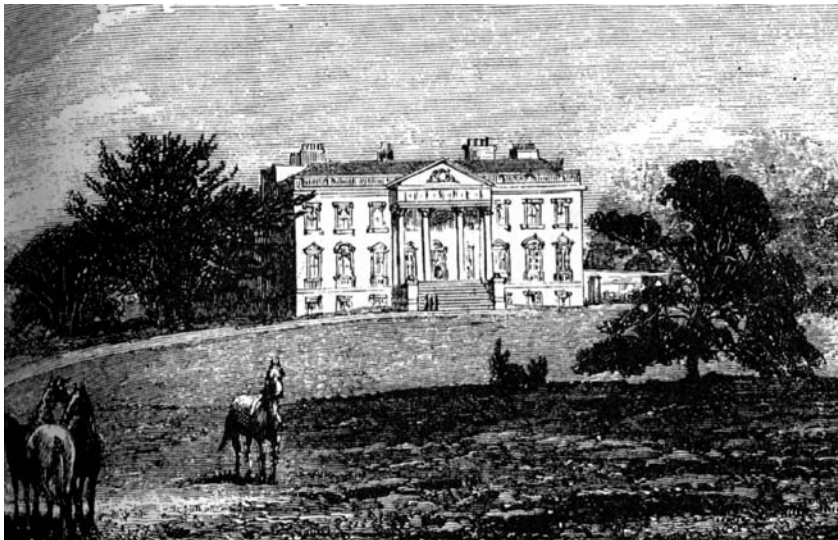


PAUL S A REDMOND

RUTH MOTTRAM



Hazleton Court Hall

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*She rose like the morn,
As she shone through the night,
And she gilded the grove,
With her gracious sight.
From her radiance the sun,
Taketh increase when,
She unveileth and shameth,
The moonlight bright.
Bow down all beings,
Between her hands,
As she showeth charms,
With her veil undight,
And she floodeth cities,
With her tears,
When she flasheth her look,
Of leven-light.*

Prologue

Ruth's Journal

I once read, or maybe I wrote it myself in a short story or a novel, maybe something I never finished and will not finish now, that it is necessary to live all one's life before one can decide which were the happiest of years. Sadly, here I now find myself, perhaps no more than halfway through my allotted span, yet closer to Death than is the spider that is aimlessly watching me from the web it span overnight between the bars of the window. Of that fact I am in no doubt. I am more aware of it than is my jailer who has kindly provided me with pen, paper and ink, unaware that these are all there may be to keep me amongst the living. And that is where this journal, my last chronicle, must begin, with my happiest years. It must be short, that which I write, for although it might appear to some that I might have all the time with which God blessed me, I know and have accepted that I actually have very little at my disposal. Even before I start I have my doubts as to my ability to complete my work, and even graver doubts that it will not fall into the hands of those who have wrongly put me here and would destroy it. And I suppose that where I must start is really only a short time ago, yet it seems so long, several lifetimes. I suppose it would be that if measured by the longevity of my arachnid companion whom I must inevitably disturb.

No, I have no fear of spiders, large or small, and I would clarify that the one I am contemplating falls into the medium category in my catalogue. There are far more unpleasant creatures in the World, vile creatures who prey on the unwary, spinning their own webs and devouring their victims without mercy, and all of these, in my own sad experience, are of the two-legged variety.

I think I have resigned myself to dying. I could not have written this a few months ago, or even a few weeks ago when I fought as hard as I could to cling to life at a time when all the elements were against me and I might easily have perished. Better that I had! Now all is changed and those whom I had thought of as my friends, and to whom I looked to for support in my tribulations, have all turned against me. Even those whom I love most dearly have delivered me into the hands of my enemies and set their minds against the prosecution of my case. So be it.

So, I must start with my happiest years, and in describing them I must be excused for setting out exactly how they were, not how I perceive them now. In some ways I think I surprise myself in how clearly I remember them, but I have cherished these memories as if they were, and I trust I may write this without appearing profane, a holy writing. They have also formed the very last piece of flotsam there for me to cling to desperately in my sea of woes, even if my grip is beginning to weaken. Oh dear! There is a cliché, and someone for whom I once had the highest regard told me I should never write in clichés. But I do it all the time. No writer could possibly avoid it occasionally when everything that could have been written has been already written in countless languages. I dare also say that every story that can be told has been told, including the one I am about to relate. The difference here is that my tale is not fiction. It is not my invention. It is not even an elaboration, dressed up and dramatised in the popular Press for public consumption. I intend to set down only the facts of the dreadful things that have happened to me and my family. I am sure that it was all written in the Book of Fate and that there was nothing that any of us could have done to change or affect the events, but I must leave the final judgement of that of the reader.

Do I mislead myself? In all probability this manuscript will be found by my enemies, those who could not allow the truth to be told, and it will be burnt. I am saddened by the thought that my endeavours should be ruthlessly suppressed and destroyed. It is not vanity that makes me wish for its preservation, but justice. But I do mislead myself. No-one is going to come. No modern-day knight is going to come to scale the battlements of the prison,

nor have I the necessary length of hair to lower down from my tower. I shall not be rescued, even so I must set this down on paper. It could survive, a message tucked in an imaginary bottle, waiting to be picked up by an unsuspecting soul on some distant shore. Who could it be? In all probability it would be a complete stranger, someone who has neither knowledge nor interest in my history. That thought saddens me too. I am not sure which would be the worst; for it to be destroyed, or for it to survive but for the reader to have no interest in the tale, for that would not give me the justice that I seek and deserve. No, I need no convincing. This account is aimed at certain individuals and against others. I have been wronged and I seek justice!

Perhaps if I addressed it to him? Would it reach him? Would he read? Or would he find it amusing? Or would it strike a sympathetic chord in his heart, one I still believe must be there, else I would never have loved him. Yet I cannot even bring myself to write down his name!

But I digress and I must start my account with those happier times. Yes, how well I now remember them! Those peaceful, settled, days spent at Sutton Minety in the cottage we rented. There is no need at this point for me to dwell on its location, or even describe Meadowview Cottage, as those for whom my writing is intended know it well enough, and for the casual reader all will be made known in time. It is enough to know that it lies buried in the tranquillity of the English countryside. Now the memories are flooding back, of happy, trouble free days spent under its thatched roof, or of being immersed in the scents of the garden, or wandering the tracks, across the meadows, or through the woods. That was the nature of the life I lived with my mother and Victoria, my pretty, younger, sister.

Had we been left on our own I am sure that we would have lived out our lives safe in our own bliss, but when I cast my net wider there are others to be recalled and named, and I think of them with less equanimity. Some were perhaps simply charged with good intentions. Others lacked any intention to do good by their actions, at least not towards me or my family. And thinking of these and what they did brings darker clouds across the sky of my fragile little world. I must think better thoughts to sustain me through what will not be an easy journey.

I can picture my mother sat in the parlour, sewing, or Victoria selecting which particular ribbon or bow she would adorn her latest dress or bonnet. Perhaps I should digress further and explain that Mother had a remarkable skill at dress-making, that her reputation in this respect was widespread in the locality, and that her services were much in demand. Why, she made the very dress and camisole that I am wearing as I put my pen to paper! It is not of the least significance as far as my tale is concerned, but it will explain to the casual reader how it was we three women could lead our modest lives without severe pecuniary embarrassment. I would often sit on the window-seat, perhaps looking out on the front path, or writing or sketching on a pad, for I have an acknowledged talent for both. I think I was happier then and possible more creative than later when I sat in my place at my writing desk and endeavoured by my own labours to keep cloth on my back and bread on the plate before me. But that was later, and I must not be disparaging about my writing desk as it was the font of all my success, such as it has been.

Yes, life was idyllic, that I can now see. I suppose it was too much to expect that it would go on for ever, yet neither Vicky nor I could see how it could ever change. Three mornings a week we would walk down the track and through the village to attend at Miss Seymour's house for tuition in some of the finer points to which young ladies were expected to aspire. Except for this and, of course, Sunday mornings, we were largely free to do very much as the fancy took us. I am not suggesting that we did not accept and discharge our share of domestic tasks, but those aside we would walk in the country, me with my sketching pad and Victoria planning her next gown.

It never occurred to me as strange that we were so un-alike. I cared little for clothes or appearances but was always seized with an urge to be creative. Victoria, for example, would never sit as would I and assist mother with the sewing to boost her earnings and supplement the small pension she received on account of our father. She would simply look forward to wearing and decorating further what ever was made for her.

I mention our father. I cannot claim that I can remember him clearly. I have an image that I have clung to, dark and indistinct, of a stern, bearded face, but I am not sure whether this is my own memory or one acquired over the years from the few occasions when Mother was prepared to talk about him. I think that my image is dark and indistinct simply because he was in naval uniform but, again, I cannot be certain as there were no portraits of him in the cottage. I never discovered whether this was by chance or by design. There was a small, locked, trunk in the loft which could be accessed from Victoria's bedroom in which my mother kept what she described to us as "your father's possessions". It was almost as if she expected him, one day, to return, yet always knowing that he would not. I can never once recall the trunk being opened and even now I have no clear idea as to its contents.

I said that I would not describe the cottage, at least not yet, but I have mentioned Vicky's bedroom, so I should acquaint the reader with the fact that although by some standards our home was small, it was large enough for each of us to have a bedroom. I had the sweetest little room imaginable with the prettiest of views out over the meadow to the woods. And to think that *he* crossed that meadow, but of that, more later.

If I do have a true memory of father it clearly comes from before he sailed on his last voyage. I would have been just over two years old and Victoria would have been at my mother's breasts. I am convinced that I can remember her reading his infrequent letters from the Crimea and of her trying to make light of the suffering and deprivation he described. I am sure she read aloud his account of the storm that destroyed his ship leaving him and his crew stranded on a foreign, inhospitable and disease-ridden shore. After she had tripped lightly over these harrowing passages, she would tuck Victoria into her crib and me into bed, then go down and weep to herself. I thought at the time that she must be weeping for father. I now wonder if she had a wider and more fundamental concern for grief. She may well have also had a premonition of what was ultimately to transpire and was weeping for herself and us, her daughters.

I cannot make mention of my father without mentioning also his brother, my uncle for that is how I will always describe and think of him. As I prepare to unravel and set down his part in this account, the storm clouds are gathering again and my hand is shaking, but I must strengthen my resolve and go on. And mention of my uncle must inevitably lead me to consideration of the man and his actions. At the time he appeared to be a great benefactor, but we could not have paid a heavier price as a result of his beneficence had he set out with no aim other than to extract it. Was it simply that his judgement was wanting when he set out to right an ancient wrong? And who am I to criticise the actions and decisions of others? I am guilty of my own errors, of making terrible mistakes which had the most dire of consequences for both me and those around me!

Now the heavy, stygian clouds are jet black and low. The walls that imprison me appear to be closing in and crushing me, sapping my resolve. See! The pen is slipping from my grip. I can travel no further through this Journal. Just as my life is to be cut short, so must this, my narrative. I must pray that someone else will take up where I leave off and complete my tale for me.