

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 Hanmer, 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. The Galtons become vulgarly jealous of Esther's popularity. The "Pleiades" reaches Gibraltar at sun-rise and some of the passengers are on deck for the sight. At last they arrive at Malta, and Esther looks forward to meeting her father.

CHAPTER VII.

"And be it never so humble,
There's no place like home."

THE dawn lay on the sea like a veil of pearl, in which the little waves leaped and flashed as they caught the light; and Esther looked through her porthole to see a long, low line of shore and barren rock. She dressed quietly, for Sybil was still asleep, and as the "Pleiades" stopped her engines to round the corner of the "Quarantine Harbour," she came on deck to catch the first sparkle of sun upon the windows of St. Elmo fort. Lord Francis Alwyne was there before her, pacing the deck with M. de Brinvilliers, and the old Frenchman paused to greet her with a courtly bow.

"We have the dawn with us now!" he said: "for you look as fresh as the morning, Miss Beresford."

"I wonder when my father will come on board," said Esther, tremulously. "How beautiful this is, and how happy I am to be here."

"Poor little girl," said Alwyne, suddenly to himself; "how I hope she will not be swiftly disillusioned," and then took himself to task for caring what happened to a girl who had been a stranger to him ten days earlier. But, after all, it was not till much later that Major Beresford appeared to claim his daughter, for he was a man who would be sure to be unlucky enough not to hear the exact time that the P. and O. flag was hoisted on the top of the "Castille," to warn the island that the mail boat was in sight; or, if he happened to be informed of the fact, there would be a hundred things to delay his starting, or to impede his progress after he had left his house behind him. And so it came to pass that Esther sat waiting dismally enough on the top of her boxes, while the decks of the "Pleiades" were cleared for coaling. Mrs. Clare-Smythe's husband had come to fetch her off in her husband's smart motor-launch and she had departed with many fervent protestations of friendship, and many kisses from "Budge." Even Mrs. Galton had declared irritably that she was not going to be kept dancing on anyone's pleasure for an extra half-hour, and had gone off in charge of her Maltese cook, who had arrived to meet the ship; and Esther thought that she was alone. Two bright tears welled up in her eyes, for, with all a girl's quick sensitive feeling, she did not wish other people to think her neglected by her father. She fixed her gaze shorewards, and set her mind resolutely to enjoy the busy scene about her; and so absorbed did she become by the beauty of the harbour and fortifications, and the colouring of turquoise sky and sea, and emerald boats, that she started and flushed when she heard Alwyne's voice behind her.

"Still sitting like Patience on a monument, Miss Beresford? I have been up to the club, and telephoned to your father, and he will be here immediately."

"How very, very kind of you!" said Esther, amazed; "but I am so sorry to have been such a trouble to you. I never thought of your doing such a thing!"

He took his seat cheerfully on one of her trunks, for every deck-chair was rolled up and put away, and the first lighterful of coal was under the "Pleiades."

"You shame me, Miss Beresford!" he said, with mock severity. "You think it so extraordinary that I could do anything for anyone else! How do you know that M. de Brinvilliers did not offer to do the same?"

"Because the boat from Government House came off

for him, and he was obliged to go, and I thought that you had gone too!"

"You have a great deal to learn, Miss Beresford; and one important thing is that the first duty of an A.D.C. is to succour English subjects in distress!"

And Esther's merry laugh brought them nearer to friendship than they had been for the whole of the voyage.

"There is your father!" said Alwyne at last, and, trembling very much, Esther rose and ran towards the gangway. Major Beresford was a tall, thin man with a hooked nose, and a grey moustache, whose eyes, looking out at her from under his sun-helmet, were very kind. But he had the air of a man who had succumbed to adverse circumstances in the battle of life, and his very figure was suggestive of depression and discontent. His shabby uniform was badly cut, and his sword ill-polished, for he was the sort of man whose soldier servant knows will never complain of anything, and with whom easy service succeeds a periodical scolding. He stood in the boat and waved his hand when he saw his daughter, and by the time he was at the top of the gangway, Esther felt all the old confidence and affection of childhood revive, and she was in his arms in an instant.

"My dear, my dear!" he said in a voice full of emotion; "you are your mother over again; after all, it is very good, Essie, to have you again, and we must begin where we left off, eh, child?"

And Esther, with a little sob, said "Yes, father," and ceased to torment her tender heart with the thought that if Major Beresford had loved her, he would not have kept her so long away from him. She drew him forward shyly to Alwyne, and introduced the two men with pretty dignity.

"Father, Lord Francis Alwyne telephoned to you, and waited with me till you came."

"Thanks, thanks for looking after my little girl. My servant never called me till an hour after the flag was hoisted, and then there was a puncture in my bicycle, and no cab procurable out to St. Julian's," said Major Beresford irritably, as he shook hands; and they parted on the most friendly terms, though the thought of Esther's probable shock as she realised what her home-life was likely to be, spoilt Alwyne's last thought of her bright face at her father's side.

The "Wiltshire Rifles" were quartered in barracks at Pembroke Camp, and the drive there seemed delightful to Esther's eyes, eager for every new impression. Major Beresford, watching her alert, happy glance, sighed a little, for he remembered that he too had once expected great things of life, and had let everything else slide when he missed the highest ideal. He looked at her dainty loveliness and charming gown, and remembered his untidy home.

"Esther!" he said suddenly; "there will be a great deal for you to do at home—you are not afraid? Your—your step-mother—Monica, is an invalid, and the children are very wild!"

"I am not afraid!" said Esther, cheerfully; "the happiest part of coming out here was the thought that I could help you."

Under cover of the rug Major Beresford's hand touched hers tenderly. "I think that we all want setting to rights, Essie; things have drifted rather," he said; and that was his only apology for failure.

It was late in the morning when the cab drew up outside the Beresford's quarters in the Camp. Since the two senior officers were unmarried, Major Beresford had managed to secure a good house for his family, and Esther looked at it with interest as her boxes were carried up the untidy garden path. The front of the tall, white stone house was covered with creepers, and the heavy rains had brought out the oleanders, and washed the dust from the roses. She could see a long chair in the verandah on the second floor, and a languid hand waving assured her that this was her stepmother. In the garden five children of ages varying from three to nine years old, were apparently rolling in the dust, but at the sound of the gate shutting they precipitated themselves like a whirlwind upon their new sister.

"Gently, gently, children!" said Major Beresford, in