

John Ingerfield and Other Stories

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To The Gentle Reader; Also To The Gentle Critic

Once upon a time, I wrote a little story of a woman who was crushed to death by a python. A day or two after its publication, a friend stopped me in the street. "Charming little story of yours," he said, "that about the woman and the snake; but it's not as funny as some of your things!" The next week, a newspaper, referring to the tale, remarked, "We have heard the incident related before with infinitely greater humour."

With this--and many similar experiences--in mind, I wish distinctly to state that "John Ingerfield," "The Woman of the Saeter," and "Silhouettes," are not intended to be amusing. The two other items-- "Variety Patter," and "The Lease of the Cross Keys"--I give over to the critics of the new humour to rend as they will; but "John Ingerfield," "The Woman of the Saeter," and "Silhouettes," I repeat, I should be glad if they would judge from some other standpoint than that of humour, new or old.

In Remembrance Of John Ingerfield And Of Anne, His Wife

A STORY OF OLD LONDON, IN TWO CHAPTERS

CHAPTER I.

If you take the Underground Railway to Whitechapel Road (the East station), and from there take one of the yellow tramcars that start from that point, and go down the Commercial Road, past the George, in front of which starts--or used to stand--a high flagstaff, at the base of which sits--or used to sit--an elderly female purveyor of pigs' trotters at three-ha'pence apiece, until you come to where a railway arch crosses the road obliquely, and there get down and turn to the right up a narrow, noisy street leading to the river, and then to the right again up a still narrower street, which you may know by its having a public-house at one corner (as is in the nature of things) and a marine store-dealer's at the other, outside which strangely stiff and unaccommodating garments of gigantic size flutter ghost-like in the wind, you will come to a dingy railed-in churchyard, surrounded on all sides by cheerless, many-peopled houses. Sad-looking little old houses they are, in spite of the tumult of life about their ever open doors. They and the ancient church in their midst seem weary of the ceaseless jangle around them. Perhaps, standing there for so many years, listening to the long silence of the dead, the fretful voices of the living sound foolish in their ears.

Peering through the railings on the side nearest the river, you will see beneath the shadow of the soot-grimed church's soot-grimed porch--that is, if the sun happen, by rare chance, to be strong enough to cast any shadow at all in that region of grey light--a curiously high and narrow headstone that once was white and straight, not tottering and bent with age as it is now. There is upon this stone a carving in bas-relief, as you will see for yourself if you will make your way to it through the gateway on the opposite side of the square. It represents, so far as can be made out, for it is much worn by time and dirt, a figure lying on the ground with another figure bending over it, while at a little distance stands a third object. But this last is so indistinct that it might be almost anything, from an angel to a post.

And below the carving are the words (already half obliterated) that I have used for the title of this story.

Should you ever wander of a Sunday morning within sound of the cracked bell that calls a few habit-bound, old-fashioned folk to worship within those damp-stained walls, and drop into talk with the old men who on such days sometimes sit, each in his brass-buttoned long brown coat, upon the low stone coping underneath those broken railings, you might hear this tale from them, as I did, more years ago than I care to recollect.

But lest you do not choose to go to all this trouble, or lest the old men who could tell it you have grown tired of all talk, and are not to be roused ever again into the telling of tales, and you yet wish for the story, I will here set it down for you.

But I cannot recount it to you as they told it to me, for to me it was only a tale that I heard and remembered, thinking to tell it again for profit, while to them it was a thing that had been, and the threads of it were interwoven with the woof of their own life. As they talked, faces that I did not see passed by among the crowd and turned and looked at them, and voices that I did not hear spoke to them below the clamour of the street, so that through their thin piping voices there quivered the deep music of life and death, and my tale must be to theirs but as a gossip's chatter to the story of him whose breast has felt the press of battle.

John Ingerfield, oil and tallow refiner, of Lavender Wharf, Limehouse, comes of a hard-headed, hard-fisted stock. The first of the race that the eye of Record, piercing the deepening mists upon the centuries behind her, is able to discern with any clearness is a long-haired, sea-bronzed personage, whom men call variously Inge or Unger. Out of the wild North Sea he has come. Record observes him, one of a small, fierce group, standing on the sands of desolate Northumbria, staring landward, his worldly wealth upon his back. This consists of a two-handed battle-axe, value perhaps some forty stycas in the currency of the time. A careful man, with business capabilities, may, however, manipulate a small capital to great advantage. In what would appear, to those accustomed to our slow modern methods, an incredibly short space of time, Inge's two-handed battle-axe has developed into wide lands and many head of cattle; which latter continue to multiply with a rapidity beyond the dreams of present-day breeders. Inge's descendants would seem to have inherited the genius of their ancestor, for they prosper and their worldly goods increase. They are a money-making race. In all times, out of all things, by all means, they make money. They fight for money, marry for money, live for money, are ready to die for money.

In the days when the most saleable and the highest priced article in the markets of Europe was a strong arm and a cool head, then each Ingerfield (as "Inge," long rooted in Yorkshire soil, had grown or been corrupted to) was a soldier of fortune, and offered his strong arm and his cool head to the highest bidder. They fought for their price, and they took good care that they obtained their price; but, the price settled, they fought well, for they were staunch men and true, according to their lights, though these lights may have been placed somewhat low down, near the earth.

Then followed the days when the chief riches of the world lay tossed for daring hands to grasp upon the bosom of the sea, and the sleeping spirit of the old Norse Rover stirred in their veins, and the lilt of a wild sea-song they had never heard kept ringing in their ears; and they built them ships and sailed for the Spanish Main, and won much wealth, as was their wont.

Later on, when Civilisation began to lay down and enforce sterner rules for the game of life, and peaceful methods promised to prove more profitable than violent, the Ingerfields

became traders and merchants of grave mien and sober life; for their ambition from generation to generation remains ever the same, their various callings being but means to an end.

A hard, stern race of men they would seem to have been, but just--so far as they understood justice. They have the reputation of having been good husbands, fathers, and masters; but one cannot help thinking of them as more respected than loved.

They were men to exact the uttermost farthing due to them, yet not without a sense of the thing due from them, their own duty and responsibility--nay, not altogether without their moments of heroism, which is the duty of great men. History relates how a certain Captain Ingerfield, returning with much treasure from the West Indies--how acquired it were, perhaps, best not to inquire too closely--is overhauled upon the high seas by King's frigate. Captain of King's frigate sends polite message to Captain Ingerfield requesting him to be so kind as to promptly hand over a certain member of his ship's company, who, by some means or another, has made himself objectionable to King's friends, in order that he (the said objectionable person) may be forthwith hanged from the yard-arm.

Captain Ingerfield returns polite answer to Captain of King's frigate that he (Captain Ingerfield) will, with much pleasure, hang any member of his ship's company that needs hanging, but that neither the King of England nor any one else on God Almighty's sea is going to do it for him. Captain of King's frigate sends back word that if objectionable person be not at once given up he shall be compelled with much regret to send Ingerfield and his ship to the bottom of the Atlantic. Replies Captain Ingerfield, "That is just what he will have to do before I give up one of my people," and fights the big frigate--fights it so fiercely that after three hours Captain of King's frigate thinks it will be good to try argument again, and sends therefore a further message, courteously acknowledging Captain Ingerfield's courage and skill, and suggesting that, he having done sufficient to vindicate his honour and renown, it would be politic to now hand over the unimportant cause of contention, and so escape with his treasure.

"Tell your Captain," shouts back this Ingerfield, who has discovered there are sweeter things to fight for than even money, "that the Wild Goose has flown the seas with her belly full of treasure before now, and will, if it be God's pleasure, so do again, but that master and man in her sail together, fight together, and die together."

Whereupon King's frigate pounds away more vigorously than ever, and succeeds eventually in carrying out her threat. Down goes the Wild Goose, her last chase ended--down she goes with a plunge, spit foremost with her colours flying; and down with her goes every man left standing on her decks; and at the bottom of the Atlantic they lie to this day, master and man side by side, keeping guard upon their treasure.

Which incident, and it is well authenticated, goes far to prove that the Ingerfields, hard men and grasping men though they be--men caring more for the getting of money than for the getting of love--loving more the cold grip of gold than the grip of kith or kin, yet

bear buried in their hearts the seeds of a nobler manhood, for which, however, the barren soil of their ambition affords scant nourishment.

The John Ingerfield of this story is a man very typical of his race. He has discovered that the oil and tallow refining business, though not a pleasant one, is an exceedingly lucrative one. These are the good days when George the Third is king, and London is rapidly becoming a city of bright night. Tallow and oil and all materials akin thereto are in ever-growing request, and young John Ingerfield builds himself a large refining house and warehouse in the growing suburb of Limehouse, which lies between the teeming river and the quiet fields, gathers many people round about him, puts his strong heart into his work, and prospers.

All the days of his youth he labours and garners, and lays out and garners yet again. In early middle age he finds himself a wealthy man. The chief business of life, the getting of money, is practically done; his enterprise is firmly established, and will continue to grow with ever less need of husbandry. It is time for him to think about the secondary business of life, the getting together of a wife and home, for the Ingerfields have ever been good citizens, worthy heads of families, openhanded hosts, making a brave show among friends and neighbours.

John Ingerfield, sitting in his stiff, high-backed chair, in his stiffly, but solidly, furnished dining-room, above his counting-house, sipping slowly his one glass of port, takes counsel with himself.

What shall she be?

He is rich, and can afford a good article. She must be young and handsome, fit to grace the fine house he will take for her in fashionable Bloomsbury, far from the odour and touch of oil and tallow. She must be well bred, with a gracious, noble manner, that will charm his guests and reflect honour and credit upon himself; she must, above all, be of good family, with a genealogical tree sufficiently umbrageous to hide Lavender Wharf from the eyes of Society.

What else she may or may not be he does not very much care. She will, of course, be virtuous and moderately pious, as it is fit and proper that women should be. It will also be well that her disposition be gentle and yielding, but that is of minor importance, at all events so far as he is concerned: the Ingerfield husbands are not the class of men upon whom wives vent their tempers.

Having decided in his mind WHAT she shall be, he proceeds to discuss with himself WHO she shall be. His social circle is small. Methodically, in thought, he makes the entire round of it, mentally scrutinising every maiden that he knows. Some are charming, some are fair, some are rich; but no one of them approaches near to his carefully considered ideal.

He keeps the subject in his mind, and muses on it in the intervals of business. At odd moments he jots down names as they occur to him upon a slip of paper, which he pins for the purpose on the inside of the cover of his desk. He arranges them alphabetically, and when it is as complete as his memory can make it, he goes critically down the list, making a few notes against each. As a result, it becomes clear to him that he must seek among strangers for his wife.

He has a friend, or rather an acquaintance, an old school-fellow, who has developed into one of those curious social flies that in all ages are to be met with buzzing contentedly within the most exclusive circles, and concerning whom, seeing that they are neither rare nor rich, nor extraordinarily clever nor well born, one wonders "how the devil they got there!" Meeting this man by chance one afternoon, he links his arm in his and invites him home to dinner.

So soon as they are left alone, with the walnuts and wine between them, John Ingerfield says, thoughtfully cracking a hard nut between his fingers -

"Will, I'm going to get married."

"Excellent idea--delighted to hear it, I'm sure," replies Will, somewhat less interested in the information than in the delicately flavoured Madeira he is lovingly sipping. "Who's the lady?"

"I don't know, yet," is John Ingerfield's answer.

His friend glances slyly at him over his glass, not sure whether he is expected to be amused or sympathetically helpful.

"I want you to find one for me."

Will Cathcart puts down his glass and stares at his host across the table.

"Should be delighted to help you, Jack," he stammers, in an alarmed tone--"'pon my soul I should; but really don't know a damned woman I could recommend--'pon my soul I don't."

"You must see a good many: I wish you'd look out for one that you **COULD** recommend."

"Certainly I will, my dear Jack!" answers the other, in a relieved voice. "Never thought about 'em in that way before. Daresay I shall come across the very girl to suit you. I'll keep my eyes open and let you know."

"I shall be obliged to you if you will," replies John Ingerfield, quietly; "and it's your turn, I think, to oblige me, Will. I have obliged you, if you recollect."

"Shall never forget it, my dear Jack," murmurs Will, a little uneasily. "It was uncommonly good of you. You saved me from ruin, Jack: shall think about it to my dying day--'pon my soul I shall."

"No need to let it worry you for so long a period as that," returns John, with the faintest suspicion of a smile playing round his firm mouth. "The bill falls due at the end of next month. You can discharge the debt then, and the matter will be off your mind."

Will finds his chair growing uncomfortable under him, while the Madeira somehow loses its flavour. He gives a short, nervous laugh.

"By Jove," he says: "so soon as that? The date had quite slipped my memory."

"Fortunate that I reminded you," says John, the smile round his lips deepening.

Will fidgets on his seat. "I'm afraid, my dear Jack," he says, "I shall have to get you to renew it, just for a month or two,--deuced awkward thing, but I'm remarkably short of money this year. Truth is, I can't get what's owing to myself."

"That's very awkward, certainly," replies his friend, "because I am not at all sure that I shall be able to renew it."

Will stares at him in some alarm. "But what am I to do if I hav'n't the money?"

John Ingerfield shrugs his shoulders.

"You don't mean, my dear Jack, that you would put me in prison?"

"Why not? Other people have to go there who can't pay their debts."

Will Cathcart's alarm grows to serious proportions. "But our friendship," he cries, "our--"

"My dear Will," interrupts the other, "there are few friends I would lend three hundred pounds to and make no effort to get it back. You, certainly, are not one of them."

"Let us make a bargain," he continues. "Find me a wife, and on the day of my marriage I will send you back that bill with, perhaps, a couple of hundred added. If by the end of next month you have not introduced me to a lady fit to be, and willing to be, Mrs. John Ingerfield, I shall decline to renew it."

John Ingerfield refills his own glass and hospitably pushes the bottle towards his guest--who, however, contrary to his custom, takes no notice of it, but stares hard at his shoe-buckles.

"Are you serious?" he says at length.

"Quite serious," is the answer. "I want to marry. My wife must be a lady by birth and education. She must be of good family--of family sufficiently good, indeed, to compensate for the refinery. She must be young and beautiful and charming. I am purely a business man. I want a woman capable of conducting the social department of my life. I know of no such lady myself. I appeal to you, because you, I know, are intimate with the class among whom she must be sought."

"There may be some difficulty in persuading a lady of the required qualifications to accept the situation," says Cathcart, with a touch of malice.

"I want you to find one who will," says John Ingerfield.

Early in the evening Will Cathcart takes leave of his host, and departs thoughtful and anxious; and John Ingerfield strolls contemplatively up and down his wharf, for the smell of oil and tallow has grown to be very sweet to him, and it is pleasant to watch the moonbeams shining on the piled-up casks.

Six weeks go by. On the first day of the seventh John takes Will Cathcart's acceptance from its place in the large safe, and lays it in the smaller box beside his desk, devoted to more pressing and immediate business. Two days later Cathcart picks his way across the slimy yard, passes through the counting-house, and enters his friend's inner sanctum, closing the door behind him.

He wears a jubilant air, and slaps the grave John on the back. "I've got her, Jack," he cries. "It's been hard work, I can tell you: sounding suspicious old dowagers, bribing confidential servants, fishing for information among friends of the family. By Jove, I shall be able to join the Duke's staff as spy-in-chief to His Majesty's entire forces after this!"

"What is she like?" asks John, without stopping his writing.

"Like! My dear Jack, you'll fall over head and ears in love with her the moment you see her. A little cold, perhaps, but that will just suit you."

"Good family?" asks John, signing and folding the letter he has finished.

"So good that I was afraid at first it would be useless thinking of her. But she's a sensible girl, no confounded nonsense about her, and the family are poor as church mice. In fact--well, to tell the truth, we have become most excellent friends, and she told me herself frankly that she meant to marry a rich man, and didn't much care whom."

"That sounds hopeful," remarks the would-be bridegroom, with his peculiar dry smile: "when shall I have the pleasure of seeing her?"

"I want you to come with me to-night to the Garden," replies the other; "she will be in Lady Heatherington's box, and I will introduce you."

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