

# A Prisoner of Hope\*

A NEW SERIAL STORY.

By MRS. WEIGALL

Resume: Esther Beresford, who has been at Miss Jenkins' private school for ten years, is visited by Mrs. Galton, her stepmother's sister, with a view to the former's leaving school. Major Beresford and his wife are at Malta. Esther is a beautiful girl, who has earned her schooling by music teaching and is a great favourite with her French grandmother, Mme. de la Perouse, who lives nearby. The old lady resolves to send her out on her first voyage into life, with a suitable wardrobe and letters of introduction. Esther goes to bid farewell to two old friends, Mrs. Hanmer and her son, Geoffrey.

"I might have warned her before she went to-day," said the old lady, tremulously. "Yet at the same time, it is far better not to put such ideas into the child's head, since they grow there naturally enough. But Geoffrey, I am sure, is too generous to bind her to so uncertain a future, and the girl must have her chance."

And that chance reminded her of her promised letter to Malta. She sat down to her table, and drew her dainty letter-paper towards her, stamped with its simple crown, and the envelope was addressed to Mme. la Duchesse de Menilmontant, Paris.

"My Dear Old Friend,—I break the silence of more years than I like to count to ask you a favour, and if ever you have loved me, or I have done you a kindness, I pray you to grant it.

"My granddaughter, Stephanie's child, is going out to her father, who is with his regiment in Malta, immediately. Will you ask Adela to be kind to her? She is beautiful and dowerless, and this would be a chance for her, but I fancy that Henry Beresford made something of a 'mesalliance' in his second marriage; and my granddaughter is a second edition of Stephanie and myself, therefore I can commend her to you without fear. I heard from Adela once that you were thinking of paying her a visit. Please God it might be while my dear child was in the island, so that you might see her for yourself.

"Adieu, dear Henriette. If my travelling days were not over I should, long ago have availed myself of your many invitations.—Yours,

"Antoinette de la Perouse."

And when the letter was in the postman's bag she felt easier in her mind.

From the wooded road that led to the village of Aborfield Esther walked in a day-dream. She had so much to think of, and so much to wonder at, that when she passed Geoffrey Hanmer going homewards with a basket on his arm she did not recognise him until he spoke.

"Why, Esther, are you too grand to recognise your old friends now?"

"Geoffrey! I never saw you!" she cried, facing round on him.

Geoffrey Hanmer was a tall, well-built man, with a face that of late had grown so accustomed to lines of care that there were crowsfeet now about his eyes. His suit of blue serge and straw hat were well worn, but he looked every inch the squire of Aborfield as he threw back his broad shoulders and smiled into her eyes with his honest blue ones. His mouth, under his brown moustache, was a firm one, and looking at Geoffrey Hanmer one would have said that here was a man who had his back to the wall through life, and was prepared to fight for success until he won it.

"What have you got in that basket, Geoffrey?"

Esther was looking at him with dancing eyes of amusement, for it was suggestive of butter or good honest marketings, and he held it by the handle with an air of trepidation.

"Be careful, Esther; it is a setting of Mrs. Yorke's eggs, to put under one of my hens. I want to try Wyandotte, as I believe they are remunerative in every way."

Two years ago Geoffrey Hanmer had walked by his father's side through his broad acres with the air of a future monarch, who had manservants and maidservants to wait upon his lightest whim; to-day he was monarch of himself alone, but he had come into his kingdom like a conqueror.

"I hope you are doing well this year," said Esther,

walking at his side through the long stretch of grass meadows that led up to the Hall from the high road. As he looked down at her he thought, with a pang at his heart, how lovely she was, with the sun upon her bright hair and the clear fresh oval of her cheek.

"The balance is on the right side so far, Esther," he said, confidently. "It will be a matter of some years, I know, but I am convinced that I shall succeed in paying off all the charges on the estate, and in beginning again with a clear outlook and not a debt in the world. I wish that my mother would not ignore so resolutely the fact of our poverty; but I believe that she has never forgiven me for staying on here in the dear old house instead of letting it to strangers and retrenching at Dieppe or Boulogne."

"All your friends think you have done what is right and brave," said Esther, gently. "You have done a much finer thing in facing the county in altered circumstances than you would have done in running away and leaving the village to strangers."

The egg basket was between them, but he managed to throw a world of passionate gratitude into his voice as he answered her.

"I am quite satisfied if you think that I have done right. But oh, Esther! I cannot bear to think that you are going away!"

Suddenly across the girl's mind there flashed the memory of words and looks that made it seem possible to her that something for what she was not prepared might be said—some demand made for which she had no answer ready, and she broke in hastily:

"Yes, I am very sorry to go for many reasons. But is that not your mother on the terrace, Geoffrey?"

"Yes; she is beckoning to you. Do you mind going in at the little gate, Esther? I must confess that I have not got the courage yet to face my mother with a butter-basket on my arm, so I shall go round by the back yard." And Esther, glad to escape for once, opened the wicket and ran through, up the flagged path.

Mrs. Hanmer met her warmly. "Why Esther, my love, what is all this I hear about your going to Malta for the season? Such a gay station as it is, and such fun as you will have! Dear me! how I wish I could persuade that dear, stupid, money-grabbing son of mine to throw his cares to the wind and take me out, too! This place is as dull as ditchwater, and Geoffrey is too absurd with his poverty mania."

Esther tried to get in a word edgewise, but Mrs. Hanmer was too quick for her, and waived her aside like a troublesome fly. "My eyes are not very good, but I am sure that he was carrying a basket. Why did he not get one of the stablemen to carry it? Only Geoffrey is so full of the simple life that I suppose it is correct to do everything for himself, though I am sure I hope no one will ask me to lead it!"

Mrs. Hanmer was a handsome florid woman of middle age, who was well dressed and fond of good living, and who had never known what it was to be without a maid and a pair of horses till now. She possessed an endless fund of small talk, and was not famous for tact; but she had always been a good friend to Mme. de la Perouse, and Esther loved her for that.

"Of course you will stay to lunch, and Geoffrey will walk back with you. And how is your poor dear grandmother? I expect she will feel your departure dreadfully, and I can't think how you can have made up your mind to leave her."

"There was no choice for me," said Esther, distressed. "My father sent for me, and, of course, my first duty is to him."

"My experience of young people," said Mrs. Hanmer, with a faint sniff, "is that their first duty is always to themselves, and, of course, Malta is far more amusing than Grandchester, only, somehow, I never connected you with being a soldier's daughter, Esther. Your stepmother has been a long time sending for you."

Esther smiled faintly, knowing by experience that to argue with Mrs. Hanmer was useless, and they entered the house in silence.

Aborfield Hall was a long, white, stone building with a blue slate roof, built in the form of a half square. The garden was a wide expanse of green lawn, set here and