

A Prisoner of Hope*

A NEW SERIAL STORY.

By MRS. WEIGALL

Resume: Esther Beresford, who has been at Miss Jenkins' private school for ten years, is visited by Mrs. Galton, her step-mother's sister, with a view to the former's leaving school. Major Beresford and his wife are at Malta.

FOR the thought that Esther Beresford might be a beautiful girl had never struck her before as possible, and now with the memory of her own two ordinary daughters before her, a beautiful companion seemed to her in the light of a calamity.

Esther looked from one to the other in confusion, and Miss Jenkins spoke first. "Esther, this is Mrs. Galton," she said. "She has come to make arrangements to take—to take you—to your father."

Esther went gently forward, with a pretty gesture of welcome. "How d'you do?" she faltered timidly. "My father told me that you were coming. It is kind of you."

The sound of her voice released Mrs. Galton from the spell that bound her. "How d'you do, Esther? I suppose you ought to call me Aunt Eleanor. I did not expect to see you so—big."

There was no offer to embrace her, nothing beyond a cold handshake, and Esther's lip trembled a little in disappointment and from the chill in the hard voice.

"Sit down, child!" said Miss Jenkins, tartly. "There is no reason why you should stand."

And Esther sat down with the golden light full upon her face. She was so lovely that Mrs. Galton's quick eyes, appraising her, felt that even her shabby blue serge gown and clumsy shoes could not spoil her; for her hair was of the dark shade of warm brown that has a suggestion of copper about its burnished masses, and her eyes clear grey under their long black lashes had all the Irish light and shade about their unsullied purity. Her colouring was clear and pale, and her mouth warm scarlet and curved like a Cupid's bow, with delicate flexible lips ready to dimple with laughter or to tremble with tears, though laughter had been her portion through her girlish life as yet. She had small hands and feet, and her graceful head was set so charmingly on her shoulders that Mrs. Galton found herself wondering why to this one girl should have been given every qualification for beauty, while to her own daughters nearly everything was denied save what money could purchase.

"You are much needed at home," said Mrs. Galton, and I suggested to my poor sister, now that they are in quarters in Malta, that she should have you out to help her. You know that she is almost entirely an invalid, and there are five children."

"I was anxious to go out before," cried Esther, "but I thought my father did not want me."

"There was no money to pay your passage," returned Mrs. Galton, curtly. "But they seem to have scraped it together somehow now."

Esther flushed painfully, for Miss Jenkins had carefully hidden Major Beresford's difficulties from the knowledge of his daughter, and the fact of this came like a shock at the present moment.

"I am sailing for Malta with my daughters in the 'Pleiades' in a week's time, and I came to tell you that I should be glad if you would join me at the hotel the night before we sail and go out with us. I have taken a house in Malta for the season."

"Yes," faltered Esther; "but it is the middle of the term—and what about the girls' music, Miss Jenkins?"

"Oh, that will be all right, my love. Rest assured it is a good opportunity, since you have to return to your father's house."

"As for your clothes," pursued Mrs. Galton, ignoring Miss Jenkins entirely, "I cannot, needless to say, concern myself with your outfit, but I daresay Carrie might have a dress that might fit you with a little alteration."

She looked contemptuously at the blue serge, and Esther knew suddenly that it was shabby and old, although she had never thought of it before.

The look of appeal that she cast at Miss Jenkins

brought that lady to the rescue at once. "I am sure that Esther is obliged to you, madam, for your kindness, but Mme. de la Perouse will no doubt wish to provide her with an outfit."

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Galton, rising with a jangle of bangles and a rustle of skirts. "Then, Esther, I will write all instructions to you as to train and hotel and my maid shall meet you in London, as no doubt we shall be deeply engaged till the moment of sailing. My girls go a great deal into society, and, being very popular, have a large number of friends."

"I am glad to feel," broke in Miss Jenkins, "that Esther Beresford is going to a place where she will be more thoroughly appreciated even than she has been here. A large number of people she will meet in Malta will, I am sure, speedily become her friends."

"Esther must remember," said Mrs. Galton, firmly, "that she is going out to help her step-mother, not to enjoy herself."

"Madam," said Miss Jenkins, with a deep courtesy, "where youth, virtue, and beauty go hand in hand appreciation follows as a matter of course, and I fancy that Esther will not lack enjoyment."

She had thrown the challenge down defiantly in defence of the child she had reared, and every bugle on her cap trembled with indignation.

"We shall see—we shall see," said Mrs. Galton. "But at any rate, I do not wish Esther to be under any misapprehension as to the position in society she will occupy. My sister is too delicate to take her out much, and I have my own daughters."

"But," said Esther, distressed, "my wishes are to help my father in every way, believe me, Mrs. Galton; I am not thinking of anything else. I am very glad to go out to him to help them all."

"Very well, my dear," said Mrs. Galton, impatiently. "And now I must wish you good-bye, and Miss Jenkins, too."

"Good-day, madam," said Miss Jenkins, coldly. "Miss Beresford will attend you to the door."

"Why, what a prim old cat your school-mistress is, Esther," said Mrs. Galton, hardly waiting till they were out of hearing of the old lady. "You will be thankful to get away from her, I expect."

"Oh, no—no!" cried the girl, with quick tears. "They have been so good to me—I have been so happy here!"

"Some people's idea of happiness is an odd one."

Mrs. Galton looked round the quiet walls, and the garden with its level expanse of sunlight and its prim flower beds. "Well, good-bye," she said, lightly pressing an icy kiss on Esther's forehead. "To-day week we shall meet again, but I shall write all directions," and she was gone.

Esther, watching her bewildered, wondered at the flash of flounced frills and patent leather boots. This fashionable woman was an utter revelation to her, and she felt sure that if all the women of the new world of Malta were to resemble Mrs. Galton she would make few friends.

Miss Jenkins was waiting for her when she passed the drawing-room door, and with unwonted affection drew her into her arms and kissed her. Bless you, my child," she said. "I hope you will be happy."

There was so much doubt and wrath in her voice that Esther felt herself struggling with her tears. "Oh, I hope so! But you have all spoiled me, I think."

"There, there!" said Miss Jenkins briskly. "I really believe I am crying. Get along to your tea, Esther, and to-morrow you must spend with your grandmother."

"And what shall you do without me?"

"Oh, no one is indispensable, and Dora Thomson will be only too pleased to take your place, I know. In fact, I am sure Mme. de la Perouse will like to have you for several days, and you had better make up your mind to give your last lessons to-morrow morning."

"Yes, Miss Jenkins," said Esther, submissively. But