

you so, and you can see for yourself that Lord Francis is very much 'epris,' my dear. I should be pleased with the marriage, and so would your grandmother, 'ma chere amie.' You would have a great name, and maybe a great position, for perhaps you do not know that Frank Alwyne's elder brother is an invalid, and that he runs a good chance of succeeding to the title before very long."

Esther had never thought of this before, and the idea that had been thus started in her mind had disturbed the even current of her thoughts and vexed the innocence of her young heart. She thought of Mrs. Galton's wonder and jealousy when she should hear the news; and of Carrie and Sybil, who would have such real cause to envy her, and she began to dress for her lunch-party at the Palace with a thrill of exultation as she smoothed out the folds of the silk and "voile" gown that was of so becoming a shade of blue.

She was surveying herself with interest in the glass when the door opened slowly and Hadji Baba came in. He was a very white, feeble-looking Hadji Baba, and if anyone had had time to notice the dark lines under his eyes, the truth of his illness would have been realised.

"O, Essie, don't go out!" he said, complainingly; "my head aches, and I want to sit on your knee and be comfy."

"Hadji, dear, I'm so sorry I can't stay with you," Esther said kindly; "go to Kopama, and she will nurse you!"

"She is with mummy," said Hadji Baba; "and mummy's head aches, too; but she is having a lot of scent and stuff put on it and no one has any time for me."

"Go to Mrs. Delaney: she looks nice and kind," said Esther, catching up her gloves and preparing to start.

"Mrs. Delaney is cross because Carmela swept all the dirt into the cupboards, and she says it's like a pig-stye!" said Hadji Baba; "and I wish I was a pig because I could lie down in the straw!"

"Lie down on my bed, darling," said Esther, catching him in her arms and laying him comfortably down among the blankets. "I can't stop darling, now, for I can hear the motor at the gate," and with a hasty kiss, she departed, taking with her a heart that was hardly at ease.

For all the way to Valetta, Hadji's small, white face kept intruding between her amusement and herself. It had been wrong to leave him—but she had done so wilfully, because her own gratification came first in her thoughts just then. But the first glance at herself in the long glass of the Palace drawing-room restored her confidence, and she forgot Mrs. Hanmer's half-read letter, and little Hadji Baba's headache, at the first sound of Alwyne's voice. He looked so handsome in his smart suit as he strolled into the drawing-room, that she could think of nothing else but her conquest, and the thought added a piquancy to her beauty that delighted him by enhancing her value in his eyes. The sight of the tandem cart, with its pair of grey Arabs and its silver-plated harness, made her heart rejoice; and as he swung her lightly into her seat and climbed up to her side, and they started up the street at a brisk trot, Lady Adela Stanier looking after them, told herself that they were the handsomest couple in Malta.

The ponies gave some little trouble until they were beyond the gates of the town, and it was only when they were settling down to their bits upon the straight road, that Lord Francis Alwyne spoke.

"I say—I should like to drive on like this for ever and ever!" he said, abruptly; "just you and I—"

"It would be very nice," said Esther; and looking down at the radiant loveliness of her face, he saw that she had not understood him.

"Esther!" he said again, "I have just found out that I love you, and want you for my wife."

Her two hands were lying crossed on her lap, and he laid his own upon them. "Esther, I am waiting for your answer," he said softly.

Suddenly there swept across the girl's mind the memory of Geoffrey Hanmer's sad and steadfast face. He had loved her all her life, she knew, and till only a short time ago she thought that she loved him; indeed, she was very sure of it now, for Alwyne's words left her heart cold. "I don't know—I don't know!" she said, hurriedly.

Alwyne smiled a little; he was certainly astonished that Esther had felt even a moment's hesitation, but this hesitation increased his anxiety for her answer tenfold. "You are not sure of yourself, darling, because you are so young; and you have had no opportunity of learning anything about love; but I am so sure of what your

answer will be, that if we were not in the public road I should kiss you."

Esther flushed crimson. "Oh, no—no!" she said, trembling very much. "I could not bear it!"

Alwyne paused to touch his hat to a friend before he turned to her again. "Dear little girl, I will give you just an hour to think over your answer—so that you shall say 'yes' on your way back to Pembroke: and we can be alone together—yes, by Jove—that will be a delightful arrangement."

Esther turned her head away. He was so confident of her answer, far more so than she was herself, and his very confidence swept her from her feet. "Wait—wait," she said; "how do you know what I shall say?"

Alwyne laughed a little. "I don't think that you will refuse to be Lady Francis," he said, and with superb tact turned the conversation to indifferent matters, so that by the time they swung through the gate on to the Marsa, Esther was herself again, and had regained her colour, and something of her confidence. Alwyne was playing polo that afternoon, and Esther watched him shyly enough from beneath the protecting wing of Lady Adela Stanier.

One of the A.D.C.'s took her into the tent to have some tea, and while he had gone to replenish her cup, she shrank back a little against the shrouding folds of the canvas, for she felt that she was in no mood to bear the stares and whispered comments of the women. As she stood there alone for the moment, she became aware that outside the tent, close to her ear, Mrs. Galton was talking to a friend.

"My dear Isabel," she said; "do you believe for a moment that Lord Francis means to marry that little Esther Beresford? He means to make a fool of her, and he will certainly spoil her chances with any other man. But, believe me, he no more thinks of proposing to her than I do! Why, the idea is absurd! Lady Adela coddles her and spoils her because she can sing and help to amuse her guests. But as for any serious intentions on his part—I have the best authority for saying that they are out of the question."

The colour flamed to Esther's pale cheeks. Mrs. Galton's shrill, spiteful tones had penetrated so clearly into the tent that there was no mistaking her words, and all the girl's pride was in arms. At that moment she saw Lord Francis Alwyne's tall figure looming in the entrance, looking for her, and she made him a little sign. She watched him make his way to her side, followed by fifty pairs of envious eyes, and her own heart beat rapidly. She would show the women of Malta that Alwyne did love her, and that he had singled her out from every other girl as the one to be his wife; and for the moment her senses reeled.

"What a snug little corner out of the world," he said, smiling down at her with eyes that suddenly flamed a little as he read her inmost soul. "You have got my answer for me?"

He was shielding her from the gaze of everyone, standing in front of her; and Esther put up a trembling hand and touched the white frieze of his blanket coat.

"It is—'yes'!" she said; and when the irrevocable words were spoken, she felt uncertain as to whether to laugh or cry. But Alwyne saw the emotion on her face, and acted on the spur of the moment with the cleverness of a diplomat.

"Come, Esther; I can't say what I want to in the tent; come outside, and tell Lady Adela. Ah! there goes the saddling bell! By Jove! my darling, what a happy 'Quarter' I shall play this time!"

Esther walked across the turf by his side feeling as though she were hardly conscious of her feet, and she found herself being congratulated by the Palace party after a few words from Alwyne, until she finally subsided into a chair by Lady Adela's side, feeling that she had achieved the object of her ambition, and uncertain whether she was bitterly glad or bitterly sorry. Mrs. Galton came up to her half an hour later, when Lady Adela Stanier's attention was diverted for the moment by a stout Maltese lady on the other side.

"How do you do, Esther?" she said; "how is your stepmother? I thought that you would soon forget your good resolutions on the 'Pleiades'! It was all very well then to talk of being a home-bird, but you had had no chance then of tasting the sweets of pleasure. I always said that your coming out so young was a mistake."

Esther looked at her silently. She was feeling the strain of the last hour, and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

TO BE CONTINUED