

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER IX.



THREE days after Mr. Bertrand's return, Rex Freer arrived at the house in a state of triumphant excitement. This was by no means his first appearance since he had left Clouds-dale, for he never passed the house on any of his numerous expeditions that he did not run in 'forten minutes' chat, and the

girls were getting accustomed to see his head appear at the window as they sat at work, or to hear the loud rat-tat on the door which heralded his coming. They soon had practical demonstration of his "managing powers," for, more than once after definitely making up their minds that nothing would induce them to stir from the house, they found themselves meekly putting on hats and jackets to join a tobogganing party, and to accompany the young gentleman part of his way home. Lettice was always easily influenced, but high-spirited Norah made many protests against what she was pleased to call his "Indian ways," and on one occasion even went so far as to dare a direct refusal. Lettice had left the room to get ready for a walk along the snowy lanes, but Miss Norah sat obstinately in her chair, the heel of one slipper perched on the toe of the other, in an attitude which was a triumph of defiance.

"Well!" said Mr. Rex, putting his hands in his pockets, and standing with his back to the fire in elderly gentleman fashion. "Why don't you get on your coat? I can't wait many minutes, you know, or it will get dark. Hurry up!"

"I'm not going. It's too cold. I don't like trudging over the snow. I am going to stay at home."

Norah raised her thin, little face to his with an audacious glance, whereat "the strange boy's" eyes dilated with the steely flash which she knew so well.

"Then please go upstairs and tell Lettice not to trouble to get ready. I can't allow her to come home alone, along the lonely roads," he said quietly, and Norah slunk out of the room and put on her snow-shoes in crestfallen silence, for it did Lettice good to have a daily walk, and she could not be so selfish as to keep her at home.

This afternoon, however, the call was longer than usual, for Rex came as the bearer of good news. "You have only to make up your mind to do anything,

and the rest is quite easy," he announced coolly. "The mater has made a point of speaking to everyone she has seen about the music lessons, and she has heard of a capital man in Lancaster who is willing to come down for an afternoon once a fortnight. I met your father in the village, and he agrees to the terms, so now there is nothing left but to write and fill in the day to begin. Thursday suits him best. Do you say Thursday first or Thursday fortnight?"

"Oh, the first Thursday. I don't want to wait a day longer than I can help. Oh, how lovely! So it is really settled. I wanted it so badly that I was afraid it would never come true. How am I to get over to your house, I wonder?"

"I'll drive over and bring you back next morning. We might use our bicycles, but the violin case would be rather a nuisance, and I suppose you'll need a bag of some description. I'll be here at eleven, and then we shall get home to lunch. Edna is in a great state of excitement at the thought of seeing you."

Norah pulled a funny little face of embarrassment. "I'm rather shy, you know," she said, laughing. "I've only seen your mother once, and the other two are absolute strangers; it seems funny to be coming over to stay. Is your father a formidable sort of old gentleman?"

"Humph—well—I think he is rather! He is awfully fond of getting his own way," said Rex, in a tone which implied that he failed to understand how any one could be guilty of such a weakness. "But he is an awfully decent sort if you take him the right way; and poor little Edna would not frighten a mouse. You will feel at home with her in five minutes. I only wish she knew Lettice. We must arrange for her to come over some time."

Norah looked at him with a feeling of curiosity which was not altogether agreeable. "Why do you wish that she knew Lettice? Do you think she would like her better than me?"

"Oh, yes," said Rex easily. (He was just like other boys, Norah told herself, and had not the slightest regard for a poor girl's feelings.) "She is such a jolly, affectionate little thing, you know, that Edna would take to her at once; Lettice, I mean, 'Lovely Lettice!' I say, isn't she pretty?"

"Yes, she is—lovely. It's a very good name for her." Norah spoke with all the greater emphasis, because, for the moment, she had been guilty of an actual pang of envy of her beloved Lettice, for she regarded the "strange boy" as her special friend, by virtue of having been the first to make his acquaintance, and it was not agreeable to find her own claims to popularity brushed aside in this unceremonious fashion. "Lettice is a darling, and everyone likes her because she is sweet-tempered, and never says unkind things

to make other people miserable," she added, not without the hope that Mr. Rex would take the hint to himself. He did nothing of the sort, however, but only yawned—thought he must be going—and marched away with stoical unconsciousness of the aching little heart which he had left behind.

On Thursday morning Rex drove up to the door in his father's dog-cart. He was a little before his time, but Norah was waiting for him, wrapped up in her warm scarlet coat; her violin case and bag ready on the hall table. Before he came she had been lamenting loudly, because she felt a conviction that something would happen to prevent his arrival; but when it came to setting off, she was seized with an attack of shyness, and hung back in hesitating fashion. "Oh, oh! I don't like it a bit. I feel horrid. Don't you think father would drive over, and bring me home to-night?"

"H—ush! No! Don't be foolish, Nonie! You will enjoy it ever so much when you get there. Remember everything to tell me to-morrow," whispered Lettice encouragingly, and Norah climbed up into the high seat, waved her hand to her two sisters until a turn of the drive hid them from sight.

"If you want to cry, don't mind me," said Rex, coolly; and the remark served better than anything else could possibly have done to rouse Miss Norah to her usual composure. The saucy little nose was tilted into the air at once, and the red lips curled in scornful fashion.

"I wonder how it is that schoolboys are always so rude and unpleasant?"

Mr. Rex laughed, and gave the horse a flick with the whip, which sent him spinning round the corner at break-neck speed. Norah understood that he was proud of his driving, and wished to impress her with the fact that it was very unlike a school-boy performance. She pressed her lips together to stifle an exclamation of dismay at his recklessness, and her silence pleased Rex, who liked to see "a girl with some courage," so that presently he began to talk in quite a confidential strain. "The professor will be at the house about half-past two, so you won't have too much time to spare. He is a tall, lanky fellow, six feet two, with a straggling black beard, goggle eyes, and spectacles. He looks awfully bad-tempered, but I suppose he can't do more than rap your knuckles with a pencil, and they all go as far as that."

"No one ever rapped my knuckles," said Norah, loftily. "You told Hilary a few minutes ago that none of you had seen him, and that your mother had engaged him entirely on her friends' recommendation. So you can't know what he is like, or anything about him!"

"How do you know that the friends did not describe him?" cried Rex quickly. "You can't know what they