

# 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 Prouse, 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 Hamner, 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."

## CHAPTER IX.

"When poverty comes in at the door  
Love flies out through the window."

"ESTHER," said Nell Clare-Smythe, eagerly; "do you know that Sybil has found an admirer?"

There was an afternoon dance taking place on board the "Douglas," the ship that Captain Clare-Smythe commanded, and to Esther's delight his wife had offered to chaperone herself and Sybil Galton.

A fortnight had gone by since the dinner party at the Palace, and Esther had not met Lord Francis Alwyne since that night, for he had been laid up with an attack of influenza. But to-day he was on board, an interesting invalid in a long armchair.

"Which is Sybil's admirer? Is he nice?"

Esther was standing leaning against the rail of the "Douglas," while her partner fetched her an ice, and Mrs. Clare-Smythe, like a brilliant butterfly in bright scarlet and black, hovered about among her guests.

"He is horrid: the most disagreeable man on board ship: a naval engineer into the bargain, too. But I am so glad, for this will be a real triumph over Mrs. Galton."

"Oh, Nell! but you do not mean to tell me that the man is not nice?" cried Esther, in distress.

"I do mean it, indeed, my dear!" said Mrs. Clare-Smythe. "He is anything but steady, and altogether a hateful person, and no one could call him a gentleman."

"But I must tell Mrs. Galton," said Esther, uneasily. "And yet I don't know what to do, for that hardly seems honourable. I had better talk to Sybil about it."

"If you take my advice," said Nell, with a little nod, "you will not interfere with anyone's love affairs. It is a dangerous kindness, and if Mrs. Galton had eyes in her head, she must have seen the affair going on for the past week, because they met at the tennis club, I believe," and she rustled away.

When Captain Hethcote returned with a striped Venetian ice in its cool green saucer, Esther was not quite so composed as usual, and he wondered what had happened to her. But her eyes were wandering in search of Sybil Galton who, released from her mother's stern eye, was flirting with Mr. Macrorie in the vulgar fashion that girls of her type are so wont to employ. She was looking almost handsome in a gown of bright pink silk and a large black hat, for her cheeks were flushed with the excitement of unwonted admiration, and her voice rang shrilly across the deck.

Andrew Macrorie was a good-looking naval engineer with a smart figure and a well cut uniform, but he had the shifty dark eyes of a man who had grown accustomed to living by his wits, and his thin olive face suggested blood that was not entirely Scotch.

He had already marked Sybil Galton down as an easy prey, for he was determined to marry a girl with money, and he was assured that there was no lack of it in the Galton family. Hethcote's eyes followed Esther's and recognised in an instant the cause of her uneasiness, for Sybil had been out of sight for the greater part of the afternoon with the same man whose knowledge of the

arrangements of the ship enabled him to conduct a flirtation in a very satisfactory manner.

Hethcote had snatched these two consecutive dances with difficulty from Esther's numerous admirers, and they meant more to him, loyal friend as he was to Alwyne, than he could say; for Lord Francis, being neither a patient nor unselfish lover by nature, had succeeded in monopolising Esther for the greater part of the afternoon as a privileged invalid, to the edification of every man and woman on board.

"Do you want me to break up that tete-a-tete," he said; "I will if you like."

"Could we ask her to have some coffee with us," hesitated Esther. "I don't think Mrs. Galton would like Mr. Macrorie." And in another moment they had passed over to Sybil's side.

"Coffee? No thanks," said Sybil flippantly; "I have had several cups already. Can't you attend to your own affairs and leave mine alone?"

And long after they had gone back to their old corner, Hethcote and Esther heard the ring of mocking laughter from the pink gown and blue uniform.

"I think Sybil is very foolish," said the girl, flushing a little. "But it seems to be of no use talking to her," and at that moment the band struck up one of Strauss's dreamy waltzes, and Esther floated away to the strain of it.

She danced beautifully, and Alwyne, from the long chair, watched her white gown threading its way in and out of the couples, groaning a little to himself over the doctor's prohibition as to his taking part in any active amusement yet. How well Esther held her head; she looked like a stately lily with the white of her gown and the pale green of her hat and sash. He knew now that he loved her, and yet he played with his feelings, assuring himself that he must not speak the fatal words yet, but must wait till he was more sure of himself and of her.

His cousin came up and paused by him for a moment. "All alone, Frank? You are one of those people who prefer splendid isolation I suppose. Sometimes I believe all you Alwynes, from the dear Marquis downwards, think no one good enough for intimate association or friendship."

She spoke lightly, and he moved with a sudden sense of irritation. "That is absurd, Nell; but you are always unjust to me."

"Not at all, my dear boy—but—you like Esther Beresford enormously, of course—you like her only just well enough to spoil her chances with some other man—not enough to make her Lady Francis."

Her cutting words annoyed him at once, and he was too angry to deny their truth, and too proud to allow his cousin to see into his heart. "My dear Nell, Miss Beresford understands the game well enough," he said icily.

"Oh, does she?" cried Nell. "Then I will tell you this one thing, my good Frank: that if you so much as bring one line of trouble on her pretty forehead, you will have to answer to me for it. What does the stupid pride of the Marquis of Ashdown and his sons matter in comparison with the heart of my friend?"

"Good gracious, Nell," cried Alwyne, lightly; "what has come over you? I hardly know you again. Can it be that private theatricals are on the tapis, and you are practising for your part?"

The contemptuous glance which Nell Clare-Smythe threw at her cousin would have withered up a man less self-satisfied than Francis Alwyne. "Yes, if you like to call life the theatricals in which I have played my part always indifferently," she said in a thrilling voice. "It is Esther herself who taught me on board the 'Pleiades' how a good woman ought to live, and I do not want her to forget that lesson herself, or to allow the high ideals that she has always held, to be destroyed within her by disappointment."

Alwyne looked into his cousin's face in blank amazement. "My dear Nell," he said, "I never associated you with romantic weakness before."

But Nell Clare-Smythe had left him, and was dancing