

## CHAPTER III.

"I am glad to see you, my dear; you are very like your father. I hope you will be happy here. Very like your father, indeed. You do not remember him, my dear?"

Mr. Talbot dropped the hand he had been limply shaking, and turned with the last nervous question to his wife.

"I do not!" she answered curtly. "And perhaps, Arthur, you will allow Miss Vane to take her place at the table. You had enough to say about the likeness between her and her father last night."

"But it is even more remarkable in the daylight," the banker persisted, with the feeble defiance of the utterly hen-pecked. "You looked a little worn and pale last night, but you are fresh as a rose this morning. I hope you slept well."

"And did not dream of Miss Muffet?" put in Frank, who, falling to secure a seat beside the pretty stranger, had been vainly endeavouring to attract her attention across the table, and now thought that he had attained his end.

"Eh, what is that? Some friend of yours, my dear?" the banker asked curiously; being a little deaf, he caught the words only in an imperfect fashion, but he saw the quick half-frightened, half-appealing look in Magdalen's blue eyes, and scented, as he thought, a mystery.

"No," Mrs. Talbot broke in, in a tone that warned the well-trained husband to ask no further questions. "Miss Vane travelled down from town with Constance Meredith, and was driven here in the Hall carriage."

Mr. Talbot nodded two or three times, and stroked his white moustache with a long shaking hand. He was a tall slender man, with a handsome weak-looking face, and a manner in which timidity and good-nature seemed ever struggling for the mastery.

Magdalen felt, in the first moment of meeting with her father's cousin, that he at least would be her friend if he dared; but she felt also that his daring would carry him but a little way in any conflict with his wife's imperious will.

So it was rather the removal of a friendly than a protesting presence that she regretted, when at last Mr. Talbot rose to go; and he himself took his departure with evident relief.

"I wonder why women hate each other in such an unreasoning fashion?" he thought, as he shook the shadow of domestic despotism from his shoulders and drove down to the bank, where he was recognized as lord and master, with less than his usual leisurely content. "There does not seem anything in that poor little girl to excite antagonism, and yet they were all against her from the first. I can see that Margaret only tolerates her as a useful drudge, and Flora certainly will not take her part."

In the meantime, while the master of the Melina House thus moodily discussed Magdalen's prospects there, its mistress formally, and with no superfluous regard for her feelings, informed her what her duties and position in that well-disciplined establishment would be.

"You would rather, I am sure, earn your bread than receive it as alms," she said agreeably—"at least, any well-principled young person in your place would prefer it."

"As I should," Magdalen answered promptly; and, with a sort of gentle pride—"I think I understood last night that I was to remain here as the children's governess."

Mrs. Talbot smoothed down the frills of her immaculate morning-dress, and alighty shook her glossy dark head.

"Subject to certain conditions, that is what I intended to propose. But in the first place, we have still the conditions to discuss, and in the second—"

"You are disappointed in me; you have changed your mind!" Magdalen broke in, as the other paused and seemed to hesitate for a word, and, struggle with the weakness as she would, the girl could not quite keep the tears out of her eyes.

Unconformable as was this home, it had long been the goal of her hopes; unkind as were its inmates, they were the only people in the world upon whom she had even the most shadowy claim of kinship.

"I did not quite mean that," Mrs. Talbot said, with chilly graciousness. "I am not able to judge of your acquisitions yet; and, on the other hand—in short there are reasons—"

Flora, who had been sitting in the window apparently absorbed in the columns of the Morning Post, looked up from her paper now, and said, in the clear disdainful tone she seemed to use habitually to her mother—

"Why can you not say exactly what you mean? It is far easier, and in the end kinder to all parties."

"Do not interrupt so rudely, Flo," the mother retorted, with a peevish shoulder-shrug; "or, if you think you can do it so much better, explain the matter yourself. I have already told Miss Vane that the arrangement can only be a tentative one."

"Precisely; but you have led her to imagine that, if she succeeds in keeping those unruly children in order, and making something more of them than the ignorant dunces they are, she will have fulfilled all your requirements, and may look on this place as her home! Now, this is not exactly the case. If Miss Vane is to remain here we shall ask something more of her than a little music, French, and German!"

"As, for instance?" Magdalen asked, with outward calmness, but a fiercely beating heart. Mrs. Talbot's cold severity was hard to bear, but she rebelled with much more passion against the insolent dictation of this mere girl.

"As, for instance, a little discretion and tact!" Flora Talbot answered placidly. "You may think the warning unnecessary, Miss Vane; but we have had a cruel experience of governesses, and you suffer for the sins of your predecessors. There must be no presuming on quasi-cousinship—no flirting with my brother, nor thrusting yourself upon the notice of any visitors to the house."

Magdalen's eyes glowed with a dangerous light, and her fair face changed from rose red to lily white, with a rapidity that alarmed Mrs. Talbot, who hurried to cut short her daughter's insolent harangue.

"Come, come, Flora, that is quite enough," she said sharply. "When we see any signs of levity or forwardness in Miss Vane it will be time to reprove her. No, no, do not answer now"—as Magdalen was about to speak passionately in—"I have no doubt that you are wounded and hurt, and it will be wiser not to say all that you feel. We will talk the matter over later, but go back to the children now!"

Magdalen hesitated for a second, feeling that, if she did not speak out the burning indignation that seemed to change her whole nature, her heart must break. Gentle as she was, she was a proud, acutely-sensitive girl, and the cool deliberate insult stung her like the cut of a whip. But, after all, she went in an absolute silence that made Mrs. Talbot anything but comfortable. The pale proud face said, plainly as any words, how fierce was her pain—that of course was a small matter; but it said as plainly also how lasting her resentment would be, and Mrs. Talbot's conscience suggested several ways in which even-handed justice might commend the challenge, of which she had poor Magdalen drink freely, to her own lips or those of her favorite child.

"Your temper is really intolerable, Flora!" she cried, turning angrily upon her daughter the moment Magdalen had gone. "That girl will never stay in the house now."

Flora turned the broad brows of the paper and raven dark eyes down the column, as she answered with a listless yawn—

"As my primary object was to get rid of her, I cannot say that I regret achieving that result. But you, I confess I do

not understand you, mother; I suppose you mean to pet this protégée of my father's after all."

"You talk like a child!" Mrs. Talbot said, with glowing anger. "I like the girl no more than you do—she is much too pretty to be a safe inmate of such a house as this; but I do not let a senseless jealousy blind me as you do. To drive Magdalen Vane out of the house without a pretence of trying her as a governess after bringing her here would rouse even your father to be her champion, and make Constance Meredith her fervent friend!"

Flora laughed.

"You know how to quench my father's chivalry, I fancy; and, as for that wretched ill-temper d little scarecrow at the Hall, what does it matter whether she makes Magdalen Vane her toady companion or not?"

"It matters much to me. While Constance lives alone there is always the chance that time may soften her to me and mine—that she may forget that foolish cause of quarrel, of which mischief-makers have made so much, and perhaps fulfill her old promise."

"To remember you in her will!" Flora finished mockingly. "I would sell that remembrance for a song mother, if I were you. Little Miss Mureau showed by her message of yesterday how the old insult rankled still."

Mrs. Talbot frowned. The hope her daughter ridiculed was one to which she clung with a desperate tenacity, and the reminder was anything but welcome.

"Even from your selfish point of view, and I know you will see it from no other," she said with spiteful emphasis, "Miss Vane will be a dangerous visitor at the Hall. She is twice as likely to meet Lord Ingestyre there as here!"

It was Flora's turn to start and color angrily at this suggestion. She was evidently discomposed by it, though she raised her dark head proudly, and said, with a great show of scorn—

"Absurd! Why should the thought of such a meeting trouble me? Magdalen Vane is—well, yes, I suppose she is—rather a pretty girl; but by no means the all-conquering beauty you seem to imagine. Lord Ingestyre is not bound to fall a victim to her charms, and even if he does so—with a shrug of exaggerated indifference—"well, we can only say—so much the worse for him. The catastrophe will affect the Towers more than Melina House. Lord Ingestyre is nothing to me."

"Unfortunately he is not anything at present," was the swift, shrewd answer; "if he were, I should feel very much more at my ease. If he were in any way bound, he could not as a gentleman and a man of honor draw back; but a more admirer, however ardent, is so fatally free to change his mind."

"And is not more free to change it than he is welcome!" Flora cried, with angry pride that deceived neither her mother nor herself. Both knew how entirely the ambitious girl's heart was set on the conquest of the young peer, and both felt that their ambition had no very stable support.

Lord Ingestyre, though he had danced and ridden and chatted with Flora Talbot during a season in town and a country house visit, had certainly in no way committed himself as a lover, though, with perhaps more than judicious encouragement, he had permitted himself to pay her a noticeable amount of attention, and had made his admiration for her brilliant brunette beauty manifest enough.

"In spite of himself!" Flora Talbot admitted to herself with cynical frankness. "I know very well that, though he admires, he by no means approves of me, and he has a high ideal for his wife. He even tries to avoid me by fits and starts, and for every *tête-à-tête* that he contrives I plan half a dozen, at least. But, what of that? When I do catch him he is docile and attentive enough, and he knows that I, at least, am in earnest. After all, perhaps it is just as well that

he should feel what is expected of him. He is a man who likes to do his duty in any circumstances, and is quite as likely to be pushed or drawn into an engagement as to leap into it with his own free will."

Flora Talbot was a clever, as well as a daring girl, and there was a certain amount of wisdom and reason in her argument; but for all that, and though she did not spare the pushing and drawing by which she hoped to attain her end, Lord Ingestyre bade her adieu, as he had met her, in the unsatisfactory character of an admiring friend, and she had almost begun to fear that the illustration had been but an unimportant interlude in his life when her brother's announcement that he had arrived at the Towers revived her hopes once more.

The meeting between the two had been, if not quite all that she could wish it, satisfactory enough in its way. Lord Ingestyre was cordial, and frankly pleased to see her; but he never hinted that she was the magnet that brought him to Craymouth, did not even suffer her to infer it in any way.

"Yes, it is pleasant to meet you here," he said, slipping into his accustomed place by Miss Talbot's side, while her mother and Mrs. Chester, the dignified mistresses of the Towers, sat sipping their tea at the farther end of the long room. "I should have made my way to your place to-morrow but for this charming accident!"

She let the black curled lashes rest on the hot velvet cheek just long enough for him to observe and appreciate the contrasted hues, then lifted her dark liquid eyes and murmured softly—

"And you will not let the charming accident change your purpose, I hope. Are you staying here long?"

"I hardly know as yet. Chester asked me down for his coming of age affair."

"Oh!" Flora Talbot's softly drawn breath was hardly a sigh, yet, coupled with the half-reproachful upward look, it had a suggestively sentimental sound. "Then you came down only for Mr. Chester's coming of age?"

"Not only for that—I had another reason. You know Miss Meredith of the Hall?"

"Yes," Flora answered, doing her best to cover the disappointment the last words caused her; her heart had fluttered so sweetly to the opening phrase—"I had another reason"—that the following explanation came upon her as a distinct shock. "Yes, we know her, of course; but—"

Lord Ingestyre smiled as though at some amusing recollection.

"I think Frank told me that she and Mrs. Talbot fell out; but that was many years ago. You do not mean to say that the feud is still in force?"

"My mother would gladly make any amends in her power. I know, for she is warmly attached to Miss Meredith; but—"

"But Miss Meredith is inflexible," Lord Ingestyre finished. "Well, I am afraid she is a little warped in disposition, but we can hardly blame her, remembering what she has to bear."

He spoke warmly, and with a ring of genuine feeling in his pleasant voice. Flora opened her large eyes in amazement. Much as they had been together, she had hardly ever heard him discuss a serious subject seriously before.

"I did not know that you knew Miss Meredith," she said at last, feeling that she must say something if she intended to maintain her sympathetic role—"that is, of course, I knew she was some connection of yours."

"She is my mother's cousin; but until lately she has kept us at a most respectful distance. However, I met her quite by an accident in town this year, and she and I grew so friendly that she gave me permission to call at the Hall if ever I found myself in the neighborhood; and here I am."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)