

Chapter One

A Proposal

“Vicky, Vicky? Are you ready? Oh! Where is she?” cried Mrs Mottram, pacing the sparsely carpeted floor of the parlour. “It is so un-lady-like for me to have to call out at the top of my voice for her. And then she does not have the grace to answer! Vicky! We will be late!” Mrs Mottram dropped her voice, but continued to direct her complaints at the walls and furnishings, and to her eldest daughter who sat calmly in her customary place at the window.

“I am perfectly ready,” said Ruth softly and without looking up from her writing.”

“You are ready Ruth because, if I can be permitted to say it, you pay so little attention to your appearance.”

“That is because it requires so little, Mother. There is no point in dressing up a sow’s ear.”

“Oh, Ruth! You can talk such nonsense! It comes from all these fanciful ideas you write about. You should pay more attention to what Miss Seymour instructs you in and less to your own invention. Writing is not becoming in a young woman. I have told you that repeatedly. But where is your sister? It is so inconsiderate of her. She knows precisely what the time is and that I have to deliver some work to the Church.”

“You are going to meet Mr Clauncy? I would rather I am not there when you do. Perhaps you could do that on the way back?”

“It looks as if I shall be forced to. Why is she not here and ready to leave?”

“I suspect, as we must both suspect,” said Ruth laying down her writing, “that the truth is that she does not consider herself ready. You know as well as do I how excessively painstaking she is about her appearance. I have no doubt that she is sat at this very minute in front of the mirror making the slightest of adjustments to this and that. She is likely to stay there until she achieves what she considers to be perfection.”

“Oh dear!” said Mrs Mottram, looking with anxious eyes at the clock above the mantle-shelf as it ticked its ponderous way into the future. “Please be as good as to go and find her and command her to come down this instant! And do not forget to remind me of the errand that I have to perform. All this trouble is likely to put it quite out of my head!”

“Of course,” said Ruth, smoothing her skirt. “I will go up to her room straight away.”

Victoria was, as Ruth had suggested, sat in front of the mirror in her small bedroom, twisting her slender waist first one way, then the other. “Oh!” she said when she caught sight of her sister’s reflection. “You must assist me, and do be absolutely candid, Ruth. You know how I am. Should it be this ribbon or that, and should I wear it her, or here?”

“That one and there,” said Ruth without hesitation.

“Do you really think so?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Vicky! You know how *I* am! As you often enough say, I have little taste or dress-sense, and what I have is dubious. But mother is waiting and growing most impatient. I suggest that you shut your eyes and just take one or we will be the last to arrive and you know how I detest having everyone look at me. I don’t much care for being scolded by Miss Seymour either.”

“But it is so important!” declared Victoria. “What could possibly be more important than the way you look and the way others perceive you? As Miss Seymour frequently says, first impressions are everything. I intend to look my best in everything, always.”

“I cannot believe that there is anyone in Sutton Minety who will notice whether you are wearing a ribbon let alone what colour it is or where it is positioned. As for me, I would like to be looked upon for what I am or what I achieve, not for what I look like.”

“Oh, Ruth,” said Victoria, standing but still hovering over the ribbons that lay on the table before her, “you are so fussy and particular as to people’s motives. It can make you appear so dull!” She made a last examination of her appearance in the mirror before turning

to her sister. "First appearances, says Miss Seymour. And look at you! What will people say when they see you in last year's dress, or is it from the year before? And your bonnet that might have been handed down from your mother or a Great Aunt, were we to have one. What do you think that people may think when they see you alongside me? I should not be surprised if they say to themselves that if they did not know better, they would take you to be in service, and not in a very senior position at that."

"So they might," said Ruth, opening the door and beckoning. "It does not concern me any more than it concerns me that they, these people who are scrutinising us, will all think that you are very fine, pretty, and impossibly un-punctual! Now come along else we shall be so late we will meet ourselves coming home."

"Where have you been?" cried Mrs Mottram as they met her at the door. "I have been calling and calling and you know how it upsets my equilibrium. It is not becoming to have to call or shout out, not even in one's own home. Ruth, is my bonnet straight?"

"I was adjusting *my* bonnet," said Victoria, carrying out further adjustments. "I must look to appear as absolute perfection when we walk through the village to Miss Seymour's."

Mrs Mottram sighed. "This has nothing to do with the fact that a certain young gentleman, if I can refer to him as that, is home from Medical School, has it?" she asked guardedly. Ruth looked closely at her mother. This was news indeed, news that concerned Ruth more than it did her sister, and news that her mother had kept to herself. When could she have heard about it? Not that morning, surely? Had her mother really kept this information secret over night without imparting it to her daughters, only to rashly let it slip now?

"I cannot imagine that there is any young gentleman, if I can call them that, in this locality in which I would have any interest or who would be cultured enough to appreciate me. None of them is anything more than a country yokel, and I would include Dr Fayrbrother's son in that category even if he is in a superior class of yokel. You can tell that from the way that they dress."

"I do see how they dress, Victoria," said her mother patiently. "I can see nothing wrong with them with the exception of Jake Wentworth's son, and he is such that he cannot help himself."

"Poor Albert," said Ruth.

"And we really must be on our way. You both know how strict Miss Seymour is capable of being regarding timeliness. If you wish to continue this conversation we must do it as we walk."

"A lady never arrives upon time," said Victoria, re-setting her bonnet. "Do I look all right, Ruth? I have not disturbed my hair, have I? Perhaps I should go and check in my mirror again, just to make absolutely certain that every lock is in its appointed place."

"Oh, Victoria!" exclaimed Mrs Mottram. "This is so silly!"

"It is not silly, Mother," protested her daughter, squeezing past and out onto the garden path. "It is very important, and that is precisely why you send us three times a week to Miss Seymour's - to establish exactly what is important. Now I have to be careful that nothing becomes snagged on one of the roses."

"But we are only walking through the village. It cannot be more than half a mile and you can be assured that you will not meet a single person who does not know you and exactly who you are. It is not as if we were being presented to Royalty or about to be paraded in an open carriage in Rotten Row!"

"How can you be so certain of that?" cried Victoria, her cheeks becoming a little flushed which, thought Ruth, only supplemented her prettiness. "I must declare that it is silly to call me silly. Miss Seymour says that a lady must look her best at all times. And in any event, one day I shall be driven up and down Rotten Row in an open carriage, in the full view of everyone, the Nobility and Royalty alike!"

"Victoria!" said her mother sternly. "Now you are becoming foolish. I never heard of such an idea!"

"Well," said her recalcitrant daughter, "it is more than an idea. I am making a prediction. It will happen! I know it will happen! I am certain of it!"

“And I am certain that we will be late unless we quicken our pace,” said Mrs Mottram. “Come along, Ruth.”

Ruth had stayed silent throughout this exchange, content to walk a few paces behind, finding herself preoccupied with the announcement her mother had made earlier. She knew why her mother had said nothing earlier. It was not for Victoria’s benefit. She would not have put on her finery specifically for Matthew Fayrbrother. No, it had been her mother’s intention to keep it from her. “Is Matthew Fayrbrother come home, then, Mother?” she asked as casually as she could.

“Oh, Ruth’s paramour!” said Victoria gleefully over her shoulder.

“He is not my paramour,” Ruth declared. “We hardly know each other. I simply take an interest in his progress as I would in anyone from the village who was setting out to better themselves and make something of their lives. And so should you, Victoria.”

“I would rather that neither of you took an interest in the Doctor’s son,” said Mrs Mottram. “You know what is said.”

“In any event he takes little interest in Ruth.”

“Victoria!” said Mrs Mottram, pulling her bonnet laces tighter. “That is an unkind thing to say. It would be spiteful if you said it to your worst enemy. It is doubly so when addressed to your sister!”

“I am sorry!” laughed Victoria, not sounding in the least contrite.

“I am not concerned in whether he shows any interest in me,” said Ruth, trying to remain calm but aware that her heart quickened as she spoke. As it was, the subject was dropped. The news that the Doctor’s son was back in the village had come as a mild, but not unpleasant, shock and Ruth was content simply to dwell upon it. It was true that Matthew Fayrbrother had shown no more than normal civility towards her, but then the circumstances had never been such that permitted anything more than this. In addition, she was uncertain as to the true nature of her feelings towards him. She was sure that she admired him for going to University. Yes, she was sure that she admired him even though it was his father, of course, who had sent him to Edinburgh. It was clear to her that here was one soul who would not be content to remain in the village all his life but who was determined to pursue a career elsewhere. In that sense he was a kindred spirit as she knew that if she was to write, she would have to travel. She shared, to a degree, his aspirations except he had acted upon them whereas, starved of opportunity, she had not. But, then, he did have a father to send him and meet his expenses! It would have been unthinkable for her to go to her mother and say that she wanted to leave home and follow a course of study. She could imagine what would be said, in particular by the Curate.

Yet how was she to break with her life there? What future was there for her if she did not? She might end up the wife of a yeoman farmer. She might end up as an old maid. That was probably the future that Victoria would have predicted for her, if asked. And when she examined her conscience, did she really want to leave her relatively care-free life at Meadowview Cottage? Yet, if Victoria could talk of riding in a carriage in Hyde Park, she could feel that it was her destiny to go out into the wide World and to seek a future somewhere other than in Sutton Minety.

Having thought this, Ruth felt ashamed of having such rebellious and ungrateful thoughts, and kept silent concerning them. As for Matthew Fayrbrother, she could fully appreciate why he took little or no note of her presence, or why the same applied to the rest of the young men of the locality who were so thoroughly despised by her sister. But Victoria was right in some respects. She took no real care over her appearance. She knew her features were not fine and beautifully symmetrical like those of her sister. She admitted that her movement was awkward and bordered on clumsiness on occasions. Victoria would cut a pretty step on the dance floor, but she was all left feet, and far too many of them as well. And whereas Vicky would sparkle and shine in her dress, she preferred more sober, basic, clothes, without frills, ribbons or bows. Her mother always said that she was the easy one to satisfy. That might be the case, but it was sadly plain that the Doctor’s son, whose head did not appear to be turned by Victoria, would never pay court to her.

Perhaps it was her fate that no man would ever fall in love with her? When she thought of her future if she were to be confined to the area, marriage was only one of the alternatives that faced her. She could, like Miss Seymour, remain single although she did not see herself as ever being in the position where she could take in and advise young ladies on the way that they should conduct themselves in Society. Living alone, for she had no doubt that Victoria was determined to marry, and marry well, was not an entirely attractive solution, but Ruth was prepared to resign herself to it if that was to be her destiny. And on that bright morning in late Spring, Ruth found herself reconciling herself to the thought that she would become a spinster with but few social graces to impart to others. She would eventually die an old maid. It was not an attractive thing to contemplate and certainly not something she wished to dwell upon.

“Why am I concerning myself?” she asked herself. “Why should I feel at all concerned?” After all, she was barely twenty-one and although the life at Meadowview Cottage could be described as spartan save the trimmings for her sister’s embellishments, she was happy, settled and content. She watched her mother perform minor miracles with the small pension she received and the proceeds of her needlework, and marvelled. If there was sufficient to keep her sister in her finery, how much better would things be once Victoria was married, as married she would be? Oh, she should not think like this! She was happy and content without a cloud on her horizon. She should leave it just like that.

Yet as she walked at the heels of her mother and sister, Ruth felt unexpectedly unsettled. The idyllic life she was able to live at the cottage could not extend for ever and there was this small, yet persistent, voice inside her, nagging away at her to “do something” without offering her any guidance as to what she might do to silence it. Why did she suddenly feel this way? Was it solely due to the return of the Doctor’s son? Perhaps it was the thought that he was there now, at home, and that she should seek to improve herself in his eyes? How foolish she could be when she tried! He would not even look at her, or if he did she would not be graced with a second glance! And the last thing she could do was talk to either her mother or her sister. If, at that moment, her mother had the slightest indication of how her daughter felt, she would have her sent straight to a convent! No doubt Mr Clauncy maintained a list of suitable establishments!

They were on the edge of the village green which the Doctor’s house overlooked. If Matthew were there, she might or might not catch sight of him. But her mother would command that they walked by with their eyes fixed straight ahead or diverted to the left in the direction of the church where no doubt the Curate was lurking. Oh, how she was deceiving herself! Even if she saw him and he her, he would take no notice of her! Yet, perhaps she could just sneak a glance?

If she was to marry and it was not to be Matthew Fayrbrother, and given the position that seemed certain, who could it be? Although she would not have used the same words as uttered by her sister, the sentiment she expressed concerning the young, eligible, men of the village was true. Perhaps an older man? Who was there who she might find in the least acceptable who was not yet already married? No, she would die a spinster if she remained living there. It was as inevitable as night following day.

To her disappointment, when they did pass the gates of the Georgian house and she managed briefly to divert her gaze without her mother being aware of the fact, there was no sign of either the Doctor or his son. Nor was there any indication to confirm that he had left the many attractions and Scottish beauties of Edinburgh. Oh, no doubt there was an abundance of young ladies there with all the qualities and social graces that she lacked in abundance. How could she expect to compete against them? Perhaps he was already engaged and had come home to tell his father. She would be a black-haired Laird’s daughter, no doubt of that, perhaps with a wild, moated castle, misty and seeped with history. It was hopeless! “No!” she told herself. “The moon is not worth crying for!”. So she quietly resigned herself to a further two hours of improvement.

“Why good morning to you, Mrs Mottram! I was hoping that I would see you today!” Mr Clauncy, the Curate, was standing in the gateway to the churchyard and the small,

wooden-steepled church as Mrs Mottram approached, clutching the bundle that she had faithfully taken with her to Miss Seymour's and back again.

"Good morning, Mr Clauncy," she said. "I see you are watching the house."

"As I always do. It is not seemly to have a disciple of Satan on the very threshold of the church. We must always be on our guard against the excesses that the man may commit. I see it as my duty to stand guard against any attempted defecation of this sacred spot. We must all do our duty."

"Indeed we must," said Mrs Mottram permitting herself a glance across the village green at the house that she and her daughters had not long before passed without apparent peril. If she were pressed, Mrs Mottram would probably have sided with those in the village who thought it effrontery for such a wicked and irreligious man to occupy a property which stood so prominently and confronted the faithful as they left church on Sundays. There were some wags who said that the juxtaposition was designed expressly for the convenience of the terminally ill, given that the Doctor was said to be inclined to prescribe poison to those who were out of his favour. Whatever the truth, neither he nor his son ever crossed the green and joined with the congregation, but remained out of sight, behind the curtained and sometimes shuttered windows. Of this, the more spiteful said this was because he could not make an act of public confession without fear of being struck down, as he had a hand in the untimely death of his second wife, a death which had left him with a considerable fortune which certainly sufficed for him to send his son to University as well as employ a living-in maid, a cook, and two gardeners. Mrs Mottram would listen to these slanderous claims but, to her credit, never imparted them to anyone other than, in confidence, her daughters. "I have brought the surplice that the Reverend Bell asked me to repair," she added, holding out the package in the hope that the Curate might relieve her of it. "I would have brought it earlier but we were pressed for time. It does not do for young ladies to arrive late at Miss Seymour's."

"Ah, yes, Miss Seymour," said the Curate thoughtfully, eyeing the package with suspicion as if it might have been tied up by the Fenians. "Of course you will want your recompense. And I have what you could call a small proposal to put to you."

"Oh, no!" protested Mrs Mottram, "Do not think of it, the recompense that is. We are, as a family, able to put so little into the collection that I am pleased to be able to be of service in some way. I would not dream of accepting a payment." Mr Clauncy appeared to relax slightly upon hearing this.

"In a way, that is something I want to talk to you about - my proposal," he said deliberately.

"What we put in the collection?" asked Mrs Mottram with dismay.

"No, no," said the Curate, shaking his balding head. "Not that at all. It is a proposal about Miss Ruth and her future."

"Her future?" repeated Mrs Mottram reflectively. What could he have in mind? For a fleeting moment the thought entered her head that he was about to propose marriage to her daughter. Her first impulse was to reject this as ridiculous as she knew exactly how Ruth would react to such a proposition, but as she was searching for the words that she might use in reply without causing offence, she started to consider that perhaps it was not as outrageous an idea as she had first thought. Indeed, in the space of a few seconds Mrs Mottram went from outright rejection to wondering why she had never thought of it herself!

It was true that Mr Clauncy was considerably older than Ruth. She would have placed him as, perhaps, in his late forties or early fifties without appearing ungenerous, but where was the problem in that? Many young girls married older men and led seemingly content lives. It was almost the fashion and if she told Victoria that it was, she would have her as an ally in what could be a difficult battle. It was also true that Mr Clauncy, with his large red nose, flabby lips, and protruding stomach, was not the most attractive of men, but then she had to accept that Ruth was not good-looking in the way her sister was. She would make a good wife, and that was what mattered the most.

So, now that she thought of it more carefully, she found herself won over before the proposal was even made. It was not a silly idea and it had the added attraction that it would remove the risk, no matter how remote, that Ruth would form some liaison with the son of the

monster that even now could be watching her from his vantage point on the other side of the Green. It would effectively put him beyond her contemplation and her beyond his reach. No, it was not a silly idea at all!

She did have slight misgivings as to whether she was being fair to her daughter, but decided that Ruth would get over it, and there would be the added bonus that her husband could keep her writing in check. And perhaps she was being a little unjust as far as the Doctor's son was concerned, but she had to heed the gossip. Although she was prepared to occasionally expose both herself and her daughters to the extent of his medical skills, there being no practical alternative, she was not prepared to place anyone of them in a position whereby the Doctor might have a pecuniary advantage from malpractice. She could not entertain the thought of one of her daughters marrying into that family. Indeed, her blood ran cold at the thought of such a match, not that Ruth would bring with her any dowry. Oh! That was another problem!

Mrs Mottram suddenly realised that whilst she had been grappling with these problems, Mr Clauncy had been addressing her and she had not heeded a word. "Ruth's future!" repeated the Curate.

"In what way?" she asked cautiously, resolving not to appear foolish by jumping to a wrong conclusion. But it had to be marriage! What else could it be?

"I have been giving the subject a great deal of thought lately," said Mr Clauncy, drawing himself up and protruding his stomach. "You know how I like to take a special interest in you and your two daughters. And you know that I have always considered that they merit special attention, especially as they have the misfortune to be fatherless, not that I am casting any shadow over the manner in which you have reared them. They are, of course, like us all, not without fault. Victoria has her vanity to curb and Ruth lacks her sister's looks. Vain and plain - yes - that is how they could be described - vain and plain."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs Mottram, suppressing her immediate impulse to come to the defence of her daughters and wishing that the Curate would relieve her anxiety by getting to the point. How would she react if she were right? But he was talking again.

"And you know that I have always been prepared to, shall I say, assist in bridging that vacuum caused by the lack of a father by offering you advice and guidance over the years."

"I have much valued your guidance given, as you say, the predicament that I have found myself in since my husband was taken from me so cruelly. It has been good to have a man whom I could approach for his opinion on a wide range of subjects."

"And I trust that you have always found that opinion to be sound and given with your, and your daughters', best interests at heart? You know that you can always come to me for such advice."

"Oh yes!" said Mrs Mottram, finding herself forced to step back a pace as the Curate extended his stomach even further. "I place great weight and reliance on the advice you have given me. Indeed, I think of you as almost one of the family!" She added this thinking that it might assist him if he was having difficulty in finding the right words with which to broach the subject.

"Just so," he murmured. "Just so. We are all members of one large Christian family, Mrs Mottram."

"Well?" she asked after a short pause.

"I was just assembling the appropriate words. This is a delicate matter and I would not wish to offend you." Mrs Mottram's heart leapt. She was right! She knew it! Her daughter was to be married to the Curate and to go to live in the Curate's house. That would give Ruth a proper position in the village and secure her future. She could not have made a better choice. She felt so elated that she was almost prepared to assist by anticipating the proposal. "Miss Ruth's future," began Mr Clauncy again.

"Oh my goodness!" thought Mrs Mottram. "What exactly should I say? And how am I to break it to Ruth?"

"To be blunt," continued the Curate, "and I give this advice in the knowledge that there has been, shall I say, a little animosity between us, Miss Ruth and I, not that I have anything but the kindest of feelings towards her and nothing but her best interests in mind."

“Oh, she is young, Mr Clauncy. I think that deep down she respects you. That is what matters. I think she would even come to like you once she knew you better, as do I.”

“That’s as may be, Mrs Mottram,” said the Curate, stretching his flabby lips into a grim smile. “What I want to assure you is that what I am about to say is motivated by nothing other than her best interests and not in the least by my reaction to the feelings she occasionally displays towards me. Forgive and forget, that’s my maxim. Turn the other cheek if smitten.”

“Ruth is not your enemy, of that I am sure.”

“She is young and headstrong!”

“She is young and can be headstrong,” agreed Mrs Mottram, shaking her head sadly. “And sometimes she has the strangest of notions.”

“Then you must be firm with her and convince her that what I - we - you suggest, and I use this word advisedly, is completely in her best interests concerning her future. At present I fear that much of what she does is not in her best interests and that it will only lead her from the path of goodness and righteousness. Take her writing for an example.”

“I have spoken to her repeatedly on that subject, Mr Clauncy. Believe me I have!”

“And you must speak again. You must be very firm and unbending. It is not seemly for a young lady to put pen to paper and write cheap romantic stories. She should not even be entertaining such ideas! Indeed, I would go so far as to declare that writing is essentially a man’s occupation as only men are capable of controlling the passions - passions, Mrs Mottram - that writing can arouse. It is not at all suitable for a woman, especially a young, impressionable, woman like your daughter. Have you never wondered why all the great writers were men, Mrs Mottram? Shakespeare, Scott, Macaulay? All men, Mrs Mottram. You will not find a single woman amongst them, and why? Because the emotions released by their writing corrupts their souls and introduces impure thoughts into their heads, leading them down the path to sedition. Remember it was Eve who tempted Adam towards his downfall and expulsion from Eden. Writing is a serpent, Mrs Mottram, and one which is lurking within your very household!”

“I am sure that you are right, Mr Clauncy,” said Mrs Mottram hesitantly.

“I am, Mrs Mottram! It is vital that you take steps to prevent Ruth from such a fate, from becoming a fallen woman. That is exactly what writing will lead her to if you do not act, and act firmly. I can assure you of that! I have seen the like of it far too often, far too often to tell.”

Mrs Mottram did not ask for examples. She was now becoming confused as she had difficulty in bridging the widening chasm between the picture of Ruth sat on the window seat, her note pad before her, and her being in the gutter which was where she always pictured fallen women. She was also wondering how Mr Clauncy was going to approach the prospect of marriage from the line of argument he was adopting, but she had her own prejudices about the propriety of what her daughter thought and wrote and was not of a mind to challenge the Curate’s predictions.

“We must find her a position!” he announced, almost triumphantly.

“What?”

“A position!”

“A position?” repeated Mrs Mottram, even more confused. She was now confronted with a suggestion that was entirely unexpected.

“Yes, a position. With a good, Christian family, mark you. Perhaps she could initially take up the position of a governess, for two or three children. That’s about the number I have in mind. It would not be too exacting, but it would occupy her sufficiently to restrict the amount of spare time that she has for her writing. Of course, in time she could move to a better post. She is relatively well-read and educated, is she not?”

“Why, yes,” said Mrs Mottram, defensively. “She is, but how would we go about finding such a position, in particular with a good family. One hears such dreadful tales now-a-days! I could not sleep soundly in my bed if I was not sure that she was well-placed and happy. It has to be with a good household, Mr Clauncy!”

“Indeed, indeed. I think the question of the household is secondary to the principle and acceptance that this is the best way forward for Ruth. You have to accept that given her age something has to be done. I think you will also accept that she does not have the attributes, if I can put it this way, to secure a good marriage. Of course we must find her a position in a good, God-fearing, household, but do you agree with the proposal? Just think, as I have said, employment as a governess will leave her very little time of her own in which to indulge her folly. I think it is the right way forward, unless you have something better in mind for her?”

“I cannot truly say that I have, but I have never really thought of Ruth being in service.”

“Do you think that she could satisfactorily undertake such duties?”

“Of course she could!” said Mrs Mottram quite sharply. “It is finding the right position that concerns me, especially as she has no experience and no references to take with her.”

“Ah, yes! I have considered both of these problems. Could you not approach her uncle?”

“Earl Mottram? Oh, no! I could never approach him!” said Mrs Mottram even more sharply than before. Mr Clauncy, however, was resolute and not going to be diverted from his course.

“I know that could be difficult for you, but there are occasions in life when we have to overcome our prejudices and preconceptions and be prepared to break the chains of the past that we think bind us. We must not forget that we are dealing with Ruth’s future and the alternative could be, to be blunt, the gutter.”

“I cannot believe that any daughter of mine would end up in the gutter!” Mrs Mottram declared.

“And I am sure that you are right,” said the Curate smoothly, “but is it also right to leave the matter to chance? Are you prepared to leave Ruth exposed to this serpent which even now she nurses in her bosom? Is it worth risking her entire life and immortal soul for the sake of a letter, a paltry letter?”

“It would be more than a letter,” said Mrs Mottram sadly, looking down at the grass beneath her feet. “No, it’s impossible. I cannot approach my brother-in-law. On that I am most definite.”

“I see,” said Mr Clauncy, frowning. “I have no idea as to what issue lies between you and the Earl that should make communication so difficult, and I have no reason to pry or enquire further, but you can always tell me in confidence if that would assist. You know that, Mrs Mottram.”

“It would not help in the least. And there is nothing to tell or that should be told. I simply cannot approach him for any kind of assistance.”

“Well, then, I will respect your position, but if you cannot write, could another do so on your behalf?”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Mrs Mottram, growing pale and glancing nervously across the Green as if it were possible that her brother-in-law was there in league with the Doctor, eavesdropping, and lying in wait for her. It was true that for reasons she did not fully understand she had come to couple these two men together in her mind. It might have been because she had, or thought she had, reason to regard Earl Mottram as a villain, but she had to acknowledge that he had not poisoned his unsuspecting wife. Indeed he had none to poison despite all the efforts by his mother at match-making. He had been exposed to every conceivable eligible woman that Lady Mottram could hand-pick from all over the country, but had refused each one of them. The speculation now that his mother had been laid to rest in the family crypt was not so much as to whom he might marry, but more as to who might inherit the estate and the vast fortune he had amassed. Mrs Mottram paid no heed to the various rumours that reached her ears. Nor did she speculate, uncomfortable in the knowledge that none of the Mottram wealth could reach either her or her daughters, but she did know that the favoured one appeared to be one Roger de Malle-Mottram, a distant cousin of whom she had heard no good whatsoever.

“This problem, does it concern the Earl’s estate and the inheritance?” asked the Curate anxiously, seemingly knowledgeable of all things at all times.

“Yes, in a way,” said Mrs Mottram, nervously. “It is not a subject I wish to discuss. Suffice it to say that neither I nor my daughters can benefit and I would not wish it to appear that we were trying to influence the situation. Nor would I wish to appear to be seeking favour from the Earl or take advantage of his influence and no matter what I did or said, that is the way it would appear. You know that to be the case, Mr Clauncy.”

“I also know that not to be the whole truth, Mrs Mottram, and if I did hear such things said I would immediately repudiate and crush them with all the moral strength that I could bring to bear!” At this point he paused and inhaled deeply as if to demonstrate his capacity for moral strength, but Mrs Mottram was preoccupied and barely noticed. “I do feel very much in earnest about this,” he continued, raising the pitch of his voice and prompting her to once again look around and check on the Doctor’s house. “As I see it, it would appear to be in the Earl’s interest to ensure that Ruth finds a good position and her proper place in Society. The same could be said of her sister, but she is younger and does not have the same wayward characteristics. In any event I am confident that *she* will make a good match in the fullness of time. But just imagine it, Mrs Mottram, imagine it! What a slur it would be on the family’s good name should the worst come to pass! The Earl’s niece becoming a fallen woman and descending into moral turpitude! And he not extending a Christian hand to save and support her! No, I would say that he has a duty to step in and ensure that such a thing does not come to pass! And I would go further. *You* have a duty to ensure that this state of affairs is brought to the Earl’s attention. We all have a duty and if you are not prepared to write to him, I shall. Yes, indeed, I shall write!”

“I will write,” said Mrs Mottram softly, her resolve melting away, “but I do not know what I shall say.”

“I think I could assist you with that,” said the Curate, smiling triumphantly. “If you will come into the Sacristy now, we can compose the letter together. Then there will be time for you to take it to Mr Sykes for it to be posted before you have to return to meet your daughters. We shall write it now, yes indeed. It is always best to strike whilst the iron is hot and get unpleasant things over.”

“I suppose so,” said Mrs Mottram trying to dispel thoughts concerning the unpleasantness of ironing. “I am not at all sure what I can say to Ruth.” She knew that conversation had the potential to be more unpleasant than a whole year’s ironing.

“Tell her?” said the Curate, guiding her towards the church door. “Why that’s a quite simple matter to deal with. Why tell her anything?”

“Isn’t that wrong? Not to tell her anything about what is being done?”

“Not in the least,” beamed Mr Clauncy. “It would be wrong to tell her something that was untrue. That would be very wrong. It would also be unkind to tell her something that might raise her expectations when there was a chance they would in time be dashed. Why tell her anything at this stage? All you are doing is writing a letter to your brother-in-law concerning the future of your family, discharging your maternal duty. What is there that should be told about that? Supposing you do not receive a reply? How would you explain that to your daughters? No, it is far better to say nothing and avoid raising false expectations. I am sure of it. Now let us find pen and paper.” With these words he ushered Mrs Mottram into the church where they spent the next hour composing a letter that contained far fewer words than the number of minutes it took to assemble them.