

SISTERS THREE.

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



CHAP. XXIV.

WEEK before the wedding
Miss Carr came down from London, and with

her came also Mr. Herbert Rayner who had paid frequent visits to

Westmoreland during the last few years, and was now regarded as a family friend who could not be spared on such an historical occasion. His lameness was not any better for the lapse of time, but Hilary's exhortations had taken effect, for he was much less sensitive about his inability to do as the other men did, while as for the rest he had every reason to be cheerful nowadays, for his writings were so highly praised that Mr. Bertrand affected jealousy, and declared that his own sun was eclipsed. There was a very warm friendship between the two men; both declared that they gained inspiration from the other, and Raymond dubbed them "The Mutual Admiration Society," because Mr. Bertrand was wont to declare that Rayner was an infinitely finer writer than himself, while Mr. Rayner in his turn despaired of ever accomplishing anything fit to compare with the work of his friend.

With Miss Carr arrived a cart-load of boxes containing bride and bridesmaids' dresses, feathers and furbelows of all descriptions, and a number of presents from acquaintances in London.

The other girls were full of excitement over the opening of these treasures, but Lettice herself was silent and indifferent, and hardly troubled herself to look at the beautiful gifts which were showered upon her. She excused herself on the plea of a chronic headache, and lay half the day on the sofa in the schoolroom, while Miss Briggs fed her with beef-tea, and fussed over her in kindly, motherly fashion. Everyone petted her and treated her with consideration, but no one said a word to suggest that she was unhappy in the thought of the coming marriage. It was too late for that; she had determined to keep to her engagement, and it was only natural to account for her indisposition on the ground of excitement and fatigue. Circumstances combined moreover to keep Lettice a good deal apart from the others during these last busy days. Miss Carr's maid was employed making the alterations which were requisite in the dresses from London, so that Lettice was continually being summoned to the sewing room, and when she was not being "tried on" she had many letters to write

acknowledging the gifts which arrived in such numbers.

Hilary was too busy to have any time for confidential talks, and when Norah had a moment's leisure, her thoughts were far away from Westmoreland, journeying over foreign lands with a certain tall young Englishman with grey eyes and a crop of close-cut, curly hair. Even Lettice herself was apt to be forgotten in this all-absorbing occupation!

The Newcome contingent, and those London friends who were to accompany them were to come down on the day before the wedding, and to put up at an hotel in Windermere, and every day brought with it a host of preparations which kept the little mistress of the house busy from morning until night.

Hilary showed to advantage under these circumstances. Always brisk, alert and smiling, never worried or unduly anxious, she shared a good deal of Rex's boasted "gift of management," and contrived to keep the house comfortable for the visitors, despite the general disarrangement, and the everlasting arrival of packing chests and boxes. Hampers of flowers, hampers of fruit, crates of china and glass, rolls of red baize, boxes containing wedding-cake, confectionery, dresses, presents—in they came, one after another, in an unending stream, until to get across from the front door into the dining-room was like running the blockade, and wisps of straw were scattered all over the house. Norah and Hilary swathed themselves in big white aprons and unpacked from morning till night, a more interesting task than it sounds, for the boxes were full of pleasant surprises, and Mr. Rayner, Raymond and their father played the part of "dress circle," and kept everyone laughing with their merry sallies. It was a cheery, bustling time, for everyone was in good spirits and prepared to enjoy the happy-go-lucky picnic life. Lunch and dinner were movable feasts, held either in dining- or morning-room, or in the garden itself as proved most convenient, and when afternoon tea was served three days before the wedding, the cups were scattered about on the top of packing chests in the hall, the cake basket hung on the hat rail, and the tea-pot was thrust out of reach of harm, beneath the oak bench. Lettice was lying down upstairs, but all the rest of the household were gathered together, the visitors provided with chairs in honour of their position, Norah seated on the stairs, Raymond, straddle leg over the banister, Mr. Bertrand and Geraldine lowly on buffets, while Hilary was perched on the top of a huge packing chest, enveloped in a pink "pin-afore," and looking all the prettier because her brown hair was ruffled a little bit out of its usual immaculate order.

"I wish we could have tea like this every day!" cried the Mouse drawing a long breath of enjoyment. "May we

have it like this every day, father, instead of properly in the drawing-room?"

"Ah, Mouse, I see you are a Bohemian at heart, for all your quiet ways! I agree with you, my dear, that it would be quite delightful, but the difficulty is that we could not persuade people to shower presents and hampers upon us in the ordinary course of events. It takes a wedding, or some celebration of the kind to start such a flood of generosity."

"Well, may we have tea like this when Hilary is married?" insisted Geraldine, with a gravity which caused a hearty laugh.

"Ask Hilary, my dear!" said Mr. Bertrand mischievously, and Hilary tossed her head and said that one wedding was enough at a time—she had no strength to think of two.

"Indeed, my dear, I wonder you are not laid up as it is," said Miss Carr kindly. "You are on your feet from morning till night, and everyone comes to you for directions; I am afraid you will break down when the excitement is over. There is generally a collapse on these occasions. Have you any idea what you are all going to do after the young couple have departed?"

"Get the house in order, and go to bed for a week," said Hilary brightly, flushing with pleasure at Miss Carr's words of praise, and at the murmur of assent which they had evoked from her companion, but it appeared that other people were more energetically inclined than herself, for both Miss Briggs and Raymond seized the opportunity to air secret plans of their own.

"I wanted to speak to you about that, Mr. Bertrand! My sister in Scarborough is most anxious that I should pay her a visit, and take Geraldine with me, and I think the sea air would do us both good."

"And I should like to have some shooting with Ferrars in Scotland. He has asked me so often, and I could just fit it in this year."

Mr. Bertrand looked at his two daughters—at Hilary, bright and natty, but with shadows under her eyes which spoke of the fatigue she would not acknowledge; then, with an anxious tenderness, at Norah, whose unusual quietness for the last few days he understood better than she suspected.

"Really," he said, "if all the world is going off pleasing, I don't see any reason why we should be left behind! What do you say—shall we all go off for a tour on our own account? I think we deserve a holiday after our hard work. A little run on the Continent would do us all good. Helen, what do you say? Will you come and take care of the girls? Rayner, I can't tackle three ladies unassisted. You will have to come and take care of me!"

"I should certainly not leave the