

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 Hammer, 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.

TO Esther, fresh from her country school, every detail of the scene was a revelation. The green-painted boats that swarmed alongside, the piles of golden and scarlet fruit, the bright-coloured dress of the boatmen, all amused her. There were pedlars with lumps of pink coral, and shell necklaces; Spaniards with coins and medals, and the quaint green china of the country, over which realistic scorpions and crabs crawl in sprawling varieties. Esther hung over everything longing to buy, yet fearing to be extravagant, and it was Nell Clare-Smythe who, coming up from below like a whirlwind, swept her out of temptation.

"Nonsense—nonsense, my dear girl—that is all rubbish! Come along now and have breakfast, because Frank and I want to go on shore at once. You know our uncle, Colonel Maturin, commands the 'Westshires,' and he is a dear old thing, and has not met us for ages!"

"But I shall be in the way perhaps," Esther answered timidly.

"Is a pretty girl ever in the way at a lunch-party? Sometimes I wonder if you have your ordinary senses, Esther!" cried the gay little woman impulsively; "how do you like my frock?"

It was a beautiful gown of white serge and silk, and Esther hastened to admire it. "I hope that I shall not be too plainly dressed?" she ventured.

"Little goose—they won't get any further than your face!"

"You seem very much taken up with your new friends, Esther," said Mrs. Galton with a sniff, as Esther came dutifully up to tell her that she was on the point of departure. "It is very selfish of you not to have insisted that Sybil should go too."

"Oh, but Mrs. Galton, it is a lunch-party at the 'Westshire' barracks—Colonel Maturin is Mrs. Clare-Smythe's uncle."

"H—m!" said Mrs. Galton; "you will find that none of these people will speak to you again when once you set foot in Malta. Do you suppose that people who have neither money nor influence are ever thought twice of in a big garrison?"

"I never thought about it at all," cried Esther, distressed. "I am so sorry that Sybil cannot go on shore with us."

"Oh, Sybil has plenty of other friends, thank you," shrilled Mrs. Galton with vehement annoyance; "you need not disturb yourself about her!"

Esther's bright eyes of wonder delighted her new friend. Everything was novel to her, from the muleteers with their jangling chime of bells, to the vultures on the hillsides with their repulsive, unfeathered necks. Alwyne watched her with a face of deep interest as he sat opposite to her in the "carroza." He was beginning—four days out from England—to find that this girl with the lovely serene eyes and the strange unselfish outlook on life, was troubling his mind to its inner depths. He was annoyed with himself, for it seemed to him as though he were running a grave risk of allowing his feelings to become seriously entangled by this girl in the blue serge gown, and he directed his eyes firmly towards the far view of sea and sky in Gibraltar Harbour, and away from the sweet face under the brim of the straw hat, that now and again appealed to him to share in her innocent delight. Colonel Maturin was standing at the gate of the barracks as they drove up, a stout, pleasant-faced man, clothed in a well-fitting khaki jacket, breeches and jack-boots.

"Halloa, Nell—welcome to you, my dear! And why

did you not bring Budge? Very remiss of you! How do, Frank, my boy? Very pleased to see you. Miss Beresford—I have soldiered with the 'Wiltshire Rifles' a good bit in India, and knew your father."

And Esther, shy and blushing, found herself being led across the cool square hall into the ante-room that seemed to her confused eyes to be full of young men in scarlet uniforms.

"Tiffin will be ready in five minutes," said Colonel Maturin, introducing his niece and her friend; "so we will wait here, and Kershaw can look after Miss Beresford."

It seemed to Esther that half-a-dozen young men must answer to the name of Kershaw, and in another moment she had become the centre of a kindly interested group, all anxious for the last news from England as they said, but as Nell Clare-Smythe declared afterwards to her cousin, more anxious for a glance from a pair of fine eyes, and a word from the prettiest lips in the world. Lunch in the long mess-room, where she sat between the Colonel and the senior major, was a thing to remember for ever, with its long stretch of table shining with silver, regimental cups and trophies, and a well-drilled servant behind every chair.

"My niece tells me that this sort of thing is quite new to you," said Colonel Maturin, looking kindly down at the glowing face. "I am glad that your first experience of a military lunch-party should have been given you by the 'Westshires.'"

"I have been at school in Dorsetshire ever since I was a child," Esther said, half wishing that Miss Jenkins could see her now; "and before that I can hardly remember India."

"You will enjoy life in Malta," said the Colonel confidently; "next week I have a daughter just your age coming out to me from school, and I think I shall enjoy her impressions very much."

"And I think she will be a happy girl to come out to so kind a father," said Esther prettily, and Colonel Maturin said:

"Thank you, my dear," with a sudden hope that his Muriel would be very like this gentle, sweet-voiced girl. "Nell," he said suddenly, a little later, when they were sitting once again in the ante-room, and Esther was looking over a book of views with Captain Kershaw. "I just want to tell you something about that girl's poor prospects in Malta as to happiness in her home life."

"My dear Uncle Ned," said Nell Clare-Smythe, "what on earth do you mean?"

"I can see just the sort of girl she is—the same sort that your aunt was when I married her—and I want you to know that Major Beresford is a bit of a waster, as we soldiers say. He is a good enough fellow at heart—and indeed he was a fine, smart soldier when his first wife was alive—but this woman, his second wife, does nothing but pose as an invalid all day long, and Beresford himself has got tired of trying to keep his end up, I expect. It is a pity he ever married her, for as Miss Monica Trinder she was older than he, and had angled for half the regiment in vain."

"But is he fit to have the care of Esther?" cried Mrs. Clare-Smythe, in dismay.

"Oh yes—kind enough and fit enough—but she will be absorbed into the vortex of the slough of despond which is the home—and slip into being a regular drudge, if you don't give her a helping hand."

"I will look after her as if she were my own sister," said Nell warmly; "and Adela Stanier is a friend of her grandmother, so I think between us she will enjoy herself, if only she does not take a too exaggerated idea of her duty."

"Can one do that?" said Colonel Maturin comically; "anyhow, I should think, Nell, that you would be an excellent antidote to any such mistaken outlook on life!"

"I don't know if you mean that for a compliment or no," said Nell Clare-Smythe petulantly, "but at any rate, I will take it for one, and now, since I have to show Esther the beauties of Gibraltar, I must tear Esther away from the blandishments of the man with the ginger moustache, who appears to be almost in-