

Chapter Six

The Boating Lake and a Further Meeting

Lucy was not the only person who felt aggrieved and whom Ruth found herself called upon to pacify. "It is really perverse, I must say," said Victoria one morning, "the way things are! Here I am, an adopted daughter, yet you get to see far more of uncle than do I. How is he to realise how pretty and truly delightful I am, and so worthy of some kind of reward, when he never sees me but sees only you? All I get is the half hour when we take tea and although I try very hard, I do not feel I am making any progress whatsoever. I believe that if I were, he would ask to see me more often!"

"Oh, Victoria!" said Ruth. "You must not talk like that. Our uncle is a very busy man with many matters to which he must attend, none of which is assisted by his incapacity. It is clear to me that his injury is sapping his strength but I am sure that he spares us all the time he can."

"Well, he spares you a considerably greater amount than he does me, and you are just his niece whilst he had adopted me as his daughter. Why, you have at least a full hour and a half of his day with him with your reading! That is far, far more than I am afforded!"

"That may be so, but I see myself more as a retained servant than a niece. I certainly do not feel that I enjoy the privileges of an adopted daughter!"

"Nor do I! That is precisely my complaint!"

"Well, you may have reason to thank me in some respects as I do sometimes feel like Scheherazade, only I trust it is not my life that I am preserving. But I will complete the book I am reading and then interest him in another. I dare say that I could make it last one thousand and one nights if I really tried. There are more than enough books in the library. He may then not feel that inclined to send us home and the longer we are here the more chance you have to influence him in the way that you desire, not that I think it is at all necessary from what he has told me."

"Oh, Ruth! He has talked to you about me? What did he say?"

"Not a great deal, Victoria, and certainly nothing that was ill-thought or which would cause you concern. He thinks you are very pretty and very gay. He enjoys you being here. I am sure that he has his reasons for that."

"Well if those are his views, why does he not spend more time with me, his adopted daughter? Oh, I know I should not say this, but I am sure that my entire future depends on his influence. I am sure that he can bring me the position and wealth for which I am destined. It is so very, very important that I do not miss this opportunity. I would die if we were to return home and nothing came of this visit! He has not mentioned us returning home, has he?"

"No, and I would doubt that we would before the Ball."

"Oh! We couldn't be sent home before the Ball, could we, Ruth! He couldn't think of doing that, not after all our expectations have been raised and the arrangements have been made."

"No," said Ruth softly. "I do not think my uncle would do that to his adopted daughter." And she then went off to read to her uncle leaving her sister feeling like an abandoned child.

But Ruth had concerns of her own. The first was the realisation that she was falling in love, not with a person but with Hazleton Court and the atmosphere there. It was the conversation with her sister that made her aware that she no longer was looking forward to returning to Meadowview Cottage. The House, the gardens, the library and her life there was seducing her. She had started to write and now words fell like the Spring rain in small showers, on separate pages, but never in sufficient volumes to complete something that she might take to the Earl. Instead she left an increasing number of short stories incomplete,

growing disenchanted with one and setting it aside for the next before it was anything like mature. She was like Scheherazade in her reading. She was becoming like her in her writing!

Yet she was now relishing the freedom to go to the library, to sit at the desk, open a drawer and take out a sheaf of paper and write exactly what she pleased. When she was not writing or reading, she would now be walking and planning what she would write next, eschewing the company of her mother and sister. "I do not know what is possessing your sister," Mrs Mottram told her younger daughter. "She appears to have no time for us anymore and is seeming to live entirely in a world of her own making. It is the writing and if this continues for very much longer I shall speak to your uncle about it. It might well be better if we were back in Sutton Minety with our feet firmly on Mother Earth instead of heads being lost in the clouds!"

It was an understatement to say that Victoria was not entirely in agreement. She feared that if her mother complained too vociferously to her uncle he might just cancel the Ball and send them all home. Or her mother might simply declare that enough was enough and that they were returning home! "I know what you mean, Mama," she would say, "but I think there is no harm in it. Uncle has asked her to write something to read to him and I think she has very much difficulty in coming up with such a composition, and that she may never come up with such a composition, and we may well then go home after the Ball with her never having anything to read to him. I think uncle has set her a test to show whether she is a writer. I know because she has told me as much and what trouble she is having." It was enough for Mrs Mottram who never did once herself raise the issue of Ruth's writing after the very first time it was raised.

Mrs Mottram's observations of Ruth's habits might have been accurate, but her interpretation of the causes was entirely wrong. The dark clouds that Ruth had been unable to dispel from her mind continued to hang over her and everything that occurred or she saw she would take as evidence in support of her conclusion. She did so when the Earl announced his informal adoption of her sister. She took his failure to see more of Victoria during the days that followed, of which she complained, as a step by him to compensate for his earlier action. When they were all together she watched them both carefully for signs of a hidden bond, pretending to herself that she was doing this as a writer for it was incumbent upon writers to observe those around them, but knowing that her reasons were ulterior. Then, becoming ashamed of her actions and her thoughts, she took to trying to avoid being present when her uncle and sister were together. This was not possible when tea was taken, but at other times she would closet herself at the writing desk, or she would walk in the grounds choosing remote locations to which she knew the bath-chair would not be propelled.

It was on one such occasion, a sun-less afternoon, that having wandered through the woodland which lay beyond the Italian garden, Ruth crossed a patch of wasteland and came across a largely overgrown and disused track. Assuming that to her left it must lead to the main drive, she turned to her right and followed its course beside a small stream, down between two large outcrops of stone. Quite suddenly the stream broadened out and she found herself at the edge of a large, placid, tree-lined lake. The track stretched out before her around the perimeter until it appeared to terminate at a semi-derelict building at the lakeside. For a moment she stood there, cataloguing the scene, the deep green reflections of the trees and bushes in the water, the sharp blades of the water-irises as they slashed at the air, and the damp green moss which clung to the rock face. And then her heart missed a beat as she saw him.

He appeared from between the trees on the opposite side of the lake and started to make his way around to the building. She realised she must have been wrong in assuming that the track ceased at the boat house. It must extend beyond to where he had emerged. But that was incidental. She was rooted to the ground completely paralysed, unable to retreat back the way she had come or go forward to meet him. And still he did not see her! Then she saw the look of astonishment on his face and thought she would faint.

"Good afternoon, Miss Mottram," he said, approaching. "I did not expect to meet you here."

"I do not understand," she said, taking a pace backward. "What are you doing here?"

"If you require the truth," he said, smiling, "it is that I was coming to seek you."

"Oh, Lord!" she whispered. Now she thought she really would faint at the thought of it and what the consequences might have been had he found his way up to the House and asked for her. Surely he could not have intended to do that?

"I do not understand," she said, looking desperately for somewhere to sit but seeing nowhere.

"I can see that I have surprised you," he said. "If this time you will accept the offer of my arm we can walk to the boat house there yonder where I am sure there is a seat for you to sit on and recover." This time she did not sweep past him but made use of his support as her limbs appeared to be losing all the strength the Lord had given them.

The door at the front of the building was ajar and hanging on only one of its hinges. He went in, to ensure that it was safe, then returned and helped her to a bench on the verandah overlooking the lake. Before her stretched the remains of a short wooden jetty, the deck of which was twisted over at a crazy angle. To one side she could see the gunwales of a sunken boat as the water lapped over them. And then, without warning, it started to rain.

"I do not understand," she whispered, "why you should be here. I thought you had returned to Edinburgh."

"It is as I said. I came in search of you. I have to confess that I had business that brought me to the locality, but what I heard only spurred me on in my attempt. I am afraid that I must have lost my bearings as I had no intention of ending up here. I assume that this track does lead to the House?"

"You mean," she said lowly, "that you would have come to my uncle's house and asked for me?"

"Of course. I don't think I would have been well received had I just loitered about outside hoping that I might catch sight of you. But now I have gone one better and caught you here!"

"Oh dear!" she whispered, watching the raindrops as they struck the surface of the lake.

"And I fear that you are trapped, we are both trapped, for the present. I assume by the appearance of this place that no-one comes here."

"I do not know," Ruth said. "I have never been here before. Nor have I heard anyone mention the lake's existence."

"Well," he said, looking around, "it doesn't look as if it is a popular venue for the Earl or his guests. I doubt that we will be discovered here if that puts your mind at ease."

"It does not," she said, beginning to recover her composure. "I wish to know what madness this is that would bring you here and direct you to the House. You must be aware that my mother and sister are staying here. They, if no-one else, would know who you are."

"For reasons I do not wish to disclose, I was prepared to take that risk."

"Oh! What do you think would have been said had one of them seen you, or come to know of your visit. How do you think that my uncle would have greeted the fact that you had called upon me?"

"I know what *is* being said," he replied with an air of mystery. "It is because it concerns your mother and sister and your uncle that I am here. It is because of *what* is being said that I can talk only to you."

Ruth's heart leapt again. "We should never have come here," she said lowly, staring at the mottled surface of the water. "We should have stayed at Sutton Minety. I am beginning to see that now. Our visit will bring only pain and suffering."

"I can say that Sutton Minety does not seem the same without you and your sister there. For a start I can walk past your cottage without the fear of your mother coming out waving a stick in my direction and telling me that the dogs would be set on me if only she kept some."

"You have walked past our cottage?"

"Well, only metaphorically. But you say that you think it was wrong to have come here. I don't know that. It is a very pleasant place I understand and I hear that the Earl, your uncle, is capable of keeping a very good house. It is comfortable, surely?"

"It is too comfortable in many ways," said Ruth, "and too full of risk. I have everything I want. I imagine that either I or my sister could have almost anything we ask for."

"I can believe that of your sister," he said. She looked at him sharply and he continued, "she has the most winning of appearances. Tell me how you spend your day."

Ruth hesitated. Their conversation appeared to be drifting away from the subject he had raised a few minutes earlier, but it was still raining quite persistently and if she did return to the house then she would be soaked by the time she reached her room. Questions would be asked as to what had detained her or how she had come to be caught in the rain. If he had a specific matter that had brought him there, he would surely raise it in the fullness of time. "I read to my uncle, and I work."

"Work?" he said, astonished. "Surely not? I mean, you are not a member of the Earl's household?"

"No," she said, allowing herself a half smile, "although reading to my uncle can be a little like work. No, I write and as I would like to make a career of it, I think of it as work. I am working on a number of short stories at present but I would like to try a novel."

"And are you comfortable here?"

"Too much so, but I must not sound ungrateful. I have the most delightful of rooms and my uncle has given me an ideal place in which to work."

"Is it then that you believe that an artist must suffer deprivation before they are truly and greatly creative? I have heard that said of composers of music."

"I do not know," she said, feeling much more relaxed and noting that the rain was beginning to ease. "If it is so, I am doomed to failure, I am sure."

"Perhaps I could read some of your work?"

"That's impossible!" she exclaimed, feeling anxious again. "I know of no way by which it could be got to you."

"In time," he said smiling, "everything is possible. And your mother and sister - they are comfortable, too?"

"Oh, yes! Victoria is very excited and grows more as each day passes as uncle has arranged a Ball for her. Oh! I am sorry. I could have arranged an invitation for you but I did not on account of, well, you have already mentioned how my mother feels."

"I am sure that you are right not to have arranged an invitation for me as it would not have been politic for me to attend. I hope that the Ball is everything that your sister expects and hopes that it will be, but you should be aware that there is talk and certain things are being said about her, things that perhaps should not be said."

"Things?" said Ruth, feeling new pangs of anxiety. "What manner of things?"

"Even now I am not sure that I should tell you, despite have come this far."

"You may tell me, sir," she said soberly. "I have a right to know what is being said against my family."

"Well, for a start, it is being said that the Earl, your uncle, has adopted your sister as his daughter."

"So he has," she said, defensively, "but only in an informal, playful, way. She is allowed to call him Papa and will have her Ball and that is the sum total of it. What can be made of that?"

"What do you think his reason was in this action?"

"Reason? I think it is that he never had a daughter nor shall have one but would have one for the duration of our stay as it amuses him."

"Never? Never had a daughter? That is not what is being said."

Later, Ruth realised that she should have terminated their conversation there and then, but it already had momentum of its own and she was such an inventor of plots, dramas and intrigues that, at that very moment, she had no wish not to be carried with it, nor to stop it. "What is being said?" she asked as calmly as she could.

"I feel that it is wrong for me to repeat such slander," he said, looking around to ensure that there was no living soul within earshot, "but you are Victoria's sister and I could not impart this to your mother even if I stood better in her esteem."

"What is being said?" she repeated.

“It is said that your uncle, the Earl, had a daughter, and that the daughter is near-grown and beautiful, and that your sister is she.”

Ruth’s heart fell and night appeared to fall over the scene before her. She wanted to deny the accusation and proclaim that it was wicked, thoughtless, gossip and that if he were a gentleman he would put down anyone who repeated such a tale in his presence as surely would she, but this was the black thought that she had carried with her since that first day, released into the wild, at loose, and the cause of mayhem. “It is mere speculation,” she said, slowly.

“But I do not hear you deny it,” he said. Her heart fell. She felt trapped and pinned to the ground, out-numbered, out-flanked, undermined and surrounded at all the same time. She did not know what to say. “You do not deny it?” he repeated.

“I would deny it,” she hissed, “but I cannot.”

“It is true then?” he persisted.

“No!” she exclaimed, finding that she had been driven to the very brink of a dark, fathomless, chasm which stretched before her and those she loved. “No, it is not true. It is speculation and nothing more.”

“But, Ruth,” he said. “tell me this and honestly. Do you know for certain that it is not true. Can you swear that there is no truth in it?”

“No,” she whispered. “I cannot. I do not wish to hear any more. It has stopped raining. You must allow me to return to the house this very instance. My uncle will be expecting his reading and I shall be missed.” She stood and left him sat there, abruptly, without any familiarity or declaration of her true feelings towards, for it was the best opportunity that she had ever had to be so forward. She left him sat there with no arrangement, not even a hint or an expressed wish, for them to meet in the future. She left him sat there by the side of the placid, green, water, but when at the point at which the track started to climb, she paused and looked back, he was gone.

Ruth returned to the house with a greater burden than she had borne when she had left it not two hours earlier, lightened only by the realisation that he had called her “Ruth”, although it troubled her for not having brought him to account for it. She was surprised and embarrassed to find that her uncle was not alone when, in a flurry she rushed into his room. “I am sorry. I have arrived too early,” she declared, feeling uncomfortable as the stranger stood and stared at her, and turned to leave.

“That is all right, Ruth. You may stay. Signor Calaceli has finished his business here and is in danger of over-staying his welcome. He is just leaving.” Ruth later described her uncle’s visitor as dark, swarthy, unmistakably foreign in appearance, perhaps in his later twenties, with dark, curly, hair and not unhandsome, but repulsive to her. When pressed she could not dissect her impressions and abstract the ones that made her feel this way. She had heard some hostility in her uncle’s voice and had allied herself to that. That was enough to explain her first impression to Victoria. But there was more. There was something in the way that this man’s eyes seemed to feast greedily upon her as he approached and passed her, in the way he paused and lowered his head in acknowledgement as he drew level with her yet never moved his gaze from her face, something in the way he said “*Buona giorno, Signorina,*” as he took her limp hand and pressed it to his lips, still not taking his large, dark, deep eyes from her. Then Twigg was there and the door was closing, shutting her from his view.

“Who was that, Uncle,” she asked, unable to disguise the disdain in her voice. “Has he come concerning more antiquities for the garden?”

“Oh, no!” said the Earl, smiling at the thought. “Would that was the case. No, he is no-one that you need worry about. I saw him only because he is an acquaintance of young Roger’s come to me with some monstrous venture to make money. I think I have told you that the World is full of such creatures and normally I would not permit one to crawl past the gates. Perhaps I should not have done so on this occasion as I can hear from your voice that you do not much care for him.”

“Oh, it was unfair of me to give such an impression. I do not know the man.”

“Well, usually they are charlatans and that is all. I must say that this one is slightly different as to his credit he actually believes in what he is selling. But that is to his discredit,

too. Who needs another railway in South America? Who needs another railway anywhere? This one is to run the length of the Andes, to open up the Amazon Basin, the Bolivian Plains and the Chilean plateaux, he said."

"He was asking you to invest money in it?"

"That is what it amounts to. He was asking me to back it and be a surety for the capital of the company until it goes public. I will not bore you with the details, but that's how disasters begin. You put your name to a prospectus. This is circulated to engender interest in the venture and then some of the shares of the company are sold at an absurd premium to one or two selected clients with the promise of a future floatation which will give them their money back several times over. When, as is inevitable, the promoters find that they cannot raise enough capital or run out of money, they come back to the shareholders and demand more or threaten them with ruin. The chances are that very little of the capital has been spent on the venture but it has been squandered on the high life enjoyed by these promoters."

"You mean it is all a fraud?" said Ruth, horrified. "That man is a fraudster?"

"I do not know about him, but you certainly could call it that. The favourite ventures are in mines or railways. Oh, one or two have made their fortunes but most have had their fingers sadly scorched."

"But, does no-one check whether these ventures are genuine?"

"Ah, if you think about it, Ruth, that could be difficult. Who is going to go all the way to South America, or some remote spot in Africa just to see if the details stated in the prospectus are true? That is where men like Signor Calaceli come in. Despite his surname he is a South American lawyer with a practice in Santiago and well respected in that city. Had I permitted, he would have verified the work that has been carried out and the plant that has been supplied. He would have said this honestly and it would be the truth. His word and my name would give the venture credibility and legitimacy. But it is not that which has already happened that matters, it is what is to happen, and that in all probability is nothing other than that a large number of gullible and greedy people would be relieved of a considerable amount of their money. I have no intention of becoming one of them. But now I must turn to more pleasant things as I have Mr Lancaster coming to see me on business shortly and would like you to see the necklace I mentioned a little while ago. You are prepared for the Ball?"

Ruth was able to answer "yes", and told her uncle that she had chosen a plain, high-necked, deep burgundy, velvet dress to wear on the occasion. "I will look my best as I promised I would although I will be more elegant than sparkling as will Victoria."

"Are you not a little young to be thinking of looking elegant, Ruth?"

"You did ask me to look my best, Uncle. I think that I accomplish that best when I am elegant. Victoria will look stunningly pretty, of course, possibly even beautiful. Everyone's eyes will be upon her and she will draw all the comment. I will look elegant and probably no-one will even notice that I am there. I doubt that I will even be asked to dance. Indeed I am tempted to inform Twigg that I shall not require a card."

"If only I were mobile," said the Earl. "I would ensure that at least one dance was marked on your card and as soon as the young men saw me dance with you, every one of them would want to emulate me and dance with you. You would be just as popular as your sister. Sadly, I cannot oblige, but as I said I have the necklace here and I think you should try it on."

Ruth took the jewel box, released the catch, and opened the lid. Even whilst nestling in the red velvet, the necklace glistened and sparkled. "Oh!" she exclaimed as she carefully lifted it out and held it up before her. "I do not think I have ever handled anything as exquisite as this! And you say it is not valuable?"

"It is not without its value, Ruth," said her uncle. "Everything has some value and its price. It is just that this is more valuable to the family as an heirloom than are the elements of precious metal and stones which make it up. If you seek to place a family value upon it, I would say it is priceless."

"Perhaps it is wrong that I should be entrusted with it," she said, lowering it into the box.

“On the contrary. I think you are the right person to be entrusted with it. Will you not try it on?” Ruth took it up again, looking for the clasp and around in search of a mirror. “Let me be your looking glass,” he said. “You may trust that I will reflect your appearance accurately and without favour. Ah, yes. It is exactly as I thought. It could have been made for you.”

“But should I wear it? Should I really accept the responsibility?”

“I not only want you to accept the responsibility for it and to wear it, I want to make it over to you and for you to keep it.”

“Oh, I could not do that!” she protested. “What would I do with it. Where would I keep it? What will Mother say?”

“I can see no difficulty in any of your questions. I doubt that your mother will object greatly as the necklace would have surely passed to her had my mother died earlier than she did. As for its safekeeping, Mr Lancaster, your uncle, will be here shortly and able to advise you on that. I will keep it secure for you until the Ball. I would think it would also be sensible for him to arrange for a paste copy to be made. You could then keep that with you at all times.”

“But what about Victoria? How will she react when she sees what I have received and she is presented with nothing?”

“Ah! Victoria!” said the Earl, thoughtfully. “The necklace would not be suitable for Victoria but now that I have been exposed to and charmed by her, I will have to be generous to her in other ways.” Ruth thought this a strange statement but wondered if the talk that had reached Matthew Fayrbrother’s ears had also reached the Earl’s, that he was now attempting to redress the balance. “I have something in mind for her which I will make known at the appropriate time,” he went on. “I would not imagine that she will be disappointed. Now, before your uncle arrives, have you brought me anything that you have written to read to me?”

“No,” said Ruth, lowly.

“I see. You will not be afraid to expose me to your work? I do know that you are writing and have written a considerable amount. You must excuse me, but I do have my spies, made all the more essential by my immobility.”

“Spies?” asked Ruth, fearing that someone might have been watching her at the boating lake.

“Just those who report on the state of the house and the amount you have written. Nothing to cause you any fear. But you must not be too self-critical.”

Ruth lowered her head and studied her hands. “I am still not happy that my paltry efforts would sit well alongside Dickens or Trollop, but after the Ball I promise I will bring that which I consider to be my best work and you can judge.”

“I will look forward to that,” said the Earl, looking over her head towards the door where Twigg had entered.

“Mr Lancaster is without,” he said.

“Show him in, then,” said the Earl. “And tell Lucy that she can serve tea in precisely twenty minutes. Ruth, my dear, I must ask you to leave us as I have important business to transact with your other uncle. The necklace may remain here until the Ball if you wish. After that it shall be yours in trust. Mr Lancaster will prepare the appropriate paperwork.”

Mr Lancaster was in the corridor, hurrying towards the Earl’s room. “You have just left him?” he said to Ruth as he approached. “What has he said to you about you and your sister? Quickly, child!”

“Why, very little, Uncle,” said Ruth, feeling a little flustered. “The Earl has presented me with a beautiful necklace, a family heirloom, and he told me he had plans for Victoria. That is all. Is there something amiss?”

“No!” said her uncle, curtly, and he was gone.