

Chapter Four

Hazleton Court Hall

Victoria solved the problem of what to pack by packing everything. The trunk delivered by Mr Sykes was not large enough for her purposes, but Ruth, whose requirements and possessions were much more modest, was able to offer her sister use of the ample spare capacity in her trunk. All the time she was packing, Victoria prattled on and bombarded her sister and mother with question about what life was likely to be like at the Earl's residence. Did he ride to the hounds? Were there Balls? Would she receive invitations to events at other houses? Would there be a croquet lawn, a fountain? Did he have his own private chapel? Did he really own three villages and all the properties within them? How many horses did he stable? How many carriages? How many servants did he have? How large was the House? And, most important of all, would he settle a substantial sum on each of them?

Ruth and her mother withstood the barrage, deflecting most of the questions by answering that they would all have to wait and see. But Victoria was persistent. Surely Uncle Lancaster had communicated some details from time to time? She had to know what kind of life she was going to. "It is likely to be for only a few days," said Mrs Mottram wearily. "There won't be time for Balls or visits or anything like that." But Victoria would not be silenced and Ruth was pleased when Mr Sykes arrived with his cart to convey them and their luggage to the railway station.

Fortune smiled upon them as the weather elected to be fine, although this only served to remind Ruth that she would have set out to complete her painting and who knows what else, but for the invitation. By the time they reached the station and the porter went in search of a trolley, the sun was already high in the sky and it felt unseasonably warm. But once they had seen their luggage safely placed in the guard's van and were sat in the carriage, Ruth put aside any residual resentment she felt at being cheated out of her afternoon by the stream. This visit would be, after all, something of an adventure which might provide her with material for further stories. And it probably would be over in a few days, too soon she was sure for her sister. It seemed such a short journey to the junction at Kemble where they disembarked together with the trunks and waited for the single coach to come up the branch from Tetbury. At Culkerton the porter wanted to know whether a carriage was being sent from the House for them. "Not as far as I know," said Mrs Mottram. "Indeed, they would not be aware of the time we were due to arrive. It is no great distance to the House. We can walk and they can send for our trunks later today." Ruth thought that it would have been nice to have been met by a carriage but did not say so.

"Is there nothing locally we could hire?" asked Victoria, being more bold on this occasion than her sister.

"I can't say as there is," said the porter. "Tom Bevan's a cart but it's market day in Tetbury and he's off there."

"Then we will have to walk," said Mrs Mottram, firmly.

"Oh, Mama!" exclaimed Victoria. "Must we? Surely there is somewhere we could take a little refreshment?"

"I dare say there will be refreshment enough at the House," replied her mother. "I also dare say that you could stay with the luggage until someone comes to fetch it, but I have no way of judging when that will be."

Victoria looked around her desperately in search of help or support. She confronted the porter whose eyes appeared to look in different directions at the same time, but he just shrugged. She appealed to her sister who said that she had no better suggestion. "Then we

will have to walk," she said at length, shaking her head and disturbing one or two errant locks.

The distance to the House that Mrs Mottram had described as "no great distance" was in fact in excess of three miles and in the midday sun, despite having her parasol, it was not the most pleasant of promenades that Ruth had set out on. Some stretches of the road that Mrs Mottram followed were lined with trees which afforded the three woman much welcomed shade, but in the most they were at the mercy of the day's heat. Victoria kept hoping that some form of salvation would appear. "I wouldn't even be choosy," she declared. "A hay cart, anything with wheels that was going in our direction. Oh, Mama, are you certain that we are on the right road? We have just passed a sign pointing in a different direction to the one we are following and saying that Hazleton is two miles distant."

"It has been a long time since I was here," said Mrs Mottram, dabbing her brow, "but the House is some distance from the village. This is the right way. I am sure of it."

It was over half an hour later when the ladies reached the gate house where a man told them he would send to the House for a carriage if they would care to wait. Mrs Mottram outraged her younger daughter by refusing. "We have walked this far," she said stubbornly. "We can walk the short distance that remains. The less I call upon my brother-in-law's services, the better I feel."

"Oh, Mama!" wailed Victoria. "What can I look like?"

They had not proceeded very far along the drive, and were not yet within sight of the House, when they saw a rider approaching at great speed, waving his arms and shouting at them. "Hey you!" the young man yelled, addressing them. "Be off with you! We don't tolerate any gypsies or vagabonds around here. Be off and take your wares with you before I have the dogs set upon you!"

"Do I look like a gypsy?" exclaimed Victoria vehemently, standing her ground. "Do I, Mama?"

"I am sure that you do not, my dear," said Mrs Mottram, calmly. "I think you are mistaken, Sir. Do any of us look as we are gypsies?"

The man reined in his horse and smiled, sardonically Ruth felt. "Why, now I come closer I can see that you do not. At least, you do not resemble the kind we normally get around here."

"Do you not recognise us, Sir?" said Ruth, raising her parasol so that the man could see her face clearly.

"Why, bless my soul! Now I look at you closely, I do. You are the two young ladies of the wood! My uncle said that you were due to visit this week but did not name the day. I am pleased to make your acquaintance again."

"Your uncle?" said Victoria.

"The Earl, Earl Mottram," said the young man, dismounting and releasing the reins. "Allow me to present myself. I am Roger de Malle-Mottram."

"Then you are our cousin!" cried Victoria. "Mama! You did not inform us we had a cousin!" She then swung back to face the young man and scowled. "Gypsies indeed!"

"A thousand apologies!" he said, but it sounded insincere to Ruth.

"I did not know that you had a cousin," said Mrs Mottram with suspicion. "Indeed, I do not know how you could suddenly have gained one so mature in years."

"Oh, that's easy," said the young man, coming closer to Victoria and winking. "I am a sort of second cousin several times removed, don't you know? But I call the Earl, uncle, as he don't take exception to the familiarity, him having no family of his own, or none of which to speak."

"We are his family," said Victoria.

"I can't say that he has ever talked about you," said the young man. "Shall I ride up to the House and have someone fetch you? It would be little trouble."

"No," said Mrs Mottram, taking Victoria's arm then losing it to Roger. "We have walked this far. We can walk a little further."

“Then I shall walk with you,” he declared. “It would normally be a bit of a bore, but perhaps not so with the present company. Perhaps I could take your portmanteau, Miss Mottram?”

“Victoria,” she said, lowering her eyes. Mrs Mottram was on the brink of chastising her daughter but a glance from Ruth silenced her. “Thank you, Sir,” added Victoria as she once more raised her parasol.

Ruth first sighting of Hazleton Court Hall was upon rounding a tree-lined bend in the drive to find it standing several hundred yards in front of, and slightly above, them. “Is that it?” said Victoria, not without a tinge of disappointment. “It is not very large, is it?” Their companion laughed.

“I suppose there are some who would find it modest as country houses go,” he said, “but it is large enough for most purposes once you are settled in it.”

“Has it a Ballroom?”

“Why, yes, it has, but I cannot ever recall it being used.”

“Oh!” said Victoria, and lapsed into silence.

Ruth’s reaction was less marked than her sister’s. She had not anticipated finding a palace and her expectations were more moderate. What she saw was a central portico, supported on tall columns, surmounting a short flight of steps, and two almost identical, white stone facades which flanked it. From where she was it was hard to discern whether the house had two or three stories, but she could make out a number of dormer windows which she took to be the servants’ quarters. It appeared to be rectangular in plan, but what impressed her most was the abundance of chimneys, constructed from brick, which appeared and seemed to cut into the sky as they rose above the roof line. Between where they stood and the house lay open, close-cropped, grassland, broken by the occasional tree, and away to the right, running out from one side of the house, she could see a high stone wall which appeared to indicate, perhaps, a formal or vegetable garden. In the sunlight she thought the house looked pleasantly attractive, but it might look quite grim if the sky were overcast. In the event, Ruth did not find the house small, and it was certainly large enough in which to become totally lost. She soon discovered that one remedy was to go outside and find an entrance that was familiar, a practice she was to adopt several times in the first days of their visit. She could not imagine what it could be like to live in a large house and she spent a little while trying to calculate how many times Meadowview Cottage might be fitted in before giving up. No, in Ruth’s view it could not fairly be described as a small house but then she was not qualified to comment upon what size of mansion would befit an Earl.

“There are those who look upon the House as rather frugal,” said their companion with an edge to his voice. “Some would even describe the Earl as a miser,” he added in a low voice intended for Victoria alone.

“Oh, Mama!” she said, turning. “You haven’t brought us all this way to meet a miser have you? Is he really ungenerous?” she added, anxiously.

“Very much so,” said her cousin, “but he may not be towards you if you are nice to him and win over his heart.”

“Then I will be as charming as any girl could possibly be,” she declared. Their approach across the vast expanse of lawn was soon noticed as they could see several plainly-dressed men descending the steps, then running towards them.

“Assistance is at hand!” declared Roger. He was not slow in directing the men to relieve the ladies of the hand luggage that they had bravely carried from the station, and the ladies, for their part, were not in the least reluctant to give it up. “And there is the faithful Twigg, the Earl’s secretary, awaiting you at the top of the steps. Ladies, I will leave you in his charge as I am not held high in his esteem, not that it counts one jot! We will see one another later, I am sure!” And with a flourish he was away, not in the direction of the steps, but towards the walled garden that Ruth had perceived and always under the watchful eye of the secretary, she thought.

“Is he not handsome!” said Victoria, watching him depart. “To think that we have him as a cousin and did not know it!”

“I was wondering what business brought him to Sutton Minety,” said Ruth lowly.

“I don’t know and I don’t much care!” said her sister, practising a twirl. “All I know is that he is our cousin and he is here!”

“Your distant cousin,” said their mother.

“So much the better!” exclaimed Victoria.

The Earl’s secretary came down the steps to meet them. Ruth described him as a plump, balding, middle aged man with grey, serious, eyes and a short beard below his reddish face. “Mrs Mottram and daughters?” he said, coldly and in a slightly high-pitched voice. “I am Twigg, the Earl’s secretary. I wrote to you. I assume that your luggage is at the station? I will send someone to collect it straight away and to bring it to your rooms. I expect that you would like to rest and refresh yourselves after your journey. If you will follow me I will show you to your rooms. The Earl is expecting you to join him for tea later this afternoon. I will send for you at the appropriate hour. If you would come this way?”

Ruth could see that Victoria was bubbling with excitement, but she felt put out and uncomfortable. Her feeling was reinforced when they reached the large entrance hall with its cold, stone, floor almost devoid of furniture and a large, dark, wooden staircase which bifurcated half way to the first floor before a tall, stained glass, window depicting the de Mottram Coat of Arms and a number of allegedly heroic deeds performed by their ancestors. She thought that the secretary was almost hostile in the manner in which he received them and was tempted to say as much to their uncle once they were in his presence. After all, she thought as they were ushered along a wide corridor flanked with portraits and tapestries, then directed into a narrower one, they were the guests! It was not as if they had arrived uninvited!

But what ever misgivings she might have nurtured were dispelled the moment that the secretary showed her the room she was to have. It was bright, fresh, with a double aspect from which she could look out over the rose garden and catch the occasional scent as the breeze conveyed it upwards. The bed was ancient and the mattress firm. She thought it small and wondered whether her feet would protrude over the end when she lay in it, another fear she soon dispelled though this time by experimentation.

“Lucy will be your maid for the extent of your visit,” the secretary informed her. “I will send her to you later. She is a good and attentive girl. I am sure that you will find her satisfactory.” It was at this point that Ruth wished that Miss Seymour had provided them with a reference book so that she could look up the subject of how to deal with personal maids.

“Well,” she thought as she stretched out on the bed and checked the location of her toes once again, “this is not at all how I imagined it would be. No liveried servants or lackeys. No breath-taking opulence. No uncle to greet us. In fact we have had a rather perfunctory welcome. But we are to be summoned into the presence of his Greatness later on. I wonder why he has invited us. Why are we here at all?”

She had resolved earlier to look for material for her writing and there was some mystery in all this. It should not be hard to develop it and construct a story, but what was the truth of it? She could start with the letter that her mother had received with irritation, read, then concealed from her daughters. Then there was their so-called cousin. He would have some part to play in the drama and, if she was honest with herself, she did not much care for him so would cast him as a villain. There was his visit to their village to be explained. Why should he have been there except he had been sent by their uncle to see their mother? That would explain his reaction when she told him who they were and the reason for him wishing to remain anonymous. And she could make something of this officious secretary and the off-hand way in which they had been received. Finally, there was the Earl himself. As she had not met him she could not gauge what part she would call upon him to play. Perhaps he had never instructed that the letter should be written. Perhaps he was, even now, a prisoner in one of the rooms or in a tower - there had to be a tower, though she had seen none - yes, a prisoner kept there by a conspiracy between their cousin and the secretary. Of course one would double-cross the other eventually, but for the present they were all in mortal danger!

A light rap on the door made her jump. It was her mother. “I was just checking whether you are all right,” she said. “Victoria is fretting over whether her luggage will arrive

in time for her to change. She is petrified at the thought of meeting your uncle in her travelling clothes. And you?"

Ruth sat up. "I was just resting, but I am fine," she said brightly. "This is a nice room, though the bed is a little firm. And I am to have a maid to attend to me. What do you think she will do?"

"Oh, very little. She will fetch you water and empty the basin when you need it, run baths, change the linen, you know. She might even put your hair up although I would not recommend that to the maid who looks after Victoria, not unless she has the whole of the day at her disposal."

"I see," said Ruth. She had her misgivings at having a maid perform even these basic services, but did not voice them. "She is named Lucy," she added, "but I have not met her as yet. I wonder what she is like. I dare say we will become the best of friends! That is assuming that I am permitted to be friendly with uncle's servants?"

"I doubt that we will be here long enough for you to make any friendships," said Mrs Mottram.

"I see. In which case, why are we here, Mother? What is this all about?"

"About?" said Mrs Mottram feigning surprise at being asked such a question.

"Yes, Mother. I am sure that both Victoria and I are happy to be here, Victoria in particular, but I think we are entitled to know why we are here, why we have suddenly been sent for. Why does our uncle want to see us?"

Mrs Mottram sighed and looked uncomfortable. "I cannot tell you, Ruth. I must allow the Earl to explain his intentions. I am sure that he will make things clear in his own time."

"His intentions?" said Ruth, standing. "Concerning what or whom?"

"That I cannot also say," said her mother, backing towards the door. "You must be patient and wait until we are summoned."

"It's to do with Victoria, isn't it?" hissed Ruth. "That is why we are here! Is she to be married? Is that it?"

"Oh, Ruth! That is such a silly notion. I do not know what puts such ideas into your head, I really do not. It is as I have said. We must all wait until we see the Earl in a short while and even then he may not make all his intentions known. You must be patient. And do be polite to him! He is a very important and influential man."

"Was I ever other than polite to anyone?" said Ruth, going once more to the window. "Can you smell the roses?"

"No," said her mother abruptly, closing the door behind her as she left.

So that was it! Ruth was convinced that she had stumbled upon the truth of it all. Victoria was to be married! Perhaps her uncle had decided upon a match between her sister and their newly discovered cousin. That would explain his incognito visit to their village. He had called upon their mother who had told him where they were walking and he had then ridden out just to catch a glimpse of them. No doubt he had thought her sister most acceptable and reported as much to the Earl. It would explain the summons and it was probable that the letter to her mother directed her not to inform her daughters until the Earl had met them and formed an assessment of the bride-to-be. No wonder her mother had folded it away and not let them read it! And then this cousin of theirs had been very friendly, almost familiar, with her sister when they arrived. It had been she he accompanied, not her mother. Yes, it all fell into place! It probably also made sense from a point of view of the inheritance and the continuation of the family. Victoria would become the next Lady Mottram. Well, Ruth was sure there could not be a prettier one.

But what of their cousin? Here Ruth nursed misgivings. If she judged him by her sister's maxim and went upon first impressions he scored rather badly. She had found him arrogant and impolite almost to the point of being un-chivalrous. It was true that she had only Matthew Fayrbrother by which to judge him, but Ruth was in no doubt as to where the choice for herself would lay. Yet Victoria was much taken with their cousin. Other than that, what mattered?

At the appointed house the Earl's secretary called upon them and led them back and across the staircase, along a further wide corridor lined with more ancestors and their discarded suits of armour and weaponry until they were faced by a wide, oak, panelled door. "The Earl is slightly indisposed," said Mr Twigg in a low voice, "but you are to take tea with him." On saying this he opened the door and indicated that they should enter. They found themselves in a long, well-lit, well-furnished, room, flanked by windows through which Ruth could see woodland bordering on the lawn across which they had walked earlier that afternoon. At the far end a slim, middle-aged man was sprawled on a sofa before which three high-backed chairs and a low table were arranged. As they approached Ruth could see that one of his feet was elevated and heavily bandaged.

"Alice!" he exclaimed brightly, suddenly, almost as if he had not expected them but beckoning them forward to the chairs with a flourish of his hand. "Dear Alice! It has been such a long time, so very long. Do come and sit down. I fear that you find me at a great disadvantage and must excuse me if I do not stand to greet you and your daughters but I am afraid that I am temporarily incapacitated by some devilish poison. Trod on a nail which went right up through the boot and the foot. Devilish job to cut it off and extract it. Sure the doctors did more harm in doing that than the wretched thing did in its entry! The irony is that it was in all certainty one of mine! What folly for an industrialist to impale himself on one of his own nails! Oh, you must pardon me ladies if I forget courtesy and affect your sensibilities. I will spare you all the gory details. Suffice it to say that I cannot put my foot to the ground even were the medical practitioners willing to permit me to. The whole thing has turned quite nasty and has to be dressed three times a day, not that I will be calling upon any of you to witness such a thing. It is not at all a pleasant business. I am even threatened with bleeding! But I expect it to clear up within a few weeks. These things usually do."

"Witch Hazel," said Mrs Mottram, boldly. "Applied to the wound with honey." The Earl smiled. "I am sure that you are right. But I am being discourteous and speaking only of my afflictions. So these are the daughters? You must be Victoria. My, the tales of your beauty have preceded you and are without exaggeration! You have inherited your mother's fine features, I can see that. Do come and sit here, beside me, so that I can see you better." Victoria gave a little curtsy, smiled graciously, and did as she was bid, ignoring or perhaps not even seeing the disapproving look from her mother. Ruth saw it and began to wonder if her prognosis was wrong. "Oh, yes, indeed," the Earl continued, "you are very pretty, child. I think if there was a young lady that I could call my daughter, she would be you. Indeed, I think I shall adopt you for the duration of my stay." Saying this he looked straight at Mrs Mottram who opened her mouth as if to speak but said nothing. "It will not be a legal adoption, you understand. Just an arrangement between us. Not something that is all cut and dried and bound up by Mr Lancaster in red and green tape and sealed with wax. Just an arrangement. How does that appear to you, daughter?"

"Very acceptable," said Victoria, producing one of her very best smiles. "Shall I call you Papa?"

The Earl frowned. "It will be as strange for me to be called that as it must be for you to address someone as Papa. But why not? Why not indeed? What do you think, Alice? Is there any harm in our little arrangement?" Ruth could see her mother's face darken with every word, but could not understand why. The Earl was aware also of Mrs Mottram's reaction as he went on, "there should not be any problem, should there, Alice? It is just an arrangement to humour a middle-aged man who is out of sorts and in dire need of a distraction."

"I suppose not," said Mrs Mottram darkly. Ruth knew that her mother was concealing her true feelings and assumed that it was not the done thing to speak one's mind in front of this man. Could this be the sole reason for their visit? Simply to amuse him and distract him from his discomfort? If it were, she decided she would be prepared to speak her own mind quite plainly if the occasion required it.

"Then, that particular matter is resolved," he said, turning to Victoria and smiling. She straightened her back and smiled back. It was as if the sun had invaded the room. "And you must be Ruth. Yes, I have been looking forward to meeting you. You shall read to me. Not all the time. I have been thinking about it, and I think half an hour in the morning, say at

eleven of the hour, and again for half an hour in the afternoon immediately before tea. I have a very extensive library which you will find on the other side of the House, roughly below your room, but there's no need to pick a novel this very moment. I will make a choice tomorrow morning. Does that suit you, young lady?"

"If that is what you wish, Uncle," Ruth replied calmly. She felt anything but calm as she tried to suppress the mixture of anger and disappointment engulfed her.

"Good," said the Earl, reaching for a bell cord. "I think it is time then that we had tea."

When tea had been taken, Mrs Mottram stood as if to leave. "No, Alice. I have not finished with today's business yet." He turned to Victoria. "Before you leave me whilst my foot is attended to, is there anything that my newly adopted daughter would ask of me? Anything small service that I can perform?"

"Could we have a Ball, please?" said Victoria.

"Victoria!" scolded her mother.

"No, no, Alice," said the Earl, waving his hand. "Let her speak. A Ball, eh? Well, it is a long time since we have had anything like a Ball here. If only I was not so incapacitated with this foot! It can so sap one's strength, but that is no impediment to us holding a Ball. None at all! Why, yes, why not? It will a short while to arrange. I am not sure that the Ballroom is not in need of redecoration, but I will instruct Twigg to take all the necessary steps. He can perform wonders. It will be only a modest affair, I am afraid as I have only a modest Ballroom. And I am not going to promise you Princes or Princesses, or Dukes or Duchesses in abundance, but I would expect all the leading families from the district will come. I am sure that when it is known that I am holding a Ball in honour of such a delightful creature, no-one will decline the invitation."

"Oh, thank you, Papa," exclaimed Victoria, kissing him on the cheek. This time Ruth shared her mother's astonishment but she was unable to make any statement on the subject as the Earl suddenly dismissed them, asking only Mrs Mottram to remain.

"I suggest," he said as they reached the door, "that you take a walk in the gardens if you are recovered after your journey. If you go right through the rose Garden and under the pergola you will come to my Italian Garden, a creation and a favourite spot of mine. When I am able to get there, that is."

"I am sure that we could arrange a chair in which we could push you there, Papa," said Victoria. "Cannot you ask that too of your Mr Twigg?"

"I will speak to him on that subject as well," said the Earl. "Now, run along you two as I wish to talk to your mother. And, Ruth, I will see you here at eleven tomorrow." He waited until the heavy door had closed behind the sisters before turning to Mrs Mottram who had remained seated. "Well?" he asked, his countenance hardening.

"Well?" repeated Mrs Mottram, still very angry and emboldened sufficiently to look him defiantly in the eye.

"What is this really about, Alice? Your letter? Why have you suddenly written after all these years?"

"After all these years? You know full well that I was forbidden to have any direct with anyone in the family after I married. As for the letter, I thought I stated my petition clearly. There is no more than that. I am concerned for Ruth's future and I would like to see something arranged for her. It is that, pure and simple."

"I see. Well, let me make it clear at the outset and before we go any further that I will not have my name, the name of my family, or my position impugned. If you make any such attempt I will have no compunction in having every hound set upon you and your daughters. That is the very least I will do. Do I make myself clear?"

"Indeed," said Mrs Mottram, lowering her head.

"I don't mind telling you that I sense conspiracy here," he snapped. "Did someone put the idea of writing to me into your head?"

"Idea?"

"Yes, idea! Oh, there is no need to answer me. I can read it in your face. So there is someone else involved, someone behind this. Is it Dr Faybrother?"

“Why no!” exclaimed Mrs Mottram in astonishment.

“Then who? It was someone!”

“It was the village Curate,” said Mrs Mottram, shaking her head sadly. “I did not want to but he said that he had only Ruth’s interest at heart. It was he who suggested it. Had it not been for him I would never have written.”

“The village Curate? Is he in league with Dr Fayrbrother?”

“Oh, no. That would be unthinkable. He does not have a single charitable word to say for the doctor. Indeed, he thinks he is league with the Devil! Mr Clauncy would not even talk to him!”

“Well, there is something afoot and that young fool, Roger, is bound up in it. I do not know what it is except that Fayrbrother’s name has been mentioned in connection with it. It would appear to require a large sum of money which Roger has been pressing me for. That’s the main reason why you find him here today. He tells me it is a way in which I can make a great deal more money, as if I needed to! It sounds to me more like a recipe to loose money.”

“And you think that I am involved in all this in some way?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Well, I am not and neither is either of my daughters. I now see that you had this in mind when you invited us and when you received us this afternoon. This arrangement of your’s with Victoria is just to spite me. I came here at your request and solely to seek your assistance in securing Ruth’s future. As it appears you are not prepared to help, I and my daughters will return home at the earliest opportunity.”

“That will not be necessary, Alice. I had to be certain of my position.”

“As far as I am concerned the past is the past and shall remain so. There was a settlement which I shall continue to honour despite the fact it was imposed on me against my will and, I believe, yours.”

“As you say, Alice, the past is the past. Let us allow it to remain so. There is no cause for you to return home. Let Victoria have her Ball as it clearly will make her very happy.”

“And Ruth?”

“Ah, yes, Ruth and her future. That is not so easily settled. I would like to think about that and talk to her before I make up my mind.” He stopped as the door behind her had opened. “Now, it is time for my dressing. I suggest that you go and join your daughters as this is not pleasant. We will have plenty of time to discuss these matters further now that we fully understand one-another.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs Mottram, softly. “We should also discuss how long our stay is to be.”

“Until after the Ball at the very least. It then depends on how well and quickly young Ruth reads!”