

Chapter Two

A Meeting

Ruth sensed the tension in the air when Mrs Mottram came to meet them after their morning's improvement and they started to walk back through the village to Meadowview Cottage. Clearly something had happened, but her mother gave no clue as to what and Ruth did not seek an explanation. She assumed that there had been an encounter with the Doctor, or even his son. Either event would be a recipe for anxiety! And it was more likely that she had met or seen Matthew as had Dr Fayrbrother been the cause, her mother would have had little hesitation in mentioning it. No, she was remaining silent because of his son!

Of course, there was always tension on the rare occasions that it was necessary for one of them to consult the doctor. It was fortunate that they were blessed with relatively good health else the frequency of such visits as would have been necessary might have scared Mrs Mottram half to death! But Ruth did not share her mother's fears and was not in the least scared by the thought of Dr Fayrbrother who she had caricatured in a number of her short stories. So when they passed across the village green again, although she half-obeyed her mother's injunction, she could not help trying to catch sight of either man out of the corner of her eye. She tried to imagine what would have happened if either of them had been there at the gates when they passed, but to her disappointment neither was, nor did she catch the slightest glimpse of one of them.

Thoughts of the Doctor's son were far away when Ruth announced her plans for that afternoon. "Shall we walk over the hill to Maggot's Bridge?"

"Why?" said her mother not without a trace of suspicion in her voice.

"It is such a lovely afternoon!" said Ruth.

"Maggot's Bridge?" exclaimed Victoria. "Uggghhh! What a ghastly place to go. You know I do not like going anywhere near there."

"I don't see why," said Ruth, considering the alternatives and wondering what had prompted her to suggest this destination in the first place. "And we have not walked over there for quite a time. It is such a pretty walk and a beautiful view as you descend into the valley."

"But it's such a ghastly place," protested her sister. "You know what is said of it!"

"I know the story but it is not a ghastly place in the daytime," countered Ruth, "and I have no intention of being there after dark."

"I would hope that you would be home in good time for tea," injected her mother. "In any event, I cannot go with you. You will have to go by yourselves as I have promised Mrs Prentice her dress will be ready for their dinner party this evening and I still have another hour's work to complete."

"Well, well!" said Victoria. "The Prentices are having another dinner party! And none of us is invited! Oh, it is fine for our mother to make and maintain the clothes that the hostess will wear, but do we receive an invitation? How am I to get out and impress people if we do not receive invitations, Mama?"

"I doubt that Mrs Prentice would appreciate having a young lady at her table who was intent on asking her whether the fitting was perfect or the repair not coming un-stitched," said Mrs Mottram.

"I would not ask anything of the kind!"

"Well, *I* am going!" declared Ruth, stubbornly.

"Going where?" said her sister in dismay.

"For my walk! Are you going to join me and leave Mother in peace to complete Mrs Prentice's dress, or shall I go alone?"

"Oh, very well," said Victoria after a moment's hesitation and an exchange of glances with her mother. Ruth knew exactly what this meant. Her younger sister was to act as her

chaperon should they happen to meet a certain person! "But do not expect me to walk right down to the bridge itself. I shall wait at the top of the path where there is a seat. If it is dry and clean I shall remain there awaiting your return, providing that is you do return!"

"Good!" said Ruth. "And there's no need for all your fineries as we are not likely to meet a single living soul unless we encounter one of the herdsmen and I doubt you see any point in impressing them. We can go exactly as we are."

"It is not the living that I am concerned with," said Victoria, "but in any case, I must look at my best." Nevertheless she was ready to depart within the half hour.

Meadowview Cottage stood on a slight rise at the very edge of the village, detached from the nearest house by some one hundred of yards. It was commonly viewed as being "pretty" and had been made all the more so by the efforts of Mrs Mottram and Ruth. They had planted the front garden with roses, hollyhocks and snapdragons and had a small vegetable garden at the rear which Mr Sykes eldest son would come and dig over every Spring for the cost of a few pence. Its produce met their needs for part of the year but Mrs Mottram had long abandoned any hope of being self-sufficient. Beyond the vegetables, abutting onto the meadow, lay a small orchard consisting mainly of ancient apple trees which were long past their prime.

The cottage itself was thought to be very old, at least that was the view expressed by the self-appointed local historian, a retired Colonel who claimed to have seen Nelson when he was a child, and who had visited them whilst preparing a book which he intended to publish. Although there was no particular feature that Mrs Mottram would have taken pride in pointing out to him, he appeared excited by what he found, announcing with great enthusiasm and authority that the wattle and daub nucleus was much older than the stone extension at the sides and rear of the cottage. He took Mrs Mottram outside and pointed out the slight ripple in the thatch where the builder had failed to match the original profile, and the other places where the effects of differential settlement between the old and new were manifest. Mrs Mottram responded by asking his opinion as to whether these effects would result in the roof leaking, to which she received a rather gruff answer.

The track that led to Maggot's Bridge ran down the side of the cottage, rising along the flank of several meadows and meandered through a wood before twisting its way down to the stream and the bridge some half mile downstream of the mill race. Beyond the bridge was a number of further meadows beyond which the track led to Giblet Wood. At one time it continued through the wood and up the hill beyond to where the Sutton gibbet stood but this way had fallen into disuse and now it petered out amongst the trees. As a consequence it was not much frequented by villagers and the main traffic was limited to the movement of herds between the meadows it served. Of course it was likely to be rendered muddy and impassable in the Winter, but by this time of the year the ground had dried out and it was possible to walk right through to the farthest woods without the risk of losing the prettiest of shoes, or having a bramble snag one of Victoria's favourite bows or ribbons.

They started their walk at the boundary of the orchard, waving "goodbye" to their mother before raising their parasols and making their way up the gentle climb across the broad expanse of meadow. This afternoon neither sister paused and stooped to gather and assemble a posy or comment on the variety of butterflies that rose into the air around them. Victoria was intent on complaining, initially, about the fact that they were not invited out with anything like the frequency or regularity that she thought was appropriate. Then she scolded her sister for supporting Miss Seymour in her refusal to instruct her charge on the steps for the polka. "Everyone dances it now," she declared authoritatively, "even in hamlets like Sutton Minety. I would wager that Mrs Prentice would dance it were there room at her house. It really is remiss of Miss Seymour to hold out against it. Can you imagine the shame I would feel if I had to admit that I would have to leave my card blank for that dance? Can you imagine what would be said?"

Ruth said she could not. In truth she would have preferred to have discussed the question of what it was that had so disturbed and upset their mother that morning, but Victoria was clearly too preoccupied to notice it. When Ruth did at last prevail, her sister declared that it probably had to do with the return of the Doctor's son as Ruth must be aware how much

mention of him or his father vexed their mother. Or perhaps it was the work that had to be completed on Mrs Prentice's dress. "I really do not know why she does not invest in a new one!" said Victoria. "Everyone must know that it is the old one with new trimmings. I would not be seen dead in it! And you know how fussy she can be!"

"I expect that you are right," murmured Ruth and let the subject lapse. Thus it was that they left the bright surroundings of the meadow in silence and passed under the leafy shelter of the trees where the track was wider and less clearly defined. They had not progressed much in excess of fifty paces when Ruth stopped suddenly and looked around them in alarm.

"What is it?" hissed her sister who had gone on a couple of paces further. "Why have you stopped?"

"I am not certain of this," whispered Ruth holding her finger to her lips. "I have the strangest feeling that we have been followed and even now are being watched, except I cannot see anyone."

"Oh!" exclaimed Victoria, more in the nature of an alarmed squeal rather than the whisper that her sister sought from her. "Where? Oh, let us go back to the meadow this instant!"

"I am not certain," said her sister, trying to remain calm as she once again looked around but saw no more than bushes and trees, and heard no more than birds. "I cannot see anyone. Perhaps it was my imagination." She was beginning to regret her announcement as she had no wish to frighten Victoria, but she had felt compelled to make it. Now she felt that it was incumbent upon her to reassure and calm her sister her nervous sister. "No," she added confidently. "There is no-one there. It must have been a deer or something like that."

"What is there that is something like a deer?" asked Victoria, seemingly rooted to the spot. "You are sure that it was not a wolf?"

"We have it on the best authority that there are no wolves left in this Country."

"Someone could have brought some in and released them! They could be out there, breeding like rabbits. We could be about to be their first human victims!"

"Oh, Victoria!"

"Or it could be some dreadful monster like the one made by Dr Frankenstein!"

"I am beginning to regret ever reading Mary Shelley's book to you," said Ruth. "It was not a wolf or a monster. I expect it was a sweet little fawn and now there is nothing there at all. Shall we continue?"

"I don't know," said Victoria hesitantly, but dutifully followed her sister once she set off further into the wood. However after a further three dozen carefully trodden paces it was Victoria who stopped in the middle of a sunny glade. "Now I think I can hear something!" she said.

"So can I, but it is not the sound I thought I heard just now. That is the sound of a horse and it is coming our way."

"What shall we do?" cried Victoria as if she was about to be confronted by a juggernaut in front of which she had not the slightest inclination to throw herself.

"We will stand our ground!" declared Ruth firmly. "There is ample room for a rider to pass."

The rider in question must have been pleasantly surprised to find himself confronted by two young ladies, parasols raised, stood before him in the middle of the wood, seeming as rooted to the ground as the trees that surrounded them. He was a dark-haired young man, impeccably dressed and not at all un-handsome in Victoria's estimation as she was later to report to her mother. For a moment it looked as if he might pass them by without as much as an acknowledgement but when the horse was alongside he gave a sudden tug on the reins and brought it to a halt. Ruth might not have been able to fully corroborate the description given later by her sister, but she did remember the smile which she described as being close to a snarl. She was un-surprised when Victoria recalled it differently in her account. "Damned nag!" said the rider, continuing to tug impatiently at the reins and pulling the horse's head around so sharply in their direction that Victoria stepped back hurriedly. "It seems that the wretched beast goes only in one direction and that is back to its stables and it goes on half a

dozen paces along that way before it responds to any command! That's the trouble with hiring a nag. I wouldn't give the beast stable-room. If it were mine I would have it shot or put to the plough, I can tell you!"

"I am sure that you are correct in your assessment, Sir," said Ruth, studying first the beast closely to see if it bore any visible clues to indicate that it was hired and a less than satisfactory creature, and then looking up at the speaker.

"You could always put it out to pasture," said Victoria, having a kinder disposition towards horses, ponies, and some smaller, furry, animals.

"Out to pasture?" said the young man with a sharp laugh. "It would not be worth the expense or the trouble. To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing myself?"

"I am sure that you are right," repeated Ruth. "I am Ruth Mottram and this is my sister, Victoria." She was sure that she detected a slight reaction at the name before he turned and nodded, but Mottram was a well known name for many miles around. Almost anyone living in that and the neighbouring County would be familiar with it. "To whom do I address my reply?"

"Ah!" said the rider. "That is not at all important. Not in the least! Good day to you, ladies." Thus saying he took hold of the reins again and dug his heels sharply into the horse's ribs. Ruth estimated it was a full five seconds before it moved forward. "Wretched creature!" she heard him exclaim, then he was gone, lost from sight around a bend in the track.

"Oh, goodness!" exclaimed Victoria. "Who on earth was that?"

"What is more to the point," said Ruth as they started to walk again, "what was he doing here?" Victoria looked at her as if she expected her sister to answer as well as ask the question. "I am sure that I do not know!" added Ruth.

"But he was so handsome! And there was you saying that we would not meet anyone and we meet someone who is clearly head and shoulders above the young men of this district. Do you not think so?"

"I am not sure that I would describe him as handsome, at least not in my book. But he did have some kind of air about him."

"Oh, yes! He had a presence. You could not miss it. A noble, almost regal, presence. Oh, my goodness, you don't think he is royalty do you?"

"Royalty? I very much doubt it. Not here in the middle of nowhere. That is why I am curious as to why he was here."

"Aristocracy, then. He must be one of the nobility at the very least."

"Possibly."

"And there was me not looking at my best. Oh, Ruth, how could you?"

"Me?"

"How could you force me to come out and meet a member of the aristocracy without me looking at my best. What ever could he have thought of me, and of you?"

"I do not know," said Ruth, "and I do not care."

"Well, I do!" said her sister curtly.

"Victoria!" said Ruth flatly. "Had you taken your customary hour to ready yourself we would have missed meeting him altogether."

"That would have been preferable to him seeing me in a state! It really would! And you had to go and tell him who I am!"

"I doubt that he will remember it for long."

"I don't know," said Victoria, lowering her parasol as they passed under the trees once more. "We should be treated as nobility. I think it is wrong of Mama to ignore our connection. What is the point of having a rich, landed and titled uncle if the connection is put to no purpose whatsoever? Just think of it, Ruth! Mixing in Society, the clothes, the jewellery, dancing until dawn with handsome young men who have no purpose in life other than to satisfy your merest whim."

"I am sure that it is not quite like that, Victoria."

"Oh, but it could be, and it is rightfully ours but we are so put upon in being denied it!"

“I think that to move in Society you have to have a great deal of money,” said Ruth slowly. “And we have none.”

“That’s where it is so unfair and we are wronged. It is not right that our uncle could have more than he could possibly require yet his nieces live in near poverty. That is unjust and it is wrong of Mama not to bring it forcibly to his attention so that it can be remedied.”

“You may be right, Vicky, but it really has no appeal for me whatsoever.”

“Oh Ruth! You can be so insular and you set yourself such low horizons. It may be that it has no appeal for you, but it is everything for me. I am sure that it is the life for which I am destined and it is one I will seize at the earliest opportunity, that is if I can find a rich husband who has no inclination towards the polka. Do you not feel the same?”

“No, I cannot say that I do,” said Ruth, but she could not help remembering the thoughts she had entertained earlier in the day. “As far as I am concerned I cannot see such an opportunity arising for me, polkas or no polkas.”

“Oh!” said Victoria, sounding a little disappointed. “I was hoping that you might speak to Mama.”

“Me?”

“Or perhaps I could ask her to write to him on my behalf?” said Victoria. “It would appear better coming from you.”

“Oh, no, Vicky. I could not ask mother to do that and nor should you. You know exactly how she feels. You will only upset her unnecessarily if you ask, because you know what her answer will be. It is best to say nothing.”

“Well it is most unreasonable,” said Victoria sulkily and lapsed into a brooding silence.

They paused when they reached the top of the descent to the bridge. “I will go no further,” Victoria declared, examining the rough seat hewn from a tree trunk that was used by the drovers. “I will just sit here and take in the air.” Before she did sit, she carefully removed a twig and a couple of yellow leaves that would have been in her proximity once seated. “I am afraid that I cannot see the dreadful bridge from here, but that is no great loss,” she declared.

“I would still like to walk down to it, having come this far. It is so pretty there, especially when you look up towards the mill. You should come down and see it.”

“I will be quite comfortable here.”

“One day I am going to come and paint it. I doubt that it has been painted before given its remoteness. Yes, I definitely shall. You are sure that you will not mind being left alone here?”

“No, not at all,” said Victoria, looking around. “Perhaps our mysterious stranger will return this way?”

“If that is a possibility perhaps I should not leave you!” said Ruth lightly. In reply her sister screwed up her pretty face in a look of contempt.

The path down to the stream dropped gently down a densely wooded slope. Ruth had no difficulty in descending but the luxuriant foliage meant that she was not able to see the bridge until she was virtually upon it. And when she did reach that, she saw something that made her stop and consider whether to return immediately to where her sister was waiting. Standing with his back to her but slumped over one of the rough hewn rails erected by the drovers to guide their livestock and prevent them tumbling into the water, was a man. As she stood there, slightly confused and wondering what to do, he stretched himself to his full height, turned towards her, and smiled. “Why Miss Mottram,” he said, advancing an arm for her to take. “What an unexpected pleasure to meet you here, and alone as well.”

“My sister is here, too, at the top of the hill,” said Ruth hastily.

“Is she, indeed? Well, your presence here brings a more agreeable end to what has been a fairly beastly and unpleasant afternoon.”

Ruth did not know what to say or whether to treat his words seriously. She was still tempted to flee back up the slope and tell her sister that she had seen all she wished to see. But if she did that there was a chance he would follow her, even offer to accompany her! And if Victoria became aware that he was there she would conclude that the sole reason for her

sister's suggestion of a walk to Maggot's bridge was to conclude a meeting there. Her mother would be scandalised if she came to learn of it! Yes, it would be best to return to her sister after entreating him not to follow her, but there was also something inside her, a feeling, a voice, urging her to stay there and talk to this man who had figured so prominently in her thoughts and who was, if she would only admit it to herself, the sole object of such romantic desires and ambitions that she possessed. "Yes," she said, ignoring his outstretched hand and boldly stepping past him to take possession of the bridge. "We walked here together. But she must not come down and find us together. That would be disastrous!"

"Disastrous?" he laughed, attracting a strong look of disapproval from Ruth. "Why would it be disastrous?"

"My mother would not approve us meeting like this, not in the slightest."

"Your mother?" he said, thoughtfully.

"In fact, I really ought to ask you to be a gentleman and leave."

"I would be delighted to oblige except the path takes me back past the spot where your sister is sat. Then, as they say, the cat would be out of the bag. But, your mother, eh? I see, or at least I don't see, but it is of no real consequence. I will do the gallant thing and save you any embarrassment or compromise. If you will but stay here for a few moments and amuse me after such a beastly afternoon I will let you return to your sister alone and she will never know that we met one another like this."

"And you will not tell anyone else?"

"Who is there to be told? No, I can put your mind completely at rest on that score. But tell me, as it clearly concerns you, how realistic is it that your sister is not, even now, descending the path? If she did appear would you rather that I fled, or hid under the bridge? It is pretty damp and unpleasant under there, I am sure."

"Oh, no," said Ruth, shaking her head. "I have to admit that it is most unlikely that Victoria will make the descent providing I do not linger too long here. She is fearful of the bridge's reputation. And if you were to hide under the bridge and then emerge she would likely die of shock! I do not think she is likely to come any closer than she already is, but I would be obliged if you kept your voice down, just in case the sound carries to her."

"Of course, Miss Mottram. I am pleased to know that I shall not have to go wading."

She smiled sympathetically. "I would not want to be the cause of you catching an ailment," she said.

"If I did so, I would be certain that it had been in a good cause and, in any case, I would be particularly well placed to treat it."

"I have always thought that this is such a lovely view," she said suddenly, feeling that their conversation was in danger of becoming too familiar. "It is such a shame that it is marred by such a gruesome tale. One day soon I shall come out here and paint it."

"Then you are not at all put off by the bridge's reputation, Miss Mottram?"

"Not in the least, and nor are you it would appear, Mr Fayrbrother." It had taken courage to pronounce his name, more courage than she would have needed to have plunged into the ice-cold stream in the depth of Winter. "But I know of many who will not walk this way, certainly not after dark. What has brought you here, may I ask?"

"Oh, nothing really," he said, looking away from her and up the stream towards the mill pond. "I suppose that, like you, I enjoy the view. I find it peaceful here and, as you say, not many come here. I needed to come somewhere quiet and think."

"And I am disturbing that thought?"

"Not in the least," he said, turning back to look at her and smiling again. "I have finished by thinking for the present."

"And your afternoon? You mentioned that it had been beastly."

"Business, Miss Mottram, simply business in which matters are not progressing as I would have them. I have quite ambitious plans, you see. Very ambitious, some might say. I have no intention of following my father in becoming a country doctor."

"It is said that your father has been greatly successful and is very wealthy."

"Yes," he said, "he is."

“And does that not mean that you will also become very wealthy in time? Oh! Does that sound impertinent?”

“Not in the least. It means exactly what you say, but the problem is that it is in time and I suspect that my father has the capacity to live until he is a hundred and I am concerned with having wealth now. And you never can be certain with an inheritance. Even if you have a copy of the Will in your possession there is nothing to stop your benefactor making a new one and disinheriting you on the least excuse. There are some who change their bequests as frequently and as unpredictably as the weather. In addition, I want far more than wealth. I want position and respect from my fellow men. I want - oh, it is so hard to put it into words. You do not approve, Miss Mottram? I can see it in your face.”

“It is not for me to either approve or disapprove, Mr Fayrbrother,” said Ruth, not really speaking her mind as she was more in sympathy with him than she was out, and thinking that it was possible that she would forgive or excuse him anything. She glanced towards the path, wondering whether Victoria’s fears were really sufficient of a deterrent to prevent her descent. It was even possible that the stranger had returned and was engaging her in conversation! “I really must return to my sister before she becomes alarmed. Every second I spend here increases the chances of us being discovered together and that would never do. It would then be I who had the beastly afternoon!”

He shook his head and turned away to look once more upstream. “If you must go I shall not be the one to stop you,” he said.

“And you will not follow me, or attempt to catch up with us? You do understand that Victoria must not have the slightest suspicion that you have been here and that we have met like this?”

“I shall keep my word,” he said, smiling grimly. “I will not tell another soul and I will even cut across the fields to the rear of my father’s property to avoid having to pass your cottage and causing further distress. There will not be the slightest hint of me. But I am home for several days and it is very boring. Shall I see you again?”

“Definitely not!” said Ruth, but the words burnt her lips as she uttered them.