

you wish to. As for her mother; why, your inimitable manner will keep her off, I'll be bound!" And Lord Francis, shrugging his shoulders, resigned himself to the infliction.

And so it came to pass that Mrs. Galton and her eldest daughter, assisted on deck by two stewardesses, had the unexpected sight of Sybil, with shrill voice and flushed face, seated in the very centre of the most select circle on board.

"I understand her!" cried Carrie, tartly. "These people want to know Esther, and think they can't do it without being civil to one of us; and they have chosen Sybil because she was dressed first!"

But since there are moments in life when it is more discreet to be deaf, Mrs. Galton said nothing; but, closing her eyes, murmured that she felt inclined for a nap since the sun was so bright upon the sea.

#### CHAPTER VI.

"Why stay we on this earth except to grow?"

MRS. GALTON spent the better part of two days in trying to make friends with Mrs. Clare-Smythe, but since any attempt at intimacy was received with the frigidity of an iceberg, she pleaded an attack of neuralgia, and confined herself to the opposite corner of the deck to the one occupied by that lady and her suite. Since Sybil had attained to the dignity of an acquaintance with Mrs. Clare-Smythe, it was plain that Mrs. Galton could not pretend to disapprove of that desirable, if flighty little woman, and the situation was a difficult one, until Carry struck up a friendship with an Indian judge and his wife, who, through the successful visit of a royal duke to their province had attained to a K.C.S.I., and for the remainder of the voyage dear Sir Solomon and Lady Brown were never very far away.

"Do look at Mrs. Galton with that funny old 'Sol Brownwig,' as we used to call him!" said Mrs. Clare-Smythe one night as she walked the deck with Esther; "look how close her head is to his deaf ear—I expect she is screaming inquiries into it as to his gout, and he is retorting by asking after her temper!"

Esther said nothing, and she felt the arm she held stiffen unconsciously.

"Oh, dear, I forgot!" she said penitently; "how stupid I am—they are not your relations, and yet you don't like hearing them abused."

"No—please not," said Esther.

But why on earth, my dear? Now I have the most absurdly tiresome mother-in-law—a ridiculous woman—who looks at both sides of a half-penny before she spends it, and I love to abuse her when she can't hear!"

"My grandmother always taught me to try not to say anything spiteful about anyone," said Esther in a low voice; "just always to look for their good side, because they were sure to have one, and if you could not say anything nice about them, at least to say nothing nasty."

There was a band playing somewhere on the second-class deck of the 'Pleiades,' and the sound of the music, rough enough and partly untrained, was wafted to their ears, softened into harmony by the exquisite night. The ripple of the water against the sides of the ship, the creak of the engines, and the sigh of the light breeze in the awnings, lent a pleasant air of peace to the whole scene. The deck was almost deserted save for the two women, for there was a concert going on down below, and arrangements being made between newly established friends for going on shore at Gibraltar the following day.

"Esther," said Nell Clare-Smythe suddenly, "on a night like this, and in your companionship, I want to be good—you make the path of righteousness seem a beautiful flower-gemmed road, and I have always been brought up to consider it a way of thorns. I want to do my duty to Budge and my husband now, and yet I know that to-morrow I shall feel just as I always do, that a child is all very well when it is in its best clothes and perfectly adorable, but that it is an unendurable affliction for more than half-an-hour at a time, and that one's own pleasure comes far before one's husband and his comfort always."

She spoke with such swift passion that Esther hardly recognised her brilliant acquaintance of dinner time, whose glittering costume of black jet with its "frou-frou" of silk skirts and grey cloak, was the simplest and yet the handsomest dress on board, in this woman of the pale face and earnest eyes.

"Dear Mrs. Clare-Smythe," she stammered, "I am sure you are very, very good—I wish that you would not talk like that."

Nell's beautiful jewelled hand caught her own fingers in a tight clasp. "That is just what I am not," she said. "I am a vain, frivolous, pleasure-loving creature, for whom the gay life in Malta is the very worst existence possible—but will you help me, Esther—will you be my friend always?"

"Why, yes, of course," cried Esther, moved out of herself at the sight of the other's emotion; "only you will not have time for just an ordinary girl like me. Why I dare say you will forget my existence, or, at least, that is what Mrs. Galton prophesied about Malta for me."

Nell Clare-Smythe forgot her own emotion, and gripped her new friend by the shoulder. "Oh, you double-distilled little goose!" she said, "are you always going to be as blind as a bat? Don't you know that a girl with your face will have Malta, and all the young men in it, at her feet, and all the women blue with jealousy?"

Esther's charming laugh rang out, and Mrs. Clare-Smythe watched her in unbelieving curiosity. "Oh, dear me! If I only believed half the things you tell me, what a very conceited person I should be!" she cried.

Nell turned at the sound of a quick step on the deck behind them.

"Oh, there you are, Frank. Come here—you are just in time to help me to convince this obstinate child that if her face alone were her fortune it would make her a millionaire!"

Esther drew herself up unconsciously, for the jesting was not to her taste, and Alwyne saw it.

"My dear cousin, I did not come here to make personal remarks, but to suggest that you should turn in now so that you might be up in time to see the sun rise upon the rock of Gib."

"What!" scoffed Nell; "do you imagine I am going to forsake my bed for an old rock? We may have played together in the nursery, Frank, but you have forgotten my force of character if you imagine that I am prepared to go so far for scenery."

Lord Francis turned imperturbably to Esther.

"Shall you risk the early rising, Miss Beresford?" he said. "I can assure you that it will be worth it."

"Yes, I shall certainly come on deck," returned Esther, with a soft wave of colour in her face.

"Gracious! How young you are!" cried Nell. "To risk your complexion and your appetite! Now for patience sake, don't tire yourself for your excursion on shore, when I want you to look your very best for lunch with the 'Westshires.'"

"Good-night," said Esther, with a quiet smile; "I shall be very careful."

"Frank," said Mrs. Clare-Smythe, when they were left alone, "you have the heart of a frog, I believe! You always preserve the same glacial demeanour towards Miss Beresford; why can't you fall in love with her like a wholesome young man—like Captain Hethcote, for instance—and forget you are an A.D.C.?"

"My dear Nell, very few people have retained their youthful ideals as long as you have. Now if I were to fall in love with every pretty girl I meet I should have more scalps attached to my sword-belt than Bluebeard himself!"

"Out upon you! Fie upon you, bold-faced jig!" cried his cousin sharply, and left him with a nod and a provoking smile.

Left alone, Lord Francis Alwyne leaned his elbow on the rail and looked down into the dark blue mirror of the sea, flashing where the keel of the "Pleiades" cut the water with phosphorescent light. But it was not the night or the sea that was attracting his attention, but from the clear mirror of the water the lovely face of Esther Beresford looked back at him.

"I don't know how or why it is," said Alwyne, shaking himself together slowly, "but I believe—I believe—I am beginning to care for that girl. Of course it would never do—never at all—but she is dangerously attractive—and I have no time for that sort of thing!"

He experienced some annoyance that a young man of such social value as himself should be subject to the weakness of fluttered feelings, and determined to be more wary in his intercourse with so charming a girl as Esther Beresford. But there was little thought of care in his mind next morning when he came up on deck to find her there before him in her quiet corner. She was looking as fresh as the day itself in her blue serge gown, with her soft hair ruffled about her face, under her jaunty little cap, and before he had realised what he was doing, he had drifted across the ship to her side.

TO BE CONTINUED