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CHAPTER I

MISS INGATE, AND THE YACHT

Audrey had just closed the safe in her father's study when she was startled by a slight noise. She turned like a defensive animal to face danger. It had indeed occurred to her that she was rather like an animal in captivity, and she found a bitter pleasure in the idea, though it was not at all original.

"And Flank Hall is my Zoo!" she had said. (Not that she had ever seen the Zoological Gardens or visited London.)

She was lithe; she moved with charm. Her short, plain blue serge walking-frock disclosed the form of her limbs and left them free, and it made her look younger even than she was. Its simplicity suited her gestures and took grace from them. But she wore the old thing without the least interest in it—almost unconsciously. She had none of the preoccupations caused by the paraphernalia of existence. She scarcely knew what it was to own. She was aware only of her body and her soul. Beyond these her possessions were so few, so mean, so unimportant, that she might have carried them to the grave and into heaven without protest from the authorities earthly or celestial.

The slight noise was due to the door of the study, which great age had distorted and bereft of sense, and, in fact, almost unhinged. It unlatched itself, paused, and then calmly but firmly swung wide open. When it could swing no farther it shook, vibrating into repose.

Audrey condemned the door for a senile lunatic, and herself for a poltroon. She became defiant of peril, until the sound of a step on the stair beyond the door threw her back into alarm. But when the figure of Miss Ingate appeared in the doorway she was definitely reassured, to the point of disdain. All her facial expression said: "It's only Miss Ingate."

And yet Miss Ingate was not a negligible woman. Her untidy hair was greying; she was stout, she was fifty, she was plain, she had not elegance; her accent and turns of speech were noticeably those of Essex. But she had a magnificent pale forehead; the eyes beneath it

sparkled with energy, inquisitiveness, and sagacity; and the mouth beneath the eyes showed by its sardonic drooping corners that she had come to a settled, cheerful conclusion about human nature, and that the conclusion was not flattering. Miss Ingate was a Guardian of the Poor, and the Local Representative of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association. She had studied intimately the needy and the rich and the middling. She was charitable without illusions; and, while adhering to every social convention, she did so with a toleration pleasantly contemptuous; in her heart she had no mercy for snobs of any kind, though, unfortunately, she was at times absurdly intimidated by them — at other times she was not.

To the west, within a radius of twelve miles, she knew everybody and everybody knew her; to the east her fame was bounded only by the regardless sea. She and her ancestors had lived in the village of Moze as long as even Mr. Mathew Moze and his ancestors. In the village, and to the village, she was Miss Ingate, a natural phenomenon, like the lie of the land and the river Moze. Her opinions offended nobody, not Mr. Moze himself — she was Miss Ingate. She was laughed at, beloved and respected. Her sagacity had one flaw, and the flaw sprang from her sincere conviction that human nature in that corner of Essex, which she understood so profoundly, and where she was so perfectly at home, was different from, and more fondly foolish than, human nature in any other part of the world. She could not believe that distant populations could be at once so pathetically and so naughtily human as the population in and around Moze.

If Audrey disdained Miss Ingate, it was only because Miss Ingate was neither young nor fair nor the proprietress of some man, and because people made out that she was peculiar. In some respects Audrey looked upon Miss Ingate as a life-belt, as the speck of light at the end of a tunnel, as the enigmatic smile which glimmers always in the frown of destiny.

“Well?” cried Miss Ingate in her rather shrill voice, grinning sardonically, with the corners of her lips still lower than usual in anticipatory sarcasm. It was as if she had said: “You cannot surprise me by any narrative of imbecility or turpitude or bathos. All the same, I am dying to hear the latest eccentricity of this village.”

"Well?" parried Audrey, holding one hand behind her.

They did not shake hands. People who call at ten o'clock in the morning cannot expect to have their hands shaken. Miss Ingate certainly expected nothing of the sort. She had the freedom of Flank Hall, as of scores of other houses, at all times of day. Servants opened front doors for her with a careless smile, and having shut front doors they left her loose, like a familiar cat, to find what she wanted. They seldom "showed" her into any room, nor did they dream of acting before her the unconvincing comedy of going to "see" whether masters or mistresses were out or in.

"Where's your mother?" asked Miss Ingate idly, quite sure that interesting divulgations would come, and quite content to wait for them. She had been out of the village for over a week.

"Mother's taking her acetyl salicylic," Audrey answered, coming to the door of the study.

This meant merely that Mrs. Moze had a customary attack of the neuralgia for which the district is justly renowned among strangers.

"Oh!" murmured Miss Ingate callously. Mrs. Moze, though she had lived in the district for twenty-five years, did not belong to it. If she chose to keep on having neuralgia, that was her affair, but in justice to natives and to the district she ought not to make too much of it, and she ought to admit that it might well be due to her weakness after her operation. Miss Ingate considered the climate to be the finest in England; which it was, on the condition that you were proof against neuralgia.

"Father's gone to Colchester in the car to see the Bishop," Audrey coldly added.

"If I'd known he was going to Colchester I should have asked him for a lift," said Miss Ingate, with determination.

"Oh, yes! He'd have taken *you!*" said Audrey, reserved. "I suppose you had fine times in London!"

"Oh! It was vely exciting! It was vely exciting!" Miss Ingate agreed loudly.

"Father wouldn't let me read about it in the paper," said Audrey, still reserved. "He never will, you know. But I did!"

"Oh! But you didn't read about me playing the barrel organ all the way down Regent Street, because that wasn't in any of the papers."

"You *didn't!*" Audrey protested, with a sudden dark smile.

"Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Yes, I did. And vely tiring it was. Vely tiring indeed. It's quite an art to turn a barrel organ. If you don't keep going perfectly even it makes the tune jerky. Oh! I know a bit about barrel organs now. They smashed it all to pieces. Oh yes! All to pieces. I spoke to the police. I said, 'Aren't you going to protect these ladies' property?' But they didn't lift a finger."

"And weren't you arrested?"

"Me!" shrieked Miss Ingate. "Me arrested!" Then more quietly, in an assured tone, "Oh no! I wasn't arrested. You see, as soon as the row began I just walked away from the organ and became one of the crowd. I'm all *for* them, but I wasn't going to be arrested."

Miss Ingate's sparkling eyes seemed to say: "Sylvia Pankhurst can be arrested if she likes, and so can Mrs. Despard and Annie Kenney and Jane Foley, or any of them. But the policeman that is clever enough to catch Miss Ingate of Moze does not exist. And the gumption of Miss Ingate of Moze surpasses the united gumption of all the other feminists in England."

"Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!" repeated Miss Ingate with mingled complacency, glee, passion, and sardonic tolerance of the whole panorama of worldly existence. "The police were awful, shocking. But I was not arrested."

"Well, *I* was—this morning," said Audrey in a low and poignant voice.

Miss Ingate was startled out of her mood of the detached ironic spectator.

"What?" she frowned.

They heard a servant moving about at the foot of the stairs, and a capped head could be seen through the interstices of the white Chinese balustrade. The study was the only immediate refuge; Miss Ingate advanced right into it, and Audrey pushed the door to.

"Father's given me a month's C.B."

Miss Ingate, gazing at the girl's face, saw in its quiet and yet savage desperation the possibility that after all she might indeed be surprised by the vagaries of human nature in the village. And her glance became sympathetic, even tender, as well as apprehensive.

"'C.B.'? What do you mean—'C.B.'?"

"Don't you know what C.B. means?" exclaimed Audrey with scornful superiority over the old spinster. "Confined to barracks. Father says I'm not to go beyond the grounds for a month. And to-day's the second of April!"

"No!"

"Yes, he does. He's given me a week, you know, before. Now it's a month."

Silence fell.

Miss Ingate looked round at the shabby study, with its guns, cigar-boxes, prints, books neither old nor new, japanned boxes of documents, and general litter scattered over the voluted walnut furniture. Her own house was old-fashioned, and she realised it was old-fashioned; but when she came into Flank Hall, and particularly into Mr. Moze's study, she felt as if she was stepping backwards into history—and this in spite of the fact that nothing in the place was really ancient, save the ceilings and the woodwork round the windows. It was Mr. Moze's habit of mind that dominated and transmogrified the whole interior, giving it the quality of a mausoleum. The suffragette procession in which Miss Ingate had musically and discreetly taken part seemed to her as she stood in Mr. Moze's changeless lair to be a phantasm. Then she looked at the young captive animal and perceived that two centuries may coincide on the same carpet and that time is merely a convention.

"What you been doing?" she questioned, with delicacy.

"I took a strange man by the hand," said Audrey, choosing her words queerly, as she sometimes did, to produce a dramatic effect.

"This morning?"

"Yes. Eight o'clock."

"What? Is there a strange man in the village?"

"You don't mean to say you haven't seen the yacht!"

"Yacht?" Miss Ingate showed some excitement.

"Come and look, Winnie," said Audrey, who occasionally thought fit to address Miss Ingate in the manner of the elder generation. She drew Miss Ingate to the window.

Between the brown curtains Mozewater, the broad, shallow estuary of the Moze, was spread out glittering in the sunshine which could not get into the chilly room. The tide was nearly at full, and the estuary looked like a mighty harbour for great ships; but in six hours it would be reduced to a narrow stream winding through mud flats of marvellous ochres, greens, and pinks. In the hazy distance a fitful white flash showed where ocean waves were breaking on a sand-bank. And in the foreground, against a disused Hard that was a couple of hundred yards lower down than the village Hard, a large white yacht was moored, probably the largest yacht that had ever threaded that ticklish navigation. She was a shallow-draft barge-yacht, rigged like a Thames barge, and her whiteness and the glint of her brass, and the flicker of her ensign at the stern were dazzling. Blue figures ran busily about on her, and a white-and-blue person in a peaked cap stood importantly at the wheel.

"She was on the mud last night," said Audrey eagerly, "opposite the Flank buoy, and she came up this morning at half-flood. I think they made fast at Lousey Hard, because they couldn't get any farther without waiting. They have a motor, and it must be their first trip this season. I was on the dyke. I wasn't even looking at them, but they called me, so I had to go. They only wanted to know if Lousey Hard was private. Of course I told them it wasn't. It was a very middle-aged man spoke to me. He must be the owner. As soon as they were tied up he wanted to jump ashore. It was rather awkward, and I just held out my hand to help him. Father saw me from here. I might have known he would."

"Why! It's going off!" exclaimed Miss Ingate.

The yacht swung slowly round, held by her stern to the Hard. Then the last hawser was cast off, and she floated away on the first of the ebb; and as she moved, her main-sail, unbrailed, spread itself

out and became a vast pinion. Like a dream of happiness she lessened and faded, and Lousey Hard was as lonely and forlorn as ever.

"But didn't you explain to your father?" Miss Ingate demanded of Audrey.

"Of course I did. But he wouldn't listen. He never does. I might just as well have explained to the hall-clock. He raged. I think he enjoys losing his temper. He said I oughtn't to have been there at all, and it was just like me, and he couldn't understand it in a daughter of his, and it would be a great shock to my poor mother, and he'd talked enough—he should now proceed to action. All the usual things. He actually asked me who 'the man' was."

"And who was it?"

"How can I tell? For goodness' sake don't go imitating father, Winnie! ... Rather a dull man, I should say. Rather like father, only not so old. He had a beautiful necktie; I think it must have been made out of a strip of Joseph's coat."

Miss Ingate giggled at a high pitch, and Audrey responsively smiled.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" murmured Miss Ingate when her giggling was exhausted. "How queer it is that a girl like you can't keep your father in a good temper!"

"Father hates me to say funny things. If I say anything funny he turns as black as ink—and he takes care to keep gloomy all the rest of the day, too. He never laughs. Mother laughs now and then, but I never heard father laugh. Oh yes, I did. He laughed when the cat fell out of the bathroom window on to the lawn-roller. He went quite red in the face with laughing.... I say, Miss Ingate, do you think father's mad?"

"I shouldn't think he's what you call mad," replied Miss Ingate judiciously, with admirable sang-froid. "I've known so many peculiar people in my time. And you must remember, Audrey, this is a peculiar part of the world."

"Well, I believe he's mad, anyway. I believe he's got men on the brain, especially young men. He's growing worse. Yesterday he told me I musn't have the punt out on Mozewater this season unless he's

with me. Fancy skiffing about with father! He says I'm too old for that now. So there you are. The older I get the less I'm allowed to do. I can't go a walk, unless it's an errand. The pedal is off my bike, and father is much too cunning to have it repaired. I can't boat. I'm never given any money. He grumbles frightfully if I want any clothes, so I never want any. That's my latest dodge. I've read every book in the house except the silly liturgical and legal things he's always having from the London Library—and I've read even some of those. He won't buy any new music. Golf! Ye gods, Winnie, you should hear him talk about ladies and golf!"

"I have," said Miss Ingate. "But it doesn't ruffle me, because I don't play."

"But he plays with girls, and young girls, too, all the same. He's been caught in the act. Ethel told me. He little thinks I know. He'd let me play if he could be the only man on the course. He's mad about me and men. He never looks at me without thinking of all the boys in the district."

"But he's really very fond of you, Audrey."

"Yes, I know," said Audrey. "He ought to keep me in the china cupboard."

"Well, it's a great problem."

"He's invented a beautiful new trick for keeping me in when he's out. I have to copy his beastly Society letters for him."

"I see he's got a new box," observed Miss Ingate, glancing into the open cupboard in which stood the safe. On the top of the safe were two japanned boxes, each lettered in white: "The National Reformation Society." The uppermost box was freshly unpacked and shone with all the intact pride of virginity.

"You should read some of the letters. You really should, Winnie," said Audrey. "All the bigwigs of the Society love writing to each other. I bet you father will get a typewriting machine this year, and make me learn it. The chairman has a typewriter, and father means to be the next chairman. You'll see.... Oh! What's that? Listen!"

"What's what?"

A faint distant throbbing could be heard.

"It's the motor! He's coming back for something. Fly out of here, Winnie, fly!"

Audrey felt sick at the thought that if her father had returned only a few minutes earlier he might have trapped her at the safe itself. She still kept one hand behind her.

Miss Ingate, who with all her qualities was rather easily flustered, ran out of the dangerous room in Audrey's wake. They met Mr. Mathew Moze at the half-landing of the stairs.

He was a man of average size, somewhat past sixty years. He had plump cheeks, tinged with red; his hair, moustache and short, full beard, were quite grey. He wore a thick wide-spreading ulster, and between his coat and waistcoat a leather vest, and on his head a grey cap. Put him in the Strand in town clothes, and he might have been taken for a clerk, a civil servant, a club secretary, a retired military officer, a poet, an undertaker—for anything except the last of a long line of immovable squires who could not possibly conceive what it was not to be the owner of land. His face was preoccupied and overcast, but as soon as he realised that Miss Ingate was on the stairs it instantly brightened into a warm and rather wistful smile.

"Good morning, Miss Ingate," he greeted her with deferential cordiality. "I'm glad to see you back."

"Good morning, good morning, Mr. Moze," responded Miss Ingate. "Vehy nice of you. Vehy nice of you."

Nobody would have guessed from their demeanour that they differed on every subject except their loyalty to that particular corner of Essex, that he regarded her and her political associates as deadly microbes in the national organism, and that she regarded him as a nincompoop crossed with a tyrant. Each of them had a magic glass to see in the other nothing but a local Effendi and familiar guardian angel of Moze. Moreover, Mr. Moze's public smile and public manner were irresistible—until he lost his temper. He might have had friends by the score, had it not been for his deep constitutional reserve—due partly to diffidence and partly to an immense hidden conceit. Mr. Moze's existence was actuated, though he knew it not, by the conviction that the historic traditions of England were com-

mitted to his keeping. Hence the conceit, which was that of a soul secretly self-dedicated.

Audrey, outraged by the hateful hypocrisy of persons over fifty, and terribly constrained and alarmed, turned vaguely back up the stairs. Miss Ingate, not quite knowing what she did, with an equal vagueness followed her.

"Come in. Do come in," urged Mr. Moze at the door of the study.

Audrey, who remained on the landing, heard her elders talk smoothly of grave Mozian things, while Mr. Moze unlocked the new tin box above the safe.

"I'd forgotten a most important paper," said he, as he relocked the box. "I have an appointment with the Bishop of Colchester at ten-forty-five, and I fear I may be late. Will you excuse me, Miss Ingate?"

She excused him.

Departing, he put the paper into his pocket with a careful and loving gesture that well symbolised his passionate affection for the Society of which he was already the vice-chairman. He had been a member of the National Reformation Society for eleven years. Despite the promise of its name, this wealthy association of idealists had no care for reforms in a sadly imperfect England. Its aim was anti-Romanist. The Reformation which it had in mind was Luther's, and it wished, by fighting an alleged insidious revival of Roman Catholicism, to make sure that so far as England was concerned Luther had not preached in vain.

Mr. Moze's connection with the Society had originated in a quarrel between himself and a Catholic priest from Ipswich who had instituted a boys' summer camp on the banks of Mozewater near the village of Moze. Until that quarrel, the exceeding noxiousness of the Papal doctrine had not clearly presented itself to Mr. Moze. In such strange ways may an ideal come to birth. As Mr. Moze, preoccupied and gloomy once more, steered himself rapidly out of Moze towards the episcopal presence, the image of the imperturbable and Jesuitical priest took shape in his mind, refreshing his determination to be even with Rome at any cost.

CHAPTER II

THE THIEF'S PLAN WRECKED

"The fact is," said Audrey, "father has another woman in the house now."

Mr. Moze had left Miss Ingate in the study and Audrey had cautiously rejoined her there.

"Another woman in the house!" repeated Miss Ingate, sitting down in happy expectation. "What on earth do you mean? Who on earth do you mean?"

"I mean me."

"You aren't a woman, Audrey."

"I'm just as much of a woman as you are. All father's behaviour proves it."

"But your father treats you as a child."

"No, he doesn't. He treats me as a woman. If he thought I was a child he wouldn't have anything to worry about. I'm over nineteen."

"You don't look it."

"Of course I don't. But I could if I liked. I simply won't look it because I don't care to be made ridiculous. I should start to look my age at once if father stopped treating me like a child."

"But you've just said he treats you as a woman!"

"You don't understand, Winnie," said the girl sharply. "Unless you're pretending. Now you've never told me anything about yourself, and I've always told you lots about myself. You belong to an old-fashioned family. How were you treated when you were my age?"

"In what way?"

"You know what way," said Audrey, gazing at her.

"Well, my dear. Things seemed to come very naturally, somehow."

"Were you ever engaged?"

"Me? Oh, no!" answered Miss Ingate with tranquillity. "I'm vely interested in them. Oh, vely! Oh, vely! And I like talking to them. But anything more than that gets on my nerves. My eldest sister was the one. Oh! She was the one. She refused eleven men, and when she was going to be married she made me embroider the monograms of all of them on the skirt of her wedding-dress. She made me, and I had to do it. I sat up all night the night before the wedding to finish them."

"And what did the bridegroom say about it?"

"The bridegroom didn't say anything about it because he didn't know. Nobody knew except Arabella and me. She just wanted to feel that the monograms were on her dress, that was all."

"How strange!"

"Yes, it was. But this is a vely strange part of the world."

"And what happened afterwards?"

"Bella died when she had her first baby, and the baby died as well. And the father's dead now, too."

"What a horrid story, Winnie!" Audrey murmured. And after a pause: "I like your sister."

"She was vely uncommon. But I liked her too. I don't know why, but I did. She could make the best marmalade I ever tasted in my born days."

"I could make the best marmalade you ever tasted in your born days," said Audrey, sinking neatly to the floor and crossing her legs, "but they won't let me."

"Won't let you! But I thought you did all sorts of things in the house."

"No, Winnie. I only do one thing. I do as I'm told—and not always even that. Now, if I wanted to make the best marmalade you ever tasted in your born days, first of all there would be a fearful row about the oranges. Secondly, father would tell mother she must tell me exactly what I was to do. He would also tell cook. Thirdly and lastly, dear friends, he would come into the kitchen himself. It