

## CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

### THE LAST DAYS AT HOME

#### Part 1

They decided to go to Switzerland at the session's end. "We'll clean up everything tidy," said Capes....

For her pride's sake, and to save herself from long day-dreams and an unappeasable longing for her lover, Ann Veronica worked hard at her biology during those closing weeks. She was, as Capes had said, a hard young woman. She was keenly resolved to do well in the school examination, and not to be drowned in the seas of emotion that threatened to submerge her intellectual being.

Nevertheless, she could not prevent a rising excitement as the dawn of the new life drew near to her--a thrilling of the nerves, a secret and delicious exaltation above the common circumstances of existence. Sometimes her straying mind would become astonishingly active--embroidering bright and decorative things that she could say to Capes; sometimes it passed into a state of passive acquiescence, into a radiant, formless, golden joy. She was aware of people--her aunt, her father, her fellow-students, friends, and neighbors--moving about

outside this glowing secret, very much as an actor is aware of the dim audience beyond the barrier of the footlights. They might applaud, or object, or interfere, but the drama was her very own. She was going through with that, anyhow.

The feeling of last days grew stronger with her as their number diminished. She went about the familiar home with a clearer and clearer sense of inevitable conclusions. She became exceptionally considerate and affectionate with her father and aunt, and more and more concerned about the coming catastrophe that she was about to precipitate upon them. Her aunt had a once exasperating habit of interrupting her work with demands for small household services, but now Ann Veronica rendered them with a queer readiness of anticipatory propitiation. She was greatly exercised by the problem of confiding in the Widgetts; they were dears, and she talked away two evenings with Constance without broaching the topic; she made some vague intimations in letters to Miss Miniver that Miss Miniver failed to mark. But she did not bother her head very much about her relations with these sympathizers.

And at length her penultimate day in Morningside Park dawned for her. She got up early, and walked about the garden in the dewy June sunshine and revived her childhood. She was saying good-bye to childhood and home, and her making; she was going out into the great, multitudinous world; this time there would be no returning. She was at the end of girlhood and on the eve of a woman's crowning experience. She visited the corner that had been her own little garden--her forget-me-nots and

candytuft had long since been elbowed into insignificance by weeds; she visited the raspberry-canecan that had sheltered that first love affair with the little boy in velvet, and the greenhouse where she had been wont to read her secret letters. Here was the place behind the shed where she had used to hide from Roddy's persecutions, and here the border of herbaceous perennials under whose stems was fairyland. The back of the house had been the Alps for climbing, and the shrubs in front of it a Terai. The knots and broken pale that made the garden-fence scalable, and gave access to the fields behind, were still to be traced. And here against a wall were the plum-trees. In spite of God and wasps and her father, she had stolen plums; and once because of discovered misdeeds, and once because she had realized that her mother was dead, she had lain on her face in the unmown grass, beneath the elm-trees that came beyond the vegetables, and poured out her soul in weeping.

Remote little Ann Veronica! She would never know the heart of that child again! That child had loved fairy princes with velvet suits and golden locks, and she was in love with a real man named Capes, with little gleams of gold on his cheek and a pleasant voice and firm and shapely hands. She was going to him soon and certainly, going to his strong, embracing arms. She was going through a new world with him side by side. She had been so busy with life that, for a vast gulf of time, as it seemed, she had given no thought to those ancient, imagined things of her childhood. Now, abruptly, they were real again, though very distant, and she had come to say farewell to them across one sundering year.

She was unusually helpful at breakfast, and unselfish about the eggs: and then she went off to catch the train before her father's. She did this to please him. He hated travelling second-class with her--indeed, he never did--but he also disliked travelling in the same train when his daughter was in an inferior class, because of the look of the thing. So he liked to go by a different train. And in the Avenue she had an encounter with Ramage.

It was an odd little encounter, that left vague and dubitable impressions in her mind. She was aware of him--a silk-hatted, shiny-black figure on the opposite side of the Avenue; and then, abruptly and startlingly, he crossed the road and saluted and spoke to her.

"I MUST speak to you," he said. "I can't keep away from you."

She made some inane response. She was struck by a change in his appearance. His eyes looked a little bloodshot to her; his face had lost something of its ruddy freshness.

He began a jerky, broken conversation that lasted until they reached the station, and left her puzzled at its drift and meaning. She quickened her pace, and so did he, talking at her slightly averted ear. She made lumpish and inadequate interruptions rather than replies. At times he seemed to be claiming pity from her; at times he was threatening her

with her check and exposure; at times he was boasting of his inflexible will, and how, in the end, he always got what he wanted. He said that his life was boring and stupid without her. Something or other--she did not catch what--he was damned if he could stand. He was evidently nervous, and very anxious to be impressive; his projecting eyes sought to dominate. The crowning aspect of the incident, for her mind, was the discovery that he and her indiscretion with him no longer mattered very much. Its importance had vanished with her abandonment of compromise. Even her debt to him was a triviality now.

And of course! She had a brilliant idea. It surprised her she hadn't thought of it before! She tried to explain that she was going to pay him forty pounds without fail next week. She said as much to him. She repeated this breathlessly.

"I was glad you did not send it back again," he said.

He touched a long-standing sore, and Ann Veronica found herself vainly trying to explain--the inexplicable. "It's because I mean to send it back altogether," she said.

He ignored her protests in order to pursue some impressive line of his own.

"Here we are, living in the same suburb," he began. "We have to be--modern."

Her heart leaped within her as she caught that phrase. That knot also would be cut. Modern, indeed! She was going to be as primordial as chipped flint.

## Part 2

In the late afternoon, as Ann Veronica was gathering flowers for the dinner-table, her father came strolling across the lawn toward her with an affectation of great deliberation.

"I want to speak to you about a little thing, Vee," said Mr. Stanley.

Ann Veronica's tense nerves started, and she stood still with her eyes upon him, wondering what it might be that impended.

"You were talking to that fellow Ramage to-day--in the Avenue. Walking to the station with him."

So that was it!

"He came and talked to me."

"Ye--e--es." Mr. Stanley considered. "Well, I don't want you to talk to him," he said, very firmly.

Ann Veronica paused before she answered. "Don't you think I ought to?" she asked, very submissively.

"No." Mr. Stanley coughed and faced toward the house. "He is not--I don't like him. I think it inadvisable--I don't want an intimacy to spring up between you and a man of that type."

Ann Veronica reflected. "I HAVE--had one or two talks with him, daddy."

"Don't let there be any more. I--In fact, I dislike him extremely."

"Suppose he comes and talks to me?"

"A girl can always keep a man at a distance if she cares to do it. She--She can snub him."

Ann Veronica picked a cornflower.

"I wouldn't make this objection," Mr. Stanley went on, "but there are things--there are stories about Ramage. He's--He lives in a world of possibilities outside your imagination. His treatment of his wife is most unsatisfactory. Most unsatisfactory. A bad man, in fact. A dissipated, loose-living man."

"I'll try not to see him again," said Ann Veronica. "I didn't know you objected to him, daddy."

"Strongly," said Mr. Stanley, "very strongly."

The conversation hung. Ann Veronica wondered what her father would do if she were to tell him the full story of her relations with Ramage.

"A man like that taints a girl by looking at her, by his mere conversation." He adjusted his glasses on his nose. There was another little thing he had to say. "One has to be so careful of one's friends and acquaintances," he remarked, by way of transition. "They mould one insensibly." His voice assumed an easy detached tone. "I suppose, Vee, you don't see much of those Widgetts now?"

"I go in and talk to Constance sometimes."

"Do you?"

"We were great friends at school."

"No doubt.... Still--I don't know whether I quite like--Something ramshackle about those people, Vee. While I am talking about your friends, I feel--I think you ought to know how I look at it." His voice conveyed studied moderation. "I don't mind, of course, your seeing



her sometimes, still there are differences--differences in social atmospheres. One gets drawn into things. Before you know where you are you find yourself in a complication. I don't want to influence you unduly--But--They're artistic people, Vee. That's the fact about them. We're different."

"I suppose we are," said Vee, rearranging the flowers in her hand.

"Friendships that are all very well between school-girls don't always go on into later life. It's--it's a social difference."

"I like Constance very much."

"No doubt. Still, one has to be reasonable. As you admitted to me--one has to square one's self with the world. You don't know. With people of that sort all sorts of things may happen. We don't want things to happen."

Ann Veronica made no answer.

A vague desire to justify himself ruffled her father. "I may seem unduly--anxious. I can't forget about your sister. It's that has always made me--SHE, you know, was drawn into a set--didn't discriminate Private theatricals."

Ann Veronica remained anxious to hear more of her sister's story from

her father's point of view, but he did not go on. Even so much allusion as this to that family shadow, she felt, was an immense recognition of her ripening years. She glanced at him. He stood a little anxious and fussy, bothered by the responsibility of her, entirely careless of what her life was or was likely to be, ignoring her thoughts and feelings, ignorant of every fact of importance in her life, explaining everything he could not understand in her as nonsense and perversity, concerned only with a terror of bothers and undesirable situations. "We don't want things to happen!" Never had he shown his daughter so clearly that the womenkind he was persuaded he had to protect and control could please him in one way, and in one way only, and that was by doing nothing except the punctual domestic duties and being nothing except restful appearances. He had quite enough to see to and worry about in the City without their doing things. He had no use for Ann Veronica; he had never had a use for her since she had been too old to sit upon his knee. Nothing but the constraint of social usage now linked him to her. And the less "anything" happened the better. The less she lived, in fact, the better. These realizations rushed into Ann Veronica's mind and hardened her heart against him. She spoke slowly. "I may not see the Widgetts for some little time, father," she said. "I don't think I shall."

"Some little tiff?"

"No; but I don't think I shall see them."

Suppose she were to add, "I am going away!"

"I'm glad to hear you say it," said Mr. Stanley, and was so evidently pleased that Ann Veronica's heart smote her.

"I am very glad to hear you say it," he repeated, and refrained from further inquiry. "I think we are growing sensible," he said. "I think you are getting to understand me better."

He hesitated, and walked away from her toward the house. Her eyes followed him. The curve of his shoulders, the very angle of his feet, expressed relief at her apparent obedience. "Thank goodness!" said that retreating aspect, "that's said and over. Vee's all right. There's nothing happened at all!" She didn't mean, he concluded, to give him any more trouble ever, and he was free to begin a fresh chromatic novel--he had just finished the Blue Lagoon, which he thought very beautiful and tender and absolutely irrelevant to Morningside Park--or work in peace at his microtome without bothering about her in the least.

The immense disillusionment that awaited him! The devastating disillusionment! She had a vague desire to run after him, to state her case to him, to wring some understanding from him of what life was to her. She felt a cheat and a sneak to his unsuspecting retreating back.

"But what can one do?" asked Ann Veronica.

### Part 3

She dressed carefully for dinner in a black dress that her father liked, and that made her look serious and responsible. Dinner was quite uneventful. Her father read a draft prospectus warily, and her aunt dropped fragments of her projects for managing while the cook had a holiday. After dinner Ann Veronica went into the drawing-room with Miss Stanley, and her father went up to his den for his pipe and pensive petrography. Later in the evening she heard him whistling, poor man!

She felt very restless and excited. She refused coffee, though she knew that anyhow she was doomed to a sleepless night. She took up one of her father's novels and put it down again, fretted up to her own room for some work, sat on her bed and meditated upon the room that she was now really abandoning forever, and returned at length with a stocking to darn. Her aunt was making herself cuffs out of little slips of insertion under the newly lit lamp.

Ann Veronica sat down in the other arm-chair and darned badly for a minute or so. Then she looked at her aunt, and traced with a curious eye the careful arrangement of her hair, her sharp nose, the little drooping lines of mouth and chin and cheek.

Her thought spoke aloud. "Were you ever in love, aunt?" she asked.

Her aunt glanced up startled, and then sat very still, with hands that had ceased to work. "What makes you ask such a question, Vee?" she said.

"I wondered."

Her aunt answered in a low voice: "I was engaged to him, dear, for seven years, and then he died."

Ann Veronica made a sympathetic little murmur.

"He was in holy orders, and we were to have been married when he got a living. He was a Wiltshire Edmondshaw, a very old family."

She sat very still.

Ann Veronica hesitated with a question that had leaped up in her mind, and that she felt was cruel. "Are you sorry you waited, aunt?" she said.

Her aunt was a long time before she answered. "His stipend forbade it," she said, and seemed to fall into a train of thought. "It would have been rash and unwise," she said at the end of a meditation. "What he had was altogether insufficient."

Ann Veronica looked at the mildly pensive gray eyes and the comfortable,

rather refined face with a penetrating curiosity. Presently her aunt sighed deeply and looked at the clock. "Time for my Patience," she said. She got up, put the neat cuffs she had made into her work-basket, and went to the bureau for the little cards in the morocco case. Ann Veronica jumped up to get her the card-table. "I haven't seen the new Patience, dear," she said. "May I sit beside you?"

"It's a very difficult one," said her aunt. "Perhaps you will help me shuffle?"

Ann Veronica did, and also assisted nimbly with the arrangements of the rows of eight with which the struggle began. Then she sat watching the play, sometimes offering a helpful suggestion, sometimes letting her attention wander to the smoothly shining arms she had folded across her knees just below the edge of the table. She was feeling extraordinarily well that night, so that the sense of her body was a deep delight, a realization of a gentle warmth and strength and elastic firmness. Then she glanced at the cards again, over which her aunt's many-ringed hand played, and then at the rather weak, rather plump face that surveyed its operations.

It came to Ann Veronica that life was wonderful beyond measure. It seemed incredible that she and her aunt were, indeed, creatures of the same blood, only by a birth or so different beings, and part of that same broad interlacing stream of human life that has invented the fauns and nymphs, Astarte, Aphrodite, Freya, and all the twining beauty of

the gods. The love-songs of all the ages were singing in her blood, the scent of night stock from the garden filled the air, and the moths that beat upon the closed frames of the window next the lamp set her mind dreaming of kisses in the dusk. Yet her aunt, with a ringed hand flitting to her lips and a puzzled, worried look in her eyes, deaf to all this riot of warmth and flitting desire, was playing Patience--playing Patience, as if Dionysius and her curate had died together. A faint buzz above the ceiling witnessed that petrography, too, was active. Gray and tranquil world! Amazing, passionless world! A world in which days without meaning, days in which "we don't want things to happen" followed days without meaning--until the last thing happened, the ultimate, unavoidable, coarse, "disagreeable." It was her last evening in that wrapped life against which she had rebelled. Warm reality was now so near her she could hear it beating in her ears. Away in London even now Capes was packing and preparing; Capes, the magic man whose touch turned one to trembling fire. What was he doing? What was he thinking? It was less than a day now, less than twenty hours. Seventeen hours, sixteen hours. She glanced at the soft-ticking clock with the exposed brass pendulum upon the white marble mantel, and made a rapid calculation. To be exact, it was just sixteen hours and twenty minutes. The slow stars circled on to the moment of their meeting. The softly glittering summer stars! She saw them shining over mountains of snow, over valleys of haze and warm darkness.... There would be no moon.

"I believe after all it's coming out!" said Miss Stanley. "The aces made it easy."

Ann Veronica started from her reverie, sat up in her chair, became attentive. "Look, dear," she said presently, "you can put the ten on the Jack."