

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE MORNING OF THE CRISIS

Part 1

Two days after came the day of the Crisis, the day of the Fadden Dance. It would have been a crisis anyhow, but it was complicated in Ann Veronica's mind by the fact that a letter lay on the breakfast-table from Mr. Manning, and that her aunt focussed a brightly tactful disregard upon this throughout the meal. Ann Veronica had come down thinking of nothing in the world but her inflexible resolution to go to the dance in the teeth of all opposition. She did not know Mr. Manning's handwriting, and opened his letter and read some lines before its import appeared. Then for a time she forgot the Fadden affair altogether. With a well-simulated unconcern and a heightened color she finished her breakfast.

She was not obliged to go to the Tredgold College, because as yet the College had not settled down for the session. She was supposed to be reading at home, and after breakfast she strolled into the vegetable garden, and having taken up a position upon the staging of a disused greenhouse that had the double advantage of being hidden from the windows of the house and secure from the sudden appearance of any one, she resumed the reading of Mr. Manning's letter.

Mr. Manning's handwriting had an air of being clear without being easily legible; it was large and rather roundish, with a lack of definition about the letters and a disposition to treat the large ones as liberal-minded people nowadays treat opinions, as all amounting to the same thing really--a years-smoothed boyish rather than an adult hand. And it filled seven sheets of notepaper, each written only on one side.

"MY DEAR MISS STANLEY," it began,--"I hope you will forgive my bothering you with a letter, but I have been thinking very much over our conversation at Lady Palsworthy's, and I feel there are things I want to say to you so much that I cannot wait until we meet again. It is the worst of talk under such social circumstances that it is always getting cut off so soon as it is beginning; and I went home that afternoon feeling I had said nothing--literally nothing--of the things I had meant to say to you and that were coursing through my head. They were things I had meant very much to talk to you about, so that I went home vexed and disappointed, and only relieved myself a little by writing a few verses. I wonder if you will mind very much when I tell you they were suggested by you. You must forgive the poet's license I take. Here is one verse. The metrical irregularity is intentional, because I want, as it were, to put you apart: to change the lilt and the mood altogether when I speak of you.

"A SONG OF LADIES AND MY LADY

"Saintly white and a lily is Mary,
Margaret's violets, sweet and shy;
Green and dewy is Nellie-bud fairy,
Forget-me-nots live in Gwendolen's eye.
Annabel shines like a star in the darkness,
Rosamund queens it a rose, deep rose;
But the lady I love is like sunshine in April weather,
She gleams and gladdens, she warms--and goes.'

"Crude, I admit. But let that verse tell my secret. All bad
verse--originally the epigram was Lang's, I believe--is written in a
state of emotion.

"My dear Miss Stanley, when I talked to you the other afternoon of work
and politics and such-like things, my mind was all the time resenting it
beyond measure. There we were discussing whether you should have a vote,
and I remembered the last occasion we met it was about your prospects of
success in the medical profession or as a Government official such as a
number of women now are, and all the time my heart was crying out within
me, 'Here is the Queen of your career.' I wanted, as I have never wanted
before, to take you up, to make you mine, to carry you off and set you
apart from all the strain and turmoil of life. For nothing will ever
convince me that it is not the man's share in life to shield, to
protect, to lead and toil and watch and battle with the world at large.
I want to be your knight, your servant, your protector, your--I dare
scarcely write the word--your husband. So I come suppliant. I am

five-and-thirty, and I have knocked about in the world and tasted the quality of life. I had a hard fight to begin with to win my way into the Upper Division--I was third on a list of forty-seven--and since then I have found myself promoted almost yearly in a widening sphere of social service. Before I met you I never met any one whom I felt I could love, but you have discovered depths in my own nature I had scarcely suspected. Except for a few early ebullitions of passion, natural to a warm and romantic disposition, and leaving no harmful after-effects--ebullitions that by the standards of the higher truth I feel no one can justly cast a stone at, and of which I for one am by no means ashamed--I come to you a pure and unencumbered man. I love you. In addition to my public salary I have a certain private property and further expectations through my aunt, so that I can offer you a life of wide and generous refinement, travel, books, discussion, and easy relations with a circle of clever and brilliant and thoughtful people with whom my literary work has brought me into contact, and of which, seeing me only as you have done alone in Morningside Park, you can have no idea. I have a certain standing not only as a singer but as a critic, and I belong to one of the most brilliant causerie dinner clubs of the day, in which successful Bohemianism, politicians, men of affairs, artists, sculptors, and cultivated noblemen generally, mingle together in the easiest and most delightful intercourse. That is my real milieu, and one that I am convinced you would not only adorn but delight in.

"I find it very hard to write this letter. There are so many things I want to tell you, and they stand on such different levels, that

the effect is necessarily confusing and discordant, and I find myself doubting if I am really giving you the thread of emotion that should run through all this letter. For although I must confess it reads very much like an application or a testimonial or some such thing as that, I can assure you I am writing this in fear and trembling with a sinking heart. My mind is full of ideas and images that I have been cherishing and accumulating--dreams of travelling side by side, of lunching quietly together in some jolly restaurant, of moonlight and music and all that side of life, of seeing you dressed like a queen and shining in some brilliant throng--mine; of your looking at flowers in some old-world garden, our garden--there are splendid places to be got down in Surrey, and a little runabout motor is quite within my means. You know they say, as, indeed, I have just quoted already, that all bad poetry is written in a state of emotion, but I have no doubt that this is true of bad offers of marriage. I have often felt before that it is only when one has nothing to say that one can write easy poetry. Witness Browning. And how can I get into one brief letter the complex accumulated desires of what is now, I find on reference to my diary, nearly sixteen months of letting my mind run on you--ever since that jolly party at Surbiton, where we raced and beat the other boat. You steered and I rowed stroke. My very sentences stumble and give way. But I do not even care if I am absurd. I am a resolute man, and hitherto when I have wanted a thing I have got it; but I have never yet wanted anything in my life as I have wanted you. It isn't the same thing. I am afraid because I love you, so that the mere thought of failure hurts. If I did not love you so much I believe I could win you by sheer force of character, for people tell me

I am naturally of the dominating type. Most of my successes in life have been made with a sort of reckless vigor.

"Well, I have said what I had to say, stumblingly and badly, and baldly. But I am sick of tearing up letters and hopeless of getting what I have to say better said. It would be easy enough for me to write an eloquent letter about something else. Only I do not care to write about anything else. Let me put the main question to you now that I could not put the other afternoon. Will you marry me, Ann Veronica?"

"Very sincerely yours,

"HUBERT MANNING."

Ann Veronica read this letter through with grave, attentive eyes.

Her interest grew as she read, a certain distaste disappeared. Twice she smiled, but not unkindly. Then she went back and mixed up the sheets in a search for particular passages. Finally she fell into reflection.

"Odd!" she said. "I suppose I shall have to write an answer. It's so different from what one has been led to expect."

She became aware of her aunt, through the panes of the greenhouse, advancing with an air of serene unconsciousness from among the raspberry

canes.

"No you don't!" said Ann Veronica, and walked out at a brisk and business-like pace toward the house.

"I'm going for a long tramp, auntie," she said.

"Alone, dear?"

"Yes, aunt. I've got a lot of things to think about."

Miss Stanley reflected as Ann Veronica went toward the house. She thought her niece very hard and very self-possessed and self-confident. She ought to be softened and tender and confidential at this phase of her life. She seemed to have no idea whatever of the emotional states that were becoming to her age and position. Miss Stanley walked round the garden thinking, and presently house and garden reverberated to Ann Veronica's slamming of the front door.

"I wonder!" said Miss Stanley.

For a long time she surveyed a row of towering holly-hocks, as though they offered an explanation. Then she went in and up-stairs, hesitated on the landing, and finally, a little breathless and with an air of great dignity, opened the door and walked into Ann Veronica's room. It was a neat, efficient-looking room, with a writing-table placed with a

business-like regard to the window, and a bookcase surmounted by a pig's skull, a dissected frog in a sealed bottle, and a pile of shiny, black-covered note-books. In the corner of the room were two hockey-sticks and a tennis-racket, and upon the walls Ann Veronica, by means of autotypes, had indicated her proclivities in art. But Miss Stanley took no notice of these things. She walked straight across to the wardrobe and opened it. There, hanging among Ann Veronica's more normal clothing, was a skimpy dress of red canvas, trimmed with cheap and tawdry braid, and short--it could hardly reach below the knee. On the same peg and evidently belonging to it was a black velvet Zouave jacket. And then! a garment that was conceivably a secondary skirt.

Miss Stanley hesitated, and took first one and then another of the constituents of this costume off its peg and surveyed it.

The third item she took with a trembling hand by its waistbelt. As she raised it, its lower portion fell apart into two baggy crimson masses.

"TROUSERS!" she whispered.

Her eyes travelled about the room as if in appeal to the very chairs.

Tucked under the writing-table a pair of yellow and gold Turkish slippers of a highly meretricious quality caught her eye. She walked over to them still carrying the trousers in her hands, and stooped to examine them. They were ingenious disguises of gilt paper destructively

gummed, it would seem, to Ann Veronicas' best dancing-slippers.

Then she reverted to the trousers.

"How CAN I tell him?" whispered Miss Stanley.

Part 2

Ann Veronica carried a light but business-like walking-stick. She walked with an easy quickness down the Avenue and through the proletarian portion of Morningside Park, and crossing these fields came into a pretty overhung lane that led toward Caddington and the Downs. And then her pace slackened. She tucked her stick under her arm and re-read Manning's letter.

"Let me think," said Ann Veronica. "I wish this hadn't turned up to-day of all days."

She found it difficult to begin thinking, and indeed she was anything but clear what it was she had to think about. Practically it was most of the chief interests in life that she proposed to settle in this pedestrian meditation. Primarily it was her own problem, and in particular the answer she had to give to Mr. Manning's letter, but in order to get data for that she found that she, having a logical and

ordered mind, had to decide upon the general relations of men to women, the objects and conditions of marriage and its bearing upon the welfare of the race, the purpose of the race, the purpose, if any, of everything....

"Frightful lot of things aren't settled," said Ann Veronica. In addition, the Fadden Dance business, all out of proportion, occupied the whole foreground of her thoughts and threw a color of rebellion over everything. She kept thinking she was thinking about Mr. Manning's proposal of marriage and finding she was thinking of the dance.

For a time her efforts to achieve a comprehensive concentration were dispersed by the passage of the village street of Caddington, the passing of a goggled car-load of motorists, and the struggles of a stable lad mounted on one recalcitrant horse and leading another. When she got back to her questions again in the monotonous high-road that led up the hill, she found the image of Mr. Manning central in her mind. He stood there, large and dark, enunciating, in his clear voice from beneath his large mustache, clear flat sentences, deliberately kindly. He proposed, he wanted to possess her! He loved her.

Ann Veronica felt no repulsion at the prospect. That Mr. Manning loved her presented itself to her bloodlessly, stilled from any imaginative quiver or thrill of passion or disgust. The relationship seemed to have almost as much to do with blood and body as a mortgage. It was something that would create a mutual claim, a relationship. It was in another

world from that in which men will die for a kiss, and touching hands lights fires that burn up lives--the world of romance, the world of passionately beautiful things.

But that other world, in spite of her resolute exclusion of it, was always looking round corners and peeping through chinks and crannies, and rustling and raiding into the order in which she chose to live, shining out of pictures at her, echoing in lyrics and music; it invaded her dreams, it wrote up broken and enigmatical sentences upon the passage walls of her mind. She was aware of it now as if it were a voice shouting outside a house, shouting passionate verities in a hot sunlight, a voice that cries while people talk insincerely in a darkened room and pretend not to hear. Its shouting now did in some occult manner convey a protest that Mr. Manning would on no account do, though he was tall and dark and handsome and kind, and thirty-five and adequately prosperous, and all that a husband should be. But there was, it insisted, no mobility in his face, no movement, nothing about him that warmed. If Ann Veronica could have put words to that song they would have been, "Hot-blooded marriage or none!" but she was far too indistinct in this matter to frame any words at all.

"I don't love him," said Ann Veronica, getting a gleam. "I don't see that his being a good sort matters. That really settles about that.... But it means no end of a row."

For a time she sat on a rail before leaving the road for the downland

turf. "But I wish," she said, "I had some idea what I was really up to."

Her thoughts went into solution for a time, while she listened to a lark singing.

"Marriage and mothering," said Ann Veronica, with her mind crystallizing out again as the lark dropped to the nest in the turf. "And all the rest of it perhaps is a song."

Part 3

Her mind got back to the Fadden Ball.

She meant to go, she meant to go, she meant to go. Nothing would stop her, and she was prepared to face the consequences. Suppose her father turned her out of doors! She did not care, she meant to go. She would just walk out of the house and go....

She thought of her costume in some detail and with considerable satisfaction, and particularly of a very jolly property dagger with large glass jewels in the handle, that reposed in a drawer in her room. She was to be a Corsair's Bride. "Fancy stabbing a man for jealousy!" she thought. "You'd have to think how to get in between his bones."

She thought of her father, and with an effort dismissed him from her mind.

She tried to imagine the collective effect of the Fadden Ball; she had never seen a fancy-dress gathering in her life. Mr. Manning came into her thoughts again, an unexpected, tall, dark, self-contained presence at the Fadden. One might suppose him turning up; he knew a lot of clever people, and some of them might belong to the class. What would he come as?

Presently she roused herself with a guilty start from the task of dressing and re-dressing Mr. Manning in fancy costume, as though he was a doll. She had tried him as a Crusader, in which guise he seemed plausible but heavy--"There IS something heavy about him; I wonder if it's his mustache?"--and as a Hussar, which made him preposterous, and as a Black Brunswicker, which was better, and as an Arab sheik. Also she had tried him as a dragoman and as a gendarme, which seemed the most suitable of all to his severely handsome, immobile profile. She felt he would tell people the way, control traffic, and refuse admission to public buildings with invincible correctness and the very finest explicit feelings possible. For each costume she had devised a suitable form of matrimonial refusal. "Oh, Lord!" she said, discovering what she was up to, and dropped lightly from the fence upon the turf and went on her way toward the crest.

"I shall never marry," said Ann Veronica, resolutely; "I'm not the sort. That's why it's so important I should take my own line now."

Part 4

Ann Veronica's ideas of marriage were limited and unsystematic. Her teachers and mistresses had done their best to stamp her mind with an ineradicable persuasion that it was tremendously important, and on no account to be thought about. Her first intimations of marriage as a fact of extreme significance in a woman's life had come with the marriage of Alice and the elopement of her second sister, Gwen.

These convulsions occurred when Ann Veronica was about twelve. There was a gulf of eight years between her and the youngest of her brace of sisters--an impassable gulf inhabited chaotically by two noisy brothers. These sisters moved in a grown-up world inaccessible to Ann Veronica's sympathies, and to a large extent remote from her curiosity. She got into rows through meddling with their shoes and tennis-rackets, and had moments of carefully concealed admiration when she was privileged to see them just before her bedtime, rather radiantly dressed in white or pink or amber and prepared to go out with her mother. She thought Alice a bit of a sneak, an opinion her brothers shared, and Gwen rather a snatch at meals. She saw nothing of their love-making, and came home from her boarding-school in a state of decently suppressed curiosity for Alice's

wedding.

Her impressions of this cardinal ceremony were rich and confused, complicated by a quite transitory passion that awakened no reciprocal fire for a fat curly headed cousin in black velvet and a lace collar, who assisted as a page. She followed him about persistently, and succeeded, after a brisk, unchivalrous struggle (in which he pinched and asked her to "cheese it"), in kissing him among the raspberries behind the greenhouse. Afterward her brother Roddy, also strange in velvet, feeling rather than knowing of this relationship, punched this Adonis's head.

A marriage in the house proved to be exciting but extremely disorganizing. Everything seemed designed to unhinge the mind and make the cat wretched. All the furniture was moved, all the meals were disarranged, and everybody, Ann Veronica included, appeared in new, bright costumes. She had to wear cream and a brown sash and a short frock and her hair down, and Gwen cream and a brown sash and a long skirt and her hair up. And her mother, looking unusually alert and hectic, wore cream and brown also, made up in a more complicated manner.

Ann Veronica was much impressed by a mighty trying on and altering and fussing about Alice's "things"--Alice was being re-costumed from garret to cellar, with a walking-dress and walking-boots to measure, and a bride's costume of the most ravishing description, and stockings and such like beyond the dreams of avarice--and a constant and increasing

dripping into the house of irrelevant remarkable objects, such as--

Real lace bedspread;

Gilt travelling clock;

Ornamental pewter plaque;

Salad bowl (silver mounted) and servers;

Madgett's "English Poets" (twelve volumes), bound purple morocco;

Etc., etc.

Through all this flutter of novelty there came and went a solicitous, preoccupied, almost depressed figure. It was Doctor Ralph, formerly the partner of Doctor Stickell in the Avenue, and now with a thriving practice of his own in Wamblesmith. He had shaved his side-whiskers and come over in flannels, but he was still indisputably the same person who had attended Ann Veronica for the measles and when she swallowed the fish-bone. But his role was altered, and he was now playing the bridegroom in this remarkable drama. Alice was going to be Mrs. Ralph. He came in apologetically; all the old "Well, and how ARE we?" note gone; and once he asked Ann Veronica, almost furtively,

"How's Alice getting on, Vee?" Finally, on the Day, he appeared like

his old professional self transfigured, in the most beautiful light gray trousers Ann Veronica had ever seen and a new shiny silk hat with a most becoming roll....

It was not simply that all the rooms were rearranged and everybody dressed in unusual fashions, and all the routines of life abolished and put away: people's tempers and emotions also seemed strangely disturbed and shifted about. Her father was distinctly irascible, and disposed more than ever to hide away among the petrological things--the study was turned out. At table he carved in a gloomy but resolute manner. On the Day he had trumpet-like outbreaks of cordiality, varied by a watchful preoccupation. Gwen and Alice were fantastically friendly, which seemed to annoy him, and Mrs. Stanley was throughout enigmatical, with an anxious eye on her husband and Alice.

There was a confused impression of livery carriages and whips with white favors, people fussily wanting other people to get in before them, and then the church. People sat in unusual pews, and a wide margin of hassocky emptiness intervened between the ceremony and the walls.

Ann Veronica had a number of fragmentary impressions of Alice strangely transfigured in bridal raiment. It seemed to make her sister downcast beyond any precedent. The bridesmaids and pages got rather jumbled in the aisle, and she had an effect of Alice's white back and sloping shoulders and veiled head receding toward the altar. In some incomprehensible way that back view made her feel sorry for Alice. Also

she remembered very vividly the smell of orange blossom, and Alice, drooping and spiritless, mumbling responses, facing Doctor Ralph, while the Rev. Edward Bribble stood between them with an open book. Doctor Ralph looked kind and large, and listened to Alice's responses as though he was listening to symptoms and thought that on the whole she was progressing favorably.

And afterward her mother and Alice kissed long and clung to each other. And Doctor Ralph stood by looking considerate. He and her father shook hands manfully.

Ann Veronica had got quite interested in Mr. Bribble's rendering of the service--he had the sort of voice that brings out things--and was still teeming with ideas about it when finally a wild outburst from the organ made it clear that, whatever snivelling there might be down in the chancel, that excellent wind instrument was, in its Mendelssohnian way, as glad as ever it could be. "Pump, pump, per-um-pump, Pum, Pump, Per-um...."

The wedding-breakfast was for Ann Veronica a spectacle of the unreal consuming the real; she liked that part very well, until she was carelessly served against her expressed wishes with mayonnaise. She was caught by an uncle, whose opinion she valued, making faces at Roddy because he had exulted at this.

Of the vast mass of these impressions Ann Veronica could make nothing

at the time; there they were--Fact! She stored them away in a mind naturally retentive, as a squirrel stores away nuts, for further digestion. Only one thing emerged with any reasonable clarity in her mind at once, and that was that unless she was saved from drowning by an unmarried man, in which case the ceremony is unavoidable, or totally destitute of under-clothing, and so driven to get a trousseau, in which hardship a trousseau would certainly be "ripping," marriage was an experience to be strenuously evaded.

When they were going home she asked her mother why she and Gwen and Alice had cried.

"Ssh!" said her mother, and then added, "A little natural feeling, dear."

"But didn't Alice want to marry Doctor Ralph?"

"Oh, ssh, Vee!" said her mother, with an evasion as patent as an advertisement board. "I am sure she will be very happy indeed with Doctor Ralph."

But Ann Veronica was by no means sure of that until she went over to Wamblesmith and saw her sister, very remote and domestic and authoritative, in a becoming tea-gown, in command of Doctor Ralph's home. Doctor Ralph came in to tea and put his arm round Alice and kissed her, and Alice called him "Squiggles," and stood in the shelter of his

arms for a moment with an expression of satisfied proprietorship. She HAD cried, Ann Veronica knew. There had been fusses and scenes dimly apprehended through half-open doors. She had heard Alice talking and crying at the same time, a painful noise. Perhaps marriage hurt. But now it was all over, and Alice was getting on well. It reminded Ann Veronica of having a tooth stopped.

And after that Alice became remoter than ever, and, after a time, ill. Then she had a baby and became as old as any really grown-up person, or older, and very dull. Then she and her husband went off to a Yorkshire practice, and had four more babies, none of whom photographed well, and so she passed beyond the sphere of Ann Veronica's sympathies altogether.

Part 5

The Gwen affair happened when she was away at school at Marticombe-on-Sea, a term before she went to the High School, and was never very clear to her.

Her mother missed writing for a week, and then she wrote in an unusual key. "My dear," the letter ran, "I have to tell you that your sister Gwen has offended your father very much. I hope you will always love her, but I want you to remember she has offended your father and married

without his consent. Your father is very angry, and will not have her name mentioned in his hearing. She has married some one he could not approve of, and gone right away...."

When the next holidays came Ann Veronica's mother was ill, and Gwen was in the sick-room when Ann Veronica returned home. She was in one of her old walking-dresses, her hair was done in an unfamiliar manner, she wore a wedding-ring, and she looked as if she had been crying.

"Hello, Gwen!" said Ann Veronica, trying to put every one at their ease.

"Been and married?... What's the name of the happy man?"

Gwen owned to "Fortescue."

"Got a photograph of him or anything?" said Ann Veronica, after kissing her mother.

Gwen made an inquiry, and, directed by Mrs. Stanley, produced a portrait from its hiding-place in the jewel-drawer under the mirror. It presented a clean-shaven face with a large Corinthian nose, hair tremendously waving off the forehead and more chin and neck than is good for a man.

"LOOKS all right," said Ann Veronica, regarding him with her head first on one side and then on the other, and trying to be agreeable. "What's the objection?"

"I suppose she ought to know?" said Gwen to her mother, trying to alter the key of the conversation.

"You see, Vee," said Mrs. Stanley, "Mr. Fortescue is an actor, and your father does not approve of the profession."

"Oh!" said Ann Veronica. "I thought they made knights of actors?"

"They may of Hal some day," said Gwen. "But it's a long business."

"I suppose this makes you an actress?" said Ann Veronica.

"I don't know whether I shall go on," said Gwen, a novel note of languorous professionalism creeping into her voice. "The other women don't much like it if husband and wife work together, and I don't think Hal would like me to act away from him."

Ann Veronica regarded her sister with a new respect, but the traditions of family life are strong. "I don't suppose you'll be able to do it much," said Ann Veronica.

Later Gwen's trouble weighed so heavily on Mrs. Stanley in her illness that her husband consented to receive Mr. Fortescue in the drawing-room, and actually shake hands with him in an entirely hopeless manner and hope everything would turn out for the best.

The forgiveness and reconciliation was a cold and formal affair, and afterwards her father went off gloomily to his study, and Mr. Fortescue rambled round the garden with soft, propitiatory steps, the Corinthian nose upraised and his hands behind his back, pausing to look long and hard at the fruit-trees against the wall.

Ann Veronica watched him from the dining-room window, and after some moments of maidenly hesitation rambled out into the garden in a reverse direction to Mr. Fortescue's steps, and encountered him with an air of artless surprise.

"Hello!" said Ann Veronica, with arms akimbo and a careless, breathless manner. "You Mr. Fortescue?"

"At your service. You Ann Veronica?"

"Rather! I say--did you marry Gwen?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Mr. Fortescue raised his eyebrows and assumed a light-comedy expression.

"I suppose I fell in love with her, Ann Veronica."

"Rum," said Ann Veronica. "Have you got to keep her now?"

"To the best of my ability," said Mr. Fortescue, with a bow.

"Have you much ability?" asked Ann Veronica.

Mr. Fortescue tried to act embarrassment in order to conceal its reality, and Ann Veronica went on to ask a string of questions about acting, and whether her sister would act, and was she beautiful enough for it, and who would make her dresses, and so on.

As a matter of fact Mr. Fortescue had not much ability to keep her sister, and a little while after her mother's death Ann Veronica met Gwen suddenly on the staircase coming from her father's study, shockingly dingy in dusty mourning and tearful and resentful, and after that Gwen receded from the Morningside Park world, and not even the begging letters and distressful communications that her father and aunt received, but only a vague intimation of dreadfulness, a leakage of incidental comment, flashes of paternal anger at "that blackguard," came to Ann Veronica's ears.

Part 6

These were Ann Veronica's leading cases in the question of marriage.

They were the only real marriages she had seen clearly. For the rest, she derived her ideas of the married state from the observed behavior of married women, which impressed her in Morningside Park as being tied and dull and inelastic in comparison with the life of the young, and from a remarkably various reading among books. As a net result she had come to think of all married people much as one thinks of insects that have lost their wings, and of her sisters as new hatched creatures who had scarcely for a moment had wings. She evolved a dim image of herself cooped up in a house under the benevolent shadow of Mr. Manning. Who knows?--on the analogy of "Squiggles" she might come to call him "Mangles!"

"I don't think I can ever marry any one," she said, and fell suddenly into another set of considerations that perplexed her for a time. Had romance to be banished from life?...

It was hard to part with romance, but she had never thirsted so keenly to go on with her University work in her life as she did that day. She had never felt so acutely the desire for free initiative, for a life unhampered by others. At any cost! Her brothers had it practically--at least they had it far more than it seemed likely she would unless she exerted herself with quite exceptional vigor. Between her and the fair, far prospect of freedom and self-development manoeuvred Mr. Manning, her aunt and father, neighbors, customs, traditions, forces. They seemed to her that morning to be all armed with nets and prepared to throw them over her directly her movements became in any manner truly free.

She had a feeling as though something had dropped from her eyes, as though she had just discovered herself for the first time--discovered herself as a sleep-walker might do, abruptly among dangers, hindrances, and perplexities, on the verge of a cardinal crisis.

The life of a girl presented itself to her as something happy and heedless and unthinking, yet really guided and controlled by others, and going on amidst unsuspected screens and concealments.

And in its way it was very well. Then suddenly with a rush came reality, came "growing up"; a hasty imperative appeal for seriousness, for supreme seriousness. The Ralphs and Mannings and Fortescues came down upon the raw inexperience, upon the blinking ignorance of the newcomer; and before her eyes were fairly open, before she knew what had happened, a new set of guides and controls, a new set of obligations and responsibilities and limitations, had replaced the old. "I want to be a Person," said Ann Veronica to the downs and the open sky; "I will not have this happen to me, whatever else may happen in its place."

Ann Veronica had three things very definitely settled by the time when, a little after mid-day, she found herself perched up on a gate between a bridle-path and a field that commanded the whole wide stretch of country between Chalking and Waldersham. Firstly, she did not intend to marry at all, and particularly she did not mean to marry Mr. Manning; secondly, by some measure or other, she meant to go on with her studies, not at

the Tredgold Schools but at the Imperial College; and, thirdly, she was, as an immediate and decisive act, a symbol of just exactly where she stood, a declaration of free and adult initiative, going that night to the Fadden Ball.

But the possible attitude of her father she had still to face. So far she had the utmost difficulty in getting on to that vitally important matter. The whole of that relationship persisted in remaining obscure. What would happen when next morning she returned to Morningside Park?

He couldn't turn her out of doors. But what he could do or might do she could not imagine. She was not afraid of violence, but she was afraid of something mean, some secondary kind of force. Suppose he stopped all her allowance, made it imperative that she should either stay ineffectually resentful at home or earn a living for herself at once.... It appeared highly probable to her that he would stop her allowance.

What can a girl do?

Somewhere at this point Ann Veronica's speculations were interrupted and turned aside by the approach of a horse and rider. Mr. Ramage, that iron-gray man of the world, appeared dressed in a bowler hat and a suit of hard gray, astride of a black horse. He pulled rein at the sight of her, saluted, and regarded her with his rather too protuberant eyes. The girl's gaze met his in interested inquiry.

"You've got my view," he said, after a pensive second. "I always get off here and lean over that rail for a bit. May I do so to-day?"

"It's your gate," she said, amiably; "you got it first. It's for you to say if I may sit on it."

He slipped off the horse. "Let me introduce you to Caesar," he said; and she patted Caesar's neck, and remarked how soft his nose was, and secretly deplored the ugliness of equine teeth. Ramage tethered the horse to the farther gate-post, and Caesar blew heavily and began to investigate the hedge.

Ramage leaned over the gate at Ann Veronica's side, and for a moment there was silence.

He made some obvious comments on the wide view warming toward its autumnal blaze that spread itself in hill and valley, wood and village, below.

"It's as broad as life," said Mr. Ramage, regarding it and putting a well-booted foot up on the bottom rail.

Part 7

"And what are you doing here, young lady," he said, looking up at her face, "wandering alone so far from home?"

"I like long walks," said Ann Veronica, looking down on him.

"Solitary walks?"

"That's the point of them. I think over all sorts of things."

"Problems?"

"Sometimes quite difficult problems."

"You're lucky to live in an age when you can do so. Your mother, for instance, couldn't. She had to do her thinking at home--under inspection."

She looked down on him thoughtfully, and he let his admiration of her free young poise show in his face.

"I suppose things have changed?" she said.

"Never was such an age of transition."

She wondered what to. Mr. Ramage did not know. "Sufficient unto me is

the change thereof," he said, with all the effect of an epigram.

"I must confess," he said, "the New Woman and the New Girl intrigue me profoundly. I am one of those people who are interested in women, more interested than I am in anything else. I don't conceal it. And the change, the change of attitude! The way all the old clingingness has been thrown aside is amazing. And all the old--the old trick of shrinking up like a snail at a touch. If you had lived twenty years ago you would have been called a Young Person, and it would have been your chief duty in life not to know, never to have heard of, and never to understand."

"There's quite enough still," said Ann Veronica, smiling, "that one doesn't understand."

"Quite. But your role would have been to go about saying, 'I beg your pardon' in a reproving tone to things you understood quite well in your heart and saw no harm in. That terrible Young Person! she's vanished. Lost, stolen, or strayed, the Young Person!... I hope we may never find her again."

He rejoiced over this emancipation. "While that lamb was about every man of any spirit was regarded as a dangerous wolf. We wore invisible chains and invisible blinkers. Now, you and I can gossip at a gate, and }Honi soit qui mal y pense. The change has given man one good thing he never had before," he said. "Girl friends. And I am coming to believe the best

as well as the most beautiful friends a man can have are girl friends."

He paused, and went on, after a keen look at her:

"I had rather gossip to a really intelligent girl than to any man alive."

"I suppose we ARE more free than we were?" said Ann Veronica, keeping the question general.

"Oh, there's no doubt of it! Since the girls of the eighties broke bounds and sailed away on bicycles--my young days go back to the very beginnings of that--it's been one triumphant relaxation."

"Relaxation, perhaps. But are we any more free?"

"Well?"

"I mean we've long strings to tether us, but we are bound all the same. A woman isn't much freer--in reality."

Mr. Ramage demurred.

"One runs about," said Ann Veronica.

"Yes."

"But it's on condition one doesn't do anything."

"Do what?"

"Oh!--anything."

He looked interrogation with a faint smile.

"It seems to me it comes to earning one's living in the long run," said Ann Veronica, coloring faintly. "Until a girl can go away as a son does and earn her independent income, she's still on a string. It may be a long string, long enough if you like to tangle up all sorts of people; but there it is! If the paymaster pulls, home she must go. That's what I mean."

Mr. Ramage admitted the force of that. He was a little impressed by Ann Veronica's metaphor of the string, which, indeed, she owed to Hetty Widdett. "YOU wouldn't like to be independent?" he asked, abruptly. "I mean REALLY independent. On your own. It isn't such fun as it seems."

"Every one wants to be independent," said Ann Veronica. "Every one. Man or woman."

"And you?"

"Rather!"

"I wonder why?"

"There's no why. It's just to feel--one owns one's self."

"Nobody does that," said Ramage, and kept silence for a moment.

"But a boy--a boy goes out into the world and presently stands on his own feet. He buys his own clothes, chooses his own company, makes his own way of living."

"You'd like to do that?"

"Exactly."

"Would you like to be a boy?"

"I wonder! It's out of the question, any way."

Ramage reflected. "Why don't you?"

"Well, it might mean rather a row."

"I know--" said Ramage, with sympathy.

"And besides," said Ann Veronica, sweeping that aspect aside, "what could I do? A boy sails out into a trade or profession. But--it's one of the things I've just been thinking over. Suppose--suppose a girl did want to start in life, start in life for herself--" She looked him frankly in the eyes. "What ought she to do?"

"Suppose you--"

"Yes, suppose I--"

He felt that his advice was being asked. He became a little more personal and intimate. "I wonder what you could do?" he said. "I should think YOU could do all sorts of things...."

"What ought you to do?" He began to produce his knowledge of the world for her benefit, jerkily and allusively, and with a strong, rank flavor of "savoir faire." He took an optimist view of her chances. Ann Veronica listened thoughtfully, with her eyes on the turf, and now and then she asked a question or looked up to discuss a point. In the meanwhile, as he talked, he scrutinized her face, ran his eyes over her careless, gracious poise, wondered hard about her. He described her privately to himself as a splendid girl. It was clear she wanted to get away from home, that she was impatient to get away from home. Why? While the front of his mind was busy warning her not to fall into the hopeless miseries of underpaid teaching, and explaining his idea that for women of initiative, quite as much as for men, the world of business had by far

the best chances, the back chambers of his brain were busy with the problem of that "Why?"

His first idea as a man of the world was to explain her unrest by a lover, some secret or forbidden or impossible lover. But he dismissed that because then she would ask her lover and not him all these things. Restlessness, then, was the trouble, simple restlessness: home bored her. He could quite understand the daughter of Mr. Stanley being bored and feeling limited. But was that enough? Dim, formless suspicions of something more vital wandered about his mind. Was the young lady impatient for experience? Was she adventurous? As a man of the world he did not think it becoming to accept maidenly calm as anything more than a mask. Warm life was behind that always, even if it slept. If it was not an actual personal lover, it still might be the lover not yet incarnate, not yet perhaps suspected....

He had diverged only a little from the truth when he said that his chief interest in life was women. It wasn't so much women as Woman that engaged his mind. His was the Latin turn of thinking; he had fallen in love at thirteen, and he was still capable--he prided himself--of falling in love. His invalid wife and her money had been only the thin thread that held his life together; beaded on that permanent relation had been an inter-weaving series of other feminine experiences, disturbing, absorbing, interesting, memorable affairs. Each one had been different from the others, each had had a quality all its own, a distinctive freshness, a distinctive beauty. He could not understand how

men could live ignoring this one predominant interest, this wonderful research into personality and the possibilities of pleasing, these complex, fascinating expeditions that began in interest and mounted to the supremest, most passionate intimacy. All the rest of his existence was subordinate to this pursuit; he lived for it, worked for it, kept himself in training for it.

So while he talked to this girl of work and freedom, his slightly protuberant eyes were noting the gracious balance of her limbs and body across the gate, the fine lines of her chin and neck. Her grave fine face, her warm clear complexion, had already aroused his curiosity as he had gone to and fro in Morningside Park, and here suddenly he was near to her and talking freely and intimately. He had found her in a communicative mood, and he used the accumulated skill of years in turning that to account.

She was pleased and a little flattered by his interest and sympathy. She became eager to explain herself, to show herself in the right light. He was manifestly exerting his mind for her, and she found herself fully disposed to justify his interest.

She, perhaps, displayed herself rather consciously as a fine person unduly limited. She even touched lightly on her father's unreasonableness.

"I wonder," said Ramage, "that more girls don't think as you do and want

to strike out in the world."

And then he speculated. "I wonder if you will?"

"Let me say one thing," he said. "If ever you do and I can help you in any way, by advice or inquiry or recommendation--You see, I'm no believer in feminine incapacity, but I do perceive there is such a thing as feminine inexperience. As a sex you're a little under-trained--in affairs. I'd take it--forgive me if I seem a little urgent--as a sort of proof of friendliness. I can imagine nothing more pleasant in life than to help you, because I know it would pay to help you. There's something about you, a little flavor of Will, I suppose, that makes one feel--good luck about you and success...."

And while he talked and watched her as he talked, she answered, and behind her listening watched and thought about him. She liked the animated eagerness of his manner.

His mind seemed to be a remarkably full one; his knowledge of detailed reality came in just where her own mind was most weakly equipped. Through all he said ran one quality that pleased her--the quality of a man who feels that things can be done, that one need not wait for the world to push one before one moved. Compared with her father and Mr. Manning and the men in "fixed" positions generally that she knew, Ramage, presented by himself, had a fine suggestion of freedom, of power, of deliberate and sustained adventure....

She was particularly charmed by his theory of friendship. It was really very jolly to talk to a man in this way--who saw the woman in her and did not treat her as a child. She was inclined to think that perhaps for a girl the converse of his method was the case; an older man, a man beyond the range of anything "nonsensical," was, perhaps, the most interesting sort of friend one could meet. But in that reservation it may be she went a little beyond the converse of his view....

They got on wonderfully well together. They talked for the better part of an hour, and at last walked together to the junction of highroad and the bridle-path. There, after protestations of friendliness and helpfulness that were almost ardent, he mounted a little clumsily and rode off at an amiable pace, looking his best, making a leg with his riding gaiters, smiling and saluting, while Ann Veronica turned northward and so came to Micklechesil. There, in a little tea and sweet-stuff shop, she bought and consumed slowly and absent-mindedly the insufficient nourishment that is natural to her sex on such occasions.