

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER XIV.



LUNCH was ready when the visitors arrived at Grassmere, and as they were equally ready for lunch they lost no time in seating themselves

at the large table in the window, and making a vigorous attack upon rolls and butter. The other tables were well filled, and Hilary

held her head with complacent pride, while Lettice and Norah nudged each other to call attention to the glances of curiosity and interest which were directed towards their father.

"A party of Americans, and the waiter whispered to them as we passed. Oh, father, you are in for it! Now—I told you so! The one with the light hair is getting up. She is going upstairs to bring the albums. Wait till you've finished lunch, then it will be—'Would you be kind enough to write your name in my little book?'"

Mr. Bertrand went through a pantomime of tearing his hair. "Is there no escape?" he groaned. "It's bad enough to be a lion in town, but I positively refuse to roar in the country. I won't do it. I have writer's cramp—I can't use my right hand. Rayner, my boy, I'll turn them on to you!"

"He is only pretending. He is really awfully pleased and flattered. Wait till you see how polite he will be when they ask him," said Lettice, mischievously; and indeed nothing could have been more courteous than Mr. Bertrand's manner when the American party flocked round him in the hall after luncheon.

"Your books are in every house in America, sir, and it gives us the greatest pleasure to have an opportunity of—"

"Oh, come along!" whispered Norah, pulling impatiently at Edna's arm. "I know it all by heart. Come into the garden, both of you—Lettice and I have something to tell you—an exciting piece of news!"

"Kitten dead? New ribbons for your hats?" queried Rex, indifferently. He was sceptical on the point of Norah, "exciting confidences," but this time Lettice looked at him reproachfully with her great, grey eyes.

"No, indeed—don't make fun—it's serious. Miss Carr is going to adopt one of us to live with her in London as her own daughter, for the next three years."

"Nonsense!" Rex sat down in a heap on the grass, in front of the bench where the girls were seated. "Which?"

"Ah, that's the mystery! She is to have her choice, and she won't say which it is to be until Wednesday night—two days more. So you see, you had better be polite, for you mayn't have me with you much longer."

"I am always polite to you," said Rex moodily, and the statement passed unchallenged, for however much he might tease Norah, and snap at Hilary, he was always considerate for the feelings and comfort of "Lovely Lettice!"

"Oh, Norah, Norah, I hope it won't be you!" cried Edna, clasping her hands round her friend's arm in warm-hearted affection. "What should I do without you? We have been so happy—have had such fun! Three years! What an age of a time. We shall be quite grown up."

"Yes; and after that, father is going to take a house in London, because the boys will have left school, and it will be better for them. Isn't it horrid to think that after to-day it may never be the same for one of us again. She will only come back here as a visitor, for a few weeks at a time, and everything will be strange and different—"

"And Rex may go abroad before the end of the three years, and Hilary may marry—and—oh, a hundred other horrible things. Perhaps we may never meet again all together like this until we are quite old and grey-headed. We would write to one another of course; stiff, proper sort of letters like grown-up people write. How funny it would be. Imagine you writing to me, Edna—'My dear Eleanora, you must not think my long silence has arisen from any want of affection towards you and yours . . . And how has it been with you, my valued friend?'"

The burst of laughter which greeted this speech did something to liven the gloom which was fast settling upon the little party, and presently Mr. Bertrand's voice was heard calling from the verandah—

"Now then, children, what are we to do until four o'clock? Do you want to go on the lake?"

"It's no good, sir. We could row round it in ten minutes." This from Rex, with all the scorn of a young man who owned a *Una* of his own on Lake Windermere.

"Do you want to scramble up to the Tarn, then? I don't. It's too hot, and we should have no time to spend at the top when we got there."

"Let us go to the Washing Gate, father," suggested Norah eagerly. "It's a nice walk; and I got what I wished for last summer—I did really—the music lessons! I'm sure there is something in it."

"Let us go then, by all means. I have a wish of my own that I should

be glad to settle. Helen, will you come?"

"No thank you, Austin, I will not. I can wish more comfortably sitting here in the shade of the verandah. I've been once before, and I wouldn't drag up there this afternoon for a dozen wishes."

"And Rayner—what will you—?"

Mr. Rayner hesitated, then, "I—er—if it's a steep pull, I think I had better stay where I am," he added, in cheery, decided tones, which brought a flush of delight to Hilary's cheeks.

She turned in silence to follow her sisters, but before she had advanced many steps, stood still, hesitating and stammering—"I—I—the sun is very hot. My head—"

"Well, don't come, dear, if you are afraid of headache. Stay where you are," said her father kindly, and Miss Carr chimed in, in characteristic fashion—

"But if you are going to chatter, be kind enough to move away to another seat. I am not going to have my nap disturbed if I know it."

"Come along, Miss Hilary. Our pride won't allow us to stay after that!" cried Mr. Rayner, picking up his crutches and leading the way across the lawn with suspicious alacrity, and no sooner were they seated on the comfortable bench, than he turned a smiling face upon his companion, and wished to know if she were satisfied with the result of her lecture.

"Entirely," said Hilary. "It sounded brave and man-like, and put all at their ease. It is always best to be honest."

"It is. I agree with you. What about the head?"

"What head?"

"Ah, and is that honest? You know what I mean. Does it ache very badly?"

"N—no! Not a bit! I stayed behind because I preferred to—to talk to you," said Hilary, stoutly, wishing she could prevent herself blushing in such a ridiculous fashion, wishing Mr. Rayner would not stare at her quite so fixedly; happy, miserable, discomfited, triumphant, all at the same moment, and in the most incomprehensible fashion.

"That's very satisfactory, because I like to talk to you also," he said, gravely, and the next two hours passed so quickly that it was quite a shock to hear calls from the verandah, and to see the walking party already assembled round the tea-table.

"What did you wish?" was Hilary's first question, but, with the exception of the Mouse, everyone refused to divulge the secret.

"I wished I might have a doll's pramulator," said Geraldine gravely, and when Miss Carr asked if the dolls were not able to take walking exercise, she shook her head with pathetic remembrance.