

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER XVIII.



OR the next month, Lettice saw nothing of Arthur Newcome. He had packed up his traps and gone to spend the

weeks of probation in Norway, where he would be out of the way of temptation, and have his mind distracted by novel surroundings.

No such change, however, fell to Lettice's share. Mr. Bertrand would not allow the ordinary summer visit to Clearwater to be anticipated. He had forbidden Lettice to mention the proposed engagement to her sisters, as he was sanguine that a month's reflection would be more than enough to convince the girl of her mistake, when the less that was known about the matter, the better for all concerned. As Arthur Newcome was out of town he could see no objection to Lettice remaining where she was, and Miss Carr agreed the more readily in this decision as she had made a number of engagements which it would have been difficult to forego. Both were thinking only of the girl's welfare. But alas, the best-meaning people make mistakes at times, and this arrangement was the most unfortunate which could have been made, considering the object which they had in view. Lettice had nothing to distract her mind from the past, no novelty of any kind to keep her from dwelling on the gratifying remembrance of Arthur Newcome's devotion. On the contrary, her life was less bright than usual, for the Newcomes were naturally displeased at Mr. Bertrand's objections to the engagement, and would not hold any communication with Miss Carr's household until the matter was decided. Thus Lettice was deprived of the society of her best friend, and was forbidden the house where she had been accustomed to spend her happiest hours.

Miss Carr did her best to provide interest and amusement, but there was a constraint between the old lady and her ward, which was as new as it was painful. Lettice was conscious that she was in disgrace. When her father fumed and fidgeted about the room, she

guessed, without being told, that he was thinking of the proposed engagement; when Miss Carr sighed, and screwed up her face until it looked nothing but a network of wrinkles, she knew that the old lady was blaming herself for negligence in the past, and pondering what could still be done to avert the marriage, and a most unpleasant knowledge it was. Lettice had lived all her life in the sunshine of approval.

As a little child everyone had petted and praised her because of her charming looks; as a schoolgirl she had reigned supreme among her fellows; her short experience of society had shown that she had no less power in the new sphere. Cold looks, and reproachful glances were a new experience, and instead of moving her to repentance, they had the effect of making her think constantly of her lover, and long more and more for his return. Miss Carr thought she was vain and selfish. Arthur said she was the best and sweetest of women; her father called her a "foolish little girl." Arthur called her his queen and goddess. Miss Carr sat silent the whole of the afternoon, sighing as if her heart was broken; Arthur had walked across London many times over for the chance of a passing word. Other people were disappointed in her, but Arthur declared that she was perfect, without possibility of improvement. Lettice would take refuge in the solitude of her bedroom, cry to herself and look out of the window wondering in which direction Norway lay, what Arthur was doing, and if he were half as miserable at being separated from her, as she was at being left alone in London. Then she would recall the afternoon on the river, when he had asked her to be his wife. How terribly in earnest he had seemed. She had tried to say no, because, though she enjoyed his attentions, she had never really intended to marry him, but the sight of his face had frightened her, and when he had said in that awful voice, "Lettice, do you mean it? Is there no hope? Have you been making a fool of me for all these years?" She had been ready to promise anything and everything in the world if he would only smile again. And he had been very "kind." It was "nice" being engaged. She had been quite happy until father came, and was so cross.

If Miss Carr could have been her own cheery, loving self, and talked to the girl in a natural, kindly manner, still better if she could have had half-an-hour's conversation with out-spoken Norah, all might have been well, but Miss Carr was under the mistaken impression that it was her duty to show her disapproval by every act and look, and the result was disastrous. Every morning Lettice awoke with the doleful question, "How am I to get through the day?" Every night she went to bed hugging the thought that another

milestone had been passed, and that the probation was nearer to its end. By the end of the month her friends' efforts had so nearly succeeded in making her honestly in love with Arthur Newcome, that they marked the girl's bright eyes, happy smiles, and told each other sadly that it was no use standing out further.

Arthur Newcome wrote to Mr. Bertrand announcing his arrival in London, and asking permission to call and receive his answer from Lettice's lips, and there was nothing to do but to consent forthwith. An hour was appointed for the next afternoon, and Lettice spent an unconscionable time in her bedroom preparing for the great occasion, and trying to decide in which of her dainty garments Arthur would like her best. Her father had taken himself into the city after a conversation in which he had come near losing his temper, and when Lettice floated into the drawing-room, all pale green muslin and valenciennes insertion, and looking more like an exquisite wood nymph than a creature of common flesh and blood, there sat Miss Carr crying her eyes out on a corner of the ottoman.

"Oh, Lettice, Lettice, is it too late? Won't you listen to reason even at the eleventh hour? It is the greatest folly to enter into this engagement. Never were two people more unsuited to each other. You will regret it all your life. My poor, dear child, you are wrecking your own happiness."

It was too bad. For almost the first time in her life Lettice felt a throb of actual anger. She had been docile and obedient, had consented to be separated from Arthur for a whole month, and done all in her power to satisfy these exacting people, and even now they would not believe her—they would not allow her to be happy. She stood staring at Miss Carr in silence, until the servant threw open the door and announced her lover's arrival.

"Mr. Newcome! ma'am. I have shown him into the morning-room as you desired."

Lettice turned without a word and ran swiftly downstairs to the room where Arthur Newcome was waiting for her in painful anxiety. For three long years he had tried to win the girl's heart and had failed to gain a sigh of affection. Her acceptance had been won after a struggle, and he was racked with suspense as to the effect of this month's separation. When the door opened, Lettice saw him standing opposite, his tall figure drawn up to its full height, his handsome face pale with the intensity of his emotion.

She gave a quick glance, then rushed forward and nestled into his arms with a little cry of joy.

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur, you have come back! Take care of me! Take care of me! I have been so miserable!"

(To be continued.)

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