

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PENITENT

Part 1

Spring had held back that year until the dawn of May, and then spring and summer came with a rush together. Two days after this conversation between Manning and Ann Veronica, Capes came into the laboratory at lunch-time and found her alone there standing by the open window, and not even pretending to be doing anything.

He came in with his hands in his trousers pockets and a general air of depression in his bearing. He was engaged in detesting Manning and himself in almost equal measure. His face brightened at the sight of her, and he came toward her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Ann Veronica, and stared over her shoulder out of the window.

"So am I.... Lassitude?"

"I suppose so."

"I can't work."

"Nor I," said Ann Veronica.

Pause.

"It's the spring," he said. "It's the warming up of the year, the coming of the light mornings, the way in which everything begins to run about and begin new things. Work becomes distasteful; one thinks of holidays. This year--I've got it badly. I want to get away. I've never wanted to get away so much."

"Where do you go?"

"Oh!--Alps."

"Climbing?"

"Yes."

"That's rather a fine sort of holiday!"

He made no answer for three or four seconds.

"Yes," he said, "I want to get away. I feel at moments as though I could bolt for it.... Silly, isn't it? Undisciplined."

He went to the window and fidgeted with the blind, looking out to where the tree-tops of Regent's Park showed distantly over the houses. He turned round toward her and found her looking at him and standing very still.

"It's the stir of spring," he said.

"I believe it is."

She glanced out of the window, and the distant trees were a froth of hard spring green and almond blossom. She formed a wild resolution, and, lest she should waver from it, she set about at once to realize it.

"I've broken off my engagement," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone, and found her heart thumping in her neck. He moved slightly, and she went on, with a slight catching of her breath: "It's a bother and disturbance, but you see--" She had to go through with it now, because she could think of nothing but her preconceived words. Her voice was weak and flat.

"I've fallen in love."

He never helped her by a sound.

"I--I didn't love the man I was engaged to," she said. She met his eyes for a moment, and could not interpret their expression. They struck her as cold and indifferent.

Her heart failed her and her resolution became water. She remained standing stiffly, unable even to move. She could not look at him through an interval that seemed to her a vast gulf of time. But she felt his lax figure become rigid.

At last his voice came to release her tension.

"I thought you weren't keeping up to the mark. You--It's jolly of you to confide in me. Still--" Then, with incredible and obviously deliberate stupidity, and a voice as flat as her own, he asked, "Who is the man?"

Her spirit raged within her at the dumbness, the paralysis that had fallen upon her. Grace, confidence, the power of movement even, seemed gone from her. A fever of shame ran through her being. Horrible doubts assailed her. She sat down awkwardly and helplessly on one of the little stools by her table and covered her face with her hands.

"Can't you SEE how things are?" she said.

Part 2

Before Capes could answer her in any way the door at the end of the laboratory opened noisily and Miss Klegg appeared. She went to her own table and sat down. At the sound of the door Ann Veronica uncovered a tearless face, and with one swift movement assumed a conversational attitude. Things hung for a moment in an awkward silence.

"You see," said Ann Veronica, staring before her at the window-sash, "that's the form my question takes at the present time."

Capes had not quite the same power of recovery. He stood with his hands in his pockets looking at Miss Klegg's back. His face was white. "It's--it's a difficult question." He appeared to be paralyzed by abstruse acoustic calculations. Then, very awkwardly, he took a stool and placed it at the end of Ann Veronica's table, and sat down. He glanced at Miss Klegg again, and spoke quickly and furtively, with eager eyes on Ann Veronica's face.

"I had a faint idea once that things were as you say they are, but the affair of the ring--of the unexpected ring--puzzled me. Wish SHE"--he indicated Miss Klegg's back with a nod--"was at the bottom of the sea.... I would like to talk to you about this--soon. If you don't think it would be a social outrage, perhaps I might walk with you to your railway station."

"I will wait," said Ann Veronica, still not looking at him, "and we will go into Regent's Park. No--you shall come with me to Waterloo."

"Right!" he said, and hesitated, and then got up and went into the preparation-room.

Part 3

For a time they walked in silence through the back streets that lead southward from the College. Capes bore a face of infinite perplexity.

"The thing I feel most disposed to say, Miss Stanley," he began at last, "is that this is very sudden."

"It's been coming on since first I came into the laboratory."

"What do you want?" he asked, bluntly.

"You!" said Ann Veronica.

The sense of publicity, of people coming and going about them, kept them both unemotional. And neither had any of that theatricality which demands gestures and facial expression.

"I suppose you know I like you tremendously?" he pursued.

"You told me that in the Zoological Gardens."

She found her muscles a-tremble. But there was nothing in her bearing that a passer-by would have noted, to tell of the excitement that possessed her.

"I"--he seemed to have a difficulty with the word--"I love you. I've told you that practically already. But I can give it its name now. You needn't be in any doubt about it. I tell you that because it puts us on a footing...."

They went on for a time without another word.

"But don't you know about me?" he said at last.

"Something. Not much."

"I'm a married man. And my wife won't live with me for reasons that I think most women would consider sound.... Or I should have made love to you long ago."

There came a silence again.

"I don't care," said Ann Veronica.

"But if you knew anything of that--"

"I did. It doesn't matter."

"Why did you tell me? I thought--I thought we were going to be friends."

He was suddenly resentful. He seemed to charge her with the ruin of their situation. "Why on earth did you TELL me?" he cried.

"I couldn't help it. It was an impulse. I HAD to."

"But it changes things. I thought you understood."

"I had to," she repeated. "I was sick of the make-believe. I don't care! I'm glad I did. I'm glad I did."

"Look here!" said Capes, "what on earth do you want? What do you think we can do? Don't you know what men are, and what life is?--to come to me and talk to me like this!"

"I know--something, anyhow. But I don't care; I haven't a spark of shame. I don't see any good in life if it hasn't got you in it. I wanted you to know. And now you know. And the fences are down for good. You can't look me in the eyes and say you don't care for me."

"I've told you," he said.

"Very well," said Ann Veronica, with an air of concluding the discussion.

They walked side by side for a time.

"In that laboratory one gets to disregard these passions," began Capes.

"Men are curious animals, with a trick of falling in love readily with girls about your age. One has to train one's self not to. I've accustomed myself to think of you--as if you were like every other girl who works at the schools--as something quite outside these possibilities. If only out of loyalty to co-education one has to do that. Apart from everything else, this meeting of ours is a breach of a good rule."

"Rules are for every day," said Ann Veronica. "This is not every day. This is something above all rules."

"For you."

"Not for you?"

"No. No; I'm going to stick to the rules.... It's odd, but nothing but cliché seems to meet this case. You've placed me in a very

exceptional position, Miss Stanley." The note of his own voice exasperated him. "Oh, damn!" he said.

She made no answer, and for a time he debated some problems with himself.

"No!" he said aloud at last.

"The plain common-sense of the case," he said, "is that we can't possibly be lovers in the ordinary sense. That, I think, is manifest. You know, I've done no work at all this afternoon. I've been smoking cigarettes in the preparation-room and thinking this out. We can't be lovers in the ordinary sense, but we can be great and intimate friends."

"We are," said Ann Veronica.

"You've interested me enormously...."

He paused with a sense of ineptitude. "I want to be your friend," he said. "I said that at the Zoo, and I mean it. Let us be friends--as near and close as friends can be."

Ann Veronica gave him a pallid profile.

"What is the good of pretending?" she said.

"We don't pretend."

"We do. Love is one thing and friendship quite another. Because I'm younger than you.... I've got imagination.... I know what I am talking about. Mr. Capes, do you think... do you think I don't know the meaning of love?"

Part 4

Capes made no answer for a time.

"My mind is full of confused stuff," he said at length. "I've been thinking--all the afternoon. Oh, and weeks and months of thought and feeling there are bottled up too.... I feel a mixture of beast and uncle. I feel like a fraudulent trustee. Every rule is against me--Why did I let you begin this? I might have told--"

"I don't see that you could help--"

"I might have helped--"

"You couldn't."

"I ought to have--all the same.

"I wonder," he said, and went off at a tangent. "You know about my scandalous past?"

"Very little. It doesn't seem to matter. Does it?"

"I think it does. Profoundly."

"How?"

"It prevents our marrying. It forbids--all sorts of things."

"It can't prevent our loving."

"I'm afraid it can't. But, by Jove! it's going to make our loving a fiercely abstract thing."

"You are separated from your wife?"

"Yes, but do you know how?"

"Not exactly."

"Why on earth--? A man ought to be labelled. You see, I'm separated from my wife. But she doesn't and won't divorce me. You don't understand

the fix I am in. And you don't know what led to our separation. And, in fact, all round the problem you don't know and I don't see how I could possibly have told you before. I wanted to, that day in the Zoo. But I trusted to that ring of yours."

"Poor old ring!" said Ann Veronica.

"I ought never have gone to the Zoo, I suppose. I asked you to go. But a man is a mixed creature.... I wanted the time with you. I wanted it badly."

"Tell me about yourself," said Ann Veronica.

"To begin with, I was--I was in the divorce court. I was--I was a co-respondent. You understand that term?"

Ann Veronica smiled faintly. "A modern girl does understand these terms. She reads novels--and history--and all sorts of things. Did you really doubt if I knew?"

"No. But I don't suppose you can understand."

"I don't see why I shouldn't."

"To know things by name is one thing; to know them by seeing them and feeling them and being them quite another. That is where life takes

advantage of youth. You don't understand."

"Perhaps I don't."

"You don't. That's the difficulty. If I told you the facts, I expect, since you are in love with me, you'd explain the whole business as being very fine and honorable for me--the Higher Morality, or something of that sort.... It wasn't."

"I don't deal very much," said Ann Veronica, "in the Higher Morality, or the Higher Truth, or any of those things."

"Perhaps you don't. But a human being who is young and clean, as you are, is apt to ennoble--or explain away."

"I've had a biological training. I'm a hard young woman."

"Nice clean hardness, anyhow. I think you are hard. There's something--something ADULT about you. I'm talking to you now as though you had all the wisdom and charity in the world. I'm going to tell you things plainly. Plainly. It's best. And then you can go home and think things over before we talk again. I want you to be clear what you're really and truly up to, anyhow."

"I don't mind knowing," said Ann Veronica.

"It's precious unromantic."

"Well, tell me."

"I married pretty young," said Capes. "I've got--I have to tell you this to make myself clear--a streak of ardent animal in my composition. I married--I married a woman whom I still think one of the most beautiful persons in the world. She is a year or so older than I am, and she is, well, of a very serene and proud and dignified temperament. If you met her you would, I am certain, think her as fine as I do. She has never done a really ignoble thing that I know of--never. I met her when we were both very young, as young as you are. I loved her and made love to her, and I don't think she quite loved me back in the same way."

He paused for a time. Ann Veronica said nothing.

"These are the sort of things that aren't supposed to happen. They leave them out of novels--these incompatibilities. Young people ignore them until they find themselves up against them. My wife doesn't understand, doesn't understand now. She despises me, I suppose.... We married, and for a time we were happy. She was fine and tender. I worshipped her and subdued myself."

He left off abruptly. "Do you understand what I am talking about? It's no good if you don't."

"I think so," said Ann Veronica, and colored. "In fact, yes, I do."

"Do you think of these things--these matters--as belonging to our Higher Nature or our Lower?"

"I don't deal in Higher Things, I tell you," said Ann Veronica, "or Lower, for the matter of that. I don't classify." She hesitated. "Flesh and flowers are all alike to me."

"That's the comfort of you. Well, after a time there came a fever in my blood. Don't think it was anything better than fever--or a bit beautiful. It wasn't. Quite soon, after we were married--it was just within a year--I formed a friendship with the wife of a friend, a woman eight years older than myself.... It wasn't anything splendid, you know. It was just a shabby, stupid, furtive business that began between us. Like stealing. We dressed it in a little music.... I want you to understand clearly that I was indebted to the man in many small ways. I was mean to him.... It was the gratification of an immense necessity. We were two people with a craving. We felt like thieves. We WERE thieves.... We LIKED each other well enough. Well, my friend found us out, and would give no quarter. He divorced her. How do you like the story?"

"Go on," said Ann Veronica, a little hoarsely, "tell me all of it."

"My wife was astounded--wounded beyond measure. She thought me--filthy.

All her pride raged at me. One particularly humiliating thing came out--humiliating for me. There was a second co-respondent. I hadn't heard of him before the trial. I don't know why that should be so acutely humiliating. There's no logic in these things. It was."

"Poor you!" said Ann Veronica.

"My wife refused absolutely to have anything more to do with me. She could hardly speak to me; she insisted relentlessly upon a separation. She had money of her own--much more than I have--and there was no need to squabble about that. She has given herself up to social work."

"Well--"

"That's all. Practically all. And yet--Wait a little, you'd better have every bit of it. One doesn't go about with these passions allayed simply because they have made wreckage and a scandal. There one is! The same stuff still! One has a craving in one's blood, a craving roused, cut off from its redeeming and guiding emotional side. A man has more freedom to do evil than a woman. Irregularly, in a quite inglorious and unromantic way, you know, I am a vicious man. That's--that's my private life. Until the last few months. It isn't what I have been but what I am. I haven't taken much account of it until now. My honor has been in my scientific work and public discussion and the things I write. Lots of us are like that. But, you see, I'm smirched. For the sort of love-making you think about. I've muddled all this business. I've had my time and lost my

chances. I'm damaged goods. And you're as clean as fire. You come with those clear eyes of yours, as valiant as an angel...."

He stopped abruptly.

"Well?" she said.

"That's all."

"It's so strange to think of you--troubled by such things. I didn't think--I don't know what I thought. Suddenly all this makes you human. Makes you real."

"But don't you see how I must stand to you? Don't you see how it bars us from being lovers--You can't--at first. You must think it over. It's all outside the world of your experience."

"I don't think it makes a rap of difference, except for one thing. I love you more. I've wanted you--always. I didn't dream, not even in my wildest dreaming, that--you might have any need of me."

He made a little noise in his throat as if something had cried out within him, and for a time they were both too full for speech.

They were going up the slope into Waterloo Station.

"You go home and think of all this," he said, "and talk about it to-morrow. Don't, don't say anything now, not anything. As for loving you, I do. I do--with all my heart. It's no good hiding it any more. I could never have talked to you like this, forgetting everything that parts us, forgetting even your age, if I did not love you utterly. If I were a clean, free man--We'll have to talk of all these things. Thank goodness there's plenty of opportunity! And we two can talk. Anyhow, now you've begun it, there's nothing to keep us in all this from being the best friends in the world. And talking of every conceivable thing. Is there?"

"Nothing," said Ann Veronica, with a radiant face.

"Before this there was a sort of restraint--a make-believe. It's gone."

"It's gone."

"Friendship and love being separate things. And that confounded engagement!"

"Gone!"

They came upon a platform, and stood before her compartment.

He took her hand and looked into her eyes and spoke, divided against himself, in a voice that was forced and insincere.

"I shall be very glad to have you for a friend," he said, "loving friend. I had never dreamed of such a friend as you."

She smiled, sure of herself beyond any pretending, into his troubled eyes. Hadn't they settled that already?

"I want you as a friend," he persisted, almost as if he disputed something.

Part 5

The next morning she waited in the laboratory at the lunch-hour in the reasonable certainty that he would come to her.

"Well, you have thought it over?" he said, sitting down beside her.

"I've been thinking of you all night," she answered.

"Well?"

"I don't care a rap for all these things."

He said nothing for a space.

"I don't see there's any getting away from the fact that you and I love each other," he said, slowly. "So far you've got me and I you....

You've got me. I'm like a creature just wakened up. My eyes are open to you. I keep on thinking of you. I keep on thinking of little details and aspects of your voice, your eyes, the way you walk, the way your hair goes back from the side of your forehead. I believe I have always been in love with you. Always. Before ever I knew you."

She sat motionless, with her hand tightening over the edge of the table, and he, too, said no more. She began to tremble violently.

He stood up abruptly and went to the window.

"We have," he said, "to be the utmost friends."

She stood up and held her arms toward him. "I want you to kiss me," she said.

He gripped the window-sill behind him.

"If I do," he said.... "No! I want to do without that. I want to do without that for a time. I want to give you time to think. I am a man--of a sort of experience. You are a girl with very little. Just sit down on that stool again and let's talk of this in cold blood. People of

your sort--I don't want the instincts to--to rush our situation. Are you sure what it is you want of me?"

"I want you. I want you to be my lover. I want to give myself to you. I want to be whatever I can to you." She paused for a moment. "Is that plain?" she asked.

"If I didn't love you better than myself," said Capes, "I wouldn't fence like this with you.

"I am convinced you haven't thought this out," he went on. "You do not know what such a relation means. We are in love. Our heads swim with the thought of being together. But what can we do? Here am I, fixed to respectability and this laboratory; you're living at home. It means... just furtive meetings."

"I don't care how we meet," she said.

"It will spoil your life."

"It will make it. I want you. I am clear I want you. You are different from all the world for me. You can think all round me. You are the one person I can understand and feel--feel right with. I don't idealize you. Don't imagine that. It isn't because you're good, but because I may be rotten bad; and there's something--something living and understanding in you. Something that is born anew each time we meet, and pines when

we are separated. You see, I'm selfish. I'm rather scornful. I think too much about myself. You're the only person I've really given good, straight, unselfish thought to. I'm making a mess of my life--unless you come in and take it. I am. In you--if you can love me--there is salvation. Salvation. I know what I am doing better than you do. Think--think of that engagement!"

Their talk had come to eloquent silences that contradicted all he had to say.

She stood up before him, smiling faintly.

"I think we've exhausted this discussion," she said.

"I think we have," he answered, gravely, and took her in his arms, and smoothed her hair from her forehead, and very tenderly kissed her lips.

Part 6

They spent the next Sunday in Richmond Park, and mingled the happy sensation of being together uninterrupted through the long sunshine of a summer's day with the ample discussion of their position. "This has all the clean freshness of spring and youth," said Capes; "it is love

with the down on; it is like the glitter of dew in the sunlight to be lovers such as we are, with no more than one warm kiss between us. I love everything to-day, and all of you, but I love this, this--this innocence upon us most of all.

"You can't imagine," he said, "what a beastly thing a furtive love affair can be.

"This isn't furtive," said Ann Veronica.

"Not a bit of it. And we won't make it so.... We mustn't make it so."

They loitered under trees, they sat on mossy banks they gossiped on friendly benches, they came back to lunch at the "Star and Garter," and talked their afternoon away in the garden that looks out upon the crescent of the river. They had a universe to talk about--two universes.

"What are we going to do?" said Capes, with his eyes on the broad distances beyond the ribbon of the river.

"I will do whatever you want," said Ann Veronica.

"My first love was all blundering," said Capes.

He thought for a moment, and went on: "Love is something that has to be taken care of. One has to be so careful.... It's a beautiful plant,

but a tender one.... I didn't know. I've a dread of love dropping its petals, becoming mean and ugly. How can I tell you all I feel? I love you beyond measure. And I'm afraid.... I'm anxious, joyfully anxious, like a man when he has found a treasure."

"YOU know," said Ann Veronica. "I just came to you and put myself in your hands."

"That's why, in a way, I'm prudish. I've--dreads. I don't want to tear at you with hot, rough hands."

"As you will, dear lover. But for me it doesn't matter. Nothing is wrong that you do. Nothing. I am quite clear about this. I know exactly what I am doing. I give myself to you."

"God send you may never repent it!" cried Capes.

She put her hand in his to be squeezed.

"You see," he said, "it is doubtful if we can ever marry. Very doubtful. I have been thinking--I will go to my wife again. I will do my utmost. But for a long time, anyhow, we lovers have to be as if we were no more than friends."

He paused. She answered slowly. "That is as you will," she said.

"Why should it matter?" he said.

And then, as she answered nothing, "Seeing that we are lovers."

Part 7

It was rather less than a week after that walk that Capes came and sat down beside Ann Veronica for their customary talk in the lunch hour. He took a handful of almonds and raisins that she held out to him--for both these young people had given up the practice of going out for luncheon--and kept her hand for a moment to kiss her finger-tips. He did not speak for a moment.

"Well?" she said.

"I say!" he said, without any movement. "Let's go."

"Go!" She did not understand him at first, and then her heart began to beat very rapidly.

"Stop this--this humbugging," he explained. "It's like the Picture and the Bust. I can't stand it. Let's go. Go off and live together--until we can marry. Dare you?"

"Do you mean NOW?"

"At the end of the session. It's the only clean way for us. Are you prepared to do it?"

Her hands clenched. "Yes," she said, very faintly. And then: "Of course! Always. It is what I have wanted, what I have meant all along."

She stared before her, trying to keep back a rush of tears.

Capes kept obstinately stiff, and spoke between his teeth.

"There's endless reasons, no doubt, why we shouldn't," he said.

"Endless. It's wrong in the eyes of most people. For many of them it will smirch us forever.... You DO understand?"

"Who cares for most people?" she said, not looking at him.

"I do. It means social isolation--struggle."

"If you dare--I dare," said Ann Veronica. "I was never so clear in all my life as I have been in this business." She lifted steadfast eyes to him. "Dare!" she said. The tears were welling over now, but her voice was steady. "You're not a man for me--not one of a sex, I mean. You're just a particular being with nothing else in the world to class with

you. You are just necessary to life for me. I've never met any one like you. To have you is all important. Nothing else weighs against it. Morals only begin when that is settled. I sha'n't care a rap if we can never marry. I'm not a bit afraid of anything--scandal, difficulty, struggle.... I rather want them. I do want them."

"You'll get them," he said. "This means a plunge."

"Are you afraid?"

"Only for you! Most of my income will vanish. Even unbelieving biological demonstrators must respect decorum; and besides, you see--you were a student. We shall have--hardly any money."

"I don't care."

"Hardship and danger."

"With you!"

"And as for your people?"

"They don't count. That is the dreadful truth. This--all this swamps them. They don't count, and I don't care."

Capes suddenly abandoned his attitude of meditative restraint. "By

Jove!" he broke out, "one tries to take a serious, sober view. I don't quite know why. But this is a great lark, Ann Veronica! This turns life into a glorious adventure!"

"Ah!" she cried in triumph.

"I shall have to give up biology, anyhow. I've always had a sneaking desire for the writing-trade. That is what I must do. I can."

"Of course you can."

"And biology was beginning to bore me a bit. One research is very like another.... Latterly I've been doing things.... Creative work appeals to me wonderfully. Things seem to come rather easily.... But that, and that sort of thing, is just a day-dream. For a time I must do journalism and work hard.... What isn't a day-dream is this: that you and I are going to put an end to flummery--and go!"

"Go!" said Ann Veronica, clenching her hands.

"For better or worse."

"For richer or poorer."

She could not go on, for she was laughing and crying at the same time.

"We were bound to do this when you kissed me," she sobbed through

her tears. "We have been all this time--Only your queer code of honor--Honor! Once you begin with love you have to see it through."