

was warping out of dock, escaping with relief from the bustle down below.

She wished to be alone for her last sight of England, and moved to a far corner of the deck where she might be undisturbed. The air was full of sound and life. Las-cars hauling on to cordage with weird minor melody of "chanties" that are their own peculiar heritage: creaking of engines, and wash of water about the white sides of the "Pleiades"; question and answer from ship to shore; harsh scream of a gull following the wake of their keel. The girl suddenly realised how much tragedy there can be under the surface of life, when she saw a middle-aged woman dressed in mourning, with a thin, pale face, waving a handkerchief to a young man who stood not far from her own side. The boy was going out to India young and full of hope, and the mother, who had spent almost her last penny in fitting him for a fine career, was left at home widowed and childless. Esther read the agony in the two faces, and her own eyes swam with tears. Here, too, was a wife bidding her husband farewell, herself doomed to remain at home to educate the children, who could not be brought up in a bad climate; here, two brothers parting. Life was full of sorrow.

Esther turned away, and as she did so, met the eyes of Lord Francis Alwyne, who was looking with keen curiosity at her. He had a pleasant face, she thought to herself.

CHAPTER V.

"La prisperite s'envole
Le pouvoir tombe, et s'enfuit.
Un peu d'amour qui console
Vaut mieux et fait moins de bruit."

By next morning the "Pleiades" was in the chops of the Channel, and a stiff breeze had churned the water into racing foam, and had whitened the black funnels with spray.

Mrs. Galton and her daughters spent the day on deck and Esther had to fly up and down on so many messages, since Jeanne was a groaning atom of humanity in her berth, that she had no time to speak to anyone except to Captain Hethcote, who was hovering in attendance on her chaperon. He seemed to exist for the sole purpose of making things easier for other people, and his kind, good-natured eyes were watching for an opportunity to help the tired girl.

Lord Francis Alwyne spent the day in a long deck chair the other side of the ship, talking to his cousin, Mrs. Clare-Smythe, the wife of one of the naval officers in the Mediterranean Fleet, who was going on with her little girl of five to join her husband in Malta. Lord Francis had contented himself with bowing coldly to the Galtons, and even that lady's courage was not proof against his manner.

The wind rose with every hour, and by night such a pitching sea was the result that Esther attended Mrs. Galton and her two daughters down below with the aid of two stewardesses. The girl was sharing a cabin with Sybil Galton, who was, perhaps, the most exacting of seasick patients; but since all three of her companions had expressed their preference for the ministrations of the stewardess, Esther felt a diffidence about offering her attentions. All night long Sybil lay and groaned, and Esther slept fitfully, and when she awoke next morning to see her dresses swinging against the panels of her cabin, and her shoes taking long dives into distant corners, she was thankful that she was a good sailor. The "Pleiades" plunged with a shudder of her engines into the trough of the waves, and came up with a sickening roll, and Esther heard the merry baritone of Captain Hethcote, in the next cabin, trolling out, "There she lay, all that day, in the Bay of Biscay, oh!"

"Oh, by Jove, Alwyne, I wish I felt morally certain that I was not going to succumb to seasickness!"

"Shut up, my dear chap," said Lord Francis. "Try will-power, as I am doing, and when you see the ceiling bowing towards the floor be morally convinced that it is merely imagination, and nothing else."

Esther smiled to herself, and, sitting up, looked out of her port across the green waste of waters. Every now and then a great rolling breaker broke against the "Pleiades," and drenched the glass with spray, and once a great wind-driven gull flashed past, staying himself against the force of the storm. Presently Esther struggled up and dressed as well as she could, then bent over the prostrate figure in the lower berth.

"Shall I get you anything, Sybil?" she said, anxiously. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Go away!" said Sybil, crossly. "Do you think I want to be looked at when I am yellow and ill and my hair is out of curl?"

"Oh, Sybil! may I get you some tea, or shake up your pillow?"

"Go away!" said Sybil. "I only want the stewardess. It is her duty to look after sick people."

And Esther's visit to Mrs. Galton's cabin was met by a still more imperative refusal. Mrs. Galton, without teeth, or fringe, or complexion, gave Esther such a shock that she ran up the companion as fast as she could, and it was only when she was breasting the wind on the slanting deck that she recovered her spirits. A woman she had made friends with at dinner the night before joined her for an after-breakfast walk, and Captain Hethcote came up on her other side, but Lord Francis was studying the sea at his cousin's side with his usual air of boredom. Little Budge Clare-Smith, a girl of five, whose nurse was ill in her berth, was playing with her doll in the saloon doorway at her mother's side, and Mrs. Clare-Smith, whose dark hair and eyes and vivacious manner made up a fascinating personality, was bestowing languid attention upon her in the intervals of discussing Malta affairs with her cousin. Esther could hear scraps of conversation as she came past them with her companions.

"Well, you'll like Adele Stanier; she is a good sort. But knowing you as I do, Frank, it beats me how you could have made up your mind to take up the A. D. C. job. Neville always calls it a flunkey job, with less than a flunkey's pay, and everybody hates you all round, and every woman makes up her mind that you are trying to keep her out of the Palace set, and—why, Frank, what a pretty girl that is, and how well she walks! Do get little Captain Hethcote to introduce you, and then you can introduce her to me. I want amusing, and I do like pretty girls!"

Lord Francis raised himself leisurely out of the chair. "All right, Nell," he said. "But she is going to Malta with some awful people, and you may be bored with her eventually."

"Nonsense, my fastidious cousin!" cried Mrs. Clare-Smythe; "there is not a woman on board that I should care to speak to but Miss Beresford, and after all when you like a person you are not obliged to adopt all her friends as your own."

Esther, on passing the door of one of the deck cabins, was struck by the wail of a child's voice within. She knew that Mrs. Devenish, the wife of a quartermaster in a line regiment, returning to India with five children, occupied this cabin, and after a moment's thought she knocked and opened the door. The wind was abating, and the ship pitching much less than it had done in the early morning, but to Esther's distress she found the cabin full of crying children, and their mother white and helpless in her berth. She had been trying to dress one of the children, but had collapsed before her task was half over.

"Please forgive me, and let me help you," said Esther eagerly. And when Mrs. Devenish sobbed out her gratitude she began by making her comfortable in her berth and giving her some brandy. Then, with deft, quick fingers, she dressed the children, and swept them out of the cabin with her.

"You need not worry about them all day," she said, "for I will take care of them till you are better."

And hardly waiting for the poor woman's thanks and blessings, she departed, leaving her to sleep.

TO BE CONTINUED

