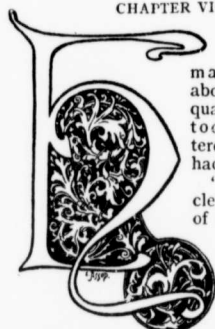


SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER VII.



HILARY asked her father many questions about the new acquaintance, and took great interest in what he had to tell.

"Clever fellow, clever fellow; one of the most promising of the younger men. I expect great things of him. Yes, lame, poor fellow, a

terrible pity! Paralysis of the lower limbs, I hear. He can never be better, though I believe there is no reason why he should get worse. It's a sad handicap to such a young man, and, of course, it gives a melancholy cast to his mind. It was kind of him to entertain you so nicely—very kind indeed."

Hilary gave her head a little tilt of displeasure. Why should it be "kind" of Mr. Rayner to talk to her? Father seemed to think she was a stupid little girl, on whom no grown-up person would care to waste their time; but Mr. Rayner had not seemed at all bored by her conversation, and when some friends had tried to take him away, he had excused himself, and preferred to remain in the quiet corner.

When Tuesday came, and Mr. Rayner arrived, Mr. Bertrand was busy writing, and dispatched his daughter to amuse his guest until he should have finished his letters. "Tell him I won't be more than ten minutes, and he must excuse me, like a good fellow, for I really am obliged to catch this post," he said, and Hilary went into the long drawing-room to find her new friend seated on the couch, with his crutches by his side. He was looking better than when she had seen him last, and had a mischievous smile on his face.

"Good morning, Miss Two Shoes!" he cried, and Hilary gave a little start of surprise and consternation.

"Oh—h—ush! They don't know. I didn't tell them. Miss Carr would never stop talking about it, and father would tease me to death. I only said that I had forgotten to put the slippers on coming home, which was quite true. It was rather awkward, for they belonged to Miss Carr. She insisted on lending them to me at the last moment. The servants would be surprised when they found them behind the curtains the next morning, wouldn't they?"

"They would!" said Mr. Rayner, drily, and there was a peculiar smile upon his face which Hilary could not understand. "So they were not yours, after all. I thought the size seemed rather—excessive! I promise not to

betray you if you would rather keep the secret, but if the story gave as much pleasure to your father as it has done to me, it seems rather selfish to keep it from him. I have had the heartiest laughs I have known for months past, thinking of the tragic incident of the scarlet slippers!"

"Please don't!" said Hilary; but she laughed as she spoke, and so far from being offended was quite thankful to hear that she had been the means of giving some amusement to the new friend. "I have been hearing all about you from father," she continued, nodding her head at him cheerily. "He has promised to give me one of your books to read when we get back to Clearwater. Will you please write your name in my autograph book? I brought it downstairs on purpose. There are pens and ink on this little table."

Mr. Rayner smiled, but made no objections. He took a very long time over the signature, however, and when Hilary took up the book, she saw that each leg of the H ended in the shape of a dainty little shoe, so finely done that it would probably escape the notice of anyone who was not critically inclined.

"Too bad," she cried, laughingly, "I am afraid you are going to be as persistent as father in keeping up the joke."

"They are the proper slippers, you observe—not the woollen atrocities," replied Mr. Rayner, and Hilary was still rejoicing in the discovery that he could be mischievous like other people, when the door opened, and her father came rushing into the room.

Luncheon was served immediately afterwards, and when it was over, Mr. Bertrand carried off the young man to have a private talk in the library. They did not make their appearance until the afternoon was well advanced, and when they did, the drawing-room was full of people, for it was Miss Carr's "At home" day, and the presence of Austin Bertrand, the celebrated novelist, brought together even more visitors than usual.

Hilary had not found the entertainment at all amusing. It seemed absurd to her innocent mind that people should come to see Miss Carr, and exchange no further word with her than "How d'you do," and "Good-bye," and though the hum of conversation filled the room most of the visitors were too old and too grand to take any notice of a girl just out of the schoolroom. A few young girls accompanied their mothers, but though they eyed Hilary wistfully, they would not speak without the introduction which Miss Carr was too busy to give. One girl, however, stared more persistently than the rest, and Hilary returned her scrutiny with puzzled curiosity. She was a tall, elegant girl, but there was something in the wavy line of the eyebrows which seemed

strangely familiar, and she had a peculiar way of drawing in her lips, which brought back a hundred misty recollections. Where had she seen that face before? Hilary asked herself, staring fixedly at the stranger. The stranger began to smile; a flash of recollection passed across each face, and the next moment they were clasping hands, and exclaiming in mutual recognition—

"Hilary!"

"Madge!"

"The idea of meeting you here! I haven't seen you since we were tiny little dots at school. I thought you lived ever so far away—up in the North of England."

"So we do; but we are here on a visit. Madge! how grown up you are. You are only six months older than I, but you look ever so much more than that. How are you, and what are you doing, and how are all your brothers and sisters? Lettice will be so interested to know I have seen you."

"Dear Lettice, yes! She was a nice girl. So affectionate, wasn't she? I should like to see her again. Perhaps I may, for father has taken a house at Windermere for next summer, and if you are not far away, we could often meet and go excursions together."

"Oh, how lovely! We are three miles from Windermere station, but we have a pony carriage and bicycles, and could drive over to see you. Do sit down, Madge. I don't know anyone here, and it is so dull sitting by myself in a corner."

"I am afraid I can't. I am with mother, you see, and she doesn't like to be left alone. Perhaps I shall see you again before I go!" and Madge Newcome nodded, and strolled off in a careless, indifferent manner which brought the blood to Hilary's face. Mrs. Newcome was talking to a group of friends and looked very well satisfied, so much so that Hilary suspected that the daughter's anxiety had been more for herself than her mother, and that Miss Madge did not appreciate the attractions of sitting in a quiet corner.

"It's very unkind, when I told her I knew nobody; but she was a selfish girl at school. She doesn't want to stay with me, that's the truth. I wish this horrid afternoon would come to an end!" she told herself dolefully, and it was with unconcealed delight that at last she heard the sound of Mr. Rayner's crutches, and welcomed that gentleman to a seat by her side. He looked brighter than she had ever seen him, and had evidently been enjoying himself up-stairs.

"Well," he said cheerily, "here you are in the midst of the merry throng! Have you had a pleasant time? Not? Why, how's that? I thought you enjoyed seeing a crowd of people."

"I thought I did, but I find I don't like it so much as I expected," said