

the "two step" with her husband, with a vigour that amazed her cousin.

His eyes followed Esther as she stood talking to her partner for a moment. The girl had changed indefinitely, as a girl must do who suddenly finds herself the centre of a gay society. For in less than three weeks Esther Beresford had won for herself in Malta society a unique position. She had become the fashion, and the invitation cards in the Beresford drawing-room were multiplying every hour. She was engaged every day for a month ahead, and her good resolutions as to devotion to her own home had undergone some modification. Her father had put his foot firmly down as to her freedom of movement, and since Mrs. Beresford, after a few attempts at energy, had gone back to her drawing-room with her novel and dressing-gown, it became an established rule that Esther was chaperoned to her gaieties by Mrs. Clare-Smythe. Her father had accompanied her once or twice, but it was so evident that he would prefer to be at his club, that Nell and Esther had combined to relieve him of the responsibility.

Every morning she devoted herself to the house and to her family and in Malta such sacrifice was so rare that it seemed a great thing. At first she had offered to stay at home in the afternoon, but Major Beresford had been so irritable when her offer had been accepted, that by degrees she slipped into the pleasant habit of enjoying herself every afternoon, and of leaving the children to their old neglected life.

Beresford had some idea of justice to his dead wife and his daughter, whom now he considered to have been kept unduly long at school. It might also be a good thing for the family and for himself, if she made a good marriage, and he was therefore anxious that her beauty should have every chance. If Esther had only explained to him that her wishes lay in another direction, he would have been quick enough to see that her influence would have been very good for Flora and Lucy at this point of their lives; but Esther was finding out for herself the delights of admiration, and she yielded, as many a woman has done before, to the voice of inclination that led her steps in quite another direction.

Nell had the use daily during the season, of an electric brougham, and every afternoon Pembroke Camp was duly excited by its arrival at the Beresford quarters to fetch Esther, who was whirled away to some new gaiety in some pretty costume with an excitement that was gradually becoming necessary to her happiness.

The strain of house work in the morning and late hours was telling on her health, in a climate where repose is far more necessary than in England, and there were lines under her eyes that had never been there in the old Arborfield days; though her beauty was enhanced by a finish and completeness that were gradually transforming her into a woman of the world.

Hadji Baba would sometimes hold her with clinging hands, but his feeble strength was not enough to keep her from her friends, nor his fretful demand for a walk and a story loud enough to make her ignore the fact that beyond the dull boundaries of Pembroke lay the delights of picnics and race meetings, and the thousand and one pastimes of a Malta season.

Major Beresford had already repaid her loan to him, but even if a dim idea as to the real source of a great part of his income had already come to her, the constant sight of cardplaying for money among her own friends had already dimmed her sense of right and wrong by dulling the shock of surprise.

Alwyne, studying her face in the interval of the dance, realised that these experiences had swept over Esther, bearing down on their tide some of her freshness—some of her great innocence; and he was glad of it, since the new Esther was more to his mind than the old one had ever been.

And at this point in his thoughts he rose, and made his way to her side. "I am just going off now, Miss Beresford. The doctor says that I must be careful of the chill at sunset on the harbour just at present. Will our drive hold good for the day after to-morrow? and will you lunch at the Palace first? Lady Adela wishes it."

Esther hesitated, for she had planned tea on the rocks with the children for that day. "I promised to take my little sisters out for a picnic that day," she faltered.

The grave contempt of his face assured her that she was hardly wise to refuse what half the women of Malta would have scrambled to secure. His words were very determined. "Any day will do for the children, Miss Beresford; but I must have you on Friday," and her

eyes fell before the look in his own that hinted at a prior right too flattering to refuse.

"I shall be very glad," she faltered; and he went down the gangway into the waiting boat with a brief farewell. Half an hour later Esther and Sybil Galton were the last of the guests remaining on board, and they were waiting for Mrs. Clare-Smythe to chaperone them back to Valetta.

Macrorie had vanished, and Esther found herself alone with her cousin, whose attitude was one of uneasiness.

"Sybil," said the girl, suddenly, "I don't think that your mother would like Mr. Macrorie. Don't you think you are unwise, dear?"

"Not at all," said Sybil, shrilly. "Look after your own flirtation, Esther. While you are carrying on so with Lord Francis Alwyne you can't expect people not to imitate your exalted behaviour."

"Oh, Sybil!"

The colour died out of Esther's cheeks at the sneer. "I am not carrying on with anyone; what a horrible expression."

"Well, if you aren't engaged, everyone thinks you are," said Sybil, uneasily, for it was unwise to quarrel with Esther just then. "But don't tell mother anything: that would be a sneaking trick, and not a bit like you."

"I don't want to do anything underhand, I am sure, Sybil, or unkind; but would your mother like Mr. Macrorie?"

"Good gracious, yes!" cried Sybil, lightly. "She is only anxious for me to get married—or rather for one of us to do so—and it would not matter who the man was; and, besides, she likes Mr. Macrorie."

And in the innocence of her heart Esther believed her, though she was evidently surprised at Mrs. Galton's taste.

"Sybil, I wish you would not say those thoughts about me," she faltered. "They are not true, and it hurts me."

"Very well, Miss Prim," said Sybil; "and in return you must leave me alone: for you and I have different ideas of enjoying ourselves."

"We have, indeed," said Esther, fervently, and Sybil was silenced.

Suddenly, upon the quiet air, the sunset gun from St. Angelo boomed across the water, and in an instant every fort and barrack, every ship and torpedo-boat sent forth the call for retreat. Sweet and unearthly, bugle followed bugle, till the whole island was calling to evening, and the melody died away from the Grand Harbour to be caught up and echoed in the lonely forts beyond the village of Civita Vecchia on its spur of cliff.

"How lovely," said Esther, with a little sob; "how lovely," and even Sybil was touched with some faint shadow of appreciation. But at that moment Nell Clare-Smythe, coming up with her husband, swept them both into the boat before her.

Evening had fallen before Esther had reached home in her father's charge, and it seemed to her that the house looked more dreary and uncared for than ever.

Hadji Baba was sitting wailing on the stairs with a scratched arm, and the three girls were quarrelling in the dining-room over a broken doll. Tired though she was, Esther carried Hadji upstairs and slipped out of her smart frock into a cotton gown, and when she was on her way downstairs again Mrs. Beresford called her.

"I have had a dreadful headache all day," she said fretfully, as Esther opened the door; "and the children's noise has been distracting. I wish that they were all at the bottom of the sea."

Kopama was brushing her hair and rubbing vinegar into her aching head, while she lay on the shabby sofa and groaned.

"You must stop in to-morrow, Essie," she said, "I can't manage without you, for I am always ill now."

"If Missie Beresford would walk more in the air or move a little, she might be better," said the Ayah's soft voice from behind the sofa, with a swift glance at Esther's disappointed face: for she had no sympathy with the woman whose ailments were purely imaginary.

"Nonsense, Kopama, hold your tongue," said Monica sharply. "Oh, and Esther, you will have to get the dinner to-night, for Carmela went home after luncheon saying she was ill. I am sure servants are the plague of one's life, and I don't know what we are going to do to-night."

Here was practical work ready to her hand, and Esther swept off Hadji to the kitchen where she found Delaney sitting disconsolately at the table washing potatoes by the light of a flaring candle.

TO BE CONTINUED