

The Fourth Generation

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

“So Lucy Allison is going to be married, and to an American—George Trevelyan. I am surprised.” Mrs. Donald lay back in her chair, and gazed thoughtfully at the tips of her little shoes set cosily upon the fender.

“And why surprised?” one of her companions said drowsily, shading her face from the glow of the fire with her long thin hands. “It’s the lot of most weak women.”

Miss Anderson was not married, and her tone implied that it was her own strength of will that had saved her.

“Have you never seen—anything strange about one of the Miss Allison’s?”

Mrs. Donald looked around at the faces shining dimly in the half light of the fire. There was a sudden movement of interest; chairs moved forward. It was the start of the sleeping cat, who is awakened by the flash of a mouse past her, and is all suspense lest it should escape.

“If you haven’t heard anything—I shan’t, of course, tell.”

Mrs. Donald closed her eyes, as if the subject were finished. She was at once overwhelmed by cries and appeals for mercy.

“Mrs. Donald, you wouldn’t be so mean; please tell. We have heard nothing. Oh, I can’t rest till I know.”

Mrs. Donald looked at her friends through half-lifted lids—she was enjoying herself.

“I really can’t; it’s a sort of scandal, and I promised our vicar I would talk no more about my friends’ little secrets.”

Miss Anderson drew herself up.

“Of course, if it’s a secret, we must think of something else. Miss Manfield, *did* you see the extraordinary bonnet Mrs. Dunn had on at Church to-day.

But Miss Manfield was stroking Mrs. Donald’s hand. “You *will* tell *me* all about it, *won’t* you? I always thought there was something funny about Virginia; but never knew what it was. Do tell?”

Mrs. Donald was adamant.

“I’d love to, but it’s rather a bad scandal; and a promise is a promise. My conscience would not allow me.”

There was a dead silence of bitter disappointment. It grew so long that Mrs. Donald became uneasy for fear that interest in her secret was waning.

“Well, if you all promise not to breath a word to any living soul.”

There was a deep sigh of relief, and a gasping, “We promise.”

“You know the Allison’s are Americans.”

There was an impatient “We know; go on” as Mrs. Donald paused a moment to argue with her conscience.

“They came from the South, she, and her father and mother and sister, a year ago; you remember? and settled in England. I don’t think I ought to tell you, any more, after all.”

There was a shriek of dismay. “But you have told us nothing, and it’s nearly bed-time.”

Mrs. Donald looked at the clock, which ticked ominously upon the chimney shelf. She bent forward in her chair, and spoke more quickly. They were all terrified lest the hostess should come in and bid them good-night. They were staying—at Mrs. Allison’s.

“Well, they had a lot of land there, and for generations their ancestors owned slaves. When their second child was born the Allison family suddenly left the South; sold up everything, and went to live for some time in New York; later in Washington. In both places they were rather shunned by society. Then they came to London.”

Miss Anderson drew back into the shadow. “I do hope there is nothing—” she began, but was silenced by a groan of “Oh, do be quiet. Go on, Mrs. Donald.”

“There is certainly *nothing*, or *I* should not be here,” said Mrs. Donald stiffly. “In fact, there’s little more to tell. You know I have lived a long time in America. It was there I knew about the Allison family. My little girl was at the same school the Allison girls went to—of course, years afterwards. She is still a child—but when there she met pupils who remembered Virginia and Lucy, and they told her strange things about one of the two—how different she was from other girls, and, indeed, they inferred the feeling of the school was so much against the Allison children—or one of them—that they had to leave in the end because of it.”

The listening group around the fire became impatient.

“Oh, do tell us what there is to tell about them,” they cried.

“Have none of you noticed anything curious about one of the Allison girls?”

The listeners thought, anxious not to make a mistake.

“I often thought Lucy a bit queer,” some one said, “and wild. Is there insanity in the family?”

Every one laughed.

“Lucy!” Mrs. Donald shrugged her shoulders scornfully. “Have none of you really remarked that Virginia is—half a negro?”

There were cries of “nonsense,” and a ripple laughter.

In the midst of it Mrs. Allison entered the room.

“You seem to be very merry in here,” she said, smiling. “I hope you are enjoying yourselves.”

“Oh, very much, indeed,” answered Mrs. Donald flushing, slightly. “We are having a good chat. Won’t you sit down and join us?”

But Mrs. Allison could not for the moment.

When the door closed after her a chorus of voices rung out.

“But the father and mother are not negro.”

“There’s not a trace in the family.”

“She’s not a bit like one.”

Mrs. Donald pounced on the last speaker.

“Not a bit like! Look at her hair! Look at her face—her lips! Have you no eyes?”

“We never noticed; but now that you draw our attention to it,” one said, “perhaps there are some characteristics. But the father or mother—what do you insinuate?”

“Me! I insinuate nothing.” Mrs. Donald was surprised. “But, between ourselves,” she added confidentially, “I fancy Virginia is not their own child, but some half-caste negro they have adopted for some reason which I should like to know.”

“What a name to call her by—Virginia!” Miss Anderson said, “if they did not want to attract attention to what they evidently wish to hide.”

“Well, there are two explanations of that.”

Mrs. Donald answered. “One American lady told me that she was christened Virginia by Mr. Allison when she was a tiny baby. He was so amused at her appearance—like a little picanniny, with her black curls—but he did not think she would grow up keeping the resemblance. The other explanation is that she was called so before he adopted her—if she is not their own—by her

real parents. Of course, in America the race feeling is so strong against any coloured people that the Allison's were treated rather coldly, I imagine."

"What a shame," some one said. "I'm sure I think Virginia more Spanish-looking than negro, and we must take them as we find them. They are kind, sweet people. I don't believe a word against them."

"Have I said a word against them?" Mrs. Donald said coldly. "I am sure I never meant to. I am very fond of them myself, and know nothing of the truth about Virginia." She spoke regretfully. "I have never even hinted there was anything wrong in it all—though it was strange that they were thrust out American society."

"Thrust out?" Miss Anderson questioned.

"Well, anyway, requested not to call again."

"Not to call again. What do you mean?"

"Didn't they leave New York and Washington, and now haven't they come to London. You ask too many questions," said Mrs. Donald hotly. "I must go and write letters."

"A silly woman," Miss Anderson said, as the door closed.

"A cat!" said some one else.

"I met her the other day in the street, rushing along," said a quiet voice, "and she scarcely stopped to speak. Do you know where she was going? To engage the Morrison's servant, who she had just heard was dismissed without a character. I told her it was a risk, but she did not care. She said there was always something mysterious about the Morrisons, and she meant to find it out from the servant. I fancy the chief mystery is that they are usually not at home when she calls."

"I don't believe a word of her story," said Miss Anderson.

"Nor I," said several voices.

Then the door opened, and Virginia and Lucy entered.

When the two girls seated themselves among the group by the fire, all eyes were turned upon them curiously. Lucy was soon passed over. Small, fair, the ordinary type of a pretty American woman, she attracted no particular notice. But Virginia! For the first time her friends were startled. They were bound to admit Mrs. Donald had some foundation for her story. The beautiful eyes were too black, the nose a trifle broad; the lips over full; the hair—yes, there was no passing over the hair—it was the hair of a black woman, short, fine, curly, black as night, though it set about a face as white as any round the fire.

Miss Anderson shaded her eyes from the fire and looked straight at Virginia.

"We were talking about blacks," she said. "Isn't there a great prejudice against the negroes in America?"

Virginia turned towards her a bright face.

"Well, yes," she admitted, "I suppose you people over here think so; but they are a low type of humanity, they will never have intelligence enough to be anything but the slaves or servants of the white races."

Lucy turned upon her sister rather fiercely.

"You are unfair," she said; "give them time—let them be held equal, men amongst men, and years will return to them that self-respect, power, and intelligence that generations of slavery and oppression have robbed them of."

"They never had such gifts, so did not lose them," Virginia said softly. "I would not sit in the same room with a negro if he had millions and had taken his university degree."

“Virginia!” Lucy cried excitedly, “you are horribly unjust. As for me, all men that God created are the same.”

Miss Anderson thought to herself:

“She knows—Lucy knows—but Virginia does not. How fine of the girl to protect her sister. No American woman would stand up for the negroes without some motive of the kind. She protects her sister, fancying we suspect. She must be an adopted child, and Lucy knows.”

Mrs. Allison and a young man came into the room at the moment. The group laughingly attacked her.

“We are quarrelling over black and white races,” one explained. “We people over here have so little opportunity of seeing anything of our dark brothers, that we want you to tell us about them.”

Mrs. Allison grew white, and glanced at her daughters. They rose to meet her, and went smiling towards the new-comer. She introduced the young man as Mr. Furlong, then began to talk of the possibilities of a drive next morning.

Mr. Furlong was enthusiastic over the idea. “Let me drive some of you” he said. “We could go to Burnham Beeches, and if I may bring my friend, Washington Gibbs, I think you will be interested. He is a nice fellow, so original, and a coming man.”

“An American,” Miss Anderson questioned, “by the name?”

“An American!” Mr. Furlong laughed, and added, with the air of one imparting a delightful surprise, “a coloured gentleman.”

The little group of women clapped their hands, all except Mrs. Allison and Virginia.

“He is writing a book,” Mr. Furlong continued. “Really, he is awfully nice and clever, not a bit like we imagine the negroes to be.”

“Oh, you must bring him,” Lucy cried, delighted. “It’s just what I was saying—give them education, and treat them as equals, and they can do anything we white people can do.” She looked around. “Where is George? I must tell him.” She went out, but George Trevelyan was not to be found. He was walking up and down the path furthest from the house, in the shrubbery—up and down in all the mist and fog, the pipe he still held between his teeth long gone out, his clothes soaked through with rain.

When the guests were gone to bed, he came to the drawing-room window and looked through. Mrs. Allison was seated before the fire, her head in her hands. He heard her sigh deeply as he pushed the closed French window open. She looked up as he entered, trying to smile.

“Not in bed,” she exclaimed, “or even playing billiards with the men! Where have you been? Lucy has just left for her room, disconsolate at not bidding you good-night.”

He came to the fireside looking sternly down at her, his hands clenched behind him.

“I stood outside the window there smoking this evening,” he said hoarsely, “and I heard the women talk.”

Mrs. Allison looked up like a hare that scents the hounds.

“What did they say?” Her heart sank. “The old story,” she whispered. “God pity me.

“They said”—he paused, it was hard to repeat—“Lucy”—his voice broke—“forgive me if I hurt you. Who is Virginia?”

“Virginia is my child.” Her voice was harsh and proud. She knew what he meant; it was an old question she was used to answering, if not so plainly put before. “Virginia is my daughter,” she said again. Her voice changed, it yearned over the claim.

“She is not like Lucy.” The young man paused, then his words escaped through his clenched teeth, “They said Virginia had negro blood in her veins, is it true? is it true?”

Mrs. Allison drew herself up, white like the dead.

"I did not wish your engagement to Lucy," she said coldly; "you followed us over America, and came to London after her."

The young man did not answer, he saw it all; he could never marry Lucy, then, his pretty, wilful, dear Lucy. He, the son of an old proud American family. He remembered how the Allison's had been shunned, the hints he had heard but not heeded, the strong opposition of his friends to his evident attraction for the younger Miss Allison. His parents knew nothing yet. "I can never marry Lucy." He drew his breath in as though it were his last. "I can never marry Lucy."

He looked hard into the thin refined face before him. He thought of Lucy's father, the proud man with the face of a Washington. He fell on his knees beside Mrs. Allison, laid his head in her lap.

"Mother," he said softly, "Virginia is very dear and very sweet, but she is not Lucy's sister, not your child."

Mrs. Allison trembled from head to foot. A son's head upon her lap—little Lucy's husband. Was Lucy's life to be spoiled for ever, was scandal always to be busy at their doors? She was so tired of it. The suspicions, questions, hints, could be ended so easily; it would leave pretty Lucy free. If George married her, suspicions would cease. Virginia—it would be the same to Virginia; it would not hurt her. She turned from the young man and spoke like one dying,—

"She is not my child—Virginia. You will speak of it to no one. She is very, very dear." She clutched her throat with her hand. "She is very, very dear."

The young man arose, his face alight with relief.

"God bless you!" he said, and was gone.

As he left by one door the other opened. Virginia entered slowly. She stood behind Mrs. Allison's chair, so did not see her face.

"Mother," she said softly, "I won't go tomorrow; I don't care to meet this negro. I dare say it is wrong: I hate them out of their position; they are only fit for slaves. I won't go to-morrow."

Mrs. Allison half whispered, "No, you must not go."

Something in her voice startled the girl; she bent over and raised her mother's face to the light.

"What is the matter," she cried, "dearest? My own mother!"

Mrs. Allison turned and caught her in her arms. She kissed her face and hair and drew her to her breast, as if they had met after many years' separation.

"My own child!" she whispered. Drawing her closer still, "My dearest, my best, my own little child!" She burst into a torrent of heavy tears.

II

The morning crept into a splendid day. All the winged world seemed mad with song when Mrs. Allison's guests woke and dressed, eager to go out early into the sunshine. Baskets were laden with good things for the picnic. Every one was in gay spirits. Lucy and her sister were together, the one trying to persuade the other to accompany the party.

"Virginia, do come. It will be lovely; such a day. Look out at the sky—so blue, not a cloud." But Virginia would not listen.

"Lucy, for goodness sake, don't put on that dress! Where did you get it? It's hideous!"

Lucy pouted.

"I like it best of all my things," she said. "You never approve what I like in clothes."

“But you like such bright colours. Why, Lucy, what is this? I never saw this collection before.” Virginia drew from an open drawer a handful of ribbons and beads—bright blue, green, red, yellow.

Lucy blushed slightly. “I love them,” she said. “Look here.” She slipped a heavy pair of gold ear-rings in her ears and round her neck a dozen strings of beads. “I often dress up when I am alone.” She drew out a handful of ribbons and wound some of them through her hair. She gestured before the glass, admiring herself.

“Don’t I look nice?” she said.

Virginia laughed.

“So this is where your pocket-money goes. Where did you get your taste for such brilliant colours? Do you remember the rows you used to have at school over the wearing of them, long ago?—how the girls worried over you? But you are too old now to go about dressed in this.” She lifted a vivid scarlet dress up as she spoke. Lucy snatched it from her in sudden rage.

“I wish you would not come into my room criticising my things,” she said curtly.

Virginia apologized, sorry for hurting her.

In a moment Lucy was gay again. She slipped a white frock over her shoulders.

“I may wear this, I suppose?”

Virginia laughed, but when Lucy insisted on finishing the effect, as she called it, by a bright yellow and scarlet sash, she grew almost grave.

“It’s all right when you are young,” she thought, “but if you keep your love of colour when you get old—” She smiled over her fancy.

Lucy was sweet to look upon, with her bright hair and flower-like face, as she stood amongst her father’s guests, ready to drive away. But her mother winced when she saw her mount the trap beside Washington Gibbs. George, too, had a frown upon his face, for she had pretended not to see his look of appeal as she passed.

“I cannot always sit beside him,” she excused herself; “besides, I want to see what an educated coloured person is like.”

When they had all gone, Virginia turned to her mother, who claimed a bad headache as her excuse for staying behind.

“I lay awake last night,” she said hesitatingly, “and I asked myself, why I had this hatred of those poor dark people; and, mother, I remembered how the children used to call me a picanniny when I was little. Wasn’t it curious? I suppose it’s my horrid, horrid hair. May be that was the reason why I grew to hate the negroes even more than most Americans do—even the black nurse I had. I remember dreading the sight of her; but Lucy always loved her and her people. I suppose Lucy got her love of finery and colour from that old woman. She was always dressing the child up.

Mrs. Allison turned away.

“I’m very weary,” she said, “and suffering. I will lie down and try to sleep.” Virginia led her to her room with great tenderness.

The party returned in the twilight, full of bright spirits, though weary after much rambling in the wood. Lucy had evidently made a conquest of Washington Gibbs; he was by her side all the evening. Once Virginia passed them as they stood upon the verandah by themselves. She noticed the sudden way that the man drew back when he saw her. “He was holding her hand,” she thought indignantly, “or going to.” “Lucy is out there,” she said George, when she met him. “I think she will get cold.” He went out and took possession of her.

Washington Gibbs was leaving. "He had to accompany his friend," he said; "but would call to see how they got over the fatigue of the day, if he might."

Lucy beamed upon him. "Come tomorrow," she murmured.

George took his place. "I'm not jealous," he said. "I know you are only studying the colour; but you must not study too hard, you know. You were with him nearly all day, and I don't like it, Lucy. A white woman ought not to talk to such fellows."

Lucy laughed, and changed the subject. She was so sweet to him that he forgot to reproach her further. But Virginia hardly said good-night to her sister.

"How could you, Lucy! You flirted with him; I saw you. How could you!"

Mr. Allison, too, looked unkindly at his younger daughter.

"You were too much with that fellow," he said crossly, "to-day. Furlong had no right to bring him about the place."

Lucy flushed hotly.

"It's very mean of you all," she said. "He is a perfect gentleman. You are cruel and unjust to condemn people for the colour of their skin."

Her father did not answer her, but when she had gone looked at his wife. Their glances met and fell. They both sighed deeply.

The next day Washington Gibbs called, but only saw Mr. Allison, and he did not come again. Lucy did not appear disappointed. She was gay and full of plans to amuse the guests in the evening. She arranged the tables for cards so that all had partners except herself. "I will be the orchestra," she said beaming, "when I find my music." She disappeared for over an hour. George thought it the dullest assembly he had ever been at till she returned. She had found her music after much seeking. Would they spare George to turn the leaves for her? George was spared gladly—he was playing vilely.

III

Washington Gibbs did not appear again, but one day Virginia came upon an envelope directed to Miss Allison. The maid had laid it upon her dressing-table, having found it in the shrubbery, she said. Virginia opened it wonderingly. It contained nothing but a huge silk scarf of brilliant colours, with "Lucy" in ugly blue letters in the corner. As she was examining it her sister entered. She ran forward and claimed it; then stopped, confused. Virginia's eyes were upon her.

"Another purchase, Lucy?" She smiled, then grew chill. "Whose writing is this? It's not yours," she said.

"It's mine." Lucy snatched it from her. "A present. Don't be silly."

"Who from?"

Virginia grew more stern, but Lucy would not answer.

"I won't tell you, you are so cross."

She pretended to be offended, and was glad to slip out of the room. Virginia was anxious; she could not sleep. She knew by Lucy's confusion she was hiding something. George was away, his brief holiday being over; all the guests save Miss Anderson had gone. She felt she ought to have more time with her sister. She remembered with a shock that there were hours after dusk when Lucy vanished. Where had she gone?

One evening she returned with her mother from a drive and found a suppressed excitement among the servants, the rest of the house uneasily quiet. Her maid, bubbling over with the news, told her almost before she had seated herself to have her hair arranged.

“The nigger gentleman had been here, and the master had horsewhipped him out of the house. Them niggers are always thieves,” the girl added. “I suppose he wanted to steal?” But Virginia could not gratify her curiosity.

As soon as she could, she went to her father. He was stern and busy when she saw him; she dared not interrupt his work. She flew to her mother with a feeling as if something was going to separate them. Mrs. Allison was troubled, but not so deeply as Virginia had feared.

“He came to ask for Lucy.” Mrs. Allison laughed bitterly. “To marry Lucy! Imagine it!” she answered to her daughter’s questioning.

“So papa whipped him out,” Virginia said excitedly, walking up and down, her hands clenched. “Quite right. The impertinence! the—the—Oh! I hope father struck hard. What does Lucy say? Is she not angry—very, very—”

“Of course, Lucy never thought of it,” Mrs. Allison said; “I was ashamed to have to tell her. But she was so excited at what she considered your father’s cruelty that I felt I ought to explain it. Of course, she saw at once that he was justified.”

“I will go to her,” Virginia said. “How she must hate that black beast! and she, engaged to George, to be insulted so!”

She found her sister sitting looking out of the window, her face flushed and her eyes shining.

She flung her arms about her. “Lucy, dearest! I am so sorry. The beast! how dared he! Just because you were a little kind to him.”

Lucy put her aside.

“Don’t crush me; it’s too hot,” she said calmly.

“I do not wonder you are angry,” Virginia cried. “Isn’t it well papa was here to whip him out?”

Lucy sprang to her feet. She began walking up and down.

“Of course,” she said, “he did not know that I was engaged to George.”

“Engaged to George! Is that all!” Virginia said indignantly. “Are you not insulted at him daring to think of you, even if he did not know—a negro, Lucy?”

“Of course, I’m insulted—of course, of course. Do go away and let me alone; I’m so tired.”

Virginia kissed her repentantly.

“Indeed, you must be tired, dear, and worried; no wonder. But he won’t annoy you again, poor child. Lie down and sleep, and forget it all by to-morrow.”

Lucy lay down and let her sister tuck the clothes around her comfortably. She did not appear again that evening, having a headache, as Mrs. Allison explained to her guest. When the morning came, she did not appear at breakfast.

“Let her sleep,” her mother said to Virginia, who proposed to go and see how she was; “she is tired.”

But as the hours went by they grew anxious. At last Mrs. Allison, after repeated knocking, opened the door of her daughter’s room; but Lucy was gone. They, still suspecting nothing, fancied she had slipped out into the garden. Only when lunch was over and evening beginning were questions asked and searchers sent out.

A day passed and Lucy did not return. Mrs. Allison was wild with anxiety, Virginia was overwhelmed with grief. Mr. Allison was the only one fit to read the letter which arrived that evening from his daughter.

“I have married Washington Gibbs,” it ran, “and I suppose none of you will forgive me. He came to you like an honest man to ask for me, and you turned him into a thief. You have treated him like all white people treat his race. Some day you will see clearer and forgive us.”

Mrs. Allison came to her husband's side, When he crumpled the letter in his hand, she put her arms around him, but he put her away.

"It's from me it comes, from me—in one child's face, in the other's soul."

He strode across the long gallery where they were together, and looked along the faces of the painted ancestors, who were hanging upon the walls. There were many beautiful works of art among these, but he did not seem to be looking at these; he stopped at last before one small canvas inscribed—"the portrait of a coloured lady." He gazed for a long time at the smiling dark face, then slowly drew a penknife from his pocket and opened it.

"To rise again in the fourth generation. Curse you! curse you! curse you!" he cried, and drew the blade across the laughing eyes and mouth till the canvas fell apart in rags.

* * *

The Allison's family packed up and disappeared. No one knew where they had gone, few knew why—only George, who died a soldier's death soon afterwards, and Miss Anderson, who would never tell. Even Mrs. Donald, who hired all the Allison's servants, could never find out more than that the black negro gentleman had been thrown out one day for stealing; that Lucy Allison had run away one night with her lover, George, who she heard was leaving for America and the war; that he was killed soon after, poor gentleman! that it was a mercy she saw him first; that the master was upset at hearing of the trouble his daughter was in, in being left a widow; that they had all gone after her back to America.

But Mrs. Donald knew there was no truth in this muddled story, and dismissed the servants in anger. She still spends hours in trying to extract the truth. from Miss Anderson's shut lips, which never open upon the subject save to rebuke her curiosity.