

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER IV.



REX FREEER'S mother wrote a grateful letter to Mr. Bertrand, thanking him for his hospitality to her son, and arranging to drive over for Rex on the following Saturday afternoon, so that Hilary's anxiety was at an end, and she could enjoy the strange boy's society with an easy mind. After Norah had broken the ice, there was no further feeling of shyness. When Rex hobbled downstairs at ten o'clock in the morning, he ensconced himself on the old-fashioned sofa in the sewing-room, and remained there until he adjourned into the drawing-room for the evening. The boys came in and out as they pleased. Miss Briggs coddled him and brought him cups of beef tea, but it was upon the girls that he chiefly depended for amusement. In the morning they were busy with their household duties; but, as regular lessons had not begun, afternoon was a free time, and while Norah drew, Lettice carved, and Hilary occupied herself manufacturing fineries for the London visit, a brisk clatter of tongues was kept up, in which the invalid took his full part. The sound of five-finger exercises would come from the school-room overhead, but so soon as four o'clock struck, the Mouse would steal in, in her little white pinafore, and creep on to the corner of the sofa. She and the "strange boy" had made friends at once, and were on the best of terms.

"I wish you lived with us for ever!" she said one afternoon, looking lovingly in his face, as he stroked her wavy locks.

"And I wish you lived with me, Mouse," he answered. "I should like a little sister just like you, with a tiny pointed chin, and a tiny little nose, and big dark eyes. You are a real little mouse. It is exactly the right name for you."

"No, it's my wrong name. My true

name is Geraldine Audrey. It's written that way in the Bible."

"Dear me! that's a big name for a small person. And who gave you that name," asked Rex, laughing. But the child's face did not relax from its characteristic gravity as she replied—

"My godfathers and my godmothers, and a silver mug, and a knife and fork in a case, with 'G. A. B.' written on the handles. Only I mayn't use them till I'm seven, in case I cut my fingers."

Dear little Geraldine Audrey! Everyone loved her. She was always so desperately in earnest, so unsuspecting of fraud, and her little life was made a burden to her in the holidays by reason of the pranks of her big brothers. They sent her into village shops to demand "a halfpenny-worth of pennies," they kept her shivering in the drive staring at the lions on the top of the gate-posts, to

see them wag their tails when they heard the clock strike twelve; they despatched her into the garden with neat little packets of salt to put on the birds' tails, and watched the poor mite's efforts in contortions of laughter from behind the window curtains. The Mouse was more sorrowful than angry when the nature of these tricks was explained to her. "I fought you told the truth," she would say quietly, and then Raymond and Bob would pick her up in their arms, and try to make amends for their wickedness by petting her for the rest of the day.

On the third day of Rex's visit, the weather was so tempestuous that even Raymond and Bob did not stir from the house. They spent the morning over chemical experiments in the school-room, but when afternoon came they wearied of the unusual confinement and were glad to join the cosy party downstairs. Norah had a brilliant inspiration and suggested "Chestnuts," and Master Raymond sat in comfort, directing the efforts of poor red-faced Bob, as he bent over the fire and roasted his fingers as well as the nuts. When half a dozen young people are gathered round a fire, catching hot nuts in outstretched hands, and promptly dropping them with shrieks of dismay, the last remnants of shyness must needs disappear; and Rex was soon as uproarious as any other member of the family, complaining loudly when his "turn" was forgotten, and abusing the unfortunate Bob for presenting him with a cinder instead of the expected dainty. The clatter of tongues was kept up without a moment's intermission, and, as is usual under such circumstances, the conversation was chiefly concerned with the past exploits of the family.

"You can't have half as many jokes in the country as you can in town," Raymond declared. "When we were in London, two old ladies lived in the

house opposite ours, who used to sit sewing in the window by the hour together. One day, when the sun was shining, Bob and I got hold of a mirror and flashed it at them from our window so that the light dazzled their eyes and made them jump. They couldn't see us, because we were hiding behind the curtains, but it was as good as a play to watch first one, then the other, drop her work and put up her hand to her eyes. Then they began shaking their fists across the road, for they knew it was us, because we had played some fine tricks on them before. On wet days we used to make up a sham parcel, tie a thread to the end, and put it on the side of the pavement. Every one who came along stooped down to pick it up, then we gave a jerk to the string and moved it on a little further; they gave another grab, and once or twice a man overbalanced himself and fell down, but it didn't always come off so well as that. Oh, it was capital sport!"

"You got into trouble yourselves sometimes. You didn't always get the best of it," Norah reminded him. "Do you remember the day when you found a ladder leaning against the area railings of a house in the white terrace. Father had forbidden you to climb ladders, but you were a naughty boy, as usual, and began to do it, and when you got to the top, the ladder overbalanced, and you fell head over heels into the area. It is a wonder you were not killed that time!"

Raymond chuckled softly, as if at a pleasant remembrance. "But I was not, you see, and the cook got a jolly fright. She was making pastry at a table by the window, and down we came, ladder and I, the finest smash in the world. There was more glass than flour in the pies that day!"

"But father had to pay for new windows, and you were all over bruises from head to foot——"

"That didn't matter. It was jolly. I could have exhibited myself in a show as a 'boy leopard,' and made no end of money. And I wasn't the only one who made father pay for new windows. When Bob was a little fellow, he broke the nursery window by mistake, and a glazier came to mend it. Bob sat on a stool watching him do it, and snored all the time—Bob always snores when he is interested—and as soon as the man had picked up his tools and left the room, what did he do but jump up and send a toy horse smashing through the pane again. He wanted to see the glazier put in another, but he hadn't the pleasure of seeing it mended that time. He was whipped and sent to bed."

"We—w—w—well," cried Bob, who was afflicted with a stammer when he was excited, "I didn't c—c—ut off my eyelashes, anyway. Norah went up to her room one day and p—played barber's shop. She cut lumps off her hair wherever she could get at it, till