

sanely interested in a book of photographs that he must have seen fifty times before!"

"What about Frank?" said Colonel Maturin, as they rose to go; "is he likely to be a successful A.D.C., and is he going to fall in love with our pretty little friend?"

"My dear Uncle Ned, Frank has far too lofty a sense of his own importance to fall in love with a woman without a penny or a handle to her name—and if he is a failure at his new job, it will not be my fault, for I shall use both whip and spur to him!"

"You are a wonderful woman, Nell," said Colonel Maturin drily; "and I think it is fortunate for your husband's peace of mind that he has struggled already to the top of the tree, and is a flag-captain at five-and-forty."

"Perhaps it is," said Nell softly; "but then, Uncle Ned, Neville is just Neville, and nobody else ever was or could be like him. He makes me feel small and imperfect when I am with him, and just filled with longing to be a perfect woman."

Colonel Maturin watched his niece drive gaily down the hill again with a smile, and then turned back to his work. The one passion of Nell's life was for her grave, handsome husband, who kept her in strict order, and the very mention of his name brought a new look to her face.

"She is a good girl at heart—one of the best!" said Colonel Maturin to himself; "and I believe she will make the child happy, for when she likes Nell can be as thoroughly unselfish as any woman could be," and aloud, "By Jove, Kershaw, I believe you want an excuse for going on to Malta in the 'Pleiades,' and I don't blame you, my dear fellow, I don't blame you! I should have been just the same at your age," and Colonel Maturin patted the adjutant on the shoulder, while Kershaw tried to explain, in the middle of a sheepish fit of stammering, that he had not been looking after Miss Beresford's carriage at all, but merely across at the guard-room, with an eye to correcting an irregularity as to the chin-strap in the helmet of a sentry.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blissful dream for Esther. They drove to the Spanish frontier, and out as far as the race-course, then came slowly back to spend an hour among the "curio" shops in the old town, where Nell bought heaps of things for which she could never have any use, and where Alwyne spent a few lavish shillings on "loquats" and purple figs, which, with an utter incapacity for carrying parcels, he would have left behind, had not his cousin pressed a Spanish boy into service.

"Here we are, having all bought things, except you, Esther," said her friend, suddenly reproachful; "why don't you buy that lovely lace scarf—it would be so useful to you after the opera in Malta; or stay—I will give it to you!"

"No—no—please not," cried the girl in distress. "I do not want the scarf, dear Mrs. Clare-Smythe, and it would pain me to think you had given it to me because I had admired it." She drew her friend away anxiously from the shop.

"But why don't you buy things for yourself?" persisted Nell curiously.

"I have no money to spare—I shall probably want all I have for my brothers and sisters, if report speaks truly," said Esther simply. "I am afraid that things are not too comfortable at home."

But when she went down to dress for dinner that night in the solitude of her cabin, she found a little parcel in her berth directed to herself, and in it the lace scarf, and a card on which was written, "A little souvenir of a pleasant day, from F. A."

And with a quick flush of pleasure she recognised that the writing was Alwyne's. When she came up on deck again, she went across to where he stood, and thanked him shyly.

"It was so kind of you—I wanted the scarf so much—and the lace is beautiful," she said.

"Don't thank me, Miss Beresford," he answered in a more earnest voice than she had ever heard from him; "rather I should thank you for making me feel an unwonted spasm of generosity. I am too fond of spending my money on myself, but I think it was the sight of your constant unselfishness on board this ship that has made one or two of us ask why we should lead such different lives."

A moment later he was ashamed of his outburst, and moved away before the astonished girl could answer him, and when she looked round at a touch on her elbow, she found Sybil Galton in a bright blue dress standing at her side.

"We have had the most dreadful day, Esther—I don't

advise you to go near mother!" she said; "we all went on shore, and stupid Sir Solomon Brown had a quarrel with a cab-driver over sixpence, and I thought the man would have stabbed him. Then mamma got a bad oyster at lunch, and that was enough to upset her for the day—but the worst of all was when Carry's young man—you know the army doctor who is going out to Cairo, and rather likes her—attached himself to me—I really thought that Carry would burst out crying at lunch right in Mr. Loring's face—and after all I could not help it!"

"I am so sorry," said Esther, gently.

"What sort of a time had you with your swells?"

"We enjoyed ourselves very much indeed," said Esther; "everyone was so kind."

"You had better not let Mamma hear you say so," chuckled Sybil, in an unkindly mood; "she thinks that you ought to have manoeuvred so that she was asked to join your party."

And later in the evening Esther found herself visited by the cold displeasure of Mrs. Galton to such an extent that she retired to her cabin in tears.

"I shall certainly give my poor sister an outline of your character, Esther!" said Mrs. Galton, who found herself no longer on friendly terms with the Browns after some plain speaking on the subject of her share of the day's expenses. "I call you thoroughly time-serving and selfish; for I see, although you have been very busy helping your fine new friends half the day, yet you have never mended that piece of lace I laid out for you to do yesterday, and you know what a bungler Jeanne is at darning!"

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Galton," said Esther, gently. "I will get up early to-morrow, and mend it for you."

"There you are, making a martyr of yourself at once! Not that early morning rising is not very encouraging to a flirtation; and I can see what is going on as well as most people!" sneered Mrs. Galton; and the girl fled without another word.

And so the days went by until they had reached the last night at sea, and there was to be a concert to celebrate the parting from some of the most popular passengers in the "Pleiades."

"You are surely not going to sing, Esther?" said Mrs. Galton, putting up her glasses to read the names on the programme. Dear me! I am surprised at your boldness! Of course Sybil and Carrie have had lessons from Signor Quassia, the best man in town; but surely you are not going to make an exhibition of your country teaching!"

"I hope I shall do nothing to disgrace my teacher," said Esther, with a smile; for her teacher had borne a very famous name, and she knew her own powers. Carrie's hard soprano, trained until all freshness had gone out of it, met with little applause, and Sybil's "coon" song, with its attendant dance, scarcely possessed the poetry of motion.

"O dear me!" said Nell Clare-Smythe impatiently to her cousin; "why should Mrs. Galton have gone to the expense of teaching a wooden doll to dance a hornpipe? What an appalling concert it is, Frank. I should feign an attack of faintness to go below to think about seeing Neville to-morrow, if it was not for Esther. I expect she sings like a corncrake or a Jenny wren, but you must applaud her whatever—"

"Hush!" said Alwyne, and Nell Clare-Smythe sat arrested suddenly to attention by the fluting of a voice like a nightingale, rapt with the passion of the summer and the woods.

"It is Esther!" said Nell. "O! good gracious!"

Esther Beresford stood straight up by the rail in her black gown, her hands folded lightly together, her face pale. Her song, "The Calling of the Past," was beautifully accompanied by the purser of the "Pleiades" who was a genuine musician, and he lingered with joy over every exquisite note that fell like silver from the girl's lips. When she had ended her song, with its pathetic cadence, there fell, upon the last word, a hush that was more complimentary than even the roar of applause succeeding it. She bowed timidly then, with a growing sense of pleasure at the kindness of the audience, and sang again, "Bid Me no More," and retired into the background with the memory of Mrs. Galton's amazed face in her thoughts. M. de Brinvilliers came up to her a moment later.

"Thank you, Miss Beresford," he said, with tears in his eyes. "You have the voice of Madame de la Perouse, the golden voice that won half Paris in the old days." And Esther delighted in her simple triumph.

TO BE CONTINUED