

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.

A few white, unhappy-looking people presently appeared from below, struggling into the open air as the wind moderated, and from the corner of the deck came Esther's merry voice, "Here we go round the Mulberry bush," and the swing of little feet following her lead.

"Great powers! Look at Hethcote, standing on one leg to black an imaginary boot!" murmured Alwyne. But the next moment so joyous did the party appear, that he felt inclined to join them. He was sorry later that he had not yielded to his impulse when the whole merry crew of children sat down to listen to a fairy story from Esther's lips. The story was the "Three Bears," and Hethcote imitated the growling and the roaring of the Big Bear so admirably that the youngest member of the party had to be comforted and held against Esther's breast.

The day fled by so fast for the girl that it seemed no time before the Devenish family were tucked safely up in bed, and she was sitting down to dinner between Mrs. Clare-Smythe and M. de Brinvilliers, with a pleasant sense of fatigue, and a keen enjoyment of the present moment. Mrs. Galton and her daughters were so much better that they had determined to struggle on deck next day, and Esther's mind was relieved of a burden of invalids. She was looking very pretty in her fresh white gown, and there was an unwonted colour in her cheeks that became her.

"Fair as an English rose!" said the old Frenchman gallantly. "And now you will have to tell me, Miss Beresford, how it is that you talk French like a Parisienne!"

"My grandmother, Madame de la Perouse, taught me," said the girl simply. "She is partly herself a Frenchwoman."

"Ah! cried the old man, with a sudden enthusiasm. "Was she M'selle Antoinette Howard, whose father was at the Embassy in Paris? An English father—but a mother of the ducal house of Menilmontant—and did she marry the Duc de la Perouse?"

Esther nodded.

"Why, she was my great friend as a girl—a child—and as a married woman, my ideal. I might have known you were her granddaughter, for you resemble her greatly, Mlle.; and are you going abroad?"

"I am going to my father in Malta."

"Then we shall perhaps meet there; for I spend a week or two with Lady Stanier on my way back to Egypt, and it will be a pleasure, M'selle. You and Adela Stanier are related, is it not through the Menilmontant family?"

Esther was conscious that the eyes of Mrs. Clare-Smythe were upon her curiously, and she blushed as she answered:

"Yes, Monsieur; Lady Stanier and my grandmother are friends."

"Good gracious, Miss Beresford, how nice for you!" cried Mrs. Clare-Smythe, vivaciously. "I tell you, Adela Stanier is a splendid friend, and she will give you a lovely time!"

Then she turned her shoulder on the girl, and took a bonbon from the dish in front of her cousin.

"I knew I was right, Frank," she said. "The girl is thoroughbred. She ought to go about labelled with her birth certificate if she is much in the society of those awful people who are chaperoning her!"

"Sometimes I really think you are silly, Nell," said Lord Francis, immovably. "If you care to be bothered with the friendship of a young woman, what does it matter what her friends are like? I thought that was your great point."

"Thinking men are a nuisance!" returned Mrs. Clare-Smythe, turning a petulant shoulder upon him; "and you were always a didactic, argumentative person in your nursery, Frank. M. de Brinvilliers is far more amusing!"

Esther slept soundly all that night, and her dreams of the delightful evening she had spent made her sleep refreshing, so that when she awoke to an irritable cross-examination on the part of Sybil Galton as to how she had spent the previous day, she felt suddenly rubbed up the wrong way.

"I expect you made a lot of stupid friends yesterday without mother there to look after you!" she said. "I expect you don't know a paymaster's wife from a colonel's, or a fleet-engineer's from a—"

"I don't think I am really as stupid as you think, Sybil," said Esther, gently. "I met some old friends of my grandmother's on board!"

"Gracious!"

Sybil was looking at her yellow face in the glass, and congratulating herself on the fact that the "Pleiades" was moving along upon an even keel.

"I don't think that your grandmother's friends can be very exciting or youthful in any way!" Sybil said, with a sneer. "Do they all wear caps and spectacles? And what on earth are they going abroad for?"

Esther tried to keep the annoyance out of her voice as she answered, for very often her grandmother had said to her: "You would never be angry if you were to count twenty before you spoke." But though she tried to count twice twenty now, her voice was not very steady, for the contempt had hurt her. "One of them is Mrs. Clare-Smythe, and the others are M. de Brinvilliers and Lord Francis Alwyne."

Sybil was silent for an instant in shocked amazement, for she had never regarded Esther as a possible link with good society, and she knew Mrs. Clare-Smythe and her cousin by report as most desirable people.

"Still, I don't think that mother will be at all pleased by your making friends all alone," she said tartly. "And see if Jeanne is coming to help me to dress."

Esther Beresford stood looking down at the ill-tempered girl in the berth. "Sybil," she said, with sudden dignity, "I want you to understand, please, that I must make my own friends on board ship, if they happen to be friends of my own relations. These people have been very kind to me, and I certainly do not intend to avoid their company."

Her firm voice impressed Sybil with the strength of a character that would be certainly worth consideration; and she looked slowly up at Esther, realising dully how pretty and charming she was. Her mind was slow to take in new impressions, but of this she was convinced: that Esther was likely, with such friends, to have a good time in Malta, and it might be worth while to be friends with her.

"Look here, Esther," she said, eagerly. "I like you, you know, and I am sorry for you, because mamma will be fearfully angry when she comes on deck and finds out about your friends. But I shall stick to you because Carrie is always horrid to me, and does not like me making any new acquaintances who are not going to be friends of hers as well. So I shall be on your side, and Carry and mamma may stick together."

"Sybil!" cried Esther; "surely your sister is not horrid to you! I cannot believe it!"

"Oh! yes she is—jolly horrid; and just because I am smarter and prettier than she is, and more quick with my tongue. Now be an angel and help me into my clothes, for I mean to get up; and Jeanne will have her hands quite full with Mamma and Carrie; and I intend to have a good time as well as you!"

So that when Esther Beresford came on deck it was with Sybil as her companion, and, in spite of a wry face on the part of Mrs. Clare-Smythe, Miss Galton was absorbed, to her great delight, into the select little 'coterie,' and carefully bestowed upon Captain Hethcote.

"My dear Frank, I can stand one of these young women, if I can't have Miss Beresford without her," she said, in a resigned aside to her cousin.

"And you can decline her acquaintance at Malta, if