

## SISTERS THREE.

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

## CHAPTER XXI.



LETTICE'S annual summer visit was postponed this year until the middle of August, for Arthur Newcome had gained his point, as Mr. Bertrand had prophesied, and the wedding was arranged to take place at the end of September. Mr. Bertrand had done his best to gain more time, but it was difficult to fight against a man who was so quiet, so composed, and so immovably determined as Arthur Newcome. He listened to what was said with the utmost politeness, and replied to all argument with the statement that he was twenty-eight, that he was in a good position, and that he saw no reason for waiting on indefinitely. After this performance had been enacted four or five times, Mr. Bertrand's patience gave way, and he declared that he was powerless to stand out any longer, and that perhaps it was a good thing to get the wedding over, since if he had much to do with Arthur Newcome, he should certainly fall into a nervous decline.

"His very presence oppresses me. It is all I can do not to yawn in his face when he is telling those long-winded yarns. Poor little Lettice! I wonder what sort of conversation he treats her to when they are alone. I thought she looked very tired yesterday at dinner. Get her all the pretty things she wants for this *trousseau*, Helen. I must do what I can for the poor child, for I fear she has a dull time before her."

Miss Carr sighed and shook her head. As time went on she was more and more distressed about her ward's engagement, for now that his time of suspense was over, Arthur Newcome had lost his temporary gleam of brightness and settled down into the old solemn ways which made him so different from other young men of his age. The previous night was not the only occasion on which Lettice had seemed weary and dispirited after a *tête-à-tête* with her lover, but she showed plenty of interest in the selection of her *trousseau*, and in the equipment of the handsome house which Mr. Newcome was preparing for his bride.

By the middle of August dressmakers and upholsterers had received the necessary instructions, and could be left to complete their work, while the tired little bride-elect went north to recoup her energies. How glad she was to escape from London only Lettice herself knew; while at Cloudsdale, the whole house was turned upside down in excitement at the prospect of her arrival. Lettice, as an engaged young lady, a bride on the eve of her marriage, had assumed a position of great importance in her sisters' eyes, and the questions as to how she would look, how she would bear

herself, formed the subject of many lengthy discussions.

The hour came at last. Lettice was once more among them. She came rushing in, in the old impetuous way, kissing everyone in turns, and exclaiming in delight at being once more at home. There had never been any unpleasantness connected with Lettice's home-comings. Though she had lived in the lap of luxury for the last three years, she was utterly unspoiled by its influence, and so far from being dissatisfied with her own home, seemed to take an affectionate delight in finding it unchanged in every particular. Her sisters followed her from room to room, listening smilingly to her ecstatic exclamations.

"Oh, how nice it looks—the dear old place! What a sweet, sweet smell of mignonette. Oh, look at the old red table-cloth, and the ink-stain in the corner, where I upset the bottle. Oh, how lovely to see it all again! And the dear old sofa where we used to camp out all together—I have never found such a cosy sofa anywhere else. Tea! How pretty the urn looks! I love that cheerful, hissing sound! and what cream! You never see cream like that in London."

She was all smiles and dimples, and though decidedly thinner, the flush upon her cheeks made her look so bright and well that she was a picture of a radiant young bride. Hilary and Norah watched her with fascinated eyes as she flitted about the room, or lay back in the deep chintz-covered chair. What a vision of elegance she was! The blue serge coat and skirt was exactly like those which the village dressmaker had made for their own wear, exactly like, and yet how different! The sailor hat was of a shape unknown in northern regions; every little detail of her attire was perfect in its unobtrusive beauty, and with every movement of the hands came the flash of precious stones. If she had been a whit less like herself, Norah would have been awed by the presence of this elegant young lady; but it was the old Lettice who flung her arms round her neck the moment they were left alone together in their own room; the old Lettice who kissed, and hugged, and caressed with a hundred loving words.

"Oh, Norah, I have wanted you! I longed for you so, but father would not let me write. It was a horrid, horrid time, and I was wretchedly lonely. Dear, darling Nonie, I am so glad to be back."

"And, oh, Lettice, I am so glad to have you! I have a hundred questions to ask. Let me look at your ring. It is a beauty, far nicer than the ordinary row of diamonds. And are you awfully happy? I was very much surprised, you know, but if you are happy, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks!"

"N—no!" said Lettice, slowly. "Yes, of course I am happy. It hasn't

been as nice as I expected, for Miss Carr has behaved so queerly, and father was not pleased. But, oh yes, I am quite happy. Madge is delighted about it, and Arthur does everything I like. He is very kind!"

"You funny old Lettice! Kind, of course he is kind!" cried Norah, laughing and kissing the soft, fair cheek. The flush of excitement had faded by this time, and the girl's face looked pale and wan, while the blue shadows beneath her eyes gave a pathetic expression to the sweet face. "Lettice," cried Norah, anxiously, "how ill you look! You were excited before, and I didn't notice it, but you are as white as a ghost, and so thin! Aren't you well, dear? Have you a headache? Can I do anything for you?"

"Oh, no, no!" Lettice stretched her arms over her head with a long, weary sigh. "I shall be quite well now that I am at home, and with you, Norah. I have been tired to death in London lately. You have no idea how tiring it is being engaged. I have stood such hours and hours at the dressmaker's being tried on, and Arthur and I were always going to the house. The workmen are so stupid, they have no idea of colourings. The drawing-room was painted three times over before Arthur was satisfied. I was so tired that I would have left it as it was, but he is so obstinate—he likes to have things done exactly in his own way, and he worries on and on until he gets it. I thought it would be fun furnishing a house, but it gets a little tiresome when people are so very, very particular. We will have a nice lazy time, won't we, Norah? Arthur is not coming up for three weeks, so we shall be alone and have no one to bother us."

"Ye—s!" stammered Norah confusedly.

This novel way of regarding the presence of a lover was so amazing, that it took away her breath, and before she recovered, Miss Briggs entered the room and there was no more chance of private conversation for the present.

Nothing could have been sweeter or more amiable than Lettice's demeanour during the first week at home. She seemed to revel in the simple country life, and to cling to every member of the household with pathetic affection. She went into the kitchen and sat on the fender stool, talking to the cook and inquiring for "your aunt at Preston," "the little niece Pollie," "your nephew at sea," with a kindly remembrance which drew tears from the old soul's eyes. She made dresses for Geraldine's dolls, trimmed Miss Briggs' caps, and hovered about her father and sisters on the watch for an opportunity to serve them. Everyone was charmed to have her at home once more, and fussed over her in a manner which should have satisfied the most exacting of mortals; but sweet and loving as she was, Lettice did not