now come—the post brought me some cheques this morning, and I am inclined to be generous. Next week, or the week after, I must run up to London on business, and I will bring you each a nice present. Choose what it shall be, and I will get it for you if it is to be found in the length and breadth of the city. Now then, wish in turns. What will you have?"

"It's exactly like the father in *Beauty and the Beast*, before he starts on his travels! I am sure Lettice would like a white moss rose!" cried Norah roguishly. "As for me, there is only one thing I want—lessons from the very best violin master in London!"

"Three servants who could work by electricity, and not keep me running after them all day long!"

"Half-a-dozen big country houses quite near to us, with sons and daughters in each, who would be our friends."

They were all breathless with eagerness, and Mr. Bertrand listened with wrinkled brow. He had expected to be asked for small articles of jewellery, or finery, and the replies distressed him, as showing that the discontent was more