

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER XX.

FOR the next ten minutes conversation was of the most desultory character; then the sound of wheels was heard in the distance, and Rex became eager and excited once more.

"There's my father! Go and meet him, Norah. Get hold of him before Hilary comes with her everlasting chatter. He wants to speak to you. Bring him along here, and I'll go into the house."

Norah sped off obediently and met the Squire as the cart turned in at the gate. He pulled up at once, handed the reins to the man, and jumped down to join her. His ruddy face looked drawn and anxious, and the first glance at the girl showed that she was like himself, in a woe-begone state of mind.

"Oh, you know all about it! That boy of mine has been talking to you, I can see!" he said, as they shook hands, and turned along the winding path. "Well, well, this is a fine ending to all my hopes. The lad's as obstinate as a mule—I am sure I don't know where he got his disposition; if he once takes a thing in his head there's no moving him. Now he wants to go and bury himself in the wilds of India! I've talked until I am tired, and I can't make him see what mad folly it is. After an expensive college education—"

"Yes, but, Squire, I don't think that's a fair argument! Rex didn't want to go to college; he went against his own wishes because you were set on it. He said it would be waste of money."

"Tut, tut, nonsense! Waste of money, indeed; I don't grudge a few hundreds spent on my only son's education. Things would have come to a pretty pass if that were the case," cried the Squire, turning off at a tangent as usual the moment he found his position attacked by the enemy. "I thought the boy would have come to his senses long before the three years were over. I have told him—" and he launched off into a lengthy account of the interview of the night before, repeating his own arguments and his son's replies, while Norah listened with downcast eyes. "There!" he cried in conclusion, "that is the matter in a nutshell, and everyone must see that I am perfectly reasonable and within my rights. Now, my dear, you talk to him; he thinks a great deal of your opinion; just tell him plainly that if he persists in his folly, he is ruining his life and behaving in a very wrong, unfeeling manner to his mother and to me. Talk to him plainly; don't spare your words!"

"I can't do that, Squire. I'm sorry, but I don't agree with you. Rex has given in to your wishes for three whole years, though, from his point of view, it was waste of time. He has worked hard and not grumbled, so that he has kept every word of his promise. Now he asks you to fulfil yours. I am sure you must feel sad and disappointed, but

I don't think you ought to be angry with Rex, or call him unfeeling."

"Eh—eh, what's this? Are you going to side against me? This is a pretty state of affairs. I thought I could count upon your help, and the boy would have listened to what you said. Well, well, I don't know what is coming over the young folk nowadays! Do you mean to say that you approve of the boy going abroad?"

"Yes, I do! It is better to be a good planter than a bad lawyer," said Norah steadily, and the Squire pursed up his lips in silence.

The girl's words had appealed to his pet theory, and done more to silence objections than any amount of arguing. The Squire was always lecturing other people on the necessity of doing the humblest work as well as it was possible for it to be done, and had been known on occasions to stand still in the middle of a country lane, brandishing his stick while he treated a gang of stone-breakers to a dissertation on the dignity of labour. The thought that his son might perform his duties in an unsatisfactory manner was even more distasteful than the prospect of separation.

"Well, well," he sighed irritably, "no one need envy a man for having children! They are nothing but trouble and anxiety from beginning to end. It's better to be without them at all."

"You don't mean what you say. You know quite well you would not give up your son and daughter for all the money in the world. You love Edna all the more because she needs so much care, and you are just as proud of Rex as you can be. Of course he is self-willed and determined, but if you could change him into a weak, undecided creature like the vicar's son, you would be very sorry to do it!"

"You seem to know a great deal about my sentiments, young lady," said the Squire, trying hard to look ferocious. Then his shoulders heaved and he drew a long, weary sigh. "Well, my last hope has gone if you range yourself against me. The boy must go and bury himself at the ends of the earth. Goodness knows when he will come back, and I am getting old. Ten to one I may never see him again!"

"It will be your own fault if you don't. Westmoreland is sweet and beautiful, but if I had no ties and plenty of money like you, I would never be content to settle here for the rest of my life, while the great, wide world lay beyond. If Rex goes to India, why should you not all pack up some year and pay him a visit? You could sail down the Mediterranean and see all the lovely places on the way—Gibraltar, and Malta, and Naples, and Venice; stay a month or two in India, and come home overland through Switzerland and France. Oh, how nice it would be! You would have so much to see and to talk about afterwards. Edna would get fat and rosy, and you and Mrs. Freer would be quite young and skittish by the time you got home! If you went to see him between each of

his visits home, the time would seem quite short."

"I daresay! I daresay! A very likely prospect. I am too old to begin gadding about the world at my time of life," said the Squire; but he straightened his back even as he spoke, and stepped out as if wishing to disprove the truth of his own words. Norah saw his eyes brighten, and the deep lines down his cheeks relax into a smile, and knew that her suggestion had met a kindly welcome. "Well, there's no saying! If all the young people go away and leave us, we shall be bound to make a move in self-defence. You are off to London for the winter. It seems a year of changes—"

"Oh, it is, it is, and I am so miserable! Lettice, my own, dear Lettice is going to be married, and she will never come back to live with us any more. I have been looking forward to London, just to be with her, and now it is further off than ever. It will never come!"

Norah had fought hard for the self-possession which she had shown during the whole of the interview; but now her lips trembled, and the tears rushed into her eyes. The future seemed dreary indeed, with Rex abroad, Lettice appropriated by Arthur Newcome, and Edna at the other end of England. She had hard work not to cry outright to the great distress of the Squire, who was the kindest of men despite his red face and stentorian voice.

"Ha, humph—humph! Sorry, I'm sure. Very sorry! Come, come, my dear, cheer up! Things may turn out better than we expect. I didn't know you had a trouble of your own, or I would not have intruded mine. Shall we go up to the house? There, take my arm. What a great, big girl you are, to be sure!"

Norah found time for a whispered conference with Rex before he took his seat behind his father and Edna in the dog-cart.

"It's all right! I have spoken to him and he means to give in. Be as kind and patient as possible, for he does feel it, poor old man, and he is very fond and proud of you!"

"Humph!" said Rex shortly. He knitted his brows and looked anxiously at the girl's face. "You are awfully white. Don't cry any more, Norah, for pity's sake. We are not worth it, either Lettice or I." Then he was off, and Raymond turned to his sister with a long, lazy yawn.

"Well, and so Rex is bound for India! He has just been telling me about it. Lucky beggar! When I take my degree I mean to ask father to let me travel for a year; or two before settling down to work."

"Oh, dear, dear," sighed Norah to herself, "what a stirring up of the poor old nest! There will be no eagles left if this sort of thing goes on much longer. And we were so happy! Why, oh why did I ever wish for a change?"

(To be continued.)