

Chapter Three

A Further Meeting and a Letter.

“Well?” exclaimed Victoria, rising as soon as she perceived her sister returning up the slope. “You have been absent such a long time I was beginning to become concerned! Did you see him? Did you?”

Ruth’s heart fell. For a moment she thought that her sister was referring to Matthew Fayrbrother and that in some secret manner she had connived with him for them to meet at the bridge. This was why she remained at the top of the path, to allow them to meet alone! Then she realised that it would have been impossible for Victoria to send any communication to the Doctor’s household let alone enter into such a complicated arrangement. After all, it had been she, not Victoria, who had made the suggestion of the walk. “See who?” she said, still apprehensive.

Victoria saw the change in her sister’s expression and was puzzled. “Our handsome stranger, of course!” she exclaimed. “Who did you think I meant? I wondered if he had circled around the far side of the hill. He could have done so on horseback. He could easily have crossed downstream almost anywhere but, perhaps, not upstream because the banks are too steep. And we know that was the direction from whence he came. He could just as easily have returned that way. But I can see that you did not catch a further sight of him either.”

It was plain to Ruth that her sister had been thinking very thoroughly about the horseman and the possible course he could have taken. It not was likely that Victoria had thought of anything else whilst she was left alone there. She realised also that she had missed the opportunity of asking Mr Fayrbrother whether the horseman had passed him by on the bridge but consoled herself with the thought that she could not have admitted as much to her sister had she not made the omission. But if he had crossed the bridge, the Doctor’s son could not have missed him! “I saw neither horsemen nor horses,” she said, “nor any strangers.”

“Oh!” said Victoria, plainly disappointed.

“And I saw no maggot-ridden bodies under the bridge, either.”

“You actually looked?” said Victoria with alarm.

“Of course I did not, you silly little goose,” said Ruth lightly. “I looked up the stream and I looked down the stream. I saw a kingfisher darting along the bank and studied the fish below the bridge. And I thought that it would be a perfect place in which to set up my easel and paint the view. Then you can get some idea of what it is really like, providing I can do it justice. In fact I think I will walk out here tomorrow afternoon if the weather is fine and start. Would you like to come?”

“With you?”

“You would have to come down onto the bridge as you could not stay up here all afternoon. You could bring a small stool and sit beside me.”

“With you, on the bridge?” asked Victoria as, in response to her sister’s gesticulation, she rose and they started their journey home. “I would have to think about it.”

Ruth was on the point of reminding her that there was the possibility that they might see the stranger, but checked herself. There was always the possibility that Matthew Fayrbrother might be there, or might come to the bridge during the afternoon, not that she had given him, she thought, the slightest hint as to her specific plans. She had mentioned painting the scene, but that was all. “Mark you,” she said after some contemplation, “it has a strange atmosphere.”

“What has?”

“The bridge. I cannot explain it. Perhaps it is the feeling of not being on solid land and having the water passing beneath one’s feet.”

“Perhaps it is something else altogether,” said Victoria. “No, I definitely will not come with you tomorrow, or any other day!”

It was at tea that an account was made to Mrs Mottram of the afternoon's occurrence at which their mother became visibly alarmed and declared that if there were strangers abroad it would, in her view, no longer be safe for either of them to venture beyond the limits of the village and under no circumstances to do anything as rash as walking through the woods and down the hill to Maggot's Bridge. "It is such a desolate spot!" declared Mrs Mottram, "And it has such a bad reputation. There is always a chance of history repeating itself!"

"Oh, Mother!" exclaimed Ruth. "That is foolish!"

"It is not foolish!" Mrs Mottram declared. "I do not know what has possessed the two of you to make you both so contrary and argumentative. This morning it was Victoria and now it is you who is railing against me. It is not foolish. There is no saying what may happen if there are strangers abroad. For all we know the Army may be camped somewhere around here. There is no saying what idle soldiers or cavalymen may get up to. You said he was on horseback."

"He was on horseback," said Ruth, "but he did not have the appearance of being a cavalryman or any other kind of military man. He was very well dressed."

"Yes," said Victoria, eager to take her sister's side in what she assumed to be the defence of this handsome stranger. "I though he must be of the Nobility."

"Nobility?" said Mrs Mottram, doubtfully. "I am not sure that changes matters in the least."

"There are always strangers about," said Ruth.

"Not in Sutton Minety there isn't," maintained Mrs Mottram. "Mr Clauncy would soon inform me if there were. He is well versed with the steps that have to be taken to protect one's daughters."

"I am sure that there are always strangers about, Mother," said Ruth stubbornly, "only we do not usually encounter them. On this occasion we met one. He was well appointed and he was very civil. I doubt that we are likely to see him again because he was on a hired horse which suggests to me that he was in this locality for just today and not staying at a local house else he would have taken one from the stable. I imagine that even now he has left the district." She saw the look of dismay appear on her sister's face and regretted the self-interest which had motivated her words, but it was a valid conclusion even if it was not the one that Victoria would have wished to hear.

"Well, it is not foolish," repeated Mrs Mottram. "I am sure that Mr Clauncy would adopt exactly the same view were I to ask him."

"Mr Clauncy!" said Ruth, not without more than a hint of contempt.

"Ruth!" chastised her mother. "I will not hear a word said against him. He has a good man, an experienced man, and a man of God. I value his word and judgement. Even today he was expressing concern for your welfare and future. I would go as far to say that he is the nearest being to a father that the two of you have got!"

"Father?" exclaimed Victoria, exchanging horrified glances with her sister. "Father?"

Ruth did not respond. It was as unjust for her to think that her mother might have pretensions of marriage towards the Curate as it was for her mother to assume that he had designs on her daughter, but this was exactly the thought that entered her mind at that moment. Her mother had met Mr Clauncy whilst they had been at Miss Seymour's and then had appeared most out-of-sorts. Perhaps he had said something? But it was a thought that was unthinkable as she could not imagine anyone, save the toxicologist who lived across the Green from where the Curate paraded his abdomen, who fitted less her image of a father. Of course, as she thought this she realised that she had the propensity to accept the doctor as a father-in-law, phials and all. Or to put matter more precisely, she would not have allowed the rumours concerning his father to form the reasons for declining a proposal of marriage from the man she had so recently left standing on Maggot's Bridge, should ever one be made.

"Are you trying to tell us something, Mama?" said Victoria slowly, still looking at her sister for support and seeing from Ruth's expression that they were thinking similar thoughts. But their mother, to their eventual relief, did not understand what she meant.

“Anyway,” said Ruth, anxious to divert the conversation away from what could have become an embarrassing subject and one which, if placed into their mother’s mind, might grow into the most intractable of weeds. Had she been familiar with the thoughts her mother had harboured earlier concerning her daughter’s future she would have been even more alarmed, “I am seriously thinking of walking over to the bridge tomorrow if it is nice and painting the view. I think it is such a pity that no-one goes there to admire it.”

“With good reason,” said Victoria.

“And do you not expect to be allowed to go as well?” her mother asked her. Victoria did not reply immediately. She was still weighing up the odds of seeing the horseman once again and imagining what might become it. Would he, if they were alone, declare that she was the prettiest thing that ever he had seen and that if she could but meet her, she would charm and delight his ageing mother? Would she be invited to stay at the Northumberland estates where the family would entertain lavishly? And would she become the talk of the district and subsequently of London, because he had to have a London house and she had to be invited there for the Season!

But Ruth was probably right in what she surmised. He was on a hired horse. He did not appear the kind of man who would have had to put up at some local hostelry. No, and had he been staying in the district he would have stayed on one of the estates and taken his pick of the stable. Ruth was right. Even now he was away, travelling back to Northumberland or the London house. Neither of them would ever see him again. “I have already said that I shall not go,” she said, coldly.

“I don’t know,” said Mrs Mottram, thoughtfully and looking at Ruth.

“Surely you can spare me, Mother? Either for the morning or the afternoon?”

“Perhaps I ought to discuss the matter with Mr Clauncy first, although he has never spoken out against painting.”

“What do you mean, he has never spoken out against painting? What has he been speaking out against now?”

“Nothing of importance,” said Mrs Mottram, reasoning that there was no point in making an issue of Ruth’s writing if, in a matter of days, her brother-in-law might find a position for her. “Perhaps it will do no harm should you go. But if a stranger does appear you should pack up your belongings and come straight home!”

“Of course I shall, Mother,” said Ruth, content to agree to a proposition that she thought was most unlikely to arise. She started to assemble the plot for a new short story in her mind. A young woman, an artist, in this remote spot as dusk is falling, is approached by this dark, armoured, stranger on a black horse with fiery breath and glowing eyes, a sort of Elf King. She gathers up her belongings, just as her mother had bade her, and flees through the wood, darting this way and that in terror and in a bid to escape, but unwittingly drops a trail of paper behind her which makes the pursuit easy. Will he catch her and carry her off to the Elfin kingdom to become his mistress and a slave, never to return to the mortal world? Perhaps she could scare Victoria with it later? That would keep her sister out of the woods for several weeks!

Her thoughts were on Matthew Fayrbrother when she lay in bed that night, trying to plan her artistic expedition. She tried to re-live the events of the afternoon and recapture how she had felt when she came upon him on the bridge. And what was it exactly that he had said to her? He had told her that she had brightened up what had otherwise been a beastly afternoon. She was pleased that she could have been of such humble service to him. But he had not explained exactly what it was that had made his afternoon, in his words, so beastly. Perhaps had he confided in her she could have helped him. She would have liked to have helped him, but why should he confide in her? She meant absolutely nothing to him. She could not even describe herself as a pretty face that had come to relieve the gloom of the afternoon. That might have been said of her sister, but not of her. Yet had he seemed pleased to see her?

And what if he should appear when she was there, busy at her daubing? How should she conduct herself? He would not respect her if she gave the slightest indication of her

feelings towards him. No, it was clear that if he did come she would act properly towards him and with the appropriate reserve. That was what she would do.

The next morning dawned bright and fine, with a golden sun and a clear, pristine, sky. Ruth could not have asked for more. She settled on the afternoon as then the sun would be behind her and spent an impatient morning trying to occupy herself about the cottage and in the preparation for her expedition. Victoria showed some amusement as her sister assembled a folding, canvas-covered, stool, her easel and paints, a small supply of paper, an earthenware jar, and then went off in search of some cord. This was much to the consternation of their mother who waxed on the availability and cost of good quality cord, and then extended her treatise to string and sealing-wax. "I will bring it back!" Ruth assured her. "It is just so that I can lower my jar into the stream for water."

"Not to drink, I trust," said Victoria. "I don't think I would fancy drinking the stream water. Not downstream of the mill pond. You should hear the tales of the things that are found in there!"

"And under the bridge itself!" said Ruth. "No, I will use it only for the purposes of my water-colour painting."

When lunch was over and the dishes had been dried and carefully replaced on the small dresser, to the continued amusement of her sister, Ruth gathered up the equipment that she planned to take with her.

"It appears to be rather a burden to carry there and back again," observed her mother in a slightly disapproving tone. "Perhaps your sister should assist you?"

"Perhaps we should hire a mule?" sniggled Victoria. "I am not going!"

"I will manage," said Ruth, resolving to relate her sister her tale of the Elf King that very evening once it was dark outside. Her first thoughts, as she climbed the gentle slope of the meadow and paused to wave to her sister who had watched her from the edge of the orchard, were of the scene that would face her. What should she leave in or, more significantly, what should she leave out? Then her heart quickened as she saw the picture with a particular figure in it, a man's figure, approaching along the bank. It would never do for her to paint him into the picture overtly. If she did, she would never be able to show it to a living soul other than the subject. No, it would have to be more subtle, just a suggestion, an obscure figure upstream. Yet she did not want him to appear obscure! Perhaps if he were standing on one bank, looking down contemplatively, into the water? She could paint in some minute clue as to his identity, perhaps a doctor's bag on the ground beside him? No, that would be too obvious! Even Victoria would guess what it was and who was portrayed! Well, if Victoria started speculating as to who the figure, was she would tell her that it was some poor soul who was just about to be maggotised! That would silence her!

There was always the chance that she might meet him on the path, or that he might be there when she reached her intended destination, but to her disappointment she found herself alone when she arrived on the bridge. When the easel was up, the jar full to the brim, and she sat and composed herself, she realised that the scene was even more beautiful than her recollection. She would have to work quickly if she was to capture anything like the essence of what she saw before her on that afternoon and she realised that even then she would be unlikely to complete everything in one sitting. Oh, it was such an idyllic spot and one that could not be improved upon except by his presence! Yet if he did come, she would still have to return home with a painting as her alibi. There was no point in sitting there, day-dreaming, and having nothing to show for it. "I was just packing up when a sudden gust of wind snatched it from my grasp and it landed in the stream," she could hear herself saying. Except the air was still and even had there been, such a story did not sound any more plausible than saying her work had been dropped whilst fleeing from the Elf King.

Her hand trembled as she rapidly sketched in the outline of the foliage and the gentle, distant, hills beyond. Then it was the line of the stream, the willows, some of the bushes, and the shape of the mill house. That would identify the spot beyond doubt. As she applied the brush and let the colour wash into the sky she was so intent on what she was doing that she dispelled all thoughts of the doctor's son. It came as quite a shock when, without the slightest warning, a man's shadow fell across the sheet of paper.

“Albert!” she exclaimed, spinning around. “You quite startled me! You should not creep up on people like that!”

“Sorry, Miss Ruth,” said the young man, sheepishly. “Albert only wants to see you paint. He hears you say that you are go’ing to paint and he’s hoping” He suddenly stopped speaking and looked woefully at the ground.

“What did you say?” she asked sharply. “Did you say that you overheard me saying that I was going to paint this scene? How could you possibly have heard me say that? How could you, Albert - unless - Albert, were you here when I was here yesterday afternoon? Were you, Albert?” His head hung even lower. “Albert,” she repeated. “Were you? I must know! You must tell me!” She knew that she had mentioned her intentions to no-one but her sister and Matthew Fayrbrother. If Albert had seen them together on the bridge there was the risk that it would soon be around the village and inevitably reach the ears of the Curate and her mother. Then not only would she be banned from going out alone, but she would never hear the last of it! “Albert!” she said, even more sharply than before.

“Yes, Miss Ruth,” he said lowly.

“And, Albert, where were you when you heard what I said. I must know that too. Were you here, at the bridge?” She looked about as she said this, wondering where he could have concealed himself.

“Albert was here,” he admitted.

“Here? But where? I did not see you.”

“Albert was unner the bridge, Miss Ruth. He knows it was bad of him an’ he has been told that it was so and thoroughly scolded. Albert ‘as a little cubby hole unner there, hollowed out in the bank, where he’s can go when it’s a-raining and he’s getting wet.”

“You were under the bridge?” said Ruth, gravely, wondering how Victoria would have reacted to such an admission. “You were under there all the time?”

“Aye, Miss Ruth. Albert ‘as seen you’s coming along the way with Miss Victoria.”

“So it was you I heard in the woods, Albert, was it? I knew I heard something! I thought that someone was following us!” His head dropped again and Ruth sensed that she had settled upon the truth. “So, Albert, if you saw me and my sister, did you also see the stranger, the man on horseback?”

“Aye, Miss Ruth,” the youth confessed. “He sees him first from the hill and he’s on the bridge with that Master Fayrbrother who he sees you talking to. The Albert’s come down to follow him. That’s as how he sees you and Miss Victoria.”

“I see. We were better prey, eh? I hope you realise, Albert, that it is very wrong of you to spy and eavesdrop on people? It is very wrong indeed!”

“Aye, Miss Ruth,” he said, sounding close to tears. “But Albert, he sees and hears many things an’ none sees or hears him an’ he says nothing to no-one. That is Albert’s ‘onest truth, Miss. He tells no-one.”

“That’s as maybe, Albert, but it is still a bad thing to do, very wrong, and you deserve to be thoroughly scolded for it.”

“Albert would not want to do you any harm, Miss Ruth,” said the youth. “You’s always been good an’ kind to Albert, not like some who say get out of my way Albert and kick him and cuff him. You’s been good, that you ‘ave.”

Ruth drew a deep breath and turned back to the painting. She still felt alarmed and dismayed at the revelation that they had not only been seen together, but that someone had overheard every word spoken. It was not that there had been anything indiscreet said, but she knew how tales could become distorted in the telling. “Albert,” she said, slowly, “would you do one thing for me? Just one thing?”

“Albert’s ‘as do anything for you’s, Miss Ruth. He’s as even give up his life for you.”

“You must not say things like that Albert. I would never ask that of you, nor of anyone. I simply want you to promise that you will not ever mention what you saw or heard yesterday to a living soul for as long as you live. You understand what I am asking of you? It can be our little secret, just Albert’s and Ruth’s. Can you promise that?”

“Secret?” said Albert, mulling the thought over in his head, “Albert’s and Miss Ruth’s secret? Albert, he ‘as many secrets.”

“So, you can add another one. An important one. A sacred one, never to be divulged. Can you do that, Albert? Can you promise?”

“Albert promises.”

“What does Albert promise?”

“Albert promised,” he said after a pause, “that he will keep Albert’s and Miss Ruth’s secret.”

“Good!” said Ruth. “Now, if you sit down there, out of my light, and keep quiet, you may watch me paint. Is that all right?”

“Yes, Miss Ruth,” said the youth and went to the indicated spot from which he did not move. He did not, however, remain silent but broke into a tuneless hum which he was apt to do when he was content. Ruth did not stop him, but pressed on with her work, adding colour to the bushes and the water. But when, as planned, she brushed in the silhouette of a man’s figure on the bank he became quite excited. “Albert?” he exclaimed, pointing at the figure. “Is this Albert?”

Ruth was not pleased at the thought of having to re-assign the identity of the character in the picture, but she could see how important it was to her onlooker. “Is that Albert?” she asked. “Why, here is a mystery for anyone who looks upon this painting. I tell you what, Albert. For as long as you keep our secret, this shall be Albert and no-one else. It shall be you.”

“It is Albert?” he repeated. “Miss Ruth?”

“Yes,” she said softly, as a small cloud obstructed the sun and she felt a sudden chill, “it is Albert.”

The sky had all but clouded over by the time that Ruth arrived back at the cottage, taking her uncompleted work up to her room. She had it in mind to return the next day and complete it. She was not to know then, or even suspect, that forthcoming events would result in her never returning to the bridge. For the next two days it rained heavily and on the third day a letter arrived, the contents of which was to change the course of her life, and those of her mother and sister.

The arrival of the letter did not pass unnoticed or un-commented upon in the Sutton Minety. “The envelope had the Earl’s crest on, I tell you,” Mr Sykes told his wife after he had delivered to Meadowview Cottage and into the trembling hands of Mrs Mottram. “I am certain of it! I have seen it before.”

“It will be in reply to the letter she sent a few days ago,” said Mrs Sykes, wiping her hands in her apron. “What day was it? Monday or Tuesday?”

“But why would she be writing to him now, after all this time? The word was that the family had been cut off completely and the Earl would have nothing to do with them. There was some business at the time of the wedding. His brother married against their mother’s wishes, or something like that.”

“Oh, you are blind Nathaniel, and you with three daughters and all!” scolded his wife. “Why the reason is as plain as the hair on the back of your head! Ruth is coming on twenty-one years of age, indeed she may have passed it. Her mother has written to the Earl on that account.”

“That may be true, woman, but on what matter would she have written?”

“Oh, Lord, save us! She has written concerning the money!”

“What money? I know nothing of any money,” said Mr Sykes, gruffly.

“I don’t know what money,” said his wife, placing a large, black, kettle on the range. “Perhaps there’s a settlement to be had or perhaps her mother is asking for a dowry. Goodness, if the poor girl is to make a good match she will need to bring a handsome dowry with her to make up for what she lacks in looks.”

“I understand she is not without her talents,” said her husband, defensively. “They say she is accomplished with the pen and brush.”

“Pah!” said Mrs Sykes. “You know as well as me that such things and learning never won any woman a good man. No, it will be for the money. That is why Mrs Mottram wrote to the Earl. And if the stories I hear are true, she is likely to be well disappointed!”

Ruth first caught sight of the envelope that Mr Sykes had delivered lying unopened on the dresser. She saw that it was addressed to her mother but she did not recognise the hand nor, despite her learning and other talents, was she as knowledgeable as Mr Sykes concerning the crest. However, both Victoria and she noted that Mrs Mottram was short of being pleased when she eventually opened it and read the contents of the brief note it contained, although they would have told Mrs Sykes that their mother was more cross than she was disappointed. "Is it bad news?" Ruth asked.

Mrs Mottram appeared to shake her head and read the note to herself again and then for a third time, as if it was in an alien language and she was unable to comprehend its meaning. "Are we to learn what it says and from whom it has come?" asked Vicky, aware that it must be of some importance.

"Yes, Mother," said Ruth. "You must keep us in suspense no longer. Who has sent it?"

"It is from your uncle," said their mother, a tremble in her voice.

"From Uncle Lancaster?" said Ruth with surprise.

"No!" hissed Mrs Mottram. "Not from my brother. It is from your other uncle, your father's brother."

"From the Earl?" exclaimed Victoria, looking at Ruth then leaping to her feet and running to her mother's side. "He has written to us? How wonderful! Oh, what does he say, not that such a letter could be looked upon as anything other than a discharge of his duty towards us."

"He does not have any duty towards either of you to discharge," said Mrs Mottram wearily. "I am tired of having to say that. And the letter is not exactly from the Earl himself. It is from his secretary, but he says that your uncle has directed him to write to me. I suppose that amount to the same thing."

"Do Earls ever write themselves?" asked Victoria, quite unable to stand still.

"I doubt that they can write," said Ruth, not having either charitable feelings towards, or expectations of, this particular uncle who had remained aloof and remote from them all.

"Now, that is not at all true," said Mrs Mottram, "at least not of your uncle. He is a very well educated man who is much respected. He is a very successful business man and I can add that he was charming in his day. The plain truth is that he moves in quite different circles to us."

Most observers would have found themselves in accord with most of Mrs Mottram's views on her brother-in-law. Those who really knew him, and they were few in number, would certainly have described him as capable of being charming. All would have acknowledged that he had enjoyed the best that education could bestow upon a man and envy the success which, unlike many of his Class, he had enjoyed as an industrialist. As for his family, the de Mottrams, for that was the aristocratic name, were long established and highly respected. Their lineage could be traced back to Guy de Mottram who had received both a charter from Henry I and the nucleus of lands which formed the current estate including several villages. And, for landed families, they were unusual in having no black sheep in their closet. No de Mottram had been a traitor or led a rebellion. Instead the successive generations had been content to live off the proceeds of the estate and drift with the tide of history, a policy that had served them well and secured their position.

But the current Earl had broken with tradition in a number of ways. He had anticipated the way matters would develop in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and invested heavily in mining, iron-smelting and acquired a number of manufacturing companies. He had also bought tracts of land to the south and east of London which were gradually being developed. He was, everyone agreed, a most successful man.

Yet he had not taken a wife, something that had broken his mother's heart and over which she reproached him from her death bed. "It is not too late," she whispered. "You must take the necklace and give it to your wife to be. It is not too late. Promise me that you will."

"I cannot promise you that, Mother," he said, softly, "and you know why."

"But that was so long ago, so very long ago."

"I still cannot promise you that."

"It is my dying wish," she insisted.

"I still cannot promise you what you ask," said the Earl, "but I can assure you that the necklace will be passed on in accordance with the family tradition. That much I promise."

"Thank you," said Lady Mottram and closed her eyes for the last time, leaving her son in sole charge of the whole estate. He was, everyone agreed, a most powerful and influential man.

"But, Mother," cried Victoria, "why has he written to us? Is he to settle money upon us?"

"No, my dear," said Mrs Mottram, "nor would I wish him to. It would bring nothing but great unhappiness."

"I don't see how you can say that," said Victoria bitterly. "I don't at all! I cannot see that it has brought the Earl great unhappiness!"

"He was born into it," said Mrs Mottram. "That makes a difference."

"I don't see that either," declared Victoria. "I cannot think of anything better to bring me happiness than a sum settled on me, something that would bring me a good marriage. If our uncle is as rich as everyone says I cannot see why he should not settle a modest sum on both of us. What kind of man is either of us likely to attract if we are penniless? If not a settlement, then an allowance. That would do as well, would it not, Ruth?"

"I do not know for sure," said Ruth, thoughtfully. "There are times when I think it would be pleasant to be comfortably placed"

"There!" interrupted her sister.

"....and there are other times when I think I could live happily with no money provided I have a roof over my head, bread on my plate, and a fire in my hearth."

"Ruth! Well, I do not feel like that at all, never!" said Victoria, becoming red-faced. "I have no intention of sharing Ruth's expectations. I want great ones. Mama, you must promise that you will not oppose the Earl if he is thinking of settling a sum on me and Ruth. After all we are his nieces. Is that why he has written?"

"I shall promise nothing of the sort," said Mrs Mottram. "I will do nothing that may compromise my ability to act in your best interests."

"A settlement would be in my best interests," said Victoria.

"You have not yet told us what the Earl's secretary has written, Mother," said Ruth patiently. "What does he say? Is a settlement proposed?"

"No," said Mrs Mottram. Victoria scowled and sat down, resting her chin in her hands.

"What then? You are going to tell us?"

"We are asked to go and stay with the Earl," said Mrs Mottram without enthusiasm.

"There!" cried Victoria, leaping to her feet. "Why else would he invite us if he was not thinking of making a settlement? He wants to meet us and see what we are like. Well, I will be all sweetness and light. He will find me most irresistible and perfect in every respect."

"Does he say why we are invited?" asked Ruth.

"No," said her mother, folding the note and placing it in her pocket.

"And are we not to read the letter?" continued Ruth.

"No, at least not for the present. There is much to do as we are requested to be there tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said Ruth and Victoria simultaneously.

"Yes, we are to travel tomorrow." Mrs Mottram looked around her as if she was taking a mental inventory of the room's contents.

"For how long?" said Ruth.

"I do not know. It does not say. For a few days, I suppose. Now the two of you had better start sorting out what is to be packed. I must go to Mr Sykes and hire some trunks and make arrangements for our journey."

"He is not sending a carriage, Mama?" said Victoria.

“No, my dear. He is not. At least there is no mention of one in the letter so we must assume that we are to travel by train. And I have answered enough in the way of questions for the present. Run along now, the two of you.

“Oh, this is impossible!” cried Victoria going to the door. “We do not know how long we are going for and we have to arrange our own transport!”

“It will probably be better to travel by train,” said Mrs Mottram. “I do not fancy having to ride all that distance in a carriage.

“But think of it, Mother! Travelling in a carriage behind a four in hand with liveried footmen and with the Earl’s Coat of Arms on the door. Oh, it would be worth it just to pass Miss Seymour’s! And with everyone who sees us wondering who we are and where we are going! Instead, we are to travel by rail, third class I presume.”

“We will have to, Victoria,” said Mrs Mottram. “It is just as well that I have a small sum set aside for just such emergencies.”

“You mean, Mama, that he has not even sent us the money for the fare and expenses?” asked Victoria with dismay.

“No,” said her mother, “nor would I have expected him to.”

“How ungenerous! Even so, I would bet you could borrow almost any sum on the strength of the visit.”

“Victoria!” exclaimed Mrs Mottram. “I trust that you did not learn to say such things at Miss Seymour’s! Usury is against the Lord’s teachings and you are forbidden to mention it again. Now run along to your rooms and start preparations. We have such a lot to think about and to do. And I will go straight away to see Mr Sykes. Come along, away with the two of you!”

When Ruth reached her room, she sat on her bed and stared out of the window at the orchard. She felt puzzled and unexpectedly annoyed. She was puzzled because, unlike her sister, she did not credit her uncle with the discharge of his long-overdue duties and could not understand what had prompted the invitation. After all, she could not recall the last time they had received any communication from him. They had not even received an invitation to Lady Mottram’s funeral! Now, completely out of the blue had come this request! It was possible that her uncle was ill, or something else had happened, but news travelled quickly when it concerned the Earl and they had heard nothing. And there was always Uncle Lancaster who did write regularly to his sister but who had not given them the slightest hint that they might be summoned.

There was a suspicion in her mind that the arrival of the letter was not entirely unexpected by her mother. It appeared that she knew it would arrive. Yet there was something in it which annoyed her, and there was her refusal to allow her daughters to read it. It would have been so easier for her to say “here you are. Read it quickly as we have much to do.” But she had not. Perhaps her mother was concerned at the prospect of the journey which was unlikely to be comfortable. Perhaps she was even concerned at the thought of visiting Hazleton Court Hall? She knew that her mother would never talk about her younger life nor the visits she made there before she married. Yes, it might well be because the visit would bring back memories, some of which her mother might rather forget.

Ruth was annoyed because the sudden change in her plans frustrated her return to Maggot’s Bridge. Matthew Fayrbrother had said he was back home for only a few days. The opportunity to meet him again would soon pass and here she was about to be whisked away for an indeterminate period of time. For a rash moment she considered writing him a short note explaining her absence, but how foolish that would have been especially after the trouble she had gone to in order to bind Albert to secrecy. No, she would have to forego the chance of seeing him again. She would probably now lose him to that black-headed Laird’s daughter, but that was the way life worked out.