

the hopeless, irritable voice he used in addressing his family; "you will annoy your sister. Esther, this is Flora and Lucy, and Mamie, and Charlie, and Hadji Baba!"

"I shall soon get to know you all apart," said Esther, with resolute cheerfulness, though the sight of the five ill-mannered, unkempt Beresfords had discounted the pleasure of her arrival. An Indian ayah came out of the front door to meet her, and Esther suddenly recalled her childhood with a rush of recollection, at the sight of the kindly, brown face.

"It is Lalloo! O, Lalloo, I remember you!" she said; and the ayah, whose mother had held her in her arms eighteen years ago as a little baby, laid her lips upon the little hand that Esther held out.

"Not Lalloo, Missie. Lalloo dead and buried; but Lalloo's daughter, Kopama; often hear her mother talk of pretty Missie Baba."

And so Esther found her first friend in Pembroke Camp.

Mrs. Beresford was lying back among her cushions when Esther came out onto the balcony, and in the first shock of realisation as to the condition to which selfish indulgence may bring a woman, Esther stood silent. If Monica Beresford had ever been a pretty woman, the shapelessness of a figure that was addicted to loose tea gowns and rich food, had destroyed every vestige of good looks. She was so indolent that she could not trouble herself to lift more than her head from the cushions and the pile of light novels, to greet Esther. Her dark hair was untidily arranged in a lump at the top of her head, and her dress of white muslin was crumpled and dirty.

"Dear me, Essie," she said, in her half-complaining voice; "I am really very glad to see you—you can be very useful to me now that you are grown up. Did you have a nice voyage? And how is Eleanor Galton? But, really, I have always found my sister such a fatiguing person that I am not a bit glad she has come out to Malta."

Esther gave, and accepted a kiss, and sat down on the seat beside Mrs. Beresford. "Mrs. Galton is very well, and so are her daughters," she said, gently; "and I had a very pleasant voyage."

"Is that the latest fashion in skirts?" said her step-mother again, eyeing the blue serge with curiosity. "Here, in this hole of a place, you never see anything, and my ayah is so stupid; I have to keep her waiting on me almost entirely, and your father is so annoyed with the way the children are neglected—but what can I do?"

"You must tell me what I can do to help you," said Esther, gently, and before she had been in the house half an hour, she found herself committed to the charge of five children, and the general supervision of the household.

"Of course, you can't expect me to do anything!" said Mrs. Beresford, fretfully; "my health is so wretched. I am sure, the mere moving here from Calcutta took me months to recover from, and the Maltese servants are just awful. You will have your hands full, Esther. And as for your father's soldier servant, he muddles about anyhow—"

"Has Esther had any breakfast?" said Major Beresford at the door.

"I don't know!" said his wife fretfully, again; "and if she had not, I don't suppose there would be anything fit to eat in the house. For, with cooks so expensive, and provisions so atrocious, a housekeeper does not know which way to turn! I can assure you, my dear Norman, that Carmela is a fearful manager, and it would have been much better if you had got over your absurd prejudice, and allowed me to have a man cook."

"Prejudice!" said Major Beresford, bitterly; "there is not much prejudice in the fact that men-cooks cost a pound a week in wages! Esther, are you hungry?"

"Not a bit!" said the girl; "may I go and unpack?"

She rose, and looked towards Mrs. Beresford shyly.

"Yes—yes—Norman, show her the way. What are you going to call me, Essie? I don't care to have such a big girl calling me 'mamma.' Why, I vow you and I look like sisters! Why not call me Monica?"

Major Beresford's grim face did not change, and Esther said, quietly: "I should like to call you Monica if it pleases you!"

She hastily added that she was not at all hungry, and Flora was summoned to show her to her room. Flora was the eldest of Major Beresford's second family; an unattractive girl, with a lanky pigtail of ash-coloured hair, and the pallid complexion of the English child who has been kept in the Indian plains too long.

She fingered her new sister's clothes doubtfully, and looked with curiosity at her simple apparatus of toilet necessities.

"What a lot of frocks you've got, Esther," she said, enviously. "Why, we've only got a best one between two of us; and look at my every-day serge!"

She held up a corner of the spotted, torn skirt, and Esther looked meditatively at it, wondering if she could manage to squeeze new clothes for the five children out of her pocket-money.

"Who makes your dresses?" she said, calculating the amount of serge necessary to cover Flora's angular body.

"O! anybody!" said the child, with an elfish laugh. "Sometimes ayah alters one of mother's old ones for me; and sometimes, when father gets his pay, and there is a party to go to, mother lets me have all a new one, and a dressmaker to make it; but that is not very often!"

She continued to keep up a lively conversation, admitting Esther into various side-lights on the household management that shocked her as to the depth of knowledge already possessed by this precocious child of nine. She dismissed her at last, and when she had completed her unpacking, and had dragged the boxes away, she sat down under the window to consider her position. Her bare room, with its matting on the floor and its narrow camp-bed, was utterly devoid of any attempt at daintiness, although she knew that pretty details could be supplied later. There were faded curtains on the windows, and a torn cover on the deal chest of drawers; but the view through the open panes made up for any deficiencies on the part of the furniture, and Esther stood there, drinking in the beauty of the sea and sky, and yellow cliff, seen through a twining frame of scarlet-blossomed creeper. She remembered the view of Dorset Hills and undulating green slopes seen through the cottage windows at Aborfield, and for a moment her eyes flashed bright with tears as she thought of her grandmother and the little white room that had been always so exquisitely dainty in every way. What was Mme. de la Perouse doing now without her? And at the thought she took out her writing case and began a letter to her, in which she was presently interrupted by a soft thump at the door.

"Come in!" she said, and meeting with no answer, went to open it; and found Baba sitting on the floor, and hugging a shaggy pup round the neck. Baba's eyes were sad, and his cheeks stained with tears, and Esther picked him up and carried him into her room, where she kissed and comforted him to her heart's content.

"Hadji Baba, what is it?" she said, wondering why his clothes looked as if he had been dragged through a quickset hedge backwards.

"Me want kissin' and a comfy knee," said Hadji Baba; "and so do Ponto. The others is playin' quicket, and the ball was hard when it hit my head!" and at the thought of his injuries he burst into sobs again. Esther felt her whole heart go out to this child with the exquisite, fair, curly hair, and the eyes like mosaics of lapis lazuli, and the wistful red lips. Somehow Hadji Baba had absorbed into his small person all the charm and beauty of the Beresford family, and, indeed, he possessed every quality that the others lacked. A little eau-de-Cologne upon the bruised forehead, and a short history of the "Three Bears," brought the smiles to Hadji Baba's lips again, and his sorrows were forgotten in the oasis of Esther's caresses. In the depths of the girl's trunk there was laid away a little store of children's clothes that Mme. de la Perouse had unearthed from one of her boxes in the attic at the Cottage, and in an instant Esther was engaged in the delightful task of dressing Hadji Baba from head to foot. When Mme. de la Perouse had given her the old-fashioned outfit, she had told her that they had belonged to her little son who had died when he was little more than a baby, and Esther had loved her for the thought that had dictated such a sacrifice on behalf of the far-off child. Hadji Baba, dressed in a little white cambric suit trimmed with fine embroidery, his hair brushed into pretty curls, and his face and hands clean and sweet with scented soap, looked like an old miniature.

"What shall I do when it gets dirty?" he said at last.

"Put a clean one on, you little darling!" cried Esther giving him a loving squeeze; "there are heaps of pretty suits for you, and I can make more; for you are going to be my boy, and sleep in my room."

"Then I shall never cry any more," said Hadji Baba; "for I just love you, Essie!"

TO BE CONTINUED