

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. At last they arrive at Malta, and Esther looks forward to meeting her father. Her father's household is uncongenial, but Esther makes a friend of her youngest step-brother, "Hadji Baba." Her step-mother, "Monica," is disposed to be kind and rejoices when Esther goes to dinner at the "Palace." Lord Francis Alwyne's attentions flatter the girl who enjoys the gay life of Malta exceedingly. Attracted solely by his wealth and position, she finally becomes betrothed to Lord Francis.

THE last "quarter" of polo was played with incredible fastness, and Esther became so interested in the game that she forgot her shyness and Mrs. Galton's unkind words, and watched the whirling dust and flying ponies, and the flash of red and blue sashes in and out, like a continual "grand chain," with eyes bright with excitement.

"Hulloa! There's Alwyne down! His pony must have crossed his legs!" cried a man near them, all unconscious of Esther's interest; and in a moment Lady Adela rose, and there was sudden confusion. Out of the hurly-burly of men and ponies the dust-cloud died away, and Esther saw a white figure on the ground, and a pony galloping away with trailing reins. It was at this moment that she realised, with a shock of agony, that the accident left her cold and untouched. What did it mean? She had promised to marry this man half an hour before, and now she could contemplate his probable death with no more agitation than she would have felt if the same accident had occurred to any ordinary acquaintance. The shock of realisation stunned her, and Lady Adela, understanding nothing of her thoughts, took her hand.

It was only when, white and shaken, he was facing Esther, and explaining that he had been stunned for the moment, that the girl collected herself enough to smile at him and murmur her joy and relief at his escape; while they were surrounded by an anxious crowd of enquiring people, whose presence made her understand how very foolish she had been in regretting for an instant her engagement. It was arranged, therefore, that the groom should take the tandem home, and that under the circumstances, Alwyne, whose arm was strained, should take Esther home in a cab, and then return to Valetta. It seemed to Esther that they received quite an ovation when they left the ground together, and Alwyne smiled a little as he lifted his cap.

"By Jove, Esther, they seem to be quite interested in our affairs; I suppose Lady Adela has spread the news."

"Yes," said Esther, smiling a little, for Alwyne was looking at her approvingly, and the applause was delightfully new and sweet; "but why should they be so kind and interested?"

"O, anything to do with the Palace is a most important event in the island; and, independently of my position, you know you are awfully pretty and popular, dear."

The drive home was a royal progress of love-making, of which art Alwyne was no mean exponent; and when at last they drove up at the little house, Esther, bewildered and tremulous, turned to him.

"You will come in, and see my father!" she said.

Alwyne nodded and opened the gate, but at the sight of the untidy garden, and the four dirty children who precipitated themselves down the path towards them, he turned away with a shrug of disgust.

She went slowly into the house as he drove away with the children hanging on her arm.

"O what a nice man in a blanket-coat! Who is he, Essie? O! Hadji is ill—at least ayah has been bathing his head all day—and Mrs. Delaney says he's a poor

washy little boy, and she must cocker him up with the best of everything—and mamma is so cross!"

Esther was half glad that Alwyne had not come in, when she found that her father was out, and her step-mother, in her worst mood, met her on the stairs. But at the same time she felt the sting of his unwillingness to enter the untidy house, and to face her relations in his fastidious mood. She took the ayah's place at Hadji's side, who was fretting and feverish, and she heard that the doctor had been to see him, and was coming again before bedtime.

"He not know what it is, Missie," said Kopama, with a sigh. "Plenty fever about—and poor Hadji plenty weak—blow him away like puff of smoke."

Esther did not leave Hadji till he was asleep, and when she had helped to put the other children to bed, Major Beresford came in to find his wife and Esther already seated at the supper-table, where, under Mrs. Delaney's regime, an excellent meal was spread.

"We thought you were dining at the Club, Norman," said Mrs. Beresford, fretfully. "I wish you would not be away from home, so much—it throws so much responsibility on my shoulders; and really, to-day my head has been worse than usual."

But Major Beresford was in an unusually cheerful mood. "Never mind anything, now, Monica! Has Esther told you her news? No, I can see she has not. O, Essie! Essie! you sly puss; so this has been going on all the time under the surface! I saw the young man at the Club—in fact, we have only just parted—and believe me, my dear Esther, you are making the best match in Malta; and I am more thankful than I can say."

And Major Beresford stooped over the girl and kissed her, while his wife cried impatiently: "For goodness sake, Norman, what are you talking about? Esther has told me nothing."

"We must drink her health," cried Major Beresford; "for Esther is going to marry Lord Francis Alwyne; and he, as everyone knows, will probably be the Marquis of Ashdown some day."

"Esther!" screamed Mrs. Beresford; "you don't mean it? Why, Lord Francis will be a sort of son to me. I shall call him Frank. And Eleanor will have a fit of jealousy?"

"It is all so new!" stammered Esther. "I do not seem to be able to realise it all yet."

"By Jove, Esther, you are a lucky girl; and I have not been so happy for more years than I can count!" said Major Beresford, coming round and laying his hand on her bright hair. "I feel inclined to say, thank God for a piece of unexpected happiness at last!"

And Esther felt, with a sudden pang, that she wished he had been more tenderly concerned over her happiness, and not his own gratification; and felt the impossibility of confiding in him any of her doubts and fears.

"I saw your sister, too, on my way home, Monica," said Major Beresford, attacking the pie before him vigorously; "and, my dear, she was actually coming to look for me in a perfect fit of fury, because Sybil had chosen the unlucky moment of Esther's good fortune to go and announce to her mother that she was engaged to be married to a naval engineer in the 'Douglas,' a man called Macrorie—not a very satisfactory person; but it appears that Sybil is independent of her mother, and says she will marry him with or without Mrs. Galton's consent; so there is a pretty kettle of fish!"

And in the lively conversation that ensued, Esther escaped to her own room and the society of her own thoughts. She must write to her grandmother at once, for she could not bear the thought that Mme. de la Perouse should hear of her engagement from anyone but herself; and when she had given Hadji his medicine, and covered him up warmly, she sat down to her letter. It was very difficult to write, but she had no idea that when it was written, every word conveyed but one thought to Mme. de la Perouse, and that—the fact of Esther's unhappiness.

"Darling Gran'mere, I have promised to marry Lord Francis Alwyne, whose father you used to know, I think, and want you to tell Geoffrey.

"I did not know that being engaged would make me