

in childlike faith; and in the peace that came upon her heart she knew which she must choose.

"Dear Lord Francis," she wrote, "I want to tell you that I am very sorry—for I think I have made a mistake in my feeling for you, and I am glad that you have written so plainly to me. I cannot leave my father now that he is in trouble, and I can be of use to my little sisters in many ways. I think you do not understand what I feel about duty, and I think, therefore, that we could never be happy, if we were to be more to one another than we are now. Please forgive me for having given you a wrong impression of my feelings to you: it has been all my fault. I am yours sincerely, Esther Beresford."

The prim little letter in its schoolgirl handwriting reached Lord Francis Alwyne as he sat in his private sitting-room, waiting for the summons from Pembroke to fetch Esther to the Palace. He had no doubt whatever as to her ultimate decision, and when he had read her letter through, he flung it into the fire with an angry exclamation.

"By Jove! I'll bring her to her senses!" he said sharply; "she shall ask my pardon for this, and very humbly, too! It is ridiculous that I should be treated like this by a mere schoolgirl! Never be happy together? No, by Jove! we never can be, unless she is convinced of her folly!"

Lady Adela Stanier saw that he was thoroughly annoyed, and the Duchesse de Menilmontant came up to her during the evening with the same thought.

"What is wrong with Frank Alwyne, Adela? Is the engagement not progressing as it should do?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear mother," said Lady Adela, brusquely; "I'm beginning to think that Esther is too good for him—or, indeed, for any of us. There are depths in her nature, and a passion for self-sacrifice that do not exist in our world, where we overlay duty with expediency."

"Yes, chérie," said the old lady; "it was the same with her grandmother, my dear friend. They are fit for the kingdom of heaven, but not so much for the kingdom of this world," and she sighed a little; for Mme. de la Perouse, in her lonely life, had kept what she had never possessed—the blessing of a quiet heart at peace with God and man.

When Esther had sent off the letter she felt happier. There were so many duties before her that she had no time to sit down and remember that, under other circumstances she would have been one of the gay dinner-party that night with the opera afterwards, and the certainty that she would be the admired and envied of every beholder in the Governor's box. Somewhere she had read these lines, and they came back to her now with double meaning:

"Oh I have caught the contagion of a world that I never loved,  
Pleased myself with approval of those that I ne'er approved.  
Paltered with pleasures that pleased not, and fame where no fame could be,  
And how shall I feel, do you think, dear, when the angels are looking at me?"

She had not fallen very far from her first high resolutions, only far enough to realise how great might have been her fall if she had not been arrested at this, the outset of her career. The fact that the children clung to her in their vague fear of illness, and that her father turned to her as to a consoler, helped her through the restless days when the strangeness of their isolation had struck cold upon her; and when Hadji was growing hourly weaker, and Mrs. Beresford was very ill, Major Beresford grew closer to his daughter than he had ever been before in those hours of waiting, and it was to her ears that he confided the history of his card-playing, and the loss of so much of his money.

"I knew it was wrong, Essie," he said; but God knows, with all this before me, I will promise never to touch a card again. Only life was so dreary, I had to find something to enliven it—some excitement. Fancy my talking to my daughter like this, Essie; yet you are like your mother: you always understand and always help."

Esther said nothing in reply, but kissed his hand tenderly; and slipping out of the room an hour later, she returned with her little purse, and laid it at her father's side.

"I don't want it, dear father," she said; "keep it for yourself; I want you to have it."

And though he said nothing, Major Beresford felt the sudden relief at her words; and vowed to himself that, come what might, when once he was clear of his debt of honour he would never touch a card again.

The post brought two letters when she sat eating her breakfast, tired and dispirited after a bad night. The children were so troublesome with their quarrels and their questions, and even the ayah was wailing and lamenting over Mrs. Beresford, who was a bad patient, and demanding to be sent back to India, though stout, motherly Mrs. Delaney was a tower of strength, and Delaney himself indefatigably ready to meet every trouble bravely.

"Any news, Essie?" said Major Beresford, glancing at the quivering white face above the fresh holland gown.

"It is only from Mrs. Galton," said Esther, knowing that her father was very anxious as to Alwyne's next move; "perhaps you had better read the one from Mrs. Clare-Smythe too; it explains things."

She rose, trying to smile, and went out into the verandah where presently her father followed her with a frown.

"What are you going to do, Essie; what does it all mean? Do you care for the young man?"

Esther lifted her eyes bravely to her father's face. "My pride cares," she said, valiantly; "but my heart does not. I think it will end, daddy, in my becoming a home-bird, and staying in the nest for always."

"The nest will be very glad of it, Essie; but, child, I want you to be happy."

Esther turned her lovely eyes upon him, smiling through her tears. "I don't think I should be happy if I married Lord Francis Alwyne, daddy—I don't, indeed—our ideas about life are not a bit the same."

And after looking at her in silence for a moment, her father went away with a sigh.

Esther gained her self-control before the children came clamouring about her asking her to settle their plans for the day, and it was only when she was alone in her own room that she read her letters through again.

"Dearest Esther, you are a quixotic goose, and I don't know whether I love or hate you. P.S.—Frank is not worthy of you. Don't worry your head about him."

Esther tore the letter into little pieces, with a faint laugh, and turned to Mrs. Galton's:

"Dear Esther, I am distressed to hear of the sad turn that the illness has taken with little Henry. My sister also seems ill, and I am glad that you are doing your duty. Of course, I shall not come near the house or see any of you. You will be annoyed to hear that Lord Francis Alwyne is paying great attention to the Hon. Miss Treherne, who is out here for the season—a beautiful woman, with a great deal of money. It must be distressing for you to have played your cards so badly, but remember that I always prophesied he would never care for you enough to marry you. Your affectionate Aunt, E. Galton."

Esther tossed the white scraps of torn letters to the winds.

"What does it matter?" she said to herself; "what anyone says or thinks—if only I do right? Things will work out in the end for the best—I know they will."

And, with a resolute toss of her head, Esther went up to her stepmother's room, and sent the ayah out for a walk.

"So you have come at last, Esther!" said Mrs. Beresford, pettishly. "I thought you were going to neglect me altogether, and I feel horribly ill; but what do you think that idiot of a doctor says: I have not got typhoid at all, but just a touch of Maltese fever! Ridiculous man! I am convinced that I am as bad, every bit, as Hadji."

And Esther tried to answer with becoming gravity, and to keep her thankfulness out of face and voice. She succeeded, indeed, so well, that before she left the room Monica, refreshed by a sponging with vinegar, and a becoming style of hairdressing, leaned back on her pillows with a sigh. "I believe I do feel better, Essie; and, Essie, I want to tell you that I am very grateful to you for stopping with us instead of going to the Staniers. Your father told me. Thank you, Esther, you are a good girl," and Mrs. Beresford's praise was very sweet to Esther's troubled heart.