

# The Last of the Ingestyres,

## CHAPTER II.

Two little girls came running out on the verandah, looking very hot and dishevelled, as though they had been disturbed in some wild romp. At sight of the stranger the older of the two stood back oppressed by awkward shyness; but the younger, a handsome girl of nine or ten, came forward with a stare that was as bold if not as embarrassing as that of her brother.

"Who is it, Frank? I do not know her," she said, in a loud cheerful tone. "If she is one of your friends she looks very nice; and I heard ma and Flora say the other day you did not care to be civil to ladies."

"You are a pert, rude little girl, Kitty; and Blanche, in her way, is just as bad. Do you not know that when your mother is out it is your place to welcome her guests? This is Miss Vane."

Blanche coloured at the rebuke, and extended her limp hand in a helpless half-hearted fashion, but the unabashed Kitty shook back her bronze curls, and prouetted gaily on the steps as she said, with a saucy laugh—

"Miss Vane does not carry her name like a label, and we could not tell her by instinct, as I suppose you did, Mr. Frank. Besides, she is not a guest, she is to be our governess, you know; ma said so this morning."

"I know that I shall box your ears if you do not learn to behave decently, and hold that magpie tongue!" the young man said, in savage disgust, and with a quick side glance at Magdalen's pale sad face. "Blanche, take Miss Vane in and give her a cup of tea, for heaven's sake; it is of no use speaking to that monkey!"

Blanche did not much relish the task he gave to her, but there was an authoritative ring in his tone that for the moment quelled even the dauntless Kitty, and that her meeker older sister never dreamed of resisting. So she led the way into the long low verandah-shaded room, which should have been so picturesque and pretty, but somehow was not, even in the eyes of the girl who had had so small an experience of comfortable English home life.

Magdalen looked round her with a little shiver; and Frank Talbot, who had followed her up the terrace steps, and now stood framed in the open French window, shrugged his shoulders, and said impatiently—

"When will you two cease your tomboy tricks, I wonder! Set that chair straight, Kitty. Did you ever know young ladies who amused themselves in such a manner in the drawing-room before, Miss Vane?"

Magdalen only smiled as she took the tea-cup that Blanche rather thrust into her hand than offered her; and Kitty, as she stooped to raise the plush and satin chair that lay with legs elevated in the centre of the room, said perily—

"You are determined to let Miss Vane know what she has to expect at once, Frank. She must have a good idea of us already. Now, by the way of change, suppose I warn her against you."

Frank Talbot twisted his moustache, and answered, with rather a concealed look.

"Unfortunately for me your conduct will concern her more than mine. I am afraid Miss Vane will not have much to do with me, Kitty."

His eyes sought Magdalen's fair troubled face as he spoke, and his words were addressed more to her than his sister; but it was the unabashed Kitty who answered them, with her over-ready and aggravating giggle.

"Well, I don't know; mamma says Miss Metcalf had a great deal too much! Does she not, Blanche?"

The young man's face grew scarlet, and Magdalen felt her own burn in indignant sympathy. Shy and wretched as she was—and with every second her heart seem-

ed to grow heavier, the faint hope fainter still—she felt that she must at all costs make an effort to turn the conversation into a more becoming channel.

"Will your mother be very long gone, do you think?" she asked, addressing Blanche, who sat glowering at her across the tea-pot, and who seemed in her silent awkwardness the less objectionable of the unprepossessing pair.

But the result was not encouraging. Blanche answered only, by a frightened scowl and an incoherent stammer that sent her younger sister into hysterical agonies of amusement.

"Oh, Blanche, you will kill me!" she gasped between the shrill peals of her mirth. "Cannot you trust yourself to answer a plain question, to utter a mere 'Yes' or 'No'? Miss Vane will not eat you!"

"I can answer your question," Frank broke in, from his place of vantage at the window; "the carriage is at the door now, Miss Vane."

Though the announcement renewed her old nervous terror, Magdalen heard it gladly. Mrs. Talbot might be unsympathetic, and even unkind; but nothing could be worse than this long hopeless wait in the company of two rude children and an uncomfortably attentive young man.

She rose with nervous haste, and stood waiting in her shy schoolgirl fashion until the door opened and Mrs. Talbot, followed by her eldest daughter, swept majestically into the room.

"So—Miss Vane has come, I understand!" Mrs. Talbot began, raising her gold-rimmed glasses to a nose aristocratically arched, and letting the eyes that hardly seemed to need their aid travel leisurely over every object within their range of vision before they settled on Magdalen's face. "Ah, you are here, I see! I may be seated, Miss Vane."

She waived her hand towards the chair from which the girl had just risen, and took her own place upon the centre couch, shaking down her abundant flounces, and saying with a sort of careless condescending graciousness—

"We were quite sorry not to meet your train, as we had fully intending doing—"

"But you had an accident on the road, I suppose," Frank Talbot broke in sarcastically; and his mother turned her eyes on him with a look of great displeasure.

"We had no accident," she answered coldly. "But we called at the Towers and stayed later than we thought."

"I see! Ingestyre came down last night, did he not Flo?"

The tall, haughty-looking girl, who had stood silent and motionless until now, raised her dark eyes at the direct question, and said indifferently—

"Why ask me, since you know already? Yes, Lord Ingestyre was there!"

Frank whistled in an aggravating way, and Mrs. Talbot went quickly on, more because she wished to stop the skirmishing between her son and daughter than from any desire to set Magdalen Vane at ease—

"And I suppose you took a fly from the station? You could hardly have walked that distance, knowing nothing of the way."

"I did not walk, and I did not take a fly; a lady who travelled down from London with me drove me here."

Flora Talbot, who had been regarding the new-comer with anything but approval of her youth and fairness, raised her slight dark brows disdainfully.

"You make friends very easily, Miss Vane," Mrs. Talbot said in a sterner tone. "You will learn by-and-by that that is not an English habit. However I suppose this lady means no harm—"

"Harm," Magdalen flashed, all her shyness forgotten, all her impetuous nature in arms to resent this most unjust attack—"harm! She saw I was alone and friendless, not knowing what to do! Was it harm to befriend me then?"

Mrs. Talbot raised her glasses again,

and surveyed the charming flushed face with eyes that wore to the full as unfriendly as her daughter's.

"I said it was no harm," she repeated with heavy emphasis. "I would counsel you to curb that hasty temper, and receive advice that should be instruction with submission if not with gratitude. Did you not even ask this benevolent lady's name?"

"She gave it unasked," Magdalen replied in a dull stifled voice. She was so utterly weary, so broken in mind and body, that she seemed robbed of all resistant force; even the angry energy of a moment back died out in the one quick flash. "She said that you know her well, and her name was—"

"Well!" Mrs. Talbot repeated, with not unnatural irritability as the girl paused, hesitating over the utterance of what seemed to her now more than ever an absurdly unreal name.

"Miss Muffet—Little Miss Muffet—she told me to say."

Mrs. Talbot's face grew suddenly crimson, and she half rose from her seat, while Frank broke into a roar of irreverent laughter, which seemed only to add fuel to the flame of his mother's wrath.

"Bravo, Miss Vane!" he cried, choking still, but making a struggle for speech. "I never saw the tables so neatly turned, or an angry old lady more completely concerned!"

"If this is a joke," Mrs. Talbot said, her voice quivering with indignation, her triple chin and heavy pendulous jaw seeming to shake in company—"If you intend any jest at my expense, Miss Vane—"

"What nonsense, mother!" Flora broke in coldly. "How could she possibly see any point in, much less plan, such a jest? The joke, such as it is, is of course all Miss Meredith's."

"Of course it is," Frank agreed with alacrity. "She saw the way of giving you a dig through an innocent stranger, and she took it, of course. I cannot say I blame the poor old girl, though I have not the honor to be her favorite; I always rather felt for her myself. But—with a fresh peal of laughter—"did you not think that the queer little body was awfully well matched for her name, Miss Vane?"

"Is it not her name?" Magdalen asked piteously, wondering why this seemingly sympathetic stranger should have deliberately set stumbling-blocks in her hard path, and made her painful entrance into this ungenial home more painful and difficult still. "I thought of course she spoke the truth. Do you not know her then?"

"We know her—yes—but not under that name." Flora Talbot answered the general appeal with icy civility, and slow distinctness. "To call herself by that was merely an ill-bred and rather pointless pleasantry. She is Miss Meredith of the Hall."

"Our local swell!" Frank said, affably, supplementing his sister's information, and quite uncrushed by her disdainful glance. "We all bow down and worship but we none of us get on very well with her, so you may consider yourself lucky indeed to be taken at once under her wing."

Magdalen did not answer, and Flora turned to her mother.

"Probably Miss Vane is tired after her journey," she said suggestively.

Utterly indifferent as the tone was, it was the pleasantest sound that had greeted Magdalen's ears since she crossed the threshold of Mellin House. Mrs. Talbot assented with a sulky nod, then turned to Magdalen.

"As you will like to see Mr. Talbot to-night, and as he will be home in about an hour, you may have to make some change in your dress, so I will not detain you now. To-morrow I shall have a few questions to ask you, and a suggestion to make. Blanche, show Miss Vane her room."

"No; let me show her, ma. Blanche

would take her into yours or Flora's!" Kitty cried, thrusting herself forward, to her sister's infinite relief. "Come with me, Miss Vane—I know where you are to sleep!"

Nobody opposed the lively young lady's wish to act as conductress, and Magdalen followed her thankfully enough up to the top of the house.

"There is your 'sky parlor,' as Frank calls it, Miss Vane," said Kitty. "It takes a good deal of climbing to get to it, but Miss Metcalf used to say that the view made up for everything."

"It is very nice, I think!" Magdalen answered with weary sincerity. It was a mere garret, poorly and scantily furnished; but the girl, whose whole life had been spent at a cheap foreign school, was not likely to look for luxurious surroundings, and any place that promised rest and solitude would have seemed an ante-chamber of Paradise just then.

But solitude at least was not to be hers at once. Kitty seemed in no hurry to leave her, but, perching on the ledge of the open window, watched her every movement with unabashed bright eyes.

"I wonder how you will get on with us," she observed at last, dangling a slim black-stockinged leg from her high perch. "We are rather unlucky with our governesses, you must know—or have been as yet—perhaps because they never take the trouble to understand us properly."

The absurdly reflective air and assured criticism of this mere child made Magdalen smile in spite of her misery, in spite of herself. Kitty saw the smile, and answered it at once.

"You think I am talking nonsense, but you will see. They all do the same things at first. Make much of me because I am clever, and snub Blanche because she is a goose; then they let mother bully them—and—which makes her most angry of all, they make love to Frank. Oh, they do!"—with a fresh outbreak of the giggling laugh as she saw Magdalen flash indignantly. "Both Ma and Flora declared, when Miss Metcalf went, that they would have some one very old and ugly next time. I suppose they did not know what you were like!"

The words were most unconsciously complimentary, but they brought no comfort to poor Magdalen.

"You should not talk so much, Kitty," she said, with a troubled sigh. "I am sure your mother would not wish you to discuss family affairs so freely, or repeat servants' gossip."

"It is not servants' gossip. I listen to what ma and Flo say, the child retorted, with a pert toss of her dark head. "And it was Flo that insisted that the governess should be ugly—though I believe she is more afraid of Lord Ingestyre than of Frank."

Magdalen saw that, if not absolutely impossible, it would at least be difficult to convince the shrewd little observer of the impropriety of her remarks, and wisely decided to change the subject.

"Why do you call me your governess, Kitty?" she asked, with an attempt at a lighter tone. "Mrs. Talbot asked me here on a visit."

"Yes; and she will make it a short one if she can," Kitty laughed. "But long or short, you will be our governess while it lasts, and I hope you mean to be good-natured and let us have a real jolly time while you are here. We do not get much fun, Blanche and I—off ma is a Tartar, and pa is a goose, and Flora wants us always kept in the school-room; but you look good-natured. I think I could get on with you. And with this expression of opinion she quitted the room.

And Magdalen, left alone at last, knelt by her little white-curtained bed, and with her head bowed on her outstretched arms, sobbed her very heart out in an access of weariness and lonely pain. Was life to be all like this, she thought, with a shudder—unwarmed by one ray of love, unlighted by one silver star of hope?