

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. Her father's household is uncongenial, but Esther makes a friend of her youngest step-brother, "Hadji Baba." Her step-mother, "Monica," is disposed to be kind and rejoices when Esther goes to dinner at the "Palace." Lord Francis Alwyne's attentions flatter the girl who enjoys the gay life of Malta exceedingly. Attracted solely by his wealth and position, she finally becomes betrothed to Lord Francis. "Hadji Baba" is taken ill and Esther refuses to leave him. Madame Perouse becomes anxious over Esther's happiness and Geoffrey Hanmer decides to leave for Malta, hoping to help the girl whom he still loves.

MME. DE LA PEROUSE had arisen from her seat in her anxiety, and she stood now at Geoffrey's side, with her hand upon his arm, thrilling with eagerness.

"Madame," said Geoffrey, very simply, with his eyes upon her face, "when I received your message to-day, I was just coming down to your house to inform you of a strange piece of good fortune that has happened to myself. Madame, I am a rich man now, for my distant cousin, John Peronel, died a few days ago, leaving everything of which he died possessed to myself."

"Geoffrey, you amaze me; I am so glad for you that I can hardly express my joy. You have been so brave through all this time, that I have never ceased to admire you, but now I am afraid for Esther."

She looked up into the strong, sensible face above her, and met the challenge of his eyes steadily.

"You mean," said Geoffrey, "what I mean; Esther must find out her own true heart for herself, and must make up her mind without the knowledge of my wealth to influence her one way or the other. She must—God bless her—care for me as a poor man, or not at all."

"That is what I mean, Geoffrey; she must care for you as a poor man, or not at all, but there will be no need for me to sell my miniature."

"I will cross to Paris to-day," said Geoffrey, with his face to the feeble November sunshine; "and when I am with her I will write to you every day, but I will never hurry her decision—but I believe I shall bring Esther back to Aborfield before Christmas."

"But what about her father and his family? What about a chaperon, you dear desperate Geoffrey?" But the face of the little duchesse was wreathed in smiles, since she loved a romance as well as anyone, and love lent her fresh youth.

"Esther is worth every moment of a man's life," said Geoffrey simply; "and as for the Beresfords, money and influence can do a great deal in bringing a man home to England, and Major Beresford shall exchange into the other battalion."

"But a chaperon—a chaperon, my friend."

"Does a man want a chaperon for his own wife," said Geoffrey, with a voice that was like a cry of triumph; and when he had gone, Mme. de la Perouse sat with her face hidden in her hands, hardly knowing whether she were more ready to laugh or to cry.

When Esther went back to the house after Lady Adela's carriage had driven away, she felt her heart sink within her. Alwyne had not looked at her again, and the grave displeasure of his attitude filled her with dismay. She felt that he ought to have realised how impossible it was for her to leave her father's stricken household, and the knowledge that he had no sympathy for her difficulties amazed her. Her whole heart revolted at the thought that she should flee into safety and enjoyment, leaving the care of the Beresford family to the care of one nurse, since the salary of even one trained woman would tax the resources of Major Beresford to

the uttermost. The children were quietly playing in the garden as she went back, and she paused to tell them that they were now to be exiled from the second floor of the house, which was to be given up to the invalids, and that the lower rooms must now content them for eating and sleeping.

"Essie, is Hadji going to die?" said Lucy wistfully, coming up to her and laying her cheek against her shaking arm.

But Esther, with a kiss, swept them all into the verandah, and set them to work with paints and pencils to make a scrap-book for the little brother that might distract their thoughts from the tragedy that was being enacted within doors. When she saw them busily employed, she went into the house to relieve Kopama from her faithful watch at Mrs. Beresford's side, and looked into the room where in charge of the sweet-faced nurse in the blue gown, Hadji lay in a stupor of fever. Her father was wandering about the house like an unquiet ghost, into his wife's room, and then to watch Hadji's struggle for life. Serious illness had never visited the Beresford family before, since Mrs. Beresford had always been a complaining invalid without any definite illness.

"You here, Esther, still?" he said, when she met him in the passage; "why I thought you would have forsaken the sinking ship like a rat. I met your young man just now, and he told me he had come to take you back to the Palace with Lady Adela."

"I could not leave you, father," said Esther simply; "you do not blame me?"

"I! blame you? Child, in the face of death all one's hopes and ambitions seem so small and petty. I had begun to think that you were becoming a woman of the world, but thank God, you are my little girl still."

He had taken her by the arm, and was looking into her face so earnestly that Esther was frightened.

"Father, is— is Hadji going to die?" she said.

Major Beresford nodded. "So St. Leger thinks, Essie—little Hadji—you and I have got to go through the Valley of the Shadow with him, for your step-mother is very ill too; heaven knows where they caught the fever."

He passed on, back to his work again, with the gait of an old man, and Esther went back to the children too stunned for tears. She was sitting in the verandah when Delaney brought her a note with the Palace crest upon it, and she opened it with a beating heart, since it was her first love letter from Alwyne.

"Dearest Esther,—

"I cannot believe that you wish deliberately to go against my wishes, for in that case our happiness does not seem either possible or probable. But as I feel sure you will have now had time to consider the situation in an impartial light, and will be able to realise that it is my love for you that dictates my anxiety, I beg you to come to the Staniers' to-night. If the expense of nursing has anything to do with the difficulty, of course, dearest, you must let me be your banker, and provide another nurse. This will be a test of your love for me, that you will come to the Palace if you really love me.—F. A."

So it had come to this—the strife between duty and worldly success; and Esther rose and paced the verandah in the evening light, making up her mind to the great decision. The appeal to her love left her cold, but the appeal to all that was worldly within her, stirred her soul to its very foundations. If she refused to go to the Staniers now, she knew that his pride would never forgive her, and that the final decision would mean giving up all that had grown very dear to her, and accepting the humble position in her father's house that she had anticipated at first. On the one hand her father's anxiety, and Hadji's little, feeble hands held her, while out of the future all that was possible for her in the possession of a great name and position, shone out beckoning to her.

She laid her burning head upon the cool rail of the balcony. Below her, in the little bay, the blue sea lay breathing like a child asleep, and in the clear opal of heaven a solitary star came out above the Camp.

"O, God help me!" she said simply, like a little child; and the answer came to her as it does to all who ask