

feel like this—so doubtful, and so uncertain of happiness; but I suppose it is the great change in my life, and I shall soon get used to it. Everyone is so pleased and kind, and father says it is such a great relief to his mind. Darling gran'mere, tell Geoffrey very kindly—but I cannot be content to marry a poor man—I cannot, indeed. I see so much of it now—and poverty means unhappiness for everyone. I do hope you will be pleased, too, gran'mere, for Lord Francis is very handsome and clever, and does everything well, and everybody likes him. I wish I could come and sit by your side and talk to you, gran'mere, but you do seem so far away.

"Your own loving Esther."

She did not sleep till the grey dawn touched the world, and when at last she closed her eyes, it was to slumber so heavily that she never heard the fretful moan of Hadji, or discovered that he had grown so rapidly worse that he was no longer conscious of her presence in the room. When at last Kopama brought her an early cup of tea, it was her cry of fear that brought Esther to her feet dazed and sleep-bound. Hadji Baba lay in his cot, his eyes open and glazed with fever, while the continuous moan that came from his parched lips was so feeble that it was hardly more than a sigh. In an instant the house was in confusion, and the Army doctor hurried in from the Camp, and before breakfast time the truth was known that Hadji Baba was ill with typhoid, and that Mrs. Beresford was under observation for the same illness. The house was put in quarantine, and an hour later Lady Adela drove up with Alwyne and interviewed Esther in the garden.

"We have come to drive you back with us, Esther. Surgeon-Captain St. Leger has given us leave, and says that the sooner you are out of the place the better for you."

"Come, Esther!" said Lord Francis, authoritatively; "don't hesitate a moment."

"I can't leave Hadji," said Esther, in a low voice; "he won't take his medicine from anyone but me!"

"Nonsense, Esther!" said Alwyne, taking her hand; "we both insist on your coming!"

But the girl's eyes shone like stars in her white, resolute face.

"I can't do it. I can't leave them in this trouble; it would be cowardly and wrong; don't you see it, Lady Adela?"

The elder woman stood back a little, with her eyes on Esther's face. "I don't know what to say, dear child," she said gently.

"I command you to come!" cried Alwyne; "why, you are in danger here! You may catch the disease!"

"I have no fear," said the girl gently; "and I cannot leave them!"

Alwyne turned round without another word, and went back to the carriage, but for an instant Lady Adela paused.

"I could not do it myself, child," she said; "but if I had had a daughter I should like her to act as you are doing," and, moved by a quick impulse, Esther kissed her warmly.

CHAPTER XI.

"Every day is a fresh beginning,

Every morn is the world made new:

You, who are weary of sorrow and sinning

Here is a beautiful hope for you."

"MY kind regards to Mr. Hanmer, Louise, and I shall be glad to see Mr. Geoffrey as soon as he can arrive this morning," said Mme. de la Perouse in a firm voice.

"Yes, Madame la duchesse," said Louise, but her assent carried with it a thankfulness out of all apparent proportion to the favour granted, and gratitude that welcomed Geoffrey Hanmer as a strong adviser in trouble. It was only yesterday that Louise had taken counsel with Maria Vine as to what news had filtered into the school from Malta, and whether such news had been good or bad. But Maria had nothing to say beyond dismal prophesies that Mme. de la Perouse was failing rapidly, and would not live to see her darling again.

"But that is nonsense!" cried Louise; "for in our noble family one lives always to the extreme limits, and Mme. la duchesse is not yet fourscore by many years."

But it was at least certain that in the past five weeks Mme. de la Perouse had changed greatly. She was not so active as before, since Louise found that it was too tiring now for the old lady to arrange the flowers in the vases, or to visit her pensioners in the village. She had said nothing about her fatigue, but Louise knew that she was fretting, and that at night she slept ill.

When Mme. de la Perouse was alone in the house, free

at last from the careful eyes of Louise, who watched her always, she folded her hands on her knee with a little sigh.

"If my darling was but happy, I could say my 'Nunc dimittis,' but she is not—O, dear heart of mine—she is not happy."

Before the window by which she sat, the November landscape unrolled itself to the faint sunlight, the blue of Weymouth bay, the dying heather on the hills. There was the clear stillness in the air peculiar to the dying year. And Mme de la Perouse remembered that the flowers in the garden were dead, and that the creepers hung with drooping brown leaves over the window. It was the season for dead hopes, dead hearts, and even the indomitable courage of the old French lady had failed before her conviction that Esther had not drawn a happy lot in life. She, who had seen land and a great name pass from her, and had known what it was to stand bankrupt of love and joy by the side of an open grave, and yet had never faltered, looked out at the future now with a heart that was suddenly afraid.

"I have my miniature of Marie Antoinette yet with the diamond setting," she murmured to herself, "and that will bring a good sum in London—enough for Geoffrey's journey;" and at that moment Geoffrey himself came in.

He had never seemed so good-looking or so strong as he did that day in the old lady's eyes. There was something in his manner of suppressed exultation that did not escape the keen, watching eyes, and Geoffrey was so alert and so strangely smart, and unlike himself, that Mme. de la Perouse said to herself with a leap of joy:

"He has not forgotten her after all—he has not given up hope."

"Good-morning, Mme. de la Perouse," said Geoffrey Hanmer, smiling down at the resolute little figure in the high-backed chair, whose hands, alas! were not so steady as of old.

"Geoffrey, I have sent for you with a purpose, to-day," she answered, beckoning him to a seat opposite her, from whence she could see every change upon his face. "Esther is not happy—I know it—and I want you to go out to Malta, and find out the truth for me."

"How do you not know she is not happy in her engagement?" Geoffrey's face had changed now, and a cloud hung over his forehead. "She has everything to make her happy, surely?"

"I made a mistake, Geoffrey—I believe I made a mistake in allowing her to go out to Malta without a clear understanding with you. It seems to me now as I sit here that I was like the woman in the poem, preaching down the child's heart when she was too young to know it herself."

"What are you trying to tell me, Mme. de la Perouse?" said Geoffrey, veiling his face with his hand. "I was never quick at reading riddles."

"But you are perhaps quick at reading the truth behind a letter?" returned Mme. de la Perouse, quick as a rapier-thrust, and she laid Esther's letters in his hand. It seemed to the old Duchesse a very long time before he had read them all, and before he spoke. She lay back in her chair, trying to curb the impatience of her heart, listening to the tick of the clock behind her in the hall that had measured out such long, lonely hours, since Esther went away.

"You are right—she is not happy."

Geoffrey could hardly see the face of his old friend, since in her eyes there was a mist of tears through which he saw—wondering if he saw aright—the changing, eager look of the Duchesse.

"Geoffrey, it has come into my heart that this child of mine loved you all the time, though she knew it not; it has come into my mind that these letters were not written by a girl in love with the man she is engaged to. Now, since the little boy has typhoid fever, as her letter last night said, she is in trouble, and in need of those she loves about her. Adela Stanier, too, in her letter gives me a hint of a coolness between the two on account of Esther's wish to stay with her little brother and help to nurse him, and perhaps she is in trouble on that account. O, Geoffrey, I am old—I cannot see for myself—but if Esther is unhappy, my heart will break. If I were a young woman I would start for Malta to-day to make sure of her happiness, and I am going to ask you, Geoffrey, for the sake of our old friendship, to take the money from me that would otherwise have been spent on my journey, and to go yourself. You could arrive there in three days if you were to go all the way overland, and it should cost you nothing, Geoffrey."

TO BE CONTINUED