

Esther smiled bravely, though her heart sank a little.

"I shall be quite happy in Malta, whatever happens," she said; "and I am sure my stepmother will be more glad to see me in a nice dress than in a shabby one."

"I expect you will have to cut them up for the children," laughed Sybil. "I shall never forget what awful little frumps they were in Cairo. Aunt Monica has no idea of management, or of anything, indeed, but lying on a sofa and reading novels, and having her hair brushed by the ayah when she has a headache."

"Sybil, you let your tongue run away with you!" said her mother, severely—and a disagreeable silence fell upon the tea-table.

"We are going to the theatre to-night, Esther," said Mrs. Galton, at last, "and dining at a restaurant first. You see, my girls are so much sought after that our time is never our own. But I have arranged for you to have an egg and a glass of milk and to go to bed early; I thought you would not care to give your father the expense of dining to-night at the hotel."

"Oh, no—no!" said Esther; "I want to save him from expense in every way."

It never entered her thoughts that Mrs. Galton might have included her in her dinner party, or that her gown of glittering black sequins would have been very pretty to wear on the occasion; but she cheerfully bade her new friends good-night, and sat down to write to her grandmother in the solitude of the sitting-room after eating her poached egg.

The Galtons were not fond of reading and therefore she had to content herself with a copy of "Bradshaw" and a penny novelette; so she decided to go to bed when her letter was written.

Even the noisy, ill-tempered entrance of Jeanne to the apartment they were sharing could not rouse Esther from her sound sleep; and, looking at the innocent beauty of the girl, the heart of the Frenchwoman relented.

"I would not be a driver of slaves—'ma foi'—no!" Jeanne said, as she looked down with shaded candle at the lovely, flushed face. "To come home at two o'clock in the morning—to be cross, 'ma foi,' how cross—and then to make me pack instead of sleeping—and be up before seven to-morrow; that is what I call slavery. Can I help it if the gentleman does not wish to marry Miss Sybil? I think I see this pretty child here on board ship with her admirers round her, and if I can make her happy I will; for it would be a pleasure to dress such hair—and not the sandy locks of Mlles. Carrie and Sybille." And still grumbling, the Frenchwoman hurried to bed.

Esther was awake early next morning, for the noise of the hotel and the roar of the streets outside roused her soon after sunrise; and, after lying still for a little, she stole noiselessly out of bed, and, wrapping herself in her blue flannel dressing-gown, perched herself on the window-seat. Up and down in the street below, London surged eastward and westward, and the astonished eyes of the girl followed the ceaseless line of traffic.

Opposite to her room, that was so near the roof, a tall block of houses rose across the street, but she, being above, could look down into the top windows, and she saw a roomful of London's weary workers get up from sleep and huddle on their clothes, then sit down to the eternal stitching that was their trade—pale and stunted, without air, religion, or hope—just one of the thousand tragedies that unfold themselves day after day in the world of London.

"Ah!" said Esther, drawing a deep breath like a sob; "I seem to have all and they nothing."

She drew her little book towards her, and turned over the leaves to find the poem that her grandmother had marked in her tremulous handwriting, and the verse that Mme. de la Prouse had underlined seemed to be a swift thought of help:

"There are in this loud stunning tide
Of human care and crime,
With whom the melodies abide
Of th' everlasting chime;
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and rumbling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat."

The thought helped her, and in another half-hour she roused Jeanne, and finished her own share of packing.

It is perhaps, on occasions such as that of starting for a long voyage that the character of the individual human being may be best realised, and Esther had cause to be deeply ashamed of Mrs. Galton, even before the

door of the hotel was shut behind them. She fought over her bill, disputing the charges, item by item. She abused the cabmen for their treatment of her boxes, and deplored the fact that Esther had far more luggage than she had expected, all in one breath; and when they finally stood on the wharf at Tilbury with the great ship towering above them, and the last boxes being swung into the hold by the donkey-engine, she felt suddenly relieved.

The "Pleiades" was the finest vessel of a fine fleet, and Esther, with dim memories of the old troopship that had conveyed her home from India, ten years before, wondered and admired each perfect arrangement, as she followed the elaborately-gowned figures of her companions on deck.

"Good gracious! Hethcote—don't tell me that I see before my very eyes the horse-leech and her daughters, to whom we were unfortunately introduced by your aunt, of revered memory, last night?"

"I am beginning to be dreadfully afraid that such is the case, Alwyne," said Captain Hethcote, with a groan. The two young men were leaning over the rail as the Galtons climbed on deck. Captain Hethcote, a fair, keen-faced young gunner officer, was going out to join his company in Malta, and his friend, Lord Francis Alwyne, was also on his way out there to act as A.D.C. on the staff of the Governor of the island. He was a man who seemed to have all that the world and fortune could give him. His blue eyes and crisp brown hair, and tall, finely-built figure, always perfectly tailored, made up a personality that had long been the admiration and despair of many a scheming mother in society. He took life easily, and had no intention of marrying until he could do well for himself; and having a great sense of his own value, and of the importance of the regiment of Household Cavalry to which he belonged, his outlook on life was naturally a limited one. But the attitude of Lord Francis was due more to his upbringing than to any fault of his nature, and he was by birth a gentleman with a good heart.

"By Jove, Hethcote," he said, suddenly, "Surely that is not another Miss Galton whom we have not seen bringing up the rear? Unless my eyes deceive me, my dear fellow, we are going to have a pretty girl on board for your edification."

Jack Hethcote studied the newcomer keenly. "I say, Alwyne," he said, drawing his lips together in a faint whistle, as he realised the beauty of Miss Beresford, "I don't know who she is—not a Galton, I'll be bound—but she is a stunner; only why should she edify me more than you?"

Lord Francis, with an air of what was befitting to an A.D.C., withdrew to the other end of the deck, as Hethcote, blushing and stammering, went forward to meet Mrs. Galton, and to offer his help. But if he hoped to be introduced to Esther, he was doomed to disappointment, for, with a quick word, Mrs. Galton despatched her below with Jeanne to see after the cabins, and the young man had only time for a bow and a glance in her direction.

"Is that another daughter of yours, Mrs. Galton?" he said with a polite smile as she disappeared.

"Daughter? Oh, dear, no!" returned that lady acidly. "Only a girl I am taking out to Malta to her father, Major Beresford, in the Wiltshire Rifles."

"Oh, indeed," said Jack Hethcote with interest. "A very good regiment, the Wiltshires—I should think she ought to have a jolly time!"

Mrs. Galton was vaguely struck by the idea that Esther might be a valuable asset in military life, but she thrust the thought resolutely from her as preposterous. "Oh, I am afraid that Esther Beresford won't have much of a time," she said lightly. "She is going out to be mother's help and governess to her family."

"Poor girl," returned Hethcote, warmly. "But I am sure of one thing, anyway—and that is that all the Wiltshires will unite to make her enjoy her time as far as possible, for they are the best lot of fellows, and the best polo team in the place."

"Did I see Lord Francis Alwyne with you just now?" said Mrs. Galton, breaking in upon the boyish enthusiasm of the young man, which was hardly to her taste. She was making a move in the direction of the A.D.C. when Hethcote dexterously barred the way.

"Alwyne is awfully busy just now, Mrs. Galton. Can't I do anything for you about your cabin? Has the Purser done his duty by you?"

And Mrs. Galton, keenly on the track of anyone who might have possibly neglected their duty towards her, was manoeuvred out of sight and sound of his friend.

Esther Beresford came up on deck, just as the ship