

## CHAPTER THE FOURTH

### THE CRISIS

#### Part 1

We left Miss Stanley with Ann Veronica's fancy dress in her hands and her eyes directed to Ann Veronica's pseudo-Turkish slippers.

When Mr. Stanley came home at a quarter to six--an earlier train by fifteen minutes than he affected--his sister met him in the hall with a hushed expression. "I'm so glad you're here, Peter," she said. "She means to go."

"Go!" he said. "Where?"

"To that ball."

"What ball?" The question was rhetorical. He knew.

"I believe she's dressing up-stairs--now."

"Then tell her to undress, confound her!" The City had been thoroughly annoying that day, and he was angry from the outset.

Miss Stanley reflected on this proposal for a moment.

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

"She must," said Mr. Stanley, and went into his study. His sister followed. "She can't go now. She'll have to wait for dinner," he said, uncomfortably.

"She's going to have some sort of meal with the Widgetts down the Avenue, and go up with them.

"She told you that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At tea."

"But why didn't you prohibit once for all the whole thing? How dared she tell you that?"

"Out of defiance. She just sat and told me that was her arrangement. I've never seen her quite so sure of herself."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'My dear Veronica! how can you think of such things?'"

"And then?"

"She had two more cups of tea and some cake, and told me of her walk."

"She'll meet somebody one of these days--walking about like that."

"She didn't say she'd met any one."

"But didn't you say some more about that ball?"

"I said everything I could say as soon as I realized she was trying to avoid the topic. I said, 'It is no use your telling me about this walk and pretend I've been told about the ball, because you haven't. Your father has forbidden you to go!'"

"Well?"

"She said, 'I hate being horrid to you and father, but I feel it my duty to go to that ball!'"

"Felt it her duty!"

"'Very well,' I said, 'then I wash my hands of the whole business. Your disobedience be upon your own head.'"

"But that is flat rebellion!" said Mr. Stanley, standing on the hearthrug with his back to the unlit gas-fire. "You ought at once--you ought at once to have told her that. What duty does a girl owe to any one before her father? Obedience to him, that is surely the first law. What CAN she put before that?" His voice began to rise. "One would think I had said nothing about the matter. One would think I had agreed to her going. I suppose this is what she learns in her infernal London colleges. I suppose this is the sort of damned rubbish--"

"Oh! Ssh, Peter!" cried Miss Stanley.

He stopped abruptly. In the pause a door could be heard opening and closing on the landing up-stairs. Then light footsteps became audible, descending the staircase with a certain deliberation and a faint rustle of skirts.

"Tell her," said Mr. Stanley, with an imperious gesture, "to come in here."

Part 2

Miss Stanley emerged from the study and stood watching Ann Veronica descend.

The girl was flushed with excitement, bright-eyed, and braced for a struggle; her aunt had never seen her looking so fine or so pretty. Her fancy dress, save for the green-gray stockings, the pseudo-Turkish slippers, and baggy silk trousered ends natural to a Corsair's bride, was hidden in a large black-silk-hooded opera-cloak. Beneath the hood it was evident that her rebellious hair was bound up with red silk, and fastened by some device in her ears (unless she had them pierced, which was too dreadful a thing to suppose!) were long brass filigree earrings.

"I'm just off, aunt," said Ann Veronica.

"Your father is in the study and wishes to speak to you."

Ann Veronica hesitated, and then stood in the open doorway and regarded her father's stern presence. She spoke with an entirely false note of cheerful off-handedness. "I'm just in time to say good-bye before I go, father. I'm going up to London with the Widgetts to that ball."

"Now look here, Ann Veronica," said Mr. Stanley, "just a moment. You are NOT going to that ball!"

Ann Veronica tried a less genial, more dignified note.

"I thought we had discussed that, father."

"You are not going to that ball! You are not going out of this house in that get-up!"

Ann Veronica tried yet more earnestly to treat him, as she would treat any man, with an insistence upon her due of masculine respect. "You see," she said, very gently, "I AM going. I am sorry to seem to disobey you, but I am. I wish"--she found she had embarked on a bad sentence--"I wish we needn't have quarrelled."

She stopped abruptly, and turned about toward the front door. In a moment he was beside her. "I don't think you can have heard me, Vee," he said, with intensely controlled fury. "I said you were"--he shouted--"NOT TO GO!"

She made, and overdid, an immense effort to be a princess. She tossed her head, and, having no further words, moved toward the door. Her father intercepted her, and for a moment she and he struggled with their hands upon the latch. A common rage flushed their faces. "Let go!" she gasped at him, a blaze of anger.

"Veronica!" cried Miss Stanley, warningly, and, "Peter!"

For a moment they seemed on the verge of an altogether desperate

scuffle. Never for a moment had violence come between these two since long ago he had, in spite of her mother's protest in the background, carried her kicking and squalling to the nursery for some forgotten crime. With something near to horror they found themselves thus confronted.

The door was fastened by a catch and a latch with an inside key, to which at night a chain and two bolts were added. Carefully abstaining from thrusting against each other, Ann Veronica and her father began an absurdly desperate struggle, the one to open the door, the other to keep it fastened. She seized the key, and he grasped her hand and squeezed it roughly and painfully between the handle and the ward as she tried to turn it. His grip twisted her wrist. She cried out with the pain of it.

A wild passion of shame and self-disgust swept over her. Her spirit awoke in dismay to an affection in ruins, to the immense undignified disaster that had come to them.

Abruptly she desisted, recoiled, and turned and fled up-stairs.

She made noises between weeping and laughter as she went. She gained her room, and slammed her door and locked it as though she feared violence and pursuit.

"Oh God!" she cried, "Oh God!" and flung aside her opera-cloak, and for a time walked about the room--a Corsair's bride at a crisis of emotion.

"Why can't he reason with me," she said, again and again, "instead of doing this?"

### Part 3

There presently came a phase in which she said: "I WON'T stand it even now. I will go to-night."

She went as far as her door, then turned to the window. She opened this and scrambled out--a thing she had not done for five long years of adolescence--upon the leaded space above the built-out bath-room on the first floor. Once upon a time she and Roddy had descended thence by the drain-pipe.

But things that a girl of sixteen may do in short skirts are not things to be done by a young lady of twenty-one in fancy dress and an opera-cloak, and just as she was coming unaided to an adequate realization of this, she discovered Mr. Pragmar, the wholesale druggist, who lived three gardens away, and who had been mowing his lawn to get an appetite for dinner, standing in a fascinated attitude beside the forgotten lawn-mower and watching her intently.

She found it extremely difficult to infuse an air of quiet correctitude



into her return through the window, and when she was safely inside she waved clinched fists and executed a noiseless dance of rage.

When she reflected that Mr. Pragmar probably knew Mr. Ramage, and might describe the affair to him, she cried "Oh!" with renewed vexation, and repeated some steps of her dance in a new and more ecstatic measure.

#### Part 4

At eight that evening Miss Stanley tapped at Ann Veronica's bedroom door.

"I've brought you up some dinner, Vee," she said.

Ann Veronica was lying on her bed in a darkling room staring at the ceiling. She reflected before answering. She was frightfully hungry. She had eaten little or no tea, and her mid-day meal had been worse than nothing.

She got up and unlocked the door.

Her aunt did not object to capital punishment or war, or the industrial system or casual wards, or flogging of criminals or the Congo Free

State, because none of these things really got hold of her imagination; but she did object, she did not like, she could not bear to think of people not having and enjoying their meals. It was her distinctive test of an emotional state, its interference with a kindly normal digestion. Any one very badly moved choked down a few mouthfuls; the symptom of supreme distress was not to be able to touch a bit. So that the thought of Ann Veronica up-stairs had been extremely painful for her through all the silent dinner-time that night. As soon as dinner was over she went into the kitchen and devoted herself to compiling a tray--not a tray merely of half-cooled dinner things, but a specially prepared "nice" tray, suitable for tempting any one. With this she now entered.

Ann Veronica found herself in the presence of the most disconcerting fact in human experience, the kindness of people you believe to be thoroughly wrong. She took the tray with both hands, gulped, and gave way to tears.

Her aunt leaped unhappily to the thought of penitence.

"My dear," she began, with an affectionate hand on Ann Veronica's shoulder, "I do SO wish you would realize how it grieves your father."

Ann Veronica flung away from her hand, and the pepper-pot on the tray upset, sending a puff of pepper into the air and instantly filling them both with an intense desire to sneeze.

"I don't think you see," she replied, with tears on her cheeks, and her brows knitting, "how it shames and, ah!--disgraces me--AH TISHU!"

She put down the tray with a concussion on her toilet-table.

"But, dear, think! He is your father. SHOOH!"

"That's no reason," said Ann Veronica, speaking through her handkerchief and stopping abruptly.

Niece and aunt regarded each other for a moment over their pocket-handkerchiefs with watery but antagonistic eyes, each far too profoundly moved to see the absurdity of the position.

"I hope," said Miss Stanley, with dignity, and turned doorward with features in civil warfare. "Better state of mind," she gasped....

Ann Veronica stood in the twilight room staring at the door that had slammed upon her aunt, her pocket-handkerchief rolled tightly in her hand. Her soul was full of the sense of disaster. She had made her first fight for dignity and freedom as a grown-up and independent Person, and this was how the universe had treated her. It had neither succumbed to her nor wrathfully overwhelmed her. It had thrust her back with an undignified scuffle, with vulgar comedy, with an unendurable, scornful grin.

"By God!" said Ann Veronica for the first time in her life. "But I will!  
I will!"