

A Prisoner of Hope*

A NEW SERIAL STORY.

By MRS. WEIGALL

Resume: Esther Beresford is a beautiful and charming girl, who has lived in England with her French grandmother, Madame de la Perouse, and has taught music in a girls' school. Her step-mother's sister, Mrs. Galton, appears on the scene and it is arranged that Esther is to go out to Malta, to join her father and step-mother. But before her departure, Geoffrey Hanmer, an old friend, declares his love for Esther who promises a future reply to his proposal. She embarks with Mrs. Galton and her two exceedingly disagreeable daughters. Captain Hethcote and Lord Alwyne, two fellow-passengers admire Esther extremely, and Mrs. Clare-Smythe, a cousin of the latter also seeks her friendship. The Galtons become vulgarly jealous of Esther's popularity. The "Pleiades" reaches Gibraltar at sun-rise and some of the passengers are on deck for the sight. At last they arrive at Malta, and Esther looks forward to meeting her father. Her father's household is uncongenial, but Esther makes a friend of her youngest step-brother, "Hadji Baba." Her step-mother, "Monica," is disposed to be kind and rejoices when Esther goes to dinner at the "Palace." Lord Francis Alwyne's attentions flatter the girl who enjoys the gay life of Malta exceedingly.

THERE was a letter from Mme. de la Perouse, which Esther had kept to open until she was sitting on the verandah after dinner. Her father was smoking his cigar, and Monica, dozing in her chair, and before them through the screen of creepers that overhung the whole balcony, the sea lay moving like the breathing of a child asleep; and away up the slope the lights of the camp twinkled like brilliant stars.

"Any news from Aborfield, Esther?" said Major Beresford, dreamily.

"Grandmere says she and Louisa are both well, and she desires her affectionate regards to you father and there is news of the village and of the Hammers."

She paused on the name, for suddenly the thought of Geoffrey and his splendid courage made her choke. "The Hammers? Ah! Your grandmother wrote to me about them," said Major Beresford again. "They are very badly off, I think she said, and there was a young man who had something of a 'tendresse' for you."

In the darkness Esther's cheeks flamed. "Geoffrey and I were always friends," she said, steadily.

"I hear at the club, gossip sometimes," pursued Major Beresford, in a lower tone; "and I hear there is a good chance of your making a first-rate marriage, Esther."

The girl hoped that in the silence the beating of her heart could not be heard. "There is too much gossip here," she said, in some confusion; "far too much; and it is not true."

"We shall see—we shall see—but at least, Esther, I want you to marry well. I want you to be sure to be true to your own heart—true to your own heart for that is always the best."

From the darkness on the further end of the balcony there came a smothered sob, and Monica Beresford sat upright among her cushions.

"Esther," she cried hysterically, "whatever you do, never marry a poor man. Look at us—two poor people together—despised and down-trodden, and slighted by everyone because we are poor and cannot entertain. Look at our children and the house; look at everything and take warning by us."

"Monica," said Major Beresford harshly: "Monica, control yourself; think of the example you are holding out to Esther."

"Confess that it is true, Norman," cried his wife shrilly; "confess that our life has been a failure because of its poverty, and will be a miserable failure to the end."

He was too honourable to turn upon his wife and tell her that it was she herself who had made life the failure that it so surely was. If she had had courage and a good heart, they need never have sunk into the deplorable condition of hopeless failure that was their condition now. He would never have drifted into the man who had no ambition beyond his rubber of bridge and his dinner; while she might have been the loved mother and the admired member of society that a woman of her own standing may so easily be. It was like standing by the grave side of a dead friend to contemplate the past, and since Beresford had no heart for it he rose to his feet and stumbled back into the house with the step of an old man. Whether he or she had been most to blame

mattered little, for the fact remained that neither had owned the stability of a living faith—the hope of a courageous soul.

"You see how it is, Esther," sobbed Monica again. "Take my advice and never marry a poor man: it just takes all the heart out of you," and just because she was overtired and depressed with the reaction of the excitement of the afternoon, Esther felt certain in her own heart that she could never, never marry Geoffrey Hanmer, and embrace poverty even for his sake.

CHAPTER X.

"The wisdom of fools."

"WHAT has happened to me?" said Esther, looking at the bright sunlight that was barring the blind against her bedroom window; "the news from Aborfield no longer interests me."

Upon her knee lay a letter from Mrs. Hanmer that had just arrived, and in every line she could trace a latent fretting anxiety that she was too generous to attribute to Geoffrey's agency. It was he who had persuaded his mother to write to Esther; he who had been so anxious for a personal line from herself that he had never rested until Mrs. Hanmer's letter was in the post. There were four closely-written sheets of foreign paper, but the petty gossip of a small country village fell on inattentive ears; and the fact that Geoffrey was likely to make a satisfactory income out of his Wyandottes and the Berkshire pigs, was swamped in the reality of the lovely gown that lay upon her bed ready for the afternoon.

"I hope that you won't forget your old friends, Essie, in the gaiety of a Malta season; though I suspect that before long you will learn the truth that a penniless girl, however pretty she may be, may have a score of admirers, but never a serious proposal of any value. Geoffrey sends his love."

Mrs. Hanmer had written, as she so often spoke—unadvisedly; and Esther resented the shadow of interference. "I can't help it," she said to herself; "I can't, indeed; I cannot marry a poor man!"

She looked round at the pitiful shifts for furniture typical of an officer's quarters: the orange chests that served so many purposes, the cupboards made out of packing-cases disguised by chintz curtains. She had never disliked them so much before, but since her conversation with Mrs. Beresford, something new had sprung up in her, something that was quite alien to her nature. With her father she had dined at the Palace the night before to meet her grandmother's friend, the mother of Lady Adela Stanier, the Duchess de Menilmontant, and she had once again been the centre of a little court of admiration in which the old French lady was the leading voice. To-day she had woke up with a disinclination for her daily duties that had extended itself to positive irritability over the children's lessons, and Lucy had been reduced to tears. She remembered now Alwyne's last clasp of the hand as he bade her goodnight, and blushed as she recalled his glance, although he had had no opportunity for any private speech with her. She was to drive with him down to the Polo this afternoon, and she knew what he meant to say to her, and to-day she knew what her answer would be. It had taken Lord Francis Alwyne some time to make up his mind seriously as to his proposal to Esther. The position of Lady Francis Alwyne seemed to him to be one of such great importance socially, that hesitation as to the great decision was only natural. But seeing her as he did under the light of the approval of one of the most fastidious of the leaders of Parisian society, he was finally assured that she would make him a suitable wife, and that he might allow the love that was in his heart to have full sway over his scruples. The love that Geoffrey Hanmer had given her was from his whole heart, and would have been faithful through weal or woe. But, with her eyes open, Esther had rejected the true for the false, and was deliberately selling herself for place and power.

"My dear," the little old duchesse had said, as she bade the child of her old friend goodnight, with a slim hand under her dainty chin; "you know that you are a very pretty girl, for I am sure I am not the first to tell