

SISTERS THREE.

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

CHAPTER VIII.



FORTNIGHT in London passes quickly enough; but the time seems much longer to the friends who are left at home, and who have no variety in the quiet course of their lives.

Half-a-dozen times a day Lettice and Norah said to each other, "What will Hilary be doing now?" And when a letter came, telling the plans of the next few days, they followed her movements hour by hour, telling each other, "Now she will be driving into town!" "Now she will be looking at the pictures!" "Now she will be dressing for the evening!" When the day of the traveller's return arrived, there was quite a bustle of excitement in the home. Lettice ordered Hilary's favourite puddings for dinner, Norah gave the drawing-room a second dusting in the afternoon, while Miss Briggs put on her cap with the pink ribbons, and dressed Geraldine in her best frock. They were all in the hall, ready to receive the travellers, as the fly from the station drove up to the door, and while Mr. Bertrand stayed without to pay the driver, Hilary lost no time in hurrying indoors. Within the first two minutes the sisters noticed a change in her manner. Her voice seemed to have a new tone; when Miss Briggs held out a welcoming hand, she extended her own at an elevation which made the good lady stare, and even while kissing the girls, her eyes were roving round the hall with an expression of dissatisfaction.

"Why have you not lighted all the lamps?" she inquired, and when Lettice replied in amazement that there were as many lamps as usual, she shrugged her shoulders, and muttered something about "inky darkness." If Mr. Bertrand had not appeared at that moment it would be difficult to say what would have happened, but he came rushing in like a breeze of fresh, wintry air, seizing each of the girls in turn, and folding them in a bear-like hug.

"Well—well—well—here we are again! Glad to be back in the old home. How are you, dear? How are you, pet? Miss Briggs! I see you are flourishing. How have all these young people been behaving while I was away? What about dinner? I'm so hungry that I shall eat the Mouse in desperation if I am kept waiting. Well, little Mouse, glad to see your father back again, eh? Come upstairs with me while I change my coat for dinner?"

It was like another house when the cheery, bustling master was at home,

and Lettice and Norah forgot their passing annoyance in rejoicing over his return. During the evening, however, Hilary managed to give offence more than once. She kept frowning to herself as she sat at the head of the table, and looking up and down with a discontented air which was very exasperating to those who had done their utmost to study her tastes, and to give her a pleasant home-coming. When dinner was over, and the family party adjourned into the drawing-room, she kept jumping up from her seat to alter the arrangement of plants and ornaments, or to put some article in its proper place. Norah elevated her eyebrows at Lettice, who nodded in sympathetic understanding, but both girls controlled their irritation out of consideration for their father, whose pleasure in the first evening at home would have been spoiled if his daughters had taken to quarrelling among themselves.

Mr. Bertrand had brought home a perfect treasure-trove of presents for the stay-at-homes. A beautiful little brooch and bangle for Lettice; music, books, and a paint-box for Norah; furs for Miss Briggs; and a small toy-shop for the dear little "youngest of seven."

Such an excitement as there was in the drawing-room while the presentations were going on! such shrieks of delight; such exclamations of "Just what I wanted!" such huggings, and kissings of gratitude! Mr. Bertrand declared at last that he would be pulled to pieces, and ran upstairs to the shelter of his beloved study. After he had gone, Hilary seemed for the time being to forget her grievances, whatever they might be, and drawing her chair to the fire, settled down to one of the good old-fashioned gossips which her sisters loved. Lettice and Norah had a dozen extra questions which they were burning to ask about every incident of the visit to London; and they were not more eager to hear than Hilary was to tell, for what is the good of going away and having adventures if we cannot talk about them when we come home?

The meeting with Madge Newcome was a subject of much interest. "Quite grown up, you say, and very grand and fashionable! And you went to lunch with her one day. Are the boys at home; what are they like? There was Cyril, the little one in the Eton jacket, who used to play with Raymond; and Phil, the middy; and the big one who was at college, Arthur, wasn't he? What is he like now?"

"I only saw him once, but it was quite enough. He is in business with his father—a terribly solemn, proper person, who talks about books, and says, 'Were you not,' 'Would you not.' Miss Carr says he is very clever, and good and intellectual, but all the same, I am sure she doesn't like him. I heard her describe him to father as

'that wooden young man.' It will be nice to see Madge in the summer, though I haven't forgiven her for leaving me alone that afternoon. Oh, and I must tell you——" and the conversation branched off in another direction, while the girls crouched over the fire, laughing and talking in happy reunion.

Alas! the next day the clouds gathered over the family horizon and culminated in such a storm as was happily of rare occurrence. The moment she left her bedroom Hilary began to grumble, and she grumbled steadily the whole day long. Everything that Lettice had done during her absence was wrong; the servants were careless and inefficient; the drawing-room—Norah's special charge—looked as if no one had touched it for a fortnight; the house was dingy and badly lighted, and every arrangement worse than the last. Lettice hated quarrelling so much that she was prepared to bear a good deal before getting angry, but quick-tempered Norah exploded with a burst of irritation before the afternoon was half over.

"The fact is you have been staying for a fortnight in a grand London house, and you are spoiled for your own home. I think it is mean to come back after having such a lovely time, and make everyone miserable with your grumbling and fault-findings! Lettice did everything she could, and the house is the same as when you left it."

"Perhaps it is, but I didn't know any better then. I know now how things ought to be done, and I can't be satisfied when they are wrong."

"And do you expect things to be managed as well in this house with five of us at home besides father and Miss Briggs, and three servants to do the work, as it is at Miss Carr's, with no one but herself, and six or seven people to wait on her?" Lettice spoke quietly but with a flush on her cheeks which proved that she felt more than she showed. "It's very foolish if you do, for you will only succeed in upsetting everyone, and making the whole house miserable and uncomfortable."

"As you have done to-day," added Norah bluntly. "I would rather have an old-fashioned house than the finest palace in the world with a cross, bad-tempered mistress going about grumbling from morning till night."

"Norah, you are very rude to speak to me like that! You have no right. I am the eldest."

"You had no right to say to me that I haven't touched the drawing-room for a fortnight."

"I have a right to complain if the work of the house is not properly done. Father has given me the charge. If I see things that can be improved, I am certainly not to be quiet. Suppose Mr. Rayner, or the Newcomes came here to see us, what would they think if they came into a half-lit hall as we did last night?"