

kindly, quiet face, the same unfashionable bearing, but she loved him, and she knew it now with a certainty that there was no mistaking. He held her hands so tightly that she could not free them, and she gently turned her blushing face towards him, so that there was no escape for her.

"Yes, Geoffrey," and, seeing that she was very near to tears, he caught her in his arms, and she hid her face upon his shoulder.

"But, Essie," he said, a few moments later, "do you mean to tell me that you are contented to come and live at the shabby old Hall on nothing a year, and to help me to clear off the mortgages? Perhaps you will have to help me with the chickens and the dairy, dear heart, and I thought that you could not bring yourself to contemplate matrimony with a poor man."

"Oh, I was wrong! I was horribly wrong!" cried Esther. "I shall love to be poor—it is better for me—it is what I want. I have had such horrible thoughts and ideas while I was among all these rich people, and I want to forget them."

Geoffrey Hanmer rose to his feet and drew her arm in his, and together they walked the length of the garden in silence, she wondering, and he too deeply moved for words.

"You are quite certain, my darling, that you will never regret this step?" he said at last; "remember that you will have to see other people richer, perhaps and more influential: and I could not bear to think that perhaps some day you would live to regret that you were not Lady Francis Alwyne, and probably to be a marchioness in the future."

"Geoffrey, I think that you are hard upon me; I have been a foolish girl, but, perhaps—perhaps it was your fault."

"My fault! You are a true woman, Essie, for you lay the fault upon the man in the cleverest fashion, though how you can attach any blame to me is beyond my comprehension," he cried whimsically.

"Because—because, Geoffrey, you did not tell me that you knew I loved you, you did not make up my mind for me," she whispered, for his face was very close to her own.

"Before I kiss you, Essie, tell me that you would be content to take me as I am, with my poverty, my anxieties."

"Oh, quite content, dear Geoffrey, and longing to share every trouble with you."

"My love—my dear," and Geoffrey Hanmer closed her lips with a kiss.

It was at this moment, when they stood lost in the Paradise of their own happiness, that Alwyne rode up to the gate unseen by the lovers. He had been driven by the force of his unhappiness to humble his pride, and return to the girl he loved. He was not clear as to what he intended to say to her, but he felt that he was compelled to see her, and to convince her that she had been wrong in her attitude towards him. It was absurd to think that he could allow himself to be jilted by a little girl who had nothing to recommend her beyond her loveliness, and he was quite prepared to go halfway along the road of submission to meet her, with a magnanimity of which he had hardly believed himself capable. He checked his horse at the gate, and when the reality of the sight of Esther in Geoffrey's arms swept full upon him and convinced him that his eyes had not played him false, the whole fabric of his pride crumbled to ruin about him, and he saw himself for the moment as he really was, in the light of Esther's love for another man. There was no mistaking her attitude, or the lover-like gesture of the man who held her against his breast, and with a rush of anger against the fate which had deluded him, he rode furiously away. The spatter of horse's hoofs upon the dry road drove the lovers apart, and for an instant Esther, realising what had happened, stood pale and trembling.

"Geoffrey, it is Lord Francis Alwyne."

Hanmer gave a great laugh. "By Jove, Essie, he has learnt a hard lesson this time; I am very sorry for him. Ah! If I had come here and found you standing so with him, I think it would have killed me."

And his arms tightened upon her waist again at the thought.

"Geoffrey, I must write to him."

"You shall write and say anything you like, sweet-heart, for to have lost your love must be the most cruel thing on earth to happen to any man."

Esther's little tremulous, blotted note did not reach Alwyne till many days later; for when he returned to the Palace after a furious ride, it was only to find a telegram waiting for him to summon him home immediately,

on the death of his eldest brother. The responsibility of his position had by that time so thoroughly filled his mind to the exclusion of every other feeling, that he was actually conscious of relief that he was no longer bound to Esther Beresford, and could seek a more suitable wife for his present elevation to an important rank in the marriage market of the world of London. But the scar that Esther had inflicted on his heart would ache sometimes when in after years he met her moving like a queen in society, her gracious loveliness undimmed by the flight of time.

Since there was no reason why Esther's marriage should be delayed, and the fact of her engagement had ceased to be a nine days' wonder in Malta, there was a quiet wedding at an early hour of the morning in St. Paul's church, attended by a few only of her nearest friends.

The real truth of Hanmer's handsome fortune had leaked out through Major Beresford, to whom it had been confided as an inviolable secret; and Esther herself was the only person in the island who was not aware of its existence. In the ten days that elapsed between Geoffrey's arrival and their wedding, it had been quite possible to keep Esther completely in the dark as to his affairs; and Lady Adela Stanier and Nell Clare-Smythe were only amused by her ignorance.

"She is a clever little thing after all," said Mrs. Galton resentfully, when Major Beresford paid an elaborately careless call upon her the day before the wedding, to give her all the latest details; "and it is absurd to tell me that she knows nothing about Mr. Hanmer's money. I am sure that if Sybil or Carrie were going to marry into twenty thousand a year, they would be the first to find it out, so don't tell me that Esther knows nothing."

"I suppose that Sybil found out the latest details of Mr. Macrorie's private income before she was engaged to him?" said Major Beresford, politely, as he rose to take his leave; "shall we see you all at the church to-morrow?"

And he left Mrs. Galton speechless with such anger as comes only to a spiteful woman who finds herself at a loss for words in a situation where nothing but congratulation to an enemy is possible. But nevertheless, Mrs. Galton and her two daughters were seated in the church next morning to watch the arrival of the happy little bride in her simple, white muslin gown. Jack Hethcote was the best man, and the only bridesmaid was Budge Clare-Smythe, who carried a posy of oleander as rosy as her gown. Esther saw through a mist of happy tears the faces of M. de Brinvilliers and Nell Clare-Smythe nodding and smiling at her, to keep up her drooping spirits, as she told the girl later. Kopama and the children were there too, with wide eyes of delight; and Mrs. Beresford, with a face changed and sad, but still instinct with new hopefulness, for they were to go home to England at once; and Geoffrey Hanmer had made the future wonderfully easy for them, with a delicacy that could not hurt even the proudest of feelings.

"O, Geoffrey, I can help you now we share our poverty together," Esther said, under her breath, as they stood aside to let Lady Adela Stanier and her husband sign the register; and she wondered why Geoffrey held her hand so tightly.

"Esther—wife—" he said, and his voice was like a cry of joy; "I have deceived you; you have not married a poor man after all. Mrs. Clare-Smythe—you tell her—I cannot!"

And with her eyes on Nell's face, Esther heard the story of her husband's inheritance.

"And now," concluded Nell Clare-Smythe: "don't be a silly little goose, and be disappointed, or anything ridiculous of that sort, for I won't allow such a thing! Fancy you with a yearly income as large as my whole fortune! I vow it is absurd!"

But Esther's eyes sought her husband's, and read there only measureless love and content.

"Dear Geoffrey," she said simply; "as long as I am with you, everything is easy—poverty or wealth."

"Geoffrey," said Esther, as they were pacing the deck together the night before the "Japan" reached the mouth of the Thames, "Geoffrey, what a happy woman I am! I have nothing left to wish for in the world."

"Nor I," said Hanmer, gently, as he lifted the edge of his wife's cloak under cover of the darkness and laid it to his lips; "we have love, fortune, everything. Pray God to give us thankful hearts."

"I pray it every day," said Esther, with a little sob.

FINIS.