

Chapter Five

A First Reading and a Procession

At the very moment that their mother was directed to go and join them, Ruth and Victoria were on the threshold of the Earl's Italian Garden. They had lingered amongst the roses, reading the names of the varieties and sampling the fresh scent. Of course, it would have been as unreasonable to expect Victoria not to be excited and talkative about what had been said by their uncle as it would have been to expect Ruth not to be silent and pensive on the same score.

"Well!" said Victoria, almost as soon as they were outside the door. "What do you think of him? Is he not the most wonderful uncle on Earth? And to think all these years Mama has been keeping us from him! And there is going to be a Ball in my honour! What will the young ladies at Miss Seymour's say when they hear of it? How envious they will be! I shall be at my very best. I shall dazzle everyone present. There will be talk of no-one else and my card - oh! I completely forgot the polka. I will have to ask Mr Twigg to ensure that no polkas are played unless I could be taught the steps in time. Do you think that is something that could be arranged?"

"Perhaps you could ask our new-found cousin to teach you," said Ruth dryly.

"Oh, no! That would never do. He must think of me as complete in every possible accomplishment! Now, what colour gown shall I wear? Oh, how is Mama going to sew it if we are here?"

"Cannot you wear one of those we brought with us?"

"Wear something old? Oh, Ruth! I must be turned out in something new and something quite sparkling. Oh, I cannot believe that here I am faced with a Ball in my honour and having not one suitable gown to chose from! That would be the end! I must speak to Mama immediately!"

"I am sure that she will join us soon," said Ruth. "As for gowns, I will speak to Mr Twigg and see if something can be arranged for the two of us. I am sure that it will present no problem."

"Do you think not? Darling Ruth! Oh, I feel so happy. I would not want anything at all to spoil this occasion. I wonder when it will be held. Do you think we will dance until the dawn? Oh, we have not yet seen the Ballroom. We do not even know where it is!"

"I am sure that Mr Twigg will take care of that as well, even if he has to lay a paper chase for you to follow. Now, do not worry so, Victoria. It will all sort itself out in the fullness of time."

"But it is so important, so very important! It is going to be the most important day of my life. And I am so excited!"

But Ruth was unable to share her sister's elation. She had heard what their uncle had said. She had seen how their mother received his words. She was now beginning to put a new construction on their visit and an outrageous thought had taken root and was growing insidiously in her mind, a thought so outrageous and wicked that she chastised herself for thinking it. Yet she could not dispel it. What was worse, it was an idea that she could not share or convey to anyone, least of all her sister. "Why do you think we are here?" she suddenly asked. "Why do you think we have been asked to come, and why now?"

"Why?" exclaimed Victoria. "Is that not obvious? Here is our uncle, on his own, made immobile and wretched by his injury, saying to himself that he needs someone in the house to cheer him and be a companion. I am here to cheer and you are to accompany. I will delight him and you shall read to him and our reward is to have a Ball!"

"If what you say is correct, don't you regret being exploited in this way?"

"Not in the slightest! I am to be rewarded handsomely for it. I do not care in the slightest!"

Ruth slipped back into her thoughts. Of course Victoria would not see things the way she did. One was always the last to see something when the truth of it, no matter how terrible, centred on one. If she was wrong in her assessment why had her mother reacted the way she did? It would have been so easy for her to smile and let it pass. Ruth had seen her mother's knuckles whiten and her face become taut and grey. She had rarely seen her so vexed and crossed up and she found that her mother was in much the same state of mind when she joined them, which only served to reinforce Ruth's fears. No, she was sure that she was right in her conclusion and the more she assured herself, the more terrible it became. And she was so preoccupied that she and her sister passed by the entrance to her uncle's Italian Garden without being aware of it, and her appreciation of its nature was left to another day.

Lucy was in her room when Ruth returned. She was a tall, slim, dark-haired girl, probably a year or so short of twenty, with small eyes which seemed to be permanently lowered, high cheeks and not unhandsome, Ruth thought. "I have brought fresh water and linen," the girl announced, gripping her hands together in front of her. "I am to tell you that dinner will be rung at eight o'clock and that the Earl will take his in his room on account of his incapacity," she said in a monotonous voice. "Breakfast will be served from nine o'clock unless *madam* wishes it earlier. I am also to ask you whether there is anything you require of me."

Ruth sat on the bed. She could not think of anything and said so. "Very well, *madam*," said Lucy, and prepared to leave.

"You can call me by my name, Lucy. Do not be concerned on account of me being the Earl's niece. It is Ruth, and I hope we can become good friends during my stay here."

The girl stopped and turned and raised her eyes. Ruth was taken by surprise as they appeared full of hostility. "That would not be at all proper, *madam*," she said. "That would never do."

"Why, Lucy," said Ruth, feeling uncomfortable. "Why should that be?"

"I have my reasons for saying it, *madam*," said Lucy. "There are those who will speak out for their rights and those 'as won't. I am not amongst them, but there are those who have rights and who may not be recognised in those rights on account of your visit. That is all I have to say on this matter, *madam*. I am saying nothing more."

Ruth let her leave without pressing the question although she would dearly have liked to. After all, she had matters of her own to think about.

The disturbing thought which had taken possession of her after their first meeting with the Earl was still with her next morning when, after a troubled night, Ruth made her way to his sitting room. He was there, sprawled on the couch reading some papers which he laid aside as soon as she entered. "Ah, Ruth. Do come and sit down. I have selected a novel by the late Charles Dickens. I trust you have read him?"

"I have," she said, somewhat coldly, taking the book from him, "including this one."

"This is one of my favourites. I like the concept of someone going through their life thinking that they owe everything to a particular benefactor when come the *dénouement* it transpires that it was someone else, someone quite obscure, someone they never even considered, all the time."

"It appears a little perverse and rather cruel to me," she said.

"We can start with a different one if you wish," he said, not appearing in the least put out by her comment. "But life can be both perverse and cruel and, by and large, I find Dickens true to life."

"No, I am quite happy to read from this one. I am not sure what else may have influenced your choice but I should make it plain that I am not cut out to be an Estelle and nor, in my estimation, is Victoria if that is the rôle you have in mind for one of us."

"Well, it certainly was not in my mind and I am not so sure about your sister, but I would agree with you in respect of yourself. I am not sure how I would characterise you. Perhaps an Esther?"

"I trust not," said Ruth. "Life is very cruel to her."

"Lizzie, then?"

"I think not. She is beautiful."

"Well, my first impression is that you are sensible, level-headed and thoughtful. I must say from the outset that these are not the qualities that society expects to find or seeks in a young woman. Am I right as to my judgement of your character?"

"I think I must leave others to be the judge of that," said Ruth calmly.

"And you are not afraid of me? Or shall I put the question differently? I am not capable of frightening you?"

"I understand that you are very influential, powerful and wealthy. I think I would be fearful of that if you were to use this strength against me or my family."

For a moment the Earl's eyes narrowed and a look of suspicion crossed his face. Then he smiled. "You need have no fear of that. I have no intention of harming you, or your sister or mother. On the contrary I would help were it possible. Those who have power and influence must always endeavour to use it honestly and fairly, and for the good of others. I have striven to do that throughout my life, at least to the extent that I was able to."

"I would have thought that you could have done anything you pleased."

"Ah, were that it were so," he said shaking his head. "I have been able to do most things I desired, but in one, perhaps the most important, thing I was frustrated. But that need not concern us today."

"I would wish to know if there is something you desire or plan which affects me or my sister or mother," said Ruth.

"Yes, of course you would, and so you shall in time," he said, smiling again. "You *are* the sensible one. You do not dictate what you want. You ask me what I propose. Yes, I prefer that, I think. Your mother tells me you have aspirations to become a writer."

Ruth was shocked. She had not considered that her mother would already have discussed intimate matters concerning her with her uncle. "I like to write," she said cautiously, "but Mother disapproves greatly."

"Well, I do not. I have given this matter some thought and think you shall write, not that there is much of a living to be made from it, especially for a woman, even more particularly if what she writes is obtuse. You may describe me as a Philistine but I have tried to read the novels of George Elliot and I find them bordering on the incomprehensible. There was also a fairly successful woman writer called Elizabeth Gaskell, you may well have heard of her, even read her, but she earned her popularity, I believe, by railing against my class. I trust that is not what you have in mind?"

"I have not decided what I should write about," said Ruth. "Thus far I have written no more than short stories for my amusement and that of my sister. Sometimes I am able to scare her, too."

"Well, whilst you are here you shall write. I have already instructed Twigg to prepare an area for you in the library - have you been there yet? I think it is one of the most peaceful rooms in the house. When you go in you will see a writing desk at the far end by the French window. It is quite old. It was my grandfather's, but you are to have exclusive use of it for the duration of your stay. Twigg will see that it is equipped with pens and ink and an ample supply of best quality paper. I would think that you will find it ideal for your purposes and you will not be disturbed, not even by me as I have little hope of getting that far in my present state. And do not be afraid to open the window, or even go out onto the balcony if the weather is fine. What I want is for you to write as often as the fancy takes you, bearing in mind always that a professional writer writes because he has to for his subsistence."

"But what about my mother? What will she say?"

"I will talk to your mother and put her mind at ease. No, Ruth, I want you to write and to feel free to write. It may be that you will find it difficult once any restraint you may have felt under is lifted, but I want you to try, and then to read to me that you have written. I warn you I will not be as easily scared as your sister. Now, tell me about this young man I hear of."

"Young man?" she said with alarm.

“There is a young man who is interested in you?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“No,” said Ruth.

“Nor one that you are interested in?”

“Not really,” she said, lowering her eyes and assuming that her uncle must have Matthew Fayrbrother in mind. She wondered how he knew. No doubt her mother had mentioned him as well as her writing. Clearly she had not named him.

“But there is someone?” persisted the Earl.

“I would admit there is a young man who I barely know but who I like. I would not venture any further than that. In any event my mother must have told you she sees him in the same disapproving light as she does my writing.”

“So it would not be wise to include his name, what ever it is, amongst those to be invited to the Ball?”

“Most certainly not,” said Ruth, firmly. “That would never do and might ruin the whole occasion.”

Her uncle paused and scrutinised her closely. “You *will* go, will you not?” he said. “I mean, you will not invent an headache or employ some other feminine device to excuse your absence?”

“I will go,” said Ruth coolly, sounding as if she saw it as a duty that she would fulfil but one she did not expect to enjoy.

“And you will ensure that you look at your best? I think you should. I can see that in this respect you differ from your sister and care little for the impression you make on others. Thinkers rarely do, considering such things superficial. And so they are much of the time, but there are occasions when even thinkers need to take the essential steps to make an impression. I would not expect you to go and attempt to compete with your sister. God has not equipped you to do so and I think any young girl or woman who attempts that on the night will be sorely disappointed. But I think you should do yourself justice, not because you are a Mottram or my niece, but because you are you. You will promise me that, Ruth?”

She frowned and studied her uncle. This was not like listening to the Curate who was unable to tell her anything other than what she should not do. Indeed, she was unused to being addressed this way by a man. Perhaps these were the kind of things a father would say to his daughter but she had no such experience, not even in the part of an honorary daughter. Perhaps in the absence of having a father to perform such a duty, these were the kinds of things an uncle might say to his niece, but if they were this particular uncle had long been guilty of serious dereliction of his duty. Even so, where would be the harm in it? She could dress soberly with a little borrowed paste, nothing too pretentious. Perhaps this uncle had a talent for reading minds for he suddenly said, “I make this request of you partly because there is a necklace I would like you to wear on the night, Ruth. It is, I must admit, a family heirloom and was worn by my mother, your grandmother, and her mother before her. I would like to see you wear it. Will you?”

Was this to be the pattern to their visit - little duties followed by little rewards? Yet, again, once she had suppressed her initial tendency to refuse on principle and thought about it, wherein lay the harm in acquiescing to this request? She could see no ulterior motive and it was asked without strings. It clearly had some significance for her uncle else he would not have asked her, but why her and not Victoria? “If I declined,” she said, “what then?”

“You would deeply disappoint an old, lame, uncle, but no more.”

“Then I agree. I will wear it if it is your wish that I do so,” she said, the semblance of a smile lighting up her face.

“Ah! That’s better. I like it so much more when you smile. As I said yesterday, I do need humouring. And as for the necklace, it will suit you.”

“Then I shall go to the Ball as Cinderella might,” she said, lightly. “I shall wear the necklace and I shall endeavour to look at my very best.”

“And I shall ask not another thing of you in that respect,” said her uncle. “Now, to reading. Yes, I was serious. I prefer to have a woman read to me. I think they read better. Usually it is one of the maids which is perhaps good for them but less so for me, the listener.

Lucy is probably the best, but she does struggle with some of the longer words and she can completely lose her way through complex sentences. Of course, when I correct her she becomes flustered and her voice falters. I doubt that I could fluster you, Ruth.”

“I would trust that you would not have cause to, Uncle,” she said, opening the book and read aloud:

“My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and continue to be called Pip.”

“Ah, yes,” said the Earl and closed his eyes.

The House was turned upside down the next day by the Earl’s sudden decision to pursue his adopted daughter’s suggestion and be wheeled to the Italian Garden. The very first step was to sent a man and cart off at the crack of dawn to Tetbury to procure a bath-chair which was the cause of some consternation amongst the servants for, as Mr Twigg had observed, they were not the kind of thing to be found on, and plucked from, trees. The man returned mid-morning, brimming with apologies at being unable to procure one which was pristine and absolutely brand new, but this one had been in the store for several weeks and the owner was prepared to swear in any court in the land that no more than four people had sat in it to sample its comfort during that period. Immediately he arrived at the rear of the House a team descended upon the conveyance, cleaning and polishing its paintwork and leather until it gleamed. Mr Twigg would surely have had the Mottram Coat of Arms applied had there been time!

Ruth, who had not the slighted inkling of the tumult elsewhere in the House that morning, was acquainted with and surprised by her uncle’s announcement when she went to him for the next of her readings. “I am to take an early luncheon,” he said,” and I would ask the same of you and your mother and sister. Then I would like you to meet me at two of the hour sharp at the foot of the steps to the front entrance as I intend to view my Italian garden with you. I have been marooned here too long!”

Of course, there was hustle and bustle, fussing and worrying, as two men, under the watchful eye of Mr Twigg, formed a chair with their arms, lifted and carried the Earl from his room, along the corridor, down the stairs into the hall and out into the open air. There he was greeted by the sight of Victoria looking at her very best and drawing comments of praise and admiration from those of the household who were there to see her. “Now, you are forbidden to push me,” the Earl told her once her was lowered into the bath-chair and a blanket laid gently over his legs. “We will allow John, here, to have that privilege. He’s a strong, young, lad. It will be nothing to him. You and Ruth, and you Alice, shall walk beside me and I will act as your guide in the garden.”

Ruth had just taken up a position beside her uncle when she saw Lucy standing amongst the members of the Earl’s household who had left their duties to witness the occasion. Once again their eyes met, and once again Ruth saw the same arrogance and hostility there. Then the girl swung on her heels, ran up the steps and disappeared into the house. She resolved that she would ask her uncle about her background, not now, not necessarily today, but when an opportunity arose that might facilitate it. For the present she accompanied the small procession as it made its way along the path in front of the facade and through an archway into the Rose garden.

“We go through here,” announced the Earl when they came to a break in the pergola where a stone archway, flanked by two large urns, was cut through the wall. “Have you walked this far yet? There are many pleasures to behold in the grounds, but this is, in my view, the best. But then, I am partial.”

“No,” said Ruth. “I am ashamed to admit that we have not.”

“Perhaps that is as well as it allows me to be the first to present you to my collection of antiquities. Everything you see I had brought back from Italy, mainly from the environs of Rome which is a city you must visit, Ruth. Do not be deterred by the Papal nonsense. It is a

Mecca for every artist or writer or romantic on Earth. That is why I have brought some of it here. Stay close to me.”

The Earl’s Italian garden was walled with stone but unlike the Rose garden it was octagonal. At each change in the direction of the walls was a small grotto, large enough for the Earl to wheeled into and to accommodate his small entourage, and each housing a fountain which cascaded water into a verdant pool. Lining the walls and grottoes were the relics that the Earl had collected, marble statues, busts on pedestals, urns, columns and, chilling to Ruth and a mystery that no-one dared explain to Victoria, sarcophagi. Radial paths, paved with stone, led from each grotto past flowers and shrubs of every description, to the centre where a double colonnade of Corinthian columns enclosed large, circular, pool at the very pivot of the garden, and where dolphins and Neptune combined to form a further fountain.

The Earl was eager to acquaint them with the origin and details of every antiquity that could be identified. “I am afraid,” he said, “there are some here who may never be so, and others of whom the identity is in doubt. However, we are blessed with some that come replete with their inscription. How strong is your learning of Latin and the Classics, Ruth?”

“I hope that it is as strong as it should be for any young lady of my age and position, Uncle,” she replied.

“Well we may put that to the test. Not for this one, however,” he said, bringing the procession to a halt before the bust of a stern young man who looked down on them from a small niche in the wall. “This is said to be Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus.”

“Yes, Papa,” exclaimed Victoria, “but which of them is he?”

“Oh, daughter,” laughed the Earl. “He is Claudius who succeeded Caligula and who was poisoned to death by his fourth wife, Agrippina. I fear that was the fate of many of his predecessors and successors. Perhaps a lesson to men not to marry?”

“Is that why you never married, Papa?” asked Victoria, earning a rebuke from her mother for what she viewed as her daughter’s impudence.

“It is a thought,” said the Earl, lightly brushing aside her question. “I trust if I had I would have had no fear of poisoning and that I would have had better fortune than Claudius for whom the omens were bad. His first wife-to-be perished on the very day on which he was due to be married to her! I dare say that she did not die of natural causes.”

“How dreadful!” said Victoria.

“Sadly that was the way of things in Imperial Rome. According to the writings of Tacitus it appears to have been the accepted practise that if someone was to be removed, whether it be wife or husband, Senator or Emperor, he or she might expect to be put to the sword or poisoned. But that man over there had a different way with him. It is said that is a bust of Caracalla who had twenty thousand put to death in a matter of months. And over there is the head of Constantine who, as you will know, was the first Emperor to embrace Christianity but who, I have read, had his wife boiled to death in her bath.”

“It seems to me, Uncle,” said Ruth, “that you appear to have filled the garden with a collection of tyrants, murderers, and poisoners!”

“And victims, too, Ruth,” said her uncle.

“Well,” continued his niece, lightly, “we should all rejoice that we live in more enlightened times when such things are no longer in vogue or tolerated!”

“Amen to that,” said her mother beginning to wonder if the Classics was a proper subject to be taught to young ladies and resolving to speak to both Mr Clauncy and Miss Seymour on the matter when they returned to Sutton Minety.

“Well, Ruth,” said her uncle later as she sat beside him by the pool as her mother wandered, and Victoria unknowingly did Lucy a disservice by winning John’s heart without lifting a finger or speaking a word, “what do you think of my creation?”

“I find it a paradox,” she said thoughtfully. “I cannot believe that such beauty and tranquillity can house the relics of all that barbarism and bestiality. Yet is so peaceful here! One could wish to spend one’s life here and never leave.”

“You may come here as often as you like, subject of course to your reading and your writing. It will become easier, my dear. I hope that you will come here often. It is a place that has to be appreciated and I see it far too infrequently.”

“Then I will add another endeavour to my list - to visit this garden as often as I can and to be my uncle’s proxy until he has recovered his strength and can accomplish the visit by himself.”

“Thank you, Ruth,” he said softly.

The days that followed the first visit to the Italian garden soon settled into a routine, dictated by the periods that Ruth had to devote to her reading to her uncle between which she would sit in the Italian Garden and paint, or sit at the writing desk and write. And when she was not thus occupied she would walk in the gardens with her mother or sister. Mrs Mottram did express the view that whereas she was comfortable with Ruth’s excursions to sit amongst the Emperors and Senators, she had her misgivings concerning her activity in the library, although she would always go on to say that as the Earl had sanctioned it she would not interfere, but also that she did not know what Mr Clauncy would say. Which meant that she knew very well and left Ruth in no illusion in that respect. Initially any fears that Mrs Mottram might have had were unfounded as faced with all the distractions that summoned her attention from every point of the compass, Ruth found that she could write very little and that she did write fell far short of that she read and was rapidly confined to the waste-paper basket. No doubt it was collected by one of the maids and a report made upon it to her uncle, who also asked her for an account of her own. Ruth was open and truthful and confessed that there were still more blank sheets of high quality paper than she had used.

“I expect that it is the novelty of it all,” said her uncle kindly. “There is much here to see and the atmosphere to absorb. In a few days time you will feel settled and the words will come. I am sure of it.”

“I find it so frustrating. I appear to be surrounded with the ingredients to make a dozen stories yet I cannot settle on starting one. At home, with far less to draw upon, I could not stop the words tumbling out, yet here I have dried up I am afraid. Perhaps I am fed and attended upon too well?”

“Lucy?” he said. “How do you find her?”

“I feel there is a story there to be told,” said Ruth after a short pause. “I see something in her eyes - oh, perhaps I should not say.”

“You may. Lucy is an honest girl who has lived and been reared in this house. I am happy for you to speak frankly and as you find her. I do not think you would not do her credit.”

“In the discharge of her duties I can find no fault in her. She is polite and attentive, but cold. And when I look into her eyes I see something. I think it is a disliking of me, possibly more. Undoubtedly there is hostility.”

“Then I shall have her re-assigned. She can have no cause to feel ill towards you!”

“Oh, no, Uncle!” said Ruth. “Please do nothing of the sort as if she has some grievance towards me that I do not know of and, I am sure, do not warrant, her removal will only add to it. Please leave her where she is and things as they are. If there is something between us I will draw it out in time and heal the wound if it is within my power to do so.”

“Very well,” said the Earl, “but, as I say, she has no legitimate ground for grievance against you or your family or, indeed, against me as I have fed and clothed her since she was a babe in arms and saved her from the workhouse. I will leave the matter in your hands.”

“I do feel that there is some history there,” said Ruth. “What is her story?”

“There is very little to tell or that should be told. Both her father and her mother worked on the Estate, and both died under tragic circumstances when she was still a babe in arms. With my agreement she was taken care off by the cook who has been a mother to her, and brought up here at Hazleton Court. She has received a basic education, but it seemed natural for her to start her working life in service here. I imagine that she will marry in time and that will then be that. I am told that John feels affectionate towards her though I am not sure that his feelings are as yet returned. That is all there is to her history.”

“In some ways I know how she must have felt, growing up an orphan as she did,” said Ruth. “I can speak, as you know, being fatherless. I feel sympathy for her and I will continue to endeavour to win her favour.”

Her uncle nodded, but said no more. Ruth was left with the impression that he could have said more concerning Lucy’s past, but had chosen not to. There was a mystery there, too, but by no means as dreadful as the one she was gradually revealing concerning her mother and sister.

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