

## CHAPTER II

### THE RISE OF ALVINA HOUGHTON

The heroine of this story is Alvina Houghton. If we leave her out of the first chapter of her own story it is because, during the first twenty-five years of her life, she really was left out of count, or so overshadowed as to be negligible. She and her mother were the phantom passengers in the ship of James Houghton's fortunes.

In Manchester House, every voice lowered its tone. And so from the first Alvina spoke with a quiet, refined, almost convent voice. She was a thin child with delicate limbs and face, and wide, grey-blue, ironic eyes. Even as a small girl she had that odd ironic tilt of the eyelids which gave her a look as if she were hanging back in mockery. If she were, she was quite unaware of it, for under Miss Frost's care she received no education in irony or mockery. Miss Frost was straightforward, good-humoured, and a little earnest. Consequently Alvina, or Vina as she was called, understood only the explicit mode of good-humoured straightforwardness.

It was doubtful which shadow was greater over the child: that of Manchester House, gloomy and a little sinister, or that of Miss Frost, benevolent and protective. Sufficient that the girl herself worshipped Miss Frost: or believed she did.

Alvina never went to school. She had her lessons from her beloved governess, she worked at the piano, she took her walks, and for social life she went to the Congregational Chapel, and to the functions connected with the chapel. While she was little, she went to Sunday School twice and to Chapel once on Sundays. Then occasionally there was a magic lantern or a penny reading, to which Miss Frost accompanied her. As she grew older she entered the choir at chapel, she attended Christian Endeavour and P.S.A., and the Literary Society on Monday evenings. Chapel provided her with a whole social activity, in the course of which she met certain groups of people, made certain friends, found opportunity for strolls into the country and jaunts to the local entertainments. Over and above this, every Thursday evening she went to the subscription library to change the week's supply of books, and there again she met friends and acquaintances. It is hard to overestimate the value of church or chapel--but particularly chapel--as a social institution, in places like Woodhouse. The Congregational Chapel provided Alvina with a whole outer life, lacking which she would have been poor indeed. She was not particularly religious by inclination. Perhaps her father's beautiful prayers put her off. So she neither questioned nor accepted, but just let be.

She grew up a slim girl, rather distinguished in appearance, with a slender face, a fine, slightly arched nose, and beautiful grey-blue eyes over which the lids tilted with a very odd, sardonic tilt. The

sardonic quality was, however, quite in abeyance. She was ladylike, not vehement at all. In the street her walk had a delicate, lingering motion, her face looked still. In conversation she had rather a quick, hurried manner, with intervals of well-bred repose and attention. Her voice was like her father's, flexible and curiously attractive.

Sometimes, however, she would have fits of boisterous hilarity, not quite natural, with a strange note half pathetic, half jeering. Her father tended to a supercilious, sneering tone. In Vina it came out in mad bursts of hilarious jeering. This made Miss Frost uneasy. She would watch the girl's strange face, that could take on a gargoyle look. She would see the eyes rolling strangely under sardonic eyelids, and then Miss Frost would feel that never, never had she known anything so utterly alien and incomprehensible and unsympathetic as her own beloved Vina. For twenty years the strong, protective governess reared and tended her lamb, her dove, only to see the lamb open a wolf's mouth, to hear the dove utter the wild cackle of a daw or a magpie, a strange sound of derision. At such times Miss Frost's heart went cold within her. She dared not realize. And she chid and checked her ward, restored her to the usual impulsive, affectionate demureness. Then she dismissed the whole matter. It was just an accidental aberration on the girl's part from her own true nature. Miss Frost taught Alvina thoroughly the qualities of her own true nature, and Alvina believed what she was taught. She remained for twenty years the demure, refined

creature of her governess' desire. But there was an odd, derisive look at the back of her eyes, a look of old knowledge and deliberate derision. She herself was unconscious of it. But it was there. And this it was, perhaps, that scared away the young men.

Alvina reached the age of twenty-three, and it looked as if she were destined to join the ranks of the old maids, so many of whom found cold comfort in the Chapel. For she had no suitors. True there were extraordinarily few young men of her class--for whatever her condition, she had certain breeding and inherent culture--in Woodhouse. The young men of the same social standing as herself were in some curious way outsiders to her. Knowing nothing, yet her ancient sapience went deep, deeper than Woodhouse could fathom. The young men did not like her for it. They did not like the tilt of her eyelids.

Miss Frost, with anxious foreseeing, persuaded the girl to take over some pupils, to teach them the piano. The work was distasteful to Alvina. She was not a good teacher. She persevered in an off-hand way, somewhat indifferent, albeit dutiful.

When she was twenty-three years old, Alvina met a man called Graham. He was an Australian, who had been in Edinburgh taking his medical degree. Before going back to Australia, he came to spend some months practising with old Dr. Fordham in Woodhouse--Dr. Fordham being in some way connected with his mother.

Alexander Graham called to see Mrs. Houghton. Mrs. Houghton did not like him. She said he was creepy. He was a man of medium height, dark in colouring, with very dark eyes, and a body which seemed to move inside his clothing. He was amiable and polite, laughed often, showing his teeth. It was his teeth which Miss Frost could not stand. She seemed to see a strong mouthful of cruel, compact teeth. She declared he had dark blood in his veins, that he was not a man to be trusted, and that never, never would he make any woman's life happy.

Yet in spite of all, Alvina was attracted by him. The two would stay together in the parlour, laughing and talking by the hour. What they could find to talk about was a mystery. Yet there they were, laughing and chatting, with a running insinuating sound through it all which made Miss Frost pace up and down unable to bear herself.

The man was always running in when Miss Frost was out. He contrived to meet Alvina in the evening, to take a walk with her. He went a long walk with her one night, and wanted to make love to her. But her upbringing was too strong for her.

"Oh no," she said. "We are only friends."

He knew her upbringing was too strong for him also.

"We're more than friends," he said. "We're more than friends."

"I don't think so," she said.

"Yes we are," he insisted, trying to put his arm round her waist.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Let us go home."

And then he burst out with wild and thick protestations of love, which thrilled her and repelled her slightly.

"Anyhow I must tell Miss Frost," she said.

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Yes, yes. Let us be engaged at once."

As they passed under the lamps he saw her face lifted, the eyes shining, the delicate nostrils dilated, as of one who scents battle and laughs to herself. She seemed to laugh with a certain proud, sinister recklessness. His hands trembled with desire.

So they were engaged. He bought her a ring, an emerald set in tiny diamonds. Miss Frost looked grave and silent, but would not openly deny her approval.

"You like him, don't you? You don't dislike him?" Alvina insisted.

"I don't dislike him," replied Miss Frost. "How can I? He is a perfect stranger to me."

And with this Alvina subtly contented herself. Her father treated the young man with suave attention, punctuated by fits of jerky hostility and jealousy. Her mother merely sighed, and took sal volatile.

To tell the truth, Alvina herself was a little repelled by the man's love-making. She found him fascinating, but a trifle repulsive. And she was not sure whether she hated the repulsive element, or whether she rather gloried in it. She kept her look of arch, half-derisive recklessness, which was so unbearably painful to Miss Frost, and so exciting to the dark little man. It was a strange look in a refined, really virgin girl--oddly sinister. And her voice had a curious bronze-like resonance that acted straight on the nerves of her hearers: unpleasantly on most English nerves, but like fire on the different susceptibilities of the young man--the darkie, as people called him.

But after all, he had only six weeks in England, before sailing to Sydney. He suggested that he and Alvina should marry before he sailed. Miss Frost would not hear of it. He must see his people first, she said.

So the time passed, and he sailed. Alvina missed him, missed the

extreme excitement of him rather than the human being he was. Miss Frost set to work to regain her influence over her ward, to remove that arch, reckless, almost lewd look from the girl's face. It was a question of heart against sensuality. Miss Frost tried and tried to wake again the girl's loving heart--which loving heart was certainly not occupied by that man. It was a hard task, an anxious, bitter task Miss Frost had set herself.

But at last she succeeded. Alvina seemed to thaw. The hard shining of her eyes softened again to a sort of demureness and tenderness. The influence of the man was revoked, the girl was left uninhabited, empty and uneasy.

She was due to follow her Alexander in three months' time, to Sydney. Came letters from him, en route--and then a cablegram from Australia. He had arrived. Alvina should have been preparing her trousseau, to follow. But owing to her change of heart, she lingered indecisive.

"Do you love him, dear?" said Miss Frost with emphasis, knitting her thick, passionate, earnest eyebrows. "Do you love him sufficiently? That's the point."

The way Miss Frost put the question implied that Alvina did not and could not love him--because Miss Frost could not. Alvina lifted her large, blue eyes, confused, half-tender towards her governess, half



shining with unconscious derision.

"I don't really know," she said, laughing hurriedly. "I don't really."

Miss Frost scrutinized her, and replied with a meaningful:

"Well--!"

To Miss Frost it was clear as daylight. To Alvina not so. In her periods of lucidity, when she saw as clear as daylight also, she certainly did not love the little man. She felt him a terrible outsider, an inferior, to tell the truth. She wondered how he could have the slightest attraction for her. In fact she could not understand it at all. She was as free of him as if he had never existed. The square green emerald on her finger was almost non-sensical. She was quite, quite sure of herself.

And then, most irritating, a complete volte face in her feelings. The clear-as-daylight mood disappeared as daylight is bound to disappear. She found herself in a night where the little man loomed large, terribly large, potent and magical, while Miss Frost had dwindled to nothingness. At such times she wished with all her force that she could travel like a cablegram to Australia. She felt it was the only way. She felt the dark, passionate receptivity of Alexander overwhelmed her, enveloped her even from the Antipodes. She felt

herself going distracted--she felt she was going out of her mind.  
For she could not act.

Her mother and Miss Frost were fixed in one line. Her father said:

"Well, of course, you'll do as you think best. There's a great risk in going so far--a great risk. You would be entirely unprotected."

"I don't mind being unprotected," said Alvina perversely.

"Because you don't understand what it means," said her father.

He looked at her quickly. Perhaps he understood her better than the others.

"Personally," said Miss Pinnegar, speaking of Alexander, "I don't care for him. But every one has their own taste."

Alvina felt she was being overborne, and that she was letting herself be overborne. She was half relieved. She seemed to nestle into the well-known surety of Woodhouse. The other unknown had frightened her.

Miss Frost now took a definite line.

"I feel you don't love him, dear. I'm almost sure you don't. So now

you have to choose. Your mother dreads your going--she dreads it. I am certain you would never see her again. She says she can't bear it--she can't bear the thought of you out there with Alexander. It makes her shudder. She suffers dreadfully, you know. So you will have to choose, dear. You will have to choose for the best."

Alvina was made stubborn by pressure. She herself had come fully to believe that she did not love him. She was quite sure she did not love him. But out of a certain perversity, she wanted to go.

Came his letter from Sydney, and one from his parents to her and one to her parents. All seemed straightforward--not very cordial, but sufficiently. Over Alexander's letter Miss Frost shed bitter tears. To her it seemed so shallow and heartless, with terms of endearment stuck in like exclamation marks. He seemed to have no thought, no feeling for the girl herself. All he wanted was to hurry her out there. He did not even mention the grief of her parting from her English parents and friends: not a word. Just a rush to get her out there, winding up with "And now, dear, I shall not be myself till I see you here in Sydney--Your ever-loving Alexander." A selfish, sensual creature, who would forget the dear little Vina in three months, if she did not turn up, and who would neglect her in six months, if she did. Probably Miss Frost was right.

Alvina knew the tears she was costing all round. She went upstairs and looked at his photograph--his dark and impertinent muzzle. Who

was he, after all? She did not know him. With cold eyes she looked at him, and found him repugnant.

She went across to her governess's room, and found Miss Frost in a strange mood of trepidation.

"Don't trust me, dear, don't trust what I say," poor Miss Frost ejaculated hurriedly, even wildly. "Don't notice what I have said. Act for yourself, dear. Act for yourself entirely. I am sure I am wrong in trying to influence you. I know I am wrong. It is wrong and foolish of me. Act just for yourself, dear--the rest doesn't matter. The rest doesn't matter. Don't take any notice of what I have said. I know I am wrong."

For the first time in her life Alvina saw her beloved governess flustered, the beautiful white hair looking a little draggled, the grey, near-sighted eyes, so deep and kind behind the gold-rimmed glasses, now distracted and scared. Alvina immediately burst into tears and flung herself into the arms of Miss Frost. Miss Frost also cried as if her heart would break, catching her indrawn breath with a strange sound of anguish, forlornness, the terrible crying of a woman with a loving heart, whose heart has never been able to relax. Alvina was hushed. In a second, she became the elder of the two. The terrible poignancy of the woman of fifty-two, who now at last had broken down, silenced the girl of twenty-three, and roused all her passionate tenderness. The terrible sound of "Never now, never

now--it is too late," which seemed to ring in the curious, indrawn cries of the elder woman, filled the girl with a deep wisdom. She knew the same would ring in her mother's dying cry. Married or unmarried, it was the same--the same anguish, realized in all its pain after the age of fifty--the loss in never having been able to relax, to submit.

Alvina felt very strong and rich in the fact of her youth. For her it was not too late. For Miss Frost it was for ever too late.

"I don't want to go, dear," said Alvina to the elder woman. "I know I don't care for him. He is nothing to me."

Miss Frost became gradually silent, and turned aside her face. After this there was a hush in the house. Alvina announced her intention of breaking off her engagement. Her mother kissed her, and cried, and said, with the selfishness of an invalid:

"I couldn't have parted with you, I couldn't." Whilst the father said:

"I think you are wise, Vina. I have thought a lot about it."

So Alvina packed up his ring and his letters and little presents, and posted them over the seas. She was relieved, really: as if she had escaped some very trying ordeal. For some days she went about

happily, in pure relief. She loved everybody. She was charming and sunny and gentle with everybody, particularly with Miss Frost, whom she loved with a deep, tender, rather sore love. Poor Miss Frost seemed to have lost a part of her confidence, to have taken on a new wistfulness, a new silence and remoteness. It was as if she found her busy contact with life a strain now. Perhaps she was getting old. Perhaps her proud heart had given way.

Alvina had kept a little photograph of the man. She would often go and look at it. Love?--no, it was not love! It was something more primitive still. It was curiosity, deep, radical, burning curiosity. How she looked and looked at his dark, impertinent-seeming face. A flicker of derision came into her eyes. Yet still she looked.

In the same manner she would look into the faces of the young men of Woodhouse. But she never found there what she found in her photograph. They all seemed like blank sheets of paper in comparison. There was a curious pale surface-look in the faces of the young men of Woodhouse: or, if there was some underneath suggestive power, it was a little abject or humiliating, inferior, common. They were all either blank or common.