

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 Hammer, 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."

UP and down went the population of Valetta that warm autumn night, flirting their fans and chattering like so many sparrows. There were several English people walking up and down under the Palace walls, and Esther, as she and her companion leaned over the green rail, started a little as she recognised among them Mrs. Galton and her two daughters, accompanied by two young men. They had evidently been staring up at her for some time, and Esther became aware with a blush that the blue and black sleeve was very close to her own arm. She did not know how lovely she looked leaning out of the shadows like a spirit of the old grey Palace, but she could hear the hard ring of Carrie Galton's laugh, and across the road her quick ears caught the words, "Beggars on horse back."

But Alwyne had seen or heard nothing, and followed her downstairs. She realised, as she saw the clock, that her father must have been waiting outside for her for some time, and Alwyne started a little as the stooping, thin figure in the shabby clothes came out of the shadow of the Palace courtyard, and Esther introduced him to her father.

"How d'you do, won't you come in and have a drink of something?" he said, evidently much relieved when Beresford quietly declined the proffered hospitality: for he thought the A.D.C.'s manner supercilious. It would have struck a man of kindlier nature that the comparison between father and daughter was a tragedy in itself, but Alwyne only saw the unfashionable clothes, the unsmart figure of the man whose career had been a failure.

"When Esther is my wife," he said to himself as he turned back into the Palace, "I must make it clear to her that she has no encumbrances in the shape of down-at-heel relations tacked on to her."

But Esther, in blissful unconsciousness of Alwyne's meditation, was pouring out to her father the history of the evening.

"I am glad to thing you enjoyed it, Essie," he said. "Anyhow, you looked very nice, and I am sure that you did credit to your relations. I cannot understand now how it was that your grandmother could afford to buy you such an ample outfit as you describe—for I always imagined that Mme. de la Perouse was badly off."

"O yes, father, she is—is very poor; but she sold some of her jewels, and they were worth a great deal of money."

"I suppose that necklace of yours is worth several hundred pounds," said Major Beresford, with a faint sigh, as he thought of a sheaf of unpaid bills and a threatening tailor.

"I think it must be a valuable one, for it was given to my grandmother by Marie Antoinette."

Esther's answer was so innocent that her father bit his lip. He could not ask her for the necklace, but his affairs were in so desperate a state that something had to be done to avert disaster.

"Essie," he said again, and his voice was so harsh that the girl looked up at him afraid; "I hate to ask you—I hate to ask you, or to say such a thing to you: but have you any money of your own?"

The clear eyes of the girl met his with a vague trouble in their depths. "Yes, father, I have twenty pounds," she said, gently. "My grandmother wished me to be

independent; she thought I might want a little money now and again."

"Essie, will you lend me fifteen pounds?" said Major Beresford. "It is an awful thing for a father to ask his child for money, but I will pay you back—"

Esther put out her hand in the darkness with a little sob and nestled close to him.

"O! daddy—oh, daddy," she said, letting the old pet name of her babyhood slip out. "Don't you know that it is a joy to help you at all. You should never have asked for it if I could but have guessed you wanted the money. Why did you not say so directly, daddy dear? The money was only to buy clothes for the children."

The leather curtains that hung on either side of the carriage were open, and by the light of the full moon he saw her face, pale and serious, and his own eyes dropped.

"Father, dear, it makes me so happy to be asked to do anything for you," Esther said again, half afraid of his silence.

Beresford laid his hand suddenly on her warm, clinging fingers and pushed them away. Before his mind there surged many a scene that he would not for the world have confided to his daughter; for there was one vice that held Major Beresford in thrall, and that was only secretly indulged in and spoken of very little.

He was accustomed to play cards for high stakes, and as is so often the case with the gambler, his winnings at first had spurred him on to indulge more often in the fatal pastime. He had begun to play for money when his affairs became embarrassed, owing to indolence and extravagance. Instead of doing his best by honest means to release himself from the position into which he had drifted, he tried to increase his income by these desperate means, and every penny that he could scrape together went to the "Bridge" table; and of late luck had been entirely against him, so that he was now reduced to considerable straits to meet what he called a debt of honour.

"Thank you, Esther," he said, hoarsely; "you shall have it all back again with interest."

Something in her father's manner repelled the girl with a quick sense of fear. "I shall never want it again, father," she said, proudly; "all that I have belongs to you."

They were driving by the sea, and the full moon lay on the face of the blue waters, so that the island was as light as day. Under the lee of the shore a little fleet of fishing boats rocked at anchor, with a lamp like a star at each foremast. By the rays of the moon, Beresford, glancing down at the rapt face at his side, was suddenly carried back over the gap of twenty years to the day he had first seen her mother. Esther was like the Molly he had wooed and won in the stormy, impetuous courtship that had swept them from their feet in those old days. Here was the same innocence of the world, the same high sense of honour that had attracted him to the lovely, shy Marie de la Perouse. He felt the same sudden desire for high ideal and ambition as he had felt in those old days; and he was almost inclined to vow that he would never touch a card again. But Giovanni was already drawing up at the gate of the garden, and the drive and the high ideals faded into the darkness of the night.

As Esther came stepping softly up the stairs, the door of the little girls' room opened, and Mrs. Beresford came out.

"Oh! here you are!" she cried, shrilly. "Here has Lucy been ill all the evening and me all alone: for ayah thought that Hadji was ill too, and would not leave him, and you in your smart clothes gadding about at parties. I suppose it is the part that the modern young woman always plays: but I can tell you that a modern mother is not a part that I am inclined to undertake."

It was Esther's first experience of the unreasonable irritability of a nervous invalid, and she had no idea that a woman whom she had left smiling and pleased three hours earlier could change so entirely into an angry flushed virago, unreasonably angry over an incident that had disturbed her from her ordinary easy life of self-indulgence.

"O, I am so sorry; I would not have left you if I