

CHAPTER ONE

The Hero

Once upon a time everyone knew that Sawbridgeworth was pronounced Sapsworth, that Daventry was pronounced Danetree, that Cirencester was pronounced Cissiter, that Derby was pronounced Darby, and, on the same principle, that beautiful, remote Happisburgh, at the very furthest corner of Norfolk, was pronounced Hazeborough, and had been since the days of its greatness. When times were swiftly changing, Mr Vernon Happisburgh had been faced with a difficult decision. Should he begin to pronounce himself Happ-is-burg or spell himself Hazeborough?

He decided upon the latter, largely so that there should be no confusion with the Imperial Family that had now fallen on difficult times.

When Isaac Disraeli decided to become a Christian, he took all his family with him, hand in hand. So, necessarily, it was with the name-change in Mr Hazeborough's family, who, however numbered only two: his wife, whose name was Phyllis, and his daughter, whose names were Cressida Hermione Helena. Until a year or two before, there had also been a son, Cressida's older

brother Hugh, but he had been killed within mere months of being conscripted, and within mere weeks of the war's end. The three survivors became Mr, Mrs, and Miss Hazeborough.

Cressida had loved her brother, who, indeed, had been a god among youths, captain of cricket, stand-off half in the second fifteen, and the first to win the open hundred yards three years running. He had been a strong and impressively competitive swimmer, a rider to hounds of more than promise (as the elderly Master had expressed it), and a dab hand with the foils, though not actually Captain of Fencing. He had danced like Vernon Castle (when given the chance).

It was in memory of him, though he had been six years older, that Cressida later took up fencing herself. There were a number of girls who went in for it at Riverdale House. First the class had been taken by Mrs Hobbs, but soon a male instructor had had to be sent for. Cressida had excelled from the first, all the time half-imagining herself to be Hugh; and in the end she had fenced for the school. The team might well have carried all before it if the others had been as good as Cressida. Alas, those very things in which we excel at school are precisely those of least application when we are compelled to drag ourselves away.

At Riverdale House, Cressida's great preoccupations, other than the memory of Hugh, had been poetry, and a dark-haired girl named Vivien, who loved poetry too. Both girls wrote it, read it, and especially read it aloud to one another. In the end Cressida came upon some lines that summed up the situation:—

'The Wily Vivien stole from Arthur's court:
She hated all the knights, and heard in thought
Their lavish comment when her name was named.'

Vivien was the younger by slightly more than a year when the two found one another in the fourth form under Miss Elm, who was not merely silly, as are so many schoolteachers, of all sexes, but simply mental. Vivien was even cleverer than Cressida and seemed likely one day to be even more beautiful. Neither of these considerations stood at all in the way. Indeed, Cressida positively preferred things to be as they were. It seems likely that Cressida would never have encountered the greatest man of his age (some, including the man himself, said, of any age) but for Vivien's enthusiasm and drive in the early stages of the project.

With the consent of the authorities and of Mr and Mrs Hazeborough, Vivien accompanied Cressida to the unveiling of the tablet to Hugh in his school chapel. After Tea, which was dull (the cakes and biscuits, like the partakers, were past their prime), the two slipped back into the high, red-brick chapel and read all the memorials to the great men: poets, generals, secretaries of state, colonial governors, prison governors, governors of the Bank of England.

'Lives of great men oft remind us,' remarked Vivien. Cressida was not used to seeing her in a plain black dress.

'He was only a headmaster,' said Cressida, examining a tablet, large, Latinate, and cracked.

'They also serve who only stand and wait,' Vivien pointed out.

'That's just about all that women *can* do,' said Cressida.

'Nonsense,' said Vivien. 'You're going to do much more.'

'I hope so,' said Cressida, doubtfully but dutifully. 'At least I think I hope so.'

'Of course you hope so,' said Vivien. 'It's much better to be a woman than a man.'

A little later, the elderly verger entered, having heard voices.

'Oh!' he exclaimed when he saw who it was. 'Enjoying yourselves, are you?' He did not know how to make the best of girls.

'Yes, thank you,' said Vivien. 'Very much.'

It would not have been proper for Cressida to reply, seeing what they were there for that day.

They continued their purposeful examination of all the memorials.

The verger stood about.

'Don't you feel cold?' he asked after a bit.

'No,' said Cressida. 'We never feel cold.'

It was a point upon which she and Vivien particularly prided themselves, at least in comparison with some of the silly geese at Riverdale House.

CHAPTER TWO

The Problem

It was unthinkable that Vivien should stay on after Cressida had left.

At their last prize-giving, Vivien had won the prize for Latin (that was how she had had no difficulty with the inscriptions) and Cressida the prize for elocution. At a later phase of the ceremony, Cressida had been called upon to manifest her art, and she had recited 'The Listeners' by Walter de la Mare; 'The Great Lover' by Rupert Brooke; and, more daringly, William Morris's 'I know a little garden close'. She was loudly applauded by the entire audience, tightly packed in the hot room and with many of the males in morning dress with spats. She seemed to appeal more than either the scene from a well-known play by Molière which had preceded her or the girl who played Bach on the violin after her. Then came a surprise. At the very end, the headmistress, Miss Grindleford, rose yet again and said that while Riverdale House did not regularly present a Good Conduct Prize but only when quite exceptional merit seemed to compel, yet that year the staff felt there was such merit, and that

it had been displayed by Cressida Hazeborough. So as well as a *Popular Reciter*, bound in red, Cressida received a *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antonius* bound in green, and translated idiomatically by a Clerk in Holy Orders. The head girl, Mary Daimler, looked sour, without being particularly successful in concealing the fact; and Cressida was considerably at a loss, then and thereafter, as to why she had been picked on. Of course her behaviour had been perfectly reasonable, because only silly geese flaunt themselves or make any kind of overt challenge. Vivien, who had sat near the back in her sixth-form dress, pointed out later that there is little known correlation between conduct and reward anywhere in this world, though it may be different in the next: 'Like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,' she said. Vivien's parents could not attend because they were in the Caribbean. This was not for pleasure, but because Vivien's father, Sir Neville, held an appointment there.

Both Cressida and Vivien were perfectly clever enough to go on to a university and, having arrived there, to excel; but there was no question of that for either of them. Cressida, indeed, was intended (in so far as intention entered into it) simply to return to Rutland and there await picking on for matrimony. Vivien, on the other hand, was positively not wanted in the West Indies. Her mother pointed out that her father and herself would soon be back in any case, because they always were, and suggested that in the meantime Vivien move into her aunt's house near Gloucester Road and perhaps look for a job of some kind. Her mother added that she had already written on the subject to Aunt Agnes (who was her husband's sister, not her own). She did not say whether or not Aunt Agnes had replied in any way.

Cressida and Vivien had discussed the whole matter before the end of the term; though not long enough before for complete convenience. The casual attitude of their respective parents strongly suggested that they would have preferred their daughters to remain safely at school for all time, even though they, the parents, had to pay for it. Vivien too had an elder brother, Paul, but he had already vanished into the Palestine Police, where he led a life of excitement.

The best they could think of was that Cressida should move in on Aunt Agnes also.

'Would your parents mind if you didn't go straight back home?'

'I don't think so,' said Cressida. 'But wouldn't Aunt Agnes mind?'

'Aunt Agnes is a good sport in her own way,' replied Vivien.

'What way is that?'

'Well, to start with, she's divorced.'

'Daddy wouldn't like that!'

'My daddy didn't like it either. It nearly finished his career. That's supposed to be why he's stuck away where he is.'

'I've never known anyone who's been divorced,' said Cressida.

'You'll meet plenty more when you know Aunt Agnes.'

'Really?'

'The house is always full of them. They're the sort of people Aunt Agnes likes best. She told me so.'

'She can't have *told* you a thing like that!'

'Of course, she did. Don't be a goose, Cressida. If Aunt Agnes weren't the type she is, she might make difficulties about taking you in. So thank your stars.'

'I'll have to *ask* Mummy and Daddy,' said Cressida.

'Well, don't say too much. Just tell them that your hostess's brother is a K.C.M.G.'

Vivien bought each of them a banana sundae to settle the matter.

CHAPTER THREE

The New Home

‘Should your aunt still call herself a countess when she’s no longer married to the man who’s the earl? Not that I don’t think she’s wonderful all the same.’

The room provided for Vivien contained a large sofa as well as a bed, and on it Cressida sprawled. In her own room, though there was a bigger bed than Vivien’s, there was no sofa. Cressida had rather expected to be sharing a room. She did not know whether to be glad or sorry about things as they were. At Riverdale House, they had contrived adjoining cubicles, separated only by a cretonne curtain. It was always said that there were many changes in one’s life when one left.

‘Why ever not?’ replied Vivien. ‘Once a countess, always a countess. Not all the water in the wide rough sea can wash the grace from an anointed king.’

‘That’s a bit different. Aunt Agnes hasn’t been anointed.’

‘Who has, nowadays?’ said Vivien. ‘Have a cigarette.’

‘I don’t really like them,’ said Cressida, taking and lighting one all the same.

'These are special. One of Aunt Agnes's friends supplies them. They're Balkan or something. Gaston says they wouldn't kill a kitten.'

'Is Gaston French?'

'Yes, he's at the embassy or somewhere. I don't like him.'

'Have you seen much of him?'

'I've seen him twice.'

'Is that often enough?'

'Too often,' replied Vivien.

Later, Cressida changed into her first really short dress. She had bought it that afternoon in Kensington High Street. Neither Mrs Hazeborough nor her husband liked short dresses. This one had been very cheap, but Cressida felt that it was hard to see why one should pay more when in any case so very little stuff was involved. The dress was mainly a pale pink.

Vivien's dress was scarlet. It had not been bought at the same time. Vivien always wore either red or black when she possibly could, which was most of the time, because her parents were mostly out of the country.

Cressida's figure, however, was more in the fashion than Vivien's.

'We must do something about our hair tomorrow,' said Vivien, eyeing Cressida's figure in her new dress.

'My father hates short hair on women,' said Cressida.

'None the less, this is London, darling,' said Vivien patiently, 'and we are about to meet the cream of society.'

'Really? I hadn't realised.'

'You look fine, Cressida,' said Vivien. 'Really beautiful.'

Cressida let Vivien descend the staircase first.

Gaston apparently was not there. At least, Cressida thought not, but the introductions were exceedingly confusing, as the

two girls had entered after the company had become quite animate, following several drinks. These appeared to be largely cocktails, and there was an actual Negro in a white jacket to shake them up. Cressida's father did not approve of cocktails, and, in fact, she had never consumed one.

'Cocktail, darling?' asked Lady Luce. Cressida accepted at once.

She and Vivien sometimes called one another darling, but the promiscuous use of the endearment by adults was still another thing that Mr Hazeborough quite specifically objected to.

At that moment, Cressida deliberately resolved henceforth to waive every single one of her parents' objections, or very nearly so. It really had become a matter which needed a decision, one way or the other.

There were more men than women. All the men were in dinner jackets, but some of the women struck Cressida as being less well dressed than she and Vivien. This was disillusioning.

Nor could it be said that any of the men was yet making eyes at her, or at Vivien either. Perhaps Lady Luce, Vivien's Aunt Agnes, would not have liked it in either of their cases, Cressida reflected. Perhaps, too, all the men had known Vivien since she was a child.

It continued to be quite easy to go on merely talking to Vivien.

'Is that man really black or is he a white man with black on his face?'

'He's black,' replied Vivien. 'But he's not here all the time.'

'There wouldn't be enough for him to do,' said Cressida.

'Possibly not,' said Vivien. 'I must say that Aunt Agnes might do more to mix us up. That little more and how much it is; that little less and what worlds away.'

But the more Cressida gazed around, the less sure she felt that she wanted to be mixed, least of all artificially.

The disconcerting thing was that these people seemed to have more in common with the people she was accustomed to in Rutland than they had anything distinctive of their own. Even the legendary cocktail had failed, as far as she could tell, to exhilarate. Probably Vivien's Aunt deemed herself too judicious to offer her another one.

A man did speak to her, but in a tone adapted not so much to a friend of his daughter's (supposing he had a daughter) as to a child at the village school. Cressida, fresh from Riverdale House, with all its sophistication, could have snapped at him, though she just managed not to, through the expedient of not speaking at all. So far in life she had found middle-aged men more interesting than young men, in so far as she had met either; but this middle-aged man was an exception. Perhaps he was divorced, and this had saddened him.

Vivien had drifted away and was now talking to a man with white hair and a red face who had even risen to his feet for her benefit.

Dinner, however, really was succulent; unimaginably better than Rutland. Some of the girls had deemed it immodest to think of nothing but food and drink. Vivien, on the other hand, had tended to cite Tolstoy (despite his apelike and toothless appearance): 'People with exceptional talents have exceptional appetites.' It was the only thing by Tolstoy she could remember reading.

Cressida had never encountered such food as this before, and the men on either side of her were so impossible that she was able to do it full justice. The men kept addressing one another

over Cressida's head, though only literally. The wives who were present tended to shout at one another also, Cressida noticed, rather than address the men next to them. Altogether, the noise in the room was tremendous. The conversation, Cressida adumbrated, was full of sound and fury; signifying nothing. Would her own life offer no more than this? So frequently she doubted both life and herself, whatever Vivien might proclaim.

Vivien had been placed by her aunt between two of the younger men. Perhaps both had been brought forward for Vivien's sake. One had dark, wavy hair and a large, pale flower in his buttonhole. Cressida supposed that he looked quite interesting, though Vivien's expression as she listened to him was, as so often, enigmatic.

'If one is at the bar,' Cressida could hear him saying, 'the grind is just murder. One hardly sees one's wife and kids from year's end to year's end.'

Cressida was surprised that he should already be thinking of things like that. But then she might not be the only person of more or less her age to be doubtful about the most that life could possibly offer. She had never before met another such person (Vivien was always a blaze of confidence), but here might be one. Intermittently, she eyed the young man opposite. Of course it was hardly to be expected that Lady Luce should provide two equivalent young men for her, Cressida, who had never been properly invited to the house at all. Even though Lady Luce had been kindness itself to her, she really knew nothing about her, except what Vivien had proffered, which was often distorted, to say the least.

Cressida picked away the last little scraps of fish from the bone. At procedures like this she must learn to be effortlessly

proficient, in case she should one day find herself seated between cabinet ministers or ambassadors. Her two actual neighbours seemed interested mainly in catching fish rather than in eating them.

'If one goes in for medicine,' said Vivien's young man, 'it's simply slavery. One can give almost nothing to one's home-life at all.'

Cressida thought that, of the two careers, the bar would be better for him, owing to the clarity of his diction. At the bar one has to speak in a loud voice for hours at a time, for days on end, sometimes for months and years, as in the Tichborne case. Her father frequently referred to that great legal battle.

'Not until it's too late,' put in the other young man, who had sandy hair, already waning, and very small spectacles, before very small eyes.

'Too late, Jeremy? What do you mean?' asked the first young man, put completely off his theme, and speaking across Vivien.

'A doctor has no time of his own until it's too late to be of any use to him.'

'That's precisely what I was saying, Jeremy. One even thinks of the church, like Alastair. But really one can't quite.'

Cressida failed to hear why that was; because at that moment both her neighbours, having finished their fish course, spoke to her simultaneously.

At a subsequent stage, the late night edition of the evening paper appeared. It was brought to Lady Luce on a salver by a man who had helped with the serving; white, not black.

Lady Luce held the paper before her and glanced at the front page. There was an almost universal hush, lest the oracle might impart.

‘Vittore has dashed off and captured somewhere else,’ imparted Lady Luce conclusively, and as if some announcement simply had to be made.

‘Bloody mountebank!’ exclaimed the man with the white hair and red face. ‘If you’ll excuse the language, Agnes.’

‘He did fight on our side in the war,’ said one of the married women.

‘If you call what he did fighting,’ said another guest, masculine, formless, average.

‘Really, Tomlins,’ said the same married woman. ‘I don’t see how we are in a position to know.’ Presumably she was the man’s wife; presumably this was one couple where there had been no question of a divorce for either party; presumably Tomlins was the husband’s Christian name.

‘Some of us know,’ said another man, quietly, but, as he intended, lethally.

Cressida might have guessed who would settle the matter.

Vivien spoke up. Though she had a clear enough voice, Cressida had not previously heard her during dinner. Perhaps she had not uttered.

‘Virgilio Vittore is the greatest man in the world,’ said Vivien.

All laughed tolerantly.

‘How do you *know*, dear?’ asked Lady Luce.

‘Everyone knows,’ said Vivien. ‘That’s just the trouble.’

‘I’m not sure *I* know,’ said Lady Luce, to ease the tiny tension. She was smiling suitably. Among other things, she conveyed that no one knew what she really knew.

Cressida much regretted that she had no views on the matter, in that she did not at all clearly know who Virgilio Vittore was,

though she too had seen the name every now and then in the newspapers.

The trouble was that, at Cressida's age, one could not take in and concentrate equally upon every topic reported. Cressida had thought it best to seek a convincing grasp upon selected subjects. In due course, she would take up further subjects, perhaps when she had grasped all there was to grasp about the present subjects, so that they had become a little boring. New subjects sometimes even imposed themselves and spread out on their own, as she had already noticed. It seemed likely that one day she would have grasped all that she would wish to grasp, and perhaps be a little bored with everything there was.

In the drawing room, Lady Luce explained to Cressida that, when the men appeared, they were all going to play bridge, so that Cressida might prefer to go up to her room. Cressida did not particularly want to go to her room, but it seemed difficult to demur.

'I forget, Vivien,' said Lady Luce. 'Do you play bridge?'

'No, Aunt Agnes,' said Vivien. 'I haven't the brains.'

'Of course you have, dear,' said an elderly lady, whom the new fashion did not entirely suit. 'Bridge is nothing like as difficult as people say. I managed to teach the man who came to mend the chairs.'

'Beatrice Basingstoke,' remarked another woman, 'managed to teach her Pekingese.'

'I think you *should* learn bridge, Vivien,' said Lady Luce. 'I'll see what can be done about it before your parents come back. In the meantime, perhaps you and Cressida would like to sit in one of the corners and play something else?'

‘Don’t *worry* about us, Aunt Agnes,’ said Vivien. ‘We both know that we still have much to learn.’

The men held back for what Cressida thought a surprisingly long time. The first pot of coffee had had to be consumed lest it grow cold; and now there was anxiety about the second pot. Cressida had always supposed that the conversation of women among women was what it was, owing to her being there, a mere schoolgirl; but in Lady Luce’s house she began to wonder whether it was not much the same whether she was there or not. Certainly the women seemed to take very little notice of her. What was more, she began to doubt also whether the conversation of men among men could be anything much preferable. Most of the adult men she had met so far had merely depressed her. She was relieved to reflect that Vivien seemed to feel the same. Now all the youth of England is on fire, Vivien sometimes remarked sarcastically at suitable moments.

Already, Cressida had very nearly come to the conclusion that divorced people were hardly distinguishable from other people. But that, she suddenly realised, might be precisely the danger; the element in the divorce situation that most disturbed her father. It seemed very probable. Like confirmation, the whole thing was perhaps difficult to grasp until one had been divorced oneself, which Heaven forbid. But to think of having even once to marry one of those men in the dining room! Even though many of them had been married twice, or much more! Not even the youth who ‘really couldn’t quite’ take holy orders appealed to Cressida. In fact, she was pretty sure that he was not even the one she would pick, if pick she had to. And one day the compulsion was going to be difficult to avoid—or to evade. The evening had brought the matter home to Cressida as

nothing before had done. It was marvellous that people managed to grow up, thunderstroke after thunderstroke, without more nervous breakdowns.

There was a woman talking endlessly about the taxes and raising her tone menacingly whenever another attempted to intrude. What the woman said was perfectly true, of course; or at least substantially so. Cressida knew enough to know that, as taxation was one of the most frequent themes at home. The troubles were that the woman was using all the wrong arguments, both silly and offensive ones; and that she would have been such a poor advocate even for the right arguments. The arguer is the greater part of the argument, Cressida reflected.

When even the second pot of coffee was nearly cold, most of the men dribbled back, in many cases tottery and truculent. Cressida assumed that the absentees were queued up around the bathroom.

Lady Luce was too good-natured to refer to the state of the coffee. She simply poured it out, and one of the men passed it round among the other men, as if nothing were wrong. It was too late for a third pot in any case; the servants having gone to bed or gone somewhere else.

'Sorry we hung about, Agnes,' said one of the men. 'We were talking about the All Blacks.'

'If we're going to play bridge,' said Lady Luce, 'we'd better hurry up and organise ourselves.'

'*You* organise us, Agnes!'

There was much conflictual moving of furniture and opening up of objects hitherto closed in on themselves; much sitting down in wrong places and standing up again; much abnegation and some assertion: while all the time missing men were

sauntering back, and ladies flitting out to make themselves even lovelier.

It was easy for Cressida and Vivien to go unnoticed, especially as one of the men, upon his return, had left the door open.

They went up to Vivien's room.

'What are the All Blacks? Are they a jazz band?'

'They are a football team,' said Vivien. 'I was taken to see them once. Rugger. Twickenham.'

'Is all conversation like that when one has left school?'

'All the conversation I've heard,' said Vivien. 'It's a mask, you know.' Vivien was smoking again.

'Then there's something more exciting behind the mask? Is there *really*, Vivien?'

'Of course men talk shop a lot, when we're not there—and most of the time when we are. You mustn't expect the Art of Conversation at Aunt Agnes's bridge evenings.'

'No, of course not,' said Cressida, blushing slightly. 'Were *all* those people divorced?'

'I think so. I don't know any of them very well.'

There was a pause.

Then Cressida asked, 'What exactly are we going to do about it, Vivien? We'll be sucked in, else. Sucked down, more likely.'

'Not me,' said Vivien, stubbing her cigarette, less than half smoked. 'And not you either. We're going to fight. We need a strategy.'

'Send me word,' said Cressida, 'when we've got one.'

'I don't know enough yet. Paul always said you can't work out a proper strategy unless you have the knowledge. But I'm going to learn, Cress. And so are you. We're in this together, and well you know it.'

Cressida considered. The matter had never before been put so plainly to her.

'I suppose so,' she said cautiously. 'I'm not sure where I am.'

'You had your chance when Tiddleywinks proposed to you. Did you want to marry Tiddleywinks? Well, then.'

'Vivien,' Cressida protested. 'It wasn't a proper proposal. I keep telling you. Tiddleywinks simply asked if he might propose when we were both older and when he was fully trained. You must remember that I've known him ever since we were babes.'

'I know one thing, Cressida,' said Vivien. 'When it comes to the opposite sex, I am interested only in a Man, and neither you nor I have ever met one.'

'Give me that man that is not passion's slave,' cited Cressida.

'Or that is,' said Vivien.

They then read their books, while Vivien smoked cigarettes, one after another, none of them completely finished.

'Vivien,' said Cressida, when it was long past midnight. 'I'm going.'

Vivien seemed still absorbed, though much time had passed.

'What book is it?' asked Cressida. They made a particular point of not trying to influence one another about books.

Vivien smiled and held the cover towards Cressida. Cressida read: Castiglione, *The Courtier*.

'Can you understand it?'

'It's not in Italian, idiot, it's translated.'

'Even then. Do you understand it?'

'Some of it,' said Vivien. 'Say not the struggle naught availeth.'

Cressida said goodnight and they kissed.

'No good asking if you want anything,' said Vivien, 'because you won't get it even if you do.'

‘D’you mean they’re still playing bridge?’

‘I should think so. Once they’ve started they don’t stop. When I was a kid, I used to creep down and find them with the curtains drawn and the lights on hours after it was daylight outside. I think that bridge is all Aunt Agnes really cares about.’

‘I suppose she’s very good at it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Vivien. ‘Daddy says she loses every time.’