

The Last of the Ingestyres.

CHAPTER V.

"He said plenty, I assure you. The Ingestyres are a chivalrous race, Miss Vane, and all the knight-errant blood in the veins of this their last representative was stirred by the thought of beauty in distress. He could not carry your colours in a tourney, or slay a dragon in your service, as one of his Crusading ancestors might have done, so he came, in prosaic nineteenth-century fashion, and tried and tried to move my sympathies on your behalf."

"You say she is charming and companionable?" he said, in his impulsive way, "and you are companionless, and must be often miserably dull. Now it seems to me—"

"He broke off there, stroking his mustache and looking at me with kind, eager deprecating eyes—he is a fearless champion in a general way; but I think his courage failed him on the brink of that daring proposition. He really hardly knows me, and I have the reputation of an ogress in his family. However, ogress or not, I have my likes as well as my dislikes, and that daring venture pleased me—perhaps the sudden breakdown pleased me even more—for I helped him after that."

"You think that two halves make a whole," I finished, with a smile that was intended to and that did reassure him—"that Magdalen Vane and I might bring our double loneliness and double sense of injury together, and manage to make comfort out of the two?"

"The boy's face brightened so absurdly, you would think I had done him some great personal favor."

"I am sure it would be a first-rate plan for both of you," he said gratefully, and I promised him I would see about putting it into execution at once. I have kept my word, and I am here. Will you accept my proposal, Magdalen Vane? Will you exchange Melinda House, with all its warm-hearted hospitality and kindness, with all its attractions, for the society of a crabbed, cross old woman, who has the evil reputation of a witch, who is popularly supposed to be as crooked in spirit as in body, and, because she is incapable of exciting love in others, is set down as having no love to bestow?"

Miss Muffet spoke now, as always, with a serio-comic self-mockery; but to Magdalen there seemed a weird pathos in the words. She came forward, on a sudden passionately grateful impulse, and, hardly knowing what she said or did, flung both her arms about the poor crooked shoulders that had rarely felt such a tender pressure and pressed her fresh young lips to the withered wrinkled face.

"Oh, may I come? Will you have me?" she cried, her voice trembling with a very rapture of delight. "Oh, I shall be so happy, so content—I will work so hard to please you, I can read, and work, and play, and I know so many games with the cards and chess and backgammon. Oh, I think I can please you, if you will let me try!"

The tears of earnest feeling were running down her cheeks before she reached the end of that long speech. There were tears on Miss Muffet's large white face too; but neither the woman nor the girl could have said with any degree of certainty from whose eyes they fell. But, if she had wept, Miss Muffet recovered her serenity with amazing quickness.

"You please me already, child," she said, a little gruffly; "but no more heroics, please. We have serious business to settle. When can you come to me?"

Magdalen gasped for breath; this was coming to the point with a vengeance; she had not prepared for such despatch. She had indeed told Mrs. Talbot of her intention to return to Brussels, and that lady had made no objection; but she had proposed at least to wait for Madame Croissant's answer to her appeal; and now—

Miss Muffet, who had been watching her changing face with curious interest, cut short her meditative musings.

"Shall I cut the Gordian knot, and carry you off at once, child? My carriage is at the door and the thing is easily done!" she said, in half-jesting tones, but with a wholly earnest manner. "Come, your sitting will afford explanations. Come, fetch your hat like a good girl, and let the rest of your possessions follow you!"

She caught Magdalen's hand in a persuasive clasp; but the girl drew back resolutely.

"No; please do not ask me—I could no do that. When Mrs. Talbot returns I will tell her, and then—"

"Then there will be a battle royal," the other interrupted grimly; but though evidently disappointed, she did not seem displeased, and added, after a second's thoughtful pause—"Well, I suppose you are right. At what time do you expect them back?"

"By the five-o'clock train. The carriage has gone already to meet them."

"Then I will stay and meet them here," Miss Muffet said composedly. "No, thank you, my dear; I will not come into the house; the sun will not hurt me, and I would rather get this business over in the open air."

She gathered her short skirts about her, and seated herself upon the stone steps with a total disregard of dignity and comfort. Magdalen vainly offered to fetch stool, shawl, sunshade, or cushion for her eccentric guest; Miss Muffet only laughed, and persisted that she had never been more comfortable or entirely at her ease.

She looked both as she sat gaily chatting and staring down the long tree-shaded avenue with a joyously expectant look—a look that brightened into absolute delight when presently Flora Talbot and Lord Ingestyre came slowly riding under the arched boughs of the tall green elms.

Frank, who kept a little in the rear, was the first to see and call his sister's attention to the odd little figure perched upon the steps. The girl started, stared, then rode quickly up with a brilliant vexation-born flush on her handsome haughty face.

"Miss Meredith—you here, and none of us at home to receive you!" she cried, with perfectly sincere veneration and disgust. Miss Meredith of the Hall was at all times worthy of condonation, but never had Flora Talbot so longed to be on friendly terms with her now that Lord Ingestyre was in her train.

But Miss Meredith received the eager apologetic greeting with an indifferent grace. She nodded coolly, surveying Flora all the while with a critical gaze that the proud girl found intensely exasperating. She bit her lip, and, by way of finding a safe vent for her indignation, turned arrogantly upon the pale and hitherto unnoticed girl who stood in the shadow of the great doorway.

"I think, Miss Vane, that you might have told the children Miss Meredith was here," she said harshly. "Blanche or Kitty would have had the sense to order tea, and not to keep her in the glare of the sun!"

"I would not drink the tea, and had no business with Kitty or Blanche," Miss Meredith answered with an evident enjoyment of the scene that turned the rose on Flora's clear dark cheek to a flush of vivid flame. "I came here solely to see Miss Vane. George, come here; I want to introduce you to my travelling companion of the other day."

Lord Ingestyre came forward with alacrity and bowed low before the troubled girl, thinking, as he did so, that the fair sweet face was even fairer and sweeter in the searching sunlight than it had seemed peeping from its picturesque green frame and lit by the pale uncertain glory of the moon.

Flora Talbot looked at the pretty picture for a second, then turned suddenly away, and, as she did so, the slender toy she carried as a riding-whip snapped with

a sharp crack from its jeweled handle and rolled to Miss Meredith's feet.

The later stooped and raised it, with a face of innocent unconsciousness and good-natured regret.

"Dear me! What an unfortunate accident! How did it happen?" she asked, holding the pretty little silver head with its glittering emerald eyes eagerly between her finger and thumb. "If you often use your whips so roughly, Miss Talbot, I pity them and your horses too."

Feeling a desire to lay the whip in question smartly about the shoulders of her tormentor, Flora muttered some incoherent answer, and snatched the handle rudely from her grasp.

"Miss Muffet little wretch!" she cried between her sharp white teeth. "How dare she come here only to insult us! Fortunately, that insolent usurper will not be here long."

CHAPTER VI.

Just as Flora reached this point in her meditations, the carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Talbot came swiftly past the lodge gate and up the avenue. Magdalen's heart began to throb a little more quickly with the feeling of a battle at hand; and, noticing the sudden pallor of the fair face, the sudden terror in the violet eyes, Lord Ingestyre felt his pulses stir with a quick throb of sympathy, and, stranger though he was, he could not help giving the frightened girl a quick reassuring smile as he drew a little nearer to her side.

Mrs. Talbot was at least as startled as her daughter when she saw Miss Meredith; but she had her feelings under better control, and her still fine eyes expressed only a tender and grateful pleasure as she moved quickly forward, with both hands outstretched in eager welcome.

"Dearest Constance," she cried, with an admirable contrived and executed emotional gasp, and she moved as though she would have gathered her small friend in a warm embrace; but Miss Meredith stepped aside and deftly avoided it, thereby very nearly causing the stately lady to come ignominiously to the ground. Altogether ignoring the rebuff she had received, Mrs. Talbot went on—

"It is so long since you have crossed our threshold—with a languishingly affectionate look—'never since—'"

"Since I heard of the pretty nick-name you gave me, of the plans my weakness had perhaps given you the right to form!" Miss Meredith answered abruptly, and with a savage scorn, a burning indignation, that seemed to transform the poor misshapen little woman and make her dwarfish figure dignified and heroic. "I have never crossed your threshold since that day Mrs. Talbot, and I have not crossed it now—I am only waiting at your gates—"

"For permission to enter?" Mrs. Talbot asked, with an uneasy smile. She too would have liked to give back taunt for taunt and sting for sting; but she too felt the all-important necessity of not quarrelling with Lord Ingestyre's cousin now. "You know how more than welcome you would be. Come, Constance, here, before my husband and children, I am ready to admit that I behaved badly and ungratefully to you. Can you with common generosity ask for more? We are neither of us young women now; is it not almost time to forget and forgive?"

She extended a well-gloved hand as she spoke, and Miss Meredith surveyed that miracle of gray French kid curiously, as though it were some pretty toy submitted for her inspection, but made no attempt to touch it; and, flushing angrily, Mrs. Talbot drew back.

"No! I did not wish to enter," said Miss Meredith indifferently now. "I hardly expected to see you at all; I came to fetch Miss Vane away; but like a scrupulous little goose, she refused to come."

The last sentence was a bombshell, as the speaker perfectly well knew. Her shrewd eyes, sparkling now with malicious enjoyment of the consternation she had

caused, wandered from one face to another, reading the various stories they told with ever-increasing satisfaction. Flora grew suddenly pale, even to her lips, and her large dark eyes dilated in a stare of insolent surprise. Mr. Talbot looked simply astonished, and, after a few seconds' consideration, rather pleased by the idea. His wife frowned, bit her lips sharply, then said, with an uneasy laugh—

"You were always an eccentric unaccountable being, Constance; but I confess that this last caprice puzzles even me. Why you should try to lure Mr. Talbot's little cousin—an absolute stranger to you, by-the-way—from the home we have given her would, I fancy, trouble even you to explain!"

"The home in which she was so happy, in which she was to remain so long," Miss Meredith put in sharply.

"Miss Vane has made good use of her time and a catalogue of our misdeeds—ours, mother!" Flora broke in, her clear bones seeming frozen with scorn. "Melinda House has made an excellent stepping-stone to the Hall for our astute young relation; we were the ladder by which she climbed to fortune, and now, as a matter of course, she is eager to kick us down. Let us congratulate her on the success that has crowned her efforts, and wish her, with all our hearts, 'good-bye.'"

She glanced disdainfully across at Magdalen; but her eyes, blazing with all the roused evil passion of her nature, met Lord Ingestyre's clear, shocked gaze, and for the first time shunned the encounter.

If she could have killed her unconscious rival then and there, she would have done so without hesitation or remorse, for in that moment she realized with an assured certainty of conviction that the game on which, as it seemed to the proud passionate girl, every hope of life was staked, was finally lost. Vanity itself could not misread the contempt and aversion of the young man's eyes.

She broke into a sharp, painful-sounding laugh, and said, with affected levity—

"Our governesses suffer from epidemics of elopement, mother, and we are forever destined to spoil their plans. However, as this one does not propose to carry Frank with her, I suppose she is welcome to go!"

"And the sooner the better," Mrs. Talbot finished, with immense dignity and crushing coldness. She too saw that the fortune of war was against her, and she too grew reckless and defiant in the presence of defeat. "After Miss Vane's display of unparalleled ingratitude, I cannot say that I have the least wish to detain her. I only regret"—she turned to Constance Meredith, shook her head mournfully, and applied her handkerchief ostentatiously to her eyes—"I only regret that your trust should be misplaced, your kindness abused. I warn you that you take a viper to your bosom."

"Oh, thank you!" Miss Meredith rose and shook out her comical short skirts with elaborate care. "I have learned to bear stings with equanimity—as you should know, who gave me a sharp experience. Come, my dear; since your friends are so ready to part with you, I will take you home at once!"

"Oh, go by all means!" Mrs. Talbot said sharply, in answer to Magdalen's half-frightened look of appeal. "I never wished you to come here! I never wish to see your sly pale face again!"

"There—run and put on your bonnet!" Miss Meredith put in, with good-natured imperativeness; but Magdalen was only too thankful to obey.

She was only gone about ten minutes; but, if her absence had lengthened itself out into ten hours, Miss Meredith would have been thoroughly and placidly content. She was a generous, kind-hearted woman, capable on occasions of heroic self-sacrifice, and at one time disposed to think well of all her fellow-creatures. But the circumstances of life had sadly warped and changed her.