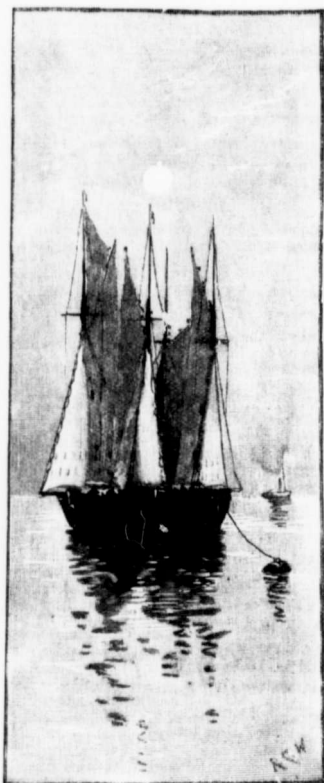


SISTERS THREE.

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



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE sun was shining over the lake of Thun, and the little steamer was puffing cheerily through the water. Behind lay the picturesque town, with its rushing river, and quaint, old-world buildings; in front lay—ah, what a scene of beauty and grandeur! Surely, it were worth while to travel from the ends of the earth to see this marvellous sight. The blue waters, fringed with brilliant foliage; the trees in their autumn glory, the rowanberries making patches of scarlet here and there, the solemn pines capping the mountain height, and at the head of the lake—beautiful, dazzling, majestic—the snow-clad range of Eiger, Monck, and Jungfrau.

In all the beautiful world there can be few spots so beautiful as the lake of Thun, as seen upon a glorious September afternoon!

The passengers on board the steamer displayed a special interest in an English party who walked up and down the deck. A father and three daughters, an elderly lady whose relationship it was difficult to guess, and a young man with a clever, sensitive face, who managed

his crutches with marvellous agility, and who was obviously neither husband nor brother. The girls themselves received a full share of admiration from the French and German visitors who are in the majority in Switzerland in autumn. The eldest was so neat and dainty, with her pretty English complexion, and trim little figure; the tall, dark girl was *spirituelle* and uncommon; while the third had an *air tres chic*, and would have been quite *ravissante* if she had been a trifle less pale and *serieuse*, but even the surprising beauty of the scene seemed powerless to bring a smile to her face.

It was chiefly owing to Mr. Rayner's persuasion that Mr. Bertrand had left Westmoreland on the very day after that fixed for his daughter's marriage. The painful duty of returning the wedding presents had been accomplished, and it was so distressing to all concerned to remain in a place where they felt themselves to be the subject of continual gossip, that they were thankful to get away to fresh surroundings. They had travelled straight through to Thun, engaging sleeping carriages in advance, and had been ensconced for over a week in the hotel on the shores of the lake, taking daily excursions, and resting beneath the broad verandah, while by common consent, no reference was made to the painful events of the past week.

"If we are going away, we must try to get as much good as we can from the change. What is past, is past. There is no use fretting over it any longer," Mr. Bertrand had said, and Hilary found so little difficulty in following his advice and being radiantly happy, that she felt a pang of remorse when suddenly confronted by Lettice's pale face, and reminded thereby of her sadness, and Arthur Newcome's suffering.

Lettice had ceased to cry, but she was very, very silent, and her eyes wore a strained, frightened look which it was sad to see in so young a face. Everyone was studiously kind to her, but Lettice was sensitive enough to feel the effort which lay behind the kindness. Norah alone was just as loving and whole-hearted as ever. Dear Norah! she had been shocked and distressed beyond measure, but how loyally she had kept her promise to help "every moment of the time!" During those two first awful days what a comfort it had been to have her near; to clutch that strong, faithful hand when the others came into the room, and looked at her from afar with cold, sad eyes! Norah was the same, but all the rest had changed. They had been grieved, shocked, humiliated by her behaviour, and though she was nominally forgiven, the chill ring of disapproval sounded in every word they spoke, and Lettice faded like a flower deprived of light and sunshine. Instead of gaining strength by the change she grew every day paler, thinner, and more ghost-like, until at

last her father became alarmed, and questioned her closely as to her health.

"Does your head ache, Lettice?"

"No, father."

"Do you sleep well at night?"

"I think—sometimes I do, father. Pretty well."

"Have you any pain?"

Lettice raised her eyes and looked at him—a look such as a wounded stag might cast at its executioner. She trembled like a leaf, and clasped her hands round his arm in an agony of appeal.

"Oh, father, father! I am all pain—I think of it day and night—it never leaves me. I think I shall see it before me all my life."

"See what, Lettice? What do you mean?"

"His face!" quivered Lettice, and was silent. Mr. Bertrand knew that she was referring to the stricken look with which Arthur Newcome had left the room where he had received the death-blow to his hopes, and the remembrance brought a cloud across his own face.

"Ay! I don't wonder at that, but it will only add to our trouble, Lettice, if you fall ill, and we have had enough anxiety."

He was conscious of not being very sympathetic, but his feeling was so strong on the subject that he could not control his words, and when Lettice spoke again it was with no reference to herself.

"Father, do you think he will ever—forget?—get over it?"

Mr. Bertrand hesitated. "With most young men I should have said unhesitatingly—yes! but I think Arthur Newcome will probably remember longer than most, though I sincerely hope he will recover in time. But at the best, Lettice, you have caused him bitter pain and humiliation, and, what is worse, have shaken his faith in women for the rest of his life."

Lettice gave a little cry of pain. "Oh, father, I want to talk to you. I want to tell you how I feel, but I can't, while you speak in that hard, dry voice! Don't you see—don't you see that you are all killing me with your coldness? I have made you miserable, and have been weak, and foolish, and vain, but, father, father, I have not been wicked, and I have suffered most of all. Why do you break my heart by treating me like a stranger, and freezing me by your cruel, cruel kindness? You are my father—if I have done wrong, won't you help me to be better in the future? It isn't as if I were careless of what I have done. You see—you see how I suffer!" and she held out her arms with a gesture so wild and heart-broken, that her father was startled, and caught her to him with one of his old, fond gestures.

"My poor child! My little Lettice! Heaven knows I have not intended to